How to Measure Distance Between Two Points

by frostian

Summary

“They were kidnapped six weeks ago,” Pepper answered, her gaze falling to her hands.
“And nobody noticed.”

“What the fuck,” Bucky hissed. “How is that possible?”

Dr. Jane Foster and her assistant, Darcy Lewis, have arrived at the Avengers Initiative compound in Upstate New York for personal safety. To everyone's shock Dr. Foster reveals she has finally succeeded in not only opening up the Einstein-Rosen Bridge but controlling it, essentially creating a human version of the Bi-Frost that would allow visitors from all Nine Realms and beyond.

This unforeseen success will no doubt attract the attention of both AIM and Hydra, one of which succeeded in kidnapping the women only weeks before. Captain Rogers, still at odds with the powers-that-be about his friend, Bucky Barnes, will have to use not only his military prowess but cunning and intelligence in order to ensure the women's safety. Because, as it turns out, the good doctor and her assistant have a knack for creating havoc all on their own.
Never let it be said that Steve Rogers didn’t know how to behave properly, especially in front of a lady. Of course, even a living icon and legend needed a little warning before being summoned to talk with a lady, especially one such as Pepper Potts.

But if anyone caught a glimpse of the good captain as he marched down yet another glass-enclosed corridor, they would’ve thought he was going to face off General Ross. Again. And this time, there would be blood; on the floor, walls, ceiling, perhaps through the walls, even.

“Fuck,” Bucky hissed as he matched his friend’s angry stride. “Not even a goddamn two-minute shower?! Hope she likes sweat and stink along with her Starbucks.”

Steve tried to shrug but the movement was swiftly aborted when he felt the slap of wet fabric hit the dip between his trapezius muscles. He looked down at his sweat-soaked t-shirt and pulled it away from his skin, wincing at the moist sound the t-shirt made. Steve also had to wage a continuous war against himself in order not to further mess up his equally sweaty hair by running his fingers through it.

Bucky fared no better. If anything he was worse off since he didn’t even have a shirt, and his hair was a bird’s nest because of the makeshift bun he’d fashioned right after he rolled out of bed.

Their combined state was due to their regularly scheduled sparring match that ended with a call from Friday, ordering them to meet with Pepper. Right. This. Minute. Thus, forcing the men to scramble out of the gym and into the myriad of hallways in the facility.

For a moment Steve indulged in the idea of just letting Pepper wait while he did take a shower and put on fresh clothes. He had little doubt she’d be the messenger of more bad news: that once again Bucky would not be able to join the Avengers in their next mission. The tally then would be up to five rejections in a six-month campaign Steve had waged on behalf of his friend.

This thought only made Steve’s rotten mood even worse. And from the way the support personnel dove out of their path, his anger was obviously scrawled across his face. But Steve was frankly too riled up to care.

So, by the time they reached the conference room he had a good head of steam going.

The walls of glass revealed Pepper Potts looking like her elegant self, even if her hair had been shorn so close to the scalp that calling it a pixie cut was being generous. It took everything Steve had not to wince when he noticed it, and suddenly he felt like a class-A idiot because Pepper did nothing to deserve his ire.

The Avengers were prepared for violence, for attacks from enemies both global and beyond. What they were woefully unprepared for was a single, unhinged individual who managed to make their way into a charity gala in order to kill the woman he thought responsible for the downfall of his career. The would-be murderer, later identified as Dr. Mueller from Fresno, was methodical and had earned an actual invitation to the party. So, he had little problem approaching Pepper who was hosting the fête.

After an hour of patiently waiting, the chance had come for him to shake her hand in a show of camaraderie and thanks. Instead, he grabbed Pepper by her hair in order to cut her throat open.

At the last moment she managed to wrench her head forward and sideways as he swung his
surgical scalpel. The desperate movement had saved her life but not her hair.

Steve had to actually peel Tony off from Dr. Mueller, who was well on his way to la-la land thanks to Tony repeatedly slamming the man’s head to the marble floor.

The moment Tony stood up, pale and wild-eyed, he whirled to face Pepper who was mutely staring at her locks now decorating the floor. Without warning, Ton grabbed hold of her, initiated his suit, and flew off.

The party quickly and mercifully ended minutes after. The violence was so shocking that no attendant posted pictures of the attack on social media. Steve knew there was more than one camera on Pepper as she was the hostess. But not a soul would volunteer any information, and the papers were forced to print a dry recount of the attempted murder of Stark’s fiancée and CEO of Stark Industries.

“Good morning, Steve, Bucky,” Pepper said as she stood up to shake their hands.

Bucky gave a small nod in reply, unaccountably turning bashful in front of her and retreating to a chair located farthest from Pepper.

“Is there an emergency?” Steve asked, silently hoping for such if only to have Bucky back where he belonged.

She smiled and shook her head, “Not as such. But we do need your help. Dr. Foster and her assistant, Darcy Lewis, are ready to come in.”

Despite the initial disappointment, the news was surprising enough to tickle Steve’s curiosity. “Really? Do you want us to show them around, then? Make sure they get settled in properly?”

“No, we need you to be their … I hate to say it but it’s true: Protection detail.”

No matter what the historians claimed, Steve was no saint. He had a temper and when it came to Bucky, that temper had a short fuse.

“We have security for that, Pepper,” Steve curtly reminded her. “Any of the men on the grounds can shadow them without a problem.”

Pepper’s gaze immediately turned flinty. “Let me speak to you plainly, then. I am well aware of your petition to the UN to have Bucky formally join the Avenger Initiative. I am also well aware that as long as your petition’s language and reasoning remains martial, Dr. Ripley will not give it the green light. Which means your petition will never see the voting floor of the UN. Please, remember, Dr. Ripley was a proponent of the Avengers Initiative and a vocal critic of the Sokovia Accords. So, when the American Representative with that kind of history says ‘no’, you won’t find any other ally on First Avenue.

“When the UN voted to vacate all charges against Sergeant Barnes, the votes were 95 to 92 in favor with Russia, China, and four other countries abstaining in protest. And though that sounds like a solid victory, the truth is the representatives for Belgium, Canada, and New Zealand are incapable of holding grudges. They also happen to be fans of clean, renewable energy that Stark Industries is currently pioneering.

“So, if you think Bucky’s formal introduction to the world as a member of the Avengers will be on a battlefield, you are sorely mistaken. The public needs to see him as a protector, not a killer, which Russia and China will be eager to parade on every social media the moment he returns to the public eye.”
Steve’s aggravation quickly died as he digested Pepper’s statement.

“And if you pair me up with Thor’s … ex, the one who helped to bring half of the universe back, then people will see me as trustworthy?” Bucky offered helpfully.

“We can hope. But the truth is your image will always be darker than that of Steve’s. There’s no getting around that so we won’t even waste our time trying.” Pepper raised a hand to stymie Steve’s protest before he even began. “However, there is a lot of wiggle room with what’s left, specifically, the classic reformed bad boy image. Which, from your history, you’ve done quite a bit to cultivate before 1945.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “Pepper… C’mon, that’s not fair.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes as he studied the woman in front of him. Then his lips curved into a sly grin. “But not untrue. So, more Lothario than Lex Luthor?”

“Exactly,” Pepper said. “I don’t know what Thor had said about Doctor Foster or Ms Lewis, but trust me when I say they need protection. And not just because of their relationship with Thor.”

Steve noticed the tension in Pepper’s voice. “Is there a viable threat?”

“They were kidnapped six weeks ago,” Pepper answered, her gaze falling to her hands. “And nobody noticed.”

“What the fuck,” Bucky hissed. “How is that possible?”

“Thor wasn’t here,” Pepper answered. “And the agents assigned to protect them were newly-trained. They thought the two had given them the slip and went gallivanting off to study some atmospheric phenomenon in Finland. In their defense, Jane had done exactly that once before.”

“How long did it take for the idiots to notice their charges were in danger?” Steve grounded out.

“They didn’t. The women escaped their captors three days after the kidnapping and contacted Dr. Selvig, who picked them up in Hallstatt. It was a mess.”

“How are they?” Steve asked, his stomach roiling as all sorts of horrible scenarios paraded in his head.

“Better than the agents,” Pepper said. “Their captors didn’t abuse them too much. From what I’ve gathered, it was AIM and they were more interested in Doctor Foster’s knowledge of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge. Of course, they tried to use Ms. Lewis as leverage to force the doctor into cooperating, and had little problem carrying out their threats when she refused. This, more than anything, turned Doctor Foster’s attention to an escape. And when a woman of that intellect focuses on something, she usually succeeds.”

Steve paled at the thought of the doctor failing and paying the price of her failure with her life and Lewis’. Thor, even though no longer romantically attached to Doctor Foster, would have torn the planet apart looking for the ones responsible for their murders.

“And when they arrive, we may finally figure out how they managed to undo what Thanos had done,” Pepper added. “I will admit, I am very curious as to how two human beings opened all the dimensional portals, allowing the Missing to return to their proper worlds.”

“And then there is that,” Steve agreed. “Apologies, Pepper. We’ll be more than happy to make sure they’re safe.”
“Thank you,” Pepper replied softly, relief evident in her tone. “I don’t know them well enough to count them as friends, but I don’t think I’m in the minority when I say I owe them some peace of mind.”

“The world owes them,” Bucky added.

The meeting adjourned quickly thereafter and the two men hightailed it to their shared quarters for a shower and a much-needed meal.

It was only after a hefty lunch that Steve was ready to deal with Bucky. His friend was practically vibrating with curiosity since the meeting and had visibly stopped himself from asking more than a few questions since.

“I got bits and pieces from the others, but those of us who stayed behind, none of them wants to really talk about it. And I can’t blame them,” Bucky said as he poured coffee for Steve and himself. “But exactly what happened after Thanos won?”

“You’d think there be riots, blood on the streets,” Steve slowly explained. “But the truth was the entire world was in catatonic shock. Nobody knew what to do. There wasn’t a family that didn’t get hit. Even the military couldn’t do anything because they didn’t know what to do.”

Steve had to finish his coffee, as his hands began shaking. “It was god awful, Bucky. Everything was quiet: no traffic, no people on the streets. And Tony, Jesus, Tony … when he showed up … the first thing he did was to call Pepper.”

“And he found out Pepper was gone.”

“Yeah, he snapped then. He couldn’t deal anymore and neither could I if you want to know the truth. Three days after that Thor got a call from Foster. She told him nobody was dead, only … hidden is the word Thor used. I never got the full gist of it, but it was enough for Thor to go to her. Two days later, he called and told us what to do.”

“I know Nat and Rhodey went globe-trotting to set those markers up for her, and Barton went MIA.”

“Yeah, he and Coulson were busy finding any remaining SHIELD agents because they realized things were going to get very busy.”

The actual event was brief but cataclysmic. Thor had appeared on international TV, telling everyone that the Avengers were going to try to bring the Missing back to their proper worlds, but that they needed help. People were told to get off the streets and wait, while any military force that could help would be more than welcomed in Wakanda. The horrifying truth was, if the Avengers succeeded, Thanos and his army would return along with the victims.

And Foster did succeed. Steve remembered seeing Bucky materialize only few yards from where he’d disintegrated, and for a moment allowed tears to fall. Then, it was back to battle for both Super Soldiers.

The sky was swathed in streaks of black and grey with air support. From F-16 and F-22s, to Lockheads and Sukhois, not to mention land forces, all used to ensure that Thanos’ invading army couldn’t escape.

Soldiers from countries that would be usually at odds cooperated, snipers and other Specialists tore through Thanos’ land force, and though many were killed or wounded, the sheer number of human fighters quickly overwhelmed the enemy, and had given Romanov a chance to end the Titan’s
As it turned out, a chance was all she needed.

“I honestly thought I’d be the one to kill Thanos,” Steve confessed, still a bit sore that Nat was the one who managed to decapitate the bastard. “I still don’t get how she got out of there alive. Even Dr. Cho was shocked by her condition.”

Bucky’s smile was grim but proud. “That’s Nat for you.”

Steve shook his head. “Three days, Bucky. Three fucking days and nobody noticed that a global terrorist group kidnapped the women responsible for our planet being in one piece. What the actual fucking hell?

“If those agents were under my command? They’d be spit shining shoes with their tongues every single day until the end of the goddamn year.”

Bucky huffed out a rusty laugh. “And people think you’re made of apple pie and sunshine. Christ, that never gets old.”

“Not my fault that nobody bothered to realize what it actually meant to be in the army during the War. And a Howling Commando, to boot. I swear, whoever did the paint job over my reputation deserves a Pulitzer or a Nobel Prize, even, for creating such fantastic fiction.”

“And a bottle of vodka, ’cause that had to have been hell of a workload.”

Steve side-eyed his friend. “You’re not insulted that a babysitting duty is what gets you the stamp?”

Bucky shook his head. “Nah, look – when it comes to political shit like this, Pepper is way smarter than both of us. And if she thinks this plan will work? I’m all in.”

Steve sighed in relief and systematically flipped open the folders Pepper had given him. “Let’s get to work then,” he said, shoving Bucky’s copies across the kitchen counter.

Bucky gave a low whistle as he studied the pictures. “Wow, that’s a whole lot of pretty with the smarts.”

Steve couldn’t help but smile at Bucky’s estimation. The two years in Wakanda did wonders for Bucky’s psyche, and Steve would be forever grateful to T’Challa and his people for all the help and support they had given.

In a way, Pepper was right in her estimation of Bucky. His friend would never again be the carefree soul before the War. But this man, sitting across from him, even painted in blood and darkness, was the best friend Steve needed right now. Because the truth was that Steve was not the same man before the plane crash. And the two, both with jagged edges in their souls as their former lives were ripped away, could depend on each other because of that shared loss.

They dedicated an entire week to studying the dossiers on the two women and their contributions to Science, in the hopes of getting ready for their arrival. More importantly, trying to plan out ways of curtailing any risky behavior before everything spiraled out of control.

All in all, Steve felt confident in his preparation for Doctor Foster and Ms. Lewis as he waited for their arrival. But as he watched the newest members of the Initiative disembark from the Quinjet, Steve belatedly realized he was nowhere near prepared.
Not even close, Steve thought in quiet panic as he watched Foster wrestle with the huge backpack dangling on her right arm while trying to keep herself from toppling out of the Quinjet.

As he rushed towards her to help, Steve idly wondered when the Universe would stop fucking with his life so thoroughly. Still, seeing her smile up at him as he shouldered her bag, maybe the Universe had a long game that would benefit him in the end.

“Holy shit, is that shoulder to waist ratio real?” Lewis barked out, eyes wide as she studied her childhood hero. “Also, is that your natural hair color? I thought you were a blond.”

No, the Universe was laughing. Goddamn it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve looked at the bathroom mirror and frowned as he took a closer examination of his face. He had liked the new look. The combination of beard and longer hair had given him certain somber aura that made people think twice about crossing him, and all without the benefit of the Captain America costume. Not that his physical heft was anything to laugh at. Still, outside of his superhero persona, Steve had initially struggled to integrate with the more pedestrian side of the Initiative, most of who were composed of military personnel. This hurdle shocked him more than anything when he had first moved to the compound. And the realization that even if he had actually fought a war, the art of warfare had drastically changed during his time on the ice, resulting in a different mindset of the soldiers.

All of this forced Steve to conclude that his initial problem with the Avengers and specifically Tony, may not be so localized to the varied personalities in the small group. So, it took Steve some time, the entire year after the Second Battle of Wakanda, to feel completely at ease with the various personnel in the facility. Which, not so surprisingly, coincided with Bucky’s reintegration into society.

Steve rubbed a careful hand over his beard and snorted. He knew his looks were considered desirable by many and envied by more than a few. Maybe he’ll trim the hair a bit, but that would be all. No fussing over what could not be fixed, as the ever-present pragmatic voice in his head declared.

So, when Steve exited the bathroom and saw a clean-shaven Bucky along with his hair neatly trimmed to his jawline, he was rendered speechless.

“Got a hot date?” Steve finally managed to strangle out. With the change in looks, Bucky actually seemed younger than him by more than a few years.

Bucky stopped eating his apple and gave him a stink eye. “No, I just wanted to clean up a bit. Clint told me last week that my ‘Murder Hobo’ look was coming back full force. And that I was scaring the piss out of the probies so much, one of them actually got remanded back to Bliss.”

Steve mouthed ‘Murder Hobo’ as if by doing so the term would make some sense. He then saw the smirk on Bucky’s face and tossed an apple at his head, which Bucky caught without looking while chomping down the one in his hand.

“C’mon, Doc Foster might need help,” Steve said. “Might as well see what the fuss is about.”

He was almost at the door before he realized that Bucky wasn’t shadowing him. Steve turned around to see his friend studying him with interest.

“What?”

“You? Volunteering to help Foster move around boxes?” Bucky leaned against the kitchen counter. “Really? You? Captain Rogers who couldn’t find paperwork he couldn’t shovel off to the next unlucky schlep? Captain Rogers who would do anything to duck out of meetings? You?”

“Fuck off,” Steve said, grinning. “I just want to make sure she doesn’t blow the base sky high, or worse, to Jotunheim.”
“Uh huh, sure.” Bucky replied, devouring the second apple until he had eaten the core, too. A habit reinforced by years of poverty. He spat out the stem into the garbage can while wiping his hands on his trousers. “Nothing to do with the fact that the good doctor and her sidekick are easy on the eyes. And not attached.”

“Bucky, you’re more than welcome to stay here.”

“Nah, just sayin’ is all. Just warning ya, maybe they’re lesbians now.”

Steve stared at his friend slack jawed. “What? Where did that come from?”

“Hey, I’m getting into this new century groove. Lesbians are a thing now.”

“They’ve always been a thing, you moron.”

“Nah, really?” Bucky said with exaggerated shock. “I never noticed that in Brooklyn. Or with Jenny and Sarah.”

“Jenny and Sarah?”

“The two girls who lived upstairs from us in 1941; the seamstresses for Whitney’s Bridal on 48th?” Bucky explained.

Steve had foggy memory of them, mainly because he’d spent a large chunk of 1941 bedridden and unable to work, much less meet the neighbors.

“I thought they were cousins. They had the same family name: Gibbons,” Steve recollected slowly. “That’s why they decided to become roommates.”

Bucky shook his head. “Christ on the Cross, if they were cousins I’m Errol Flynn.”

“I’m leaving. You and your fond memories of Brooklyn lesbians can stay here.”

“Cousins,” Bucky muttered as he followed Steve out the door. “Roommates.”

Steve made a rude hand gesture and continued walking.

Doctor Foster’s lab was at the western end of a complex dedicated to research. The one preceding hers was slotted for Banner, who was currently in Bethesda Hospital, studying some of the Missing who’d come back infected with whatever the hell they were exposed to during their time away from home.

Jane’s lab wasn’t the biggest but it looked massive due to the high ceiling, and a retractable skylight that covered at least a third of it.

“So, where are the lesbians?” Bucky asked, looking around the lab.

“Where’s what now?” Darcy asked, her head popping up from a stack of crates lined up against a wall.

“Goddamn it,” Steve muttered as he glared at Bucky who was struggling mightily not to laugh at his friend’s expression.

“Dude, I don’t know what Stark told you but this here is for science,” Darcy said, frowning at them. “Also, just because we are women who work together doesn’t automatically mean we’re romantically attached to each other. Or, sexually for that matter. So get your head out of the gutter.
And, FYI, Janey there has two loves: Thor and the stars.”

“So, she doesn’t love you?” Buck teased.

Darcy’s gaze narrowed further. “You’re trouble. I can tell.”

“You have no idea,” Steve agreed. “Just don’t feed him, and he’ll get bored and go away.”

“I thought she and Thor were kaput,” Bucky asked, elbowing his friend.

Darcy shrugged. “Yeah, but you know: Thor. He’s kinda hard to get out of your system.”

“What about Thor?” Jane suddenly appeared behind what looked like the biggest airplane turbine Steve had ever seen. And he’d seen a decommissioned Antonov.

“I rest my case,” Darcy said. “Hey, Janey, you love me?”

Jane gave an inelegant snort. “Of course I do. You stuck with me through two Apolcalypse … s. Is there a plural for Apocalypse?”

Bucky rested a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Since he’s in charge, yeah. There should be.”

“Trouble,” both Steve and Darcy chimed in unison.

Jane laughed; it was a soft, clear sound that made Steve blush. And though she was sporting sweatshirt and jeans, Steve thought she looked elegant enough for a tea party on Park Avenue.

“Oh,” Darcy suddenly exclaimed. She pointed at the two men. “They didn’t do the thing!”

Jane looked impressed. “You’re right. They didn’t.”

“What thing?” Steve asked, wondering if his curiosity would bite him in the ass.

“Mention that Janey’s Thor’s ex right at intro!” Darcy said. She scrambled over few boxes and grabbed a truly heinously colored tote bag roughly the same size as her friend.

“You’ll want to take what she’s offering,” Jane said.

Darcy flipped open a large Tupperware container and pulled out what looked like lemon bars. She handed one each to Steve and Bucky.

“Home made,” Darcy explained. “I firmly believe in positive reinforcement.”

Steve took a cautious bite, and then jammed the entire thing into his mouth because it was so heavenly. He wasn’t too ashamed as Bucky did the same. While chewing Steve recollected his introduction to Foster and Lewis and belatedly realized he didn’t say a friggin’ word. No, he just escorted them to the lab, dropped off Foster’s bag on a chair. He then performed a crisp turn and left the women in the lab.

Bucky looked around. “So, do you need help?”

“Have to ask, how is the balance?” Jane asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

Jane pointed at Bucky’s left arm. “I’m guessing that arm is stronger than the right?”
Bucky gave a hesitant nod.

“So, when you lift weights, does the left arm automatically recalibrate?” Jane leaned forward to study the arm closely.

Bucky’s smile was fond. He looked at Steve and shook his head as both Jane and Darcy stared at his arm. There was no fear, no hesitation from the women even though they must have been briefed about Bucky’s violent past.

“Yeah, it does,” Bucky answered. “But it can recalibrate force when needed.”

“How?” Jane looked up at Bucky.

Steve hoped his jealousy didn’t show too much as the doctor’s eyes were shining with curiosity.

“It’s networked into my entire nervous system,” Bucky explained. He then made a fist.

The two women gave a hushed ‘wow’ as the plates shifted and a near-silent whirl sounded as the result.

“That’s so cool,” Darcy whispered, then blinked. “Not that it’s cool with what happened to you ‘cause that sucks and blows and other horrible things.”

“Is that vibranium?” Jane asked, completely ignoring Darcy.

“Yeah, and it can take a lot more heat than the one it replaced,” Bucky said.

Darcy looked up at the connective junction between the shoulder and arm. “Does that hurt?”

Bucky had to pause before answering. “Sometimes. But replacing it is too dangerous. At least right now.”

Jane gave the arm a sympathetic pat, not realizing how Bucky startled at the innocent gesture. She turned her gaze to Steve. “So, help?”

Steve was grateful to be included in the conversation once more. “What do you need?”

It didn’t take long to realize that Jane’s stuff was nothing like Tony’s. It was a curious mix of something that was rescued out of a junkyard or bought from some sleek futuristic store that probably had snow-white blinding décor.

Bucky, meanwhile, had been recruited by Darcy who kept up hilariously descriptive tales of the boxes that needed to be moved, ranging from, “The box that looks like there’s something alive in it and trying to break out,” to “the cute little yellow one that has like, all the weapons in the world, but Ant-Man sized.”

“Sorry I’m late,” a youthful voice said from the doorway. Steve turned to face Peter Parker who looked around the room with open glee. “But it took me a while to find my room.”

“Hello, I’m Doctor Jane Foster and that’s Darcy Lewis,” Jane said warmly. “You must be Peter. Tony’s spoken very highly of you.”

“Did he?” Peter said, looking genuinely shocked. “Wow, um … cool. Hope I don’t disappoint you. And, also, can I say how amazing it is I’m getting my AP credits from this summer internship? Like Columbia cool. NYU is so going to regret not taking my early acceptance application seriously!”
Darcy threw a companionable arm around Peter’s shoulders. “Don’t worry, it’s going to look awesome on paper. But the truth is you’re going to be doing a lot of data entry. So, so much data entry.”

Steve watched in amusement as Peter valiantly kept his gaze on Darcy’s face and not on her chest. “Peter here is a bright kid, but you might want to take easy on him, at least for the first week.”

“I’ll try but no promises,” Jane said. “I plan to have everything up as soon as possible.”

“Oh, by the way,” Peter said as pulled out some papers from his backpack and handed them over to Steve. “I passed the physical and the field test.”

Steve hurriedly shoved the papers into his pockets, but the damage was done.

Jane’s gaze turned serious. “They made you take a field test? Why?”

Peter, realizing his mistake, stuttered out, “Just normal stuff, running, swimming, and basic weapons training. You guys were probably grandfathered ‘cause of Thor.”

“I beg your pardon?” Darcy looked genuinely taken back. “Kid, you’re like sixteen? What the hell?”

Steve belatedly realized they didn’t know about Peter’s superhero persona. “It’s just the basics. Nothing too serious.”

“Guns are serious, Steve,” Jane said, her face turning mulish. “And he’s not even old enough to vote!”

“I hate guns!” Peter shouted. “I don’t like guns and I don’t plan on carrying any. They only wanted to see if I knew what to do with it. I didn’t, and that was fine, so no problem!”

“Hope not,” Darcy said. “This lab’s going to have some seriously delicate machinery and one bullet could do huge damage.”

Bucky’s demeanor turned stiff as his alter ego surfaced. “What machinery?”

“I will be building the permanent Bi-Frost here,” Jane explained. “Allowing Thor and other Asgardians to come to earth as they rebuild their home.”

“I thought they were all dead, save for Thor,” Bucky said, glancing at Steve who was taken back by the news.

“Most survivors will be from the outer colonies, or were traveling at the time,” Jane explained. “Some did survive Thanos’ attack, too.”

“Where are they now?” Steve asked.

“They have set up on one of the planets near Vanaheim,” Jane said. “They’re still salvaging whatever they can. Luckily the new planet is very hospitable to Asgardians, and there are outposts and farming communities already in place.”

“That must be so hard,” Peter said. “Losing everything like that.”

Jane nodded. “It was, but Thor’s determined to rebuild Asgard, and he wants to do it the right way. Not at all like what his father had done.”
Steve noticed Jane’s voice turning bitter when mentioning Odin. And considering Darcy’s worried glance at her friend, there was genuine cause for it.

Peter, completely ignorant of the tension running under the conversation, clapped his hands together. “So, what can I do?”

Darcy pointed at a clump of wires that decorated the floor. “We need to connect those to the proper inputs. That way, at least the gravity decelerators can start charging.”

“Gravity decelerators?” Peter echoed, eyes wide. “You actually built one? I didn’t know any existed outside of CERN.”

Steve didn’t think the accomplishment was something to celebrate. He liked gravity, and anything that messed it up seemed to him like a recipe for disaster: such as turning the entire research wing into an overpriced bouncy house.

“Why do you need to mess with gravity?” Bucky asked bluntly.

“Matter behaves differently if you negate gravity,” Jane explained. “Yes, atoms are atoms but if we recreate space where gravitational forces are negligible, I can make Heimdall particles travel faster while having better control over them.”

At the mention of the fallen Asgardian, Jane’s voice tipped into sorrow. “Then we won’t need so great an energy input as we would otherwise.”

“Heimdall?” Peter echoed. “He’s real?”

“Was,” Jane corrected. “He died when Thanos attacked Thor’s ship.”

“Oh,” Peter said, looking crestfallen that he would never get the chance to meet the legendary guardian. “What was he like?”

“The stories don’t do him any justice,” Jane said. “He was so grand and beautiful. But he was also kind, and didn’t care that I was a Midgardian who ensnared the Prince of Asgard.”

“Sounds like a good dude,” Peter said. “Wish I’d met him.”

The two scientists went back to work, with Steve and Bucky obeying the many requests of putting boxes ‘over there no not there, there,’ and ‘actually, could you move the crate back to that corner?’

It didn’t take long for Peter to feel outclassed with all the brawn so, of course, he broke out his less flashy Spiderman powers, which resulted in Darcy crying out,

“How? No, forget how. Share! Sharing is caring ‘cause I could do so much damage on the dance floor if I could move like that.”

Jane studied Peter for a moment, shook her head, and went right back to unpacking. After Thor, she had become somewhat immune to weird sights, so Steve thought. And then felt like an ass because it wasn’t the most charitable one he could drum up under the circumstances.

Steve looked around the lab and seriously wondered if Thor’s relationship with Jane was truly over. Maybe Jane regretted ending it since Thanos’ attack. And that was why she was so hellbent on creating the bridge to bring back Thor.

It took solid three hours before Steve and Bucky were no longer necessary. Peter remained with
Darcy so she could give a quick overview while Jane was busy turning on her computers and checking to make sure they were working properly.

The cafeteria was nearly empty which suited the men just fine. They grabbed a table at a corner and scarfed down plates of pasta and stir-fried beef with vegetables. Still feeling out of sorts after the meal, Steve decided to go to the gym while Bucky headed towards the commissary to pick up an Amazon delivery being held for him.

After an hour sprint on the treadmill, Steve found himself the sole occupier of the expansive hot tub at the natatorium. He silently gave thanks to Tony as he sank into the steaming water, enjoying the outrageous luxury.

A familiar figure caught his eye, breaking his slightly dozy state. It was Jane, wearing a racing one-piece swimsuit, complete with cap and goggles. She noticed his stare and gave a friendly wave before situating herself on the starting block.

As if hearing a starting pistol, she dove into the water and began swimming. Steve rested his chin on his hands and studied the small figure as she cut through the water. Butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and crawl. Jane had no problem with any of it as she raced against an invisible opponent.

Steve forced himself to ratchet up his estimation of Dr. Foster as he studied her. And also to revise the dossier on her because, from all accounts, she had the physical stamina of a sloth.

The near-silent hiss alerted him to visitors and Steve turned to see Bucky and Darcy enter. It took everything he had not to grind his teeth in frustration and jealousy. Darcy was holding a familiar looking cup with two straws sticking out. The cheerful red lettering told Steve that it was from Nanette’s, a local and much-beloved ice cream parlor. And knowing Bucky’s sweet tooth, probably some dark chocolate concoction that he was so fond of.

_In four hours, Bucky managed to charm Darcy enough to get a goddamn date out of her_. He watched as she took a sip from her straw and then handed the drink to Bucky who took a sip out of his.

_Looks like a Norman Rockwell painting if you could ignore the fact one of the two lovebirds is a six-foot plus super soldier with a metal arm._ Bucky shot him a knowing grin. _And a jackass._

“Came to find Jane,” Darcy explained. “Banner is flying in late tonight and wanted to chat with her first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” Steve said and made a move to get out of the hot tub. That was when he remembered what he was wearing. As a show of individuality, Steve had refused the swimming briefs used by most male personnel. Instead, he tried to order more modest ones online only to have Tony fuck it all up because he was just that big a dick. So, what Steve got was Captain America swimming trunks, which he refused to wear.

Unfortunately, that left Steve with few old (ratty) workout shorts.

“Anything interesting?” Jane piped up as she joined the group.

Steve was definitely not getting out of the hot tub. No fucking way was Jane going to realize that Captain America was freeballing because he refused to wear standard swimming trunks. In fact, he gently skooched over to where the jets were the strongest, hoping the bubbles would keep him decent.
A suspicious sound from Bucky told Steve that his friend had clued in on what was happening. And if Bucky had an iota of self-preservation left, he’d stay quiet. Otherwise, Steve wouldn’t hesitate to rip the metal arm off in order to beat him with it.

As if reading his mind, Bucky slowly slid Steve’s towel far enough that there was no way Steve could grab hold of it without completely leaving the hot tub.

“Banner’s coming in tonight,” Darcy informed her friend. “He wants to meet us right at eight tomorrow.”

“That’s fantastic,” Jane said, positively giddy with the idea of spending time in an enclosed space with a man who accidentally leveled Harlem. “Thanks for the heads-up!”

“Oh hey, we forgot to tell you guys earlier about condoms,” Darcy added as an afterthought.

Steve’s brain could not parse that simple sentence so he looked at his friend for help.

It took a moment before Bucky could ask, “Um, why would you need to tell us about those?”

“It’s because of Thor,” Jane said, as if those four words were good enough of an explanation.

Steve really tried, seriously gave it his all but his imagination just refused to go down the merry path that Jane was pointing towards.

“I beg your pardon?” Steve finally managed to say.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve explained better,” Jane apologized blithely, not realizing the bomb Darcy had dropped into their midst. “As it turns out, Thor is also the god of fertility.”

“I beg your pardon?” Steve repeated.

“After Thor landed in Puente Antiguo, the pregnancy rate in the town sky-rocketed with no discernable anomaly, save for Thor,” Jane explained. “The same happened in the neighborhood in London when he stayed with us. So, I asked him and he confirmed it.”

“Well, now you know so make sure your little hammers have the proper shielding or there could be parcels of baby Captains and Sergeants running around in ten months,” Darcy said, taking another sip from the cup. “And, yes, pregnancies last ten fucking months, not nine.”

“I’ll talk to the Commissary and medical personnel,” Steve said weakly.

“Good,” Jane said. “I know it’s embarrassing, but better prepared than sorry.”

With that she returned to her workout, not looking back once at the two stunned men.

Bucky threw the towel at his shocked friend with laughter in his eyes. “See you in a few.”

“That’s my cue! Good night, Captain!” Darcy chirped before manhandling Bucky out the door.

Steve made sure no one was within visual shot before leaving the tub, with the towel firmly wrapped around his waist. Despite the horrendous and confusing conversation, Steve was actually happy Bucky had befriended someone outside of the Avengers. And though Darcy seemed like the carefree, tumultuous spirit, he suspected Jane would not keep someone who would be careless with either people or objects.
Steve’s good mood pretty much evaporated as he considered how to address the ‘Thor’ issue. He tried to imagine having a conversation with the head of the Commissary about increasing the order on prophylactics and immediately threw that idea out the window. It would be agonizing and the compound would be buzzing about it the next day.

Steve also had no idea who in hell he’d talk to in Medical, and the last thing he wanted was waylay some poor nurse trying to find an answer. So, Steve decided he’d just put in the order instead. Even though he was still officially an army captain, he had limited influence on the day-to-day mechanics of the compound. However, he did have the go-ahead when it came specifically to the Avengers.

So, Steve was able to put in the appropriate requisition and made sure the request was sent to the right party. Then, with a sigh of relief, Steve called it a night.

At least he tried to call it a night. Steve was in bed, reading when he heard Bucky return without company, and decided to turn in for the night. Unfortunately, before he could turn off the lights, his cell started ringing. Steve glanced at the caller ID and frowned.

“Phil?” He said, “Is everything all right?”

“Captain, good evening,” Coulson said.

Steve felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Phil did not sound like he was having a good evening. In fact, Phil sounded like the last thing he wanted was to call Steve.

“Phil?” Steve asked, his tone loading that one word with meaning, such as ‘Do the Avengers need to assemble and rescue you?’

Sensing Steve’s distress Phil said quickly, “I had been contacted by the Requisitions Department few minutes ago.”

Steve now wished the Avengers did need to assemble, if only to get out of this conversation. “I see,” he dragged out, digging the heel of his free hand into his eyes.

“So, well, when such large orders are placed, the peripherals that are used with the material also go into requisition. Automatically. Well, that raised some red flags.”

Steve blinked. “Peripherals? What peripherals?”

Phil actually sounded pained as he explained. “Pregnancy tests, STD examination kits, and like.”

“Of course,” Steve said.

“So, I wish to ask why you thought the compound needed an additional order of 40,000 condoms?”

