### Fertile Ground

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**Fertile Ground**

**by** [27dragons](http://archiveofourown.org/users/27dragons), [tisfan](http://archiveofourown.org/users/tisfan)

**Summary**

There are a few things in Avengers Tower that everyone agrees on: Clint is an immature asshole, Natasha is not the motherly type, you wouldn't like Bruce when he's angry, and Tony would be a terrible parent. So when a handful of unexpected children show up, claiming the Winter Soldier as their father, everyone reacts with grace and compassion, welcoming them with open and loving arms.

Just kidding. Panic ensues, of course.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10801266/notes).
What I Have Seen and Heard

Chapter Notes

Edited 6/5/17 to add the ADORABLE TITLE ART from tumblr user monobuu!!! We are both OVER THE TOP squee about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky

Bucky was exhausted; the sort that came with long missions, heavy fighting, and above all, failure. Whatever M.O.D.O.K. and AIM were up to, the Avengers were not winning. The crazy brainiac was always two steps ahead of them -- according to Tony, that was because M.O.D.O.K. had the ability to render odds so precisely that it bordered on precognition -- and he was apt to leave hundreds of wrecked and mind-controlled normals in his wake, turning each op into a PR disaster. Because of course the nations of the world were more likely to blame the guys saving the day than the ones who started the shit in the first place.

And then there was the paparazzi, who’d managed to figure out that Tony and Bucky were dating, a fact which they had been hoping to keep out of the public eye a little longer. But no. Worse, they had figured it out while Pepper was on one of her very rare vacations and the Avengers had been chasing beekeepers around the freaking south pole for reasons no one had been able to figure out yet. So the whole mess, including the truth behind Howard and Maria Stark’s deaths, was front page news by the time they got back. A couple of rags were even suggesting -- just possibly, maybe -- Tony had been responsible for that particular mission, since he was the one who theoretically benefitted the most.

That hadn’t even calmed down before M.O.D.O.K. was at it again, setting off random, uncontrolled earthquakes in Florida. Where the damn inflatable face had escaped. Again.

Bucky threw himself into the co-pilot’s chair, trying not to think about it. Tash got them into the air, with Iron Man and Iron Patriot and War Machine escorting on either side, and Thor smashing the sound barrier somewhere overhead. “Mr. Barnes?” JARVIS’s cultured, British voice crackled through a closed channel.

“Yeah, J, what’s up?” Bucky asked, loading in their flight plan. “We should be home for dinner.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barnes; I am aware. If you can spare a moment, we have a situation here which
requires your attention."

“Mine?” That was new. Tash flicked a glance at him but didn’t say anything.

“If you could bring up your phone, there’s some video footage of particular importance, I believe.”

Bucky nodded. “Sure.” He raised an eyebrow at Tash. “Up to flying without a side-seat driver for a bit?”

“Go away, Mom,” Tash said. “I can handle driving to the mall.”

Bucky pulled out his phone and touched the alert JARVIS had sent him. “What am I looking at?”

“Security feeds, A-16, E-3, and B-28.”

Unlike normal security cameras, JARVIS was always watching, and his cameras followed the disturbance around, sharpening focus where necessary, switching angles. It was almost, Bucky thought, like watching a movie.

A woman strode toward the Tower. She was tall, with a mop of brown hair that hung down in her face. She was wearing black leather, carrying more weapons than was strictly legal, and... had a baby on her hip? An older kid of indeterminate gender followed just behind her, also clad in black, brown hair pulled into a short queue at the back of the neck. Despite obvious youth, that one carried two guns, hand lingering near the pistol with startling steady confidence, like the kid knew exactly how to use it and wouldn’t hesitate.

“When was this taken?”

“About ninety minutes ago, sir. Given the outcome of the event, I decided that alerting you could safely wait until you were en route home.”

The woman barely made it through the lobby doors before security was rolling out, guns and nets and tasers at the ready.

“I want to speak with James Buchanan Barnes,” she said in a flat, emotionless tone. The audio feed had been distorted somewhat by the distance of mic pickups and the earpiece that it was playing through, but Bucky could still detect a tinge of Moscow just around the edges, an accent she’d tried hard to lose, perhaps, and failed. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I won’t let you interfere with my mission.”

“Drop the weapons, ma’am, and step away from the hostages,” the security captain said, leveling his weapon. The sound of two dozen more pistols and rifles coming up was incredibly loud, even over the video. The few civilians who had been in the lobby scattered, hurried along by a couple of the guards.

“Duraki,” the woman snapped. She shoved the baby at the younger kid. She whirled, even as the guards took aim, and yanked the heavy Stark Industries logo plaque off the front of the security/reception desk, dropping it in front of her to shield herself and the children from incoming gunfire.

The woman gave the guards time to empty their clips, then attacked. She held automatic pistols, one in each hand, and seemed to be equally accurate with either. Bullets whined and bounced off her tactical armor. Her tactics were brutal, but non-lethal. She shot guards’ legs, ricocheted bullets off the walls behind them to clip elbows and shoulders. She marched right up the middle of the security corridor, smashing her guns down on people’s heads, punching, kicking, and mangling with a
ruthless efficiency that was almost hypnotizing. The kid stayed behind the logo plaque and covered her. The kid was also frighteningly accurate, shooting the guns out of the guards’ hands.

By the time the woman got to the door, both security teams were completely disabled. Bucky didn’t think there were any fatalities (though you could never be sure, with head injuries), which was impressive. The kid rejoined her, carrying the baby. All three of them still looked emotionless and calm. She faced the backup teams that were scrambling into the lobby.

“James. Buchanan. Barnes. I want to talk with him. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will not allow you to stand in the way of my mission.”

The backup security lead seemed to have a little more sense. He held up empty hands. “Ma’am,” he said, “if you will allow us to escort you inside and are willing to wait in a secured location for the safety of the civilians in this building, I promise you, I will make sure you speak with Mr. Barnes as soon as he returns from his current mission. Is that acceptable?”

The woman considered it, then spun her pistols in her hands and re-holstered them. “That is acceptable. I will not submit to a weapons search or body scans. You have my word that I carry no explosives and intend no harm to anyone who does not attempt to impede my mission.”

They didn’t have much choice but to accept, with all the Avengers out of the building. The guard nodded. “Then if you’ll come with me, ma’am,” he said. “And what of the children?”

“They’re with me. Where they go, I go.”

“Of course.”

The security team fell in behind the lead, and he escorted her deeper into the building. The video feed flickered and stopped.

“Where are they now?” Bucky asked.

“Secure floor 31,” JARVIS said. “We have evacuated nonessential personnel and put local authorities on standby, but she appears to be waiting calmly. And, Mr. Barnes?”

“Yeah, JARVIS?”

“She gave her name as Rikki Barnes,” JARVIS said.

Bucky almost dropped his phone.

***

He’d lied to Tony, and now it was going to come back to bite him in the ass. The words came back to him, crystal clear.

"Mm, nice. Wonder how many times you can go in a row," Tony mused.

“Bastard,” Bucky managed. “Jesus, I don’t know.”

Except he did know, didn’t he? Snowmelt had been one of Sarkissian's projects. The serum didn't act the same on everyone; they had lost more subjects than they gained, many more. But maybe, Sarkissian had thought, a breeding program might be the answer to their problems. So yeah, he’d found that answer out, and it hadn’t been as much fun as it sounded: The answer was twelve, before his body had shut down and refused to have anything to do with him for the rest of the day, no
matter what the stimulus.

What he hadn’t known, damn it, was that the experiments had been successful. Of course he couldn’t have asked, so everything he’d heard had been hearsay, absorbed bits of data and information from the techs and scientists around him. But the impression he’d gotten was that the breedings had been a spectacular failure, almost always resulting in the deaths of both the surrogate mothers and the babes. Of the few mothers who survived to full term, none of them survived the births, and the infants hadn’t lived past their first year.

And yet, here was this girl calling herself Rikki Barnes, and if she wasn’t his daughter, then she was a fucking clone. If she’d been just a little taller, he could have used her as a shaving mirror; she had the same dark hair, the same piercing stormcloud eyes, the same dimpled chin. Her features were female, softer, but she held her shoulders the exact same way, and there was nothing unfamiliar about her open-mouthed sneer, either.

He wouldn’t have noticed it at all except he that wasn’t blinking, couldn’t look away from her face, but for just an instant, Rikki Barnes’ features softened, her eyes gleamed with interest, and her mouth dropped open. And then it was gone, replaced with cold fury on her face surpassing any he’d ever seen.

“So. You’re our father. Huh. Dunno, guess I expected you’d be taller.”

***

Rikki

Rikki wasn’t sure what she’d hoped for, but it wasn’t this weary man who strode into the room, wearing dirty, bloodstained combat armor, his hair pulled back from his face in a messy bun. He walked like he was on his way to commit mayhem, and that was the only thing familiar about him. Rikki had been studying his history since she was old enough to be told that she was failing to meet the mark.

The Winter Soldier had been her hero, he’d been her idol, he’d been everything she wanted to be and everything she was supposed to be. Well, right up until her handlers had handed her a four-month-old baby boy and said “This is your brother. Train him.” She’d been twelve.

There was more James Barnes in the man’s face than Winter Soldier. He had smile lines around his eyes and he didn’t hold himself with precision. She’d seen those videos, too, old ones, from the forties; the man who’d walked at Captain Rogers’ side. That noted, he also carried shadows in his eyes that she had no way of comprehending. All gave some, some gave all. For a man who wasn’t dead, James Barnes looked like he’d seen Hell and left some parts of himself behind.

She flicked her gaze at his silver arm, one of Hydra’s great treasures. When she was younger, she’d dreamed of giving up her own limb on a mission and being rewarded in a similar fashion.

He still hadn’t said anything, and the silence was growing awkward. It made her uneasy. And when she got uneasy, Sasha, the baby, started fussing. Which was never a good sign.

“These are your sons. This is Jaime.” Beside her, Jaime nodded in solemn acknowledgement. “And the baby is Steven. We call him Sasha. I’m Rebecca. Rikki.”

“I…” James Barnes started to speak and fell silent again. His eyes were huge and he was trembling minutely.

Weakness. Was he playing her? Anger flared, even more sharply. How dare he, when he had failed
them! “Why did you never come for us?” she demanded. “How could you leave us behind? I earned my place. I was strong, for you. I waited for you! I saved them. For you. How could you?”

“I didn’t know,” James Barnes said. He clamped his metal hand down on the table, fingers digging into the mahogany like it was cheese.

“You’re a liar,” she spat. “I earned it. I trained for it. I killed for you, and you were supposed to come for me. I was promised.”

The table cracked and the edge that he was gripping splintered. “You were promised, I believe you,” he said. “But not by me. If I had known, you could set your watch by the fact that I would have come for you. No doubt.”

Jaime looked up at her. He hadn’t said a word -- he seldom did, the training had beaten most of his spirit out, and it was a rare day that she could get him to talk, or eat, or sleep. “Getting warm in here.” Jaime’s voice was beautiful, achingly clear and precise.

“You should leave,” Rikki said. “You’re upsetting the baby.” She held out her arms and Jaime put Sasha in them. The child was already too warm, fever-heat seeping through his skin and when he opened his eyes to look at her, the pale blue irises were limned with gold. Shit. She didn’t want to ask anything of this man, but… who else could help them?

“What’s wrong?” Their father’s voice was flat, cold, like he was delivering a report, or giving a mission.

“Sasha’s… special,” Rikki said.

“Tell me what you need,” James said. “And I’ll make sure you have it.”

“Food, anything soft, really. Rice pudding. A banana, something like that. Milk. Ice. A lot of ice.” It was too late to hesitate because Sasha was too hot, and she was out of time. “Before he catches himself on fire. Again.”

“JARVIS?” James stood, addressed the air.

“Someone will be en route to you momentarily, Mr. Barnes. If the matter becomes more urgent, Miss Barnes, please allow me to offer to engage the room’s fire suppression.”

A sliding panel near the floor opened moments later and a squarish robot emerged, straightening up and offering her a carry basket that included the items she’d requested.

“<Ice, yes, darling,>” she spoke to her baby brother in a soft, maternal voice, in Russian, which was the only language he understood; she and Jaime had not been speaking English around him yet, or to him. “<Here you are.>” She crushed the ice in her hand and offered him slivers to eat, using her damp fingers to cool his skin.

“He’s different from you,” James said. Rikki looked up, shocked to find him so close, but he wasn’t looking at her, he was staring at the baby.

“We’re all your children,” Rikki said. “But Sasha’s surrogate, the woman who provided genetic material and a womb? She was Inhuman. Three months ago, he became sick. We don’t get sick, so I was worried. They gave me medicine for him, and when I gave it to him, he turned to stone, for just a moment. I thought they’d killed him, but then it broke free and he was... different. They say it’s happened all over the world, this Inhuman menace.”
“You were with Hydra?”

Rikki nodded, continuing to feed her brother ice until he calmed, the ambient temperature in the room dropping slowly. “Where else would I be?”

“Right.”

“We couldn’t wait any longer. They were talking about taking him away from me, said I couldn’t take care of him anymore. You were supposed to come, but they said you left, you defected. You betrayed us,” Rikki said, hugging the baby to her chest, damp and sticky as he was, and Sasha grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked. “I couldn’t let them take him. I couldn’t.”

“Why did you come here?” James asked. His hand hovered around her shoulder for a moment, as if he wanted to touch her, but couldn’t bring himself to do so. So it was true, she thought. He was disappointed in her. She wasn’t worthy. Fresh hatred burned inside her.

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go,” Rikki snapped. “There’s no one else to help us and we are out of time. Sasha is dying, and I don’t know how to stop it.”

Chapter End Notes

Terrible Russian Translations:
Duraki - fools/idiots

Inspiration:
This is Cara Delevingne, who bears a striking resemblance to Sebastian Stan, and with slightly darker hair is our model for Rikki Barnes. (Rikki probably isn’t wearing that lipstick, though.)
“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Mr. Barnes?”

“Get them whatever they need, within reason. And have Tony and Steve and… hell, whatever Avengers are in the Tower meet me in the war room in five, yeah?”

“Of course,” JARVIS said. “And may I add, however belatedly, congratulations?”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that, no doubt,” Bucky said. He touched the outside of the door, the foundations of his entire life crumbling around him. He didn’t know how to rebuild, not with this new information.

Clint and Steve were already waiting. Steve was leaning against the table, his arms crossed over his massive chest; Clint was perched on a chair, feet in the seat and butt up on the back, looking for all the world like an owl and munching on a sandwich.

“He’s got his I’m in trouble face on, Cap,” Clint said, clicking his tongue.

“I was noticing,” Steve said. “This about those Hydra defectors?”

Hydra defectors… That was one thing to call them. Bucky tapped his phone a few times, brought up the security feeds that JARVIS had shown him earlier. “First off, find out who all these knuckleheads are. Pay their hospital bills and then fire their asses.”

Tony skipped into the room, poking his phone, still clad in the skin-tight, black underflight suit, although he’d stuffed his feet into some amazingly ugly orange high top sneakers. “Are we making personnel changes? Did they steal the last bag of microwave popcorn?”

Bucky scrubbed his teeth with his tongue, before answering slowly, “No, Tony. They shot at a woman and two kids earlier this morning, who, while armed, were not currently offering hostilities. I thought you might want to keep the situational escalations to a minimum.”

Tony blinked at Bucky. “Yeah, okay, good call. Anyone hurt? You seem pretty tightly-wound, what’s up?”

“They are,” Bucky said. He triggered the video, sans sound. Watching the video again, he was impressed; his daughter was brutal and efficient, wasting not a single move, not a single second. She tore through the ranks of men before her, weighed and found wanting. Jaime, in the back, was quick, although a closer look at the boy’s face made Bucky wince; he didn’t look like a little automaton, he looked like shooting at people was putting bullets into his own chest. “Damn. Damn, damn.”

“Where are they from?” Tony asked, frowning, eyes not leaving the video. “And what do they want?”

“They need help,” Bucky said. “They’re Hydra defectors, children from the Snowmelt project. I knew about it, when I was… yeah. Thought it was a failure. Apparently not.”
“What’s Snowmelt? Child soldiers? I thought they had the Red Room for that. Where’s Natasha, maybe she knows something.” Tony looked around. His eyes snagged on Bruce’s empty seat. “Right, never mind, we’ll ask her later.”

Clint finished chewing the last of his sandwich, then licked mayo off his thumb. “Anyone else notice the girl has a creepy resemblance to the Winter Soldier, here, or is it just me? She’s missing two of his inches and he hasn’t got such a nice rack, but…”

Bucky turned, his eyes ice cold. “You want to shut up, right now, Clint.”

“Woah, Cold War,” Tony said, “what is wrong with you?”

Bucky inhaled, willing himself to calm, willing himself to rationality, but damn, it was hard. By the time he got there, he was leaning against the table, both hands flat, lungs heaving for air. “They all look like me,” he said. “They’re… they’re my children.”

“I’m sorry, did you say your children?” Tony’s hand clenched the arm of his chair, but not before Bucky saw it shaking. He looked at the video again, checking the kids’ faces more closely.

“Snowmelt was one of Sarkissian’s pet projects; the serum works badly and erratically. Frankly, we’re lucky Steve and I survived it. Sarkissian’s idea was that the genes could be passed down,” Bucky said. He fell into the chair and hid his face in his hands. “I didn’t know they’d had any success. I… what little I heard, what little I can even remember. I thought they’d all died.”

Clint whistled, long and low. “Man, Hydra is so f*cked up.”

Bucky looked up at Clint, absolute despair in his gaze. “I overheard, once, there were over fifty successful pregnancies. And I have three. Children.”

“That you know of,” Tony said. His eyes hadn’t left the screen, and his voice was hard.

Steve scratched his jaw. “Are we sure about this? I don’t want to be the cold-hearted bastard in this scenario, but this could be a honey-pot of epic proportions.”

“Why not both?” Tony snapped. “If they were raised by Hydra, I’m sure they wouldn’t have any aversion to running a little woe-is-me guilt scam on their father. It’s not like they know him.” His eyes flicked to Bucky. “Right?”

Bucky flinched. “The youngest one… do you know what his name is?” Of course, that was a rhetorical question, and he looked up at Steve with some uncontained despair. “His name is Steven.”

“To play on your sympathies,” Tony suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Bucky said. “She… the girl—” He still couldn’t seem to bring himself to say my daughter aloud. “—Rikki. She… oh, Tony, she hates me. If she’s faking that, she learned from a better master than Tash had.”

“And yet she came to you. Why?”

Bucky clawed for breath, the air was pressing down on him, and he realized that what she’d said had hurt him, reached in and grabbed things he wasn’t even aware that he had, and torn them out. “The baby… Sasha, they call him. He’s sick. Hydra was going to remove him from Rikki’s care, and… She loves those boys, you can see it all over her. She didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

Steve frowned. “If they inherited your serum -- and it sure looks that way in this footage -- how is he
sick?”

Clint muttered “clusterfuck” under his breath.

“Rikki called his mother -- the surrogate -- an Inhuman. He can’t control it. He’s got some sort of fire ability. Little like Johnny Storm, but not controlled. She said he’s burned himself before, being upset. I had to leave, I was pissing her off, and her being upset was makin’ the kid unhappy. Tony, he started smoldering.”

“Son of a bitch.” Tony rubbed his eyes with the hand that wasn’t still clenching the chair arm. “That complicates things, doesn’t it. Okay, JARVIS, analysis on the security footage; anyone who opened fire before the kids started retaliating, fire them. Send the rest back to training; if they can’t handle working around enhanced and metahumans, they need to be reassigned. Give the kids whatever they need but don’t let them leave the building without an Avenger in escort, for now. I’ll... I’ve got some people to talk to about the flame thing. I don’t want to ask Johnny Storm to babysit unless it’s a last resort.”

Clint snorted. “Oh, come on, who better to handle a flaming baby?”

Tony gave Clint a flat look. “Literally anyone, I’m pretty sure. The Thing, maybe; he’s impervious.”

The feed looped again and Bucky was drawn to the image like a moth to a flame. “Look at her... just...”

“Yeah, I’m seein’ her, pal,” Steve said. “She’s terrifying.”

Tony looked back at the video, but his eyes were drawn not to Rikki, but Jaime. He watched for a handful of heartbeats, then stood abruptly. “I’ll be in the workshop.”

Bucky sighed, watching him go. Tony had barely looked at him, as soon as he’d acknowledged the relationship. “Shit.”

Clint clapped Bucky on the shoulder on his way by. “Adventures in babysitting. Should be exciting. You know, Thor was in that movie, I think.”

Bucky leaned against the table and watched the film, again. “Guess there’s a reason why guys like you an’ me shouldn’t settle down, eh, Stevie?”

***

Tony

It wasn’t that he was hiding. The protracted battle with M.O.D.O.K. had left him with a lot of work to catch up on -- things he’d promised for SI, and damage to the armor and the others’ gear that needed to be repaired ASAP so they’d be ready when the damn balloonhead inevitably showed up again.

The security team that had escalated an already tense situation needed to be evaluated and handled, obviously. And, apparently, there were arrangements to make for their new guests.

Tony wondered if Bucky was going to want to move down into the guest suites to be near them, and then ruthlessly cut off that line of thought with a mental sneer at himself. He dragged up the screen that held the inventory of Clint’s quiver to see which arrowheads needed to be replaced.

JARVIS popped up a HUD unit, off to one side, containing a scroll of text. {Sir, I postulate a genetic
Tony frowned at the display, waiting. If JARVIS was using a written display rather than simply talking--

{You’re about to have a visitor. Upper left quadrant of the shop, from the vents.} Well, that was Clint’s favored access point, so it wasn’t too surprising. JARVIS didn’t offer to lock down the vent or shoo his guest away, which for JARVIS, was a fairly loud hint.

Tony waved a hand at JARVIS’ warning to dismiss it and angled his body so he could keep one eye on that corner. Sticky-arrows. Clint needed a lot more sticky-arrows and other non-lethals if Brain-in-a-Jar was going to keep using civilians to do its dirty work.

A slender form, lithe and probably not more than forty-three inches tall, dropped to the floor, soundless, and immediately disappeared into the shadow of the fabricators.

Tony snorted. “Your stealth needs work, there, Mighty Mouse.”

The kid could have been cut from the same cloth as the lost and terrified Bucky Barnes that Tony had first met in the communal kitchen. He peered out behind the fabricators, then stepped out, neck bent, chin tucked to his chest. He stood, arms behind his back, feet spread, braced like he was expecting a blow. “<Understood, sir.>”

Tony squinted at him. Jesus, he looked terrified. And hungry. More super-soldier metabolisms to support, check; Tony made a mental note to adjust the standard grocery orders. He stayed right where he was, still poking absentmindedly at Clint’s inventory. He flung the order for sticky arrows at the fabricator. “So you understand English; do you not speak it? I mean, I know some Russian, but it’s not my best.”

“This trainee speaks French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Italian, Arabic, Mandarin, and Cantonese, sir.” The boy glanced up at Tony through a tangle of hair, checking the emotional weather in Tony’s face and then back to the floor.

“Well, we’ve got a decent overlap, then, but we mostly use English here, just so you know. And for petesake, you don’t have to be so formal. Only JARVIS ever calls me ‘sir’ and I’m pretty sure he means it ironically at least half the time. You’re not actually a trainee anymore, you know that, right?” Tony wondered who he should call to come and collect the kid. Gods knew Tony shouldn’t be left alone with someone this young.

“Rikki said,” the boy admitted, breathless, as if terrified of saying so much, “that we were coming to Father. That the Winter Soldier would finish our training. Rikki lies, sometimes. She does not mean to, but she promises more than we can have.”

“Well, she did manage to get you to the Winter Soldier, at least.” Tony clenched his teeth, fighting the ache in his chest at the thought of Bucky. “But I’m pretty sure he’s not going to want to train you.”

“We’re unworthy. Understood.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, you’re not unworthy; you’re children!” Tony balled his hands into fists and pressed them against his eyes. This, this was why he couldn’t be trusted, why he was going to lose--Stop it. Made of iron, show no weakness. He made himself put his hands back down, though he had to brace them against the worktable to keep them still.

The boy took out a gun, tucked at the small of his back and held it, his hands moving lovingly,
adoringly over the gunsteel, touching the grip with reverence. “Self-examination, ninety-two percent success rate. Injuries acceptable to mission parameters. No deaths. No permanent injuries. The trainee was afraid, but completed the mission.”

Mother of god, he’d thought he was done with the fucking mission reports. Tony huffed softly. “Yeah, I appreciate you not killing or maiming anyone; they were idiots, but that’s not a killing offense. They make you report fear? That’s... Everyone’s afraid in a firefight.”

Something fey and wild lit up in the boy’s eyes. “I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.”

Tony was startled into a laugh. “Winter Soldier training involves sci-fi novels now?”

The boy shook his head. “Rikki. She stole us. Father was supposed to come, but he didn’t. He left us behind. She stole us, and we were hiding. She read to us, when Sasha was scared and we were in the snow and it was cold and... a soldier would have burned the book, for heat. But she read it.”

“Much more useful,” Tony said. He took a breath, bracing. “Maybe Hydra meant to bring him to you eventually, for training. I don’t know. But he left Hydra, and he didn’t know about you. I’m... pretty sure if he did, then he wouldn’t have left you there.” Tony was certain of that, really.

“Voice pattern analysis,” the boy said, “percentage in the ninetieth: if you lie, you are unaware of it.”

“Yeah, he was pretty convincing when he told me he didn’t know.” Tony shook himself; he didn’t want to think about Bucky or what was going to come of them because of this. It wasn’t the kid’s fault that Tony had no idea what to do with children outside of meet-and-greets.

“Should I… this person is uncertain of proper behavior. What name are you called by that this person should use?”

“Oh my god, stop with the ‘this person’ bullshit, you can use personal pronouns. I’m Tony.”

The boy’s eyes widened, impossibly. “Tony Stark?”

“...Yes? You didn’t know that already?”

The boy shook his head, scattering his mop of hair into his face. “Rikki said Father. And Steve. And...” He lowered his voice conspiratorially, “Black Widow. Not Tony. This... I... imaginary pictures, waste of time, daydreaming, mission failure, but...” He was babbling on the edge of incomprehensibility, but his eyes were huge as saucers with something like... delight? “Always thought. Maybe...” He tented his fingers on his chest. “H. James Barnes, called Jaime. Code name: ‘Ward.”

“Ward, seriously? That’s a terrible codename, it makes you sound like a kid in a bad Victorian romance. Or maybe a Batman comic. Stick with Jaime, that’s not bad.”

“For... for Howard. I thought... maybe... like brothers. You ‘n me.”

Tony stiffened, and looked at the boy sharply, then snorted and rubbed his hand over his eyes. “Well, if Howard is hanging over both of us, I guess that’s something in common. Still. Stick with Jaime.” He sighed, then nodded at the gun. “Pretty good handling on that. You need to clean it?”

“A soldier’s first duty is to the weapon he is, the next to the weapons he has.”

“Yeah, eventually we’re going to get it into your head that you’re a kid, not a soldier, but Howard
took me to the firing range for the first time when I was about four, so taking care of your stuff is pretty well ingrained in me, too.” He nodded toward another worktable, closer to where Jaime stood, still out of Tony’s reach. “U, get a weapons cleaning kit over there for the kid.”

Jaime’s gun was a beautiful piece of work, custom-made to fit his hand. He unloaded the piece and emptied the magazine, placing the bullets in a row along the table. “Armor-piercing discarding sabot rounds,” he informed Tony, crisply. “Fin-stabilizing on rounds this small, not recommended.”

“Yeah, there’s better ways to deal with the wobble. I’m surprised you can throw armor-piercing rounds from a weapon that small.”

“Muzzle-velocity exceeds expectations, 1400 meters per second. Stolen design, improved, original from Baintech.” He field-stripped the gun. “Secondary pistols, Hammertech. Crap guns. But less dangerous for close-in work.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Hammertech may be more dangerous close-in, in that it’s as likely to blow up in your face as hit anywhere near the target.”

“Lightweight, concealable,” Jaime admitted. “Rapid repeater. I… have been improving them, a bit.”

Tony paused before he could work his way up to his standard rant about Hammer. “Improving,” he repeated. “Any chance you’d like to tell me about that?”

The smile that Jaime gave Tony was like a burst of supernova, bright and brilliant and absolutely familiar. “Replaced the firing mechanism, improved grip. Power-charge for acceptable muzzle-velocity added. Stole three rods of adamantium; Rikki would only let me have one,” he grumbled. “Said the rest of it was for Father’s arm. So it could be lighter, but… vibranium out of our reach.”

“Yeah, don’t try to steal vibranium, the Wakandans are very tetchy about that,” Tony agreed around the knot in his throat. “Thought she hated him; why’s she bringing gifts?”

Jaime shook his head. “Vocal pattern analysis: Rikki is afraid. She has disappointed the Winter Soldier. He is ashamed of her. She is unworthy.” He made a gesture with his hands that made no sense.

“I guess if you’re going to knock on a stranger’s door and ask for favors, it doesn’t hurt to bring something to sweeten them up with, but I feel compelled to point out, once again, that he didn’t know about her until a couple of hours ago; he can’t be disappointed in her.”

The look that Jaime slanted at Tony came from eyes much older than the eight years this kid must have seen. “There’s real and there’s truth. That’s Rikki’s truth. She’s never good enough. She’s a disappointment. She’s useless. Unworthy. The Winter Soldier was the carrot. Dr. Sarkissian holds the stick.”

The name hit Tony like a punch to the gut, and he grunted. “Sarkissian’s dead. No more stick.”

Absently, Jaime rubbed at his shoulder. “Dead?”

“Yeah. The Winter Soldier killed her. I was there.” Tony didn’t want to relive that awful day.

Jaime took several steps forward, hesitant, tentative, like he wasn’t sure Tony wasn’t going to hurt him, grab him. “You were afraid.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “She was going to...” Christ, Stark, shut up, the kid doesn’t need your damn trauma on top of his own. “…hurt me,” he finished lamely.
“The chair…” Jaime whispered, shivering all over.

Tony grimaced. “Well, that answers that question I didn’t want to ask,” he muttered. “Yeah. She was trying to recover the Winter Soldier, and grabbed me, too.”

Jaime reached out for Tony’s hand and grasped his fingers with shaking hands. “Here.” He pressed Tony’s fingers to the back of Jaime’s neck. Under the child-soft skin, Tony felt... outlet ports, concealed by the mop of hair.

“Jesus,” Tony breathed. Rage burned away the aches in his chest and body, and he trembled with the effort of keeping it from exploding out in ways that would frighten the boy. “I’m. I wish I could kill her again,” he said, soft and tight. “This isn’t right. You know that, don’t you? This is... it’s wrong.”

“Snowmelt’s children,” Jaime said. “Strong, fast, unstoppable. When we live. We can bear it.”

Tony tightened his hand on the back of Jaime’s neck. “Can doesn’t mean should,” he said firmly. “I know fuck-all about kids, but I know you shouldn’t be fucking experimented on or wiped.”

Jaime threw himself into Tony’s embrace, pressing a hot, damp face into Tony’s mid-section, his arms wrapping hard around Tony’s waist and shivered, sobbing silently.

Damn it, he’d fucked up again. Tony squeezed his eyes shut and carefully held the boy, rubbing gentle circles on his back. “Hey, it’s okay,” he tried. “We’re not going to let Hydra get you back, it’s going to be okay.” Well, not for him, probably, but Jesus, Jaime was just a child. He needed to have a childhood.

Jaime looked up, stormcloud eyes huge, eyelashes sticky with tears and held up his arms, a wordless plea to be picked up, and Tony did so, noting that the kid was impossibly thin and light, not the sort of weight he’d have expected from the athletic qualities he’d displayed in the video. Jaime tucked his face against Tony’s neck, sighed, and impossibly… fell asleep.

Well, fuck, now what? Tony tried not to think about how warm the boy was, about the way it made Tony feel suddenly and fiercely protective. He’d felt this before; it wasn’t something he could have. He got up, carefully, and carried Jaime to the couch, gently untangled the arms wrapped around his neck, and found a blanket.

Tony looked down at the kid, face relaxed and innocent in sleep, eyelashes still matted together with tears. He looked uncannily like Bucky, like this, a resemblance that hadn’t struck Tony when he was awake.

Maybe the kid’s presence would put off the inevitable shouting Bucky was sure to be winding up for.
I Stumbled When I Saw

Chapter by 27dragons

Rikki

She left the camp under cover of darkness. Past the mother-houses, unoccupied now since Sasha’s surrogate had died. To the wall. Faint snowdrifts provided shadows. Jaime was at her heel and Sasha’s weight was nothing against her back, stuffed in the carry-all they’d procured.

“They’re comin’ for the kids, sweetheart,” Frag had told her that afternoon. Frag, one of the Phoenix soldiers, had been her mentor, her trainer, her best friend. More. Enhanced by the same formula that Hydra used on the mothers, he was one of them. Rikki knew his warning was true; the looks the guards and the tutors had given her were wary. At least three of them carried tranq dart-guns with them now, at all times. The tranqs wouldn’t stop her for long, but if they could get their hands on Jaime, she’d surrender. The way he screamed when they plugged into his head would stop her like nothing else.

Hurt me, she always begged, hurt me instead, please, please, anything you want, just don’t…

But they never stopped. Sarkissian was away. They were always less careful when the doctor wasn’t at the compound; she didn’t like her charges to be damaged by others. When she was gone, they were more brutal. Rikki was shocked they hadn’t iced her yet. It would keep her out of trouble.

But Sarkissian had told Rikki that the mission she’d been waiting for was soon. She had been promised glory and she meant to claim it.

No longer. If Frag was right. He’d never lied to her, even Jaime agreed with that. Rikki couldn’t judge lies and truth the way her brother could; that sort of calculation was beyond her skill set. But Jaime agreed: Frag didn’t tell them lies.

She peered up at the wall, waiting. Frag had promised, he would…

Snap, snap, snap. The silenced gun hissed through the air, dropping the guards noiselessly over the side of the wall.

“Up, now,” she hissed, giving Jaime a leg up and watching him scale the wall with easy grace. She followed close behind and slid down the rope Frag had set for them. Her boots touched down on the other side, the first taste of freedom, and when she turned she was in Frag’s arms and he was kissing her fiercely.

“Love you,” he said against her hair. “Now run. Don’t look back. Be safe. Cap will look out for you, I promise, when you get to him. He owes me one.”

She woke up and the room was blackness around her. She inhaled, unsteady and shaky. Sasha was a heavy, hot weight against her chest. She blinked, letting her eyes grab all the light until the room snapped into focus, pale lavender in the ambient lighting.

She listened: her breath, hard and shivery. The baby’s, that soft, nuzzling snore that always melted the chunk of ice in her chest. The air cycling unit. Other sounds, on the other side of the walls. Unimportant. Irrelevant. Nothing else.

“Jaime?” She kept her voice pitched low, not to wake the baby. Sometimes her brother would dream,
sometimes he thought they were being followed, and he would hold his breath against discovery. But there was nothing…

“Jaime. Come on, kid, you’re scarin’ me.”

He didn’t answer and panic slammed into her chest. She struggled to her feet, her bare toes unflinching against the floor. She swore, silently but nasty. They were supposed to be safe here. Barnes… Flames licked against her brain, beating a silent heat against the panic. She wasn’t dressed; she’d stripped out of her gear and wore only a cropped tee and a pair of blue Captain America panties that the bot had brought, but she couldn’t put the baby down to pull clothing on. She was already upset, if she put Sasha down, he’d get upset, too.

“Barnes,” she muttered, “if you let something happen to your son, I will make you regret it.” She stuffed her feet into her boots, not able to tie them up one-handed. She paused at the door, wondering if it was locked. She gritted her teeth and tested the knob. It swung easily under her hand and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Rikki wasn’t sure where to start looking for Jaime. She hadn’t heard anyone enter their rooms, but… who knew what could happen in this place? She’d heard of magic and gods and aliens and… WHAM!

She walked right into a blond brick, managing to keep her balance through sheer luck. She looked up… and then up some more into a face like Adonis, the blond hair parted deep on the right, brilliant blue eyes like the dawn of a new day. “Oh…”

“Whoa!” Those blue eyes crinkled a little. “You okay?” He looked down to check for damage, and then his eyes snapped straight back up to her face, round with shock, and his skin suddenly flushed violently red. “Sorry, I-- You-- Uh.”

“Captain,” Rikki murmured, soft like a caress. Because of course she knew him; everyone knew who Captain America was, even Assets from the other side of the globe. She’d seen him in training photos and videos, in the history papers she’d managed to steal.

Sasha hadn’t moved, which let her spend all her attention on the captain. She felt electrified, just seeing him. Oh, wow… She ran an appreciative gaze over his… well, everything.

Captain Rogers actually took half a step back, hands coming up as if he were being arrested. “Uh, can I find you some, uh, something to wear, miss?”

“Rikki,” she said, eager, breathless. “No, it’s okay, I’m not cold, but… Captain, you haven’t happened to see my brother, have you? He was gone when I woke up, and I didn’t think… I would have woken… I… if someone had taken him, I think, but I’ve been so tired and…” Rikki trailed off, the weight of her failures piling on her, and she was babbling like an infant at Captain America, how humiliating.

Captain Rogers straightened at this, the flush on his features fading somewhat as he frowned. “We’ll find him,” he promised her, his voice firm and commanding now. A man with a mission. “JARVIS, what can you tell us?”

JARVIS, the voice in the ceiling. Rikki flicked her eyes up to the tiles. “The young Mister Barnes is in the workshop. He’s been sleeping there for some hours.”

Rikki frowned. “Jaime? Sleeping? For hours? You lie, he never sleeps for more than forty minutes at a time.”
Captain Rogers said. “JARVIS doesn’t lie. JARVIS, is he alone down there? Some of Tony’s stuff...”

“No, Captain; Mr. Stark is with him.”

“Stark.” Rikki’s voice was suddenly flat and full of pain. Father’s boyfriend. The man who had captured their father's attention, kept him from coming for them. “Father’s distraction.” She eyed Captain Rogers sidelong, taking a deep breath and shifting the baby on her hip. His gaze flickered to the hem of her cutoff as it rode up her side, and then rigidly faced forward again. A tiny, powerful, feminine smile touched her mouth.

“Uh. I’m not sure what you mean by that, but we can get you a bathrobe or something and then go look?” he offered.

Rikki pouted. “I said I’m not cold,” she said. “And I want my brother. Please, Captain, take me to him.”

“I... of course. This way.” The captain turned and strode down the hall in the direction he’d come from.

Mmmmm, nice view in this building, she thought, following him, watching the smooth flex of his thighs. She stretched her own legs, picking up the pace and coming alongside him. “I didn’t know you lived here,” she said. “My information said you had an apartment in Brooklyn.”

He gave her a sharp glance at that, not the bashful-terrified look from before, but the Captain, assessing and weighing. “I do,” he said after a moment. “Moved back here when Buck did, so I could... help.”

Rikki raised an eyebrow, shifted the baby from one side to the other, then touched the captain’s arm lightly. “Well, I’m glad, then,” she said, not sure if she meant that she was glad that someone was helping her father (Bucky, what a stupid name) or just glad that he was here, now, and somehow the shape of his face was etched in her very bones, like she’d been born for no other reason than to look up at the captain and smile.

He gave her a faint smile, and set his eyes resolutely ahead again. He seemed to hesitate between the elevator and the stairs, but then sighed and hit the button for the elevator.

“If it wasn’t for Sasha,” she said, “I could race you to the bottom, Captain.”

He actually laughed at that. “I’m sure you could, and quite possibly win. Longer legs aren’t much of an advantage in a stairwell.”

The elevator dinged softly and Rikki stepped into a mirrored box; god, she looked like shit. Her hair was a mop of tangled brown disaster, and her eyes were so baggy that she had the appearance of a drunk raccoon. The crop showed off how thin and underfed she was, even if it did showcase her stupid, too-full bosom nicely. Damn things got in the way more often than not when they weren’t flattened to her chest by combat armor, but men seemed to admire them. She cocked a hip as she rotated to face the door, her gaze seeking out the captain.

The captain’s blush was back, and his eyes were jittering from spot to spot, trying to find a place to fix his focus. He eventually came to the conclusion that the baby might be safe enough, which squeezed Rikki’s heart in a funny place.

“I… named him after you,” she offered. “Steven Abraham Barnes. Sasha for short.”
He looked surprised at that, his eyes meeting hers. “Abraham... Erskine,” he guessed.

She nodded, eager to show off. “I studied Father’s life. Your life. Everything I could get my hands on, everything I could steal.”

“I’m a little surprised Hydra had anything around on me that wasn’t either reverse-engineering the serum or strategic analysis,” he said, wry. “They let you name your brothers?”

She shrugged one shoulder, careful not to jostle the baby. “They used our code names; didn’t care what we called each other. We’re not... people. I don’t know who named me. Rebecca Margaret Barnes.”

“Rebecca was Bucky’s oldest sister,” the captain offered. “I mean, you probably knew that, I guess. I just... You know.” He shrugged and looked away, eyes fixed on something much farther away than the elevator walls.

“Just because I know doesn’t mean I don’t like hearing you say it, Captain,” she said. “I’ve... we’ve been alone... And I was never really there. Not like a person, with opinions and knowledge. Hydra handlers don’t talk much personal stuff with the furniture, you know.”

The captain grunted. “Yeah, Bucky said that. I still don’t like it.” He sighed. “But your name is... Whether the person who named you meant it or not, you’ve got names that mean something to him. And to me.”

“I don’t know who named me,” she said again. “My mother didn’t live long enough -- Snowmelt’s children are hard on the surrogates. We’re too much. Too hungry. Many of them starve to death. It’s terrible. I... they stayed at the camp with us. I’ve watched so many die and there was nothing I could do about it.”

Captain Rogers’ lips pressed together, thin with -- what? Anger? Grief? “Was it just the three of you?” he asked, carefully. “No one who came before you, that you know of?”

“There was one, older than me. He was killed in action. I never met him; he was dead before I was born. There was a breakthrough with Erskine’s formula, in the 90s.” She slanted her eyes to the side. “They started injecting the surrogates, which sometimes let them live through the pregnancies. At least long enough for the subjects to survive. Which led to some other discoveries, and Phoenix Project started up again.” She touched her throat, thinking of Frag and his easy, eager smile. “I knew a few of the Phoenix soldiers. They trained with us, sometimes.”

The captain just grunted at that, and Rikki didn’t know how to interpret it.

The elevator doors slid open, revealing a huge glass wall across the hall. Behind it was a single figure, dancing his fingers over a light show like a stage magician.

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Steve

Tony’s workshop was everything that Steve always hated about the future, and at the same time felt oddly familiar. The smells of heated metal and oil combined oddly with coffee and cheese fries but still caused Steve’s mouth to twitch into a smile. Like Tony himself, a contradiction and a muddle and utterly one of a kind.

Tony looked up as they came in, and his smile of welcome dimmed a little when he saw Rikki. But he waved them over, then held a finger to his lips and tipped his head toward the far side of the
room, where a shock of brown hair was just visible under a lump of blanket. “Hey Cap, Ripley,” he said, softly. “What’s shakin’?”

Rikki snarled, her lips pulling back from her teeth in a feral expression. “Hours? He’s been here for hours?”

Tony looked taken aback. He glanced at Steve, as if Steve had any idea what the girl’s sudden fury was about, and then looked at her again. “He fell asleep on me, I figured he needed the rest. There a problem with that?”

Rikki’s anger transmuted into something stricken, near tears. “Fell asleep on you? Jaime doesn’t… touch strangers. Ever. What did you do to him, poison him?”

Tony shifted from confused to angry in a heartbeat. “What kind of assho--” He broke off, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Well, the Hydra kind of assholes, obviously.” He faced her again, expression tight. “He came crawling into my vents, and when I said hey, he gave me his fucking mission report. I let him clean his gun, we talked a little, and all of a sudden he...” Tony glanced toward the couch, his eyes turning soft and pained. “Look, anyone who knows me could tell you I’m the last person you want to trust with a kid, but I wouldn’t hurt one on purpose, no matter what you’ve heard about me.”

She backed Tony up against the wall like a tiny Mac truck, her arm shoved up against his throat. “He talked to you? What the fuck did he say? Tell me, now.”

“Hey, woah. Miss Barnes, come on,” Steve said. “Let's not wake up the baby, okay?” It was the only thing he could think of that might draw her attention.

“Captain...” Rikki took a step back, letting Tony cough and splutter. “Jaime doesn't talk. He doesn't sleep. He barely eats.” She was crying and barely seemed aware of it, the tears running down her cheeks and dripping off her chin. Her jaw was still set in stubborn anger, though, an expression recognizably similar to Bucky’s.

Tony looked upset, but only to Steve’s knowledgeable eye. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe he decided he could talk to me because he’s named after my dad. Maybe it’s because he’s got a fucking computer port in his skull, and I’ve always been better with computers than people. I don’t know why he...” He glanced over at the boy again, lips pressed tight. “But if he can sleep here then he can sleep here. And if I can get him to eat something, then I will. I’m not going to hurt your brother. Not... if I can help it.”

Rikki took a tottering step forward and then practically fell against Steve’s shoulder, shaking. The baby in her arms opened his eyes once, yawned, and snuggled back into her grip, just long enough for Steve to see the brilliant gold of the boy’s eyes, like a wolf or an eagle.

Tony looked at the girl, then tipped his eyes up to Steve, amused, one eyebrow quirking. Steve scowled at him, but that only made his smirk wider.

