**Born in Darkness**

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**Born in Darkness**

by [Borble](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Borble)

**Summary**

“What are you thinking about?”

Tony nearly flew out of his chair as a soft voice startled the ever-loving fuck out of him; he held his hand over his chest as he spun around in his chair to come face to face with the little Banner. The mustard-yellow knit jumper she wore was way too big on her and engulfed her tiny frame as she stared up at him with wide, sparkling green eyes. The Marc Jacobs glasses she donned were too large for her small face and the round frames only seemed to make her green eyes bigger than they already were; in all honestly, Tony thought she looked like a huge dork, but in an endearing sort of way. She wore a light pair of skinny jeans and much to Tony's disapproval, her feet were bare, which he was certain was some kind of health violation in his laboratory. Her wild curls were piled on top of her coocked head in a
somewhat organized bun and Stark eyed the little sunflowers and daisies that had been tucked securely into the bun.

A ray of sunshine, is what Tony, and everyone else, would best describe her as.
The Suffering

The first time Steve sees her, it's after the battle of New York; she's covered in rubble and nearly dead.

Twenty six hours—that's how long she was trapped under the remains of a fallen building.

“She's missing,” Dr. Banner had whispered desolately, “My daughter...”

He could still hear the haunted tone of Dr. Banner's voice after the 'other guy' went back to its resting place and he returned to his normal self; it took a few minutes for Steve to understand what he was talking about. At first he thought Bruce was delirious after the battle, maybe he had gone into shock after everything they had all witnessed? Dr. Banner had never once mentioned anything about him having a daughter and it wasn't until Natasha showed up with the rest of the Avengers and a picture of the doctor's daughter that Steve realized their mission was far from over. The first day, Natasha and Clint had been the ones to search for her, but it was to no avail and they came back empty handed, much to Dr. Banner's dismay. Steve wasn't fully recovered when he insisted on helping, but he didn't care in that moment. While Steve hadn't met the girl, he knew that she meant the world to Bruce Banner and he had to do something to help find her, especially after everything Bruce had gone through for the team. So he inspected the photograph that Bruce kept near to him at all times; lush green eyes stared right back at him and Steve could see the stunning gold flecks in the irises. She posed happily with Dr. Banner—her dad—and a large grin adorned her gentle-looking features. Her dark brown hair, which Steve could tell she had attempted to straighten, was a kinky type of curly at the ends and was slightly frizzy at her roots. Her skin was darker than Dr. Banner's—a very beautiful bronze color and Steve couldn't help but to think that her mother must have been very pretty as well.

“Her name is Marcella,” Bruce had said frantically as Steve grabbed a flashlight and attached his shield securely to his back, “She's really shy but if you use her nickname, Marcie, she'll know that you're a friend of mine, that we know each other. She had classes at Columbia yesterday but I... I don't know where she is.”

Despite the dire circumstances, Steve smiled softly, “I'll do everything I can in my power to bring her back to you, I promise.”

Natasha stood behind Steve and gave a small nod, “Don't worry Dr. Banner, I'm sure she's okay.”

And with that, the pair made their way down the rubbished street together in search for the Banner girl. They were quiet, as they hadn't much time to really talk one-on-one before the battle they had all just endured, but Steve liked her and definitely held a great amount of respect for the SHIELD agent. She fought hard—harder than anyone he had ever met before, and he had worked with some amazing soldiers back during the war. Natasha wasn't much of a talker and didn't try to make small talk with Steve solely out of pity, and he was grateful for that.

However, she was the first one to break the comfortable silence.

“She's a really good person,” Natasha said nonchalantly.

Steve glanced at her, confused, “Hm?”


“Oh, I didn't know she was a SHIELD agent,” Steve frowned.
“She's not,” The red head scoffed, “That girl would make the worst agent ever, she doesn't have a mean bone in her body and cries if she even stubs her toe. She's smart like Dr. Banner—probably one of the smartest people I've ever met—she's a talented engineer who could specialize in almost anything you can think of, but she's mostly passionate about creating prosthetics for amputees. She was in Yemen last year, helping victims in hospitals who had sustained terrible injuries after getting caught up in explosions. Dr. Banner was worried about her going to such a war-stricken country that he contacted S.H.I.E.L.D, asking if they could send an agent out to keep an eye on her and make sure she didn't get hurt or caught up in any trouble.”

“Let me guess,” Steve smirked, “That person was you.”

“You guessed right. I didn't get the chance to really talk to her, but people like Marcella are easy to read—she's too kind and gentle.”

“You say that like it's a bad thing.”

“It can be,” She shrugged, “Especially when that person is curious about anything and everything. She's incredibly smart and has only good intentions but... but she's weak and sensitive and extremely shy, Steve. People like her get beat down in a world like this, she needs to learn how to survive. If she were stronger and had been taught proper survival skills she wouldn't have ended up in this situation.”

“Sometimes it takes a great deal of strength to be kind and patient when everyone around you is being cold and rude,” Steve reasoned, “Besides, not everyone can be like us; she wasn't made to be a fighter or survivalist and that's not a bad thing. She helps others in her own way—but using her intelligence to create better living conditions for those who need it.”

“Maybe.”

The Captain bit his tongue; he didn't want to argue with Natasha when he hardly knew her, but he couldn't understand why he was talking about the girl like this. He remembered his childhood, how weak and sickly he had been for the majority of it, and he couldn't find it in himself to judge someone for something they had absolutely no control over. Though she might have been small and not very strong, it sounded as though Marcella Banner had a heart of gold and wanting nothing more than to change the world in a positive light, and that was more than he could say about most people he had met since coming out of the ice.

All the Captain knew was that this was a person with a purpose in life and he wasn't going to sleep until he knew she was safe or that she was for sure dead.

That didn't stop Steve from feeling defeated by the time they made it to the section of Columbia that Marcella mainly studied it—most of it was in ruins and he couldn't even begin to fathom how long it would take to rebuild everything. He made a mental note to come back in a few days to volunteer and help the firemen to do some of the more heavy lifting.

Steve wondered how many bodies were buried beneath the rubble, but quickly shook it off and started digging through heavy bricks and metal beams.

“We should call for an ambulance or the fire department,” The Captain suggested solemnly after the sixth survivor they found; they had all been younger, most likely students as well. He felt bad because there wasn't much he could as far as medical attention was concerned, but him and Natasha were able to provide them with water bottles and granola bars. Steve noticed the expression in the survivors' eyes; they were all wide and filled with exhaustion and horror—most of them were in an intense state of shock and...
It was something he was all too familiar with.

Wordlessly, Natasha pulled out her phone and made the call; Steve pretended to not notice the tired expression on her face and continued with his mission. He was definitely tired, he wouldn't deny that, but he had made a promise to Dr. Banner and he intended to keep true to that promise.

“Marcie?!” He called out, lifting a steel beam from a particularly large pile of rubble. It was silent as the super soldier sifted through the pile of bricks and other garbage; he found pages ripped from school textbooks, flipped over desks, and backpacks covered in dirt and dust. Steve tried to ignore the photo he found of a young looking man with a giant grin on his face as he knelt down next to what looked to be a golden retriever; he hoped that the boy in the picture was safe and unscathed. The Captain knew that him and his team had done all they can to protect the citizens of New York to the best of their abilities, however, he couldn't help but to wonder how many had paid the price before the Avengers could stop the destruction caused by the chitauri.

Maybe they could have done more for the people of New York, surely all of that destruction hadn't been necessary.

“Steve!” Natasha called from a distance, “Come here, I think I found something but I can't lift this beam.”

He dropped the destroyed book he had been inspecting and quickly headed towards Natasha's location, trying to remain calm even though he wasn't really sure of what to expect from whatever Natasha had found.

“Steve, look,” She pointed to a particular spot in the rubble, and sure enough, Steve spotted a tiny, ash y hand sticking out—as if asking for help. He was hesitant as he approached the rubble—mostly cinder blocks and broken beams—and softly called out the young lady's name. He wasn't even sure if it was the person they had been looking for, but he tried his hardest to keep his hopes high after how long the pair had been searching for her.

“Marcie? Ms. Banner?”

But the hand remained unmoving and though he was exhausted and his muscles ached, Steve used all of his might to lift the steel beam away off of a large cinder block that looked like it was crushing the petite arm. Sirens could be heard in the distance, making their way to the desolate location and he hoped they got here soon for all of the survivors' sake and for whomever was trapped underneath all of the rubble he was currently trying to clear.

“Marcella? Can you hear me?” Steve carefully lifted away the heavy cement blocks away from the dust-covered body, revealing a bloodied and bruised young woman. He noticed that her white t-shirt was caked in blood and he finally registered the slim pole that was sticking into the air, coming from her abdomen—she had been impaled and Steve's heart sunk at the realization. It took him a few moments of removing debris and bricks until there was no longer any rubble covering the still body and Steve was finally able to get a good look at the face, even though it was hard to make out any distinct features due to the dirt, dust, and blood covering her entire body. However, he could see the kinky curls on top of her head and that brought him little comfort. Natasha stepped forward and stared at the girl's face with an unreadable expression before nodding at Steve, confirming that it was Banner's daughter.

“She looks...”
Steve tuned out the rest of whatever Natasha was going to say and inched forward towards the body; gently, he laid his head on top of her chest and closed his eyes, concentrating hard and waiting for any sign of life. The longer he waited, the more hopeless Steve started to feel—he couldn't bear the thought of having to deliver a lifeless body to Dr. Banner, to have to watch him as he realized that his daughter was gone forever.

And then he heard it.

A soft thud against his eardrum—it was weak and barely there, but it was something.

“She's still alive, but she needs medical attention right now.”

“It sounds like the ambulances are almost here, can you get her out of there without moving that pole too much? She can't afford to lose anymore blood.”

Steve nodded as he handed his flashlight to Natasha and searched for the most uninjured part on her body, quickly deciding that her arm seemed pretty unscathed. Carefully, he placed his hand underneath her shoulder and gently slid it across her shoulder blades until it was wrapped around her securely, then he moved on to her legs.

Her legs, however, proved to be much more difficult.

There were cuts and bruises everywhere and Steve certainly didn't miss the gash that started at the middle of her thigh and ended mid-calf. Even though she was unconscious, he was still scared of hurting her more than she already was—he couldn't even imagine how much blood she had already lost. He gently wrapped his other arm around the back of her knees and slowly lifted her from the pile of rubble, being careful to not jostle her body too much and move the pole that protruded disturbingly from her stomach. His arms ached in protest as he gently hiked her up closer to his chest and made his way to where one of the ambulances was now parked. Survivors had flocked to the EMTs in great relief, receiving some much needed medical treatment.

“She's eyes are open,” Natasha sounded surprised by this observation, “I think she's in shock.”

Sure enough, Steve glanced down at the small body in his arms and wide, green eyes stared right back at him.

The first time Marcella Banner sees Steve, she is filled with so much relief that it brings tears to her eyes and she curls her fingers tighter around the collar of his suit to make sure he's actually there. It's the first time since the war that anyone has looked at Steve that way—the same way Bucky had looked at him when he found his best friend in that Hydra facility. Her breathing is loud and ragged and the Captain cringed when he heard her cough against his chest; the sound was wet, like she had fluid built up in her lungs and he knew she must have been in great pain. He remembered when he had gotten pneumonia as a child and how hard it had been for him to breathe, especially with his asthma, and he genuinely felt for the girl and all of the dust and debris she must have inhaled during the collapse of the building.

“It's okay ma'am,” Steve comforted the girl quietly as her body shook with every violent cough, “You're safe now.”

Her eyes closed at his soft words and her head lolled back as she slipped back into unconsciousness; Marcella's lithe fingers loosened from his collar, leaving little bloody prints in their wake.

For the first time since coming out of the ice, Steve feels like there might be a place for him in this new world.
A Composed Friendship

Chapter Summary

“I like your hair,” Steve sputtered before he could stop himself, “It's uh, very big and curly.”

Marcella grinned softly.

“If you'd like, you can come in and see her.”

Steve woke with a small jolt when he heard Dr. Banner's quiet voice; he hadn't quite fallen asleep, but he had definitely been dozing off in the hospital waiting room. He had been sitting in the uncomfortable chair since the ambulance had brought Marcella in and he had been too nervous to leave, in case something bad happened while he was gone. Six hours was how long he had been waiting to see her and Steve was surprised that his neck didn't feel worse than it did from being in the same, uncomfortable position for so long. Natasha and Bruce had reminded the Captain numerous times that he didn't have to stay for her, that he should go home and get some rest, but Steve politely declined and waited patiently for the Banner girl to wake up. Much to Steve's surprise, Tony had stopped by to drop off some flowers for the girl, shrugging it off when Steve quirked an eyebrow at the billionaire's uncharacteristically kind demeanor.

“People like her are important,” Tony spoke with unusual seriousness, “Scientists and doctors... those are the people who are going to change the world and I can't imagine how many students were killed during the battle.”

Steve didn't know what to say to that, so he had remained quiet and solemn.

Now, he stood up and anxiously followed after Bruce, running a hand through his unusually mussed up hair.

“She's been in and out of consciousness and she's in a lot of pain,” He spoke quietly as he arrived at her room, “luckily that pole was relatively slim and didn't impale any vital organs, so the doctors are confident she's going to be okay, but she definitely won't be able to move around for a while.”

“That's good to hear,” Steve breathed a sigh of relief for this girl he barely knew, “Are... are you sure it's okay for me to be in her room?”

Bruce pushed the door open and raised his eyebrows at Steve's concerned expression, “It's okay Captain, she's just sleeping.”

Steve nodded and slowly entered the quaint hospital room, immediately spotting her figure snoozing away on the comfortable looking bed. He heard the door softly click behind him as Bruce left the two alone, much to his surprise. Though the doctor had been a nervous wreck when they brought Marcella in, Steve had to admit that he was certainly handling the delicate situation a lot better than he had expected. Bruce had watched through an observation window as some of the best doctors in New York operated on her and worked relentlessly to remove the pole from her abdomen without causing anymore internal damage and Steve couldn't even imagine how hard that had to be for Banner. It was obvious that Marcella was Bruce's world, and to leave her life balance in the hands of
a group of strangers... God, Steve couldn't even imagine.

Captain Rogers found it difficult to look at the still body lying soundlessly on the bed, so he observed the numerous vases filled with a variety of flowers and plants on the little desk by her bed. He recognized the signatures of his comrades and smiled softly when he spotted Thor's messy scrawl attached to a vase filled with what looked to be some unearthly plant—but it was beautiful, nonetheless. For some reason, Steve was surprised to see that even Director Fury had sent a 'get better soon' card along with a bouquet of giant sunflowers. Instead of sending flowers like most normal people would, Clint Barton had dropped off some cookies that he had insisted he baked himself, but Steve was convinced they were store bought. It seemed as though everyone knew Marcella and wished to see her recover quickly and Steve wondered if she would become an important member of their group because everyone seemed to adore her. While he didn't know too much about her profession, it sounded like an important job and Ms. Banner sounded like she excelled at her job.

Finally, Steve turned and slowly sat in a chair right next to her bed, gazing at the young lady's face with a weary expression.

Now that she wasn't covered in all of the dust and debris, Steve was able to easily make out more of her delicate features.

He hadn't noticed the darker freckles that were splashed across the bridge of her nose, cheeks, and even her forehead in the picture that Natasha showed him, or the small scar that started at her left temple and cut into the small, dark hairs of her perfectly plucked thick eyebrow. For some reason the scar looked out of place on her gentle-looking features, along with all of the cuts and bruises she had acquired during the battle. Steve wondered what she had been doing when that building collapsed; did she know she was in danger and tried to escape? Or did the building give no warning as it collapsed and trapped her in absolute darkness for over a day? He couldn't imagine how terrifying the whole ordeal must have been to a normal human—to be trapped under so much rubble that you can't even move your limbs or know which direction you're facing. Steve knew that she would physically recover, but he wondered if she would have nightmares of being stuck underneath a collapsed building, or if certain loud noises would trigger her and remind her of that day.

He thought about Natasha's words, about how she was sensitive weak, and tried to ignore the doubt that washed over him.

'People like her can't survive in a world this harsh...'

Steve found himself staring at her small hand that lay by her side and carefully avoided the IVs as he covered her hand with his own—he remembered a time in his life where he had been that small and always sick. While she wasn't nearly as feeble as he had been, the young Banner girl couldn't have been any taller that 5'2 or 5'3 on a good day and probably only weighed a little over a hundred pounds. The Captain found himself curling his thumb and pinky around her wrist, noticing how they overlapped one another and he wondered if the girl had some sort of condition that made her this small.

He observed her facial features again, this time more closely and attentively.

Her hair had been washed by one of the female nurses and was tied securely into a messy bun on top of her head and Steve noticed a few curls that escaped the hair tie and framed her face; the bun looked huge on top of her head and Steve figured that she had a lot of that curly hair—probably a mane of it. Clear tubes had been inserted into her nostrils to help her breathe better and he spotted a few small cuts along her freckled cheeks, but it seemed like it wasn't anything too serious. Her cheeks had a slight flush to them, as if she was blushing even though she was unconscious and it
made her seem more... lively, Steve noticed. Her lips—chapped and dry—were plump and a pale pink color; they were slightly parted as she took in shallow, ragged breaths, almost like it physically hurt to breathe. She had a heart-shaped face and Steve couldn't find too much resemblance to her father for some reason, but he decided not to think about that. Instead, he focused on how small she seemed in her hospital gown and the way the white blankets covered her like an ocean. He could see the way her collarbones sharply peeked out from the top of the gown and how boney her hand and wrist seemed under his—he was almost scared of accidentally breaking it without even thinking about it.

She was very pretty, Steve thought to himself, even if she was different than the women he was used to back in his day.

God, she seemed so tiny though and Steve tried to shake his own memories of being small and sickly from his mind. He couldn't help it though, and he wondered if she was very sick growing up, and if not, if she had been bullied and harassed like he had been because he knew how cruel people could be.

Steve forgot his hand was covering her much smaller one until he felt her fingers twitch under his palm—nearly startling him to death.

He pulled his hand away quickly as her frail body was wracked by a violent bout of coughs, they sounded wet and guttural, making Steve cringe. He almost stood up from the chair, ready to go find a nurse or doctor, but froze when her eyes slowly cracked open. Steve noticed her long, wet eyelashes and the way she tried to blink away the layer of glossiness over the green orbs, causing tears to escape from the outer corners of her eyes. Unable to move her head, her eyes shifted to where he was sitting and the two stared at each other for a few moments before Steve quickly stood up.

“I'm sorry,” He stammered, “I'll go find a nurse.”

The first time Marcella speaks to Steve, her voice is weak and if it weren't for his enhanced senses, he definitely wouldn't have heard it.

“Wait,” She croaked, licking her chapped lips, “Please...”

Her voice was barely there, but Steve heard it, nonetheless, and stopped in his tracks. His expression must had been one of terror because she peered up at the tall man with a gentle expression.

“M-Ma'am, I should really go get a nurse for you...”

“Ice,” She mumbled, and with all of her strength, nodded towards a cup of melting ice chips that were on the little desk with all of the flowers, “Please.”

Steve felt glued to where he was standing and his gaze shifted between the pleading look on Marcella's face and the cup of ice on the desk; he knew he should go get a nurse or even Bruce, but the desperate look on his face caused him to grab the plastic cup and the little spoon and Steve sat back down. He stared at the contents of the cup for a moment and then he grabbed the spoon and scooped up some of the ice before offering it to Marcella. He felt awkward watching her as she gently accepted the ice and sucked on it for a few seconds, immediately feeling the cold water soothe the back of her aching throat.

“I'm good,” She spoke again when Steve went to spoon up another ice chip for the fifth time, “Thank you.”

“N-No problem, ma'am, but I should really go find a nurse for you.”
“Please don't,” Her voice was still small and raspy from all of the dust she had inhaled, “I just need a few minutes of peace and quiet before dad comes barging in here like a madman.”

“Are you sure? I don't mind finding a nurse or even Dr. Banner, ma'am.”

A small smile twitched at the corners of her lips, “I'm sure, just a few minutes, please.”

“Y-Yeah, okay” Steve's frantic eyes fluttered for a moment before landing on the small Banner girl, “Sure, but please let me know if there's anything I can do to help.”

“I'm good.” The green-eyed girl reassured him and leaned her heavy head back against the pillows, “Thank you.”

The two of them grew quiet and Steve tried to ignore the way she observed him closely; he couldn't blame her, she was a skilled scientist after all, and it was her job to observe people and learn about them. If she recognized who he was, she gave no indication and gazed at him like she would any other stranger, her glossy eyes full of curiosity and softness. Her green orbs calculated his movements as he spotted a device on the desk—it looked like the mobile phones he had seen everyone walking around with, but the screen was five times bigger and there were less buttons. Steve thought about picking it up to observe it, but he figured it belonged to Marcella and didn't want to break the expensive looking gadget somehow, plus he had no idea how it worked.

Marcella noticed this and spoke softly, “Go ahead, it's technically Tony Stark's property, so I won't be mad if you drop it.”

“I don't know how it works.”

“Oh, okay.”

Steve's eyes widened as she placed both of her hands on the mattress and pushed herself up so her back was resting against the pillows instead; he noticed the pained expression on her face but she didn't say anything about it and gave him a gentle smile, as if trying to reassure him that she wasn't in pain. One hand gently gripped her side—right where she had been impaled—and the other reached out for the device.

“Please be careful,” Steve urged, “You'll rip your stitches open.”

“I'm fine, promise; why don't you take this?” She held out the device to Steve for him to take, “I can show you how to use it?”

Hesitantly, Steve took it and nodded, “I would like that, thank you ma'am.”

“Yeah, no problem,” She gave him a shy smile, “And you can call me Marcella, or Marcie, it doesn't matter; everyone kind of has their own nickname for me at this point.”

“Okay... Marcella.”

“So to start up the Stark Pad, you just want press the home button at the bottom of the screen...”

For hours, the two were immersed in today's newest technology and Steve was grateful that Marcella had a great deal of patience, because Lord knows that she needed it while dealing with him. Every now and then, she gently took the gadget from his large hands and showed him directly how to do something if he didn't understand her directions at first, and while there's a few things that take a few tries for Steve, he eventually gets the hang of it. She would really smile when she explained certain things, mostly music and movies and she had sheepishly confessed that she was a music snob—
listening to everything from older fifties Italian music, to modern hip hop. For the life of him, Steve couldn't understand why everything about her was so kind and gentle, despite what she had just endured—if anything she should be angry at the aliens that had descended from the sky, or even Loki who had nearly destroyed the world—but she remained calm and quiet, choosing to not speak about the whole ordeal.

“--And that's Spotify,” She interrupted his thoughts, “You can pretty much listen to any song ever and it's super awesome if you love music. If you tap that little bar with the magnifying glass in it, it will pull up the keyboard and you can type in any artist or song or even album and it should pop up.”

Steve thought about typing in some of the old tunes he used to listen to with Bucky or even his mother, but figured it might bring back too many memories and glanced at Marcella for help.

“What do you like to listen to?”

Her cheeks turned pink as she thought about it for a moment, “I listen to a little bit of everything, but if we're trying to get caught up on over seventy years of music, I probably shouldn't start you off with today's pop music. I suppose we could start with the Beatles... or maybe Pink Floyd, they're some of my favorite bands to come out of the British Invasion. Oh, you'd probably really like Buddy Holly or Elvis Presley.”

He was about to ask what the British Invasion was and if it was some kind of war that England had won, but Steve noticed the way her eyelids fluttered with exhaustion and he immediately felt guilty, “You look beat, maybe I should come back later after you've had some rest.”

He tried to ignore the way her shoulders sagged with defeat, “Yeah, I guess I am pretty tired... it's been a long couple of days.”

“Understatement of the year,” Steve smiled and she met it with one of her own, “If you'd like, I could come back tomorrow after I've finished volunteering with the cleanup? I mean if you're not busy and--”

“I'll definitely be here,” She interjected softly, “It's not like I can go very far when my leg has been sliced open and there's a gaping hole in the my stomach.”

Marcella immediately apologized when she saw him grimace, “Sorry, I didn't mean...”

“No, it's okay,” He said, brows pinched together in the middle, “It's just... hard for me to think about it, the way you were when I found you underneath all of that rubble. I saw that metal pole sticking out of your stomach and I just thought for sure you were... dead. I just don't want to think about how awful it would have been bringing you back and seeing Dr. Banner when he realized that you were gone, I can't even imagine.”

She thought about his words carefully and nodded, “My dad didn't want to tell me because he thought I would get... upset, but could you please tell me how long I was underneath that collapsed building?”

Steve gazed down at her for a second before answering, “Approximately twenty six hours.”

Marcella doesn't get upset like her father had anticipated, instead she mulled over his answer before responding,

“It felt like forever.”

“I know,” Steve murmured and stood up, “I understand.”
“Hey Steve?”

He froze in his tracks and turned to Marcella right before he could leave the room, “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, you’re really going to come back?”

The words sounded doubtful and timid, and that surprised Steve—did most people not come back to her?

“Of course I’ll come back,” He smiled and glanced at her, “If you would like, I could maybe bring you some food from that cafe down the street? If that’s even allowed... are you allowed to have regular food or--”

“A slice of their chocolate chip banana bread would be amazing,” She interrupted excitedly, “I mean, please? If it’s not a problem?”

“You got it,” Steve felt his nervous smile slip into a comfortable grin, “I’ll be here, I promise, Marcella.”

The next day.

Steve was incredibly exhausted by the end of the next day.

He had woken up bright and early at 4 AM to help firefighters and policemen clean up the streets of New York and search for any survivors that might have been trapped underneath rubble still. Steve had been surprised at how well the rescue dogs were trained and how many people they managed to sniff out by the end of the day; he was glad that people had found useful ways to utilize animals without harming them and remembered all the suffering horses he had encountered during the war.

The Captain was there to help lift up heavy objects that most average human beings wouldn't be able to lift, and he also escorted survivors to medical personnel who were nearby. Steve was in the process of carrying a large cinder block when he was approached by a policeman with a German Shepherd trailing lazily behind him. For some reason, the sight of the dog covered in dust made Steve smile—he had always had a soft spot for animals, but never really owned any when he was younger due to allergies. As the police officer came to a halt just a foot away from Steve, the dog instantly sat next to his handler and gazed up at the Captain with curious eyes.

“Captain Rogers,” The officer started and gave him a nod of respect, “We really appreciate your help and all you have done for us, but you've been working for over twelve hours now, you should really go get some rest.”

“Are you sure? I really don't mind staying to help out a little longer.”

“I insist,” He gave him a firm clap on the shoulder, “We can't thank you enough for your service and hard work.”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged, “You guys are the real heroes, I'm just here for the heavy lifting.”

“Well, we still appreciate, thank you again, Captain.”

“Anytime, you have a good evening and stay safe out in these streets.”

“Always.”
And with that, Steve made his way down the cracked and crumbled sidewalks of Manhattan; the hospital was only a few blocks away and he could probably be there in about twenty minutes or so. He kept his eye out for the small cafe that he had mentioned to Marcella, hoping it would still be open despite everything that had transpired in the last few days. Sure enough, a glowing neon sign was hanging from a window, indicating to Steve that they were, indeed, open and he hesitantly stepped inside. There was only one other person sitting inside the quaint cafe, a small elderly man, and he was hunched over with a newspaper close to his face as his eyes squinted to read the small words.

Steve smiled—the man was adorable in that stereotypical 'cranky old man' kind of way.

“Hello,” A young barista with braces greeted tiredly and Steve noticed the way her eyes widened when she realized who had just walked in, “W-What could I get f-for you today, s-sir?”

The young lady whose name tag read 'Clementine' seemed intimidated by his presence and he did his best to seem as non-threatening as possible, “Could I please get two slices of the banana bread with the chocolate chips? And um... what drinks would you recommend?”

“Well uh, my favorite is the Parliament Mocha—it's not as sweet as some of our other drinks which is why I like it,” She explained, “But our most popular is the lavender vanilla latte. It's uh, definitely a lot sweeter than the Parliament Mocha and is a lot lighter in a taste, so not really bitter at all.”

“Okay, I'll take one of each,” Steve pulled his wallet from his back pocket, “Uh, I'll take the medium size... the sixteen ounce and uh, iced, please?”

The barista grinned and nodded, “That will be right up, and don't worry about it, it's on the house.”

Steve held the twenty dollar bill in his hand with a surprised expression, “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely... my mom works in the Human Resources building right across from Stark Tower and if it weren't for you and your friends... well, I don't want to think about that. Besides, my manager told me that officers and firefighters get their drinks and food for free after everything, so do you and the rest of the Avengers.”

Steve was touched by her words and without hesitating, tossed the twenty dollar bill in the tip jar, “That is very generous of you guys to do, we really do appreciate it. I think all of the rescue and cleanup crews can use all of the coffee they can get at this point.”

She gave him a sweet smile and started on his order, asking him if he would like the slices of banana bread to be heated up or if he would like extra chocolate and vanilla syrups in the drinks. Steve waited patiently for his order and smiled when she quickly rushed out to the little dining area and gave the elderly man a refill on his black coffee, to which he gave her a small nod of appreciation. The Captain watched as she bagged up the slices of banana bread—which smelled absolutely delicious—and put plastic lids on the drinks before placing everything at the end of the little bar table.

“Here you go,” She called out with another smile, “Thank you for the tip and everything you've done for the city.”

“Anytime, Miss,” Steve smiled and shifted in a nervous manner as he grabbed his order, “Have a good evening and um, stay in school.”

Her eyebrows shot up, but she nodded with a large grin on her face and wished him a goodnight as he exited the cafe and made his way down the block at to the hospital. It took about five minutes for
Steve to arrive at his destination, and as he walked down the hall to Marcella's room, he could hear soft voices speaking to one another. The closer her got to her room, he then realized that the voices were coming from Marcella and Bruce and it sounded like they were having a conversation.

"--I just think you should take a break..."

"But dad, I'm less than a year away from getting graduating and getting my Master's degree, I'm just so close."

"I understand, Marce," Bruce Banner spoke in a calm and gentle voice, "But you'd be studying abroad for an entire semester; do you think it's a good idea to be in a foreign country after everything you've been through?"

"I've done it before," The Banner girl argued, "Dad please, you know this means the world to me—I went to Yemen last year so I know what to expect in Syria; I wouldn't even be in the worst parts and I wouldn't mind if a SHIELD agent went with me again, like last time. The Biomedical department needs someone to be part of their medical research team and Professor Wilkerson specifically requested that I be the one to help with research which means he clearly saw something different with me."

"I know... I know," The doctor sounded stressed but stayed calm, "We'll talk about it another day, I promise. I think these last few days have been hard for both of us, mostly you."

"It's okay dad," Marcella soothed and the skin around Bruce's eyes wrinkled as he smiled tiredly, "You went through a lot too."

"I don't think I've ever been as relieved in my entire life than I was when Steve called and told me they found you alive... I don't know what I would do without you, Marce."

"I love you, dad."

"I love you too, Marcella," He sounded like he was smiling as he said this, "I hope you always remember that you have always been mine and your mother's pride and joy, she would have been so proud of you and what you're doing with your life."

"I miss her," She admitted, "But I'm glad that I still have you in my life."

"Marce, I'm sorry that I--"

"Dad," She interrupted, "I already told you a long time ago that I forgive you, I don't hate you for what happened. How many more times am I going to have to tell you before you realize this?"

"Sometimes I think that you're not even capable of holding grudges or hating anyone even when they deserve it," He sighed heavily and sounded incredibly sad, "Tony needs help cleaning up the labs and recovering research data, get some rest, okay?"

Steve quickly shook off the conversation and gently pushed the door open, shifting his gaze between the two Banners, "Sorry, I can come back later if now's not a good time."

Bruce opened his mouth to say something, but was quickly cut off by his daughter.

"No!" She exclaimed and Bruce jumped at the sudden noise, "I can smell that banana bread from here and plus I compiled a list of artists and bands that will get you caught up on seventy years of music in no time. So uh, now is definitely not a bad time."
Bruce raised his eyebrows at his daughter's pink cheeks and pushed his glasses further up his nose, “Well, I guess I'll leave you two be, then.”

Steve and Marcella said goodbye to the skittish doctor and she gave him a toothy grin as the blonde man took a seat next to her bed. Marcella seemed to be feeling better today and even looked to be in better spirits; her hair—which had previously been in a messy bun—now fell past her shoulders and to the middle of her back in wild, tight curls. The giant mass of curls made her face seem small and Steve noticed that she was wearing glasses with slightly larger frames; the large frames looked out of place on her small face, but they emphasized the beautiful lush green color of her eyes and he was able to see the golden flecks easier with the glasses on. She had a few small cuts and bruises on her face, but despite this, she was still smiling and Steve can't help but to admire her will to remain lighthearted.

“I like your hair,” Steve sputtered before he could stop himself, “It's uh, very big and curly.”

She grinned softly before grabbing one of the long curls and twirling it around with her finger, “Thank you, I used to hate my curls when I was little, I got made fun of by other kids a lot and always wanted to straighten it. I guess I just stopped caring as I grew up, I think natural, curly hair is beautiful now.”

“I think it is too,” He murmured, looking away from the fond smile on her gentle features.

“Oh! Here you go,” Steve snapped out of his daze and held out one of the slices of banana bread out to her, “I uh, got one for myself, but if you're really hungry, you can have it, I wouldn't mind. I also got some drinks... one of them is a um... something mocha, and the other is a lavender vanilla... latte?”

Steve noticed the soft look in her eyes as he tried to remember the names of the drinks and he felt his cheeks get warm.

“One slice of banana bread would be wonderful, thank you. As far as the drinks go, I've tried both and like them equally, so how about you take a sip of each one and decide what you want?”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded and hesitantly, Steve took a sip of the lavender vanilla one and tried to hold back the grimace as the sweet concoction overwhelmed his taste buds; Marcella noticed this and smiled when an expression of relief crossed his features as he tried the Parliament Mocha and decided it suited his tastes more than the other. Wordlessly, he handed the lavender vanilla latte back to her and she happily sipped it as she tossed pieces of the banana bread into her mouth. While she didn't mind drinking her coffee black, she definitely preferred her coffee and lattes to be more sweet than bitter—it seemed as though Steve preferred the opposite.

“This is what I needed after everything,” She murmured, eyes closed as she savored the sweet taste of bananas and chocolate chips, “Thank you, for everything.”

“It's no problem, really,” Steve shrugged with a sheepish smile, “So... that list?”

Her eyes shot open and immediately lit up as she grabbed a the Stark device from the desk, “So, I figured we could start off with my personal queen, Nina Simone, and then work our way into the fifties and sixties. Nina, Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, The Beatles—obviously. Man, we have a lot to cover.”

“Let's start,” Steve grinned, “I have plenty of time.”
Marcella grinned, “Me too.”

Steve visited her every day for the next three weeks.
To Be Alone

“I don’t know if you want to go in there Captain, she’s not having a good day.”

Bruce Banner’s warning had taken Steve by surprise when he arrived at the hospital one day after finishing his volunteer work; one glance in the window, and Steve could immediately see that Bruce’s words held some truth. Marcella sat on the edge of the hospital bed, her back was facing the window and her head was hung low as an internal war clearly rage on within her own mind. He watched closely as she lifted her arm and used the back of her hand to wipe at her cheeks—she was crying and Steve wondered what had happened. They had been together the night before, Marcella showing Steve some of her favorite songs and music videos; she had also showed him how to use YouTube and Google. The search engine seemed incredibly useful to Steve, and now he if he had any questions or wanted to know more about some historical events he had missed, he could just ‘google it’.

But now, the usually happy girl seemed incredibly sad and dejected as she she sat on the bed all by herself.

“What happened?” Steve frowned.

Bruce sighed and readjusted his glasses, “You know that gash on her left leg? Well, I guess it caused more damage than we initially thought and it looks like she has some pretty bad nerve damage in that leg. She was trying to walk just a few ago and was complaining about a burning pain in that leg, and then she said it started to get really numb.”

“Is it permanent?” Steve questioned, “Can you do surgery on it or something?”

Bruce smiled sadly, “She doesn’t need surgery; Marcella is going to need a lot of rehabilitation though, it will definitely be a painful process but the nerves can definitely heal with time.”

“That’s good though,” Steve said, “I mean, she could have had to had it amputated, is this not the best case scenario?”

“No, it definitely is,” Bruce nodded, “She’s just really frustrated with herself; this isn’t the first time that Marcella has been in... circumstances like she is now. Marcella’s just not...”

Steve frowned as he watched the soft spoken doctor try to process the correct words.

“Marcella isn’t meant for this kind of life,” He sighed and glanced at his daughter through the window, “She’s smart and kind and wonderful, but she’s not like us and she knows that. I think she’s just hard on herself all of the time because she’s constantly comparing herself to others.”

“Even we have our flaws though.”

“Don’t I know it,” Bruce gazed at Marcella’s hunched over form, “That girl has always been too hard on herself though, guess it doesn’t really help that she didn’t have the greatest childhood.”

Steve bit his tongue and the urge to ask him about her childhood and changed the topic instead, “Would it be okay if I went in and talked to her still? I know she’s really upset, but I uh, brought her some banana bread and maybe it will make her feel better.”

Bruce smiled softly and nodded, “Good luck, I’ll see you later.”
Steve watched as the doctor walked away tiredly; he seemed worried and maybe even scared for his daughter, and Steve couldn't figure out if it was because of her leg or her mental state. He gently pushed the door open and stepped into the hospital room; if Marcella had heard him enter, she chose to ignore it and remained entirely still. Her long, wild hair had been pulled into a ponytail and a few curls had sprung free from the elastic. The white t-shirt she wore was too big for her, and the large sleeves made her arms seem tiny. Steve could hear the way she struggled and tried to stop her tears and sniffling, all to no avail, and then she glanced at him over her shoulder. Marcella's eyes were glossy and slightly red, full of sadness and frustration towards herself. She stared at him with furrowed brows, as if she was sizing him up and he could have sworn he saw a look of jealousy among her usually gentle features.

His suspicions were confirmed when she gave his left leg a fleeting glance before turning back around.

Steve stared down at the paper bag in his hand, he could smell the banana bread and suddenly wondered if he should leave Marcella alone. It sounded like she was genuinely upset about this whole situation and Steve was suddenly terrified that he would say something that would only make it worse. He had never been that great at talking to women and being trapped in ice for over seventy years definitely did nothing to improve that, but for some reason, Steve felt comfortable talking to Marcella. He found it incredibly easy to be around her, and he figured it had to do with her being an observant scientist and being generally accepting of everyone and their background and culture.

He mustered up some courage and advanced towards where she was sitting on the bed, before taking a seat and staring at his hands.

It was silent for a few minutes—painfully awkward—and the only sound in the room had been coming from Marcella and her attempts to stop the tears that were still pouring from her eyes. Steve could only imagine what must have been going through her head, what with her receiving the news that her leg had serious nerve damage and that she would be going through extremely painful rehabilitation. She usually seemed so happy and it just felt so wrong seeing her like this—full of sadness and tears.

“I'm not really hungry,” She finally spoke when she calmed herself a little better, “You can have my slice of banana bread today.”

“'S okay,” Steve shrugged and placed the paper bag on the desk by the table, “You might get hungry later.”

“He told you, didn't he?”

Steve immediately knew what she was talking about and nodded, “Yeah, he did.”

She lowered her head and wrung her hands together nervously, growing quiet again. She wanted to tell Steve that she hated Loki for doing this and putting her in this physical state, but for some reason, she could only blame herself for what had happened to her. Maybe if Marcella had been stronger and faster, she wouldn't have even gotten trapped under that building in the first place. Maybe if she had been faster, like her peers, she would have made it somewhere safe before that building gave way. She thought about the few peers she had seen perish right in front of her eyes, being crushed by large cement blocks or impaled by metal beams and she closed her eyes as more tears escaped. Marcella thought about people like Clint, Natasha, and even Tony—they were human beings without any actual powers and they had thrived in that kind of environment. Marcella on the other hand, could barely jog a mile before running out of breath and had sobbed for hours after watching Marley and Me.
“What happened to me wasn’t even horrible,” She spoke quietly, “And every time I close my eyes at night, I have nightmares.”

“You were trapped under a collapsed building for over a day, Marcella; I think that's pretty horrible,” Steve argued and carefully placed a hand on her dainty shoulder, “The things you saw and went through... I can't even imagine.”

Her head hung low and Steve noticed the way her watery eyes remained closed, “I know what people say about me, how they think I'm weak and I'm not meant for any of this.”

“People are strong in different ways,” He started, gaining her attention, “People show their strength by how kind or smart they are, or by being generous. Just because you're not strong physically doesn't mean that you're not strong at all. You're a genuinely kindhearted person, Marcella; you're kind and patient which is something that's hard to find in people nowadays. Besides, do you think most people would have survived being trapped under all that rubble for more than a day, after being impaled and having a giant wound on their leg? Don't be so quick to put yourself down, okay? You're so much stronger than you give yourself credit for, Marcella.”

She stared at his face for a moment before nodding to herself, but he could tell that his words had done little to ease the pain in her heart.

“I have nightmares too,” Steve admitted softly, and forced a tight smile when she glanced up at him with wide eyes, “I used to get them during the war, but ever since I woke up from the ice, they just keep getting worse. Sometimes they're about people I knew back then, but lately they've been about the Chitauri and all the damage they caused. If you... if you ever need to talk about them, I uh, I don't mind listening. I know that we haven't really been through the same kind of situations but I think I understand the kind of pain you're feeling... I've been there.”

“Thank you, Steve,” She murmured, her gentle eyes observed his facial features, “If you ever need to talk, I don't mind listening either.”

The blonde smiled, “Thank you, I appreciate it. Did you want to be alone today? If you'd like I could leave? Or we could listen to some music or watch a movie or something?”

Steve Rogers... so sweet and kindhearted; Marcella admired him and couldn't help but to see him in a different light after his reassuring words. Timidly, the Banner girl gazed up at his soft, yet worn, features, noticing the small trace of sadness that lingered in those incredibly blue eyes.

“I don't want to be alone,” The way she said it made something inside of Steve's chest clench painfully, “A movie sounds nice, we haven't watched too many of those. Are you in the mood for anything in particular?”

Steve watched as she scooted closer to the desk and sifted through a large stack of what he had learned were called DVDs, “I'm fine with anything you choose; just uh, none of those crazy action movies that Clint and Natasha make me watch, please.”

“No action movies, no problem,” She spoke mostly to herself and then a small smile spread across her lips when she came to a particular DVD, “I think it's time we watch my one of my favorite movies ever, Forrest Gump; you're in for a treat, big guy. Do you want to put that in the DVD player for me?”

Steve carefully took the disk and made his way to the DVD player that was on a little entertainment stand right underneath the TV that was mounted on the wall; it took him a second to remember the way Marcella had instructed him to use the device, but eventually got it without her help. When he
turned back around, Marcella was sitting up against the pillows on her bed and she gently patted the spot next to her, indicating that Steve should sit with her. He hesitated, usually when the two were together, Steve usually just sat in the chair and kept a small distance from Marcella. Even now though, as Steve gazed at her, everything about her seemed warm and inviting, so he obeyed the small gesture and slipped his shoes off before taking a seat next to her on the bed.

It was obvious that the mattress was only meant for one person, Steve noticed when his arm grazed hers, but he didn't really mind all that much and carefully leaned back into the pillows as well.

Within an hour of the movie starting, Marcella was already crying, though she denied it when Steve asked if she needed a tissue.

By the end of the movie, Marcella's eyes were closed and her head gently rested against Steve's bicep.

The Captain realized just how heavy of a sleeper she was when he carefully wrapped a throw blanket around her small body and readjusted her head so she was in a comfier sleeping position. He turned the TV off and flicked the light switch off, deciding to leave the lamp on her desk turned on, that way she would know where she was when she woke up again. Steve stared at her sleeping figure for a minute, unaware of the fond smile that had spread across his lips. The tiny lady looked like she was at peace with herself and Steve took in the relaxed features on her face.

Everything had been so confusing when he reemerged from the ice after seventy years of sleeping and he had felt so lost, but when he was with Marcella, he felt like he had found a place in this new world. She never talked to him like he was dumb or incapable of thriving in today's society, instead she helped him and answered all of his questions to the best of her knowledge without judging him. Even though she had a shy and quiet demeanor, she could still make him laugh even when he wasn't having that great of a day.

After everything that had happened with Loki and the Chitauri, Marcella reminded Steve that there were still some genuinely good people in this world.

“Nobody will ever hurt you, Marcella,” He promised softly, “Not if I can help it.”

Two days later.

“There she is! The woman of the hour!”

Marcella's green eyes widened and her freckled cheeks turned a bright shade of pink when Tony pointed at her as she entered the Avengers dining area; Steve had already heard the sound of her crutches clicking softly on the hardwood floors before she had entered the room. She wore a pair of cut off shorts and a white t-shirt with some kind of logo that Steve didn't recognize on the back of the shirt and it looked like she had just woken up. She caught Steve's lingering gaze that was directed towards the white bandage wrapped around her slender leg, and her cheeks turned an even brighter shade of pink; Steve felt his cheeks get warm too. Though it was only ten in the morning, everyone was already dressed and ready to tackle whatever obstacles were thrown at them.

“I made some pancakes!” Clint spoke proudly, ignoring Natasha's irritated expression, “They're chocolate chip and they're actually not that bad, help yourself, dear.”

“I did most of the work,” Natasha said, “He just watched and made more of a mess than necessary.”

Marcella leaned her crutches against the counter top and gently made her way to the only open seat that was in between Tony and her dad; she ignored the burning in her thigh and calf as Bruce pulled
the chair out for her. Tony gave her a friendly clap on the back as she sat down in the chair and everyone raised their brows at Tony's uncharacteristically friendly disposition.

“The science crew is here and ready to raise hell,” He passed the plate of pancakes to Marcella, who gently grabbed two fluffy pancakes from the stack. Her cheeks were still a bright shade of pink as she poured some syrup over her pancakes and began cutting them into smaller pieces; she could hear Tony still talking about how the three of them could be some sort of holy trinity, but she tuned the conversation out as she began eating her food. Her cheeks were slightly puffed out from the food she had stuffed in her mouth and she raised her thick brows at how nice Mr. Stark was being towards her as he asked her about her studies and her next big project.

“Sheesh kid,” Tony noticed how fast she was eating, “Slow down, I'm sure the last thing Bruce wants to see is me performing the Heimlich maneuver on his young daughter.”

Bruce, who had been drinking orange juice, coughed and sputtered as the acidic liquid went down the wrong way.

“Sorry,” She mumbled, trying her hardest to not smirk, “I didn't realize how hungry I was until I started eating.”

“That's just how good my pancakes are,” Clint commented proudly, earning an irritated glance from Natasha. The group of heroes continued to talk amongst themselves and Marcella couldn't help but to feel a little out of place, but she remained quiet anyways and continued to keep to herself as she ate the pancakes contently. Even Steve, who was normally quiet during these team breakfasts, spoke every now and then and Marcella realized just how comfortable everyone had gotten with one another.

“So, Marcella,” Clint said randomly, gaining the woman's attention; her cheeks were puffed up as she peered at the archer, “What are you planning on doing after everything that just happened? Are you going to join us and fight crime?”

He made karate chop motions and Marcella smiled softly at his antics.

Everyone grew quiet and waited for the quiet Banner girl's answer.

“Well,” She started and swallowed the food in her mouth, “I'm uh, graduating from Columbia next semester and I was recruited by one of my professors to travel to Syria and help create affordable prosthetics for amputees who need them. The whole country has just been... in complete and utter turmoil for the last few years and there's so many people who aren't getting the medical attention they need. I've been um, working on these prosthetics that are extremely durable and are easy for amputees to become accustomed to; they have these really comfortable sockets that don't chaff and blister the user's skin. Since the prosthetic is actually connected to the amputees nerves, it almost starts to feel like a real limb—not an artificial one.”

“Aren't you worried about going somewhere so dangerous?” Steve asked, seeming genuinely interested.

“Well, um,” Steve watched as she shifted anxiously in her chair, “Not necessarily. Sure, the country is in complete chaos, but there's people there who desperately need the help and the rest of the world just doesn't care and refuses to send over any help. I understand that at the moment, America is more concerned with starting wars than helping other countries who are in dire need of aid, but I have access to the proper resources and technology to make a difference and give people a second chance at maybe living a normal life and I want to take advantage of it.”
“Didn’t you go to Yemen last year for kind of the same thing?” Clint questioned with a mouthful of food.

“Yeah,” She smiled softly, “That was the one where Natasha had to go with me to make sure I didn’t get shot.”

The red-haired woman smirked softly, “You almost walked right onto a landmine—I swear, you’re so clueless sometimes.”

“Yeah that was my fault,” She blushed and stared down at her plate, “I got so distracted by a really cute baby—it was literally the cutest baby I had ever seen and I just had to say hi to him and the mom.”

“God woman, it’s a good thing you’re not a SHIELD agent,” Natasha chuckled and shook her head, “You seem really passionate about helping these people though; you must be excited to be going back.”

Steve noticed the way her shoulders sagged and how Bruce tensed up.

“I don’t know,” Marcella said quietly, “I might not be able to go, now. I messed up my leg pretty bad and the doctors have been telling me that rehabilitation could take up to a year and it’s not in my best interest to be traveling during that time. I’ve been having to complete all of my assignments online too.”

Everyone at the table grew quiet at her somber tone, and suddenly Marcella didn't feel so hungry. Not wanting to be rude and disrespect Natasha's cooking, she forced down the rest of her pancakes and excused herself from the table. She heard Tony say something along the lines of, “well, that just took a turn for the worst, way to go Mother Russia”, and then Marcella heard Natasha say some sort of scathing threat to the billionaire. Marcella knew that Natasha hadn't meant to upset her, it's just the way the red-haired assassin was and that she couldn't help but to ask a lot of questions. While she didn't care too much, Marcella had always had the impression that Natasha didn't like her and she wasn't sure if it was just because she thought Marcella was weak, or the fact that the SHIELD agent had gotten stuck guarding the anthropologist on one of her medical research missions. It had seemed like such a measly mission for the Black Widow, and even to this day, Marcella couldn't fathom how she had been chosen to watch her. Though it seemed like the assassin didn't hold much respect for her, Marcella still couldn't help but to admire the beauty and determination that Natasha possessed; she strutted like she could murder someone at any moment, and people feared just the sight of her.

As they should.

Marcella remembered what Steve had told her, about how it took a certain kind of strength to be gentle and kind, and for some reason, something warm bloomed in the pit of her stomach. The soft words comforted her when she started to feel down in the dumps, and his voice had held such a great amount of sincerity as he spoke to her.

She remembered the soft look in his blue eyes and she felt her cheeks get warm.

“Marcie!”

The Banner girl froze in her tracks and glanced over her shoulder; Steve had slowed his quick pace down to a steady walk and gazed at her with that same soft expression on his face. He slowly approached Marcella, noticing the pink color that tainted her freckled cheeks and Steve's hand went to the back of his neck sheepishly.
“Hi Steve,” She said in her quiet voice; her slender fingers shifted nervously around the bars of the crutches she wielded. Marcella's green eyes found Steve's blue ones and while she had always had trouble making eye contact with others, she found it hard to look away from Steve.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay, you seemed a little upset back there.”

She seemed surprised by his concern, “M okay, Steve. I appreciate your concern.”

“No problem, Marcie,” He stared at her for another moment before speaking again, “Do you maybe want to get out of the tower for a few? I don't know about you, but sometimes this place feels like it's caving in on me.”

“I understand,” She could definitely relate to him, “I would like that a lot, actually. Let me uh, just put on some shoes.”

“I'll be waiting downstairs in the lobby.”

Marcella hobbled to her temporary bedroom in Stark's tower—cleanup and repairs had been coming along nicely and she couldn't even tell that the room she currently resided in had been destroyed in the battle. After finding a pair of socks and pulling on her comfortable sneakers, Marcella glanced at herself at the floor-to-ceiling mirror doors that led to her closet. She was surprised when she saw her reflection; there were dark circles underneath her eyes and her eyelids were a reddish color and she realized she hadn't been sleeping all that well. Marcella had always been small, even when she was growing up, but when she lifted her shirt and saw her reflection, she could easily see her ribs and hip bones and immediately grew upset.

Suddenly she felt insecure.

She spotted a picture on her nightstand—one of her and her father at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science from two years ago. Marcella seemed happier then, carefree and unburdened with the terrors of this world she had since experienced. She couldn't detect any dark circles or bags underneath her eyes in the picture, and her body seemed healthier and fuller. A genuine smile graced her lips, and though her father seemed nervous in the picture, he seemed genuinely happy as well. Marcella thought about her father's disappointment when she had been trying to convince him that going back to a country like Yemen or Syria wasn't a horrible idea; he had seemed tired and almost sad, and a part of her wondered if he would have been better off without her. Certainly there were times where she stressed him out beyond belief, and Marcella couldn't even begin to imagine how hard it was for him to have to parent her all by himself.

'He would have been better off abandoning me... I'm surprised he hasn't yet...'

Marcella snapped out of her daze and quickly exited her room, trying to shake off the bad feeling about herself in the pit of her stomach.

Just like Steve had said, he was waiting for her in the lobby; his arms were crossed over his broad chest and every now and then, he would nod with a small smile when someone said hello to him. Marcella mustered up a weak smile when he spotted her and he returned it; something was off with her demeanor, but Steve decided to not bring it up—it wasn't his business and he wasn't going to pry.

“If you want, we can take a taxi to Central Park?” Marcella suggested, “And then get some lunch after?”

“That sounds nice,” Steve smiled, and it really did. It felt like he had been cooped up in Stark's tower for weeks and he could definitely use some fresh air. After Steve hailed a cab for the two of them,
and Marcella got all situated in the back of the cab with her crutches, the pair fell into a comfortable silence and every now and then, they would offer one another a smile. Marcella noticed the way the cab driver would glance into his rear view mirror on numerous occasions, and she certainly didn’t miss the disapproving look in his eyes every time he did this. After the fifth time he did this, Steve sent the driver a cold glare—which surprised Marcella—and the man stopped after that.

“I got it,” Steve insisted when Marcella went to pull some money out of her back pocket. Before she could argue, Steve had already pulled thirty dollars out of his wallet and hastily handed it to the man before helping the injured woman out of the cab. Much to Marcella's amusement, Steve glared at the taxi cab as it quickly drove away and sped down the street.

“Thank you for paying,” She said softly, “That was nice of you.”

The blonde shrugged, “Anytime. What do you think that guy's problem was? He kept giving you mean looks.”

“He's an old white dude,” She scoffed and peered up at Steve with an amused expression, “A lot of baby boomers in this area don't really like seeing white people with people that aren't... white, I suppose. He probably thought we were a couple, which makes it even worse.”

Steve's eyes narrowed in disbelief, “You're joking, right?”

“I wish I was, big guy.”

“That's ridiculous,” He huffed, much to Marcella's amusement, “I mean, I'm an old white dude and I don't care.”

Marcella snorted and giggled as the two made their way through the park, “I think it's a bit different with you. I mean, I get that you're technically almost a hundred years old, but you obviously don't have the mentality of a hundred year old cranky white dude. Besides, you grew up in Brooklyn and that area is typically more diverse than this area. You should see the way people look at me when I'm walking around upper Manhattan after my classes; you would have thought I'd grown a second head or something.”

“Are you not bothered by being treated this way?”

She raised her eyebrows at how heated he sounded, “Obviously I'm bothered by it. Like, you would think in the twenty-first century racism wouldn't be as big of a problem as it was in the twentieth century, but it is and it just doesn't surprise me anymore. I've just... gotten used to it, I suppose. It sucks and it still hurts, but there's not a whole lot I can do about it besides continue on with my life and ignore people like that taxi driver.”

“Well,” He started, “I'm sorry you have to deal with that, it doesn't really seem fair to me.”

“S okay Steve, really,” She smiled sadly, “Do you... do you mind if we find a place to sit? My leg is kind of hurting.”

“How about under that tree over there?” Steve nodded to a large oak tree with hundreds of beautiful, lush green leaves attached to the branches. Marcella nodded and the two made their way to tree; Marcella took great relief in the shade that it provided and she slowly sat down in the plush grass, being mindful of her damaged leg. She set her crutches next to her and smiled when Steve copied her actions and sat right next to her, resting his arms on top of his bent knees. They people-watched for a while; enjoying watching families playing frisbee and the loud shrieks of laughter coming from small children. Steve glanced at her and noticed the way she stared up at the thick branches with a content
expression on her features, watching as leaves slowly departed from the tree and traveled along with the soft breeze.

“Do you remember what you wanted to be when you were that little?” Steve asked, nodding towards an adorable little girl who looked no older than five years old. She wore a pretty red and blue dress—very patriotic—and was rolling around and twirling on her toes in the grass; her parents watched from a distance with large grins on both of their faces.

“Sure,” Marcella smirked, “I wanted to be an astronaut.”

Steve grinned, “Bruce must have been ecstatic.”

Her smirk fell into a soft smile, “I'm not uh... I didn't even know Bruce when I was that little. He uh, he and his fiancee, Betty, found me in the streets when I was seven years old. They um... I'm not blood related, they just kind of adopted me after they found out that she couldn't have children. I don't remember a whole lot about them taking me in, but it took me forever to trust them apparently; I had been living on the streets and in foster homes up until that point and couldn't really fathom having parents.”

Marcella seemed somewhat somber talking about it and Steve immediately felt awful, “I'm sorry, I didn't even think about--”

“No,” She interrupted with the tiniest smile, not seeming offended in the slightest, “Don't be sorry, you couldn't have known. I'm not ashamed of being adopted and I don't think I would change having them as parents, even though mistakes in the past have nearly torn me and my dad apart. It's just... I was alone for a long time before they found me. I don't really remember that much of what happened because I was so young, but that's the one thing I try to forget... being alone and in the dark for that long. Even now, I don't really care too much for the dark.”

Steve stared at her as she spoke and realized how brave she seemed in that moment.

Marcella stared at her hands for a few moments before speaking again, “I think I was eight years old when I realized I didn't want to be an astronaut anymore... I wanted to be a scientist like my mom and dad.”

“He's proud of you,” Steve said softly and her green eyes met his blue ones, “I see the look in his eyes whenever he talks about you, he really likes to brag about you to everyone, especially Tony. You know... if you wanted, you could easily have a place on this team; everyone loves you, Marce.”

“I'm just an engineer,” She reminded him with a small shrug, “I'm not... amazing like you or my father or even Tony. Sure, I would like to change this world, but there's not really a whole lot I can do.”

“I know, but there's a lot of scientists and doctors who live in the tower and work for Stark.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue but she cut him off gently.

“Please Steve,” Marcella interjected softly, “I don't need you to make me feel better and I don't need anyone's pity.”

“Marcella,” Steve whispered, but he couldn't find the words to say that he liked her just the way she was. The small girl was soft and smiley and warm and she was so incredibly smart and Steve wished she could see herself the way he saw her. He wished he could tell her how amazing she was without making himself sound like a bumbling idiot.
Steve wished he could do more to help.

“I'll be okay, Steve.”
Clint's mouth dropped at the confession, “How can you like a Fast and Furious movie with no Vin Diesel or Michelle Rodriguez?!”

“Look buddy, it's not my fault you have some kind of weird obsession with Vin Diesel.”

Marcella sighed as she stared at the construction sight in front of her.

While months had passed and the attack on New York still lingered in the back of her mind, Columbia continued the long process of restoring the numerous buildings that had collapsed and had also destroyed much of the precious equipment that those buildings contained. The science building as well as the library had suffered the most, obviously excluding the victims that had been in those buildings. Marcella didn't even notice one of the construction workers glancing at her with a sympathetic expression as he noticed the chunky cast around her leg and the scars that marred her warm brown skin. Her green eyes held a great amount of sadness as she watched the workers attempt to resurrect the science building that she had always loved since she was a freshman—it was a place where she always felt comfortable and happy, even safe.

Using her crutches, Marcella hobbled a few steps closer to the construction site until she was right in front of a little memorial with sixteen little white crosses pushed into the soil of the Earth—all with the names of the students and the one professor who had perished in the attack. Her eyes closed as she tried to block out the images of seeing another student being crushed by the ceiling collapsing on him and the severed limbs she had witnessed before her own demise. Marcella recalled the searing pain in her abdomen, where she had been impaled by a metal beam—she remembered how hard it had been to breathe and how incredibly thirsty she had been and how she thought for sure she was going to die.

“Miss?” She vaguely heard a voice call out to her, “Are you okay?”

Marcella hadn't realized how badly she had been shaking—how hard her heart had been pounding in her chest. Tears had formed in her eyes and she forced them away, not wanting to cry in front of this stranger; she didn't even like to cry in front of her own dad.

“Hello? Are you okay? Is there someone you can call to help you?”

“Dad” She gasped out and watched as the man—the construction worker who had previously been watching her—furrowed his eyebrows.

“You need to breathe, miss,” He reminded her as she gasped sharply, “Do you have a cell phone or would you like to use mine?”

She shook her head, of course she had a cell phone, why wouldn't she?
Shakily, Marcella pulled her phone from her pocket and speed-dialed her father. Gently, the older, kind man took her crutches and helped her sit on the lush grass, keeping his hand in between her shoulders as she hunched over and attempted to control her breathing. She listened to her phone ring and prayed her dad answered; luckily after a few rings, a familiar voice met her ears.

“Hey Marcella, is everything okay?”

She broke down almost immediately at her father's concerned tone, “D-Dad there's something w-wrong with me, I-I think I'm h-having another p-panic attack.”

“It's okay Marcie,” He tried to comfort her to the best of his abilities, “Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and count to ten—just like we practiced. Can you do that?”

“Y-Yes, I think so,” Marcella whimpered and closed her eyes, “Don't hang up.”

“I won't, I promise. Count to ten out loud, I'll count with you.”

“Okay, okay,” She nodded and breathed deeply, “One, two, three...”

Bruce counted with her, the sound of her father's soothing tone comforted her and she opened her eyes once she was sure she was mentally stable. The construction worker took his hand off her shoulder and stood up, giving her a reassuring nod before returning to his job. Marcella's eyes closed once again as she sighed deeply and dropped her head into the palm of her hand, rubbing her forehead tiredly.

“What happened, Marce?”

“It's dumb.”

“No it's not, especially if it triggered you like that.”

“I was walking back from class and passed by where they're doing construction on the science building and there was... there's a memorial for the victims, for the people who died in the attack. It just... I guess it just affected me more than I thought it would.”

“Oh Marcie,” Her father sighed, sounding sad, “I know these thoughts and feelings you have are scary, but they can't hurt you anymore... it's in the past.”

“I know,” She whispered, “I just can't help it... I feel like I should have died in the attack... I just feel so guilty.”

“Don't say that Marcella,” Bruce still spoke softly, but now he was a little more stern, “You are so precious and I am so incredibly grateful to have you in my life and to be able to call you my daughter. Everyone here loves you and cherishes your presence around the tower; please don't ever think you're not loved by so many people.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean...”

“I understand, Marcella, I really do. If you ever need to talk, I'm always going to be here for you no matter what, but I don't ever want you to feel worthless or unloved.”

Marcella wiped her cheeks and nodded, “Thank you dad, I love you so much.”

“I love you too Marce, don't you ever forget that,” He replied kindly, “Do you want me to come pick you up?”
“If you're not busy, I'd appreciate it.”

“I'll be there in fifteen.”

Later that night.

“I don’t know what to do Tony, this is the fifth panic attack she has had in a month.”

Marcella squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped the navy blue fleece blanket tighter around her shivering body; she tried to block out her dad's and Tony's conversation that she had accidentally overheard earlier when walking to the kitchen to get some tea. She knew she should have turned around, but the concerned tone of her dad’s voice grounded her in place and caused her to freeze up.

“She'll be fine,” Tony reassured the doctor with a wave of his hand, “We've all seen some serious shit and we're okay.”

“No we're not,” Bruce argued, “You’re having panic attacks too, Steve is having nightmares, and Clint is still traumatized after that whole being controlled by Loki's staff ordeal. I don't think any of us are really okay and I have no idea what she must have seen when her school was attacked, but it haunts her every single night when she tries to sleep. Her eyes are filled with so much torment and I can hear her screaming from my room every night from whatever nightmares she is having!”

Marcella saw the tears well up in her father's eyes and she couldn't help her own tears.

“Nothing about this is okay!” He seethed and Tony inhaled deeply as the older Banner curled his fingers into fists, “She is suffering and I don't know how to help her, I don't know how to make the pain go away!”

“Okay,” Tony spoke in a quiet, soft tone that Marcella wasn't used to, “As much as it kills me to say it, you're right. I'm sorry about Marcella, I really am, Banner. That kid is so incredibly smart and kind and didn't deserve what happened to her... none of those students did. If you'd like... I can have Pepper find the best therapist in New York and have her make an appointment with your kid.”

Bruce stared at Tony for a moment before nodding, “I'd really appreciate that, I'll talk to Marcella about it.”

Marcella's father had kept true to his word, and had talked to her later that day about the possibility of seeing a therapist. She had argued against going until she noticed the tears in her father's eyes once again and spoke with a shaky voice.

“I don't want to see my daughter suffer anymore.”

That had done it for Marcella; she couldn't bear to see her father cry because of her.

Now she sat in her bedroom in the newly revamped Avengers tower, her blanket wrapped impossibly tight around her as she tried to control her shivering. The Banner girl heard a knock on her door but didn't answer, she figured it was either her dad or maybe even Tony asking for an opinion on his latest project. For some reason, the billionaire enjoyed hearing her feedback on his ideas and genuinely took them to heart. Tony would never admit it, but he certainly had a soft spot in his usually cold heart for Bruce Banner's kindhearted daughter.

“Marcella?”

She lifted her head and stared at the tall blonde who stood in her doorway, “Is it okay if I come in?”
She nodded and leaned up against her headboard, watching as Steve—still in his uniform—quietly sauntered into her room and gently propped his shield up against the side of her desk before taking a seat in the desk chair. He must have just gotten back from a mission, Marcella noted, and decided he looked incredibly out of place in her bedroom. He gazed up, where there were hundred of stars and galaxies that were projected onto her ceiling; it had been a gift from her dad a long time ago when he learned that she was still interested in space travel and astronomy. He would oftentimes point at the realistic looking constellations and tell her about them until she would fall asleep to the sound of his voice; Marcella remembered him doing this on the nights where she would wake up from nightmares.

Steve gazed at the photographs on her desk, some were with a few friends he obviously didn't recognize, but there were quite a few with Dr. Banner and what he assumed to be Marcella's mother. Gently, Steve picked up a frame containing a picture of Bruce and Marcella from when she was a little girl. It must have been on Halloween because the curly-haired girl was dressed up as an astronaut and Dr. Banner was wearing a NASA t-shirt—Steve thought it was adorable, to say the least. The older scientists was holding his daughter in his arms, both of them beaming at the camera and it was the happiest expression that Steve had ever seen on the scientist's face. He assumed it must have been before the gamma ray accident, because Steve and even Marcella hadn't seen the older man smile that big in such a long time.

"Yours and Bruce's relationship reminds me of me and my mom," Steve finally spoke as he placed the picture frame back on the desk and glanced at the young woman who was still huddled up into a tiny ball, "She was so kindhearted but could be so fierce when it came to protecting me, just like how Bruce is with you."

"What happened to her?" She spoke softly, "If you don't mind me asking."

"It's okay, it happened so long ago," He shrugged and gave her a sad smile, "She worked in a tuberculosis ward as a nurse and eventually got sick as well; even she couldn't fight it and ended up dying. She pretty much raised me herself, my father had died in World War I from a mustard gas attack; it was hard but we made it work. After she died, the only family I had was Bucky."

Marcella didn't say anything and for a moment Steve was worried that he had upset her too much.

"Come here," She murmured softly, patting the spot next to her.

Steve followed her command and warily stood up, tired from his mission but he had found it nearly impossible to deny the Banner girl anything. He plopped down next to her on her soft mattress and leaned against the headboard as well, their arms grazing. Gently, Marcella looped her arm around his and rested her head against his bicep. It was a kind, friendly gesture and somehow made him feel less empty. Steve moved his head so his cheek was resting on top of her soft curls and accepted the comfort she offered him, hoping he could offer her some comfort as well. The two gazed up at the cosmos displayed on her ceiling for a few moments, a comfortable silence surrounding them.

"My mom got cancer," She finally spoke and met Steve's soft expression after a moment of hesitation, "She was very beautiful and had always been so full of life... I think it broke my dad's heart to see the state she was in before she passed. I think he also blamed himself for her death; she had been in that gamma radiation explosion that made my dad the way he is now, but obviously her side effects were completely opposite from his. She died a few months after that and then my dad just... disappeared. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months, I had been living with my abusive grandfather for almost a year since he was my last living guardian and then my Dad showed up out of nowhere one day."

"I can't remember ever being that angry in my life," Steve remained quiet and solemn as she told her
sad story, “I was full of so much hatred and I even resented him; what kind of father leaves his own child with the same man that abused him as a child? I thought he had abandoned me because I wasn't his real daughter... I was just some pathetic little foster kid that him and his fiancee had picked up off the streets. There was no way this man could love something that wasn't his by blood... that's what I thought and I figured he had been punishing me by leaving me with such an abusive man. Then he came back and...”

“Hey,” Steve whispered when he noticed how badly she was shaking, “You don't have to continue, it's okay.”

Marcella ignored him and continued anyways, “He saw all my bruises and scars and cuts and he just lost it; that was the first time I ever saw the other guy—Hulk.”

“Did he kill him?”

“No,” She shook her head, “I think he really wanted to, and I think it took everything in him not to, but he just... grabbed me and got me out of there as fast as he could. I wanted to hate him so much, but the way he cried that whole night... it was like listening to an animal suffering—I’d never heard anything so heartbreaking in my life. I couldn't hate him after that, not after seeing how torn up he was. Even now I sometimes see remorse in his eyes when he looks at me; I don't... I don't know if he'll ever forgive himself but I know he wasn't in the right state of mind when he first left. He had been so depressed and I'm sure it had been overwhelming with the other guy constantly in his subconscious... but it still hurts to think about it.”

“I can't believe you went through all of that, doll,” The pet name surprised her but she didn't comment on it, “To forgive someone after having to endure something so horrible... you have such a good heart.”

“It took me a long time to trust people after that,” She murmured and refused to meet his eyes, “My father, while he has made horrible mistakes, he is a good person and means well. I'd like to think most people are that way—that most people are good at heart but lately I'm not so sure.”

Steve lifted his head and gazed down at her sad features, “Hey, don't let people like... Loki, ruin the way you see others. I wish I could see the world the same way you see it—how you manage to find beauty in even the worst situations. I had lost my faith in humankind after the war, but you've helped me see others in a different light, Marce. You are such a genuinely good person, please don't let your heart grow hard.”