Steve tried to math that one and failed. “I didn’t order 40,000 of anything, much less condoms.”

“Captain, you requisitioned that specific number three times on the form.”

“I placed an order of 400. And I know that number because I typed it three times.”

“Captain, each order signifies 100 count.”

“Who in hell needs a box of 100 condoms?” Steve blurted out.

“The commissary breaks them down and sells them in packets.”
Steve digested that explanation, decided ‘nope, not today’ and went with, “Exactly how many pregnancy tests and other kits are we talking here?”

“Well, more than the compound needs for the next … 6 years? And that’s putting into consideration the expiration dates. Not to mention storage factors because temperature control is an issue.”

“I did not think of that,” Steve said, all the while wanting to brain himself in order to avoid talking any further.

“Captain, may I ask why?”

“Dr. Foster informed me that Thor, amongst other things, is the god of fertility. It seems that any place he stays for a length of time … well, there are side effects involved.”

“I thought that was a myth,” Phil confessed. “All right, then. I will place an order for twice the usual count in that area and correct the number of peripherals.”

“Sounds good to me,” Steve agreed hurriedly. “Thank you for your help.”

“Good night, Captain.” If anything Phil sounded even more relieved that the conversation was over.

Like Steve, Bucky’s hearing was amped and he had caught the horrifying exchange from the hallway. So, it took Bucky a good minute before he could stop laughing no matter what Steve threatened to do to him.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to make a funny situation funnier, put a 'straight man' in it. The best example of this is Tommy Lee Jones in the MIB movie series. Will Smith is a natural comedian, but he was even funnier because his partner, TLJ, played the entire thing like it was a drama.

Also, Phil lives. That's just me.
Chapter 3

Author’s Notes: There is a brief conversation about attempted rape. It’s not very descriptive as I tend to avoid writing about it. Still, a warning is necessary because of the very subject.

Bucky’s phone gave a ring that was becoming all too familiar to Steve. What wasn’t so familiar was the alacrity with which Bucky answered. After scrolling through few screens, he broke into a smile; a genuine one and not the casual smirk that fooled so many people into thinking he was in a good mood.

“Look at this,” Bucky said as he handed over his phone.

Steve looked down at the screen and had to laugh. The picture was innocent enough. It featured both himself and Bucky looking down at Jane whose hands were raised high above her head, so barely reaching Bucky’s eye level.

Steve remembered the entertaining conversation. Jane had been explaining one of the more hilarious moments during her impromptu visit to Asgard. She had to convince great number of courtiers and warriors alike, including the royal clothier, that no, Thor was not a cradle robber even though Jane was roughly the same size as a twelve-year-old Asgardian girl.

It didn’t bother Steve that his face was in plain view because that bit of privacy went up in flames the moment he became an outlaw thanks to the Accords. What the picture also prominently featured was Bucky and his metal arm and shoulder, and the horrific scarring around it thanks to the tank top he was wearing. Along with a sweet if also quizzical smile on his face.

Still, despite the difference in size between the soldiers and Jane whose back was facing the camera, or maybe because of it, the entire scene came across as comical.

Steve then read the tags and burst out laughing again.

#CaptAm #science! #JBB #brooklynbabes #posterboysofhotness #handmemysmellingsalts

“I’m guessing Darcy?” Steve asked.

“I swear, she’s determined to break Instagram,” Bucky said. “This is the fifth one in two days.”

It was only then Steve remembered Pepper’s request from two weeks ago. “Bucky, did you talk to her about reforming your image?”

Bucky paled a little. “Shit, no I didn’t.”

“Do you think someone did? Or maybe - I don’t know - pressed Darcy into doing it?”

Bucky rubbed his face in frustration. “Damn it. I wouldn’t be surprised. She’s got such a big heart.”

“Let’s talk to her,” Steve said, all too aware that Bucky would like nothing than toss aside the tomes given to them by SHIELD’s finest in order for both men to fully catch up on current events. Despite what people thought, Steve did not have the time to sit down and enjoy a book while he was on the run. In fact, this was one of the sore spots for Steve who was naturally an avaricious reader.
Unfortunately, the stacks of tablets and books littering the coffee table weren’t the kind that would reignite Steve’s love of reading. So, he and Bucky were more than relieved to go looking for Jane and company.

To his surprise Steve found Banner in a serious conversation with Jane in her lab, utilizing her computers. He was confused by the collaboration, as Bruce was mainly focused on biological research due to the health issues of the Missing, while Jane was a dedicated astrophysicist.

Their entrance seemed to have snapped the somber mood in the lab, and the two scientists immediately turned their focus onto the visitors. Steve also noted that Jane enacted privacy protocols for the computers she and Bruce were using.

It stung, this quiet rejection. It also set off all the alarms in Steve’s head.

“Hi,” Jane greeted the, obviously frazzled and more than a little caffeinated. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” Steve stumbled over the word, making sure he didn’t sound like he was issuing an order. “We wanted to talk to Darcy, actually.”

“What’s up?” Darcy hollered from the back of the bizarre copycat of the airplane turbine, which was actually used as a focal for energy loops that Jane needed to generate. Or that was what Steve got out of that particular lecture.

He really needed to pay closer attention to what Jane was saying, instead of looking at her like an infatuated ten-year-old and zoning right into fantasyland.

Steve caught Bucky running his human hand through his hair and knew his friend was nervous about bringing up the subject of the Winter Soldier.

“We saw the Instagram post, and it was a good one,” Steve said, rolling over any apologies Darcy might have had for posting the picture without their approval. “We were wondering if you were coerced into doing it.”

“Coerced?” Darcy echoed.

“Pepper wants my image refurbished for the public,” Bucky said, his voice strained as if even speaking about the idea wounded him. “She thinks if I want to officially join the Avengers, my past as Winter Soldier is going to have to fade.”

“Is that even possible?” Jane asked. “The information that Russia and China made is still in public domain, free to be downloaded by anyone.”

Buck’s shoulders dropped noticeably. “Yeah, I figured as much.”

“Steve, Bucky, listen to me. As long as you play their games, it won’t be,” Bruce said firmly, even though his voice was gentle as ever.

It was then Steve realized Bruce had gone through this very ordeal himself. The lab quieted down immediately.

Bruce sat down at the edge of a desk and took off his glasses, acting as if he was about to give a lecture to the freshmen class. “The party that wants you and I to spend the rest of our lives in the Raft? They think there are only two sides to our situation. Them versus us, and that should surprise no one since that’s always their mindset.”
“You don’t think so,” Steve countered.

“No, absolutely not,” Bruce said, shaking his head. “After the Chitauri War, I went for a walkabout, had to decompress from everything. And I found out the number of opinions are as varied as there are number of people. Some people thought that the Hulk was a monster, no doubt whatsoever. Some sympathized with the Hulk. Some also sympathized and thought the Hulk was necessary. Some thought the Hulk was a necessary evil. And so on and so forth.”

“So it’s a battle that’s never going to end?” Bucky asked. “That doesn’t sound promising, Doc.”

Bruce shook his head. “Take a step back. The first thing you must do is to stop thinking of it as warfare. Think of it as a rope you have to coil. It has to be done slowly, and when you hit a knot, you have to undo it first. Otherwise, it’s going to get tangled up and become a complete mess.”

Steve pointed a thumb at himself. “That goes for me, too?”

Bruce smiled and nodded. “Here’s a secret: that goes for everyone. Tony knows it too. He just doesn’t think about it that way. Or, he doesn’t think about it if at all possible. Probably because Pepper does it for him.”

Steve elbowed Bucky. “We’ve got a century’s worth of rope.”

“ Fucking hell,” Bucky muttered, looking aggravated but no longer defeated. “There are days when going into stasis seems like a damn good option.”

“Don’t do it, yet, Bucky,” Darcy cackled, waving her phone. “The latest post got just reached 10,000 hits.”

“What?” Bucky blurted out, shocked. “Are you serious?”

Jane gave a snort. “Two scruffy handsome men in tight shirts, smiling. You’re going to get a lot more hits than a measly 10,000.”

Bucky gave a glance at Steve and saw the telltale blush on the back of Steve’s neck and tip of his ears. He then caught Bruce’s sharp gaze studying his friend and wondered what that was about. 

Did Banner have an interest in Jane, too?

Bruce caught his stare and blushed. “Betty is coming up in a month to help me on the fourth phase of the gamma emissions.”

Bruce’s statement only confused Bucky, but he was the only one.

“Oh, cool,” Darcy said. “Culver is going to give those Citadel flunkies a run for the money.”

Jane gave a fist bump as an act of solidarity. “Female geeks represent!”

“What’s Betty?” Bucky asked.

“My ex-girlfriend,” Bruce explained.

“Not for loooonnnggg,” Darcy chanted as she gave a wink at Bruce, who responded with a raised eyebrow before hurriedly putting on his glasses.

Steve was briefed about Betty Ross so he had to ask, “She’s all right with coming here?”

“She’s fine with it,” Bruce explained. “Her father, on the hand, probably not.”
“Who’s her father?” Bucky asked.

“The former General, Thaddeus Ross.” Bruce explained in a deadpan voice. “Yes, the one who had the Army strip you of your rank and honors because he’s just that big a bastard.”

Bucky’s head tilted to the side as a look of shock slid across his face. “Are you saying you dated his daughter?”

“His only child, to be exact,” Bruce confided. “I used to work for him, too. But that was over a decade ago.”

“How in hell did that happen?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bruce said, waving his hand. “What matters is that you don’t turn this into a pissing match. Let them do that instead.”

“So, I keep posting pictures of Bucky and Steve, doing normal things while looking abnormally attractive,” Darcy summarized. “That should generate some good will.”

“And a lot of trolls,” Bruce added. “Ross isn’t the only sore loser out there.”

“Please,” Jane sniffed. “Female scientist here, and until Thor, the laughingstock of the scientific world. You should’ve seen my Facebook page. I had to shut it down a month after I made it because of all the trolls.”

“Moderately attractive woman with boobs working in the scientific field,” Darcy said. “Who also knows how to say no, repeatedly. Yeah, troll magnet here.”

Steve and Bucky stared at the women, wide-eyed. They turned in unison to Bruce who looked equally tired and frustrated.

“Just because the men are educated doesn’t mean that we are up to par with our female counterparts when it comes to proper behavior,” Bruce said. “Look at Tony.”

Steve winced while Bucky wisely remained silent. No further explanations were necessary. They were both aware of Tony’s wilder days, and few of the stories had bordered on litigious to say the least.

“But it would be best if there are third parties in the pictures, to keep them anonymous,” Bruce cautioned.

“Oh, that’s SOP,” Darcy said. “When Janey got famous and Thor was off-world, everyone turned into a yenta and tried to marry Janey off with any man that appeared in a photo with her. It became a total madhouse the week before Christmas.”

Steve laughed as Jane buried her face in embarrassment.

“It was awful,” Jane moaned from between her fingers. “My phone actually crashed.”

Bucky ended up sharing Steve’s amusement as Jane’s blush continued to darken.

“It’s not funny!” Jane protested. “There were dick pics!”

Steve’s laughter died quickly and he was forced to ask, “I’m sorry, what pics?”

“Guys think they’ll nab the girl of their dreams or, you know, the ones they want to bang, if they
send pictures of their dicks,” Darcy explained airily, because obviously she had become immune to such behavior.

Bucky looked at Bruce for denial. “She’s joking, right?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, she isn’t, unfortunately.”

“Strangers send pictures of their genitals as a wooing gesture?” Steve asked incredulously. “In what world is that an acceptable behavior?”

Both women made derogatory noises while Bruce gave a shrug. Bucky walked up to Darcy and stood right in front of her, lowering his face until he could stare at her right in the eye.

“If anyone on base does that to you, you’re going to tell me, okay? You guys have enough shit to deal with, and the last thing you need is some stupid asshole sending you pictures of their dicks.”

Steve wondered if Darcy would be taken back by the vehemence in Bucky’s tone. Instead, she gently punched Bucky on the right shoulder.

“You’re a good one,” Darcy said fondly. “Troublemaker for sure, but a good one.”

Jane smiled at her assistant’s summation and said, “We will.”

Steve waited patiently, well into the evening, for both Darcy and Jane to leave for the day before approaching Bruce. The target of Steve’s focus didn’t seem at all surprised to see him enter his personal lab.

“Is this a visit from Steve Rogers or Captain America?”

Steve shrugged. “A bit of both, actually.”

“Then I’m going to answer as both Bruce and Dr. Banner.”

“There was something serious going on before Bucky and I came into her lab,” Steve went right for the killshot. “Is there something I should know?”

“Now that’s interesting, because I wonder if the concern is coming from Captain America who somehow convinced himself that he’s responsible for the welfare of just about everyone in the compound. Or, as Steve, the man who’s definitely more than a bit sweet on Dr. Foster.”

“Don’t play games,” Steve said firmly. “Leave that to the pros, like Tony.”

Bruce sighed and his posture suddenly revealed a very worried man. “Jane is sick.”

Steve did not expect that answer. It took him a while to regroup his thoughts. “Was it AIM? Did they infect her with something?”

“No, they didn’t,” Bruce said. “They had no idea. She was infected off-world.”

Steve finally connected the dots. “Thor,” he whispered. “That’s why she’s so eager to make the bridge.”

“The Asgardians thought they cured her,” Bruce explained. “And they did, mostly. But there was a trace of the infection in her system, and it flared up when AIM kidnapped her.”
“Is it fatal?”

“It’s always fatal, and that’s including Asgardians and probably most other living beings in the universe.”

“That sounds like biological warfare,” Steve said.

“I guess you could classify it as such,” Bruce answered. “It nearly killed her the first time around. Jane said it had to be ripped out of her body: atom by atom. The pain from the removal was beyond description, from what she could remember.”

Steve vividly recollected his experience with the Serum and felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. “How could Thor not realize this?”

“Loki,” Bruce said. “Loki helped set it all up and things went to hell as it usually does when he’s involved. When everything finally settled, everyone believed Jane was completely cured.”

“I know he’s Thor’s brother, and the bastard redeemed himself in the end,” Steve said. “But you won’t find me shedding a tear for his death.”

“Any more questions?”

“None. I hope you understand why I had to ask. And that you keep Jane’s condition in confidence.”

“I have to tell her about our conversation, of course,” Bruce said.

“Yeah, I guess you do,” Steve said, suddenly feeling so very tired. He saw Bruce’s eyes crinkle in good humor. “What?”

“I think I had my first genuine interrogation by Steve Rogers,” Bruce explained. “I’ve went toe-to-toe with Captain America few times, but never Steve.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the most talkative fella.”

“No, you’re not,” Bruce said. “But then neither am I. We should start a club. Get Darcy to make us t-shirts.”

“Don’t even think it. From what Bucky told me Darcy is seriously considering making t-shirts for all the Avengers, and that includes both the Hulk and you.”

Bruce actually cracked a genuine smile as he waved good-bye and returned to work. “She’s going to need a lot of fabric if she’s making one for the Green Guy.”

Steve was able to keep his stoic mask until he walked through the front door of his apartment. It was only then, in front of Bucky, that he allowed fear to overtake him.

“Shit, what’s wrong?” Bucky asked, as he grabbed Steve and helped him to a chair.

“I know why Jane’s so keen on getting Thor here,” Steve answered, burying his head into his hands. “She’s sick. Really sick. And there’s no cure on earth that can help her.”

Bucky took the chair next to him. “That’s explains a lot. Darcy always texts Jane whenever they’re separated for more than an hour. I thought it was because Jane was such an egghead that outside of her work, she’s a walking liability.”
Steve gave a watery laugh. “That’s still true. Christ, why is this happening?”

“Buddy, she’s sick, not dead. Don’t write her off yet,” Bucky said.

“What?!” Steve snapped in outrage.

“Look, you have the scary habit of thinking everything at once because that serum-enhanced brain of you just scrambles everywhere before coming up with some crazy idea. That’s battle thinking for you, yeah? But this isn’t a fucking raid so stop thinking like that. Also, in this case, there are bigger brains than yours making sure Jane pulls through.”

Steve mulled over his friend’s statement before pulling out his phone.

“What are you doing?” Bucky asked.

“Bruce is going to tell Jane that we talked about her condition,” Steve said. “I’m hoping to open a pressure valve before she blows.”

Bucky’s phone began ringing. “Too late.”

Steve dropped his cell and laughed weakly. “Serves you right.”

“Fuck you,” was Bucky’s easy reply before answering, “Hey, Darcy. What’s up?”

Steve could hear Darcy from where he was sitting. It told him how gone his friend was for the vivacious woman that Bucky listened to her diatribe until she ran out of words.

That took a while.

“Why don’t you and Jane come by,” Bucky asked. He then waited patiently for Darcy to finish yelling. “No, sweetheart, we’re not scared that we’ll get whatever cooties Jane has.”

Steve moaned and rested his head on his arms when he heard Darcy’s angry retort to Bucky’s saucy take on the fucked-up mess.

“Sorry,” Bucky said, sounding anything but. “I’ll put on some coffee. I got some blackberry pie, too. I could heat it up if you want a slice?”

There was a resounding silence before Darcy hung up.

“Jesus, Bucky,” Steve said. “Was that necessary?”

“Listen, she’s pissed at me now, not you. So a little gratitude would be nice, jackass.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re welcome.”

For someone so tiny both women caused a huge racket as they came down the hall. Steve was so nervous about the incoming confrontation, he had to wipe his hands on the kitchen towel.

Noticing Steve’s open distress, Bucky decided to be merciful and opened the door. He came face to face with Darcy, her right hand curled into a fist, ready to bang on the door loudly enough to wake the dead.

Jane, on the other hand, didn’t look upset, just tired and what Steve hoped was relief.

“You’re right, we didn’t.”

Darcy opened her mouth for a smart retort but Bucky’s agreement silenced her. Jane glanced at her friend’s shocked face and sighed loudly.

“Stop,” she said. “They have a right to know. And let’s face it; we’re terrible liars.”

Darcy deflated immediately. “I know.”

Jane took a place across the kitchen counter from Steve who didn’t stand up as manners dictated, which made him feel even guiltier. Instead, he silently poked a plate of blackberry pie and a mug of coffee towards Jane. She took the offering and began digging in. Seeing her friend eat, Darcy took Bucky’s peace offering.

“So, you have questions?” Jane said after finishing her pie and taking a sip of coffee.

“Is it biological?” Steve asked bluntly, then mentally kicked himself when he saw Jane flinch at his tone.

“No, not biological in the way you think,” Jane answered, and then with a deep breath she continued, “It was one of the Infinity Stones.”

That shocked both Bucky and Steve into silence.

Darcy placed a comforting hand on Jane’s shoulder while she continued to explain. “The Aether was the Reality Stone,” she said. “That the Dark Elves tried to use to destroy the Nine Realms during the invasion of Greenwich.”

“What?” Steve asked. “I don’t remember seeing a gauntlet. Or a gem of any kind.”

“Unlike the other stones, the Aether is completely malleable and transmutable. When I was exposed, it was gaseous.”

“I remember the Tesseract. Was it something like that?” Steve prompted.

Jane shook her head in frustration. “No, it’s so hard to explain because there are holes in my memory during that time.”

“Take it easy, Janey,” Darcy cautioned her friend. “Not gonna help anyone if you pass out again and lose five hours.”

Steve and Bucky shared an alarmed look.

“It’s not biological in the ways we are,” Jane repeated. “But it was semi-sentient. It talked to me. It didn’t want to be destroyed. It didn’t want to be used like Mjølnir. It wanted to be … it wanted freedom.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky whispered, taking the chair next to his friend.

“And it offered me everything,” Jane continued, her pallor increasing as horrific memories surfaced. “But it was killing me. The Reality Stone or Aether, as we called it back then, had the power to transform universes to its wielder’s wishes. And I think someone did, someone like Thanos, thousands of years ago. Before Thor was born, before Odin, even. But something happened and it was cast out. It was weakened then, at least weak enough for Malekith to
transform it to a controllable form in order for the Dark Elves to use it as a weapon.

“And they almost succeeded during the First Convergence. It was only after the war, the Asgardians realized the Aether could not be destroyed. So they hid it, thinking no one would be able to find it. I was accidentally exposed to it and you know the rest.”

“But you thought you were healed,” Steve prompted.

Jane gave a single nod, her eyes becoming teary. Darcy hugged her tightly, shielding her friend from the men’s gaze.

“They were going to make her watch,” Darcy finally said.

“Watch what?” Bucky asked reluctantly.

“AIM, they were done fucking around,” Darcy answered. “They were going to rape me and make Janey watch.”

Steve closed his eyes. Of course. Fucking bastards. If he ever found them, he planned to make each and every one regret their choices, with their blood and sinew if need be.

“I lost it,” Jane muttered, her face still buried in Darcy’s embrace. “I didn’t realize what was happening until it came out of my body. The next thing I know, there was complete darkness. When it was over, Darcy and I were the only ones left.”

“Was there an explosion?”

Jane shook her head. “No, nothing like that. Just this quiet, inky black that covered everything. What’s left now is a crater that’s almost 30 feet deep and a city block wide. And some ash. No debris, no bodies.”

“It’s a wasteland,” Darcy said. “You can’t miss it.”

“But there has to be something,” Steve said, unable to imagine what the women were describing.

“No, there’s nothing, not even radiation trace,” Jane said firmly. “I think whatever is in me is too weak to do the level of damage the Aether could do, but that just means it’s a controllable weapon now, and a powerful one.”

“And just might be killing her, slowly,” Darcy added. “But killing her like the Aether did.”

“Do you think Thor can help you?” Steve asked. “Especially since Asgard is gone and with it most of their technology.”

Jane took a deep breath and straightened herself. “Yes, because I plan to dump what’s left into the Bi-Frost the first chance I get.”

“I don’t understand,” Bucky said. “How can the bridge help you?”

“It’s like spreading ashes out the window while the car is going millions of miles per second. If this situation is like what it was back in England, that won’t work. It’ll just weave itself tighter into my DNA and probably kill me even faster.

“But in its current state? I can force it out of me and make sure it’s destroyed.”

“And good luck trying to gather that shit,” Darcy added. “Thanos was a powerful bastard, but even
he could only use it when it became a stone for his gauntlet. So, unless someone out there has a huge cosmic vacuum cleaner that could filter out the Aether, it’s going to be impossible to find much less gather up.”

“How did you come up with such a crazy plan?” Bucky asked, his gaze bouncing back between the women.

Jane looked at Darcy with a twinkle in her eye. Darcy looked grumpy and embarrassed for a moment before blurting out,

“I was trying to make pie crust. Turns out my seasonal allergies were really bad this year. Anyway, I had a sneezing fit and dropped the flour bin. That shit got everywhere. Which got the ball rolling for Jane.”

Steve knew the situation was serious, dire even, considering what was at stake. Still, the mental image of the two women covered in flour before Jane scrambling to write down her ideas was too humorous to ignore.

His smile was thin but genuine, and Bucky looking at Darcy with open fondness only helped to lighten the tense situation in the kitchen.

“Did she write in the flour?” Steve finally asked, caving into his curiosity as he was only too well aware of Jane’s infamous bouts of brilliance.

Now, it was Jane’s turn to blush while Darcy looked smug. Then Darcy’s phone vibrated. She took one look at the screen and rolled her eyes.

“Remember what we talked about earlier? Dick pics?” She said, handing her phone over to Bucky. “Here’s one and the douche canoe works here.”

Bucky looked down at the message. His face made an interesting journey from disbelief, to shame, to outright anger.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered. “I can’t believe this.”

Steve took the phone and looked at the well-lit if also obscene photo. “Who’s this idiot?”

“Adam Liljgehren,” Darcy said. “He was our driver for two weeks right after the kidnapping. He seemed like a nice guy so I went on a date with him. Big fucking mistake.”

“He’s in transport, right here,” Steve said as he recollected the man’s files. “This is him?”

“Well, that’s his dick,” Darcy said. “I bumped into him couple of days ago. He wanted another date and I politely refused, told him about my job. I thought he understood. I mean, he didn’t kick up a fuss or tell me off for being a frigid bitch.”

Her phone buzzed again, and this time the nude shot consisted of a well-defined chest and face.

“Yeah, that’s him,” Steve said drily.

“Forward them to me,” Bucky said.

“I don’t think so, buddy,” Darcy argued. “The last thing you need on record is attacking some idiot working in the compound because of a dick pic. People might understand you’re pissed, but punching a soldier right into medical won’t work in your favor.”
Steve could almost hear Bucky’s temper revving up.

“Send them to me,” Steve said calmly. “Being Captain America has its uses. I’ll just put my ‘Disappointed in You’ face and make a notation in his files for inappropriate behavior.”

Bucky didn’t argue which made it easy for Darcy to agree. And while he escorted the women back to their living quarters, Steve planned an atypical way to handle Adam Liljgehren while ensuring no other personnel would be harassed in such manner again.

“What are you going to do?” Bucky asked before he turned in for the night. He knew his friend too well; there was a reason why Steve was called ‘The Man with the Plan’, even if his strategies took a Hail Mary to work. Bucky was also very curious as to his friend’s plans for Liljgehren. Steve might look like a choirboy but his imagination definitely belonged to a Howling Commando.

“Nothing too over the top,” Steve answered, his face beatific and serene.

“Liljgehren just became a volunteer, didn’t he?” Bucky asked with a smirk.

“Gotta love volunteers. Makes my life so much easier.”
Private Adam Liljgehren checked his phone again, no longer caring if his anxiety was being broadcast to everyone in the hangar. He had dutifully woken up at seven with a serious hangover and a niggling worry that he’d forgotten something important. It wasn’t until he was on his third cup of coffee and looking over the day’s schedule that Adam remembered the truly regrettable decisions he’d made the night before.

“She’s probably working,” Justin piped up from his workstation, grinning like the happy grease monkey that he was.

Their shift hadn’t even properly started, and Justin Brubaker’s face was already streaked with all sorts of lubricant as the gifted mechanic repaired the backup compressors to the Quinjets. The planes always took a heavy beating during operations so Transport B team had to have replacements in hand.

Adam gave him a small, tight smile. He knew listening to Jason and Charlie, technically his superiors, last night was a huge mistake. Yeah, sending a dick pic was his idea, but he wasn’t going to actually go through with it until the rest of his unit goaded him after few rounds of tequila shots.

“Fuck,” Adam whispered and earned sniggers from Charlie and Jason, the two bastards responsible for the liquid courage that Adam used to try and win Darcy’s good graces.

“Shit, why is he here?” Jason muttered in alarm as two men entered the hangar that Transport B called home.

One was Doctor Bruce Banner, a man that Adam would have completely ignored had they met on a city street. The other, Barnes AKA the Winter Soldier, was someone Adam could never ignore under any circumstances.

Even if the world was ending. Especially if the world was ending, because the psycho fucker was probably responsible for it.

The two men had their phones in their grasp and comparing something, all of which doubled the level of dread in Adam’s gut. For a moment he entertained the crazy idea of running all the way back to Nevada: on foot. Then, he remembered Barnes could catch him without breaking a sweat, and maybe even use him as sidewalk chalk on the concrete floor because today was a day that ended in Y.

It was Dr. Banner who spoke first. “You’re Adam Liljgehren?”

“That’s me. Something I can help you with?”

“Care to tell me why you sexted me pictures of your genitals last night?”

Charlie and Jason straightened in their seats and gave alarming glances at Adam. Justin, on the other hand, somehow managed to scrunch down his six-foot plus frame small enough to hide behind his gear.

“Doctor, I did no such thing,” Adam protested, his gaze bouncing between the two visitors.

“Oh, then why did you send me a picture of your dick?” Barnes asked, his voice sane and calm,
all of which made Adam’s pulse accelerate. “You also sent another nude with your face, so don’t even bother denying.”

And to make his point, Barnes turned his phone towards Adam and flashed both pictures only inches from the private’s face.

“Sergeant…”

“Not my rank anymore,” Barnes interrupted curtly. “Ross made sure of that.”

Realizing he was digging his grave with a backhoe, Adam hurriedly explained, “Sorry. What I was trying to say was there must have been some kind of a mistake. Yes, I did take the two pictures, but they were private and sent to one person.”

Dr. Banner looked at his phone and began scrolling. Adam wondered exactly what in hell was on the screen that it took Banner so long to find what he was looking for.

Dr. Banner hummed and muttered to himself before asking, “Darcy Lewis?”

Barnes’ face completely shut down the moment Darcy's name was spoken, and Adam’s heartbeat began rabbiting all over the place. It wasn’t exactly a secret that both Barnes and Captain Rogers were seen in the company of Dr. Foster and Darcy Lewis. And the whispers were that the former Hydra assassin was more than a bit sweet on the bodacious assistant.

“Yes, Dr. Banner,” Adam confessed weakly.

“Doctor, it was our fault,” Justin said, standing up. “We were drunk last night, and we goaded Private Liljgehren into doing it. I’m sorry it somehow spread like that.”

Banner shook his head. “When you sent this to Ms. Lewis, you didn’t specify which account it was to be directed to.”

Adam frowned. “I don’t understand. It was her phone…”

“Her number has two accounts,” Barnes said coldly. “It was set up that way because of her job. One is private, the other to her work.”

“What?” Charlie looked completely puzzled. “I don’t get it.”

“I don’t know if you’re aware but Ms. Lewis has dealt with two alien invasions, one in New Mexico, the other in Greenwich. Both times her phone was instrumental in getting SHIELD involved,” Banner explained patiently. “So, to make her life easier, and because every second counts, Darcy’s number is routed through FRIDAY to two separate accounts: private and work when she agreed to come to the Compound.”

Adam blew out a frustrated breath. “I honestly didn’t know.”

It was Justin who realized first. “Um, exactly how many people…”

“Everyone that Stark deemed necessary on her contact list, which includes the Avengers,” Barnes answered, his gaze never leaving Adam.

“Shit,” Charlie said, rubbing his face. “Oh shit.”

“Yeah, just about,” Dr. Banner said. “You also realize that by showing your genitals, you’ve effectively given something akin to a thumbprint to all of the Internet.”
That made Adam twitch violently. “Sorry?”

“Private, everyone’s genitals are different, no two are alike – this can be argued even for identical twins. So, unless you plan to have plastic surgery to alter your physiological structure, anyone can make a visual match. Especially since the pictures are in high pixilation.”

Adam’s jaw actually dropped. “Are you saying that my dick can be used to ID me?”

“Well, yes,” Banner answered, nodding.

The hangar went dead silent with that revelation until Adam croaked out,

“Oh my God.”

“I don’t think God has anything to do with this,” Barnes said drily. “But if it makes you feel better, the Chapel is open 24/7.”

“It’s nondenominational, though,” Bruce added then looked down at the picture. “And Private Liljgehren is Catholic if the cross tattooed on his hip is what I think it is.”

“Right about now, anything would help,” Barnes said, pointing towards the entrance. “That’s Steve and he ain’t looking too pleased.”

The transport team turned in unison to watch Captain America descend on them with the now-notorious single mindedness that was known not only throughout Earth, but beyond.

“Bucky, isn’t Romanov in the field?” he barked at his friend.

“Yeah, until next Monday,” Barnes answered.

“So, why is she getting dick pics while working?” Rogers asked, standing right in front of Adam, looking down at him with frosty gaze. “The last thing Romanov needs while undercover is getting notifications of your personal business. Don’t you agree?”

“Sir, yes, Sir,” Adam said, looking at the base of the Captain’s throat, which was his eye level. “I apologize profusely, Sir.”

“Son, don’t bother apologizing to me. You’ve got bigger worries come down the pipe,” Captain Rogers said a bit more calmly. “Agent Romanov is not the most forgiving type.”

Barnes gave a snort and shook his head. “No, she most certainly is not.”

Rogers looked at him. “Escort Private Liljgehren to HR, Bucky.”

“Will do,” Barnes said and placed a heavy hand on Adam’s shoulder. “Let’s get this show started before Romanov comes back.”

Justin gave Adam a worried look while Charlie and Jason kept their gaze at Captain Rogers.

“Sir,” Charlie said, stepping up to the plate.

“Save it,” Captain Rogers snapped.

“Sir, it was a joke. No harm done,” Jason said. “The kid was just playing.”

“I don’t care what he thought, or what any of you clowns believed,” Rogers said. “The R&R
clearly states that such behavior is strictly forbidden, and will be punished.”

“You’re not in charge of the Compound,” Charlie argued. “Hell, Lewis probably got a good laugh out of it!”

“No, I am not in charge of the day to day operations, but I am with the Avengers Initiative. And when my people get shit like this, it takes their focus away from their work. And just in case you’re unaware, nobody wants to deal with this, men, women, or animal.”

Steve flashed his phone and showed the nudes. “This isn’t funny or cute or in any way acceptable behavior for a professional.”

“She’s a lab rat,” Charlie cried out, “For Christ’s sake! What’s the big deal?”

“She works in a lab that plays with gravity, that deals with elements that haven’t been discovered by any human and perhaps any other intelligent being in the entire fucking universe. So, let’s get something straight: she doesn’t have guns but she has within reach something that would make most of the armory in the Compound obsolete without a fuss. As Battle of New York and Wakanda have so fucking clearly shown.

“And her friend, Dr. Foster, does not appreciate it when entitled jackasses make her life any more difficult than it already is.”

Charlie paled and took a step back, which only invited Captain Rogers to step closer until his gaze was the only thing Charlie could focus on.

“So, I strongly suggest you read the goddamn manual HR gave out the day you stepped onto this Compound and take it to heart. And leave dumbass shit like dick pics behind, with the other poor decisions.”

Charlie opened his mouth but immediately shut it. For a moment, Captain Rogers seemed to swell and grow even bigger. It was only then he remembered this man faced off enemies that he’d never imagined. And stood his line against Iron Man, the UN, even against his own country, and somehow came out the other end in one piece.

If there was a more brutal trial by fire, Charlie didn’t want to know.

“Yes, Sir,” he said, dropping his gaze.

“Good,” Captain Rogers said. “You’re going to need to make sure the Quinjets are running smoothly. Dr. Foster thinks we’re going to have visitors soon, and if Thor keeps true to form, we’re going to be very busy.”

“Busy?” Justin said cautiously.

“He’s King, now,” Captain Rogers explained, his tone a great deal more conversational. “And if Asgardian traditions are to be kept, there will be an entourage.”

“Of Asgardians?” Justin asked, wide-eyed. ‘Holy fuck.”

“We should be so lucky,” Steve explained. “After Thanos, we might have visitors from the other realms, especially since Thor is evaluating our relationship with them to ensure that no one else tries what Thanos had done. There’s also the fact that unless we want to have disastrous thunderstorms wherever we travel, it’d be best we use the Quinjets.”
The men stood silent, each imagining the scenarios involving multiple Asgardians roaming around the grounds, all a variation of the only Asgardian they knew. Not to mention the immeasurable mayhem that was sure to follow. And that scenario was the more preferable one.

“Fuck me,” Jason cursed as he imagined the workload ahead.

“Exactly,” Steve drily stated. “Just do your job and keep your shit out of circulation. Christ, the last thing I needed to see while eating dinner was your buddy’s uncircumcised dick.”

None of the men could argue with that, so they dove back into work, thanking God for small mercies.

Bucky waited until Darcy had stopped laughing to refill her coffee. Jane had lost it completely and was rolling on the kitchen floor. He needed to speak to them, so offered them a home-cooked lunch and the story of what had transpired earlier.

Steve, the coward, begged off and made some noises about unfinished paperwork that he’d foisted on Bucky last week before beating a hasty retreat to his office. So, it was Bucky who had the pleasure of recounting the rousing tale of Liljgehren’s dick pics vs. the Avengers.