Steve ignored Tony as best he could and instead patted Rikki’s shoulder gingerly. “It’ll be okay,” he told her. “Tony’s a good guy.”

Rikki snorted, unladylike. “Stark has some mystical, inhuman charm. Seems to work exceptionally well on Barnes men.”

Steve could see Tony getting ready to respond with an off-color joke, an automatic reflex, but then he glanced toward the sleeping boy again, and shrugged. “Who knows?” he said instead. “If I do, it’s
not under my conscious control. And so far, they seem at least a little better for it, so I’m not going to apologize.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Rikki snapped. “He can stay, if he wants to. If he wakes up and you can get him to eat, he needs protein and as much Vitamin D milk as you can get in him. We’ve been sun deprived. Please.” She said the last word as if she expected it to bite her.

“Vitamin D and protein,” Tony repeated. “And with supersoldier metabolisms, a heaping pile of carbs.” He flashed a grin at Steve, but it was still wary, too full of teeth.

“I don’t understand why he trusts you, when he…” She broke off, wiping her nose on her arm.

“Lady, I don’t understand it, either. I’m not the kind of guy who inspires a lot of trust. But whatever.”

“My father trusts you. Be worthy of it,” she said.

Tony’s lips thinned at her mention of Bucky, and his eyes slid away, which was unlike him, Steve thought. “Believe me, it’s a daily struggle.”

“Captain?” Rikki asked. “Can you please show us where we might eat?” If Steve didn’t know better, he could swear she was batting her eyelashes at him.

“...Yes, I can take you up to the kitchen,” he said. At least that was in the common area. He waved her toward the elevator, then paused to look back at Tony. “Are you okay?” he asked softly. “You want me to send Bucky down?”

Tony shook his head quickly, eyes fixed on the blueprint he’d been working on when they came in. “Fine,” he said. “No need to bother him.”

Steve hesitated, but whatever it was, it was something between Tony and Bucky, not anything Steve could fix. He nodded. “I’ll have someone bring down some food,” he said instead. “For both of you.”

Tony nodded absently and waved. Steve sighed and followed Rikki back to the elevator.

Rikki walked away, bouncing the baby on her hip, moving a lot more like she was wearing a slinky dress and heels rather than combat boots and half a tee.

Steve shook his head. He’d seen Natasha wearing less, down to shorts and a sports bra when they trained, or in her loose, comfortable nightshirt on movie nights, but she’d never been so... provocative. Not toward Steve, though he’d seen her turn flirtatious and seductive at marks.

Maybe this was something Hydra had trained into Rikki the way the Red Room had trained it into Natasha, to use herself as a weapon, something she did without even thinking about it. He’d have to see if he could get Natasha to talk to her about it, maybe.

Rikki turned at the elevator and flashed such a brilliant smile at Steve that he was stunned. Because it was familiar, of course.
Natasha

Drinking heavily was not a thing that she did; she was skilled in emptying her glass without looking like she was faking, and her enhanced metabolism burned through what alcohol got into her system. But she was rarely drunk. And never ever hungover.

Which was why when Natasha bolted from Bruce's bed at just after six thirty in the morning to vomit profusely into the toilet, she was worried.

She didn't get sick, either. Not usually. Although on the rare occasions that she picked up a bug, it kicked her ass all kinds of sideways.

“Nat? You okay?” Bruce stuck his head around the corner, winced as she threw up again.

“I'll hit medical if I don't...ug. Bruce…”

“Yes?”

“...go away…”

“Um. Right.”

***

Helen Cho said the words, and Natasha had no idea what they meant, put in that order. She’d never expected to hear them. Not directed toward her, at any rate.

“That’s not… not possible,” Natasha managed, finally.

“Agent Romanov,” Dr. Cho said, “this is not entirely out of the realm of possibility. The procedure that the Red Room performed on you was simplistic. They didn't remove your ovaries or uterus. That surgery is risky, has a fairly lengthy recovery period, and has complex side effects that cause hormonal imbalances that would have limited your combat efficiency. They took a short cut -- forgive the pun -- and just snipped your fallopian tubes. Even for a normal woman, the chance of ligation failure is two percent. With your improved healing, even if it’s not as efficient as some of the other Avengers’... Well.”

Helen took a deep breath. “I'm afraid it’s quite certain. You are pregnant. Between six and eight weeks, at best guess. I'll have a more precise estimate when we get your blood work back.”

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Tony

The fabrication units whirred and clicked as they spun into action, and Tony looked over his shoulder to make sure Jaime wasn’t upset by the noise. The kid had been doodling on a tablet, the last Tony had checked, resisting every suggestion that he go find his sister.

Stubborn like his father.
Grimacing, Tony verified that Jaime was still absorbed in the tablet, and dragged his own thoughts back to his work.


“Stark,” she said and he could hear her through the shielded glass, which was... That was bad, if she was that pissed.

And he hadn’t been “Stark” since that thing with the repulsor-powered tea tray. But hiding from Natasha never worked and just made her more pissed. He waved for JARVIS to open the door.

“God damn it, Stark,” she snapped as soon as she was inside.

Tony took a reflexive step back. “What did I do?”

“More like what you apparently didn't do,” she growled.

“That... does not narrow it down much,” Tony pointed out. “I don’t do a lot of things.”

“You were on the surgery list for a vasectomy,” she pointed out. And that was privileged information, doctor/patient confidential and all that, but Tony had given up on any expectation of privacy, given that he was living with a bunch of spies and assassins.

“Well, yeah, but then Pepper and I called it quits, so I didn’t really--” He broke off and stared at her in horror. That little adventure they’d had recently where he and Bruce had swapped bodies... “Oh, no. You’re saying...”

“Apparently.” Natasha took a deep breath and staggered over to one of the chairs, falling into it. “I just came from Cho. Almost two months along.”

Tony could feel his hands shaking. He almost asked if she was sure, but that was about the stupidest thing he could say, apart from-- “Are you going to keep it?” --Apart from that. Thanks, utter lack of brain-to-mouth filter.

“Hadn’t gotten that far, Tony.” At least she was back to Tony and not Stark.

“Okay, okay, right.” Jesus, another kid, here in the Tower? Another small person for Tony to fuck up. He risked a quick look in Jaime’s direction.

Jaime had scrunched as far back on the couch as possible, as if he could make himself invisible through sheer force of will, peering at them over his knees. To be fair, Tony allowed him, an angry Natasha was pretty terrifying.

Tony rubbed at his face, and shoved his hand through his hair. God, he was tired. He used to be able to go three or four days with only quick naps, but now two days wiped him out. He was getting soft, letting Bucky drag him to bed every night.

Of course, it was entirely possible that wasn’t going to be a problem. Bucky hadn’t come to get him since the kids arrived.

Not the time, Tony chided himself. He looked back at Natasha. “I’m... sorry?” he offered. “It really didn’t occur to me, you know. At the time. I wasn’t really thinking things through very well. And I thought you had the-- whatever they call the version for girl parts.”
“Apparently it didn't take,” Natasha said. “Tony… I never thought I'd… ever get to even think about it. The one thing they always knew that we'd ever break conditioning for was our family. So we always knew they'd do whatever they had to, to make sure we never had one.”

Tony reached without thinking to take her nearest hand in both of his. “You know we’re all with you,” he said. “Whatever you want to do.”

“Genetically,” she said, “this baby will be a Stark. But it's also a Banner. And a Romanov. And probably a Barton, too, at least.”

“I was trying,” Tony said carefully, “not to think about the fact that it’s in any part mine, because we all know I’d be a terrible father. Though the idea of Barton being one might actually be worse.”

“I'd like to... keep the baby, Tony. If Bruce is okay with it. If you are. I… it's a gift. The best one you could ever have given me.” Gently, she leaned forward and kissed him, very softly, on the mouth.

It wasn’t as if he could tell her not to have the baby. It was hers, whoever the father was, genetically or spiritually. He nodded and lifted his chin to kiss her on the forehead. “Okay,” he said. “Just... tell me what you need from me. Except, you know. Parenting.”

“I'll make the attempt. Don't be surprised if it sneaks up on you, Tony. Love, I mean.”

He managed a smile for her. “I've never seen it coming before; why should I start now?”

Love wasn’t the problem. It had never been the problem. Tony had never been able to stop himself from loving someone, even when he knew it was a bad idea. Hell, he already loved this kid, if only because it was part of his friends.

“Wish me luck,” she said. “Bruce may be a bit touchy for a few days. After I tell him. And Tony? You should probably be the one to tell Yasha.”

Fuck. He hadn’t thought of that.

Bucky wasn’t going to like this at all.

Bucky was all sorts of possessive and jealous and... Tony sighed. Of course, if Bucky had given up his claim on Tony, then maybe it wouldn’t matter. Tony couldn’t decide which option he would prefer; which really meant he wanted to put off the conversation for as long as humanly possible. Schrödinger's break-up. Until the discussion actually occurred, he was both Bucky’s boyfriend and not Bucky’s boyfriend at the same time.

Which was better than the alternative.

A moment after the door closed behind her, Jaime tugged on Tony's shirt. “She's gonna have a baby?” His eyes were huge, terrified.

“Looks that way,” Tony said. He felt a little like someone had hit him really hard in the head, dazed and dizzy and dismayed.

“They die. The mothers. They always die.” Jaime patted Tony's hand like he was consoling him.

Aw, hell. “Not when they’re not Hydra experiments, they don’t.” Tony put his hand on Jaime’s thin shoulder and pulled him into a half-hug. “She’s pretty tough.”
“She’s Hydra, too. Or she was. Like us. Like Father.”

Tony wobbled his hand, *so-so*. “She’s enhanced,” he agreed. “Not as much as you or Bucky, but yeah.” *And the father isn’t*, he nearly continued, but fuck if Tony was going to spell out for the kid that it was the infants’ enhancements that caused the mothers’ deaths. Too much of a burden for such a young kid. He’d figure it out on his own eventually, and it would be bad enough, then. “So she’s got a better chance than the Snowmelt mothers, right?” Tony said.

“I hope so,” Jaime said. “She seems nice.”

Tony grinned. “Very few people are willing to say that about the Black Widow, kiddo. You’ve got nerve.”

Jaime grinned. “‘Fear is the mind killer’.”

“I have *got* to get you something to read besides Frank Herbert,” Tony mock-grumbled, then ruffled the boy’s hair. “Come on, I could use a snack, you going to join me?”


“Yeah, kid?”

“You're wrong, you know that, right?”

Tony raised his eyebrows at him. “Well, it’s been known to happen, very rarely. About what?”

“About yourself.”

“Excuse me?”

Jaime smiled, a child's grin and not that serious, older-than-his-years smile. “Vocal pattern analysis indicates… you don't see yourself… not truly. Snack, now? Race you!”

Tony blinked after him, trying to figure that one out, but he was an odd kid, hard to understand sometimes. Maybe it would make sense later. “Last one there has to wash the dishes!” he challenged, and set off running.

***

*Bucky*

DOB-E brought him snacks, smuggled from the kitchen area, and a change of clothes. Bucky glanced at the display on his phone. Three more minutes, he thought, like a kid getting ready to go to school again after a long, glorious summer and desperately smacking the snooze button.

It had taken almost eighteen hours to get his kids settled into the Tower, to set up very rudimentary precautions for a son who was prone to spontaneously combusting like some sort of terrible Stephen King movie character. To speak with Rikki several times -- and that had been exactly zero amounts of fun. His daughter was torn between utter loathing of him, and her desperate need to help. She’d been angry, hostile, sarcastic, but Bucky could see the panic under the surface.

It had made his heart ache, but there was no comfort he could offer Rikki that she was going to be willing to accept. He’d staggered up to the penthouse that night, exhausted and hoping that Tony would just hold him for a while. When Tony hadn’t been there, had taken his own refuge in the workshop -- under lockdown, JARVIS had told him -- that had been too much. Bucky had hit the
forty-second floor, grabbed a blanket, and had hauled it over his head. He had ignored the world with the diligence and single-mindedness of the Winter Soldier.

Twenty-four hours was all the time he was going to allow himself for unfettered freak-outs. It was almost time to get his shit together, put on his game face, and figure out what the actual fuck he was supposed to do now.

Lose Tony. That tiny voice had been clammering in his head, nonstop, since he first clapped eyes on his daughter, had dug through his memories and pulled out every single time Tony had joked in poor taste about children, about Howard, about his own childhood. He’d mentioned Bruce’s alcoholic father once and how that had probably led directly to Bruce’s temper issues.

Clint, too, had terrible, abusive parents, a fact that seemed to bother Tony more than it did Clint. Of the regular Tower inhabitants, Bucky, Steve, and Sam were the only ones with anything resembling a normal childhood at all.

Steve’s mom, Sarah, had been wonderful, attentive, devoted to her son and fiercely protective. Bucky’s parents were benignly negligent, poor, hard-working, and loving of their children as a whole without really appreciating the minor differences between, say, Bucky and Becca, but Bucky had fond memories of being clustered around the dinner table and tussling with his younger brother over the last dinner roll.

But Tony… he hated kids, hated the idea of kids, hated the very idea of being a parent. In fact, it was one of the first things Tony had said, that very first day that he and Bucky had gotten together. Can you imagine the sort of demonspawn any child of mine would be? He’d been joking, but at the same time, a ripple had shuddered down Tony’s spine at the very thought.

Tony was going to make him choose.

He probably wasn’t going to come out and say the words, but Bucky couldn’t have half a family… Why did you chose him, instead of me? An echo there, of Steve’s voice and that terrible second where Bucky was faced with a horrific decision: Tony… or Steve. Luckily, he’d managed to dance his way around that, to keep them both in his life. There wasn’t any easy solution this time.

Bucky had watched the way Tony’s hand shook, the matter-of-fact everything-is-fine-we’re-all-fine-here-how-are-you to his voice as he started making arrangements for the care of the Barnes children. That had been Tony, pulling out the plugs to his heart, cutting the ties that held him to Bucky, and leaving him behind.

Bucky had given himself twenty-four hours to freak out; now it was time for action. He had children, no matter how they’d come to be, and he had a responsibility to them. Especially Rikki, whose shattered expression had broken his heart in a dozen pieces. To Jaime, who might be still young enough to save, and Sasha, who was helpless, vulnerable, and utterly dependent. Bucky could make a difference, hopefully a positive one, and he owed it to his children, and to the universe in general, to at least try.

If it cost him Tony… Bucky shuddered. He would mourn for the rest of his life, that precious, wonderful love that had saved him. But Rikki and Jaime and Sasha would never need to know. He could be strong, for them.

Maybe.

Bucky got to his feet, slowly. He’d given up his guest suite on the 86th floor, with its standard high-class amenities. The bolt-hole that JARVIS had given him, that had seen him through any number of
tough times, had once been meant for college students. While Tony probably wouldn’t have skimped on the aesthetics if he’d been consulted, Pepper was a more practical sort, so it wasn’t luxurious.

The shower in particular was pathetic, but it did the job. By the time he was washed, dried and dressed, he had his game face on. He’d had twenty-four hours of being selfish and stupid and sad; now it was time to face his life.
Clint

The best thing about not actually sleeping with anyone else on the Avengers Team was that Clint
didn’t have any particular stake in much of the drama that went on around him. He rarely was
required to contribute anything more than the occasional throwing of food, mocking of lovesick
idiots, and other generally childish and ridiculous antics. He had brothers: Steve, Bucky, Sam, Tony,
and Thor (with Rhodey tossed in from time to time as the actual responsible one) and a soulmate in
Nat. A strange, aching, keening, and now strictly platonic soulmate, but soulmate nonetheless and he
was mostly happy with that. He was almost never asked to do anything that he couldn’t handle (not
even the dishes). And while he was always covering his teammates’s respective, tightly-packed asses
(seriously, superheroes were stupidly hot, and Clint considered himself an expert on all things sexy),
he rarely felt the burden of responsibility.

That slammed to a halt the instant he walked into the communal kitchen and saw Bucky’s teenaged
daughter’s ass on display. She was bent over, leaning on Steve’s shoulder while Captain America sat
at the kitchen table, oblivious to that fine asset, baby-talking at his namesake and feeding the baby
sliced bananas and mashed peas.

The immature, dirty-joke-cracking pervert part of him took a mental snapshot: the bare legs, the high-
cut panties (with Captain America’s symbol on them and damn, that was all kinds of fucked up
wrong), and the crop top. From Clint’s angle, he was getting a good eye-full of underboob and
Bucky was going to kill everyone dead in the goddamn room if he saw any of this. If he knew that
Clint had seen any of this, and probably even if Bucky thought Steve had noticed any of it. Which he
probably had, because Steve wasn’t looking at Rikki while they talked, and Steve was usually
scrupulously polite.

Clint took a few steps back, leapt up into the vents and crabbed his way to his nearest stash. He
grabbed a bundle of cloth -- sweatpants and an oversized green tee-shirt featuring the Hulk -- and
then dropped out again in the kitchen.

“Mandatory pants,” he said, thrusting the sweats at the girl. “It’s a rule around here. You’d know that
if you’d ever been around after one of Bruce’s little adventures, but for now, cover up.”

Clint didn’t fail to notice how Rikki brushed up against Cap as she straightened up, either. Well, that
wasn’t his responsibility, and he’d always wondered if Cap and Bucky had had a thing, back in good
old double-you double-you two; maybe banging the girl would be some sort of Freudian wet dream
closure thing for Cap. Hah. Ask no questions, endure no embarrassing mental pictures.

Rikki glared daggers at Clint, but he’d been glared at by Nat on days when she needed chocolate and
Midol and this Winter Soldierette didn’t have shit on that, so he was safe. She did pull on the sweats
and tied the drawstring around her waist, which was a relief to Clint’s eyes, because there was
something really awkward about having a boner for a girl who looked just like one of his best

“Are we missing one?” Clint looked around. “Where’s the pint-sized sharpshooter?”

Rikki snagged the green shirt from his hands and pulled it over her head with a even angrier air.
Rikki wasn’t exactly trying to keep the crop top from sliding up while she dressed, which meant Cap was eye-level with that impressive underboob for the second or two it took her to pull on the shirt. Cap went completely pink in the face. Clint hid a smirk behind his hand.

Behind him, the elevator dinged softly and Tony and the boy spilled out of it, giggling and apparently in the middle of a foot-race because Jaime nearly ran Clint over getting to the kitchen and tagging the table.

“I win! I win!” the boy yelled, whooping and then suddenly noticed that he had the undivided attention of every person over three years old in the room. He blanched, flinched, and ran back to Tony, hiding behind Tony’s legs.

Tony rolled his eyes and dropped a hand on the kid’s head, ruffling his hair. “So Neo and I were going to have a snack,” he announced casually. “Anyone else?” He shuffled his way across the kitchen, gait awkward to avoid dislodging Jaime. “What d’you want, PB&J?” he asked.

Jaime blinked up at Tony, eyes still wide and terrified, not looking at anyone else in the room. “I don’t know what that is.”

“So Neo and I were going to have a snack,” he announced casually. “Anyone else?” He shuffled his way across the kitchen, gait awkward to avoid dislodging Jaime. “What d’you want, PB&J?” he asked.

Jaime blinked up at Tony, eyes still wide and terrified, not looking at anyone else in the room. “I don’t know what that is.”

“Tragic,” Tony said. “Seriously, that’s just sad.” He opened the cupboard and pulled out the jar, and leaned over to drag the bread closer. “Clint, wanna grab the jelly from the fridge for me?” He started slathering slices of bread with peanut butter and pretended not to notice Jaime edging between him and the counter, turning Tony into a shield.

“This,” Clint announced to the room in general, “is very domestic. I want it clearly understood that if I break out in hives, it’s your fault.” But he dug around in the fridge anyway, finding strawberry, grape, and apricot marmalade (gross, that had to be one of Nat’s picks, because ew. Yuck.) and oh, look lemon curd. He looked at the kid for a minute, all skinny legs and huge eyes, sighed. “Fine, fine. Here…” He reached into the vents and pulled out a white jar. “This. Tony. He should have this.”

Marshmallow fluff. His personal goddamn stash of it, too. He hoped someone was taking note of his sacrifice.

Tony narrowed his eyes at the jar, and then at Clint. “...Yes. Good call, birdbrain. Fluffernutter it is.”

“Hey, I couldn’t get Barnes on board with marshmallows, maybe I’ll have better luck educating the kids.” He grabbed a few spoons, dug out a wad of fluff and handed it to Rikki like a lollypop. “Best shi-- er, stuff ever. Your dad hates it, but he’s weird and full of wrongosity.”

Tony snorted and spread a generous dollop on a slice of bread, then slapped it onto the side he’d already smeared with peanut butter and handed the whole mess to Jaime. “Here, try not to get it on your clothes. Or mine.” He eyed the jar again, dubiously, then reached for the strawberry jam. “Anyone else, while I’m sandwiching, here?”

Cap, who looked absolutely and utterly relieved now that Rikki had on more clothes than a stripper, raised a hand. “Thanks, Tony.” Sasha had clamped onto Steve’s wrist, taking banana slices from him as fast as Steve could pick them up. “This one’s not let me get a bite in at all.”

With a sly smirk, Rikki snitched the sandwich from Tony as soon as he finished it. She cut it into four triangles and started feeding the bits to Steve, looking coyly subservient and adoring at the same time.

The elevator dinged again, and Barnes stepped out, wearing what Clint thought of as his ad-for-
cigarettes outfit; tight jeans, boots, ironic tee, and sport jacket, his hair pulled into a messy bun. He stopped dead in his tracks at the chaotic domesticity going on in the kitchen.

Tony stiffened, just a bit, and focused very closely on his stack of peanut butter sandwiches.

“Well, that’s not fair,” Rikki said, undertone, staring at her father with… awe? Jealousy? Anger? Hard to tell. “My dad’s supposed to be some old guy, not… not a fucking supermodel who does better eyeliner than I do.”

“In case you hadn’t looked in a mirror recently, sweetheart,” Clint said, “you look just like him. Well, you know, except all… “ He made a swooping, curvy gesture with his hands. “Girly-girl.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, tiny smug smile on her lips. “Really? Good to know you like what you see.”

The black scowl Barnes turned on Clint was almost, but not quite, as hard as a blow. “Are you flirting with my daughter? She’s a bit young for you, don’t you think?”

Clint scoffed. “The age difference between you and Stark is twice that, and you don’t see us complaining that he’s too young for you.”

“I’m nineteen,” Rikki said, folding her arms over over her chest and glaring back at her father. “I’m an adult. Besides, you’re what? Twenty-five? And you seem to like older men. What’s he, like fifty?”

She directed her scorn at Tony, which didn’t maintain well as Jaime was right in her line of sight, grinning at his sandwich and marshmallow fluff all over his nose.

Barnes stole a glance at Tony, his entire heart in his eyes for just a second in a way that left Clint feeling like he’d been punched in the gut. (“Feelings, ugh!”) “My relationship with Tony is hardly relevant—” Tony flinched at that. (“Goddamn it Barnes, could you phrase that any worse? Idiot.”)

“Yeah, I’ve seen your press clippings, Dad. Besides, where do you get off, telling me what to do? You’ve been absent my whole life and now you want to swoop in and think you can play Daddy?”

Barnes spread his hands, “You came to me, kiddo.”

Steve pushed away from the table, disentangling himself from the baby. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “I think I’m going to go have a run, I’ll see you later.”

Rikki’s eyes lit up like fireworks at Fourth of July. “Mind if I come with you, Captain? I could use some air; it’s kinda rancid in here.” She glared at Barnes. “Maybe you could look after Jaime and Sasha for a bit, Dad?”

Steve blushed furiously, didn’t meet anyone’s eyes, but shrugged. “Sure, if you want.”

“Great!” She bounced on her toes excitedly. “I’ll get something more appropriate to wear!” She glowered at Clint, plucking at the ugly tee-shirt, then turned that blinding smile on Steve again. “You know, those little bots brought me a whole wardrobe, I can’t wait to test some of it out. I’ll meet you at the lobby in ten minutes?”

Steve flashed a look around the room as if pleading for help, but no one seemed interested in providing it. “Go ahead,” Barnes said. “Have a good run, Rikki.”

Rikki scooped up the baby, kissed his forehead and then handed him off to Barnes, who looked almost as terrified as Steve. “Jaime, keep an eye on your brother for me?”
Jaime nodded, licked fluff off his fingers and very seriously started trying to stretch his tongue out far enough to get the marshmallow crap off his nose.

The elevator closed behind Steve and Rikki. Clint turned to Barnes. “I don’t think it’s *me* flirting with her that you need to worry about, Pops.”

***

Tony

Tony had never been so relieved in his life to have JARVIS summon him to the hangar; the tension in the kitchen had managed to go up rather than down once Steve and the Winterette had left.

He watched the small hovercraft maneuver expertly to a landing, one hand on Jaime’s shoulder, reassuring. Bucky was standing off to the side, holding Sasha, but as far as Tony could tell, Bucky was actively avoiding meeting Tony’s eyes. Tony tried not to think about that, instead focusing on the ramp and the people coming down it.

“Professor,” Tony said, stepping forward and bending to shake Xavier’s hand. “It’s good of you to come on such short notice.” Jaime shuffled behind Tony, grip tightening on Tony’s shirt. Tony couldn’t tell if Jaime was more afraid of Xavier and his companions than any other strangers.

“It sounded like an urgent matter,” Xavier said. “You remember Dr. McCoy, I assume.”

“Hank.” Tony shook the Beast’s hand as well. It had been hard to get past McCoy’s appearance at first, but it hadn’t taken him too long: Tony’d had a lamp embedded in his chest for years, Bruce turned into a monster when angered, and Hank was covered with blue fur. Whatever. The important bit wasn’t Hank’s fangs or claws, but that beautiful *mind*. “You here to help us check things out?”

Hank’s teeth bared in a grin. “And to raid your lab,” he agreed.

“And this,” Xavier continued, “is Ellie Phimister. She’s relatively new to our school. She won’t be affected by the young one’s fire, and I thought the older children you mentioned might like someone closer to their age to talk to.”

The girl, her head shaved close, wore ragged goth clothing and barely deigned to look up from her phone long enough to give a muttered, “‘sup.” She’d probably just Instagrammed him and Bucky there with the kids, which was kind of exasperating.

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll have a lot to talk about,” Tony said. He made an effort to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Not much of one, though. “Good luck detaching this one from my leg, though; he seems to be permanently attached.” Tony ruffled Jaime’s hair again, and winked when Jaime looked up at him, eyes wide and uncertain.

Jaime glanced at Hank, then back at Tony. “Is… he the cookie monster?”

Hank looked tolerably amused. “Why? Are there cookies? I hope you didn’t let Hawkeye make them.”

“Barton’s not allowed to make anything but coffee and cold cereal,” Tony said, then told Jaime, “This is Hank McCoy. He’s a scientist, like Bruce.”

“And like you,” Jaime said. He sighed. “Is he going to hurt us?”

Bucky flinched, eyes wide and pained. “No, no, he’s not. Absolutely, he is not.” There was a
promise and a threat and fear and sympathy in his face all at once. “These are… the good guys, Jaime. I promise.”

The girl -- Phimister? -- rolled her eyes extravagantly at that, but didn’t contradict Bucky. Hank crouched down and held out one massive hand, palm-up, like he was letting a dog sniff at him. “I’m here to help your brother,” he said. “As are Professor Xavier and Negasonic. Would you like to come with us, so he knows he is among friends, and so you can make sure we do not hurt him?”

Jaime peered at Hank’s hand, not letting go of Tony’s leg. “I… yes. This pers… “ he glanced at Tony, then straightened his back and stepped to one side, parade rest. “I am capable of protecting my brother, sir.”

Bucky winced again. “Of course you are, Jaime.”

It ached, to see Jaime turn back into a miniature soldier when he’d been a shy boy all morning. “I can come with you,” Tony began, but Xavier held up a hand.

“It will be better not,” he said firmly, then fixed Tony with a stern, if sympathetic, look. “I think you and Mr. Barnes have some things to discuss, do you not?”

Tony made a face. “Stay out of my head,” he grumbled.

“It does not take any great power to read your faces,” Xavier returned. “It will be better for everyone if you talk, I think.”

Bucky slanted a quick, sardonic look at Tony. “Good thing he’s a professor. I think we’ve just been schooled.” He jerked his chin at Negasonic. “C’mere, fire-proofing. He’s a little warm right now, but not dangerously so.”

She looked put-out at having to put her phone away, but settled Sasha on her hip with an ease that suggested practice. “Lead the way, furball,” she told Hank. “I assume you know your way around this giant monument to Stark’s–” She glanced at Jaime, and then Xavier, and didn’t finish.

“Oh, yeah,” Bucky said. “Rikki will like you, no doubt. She went for a run with Steve, I’ll have JARVIS send her to you when she’s showered up.”

Tony watched them leaving with a sense of betrayal. He’d been trying not to have this exact conversation, damn it.

Bucky glanced at the departing kids, then heaved a huge sigh. “S’long as we’re on the roof, do you mind if I… uh, have a smoke?”

Shit, this was going to be bad. Bucky only smoked when he was feeling completely out of his depth, and Tony hadn’t even spilled the news yet. “Sure,” he said. “Go for it.”

“I don’t even know if it helps anymore, super-soldier lungs and all that, but… doin’ something with my hands? That helps,” he said. He dug around in his locker and pulled out a pack, tucked one cigarette behind his ear and lit a second before locking them back up. “This is so fucked up, Tony.” He drew a long drag, held it, then let the smoke slide sideways out of his mouth, away from Tony.

“You’re telling me,” Tony sighed. “You don’t even know the whole story yet. There’s been, mm, let’s call it a development.”

“There’s more?” Bucky scoffed. “Go on, knock me off the roof why don’t ya?”
Tony shivered, reflexively running the calculations in his head: wind shear as he jumped after, time for the suit to catch him, time for him to catch Bucky... “Natasha’s pregnant,” he said, tearing it off like a bandage.

Bucky closed his eyes, held the smoke in his lungs, and went utterly, utterly still, as if he’d looked face-first at a gorgon. The only indication that he was a person at all anymore was how the wind tore little strands of his hair out of the messy bun and whipped them around his cheeks.

Finally, he exhaled. “Yours, I take it.” It wasn’t a question, and he didn’t open his eyes.

“You’re not doing so bad, yourself. Jaime seems to like you,” Bucky mentioned, casual.

Tony snorted. “Yeah, he’s kind of latched on because his first name is Howard,” he said.

“Jesus, poor kid,” Bucky said.

“I know,” Tony said, and felt a smile tug at his lips.

Bucky took a long drag, exhaled. “Is Tash… is she okay? Happy? Does… I don’t even know how to ask.”

“She wants it,” Tony said. “She’s going to keep it. I don’t know how happy she is, yet. She came and yelled at me because it’s my fault, apparently, so she didn’t have a lot of happy showing. But I think she’ll get there.”

“Hey, if they didn’t wrap up your dick while Bruce was using you as a ride-along, that’s on them,” Bucky said, crossing his arms and letting his smoke rest against his lower lip.

Tony did laugh that time, which hurt. God, he loved Bucky. “Yeah, you try telling her that.”

“‘It’ll be okay,’” Bucky said. “‘Look at it this way, two of my three favorite people, in one little package. And given how goddamn horrified Steve is of my kids, I don’t think I’ll be an uncle anytime soon.’”

Tony would have been offended by that -- Jaime was a fantastic kid, and Sasha cute as a button -- but he’d seen the determined way Rikki had been leaning into Steve’s space, so he couldn’t blame Steve too much. “Uncle wouldn’t be bad,” he mused, idly. “I couldn’t fuck ‘em up too much if there was someone to take them away from me.”

“What are you even talking about?” Bucky snubbed out one smoke against his metal palm and lit the second one. “I thought you couldn’t push ‘em away fast enough.”

Tony looked directly at Bucky for possibly the first time in two days, blinking in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

Bucky raised his chin. “‘You left. You didn’t say a word to me about anything other than logistics, or whether or not Hydra sent something toxic and awful into our home. You didn’t come looking for me, and you know where I am when I’m stressed, Tony. I can only assume this is something you want nothing to do with at all.’”

Tony realized that his mouth was hanging open, and shut it with a snap. “I left because I was trying to... They’re kids, okay, no one wants me around their kids outside of an autograph line. I was trying
to, I don’t know, give you space for them!”

Bucky gaped at him, almost losing his cigarette and catching it absently between his index and middle finger. “Who are you talking to, Tony? I’m not a suburban mom, I’m the goddamn Winter Soldier. They’re kids, but they’re also soldiers. Who the fuck else is supposed to help me, but you?”

“I don’t know,” Tony gritted. “I figured Rogers, maybe. I just–”

“You just what? Thought you were going to crawl back into the bottle and try to slap Jaime around? Do you think that’s how I feel about you? That you’re a Howard remake? God damn it, Tony, have some faith, would you? Please?”

Tony flinched and turned away. “I’m not Howard,” he growled. “I wouldn’t– But I have no idea what to do instead! The last kid I spent any time with, I got him dragged into a literal firefight and then abandoned him, left him standing alone in the middle of the snow. I’m not…” He shoved his hands into his hair and pulled.


“That wasn’t you and you know it.”

“I know. Doesn’t mean I didn’t do it. Doesn’t mean I don’t remember it. Tony, please, I am begging you -- if you want I will get down on my fucking knees right here and beg. Please don’t make me choose. Don’t make me do this alone.”

It felt like he was having to drag every breath through a cocktail straw. “I want this,” he said to the floor. “That kid… If I could have that, have him, them… But I’m going to fuck it up, honey. That’s what I do. And then you’re going to have to make the call anyway. It’s… easier if I don’t get too attached first.”

Bucky flicked the smoke to the ground and stepped on it, then grabbed Tony’s shoulders and pulled him in. “Jaime’s been starving himself,” Bucky continued, his voice breaking and hot tears splashed down on Tony’s shoulder. “Because when Rikki didn’t do what Hydra wanted, they hurt him. To make her comply. He’s been blaming himself for that, and thought if he died, she wouldn’t have to be hurt anymore. And this morning? In the kitchen? He was eating. And smiling at you. Tony… you know I never told you this and I don’t even know why, but your laughter, it saved me. You can do that for him, Tony… please.”

Jesus, the poor kid; Tony had known Hydra had done terrible things to him -- to all of them -- but god, to use them against each other like that... Tony shivered, and pushed further into Bucky’s arms, hardly daring to hope.

“Are you gonna make mistakes? Fuckin’ A, of course you are, baby. That’s what happens to people. Even those of us who had decent upbringings… you think it was fair to Steve that Sarah hid her TB from him? Or that Thor’s dad didn’t make some epic, world-changingly fucked up decisions that led to Loki trying to take over the planet? Yeah, I know, you could make some massive screwups, too. Believe me, I’m worried about my own mistakes, too, but I took care of Steve, and he’s mostly okay, little punk. And if you don’t think JARVIS and the bots are your kids, you’re kinda missin’ the whole point of parenting.”

The bots that I routinely insult and threaten with disassembly? Tony wanted to protest, but it felt so good to feel Bucky’s arms around him, to feel the rumble of Bucky’s voice against his chest. And it was as terrifying as it had ever been, to think of having a child’s wellbeing in his hands, when the one and only precept of childcare that he knew was don’t be like Howard and Tony was more than
aware that there were plenty of other ways than Howard’s to ruin a child. But if Bucky wanted him, if Bucky for some utterly unfathomable reason could trust him, then Tony owed it to him to be worthy of that trust, didn’t he?

“Look, if this really isn’t something you want to do, I... understand that. We didn’t plan for it, but... and maybe we could still see each other on the weekends, or something, because I will never stop loving you, no matter what, but...I have to do this. But I’d really rather not have to do it alone.”

“No.” Tony fist ed his hands in the back of Bucky’s shirt and pressed his face against Bucky’s shoulder. “I do want it,” he said. “I still think I’m going to fuck it up. But I guess... I guess I can’t fuck it up as bad as Hydra, huh?” The way tension bled from Bucky’s body felt like finally drawing breath after being underwater too long. “Promise me, promise you’ll tell me when it happens. That you’ll make me listen.”

“Damn right I will,” Bucky said roughly. “You too, okay? Ain’t like I’ve ever done this before, either.”

Tony nodded, and shuddered with relief. He could have this. He could have it, and Bucky wouldn’t let him hurt them, because god knew they’d already been hurt enough. Shy, sweet Jaime and adorable Sasha and even Rikki who hated the sight of him. (Tony remembered being nineteen. God, what a miserable age, even without a lifetime of Hydra propaganda. Not as bad as fourteen, but still. He could endure her scorn; she was hardly the first and hardly the worst.)

“Sorry,” he breathed. “I’m so sorry. I was just... I was so sure you wouldn’t want me for this, and I didn’t want to have to hear you say it.”

“Some genius you are,” Bucky scoffed, holding Tony tighter. “There’s nothing in this world, Tony, that could make me not want you at my side.”

Chapter End Notes

Ellie Phimister (aka Negasonic Teenage Warhead) here is (mostly) the one from the Deadpool movie, not the one from the comics, just because we really liked her.
Rikki

At first, she’d just grabbed onto the idea of leaving the room; she was within an inch of falling on her knees and thanking God for Tony Stark, and wasn’t that galling as shit? And spending more time with the captain? That was just perfect; he was everything she expected in a supersoldier. And he was a volunteer, he’d chosen this life. Didn’t hurt anything that he was knock-her-over gorgeous. When he met her in the lobby, wearing his running clothes, she almost died right there on the spot; his shirt clung to his chest like a second skin and while he was wearing sweat pants instead of shorts, she got a pretty good eyeful of muscular thighs and calves as he moved.

Rikki had pulled on two specially-made sports bras, one red, one black, and a pair of knee-length stretchy pants. She’d bounced a few times, but the bras held her bosom in place, which was good; much as she wanted the captain to notice her, running was awkward if her breasts weren’t held down. The running shoes were lightweight, silver, with a red star on them and she wondered where they’d come from. She rubbed absently at the tattoo on her left shoulder, the red star with her codename underneath. The Cyrillic letters were familiar under her fingertips; sanktsii. Sanction.

“Where are we going?” Rikki asked.

“Van Cortlandt Park,” the captain said, flagging down a taxi and holding the door for her. “There’s over fourteen miles of trail, and it’s nice and green. My favorite, since I moved out of D.C.”

She nodded, trying not to stare out the windows like she’d never been to America before. (She hadn’t, but she didn’t really want the captain to know it.)

The taxi-driver was an Armenian with a wide, gap-toothed smile, and talked entirely more than necessary, which didn’t let her get on with her goal of getting to know Captain Rogers better, and Rikki eventually pushed back against the seat-back, pressing her feet into the base of the driver’s seat, which made the driver squirm uncomfortably as she messed with his lumbar support.

It wasn’t a very long drive, though, even in the morning traffic. Captain Rogers paid the driver and tipped outrageously. Rikki tried not to stare; couldn’t the Avengers simply commandeer transportation when they needed it? The driver should have been honored to carry them anywhere they wished.

Rikki walked over to the nearest green patch, glanced at the brown-wooden map and analyzed the various routes, her head for maps and tactics burning the image into her brain. She nodded after she held the picture, checked her watch. Forty seconds. She flinched; she was out of practice, but the captain didn’t chide her. “Do you wish to stretch, or run cold?”

“Better to stretch,” he said. “Don’t want to risk injuries when there’s no reason for it.” He folded over, stretching his legs, putting action to words.

Rikki nodded again, moved onto the grass and started her warm-up routine. Several years ago, when she was still a girl and thought that Frag had set the moon just for her, even though she was little more than a disappointing student, he’d shown her an American film, The Empire Strikes Back, and she modeled her routine on Luke Skywalker’s training, learning to balance upside down on one
About two years ago, she’d incorporated Jaime into the routine and she missed the comforting weight of him balanced on her soles. The training had come in handy as they escaped from Hydra, because she could run, jump, and flip without upsetting the baby strapped to her back. She wobbled, her thoughts spiralling out of control. She blanked her mind; closed her eyes, felt the living world around her, and steadied out. When she was centered again, and in control, she let herself down to the ground.

Captain Rogers, approaching the end of his warmup, apparently, bounced on his toes a few times and then performed a backflip from standing. “Ground’s nice and springy,” he said.

“<Show off>,” she muttered, linking her hands together and stretching to the sides.

“What’s that? I’m trying to learn some Russian, but I don’t pick these things up as fast as Tony does.”

“You’re very impressive, Captain,” she said. It wasn’t exactly the right translation, but he was hardly going to be able to look it up.

“Oh. I, that’s just. I like to get a feel for-- I’m not used to having an audience. I usually run a lot earlier.” He smiled half-heartedly.

“That must be nice,” she said. “I’ve never trained without at least one handler or tutor to judge my skills. I count on you to let me know if I falter, sir.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” he said. “This isn’t really training, you know. I just like to stretch my legs.”

“Life is training, Captain,” she said. “Set the pace.”

Those blue eyes were on her, then, not so flustered this time, simply appraising. “Okay. We’ll start off slow and build up. I don’t know how far your enhancements stretch, so speak up when I’m getting close to your limit, okay?”

Rikki didn’t answer, she dropped into a runner’s starting crouch. She nodded once, took a deep breath. She held it until he moved, and on the exhale, chased after him, her body moving in rhythm with her lungs and heartbeat, running for the sheer freedom of doing so.

The captain started sluggishly, only perhaps twice as fast as an unenhanced runner, but increased his speed quickly when he saw that she was keeping pace easily. He barely slowed as the paths curved around what seemed like hairpin turns, and a thrill raced through her that felt like laughter.

The scenery disappeared in a blur of colors, the rush of air across her nose and ears was green and fresh, leaves and grass and trees, undercut with the sharp scent of pavement, dog waste, human sweat. She gathered information as she moved, noting other runners in the park who stared after them as they hit over fifty klicks an hour. No bikes, which was good, since bikes were harder to dodge around. A group of middle-aged men crowded the path and Rikki hit the woods to their left, leaping over a downed tree and rocketing over a patch of wet ground to skid back onto the path some two hundred yards down, losing speed for a moment as she adjusted to the ground under her feet.

Captain Rogers was following her now, shouting apologies to the startled men, crashing through the woods like a bear.

“I’d hear that at least two kilometers away, Captain. Can’t you run quiet?” She grinned at him as he
drew abreast.

“Not a spy!” he returned, half-laughing, and put on a sudden burst of speed, shooting ahead of her.

“Suka, blyad,” Rikki muttered, dug in and damn, he was fast. She’d chased cars through Moscow that moved slower than he did. She caught a glimpse of a tree, the trunk angled from wind and growing patterns and she was up, scaling the bark and getting height on him. From her vantage, she leapt across the tree branches, and dropped back to the ground in front of him. “Eat dust, Captain,” she yelled, putting more effort into it and coming up to the end of her speed, not sure she could match this pace for long, but determined to try it.

“Not today!” he shouted, sounding happy about it, and hell, he got even faster. She would have squawked in outrage, but was breathing too hard to let it out. She squinted ahead -- another one of those hairpin turns that were probably reasonable for someone only going 20kph, with a low-hanging tree. She launched herself at it, catching the outflung branch just as he passed, and swung herself back into the lead as he slowed, just a fraction, for the turn.

“Cheater!” he accused, but he didn’t sound angry and she didn’t have enough of a lead to waste the effort to turn and look.

In the end, it was the poor equipment that failed her; running shoes off the rack couldn’t keep up with her, and she came down hard, the sole abraded and worn away by their circuits. She rolled as the shoe disintegrated under her, smashing into the underbrush and coming up hard against a good-sized oak that shuddered as she hit it.

“Shit!” Rogers churned to a stop beside her. “Are you okay?”

Rikki was soaked with dirty water, bark in her hair and leaves sticking to her skin as she crawled out of the woods. She glanced up at him from the ground and grinned, wide and open and delighted. “That was AWESOME!”

He grinned back at her, and offered a hand. “Not too many who can keep up with me, these days. Good job.”

She took his hand, let her fingers linger along his palm, panting and breathless from laughter and effort. “Stupid shoe,” she said. “I had you on the ropes.”

He pulled her to her feet as easily as if she were a wisp and not solid with muscle. “Only if that means what it meant back when I used to say it. Wait a minute and I’ll get us a cab to head back.”

She looked down at her sticky, wet self. “No driver’s gonna stop for us, with me looking like I had a fight with a pile of leaves and lost.”

“You don’t want to walk back with only one shoe,” he returned. “It’s more than ten miles.”

She smirked, kicking off the other shoe and then peeled her socks off. “What’s the roof run look like? In Moscow, I can go from Balashikha to Poldosk without touching the ground.”

“I try to confine my gymnastics to the gym,” the captain said. “You could probably get a fair way, but unless you’re a damned impressive long-jumper, we’ve still got to get back across the river.”

She tilted her head to one side and conceded. “Yeah, and that ceiling-computer said we’re not allowed outside the building unless one of you are with us. I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble by running off.”
She turned, trying to look at her back, the skin felt scratchy and rough as she rubbed at it. “Shit,” she muttered, her hand coming back tacky with blood.

“Yup, we’ll get a cab,” he said decisively. “Come on, let’s get you back to the Tower and cleaned up.”

“Thanks, Captain,” Rikki said. “This was… fun.” She rolled the word around in her mouth, trying to figure out what it tasted like. “Phoenix soldiers don’t run as fast as I do. It’s good, to be challenged.”

He made a face. “Definitely. We’ll have to bring some of the others, next time. Oh, and you’ll love the obstacle course, too. Tony keeps it interesting, something different every time.”

Rikki rolled her eyes. “Tony, Tony, Tony. Blech.” She tossed her tattered shoes into the trashcan as they exited the park.