That made Marcella smile softly.

“Why are you so wise?”

“Well, you know what they say about always listening to your elders, they are the wisest.”

“I keep forgetting how old you are,” She giggled, making Steve smile as well.

“I don't know how you could forget when Tony literally cracks jokes about it every time I enter the room.”

“Yeah,” She let out a breathy laugh, “Tony cracks jokes about everyone, don't let it get to you too much.”

“He doesn't crack jokes about you,” He argued smoothly, “Everyone really likes you, Marcella—it's impossible to not like you when you're always such a ray of sunshine around the tower.”
“I don't think so, Steve” Her cheeks grew pink and the expression on Steve's face must have been an offended one because she giggled again.

“It's a relief to be around you,” Steve continued, his expression serious “You're kind and quiet when all we really know is the sound of guns firing and loud explosions and bad people who just want to kill us. Being around someone like you and having a normal conversation is a breath of fresh air; I have no idea how you do it, but the room literally lights up when you walk in. I've never met anyone who has that kind of strength... I think that's beautiful in its own right.”

Steve noticed the way her cheeks grew a brighter shade of pink, but didn't say anything about it. He didn't want to come off as being weird, but he truly meant what he said and hoped Marcella didn't doubt it. Even today, after arriving at the tower after a four day mission with Natasha, the first person he had wanted to see was Marcella and he didn't even want to wait until after a shower and nap. He hoped he didn't smell too much of sweat and blood, but if he did, Marcella didn't say anything about it.

“My dad wants me to see a therapist.”

The admission made him freeze and he stared at the Banner girl in shock.

She fiddled around with her fingers as she continued to speak, “I-I had a panic attack after class today; I was just walking in front of where the old science building used to be and I saw they put a memorial there for all the victims in the attack and I just... lost it. I couldn't breathe and I was shaking so bad; one of the construction workers came over and helped me but this isn't the first time this has happened. I just keep having these panic attacks over these small, trivial situations like being in an elevator or hearing loud noises. My nightmares are getting worse and worse and I dread going to sleep at night. I don't think I've gotten a full night of sleep in over two weeks Steve... I keep seeing my peers and them being crushed to death and people running around with severed limbs.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose as she shook her head, “It's so horrible Steve.”

Marcella tensed up for a fleeting moment as Steve's giant arms wrapped around her small frame in a tight hug, “Go see a therapist Marcie, it'll help you to talk about everything to a professional. There's no shame in therapy or having to take medicine to help you become emotionally stable.”

“I know,” She whispered and felt herself relax against his hard frame, “I just don't know how I'll be able to talk about any of this to a stranger when I can barely talk to my dad about it.”

Steve smiled, “I'm sure it won't be easy, but you're tough and you've made it this far.”

“I suppose,” She shrugged, “Thank you for talking Steve, it really means a lot.”

“Anytime, Marce,” Steve reassured her, standing up from her soft bed, “I'll always be here for you if you need to talk.”

“Same, Steve,” The curly-haired Banner girl beamed up at him, “But no offense, you should really go take a shower.”

“Do I really smell that bad?”

“I've been breathing through my mouth this whole time.”

Steve snorted at her very rare sarcastic insult, “I'm hurt, Marce.”

“Well, go sulk in the shower because I need to light some candles in here.”
“Oh,” Steve raised his eyebrows and grinned at the smirking girl, “I see how it is.”

A few days later.

“Marcie, could you please just back up a little?”

Her freckled cheeks turned a light shade of pink and Marcella quietly took a step away from the project Tony was hunched over—prosthetic limbs that were of the same caliber of his iron suits. For some reason, Marcella’s heart had soared when she had explained her idea to him and his own eyes had lit up; though he would deny it, Marcella couldn’t help but to think that Tony Stark was more selfless than most people thought. She thought about all of the soldiers overseas who had lost limbs in the war and people in her own country who had been subject to diseases and terrorist attacks—what this could do for them, how this could change the science and medicine world tremendously. Tony had seen firsthand the atrocities of wars; he had been in the Middle East when his vehicle had been attacked by one of his own weapons that he had sold to the bad guys and Marcella knew that had truly opened his eyes and changed his heart.

She respected the billionaire for his ability to apologize and turn his life around because after everything that had happened with her own dad, she knew how hard it could be for a grown man to admit that he was wrong.

“--and now I just connect these two wires and--”

Before he could finish, Tony was thrown backwards from the force of a powerful shock from the machinery he had been tinkering around with.

“Shit.” He grunted and placed his palm on the back of his head, “Wrong wires... wrong fucking wires.”

Marcella’s eyes were wide and filled with concern as she cautiously approached the engineer, who had propped himself up against the wall adjacent from his work desk. She knelt down next to him and gently placed her small hand where his had previously been, a frown spreading across her full lips when she felt a warm liquid cover her fingertips.

“Mr. Stark, you're bleeding,” She noted, “You should go to Dr. Cho and have it looked at.”

“Oh, that's nothing; I'll be fine, kid.”

“You hit your head pretty hard,” The Banner girl argued and Tony's face scrunched up at her concerned tone, “You should really go get that checked out in case you're concussed.”

Tony grunted when she gently helped him up and softly grabbed the sleeve of his shirt, urging him out of the lab and into the quiet corridor. Surprisingly enough, Tony let the smaller lady tug him down the hallway and into the elevator, keeping his palm pressed to the back of his head to help the bleeding slow down.

“Jarvis, can you please let Dr. Cho know that we're going to need her to look at Tony's head.”

“Right away Miss Banner,” The AI replied politely, and then as if to sass Tony, “Is the damage external or internal.”

“It's debatable,” Marcella snickered at the offended expression on Stark's face, “External Jarvis—possibly internal as well.”

“I will notify Dr. Cho immediately.”
“I really need to reprogram him to be a less sarcastic,” Tony mumbled under his breath, making Marcella grin. The unlikely pair was quiet as the elevator doors opened after a minute and Marcella kept her hand on Tony's arm as she led him down the hall and into Dr. Cho's office. There was already another patient in the room and when Tony saw who it was, he immediately groaned and tried to turn around, stopping halfway when Marcella grabbed his bicep and tugged him back into the room. He was genuinely surprised by how strong she could be, easily keeping him grounded in place as he glared at the man who was lying down on the exam table.

“Well shit,” Clint grinned at the two of them, “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Shut it, Legolas.”

“Shove it up your ass and choke on my di--”

“Okay,” Dr. Cho interrupted before Clint could finish, “Marcella, what happened?”

“Lab accident,” She explained and watched closely as Tony sat on one of the examination tables, “He got electrocuted working on one of his projects and the force of the shock knocked him out of the chair and he hit his head on the floor. There was some bleeding but I was just worried he might be concussed.”

“You worry too much, kid,” Stark grunted as Dr. Cho shined a light in his eyes, “I'm totally—ow!”

Marcella shifted nervously as Tony closed his eyes in an effort to block out the bright light; Clint, noticing the worried expression on her face gently placed his hand on her shoulder.

“C'mon Mars Bars,” The nickname made her grin softly, “I'm done here, want to go get some food with me? I think Natasha is cooking dinner tonight.”

“Okay,” She agreed softly and turned back to Tony, “A- Are you going to be okay here?”

Her question seemed to take him by surprise but he nodded and waved his hand nonchalantly, “I'm good, thanks for taking care of me kid, between you and Pepper, I feel spoiled sometimes.”

She smiled softly, “Bye Tony, get better.”

With that, Marcella and Clint made their way to the kitchen. The two were mostly quiet but occasionally Clint would ask her a couple of questions like how school was going and what classes she was taking. He was trying to get her mind off of what had happened to Tony and she was grateful for that. Though she knew Tony would be alright, she hated to see any of her friends injured.

Then out of nowhere, he asked, “Hey, is it weird having someone like Bruce as a parent?”

Her eyes widened at the strange question, “Someone... like Bruce? What do you mean?”

“Your dad is a superhero,” He shrugged, “Out of all of us he's the only one that has a kid and I was just wondering what that must feel like for you?”

“I don't know,” She shrugged and gazed up at the archer for a moment, “I don't... I don't really think of him as a superhero. Before any of that happened to him, he was just my dad and I suppose that's all I really think of him as. I-I see the way people look at him sometimes though, like they're scared of him; he says it doesn't bother him but sometimes I think he's lonely... I'm glad he has you guys though.”
Clint smiled at her timid response and placed his hand on her shoulder once again, “You're such a good person, it's easy to see why Steve cares about you so much.”

Her green eyes widened and her cheeks grew pink at his words, “Steve is my friend.”

“Okay,” Clint grinned knowingly, making Marcella's eyes narrow.

“Don't do that.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Just say it,” Marcella huffed as they made their way off the elevator and to the kitchen.

“I'm not going to jump to conclusions, but I see the way he looks at you compared to everyone else and I guess it makes sense since you were the first real friend he made since coming out of the ice. He's so quiet but the second someone even mentions your name he just perks up like a puppy after seeing its human come home after a long trip.”

Marcella shook her head as they paused in front of the door that led to the kitchen and the main room where the Avengers and other staff usually hung out. The usual playful glint in the archer's eyes were gone and had been replaced with a softer, more serious expression.

“I never noticed.”

“Well, it's safe to say the rest of us have,” Clint smirked, “I think Bruce is worried that the star-spangled man is going to whisk away his daughter.”

The young lady rolled her eyes, “Trust me Clint, me and Steve are just friends, I'm sure he doesn't like me anymore than that.”

The archer held the door to the main room open for her and shrugged, “I guess we'll just have to see.”

Marcella shook her head and greeted Natasha, who was cooking some sort of pasta dish for dinner. Bruce lingered in the kitchen, handing her ingredients whenever she asked and Steve and Thor sat on the couch watching some sort of action movie. Marcella smiled at the small, dysfunctional group and followed Clint to the leather couch, taking a seat on the sectional part.

“Fast and Furious?” Clint scoffed, “Really guys? It's not even a good one, Tokyo Drift was literally the worst Fast and Furious movie produced.”

“I liked Tokyo Drift,” Marcella interjected with a grin, gaining Steve and Thor's attention, “I thought it was a pretty decent movie.”

“None of the original characters were even in it! Vin Diesel doesn't show up until like five seconds before the ending.”

“That's why I liked it.”

Clint's mouth dropped at the confession, “How can you like a Fast and Furious movie with no Vin Diesel or Michelle Rodriguez?!”

“Look buddy, it's not my fault you have some kind of weird obsession with Vin Diesel.”

Steve watched with the tiniest smile as the two continued to argue; even Natasha, who watched with crossed arms from the kitchen, with an amused expression as Clint got all riled up and Marcella
remained incredibly calm. Eventually, Natasha finished dinner and she started handing out bowls filled to the brim with pasta puttanesca out to everyone, Marcella being the first to receive her food, much to Clint's dismay. Since Tony wasn't there, they all sat on the couch as they ate and watched the movie contently.

The Captain stole a glance at Marcella and smiled when he saw Bruce offering her some of his garlic bread; she accepted it with a huge grin on her face. Thor was shoving food into his mouth so fast and Clint watched with fascination and horror as the Asgardian finished his bowl of pasta within a matter of minutes. Natasha remained quiet as she swiftly changed the channel to an action movie that looked a lot better than the previous and Marcella immediately grew excited when she realized it was Mad Max: Fury Road. Natasha was pleasantly surprised when Marcella mentioned how much she loved the movie, more specifically, Charlize Theron's character, Furiosa.

“All I'm saying is that you should totally shave your head—you would make a great Furiosa.”

Natasha scoffed and raised her perfectly plucked brows at Marcella, “You know how potatoes start to look after they’ve been boiling for too long? That's how I would look if I shaved my head, kid. However, I think you could actually pull off that whole look; it'd probably make you look like a little badass.”

“You think?” The way Marcella gasped softly earned a couple of laughs from the team, “Ugh, don't give me any ideas... if I shave my head, I'm totally getting a head tattoo.”

Natasha gave the much smaller woman a grin; Steve had learned it was a smile that the red-haired woman only seemed to ever give to Marcella. At one point during their little movie night, Thor had managed to lock Marcella in a gentle head lock while Clint tickled her mercilessly. Instead of getting irritated when she accidentally kicked Bruce in the face with a bare foot, the older scientist merely raised his eyebrows at his team's antics.

Steve smiled, it truly felt like being in a dysfunctional family.

Later that night, Pepper Potts found herself surprised when a certain little Banner showed up outside of Tony's laboratory with two bowls of hot pasta. Marcella handed them both over to Ms. Potts, insisting that she had missed the two of them at the team dinner, but that they should still eat something.

“Thank you, Ms. Banner,” Pepper eventually smiled at the smaller girl, “This so sweet of you to do.”

Marcella shrugged and smiled sheepishly, “It's no biggie! Besides, there were plenty of leftovers. Anyways, I'll leave you and Mr. Stark alone; please tell him to take it easy after that lab accident.”

“Of course,” Pepper smiled, deciding in that moment that she adored the little Banner woman, “You have a good night, Ms. Banner, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

Kind of a filler chapter, but I think it's important to give Marcella's relationship with the team some more development ♂_(♀)_♀

Thank you all for the comments! I always appreciate it :)
Everlasting Arms

Chapter Summary

“It's not a bad thing—being selfish. Even Captain America should be able to indulge once in a while, and I doubt Marcella Banner is going to be making it on anyone's hit list. She's about as harmful as a kitten.”

It had been months since Steve had reemerged from the ice and tried to adapt to this new world.

Marcella had been incredible in the sense that she was patient and kindly answered all of his questions, no matter how ridiculous they might have been. She was really big on teaching him about music, movies, and even history and Steve couldn't help but to feel like he would never get caught up on everything. Marcella had smiled politely at him when he voiced his concerns, and explained how students took history classes that went back thousands of years and that comforted Steve a little; if high school students could do it, then so could he.

Steve enjoyed the days when Marcella would introduce him to music he had never heard before.

Eventually Steve had warmed up to the rock genre of music—which Marcella had been ecstatic about—and he actually enjoyed certain bands like The Beatles and Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones. It was certainly different than what he was used to, but it definitely wasn't as awful as he expected it to be. He tried to keep his mind open as she introduced him to new things, however, Steve couldn't really get a handle on country music or even rap, for that matter. Marcella had learned that Steve liked music that was easy on the ears, which made sense to her. Everything about this modern world was loud and noisy, it was nice to have some sort of way to escape from that and relax.

“I like this,” Steve admitted, adjusting a white earbud around so he could hear the song they were listening to a little better, “Who is it?”

“It's a group called The Bee Gees, they're one of my favorites.”

Marcella watched with a quirked eyebrow as Steve pulled out a small journal and a pen from his pocket and promptly wrote the name of the band the two were currently listening to. After he was finished, the pair who had seemingly become inseparable, continued to eat their sandwiches—Steve's turkey sandwich was noticeably bigger than hers.

“You've been acting different around me,” Steve observed, “You found out, didn't you?”

Marcella's gaze nervously shifted away from his face as he spoke, “I wish you would have just told me sooner, is all.”

“I know... I was just scared to tell you because I didn't want you to be upset.”

“I would have been sad regardless of when you told me.”

“It's okay, Marcella,” Steve murmured, “Washington DC isn't that far of a drive. It's like, what? Three hours at the most?”
She gave him her best sad puppy dog impression and he immediately groaned, “You're breaking my heart, Marce. I promise we'll still talk a lot and see each other every now and then.”

Marcella nodded and tried to ignore that nagging voice in the back of her head that was trying to convince her that he was lying. Steve had always been good at keeping his promises though—whether it was meeting her after her excruciatingly long rehabilitation sessions for lunch, or even if it was just to hang out together at the park. This, however, was an entirely different situation that the Banner girl was all too familiar with. Marcella remembered the long periods of time her father would be assigned in other countries when she was little and how he had missed numerous birthdays; she remembered her mom working ridiculously long and late hours at the lab and how she would come home from school to an empty, cold house. Though she knew her parents were both very important figures in science and Bruce continuously apologized to this day for not being there for Marcella as a child, it certainly didn't ease the pain and loneliness that ebbed at her heart every now and then.

Marcella Banner despised being alone.

Yet, she always seemed to find herself completely alone.

“Marcella?”

“Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Hey,” Steve noticed the worried expression on her face and hesitantly placed a hand on her shoulder, “You're upset, what's going on Marcella? If it's about me leaving, you know you can talk to me about it.”

“It's nothing.” She forced a small smile as she glanced up at him, “I'm just... I'm just being dramatic. You know I've always been a bit sensitive and I don't want you to think that I'm being... needy, or whatever.”

“You know I won't think any less of you, no matter what it is that you say to me.”

Steve noticed the way her green eyes grew large and watery as she spoke, “I'm just going to miss you, is all. I know that you're not going to be that far away and that we can still talk over the phone, but it's just not going to be the same Steve. Y-You're going to be working for SHIELD and they're going to be sending you away on all these missions and I'm sure there's going to be weeks at a time where I won't hear from you because of how busy you're going to be. I'm just... I'm going to worry about you because I suck at making friends and I don't have that many in my life and I'm just scared of losing the few friends and family I do have. I don't... I don't want to be alone.”

“Don't worry about me, Marcella. I'm going to be just fine, I promise.”

“You're not indestructible Steve, none of you are.”

“I know how to take care of myself Marce, you know that.”

The Banner girl tried to choke back the heavy lump in her throat, “I know, I'm sorry. You must think I'm being so dramatic... my dad always used to say that I was too sensitive for my own good, that I get attached to people too easily.”

“It's not a bad thing, I don't think,” Steve smiled at her and gave her hand a gentle squeeze, “It's nice to know that someone genuinely cares about you.”

“Yeah well, sometimes it feels like a curse,” She whispered and started to stand up. Steve softly grabbed her elbow and helped her to her feet; while her rehabilitation had been going remarkably
well for her leg, it still hurt to walk long distances and she brought the crutches with her to the park just in case. The blonde held her crutches with one hand, while she gently looped her arm around his and made their way through the park. The summer had given way to beautiful, crisp Autumn weather and while the sun shone brightly in the sky a cool breeze made Marcella's bronze skin break out in goosebumps. She immediately pulled down the sleeves of her hoodie, which had been pushed up to her elbows, and put her free hand in the warm pocket. The soft breeze kept blowing strands of thick curls into her face and Marcella grew frustrated as the wind blew against the back of her head, much to Steve's amusement.

While hairstyles had certainly been different in the early to mid twentieth century, there was something about Marcella's wild mane that Steve admired. The dark tresses were long and fell down to the middle of her back in soft and unruly, kinky curls that no amount of bobby pins and elastics could tame. As Steve fondly observed her for a few more moments, he noticed how the little baby hairs around her forehead and even the frizzies on top of her head were curly.

“Stop staring,” She grinned, her cheeks growing warm “You know it makes me nervous—I know my hair's a mess.”

Steve chuckled, “You stop that, your hair looks beautiful, Marce.”

“Yeah,” She scoffed and rolled her eyes, a small smile still lingering amongst her plush, pink lips, “I guess it's nice if you're into that whole 'just rolled out of bed' look.”

“I like the curls,” Steve insisted and eyed the beautiful mane, “I think they look beautiful on you and it clearly took you a lot of time and work to get them that way.”

Her cheeks grew warm and she side-eyed the Captain playfully, “Are you trying to flatter me, Rogers.”

“Is it working?”

“Hm,” Marcella grinned, “Maybe a little.”

The blonde shifted his gaze from the Banner girl to the dark-looking clouds that loomed in the distance, and a soft smile still spread across his lips.

Steve would be lying if he said he wasn't going to miss Marcella. The curly-haired girl had been the first friend he had made since reemerging into the world that didn't remind him that he was Captain America every five minutes. She had taken time out of her days for the last few months to help him become more comfortable and acclimated in the world. Marcella had been there for him and didn't make him feel like a burden and in return, he had been there on speed dial whenever she woke up from nightmares or found herself in the throes of a panic attack or a downward spiral. Whenever she felt like she was losing herself, Steve had been there to bring her back and he had never judged her or looked at her as though she was pathetic and weak.

No, Steve had always been kind when he spoke to her and he had never cared that she was clearly going through a rough patch in her life.

He was definitely going to miss being around someone who made him feel like he was so much more than Captain America and more importantly, he was going to miss her warmth and kindness that he knew most of the SHIELD agents he was going to be working with lacked.

Steve tried to ignore the wave of sadness and pain that washed over him.

Later that night.
“You've been acting all weird ever since you agreed to come work for SHIELD in Washington, what's going on?”

Steve glanced at Natasha for a moment before returning his attention back to the sketchpad in his large hands, where he was drawing a sketch of the tree that him and Marcella oftentimes sat under. He couldn't help but to wonder if she would still go to that tree even after he left.

“It's nothing,” He insisted and gently shaded in a branch. They both sat in the living room area of Stark tower; the TV was playing some sort of action movie that Natasha had insisted on Steve watching. However, he had lost interest about halfway through and had politely asked Natasha if he had to keep watching it. Her eyes had narrowed for a moment and Steve was prepared to feel her wrath, but she had merely shrugged it off and the blonde man had retrieved a sketchpad.

“Does this have to do with a certain lady?” Natasha pried, “A pretty lady by the name of Marcella?”

Steve scowled, “It doesn't matter.”

“If it's bothering you this much, then it does matter.”

“I'm just going to miss her, is all,” Steve confessed, too nervous to look at whatever expression Natasha had on her face. He hated how easy it was for her to read him like an open book all the time and if anything, it also made him feel vulnerable. The more he hung out with Natasha, the more Steve realized just how good she was at getting under peoples’ skins and getting them to say things they wouldn't normally say out loud. While she hadn't done this to Steve a lot, the few times she had was for his own good, even though he probably wouldn't admit it out loud.

“You like her.”

It wasn't a question and for some reason, her assumption irritated Steve.

“She's my friend.”

The smirk on Natasha's face grew, “I see the way you look at her Steve, and yeah, maybe you guys consider each other friends right now, but there's something more there. From the moment you saw her underneath all that rubble, you just had this different look on your face and you don't look at anyone else that way.”

Steve thought about Marcella and him... well, together, and the thought didn't seem to bother him at all. He thought about holding her petite hand in his as they strolled through Central Park, or even going on dates at that little cafe that she loved so much, or going on picnics on warm, sunny days. He thought about taking her out for walks through the botanical gardens in Brooklyn, because he knew how much she loved learning about plants and flowers. Steve thought about her delicate features and what a relief they were when everything else in his life seemed so rough and harsh; he thoughts about the soft freckles that were splashed recklessly across her cheeks and the bridge of her upturned nose. She had become this beacon of light in his life, and he was terrified of losing her even though she insisted that wouldn't happen. He knew there were people out there that wanted him to suffer and if they saw Steve with Marcella, that would most definitely make her a target for bad guys to come after her and use her as a means of hurting him.

“Even if I did like her like that,” Steve started, “Me being with her would put a big target on her back and I won't let that happen to her. Moving to D.C. to work for SHIELD is the best thing that could happen between me and her right now... it's the safest option for the two of us and doing anything else would put her in danger and would make me selfish.”
"It's not a bad thing—being selfish. Even Captain America should be able to indulge once in a while, and I doubt Marcella Banner is going to be making it on anyone's hit list. She's about as harmful as a kitten."

"It doesn't matter if she's harmless, the risk is still there," Steve said with a hard look, even though a part of him longed to tell her about his feelings, "I'm not... I'm not going to risk putting someone I care about in danger, not again."

Natasha seemed dissatisfied with his answer, "So, what now? You're just going to be single the rest of your life?"

"If it's what I have to do to protect the people I care for, then I guess it's a sacrifice I have to make."

Natasha stared at him with narrowed eyes, "Do you even realize how ridiculous you sound right now? The fact that you are trying so hard to be selfless is making you sound even more selfish, Rogers. I see the way that girl looks at you with admiration and has relied on your guidance and words of wisdom in the past, whether you two become something more than friends or not, I don't give a shit, but she needs you and I think you need her. Please don't... just don't do her wrong, not after she's grown this attached to you."

Her tone grew softer as she spoke those last words and Steve sighed as she swiftly stood up and made her way out off the main room. Natasha paused right after passing him and gave him a soft pat on the shoulder; it was a strange gesture from the Widow but he accepted it nonetheless.

"You don't have to be alone in this new world Steve," She said quietly—comfortingly, "Talk to Marcella and I promise everything between you two will be okay."

With that, Natasha left the room and left Steve alone to his conflicting thoughts. After a few moments of deafening silence, Steve stood up and made his way to where he knew Marcella would be. He stepped in the elevator and told Jarvis which floor he needed to go, the AI responding immediately in a polite tone. Steve sighed as he arrived at his destination and he stepped off the elevator, strolling down the corridor and greeting the workers on that floor whom he had come to memorize the names of. He paused in his tracks when he arrived in front of a window and he glanced inside the room, immediately spotting the curly-haired woman lying down on an examination table.

One of the specialists was holding Marcella's scarred leg in her hand and was digging her palms into the sensitive flesh as she gently raised the limb until it was vertical with her body. Marcella's eyelids were shut and if she was in pain, her facial features gave no indication to any discomfort; her plush lips were slightly parted as she exhaled deeply and her hair was splayed out all around her. Steve watched as the specialist lowered her leg back down to the table and gently grabbed Marcella's wrist as he helped her sit up. He spoke to Marcella for a few moments, probably giving her some advice and exercises for her leg, before clapping his hand on her shoulder and exiting the room.

"Captain," The specialist acknowledged with a smile as he walked passed him.

Steve nodded, "Doctor Larkin."

The Captain leaned against the wall and stared at his shoes as he waited for Marcella to exit the room, knowing that she usually needed a minute or two after her sessions.

"Hey," He finally heard the soft voice after a few moments, "I wasn't expecting to see you this early."

"Oh," Steve's eyebrows furrowed, "Is that okay? I was hoping we could go get some coffee and talk,
but if you're busy that's okay too."

“No,” She smiled up at him, “That actually sounds nice right now, I could go for some banana bread after that session.”

As if it was a routine for them, Marcella gently looped her arm around his and rested her hand on his bicep as they made their way out of the tower. The air was crisp and Steve certainly didn't miss the way the cool breeze pushed her curls from her face and the sun shone brightly on her bronzed skin, making her look even prettier and that only conflicted Steve even more. Peggy had been the only other woman he had ever had feelings for and he couldn't figure out what it was about Marcella that made him feel something, but something different to the way he felt about Peggy. Peggy Carter had been fierce and very independent, willing to throw herself on the battlefield and make even the strongest of soldiers look weak, but Marcella... she was totally opposite. While Marcella certainly held a different kind of strength, she was so incredibly small and quiet and maybe even a little timid at times. The Banner girl was incredibly reserved and had impeccable control over her anger and her emotions, not to mention she had impeccable patience towards everyone and everything she encountered.

Steve wasn't sure if this was something more than a crush, but he knew Natasha was right and he cared tremendously for her.

A familiar face greeted him when the unlikely pair entered their favorite cafe—the young barista by the name of Clementine grinned at the two of them, seeming to recognize both faces.

“Hey guys!” She greeted enthusiastically, “What can I get for you two today?”

“Two slices of the banana bread,” Steve smiled warmly, “I'll take the parliament mocha and she'll have the honey vanilla chamomile tea, please.”

Marcella grinned when she realized Steve had memorized her order and pulled out her wallet to pay. Steve quickly beat her though and swiftly handed the barista his card, ignoring Marcella's harmless glare; Steve knew she could stay mad for only so long. Before the Captain even realized what she was doing, she had pulled a ten dollar bill from her wallet and stuffed it in the tip jar, which was usually pretty full when Clementine was working in the front. After she thanked them for the tip and handed Steve's card back, the two of them sat down at a table in front of one of the windows, watching as pedestrians bustled around the city.

“Hey,” Steve interrupted her from whatever thoughts were running through her mind, “I was hoping we could um, talk for a few.”

Marcella took notice of the way he spoke nervously and nodded, “Of course, is everything alright?”

“Yeah, definitely!” He spoke a little too quickly and she raised her eyebrows at his defensive tone, “Actually, it's kind of not. I guess I've just had a lot on my mind since agreeing to move to D.C. and I just don't want to leave on a bad note.”

Her shoulders immediately sagged and before she could respond, Clementine gently set their food and drinks down on the table, “Anything else I can get for you guys today?”

“We're good,” Steve smiled softly, “Thank you Clementine.”

“Steve,” She sighed when the young server turned around and left the pair alone, “It'll be okay, you said so yourself.”
“I know, I know,” Steve mumbled sheepishly.

“What's wrong Steve?”

He stared at her soft features for a moment before responding, “I just... I just don't want you to be alone, I know what that's like and I don't want you to have to go through it. You don't... I know you don't really have anyone else, what with Clint and Natasha leaving too.”

“I'll be fine Steve,” She gently placed her small hand on top of his much larger one, “Like you said, it's only a couple hours away and I'm always going to be able to talk to you over the phone regardless of where you are. Besides, I'll still have Tony and my dad... we're like the science dream team; I know I'll be alright.”

To her surprise, Steve turned his hand in hers so he was gently gripping her hand instead, “You're the first real friend I made after I came out of the ice and you were the one thing that gave me hope. I owe you so much...”

“Oh Steve,” She murmured, her green eyes piercing into his soul, “You don't owe me anything, okay? You are such a wonderful human being and friend and that's all I could ever ask for.”

Steve smiled and carefully gave her small hand a squeeze, “If you ever need anything, you call me, okay? If you ever feel like you're in danger or an unsafe situation you call or send me a text immediately. Even if it's something small like you're having a panic attack or a bad nightmare, you call me right away; I don't care if it's three in the morning and it's for something ridiculous like you stubbing your toe on that coffee table that you hate so much. I might be far away, but I promise I'll always be able to keep you safe, okay?”

“Steve...”

“Please, Marcella, just promise me you'll contact me if you're ever in danger.”

“I promise.”

Steve gazed at her features for an ephemeral moment, his eyes looking sad and his own expression looking worn and tired. The normally reserved man suddenly seemed so vulnerable as he stared at her for the longest time, as if trying to memorize every detail on her freckled face. He had experienced so much loss and pain and Marcella always forgot about the horrors he had faced; Steve had always been so quiet and nonchalant that she rarely thought about what he had been through. However, sitting across from him at the small table, it all seemed to hit her at once.

Gently, she removed her hand from his and cupped his cheek instead, “It's going to be okay, you and I are going to be okay.”

“You're my best friend, Marcella Banner.”

A week later.

“Wait!”

Steve froze in his tracks and turned from the jet he was about to board; the softest smile spread across his lips when he saw a certain curly-haired girl rushing towards him. She was holding what looked to be a small, wrapped present in her hand and she had a nervous look on her face as she approached Steve as well as Natasha, who was only standing a few feet away from him with a surprised expression. The red head gave the pair a knowing look and continued onto the jet, giving Steve and Marcella a few moments alone before they parted ways.
“I didn't think you were going to come.”

She smiled sheepishly at him, “I got stuck helping Tony with something in the lab, sorry I'm late.”

“No, it's okay,” Steve smiled just as nervously, “I'm glad you were able to make it.”

She tucked a curl behind her ear as her cheeks grew warm, “It's not much, but I got something for you.”

Marcella handed him the small package and he hesitantly took it, “You didn't have to do that Marce, I feel awful that I didn't get anything for you.”

“Don't worry about it,” She offered him a reassuring smile and waved it off, “It was kind of a last minute thing, you're not allowed to open it until you get to your new home though, okay?”

Steve nodded and resisted the urge to tell her that there was no way his new home was actually going to feel like a home without her presence there. He gazed at her for a moment before he tugged the chain he always wore around his neck over his head; he observed the rusty engraving on the dog tags and the silver cross his mom had given him before she passed. The softest smile made its way onto his features as he held the precious jewelry out for her to take. Steve Rogers certainly wasn't a materialistic man, but these pieces of jewelry were incredibly precious to him and he knew that Marcella would take good care of the items while he was away.

Instead she shook her head and took a small step back, “Steve, I can't take that, I know how much that means to you.”

“Then I know you'll keep it safe,” He smiled as she hesitantly held her hand out, “I never wear it on missions anyways, I'd feel better knowing they're with you.”

“You are so stubborn Steve Rogers,” She sighed as he placed the jewelry in her palm, his eyes lighting up as she slipped the chain over her head and tucked it safely inside the sweatshirt she wore. Before he could respond with a sarcastic comment, she threw him off guard as she wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head against his chest. Gently, Steve wrapped one arm around her shoulders while his other hand cupped the back of her head. She felt tiny and fragile in his arms, like if he squeezed too tightly she would break in his hold. The comforting scent of fresh flowers and citrus hits him like a wave; she always seemed to smell like she spent hours rolling around in a garden and Steve tried to commit the refreshing smell to his memory.

“Please stay safe out there,” She whispered, “I know how reckless you can be sometimes, just try to... tone it down a little.”

Steve chuckled, “I'll try.”

She lifted her head from his chest and for a moment Steve thought she was going to pull away.

Instead, he froze when she reached up and place a gentle kiss to his cheek, “Come back to me in one piece.”

Steve nodded, his cheek pressed against hers, “I will, I promise.”

The pair pulled away from one another, Steve relishing in the way her hand cupped his cheek for the quickest moment. Without another word, Steve turned from her and took in a deep breath as he boarded the jet, daring to take one more glance at Marcie. Her eyes were soft and kind as usual, and she gave him a genuinely encouraging smile before nodding at him and giving a wave goodbye.
It was all the encouragement he needed, and he gave her a nod before turning around and closing the latch.

“Everything okay?”

Natasha questioned nonchalantly as he took a seat next to her, sparing him a quick glance. The Captain looked slightly solemn and tired, as if saying goodbye to the younger Banner had left him emotionally exhausted. The intensity of their friendship was clear to everyone and Natasha knew that it must have been hard for Steve to leave behind the girl that had become his best friend—the first friend he had made after coming out of the ice.

“I think so.”

Later that night.

Steve plopped down on the couch, a groan escaping his mouth as he leaned his head back and glanced around his apartment for a few moments. It was definitely a lot smaller and more quaint than his room at the tower, but he certainly didn't mind at all. If his apartment would have been any bigger, he definitely would have felt a lot lonelier than he already did. A package wrapped in sparkly red gift wrap caught his attention and he anxiously grabbed the present from where it had been sitting on the coffee table; he got a small chuckle when he realized it was Fourth of July wrapping paper. Steve's thumb ran across the smooth, neatly wrapped present before he carefully ripped the paper open and smiled at the thoughtful present.

Framed by beautiful mahogany wood, there was a picture of Marcella and Steve beaming at the camera together.

He remembered that day clearly; it had been taken a few weeks after them becoming friends when her and Steve had gone to the beach together. Walking in the sand had made the pain in her leg flare up and Steve had insisted on carrying her on his back, and though she had protested at first, she eventually caved in and had jumped onto his back. She had explained to him what selfies were and proceeded to pull out her smartphone before taking a picture of the two of them together, their flushed cheeks pressed together. Steve stared at the two of them and didn't realize his eyes had grown misty; he seemed genuinely happy in the photo and noticed the way the skin at the corners of his eyes wrinkled as he beamed at the camera. Marcella's expression was nearly identical, her eyes barely open from how much she was smiling.

Even now, all alone, the picture made Steve smile and helped alleviate the strange pain in his chest.
“I feel like...” Tony's eyebrows were still raised, his forehead wrinkled as he stared after the Banner girl's disappearing form, a hand pressed to his chest, “I feel like your daughter just landed a swift kick to my throat—how did she do that?”

Bruce chuckled and shook his head, “She has that effect on people; you get used to it after a while.”

“All I'm saying is that I didn't enjoy Titanic that much, I feel like it was... over hyped.”

Marcella pulled her cellphone away from her ear and glared at the device for a moment, as if it had personally attacked her, “I thought it was a very romantic movie and they had amazing chemistry. I get why you think it was over hyped, but at the same time Titanic changed the romance genre entirely. Plus nineties Leonardo DiCaprio is everything and Celine Dion's My Heart Will Go On was literally all I listened for like, a week after watching it.”

Steve practically groaned, “What is it with you and these cheesy romance movies?”

The curly-haired girl's eyes narrowed, “What is it with you sucking the fun out of everything?”

“Thanks,” Steve snorted and she could just imagine him smiling as he spoke, “If I recall correctly, you were the one sucking the fun out of everything when you told me I'm not allowed to jump out of planes without parachutes anymore.”

The Captain smirked as he unlocked the door to his apartment and jiggled the knob before it finally opened; he turned the lights on and tossed his keys into what was supposed to be a fruit bowl that Natasha had picked out for him. He kicked his shoes and socks off and made his way to his bedroom; he sat on his bed and rubbed his cheek with the palm of his hand. Steve had been so incredibly tired after coming back from a particularly rough mission, but had been determined to talk to the soft spoken lady anyways.

“I am not a fun sucker;” She gasped, “I am young and I like to party hard and stay up until the crack of dawn, unlike you, old man.”

Steve couldn't suppress the loud laugh that escaped from the back of his throat, “Every time I talk to you, you're either waking up from a nap or studying, I wasn't aware you had time for partying.”

“You caught me red handed;” She chuckled and stared at her starry ceiling with a huge grin, “Hey, speaking of school, my graduation date is on the fifteenth of June and I was just wondering if there was maybe anyway you'd be able to make it? I totally understand if you can't make it because I know how busy you are, but it would mean a lot to me.”

“I know,” Steve sighed, “I'll have to double check but I think I might have an important mission that week.”

“Oh, it's okay Steve. Like I said, I understand that you're busy out saving the world and little kittens from trees.”
The blonde smiled but he could hear the slight disappointment in her voice, “I'll see what I can do, I promise; the kitties do need me, though.”

“Don't worry about it,” She shrugged even though a wave of sadness hit her, “I didn't even want to walk at first but my dad told me I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't.”

“Well, that's a little dramatic.”

“Who do you think I get it from?”

Steve snorted, “You're like, the least dramatic person I have ever met, you know that, right?”

“You give me too much credit.”

Steve smiled and lowered himself until he was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling; he placed his other arm behind his head for a little support and closed his eyes as he took in the silence that enveloped him—except for the soft, barely there sound of Marcella breathing. It was always nights like this, after coming home from an exhausting mission, that the loneliness really seemed to creep up on him. While his and Natasha's relationship had become something more than just comrades, he wasn't sure if he would classify the relationship as being friends. Then there was young lady Natasha had set him up with—Heather, her name had been, and while she had a very bubbly personality, the two of them certainly hadn't clicked. It was only then when the red-haired assassin had urged Steve to tell Marcella about his feelings for her—whatever those might be because he still wasn't even sure.

However, listening to her soft voice over the phone... Steve knew he missed her like hell and his heart ached every time they talked on the phone.

“Gotta have faith in something, I guess.”

She grew silent for a moment, and she must have been able to detect a shift in his tone of voice because then she asked, “Hey, is everything okay? You sound kind of bummed out.”

“No, I'm just...” The Captain pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed softly, “I got back from a mission tonight, I'm just a little tired.”

If she knew he was lying, she didn't say anything about it.

“I can let you go if you want? You should get some sleep.”

“I could definitely use one of our talks right about now,” Steve answered truthfully, “So, I'm uh, good for a few more... if you're not busy.”

“Nah, I've given up hope on revising my dissertation tonight, I'll finish it tomorrow and have dad help me look at it,” She chuckled and Steve could practically see her beaming, “You're not going to fall asleep on me again, are you?”

Steve could hear the lightheartedness in her voice, “I make no promises. To be fair though, I couldn't help it last time—you were literally singing me to sleep.”

“Even superheroes need their beauty sleep; besides, you really needed the sleep that night,” She let out a breathy laugh at his honesty and promptly changed the subject, “How's Natasha doing? I miss having another female around the tower.”

Steve smiled, “Natasha is... Natasha. Just as sarcastic and scary as ever; she won't admit it, but I think she misses you and the rest of the group too.”
“Yeah... it's definitely strange not having you or her around. I think Tony misses having you around, too, he has nobody to bicker with anymore.”

“You were supposed to fill in for me when I left, have you not been doing your job?”

“I forgot we had that deal,” Marcella grinned, “Tony doesn't bicker with me, he knows it's a lost cause and he's going to lose any argument he tries to start with me. If anything, Clint has taken over with the arguing and I must say, he's really good at getting under Tony's skin.”

“I'll be sure to thank him the next time I see him,” Steve chuckled and slid a forearm underneath his head, “What else am I missing, Marce?”

They talked for nearly another hour, Steve describing his new comrades and his missions—without giving away too many details, of course. Marcella talked about the rehabilitation on her leg and how it was going remarkably well, and how she still struggled during her therapy sessions but was getting better at talking about what she had endured during the attack of New York. She still couldn't find it in herself to talk to the therapist about her childhood and Steve reassured her that there was no hurry and she should do things at her own pace. Steve had been surprised to find that she had taken quite the interest in aerospace engineering and was contemplating going back to school for it after getting her PhD in biomedical engineering. It would never cease to amaze him how incredibly intelligent both of the Banners were and Steve still couldn't believe that the older Banner had seven PhDs in numerous fields, though Marcella always insisted that many PhDs was way too excessive.

Eventually, Marcella realized the Captain hadn't spoken in quite some time and heard the faint, barely-there sounds of Steve's soft snores and smiled softly to herself. She stared up at her ceiling for a few moments, taking in all of the stunning holograms of the different galaxies in the darkness of her room. After helping her through a nightmare one night and realizing that she still used the old cosmic projector he had given her such a long time ago, Bruce had merely created a more realistic 3D interface that would project live simulations of the events taking place in space. To say she had been ecstatic would be an understatement—the little invention had become one of her favorite gifts that her dad had ever given her and she used it every night to help her fall asleep.

She listened to Steve's snores for a few more moments before speaking softly, “Goodnight Steven.”

A week later.

Marcella nearly skipped down one of the many long corridors in the completely repaired Avengers tower, a smile on her face as she greeted the building's occupants. Her mane had been pulled into a neat ponytail and swished behind her as she strode confidently through the hall, a tablet tucked underneath her arm and an easy smile on her delicate features. A soft, long-sleeved baby blue blouse had been tucked into a high-waisted white skirt and though her still healing leg burned, her white heels clacked along the tiled floor beneath her. Her freckles had been covered with a full-coverage foundation, her already thick eyebrows had been filled in, the high points of her cheeks shone beautifully with the blinding highlight she had applied, and she had painted fierce, sharp wings onto her eyelids, accentuating her bright green eyes even more with mascara. Her lips had been painted precisely with a deep shade of liquid red lipstick. She had forgone wearing her big glasses and had popped in some contacts instead and while most people probably thought she was going on a date or something, truthfully, she probably wouldn't have gone through all of this trouble for a damn date.

The young Banner girl remained calm and collected as she entered an office that she had become all too familiar with and beamed at the strawberry blonde woman who sat at a desk with a surprised expression on her face. Ms. Potts took in Marcella's full face of beautiful makeup and the very business formal outfit she wore; the older woman had only ever seen her in t-shirts and hoodies.
“You look...” Pepper eyed Marcella and a tiny smile broke along her face, “Does Cap know you have a date?”

“You think I'd actually shave my legs to go on a dumb date?” Marcella countered, a wry smirk playing at her red lips and Pepper immediately smiled, “I actually just got back from an interview and thought I might as well drop my resume off here while I'm at it.”

“Already applying before your commencement? I respect it,” Pepper's perfectly plucked eyebrows shot up as she gave Marcella an impressed smirk. She always knew the younger Banner was incredibly intelligent—graduating from high school a year early and immediately getting accepted into Columbia University, it was incredibly rare for some one to achieve such things at such a young age.

“My oral presentation and dissertation got approved by the doctoral committee a few days ago,” Marcella admitted with a sheepish grin and Pepper's eyes widened at this news and she immediately stood up, making her way over to the younger Banner. Pepper Potts rarely got this excited over anything, but she had come to adore the younger girl and couldn't contain her excitement as she pulled Marcella into a tight hug. After everything she had been through, everyone had their doubts if Marcella would ever be the same after the Battle of New York, but if anything, she had come out of the scary ordeal stronger than ever and Pepper admired that about her.

“I'm so happy for you,” Pepper said honestly, finally pulling away, “I guess we're all gonna have to start calling you Dr. Banner, huh?”

Marcella giggled, her cheeks growing warm at Ms. Potts' unusual display of excitement, “I think that might get a little confusing, don't you think?”

“We'll figure it out—Tony keeps calling you Little Banner, so maybe now you'll just be Little Dr. Banner,” Pepper grinned softly before continuing, “What company did you interview with? Must be pretty big if you actually shaved your legs.”

“Axial Incorporated,” Marcella shrugged and then grinned, “I may or may not have had an interview at Neuralink yesterday.”

“That's... that's Elon Musk's company, isn't it?”

The young scientist beamed as she clasped her hands together and swayed softly, “It sure is, Ms. Potts; I happened to catch him while he was there too.”

“Are you crazy?! Tony is going to have a conniption if he finds out that you had an interview with one of his rival companies.”

“With whose rival company?”

Pepper immediately pinched the bridge of her nose as a huge grin spread across Marcella's face; the petite girl turned on an heel and met Tony and Bruce's narrowed, speculating eyes. The men both took in her formal appearance and their curiosity only intensified as they noted that she was actually wearing makeup—something she only did for special occasions. Bruce then wrung his hands together nervously and Pepper couldn't stop herself from rolling her eyes as Tony proceeded to cross his arms over his chest and glare at the young woman, who didn't seem phased in the slightest the both of the men and their suspicion. None of them had ever seen Marcella look so happy and... smug? She didn't really pull it off as well as someone like Tony, Bruce noted, and found a tiny smile playing at his lips at the blissful girl's unusual behavior.
Marcella only ever acted this way when it came to her academics and projects.

“Oh hello dearest father... Mr. Stark,” Marcella beamed at the two men, bowing in the slightest, “I was just telling Pepper about my interview at Neuralink yesterday; I think it went quite well, actually.”

“Neuralink?!” Tony practically shrieked and everyone besides a smug Marcella cringed at the noise; her eyes were nearly closed because of how much she was smiling “You had an interview at one of 'he-who-must-not-be-named' company's? How could you do this to us?! How could you do this to me?! Bruce and I deserve better than this, don't you think? We raised you better than this!”

Bruce raised his brows and gave Tony an incredulous stare, “We? I didn't realize we were raising Marce together.”

“Well, of course—she's gotta get her sass and wit from someone, and you're clearly in no position to do so,” Tony deadpanned before turning back to the still beaming girl with a glare, “Seriously though, Neuralink? Did I personally do something to hurt you, kid? I'm genuinely offended right now.”

“I wanted to explore my options,” Marcella explained, taking in the the somewhat offended expression on her dad's face as well, “I love you guys, but I want to do what's best for me and what will help me expand my career. I love working in prosthetics and helping people be able to function normally, but I think it would be amazing to delve into other fields as well and I want to work for a company that will be flexible with my schedule in case I decide to go back to get another PhD or Masters. I just... I just need to do what's best for me and my career.”

“Oh God,” Tony glanced at Bruce again, pretending to look terrified, “She's starting to sound like me—this is how world domination starts. Make her stop Bruce! Don't let her turn into a miniature version of me! Don't let her get seven PhDs like you did! That's so fucking unnecessary, don't you think?”

“Mr. Stark, could you please just listen for like, a minute?” Tony seemed genuinely offended as he slowly approached the lady whose smug expression had turned into something softer, “I had two companies that I really wanted to work for... companies that are truly breaking the boundaries and are paving the way for modern technology. I wanted to work for someone who would let me explore my idea and provide me with the resources to help me achieve my goals.”

“What's the other company? I swear to God, if it's--”

“I wanted to work for Stark Industries,” She gently interjected and Tony immediately shut up; Marcella didn't miss the shocked expression on her dad's face, “You guys have always listened to my ideas and valued them when everyone else thought they were horrible. Every time you guys let me work in the labs with you, it just feels so... natural and I don't have to worry about being judged even though I've blown up like.. six of your projects, Mr. Stark. You've never had a problem correcting me and when you do, you guys have always given me helpful advice and constructive criticism.”

“Marcella,” Bruce breathed, his eyes gentle as he gazed at her, “You could have just said something earlier, I'm sure Tony wouldn't have minded giving you a job.”

“I don't want you to give me this job,” Marcella argued and Bruce was surprised by the fire in his daughter's usually kind green eyes, “I want to earn a position in your company because you thought I actually deserved a place here. I don't want you to hire me because I'm related to one of the most renowned scientists in the world—a man who has seven PhDs, which I still think is kind of ridiculous. Who needs that many PhDs, dad?”
“She's got a point,” Tony nodded and Bruce merely scowled at the billionaire.

“Anyways,” She stepped forward and held out a tablet containing her resume and portfolio out for Mr. Stark to accept, “I only want to work here if you truly believe that I could contribute and be a productive member of your staff. If I have even the slightest inclination that you’re hiring me because of who I'm related to, don't think for one second that I wouldn't leave.”

Everyone stared at the girl with shock, not used to her having a confident and... somewhat cocky attitude?

Bruce merely grinned at his little girl as Tony stared back at her with disbelief.

“You're talking like I've already offered you the job.”

“Look at my portfolio and my dissertation, if you'd like” She insisted with a half-assed shrug, “Mr. Musk seemed to really enjoy my idea of attaching a prosthetic directly onto its user's remaining nerves, allowing them to actually feel and control it like one would with a real limb. Also, I never thought it was that groundbreaking, but he really liked my rough sketch of my spacecraft.”

Tony blinked and turned to Bruce who still had a proud smile on his face, “Spacecraft?! Why are you working on spacecraft when you haven't even graduated?”

“Boredom and morbid curiosity,” Marcella shrugged again, staring at the dumbfounded man, “After Loki's attack, I thought it might be interesting to create some sort of craft controlled by AI that can detect threats against outsiders or even detect serious threats closer to home—such as missiles or even nuclear bombs. I don't know, even though creating extremely realistic prosthetics will always be my biggest passion, I've been quite fascinated in aircraft and spacecraft lately. I was thinking about going back to school maybe next year—MIT sounds promising.”

Tony's head snapped up and he found himself staring at the girl with an uncharacteristically soft expression, “You would fit in perfectly there... and they would definitely love to have you.”

Marcella beamed at his encouraging words, “Thank you, Mr. Stark.”

Bruce stepped forward and gazed over Tony's shoulder as they both flipped through her virtual portfolio; she instantly knew when the billionaire came to her air and spacecraft sketches when his hand hovered above the tablet. He pressed a button on the tablet, causing it to project a 3D hologram of one of her more unusual projects. If there was one thing Marcella always made sure to pay great detail to, it was her rough sketches of all of her projects. She always included little arrows pointing to certain parts with details of what those parts would be made of and how they should be assembled; Marcella took great pride in everything she created and beamed as the two men finally looked up at her with raised brows. Behind them, Pepper was smiling at the young scientist with an encouraging expression and she held a thumbs up at her, to which Marcella quickly winked.

“The craft would be made out of carbon steels and nanotubes, of course, and would actually only a couple hundred pounds thus reducing propulsion upon escaping gravity.” She pointed out when the two men remained silent, “The windows would have been made out of vibranium, but obviously that's not an easy metal to get your hands on so I thought about lacing titanium and iron in the glass of the windows to make it shatter-proof—stronger than bulletproof glass and nearly as strong as adamantium or vibranium. I um, I've actually started working on it and I've already assembled the interface modules and I have the majority of the inner-wiring mechanisms finished, it's just... the actual aeroshell I don't have the resources for.”

“What powers the craft?” Tony questioned, using his index finger and thumb to zoom in on a certain
part of the sketch.

“Solar thermal propulsion,” Marcella grinned cheekily and skipped over to the men before using her own index finger to zoom in on the craft, “You see that little guy there? The propellant would flow through that cylinder right there and retain the heat as the cylinder rotated, offering a higher impulse for the rocket.”

“This is... like something out of a sci-fi novel,” Bruce blinked and zoomed in on the aerospike engines, “This could seriously change the way we travel through space, you know?”

“It's no rainbow bridge,” Marcella shrugged halfheartedly and smile softly at the men, “But I feel like with enough time and the proper resources, I could really make this a reality. Obviously, prosthetics are still my biggest priority and I want to try to help as many amputees as I possibly can, but NASA and other intelligence agencies should really start consider different options in protecting Earth against extraterrestrial threats, along with nuclear threats, don't you think?”

“You... you did this all by yourself?”

“What?” Marcella asked innocently, meeting Tony's surprised expression, “Like it's hard?”

The billionaire's surprised expression immediately melted into an incredulous one at the Legally Blonde reference.

“You know, if something like this got into the wrong hands...”

“I know,” Marcella blinked at Tony nodded slowly, “I don't intend on letting that happen, which is why I was hoping you would seriously consider hiring me, because I trust you guys and I know you've learned from your past mistakes.”

“That's debatable,” Pepper interjected, causing Tony to pout at her before turning back to Marce.

“Get through your graduation first,” Tony said and Marcella nodded lightly, “Then I promise we'll talk about your options, yeah?”

“You got it, Mr. Stark,” She went back to her usual sunshiny self and beamed up at him, “Thank you for your time; I hope to hear back from you.”

Everyone watched as she turned on her heels, her thick ponytail hitting the billionaire in his stunned face as she did so. Marcella easily slid her sunglasses onto her face with an unusual smirk was etched onto her features, feeling good about herself after the encounter. Bruce chuckled and shook his head, “She has that effect on people; you get used to it after a while.”
“I can't believe she actually had an interview at Neuralink... I hate that Elon Musk guy.”

“All the better reason to hire her,” Bruce suggested with a shrug, “She clearly has some amazing ideas; it would be a shame if they fell into the wrong hands.”

“I won't let that happen... not again.”

A few days later.

A pair of bright green eyes scanned the crowd around her, searching diligently for a certain skittish doctor.

The students chattered around her with excitement, some smoothed out their graduation gowns while others fiddled nervously with their tassels. Marcella was among those who were nervous, but instead she messed with her smooth hair that had been straightened for this special occasion. She ignored the sea of baby blue and black gowns and continued to search for her father instead, a grin broke loose on her serious features when she spotted her new, dysfunctional family all sitting together in the same section of the stadium. Even Thor, whom she only got to see on rare occasions, was sitting to the left of Clint who's eyebrows were furrowed as he fiddled around with a digital camera. Tony sat next to Clint, looking serious as he spoke to Bruce and waved his hands around; judging by the uncomfortable look on her dad's face, she assumed Tony was talking about one of his projects that was more than likely destined for failure.

The real shocker was when a certain redhead sat down next to Thor, reaching over to hand the archer a small bucket of popcorn.

She definitely hadn't expected Natasha to show up, but her heart swelled with happiness at the kind gesture.

Finally, Bruce turned and made eye contact with his daughter; Marcella grinned and was surprised when she realized her dad must have spotted her a long time ago when she was still searching for him. She waved enthusiastically at her dad and he waved right back at her, the biggest grin on his usually serious features—he seemed genuinely happy to be there for her. Tony turned as well, curious as to what had caught the doctor's attention and he immediately yanked his sunglasses away from his face, revealing a stoic expression.

Tony's expression remained serious as he threw up the peace sign at her and the expression broke out into a rare, genuine grin when the young woman crossed her wrists in front of her chest and held up the peace signs as well—doing her best Blue Steel impression from Zoolander. Much to everyone's surprise, the unlikely pair had grown quite close in the last few days and had even worked on projects together whenever Bruce wasn't there to supervise their reckless antics. They had similar taste in music and she didn't mind when he would play cheesy dad rock songs, and he didn't mind when she played old eighties and seventies pop songs that would probably make anyone else's ears bleed. If anything, Marcella had come to look at Tony like that cool aunt that every family has and drinks way too much and has more money than they know what to do with—he was definitely a strange man, but Marcella admired his work ethic, nonetheless.

Clint waved at the Banner girl and she snorted when Thor pointed at her and started yelling, alarming the people who were sitting around him. The few times she had seen him, he had always been dressed in his Asgardian clothing, but now he wore a white t-shirt with a red cardigan, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His long blonde hair had been pulled back into a ponytail and if not for his booming voice and laughter, Marcella would have mistaken him for a normal Earthly human.

“Welcome everyone, to the commencement for the class of 2014!”
“Yes!” She heard a deep, thunderous voice boom, “Lady Banner! Can you hear me?!”

Marcella could certainly hear Thor's cheering over everyone else's and she knew it was going to be a long ceremony.
Background Noise

Chapter Summary

The two had somehow made it up to the karaoke stage and Steve had found himself grinning as they sang a duet to Elton John's Don't Go Breaking My Heart, where Clint had gotten stuck singing the female part.

Steve crossed his arms behind his back as the elevator ascended to the top floor.

The long sleeves of his blue dress shirt had been pushed up to his elbows and he stared at his reflection in the elevator doors; his hair—which had been cut to keep up with modern times—was lightly rustled up in the front but certainly wasn't unkempt by all means. He noticed the dark circles underneath his eyes from lack of sleep; he had just gotten back from another mission and hadn't had a proper night of sleep in at least a week, but there was no way he was going to miss this night. The elevator doors slid open and Steve could already hear the upbeat music from down the hall, bringing the smallest smile to his face. It was rather late and a part of him was surprised he didn't miss the party in its entirety, but if Tony was hosting the party, then he should have known that it would be an all night event. His stride was slower than usual; his feet felt like cinder blocks and the muscles in his calves and shoulders ached, but he disregarded it and continued until his hand was turning the door knob and pushing it open.

He was greeted by the surprised expressions of his friends as well as some of what he assumed to be Marcella's friends and acquaintances. It was a smaller party, with there only being about thirty people or so, but everyone mingled with one another and the room was filled with the sounds of laughter as well as Clint having a ball with the karaoke machine. Steve grinned as he listened to the archer's drunken rendition of Benny and the Jets by Elton John and how he danced clumsily around the stage with Tony—their arms wrapped around each others shoulders. Steve turned his attention away from the hilarious scene and his calculating blue eyes scanned the small crowd of people, searching for one curly-haired girl in particular. His hand unknowingly traveled to the small weight in his pocket and his heart sped up a little as he tried to think of how he would give her the small, blue velvety box.

“She stepped outside for a few,” A voice spoke from behind him, startling the Captain.

“Sorry,” Bruce smiled and reluctantly approached the Captain, “I figured you were looking for Marcie? She's out on the balcony; I think she got a little overwhelmed after Tony's speech about how it's young people like her that are going to change the future.”

Steve shook his head with a small smile, “Always so dramatic.”

“You don't have to work with him every day,” Bruce responded with a small smile of his own, “I'm being sent out on an important assignment for a while, I'm not sure when I'll be back but I think Tony has been considering asking Marcella to be his lab assistant—or at least work with him in one way or another. She dropped off her portfolio the other day and he seemed genuinely impressed by her ideas.”

“That's great,” Steve nodded, “It's so hard for college graduates to find jobs these days, this is the best case scenario, right?”
“Oh definitely. I know how reckless Tony is though... I don't know what I would do if anything happened to her.”

The Captain glanced over to the bar, where the billionaire had a group of people around him, everyone listening to one of his many stories with great interest. The sight made Steve shake his head, he had no idea how Stark always managed to be such a social butterfly at social gatherings like this—he chalked it up to the alcohol.

“Marcella is... tougher than she looks, I know she can take care of herself,” Steve shrugged, “Besides, I think Tony genuinely cares about her, I don't think he'd let anything happen to her.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” He reluctantly agreed and spotted Nick Fury, who was staring at the doctor from his spot in a much less crowded area of the room, “Hey, I'll talk to you later, okay? Thanks for being able to make it, that really means a lot to her.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't have missed it for the world.”

Steve nodded and watched as Bruce made his way over to the Director; he had noticed the immediate shift in the doctor's tone and wondered if everything was alright. The blonde tried to shake away the troubling thoughts and made his way to the glass slider doors that led out to the balcony, they were already open to let some fresh air in and Steve leaned against the frame as he stared softly at the only person who was standing outside. Her usual curly hair had been styled differently and Steve had never realized how long it really was—the soft brown tresses falling down to the middle of her spine in shiny waves, ending just above her hips. Her hair swayed along with the gentle breeze that the night had to offer and Steve spotted a sunflower that had been tucked into one of the braids pinned to the back of her head. She wore a summery white dress that contrasted beautifully against her bronze skin and ended mid-thigh; Steve had been so used to seeing her in sweaters and t-shirts all the time, but she looked so pretty either way. Her heels had been discarded a long time ago and the Captain assumed that her feet must have been sore by the way she carefully stretched them out and it was only then that he spotted the healed scar that started right above her knee and ended about mid-calf. She supported most of her weight against the glass barrier that protected her from falling; her elbows rested on top of the ledge and Steve didn't have to see her face to know there was a sort of strange sadness that resonated from her.

“I thought you told me you like to party hard.”

She turned around so quickly that Steve almost thought she was going to fall—Steve's heart soared when he saw the shocked, yet ecstatic grin on her delicate features.

“Steve!” He stepped forward as she nearly ran to him, instantly crashing into his arms. The Captain's arms immediately wrapped themselves around her waist as he held her close, his eyelids shutting as he realized how much he had missed physical contact like this. He tried to memorize the feeling of her petite arms around him, one hand had made it's way to the spot between his shoulder blades while the other had gently cupped the back of his head. Steve held her just as tightly, one hand on her waist and the other in between her shoulder blades as well—the soft, bare skin there made his fingertips tingle. The Captain hadn't even realized her feet weren't touching the ground and he certainly hadn't noticed the way his aching muscles screamed at him in protest; he knew he was in desperate need of some rest, but he had been so determined to see Marcella that he was willing to wait a little longer. He had missed even the smell of her, like hibiscus flowers and orange blossoms; Marcella always had a way of smelling like she had just gotten finished rolling around in a garden, picking berries. As he gently pressed a kiss to the top of her head, he caught a whiff of her shampoo and conditioner—the raspberry and vanilla scent made him feel lightheaded and like he was in some sort of hazy dream.
Steve remembered how heightened his senses had been right after getting the serum and being able to properly smell everything during spring; it had been eye opening and Marcella's scent always reminded him of his first real spring.

“Marcella,” Steve said softly and then grinned, “Or should I refer to you as Dr. Banner now?”

“Don’t you dare,” She breathed out a laugh against his shoulder, “I thought you said you had a mission.”

“I did,” He sighed as he gently set her back down and took a moment to take in her features, “I managed to finish it a little earlier than I thought... I'm so sorry I missed the ceremony though.”

“Don't be,” She chuckled, “It was pretty boring, to be honest. The biggest highlight was the lady sitting in front of Thor and Clint glaring at them the whole time—I didn't think those two could be so loud.”

“Sounds like a nightmare,” The Captain grinned down at her; for some reason, the way she gazed up at him with those shining green eyes made something inside his chest flutter. He thought about all of the things Natasha had told him about confessing his feelings to the Banner girl, but he wasn't even sure of his own feelings at this point. Steve's feelings for Marcella were... different than anything else he had been used to in his life. Sure, he thought she was a beautiful girl even if she possessed a different kind of beauty he was used to, but he also knew that he cared for her deeply and would do anything to keep her out of harm's way.

There was no way he was going to put any of his close friends in danger, not after what had happened with Bucky.

“I'm really glad you were able to make it, Steve... even though you look like you haven't slept in days.”

“I really haven't,” Steve admitted with a small laugh, “It's fine though, I've gone longer without sleep, I'm used to it.”

“Are you sure? You just look--”

“I'm fine,” Steve gave her a reassuring smile, “I promise.”

Marcella stared up at him and Steve couldn't decipher the look in those green eyes, despite how expressive they always seemed to be. Though she rarely talked about her feelings, Marcie was someone that most people could read like an open book—she wore her heart on her sleeve and had no problem showing concern for those she cared about. Carefully, Steve reached out and cupped her cheek with the palm of his hand, nearly pulling back immediately when he felt how soft her skin was and how delicate the sensitive flesh felt against his rough palm. The blonde kept his hand in place though, wishing he could tell her about the way he felt about her and how confusing all of these new emotions were to him. He wanted to tell her about all of the horrors he had already seen in this new world and how he hoped she always remained kindhearted and gentle—she was quite possibly the only gentle thing in his life right now. A little unsure of himself, Steve gently ran his thumb up her cheek and to her hairline, tucking a thick lock of hair behind her ear that the cool breeze had made a few of the brown tresses to blow around her face wildly.

“I missed you so much,” He admitted before he could stop himself.

“Steve, talk to me, what's going--”

“Hey lovebirds!” The pair turned around to see Tony standing in the doorway with a drink in his
hand, “I don’t know if you two know how to party, but you sure as shit shouldn’t be out here being all antisocial.”

Marcella felt her cheeks grow warm and was grateful that she was wearing makeup for once, “We’ll be there in a second, Tony.”

“No,” He whined and gently grabbed Marcella’s arm while placing the alcoholic drink in her free hand, “I’d expect this from Bruce and Steve, but you, Marce? You need to party and make up for all of the nights you spent studying instead of drinking.”

Marcella snorted but let him drag her back inside, “It’s called being responsible.”

“I’ll have you know I am the very fucking definition of responsible.”

The two bickered back and forth all night and Marcella actually danced with some friends once she had a couple of drinks—Steve wore an amused expression when he realized how much of a lightweight she was. The Captain had never seen the Banner girl drink before and assumed she only did it socially or during celebrations like this one; plus she was so tiny that it came to no surprise that she couldn’t really hold her alcohol. It had only gone downhill when Tony broke out a bottle of what he insisted was very expensive tequila, insisting that everyone take shots.

What a horrible influence that man was, Steve had thought to himself, but he was definitely like Howard Stark in more ways than one.

At one point during the night, Thor had joined her out on the dance floor and had grabbed her small hand in his humongous one, the pair laughing as he spun her around wildly to Earth, Wind and Fire’s September. The scene made Steve grin, watching as her hair whipped around her face and her smile seemed so contagious, causing a boisterous laugh to escape from Thor and making everyone look at the two as he taught her the way people danced on Asgard. The Asgardian Prince—or King—seemed pleasantly surprised when she was able to easily keep up with him; nobody besides Bruce knew that the girl could actually dance. He glanced over at the older Banner, whom he had previously been talking to and noticed a soft smile on his face as he took in the friendship between the unlikely pair. Marcella had always been so quiet and timid and it warmed her dad’s heart to see that she had grown so close to the team and had found a different kind of friendship within each person. Eventually, Clint interjected and she giggled wildly as the archer showed off his dad moves, doing the sprinkler and freaking out when Marcella grabbed her hands and attempted to show him how to actually dance.

The two had somehow made it up to the karaoke stage and Steve had found himself grinning as they sang a duet to Elton John’s Don’t Go Breaking My Heart, where Clint had gotten stuck singing the female part. Tony had been surprisingly sober enough to record the whole thing, claiming he would use it as blackmail if the girl ever wronged him.

Everyone, including the older Banner had been absolutely stunned when a buzzed Marcella had clasped her tiny hands around Natasha’s later in the night, whose eyes had grown kind of wide as the younger girl gently dragged her to the dance floor. Everyone’s shock had only intensified as Natasha’s hard expression melted into an easy grin and followed along with her as the two women danced along to the Bee Gees’ You Should be Dancing.

The young woman was all smiles and a little unsteady on her feet as she approached her father and Steve later that night, “Hey, I’m getting pretty tired and my leg is starting to hurt, I think I’m done for the night.”

Bruce smiled and brought his daughter in for a hug, “I’m so proud of everything you’ve
accomplished, your mom would be so proud of you too.”

“Thanks dad,” Her green eyes shone with happy tears, “I love you.”

“Love you too, Marcie,” He gave her one more hug before letting her go, “Tony had your gifts sent up to your room a few ago, I know you don't really like opening presents in front of people. And Marce, make sure you drink some water before you go to bed or else you're going to hate yourself when you wake up in the morning.”

“You got it big guy,” She grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

“Hey, I'll walk you to your room,” Steve stood and the older Banner's smile faltered for the tiniest moment; if it were anyone else, Bruce would have most likely lost his shit. He had seen all kinds of stories of young drunk women who got taken advantage of at parties, but Bruce genuinely trusted Steve. He knew how much the Captain cared deeply for others—especially his daughter—and was certain that he didn't have any ulterior motives. He trusted all of his comrades, to be honest, but Steve was the kind of guy most parents wanted their daughter to be with and the kind of guy most parents wanted their son to be and he knew the unlikely pair had grown extremely close from the moment Steve and Natasha had found Marcella underneath all of that rubble.

Bruce would always have a special place in his heart for the red-haired assassin and the Captain after bringing his daughter back to him alive.

The scientist watched with gentle eyes as his daughter gently grabbed Steve's bicep to steady herself as they made their way out of the room and while he was happy for his only child, an ache started to bloom in his chest. He was truly starting to understand what it meant when other parents said things like “they grow up so fast”, because it seemed just like yesterday he had found the tiny girl begging for money and food on the streets. While she was still very petite, Marcella had been nothing but bones covered in dirt and tears when Bruce and his wife had first seen her. The doctor wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to rid himself of that horrible image—instead he tried to think about how she had become such an amazing young lady, so smart and selfless and even fierce. While she had acted so timidly around him after he came back for her after the gamma ray incident, she had never once been a reckless teenager and Bruce had never been on the receiving end of any temper tantrums from the girl. He remembered asking her about it a while ago, wondering why she had never lashed out at him and his heart had broke when she explained that she didn't want to lose him again.

Marcella Banner truly did not have a single mean bone in her body, even though she had every right to resent him after what he had done to her.

Even after all these years, Bruce still couldn't understand why she forgave him after everything.

“Hey big guy,” Tony spoke from behind him, “Shot of tequila?”

Bruce waved his hand and chuckled at his friend, “That's the last thing I need.”

And while Bruce never thought he'd be able to admit it, but he was incredibly thankful to have a friend like Tony Stark as well.

“Hey thanks again for walking me back to my room,” Marcella smiled and Steve could tell she was trying her hardest to act sober, much to his amusement. After she had nearly fallen in the elevator, Steve had hesitantly wrapped his arm around her shoulders in an attempt to keep her more stable on her feet. The sensation of her wrapping her tiny arm around his waist had caused him to tense up for the smallest moment and he focused on getting her to her bedroom in one piece. She spoke to him softly and a little more slowly, as if truly thinking about her words before saying them out loud—as if
she was scared she was going to say something wrong in her inebriated state.

“It's no problem,” He reassured her as they practically stumbled into her room; Steve held onto her elbow as she took her heels off, inspecting her feet for any damage that might have been caused from dancing in them all night. He kept a close eye on her as she made her way over to the foot of her bed and plopped down with a tired expression on her face, sparing a quick glance at the rather large stack on gifts on her desk before turning her attention to her aching leg.