“Steve was channeling Captain America on a ‘roid rage like a champ,” Bucky concluded, wiping tears from his eyes. “Or maybe he was thinking about Colonel Phillips. Crusty Chester was a magnificent bastard.”

“Adam’s not going to get into too much trouble, though, right?” Darcy asked. “Yeah, he’s an idiot, but if you go punishing every idiot, the Compound’s going to be empty pretty soon.”

Bucky couldn’t help it. He reached out with his left hand tucked a strand of curls behind Darcy’s ear.

“You are a wonder,” he whispered. “I just don’t get how you came this far with this crowd and not end up burned.”

Darcy blushed and made a rude noise. “Burned, microwaved, and probably irradiated.”

Jane picked herself off the floor and sat on her chair. “It helps to have humor, and Darcy has that by the ton.”

“Nah, he’s going to be remanded to Nellis and given plenty of time to think about his life choices,” Bucky said, dropping his hands back to his side. “But what matters even more is that his buddies are going to take what Steve said to heart and not pull that kind of shit themselves.”

“Then they’ll tell their friends, and so on and so forth,” Jane concluded. “Smart.”

“Steve always was,” Bucky said. “He would’ve gone far if he had money back in the day. And if he was a bit healthier. He still draws, you know. Used to scrape up a living in Brooklyn doing that after his Ma died.”

“So, it’s not just the Serum then?” Jane asked, her voice a bit too casual.

Bucky and Darcy shared one knowing glance before Bucky answered,

“Nah, he was always smart. Bit of a punk, yeah, but had no problems with classes when he could make them.”
“So were you,” Darcy said, bumping him on his knee with hers. “I heard the night before you shipped out, you took your date to the Stark Expo to see his flying car and whatever else Howard Stark had dreamt up.”

Bucky shook his head in surprise. “I actually forgot about that. But yeah, I did. Steve and I used to love stuff like that. The future was something we could imagine without paying a nickel when we were kids.”

“And here we are,” Darcy said, clinking her coffee mug against his beer bottle. “Not bad, yeah?” Bucky grinned. “Nah, not bad at all.”

Jane kept her gaze at her coffee mug when she said, “Something tells me your adventure this morning isn’t the only reason we’re having homemade lasagna and beer for lunch.”

Bucky was once more taken back by how astute Jane was. From all accounts he thought she’d be clueless as to social cues, but so far she had been on the ball with him and Steve. Save for Steve’s huge, unspoken crush on her.

“So, why are we here, exactly?” Jane continued, suddenly leveling her bright, unnerving gaze at him.

Bucky took a deep breath and said, “I need to tell you both something because you’ve been hanging around me and Steve, but I don’t know how to say it without sounding like a lunatic.” And scaring you away, went unspoken but definitely heard by the guests.

“All right, spill.” Darcy hedged softly. “You fed us delicious lasagna, got us some decent beer, and one hell of a story. If there was any time for you to lay one on us, it’s now.”

“You’re going to hear a lot of shit about the Winter Soldier,” Bucky said.

Darcy frowned. “More than we’ve already read and heard? Don’t know how that’s possible because of what’s been floating around on the boards. I mean, there are trolls that post links to all that crap whenever I post a picture.”

“Not the history,” Bucky explained. “Winter Soldier as of now. Today.”

Darcy shared a confused look with Jane. “I don’t get it.”

“When I was in Wakanda, the doctors there managed to disarm the triggers in my head, that would make the Winter Soldier … the sole driver, I guess. But the truth is it was impossible for them to completely erase him altogether.”

Darcy leaned away from him; the first time she had ever shown wariness. The movement caused enough physical pain to take Bucky's breath away, but he plowed on.

“It’s like playing tic-tac-toe against yourself,” Bucky said. “It’s not possible for one side to win. Hydra got the Soldier from me because he was always there in a way.”

“How?” Jane prodded.

“Steve,” Darcy guessed immediately.

“Close,” Bucky admitted. “Captain America to be exact. I was his second and the sniper for the Commandos. And that job was a nightmare. Seriously, him and Phillips and Stark would have all
these elaborate plans, but the moment the first bullet hit? Everything went to hell. And Steve would just charge into these fucked up situations, thinking the Serum and his shield would be enough.

“But it wasn’t. And it took everything I had to make sure his six was clear.”

“I’m still in the dark,” Jane confessed.

“Steve had no fucking training save for basics he went through for Erskine when he was still alive,” Bucky said. “When he rescued me, he was still in his goddamn monkey suit and whatever he managed to steal before heading out. You think any sane soldier would go rushing into battle wearing that getup?”

“So, he had no real combat training?” Jane asked, agog. “Are you serious?”

Bucky nodded. “Oh yeah, he was Captain America, beloved stage actor, but he wasn’t a real soldier. What he learned, he learned through fire. There was one time Hydra got behind him, and I had to take them all out. All five. The asshole turned around, saw what I did, and then saluted me!”

Darcy’s eyes went round. “Oh my God … he gave up your position?”

Bucky took a deep pull of his beer. “I got pounded on by whatever Hydra artillery was left standing. I lost my helmet and my pack that day. It was a miracle I didn’t lose my skull. Gave him whatfor ‘cause, Christ, that was close. And it stayed like that for a while, until Steve learned the ropes.”

Bucky could see Jane working through what he was saying.

“Oh,” she said softly. “Of course.”

“Yeah, not an easy job, and definitely not for the faint of heart,” Bucky said. “But that punk was my best friend. And I couldn’t let him go after Hydra by himself. Even if the Commandos were with him. Hell, some of them were even crazier than he was.”

“Hence the Howling Commandos,” Darcy added.

“Exactly,” Bucky said. “So, I guess Hydra just stripped me until what was left was what they needed. A weapon but nothing more. No man, no soul, no soldier in the sense we’re used to.”

“But the Winter Soldier’s been around for over a half a century,” Jane concluded. “And there was no way to take him apart without taking you apart, too.”

“Because he was always a part of you,” Darcy said. “The part that was necessary to keep Steve alive.”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, so the doctors tried to integrate us again, like before 1945. And they succeeded, but the end product’s a bit rough.”

“Have we seen that part of you yet?” Darcy asked, leaning forward and getting into his personal space again.

It took every bit of his willpower to keep his voice to steady. “No, but that’s what I wanted to tell you. When things go to shit and they will, because, let’s face it – we’re here - I’m not going to be the person you see now.
“And I don’t want you to get scared or feel like you have to run away. I’m not going to hurt you or
decided you guys are not worth the trouble and leave you behind. It’s just … it’s Him and he’s not
good with people, because the mission was all he was ever trained to care about.”

“How does that not hurt your brain?” Darcy blurted out and then slapped a hand over her mouth
while blushing furiously.

“What Darcy means is how are you dealing with it?” Jane asked. “Is there something we could do
to help?”

“Nah, nothing more can be done. And it doesn’t hurt anymore. Now that I’ve accepted what’s
necessary.”

“And he’s accepted, too,” Darcy asked. “I mean, is he okay with all this? It’s gotta be scary for him
now that things aren’t so simple anymore. He’s no longer just The Asset, and he doesn’t exactly
have handlers … or at least Hydra handlers.”

“And he has to make choices, too,” Jane added. “About food, about clothing, tactics and millions of
other things that weren’t even on his radar before.”

Bucky stared at the two women in wide-eyed wonder. The few who knew about his condition were
all, except for Steve, worried about what the Soldier would do. Because to them, the Soldier was
still a separate entity and not part of Bucky.

But these two relative strangers took his confession, turned it upside down, gave it a good rattle,
and still managed to insert their humanity into a situation that seemed to be devoid of it.

“When he’s around, things are simple ‘cause it’s basically ‘all hands on deck’ kind of situation,”
Bucky explained. “But thanks for asking.”

Jane looked puzzled. “Why wouldn’t we ask? You just told us that he is a part of you, a very
integral part that’s been brought to fore and then abused and tortured for decades. I think that
deserves a bit of consideration.”

“And maybe some of my Nana’s chicken soup ‘cause holy shit, that’s just bad,” Darcy muttered.
“For both of you. Or just you? I’m kinda confused, so let’s just go with it’s all bad, and Hydra can
kiss my perky ass.”

Bucky decided the only recourse was to laugh because, really, what else was there to do when
Darcy wanted to make chicken soup for the Winter Soldier? A figure unanimously considered by
the intelligence communities to be one of the most prolific and bloodiest assassin in recent history.

It was only until late evening that Steve dared to show his sheepish face, along with two boxes of
Geno’s Meat Lover’s Delight pizza. Bucky told him about the conversation in all its glory, but
Steve wouldn’t buy the bit at the end about Darcy’s wanting to make chicken soup.

So, Bucky messaged Darcy who promptly replied with slew of pictures featuring a large pot of
chicken soup she was currently whipping up. Her explanation was that the afternoon conversation
had given her an incentive to make her Nana’s classic chicken soup with matzo balls instead of
noodles.

The pizza didn’t taste too appetizing after that.
Chapter 5

Author’s Notes: I firmly believe Betty Ross got shortchanged in MCU. So, here she is, and she does live up to the family name in the best way possible.

Steve wasn’t loitering. He was reconnoitering. After all, Betty Ross was definitely a figure to be reckoned with. She had stood up to her father on behalf of Bruce so often that everyone stopped counting their clashes. Then, after Sokovia Accords and the arrests of the Avengers, she did not hesitate to point out the legal and moral fallacies of the arrests.

All her endeavors abruptly ended when she became one of the Missing, and one would’ve thought Dr. Ross would possess a more zen-like approach after such a profound experience. No, instead, she upped her gear and went after the entire Pentagon for their contribution to the creation of the Hulk, the Abomination, and their unending and often-disastrous attempts at recreating Project: Rebirth. After watching one of Betty’s enlightening interviews on PBS, Bruce had informed the rest of the team that Betty had inherited her father’s single-mindedness which earned him the nickname ‘Thunderbolt’. A moniker Steve thought was so fucking pretentious, it made him roll his eyes when he first heard of it.

If anyone had any question about her loyalties, her one-woman war pretty much answered it. Bruce had witnessed the entire crusade with something akin to awe and hope while furtively traveling between the Compound and some unspecified lab in Canada.

As it turned out, Thunderbolt Ross was able to face down Iron Man or Captain America, but he had a hard time looking at his own reflection in the face of his only child. This hesitation didn’t stop them from facing off, and their confrontations, both online and real life, were now stuff of legends. And quite possibly eclipsed the single confrontation between Steve and the former general.

After the dust had settled and the lawsuits dismissed, it was Bruce who had made the first tentative call to Betty. That conversation was noted for its brevity and lack of emotions from both parties. Unfortunately, the following conversations weren’t exactly improvements on either front. And yet, here he was, nervously lurking in a hallway, waiting to be introduced to Betty Ross who had arrived two days ago and had been firmly ensconced in the research building with Bruce, Jane, Darcy, and Peter who was positively giddy he was interning with yet another Nobel-bound scientist.

So, Steve might be dragging his heels entering Bruce’s lab where Betty had Peter compare data on a chromosomal study that, quite frankly, made Steve’s skin itch when he read Bruce’s brief laymen-friendly synopsis.

“You honestly don’t have a problem with the Winter Soldier just roaming around the place?” Peter asked.

His question startled Steve, who had expected them to be in knee-deep cahoots about gamma radiation something or other and its influence on human cell structure.

I really need to pay more attention to what’s going on here.

“You forgot I was with Bruce when the Hulk showed up and leveled Culver: twice.”

Steve could hear Peter tapping nervously on the armrests with his hands.
“But, I mean, the Hulk is … well, he’s not a super assassin, and I did the body count. Winter Soldier like has the lead by nineteen as far as I know.”

“Peter,” Betty said softly. “Is there a problem?”

“Nah … yeah, maybe? I don’t know. Everyone here, and that include Dr. Foster and Darcy, they’re so boo-yaa about him. It’s like they all drank this weird Cool Aid and forgot he’s the reason the Avengers split up, right?”

“I think he’s one of the reasons, yes,” Betty cautiously hedged.

“Did Dr. Banner tell you anything about me?”

“Besides your worrisome fondness for Flushing’s dim sum joints? He told me something about you looking out for the little guys.”

“Okay, good, I wasn’t sure, you know. When I told Dr. Foster and Darcy, they both lost it. Wanted to go to NYC and beat Tony in the face for putting me in danger.”

Betty’s laughter was surprisingly loud and strong. “I am in no way surprised.”

“I was there, at the airport, you know. When everyone just tore into each other,” Peter’s voice suddenly went thin and weak. “And it was amazing at first, but then it got really ugly fast. Tony was so angry and worried. I don’t get it. I mean, didn’t we matter at all? Yeah, Bucky was his best friend, but Tony thought and I did too, that we meant something to Captain Rogers. Instead, he just left, chose to become an outlaw, took half of the Avengers with him.

“Tony’s heart just broke after that. And his workload doubled, too. If it wasn’t for Pepper, I honestly believe Tony would’ve just cracked from all the pressure,” Peter gave a sigh that was too heavy to have come from one so young. “I mean I guess I know why Captain Rogers did it, but … what the hell? Seriously? Didn’t the rest of the human race deserve some consideration?”

Steve closed his eyes. It was much too easy to forget that Peter Parker was a kid who had lost too much before he even put on the suit. And the civil war between the Avengers must have driven that sense of loss even deeper, maybe too deep to ever heal properly.

“Then, you must ask this: Is Bucky Barnes worth that risk? And what does Barnes represent to both Steve Rogers and to the society?”

“He’s a guy. From what I read he was a great guy and a good friend. But he isn’t the only one on this entire planet who’s a good guy and a good friend.”

“He was a prisoner of war, you know that, right?”

“They brainwashed him, so yeah, I guess. And then they put him in cryo, which must have sucked, but at least he was sleeping instead of running around, killing presidents.”

“Peter, you’re assuming cryostasis meant rest; sleep. Is it, though? Is it the rest you and I are familiar with? Cryostasis means a holding pattern in a frozen environment. That’s it. You also have to remember they tortured him before he went to stasis by flooding his CNS with electricity.

“Why do you think they did that?”

“’Cause they’re Nazis? And they’re evil?”
“Yes, well that is true. But, Peter, they wiped him clean, every single time. Now why would they need to do that if he was compliant?”

There was a long silence before Peter answered, “Because he wasn’t?”

“Exactly. He wasn’t compliant. He might have obeyed but something about Barnes started surfacing. Can you imagine? That he was forced to do something so horrible, so awful that he’d fight against that level of mind control? Imagine the strength in that personality, Peter. Imagine what it would’ve taken for a human being to fight like that for seventy years.

“It could’ve been something small, such as a comment or a preference of food, or maybe even weaponry. But something that was Barnes started to bleed through the Soldier, or maybe even the Soldier allowed it. Either way, it scared Hydra enough that they were willing to risk brain damage in order to keep Barnes in control.”

“Are you saying Barnes could’ve been Captain America?”

“I think before the hell he went through? Yes, he definitely would’ve been a great candidate for the program. But not anymore. So, imagine Captain Rogers as he was before Project Rebirth: skinny, sickly kid, still a fighter, though, and getting into all kinds of scrapes because he never backed down. This Irish street rat, an orphan mind you, who didn’t have a dollar to his name.

“Who do you think was his Captain America?”


“And not just his Captain, but his best friend, his only friend until Erskine who was murdered in front of him. And Peggy, who died of Alzheimer’s not long after Steve woke up. And a lot of people seem to forget, Captain Rogers was twenty-six when he crashed the plane. Technically, he’s the second youngest Avenger next to you.

“Despite all that, we still put Steve Rogers on a pedestal because it’s so easy. What’s not so easy is to see the man behind the documentaries and the propaganda.

“You’re not having a difficult time forgiving Barnes for causing the mess, because you know he wasn’t at fault. I think your difficulties come from trying to forgive Captain Rogers for taking a stand you don’t agree with. And one that cost you personally.”

Steve couldn’t breathe properly when he heard Peter’s teary voice finally confess,

“I hated it. I hated it so much. I just want things to go back to normal. But it isn’t, is it?”

“No, Peter. But we can hope it gets better, if not now, then later.”

“You did this when the Hulk showed up?”

“No, I had to with my father,” Betty confessed. “And I went through what you’re going through around the same age, too. Thunderbolt Ross was more than just a hero to me. He was my dad. It was hard, so hard. Still is, to some degree.”

It didn’t take Steve long to interpret the rustle of clothing to realize she was hugging Peter while the boy took deep breaths to calm himself.

“What can I do?”
“Just be you, Peter Parker. That’s all you can do. And let the grownups figure out how to function as grownups. And if we fail, you’re more than welcome to mock us whenever you see fit. Just because we’re adults doesn’t mean we don’t need a swift kick in the ass once in a while.”

Steve closed his eyes and gave a silent sigh of relief. So Betty Ross was more than a pretty brainiac with daddy issues that could rival Tony’s. Not for the first time Steve wondered how it was possible that the Avengers could attract people who not only had the courage but the wisdom to withstand all that came with being attached to the so-called ‘superheroes’.

_Cherchez la femme_, Howard Stark once cautioned him during a particularly grueling December while they were sussing out Hydra bases. Steve now wondered if it was actually a warning or a recommendation stemming from a fountain of experience. Knowing Stark’s relationship with Peggy, probably a bit of both.

A tap on his shoulders startled Steve out of his reverie. To his shock, Bruce had managed to come up behind him without Steve being any wiser. His eyes were dry but there was an immeasurable swell of emotion behind them. The two men waited an entire minute before entering the lab with accoutrement of noises, giving Betty and Peter enough time to regroup.

After all, such a wealth of kindness deserved some in return.

Bucky heard the bizarre clunk and clunk steps along with the telltale ‘whoosh’ and sighed. Of course, Wilson. Who else would Steve send to find the negative impact left by Jane?

“Oh, hey, it’s you,” Wilson said, stepping into the office. “You’re actually sitting behind a desk. Hell just froze over, didn’t it?”

Bucky gave him the finger. “What did you find?”

“Where’s Steve?”

“Right here,” Steve answered, rushing into the room. “Hey, the furniture is still standing. So, you must have just come back.”

Sam gave a sigh and sat on the only comfortable chair in the whole damn office, earning a glare from Barnes who hated his ergonomic piece of crap.

Sam fiddled with his bag and brought out a small tablet. It wasn’t long before there was a holo projection on Steve’s desk.

“They were telling the truth,” Sam said, all trace of irascible humor gone. “It’s a dead zone, and I mean that in every sense of the word.”

He then pulled out a small vial of grey ash and shook it. “I’m guessing whatever this is, we won’t find any organic matter.”

“Anything else?” Steve asked.

“As you can see, outside the blast radius, there is plant life, even animal life. And some of them are quite sensitive to any drastic changes,” Sam explained as he pointed out various flowers, birds, even bees. “It’s like this specific site has been carbonized without disturbing the environment immediately surrounding it.”

“But?” Bucky prompted.
“There is no trace of radiation. No energy signature whatsoever.”

“How is that possible?” Steve asked. “Doesn’t human bodies leave traces? A cell phone has a signature and that’s enough for FRIDAY to use and locate.”

Sam nodded. “Exactly. Even decaying matter lets out something that tells us what it was. Hell, we can even do a DNA biopsy to find its origins. But there’s absolutely nothing here. There is no trace of any structure, any vehicle, and the real concern: human life.”

“Are you saying it’s been erased somehow?” Steve asked, concern for Jane’s welfare warring with mounting fear.

“No, I’m saying whatever did this, made this entire area into a goddamn void,” Sam explained. “Look, an absence means something was there and then taken away. This, this makes the blast zone into a null. It makes it that so nothing was ever there to begin with. No life, no construction, no human interference. Unless we dig deeper, I’m betting there won’t be even geological evidence we could use.”

“So, what the hell is the ash made out of?” Steve asked.

“Good question,” Sam asked. “Better question: how in hell is Dr. Foster containing this thing, whatever it is? Because it’s one hell of a weapon to be carrying around in that tiny frame.”

Steve saw Jane yawn around another yawn, which would be impressive had he not done it himself throughout Europe, and then after waking up from the ice. For a moment he shivered, remembering the cold that entered not only his bones but his mind, engulfing everything until he could no longer remember what it meant to be warm.

Those seventy years weren’t of rest, of sleep, but unending nightmare of sorts, one that Sam had repeatedly asked him to see a therapist because Bucky wasn’t the only centenarian with PTSD. And no serum could possibly mend that fissure in his mind.

Jane spotted the three men and smiled, which did lessen the worries rolling around Steve’s head.

“Hey, I’m Sam,” The Air Force vet said, with the easy smile and casual drawl that charmed so many women right off the bat.

The way both Jane and Darcy responded meant Sam was batting a goddamn 1000. Bucky threw a quick stink eye at Sam, who cheerfully ignored him in favor of turning on his charm just enough to draw the attention away from his two surly companions.

Not for the first time Steve wondered how Sam would’ve dealt with being Captain America. And came up with the conclusion that Peggy would never have shot him because the man wasn’t an idiot when it came to the opposite sex and their wants.

“The Falcon, my man!” Darcy exclaimed. “Brought a knife to a gunfight and ended up with the biggest gun. There’s badass and then there’s Badass. And you, sir, are definitely the latter.”

Peter’s eyes widened. “Oh, that was you on the freeway!”

And then quieted because he remembered who else in the room was on the goddamn freeway.

“We about done cooing over the new guy?” Bucky asked in a flat tone.
Sam’s face scrunched up a bit as he fought off a belly laugh, but gamely regained control. “I bought you a present you never wanted, Dr. Foster. A sample of whatever the hell that was left in the area you described.”

Jane took the vial and looked at it. “Looks powdery, almost.”

Darcy peered too. “Yeah, was it like that when we were there?”

“No, it was definitely sand-like,” Jane uttered, looking annoyed. “I wish I had taken a sample.”

“But we didn’t and you can’t complain ‘cause we were running for our lives, right?!”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Yes, Darcy. I won’t complain about not taking samples or pictures.”

She peered closer to the sample and gave a nod. “I can definitely say the texture of the material is breaking down.”

Sam’s easy demeanor had completely changed. “I haven’t taken any hard sciences in years, and I’m more of a math guy, but what could cause that? Just being exposed to the air?”

“Doesn’t that happen with everything?” Bucky asked. “When I was a prisoner, we were made to study some chemistry along with propaganda shit, but biodegradations does happen.”

“Over a course of time, most certainly,” Jane answered, her attention still focused on the vial. “But not in a matter of weeks. And the deterioration looks uniform.”

“I’ll fire up Abraham,” Peter said before running to a corner.

“What’s Abraham?” Steve asked, watching Peter turn on a computer that was networked to what looked like a printer that Hulk would use.

“It’s a modified atomic microscope,” Darcy explained as she joined Peter. “But Janey like seriously gave it a kickass boost.”

“Wait a minute,” Steve asked, agog. “You can actually see an atom?”

Jane smiled. “Even better. Come.”

“Wow,” Steve whispered as he looked at Bucky. “Did you know this?”

Bucky shook his head, looking just as taken back.

Sam looked at the two and said, “I’m getting you guys magazine subscriptions for Christmas. This stuff is amazing.”

He then looked at Abraham and pointed at a prominent logo stamped on its side. “Wait a minute, that’s an Epson printer.”

Darcy grinned. “The shell is. Don’t ask. Janey was impatient waiting for replacement parts so she Frankensteined her own.”

Sam’s demeanor turned somber and a new level of respect shone from his eyes as he studied Jane.

“She built this?” he asked Darcy, watching Jane type into the computer.

Darcy nodded. “Let her loose in a junkyard or a computer recycling plant, and trust me, you will be
amazed beyond words in ten minutes or less.”

Steve glanced at Bucky who was staring at all the different machinery in the room with newfound respect. It was one thing to be a genius, but another thing altogether to be able to cobble together a coherent, working machinery from such disparate entities.

“Here we go,” Peter said. “Three, two, and one.”

“We got visual,” Darcy said as the largest computer screen in front of them came live.

“So, that’s what an atom looks like?” Bucky asked, leaning closer.

“No, it isn’t,” Jane answered, pale. “That’s not an atom at all.”

Peter blinked. “What the hell is that?”

“It looks like thread,” Darcy said as she studied the screen. “Like lots of squiggly thread.”

“Umm, I’m going to take pictures, and set up a dimensional visual ‘cause that’s just freaky,” Peter said, eyes still glued to the screen. “Maybe they’re molecules? That was caught in some kind of energy blast?”

“No, at this resolution that’s supposed to be an atom,” Jane countered. “Peter, get it on 3D now.”

The table that was in the middle of the lab lit up brightly and revealed a flat surfaced interconnected threads.

“Yeah, no, that’s definitely not an atom,” Peter said as the hologram turned in various angles, revealing uniformity throughout.

“Um, Janey, what’s happening?” Darcy asked. “Cause the microscope is powering down.”

Jane ran to Abraham and flipped it open once it turned dark. She pulled out the sample dish and nearly dropped it.

“It’s empty,” she said. “There’s nothing left.”

“The vial is empty too,” Sam said, pointing at the container propped in a holder.

“Darcy, review the scans of the room since they came in,” Jane said.

Darcy did as asked. “Yeah, we got six humans, various energy signatures as expected.”

“Any from the vial?” Jane asked.

Steve knew the answer even before Darcy answered, “No, nada.”

Jane studied the recordings and paled even further. “There is actually nothing there.”

That got Peter running to her. “What?”

Jane put the recordings on the main screen. When Sam held out his hand, there was nothing but inky darkness where the powder should have been.

“Nothing,” Jane whispered. “There is nothing.”

Then, without another word, she sat down hard on the nearest chair.
“Janey?” Darcy asked, her fear plain on her face. “What’s going on in that big brain of yours?”

“It’s what Malekith said about the Aether,” Jane answered in a thin voice. “There is no energy signature because we aren’t capable of measuring it. Its structure was compromised because it was hit with something that is capable of destroying all matter. Or whatever was holding it together.”


“What is dark matter?” Steve asked, trying hard to keep his voice calm.

“It’s theorized to be the majority of what the universe is made of, but we just can’t see it yet,” Jane answered.

“Dark energy?” Peter offered. “Could that stuff have been the result of dark energy?”

Jane shook her head. “No, then the powder would not have existed at all. And I would’ve been dead long before.”

“I’m completely lost here,” Bucky said. “Could someone explain it to a bunch of guys who took basic science before Hiroshima?”

“Malekith wanted the Aether because it would bring eternal night,” Jane explained. “And he got it right in a way. It’s night because the Aether takes matter and turns it into dark matter. The end result is complete annihilation of the original substance.”

“So no sun, no stars, no energy,” Sam added. “Yeah, that would bring eternal night.”

“And alter reality,” Jane said. “Because the Aether would allow its wielder to convert matter into dark matter at will. To turn the entire universe upside down, inside out, however Malekith saw fit. Or Thanos.”

“But Thanos didn’t,” Steve said. “He didn’t succeed.”

“Because the Reality Stone was incomplete,” Jane said before closing her eyes.

“How do you know that?” Peter asked.

“Because a part of it is in me,” Jane answered.

“How long before the Bi-Frost is complete?” Steve asked, his gaze never wavering from Jane. His desire to get that shit out of her had become his sole focus.

“A week, maybe five days,” Darcy answered for her friend. “Less if we have some help.”

“Who can you trust with this, exactly?” Sam asked.

“Bruce knows, along with Darcy and you guys,” Jane answered. “Peter’s on board now. But this science is still mostly theoretical to the rest of the academic community.”

“But Thor landed years ago,” Sam was confused.

“The only scientist close enough to understanding the Bi-Frost technology is Janey, period,” Darcy said. “Nobody, not even Erik, fully bought into her branch of astrophysics until New Mexico. Even if we wanted to, we won’t find anyone who can follow her well enough to help us. It’ll take another decade or more for someone to even approach what she knows right now.”
Steve had known that Jane was a genius, but this was beyond anything he had remotely been aware of. Not even the world of science fiction could touch what Jane understood and was further capable of learning.

“So, when someone says Dr. Foster is one of a kind, we’re using a universal measuring stick,” Sam uttered. “As in galaxies far, far away.”

Darcy fiercely hugged her friend. “We’re going to build that rainbow bridge and get that shit out of you.”

“I’m not worried about me,” Jane confessed. “I’m more terrified of what it’ll do to the rest of you. To the compound.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Steve said. “Every personnel had dealt with an alien invasion or two. Coulson and I made sure of that. They’ve also been trained to deal with non-sequential emergencies.”

“What about Mr. Stark?” Peter piped up. “I mean he might not get all this but he’s probably one of the best engineers in the world.”

“I’ll call him,” Steve said. “I’ll get him here by tomorrow. Just continue on schedule, and don’t cut corners. I know the temptation is there, but the end result could be disastrous.”

Steve was midway down the hall when he gave into the urge and rushed back to the lab. Jane was where he left her, still sitting, eyes wide and unseeing. Or perhaps she was seeing something, because of all the people on the planet, Jane might be the only one who had a good grasp of what was happening inside her.

Steve kneeled in front of her and cupped her face. Steve could feel the delicate bones on her cheeks brush against his palms. He wanted to say something encouraging, maybe even kind, but the tears that fell onto his scarred hands made him mute.

“I don’t want to die,” she whispered so quietly that only he could hear her.

Steve closed his eyes and blew out a small breath. He then touched his forehead against hers. Steve didn’t know how long he held her in that position, only that no one disturbed them.

It was Sam who made the call.

Tony looked at his cell then frowned. Pepper saw the look and asked,

“Who is it? Steve?”

“No, it’s Wilson,” Tony answered. “That can’t be good. He never calls me. I didn’t know he even had my number.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and answered the phone. “Hi, Sam. It’s Pepper, do you need to speak to Tony?”

She gave the cell promptly to Tony who hefted a disappointed sigh. “I still hate being handed things.”

Whatever Sam said caught Tony’s attention well enough. He remained uncharacteristically silent as Sam spoke.
“Well, shit,” Tony said succinctly. “Okay, I’ll be there tomorrow morning.”

Pepper began immediately rescheduling Tony’s itinerary for the next two weeks. She then took in his pale countenance and decided to reschedule hers, too.

Whatever Sam had said, it was enough to upset Tony who had gained an admirable level of self-control after Thanos’ destruction.

“Something’s wrong with Steve?” Pepper asked without prompt. She knew that the only reason Sam Wilson would call Tony so late at night was because of Captain Rogers.

“Yeah,” Tony said, rubbing his face in frustration. “Turns out the good captain has gone sweet over Dr. Foster.”

“That’s old news, Tony,” Pepper said over her tea mug. “Most everyone recognized Steve following Dr. Foster around like a faithful puppy, even when he doesn’t have to.”

“That and him going ballistic over those idiots about the sexts?” Tony hummed and winked at Pepper.

Pepper’s smile was trim but genuine. When she caught the mischievous glint in Tony’s eyes, the smile turned into a snort.

“That was funny,” Pepper finally confessed.

“Yeah, well, Dr. Foster’s in trouble,” Tony said. “Big trouble, and they need my help.”

Pepper knew that look on Tony’s face. The kind of trouble she imagined was not something to be taken lightly, and that clearing Tony’s schedule was definitely the right course of action.

“I’ll pack and tell Happy we’re going upstate,” Pepper said.

“Yeah, you should,” Tony agreed. “But you don’t need to go.”

Pepper looked at him sharply. “Really?”

“They need me to lend a hand in building the Bi-Frost so Thor could come back and help Foster,” Tony said. “No need for you to get involved. In fact, you should go to Malibu, and see how our LA branch is doing with the switch to the Arc generators.”

Pepper didn’t react. She knew what Tony was asking. And though she gave a kiss on his cheek as agreement, she wasn’t going to be dissuaded so easily. As she packed her own bag, she hid her bracelets: the ones she used to control Extremis. Tony managed to negate the most harmful side effects of the drug, but there were still telltale traces in her bloodstream; enough to cause damage if she were forced.

Pepper never had to use it because she never needed to. But Pepper was more than prepared for the inevitable. Some day, maybe not this week, or next, or maybe in the ensuing months, but sooner or later some dark organization will corner her, and the choice to use Extremis would be taken out of her hands, quite literally.

Pepper also packed a much-used secondhand book of baby names. Also, just in case.

*Prepare once; prepare twice. Regret never.*
Chapter 6

Steve arched his back and rotated his shoulders, loosening the hyper-tense muscles and joints. Tony had arrived yesterday with none of the usual fanfare and immediately went to Jane’s lab. His entrance was so casual that few knew of his presence until every window in the research building lit up like mid-afternoon in July. This wouldn’t have mattered much because it was July. However, the flare had occurred during twilight hours, thus attracting quite a bit of attention from the surrounding areas.

Steve barely slept for more than three hours after that fiasco, and dealing with Tony’s usual abrasive attitude, he was more than willing to dish out some pain. Fortunately for him and everyone else in the compound, Bucky was more than willing to volunteer.

The two men squared off, each systematically shutting out the usual noises generated by onlookers. Their sparring sessions always attracted a crowd; some were gawkers, most were personnel eager to learn a few moves from the super soldiers.

Steve barely managed to duck Bucky’s left hook, which came at him full force, and wondered if his friend was working off some frustrations of his own. As far as he knew Bucky had not had any nighttime visitors since they moved to upstate New York. And though Steve had silently approved of the slow if amusing dance between Bucky and Darcy, he had to wonder if Bucky would, as the new generation called it: seal the deal, any time soon.

If the snarl on Bucky’s face was any indication, the answer was a resounding no.

Steve’s grin was purely predatory. This was going to be fun.

The two men were a study of grace and lethal power, as they traded blows and kicks, with jumps that cleared more than ten feet in height. And all were performed in split second of each other. Added to this confrontation of operatic violence was the constant humming of Bucky’s left arm, as he calculated and recalculated the force necessary to defend and parry Steve’s blows.

So, the sound of a plastic snack bag being ripped open was more than jarring enough for the combatants to snap out of their battle mentality.

They turned in unison to see Darcy who had somehow managed to finagle a seat in the front row, wrestling with an extra-large Cretors’ popcorn bag that proudly proclaimed its contents to be GMO free.

Steve blinked, as the sight was something he had never seen before in the gym.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing?” Bucky asked, staring at Darcy like she’d just performed the Lindy Hop while engulfed in flames.

“Tony,” Darcy answered, munching happily. “Either I take a break or help Jane launch the playboy-billionaire-philanthropist all the way back to NYC minus his suit.”

“But you left Jane there?” Bucky asked, grinning. "Won't she go through with her threats?"

“She won’t go all villain-y without me,” Darcy explained. “I also switched everything to decaf before I left.”

“That sounds plenty evil to me,” Bucky countered, his smile growing bigger and brighter.
Darcy blew a raspberry and shrugged. “The needs of the many blah blah blah.”

Then, without any preamble, Darcy took out a can of ginger ale and pulled the tab. The snap-fizz sound was louder than the one made by the popcorn bag.

Steve looked at the woman sitting next to Darcy: Private Liu currently slaving away in Communications. She was struggling not to laugh, but Steve saw tears glimmering in her eyes.

“Hey, Lewis,” Steve said in his most officious tone. “Brought enough for the class?”

Without a word, she pulled out a stack of small party cups that featured a white cat with a pink bow on its ear. Then, with the aplomb of a British butler she passed it to Liu.

“I’m trying to figure out if you mugged Hermione or Mary Poppins,” Liu said, peeking into Darcy’s all-too familiar tote.

“Hah,” Darcy said, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Punctuating the snappy comment, Darcy pulled out three six-packs of ginger ale, her eyes never leaving Steve. “I have enough for the class, Captain. I ain’t playing favorites with this crowd.”