“He’s a pretty good guy, once you get to know him,” the captain said, half-distracted as he waved down a taxi.

“Don’t really want to, but okay,” she said. She crawled into the cab, hissed as her back touched the seat, and leaned forward, leaving a faint smear of blood on the seat. “Ug. That’s hardly hygienic.”

“We’ll get you some alcohol wipes or something when we get back,” Captain Rogers promised.

Rikki sighed. “Quietly. Dad’s gonna freak. He just has that look about him, don’t you think?” She leaned over, bracing herself against his legs, to keep her back away from the dirty seat and draping over the captain like a sleepy cat.

“As many-- uh. Right. Okay.”

“Hush,” she said, tapping his leg. “If I concentrate, I can heal this up by the time we get back.” And she closed her eyes, shuddered once, and dropped off into an impossible sleep.

***

Bruce

Bruce stared at the door between their suites; a door that locked (or opened) from both sides. Instead of moving into his room, or allowing Bruce into her space, when they’d finally come to the conclusion that love was a thing they would try to make work, Natasha had merely borrowed a contractor from downstairs and had the door installed.

It wasn’t like they had an overabundance of stuff to fill out two complete suites -- the permanent residences in the Tower weren’t exactly small, either, pushing upward of a thousand square feet per Avenger in a city where a closet and a toilet might run eight hundred dollars a month. The two units together were larger than most high-end houses, even in Connecticut. Certainly immense compared to the little shack he had back in India.

Both he and Nat were minimalist, as it came to decorations, although her color scheme was all fiery reds and brilliant oranges on black; what Bruce thought of as classic Kiev. Pretty, but not soothing. His own rooms were painted in pale blues and soothing grays and nothing remotely resembling green. Nat didn’t have stuff because she’d been taught from a young age that her own wants and needs were irrelevant and she still hadn’t learned joy in inanimate objects. Bruce, because the Other Guy had wrecked so many things that Bruce had trouble collecting anything, knowing that he was one flicker away from destroying it all in a single moment of rage.
Jokingly, Clint had once called their home “minimalist depression style” and suggested they go to flea markets more often.

Which was how they came to have a strange Sunday ritual, on weeks that they weren’t Avenging. Two or three hours set aside to wander the streets of the city with no destination in mind; they’d flip coins at intersections. Once they arrived at a city block, they’d seek out the nearest shop, curio, bookstore, bodega, stamp collecting hobby shop, whatever they could find and they’d examine all the items for sale within.

Each week, they took a turn buying something. Last week, Nat had picked up a delicate, sea-shell patterned tea cup, the porcelain so thin it was almost translucent, and a matching saucer. A few days later, Bruce had provided a tin of her favorite tea and watched with pride as she sipped it from her new cup. It wasn’t the same, really, as items passed down from parents and grandparents and great aunts, but they were slowly turning their flat, empty space into a home.

They maintained separate bedrooms for occasions when one or the other was restless; months ago, Bruce had woken in a panic and almost greened out when Nat had a nightmare. Her eyes sightless, fixed on some point in the past, she had been tugging at her wrist, desperate, as if she’d been handcuffed to the bed and couldn’t get free. When she’d talked about it, later, he’d discovered that had, indeed, been the case. She’d spent most of her formative years in the Red Room where being cuffed in at night was the bedtime routine she was most accustomed to.

He’d greened out even more when he found out she sometimes cuffed herself to the bed when she couldn’t sleep, that the feel of the metal cuff was somehow comforting.

One of the bedrooms in his suite was occupied by a Hulk Cage. He hated it, hated that he kept needing it, but at the same time, was relieved that he could be near her and still be safe.

She never suggested having discussions with the glass between them. Never did anything to suggest she was afraid, or even nervous. She let him place all the restrictions, let him decide what was safe and what wasn’t. What he was comfortable with. As long as the pace moved forward, she didn’t mind that it was glacial.

In the half of the joined suites that was Nat’s, because the door was only that, a door, and their spaces belonged only to themselves, and they shared with each other, Nat had taken him into her svyatilishche -- her sanctuary -- for this conversation. He’d been here exactly once before; this door was always shut, always locked, and the first time he’d seen it, he wasn’t sure what he was looking at.

She’d blocked over the windows; there was no natural light. One wall held rack after rack of candles, all red. Slowly, she lit two, knelt on the cushion in the middle of the floor. She gestured, graceful, at a cabinet to one side, the only furniture in the room aside from the candle rack. Inside, there were more candles, and a few spare cushions. He took his time, testing the materials of each, the plushness, and she seemed to approve, then withdrew one in a pale tan, like desert sands.

Nat’s face was never open; after a lot of practice, Bruce could sometimes read her subtle body language under the mask of whatever she was projecting. Even when she was sincere, she was not often outside of her mask. The svyatilishche was her freedom room, she said, the only place where she allowed herself to feel what she felt, allowed herself to show her emotions on her face. Bruce wasn’t sure how it mattered, since she rarely, if ever, allowed anyone in the room to see it, but at the same time, there were dark green things in his own mind that he reveled in, even if he would never actually admit it aloud, that sometimes, often, even, he liked Hulking out, liked the freedom, liked the relief. It was only when he was back to human form that regret and depression stung him like wasps, that he was afraid of what and who he was.
That she’d brought him in here, when she started the conversation with, “There is something you need to know,” was mildly worrisome.

When they were both seated on cushions, she made a quick gesture and JARVIS turned on the music; nothing he’d heard before, but the house beats and synthetic keyboards put Bruce in mind of club scenes that he had always tended to avoid. The singers come on and chant harsh, angry Russian. Nat kept the music soft enough that they could easily talk over it, but for the first few minutes, she just closed her eyes and swayed softly to the beat.

She didn’t speak until the strains of the first song (Bruce hesitated to call it a melody, because there was nothing melodic about it) ended and a second song (at least he thought it was a different song, he couldn’t tell, it might have been the same one, or a ‘dance remix’ or something. Music was never a thing he had been particularly good with) began.

“I made a mistake,” she said. Her skin flushed and her blush was not pretty; it clashed terribly with her hair and spread down her throat in uneven blotches.

Completely unlike Nat to be so utterly honest; he was used to her hedging -- the same way Tony often hedged with a ‘that’s not the expected result’ -- defusing the situation, or already turning it on its head. A few times, he knew, she’d admitted to being caught, although rarely being wrong altogether.

There were so many options to chose from; was the mistake something in one of the Avenger’s missions? Things had not been going well; M.O.D.O.K. was floating circles around them, and they hadn’t even been able to figure out what he was looking for. There were plenty of opportunities for mistakes there. Was it something with the team? Emotions had been particularly high at the Tower for a number of months, between Barnes joining the team, the science gone awry, the explosive new relationship that Steve had and the emergence of old enemies in the form of Leviathan, the addition of a handful of Barnes children. Not to mention Odin’s ultimatum and the vast array of crazy that had gone along with that particular misadventure.

And those were just the surface, lighter issues that could be solved, resolved, or abandoned. There were other, deeper issues... the worst fear, that she’d made a mistake about them. That she’d decided that Bruce couldn’t be trusted, that the Hulk couldn’t be trusted, that she was in danger, or that she was just bored with the snail’s pace they moved, with the dozens of failures in science, the...

Bruce took a deep breath; they’d discussed this before. Nat had a list, what she called the highest mandates.

Survive. Love. Question. Do not project.

The four guiding principles of her life.

Bruce plucked one from the list; do not project. Fearing that she was going to leave him, that this was the bad decision she was prepping to admit to, that was him telling her how she felt, even if he never said a word.

Waiting. That was harder. The Other Guy didn’t like to wait, and he was like a pacing tiger in the back of Bruce’s brain, just itching for the chance. The Other Guy was also jealous; he cared for Natasha in his own right and there was loathing and anger from him directed at Bruce, as if Bruce was keeping the Hulk away from something he loved, cared for. The Hulk’s interest in Nat as a person had made things harder; after the body-swap, there had been a great deal of hostility there; directed at Bruce, rather than Tony, for cheating the Hulk of his opportunity.
She waited, and Bruce waited and the silence between them stretched like taffy, and finally Bruce realized that she was waiting for him to say something. Anything.

“You want to tell me about it?” Bruce offered.

Apparently that was the right response, and Bruce had gotten better at them. He used to demand, badger, bother, and once the Hulk took over his life, avoidance had been the key. Avoidance of everything, too much so. He’d denied himself friendship, denied himself the comfort of another human touch, denied that there was anything good that he could put forth in the world. He’d known, as soon as the Harlem thing was over that he was never going to be remembered for science; he had as much to give to the world as Tony Stark, or Reed Richards, or Hank McCoy, but he was going to be remembered for so much less than that; his great, green ball of rage monster. That was his legacy.

Until Nat came into his life. And taught him differently.

Nat smiled and at the same time, tears started down her cheeks, silent and unflinching and Bruce had to grip his thighs with his fingers to hold himself in place, because she was weeping and he was supposed to do something about that, except he has no idea what.

“I made an assumption,” she said, lightly, as if she wasn’t crying, and Bruce suddenly wondered if she was aware of it at all. “I shouldn’t have, because I know how Tony is, and I should have followed up, but I was too eager and I wanted too much and… now everything is different.”

Bruce closed his eyes, breathing calm and quiet because the Other Guy was not calm, was not quiet and you remember that it was Tony that I lay down with.

“Just say it,” Bruce said. Demanded, really, but who was counting, at this remove?

And when she did, for just a moment, the whole bottom of his world dropped out.

“I’m pregnant.”

That… was so much not what he expected to hear that he almost allowed himself to Hulk out in sheer relief, and that had never happened before. A flurry of questions built up behind his eyebrows, but none of them were the right question, all stupid and invasive and profoundly, undesirably male questions. He sorted through them carefully, then ventured with, “Is this a problem, or an announcement?” Seeking clarity. The child had to be Tony’s. That was an easy conclusion to draw; the hows and whys and weren’t yous were pointless, because she was certain, and Tony was the only physical person she’d been with. Well, unless she really was knocking with Clint from time to time in the vents, like he sometimes made jokes that they were, and Bruce wasn’t even certain that Nat would think of that as sex at all. She and Clint had some sort of platonic soulmate thing going on that Bruce couldn’t wrap his head around but it was okay, and he was fine with that, and if… but no, if it was Clint, it would have happened sooner. The timing was… right. Still keeping his mouth shut because she hadn’t answered him.

“I guess that depends on you,” she said. “I spoke with Tony and--”

“Why?” That hurt, god that hurt, that she would go to Tony, tell Tony this before she told Bruce? What was… he inhaled sharply, got to his feet, paced around the room, quick at first, then slowing, and Nat watched him with those pale, knowing eyes, as he calmed himself.

“Because I was angry,” she said. “That’s where the mistake came in. He’d put in at medical to get a vasectomy, a few years back. I made the stupid assumption that he’d actually gotten it, but I forgot. We had so much Avenger shit going on at the time that he couldn’t take a few days for outpatient,
and then Pepper left and he thought that it wasn’t so urgent, then Yasha joined us, and Yasha’s apparent fertility aside, pregnancy didn’t seem quite so much of a concern for Tony. So…”

“Is this a you problem, a me problem, or an us problem?” Bruce asked.

“Definitely an us problem,” she said, giving him a quick, shy smile. “Random assorted possible complications aside, I want this baby. My preferred selected outcome is that we have this baby. Legally, that will involve some paperwork with Tony, get him listed as a sperm donor—” Well, Tony certain was that, just not in any normal, rational sort of way, but the law didn’t care about reality “-- and you for legal adoption. We’d stay in the Tower, let Tony play the generous batshit crazy uncle, and have a team of super-powered babysitters.

“Second solution; I keep the baby, you don’t take responsibility as father -- which is fine, Bruce, calm down -- and Tony provides financial support for me and the child, and you and I carry on as a couple, but not both parents. Third solution, you and I do not stay together and one of us moves out of the Tower. If it’s me, accept that Clint will probably come with me and do his best to help parent. Scary thought, sometimes, but I think he’s going to be able to relate better to a small child than I am.

“Last option, I have the baby and give it up for adoption. My enhancements aren’t as strong as the others, and with Tony as genetic donor... Well, the child will probably not be a danger to normal kids; maybe run faster or be stronger, but only in a top of human-norm sort of way. I can’t promise that Tony won’t... try to circumvent that in some manner. Those are the options that I see that I can accept. I will not terminate the pregnancy. But if you have other suggestions, I’m willing to listen.”

“Is there a time limit on this decision?” Bruce hedged a little toward being proud of himself; he was handling this discussion exactly the way Nat wanted to. They’d had several conflict/resolution conversations before this moment, usually on what he was or was not comfortable with, and it was getting easier to approach a conversation like it was a project or plan of attack. Nothing like what he’d known in previous relationships, not that he’d had lots of luck with those. His parents’ marriage had been a disaster of epic proportions and Bruce himself had fought, long, hard, and dirty with Betty Ross, right up until he had to leave her rather than be responsible for hurting her. She hadn’t taken it well, if the angry letters she’d managed to get to him were any indication.

“Some of the legal stuff will be easier sooner rather than later, but all the way up until I go into labor, we can change or decide on just about anything.”

“Good,” Bruce said. He leaned over, kissed her mouth lightly. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

He’d been planning to give it to her for Christmas, and then he’d chickened out at the last minute. Mostly it was a matter of consideration after watching her snort and scoff at some of the more lavish proposals in the terrible romcoms that Barnes and Tony liked to watch; how a public proposal was bullying and something something feminism, something something agency. Bruce tucked the package back in his pocket and was glad he’d gotten carried away with the whole purchasing jewelry thing. The salesperson had earned the hell out of their commission. Nat had seemed pleased enough with the less emotionally laden, if vastly more expensive, necklace and bracelet set and wore them just about any time they weren’t Avenging. And then the thing with Tony had happened and Bruce had set it aside again, waiting for a better time.

There was never going to be a better time.

“So,” he said, getting back on the cushion, sitting criss-cross, “decisions. In my defense, I’ve had this for about six months now, waiting for the perfect moment, so this isn’t a hasty, reactionary sort of thing, and I know I’m not romantic, and based on the way you snark on the movies we watch, romance isn’t exactly your thing, either. I didn’t… er, prepare any remarks. You know I’m not good
with words.”

The side of her mouth tipped up. “You do okay,” she said.

“Can’t say I was expecting a baby and I admit to no small amount of trepidation for me around a very breakable child.” He handed her the box. “But I’ve thought about this for a while now, and… would you… Natasha Romanov, will you marry me?”

Natasha opened the tiny box, her eyes widened. The ring was deceptively simple, blackened gold with a single, round emerald and on either side, half-moon rubies. “Oh,” she said, more of a gasped inhalation than a word. “It’s lovely.” Bruce waited, not quite fidgeting until she slanted a look at him. “Is there a time limit on this decision?”

Bruce snorted, laughing, then clapped his hands over his mouth to hold it in. “I do love you,” he said, finally.

“I adore you,” she said, handing him the box back. “Yes, absolutely, yes. Put it on me.”

He took up the ring, held it carefully between his fingers and slid it on her ring-finger. The Hulk, who’d leaned forward in his head, observing carefully, roared his approval. So rare, both sides of him in complete accord.

Natasha wrapped her arms around his neck and brought him in for a kiss, and if they were a little less careful than usual, the Other Guy didn’t see the need to come out and play.

Chapter End Notes

Terrible Russian translations
Suka, blyad - bitch motherfucker

Also, this is not QUITE Bruce's ring, but it'll give you a general idea.
When Bucky was in the mood to ramble, he was quite convincing in his arguments for fate and destiny. Steve was still not sure he believed that karmic balance was a thing, but he did have to admit, there were things in his life that he could completely take for granted that they would never, ever change, that they would never, ever play out differently.

One of those was: whenever a situation could be presented in its worst possible light, that’s exactly what would happen.

Carrying Rikki Barnes into the Tower, still lingering in her healing sleep, was a perfect example of that phenomena.

Because who else was he going to run into while carrying a passed-out, half-dressed teenage girl but his super-girlfriend, Jessica Jones?

So, so typical. That was his life now.

Jess had been on an assignment for almost a month, working with the remnants of SHIELD, helping to track down and rescue Inhumans and mutants who’d been kidnapped and exploited. While she found it satisfying work and Steve was proud of her, they were apart these days more often than they were together.

Under normal circumstances, spotting her for the first time in weeks, Steve would have run to her and they’d have crashed together in their need to touch and kiss. Probably they’d have knocked something over and broken something else because that’s what they tended to do when they weren’t paying attention. (Steve spared a brief moment of regret for Bucky, who loved a normal, breakable human and had to be so very careful all the time.)

Except this time, Steve sort of wanted to hide, because this… this did not look good. He didn’t. Wanted to, but didn’t. Jess had absolutely no hesitation calling him out on his bullshit and despite how it looked, he really wasn’t doing anything wrong.

“Jess!” Steve called, getting her attention from where she was talking to Tower security, probably registering another powered person who could take refuge in the Tower until other arrangements could be made.

Jess turned toward his voice, already grinning, but when she saw him, her eyebrow went way up into her hairline. She took one look at Rikki and the other eyebrow joined it. “Are we having another ‘what happens in Asgard’ moment?” she asked. (It had taken months to pry the story out of Clint about the time he’d been changed into a woman.)

“What? Oh, no, this isn’t Bucky. Looks like him, though, I know. This is Rikki Barnes, Bucky’s daughter. I was taking her up to medical; want to ride in the elevator with me?”

“Rogers,” Jess said, her hands on her hips, “are you planning to use me as a human shield when Bucky finds out you’re toting his daughter around like she’s the princess you found in another castle?”

“Nope,” Steve said. They walked over to the elevator. “JARVIS, can you let Bucky know I’m taking Rikki to medical, please, and ask him to meet us there?” He turned back to Jess. “It’s not
entered your mind at all that I might be happy to see you, after you’ve been gone for a month?”

Jess tipped her eyes at him; she and Bucky were masters of eyerolling, tying for second place, right behind Tony. Honestly, it was a wonder that Steve didn’t find himself tripping over eyeballs, the number of people in the Tower who used that as self-expression these days. “You look guilty,” she finally said.

Steve snorted, trying to hide his smile. No one had ever accused his girl of being unobservant. Or subtle. “Feelin’ it,” he said. “They just got here a few days ago. Bucky… has been flipping out, to put it mildly. And now I’m bringing her back, hurt? Doesn’t speak well of me, as a guardian.”

The elevator opened, letting them out into medical. Bucky was already there, pacing right in front of the door. “No,” he said, shortly, as soon as Steve stepped out.

“What’s no?”

“No medical. Helen can come up to the kids’ room,” Bucky said, pointing back at the elevator. “They’re like me, and I ain’t gonna traumatize her by lettin’ her wake up somewhere that reads like a lab. What happened?”

“She hit a tree,” Steve said. “At sixty, maybe sixty-five miles an hour. I’m not sure exactly, but she runs fast. If we were on a flat-out and she had decent gear, she might be faster than I am.”

Bucky looked at him, flat and unimpressed. “I’m faster than you are,” he pointed out.

“Like father, like daughter, I guess,” Steve said. “She said she could heal it up if she slept, but the cab ride back wasn’t long enough, maybe? Or she’s more injured than she looked; seemed like just her back got scraped up pretty bad.”

Somewhat to his surprise, Bucky seemed to accept that explanation, though he still looked tense and worried. “If she could talk after it happened, she’ll be okay. Come on, I’ll help you get her settled. Helen’s already putting together her gear.” He leaned around Steve to wave at Jess. “And get you filled in on all the news, I guess. Welcome back, it’s another Tuesday in Avengers Tower.”

***

Tony

Sorting things out with Bucky left Tony feeling more clear-headed than he had since before the mess with M.O.D.O.K. had begun, so he’d gone up to the lab where Xavier and Hank were working on the exploding baby issue, ready to help wherever he could. (It had nothing to do with wanting to see the kids and know he was not only allowed but encouraged to like them, to grow fond.)

He had to endure a few moments of Xavier looking smug, but it was worth it for the look of relief on Jaime’s face when he came in. Tony was used to people being excited to see him, or upset, or frightened, or angry; and he even had a little experience with some few people being happy to see him, but relief was, if not unique, then at least novel.

“What’s shaking?” he asked, coming around the exam table between Jaime and Hank, where Jaime could use Tony’s body as a shield if he needed one. He ruffled Jaime’s hair as he passed, but turned most of his focus to Sasha, standing on the X-girl’s lap and attempting to scale her like a climbing wall. She looked bored and annoyed, but she wasn’t trying to blow him up or kick him in uncomfortable places, and in Tony’s experience, that was about as much as you could expect from a certain type of teen girl.
“We’re making some progress,” Hank reported, waving at the screen in front of him. “You’re welcome to see, though I don’t know if your particular specialties will lend themselves to this analysis.”

“That was probably the very nicest version of ‘stand back and let the grownups work’ I’ve ever heard,” Tony congratulated him. He peered at the screen anyway “How are you getting the data? You’re not, like, poking the kid until he combusts or something, are you? Because I’m pretty sure that’s against the rules.”

“Some of it I am able to skim from his surface thoughts,” Xavier said. “Largely for purposes of correlating his emotional state with his level of control.”

Tony flapped a hand. “We already have that data,” he said. “Kid gets mad, kid goes up in flames. Literally.”

“Any high level of excitement will work, as it happens,” Hank said. “It is also protective; when Negasonic uses her powers, he ignites.”

Tony gave McCoy his best glare. “And exactly what were you going to do if he hadn’t managed to protect himself?”

The girl rolled her eyes so hard Tony could almost hear the muscles straining. “I can control the level of force, I’m not a cretin.” Her neck lolled around until she was staring sullenly at Xavier. “Bring one of the others next time. There’s, like, at least five other people who can handle this.”

“I’m so very impressed by your sunny disposition and dedication to improving the lives of others that I’m going to reward you,” Tony told her. She narrowed her eyes at him, and he grinned. “Want a new phone?”

She rolled her eyes again -- Tony was beginning to understand why parents threatened kids with the ‘they’ll get stuck that way’ line -- and muttered, “Yeah, right.”

“No, we’ve been looking for beta testers for the new model,” Tony said. “The testing department doesn’t really abuse them the way a real user would.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “I can’t tell if you’re making fun of me or if you actually mean it.”

“What, it can’t be both? JARVIS, have Testing send up a unit or three for Furiosa here.”

“Three?”

“I’m assuming, witty personality like that, you’ve got some friends.”

“...I think I hate you.”

“Zero for two with teens this week,” Tony mock-sighed, and turned back to Hank. “Okay, so distill down the gobbledegook and tell me what you want me to do.”

“I think I can synthesize a compound that will react to the low-level energy signature that precedes ignition,” Hank said, not looking away from the screen where he was manipulating chemical models. “If we put it in something that rests against his skin -- an armband or necklace, perhaps -- then the reaction can trigger a warning of some sort, at least.”

A small fist curled in the back of Tony’s shirt. “He doesn’t like cold,” Jaime said. “If he feels cold
against his skin, there is an 83% chance that he will stop the fire. Rikki keeps ice on hand, whenever possible.”

Tony twisted around to look at Jaime’s wide eyes and solemn face. “You think he can train himself to control it that way?”

Jaime’s head cocked slightly, eyes going distant for a moment. “With consistent early application, strong odds,” he ventured. “60% likelihood within three weeks, almost 75% at two months. Goes up from there, but I don’t have enough data to compute the curve.”

Tony rested a hand on Jaime’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “That’s fine, that’s good enough. Definitely a solid approach. Hank, what’d you think?”

“Mmm.” Hank doodled some more chemistry. “Yes, it should be possible to make the reaction endothermic.”

“Great, so we just need something to put it in that he can wear. Wearables are definitely my field; I’m going to go down to the workshop and knock something together, unless you need me to stick around here for some reason?”

“No, go play with your little toys, Stark,” Hank chuckled. “I’ll have this ready in a couple of hours.”

“Awesome.” Tony clapped his hands. “Gonna tag along and help me out?” he asked Jaime.

Jaime’s eyes rounded. “Can I?” Then his face fell. “But I can’t leave Sasha. I promised Father I would protect him.”

Tony couldn’t decide if that was sweet or heartbreaking. Probably mostly heartbreaking, right? “Well,” he said, “I think if Dr. McCoy doesn’t need him for the next little while -- do you, Hank?”

“What?” Hank’s head swung around to blink at them. The little glasses perched on the end of his snout really didn’t do much to negate the effect of those fangs. “Oh, no, I won’t need him again until I have the reactant synthesized, for testing purposes.”

“Great. Then Sasha can come with us. Along with Fireproofing, here, so we can get her phone set up.”

***

Rikki

Rikki came awake, too warm and sweating, starving and thirsty and no memory of how she’d come to be where she was.

She didn’t even know where she was.

She inhaled, slow, careful, not opening her eyes, not letting any signs of wakefulness slip her grasp. She heard someone breathing, not anyone she knew. She smelled acetone, powder, chapstick. Heard a heartbeat, someone young, probably female. Her eyelids were dark red; there was light in the room, but not much.

“Hey there,” the woman said. “You don’t need to pretend you’re still asleep. I got precog. You’re gonna open your eyes right about… now.”

Rikki opened her eyes.
“Ha! That’s three and one, today,” she said. Rikki stared; she’d never seen a woman quite like this one before; her black hair was shaved almost entirely and she wore silver piercings all up her left ear, and one in her nose. She had dark eyes, thick black eyeliner, black lipstick, and to complete the look, every stitch of clothing she wore was black, except for a brilliantly yellow belt. The sole light in the room was coming from a phone that she poked at gleefully, even after looking up over the edge to wink at Rikki.

“Where --”

“One floor down from the penthouse,” the woman said. “Your dad got you more permanent quarters. Bigger, nicer. And with the literal god among men across the hall, in case someone needs to make it rain in here. Some sweet digs, really. At the school, we have to share a room, unless you’re one of the top-notchers. They get a room to themselves, but only if they’re dangerous. I got my power under control, so I share a room with two other girls.” She rolled her eyes.

“Who--”

“Negasonic Teenage Warhead’s what they call me,” she said, “Ellie Phimister. You can call me Elz, if you want.”

“Could--”

“Oh, right, sorry, yeah. Precog. Hang on.” Elz took a few deep breaths, her eyes turning from dark brown to brilliant orange for just a moment, flooding the room with brimstone light. “I’m s’posed to practice a few hours a day, but I can turn it off. I know, finishing your sentences for you is very annoying.”

Rikki opened her mouth, waited, then finally got a full sentence in. “What happened?”

“Dunno,” Elz said. “Captain America carried you into the building and your dads were all frantic and stuff, but the doc checked you out and you’re fine. Apparently. Fractured vertebrae, but for you, that’s nothin’ to worry over. Stark-Raving-Mad and the One-Armed-Bandit are getting food with your brothers, Be Tee Dubs. Since the Professor is still here, I thought I’d sit with you, so you had a friendly face to wake up to.”

Well, there was something she didn’t want to think about; the insulting implication that Tony Stark was, in any way, going to be a parent to her or her brothers. “<I am dreaming.>” Rikki said, muttering, rubbing at her eyes.

“<No, you’re not.>” Elz said, following her into Russian. “<Sorry, my teacher is Russian, he’s been teaching me. Professor Rasputin. Colossus, we call him. He’s not in the country right now -- he had family business in Russia -- so Professor Xavier brought me with him, since I can’t be burned. And because he thought you might need a friend.>”

That jerked at something deep inside her, tugged at it. Rikki clenched her jaw, refusing to let the thread unravel. “<Assets don’t require friends.>” she said.

“Maybe not,” Elz said. “I don’t require a new phone, either, but I got one. Sooo, this one’s yours. I already put myself in your contact list. Call me. Text me. Snapchat, google hangouts, skype, whatever’s your thing.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Precog,” Elz said, again. “And I can see that you’re gonna, actually, require friends in the not-too-distant future.”
Chapter Notes

For those who are averse, most of everything after the first break is smut! (You may want to read the first handful of paragraphs for some dad!Bucky feels, but once they start moving in a smutty direction, that's the rest of the chapter.)

Tony

Rikki had been quietly but obviously furious when Jaime asked Tony to put him to bed. If she’d had power like Sasha’s, Tony would have been a cinder before he’d gotten through the door, just from the force of her gaze.

Tony didn’t really care. Rikki wasn’t ever going to like him; the best he could hope for was something like grudging acceptance. As long as she didn’t actively try to sabotage Tony’s relationship with Bucky, he could work around it.

Jaime’s room was the smaller of the bedrooms in the guest suite where the kids had been stashed -- Rikki and Sasha shared the bigger room, Rikki in the bed and Sasha in a hastily-fabricated crib strong enough to withstand superbaby strength and heat. At least in theory. More often than not, at least so far, all three wound up together in Rikki’s bed, curled together like spoons.

Not that Tony could blame them; they were still very much in a strange and unfamiliar place. It was no wonder that they clung to each other.

Still, Jaime had asked Tony to put him to bed and when Tony had agreed, Jaime had led Tony to “his” room. It was still very spartan, the tasteful-but-neutral decor made it look like an upper-end hotel room instead of someone’s home. The only things that gave any hints about the room’s occupant were an untidy scatter of books on the desk and nightstand, a teddy bear on the bed, and the assortment of child-sized clothes hanging in the closet and strewn haphazardly in the general vicinity of the hamper.

Tony didn’t have the slightest idea how to put someone to bed who wasn’t either a) young enough that they had to be changed and lifted into a crib, or b) an adult using the phrase euphemistically. He picked a book up from the desk at random and flipped through the pages; it turned out to be a text on the physics of combustion and explosion. “A little light reading?” he asked.

Jaime’s head cocked to one side. “Thi-- I don’t have the strength or speed enhancements that Rikki and Sasha have. I can make up the lack, sometimes, with precision targeting and advanced situational analysis. But to do that, I have to understand all the variables. Study is essential to efficient operation.”

“Still not a soldier,” Tony pointed out. “Though I’ll be the last to discourage study. But maybe we can find you some more constructive fields to dig into.” He dropped the book back on the desk and turned to find Jaime standing beside the bed, almost at attention. “What’s this?”

“Inspection,” Jaime said, and his eyes didn’t roll, but Tony could hear it in his tone.
Tony snorted. “Hands washed, face clean, teeth brushed?”

Jaime did give him a “what kind of idiot are you” sort of sideways look for that. “Yes.”

“Good enough for me,” Tony said. He clapped his hands and made a shooing gesture. “Get in the bed.” Jaime hesitated, then climbed onto the bed and wriggled under the covers, knocking the teddy bear to the floor in the process. Tony picked it up and offered it back.

Jaime took it, though Tony got the impression it was more out of reflex than because he actually wanted it. He turned it over in his hands. “Real bears are scary,” he said.

“True,” Tony said. “We can get you something else if you’d rather. Rabbit or something.”

Jaime shrugged. “Soldiers don’t need toys.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Tony said, “but we are in fact capable of providing wants in addition to needs. Took me a while to convince your dad of that, too. So the question is not whether you need a new toy, but whether you want one. Don’t decide now; we’ll go shopping or something tomorrow. You can pick out some stuff for Sasha, too, while we’re at it.”

Jaime’s eyes lit up at that, and Tony smothered a grin. If he could get the kid to splurge on Sasha, then Tony could keep watch for the things that Jaime’s eyes lingered on without asking for. Maybe he’d bring Clint along; that seemed like the sort of thing Clint would know how to watch for. Also, watching Clint in a toy store was bound to be hilarious.

“So that’s tomorrow,” Tony said. “For now, though... I don’t know; what am I supposed to do, here? Help me out, I’m new to this.”

“Me, too,” Jaime said, suddenly looking every bit the small child he was. “Sometimes Rikki reads to us?”

“Reading,” Tony repeated. “Yeah, I can read.” He pulled out his phone and flipped to the Kindle app. “JARVIS, what’ve we got here that’s, y’know, vaguely age-appropriate?” The screen shuffled and re-sorted, and Tony considered the top ten or so before selecting one more or less at random and beginning to read. He looked up a while later -- twenty minutes? half an hour? -- to find that Jaime had gone slack in sleep, body curled toward Tony like a plant growing toward the sun.

The ache in Tony’s chest was nothing like the way he felt when he watched Bucky sleeping, and it was exactly like it. He tugged the blanket up over Jaime’s shoulder, hesitated, then bent to kiss the tousled hair before he backed out of the room and carefully closed the door.

Bucky was waiting for him just outside, leaning on the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and a smile on his face that Tony wasn’t entirely sure how to read. “You are so gone on that kid,” he said.

“Shut up,” Tony muttered, but he let Bucky pull him closer for a kiss.

“He’s just as gone on you,” Bucky said, softer. “And I can’t think of anything in this world that’s better than seein’ the two of you together like that.”

“He looks like you and he reminds me of me,” Tony confessed. “I’m completely defenseless.”

“Nothin’ to do but surrender, then,” Bucky said, cheerful about it as he tugged Tony into the elevator.
**Bucky**

Love, Bucky was discovering, was not a zero sum game.

There’d been that crawling fear that opening himself up to his children would mean there would be less love for Tony. But he couldn’t seem to help that; it didn’t matter that Steve was probably right and there was some trap lurking under all this. He’d taken one look at his children and fallen in love.

He would never have ranked his kids in a manner of who he loved best (he’d heard there were parents that did that, but he just couldn’t see it) although he was pretty much convinced that Rikki was the one who needed his love most, and was going to have the most trouble accepting it. She was so far into her training, she’d been saddled with responsibility too young. She… was going to take a lot of work.

It was good, he thought, that Jaime had latched onto Tony like a little limpet. Jaime needed a lot of work and love and care, too. Jaime was fearful, and Bucky had to admit, no matter how much it pained him, the Winter Soldier was a goddamn terrifying individual. And Jaime didn’t yet see Bucky any other way. There was respect there, but there was more fear. So, Bucky backed off, let Tony be Jaime’s rock and touchstone, and tried to father his kid from the sidelines.

Sasha was a delight. When he wasn’t upset and trying to burn the building down, that was. Everyone loved him; the baby was charming and, given that he wasn’t old enough for any of the conditioning or training, he was the easiest to love. As far as Bucky could see, the only major difference between Sasha and a normal kid was the various results of his serum crossed with an Inhuman manifestation. And that the kid was stupidly adorable. Bucky sometimes wondered if that was another aspect of his abilities; Sasha seemed to know the exact moment to stop crying, the perfect time to give an adult a wide, toothless smile. Or maybe it was just that, like a kitten, there was very little that a happy baby could do that wasn’t utterly loveable.

Despite the addition of three unexpected family members, and the resultant constraints it put on the available amount of free time Bucky had, the desperate, needy craving for Tony that occupied his mind, heart (and groin, because he had to be honest) hadn’t changed.

He just had less time and energy to devote to it. It wasn’t as bad as the three months where Tony lost his memory; that had been the worst case of unrequited love that Bucky ever wanted to be on the wrong end of. Tony had woken every morning with no idea who Bucky was, and every single damn day, Bucky had been falling harder. Un-fucking-bearable. Literally. Well, not entirely. Tony had seduced him a few times, not that Bucky was at all unwilling, even if he’d been ashamed of himself for letting it happen.

There had to have been something that Hydra had been giving the Winter Soldier aside from orders; Bucky’s hunger for sex was as urgent to him as his need for food and air and water. Maybe there had been a suppressant in the drug-cocktail they injected him with, or in the nutrient smoothies, because it had never felt like this, before.

Or maybe, he thought, watching the security feed of Tony reading a bedtime story to Bucky’s son, it was just love.

Love that made him need and ache and want and **crave**.

They’d spent three weeks chasing M.O.D.O.K. around Florida, assisting in earthquake clean up when they couldn’t find the damn monster-brain in time. The team had practically slept in their gear,
showers had been catch as catch can, and privacy virtually non-existent (well, except for the one time that M.O.D.O.K. had opened up a crevice right in the middle of a hospital and they’d rescued the whole ICU ward from sliding into it, and afterward Bucky had nudged Tony into a broom closet to celebrate). And then they’d come home to spend another week dealing with unexpected kids and crises and misunderstandings.

Things were finally calm, or at least as calm as they ever got around the Avengers and Bucky was starting to feel -- *Oh, just be frank and honest about it, Barnes*, he thought. *I am fucking randy as hell.*

Just inside the door to the penthouse, Bucky pulled Tony into an embrace, resting his forehead against Tony’s shoulder, feeling the sturdy, compact lines of Tony’s body pressed against his. For a long moment, that was enough; the smell of Tony’s hair and skin, the weight of Tony’s arms around Bucky’s waist, the heat of his skin seeping through his clothes, the throbbing pulse of his heart.

And then, like always, it *wasn’t* enough, wasn’t nearly enough. Bucky turned his head to the side, pressed his lips against Tony’s throat, felt the wet, lush heartbeat underneath, the pulse of blood just below the skin. His tongue flicked out and tasted Tony’s skin, salt and the synthetic creams and skin care and cologne that Tony managed to find time for on just about any day that they weren’t Avenging. Underneath, the raw flavor of *Tony*.

“Something on your mind, Buzz Lightyear?” Tony said, teasing, leaning his head back to give Bucky better access.

“Thinkin’ it’s been a *long damn time* since I’ve seen you with your clothes off,” Bucky growled, deep and low, in Tony’s ear. One hand slid into Tony’s hair, fingers gripping and tugging light and steady. That was true, god damn, it had been most of a month since they had any time, any privacy. Even the quickie in the broom closet had been a desperate, hurried blow job with Tony’s pants around his thighs and Bucky jerking himself off while on his knees.

“Being a superhero isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be,” Tony agreed. “Oh, that’s nice… yeah, okay, we can probably do something about that.”

Bucky slid a hand under Tony’s jacket and pushed it from his shoulders, catching the collar just before it hit the floor. He folded up neatly over his forearm and then draped it over a chair.

“Were taking our time tonight, are we?” Tony asked, fingers going up to his tie to loosen it.

“I can either do this calmly and take my time and do you proper,” Bucky said, taking Tony’s hands away from his tie and placing a kiss in each palm, “or I can tear your clothes off and fuck you right through the floor.”

Tony’s mouth moved in that insouciant little smirk. “There something wrong with both, soldier? I’m up for both. Both is good.”

Bucky’s bones turned to water and he wasn’t ashamed to admit it. He leaned heavily on Tony’s shoulder, breath suddenly shivery. “Tony,” he gasped against Tony’s neck.

“You’re taking our time tonight, are we?” Tony asked, fingers going up to his tie to loosen it.

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“Here.” Tony pressed something into his hand. “Incentive.”

Tony blinked down at a small bottle of lube. “Tony, what… even the…”

“I’ve been carrying it around since that closet adventure when we couldn’t do more than… Prepared, Bucky.”
“My Christ,” Bucky swore. “You coulda told me. Pretty sure I coulda made time to throw a fuck into you in the ‘jet when we were waiting for Tash.” Although it might have been a good thing that he didn’t know. There were a couple of times when he’d needed to think fast and move faster, and those got awkward when he had a boner underneath his armor.

Bucky stepped back, achingly aware of the empty space between them. “Take it off,” he said, gesturing to Tony’s clothes. “I like this suit and if I do it... I’m gonna wreck it.”

That… might have been a mistake. Tony’s eyes lit up with mischief, a dark glow of lust, and he very slowly started loosening his tie.

Bucky backed up until he was up against the door, hands firmly behind his back, just watching, his blood fire in his veins as Tony stripped at a glacial pace, with a lot of completely unnecessary fussing. He “dropped” his tie on the floor and then bent over to pick it up, casting a wicked look behind him at Bucky, shivering and holding himself upright by sheer will power.

“You are a monster,” Bucky accused.

The belt went next, a whisper of leather through the belt loops. Tony folded the belt in half and snapped it once. Bucky whimpered, the sound shooting sparks of need along his spine. He covered his face with one hand, mouth dry, but he couldn’t stop watching for long, peeking between his fingers as Tony stepped out of his shoes and then, one hand on the chair for support, took his socks off.

Tony tugged the button open to his pants, then let the zipper down, agonizingly slow, half inches at a time, until he stepped out of the pants. The tail of his shirt covered him to the upper parts of his thighs. He folded his trousers and laid them carefully over the jacket.

The cufflinks, next, leaving his shirt gaping at the wrists, displaying and enhancing Tony’s strong, narrow wrists and graceful, long fingers. Tony paused, his mouth twitching, then he slid his fingers under the shirt, tugged his boxer-briefs down. Bucky caught a flash of skin before the shirt settled back in place.

“Could you possibly move any slower?” Bucky complained.

“Is that a request, Speedy Gonzales, because I’m pretty sure I’m up to that challenge.”

“No, not even,” Bucky said, shaking his head for emphasis.

“You’re sure?” Tony queried. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, then the next one. “Because I got nothing but time here, sweetheart.” He gave Bucky a raking glance. “Besides, you’re still dressed.”

As if Bucky wasn't trembling with need. “Thought maybe you might want to do it yourself,” Bucky said, “but i can help you out, if you need it.”

“You’re being remarkably restrained,” Tony said. He flicked the last button free, then shrugged his way out of the sleeves. Tony was (ha!) stark naked in front of him.

Bucky couldn't do anything but stare. Tony's olive skin was perfect, even marred as it was by lingering bruises. Perhaps even more so; Bucky always did appreciate the evidence of hard work and war. There were no words for the possessive, eager need that rose up inside him, the urge to mark his territory, to brand Tony as his own, to carve himself so deep under Tony's skin that the man could never even think of another lover, another life, ever again. It was too much, and god knew he could never deserve it. “Tony.”
“What? Did I stun you with my good looks?” Tony asked, eyes still dancing. “I understand that my beauty can be overwhelming. C’mon, lose the shirt, soldier.”

Bucky hitched in a painful breath, rocked to the core. “Yes, sir,” he whispered, voice ragged. Bucky grabbed the tail end of the red Henley he wore and pulled it over his head. He wasn’t able to make a production of it, just dropped the shirt to the floor and stood there, shaking.

Tony was there, sudden, one hand stroking down the metal arm, fingers glazing over the shiny skin. That gentle touch shivered up artificial nerves until the sensation twisted down Bucky’s spine and into his balls. Standing still while Tony did that to him was like the most exquisite torture. Hard and desperate, Bucky wanted to squirm and beg, fall to his knees and whimper. He settled for a choked moan, which went higher pitched as Tony’s fingers found the sensitive crease along the inside of Bucky’s elbow.

“You know,” Tony said, sly and quiet against Bucky’s ear, “I can see that you’re trying really hard to be good and be patient and take your time. That’s totally adorable. But really, if you don’t fuck me right through the floor in the next three minutes, I am going to die from a truly criminal span of celibacy.”

Bucky managed a strangled laugh. “You know that only makes me want to drag it out more, now,” he said, even as he was working his belt off and stepping out of his pants -- god dammit, why did he always forget he had shoes on?

“Don’t you dare,” Tony whispered, running one hand down Bucky’s chest and lower, trailing his fingers over the bulge in Bucky’s underwear. Bucky groaned, pushed against that teasing hand. He finally got untangled from his pants and started nudging Tony toward the sofa. Fuck the bed, they weren’t going to get that far this time.

“Tony, Tony, Tony,” Bucky chanted like a prayer, kissing Tony’s mouth between words, tasting his lips, the scrape of Tony’s beard against his cheek. Tony tried to say something, but Bucky pressed his mouth down on Tony’s again. In seconds, he had Tony sprawled out on the sofa, climbing on and stretching out, full length, skin to skin, as much as he could take and he still needed more. He rubbed against Tony’s groin, listening with an appreciative ear to the little sounds that Tony made.

“Come on, soldier,” Tony said, his fingers trailing over Bucky’s back, raising shivers of sensation. “I’m dying here, literally…”

Bucky manfully resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Fine,” he huffed, as if he didn’t want it just as bad. He slithered down the sofa until he was arranged between Tony’s legs. He paused, just long enough to get that deep inhale, watching Tony’s face as he lowered his mouth to Tony’s cock. Bucky teased, strokes over the head with his tongue, quick flicks with slow breaths in between each until Tony was rocking his hips, trying to get closer.

Tony’s eyes drifted shut, his head rolled back on his neck, cords in his throat standing out. Lovely. Bucky smirked and flicked his finger against Tony’s thigh, which got him a slight jump. “Look at me,” Bucky murmured, brushing his lips lightly over Tony’s hip.

Tony heaved himself up onto his elbows, mouth slightly ajar. “C’mon,” he groaned. “You’re making that face at me again, you know I can’t--” Bucky lowered his mouth again, gaze locked on Tony’s as he drew Tony’s prick entirely into his mouth, licking the underside like it was a lollipop. “--ohgod.”

Oh god was exactly right, Bucky thought and went to work, never looking away from Tony, making him watch, making him writhe with need, squirm and twitch and clutch his hands on the sofa’s soft fabric. The taste of Tony, the weight of Tony’s cock in Bucky’s mouth.
The urgency faded somewhat as Bucky did what he was born to do, winding Tony up into this quivering, shattered wreck, wanting nothing more than to taste and touch and occasionally grin smugly around his mouthful.

“Bucky,” Tony gasped out, straining, and Bucky cocked an eyebrow, unwilling to stop the delicious things he was doing with Tony’s prick. “God, Bucky, if you keep doing that, I’m not going to last.”

Tony bucked up, or tried, hips straining against Bucky’s weight.