“Do you want to open those?” Steve questioned softly, “I can hand them to you.”

She shook her head and smiled at him, “I'll open them tomorrow when I'm sober.”

“Good idea.”

Steve watched as she gently ran her thumb over the painful looking scar on her leg—the pearly white flesh contrasting deeply against her bronze skin. It looked as though she was massaging it and after noticing the way her brows furrowed and she wore a pained expression, Steve asked if she was alright. The worried expression remained on his face when she shrugged and insisted that she was okay. It was the first time he had seen the scar without all of the bandaging and stitches and it looked like it had been an extremely deep, painful wound and Steve couldn't fathom how she had gotten so lucky and had not bled out.

Bruce had once explained to him that one of the cinder blocks that had been practically crushing her legs had put enough pressure on the painful wound to help slow down the bleeding, but she had merely gotten lucky when it came to avoiding any type of infection.

Steve would fight anyone if they ever said she was weak because there was no way he'd be able to survive something like that without the serum.

Most healthy humans probably wouldn't have been able to survive that whole ordeal at all.

“Sit with me,” Marcella patted the spot next to her on the mattress and Steve hesitated as he stepped forward. Slowly, the Captain sat down next to the Banner girl and closed his eyes when she leaned against his side and rested her head against his shoulder. They were quiet for the longest time, listening to the music that could still be heard from the floor above them. As more and more people left the party, Steve noticed the music become slower and even a little softer—the obnoxious pop music giving way to sweet, more acoustic songs. His eyes remained closed and he grew more and more tired as they sat there together in a blissful silence, the exhaustion hitting him like a freight train.

“Steve?”

“Hm?”

“Why are you sad?”

Steve pulled away and stared down at her with furrowed brows; she gazed right back up at him with those big green eyes, her cheek scrunched up against his bicep. Her eyes were filled with a sense of curiosity and Steve realized she had meant no harm by the blunt question, but it still took him by surprise. She had always been a curious human being and while it wasn't necessarily a bad quality to have, Steve knew that in today's world being curious could also be a curse.

“I don't... what do you mean?”

She lifted her head and just like he had done before, she cupped his cheek with her small hand and smoothed her thumb over his clean shaven cheek. Then her thumb moved to the skin right
underneath his lower eyelashes, undoubtedly tracing the dark circles that had formed there. There was no doubt in Steve's mind that he looked like he was about to pass out from exhaustion—but he hadn't thought he looked sad or distressed in any way.

However, she clearly saw right through that.

“Your eyes seem sad now,” She observed and moved her thumb to the spot between his brows, smoothing the wrinkles from his furrowed eyebrows, “And the features on your face just seem... worn out, like you've seen so much. It looks like you are suffering.”

Her gaze seemed more focused now, as if the thought of him being in any sort of mental distress had caused her to sober up slightly. Steve stared at her with an indecipherable expression—he wasn't irritated with her, he was more irritated with himself for being able to be read so easily. He had tried so hard to hide his emotions, especially from her, and it frustrated him that she was still able to see right through him.

Gently, he grabbed her hand and pulled it from his face, keeping it in his, “Don't worry about me, Marcella.”

“You know I can't help it.”

“I know, I know,” The Captain lightly shook his head, “That's just how you are, always so kind and worried about others.”

“If you're in pain... you don't have to go through that alone.”

For some reason, her words made his eyes burn with tears that he refused to let fall from his eyes. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her again and pulled her close as he rested his cheek against the crown of her head. He didn't cry—he certainly wouldn't let himself do that in front of her—but just having her close made him feel better about her truthful words. He knew that he had been through a lot and absolutely no one should keep stuff like that bottled up, but Steve's chest flooded with sorrow and guilt at the thought of burdening Marcella with his problems.

“You're too... soft,” Steve murmured, “I'm not going to force the weight of my problems onto you, Marcella, you deserve better than that.”

“You act like I haven't experienced pain before.”

“I know you have, and I know it still gives you nightmares... that you still feel like you should have died that day I found you in the rubble. I've seen how badly this has torn you up; I've talked to you after you've had panic attacks and when you've woken up screaming and crying because of your nightmares. This is a battle I need to fight on my own, I won't burden you anymore.”

“But I care about you.”

Steve turned and glanced down at Marcella, who stared back up at him with wide, shining eyes and a small smile made its way onto his lips.

“I know, and I care about you too,” He admitted, trying to ignore how scary it was for him to say that. They grew quiet once more, enjoying the silence because it felt as though they had said all that needed to be said to one another. Steve could tell that she wasn't happy with the way their conversation had ended, noticing how her eyebrows were furrowed and there was a faraway look in her eyes—as if she wasn't even there with him in present time. It was something more of a worried expression, combined with conflicting thoughts as well as torment and a part of Steve wished she didn't care so much because that had been his best friend's ultimate downfall during the war. Having
someone care about you the way Bucky or Marcella cared for Steve... it certainly complicated things for him. Every time he went on missions he had to think through the repercussions of his actions and it took everything in him to not be so reckless like he had once been, for the sake of his comrades and especially the Banner girl.

“Do you want to dance?”

Steve immediately felt his cheeks warm up, “I'm really not that great of a dancer.”

She shrugged, “So?”

The blonde chuckled as Marcella stood up, a soft look on her features as she grabbed his hand with both of hers, urging him to join her. He remembered promising Peggy a dance right before he went under and guilt flooded his chest once again, but then he remembered Natasha's words from a while ago, about how Peggy would want him to move on and find happiness. He glanced at Marcella's face, noticing the hopeful expression and the way her eyes shone brightly in the dim lighting of her simplistic room. Finally, he caved in and stood with her; the Captain was only slightly unsure of himself as he gently enveloped her small hand in his large one and placed the other on her hip. She glanced up at him with a small smile as she placed her hand on his shoulder, the two of them swaying back and forth as they listened to the music softly play from the floor above them. It was a soft, delicate tune and Steve figured that the last of the guests were probably leaving the party, considering it was almost three in the morning. Her movements were graceful compared to his, knowing where to put her bare feet and knowing when to dodge his bigger ones.

“I had no idea you liked to dance,” Steve mumbled, grinning when he carefully spun her and brought her back to him, almost stepping on her feet in the process. She continued to hum softly along with the song, clearly knowing it well as she swayed softly with him.

She shrugged, “I don't really do it that often—I was always too busy with school to go out with friends but... when I was little my mom and I used to dance with each other all the time. She would always try to get my dad to dance with her but I think he's more awkward than you are.”

“Gee thanks,” Steve chuckled, giving her hand a soft squeeze.

“Hey, you're not doing so bad right now,” Marcella giggled and leaned her head against his chest, “If this whole superhero thing doesn't work out, you might have a future in dancing.”

“You don't have to lie to me to try to make me feel better.”

“Like I would ever lie to you.”

Marcella sang softly and Steve closed his eyes as he listened to her, remembering all of those nights he would listen to her voice lull him back to sleep when he would have nightmares. He would never tell anyone else but her, but hearing her sing random songs always calmed his pounding heart and knowing she was safe is what always helped him fall back asleep. It was rare that she ever called him because of a nightmare or panic attack, but it had happened twice and though Steve wasn't nowhere near as good of a singer as she was, he would try his hardest and she seemed to appreciate that.

'You know the door to my very soul
You're the light in my deepest, darkest hour
You're my savior when I fall
And you may not think I care for you
When you know down inside that I really do'
'And it's me you need to show
How deep is your love, how deep is your love?
'Cause we're living in a world of fools
Breaking us down when they all should let us be
We belong to you and me.'

Steve exhaled softly and felt his hand travel up her spine until it was pressed against the soft skin between her shoulder blades, keeping her close to him as they swayed softly.

Suddenly, Steve remembered the little box in his pocket and opened his eyes reluctantly, “Oh hey, I forgot to give you your present.”

“Steve,” She breathed softly and shook her head, “You didn't have to get me anything; I'm just happy your here.”

“It's nothing, really,” Steve insisted as he pulled the velvet box out of his pocket and gently slipped it into her small, hesitant hands, “I know you don't really wear flashy things like Stark does, so it was kind of hard to find something for you, but I thought this would look really nice on you.”

Marcella blinked and reluctantly flipped the box open, her eyes lighting up at the beautiful necklace, “I love opal! It's one of my favorite stones, but you really didn't have to do this Steve.”

“Marcella, it's really nothing; besides, I wanted to get something for you to show you how proud of you I am.”

The girl beamed as she gently lifted the beautiful piece of jewelry from the box. It was just a tear-drop shaped opal stone with tiny diamonds encrusted around it with a dainty rose gold chain, but it was beautiful, nonetheless, and Marcella held it out to Steve and asked if he could help her put it on. The tall blue-eyed man obliged as she turned around carefully brought the delicate chain around her neck before clasping it securely at her nape; his calloused fingers skimmed across the soft skin there and Steve knew he was imagining things when he thought he felt her shiver.

“I love it Steve,” She turned back around, and leaned her head up to press a warm kiss against his cheek, making his face turn red at the sentiment, “Thank you.”

“Of course,” The Captain murmured, gently wrapping his arm around her hips as they resumed their dancing once again.

Steve let out a shaky sigh and he wasn't sure why he did it, but he slid his hand from her hip to the spot between her shoulder blades once again, keeping her close to him. Her hand felt so soft and small in his and Steve tried to focus on that rather than the way her head rested against his chest, right above his pounding heart. After reemerging into this new world, Steve wasn't sure if he would ever be able to find happiness like he had with Bucky and even Peggy, but swaying gently back and forth with Marcella in his arms—he felt hopeful. Sure, he was terrified of putting a target on her back for being associated with him, but he already knew he would do everything in his power to keep her safe. Not only had he grown so close to her, but he knew everyone on the team and even most of the staff in the Avengers tower had come to adore her over the past few months. She was the kind of person who knew the names of all the janitors and chefs, thanking them and even starting conversations with them whenever she ran into any of them. Even Thor, who rarely traveled to Earth from Asgard had developed a huge soft spot in his heart for the Banner woman—explaining to everyone how she was as smart and kind as his Jane and how they could be sisters. Clint had taken to tormenting her like an older brother does with a little sister, oftentimes playing pranks on her.

Glancing down at her, Steve wondered if she knew just how much she was cared for but a part of
him didn't think she was aware in the slightest.

'I hope you know how precious you are to me.'
“During the battle of New York... when I flew into that black hole, I didn't expect to come out alive; I had accepted it. Just like how I'm sure when that building collapsed you didn't necessarily expect to come out of all that rubble alive either. We're Christmas miracles, you and I—Christmas miracles with enough daddy issues to make a great Hallmark or Lifetime movie.”

“If this is your way of trying to make me feel better, it's not really working.”

“Miss Banner? You are running late for your daily morning run.”

Marcella lifted her head and ignored the slight ache in the base of her skull and squinted her green eyes as she blearily opened her eyelids, her head hurting when she took in the dim lighting of her bedroom. She blinked a few times, trying to rid herself of the blurriness in her eyes before reluctantly kicking her covers off and sitting up. While her head ached, it was something similar to the feeling she got after pulling an all-nighter while working on homework and staring at her computer monitor for hours on end—she was certainly used to the feeling. She sighed softly as she swung her legs over the edge of the mattress and dug her toes into the plush carpet, rubbing her hands over her face before slowly standing up. Her stomach felt slightly queasy, but she was able to ignore it as she threw her frizzy hair up into a half-assed bun and brushed her teeth vigorously. By the time Marcella washed her face and threw on a pair of leggings, running shoes, and a white tank top, she felt much better and took a few extra minutes to stretch her stiff muscles.

The Banner girl rubbed her eyes tiredly as she ventured down the Avengers tower, popping in her white ear buds and opening Spotify so she could listen to her running playlist. The tower was surprisingly... quiet and somewhat barren as she entered the lobby; she really shouldn't have been surprised considering it was 5AM on a Saturday morning and most people were probably hungover after the previous night's party.

Jaime, the secretary on the clock greeted her with a warm smile, “Good morning Dr. Banner, I'm surprised to see you up so early.”

Marcella grinned at the beautiful woman, “Well I know if I sleep in one day I'm gonna want to keep doing it and I need to stay healthy somehow.”

“Fair enough,” Jaime responded, “Have a nice run and stay safe out there.”

“Will do, have a nice morning, Ms. Lee!”

With that, the Banner woman took off and made her way outside into the dark streets, starting off at a slow pace before working her way up to fast, steady sprint. The smaller girl had certainly never been a runner—or one for exercise at all—but as her wounded leg continued to heal, she had been determined to develop healthier habits, which had also included her diet, unfortunately. Marcella always had a weakness for sweets as well as pizza and giving up a lot of that had been hard for her, but she desperately wanted to be a better version of herself. While exercising hadn't come naturally to her at first, she had slowly trained herself to be a decent runner, even though she was sure her
breathing sounded like she was dying to others.

She focused on the path in front of her as her mind wandered back to the previous night, the memories of dancing with Steve flashing in her mind on a loop. Marcella had been buzzed, but she remembered everything so clearly. She remembered asking why he had seemed so sad and the memory made her cringe; while she had always been a curious person, she never wanted to be rude towards her friends and loved ones. Steve hadn't seemed offended, but even if he had been, there was no doubt in Marcella's mind that he never would have told her.

That man was too nice for his own good—definitely sassy at times, but never mean or hurtful.

Marcella ran until the sun started to rise and made the dull ache return to the back of her head and made a swift turn onto an upcoming street, deciding she could cut her run short at least one day of the week. The fact that she had even gotten up in the first place was a miracle in itself, to be honest, and she was proud of herself for being able to roll out of her bed that early.

She made her way back home as more and more people filed out of their homes and started their days in the big city—some people nodded a hello to the Banner woman, but for the most part, everyone minded their own business. By the time she made it back to the tower, a full on headache had formed and her breathing had become violently ragged and she realized she was more hungover than she had initially thought. She ignored it and after taking a shower, she took some extra strength aspirin before making her way to the main level where everyone usually hung out. She braided a few damp curls as she walked and pinned them away from her face, ignoring the baby hairs that tickled her forehead still. A soft smile spread across her plush lips as she fidgeted with the opal stone that rested between her collarbones, memories from the night before came rushing back and her heart skipped a beat when she remembered how close she had been with Steve as the two swayed in her room. She remembered how his hand had felt so heavy against her back as she sung softly, but it had been a comforting weight that she had longed for and she couldn't help but to wonder if Steve felt the same way about her.

“Huh,” She mumbled to herself when she made it to the level, only to find that there was nobody there. The short woman was surprised to find the room in somewhat of a chaotic state—paper plates, red cups, and beer bottles littering the marbled island as well as most of the counters in the kitchen. Confetti covered the tiled floors and there were even a few half-eaten slices of pizza on the coffee table in front of the leather couch.

Marcella figured that Tony had probably passed out before he could ask a janitor to clean things up; Pepper had most likely been the one to drag him to his bedroom. The petite woman rolled up the sleeves of her oversized cream-colored sweater as she grabbed a trash bag from the cupboard below the sink and set to work on cleaning up the messy room, starting with the kitchen first—the messiest area of the main room.

She had been in the middle of wiping off the marble counter tops when she heard a soft, familiar voice from behind her.

“You know you don't have to do that, right? The tower has janitors for messes like this.”

Marcella smiled at the Captain and shrugged, “I don't mind, I'd feel bad waking them up this early on a Saturday.”

“Fair enough,” Steve chuckled, and without another word the large man grabbed another trash bag and helped her finish up the kitchen before moving on to the living room. The pair was mostly quiet, only talking to each other every now and then, cracking jokes about the way Clint danced and sang at all of Tony's parties and how he actually had a pretty decent voice. It was a stark contrast from the
way she had acted last night when she had been slightly inebriated, but Steve didn't really mind all
that much; he was perfectly comfortable sharing some silent moments with the Banner woman.

The curly-haired woman had been quiet for nearly twenty minutes when Steve finally stole a glance
in her direction, realizing she was sitting on the couch—the half filled trash bag had been discarded
next to the coffee table as she held a wrapped package in her hand.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” She responded and glanced up at him before flipping the package over in her hand, “It's...
it's just a present from Tony; he must have forgotten to have it sent up to my room.”

Steve made his way over to her and sat down on the other side of the couch, resting his arms on his
thighs as he gazed down at the curly-haired woman softly. She glanced up at him for a moment,
receiving a warm, encouraging smile from the Captain and she turned her attention back to the
package. A neatly manicured nail gently dragged its way across the wrapping paper before she
turned her attention to the card that was tied neatly to the package with a red bow—deciding it was
only right to read the card before opening the gift. She disregarded the package for a few moments in
favor of the envelope before tearing it open with great precision, sliding the card out of the white
envelope. A grin spread across her lips and she immediately let out a loud laugh at the card that Tony
had most definitely picked out for her.

On the front of the card, there was a picture of Jon Snow—her favorite Game of Thrones character
—with the words “Congrats Grad... You Still Know Nothing”, in the Game of Thrones font. While
Steve didn't quite understand the reference, he wore a smile of his own at the sound of Marcella's
laughter, figuring it was just Tony being clever as usual.

“We need to add Game of Thrones to our list of things to watch together,” Marcella grinned up at
him cheekily, “You'd probably like it.”

Steve chuckled and nodded, “I'll add it to the list.”

She flipped the card open and what looked to be something similar to a credit card fell out and
landed on her lap; she merely spared it a glance before reading the heartfelt—yet corny words Tony
had wrote.

'What's up science buddy?

I hate writing these things but Bruce said you look up to me and that you're inspired by me every day
we work together... how unfortunate for you. I'm not going to lie, you've grown on me like a
disgusting leech and just like your dad, you're easy to tolerate and be around. So being the
generous, selfless man that you know me to be, I've decided to make you an offer. As you already
know, Bruce has a mission in God only knows what country for God knows how long, which leaves
me Banner-less in the lab.

That is just unacceptable.

Just like how there must always be a Stark in Winterfell, there must always be a Banner working
with me in my labs because you two are way too God damned smart for your own good.

So, in case you haven't pieced together what I am trying to say yet, this is me offering you a paid
internship to work alongside with your fucking idol and get paid a shit-ton to do it.

You don't have to give me a solid answer right away, take your time and even if you say no, I
included a debit card as a gift with more than enough money to pay off your student debt and get
you started on a solid career path—wherever it is you plan on going. You're an incredibly smart kid and anyone would be lucky to work beside you, but don't you dare tell anyone I said something kind or else they might think I actually have a heart, and don't you dare think about working for Elon Musk; I'd treat you way better here and value your ideas more.

_Congrats kid, keep up the amazing work._

-_Tony Stark._

Marcella smiled and shook her head softly at the eccentric billionaire and his awkward way with words; she already knew there was no use in trying to return the debit card, but she couldn't help but to feel like he had given too much by offering her a paid internship—she would confront him about it later. The young lady tucked the debit card and grad card back into the envelope and turned her attention to the red, velvety box that had been attached to the envelope in the first place. She hesitated and hoped that Tony hadn't gotten her anything too... gaudy or extravagant.

She was pleasantly surprised as she flipped the lid open on the small box.

There was a very tiny, dainty rose gold bracelet with a small, matching rose gold plate attached to it.

On the small plate were the simple words, 'Kindness is Power', etched into the gold.

It was a very unambiguous gift, but still thoughtful, nonetheless and Marcella didn't hesitate to gently take the bracelet out of the velvety box and handed it to Steve, silently asking him to help her put it on her wrist. He obeyed her silent command with a soft smile as he carefully wrapped the piece of jewelry around her dainty wrist and clasped it in place, his hand lingering against the inside of her wrist for a fleeting moment as he admired the way the rose gold color looked against her bronze skin.

Steve watched as she gazed down at the words on the bracelet, noticing the way her other hand moved to the long chain around her neck—where the dog tags and his mom's cross rested against her chest—along with the opal necklace he had given her the previous night. He hadn't even realized she had been wearing the dog tags still, but his heart swelled at the observation and he was glad that she had taken great care of the precious jewelry—notice that it had been polished and how the rust on the dog tags had seemed to all but vanish.

He knew he could trust her with the precious items.

She seemed thoughtful as she sat there silently for a few more moments, pondering over whatever it was that Tony had said in his letter. Much to Steve's surprise, the contents of the letter must have been more on the serious side to have caused this kind of reaction from Marcella, which was certainly unlike Tony to be more serious about certain situations.

"Would you like some breakfast?" She questioned softly, finally sparing him a glance.

She wore a different expression now, as if she was still contemplating everything that had happened and Steve wanted to ask if she was okay, but he knew she didn't feel like talking about it. Marcella Banner wore her heart on her sleeve and while she never had a problem talking about what was going on in her mind to Steve, even he knew that there were still certain things she struggled to talk about. While she had opened up to him numerous times about what had happened during the Battle of New York and how it had all but left her traumatized, it was nearly impossible for her to talk about her childhood. He had seen the scars on her shoulders, along with the few that marred the beautiful bronzed, freckled skin of her face and it was all he needed to know. Bruce Banner was a genuinely good person and truly wanted to make things right with his daughter, but her grandfather had been a horrible person who had no problem abusing children.
And that was the end of that.

“Sure,” He smiled and even though he only knew the basics of cooking, he asked, “What do you need help with?”

“If you could start cracking some eggs, that would be wonderful.”

“You got it, chef.”

Later that day.

Marcella glanced down at the half-finished prosthetic leg in her hand—mindlessly observing the colorful wires that poked out where a knee should have been; in the other hand, she twirled around her wire cutters. She knew her mind was starting to wander to other places and when her dad glanced up from his own work, he must have noticed too. He blinked and gently set down his notes, pulling off his glasses as he took in the strange expression on his daughter's features. Her wild mane had been pulled into two neat buns on either side of her head, making her look kind of like a Star Wars character, and she wore a light layer of makeup that accentuated her soft features. Her lips were pursed together and her thick brows were pinched together; Bruce eyed the scar that ran past one of her brows and he remembered having to stitch up that very wound when he had taken her away from his own father's custody.

Bruce stared at his daughter for a moment, noticing the faraway expression in her green eyes and the way she started to chew on her lip nervously as she thought about whatever it is that must have been bothering her. Between everything that had been going on with Steve and Tony, Bruce assumed that the poor girl had been over-thinking things as of late. While he was typically oblivious to these kinds of situations, Bruce knew his daughter well enough to know when she had strong feelings for something, or in this case someone. A part of him had known from the moment she had woken up after the attack of New York and had officially met the Captain that what she felt for him was different than the way she felt towards her other friends. At first Bruce had thought she acted the way she did because he had been the first person she had seen after being pulled out from all of that rubble, but eventually he knew it was something more than that. Bruce couldn't exactly pinpoint it, but a part of it was in the way that the typically shy girl spoke and interacted with him and how her face absolutely lit up when he was even in the same room as her. The young scientist, who was normally calm and collected around everyone, seemed to grow a little more excited and giddy whenever the two spoke with one another and Bruce noticed how she had this different smile that only seemed to be reserved for him. Her green eyes would sparkle and the tiny smile she usually wore on her face would grow into a large, soft smile that had the Captain reacting the same way.

Bruce didn't want to believe that his daughter, and only child, had a crush on Captain America. After what had happened to the skittish doctor as well as his wife, Bruce had always hoped that Marcella would ultimately fall in love with someone... normal, not an almost hundred year old man who had technically died during World War II. Bruce was well aware of the fact that Marcella already had a target on her back just for being his daughter, but he couldn't fathom how bigger that target would be if the wrong kind of people found out that her and Steve had a close relationship. Steve was extremely protective over her though, everyone had noticed, and was always giving her worried glances if she so much as stumbled—which was unfortunate for the Captain, considering Marcella Banner was the clumsiest woman he knew.

He had watched her accidentally walk into a wall just a few hours ago.

“What's wrong, Marce?”

The green-eyed girl glanced up at her dad with something similar to a somber expression, “I just feel...”
like... Tony kind of just handed me that internship because of my last name... not my skill.”

Bruce sighed and gave his daughter a soft smile, “You know that's not true, Marcie. Tony thinks what you're doing for prosthetics and engineering in general is amazing; you're trying to help so many people and he genuinely respects you for doing that. He wouldn't have asked you if he didn't think you could keep up with him... and he wouldn't have given you that money if he didn't trust you.”

The mention of the debit card that Tony had given to her made Marcella cringe—it had felt so wrong taking that much money from someone else and whenever she tried to give it back to Tony, he merely ignored her. Even when the young Banner woman tried to hand the card to Pepper, the strawberry-blonde woman had insisted that her hands were full and to come back at a later time.

“Why would he give me that much money?” Marcella asked her dad, and she didn't sound irritated but she certainly sounded curious.

Bruce shrugged, “Because he has a lot of it and wants to give you the resources and materials to succeed; even with the paid internship and however much he's going to pay you, lord knows you were going to be in debt for years. Please Marcella, Tony would be grateful if you took the money and got yourself out of debt.”

When Bruce glanced at his daughter again, she wore an expression that he had only seen on rare occasions. It was almost a resigned scowl, like she still didn't understand why Tony had been as generous as he had been—but she wasn't going to ask anymore questions and had taken to being silent instead. Bruce decided to leave her to her own thoughts and went back to writing in an old, leather notebook—Marcella assumed it was something to do with the extremely classified assignment that not even he could tell Marcella about. The father and daughter duo only broke their concentration when the eccentric billionaire entered the lab wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt and a pair of dark jeans; as usual, his facial hair was neatly trimmed and his hair styled in his typical way.

“Big Banner,” He greeted Bruce and then turned to Marcella, “Little Banner.”

“Mr. Stark,” She greeted back just as tersely and turned her attention back to the unfinished prosthetic in her tight grasp—surprising Bruce. The way she acted so suddenly wasn't necessarily what Bruce would call standoffish... but more so intimidation, like Tony was suddenly making her nervous. Tony pursed his lips for a moment as he inspected the freckled girl before turning his attention to the doctor, who merely shrugged at the strange shift in her attitude.

“Director Fury is outside waiting for you,” He spoke monotonously, “Try not to look into his eye, I made that mistake in the elevator and I'm pretty sure I lost a part of my soul.”

Bruce snorted but stood up and wiped his hands on his pants, “I'll be right back, Marce.”

“Take your time,” She mumbled and was sure that it came off as sounding rude. Instead of taking it personally, her father patted her shoulder and pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her head, making her smile at the rare display of affection. For some reason, she expected Tony to leave, instead she watched from the corner of her eye as he hopped onto the stool next to her and spun around a few times before grabbing one of her pens and flipping it in the air before catching it in his hand. She felt her eyebrow twitch as he furiously clicked it against the desk and finally lifted her head to gaze up at him.

“You know,” He started, his voice taking on a serious note, “During the battle of New York... when I flew into that black hole, I didn't expect to come out alive; I had accepted it. Just like how I'm sure when that building collapsed you didn't necessarily expect to come out of all that rubble alive either.
We're Christmas miracles, you and I—Christmas miracles with enough daddy issues to make a great Hallmark or Lifetime movie.”

“If this is your way of trying to make me feel better, it's not really working.”

“No,” The man smiled genuinely, the corners of his eyes crinkling, “It's definitely not me trying to make you feel better, if that were the case I would have brought Pepper instead. What I'm trying to say is that you and I were clearly meant for something bigger than... well, whatever it is we were supposed to be doing in the first place. I know what you're trying to accomplish and I think it's amazing and you're going to do wonderful things for the field of science and engineering. It would be a shame to let that go to waste because I overlooked your talent and didn't take you in and give you the proper resources you need.”

Marcella glanced down at a small scar on her hand, the opalescent flesh contrasting deeply against her bronze skin.

“Look at me, kid,” and when she looked up at Tony, she was surprised to find nothing but sincerity in his dark eyes, “I don't hand out money to people who I think don't deserve it, and you are no exception. All I ask for in return is to not let me down, and the only way you could ever let me and even your dad down is by giving up on this vision of yours.”

“I won't,” She reassured him and then clarified, “Give up... I won't give up.”

“Good,” He clapped her shoulder gently, “Because I'd hate to have to give you another motivational talk.”

“Trust me, I get enough of them from my dad.”

He looked surprised at her comment, “Are you trying to tell me that Dr. Banner, quite possibly one of the most pessimistic men I have ever met, is a connoisseur in motivational speeches?”

Marcella shrugged and grabbed a tiny red wire between her thumb and index finger before inspecting it, ignoring the spark that landed on her hand, “He's really only pessimistic around you, I think. He told me that it keeps you grounded and... reasonable.”

“Huh,” He stopped chewing his gum for a second as he glanced at her, “Makes sense.”

Marcella glanced at the unfinished prosthetic in her hand and stared at it thoughtfully for a few moments—every time she looked at it, all she could see were her peers running around without an arm or lying on the ground and clutching a leg that would most likely have to be amputated. She thought of her own leg... how she had gotten lucky and how she didn't deserve to be alive and in one piece when there were people stronger than her who had perished or suffered greatly in the attack. Carefully, she set the mechanic limb on the metal table and placed her chin in the palm of her hand, ignoring the way Tony looked at the action with somewhat of a somber, understanding expression. He watched the vacant look in her green eyes as she ran her thumb over the smooth steel; what she had built so far was a mirror image to the prototype she had shown Tony before she started this project, the hard part was getting the wiring correct and figuring out how to make a connection between the machinery and a human's nervous system.

Which he had been willing to help out with, but she insisted on doing it herself and merely accepted advice from Tony instead.

“So what's up with you and Capsicle?” Tony questioned out of nowhere—ever the gossip girl, that man.
Marcella kept her chin in her palm as she rolled her eyes, “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” He dragged out the word, “Has he confessed his unconditional love for you yet, or is he still acting like a rejected puppy?”

She shook her head, “Why does everyone keep assuming that we like each other? We're just friends.”

“Honey,” Tony started in a condescending tone that nearly had her smirking, “I saw the way you two looked at each other at your graduation party; Stars and Stripes was giving you those bedroom eyes.”

“You're gross.”

“Don't lie, you love this shit and you love that human popsicle.”

“Stop calling him that,” Tony continued to stare at her and she realized that he wasn't going to let this go, “Even if I did like him more than a friend, I'm sure he doesn't feel the same way. Besides, he's got his own life and I... I'm not a part of it. I'm not spectacular or extraordinary like the people he works with; I'm sure he could do better than someone like me.”

Tony seemed surprised at her confession, “Jesus Christ, what is it with you Banners and your self-esteem issues? You're almost worse than your dad.”

Marcella rolled her eyes again, “I'm being realistic, Tony. Seriously, just let it go.”

“This is me you're talking to, I don't let anything go,” He reminded her, “Seriously kid, you're over here being all smart and sunshiney and shit, and you're saying that you're not spectacular? Cap would be an idiot to not like you.”

“It's stupid,” Tony grew serious as Marcella stood and stared at him, “I like Steve, okay? More than a friend... are you happy now? Go ahead and tell him if you want, it's not going to change anything between us... he doesn't want me as anything more than a friend. I'd be nothing more than just a burden and a weight on his shoulders.”

Tony watched with a frown as the girl threw her satchel over her shoulders and gathered her papers into a binder, “Look, I don't know why you're saying these things because they definitely aren't true; you really need to stop being so hard on yourself.”

Marcella stared at the eccentric man for a few moments before responding with an unusual seriousness to her tone, “I saw what happened between my mom and dad when she got sick—the way she spoke and acted like she was nothing more than a curse to my dad. I saw how it tore their marriage apart when she got sick and how depressed my dad grew when he realized just how weak she had gotten; they drifted apart. I never want that to happen to anyone I love... for them to lie awake at night crying because they're not sure or not whether I'm going to be okay. I know... I know Steve knows that I'm not strong like the rest of you and I'm certainly not indestructible; as a matter of fact, I'm quite weak and I'm sick every other day and I can barely run a mile without feeling like I'm having an asthma attack. H-He deserves better than that and I'm sure he knows that as well; he deserves someone that he doesn't have to worry about everyday when we're not together.”

“Marcella... you're not--”

“Tony, please,” Marcella backed up, “Just let it go. It really doesn't matter that much to me and it shouldn't matter to you either. I'll be fine on my own; I always have been and I always will.”
She hesitated before she spoke again, more quietly this time, “I do better when I'm on my own...”

Tony watched silently as she turned around and exited the room, her shoulders slumped and her head hanging low. He could comprehend how she felt about Steve, surprisingly. There were days where Tony certainly felt like he nothing more than a burden to Pepper, especially on the days where he unintentionally got under her skin and she would get extremely irritated with him. A part of him was merely trying to push her away—he knew this—but he never felt like he was undeserving of love, like Marcella seemed to feel. For some reason, Tony would have never been able to make the connection between her parents’ relationship to the way she felt about love in general, but it made sense the more he thought about it. It was almost similar to way Tony's relationship had been—where they both loved each other immensely but had mostly been focused on work most of his childhood. It was a sad reality for both him and Marcella, but Tony was at least grateful that her and Bruce had mended their relationship for the most part before it was too late—just like it had been with him and his dad, Howard.

However, Tony couldn't help but to feel a slight inkling of sympathy at the way Marcella refused to believe that Steve couldn't look at her as anything more than a friend when he clearly did.

God, Tony was growing soft, he realized when he told himself that he was going to have to handle this situation himself.
Chapter Summary

“I like how you made fun of me for originally throwing up on the cyclone, yet here we are.”

Marcella glared up at Steve as he handed her a cold bottle of water; he sat down next to her on the bench overlooking the beach and gently rubbed the space between her shoulder blades. Her face was quite pale and there was a thin layer of sweat covering her bronzed, freckled skin—the sight was all too familiar and he genuinely felt bad for the much smaller woman.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Dr. Banner?”

Bruce lifted his head and rubbed his eyes as he woke up from the light sleep he had fallen into, “What is it Jarvis?”

“Ms. Banner's heart rate has skyrocketed and it seems as though she is in the middle of having another night terror—she's been asking for you for a few minutes now in her sleep.”

Bruce blinked and quickly stood up, rushing as he made his way out of his bedroom and down the hall where Marcella's room was just a few doors down from him. He pressed his hand against the sensor attached to the door and was immediately granted access; the scientist didn't hesitate as he entered the dark room and was instantly met with the sound of her loud cries. Bruce quickly made his way into her bedroom and was surprised to find her tangled in her comforter, writhing around on the floor as though she was in pain even though he knew it wasn't a physical kind of pain that he could take her to the hospital. No, this pain was almost worst than that in the sense that there was only so much he could do to soothe the pain of her dark memories—he would never be able to make that kind of pain go away.

“Hey, Marcie,” Bruce knelt down next to her and removed the material around her face so she could breathe easier, “It's okay sweetheart, it's just another nightmare—you're okay.”

“No!” She wailed, still in the throes of her night terror as Bruce placed his palm against her sweaty neck, “Don't leave me!”

Bruce froze when he realized what she was dreaming about and his hand slowly slipped away from her neck. Instead, he slowly sunk down next to her writhing form and carefully gathered her in his arms, waiting for her to wake up; he knew when she was that deep in a night terror, there wasn't a whole lot he could do to wake her up. She sobbed for a few more minutes, her body shaking violently as he stroked her soft curls and spoke quietly to her, telling her that everything was going to be alright even though it sounded more like he was trying to convince himself. Bruce knew she had finally woken up when her sobs were replaced with quiet whimpers and sniffles; she gazed around the room with a confused, terrified expression before she gazed up at the man who was holding her together tightly.
“Shh, you're okay—I've got you,” The older Banner reassured her as she cried harder against his chest, “You're okay Marcie, he can't hurt you anymore.”

He ignored her sweat-soaked t-shirt as he rubbed her back comfortingly, rocking her back and forth like he used to do way back when her night terrors were frequent and even worse than the one she had just experienced. Bruce knew that he had missed out on a lot of her childhood and while he would never forgive himself for that, it brought him comfort to know that he had always been there for her when she had her night terrors. Even when Betty and him had first adopted her, her nightmares had eventually turned into sleep paralysis and night terrors and they had become quite proficient at pulling her out of it and comforting her.

She let out a shaky breath and her voice was barely there when she spoke, “I'm sorry... I-I didn't...”

“Don't you dare apologize, Marcie,” Bruce shook his head, still rocking the two of them as he stared up at her starry ceiling, “You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for.”

“Do you ever wish you could forget your past? All of the hurtful things that happened to you?”

“Of course,” Bruce whispered just as quietly, “But sometimes it's better to remember the pain, that way you don't repeat the mistakes that those who hurt you did. You've been through so much Marcella—so much pain—but all of that pain and loneliness just made you benevolent and more selfless. You are who you are because of your past and nobody can take that away from you.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Marcella exhaled unsteadily, “I'm sorry for waking you up.”

“Never do that, Marcie,” Bruce scolded gently and let out a relieved sigh when her tears finally came to a stop, “Hey, point out some galaxies to me—I used to be good at it, but you're probably way better than me now.”

The younger scientist wiped her cheeks and stared up the interface that was projected on her ceiling, crossing her legs as the two sat next to one another, propped up against the side of her bed. She observed the beautiful, colorful galaxies and constellations for a few moments, a part of her wishing that she was out there exploring the unknown and meeting creatures from other galaxies. She remembered being little and wishing the same thing during those rough nights where her father wasn't there for her—she would stare out her bedroom window and observe the night sky above her. She prayed that some sort of guardian angel would take her away from her real life nightmare and there were times even in present time where she wished nothing more than to leave the planet so she could explore the unknown.

“That um, that one--” She pointed to one of the brighter constellations with red and blue tints, “That's the tarantula nebula and is about one-hundred and sixty-thousand light years away from Earth. That one over there is the sculptor galaxy and the reason why there's so many luminous spots located within the core is because it's going through intense star formation right now; it's a--”

“Starburst Galaxy,” Both of the Banners said at the same time, grinning softly at one another. For the next few hours, the two continued to point out different galaxies and constellations to one another and found comfort in each other's presence.

Marcella Banner held her tears in when her father left later that same day to embark on his top secret mission, leaving her in Tony's care while he was away. The billionaire had been somewhat surprised at how well she held herself together as the helicarrier finally disappeared from their line of sight—she didn't shed a single tear and even kept her breathing pattern and heartbeat composed as she stared at the sky for a few moments. Her heart felt heavy in her chest as Tony gave her shoulder a light squeeze before turning away to return to his own projects, leaving her to her own thoughts until that
evening when Steve found her on the top floor balcony, still staring at the sky. At first, he had tried to force himself to turn away because she seemed sad and conflicted and she probably wanted to be alone with her thoughts, but he found himself making his way over to her instead.

Marcella had spent so much time in solitude, and he decided to keep her company as the two made their way back inside to eat some dinner and watch a movie. He nearly laughed when she insisted on fast forwarding through the first twenty minutes of John Wick to skip the scene with the puppy dying, but he respected her wishes and wrapped a heavy arm around her shoulders as they watched the action movie contently. Steve kept a count in his head of how many times she professed her love for Keanu Reeves and every now and then, she would start spouting off random facts about him, much to Steve's utter amusement—she could be quite silly at times.

That same night, her night terrors returned at full force and she knew she wasn't going to be getting any sleep once it hit four in the morning. She sighed as she rolled out of bed and threw a white Columbia t-shirt on, along with some dark-wash skinny jeans and her beat up converse that she probably needed to retire already. The young scientist grabbed her lanyard as she exited her bedroom and descended to the lobby of the tower, greeting a few workers as she went. Right as she stepped outside, a large, muscular figure ran into her and she felt the wind get knocked out of her as she stumbled backwards and he cursed at the sudden impact. Before she could hit the concrete, a heavy arm wrapped itself around her waist and she blinked as she stared up at the familiar face just inches away from her.

“Marcie?”

“Oh uh, hi Steve... what a coincidence.”

Marcella smiled nervously at the much larger man, only to meet the piercing blue eyes of Captain Rogers—minus the uniform of course. There was a soft, caring expression on his face as he slowly unwrapped his arm from around her waist when he figured she was steady enough to stand on her own. His fingertips lingered against her hip and she felt her cheeks grow warm as he raised his brows at her and the whole situation. The Captain noticed her red-rimmed eyes from crying and the dark circles underneath her eyelids, confirming that she hadn't been getting enough sleep in the last few days. Her wild mane had been pulled into a huge ponytail that swished unceremoniously behind her and Steve eyed the curls that had sprung free from the elastic, tickling her forehead as a soft breeze blew past them.

“Hey Marce,” Steve greeted with a gentle smile, “What are you doing out here so early?”

“I was um,” She hesitated when she tried to think of an excuse, but she found it nearly impossible to lie to him, “I couldn't sleep so I was just going to go for a walk—try to clear my head.”

Steve nodded slowly and chose his next words carefully, “You should really let someone know... it can be dangerous walking around by yourself—even here in Manhattan.”

Marcella shrugged, “It's fine, the streets are usually pretty empty around this time.”

“Fair enough,” Steve said and noticed the nervous expression on her face, “Do you... do you want to do something? Maybe get your mind off the nightmares?”

“Honestly,” She stared down at her converse before peering up at him through thick lashes, “I just get usually get on the B and stay on it until I decide to get off—that's what I... it's what I always do when I feel lost.”

“Okay,” Steve nodded again and held his arm out for her to take, like he always did, “Then let's go.”
Marcella hesitated as she stared at his huge bicep, “You really don't have to go with me because you feel bad; I'll be fine Steve.”

“I know you'll be fine,” He murmured, his expression indecipherable, “But you don't always have to go through things alone all the time.”

“Okay,” She eventually acquiesced and wrapped her hand around his bicep as the two made their way to the subway station, Marcella mostly leading the way as she knew these streets like the back of her hand. They were both silent as they arrived at their destination and only had to wait a few moments for the subway to appear and Marcella gently grabbed his hand as she led him to her usual spot in the back.

“I don't think I'll ever get used to the subway system here,” Steve chuckled as he sat down next to her, feeling a little emptier when she reluctantly let go of his large hand, “It's too much.”

Marcella smiled softly at her companion, “It's definitely overwhelming at first, but when you've been living here for over six years, you kind of learn to get used to it. I tried driving the first few months I was here and it was just way too stressful so I forced myself to memorize all the different subway lines. I would just listen to music and ride the subway for hours—especially to go to Coney Island.”

Steve immediately grinned, “I used to love going to Coney Island back in the day; I bet it's changed so much though, huh?”

“Oh yeah it's huge now and they've added so much to it—it's still one of the longest boardwalks in the world actually,” She informed him with a gentle grin of her own, “But they still have the cyclone and the ferris wheel, in case you were wondering.”

“Oh man—I have so many memories about that damn cyclone,” Steve admitted, the corners of his eyes crinkling with happiness, “Like trying to convince myself to go on it every time me and Bucky went there and finally getting the courage to actually do it.”

“How did that go?”

Steve still had a fond smile on his features as he stared down at her, “Horrible—I threw up for like twenty minutes and Bucky practically had to carry me home.”

Marcella finally giggled for the first time since her nightmare and Steve's heart fluttered in his chest, “I know it's last minute... but would you want to go?”

The Captain blinked, “To Coney Island? Right now?”

“Sure,” She shrugged, suddenly feeling a little bashful, “We're already on the B, all we would have to do is take it to the Q and that will take us right down to Coney Island. By the time we get there, most places will be open and we can get ourselves some breakfast and walk around for a few—maybe I can get you to ride the cyclone again.”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded after a moment of contemplation and smiled, “That sounds nice actually.”

Marcella grinned before the two fell into a comfortable silence; she leaned her head against his bicep as the subway continued to travel through Manhattan and eventually into Brooklyn, where they got off and made their way onto the Q line. They stared out the window as Steve kept an arm wrapped comfortably around her shoulders, looking like the epitome of warmth and comfort.

“Do you want to talk about it? Your nightmare?”
She thought about it, and she thought about her nightmare and how she was so certain she could actually feel her grandfather beating her to the point where she was nearly unconscious. Marcella wondered how her dad had endured an entire childhood of that... she had cracked within a single year of living with that horrible man and even now, her back ached where her grandfather had hit her numerous times with his belt. She could still feel the horrible pain from being struck in the face with a glass coffee pot and every time she looked in the mirror and saw that thick scar that passed through her brow and ended just a couple of inches below her eye, she'd be reminded of that night.

The bronze-skinned girl ignored the sharp pang of resentment that shot through her chest—she had forgiven her dad so long ago, but nightmares like the one she just had would always reminded her of what he had done. Though she loved her dad to pieces, she wasn't sure if she would ever forget the way he had just abandoned her. Marcella's eyes slipped shut and she lowered her head for a moment, ignoring the way Steve gazed at her with a concerned expression, his arm tightening around her in just the tiniest bit.

“No,” She whispered, “Not this time.”

“'S okay,” He murmured, “They're just... bad thoughts, they can't actually hurt you.”

Marcella nodded but kept her eyes closed as she placed her hand on her forehead, rubbing the skin with her fingers in what was supposed to be a soothing motion, though her head still ached. Wordlessly, Steve placed his hand on the back of her neck and she felt some of the tension alleviate from her body as his calloused thumb glided across her nape before giving the soft skin a gentle squeeze, bringing her closer to his warm chest. A part of her wished Steve hadn't ran into her, because these were the nights where it felt like Marcella was starting to slowly lose herself, like she was floating in the darkness and no matter where she looked, she was all alone. Normally, she was okay during the day, but for some reason the nighttime is when everything seemed to crash into her like a freight train.

She placed her hands over her eyes as a few tears slipped down her cheeks and she cursed herself for crying in front of Steve—she wished she could just keep it together for one night.

“I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” He repeated and with his large hand still on the back of her neck, he guided her until she was fully wrapped in his arms; the position was slightly awkward since they were sitting down and Marcella turned so she was curled against his chest. Slowly, she wrapped her own arms around his midsection and pressed her cheek against his chest as she tried to calm herself down and rid herself of the bad memories that lingered on the forefront of her conscious. Marcella inhaled and exhaled deeply as she counted to ten, just like she had done hundreds of times before and managed to calm herself down until she was breathing regularly again. Steve continued to hold her tightly though, one hand gently cupped the back of her head while the other rested against her shoulder blade—his entire body feeling like it was enveloping her much smaller one. He held her so tightly, as if he was trying to keep her from falling apart right in front of him, and that made her feel better—to have him so close.

“Thank you,” She mumbled after a few moments and slowly pulled away from him.

“You're welcome, Marcella,” Steve gazed down at her with that kind expression and gave her a tired little smile. He looked contemplative as he cupped her freckled cheek with the palm of his hand, his long fingers carefully sliding into her hairline. She felt something warm bloom in the pit of her stomach as his thumb carefully slid across the skin right below her eye, wiping away any of the wetness that still lingered there from her tears. Without another word, Steve leaned forward and kissed her forehead, right above the center of her eyebrows. A part of her thought about Tony's
words—how he had been so insistent on Steve liking her more than a friend and she felt her cheeks 
grow hot at the thought.

While the thought wasn't... unpleasant, for the life of her, Marcella couldn't imagine the two of them 
ever being together as a couple—even in a perfect world. She cared for Steve greatly, and these 
feelings that she felt for him were completely foreign to her. She'd always have crushes in high 
school and in college she had always been too busy with studying and schoolwork to really date 
boys, It's not like her self esteem had ever been that great either, so if there were ever any boys who 
had shown interest in her, she had most likely been oblivious to it. She tried to watch Steve carefully 
whenever the two of them interacted, trying to notice any kind of change in behavior in the way he 
acted or talked, but she could never spot it.

Maybe she was just blind.

She felt her eyes slip shut when his fingertips gently made their way past her hairline and came to a 
stop when they rested against the crown of her hair—she couldn't remember the last time someone 
played with her hair, but it felt nice.

As if having a moment of realization, he took his hand back and slowly lowered it back to his side.

Steve watched silently as her green eyes flickered open and stared right back up at him.

“When are you going back to SHIELD?”

Steve sounded somber as he responded, “Tonight.”

Marcella nodded, and reminded herself that this was why they couldn't be together. She had... 
abandonment issues, to say the least, and she knew that it would be hard for her to have to say 
goodbye to Steve this frequently. She remembered how hard it had been for her to say goodbye the 
first time, she couldn't imagine having to do it every month.

“It'll be okay, Marce.”

“I know...” She turned from him and stared at the dark waves with furrowed brows, “You know 
how I am... I just get so attached to people and it's always so hard for me to say bye. Between you 
and my dad leaving...”

Steve nodded and immediately understood where the pain in her eyes was coming from—he couldn't 
believe he had forgotten that Bruce had left on that classified mission as well. He couldn't help but to 
worry for the Banner woman at the sudden realization that she was going to be alone, essentially. 
Sure, she had Tony, but that wasn't nearly the same as having a father figure or even a close friend, 
like Steve, to talk to about incredibly grave subjects. Clint was traveling to god knows where for a 
while, probably taking a break and Thor had left for Asgard the day after Marcella's graduation. 
Obviously, Natasha was going back to D.C. with Steve and he felt a sharp pain in his chest when he 
realized that all of her friends and family, excluding Tony, were leaving her.

All this time, Steve thought he had been the loneliest guy out of the group, but the more he talked to 
Marcella, the more he realized he wasn't the only one and she was probably one of the loneliest 
people he had ever met.

He had his new comrades and Natasha had become something similar to a friend to him, but 
everyone Marcella had loved in her life had either left her or wronged her in one way or another. She 
had forgiven Bruce for abandoning her and leaving her with an abusive man, but the pain was 
obviously still there and Steve wondered if they would ever have a normal, stable relationship. The
only thing that made Steve feel better about leaving was the fact that she'd be working alongside Tony. While he probably wouldn't admit it in a million years, everyone on the team knew that the billionaire had the absolute softest spot in his shrapnel-ridden chest for the soft spoken, clumsy girl.

Not really knowing what else to say, he exhaled unsteadily before speaking up, “I'm sorry.”

“It'll be okay,” She gave him a half smile, “Let's just enjoy today, yeah?”

Steve smiled down at her and nodded, “Yeah.”

Later that day.

“I like how you made fun of me for originally throwing up on the cyclone, yet here we are.”

Marcella glared up at Steve as he handed her a cold bottle of water; he sat down next to her on the bench overlooking the beach and gently rubbed the space between her shoulder blades. Her face was quite pale and there was a thin layer of sweat covering her bronzed, freckled skin—the sight was all too familiar and he genuinely felt bad for the much smaller woman. He oftentimes forgot about how similar her health was to his before he got his serum and she was probably even the same size he was before he came out of that machine. For the tiniest moment, Steve eyed her collarbones and her sharp jawline, remembering a time so long ago when he had been that tiny and he hoped she wasn’t as self conscious as he had been.

“You shut up, big guy,” She huffed and held her head high as she gave him a cheeky smirk, feeling a little better after drinking the cool liquid, “I shouldn't have had that funnel cake before going on that ride.”

“Excuses,” Steve snorted and easily caught her hand as she went to playfully shove him away from her. She giggled wildly as he easily overpowered her and his fingertips brushed against her side, making her squeal and squirm against him. He had discovered the ticklish, sensitive spot when they had been wrestling one another in a lighthearted way a few days ago and needless to say, he had won that fight when she nearly passed out from how much she had been laughing even though he had been worried sick about her.

“Steve!” She tried to scold him, but it only came out as a giggle and he raised his eyebrows when her other hand darted out. She went to shove his shoulder but missed horribly and ended up slapping him in the face instead, the loud sound shocking the two of the second it touched their ears.

“Oh my God!” Marcella exclaimed as Steve immediately stopped tickling her and held a hand against his cheek, surprised at the stinging sensation, “I'm so sorry Steve, I didn't mean to... I'm so sorry!”

“Hey, it’s okay,” The Captain chuckled, “I definitely deserved that—you have a lot more strength in that tiny arm than I thought.”

Marcella still looked tense and worried as she observed the blonde warily, “I'm sorry Steve! I meant to hit your shoulder and not your face.”

“Hey, it's okay Marce,” He reassured her and pulled his hand away from his red cheek, noticing the frightened expression on her face, “I'll make sure to tickle you with caution next time.”

The look on her face reminded him that she had been a victim of child abuse and the thought made him feel slightly nauseous.

“I'll warn you next time, promise.”
“Thanks,” The scared expression slowly melted away as she snorted, “Or you could just, I don’t know, not tickle me?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Marcella narrowed her eyes at him playfully before the two decided to make their way down to the shoreline. They discarded their shoes just a few feet away from the wet sand and Steve watched with a fond smile as she happily skipped to the salt water until it was just a little past her ankles. She had rolled the bottom of her skinny jeans up to the middle of her calves and had removed the elastic from her hair, letting the beautiful mane fall down to her waist and he watched as the curls whipped around her face as the wind blew past them. It was just getting to that time of the day where the sun was starting to set and this had become Steve’s favorite time of the day solely because of the way the golden rays of sunlight made her skin seem so radiant and accentuated her green eyes and freckles. Before she could turn around to face him, Steve pulled out his phone and took a picture of her so he could remember what she looked like in the beautiful golden rays, right in front of the sparkling ocean water.

“Steve!” Marcella called out, snapping him out of his temporary daze, “Come here you big wimp!”

She watched with a grin as he shook his head and made his way over to where she was, nearly hissing at the cold water that covered his feet and ankles. He wasn’t sure what compelled him to do it, but he found himself wrapping his arms around her shoulders from behind as he took in the beautiful scenery in front of him. Marcella beamed up at him and her own hands came up to gently rest on top of his forearms; she felt his heat envelop her as she pressed her back against his chest and smiled contently. It felt right to be in his arms like this and it almost felt like being in a cocoon as he gently rested his chin on top of her head after pressing the softest kiss to the top of her head. Marcella wondered if it could ever be like this every day—if he liked her the same way she liked him and if he could ever settle down with someone like her. She thought about moving to somewhere in Europe, maybe Ireland or Scotland somewhere on the countryside where they would own a tiny little farm and living the rest of their days in pure bliss; it sounded too perfect though, and she knew that she would never get that lucky. She would never expect him to hang up the shield and stop going on missions for her, but she wondered if he could ever fall in love with her and need her the same way she needed him.

Did anyone ever really need her?

Marcella decided not to think about that though, and settled on enjoying their moment before Steve left again for God only knows how long.

When Steve leaves that night, Tony watches as she remains composed and doesn't shed a single tear when Steve holds her impossibly close to his huge frame and presses an affectionate kiss against her forehead before making his way onto the small jet that awaits him. Instead, she forced a sad smile that he knew the Captain could easily see through and Tony didn't miss the conflicted, torn expression on his face as he threw her one glance over his broad shoulder. It was the first time Tony had ever seen the Captain show any uncertainty in his actions; he was always so calculating and somewhat confident in everything he did. However, having to leave Marcella behind in a place where he couldn’t get to her quick enough to protect her in case of an emergency was enough to even make him question his role as Captain America and that shocked Tony. Within the span of a few months, Marcella Banner had wormed her way into Steve Rogers’ stubborn heart and it was clear to everyone, especially Tony, that they had an incredibly close bond. A part of him wished he could see into the future, just so he could confirm that the two would live happily ever after and while he’d never admit it, Tony hoped that they would find happiness and comfort in one another.
Lord knows they had both been through so much and deserved it.

The billionaire admired her strength and wondered how hard it was for her to not burst out into tears after having to say goodbye to her two favorite men within the span of just forty-eight hours. Instead of breaking down in front of him, Marcella lied awake in bed that night and stared up at the interface projected onto her ceiling until morning slowly approached.

She found herself pointing out different galaxies and constellations to pass the time.

A few days later.

Tony yawned loudly as he stood up from his desk and flicked his little lamp off; his eyeballs felt dry and itchy from how long he had been staring at the computer monitor and he rubbed them viciously. Glancing at the digital clock on the corner of his desk, he grunted when he realized it was three in the morning and quickly made his way to his bedroom. He knew Pepper would be upset with him if he spent another night in the lab and Lord knows he couldn’t handle angry Pepper, again.

He was halfway down the hall and ready to lock everything up when Jarvis' voice startled him.

“Sir?”

“Whatever it is, it can wait until I've had at least three or four hours of sleep.”

“Sir, I must inform you that before you lock all of the doors on your current level, Dr. Banner is still in the Robotics laboratory.”

Tony felt his eyebrow twitch that the Banner girl was starting to pick up unhealthy habits, “That can't be right, I'm supposed to be the token insomniac friend of the group.”

“According to my records, Dr. Banner has gotten less than ten hours of sleep in the past five days.”

Tony's steps faltered at this information and he quickly made his way to the laboratory she currently occupied on the same level. The room was illuminated by a small lamp on the table she worked at and her back was facing toward him; he remained silent and crossed his arms as he watched her tiredly, but with immense interest. Though he felt like he was ready to pass out, Marcella seemed entirely awake as she held a small remote in her hands—a remote that seemed to control the prosthetic leg that was connected to one of his suits. The prosthetic was sleek and matte black, all except for what was supposed to be a kneecap that was shiny and an incredibly durable steel. The limb was considerably less bulky than the limbs on most of his Iron Man suits, it was more... human-like and Tony felt his arms fall to his sides as he watched the fluid movements from the prosthetic. Though he knew that one of his suits certainly wasn't nowhere near the same as a human being, Tony watched as the suit walked around in front of her without so much as a limp and he felt the tiniest grin spread across his lips.

“You know,” He started, causing her to jump and immediately turn around, “I was going to come in here and yell at you to tell you to go to bed, but if this is what's been keeping you up these past few nights, I don't think I can really be mad.”

“I...” She hesitated as she stood up and examined the artificial limb, “Designing it is the easy part, now I just need to figure out how to connect the electrodes to the nervous system—I think there's a good way to do it by using a steel anchor.”

Tony frowned and knelt down as he examined the leg, “Why don't you just implant the electrodes on top of the skin, above the prosthetic where the remaining muscles are located? Say if someone's prosthetic ends right above their knee, implant the electrodes on the thigh.”
Marcella felt her cheeks heat up, “I know... I know how to make a basic electronic prosthetic Tony.”

“Then what's the big deal?”

“I want...” She glanced at Tony nervously, “I think I might be able to figure out a way for... for people with these prosthetics to be able to actually... feel things with it. Especially with their arms... their hands.”

Tony smiled thoughtfully and shook his head slightly, “That’s… that’s a lot for you to take on.”

And just as soon as her shoulders slumped and Tony noticed the dejected expression on her face, he quickly spoke again, “But it's not... it's not impossible, I don't think. I mean, shit, I guess in today's world nothing is really impossible, right?”

“I have some ideas,” She said quickly when he didn't reject her idea and started to gather her notes with newly found energy, “There's this electrode, it's called a macro-sieve peripheral nerve interface and it's half the size of a dime... the user wouldn't even be aware of its existence if it was planted just above their damaged muscle tissue. I assumed most people without an arm would like to feel pressure and heat and even the cold with their hands—their prosthetic—this electrode, if planted correctly into the working muscles above the prosthetic, I believe could do just that. I feel as though this could be achieved from the electrode stimulating either the Ulnar or Median nerves—a direct link to the nerves themselves and a connection that works both ways.”

“And for the leg? If the user decides he or she wants to feel pressure with their prosthetic leg?”

“Easy, just plant the electrode in the Sciatic nerve.”

“Huh,” He nodded and placed his hand on what seemed to be her notebook before glancing at her, she nodded her head and gave the eccentric man permission to look at her notes. The handwriting was neat and mostly written in cursive, much to his surprise, but he continued to flip through the notes and observed some of the little pictures she had drawn herself. A soft smile made its way onto his normally stoic, asshole-ish features as he came across what seemed to be some sort of advanced aircraft that could be controlled from the ground in a safe spot. It was tiny enough to be a fighter jet, but had enough power to do some serious damage to an object nearly a hundred times its size. She had prototypes for a device that could disinfect a gaping wound shut without having to go through the stitching process.

“Amazing,” He said to himself as he closed her notebook and set it back on the table, directing his attention to his suit that was still standing, “It really is.”

He turned to the young Banner woman and took in her features for a split second, “I'm impressed, and that's really saying something because I've seen a lot of cool shit. However, you're running on less than ten hours of sleep and judging by those circles under your eyes, it looks like you could really use some sleep.”

“But I just have to weld the--”

“I know,” Tony clasped a large hand on her small shoulder, “Trust me, I understand that you're still having nightmares and want to fill your nights with something other than sleep, but it's not healthy. I was the same way after the battle... still am, to be honest. The last thing I'd want is for you to end up like me, a hot mess.”

“You have someone,” She said so quietly, that he barely heard.

“What was that? You’re mumbling again.”
“It’s easier for you because you have someone to come home to… you have a home.”

Tony blinked, realizing that this was more than just the nightmares, “You have people who care about you too, kid.”

“Yeah,” Marcella whispered, not feeling very comforted by his words, “I guess I do.”

“Is there…” Tony’s face scrunched up as he thought about his next words, “Fuck, I’m really shitty at this, but do you need to talk or something?”

Marcella grimaced and looked at him incredulously, “With you?”

“No, with the Easter bunny,” He said seriously, “Yes, with me.”

“I'll be okay.”

“You've been saying that a lot lately.”

Marcella gazed at the unusually serious expression on his features, realizing that he was right and she had been repeating the phrase a lot these past few months. She knew she was trying to convince herself more than anyone else that she was okay, and it had become something similar to a mantra for her. Every time her therapist would ask her if she was alright at the end of her sessions, she would always respond with a simple, “I'm okay”, and even though she knew she wasn't, she was confident that one day she would be.

“It helps me get through the day when I feel like I can't go on,” She explained, staring down at her feet, “I guess it's reassuring for me to say it out loud... for me to hear my own voice say those words rather than someone else telling me that I'll be alright.”

“Do you mean it when you say it?”

“Sometimes,” She replied honestly, sparing a glance at his cautious expression, “Not always though.”

“I didn't peg you for a liar, little Banner,” He narrowed his eyes when she gave a half-assed shrug, “I guess I can respect that. Now c'mon, it's bedtime.”

Marcella nodded and gathered her stuff reluctantly, quietly letting Tony lead her to the elevator. Even he must have been tired because he kept his talking to a minimum as they ascended, only talking about their different projects and Marcella was grateful he didn't bring up the Steve situation again.

“Can I ask you something?”

Tony glanced at the Banner woman before shrugging, “You just did, but go for it.”

“How do you... how do you deal with the nightmares? I mean, I know all of you guys get them, but I literally dread going to sleep every night and mine probably aren’t even as bad as yours.”

“It’s not a competition of who’s had it worse, kid, we all have our awful shit that we’re dealing it and yours is just as horrible as ours,” He reminded her with a serious tone, “Personally though, I like to deal with it with medication... alcohol.”

Marcella gazed up at the man with an incredulous expression and he snorted, “I'm kidding... well, not about the medication part, that certainly helps. I thought you were seeing a therapist?”

“I am,” She huffed and shook her head, “There's just... certain things I can't bring myself to talk
about.”

“Maybe you're missing the whole point of therapy, but the whole reason for going is to talk about the things that keep you awake at night, even if it is hard for you to talk about it.”

“It only makes things worse.”

“You're smarter than this, kid,” He shook his head, “You don't talk about these things and it's like they're just... lingering in your consciousness all day, every day. That's why it haunts you at night, because you don't know how to let the past stay in the past and you don't talk about it and it just festers in your mind like a rotting corpse.”

Marcella stared up at him thoughtfully and he met her expression with a rare, serious one, “That's right, I've had my fair share of existential crises as well.”

“Do you talk to a therapist too?”

“Hell no,” He responded quickly and noticed the somewhat offended look on her tired face, “I don't have time for that, I'm fucking Tony Stark.”

“Maybe you should,” Marcella shrugged, “See a therapist, I mean. Sometimes you get really quiet when we work together and you just... seem sad.”

“Nah,” He disagreed, “I've come to terms with... whatever the hell is wrong with me and I don't use alcohol as a coping method anymore, which I suppose is a start in the right direction. People like Pepper and Rhodey... hell, even you and your dad, make me want to be a better person and keep me grounded.”

Marcella felt the tiniest smirk tug at the corner of her lips, “Are you growing soft?”

He scoffed as the doors opened on Marcella's level, “Don't you dare tell anyone, I won't hesitate to put you on the top of my hit list, kid.”

“One below Clint, right?”

Tony grinned at her, “Right below Clint and right above Capsicle, just like you always dreamed of.”

Marcella's cheeks immediately burned and she quickly exited the elevator, making her way down the hall and ignoring Tony's voice when he wished her a good night with a smug voice. She made her way down the silent hall and to her room, feeling her shoulders sag when she entered the dark room. The bronze-skinned girl was quiet and maybe even a little somber as she slowly sauntered to the ceiling-to-floor window that covered what was supposed to be a wall, and observed the city with green, calculating eyes. After accepting Tony's paid internship, he had insisted on her staying in a much larger suite higher up in the tower, complete with a small, but still decently-sized laboratory for days that she wanted to work alone. It was certainly much bigger than her last bedroom and the view was outstanding; Marcella would be eternally grateful for everything the billionaire had provided her with and had come to learn to accept his... gratuitous displays of affection and praise.

Though there was so much on her mind, as Marcella continued to stare at the city in front of her, she couldn't help but to think of Steve and wonder what he was doing right now.
So I usually only update like once a week, but I saw Infinity War last night and was heartbroken and needed to write some cute moments between Marce and Steve to help ease the pain :(

But like, bearded Steve Rogers cleansed my soul and cleared my skin and you can bet that I'm going to include a bearded Cap soon lmao. I honestly can't wait until this story gets to the point where it's aligned with the Infinity War and I already have so many ideas on how I'm going to incorporate Marce into the story, along with the Winter Soldier and Civil War plot. I can't wait to get to the Black Panther and Ragnarok plot as well; I just have so many ideas for this story and don't really plan on ending it soon, tbh lmao. Marcella is one of my favorite characters that I've written and I can't wait to give her more development because she certainly deserves it; I think you guys are going to like what I do with her personality :)

Anyways, thank you everyone for all of the comments! I know I'm the worst at responding, but I promise I always read your guys' kind words and it means so much to me that you guys are enjoying my story so far and I can't wait to see where this story goes!
Chapter Summary

“Ah yes,” Steve chuckled and made a left when he came to an intersection, “I still can’t believe he put your keys and wallet in a vending machine, but I have to admit, that’s pretty clever.”

“I’m trying to decide whether I want to replace all of his artwork with posters of Elon Musk, or put low grade repulsors underneath all of the couch cushions.”

“Hmm, why not both?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A month later.

“What about Leah from ballistics? If you're not going to ask Marcie out, at least try to make an effort to go out on a date with someone else.”

Steve felt his eyebrow twitch as he took a swig of his beer and glanced at Natasha for a fleeting moment before turning to his other teammates, Brock and Jack who sat at a small table with him. The two other men had been eating some buffalo wings and watched with raised eyebrows as Natasha and the Captain bickered back and forth relentlessly. They had heard quite a bit about this Marcella woman, but both of the men still knew absolutely nothing about her besides that the Black Widow was desperately trying to set Cap up with her and that he would get flustered at just the mere mention of her name.

“That's not... happening.”

Natasha's eyes narrowed at his response, “You realize I'm not going to let this go until you say something to Marcella.”

“I'll tell her when the time is right—I'm not going to rush this and freak her out.”

“You're not getting any younger, old man,” She argued, “By the time you grow a pair, she's going to have already found someone else.”

“Who's this Marcella you guys are always talking about? I didn't realize Cap was so in love with anything other than America.” Brock questioned with an amused expression and Jack remained silent as he continued to eat. Both Natasha and Steve glanced at him for a moment and when it was clear that the blonde man wasn't going to answer his question, Natasha spoke with a coy smirk on her face.

“A cute girl who's basically a ray of sunshine that Cap has had a thing for ever since he came out of the ice,” She glared at Steve for a moment, “And for some reason, he refuses to tell her how he feels even though she clearly likes him too.”

“I'm sure she doesn't,” Steve rolled his eyes for what felt like the hundredth time that night, “She
would have said something by now if she did.”

“We both know that's a lie—you two are the biggest losers when it comes to socializing and talking about your feelings.”

“She work for SHIELD too?”

“Definitely not,” Natasha grinned at Jack's question, “She's a scientist and she's super smart, but definitely not meant for this kind of life. She's the kind of girl that cries when she sees a really cute dog and sobs when she stubs her toe. She's cute and extremely intelligent, but certainly not strong—at least in a physical sense.”

Jack snorted, “No wonder why you haven't told her.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Steve grew serious as he finished off his beer, his eyebrows pinching together.

“Women like that are useless and annoying.”

Steve's head immediately snapped up at the offensive words and he glanced at Natasha with an irritated expression, who merely shrugged; he knew Jack wasn't intentionally being an asshole, but those kind of remarks always seemed to come to him like second nature. While he didn't necessarily hate the guy, Steve certainly wouldn't consider him anything other than an acquaintance. The Captain had heard the way he talked about women in general and didn't really appreciate it; something about it always rubbed him the wrong way and that was part of the reason why he never spoke about Marcella to anyone, especially Jack Rollins or Brock Rumlow. Though Marcella had been through so much, there was still some sort of innocence to her and to hear anyone talk horribly about her made Steve lose his temper, though he knew the Banner girl was much tougher than she looked. She had survived through foster care and living on the streets for the first six years of her life, losing her mother to cancer and being abandoned by her father, only to be abused by her grandfather for the next year. She had suffered through being bullied all throughout grade school and once she thought she had found a safe place at Columbia University, everything had literally come tumbling down on her and she had somehow survived being impaled and trapped under rubble for over a day.

He didn't ever want to hear anyone say that Marcella was weak, because as far as he was concerned, she was quite possibly the strongest person he had ever encountered in his long life.

“You're wrong,” Steve Rogers could feel Natasha staring at him with a weary expression as he spoke again, “There's not one woman alive or dead who is or ever was useless, everyone has a purpose in life and women like Marcella aren't useless or annoying. She makes prosthetics for people who need them and can't afford them... people who serve this country and even worked for SHIELD, and now she's delving into the field of aerospace engineering. She's been through more than you could possibly imagine, but yeah, I guess that sounds pretty useless... like a waste of a human-being.”

“I didn't mean to offend you, man.”

“I don't care about that,” Steve shook his head, “It's not me that's offended... I'm sure women don't exactly like hearing men calling them useless and annoying all while having to worry about the fact that men still have more rights than women, even hundreds of years later. The way you talk sometimes reminds me of the way older men used to speak down to women all those years ago; it's sad to see that not much has changed.”

Natasha watched Jack as he clenched his jaw but swallowed down the urge to fight with Steve over
something like... women's rights. A part of her couldn't help but to feel a little proud of the fact that Steve was aware of these issues, but she also wasn't surprised. She knew that he came from a time where women's roles in society ranged from being a stay-at-home mother to being a nurse, and she also knew that he had been raised by a single mother who worked relentlessly to provide for him and take care of him when he was constantly getting ill before the serum.