Steve threw back his head and laughed. Bucky had already leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees so he wouldn’t keel over completely in his hilarity.

Steve knew the sight of two of them lost in humor would be the most shocking thing the witnesses had seen in this sparring room, but he didn’t care. Between Bucky’s great mood and Darcy’s saucy humor, life at that moment was so very good.

He then heard the telltale snap of the magical Tupperware and looked up to see the familiar blue-lidded container.

The noise Bucky made in response was practically pornographic, and attracted shock looks. Steve still didn’t care. Darcy’s magic worked: positive reinforcement was guaranteed success when homemade desserts were in the offering.

Bucky sprinted over, grabbed two of whatever it was and returned to Steve.

“Holy shit,” Steve uttered around a mouthful of fudge that tasted like Sacher Torte.

Bucky gave a deep rumble of contentment and winked at Darcy who looked proud of her achievement. Soon, the popcorn, the Tupperware filled with chocolaty goodness, and the ginger ale with the small cups were circulating around the room.

Life got even better when Jane marched into the class. Of course, her attention was riveted onto the tablet in her grasp so she completely missed the scene she unknowingly interrupted.

“Hey, Darcy, where did you put the particle calculator? I…” Jane looked up to see Darcy staring back at her, ginger ale in one hand, and a fudge square in the other.

She then noticed everyone and everything else in the room. With what looked like dread, Jane slowly turned around until she caught sight of Steve and Bucky, both staring at her from their position right in the middle of the sparring floor.

“Oh, so that’s why…” Jane never finished her sentence.

Steve’s gaze intensified as he caught her eye. The intimate moment of two days ago wasn’t
repeated as Jane’s focus had returned to her work. But Steve still felt the sensation of her hair brushing against his cheeks. So overwhelmed by the memory, Steve had to forcibly curl his hands into fists in order to maintain self-control.

“Sorry,” Jane apologized in a rough tone, her gaze never leaving Steve. And then, with a swift, elegant turn, she charged out of the room.

A breathless quality of expectation settled in as everyone watched Captain Rogers’ unflinching attention follow Dr. Foster as she disappeared from his sight.

There was some awkward throat clearing, and more than few healthy blushes that were carefully hidden, as the witnesses filed away that bountiful tidbit of evidence.

Bucky kicked lightly at Steve’s calves, breaking his friend’s concentration. The two men returned to sparring, though now the air was scented with chocolate along with sweat and blood. After the training session ended, Bucky approached Darcy and the two shared a brief conversation. Still, the talk must have held some weight as Darcy left looking mighty pleased, while Bucky stared moon-eyed after her.

The naked longing in his gaze did much to convince the witnesses that, just maybe, the Winter Soldier wasn’t made completely out of ice. And that yes, Darcy’s tote had to have been a present from Thor. Because only Asgardian magic could explain how it was able to contain such huge amounts of food and drink.

Steve knocked on the lab door, even when he knew FRIDAY had announced his presence to the scientists while he was still in the hallway.

“How’s it going?” Steve asked, carefully eyeing Tony who was bouncing between various computer terminals.

The man’s sartorial condition had deteriorated steadily after his arrival. Gone were the swanky suede jacket and the wristwatch that probably cost an entire building in Queens if not Brooklyn. Tony was now sporting his usual t-shirt liberally smeared with unidentifiable fluids and jeans that looked like it was holding on for dear life what with the burn marks and tears.

“We’re good,” Darcy said, not bothering to look up from her laptop.

Peter glared at her, but said nothing. Instead, he shook his head and crossed an index finger across his throat.

“Oh come on!” Tony cried out. “It was one measly fire!”

“Those were my favorite sneakers!” Peter shot back with venom. “Aunt May paid nearly two hundred dollars for those! And they were a Christmas present!”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I’ll get you a new pair, Spidey.”

Peter, in no way, seemed mollified. Instead, he looked down mutinously at the stack of paper in front of him. Darcy bit her lips in order hide her smile and pointed to the left corner of the lab.

Steve wisely said nothing, either, and hurriedly made his way behind a bank of servers to find Bruce and Jane embroiled in what seemed like the world’s politest tug-of-war.

“Anyone need help?” Steve offered. “Intervention, maybe?”
Jane looked up and blushed so quickly that Steve leaned forward in alarm. Then he realized she must have remembered the morning sparring session and preened a little. His ego didn’t need stroking from strangers, but when a woman like Jane Foster gave you more than a second glance – you take it with a hearty thank you.

Bruce sighed deeply and held onto his end of the rope of cables. “Intervention would be good, but it won’t solve much.”

Jane harrumphed. “No, it won’t.”

And with that she yanked the cables free from Bruce’s grasp and rapidly plugged them into the servers behind her.

“Do we really use that many?” Bruce asked, his face scrunched up in protest. “The energy drain is going to be massive, even for this place.”

“I am planning to record everything the moment the Bi-Frost goes live, and that also means whatever is happening on Thor’s side,” Jane explained to Steve. “All that will generate massive amounts of data.”

Bruce looked at Steve and pointed at the stacks behind him. “These are zettabytes. I had no idea any private entity could purchase these many and not get arrested.”

“Pays to be me!” Tony hollered.

Bruce rolled his eyes. “Of course, then we have Tony.”

Jane laughed. “That should be the title of his autobiography: Then We Have Tony.”

Tony finally joined them. “I was thinking Iron Man, the Myth, the Legend.”

Jane scoffed. “Please, Iron Man is a persona you adopted to do what Tony Stark wanted to do but without all the glam and the paparazzi.”

Steve saw Tony’s eyes widen just a little, but it was more than enough for Steve to realize how taken back his friend was by Jane’s words.

“Besides, Iron Man can’t do any of this,” Jane continued, waving her hands around herself. “So, pack him away, Tony. ‘Cause I swear, if you power up your suit in here, I will sic Darcy on you.”

“And that means me, by default,” Bucky drawled, looking relaxed and mildly entertained by the conversation.

He had managed to enter the lab without anyone being the wiser save for Peter, who had hunkered down in front of his computer and refused to even acknowledge the newest visitor.

Darcy winked at him and then blew a kiss at Bucky who grinned, making him look years younger with his boyish smile.

Bucky gave a cautious nod towards Tony then said to Steve, “Coulson wants to talk to you around nine. Something about requisitions.”

Steve narrowed his eyes at his friend but kept quiet. Mainly because he didn’t know if Bucky was being a little shit, or Coulson really wanted to talk to him about the requisition from hell before Thor’s arrival tomorrow.
“Speaking of Coulson,” Tony said, his attention fully focused on Jane. “Is that thing about Thor true? That he’s a fertility god?”

Steve willed down his blush and huffed out a breath. Another topic he wished he’d never have to think about.

Jane nodded. “Yes, it is true.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at her. “How are you not pregnant? You should be in a Brady Bunch sitcom by now if that was true.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “It’s called birth control, genius.”

Tony raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Yeah yeah, I get it. None of my business.”

Jane tipped her head. “Why are you so curious about this?”

“Pepper wants twins,” Tony explained with a large grin. “Go big or go home, yeah?”

Steve managed to keep a civil tongue by chewing on it. Bucky, on the other hand, was nowhere near subtle and stared at Tony with wide eyes and open mouth.

If Tony noticed Bucky’s shock he didn’t say anything. Instead, he returned to his work, humming a jaunty tune.

Bucky shook his head and asked Darcy, “See you for dinner?”

“Sure, I’ll text you,” Darcy answered then gave Bucky a peck on the cheek before returning to her desk.

Bruce tossed a wave over his shoulder as he ambled towards Peter. His departure left Jane alone with Steve, simultaneously fulfilling one of Steve’s desires and personal nightmare.

Jane studied him with tired eyes and good humor. “So, are we on for dinner or should I…”

“Dinner sounds great,” Steve hurriedly said. “Um … we can … I can…”

“Can what?”

“I can’t cook,” Steve said. “And I can’t leave the compound tonight because I’m on call.”

“Of course. So, the cafeteria then?”

“They’ve got good apple pie,” Steve muttered, not being able to hide the frustration in his tone.

“You don’t like apple pie?”

“Not anymore. I used to like it but I’ve grown sick of it since I’ve woken up.”

“Oh, the propaganda,” Jane said.

“Yeah, it’s just awful,” Steve explained. “No matter which restaurant I go, they ask me if I want apple pie. Honestly, if I don’t see another apple pie for the rest of my life, I’ll be happy.”

“So, no apple pie, then,” Jane said with a firm nod.

“I’ve got sushi flying in about three hours,” Tony said peeking over his terminal. “I’ll just order
enough for everyone. That way we can all avoid this awkward dance between you two, and I can chaperone you kids.”

Steve blinked at that and then turned to Jane who had buried her face in her hands. He knew she wasn’t crying because he could hear laughter.

“Well, I guess that’s decided,” Steve said without a drop of rancor. “You like sushi?”

“She loves sushi!” Darcy hollered from her desk.

Jane’s laughter grew louder.

“It’s a good thing we’ve got friends like these. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know how to put on my trousers,” Steve deadpanned.

“And a bunch of desserts too,” Tony added. “Ilili’s Halawet Jibneh is to die for.”

Steve frowned in confusion. “Hal… what?”

“Halawet Jibneh,” Jane pronounced it elegantly and quite easily, as if she could whip it up herself. “Tony’s right. It’s quite delicious.”

“Sounds good, text me please?” Steve asked, deliberately staring at her with his baby blues under his lashes.

Her blush returned full force. “Yes, I will.”

Steve preened a little more as he returned to work. Then, he had to put out fires because Sam decided to test his new wings by dive-bombing Bucky.

Bucky’s response was to open fire on the Falcon with live rounds, and pandemonium ensued.

After dressing down his friends, Steve spent the rest of afternoon filling out paperwork explaining why 1.5 members of the Avengers decided to use each other as target practice. So, it was a grateful Captain America who showed up for dinner with Bucky and Sam in tow, both chastised to the bone.

Not that Steve expected any more problems with Bucky. Darcy gave him her seat and promptly sat on his lap. Bruce seemed in no way deterred by this jarring behavior and continued to eat his rolls while Tony just plowed through his plate.

Steve watched Jane take four bites before relinquishing her chopsticks. He then caught Darcy’s worried glance along with Bruce who quietly sipped his tea while gazing sharply on Jane’s full plate.

“Do you want me to break out the desserts?” Tony offered.

“I guess,” Jane said. “I’m still trying to figure out what Thor’s going to need the moment he lands. And it’s giving me a headache.”

Steve frowned. “Umm, that’s not your job. It’s McMichaels in PR who handles that. Coulson made sure the position was taken by someone who has experience in foreign diplomacy.”

“It’s not the same. Knowing Thor and Asgardian traditions, there’s going to be a lot of translation needed.”
“Allspeak does that, doesn’t it?” Bruce asked.

Jane huffed out a breath of frustration and looked at Darcy who hummed a little before saying,

“Lördag.”

“Good one,” Jane countered.

“What’s that?” Bucky asked.

“Saturday is traditionally used by Vikings as bath day,” Jane explained. “It’s when family members all gather in and around a communal hot spring and spend time with each other. Unlike what you’ve read or heard, Vikings were one of the cleanest societies in Old Europe.”

Tony put down his mug with a thud. “Wait a minute…”

“Asgardians keep a tradition very similar to Lördag,” Jane added. “So, every Saturday, you might find naked Asgardians frolicking in the hot tub.”

“Ahh fuck,” Tony said, rubbing his face. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, and it doesn’t matter if the Asgardians are mixed gender. They’ll all gather in the bath and discuss anything that crosses their minds. I saw it while I was in Asgard.

“It was a bit like Thanksgiving dinner. But with more nudity.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “So, McMichaels should schedule … something on Saturday and make sure the entire natatorium is closed?”

Jane shrugged. “Asgardians don’t care about nudity. Probably because every one of them is peak perfection in their own way.”

“We could never take Thor to a pool because he wouldn’t put on swimming trunks,” Darcy said with a grin. “The dude ran around the London flat naked as a jaybird the entire time he was there.”

“Well, if you take away his armor, he didn’t have much else,” Jane said hurriedly.

“That’s not too bad,” Peter said diplomatically.

“Some of them are gender fluid,” Darcy’s grin turned positively evil.

“Okay, I can see how that could be confusing,” Peter said, blinking.

“And then we have the rest of the entourage,” Sam thoughtfully concluded. “And God knows what their preferences are.”

“Asgardians also like to hunt, so if you want to spend some quality time with them, go on a hunt,” Jane said.

Bucky frowned. “Is it hunting season?”

“It is now,” Steve quipped, mentally noting the fact.

“I think I’ll stay here,” Bruce offered, pointing at the various machines crammed into the lab. “It’s nice and quiet.”
“You know the Hulk is a legend now,” Jane said, smiling impishly. “Your feats have become lore in some societies. They might even ask you for an autograph or a selfie.”

Steve looked at Bruce and was shocked to find the man blushing.

“Oh, there’s a story there,” Sam goaded. “Anything good?”

Bruce shook his head. “Not really. It’s just the Green Guy went a little rampant and the planet he landed in … well, they liked rampant.”

Steve had to actually think about that. A society built to encompass Hulk’s level of destruction and even welcome it. For the sake of his sanity, he decided that no, he wouldn’t pursue that thought any further. Especially since Earth was not capable of reparations to balance out that level of damage.

Then Tony presented the desserts with his usual flair, and Asgardians and their dangly bits were promptly brushed aside for the heavenly treats.

Bruce ended his call. “Betty’s flying back from Boston on Friday.”

“Good,” Tony said. “We’ll need every bit of help we can get.”

Steve placed the shield in front of him. He didn’t want to greet a friend and ally in such a manner, but there was no guarantee that Jane’s Bi-Frost would make the proper journey and bring back Thor instead of a homicidal frost giant.

Even Bucky was in full gear, along with the half-mask and goggles that reflected the setting sun.

“All right!” Steve ordered. “All eyes on the circle and let’s hope for friendlies. But if we get anyone else, let’s give them a welcome they’ll never forget.”

The ring of security personnel was placed ten feet from the landing site, with Sam circling overhead. Tony was on the ground though his thrusters were already warmed up.

Darcy was standing behind a bank of computers; her attention solely focused on the pattern Jane was methodically burning into the grass. Steve knew it was somewhat similar to the one Thor had created every time he left earth.

Darcy gave a thumbs-up to Jane. “Atmo is 5/5.”

“Good, I’m done.” Jane stood back from the circle. She gave Steve a nervous smile. “We’re set to go.”

With that she joined Darcy behind the bank of computers. Within seconds, the white sticks Jane had set up around the circle began glowing. Moments later, the airplane turbine situated behind Tony started vibrating, though there were no visible signs of movement within.

Steve also noticed there weren’t any power cables connecting any of the machineries either. Still, something was powering up the Bi-Frost. He noticed Tony looking around for the same reason before catching his eye. His shrug looked hilarious since Tony was still in his Iron Man suit, but his lack of understanding only increased Steve’s nervousness.

Then, without warning, Jane put on some type of gloves and walked right into the center of the pattern, which started glowing even brighter. Steve had to forcibly stop himself from yanking her
away. Instead, he looked at Darcy for any clues, to find the assistant only excited.

“Are those mittens?!” Tony asked, aghast.

His exclamation forced Steve to refocus his attention on Jane and realized that she was wearing what looked like the bastard love child between woolen mittens and the prototype of Iron Man’s gauntlets.

“Hey,” Darcy yelled, “respect the Mittens of Time. She can’t control the bridge without it!”

“She knitted a code pattern into the gloves with some type of Asgardian thread,” Bruce hollered.

That made Steve give Tony a second glance, who stared back with what the hell look. Even though Bucky was completely masked, Steve could feel his confusion as Bucky's stance hardened even further.

Just as the sun began sinking, a dance of colors emanated within the circle, lighting Jane until she was glowing just as brightly. Steve’s breath stuttered as colors he couldn’t hope to identify danced across her face, hair, and body, making Jane’s already-ethereal beauty into something truly unreal.

Not even Rembrandt could paint her now, Steve thought numbly.

And Steve knew he wasn’t the only one who thought it, either, from the breathless gasps originating around him. For a moment Steve was overwhelmed with the all-too human thought of mine, mine, mine. I saw her first.

The thunderous roar from the clear, darkening sky was the only warning before a huge tornado of light descended from the heavens. Jane seemed to take that as a signal and calmly walked backwards until she rejoined Darcy.

When the light faded, there were five figures within the circle; with the pattern on the lawn smoking. There was the familiar, gigantic figure of Thor, and alongside him was the warrior woman named Sif. Behind them was a man, almost large as Thor but looked to be of Asiatic descent. Next to him was someone Steve guessed to be a light elf. He identified the last to be another Asgardian, but from the wide-eyed stare, Steve guessed the visitor to be young despite a face full of beard.

Thor smiled grandly and bowed. Even though he was now officially king, Thor was sporting no finery and wore the same armor, save for some type of band around his left bicep that glittered brightly. Of course, on a human being that piece of finery would have been a crown, and a priceless one at that.

“Captain!” Thor greeted heartily and strode out of the circle. He clapped Steve’s forearm instead of hand: a warrior’s greeting Thor had once told him.

“Good to see you,” Steve said, relieved to see his friend. He’d missed the open-minded and congenial Asgardian.

Thor then spun around and until he saw Jane. He bowed deeply.

“I knew you could do it,” he said, and though his voice was still booming, the statement seemed extraordinarily intimate.

Jane gave a teary smile. “And I knew you’d come back.”
Steve swallowed the lump in his throat and fought to keep his face betraying his feelings. After all, there were no promises between him and Jane, while she and Thor shared years of intimacy between them.

Thor turned to his entourage while clearing his throat.

“It is my great honor to introduce you to Warrior Sif, my wife and Queen of New Asgard.”

Steve watched as Thor continued his introductions but he could hear nothing after Thor had said ‘wife’. He looked at Bucky who had taken off his mask and goggles, which made it easy to see his shock at the announcement. Steve dared a glance at Jane and caught the shadow of loss flit across her face. He desperately wanted to say something to Jane, no matter how trite, to lessen her pain. But all he could think was:

Fuck.

Author’s Notes:

The whole knitting thing is actually really real. NASA’s LOL Knitting Club
“Oh, what am I going to do after this? I plan to have all the sex with you. Though, I don’t know if we could catch up to your seventy-year drought. But hell, I plan to put a big dent in it.”

Bucky was not expecting that answer. So, he just continued to stare at Darcy as his pasta slowly slid off the tines of his fork before landing unceremoniously onto the tray. But his shock wasn’t so overwhelming that he didn’t notice the two tables closest to theirs promptly cleared out even though more than one person still had a full plate.

There was also Steve who was fast approaching their corner, but must have overheard Darcy because he made a crisp turn right into a glass wall. Bucky thought his friend would have gone through the damn thing if given no choice, but fortunately for the compound, Steve just followed the wall around a corner and into a different section of the cafeteria.

Bucky slowly deposited the fork onto the bowl; his appetite suddenly switching routes to fulfill a more carnal hunger.

“Sweetheart, are you serious?” he managed to ask in a calm, easy tone, trying to give Darcy an out if she were joking.

And if she was, Bucky might actually burst into tears. Or clean out whatever Hydra cells remain in the continental North America just so he could calm the fuck down.

Darcy looked up from her banana pudding cup. “Um, yeah.”

Bucky sat back into his chair. He wanted to say something to make her realize he was going to take her offer and practically deposit it into a bank. But all he could say was, “Huh.”

Darcy studied him with uncharacteristic anxiety. “Bucky, please tell me I wasn’t reading you wrong. I mean, you’re a great guy, and if you just want to be friends, I’ll throw a fucking party. But I was kinda hoping we could be something else too.”

Bucky looked down at her tiny hands, all scarred up because of her propensity to run headfirst into danger, even when sure death was in the offering. Without a word he took her right hand with his metal one.

This was the first time he’d used it to initiate non-violent contact since 1945.

“Darcy, I’m going to be friends with you, always. And there isn’t a day I’m not grateful for being able to call you friend. But, yeah, I want more too.”

Darcy leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on the metal knuckles. He didn’t shiver but the metal plates on his hand adjusted as if the gentle touch was enough to shock him like a well-placed blow.

She smiled at him, her eyes bright and hopeful. “But Janey comes first. Then, like I said: All the sex.”

Bucky laughed hoarsely. “Yeah, Janey first. And I better start filling out vacation paperwork today.”

An ear-splitting thunder shattered the lovely tension between them. They both looked out the glass wall to see serene blue sky. And yet, the thunder kept rolling through and getting even louder.
“What the hell?” Bucky whispered, standing up. And he wasn’t the only one as other personnel slowly stood to their feet with their hands on their sidearms, prepared for a violent confrontation.

Thor came into view, his stride long but choppy. His eyes were throwing flares of light as Thor circled the grass, snarling at no one.

“I guess he finally had that talk with Janey,” Darcy whispered.

“Shit,” Bucky hissed between his teeth as lightning began dancing on the tips of Thor’s fingers and arcing out into the air. An unfortunate crow was the fatal victim to one of the flares, and its corpse was still smoking even as its wings turned to ash.

Bucky quickly called Steve, hoping as the Captain of the Avengers, he would be able to talk down Thor from unintentionally inflicting massive property damage.

It took Steve almost ten minutes to calm down Thor well enough to return to Jane’s lab. Though he remained wary of his friend, as it was obvious Thor was still furious about Jane’s condition. Steve had forgotten that underneath Thor’s congenial exterior, there was a warrior who easily slid into berserker mode: personally challenging Thanos to a duel being a glaring example.

And there was also the fact that Thor had lost his entire family and his home world. So, the threat to Jane’s life just might be the breaking point for the Asgardian.

The two Avengers found Jane calmly sipping a mug of tea, courtesy of Bruce who was keeping her company. Sif was also in the lab, looking irate but not at Jane. The moment she saw them, Sif marched up to Thor.

“How dare you!” She roared. “It’s not your place to indulge in such emotions! Dr. Foster needs your help, not your anger!”

Steve stepped back few paces. He may be a super soldier but he knew better than to get between arguing demigods who were married to each other.

Thor took a deep breath and deflated. “Of course.”

Steve gave a silent prayer of thanks. He then glanced at Jane who still managed to look serene despite being surrounded by such volatile characters, and Steve included himself in that group no matter what the public at large believed.

Jane smiled wanly, “So, I have a problem.”

“You also have a solution, I hope,” Sif said.

Steve waited patiently as Jane explained her idea. Thor was confused at first then the look of understanding dawned across his face. Sif didn’t have any difficulty following Jane’s reasoning and didn’t bother to hide her admiration as Jane finished.

“So, what do you need from us?” Sif asked.

“To find a place to finish the journey before returning to Midgard,” Thor supplied.

“Exactly, I want the trip to end on a planet or planetoid where my arrival wouldn’t cause havoc. I would also prefer that there be little to no population in the immediate vicinity.”

“Should that matter?” Steve asked.
“No,” Jane answered reluctantly. “But still, I like to take every precaution possible.”

Steve didn’t want to hear that answer, because it meant Jane wasn’t completely sure her attempt would succeed. Or that she might survive it.

Jane put down her drink and leveled her dark gaze at the audience. Steve felt her intelligence zero in on him, and found the sensation both unsettling and flattering.

“I’ve been in the sciences my entire life, and one of the things I’ve concluded is that there are no assurances. The most I can hope for, and that’s after everything’s been calculated … is that my guesswork is a damn good one.”

“Is that enough to risk your life?” Steve asked bluntly.

“It has to be. We won’t get anything better.”

“And her condition will worsen,” Bruce interrupted somberly. “It isn’t alarming right now, but it’s happening. Not as quickly as before, of course, but I’m afraid the deterioration will accelerate as her immune system fails.”

“What is the timeline?” Steve asked.

“Twenty to thirty days,” Bruce answered.

“So, during our stay,” Thor said. “We should take care. We have to make sure that the final arrival point is some place safe enough for Jane.”

“Um…there is the entire universe?” Bruce asked.

Jane shook her head. “That doesn’t mean much to a human being.”

Thor nodded. “There are some realms we must avoid at all costs. But Sif has traveled far, as have I while hunting down Thanos. Between the two of us and Lord Heylien, I believe we could map out safe ports for you.”

“So, we are going through with Jane’s plan?” Steve asked Thor directly.

Thor’s gaze shifted from considerate to assessing by his question, and Steve realized Thor has finally caught onto the reason for Steve’s concern. But Steve didn’t quell under Thor’s attention nor did he feel any guilt.

Thor was sitting next to his wife, so what right did he have to pass judgment?

Bruce cleared his throat. “So, getting back to mapping…”

“We should start immediately,” Sif prompted both Thor and Steve with a firm tone.

“Yes, please,” Jane agreed and stood up while gathering various tablets on the desk. “I have everything ready to go.”

Thor’s gaze shifted from Jane to Steve and then back. “Agreed.”

“I have to go back to my office, but keep me updated,” Steve said before leaving the room.

He was almost at the door when he felt Thor’s hand on his shoulder. Steve forced himself not to tense up in response.
“If I may have a moment,” Thor rumbled.

Steve gave a sharp nod and led them to an empty common room. He then locked the door behind them in the hopes of having their conversation in relative privacy.

“Is it safe to assume there is something between you and Jane?” Thor asked bluntly.

“Yeah, I was going to tell you about it at your wedding,” Steve cut back with a smile. “But shucks, I must have missed the invite. Sorry about that.”

“There was no time,” Thor finally said, running his hands through his hair, which was growing back to its original length.

“Really? Not even a ‘hey guess what?’ to Jane? I know you guys broke up but didn’t she deserve a little consideration?”

“Did Jane look surprised at all by my announcement?” Thor roared, throwing his hands up. “Did she look in any way shocked by the fact that I am wed?”

“No, just in pain,” Steve shot back. “Which is no fucking surprise, considering.”

“Why are you angry? I would imagine you would only be too glad to soothe away her disappointment!”

“And this is why we can’t let boys play by themselves,” Sif sarcastically interrupted.

Neither Avenger realized that the locked door had swung wide open revealing Darcy, Bucky, Sif, and Jane all crowded in the doorway.

“We could hear you clear down the hall,” Bucky explained. “Thought an intervention was necessary before everything went to shit.”

“I need to talk to Steve,” Jane said firmly, but her gaze was trained on Thor, who stormed out without a word.

Everyone else followed save for Steve who stood immovable like an oak tree in the middle of the room.

“I’m not going to apologize,” he stated flatly. “Besides, I only said what everyone else was thinking since last night.”

Jane offered her hand, “Let’s take a walk. I think the last thing you need is to be cooped up inside.”

Steve stared at the slender fingers before engulfing them with his. And without another word, Jane led him out to the left of the compound, where a copse of white birch delineated the area between the facility and the woods.

“If there is one thing you have to understand, it is the fact that I am the interloper, Steve. I am the other woman when it comes to Sif and Thor.”

Her statement startled him enough to come to a halt. “What?”

“Thor and Sif grew up together,” Jane explained patiently. “They were childhood friends, and there was something between them for a long time. Some thought it was only friendship, but both Odin and Frigga believed they would marry each other.
“Then Thor was stripped of his powers and exiled here where he met me. Our romance was strong, Steve, but it was at best May to September, not because either of us were fickle, but … Steve, Thor is the youngest king to have ever ascended to the Asgardian throne. When he landed in New Mexico, he was at best twenty, twenty-one or late teens in human years of emotional development.

“You also have to consider the fact that if he’d married me, we would have fifty years together unless Thor could lengthen my lifespan. Even then I could live maybe another five hundred to thousand years. While Thor, Thor could live another six thousand easily.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve whispered as he imagined the chasm of lifetime for Thor after Jane died. “Would he have remarried?”

“It’s not traditional and I don’t know if any Asgardian king had ever remarried, but I don’t think so. And I know Thor wouldn’t have. That became clear after Greenwich, and that was why I ended the relationship. Thor understood my reasons, but he wasn’t happy, and we had a bit of a row right before he left. Looking back now, I’m glad I did because his people need stability and familiarity. If I married him, it would have been disastrous at best. At worst? He could have been dethroned and his people forced into nomadic lifestyle.

“Sif is a great warrior and a true champion of Asgard. And she was and is one of his best friends. Thor trusted her since they were children, and she has more than earned it. If they’re not exactly in love now, give it time and they will be. Time they will share but I never could.”

“But your heart still broke.”

Jane took a deep shuddering breath. “Of course it did. But that’s what you do when you love someone and you’re not good for them. Besides, he’s still one of my best friends, and I’ll never forget what we had. There’s comfort in that, Steve. And I have to be satisfied with that and only that.”

“I guess I owe him an apology?”

Jane shook her head. “No, he was an ass for not warning me about the wedding. But that’s all we can complain about. And since you already did, loudly I might add, there is nothing more to be said.”

“And us?” Steve asked, regretting the two words even as they fell from his lips.

He didn’t want to push, didn’t want to be another problem for Jane to solve, but his world had been turned upside down with terrifying consistency, and Steve was so tired of it; having someone solid like Jane in his life seemed like nothing less than a godsend.

“Well, I think right now I have to keep focus on getting the Aether out of my body and into the wide universe. But after? I am amenable to dinner and a movie, or more.”

“Good,” Steve could almost feel the constriction around his heart lessen its hold. Almost giddy with relief, he gently pulled Jane into his arms. “FYI, the Serum helps me heal, but it doesn’t make me immortal.”

“I figured at much.” She placed feather touches around his eyes. “You have laugh lines.”

“I guess I have something to be happy about, especially now.”

The smile on Jane’s face was radiant.
Bucky waited patiently, while keeping an eye out on Thor. The concern and frustration emanating from the Asgardian was genuine, and worrisome enough that Sif had migrated to his side.

She placed firm hands on his shoulders and whispered to him. Bucky was surprised to note that Allspeak did have a mute button, as he couldn’t understand a word they shared.

“That’s not fair,” Darcy muttered as she continued to work on her computer. “You can’t hold it against Jane, not for trying to build a future here on earth.”

Thor huffed a large breath, sounding alarmingly like an irritated boar. “I know that, Sister. And I am aware Captain Rogers is a good man. And should their relationship blossom, I can only give them my heartfelt good wishes.”

“It’s just that it’s Steve that Jane fell for,” Bruce concluded. “It’s not some stranger, but someone you know and respect.”

Thor had the grace to blush. “Perhaps.”

“He means yes,” Sif said. “Rarely is a past suitor glad to find his former heart had moved onto better pastures.”

Thor gave her a stink eye of Asgardian proportions. Sif only raised an eyebrow as answer. The two locked gazes until Thor began chuckling wearily if also in genuine humor.

“It’s true,” Thor confessed. “Had she found comfort in the arms of someone like … that person, Intern Ian, I think my pride would have taken it better.”

Darcy snorted. “Yeah, not happening. Janey would’ve stomped on him three days flat, and not even realized she’d done it. Janey needs someone to match her step for step, and someone who could stand up to her when she’s spinning out of control. Which was why I was so fucking glad she ran you over after breaking up with that asshat, Donald Blake.”

Bucky echoed, “Ran you over?”

“Asgardian Bi-Frost wields tremendous power and creates massive atmospheric changes,” Thor explained. “And Jane, ever brave, had chased the storm that heralded my arrival on earth. So, in the Bi-Frost storm she lost control of her vehicle and hit me.”

“Nice try, but she ran over him twice,” Darcy said, holding up two fingers. “The second time, she backed into him in a hospital parking lot.”

“Holy shit,” Bucky said, looking at Thor in admiration. “That’s got to be one of the worst First Contact stories I have ever heard.”

Sif was staring at Thor in complete shock. “You did not tell me any of this!”

“Thor might not have had Mew Mew, but he was terrifying,” Darcy said fondly, which was weird considering the subject matter. “He kept screaming about who he was and how he was going to beat us into submission. So, yeah, we were a bit terrified of the ginormous blond hunk that just dropped out of a lightning tornado. There was also the little fact that Thor nearly took out the entire ER staff when he got to the hospital.”

Sif covered her mouth and laughed until she was out of breath. Thor, on the other hand, crossed his arms across his chest, all the while resembling a child that had been told he would not have any TV time as a form of punishment.
Darcy began giggling when she saw the look on both Bruce and Bucky’s faces. “He also took out almost the entire SHIELD personnel guarding Mew Mew. Clint told me Coulson was actually impressed enough to have blinked twice.”

“How many people are we talking about here?” Bucky asked in admiration.

“Thor?” Darcy asked sweetly. “Can you answer that question?”

“Eight during my stay at the hall of healing, and probably sixteen SHIELD guards.”

Bruce gave a low whistle. “Wow, that’s impressive. And this was when you were depowered?”

“Yes, though I suspect my father didn’t leave me completely helpless.”

“Not true,” Jane disagreed as she appeared without Steve. “Even though we share similar physiological traits, there are major differences in our genetic structure, which allows Asgardians to function at a complete different level when it comes to physical activities. And Asgard also had stronger gravity.”

“Which means denser bone and muscle mass,” Bruce concluded. “That would explain why even though we have human beings your size, a one-on-one match would not be recommended for the poor soul.”

“So, shall we get started?” Jane turned on the terminals she had allocated to mapping. “We have the entire universe to sift through.”

Steve was halfway down the hall when he heard the all too familiar, “Aww … no!”

Then a lengthy silence, which told him both Clint and Natasha had returned.

He peeked around the corner to find Natasha checking her phone while Clint mournfully studied the gun on the table. At first glance the weapon looked fine, but Steve could see the hairline crack that threaded right down the snub barrel. He also spotted Tony at the other end of the room, cheerfully talking on the phone.

“What happened?” he asked in lieu of greeting. The familiarity of dropping right into conversation with the two spies was an indulgence Steve rarely sampled.

“Clint used it as a blunt weapon,” Natasha explained airily.

“Fuck,” Clint hissed as he turned the gun around in his grasp. “Was my favorite since Morocco.”

Steve paused to consider Clint’s statement. “Morocco was last month.”

“Yes, I know. It was my favorite gun since then,” Clint said, looking puzzled by Steve’s confusion.

“Exactly how many guns do you go through on every mission?”

“Too many,” Natasha answered succinctly on behalf of her partner. “He tends to use them as clubs when things don’t go his way. If you want a weapon to survive Hawkeye’s particular brand of usage, it has to be long range. Otherwise, he will punt the damn thing, if given half a chance.”
Steve turned to catch Clint shrug carelessly.

“What?” Clint defended himself. “A win is a win is a win.”

“Maybe you should ask Tony for a weapon that might survive more than just one assignment?” Steve asked humorously as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“Perish the thought,” Natasha deadpanned. “The last thing we need is to be beholden to Stark.”

Clint nodded. “Yeah, that’s true. Besides, anything Tony makes will be about as subtle as a disco ball. And the last thing I need is to catch attention.”

“Understood,” Steve said. “So, how’s everything else?”

Clint’s smirk turned into a genuine smile. Steve had never spoken about Clint’s family after his stay at their home, and ensured that treasured secret survived the Accords and Thanos.

“Oh, it’s going great,” Clint answered truthfully.

Natasha’s face remained serene but there was a glimmer of satisfaction that told Steve she had joined Clint when he last visited his family. Steve still couldn’t pin down what her relationship with the family was; only that she had her own bedroom and the children were familiar enough with Natasha to love her without reservation.

Not that it was any of his business. Whatever was between Clint, Natasha, and Laura, it worked beautifully. And Clint must be able to breathe easier knowing that should anything happen to him, Natasha would be more than willing to ensure his family’s continued safety.