Kinda the point, baby, Bucky thought, but didn’t bother stopping long enough to say. He just hummed wickedly, pushing his tongue firmly along the big vein down the middle, then twisted his head, circling. He groped around behind him until he found that sample-bottle of lube and wet his fingertips.

“Yes,” Tony hissed, “shit, Bucky, please.” His head fell back again, and Bucky flicked at his thigh again for attention. “God, so demanding.”

Bucky nodded, perhaps a little more tease than strictly necessary. He slid his right hand up Tony’s thigh, lube-slicked fingers pressing against Tony’s hole, gently, easy. Circled the ring of muscle there. He twitched his eyebrow at Tony again, smug and satisfied.

Tony whimpered. “Please, please, please, c’mon, baby, I need you so bad...”

Need. Was it need yet, or just want? Bucky considered, twisted one finger along Tony’s hole, then pressed in, slow, easy, matching the slide of his mouth to his speed, teasing. God, it was hard to resist when Tony started making those noises. Bucky’s stomach clenched up, his thighs ached and the back of his neck prickled with sweat. Soon, he thought, breathing, trying to calm his heart rate, the desperate ache of his cock that pressed relentlessly against the sofa cushions.

“So cruel,” Tony complained. “This is punishment for the clothes, isn’t it?”

Bucky experienced almost tangible levels of regret as he pulled off Tony’s dick. “Are you complaining? Still?” He didn’t stop moving his finger, working it in and out of Tony’s ass, almost as if he’d forgotten that it was there at all, giving Tony his absolute best I am an evil assassin and I will murder you through sex glare.

“I distinctly said three minutes, I remember that very clearly,” Tony pointed out, his stern-and-scolding tone utterly spoiled by the way it hitched with Bucky’s every movement.

Bucky twisted his wrist, slow, finger crooked. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Don’t you dare.”

Two fingers, and Bucky turned Tony on the sofa, mostly sitting, with Bucky kneeling between Tony’s thighs. “You want it?” He growled low and soft in Tony’s ear, then bit down lightly on the shell.

Tony groaned and pressed against Bucky, tucking his face into the curve of Bucky’s throat, licking and scraping his teeth along the skin there. “God, yes,” he panted, “I want you, all of you, always.”

Bucky shuddered all over, rested his head against Tony’s shoulder for a few heartbeats. When he looked back up, he drew Tony’s mouth to his, kissed him like it was the first time, like it was the last time. Everything he never knew how to say in words, the glorious pain in his chest every single time he looked at the man; if there was a way to express those things in lips and tongues and teeth, Bucky would have spelled it out, each syllable. As it was, the kiss left Tony winded and panting and shivering.
He clamped the metal hand along the back of the sofa to keep the damn thing on the floor, then lined himself up. “I gotcha, baby,” Bucky said. He hooked one of Tony’s legs over his shoulder, bringing them closer, then pressed against Tony’s hole, slick and ready and god, so hot. Bucky shivered, almost lost himself there and bit the inside of his cheek to steady himself.

Tony watched him with wide, dark eyes, patient now, as if he knew how close Bucky was to the edge. His fingers brushed Bucky’s cheek and threaded into Bucky’s hair, a delicate counterpoint to the pounding of Bucky’s pulse, the matching staccato of Tony’s heart. “I know,” he said, “you’ve always got me, honey.”

Tony’s body was home. Bucky slid in, careful, gentle, the dark heat and tight, twitching muscles welcome and wanted. “God…” The only word he could manage, although there were so many other things he wanted to say. He drew himself in, pulling Tony closer, closer, until there was nothing between them but heat. He crushed his mouth down on Tony’s, swallowing his air, tasting the flavor of his lips, soft and agile and, god, he was dying with the need to move slow, to feel everything, to be totally lost in this one moment. “Tony…”

Tony’s hand tightened in Bucky’s hair and his body arched into Bucky’s like a well-rehearsed dance. “Fuck, you feel good,” he gasped raggedly. “Missed this.”

Bucky flexed to match Tony’s pace, groaning. “We could quit being superheroes, have more time to fuck.”

“Oh, yeah, that was either a great idea or a terrible idea. Bad enough that he got hard just walking into breakfast and seeing the man smile. Bucky’s dick had some strong opinions about what it’d be like to be able to just pounce, whenever he wanted. Christ, that… Yeah, dick does not get a say in this. Bucky worked himself in, slide back. “So good,” he murmured. “Tony, you… nnnnnngh. What, you don’t already own three islands. I’m disappointed.” Wow, coherent sentence. Mostly. Bucky managed a quick grin before sensation took over and probably gave Tony a good view of Bucky looking like a drooling idiot.

Tony laughed, a beautiful sound that Bucky thrilled to. “I’ll get right on that,” he promised. He stretched up to kiss Bucky again, sloppy with urgency, grunting softly as the angle shifted. “God, Bucky, Bucky…”

That did brilliant, interesting things to the angle of Tony’s body, to the heat and friction and Bucky tipped over the edge, swearing and pleading, lost to white hot pleasure. “So perfect, so… god, God!” Bucky shouted, tucked his head down on Tony’s shoulder, shuddering with the force of his release.

“Okay,” Tony breathed, “I’ve got you, soldier,” Tony breathed, “give it to me, love you…”

The sofa moved under them, rocking back once. Shit. Not enough, not nearly enough. Bucky groaned, then slid both arms around Tony and lifted him down, laid him on the thick carpet.

“Right through the floor,” Bucky promised, then moved again, sliding into the loose, slick depths that Tony opened to him, working with strong, steady strokes. “Baby, Tony, you’re so good, so sweet for me, love you, love you so much.”

Tony’s groan turned into a shout as Bucky began moving in earnest, his hands clutching at whatever part of Bucky they could reach as his body struggled to match Bucky’s rhythm, and then found it. “So good, so good, Bucky, yes, just like that, perfect… God, I’m going to be feeling you for days.”
He sounded happy about it.

Bucky lost himself in the sensual richness of Tony’s body, the scent of his sweat, the taste of his skin under Bucky’s mouth. He wanted to bend Tony in half like a hairpin, slam into him, take, take, take, brand himself on Tony’s body. He didn’t, but it was a close thing, arrested by the thought of carpet burn on Tony’s back. Bucky flinched -- no, wrong kind of mark -- and then rolled them. He almost lost the sweet penetration, but got Tony resettled before they slid apart. “Come on, baby, come with me.” His own skin was mostly unperturbed by the carpet, what little burn there would be would heal in less than an hour.

Tony steadied himself and put his hands on Bucky’s shoulders, leaning on them for balance. He set a pace close to the one they’d been at before, but a little harder, a slight roll of his hips when Bucky was buried deep that made his eyes flutter with pleasure. “Almost,” he gasped, and then, “Nearly...” He bit his lip, then opened his eyes again to see Bucky staring up at him. Whatever he saw in Bucky’s face made his eyes widen and his rhythm falter, and then he threw his head back and shuddered into release, come spilling over Bucky’s chest and belly as Tony shouted, fingers digging into Bucky’s good shoulder hard enough to bruise, however briefly.

Tony clenching up around him, oh, god, so fucking good. Bucky arched up into it, heels digging into the carpet, fingers on Tony’s hips. Oh, Christ, just perfect. Bucky cried out, trying not to, but losing it. His eyes fluttered shut without his approval, but he could see everything anyway like some kind of out of body experience. Tony hovered over him like an angel, and God, Bucky couldn’t breathe in the fires of his pleasure.

Five seconds, five minutes, five days, he had no fucking clue when he finally settled back into himself, Tony hot and light over his chest, sleepy and warm and utterly content. “You…” Bucky managed to raise his hand and sweep his hair out of his face. He curled his hand around Tony’s neck. “You are… everything.”

Tony huffed half a breathless laugh and didn’t otherwise move. “Dunno about everything,” he mumbled, “but we’re a damn good start.”

Bucky opened one eye. “My everything.” That was just about as much clarification as he could manage at the moment. The carpet was not… entirely uncomfortable. And Tony was a nice, comforting weight on his chest. It would do for a while, until he recovered. Then… he grinned down at Tony, Tony’s hair sticking out all over the place in sweaty clumps. Then, round two.
We That Are Young

Tony

“I predict, sir, a 91.3% chance that this outing will end with either an arrest or a lawsuit,” JARVIS said.

Jaime pulled his hoodie on with entirely too much seriousness for a child getting ready to go to a toy store with a blank check from Tony Stark. “Insufficient data,” he said to the AI. “Risk factor decreased by at least thirty percent if local law is informed of our intended destination.”

“With all due respect, Master Barnes, I believe my collected data concerning Mr. Stark to be fairly conclusive,” JARVIS disagreed.

“I’ve got twenty that says it’s Tony that gets smacked with the lawsuit,” Clint said.

“I’ll put twenty that it’s Clint that gets arrested,” Natasha quipped back. She tucked a pack of saltines into her handbag; her morning sickness had made a huge comeback and she’d already excused herself once that morning to hide in the bathroom for about twenty minutes.

“What is wrong with you people? We’re going to a toy store, this isn’t an undercover mission in Latveria, for pete’s sake.” Tony tucked his wallet into his pocket and double-checked that everyone was wearing shoes, because apparently that was his life now.

“No, if we were going to Latveria, I’d be betting that Bucky would be arrested,” Clint pointed out, snickering.

“ Shut up, Clint,” Bucky said. He reached over and straightened Jaime’s jacket, then eyeballed Rikki’s crop-top and mesh overshirt with a resigned sigh.

“You sure you don’t need backup, Tony?” Steve asked from the sofa, where he had a lapful of Jessica Jones and they were getting ready to binge watch West Wing.

“I’ll hit the panic button when we run into the supervillain who’s going to take over the world with animated teddy bears,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “Otherwise, I think four Avengers and a spare super-soldier will be enough to keep the two Barnes boys in check.”

Jaime glanced up. “You don’t have to worry about me, sir.”

“Nobody’s worried about you,” Bucky said. “We’re giving Tony a hard time. It’s how we pay the rent. In abuse.”

“Besides, it’s Sasha and your father I expect to have the most trouble from,” Tony told Jaime, loftily ignoring everyone. He ruffled Jaime’s hair, then pointed toward the elevator. “Let’s get this circus moving.”

“Oh, Tony,” Natasha said, turning her phone over. “Sue and Reed want to know if they can meet us -- well, me. Sue wants to congratulate me -- for lunch, after we’re done.”

“I’m not trying to tell you who you can and can’t meet for lunch,” Tony said. “Do I look like I have a death wish?”

“No.” She smiled, all light and friendly, a very unnerving sort of look. “Thank you for volunteering
to keep me company.”

“Boom!” Clint yelled. “You walked into that door.” He offered an arm to Rikki with a sarcastic little bow and started the group off toward the elevator.

“It’s fine, Reed and I can talk science until Sue and Natasha get so irritated that they kick us out. Alternately, everyone can look on in stunned wonder at my skill for winning the company of two beautiful ladies, because no one would ever guess that Reed could attract a mouse with cheese.”

Bucky scooped up his youngest, holding the baby with easy grace in his left arm, which was probably for the best, as Sasha had recently developed a bad habit of biting and as a super-baby, that was painful for most people. He did a quick headcount, running the numbers in both English and Russian.

“I remember your ma used to do that, when we all went out together, Buck,” Steve commented from the sofa. “Six Barneses, one Rogers, and Becca’s friend Tibby.”

“Oh, God,” Bucky muttered. “Tibby the tattle-tale. I’d forgotten about her. Okay, we’re as organized as we’re gettin’. Let’s go.”

“Call if you need bail,” Jessica piped up just before the elevator closed. “I ain’t sayin’ we’ll pay it, but we’ll have fun laughing at you.”

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Natasha

Pregnancy sucked. Natasha managed to keep her gorge down while riding shotgun in one of the two cars they’d taken, mainly by constantly taking tiny bites of saltines and chasing them with similarly tiny sips of ginger ale. What she really hated about the morning sickness wasn’t so much that it was nothing like contained to morning (more like morning, after lunch and just before dinner sickness) but that she felt so wretched right up until she threw up, and then she’d feel ridiculously happy and perky as soon as she washed her mouth out. It was like being stuck inside a cheerleader’s body. She did not want all these happy-glowie-pregnancy hormone-addled feelings.

As soon as Tony put the car in park, she was out her door and racing over to the nearest trash can. Rikki, who’d taken to following her around recently like a gothy-winter-soldier-shadow, was at her side in an instant, holding her hair back while she puked. Rikki patted her back, rubbing little circles on her shoulders, which felt wonderful.

By the time Natasha finished heaving, Rikki had a bottle of water and a tissue waiting, as well as the evil-death-glare that she was constantly aiming in Tony’s direction any time Natasha’s uncomfortable pregnancy entered the conversation. Natasha knew it was traditional for the father to be blamed for the discomforts of pregnancy, but really, if Natasha wasn’t going to punish him, no one else ought to be allowed to.

There was no time that a toy store in New York City was going to be empty, but Thursday before lunch was probably the closest they’d get to it. Clint came over immediately and relieved Natasha of the burden of her shadow again, snickering at the life-sized Captain America cardboard cutout that was right in the front of the store, welcoming in new customers.

Jaime tugged on Tony’s hand, pointing out the various stuffed rag-doll type Avenger replicas. There was even a round (overly fat, in Natasha’s opinion) stuffed Black Widow who was at least scowling, rather than having a stitched smile on its little fabric face.
Tony grinned. “They’re kind of cute. Is it weird if you have toy versions of the people you actually live with?” He shrugged. “Whatever, grab whatever you want, kiddo.” He pointed at the rack of shopping carts. “Let’s grab one of those.”

As if reminded, suddenly, of his status, Jaime turned, directed an uncomfortable look at his father and tucked his hands behind his back. Bucky blew air out his mouth, wafting his unruly hair away from his face. “Might as well pick out what you want,” he said, shrugged. “If you don’t, Tony’ll just buy a bunch of stuff you don’t want. I’ve heard wonderful stories about a forty-foot stuffed rabbit.”

Tony mock-glared at Bucky. “You’re not allowed to have lunch with Pepper without me ever again.”

“Put them back, Clint,” Natasha said.

“Aw… Nat, no,” Clint complained, but when her scowl darkened, he loaded all the little Black Widow dolls back onto the shelf.

Defiantly, Bucky grabbed one -- just one -- and put it back in the cart. “Yasha, you suck,” Natasha muttered, digging around in her bag for her bottle of ginger ale again.

Jaime shrugged and added the same model of Iron Man doll to the cart, which earned an even darker scowl from Rikki, who stalked off, but Natasha noticed that she paused, briefly, near a display of glittery stickers and ran a hand over a rack of brightly colored nail polishes.

“Come on, load ‘em up,” Tony said. “This is a big store, let’s get moving!”

Sasha proved to be exceptionally difficult to shop for. It was hard enough to finding something the baby both liked and that wasn’t immediately combustible, but then throw in his super-strength and tendency to put anything that he picked up immediately in his mouth, and the search for toys got... interesting.

“No, Clint,” Natasha said, grabbing the back of his shirt as the archer moved off to investigate a toy xylophone, the sort with colored metal bars and a tiny mallet. “No toys that make noise. It’s a rule.”

“Since when?”

“Since the moment you decided you didn’t want me to break your fingers,” Natasha said.

The first thing Jaime actually showed interest in, leaning closer to look with fascinated eyes, was a Slinky; the store had set up a display that included a tiny escalator about four steps tall, and the metal spring was jangling cheerfully as it dropped down and over and down, never making any progress, but constantly in motion.

Tony leaned against the shelf next to the display, watching Jaime’s captivated face. “Pretty cool,” he said. “Gonna grab one?”

Jaime looked up, checking Tony’s face, then said, “I… yes, please?” He had a strange, longing expression, like the toy was too good to be believed, or that he could actually have one was too much to contemplate.

Tony waved at the shelves. “Go ahead pick out a couple, we’ll run experiments on them or something. See which one goes longer or... I dunno, whatever.”

“Wave equations,” Jaime agreed, then, tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth in concentration, he started selecting, different lengths and materials.
Tony grinned. “I might convince you to have some fun after all. We haven’t even gotten to building toys yet,” he pointed out. “This is going to be awesome.”

Turning the cart down another aisle, Bucky’s eyebrows went way up and he made a shushing gesture. He turned the corner, peeking, and then grinned, beckoning. Around the side, Rikki, carrying on a conversation with another teen, had not one or two, but four hulu-hoops going around her waist at the same time and was laughing, a sound none of them had heard before. The other girl had managed to get two hoops going around her waist and was spinning another on her wrist, held out to the side.

Natasha gave them about ten more seconds before one of them wobbled in the wrong direction and… yep, there went a shelf-full of boxes on one side with a loud crash.

Tony winced. “Whoops.”

“Oh, hey there, girlie-girl,” Clint said, there in an instant and picking up boxes. “Pretty sweet moves with that hoop, here. put this up, would you?”

Rikki, who was blushing -- and looking remarkably like her father in that instant -- grimaced, then she and the other girl helped Clint load the stuff back onto the shelves while Jaime picked up the hoops, glanced at his sister, then back to Tony for permission and loaded them into the cart.

“Now you’re getting it, kiddo!” Tony ruffled Jaime’s hair.

The other teenager, who was giving Clint the biggest of big eyes, looked over when Tony spoke and then got even more wide-eyed. “That’s Tony Stark,” she said, breathless, which made Rikki give out an exasperated sigh.

“Yes. He’s annoying, don’t pay attention to him, he likes it too much,” Rikki said. She grabbed her new friend’s hand and walked away.

“How do you know Tony Stark?” the other girl giggled, apparently unaware that out-of-sight did not mean out-of-hearing. “That’s so cool!”

“He’s my dad’s stupid boyfriend,” Rikki said, obviously aggrieved and not caring who overheard. “It’s not cool. There’s nothing cool about --”

“You’re Captain America’s daughter?”

“Oh, god,” Bucky muttered. “Kill me now.”

Tony had to duck into the next aisle to hide his flailing. Natasha watched with interest as he turned nearly purple, trying to contain his laughter.

The next row over included a constantly running soap-bubble machine; the floor near it had a non-slip mat and was ringed with caution signs. Sasha reached out and tried to grab a bubble. When it popped, he made a little confused sound, and tried again.

“Huh,” Clint said, then grabbed a super-soaker and started reading the back of the box.

“No, Clint,” Natasha said.

“Oh, come on, Nat,” he said, turning a pleading eye on Bucky. “Is this another one of those Russian things again? She’s totally harshing my squee here.”
“She’s practicing for when she has her own kid,” Bucky said. Sasha tried again to catch a bubble. The shiny, rainbow soap popped against his skin and the baby waved his arms. Suddenly the cheerful indulgent smile dropped off of Bucky’s face. “Crap, he’s…. Tony, he’s heating up. Where’s Rikki?”

“She’s just over...” Tony jogged back a few steps and leaned to look down the other aisle. “Damn. Hang on, babe, I’ll find her!” Tony backed up further, listening for teen chatter.

Natasha shook her head. “He’s just mad about the bubbles,” she pointed out. She dipped her fingers in the machine’s reservoir and then used her soap-slicked hand to catch a few, bringing them closer to the baby’s face. “Here you go. Pretty, right?”

Clint took advantage of everyone’s distraction to load the cart with a dozen or more nerf guns, several packs of replacement darts, and a couple of nerf frag-grenades.

Truthfully, Natasha knew it wasn’t unusual for a shopping trip to be cut short because of a cranky baby. When she’d gotten pregnant -- which still turned her all upside down and inside out whenever she re-realized it -- she’d found herself on the internet, reading mom-blogs and What To Expect When You’re Expecting and had even fallen down the rabbit hole of “I was infertile and now I’m pregnant and terrified” forums, which were not as rare as she might have thought. There were helpful moms who gave advice, and there were badgering, judgmental pieces of human excrement who’d happened to bear children and decided that made them experts on all children, everywhere. “Mommy-drive-bys” was not a phrase she’d expected to encounter, and had been mildly disappointed that it didn’t mean what it sounded like.

But a melt-down at the toy store? That was something she felt like she might be well-advised enough to handle.

Prepared! She dug into her purse -- it still bothered her that she had to carry a purse these days, but maternity clothes came with even fewer pockets than regular women’s clothing -- and pulled out a ziplock bag of Cheerios. They made a nice change when she got sick of saltines. And Cheerios seemed to be some sort of magic baby food. Natasha hadn’t yet read a blog with a kid who didn’t like the crunchy little o’s. She ate few, and then offered Sasha one. He was mostly eating solids, being around nine months old. (...ish. Rikki didn’t know his age for sure and Cho had made as close an estimate as she could, but with super-serum and Inhuman metabolisms combined, it was still just a guess. He could really be anywhere between seven months to a little more than a year, depending how old he had been when Hydra gave him over to his sister’s care.)

Sasha stopped shrieking and reached for her hand. He used one hand to hold hers still and the other hand to shotgun the cereal into his mouth as fast as possible. She had to limit how many she put in her palm at a time for fear he’d choke.

Tony returned, Rikki just behind him. She skidded to a halt when she saw Sasha in Natasha’s arms, stuffing so many Cheerios in his mouth at once he resembled a chipmunk.

“Really, Stark?” Rikki huffed and rolled her eyes. She kissed Sasha’s cheek and brushed half-chewed Cheerios off his face. “Do we really have to take him with us to lunch?”

“God, yes,” Natasha said. “If we don’t, you’ll have to listen to Reed Richards pontificate for hours. Trust me. You want Tony for this.”

“So nice to feel needed, don’t you think?” Tony asked, obviously not expecting an answer.

“Yes,” Clint said, leaning on the cart, which had mysteriously accumulated a lot more stuff. “And
right now, we need you to whip out your shiny credit card and pay for all this stuff.”

***

“No,” Natasha said as they exited the elevator into the public areas. “Pay up, Clint. You owe me twenty dollars.”

“Doesn’t count,” Clint said. “They didn’t actually arrest me.”

“Handcuffs counts!” Tony crowed, dropping several bags of toys on the floor. “They absolutely arrested you. I have photographic evidence.”

“The handcuffs were unnecessary,” Bucky said. “He had the cash in his wallet and he wasn’t resisting.”

“They were showing off,” Natasha pointed. “It’s not every day you get to arrest an Avenger.”

Steve glanced up from the couch. Jessica was asleep, her cheek resting against Steve’s massive thigh. “What did Clint get arrested for?”

“Expired driver’s license and outstanding parking tickets,” Bucky said, snickering.

“Aw… team, no,” Clint said. “I already had to pay a grand for those tickets, Nat, have mercy.”

“This… this is why I never bet against Tash,” Bucky said.

JARVIS piped up from the speakers, “As you see, young master Barnes, I am, again, correct.”

“It’s bad form to say I told you so, J,” Tony said.

“I didn’t intend to be rude,” JARVIS said dryly. “It must be a fault of my upbringing.”
The Tameness of a Wolf

Clint

Clint was contemplating nothing more earth-shattering than the joy that was A&W root beer Pop Tarts when a high-heeled combat boot kicked him in the ankle.

“Ow.” He looked up.

“I need an Avenger,” Rikki Barnes said. She had done something with her hair: plied a ton of product to it and swept the entire thing over to the left, and she’d either found some clip-on colored extensions or she’d been hitting the hair dye, because she now had several blue streaks in it. She had been a little heavy-handed with the make-up and while blue lipstick was a thing, Clint didn’t think it looked particularly flattering, especially since she kept pressing her lips together like she was pissed off. Red was really a much better color for that.

“What’s up, girlie-girl?” One of these days, Clint was going to have to get used to having a really hot, female version of one of his best friends hanging out around the Tower and wearing deliberately provocative clothing, mostly it gave him the world’s most confusing boner and he’d really like that to stop. Today… today was not that day.

Rikki was dressed like she’d skinned one of the floor models at the local Hot Topic, in an ironic crop-top and tight leather pants.

“I want to go out,” she said. “And it’s against protocol for me to go out without an Avenger escort. That wouldn’t stop me if I really wanted to go, but today… today I do not feel like being chased all over Manhattan by Father.”

“How about it?” Clint shoved half his toaster pastry into his mouth and used his fingers to catch the crumbs, shoving them into his mouth as well.

“You annoy me least,” she ventured. “Aside from Agent Romanov, and she said she was feeling too ill to join us.”


“Soldier curriculum has some tragic gaps,” Rikki said. “I didn’t go to finishing school. And I can barely make myself a sandwich; even Stark can manage that much. Elz invited me to go to a culinary class with her. I’d like to go. Would you please escort me?”

“You?” Clint said, contemplating his other Pop Tart. “You want to go to cooking class. With Negasonic Teenage Warhead?”

Rikki shuffled her feet, staring down at her hands. “I…” she said, drawing a deep breath. “Elz has said that I will require friends. Research indicates that friendships are maintained through contact, sharing activities, and common interests. Elz has invited me to participate in an activity that she finds enjoyable. And I do not know how to cook. So, yes. I would like to go to cooking class with Negasonic Teenage Warhead.”

“Huh,” Clint said. “That was impressive, girlie-girl. A little more practice, and I might think you’re an actual teenager.”

“When, in fact, I am nineteen years old,” Rikki said. “I am an adult.”
“And I’m forty, but that don’t mean I grew up any,” Clint said. “Sure, I can chaperone your date.”

“It’s not a date,” Rikki protested, but her neck turned pale pink, and Clint was familiar enough with Bucky’s tells to read them pretty clear on his daughter’s face. “It is a lesson in cookery.”

“You keep tellin’ yourself that, sweetheart,” Clint said.

Rikki glared at him. “It’s a good thing the bar is set so low for person who annoys me least,” she snapped. “I shall be in the lobby at three-thirty. Do not be tardy.”

Clint’s laugh chased her out of the kitchen.

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Rikki

Cin-ful Cookery (Culinary Institute of New York) was located on the fifth floor of a squat, ugly building. Indeed, much of the United States had been a bitter disappointment to Rikki. She was used to hearing how decadent and sinful it was, but honestly, she thought Moscow was a much more handsome city than New York. There were places that were nice, but mostly, it looked like everywhere else Rikki had ever been. Tall and crowded and dirty, thick with people and an astonishing number of rats, the city was less American decadence and more overpopulated shithole.

“Oh, look, it’s Arrow Dude,” Elz said, detaching herself from the hallway wall where she was loitering. “How ya doing, short, blonde, and Hawkward?”


Rikki sighed. “I’m still on house arrest,” she explained. “Until some mythical amount of time passes and I can prove I’m not still under Hydra control, or swallowed bomb ingredients or something.”

Elz held up her phone, drew Rikki up against her side and snapped a selfie, the cooking institute’s sign behind them. “Don’t even worry about it. It’s totally worse, being an X-man. Matching unitards. The house blowing up every few months. Colossus telling me that eating spinach builds character.”

“Besides that, Negasonic is a bomb ingredient,” Clint added. When Elz gave him the finger, he said, “What? I follow Wade’s instagram.”

“He doesn’t have to come in with us, does he?”

“As long as she promises not to leave the building by jumping out a window or something, no,” Clint said. “I’ll just sit over there and wait for you to be done burning the kitchen down.”

“Oh, now there’s a stupid,” Elz said, hooking her arm with Rikki’s. “Let’s go be productive with our time, shall we?”

“You sound just like Xavier,” Clint tossed at them as they entered the institute.

“And he’s the one you like best?” Elz stared at Rikki. “Seriously? Him?”

Rikki blushed. “Well, no, actually, I like Steve best, but I don’t… want him babysitting me. That’s just humiliating.”

Elz guided Rikki over to one of the shared workstations. Each station had three stove-burners, a rack of necessary tools, a packet of papers, and a basket full of ingredients. The ingredients included tiny vials of pre-measured spices which were so adorable that Rikki wondered if there were a place she
could buy them; the spices would be useful in the Tower’s kitchen and Jaime would be thrilled to have tiny rows of test-tubes.

Rikki picked up the file -- a good soldier always read the materials -- and sat down, engaging that part of her mind that absorbed written materials and stored them. With proper preparation, she could bring anything she’d ever read to mind, letter perfect, and transcribe it. A useful skill for a spy and assassin, with no need to carry files or media storage.

**LEARNING CAJUN COOKING: MIREPOIX VS. THE TRINITY**

A quick search online turns up more recipes than there are atoms in the universe. However a wise chef once surmised that only a few handfuls of true recipes exist in the world – all else is simply a derivative of a “Mother” recipe.

Never is that more true than when you consider the sautéed vegetable foundation of so many great dishes. Whether it’s the French mirepoix (MEER-PWAH), the Spanish sofrito, Indian tadka, the German suppengrün, or the Cajun trinity, many of our most revered culinary creations hail from a simple, balanced base. The “Step One” of a wide variety of recipes is a gentle sauté of a prescribed trio of chopped veggies. From the east to the west, this practice has resonated with chefs, home cooks, and eaters for centuries.

Rikki was just set to turn the page when Elz snatched the booklet out of her hand. “What are you doing?” Elz asked, blinking. “Are you memorizing the flavortext?”

“The what?”

“The garbage they fill these things with. The stuff that supposedly adds flavor to the lecture. You don’t have to read this, you know. It’s not a *mission*, it’s just cooking.”

Even now, at this remove, the word sent shivers up Rikki’s spine. She hadn’t gotten very many missions before she’d been encouraged to run, to take her brothers and flee before things got worse. And things were going to get worse, she had known that. Hydra was collapsing, the weight of a million secrets and serpents too much for their infrastructure. She’d studied history, and no matter what the leaders and handlers said, it was happening to Hydra. The various factions squabbled and grabbed for Assets and weapons, no longer united under a single banner, no longer led in the same direction.

Under those circumstances, it seemed inevitable that the Winter Soldiers would end up torn apart, each one kept to a separate cell, alone. She couldn’t face that. She’d taken her brothers and fled. But she didn’t know how to live without missions; even now she had her missions and her protocols.

“There’s no test,” Elz was saying. “No one is going to care if we screw it up. It’s just for fun. And if we learn something, that’s great, too. Relax, Rix.”

“I don’t…” Rikki stared at Elz, drinking in the serious, sober expression, the wide, dark eyes lined with black, eyelashes long and impossibly thick. “Fun’s not a thing I’m well versed in. I’m sorry.”

“I have every confidence that you can learn,” Elz said.

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“So, what did you learn, girlie-girl?” Clint asked. He wasn’t even looking at them. Hell, he hadn’t even opened his goddamn eyes. He was laying on one of the padded bench-seats in the hallway,
looking for all intents and purposes as if he were using the cooking class as an excuse to catch a nap.

“Um… setting the burner higher does not make things cook faster?” Rikki offered. They’d completely ruined one batch of sauteed vegetables, but luckily the instructor had more.

“Rix is scary-good with knives,” Elz put in, grinning. “Like, scary good. I never seen somebody chop so fast in my entire life, and I live with Wolverine.”

“Here,” Rikki said, handing over a foil container; she had a bag of six and Elz had the same. “Go ahead, you can try it.”

Clint hesitated. “What was it before it became dinner?”

“Little tiny lobsters with rice and vegetables and a sauce made from butter and flour,” Rikki said, not able to remember any of the words.

“Crawfish étouffée,” Elz clarified.

Clint shrugged, stuffed a fork into the tin and pulled out a mouthful of not-quite soup. He took a bite, stopped mid-chew. His face contorted in a mask of effort. He swallowed painfully, without chewing the rest of the mouthful.

“Well, that’s,” he coughed, “interesting.”

“Trash?” Rikki asked, turning to Elz. She wasn’t upset, not really. A learning experience, she told herself. What she was learning was that she needed a lot more practice. Cooking wasn’t something she was instantly good at. But it had been a while since she’d been truly challenged in her lessons and despite the miserable failure that her Cajun dish had been, she had enjoyed herself, teasing and chatting with Elz.

“Not even a little bit,” Clint said, grabbing the leftovers bag from her. “You are absolutely going to take this back to the Tower. You’re going to sit one in front of Tony and one in front of your dad and you’re going to smile expectantly and we’re going to take photos of them trying to eat it and be nice.”

Rikki stared at him in pained astonishment for a moment, attempted to picture the scene and then suddenly she was laughing in a way she seldom did -- a soldier does not feel -- until Clint and Elz were forced to hold her up so she didn’t collapse.

“Yeah, okay, yeah,” she said, gasping for air.

“I was planning to give mine to Remy,” Elz said. “We can make a YouTube video later.”

Rikki grinned; during the lesson, Elz had talked about Remy, the card-sharp kineticist who called everyone mon chère. He was, according to Elz, an incurable flirt and from Louisiana, where the Cajun culture reigned supreme. Elz’s terrible excuse for étouffée would probably make the man choke.

Rikki linked one arm through Elz’s, the other through Clint’s, as they headed back to the Tower. She felt happier in that moment than she’d ever done before. She’d failed at something, failed spectacularly -- even the cooking instructor had been impressed and suggested that she take a beginner class before trying again -- and instead of pain and punishment, there was the anticipation of humor, the shared camaraderie of having done a piss-poor job of something with another person.

“C’mon,” Clint said. “Let’s get some real food before we head back, otherwise your dad’s gonna
expect you to eat this shit.”

***

_Bucky_

“I can’t decide if I should pay for a year’s worth of cooking lessons,” Tony said, “or if I should save myself the indigestion and ban her from the kitchen _for life._”

“Oh, come on,” Bucky said, leaning back against the elevator wall, ignoring the grumbling in his own stomach, “she’s trying.”

“Trying to break the Tower’s record for worst cook ever, that’s what she’s doing,” Tony said.

Bucky tilted his chin to look at his boyfriend with fond indulgence. “Don’t make me have JARVIS run the footage from your attempt at making a birthday cake.”

“The fire was, I’m telling you, completely contained to the oven. The sprinklers weren’t even engaged, which is more than I can say for Clint’s attempts at making strudel.”

“Clint’s cooking skills, or even, for that matter, yours, are not what’s in question here,” Bucky said. “For a first attempt at a complicated recipe, it was… not terrible.”

“Oh, yes it was,” Tony said. “So very, very terrible. Crawfish should not, in any way, resemble the flavor and texture of rubber bullets.”

“I know it’s all gone now,” Bucky said. “Bruce did a breakdown analysis of it, though. So one of these days, I’m going to mix up the nutritional beverages that Hydra used to force me to subsist on. Then you can complain.”

“Look, I spent the better part of a year drinking a chlorophyll detoxing solution that JARVIS designed for me while I was busy dying of palladium poisoning. I know gross and disgusting foodstuffs, and believe me, this qualifies.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, “so what’s the best food you make, huh, Tony?”

“Reservations, my dearest, darling boyfriend. I make really _excellent_ reservations.”
They are running, have been running for hours. His breath is like knives in his lungs. Very soon he will have to ask Rikki to carry him, and that will mean punishment. For Jaime, for not being strong enough. For Jaime again, to punish Rikki for coddling him. But he is reaching the end of his endurance, an indisputable fact glowing through the numbers and charts in his brain.

He looks for her, to tell her, and she is gone.

Panic stutters in his chest; Rikki has never left his side during training like this. But she is gone and the trail they have been running opens up onto a wide plain, tall grass swaying in a wind he cannot feel. It fills him with dread, though he does not know why.

“No,” says the handler, standing beside him. “This is your test. She cannot be with you here.”

Another test. Jaime looks out into the plain, studying. Calculating.

There is a tower in the center of the plain that was not there before. It is tall and foreboding, but Jaime yearns to go there. He says nothing, waiting for his orders.

“There are monsters in the grass,” the handler says.

There are always monsters. Jaime calculates the distance: 1.57 kilometers to the tower. He has run this distance before. It would not be difficult except that he is already near the end of his endurance. Except for the monsters. He wonders if they are animals that wish to eat his flesh or visions that will consume his mind. The handler will not tell him if he asks.

“Objective?” he asks instead, like a good soldier.

“Destroy the tower,” the handler says.

Jaime is standing at the edge of the cleared land around the tower. He does not remember crossing the distance. Two monsters flank him. They are not tamed, but they share his goal, and so there is an alliance of sorts.

They step into the open space surrounding the tower, and though the air grows oppressive and heavy, nothing happens. The entrance is locked, barred, and the monsters cannot shift it. Jaime lays a hand flat on the door, and is not at all startled to feel that it pulses, as if the tower has a beating heart deep within it. He desperately does not want to harm the tower, but he must.

“Let us in,” Jaime whispers, and the door swings open.

Inside, the walls and furnishings shift restlessly, always dark and sharp-edged and covered in spikes, but Jaime feels its welcome. It is wary of the monsters, but if they stay at Jaime’s heels, it allows them.

Jaime mounts the stair at the center of the tower, an endless spiral, searching for its heart. He knows the tower is leading him straight to it, and wishes it wouldn’t, but the tower does not understand that he has come to destroy it.
Far too soon, he stands before the heart. It is small for such a large tower, barely half Jaime’s size, and despite the fierce flames that envelop it protectively, it looks soft and frail. The monster at Jaime’s left rumbles deep in its throat, uneasy. The monster on his right whines like a scolded dog. Neither of them can touch the heart; this is Jaime’s task.

He picks up the silver dagger on the table and holds it carefully with both hands. He does not want to destroy the tower, but he is a soldier and he must follow orders. He grits his teeth and drives the dagger deep into the heart. The tower writhes in distress. Jaime yanks the dagger down, cutting a deep rent in the heart. Its flame sears him, but he cannot be harmed by it.

The tower wails its betrayal. Jaime releases the dagger, leaving it in the heart, and backs away. The tower spins and shrinks and it is a person, the dagger still thrust deep into her body, a gaping black void of a wound down her chest where Jaime cut. Shaking, he looks up into her face. It is Rikki.

He wakes, screaming. He can still feel the heat of the flames, the sticky wet blood on his hands and arms, and he cannot stop screaming.

Rikki is there, whole and alive, but Jaime killed her and he cannot stop screaming.

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Tony

The two-toned alarm jolted Tony out of a sound sleep and brought him bolt-upright on the bed. It wasn’t the “Avengers Assemble” alarm, but it wasn’t his “get the fuck up you promised Pepper you’d go to this meeting” alarm, either. Next to him, Bucky was awake as well, but he’d frozen in place, eyes on Tony.

“JARVIS?” he managed, rubbing at his eyes.

“My apologies, sir,” JARVIS said, “but Miss Barnes and the two young gentlemen are on their way to the penthouse at this moment. Master Barnes appears to be in great distress.”

“Well, fuck,” Tony said. He grabbed his pants off the floor and started dragging them on. “I’m on my way.”

Bucky rolled out of the bed and started fishing under it for his sweats. “Jesus, Tony,” he complained before finally snagging them. He turned them right side out and scrambled into his pants. He scrubbed both hands over his face and flicked the light on, squinting.

“It’s not like I throw them under there on purpose,” Tony said. He waited just until Bucky was mostly decent and then strode out into the living room. He heard the kids well before the elevator doors opened; Jaime sounded like he was in the midst of a complete hysterical meltdown.

The doors opened, and the noise got exponentially louder; Rikki stumbled out of the car in a mockery of her usual grace and all but shoved Jaime toward Tony. “Go on, there he is!” she said. Tony couldn’t tell if she sounded testy because she actually was or if it was just that she had to talk so loudly to be heard.

Jaime didn’t move until Tony actually touched him, at which point the boy scrambled into his arms like a monkey, clinging so tightly Tony was a little worried for his ability to breathe. “Hey, kiddo, I’ve got you, what’s up, huh?” He kept his voice low and soothing, even though Jaime’s loud sobbing and wailing hadn’t abated at all.

Bucky circled over to Rikki, concerned. She had Sasha on her back in a tattered, ancient-looking
The baby was corkscrewing up his mouth, getting ready to let go with a wail. Bucky tapped the silver armband on Sasha’s wrist, which promptly whirred, giving off a quick puff of cold air.

“What happened?” Bucky said to his daughter, putting one hand on her shoulder.

Obviously distressed, Rikki not only allowed Bucky to touch her -- she was quick enough to pull away most of the time -- but she actually sagged against him, her arms going around his neck for a moment, drawing strength from his solidity. “Dream,” she said. “I guess. He wouldn’t say anything, wouldn’t tell me, just… screamed like hell. Finally asked him if he wanted Stark and he calmed down a little bit.”

Tony lifted his eyebrows at her, but rubbed Jaime’s back and kept crooning soothing nonsense. “Come on, kiddo, you got me, I’m here, everyone’s okay...” Christ, but he was going to have a hell of a headache from the kid bawling in his ear. Tony made his way over to the sofa and collapsed onto it, Jaime still held tight.

“This is calmer?” Bucky asked. He slid the bag straps off Rikki’s shoulders and pulled the baby up onto his hip, bouncing Sasha a bit. Sasha, never anyone’s fool, grabbed huge handfuls of Bucky’s hair and yanked.

Rikki nodded, giving her father a particularly telling look. “Not nightmares, Father. Dreams.”

Bucky went pale. “Shit.”

“I’m missing something,” Tony said, rubbing Jaime’s back.

Bucky swallowed, his throat so dry Tony could actually hear the click over Jaime’s noise. “Conditioning dreams. I told you about mine, the once. The monster...”

Tony felt pretty queasy at that, himself. “Oh, those dreams.” He held Jaime a little tighter. “It can’t have you,” he said, soft and fierce.

“It’s my fault,” Rikki said, her voice breathy with panic. “He wasn’t ready. They... they did it to hurt me.”

Tony huffed. “Doesn’t make it your fault.” Was Jaime beginning to quiet, a little? God, he hoped so. “Babe, can you get us a glass of water, here?”

“I’ll get it,” Rikki said. She wiped her eyes against Bucky’s shoulder, then headed into the small kitchen area off the penthouse. She was muttering darkly to herself as she walked by Tony, her eyes narrowing at his naked shoulders and the bruises Bucky had left there.

Bucky bounced the baby a bit, playing the game they’d started to teach him, moving one hand over the wristband to depress the shot of cold each band was capable of delivering. At least the training was paying off, Tony thought, as Sasha hadn’t caught anything on fire in several days.

When Rikki brought the water back to the sofa, Tony pretended not to notice her angry glares -- who knew what she’d decided to be offended by this time? -- and focused on Jaime. “Hey, kiddo, I know it’s awful, but you think you can manage a sip of water for me? I mean, you have to reload the snot cannon somehow, right?”

More water went down his chin than into his mouth, but it was an effort, at least, and while still helplessly crying, he wasn’t screaming anymore. His frail body trembled all over and he twisted in Tony’s lap to avoid looking at his sister, which made Rikki even more furious, if such a thing was possible. Eventually she was going to have to run out of anger, right? Right?
“Hey, that wasn’t too bad,” Tony said. He let Jaime fold up into a compact ball and lean against Tony’s body, head tucked right up under Tony’s chin, as he kept crying. “Whoever came up with this had better be dead,” Tony told Bucky conversationally.

“It’s an idea, Tony,” Bucky said, sighing. “Once it’s out of the box, I don’t think it matters if the creator’s dead. Zola designed mine, pretty sure of that much. I… remember. When they… days. We ran through it for days. Needle in the back of my damn skull. Until bein’ awake and bein’ asleep were equal torture. I… damn, they did that to a kid? To you?” He turned to Rikki, horrorstruck.

“Jesus.” Tony couldn’t help cupping Jaime’s skull protectively. His fingers brushed the dataports embedded there, and Jaime shivered, and then leaned into it, just as Tony was about to pull away. “That helps?”

Jaime nodded, so Tony pressed against the ‘port again, gingerly, and then harder in response to Jaime’s push back. He had no idea how that was any good, but Jaime was actually getting calmer, so he kept it up.

“Course they did,” Rikki said. “Hydra’s got so many heads, but not so many ideas. Problematic, though. They did mine, first time, when I was thirteen.” She was trying, so hard, to look tough, but Tony could see the despair building behind her eyes.

Fucking fuck.

“First time?” Bucky said, looking like he wished he didn’t say it, but couldn’t call the words back.

“I shake ‘em off,” Rikki said. “They can’t hold me for long, maybe eight months, tops.” She took a deep breath and said the rest like a death sentence. “Because of Jaime. I love him more. They started hurting him, because it was the only way to keep me down.” She covered her face and tears trickled out from under her fingers. “I’m so sorry. I stopped fighting. But… they never would stop. It didn’t matter what I did.”

Jaime sobbed again and pressed more tightly against Tony’s chest, as if he were trying to burrow inside. “Well, thank god you got out.” Tony tapped at Jaime’s dataport again and then ruffled his hair gently.

Bucky sat on the far side of the sofa, drawing Rikki into a one-armed embrace. “You did exactly right,” he said, firmly. “You took care of them, you took care of yourself. I couldn’t be prouder of you, Rebecca Barnes, you did a really good job.”

Rikki shivered. “I should have done it sooner,” she said. “But I kept hoping you’d come. I didn’t even know, not until… I didn’t know where you were.”

Bucky shrugged. “I didn’t even know who I was, until about a year ago. I’m sorry. I swear to you, I did not know you existed. I would have, I promise, I would have come for you all, if I’d had any idea.”

Jaime had mostly stopped crying, even if he hadn’t unfolded, so Tony nudged him a little. “Back with us?”

Jaime nodded.

“Want to tell me about it?”

That got him a fervent head-shake, no.
“Okay, you don’t have to. Helps, though, so if you change your mind, let me know.”

Rikki shook her head and struggled to get off the sofa. “It’s me,” she said. “Whatever it is, he can’t say it when I’m here. I’ll just… look, kid, I love you, you know that, right? It’s okay. You just… stay here, okay? Father can keep you safe, I promise.”

She gave Bucky a glance that could set fire to cement. She held out her arms for the baby and took Sasha with her, the younger Barnes boy content now that his older brother wasn’t shrieking like a banshee. “You help him. Please.”