Not to mention he was best friends with a young black woman who had been adopted by a white couple and Natasha knew the younger Banner had faced quite a bit of racism growing up. There were numerous times where Marcella talked about how uncomfortable it made her whenever people stared at her and Steve in public, or the time she had gotten followed around in one of the nicer clothing stores in Upper Manhattan. It wasn't until Bruce had stepped in that the employee and security guard apologized and left her alone. There was no doubt in Natasha's mind that the young scientist had informed Steve of the racial tension that still existed in America to this day, and how there was still a huge divide between men and women's rights.

Natasha wasn't sure if she had ever met another man who respected women quite like Captain Rogers did, and while he felt a strong need to protect women and children at all costs, the red-haired assassin also knew that he would walk through fire if it meant defending Marcella Banner—the two had become inseparable within the span of a few months.

“Sorry man,” Jack scoffed and Brock elbowed him in the gut in an attempt to get him to shut up, “I didn't realize you were a feminist.”

“You say feminism like it's a bad thing—like believing in equality between men and women is a bad thing.”

“That's not...” Jack seemed exasperated as Steve raised his brows at the man, “Look, I have a sister and a mom—of course I don't hate women.”

Steve's brows shot up—remembering all of the times that Marcella had told him of the things some of her peers had said about her in the past, living on a campus that was compromised predominantly of Caucasians.

“If I had a dollar every time someone said something like 'I'm not racist, my roommate is black', I'd have enough money to pay off my student debt,” Marcella scoffed as she leaned back in her seat, glancing out the window of the quaint cafe they had found themselves in.

Steve's face scrunched up, “Who says things like that?”

“People who feel like they have to defend their racist tendencies.”

“Sorry guys,” Steve stood and pulled some bills out of his wallet, placing it on the table, “It's getting late and I've gotta be up early, I'll catch you guys later.”

They all bid him goodbye, Jack seeming a little uncomfortable after their small argument even though Steve hadn't seemed too angry with him. Brock's eyebrows were raised and he smirked as he took a large swig of his beer, clearly entertained by Cap's and Jack's extremely different views—it was something he learned to not get involved with. Everyone had learned a long time ago that the newest member of the STRIKE team was incredibly stubborn and tenacious and though he believed everyone had a right to their own opinion, the Captain clearly didn't appreciate when others had opinions that affected women, children, and minorities. When it came to the few he cared about though... well everyone knew not to mess with his closest friends and it was clear that Jack had struck a nerve with even mentioning Marcella, let alone calling her useless.
The way he had said her name even sounded wrong to Steve; it made something in the pit of his stomach coil in an unpleasant sensation.

The Captain kept his head down low as he walked through the streets of D.C., feeling exhausted and maybe even a little irritated by his conversation with Jack even though he knew he shouldn't let the ignorant words get to him. It certainly sucked, but there was always going to be people who believed that not everyone deserved basic human rights and Steve promised himself that he would always speak up for those people. He knew he had quite an impact on the way people viewed American values and he would use his voice and privilege to try to make a difference.

But first, he needed sleep.

He yawned as he pulled his phone from his back pocket and swiped it open, immediately seeing a new text from the Banner woman and a smile instantly broke out along his stoic features.

'Trying to surpass you on Tony's 'most annoying co-worker' list'

Attached to the text message was a picture of Tony, asleep on the black leather couch in the main lounge room with what looked to be sharpie all over his face; tucked into the crook of his elbow, there was a teddy bear wearing a little Captain America costume complete with a little plushie shield attached to its arm. The image immediately made Steve grin and he didn't hesitate to press the little phone button right next to her name, bringing the smart phone up to his ear as he awaited eagerly to hear her soft spoken voice.

"Before you ask, yes, I have fled the scene."

Steve laughed and stared down at his shoes as he walked, "I told you to give Tony a hard time while I was gone, not get yourself killed."

"Please," Her voice was quiet as she quickly navigated through the tower at such a late hour, her heart pounding in her chest as she choked back a mischievous giggle, "I'm like the one person Tony wouldn't kill for pulling a stunt like this, if anything, he'll respect me more. That's how our friendship works—one of us does something to gain the other's respect until it gets out of hand and we end up blasting each other with repulsors."

"You two are crazy," Steve spoke just as softly, "This prank war you've got going on is getting a little out of control, don't you think? One of you is going to end up getting hurt."

"It's Tony's fault for starting it," She reminded him and smiled when she heard Tony yelling from down the corridor, calling her an extremely obscene name that had Marcella giggling and Steve's eyes growing wide at the awful language. She sped up a little and made it to the elevator before Tony could spot her; Steve raised his brows as he heard her cackling maniacally when the billionaire finally found her right when the doors were starting to close. She flipped him off with an innocent smile as he darted for the elevator, only for the doors to slide shut in his face.

"Ah yes," Steve chuckled and made a left when he came to an intersection, "I still can't believe he put your keys and wallet in a vending machine, but I have to admit, that's pretty clever."

"I'm trying to decide whether I want to replace all of his artwork with posters of Elon Musk, or put low grade repulsors underneath all of the couch cushions."

"Hmm, why not both?"

Marcella smirked as she made her way up to her room, "Now that's the spirit."
Steve's voice took on a softer tone, “How are you doing?”

“I'm okay,” And Steve felt his smile fade at the slightly somber tone of her voice, “Just worried about my dad, I guess. I haven't heard from him in a few weeks and I know that he's not really allowed to contact anyone but I just... I don't know; I worry about him being all alone. Something about this assignment he's on just... it gives me a bad feeling, for some reason.”

“I'm sure he's okay,” Steve reassured her, “Bruce is capable of taking care of himself.”

She sighed, “I know, I know. I think it's the not knowing where he is and how extreme the mission is—that's what worries me the most, but you're right. He's going to be okay, I'm sure.”

“What else is going on over there? Anything exciting happen?”

“I know you don't really like talking about work when you're not on the job,” Marcella started slowly and Steve could hear the excitement in her voice and the change of tone had him smiling tiredly again, “But Tony and I have been working on yours and Natasha's tactical suits and I don't mean to brag, but I think you're going to really like what we came up with.”

Steve raised his brows at her cheeky tone, “Finally something different from the old fashioned stars and stripes get up?”

“Oh yeah, definitely a big change,” She admitted excitedly and had a small skip to her step as she hastily made her way to her bedroom, “It's a lot different from what the public is used to seeing, but I think it will prove to be a little more inconspicuous on stealth missions. Natasha will be happy to hear I repaired her thigh holsters and upgraded her blasters; I also have a few different pieces of equipment that I think she will have playing around with.”

The blonde chuckled as he kept his head low, “You realize this technically makes you a member of the team, right?”

Marcella let out an incredulous scoff, “I just help Tony with certain things when I'm not busy with building prostheses.”

“No,” Steve argued, grinning when he could practically see her scowling at his stubborn personality, “You help Tony make equipment for us and you help fix all of our suits—hell, you even help Tony with his Iron Man suits and you make them look really good, Marce. Even Clint won't stop talking about the new arrows you and Stark gave him as a birthday present a few weeks ago.”

“Oh,” She exclaimed, her scowl melting away to reveal and adorable smile, “Aren't those incendiary arrows the coolest?! They're made out of carbon steel and titanium so they're virtually indestructible, just like your shield, and the crossbow has three threaded holes for sight, rest, plunger and stabilizers and can--”

“See,” Steve gently interjected, “You're slowly turning into Tony with all of these different gadgets.”

Marcella huffed as she quietly slipped into her bedroom, “Admittedly, I like knowing that you guys are using our equipment to help others... plus, it's also kind of nice knowing you guys wouldn't be as great as you are if it weren't for me and Tony.”

“Ahh there it is... that cockiness you've been developing from working with Tony so much.”

“Don't lie,” She whispered as she gently unbraided her hair and massaged her scalp, “You secretly love it.”
“Yeah well, don't go telling Tony—he'd never let me forget it.”

“Your secret is safe with me, Captain Rogers.” The way she used his title made something in the pit of his stomach knot together in a pleasant way, “Anyways, how have you been? Did you get the package I sent you?”

Steve immediately smiled when he thought about the package that had showed up on his doorstep just a couple of days ago, filled with movies and CDs that she insisted on him watching and listening to. It had also contained pictures that she had taken while he had been away—most of the pictures were of things going on around the tower and her with all of his teammates. One of his favorites had been the picture of her and Thor, his large hand wrapped around hers as they both held Mjolnir, proud grins on both of their dorky faces. Another one of his favorites had been of her and Clint on the beach, standing in front of two sandcastles with proud smiles on their faces as they displayed their sandcastles like a prize on the Price is Right. Marcella's had looked fancy and intricate like an actual palace while Clint's had been a single bucket-shaped lump of sand with a white flag sticking from the top of it. She always looked so happy in the pictures with everyone else on the team—like a ray of sunshine that only shined brighter when she was around those she loved and cared for.

The Captain had immediately pinned the photographs to a cork board right above his desk in his bedroom where many other pictures that she had sent were pinned.

“I did, and I loved everything in it, but I think it will take me a while to put a dent in that stack of DVDs,” Steve answered honestly, “I really appreciate it though, Marcella, the pictures and everything mean a lot to me. I was quite a fan of um, that group that sang that Roboto song.”

Steve held his phone away from his ear as his best friend screeched, “Captain America likes Mr. Roboto!”

“Can you not--”

“Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto!”

“You're the worst, Marcella Banner,” Steve was grinning from ear to ear as he palmed his face with exasperation, his cheeks turning a bright shade of pink, “You're never going to let this down, are you?”

“Steven Grant Rogers, Captain America, listened to Mr. Roboto and thoroughly enjoyed it,” She reiterated, giggling so wildly that the Captain could practically see the tears in her green eyes, “This is the greatest moment of my life.”

“I have another secret,” Steve spoke quietly, seriously and only continued when he was met with silence, “I really liked those ABBA songs too.”

Steve held his phone away from his ear once more as she all but screamed, “I have so many songs I need you to listen now knowing that you like the Styx and ABBA! You don't understand that you've just unleashed Pandora's box for me, Rogers.”

“Well I'm looking forward to what other obscure songs you recommend in the future.”

“Oh boy, you better prepare yourself.”

“Hey um,” Steve searched for the right key as he entered his apartment complex building, “I was going to surprise you, but I know how busy you are with work and everything now. I actually have next week free and was thinking of visiting you guys just for a few days? I know it's a little short notice but I'd rather not spend my birthday with my teammates...”
“T-That would be awesome, but I don't want you to feel like you have to visit because you feel bad, or something.”

That confused Steve and he furrowed his brows, “Why would I feel bad? I want to see you... it's been a while.”

“Okay... that would be nice,” Marcella spoke softly, in a different tone of voice, “I can't believe I almost forgot about your birthday... how could I? It's on the fourth of July, as if you're not patriotic enough already.”

“Yeah, I don't know how you could forget when you literally sing that ridiculous Star Spangled man song every night.”

“It's a catchy song,” Steve rolled his eyes and he immediately knew what was coming, “Who's strong and brave, here to save the American Way?”

“You stop that right now, Marcella Banner.”

“Fine,” She laughed softly, “I won't let this go though.”

“I know you won't—you never do, Marce.”

He made his way up the creaky stairs and nodded with a smile at his next door neighbor, Sharon, who Natasha had tried to set him up with on numerous occasions. She was certainly pretty and kind, but he really didn't want to be a part of the dating scene and it had been then when Steve admitted his feelings for Marcella to Natasha. It had certainly been hard for him to say out loud even though he knew that Natasha was well aware of the things he felt for the Banner woman, but he had been relieved that he was able to say it himself. There had been a night where he had woken up from a nightmare and even though it had been two in the morning, he had called her and she had picked up on the second ring. Marcella had stayed up with him for another two hours, rambling on about random things, but the sound of her voice had soothed him and made him forget about what his nightmare had even been about. In a moment of vulnerability, she had talked to him about her own nightmares and how she used to try so hard to forget about her past, only to find that it would always haunt her. Instead of letting her abusive relationship with her grandfather and rocky past with her own father dictate how she was going to live life in the present, she chose to embrace the pain and channel it into a more productive adult.

For some reason, that conversation really resonated with Steve and after that night he had looked at her in a different kind of light and admired her even more.

It was the first time he had realized how loyal of a person she was and how she cared for people with all of her heart.

“Well it looks like the only thing I really have going on is an appointment with a patient on Wednesday afternoon, but other than that, most things can be cleared.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, definitely,” She reassured him, “Everything else is pretty much assisting Tony in the lab, but I've been working every day for like the last three months, he'll be happy if I take a small break.”

“Even after that prank you just pulled?”

“Especially after that prank I pulled,” Marcella grinned, “He won't mind Steve, I'm sure of it. Besides, he had this coming for a while.”
Steve couldn't suppress the large smile that spread across his own lips, “I'll see you next week then, Marcella.”

“Sounds like a plan, my star-spangled man,” She said, making Steve groan.

“Yeah, I definitely need to get you away from Tony,” He tossed his keys into the empty fruit bowl and slipped his shoes off, “Before more of his sass and crude humor starts rubbing off on you.”

“Don't lie, you love it.”

Steve chuckled and plopped down on his couch, “Yeah, yeah... just don't tell anyone, it might tarnish my reputation.”

“Your secret is safe with me, Steven.”

For some reason, hearing her say his full first name like that makes something hot bloom in his chest and he felt his eyes slip shut, “Goodnight Marcella, call me if you need anything, okay?”

“You got it,” She replied just as softly, “Same goes for you, okay? Goodnight Steve.”

Reluctantly he pressed the ‘end call’ button and set his phone on the coffee table before pushing himself from the couch, making his way to the bathroom that was connected to his room. He merely glanced at his tired reflection in the mirror before stripping his clothes and stepping into the shower, flinching when he turned knob for the water and a cold stream sprayed him in the face. He turned his back and closed his eyes as the water eventually grew hot and released the tension in his taut, broad shoulders.

For some reason he couldn't stop thinking about what Jack had said and wondered if he thought that way about all women in general, or just women that weren't like Natasha. It didn't make any sense to Steve... sure Natasha was beautiful, strong, and certainly independent, but it's not like all women could be exactly like her and fight their way out of situations. While Steve obviously had never experienced that kind of discrimination firsthand, he remembered the way others had looked and spoke about his mom when she would show up to work covered in bruises and cuts, thanks to his dad. It's not like they had ever really looked at her like a victim, but the glances were almost accusatory, wondering what she had done to deserve that. There were people still like that too, Marcella had mentioned before, especially when it came to rape victims and society blaming it on the person being intoxicated or dressed scandalously. Steve couldn't believe the audacity of some people, but he supposed that some things would never change.

Then he remembered the way people, especially older people, would look at Marcella whenever the two of them were out in public places—especially richer neighborhoods. It was always judgmental expressions, but never towards Steve... the stares were always directed at Marcella and it always bothered the Captain while Marce had become proficient in ignoring the judgmental gazes. He knew that back in the early early to mid 1900s that it was almost scandalous for a white person to be friends with or even date a person of color, but almost a hundred years later, Steve couldn't believe that people still cared.

He couldn't believe that sexism, racism, and homophobia was still relevant and it certainly irritated him, to say the least.

Marcella had insisted that she had gotten used to it... people stereotyping her all the time, but Steve couldn't even begin to fathom what it must have been like for people to instantly dislike you due to the color of your skin.
All Steve knew was that if he ever heard someone talk to Marcella the way Jack had spoke about her... he would probably lose his mind.

The next day.

“What are you thinking about?”

Tony nearly flew out of his chair as a soft voice startled the ever-loving fuck out of him; he held his hand over his chest as he spun around in his chair to come face to face with the little Banner. The mustard-yellow knit jumper she wore was way too big on her and engulfed her tiny frame as she stared up at him with wide, sparkling green eyes. The Marc Jacobs glasses she donned were too large for her small face and the round frames only seemed to make her green eyes bigger than they already were; in all honestly, Tony thought she looked like a huge dork, but in an endearing sort of way. She wore a light pair of skinny jeans and much to Tony's disapproval, her feet were bare, which he was certain was some kind of health violation in his laboratory. Her wild curls were piled on top of her cocked head in a somewhat organized bun and Stark eyed the little sunflowers and daisies that had been tucked securely into the bun.

A ray of sunshine, is what Tony would best describe her as.

“Jesus, kid,” Tony huffed, giving her an offended expression, “You can't just sneak up on me like that.”

“I've been talking to you for the last five minutes—maybe Clint could recommend a good place to get some hearing aids.”

“Very funny.” He narrowed his eyes at her and promptly turned back to his project, “Well, I was going to tell you what I was working on, but I don't think I will after that rude little comment, smalls.”

Before he could stop her, Marcella simply skipped around his work bench and picked up a piece of equipment that looked similar to one of his repulsors, “Oh wow! This looks twice as powerful as the repulsors on your suits... and this helmet! It's humongous! Is this a new suit you're working on? Can I help?!?”

“Eh,” He hesitated and Marcella immediately grew suspicious, “Your dad and I were working on this together before he got sent on that mission... I decided to work on it while he was away just in case.”

The smile immediately dropped from her face and Marcella gently set the equipment back down on the metal table, “In case of what?”

Tony hesitated again and the young Banner wrung her hands together nervously—since when did Tony Stark ever have trouble saying whatever was on his mind? Marcella grew silent as she stared at all of the pieces of the equipment in front of them before her eyes landed on the blueprints of the project; the result was an enormous Iron suit that looked to be twice the size of the Hulk. Judging by the rough sketch of the suit, it contained eleven arc-reactors and missile launchers connected to the gauntlets, along with grappling hooks, prehensile technology, and even an orbital tracking form that could control the suit at all times.

Tony made no move to stop her as she gently pushed a few papers away from the blueprint and she immediately saw the name that had been scribbled messily above the rough sketch and her jaw clenched.
“Hulkbuster?” She questioned seriously and something flickered dangerously in her green eyes as she peered over at Tony, “What is this?”

“Dr. Banner and I agreed that we need to have some sort of plan if he snaps one day and nobody is there to take down the big green fella,” Tony answered honestly, “You... you're good at bringing Bruce back but you can't always be there for him when he loses himself, kid. We both decided it would be a good idea to come up with some sort of defense system that could take down Hulk if absolutely necessary... Brucie was quite insistent on it, actually.”

Marcella nodded slowly, “That... that makes sense, I suppose. It won't... kill him though, right?”

“No,” Tony said quickly in a breathy way, “It'll be enough to overpower him and even knock him out, but definitely won't do any long-term damage to him.”

“You couldn't have just accepted NASA's contract to work on that Jupiter landing device, could you?” Marcella sighed and sat across from the billionaire, who suddenly started to smirk at her, “No, instead you have to go and work on even more suits.”

“You think I would pass up the opportunity to sign a multimillion dollar contract? Of course I accepted it... if I didn't, Elon Musk would have gotten his dirty little hands on it and taken all the spotlight from me and I certainly can't have that, can I?”

“Wow,” Marcella was grinning as Tony promptly pressed a button on his tablet, causing a projection of his blueprint of the Jupiter landing device to pop up, “I can't believe you and Elon Musk are competing with each other... I hope I'm that great of an engineer one day.”

“Honey, it's no competition—we all know that I'm better than that guy in every way possible,” Tony huffed, crossing his arms over his chest, “And if I find out that you're using anything that he's manufactured, I'll...”

Marcella raised her brows at her boss and he continued, looking somewhat flustered, “I won't let you help me work on those jet-propelled roller skates.”

“I didn't even want to help you with those... I'm telling you, jet-propelled skates that can go nearly seventy miles an hour is a horrible idea,” Marcella chuckled and spun around in her chair, “Besides... I do use Paypal, which Elon Musk founded... and maybe one day I'd look into buying a Tesla.”

“No!” He immediately snapped, though Marcella knew he wasn't genuinely offended, “No Teslas for Little Banner—I'll create a better car for you, okay? Besides, you're not materialistic enough to drop that much money on a car; you hate spending even ten dollars to buy yourself a decent lunch. Now, do you want to help me with this suit or not? Because Bruce isn't here to offer any ideas and you two think alike... I need a Banner in this lab with me at all times.”

“Well,” Marcella picked up the blueprint for the orbital tracking form and cocked her head to the side, “I really like the idea of having a device module that can track down my dad and detect his rampages, but there's so much more you could do with this, don't you think? I mean, you have total control over this satellite and your main focus is using it to assemble the Hulkbuster suit... but you could really be using this to the team's advantage as well. You guys could be using it to get good surveillance of an aerial view of a battlefield and you could personally be using it for your suits when they've been damaged beyond repair.”

He waved his hand around, “Keep on elaborating Dr. Banner.”

Marcella's cheeks immediately grew hot at the formal name, “Well, you were originally using the
orbital tracking device to assemble this suit, but you could also be using it as an armory for when the suit starts to sustain too much damage. Judging by the blueprint, this module is huge and certainly has enough capacity for a stockpile of suit parts in the payload, along with other weapons and equipment. You have complete control over the device and could easily have it send out spare parts when you absolutely need it, don’t you think?”

A smile slowly spread across his face and he pressed his lips together as he nodded, “Not a bad idea... grab that blow torch and help me out, kid.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering, I sincerely believe that Steve Rogers is a feminist and nobody can change my mind about that lmao.
“I would have been twenty-three,” He answered after a moment, immediately noticing the way her eyes watered as she stared up at him.

Marcella Banner was too sensitive for her own good.

“Hey, no,” Steve murmured and easily caught a stray tear that escaped from the corner of her eye, “No crying on my birthday, because if you start crying, then I’ll start crying and it’ll just be one big giant mess.”

“All I’m saying is you need to make a move before someone else does.”

Everyone on the jet raised their brows at Natasha and Steve ignored her as he readjusted his ear piece—a sign of nervousness, not from the mission they were currently undergoing, but more so for the direction that the conversation was heading towards. A few of the men glanced at the Captain, waiting for his response even though he didn't really have one. He knew Natasha was right; Marcie was a beautiful young woman with a bright future ahead of her and it was only a matter of time before someone asked her out. While Steve was certain that she deserved better than him, the thought of her dating some stranger made his insides coil and clench uncomfortably and he forced himself to not think about it.

He was the one that would answer her calls in the middle of the night when she woke up from a nightmare and he was certain that he was the only one that would sing her back to sleep when her thoughts were too much to handle, even though his voice wasn’t nowhere near as soothing as hers. They had developed such a special bond and even though Steve knew she deserved someone who wasn’t away so much, even he couldn’t imagine having that same connection with anyone else other than the younger Banner. She was a special woman and she needed someone who valued that about her—someone who could love her for her beautiful personality and not grimace whenever they saw the horrific scars that marred her bronzed skin.

The thought of her being with anyone else made him feel sick, but he just wanted her to be happy; if she found someone who made her happier than he could, then he would respect her wishes.

Steve watched as Brock and Jack departed from the jet, parachutes strapped to their backs, and he tried to pull his mind out of the gutter as the pilot reminded him and Natasha that they would also be departing in a few moments.

“You can’t keep waiting for something to just happen,” Natasha spoke softly again, gaining his attention, “You of all people should know how something—or someone—can be taken away from you in the blink of an eye.”

“I know,” Steve said quietly, “Trust me, I know.”
Natasha stared at him for a moment before speaking carefully, “Clint told me that she was supposed to go on a date tonight.”

Steve exhaled deeply and nodded slowly, “Oh...”

“Some guy named Charlie that used to be one of her peers at Columbia,” The red-haired woman noticed the conflicted expression on Cap's face, “Clint said he stood her up though—asshole.”

Steve's brows furrowed at the new information—she hadn't told him anything about a date when they spoke the previous night.

“Why... why would someone do that to her?”

“Because men are jerks,” Natasha answered bluntly with a shrug, “Apparently someone asked her out last week and she turned them down though.”

“Why?” Steve frowned and Natasha rolled her eyes at how oblivious he could be; everyone, including Tony and Bruce, knew exactly why she had turned down the man that had asked her out. The SHIELD agent had no idea why Steve refused to believe that someone like Marcella Banner could actually develop feelings for him, especially when she made it so obvious that she absolutely adored him. Not to mention that the two were perfect for one another—Marcella was an absolute ray of sunshine and Steve could certainly use that in his life. Though he had his comrades and the STRIKE team, Steve was an entirely different person without his suit and shield and not many people seemed to understand that he was so much more than Captain America.

Marcella Banner knew that better than anyone else though.

Natasha had seen the way she looked at him like he was her own hero, but for different reasons. Steve had always been there for her in ways that nobody—not even her own father—had been and he had become a hero to her for just being sassy and sweet Steve Rogers.

“Do you...” Steve hesitated and Natasha eyed him closely, “Is she okay? How long did she wait for that guy to show up?”

“At least a few hours... Clint offered to make his life miserable but Marcie won't let him,” The red head chuckled but Steve's frown remained on his face, “It sounded like she was pretty bummed out though. I've known Marce for a few years now and I don't think I've ever seen her go on a date with someone—it's probably the first time she's been stood up, so I could imagine she's not feeling too good about herself right now.”

Steve's shoulders sagged and he immediately understood; before the serum, he had been stood up numerous times and it always felt awful every time it happened.

“I'll call her when I get home later.”

“Yeah?” Natasha raised her brows and Steve braced himself for whatever she was going to throw his way, “Are you going to confess your undying love for her?”

“Yeah, sure,” The Captain snorted, “At least let me get through the first date.”

Earlier that night.

Marcella stared down at the concrete sidewalk in front of her as she slowly trudged back to the tower. The usual bounce to her step was gone and the characteristic smile she usually wore had been replaced with a soft frown as her heels clicked against the ground. A few people eyed her and the
navy blue dress that hugged her body snugly and she wondered if they could somehow tell that she
had been stood up. A few stubborn strands of hair had been braided away from her face and the wild
curls tumbled down to her waist and billowed around her as a soft breeze cooled down her warm
skin. Her eyes burned and her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment when she remembered the
sympathetic looks that the restaurant's staff had continuously threw her way while she waited
patiently for four hours for her date to arrive. Detecting the denial in her voice when she reassured
her waiter that her date was just stuck in horrible New York traffic, he had appeared later with a
bowl of ice cream that she had tried to pay for, though he refused.

She couldn't remember feeling so embarrassed—at least not since middle school when she had been
bullied relentlessly by her peers.

Marcella wasn't even sure why she had agreed to go out with Charlie in the first place—he was cute
and had always been nice to her in the classes they shared with one another at Columbia, but they
had only ever been acquaintances.

Why would anyone be interested in her?

“Good evening Dr. Banner!” The receptionist at the tower, Jaime greeted her, “How did your date
go?”

Marcella forced a wavering smile that even a vision-impaired person could easily detect, “It was
okay, thank you Jaime.”

“Of course,” The receptionist smiled softly, easily detecting the sadness in her voice, “Have a good
rest of your night, Marcella.”

“You too, Jaime, thank you.”

Marcella kept her head down low, not wanting to socialize with anyone at the moment and continued
to ascend into the tower. A few staff members greeted her and bid goodbye to her as they departed
from the elevator and finally she was left alone as the elevator continued on its journey to the top.
The younger Banner stared at herself in the reflection of the elevator doors and watched with disdain
as a tear trickled down her cheek and left a tiny watermark on her dress. She shook her head and
quickly wiped at her cheek before leaning down to remove her heels and she immediately felt better
when her bare feet were back on flat land; her legs had been killing her the entire walk home.

The doors finally slid open and Marcella plopped her heels down next to everyone else's shoes
before making her way over to the kitchen, unbraiding her hair as she moseyed along. She massaged
her sore scalp as she scanned the inside of the fridge before zeroing in on some leftover ravioli and
deciding it would make a decent dinner, along with a glass of sweet red wine that probably belonged
to Pepper. As she waited for her leftovers to finish heating up, she scanned her surroundings and
tried to ignore the wave of loneliness that washed over her. Her dad was still on his mission, Tony
had left a couple of days ago to do God knows what, and Clint would probably be getting back from
his own mission sometime the next day. Natasha was on a mission with her new comrades and Steve
had called the night before to let her know that he wouldn't be able to make it down for his birthday
because of a mission that he wouldn't be getting back from until the early morning the day of his
birthday; they both knew he would be too tired to do anything.

After finishing her food at the kitchen island, the younger Banner made her way over to the main
area and plopped herself down on the leather couch, resting her head on top of the arm rest and
curling her knees up to her chest, taking a sip of her overly sweet wine. She wasn't aware of the
elevator doors sliding open as she stared at the blank flat screen TV with a vacant expression and she
certainly didn't hear the soft footsteps approaching her slowly.
“You know,” A familiar voice startled her, “It's more entertaining when you actually turn the TV on.”

Clint blinked down at her and furrowed his brows when he noticed a few tears trickling down her freckled cheeks and a glass of wine that nearly filled to the brim—that was certainly unusual. She blinked and quickly wiped at her cheeks, trying to hide any evidence that she had been crying just before he got there even though Clint had definitely seen it.

The archer made his way around the back of couch and plopped himself down on the other end, the bottoms of her feet barely skimmed the side of his thigh and he observed her for a few more seconds before staring down at his hands in his lap. Clint was absolutely exhausted and she looked utterly drained and they both probably needed sleep, but the sight of a sad, weeping Marcella Banner had him more distressed than he was used to feeling. He only ever knew her as a happy, bubbly girl and something serious must have happened to reduce her to tears and he vaguely remembered her mentioning a date.

Immediately, he understood.

“Is this about that date you were going on earlier?” Clint asked softly, dropping his usual sass and banter, “Because if he hurt you or said something horrible, I'll track him down and make him eat his own—”

“He stood me up,” She interrupted quietly and wiped at her flushed, wet cheeks, “It's not a big deal, really.”

“What an asshole,” Clint huffed and placed one of his hands on her ankle in a comforting way, “Don't let one guy bring you down Marce; you can do way better than him and you certainly deserve better. No man is worth your tears and shouldn't be able to make you feel this bad about yourself.”

“It's more than that… it's just…”

The archer watched her as she sat up and stared down at her own hands; he noticed the way her lips trembled and her brows furrowed as she tried to stop herself from crying in front of him. Though he could be quite oblivious to certain things, Marcella Banner was an open book and he immediately detected the stray tear that had managed to escape the corner of her eye and trickled down her cheek before her entire demeanor seemed to crumble right in front of him.

“I'm just...” Her voice shook as she exhaled deeply and Clint immediately wrapped a heavy arm around her dainty shoulders, “I'm just lonely and I guess I didn't realize it until tonight. I know I have friends and people who care about me, but this doesn't... it doesn't feel like a home, you know? This place doesn't feel like a home to me and I don't think I've ever really had one and being stood up tonight... I don't know, it's stupid, I guess.”

“It's not stupid; you were hurt tonight and it clearly stirred up a lot of shit in you—nothing to be ashamed of,” Clint stared down at her softly, watching as she wiped at her flushed cheeks a little roughly, “A home doesn't have to be a place, you know? A home can be a person... a person you love and it doesn't matter where you two are, as long as you're together. It's just somewhere where you know you belong and it's not always place, Marcella; home can be whatever you want it to be, it's more like a feeling.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat as she stared back up at him with watery eyes, “Nobody needs me the way Pepper and Tony need each other... or the way you and Natasha need each other. Sometimes it feels like my own dad doesn't want me—there's days where he can barely look at me. Maybe I just don't have a home, maybe I was never meant to have one, you know?”
“Don't you dare say that about yourself, Marcella,” Clint scolded her and gave her shoulder a firm squeeze, “You are just important to this group as Tony or even Steve—you're our beacon of hope and that means so much to us. We all thought you were dead after the Battle of New York and we were all sure that you wouldn't even recover after you were found, that you would die from infections or that the trauma would be too much for you to handle. You proved us all wrong; you came back stronger and more motivated than ever and overcame every obstacle that got in your way.”

Marcella wiped her cheeks and noticed the way his own eyes sparkled as he observed her softly, “You're stronger than all of us—maybe not physically, but emotionally and mentally, and I'll never fucking understand how you do it. You can still smile after having such a horrific childhood and you can still get out of bed every morning even after having all of those nightmares about being trapped underneath that rubble for so long and there is so much fucking strength in that alone. You motivate each and every one of us because if you can be this strong despite everything, then so can we.”

“You really mean that?”

Clint smiled encouragingly, “Of course; do I ever lie, kid?”

“Thank you,” Marcella wiped both of her hands over her face and let out a calm sigh, “I think I just... really needed to hear that.”

“Feel better?” Clint asked and the younger woman nodded, giving him a reassuring smile that actually met her eyes, “Good, and I meant what I said earlier too—about no guy being worth your tears. You're a smart, beautiful young lady and you should know that you are worth so much more than some man who's just going to stand you up; you need an actual man... like Steve-o.”

“Stop,” Marcella breathed out a soft laugh and shook her head, “He's got more important things to do than worry about his dating life.”

“No!” Clint argued and the younger Banner rolled her eyes, “We all need Cap to get laid so he can take it easy on us! We're counting on you, Marcella.”

Her cheeks immediately grew hot, “Why did you have to ruin your nice motivational speech?!”

Clint cackled and stood up before she could punch him in the arm, taking out his hearing aids before she could yell at him even more, “G’night Marcie boo! I love you!”

She rolled her eyes but grinned as he rushed towards the elevator, “Love you too, Clint.”

Marcella sighed as she lay back down so her head was resting on the arm rest and turned the TV on, immediately switching it to the Food Network. She watched MasterChef Junior mindlessly and thought about Clint's words, wondering if the team really looked at her in the same way Clint had described her. Marcella continued to watch the show even though she wasn't really paying attention to any of the challenges and she wasn't even aware that it was two in the morning until her phone startled her and pulled her out of her strange daze.

'Who's strong and brave, here to save the American way?  
Who vows to fight like a man for what's right, night and day?  
Who will campaign door to--'

“Hey Steve,” Marcella answered her phone, still smirking at the ring tone she had set for him, “What's up?”

“Hey Marce,” His voice immediately soothed her and she turned over until she was lying on her
back, staring at the ceiling, “I heard about what happened and just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“Clint told Natasha already, huh?”

Steve smiled sadly from the comfort of his own bed, staring up at the ceiling as well, “You know those two love to gossip.”

“Don't I know it,” Marcella sighed softly and pressed her palm to her warm cheek, “I'm okay now... I guess I was just really embarrassed at first, but it's not worth being sad over.”

“You're right, but I know that it still hurts; I've been there plenty of times,” Steve said and Marcella knew that he understood her situation, “I'm glad you're feeling better now though, and that you know that guy isn't worth your time anyways.”

“Most men aren't worth my time,” She chuckled and Steve could practically see the smirk on her face, “I'm just mad that I actually shaved my legs and put on a dress just to get stood up, you know?”

Before he could stop himself, Steve found himself speaking with thinking, “It's his loss, I bet you looked amazing.”

Her cheeks grew hot and Steve worried that he might have offended her, “You're right... it is his loss.”

“That's my girl,” Steve's worry instantly melted away and the two fell into a comfortable conversation, happily talking about their day instead.

Marcie talked a whole lot about her new patients and how more and more amputees had been contacting Pepper in hopes to get a consultation with the young doctor. Steve was so incredibly proud of her and could tell that it genuinely gave her joy to be able to help those people; he could easily hear the emotions bubbling in her voice as she spoke about a little girl who was a Syrian refugee and had lost her arm in a horrific explosion. She talked about how the little girl's family didn't have all of the required documents to legally treat her and how she had almost risked her career to help her before Tony graciously stepped in and got into contact with some people who could get the proper documents for the family.

Steve spoke begrudgingly about having to go on a tough mission just days before his birthday and how he most likely wouldn't be back until some ungodly hour in the morning on the fourth of July. Marcella had been bummed out when he had to cancel his plans to come to New York, but she understood and felt bad that he even had to work right before his birthday. While she didn't know the exact details of the mission, he had mentioned it had to do with the crisis in Syria and while she felt bad that he had to go to such a war-stricken country, they both knew that heroes never really took vacations or sick days.

Little did Steve Rogers know that the younger Banner was secretly forming her own little mission. Five days later.

“Is this your car?”

Marcella blinked as she made her way out of Starbucks, gracefully holding two cups of coffee stacked on top of one another in one hand while the other hand held two paper bags with slices of banana bread in each. Her wild mane had been pulled into neat buns on either side of her head and she wore a pair of aviators that were a little too big for her head. She wore a white blouse with a floral print and ruffled short sleeves and a pair of light wash skinny jeans, along with the bracelet
Tony had given her as a graduation present and the necklaces Steve had gifted to her sat between her collarbones. In an attempt to make herself seem taller and like she was worthy of the extremely luxurious car that Tony had let her borrow, she wore cream colored Louboutins that had her feet screaming at her in protest.

She eyed the small group of teenage boys that surrounded the car and were taking pictures in front of it, raising her brows when one of them leaned up against it. At first, she thought the question had been directed towards her and it took her a moment to realize that they were asking a man wearing a nice Armani suit. She raised her brows even more and before the man wearing the suit could say anything, she spoke against her wrist to Jarvis and the boys jumped when the car alarm went off, making them take a few steps back. Marcella made her way up to the luxurious car and tucked her bags of banana bread under her arm, pressing her thumb against the door handle.

“Thumb print recognized,” Jarvis' voice spoke out loud from the black cuff she wore around her wrist, “Voice recognition required—state your name.”

Marcella's cheeks grew warm as the boys surrounding the sleek black and gold car stared at her in awe, “Dr. Marcella Banner.”

“Voice recognized, welcome back, Dr. Banner.”

“Thank you Jarvis,” Marcella hastily spoke when the door slowly opened and she immediately placed her coffee drinks in the cup holders and the banana bread in the passenger seat. She pressed her hand against the center console where the sensor was located and the men surrounding the car jumped back as the engine rumbled and the car swiftly came to life. The scientist eyed the interface displayed on the tinted windshield as it showed her a detailed route on a map of where she needed to go; she made sure all of the guys were away from the car before she quickly pulled out of her spot against the curb and swiftly made her way to her destination, barely sparing them a glance in the rearview mirror. As she sped down the streets, Marcella found herself grateful that Bruce wasn't in the car with her because she knew he would have a conniption if he saw how fast she was driving.

While she knew she was a good driver and normally didn't drive as fast as she currently was, Marcella found it difficult to be in a Lamborghini Veneno and not take advantage of the expensive car.

“Incoming call from Natasha Romanoff.”

Marcella perked up when Natasha's contact photo appeared on the interface in front of her on the windshield.

“Accept call.” She said out loud and immediately heard Natasha's throaty voice from the speakers of her cars, “Hey Nat!”

“Hey kiddo,” The red head greeted and it sounded like she was in the middle of a fight, “I just wanted to call to make sure you were still visiting the old man today. I got stuck training some newbies and feel bad that he's alone.”

“If anyone understands it's probably Steve,” Marcella weaved through traffic easily and spoke to Natasha in a nonchalant manner, “And I'm actually on my way there right now; I'm only about ten minutes away, it looks like. Are you sure this is a good idea? I don't want to interrupt anything he might already have planned and--”

“Like what? Sitting around watching videos about space on YouTube or war documentaries on the History Channel while having an existential crisis?”
“I don't know what you're talking about, that sounds like a typical Friday night for me.”

Natasha chuckled and Marcella could hear the sound of a man crying out in pain in the background, “I'm serious though, Steve is probably going to freak out in a good way when he sees you, so don't even worry about that. I'm pretty sure he had convinced himself that he was going to be spending his birthday alone, so he'll be glad to have someone there, especially you.”

Marcella exhaled deeply and wished she had more confidence in herself rather than thinking that he would be upset with her for surprising him. Her and Natasha spoke for a few more minutes before the red-haired woman told Marcie that she had to go, exclaiming that she needed both hands to put her opponent in a headlock. The young Banner merely chuckled at her friend's ferocity and said her goodbyes before she was met with silence again, sighing nervously when she approached her destination a few minutes later. Steve had admitted that he quite liked his apartment because it was quaint and all of his neighbors were nice in the sense that they usually left him alone, except for the older man a few doors down who was always asking for his help with repairing things around his apartment that was too high up for him.

Even when he wasn't wearing the suit, he still did everything he could to help people out.

After finding parking behind the complex, she gathered all of her stuff from the car and politely asked Jarvis to lock the doors for her since her hands were full. Marcella made her way into the elevator and smiled sheepishly at a pretty blonde woman who was exiting as she was about to get on it before pressing the button for what floor she needed to go to. After he had insisted on her coming around whenever she wanted to, Steve had given her a copy of the key to his apartment in case of emergencies as well. He had told her that even if he wasn't home and she needed somewhere to go, that she was more than welcome to stop by and stay for however long she needed to.

She shuffled around nervously and wondered if she looked alright, even though she didn't really care that much. If it were up to her, she would have driven all the way to D.C. in her pajamas, though she knew that probably would have looked quite silly if she had taken the Lamborghini still.

By the time she made it to her destination, Marcella's heart was pounding in her chest as she shuffled all of her things to one arm and pulled Steve's apartment key out of her pocket. She nervously unlocked the door and slowly pushed it open, half expecting to be attacked by Steve because he thought she was an intruder or something.

Instead, she was met with the lovely sound of birds chirping happily from the bird feeder on the balcony and an apartment that was actually decorated quite nicely.

She assumed SHIELD had done most of the decorating, but was surprised to find that he had put his own personal touches on certain things. As she discarded her shoes and placed her items on the small counter separating the kitchen from the living room, Marcella took in the numerous photographs that he had framed and hung up on the walls or placed on his desk. She wasn't sure why, but she was overcome with emotion when she realized that they were all pictures she had sent to him in care packages and couldn't believe that he actually took the time to go out and buy frames for everything. There were numerous photos of their friends doing silly things, like her and Clint building sandcastles at the beach or her and Natasha french braiding Thor's hair while he napped on the couch without a care in the world. The young Banner stared at the framed photo on his desk, right next to the docking station where she assumed he listened to music while working on paperwork that had to do with his missions. She swallowed the lump in her throat when she realized the picture only had her in it and she certainly hadn't sent it to him in one of her care packages.

In the picture, she was staring down at her feet that were submerged in the cold ocean water and had a huge grin on her face as her wild curls billowed out behind her. The golden rays that the sun
offered at the twilight hour accentuated her freckles and made her bronze complexion seem so warm and like her skin was glowing. Though she was slowly gaining more confidence in her looks, Marcella had never really seen a photograph of her that she liked and thought she looked beautiful in, but she really liked this picture that Steve must have taken of her at Coney Island when she was distracted by the vast ocean. She liked how noticeable her freckles were and didn't mind the way the sunlight hit the opalescent scar that ran across her eyebrow and eyelid; for the first time, Marcella actually thought she looked beautiful and wondered if Steve always saw her this way.

Her cheeks grew warm and she glanced around the apartment, searching for any signs of life from the Captain.

The door on the opposite side of the living room was cracked open and Marcella quietly made her way over, hesitantly peeking inside the bedroom. She was surprised to find a huge figure sprawled out on his stomach on top of the sheets, dead to the world as he slept like a rock after his exhausting mission. Marcella quickly turned away from his bedroom and got to work on preparing a birthday breakfast for her best friend; it was something her dad always did for her on the birthdays he hadn't missed and it always made her day so much better.

After finishing the blueberry pancake batter, she unwrapped the white paper package that had bacon on the inside before quietly fishing out some pans from one of Steve's cabinets and getting to work on cooking everything before Steve woke up. She brewed some coffee, knowing that there were some days where he lived off of it and that one cup from Starbucks wouldn’t last long between the two of them. Hell, there were days where coffee was the only thing that kept her going and she figured she'd probably end up drinking most of his in the end. Marcella crossed her arms over her chest as she remained vigilant to the task at hand—flipping the pancakes without totally fucking it all up like she normally did. She was in the process of carefully shuffling a spatula underneath the edges of the pancakes and was completely unaware of the figure that had emerged from his bedroom and was now watching the girl with great amusement as she struggled to complete the easy task.

Steve watched her in the soft lighting of his apartment; she looked like she belonged there with him and it made something in his chest flutter.

"Fucking hell," He heard her curse when the pancake broke in half mid-flip and his eyebrows shot up at the uncharacteristic language coming from her mouth, "Stupid fucking piece of--"

"Tony's dirty mouth really is rubbing off on you," Steve spoke and felt a little bad when she let out a squeak and nearly jumped ten feet into the air as she turned to face him with wide green eyes.

Though he initially hadn't wanted to get out of his comfortable bed after his tiring mission, the mouthwatering scent of bacon and coffee had all but forced him out of bed and he had been utterly stunned to see his best friend standing in the middle of his kitchen. She had been too concentrated on her task to notice him making his way out of his bedroom and he found himself smiling fondly at the curly-haired girl. A few curls had sprung free from the two buns on either side of her head and her heels had been discarded a long time ago; Steve knew how much she hated wearing shoes and noticed how out of place her nice heels looked right next to his beat up running shoes and scathed boots.

"I was supposed to surprise you with breakfast!" She huffed, peering up at him through her large glasses that he absolutely adored, "It was going to be your surprise birthday breakfast—happy birthday, by the way."

Steve chuckled at her flustered tone and made his way into the kitchen, "You didn't have to go through all of this for me Marcie, but thank you, this really means the world to me."

Her cheeks grew incredibly hot as Steve pulled her into a warm hug and pressed an affectionate kiss
to the side of her head, “Yeah, well I couldn't handle the thought of you being alone on your birthday even though you kept saying it wasn't that big of a deal.”

“Thank you,” He repeated, his blue eyes sparkling as he reluctantly pulled away from her, “Even though it looks like you're kind of struggling with these pancakes; do you need some help?”

She seemed conflicted as she stared down at her broken pancake with despair, much to Steve's amusement, “I mean, if you don't mind?”

Steve chuckled and shook his head, “Of course not. Why don't you take over on bacon and I'll handle the pancakes?”

“Sounds good to me!”

“Who would have thought that Marcella Banner, a twenty-two year old woman with a PhD in biomedical engineering and quite possibly one of the smartest people I have ever met, can't flip a single pancake without it breaking in half?”

“I come all of this way to be with my best friend on his birthday, only for him to insult my cooking skills,” Marcella fought back the grin that was threatening to spread across her lips, “The nerve of some people—how rude of you, Rogers. I don't think I'm going to give you your present after that sassy little comment.”

“Oh Marce, please tell me you didn't go through all of the trouble of actually getting me a gift.”

“Okay, then I won't tell you that I didn't get you a gift,” She then smiled coyly and Steve narrowed his eyes at her, “I got you a few gifts.”

Steve groaned, “Why are you like this?”

“Because Tony pays me way too much and you guys are literally the only friends I have,” Marcella shrugged and smiled up at the Captain, “Besides, I'd say after everything you've been through, you deserve a few presents.”

Steve had to fight the urge to pull her into his arms again—who gave her the right to be this sweet?

Later that day.

Steve spends his birthday watching movies with Marcella and doing absolutely nothing, but it's one of the best birthdays he can remember having in such a long time.

Though she couldn't really cook all that well, Marcella had proven herself to be quite the baker as her and Steve continued to talk to one another while she worked on a homemade apple pie from the kitchen and he remained seated on the couch. Every now and then, he can see her twirling around and he nearly had a heart attack every time she almost fell and hit her head on the counter; Marcella was quite possibly one of the clumsiest people he had ever met, though she held herself in such an elegant manner.

As soon as the sun started to go down, the two made their way onto the balcony and Steve found himself wrapping an arm around Marcella's dainty shoulders as they watched the fireworks from the comfort of his home. Marcella found herself glancing up at Steve as the fireworks illuminated his prominent features and she noticed the way his long eyelashes skimmed across the top of his cheeks as he blinked up at the sky. Though he was so mature and was nearly a hundred years old, he suddenly seemed so young to her and she had to remind herself that he had been in his early twenties when he made the decision to bury that plane in the ice. How could he make such a hard decision at
such a young age? Marcella could barely decide whether she wanted Panera or Chipotle for lunch most of the time and couldn’t imagine having to make the decision to willingly kill herself to save hundreds of thousands of people. Of course, she knew she would make the sacrifice if it was for the greater good, but she couldn’t imagine how hard it would be still.

“How old are you really?” Marcella found herself asking, clearly not a history buff like some of her peers, “Taking all of those years you spent in the ice out of consideration, how old would you have been?”

Steve stared down at her for a moment and smiled sadly at the curiosity in her sparkling green eyes; he noticed how the blue and red glow from the fireworks lit up her face and accentuated her features. She looked like the very epitome of soft and warmth in her oversized sweater that swallowed her dainty arms; Steve just wanted to wrap her up in a blanket and keep her there with him forever.

“I would have been twenty-three,” He answered after a moment, immediately noticing the way her eyes watered as she stared up at him.

Marcella Banner was too sensitive for her own good.

“Hey, no,” Steve murmured and easily caught a stray tear that escaped from the corner of her eye, “No crying on my birthday, because if you start crying, then I'll start crying and it'll just be one big giant mess.”

She breathed out a soft laugh and used the sleeves of her sweater to gently wipe at her eyes, “I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget that you were so young when everything happened to you; you just seem so mature, like you had to grow up too quickly.”

“We both did, for different reasons,” Steve reminded her with a sad smile, placing a hand in between her shoulder blades and leading her back in his apartment once the fireworks ended, “I'm okay though Marce, really. I'm in a way better place than I was when I first came out of the ice and a lot of that is because of you and the team and I'll never be able to thank you enough for that.”

The two sat on the couch and faced one another with soft smiles on their faces.

“You saved my life and became my friend when I needed one the most... I should be thanking you as well.”

“I'm glad I did... I'm glad I found you that day, Marcie.”

“Ohay,” She let out a shaky laugh, “Let's open presents before you make me cry again because nobody wants that.”

Steve sighed and reluctantly faced the three gifts that were wrapped neatly in gift paper with little red, white and blue ribbons wrapped around them, “Is there any order I should open them in?”

“Hmm, I would say to maybe open them from biggest to smallest.”

Steve nodded and got to work on opening the presents even though he kept insisting that she didn't need to get anything for him. He had lost the argument when she brought up the fact that he had surprised her at her graduation with the necklace that she still wore around her neck and promised him that it wasn't anything to gaudy or expensive. Reluctantly, he grabbed the larger package and was surprised at how heavy it was; she watched with a nervous expression as he untied the ribbon and ripped the gift wrap with a precariousness that only he could possess when opening gifts. Immediately, his eyes lit up when he read the words on the box and the skin surrounding his blue eyes crinkled as he glanced up at Marcella.
“You bought me a record player?”

“I did,” She chuckled as he continued to observe the box, “You can also hook your phone up to it to play music and listen to the radio, but I thought it would be nice to have something that's a little more old school, you know?”

Steve grinned softly and already knowing what the next gift was, began to unwrap it. He was right as he was met with the sight of tons of different vinyls in a large crate and Marcella noticed the soft expression on his face as he took his time to sift through the stack with a smile on his face. She had made sure to get a pretty good variety in there and the crate contained everything from thirties jazz, to fifties and sixties rock, all the way to seventies disco and eighties synthwave pop. Steve nearly laughed when he realized she had left out the nineties, claiming it was one of the worst decades for music and that she was ashamed to be born in the same decade that Creed and Limp Bizkit became a thing. The only vinyls she had put in there from the nineties was a Soundgarden and Green Day; she reassured him that she thought he would enjoy their music even though Steve knew that he would enjoy anything she got him.

He continued to thank her as he reached for the last gift on the table, the smallest one, and Marcella watched softly as he began to unwrap it, revealing a navy blue box. He furrowed his brows when he saw the U.S. Army logo engraved in gold on the box and quickly flipped it, exhaling deeply as he observed the familiar, polished silver that sparkled in the dim lighting of his apartment. The huge blonde swallowed the lump in his throat as he carefully lifted the compass from its spot in the jewelry box before flipping it over, his eyes growing wide as he peered up at Marcella with an expression she couldn't decipher.

“This is... this is Bucky's compass,” He exhaled and she could have sworn she heard his voice shake, “How on earth did you get your hands on this? They tried to... they tried to recover his belongings after the fall and couldn’t find anything.”

“It was recovered about forty years ago in the Soviet Union,” Marcella smiled sadly, noticing the way his thumb brushed over his best friend's name on the back of the compass, “The German Historical Museum in Berlin bought it during an auction, along with a few other artifacts that didn't really belong to them, so I decided to take them off their hands. Thank Tony too, he helped me pitch in enough money to buy it.”

When Steve remained silent, Marcella started to grow nervous that this had all been a mistake.

“I mean, I know you're not materialistic at all and like things that are sentimental, but I didn't think that this would--”

“Thank you,” Steve interrupted and quickly pulled her against his side, holding her in an embrace that nearly crushed her dainty shoulders, “I know you must have went through so much trouble to get this, but it means the world to me. The only thing I really had to remember him by were pictures and the exhibit at the Smithsonian, but nothing really physical.”

Her cheeks grew warm as he pressed his lips to her temple, “No biggie—it didn't belong to the museum, it belonged to you.”

“You and Tony didn't... steal this, right?”

Marcella snorted and pulled away from the Captain with a cheeky grin, “No, but we thought about it when we realized that they had precious artifacts that had been taken by Americans in places like Wakanda and Egypt. We bought those too and sent them back to their real homes where they've always belonged.”
“You two,” Steve chuckled and carefully placed the compass back in the jewelry box, giving it one last glance before shutting it, “Thank you for all of this, Marcie; I really didn't expect you to get me anything.”

She shrugged and smiled up at him, “This is the first time you've actually celebrated your birthday in seventy years, I couldn't let you spend it like you would any normal day off. I just have one more thing for you though.”

“Marcie, please--”

“I wasn't sure if I should even give this to you on your birthday,” She hastily got up and watched her as she picked up a thick case that she had set on the floor by her shoes earlier, “Because I know you just got back from that long mission and you probably don't even want to think about work, but I wasn't sure when I would see you again and I wanted to give this to you in person. Full disclosure, it's definitely related you being Captain America and I totally understand if you don't want to open it and I won't be offended.”

Steve's eyes softened at her flustered tone and he accepted the metal case that she held out to him; he gratefully took it and even though she reassured him that he didn't have to open it right away, he found himself grabbing the key that was tied to the top with a red ribbon. The case clicked as he unlocked it and he exhaled deeply when he opened it and realized it was the suit that she and Tony had been working on together. He was surprised to find that there wasn't any red located on the suit, but instead, it was all a deep navy blue color and the white star he normally wore on his chest was now silver. There was a new utility belt with a few different weapons already attached to it and Steve smiled softly when he realized she didn't include any guns—she didn't like them and neither did Steve.

He ran his hand over the material and raised his brows, “This feels different, what is it?”

Her cheeks grew red, “It's made out of Spectra Fiber, a highly resistant and high performance polyethylene material that is five times stronger than steel and more durable than what they use in bulletproof vests. Tony insisted on adding some red to make it more patriotic, but I thought the darker blue might be better for missions where stealth is required, you know? I thought it might keep you hidden a little better, but if you need me to make any adjustments just let me know because I can handle criticism unlike Tony and--”

“Thank you,” Steve interrupted with a soft chuckle, immediately stopping her from her adorable rambling, “I love it—maybe now you guys will stop making fun of me since it's not that patriotic.”

“Not a chance,” Marcella grinned up at him, making him groan, “You'll always be my star-spangled man with a plan.”

“You are the only one I will that can get away with always calling me that and I hope you know that.”

She pressed a hand to her chest as she beamed up at him, her eyes nearly closed because of how much she was smiling, “I am honored, Steve Rogers.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for how long it took to get this up!
I've been writing ahead and wanted to have quite a few chapters finished before putting this out that way I'm not stressed trying to put a chapter out every few days or something lol. I'm still trying to stick to my goal of updating once a week, but if I end up getting a lot further ahead, then I might start to bump it up to two chapters a week :) I've also been working on a Thor story because I feel like there's definitely not enough Thor fic and he's literally too sweet and too pure.

Thank you as always for reading and commenting! It really motivates me to keep writing :)
“What do I do?” He whispered into the darkness, his thumb still rubbing her cheek in a soothing manner, “How am I supposed to love you and keep you from getting hurt because of who I am?”

The Captain smiled sadly when he was met with silence, the tiny Banner woman down for the count.

“What are you doing?” Marcella asked herself in a hushed whisper, “Why are you doing this to yourself?”

When he had noticed her eyelids drooping just a few hours ago, Steve knew that he couldn’t let her make the long drive back to Manhattan when she was so sleepy, so he insisted that she spend the night at his place. Though she had been hesitant, feeling like she was invading his personal space, it took her a few to realize that Steve spent most of his time alone and she was sure that he didn’t mind a little company, so she had agreed. At first, Steve had insisted on sleeping on the couch because he was already so used to falling asleep in uncomfortable places and positions, but she had argued back and claimed that he was too big for the couch and she could fit on it much better. Eventually, Steve, stubborn as always, had won the argument and she had reluctantly agreed on his sleeping arrangements and after Steve lended her some of his smaller clothes--a white t-shirt that still made her arms look like toothpicks and boxers that ended just above her knees--the two had went their separate ways and settled into their respective beds.

Marcella oftentimes had nightmares and had tossed and turned in bed for about an hour, terrified of falling asleep because she knew she made God-awful noises in her sleep and she didn’t want to wake Steve up. She had already thrown off his schedule by showing up for his birthday and the tiny woman knew that he had probably planned on sleeping in longer if she hadn’t shown up that morning; she’d feel guilty if she kept him all night after he had been kind enough to let her stay the night. Maybe it was childish, and that was part of the reason why she hadn’t mentioned it to Steve, but she always found it difficult to sleep in unfamiliar places. As she stared up at the ceiling in the darkness for what felt like forever, the tiny scientist rolled over onto her side and pressed her cheek into Steve’s soft pillow, letting his comforting scent lull her into a strange doze. It was a woody scent that reminded her of Fall--her favorite season, next to Spring, of course--and the scent was intoxicating and extremely masculine. There were watery notes in the comforting scent and it reminded her of when her and Bruce had gone to Colorado when she was younger and hiked through a small part of the Rocky Mountains; the air had been so incredibly brisk and the scent of amber and crisp leaves had overwhelmed her senses and the scent on Steve’s reminded Marcella of that hike.

It was like he himself had gone hiking through the Rocky Mountains and had been caught in a rainstorm.

Though she had tried to force herself to stay awake, Marcella had eventually dozed off and even
though the scent had comforted her before, her nightmares welcomed her with open arms.

Steve had just been dozing off when he heard the first strange noise come from his bedroom; it was something between a whimper and a choked out sob and the noise was similar to one would make when they were in pain. At first, Steve thought it might have been his imagination since he had nearly been asleep when he heard it. A few moments had passed and Steve had been staring up at the ceiling when he heard it again, but this time, the sound was more drawn out and a little louder; the whimper had turned into a wail and Steve was instantly wide awake as he quickly stood and made his way to his bedroom. Of course he knew that she oftentimes had horrific nightmares and night terrors and he knew most of them were related to the abuse she had endured during that dark time when Bruce had left her with her grandfather, but this was the first time he had actually witnessed her have one and he felt helpless as he watched her cry into his pillow. It wasn’t until he heard her sob and wail, like she was in physical pain, that the Captain found himself walking towards the bed and sitting next to her hunched up frame.

“Marcella,” He said her name gently and found himself stroking her freckled, damp cheek, “Shh, it’s okay; please wake up.”

Steve gently pulled her closer until her back was pressed against his chest and his huge arm was wrapped around the spot just above her chest; he could feel her collarbones poking at the underside of his forearm as he held her close and gently rocked the two of them sideways. Eventually, her sobbing turned into sniffles as she fought against the terrifying embrace of her night terror. Steve noticed the way she tensed as she lifted her head, her entire body shaking as she glanced around the room and she almost seemed confused for a moment, the room not familiar to her at all.

“It’s okay,” Steve murmured and lowered his head until his chin was resting on her shoulder, “You’re at my apartment; you’re safe Marcie.”

Slowly, her hand came up to touch his forearm that was still wrapped around the front of her shoulders and he didn’t flinch when he felt her fingernails dig into his skin; he knew that she was trying to make sure that he was really there and she wasn’t trapped in her night terror anymore. She relaxed and her other hand came up to his forearm and Steve exhaled softly when both of her tiny hands wrapped themselves around his heavy arm; gently, he wrapped his other one around her waist and held her together.

“I’m sorry,” Marcella choked out, feeling absolutely tiny and insignificant in his embrace, “I didn’t mean to… I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“Hey, no, none of that,” Steve held her a little tighter as she continued to tremble against him, “You can’t help it, sweetheart.”

Marcella continued to shake like a leaf in the wind in his arms and Steve wanted to cry for her because she was so, so sweet and was one of the kindest souls he had ever met and to see her cry and hear her whimper felt like a crime in itself. She deserved so much better and had been done wrong so many times in the past; Steve promised himself he would never become one of those people that made it onto the list of people who had abandoned or hurt her. The Captain lowered his head until his lips were pressed against the fabric that covered her shoulder, wishing he could do more for her and make her feel safer.

He had never witnessed one of her night terrors firsthand and had only been there when she called him afterwards, trying to cope with the aftermath of the horrific memories. Steve wondered if they were always this bad, if she always cried out like she was actually being beaten and if she was always confused when she woke up. Sure, he had his nightmares too, but he usually woke up in a cold sweat and his heart pounding in his chest and it was nothing compared to how grim most of
Marcie’s nights were. Steve remembered that Bruce had once mentioned that getting through the night had always been a difficult task for her and though it was rare for her, she sometimes even suffered from sleep paralysis.

Because night terrors weren’t bad enough and God forbid she ever get a peaceful night of sleep.

“Don’t leave,” She begged, her tears finally coming to an end, “Please stay with me… don’t leave…”

“I’m not going anywhere,” He promised and gently adjusted himself so he was lying on his back; Marcie moved until she was curled against his side. His heart was still hurting when he felt her eyelashes flutter against the side of his neck and her fingers curl into the material that covered his chest, clearly still shaken up by her night terror.

“Don’t…”

“It’s okay,” He reassured her in a soothing voice, “I’m here… I’m here with you Marce and I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“I’m sorry for waking you up Steve,” She whispered and he felt her warm breath on his skin. With his free arm, he reached up and grabbed the tiny hand that was still curled into a fist on his chest, gently unfurling her fingers and wrapping his hand around hers in a sentimental way that Marcie was sure she’d never forget.

“Hey, don’t do that; you have nothing to be sorry for,” Steve whispered, remaining completely calm as he comforted her, “I can go a long time without sleep. Besides, how many times have I woken you up after I’ve had my own nightmares? I told you I’d always be there for you even when I’m far away and I meant it, doll.”

“I know,” Marcie exhaled shakily, “I just don’t… you already have so much weight that you carry around on your shoulders, I don’t want to make it worse, Steve.”

“You’ve been hurt just as much as I have,” The blonde reminded her gently, giving her a hand a tender squeeze, “And you… I know you feel so alone all the time Marce; I get it because sometimes I feel just as alone as you do. This pain though, you don’t have to feel it all by yourself too. You’re my best friend and you’re… you’re so precious to me.”

“Steve…”

“I know you’re not always as happy as you force yourself to look in front of others and you don’t always have to be so strong for us,” Steve’s thumb rubbed soothing circles on the back of her hand, “Even if you don’t want to always talk to me about your night terrors, you don’t ever have to feel ashamed for crying in front of me and I won’t think any less of you because you’ve been through so much. We’re not… you’re not a machine Marce, you’re allowed to feel these things and cry about everything you’ve gone through.”

“Thank you Steve, for everything,” Marcella’s voice grew steadier as Steve continued to comfort her, “You’re… you’re precious to me too.”

While Marcella knew that her feelings for Steve had always been there, it was then that she knew she was completely and utterly in love with Steven Grant Rogers.

With one arm wrapped around her shoulders and his other hand engulfing her much smaller one, Marcella tried to remember a time where she had put this much trust in anyone other than her father to see her in such a vulnerable state. Everyone always expected her to be happy and optimistic and
while she was fine with having the role of the more maternal figure of the group, it was becoming harder with every passing day to act so strong for everyone else. It was hard to pick others up when she could barely keep herself together some days and she was grateful for Steve and how incredibly sweet and accepting he was, because he never expected her to put up a facade for him--he never expected her to be strong for him. Steve had always encouraged her to tell him what was really going on and how she was really feeling, never expecting her to always be so bubbly and optimistic.

Marcella wondered if she would ever be able to say--or even write--the words to truly thank him for being such an amazing man, for being her best friend and the first man that she had truly fallen in love with. As she breathed in his woodsy scent, she wondered how someone so huge and powerful could also be so soft and gentle. She wondered how someone could go from being authoritative and perhaps even intimidating, to a giant pile of mush whenever she did things like grab his hand or kiss his cheek whenever they had to say goodbye. Even now, she noticed how gentle his calloused fingers were as he flipped her hand over so her palm was facing up. Marcella wondered if he felt the way her heart pounded in her chest as his rough fingertips skimmed along the much smoother skin of her palm; though it was just a small touch, it felt intimate and sentimental and she didn’t want him to stop.

She could feel Steve’s pulse against her cheek as she let him lull her to sleep with his soft touches and she was nearly asleep when she felt Steve’s hand slip from hers. The tiny scientist grew even more tired and felt like she was in some sort of pleasant dream when she felt a warm hand cup her cheek, his thumb gently rubbing the skin right next to the tail of her eyebrow.

Steve stared at the ceiling, no longer feeling tired as he felt Marcella’s breathing pattern slow down and her body melt against his; she had finally fallen asleep, but he kept his palm gently pressed to her warm, freckled cheek. He thought about all the times Natasha had nagged him about asking her out and the Captain suddenly felt angry with himself for not doing it earlier when they had been watching the fireworks on his balcony--he had been so close to doing it and then she had asked about his birthday and what his age would have been if he hadn’t spent seventy years in the ice. Steve was terrified of overwhelming her and ruining their friendship, but as he continued to stroke her soft skin and held her close to his side, he knew he had to tell her soon. He had to tell her because Marcella Banner was so incredibly sweet and soft--so incredibly fucking soft--and she was simultaneously happy and sad and lonely and she needed someone who could love her like he knew he could. She needed someone to help her through these horrific night terrors and she needed someone she could be emotionally vulnerable in front of without feeling judged because she had gotten so good at carrying other people’s burdens on her already weighed down shoulders--she could only take so much more before she collapsed under the weight.

Steve continued to stare up at the ceiling as an errant tear escaped from his eye because Marcella Banner was so lost and so sad and he was too terrified to tell her that he was so in love with her because everyone he had ever loved had died or suffered because of him. The thought of Marcie suffering anymore because of him terrified him beyond belief, but she was still suffering regardless because she didn’t have a real home and Steve knew he could be her home if she let him.

Steve didn’t know what to do because either way, there would always be a huge target on her back and it would only get worse if the two became something more than friends.

“What do I do?” He whispered into the darkness, his thumb still rubbing her cheek in a soothing manner, “How am I supposed to love you and keep you from getting hurt because of who I am?”

The Captain smiled sadly when he was met with silence, the tiny Banner woman down for the count.

“Please, come back soon,” Steve smiled at Marcella the next morning, the sun shining on the two of
them as she leaned against the Lamborghini that Tony had let her use, “It was really nice having you over; spending my birthday with you was really the best gift I could ever ask for, but thank you for all of the other gifts Marcie.”

The freckled girl smiled sheepishly and tucked a couple of curls behind her ear, “Of course Steve, I couldn’t let you spend your birthday all alone. Thank you for having me over even though I kind of invited myself.”

“You’re welcome here anytime,” The Captain reassured her, “You… you have a home here whenever you don’t know where else to go, whenever you feel lost. You can come by anytime, even if it’s in the middle of the night or I’m not even home and you just need somewhere to escape to--you have a home here, Marce, always.”

Marcella beamed up at him, remembering what Clint had told her about home being a person and not a place. Maybe Steve Rogers was her home and she was barely starting to realize it, even though it made sense to her. He had been there for her from the very moment he had pulled her from the rubble and had comforted her in ways that not even her father could.

“Thank you, Steve,” Marcella whispered and pushed herself away from the expensive car, wrapping her arms around Steve’s torso, “For everything.”

“Of course,” He said just as quietly, his own arms slipping around her shoulders, “Anytime.”

The two held each other for a few moments, Marcella’s hands sliding up his back to come to a rest on his unyielding shoulder blades, her cheek pressed against his chest. Reluctantly, they pulled away from one another and Marcella stared up at him, a conflicted expression on her face when she found it damn near impossible to move from her spot to get into the car. Steve watched the way she clasped her hands together, looking lost and maybe even a little frantic as she tried to convince herself that she needed to leave because Steve was strong and didn’t need her the same way she need him.

Marcie wondered why it was so hard to leave him this time and as she gazed up at him, she knew it was because she was finally able to admit to herself that she was in love with him and as he stared back down at her with a softness in his blue eyes that he only reserved for her, she knew that he felt something for her too.

Before Marcie could get in the car, Steve gently grabbed her wrist and she stared up at him with surprise on her features as he bent down to press his lips to the skin right next to the corners of her lips.

“Take care of yourself, please.”

Marcie forced a sad smile and Steve swore he saw tears in her green eyes as she turned away from him and opened the car door, “You too, Steve.”

And as the car came to life and the engine rumbled, regret instantly floods Steve’s chest because she’s leaving and she’s still sad and lost and he still hasn’t told her how he really feels. She still doesn’t know that he absolutely loves and adores her; she doesn’t know that he definitely needs her the same way she needs him and he hates himself for letting her leave without letting her know that she is completely loved by him.

Steve watched as she quickly backed out of the parking spot and he could hear the speakers vibrating from how loud she was playing her music. Steve wanted nothing more in that moment for Natasha to come out of nowhere and kick him in the back of the head for being an idiot and not actually kissing her on the lips like he had originally planned on doing.
As she finally disappeared from his sight, driving at a speed that would make Tony happy and Bruce disappointed, he wondered if she would have stayed if he had kissed her and told her how he felt.

A month later.

“Good job,” Clint signed as he swiftly caught Marcella's ankle as she swung it towards his side for the hundredth time that day. He raised his brows at the force behind the kick; she was getting stronger with every passing day and it was only a matter of time before she was beating him in these training sessions.