Something Natasha had amply demonstrated by beheading Thanos with her two hands and a sword courtesy of an unfortunate guard in Thanos’ personal entourage. Steve could remember the blood rage on Natasha’s face as she somehow managed to hang onto the Titan even as he dug his huge fingers into her ribs, frantically trying to pull her off his back while she sawed through his neck.

In his dreams, Steve still heard the sound of Thanos’ head being ripped off his body and then tossed into the midst of his army, and the incredulous silence that followed. Those dreams were startling in their brutality but he would never consider them nightmares.

“There were some whispers,” Natasha began apropos to nothing, as was her habit. “About Dr. Foster, Darcy Lewis, and their imprisonment.”

Steve didn’t care how much personal information he revealed to them when his posture stiffened immediately. “What kind of whispers?”

“That the group responsible for her kidnapping was a splinter cell from AIM that cooperated with Hydra remnants.”

“Damn it,” Steve muttered. “Any details to back that up?”

Natasha shook her head. “None, but I am having my people look into the rumor. I don’t like the idea of those two cooperating with each other. I much prefer them at odds with the other’s ideology.”

“Tell me the moment you find anything,” Steve said. “Yeah, the idea of them cooperating isn’t good news for anybody.”
“We should go say hi to Thor,” Clint said, standing up. “Especially since we heard he got less-than-stellar greeting from you.”

Steve let out a barking laugh. “Gossip must be like bread and butter to you two.”

“We are spies, Captain,” Natasha reminded him. “Gossip is better than food. It’s air.”

“Well, if Bucky is still with them, tell him to get his ass out of the lab and back into his office. He still has paperwork that needs looking into.”

Clint gave an inelegant snort. “The first time I saw Barnes behind a desk I thought I had head trauma and was hallucinating things.”

“We should get him a plant as a present,” Natasha said with a Cheshire cat grin. “Maybe a cactus?”

“Something poisonous,” Clint bargained. “You know, looks fucking dangerous to be within reaching distance and even more lethal when touched.”

Steve bit back a smile as the two walked away, discussing what horrific plant they could dredge up in their next outing that would perfectly fit with Bucky’s perceived persona in the compound.

Of course knowing those two, it’d probably be delivered by having it nailed to the desk with an arrow or a dagger.

*Have to make sure it doesn’t violate the health codes,* Steve made a mental note. The last thing he wanted was to have Dr. Cho breathe down on his neck because some unlucky bastard accidentally brushed up against the present.

*Of course, there’s always the chance that Bucky might chuck it at some idiot,* but Steve thought that if his friend did, the asshole probably deserved it.

Steve was never a saint, never claimed to be one, and was more than a little pissed that the world at large thought him as such.

The amused captain caught the tender smile on Tony’s face as he waited for the lovestruck man to finish his call.

*He’s probably planning for Pepper to visit.* Steve remembered his friend’s desire for children. *Maybe I’m old fashioned but shouldn’t he marry Pepper first? Engagement is good and all, but hell, that piece of paper from City Hall is still important even in this century.*

Steve waited until Tony was ready to speak to him before asking, “How’s Pepper?”

“On her way here,” Tony answered. “Is Jane still in her lab?”

Steve caught the glint of manic curiosity in Tony’s eyes. “Yes, and probably for the foreseeable future. Why?”

Tony snapped his fingers in a jittery manner. “I’m just curious as to what she used as the power source for her Bi-Frost.”

Steve was surprised to hear his confession. “I thought you’d have figured it out by now.”

Tony’s agitation morphed into annoyance. “Not a goddamn clue. Look, I’m good at the sciences that deal with technology. Now I can go pretty damn far with that, hence, Iron Man. If need be, I can also focus on whatever needs my attention and pretty much hold up my end of the bargain.
“Jane Foster, though? She’s something else. She’s that rare, rare bird who imagines first, and it
can be something so outlandish that most people in her field with automatically dismiss it as flight
of fancy or insanity, and then have the fucking wherewithal to back it up with technology. Yes, I
know the rainbow bridge is real, but when she first started, nobody and I mean nobody believed
her. Selvig approved some of her theories, but not even he would condone all of them. It was only
after Thor hit earth that people realized she was right.

“Steve, people like her? We’d be lucky to have one every one hundred years. And when someone
like Foster does come around, there are massive upheavals both socially and politically. And the
scary thing is she’s just getting started. Because when someone like Jane Foster gets going?
They’re not going to be stopped unless someone stops them.”

“You’re worried about her,” Steve stated softly in shock. “Why?”

“Not her, just the repercussions of her success,” Tony confessed. “I’d feel a lot better if I knew
what is powering her Bi-Frost. After that, I could probably work out the rest, and make it more
palatable for the UN, because we both know they’re going to be mighty curious. And those
assholes are on our side. I don’t even want to consider what Russia and China are thinking.”

“You want me to spy for you?” Steve offered, hating himself for it but realizing it might be
necessary.

“Not at all. Just find me something, anything, that could answer my questions.”

Steve leaned back and crossed his arms across his chest. “I’m guessing you have an idea?”

“Her 'Mittens of Time','” Tony’s answer was immediate. “What the hell are those things?!”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that too,” Steve agreed reluctantly. “Asgardian thread sounds nice
and all, but it doesn’t cut much as an answer.”

“No, it doesn’t at all.”
Chapter 8

Steve watched Pepper gracefully walk across the courtyard, sparing not a single glance at anyone else save for Tony who had just noticed her arrival. But he made no movement towards Pepper, only studying his fiancée until she was within reaching distance. Only then was there a change in Tony's languid posture. Steve had seen this dance between Stark and Potts so often, it was almost cathartic to witness it now, here at Upstate New York. It felt almost like a blessing of sorts from the couple for this newest endeavor for the Avengers.

Steve continued to watch the familiar rhythm created by the two. He knew that the moment she was close enough, Tony would grab hold of her hand or arm, or one memorable occasion - a projectile weapon for Natasha, and pull her to his side until they were hip to hip. His movement was snake-fast but gentle. And the look in Tony’s eyes were so full of emotion that even in the most crowded of spaces, it felt intimate.

Years ago, Steve would have thought Tony was callous for this behavior, for forcing Pepper make her way towards him while he lounged about. Only now, after numerous hard-won lessons, did Steve realize Tony was making himself stand still in order to study Pepper, figuring out all the little nuances that would tell him whether she had a good day or bad one; whether she was annoyed with his latest escapade; and most importantly, if Pepper had finally, finally given up on him because of his unending reckless behavior.

Only so Tony could scrimp together few precious seconds to fortify himself for the inevitable confrontation chased by the pain of ultimate failure.

It was fucking tragic was what it was, Steve concluded. A man with that much wealth, power, and influence, lived in perpetual fear that what he wanted most would be taken away from him because of his personal inadequacies.

What was remarkably hopeful in this tragic scenario was how Pepper knew exactly what Tony was doing and regulated her behavior as to not cause any alarm. She was the only one as far as Steve knew who could play Tony like this. And the only person Tony would allow, as he hated being made a fool.

Pepper rested her head on Tony’s shoulder before engaging in the conversation with Betty Ross. Her comment must have been funny because the researcher threw her head back and revealed her throaty laughter to everyone within earshot. Tony’s response was to close his eyes before shaking his head in mock despair, but there was also a chagrin smile on his face as Pepper kept talking.

Steve could listen in on them if he gave an effort, but they deserved their privacy, and something told him that he’d be privy to it soon enough.

He didn’t see Pepper's bright gaze follow him as he left the quad.

Only after she was sure Captain Rogers could not eavesdrop, did Pepper ask Tony, “So, what has grabbed your interest this time?”

Tony placed a hand on his chest. “Me? Nothing, I assure you. I’m here purely out the goodness of my heart.”

Betty looked at the two and raised her hands in surrender. “I’ve had conversations like this. So I’m smart enough to know this is where I bow out.”
With that wise summation, Dr. Ross continued her trip to the cafeteria to get her very late, late lunch now well into teatime.

Tony looked down at Pepper. “So, I may have hit a snag.”

“Something Legal needs to deal with?”

Tony shook his head. “No, not at all. It’s just that Foster isn’t sharing her toys.”

Pepper silently considered his words and then, with dismay, she whispered, “Tony, no.”

“Tony, yes!” he shot back and wiggled his eyebrows.

“No, we talked about this, and it’s even in her contract. She has sole rights to her work and any inventions resulting from it.”

“I’m not going to steal them, I swear. And if anything she ‘borrowed’ mine.”

“Borrowed?”

“Foster made this … mitten/gauntlet thingy that basically controls her Bi-Frost. And it looks like the prototypes I made for the first Iron Man suit in Malibu. God, was that over a decade ago?”

“Not computers? Software, perhaps?”

“Well, that too,” Tony admitted reluctantly. “But something tells me those little mittens are the key.”

“Are you saying a pair of LL Bean’s finest controls the Einstein-Rosen Bridge?” Pepper looked unconvinced. “Or since they have to be sturdy enough to survive interplanetary travel: Filson-made, perhaps?”

“Yes.”

“Tony, are you sure about this?”

“I swear I saw them at work. And Lewis, who is by the way Foster’s only assistant, called them ‘Mittens of Time.’” Tony even air quoted the last three words.

Pepper silently mouthed the description. “So, what do you plan to do with them if you get your hands on them? Try them on for size? I’d imagine your hands might be a bit too large for those.”

Tony gave her a flat look. “No, I just want to know what tech it is, because it’s not from around here.”

“You’re afraid it’s alien tech.”

“Well, yeah. And let’s face it; besides Thor, we’re batting 0 for 3 when it comes to our friendly extraterrestrial neighbors. Seriously, the X-Files got it more right than wrong.”

“And where would she have gotten this alien tech if not for Thor?”

“She probably did. Look,” Tony came even closer until Pepper was completely engulfed in his embrace. “I just want to make sure whatever she’s doing – it’s not going to come back and bite us in the ass.”
Pepper looked at him with such tenderness, Tony wanted to ditch the entire Foster mess and drag her to the nearest Bed and Breakfast that had decent food along with a really huge clawfoot tub since there was no way in hell he was going near the facility’s offering (which he paid for and personally designed, damn it) while the Asgardians were still around.

“All right then,” Pepper said. “Let’s see what I can do about these egregious mittens.”

“Wait, no, that’s not what I meant.”

Before Tony could protest any further, Pepper threw a playful wink over her shoulder as she briskly made her way straight to the labs.

“Damn it,” Tony hissed. He wanted to follow her, but learned from previous occasions that he’d fuck it up even more if he tried to get in Pepper’s way.

Instead, he went after Steve. After a quick trip to the gym, the armory, Tony finally located him in his office with Barnes. The former assassin’s presence was almost enough for Tony to back off, but the thought of Pepper becoming involved in their little covert agenda was enough for him to grit his teeth and enter the room.

Barnes looked up at him owlishly. “Um … Tony, hey.”

Steve was equally taken back by his presence in the office. “What’s wrong?”

Tony really wanted to be insulted by the fact that Steve just assumed something went to hell, but unfortunately, he was probably correct. More often than Tony liked if he actually thought about it.

“Pepper knows about the mittens.”

Barnes’ look of confusion grew exponentially, and in any other occasion Tony would have been absolutely gleeful that he was the cause, but not right now. Not when it came to Pepper.

“What?” Steve asked, suddenly becoming the authoritative Captain America that irked Tony so much. “What did you tell her?”

“Not much, but Pepper knows that I’m worried about Foster’s tech. And that was more than enough to get her going.”

Barnes’ face lost its confusion and his gaze sharpened enough to make Tony take a deep breath.

“What are you two brainiacs exactly up to?” he asked darkly.

Steve managed to look contrite. “We’re concerned about the technology Jane used to create her Bi-Frost.”

“Why are we worried about that?” Bucky asked. “That shit weighs a fuckton, and it can’t even work without the servers, which weigh even more. Nobody’s going to walk away with the tech without declaring war.”

“None of them are the controls,” Tony said. “Those goddamn mittens are what makes the Bi-Frost possible.”

“Are you serious?” Bucky asked, his gaze pinged between Steve and Tony. “You’re saying homemade woolen goods are making wormhole travel possible.”

“To put it succinctly: yes,” Tony answered.
“Steve, are you on board with this brand of crazy?” Bucky asked, wide-eyed.

“I hinted at Bruce while he was working with Betty earlier this morning,” Steve said. “And his knowledge was severely limited because Asgardian technology is basically magic to us. And that’s all I’ve got. So, I…”

“Should have asked Dr. Foster the moment you had questions,” Pepper said from the doorway, looking amused and irritated with just an arch of a brow and compressed lips. A look she had perfected over years of relationship with Tony Stark.

She then stepped aside and allowed the Asgardian, Ganla, and Peter into the office.

“Gentlemen, this is Master Ganla and you all know Peter. They’ll get you up to date on those pesky mittens.”

With that single bomb she left them.

For a teenager, Peter was doing a damn good job looking like a disappointed and concerned father who’d discovered his children behaving badly during Christmas Eve mass.

“You could’ve just asked,” he muttered as he placed the mittens in question on Steve’s desk.

Tony covered his eyes with his right hand. “Well, fuck.”

Bucky looked away in order not to burst out laughing as he took in Steve’s gobsmacked expression.

“I second that,” Steve finally said, trying to compose himself.

“You know Jane wasn’t keeping it a secret from you guys,” Peter continued. “She thought Mr. Stark would’ve accessed the database, or just ask her if he had questions.”

“So, she knows I’ve been … umm … curious?” Tony asked.

“Well, yeah,” Peter said. “I had to sign out for these: they’re prototypes.”

Steve looked at them. They were too small for his hands, and from a light glance, they looked like perfectly fine pair of woolen mittens. Until you looked closer, then the silver threads became noticeable. Which still wasn’t something worthy of note, as metallic threads were widely available. Hell, Amazon sold them.

Ganla picked them up and only then the mittens started throwing off weak light, but the display was surprising enough to have the human contingent gasp in surprise.

“It really is magical,” Peter said.

“Magic is science we don’t understand yet,” Steve automatically countered.

“Exactly,” Ganla said, looking fondly at the mittens in his hands. “This is Frigga’s work, though I know it was Dr. Foster who had created them.”

“Frigga?” Tony asked, “As in Queen Frigga?”

Ganla nodded. “Yes, she was one of our greatest … weaver? No, that word is insufficient. Creator and builder are closer to the truth.”

Tony’s gaze sharpened. “So, this is your technology.”
Ganla nodded. “Yes, our technological advancement has or had progressed so far, and has become so divergent from Midgard’s that, to you, it would look like magic. Queen Frigga was able to erect walls that were stronger than any stone-made, and cloth that worked like armor with what she had woven in her many looms.”

Ganla handed the mittens to Steve who cautiously thumbed their soft yarn, and was left disappointed to feel nothing special. The Asgardian’s smile was gentle and knowing as he took them back. The mittens began to throw off light once more.

“That was her greatest accomplishment, Captain. To make the most usual objects unusual. To imbibe the common with such power and yet have the thing retain its common traits. And it looks like she had taught Dr. Foster a great deal in the time the Midgardian was in Asgard.”

“Frigga was the goddess of home and marriage,” Bucky said without prompting. “Doesn’t that mean her art was relegated to those fields?”

Ganla looked at Bucky with humor dancing in his eyes. “Ah, but think, James of Barnes hold. What is exactly the art of home and hearth? Should a wife not worry about her warrior husband’s health and welfare continuously? Would that not include his armor? His weapons? The very breastplate that shields his loving heart? Or even the helmet that protects his noble head?

“Queen Frigga knew those divisions in Asgardian Society and wove her intelligence through them until her threads quietly throttled the many idiocies that marred the beautiful tapestry of Asgardian life. It took her thousands of years, mind you, but she did it. Little wonder Odin faded away so quickly after her death. And that Asgard had fallen, too, soon after it had buried its greatest queen.

“It was Odin who had ushered Asgard into its golden age, but it was Queen Frigga who had built its burnished halls and mended its borders by ensuring fair trade after Odin had ceased his bloody reign. And it was she who continued to love Loki when no one else did. I personally believe that was her last and greatest magic. It also goes a long way in explaining why Loki died trying to protect Thor, who has more than a passing resemblance to his mother. Odin may have forgiven Loki in the end, but Frigga never needed to as she had not ceased to love her wayward son.”

“Loki really did want Malekith dead, then,” Tony supplied. “It wasn’t for show.”

“Oh, yes. The creature murdered the only one who had kept faith with him throughout his entire life in Asgard. Though Loki may have loath to admit; Queen Frigga was why he could not bear to see Asgard fall. And as twisted as his reasoning was, Prince Loki wanted only what he thought was best for the kingdom she had helped to create.”

“So, where does Jane come in all this?” Steve asked, trying to work out the multi-faceted political ramifications of Jane’s tech and her personal relationship to Asgardians.

“I was not privy to the bond between the Midgardian and our queen, as I was sent to Vanaheim to help the people there build their defenses. But their relationship was more than congenial by all reports. It was while protecting Dr. Foster that Queen Frigga was murdered.”

It wasn’t only Steve’s gaze that sharpened when Ganla divulged that fact. “What did you say?”

“You did not know?”

Tony looked around the room. “Anyone else shocked ‘cause I sure as hell am.”

Bucky readily confessed, “I had no idea.”
Peter mutely shook his head.

“Malekith and his soldiers invaded the palace in the hopes of kidnapping Dr. Foster,” Ganla explained in a mournful tone. “Queen Frigga was with her at the time, and managed to hold back the dark elves until the palace guards arrived. Unfortunately, she had received a mortal blow. Odin was beyond consolation and it took Thor some time to convince Allfather to let go of her body.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky whispered. “And Thor?”

“He was there, too,” Ganla answered. “Little wonder then he sought Loki’s help in annihilating the ones responsible for his mother’s death, even though the younger prince was imprisoned. King Thor was more than desperate, he was half mad with grief.”

Steve felt a trickle of fear run down his back as he once again considered what Thor would do if Jane’s endeavor failed. He was too cowardly to even touch the sticky question of what his reaction would be.

“What’s the power source, then?” Tony asked, his interest still unabated even though there were plenty of explanations given. “What about everything else?”

Ganla smiled. “Think about what I just said. And then think about Dr. Foster’s technology responsible for her Bi-Frost.”

It was Steve who got it first. He barked out a laugh. “Holy shit.”

Ganla’s grin was mischievous and genuine. “Exactly, women’s magic, Captain.”

“What? What am I missing?” Tony asked even as Peter began laughing along with the Captain.

“Trick of hand, Tony,” Steve answered. “The fucking turbine, the doodads, all of it: they’re just for show. It was a spectacle designed to make others think twice before interfering.”

“Not the rods,” Peter contradicted. “They’re actually necessary and some of the programs, too. And I think the patterns on the ground have something to help with bi-location which the bridge needs like the landing lights at the airport. But the rest? It’s just special effects.”

Tony collapsed onto a chair. “I’m going to strangle that woman, and then give her a fucking raise because, wow, I was not expecting that.”

Bucky snorted unceremoniously. “I honestly thought that the compound would blow up with the shit they’ve been using. Christ Almighty, what the actual fucking hell.”

“She was protecting you,” Ganla said. “She wanted to make sure that any unfriendly eyes and ears think twice before knocking at your gates, especially if they coveted her creation.”

“So, she made massive fucking doohickeys to scare the everloving daylights out of our enemies,” Tony concluded. “Make it look big, impressive, and deadly as possible to convince them to think twice.”

“Make it look like it would rip holes in time and space continuum if even nudged the wrong way,” Peter added. “Think about it. Would AIM or HYDRA have the time to crawl through zettabytes worth of data every time the Bi-Frost is used? It would take them decades.”

“Best kind of hearth magic, my friends,” Ganla said, “is the kind that does no damage to the hearth. And what women count as hearth is what women decide it to be. If you are wise, best to let her judge freely.”

“Remind me never to play cards with her,” Tony concluded. “Her poker face has to be awesome.”

“Kinda cool, right?” Peter asked the room.

“More than cool,” Bucky said, “As Darcy would put it: Awesome.”

For the first time Peter directly met Bucky’s eyes. “Yep, awesome.”

Steve laughed. He couldn’t help it. He just rested his head on his hands and laughed until tears streamed down his face.

“You okay there, buddy?” Tony asked, his voice strangled with worry.

Steve flapped a hand and just kept on laughing.

“Um, should we get Dr. Banner?” Peter whispered to no one in particular.

“Nah, let him have this, he needs it,” Bucky said. “It’s either this or destroy every workout gear for hundred miles around. Besides, the idiot just realized his dame got one over him and just about everyone else in the Compound without breaking a sweat.”

Steve made a wheezing noise as he wiped tears from his face. “Christ, all we had to do was ask. That’s all, and she would’ve told us. Hell, she’d probably have demonstrated, maybe even given us handouts just to make sure we got everything right. And none of us did.

"Fuck, how in hell did we get it so wrong?"

“Sometimes working for secret organizations can bite back real hard,” Bucky explained. “Everything is covert, black bag, eyes only. Then, wham, we meet someone who actually knows the difference between a secret and covert op. And it’s us who have to figure out what falls where.”

Tony absently picked up a pen and began twirling it around his fingers. “I owe Pep so many Manolos, she’s going to need a completely new closet system for them.”

Steve burst out laughing again at the thought of Tony presenting truckload after truckload of Pepper’s favorite shoes as a form of apology.

It was Peter who hesitantly asked, “Um … how about a wedding instead? I mean you guys have been together forever and I’m hearing babies are in the near future.”

Tony looked at Peter for a hard moment. “Kid, we’re married.”

That announcement immediately silenced the entire room.


Tony looked around. “You guys didn’t know? FRIDAY didn't tell you?”

“Know that one of the richest and most powerful men on this planet got hitched? No!” Steve answered for his incredulous friends. This would be the second wedding he'd been left out, so Steve was also feeling a little hurt by the exclusion.
“What the hell?” Tony was genuinely taken back by the confusion around the room. “I am not going to get Pep pregnant without making sure she and the tadpole have full protection of the law. My money can do a lot, but the U.S. government better pull their goddamn weight when it comes to my family.”

“When did you get married, Tony?” Steve asked, genuinely curious by the news. “And congrads, by the way. Look, Bucky is completely speechless, so you win an award of some sort.”

Tony’s smile was broad. “Two days after she came back from wherever the hell that purple nutsack sent her. We decided right then that there was no point in waiting. Happy was driving us and he demanded he’d be a witness after all we put him through. He would’ve had a fit and keeled over from a heart attack if we didn’t say yes.”

“Where did you get hitched? Was it Paris or Kyoto? She likes that city, doesn’t she?” Steve asked, picturing the madcap results from his friend’s desperate decision.

“No, we went to Reno.”

“Oh my God,” Peter said, eyes wide in abject dismay. “You chose Reno? Seriously? Like Queens would’ve been better. Maybe Staten Island!”

“Fuck no,” Bucky said. “No way in hell is that an improvement!”

“Wow, and we should listen to you ‘cause?” Peter argued without hesitation, making it obvious that whatever qualms he had about Bucky were now well and truly gone. “Besides, you’re from Brooklyn so your opinion is pretty much invalid here!”

“Is this … normal?” Ganla finally asked Steve as he studied his human counterparts. “And, also, a place called Queens seem like an appropriate place to get wed.”

Steve had to fight back another hysterical laugh. It took him a while as he watched Bucky and Peter continued to throw stink eye at each other, reminding Steve that Shakespeare’s Fair Verona had nothing on the Five Boroughs’ legendary hatred of each other.

“It’s more like friendly neighborhood competition between five different cities situated right next to each other,” Steve lied easily. Then paused to consider before firmly stating, “But Staten Island is a hellhole so getting married there is a definite no-no.”

“Look, Happy knew someone in Reno who could arrange something quiet but completely legal,” Tony explained. “And that’s all we wanted.”

“So, where’s the stone?” Bucky asked, leaning forward in a predatory manner. “I would’ve thought you’d stamp that with a diamond roughly the size of Pepper’s head.”

“Not her head,” Tony said with an equally predatory smile. “And where she put it is none of your fucking business.”

“Aaaaaaanmmmnddd we’re back to awkward,” Peter announced. “Okay, so unless I want more trauma, I am going to take these and go back to the labs. Master Ganla, please follow me, and I will introduce you to Dr. Betty Ross, someone who would be very interested in your Asgardian medicine.”

Tony dropped the staring contest he had with Bucky and turned to Peter. “Did you say medicine?”

Peter leaned back, as if Tony’s steely gaze was putting physical pressure on his body. “Um, yeah?”
“Let’s walk, and you can keep talking, Spidey.”

As the three walked away, Steve could hear Ganla ask,

“Why do you keep calling Peter of the Parkers an arachnid? Also, is he related to that woman whom you addressed as the Black Widow?”

Peter’s sputtering was loud and vociferous.

“We’re dipshits,” Bucky concluded. “I could’ve asked Darcy and we could’ve avoided this entire mess.”

“Christ, it didn’t dawn on me to even ask Jane,” Steve confessed. “I was afraid she’d lock me out or worse, tell me I’m not cleared for the intel.”

“How in hell is that possible?”

“I don’t run the compound,” Steve explained. “Coulson does, even though he’s not here. After Thanos, it became clear that I head the Avengers Initiative and only the Initiative. There is an overlap, of course, but the SHIELD and the Avengers have to be completely separate if we are to work properly.”

“It’s because of me, isn’t it?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. The reason is that the UN would be more receptive to us jetting all over international air space if there was an independent oversight. The same goes for SHIELD, too. And after the fallout from the Hydra revelation and Thanos, I wouldn’t be surprised if SHIELD creates a branch that just oversees off-planet threats.

“Before you ask, I honestly have no any idea how to deal with that much bureaucratic bullshit.”

Bucky stared at the doorway with a slight grin. “Remember when we were sitting in front of my stoop and talking about all the cool future fantasy stories we read about? Did we ever think we would actually use weapons built by alien civilizations? So we could fight evil alien overlords?

“There are times I have to stop and think about it ’cause it seems like something right out of Flash Gordon?”

Steve chuckled, his eyes crinkling in good humor. “Hell, no. I would’ve been grateful if I could go through a goddamn day without ending up flat on my back, fighting to get air into my lungs.”

“Still, fighting space aliens and having gorgeous, smart dames fall into our arms,” Bucky mused. “Not a bad way to end a day, yeah?”

“Yeah, not bad at all,” Steve agreed amiably.

“You also realize those gorgeous dames are going to tan our hides when they see us, right?”

“Okay, that is bad.”

“Thank God the fucking paperwork for vacation time is like nineteen reams long. It’s going to take me hours to get it all filled out.”

“Vacation? When are you going on vacation?” Steve asked, but all he got was a Sphinx-like smile from his friend. “Bucky? What are you … answer my goddamn question. What vacation?”
“All I can say is; if you’re not filling out the paperwork, sucks to be you, Buddy.”

“What vacation?!” Steve repeated.

Bucky’s only answer was to hum a truly lively version of Satchmo’s *When the Saints Go Marching In.*
Bucky hated entering Steve’s private suite. Their shared spaces were monochromatic and furnished comfortably, if sparsely. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for their personal set of rooms.

When Bucky had first moved into the Compound, he was given an extraordinarily generous allowance to decorate his private suite. That initial surprise was quickly overwhelmed by the fact that the generous amount turned out to be necessary when he went online and saw the prices on the furniture pieces that caught his eye.

Still absorbing the sticker shock of the 21st century, as his mentality was firmly planted in the Great Depression Era, Bucky quickly backpedaled and went to websites that sold handmade furniture instead. The prices were still steep but his conscience was assuaged by the idea that he was supporting the small shop economy.

Of course, being located in Upstate New York, Bucky did splurge and purchase a Stickley bedroom set. He may not have Steve’s eye for art, but Bucky wasn’t half bad at appreciating it. When he was young and wasn’t actively dragging Steve behind him in order to escape another pummeling, Bucky would accompany Steve to the library and read over his friend’s shoulders about art periods and their influences. So, he learned to appreciate the Mission Style in the Arts and Crafts Movement while Steve was more focused on Modernism that was sweeping the globe.

Which all translated to a rather nostalgic excuse to splurge on a bed that was plenty comfortable even with his frame.

The Stickley blanket chest had been hilariously refitted to house some of his most precious weapons. A fact that Steve had relentlessly teased him about even as he watched Bucky tackle the carpentry necessary for the modifications.

Unfortunately for Steve, he had to endure the fact that his personal space came already furnished. And it was pretty much as horrific as he had feared when he first heard about the decision.

His bedroom and study looked like Mount Rushmore had thrown up in them, and that meant all four heads contributed to the patriotic upchuck that was Steve’s suite.

“The only thing missing is a fucking eagle roosting by the window,” was Steve’s surly description as he took in the blue and white walls, along with gigantic crimson bedspread on the California king. It had an astonishingly intricate design titled ‘Broken Star pattern’, all hand-stitched by the women of an Amish community in western Pennsylvania. The furniture was solid oak, courtesy of the men from same community, so Steve couldn’t cheerfully set the goddamn room on fire and start over.

And he was frankly too lazy to repaint the walls.

However, the poster collection from Steve’s Hollywood days were relocated to a firing range after Steve found out they were reproductions and not originals. The only other contraption that survived his purge was the weapons’ locker, which had been tethered into the goddamn load-bearing wall. All of which made it impossible for Steve to remove it without actually damaging the building structure.

Bucky humorously argued that Steve should be glad Stark had specifically created a protective unit where he could safely store his world-renown shield.
Steve quickly pointed out that the fucking thing was actually a copy of a display case in the Met where the replica of the shield was permanently featured. Which made him feel like he was sleeping in a goddamn museum instead of his own bedroom. And to validate his argument, Bucky had often found Steve snoring like a busted carburetor on their couch, passed out from the day’s work.

Bucky leaned on the doorframe as he watched Steve flip through his plaid shirts, khakis, jeans, and t-shirts, which Steve insisted on hanging instead of folding them into the dresser. Even his workout clothing was neatly stacked on the closet floor alongside his shoes.

Bucky didn’t have to ask why his friend did this, as he did the same to a lesser scale. The reason being their dressers were stuffed full of little tchotchkes they couldn’t stand to throw away: a complete contrast to the other Avengers’ practices.

Pepper and Tony’s personal set of rooms in the facility were tastefully decorated with their drawers and cupboards standing nearly empty. And their bookshelves weren’t overflowing either with catalogs and magazines like Steve’s. But they could afford to do that because they were wealthy, and grew up in a prosperous household. That meant they could throw away anything they wanted to discard, and if necessary, purchase them again when needed.

Bucky and Steve grew up barely above the poverty line, and throwing away things seemed like a waste, no matter how reasonable. So, Steve's desk drawers had stacks of papers he planned to reuse because the printout was one-sided, not to mention paperclips and pens he unconsciously took after meetings. Spent USBs from sitreps were routinely reformatted. Even unused shoelaces were neatly bundled and put away alongside empty jam jars that Steve used when he painted. And why would any reasonable person waste money buying palettes when broken clipboards could do just as good a job?

Bucky’s drive wasn’t so pronounced as his innate desire to hoard had lessened in the two years he’d lived in Wakanda. Since that particular lifestyle forced him to invest in few possessions. And yet he had dozens of sample cologne strips he had ripped out of fashion magazines shoved carelessly inside a bathroom drawer.

“You know, you’re going to have to do something about this room if you want company,” Bucky said conversationally, mentally shaking himself free from his thoughts. “Foster’s got nerve, but not even she could deflower the Captain of America’s Greatest Generation in this FUBAR of a room.”

He turned to Steve and found the man at complete standstill.

“Steve?” Bucky asked, now concerned by the distant look in his friend’s eyes.

“Awww fuck,” Steve muttered and plunked onto his bed, his face buried in the glorious Amish bedspread. “Goddamn it, I didn’t even think that far.”

Bucky’s eyes bugged out. “Are you really that brain dead? You seriously did not consider having a fuckation the moment she’s better?”

Steve raised his head and looked at him. “A what?”

“Fuckation,” Bucky repeated. “That’s what Clint calls it. Or what Laura calls it. He says every time they have one, boom, there’s a kid.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “No, I was not planning a fuckation with Jane after all this blows over. She’s a classy dame. Needs to be wooed properly.”
“Christ, you’re hopeless. Jane is classy, yes. But you’re a jackass, so it all balances out. What? You’re going to take her to Ritz or something? Where they serve tea and expect you to wear black tie for dinner?”

“The Point on Saranac Lake was what I was aiming for,” Steve answered softly.

Bucky was completely stunned by his friend’s immediate answer. Only then did he belatedly realize this idea was a fixation for Steve, not a passing fancy.

“What’s up with you, Buddy?”

It took Steve a while to answer his friend. But when he began speaking, there was a deluge of words.

“I never had a chance to woo a woman properly, you know? With Peggy – there was the war. With Sharon – there was SHIELD and HYDRA, and we shared too much of the past and not enough with our present. Jane is the first woman who likes Steve Rogers. And familiar with all of this and not bat an eye at any of it.

“I had respectable amount of first dates, so I’m not complaining about that. And a handful of second ones. But…” here, Steve faded away and pointed to his shield proudly on display with recessed lighting and a tricked-out security system that only a handful of people knew how to access, thanks to Tony.

“Steve Rogers just want to take his girl out dancing, to a movie, and a nice restaurant,” Steve continued, sounding so young, like in his pre-serum days. “Step out sharp and with money in my pocket to treat my girl right. Buy her flowers; take a cab and not the subway so her pretty shoes wouldn’t get dirty. And her hair won’t get messy because of the wind or the rain.

“I never done that, Bucky. Never.”

For a moment Bucky couldn’t say anything as his throat closed up and there was a hot burn behind his eyes. He had completely forgotten, when they were young women didn’t give Steve much of a glance, and ones that did: they wanted to baby him more than anything. And Steve had too much of pride to allow that. Not that Bucky could blame him; being so poor, pride was pretty much the only thing they had on the regular.

“When I first saw her, I remembered Gene Tierney from Laura,” Steve recollected wistfully. “Like she stepped right out of the silver screen, all classy and beautiful without being dolled up to the nines. Sharp as a tack, and not afraid to show it but never mean about it, especially to a guy who could only afford art school few months out of the year.

“I know Jane isn’t some fragile doll, and doesn’t care about any of that … but just for a moment, I thought what it would be like to have Park Avenue swing by my place. And stay not because I’m Captain America, but because I’m Steve Rogers.”

“I hate to break it to you, but Jane has bigger collection of plaid shirts than you.”

Steve laughed softly. “Yeah, I know, jackass. But you can see it when she moves. It’s like she’s naturally graceful and what’s that word? Charisma, that’s it. She has that by the ton. Thor wanted her to become his queen, Bucky. And if Asgard didn’t fall, I think he would’ve tried to convince her to give him another chance. Asgard, Bucky. He would’ve lain down Asgard at her feet.

“Let’s face it, Bucky. Women like that? I didn’t exist in their world until the serum. And after – well, let’s just go with full-blown disappointment from my corner and theirs too, if I’m being
honest. So, let’s just leave it at that.”

Bucky sat next to Steve and nudged his knee. “You have a decent suit, then? And shoes, can’t forget the shoes, Stevie.”

Steve grinned openly at the old nickname. “Yeah, I saved a suit and a pair of shoes. And I never worn them to any Captain America meet and greets or charity functions. Pepper told me I look pretty sharp all dressed up in them, so I know Jane’s going to like how I look.”

“Not NYC though? Take on those bright lights big city style?”

Steve shook his head. “Nah, gonna keep it low-key but classy. Just like Jane.”

“So, that’s a firm no on the fuckation?”

“For cryin’ out loud! Look, do I want sex? Yes, no shit, Sherlock. But I refuse to make it a fuckation, okay? If you and Darcy want that, go right ahead. Just stay out of my bed and give me a warning. That’s all I ask.”