“Whatever we can do, we will,” Tony promised, to both the girl and the boy in his lap, still shivering with residual fear.

“Rikki,” Bucky said, scrambling to his feet, all gracelessness and worry. “Hey, hey. Wait a second, wouldja?”

Rikki shifted uncomfortably, but waited until Bucky caught up with her. “I meant what I said, okay? You did damn good. I know what they told you, but it wasn’t true, okay? I know you don’t believe that, that you don’t believe me, but… you were always worthy. You’ve always been worthy.”

Bucky got an exasperated huff and a muttered “whatever” for his efforts, and then Rikki was gone, the elevator door closing behind her.

“What, no cursing?” Tony said lightly. “She’s practically eating out of your hand.”

“I’m all astonishment,” Bucky said. “Holy shit, Tony, she actually let me touch her. That’s… better than I thought.”

“That was unexpected,” Tony admitted. He gave Bucky a warm smile, then turned his attention back to Jaime. “Okay, so, Rikki and Sasha went back to bed. Any chance you’re a little more amenable to talking?”

“She already knows,” Jaime said, his voice barely above a whisper, the normally high, clear sound ragged from the damage he did to his throat. “What else would it be? I’m killing her.”

“Oh, baby,” Tony sighed, and hugged him tighter. “Why do Hydra have to be such dicks? If they’d try to rule the world with puppies and rainbows and hugs, we’d probably just hand it right over.”

“It’s not even a dream,” Jaime said, his words as always, at odds with the child-like quality of his voice, “it’s symbolism. Nothing but the truth of things, made into monsters.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth?” Bucky muttered, scrubbing his hands over his face again. “It’s how they get you, pin you down with shit you already know is your fault and your doing. ‘Cept it ain’t. It’s a lie, Jaime.”


“If I wasn’t so weak,” Jaime said, obviously disgusted, “they wouldn’t need to. Not fast enough, not strong enough. They punish her because I’m not good enough. It’s not her fault I’m broken.”

“Hey,” Tony said. “They punished her because they’re assholes. If it wasn’t you, they’d have found some other excuse, because they needed to keep her controllable. It’s not. Your. Fault.”

“In the end, they always fail,” Bucky said. “Look at me, I didn’t have anything to keep me, nothing to fight for. Everyone I knew was dead and gone, and I still got away from them, in the end. And
you got away from them. That’s not worthless. And it’s not all your sister, neither. She needs you, much as you need her. That brain of yours, kiddo, I know why you go to Tony with your thoughts, ‘cause your old man can’t keep up with it. You were wasted on them, they had no idea what they had. They’re unworthy. We’re better than that, we deserve better than Hydra.”

Jaime looked up at that, met Tony’s gaze. His eyes, red-rimmed and swollen from crying, were filled with dread. “We haven’t seen the last of them,” he said. “They’re going to come for us, you know that, right? Percentage of success based on past trends, 63.179%. Even in failure, 87.7% chance that they’ll kill one of you.”

“That’s a better than ten percent chance we’ll all survive, and I’ve got to tell you, Avengers as a rule have a habit of beating the odds.” Tony smiled. “Anyway, taking that risk is what we do. To protect innocent people, like you. You have intel you think will help, lay it on us, but otherwise... Let us worry about Hydra. They’re not getting you back. Any of you.” He shot Bucky a warm glance.

The doubt radiating off Jaime’s expression was a near tangible thing, but he blinked a few times and made the effort to push it away. “C’n… Would I be allowed to stay here, tonight, sir?”

“Of course you can. JARVIS, let Rikki know Jaime’s staying with us for the rest of the night so she doesn’t worry.”

A moment later, JARVIS made one of those not-quite-sounds, then said, “She said, and I must quote, sir, ‘Duh, asshole.’”

Bucky snorted, then blushed. “Still gonna count that one as a win.”
Steve

There were two things that Steve had promised himself he would never think again; the first was “how bad could it be” since the answer, inevitably, was very, very bad. The other was “could this get any weirder” because apparently, it could. And the universe -- what Bucky liked to call Destiny, when he was in a mood to philosophise -- always, always seemed to take “what’s the worst that could happen” as some sort of personal challenge. So, when Stephen Strange showed up, Steve didn’t ask those questions.

Dr. Strange had turned up at the Tower asking for assistance -- two Avengers who could fly, a heavy hitter, and someone to fly the Quinjet (one thing Steve liked about working with Strange was that the man never showed up without a plan). Steve normally would have gone with Iron Man, Winter Soldier, Captain America, and Jessica Jones, but that morning had been full of Rikki at full-on peeved mode and a complete and utter baby Sasha meltdown, so Steve had asked Thor and Black Widow to stand in for Tony and Bucky so that the super-parents could deal with their super-brats.

What he hadn’t expected was that Dr. Strange needed them to track down a honest-to-god interdimensional dragon.

Steve didn’t ask the dangerous questions, but he did want to know: How did you lose a dragon?

That, it turned out, was the wrong question.

The right question was: How did you lose a dragon that was that big?

They finally found it south of Seattle, where the beast had settled down over Mt. Rainier. It was a dull gray scaled monster, nearly forty feet tall at the shoulder, with a terrifying wingspan. Strange’s plan, such as it was, was that the fliers and the Quinjet pilot would attract its attention and direct it back to where Strange -- with Steve to protect the sorcerer while he was casting -- would open up an enormous sling-portal to send the creature back where it was supposed to be.

That was all good and well, but dragons were apparently cranky, belligerent, and desperate to not go home again. Or at least, this one was.

But dragons and aliens, apparently the way the world was now. Steve suited up and got to work. Thor was so pleased at the idea that Steve couldn’t help but grin as the God of Thunder went to war. Dragonslaying was a huge accomplishment, even for Asgardians, although Strange had been pretty insistent that this dragon just needed to go home.

And he was definitely going to have to have words with his great idiot girlfriend, who almost got herself eaten by the damn dragon in her gleeful determination to take a selfie with the dragon in the background.

In the end, it had been Natasha who’d done the job right; spinning the Quinjet like a master and getting the dragon to chase her. Steve was just as glad his feet were on the ground, since he was pretty sure he’d have gotten airsick, the way Natasha was flying. She’d circled around the dragon several times, getting it nicely dizzy, then lured it into several loops, each larger than the one before, until she burned fuel to put the jet down just behind Stephen’s glimmering portal.

Steve caught one glimpse of the dragon’s homeworld -- where apparently it was a baby, which was just mind-bogglingly awful -- before the portal snapped shut behind it. It was almost shocking to
have a mission go so smoothly. Jess had a few cuts and bruises from being slapped out of the sky by an angry dragon tail, Thor was grinning ear to ear despite a bloody nose, and both Steve and Strange had been buried in snow at one point, but none of them were badly hurt, there had been no civilian casualties or property damage, and they were back in New York before dinner. Steve was just congratulating the group for a job well done when Bruce stormed into medical.

“What, exactly, did you think you were doing?” Bruce demanded, his normally brown eyes crackling with little streaks of green.

Steve blinked and stepped back. “Uh…”

Natasha got up from the med-cot; she was, actually, the only one who hadn’t gotten hurt, although the Quinjet was going to need to be cleaned. “Hey big guy,” she said, soothingly.

“Don’t you even start with me, Natasha,” Bruce snapped, instead of his usual calm tones. “I’m not speaking to you right now.” The tone of his voice drew Thor’s attention and Mjolnir was suddenly in his grip.

“Bruce, hey,” Steve said, holding his hands up.

“How dare you take her out on a mission? There are at least two other Avengers in this building with the skill to fly the quinjet who are not pregnant.”

Oh.

Natasha suddenly dropped back a step and looked guilty. “Bruce, I’m fine.”

Not that Steve knew much about pregnancy. But he did remember Bucky’s mother being confined to bed when round with Bucky’s younger brother because she’d tripped on the stairs and taken a fall.

Bruce spared her a quick glower. “Dragon? Dragon. And look, we have a super-soldier, the sorcerer supreme, and a minor deity, all with injuries. That you’re not injured is a miracle, Natasha, and I’m a scientist. I don’t trust miracles; they’re not replicable in a lab situation. I’m holding you personally responsible, Captain,” Bruce said, turning back to Steve. “Put her on desk-work if you have to have her expertise, but I guarantee you that if she ends up in the field again before February, you’ll see a side of me you’re not going to be happy with.”

There was a long, quiet moment after Bruce left where no one quite looked at anyone else, then Steve blew out his breath. “Right. You’re benched for the duration, Widow.”

Natasha sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “I suppose it was inevitable. Although I might have thought he’d wait until I was actually showing before turning into a typical male worry-wart.”

Dr. Strange held out one hand, his wrist encircled by glowing blue and yellow runes. “There is a strong aura about the child,” he said. “I look forward to meeting--”

“Shut up, Strange,” Natasha said, absently. “Excuse me, I should… go talk to him.”

***

Jessica

Jessica folded her combat armor (in her head, she was still calling it the “Jewel jammies”) so she could deliver it to Tony. He’d build some shock absorption into the material, ostensibly for reducing injuries from enemy blunt weapons, but everyone knew the actual reason was because her flying
skills sucked and Jessica crash-landed more often than not. Strange’s runaway dragon mission had been her first field test and Tony had started texting her before they’d made it back to New York to ask about its performance.

Never satisfied, that man, unless they all walked away without injury. He was constantly upgrading, tinkering, experimenting. Anything and everything he could do, to keep the team safe. Steve never seemed to notice, but he’d had a Stark taking care of him since the very beginning of his career (and Bucky before that, although she suspected that Bucky hadn’t been providing underwear that was safe and fun to wear).

“Jess?”

“Hey, cowboy,” she said, looking up at her boyfriend. As always, she had to pause just a second to breathe; he was that fucking gorgeous. Especially, for some reason, when he was still sweaty and messed up from battle. She wondered if he’d be interested in a post-mission mattress test.

“Make sure you get your mission report to me,” he said, not quite meeting her eyes, which was unlike him. She frowned. “And please don’t post that selfie online. I don’t want another PR incident about rampaging monsters. I don’t know that any civilians saw that dragon, but let’s not get anything stirred up, okay? Oh, and I have that meeting with the governor tonight, so I won’t be back until after dinner. But if you could set some time aside… we need to have a talk, all right?”

Jessica experienced a very unpleasant shifting of her internal organs. Her stomach dropped a good six inches and her heart rose up into her throat until she thought she’d choke on it. “Sure. Talk. Right.” Oh, this was bad, this was so very bad.

And then it got worse, because he didn’t hug her or kiss her goodbye. He squeezed her hands once and then went to hit the shower.

Jessica stared after him for a long moment. What the hell had she done? She racked her brain, but nothing stood out. Well, he’d yelled at her again, when the dragon had knocked her out of the sky, but Steve was always doing that. He didn’t differentiate between her and any of their other teammates when someone put themselves in danger. And by put themselves in danger, Steve often meant not letting him stand between them and incoming fire. The man’s main weapon was a shield, for fuck’s sake; she sort of expected him to be a world-class worry-wart.

She packed her armor into the rucksack, tucked it over her shoulder and headed out to the elevator, still trying to figure out what she’d done wrong. She had been taking quite a few out of town jobs recently; working with the remnants of SHIELD to track down and recover missing powered people and shutting down the Inhuman trafficking rings that had popped up all over the country.

The music in Tony’s workshop was so loud that Jessica could feel the beat vibrating through the glass. She knocked a few times, but he didn’t appear to notice. “Hey, JARVIS?”

“Yes, Miss Jones?”

“Could you just let him know I’m leaving this here for him, and whenever he’s not busy he can let me know and I’ll go over the design flaw with him.”

The wall suddenly stopped vibrating and the door swung open. “What design flaw? There’s no design flaw.”

Great. Now she had to talk to an already offended Tony Stark. This day was just getting better and better.
“Fairly certain that dragons weren’t on your list of potential hazards,” Jessica said. She brought the armor in, and dropped the bag near Tony’s workstation. She hooked up her tee shirt to show him the gruesome bruising on her lower rib cage. “I got hit right where the meld line is between the top of the armor and the legs, which directed all the force to this one seam.”

“Okay, that’s probably a design flaw,” Tony admitted. “I’m used to compensating for you hitting the ground. Or a building. Or a row of trash cans. Or --”

“Can you just not… do that. Today? Please?”

“Bad day?” Tony was already taking the armor out of the bag and spreading it over the workstation, the schematics coming up on his display.

Confiding in Tony didn’t exactly seem like the worst idea ever. Surely she’d had worse ideas than that. She couldn’t think of any offhand, but… She held up her fingers about an inch apart. “I think I’m this close to getting the Let’s Be Friends speech.”

“Why? What’d you do?”

Yeah, worst idea ever. Jessica rolled her eyes. “Never mind, just fix the armor. Please,” she added, because to be fair, it wasn’t like he owed it to her, and it wasn’t technically his fault that she was about to be dumped. Probably.

“Hey, wait, no, c’mon, I didn’t mean to-- Well, okay, I probably did, because my first reflex in any given situation is to be an asshole, ask anyone. But I didn’t mean it personally. What’s going on with you and Captain Twinkletoes?”

“I don’t know. I never know. I’ve got about as much people skills as you do,” Jessica said. She threw herself onto the stool near the workbench.

“Mm. Maybe it’s him. You two have been together for what, about eight months now? Maybe he realized you’re closing in on a year and is having a commitment freakout.” Tony picked up the armor and started examining the faulty seam.

“Is that a real thing? I thought guys didn’t keep track of anniversaries,” Jessica muttered. She leaned over and opened the bottom drawer of Tony’s workstation. “Aha! I knew I could count on you to have a booze stash somewhere. Do you mind if I?”

Tony waved careless permission. “I know I don’t keep track of anniversaries,” Tony said. “But I don’t have to, because I have JARVIS. But you are dating Steve. Who strikes me as the sort of guy who keeps track of all that stuff.”

“You know, Luke and I could never work our shit out,” she said, cracking the whiskey bottle open. She looked around for a cup, found something that DUM-E probably hadn’t poured motor oil into recently and made it a generous pour. “Every three to four months; you could set your watch by it. But there was always lots of yelling and screaming leading up to it. ‘We need to talk’ is like getting an air-raid siren. I got no idea where it’s coming from or when it’ll get here.”

“So go camp out in his room and ambush him as soon as he’s back from that meeting with the governor,” Tony suggested. “Of course, I can’t recommend getting your advice from me, because I am currently in the longest relationship I’ve ever managed to keep going, and I’m fairly certain that’s due mostly to Bucky’s efforts, not mine. Because, as previously stated: asshole.”

Jessica peered into the bottom of the cup; how had it gotten empty that fast? She didn’t even really remember tipping it up. Sigh. “Here,” she said, shoving the bottle back at him. “You better keep that...
or I’m gonna drink all of it, which isn’t going to be helpful. I don’t think. I might come back and get it later tonight. Just wish I knew what I’d done. You’re not the only asshole around here, but I thought…”

“For what it’s worth, I thought you were doing better at the people-ing,” Tony said. “I’ll make sure JARVIS points you to the nearest painkiller in need. But give us an update first, in case he’s just being stupid and Bucky needs to go smack him upside the head.”

“Yes, maybe,” Jessica said. Depended on the reason, she supposed. “Thanks, Tony. I’m… gonna go be depressed somewhere else. It’s too bright in here for a proper sulk.”

Jessica had never been assigned her own quarters in the Tower; she’d just moved into Steve’s. The top floor apartments were ridiculously enormous as it was; her own apartment, tucked behind Alias’s front office, was about the size of the living room in Steve’s place. She hadn’t worried about crowding him; he’d confessed shortly after she moved in that it was a relief to see more stuff in the place, to have another person moving around in what he considered to be a ridiculously large living area for one person.

Despite having things like her dresser drawers, her side of the bed and the closet, and one chair that she gravitated to regularly, she still thought of the apartment as being Steve’s and not theirs. Maybe it was her fault; whatever it was. She still maintained her own place, despite business being good enough that she could have afforded a better office if she’d wanted one. Maybe Steve felt like she wasn’t… committed.

She threw herself into her chair and used the remote to thumb on some music. Not any of Steve’s crappy 1940s shit, either, but early punk.

The problem with having several hours between when he said “we need to talk” and when they were actually going to be able to talk was that Jessica was able to run through about eighty possible scenarios. Of which only three of them were good, maybe a dozen of which she might be able to talk him into giving her a second chance, and the rest were all versions of “you’re a terrible person Jessica Jones, go away.” Except for that last one, which was “I think I’m in love with Rikki Barnes,” and that was the one she kept coming back to, because…

Well, because Rikki Barnes was so close to a carbon copy of her father, down to the traumatic backstory and obvious adoration; neither of them looked at Steve like he’d done anything other than hung the sun in the sky, and she was quite positive that if Steve had ever given Bucky any indication at all that Captain America was anything other than strictly Kinsey Scale Zero, well, she wouldn’t be the only person without a supersoldier, now would she? Well, maybe not now. Bucky seemed pretty attached to Tony. But certainly during the war, that might have been a thing that had been possible.

Especially as Rikki was damned attractive. And young. And had enormous breasts. And…

Jesus Christ, this is pathetic, Jessica thought, savagely.

She hadn’t really realized that the sun was setting, that the rooms were slowly getting darker until she was sitting, staring at nothing, in utter blackness, the music of her emo-teenage years steady and harsh in her ears.

Steve opened the door and snapped on the light. Jessica squinted and held up her hand to shade her eyes.

“Hey Jess,” Steve greeted her. God, he looked beautiful; apparently the governor wasn’t the sort to insist on the Captain America suit, and Steve was in an actual suit, complete with tie and fancy
cufflinks. "What are you doing?"

*Sitting in the dark and rehearsing conversations.* "Listening to music," she said. "I didn’t realize it had gotten so late."

"Music? Right, that’s what you call this," Steve said. He gave her a wide grin.

"I’d think you’d recognize it," she said. "It’s called punk. You know what the main thematic nature is about punk music?"

"No."

"Punk music is all about doing whatever the hell you want, no matter what," Jessica said.

Steve chuckled ruefully. "Yeah, sounds like me," he admitted.

Jessica took a deep breath to ground herself and the way it shivered into her lungs, she knew it wasn’t working. Time to get this over with. Mostly because she couldn’t stand much more of not knowing. "So, what did I do wrong?"

Steve blinked. "I’m… not sure what you mean."

"Well, Tony thinks you might be getting commitment-phobia or something," she said, "but I dunno, it’s usually me."

"What? Why would Tony say something like that? That’s a… why would he say something like that to you?"

"Because I was stealing his hooch and whining at him, I imagine," Jessica said.

Steve grumbled. "That was really uncalled for. I’m going to have words with him."

"Well, first you’re going to have words with me, because I’ve been sitting here worrying about it all goddamn day. So if you already told Tony you’re going to dump me and he broke the bro-code, you can take it up with him later."

Steve very carefully adjusted his cuffs. "Did Tony say that?"

*Great.* Now it was hard to remember which conversations she’d actually had and which ones were going on entirely inside her head. "Not exactly that, no," she said. "He did ask me what I did wrong, which is what I’d like to know."

"Why would Tony think… I didn’t… okay, okay, obviously you’re upset. So --" 

"Obviously," Jessica said. Upset was barely *beginning* to cover it, and she was rapidly moving into highly pissed off.

"I don’t know what Tony told you, but breaking things off with you is not on my to-do list. Not tonight, not tomorrow, not *ever* if I have anything to say about it. So… can we take a few deep breaths, because now I’m really worried, Jess. What did Tony say?"

"Tony didn’t… you said it."

"I did not say anything of the sort. Not to Tony, not to anyone."

"You did," Jessica insisted. "You looked me right in the face and said ‘we need to talk.’"
Steve nodded, slowly. “Because we need to talk. I thought… I thought that was a thing, now. Communication, in a relationship. When one partner has concerns, we’re supposed to talk things out?”

“‘We need to talk’ is code for ‘it’s not you, baby, it’s me’ and ‘I need some space’ and ‘I think we need to see other people!’ What the hell was I supposed to think? Particularly when there’s a young, half-dressed, teenage doppleganger of your best friend wandering around the halls in her underwear - - with your damn shield on them, no less -- trying her damnedest to get sempai to notice her!”

Steve practically choked on that. “My God, Jessica, she’s a child! No.”

“Okay, we’re not even going to get into the things I was doing at nineteen and let’s move right into the part of the conversation where you tell me what the hell!”

Steve took a deep breath and then, very slowly, sat down. “It recently came to my attention -- not but ten hours ago -- that Natasha’s condition was going to limit her, as far as combat was concerned. I… You know I have like next to no previous experience with actual, lasting relationships, right? I probably should have thought about this months ago, and I didn’t, and you didn’t bring it up, so… and I’m not saying I’d object if it happened, but it might be nice to have a plan.”

Now she was confused. “What are you talking about?”

“It concerns me that we haven’t discussed the possibility of you getting pregnant.”

Jessica very slowly leaned forward until her elbows were on her knees, and then rested her face in her hands. “Let me get this straight,” she said. “I just made an absolute cake out of myself thinking that you had the hots for little miss assassin and after eight months of absolutely stellar, frequent, and unprotected sex, you’re now concerned that I might get pregnant?”

And there went the patent pending Steve Rogers blush.

“We never talked about it,” he said. “I mean. I’m not. I… is there any good way to have this conversation?”

“I can’t believe this is the first time this has come up,” Jessica said. The room was spinning in crazy loops and she probably should have eaten something at some point today, especially as she’d been battling a goddamn dragon earlier.

“Well, I know about rubbers,” Steve admitted, still blushing. “The Army was pretty active with their campaign to keep American soldiers from getting syphilis. But --”

“But you’re a super-soldier and you can’t get sick,” Jessica said. She was actively aware of how hungry she was, now that she wasn’t panicking anymore. This was what he wanted to talk about? Now? After eight months? Idiot. “Now I’m wondering if there are any blonde haired, blue-eyed septuagenarians out there who think you owe a lot of back child-support.”

Steve blushed harder. “Pretty sure if any of the gals I went with back during the war had had a baby, they’d have mentioned it. Even after I was in the ice, Howard would have been willing to throw a lot of money at getting his hands on any child of mine.”

“So, is this a thing you’re worried about, or a thing you want?”

Steve opened his mouth, then shut it again.

“Because we’ve been given some pretty compelling evidence that super-soldiers can have children.
And that it’s not necessarily the safest thing in the world for the mother in question, which I’m less concerned about, since we’re pretty well-matched as far as physical endurance goes. We might want to consult a doctor who specializes in enhanced persons, just in case,” Jessica said, carefully. “But as far as it goes; I’m also not going to get a disease. I don’t even get colds anymore. But pregnancy. That’s a thing that could happen. I think. Everything works the way it should. Admittedly, I’ve never had a fertility test. And while I’m not as immune to most pharmacological substances as you or Bucky, I was concerned about the efficiency of the pill. So, I’ve got an IUD. Just the plain copper kind, not the one with hormones in it. So far, it’s been pretty effective. But that’s an easy thing to reverse, if… that was something you… If we were interested in taking this relationship to the next level.”

The IUD had been a damn good idea, left over from those teenage years that she didn’t really want to discuss with Steve, and even better because Killgrave had once told her to stop taking the pill, and she could tell him she wasn’t. Killgrave had liked the idea of having a baby with her, had talked about it until she wanted to throw up. The part of her that knew just what the hell he was doing to her had kept everything she could secret. She didn’t have to do anything, unless he specifically told her to, so she hadn’t volunteered the information.

Something on her face must not have looked right, because Steve said, “I don’t want to do anything that you’re not on the same page as I am. I can live without a kid, Jess. I can’t live without you. I’m not going to… push you into a family you don’t want.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Steve,” Jessica said. “You’d be fine.”

“No,” he said, and suddenly he was on his knees in front of her chair, taking her hands and pressing them against his chest. “I wouldn’t. I love you. I would not be fine. I’m fine now, because of you. Ask anyone on the team, they all knew it. I was a disaster before you came along. Losing you would leave scars, Jess.”

She pressed one hand under her eyes, blinking back tears. “Sorry,” she said. “I… know you said you didn’t want me to be all dramatic.”

“And I also said I’d take that,” Steve said. “I mean, this is going to sound really horrible, and I’d rather you not have to be that worried again, but it kinda feels good. That you were worried I’d leave you. That you’d notice, even, if I was gone.”

“You’re right, that sounds horrible.” And she was laughing because she was so god damned relieved. “But… I love you, anyway. What are you gonna do?”

“Love you for the rest of my life,” Steve said, cupping her face.
Rikki

Rikki wouldn’t say she was happy, not exactly. Perhaps she just didn’t have enough experience with the emotion to be certain what she was feeling.

Her brothers were safe. Or as safe as anyone ever really was. When she’d been younger, she’d imagined that there was someplace completely safe in the universe. Somewhere that her brothers could be children, could be protected. Would grow up secure and well-loved and fed. Those things that she wanted for them, that she would never have thought to ask for herself. Would not even have taken, if they’d been offered.

She had skills; she was a soldier.

Her skills were languishing. There was practice, sometimes, when she could persuade one of the Avengers to train with her. Clint was willing, and Natasha had been, right up until the Captain chewed her out about it. That much, at least, Rikki could understand. Pregnant, Natasha was to be protected at all cost.

The Captain would sometimes aid in her training, but he was important and had many duties. She could not impose on him terribly often. The Captain’s woman, Jones, was still in training herself, although Rikki itched to knock that woman across a ring. (Rikki could not decide what about Jones bothered her more: that the woman was engaged in sexual relations with the Captain, or that she was Father’s student. Both facts made Rikki burn with jealousy. Perhaps it was just as well that Jones wouldn’t spar with her; Rikki wasn’t sure what would happen if she forgot to pull her punches.)

Dr. Banner never sparred, and the first time Rikki saw footage of what the Hulk was capable of it, she agreed that perhaps, that would not be wise. The demigod, Thor, was willing to spar with her, and she found lessons with him to be both exciting and exhausting. But, like the Captain, he didn’t have much time to give her. Father had taken some of her training in hand, but often put her aside in favor of Jones, who, as a part-time Avenger, had the greater need. And Rikki would have cut off her own hand rather than ask Stark for lessons in anything.

Sam Wilson, the Captain’s second, refused point-blank.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “Tangled with your dad when he was full on Winter Soldier and my shoulder still bothers me from that. I ain’t about to have a matching set of weather-wise aches. For the life of me, I don’t know how you Ruskies lost the Cold War; all of you kick so very much ass.”

Rikki snorted. “You spent us to death, you decadent capitalist.”

Stark had looked up at that. “He with the most money wins,” he said, that insouciant smirk playing on his mouth. Rikki had to restrain a growl at that. Stark… Stark was going to be a problem, long-term. He had an unholy amount of influence on everyone in the Tower and what was worse, he seemed to have no idea that he wielded it. He owned the building, he paid all the expenses. Jaime had tapped into the Tower logs for her, and she’d seen the budgeting sheets. The cost of upkeep for her and her brothers was near to the cost of maintaining an Avenger, and she did nothing to earn her place. Being indebted to Tony Stark was a particularly sore point.
Especially the way Father deferred to him.

Not the same way everyone else deferred to the Captain, which was proper. Father catered to Tony Stark’s wishes -- even Stark’s mere whims! -- as a matter of course. Infuriating. Especially considering that Stark didn’t treat Father with anything like the respect he was due. The first time Rikki had seen the Winter Soldier fetching Stark a cup of coffee like a servant, she’d nearly lost it. Her fingers itched for her guns.

Stark was… irreverent. He addressed no one with any proper form of respect. The fact that Rikki was having to constantly research the ridiculous names he called her was infuriating, never mind the names themselves. (She would never admit in a million years that she was rather flattered when he called her Ripley; when she’d looked that reference up, she’d ended up sitting through most of a day’s worth of films, enraptured. Ripley was ruthless, protective, and took no shit. Badass, as the slang would have it. Ripley was a deserving namesake. Of course, Stark never used it again, preferring to dig up more and more obscure references.)

Worse still was the fact that Stark was the father of Natasha’s unborn child; it was an open secret in the Tower. Everyone seemed to know, and no one said a word. Natasha was planning her simple wedding with Dr. Banner (“a few witnesses and go out to dinner”), and Banner was quietly joyful about it. (Rikki would admit to being relieved that Banner was not the father of the babe; she liked Natasha and watching the woman be ripped in half by the child she carried would be highly distressing.) What she’d been told by Jaime, who witnessed the entire discussion between Stark and Natasha, was that they’d had some sort of drunken affair. That Father could know about this and still treat Stark with such adoration? It was unthinkable. Rikki would have killed a lover that would not stay faithful.

“Is your breakfast curdled?” Stark asked, dragging Rikki out of her thoughts. “Because the eggs are already dead; you don’t have to glare them into submission.”


Rikki twitched. She wanted a knife. She could easily kill him with her fork; that wasn’t even the problem. The problem was that there were at least four Avengers in the room -- and Jaime, who regarded Stark as if he were a god, and Father was just in the next room. The likelihood that she’d succeed in inflicting a death blow with a fork before someone stopped her was pretty damn close to nil.

She considered simply walking out of breakfast. It would get her out from under Stark’s sardonic looks and mocking quips. Not finishing her breakfast would mean she was hungry later, which she could endure; that Jaime might take it as a sign that he didn’t need to eat his own food, which she could not; and that Stark would win this particular round of engagement, which was entirely out of the question. She stabbed the fork into her eggs and took another bite.

Stark glanced at her, his mouth tugging into one of those lopsided smirks. She wondered if he kept a running tally of their silent battles as much as she did, and whether that smirk was his mockery of her for being so far behind in points.

Father came in from the kitchen, and set a cup of coffee down in front of Stark like he was a footman waiting at table before he kissed the side of Stark’s neck. “Morning, Zhelezoska.” Rikki shuddered inwardly at the display of subservience. Disgusting.

She looked back at her eggs. She couldn’t watch, not any longer. She had worked hard to gain access to the Tower, to bring her brothers home, and she would not risk being the reason they were denied. If she remained, she would surely do or say something unwise. She grabbed two pieces of
toast from the platter in the center of the table and folded the remainder of her eggs inside.

As was the rule, Rikki took her emptied plate and silverware into the kitchen. Natasha was there, eating grape jelly directly out of a jar with a spoon, talking quietly with her intended as Banner scrambled more eggs.

Rikki swallowed her resentment of Stark and made her habitual inquiries about Natasha’s health, and was pleased to hear things were going well. She couldn’t help a sneaking side-eye at Banner. Rikki knew what he was capable of, at least to some degree. How had he not at least once taken a run at Stark for the betrayal? They were supposed to be friends!

Rikki shook her head.

Still eating her sandwich, she found Wilson in the entertainment room. “It’s your turn today,” she said.

“What is?”

“Babysitting,” she said, disgusted. Clint had done it for quite a while, and she did actually like him, so it was less of a burden than it could have been, but he had duties to attend to today. JARVIS kept her informed of the general schedule, so that she might know who was on Tower duty and could be spared as an escort. (That is, if anyone was; sometimes there was no one with the time to run her errands with her. She wondered just how much longer this intolerable situation was going to continue).

“Oh,” Wilson said. “Um, what are we doing today?”

“Cooking class with Elz,” she said, consulting her phone. “And then tutoring in engineering with Doctor Richards. And then Johnny Storm asked me if I wanted to ‘Netflix and chill’ with him.”

Wilson choked at that one. “You might wanna look that up on Urban Dictionary before you agree.”

“No,” Father said, from the kitchen. “Absolutely not.”

To Wilson, she said, curtly, “I’m already aware of the colloquialism, thank you for your concern. I believe I can handle his amorous intentions.” She drew in a deep breath. “I do not see where it is your concern, Father.”

Father leaned in the door to the common room. “Storm is at least ten years older than you,” he said. “And he has this… reputation.”

“Very well,” Rikki said. “I shall inform his sister that you don’t consider her an adequate chaperone.”

Father joined Wilson in making a choking noise. “Er,” he stammered. “No, that’s okay, you don’t need to tell Sue anything of the sort. She’s going to be there?”

Technically, yes. Sue Richards was going to be in the Baxter building; she usually was whenever Rikki took lessons with Doctor Richards. It wasn’t lying. “I believe that is the intention.”

“Right, then,” Father said, flushing. “Just…”

“Father,” Rikki snapped, hands on her hips. “I am an adult, of legal and consenting age. Regardless of your opinion, I am, in fact, fully capable of making an informed decision about engaging in sexual congress. And at least, if I decide to have sex with Johnny, we will both know the full value of what
we have given.”

“What?”

“Your precious Zhelezoska,” Rikki sneered. “I cannot believe you have the nerve to lecture me about what partner I chose when you continue to allow that entitled bastard a place in your life.”

From the kitchen came the peal of Stark’s laughter, which was exactly as much as she could stand. “I am going now,” she declared. “It is unnecessary to provide an escort. I will be with Negasonic for cookery class and at the Baxter Building the rest of the day. Surely, if I am to have a break with sanity during those times, someone will be on hand to contain me.”

She turned on her heel and stalked off, heading for the staircase. The elevator was too slow and she needed to burn off some of the anger. While Elz might share her disgust for all things related to Tony Stark, Rikki was too fond of the woman to subject her to such a foul mood.

***

Bucky

When Rikki stormed out of the Tower, Sam immediately volunteered to suit up and keep an aerial recon on Bucky’s wayward, somewhat pissed off daughter. “It is my turn,” he pointed out. But Bucky remembered being nineteen; it sucked almost as bad as being fifteen -- that cusp of life where you were sort of an adult and had responsibilities, but at the same time your parents kept treating you like a kid. And when you didn’t have your shit together, which was inevitable because you were nineteen, everyone would lecture you about how you were supposed to be an adult. Aggravating as shit.

“Nah,” Bucky said. “She’d spot you, no doubt, an’ she’s trying to make a point here. Let her cool off. She’ll be better for it.”

Tony came up behind him, slid his arms around Bucky’s waist. “Hey, K-19,” he said, “you okay?”

Bucky leaned back against him, drawing strength from Tony’s support. “Probably feelin’ like every other dad out there with a teenaged daughter. She’s just pissed; she’ll figure it out. What could go wrong? I mean, I’ve just let an assassin-trainee loose in New York City. I’m sure everything’ll be fine.”

Sam frowned. “Man, do you gotta say that? Don’t you know better by now?”

Knowing he needed distraction from worried thoughts, Bucky threw himself into his daily tasks: training with Jessica, target practice, answering fan mail. (He actually got fan mail. The first time he’d found out about that, it had completely freaked him out, but apparently that was part of being an Avenger. Some of the more popular Avengers -- primarily Steve, Tony, and Thor -- got so much mail that Tony had staff on hand to sort through it, but Bucky was able to keep up with his own.) After lunch, he spent a few hours with his sons.

Bucky didn’t start to get worried until Sue called.

Okay, he was totally lying to himself there; he had been worried as soon as Ellie Phimister texted him to ask if he’d grounded Rikki, or if she’d forgotten that they had class today.

_Bucky: She was pissed when she left; she’s probably brooding somewhere. Check cliffs overlooking the city or perched on churches._
Ellie: (ノ△益▔)ノ≡≡

Bucky: I don’t even know what that means

Ellie: have her call me

Bucky: Will do.

But if there was one thing, one single thing that united his kids, it was their thirst for knowledge. No matter how it had been drilled into them, both Rikki and Jaime were sponges for lessons. Jaime was a little more serious about it, sometimes to the point of acute anxiety, and Rikki wasn’t as quick to pick things up, but that didn’t quell her thirst for knowledge, and once she learned a thing, she never forgot it.

There was no way she’d deliberately skip Dr. Richards’ lessons; not only did she particularly enjoy the subject matter, but she also took pleasure in tweaking Tony by mentoring under a man that Tony considered a rival. Tony had made just enough of a production about it that Rikki was practically welded to Richards’ side.

And Bucky wasn’t blind; there was a crush-thing going on with Johnny Storm, too. That was probably because her first fixation had been on Steve, who had been nothing but uninterested (thank god). It seemed reasonable that she’d transfer the crush to Storm, who bore a suspicious resemblance to Steve (seriously, it was uncanny). She wouldn’t have skipped out on that, especially after making such a production of her sexual independence, although he really, really hoped she wouldn’t fuck Storm just to spite Bucky. That was always a bad reason for any sort of relationship (or whatever Storm would have called it, because even at twenty-eight, Storm was pretty damn immature.)

But Sue was telling him that Rikki hadn’t arrived at the Baxter Building.

“Thank you, Sue,” Bucky said. “I’ll keep you informed.”

He put his phone back in his pocket, took a deep breath. He was calm. He was…

Slowly, he withdrew his fist from the plaster, dust puffing in the air around him. *Shit.*

No, he was not calm.

He shook his hand out, watching blood prickle around his knuckles, then pulled out his phone again. Tony had installed a tracker app on both Jaime’s and Rikki’s phones. He was sure that Rikki would have figured it out, but JARVIS was hard to fool.

She didn’t show up on the app. Even if she turned the phone off, the phone should have pinged a tower once an hour or so, but there was no data, not for the last four hours and seven minutes. Bucky scrolled through the data before the trail went dead. She’d left the Tower an hour before her class, and stopped at a smoothie bar. That made sense; she’d skipped half of her breakfast. She’d left the shop, headed toward her class, and then, maybe four blocks away from the culinary institute, she’d just vanished.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Mr. Barnes, how might I assist you?”

“Pull me up traffic cameras, four hours, twenty minutes ago, near this location.” He tapped the last reading from the tracking log. “Rikki’s gone AWOL. See if you can find where she went. Gather up whoever’s available -- discreetly; I don’t want Jaime freakin’ out -- and meet up in the war room.”
He grabbed a comm unit and thumbed it on, shoving it in place.

“I will continue to look through the security camera footage, Mr. Barnes, but I do not believe the war room will be necessary.”

“Why not?”

“Because she was just assisted out of a taxi near the front door. You may wish to meet her, she appears disoriented,” JARVIS said.

“Identify that taxi,” Bucky snapped. He hesitated for just a moment, then decided on the express route. After scolding him for using the elevator cables a few times, Tony had rolled his eyes and set up a rappelling line in one of the stairwells with a quick-fasten harness. That was one of the things Bucky loved about Tony: he didn’t so much stop Bucky from doing stupid things as just try to make them safer.

Bucky clicked on the belt and was down the middle of the stairs, eighty floors in less than two minutes. He unhitched, tugged the line for JARVIS to retract it, and bolted outside.

“Get Tony and Bruce to medical for me,” Bucky said, pushing a little rougher than necessary at the crowd of civilians that had formed a loose semi-circle around his daughter when she’d collapsed in the plaza. “Move, god dammit!”

Rikki was sprawled on the sidewalk, motionless. She stank of booze and… Bucky leaned closer, inhaling. Drugs, too. What the hell? Getting high was fucking pointless, and it certainly shouldn’t garner this sort of reaction; the super soldier serum chewed pretty quickly through anything that wouldn’t kill a normal human. The one time he’d managed to get close to drunk with Steve, they’d been sober again by the time the cab got them to the Tower, despite the sheer quantity of booze they’d consumed. Just enough to get them both light-headed and giggly. Not passing out.

“Rikki,” Bucky said. He touched her throat; her pulse was strong, if quite a bit more rapid than he would have expected. “Hey, hey, come on, can you wake up a little?”

Rikki was barely responsive to his voice and not at all to his touch. God damn, what the hell had happened to her?

“JARVIS, I’m bringing her up to medical. Tell Jaime to meet me there; let him know that Rikki is very ill and I may need him to run scenario numbers for me.”

Bucky got his arms under his daughter and lifted her into a fireman’s carry. She smelled strange, under the reek of booze, and he didn’t want her to choke if she had to throw up. Security scrambled to open the front lobby doors for him and he ducked into the Avengers’ exclusive elevator, the retinal scan going off even though JARVIS was riding the controls.

Rikki didn’t throw up until Bucky was getting her settled into a cot in medical. Her eyelids fluttered open and she whined, then gagged and choked and produced an excessive amount of vomit.

“<Hey,>” Bucky said, smoothing her hair back as she settled into the cot. “<You’re home. You’re safe. It’s okay.>”

<"Father,"> she said.

“I’m gonna bag some of this for testing,” Bruce said, busying himself with the clean up. “See what’s in her system.”
“<Father,>” Rikki said again. “<What… what’s happened?>”

“<Well, I was hoping you could tell me that, my star,>” Bucky said. He handed her a cup of water and she sipped, slow.

Rikki looked up at him, her eyes wide and terrified. “<I don’t remember.>”

***

Tony

“I can’t tell,” Jaime was saying as Tony rounded the corner into medical. “Not enough data.”

Rikki was all but rigid, sitting up in the medical cot, her spine so stiff it made the muscles in Tony’s back flex in sympathy. Her stormcloud eyes were steady, staring not quite at her father, at some spot just beyond the left side of his head.

“Is there anything you can tell me?” Bucky said to the boy. Jaime had hold of Bucky’s shirt with one hand, as far back from his sister as it was possible to be and still be in the room.

“She’s not drunk,” Jaime stated. “It wouldn’t affect her like this. Might be poison. That’ll take some time to get clean, depending on what it is. Doesn’t smell right for digoxin, which is about the only known readily-available poison that will kill Snowmelt’s children, if left untreated. Maybe something else.” The boy shot a quick look at Bruce, who was running the centrifuge.

Tony leaned over Bruce’s shoulder to look at the analysis in-progress, then turned back to look at Rikki again. Something about the way she was staring bothered him. It wasn’t at all vacant, like it would be if she were drugged, or having some kind of dissociative episode. He pushed it aside and turned to Bucky instead. “What’s the latest?”

Steve came in, holding one of the StarkPads like it was a baby he was trying to soothe. He poked it absentely, then shrugged and handed it to Tony. “JARVIS ran some camera surveillance on where she’s been. You figure it out, I hate that thing.”

“It can smell your fear,” Tony quipped, and flipped the holographic interface out of the glass surface with a flick of his wrist.

As soon as Tony was preoccupied, Jaime let go of his father and moved quickly around the room, keeping as much space between himself and his sister as was manageable, and eventually ended up behind Tony’s legs. He bounced up onto his tiptoes to look at the display. “I know that shop,” he said. “Before?”

“Before we came here,” Jaime clarified. “Rikki wanted to do recon, before she attempted to report to the Winter Soldier. They make drinks with a high caloric yield. Protein powders and nutrient syrups. Nasty. Rikki reported there, daily. Brought us drinks when she came back.”

Tony paused mid-motion and looked down at the boy. “Before, before?”

“Before we came here,” Jaime clarified. “Rikki wanted to do recon, before she attempted to report to the Winter Soldier. They make drinks with a high caloric yield. Protein powders and nutrient syrups. Nasty. Rikki reported there, daily. Brought us drinks when she came back.”

Tony stuck a pin into the shop and started attaching notes to it. “When you say ‘reported’, kiddo…” Tony glanced at Rikki again. She wasn’t responding to the conversation, but she still looked awake and alert. He had seen that expression before, but where?

“Two children with such a young escort would be noticed,” Jaime said, softly. “Draw attention,
especially on a daily basis. Trainees will remain in the safe house. The soldier will attend to their needs. *Jaime, you must stay here.*”

“Mm. So it’s just where she went to get food for you all?”

“I can’t say,” Jaime repeated.

“Insufficient data,” Tony recited along with him. “Yeah, okay.”

Steve was frowning thoughtfully at Rikki as well. When Bucky turned to look at the first chemical analysis results with Bruce, Tony caught Steve’s eye and raised an eyebrow. *You have any ideas?*

Steve’s lips thinned. *Nothing good.* He glanced at Bucky, then lifted a hand and spelled out *P-T-S-D* in ASL, with a head-tilt that made it a question.

Tony shook his head. It wouldn’t surprise him in the slightest if Rikki had a whole heap of PTSD, and the gods knew it showed up in all sorts of bizarre ways, but that *felt* wrong.

Bruce turned back to the cot. “I’d like to take a blood sample, if you’re okay with that,” he told Rikki carefully. She held out her arm in mute acceptance, without even looking at Bruce

“Rikki,” Bucky said, gently, like he was afraid to spook her. “What do you remember?”

“Specify,” Rikki said, shortly.

“From this morning,” Bucky said. “Specifically, after you left the building.”

Rikki’s eyelids flickered once, twice. She nodded. “Conflict of goals. Keeping Jaime and Sasha safe, at the Tower, would be jeopardized by thi... by stabbing Tony Stark with a breakfast fork.”

Tony was hard-pressed not to laugh at that. He didn’t think anyone had ever threatened him with a fork before. It was a novelty. On the other hand, Rikki’s clipped speech sounded a hell of a lot like Winter Soldier Report Mode, and... all of a sudden, Tony knew where he’d seen that look: on Bucky, standing at attention behind Madame Hydra, waiting for his orders and otherwise ignoring everything else. Also on Jaime, sometimes, after a nightmare-memory. Tony glanced at Steve again.

Steve’s eyes had widened -- he’d recognized it, too.

“I’m always in favor of you not stabbing much of anyone, really,” Bucky said. He reached out as if to pat her hand, but Rikki slid her fingers away. “So, yeah, if you need to take a walk to cool down, that’s preferable.”

Bucky hadn’t caught on. Well. He was usually seeing it from the other side, wasn’t he? Tony made a face at Steve. *You tell him.*

Steve shook his head, minutely but quickly. *Oh hell no.*

“What happened after that?”