The archer had been pleasantly surprised when she had come up to him randomly a few weeks ago, asking if he could give her a few pointers on self defense. At first, he had been worried that there was something she wasn't telling him—that maybe someone was after her or that she was simply paranoid about being attacked. Instead, she had insisted that she felt it necessary for her to know at least some basic moves since she already had a target on her back, what with being associated with each member of the Avengers in one way or another. Though she was incredibly tiny and didn't have a lot of strength, she was very calculating and quick on her feet and had managed to dodge most of his punches and kicks so far. Clint already noticed a little more definition in her arms and shoulders and she was extremely adaptive to their workout routines; he knew she would be a fighter in no time at all.

She easily countered a punch he aimed toward her side and Clint's eyes widened with surprise as she grabbed his fist in her much smaller hand and tightly wound it behind his back. The air left his lungs as Marcella roughly kicked the back of his knee and he barely registered the way his cheek slapped against the cushioned mat they had been sparring on. Her knee was pressed against his back in an uncomfortable angle and she kept his arm wound tightly behind him; he reluctantly used his other and patted the mat next to him, signaling his defeat. While he obviously wasn't using all of his strength on her, as he was twice her size and much stronger, she had taken him by surprise with how quickly she had learned all of the moves he had taught her.

“Good,” Clint signed again as he turned over onto his back and she promptly helped him up from the floor, beaming as he praised her. Her curls had been pulled into a messy bun and the older man eyed the frizzy baby hairs at her hairline with amusement; she looked quite disheveled and her breathing was a little ragged, reminding him of just how tiny she was and how she had quite a few health problems. He had found out that she had asthma when she was quite younger, but she hadn't used an inhaler in over eight years, though she kept one in her gym bag just to be safe. Because of her tiny stature, she always seemed to be getting sick and had quite a few vitamin deficiencies, but her health seemed to be getting slightly better the more they exercised together.

She was getting so much stronger, and that made Clint happy.

Of course she was always going to be naturally small and though it was somewhat similar to Steve's stature before getting the serum, medicine was more advanced in today's society than it was back then and most of her health problems could easily be treated.

Still though, Clint was pleasantly surprised by how much strength she possessed for being so small; she had taken him down numerous times. He had noticed a change in her personality since her little trip to Steve’s a little over a month ago; there was a fiery glimmer in her green eyes now and she seemed more sure of herself in everything she did. While she was still happy and optimistic, she was more determined now and seemed to be saying whatever was on her mind, even if it was something that the others might not want to hear. Marcella almost seemed... harder now, like Steve had said or did something to her to make her more fierce; or perhaps she had just woken up one day, tired of feeling sorry for herself.
Clint liked the slight change in her personality though; she was still her typical kind self, but was also quite sassy and ruthless.

“We’re going to try something new today,” Clint made his way over to his gym bag and pulled out a small item, gaining her interest and curiosity, “You don’t really seem like much of an archery kind of gal, so I thought we would try out something else for you. You’re an engineer and I know you’re really good with your hands—very calculating and unwavering, so I think this will be perfect for you.”

She watched with curiosity as he pulled out a short, baton-like weapon and held it out to her. She hesitated and the archer nodded at her with an encouraging smile; she reluctantly took it from his hands and was surprised at how light it was. It must have been made out of carbon steel, the same kind of metal that Clint's crossbow was made of, and she figured it must have been extremely impact-resistant and durable.

Clint made a gesture with his hand, signaling for her to give the baton a good swing and she promptly followed the order, doing it the same way he had. She jumped when the baton extended into a staff that was nearly the same size as her and the startled girl glanced up at Clint with an unsure expression and he smiled at the adorable expression on her face. He’d hate to see what she would do if he had handed her a gun instead; he knew she hated guns and that they made her nervous, so he’d never be able to do that to her, make her train with a gun if she didn’t want to.

“It's okay,” He signed and gave her an encouraging smile, motioning for her to give it a few good swings just to get a good feel for it. She hesitated, but eventually followed his motions as he swung his own staff around and showed her the proper way to handle it. Clint watched with a soft expression as she effortlessly twirled it in her hands and copied his own actions so she could learn how to use the staff to defend herself before having to use it to attack an assailant.

“This is perfect for you,” Clint reassured her as his own staff made a swishing sound as he swung it at her; without a second thought, she easily brought her own staff up and blocked the swing with a surprised expression.

“You may not be physically strong,” He continued and circled her, “But you’re extremely fast and this will help you block shots so much easier. Plus, this will give you an advantage as you won’t have to stand so close to an attacker or an opponent.”

“I like it,” She signed, and Clint smiled softly as she easily twirled the staff and blocked another swing from him. He had been doubtful when he agreed to show her a few moves, but once he realized that she was an incredibly fast learner, he had wanted to teach her so much more than just a little self-defense. She was right when she said that there was a target on her back because of her association with the Avengers, not to mention her close friendship with the Captain and how her dad was literally the Hulk. She had made a name for herself and Clint knew it was only a matter of time before someone tried to come after her—whether it be for her knowledge or association with the extraordinary heroes, he knew it was bound to happen eventually. While he knew there was only so much the Banner girl could do to protect herself, if he could teach her even an ounce of what he and Natasha had learned during their training days, he would feel immensely better about her chances for survival if she ever found herself in a dire situation.

“Great,” Clint smirked, “Let me see your angry face—like we practiced.”

The archer's smirk melted away and was replaced with a loud, heartfelt laugh as she forced her lips into a sneer and her brows furrowed in the middle.

Marcella Banner wasn't capable of looking angry.
“That's okay,” Clint's laughter finally died down as he wiped the corner of his eye, “We'll work on it.”

Later that day.

Marcella had come to learn that one of her favorite parts about working in the tower was being able to wear fancy clothes.

In college, the Banner woman never had a need for formal clothes and mostly stuck to hoodies and ripped jeans, not really caring what she looked like when she was running on less than a few hours of sleep most mornings. The curly-haired girl tucked a loose curl that had freed itself from the the crown she had dutch-braided on top of her head behind her ear and smoothed her black skirt down on top of her thighs. The high-waisted flowy skirt fell down to the middle of her thighs and a white button down shirt was tucked into the waistband of the skirt. The long sleeves had been rolled up to her elbows and the first few buttons were undone, showing a little more skin than she normally would. The longer silver chain with Steve's cross and tags was on display, which was rare because it was typically tucked into whatever shirt she wore.

She watched with soft eyes as a middle-aged man in front of her walked slowly, but surely on a prosthetic leg that she had created especially for him. Pepper Potts stood behind her and watched with a wide smile as the man's steps slowly became more fluid and human-like...as though he wasn't wearing a fake limb. He stretched for a few moments, touching his toes and doing lunges, all while staring at the artificial limb with an amazed expression. The artificial appendage didn't feel so...artificial; it actually felt like a natural part of his body, like an extension of himself and he didn't have to put as much effort into moving it around like he had with his other prosthetic.

“How does it feel?” She questioned when the older man, Benjamin, finally looked at her, “Do any adjustments need to be made to the anchor? Is it too tight around your thigh? Is the sensitivity okay? I can always adjust the electrodes and--”

“No,” He shook his head and did a little hop on it to test its sturdiness, “This is... this is amazing. I've never had a prosthetic that has felt like an actual leg; they're always so clunky and difficult to deal with.”

“It will take a little while to get used to it,” Marcella gave him a soft smile, “But you'll be back to running in no time.”

“This means the world to me,” He told her earnestly, looking her straight in the eyes, “It really does, but I'm not sure if my insurance will be able to cover even half the cost of this prosthetic.”

“Don't worry about it,” Pepper spoke up and reassured him with a warm smile, “I was actually planning going over payment options with you and will help you choose the best option. Getting a prosthetic leg that functions like a normal appendage shouldn't have to leave you broke—it's not a right or a privilege to be able to get around comfortably, it's a necessity.”

“She's right,” Marcella nodded and continued to inspect her work, “I spent a semester in Yemen not too long ago and witnessed the pain and suffering that comes with war and terrorism. I think it's horrible that this country is so focused on doing everything in their power to end these wars, but they forget about those who have been greatly injured in the process. It's not right and something needs to be done about it.”

“The world needs more people like you,” He said, the compliment taking her by surprise and he glanced at the chain around her neck, “You lose someone in the war?”
Pepper raised her brows at the question, knowing that Steve had trusted her with his old tags and that they were precious to her, even though the tiny scientist had never considered herself to be materialistic.

Marcella faltered as she grabbed the dog tags, “N-No... they belong to a friend... he's not here, but he wanted me to hold onto these while he's away.”

“He must be a good guy if he’s your friend,” He smiled softly, a sadness in his eyes that made her heart feel heavy in her chest, “I didn't lose my leg in the war, but I've definitely lost friends because of it. You lose a part of you... people suddenly look at you different and treat you more like a burden.”

Marcella held hands together in front of her thighs as she leaned back against the examination table, “If you don't mind me asking, how did you lose it?”

“Battle of New York. I was in a meeting when one of those... aliens just came crashing through the window and next thing I knew there was this big explosion. I was in the hospital for three days when I finally woke up, I couldn't feel my leg and realized they had amputated it because of how damaged it had been.”

Marcella immediately understood and shook her head, before turning her scarred up leg so he could see it, “I was in the science building at Columbia when it collapsed on me and my peers. I was stuck underneath all of the rubble for over a day before I was found—the nerves in my leg were fried, but they were able to rehabilitate it. Sometimes it hurts still, but I got lucky, I suppose. I'm sorry for what happened to you and your leg.”

“Please don’t be,” He gazed at her leg for a few moments before looking up at her, “Me and my family are alive and healthy, that's all that I could ever ask for. Thanks to you, I'll be able to take dancing lessons with my daughter before she gets married without feeling ashamed of myself. What you're doing here, giving amputees these amazing, high quality prosthetics and helping them pay for it... it's wonderful and you should be proud of yourself... and at such a young age.”

Marcella felt her cheeks grow hot as she gazed down at her red heels, “I'd like to change the world and make it a more hopeful place for people who have been through so much and seen such horrible things—people like you.”

“Thank you again, this is really the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me.”

Marcella smiled sheepishly and accepted his hand as he shook hers vigorously, “The pleasure is mine, if you have any problems or questions, don't hesitate to call me.”

She handed him her business card—something that Pepper had provided her with when she had become more confident with her prostheses and insisted on taking in patients.

“I will,” He nodded as Pepper led him into her office to set up a payment plan that would be easy on him; the last thing she heard was Ms. Potts talking in her usual soothing voice, asking Benjamin if he would like some coffee or water.

Her first few patients had been hesitant on being the first people to try the new type of prosthetic legs, but had been pleasantly surprised by how lightweight and human-like the artificial appendages had felt attached to their body. They had been more amazed that the movement of the prosthetic was effortless and even though it was an electrical unit, it operated off of self-sustaining energy that Tony had helped her with—which meant that the user would never have to worry about changing batteries or charging it at night. After she had mentioned creating a new kind of prosthetic that allowed its user
to feel pressure and heat and cold, her list of patients had doubled in size and Marcella would never forget the look on her patients’ faces when she would press her fingers to their steel palms. Their eyes would always grow wide and a huge smile would spread across their face when they felt the familiar sensation of pressure and warmth.

It felt so real, they would all tell her.

Tony had seemed incredibly proud of her then, though he’d probably never admit it, and had provided her with her own office and laboratory in the tower.

She’d be lying if she said the incredibly generous and kind gesture didn’t make her tear up.

It felt as though she had been promoted from a lab assistant to her own boss, but Tony made sure she knew that she still worked for him and would continued to ask for her advice on certain projects. He genuinely valued her opinions and Marcella thoroughly enjoyed working with the billionaire because of that; he was never rude to her and never undermined her intelligence.

At one point, he had admitted that he thought the younger Banner was smarter than her father, which she had vehemently denied while blushing like a madwoman.

It's not like she had seven PhDs.

Marcella smiled to herself as she grabbed her lanyard and unlocked one of the drawers on her file cabinet, storing away Benjamin’s file and information with great precision. She tried to ignore the wave of pride that washed over her when she remembered how happy he had seemed when he had been walking around on the prosthetic—the way his eyes lit up when he took a few small hops. It was always little moments like those that made her feel incredibly humble and reminded her why she was doing this. She made sure everything was locked up and secure as she exited her laboratory, locking that up with her key-card and a thumb print as well.

Her heels clacked against the shiny, tiled floor as she made her way to the elevator and to the lounging area, realizing just how hungry she was after she had forgotten to eat breakfast. She kept her head down as the elevator ascended to the top floor and she only looked up when the doors slid open as she arrived to her destination. She heard an unfamiliar female voice, as well as a very familiar male voice and she immediately sped up and swung the door open to the lounge, immediately grinning when she spotted a certain Asgardian Prince. He spotted her at the same time and the serious expression he previously held on his face instantly melted into his characteristic grin at his favorite little Midgardian human.

Next to Jane, of course.

“Thor!” She all but ran to him and his grin mirrored hers as he caught her and practically swung her around. It was only when he set her back down on solid ground and gave her head a friendly pat, she noticed a familiar woman standing about a foot away with a fond, yet shy smile on her face.

Marcella easily pushed past Thor and ignored the way his eyebrow twitched as she became a bumbling mess in front of the astrophysicist in front of her.

“J-Jane Foster,” Marcella stuttered when she realized this was the Jane that Thor had mentioned so many times, “Your work in the field of Astrophysics is astounding and so incredibly interesting. I um, I actually attended your speech you made at NYU two years ago and I was just captivated by the way you spoke the entire time. I mean, space has always been such a huge interest of mind and I’ve actually been thinking of going back to school to get a PhD in aerospace engineering and maybe... God, I'm sorry, this is so embarrassing and I--”
“It’s okay,” She chuckled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she shook the curly-haired woman’s hand, “It’s actually a pleasure to meet you as well, Dr. Banner. Ever since Thor has mentioned you, I’ve been reading a lot about you and your work in robotics and biomedical engineering and I think it’s quite amazing what you do as well. The fact that you’re able to create a prosthetic that lets the user still be able to feel with it is just astounding to me; I’ve read so many stories from your patients about how it actually feels like their prosthetic is a real limb and how they can’t even tell the difference.”

Marcella felt her mouth fall open a little and she looked up at Thor who was beaming at his two favorite women, “I’m going to pass out.”

Another voice spoke, “Don’t do that, I just had these floors cleaned and blood is a pain in the ass to get out of white carpet.”

The Banner woman turned around and faced Tony with a smirk, “All the more reason to do it, I suppose.”

“Watch it, kid,” He warned and sauntered towards the small group, “You’re starting to sound like me.”

He gave her shoulder a small pat as he walked past her and into the kitchen, pulling out a container of blueberries and popping a couple into his mouth. Thor smiled softly at the friendly exchanged between the two; they had grown closer in the short amount of time Thor had been away and he certainly didn’t miss the uncharacteristic way that Tony looked at her. There was this strange sort of softness in the way he acted around her and his voice would become just the tiniest bit quieter when he spoke to her, as if he knew she was jumpy around loud noises and when people yelled around her.

“What are you guys doing here?” Marcella turned her attention back to Thor and Jane who were watching the two interact with amused expressions, “Not that I’m complaining, I’m just surprised to see you here. Is the world about to end again?”

Thor and Jane glanced at each other for a moment before the Asgardian responded with a serious tone, “I’m afraid I come from Asgard bearing bad news, Lady Banner.”

Marcella immediately felt her smile slip from her face and Tony slowly made his way back around the island and to the Banner woman's side, crossing his arms over his chest as he planted himself on one of the stools. It was only then when she realized that Thor, and even Jane, were both dressed in Asgardian attire—as if they had quickly made their way back to Earth solely just to talk to her, not even having time to change first.

“Heimdall has spoken of grave things involving your father.”

Marcella felt her heart plummet to the pit of her stomach as Thor spoke with an unusual softness; her head fell as she stared at the floor and tried not to jump to the worst case scenarios but she had known this whole time that something was off. Even if he wasn't allowed contact with anyone, her dad would have found a way to at least let her know that he was okay. It wasn’t like him to not give her some sort of sign that he was alright, especially after everything that they had been through together.

A heavy hand covered her dainty shoulder, making her look up at the God.

“He has not perished,” He spoke softly, though it did absolutely nothing to calm her, “Heimdall told me me that he is being held as a prisoner.”
“Prisoner?” Marcella shuffled and glanced at the stoic expression on Tony's face for a moment before turning back to Thor and Jane, “Why? What do they want with him?”

“I'm assuming it has something to do with that mission that Fury sent him on,” Thor explained and shook his head, “It was hard for Heimdall to see what was going on, but the people who are holding him as a prisoner having been experimenting on him and testing out different type of... methods on him. It sounds like he had something that this group of men wanted in their possession. It... it also seems like they are trying to get him to turn into the green beast.”

“D-Do you know where he is?” The curly-haired girl glanced at Jane, “C-Could Heimdall see where he was?”

Thor turned to Jane who had heard Heimdall say the name of the Midgardian location, “San Pedro Sula, it's in--”

“Honduras,” Marcella finished with a deep pit of dread blooming in her chest, “It's one of the most dangerous places in the world... why would Director Fury send my father to a city like that?”

“That is a question that I'm afraid I do not have the answer to,” Thor replied honestly and kept his hand on the somber woman's shoulder, trying to provide her with a little comfort, though it was no use. She was beyond worried at this point; she was terrified of losing her father.

“What should we do?” She asked looking from Thor to Tony, “We can't just sit here and do nothing... my dad needs help.”

“SHIELD has already been contacted,” Thor tried to calm her down, “I'm afraid there's not much else I can do at the moment, Asgard is in shambles after all of my brother's antics and they need me right now.”

“I understand,” Marcella whispered, “It means the world to me that you were able to deliver the news, thank you, Thor.”

“Of course,” He nodded and took in the heartbroken expression on her face, “Please, Lady Banner, I understand the despair you must be feeling with this news, but have faith in your father and the people who have been sent out to find him.”

Marcella nodded and didn't say anything as him and Jane bid the Banner woman and Tony goodbye, his hammer swinging as he stepped out onto the balcony with Jane. The tiny scientists lowered her head and didn't watch as Thor and the astrophysicist ascended into the sky; for once, even Tony was quiet as he contemplated over everything that had just been revealed. The room was so silent that the only thing that could be heard was a clock ticking on the wall from the other side of the room and Marcella wasn't even aware of the way Tony stared at the resolute expression on her face. He gave the girl credit for keeping it together and not even shedding a tear—she had become stronger and more acquainted to the horrors of the world and he wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

“Enough moping.” Tony grabbed her elbow and tugged her along with him, “It's time to get to work and find your dad.”

The next day.

“Absolutely not.”

Marcella felt her jaw clench as Tony stared at her with an irritated expression after she had spent the last ten minutes begging him to bring her along to Honduras. She had told him that she was fluent in Spanish in hopes that would convince him to let her go, but he was having none of it. Her eyes
looked tired and there were dark circles underneath her eyelids from lack of sleep, but Tony looked pretty similar too, and she knew that the billionaire could only take so much more. She knew Bruce had become a good friend to Tony and the two oftentimes relied on one another for constructive criticism when it came to new projects they were working on. It was rare for her dad to make friends with others, as he had become incredibly secluded after the gamma ray incident, so she knew it must have been tearing Tony up to not know if the older scientist was alright or not.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but the ringing of his phone cut him off and he gave her a decisive glare as he answered it and temporarily exited the room.

Now, it was unlike Marcella to not listen to Tony or even her dad when they gave her orders to not do something in particular, which is why even she was surprised when she found herself bending over in front of Tony's computer and hitting the little printer icon at the top of the page. It had been easy for Tony to hack into SHIELD and access the coordinates where her dad was allegedly being held hostage, but he had refused to show them to her—worried that she would do something irrational.

Which he clearly wasn't wrong, she thought to herself, as she quickly snatched the warm page from the printer and folded it in into the back pocket of her jeans. Tony entered a few seconds later, shoving his phone into his pocket with an irritated look on his face as he looked at the equally irritated expression on her face.

“This is completely out of your pay-grade, so don't give me that look, Little Banner,” He huffed, noticing the way she clenched her jaw, “It's already decided, I'm leaving tomorrow night and you're going to stay here and out of danger. Can you manage to do that for a few days?”

“I don't know,” She answered honestly, staring him dead in the eyes, “I guess we'll find out.”

“I'm serious, Marcella.”

“So am I.”

The two stared each other down for a few moments before Tony finally turned around and stormed out of the room, practically slamming the door behind him. She knew he was mad at her but Marcella ignored it as she contemplated her next actions, wondering if any of this was a good idea or not.

Of course it wasn't, but that wouldn't stop her.

“Jarvis?”

“Miss Banner, how can I help you?”

“I need you to do a huge favor for me and book me a plane ticket for the first flight to Honduras, preferably an airport near San Pedro Sula.”

“Is Mr. Stark aware of your trip?”

“No, and I'd prefer to keep it that way for as long as possible.”
Thank you guys for all of the comments on the last chapter! They really do motivate me and I love hearing your guys’ thoughts on certain aspects of the story.

This chapter was originally going to be only 4,000 words and wasn't even going to have Steve in it, but I feel like they needed some angst and fluff before shit hits the fan in the next chapter lol. Marcella hasn't really experienced any action like the others and I think it's finally time to give her a little plot of her own before I start to incorporate The Winter Soldier plot into the story.

As always, thank you for reading and commenting, you guys are the best! :)}
Chapter Summary

“I remember the first time I ever saw her... she was thirteen and she was just so...”

Natasha furrowed her brows as she stared at the sleeping scientist with the softest expression that Steve had ever seen from her, a hint of sadness in her eyes as old memories played in her head of the first time she had seen Marcie.

Steve waited for her to continue but she shook her head, “Nevermind... it doesn't matter.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“What is it?”

Steve stared at Tony’s name on his cell phone as the device vibrated in his hand violently; it was the third consecutive time the phone had rang and Steve knew something was wrong. Brock and Jack were both staring at the Captain expectantly, knowing that it was extremely out of character for him to bring his personal life onto the field and that meant taking personal calls on the job.

He frowned though, knowing that something must have been up for Tony to keep calling him this much and his mind briefly wandered to Marcella as he thought about something happening to her. Though she was an adult and was more than capable of taking care of herself, Tony had sort of picked up the role of keeping an eye on her since Bruce and Steve were both gone and had become something similar to a parental figure to the tiny scientist. Perhaps it was just him being paranoid, but the Captain hadn't been able to stop feeling like something bad was going to happen and he knew if something was going on with her, Marcella probably wouldn't tell him because she was too stubborn for her own good. He knew it wasn't her fault for keeping things bottled up all the time because it had become second nature to her and she had spent a good portion of her life wither being alone or not knowing who to trust, but he wished that she would talk about the things that haunted her night terrors or the horrific memories that kept her awake all night. Steve wished he knew when she was in pain because even though he could see the sadness in her eyes, she had become an expert at keeping her voice light and void of any sadness and he hated how good she was at disguising the pain.

The Captain sighed as he continued to think about the worst case scenarios running through his mind.

“Sorry,” Steve stood up, ignoring the irritated expression on Nick's features, “I need to take this, it's an emergency.”

“If you walk out of this room right now,” Nick started in his harsh voice and everyone on the STRIKE team stared at the two in anticipation, “Don't bother coming back for the rest of this meeting. If Stark or Banner are more important to you than this mission, then I think we can manage without you.”

“Yeah,” Steve stared at him impassively for a few moments, his phone still vibrating in his hands,
“Then I'm sorry, because my friends and family mean way more to me than whatever it is you want us to do for you this time and I can tell that this is an emergency if Stark keeps on calling me; I have faith in you guys to complete this without me. Good luck guys.”

Natasha watched him curiously as he turned away from the small group of fighters on the team and quietly slipped out of the room, answering his phone the moment the door closed behind him; she furrowed her brows when she noticed the frown on the Captain’s features.

“This better be good, Tony.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt your day, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis spoke instead of the billionaire, surprising the blonde, “I have been trying to wake up Mr. Stark for the last half hour as he and Dr. Banner are the ones that I contact first whenever Dr. Marcella Banner does something reckless. I figured that I would have better luck contacting you, especially with this concerning Dr. Marcella Banner.”

Steve instantly froze, not noticing the red-haired woman that was trailing behind him as he made his way through SHIELD headquarters. His mind instantly wandered to the worst case scenario and fear coursed through his veins as he thought about Marcie getting kidnapped and hurt, or maybe she was caught up in some sort of dangerous situation because God only knew that she never listened to him when he told her it could get dangerous to wander around New York by herself. Steve remembered finding her underneath all that rubble and how lifeless she had been before he had found her pulse—he had thought for sure she was dead and even though he didn’t know who she was at the time, the thought of her being in that kind of situation again made him feel numb from the inside out.

The thought of someone even looking at her the wrong way made his chest ache.

“What's going on, Jarvis? Is Marcie okay?”

“After receiving news from Thor that her father is being held hostage in San Pedro Sula, Dr. Banner took the first flight out to Honduras.”

Steve immediately groaned and rubbed his hand over his face, trying to ignore the irritation that hit him like a freight train; he was absolutely going to kill Tony. Though he still talked to the tiny scientist almost every day, there was something different in the way she talked to him and Steve sometimes heard the way she hesitated when she talked about certain things. Marcie used to talk more about her night terrors, but ever since she had spent the night at his apartment and woke up crying nearly a month ago, she had trouble even mentioning how fucked up her sleeping schedule had become in the last few weeks. He wondered if this had to do with him not confessing his feelings for her and almost kissing her like he had originally intended on doing, though Marcie had always been independent and he knew that she definitely didn’t need a man, he was well aware that it still hurt to love someone and not receive the same kind of feelings back--but God, Steve loved her too.

He wondered if a part of her was mad at him because she had never told anyone besides her own father that she loved them and even when she said it to her father, there was a hint of resentment. Steve knew that even though she was so soft and kind, she had trouble admitting that she loved people because she was so sure that they wouldn't convey the same feelings. Even a month later, Steve still regretted not telling her about his feelings even though she could have easily said something, but he knew that she was absolutely terrified and he couldn't blame her for that.

“Dr. Banner asked me to not tell anyone of her whereabouts,” Jarvis continued when Steve remained silent, “But I was ordered by Mr. Stark to notify him of Marcella's location when she is in danger, though he is passed out after drinking a bottle of wine last night. Dr. Bruce Banner is next on the list, but he is being held hostage where Marcella is currently at, so that makes you the third option.”
“How come you didn't tell Tony when she first left?”

“I was ordered to notify Mr. Stark when Dr. Marcella Banner is in danger,” Jarvis repeated as Steve made it to the lobby, Natasha still quietly following him, “Dr. Banner was not in any form of danger when she was on the plane or when she landed in Honduras. Just an hour ago, there was a shooting just two blocks away from where Dr. Banner was walking.”

Steve sighed deeply, feeling his eyebrow twitch from the oncoming stress and irritation, “Thank you Jarvis, could you please find me the first flight out to the nearest airport by San Pedro Sula?”

“There's no need for that,” A raspy voice spoke behind him and Steve hung up his phone as he stared at Natasha with surprise on his features, “For some unfathomable reason, Nick actually trusts me with the keys to one of the quinjets.”

“Did you hear that whole conversation?”

“Just bits and pieces,” She shrugged, easily catching up to him as he made their way to the hangar, “Who are we saving today?”

Steve gave her an irritated expression and she immediately smirked when she noticed his eyebrow twitching; there was only one person who could get such a reaction from the usually stoic man and Natasha immediately knew who it was that they were saving. After Steve had finally told Natasha to stop trying to set him up with other women because he planned on asking Marcella out, the red-haired woman thought for sure it would have happened when the tiny scientist visited him on his birthday a little over a month ago. In fact, Natasha had been so sure of this that she had prepared a slew of teasing remarks and had even bought fake wedding invitations to hand out as a joke, only for Steve to come in a few days later, looking a little dejected. At first, Natasha had been shocked, thinking that Marcie had rejected him. Then she had found out that Steve hadn't even said anything to her and while the Captain had been prepared for her to whoop his ass, she had gotten strangely quiet and maybe even… sympathetic? Though Natasha absolutely refused to admit it, everyone knew that she had a soft spot for Marcie and the two had something similar to a friendship, which was incredibly rare for the Black Widow to form meaningful relationships with anyone. It saddened Natasha that Steve had all but convinced himself that he didn't deserve Marcie, because those two were so sad and lonely but their eyes absolutely lit up when they were together; they found solace and happiness in one another and Natasha wished they would just admit their feelings already.

Either way, she was still rooting for Cap and the adorable scientist and if it took five years for them to get together, she would still be happy for them when it finally happened.

But she, or anyone else, certainly didn't plan on waiting that long.

“Where to, Cap?” Natasha asked when they finally made it to the hangar and Natasha and Steve got access to enter, “Somewhere in the Bahamas or Spain would be preferable.”

“Honduras,” Steve answered with a small huff, shaking his head at the predicament the younger Banner had found herself in, “Specifically, one of the most dangerous cities in the world, San Pedro Sula.”

“Great,” Natasha muttered as they made their way towards one of the smaller jets in the corner of the hangar, “She just couldn't give me a break for once, could she?”

“This is Marcie we’re talking about, of course nothing can be simple,” Steve smiled wryly and Natasha heard the bitterness in his voice, making her raise her brows at him, “Bruce is there too, being held hostage. That's why Marcella snuck out without telling anyone, because she was planning
“I knew something was weird about that mission SHIELD sent him on; there's something Nick wasn't telling us about it.”

“Yeah, it's always something with Fury,” Steve huffed and watched as Natasha pulled a lever on the underside of the aircraft, causing a ramp to come sliding out, “Either way, Bruce is our friend and we deserve to know why SHIELD put him at risk like this.”

“She does too,” Natasha regarded him for a moment as the two made their way up the ramp, “If anyone deserves to know what's going on, it's Marcie; he's the only family she has.”

Steve clenched his jaw for a moment, “She could have told us; we could have helped. All she did… all she did was put herself in the way of danger.”

“You think she would really trust the people who work for the very organization that sent her father on that mission in the first place?” Natasha scoffed as she started up the jet, pressing a button that closed the ramp behind them, “Don't get me wrong Steve, I know it feels like we're doing the right thing most of the time, but even you have to admit that this all seems weird. Bruce doesn't… he doesn't do missions like we do, it's not his forte, and Marcie knows this. She's not stupid, Cap, she knew the second they sent Bruce on that mission that something was wrong.”

Steve sighed as he settled into the passenger seat and buckled up, “Well, let's just find Marcie and we'll get this all sorted out.”

“Yeah, hopefully,” Natasha shrugged a shoulder, shaking her head as they slowly started to roll out of the hangar, “I can't wait to hear about Tony losing his shit; he's probably shitting his pants right now.”

Steve scowled as he thought about the billionaire; he was going to give Tony an earful the next time they saw each other if he didn’t kill him first.

Meanwhile.

Tony was surprisingly quiet and even a little somber as he knocked on Marcella's door for the fifth time the next morning.

“C'mon kid,” He sighed and placed his hand on the knob, “I know you're upset with me but at least say bye before I leave and possibly never come back. This is the kind of place people go to knowing that they're going to wake up in a bathtub with a couple of their organs missing—though you would probably love it if that happened to me, huh?”

Tony sighed when he was met with silence, “I'm sorry for snapping at you kid, and if I hurt your feelings because I know you get nervous around people when they're mad. I just… I just want you to know that I'm not mad at you and I'm starting to think I could never really be mad at you because you're…”

'Because you're one of the few people I consider a friend…’ Tony thought to himself, not able to say the words out loud for some reason.

“Because I actually like you, kid,” He finished, the sarcasm melting away from his voice, “And I don’t blame you for being upset because even though Big Banner put you through so much awful shit, he’s still your dad and I… I get it. I wish I had been able to forgive my old man as easily as you did and I’ve always respected that about you because you just don’t know how to hold a fucking grudge, do you? I’m like, the king of holding grudges.”
“I’m pouring my fucking heart out to you, kid,” Tony huffed, glaring at the door, “You leave me no choice but to break down this bitch and—”

Tony was surprised to find her room unlocked and hesitantly entered it—absolutely terrified that she was indecent or something. Instead, he was surprised to find the room empty and upon further inspection, he realized that she wasn't in her bedroom, bathroom, or even her small office. The billionaire tried to flush away the wave of unease that washed over him and noticed something glimmer from the corner of his eye. His footsteps were slow as he approached her nightstand, picking up the graduation present he had gifted her—the dainty little bracelet that Pepper had picked out, along with Steve's cross and dog tags from the olden days. Instantly, he knew what had happened because it was extremely rare for Marcella to remove her favorite pieces of jewelry that two of her favorite men had given to her as sentimental gifts. Tony had merely waved off her sweet words when she had admitted that Tony, Steve, and Bruce were here three favorite men; he wasn't going to admit that he had grown quite fond of the young scientist as well.

His shoulders sagged when he realized what was going on, though he really didn't want to believe it.

“Jarvis?” His voice had a slight tone of panic as the AI responded, “Where's Marcella?”

“Marcella left at approximately eleven-thirty, last night, Mr. Stark.”

And even though a part of him already knew the answer, he can't help but to ask, “And where did she go?”

“Miss Banner arrived in Honduras at seventy-thirty this morning.”

“And why wouldn't you bother to tell me this vital information?”

“I attempted to, Mr. Stark,” He responded, “You wouldn't wake up after drinking that bottle of wine, so I used my best judgment and notified Captain Rogers on Miss Banner's whereabouts.”

“Shit, shit, shit...” Tony mumbled repeatedly, running his hands through his already messy hair as he paced back and forth. This was bad... this was really bad, which was saying something coming from Tony who had been in plenty of horrible situations. Tony wasn't sure if he was scared for Marcella being in what could quite possibly be considered the most dangerous city in the world, or what Steve was going to do to him once he saw him. Immediately, the billionaire pulled his phone out of his pocket and tried to call the Captain, only for it to go to voicemail immediately—like he was purposely ignoring Tony, which he really didn't doubt at this point. He should have fucking known that Marcella would have pulled a stunt like this, but a part of him was also surprised at how she had gone against his orders and had rebelled against him. She had never been the type to make irrational decisions and rebel, but she was also the kind of person to stand up for herself and others that she cared for deeply—including her father, of course.

“I don't get it,” He talked to himself as he exited her room, “She's twenty-two and is barely going through her angsty, rebellious teenager phase. This is why I'm not having kids, they'll just stab you in the back when you try to protect them and fuck themselves over.”

“Mr. Stark, shall I book a flight for you as well?”

“No need for that,” Tony huffed as he made his way to his own laboratory and easily stepped into one of his suits, “I'll take care of it myself.”

Meanwhile.

Marcella kept her head down low as she roamed the quiet and tense streets of San Pedro Sula;
though it was warm and humid, she wore a hoodie and kept her hands in her pocket, trying to ignore the way her switchblade felt against her small hands. She had practically burned the image of her dad's main assailant into her brain, as a picture of the older man had been printed on the page along with the coordinates she had all but stolen from Tony's computer. Though she had been a small child, she had grown up in the dangerous streets of Hell's Kitchen when she was little but this... this city was an entirely different setting to say the least. Men covered in gang-related tattoos lingered in the streets, most likely searching for their next victim, while corrupt police patrolled the area, causing even more tension among the citizens. She made sure to stick to main streets, only venturing off when she noticed a man with a similar tattoo on his cheek to the one she had seen on the man in the printed photo.

She made sure to follow him from quite a distance and tried to ignore the uneasy feeling she got when he entered an abandoned factory building in a more rural part of the city. Marcella watched as others trickled into the building and when she was sure no more would enter, she cautiously made her way to the entrance, making sure to be as silent as possible as she descended down the stairs and into a very dimly lit hallway—she hesitantly peered around the corner of an open entrance.

Members of what Marcella assumed to be either a gang or drug traffickers all sat at a wooden table in the center of the room as they held what seemed to be a meeting.

With great precariousness, the Banner woman crouched as she entered the room and knelt down behind a small stack of boxes filled with god knows what in the corner of the room—poking her head out a little so she could see exactly what was going on. There were only eight men sitting at the table, but Marcella assumed they were extremely important from their incredibly pristine clothes when more than seventy percent of the city lived in poverty. She felt her eyes grow wide when the man from the photo stood, surprised to find him wearing a police uniform... and judging by all of the pins and badges on his collared shirt, he must have been some sort of high-ranking officer. Marcella was deathly silent as she pulled out her cell phone and held it up as she zoomed in on the guy, taking a picture of him before deciding to record a video as well.

“This morning” The officer started in Spanish, glaring at all of his men with an expression that could kill, “I found out that one of my soldiers, someone who is supposed to be loyal and put my life before his, was going behind my fucking back and making deals with a member of the MS13 gang. That is just fucking unacceptable; did I not make myself clear when I said snitches will be punished?”

The small group of men murmured amongst one another as they speculated who it could have been, however, their voices were cut off as the man in the police uniform raised a sack above the table. A red liquid dripped from the dirty sack and onto the shiny surface of the table and Marcella tried to keep her mouth closed as she realized the dark liquid was blood.

“Because of this traitor, I have lost more money in a day than you assholes will see in your lifetime.”

The sound of his boots hitting the hard floors was the only thing that could be heard in the room, and even Marcella could feel the tension from where she was hiding. The men seemed too scared and intimidated to make eye contact with the leader, and most of them either stared at each other with great anxiety or down at their fingers as they waited for whatever it was the man in charge had to say.

“We all know what happens to traitors.”

“Sin piedad!” They all shouted in unison, and Marcella slapped her hand over her mouth as the man flipped the sack upside down and let its contents spill out onto the table.
A decapitated head rolled over until its lifeless, grey eyes stared in the same direction that Marcella was hiding, and for the first time since arriving, she shook with fear as the gravity of the situation hit her like a freight train. While she didn't have Steve's strength or Natasha's speed, she kind of knew how to defend herself with technology, much like how Tony relied on his suits and his wit to keep him going in dangerous situations and the moves that Clint had taught her. She knew she was smart and her small stature aided her in being somewhat stealthy and light on her feet, making it quite easy for her to go undetected, but this situation was completely out of her league. She was just a young lady and this... well, this was a deadly gang who had no problem in decapitating members of their group. Marcella wondered what her fate would be if she was discovered to be snooping around their territory, but she had no doubt in her mind that these men had absolutely no qualms in torturing people like her. The young woman in hiding found herself zoning out and only broke out of her daze when her last name was spoken.

"Is there any new information on Dr. Banner?"

Marcella listened closely as one of the men spoke up, “General Salazar and his men are still performing the experiments to see exactly what it is that causes his transformation and if they can somehow replicate it and make it into a serum. The doctor still hasn't given in and refuses to transform into the monster, but they're still working on it and doing everything they can.”

The officer nodded his head thoughtfully, gazing down vacantly at the decapitated head, “Worse comes to worse, I guess he'll just end up like our little friend here.”

A few members chuckled and Marcella closed her eyes as she turned away from the scene and crawled out of the small space, quietly making her way out of the room and down the hall. She stared at the ground as she walked aimlessly through the desolate streets, knowing that this certainly wasn't the place to not be aware of her surroundings, nor the man who followed closely behind her. She tried to process everything she had just heard and witnessed, but she couldn't get the horrifying image of that decapitated head from her mind—it was the first time in her life she had seen anything like that and it only made her realize just how sheltered she had been most of her life. Despite her tumultuous childhood, her father had made sure to give her everything she needed to succeed and achieve her dreams, making sure that the kind of pain that had been inflicted on her in his absence would never befall her again.

Then she thought about her father and this newfound information about him being experimented on solely for his unnatural abilities. Marcella wondered what they were doing to him and if he was in a lot of pain—she wondered if he was completely conscious for all of these experiments and tests. Her heart ached and she wanted nothing more than to see her father, preferably in one piece, and she remembered how Steve had told her that Bruce was more than capable of taking care of himself. While she knew her father was a strong man, Marcella also knew that he was incredibly vulnerable and more often than not, hated the other side of him and was going to do everything in his power to keep that part of him hidden away from those people.

Even if it meant he was going to suffer.

Marcella didn't have time to scream as a thick arm wrapped itself around her waist while his other hand clapsed itself tightly over her mouth and pinched her nose shut. She struggled as the the assailant dragged her to a nearby alleyway and pushed her up against the hard brick wall until the front of his body was pressed harshly against her much smaller one. She forced her head back and the man grunted when the back of her skull collided with his nose, immediately causing it to bleed profusely. Marcella immediately turned around and swung a fist towards his face, only for him to easily catch it and twist it around until it was pressed firmly to her spine. In a fit of panic, she struggled relentlessly against the man and managed to fit her small hand into the pocket of her zip-up
hoodie, not even hesitating as she grasped her pocket knife and flipped the blade free as she pulled it from her pocket.

She was surprised at how fast the movement was, but she assumed the adrenaline was fueling her need to fight the attacker and it was only then that she lodged the sharp blade into his thigh, causing him to shout in pain. His grip on her slackened and she immediately turned and attempted to run, only getting a few feet away before she felt a hand wrap itself into her unruly curls and made a tight fist, pulling her back to him violently.

“You thought you could get away from me little girl,” His breath was hot and gross on her cheek as he spoke in a quiet whisper, “I was going to make it easy on you and just kill you, but now I think I'll have a little fun with you first after that shit you pulled.”

She grunted as he pushed her against the wall once more, her forehead slamming against the hard surface and temporarily stunning her. He kept one hand on the back of her head—keeping it pressed to the wall—while the other made its way to the zipper on her hoodie. Her struggling started to weaken more and more as her vision started to fade and she felt something warm trickle past her eyebrows and into her eyes... blood.

Marcella was aware of the weight of his body being ripped away from hers and out of the corner of her blurry vision, she saw a faint flash of blue and silver. She carefully slid down the wall and pressed her hand to her forehead, attempting to stop the bleeding that poured from a gash right near her hairline. Her green eyes flickered up and was surprised to find a familiar red-haired woman crouched down in front of her with something close to a worried expression and for a second, Marcie thought she was hallucinating because there was no way that these two had traveled all the way from D.C. to Honduras just to help her. The red-haired woman gently grasped Marcella's hand and tugged it away from her head so she could inspect the deep wound, frowning when she realized it was deep enough to require stitches.

“You really did it this time, didn't you?” Natasha spoke softly and Marcella gazed past her, immediately spotting Captain America standing over her assailant's unconscious and bloodied body. She wasn't sure if her heart was pounding because of the adrenaline or fear because she knew Steve was going to be pissed at her for the situation she had found herself in. A part of her felt angry towards the Captain and she wasn't sure why she was being so unreasonable because he hadn't hurt her like others had. Steve had always been so good to her and she couldn't blame him for her fear of telling him how she really felt, but that didn't stop the bitterness that crept up on her as she watched him closely, noticing how tense his shoulders were.

His back was to her and she watched as he held onto his large shield for a few moments before reaching behind him and securing it to his back; he turned towards the two women and Marcella knew immediately she was in some serious trouble and tried to not look into his eyes. Though he wore his usual headgear, the Banner woman could see an expression on his worn out looking features that she had never seen before—fury. He paid no mind to the lifeless body on the ground and made his way toward Natasha and Marcella, looking as though he could kill her for probably numerous reasons. The blonde slid his headgear off and Marcella immediately cringed when she noticed the way his eyebrows were pinched together in anger, his mouth had formed into a scowl when he finally noticed the wound on her head. Of course she had seen a serious expression on Cap's face many times, but Steve Rogers had never looked at her the same way he was now—with indignation and maybe even disappointment and it made her chest ache.

He crouched down next to Natasha and before Marcella could even attempt to stand up, Steve grasped her shoulder tightly and kept her sitting up against the wall—pinning her against the hard surface with an equally hard expression and she, and Natasha, let out a shocked gasp. She didn't like
this… she didn't like seeing him when he was in Captain America mode and she noticed the way his blue eyes softened, noticing the fearful expression on her tired features, and he moved his hand until it was gently cupping her neck instead. The Widow seemed almost surprised at Steve's harsh actions and frowned when she noticed the faraway look in Banner's green eyes—she was going into shock, but the redhead had a feeling that it wasn't because of the wound near her hairline. She had been following Marcella since she had exited that warehouse and Natasha knew that the girl had seen something horrific in there, something that was probably just sending her into shock. The redhead had temporarily lost track of Marcie after Steve had notified her of dangerous gang activity going on in the heart of the city and that innocent civilians were being targeted by dangerous men; Natasha had begrudgingly left Marcie for just a few moments to go help Steve.

“Steve,” Natasha said softly as the Captain squeezed her tiny bicep a little too tightly with his other hand and glanced at the much larger man with a disapproving expression, not liking the way he was gripping her, “You're being too rough with her.”

“Have you lost your damn mind,” He ignored Natasha and the way Marcella flinched at his harsh tone, “Or has working with Tony really made you just as reckless and stupid as him? I thought you were supposed to be smarter than this, but this is quite possibly the most idiotic thing you could have ever done. You're not strong enough for situations like this.”

Even in her lightheaded and drowsy state, the words still felt like a slap to the face—Steve had never spoken to her in that tone of voice and it made her regret everything. Though he seemed infuriated with her, Marcella could see the terrified expression in his piercing blue eyes and that seemed to almost outshine the angry expression on his face.

She exhaled deeply, leaning her aching head against the brick wall she was propped up against, staring at Steve with furrowed brows and a conflicted expression, and she hated the way her eyes burned with tears. Marcie hated herself because even though she wanted to be mad at him for his harsh words, she had missed him so much and she didn’t want to because she was Marcella fucking Banner and she was supposed to be independent. When she had been jumping from foster home to foster home, she had only ever relied on herself to survive and even when Bruce and Betty had entered the picture, she had kept her independence still. When Bruce had left her with her grandfather, she had only ever relied on herself to survive because barely getting by was all she knew; going to bed hungry every night and thinking she might die from starvation was all she had ever known. Marcella had never needed anyone, not even Bruce, and then Steve had come prancing into her life with his stupidly perfect personality and good looks and had pulled her from the rubble and became her closest friend and now she relied on him way too much. Marcie hated herself as a tear trickled down her cheek because even though he definitely didn’t understand what was going on in her head and even though he didn’t mean to hurt her, Steve Rogers could get away with leaving her like Bruce did and she would still love him.

Marcie hated herself because she had fallen in love with Steve and that wasn’t supposed to happen.

The last time they had seen each other was on his birthday when Steve had nearly kissed her and despite the situation she had found herself in, she felt the strange tension between them and judging by the wavering expression on Natasha’s face, she must have felt it.

“I needed to help him... my dad...”

“Then you leave it to SHIELD and the people who are capable of handling situations like this!”

“You mean the same people who sent him here in the first place?” She tried to blink away the blurriness from her vision as she replied with a shaky voice, “Did you know they sent him here? SHIELD? This mission... it was nothing more than a death wish, a suicide mission.”
“I didn't know.”

“I swear to God, Steve--”

“Marcella,” He said with a resolute tone and suddenly his gloved hand is cupping her cheek gently, “I promise you, I had no idea that he was going to be sent here... I would have... I would've intervened if I knew. This place is like hell on Earth.”

“Steve,” Natasha started, noticing the way Marce's eyelids fluttered, “We need to get back to the hotel, we're already in enough danger as it is and she's losing blood quickly, this conversation can wait until later.”

The Captain clenched his jaw, but nodded and went to slide his arms around Marcella so he could carry her back to the hotel they were staying at. Though she knew it was a horrible idea, she nudged his arms away and used the palms of her hands to push herself from the ground and leaned against the wall for a moment so she could regain a little composure.

“I don't want your help, you... you jerk.”

Compared to all of the insults he had received from enemies in the past, being called a jerk was certainly a tame insult, but it definitely hurt coming from her.

The SHIELD agents seemed surprised at the act of defiance and independence—she had never acted so stubbornly before, and Natasha couldn't help but to feel a little proud of the amount of strength she seemed to possess in that moment. Before she could do anything else, Marcella pulled her cell phone out and opened it to the picture she had taken of the leader of the group that had some information on her father; she stared at Natasha as she held the phone out to the assassin, who gently took it from her. The red-haired woman's mouth dropped a little and she seemed to immediately understand that whoever this man was, he played a huge role in saving her father. Natasha gave the Banner woman a tiny nod before locking the phone and slipping it into her own pocket, ignoring the way Steve stared at the interaction with curious eyes.

He knew Natasha would explain everything later, though.

Marcella tried to remain steady on her feet as she walked in between Steve and Natasha and only sped up a little when the red-haired woman grabbed her arm and gently looped it around her shoulders and neck, that way she had a little more stability. The Captain tried to stop glancing at her, but every time he did, she didn't seem to notice with her head hanging low and her eyes concentrated on her scuffed up boots. There was this strange air surrounding her, Steve had noticed, as though she was angry and more determined than the last time he had seen her and he wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

It wasn't until he took a deep breath that he realized his heart was pounding wildly in his chest—something that rarely happened to him with the serum. Steve tried to ignore the way Marcella being assaulted played on his mind repeatedly, but he couldn't rid himself of the terrifying images. He knew that him and Natasha had gotten lucky by showing up when they did, his sensitive ears picking up the sounds of muffled, distressed screaming from an alleyway close by. They had been walking around the city for nearly an hour when they finally found her with that older man pressed up against her—Steve immediately knew what he was trying to do and rarely felt the kind of anger he had felt in that moment.

“Steve,” Natasha interrupted his thoughts when Marcella had slowed down and slumped against the assassin, “I think she's losing consciousness or going into shock.”
Steve looked at Marcella sadly and stepped forward, “I've got her.”

Much to his surprise, Marcella didn't struggle when he carefully bent down and hooked his arm under her knees while his other arm made its way around her shoulders. She felt light and limp in his arms and even though it was a pretty warm day, she shook like a leaf in his arms and Steve figured that she probably was in a state of shock. The Captain felt her fingers curl into the collar of his shirt and he grew worried when he realized that her skin felt like ice, despite how warm and muggy it was; his anger started to slowly melt as he held her close to his chest.

“I'm okay,” She tried to reassure him when Steve asked if she was alright, “I'm okay... I'm okay...”

Steve ignored the look Natasha gave him and continued on forward.

That night.

“I just don't understand how she could do something like this... it's not in her to be reckless.”

Natasha broke her attention away from where the Banner girl was sleeping on the couch—her arms rested across her stomach and her eyebrows were furrowed, clearly she wasn't having a pleasant dream. The assassin had been quick to stitch up Marcella as soon as they got back to their quaint hotel room; she had been so out of it that she hadn't even awoken when the needle first pierced her bronze skin. Natasha knew that it must have been a combination of being in shock and losing so much blood, because the young woman had been totally unaware of her surroundings and that a needle was working its way into her skin. Everyone knew how squeamish the Banner girl was and how she could barely handle getting blood work done, let alone receiving stitches. Natasha couldn't help but to wonder how she didn't pass out or throw up upon seeing that decapitated head from earlier—it had certainly been a gruesome sight that not many would have been able to handle seeing that close.

“I remember the first time I ever saw her… she was thirteen and she was just so…”

Natasha furrowed her brows as she stared at the sleeping scientist with the softest expression that Steve had ever seen from her, a hint of sadness in her eyes as old memories played in her head of the first time she had seen Marcie.

Steve waited for her to continue but she shook her head, “Nevermind… it doesn't matter.”

Natasha and Steve hadn't noticed it before because of the hoodie she donned earlier, but after they had discarded the hoodie and left her in a white tank top so she wouldn't overheat, they noticed that she seemed much healthier and... more muscular? Her arms actually had definition and Steve noticed how her shoulder blades seemed less boney and more toned instead. He could no longer see her ribs and while tank tops like the one she was wearing would normally hang off of her tiny frame, the material now clung to her torso snugly and even her abdomen seemed more filled out. Natasha had briefly mentioned that her and Clint had been working out together, but now he knew that it was more than being gym buddies and that the archer was probably training her some self-defense.

“It makes sense to me though, why she would do something like this,” Natasha shrugged, “Doesn't matter how strong or weak someone is... if you love your family that much, I imagine someone would be willing to do anything to keep them safe. For a while, Bruce and Marcella relied on each other only to get through hard times and while they don't necessarily have an incredibly strong father-daughter relationship, they would walk through fire to save one another.”

Steve frowned and turned glanced at Marcella, eyeing the four little stitches right below her hairline.
“She's small and sometimes even timid,” Natasha continued, “But she's loyal... unbelievably loyal, to be honest. Can't really be mad at her for that.”

“It doesn't matter, her recklessness could have gotten herself killed as well as others, including Bruce.”

“It didn't though,” The assassin pulled Marcella's phone out of her pocket, “As a matter of fact, her recklessness came in handy and gave us a little information on what we're dealing with here. You're mad at her and I get it, but she's alive and in one piece and it's not like there's anything we can do to change the way she disobeyed Tony's orders, so we might as well make the most of it. I expect you to apologize to her later when she wakes up for how rude you were earlier; now shut up so I can watch this video in peace.”

Steve clenched his jaw but made his way to where she was standing in the little kitchen area, looking at the phone screen over Natasha's shoulder as the short video started. Though some of it was in Spanish, Steve caught the gist of most of the conversation—something about a drug trade and how one of his men had been a traitor. He had tensed up when the man dressed in a police officer uniform emptied a bloody sack onto the table, revealing the decapitated head of whom Steve assumed to be the traitor in the group. Though it was brutal and gruesome, the man had done it so nonchalantly, like he was used to it and the thought of Marcella even being in the same room as this guy made Steve's skin crawl.

“They just want Dr. Banner so they can create a serum that replicates his abilities,” Steve murmured with a frown as the video soon ended, “I don't... I don't understand.”

“Colonel Marco De Salazar,” Natasha said as she typed furiously on her laptop, “Used to serve in the Honduran Navy and is now working for the Government as a member of the Ministration of Defense. Sounds to me like he captured Bruce with plans to somehow turn him into a weapon and the only way they could ever get Bruce to do something like that is to forcefully do it... ”

“Do you think SHIELD knew something like this was going to happen?”

“I'd like to think not,” Natasha's eyes flickered up to Steve's, “But with their track record... I'm not so sure. I'd like to think if they sent Dr. Banner here with the notion that he was going to be captured, they did it for a good reason.”

Steve glanced at Marcella, his features still rough as he watched her sleepily turn over so her back was facing him, “I don't see any rational reason as to why SHIELD would intentionally try to get Dr. Banner captured; it doesn't make any sense to me.”

“Yeah, something about this doesn't seem right,” Natasha agreed and noticed the irritated expression that the Captain was shooting in the Banner girl's direction, “Don't you think you were a little harsh with her? You two are usually disgustingly cute with each other and what you said was... it was a little out of line.”

“I know... I was just so angry when I saw what that man was going to do to her,” Steve shook his hand and finally tore his gaze away from the snoozing girl, “I didn't mean to lash out at her like that, but this all could have been avoided if she just stayed at the tower with Tony.”

Natasha shrugged and Steve watched as the red-haired woman stood and approached Marcella; his expression grew soft as he watched his comrade gently stroke the sleeping girl's wild hair. Marcella remained still, clearly drained from the day's events and Steve immediately felt a wave of guilt wash over him when he remembered how harsh he had been with her and how nasty his words had been towards her. The Captain knew that he had used one of her biggest insecurities to make her feel bad.
about himself and he wasn't sure if she would be able to forgive him for that.

It had been an extremely low blow and while he had been hurt and pissed off, she still didn't deserve what he threw her way.

“You do what you need to do for those you love,” Natasha whispered, still stroking Marcella's soft curls, “You don't know what it's like for someone like her... the only love she has ever known was from her deceased mother and her own father who abandoned her at such a young age—he had made her feel like he never loved her and I don't think I'll ever understand how she could trust him again, but she does. She doesn't love a lot of people, but those who have managed to worm their way into her heart... well, she would literally die for them; she's just that loyal, there's strength in that, I suppose. I respect her for that.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds like a curse,” Steve stared at the sleeping girl with a sad expression, “She doesn't owe anyone anything; she should be focusing on herself and living a normal life like she's always wanted.”

“You're kidding, right?” Natasha gave him an irritated scowl, “You think someone like her could ever have a normal life? She works for Tony Stark, her father is the Hulk, the only friends she has are the Avengers and she has a crush on Captain America—she could never have a normal life and I think she already knows this. Now you're starting to sound selfish, Rogers, maybe this new world really has changed you.”

Marcella, who had woken up a few minutes ago, kept her eyes closed as she waited for Steve's response, only to be met with silence instead. She knew that he wasn't necessarily angry with her, but that didn't mean his words hadn't felt like a swift punch to the gut when he had spat them out at her. Steve had never raised his voice or shown any anger towards her and while she knew that he would never intentionally harm her, Marcella absolutely hated it when people yelled at her. A part of it was her just being sensitive, but she knew a lot of it stemmed from all the times she was yelled at by her grandfather when she was little and how the yelling always evolved into clenched fists and forceful kicks to the ribs.

“Nothing about this world has changed since I came out—people still act the same way,” His voice had a strange bitterness to it that Marcella didn't miss, “People are always going to beat down others that are smaller and better than them and strip away their innocence; it's never going to change.”

'You're wrong, Steve Rogers,' Marcella thought to herself, 'People can change and learn from their mistakes... they have to.'
Divine In Her Sight

Chapter Summary

Marcella Grace Banner had always been his better half and he had, without a fucking
doubt, taken her kindness and optimism for granted.

Bruce wondered how he could inflict so much pain on the one person who had only
ever loved him unconditionally and he couldn’t stop the tears that gushed from his eyes
because he had never, ever, deserved her.

He wondered how it was possible to simultaneously save and ruin someone’s life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even in the strange drug-induced daze he had found himself in, Bruce remembered the first time he
had ever seen that tiny girl begging for food on the streets.

Even though she had been covered in so much grime and she wore an expression on her face that
still haunted Bruce to this day, she had been the most adorable child he’d ever seen. Obviously her
curls had been much shorter then—ending right above her shoulders—and the untameable locks had
been covering most of her features and stuck in all different directions. Bruce could still see the way
the sunlight shone down on her that day, making her hair seem like a richer shade of dark brown,
like her favorite dark chocolate that nobody else liked because it was too bitter for them.

It wasn't until Betty and him had passed her that she had looked up at the two strangers and God,
Bruce would never forget the way she looked at him with those emotionally vacant green eyes that
day. There was this devastated expression on her features that no six year old should have and
though she was just a child, practically a baby still, Bruce knew that she already been through so
much in her short life and he wanted to know her story. Her freckles had seemed more noticeable
then, Bruce realized as he dozed in and out of consciousness, and he wondered if it was because her
scars shad become more prominent than the endearing freckles splashed across her cheeks and
upturned nose. That thought shook Bruce to the core, because the only scars she had on her body
when they adopted her were the tiny ones she got from running away from grocery stores and street
vendors after stealing food and falling onto the unforgiving pavement, or cutting her skin trying to
climb over chain-linked fences. Her scars had only ever come from trying to survive and after
adopting her, her collection of scars had only continued to grow because of the consequences of his
actions.

“I just can’t get it out of my head,” Bruce whispered that night as he and Betty lied in bed, both
facing one another, “Just the way she was looking at me… it wasn’t like she was begging for us to
help her, but just for someone to even acknowledge her. I wonder… I wonder if she’s okay.”

Betty raised her thick, dark brows at him, “I didn’t realize that you had such a soft spot for kids. As a
matter of fact, I specifically remember you telling me that you didn’t think you could ever be a
father.”

“She just…” Bruce swallowed the lump in his throat and turned onto his back, staring at the ceiling
with a conflicted expression, “She reminded me too much of myself when I was that age, when my own dad was starting to take his anger out on me. I don't know Betty…”

The young scientist thought about the curly-haired girl with the wild freckles, thinking about how the hand-me-down yellow hoodie she had been wearing was too big on her or the how she squinted at her surroundings, clearly needing some visual aid that she certainly couldn't afford. He thought about the way she gripped her stomach from the discomfort that came with hunger pains and he remembered how gaunt her features had been, too gaunt for a six year old. Bruce knew that the turkey sandwich he had bought for her would only satiate her for maybe a day before the hunger came back and she was back to her ways of stealing just so she could live.

“You're really torn up about this, aren't you?” Betty questioned softly, gently touching Bruce's bicep, “If it makes you feel any better, we could go see if she's there again tomorrow. Maybe try to help her, you know?”

Bruce gave a small nod, “I think that would be nice. I don't know what it is about her, Betty, I feel like she just needs us.”

“Everybody needs someone,” Betty smiled, the skin at the corners of her eyes crinkling, “Maybe she needs us.”

Bruce had never wanted kids.

He had never wanted kids and that was one of the only topics that he and Betty had ever gotten into because she had always been so incredibly passionate about everything, including children. After being informed by her doctor that she physically could not have a baby because she had developed endometriosis, but that didn't stop her from wanting a baby after the two had gotten married. She insisted on adopting a child who desperately needed a home and Bruce insisted that they were both too busy to take care of a little one, that their careers were more important than a child. Though she eventually agreed with him, he knew that Betty still longed for a little girl to take care of and call her daughter, but she never really brought it up again and he knew it was for the best.

Bruce had been set on never having kids because how could he care for one when his own father had abused him from such a young age? He didn't know how to be a good father and while he knew that he would absolutely never lay a hand on his partner, or any woman for that matter, he didn't know what it meant to be a good father. Betty had always told him that he was one of the most patient men that she had ever met, but that didn't mean anything when the only experience he had with his own father had always been negative.

He had said it a hundred times before and he would say it a million times more, but Bruce promised himself that he would never have a child and things had been going so well for him and he was so sure it would just be him and Betty until they were a couple of old geezers.

Then they saw that little girl on the streets--six years old and covered in grime and freckles and bruises from being so reckless, and he immediately knew that his life would never be the same.

Thinking about it now, Marcella had always been so good at changing people for the better because Bruce had always been so awkward around kids until he met her. He remembered the first night they had brought her home and she had been too scared to sleep alone in her new bedroom, so he had stayed up with her all night, telling her stories about a little astronaut with freckles and a wild lion's mane that traveled the galaxy in a little rocket ship. Eventually, she had gotten used to her bedroom but the nightmares and night terrors remained and while Betty had always been better at comforting others, she had always insisted that Marcie preferred it when he comforted her after waking up from her nightmares. So it became routine for Bruce to be there when she woke up in the middle of the
night screaming, and that little astronaut that Bruce always spoke of started to travel further and further until she had made it to Andromeda and he would see the way her eyes lit up whenever he spoke of a new planet with new friends that she would encounter.

It didn’t take long at all for Marcella Banner to worm her way into his heart and he liked to think that the tiny freckled girl had always been his biggest pride and joy, his best friend and greatest love because she had taken him back after all the horrific shit he put her through. She had accepted what he became after the gamma ray incident and though she had every right to be terrified of him and what happened when he got angry, she had stuck by his side. Even after her throat became raw from all the screaming and crying she did the day he abandoned her, she had still wrapped her tiny arms around him just hours after he came back and got her out of that hell, more than a year after leaving. Even after being so busy with work that he missed so many science fairs and award ceremonies, not a day went by where she didn’t tell Bruce that she loved him before going off to bed.

Marcella still had the strength and kindness to smile at him, though he was sure every time she looked at him, she could only see him leaving her.

Bruce had never wanted a child, especially a daughter, until those oddly huge green eyes peered up at him in a way that he was all too familiar with, like she needed his help but she was too stubborn to ask for it. He had never wanted a daughter until they visited that same spot the next day, only to find no traces of her and he found himself worrying about her safety.

“So do you think that she maybe has a home?” Betty questioned as the two stared at the empty spot in front of the little deli she had been sitting in front of the previous day, “Maybe she does and they just don’t take care of her.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce frowned and the two turned their heads when they heard commotion from down the street.

“Get back here you little thief!”

Bruce blinked and watched as a grown man, maybe in his fifties, chased after a familiar freckled girl out of a grocery store across the street. Though Bruce and Betty were a little far away, they could see the baguette that was tucked underneath her arm as she bolted into the street, not seeming to care about oncoming traffic, and the married couple’s eyes widened as she narrowly dodged a pickup truck. As she turned her head to make sure the owner of the grocery store was no longer following her, she didn’t notice the small sedan that was speeding in the next lane and though he darted out into the street to try to help her, Bruce wasn’t nearly fast enough as the car tried to swerve out of the way.

Bruce thought for sure she was dead as soon as that sedan clipped her and the little girl went tumbling until she was lying motionless in the center of the street; she was just so unbelievably tiny and how could someone her size take a hit like that? Bruce and Betty didn’t care about cars that were still driving down the street despite the incident that had just occurred and made their way to the unmoving girl, Betty yelling profanities as the owner of the sedan quickly sped away from the scene. How could anyone just flee the scene after hitting a little girl?

Bruce crouched next to the girl who was lying on her side, blood dripping from a deep gash at her hairline and he watched as it stained the asphalt around them, along with the stale baguette she had stolen. The scientist placed a gentle hand on her bony shoulder, causing her to groan from the pain and he easily rolled her over so she was on her back. Bruce would never understand how she managed to keep it together though she had clearly been in a great amount of pain, judging by the way her face was all scrunched up, but she refused to cry in front of the strangers. She was a tough little thing and she was certainly a little… rough around the edges.
“Look at her pupils,” Betty spoke softly and Bruce noticed how diluted the center of her eyes were, “She must have a concussion.”

“Leave me alone!” She huffed and attempted to sit up, but Bruce kept his hand pressed to her shoulder so she wouldn’t move and make her injuries worse, “I don’t want your help!”

“It’s okay,” Bruce said quietly, “We know that you don’t want our help, but if you don’t get help, you might die from brain trauma. You need us right now.”

She had looked so feral that day, Bruce remembered, her wide green eyes appearing in the forefront of his mind even though he was currently drifting in and out of consciousness. There had been this sort of crazed fear that resonated from her that day she got hit by the car and Bruce remembered the way she had flinched away from him when he reached out to carry her away from the street and oncoming traffic. Her tiny muscles had been so tense underneath her vibrant yellow hoodie as Bruce carried her to a bench on the sidewalk and he briefly wondered why she thought it would be a good idea to steal food while wearing something so conspicuous, but didn’t ask as they all patiently waited for an ambulance, Betty holding her sweater against the little girl’s wound while she scowled at the two of them.

“Do you have a home?”

“I…” She seemed confused then, her anger temporarily melting away, “I’ve had a lot of homes.”

“What about now?” Bruce questioned softly, not wanting to upset her, “Where’s your home? Your family?”

She scowled then and in a petulant way, she responded with, “Where’s yours?”

The little girl had merely glared at Bruce and Betty, trying her hardest to look terrifying even though she was about as intimidating as a feral kitten. The bright blue leggings she wore had little white daisies on them, as well as a few splatters of blood, and Bruce noticed how dirty and cut up her feet were; had she ever even owned a pair of shoes before? Bruce had also noticed how heavy she was breathing from the incident and at first he had figured it was from her being in shock, but then he noticed how it seemed almost physically impossible for her to compose her breathing pattern and the scientist assumed she must suffer from asthma. Bruce and Betty would later find out that she suffered from a multitude of health problems: asthma that had been worsened after recovering from pneumonia just months earlier, anemia that oftentimes made her feel narcoleptic and cold, a weak immune system, and upon further observation, they had learned that she had a strange defect between the left and right ventricles of her heart that looked similar to a gaping hole.

Bruce and Betty had later paid a pretty penny for her to have open heart surgery from one of the best cardiothoracic surgeons in the country, only to find out a few weeks after the reasoning behind most of her health problems, and also the reason why her real parents had abandoned her. According to the file they had received after officially adopting her when she was still recovering from the surgery, Betty and Bruce had learned that her mother had been a drug addict and hadn’t been able to quit, even after learning about the pregnancy. As it usually goes in those kinds of situations, the biological father had bounced the second he learned about the pregnancy and nobody had seen him since then and Bruce and Betty decided it was best not to track down the parents; they didn’t know the full story and quite frankly, they weren’t sure if they wanted to. They didn’t want to know what their motivation was to leave a premature baby, born nearly nine weeks before the due date, in front of a fire station without a blanket in the middle of December; Bruce didn’t want to know how that woman could look at that tiny little infant, barely weighing two pounds, and abandon her without even caring that she might die in the cold.
Then he thought about how he had abandoned her and, God, was he any better than the people who gave her up in the first place?

Bruce had it all at one point; a beautiful wife who was smarter than him, a cute little cottage in Colorado in a nice area where nothing bad ever happened, and a little girl who stared at him like he was her superhero, and he had been at one point. Bruce had always been the one to comfort her after nightmares and take her to museums with exhibits that he knew she would be interested in; he had been the one to take her on a roadtrip to the Smithsonian in Washington DC while Betty had been gone on a business trip. Bruce had been the one to take her trick or treating the first year while Betty stayed home to pass out the candy, and he had been the one who helped make her adorable astronaut costume from scratch rather than going out to buy one and he had stayed up with her for the rest of that night, eating candy while watching 2001: A Space Odyssey. Bruce had always been the one to help her with science fair projects though she would always do most of the work on her own and he was basically there just to make sure she didn’t make anything explode.

Bruce had everything, and then all at once, he had nothing—not even Marcella.

To be honest, he doesn’t really remember much following the weeks of Betty passing away other than letting Hulk take over his mind and all of his rational thoughts. He doesn’t remember Marcie covering him with a blanket and sliding a pillow under his head after he passed out from drinking too much whiskey or tequila; even to this day, he can’t handle drinking hard liquor because it reminds him of the days following his wife’s death. Bruce doesn’t remember driving with her in the passenger seat to his father’s house, not even bothering to answer her questions when she kept asking him where they were going and as he thinks about it now, he can’t stop the tears that escape from his burning eyes because the only thing he can remember is her screaming after him.

And he’s never been religious, but as footsteps approach the metal table he’s currently lying on, he finds himself whispering, “Please forgive me, God… please forgive me Marcie.”

“Daddy…” Marcie frowned as they pulled up to an unfamiliar house, staring at him as she held a little cage close to her body, “Where are we?”

An albino rabbit peered up at Bruce from its cage, and he quickly looked away from Marcie and her beloved pet because he was a coward and couldn’t even look his own daughter and her rabbit in the eyes before abandoning her. Bruce couldn’t look at the adorable little girl and her quirky freckles or wild curls; he couldn’t look at the curious expression on her features because he knew that he would immediately break down into tears. He stared at his hands that were gripping the steering wheel tightly and noticed the green that tinted his skin; disgust coursed through his veins as he felt a strange wave of anger hit him like a tidal wave. Bruce kept telling himself that this was for the best and even though his father was a huge asshole, he was more capable of taking care of Marcie than Bruce was, especially given the circumstances of his mental state.

He would later find out how horribly, and tragically, wrong he was.