“Remind me to give you a copy of my vacation schedule.”

“What are you going on about? Wait a minute … hey, asshole, I live here too!”

Bucky bolted out of the apartment before Steve could tackle him.

Bucky had to run around the compound twice before losing Steve. But the chase had turned out to be fortunate disaster as he found the perfect weapon to use in order to beg forgiveness from Darcy.

So, more than a few were privileged to witness the Winter Soldier cradle a rather sad looking clump of bluebells in his grasp as he made his way to the labs.

Darcy didn’t look too charmed by the sight, but Bucky could see the twinkle in her eyes as she took in his sad state. The big eyes, the soft pout, and the well-defined muscles under the sweaty t-shirt (thanks to Steve), not to mention the limp bluebells, all contributed to chip away at her anger.

“What happened to you?” Darcy finally asked.

“Steve,” was the simple answer. “Not happy with me.”

“Did you deserve it?”

“Nope,” Bucky answered. “He’s just got the flagpole stuck so high up his ass, I’m pretty sure it’s going to take a neurosurgeon to get it out of him.”

Darcy took the bluebells and put them in a beaker. “You could’ve asked.”

Bucky blew out a frustrated breath. “I know. Hell, we all know. Now. But…”

“But?” Darcy prompted. “I’m gonna need an explanation, Bucky.”

“All this,” Bucky said, motioning around him. “This stuff is so out of my league, and Steve’s, that we feel threatened by them.”

“Dude, half this shit has duct tape all over it.”
Bucky’s laugh was hard and grating. “Yeah, but it’s something we can’t even begin to imagine. And ... well, men like me? We’ve been ingrained to believe that what we don’t know can very well kill us.”

“Personally, I wasn’t so sure I could understand it, even if Jane did explain it to me,” Steve added as he stepped into the lab. He then thumped Bucky on the back of the head before continuing. “And I wasn’t sure I had high enough clearance to get an explanation, to begin with.”

“You still could’ve asked,” Jane sniped as she stepped out from behind the bank of servers she had taken refuge. “I’m a teacher, and a damn good one. I would’ve found a way around any SHIELD mandates.”

“It’s kind of our specialty,” Darcy added. “SHIELD screwed us over big time when Thor first came to earth.”

“Really?” Steve asked; eyes alight with avid interest. “Didn’t hear that one, did we, Bucky?”

Darcy let out a huff of frustration. “Of course they wouldn’t tell you any of that.”

“They stole all my research right after Thor landed in New Mexico,” Jane continued. “Came up to our office and took everything. They even stole my notebook.”

“And my iPod,” Darcy added darkly. “Hell, they pawed through my underwear drawer, which was just horrific from beginning to end.”

“Is that why you called them jack-booted thugs?” Bucky asked.

Darcy nodded. “Yeah. Agent Agent was okay. He was all bureaucratic blah blah blah, which is his default state, by the way. But he didn’t get off on it. There were others who did and boy, was that fucking nauseating to watch.”

“HYDRA recruited, probably,” Steve offered.

“Hopefully,” Bucky added, wincing at the thought of STRIKE team members and their shared mentality when it came to women.

Jane shuddered. “Just thinking about that makes me want to run and hide. Having Nazis go through my research. Thank God I didn’t get too far back then.”

“Is that why you joined us?” Steve asked. “I never got the full details from Coulson or anybody about your reasons for joining the Initiative.”

_Especially since you and Thor ended it after the third time you got dragged into an intergalactic brawl, went unspoken._

“We signed up before the kidnapping,” Jane answered. “Because we realized that opening the Bi-Frost without having proper security for us and the travelers was just too dangerous for everyone. Hallstatt only confirmed it.”

Steve took a deep breath and decided to man up. “It’s my fault so don’t go laying it out on Bucky. Tony told me about his confusion with your Bi-Frost, and that got me nervous. So, it was me who decided that we needed to work around you guys in order to get the information.”

The two women wordlessly stared at Steve for so long he started to squirm.
“Wow, I could almost see the amber waves of grain,” Darcy finally muttered, looking amazed by Steve’s speech. “I think I heard an eagle cry in the background, too.”

“That’s just brilliant,” Jane said. “Are you always like this?”

Bucky dropped his head and chuckled helplessly while Steve asked,

“What?”

“It’s something else, isn’t it?” Bucky offered, grinning. “And it ain’t some PSA bullshit either. That’s Steve Rogers for ya.”

“Erskine really did hit the jackpot with you, didn’t he?” Jane said, admiration evident in her tone. “My goodness.”

“Would someone like to clue me in?” Steve asked, looking around the room.

“You were a chump, but we forgive you,” Darcy answered, putting Steve out of his misery.

“You get one get-out-of-jail card,” Jane supplied when Steve turned his blues on her. “But just one. After that, there’s a small and drafty doghouse that I’ve used before. Just ask Thor.”

Steve let out a gusty sigh. “Okay, considering how big a fuck-up I made, I’ll take it.”

“So, wanna show us what the hell is in that turbine?” Bucky asked, pointing at the monstrosity. “That one stole the show.”

“Oh, I made it that way,” Jane answered. “I figured I needed something to help me while attracting attention away from the other components of the Bi-Frost.”

Steve looked at Jane with admiration and exasperation. “So, it is necessary for the Bi-Frost, then?”

“Yes, but I could jigsaw something much smaller to do the job.”

“It’s awesome, c’mon.” Darcy grabbed Bucky by his robotic arm and dragged him towards the machine.

Jane pulled out a screwdriver and then poked it between slats. There was an audible click and the face of the turbine came away from the body like a door. Steve was surprised to see Jane easily push it wide open even though it towered over her by at least twenty feet. It took only a moment before they were able to see the innards of the machine.

“What’s that?” Bucky pointed at something that had speakers attached but he couldn’t figure out the mid-section of the contraption.

“A boombox,” Jane answered. “It was a favorite way to play music during the eighties and the nineties until the digital age fully took over.”

“Janey also loves the movie Say Anything,” Darcy added. “So when Erik was going to throw it away, Janey grabbed it.”

“Is that a car battery?” Steve asked, leaning in.

“Yep, it feeds the rest of the speakers,” Darcy said, pointing out the other dozen speakers inserted in a position like a clock face.
“So this machine plays music?” Bucky was confused.

“No, the boombox plays certain type of white noise,” Jane answered. “The frequency is by no means clean, but the strength of the noise is what is necessary to excite the Heimdall particles enough for them to start circulating.

“And when the Heimdall particles are excited enough they generate energy. We have to be careful when that happens. To control the particles in that state is a very delicate process.”

Jane then pointed at a stack of machines. “Then the gravity decelerators become live.”

“What about the white sticks?” Bucky asked. “What do they do?”

“They are like lightning rods,” Jane explained. “They draw some energy from the atmosphere, but in the process they also send a beacon to the other site.”

“So, when you add that with the symbols on the ground, boom!” Darcy finished for Jane.

“You have built a bridge,” Jane said. She then looked around and ripped out a page from a notepad. She then drew two points on the paper and looked at the men. “Show me the shortest distance between these two points.”

Bucky hand drew a straight line.

Jane then took the paper, folded it in half and until the two points were side by side. She then punched a hole through the overlapping points with her pen. “This is the Bi-Frost I’ve created.”

Steve looked at the paper and the pen display. “How much energy does that take?”

“A great deal but nowhere near the level that the Asgardian Bi-Frost required,” Jane answered. “Their’s was powerful enough that they could manipulate it at will. The Asgardians could land on top of the White House and we couldn’t stop them.”

“For us, we need the right atmospheric conditions and a proper landing site. I also ended up harnessing some of the alien tech that SHIELD had offered years ago.”

Steve took a deep breath. “So, SHIELD is still using alien tech.”

Jane looked at him sharply. “Yes, they’ve been gathering them from New York. I know they have some from the Wakanda battles, too.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “They’ll never learn, will they?”

“Probably not,” Jane said. “But just because they have it does not mean they understand it, or even how to harness it, especially when it comes to Bi-Frost technology.”

Darcy made a rude noise and hummed, “And they’re never ever gonna get it together, either.”

Jane tried to choke down a giggle but failed miserably.

Steve narrowed his eyes in a thoughtful gaze. “Jane, what did you do?”

She looked shifty and yet so very satisfied.

“Dr. Foster?” Steve asked again. “Doll, what did you do to SHIELD?”
“SHIELD let me have some of the energy orbs that the Chitauri used,” Jane answered reluctantly. “I thought it was nice of them. I later discovered they had hacked into my servers in Culver to find out what I was doing with their so-called donations.”

“You clever girl,” Steve said with a shit-eating grin. “Tell me you didn’t.”

“Nothing bad,” Jane said hurriedly. “Just they’re going to be chasing their tail for a while. As far as they know, the orbs are inductive power source that requires a chill factor of -32 Celsius in order to expand energy.”

“That sounds like science, so I have no idea if it’s a valid one or not,” Steve said.

“First off, the those glowing orb thingies aren’t inductive at all,” Darcy supplied, her smile cracking wide on her face. “Second, you put an energy source in negative temp and the thing is going to cool down completely, with no energy output.”

“Wouldn’t they have thought that?” Steve asked, wondering exactly how smart the SHIELD research division was. He’d thought their brain trust would realize that if you put a fucking car battery into glacial ice, it’d die sooner than later.

“Ahh, but you see we’re also talking about Heimdall particles,” Jane said, her smile matching Darcy’s. “In order for them to work at optimum, they need zero gravity. And for them to be used properly, they have to be in complete suspension at the moment of incision.”

“Which can be had if the Heimdall particles are frozen in a proper suspension fluid,” Darcy concluded with a flourish. “So, it is completely feasible that the energy release can be had even in a frozen environment. All they have to figure out is how and when. At this point, we’re pretty sure they’re also using a type of gravity declerators, but their shit got nothing on ours.”

“But every time they try,” Bucky hinted, “what?”

“Nothing,” Jane answered. “It just drains the energy orbs. As long as they keep trying to release the particles and the energy output in freezing temperatures.”

“What happens when they raise the temperature higher?” Steve asked.

“Black hole,” Darcy quipped.

Jane elbowed her and said, “A really, really bright flare. The Heimdall particles are key, not the energy input or output. Also, they don’t have the proper control system.”

“How did they get their hands on Heimdall particles?” Steve asked.

Jane made a mulish face. “I don’t. But until I joined you guys, my security was iffy at best. And SHIELD does have good spies, if Romanov and Barton are anything to go by.”

“But they’re going to run out of those suckers, too.” Darcy made a pouty, sad face. “And then they’re going to have to break into this lab to get more. Which, by the way, good fucking luck. Sif had been working like a demon to make sure we’re secure on this end.

“That woman takes personal safety very, very seriously.”

“She even offered a domesticated bilgesnipe for a guard dog,” Jane said wistfully. “It’s nowhere as big as its wilder cousin, but still a size of a healthy pony.”
“Wait a minute, that thing’s real?” Steve paled a little as he remembered Thor’s rapt description of the monster.

“Oh yes,” Jane said excitedly. “Here’s a picture.”

A truly terrifying beast was displayed on the dimensional holo table.

“Holy shit,” Bucky said in a thin voice. “And she wanted to give you guys that as a … what? Christmas present?”

“A boon was what Sif said,” Jane answered. “For all we have done for Thor and Asgard.”

“We’ll pass,” Steve said firmly as he watched it gore another monstrous creature with its many, many horns. “I don’t think it’s something we can allow on the compound without the UN having fits.”

“Look at those teeth,” Bucky whispered in awe. “That thing could do so much damage.”

“It’s an herbivore,” Darcy said. “Completely vegetarian.”

Steve gave her an epic side-eye. “You’re kidding. That thing has fangs. If it’s an herbivore, why does it need canines roughly the size of my bicep?”

“It likes to fight,” Jane answered. “It’s very territorial, which is why bilgesnipes make great guard dogs, especially if there’s a baby in the house. Their spine is also compacted so that they could stretch like a giraffe to reach the top of the trees to eat the leaves. They can also stand on their hind legs.”

“Jane, no,” Steve said firmly. “We can’t have this thing roaming the compound.”

“Not the compound. Just the research building.”

“Gotta admit, would love to see Hydra come face to face with it,” Bucky said, sounding as wistful as Jane. “Maybe then they’ll back the fuck off.”

“Think of the clean up,” Steve said drily. “I don’t think the janitorial services deserve to clean up after a bilgesnipe rampage, right?”

Jane looked slightly crestfallen. “I guess.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed reluctantly.

“We could have Tony make a Roomba that only cleans up after Eddie,” Darcy said.

Steve closed his eyes. “Eddie?”

“Well, it has to have a name,” Jane said. “So, Eddie.”

“I always wanted a dog named Eddie,” Darcy explained further. “But we couldn’t have any pets growing up because my dad was deathly allergic to dander.”

“So, Eddie,” Steve said in a calm tone, because yes, giving a name like Eddie to an indescribable monster was something one should consider in a sane fashion when working with the Avengers.

When he heard one more wistful sigh, Steve decided to focus the conversation back to Jane’s work, before he ended up with a fucking bilgesnipe because he couldn’t say no to Jane and Bucky.
Darcy wouldn’t bother asking. She’d just do a runabout and Steve would be dealing with the fallout of having a one-ton monster patrolling around the labs. One whose spine allows the beast to physically mimic an accordion.

Still, just for a moment Steve indulged in dreaming about unleashing monster in a Hydra cell somewhere.

“So, the energy source for the your Bi-Frost?” Steve prompted, kicking Bucky's calves to knock him out of his daydream.

“Multiple sources,” Jane answered. “We have the orbs, the sticks, and of course…”

“Mittens of Time!” Darcy hollered as she put them on her head like some goddamn ears. Which prompted Bucky to take a few pictures.

“Okay, what the hell is that?” Steve pointed at the mittens while valiantly ignoring his friend’s playful antics. “Is that what really controls the Bi-Frost?”

“Yes and no,” Jane answered.

“Gotta do better than that, Jane,” Steve said, looking directly at her.

“The mittens do control the Bi-Frost in that it taps into this,” Jane answered, pointing at her head.

“What?” Steve didn’t like her answer.

“It taps into my mind, Steve.”

Yeah, he really, really did not like that answer.
Sam’s chuckles expanded to full belly laughter. “I don’t care what anyone says. Pepper, you’re way too cool to be an Avenger.”

Pepper gave him a playful look. “At least that’s all sorted out. When Tony becomes obsessive, it’s hard to stop him.”

“I bet,” Sam said, finishing his coffee, including the dredges, mainly because the undissolved sugar at the bottom. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Nothing regarding the Avengers,” Pepper answered.

“And about Bucky’s public rehabilitation? You’ve given up on that?”

It was only a slight hesitation but Sam was trained to watch for anomalies, no matter how small. And he knew he hit a nerve. What it led to, Sam had no idea, so he kept quiet.

Pepper tapped her index finger twice on her desk. Sam knew it was a tell, but he wasn’t sure if she was doing it on purpose in order to lead him astray or a natural response to his gentle probing.

“Darcy’s Instagram is doing miracles, but we need something with a bit more punch.”

“I thought that was what we wanted to avoid.”

Pepper gave him a classic side-eye. “I’m going to ignore that.”

Sam shrugged and leaned forward. “I’m only concerned because Steve’s sanity is tied to Bucky’s well being.”

“And doesn’t that worry you?”

“Only as much as your relationship with Tony worries me.”

“I deserve that.”

“But you’re not wrong in that I should be concerned for both of you.” Sam dropped the mask of being the sympathetic sidekick. “We all know what happens if we lost Captain Rogers. In fact, there’s another book coming out in November detailing about the fracture in our team. Don’t worry, a friend of mine got me an advance copy, and it’s just rehashing old news. So, no need to lose sleep over that.

“What would turn me into a full-blown insomniac is what would happen if Tony loses you permanently. To put it bluntly, the world would lose Iron Man, and worse, Tony Stark. I don’t want to even think about what that’ll do to the Avengers.”

“My protection detail is more than efficient,” Pepper countered easily enough as the argument was an old one for her.

“It wasn’t enough at that charity gala,” Sam reminded her. “Where you nearly got your throat cut.”

“But I survived, Sam, because I fought back. People always forget that I’m not your usual target.”

“Yeah, you’re not. That’s obvious to the rest of the world. But the truth is Tony wouldn’t be where he is today if you weren’t with him every step of the way.”
Pepper frowned. “Tony became Iron Man without my help. He latched onto the idea…”

“Yeah, but Tony has the Shiny Syndrome, doesn’t he? If you walked when he started being Iron Man? Tony might have stuck around for a while, maybe a year or two? But it would’ve only been a matter of time before something else caught his imagination. Then he’d do something incredibly stupid that would’ve gotten him wounded or worse. And Steve would’ve no choice but to cut him loose. And that would’ve had Tony go into one of his spirals.

“I don’t have to tell you where that leads to since you’ve seen your fair share of it.”

Pepper looked away but Sam saw the clench in her jawline. Still, he pushed.

“Or, or you walk and he follows, for a while. But Tony’s guilt would eat at him until he comes back but not before leaving you behind because he wants to do the noble thing. And that wouldn’t work because something would happen to you anyway, and that would mean Tony's world comes crashing down on him and the Avengers wouldn’t survive that. And if by some miracle he did survive, Steve would have to cut him loose if only to save Tony’s skin before he self-destructs.

“Different plot, same ending.”

Pepper gave a laugh that was devoid of any humor.

“So, you’re kind of stuck with us, which, let’s face it, will play havoc with your schedule and that’s on a good day. It also means you’re going to have Avengers who are going to be pretty damn extra when they’re around you. And that’s not because you’re Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries. But because you’re an Avenger without the fun toys. Seriously, I know Tony made you a suit. You don’t have to shower in it, but it’s good to have it around, yeah?”

Pepper looked at him with searching gaze. “Was it your idea or Steve’s to talk me into getting a suit?”

Sam blushed at being caught out so flagrantly. “Eh, a little of column A, little of column B. Steve’s paranoid with anyone adjacent to his team. He’s always been hyper-cautious about Laura and the kids, but after Dr. Foster and Darcy plonked themselves into the Compound … well, his paranoia kicked up a few notches.

“You can’t blame the guy. He’s seen way too much for his day, and he’s buried Peggy only few years ago. From what Natasha told me, he was almost at a breaking point then.”

“So, when Bucky resurfaced – he broke?”

“In a way, yeah. But because he’s Steve Rogers, notice I’m not saying Captain America, he broke in a spectacular fashion.”

“I must admit, I didn’t think of it that way,” Pepper confessed. “I’d thought his friendship with Barnes was one that he couldn’t fail.”

“Yeah, but that’s not all of it. Anyway, nice diversion in getting me to talk about Steve. We were discussing about your safety here, weren’t we?”

“No, we were talking about Mittens of Time,” Pepper had to stop and giggle a little at that. “Before you so carefully veered into my personal safety issues.”

“Now that we’re on the subject: Suit? Yes, yes? What should you call it? Hot Stuff? ‘Cause you’re Pepper, so we should keep that theme. Iron Lady is just a huge no-no.”
Pepper couldn’t keep her straight face as Sam teased her.

“How about … Sane and Smooth? Check Point?! Yeah, Check Point, ‘cause you’re basically the last stronghold before Tony gets to storm crazy land and plant a goddamn flag there.”

Pepper didn’t even bother to smother the sound as she threw her head back and laughed.

“And that’s my good deed for the day. But seriously, think about having the suit around you, if only to keep me from joining Bucky during his witching hour patrols,” Sam said as he put his cup on the side table. “So, about Bucky?”

“His image rehabilitation is going pretty well, actually,” Pepper said. “Personnel aren’t giving interviews, but there are some news leaking around the edges.”

“You suspected that, I hope.”

Pepper made an unimpressed face. “And from what I’ve gathered, it’s very positive. I hadn’t counted on how naturally charming Barnes could be. Of course, I’ve read about his romantic conquests back in the day, so I was prepared for the debonair, honey-tongued young man.”

“But he grew up, got kidnapped, tortured, turned into a monster and then broke free from HYDRA all on his own. The boy’s got a solid pair, that’s for sure.”

“And then that happened,” Pepper continued as if Sam hadn’t interrupted her. “So, the sweet-hearted rake has grown up to be a genuine sweetheart, period. Of course, having Darcy run rings around him also helps his image.”

Sam chuckled. “They’re a cute couple. It’s like seeing a cottontail cuddle next to a very big panther and expect kisses instead of being turned into hors d’oeuvres.”

“Still, I would like to see something with a bit more splash,” Pepper said. “Something that has a bit of, and I hate to say it - Iron Man - in it.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to burst out laughing. It took Pepper only a moment before she realized the reason.

“Sam, that’s not what I meant!”

“What did he mean?” Steve asked as he ambled in.

Pepper made a sour face. “How much of the conversation have you heard?”

“Enough not to blow my fuse,” Steve answered in a light tone. “And after listening to Sam, I think I know what to get Bucky for Christmas.”

Sam’s laughter increased. Pepper on the other hand did not look impressed.

“Steve, no.”

“Steve, yes!” He said gleefully before throwing up his arms in a victory pose. “Finally! I wanted to say that ever since Tony’s started last year.”

“You really are a troll, aren’t you?” Pepper said, looking like she’d been knocked sideways by the revelation. “Tony's been telling me but I didn't believe him. How could I?”

“Oh, he is such a troll,” Sam said emphatically. “Don’t let the ‘All American Aw Shucks’ look
fool you. Last Christmas, he started an all-out Nerf war between Clint and Bucky. And nobody was the wiser. It took Natasha to personally threaten their balls to have the two back down.”

Steve blinked innocently. “Is that what that was about? Wait a minute, what’s a Nerf?”

“Oh my God, how do you do that?” Pepper asked in amazement. “Really? That’s astonishing!”

Steve grinned and gave her a wink. “Been doing that with Bucky since we started running together as kids. Bucky would save our hides and I would make sure we wouldn’t get into too much trouble at home when we showed up with ripped clothing and bloody noses.”

“I honestly think Dr. Erskine might have been the best troll of them all,” Pepper said with an impish grin.

The statement took Steve by surprise and he barked out a laugh.

“I’m glad you’re here, actually,” Pepper said, all business. “And Sam is also. We were talking about my safety.”

“Yes, and his idea of a suit isn’t half bad, Pepper,” Steve urged in a calm tone. “Would give Tony some peace of mind.”

“Tony knows better,” Pepper said and then raised her hands to reveal two lovely thin bangles. “These are prototypes.”

Steve leaned forward. “Wow, are those for a suit?”

“Seriously?” Sam blinked. “Or is it that glove thing he had going in Berlin?”

Pepper didn’t answer. Instead, she took them off. Without warning her hands began to glow.

“Pepper, what the hell is happening?” Steve asked, trying not to shoot out of his chair.

“It’s Extremis,” Pepper answered as her hands returned to normal. She then calmly put on the bangles, and looked as if she hadn’t done anything extraordinary.

“Extremis as in the human bomb thing that Aldrich Killian made?” Sam asked, his gaze still firmly planted on her hands. “How did you get it?”

“Killian didn’t just kidnap me,” Pepper said slowly, as if she were sampling the words, wary of their weight. “I was tortured, Sam. Killian experimented on me to get Tony to cooperate with him to stabilize Extremis.”

“Damn it,” Sam whispered, his gaze never leaving Pepper.

“Tony did, of course. But by the time the stabilizing agent was ready, Extremis had completely integrated with my body. Still, I was treated and successfully I might add. And I am sure of this because if my position as CEO in Stark Industries hasn’t made me explode, not to mention working with Tony and the Avengers, I’m pretty sure I won’t turn into a nuclear bomb any time soon.”

“The bangles are for?” Sam prompted. “Back up?”

“They’re to contain Extremis,” Pepper answered. “In case I do lose control.”

“Have you ever lost control deliberately?” Steve asked. “Sounds like something Jane is going through.”
Pepper’s calm demeanor turned forlorn when she answered, “Steve, what Dr. Foster is going through is nothing like my experience. I survived Killian’s experiment, and I have control over Extremis. It is also not actively trying to end my life. Hers? It’s trying to kill her, and it’s also semi-sentient.

“I cannot imagine the willpower it takes to not go completely insane under such circumstances.”

“You still didn’t answer my question, Pepper.”

Pepper took a deep breath. “Yes, I have but Tony doesn’t know. I visit some of the Hulk chambers he and Bruce uses. And I do have control. I don’t like it, though. Afterwards, I feel like I have the flu.”

“So it hits your immune system,” Sam concluded. “That’s not good.”

“No, it isn’t, but I’m glad, actually. It means there is a price to be paid for using this weapon. I don’t want to wield power, any power, without there being consequences, even repercussions.”

“Like I said, way too cool to be an Avenger,” Sam said with a tender smile. “Too bad you’re stuck with us anyway.”

Pepper laughed softly. “Yes, yes I am. And I’m so glad.”

Realizing that conversation was at an end, Steve prompted, “And Bucky?”

“I think he should be present at the next big Avenger-related gathering,” Pepper answered. “Some time near Christmas, perhaps? Stark Industries have a tradition of sponsoring the free skate event at Bryant Park during the holidays.”

Steve grinned as an old and precious memory surfaced. “Bucky can’t skate for shit. God, he tried, though. There was a girl … Evelyn McDougall, a pretty redhead who lived on our street. She loved skating so, of course, Bucky had to learn to skate because what kind of a fella would he be if he was left on the sidelines while his girl got to zoom around the ice.”

Pepper covered her mouth as her eyes shone in mirth. Sam shook his head in mock despair.

“The idiot sprained both his ankles the first five minutes he got on the ice. Ended up flat on his back behind the entire Christmas holidays. By January, Evelyn was going steady with Jack Merot, who Bucky hated with every bone in his body until he got shipped out.”

“Oh my God, are you for real?” Sam asked.

“Bucky does not like it when someone poaches him,” Steve said. “He could never stand to have someone cut in when he took a girl out dancing. The skating thing probably changed because of his time as the Soldier, but don’t be surprised if he’s less than graceful when he gets on the ice.”

Sam looked imploringly at Pepper. “I’ll babysit Tony for the entire party, Pepper. But you have got to get Bucky into skates. Please, for the good of mankind! Think of it as a Christmas present to me, and Clint!”

“I’d like a photo or two of that myself,” Steve chimed in with mischief dancing in his eyes.

“You’re all terrible,” Pepper said. “And I’ll make sure Bucky gets into skates.”

“Bless you,” Sam said. “I’ll make sure Darcy gets the pictures necessary to break Instagram.”
“Now, shoo. I have work to do,” Pepper said as she opened up the two laptops in front of her.

The two men gave smart salutes and left the office, grinning madly at the thought of James Buchanan Barnes, former lady-killer and heartbreaker, going about the ice like a newborn giraffe on roller skates.

“So, this is it,” Bruce said as he stared at the hologram revealing all the planets Jane could safely land on. They were colored green, but there were so few amongst the sea of white and red, that Bruce had to squint to see any.

He glanced at Betty who looked about as happy as he felt.

“Unfortunately, this will have to suffice,” Sif answered. “Still, it is better than what I had originally feared.”

Matsil, the youngest charge under Sif’s command, glanced at Jane before switching his gaze onto his superior. Sif had to hide her smile. The young guard had been more than a little shocked when he’d first landed in Midgard. But thanks to his youthful curiosity and tenacity, he’d quickly become useful to their endeavors and had appreciated the alacrity with which they had to deal with Dr. Foster’s problem.

And during the process the young guard had become a little enamored with Jane Foster. It didn’t help the poor child that Jane was slight in stature, big in heart, and blessed with delicate features. Or the fact that trouble liked to follow her around like a faithful guard dog. So, anyone with a protective streak would find themselves drawn to her, if only to keep her in one piece while she plowed through her scientific endeavors.

Jane blew out a frustrated breath. “Still, something’s better than nothing. And now that I have a workable map, I can start finalizing our plans.”

“We, you mean we, Jane,” Thor said, frowning. “You’re not planning to make this journey alone.”

Sif narrowed her gaze at the Midgardian when she saw Jane’s chin jut out in determination.

“Foster, you cannot be serious.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Jane argued. “I won’t have anyone else exposed to this.”

Thor’s countenance darkened immediately. “Jane, have you forgotten who I am? I have battled Thanos…”

“You had it inside you in Greenwich, Thor. Do you remember the destruction you caused? Do you remember that?” Jane coolly shot back. “If even a trace of this gets into you – the damage to the Compound could be staggering! And if it didn’t, and something happens to you – the damage would still be staggering but for completely different set of reasons!”

Thor looked shocked by Jane’s ferocity. “Still…”

“You are King, Thor, and your people need you. My people need you,” Jane said in a gentler if also sadder tone. “We can’t risk any Asgardian lives simply because there aren’t enough of your kind left to risk. I won’t risk my people because this thing will probably kill them outright.”

“Why do you suspect that?” Sif asked.

“It’s getting smarter and … more devious.”
Bruce recoiled in shock, no doubt remembering Ultron. “It’s learning from you?”

“Yes, it is. Like I said, it’s semi-sentient. I don’t know if its intelligence is something akin to ours, but it has survived for tens of thousands of years, so I could safely guess that it can learn from experience.”

“What is it trying to do right now?” Bruce asked.

“It’s trying to leave, I think. Maybe find a new host, even,” Jane replied. “But I won’t let it.”

“Are you actively trying to keep the infection alive in your body?”

Jane looked at Bruce before firmly answering, “No, I’m trying to keep it from spreading. And I’ll admit it’s exhausting.”

Sif looked at Thor with worry in her eyes. Thor didn’t look any better by Jane’s confession.

“How are you doing this?” Betty asked, her natural pallor now turning sickly.

“As it’s learning from me, I’m learning from it, too,” Jane said. “I’m keeping it involved by putting it in Rube Goldberg layouts. I used to love making those with my father when I was a child.”

“Rube Goldberg?” Sif echoed. “Who is he?”

“It’s a name we give to complicated, almost ridiculously time consuming machinery all created to do simple tasks.”

“How are you achieving this?” Thor asked. “Since you’ve been fully involved in your work.”

Jane shrugged. “It’s a mental exercise I used to do as a kid to calm myself when things got bad at home.”

Bruce didn’t say anything because he personally knew how bad things could get at home.

“That’s good,” he said succinctly, a knowing look on his face.

“How do you plan to return to Midgard?” Sif asked.

“I’m working on a retriever button,” she answered. “Something that will snap me back here once the Aether is out of my system.”

“Like a rope?” Matsil asked.

“No, more like a machine that follows certain tags I’ll be leaving behind as I travel. When I activate the retriever, it will focus on collecting one tag after another, leading me back until I’m home.”

“Okay, then,” Bruce took a deep breath. “Let’s finish this.”

Steve dropped off his suit at the in-house dry cleaners before returning to his apartment to find Bucky shoving a small box under his bed, cackling.

“What the hell, Bucky?”
Bucky looked up. “What?”

“Do I have to worry about what you just hid under your mattress?”

Bucky shook his head. “Nope, it’s all good here.”

“Bucky, I swear…”

“I bought something for Darcy from the Commissary, and I don’t want her to find it.”

Steve was less than convinced. It didn’t help that Bucky looked slightly maniacal, either. “Please don’t start another prank war with Clint. Natasha might just kill you two if she finds out.”

“Not my fault she walked into Clint’s trap,” Bucky said in a breezy tone.

“It was the steam room, Bucky,” Steve argued. “We all use it.”

Then he narrowed his gaze in a threatening manner. “And whatever it is you’re planning – leave me out of it.”

Bucky raised both his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I promise it’s not for a prank, and if it is: I’ll make sure you don’t get caught in the crossfire.”

Steve had to be satisfied with that and retreated to his bedroom. He closed the door behind him and locked it to ensure Bucky wouldn’t barge in after him without warning. With a deep sigh, Steve pulled out few small packing boxes from his closet and sat in front of his dresser. It took him nearly a full minute to pull out the bottom drawer.

Twinkling jam jars greeted him along with single socks whose partners had long gone missing. Steve grimly took the socks and put them in a box along with old t-shirts that couldn’t be worn in public or private, lest he become the butt of a joke.

Will use them tonight to polish up the shield and anything else that needs cleaning.

Steve couldn’t bring himself to clear out the jars, though. With a frustrated snarl, he slammed the drawer closed. Pulling out various polishes and leather milk, he took out his shield, and guns that were rarely used until he was on the run.

The disassembly was lightning fast as Steve had done it countless times, if only to calm down from a harrowing mission. Soon, there was a pile of grimy socks along with soiled t-shirts that needed to be trashed. He then took the shield onto his lap and studied at the draconian present.

She’s as beautiful as I first held her, Steve thought as he polished the vibranium until it reflected the crimson light of the setting sun. Only when he angled it in a certain manner did the imperfections come to sight. He quietly touched the small divots and claw marks that marred the surface as surely as they marred his skin.

Ain’t it just grand for us, Ol’ Girl? Everyone knows us now. We’re so famous that people from outer space know about you and me. After Thanos’ rampage, so many people say they love us. But really, who would love Steve Rogers and a round piece of metal without any of the hoopla? Do you think any of them would care about our scars? Ones that are never seen in pictures or movie reels or even interviews? And if they did, would that make them feel sorry for us? Or angry because they’d think they were tricked into believing the hype of Captain America and his trusty Shield?

Not for the first time Steve wondered where he ended and Captain America began. At first, it was
easy. But now, after so many battles, wars, and personal conflicts, Steve had to fight to remember what he wanted, what his personal beliefs were instead of Captain America's who was forced to incorporate the needs of many into his judgment call.

Steve bathed the straps in leather milk though the material was a polymer. Still, it absorbed the liquid as readily as genuine leather, and with some careful brushing and polishing, the straps looked as good as new.

He was only too aware that if any part of the straps failed or became frayed, Tony would have them replaced within minutes. But Steve liked the feel of cleaning his weapons, and the smell that permeated his uniform afterwards. The warm scent comforted him.

His phone made a loud noise, startling him from his reverie. Steve looked at the screen and laughed. Someone, and he suspected Bucky, had switched Jane’s message tone from a ping to the sound of a car crash.

We’re ordering Indian for dinner because Bruce is willing to risk heartburn, just so he could keep Betty company while she works tonight. Do you want me to order Super Soldier size for you? Bucky and Darcy are going out for a bite, which means cafeteria food and a chance to traumatize more personnel. I’m not sure, but I think Bucky has a bet with Natasha about who can scare the most number of people under certain number of days. I don’t know why he bothered. Nat would win that one blind-folded and hopping on one leg.

Steve wasn’t a fan of spicy food, but a sit-down meal with company, especially Jane, would definitely help lighten his mood.

I would like four orders of lamb biryani, mild, please, and some ratia(sp?) sauce. I’ll bring the beer.

Will do! See you in thirty minutes.

That gave Steve enough time to trash the used clothing and take a shower before heading out into the night with a lighter heart. He even had the shield strapped to his back, only because it felt right to take his Ol’ Girl out for a nice evening walk. Besides, it was time he formally introduced Jane to Howard Stark’s most iconic creation; one that defined Steve Rogers’ life from one millennium to the next.
Chapter 11

Steve easily spotted Sam who had taken refuge from the bright August sun by resting under a large maple tree. The former Air Force pilot had definite preference for the summer months, so as soon as the weather was warm, Steve would often find him sitting in an outdoor café or reading the latest NYT bestseller as he was doing now.

Steve knew Sam wouldn’t mind if he interrupted his downtime, but he still had to fortify himself mentally for the conversation ahead. And the reluctance to approach Sam in it of itself was aggravating since the man was one of the easiest person to talk to in any situation.