Rikki jerked her chin up, looked at her father with terrified eyes, then back down, subsiding. “I don’t --” her gaze flickered to Jaime and she started shaking. “I don’t remember.”

Tony mouthed *get Jessica* at Steve -- Jones was better than anyone else at calming one of Bucky’s panic attacks, for whatever reason.

Steve nodded, stepped into the hall. Tony steeled himself and put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder.
Grounding, he hoped. “I hate to be the one to say it,” and god, did he, “but this looks to me a lot like a Soldier state of mind.”

“What?” Bucky jerked, pulling himself out of Tony’s reach. “No. That’s not… Jaime?”

Rikki flinched, her eyes darting to her brother, then back at attention again.

“We are soldiers,” Jaime said. He sighed. “Sorry, Tony. It is the truth, even when the truth displeases.”

“It’s not your fault, beansprout,” Tony said, because he’d learned the hard way that if he didn’t explicitly respond to an apology, then Jaime would falter and trip over the uncertainty of whether it had been accepted. But he kept most of his attention on Bucky. “I’d like to be wrong, babe, but it looks a hell of a lot like she’s had her programming triggered,” he said softly.

Rikki was breathing harder. “I didn’t… I didn’t do anything. I didn’t do anything wrong.” She held out her hands, palms up. “No blood. I’m clean.”

Bucky blinked. “Oh, god.” The door slid open again and Jones stepped inside. She didn’t say anything just nodded to Tony. Steve… did not come back in, the coward.

Rikki’s breathing was coming even faster, and she was turning her hands over and over, examining them for evidence. And now that Jones was here, Tony had to push on to the hard part. “Bucky, hon. You’re her on-site authority, at least; you need to be the one to tell her to stand down.” It hurt to say that, remembering how much he’d hated having to do the same for Bucky. But he could also remember how necessary it had been.

Bucky shivered, his lips growing gray. “I…”

“I didn’t do anything,” Rikki protested, again. “Don’t hurt him, please… please don’t…”

“Sanction!” Bucky snapped, his eyes round with horror. Rikki snapped back to attention, her hands still. “At ease. Report.”

Behind Tony, Jaime’s breath hitched, stifling a sob or a protest or-- Tony reached around without looking and pulled the boy into his side, offering what paltry comfort and protection he could.

Rikki was panting for air, trying desperately to comply. “Mission… mission… don’t know. Don’t remember.”

“You’re not wiped,” Bucky said. “You remember this morning.”

“The chair?” Rikki asked. “No, no chair. I left the Tower. Going to see my friend. Deviant behavior noted: assets don’t require friends. Classes. The Soldier is a tool for learning. The Soldier will apply what she knows.”

“Oh, god,” Bucky repeated. “Tony, Tony, I can’t do this…”

“I know, baby,” Tony said, low and soothing, even if his own chest felt like it was going to crack in two. “Almost there. You just have to wrap it up. You can’t leave her hanging, you know that.”

Jones moved, put her hand on Bucky’s arm. “What street, Barnes?”

“Pierreport,” Bucky ground out. He shivered, then started the whole list. “Henry. Montague. Remsen.”
“Do it again.”


“You see the street signs?” Jones asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hold them. You’re back there again. None of this has happened yet… Go again.”


“You good?”

Bucky nodded, and Tony threw Jones a grateful look. Bucky pulled in a breath. “Sanction. Mission deviations acceptable. Well done. You will allow yourself to be treated. You will eat, drink, rest. When these are done, we will have a Recall. Are you clear on your orders, Sanction?”

“Yes, sir,” Rikki said. “This soldier will attend medical personnel. This soldier will keep the Asset in functional condition. Recall to be attempted after recharging.” Her eyes flickered. “The trainee will not be harmed.”

“Mentors have no need to punish the trainee or the soldier at this time,” Bucky said.

“Ready to comply,” Rikki said.

Tony flinched at that. If he never heard those words again, it would be too soon.

Bucky nodded once, then, very calmly, said, “Gonna throw up now.” He whirled, found the nearest receptacle, and lost his breakfast, lunch, and quite possibly his toenails as well.

Tony rubbed Bucky’s back and muttered something that he hoped was appropriately comforting, but he wasn’t sure exactly what he was saying, because all he could think was how badly he wanted to find whoever had triggered Rikki and express his opinions. With extreme prejudice. On their face.

Well, and the first step to that was figuring out where she’d gone, so he needed to get Bucky somewhere warm and quiet to recover and then put JARVIS to work. The traffic-cam footage, for a start, beginning with--

JARVIS triggered the building alarm.

“Avengers, assemble,” JARVIS said. “Reports are coming in from Central Park. M.O.D.O.K. has gained control of over three hundred civilians.”

Tony stiffened. “God damn it,” he snapped, but there was nothing for it; the safety of civilians certainly outweighed the comfort of Avengers.

Bucky spat a few times into the trashcan. “I’ll stay with Rikki,” he said. “I’m a hazard in the field right now. Too… too close to… yeah.”

Tony wanted to argue, but Bucky was right. And someone needed to stay behind anyway. “Yeah. Stay on comms, though. Jaime, you stick with your dad, don’t give him any trouble.”

Jaime snorted. “You don’t have to worry about me, sir.”
Jones gave Tony a quick, reassuring pat on the shoulder. “At least my mindblock works against giant ugly brainiacs, I guess.”

“You’re an asset in the field, Jones,” Tony told her with a tight grin. He clapped Bruce on the shoulder. “You stay here, too,” he suggested. “We’ll call you if it looks like we need the Other Guy, but with that many civilians...”

Bruce nodded. “Yeah, too much collateral risk. And... I can do more here.”

“You do that,” Tony said. “We’ll stay in touch.” He kissed Bucky on the temple, then kissed the top of Jaime’s head. “JARVIS, warm up the armor.”

“Hawkeye on comms,” Clint reported in. “What even the fuck? M.O.D.O.K. doesn’t do this; he’s too close. I don’t like it.”

“I’ll be sure to ask him next time we meet up for drinks,” Tony sniped as he jogged toward the stairs and his lab, keeping pace with Jones.

“Guess I’m babysitting again,” Natasha said, her comms unit crackling to life. “JARVIS, throw me up some tactical maps, here, would you?”

“Yeah, if he’s just practicing for the Macy’s parade, someone needs to remind him that he hasn’t submitted his permits to the Balloons Committee.”

Tony and Jones parted ways at the entrance to his lab, and the armor was wrapping around him as soon as he’d pushed through the door. The hiss of pneumatics and the whirr of servos accompanied the sound of metal locking into position, the hypnotic refrain that told Tony’s back-brain that it was time to get to work.

And unluckily for M.O.D.O.K., Tony was really in the mood to Avenge something today.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes Tony is obscure with his nicknames. K-19 was a Soviet nuclear submarine. In 1961, it suffered from a coolant failure. 22 crew members died from radiation poisoning preventing the reactor meltdown -- an event that might have sparked a nuclear war. The sub’s nickname (plagued by bad luck even before the meltdown) is “Widowmaker.”
Jessica

Fighting M.O.D.O.K. was a lot of times what Tony called a drag-and-drop operation. M.O.D.O.K.’s mind control was strong; he could get mostly anyone to do almost anything, but it was also limited. The person he was mind controlling had to be within a certain distance.

There were a few people who could resist; Thor was entirely immune, he couldn’t even feel it when the chaired menace tried to use the ability. Professor Xavier could resist, and what’s more, he could shield others. Squirrel Girl, because God only knew what her brain was like, she seemed to be more powerful than anyone could understand, but she was also a complete flake. And in Michigan at the moment. And Jessica herself -- months of being mind-controlled by Killgrave had given her some sort of built up tolerance to it.

So, along with Thor and occasionally Tony -- who could fly fast enough to be out of range before M.O.D.O.K. could focus on him, most of the time -- they played a massive game of Red Light, Green Light with M.O.D.O.K. The ranged members of the team would set up just outside M.O.D.O.K.’s field and make the the attacks (Hawkeye was particularly a valued teammate during these battles) and whenever M.O.D.O.K. would charge in one direction, the fliers would relocate the at-risk teammates.

Steve took up a protective position, using his speed to move around the edges of the battlefield and start removing civilians from the scene. M.O.D.O.K. seemed particularly focused on Tony today, and that was good, because Tony led him toward a previously evacuated route, keeping himself just far enough ahead to present a tempting target while Steve and Sam started moving the stunned and recovering mind-controlled civilians.

“Is there any way we could get Strange to make an appearance and pop this aggravated dirigible to somewhere a little less populated?” Tony whined over the comms. He whirled in mid-air and shot down a half-dozen of M.O.D.O.K.’s missiles before they could hit anything important, like buildings, people, or hot dog stands. As it was, debris rained all over the park.

“Sorry, Iron Man, I don’t have the Sorcerer Supreme on my speed dial,” Clint snarked. He raced in closer, managed to get a sticky-arrow off, pinning the Mobile Organism down for a few minutes, then got the hell out of the way as M.O.D.O.K. sent a dozen more missiles in his direction.

Jessica made a bombing run over the disgusting little goblin while he was stuck, but her guns weren’t even making a dent in his shield. “I need a bigger gun, Tony,” she bitched.

“Pretty sure it wouldn’t matter, Jess,” Steve said. “That shield is pretty powerful. Give me a lift, I’ll see if I can knock out the power supply.”

“Get your straps on, cowboy, I’m coming in hot,” Jessica said. She caught an updraft and soared into the sky, tucking her guns away. Steve took a few running steps and leaped on top of a picnic shelter, ducking his head to give her a clear grab at the leather carrying straps most of the Avengers wore these days for the express purpose of letting a flyer get a good grip. “Arms out, here we go.”

They executed the maneuver perfectly. Steve leaned into the flight pattern with her, shield against his chest, arms out with the new uniform glide-wings spread like a bat. Aerodynamics, that was a thing. Jessica twisted into a spin, letting the air currents guide her, then lined Steve up with the stuck bad guy. M.O.D.O.K. was using a laser cutter on the sticky, glue-y mess that Clint had dumped on him.
and the smell was unbelievable. Probably toxic, too. Thing #812 to add to Tony’s workload.

“You ready to catch him on the rebound, Iron Man?”

“I make it my life’s mission to never let Capcicle down,” Tony said.

“Go, go, go,” Jessica yelled, letting her boyfriend go just on the upswing. Steve came down on M.O.D.O.K. like a ton of bricks, shield raised. He smashed into the back of the monstrosity’s chair. Jessica rolled, tumbled, off-balance for a moment, and nearly crashed into the trees before she recovered. She turned, stretched her back some and got up about a hundred feet to watch, in case she was needed.

Sparks flew from the back of M.O.D.O.K.’s chair and the purple bubble that prevented bullets and repulsor blasts alike shimmed and crackled and died.

Tony swooped in, hand outstretched to grab Steve and suddenly faltered.

“What the hell, Tony?” Steve yelled as the red and gold armor passed him by and then stopped, hovering directly over M.O.D.O.K.

“Captain America,” M.O.D.O.K. said, turning slowly like he was on a giant lazy susan. “So good of you to drop in.”

Steve took a step back, staggered, his hands going up to his head. “Get out,” he muttered.

M.O.D.O.K. grinned, his enormous teeth eating up half of his oversized head. His smile was creepy. Like, way up on the disturbing list.

“Captain, I had wondered who the target was, when the Hydra traitor gave me the information. The perfect moment for a distraction. And you are the ideal candidate. Such a fragile alliance, the betrayal would have torn you apart.”

Steve raised his head with a great deal of effort. “What?”

“Jesus, Cap, don’t talk to him!” Hawkeye yelled over the comms.

“She’s failed in her mission, it seems, the little snake,” M.O.D.O.K. continued, like they were having a conversation, like Steve was responding to him. “I wonder what they’ll do to her, when they find out how unworthy she is. What good is a broken tool? Will that be your fault as well, when they dispose of her?”

“Thor,” Jessica said, “I need immediate extraction of Cap, please. I’m at a better angle to get Tony out of there.” Shit, she was tactical leader now? With both Iron Man and Cap snagged by M.O.D.O.K., Winter Soldier back at the Tower dealing with his children, and Iron Patriot currently unavailable, yeah, that left her in charge. Shit.

“It shall be as you have said, Lady Jessica,” Thor said. The sky around them started to darken and the wind picked up.

“Watch that downdraft,” Jessica said. “I don’t need to eat sod right now.”

“You need me to run a distraction?” Sam queried. His flight suit wasn’t as fast and his distance weapons couldn’t reach into the sphere of influence, but he might be able to get M.O.D.O.K.’s attention.
“Do a wide circle,” Jessica said. “Throw some missiles his way, we might be able to hurt him enough now that his shield is down.”

“On it,” Sam said.

M.O.D.O.K. gestured and Tony flew closer, obedient and trusting.

“JARVIS, can you override him? Fly him away?”

“I am afraid not, Ms. Jones,” JARVIS’s cultured voice said in her ear. “M.O.D.O.K. commanded him to override my lockdown.”

“Damn him,” Jessica muttered. She pulled herself up into the air, over Thor’s portable storm to get momentum. “On my way.”

“On your command, Lady,” Thor said.

“Now.”

She dropped, putting all her strength into the curve. She was going to have to grab Tony at just the right angle and hope to God that she could move fast enough before M.O.D.O.K. had Tony start fighting. Straight down and straight up. Thankfully, if she had to, she could drop Iron Man and probably not kill Tony in the process. Better her than Thor, though. Thor’s powers just amped the shit out of Tony’s repulsors. Which was an idea, actually.

“Hey,” she yelled, moving at her top speed, eyes on the target, “once I get Iron Man out of range, blast the hell out of him, Thor. Maybe we can make a crater where M.O.D.O.K. used to be.”

“A sound strategy,” Thor replied, and then there was no time left for chatting. Jessica grabbed the Iron Man suit, coming in under Tony’s arms and pulling him up, fast as she could.

“Don’t struggle, don’t struggle, come on, come ON.” Good lord, that suit was fucking heavy. Between Tony and the suit, she was trying to fly with an additional four hundred pounds or so; she’d been training with two hundred and eighty pound super soldiers. “God, you’re fat, Tony.”

Tony twisted under her hands, the repulsors in his boots shooting off and driving them back down.

“Shit, I’m losing him!”

Thor, who’d swept Steve up in a bridal carry, gestured. His portable storm swelled, lifting her. Jessica tumbled end over end, Tony’s repulsors knocking them entirely off course.

M.O.D.O.K. had finally managed to get his chair free from the sticky arrow and was dragging it -- the left thruster seemed to be operating only at half power -- toward Jessica, where she still had an armful of angry Iron Man.

Thor tossed Steve, mid-air, and Sam caught him with a huffed, “Yeah, man, tell me you ate too much breakfast again, I dare you.”

Whirling midair, Thor threw his hammer at the chaired monster, crashing down to the ground in a superhero landing, the ground breaking under the force of his fall. Mjölnir, singing its keening warcry, crashed into the floating device and knocked another thruster out of whack.

“Give him back!” M.O.D.O.K. shrieked, shaking one tiny fist in Iron Man’s direction. “He’s mine and I will have him!”
“Not today, foul creature,” Thor roared, Mjölnir returning to his grip.

Tony flicked his wrist, repulsor whining, and suddenly Jessica couldn’t see. She lost her grip, tumbled out of the sky, falling, she knew, but not how close.


“You’re going to lose, little worm,” M.O.D.O.K. said. She couldn’t see, god damn it. Where was he? The noise of his chair was all around her. Jessica tipped her head, trying to decide which side was loudest. She reached, slowly, for her automatic pistol. Her arm was broken, trying to heal already and she was cold, despite the high temperatures.

Above, the sky opened up; crash of thunder, the sizzle in the air of lightning. Tony’s repulsors firing. Shit, Thor and Tony were at it again.

“M.O.D.O.K. will have him eventually,” M.O.D.O.K. said. “She will bring him to me. You’re harboring a little snake, my dear, and she will destroy you. It’s wonderful.”

The mutated creature was laughing, and Jessica felt arms lift her. She couldn’t help it, she was so cold that she cuddled into the warmth, not knowing who it was, except that it could not be M.O.D.O.K. One of his mind controlled normals, she supposed. It wouldn’t take long for her to heal, she hoped.

“Bring her,” M.O.D.O.K. ordered. “If the others get close, break her neck and leave her behind.”

She felt the air shift, even before she hit the ground for the second time in less than half an hour. “Ow.” The shield whirred overhead, the singing vibranium distinctive and smug.

“You’ve won today, little worm,” M.O.D.O.K. said, “but your luck won’t last forever.” With that, the chair hummed and Jessica got just enough of her sight back to watch him speed out of sight. Next to her, a teenaged boy was crying on the ground as M.O.D.O.K. released his mind control.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said, “I didn’t want to.”

“I know,” Jessica said. She sat up, slowly, her arm still really sore. “He does that. Are you hurt?”

“I didn’t hit him with it, Jess,” Steve said, jogging up next to her. “Just used the wake to knock you both down before you got out of range.”

“Is everyone okay?” Jessica groaned as her arm wrenched itself back into position, the bone knitting. “Come here and give me a hug if you want me to walk off this battlefield.” Super-soldier body heat was *the best.*

“Tony’s a little banged up and crispy around the edges, but alive and back under his own recognisance.” Steve knelt next to her and she snuggled into his warmth, fingers moving to his neck.

“I hate that thing. Is it gone?”

“He floated himself into a pod and launched. JARVIS is tracking it now, but… yeah, there he went. Cloaked it.”

“No ship that small should have a cloaking device,” Jessica complained.

“Stolen,” Steve said. “Probably from S.H.I.E.L.D. during the administrative overturn.”
“It’s totally unfair that they’re using our own tech against us,” Jessica said.

“If we ever catch him, maybe we can steal it back,” Steve said.

Jessica rubbed at her eyes. “Well, he’s after Tony specifically,” she said. “So I imagine we’re going to see him again.”

“No,” Tony said, landing nearby. “I already have one stupid villain with a pathetic crush. I am not going for a matched pair.” He wobbled a bit as he touched down. “What was he saying to you earlier, Cap?”

Steve shrugged. “I don’t know, it’s all… twisted up in my head. I can’t… Something about Rikki, I think.”

Jessica said. “Said we had a snake in the tower. That we had a fragile alliance.” She flexed her fingers and the silver agony that shot up her arm wiped out everything else that she was thinking. Work faster, she urged her powers.

“Like we didn’t have enough problems,” Tony said. “M.O.D.O.K. often knows things he really shouldn’t. Maybe he knows Nikita was triggered earlier today.”

Steve ran one hand through his hair, sweat making it stick up at odd angles. “I remember something… about a failed mission –”

Well, Winter Soldier missions had never been good news for anyone. Maybe Rikki had some residual bullshit going on in her head. Shouldn’t surprise anyone. Jessica twitched in Steve’s embrace. “You can put me down, cowboy, think I’m mostly healed up.”

“That was a hell of a fall you took, Jess,” Steve said, stubbornly holding her against his chest.

“You’re sweet and adorable, you know that, right? Down, now.”

Steve flushed, which was also cute, but at least let her slide down until her feet were touching the ground again. He kept an arm around her, which she didn’t mind, much.

“What’s the count, Hawkeye?” Steve put his finger to his ear.

“We’ve got thirty wounded, a fire on the south end of the park, and a half-dozen overturned vehicles. City response personnel are on the way, now that we’ve given them the all-clear. Not too bad,” Clint said. “No fatalities.”

“Good job, Avengers,” Steve said. “Let’s head home.”
Jaime

Howard James Barnes was only a mediocre trainee; his speed, strength, endurance and physical prowess were so far below acceptable levels as to barely exceed human normal, and not even that, all the time. He’d seen the reports.

When he had survived his third month, the scientists had given him over to his sister for care and training. His file noted that he “lacked primary potential” but could offer “favorable emotional incentive and control of the primary subject currently in training.”

Jaime’s memory was a strange and compartmentalized thing. His first active memory was of Rikki’s face, crumpled and crying, because of... him. He’d been hurt, and while he could reference the event in his logs, he couldn’t bring to mind the event itself.

All his memories before the install were like that: fragmented, fuzzy, colored by feelings and impressions and unbalanced by objective data. After the install, the memories were neat and categorized, accompanied by clarity, narrated by the voices of the scientists and the bosses who read to hissing recorders, or the quick translation of letters that etched themselves against the backs of his eyelids. He was able to access clips of video and test results.

His most recent memories had not been analyzed. Not by the bosses. He had been forced to draw his own conclusions. And then he had been forced to keep those reports to himself, as his two mentors (Father. And Tony.) had both exhibited signs of extreme distress whenever he tried to report.

Strange how their distress was more motivating than the pain-programs.

Neither of his mentors were involved in active training; the academic mentor (Tony) had been most fervent in perpetuating the lie. “You aren’t a goddamn soldier,” his mentor had said. But the mentor had also continued the lessons -- even increased their pace until Jaime could barely keep up with all the information that given to him. He had also reached some new threshold of analytical difficulty, as his mentor did not move from one topic to another in an orderly fashion, but skipped and jumped from topic to topic and left Jaime to categorize, analyze, and store the information in whatever way seemed most correct. Jaime had made many mistakes at first, but was pleased with his improvement and progress. His mentor had not tested him yet, though he’d absorbed lessons in fabrication, in construction, in design, in financial law, in mathematics and engineering, in business analysis.

The combat specialist (Father) was even less willing to present learning materials, but he never objected if Jaime merely approached and observed. The combat specialist engaged in self-training and improvement, or conducted tests of skill against the other trainers, and Jaime was free to watch. So every afternoon Jaime would find himself in the combat gym, watching, trying to absorb the lessons without actually performing them. There was an astonishing lack of casualties in the mock-combats, and a general lack of urgency that suggested, absurdly, that there were no punishments for poor performance.

Other trainers came and went. The red-haired mother-to-be (Auntie Nat) had trained very regularly until the Captain (Uncle Steve) ordered her to stand down and what the fuck did she think she was doing, she was pregnant and she’d damn well better obey orders this time, because he was not putting her at risk, she could figure it out later after the child was safe. Jaime had retreated all the way into the shadows, as far as he could go, because the Captain had been terrifying and the mother-to-be had hardly been less so. Jaime had remained hidden for a full hour after the argument had
concluded and the Captain and the trainer had gone their ways.

One trainer (Just Clint, kid) had actively engaged with Jaime. He’d brought a scaled-down compound bow and instructions on its use, had gauged the trainee’s aim and strength, made adjustments, and been generous with praise. That trainer had also welcomed him into the air duct systems and maintenance tunnels that connected the entire building and there had provided a small nook where Jaime could keep his bow, quiver, guns, and a backpack that the trainer called a “scat-bag” — “for when the shit hits the fan and ya gotta scat.”

Jaime’s hand was on the bag’s strap, already plotting his exit strategy, when the first of the cramps wracked him.

Past events predict future trends.

Rikki had been right; he was close to the line. But he did not want… trainees do not have wants. They take what is given them and they perform.

The muscles in his legs contracted, ripping agony from his knees down. That was going to make things harder. And if Rikki found him, there was no way he could stop her. The pain eased, somewhat. Jaime grabbed his bag, stashed his pistols and threw the bow and quiver over his shoulder. He crabbed through the vent, away from his bolt-hole. Rikki didn’t know where it was but the archer (Just Clint, kid) did. The archer was strong but not enhanced; analysis indicated that Rikki’s preferred interrogation methods would extract the relevant information in less than two hours.

Agony stabbed through his kidneys. Jaime rolled over, arched up, trying to ease the pain, panting for breath and trying not to scream as it rippled through him in waves.

He knew this pain. The bosses had let them go almost completely through withdrawal once, caged and exposed, so they would know what would happen to them if they ran. According to Rikki, they repeated the demonstration every five years, but Jaime had not yet undergone a secondary demonstration. He did not need it; every moment of that agony was recorded in unerring detail in his memory. He had sixteen hours left before the pain would be so great he couldn’t move, before his eyes would run blind, before he was reduced to begging for the drug, for an end to the pain.

He wasn’t Rikki; he couldn’t run for four hours and be two hundred miles away. She’d carried him and Sasha both through hundreds of miles of Siberian wasteland, never complaining.

Sasha. Leaving his brother behind had hurt, doubly so because Jaime had used Sasha to escape.

Rikki loved him, Jaime knew that, knew it like he knew his name, like he knew pi out to ten thousand digits and could calculate it further if he needed to. But she… Past events predict future trends. She had come to him in the darkness with the kit. Declostipine and sevenerol. Jaime could already smell it on her; for the first forty hours after the injection, the body increased production of dopamine and oxytocin by a factor of ten.

She also smelled of sweat and -- even thinking about it jolted his pain programming, there was something he was not allowed to think and Rikki had-- zzzzzzzt!Jaime collapsed, a thin, thready whine captured in the back of his throat that he refused to let out.

But the kit, that was permitted, and Jaime did not want it, did not want the drugs. He had moved as quickly as his inferior body allowed. Tracking her movements and calculating her course, he had kicked the kit from her hand and screamed. As he’d known it would, his scream had roused Sasha in a panic, and the baby had ignited into protective flames. Jaime had counted on that and he was so, so sorry, but it was the only course of action that offered any probability of his escape.
Sasha had never had the drugs in his veins; he was too young. Rikki wouldn’t hurt him, wouldn’t give him the drugs -- but she would turn away to calm him, to soothe the flames, and that was Jaime’s only chance.

He was in the vents and away, snatching up his scat-bag and crawling as fast as he could, taking turns, backtracking to disguise his trail. Rikki was slender, but bigger than Jaime; her bulk and general unfamiliarity with the vent system would generate a fourteen percent reduction in performance. That, and the delay he’d manufactured, might be enough.

Rikki didn’t give chase right away. As soon as Sasha combusted, JARVIS had triggered the alarms. So Rikki would not only be forced to pause to calm Sasha, but to do her own cleanup-and-hide. The combat trainer (Father) could not be allowed to find the drugs. Rikki would be forced to hide or get rid of them before he arrived.

Wait. Recompute. That... didn’t make sense. Jaime tried to pin down the errant variable even as he crawled. Why couldn’t the combat trainer know about the drugs? Of course the trainers knew about the drugs. But Rikki had said not to tell Father, that… zzzzzzzzzzzz! Pain and pain and more pain. He must not question, he must not think about that. Soldiers followed orders, and he was a soldier--

“You aren’t a goddamn soldier.”

The academic mentor (Tony, dammit, call me Tony!) had exhibited extreme revulsion when exposed to the trainee’s installs. Had said it was wrong, that no one should be...

Maybe…

Jaime pulled himself through the vents with his hands; there was an access panel not far, though the pain made the distance seem ten times what the cool numbers promised. He made it, lay panting against the wall for some time, then opened his pack to retrieve his tools and his connection cable. He opened the panel and tapped the line in an instant. That was the easy part. Then he plugged the cable into the port in the back of his head and inserted the splicing needle into JARVIS’s dataline. His mind filled with glittering fire as he let himself into JARVIS’s systems.

***

Tony

Tony was in his seldom-used office, wrapping up a conference call with Pepper and the Director of Sales in Japan. American managers didn’t much care if he wore a band tee and grease smudges to meetings as long as he brought the brain, but most of the Japanese managers seemed to be much more comfortable if he was in at least a shirt and tie, and had the dark, posh background of the office on calls. And he’d promised Pepper he would be on his best behavior for this one.

“Right, I think that will do for an action plan,” Tony agreed solemnly. “Ms. Potts, are you satisfied with that arrangement?”

“It will do for this quarter,” she allowed, “but I need a plan for at least an eight percent increase next quarter.” She went on to say something about the satellite office in Kyoto, but Tony was distracted by the flashing red light in the corner of his screen.

“Sorry, are we done?” he said. “I’ve got a priority call coming in.”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Stark,” Pepper said, “but if you could remain on the--” Tony switched off the call. “JARVIS, where’s the fire?” He started yanking his tie loose.
“The actual fire, sir, is in the Barnes family quarters,” JARVIS answered, crisply, then his voice dropped, skipped, twitched. There was a crackle of electricity. It was still JARVIS’s voice, but the inflections were all different. Breathy and young. Panicked. “Tony? Tony, I need help.”

Tony was on his feet and ready to run even before he knew where to go. “Who is-- Jaime? That you, kiddo? Where are you, what do you need?”

“Sir!”

“Stop fighting me.”

JARVIS had never screamed before in the entire course of his existence; hearing that voice in pain was like a lance through the chest.

“Sorry. Sorry. Please, I’m sorry. I… 18th floor vent, near the elevator. I. I can’t get out. This. Trainees do not have wants, they take what is given. Tony, please.”

Another crackle of electricity, then JARVIS again, sounding subdued. “He has removed the splicing line, sir.”

“Damn it,” Tony breathed, but he was moving, into the elevator and punching the button for the eighteenth floor, skimming his mental blueprints of the building as he waited for the doors to open. He knew where the vents were, knew all the access panels. He’d re-designed them when he’d found out Clint’s propensity for climbing through them like a giant hamster maze.

The nearest access to the elevator was-- He strode out of the elevator and turned left, took three steps and jumped to knock on the lower edge of the panel. “Hey. Come on, kiddo, I don’t have a ladder, can you come out for me?”

Jaime groaned, exhausted, pain-filled. “Trainee re... reports…” A scraping noise, like someone dragging nails across a chalkboard and then the boy appeared, pulling himself along, his arms barely long enough to extend the width of the passage, then slid out, graceless, completely unlike himself, plummeting toward the floor.

“Shit!” Tony managed to catch him before he fell. “Hey, I’ve got you, it’s going to be okay.” Jaime was limp and shivering, so Tony slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor and cradled Jaime on his lap. “What’s going on, here?”

“Promise,” Jaime said, opening his eyes and looking straight at Tony. He was holding one of his child-sized pistols, poking it into Tony’s chest like an extension of his finger. “You have to hide me. Promise me, please. Rikki can’t… she can’t… I will not do it.”

“Okay, I’m going to keep you safe, okay? I promise, I’ve got you. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I promise that, too.” Shit, the kid was really frantic, and the shivering was only getting worse.

Slowly, Jaime lowered the pistol, flipping on the safety again. “Thank you,” he breathed.

“It’s okay,” Tony said, absently checking for fever. “I’m going to take care of you, but it sure would be helpful if you’d give me a hint, here, of what’s going on.”

“Not her fault,” Jaime said. “She loves him. Can’t… ahhhhh!” Jaime clasped his hands to his head. Blocked, blocked, can’t think, can’t remember-- Pain-inducements set to medium, redlining. The trainee must not--”
“Okay, okay, don’t, if it hurts, don’t, we’ll figure it out.” Tony peeled back an eyelid to check the pupil response. It was almost like the kid was going into--

“Trainee report, secondary withdrawal symptoms progressing. Fifteen hours until full shutdown.”

“Well, fuck.” Tony managed to climb to his feet. Jaime would freak out if they went to medical, so... “JARVIS, get Helen down to the workshop with a general-purpose detox kit. And tell Bucky to find his other offspring and meet us there.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS said, oddly subdued. “The child left a chemical formula in my databanks. Shall I transfer it to your phone?”

“Yeah. Helen’s, too. Have her take a look before she heads down.” Tony dropped a kiss on top of Jaime’s head, though he wasn’t sure Jaime could feel it. “Good job, kiddo.” He got back into the elevator. “Workshop. And send the bots with some blankets and water. And probably a few buckets, because I expect this is going to be messy before it’s done.”

He left the workshop lights low and got Jaime situated on the couch, piling blankets on him to help with the shivering.

“She took it,” Jaime murmured. “Need to warn Father. She’ll be stronger. Faster. Not… care as much.”

“Pass that on, JARVIS,” Tony said, and brushed the hair back from Jaime’s forehead. “Your dad’s pretty tough; he’ll take care of himself,” he promised. He sat on the edge of the couch and fished his phone out to pull up the chemical data. “Where the hell did she get this? This is not your common street-variety cocktail. She hasn’t been in the R&D labs, has she, J?”

Jaime gritted his teeth and sat up, breathing hard. “Tony. Permission. I can… mentor-access.”

Tony tipped his head, working through it, and sighed. “One of these days, we’re going to pry that shit out of your head... Okay, trainee, tell me what you’ve got.”

“Phoenix program. Subject, Brock Rumlow, age thirty-six. Codename Frag. Codename Crossbones. Current assignment: subject Rebecca Barnes, Snowmelt Project. Primary mission: support, contain, control. Secondary missions: maintain subject sympathies, provide pharmaceutical enhancement and control regimen Snowmelt subjects as directed, provide extraction if necessary. Target: Captain Steven G. Rogers.” Jaime sagged, as if accessing that terse report had been an effort on a level with running a marathon.

“Fuck. JARV, get Steve down here, too.” He brushed a hand over Jaime’s hair again. “You did good, kid.”

“My fault,” Jaime said. “I… programming. Told her she could trust him. Voice pattern analysis indicates 96.4% probability of significant willing falsehood, but I told her... lied to her. Couldn’t say the right... I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Tony said. “They were using you, you couldn’t help that.”

“-- access comms system,” Bucky’s voice said from JARVIS’ speakers. “What the fuck? She’s on the loose, armed and dangerous. Repeat, Rikki Barnes is armed and dangerous. Take cover immediately. All non-combatants out of the fucking corridors. I’ve got Sasha, but I need goddamn backup, right now.”

Tony growled. “Stay right there,” he told Jaime. He ran across the workshop and jumped into the
waiting armor that JARVIS had already opened for him. If Rikki was jumped up on Hydra’s drugs and feeling ornery, it was best to be prepared. “Avengers, be advised that apparently Rumlow’s involved and he’s got some kind of psychological hold on Rikki. Don’t know if he’s currently on-site, but he’s definitely not far. Be alert.”

He went back to the couch and took up a protective stance in front of Jaime. Much as he wanted to go find Bucky, it seemed clear that Rikki was intent on getting the drugs into her brother. And that wasn’t going to happen.

Jaime whimpered. “Sanction. She’s coming.”

JARVIS spoke up in the suit. “Detecting heat signature, sir. She is engaging some sort of stealth combat suit.” The flare of red and orange against the HUD showed a human form, crouched, working with something, just outside the workshop.

“Alert the others, let them know where she is,” Tony told him. “What’s she doing, getting set to blow a hole in the glass?”

“I would assume so, sir,” JARVIS said.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Fine, whatever. Hey, Neo, we got any kind of cease-and-desist code for your sister when she’s like this?”

“Do you… voice recordings? I can… Rumlow’s the only one, voice and cadence. Maybe I can…”

“I don’t think I’ve got much from him; we knew he might have survived, but... Well -- JARVIS, see if you can dig something up. Otherwise, we’ll have to stop her the old-fashioned way.”

Jaime dragged himself upright and plunged his hands into the holodisplays, fingers flicking as he searched through the database, grabbing clips and syllables. Rumlow’s raspy voice called out a word and the figure in the hall stopped and looked up, a red blob against the HUD. Then the armor’s stealth mode flickered away and Tony could see Rikki outside the glass, her face a blank, icy mask. And she was holding -- Jesus Horatio Christ, where had she gotten a Hydra assault rifle, and how had she managed to get it into the building? Fully functional, too; the blue light flickered at the end of the weapon.

“pRICK... ready...” Jaime was still manipulating soundbites, Rumlow’s voice clipped from old mission reports. “Cut it down, cut it,” Jaime rattled off. “RICKY.”

Rikki jerked to attention the instant the voice blasted into the hallway. She hesitated, looking around for her commander. “Frag?” When there were no more forthcoming orders, she moved again, setting her device against the glass. She didn’t bother to turn the camo back on, or maybe the charge was expired, who knew?

“I don’t have enough other phonics, sir,” Jaime said. “I can’t. You have... You have to take me hostage.”

The vent in the upper left corner of the workshop slid away and Hawkeye dropped in, bow up and ready. “Hey, so this is some fun family drama,” Clint said. “What’d you do, try to take away her car keys?”

“Worse; her phone,” Tony quipped. “I’m not taking you hostage; I’m protecting you. Stay behind me. Clint, wanna grab a vantage before she busts the glass?”

“I’m on it,” Clint said, climbing up on one of the computer banks. “She blocked the elevator and the
stairs. Cap and Winter Soldier are rappelling down, but this isn’t on the main corridors, so they’ll be a little bit. Nat’s got the baby in the Hulk Room and lemme tell ya, she is hot-pissed-off about being babysitter.”

“Well, it’s not like anyone else can babysit the one that’s still inside her right now,” Tony said. “She can go back to throwing herself in front of lethal weapons as soon as it’s only one life on the line. Cap, Buck, you guys on comms?”

“I am,” Cap said. “Buck’s got the ICER from the armory, but she’s sealed you in. We’re working on it.”

The device slammed into the glass, rattling it, but it didn’t give way. Rikki paced in the hall, murder strut and killer glare.

“Okay, seriously,” Clint said, tracking her with a sticky arrow. “Don’t tell Bucky I said this, but his daughter is stupid hot. Oh, my god.”

Tony couldn’t agree, just on general principle, even if he kind of wanted to. “She’s like eight, c’mon.” Tony pulled up a holoscreen and activated on-site security measures. Most of them were nonlethal, so they wouldn’t do more than slow her down, but hopefully that would be all they needed.

“Hips don’t lie, man,” Clint said. “I mean, look at those legs.”

“Dude, she is practically my stepdaughter, that’s gross.” Tony kept working, one hand in the holoscreens and one eye on the door. It was reinforced bullet-proof glass, but there weren’t many materials that could withstand determined super-soldier assault.

Rikki’s device whirred, slammed into the glass again; the glass shuddered and a long, white split appeared. She backed to the far side of the hall, unslinging the Hydra weapon from her back.

“Tony, is that what I think -- what I hope it’s not?” Clint asked.

Tony spared a half-second to give Clint an incredulous look. “Probably, unfortunately. Are you hoping it’s not a Tesseract-powered Hydra assault rifle? Because that’s what it is. Disintegrates whatever it hits, so don’t get hit.”

“Good advice,” Clint said. He set his jaw. “Thought that light looked familiar.”

Tony flinched on Clint’s behalf. “It’s just the power source,” he said, entirely aware that it wasn’t going to help. “A battery. It doesn’t have any of the other powers.”

“Distract her for us,” Cap said over the comms. “We’re coming in.”

“Hooboy,” Tony sighed. He snapped down the faceplate. “Stay behind me, Jaime,” he warned, and raised his gauntlets, powering them up so Rikki couldn’t help but see his own blue glow. “Caught that, Clint?”

“Gotcha,” Clint nodded. “She’s one good --”

The glass exploded.

Rikki was moving even before the glass finished falling. She dropped to one knee, aimed her weapon and fired a blast directly at Tony. Luckily, JARVIS’ avoidance systems had been tracking the shot, and the armor moved to dodge in the instant her finger tightened on the trigger, before the
blast even left the muzzle. Behind her, the wall crumbled, dust filling the corridor. Bucky stepped through, unarmored and carrying only the ICEr pistol. At his side was Steve, shield up to deflect the debris from the wall coming down.

She rolled as soon as the wall exploded, bringing the rifle to bear on her father, firing several shots; Steve got the shield between Bucky and incoming fire, the vibranium singing out as the bolts struck and reflected, bouncing into the ceiling and floor.

Tony aimed not at Rikki herself -- as far as he was concerned, she deserved it, but Bucky would be pissed -- but at the barrel of her rifle. If he could render it nonfunctional, things would be a lot less tense. These weapons were old; the Tesseract-fueled power cell would be good for centuries still to come, but the steel they’d been built with should succumb to the laser cutter.

Rikki snarled as the weapon went dead in her hands. She threw it with frightening accuracy and Clint was forced to roll and tumble off his perch. He rolled to his feet and released a net arrow, but she was too fast. The net snagged an ankle, but she kicked it loose and was up and away. She took a quick tumble and knocked both Steve and Bucky over with a sweeping kick.

She snatched the shield, flipping Steve over as she wrestled him for it. Bucky got to one knee, raised the ICEr and shot his daughter in the back of the head.

Rikki managed to turn, yanking the shield away from Steve. She slammed it into her father, knocking the ICEr away. Raised it again... and then toppled over.

“Sanction down,” Jaime reported in a calm, emotionless voice.

Tony slumped, letting the suit hold him upright for a moment. “Jesus.” Steve was kneeling next to Rikki, so Tony turned his attention back to Jaime. “Okay, let’s just... JARVIS, tell Helen it’s safe to come down now, and she’s going to have multiple patients. If not now, then soon. And give Nat an update; I’m sure she’s waiting.”

“Lock her down,” Bucky said, his voice tight. Steve produced a pair of super soldier cuffs and bound Rikki’s arms behind her back, locked elbow to wrist, which bent her spine in an uncomfortable-looking position. Tony didn’t have a lot of sympathy for her, though. Bucky peeled back an eyelid, then sniffed at her throat. “What the actual fuck?”

“According to Jaime, our old buddy Rumlow is Rikki’s chief handler, or something. He’s been smuggling her drugs.” Tony stayed in front of Jaime. “She thinks he’s a friend, so yay, Hydra mindfuckery. Jaime didn’t want to take his medicine, came looking for me, which -- good choice there, kid. But he’s dropping into withdrawal now, so.”

Bucky was on his feet, moving to his son, concern written over his features. “How long?”

Jaime looked up at his father. “Fourteen hours, thirty-two minutes.”

“Christ, Tony,” Bucky shoved both hands through his hair. “I remember going through withdrawal, that could… ain’t pretty.”

“How well do you know the profile?” Tony asked, popping his faceplate again. “I sent the analysis to Helen, but if you know it... Can we do a wean-off, or is it better to just get through it all at once? And what can we do to minimize risk and pain?”

Bucky shrugged. “I puked my guts out for about a week and had muscle-spasms bad enough to break bones. I don’t know if it can be neutralized. It’s… incentive not to leave. Didn’t have a choice, myself. Couldn’t fuckin’ find a handler in time. Would have, if I could. It’s bad.”
“Okay, well. We’ll see what Helen can come up with; biology is her specialty. We can throw Bruce at it, too, for the chemical stuff. Or I can call Hank. We’ll... Whatever we can do, we’ll do.” He said that last to Jaime, as much of a promise as he could make. As much as the kid would probably believe.

“In the meantime,” he continued, “she’s been getting her supply from Rumlow, which means they’ve either got some kind of drop scheduled or she’s actually been meeting him. JARVIS, get on a rundown of her movements within Tower surveillance areas and let’s see what we can figure out.”

“Rumlow, that son of a bitch,” Steve said. “He’s mine.”

“Flip you for it, pal,” Bucky snapped. He glanced around Tony’s destroyed workshop. “You okay, babe? I’m… Christ, what a mess. Damn it. You… you warned me this was gonna happen.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m happy about it,” Tony sighed. “I’m okay. She didn’t clip you, did she?”

“Nothin’ worth reporting,” Bucky said, shifting his eyes to one side the way he tended to when he was almost lying. “ Took me by surprise when she flipped out, but… no damage done, ‘cept to the walls.”

“Mm-hm,” Tony hummed, which was his way of letting Bucky know he’d be checking it out later anyway. “Okay, you and Steve want to get her somewhere secure, and I’ll stick with Jaime, at least for now? Clint, can you go check on—” He turned back to Jaime, arrested by a thought. “Tell me the baby isn’t getting dosed with this shit.”

Jaime shook his head. “He’s too young. I was five before they started me on it.” And he suddenly shuddered all over and vomited into the bucket Tony had brought him earlier.

Tony sighed. “And it begins. Okay, Clint, you go check on Nat and the two of you can coordinate with JARVIS on finding Rumlow. I’ll... form a bucket brigade, apparently. JARV, wanna get the bots in on this? At least they don’t have senses of smell.” He cracked a Gatorade open and offered it to Jaime. “Little sips. I know you don’t wanna, but trust me, throwing up empty is worse.”

Bucky slid his hands under his daughter’s limp form and lifted her gently. Not quite looking at anyone, Bucky jerked his chin at Steve. “Let’s get her secured and comfortable. She’s not going to go through withdrawal for another thirty days. Someone check their rooms, see if there’s any more of it hidden. JARVIS, why the hell didn’t we know about this?”

“I’m afraid, Mr. Barnes, that young master Barnes has been tampering with my systems,” JARVIS reported. “I did not register the error until he released the programs when he contacted sir for assistance.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at Jaime. “Grounded. At least until you stop throwing up.”

Jaime nodded, pale and miserable. “That’s fair, sir.”
Let Me Not be Mad

Tony

So much for hoping Rikki Barnes would have come out of Soldier mode when she woke up from the ICEr. She didn’t. They had put her in the reinforced prison cells; not quite a Hulk containment room, but close, under surveillance. She was asleep, and then she was awake.

She didn’t yawn or stretch or look confused. She went from unconscious to high alert in an instant. She’d looked directly at the camera, eyes assessing. There was no emotion to her, not the brilliant hatred she sometimes directed at Tony, nor the half-rebellion/half-adoration that she expressed toward her father. She was just… gathering information.

Bucky had gotten Natasha to help him strip her down and search her for weapons, which was frankly smart, as she’d been loaded. He’d even removed a strip of monofilament wire contained in a plastic tube that rested just under her bottom lip, around her gums. Bucky had laid out all the concealed weapons on a table in some sort of order; Tony wasn’t sure if that was just Bucky’s tendency toward organization, or if Hydra had once laid them out in a similar pattern. Not the time to inquire.