Bruce turned the car off as he got out, instructing Marcie to do the same and she immediately obliged, still hugging her cage to her tiny little body as she hopped out of the car. The older man wiped his damp cheeks as he quickly opened the trunk of his shitty Honda Civic and pulled out the purple suitcase that Betty had helped Marcie decorate with embroidered flowers and Bruce’s stoic facade finally cracked as she slowly came around the car to peer up at him with curious, but gentle eyes; perhaps it was how oblivious to the situation she was that made his chest ache and his features crumble. Bruce was a coward because he couldn’t let his own daughter watch him cry as he lifted her little suitcase from the trunk and set it on the ground next to her, turning his head as the front door opened and watching as an older man that resembled him slowly stepped out onto the porch.
“I have to leave for a while, sweetie, but I won’t be gone for long,” Bruce choked out as he knelt down in front of her, staring at the spot between her brows and the tip of her nose because he couldn’t bear to see the confusion in those vibrant green eyes, “I just… I have some things that need to be sorted out, but your grandpa will take care of you, okay?”

She frowned as she glanced at the older man who was staring at the two of them with arms crossed over his chest, “I can… I can go with you daddy, I won’t get in the way, I promise.”

“This isn’t…” Bruce swallowed the lump in his throat as his head fell, “I have to do this alone, Marce, I’m so sorry.”

“You can’t…” She hugged the cage tighter to her body as she stepped closer to him, “Don’t leave me! Don’t leave me like mama did, please! I promise I’ll be good daddy!”

“This isn’t because of you,” He choked out, shaking his head as the tears trickled down his cheeks now, “I just… I’m doing this to protect you, Marcie.”

“No,” Her voice shook as he stood up and made his way to the driver’s door, “Please don’t leave! Take me with you, daddy!”

The scientist let out a shaky breath as that same feeling of anger washed over him and he quickly got in the car; he was vaguely aware of his father stepping forward to grab the girl’s elbow and pull her away from the car. Bruce couldn’t look at her as he pulled out of the driveway and even with his windows rolled up, he could hear her screaming out for him, begging for him to not do this and God, he really was no better than the people who abandoned her as a baby, was he? He could have stayed there with her and perhaps he would have been able to figure out all of his problems with her by his side, but he couldn’t risk killing her when he had no control over the other guy and he wouldn’t let himself be responsible for anymore deaths, especially his own daughter.

Bruce doesn’t remember Marcella trying to run after the car, collapsing to her knees in the street when he’s officially out of her sight and at the time, he’s not aware of the consequences of his actions as her grandfather grabs her by the elbow, a little more roughly than before, and forces her inside the house. The only thing he remembers is pulling over after about ten minutes of driving, not even able to see the road through his tear-filled eyes and the younger scientist instantly breaks down the second he turns the engine off, sobbing as he presses his forehead to the steering wheel.

Bruce had never wanted kids until he first saw Marcella that day, and all at once, she had changed his outlook on life. She had made him a hundred times more optimistic because if someone like Marcella could smile, despite everything she had been through in her six short years of living, then why couldn’t he smile when he had everything he could ask for? Marcie had turned him into a patient, understanding man and helped him become more sympathetic towards others who weren’t as privileged as he and Betty were and she had made him believe he could be a good father, despite his own father being an abusive asshole.

Marcella Grace Banner had always been his better half and he had, without a fucking doubt, taken her kindness and optimism for granted.

Bruce wondered how he could inflict so much pain on the one person who had only ever loved him unconditionally and he couldn’t stop the tears that gushed from his eyes because he had never, ever, deserved her.

He wondered how it was possible to simultaneously save and ruin someone’s life.

Meanwhile.
Marcella finally opened her eyes and forcefully threw the blankets away from her body a few hours after Steve and Natasha had retired for the night; she spotted Steve's sleeping figure on the floor in front of the couch and tried to remain as stealthy as possible as she stood up even though she was sure her footsteps were loud in the silence of their motel room. The Banner girl knew it was a bad idea to sneak out when Nat and Steve were still sleeping, but knowing that those men were inflicting so much pain on her father was making it impossible for her to just sleep and do nothing and she couldn’t handle it any longer. How could she sleep comfortably knowing that her dad probably hadn’t slept in days? She didn’t care if those men hurt her or even killed her; she needed to save her dad somehow and she wouldn't sleep until she knew for certain that he was safe.

Just as she was about to step over Steve, his hand darted out and grabbed her ankle firmly, causing her to fall on the carpet with a squeak and a thud, shocked by the contact. His large hand immediately moved to her wrist and tugged her closer to him with an extreme amount of softness that she always forgot he possessed, until her face was only a few inches away from his. She thought for sure she was going to find an angry expression on his mature features, but she certainly wasn't expecting that sad, soft expression that marred his face. His long eyelashes fluttered as he inspected her face closely, taking in the resolute expression that he had never really seen from her before and she noticed the way his brows furrowed as he stared at her like he was trying to figure her out. Marcella Banner would always remain a mystery to him because while he absolutely loved her independence and will to do the right thing, he hated it at the same time and wished she could just… have one normal week without getting into too much trouble. The little stitches at her hairline only reminded him of what had happened earlier and he immediately felt a wave of guilt wash over him when he remembered how mean he had been to her.

He remembered the fear in her eyes when he had pinned her up against the wall and Steve felt nauseous when he thought about it because he had talked to her in the same tone that so many mean men had used with her in the past; he had promised himself when he first pulled her from the rubble that he would never let anyone hurt her and he never thought he would be one of those people. Steve was convinced that the terrified expression on her face would haunt him and he realized that a part of her had thought for the tiniest moment that he might actually hit her or do something cruel and while he still regretted yelling at her, he had been absolutely terrified for her. Steve hadn't meant to yell at her and though he wasn't religious, he prayed that she would forgive him and not be scared of him because the thought of Marcella looking at him the way she had when he lashed out at her broke his heart.

A part of her had been certain that he would hit her and God, his heart ached for her because Marcella Banner was too kind and too soft and… how could anyone ever even think about hitting her? How could anyone tell her that she was worthless and that nobody could ever love her? A man had once yelled these things at her so much while physically hurting her that she had started to believe it; she had started to believe she wasn’t worth someone’s love even though she was the pure embodiment of love and kindness.

When Steve looked at her, he felt his eyes water because the world didn't deserve someone like Marcella Banner.

“I saw you almost fight that man off earlier,” Steve mentioned quietly, his voice oddly calm considering their circumstances, “How did you learn those moves? I saw the way you twirled that knife between your fingers before you stabbed the guy in the leg.”

“I don't know... maybe it was adrenaline?”

“Don’t do this Marcie,” Steve's expression suddenly grew sad and it made Marcella's chest hurt, “You don't have to lie to me and you don’t have to be worried about me getting mad at you. I know
you've been doing some sort of training lately—I can see your arms are more lean and muscular and you almost held your own against that guy in the alley.”

“I...” She observed his grave expression before exhaling softly and giving in to those puppy dog eyes that he was so good at giving her, “I've been training with Clint; I wanted to learn some self defense moves and I guess it turned into something more. He's been teaching me how to fight with weapons lately—butterfly knives and bo staffs.”

“Marce...” Steve looked worried at her response, “Is everything okay? Are you training because you're in some sort of trouble?”

“It’s not that,” The curly-haired girl felt annoyed by his question, “I want to be able to protect myself, Steve; I don't want to have to keep relying on others to keep me safe. I could have taken down that guy if I wasn't so weak and didn't try to run away—if I had just fought back. It's okay... I'll be stronger next time.”

“I can't let you go by yourself; I won't let you risk getting yourself into another situation that you can't get yourself out of,” He whispered and noticed the way her eyes watered as she stared back at him, “You know that I can't let you do that, but I'm not mad at you for trying because I'm sure I would be doing the same if I were in your shoes. I can't even imagine how scared you must be right now, sweetheart.”

“I don't have time to be scared, Steve.”

“Marce, please just--”

“He could be dead already,” Marcella's voice shook with anger as Steve wrapped his hand tightly around hers, “And you two are just going to sleep and not do anything about it and I won't have any part in this. If you guys refuse to do anything and leave the rest for SHIELD, I'll go and find him myself because even if I get hurt, at least I know that I tried unlike you two.”

“I understand your anger,” Steve whispered, and he truly did, “Bruce is our friend--”

“He's my father! You don't get it, Steve.”

“No, I don’t get it! He left you in the care of a man that he knew would hurt you and you forgave him for that!” Steve hissed and he wasn’t sure why he suddenly sounded so bitter, “I don’t understand how anyone could forgive a parent who does that to their child, especially when that child was abandoned by their real parents in the first place. I don’t get it Marce! Bruce is my friend but I’ll never understand why you defend him and care for him after all the horrible stuff he did to you!”

“I understand your anger too, and maybe you’re right, but I still have hope with him,” Steve immediately regretted his words when he noticed the way her lips trembled as tears trickled down her cheeks, “You don’t get what we’ve been through and I know everyone thinks I’m an idiot for forgiving him, but I promised my mom before she passed away that I would stay by his side and I don’t break my promises, Steve. My dad was the first man who had ever shown me kindness and I understand that he missed a lot of my childhood and he… he’s part of the reason why I can’t stand to be in a room full of men, but the good memories I have with him are the ones that keep my hope for him alive, they keep me going. I know you might not have hope for humankind, but I do, and that’s why I need to do something.”

Steve shook his head at her words; he couldn’t believe that she could love Bruce as much as she did despite everything he had done and though he adored her, Steve wasn’t sure if he would ever get her
reasoning for certain things. He knew that kindness was seemingly a rare trait in people nowadays, but Marcella Banner was too kind and he knew for fact that people took advantage of her for it. Steve knew that Tony took advantage of her all the times she stayed up with him until some ungodly hour in the morning because she wanted to make sure he ate enough food and drank enough water and instead of thanking her, he would merely wave it off and insisted that he didn’t need any help. Clint would ask her to help him fix his crossbow whenever he dinged it up too much during a mission and Natasha would ask her to upgrade certain parts of her tactical gear, along with her suit and usually repaid her with a soft pat on the shoulder and a small smile. She would always keep Thor company and teach him about Midgardian culture whenever he visited, cooking certain dishes for him that he would scarf down within seconds, sometimes barely saying goodbye as he left the next morning and yet, she never said a single word.

Marcie never gave any indication that she felt like she was being taken advantage of and he wondered if she even knew.

And as Steve stared into her watery eyes, he realized that even he had taken advantage of her on numerous occasions.

He would always keep her up until the early hours of the morning when he knew that she must have been exhausted, comforting him after his own nightmares and he oftentimes found himself falling back asleep before he could thank her. How had he repaid her after she gave him those thoughtful gifts for his birthday? Steve had merely walked her to her car the next morning and gave her a kiss on the cheek instead of telling her that he wanted her to be with her more than just a friend. Marcie always went out of her way to help him and make his life so much brighter and easier, and what had he done for her?

He had yelled at her and pointed out one of her biggest insecurities.

No, the world didn’t deserve Marcella Banner and they would only ever take advantage of her compassion.

“You're going to get yourself killed if you keep trying to do things like this,” He said with desperation and his grip tightened around her hand in a tender way, “Don't you get it? You can't just do something like barge in there without having a solid plan; it's stupid and reckless and I won't allow it because I can’t afford to lose you and I can’t even bear the thought of someone hurting you.”

“I don't care if I get killed,” Tears slipped from her eyes and Steve shook his head, “Are you telling me you wouldn't do the same for someone you love? He's the only family I have left and…”

“It's not the same, Marce.”

“Why?” She whimpered as tears continued to trickle down her freckled cheeks, “Because you're over a hundred pounds heavier than me? Because you're over a foot taller than me? Tell me why it's different from what you used to do… you never cared whether you would die or not, right?”

“That's because I didn't care about anyone or anything,” He admitted and observed her broken features with a somber expression of his own, “I mean, I've always been reckless, but then it felt like I lost everything when Bucky died and I think that's when I really stopped caring. When I came out of the ice and tried to get used to this world, I felt more lost than ever, and then I met you and you kind of ruined all of that, but not in a bad way, you know? It felt like you gave me a purpose and I spent so much time trying to figure out what that purpose was and now…”

“I don’t know…” Reluctantly, his hand moved from Marcella's wrist to her cheek and his fingertips caught the tears that slipped from the corners of her eyes, “I guess... I guess I saw a lot of myself in
you, before I got the serum, you know? You're so small and yeah, you're not very physically strong, but there is this passion inside of you that I hadn't seen in such a long time and you never back down from a fight which is really frustrating for me because lately it's been getting you into sketchy situations. I think I'm finally starting to understand what I put Bucky through all those years he had to help me whenever I got into fights.”

“So,” He smiled sadly, his blue eyes sparkling as he stared at her in the darkness, “I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's different because you're my best friend and you're the first person I've cared about this much in almost a hundred years and I can't let anything ruin that. I used a parachute the other day on a mission for the first time... I wasn't going to, but then I remembered how scared Peggy and Bucky would be whenever I didn't use one and thought you would get upset if you found out too, so I used one. I did it because I thought about how much I would hate it if you were doing things like that; I did it because I cherish what we have, Marce. I think that's why I got so frustrated with you earlier, because I hate the thought of you doing reckless things like what you did today—it's exactly the same thing I would have done before I met you.”

“I'm sorry,” Marcella cried as he continued to wipe away her tears easily, “I just... I wasn't thinking rationally. All I could think about was finding my dad... I need to find him Steve, I need to know that he's not dead...”

“I promise that he's not dead; don't ask me how, I just know that he's okay.”

The Banner girl stared up at Steve with desperation, “We'll find him, right?”

“We're going to find him, Marcella,” Steve reassured her, though his words did little to comfort her, “I just... I just need you to trust me okay? No more sneaking around and getting yourself into trouble. You're an incredibly smart girl and we can use your help with this, but I'm not going to let you put yourself in the line of fire for the sake of trying to get information for us, okay? You've already helped us enough by getting a good video of Salazar, let us handle the rest.”

Steve stared at her face as she reached out and curled her fingers into the soft material of his white t-shirt, right underneath his collarbone. His hand fell from her cheek and he opted to rest it on her outstretched forearm instead, noticing how tiny the limb seemed to feel in his much larger grasp. The Captain longed to tell her how he really felt about her—that he completely adored her and whenever his nights grew unbearably dark, she was the only light that kept him going until the sun rose in the early morning. He wanted to tell her that he thought she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever met in his long lifetime, and that her personality and heart was just as beautiful as her. God... had he ever met someone who was so incredibly kind and loyal to the point where they would walk through flames to save the few people that they loved?

“I'm sorry for what I said earlier when we found you,” Steve apologized when he suddenly remembered how angry he had been with her, “The way I handled that situation was wrong and I shouldn't have raised my voice at you like that.”

“It's okay, Steve,” Marcella reassured him quietly, and he was vaguely aware of how close the two had gotten during their conversation, “You were... you were right though, what I did definitely wasn't very smart of me. I just... I just wanted to try to help find my dad.”

“I know, Marce,” Steve smiled sadly, “I know you just wanted to help, I can't be mad at you for that. I guess I was more worried than anything and lashed out at you; it was a bad thing to do and I'm still sorry for making you feel that bad.”
"I forgive you, Stevie," The way she used his nickname caused a warm sensation to bloom in his chest and the pit of his stomach, and any ounce of anger or sadness that he had been carrying around with him suddenly vanished as she stared up at him with those bright green eyes. With his heightened senses, there was just enough light in the room where he could see her freckles and how flushed her tear-stained cheeks were. Steve wasn't sure if he'd ever get tired of looking at her like this —she was just too beautiful and soft. Even with the few opalescent scars that marred her warm brown skin, she always seemed so delicate and innocent, even though Steve knew she was strong in her own way and had experienced so much pain her short lifetime.

“You're so tiny,” Steve whispered as he slid his hand up her forearm and covered her own hand with his, “I feel like you're so small that I could just carry you around with me in my heart all the time.”

She eyed their hands that were still curled together on top of his chest before reluctantly meeting his soft blue eyes, “Do you... do you think there's enough room for me there?”

“There has been for a long time, Marce,” He spoke so softly that she barely heard it and she could hear her heart beating in her ears as her face grew warm, “Ever since I found you underneath all of that rubble, there's always been a spot for you in my heart.”

“Well,” She breathed and noticed the way his expression suddenly grew nervous, “You're like, really big, but I think I have enough room in my heart for you too, Steve. I know... I know that I'm bad at talking about my feelings and I'm... I'm sorry.”

“No,” He whispered and brought her knuckles up to his lips; they were soft compared to his own, “I can understand why it's hard for you to talk about your feelings because the only person you ever said ‘I love you’ to is your dad and even he hurt you.”

“He didn't...” Marcella tried to stop her tears as she struggled with her words, Steve's expression becoming soft as he stared at her, “He didn't mean to... I know that sometimes I wasn't the easiest person to love.”

“Don't you dare...” Steve felt like his heart was being torn in half and his eyes watered at the way her voice shook, “Don't you dare try to tell me that you're not easy to love because... because you make it so easy to love you Marce.”

“I could have... I could have made him stay. Maybe if I was just better and...”

“It was never your fault, Marce,” He whispered, his lips still skimming across her knuckles before he brought her tiny hand close to his chest, “I don't know the whole story and I know you and Bruce have things you need to work out, but I can guarantee that none of this was ever your fault. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry that you feel things as intensely as you do because I can't even imagine the kind of pain and insecurity you feel all the time, sweetheart.”

“I'm okay, Steve, really,” She gave him a wavering smile that told Steve she really wasn't okay, "I'll be alright."

He heard the way her voice shook and frowned, “You've been acting different since that night, since my birthday and it's okay if you're not okay, I just don't want you to feel like you can't talk to me.”

Marcella stared back at his barely distinguishable features in the darkness of the motel room, wondering if telling him what was on her mind would truly be so horrible.

“I'm just...” Marcella’s fear melted away when she saw the softest expression on his features that she had ever seen, “I know everyone has this idea of who they think I am, but I don't know how to..."
She hesitated and Steve smiled sadly, “It's okay, Marcie, I understand and I'm sorry for not telling you how much... how much I care about you when I had the chance. The way I feel about you Marce, it's terrifying because I've never felt this way about anyone before and I don't want to put all of this on you when you already have so much going on.”

And Marcella smiles because she doesn't understand how Steve can be so sweet and kind hearted despite everything he's been through.

“I adore you, Steve Rogers,” Marcella whispered and saw the way the corners of his lips quirked into the smallest smile, “I'll never understand how you can be so kind and patient because most men would have left by now.”

“I don't think I could ever leave you, sweetheart,” He whispered, his fingers curling around hers where their hands were still clasped together against his chest, “You're just... you deserve the whole world and I don't know if I can give you that much, but I can try.”

“I don't want the whole world,” Marcie matched his quiet tone, her heart pounding, “What's the whole world if I can't have you with me to see it?”

A smile made its way across his usually stoic features and Marcella felt a tiny smile of her own appear as the two stared at one another. They could both hear the grim sounds of gunfire in the distance, reminding them that they weren't in New York or Washington D.C.; they were in the middle of one of the most dangerous places on earth. Slowly, Marcella moved closer to him and Steve immediately wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her until she was settled against his side with her head tucked firmly underneath his chin, like it was second nature to him to hold her this close. She turned her head until her cheek was resting against the soft material of his shirt; Steve watched as she rested her hand on top of the same spot from earlier—right on top of his chest where she could feel a strong pulse. Her fingers were splayed out across the material as she thought about the conversation they had just had, still slightly confused about his feelings towards her. While she knew that she absolutely adored Steve, she never had experienced any guys really showing interest in her and wasn't sure if his feelings were similar to hers.

Suddenly, she felt nervous and oh God, what even was she doing?

What if this was just her getting attached to someone when they didn't feel the same way?

“Steve?” She whispered, into the dark, “Are you still awake?”

“Hm?” He sounded groggy and like he was five seconds from falling asleep, “What is it?”

“I don't know how to do this,” She felt Steve shift underneath her and tried to gather her thoughts, “I don't know how to be with someone like this.”

“That's okay,” He reassured her sleepily, “I don't either; we can figure it out together.”

“So you do like me then?”

Steve breathed out a small laugh, “Yes Marcella, I like you.”

“Like uh, more than a friend?”

“More than a friend,” He confirmed quietly, his voice seeming a little more alert.
“Oh,” She refrained from grinning as he leaned his head up to press the gentlest kiss to the top of her head, “If we… if we make it out of this in one piece, do you think we could… go on a date or something?”

“I’ll take you wherever you want, sweetheart, I promise.”

The next morning.

“Wake the fuck up Cap!”

Steve jumped awake when he felt a harsh pressure against his ribs; he forced his eyelids open and was immediately assaulted by the bright sun rays filtering through the room along with a certain billionaire's angry expression as he nudged the groggy man with his foot. Steve wasn't necessarily surprised that Tony Stark had followed Marcella all the way to San Pedro Sula; however, he was surprised to find that Marcella was nowhere in sight and judging by the irritated expression that Tony wore, she had gone missing again. Steve slowly sat up and Tony held out a small piece of paper to him, which the Captain reluctantly took and immediately noticed Marcella's near perfect cursive, frowning as he read the note with a heavy heart pounding in his chest.

'I'm sorry for leaving again Steve,

I can't just sit back and do nothing while those men torture my dad; I hope you'll still have enough room in your heart for me after today.

-Marcella'

Steve's head dropped and his shoulders sagged as Tony gauged the Cap's reaction, “Why didn't you pay closer attention to her? God only knows when she left... she could be dead by now!”

“I didn't think...”

“Yeah,” Tony scoffed and Steve barely registered his unusually grave tone, “Clearly you weren't thinking, for once in your fucking life.”

“That's real nice coming from the guy who got so drunk that he slept through Marcie sneaking out and Jarvis trying to wake you up for almost an hour.”

“You had her!” Tony snapped, surprising Natasha because of the hurt in his voice, “She was in your arms and if you just... you could have stopped her and she might be dead now.”

“You're in no place to talk, Tony!” Steve argued back, his voice growing louder, “Like I said, you had every opportunity to prevent this from happening and if you would have just gone one night without drinking yourself into a coma, she’d still be safe in the tower.”

“She would have gotten here no matter what,” Natasha interjected, typing away on a laptop as she shut down both of the men, “Now shut up and stop blaming each other for something that none of us could prevent.”

The Captain finally raised his head to stare at his new friend, noticing for the first time how desperate and terrified he seemed by the situation Marcella had gotten herself into. While Steve and Tony had worked out their differences and had maybe even developed something close to a friendship, Steve knew that the billionaire had developed a huge soft spot in his shrapnel-ridden chest for the younger Banner. The Captain wasn't sure if he had ever seen an expression like this on Tony's face—something identical to hurt that he had let Marcella get away combined with the fear of not knowing where she managed to run off to. He truly didn't have an answer and regretted falling asleep last
night; Tony was right, he should have stayed up and watched her to make sure she wouldn't sneak out, but he had always been a light sleeper and figured he would wake up if she tried to leave. He had hoped that the conversation they had last night might keep her from making any more irrational decisions, but Steve was starting to find out that Marcella was quite independent and if she wanted to do something, she was going to find a way to do it.

“She's not dead,” Natasha suddenly broke the silence as she closed her laptop and pulled out her phone from her back pocket, holding the device out to Steve, “I placed a tracker on her yesterday when I was stitching her up; I figured she would try to pull a stunt like this again and clearly I was right.”

Steve quickly took the device and studied the blinking red dot that was displayed on the digital map, “That's the warehouse she was at yesterday—that must be this group's base. Do you think they're keeping Bruce there too?”

“Looks like there's an underground level to the warehouse,” Natasha noted, earning a wary expression from Tony, “If they're keeping Bruce anywhere, it's probably down there and I'm sure Marcella must have figured this out somehow, because she's descending into the building as we speak.”

“She's gone crazy,” Steve hissed and started to gather his things together so they could head out, “She's going in there without any weapons.”

“That's where you're wrong big guy,” Tony crossed his arms over his chest and Natasha noticed the slightly embarrassed expression that spread across his features, “We were working on the prototype for one of my suits and she might have taken one of my watches.”

Steve raised his brows at Tony, “A watch?”

“Yeah,” He huffed and waved a hand around nonchalantly, “A watch that may or may not turn into a gauntlet with repulsors that can easily take down every man your size in a five mile radius, if used correctly. She helped design it, so I guess I can't be that mad at her for stealing it, to be honest.”

“Well, suit up boys,” Natasha sighed and pulled a shotgun out of her duffel bag, “Time to find Big Banner and Little Banner, hopefully alive.”

Chapter End Notes

You guys are seriously the best! I absolutely adored all of the comments on the last chapter and was inspired to make this into another super long chapter and added that whole bit with Bruce at the beginning of this chapter. I swear, most of these chapters are only like, 4,000 or 5,000 words before I edit them and then it just gets out of hand and before I know it, I have a chapter with 9,000 words typed out like this one lmao. I think this is the most fun I've ever had writing a story and Marcella is literally my favorite OC, so to hear you guys are enjoying this so far really makes me so happy!

Anyways, I'll stop rambling! As always, thank you guys for reading and commenting because this story has kind of turned into my baby over the last few weeks lol.

I hope you enjoy this long chapter!
Chapter Summary

She closed her eyes when she heard the sound of bones snapping followed by high pitched screams and she wondered how long the pained wails would haunt her nightmares, along with the screams coming from the numerous women surrounding her.

Marcie was going to have a long therapy session when she made it back to New York.

**Trigger warning for this chapter! There are mentions of self-harm, depression and suicide, and sex trafficking, along with some bullying.**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A Month Earlier

“Do you think you forgave your father because you felt bad for him?”

Marcella turned her attention away from the golden retriever that had its fuzzy head placed firmly on top of her lap and gazed up at the middle-aged woman that was sitting just a few feet away from her in a leather armchair. For some reason, the weight of the therapy dog against her made her feel more comfortable and Marcie would never understand how dogs were so good at being able to read human emotion and how smart a lot of them were, how easy it was to train them to do things that not even humans could do.

Dr. Kumiega stared at her with a soft expression and Marcella was oddly comforted by the fact that her therapist was a woman; it had been one of her only conditions when Bruce had insisted that she get some sort of help with everything that was going on in her head after the Battle of New York. Marcella had been skeptical on the car ride to her therapist’s nice office in Upper Manhattan, but then she had walked into the quaint office and her eyes instantly lit up when she spotted a snoozing golden retriever on top of a huge dog bed wearing a therapy vest; the dog had immediately woken up upon her arrival, lazily sauntering over to where she had been standing. Marcie had immediately fallen in love with patient pup and though she barely talked at all their first session, Dr. Kumiega insisted that was alright because most people felt awkward or embarrassed for the first few sessions.

Marcella had only been taking therapy sessions for a little over a month now, but she really enjoyed Dr. Kumiega’s company and had grown surprisingly comfortable around her, but for some reason, she found it difficult to talk about her relationship with her father. Though she didn't know it at the time she would later find out that it was hard to talk about because she was definitely in denial about being able to forgive him about everything that had happened, because Marcella could forgive, but she couldn't forget what he did. She couldn't forget how raw her throat felt after screaming for her dad to not leave or how swollen and puffy her eyelids felt from all the crying she did; she couldn't forget the way he had missed out on so many milestones and little award ceremonies her schools used to hold. Marcella couldn't forget the first time she had nervously called him after going to her first high school party and had a little too much to drink because she obviously didn't know any better, only for her call to go straight to voicemail; Marcie had walked two miles home by herself that night.
She oftentimes wondered what her life would be like if she had a different father. She wondered if she'd still be as passionate about biomedical engineering as she currently was, or if she'd still have aspirations to work for NASA, or perhaps an interest in another field. Though she hated herself for even thinking it Marcie wondered if her life would have turned out any better if someone as influential as Tony Stark had been her father, but even he had been with overwhelmed with his own problems and had issues with his own dad.

Marcie couldn't change the past with her dad but she could help shape their future.

“I don't know why I forgave him, honestly,” Marcie answered truthfully, risking a glance at Dr. Kumiega, “I promised my mom I wouldn't stop loving him, even after the gamma ray incident and I don't like breaking promises, but it’s hard to not question it sometimes, you know? I know that I definitely love him, but it’s hard to believe him when he says that he loves me after everything we’ve been through.”

The older woman nodded slowly, the corners of her eyes wrinkling as a sad smile appeared along her features, “Do you think your dad made the same promise to your mom before she passed away? That he wouldn't stop loving you or that he would stay by your side?”

Marcie froze, her eyes wide as she stared down at the therapy dog's beautiful brown eyes and kept her hand on top of his fuzzy head; she thought about her therapist’s question and, God, did her dad make the same promise to her mother? How many times had Bruce reassured Betty that he'd take care of Marcie even after she passed away? Marcie remembered the day her dad had dropped her off at her grandfather's house, reassuring that he would only be gone for a short amount of time and she had figured a few days or a couple of weeks at most. She remembered how devastated she had been when weeks turned into months, and before she knew it, a long, agonizing year had passed and a familiar dark-haired man had shown up at the front door. Marcie could recall the thick beard that had covered his jawline and cheeks, along with skin between his nose and upper lip; she hadn't even recognized him at first, her own vision blurry from the punishment she had received earlier that day.

“Get the door, you brat!”

Marcie held her hand over her eyebrow and eyelid, blood seeping through the little slits of her fingers as she slowly, and painfully, collected herself and stood up. She was unsteady on her feet as she wandered through the house and tried to keep her tears under control because she knew that would only make her throbbing head hurt worse and her grandfather angrier, and she certainly didn't want that. She could barely remember what caused him to get so angry this time, something about the dishes not being washed and dried correctly and Marcie remembered not having any time to react as the older man swiftly grabbed a glass coffee pot from where it had been keeping the coffee from that morning hot. She remembered him throwing it in her direction and she wasn’t able to duck in time to dodge it and perhaps it was from exhaustion and hunger, but Marcie would have normally been able to dodge something like that and she hated herself for not being faster because she couldn’t remember being in so much pain. The tiny girl must have blacked out for a few minutes because she had woken up with the worst headache of her life and no vision in one of her eyes because of all the blood that had trickled into it; her eyebrow and eyelid split open in such a gruesome way and Marcie knew that she definitely needed stitches.

She had been sitting on the floor in front of her bed minutes after the incident, holding a hand to her eye with her other hand gently petting her beloved rabbit as she tried to hold back her tears when the doorbell rang, followed by a few heavy knocks.

As she finally made it to the front door, still holding her albino rabbit, the knocking grew louder and more frantic and the noise made her head hurt even more.
“Coming,” She mumbled so lowly that there was no way the person on the other side could have heard her, but the knocking stopped and the tiny girl slowly unlocked the door and cracked it open, staring up at the homeless looking man in front of her. The bottom half of his face was covered in a thick, unruly beard and his dark curls were matted together in a clumpy mess and she noticed the grime that coated his tanned features. His dark eyes were wide and there was this strange, unnatural green tint to them, Marcie noticed, and watched as his chapped lips parted as he observed her, his eyes filling with utter devastation as he took in all the blood that was seeping through her fingers and trickling down the back of her hand.

Marcie took a step back and cocked her head to the side as the grown man dropped to his knees in front of her and even when he spoke, his voice was so hoarse and quiet that she still didn’t recognize the blubbering man. Perhaps it was because everything was literally a blur and she could see black dots dancing around in her unstable vision, but Marcie had no idea who this strange man was and, oh God, why was he crying in front of her like someone had just died? Despite her blurred vision, she noticed the way his features crumpled as he let out a heart wrenching cries of pain and reached out for her, causing her to step back further, glancing over her shoulder to make sure her grandpa was still lying on the couch, watching some game show as he popped open another beer.

“Are you… okay, mister?” Marcie frowned and noticed how the tears trickled down his grimey cheeks and into his unruly beard faster; the hand he had been holding out towards her suddenly curled against his chest, right above his heart as though he was in physical pain. A sob that had been bubbling in the back of his throat finally made its way to the surface and Marcie scrunched her face up as the man sobbed in front of her; had she ever seen a man cry like that before? Her own dad had barely cried the day he left her and she wondered if it had really been that easy for him to leave.

He had never loved her--of course it had been easy for him to leave that easily.

“It’s me, don’t you remember?” His voice was still hoarse but it was louder now and Marcella recognized it; her face instantly dropped, “I’m so sorry… I’m so sorry, Marcella. What have I done to you? Oh my God, please forgive me… please…”

The tiny girl lowered her hand from her eye, the blood still gushing from the gaping wound as she stared at her father in shock and she found herself shaking her head as she held her rabbit closer to her chest and stumbled backwards, ultimately falling on her rear. Bruce’s bloodshot eyes were wide as he took in the horrific state she was in, longing to reach out and help stop that gruesome wound from bleeding so much, knowing that it must have been extremely painful and God, could she even see out of that eye?

“I’m so sorry,” He sobbed, reaching out for her once again, “Oh God, what have I done?”

“What’s all that racket?!” Her grandfather screamed and Marcie felt overwhelmed when she heard his footsteps get closer to her.

“Please,” Marcie’s voice shook as she quickly glanced behind her before turning back to the broken man in front of her, immediately standing back up, “G-Get up; he’ll only get angry if he sees you like this.”

And Bruce stares at her terrified expression as his own father appears behind her, because he is all too aware of the older man’s anger issues. He notices the gory way her eyebrow and eyelid are split open as she peers at him and how there’s a bruise that resembles the shape of a hand on her freckled cheek. Bruce notices all of the healing cuts and bruises, along with the scars that have healed long ago.
But most of all, he notices the worried expression she gives him in that moment and in that moment, he feels like his whole world is being destroyed right in front of his eyes while simultaneously being saved by a little girl and her beloved albino rabbit.

It takes every fiber of his being to stop himself from lashing out at his father, from letting the other guy take over and kill him.

“Get up,” She said a little more firmly and reached out to grab his hand tightly, “Please.”

“Hey, it's okay Marcella,” Dr. Kumiega pulled the freckled girl out of her thoughts, “Remember, you don't have to be talk about anything that you don't want to talk about.”

“It's not… it's not a good idea to keep it all on the inside,” Marcella whispered, gently rubbing the golden retriever's muzzle as he stared up at her with his kind eyes, “It only makes everything worse; it makes the pain and the bad thoughts worse.”

“You're right,” Dr. Kumiega gave her a sad, sympathetic smile, “And you've gotten quite skilled at keeping all of these emotions and thoughts locked away in your mind, haven't you? I know it takes a lot out of you just to talk to me about your friends and your family; is this the first time you've talked to anyone about the way you feel?”

“I talk to Steve a lot,” Marcie explained softly, her cheeks growing warm at the mere thought of the Captain, “I just don't… he's already got so much on his plate and I don't want to be a burden; I'm sure he's got other things to worry about.”

“I don't know the relationship between the two of you, but it sounds like the two of you are extremely close and I can guarantee that he would never think of you as a burden.”

“I don't know,” Marcie kept her eyes on the sleepy dog in front of her and her brows furrowed as she thought about Steve and how stupidly perfect the public always made him out to be, though she knew better, “He's… he's had it way worse than me. Like I said before, I don't want him to worry so much about me and I don't want to be one of his many problems.”

“You can't keep comparing your problems to other people's,” Dr. Kumiega reminded her softly, “This isn't some sort of competition of who has had it worse and that kind of thinking… well, that leads to the really dark thoughts, Marcella.”

“Trust me,” Marcella stared at her thoughtfully for a moment before responding, “I know.”

Dr. Kumiega looked worried and patient as she chose her next words carefully, “Do you find yourself having those thoughts often? Thoughts of suicide? Have you ever had those thoughts?”

“A young, thirteen year old Marcella glanced over her shoulder and immediately spotted a group of girls huddled in front of their lockers, looking straight in her direction; they instantly grew quiet and stared at her like she was some sort of cursed witch.

Who knows? Maybe she was cursed; it sure felt like it more often than not.

The freckled girl quickly turned around, her cheeks flushing at their rude words and she merely grabbed her textbooks as the bell rang, signaling the end of another high school day. She knew her classmates thought she was some sort of freak who was also a teacher's pet because the adults all adored her and constantly used her projects and reports as grading rubrics for other classes. Marcie had learned that was why a lot of her peers disliked her, because she was that one kid who was an
overachiever and always set the highest standard for whatever class she was in and while most sophomores weren’t concerned with graduating for another two years, Marcie was on track to do it that year. The principal had already informed her that she had been selected to be valedictorian, much to her dismay, and she had already sent out all of her applications to Ivy League schools that she aspired to attend. As if she wasn’t already enough of a freak, word had gotten out that her father was the same man who had nearly destroyed an entire city in Colorado just a few years earlier and the teasing and harassment from her peers had only gotten worse with every passing day, though she tried her best to ignore it and continue on with life as normally as she could.

Marcie sighed and smoothed out her uniform, picking at a loose thread on the hem of her black skirt as she thought about all of the homework she had due the next day and how she would probably have to pull another all-nighter to finish it all. She kept her head down as she pushed her ear buds into her ears and pulled out her brick-like ipod that her dad had bought for her a while ago; she remembered how excited he had been for her to open it Christmas morning the previous year. The tiny teen was completely unaware of the small group of smirking football players that trailed a few feet behind her as she made her way to the back of the school where all of the school busses were parked and waiting, and she was definitely unaware of a young red-haired woman who trailed behind those boys, watching the scene unfold with an impassive expression.

It wasn’t until one of the jocks grabbed her by her elbow and yanked her ear buds out that Marcella was made aware of their presence, peering up at the much larger boy with a wary expression. He towered over her 5’2 figure and the curly-haired girl frowned when he placed a heavy hand on her shoulder, giving it an uncomfortable squeeze.

“How’s it going Scarface?” The jock asked though she knew it was a rhetorical question and remained silent as the boys slowly surrounded her, “I actually wanted to have a word with you about that history report you wrote for me; you remember, right?”

“Yes I remember,” Marcie mumbled, avoiding eye contact with the rude football player, “You asked me to dumb it down for you so it would be more believable.”

“Yes, and you clearly didn’t dumb it down enough because Mr. Reid found out that you wrote it when you used one of the same quotes from a paper you did last semester,” He hissed and squeezed her shoulder more tightly, making her wince in pain, “For someone who is supposed to be a fucking genius, you’re really just a fucking idiot, aren’t you?”

Marcie raised a scarred brow at him, giving him an incredulous expression, “You’re the one that asked me to dumb it down for you so it would be more believable.”

The jock scoffed out a laugh before grabbing her by her nape and using his other hand to snatch her iPod out of her hands, “You don’t want to talk to me like that, Scarface, I could easily snap your neck in half like a fucking twig and wouldn’t that just be a shame? I can ruin your life and make you wish you were never born, do you understand me?”

“Yes, I understand,” Marcie responded with a whisper, though there was a part of her that already wished she had never been born--a thought that crossed her mind nearly every damn day when she got pushed around in the halls at school or arrived at an empty home. The tiny Banner girl refused to let the tears fall from her eyes as she stared down at her scuffed up Mary Janes--she never cried anymore and had gotten so good at faking smiles and stories whenever her dad asked how her day went. A part of her knew that he definitely saw through the facade and he noticed the way she would wear winter clothes that hid the bruises on her arms and neck even though it was getting closer to summer; Marcie wondered if he ever saw the way her eyes sparkled and even though she wished he would point it out and say something, he usually remained quiet and solemn.
“Good,” The jock spat, squeezing the back of her neck so tightly that she was sure it would bruise, “And don’t even think about telling your dad about this, or else you’ll really regret crossing me.”

Marcella nodded slowly, still unaware of the soft, vigilant eyes that were watching her from far away; the woman’s red hair pulled into an elegant dutch braid that tumbled past her shoulders. The red-haired assassin forced herself to not intervene as the jock inspected the music device in his hands before launching it into the hard pavement of the sidewalk and even though Natasha was pretty desensitised to this kind of stuff, she found herself frowning as tears formed in a young Marcella Banner’s green eyes. She had only been watching the Banner girl for a few weeks after tracking down Bruce Banner, but Natasha had found herself more interested in the teenager than the man who turned into a huge green beast, solely because of what she had been through and how incredibly fucking smart she was--already on course to graduate two years early with honors and a guaranteed scholarship to any University of her choosing. Marcella Banner had all of these little inventions that she had built from scratch and Natasha had been surprised and impressed to find that she had somehow managed to create a military grade flamethrower that would definitely put her on some sort of government suspects list if Natasha knew she hadn’t built it out of pure boredom.

Natasha scowled and shook her head at the jocks from the driver's seat of her car as she realized that the iPod had broken into a couple of pieces, no longer able to work, and she found it near impossible to force herself to stay in the car as one of the jocks pressed a hand to her back and shoved her to the ground; the teen and Natasha both cringed at the way her knees smacked against the hot pavement

“You're lucky this is the first time this has happened and I only got benched for one game,” He hissed as he knelt down next to her and grabbed her nape again, his mouth too close to her ear for her, “But if this happens just one more time, I'll do something much worse than breaking your little iPod. Maybe next time it'll be one of your bones, how does that sound?”

Marcie remained quiet as her scraped knees burned against the hot pavement and nodded, keeping her head down low as she stared at her broken iPod and tried to figure out how she was going to fix it. She kept her head down until the group of boys finally shuffled away, resembling something close to a pack of hyenas as they cackled about cornering a girl who was two years younger than them and half their size and she wondered if jocks would ever stop perpetuating this stereotype of being absolute dickheads.

Marcella would come to learn that people never really changed, did they?

Natasha finally put the car into drive and gave the teen one last glance before pulling away from her spot, driving away even though she knew the girl desperately needed some sort of help because she was just a few steps away from having a fucking mental breakdown. It wasn’t until Natasha glanced in the rearview mirror that she noticed the way Marcie slowly stood back up, her head still hanging low as she collected her things and made her way onto the bus, shedding a single tear before wiping it away because she was supposed to be strong. She was supposed to be the one that made it out on top, despite all of the obstacles she had jumped over and smashed through to get to where she was today and where she wanted to be in the future; Marcie was supposed to be a rags-to-riches story, even though she was so much more than that.

Sure, she had come from nothing, but she would later come to find out that she would have been just as extraordinary even if she didn’t have such a notorious last name--she was so smart with or without her father and her last name didn’t define who she was nor the path she would take later in life.

“Marcella,” Dr. Kumiega spoke gently as the girl continued to stare down at the dog with a faraway
expression, memories flooding her mind like the aftermath of a tidal wave, “If you have had thoughts of suicide recently or even in the past, it might be a good idea to look into getting you on some kind of medication that helps with depression.”

“Oh Marcie,” Bruce frowned when the girl made it home after a long bus ride, waiting for her on the porch like he always did. Her head was hanging low and gone was the usual bounce in her step as she approached Bruce with a metaphorical rain cloud hanging over her head; Bruce absolutely hated seeing her like this and even though she always tried to act so strong for him, she was always so easy to read.

“What… what happened sweetie?”

Suddenly she felt tears fill her eyes and her cheeks grew hot as she spoke with embarrassment, “I just um, I… I fell and ruined my favorite tights.”

Bruce noticed the holes in the black fabric that covered her bloody, scraped up knees; the white daisies printed on the tights were stained red around the cuts and Bruce frowned, knowing how much she loved those tights. He noticed the way she shook from fear and instantly knew that even though his daughter was quite clumsy, that the reason why her tights were torn and her eyes were full of tears wasn’t because she fell. Bruce had called the school numerous times before about her being bullied and while the faculty always reassured him that they were handling the situation, their version of “handling the situation” included them suspending those students for a few days before they were back to their ways again. He was glad that she only had a few more months of high school left to go before she would be moving on to college because he knew damn well that she would fit in at a place like MIT or Columbia, because she was so smart and had so much potential, but his heart broke when he remembered that whoever was doing this to her would only find someone else to bully. Bruce wondered how long it would take for the faculty to actually step in and do something other than suspending these bullies; he wondered how much more blood would be spilled before a child completely lost it and tried to take their own life.

Bruce stared at his daughter with gentle eyes and a sympathetic smile as he wrapped an arm around her tiny--too tiny--shoulders.

“Hey, don’t cry Mars Bars,” He smiled softly when she cracked a watery smile at her nickname “I’ll find you a better pair of tights, okay? How about ones with sunflowers on them this time? I know how much you love bright, colorful things.”

“I do like sunflowers,” She nodded slowly and wiped her damp cheeks as she peered up at her dad, “I broke… I broke the iPod you gave me when I fell… I’m sorry.”

Bruce observed her with a sad, fond smile and it was moments like this that he was reminded of just how young she was, barely a teenager and ready to graduate high school already. It was moments like this that he would look her in the eyes and see that little girl that had been stealing food from restaurants and doing other students’ homework to make money so she could survive. Bruce was starting to think that it wouldn’t matter what age she was, because he would always see her as that adorable little girl that could spend hours in their garden, forming little daisies into flower crowns and giving sugar water to bees who looked liked they needed it. He would always see her as little Marcie who literally cared for every creature, no matter how big or miniscule, and he would never understand how she found beauty in literally everything and everyone despite all of the horrific shit she had endured.

“Don’t worry about it; you know that thing was only like, fifteen dollars at Goodwill, remember? Besides, between the two of us, I'm sure we can find a way to fix it together. Remember what I said before? About things that are broken?”
“That they can always be fixed if you put in the time and effort?”

“There you go,” Bruce smiled at the much smaller girl and reached out to wipe the tears away from her cheeks, “Why don't you go get cleaned up and I'll take a look at your iPod, see what I can do to fix it.”

“Thanks daddy,” Marcie forced a smile as he gently ruffled the wild curls on top of her head before heading to her bedroom. The teenager wiped her hands over her face before discarding her skirt and ruined tights; she found herself staring at her reflection in her closet door mirrors as she untied the large bow tie that was part of her uniform before removing her white button up. She sighed wistfully as she spotted all the scars splashed across her deep brown skin, not particularly fond of the way the opal flesh stood out out like a sore thumb and wondered what it must be like to actually like the way you look. Marcie wandered to the bathroom that was connected to her room and grabbed a washcloth from the cupboard below the sink, letting it soak in the hot water before wiping at her bloody knees.

When her skin was finally clean of all the dried up blood, Marcie made her way back into her bedroom and instantly spotted a scalpel that she had forgotten to give back to her dad after borrowing it for a school project. Her lips parted as she stared at it for a moment before wrapping her fingers around the handle and pressing the tip to the tip of her index finger.

A single drop of blood trickled down her finger and to the palm of her hand before ultimately landing on her wrist and Marcie exhaled deeply as she stared at the blade, feeling more in control of herself than she ever had in her life.

“What have you ever had thoughts of suicide?”

Marcie’s thumb skimmed across a healed scar along her wrist as she stared up at Dr. Kumiega, observing her kind features warily.

“No,” Marcie lied, which is weird, because since when does Marcella Banner lie? Dr. Kumiega frowned and nodded slowly as Marcie continued to stare down at that scar along the inside of her wrist, writing down a few notes in her file that she kept for Marcie.

“Because if you have had any previous issues with depression or thoughts of suicide, it might be a good idea to look into putting you on medication, especially if you are still having those thoughts. Depression is a serious mental illness and even if you don’t think it’s that bad right now, it can certainly get worse over time and lead to dangerous habits—it’s best if we treat the problem right now before it worsens over time.”

“No,” Marcie shook her head and hesitantly met the doctor's observant eyes, “I've never thought about it.”

“Very well then; I think we should end today’s situation, you’ve talked quite a bit, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Marcella whispered, her mind wandering off to a faraway place as she stared back down at the scar on her wrist, “I guess I have.”

Now.

“You're an idiot if you think you're making it out of this alive,” Marcella silently told herself as she remained close to the ground, crouching as she swiftly made her way further into the cold and damp warehouse. She exhaled deeply and rolled her eyes, briefly wondering why she had put herself in a situation like this, though she knew her dad was worth the risk of getting seriously injured.
After climbing in through a tiny window on the backside of the building and walking through a long corridor, Marcella had found herself face to face with a long set of stairs that seemed to descend into nothing but a dark abyss—judging by the muffled screams, it sounded like she was about to descend into a literal hell hole. The Banner girl fiddled nervously with her watch as she made her way deeper into the building and firmly grasped the little baton that unfolded into a steel bo staff that was nearly her size; Clint had insisted she keep it after one of their training sessions so she could practice by herself. With her weapons in hand, Marcella felt prepared to run into guards at any moment even though the security here didn't seem very well thought out—which was weird because she had definitely been prepared for some Homeland Security kind of bullshit with lasers and motion sensors. Though the front entrance had been heavily guarded, the backside of the building only had one guard roaming around and Marcella had easily made her way past him and slipped open the back window when he had turned around.

‘What would Steve do?’ She silently asked herself and immediately scrunched her face up, realizing that the Captain definitely wouldn’t be trying to conceal his presence and would probably smashing through doors with his shield, easily taking down men who stood absolutely no chance against him. Then Marcie thought about what Tony would do and the mere thought of him announcing his arrival to all of the bad guys made Marcie roll her eyes, because that is certainly something that Tony Stark would do and would probably put himself in more danger. Natasha, however, would be sneaky and smart and even though she would have ulterior motives, she would have a solid plan and would take down anyone who got in her way and would probably make men twice her size shit their pants because she was the fucking Black Widow--everyone was terrified of her.

The three of them would all be brave, despite their fears, and Marcie knew that this was a bad time to doubt herself because there was a chance that she very well might not come out of this unscathed, or even alive; now was a bad time to feel weak and vulnerable.

So, Marcie lifted her head and sighed deeply before descending further down into the base.

The screams got louder and louder as she continued into the darkness and Marcella noticed that the screams seemed to belong to all women, and her heart pounded in her chest as she thought about what these cruel men must have done to those women for them to be making such horrific noises. A dim, green light suddenly appeared at the bottom of the stairs and Marcella held her breath as she finally finished her descent into the hellish building and hesitantly took in her surroundings.

Immediately, she brought her hand to her mouth in shock as her green eyes started to burn with tears. Nearly thirty women, barely dressed, surrounded her in tiny rooms that could only be compared to prison cells—cages. Up until that moment, she had remained strong, but when the gravity of the situation hit her, she couldn't help but to break down into tears. These women were clearly all being held against their will and most of them looked like they hadn't eaten in weeks and some didn't even have clothes to wear. The scent was what really hit her though; it was clear that these women didn't even have their own bathrooms and as she peered into one of the cells, she realized that they didn't even have beds or blankets. A few women stared at Marcella with hope, as she had been the first non-prisoner girl they had seen in months, maybe years, and wondered if she was going to help them out of this hell. Marcie felt like she was lost and in shock as she took in all of the faces that peered back right at her and the young scientist knew that their vacant and desperate stares were going to haunt her for the rest of her life and that she wouldn’t be getting a peaceful night of sleep any time soon.

Marcella turned to the cell that was closest to her, coming face to face with a woman who looked extremely malnourished and terrified. The Banner girl immediately made her way over to the young woman, noticing the way she cowered and stepped away from the bars. Marcella wished she knew
how to make herself less intimidating to the poor girl—nobody had ever looked at her the same way this girl was staring at her and it made her heart twist uncomfortably in her chest. The tiny woman must have realize that the Banner girl meant no harm, as she was still crying from the shock of their living conditions and the prisoner slowly trudged forward to come face to face with her.

“Habla usted Inglés?” Marcella questioned softly, wiping away her tears, and the girl nodded frantically, “My name is Marcella Banner, I promise I won't hurt you.”

“B-Banner?” She questioned, the name sounding familiar, “Dr. Banner?”

Marcella nodded enthusiastically, “Yes, my father is Bruce Banner and he was captured by the same people who did this to you... d-do you know where they took him? Have you seen him?”

“They...” The lady had a terrified expression on her face as she slowly answered Marcella's question, “They put him in the darkness... nobody comes out of there... they'll put you in there if you don't leave right now. Please, you still have time.”

Marcella shook her head, “The darkness? What do you mean?”

She shook her head frantically and held a trembling hand out in front of her, a bony index finger pointing to the space behind Marcella. The Banner girl slowly turned around and immediately noticed a cell on the other side of the room that was completely shielded in darkness and significantly smaller than the rest. She could barely make out a hunched over figure in the darkness and quickly turned back to face the woman who stared right back at her with watery, bloodshot eyes. The woman couldn't have been any older than Marcella, but this place had inflicted more pain on her than most people experienced in a lifetime and she had definitely aged so much. Marcie was sure that this woman had seen more in these last few years than she had seen in her entire lifetime and Marcie made a promise to herself that she wouldn’t leave a single woman behind, not if she could help it, at least.

“Nobody leaves,” She whispered, “You should go, while you still have the chance.”

“I can't do that, Miss,” Marcella stepped forward and reached through the bars, gently grabbing her scrawny hand, “I'm not leaving here until my dad is safe and all of you are free; you guys aren't animals and shouldn't be caged up like this. I promise, I'm going to get you guys some help and medical attention.”

“We're used to it, we'll be okay, but you need to leave.”

“This isn't something you should be used to,” Marcella insisted as tears burned her eyes, “This is horrific and this is complete bullshit; you guys shouldn't have to live like this—nobody should live in these conditions. I've seen people in America treat their own pets better than this... please, let me help you, Miss.”

“Please, you need to--”

The room suddenly grew deathly silent and Marcella heard heavy boot steps enter the prison-like room; the girl in front of her sobbed as she realized it was too late for Marcella to escape and she quickly backed away from the bars. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest, but the Banner girl slowly turned around and came face to face with the same man who had dropped that decapitated head on the table just the day before—Colonel Salazar. He was much bigger than she had anticipated and certainly just as intimidating as when she had first seen him the previous day, but she merely raised her chin and clenched her fists, earning an amused smirk from him. He looked a little older, maybe in his forties with a little gray that stood out in his dark beard and full mustache, along with
the black hair on top of his head. The corners of his eyes wrinkled as his smirk turned into a sadistic grin—he was the very depiction of the villain in every action movie she had ever seen and she almost rolled her eyes at the realization.

“Usually I have to drag these women down here with them kicking and screaming,” He stepped towards her and his dark, almost black, eyes bore into her green ones, but Marcella remained grounded, “But it's not every day I have a beautiful woman willingly bring herself here. I would have thought you wouldn't be returning after seeing what I'm capable of, especially after yesterday. Tell me, American girl, are you with the FBI? Or is it SHIELD? You seem like a smart girl though—too good for SHIELD.”

“You knew I was watching you guys,” Marcella ignored the question and her brows furrowed when the Colonel merely laughed.

“I knew you were there from the moment you entered the building,” He reassured her with a heavy accent and finally came to a halt when he was standing just a foot away from her, “Just like I knew that you snuck through that back window to get in here. I must admit that I'm actually quite impressed, a woman such as yourself would seem like the last person to wander down here all alone.”

Marcella's knuckles turned white as she glared up at the older man, “Why are you keeping all of these women here and making them suffer like this? This is no way for a human being to live; you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Money, mostly,” Colonel Salazar said honestly, like the noises of the women sobbing didn't phase him, “It's amazing how much men are willing to pay just to have a warm body in their bed for the night.”

“You're...” Marcella glanced around the room and took in the haggard, beaten up state of most of the women, the harsh expression on her face instantly melting into a devastated one, “You can't just use these women like this! They're not your property—they're human beings and shouldn't be living under these conditions!”

“I'm sure some of them enjoy it—you should hear the way they scream out when men touch them the right way,” He shrugged and Marcella felt disgusted as he stepped forward and swiftly grabbed her cheeks in his large hand, squeezing tightly; he didn't notice the way her hand gripped her little baton, “Normally, if someone pulled the shit you just pulled, I would have killed them in a heartbeat, but there's another reason why you're here. I'm sure you didn't come here just to tell me that I'm a bad person, right? Because if so, you have a massive pair of balls on you, young lady.”

“You have my father,” Marcella's hand shook as she slapped his hand away from her face and swung her baton, causing it to unfold to its full size, “And I won't leave without him and I won’t leave until every single woman in this room is freed.”

“The man who turns into a green beast is your father?” He laughed sardonically, circling her “You poor thing—to have such a weak man as your father must have been so horrible for you. We thought he was going to try to fight back, but he only got all sad and weepy when we would try to experiment on him.”

“What do you want with him?”

“We want his strength and power, but he's proven to be useless to us as he refuses to turn into the beast. We were hoping to sell a serum on the black market or to other agencies—can you imagine how much people would pay to have that kind of strength? I bet SHIELD wouldn't mind having
their dirty little hands on a serum that could make someone that powerful; I bet they would love to have that kind of weapon of mass destruction.”

“Is this why SHIELD sent him here? Because they knew you guys would capture him and experiment on him?”

“Even if that was their plan all along, it wasn’t much good considering he refused to let the green beast out.”

“You don’t want him to turn,” Marcella smiled cynically, “He would easily end your pathetic life if he chose to let the other guy take over. I’ve seen what he’s capable of and a man like you? He’d snap you in half like a twig.”

The arrogant smile on his face immediately melted and he swiftly pulled out a shotgun, holding it to her forehead, “Who the fuck do you think you are? Nobody talks to me like that and gets away with it! Do you even know who I am, you little--?”

With the kind of speed that Clint had taught her, she swung her steel staff and he let out a surprised cry as it collided with the back of his knees, “I'm Marcella Banner and I want my dad back—I won't leave without him!”

His gun had fallen out of his hand as she used her staff to slide it across the room, far away from his reach and Marcie watched as the arrogant expression finally slipped from his features, revealing something a little more human.

“Well this hardly seems fair,” He hissed and Marcella kept her eyes locked on him as he slowly stood up, “It seems as though I don't have any weapons but you do.”

Marcella scoffed, but dropped her staff anyways, “Life's not really fair, but I'm sure you would know all about that, right? I don't think it was very fair to rip these women away from their family and force them to have sex with disgusting men twice their ages and it sure as hell wasn't fair of you to perform experiments on my dad, yet here we are.”

The man circled her like a predator and she immediately noticed how he seemed to favor his right leg and she made a mental note of the weak spot, acting fast as a tight fist came towards her face.

Marcella immediately dodged it and remembered all of the training sessions that her and Clint had in the past; he would always tell her that it was vital for her to know self defense in case she ever ended up in a situation like the one she currently found herself in. Though the archer had admitted to her that she wasn't nowhere near as strong as him or Natasha, she was very quick and calculating on her feet and the young Banner girl had become somewhat skilled in memorizing fight patterns. Much like Tony, Marcella was quite smart and tactical when it came to combat and always seemed to keep her composure during her sparring sessions with Clint.

The Banner girl dodged another punch and aimed a kick at his left leg, causing the older man to grunt out in pain. Before he could compose himself, Marcella landed another kick to the sensitive spot between his legs—it was a cheap shot, but this man deserved a lot worse than a swift kick to the balls, as far as she was concerned. While he was crouched over with a hand cupped over his crotch, the much smaller girl easily grabbed him by the back of his head and forced it down onto her knee.

The sound of his nose crunching against her knee pad nearly made her gag and she watched as the Colonel collapsed to the ground, blood pouring from his broken nose. His eyes flickered up to meet hers in a rage-filled glare and Marcella stared right back at him with irritation; blood was starting to collect in the man's facial hair and she couldn't believe this was the same man she had seen just the day before. She was sure that she would have been dead by now, but this man was so much weaker than she initially thought and wondered how he had worked his way so high up in this cartel--had he
really acted his way to the top?

“You're not the one that decapitated that man from yesterday, are you?” Marcella questioned, her gaze still hard, “You put on this terrifying front that you're the biggest, baddest guy, but you have others do all of the dirty work for you, don't you?”

“You're a lot stronger than I initially gave you credit for.” He laughed, completely tip-toeing around her question and Marcie knew that her suspicions were correct, “Clearly you don't get it from your father—what a weak, pathetic little--”

Marcella immediately cut him off as her boot collided with the side of his head, causing him to turn over with a loud, pained groan and her eyebrows quirked up because how had she been so terrified of this weak man?

“Just remember,” The Colonel laughed and Marcella exhaled deeply when he pulled out a gun from one of the inner pockets of his coat, “He brought this upon himself, and now, so did you. It seems as though you Banners are destined for tragedy, don't you think?”

“Yeah,” Marcie scoffed at his words, realizing they held some truth, “Maybe we are.”

Marcella's expression remained impassive as he aimed his gun at the space between her brows and if she was scared in that moment, she certainly didn't show it. In the blink of an eye, the watch around her wrist vibrated and suddenly encased her entire forearm in a sleek, matte black gauntlet that she had helped Tony create. Before he could fire his gun, Marcella had already charged up the repulsor and let a huge beam of energy flying in the Colonel's direction, landing a direct hit in his gut.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she watched the man remain lifeless on the ground—she had never used the repulsors on anyone before and didn't realize how powerful they could be. Though she was scared, she slowly made her way forward and crouched down next to the Colonel's unconscious frame, noticing the key that was attached to the loop of his belt. Hesitantly, she reached out to grab the key, figuring it must have been the key to unlock the cells that these women had been trapped in. She knew she had to help them—what kind of monster claims women as a piece of property and uses them as a means to earn money? Marcie was vaguely aware of the sounds of heavy boots descending down the concrete stairs quickly as a group of security guards filled the room and surrounded her and the Colonel, and though she knew she was outnumbered, her fingers curled around the keychain latched to his belt.

Marcie let out a shocked scream as his hand shot out and nearly crushed her wrist in a death grip, “You dumb girl; I'm not letting you leave here with anyone, let alone your father or these useless women. I'll give you credit though, that was a cute little trick that you had up your sleeve, but you're going to need something much stronger than that to take me and my group down.”

Before she could speak, his other hand wrapped around her neck and shoved her down on to the unforgiving cement. He straddled her as both of his hands enclosed around her neck, cutting off her air supply and making her gasp desperately for air. Marcella clawed at his forearms with her nails, but he wouldn't let up and she grew desperate as her vision started to swim with black dots. She wondered what the others would do if she died like this, in an unforgiving city like San Pedro Sula, and God, she hoped that Tony or Steve wouldn't blame themselves for her recklessness because she only had herself to blame for this whole mess. Marcie wondered if this was what Steve felt when he had confessed his feelings to Peggy, only to have to crash that plane into the ice only hours after admitting his feelings because the freckled girl had been really looking forward to that date he had promised to take her on.

“Please...” She choked out, her lips growing blue and her face red.
“Nobody is going to save you, little girl.”

Then she heard it.

“Marcella?” A deep, monstrous voice boomed, startling the Colonel, “Marcie?!”

Behind him, Marcella could barely see a giant green figure emerge from the darkness of the cell behind them and while the creature certainly wasn't completely rational in his decision making—his eyes held something human-like within them and the young woman knew that she was safe from the Hulk's rage. She gasped desperately as the Colonel quickly unwrapped his hands from around her neck and she shielded her face as the Hulk easily smashed through the steel bars of the cell, sending metal flying in all directions. Two pairs of green eyes met one another and Marcella noticed the frantic look in Hulk's eyes as he observed her lying on the floor, a snarl on his face as she continued to wheeze and God, she could really use her inhaler right about now; suddenly he turned to the man that had assaulted her and let out a deafening roar. She turned over so she was on her stomach and coughed, her lungs burning in a way that reminded her of when she had inhaled all the dust after being buried underneath the rubble after the Battle of New York. An angry roar shook the ground as Marcella rested her head against the cold cement, trying to stop the blurring of her vision, and she could hear thunderous footsteps approaching her. Her father was in there somewhere and the Hulk seemed to understand this, because he didn't gaze at her like he was going to hurt her—she was safe now.

Colonel Salazar, not so much.

She closed her eyes when she heard the sound of bones snapping followed by high pitched screams and she wondered how long the pained wails would haunt her nightmares, along with the screams coming from the numerous women surrounding her.

Marcie was going to have a long therapy session when she made it back to New York.

Meanwhile.

“This is all your fault, you know?”

Steve ignored Tony for the hundredth time that day as the three of them wearily approached the warehouse, surprised to find it quite abandoned on the outside with no guards watching the entrance, but they could all hear the gunfire coming from the inside of the base, along with loud shrieks that made the three of them exchange worried glances. The Captain frowned as he searched for any sign of life, maybe a sniper on the roof or someone camouflaged in the bushes in front of the sketchy building. Steve managed to drown out Tony's crude threats, knowing that he was just worried about Marcella being hurt due to Steve's negligence, though the blonde knew there was nothing he could have done to stop her from going after Bruce. If Marcella was this desperate to find her dad, she would have found a way to sneak off no matter how hard Steve watched her, but it still didn’t ease his mind nor the guilt that was coursing through his veins because the thought of anymore people getting hurt because of him--especially Marcie--absolutely tore him apart.

“That's strange,” Natasha hummed and gained their attention, “Marcella's pulse seems quite… frantic and unsteady. Something intense must be going on in there to get a reaction like that from her.”

Suddenly, a thunderous, Hulk-like roar shook the ground around them and Steve nearly groaned because it was always something, wasn’t it?

“Let's move in, then,” Steve insisted and Natasha nodded as the three of them started towards the entrance of the building, looking extremely guarded as they took in their surroundings even though it
seemed completely deserted outside the warehouse. As they approached the steel double doors, they heard movement from the other side and Steve held his hand up, signaling for his comrades to stop in case it was a threat on the other side of those doors. Natasha held her gun out in front of her, Tony held a palm out, the repulsor glowing brightly on his palm while Steve held his shield in front of the three of them. The atmosphere grew tense as the doors rattled and the three prepared themselves for the worst; even Steve, who was normally composed, couldn't help but to feel nervous at what was going to happen when those doors opened.

The doors suddenly flung open and Tony was the first to drop his guard at the sight in front of them.

“Oh no,” Natasha said quietly at the sight in front of her, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Holy shit,” Tony whispered, eyes wide as a bloodied Marcella exited the building, looking determined and utterly shocked at the same time. Her cheeks were coated in blood, along with the white t-shirt she wore and though most of the blood didn't seem to belong her, Steve immediately spotted the angry looking red marks that were forming around her neck. Everyone could tell that her entire body was shaking furiously—from fear or shock, nobody was quite sure yet, but Steve saw the way her eyelids fluttered and knew that she had seen something horrific happen in that building. The vacant, faraway expression in her green orbs mirrored those of the soldiers he often met during the war that had been through something traumatic and Steve knew that her nightmares would probably get worse for the next few days.

Bruce, who was half naked and loosely covered in a thin blanket, had a hefty arm wrapped around Marcella's thin shoulders and she supported nearly all of his weight as they trudged forward slowly. Bruce seemed to be barely conscious and had wounds of his own, while Marcella’s features changed into an expression that the three of them had never really seen on the young girl's face before. Despite her entire body trembling, she looked determined and fierce as she practically carried Bruce with her and it wasn't until Steve spotted numerous women following in the Banner girl's footsteps that he promptly dropped his shield, sparing a quick glance at Natasha who seemed just as surprised as he was. Much like Bruce, the women were barely wearing anything and seemed to be in quite a poor state—most of them malnourished and covered in bruises and other wounds, all while clinging to one another for support.

It wasn't until she was standing about a foot away from Steve that she finally halted, glancing up at the huge Captain with a weary expression.

“These women need medical attention immediately,” Marcella stated softly, her voice barely there, and Bruce sluggishly lifted his head, “So does my dad—I think they injected him with something, but I don't know what. He doesn't seem to badly injured though.”

“What about you?” Steve whispered, surprised that he wasn't angrier with her, “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” She breathed, even though she definitely wasn't, and glanced over at Tony and Natasha who both still seemed surprised by the bloodied state of the young Banner girl, “Please, these women need help.”

“I'm on it,” Natasha finally snapped out of it and spoke up, giving Marcella the tiniest smile and nod before turning around and pulling a cell phone out of her pocket. Surprisingly, Tony remained silent as he gestured for Marcella to give him Bruce's arm, that way he could give her a much needed break from carrying the shaking man. Without a single word, the billionaire all but carried Bruce along with him, leaving Steve and Marcella alone and he soaked in her appearance, remembering the first time he had experienced being in a warzone; he was sure that the expression she currently had on her face mirrored the one he had on his face after making it out of the trenches for the first time. He had expected himself to feel angrier because she had gone off and done the very thing he had told her
that he was terrified of her doing, and he truly wanted to be mad, but as he stared at her sadly, the only thing he could feel was concern for the young scientist. Though Steve had witnessed horrible atrocities since coming out of the ice, and though he was entirely aware that Marcie had her fair share of horror stories, he knew that she wasn’t used to seeing the same things that he constantly saw while out on missions and he didn’t want to think about how badly this would mess her up.

Marcie was always so strong for him and everyone else, but Steve had never seen the Banner girl look as sad and shocked as she did when she gazed behind her to take in the horrific condition that most of the women were in. Everything seemed to crash into her all at once as the women all stared back at her with tears and looks of hope and Steve breathed deeply as one of them stepped forward and stumbled towards Marcella—the same lady she spoke to when she first entered that underground room. The woman nearly collapsed in front of Marcella but the young scientist was quick to catch her and hold the feeble woman close to her own tiny body.

“Thank you,” The woman cried out and Marcella, as soft as ever, wrapped the tiny woman in her arms and held her close so she wouldn’t fall apart, her hand stroking the matted hair on her head. Steve noticed it though—the way Marcella shook as she held on to the woman like her life depended on it and he knew then that she was also trying to keep herself from falling apart. The strong resolve she had put on for the group of beaten and bruised women suddenly broke and Steve heard her whimper, her shoulders shaking as she started as the two held onto one another.

“I’m so sorry,” Marcie consoled the battered woman, her voice cracking as the weight of the world suddenly pushed down on her already heavy shoulders, “I’m sorry I couldn’t get to you sooner… I’m so sorry…”

Steve swallowed the lump in his throat as Marcella focused on the group of women and comforted them until medical attention arrived; he remembered what he said about how people could never change and felt a small twinge of guilt because this tiny scientist was proving him wrong.

As the group surrounded Marcie and enveloped her in a massive group hug, he found himself thinking that maybe people actually were capable of changing their ways and showing kindness.

Steve wondered how it was possible for someone so tiny and soft to be so strong and determined, but then he remembered he had been like her at one point in his life and the Captain found himself terrified for her because after everything he had been through, he knew that he had let this cruel world ruin a lot of the softness he had in his soul.

Marcella couldn’t lose that softness because if there was no hope for someone like her in this world… well, what chance did the rest of them have?

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay in updating guys, it's honestly been such a hectic work week and I haven't had a lot of time to myself lately :/

Plus I wasn't really happy with the way I wrote this chapter originally because I feel like I'm not the best at writing action scenes and then I ended up re-writing like the whole thing lol. I really wish I was better at action scenes, but if anyone had any constructive criticism for me, I would definitely appreciate it because I feel like like I've gotten a lot of helpful advice on adding more development to this story!
Anyways, thank you all for the comments on the last chapter! As always, your guys' words mean so much to me and I'm so happy to hear that you guys are still enjoying my story :) I promise there will be more Steve/Marce in the next chapter, plus some angst and fluff between the two, because I'm clearly a sucker for the fluff lmao

Thank you all for reading!
Fickle Is The Finger Of Fate

Chapter Summary

Natasha remembered the first time she had ever seen Marcella Banner.