Steve was halfway down the path when Sam looked up from his reading. “Oh, hey. Just so you know, Parker just came back from Queens. From what I could see, he’s uninjured, though I can’t be sure.”

Steve shook his head in wonder and exasperation. “I know I don’t have a leg to stand on, but that kid’s taking way too many risks, even with his powers.”

“You’re right, you don’t have a leg to stand on,” Sam agreed with a grin. “But Tony’s been upgrading his suit like a maniac. And keeping track of the kid whenever he becomes the webslinger. That, and the fact that Tony is treating Peter like a son, should keep Spider-Man from getting into too much trouble.”

“Did he ever talk to you about what happened when Peter went Missing?”

“Yeah, he did, and I wish I can tell you more…” Sam didn’t finish his sentence. He didn’t have to.

“Don’t worry, I’m glad he did,” Steve said, relief evident in his tone. “And that’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Sam put down his book and looked around the quad. It was pretty much empty save for a trio of female personnel who were enjoying the sunshine. But they were too far to eavesdrop or even read lips.

“What’s up?”

“I need someone to talk to,” Steve said, “officially, about my experiences. And traumas. Let’s face it, I’ve got more than a few, and if I want this thing with Jane to work, I need help. I learned a lot from what happened with Sharon, so I don’t want to saddle Jane with my issues. Besides, it’s not her job to help me with all the shit that’s going on in my head.”

Sam leaned back on the tree and closed his eyes before blowing out a gusty sigh. “Good to hear you say that. And you’re right: it shouldn’t be her job. But you do know she can help you, right? Not because she’s your girlfriend, but because she’s a decent human being.”

Steve gave a jerky nod and ran a hand down his face. “Still, Bucky told me after we left Wakanda that he’d talked to therapists. He also said he went through four before he found someone he was comfortable with. And considering what Bucky suffered, that’s a damn miracle. I figured by that measuring stick I should be a bit luckier.”

Sam made a pensive face. “I don’t know about that. As Steve Rogers, you have more than enough trauma to go around the entire Compound. And I’m talking about your life before you even became Captain America. That could have been resolved as you grew older in your time, but you weren’t
that lucky. And on top of all that, you became Captain America. That’s whole another boatload of issues right there.”

“So, I’m an overachiever in that department, too?” Steve joked feebly.

“Yeah, but there’s something to be said for a man who won’t look away. Especially in a society designed to look away from the hard stuff. Notice, I didn’t say bad or evil, but hard. How a person works with that is different with each person, of course. But you?

“It’s like you have this universal translator for every hardship a human being goes through. I don’t know if that’s because you were raised right or your level of empathy is through the roof. If I had to guess – it’s a harsh combination of the two. Whatever it is, Steve, you take things personal, which explains why you have a temper. And I already know your emotional range that goes from zero to one hundred on a dime. But it also explains how in hell you’re able to do the impossible in practically every goddamn mission, and I’m not talking about the Serum here. That helps, but the willpower, the sheer drive? That’s all you, buddy.”

“So, it’s a two-edged sword,” Steve spoke slowly, digesting Sam’s words. “And it’s not something I can turn off without having the other half suffer.”

Sam raised a cautious hand. “No, I didn’t say that … exactly. Look, a lot of people think geniuses have to suffer in order to become a genius: Tony, for example. I call bullshit. Can you imagine what Tony could’ve accomplished if he had a healthy childhood? With loving, supportive parents who had his welfare in mind? I won’t even consider going down that road because it’d piss me off beyond belief. I think the same can be said for Steve Rogers.

“And Steve Rogers is definitely one of a kind because you’re able connect your empathy, sympathy, and pity with a whole lot of people whom most would not, mainly because of your background and experience. This is a gift and a burden, but you’re able to do something about it because of the Serum, which is good for all concerned. But … it can take a toll, Steve. Personally, I think you should’ve asked for help long before. You know there’s no shame in that, not nowadays, anyway.”

“Back then we didn’t, you know. It was either you deal with it quietly or look at the bottom of the bottle.”

“Not a coping mechanism I would recommend, and you can’t get drunk anyway.”

Steve shook his head. “No. Can you make me a list?”

“Of course. I’ll put in few names of therapists who have dealt with veterans, exclusively.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Steve said in a heartfelt manner. “I should’ve done this after the Missing came home…”

“But you’re Captain America, and the world needed you,” Sam said softly. “I can’t even begin to explain how angry I get whenever that thought crosses my mind. Don’t get me wrong: I admire Captain America. I admire what he does and stands for. But it’s Steve Rogers who’s one of my best friends. So, I get very unhappy when my buddy is shoved into the corner to make room for Captain America.”

“But, like Bucky and the Winter Soldier…”

“Yeah, I know,” Sam interrupted, waving a careless hand. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”
“Sam, most days I don’t much care for it, either.”

“I’ll write down a list, not electronically,” Sam said. “Stuff like this should be private. And you can
look them up. Tell me who you want to talk to, and I’ll make a call.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. This is long overdue, but I guess I’m grateful something put the fire under your
all-American ass to get help.”

“Jane Foster is the something.”

“She’s something all right.”

Steve chuckled at Sam’s summation of the brilliant astrophysicist currently tolling in the labs not
one hundred feet from where they were talking. He knew they were at the tail end of the
dangerous-but-necessary journey for Jane. He also knew that no matter what she said Thor would
accompany her. She was a very stubborn human being, but Thor was a stubborn demigod, and
history sided with him if one were to measure stubbornness.

He heard Clint’s footsteps and the encompassing silence that accompanied him nearly always.
Steve turned to see the archer with Natasha. With another glance Steve humorously noted the
entire quad had been emptied of human presence.

“God, I wish I could do that,” Sam muttered.

“No you don’t.”

“No, I don’t,” Sam agreed easily.

Only when Steve looked at the approaching agents that he saw the tension on both their shoulders.
He stood quickly, his easy body language swiftly morphing into a martial stance.

Natasha greeted them with, “We have a problem.”

Sam stood up swiftly and joined them. “What’s wrong?”

“My sources tell me Hydra is aware of Dr. Foster’s power. A member of the cell was returning
from a supply run when he’d witnessed what Foster did to the base,” Natasha explained. “They’re
not at all interested in the Bi-Frost technology, just her. And they are willing to mount an all-out
offense to get her.”

“This is AIM and Hydra remnants, coordinating with each other,” Clint added. “That’s not good,
’cause whatever intel we got on those two, they’re practically useless now if they integrated.”

“The good news is that they can do this just once,” Natasha continued. “But wherever they attack –
we will have to expect casualties.”

“Everyone’s at Jane’s lab, though I’m not sure if Bruce is having lunch right now,” Steve said as
he began marching towards the research building. “Get the Compound on yellow alert.”

Clint made two calls, one to Coulson and the other to the Compound’s Active Security Chief for
the day. As they approached the lab complex, Steve could hear one phone after another go off,
alerting the personnel.

Tony was waiting for them at the entrance of the building. “What’s going on?”
“Hydra and AIM are targeting Dr. Foster,” Nat answered. “They are aware of her situation and wish to take her prisoner, either to use her as a weapon or to recreate the Stone.”

“They can’t recreate it,” Tony argued as he fell into step with them.

“But that won’t stop them from trying,” Steve said. “And it definitely won’t stop them from killing her, either.”

Bruce was waiting for them at the front of the Jane’s lab. His coat was gone and so were his glasses.

“Got a problem?” he asked, the easy tone of his question in complete contrast to the stark outline of the blood vessels rippling in his forearms.

“They know about Jane’s infection,” Steve said. “And they’re coming for her.”

“Right then,” Bruce said. “Let’s get this started.”

Jane’s plan was so completely hare-brained that Steve was rendered speechless when she finished her talk with a stubborn nod.

Bucky, on the other hand, interrupted Jane no less than nine times, forcing her to clarify her outline so he could “clearly understand the Kilroy Was Here and Here and Here plan you geniuses had cooked up.”

Steve suspected Bucky did so only for his benefit; allowing Steve to mentally go over everything with all his tactical insight. Because this plan could not fail for the simple fact that if the attack damaged Jane's Bi-Frost, Steve wasn’t sure Jane had enough time left to build another one.

It was the little things, but Steve noticed her caffeine intake had gradually lessened over the weeks since her arrival. That her clothes hung a little more loosely on a frame that could poorly afford to lose any more weight.

But the most telling evidence was how she stopped speaking and would have to drink water or tea in order to compose herself. Steve suspected it wasn’t her mind that was faltering but her body.

“I don’t understand Hydra’s thinking. If they’re going for a big push, to do so at the Compound is risky for them, too,” Bruce said.

Tony turned to him. “Why would you say that?”

“Because the odds are they are aware to some extent what has been happening here,” Steve answered readily for Bruce. “The information they have might not be completely correct, but if they have the numbers; all they need to do is destroy the Bi-Frost. Then they can try later to grab Jane. Of course, this is calculating the risk that Jane would recreate what she had done in the Alps. But if they’re desperate enough, they’ll definitely try.

“These bastards have an affinity for putting on a giant shit show.”

Darcy snapped her fingers at Jane. “London!”

Jane returned her friend’s outburst with her own. “That could work!”

“You want to move this entire operation into a crowded capital?” Bucky asked. “Isn’t that dangerous?”
“Not the entire city. When the Second Convergence happened, a storage building in London was the epicenter for the alignment on earth,” Jane explained. “I took a reading of the building after the attack. The numbers definitely showed there was energy residue left behind by the Convergence. Which makes that point good enough to make the longer travel.”

“How would you do that?” Sif asked.

“Start the jump from here, then to London, before hitting off-planet,” Jane answered. “Make two jumps on Earth. That way, even if Hydra attacks the Compound, they can’t stop me.”

“It’ll split our numbers,” Steve cautioned.

“Yeah, but they won’t know we’re playing hide-and-seek here,” Tony said.

“Do we have enough equipment for that, though?” Bucky asked.

“Yes, we do,” Jane answered. “It won’t take much to get to London from here, or vice versa. Most of the energy source should be allocated to London because I’ll be using the second leg for the travel off planet.”

“And back,” Steve added. “So, you don’t have to return to the Compound. That way, we can find a safe place for you that’s anywhere but here, which is rest of the world.”

“There’s the extra bonus that by that time the Aether will be destroyed,” Jane said. “And they would have no reason to come after me.”

“Except for the fact that you have successfully recreated space travel used only by superior alien species,” Bruce amended.

“But the previous ploys would make them reluctant to go any further,” Thor said. “Remember, Jane is their target first and foremost because of the Aether in her body.”

“Let’s worry about getting the Aether out of Jane and away from AIM or Hydra or whoever else wants to harness it,” Steve said firmly.

“Agreed,” Thor said.

“When can we start?” Steve asked Jane who looked determined if also exhausted.

“As soon as we set up,” she answered firmly. “Then it’s all systems go.”

“Natasha and Clint will take the Quinjet. Sam and Thor, go with them and give air cover. The population density is going to be high no matter where in London. I’ll contact Coulson to get the green light to set up there. SHIELD will tell London there’s an atmospheric anomaly that shows up whenever portals appear. And that we want to clear the area, just in case. That should be enough to give us the green light to set up.”

“I’ll help Nat vet the personnel for the London Op,” Bucky volunteered without preamble.

“I’ll get the Quinjet ready,” Clint said, already typing on his phone.

Tony and Bruce shared a look. “Bruce and I’ll help Jane set up. I’ll also message Pep to make sure she stays in our rooms in the Compound.”

“We should alert Ganla and Lord Heylien,” Sif added. “The elf lord had been most generous with his time even though the Bi-Frost travel had made him quite ill. And though his days as a warrior
are much lauded they are long past. If something were to happen to him, we will be made to answer harshly for our failure.”

“See if he wants to bunk down with Pepper,” Tony offered. “They can trade war stories about handling difficult personalities.”

Sif grinned and gave a curt bow before leaving them.

“So, we’re finally doing this,” Jane said in a thin voice.

“Wow,” Darcy whispered as she embraced her friend. “Final countdown?”

“Don’t you dare,” Jane said with surprising venom. “I hate that song!”

“It’s a classic!” Barton argued. “C’mon, what else fits?”

“Ground Control,” Jane shot back.

“No, no, no,” Darcy shook her head. “Janey, Major Tom never comes back.”

Jane’s frown was more of a pout. “Oh, yeah, he doesn’t, does he?”


“No!” was the chorus from Darcy and Jane.

And their objection was strong enough to garnish even Steve’s attention as Bucky recoiled from their vehemence.

“It puts me to sleep!” Jane grumbled, shaking her head. Before she could say anything further, ear-shattering music emanated from the small Bluetooth speaker on Darcy’s desk.

“Fuck,” Jane moaned as Darcy began bopping her head to what Steve thought was truly atrocious music.

Still, the horror that Darcy called mullet rock energized a lab full of people, including Parker who had stumbled into the meeting after scarfing down a late lunch.

Steve watched in wonder and no small amount of pride, as his team efficiently packed up various equipment strewn all over the lab, either to be set up outside or in London. He was intimately familiar with their efficiency in the field, but usually with weaponry, transport, and unconscious enemy combatants; not materials necessary for interplanetary travel.

“Hey, stop with the window shopping and more with the helping,” Bucky groused as he walked by Steve, arms laden with a stack of small boxes.

Captain Rogers didn’t need to be told twice. He was never afraid of physical labor, only the aftermath, and that hadn’t matter since the Serum. He dared to give Jane a quick peck on her head as he walked by and was rewarded with a wink. But that was all they could afford as the packing process soon deluged the entire lab.

Steve was a little shocked to notice that even after everything was loaded onto the Quinjet and hauled onto the grassy spot right outside the building, Jane’s lab was still a maze of machinery and computers. Still, her chaos comforted him. It solidified the feeling that after everything was done, Jane would stay. After all, the only reason she was here was to establish the Bi-Frost for the Initiative. There wasn’t much left in her contract after that, and Steve was sure of this because he
had actually read the damn paperwork from top to bottom.

The moment packing was done Thor left with Sif for London. After waving goodbye to them, Jane prompt handed over tablets to Clint, Natasha, and Sam. “This is for the setup in London. The directions are simple, but you have to be precise.”

Clint frowned as he scrolled down the screen. “Umm, you know I don’t even have a high school degree, right?”

Nat’s shoulders tensed just a bit, but it was enough of a tell for Steve to give his full attention to the conversation.

Jane gave Clint an unimpressed look. “The lack of alphabets after your name hardly makes you an idiot. The fact that you lasted this long tells me either you’re the luckiest human being on the planet, which we both know is not true. Or, you’re not as stupid as you act, which I know is true since I’ve seen you fleece people right and left during poker nights. Besides, Steve has a very low tolerance for stupidity on a good day, much less bad ones.”

Clint smirked, but it lacked the sarcastic bent and the crinkles around his eyes were genuine.

“So, just follow the directions, and I’ll be free of this goddamn thing in time for dinner.”

“Let’s do this,” Natasha declared, and bumped shoulders with Clint before leaving.

Sam gave a grateful look at Jane but said nothing as he followed his team members to the Quinjet.

It took Steve everything to repress his laughter as Jane snarled, “I don’t know who made Clint feel that way, but if I ever get my hands on the jerk, I’ll not be responsible for my actions.”

With that cranky summation Jane joined the team currently setting up the Bi-Frost in the compound. It took them little under three hours to set up, while the London team needed another thirty minutes.

Darcy took Bucky to get some food for everyone, especially Jane who was practically buzzing with excitement.

“You okay?” Steve asked quietly, sensing the steady increase in Jane’s distress.

“I always thought I’d be more excited to use my Bi-Frost. It’s such a huge accomplishment, Steve,” Jane confessed. “But all I want right now is for this to be over, so I can get a fresh start.”

It took Steve a moment to compose himself after listening to Jane’s wistful comment. “You’re not the only one.”

Jane blew out a gusty breath and said, “When Darcy gets…”

The first explosion transformed the ancient maple tree in the quad into a catastrophic weapon, as thousands of wooden shrapnel pieces flew in every direction. The end result was there wasn’t a person who didn’t get hit. Some went down with minor wounds. Some went down and couldn’t get up.

The second explosion rocked the area between the hangars, mercifully leaving the Quinjets undamaged, but taking out the motor vehicles parked in the fenced-off lot.

Steve knew it wasn’t luck. The attackers were planning to use the planes to escape. He turned to
find Jane calmly hiding behind a stone picnic table. The door to the lab building snapped open behind her and a security personnel ran out. He grabbed Jane and started escorting her back into the building when a bullet cleaved his skull into two.

Jane still didn’t panic. She jumped over the body and dove into the building, allowing Steve to fully engage in the enemy. The bright red and gold blur of Iron Man flew above him, towards the multiple enemies now jetting downwards in what looked like a modified wing pack like Falcon’s.

“Bucky!” he yelled into his earpiece.

Only silence greeted him.

The first explosion had big enough impact for Darcy to lose her footing, even though she was on solid ground. When she turned to look at Bucky, the second explosion greeted her through the third floor window of her apartment.

“Shit,” she hissed as she saw the numerous attackers flying down. “Bucky!”

The silence that greeted her was eerie enough to draw her attention away from the battleground blooming in the Compound towards the man standing right next to her. She saw an odd sheen of distance in his gaze. And though it was impossible, Bucky seemed to have increased in size.

“Bucky?” Darcy asked, her tone wavering in confusion.

He blinked and looked down at her. Still, he said nothing.

“Oh,” Darcy said weakly. “Hey, I … so, help?”

Bucky’s response was to grab hold of her and yank her to his side. Then they began running. Darcy was barely able to keep up his pace, and when she couldn’t he just lifted her off her feet, which didn't slow him down at all.

Despite the fact she wasn’t running too much, Darcy was panting for breath as scenes of violence confronted them from all sides. Only when Bucky ducked into the labs, did Darcy finally realize what he was about to do.

“No!” she cried out as they headed towards the Hulk-proofed chamber where Bruce was waiting for them. But instead of heading into the chamber himself, Bruce took off his shirt and glasses.

“Shit,” Darcy hissed as she watched his skin ripple before turning green. The transformation itself took only to a moment. So, Darcy didn’t have the time to panic as the Hulk stood in front of them. Luckily, he paid them no attention and smashed right through the front entrance and into battle.

“If Janey’s Bi-Frost gets destroyed, she’ll die,” Darcy yelled at Bucky. “There won’t be enough time for her to build another one. So, don’t even think about shoving me in there!”

Bucky blinked at her. “Then what?” he asked, his voice rusty as from disuse even though they were having a lively conversation right before the attack.

“I have an idea,” Darcy said and took charge. She dragged him to Jane’s lab and grabbed her tote. She then began stuffing it with unidentifiable junk stored inside a metal filing cabinet along with more familiar arsenal.

And the entire time Bucky watched in disbelief, because it was simply impossible for that much of
crap to fit into her bag.

“How?” he finally asked.

Darcy looked up and grinned. “It was a gift from Thor. It’s actually Asgardian.”

She then hefted the bag onto her shoulder as if it weighed nothing.

“You’re a wonder,” he said, echoing the genuine surprise that underlined the statement when he first said it weeks ago.

She pulled out what looked like a sawed-off baseball bat from her desk and gave him a nod.

“Let’s introduce them to my little friend,” Darcy said, her voice dark with anger and frustration.

He needed no further encouragement and returned to the fight, with Darcy practically plastered to his back.

Pepper ran down the hallway, into the ambassador’s quarters. “Master Ganla, Lord…”

At first she couldn’t understand what she was seeing. Ganla was on the floor, his face slack with his eyes wide. The young Asgardian guard, Matsil, was on top of him, pinned to Ganla by a spear. The elf lord was desperately struggling to pull out the weapon.

He turned to Pepper. “I was too late. Help me, please! Ganla might still be alive!”

Pepper looked at the spear. There was no way the weapon originated from Earth. “What have you done?”

Heylien didn’t seem in any way taken back by her accusation as he successfully removed the spear from the bodies. “I did what needed to be done. The remains of the Aether must never leave your home world.”

Pepper took a step back. “But it’ll kill her, and then…”

“It will keep looking for hosts, yes,” Heylien said, his voice genuinely sorrowful. “It will take us some time, but we will find a better way to destroy the monstrous weapon. Much safer than what your Foster is planning.”

“But it will kill millions,” Pepper whispered. “Maybe the entire planet.”

Heylien took a deep breath. “Better to sacrifice one world than all the Realms.”

“Does your king know about this?”

“He’s young, and still too naïve in the ways of tragedy. I, on the other hand, am too well versed in such things.”

“Really? I think I can manage a surprise,” Pepper said, her voice trembling with rage.

The only other warning Heylien received was the clinking of her bangles as they hit the floor.

Peter was having a damn good time, even though bullets were flying about, and he was sure he heard Hulk roar somewhere to his left. He also knew well enough not to fully engage in the fight,
so he took to swing around the main building while plastering the bastards to the walls with his web. Unlike Germany, Peter kept quiet this time, so he could hear the comm. And the constant chatter told him that even though the enemy had the drop, they were slowly being pounded into the dirt.

Suddenly the windows to his left exploded and the elf lord sailed past. Or at least parts of him did. Peter nearly face-planted right into the wall as he saw Pepper Potts standing in the blasted opening, her eyes blazing red, with her arms and hands on fire.

She spotted him and yelled, “Heylien betrayed us! He told Hydra everything!”

“Oh, shit,” Clint hissed. “Eyes up everyone! Thor, take the skies with Falcon! Lady Sif, the ground floor! Nat, your usual! Everyone else clear your assigned floors!”

With that Peter now knew London was also prepped for battle. He made another swing to find himself face to face with five attackers who somehow managed to crawl up the side of the building like some freaking ninjas.

“Hey, fellas!” Peter said brightly. Then he remembered Captain Rogers might not get the Star Wars reference. “Cap, Anakin…”

There was a loud clunking noise followed by Captain Rogers snarling, “I got it just fine!”

Before Peter went to entangle the five assholes, he could’ve sworn he heard Bucky’s quiet chuckle of amusement.

Darcy was pumped with adrenaline, with brief interspersed moments of pants-wetting terror. She quickly realized having Bucky Barnes as protective detail pretty much meant no bullets came near her. Unfortunately, the fuckers were using more than just conventional weapons. Darcy suspected the bastards had stolen alien weaponry from the divorce between SHIELD and Hydra, but right now she didn’t have the time to figure out the details.

Instead, she kept whipping out small discs from her tote and throwing them at the enemies followed by swinging her boomstick, as she liked to call it. During one drunken night of scientific shenanigans, both Jane and Darcy decided they needed weapons. Considering Jane was a walking, talking brainiac of a weapon, they dedicated their inebriated intelligence into making one for Darcy.

Enter the boomstick.

It didn’t emit lightning like Thor, but what it did was have the acoustic backup of Mjolnir. Wherever the disc landed, she’d aim the boomstick, which emitted powerful shockwave that would hit whatever the disc was stuck on. The blast would be relegated to that singular spot, but it would be akin to getting punched by Thor.

Darcy was by no means bloodthirsty, and she would avoid physical confrontation altogether if possible. But if any of these fucking Nazis thought they could get away with hurting Jane or turning her into a weapon, the heartless bastards were about to be on the receiving end of a godly ass-kicking. Even if the ass-kicking was delivered by a mortal woman.

Darcy noticed the fighting was dying down the same time she heard the familiar hum. With
dismay, she realized Jane had remotely turned on the Bi-Frost.

“Fuck!” Darcy hollered and elbowed Bucky none too gently. “Janey’s gonna go for it!”

Bucky didn’t need further information. He knew it was up to him to ensure Jane has enough cover to make a run for the portal.

In full panic, Darcy scrambled over to the cordonned off area and checked to make sure the design on the ground was still in acceptable form. Mercifully, the locator sticks were humming along, informing her they were functioning properly.

Bucky dashed after her, yelling in Russian and English. Darcy would’ve thought it was funny that she managed to irritate the implacable Bucky Barnes into losing it in two languages, but she was too busy ensuring that everything was in working order.

So, the first bullet that shattered her ribs and ripped into the upper left lung was only shocking enough for her to sway, as it took Darcy a moment to figure out what had happened. The second bullet that lodged into her left kidney spun her around. She landed on her stomach, almost on top of the runes.

Darcy didn’t want to bleed onto the symbols. She wasn’t sure if that would fuck it up for Jane. So, with herculean strength, she rolled away. It was only then Darcy heard Janey screaming her name. But Darcy was too busy not bleeding out on the symbols. She couldn’t fail her bestie now. Not when they were so close.

Steve froze in shock as he watched Darcy falter then drop. Without even thinking he swung his shield and heard the telltale thump of it hitting the sniper responsible for the attack. And his gaze was still trained on Darcy’s unconscious form, when he plucked the shield from midair and began running towards her even as Bucky reached Darcy.

A small, dark blur zoomed into his sight and grabbed his attention.

It was some type of drone, but the weaponry that was fixed onto it was familiar enough, as he’d seen the Chitauri use them. It fired and blew both Bucky and Darcy right into the portal. A curtain of shimmering light appeared and the two figures were gone.

“Clint! We lost sight of Bucky and Lewis. Can you see them in London!”

“Yeah, Cap, they’re here! We’ve got the fuckers crawling out of the goddamn sewers! Holy shit … was that Sif?!”

“She’s gone nuclear,” was Natasha’s even reply. “Ground floor is secure! We’re making our way up.”

But Clint didn’t answer.


“Thor’s busy right now,” Sam yelled. “And I’m in the building, but the wings are taking a beating because I can’t maneuver properly in here!”

A huge flash of light blinded Steve and he instinctively ducked behind his shield. It took him only a moment to regain his sight while the rest were still blinded. Pepper stepped into view, or at least the figure looked like Pepper. It was hard to tell as she was engulfed in flames that were so burning so bright she was almost all white.
Then, Jane came bolting out of the building. Her glowing hands warning Steve what she was about to do.

He screamed out her name but it was too late. She had gone through the portal, too.

“Falcon! Foster’s gone through the portal! Report!”

There was only silence, not even hint of background noise or even static. The comms were completely down.

Bucky looked down and was greeted by a smoldering stump where his metal arm used to be. And from the acrid but meaty smell, Bucky suspected his entire back was made up of third degree burns. So, the shock trying to overwhelm him came as no surprise, but he fought against it. Ignoring his injuries, Bucky got to his knees and looked around. He spotted Darcy only few feet away, halfway dangling downwards into the cavity that was the center of the building.

He crawled towards Darcy and grabbed her with his remaining hand. He was slowly trying to drag her to safety when a vicious kick sent him reeling forwards and Darcy right off the edge. His hold on her tightened even as the barrage of kicks continued. Bucky would’ve fought back but something truly horrifying had grabbed all of his attention.

Bucky was close enough over the edge to see the anomaly suspended right over the ground floor. It resembled a wave in the air, not unlike a mirage in the desert. Not that Bucky cared much what it looked like. He only knew that if he let go of Darcy, he would never see her again. At least not in this lifetime.

If Bucky felt the nudge of the rifle barrel at the base of his skull, he didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, he took a deep breath and tried to pull Darcy up, even as the edge of his consciousness began to turn white and cold.

There was a sudden explosion of sound, as if someone had turned up the noise volume to a level where Stark would appreciate it. Then Bucky's attacker yelled in surprise, as another person slammed into him from behind. The two twirled in the air before falling over the edge.

Bucky’s eyes widened in horror as Jane’s small figure caught his gaze. Her gloves, glowed ever so bright, allowed him to track her fall. That only lasted a second and she was gone in an opal flare along with the Hydra agent who almost executed him and Darcy.

A moment of silence reigned before the blowback from the portal’s explosion threw both Darcy and Bucky back ten feet and onto safer grounds. He looked up into the crumbled roof and the polluted night sky. He couldn’t see Thor, but he could hear the demigod screaming Jane’s name. His thunderous voice echoing down, down, down, following Bucky into unconsciousness.

Tony sat preternaturally still, reading the tablet in front of him. Pepper sat right next to him, her right side plastered to his left. Not that she could’ve moved as Tony’s left arm had a grip on her not even Bruce could dislodge.

“You know, I’m not a medical doctor,” Bruce said even as he finished bandaging Pepper’s hands.

Tony managed a weak smile at the old argument between the two of them. “I trust you more than most.”

“It’s not even a first degree burn,” Bruce told Pepper. ”So I really suggest you don’t aggravate
them. And you should probably prepare yourself for a truly terrible summer flu.”

Pepper gave a watery smile. “Thank you, Bruce. How’s Betty?”

“Busy helping Dr. Cho,” Bruce answered readily. “Clint’s got a concussion that’s going to leave him unavailable for anything more strenuous than eating for the next fourteen to eighteen days.”

“What’s the report, Tony?” Pepper asked gently.

“Six personnel dead, nineteen wounded. Thirty-seven Hydra or AIM fuckers in custody. And no, I didn’t bother to find out what state they’re in. Darcy … she’s in critical and too injured to leave London. Dr. Lambs from Saint Barts said she has to stabilize the kid before doing any surgeries. And that’s surgeries as in plural. Darcy lost too much blood to even think about cutting into her now.

“Barnes in stasis. He’s gone into shock, but considering the damage he took, that’s good news. As soon as the Compound is halfway back to normal, I’m going to build him a new arm. T’Challa is flying in with Shuri and some of their doctors to London. They’re bringing in as much of the equipment they can.”

“Tony…”

“Actually, I should start working on Barnes’ new arm right now. ‘Cause … ‘cause Steve needs him so fucking badly.”

Pepper kissed his graying temple. “I’ll have Rhodey run interference with Washington DC for now.”

Tony looked at her, then. His eyes bright with the shock that accompanied unfathomable loss. “What are we going to do, Pep?”

Pepper didn’t answer. Neither did Bruce.

Sam found Peter under the splintered remains of the tree in the courtyard. He wordlessly handed the kid a bottle of water and a protein bar.

“Did you talk to your aunt?”

Peter nodded mutely. “Yeah, I did. I never had to do that before. Call someone, anyone, to tell them I’m alive.”

“It feels weird, for sure,” Sam said. “Part of you is so damn glad you survived. But then, there’s the other part that’s wondering who else died so you could live.”

Peter buried his face in his hands. Sam pulled him into an embrace.

“And that’s why the Compound is so quiet,” Sam said. “Everyone’s going through what you’re going through, Peter. Don’t grieve by yourself, kid. It won’t help.”

“It wasn’t suppose to be them,” Peter said, voice clogged with tears.

“No, the Avengers, the personnel here … we all volunteered for this job knowing the risks. Hell, most of us had been shot at more than we’ve celebrated birthdays. But Jane and Darcy – they didn’t volunteer like we did. And we know it. It was our job to protect them when all hell broke loose.
“And we failed. But, Peter, we all failed, together. Not just you. Remember that. Don’t put this all on your shoulders, kid. From what I know, you did great. Even better, Peter, you did all you could.”

The first sob was so quiet, only Sam could hear it. The ones that followed were just as subdued, but not the grief behind them.

Sam looked up and spotted the familiar figure of Steve sitting on top of the main building, looking up at the night sky. It was so clear tonight because the Compound was on emergency backup generators and only few of the ground lights were working.

He then saw the even bigger figure of Thor flying down from the sky to join Steve.

“What’s the report from London?” Steve asked, his eyes never leaving the stars.

“They believe that AIM and Hydra had attacked London in the hopes of trying to secure the portal in order to test their weapons. And that we were trying to close it.”

“She’s fighting both her anger at Lord Heylien for his betrayal, and grief for our losses.”

“Will the elf king believe you when you tell him?”

Thor nodded. “He will. Lady Pepper had secured the surveillance footage showing Heylien’s murderous deeds.”

“Do you have any idea … where Jane might have gone?”

“No. I will contact Erik Selvig. With Darcy so injured, he might be the only person to decipher Jane’s work.”

“Good, get him here as soon as you can.”

“Captain…”

“Not now, Thor,” Steve begged, his voice hollow and aching. “Please … just let me look at the stars. I really, really need to look at the stars, right now.”

Thor wordlessly joined him as Steve looked up at the heavenly display, trying to decipher from their brightness which one belonged to Jane now.
Dr. Adam Ripley, the current United States Representative to the UN, was having an atrocious day. The pinnacle being the latest print from *The New York Times* no less; its front page presented a damning picture, above the fold and dominating most of the print space. It was also the special feature on the paper’s website; unsurprisingly, the website crashed because of the number of hits the article had received in the first thirty-seven seconds.

The picture in question? That of the Falcon holding Captain America’s iconic shield in the midst of confronting a rogue military unit in Latvia that had backed up HYDRA’s escape route to the Baltic Sea after their bases in the country were raided.

A full two months had passed since the attack on the Avengers Compound, and only a handful of press releases had come from the base. The first was the worst: detailing the fatalities, which, to the world’s shock, included Dr. Jane Foster. A preliminary investigation had revealed she was the primary target of the attack for her knowledge of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, and the Infinity Stones that had caused so much grief for humanity and beyond.

This revelation had riled up the academic community, who traditionally had avoided confrontations with the more militant population. But Foster’s death was the tipping point for them. They threw their metaphorical hat into the ring by siding with the Avengers, and their contribution had steadily helped not only the Avengers but the international intelligence communities in bringing down one HYDRA or AIM hub after another.

“Darcy Lewis?” Adam asked his old college friend, Phil Coulson, now the Director of the (hopefully) HYDRA-free SHIELD. “How is she? The last I heard Dr. Cho’s cradle was successful in healing her lung and kidney.”

“The artificial ribs were successfully implanted last week, and she is in stable enough condition to return to NY,” Phil answered. “As you can imagine, her security detail will be on high alert.”

Adam pulled up the one photo that had shocked him into stillness when he’d first laid eyes on it. That of the James Barnes, formerly the Winter Soldier, lying on his stomach, halfway dangling off a ledge. His mechanical arm was clearly blasted off, and his right one was desperately holding onto an unconscious woman. A HYDRA gunman was standing over them, with his rifle shoved right against Barnes’ skull. But Barnes didn’t seem to realize the danger he was in, as his entire focus was trained on the woman dangling from his grasp.

“How is … Mr. Barnes doing?” Adam asked gingerly. Captain Rogers’ best friend was still a sore topic for both Phil and himself, as the former believed the man was reformed while the latter was nervously waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Sergeant Barnes has fully recovered from his wounds, though the Serum in this case presented something of a problem.”

“How?” Adam asked, puzzled. He was, after all, a medical doctor who spent years in battlefield hospitals, and emergency care when he returned stateside.

“His wounds began healing before we could remove the debris melted onto his back. The spine
had fused over some of the Kevlar not to mention the remains of various weaponry he kept…”

“Jesus Christ, Phil, enough,” Adam whispered roughly. “I get it. Okay? I get it.”

“Do you, really? Adam?” Phil asked, finally revealing the level of frustration he was laboring under. “Because this pissing match you got going against Sergeant Barnes is something I just don’t understand.”

“Look, as the Winter Soldier, he had destabilized government after government, including ours. There is no way I could ignore that, no matter who spoke on his behalf.”

“Well, now that there’s nearly no one left to speak on his behalf, how do you feel about Sergeant Barnes?”

“I’ll sign the petition,” Ripley said, allowing exhaustion to seep into his voice as he reached over his desk. “Just give it to me before I change my mind.”

Coulson handed over the release papers that would allow James Buchanan Barnes to become a fully active member of the Avengers. Adam didn’t even bother to read before signing. That spoke volumes of trust they had shared, which unfortunately eroded over time as the two men butted heads over numerous issues since their time together in college.

“And Captain Rogers?” Ripley asked. “Does he need anything?”