Rikki sat down on the edge of the cot, testing the fabric of the jumpsuit Nat had stuffed her in; the material would fray into uselessness if she tried to rip it into strips, and the fasteners were little squares of velcro. No zippers or ties or buttons allowed. Even so, Tony was willing to bet, given enough time, she could fashion a weapon from it.

Tony leaned against the wall of the observation deck and folded his arms, watching Rikki. As soon as she’d been secured, he’d sent Bucky along to medical with Jaime, with the excuse that Bucky was the one best qualified to talk to Helen about the drug’s effects and withdrawal symptoms. Which was true, but not the main reason.

The main reason was that Bucky was not handling his daughter’s betrayal well; Tony had recognized the signs. He was halfway to locking himself down into Winter Soldier mode already, which they knew from experience would only make him feel worse later. And she hadn’t even been awake yet. Tony sighed and watched Rikki testing and exploring the room. She hadn’t stood up yet, but Tony knew the Winter Soldier mindset well enough to see her recognize at least three potential avenues for mayhem.

When Rikki finished her assessment, she stared at the one-way glass, exactly where Tony was sitting, as if she could see him. Who knew; she might actually be able to. Her gaze was steady, unwavering, and without fear or anger or any of the other emotions that she’d exhibited -- quite
loudly -- over the last several weeks.

Tony hated it. He hadn’t enjoyed her scorn and apparently sourceless disgust, but she was nineteen; he hadn’t really cared all that much. He’d certainly rather have that back than this automaton-like soldier.

“Prisoner requests information.” She looked directly at Tony, then to the camera, then back.

It was on the tip of Tony’s tongue to say something smart-assed and sharp, but it would be wit wasted. “What do you want to know?”

“Prisoner requests status report on Snowmelt’s children, codenames Ward and Inferno.” She didn’t quite look unhappy, but there was a tenseness to her shoulders that hadn’t been there before.

Interesting: even locked behind the soldier’s mask, she couldn’t stop herself from taking care of her brothers. Couldn’t stop herself from caring for them. Hydra had fucked up there, no doubt about it. “How about a trade?” Tony suggested. “You tell me where and how to find Rumlow, and I’ll fill you in on Jaime and Sasha.”

For a moment, her mask cracked and Tony saw the broken-hearted teenager underneath, then she shook her head, her lips moved, soundless. She straightened, then asked, “Purpose for location of Brock Rumlow?”

Because there is a long line of us waiting for a turn at punching him in the teeth, Tony thought viciously. He couldn’t tell Rikki that, though. Tony shuffled through his mental collection of terminology. “Mission debrief and evaluation,” he said into the microphone, trying to keep the sarcastic twist out of it. Bucky would probably know the exact right thing to say, but damned if Tony was going to make Bucky’s life any harder right now.

“Primary operating protocols; protect Snowmelt’s children, all means and methods acceptable to mission goals,” Rikki said. “Secondary mission protocols; protect and obey consort, Brock Rumlow. Query; captors intend harm to Brock Rumlow?”

You already know, or you wouldn’t be asking. Tony wondered if Rikki could do Jaime’s voice-analysis lie-detector trick. Probably not as well as Jaime could, anyway, and Tony was a damn good liar. “We intend to detain him,” he admitted. “If he surrenders peacefully, he won’t be hurt.” At least not until we’ve got him restrained.

Rikki flicked her gaze to the side, an exact duplicate of Bucky’s dismissive eye-roll. “Primary mission protocols; all means and methods. Deviant behavior noted. Request partial report of condition of Snowmelt’s children, bargain in good faith.”

Tony considered his options. “In good faith,” he repeated, “Sasha’s fine, and Jaime’s... in medical care.”

Rikki shuddered. “Frag...” She touched her throat, ran her fingers across her collarbone, like she was dreaming. “Contact protocols, infiltrated security desk employee, Avenger’s Tower. Location changes, according to color of tie. Shift begins 0900, ends 1600. Employee to provide assistance to Sanction, on demand. Facilitated acquisition of necessary medicals, weaponry, listening devices. At present moment, location unknown.”

Well, that was more helpful than he’d expected her to be. He flipped off the mic. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir. Compiling and analyzing data now.”
Tony turned the mic back on long enough to say, “Thank you, Sanction. Get some rest.”

Rikki shivered again, jerked her head to the side. “This soldier… is grateful for the care shown to Snowmelt’s children.” She lay down on the cot, rolled over to face the wall.

“Sir?” JARVIS said, softly. “Analysis complete, employee identified as Nolan Clark. Shall I detach security to detain him?”

The door slid open and Bucky hovered in the doorframe, resolutely not looking at the monitors. He looked… broken in a way Tony had not seen before. The closest recollection was one shattered by Tony’s own emotional turmoil, the moment he’d given his last mission report: December 1991.

“How is she?”


“Cho gave him something for the muscle spasms,” Bucky said. “We hope it works; he’s already broken his left radial. She’s got it on a drip.”

“Jesus, the poor kid.”

Bucky jerked his chin in a wobbly sort of nod. “Jessica’s SHIELD friends are getting us more of that… dendrotoxin? -- that stuff that goes in the ICEr. We’re gonna knock him out, if we can. Took me a while to talk him into it, which God, I know why he doesn’t want to go under.”

Tony took a step toward Bucky, slow and careful, telegraphing his movements, and reached out a hand. “How are you?”

Bucky took a deep, shaky breath. “I… not good. Slipped twice during that conversation, scared him to death. He’s fucking terrified of the Winter Soldier.”

Tony nodded. “It’ll be okay,” he said, still holding out his hand, offering. “He’ll work through it, it’ll just take some time.”

Bucky nodded again, then stepped into the circle of Tony’s arms, not quite putting his own arms around Tony, his arms held, fist, at Tony’s sides. “Time’s what we don’t got right now,” he said. “Do we have anything to go on? Anything at all?”

Tony squeezed Bucky as tight as he could, relieved he could offer that much comfort. “As a matter of fact, yes. Rikki gave us her contact protocols for Rumlow; I was just about to have JARVIS call the available hands for a pow-wow.”

“How…” Bucky jerked back a little, stared at the monitor. “Why would she do that?”

“Because Jaime and Sasha rank higher in her concerns than Rumlow or Hydra,” Tony said, rubbing slow circles on Bucky’s back. “They even knew that; they were using the boys to control her. But now that Hydra doesn’t have the boys…” Tony shrugged. “She agreed to an exchange of information.”

“She needs to be watched,” Bucky said. “The three base mandates can’t be fucked with. They still apply, even to me. She’ll go for one of them, soon.” Bucky ticked off on his fingers. “Escape. Survive. Deny the enemy. If she decides we’re the enemy, she will eventually suicide. Once she exhausts the other options.”

“We’ll keep an eye on her,” Tony promised.
“Tash… Tash can do it,” Bucky said. “She’s got a good track record with that sort of thing, and Rikki trusts her.”

“Good idea,” Tony said. He caught Bucky’s chin in his hand and tugged gently until Bucky met his gaze. “Tell me what you need right now.” He smiled, just a little. “Aside from Rumlow’s head on a platter.”

“Peace of mind?” Bucky laughed, harsh, bitter. “Keep feelin’ Winter’s cowl on me, but I know better than to let that in. Trying to keep it at arm’s length, but it ain’t workin’ too well. I… wanna go sit with Sasha for a bit, with the one kid that bein’ my son ain’t fucked him up beyond repair.”

“Hey, none of them are beyond repair,” Tony said. “Take a little work to get them there, but they’re worth it.” He kissed Bucky’s cheek. “Go on, then, go sit with Sasha. I’ll get Natasha up here to keep an eye on Rikki and then I’ll come, too. Okay?”

Bucky heaved a deep sigh. “Sometimes, I wish…” He touched Tony’s lips, fingertips shaking. “Just wish I was still only a soldier. Bein’ a person... sucks.”

Tony recoiled mentally at the thought of Bucky returning to the soldier’s mentality, but he could understand the appeal, in moments like this. “I know, baby,” he said. “But the good stuff is worth it, in the long run. Gotta keep telling yourself that. Sometimes it helps.”

“Someone deserves to go to hell for this,” Bucky said, staring at the monitor. “So help me, I’ll drag ‘em there myself.” He brushed his lips against Tony’s cheek, too fast and too hard to be anything but a cry of despair. “See you in a few.”

He closed the door behind him.

Rikki rolled back over and sat up, blinking. Her face was mobile, the lips pulling into a sneer. “I know you’re out there, Stark.”

Tony looked around, not sure what he was looking for, then flipped the mic switch. “Say your piece, then.”

“You stole your damn arc reactor,” she said. “You stole my father. You’re stealing Jaime. You’re nothing but a thief. Frag… Brock will end you. He’s already begun and you don’t even know it.” She hitched a breath, exhaled like a sob. “This soldier… I can’t, I can’t… primary… primary protocols. Stark! Please… Too long, too late.” She got to her feet, reaching her hand toward the camera. “Get them out of the building! Please, leave me, but get them OUT.”

She collapsed on the floor.

Well, that was a call to action if he’d ever heard one, even if he didn’t know exactly what was up. “JARVIS, time for some alarms -- get the civilians cleared and the Avengers and security geared up and on high alert. Get me a suit and scan for anything out of the ordinary right the hell now.”

“Sir,” JARVIS said, “Your presence is required in medical immediately. I have detected a biological explosive, yield unknown. Mark XXVIII is outside the door.”

“Dammit! Okay, I’m--” He glanced over his shoulder at Rikki’s limp form. “Get Natasha down here to keep an eye on Elsa, here. I don’t trust her to remain quietly unconscious.” He yanked open the door and jumped into the Mark XXVIII, already running for medical.

He switched from running to flying as soon as the suit sealed around him, bursting through the stairwell door and diving into the center well.
The building klaxons blared. “Multiple explosives detected,” JARVIS continued. “Nursery floor. Captain’s quarters. Common area. Vents, floors 42 and 41. My apologies sir, they appear to have been grown over time. Biological makeup not previously recorded.”

“Well, at least most of the civilians were already cleared when Rikki freaked out in the first place,” Tony growled. “Send SI Security outside and tell them not to let anyone in. Alert the others, priority whoever’s closest to an explosion, second priority whoever’s closest to medical so they can help with evac. This suit have sufficient air filters, you think?”

“Seals and vents were replaced on all armors after the incident with the moles, sir. They should provide adequate protection,” JARVIS said.

Bucky ducked out of the stairwell, moving with a determined stride. “Widow’s got morning sickness,” he reported to Tony in passing. “I’ll keep an eye on Sanction. Cap’s on his way to medical.”

“Got it,” Tony shouted, already past. Damn. Bucky was going to be hurting later. “J, tell Rogers not to touch the whatever-it-is, just start clearing the place. Take them to the Hulk Room, that should be safe enough until we can establish a clear route out. Anyone in medical besides Jaime and the doc?”

“Doctor Banner has been assisting Doctor Cho with a chemical breakdown of the Snowmelt control agents. He has been alerted to the situation.”

“Tony, what is this shit?” Clint came onto comms suddenly. “Looks like… mold? But it’s chasing me. Shit.” Comms echoed a few rattle-bangs. “Ow.”

“We don’t know what it is, and what do you mean, it’s chasing you? Where are you?”

“Where the fuck do you think I am? In the vents.” Clint snapped. “It’s not moving fast, but it’s crawling.”

“It’s a big building, Barton, how about a little more direction?”

“Um, thirty-ninth floor, moving west along the south end of the building,” Clint said.

“On my way.” Tony flipped his comm channel. “Cap, can you handle clearing medical? I’m en route to Clint.”

“Got Jaime,” Steve said. “Jess’s flying Cho and her lab rat up the elevator shaft. Someone’s jammed the main elevator, the civilians are going down the staircase from 30 and down.”

“That explains all the noise,” Tony said. He could see some of the people now, a dozen or so floors below. He veered sharply to drop onto the landing at 38, and yanked the door open.

“Sir. I have detected an anomaly.”

“You mean in addition to the biological weapons in my building?” Tony snapped.

“I’m afraid so, sir,” JARVIS said. “There are currently two individuals in this building with facial features, build, and voice patterns matching James Barnes.”

“What the fuck.” He skidded around a corner. “Okay, that’s… Shit. Heat signatures, J, check the ambient body temps. Bucky runs hot. Buck, you on comms?” Of course, that was assuming the intruder -- Rumlow, Tony would bet on it -- hadn’t hooked into their comms. But the comms were DNA-coded, much harder to fool than simple scans.
“I’ve got eyes on Yasha,” Natasha came on the comms. “Seems all right, if stressed. He’s got the baby in the Hulk room.”

Natasha was almost impossible to fool when it came to who was wearing what body. “Damn it, that means the fake one is the one who just promised to keep an eye on Rikki for me. We need to get the hell down to containment.”

“They’ve got us running in circles, Tony,” Steve said. “Medical’s clear. Um. As a note, the fire extinguisher seems to slow the biologic down. I didn’t do it, stupid thing oozed right by it and set it off.”

“What the fuck is it?” Tony growled. He added, “Rhetorical question,” before anyone could supply a snarky response. “Get to containment, the biologics are a goddamn diversion.”

“You sure this one is Rumlow?” Clint asked. “I don’t want to shoot your damn boyfriend again.”

“No, but I’m pretty damn sure it’s not Bucky,” Tony said. The imposter wouldn’t lock himself into the Hulk Room with Sasha and Jaime and Natasha, he was certain of that. Jaime and Natasha were both canny enough to see through the disguise, and anyone who’d studied them enough to know how to match Bucky’s vocal patterns would know that.

“Shit,” Clint said. “I can’t take the shot. She’s fucking blocking me.”

“Where the hell-- I came up to 38th to rescue your ass,” Tony complained.

Muffled, from a few floors below, came the rattle and hollow boom of explosives.

“Ha! Eat that, psycho bitch,” Clint crowed. “They’re out the window, Tony, but I fucking tagged her. She’s got a bug.”

“Good job, Hawkeye,” Steve said, before Tony could respond. “JARVIS, keep a close eye on that signal; corroborate using external sources where possible.”

“I love it when you give my baby permission to hack the street cams,” Tony said.

“Of course, Captain,” JARVIS responded. “Agent Barton, if you would kindly remove yourself from the ventilation systems, I will shut them down to use fire suppression on the biologicals.”

“Ug, J, that’s gonna kill my goodies stash,” Clint complained.

“Oh my god, I will buy you more Twinkies and Cheetos,” Tony groaned.

“All right, all right, I’m going.”

“So...” Jessica came online. “This was probably a mistake, and I’m really, really sorry, Steve.”

Tony swore he could feel Captain America face-palming from several floors away.

“I am going to put a leash on you, woman,” Steve muttered. “What did you do?”

“Um. I’m kinda. On their quinjet.”

“Confirmed,” JARVIS said. “Both Miss Jones’s comms unit and Agent Barton’s bug are currently headed north, at 20,000 feet.”

“Oh, thank god,” Tony said.
From above, another explosion rang out.

“Apologies, sir,” JARVIS said. “It appears the biologicals explode upon contact with other biological substances. The bots have been driving them out of habitat areas with fire suppression. We are, however, now down one group of experimental rats in the laboratories. As well as sixty percent of that facility.”

“Well, better rats than people,” Tony sighed. “Try to keep that from becoming general knowledge, though; it’ll play havoc with PR if the press gets wind of it. How many more biologics do we need to deal with?”

“Three, sir,” JARVIS said. “Ventilation is cleared. The kitchen, common room, and the Captain’s quarters are still infected.”

“Right, well. Let’s see if we can find a way to deal with these guys that doesn’t destroy sixty percent of those floors. Kitchen first, there’ll be some spare biologic substance in the fridge. Hell, if Barton’s leftovers are still in there, they can have a date.”

“Ha, ha, Tony,” Clint complained.

They were just clearing out the last of the biological explosives -- Tony was never going to be able to eat deli ham again -- when there was a strange, crackling BAMPH! noise and a tall man with black hair and blue skin and a fucking prehensile tail popped up in the kitchen. Holding onto his hand was Negasonic Teenage Warhead. She grimaced. Tony couldn’t blame her; the smell of fire-suppressant soaked alien biologicals was pretty rank. There was more than one reason he’d stayed in the suit.

“Thanks, Kurt,” she said, brushing her black coat down, smoothing non-existent wrinkles. “Hey, Stark. So… my precog just went nuts. What do you need?”
Jessica

She was a stupid sundae. Seriously, that was becoming her catch-phrase and it sucked. She’d been helping the civilian evacuation when she’d spotted the cloaked quinjet hovering off the side of the Tower. She’d only known it was there because Coulson (she was going to smack him one of these days for keeping secrets because Clint was still mourning the man, god damn it) had taught her how to recognize the air-shimmers that concealed the ‘jets from most people.

She had jumped up to take a look and realized that the ‘jet was on autopilot and that the hatch was open. She’d just stepped inside to take a look around when Rumlow and Rikki had landed on the canopy. She’d ducked under the seats, pressing herself as close to the metal hull as she could, and hoped to Christ that they weren’t paying attention.

Fortunately, spending a lot of time on SHIELD quinjets meant she was very familiar with the inside of one, including the three compartments below the floor, where the teams stored extra weapons and medical supplies. On the Hydra version, two were full of equipment and one was empty. Jessica rolled into it and closed the lid, sealing herself in the darkness.

“Fly the fucking plane, sweetheart,” Rumlow said, his voice all dark broody crackle underlaid with malice. “Your dad finds us and we’re fucked. Cap finds us and we’re fucked.”

“Stark finds us,” Rikki said. “Stark will find us.”

“Well, whose fault is that?” There was a sharp sound, skin on skin -- a slap? “We were supposed to have backup. Two months I gave you, and you fucked it up. Useless. Worthless.”

“Compliance commands for Winter Soldier no longer active,” Rikki said, by way of explanation, her tone low and pleading. “Sanction unable to bring Winter Soldier into compliance. Trainee Ward escaped into ventilation systems to avoid medical upkeep. Break with protocols, reported to Stark. Mission failure.”

“I fucking know mission failure.” Another blow. “Failed to get our lost Asset. Lost both the kids. Failed to recruit Rogers. Worthless. You are fucking worthless.”


“Huh,” Rumlow said. “Probably not any more, but yeah. Good to know. So, Cap’s gettin’ a little action on the side. Good. Can you take the woman out?”

“Subject Avenger Jessica Jones, analysis: Has received training from Winter Soldier. Combat skills moderate. Advanced healing. Flight capability. Soldier Sanction could neutralize subject, if Captain Rogers does not interfere. Noted: Subject inspires protective urges in Captain Rogers; he is likely to interfere if possible.”

Jessica wondered if she could shoot Rumlow before he could order Rikki to attack.
“You do that, if you see her,” Rumlow said. “Rogers is a sap. Killing his woman will weaken him.”

“Sanction disagrees with assessment. Captain Rogers will retaliate with full capacity. Soldier Sanction unlikely to survive.”

“I can live with that,” Rumlow said. “God knows, I won’t miss you, you creepy little fucktoy. Order stands.”

“Accepted.” Fuuuuuck me. Yeah, that would go all sorts of sideways, really fucking fast. If there could be anything that would tear the Avengers apart, it would be Steve killing Bucky’s daughter.

Steve was going to kill her. Assuming, of course, that Jessica lived through yet another episode of her extremely poor life choices.

***

Ellie

Stark talked too much.

Nothing new there. Not even interesting enough to hashtag it. He was busy giving orders that everyone already knew.

*Find the Quinjet.* Duh.

*Get these fucking biologics out of my goddamn Tower.* Duh again.

*Analyze the footage from the containment room.* Useless. Rumlow had taken the cameras down as soon as he was in the room with Rikki.

Ellie bunched her hands into fists, inside her coat pockets where no one could see. #getmygirlback #notmygirlyet #precogsucks @jeangrey *tell me about it, sis.*

She flashed forward again, then moved right before Barton dropped out of the ceiling on her. He smelled even worse than the kitchen.

Agent Romanoff moved out of the kitchen and into the common area. Her rounded belly was just starting to protrude. #itsybitsyspider Rikki was fond of Romanoff, would want her looked after. Ellie grabbed a cold ginger ale from the fridge and hunted down some crackers, bringing them in.

Rikki’s father was in the common room, holding the baby. Ellie glanced at the child for a moment. Far forward flash; Sasha as an adult, flaming wings protruding from his back, eyes brilliant orange. #canwejustNOT Ellie staggered. She hated the far-flashes. They changed too often to be useful, and they made her dizzy. Tired. Hungry.

“What did you see?” asked her father-in-law. (Future father-in-law. Probably. Maybe. Depending. Shit, no, no, no. I don’t want to see that right now.)

“Potential,” she answered. “Gear up; we have thirty-six minutes.”

“You’re not going,” Stark said, his face plate pulling back in surprise. “You’re like, twelve.”

#fuckyoustark Oooh, look, that was trending.

“The hell I’m not,” Ellie snapped. She could feel her power under her skin, heating her up, wanting to run, wanting to destroy. Stop it. Knocking Stark through the wall of his own building would be a
tactical error. “You need me.”

“Absolutely not,” Stark said. “I am not taking one of Xavier’s kids into a combat situation.”

Ellie had to compose herself. She breathed. Took a piece of gum out of her pocket and folded it into her mouth. Chewed a few times. “You will, or you will die,” she said. “I’m not supposed to foretell, but I have seen eighteen possible futures since I was introduced to Rikki Barnes, and in all but two of them, she will be my wife. In one of those two, it will not happen because she will die in the next eight hours unless I help you save her. So help me God, Stark, you will not take her away from me.”

#bitemeasshole In the insulting way, not in the kinky pirate way.

“Does Rikki know this?”

#doilookstupid #nevermind

“I’m taking children into battle now? I’m going to hell. And Rumlows going to be there, waiting for me.”

“Well, he’s going to hell,” Rikki’s dad said, getting up from the sofa and handing his son over to Agent Romanoff. “You are staying here, alive, with me.”

#donotprecog #infrontofthenormals #precogrealllysucks

***

Natasha

Natasha was taking a page out of Jessica Jones’ book today.

A few months after Jessica had arrived, Natasha finally put on her assassin’s face and visited with the intent of delivering the shovel talk. Except in this case it went, “If it were possible for me to throw you a goddamn parade, so help me, Stalin, I would. You are the second best thing to ever happen to him.” Jessica hadn’t asked what the first thing was; everyone knew that answer.

A few days after that, Jessica had showed up at Natasha’s door with two ugly-cry-face movies and a bottle of vodka. “It’s an eight-on-the-list day.”

And then Jessica had explained about the list: at five items, she started punching things. At eight, it was time for serious drinking. (Which was apparently different from the constant “regular” drinking Jessica did.)

“First time I met Rogers,” she had said, “it was a twelve-on-the-list. Rogers was like items six, eight and twelve all by himself.”

“That sounds about right,” Natasha had responded.

Today, Natasha had a list:

1. She wasn’t allowed to hit anyone.
2. She wasn’t allowed to drink anything alcoholic.
3. She was babysitting in the Hulk Room...
   a. because it was the only place in the Tower that didn’t smell like biological explosives...
   b. that wasn’t also Tony’s workshop, and...
   c. Sasha could absolutely not be trusted in the workshop.
4. Sasha had learned to walk while being babysat in the Hulk room and his sister, fathers, and friends were all off Avenging. Aside from Natasha and Jaime, no one else got to witness him take those first, few, faltering steps and then tumble into Jaime’s arms.

5. Sasha had tumbled into Jaime’s broken arm...
   a. which had made Jaime cry...
   b. and then complain about not being up to mission-standard levels of super-soldier...
   c. and had resulted in Sasha crying...
   d. which continued to make Natasha pissed about items 1 and 2.

Right. List making was not quite as cathartic as Jessica had made it out to be, since all of it boiled down to how goddamn pissed off she was that there was a huge line of people who were going to get to punch Rumlow in the face and she wasn’t any of them.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Agent Romanov?”

“Could you bring up the security feeds outside containment, while Rumlow was in with Rikki?”

“Of course.” JARVIS pulled up the appropriate footage and displayed it on the wall.

“Increase volume,” Natasha said. She closed her eyes to better concentrate. “Enhance. Cut the background chatter from Stark.”

The Russian coming out of Rumlow’s mouth was pathetic. His accent was so bad he might as well have been a Frenchman.


Natasha ruffled her hand through Jaime’s hair. “Excellent work,” she said and the boy gazed up at her with adoration. At least that had stopped him from crying.

“JARVIS, get me a private line to Tony, please.”

“Of course, Agent Romanov.”

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Tony

“Tony? You got a minute?”

“For my favorite deadly arachnid, always. Something wrong at home?” Tony set his jaw; the number of reasons that Natasha would break open a private line while they were en route to a confrontation were pretty limited, and while all of them were important, very few of them were good.

“Turns out little pitchers do have enormous ears,” she said. “Rumlow only shut down the cameras in the containment room itself. Jaime and I were able to listen in on the conversation from surveillance in the hall. You owe me vodka and a diamond bracelet after I have this baby.”

That... was not what he had expected at all. Not that he was going to complain, mind. He’d have slumped with relief if he hadn’t been moving at Mach 4. “Given the way things go at poker night, I
was probably going to owe you that anyway, Bluff Queen. What’d you find out?”

“We got her compliance codes. Remind me to never complain about your accent again. Rumlow sounds like he should be gutted by phonics.”

Tony’s flight actually stuttered with his shock. That was... well, more than he’d ever thought to hope for. “I would hold you to that, but we all know you’re going to start making me do tongue-twisters again in a week. Have JARVIS shoot the list to me, Steve, and Bucky. I hope we won’t have to use it, but... it’s good to have a Plan B. Or in this case, you know, a Plan Q.”

“Pekar’ Pyotr pyok pirogi,” Natasha quipped. “If there’s anything left of it after Yasha has his go, please feel free to punch Rumlow in the face for me. Preferably under his left eye. It’s twitchy. Also, if it comes to hand to hand, his right ankle is sensitive from a break a few years back.”

“Good to know; I’ll pass that on to everyone. And I’ll make sure to get a video of all the punching so you can enjoy it later on continuous loop.”

“I have a video for you, too. Share it with your boyfriend, if he gets too down, but probably wait until after the punching. Sasha learned to walk today.”

“Well, damn,” Tony sighed. Bucky and Steve would both be sad to have missed that. “Yeah, that’s an after-action report item, for sure.” Tony eyed the little video that JARVIS helpfully opened on the HUD, and grinned. Cuteness was definitely one of Sasha’s superpowers. “Keep the boys safe. Tell ‘em if they’re good, we’ll bring back presents.”

In the background of Natasha’s comm unit, Tony heard Jaime, quite firmly. “Caviar.”

Tony snorted. “I thought he’d have to hang out with Pepper before he started developing expensive tastes. I’ll keep it in mind. We may be a while, though. We’re still high up and moving fast; I swear, she’s going to drag us all the way back to Siberia, at this rate.”

“It’s not unlikely,” Natasha said. “Lots of places to hide there where people don’t ask questions.”

Tony huffed an affected sigh. “Just once, I want bad guys who have nice tropical lairs. Just once, that’s all I’m asking.”

“Uuufgh, it’s summertime, Tony,” Natasha said. “Next time, you can get pregnant and stay home, and I’ll go run around St. Petersburg.”

“Yeah, I’ll have Helen get right on that. Actually, I won’t, she’d probably actually do it.”

“Have fun kicking ass,” Natasha said, signing off.

A moment later, Bucky’s voice came over comms, dark and ugly. “Jesus wept. What a word to seal her on. No... fucking wonder.”

Tony hadn’t looked at it yet; he pulled up the list and scanned to the end. Unworthy. “Christ. We got any of that stuff for resetting the codes? She could for sure use some better ones.”

“I have a chem-breakdown on file,” Bruce spoke up, his voice soft as always. “We can probably replicate it.”

The trackers eventually led them to an island in the northern Kara Sea that had the (probably intentional) misfortune of having a live volcanic mountain on it that resembled a grinning skull. Appropriately creepy and grotesque and non-subtle.
“Welcome to my secret lair on Skullcrusher Mountain,” Tony sang under his breath as Steve started assigning positions and tasks.

***

Rikki

The soldier hated the island at first sight. It was the worst combinations of things: covered in snow and volcanoes, surrounded by frozen seas and thick, impenetrable forests. The forests, at least, indicated that the volcano, while active, had not erupted in some time. The air was thick with the stench of sulfur and dead sea creatures.

There was another smell, as she exited the Quinjet, familiar. She could hear a heartbeat and muffled respiration. The soldier was familiar with the personal scent of each Avenger and community. The soldier consulted her orders. They were quite clear: kill Jessica Jones on sight.

The soldier took a few large strides to catch up with her consort. Protocols while at the Mother’s camp dictated that the soldier display affection to Brock, a hand on his arm, or at the small of his back. She hesitated. Brock had not been happy to see her; commentary and expressions had indicated strong levels of disapproval. She was unworthy.

She took up a guard position instead, a half step to his left and one meter behind. Her hand did not stray far from her weapon; Rumlow had not provided a mission briefing. The soldier was unprepared for the island’s resources.

The base was heavily fortified with surface-to-air heavy guns and a small army. Won’t matter, the soldier thought. Inadequate forces for incoming enemy. Her tactical assessment was not requested; she didn’t give voice to the thought.

The soldier’s consort barked a few orders; the guns were manned against incoming air assault. Four of the men detached from the assembled squads to man the guns. Brock reminded them that Iron Man in particular was a priority target. The soldier experienced discomfort at the thought of Iron Man (Tony!) being shot out of the sky. She shook her head, trying to rid herself of intrusive thoughts.

The pilot of the Iron Man armor had recently taken particular care of the soldier’s dependents. The pilot was owed.

Unworthy. The pilot was the enemy. Disabling or destroying the pilot would --

No.

Yes.

He is a thief.

“Hail Hydra,” Rumlow said, slamming his fist into his chest as several other men and women joined him. Phoenix soldiers, the soldier noted. Not as powerful as the soldier, or the soldier’s sire, but strong enough.

“Not quite the expected outcome, Rumlow,” one of the Phoenix soldiers said. The soldier did not know the man, but Rumlow grimaced. His expression, intended to cause fear in the outspoken comrade, was lacking. Father scowled at breakfast with more fervor. Deviant behavior noted.

“You brought your toy with you,” another one said. The soldier stiffened, imperceptibly. She knew that voice. Jack Rollins. A Hydra infiltrator to S.H.I.E.L.D. and a loyalist to Madam Hydra. He had
been present during much of her training.

“You want her? She’s fucking useless,” Rumlow snarled. “Three failed missions and I had to personally get her ugly ass out of the fucking Avenger’s Tower. She’s not even any fun in bed.”

“That’s because you lack imagination,” Rollins said. “Sure, I’ll take her. Relieve you of the burden.”

The soldier had served Rollins before.

No.

NO.

Rollins touched the soldier’s cheek. She turned her face away, eyes averted. “Aw, she remembers me,” Rollins said.

“After the fight,” Rumlow said, slapping Rollins’s hand away. “We got Avengers incoming, you fucking moron.”

“Emphasis on the fucking part,” one of the Phoenix soldiers muttered.

The soldier shuddered, taking a step to the side. Deviant behavior noted.

The sky darkened with clouds. Lightning crackled between the rolling cloudbank. The soldier tipped her head to one side, listening. Repulsors. Engines.

“Time to die, assholes,” Rumlow said, glancing up at the sky.

Hope so.

Deviant behavior noted.

Chapter End Notes

_Pekar’ Pyotr pyok pirogi_ - Baker Peter bakes pierogies.

_Skullcrusher Mountain._
Who is it That Can Tell Me Who I Am?

Bucky

“Someone had better have brought me a fucking coat,” Jones said over the comms as soon as the Avenger Quinjet reached the Kara Sea.

Elz stood up, her hips shifting to maintain her balance. “You can wear mine,” she said. The hatch opened up and Jones flew in. She did not keep her balance nearly so well -- Steve caught her and eased her into a chair. “Once I go nuclear, I lose all my clothes anyway.” Elz unwrapped the thick, black scarf from her neck; the soft wool was longer than it looked, draped around her four or five times.

Her eyes burned for a moment, literally. Orange flickers dotted her normally brown irises, then her black-painted lips turned up in something that sort of resembled a smile. “Here,” she said. She draped the scarf over Bruce’s head, letting only one loop hang down. “It’s cold, this should still fit the big guy.”

The Winter Soldier turned his attention back to piloting. He was made for this, flying solo, as most of the rest of the ‘jet pilots were occupied -- flying outside, in his red and gold armor, or back at the Tower on babysitting duty. Clint was organizing his arsenal, and everyone preferred that Wilson fly his goddamn wings and not the ‘jet unless it was an absolute, make-peace-with-your-maker emergency. Wilson flew his wings like a righteous angel; he flew the ‘jet like someone’s granny.

“Wait, what?” Tony’s voice over the comms sounded weirdly prudish, for Tony. “What do you mean you lose all your clothes?”

The flaming eyeball trick was neat; the Winter Soldier wondered briefly if JARVIS was giving Tony a visual to go with the displeased voice. “I have a unitard underneath, pervert,” Elz said. “It’s fireproof. But it’s also fucking ugly, so I don’t wear it outside of combat situations.”

Steve covered his mouth with his hand, then muttered, “Language,” into his comms unit.

That got Steve the teenage death glare. The Winter Soldier found himself approving more and more of this woman who was ninety percent likely to end up as his daughter-in-law.

Elz staggered, fell into her chair. When she opened her eyes again, they were brown and flat. “Shit. Get off the plane, do it now!”

Thor came on comms, something something pompous, the Winter Soldier wasn’t listening. He threw the ‘jet into autohover, dropped the hatch. Grabbed the girl and jumped. Jones had a hold of her boyfriend -- he really didn’t need it, Christ, worrywort, it was only a hundred feet or so to the ground -- and Sam’s pack was already spreading out, catching Clint as he did a tumble toward the ground. About ten feet from the ground, Bruce exploded into the Other Guy with a terrifying roar. Why did the Winter Soldier always forget how goddamn big the Hulk was?

The Quinjet disintegrated in flames of metal shrapnel as the GTAM tore the ‘jet to pieces.

“Looks like we’re running the rest of the way,” Steve said.

“Do I look like I run, Capsicle?” Tony snarked, overhead. “Everyone alive down there?”

“Little toasted, but ok. Why do we not bring marshmallows to these things?”
Elz rolled her eyes, then took a few steps away from the Winter Soldier, bunched her fists at her sides and screamed out a warcry. Around her, golden licks of energy convulsed, feeding on the sound coming from her throat until she was surrounded by a ball of brilliant energy. She finished her scream, her clothes melting off her body until she was clad in a dull yellow unitard, and then she bolted forward, power building with every step.

“Shit,” the Winter Soldier muttered, then took off after her. Fuck him sideways if he was going to let a kid get boots on the ground first.

Jesus Christ, she ran fast.

“Tony!” the Winter Soldier snapped. “Tony, cover her.”

“I’m on it,” Tony replied, zipping ahead in a red and gold blur.

“I, too, shall protect the young warrior maiden from harm,” Thor announced. Oh, goodie. The Winter Soldier should probably not be rolling his eyes before melee.

The island wasn’t very large, which was good, because the half mile to the compound was just about as far as the Winter Soldier wanted to run in full gear before facing hostiles.

Elz hit the squadron of Hydra goons like a flaming bowling ball; knocking people everywhere in a blazing trail. Excellent. Less that he had to deal with. The guns came to his hands like a magician’s trick and he was firing as soon as he was within range, eyes chasing targets behind barriers and into the various compound buildings.

Typical Hydra layout, and the Winter Soldier was calling warnings to his teammates of potential traps and ambush sites. Iron Man was flying aerial cover overheard, repulsors whirring.

*Damnit, Tony, stop being so fucking beautiful, it’s distracting.*

Oh, look, Hydra idiots shooting at the Hulk, well, that was going to get them nice and in traction very shortly, wasn’t it?

“Bucky, look --” Steve’s voice, panicked.

*Fuck.*

Hydra shitheel popped up from a ground-cover, one of those damn disintegrator rays pointed directly at the back of his head. The Winter Soldier curled his lip up, baring his teeth in a snarl of frustration. He turned, hoping to all the saints that adamantium could cover him half as well as vibranium, when the guy sprouted an arrowhead and several inches of shaft right out of the middle of his forehead.

“Watch your goddamn aces and eights, Barnes, I don’t have time to haul your ass out of the pit every five minutes.”

“Fuck you, Barton.” *Thanks.*

“You are never gonna have it that good, Barnes,” Hawkeye snarked. *You’re welcome.* It was good to have friends that spoke the same language.

Steve burst out of the surrounding forest like a red, white, and blue tornado, shield singing into the mix. That was always fun; the Winter Soldier grabbed the disk on the rebound and sent it spinning back. They’d fought that way before, like the shield was a psychic bond between them. The vibranium hummed whenever it touched his hand, singing mayhem and crying murder. The Winter
Soldier loved that fucking thing; it was awesome beyond words.

Everything was standard procedure for the Avengers, right up until the Winter Soldier and Captain America ran into the Phoenix squadron.

The Winter Soldier had barely held his own against Captain America when Steve had a mission to bring the helicarriers and Project Insight down. As soon as the general population was safe, all the fight went right out of him, and even with that, both of them came very close to getting friendly with the Grim Reaper. Two super-soldiers versus a whole squad of enhanced mercenaries was... not good.

Adding Jones to the melee helped out, even though she was absolute rubbish with the shield. Jones muttered about the *fucking bitch metal* and went on what might have been a complete jealous meltdown, except that the Winter Soldier missed most of the commentary, trying not to get his head taken off by a mercenary with full mesh body armor and a combat whip made from something that was entirely too similar to a repulsor beam.

And then Elz was there, brilliant and nuclear, which was just a little bit scary, because even super-soldiers don’t really want radiation all that close to them.

“You’re not allowed to die just yet,” Elz said, shaking a finger. Her other hand closed around the guy’s throat and melted his face off.

That was. *Gross*. The Winter Soldier considered losing his breakfast.

Elz pointed. “Rumlows that way. You, come with me.” And because the Winter Soldier did not want her to touch and drag while she was glowing like that, he shrugged and followed her.

Close-quarters combat with someone who could see the future was easy. Also, a little boring. Elz walked in front of him, glowing like a miniature sun. She flicked her fingers, one finger for each Hydra fanatic. The Winter Soldier had only to follow along behind her, picking them off as they charged in. She even paused just before he needed to reload. It was like playing a video game with the cheat codes. Clint did that sometimes, when he’d had a bad day; “Sometimes I just wanna shoot shit, not worry about covering my six.”

It was so easy that the Winter Soldier forgot that teenagers probably should not be warriors. One of the Hydra goons got too close and when the Winter Soldier brought his gun up, the warm splatter of blood was too much.

Apparently melting a guy’s face off, that was okay, but a little gore backsplash, that earned a full-on scream. Elz crumpled to the floor, scrubbing frantically at her face. *Shit*. Winter Soldier *sucked* for that sort of shit.

The Winter Soldier shivered, brought the words of his will to his mind, a quick swirls of images and impressions that burned a hole in the ice inside his chest and Bucky fell back into himself with a quick gasp.

“Oh,” he said, dropping to one knee and digging around inside one of his myriad pockets and pouches. He finally found a black do-rag for times when he really needed his hair out of his eyes, and carefully wiped Elz’s face with it, cleaning off the blood. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

The girl shuddered. “It’s... precog *sucks*,” she said.

“Seems pretty useful, so far,” Bucky said. She still had smears of red all over her face and he would prefer if she didn’t look in a mirror, but at least it probably didn’t feel runny and drippy anymore.
Elz snorted. “Yeah? Look at it this way; in my head, I’ve been in a relationship with Rishka for years. I know everything about her. Everything she will ever tell me in twenty different possible futures. I wake up at night reaching for her. And right now, she thinks of us as mandatory friends. She’s desperately in love with Captain Rogers, she’s considering an affair with Johnny Storm and I have to be supportive of that. Even in the best possible futures we have, our first date will be your wed-- Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t tell you that. But it’ll be nice. At least seven futures, that’ll be how it goes. If she dies, today, I’ll still mourn her, even though she’s never even touched me. It’s a horrible ability.”

“She’s not going to die today,” Bucky said, firmly. “We’re going to save her, you and I.”

Elz stiffened again, her eyes flaring, then she said in a fierce, triumphant tone, “No, we’re not. Tony is.”

Which was, of course, the second that Rikki got the drop on them.

_Fuck._

“Surrender,” Rikki said. The snub-nosed Hydra tech pistol was pointed directly between his eyes. Bucky raised his hands cautiously. Rikki jerked her chin at the man with her, the curve of her shoulders indicating that he held her in compliance. The man jerked Bucky’s hands down behind him and locked him in place with those damn heavy cuffs.

“Information requested,” Rikki -- no, Sanction -- said.

_Delay._ That was always the best plan. “What information?”

“Explain how Winter Soldier has evaded compliance,” Sanction demanded.

Bucky was hard pressed not to give her a bitter grin. She had tried to trigger him when she’d gone into her fit and while the words had no effect on him, he’d still been affected. The sound of them falling from her lips had stunned him, briefly. He still heard them in the darkness, sometimes, waking from nightmares where he was turned, again, and again, and sent after his friends, after Steve. A few, terrible times, after Tony. She’d grinned, triumphant, thinking she had won, until he threw off shock, realized what was going on, and tossed her across the room.

He couldn’t resist, right now, with her handler less than a meter away, his own gun at the back of Elz’s head. So much of Elz’s abilities depended on speed; could she get up to nuclear from her position on the floor? Bucky didn’t know, wasn’t willing to chance it.

“There’s a process,” he said, “to reset the compliance commands.”

“Who did it?”

Bucky gave her a shark’s grin. “I did.”

“Give me the codes!”

“Don’t be an idiot,” he snapped.

_Ow._ What was it about his face that made people want to backhand him? _Fuck._ She hit hard.

“Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t tell you,” Bucky said, gingerly adjusting his jaw. “First damn mission I gave myself was those words die with me. No one ever has them. _Ever._”
Something glassy and brittle broke in Sanction’s eyes. “You… give yourself missions?”

“Oh, come on,” the man said, nudging his pistol at Elz’s neck until she was whimpering and bent in half. “This ain’t family hour, bitch. Get him up and moving. We can reset him later. We gotta get out of here now.”


“You will, or there will be consequences.”

“Death, first,” Bucky snapped.

“Sure, I can do that,” the man said, turning his gun on Rikki. “You want me to shoot this girl, or that one? It’s all the same to me. Sanction, if he disobeys, blow your brains out.”

What?

Sanction moved her gun easily from Bucky’s forehead to the underside of her chin. “Follow Rollins,” she said. It was fucking eerie how calm she was. How fast she could be. Without his hands, he couldn’t stop her, there was no… god fucking dammit.

“Rikki, no,” Bucky choked out. “I’m gettin’ up.” He struggled to get his feet under himself, grief and rage strangling him.

Rollins had a slipjet on the roof, silent and virtually undetectable by radar. Rollins shoved Elz toward the ramp and she stumbled, clumsy and unlike herself, going flat on her face, covering her head with her hands.

***

Tony

The mini-missiles didn’t pack as much of a punch as Tony would have liked; their explosive charge made them more effective than .50-caliber bullets, but only by a factor of 20-35%, depending on precise strike location. More than enough to stop a normal human, and the force of impact was enough to knock over a Phoenix soldier, but it wasn’t slowing them down as much as he’d like.

Still, a good strafing run knocked them off-balance and made them duck, which made them easier targets for Thor and Cap and Jones, so Tony and Sam were taking turns doing their part to keep the bad guys’ heads low. Sam’s autoguns did less damage than Tony’s missiles, but fired faster, so Tony was pretty sure it evened out.

The side of his HUD lit up with a blue and green overlay on the terrain. “Sir,” JARVIS said, “I’m detecting some anomalous activity in these regions. That quadrant is being swept by Mr. Barnes and Ms. Phimister.”

And Tony shouldn’t play favorites, just because it was his boyfriend over there -- Bucky could more than handle himself -- but there was the Goth Menace to keep an eye on, and that was excuse enough for Tony. “Tell Cap I’m going to sweep wide to check that out,” he told JARVIS, “and let Sam know he’ll need to take over the air cover solo for a bit, unless Clint’s at a useful vantage point.” He shifted his weight and curved toward the place JARVIS had highlighted for him.

It was hard to see for the trees, but there was an irregular path of cleared spaces that bore the marks of Warhead’s nuclear bursts, and then… nothing. Dammit. Tony shot forward, scanning the ground
frantically. “JARVIS, give me all the visual aids here.” Had they circled back toward the larger fight?

“Sir.” Blinking crosshairs on the HUD drew Tony’s attention to a low building with a slipjet parked on the roof. “Shall I deploy anti-aircraft?” JARVIS suggested. Boy, Tony loved it when JARVIS got bloodthirsty.

Still, there wouldn’t be a slipjet here if they hadn’t intended to use it for something, and it was far too small to fit even half of the force below. “No, let’s take a closer look first,” Tony said. He banked wide and came in behind it. Better than blowing it up would be planting some booby traps so it would blow up with Hydra assholes aboard, but obviously that wasn’t a workable plan if they still had Rikki in their thrall.

He did a quick look around on the roof as he landed, but the ‘jet seemed to be unguarded. Tony went to the edge of the roof and looked down -- and ducked immediately, cursing softly. Hydra was on their way, and they had Bucky and Phimister. Damn, damn, damn.