Thirteen years old... thirteen years old with scars covering her back and shoulders and a thick, painful looking scar on her face that someone had inflicted upon such an innocent soul at such a young age.

Natasha knew most things about Marcella Banners chaotic life but even she didn't know where she got that scar that traveled through her eyebrow and eyelid, stopping just an inch or two below her lower lash line.

Trigger Warning: Mentions of child abuse, depression, self-harm and suicide

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You know,” A voice startled the young Banner daughter and she turned to meet a pair of familiar blue eyes, “You're like some sort of hero now.”

Marcella glanced at her father's sleeping form through the window of the little room Tony had put together for Bruce to recover in before turning to Steve with a shy expression. She had expected him to be furious with her, but once he realized that she hadn't sustained any life-threatening injuries and she had actually gone in there with a weapon, his irritation had slightly disappeared and been replaced with intense worry. He was still disappointed that she had ignored his advice to not be so reckless, but he supposed that love made people do stupid, reckless things. Lord only knows he would put himself through hell if Marcella had been in the same situation, so he found it harder and harder to be upset with her. Every time he wanted to be angry at her for ignoring Steve's pleas to not do anything reckless, he would spot the dark bruises around her neck and the anger and hurt would immediately melt away. Instead, he would find himself pulling her into a strong embrace and Marcella wondered if it was more for him than her.

Essentially, Nick Fury had been furious to learn that she had intervened with what should have been strictly a SIELD mission and had all but confined her to the Avengers tower, which Tony seemed to have no problem with. Maybe it was revenge for making him so worried for running away, but Tony had decided it was only fair that he make her hours longer in the lab and have her wake up at nearly five in the morning every day. Perhaps it was just his way of trying to keep her mind off of everything that had transpired within the last week though—or a combination of both.

Steve knew that the long work hours didn't do anything to keep her mind off of the things she had witnessed in that warehouse and he knew that her nightmares were plagued by the horrific screams coming from the women who had lived in those cells for God only knows how long. There had been a few nights where she would show up in front of his room and he would immediately see the tears in her green eyes as he greeted her. He'd never really say a lot to her, instead, he would wrap an arm around her shoulders and lead her into his bedroom where he would hold her until she fell asleep
again, still plagued by nightmares. He would see the way she would zone out when she was working on something, the way her bright green eyes stared at the project in front of her in a lifeless manner, and Steve knew in those moments that she was somewhere faraway. It was like she would go into shock all over again, her body trembling as she was taken back to another time and tears would fill her emotionally vacant eyes. Tony must have noticed the Banner girl's change of demeanor as well, because more often than not, Steve had watched Stark gaze at the young girl with an uncharacteristically worried expression.

Even now, as Marcie gazed up at him, there was something different about the heavy expression she wore on her face and the way her green eyes peered up at him with exhaustion. Nearly losing her father for the second time in her life, along with seeing all those imprisoned women seemed to have stripped away the innocence she always seemed to exude. She seemed sad and lost now, like she didn't know where to go from this moment on and the pain was so palpable, that even Steve could see and feel it.

His chest hurt and he wished there was more he could do for her because he knew there was only so much his hugs could do to help soothe the pain she felt in her own heart. Steve liked to think his presence helped her out a little, but he was also well aware of the fact that this was an obstacle she needed to overcome on her own and that it would only get easier as she talked about it in therapy, because Steve had been able to tell a big difference in her personality after she first started doing therapy after the battle of New York.

“Do you ever feel like everything just hits you all at once?” She whispered, her tired eyes were emotionally vacant as she turned her attention back to her dad, “The guilt and pain? I can't imagine how it must feel for you...”

“Marce,” Steve whispered, now worried by how strange she was acting, “What are you talking about? Because of you Colonel Salazar's men are locked up in SHIELD facility—they can't hurt anymore women. You did this—you're a hero now... you always have been to me.”

“I did what anyone else would have done—besides, my dad did most of the work... he's the one that killed Salazar. I would probably be dead right now if it weren’t for him.”

“You're the one that found Bruce and all of those women; you could have easily left them there and you didn't,” Steve insisted, frowning when she lowered her eyes until they were staring straight down at her Converse, “You're a hero to those women... to Bruce and don't you dare let anyone tell you otherwise.”

She lifted her head and stared straight forward at his chest, “I don't... I don't feel like one.”

Without thinking, he reached forward and cupped her cheek, gently making her look up at him again, “Those women are free because of you, why are you being so hard on yourself?”

“Yeah, they are free,” Her eyes filled with tears, “And what good is it if they're returning to a city like that? You saw how horrible San Pedro Sula was—like hell on earth—what good is saving them if they're going to get killed in the streets by a stray bullet? Or being attacked by a member of a gang? I didn't save them, Steve, sure I might have solved a problem temporarily, but they won't be safe forever.”

Steve shook his head and stared at her with those sad, puppy dog eyes; even he didn't know what to say because there was truth to her words.

“There has to be more that I can do, Steve.”
“I'm sure there is, but Marce,” Steve sighed and his hand slid down to the side of her neck, “You can't just... you can't just bear the weight of the world on your shoulders. You're already doing so much by working with Tony to create those prosthetics for people who really need it and you're doing so much for modern science and technology—you can't just take on everything at once. Places like San Pedro Sula... that's something that the Honduran government needs to figure out and regulate better; even S.H.I.E.L.D could intervene and help weed out all the corrupt officers and officials and they already having starting with Salazar. If anything, let us deal with it; you've already been through so much.”

“I can't just...” Marcella sighed and stared up at Steve, “Do you think the rest of the world cares about what happens in those countries? Even I wasn't aware of what was going on until I saw it for myself. I don't think I'll ever forget the look on all of their faces—how terrified and malnourished they were... and the smell... those men didn't even let them out of the cells to use the bathroom. Things that I take advantage for every single day are things that probably became a luxury to them when they were freed from those cells; God, Steve... some of those girls were just children still, some barely teenagers. I want to make sure something like that doesn't happen again, especially in San Pedro Sula.”

The blonde stared back at her sadly, “I don't want the horrors of this world to harden your heart, Marcie.”

“My heart isn't as soft as you think it is,” She whispered, as if she was ashamed, “You keep forgetting that I came from nothing—that my own parents never even wanted me and my dad couldn't even stand to look at me after mom died. I've seen how cruel people can be... I've seen it firsthand... I've felt it every single day for months on end.”

“I know, I'm sorry,” Steve said sadly and nodded, his eyes flickering to the thick scar that ran past her eyebrow and ended just an inch or two below her eye, “As long as you don't go sneaking around again, you know that I'll always support you, Marce. I just need you to be more careful—I wasn't sure if you were okay or not when I woke up that morning and you weren't there.”

Her cheeks reddened and Steve felt her skin grow warm underneath his palm, “I'm sorry about that... I just couldn't sit around and wait for S.H.I.E.L.D to do its job.”

“I know... I guess I never realized how stubborn you are.”

“Yeah well,” She smiled wryly and turned her head to glance at her dad once again, “I can't just do nothing in circumstances like that... not when someone I care about or innocent lives are in danger. You know, I never had a lot of friends and my dad is really the only family I have left, but I can't imagine not having you guys in my life. I would do the same thing for any of you guys; I would do all of this over again if Tony or Natasha were in that kind of trouble..”

“I'd rather you not,” Steve chuckled and his blue eyes seemed to sparkle as he gazed at the Banner girl, “But I understand and can't be mad at you for that, I guess. If you're going to do something like this again, at least let Tony and I know before sneaking out—you're not alone, Marce.”

“I forgot what it felt like... to have all of these people care about me.”

“Well hopefully you can get used to it,” A soft smile broke loose on his stoic features, “It doesn't look like any of us are going anywhere.”

She observed the Captain for a moment and the exhaustion in her green eyes melted into something softer, “Do you still mean what you said that night?”
He smiled then, the corners of his eyes wrinkling in a happy way, “You know, you could probably make me angrier than the Hulk, and there would still be a spot for you in my heart. I wouldn't have said any of that if I didn't mean it Marcella—and I still do mean it.”

For the first time since arriving back in the States, Steve watched as a genuine, endearing smile spread across her plump lips at his sweet words. The lighting that emanated throughout the long corridor made her bronze skin seem so warm and she wore a soft pink jumper that was two sizes too big for her, the hem falling mid-thigh and the sleeves engulfing her petite arms. Her wild mane had been pulled back into a somewhat neat bun that sat on top of her head and a few curls had popped free from the restraints that the elastic had on the beautiful curls. Though she was clearly wearing makeup, Steve could faintly see her freckles underneath the light layer of foundation, along with the few scars that were scattered recklessly among her features. Her lips had been stained a pretty red color and a light coat of gloss had been applied on top, making them seem even more plush. Her long eyelashes fluttered against the top of her rosy, highlighted cheeks as she sheepishly gazed down at the floor and if it wasn't so inappropriate, Steve could have kissed her right there in the middle of the hall.

The Captain observed her with sparkling blue eyes and a fond smile as she turned her attention to the window that displayed Bruce’s sleeping form, still recovering from the withdrawals he had suffered from upon not being able to take the drugs that Colonel Salazar's men had cruelly injected into his system. Marcella still didn't know how he had the strength to control his emotions—especially his anger—during that whole ordeal, but she respected him for not giving into their selfish desires. He had briefly explained that his main reason for not wanting to let Hulk out was out of fear of killing those women who had been imprisoned along with him—that had been his greatest fear.

Marcie bit the inside of her cheek as she chose her next words carefully, “I heard what you said back in San Pedro Sula when you and Nat thought I was sleeping—about how people won't ever change and learn from their mistakes and I think you're wrong. I know... I know that you believe in standing up for what you believe in and fighting against bullies and the bad guys, but I think it's sad that you don't think people can change.”

“I want to believe that people can change,” Steve sighed softly, not seeming offended by her words, “But when I crashed that plane seventy years ago, I thought I was doing it for the greater good and thought that maybe if I could help end the war, people would learn from their mistakes. Nothing has changed since then.”

“I know,” Marcella smiled sadly and continued to stare at her sleeping dad, “I know people are capable of horrific things, but love can change this world and overcome all the bad things. There are people out there who are full of so much compassion and love... those are the people who are going to help this world, I just know it.”

Steve's eyebrows were pinched together as he observed the Banner girl with utter softness, “You really believe that?”

“With all of my heart,” She insisted, finally turning her attention to him with a genuine smile, “People are capable of wonderful things—you should know that by now, Captain.”

“I'm... I'm finally starting to realize that, thanks to you,” He chuckled and she beamed up at him, seemingly in a better mood despite their previous conversation, “I know... I know that the timing is wrong for me to be asking you this, but I was just wondering if you wanted...”

Marcella noticed the anxious expression on his hard features and raised her brows, “Would you want to have dinner together tomorrow night? Maybe watch some movies or something? I'm still trying to get caught up on all those Disney Pixar movies you recommended.”
She immediately perked up and nodded, “I'd love to have dinner with you, and a movie sounds
wonderful! We absolutely need to watch Wall-E this time—that movie was beautiful and fantastic.”

Steve grinned and nodded, “Okay... it's a date then.”

Later.

“You know,” Bruce whispered, startling his daughter who had been dozing off in the chair next to
his bed, “I never remember anything when the other guy takes over, but I remember seeing that man
nearly strangle you to death. What a weird experience... my anger mixing in with his; I don't think
I've ever felt emotions as strong as what I felt that day, not since your mother passed away.”

“Dad,” Marcella rubbed her eyes and went to stand up, only for him to gently grab her wrist and
keep her grounded, “I should go get a nurse.”

“No,” He continued to speak lowly and Marcella watched as he pushed himself up until he was
leaning against the headboard, “No more nurses and no more blood tests; I just want a little peace
and quiet... I also want to know why you would do something so stupid and put yourself in danger
like that.”

“SHIELD wasn't acting quickly enough,” Marcella explained feebly and hesitantly met his irritable
gaze, “By the time they got to you, Salazar's people would have tortured you to death and I couldn't
bear the thought of that happening.”

“I would have been fine!” He argued and Marcella frowned, knowing he was still off from all of the
withdrawals, “I'm always fine, but you... you could have gotten yourself killed! What you did was
stupid and selfish... I'd expect something like this from Tony, but not you. You almost got yourself
killed, Marcella.”

The younger Banner remained calm and merely blinked at him, “Yet here I am; why can't you just
be thankful that you're not a prisoner in that hellhole anymore?”

“You ruined it!” He snapped and Marcella slowly stood as his hands shook, “They were... they were
going to get rid of it, and you ruined it!”

Her eyes filled with hot tears as she clasped her own shaking hands together and took a few steps
away from his bed, “They were going to get rid of what?”

Bruce continued to shake as the anger on his face melted away—noticeing the fear in his own
daughter's eyes as she lowered her head and his heart sunk to the pit of his stomach as a wave of
shame washed over him. The fearful expression on her face was becoming all too familiar to him and
Bruce hated himself for letting things get so bad between him and his own daughter. Why did he
always let his emotions get the best of him? Maybe if he had ever learned to stay calmer in these
kinds of situations, him and Marcella would have had a better father-daughter relationship. Maybe
she wouldn't be as lonely and insecure if it weren't for him... was he even any different from his own
dad? Bruce remembered watching the light die from her eyes the day he had dropped her off at his
dad's house, just days after Betty's death; he had witnessed his own daughter's innocence and
happiness die that day. He remembered how terrified and jumpy she had been around him after he
had taken her back in and to this day, she still got scared that someone would lash out at her; there
were times where she couldn’t even look him in the eyes because she was so sure he would snap at
her and she had every right to feel that way.

He had always been the source of her pain and sadness, the reason why she didn't believe anyone
could ever really love her; that was on him and Bruce would never forgive himself for taking that
away from her. Bruce was part of the reason why she had convinced herself that Steve couldn't love her and he knew he was the reason why she never allowed herself to show what she was really feeling in front of others.

Even now, she was scared and sad because of how awful he was being to her.

“I'm sorry,” He choked out as she refused to meet his teary gaze, “I don't... I don't know why I do this to you—why I always cause you so much pain. I'm so sorry, Marce.”

“It's not... it's not your fault,” Marcella's voice shook and Bruce noticed how unconvincing she sounded, as if the only person she had convinced was herself, “I know that I haven't always been the greatest daughter... it's not you...”

Tears finally trickled down his cheeks at her self-harming words, “Don't do that Marcie, you were always the perfect daughter. You never threw any temper tantrums, you always ate your vegetables at dinner and got A's in school; all of your teachers absolutely adored you and you were the perfect role model for kids who came from nothing. You were always the perfect daughter... always so selfless even though you had absolutely no reason to be. You've always been the perfect daughter.”

“Then why did you leave?” She cried, finally meeting his heartbroken expression, “I was so little and you… you just decided to leave me with the same man who abused you as a child just days after mom died--who fucking does something like that?!”

“I'm sorry,” He whispered, closing his eyes, "I'm so--"

“No!” Marcella sobbed and suddenly bent over to grab his stubbly cheeks, “I'm so tired of your apologies—you're always apologizing! I want to know why you did it, dad, that's all I want. You're always talking about how I'm your pride and joy and the best thing in your life, but you still left me there knowing what that man was going to do to me and I know I've said so many times that I've forgiven you, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt me every time I look at you! Please... just tell me why you left.”

“After Betty... after your mother died,” He started, finally meeting her desperate gaze, “I just wasn't myself... I wasn't in the right state of mind and everything made me snap. Just the thought of living in a world where she was dead was enough to make the other guy take over and I couldn't... I couldn't risk being around you when I was that unstable. I don't... I don't know why I left you with him; I wasn't in the right state of mind and I had been drinking so much and the last thing I was thinking about was your well-being.”

“Would it have been different if I was yours by blood?” She whispered, hot tears still streaming down her face, “Would it have made a difference if I wasn't some pathetic foster kid you and her just picked off the street?”

“I would have left still,” Bruce answered honestly, causing more tears to spill down her freckled cheeks, “You're my daughter, Marcella, and I've never looked at you as anything less than my own child—you're not just some sad little girl we decided to take pity on. You're not some sort of charity case to help my guilty conscious—you were always my little girl and you always will be and I need you to know that not a single day goes by where the guilt doesn't incapacitate me for what I did to you. It's unforgivable and the fact that you're even standing here talking to me right now is astounding to me.”

“I wanted to be an astronaut when I was little,” Marcella spoke shakily, plopping down in the chair next to his bed, “I would spend every single night looking up at the stars and the moon wishing I could just leave Earth and then you and mom found me and I knew I wanted to be exactly like you
guys. Remember the first Christmas we all had together?"

Bruce smiled sadly and nodded, "We tried to convince you that Santa was real and you told us there
was no way that one man could visit every house in the world within the span of a night and you
said you didn't believe us—you've always been so smart."

“Everything I've done... I did it with you and mom in mind,” Marcella admitted vulnerably, wiping at
her flushed cheeks, “I always worked so hard in school because I wanted you to be proud of me; you
barely glanced at my report cards and would always miss award ceremonies. When I got accepted
into Columbia, you were the first person I called because I knew you'd be proud and the only thing I
got in return was your voicemail saying you were busy and to call back at a better time. I accepted
Tony's paid internship and this job because I knew you would never want me to move so far away
from you, and you intentionally go off on a mission you know is too dangerous and keep all these
secrets from me. I do so much for you and what do I get in return? Birthday cards apologizing for not
being there and empty apologies instead of actually showing me that you've changed.”

“Marce...” Bruce breathed as she stood back up and slowly back away from his bed, “Don't leave,
please.”

“You're not... I don't think you're in the position to be having this conversation with me,” Marcella
made her way to the exit, “Come talk to me when the drugs are completely out of your system and
your withdrawals are gone.”

Marcella could hear Bruce yelling after her as she quickly exited the room, holding a hand to her
mouth as she tried to muffle her sobs. She felt nauseous and lightheaded as she hastily made her way
down the corridor and into the elevator, holding her face in her hands as she finally released all of her
pent up emotions. Marcella felt sad and lonely as she pressed the stop button on the elevator and
sunk down to the floor before pulling her knees up to her chest. Her breathing was ragged and her
lungs hurt as she pressed her hands to the sides of her head, trying to rid herself of her dad's
desperate voice that kept haunting her.

She pressed her hands over her ears a little harder when small, but strong hands pried the doors open
and a figure stepped into the elevator with her.

“Marcie, hey,” Natasha frowned as she shut her eyelids together tightly and shook her head, “C'mon,
I need you to get up.”

“I can't,” Marcella sobbed, shaking her head as her chest and lungs started to burn, “I can't do this—
he doesn't love me.”

“Hey, no... don't talk like that,” Natasha wiped at the girl's cheeks and brushed a few curls away
from her face, “You know Bruce loves you more than anything in the world; don't say that. I need
you to get up now, okay? Your breathing is getting too heavy and irregular and you might be having
an asthma attack from the anxiety at--”

“I don't care and you don’t either!” Marcella shook her head and tried unsuccessfully to push the red-
haired woman away, “Please just leave me alone, just go away.”

“I can't do that for multiple reasons,” Natasha stared at her with an indecipherable expression, “Now
c'mon and get up; you're not really going to make me carry you, are you kid?”

“I'm not a kid.”

The smile Natasha gave her was full of sadness, “Of course you're not... but it's not going to stop
Clint and I from calling you one because when we first met you, you were just a kid. Now, it's time to get up and get some much needed sleep. These last few days have been pretty traumatic for you and you could certainly use some rest, don't you think?"

Marcella's expression looked absolutely wrecked and devastated as Natasha stood up and held a hand out for her to take. The younger Banner stared at her hand for a moment, wondering if this was some sort of trick that the SHIELD spy was playing on her or if she was trying to get into her head. The characteristic cold expression she normally wore on her stoic features suddenly melted into something softer and more genuine as she eyed the much smaller girl who was still sitting on the elevator floor with her knees pulled up to her chest.

Marcie's hand shook violently as she reluctantly accepted Natasha's peace offering and the assassin easily pulled her to her feet.

Natasha remembered the first time she had ever seen the young Banner girl; she had only been thirteen at the time and SHIELD had just discovered that Bruce Banner had some dramatic side effects to the gamma ray explosion that were quite concerning. He had done quite a good job at keeping her off the grid and away from the public for a short amount of time, but then one day Natasha had been sent to watch the elder Banner on an undercover mission to make sure that he wasn't a huge threat.

She hadn't been expecting to find him walking out of his house and to his Honda Accord with a much younger, tinier girl who wore a yellow backpack and a private school uniform. Even as an awkward teenager, Marcella Banner had been so incredibly adorable with her kinky curls expertly pulled into little puffs on either side of the top of her head and a mouth full of metal as she grinned up at her father, showing off her braces, along with the knee-high socks she wore with little daisies printed on them. Natasha had noticed no resemblance between the two and after running the girl's face through a facial recognition software program, she had found out the story behind Marcella Banner and where she came from—or in her case, how she came from nothing.

"I need an update on Dr. Banner, Romanoff."

"With all due respect, sir," Natasha started with a monotone voice, "I think it's the girl we should be more concerned with."

"Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realize she also turned into a raging green monster," Nick said with a sardonic tone, "I gave you a mission and that was to watch Dr. Bruce Banner and determine if he's a threat, not his thirteen year old daughter with a list of health problems that rivals Captain America's before he was given the serum."

The red-haired woman rolled her eyes at Nick's authoritative tone as she adjusted her ear piece and watched as a thirteen year old Marcella Banner skipped down the street, petting any dog or cat that happened to be moseying around in the neighborhood. After observing the tiny Banner family for a little over two weeks, Natasha had gathered numerous interesting, yet strange, facts about the younger Banner girl and while she never got involved with absolutely anyone during her undercover missions, even Natasha found Marcella Banner quite endearing. She liked to carry around treats in her backpack for stray cats and dogs, she always wore tights with daisies on them to school and if she wasn't wearing those tights, she would tuck sunflowers into her wild curls. Marcella loved to dance and sing, mostly along to shitty eighties music, and she loved tinkering around with gadgets and the thing that Natasha found most interesting was how she made little prosthetics and wheelchairs for disabled animals at local shelters.

"I think..." Natasha frowned as she continued to observe the unknowing girl with the bright green eyes and dorky freckles, "I think she’s stronger and smarter than Dr. Banner, in a sense; she sees
the world in a different way than anyone else and processes information in such at such an amazing rate.”

“Are you telling me that we should look into recruiting her rather than Bruce Banner, Romanoff?”

The Black Widow pursed her lips as she continued to watch Marcie make her way down the street and she noticed how there was this sort of sad, strange glimmer in her green eyes.

“No, sir,” Natasha whispered, observing the small teen as she tUCKed a thick curl behind her ear before fumbling with her keychain, “I don’t think we should recruit her--she’s not strong in that kind of sense.”

Natasha had already established that Marcella was capable of making military grade weapons and could most likely assemble an extremely powerful nuclear weapon at the age of thirteen; that nearly made her a perfect candidate for this operation that Director Fury had proposed. She had already made a flamethrower from scratch simply because she had been bored and her and Bruce had jokingly created an actual lightsaber and she had nearly burnt a chunk of his hair off before the two decided swinging around a lightsaber was too dangerous. She had been taking college level courses since she had turned nine years old and already had just as much knowledge of quantum mechanics and mechanical engineering that most professionals had obtained after going to college for an extensive amount of time. By the time she had turned twelve, she had written an essay on the four Laws of Thermodynamics that had almost instantly gotten her a scholarship into an Ivy League school of her choosing and it had been determined that she was basically a child prodigy; Natasha liked to think that she was smarter than Tony or Bruce, though the two men were probably much too stubborn to admit it.

Natasha had also learned that Marcella Banner wasn’t as cheerful and happy as everyone else thought she was, noticing the way she would stare at sharp objects with a faraway expression or how she wore hoodies even though it was starting to get so hot outside, which is why she would absolutely never work for SHIELD, because she was mentally unstable.

Marcella had a war waging on in her head as she tried to decide whether or not she should kill herself and Natasha noticed the way she would oftentimes zone out, her mind going to a place so far away as she wondered if the world would truly miss someone like her; she definitely should have been on antidepressants, but how could anyone have known what she was going through? Even though she could smile in front of her father, Natasha would see the way tears would trickle down her freckled cheeks as she chose to walk four miles home from school, rather than take the bus where she knew her peers would torment her. Natasha had learned that she usually skipped lunch in the cafeteria and would study in the library instead, or even help out her teachers with whatever material they were going over that day.

If Marcella Banner didn’t get help soon, she would be consumed by her depression.

The red-haired spy watched as Marcella entered her empty home and even though she knew she should be watching the older Banner right now, Natasha had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach and pulled her earpiece out, sliding headphones on top of her head before out a mobile device that was connected to the multiple mics that she had placed inside the house. Marcie, who had been humming softly, immediately stopped when she made it up to her room and Natasha watched through her window as she picked up an object that looked to be a scalpel, inspecting it with an expression that mirrored a wounded animal.

Natasha listened closely as the tiny girl made her way into the bathroom and only a few moments passed before she heard tiny whimpers and pained gasps.
Natasha closed her eyes and removed her headphones, hesitating before pulling out her burner phone to call for an ambulance.

Now, Natasha removed her hand from Marcella's and immediately slipped her arm around the much smaller girl's shoulders as she told Jarvis to bring them up to the floor that she was staying on. The younger Banner remained unresponsive under Natasha's comforting touch and seemed to be in a faraway place as she ignored the red-head's questions, choosing to stare blankly in front of her instead. Natasha eyed their reflections in the elevator doors and wondered when the hell Marcella Banner had become one of the saddest people she knew. Then again, there had always been this sort of sadness that resonated from her that not many saw firsthand and it was part of the reason why Natasha had always been intrigued by her, even though Marcie had been convinced otherwise. They were both pretty rough around the edges and more similar than most would think, and perhaps that was the reason why Marcie thought Natasha had never liked her, even though the Black Widow had always had something close to a soft spot in her heart for the tiny Banner.

Natasha believed that this strange and unlikely connection formed that day she called for an ambulance after Marcella had attempted to take her own life with a scalpel, digging down a little too deeply and nearly losing enough blood that definitely would have killed her if the ambulance had gotten to that house any later. Every time Natasha looked her in the eyes, she remembered that day and though she had very few regrets in her life, not intervening when she knew that girl needed help would always be one of those regrets because maybe if she had notified someone beforehand that Marcella Banner was clearly suffering from depression, maybe she never would have tried to end her own life.

She spared a glance at the smaller woman and took in her flushed, tear-stained cheeks and the way her lips trembled as she continued to think about her conversation she just had with her own father. Though she looked absolutely drained, there was this vacant look in her eyes that Natasha oftentimes only saw in other field agents that had seen so much horrible shit and she wondered if Marcella Banner really any different from the rest of them? As if hearing her thoughts, Marcella blinked and slowly lowered her head until she was staring down at her shoes instead of her reflection. Sure, she was normally an optimistic, bubbly girl but everyone knew that she was so much more than that, that she was suffering just like everyone else on the team who had seen their fair share of atrocities. The scars on her face and back told everyone everything they needed to know, that she was a survivor and her kindness and compassion had come with a hefty price.

A normal, happy childhood.

Natasha remembered the first time she had ever seen Marcella Banner.

Thirteen years old... thirteen years old with scars covering her back and shoulders and a thick, painful looking scar on her face that someone had inflicted upon such an innocent soul at such a young age.

Natasha knew most things about Marcella Banners chaotic life but even she didn't know where she got that scar that traveled through her eyebrow and eyelid, stopping just an inch or two below her lower lash line.

She had watched Marcella flinch whenever someone would just reach out to grab her hand, and how she struggled to make eye contact with anyone for years after living with her grandfather. Natasha would notice that even now, her thin shoulders would scrunch up and her muscles would become tense whenever she was in a room full of older men. Sometimes even when she was around Bruce or Tony, she would stare at them in a somewhat nervous manner whenever she made a mistake in the lab, wringing her hands together nervously as she waited for one of them to lash out.
Just like Bruce, Marcella could be quite the nervous wreck, but for completely different, sadder reasons.

After everything she had been through, she just didn't know who to trust besides for one man in particular and even she was too terrified to tell him how she felt.

“I misjudged you,” Natasha admitted out loud, and if Marcella heard her quiet words, she didn't acknowledge them, “All those times I talked about you behind your back and said you were weak... I was wrong.”

Marcella remained silent and continued to shake like a leaf underneath Natasha's arm, letting the assassin lead her to the elevator doors when it finally came to a stop at her floor. She reluctantly made her way out of the elevator and Natasha watched as she paused just a foot from the doors before slowly turning to look at the red-haired woman over her shoulder.

“Thank you,” Marcella finally said quietly, her face still void of any emotion, “For being a friend, Nat.”

The strong-willed red-haired woman remained silent, but gave Marcella a small nod as the elevator doors gradually slipped shut and she found herself alone, yet again. A shaky sigh escaped her mouth as she wiped at her warm, wet cheeks and she tried to ignore the wave of embarrassment that washed over her as she turned away from the elevator and slowly made her way down the long corridor. She came to a stop in the middle of the hallway as she glanced at the doors on either side of her, feeling conflicted as she tried to convince herself to just go to her own room and get some sleep; it was nearly midnight, after all.

Slowly, Marcella approached the door that was across from her own room and stared at it for a few moments, raising her hand to knock against the wood. She paused as she tried to think about the consequences of her actions, but she couldn't think of any because he had never shown any kind of anger towards her besides his outburst in San Pedro Sula. However, that had been something more than anger—it had been fear in his eyes as he yelled at her and told her she could have gotten herself seriously hurt. His anger had stemmed from complete and utter fear and Marcella knew he was more angry that she had put herself in the line of fire rather than disobeying orders and going against Tony's wishes for her to stay at the tower.

Even though she knew it was late and that he was probably asleep, she knocked on the door to Steve's bedroom anyways.

Regret immediately hit her like a freight train and she let out a shaky breath as she turned around and made her way back to her own room, closing her eyes when she heard a familiar voice.

“Marce?”

She froze in her tracks, right in front of her door, and hesitantly turned around when she heard Steve's heavy footsteps approaching her.

Her tear-filled green eyes slowly met his worried blue ones and she peered up at him through thick lashes as he furrowed his brows and observed her closely, his lips parting when he realized that she had most likely been crying for hours. He looked as though he had just woken up, Marcella noticed as she eyed his mussed up hair and his sleeping attire, some gray sweatpants and a white tank top that was probably a size too small for his large frame. He rubbed the sleep away from his eyes and Marcella felt bad when she realized that he had definitely woken him up from the sleep he desperately needed.
“Hey,” Steve said softly when she lowered her head and stared down at her feet; he noticed the stray tear that trickled down her cheek, “What is it?”

“I'm sorry,” She said quickly and roughly wiped away the tear, “I just... I just didn't want to be alone.”

Steve felt his heart sink slowly at the way her voice cracked and instantly reached forward to grab her dainty wrist before gently pulling her into a tight, secure embrace. His hand cupped the back of her head and he was careful as he wrapped his other arm tightly around her shoulders; immediately, he felt her tears dampen the material covering his chest and he held her as close as he possibly could without crushing her tiny frame. Steve felt the comfort of her own arms wrapping around his torso and he curled his fingers into her soft curls, placing an affectionate kiss to the top of her head in hopes that it would make her feel a little less lonely. Marcella noticed the way he almost seemed to curl his body around hers and while he probably didn't realize how heavy his body was against her, she appreciated the gesture and didn't complain when his arm tightened even more around her shoulders. His warmth was overwhelming in the most pleasant way possible, along with the clean scent of his body wash—it was a a generic woodsy scent, but it was still comforting and nice, nonetheless.

“You know you can come to me anytime, sweetheart.” The blonde said quietly against her soft hair, “When I said that I'll always be here for you, I meant it.”

Marcella swallowed the lump in her throat and curled her fingers into the material of his tank top, “Do you... do you think I could stay with you again tonight?”

Steve doesn't even hesitate as she slowly pulls away from him and he gently cups her face in both of his hands, “Of course you can stay; you can stay with me whenever you want to, Marcie. Go get changed into your pajamas, my door will be unlocked.”

The two reluctantly pulled away from one another and Marcella wordlessly made her way into her dark room to change into her pajamas. She threw on an old college t-shirt that was a couple sizes too big for her and a pair of shorts with little NASA logos on them that ended on her upper thighs before exiting her bedroom and making her way across the hall again. Just like he had promised, his door was unlocked and Marcella quietly slipped in and locked the door behind her. For the most part, his living quarters were quite bare with the exception of paintings that Tony's interior designers had hung up on the walls. Marcella wasn't surprised, as this wasn't really his home and he only ever stayed here whenever he was visiting New York and needed a place to stay.

The younger Banner quietly made her way through the living room and into his bedroom, where he had already made himself comfortable in bed as he waited for her. The large man wordlessly lifted up the comforter and she easily slipped underneath before curling up to his warm frame, closing her eyes as he gently pulled the thick comforter over her shoulders and wrapped an arm around her waist.

As he turned so he was lying on his back and she settled against his side with her head resting on his chest, she knew that this wasn't something that normal friends did. Marcella had wound up in Steve's bed every night since coming back from Honduras and he would always hold her close to him while she sometimes slept restlessly or peacefully—it was always hit or miss with her. He had learned that there was only so much he could do to prevent the nightmares that seemed to plague her during the darkest hours of the night, but he was always there when she woke up with tears in her eyes. Steve had also found his own kind of comfort in having her in his arms after he had gotten so used to spending most of his nights alone and he had discovered that he actually slept quite peacefully with her pressed against his side.
“Do you want to talk about it?” Steve questioned and felt the way her hand curled into a small fist on top of his chest. He was gentle as he covered her fist with his hand and smiled sadly when her fingers curled around his much larger hand; he readjusted his other arm until it was resting comfortably around her shoulders. Steve felt something in his chest flutter as she moved until she was in a more comfortable position with her head nestled underneath his chin and he could feel her long eyelashes tickling his neck.

Marcella swallowed the lump in her throat as she stared at their hands resting on top of his broad chest, “It's stupid... I'm stupid because I've been trying to make things right between us for the last, what? Ten years? It’s like… nothing I do works, you know? You can’t force someone to love you and I’m starting to think that maybe he never loved me in the first place, that I was just someone he pitied.”

Steve remained silent and stared up at the dark ceiling above him, furrowing his brows when he heard how shaky her voice was as she spoke about Bruce.

“I'm starting to realize...” Her voice cracked again and Steve tightened his arm around her shoulders to keep her from falling apart, “Just how much time I've wasted on trying to mend a broken relationship that might not even be able to be fixed. I've had so many nights like this one where everything just hits me all at once... where I can't help but to wonder if I was part of the reason why he left me.”

“No,” Steve whispered, feeling his heart ache for her, “You're not a burden, Marcie, and I obviously don't know Bruce as well as you do, but he clearly wasn't in the right state of mind when he first left you. He left because of his own problems and yeah, it was a really horrible thing to do and he clearly regrets it, but don't you dare ever blame yourself for him making the wrong decisions. You're not... you're not like him, Marce. You don't have to have the same legacy as your dad, you finally get to be your own person and choose your own path and learn from his mistakes.”

“I-I could have been better,” Her tears trickled down her cheeks and onto Steve's shirt as he held her impossibly close, “Maybe I could have...”

“Please, stop doing this to yourself; stop trying to convince yourself that you're not a good person,” Steve said desperately, feeling his own eyes grow watery at how devastated she sounded at the thought of her father leaving because she genuinely thought that she was a bad kid, “You're so beautiful Marce—on the inside and outside—Bruce was stupid for leaving you and not being there when you needed him the most. You can't keep blaming yourself for other peoples' mistakes and it's not only up to you to make things right again; it's something you both need to work at. Don't you dare ever put yourself down like that again though, because you honestly deserve so much more than all of these people who keep letting you down.”

Marcella remained silent as Steve slowly turned his head and she felt the way his lips skimmed across the scar that started just above her brow.

“Sometimes... sometimes I wish you could see yourself the way I see you,” He whispered as she sniffled against the side of his neck, “I get it though, because you've been through so much and it's hard for you to trust people when they tell you that they care about you or that they think you're beautiful. I've seen it, the way you roll your eyes when I tell you how pretty you are or the way you get all quiet whenever Tony compliments your work, like you think it's impossible for someone to actually believe you're capable of being anything else than some meek girl. I see the way you get nervous in a room full of men and I see the way you flinch whenever someone moves towards you too quickly; I don't think I'll ever forget the way you looked at me that day we went to Coney Island and you accidentally slapped me. You thought... for a second, you thought I was going to lash out
and hit you or yell at you and I'll never forget that Marce.”

“I didn't...” Marcella sighed and chose her next words carefully, “I can't help it sometimes.”

She didn't notice the tear that escaped the corner of his eye, and he was glad it was dark in his room.

“I know, I get it,” Steve continued to speak quietly, keeping his voice calm because he had gotten so good at always remaining composed, “Because you were just so used to it at one point in your life that it became an instinct for you... that fear of doing something wrong to make someone hurt you; I know you don't mean to do it. I just need you to know I would never do something like that to you, Marcie.”

“Steve...”

“I’d never hurt you,” He promised and she felt his fingertips curl into her soft hair, “I’d never raise a hand at you and I know that sometimes my emotions can get the best of me, but I’d never yell at you like I did in Honduras when you got hurt. I'm still sorry about that, Marcie, because I can still see the look on your face after I yelled at you and I still haven't forgiven myself for that.”

“He...” Marcie swallowed the lump in her throat and turned her head until her chin was resting on his chest and she was peering up at him through long lashes, “I’ve seen the way you look at the scar on my face—this one.”

Marcie’s fingertips skimmed along the scar that marred a perfectly plucked thick brow and Steve’s features softened immensely, “You don’t... you don’t have to talk to me about it if you’re not ready.”

“I honestly don’t remember what I did to make him so angry... something about the dishes I think?” Marce recalled, her fingers still skimming along the scar as Steve stared at her in the darkness of his bedroom, “He just got so mad and at the time I really thought I had deserved it because I had been messing things up that entire day, but that--me messing up the dishes and not drying them properly--I guess that had been crossing the line and he just snapped. Honestly, I don’t really remember him grabbing that glass coffee pot, or him throwing it at me; I was already so tired and so hungry and I just...”

She exhaled deeply and Steve reached out to gently grab her hand that was still stroking her brow, “It’s okay sweetheart, you’re good.”

“I didn’t have time to dodge it, the coffee pot,” There was this faraway expression on her face and even Steve’s hands couldn’t bring her out of the horrific memory, “I don’t remember a lot, but I remember the glass shattering when it hit me and I remember feeling a shard of glass slicing into my eye. I didn’t... I didn’t think I’d be able to see out of this eye again and my vision is a little worse in it than my other eye, but um, when I regained consciousness and went to my room to try to clean up the cut, that was when my dad came back and... I don’t know. I never thought I’d be able to forgive him after everything he did and then I opened the door and he was just standing there and I just... I couldn’t hate him. God, I tried so hard to hate him, but he...”

“It’s okay,” Steve murmured when he heard the way her voice cracked as she spoke so earnestly about Bruce, “I can imagine it would be hard for you to hate him, even after everything you went through, but he came back for you. Maybe that's why you forgave him, because you had been convinced that he'd never come back and he proved you wrong and I know he's hurt you so badly sweetheart, but I just feel like maybe... maybe he'll keep proving you wrong if you give him the chance."
“He never should have left me there in the first place,” Marcie said, and he could hear the bitterness that was edging its way into her voice, “Maybe he wasn't completely there mentally and the other guy was messing with his head, but my father knew what would happen to me if he left me there and he chose to do it anyways.”

Steve contemplated his next words, knowing there was truth to what she said, “I think you two have a lot of problems that need to be worked out and it's going to take time, but I don't want you to give up on him because I know you two have a special relationship and he was the only person you could rely on at one point in your life.”

Marcie swallowed the lump in her throat, “Aren't you the one that got mad at me in Honduras for going after him? You thought I was being ridiculous for trusting him after everything, for forgiving him even though he left me with the same man that abused him when he was little.”

“I was scared of losing you and I was hurt that you felt like you couldn't trust me enough to ask for my help,” He corrected softly and moved his hand to stroke the back of her neck, “And I had no right to snap at you like that, but I need you to know that won't ever happen again and I'll never hurt you and I don’t think he will either.”

“I know,” She whispered with a sincere tone, “I know, Steve, and I'd never hurt you either.”

The Captain smiled sadly at her soft words and lifted his head to press an affectionate kiss to her cheek in a gesture that he normally wouldn't have the confidence to do. Steve felt comfortable around Marcie and while he still wasn't entirely sure of what their relationship was supposed to be, he knew it was something more than friends and she seemed to understand this as well. She was the one person of that could make him genuinely happy and relaxed just by being around him and he'd never understood how she managed to do that, how she managed to make him feel like he was home whenever he was with her. When he had first pulled her out of the rubble all of those months ago, he had never expected for the two of them to grow this close, but he was so happy that they did because Marcella Banner made his life so much brighter.

Her lips quirked up into the tiniest smile as Steve's lips lingered against her cheek and he hoped that he made her life a little brighter and happier as well.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, I am so sorry for the long wait guys :( Life kind of got in the way and then I was going through serious writer's block and just didn't have any motivation to edit or proof read this chapter. I've working like crazy lately and I'm always so tired, but I really want to get back into the habit of writing and editing every night again.

Thank you all for being so patient with me and for all of your lovely comments, it really means so much to me and keeps me going; you guys are really the best! I'm hoping to have the next chapter up in just a few days since this one took me forever to get out. I already have the next part all written out and let me just say, it's angsty and fluffy AF and I'm kind of living for it tbh. At this point, I feel like I'm trying to give everyone as much character development as I can before I start TWS plot, which I definitely have really big plans for and can't wait to write because that's also about to get super angsty AF lmao.

Anyways, thank you all so much for being so patient and lovely! It means the world to
Sunshine Trapped In Our Hearts

Chapter Summary

“Do you think anyone is really going to remember you in the future when you’re dead and gone? You’re not special, kid.” Tony stepped forward then, his arms falling to his sides as he approached her like she was his prey, his dark eyes void of any emotion, “Sure, you can get away with being as small or as weak as you are because that has nothing to do with how smart you are, but nobody is going to give a shit about you when you look like that..."

Marcella backed away, shocked by his brutal words and not liking how cold he sounded when he spoke

Trigger Warning! Mentions of child abuse and scars, very brief mention of animal abuse, but nothing too detailed!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“When did you become an expert in aerospace engineering?”

Marcella lifted her welder's mask up and peered up at the billionaire, “That was actually what I was originally majoring in, but I thought biomedical engineering would be more fulfilling, you know? I kind of went through a few different phases... like wanting to major in chemical engineering or quantum physics. I almost thought about going into the medical field to be a surgeon as well, but I figured I didn't really have what it takes to do that kind of stuff. I did take a few basic medical training classes though; I’m still trying to decide what I want to go back to school for in fall.”

“Nonsense,” Tony waved his hand and glanced at all of the stabilizers she had already built, “You should go back and get a degree in aeronautics, kid—space is really fucking cool and nothing is more rewarding than exploring the unknown. Plus I can tell that you're really passionate about it.”

“You want me to go and get another PhD in engineering just because 'space is cool'? Do you realize how much that would cost, dude? Just a semester at Columbia was twenty thousand dollars and I would have been in debt for the rest of my life—and afterlife—if you hadn't paid it off for me, which I still wish you wouldn't have done, to be honest.”

“Why not?” He grinned and Marcella couldn't tell if he was being serious or not, “You're already making a pretty hefty paycheck working here with me. Besides, you're only twenty-two and have a PhD already; that's pretty damn good considering it takes most people six or seven years to get one of those bad boys.”

“It did take me six years,” Marcella raised her brows at his confused expression, “I graduated high school a couple years early and got accepted into Columbia right away after taking college level courses—when I was thirteen. I took a year off for personal reasons and then another year to travel, then I took a few extra unnecessary classes just because I was interested in them, so it actually took about five years, now that I think about it. I probably could have gotten it done a couple years ago if I didn't take that time off and fully decided on a major, you know?”
“You…” Tony pressed a hand to his chest, taking in this new information, “You're kind of insane--you know that right? You're trying to tell me you could have gotten your PhD before you turned twenty?”

“What?” She deadpanned, “Like it's hard? Maybe you're right though—maybe I'll go back to school and get another PhD in aerospace. Why not shoot for a few others after I'm done with that? Chemical engineering sounds like it would be a nice walk in the park, don't you think?”

“I hate you,” Tony insisted and watched as she turned back to her work with a smirk, “But I think I'll keep you around anyways.”

“Gee,” Marcella smirked and shook her head, “Thanks, I'm honored.”

The two fell back into a comfortable silence for about an hour, their work playlist playing softly in the background as they worked on their separate projects. Before, Marcella would typically only help Mr. Stark with his own projects and almost act as an assistant to him, which she didn’t mind because he had always trusted her enough to not fuck up his routine or any of his projects. Eventually, she had become comfortable being in a laboratory setting with him and had politely asked if she could work on her own projects when he didn't need her—to which he had taken surprisingly well and had helped her gather the resources she needed for her own independent projects. Mr. Stark had given her the freedom she desired, but if he ever needed assistance with something, she was there in an instant to help him.

They had, much to everyone’s shock, formed something similar to a close friendship and even Steve wasn’t oblivious to the way Tony’s brown eyes would soften whenever Marcie talked about things she was passionate about; she would get just as excited as Tony when he started forming new ideas. Next to aeronautics, the tiny scientist had recently gained an interest in quantum physics and Tony would never understand how she did it, but that woman had a brain that was like a sponge and just soaked up any information that was thrown her way. She had only been thirteen when a younger Tony heard about a little girl that the media had deemed as a child prodigy with an IQ over two hundred and he remembered scoffing at the idea of Marcella Banner being a genius because the only thing he figured she had going for her was her last name. He had severely underestimated her, but then he had actually met her when she was around sixteen when he gave a lecture at Columbia and actually had time to talk the wide-eyed, starstruck teen.

“Do you remember the first time we met?”

Tony glanced at the Banner girl who was staring back at him with an amused expression, his brows furrowing as he remembered the first time he had ever met her.

“That’s quite the car you got there for someone so tiny.”

A sixteen year old Marcella Banner blinked as she juggled her textbooks in her arms as she tried to fish her car key out of her pocket and decided to glance at the older man who was leaning against his own luxury car. The first thing she noticed was his black Armani shoes that didn’t have a single scuff mark on them, and how crisp his matching Armani suit was—not a single wrinkle marred the thick fabric. His facial hair was neatly groomed and trimmed into a perfect goatee and the sunglasses he donned were probably worth more than four of her paychecks combined; he emanated money and power and Marcella scanned her surroundings to make sure he was talking to her.

Her black sweats that had been tugged up just underneath her knees were probably the furthest thing one could get from a luxury suit, along with a white NASA sweatshirt that still fit her from when her dad had taken her to the Yerkes Observatory eight years ago when she had been going
through her space phase. Her massive mane had been pulled into a messy bun and the fuzzy moccasins she wore probably wouldn’t have looked as silly as they did if she didn’t pair them white socks with daisies on them that had been pulled up mid-calf. Her glasses were probably too big for her face but she didn’t care as she stared right back at Tony Stark with wide eyes, feeling slightly caught off guard as her eyes flickered between him and her beloved, decked out Subaru that had more horsepower than most luxury cars.

“Thanks?” She finally spoke, the word coming out as a question, “I built most of it myself.”

The billionaire nodded slowly and though she was clearly struggling with her books, he remained propped up against his own car with his arms crossed over his chest and inspected the car like he was actually impressed, “Are you majoring in mechanical engineering? I’m doing a lecture later today at Havemeyer Hall; it might interest you if that’s your major.”

“No... I’m undecided... leaning more towards biomedical engineering these days,” Marcie explained finally fishing out her key so she could unlock her car; she glanced at Mr. Stark and instantly noticed the way his face scrunched slightly at her words, “What? Is there a problem, Mr. Stark?”

“I took a few courses on biomed engineering when I went to MIT,” He shrugged and Marcella tried not to grimace at the cocky aura that seemed to surround him in a toxic cloud, “Always bored me, to be honest. I guess I just don’t understand why someone would spend that much money on a field that barely gets any funding from the government. I’d switch to mechanical engineering if I were you, kid, there’s always a demand for mechanics and aeronautics majors and it pays a shit ton more.”

Marcie couldn’t stop the grimace that spread across her features and instantly grew defensive at his blunt words, “With all due respect sir, I’d rather be helping others and changing the future for medicine rather than making weapons that terrorist organizations seem to keep getting their hands on to hurt the innocent. The United States has a really shady history with giving powerful weapons to foreign groups that slaughter people who fight for what they believe in and if I recall correctly, your name is on that list of people who have strengthened various terrorist groups--though I’m sure you don’t care about that right? No…”

Marcella let out a sardonic chuckle as the billionaire slipped off his sunglasses and raised his brows at her, “No, you only care about the money, right? I admire the things you’ve accomplished at such a young age and I used… I used to look up to you, but I can’t support someone who has built part of their empire off the backs of those who have been slaughtered by the very weapons you have manufactured.”

Mr. Stark pursed his lips together and nodded before totally disregarding everything she had just said, “I kind of like you; what’s your name kid?”

Marcie wasn’t sure why she was so surprised by the sudden change of topic, because there was clearly no way this man could be swayed, “Marcella… Marcella Grace Banner.”

“No shit,” Tony raised his brows even further as he instantly recognized the name, “You’re like a celebrity on this campus; for some reason I was expecting you to be different, a lot taller and more powerful looking. Listen kid, I respect you too, because you’re clearly extremely intelligent if you managed to get accepted into Columbia at thirteen, but I have a little advice for you. Nobody is ever going to take you seriously if you don’t exude wealth and power--nobody is going to take you seriously in that Goodwill getup or when your voice is shaking that much because you just ran up a flight of stairs and you’re this close to having an asthma attack.”
“Do you think anyone is really going to remember you in the future when you’re dead and gone? You’re not special, kid,” Tony stepped forward then, his arms falling to his sides as he approached her like she was his prey, his dark eyes void of any emotion, “Sure, you can get away with being as small or as weak as you are because that has nothing to do with how smart you are, but nobody is going to give a shit about you when you look like that--and that whole thing with me manufacturing weapons to the terrorists? I just make them sweetheart; I don’t care whose hands they fall into as long as I get my paycheck at the end of the day and maybe one day you’ll understand where I’m coming from.”

Marcella backed away, shocked by his brutal words and not liking how cold he sounded when he spoke, “I find it sad that you lack compassion, Mr. Stark, and no, I don’t think I’ll ever understand where you’re coming from. I would never discourage someone from following their dreams because it wouldn’t earn them enough money, and I sure as hell would never tell anyone that they’ll never amount to anything and that all of their hard work will someday be forgotten. I can’t imagine being able to sleep peacefully at night knowing that my creations were tearing families apart and killing children, but I guess that kind of money can buy you as much alcohol and sleeping pills as you need, right?”

Tony scoffed and opened his mouth to speak, but Marcie beat him to it and for once in his life, Tony Stark didn’t get the last word in.

“Thank you for the talk, Mr. Stark, it was quite enlightening and has made me glad that I stopped looking up to you a long time ago,” She forced a polite small and opened passenger door of her car, plopping all of her stuff down in the empty seat, “I hope one day we’ll meet again and you’ll feel differently about the world--that maybe you’ll have more sympathy and compassion for those who can’t afford nice Armani suits or Lamborghiniis. Have a nice day Mr. Stark, and good luck with your lecture tonight, I know many other students are looking forward to it, though I would suggest you brush your teeth before speaking in front of all those people. I can smell the whiskey on your breath from here.”

Tony bit his tongue, reminding himself that this was just a sixteen year old girl and it would look bad on him if he got in a fight with a literal teenager. He stepped out of the way as she slid in the driver’s seat and the car roared to life; the tiny teen looked slightly out of place in the heavily modded car, but she clearly had a good handle on it as she swiftly backed out of her spot and sped away, easily drifting out of the parking lot.

Tony decided he didn’t like Marcella Banner that day, which was fine with her, because she certainly didn’t like him either.

“I remember,” Tony answered, shaking his head as Marcie easily used a small blowtorch, not bothering with her welder's mask, much to his dismay, “I was uh, a bit of an asshole then, huh? I remember saying some horrible things to you and thinking you were just another bratty, privileged teen who got into whatever school they wanted because of their parents.”

“I think you just described yourself, not me.”

Tony practically snorted and shook his head, “I don’t think I ever really said sorry for how rude I was that day.”

“You learned from your mistakes though and you changed your entire company just to make sure your inventions wouldn’t ever fall into the wrong hands again,” Marcella said quietly as she set the blowtorch down on the workbench, “I think... when I watched that press conference on TV--the one you held right after coming back from the Middle East--I think that really opened my eyes and made me start believing in people again. I mean, if someone with your kind of power and notoriety could...
come forward and admit their wrongdoings, surely there’s hope for everyone else, right?”

“I think…” Tony sighed as he searched for the right words, “I know you try to have faith in everyone, kid, but I think some people are a lost cause no matter how much you try to change them. Who knows? Maybe I’m just a pessimist.”

Marcie placed her hands in her lap and stared at them as she thought about Tony’s words, “Maybe you’re right… maybe some people just can’t be saved.”

“Marcie? Do you have a moment?”

Marcella and Tony both lifted their heads and turned around, spotting the older scientist standing in the doorway of Tony's main laboratory. Bruce was staring at the younger Banner with so much remorse that even the billionaire felt it and he hesitantly glanced over at the girl sitting next to him, not really fond of the strange expression on her face. Her green eyes were wide with fear and sadness and her breathing had picked up, clearly not expecting this visit from her dad and probably not happy to see him either. Tony turned his attention back to Bruce, noticing the thick book he held in his arms—it looked to be an album of some sort, but he wasn’t positive. While Stark didn’t know the extent of their conversation they had just the day before, he knew it was bad enough for her to not say a single word or even send a smile in Tony’s direction when she first arrived, which was rare for the little Banner because not a day went by where she didn’t greet him with the biggest smile that almost always had him smiling back at her. Every time they worked together in the lab or she was helping her patients, she always had a characteristic smile on her soft features that seemed so infectious and had others treating her with the same amount of warmth and softness.

Tony wondered how she always managed to do it, how she could be so fucking soft and kind despite all of the horrors that had been inflicted upon her--how she could find beauty in every single person and thing she laid her green eyes on. It was a superpower in itself, Tony decided then, because he had always been a realist and was always wary towards others because he had been hurt so much, but so had she and it never really changed her outlook on life, did it? She had been stretched to her limits and broken so many times, but it seemed like she always came out on top and Tony wondered how she managed to do it.

To him, Marcella Banner would always remain such an enigma.

Marcella was always such a ray of sunshine and could make even Tony smile when he was having the worst day, which is why he had been confused when she showed up with red-rimmed eyes and flushed cheeks—it was clear she had been crying hard the previous night.

Marcella remained silent and Bruce took that as his cue to continue, wanting to reach out to comfort her because she looked so sad and lost and it was all his fault that she was feeling that way.

It was always his fault.

“I took the time to go over everything I wanted to say because you, out of all people, know that I've never been good with words,” He explained and stepped further into the lab, ignoring Tony's pointed look, “I always stutter and the things I think about saying never come out the way I want them to, but that was never an excuse to do and say all those horrible things to you. That was never an excuse to just get up and leave you with the same man who abused me and I… it’s unforgivable. I could have left you with anyone else and I… I listened to him--I listened to the Other Guy and I’ll never understand why I did that because he’s never thought rationally for me.”

“You're right,” Marcella said poignantly and Bruce nodded, glad that she was hearing him out, “You had absolutely no excuse to leave me with him.”
“I remember... I was eight years old and I... I had a cat—barely a year old,” Bruce swallowed the lump in his throat and Marcella longed to reach out and hug her father as tears gathered in his eyes, “He got mad at me one night, your grandfather, because I hadn't cooked his steak properly and he came into my room and he... I was holding my cat and he just grabbed it and...”

Marcella exhaled shakily and lowered her head, knowing exactly what had happened next.

“When your mother and I first adopted you, I made a promise to myself that if you ever asked for a pet, I'd get you whatever you wanted and would teach you how to care for it. I promised myself that I would never do anything to traumatize you the way my own father traumatized me when he killed that poor cat right in front of my own eyes—like taking away a life meant absolutely nothing to him. Do you remember what you asked for the first birthday we celebrated after adopting you?”

“Of course,” Marcie's voice cracked when she spoke, “I asked for a rabbit because we had been studying about them in school at the time and you and mom took me to the shelter to look for one.”

“You named it Daisy because those were your favorite flowers when you were little,” He reminisced, a sad smile on his face, “That thing hated everyone besides you and I remember you would carry her around and pet her like she was a cat or something—she would always sit on your lap and you would cuddle her whenever you two took naps together. You loved that rabbit the same way I loved my cat and I'll never forget the look on your face when you saw her at the shelter for the first time. You cared for that rabbit for nearly ten years and I saw how much it tore you up when she died from old age and you had to bury her. You've always... you've always loved and cared so hard and I'll never understand how you have that kind of strength because I know how much your grandpa hated that rabbit and I know you took so many hits to protect it and hide her. To this day, I'll never understand how you kept that rabbit alive for so long.”

Marcella stared down at her shoes and wiped at her cheeks as a few tears escaped the corners of her eyes, “When you love something or someone, you're supposed to do anything to protect them.”

“I know… and I failed at that,” Bruce whispered and Marcie watched as a tear slowly trickled down his stubby cheek, “I didn't... I didn't even think about you and Daisy when I left you there. Marcie... I didn't even think about my cat that he had killed when I had been your age and how he could have easily killed that rabbit too. I was… me and the Other Guy, we were selfish and we were only thinking about ourselves and getting as far away from civilization as we possibly could. We didn’t care who I was dropping you off with and we didn’t give a shit what they would do to you; the only thing that mattered was leaving as fast as we could. I don’t… I remember waking up one morning and he was in control and I heard your voice from somewhere in the back of my mind and I…”

Bruce’s eyes were wide and full of horror as he shook his head, “I couldn’t remember who the voice belonged to; I couldn’t remember my own daughter and when I finally turned back into myself again, I knew it had been so long. It could have been years and I wouldn’t have known--time didn’t exist at that point in my life, but I knew I had to get back to you because everything had hit me all at once and you... you were still suffering while I was holed up in a cave in the middle of nowhere. I don’t know why I did it Marcie and I know that's shitty because I'm supposed to be able to explain everything; I'm supposed to have all the answers to all of your questions because you used to look up to me like I was the smartest person you had ever met and known, but I can't explain why I did what I did.”

Bruce quickly wiped at one of his tear-rimmed eyes with the back of his hand and tried to explain his actions the best he could, “I don’t know why I did it--why I left you with him--and I wish I could put all the blame on the Other Guy because he was just… it was like he was infecting me with all of his shitty thoughts and decisions but I could have fought it. I could have stayed with you and maybe our
relationship wouldn’t be as bad as it is today.”

“I killed your childhood... your innocence and happiness,” He admitted, more to himself than her and she sucked in a deep breath as Tony shifted glances between the two Banners. Tony watched as the expression on Marcie’s face completely crumpled as she gave up on trying to remain composed in front of the two of them and tears immediately gushed from her eyes. He hated comforting people and he had always been complete shit at it, but Tony found himself placing a large hand between her tense shoulder blades in a feeble attempt to keep the tears at bay; he knew that this was probably a conversation that the two should be having privately, but the billionaire couldn't find it in him to leave her side.

“I still mourn that death... just as much as your mother because you were never really the same after I came back, were you? Even now, after everything you've accomplished and making a name for yourself... there's so much sadness in you and I know a lot of it is because of what I did... what my own father did to you and the scars he gave you on your back and your face. I see the way you care for and love others and I know it's because nobody has truly ever cared for you with that same intensity and you wish someone would return the sentiment; you always seem so lonely, even when you're surrounded by others. I think the first time you actually talked to Steve after the Battle of New York, that was the first time I had ever seen you grow that attached to someone that quickly and I know it’s probably because that was the first time in a very long time that someone returned your feelings. As silly as it might sound to others, the day that Daisy died... I think the rest of your innocence and livelihood died with her because she was the only thing that had given you just a tiny bit of happiness and hope during those dark nights when I wasn't there and then you… you met him along with everyone else on the team.”

Marcella remained silent and her eyes flickered up to meet Bruce's watery ones; Tony knew he should get up and fucking leave already, but he felt glued to his chair. Though he would never, ever, admit it out loud, Tony Stark had begrudgingly grown quite fond of Little Banner and wanted to make sure Big Banner wasn't going to fuck up and say something harmful to her. He was well aware of the fact that the two had a lot of shit to talk about and they were probably going to require a shit ton of therapy after this, but Tony knew it was a step forward in mending their relationship and he wished that his own father would have had this kind of conversation with Tony before he died. He knew how difficult it was for someone like Bruce to come forward and admit that he was wrong, because he was one of the most renowned scientists in the world and was used to being right all the time--but he had fucked up this time and done Marcie so fucking dirty by leaving her when she had been so little and vulnerable.

So, he stayed in his spot and crossed his arms over his chest, raising his chin high as he silently guarded his Little Banner because she had always, always, been there for him when he needed someone to hold him up, and he'd been damned if he took that for granted anymore.

“It's okay,” Bruce whispered vulnerably and stopped just a foot or two away from her, “You're always the one who does the talking so if you don't want to say anything, I understand... you don't even have to say a single word if you don't want to, but try to bear with me, okay?”

Bruce continued when Marcella nodded without a word, “You were right when you said I was never there for you when you needed me because looking back on it now, there's so many things I missed out on. I never got to drive you to any of your school dances, I never gave you any lectures that any father would give when their daughter tells them that they're going to a high school party... I never even got to teach you how to drive stick shift—you learned it all on your own. I never got to yell at you for sneaking out, even though you were such a good kid and I don't think you ever snuck out or hung out with questionable people. I missed so many of your birthdays and science fairs; you told me so many times that I was your hero when I did absolutely nothing to deserve the way you used to
look at me with admiration. After I came back, I was just a monster to you and I know you were lying to me all those times you denied being scared of me, and I just need you to know I don't blame you for thinking of me that way; I don't blame you for looking at me the same way I used to look at my own father.”

“I'm not scared of you, dad.”

Bruce shook his head as he stared at the torn expression on her face, “Your eyes have always told me every single emotion that you're feeling and more often than not, they are just filled with nothing but sadness and fear when you look at me. I know that I deserve it... I deserve your anger and hatred but you can't even find it in yourself to hate me... are you even capable of hating someone? God, I don't think you are and I don't think I'll ever understand how you can do that because I definitely deserve it.”

Marcella blinked, trying to stop the tears that were still pouring from her eyes, “Hatred doesn’t fix anything… it’s an exhausting emotion to feel all the time and I’m already tired enough as it is, dad.”

“I know… I know.” The older man couldn’t even force a sad smile as he regarded her with an indecipherable expression, “But every time you look at me with that same look that you only ever give me and nobody else, I know I did everything to deserve that kind of sadness and distrust because I ruined so much of your childhood. I know that I'm letting you down with every passing day that I refuse to give you a genuine apology and I can't let another day pass without saying something. I don't want you to look at me this way on your wedding day during our father-daughter dance, and if you ever decide to have children... I want to be one of the first people you tell because you know that I'll be over the moon at the opportunity of being a grandfather. I want to be there for you when you become just as notorious as Tony for all the hard work you do--”

“Not possible,” The billionaire interjected lazily, but both Banners ignored him.

“When you found me in San Pedro Sula,” Bruce started shakily and Marcella lifted her head as he struggled to explain himself, “They weren't experimenting on me to try to get a serum to recreate the other guy's strength... they were trying to figure out a way to get rid of him.”

“Dad...” Marcella whispered, horrified, “You should have...”

“Obviously, things weren't supposed to go as horribly as they did and I certainly wasn't expecting to run into someone like Colonel Salazar. Initially, I was meeting with a chemical engineer who worked with SHIELD and operated on the outskirts of the town, somewhere far more safer than San Pedro Sula and we were going to work together to try to get rid of him. We were ambushed by Salazar's men and the chemical engineer was killed in the process. When Salazar and his men captured me, I couldn't get the other guy to come out and it was the first time my mind was just... quiet, since the gamma explosion. I thought... well, I thought that maybe the experiments had been a success and that I would be normal again. Then you showed up and I saw Salazar hurting you and...”

“And you saved my life... you and Hulk both saved my life,” She reminded him, her eyes filled with tears, “You're not the monster you make yourself out to be, dad. You're amazing and the fact that you're alive after being exposed to that much radiation is a miracle. You were never a monster to me because of the Hulk... you were a monster to me for leaving me alone with that horrible man.”

“I know,” Bruce whispered and stared down at the floor, ashamed, “I wasn't... I wasn't in the right state of mind and I wasn't able to control the other guy's thoughts; it's like his emotions were affecting my ability to make rational decisions and I knew I couldn't be a good parent to you during that time but I could have... I could have went about it differently. I have no excuse for my actions and I know that even your mother would have been ashamed of me if she saw what I did; she truly
would have hated me if she could see what I’ve done to you and how broken you were because of me.”

Marcella wiped the tears away from her cheeks and peered up at him sadly.

“I pushed you away when you needed me the most,” He took another step forward and gently grabbed her hand, “And I wish I could go back and do all of this differently, but I can’t and I’ve accepted that but I can’t live the rest of my life knowing I didn't try to make things right between us and mend our relationship. For all I know, it might be too late and--”

“It is never too late, dad,” Marcella gave his hand a soft squeeze and met his gaze with a serious one of her own, “All I’ve ever wanted was a stable father-daughter relationship with you; all I’ve ever wanted was for you to explain yourself and apologize for what you did. I know… it’s going to take a while for me to really trust you again and have a normal relationship, but I don’t want to give up on us and I hope you don’t want to either.”

“I don’t want to give up on us either,” Bruce insisted, finally giving her a sad, wavering smile, “You… besides the group, you’re the only real family I have left and you’ve always been my biggest pride and joy. When the Other Guy’s bad thoughts start to get really overwhelming, you’ve always been the one to talk me down from it--you’ve always been my clarity.”

Marcie wiped her flushed cheeks with the back of her hand, “Well someone’s gotta talk you out of doing some seriously stupid shit, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, and you’ve always been that person,” Bruce smiled sadly and held the book he had been clutching out towards her, “I um, your mom and I started working on this when we adopted you and I wasn’t even planning on giving it to you for another few years, but I feel like you need it now more than ever. I need you to know that even though I wasn’t always there for you, that having you as a daughter and watching you grow up into such a successful, kind young woman will always be my greatest accomplishment.”

“I love you dad,” Marcella accepted the thick book and gave his hand another squeeze before pulling it away and wrapping both arms around the book.

“I love you too, Marcie, please don’t ever doubt that,” He whispered gently, “You were always my little astronaut and that will never change.”

The curly-haired scientist swallowed the lump in her throat and watched as her dad silently left the room, rubbing at his cheeks roughly as went.

Marcella stared at the closed door for a moment, still hugging the book close to her chest and not noticing the way Tony kept stealing concerned glances at her. However, his concern soon turned to confusion when the tiniest smile spread across her plump lips, tears still trickling down her cheeks as she stared at the door her dad had just exited; Tony realized it was a hopeful smile because this was the first time that Bruce had really talked to her about the whole situation and his shitty decisions.

She decided to wait until later to look at the contents of the book, wanting to do it away from Tony's sneaky eyes and in the privacy of her living quarters.

“ You good, kid?”

Marcella glanced up at Tony before nodding vigorously, “Yeah, I actually am this time.”

Later that day.
“What the hell--?”

Tony and Clint watched with raised brows as the Banner girl fluttered energetically around the laboratory, singing along to a soft tune that filtered throughout the room, the tiniest smile on her soft features as she spun around on the tips of her toes, eyes closed. It was the first time they had seen her look so happy since before Bruce had left on his mission and a tired smile spread across the archer’s face as he watched Marcella skip around, her high-waisted skirt twirling around her gracefully, along with her wild curls that swished around her. A long sleeved black and white striped shirt had been tucked into the hem of the skirt and a small sunflower had been tucked behind her ear, making the two men smile as she always seemed to be picking up random flowers in the strangest places. Clint had a fleece throw wrapped around his shoulders, clearly just having woken up from a nap after going on a long, grueling mission, while Tony looked casual in a Van Halen shirt and dark wash jeans that were probably a size too small for him.

Her singing gradually grew louder and Tony was surprised to discover that the little Banner could actually sing quite well; her curls swayed along with her head as she danced carelessly.

“She's singing along to the Bee Gees,” Tony spoke, eliciting a shocked squeak from the Banner girl as she whipped around so fast that she nearly fell, “That can only mean one thing.”

Clint’s grin immediately grew when he caught on to what Tony was implying, “What does that mean?”

Marcella glared at Tony, “It just means I have good taste in music.”

“Don't humor me, kid,” Tony grinned smugly, “You have flowers in your hair and you smell like you've rolled around in a garden for hours, you're wearing lipstick and you're hair isn't a total mess, you're singing along to love songs by the Bee Gees—you have a date tonight, don't you? You have a date with a certain someone.”

If Clint didn't look absolutely snug and cheeky earlier, he certainly did after Tony’s words. Marcella's mouth opened as she stared at the two men who stared right back at her with similar, smug expressions on both of their faces; Clint was holding a hand over his heart like he was ready for her to spill some gossip that would satiate his inner-teenage girl persona. He looked offended at the thought of Marcie not telling him that she was going on a date and Clint immediately knew exactly who the lucky man was, because Steve's dumb face instantly appeared on the forefront of his mind. Clint wondered if her dad knew she was going on a date, though the older Banner must have known that this day would eventually come—where his daughter would finally start dating—and everyone knew there was no way he was going to be prepared for it when she finally told him who she was seeing. If it had literally been anyone besides the Captain, Bruce probably would have had the worst time controlling his emotions, but Steve was... well, Steve was about as good as it gets when it comes to being a decent human-being.

Clint wasn't sure if he had ever met a man with morals as good as Steve's and everyone knew that the Captain would go to great lengths just to do the right thing and stand up for what he believed in. He supposed that he and Marcella were similar in that kind of sense, that they were both righteous and refused to stay silent on important problems in the world—war, poverty, racism and sexism, famine—along with a multitude of other issues plaguing the planet. There had been multiple situations where they had witnessed Steve or Marcella shut down assholes with shitty opinions that were harmful towards others and it never failed to make Clint feel proud, especially when it was someone as tiny as Marcella Banner going off on men twice her size.

“It's not...” Marcella held up her hands, ignoring the amused, cocky expression on Tony's stupid face, “It's not really even a date guys; we're just making some dinner together. That's what um...
that's what friends do, you know?"

Tony then called out, “Who are you trying to kid?!”

“It’s okay Marce, we’ve all been waiting for this day to come,” Clint was grinning because he had been rooting for Steve and Marcella since the day he had pulled her from the rubble after the Loki incident, “You don’t have to worry about anyone on the team freaking out; I think everyone has kind of just been expecting this to happen for a while now.”

“Can we not do this?” Marcella's cheeks grew unbearably hot and she forced herself to not look at Tony's stupid face, focusing on Clint instead, noticing the way his smirk turned into something softer as she attempted to argue with them, “We're just friends.”

It came out as a weak whisper and she sounded like she was trying to convince herself that her feelings for Steve weren't there, though the two men knew for a long time that there was a strong chemistry between Cap and Marcie. There were these tiny, fond smiles that they only reserved from one another and while Steve spent most of his time in Captain America mode, whenever he was with the Banner girl, that hard exterior seemed to always unravel from the very moment she regarded him with just a smile. Thick eyebrows that were normally pinched together in the middle due to stress would slacken and his cold blue eyes would sparkle with adoration—his shoulders would sag as his entire body loosened up and a softer version of that hard man would make a rare appearance. Then there was shy Marcie and while she always seemed reserved and a little bashful around others, whenever she was around Steve there seemed to be a sense of carelessness that she developed when they were together. She had no shame in dancing around and singing to her heart's content when Steve was in the same room, holding not a single ounce of embarrassment in her tiny body as Steve watched the carefree girl with the fondest expression on his face.

“Friends who sleep in the same bed together?!”

Marcella's eyes grew wide as she stared in Tony's direction, who was gazing back at her with raised brows.

“You forget that I have access to the tower's surveillance,” Tony reminded her with a smug grin, “I got worried after Jarvis told me you had a panic attack last night and when I checked the surveillance on your floor to make sure everything was okay, I saw you sneaking into Cap's room.”

The young woman blushed and gazed down at her shoes with furrowed brows, “He... he helps with the nightmares. It's easier to fall asleep when you're not alone.”

Tony stared at her with an indecipherable expression before he nodded slowly, “I know--I get it.”

“It's really not a big deal guys.”

“Don't be ashamed Marcella,” Clint smiled at her, his expression softer as she stared up at him with a conflicted frown, “I think we all kind of know what it's like to feel things in a way others don't, how overwhelming and scary it can be to feel emotions to such an intense level where it almost feels like you're suffocating. You don't... I know you don't love a lot of people, but the people that you do love... well, you love them with your whole heart. You're allowed to let people love you like that too, you know?”

“Do you think he could ever love me like that?” She questioned timidly and Clint and Tony both frowned—could she not see how amazing she was? It would always kill them to know that someone as smart and beautiful as Marcella didn't think better of herself, that she was always doubting herself and feeling so insecure.
They knew a lot of it must have stemmed from her tumultuous childhood, but they hoped that one day she would grow more comfortable and confident with herself. Tony eyed Marcella's soft features, noticing the few scars that seemed out of place on the delicate skin and sure, he definitely had his own scars, but most of them were easily hidden with shirts and he didn’t really have any prominent ones on his face like she did. Tony was anything but insecure and doubtful, though sometimes he felt that strange doubt creeping up on him whenever he fought with Pepper, but he couldn’t even begin to imagine what she must feel like when she was with Cap. Steve was built like some sort of Adonis and stood over six feet tall; most of his scars healed within a few hours and ever since the serum, he had probably forgotten what it felt like to feel insecure about his body. Marcie was… well, she was just little Marcie who was probably half the size of Capsicle and without makeup, the first thing that anyone would notice would definitely be that thick scar that started just above her eyebrow and passed through her eyelid before coming to a jagged stop just an inch or two below her lower lid. In the short time he had known her, Tony had only ever seen her wear a thin-strapped shirt once and that’s because he had barged in on her when she had been working in her own lab without giving her any sort of warning.

He had immediately understood why she didn’t like to show off her skin as he stared at the keloid and hypertrophic scars that covered her shoulder blades; the scars certainly came from something more painful than a belt and had felt like a slap in the face to Tony at the time. The older engineer had fallen asleep that same night wondering how cruel a man must have been to be able to look into those wide green eyes and feel nothing but hatred and disgust towards someone so tiny and soft—how could anyone look a child, practically a baby, in the eyes and still want to beat the living shit out of them?

Tony would never really understand how cruel humans could be.

“I think he already loves you the same way you love him,” Tony finally answered, looking unusually sincere as he stared into those huge green eyes, “He just looks at you like you're his entire world and you look at him the same way sometimes--it’s kind of disgusting, actually.”

“I don’t…” Tony and Clint both watched as a few tears finally escaped the corners of her eyes and trickled down her freckled cheeks and the billionaire instantly cringed because he was no good around crying women, “I don't think I'm easy to love; people... they always leave. You can love someone unconditionally and with your whole heart, but that won't stop them from leaving and I don’t… he’ll get tired of me after a while and leave too.”

“Hey,” Tony interjected firmly, his voice seeming oddly quiet and tense, “You're talking to the king of abandonment issues here. If Pepper can love someone like me, despite me being like everything she hates in a man, Steve can love someone like you—a literal ray of sunshine.”

“He's right,” Clint said, not wanting to admit it out loud that Stark was correct about something for once, “You need to have a little more faith in yourself and believe that someone can love you as much as you love them, Marce. Like we’ve said before, we’ve seen the way he looks at you and there's no doubt in my mind that Cap loves you with all of his heart. Ever since he rescued you from the rubble after Loki's attack, you two have been inseparable and you were the first real friend he made after coming out of the ice. You gave him a reason to keep on fighting when I know he probably just wanted to give up.”

A soft sigh barely escaped her lips as she crossed her arms over her chest, staring at her flats with a sad, conflicted expression. Though her first priority had always been her academics and meeting all of her goals, she had always felt invisible and wondered if there was something wrong with her. People usually looked right past her without a second thought, but the more she thought about the way Steve looked at her, she wondered if there was really something special between the two of
them. She couldn't help but to wonder why he didn't want someone like Natasha—who was strong and worked alongside him in SHIELD. Marcella wasn't aware of the way her hand traveled to her brow nervously rubbing at the scarred flesh there—a habit that Tony noticed she had picked up on a long time ago whenever she would grow nervous or upset.

How could Captain America love someone like Marcella Banner?

Marcella remained silent, her heart pounding as Tony decided to speak up, “I know you don’t want to admit it, but we’re right. The way you and Steve look at each other is kind of disgustingly adorable and it’s obvious to literally everyone, even Thor who’s the most clueless person ever, that you guys have feelings for each other—you should really have a little more confidence. It kills me to say it, but I think the two of you are good for each other. However, if Capsicle ever hurt you or did something to seriously upset you, always remember that I would literally break every bone in his old man body. I'm not afraid to hurt an elderly man, kiddo, and I don't think Clint or anyone else on the team is either.”

“I'm not,” Clint insisted with a smile as Marcella gazed at the two men with a blinding smile, her green eyes filled to the brim with hot tears, “Natasha would probably murder him if he even thought about hurting you, though I don’t think that guy would hurt a fucking fly if he could help it.”

“Thank you guys, I really needed to hear all of this.”

“Shh!” Tony gave her a playful glare, “Nobody can know that I might have a soft spot for you.”

“Your secret is safe with me, Mr. Stark.”

Tony ignored the shock that hit him like a freight train as she wrapped her dainty arms around his middle because he was Tony Stark and he had never been touchy-feely in the slightest, but of course he didn’t have the heart to pull away from the girl that he looked to like a little sister or niece. Clint’s eyebrows shot up as Tony reluctantly wrapped his own arms around Marcie’s shoulders and pressed his mouth into a firm, straight line—determined to not show any emotion—even though he was slightly touched by the friendly hug.

Yeah, Marcella Banner would always remain an enigma to him.

Later that night.

“I had no idea that Steve Rogers could actually cook.”

The blue-eyed man peered over his shoulder, gazing at the smaller Banner girl with raised eyebrows as she practically skipped throughout her living quarters; she was certainly in much better spirits than the night before and her smile was absolutely contagious as she beamed at him. She was humming along to the soft music that she had picked out for the two of them to listen to—something from Frank Sinatra—and she would quietly sing when she thought he wasn't listening, even though his enhances senses definitely picked up on her gentle voice. Steve had to suppress his laughter when she explained that the music was from her Italian cooking playlist—how many songs could one possibly listen to while cooking Italian food? Apparently there had been tons though, because he had been in her little mock apartment for just about an hour and the playlist had yet to play any repeats—Steve had learned she had a strange love for artists like Dean Martin, Louis Prima, Frank Sinatra, but most of all, Louis Armstrong. He had learned this after hearing her rendition of La Vie En Rose and Steve had been surprised at how well she sang along with Armstrong's distinctively gruff voice, especially after having a glass of wine, much to his amusement.

She certainly was quite the lightweight.
“Yes well,” He turned back to the saucepan that contained a lemon butter for his chicken medallions, remaining vigilant, “The Food Network is way more addicting than I thought it would be, plus it’s more calming to watch than the history channel sometimes.”

“The Food Network is about as good as modern television gets, to be honest,” Marcella nearly stumbled as she approached Steve, helping him with the rice pilaf. Steve stole a quick glance at her and noticed how good she looked in her high-waisted skirt and the royal blue striped shirt that was neatly tucked into the garment. Steve had learned a long time ago that Marcella loved flowers and plants and his observations were only proved to be correct by the beautiful red flower embroidery that was sewn onto where the hems should have been on the off the shoulder sleeves of her top. Though her hair tumbled down to her waist in soft, frizzy curls, stubborn strands had been pinned away from her face and Steve was able to make out her delicate features better in the soft lighting on her living quarters in the tower. Much to his surprise, she wore less makeup than usual and only seemed to be wearing mascara along with highlight on top of her cheekbones, making her skin seem fresh and like it was glowing. Though he thought she looked beautiful either way, Steve always found himself leaning down to kiss her scarred brow because he loved her freckles and scars and hoped she wasn't ashamed or embarrassed by the marks. Not one for shoes, her flats had been discarded and she roamed around comfortably all while barefoot, twirling every now and then on the tips of her toes.

“Thanks for helping,” Steve said genuinely, tossing her an easy smile, “You really didn't have to go through all that of trouble of making the Tiramisu, but I can't wait to try it later—I bet it's delicious.”

“Oh of course, I really don't mind,” Marcella grinned and promptly removed the asparagus from the oven, “I'm not the best cook, but I love baking and making desserts, especially Tiramisu.”

“Then I guess we balance each other out, huh?”

Steve anxiously pushed the sleeves of his navy blue dress shirt up to his elbows as doe-like green eyes peered up at him happily. While he was normally oblivious to when people were flirting with him, Marcella would always stare at him with those sparkling emerald orbs with a softness he hadn't seen in so long and he didn't know what that meant or how to handle his emotions whenever she gazed at him like that. Sure, Marcella was kind-hearted towards everyone she encountered, but whenever they were together... she was always so free and unconcerned in everything she did. Her body seemed looser and she had no shame in dancing or singing around him, belting out her favorite songs in a way that she wouldn't dare to do around anyone else.

The two had become so incredibly comfortable around one another and Steve tried to remember the last time he was able to be himself completely in front of someone else—it must have been when Bucky was alive or he had a thing going on with Peggy. He wasn't Captain America to Marcella though, or even Steven Grant Rogers for that matter... he was her best friend and confidante. He was the one she would call at two in the morning sobbing because of a nightmare—and he would pick up his phone on the first ring without even an ounce of hesitation. Steve was the one that she had come to in the middle of the night so he could hold her and give her a little peace of mind during the darkest nights. He was one of the only people who knew about her rough past and all of the horrible shit that had been inflicted upon such an innocent soul and he was the only man who had ever kissed her scars that she used to think were hideous; he made her feel beautiful. She knew him as the man who listened to Mr. Roboto and loved Pixar movies and while Steve didn't know it yet—he was her hero for reasons other than him being a literal superhero.

And she didn't know it yet, but Marcella Banner was Steve Rogers' hero.

“And that's Amore by Dean Martin is
playing... you need to dance with me!”

His cheeks immediately burned and his face scrunched up a little, “Marce, you know I don't dance.”

“In Napoli,” She ignored him and sang softly, gently pulling at his wrists with both of her hands and Steve groaned as she continued, “Where love is king! When boy meets girl, here's what they say...”

“Marcie,” He laughed as she swung his arms and he gave in, placing a hand on her waist while he held the other in hers.

“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie!” She giggled wildly and it was infectious because Steve found himself laughing along with her, “That's amore! When the world starts to shine like you've had too much wine, that's amore! Bells will ring, ting-a-ling-a-ling, ting-a-ling-a-ling, then you'll sing Vita Bella!”

Steve nearly stepped on her toes as she carefully quickened the pace, kindly showing Steve how to move his feet with a beaming smile; the bumbling man could tell she was a good dancer when she deftly avoided his big feet from stepping on her bare ones. She didn't seem bothered by his lack of skill in dancing and Steve only removed his hand from her waist when she held both of their hands up high, gracefully twirling with a vivacious giggle.

“When the stars make you drool just like a pasta fazool, that's amore,” She cooed melodically, and Steve continued to hold her hand as she twirled in the opposite direction, “When you dance down the street with a cloud at your feet, you're in love.”

Steve knew he was gone when she fondly placed a tiny hand on his neck as his own hand slipped back around her waist, steadying her as she nearly stumbled and tripped on his feet. Her long curls grazed his forearm and Steve noticed the way a few unruly strands had popped free from the little bobby pins she had pinned to the back of the crown of her head. Her freckled cheeks were so flushed—probably due to the wine and dancing—and Steve couldn't stop himself from grinning at how easily the young scientist seemed to have fun and how much of a lightweight she was. Her soft blouse had come untucked from her flowing skirt and a small strip of bronzed skin peeked out at Steve and he forced himself to look away from her waist.

Looking at her like this... in the dim lighting of her home with her hair swaying around her as she sung and danced in such a carefree way... Steve swore he was looking at the epitome of benevolence and ethereality. Gently, Steve's hand slipped up from her waist and he found himself wrapping his arm around her shoulders, bringing her closer to him until her chin was nearly resting against his chest as she peered up at him fondly. Their dancing slowed until they were just swaying back and forth, Marcella's bare feet resting on top of his nice dress shoes as he took over with leading the two of them. They gazed at one another for the longest time and Steve was vaguely aware of her hands resting against the nape of his neck, playing with the soft strands of blonde hair there. It wasn't until one of Steve's hands traveled to the back of her head that she blinked, nearly sighing as his fingers curled against her scalp in a comforting way before sliding to her flushed cheek in a way that nearly had her curling her toes; Marcie had always adored how soft he could be despite his huge size because there had been a point in her life where people only touched her with violent intentions. Steve had always been so gentle and held her like she was some sort of treasure that he had traveled to the ends of the Earth to find; he always held her so tightly and softly at the same time and she absolutely adored that about him.

“I don't know what I would do if you ever stopped looking at me the way you're looking at me right now,” He whispered and Marcella could feel his warm breath against her face, “And I know you've been through so much... and you've been hurt so many times; I don't think I'll ever understand how you still have this light that seems to always surround you. I could be in the worst mood and you'll...
always find a way to make me smile without even trying... how do you do it?”

“I don’t...” Marcella sighed softly as his thumb grazed her jawline, “I don’t like seeing you sad... you know that I would do anything to make you happy, Steven.”

The two didn't realize that they had stopped moving to the music and Steve's eyebrows were pinched together softly as his blue eyes sparkled down at her, “You are the only thing that's been consistently amazing in my life since coming out of the ice; Marcella, you don't have to try to make me happy, just being here with you is enough. Seeing you smile like this, I wish I could imprint it in my mind forever.”

Marcella continued to peer up at him and her own hand traveled to his cheek, her eyes mapping out every detail of his more mature features. She had never noticed the tiny specks of green in his vibrant blue eyes, or even the tiny—nearly undetectable freckle that marked the skin of one of his cheeks. He was so handsome and though Marcella usually noticed a sort of sadness on his worn features, she finally noticed that there was not an ounce of distress on his calmed face. His long eyelashes grazed the top of cheeks as he blinked down at her and the younger Banner remembered what her Clint and Tony had said about Steve looking at her like she was his entire world. Marcella wondered if she looked at him like he was her entire world too, because there were certain days where it certainly felt like he was and she’d never understand at what point it was that she truly fell in love with the huge blonde; perhaps it was from the very moment he had pulled her from the rubble and she had opened her eyes. Marcie vaguely remembered seeing him for the first time as he gently carried her to an ambulance; she couldn’t remember a time where she had been filled with so much hope as when she peered into those glistening blue eyes and realized that this total stranger was genuinely terrified for her. The only information he had known about her is what Natasha and Bruce had told him, but he had looked at her like he had known her for years and he'd be absolutely devastated if she didn't survive.

“You're giving me that look again,” He whispered and her other hand curled into the collar of his dark blue dress shirt at the back of his neck, “I used to think you gave everyone that look—where your eyes get all soft and they sparkle—but then I found out you only ever look at me that way... why?”

“Because you're special to me in a way that nobody else is,” Marcella spoke just as quietly, feeling warm and lightheaded and intoxicated by his presence and words, “And I think these last few days have made me realize how much I really care for you and want you in my life.”

“You've had me for such a long time, Marcie.”

Steve found himself lowering his head as if it was instinct and he thought he was going to die when Marcella's eyes became somewhat hooded, her lips parting in the slightest as she anticipated the feeling of his lips against hers. His arm that had been wrapped around her shoulders slipped back down to her hips and his own eyelids slipped shut as she hardly grazed her plump lips against his—it was barely a kiss, so soft and delicate that he nearly missed it, but it was everything that Marcella represented. She had always been so gentle and innocent, always taking her time to really think things through because she was a scientist and that's what she always did. Marcie felt the way every single muscle in his body relaxed as she pushed her lips a little more firmly against his, her hand traveling to the hair at the nape of his neck as she grew a little more rapacious because she couldn’t get enough of him and soft mouth.

Marcie always thought she would feel frantic and close to an asthma attack all the times she imagined her and Steve together like this, but as the two pulled away from one another, she felt completely at ease and wanted more and she definitely noticed the way his eyelids fluttered as his blue orbs
flickered down to her pink, plush lips.

"Is it...?" Steve seemed more out of breath and dazed than she was and that was certainly strange for the huge blonde, "Is it okay if I kiss you again?"

And Marcella Banner has always been selfless, so of course she nods her head with a little more excitement because she still hasn't had enough of him and wants more.

Steve's fingertips came into contact with the tiny sliver of skin that had appeared at the middle of her spine and suddenly Marcella was pushing herself closer to him; their bodies nearly pressed flush against one another and he took the opportunity to cover her lips with his own. An intense heat pooled in his chest and the pit of his stomach as the much smaller woman practically melted into his touch and Steve removed his hand from her waist to gently cup her cheeks with both of his hands, tipping her head a little further back so he could kiss her easier. Marcella found herself sighing contently against his plush lips, wondering how he was such a good kisser when he had been asleep for seventy years. She felt lightheaded when his tongue skimmed across her bottom lip and she could still taste the sweet wine on his lips. The warmth that exuded from his hulking frame enveloped her and her cheeks felt like they were on fire beneath his palms; Marcella wondered if he even noticed or if he was just as lightheaded as she was.

“I'm so glad I found you in the rubble that day,” Steve whispered breathlessly against her lush lips as they finally pulled away, his calloused thumbs gently stroking her cheeks, “You are the best thing in my life and I know you're so strong and don't need any protection, but I promise I'll never let anything or anyone hurt you—not if I can help it.”

“I used to think that I didn't deserve this,” Marcella's eyelids fluttered as Steve kept his face close to hers; she felt like she was floating as he kept his lips close to hers. His eyelids were slightly hooded as he gazed down at her in a way that took her breath away. His eyelashes skimmed the top of his cheeks as he blinked slowly, an uncharacteristically dreamy expression on his handsome features as his eyebrows pinched together in the middle, like he was trying to figure her out and everything that was going on in her mind. Marcella let out the tiniest sigh as his lips continued to skim across hers until they were pressed against the corner of her mouth and she found herself smiling softly when she felt a strange fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach.

“You are the epitome of love,” He said, his soft voice thick with intense emotions, “You are the most selfless woman I have ever met and even when you do reckless things, you do it for the sole purpose of helping others; I don't think I'll ever stop being amazed at how kind you are. Don't ever... please don't ever think you don't deserve to be loved because you deserve so much more than someone like me, but I don't think I could ever not want you, doll.”

“You already have my heart Steve,” Marcella whispered, her plush lips skimming across his as he continued to hold her face in his large hands, “You've had it for so long now and that terrifies me.”

“I promise I'll protect it,” Steve said genuinely and Marce gripped the sides of his shirt in little fists, “You know I would never do anything to break this trust that you have in me.”

"I trust you," Marcella's eyes watered and her thick brows furrowed, “I know you think I'm loving and caring... but I've never been someone like this Steve. I don't know how to be intimate with someone and I-I don't know how to be with someone as something more than just a friend.”

“I don't either,” The huge blonde reminded her, offering a tiny smile, "I'm willing to give it a try if you are though.”

Marcie smiled as he easily caught a tear trickling down her freckled cheek and she nodded at him,
realizing that Clint and Tony were actually right for once and he genuinely wanted to be with her more than a friend. As Steve stared back down at her sparkling green eyes and continued to cup her flushed cheeks in his palms, it felt as though he was holding his entire world between his hands, but for once, he didn't mind because it wasn't a heavy weight.

Steve wondered if he'd ever be able to find the words to tell her just how much he absolutely adored her.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, I totally wasn't expecting this chapter to get nearly as long as it did and I was originally going to split it into two chapters before deciding that I've dragging this slow burn out for like, 16 chapters lmao. I hope you guys enjoy this behemoth of a chapter, along with the freaking fluff at the end with Steve and Marcie, because I just couldn't wait any longer for them to get together, especially with TWS storyline coming up soon.

I know I kind of wrote Tony as a mega douche in the flashback, but I'd like to think that was at the worst of his drinking problems and just top notch douchey Tony where nobody could really tell him anything, but that's okay because everyone has their flaws and he changed his ways! Just like Bruce is trying to make things better between him and Marcie :)

Anyways, thank you all for the lovely comments on the last chapter! You guys are always so amazing and supportive, and I love hearing any criticism and suggestions from you guys! I feel like I've gotten so much helpful advice and inspiration from you all :)
“Right, Uncle Tony.”

“She just…” Tony pressed a hand to his shrapnel-ridden chest, giving Bruce an expression like he was touched by her words, “I’m Uncle Tony now.”

Bruce rolled his eyes at the two engineers.

“You should come and stay with me for a while.”

Marcella felt her eyelids slowly slide open, staring at Steve's sleepy face in the soft rays of sunlight that filtered throughout her bedroom. It was around six in the morning and though he knew for fact that Marcie had been awake for over half an hour now, trying to force herself to actually get out of bed, he had pretended like he believed her little facade and let her get some much needed rest. She yawned as she rubbed her eyes with a balled up fist that was covered by the sleeve of her huge sweater and Steve could feel her bare legs skim across his calves underneath the heavy comforter.

Green eyes peered up at him curiously and Steve was positive that nothing else in the universe was as stunning as the green orbs with flecks of gold splashed recklessly around the pupils. He never understood how people could see people's emotions just by looking in their eyes, and then he had met Marcella and he remembered the way she had stared up at him after pulling her out of the rubble; it had been so easy to read the emotions in her eyes that day, a mix of fear and hope.

Ever since then, Steve had been able to read every single emotion in those beautiful green eyes. Whenever she was happy, her eyes would nearly be closed because of how much she was smiling or laughing and when she was sad, there would be this strange sparkle to her half-lidded eyes and she would lower her head, trying to conceal her emotions from the world. He used to think people were hard to read, but then he met Marcie and started looking people in the eyes more, especially people who were trying to hurt him on the field. The Captain would always either see a determined, shifty look in his enemies’ eyes, or they would be slightly fearful because most men seemed to understand that they usually didn’t stand a chance against him. Marcie had taught him how to read people better and be more patient with others because if someone like her could be patient and sympathetic after everything she had been through, then he could as well.

“I don't know if I can afford to take time off,” She murmured, her voice a little raspy from how sleepy she still was. He watched as she rubbed one of her eyes with a balled up fist and yawned and God, Steve hated and loved how endearing she was without even knowing it.

Steve's expression grew worried, “You've been barricading yourself in the lab for the last two weeks, Marcie; have you even been eating lately? You've been doing the same thing Tony does when he's upset and wants to avoid his problems.”

“I'm not avoiding my problems; me and Bruce got everything resolved.”
Steve smiled at her sadly, knowing that there was a chance that the two Banners might never completely resolve all of their problems. Marcie wanted a normal father-daughter relationship and Bruce was still struggling to forgive himself after abandoning her and Steve tried not to judge the elder Banner for his past decisions. It was clear that he hadn't been in the right state of mind when he left Marcie with the same man that had abused him as a child, but Steve couldn't fathom leaving her in such a dire living situation. He couldn't fathom where her grandfather's anger had stemmed from and what would cause him to lash out and hit a defenseless child.

Steve would never understand how anyone could lay a hand on someone you're supposed to love and protect; just the thought of yelling at her like he had in San Pedro Sula made Steve feel sick to his stomach and he wondered if the guilt ate away at her grandfather. Steve wondered if Bruce had nightmares about it every single night and a part of him felt bad, because yeah, he hoped that the guilt would always linger in the back of the elder Banner’s mind and heart; he hoped the guilt would always stay with him, even when Hulk was in control.

“I know,” Steve said softly, admiring her features in the soft lighting of her rather large room, “You've been working yourself to the bone, Marce. Last night was the first night in like, a week that you actually came to bed and I can… I can tell you're tired and stressed being in the tower… being around him.”

“I don't…” Marcie hesitated as she reluctantly met his soft expression, “I don't want to intrude; I know I'm not the easiest person to live with. You of all people know how hard it is for me to sleep quietly and I don't want to keep you up all the time.”

“I don't mind,” Steve hummed, his hand sliding around her waist, “I can go a long time without sleep. Besides, I've noticed you sleep a lot better when we're together; you didn't have a single nightmare last night, did you?”

Her cheeks grew warm as he pulled her close until she was nearly lying on top of him, “I just… I know I can be difficult and… I don't want you to regret inviting me to stay with you.”

Steve's lips parted slightly as he tucked a curl behind her ear, pulling his hand back and letting it linger against his cheek, “I regret letting you leave that day after my birthday without telling you how I felt without kissing you. I… maybe it is selfish of me, but I want you with me all the time Marcie. Everything just seems so much easier and clearer when I'm with you… I don't think I could ever not want you around.”

Marcie found herself melting against him as she leaned down and covered his lips with her plush ones and her fingers immediately curled into the collar of his T-shirt. She let out a content sigh when his hand traveled past the hem of her sweater, his warm fingers finding the small of her back while his other hand remained still on the back of her bare thigh, his fingertips digging into the soft flesh as he restrained himself.

Though the two had been seeing each other romantically for a little over two weeks now, the two weren't oblivious to the strange sexual tension that oftentimes crept up onto them when they woke up next to one another. She wasn't sure if it was because they had been denying their feelings for one another for so long, or how close Steve would hold her against his body while they both slept, but Marcella always felt like her skin was on fire when he touched her in places she wasn't used to being touched and a part of her liked the unfamiliar sensation. It almost felt wrong to want more because she had been taught to always be the ‘good girl’ and not be rebellious or promiscuous, but she had never been touched by a man the way that Steve touched her and there was something addicting about it. She didn’t feel ashamed of herself whenever he touched her in certain ways that she had never been touched; it never felt wrong when his hand would slip past the hem of her shirt or sweater
as he took on the dutiful role of being the big spoon. Even though she always felt pressured when all of her peers were dating others and her cheeks would always grow warm when college roommates and friends would tell her about their sexual encounters, but none of it had ever felt right to her when she had been in those kinds of situations and she knew that so many of her friends must have thought she was a prude. Marcie knew that women couldn’t really do anything right, by society’s standards, because women are always labeled as prudes when they refuse to be intimate with others, but then if they slept with too many men or women, they were labeled as sluts and whores.

As Steve all but trapped her in a warm, intoxicating embrace, she didn’t care about any of that because nothing about it felt wrong.

“Stay with me Marce,” He urged as he gently pushed her over until she was pinned beneath him, his lips immediately traveling to her jawline and she instantly whimpered at pleasant sensation that traveled down to her curled up toes, “I don’t… I don’t want to have to keep leaving you here… I don't want us to be alone anymore.”

Her eyelids fluttered as his lips skimmed past a sensitive spot on her neck and her mind was too hazy to feel embarrassed as her hips bucked against his, causing the blonde manto groan against her skin; Marcella wanted more. She always thought she’d be one of those women that doesn’t have sex until they’re married, even though she definitely wasn’t religious, or that having sex for the first time might be awkward, but being with him felt right and natural. It wasn’t until she found herself wrapping her legs around his hips that she felt his arousal pressed against her core and her fingertips dug into the nape of his neck at the strange sensation, but she liked the feeling and… well, clearly he liked it too.

“Okay,” She murmured as his lips continued to assault the sensitive spot on her neck, “I'll take a week or two off… I expect you to take me out on a real date, Rogers.”

“I'll take you out on as many dates as you want, sweetheart,” He huffed against her skin and Marcella wasn't sure why, but she felt panic creep up on her when Steve's hand crept up the small of her back. She knew by the way he faltered that he felt the strange scars on one of her shoulder blades and the Captain instantly pulled away from her because he knew that she suddenly felt uncomfortable. The scars felt more similar to welts and a combination of anger and sadness washed over him because there were these little reminders all over her body of what she had gone through and he knew that she was ashamed of them, even though there was nothing to be ashamed of.

“I'm sorry,” Marcella choked out quickly and he noticed the way her eyes immediately watered, “I didn't mean to… I'm sorry for ruining the moment.”

Suddenly, Steve realized why she always wore t-shirts and clothing that didn't expose her shoulders or her back.

“Hey, no,” Steve whispered and quickly settled on the mattress next to her, not wanting to make her feel trapped, “You didn't ruin anything, Marcie. I'm sorry if I took things too quickly.”

“I want to… I want you, Steve. I just…”

Steve's eyes were half-lidded as he stared back at her with a soft expression, “It's okay, sweetheart, there's no rush. I would… I would never make you do anything you're uncomfortable with.”

The tiny scientist gave him a wavering smile, tears still in her eyes, “Can we… just stay here for a little longer?”
Steve nodded and gave her a tiny smile also, “Come here.”

The Captain gently pulled her against his side as he lied on his back once again, slipping a heavy arm around her shoulders. As she settled herself against him and he felt her long lashes flutter against his neck, Steve promised himself he would never do anything to make her look at him like she had in San Pedro Sula when he had called her weak. Steve would never let his fear or anger get the best of him in front of her because she was so nervous around angry men and she had a good reason to be so jumpy, judging by all of her scars.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Steve questioned softly, staring up at the ceiling as her damp eyelashes continued to tickle his neck.

“I don’t…” She let out a shaky breath, “Maybe another time.”

“Okay,” The huge blonde gave her hip a gentle squeeze, “Whenever you’re ready; there’s no rush.”

Marcie thought about it for a few moments, staring out the window as she admired the overcast weather. Did she really want to tell Steve all of the crap her grandfather did to her? She didn’t want him to worry about her even more because it had happened so long ago and even though she still had nightmares about him quite often, she had gotten over him and put it behind her. Sometimes she would detect the tiniest similarities in her dad and her grandfather’s features, but even when he was at his angriest and the Hulk had taken over, he had never once even thought about hitting her. Marcella wondered what would have her more heartbroken though, him abandoning her again or physically beating her, because she couldn’t remember being as heartbroken in her entire life than the day Bruce left her just weeks after her mother’s death; Marcie wasn’t religious, but she prayed she’d never have to go through that kind of pain again.

She wasn’t sure what she would do if Bruce left again without a word, or if Steve went away on a mission and never came back; Marcie would be devastated if something happened to Tony and he was torn away from the group because his ideas were sometimes drastic and the others didn’t always agree with him. Marcie wondered what it would be like if something happened to Thor while away on Asgard; what would she do without his exciting stories of space exploration and his exuberant company? What would she do if she didn’t have a female friend as strong and fierce as Natasha? The red-haired assassin was known for being stoic and even though she always insisted she never formed emotional attachments to people, Marcie knew for fact that Nat considered her and Steve close friends. And what would she do without Clint? He was like a silly uncle, or annoying older brother that taught her how to be reckless but so strong at the same time and she owed him so much for helping her become a better version of herself.

Marcie’s eyes watered because she had formed so many close bonds to these people she called her family and they could all be torn away from her within the blink of an eye. The thought of losing Steve made her chest ache and she found herself curling her fingers into the soft material of his shirt as she reminded herself that he was with her in that moment and that was all that mattered.

Maybe Marcie wouldn’t have him forever, but she had him right now and that was good enough for her.

“Can we go bowling?” She whispered after a few moments, earning a questioning hum from Steve, “When we go on our first real date, can we go bowling? I need to know that there's something I can whoop your ass at.”

Steve grinned, “Don't get me wrong, sweetheart, I care about you, but that doesn't mean I won't show any mercy when it comes to anything remotely competitive.”
Marcie found herself grinning as well, feeling better as Steve reached down to press a tender kiss to the corner of her lips before settling back into the pillows. He was quiet for a few, enjoying the comfortable silence between them and that was something he enjoyed about her company, that they didn’t always have to talk to understand how the other was feeling.

“If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you want to go?”

Marcie blinked at the random question before easily answering with a confident, “Disneyland, for sure.”

“Disneyland?” Steve chuckled, raising his brows at her answer, “If there was absolutely anywhere you could go in the world, no matter how much it cost, you would choose Disneyland?”

“Actually, probably Disney World,” She corrected herself and Steve didn’t miss her wistful tone, “I don’t know… I’ve never been there and I’ve always wanted to go. It always just seems so magical, especially during Christmas or Halloween, don’t you think? I want to meet all my favorite Pixar characters like Sully from Monsters Inc. or Wall-E and I want to eat one of those cute Mickey Mouse cinnamon buns and then go on the tea cup ride afterwards and probably throw up because you know how much of a wimp I am on rides like that. So yeah, if I could go anywhere in the world, it would definitely be Disney World; what about you? Where would you go?”

And Steve is too nervous and too stubborn to tell her that he’d be fine going wherever, as long as she was there with him.

“You know, you’re really starting to tempt me with Disney World,” Marcella felt his chest rumble under her cheek as he let out a chuckle and she beamed up at him, “Are those cinnamon buns worth dealing with the Florida humidity though?”

Steve felt like he was looking at the most precious living being in the universe as she rested her chin on top of his chest and peered up at him through an abundance of dark lashes. Something in the pit of his stomach clenched and coiled together in the most pleasant way as her eyelids fluttered when his thumb skimmed along the tail of her scarred brow and he was well aware of the way her fingers coiled into the collar of his t-shirt.

“I don’t know about about the cinnamon buns, but Space Mountain would definitely be worth it.”

Later that day.

“You're making me nervous, kid.”

Marcie gazed up from the pylon she had been constructing, meeting her dad and Tony's amused expressions. It took a second to realize she had been bouncing her leg and furiously clicking a pen against the desk and she quickly dropped her pen, her cheeks growing hot as she stared at the men with wide eyes.

“What?” Marcella questioned innocently, “I'm just trying to figure out how to properly mount the thermonuclear reactor to the--”

“You've done it a hundred times before,” Bruce reminded her, noticing the way she avoided eye contact with him, “Why are you acting so strange? You’re not getting sick again, are you?”

Marcella's thumb skimmed along the matte black surface of the unfinished piece of aircraft she had been putting together and reluctantly met Tony's expectant gaze, only for him to nod his head at the older Banner who sat next to him. Her green eyes flickered over to her dad's face, noticing the kind and patient look he donned. Ever since their dramatic talk, the relationship between the two had
slowly, but surely, improved and they found themselves talking to one another more. Oftentimes after dinner, the two would sit on the balcony just outside of the lounge room and would attempt to talk about their feelings, which just mostly ended up in them talking about their projects.

“I just,” Marcella felt torn, because their relationship was slowly improving and she was planning on leaving to DC with Steve in a few days for an indefinite amount of time. She knew that it wasn't going to be more than a few weeks, but she couldn't help but to feel like Bruce would think she was leaving because of him and the thought of him believing that broke her heart, “Don't be mad at me.”

Bruce lifted his head a little, brows furrowed, “Why would I be mad at you? What’s going on?”

“I already got everything sorted out with Tony and Pepper,” Marcie started slowly and Bruce suddenly grew worried, “I decided to use my vacation hours to take a small break. I thought it might… I thought it would be good for my mental health to get away for a few and I don't want you to think that I'm doing this because of you, I just need a break from everything.”

“Oh… yeah, okay,” Bruce tried to keep the sad expression off his face as he stared at her closely, “Where are you going to go? As long as it's somewhere where you'll be safe…”

“Steve asked me to stay with him in DC for a few,” Marcie said quietly, staring down at the floor, “I need to…”

The men watched as she furrowed her brows and shook her head, willing herself to not cry in front of them anymore.

“There's things in my head that I need to get sorted out and all these problems that I need to fix and I don't think New York is the best place for me right now… not when there's too many painful reminders of the past everywhere I go. I need to… I need to find my home because it's definitely not here and I'm coming to terms with that. Someone once told me that home doesn't always have to be a place, it can be a person and I think I'm starting to find my person--my home.”

“You and Steve? It's finally…?”

Marcie smiled softly and stared down at her hands that were clasped together on top of her lap, “Yeah, we uh… we had that date a couple of weeks ago and I guess, it's uh…”

Marcella's cheeks were on fire as she tried to explain herself to a morbidly curious Bruce, “It's uh, official now, I think.”

“And you're happy, right? He's not… he treats you okay? And he's always…?”

Though he left his question hanging in the air, Marcie immediately understood and nodded with a tired smile, “He's wonderful; I can't remember the last time just being with someone has made me so happy.”

Bruce looked sad and maybe even hurt, but he managed to remain composed as he chose his next words carefully, “You don't… you don't have to be scared of me being disappointed in your choices, Marcie. I'll support you no matter what and if… if he makes you happy and you feel like you're home whenever you're with him, then I'm happy for you. You've always been there for me and I know how restless you get; it's time for you to do what you want to do.”

“Thank you,” Marcie said quietly and Tony watched with a tiny smile as she got up and made her way over to Bruce who was still sitting on a stool, “For being supportive; it means a lot because I know it can't be easy for you to see me with him.”
“He makes you happy,” Bruce exhaled softly when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, “I haven’t seen your eyes light up that way when you’re with anyone else, and seeing you that happy makes me happy.”

“Well this is sweet,” Tony huffed out when the two Banners pulled away from each other, “We were all taking bets on how long it would take for you guys to get together.”

Marcella raised her brows when she noticed the sheepish expression on Bruce’s face, “You were in on this too?! For how long?”

“Remember the day Steve visited you in the hospital after the Battle of New York and he brought you your favorite coffee and banana bread from that little coffee shop down the block? And you showed him how to use the Internet and smartphones? I think that was the first time I saw you talk and laugh with someone for that long and I figured that something would happen between you two sooner or later.”

“Jesus, you guys made that bet that long ago?”

“I was the closest,” Tony chimed in, “I said it would take a little over a year because you two are a bunch of awkward virgins and have no idea how to go on dates, but I still had faith in you two.”

Marcella pressed her palm to her face in an attempt to hide her embarrassment as her dad spoke up, “I was way off, I thought it was going to take two years for you guys to even start dating.”

“You guys are… the absolute worst.”

“That may be true,” Tony shrugged, holding his hands up in surrender, “But every single person on the team owes me fifty dollars; except Natasha, she owes me two hundred. She told me that a year was too long and it would only take five months.”

Marcella scowled, “No wonder why she keeps nagging us.”

“So it's official? You and Cap?”

“I mean, we haven't gone on a real date or anything yet... but yeah, I'd say it's official.”

Tony nodded, a coy smirk playing at his lips as he turned to Bruce, “Okay big guy, new bet--how long before they get married? I give it another year, give or take.”

Despite the flustered expression on her face, her dad shook his head with a small smile of his own, “I'm saying two years.”

“Some people just never learn,” Tony snorted, turning back to his work, “I guarantee in the next two years, she'll be married and they'll either have a baby or be pregnant.”

Marcella scrunched her face up and before she could stop herself, she found herself talking, “Can we not have this conversation when we've only been dating for two weeks? Besides, I'm not... I don't even think I can have children, like physically, you know? My doctor told me that I'm not... I'm not healthy enough and my menstrual cycle is too irregular.”

Marcella isn't sure why she's telling the two men this information, but it feels good because the only other person she would trust with the info is Natasha, and she's not even there. She had been told a few months ago at a checkup that she was quite underweight and that could affect her fertility, though Marcie wasn’t really concerned with kids at the moment. The tiny scientist was happy with focusing solely on her career and her friends and her family and the thought of even having children.
made her feel uncomfortable.

“Marcella, sweetheart,” Bruce is frowning and she noticed the sad expressions on both of their faces, “I'm sorry… I didn't know.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” The girl shrugged, still indifferent on the idea of quite possibly being infertile, “I'm not really torn up about it, and I kind of saw it coming, you know? I'm not… I know that I'll always be this small and I'll always have anemia, and I'll always have to carry around an inhaler with me just in case, and that my immune system is always going to be shit. I'm okay with that and I've accepted it; I don't need a super soldier serum to make me love myself.”

Bruce gave her a proud smile as she pushed her glasses further up her nose with a warm expression on her freckled, scarred face, “You're right, I think you're great just the way you are.”

Marcie beamed at the two men, her eyelids nearly closed from how big she was smiling, “I know, and I don't need a man to remind me of my greatness.”

“Great,” Bruce glanced at a grinning Tony, “Your cocky personality is rubbing off on her.”

The billionaire patted Marcie's shoulder with a proud smile, “It's not cockiness, just confidence, right kid?”

“Right, Uncle Tony.”

“She just…” Tony pressed a hand to his shrapnel-ridden chest, giving Bruce an expression like he was touched by her words, “I'm Uncle Tony now.”

Bruce rolled his eyes at the two engineers.

A few days later.

“Like I said before, I know it’s not really much, but please make yourself at home. I want you to feel completely comfortable when you're he--”

Steve stopped talking when he turned around, watching as Marcella found a granola bar in his pantry and ripped it open, clearly taking his advice and making herself at home, scanning her surroundings and taking everything in with a curious expression painted among her delicate features. After a heartfelt goodbye between Marcie and Bruce, and even Tony, Steve and the tiny scientist had made their way back to D.C. in a very luxurious car that Tony had let her borrow during her little vacation. At first, Steve thought that Tony had been tossing the keys to his modified Lamborghini Aventador to him, only for Marcella to nudge him out of the way with her hip and easily catch the key to the fast car. It was during that mini road trip that Steve learned Marcella was quite possibly a crazier driver than Tony and even Natasha, easily weaving in and out of traffic and making it from Manhattan to D.C. in record timing. He enjoyed driving fast and drifting around turns and when Steve had asked her how she learned to drive like that, she gave him an innocent expression and responded with, ‘the Internet, duh’.

He didn't believe that for one second though, and knew she had learned it from someone.

She was a really good driver though, albeit just a little reckless, but he trusted her because she clearly knew what she was doing and did it well.

He watched with soft eyes, setting her stuff down in the living room, as she opened one of his cupboards and immediately spotted a glass on the top shelf. The tiny scientist stood on her tippy toes as she reached up, her hand just a few inches away from the glasses he kept just a little too high out
of her reach. She lifted her leg, ready to climb on top of the countertop and he raised his brows in an amused manner, knowing how clumsy she could be and how bad of an idea it was for Marcie to be climbing around on anything.

“Sorry,” Steve chuckled, rushing forward to grab the glass before she accidentally broke something, “I'll move things a little lower tomorrow so you can reach them.”

“S'okay Stevie,” She shrugged and his cheeks grew warm at the nickname, “I'm good at figuring these things out, I don't mind getting on the counters.”

Steve smiled sheepishly and nodded as she got water from the little dispenser on the door of his fridge, “I know the apartment isn't exactly huge, but there's plenty of space in the closet for your clothes and I cleared out one of the drawers in my dresser for your um…”

“Lingerie?” Marcie finished with a coy smirk, noticing the way his cheeks grew pink at the image that popped into his mind, “I'm kidding Steve, thank you though, for everything. I never… I never expected you to invite me into your home, but I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, of course, Marcie,” The huge blonde smiled warmly at her as she spotted his record player on his desk, the one she had gotten him for his birthday, “Want to listen to something? I was just planning on cleaning the place up, but if you'd rather do something else…”

“No,” Marcie interjected quietly and placed her cup of water on the little island that divided the kitchen from the living room, “That sounds nice… and normal and relaxing.”

Steve watched as she made her way into the living room, cocking her head to the side as she stopped in front of his desk and glanced at the record he had been listening to last. She tucked a curl behind her ear and Steve's lips parted as he stared at her with admiration, his eyes half-lidded and the softest expression displayed on his usually stoic features. The soft rays of light that filtered through the slits of his blinds casted an ethereal glow around her and accentuated the silhouette of her curls and the way her nose turned upwards in just the slightest way. He noticed the way her plump lips quirked upwards into a smile at the familiar name of the group and album that was displayed on the record. It was tiny, ephemeral moments like this that Steve absolutely wished he could ingrain in his mind for the rest of his life, for the nights where he was in some war-stricken country where all he could hear at night were explosions and gunfire. She was the absolute epitome of softness and even though she had such a sad, horrific past, there was this light that seemed to surround her at all times. Marcie was delicate and graceful, yet rough around the edges and clumsy at the same time; she was like a walking contradiction and he absolutely loved that about her.

“You were listening to this before?”

“Yeah, I love their music,” Steve said quietly, still observing her in the soft glow of his apartment. He could see the tiny dust particles that floated around in the rays of sunlight and as Marcie moved to plug her phone into the aux cord that was connected to the record player, one of the rays hit her her cheek so he could see her adorable freckles. There was this reddish, pink stain on her lips from the lipstick she had previously been wearing that had quickly disappeared after kissing her one too many times and he noticed the faint bruises on her neck from where he'd kissed her a little too roughly, though she insisted that she didn't mind the marks.

How did he get so lucky to end up with someone like her?

“Have you heard Just Like Heaven?” Marcie asked as she scrolled through one of her many Spotify playlists; how could someone have a playlist for the most absurd occasions? “It’s one of my favorite songs from them.”
“I don’t think I have--I just started listening to them.”

“I think you’d like this song; it’s pretty magical.”

Steve nearly chuckled when she quickly started the song and got to work on organizing his apartment because it had been nearly a month since he had slept there and a layer of dust seemed to cover nearly every surface. Though he felt slightly embarrassed by the messy state of his home, Marcie insisted that it was alright and she had seen way worse; explaining that her grandfather had been a hoarder and that his house had been disgusting and the mold had only made her asthma worse. The Captain could hear Marcie humming along to the beautiful acoustic song that filtered through his apartment as she helped him, mostly clearing out his fridge of food that had spoiled while he tackled the living room.

“Why are you so far away?” She sang so softly that he barely heard it, “Why won’t you ever know, that I’m in love with you? That I’m in love with you,”

Marcie continued to sing, not noticing the way Steve glanced at her over his shoulder, “You, soft and only, you, soft and lonely. You, strange as angels, dancing in the deepest oceans, twisting in the water. You’re just like a dream, just like a dream.”

Steve realized that she was right about the song being magical; because even though the beat was upbeat and cheerful, there was something quite sad about it that he couldn’t really describe.

His cheeks grow hot when Marcie wanders into the living room and easily grabs his hand, making him drop the duster as she pulls him into an easy, slow dance even though the song eventually ends and turns into something way more upbeat that isn’t really made for slow dancing. Though she’s so good at distracting him, Steve can’t be mad about it because the way she stares up at him like she's just discovered a new star takes his breath away. It’s almost similar to the way she had looked at him when he first rescued her from the rubble, except this time, she’s not covered in dust and dirt and there’s not a pole protruding from her abdomen. Instead, she’s wearing an oversized pastel pink sweater that barely falls off her shoulder and he watches as she immediately tugs it back in place when she realizes he can see her scars; even though he loves her scars and thinks they make her look so strong, stronger than him. Moments after making it into his apartment, Marcella, a big supporter of not wearing pants, had wandered into his bedroom and had reappeared minutes later, wearing these little yoga shorts that did absolutely nothing to conceal her legs--not that Steve minded.

Steve’s hands wandered to her cheeks and he pulled her closer to him as he leaned down to cover her soft lips; he wasn’t oblivious to the way she melted against him. Marcie was positive she would never get tired of kissing Steve now that they were both more comfortable around one another. Her hand traveled to his nape, her fingers curling into his soft blonde hair as she kept him close to her and kissed him like it was the last time she was going to see him.

Steve wondered how she did that, how she always kissed him with that much passion when he was the only man she had ever been with in this kind of way.

“But if I had your faith,” She continued to sing softly, her voice barely a whisper against the corners of his lips, “Then I could make it safe and clean…”

She let out a tiny whimper when Steve lowered his head and pressed his lips to the skin where her jawline met her earlobe, one of his hands traveling to her hip while the other cupped the side of her neck.

“Steve,” Marcie sighed his name, tilting her head backwards as Steve continued to lower his head until his nose was skimming across her exposed collarbone. He certainly didn’t miss the way she
pressed herself harder against him as he nipped at the hollow right above her collarbone, finding a small, opalescent scar right on the top of her shoulder, and her floral, fruity scent made him feel intoxicated in the most wonderful way possible. The collar of her oversized sweater started to slip off her shoulder again and Steve lifted his head as he removed his hand from the side of her neck, knowing that it made her nervous when he could see those scars in particular.

“It’s okay…” She breathed out, her face still inches away from his, “I don’t… I don’t mind if you see them.”

He paused then, feeling conflicted as his hand hovered above the scars that resembled welts, “You don’t have to do this because of me, Marce, like I said before, I’d never pressure you into doing anything you didn’t want to do.”

“I know,” The curly-haired engineer murmured and he watched with half-lidded eyes as she curled her fingers into the hem of her sweater, feeling at ease as she lifted the material. Steve knew that she was tiny, unbelievably tiny, but all of her hard work with Clint had paid off and he noticed the slight definition in her abdomen as she removed the oversized sweater, revealing a smooth, toned stomach with a few freckles splashed across her beautiful warm brown skin. His brows furrowed as he stared at the long, thick scar that started between her covered breasts and ended just below her sternum; it was a clean scar though, and Steve assumed she had gotten it from a medical procedure rather than her abusive grandfather.

The Captain noticed how beautiful the deep navy color of her cotton bra looked against her bronze skin; though she looked beautiful in everything, Steve thought she always looked particularly lovely in blue because of the way it made her green eyes stand out even more. The little shorts she wore did absolutely nothing to hide her toned legs and Steve could see the definition in her thighs from all of the strength training she did late at night when most people were asleep.

Marcie glanced down at herself for a small moment, wondering why she didn’t pick something cuter than a simple cotton bra and some black shorts that probably weren’t his idea of sexy. Her green orbs slowly flickered up to observe his features and for the first time since they started dating—hell, since they became friends—she doubted their relationship and wondered why he had chosen her when he could literally have anyone. She wondered if there was a single scar on his smooth flesh, or if he was just completely unmarred and perfect and God, how could he love her and think her to be beautiful when her shoulders and back were riddled with bumpy, rough scars. Did he really not mind the thick scar on her face? Marcie suddenly wanted to take back her previous words about being okay with being exposed to him; she wants to tell him that it’s okay if he finds her hideous.

But then she meets his half-lidded gaze and the doubts swirling around in her mind almost immediately disappear because his eyes are literally sparkling with adoration and a love that she’s never really known.

Marcie watched the way his eyes traveled down the length of her body, her cheeks growing warm as he noticed the scar that she had gotten from her open heart surgery when she had been so much younger. The curly-haired engineer knew that Steve had always been extremely observant and there had been many times where she thought that he would have made a great scientist because of that. His eyes were always scanning his surroundings as he figured out all escape routes in case of an ambush and he was always observing other people to find any drastic shifts in their actions and their demeanor.

Steve was always so incredibly observant and always taking in everything around him, but Marcella’s skin felt like it was on fire as he completely disregarded his surroundings, focusing on her and absolutely nothing else.
“You’re so beautiful, Marce, so beautiful and I still can’t believe that I got so lucky to have you as a best friend and partner,” He insisted softly, pulling her back in his arms. Her eyelashes fluttered against the tops of her cheeks as she peered up at him, her small hands curling into the bottom of his own shirt and he immediately understood and helped her remove his shirt. Marcie sighed softly as her hands trailed along his defined abs and she wondered if he knew how powerful he truly was or if he oftentimes forgot about his strength when he wasn’t on missions, when he was just with her. As if he could read her thoughts, his hand skimmed further up her spine until the tips of his fingers were underneath the clasp of her bra and Marcie knew he was restraining himself as his other hand cupped her rear; he barely used any strength to hike her up onto his hips and she easily wrapped her legs around his broad frame as he covered her lips with his. She felt like a frenzied animal as he easily carried her to his bedroom and she reached behind her to unclasp her bra, needing to feel some sort of friction and Steve quickly helped her slide the straps down her toned shoulders before discarding the navy colored bra in a swift motion.

She whimpered at the friction and her thighs tightened around his waist, making the huge man groan, “Steve, I…” Marcie felt lightheaded and warm as he gently eased the two of them on top of his soft, cloud-like mattress and his bright blue eyes were full of kindness and patience as he stared down at her, “I need…”

She let out the tiniest whimper when his thumb skimmed along the underside of her breast, “What is it, doll? What do you need?”

“I need you,” Marcie choked out when Steve lowered his head and his lips glided across the slope of her breast, her body jolting when she felt his mouth against the pebbled skin of her nipple. The huge blonde man suddenly felt just as lightheaded and warm as she as she curled her fingers into the waistband of his jeans and his eyelashes fluttered against her sensitive skin as she tried to tug his jeans down, his heart pounding in his chest because even though this wasn’t his first sexual experience, he still had no idea what he was doing and wanted her first time to be nice. Steve quickly unbuttoned his jeans and nipped at the bud his lips had currently been sucking at and he was sure that he was going to pass out when she let out the tiniest, most pleasant moan that he had ever heard; she immediately tugged the denim down his legs, needing to feel more of him against her. It was an instant relief when she pushed the jeans down his thighs and he helped her completely remove the piece of clothing, the pressure against his crotch area instantly alleviated and Steve quickly sat up on his knees when she moved to remove her own shorts.

“Are you sure?” Steve struggled with his words as his own fingers curled into the waistband of those little yoga shorts, “Because I can definitely stop whenever, Marce; I just want you to feel comfortable and I know that we haven’t been together for that long and that this is your first time, but if you--”

“Steve,” Marcie interrupted with a soft, reassuring smile, “I’m sure, and I know that we’ve only been together for a few weeks, but I’ve never felt more comfortable with anyone else than I do with you, and you… you make me feel like this isn’t the first time I’ve done this. Whenever we’re together, it just feels right and natural and I know you would never do anything to hurt me; I trust you and I want my first time to be with you. You’re patient and kind and gentle and I know… I just know that this feels right.”

Steve nodded and gently pulled the waistband of her shorts down, “Just… if you need me to stop at any time, tell me right away, alright? I can stop at any point.”

“I will,” She promised and helped him tug the shorts down her legs and Steve was so sure he was going to die when he realized that she definitely wasn’t wearing underneath. Marcie tried to gauge his reaction and noticed the way his nervous expression instantly softened as his eyes scanned her
nude figure in a way that didn’t make her feel insecure in the slightest. Steve was good at that, making her feel like one of the most beautiful women on earth, even with all of her horrific scars and even when she had been at her lowest weight, never had he pointed out that she should eat a little more or wear more makeup. He never told her in that sort of condescending tone that a lot of older men used when they told her that she should smile more, or that she shouldn’t cry so much or always be so sensitive; Steve had only ever been understanding and patient with her when she was upset and would help her talk about her feelings.

As Steve lowered himself until his lips were covering hers once again, Marcella found herself smiling because the world didn’t deserve someone as good as Steven Grant Rogers.

The curly-haired scientist let out a soft exhale as one of Steve’s hands skimmed along the inside of her thigh and the soft; content sighs instantly turned into restrained moans as Steve’s thumb found her clit and the huge blonde nipped at base of her neck as he applied a little more pressure to that tiny bundle of nerves.

“I don't understand how you are able to always look at me like that,” Steve murmured as she smiled so softly at him, her eyes glimmering in the dim lighting of his apartment.

“You know why,” She whispered against his lips her eyelids fluttering and a gasp escaping the back of her throat when a finger slipped between her folds and stretched her out gently; she was already slick and wet and ready for him and Steve groaned because he just wanted to keep her to himself until the end of time.

“It’s okay if you can’t say it out loud,” Steve reassured just as quietly, his other hand gripping her hip so tightly to keep her in place, “I know it’s hard for you to say, but I… I know how you feel, and I feel the same way, Marcie.”

He noticed the way she clenched her teeth and he moved his hand from her hip to the underside of her tense jaw; her eyes started to water and he briefly wondered if she was going to cry because of how hard it was for her to say something like this to a man or if it was from the pleasure— or both. Steve had always wondered if there was a part of her that doubted her own words and if she had truly loved anyone since her mom had passed away.

“It's okay,” Steve continued to reassure her and her mouth fell open when his finger curled against a bundle of nerves that she wasn’t even really aware of and she's suddenly shaking and letting out these tiny moans underneath him, her body slightly tense and numb as she comes apart, “It’s okay if you can’t say it and I don't blame you for struggling so much with this. I just… I just need you to know that I mean it when I say it, when I tell you that I love you because I really do Marce; I love you with all of my heart and I know we haven’t been dating for a long time at all, but I think I’ve known for a while.”

“Steven,” Marcie was still whimpering and shaking and tears filled her eyes because she believed him, “I love you too Steve and I don't want you to think it's so hard for me to say it out loud because I'm doubting myself, I just… I love you, I promise.”

“I know, I believe you,” He whispered, quickly wiping away the tear, “We're both just… one big mess, huh?”

She let out a nervous laugh, “I think we’re doing pretty well, despite everything we’ve been through.”

Before Steve could answer, a loud knock at the door interrupted the two and the Captain let out an irritated groan as he pressed his face against her shoulder, his breath warm and comforting against
her skin. At first, the two were going to ignore it and then Steve’s phone started to vibrate on the
nightstand next to the bed and Marcie’s eyes widened as the Captain let out a few uncharacteristic
curses; the irritated expression instantly melted away as she gently squeezed his cheeks between her
fingers and thumb.

“It’s okay.” She whispered against his lips and reached over to grab his cell phone, “We have all the
time in the world and I’m not going anywhere.”

Steve sighed when she handed him his cell phone and he reluctantly answered, “Hello?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that my favorite Banner was staying with you for a few weeks?” Natasha
asked with a deadpan tone and Steve immediately raised his brows, watching as Marcie easily threw
her sweater back over her petite frame, along with those little shorts that might be the death of him.
Her hair was a lot more wild and unruly than it was before and he noticed how pink her lush lips
were from being kissed so much; she looked beautiful like this and Steve wondered if it would ever
get to the point where it could always be like this. She gave him a warm smile as she made her way
back out to the living room, giving him some privacy as he spoke on the phone with Natasha.

“She literally just got here like, an hour ago,” Steve responded with a little irritation creeping into his
voice, “How did you even find out?”

“You left the file that Nick gave the both of us at his office, so I thought I would stop by your
apartment to drop it off and what do I find parked out in the front? A black and gold Lamborghini
Aventador that definitely doesn’t belong to you, grandpa. So, I figured that Tony Stark wouldn’t be
visiting you seeing as you two can barely be in the same room for more than ten minutes without
bickering like an old couple. The only other person who can drive that car, or any manual
transmission car, for that matter, is Marcella and I want to go take it for a ride with her because it’s
fun driving with Marce.”

“I know how to drive that car,” Steve scoffed and stood up to put his clothes back on, “Give me a
second and I’ll let you in.”

“Marcie already beat you to it,” Natasha said without skipping a beat and Steve raised his brows
when he heard the tiny Banner giggling from the living room. Steve sighed and pressed the little red
phone button at the bottom of the screen, hanging up on Natasha as he threw his t-shirt and jeans
back on before making his way out to the living room and immediately spotting Marcie sitting on one
of the barstools. Natasha was standing across from her in the kitchen her elbows resting on the little
island as she conversed with Marcie in such a comfortable and natural way that Steve wasn’t used to
seeing from Natasha, who was usually guarded and quite stoic around most people. He knew there
was a history between the two that he didn’t completely understand, that Natasha had known her
since she was just a young teenager and that she had been there when Marcie went on that study
abroad program in Yemen to help victims who had been injured in the civil war that still raged on
there. Steve remembered the strange, sad expression on Natasha’s face back in San Pedro Sula when
she had been recalling the first time she had ever seen Marcella Banner and he genuinely wanted to
know more about the history between though. He was sure it was something difficult to talk about
though, and that if Natasha or Marcie wanted to talk about it, they would tell him when the time was
right.

“I’m stealing your Little Banner for the night, Rogers.”

Steve raised his brows at her resolute tone and the tiny smirk on Marcie’s features, “I figured as
much; just try not to get into any trouble. I know how the two of you are when you get together.”
“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Marcella said innocently, the skin at the corners of her eyes crinkling as she smiled, “You’re the one that’s a troublemaker—throwing yourself off of bridges and out of airplanes without parachutes.”

“If I recall correctly,” Steve started, missing the amused expression on Natasha’s face as the two bickered playfully with one another, “You and Tony are the ones that tried to make your own phasers like the ones in Star Trek and didn’t he almost stun you? Or when the two of you made your own lightsabers and you nearly cut off Clint’s arm in the process?”

“It was an accident,” She huffed out a laugh, “And I don’t think I should go out Nat, I told Clint I would work on his suit and arrows. I’ve been working on this gauntlet for him that has this military grade magnetic strip so he doesn’t keep running out of arrows and--”

“You’re going out with me tonight and we’re taking the Lambo,” Natasha insisted before throwing Steve a challenging expression, as if they were now competing for Marcie’s affection, “You hang out with the guys too much and so do I. I think we definitely could use some girl time and you never spend any of that money you get from working with Tony.”

“I’m saving up.”

Natasha and Steve both raised their brows before the huge blonde spoke up, “For what? You make way more than any of us and could easily afford anything you want, Marce.”

Marcella smiled sheepishly and nodded, “I’m saving up for… just in case of an emergency, you know? I try not to ask Tony for resources and parts when I’m making new things; I pour my own money into it and I just… I’m saving up for something.”

“No you something that we don’t?”

Marcie blinked at Natasha’s suddenly serious tone and tucked a curl behind her ear, “I don’t know any more than what you guys know but… I also know that there’s a lot of things that you guys don’t know. Things that… just things that me and Tony have discovered working together and I don’t know.”

“You don’t trust SHIELD, do you?” Steve questioned softly as she gazed down at her hands that were clasped together on top of her lap, “What do you know?”

“Like I said before, I don’t know any more than what you guys already know,” She said quietly, finally meeting his conflicted expression, “I just know that there’s very few people I trust—just you guys—and you shouldn’t… maybe you should think about who you really trust because SHIELD is notorious for having agents who also work for organizations that don’t… that don’t stand for what you guys stand for. I don’t want to see any of you guys get hurt trying to do the right thing, but I can’t help but to feel like something terrible is just right around the corner and I feel like…”

“What is it?” Natasha urged her softly when she struggled with her next words; the Captain and the Black Widow exchanged worried glances at one another. Though Marcella didn’t know the exact details of the missions they went on, it was clear that she knew more than what she was letting on and while there might have been a point in Natasha’s life that she’d scoff at someone like Marcella Banner, there was a strength that she possessed that not even Natasha could comprehend that Steve could understand all too well. They both knew what it felt like to go to bed hungry and thinking that they might actually die from whatever illness they were suffering from and they both knew what it was like to feel so incredibly small and miniscule, like the world could just swallow them up at any moment. Steve had once said that he saw a lot of his younger self inside of her, and he had truly meant it because they both knew what it was like to rely on others to show compassion when that
was such an incredibly rare trait in today’s society. They both know exactly what it feels like to be absolutely defenseless, but they both always stood up for what they believed in, even if it means no one is willing to stand with them as they’re getting bullied and pushed to their physical limits.

Steve and Marcie both know what it’s like to gain strength from being weak and poor, and Natasha admires that about their relationship.

“I can’t help but to feel like something horrible is going to happen and people are going to get hurt,” She smiled sadly, her green eyes peering right up at Steve’s blue ones, “I feel like there’s a chance that you guys might get hurt and something might happen that will tear the group apart.”

“How long… how long have you had this feeling?”

Marcella stared at Steve, trying to decide if she should really tell him what was going on.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to send Happy to come and get you, kid? You really shouldn’t be walking around this late at night.”

“I’m fine, Tony, really,” Marcie sighed as she genuinely thought about hanging up on Tony, “I just have a few more blocks and I’ll be right back at the tower. I’m not… I’m not going to run off without any warning again.”

“I’d fucking hope not; you’re dad and Cap still haven’t really forgiven me about letting you go like that,” He said, referring to the San Pedro Sula incident, “Hell, even I’m still pretty mad at myself for letting that happen.”

“You didn’t let anything happen, Tony; that whole situation was my fault and you and I both know I would have found a way to leave even if you didn’t get drunk that night. Besides, I’m not a kid anymore, I’m an adult and I can take care of myself now.”

“An adult who wanders out at midnight to get some ice cream?”

“Do you expect me to watch Netflix without a pint of rocky road?”

Marcie smiled softly and scanned her surroundings, frowning when she heard something rustling behind her. She came to a stop on the sidewalk and turned around, staring at the path in front of her, but not noticing anything out of the ordinary; her eyes landed on a dark, sketchy alleyway just a few feet away from where she was standing. The tiny Banner always hated it when victims in horror movies insisted on inspecting areas where the source of an ominous sound came from, but as she stared at the dark alleyway, she found herself slowly moving towards it while her hand moved to the pocket knife she kept attached to her keychain. She came to a stop when she was standing directly in front of the opening between the two buildings and lifted her head when she saw a figure retreating further into the darkness, though she wasn’t able to make out any of their features other than the fact that they were dressed from head to toe in black. As the figure paused for a moment, their back still facing her, they peered at her over their shoulder and Marcella noticed a thick curtain of unruly, shoulder-length locks covering most of their face. Judging by the silhouette, they were extremely jacked and Marcie noticed how his build was almost similar to Steve’s, like he could crush her skull without even breaking a sweat.

“Marcie?” Tony’s voice startled her and she didn’t even realize she had dropped her pint of ice cream, “Everything okay, kid?”

The figure regarded her for another moment and as he turned around, Marcie swore she saw the moonlight catch the metal surface that covered his entire left arm.
She let out a shaky breath as he easily made his way down the alley before disappearing into the darkness.

“Yeah,” She whispered and tried to keep her voice composed as she stared down at the ice cream that was now melting on the pavement, “I just… I fell and dropped my ice cream.”

“That’s okay,” Tony said and she noticed the strange softness in his voice, “I think I still have some ice cream in the fridge; I know you don’t like pistachio, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Only elderly people and heathens like pistachio,” Marcie huffed, earning a scoff from the billionaire, “And you just happen to be both.”

“Steve’s favorite is butter pecan, so that automatically makes him a walking fossil, right?”

“An absolute plebeian,” Marcella finally cracked a smile, “Do I even want to know why you know Steve’s favorite ice cream?”

She was met with silence and as she continued on her way back to the tower, listening to Tony’s half-assed explanation with a soft smile on her face, she couldn’t forget about the huge man standing in the alleyway. Maybe she had just been imagining the strange metal limb attached to his torso, but Marcella was slowly becoming one of the most renowned biomedical engineers in the world and was an expert in prosthetics and that had by far been one of the strangest prosthetic arms she had ever seen in her life. Though she had merely caught a glimpse of it, the bionic arm looked incredibly heavy and she wondered if it tugged at his skin in a painful way.

God, she just really wanted to see that arm up close.

And as she thinks about the man, the heavy feeling in her stomach continues to get worse and she knows that something bad is around the corner.

“Marcie,” Steve interrupted her thoughts and she blinked up at him, not even realizing that she had been zoning out again, “If something happened to make you feel this way, you know that you could always tell us, right? We can… we can help keep you safe if you feel like you’re in some kind of danger.”

“Yeah,” Natasha interjected with a soft tone to her raspy voice, “We know you don’t trust SHIELD, or most government agencies for that matter, but we don’t have to tell anyone if you’re having problems.”

“No, I’m fine,” Marcie furrowed her brows as she gazed at her two friends, “Nothing happened.”

It’s that moment that makes Steve realize just how similar they are, because she’s just as bad of a liar as he is.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I am sooo sorry about the long wait guys. These last few weeks have been rough for me and I know it probably sounds so silly and ridiculous, but my dog has just been having some problems and he's getting older and I've just been so upset and distracted lately because the thought of losing him is absolutely heartbreaking to me. He's been in our family for nearly eleven years now and he's just the sweetest big boi, so
seeing him having issues with arthritis has just been so incredibly hard to watch and it's been hard for me to think about anything other than him. Luckily he seems to be doing better with the help of medicine and his hips don't seem to be causing him any pain, thank God, because he's literally the love of my life.

Anyways, thanks as always for being patient and I'm so excited to finally be starting TWS storyline in this and oh boy, it's definitely going to be an emotional rollercoaster coming up in these next few chapters. I'm kind of putting a bit of my own twist on it and giving Marcella her own little story as well and I'm super hyped about it because it definitely has some serious foreshadowing to the future and ugh, it's going to be angsty and depressing and great lmao.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter in all its fluffy/kinda smutty glory, because I'm trying to work on writing smut and it's definitely one of the most difficult things for me to write lol, but hopefully this wasn't written too badly. There's definitely going to be some uninterrupted smutiness coming up real soon, so be ready for that and if anyone has any tips on writing smut, please hit me up because I'm trying my best here lol.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!