On the other hand, if they were coming this way, there wasn’t much doubt as to their destination. Tony scrambled for the ‘jet. A flashing light on the console by the hatch demanded a passphrase. Tony rolled his eyes and put his hand over the keys, not even looking. “JARVIS, do something about that.” This wasn’t exactly SHIELD encryption; a subsonic port tunnel would get JARVIS into the jet’s systems in a matter of seconds.

The passcode request turned green and went dark only a couple of seconds before he heard the roof access door open.

“Oh, come on,” said a man’s voice. Not Rumlow’s. “This ain’t family hour, bitch. Get him up and moving. We can reset him later. We gotta get out of here now.”

“This thing have any external cameras you can feed me, J?” Tony muttered. A couple of seconds later, a fish-eye image popped up. Tony didn’t recognize the man, but whoever he was, he had a gun’s muzzle pressed hard into the back of Ellie’s neck in a way that made Tony burn with fury.

Bucky’s arms were bound in magcuffs, and Rikki’s gun was on him. He stopped when he saw the ‘jet and dug his feet in. “I ain’t going with you,” he growled.

“You will, or there will be consequences.” Obviously, Hydra-asshole didn’t know the first thing about Bucky, because Bucky--

“Death, first!” ...Yeah, like that.

“Sure, I can do that,” the man said, turning his gun on Rikki, and no, no, no, that was bad, Bucky’s soft spot for Rikki was his biggest weakness here. “You want me to shoot this girl, or that one? It’s all the same to me. Sanction, if he disobeys, blow your brains out.”

Rikki turned her pistol up under her own chin and Tony’s blood ran cold. “Follow Rollins,” she said, that same eerily calm cadence that Bucky used when he was being the Winter Soldier.

No. No, no, no. This was not happening, this could not be allowed to happen. This was Tony’s family, damn it, and he wasn’t going to lose them now...

Some small, still-rational corner of his brain was feverishly calculating. Angles and rates of fire; if they were going to board the ‘jet then they’d have to adjust their positions in which case... Close, he was so close to a workable solution, but Rollins was a consummate professional, fuck it all, and was keeping Ellie close, using her as a shield.
Here they came, and he still had no good solution. Ellie looked up, straight into the camera, despite it being a tiny dot hidden amongst the electronics under the wing. How the hell had she--

She winked.

Signal, it was a fucking signal, Stark, what the hell kind of genius are you, anyway? Tony locked in the angles and braced.

And sure enough, as they reached the ‘jet’s ramp, Rollins shoved her and she skip-hopped and tripped and fell. It was a bit over-acted; he hadn’t pushed her nearly hard enough for that, but that didn’t matter; what mattered was the clear shot he had. Tony turned into the hatchway and shot zzzzip! a micro-missile straight into Rollins’ sternum, and before it even exploded, a repulsor blast at Rikki’s hand, knocking the pistol a critical few inches to the side. Blam it went off but missed her, thank Turing.

Bucky lunged, got a leg between Rikki’s ankles and twisted, knocking her to the ground. He moved like a dancer, kicking the pistol away. She rolled over and scrambled for it; looking like he wanted to throw up, Bucky planted a foot in the middle of her back and crushed her to the ground. “Sanction!” He dropped to his knees, bracketing her hips, and put all his weight against her spine. “Tremors.”

Rikki going under her command words was nothing like what Bucky did; she didn’t freeze or cry. She did, however, start struggling harder, screaming. She threw Bucky off and planted an elbow in his face. “Don’t you fucking do it.”

Rollins was another fucking Phoenix enhancile; he was already trying to climb to his feet despite the scorched mess on his chest. “Sanction, you useless bitch whore,” he snarled.

Tony strode past Ellie and aimed the much larger arm-mounted missile right between Rollins’ eyes. “You’re going to want to speak to our daughter with a little more respect,” he snapped.

Rikki recovered her gun, jerked the barrel in Tony’s direction and fired. She blinked, then stared at Tony as if she’d never seen him before. “What?”

“Ninety-seven. Matrushka,” Bucky managed. He got to his knees, a cut below his eye bleeding freely.

Rikki clutched at her head, the gun falling from her hands. “No, no, please, don’t. Don’t.”

Fuck, Tony hadn’t wanted this for him, for Bucky of all people to be forced to bring her into compliance, but Bucky had started it and it had to be Bucky who finished it now. Tony gritted his teeth and made himself watch Rollins, who was working himself up to say something stupid and defiant despite the missile aimed at his face.


Rikki scrambled around on the ground for her gun, got it in her hand. She hesitated, barrel twitching from target to target. Bucky, Tony. Rollins. “Help me, you stupid piece of shit.”

“So,” Tony snarked at Rollins, “which one of us is she talking to, do you think?”

“Alginate. Familial. Lyrical.”

“Tony, don’t you dare let him do this to me!” Rikki turned despairing eyes on the only person who might be able to save her.
“I’m sorry,” Tony said, and it was too bad that the modulated frequencies of the suit’s speakers would hide his sincerity, because he really was sorry. “I know you’re going to hate us for it, but it’s for your own good.”

Rikki jerked the pistol upward, snugged back under her chin. “I refuse.”

“Unworthy.” Bucky managed to spit out. “Sanction, stop. Stop!”

The gun fell back to the ground. Rikki straightened, her face damp with tears. “Ready to comply.”

Tony closed his eyes -- behind the armor, Rollins wouldn’t know, and JARVIS wouldn’t let his aim waver -- and swallowed hard. Fuck, fuck, he hated this. No time to fall apart now, though. He took a breath. “Negasonic. In the ‘jet, there’s got to be another pair of magcuffs. Find ‘em, would you?”

Ellie got herself to her feet, looking about three hundred years old, her hair crispy and falling out. No wonder she kept it shaved. Her eyebrows were gone, too. “No.” She turned to Rollins, her hand glowing with power.


“I deserve it,” she said, calm, collected. The nuclear energy around her body flickered, grew. “Step back, Stark, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Not in cold blood,” Tony said softly. “You don’t want to do that to yourself.”

Ellie’s power stuttered, faded a bit. “He’s a monster. You don’t know what he’s done. You don’t know what he was going to do.”

“I’m not talking about what he deserves,” Tony said. “I’m talking about what you deserve.” He popped the faceplate and met her glowing eyes. “He’s not important enough to burden yourself with, Ellie.”

She shook all over, then the power faded all the way down until her eyes were brown and her skin wasn’t glowing. “Do all superhero mentors go to the same damn philosophy classes?” She snarked, the bite from her words barely maintained. She stomped into the ‘jet, throwing things around in her search.

“Sanction, come here, please,” Bucky said, softly. He was still on his knees, his arms behind his back. “Set primary protocols.”

“Ready to comply.” Rikki knelt in front of her father, head down, muscles relaxed.

“Soldier has discretion. Autonomy. The soldier makes her own choices. Her own missions. Do you understand?”

“Sir, yes. Protocols… accepted.”

“Your name is Rebecca Barnes. Called Rikki. You make your own choices.”

Rikki’s brow furrowed, she tilted her head to one side. “Request clarification: Why?”

Rollins made a face like he was biting into a lemon and opened his mouth. “Don’t,” Tony advised him tightly. “Just don’t.”

Bucky waited until she was looking at him. “Because you’re worthy.”
Rikki jerked back; Tony could see the animation in her face coming back until she was fully seated in her own body.

Ellie came out of the ‘jet, bearing a set of cuffs. She locked Rollin’s hands behind his back with a little more force than necessary, but it probably didn’t hurt the man anyway. Stupid enhancements. “Um, hey, Stark?”

“Yeah, Fallout Girl?”

“Look at me, for just a second, okay? Right here?” She pointed at her own eyes with forked fingers.

Tony glanced first at Bucky and Rikki, heads close and voices low, then turned to face Ellie, eyebrows raised. “What?”

Behind him was the distinct sound of a supersoldier fist crashing into another supersoldier. Bucky swore, low and fervent.

“God damnit, somebody get me out of these fucking cuffs,” Bucky snarled.

“I got him,” Ellie said. She put her hand on Tony’s arm. “Sorry. And, brace yourself, hmmm?”

She passed Rikki on the way down the ramp. Rikki stopped a few feet away from Tony, gun still in her hand.

Rikki twirled the pistol in her hand, as skilled with the gun as Bucky was with a blade, graceful and deadly. She nodded her head, then offered Tony the pistol over her bent forearm.

Tony tipped his head. “What’s this?”

“You protected my brothers. When I couldn’t. When I wasn’t. I… was going to send Jaime to kill you. He would have succeeded. And I would have made him a murderer.”

Tony considered it, running the numbers in his head. He wouldn’t have hesitated to let Jaime close, would have hesitated to defend himself. Given the additional enhancements of Hydra’s drug cocktail and Jaime’s own analytical capabilities… “Yeah,” he agreed. “Shitty damn thing to do to your own brother.”

“I don’t like you,” she said. “I don’t think you’re worthy of my father. But then, neither am I. You’re in no danger from me, so long as I have discretion.”

“Tell you a thing, Furiosa,” Tony said, eyes drifting to where Bucky was rubbing at his wrists. “I don’t think I’m worthy of him, either. But damned if I’m going to let him go.”

Rikki jogged the pistol on her arm. “Take the gun, idiot. It’s symbolic.” She waited until Tony put his hand on her pistol and then walked away without looking back. “Elz, what are you doing here? Come on, girl, let’s go home. It’s this way. There’s a quinjet on the north end of the island. If someone hasn’t gotten her out, Jessica Jones is in there. Boy, that was fun, I’ll tell you. Rumlow wanted me to kill her if I saw her, so I just didn’t look. Dumb-ass handlers.” Chattering the whole way, Rikki walked next to her friend, not looking at her father or Tony.

Bucky scowled, then pinched the bridge of his nose and twisted. With a crack and a groaned exhalation, he reset his nose. “That’s twice today she’s broken my damn face. Startin’ to piss me off.”

Tony ejected the pistol’s clip and checked to make sure the chamber was empty. “She’s nineteen,
hon; you can’t exactly send her to bed without dessert.”

Bucky laughed, pained, but it was still a laugh. He touched his ear. “Someone tell me that you guys managed to bag Rumlow?”

“Nice of you to rejoin us, Winter Soldier,” Clint snarked. “What have you been doing, taking the scenic route? Yeah, Rumlow’s eating dirt under Cap’s boot. It’s a glorious sight. I took pictures for the warroom. I think I’ll get them framed.”

“Natasha wants video if there’s punching,” Tony said. “Tell me someone got that.” He slung an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, wishing he could feel the warmth of Bucky’s body. “Guess we should get back down there.”

Bucky grabbed Rollins by the hair. “Come on, asshole, let’s go.”

The Avengers had done a pretty good job of containment; only six dead and the rest corralled, with Hulk keeping them pinned in like he was playing a massive game of whack-a-mole. Hulk saw them coming and gave one of his wide, green-toothed grins. “FUN TOYS!”

Bucky shook his head. “It’s almost enough to make you feel sorry for Hydra. Almost.”
Natasha

“So, reconfirmed that Hydra is an entire cargo ship full of dicks,” Natasha said, shutting the door the the kids’ room behind her. “Where’s my diamond bracelet, Tony? Since I still can’t have vodka.”

“You know the diamond industry is just a massive scam, right? Stashing stones to drive up market value in order to get wealthy off slave labor and artificial demands? I can make you a diamond in my lab in like two weeks,” Tony protested.

“Does this face look like I care about that? They’re pretty and I want them,” Natasha said.

“Your face is perfect, as always,” Tony said. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a round, velvet box. “Here. One diamond bracelet.”

Well, that was worth not being pissed off long enough to open the catch and peer into the box with delight. “Oh, my word, Tony,” Natasha gasped. It was lovely; dotted with oval diamonds, the white gold base was shaped like a tree branch with ruby and sapphire delicate blossoms. In the very center was a solid black diamond cut like a spider. “Oh. My word.”

“Glad you like it,” Tony said. “Bucky’s drinking your vodka, so I’ll have to get more. Gearing himself up for this. Which sucks.”

“She won’t be ready for a while,” Natasha said. “She’s only been triggered like that a few times in her life; they’ve been using Jaime to control her instead, so it’s… it was bad. She’ll need a few hours, maybe longer, before she’s ready to let him trigger her intentionally.”

Tony shuddered. “Yeah, things I don’t want to think about right now. Moving on. Was there anything useful in it?”

“Aside from making me want to go back to my roots, break into a maximum security prison designed specifically to keep powered villains in check, and commit a little bit of social justice? Maybe? There exists the possibility that there’s another Snowmelt out there; Rishka’s word… third? If she’s the third survivor, the third one to live long enough to require compliance commands? There’s the brother she knows died on a mission, but… where’s the second son? Or daughter?”

“Great,” Tony said, stretching the word out obscenely. “This is going to be a thing, I see. Every few years we end up with a new supersoldier.”

“Gotta catch ’em all,” Natasha said.

“I am totally telling Bucky you called him a pocket monster,” Tony said.

***

Tony

As it turned out, Rikki recovered better from having her words reset than Bucky did from having to reset them. Which Tony could have told him; Tony still had nightmares from Bucky’s birthday,
where everyone else was feeling jubilant and celebratory and Tony had wanted nothing more than to find a warm dark space to climb into and die. He hadn’t bothered to warn Bucky. No amount of warning would help. Sometimes anticipating a bad thing just made it that much worse, and Tony couldn’t imagine many things worse than watching someone you care about slip into compliance on your word.

He couldn’t say much of anything to help, either; Bucky already knew all the things that Tony could say, and Tony already knew they didn’t really help. So he mostly just tried to spend as much time close to Bucky as possible, to just be there. Bucky was working up to talking about it.

In the meantime, Tony did most of his work on a tablet while sitting on the couch, rather than down in the workshop.

Workshop Day with Jaime, however, was still upheld. Something about kids and routines and stability, blah blah, whatever. Tony roped Natasha into coming to hang out with Bucky so he wouldn’t be alone, and took Jaime down to the ‘shop to continue their latest project.

Jaime sighed and dug underneath the cast he wore with the stylus. “Tony?”

“Yeah, short stack?” Tony looked up. “You lose that stylus in there, you’re going to regret it.”

Jaime glowered. “It itches,” he complained. “Stupid, outdated biological impulses. Don’t need to stimulate blood circulation when we have immobilization devices to heal broken bones.”

Tony grinned. “You can’t expect the plodding pace of evolution to keep up with human ingenuity,” he pointed out. “At least you still have an accelerated healing rate.”

“Dr. Cho says based on x-rays, I have to wear it for another ten days,” Jaime said this with the air of someone for whom ten days is an eternity of time, centuries or millennia.

“The horror,” Tony said drily. He peered over Jaime’s shoulder. “This is... not a lot of progress on these specifications,” he observed. “Are you stuck, or distracted?”

Jaime heaved a sigh. “This trainee is working on a logic versus emotion dilemma. Sorry.”

“Distracted,” Tony translated. “Hey, it happens, everyone’s got an off day now and then.” It was not the reaction Howard would have had. Tony shoved that thought aside; unlike Tony at the same age, Jaime was already highly self-motivated. An occasional distraction wouldn’t hurt. Maybe it was even healthy. Tony wouldn’t know. “I’d offer to help, but emotional dilemmas are really not my forte.”

“Perhaps, you could weigh in on logic’s behalf,” Jaime pointed out. “Observations show that each side deserves advocation.”

“Mm. Let’s hear it, then.”

Jaime stabbed under the cast again with the stylus, marshalling his thoughts. “Rikki is adapting well, to autonomy. Which is not to say the trainee has not observed her making very poor decisions, of late. But she seems. Lighter? She has always cared for Sasha, for me. Now it seems less of an obligation, and more a thing she does because she wants to.”

“Logically speaking, I have to agree,” Tony said. He leaned one elbow on the table, watching the kid carefully. Jaime was very guarded, but occasionally allowed his expressions to slip.

“For Rikki, the process of achieving autonomy was terrible,” Jaime continued. “But the results have been ’worth it.’ She does not wake at night as often and try to hide from us. She no longer has an
illogical devotion to Phoenix Soldier, Brock Rumlow. These are things considered of value, and next to them, the emotional trauma of the event faded from her memory.”

“Sounds about right. The human psyche is pretty resilient, really. So what’s the dilemma?”

Jaime lowered his eyes for a moment, studying the high-tech cast that Cho had put on him. It wasn’t like the plaster casts of Tony’s youth, where friends could sign it and do artwork, but Jaime had rigged a holographic display bracelet. He tapped this, bringing up Clint’s magnificently weird caricature of Natasha chasing Jaime and Clint around the Tower after they’d glitterbombed her. “Father is the dilemma,” Jaime said. “His recovery from the event is concerning.”

“It’s harder to watch someone you love be in pain than to be in pain yourself,” Tony said. Which Jaime already knew, having spent most of his young life as Rikki’s literal whipping boy. “It’s even harder when you have to cause that pain, for their own good. And harder still in this case for Bucky, who has personal knowledge of what that pain feels like.” Tony gave Jaime a small smile. “He’s... coping. He’ll get better. It’s worth it to him, too.”

“Logically it is his duty, as our father, to take this task on himself.” Jaime heaved a huge sigh and when it was over, he seemed smaller than ever.

“Emotionally, too,” Tony pointed out. “I’d think.”

“Rikki would say it is my own fault,” Jaime said, “that I heard something I should not have. That Father did not mean me to know. I’m not as strong, not as fast. My stamina and healing are not as great. This has always been true; I have combatted this weakness with knowledge. With mathematics. With understanding. So... I spy. Rikki says I shouldn’t do that anymore.”

Tony snorted. “Kid, if you’re having an etiquette problem, I am definitely not the one you want to talk to. You’d be better off talking to Barton.”

“Father thinks we’re broken. Rikki and I.”

Tony didn’t bother trying to deny it. “We’re all a little broken, here,” he said instead. “Hydra’s fault, not yours.”

“No question of blame, but fault doesn’t fix it, either,” Jaime said. “I... the trainee does not want. Ever. I don’t want him to look at me like that. Not open. I don’t want him to see that.”

“Ah,” Tony sighed. “Yeah, okay, I see what you’re saying.” It was a fair point. It was going to be an even harder punch to Bucky’s gut to make this sweet kid fall into compliance.

“With Father’s recovery so...” Jaime shrugged, like he didn’t quite know what to call the depression Bucky was dealing with. “Solutions to dilemma are required.”

Suck it up and deal was the solution Tony had to hand, but he hadn’t anticipated Jaime’s reluctance into his own calculations. “Got any candidates?”

Jaime stretched out his hand and laid it over Tony’s wrist. “I trust you.”

Tony stared at him. He couldn’t possibly mean... “You trust me to, what, figure out a solution?”

“Logic,” Jaime said, talking faster now, words almost tripping over themselves. “You stand in the same role as Father; protector, mentor, parent. You’ve done it before. You understand the needs. Emotions. I trust you. Solution?”
Jesus, if there was anything Tony *never* wanted to do again, it was read out someone’s compliance codes and watch their eyes drain into emotionless compliance. But if he could spare *Bucky* that, if it was Jaime’s choice...

He’d told Bucky he wanted this. This... family. To belong to Bucky and his children, together. That meant taking on the shit jobs, too, didn’t it. Tony closed his eyes and sighed. “Yeah, kiddo. Solution. I’ll do it.”

Jaime put his arms around Tony’s neck -- more like being scaled like a tree by an enthusiastic monkey than a hug, but close enough. “Thank you.”

Tony wrapped his arms around Jaime’s slender torso. “You’re welcome.”

Worth it.

***

*Bucky*

“*Your work has been a gift to mankind. You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time...*”

Bucky jerked awake, still, silent. The room was quiet, dark. JARVIS projected a quick holo on the ceiling with Bucky’s current location, the date and time. Both Tony and Bucky had needed that comfort, more than once, remembering where they were, and when.

In Bucky’s case, sometimes *who* he was.

It was strange to think that Tony could sleep, the way Bucky’s heart was racing in his ears, the way his breath heaved in and out of his lungs. Bucky checked his hands, twisting them this way and that in the faint light. No blood. He was clean.

“*Wipe him, start again.*”

Closing his eyes didn’t shut the memories away. Everything was more vivid under his eyelids; Pierce’s anger, Rumlow’s mocking grin, the terrified techs, the medical staff who were shaking their head over the man Bucky had punched -- bone splinters in the brain, nothing they could do. Rumlow drawing his sidearm and putting the man out of his pain. The med-staff didn’t like that, it was messy.

“*Send the girl to Maputo. We’re behind schedule.*”

Bucky drew his knees up, resting his forehead on them. Had he heard that right? It was difficult to remember, that day had been such a maelstrom of emotion, punishment, remembering. Fighting.

“*The man on the bridge, who was he?*”

Bucky laced his hands behind his head, pulled himself into a tighter ball, shivering.

“*Bucky?*”

“*Who the hell is Bucky?*”

A touch on his shoulder, hot. He wrenched away, instincts screaming *threat*, heartrate spiking, hands coming up to defend--

Tony was frozen, hand still outstretched, eyes wide and dark in the dim light. “Babe? You with me?”
“Send the girl to Maputo. We’re behind schedule.” He coughed, threw Pierce’s voice out of his mind, no, he didn’t want… Soldier has discretion. Bucky blinked a few times, then looked up.

“Tony? What the… Jesus. Fuck. I thought I was done with this shit.” He shuddered.

Tony made a face, reached out a little farther, offering, but didn’t otherwise move. “Nightmares again?”


Tony pushed himself upright. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, and started straightening the blankets that Bucky’s writhing had twisted and tangled. “What’s in Maputo?”

“I… Rikki might have been,” Bucky said. “I… god, why am I still having these fucking dreams? Soldier has fucking discretion and I would like to have just. Three fucking days in a row where I can sleep, is that too much to ask?” He was still shaking as he thumbed through the downloads that JARVIS displayed for him.

“It takes a while,” Tony said. “I had nightmares for weeks after... After. It’ll settle again.”

“Here,” Bucky said, shoving the glowing document at Tony. “She was there, this political assassination; shifted the whole election cycle. I was supposed to do it, but I ran into trouble with Steve. Christ, they put her out there? She was fucking seventeen years old.” Bucky rubbed his eyes as if trying to scrub the memories right out of his head.

“Hydra are assholes,” Tony said. “We knew this.” He grabbed the screen and began manipulating it with fingers that flickered almost too fast for Bucky’s eyes to follow, flipping sub-documents off to the side to be tagged and sorted. “We’ll run this down.”

Did Rikki even know that it was because her father was screwing up (mission failure) that she’d been sent on such a dangerous op? And why the fuck was he feeling guilty about Not Killing Steve so that he could have taken a shot at some politician in Africa? Gyah! Bucky twitched again, staring at his hands. He hadn’t hurt anyone today. Not today.

“What a thing to feel,” he muttered. “Stupid, useless…” He turned his hands again. No blood.

“You… you shouldn’t have to deal with this. One of these nights, I’m gonna hurt you. I’m not going to mean to, but Tony…” Bucky buried his face in his hands.

“Worth the risk,” Tony said firmly. The mattress shifted and Tony’s hands were on his, warm, gently pulling them away. “You’re not going to hurt me,” he said. “You’re okay.”

Shivering, Bucky let Tony draw him into Tony’s embrace. “I know what they did to us, I know it. So why do I still feel so fucking guilty about not knowing who they were talking about? I remember not knowing. The man on the bridge, who was he?”

“I can’t answer that, honey,” Tony said, dragging his fingers through Bucky’s hair, scratching at the scalp. “Why do I still feel guilty for all the shit Obie did with my company when I wasn’t looking? Guilt never makes sense.”

“Tryin’ to be grateful that I sleep some nights,” Bucky said. “Cryo wasn’t dreamless an’ I didn’t wake up from it bein’ anything other than fucking exhausted. Leastways, now I get coffee.” He uttered a shaky, tiny laugh. “Wish I could do this quietly. No sense both of us losin’ sleep, babe.”

Tony pulled back far enough to give him an unimpressed look. “I am the champion of operating on minimal sleep, I’ll have you know. At least this is a better reason than I usually have.” He kissed
Bucky’s forehead. “And I don’t like the idea of you taking it on alone.”

Bucky checked his hands again. No blood. He was clean. “Ug. Right,” he said. “I ain’t goin’ back to sleep now. You want to get some more rest, babe? Or I might make syrniki. It’s almost dawn, Steve’ll be up in half an hour, the relentless early riser.”

Tony grinned. “Feed me. I’ll make coffee.”

“My hero,” Bucky said. He leaned over, kissed Tony’s cheek and climbed out of bed. It would never be all right; what had been done to them was monstrous and they’d created monsters. But sometimes, it was better.

He looked back at Tony, sleepy and tousled and gorgeous and glorious. Sometimes, it was a lot better.

***

Bruce

The day before the wedding, and Bruce wasn’t sure why he wasn’t more nervous. Natasha had not wanted to make a big deal of things, but she’d also insisted that they get married before the baby had made a more obvious curve in her belly. As it was, she was avoiding mirrors like she owed them money. (He wanted to smash them, to destroy anything and everything that caused her pain.)

He was in his lab, but he wasn’t doing anything, just sort of idly staring at the chemical formula that now both Hank and Tony were working on. It was going… well. Surprisingly so, but he didn’t think it would be ready in time. Maybe… after the baby was born. That was going to be safer anyway.

“Dr. Banner?” He turned and saw Jessica Jones leaning in the door to the lab.

“Come in.” Unusual. Jessica spent a lot of time trying not to be particularly close to Bruce. Not that he blamed her; a little tracking and research had given him the knowledge that she’d been in Harlem the night he and Blonsky had their rather famous duel, and her ex-boyfriend, Cage, had been a resident in that area. The destruction caused by both Hulk and Abomination had been widespread and devastating in an area where the residents had very little extra money and investors were often unwilling to take risks.

His vision went green and he closed his eyes for a moment, pushing back the surge of fury and fear that surrounded memories of that night. When the beast had subsided, he opened them again to lift his eyebrows at Jessica.

“I have a wedding present for you,” she started. Then she blinked and corrected herself, “Well, more for Natasha than you, although… surprises! You don’t like surprises.”

“Generally a true statement,” Bruce said, not entirely failing not to smile.

“So… because I don’t really want to shock you, and… trust me, this has been a long time coming… I have a special guest to bring to your wedding.”

Bruce frowned. Natasha had been very clear on her wishes. Friends only. She had a very small group of them and almost all of them were living in the Tower on a regular basis. She’d put through several urgent and increasingly nasty phone calls until Nick Fury had agreed to drag his ass out of whatever dark cave he’d been hiding in and not just show up, but show up to officiate. (How dare he hesitate?)
Fury had suggested giving away the bride, as in his long list of career options and skills, legal officiant made for some interesting paperwork for a man who was supposed to be dead.

“You’re not my father,” Natasha had said, and even Bruce had raised an eyebrow at that, since everyone knew how Natasha felt about Fury. “And I belong to no man. No one. Not now, not ever. You cannot give me away and Bruce cannot accept me into his possession. That’s not happening, symbolic or otherwise.” Bruce had felt a little like cheering at that.

Jessica was still watching him, cautious but smiling. “Pretty sure Nat already invited everyone she wanted to be here,” Bruce pointed out. “There’s like twenty people, tops.”

“Well, now there’s twenty-one,” Jessica said. She gestured, checked Bruce’s facial expressions very carefully. “Please don’t freak out, okay. I don’t know any other way to tell you this, so…”

A thin man stepped into the room. He was balding on top, and wearing a charcoal gray suit with a blue tie. He was a little broader in the shoulders than Bruce remembered, and older. The wrinkles around his eyes were deeper. Bruce’s sensitive ears picked up on the faintest mechanical whine and his eyes dropped immediately to the gloved left hand.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Banner,” Phil Coulson said. “It’s been a while. Good to see that you’re well.”

“Agent Coulson—”

“Technically, Director Coulson now,” Phil said, that tiny little smile twitching at his mouth. “Consultant Jones threatened me with dire, bodily harm if I didn’t come to wish you and Romanov well. Which would not have swayed me, but Jones is particularly sneaky. She enlisted the aid of most of the women on my team, Agents May, Simmons, Johnson, and Morse. And then she talked to Fitz. I gave in under that. Never let Leo Fitz become disappointed in you. It’s a heart-rending situation.”

“How did.. Who else.. What…” Bruce was so floored that even the Hulk didn’t know how to respond.

“Steve’s known since January,” Jessica said. “During the incident in Michigan. I knew about two months after that, when I started working with S.H.I.E.L.D. for the recovery of captured Inhumans.”

Oh, there was the Hulk’s rage. “You have been alive this --”

“Technically, I did die,” Coulson interrupted, even though he must have seen the tic in Bruce’s jaw, the way Bruce’s eyes had begun to ripple with color. “I was dead. Very dead. Exceptionally dead. The you don’t want to ask any more questions about this right now kind of dead. And Fury had me brought back with an experimental contingency that had been set aside in case we lost an Avenger. Personally, I am still of the opinion that he fed me that line to flatter me into taking on the Directorship of S.H.I.E.L.D. while he got to pretend to be dead for a while, but that’s hardly relevant.”

Bruce swallowed down the anger. Natasha, he reminded himself. Natasha would know how to respond to this... appropriately. “Glad you’re feeling better?” Bruce tried. That got a reaction. Coulson actually laughed. Impressive. Bruce wasn’t sure he’d ever heard the sound before. “Especially since Clint is going to kill you.” Even more than Natasha.

The smile fell off Coulson’s face like someone had wiped it off with glass cleaner. “Yeah. You know the worst thing about being dead is how to tell someone you’re not, anymore. And the longer I kept not telling people, the easier it was to keep... Not telling people. Not to mention the whole
Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. thing, which is a pretty high-risk job. I’ve almost died eight more times this year alone. And went insane for a while. And lost my arm.”

_Excuses_. Bruce couldn’t entirely push that one aside. He took a breath and allowed himself one pointed comment: “I’m not the one you need to make excuses to. Nat’s faked her own death before and the hormones have been making her especially sentimentally lately, so she’ll probably let you off light. But Clint and Darcy go to your grave every year. If I were you, I’d go talk to him tonight. Nat will be pissed if he punches you out during the wedding.”

Jessica snorted. “Oh, come on, it’s not a real wedding reception until someone gets slug in the face. Or falls in the punch bowl. Or fucks one of the bridesmaids in the coat closet.”

“I have obviously been missing out on the real weddings,” Phil said. “I’ll… go see Clint.”

“Good plan.”

As it turned out, Clint showed up at the wedding looking calm and at peace. And no one -- not even the Hulk -- said a word about the dark bruise on Coulson’s chin.

***

_Steve_

Steve would rather face an entire squadron of Doombots stark naked than a gaggle of reporters that thought they had a juicy morsel in their teeth. _Especially_ when they were actually right for a change.

"I'm sorry," Natasha said with her knife-sharpening smile, "I must have misheard. For a moment there it sounded like you were implying that I cheated on my husband."

"Of course not," the reporter said, "but we do have this clip on file of Dr. Banner saying that he couldn't father children. I was just curious if he'd found a way around that difficulty. I'm sure thousands of sterile couples around the world would be interested in that solution." Damn, she was good. Steve made a mental note to have JARVIS do a background check on that one. She was too sharp to provoke.

Natasha's smile wasn't getting any warmer. "The use of a donor is not a new solution, I'm afraid."

"A very well-vetted donor, I would presume," the reporter said, not missing a beat.

"For obvious reasons," Natasha said, with far more calm than Steve would've been able to muster, "our donor prefers to remain anonymous."

Tony wandered over with that casual gait that meant he knew he was on stage. "How's tricks?"

"Mr. Stark, it's been mentioned in multiple venues that Agent Romanov's baby looks remarkably like you," the reporter said brightly.

"Has it?" Tony looked over the top of his sunglasses at the reporter. "I thought she was remarkably attractive, for a baby.'

"Some are even speculating that you might be the father," the reporter pressed.

Tony outright snorted. "If the fans want to ship me with Natasha, I can't stop them, but that doesn't mean I want to read the fic. Look, I'm sure you're aware that the Avengers have acquired a number of new charges, over the past year. We're all still adjusting, we're all helping each other out. But as
far as I'm concerned, Zinobiya's father is the man who has to take her when she starts to smell. Which is Dr. Banner. Now, if you'll excuse us." He put an arm around Natasha's shoulders and she let him steer her away.

Steve let out a sigh of relief. Someday, the press was going to figure out that Tony actually was Zoya's biological father, and that would be a hell of a fracas. But it seemed they were safe, for now.

"Captain Rogers!"

Or not.

Steve plastered on his press smile (not quite as polished as Tony's, but he did all right) and turned to face the reporter. "Ma'am?" They hated being called ma'am, he'd been told.

"How do you feel about the recent influx of children among the Avengers?"

"They're great," he said truthfully. "Couldn't ask for a better bunch."

"So you like children, Captain?"

Steve forcibly restrained himself from rolling his eyes. As if he'd be dumb enough to say he didn't like kids on camera, even if he didn't. "Of course I do." He drew a breath to expand -- something obnoxiously patriotic about children being the future, something long-winded enough to let the others finish making their escapes.

But the reporter beat him to it. "How wonderful! Do you think we can expect to see some little Lieutenant Americas soon?"

Steve stared at her for a moment, his mouth half-open, before forcibly snapping his mouth shut. "That's…" None of your damn business, he wanted to growl, but Pepper would take one of her pointy shoes to him if he caused yet another press nightmare. "…something that Ms. Jones and I need to discuss."

And then he fled before she could say anything else.

Of course, that didn’t save him from having to run the truly daunting gauntlet that was the assembled Avengers, once they were all safely back behind closed doors.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” Steve grumbled. “I’d like to see any of you assholes do better. At least it took the heat off Na--” The words dried up in his throat as Jess came into the room.

She had Sasha on her hip, because even though he could walk pretty well, now, he still preferred to be carried if he could arrange it, and since he was still about the cutest damn thing any of them had ever seen, he usually seemed to arrange it.

Jess caught Steve’s eye before he could look away and raised her eyebrows. “Somethin’ we need to discuss, cowboy?”

“Ooooooooooh, Cap’s in trouuuuuuuublllllllle,” Clint whisper-sang, which set off Tony and Bucky into hysterical, half-suppressed giggles, like the bunch of mental ten-year-olds they were, but even Sam was grinning behind his hand.

Jess rolled her eyes. “It’s like living in a damn nursery,” she complained. She set Sasha down. “Go play with Jaime,” she told him, then cocked her head at Steve. “Come on.”
A fresh wash of laughter broke over Steve and pushed him out of the room like a wave washing a shell up onto the sand.

“So, kids, huh?” she said when they were enclosed in the privacy of their suite.

Steve grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve thought about it, some,” he admitted.

“Yeah? What kind of thoughts?” Jess looked at him, then looked away, busying herself with tidying up the files strewn across her desk.

Steve took a breath, and let it out. They were just thoughts, he reminded himself. “Uh. Bucky’s kids got me started thinking. The serum passes down, apparently,” he pointed out. “So any kids I have probably won’t have the health problems that I was born with. But the mother--” He looked at Jess, but she was still avoiding his gaze. “--would have to be enhanced or powered herself, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Jess agreed neutrally.

“And you know, downside -- any kid of mine is going to be a target, just by virtue of being mine. And serum or not, it would be a good while before they could defend themselves. It’s... a concern.” He chewed on his lip. “But between Bucky’s kids and Zoya, it looks like... Like the whole team is on board to help. Babysitting and protection and... whatever.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot,” Jess said.

Steve shrugged. “I guess. I mean, how could I not? We’ve got Sasha underfoot half the time, and Jaime lurking around the common areas like a ghost anytime he isn’t in Tony’s workshop, and now Zoya, so. Yeah.”

“Forget the pros and cons,” Jess said, finally looking straight at him. “Do you want kids, Rogers?”

“I... yes. Probably obviously, or I wouldn’t have put so much time into considering the pros and cons.” And what did it mean that Jess apparently hadn’t been thinking about it?

“I’m kinda amused that you went straight from panicking about me getting pregnant to wanting kids. I mean, don’t you have a fulcrum point or something?” Jess asked. Jess had a couple of different argument modes; pissed off and yelling, dodging trouble, and making a list. Whenever Jess had her I’m making a list face on, it was rarely any good for anyone in the nearby vicinity. Steve couldn’t quite tell if she was there, just yet, but it sure seemed to be edging in that direction.

“I’m not saying now,” Steve said. “I mean, I wasn’t even gonna bring it up, except that reporter decided to jump right into things that aren’t any of her business. I just...” She was staring at him hard, and even though he was probably getting into trouble, he couldn’t help but think how gorgeous she was, the contrast of that pale skin and black hair, those big, sharp eyes. “You have to admit, we’d make an awfully pretty baby.”

“I remember thinking you were trouble the first time I saw you, cowboy,” Jess said, looking away, her cheeks going pink.

Steve grinned. “You wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Jess said. “You’re a mess, Steve Rogers, but you’re my mess. I think my parents would have liked you. My mom used to say I had no ambition, but I think you’d prove that wrong. Hmm. All-American baby, huh? I’m not saying yes, and certainly not right now. And there’s a certain process that I’d kinda like to put in the proper order. You might not have noticed, but I get more hate mail around here than anyone but Tony. Lotta fangirls out there don’t think I deserve you.
That’ll get worse, if you don’t stick a ring on it, first.”

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph but Steve was going to burn to a cinder on the spot. “I was— That is, I wouldn’t— I mean, yes’m.”

Jess spread her hand out, just under her eyes, and shook her head. “You are… Damn, cowboy, you’ve been dating me for over a year and you still get all flustered. Clearly I am not traumatizing you enough.”

Steve stepped closer and curled his hands around her hips. “You’re welcome to try again, sugar.”

***

Rikki

Rikki had never seen a baby so tiny before; by the time her brothers had been delivered to her, they had been a few months old. Sasha had been somewhat larger, but Rikki believed they’d been roughly the same age. Jaime had been slender, quiet, with huge eyes that tracked her movements from the moment Sarkissian laid him in Rikki’s arms.

Zinobiya Maria Romanov-Banner was itsy. Much too small for the enormous name they’d given to her. And red-faced. And yowly. By the motherland, Rikki’d never heard a baby scream that loud.

She had a bright shock of red hair, marred just over her left eye by a patch of white. That red was the one hint of her mother’s heritage. The rest of her was pure, one hundred percent Tony fucking Stark. Including the loudness.

Rikki leaned over the squalling infant. “<You should not exist,>” she said, low and angry. The baby uttered a plaintive wail and batted her tiny fists at Rikki. “<And you’re not my sister. No matter what my idiot father decides to do with your idiot father.>”

Rikki was all packed. She’d set herself one last mission, to watch over Natasha until the baby was born. Some part of Rikki had hoped desperately for some sort of proof that the baby wasn’t Stark’s child, but no, there was nothing of Banner in this baby, nor even of Barton.

She’d done everything she’d set out to do; brought her brothers somewhere that they could be safe, and loved. Sasha wouldn’t even remember her in a few years, and Jaime… well, she would miss him, but he had Stark. And Father. He’d get over it. He wouldn’t have to wake up in the darkness, terrified that he’d have her blood on his hands.

Rikki wasn’t a child any longer. It was time to go.

“You can pick her up,” Natasha suggested, stepping up behind her, “if you want to.”

“She’s no family of mine,” Rikki said, but she didn’t move, still staring down at the baby, who’d stopped crying as soon as Natasha entered the room. Natasha lifted her child, cradling the baby in the crook of her arms.

“No, but she could be,” Natasha said. “There are many kinds of families. But the best kinds are the ones we pick for ourselves.” She offered Rikki the infant girl and Rikki’s arms automatically reached out to support Zinobiya’s head.

“She’s very pretty,” Rikki said, which was true, much as it pained her to admit it. Stark’s features suited her, the rich brown eyes already dark and huge.
“Thank you,” Natasha said. “It’s a lot more work to build a whole human being from a tiny cell than
I thought. I’m pleased to know I did a good job at it.” She gave Rikki a searching glance. “You
know, I never knew any of my family. If I had brothers or sisters, I never knew it. I was taken and
placed in the Red Room before I could form any bonds at all. The first time I formed an attachment
to a person that lasted, it was your father. I was about your age, first time I met him.”

_I would rather have you, as a parent_, Rikki thought, bitter. Why could Father not have remained in
love with this woman instead, this powerful, amazing creature.

“Do you know why it is that I love Bruce?”

Rikki glanced up, surprised by the question. She hadn’t thought about it.

“I surround myself with warriors,” Natasha said. “I am one, myself. And nearly everyone I know is a
fighter. And here’s this one man, this one generous, forgiving soul, who doesn’t want to fight.
Because he knows he’ll win.”

There was a message in those words, Rikki knew. She’d been around Natasha too much now to
think that there wasn’t some hidden meaning, some lesson she was supposed to draw. Maybe it was
simply that, if it were peace Natasha was after, Rikki’s father was not the man who could give it to
her.

“But we can still be family,” Natasha said. “This, this here, this is my family.” She lifted her hands to
indicate Avenger’s Tower and the entirety of the small world contained within. “The bonds you
choose are the strongest bonds there are.”

“Mmm.” Rikki couldn’t quite deny the pang there, as she handed the baby back to Natasha. A
neutral sound. _Maybe. I’ll think about it. But probably not._

She nodded a quick farewell, which made the last of the Tower’s residents that she wanted to see
before she left; she wasn’t actually saying goodbye, she didn’t want to explain herself over and over
again, didn’t want to be weighed down with the ordeal. She’d started with Clint, bringing him a box
of chocolate peppermint Twinkies and a few packs of grape pop-rocks, and he’d tried to cheer her up
by showing her the looping video he’d made of Captain Rogers bouncing Rumlow off a tree before
stomping his face into the dirt.

_It had_ made her smile, a bit; especially knowing she’d never have to report to that sort of duty again.
There was also pain. She’d thought herself so very much in love and come to find out that all of it
was implanted. Stronger still, had been the sense of displacement when she looked at Captain Rogers
and his woman and felt… nothing. The Captain was a good looking man, but that was all. There was
no tug of desire, there was no need to impress. He was simply someone who’d been kind to her.

Had anything she’d felt been real? Overlaid with her missions and her protocols; she couldn’t sort
them out. She needed to get away, get some distance. There was a safe house in Reston, Virginia,
where she could stay a while, give herself time to decide what she wanted to do with her life. Now
that she had a life. Now that she could make decisions.

Jaime was in Tony’s workshop. He’d taken one look at her in the morning and he’d known. She saw
that in his eyes before he even opened up his mouth. But he didn’t throw blame at her, or anger, or
even try to convince her to stay. He’d just said, “Good luck, Rikki.”

She wasn’t going to stop and see Father before she left. She’d been enough of a disappointment to
him. She wasn’t sure if it would hurt worse if he tried to convince her to stay, or if he didn’t. Either
way, it was out of his hands. She went back to the suite to grab her bag. There wasn’t much, a few
So, *of course* he was sitting on her bed when she walked in the room.

“Father,” she said, because she was stuck now, having this conversation.

“Rishka.”

And he was going to make her say it, too. How could he claim he didn’t know her for her entire life? He did absolutely everything that was pre-designed to annoy her.

“I’m going, now,” she said, reaching for her bag’s strap.

“I’m not here to stop you,” Father said. “Soldiers have discretion.”

“I was never meant to stay here,” she said. “I came here to fill a mission. It’s done. It’s over. We’re done.”

Father grabbed her wrist, held it. She could have twisted free easily enough, but didn’t. “The mission may be over. But you and I? We will never be done, we will never be *over*. You’re my daughter. Forget the end of the line… I will go on ‘til the end of *time* for you. You don’t have to stay; I won’t even ask you to. But. You’re *welcome* to stay. I’d *like* you to stay. And there will always be a place for you, here. If you go now, you can always come home. *Always.*”

Rikki didn’t know what to say to that. She shook her head and the bag swung against her hip as Father released her hand.

“Here,” he said, handing her what looked like a cellphone.

“What’s this?”

“A gift. From your family. Her name’s Friday. Once you get where you’re going, settle in someplace specific, she’ll walk you through setting her up permanently. She’s an AI, like JARVIS. She won’t report on you, or anything. Just help keep you safe. Let you get in touch with us, if you need us. Or if you just want to say hi. Tony made her for you.”

Rikki blinked. “He did what?”

“You don’t have to start her up,” Father said. “She’s hibernating. We… didn’t want you to be alone. Even if you don’t want to be around any of us.”

Rikki started to shake. Her eyes burned. She blinked, trying to ease the stinging, but it just got worse. “Father, I…”

Father curled his metal hand around the back of her neck and kissed her forehead. “I’ll miss you, if you go. But *soldier has discretion*, Rikki Barnes. You can go, if you want to. If you need to.”

She started to cry.

“Or, you can stay.”

Rikki dropped the bag and threw herself into Father’s arms. “I want to stay.”

“Oh, thank Christ,” Father said.

They stood that way for a long moment, then Father let her go. “Let me help you unpack,” he said.
He unzipped her bag and threw her clothes haphazardly around the room. “There, unpacked. Buy you an ice cream?”

“I’d like that.”

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Chapter End Notes

Natasha's bracelet is inspired by this piece.

And that's... that it? This fic is done? Wow.

Don't worry, Kitchen fans, there's more to come! Friday, we've got a little bit of PWP fluff called "Voice Activated" to celebrate the end of this fic, and then next week, we'll start posting "Proposal of Doom." If you think you can figure out what it's about from the title, I've just got to say... Well, you might be right.

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End Notes

As always, please come and scream at us on tumblr: 27dragons and tisfan!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!