“Are you asking when he’ll get back into the field?”

“Goddamn it, no!” Ripley finally lost his temper. “I’m asking how is he? I saw the fucking damage in NY, and I’m worried he got the brunt of it. The man’s not known for his sense of self-preservation. He tosses the damn shield more than he uses it to take cover, for fuck’s sake!”

“He’s on R&R right now. I know Captain Rogers received medical treatment for his wounds. Fortunately, his weren’t as severe as his friend’s.”

“AIM and HYDRA had off-world weapons?” Adam asked, only after reining in his temper.

Phil blew out a frustrated breath. “They did. We’ve confiscated them, of course. And that’s part of the reason why the Avengers are on what looks like a rampage. They don’t want anyone else to get hold of such weapons and use them.”

“You mean they are on a rampage, but they’ve got a good excuse for doing so.”

Phil gave a wan smile. “That, not to mention the rest of the base is baying for blood because of what happened, if you must know.”

“A base full of former military personnel, mostly composed from Special Forces. And they get attacked, with multiple casualties including the two civilians they were assigned to protect.”

“Why would they take it personally?”

“Indeed.”

Dr. Ripley wisely said nothing. It didn’t take a genius to realize that Coulson was enraged by the losses, too.

“Sergeant Barnes?” he asked delicately. “He was reinstated?”
Phil poured two glasses of whisky from Adam’s wet bar and handed one over to his friend. “I thought that after everything, the former Winter Soldier deserved recognition for what he had done on our behalf. And since Mr. Ross wasn’t around to throw his weight, it didn’t take much to have his rank returned to him.”

“What about Stark?”

“He’s splitting his time between upstate and NYC. But most of his attention is dedicated to recreating Dr. Foster’s Bi-Frost. And now that we have Professor Selvig fully on board, we hope it won’t take too much longer.”

“And our Asgardian guests?”

“Still in berserker mode,” Phil sighed. “You would’ve thought leveling five bases would be enough for Thor and Warrior Sif, but they just seem to consider the destruction to be an appetizer: nowhere near enough to satisfy their bloodlust.”

“That should give any other terrorist organization food for thought before getting into the Avengers’ crosshairs any time soon.”

“You would think,” Phil supplied with a frown. “But it will only be a matter of time before they start rustling.”

“Because without Captain Rogers … the Avengers aren’t complete, are they?”

Phil shook his head and put down the crystal tumbler. “There is something to be said for the First Avenger holding the shield.”

“It evokes hope,” Adam added. “Where once upon a time, we, as a nation, were doing not just the correct thing, but the right thing.”

“He’s a human being, though, Adam. He’s just a man.”

“Aren’t we all at the end of the day?”

Darcy exited the Quinjet firmly ensconced in Bucky’s arms. He quickly studied the surroundings before returning his attention to the woman in his protection.

“I’m okay, Bucky,” Darcy whispered, even though she hadn’t lifted her face from his chest. “Also, you smell good.”

Bucky bit back a laugh. “Darcy, that’s tac gear and leather. Also, maybe Ivory soap.”

“Well, the combo is doing things to my lady bits.”

Bucky placed a kiss on her head. “God, I missed you.”

“Yeah, Skype calls just can’t replace the real thing.”

“How are you lovebirds?” Tony sing-songed as he approached the couple. Floating next to him was a bizarre contraption that looked like a souped-up wheelchair.

Bucky studied the futuristic wheelchair for only a moment before his gaze narrowed dangerously. “No, Tony.”
“Yes, Tony!” he shot back. “Look!”

Darcy’s jaw dropped as the wheelchair suddenly began making graceful circles around its creator.

“Oh that’s so cool,” she whispered.

“No,” Bucky said flatly. “No fucking way are you gonna sit on that death trap.”


“I have to agree with Darcy on this,” Natasha said as she joined the group, warily eyeing the flying contraption. “The last thing Dr. Banner needs is for Darcy to sneak up…”

The wheelchair suddenly did a loop and was now upside down. Then, without warning, it slammed into the ground, repeatedly.

“Tony,” Bucky snarled, “get that thing out of my sight.”

Tony paled as he pressed buttons on the remote. “It shouldn’t have done that.”

“Tony,” Natasha said quietly and suddenly the temperature dropped by twenty degrees.

Tony turned off the wheelchair and watched as it mercifully sputtered to death.

“We’re leaving,” Bucky said flatly and made his way down the ramp.

Tony slipped right in front of him, blocking his path. “So, we need to drop by the lab. I’ve got some news that Darcy needs to hear.”

Bucky saw Natasha’s interest perk up visibly. Ever since the attack, she had been easier to read. He wasn’t sure it was because she was allowing her guard down more, or the result from watching so many people close to her get hurt.

Darcy huffed out a breath and finally looked up at Bucky. “Could we drop by the lab, please?”

Bucky winced. “Sweetheart, we just flew across the Atlantic.”

“Sam piloted like he forgot the lasagna was in the oven,” Darcy countered.

“Hey!” Sam squawked from inside the Quinjet. “Not my fault you folks can’t take my skills!”

“Shove it, chicken butt! I saw two British Airways jets diving for safety!” Darcy shot back. And though her voice was weak, her humor was not.

Sam stuck his head out and shook a threatening fist before disappearing back into the plane. Bucky grinned at the ridiculous conversation and he wasn’t the only one. Tony’s smile was genuine, and even Natasha was enjoying the back and forth.

“Seriously, Darcy will want to see this,” Tony insisted in a gentler tone.

Bucky studied the man a bit more and noticed that beneath the usual manic energy, there was genuine excitement. And something Bucky hadn’t seen since the attack: Hope.

“Bucky, it’ll take just a minute,” Darcy said. “And if you don’t want to stay, we’ll leave together.”

The lab turned out to be Jane’s. And it was busy with Erik Selvig rushing about; Sif and Peter, who
was spending his free weekends upstate, were following his frantic orders. Even Thor was busy, looking at holographs of various star systems.

Darcy waved at Erik. “Hey, thanks for coming.”

Erik rushed to her and gave a gentle hug. “Oh, thank God. I knew you were doing better, but it’s still good to see you.”

Thor brought over the most comfortable chair in the lab and let Bucky put her down before resting his forehead against hers.

“Brave sister. I only wish…”

Darcy cupped his chin with her hands. “No regrets. Remember? There’s so much to learn and no time to second guess our choices.

“Jane’s mantra, big guy. You know it. Hell, we all know it. I’m pretty sure even SHIELD knows it.”

Thor took a deep breath and then placed a kiss on her forehead. “You’re right, of course.”

“Am I late to the party?”

Steve’s question made everyone turn to face him. And, in concert, all their jaws dropped.

He’d shorn his hair so close, you could see the scalp. He also sported a grubby beard that spoke of weeks without shaving. His clothes were dusty, and the motorcycle helmet looked like it went through a mud bath. Still, he was standing tall and there was something akin to relief in his eyes.

“Fuck me,” Natasha said in a tone of pure aggravation.

Now everyone turned to her, eyes bugging out.

“No wonder we couldn’t get a bead on you,” she continued as if she hadn’t said anything outrageous.

Steve ran a careless hand over his tanned scalp. “Yeah, I figured you guys would be looking for me, so I decided to change my look.”

“How is it you’re still like hotter than hell?” Darcy whined. “Seriously, you could be mistaken for a leader of a motorcycle gang and you still look GQ worthy!”

”Holy shit!” Clint hollered from the hallway. “I didn’t recognize you from the security cams. I thought you were some nutjob who came window shopping!!”

He circled Steve once before looking at Natasha. “No wonder we couldn’t find him!”

Nat smiled. “At least you didn’t knock him out.”

Clint twirled the nerve injector in his grasp before putting away the weapon. “Yeah, small mercies and all that.”

“What is this about?” Bucky asked.

“I was wondering,” Steve added. “Tony called me yesterday, hollering on top of his lungs to get me back on base.”
Bucky looked at Tony, genuinely shocked. “You knew how to get in touch with this asshole?”

Tony shrugged. “The man wants a walkabout. He deserves a walkabout. But I wasn’t just going to let him trapeze off to the wild blue yonder without something.”

“Thanks for the credit card, by the way,” Steve said. “Much appreciated.”

“You didn’t use the fucking thing!” Tony sniped. “I thought you’d at least buy some gas for your deathtrap; that way I knew you’d be surviving.”

Steve grinned. “I know and that’s why I didn’t use it. But it’s the thought that counts.”

“So, why are we here?” Darcy prompted.

Erik pulled up a line of numbers on the holo table. “This was Jane’s last entry before she left.”

Steve studied the projected numbers and symbols. “I don’t recognize it.”

“Not surprising because it wasn’t in any database,” Tony explained, then amended, “Exactly.”

Darcy looked at him, her gaze sharpening. “What the hell are you saying, exactly?”

“These coordinates,” Erik explained, positively vibrating with excitement. “Lead to a planet in the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” Steve asked, his eyes widening. “Peter Quill.”

“Star-Lord,” Tony said. “He talked about the Nova Empire when he came by to pick up Rocket and Groot. I loaded some of his information into our database, but not all. Mainly because of all the tequila, and I wasn’t sure if he should be taken seriously, sober or not. But I remember that conversation. I told Jane about it while she was building the Bi-Frost, but I didn't think she took Quill seriously either.

“If you follow these coordinates, you land on Xander, the capital planet of the Nova Empire. And they should consider human beings as allies because of what we did to Thanos.”

Darcy gaped at the display. “Oh my God…”

“Jane entered these coordinates three times,” Erik explained. “Not once, not twice, but three times. She didn’t need to do it, and yet here they are.”

“It’s like she typed it again and again for her benefit,” Tony said. “Not for the computers.”

“The mittens … they’re controlled by her mind,” Steve recollected. “Not computers or servers. But her mind.”

“And Janey’s got a huge brain. She could remember perfectly any star chart and recreate it by hand,” Darcy whispered. “Do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Erik said. “The best I can say is we hope like hell and see what we can do at our end.”

“So, we rebuild the locator sticks,” Peter said urgently. “We can’t control her Bi-Frost, but something’s better than nothing.”

“And both New Asgard and Alfheim were told that should we not return within our allotted time,
they were to send help to Midgard,” Thor offered. “I am sure they could give some aid to this endeavor.”

“And since we are already twenty days late in our return, I believe we will have visitors soon,” Sif added, grasping Thor’s hand and giving it a hard squeeze.

“So, what the fuck are we waiting for? An invitation?” Darcy barked. “Let’s get started!”

“First off, all this needs weeks if not months of work,” Tony interrupted. “And you’re in no shape…”

“Yo, to the Manscaped-Douchewad-Who-Is Not-My-Dad,” Darcy bit back. “You listen to me carefully, ‘cause I’m not gonna waste my energy saying it twice. When Janey started: Hope was all she had. Hope, and faith in herself were what got her through years of belittlement from her so-called colleagues, if they bothered to pay attention at all to her work. Years of people mocking her ideas ‘cause their ginormous brains didn’t have a fucking drop of imagination.

“As for my health: my ribs are rebuilt, my lung works fine, and my kidney is back 100% at doing the pissing thing. So, don’t even. I want Janey back. You want Janey back. Everyone wants Janey back. So let’s haul ass and get started!”

“Bucky carried you here,” Natasha supplied gently.

“If you had a hottie like Bucky offering his services, would you turn him down?”

Bucky didn’t bother to hide his proud smile. Instead, he looked around the lab, “The lady’s got a point. What the fuck are we waiting for?”

Still, as the day progressed it was obvious Darcy was depending more on sheer will power than physical stamina. So, by dinnertime, Bucky peeled Darcy off her terminal and led her back to her apartment. After taking one look at the funereal quiet of Darcy’s place, he turned around and carried her to his rooms.

To Bucky’s surprise, Steve was in his study, staring at the shelves of magazines and other paraphernalia he’d collected over the years.

With gentleness that surprised even him, Bucky tucked Darcy into his bed. She had fallen into deep sleep during the stroll and didn’t wake even when he undressed her to her underwear. Though Bucky didn’t want to disturb her rest, he didn’t close the door. He suspected Darcy would have nightmares and wanted to make sure she didn’t thrash hard enough to damage her recently healed wounds.

“Hey,” Bucky greeted his friend who was still staring at the mess with an empty gaze.

Steve looked at Bucky. “I want to apologize for disappearing on everyone, but especially you.”

“Not my place to get angry,” Bucky said. “I would’ve done the same.”

“I went to DC,” Steve explained. “Sam gave me a name of a PTSD therapist who works in Bethesda. I stayed with him for a while, trying to figure out what … what I wanted. And who I wanted to be.”

“Sounds familiar,” Bucky said before companionably bumping shoulder with his best friend. “Got any answers?”
“No, got more questions, but they’re more manageable than the ones I had before.” Steve took a deep breath and pulled out empty boxes from the closet. “Faith and hope; that’s what Darcy said.”

“What kept Jane going when everyone else turned their back on her.”

“It’s so damn hard,” Steve whispered hoarsely. “I don’t know if I have any more left.”

“Not surprising, considering all the shit you went through.”

“What about you, Bucky?”

“Didn’t have any when I was with Hydra. Didn’t have any when I broke their programming. All I had then was rage and pain,” Bucky answered readily. “But, somewhere along the line: I found out I had some. Don’t know if I borrowed it from you guys or I managed to scrape whatever was left in me. Maybe it was an illusion because I wanted faith and hope? Can’t answer for sure.”

“But you found hope? And Faith?”

Bucky felt tears form and allowed them to fall. He placed a firm hand on Steve’s shoulder and squeezed. “Yeah, I did, Stevie. I found a lot, actually. And not just because of Darcy, either. Though it’s because of her I’m willing to take a risk again instead of hoarding it all like some fucked-up dragon.”

“So…” Steve took a deep, shuddering breath and braced himself to ask a very hard question. “To the end of the line?”

“Yeah, to the end of the line, Buddy. To the end of the line.”

Without a word, the two old friends began cleaning up Steve’s office. At first it was quiet, but the two began chatting as they flipped through the magazines and printouts, either to mock the articles or wonder what the hell the photographers were thinking when they took the pictures.

Darcy woke up six in the morning to find the two men making breakfast, looking refreshed despite working through the night.

A week after, another picture showed the Avengers in mid-conflict, this time during a hostage crisis on a luxury cruise liner in international waters. Captain Rogers was plain as the sunlit waters, his shield firmly in his grasp.

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Tony glared at the Alfheim guests who were squirming uncomfortably under his hostile gaze.

Thor leaned towards his friend. “Tony Stark, everything will be well. We’re going to New Asgard, and they are returning to Alfheim.”

“Call me paranoid, but I don’t know if I can trust this Bi-Frost any more than your so-called allies.”

Erik chuckled softly and peeked out from his terminal. “Fortunately I’ll be the one controlling the Bi-Frost.”

His statement did little to comfort Tony as the man continued to scowl.

The visitors from Alfheim gave a weak wave of farewell before hefting the coffin that contained Lord Heyliken’s body. With a flash of light that was nowhere near as beautiful as Jane’s display, the group disappeared.
Steve let out a deep sigh of relief and then blushed when he realized everyone heard him.

“Sorry,” he apologized, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s just … yeah, I got no manners is what I’m trying to say.”

Sif grinned. “Do not apologize, Captain. I think we will all be relieved to return to our homes.”

“And the moment we hear anything about Jane, we will contact you,” Thor promised.

“Thanks,” Steve said in genuine gratitude.

The two embraced each other before Thor waved his farewell to the rest. He, Sif, and the two Asgardians who came with the Alfheim guards entered the departure circle. And with another flash of light, they were gone.

“How is the Bi-Frost working?” Steve asked Erik. He was aware of the man’s mental issues, and was initially wary of him joining the team.

But it seemed when Jane’s welfare was on the line, Erik had no problem concentrating on the work necessary to bring her back. Though Steve was sure he’d seen Darcy cart around a carry-on for Selvig on the occasions the man forgot to wear proper clothing, such as shirts or pants. And now, a heavy fall jacket.

Tony thought the entire thing hilarious, and would actively follow Selvig around, if only to catch the man pant-less. It took Darcy few swift kicks aimed at Tony’s shins for him to finally stop being such a dick.

Erik sighed and rubbed his eyes in exhaustion. “It is a fantastic piece of work. I’m very proud that Jane was able to manage to cobble all this into working order. But I have to tell you; the number of variables needed to successfully create the bridge is colossal. As the weather gets colder, I don’t know if we can have successful Bi-Frost travels.”

“That’s alright, Professor,” Steve said. “You’ve done some amazing work here. Do the best you can. It’s all we can ask for.”

The air was already nippy and it was only the second week of October. He was warned, repeatedly, that by Halloween to expect the first snowfall. And that by mid-November, the base would be buried under snow, and no one would be able to see the ground until end of April, at best.

Still, he couldn’t ignore the anticipatory hum in his veins. At first he’d wondered if it was a remnant of his childhood: anticipating Christmas even before Thanksgiving hit. And though many of his current friends would consider his childhood presents meager, at best; Sarah Rogers always managed to make the best of what she had, and never left her only child wanting for more.

His phone rang, alerting him that his scheduled session with Dr. Linley was about to start in five minutes. He turned to Bucky who gave a nod of acknowledgement. Steve quietly left the group; they were well versed in packing up the Bi-Frost gear and didn’t need his help.

Steve greeted the people who crossed his path as he went to his apartment, instead of keeping his head down and ignoring the ‘hellos’ thrown his way. He locked his office door, knowing that he wouldn’t be interrupted for the next ninety minutes. Bucky would appear afterwards, gauging Steve’s state to see if he wanted company for dinner or not.

It wasn’t the ideal situation for the Captain of the Avengers, but it was miles of improvement compared to his state after the attack. And truth be told: even before Jane had joined him in the
Steve picked up on the first ring. “Good afternoon, Dr. Linley.”

“I just remembered today is when our off-world visitors leave. Did everything go as planned or were there explosions?”

Steve grinned. “Nah, the scientists knew what they were doing. Everyone’s gone home, including Thor.”

“So, the King of New Asgard returns to his homeworld,” Linley said. “That must be something of a relief.”

The old Steve would’ve argued that Thor was no cause for worries, but he was far wiser now. “Have to say it was. Still, I have to admit it was sad to watch him go. I’ll miss the big guy.”

“I’m still trying to digest the fact that the Asgardian is even bigger than you,” Linley confessed. The man was a life-long marathoner and clocked in at 150 pounds soaking wet.

Steve chuckled and then fell into discussion about the challenges of having off-world visitors and dignitaries, especially after the August attack and Lord Heylien’s betrayal of both his people and earth’s safety.

The ninety minutes passed quickly, so by the time they were done, the sun had already set and nighttime had descended with biting winds that made it feel like December was knocking on the door.

Steve heard Bucky come into the apartment with Darcy in tow. Wondering if they wanted takeout for dinner, Steve walked out of his office and into a heated discussion.

“What…” Steve never finished his question.

Darcy had turned to face him fully when he came into the living room and only then did Steve see that the right half of Darcy’s hair had been singed right up to her earlobe.

Bucky pointed at her. “She thought she could fix the fucking thing with duct tape.”

“Which I have done three times already, so excuse you!”

Bucky gaped at her. “Three times, woman. Three times! Shouldn’t that have been enough to worry you? If anything breaks down three times, I’d think it was time for the damn thing to be either scrapped or just taken apart!”

“Oh my God, Bucky! And where do you suggest I get another gravity decelerator?! From Tony’s ass?”

Steve burst out laughing as he watched the heated exchange between the couple. The two made a wonderfully entertaining pair even when they were steaming under their respective collars.

“It’s not funny, asshole!” Bucky hollered. “Her hair’s ruined!”

At that accusation Darcy burst into tears, which abruptly ended Steve’s amusement and doused Bucky’s ire. The two men decided to order Darcy’s favorite - Thai - while Bucky fretted over his girlfriend, and Steve hunted down someone who was semi-decent with hair styling.

It was a chastised Bucky who escorted Darcy home so she could wash her hair and go to bed. And
Steve suspected his friend wouldn’t return until near midnight.

So, he waited patiently for Bucky with beer and leftovers. With their serum-enhanced metabolism, leftovers didn’t survive more than couple of hours after being refrigerated.

It was almost one in the morning before Bucky returned.

“Don’t, just don’t,” Bucky said wearily as he took the beer. “She had her head stuck in the goddamn machine and the next thing I know there were flames and I could smell burnt hair. Jesus Christ, I thought she caught on fire.”

“That’s why Jane’s lab has Dum-E II.”

“And it’s about as useful as the first one,” Bucky groused. “You would’ve thought Tony would’ve made improvements, but nah. The second one’s even more stupid than the first.”

“I’m not sure if Tony makes his robots to be smart or cute,” Steve wondered. “You know, to appeal to Pepper’s sense of humor more than anything.”

Bucky paused mid-sip and considered Steve’s statement. “I would’ve thought fancy gifts from Cartier would be more his style.”

“Most of the time, yeah,” Steve said. “But Tony’s known for his unpredictability, and building those dumbass robots that make cute mistakes … I don’t know. Makes him more approachable, I guess.”

Bucky snorted and shook his head. “That reasoning doesn’t make any sense, which means you’re probably right.”

Steve chuckled. “Whatever.”

Bucky looked at Steve. “Why do I get the feeling there’s something you need to tell me?”

Steve sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Remember that whole ‘Thor is fertility god’ thing?”

“How can I forget? One of the reasons Darcy and I haven’t had sex was because we were both worried she’d get pregnant, no matter what protection we used.”

Steve stared at his friend wide-eyed. “Okay, that wasn’t what I wanted to talk about … but really? You’re that worried?”

“Look, I’m not sure if I can have kids. Or if I even want one, what with our lifestyle. Not to mention the fact that Darcy seems to be swimming in radiation while working. And she’s not exactly gunning to have kids right now. So, yeah, we’re worried. Besides, I know she acts like she’s back 100% but she isn’t. Not even close.”

“She really is pushing her limits, isn’t she?” Steve put down his drink. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk about. Pepper’s pregnant.”

Bucky put down his beer and sat back on his seat. “Holy shit. Tony Stark is going to be a daddy. Wait a minute, does he still want to be one?”

“Yeah, that’s not an issue, so don’t worry about it. But … Pepper asked me to be the kids’ godfather along with Rhodey and I said yes.”
“Kid or kids? As in plural? As in twins?”

“Yes, twins. So, I just wanted you to know that, because, for once, Tony’s practicing tact. I think Pepper threatened to tear him a new one if he mass texted everyone about the pregnancy. Also, after the babies are born, Tony is going to take some time off to be a full-time father. Which means, I’m going to need you to come on board as an Avenger. No more peripheral missions or intel gathering. You’re going out with us, and that includes dealing with Hydra.

“Are you ready for that?”

Bucky’s grin was lupine and ice-cold around the edges. “Yeah, I’m ready to go after those bastards.”

“Good.”

“So, I’m guessing the UN folded?”

Steve shrugged. “They believe that with you at my back I won’t go MIA like before. But the truth is I can’t go on every mission. That’s just not feasible, if I want to stay alive. So, like with Sam, you might just end up hoisting the ol’ gal once or twice.”

Bucky tried to fathom the level of trust Steve had just shown. And utterly failed. So, he backpedaled and went for humor instead.

“Better watch out Stevie. Your gal might prefer this boy after I take her around the floor once or twice.”

Steve flipped him a bird but said nothing. And the two men finished their beer in companionable silence.

Steve watched while laughing at the shovelbots that Tony had built to deal with the snow that piled on the various walkways threading compound. The snowplows were more than sufficient at cleaning the roads and the parking lots. But they were next to useless with walking paths.

Unfortunately, with the way Tony had programmed his creations, the shovelbots ended up wasting much of their time dancing around the humans populating the walkways. So, more often than not, personnel would grab a shovel and help out. It was a job that Steve particularly enjoyed. And watching the robots performing the hokey pokey was a definite plus on the entertainment side.

Without a sound, a thin tornado of light pierced downwards from the bright, frosty sky and into the research complex. Steve immediately threw his shovel into a snowdrift and ran towards the building. And he wasn’t the only one. Sam sprinted full tilt along with a host of security personnel with their sidearms drawn and ready.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” Darcy yelled from the lab. “It’s just UPS!”

Steve stopped to take a breath of air and calm his heart. For a minute, he had imagined one of the monsters from his nightmares ripping through Jane’s lab and their friends.

It took Steve a moment before he was able to dismiss the security personnel.

“UPS?” Sam asked as he followed Steve into the lab.

“Universal Postal Service,” Darcy explained, pointing at a nondescript mass on a small platform.
located right at the center of the lab, under the open skylight. It was roughly the shape and size of a Meyer lemon, though the color was dull grey.

Without hesitation, Darcy touched it and the object began morphing.

“Darcy?” Sam asked, never leaving his gaze from the damn thing. “What is it?”

Darcy raised a finger and hummed tunelessly even as the thing twisted and turned in her hand like a snake.

“Darcy,” Steve said in a cautionary tone.

The object suddenly began shrinking and turned into something more familiar.

“What the hell?” Sam asked, approaching Darcy. “Is that USB?”

“No, it isn’t,” Darcy said, grinning. “But it mimics one so that we can use it. Asgardian, if you’re curious. They build shit like this for the stuff they use day-to-day.”

“This is their rudimentary technology?” Steve wondered in amazement.

“I know, right? It’s so cool!” With that comment, Darcy plugged the USB into her laptop, which began making whirling noises even as the screen went black. Then lines of code began flashing.

“I thought the Bi-Frost was closed for the duration,” Steve said.

“It is for human and/or Asgardian travel,” Darcy explained. “But we’ve been sending small shit like this back and forth for a while. So far, nothing’s exploded or grown legs and screamed, so it’s all good.”

The screen suddenly switched back to normal and a new icon popped up.

“It’s a sound file,” Sam said. He clicked on the icon.

A slight buzzing noise started, as if the recorder picked up a rotating fan.

“I can’t believe this,” a familiar voice exclaimed. “Our engines are holding steady!”

“That’s Peter Quill,” Steve identified the speaker. “What the…”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks for your trust in my skills,” muttered a grumpy sounding, two-packs-a-day-smoker, who was much closer to the recording device.

“Are we transmitting, Rocket?”

Steve suddenly felt all the air rush out of his lungs and nearly fell flat on his ass. Darcy stumbled violently and Sam had to grab her to keep her standing.

“I think so,” Rocket replied. “But I can’t guarantee anyone’s listening, Princess.”

“Oh, I hope someone is,” Jane fretted. “I can’t even begin to imagine how worried my friends are right now.”

“Jesus Christ…” Sam managed to choke out. “She’s alive.”

“I aaaaaammmmm Groooooootttttttt,” a bizarre voice enunciated clearly if also slowly.
“Thank you, Groot. That’s very sweet of you,” Jane said.

“You don’t know how to speak Groot,” Quill barked out. “So stop pretending!”

“For the last time I do know how to speak Groot. I am something of a genius, you know!” Jane sniped back.

Darcy began laughing and crying at the same time, listening to her friend take umbrage because someone thought her a poor student.

“How do you want to visit New Asgard?” a sweet melodious voice asked.

“I do, but … but I really want to go home, Mantis,” Jane answered. “Just the work piling up because of my research is going to be a major pain to deal with. And the base must be in shambles from the attack, though I hope they’ve cleaned up by now.”

“I notice you didn’t mention any friends, which makes me wonder if you got any.”

“Peter Quill,” a deep male voice interrupted the conversation. “If Jane Foster has to talk about her friends to prove their existence, she would be incapable of being quiet!”

“That’s Drax,” Steve said, his voice trembling and weak. “He’s like Dugan without a drop of humor.”

“Will we be welcomed there?” another female voice asked in a clipped tone. This one strongly reminding Steve of Natasha. “With all the multiple attacks Midgard had suffered, I’m not certain if our ship appeared out of nowhere, we won’t be branded as hostiles and shot down.”

“Not likely, Nebula,” Jane answered without hesitation. “The moment we enter my solar system, I’ll be able to put out a signal that the Avengers can pick up. Or, at least, Darcy can. I have satellites in orbit so it won’t be a problem.”

“That’s good to hear,” Rocket grumbled. “Maybe this time I’ll get his gun. What with returning you to the Avengers.”

“Rocket, I might be able to get you Bucky’s rifle because he’s got a few. But I cannot get his arm. You know that, right?”

“Why not? He has to have more than one arm. What if one was destroyed? Eh? It makes no sense if he doesn’t have backups!”

“Guys, this is getting me all nostalgic about Earth, but I’m the pilot here, so can you all shut up?”

“So you can play Footloose? Again?” Jane said, laughter in her voice. “It’s an okay soundtrack but you’ve played it enough, don’t you think?”

“Get out of my cockpit,” Quill seethed. “Now.”

“He is sensitive about his music, isn’t he?” Drax said, not bothering to lower his voice.

Jane didn’t reply but Groot said, “I am Groot.”

Steve could have sworn he could translate those three words as something snarky.

With that the listeners heard some rustling and the noise level definitely died down.
“I swear, the only reason Xander upped our engines was to get her the fuck off their planet,” Quill groused.

“Please, she had no less than four marriage proposals during her stay,” Nebula stated flatly. “I was afraid we’d have to smuggle her back to Midgard.”

“She is a cutie,” Rocket supplied. “Can’t shut up to save her life, but still, not bad on the eyes. And got something between her ears. Not a bad combination if you ask me.”

“Funny enough, I didn’t ask you. So shut up!”

There was more static, but to everyone’s disappointment, only silence followed before the recording ended. Fortunately, another display popped up with rows of calculations, which Darcy quickly copied and pasted to a more manageable file.

“I’ll go wake Erik,” she whispered, wiping tears from her face. “He’s going to want to read this.”

Steve took a huge breath, and for the first time since the attack felt the thorny band around his heart loosen its grip.

“Definitely,” Steve said. “I’ll stay and make the calls. They’re going to want to hear this.”

Darcy didn’t point out the fact that Steve would probably play the recording over and over, and maybe copy it to the Initiative’s server in order to download it at his earliest convenience.

Sam sat next to him. “That’s a fucking miracle. I mean I know Foster’s a genius. But … the entire goddamned universe and somehow she gets it right.”

Steve smiled at Sam’s comment before breaking into laughter.

“I know I’m a funny guy, but I wasn’t trying to be funny now,” Sam said, looking askance at his friend.

“No, it’s that … I dropped off the suit I was going to wear for our date at the dry cleaners back in August, and I never picked it up.”

“I’m pretty sure you can show up in your pajamas and Jane won’t complain.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Sam helped him upload the sound file not only to the Compound’s private servers but also Starks’. And within fifteen minutes, Steve was fielding hysterical if also deliriously happy phone calls from the Avengers. He had to take extra time with Peter because the kid burst into tears in the middle of the conversation and had to take some time to pull himself together.

Then Steve was forced to impersonate a friend of the Parker family in order to have Peter excused from school because of his mini-breakdown in the middle of study period. A course of action Steve deeply regretted because as soon as he hit the streets, Peter promptly used his freedom to abscond to the Compound before lunchtime.

So, it was one chagrined Steve Rogers who had to contact the indomitable Aunt May in order to explain why in hell her nephew decided to do a runner all the way to Upstate New York during school hours.

Steve quietly explained the reasons, and bless the woman, all she said was:
“I guess returning from the dead is good enough excuse to take the rest of the week off. But tell Peter he better have his web-slinging ass back home by noon, Sunday.”

“Yes, ma’am. Both Stark and I will make sure of that.”

She hung up without a goodbye, which allowed Steve to give Peter a stink-eye of Captain America proportions.

“You could’ve called her before you left,” he admonished the youngest Avenger.

“I know but that meant she’d drive me here and that would mean she would miss at least two days of work. And that would mean…”

Steve raised a hand. “Okay, okay, I get it. Just help Darcy and Erik when they need you. And try to keep Tony from running over them.”

Peter winced. “Yeah, he does that when he’s excited.”

“Did I hear someone say my name?” Tony hollered as he zoomed right into the lab.

Steve dropped his head and moaned quietly, “Fuck.”

Peter looked hugely entertained by Tony’s arrival. “Wow, did you just suit up?”

Tony nodded as the suit dismantled around him in an elegant display of mechanical fluidity. It settled into a briefcase that looked as expensive as the rest of Tony’s outfit.

“So, Foster’s doing a Kessel Run?” Tony gleefully rubbed his hands together. “What can we do to make sure she gets here in one piece and stays that way?”

Steve glared at his friend. “I’m pretty sure Quill’s got that covered.”

“Yeah, I’m not worried about that,” Tony said. “But what are we going to do when his fucking space ship appears in international airspace? Let’s face it, every time that happens we end up at war with some hostile alien species.”

Steve remembered Nebula’s concern. “Goddamn it.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, no kidding. We have to make sure Quill’s arrival won’t be greeted with nuclear weaponry. And then properly reintroduce Foster because about seven billion people believe she’s dead thanks to Hydra.”

“Why would that be difficult?” Peter asked. “People are going to be glad she’s alive.”

“The public believed HYDRA killed her,” Steve explained. “And if she suddenly shows up alive and in one piece, there are going to be some who are jaded enough to believe SHIELD and the Avengers played them. Especially since we’ve been getting foreign powers to help us root out HYDRA and AIM bases since the attack.”

“There is one way that’ll definitely work in our favor,” Tony offered hesitantly. “But I don’t know how much Darcy’s boy toy is going to like it.”

Steve pulled out his cell. “Let’s find out.”

Adam watched the video with his mouth open. “Holy shit.”
“It is gruesome,” Phil agreed readily. “As you can imagine the Avengers and SHIELD did not want this to leak out because of the level of violence, not to mention all the alien technology involved.”

“So, Dr. Foster decided to just destroy her work and risk her life to save her friends?” Ripley asked after the video ended.

“Dr. Foster probably believed she had no choice. And I suspect she wasn’t sure if her Bi-Frost would succeed either.”

“But how could she have known Xander could receive her if they didn’t have Bi-Frost technology themselves?”

Phil knew this was the moment he had to lie flawlessly. “They have similar technology, which makes sense since their empire is composed of multiple planets. They are actually the largest ruling government in the Andromeda Galaxy. All of which made them a perfect target for Thanos’ genocidal rampage.”

“In the end, it was still a Hail Mary pass,” Ripley countered.

“She was desperate,” Phil agreed. “You can imagine the chaos, and what with watching her friend and Sergeant Barnes being blown right into the portal. She had no idea if they were alive, or if any of the Avengers would survive the attack. So, she decided to take herself out of the equation.”

“Save us from martyrs,” Adam muttered. “Do you have any idea when she’ll reach earth?”

“Dr. Selvig calculates some time late January or early February,” Phil answered. “Allowing the fact that Quill’s ship will make the journey safely.”

“And they’ll contact us the moment they enter our solar system?”

“Knowing Dr. Foster, the moment they enter the Milky Way Galaxy.”

Adam chuckled, eyes bright with wonder. “The Milky Way Galaxy, Phil. We have one of our own coming back from the other end of the universe, because she wants to come home.”

Phil took a deep breath. “About that. There’s something you should know. Adam, it’s important that you keep it to yourself. You can’t even tell Naomi or the kids.”

Adam frowned at his friend’s sudden change in demeanor. “What? And yes, I promise.”

“She isn’t just coming home, Adam. She’s coming back to someone.”

“But Thor…” Adam stopped abruptly as he finally connected the dots. “Are you serious?”

Phil nodded. “I am. Captain Rogers had one relationship since he had woken from the ice. And it was an unmitigated disaster. That’s not due to either party’s fault, either. The fact is his job as Captain America made it impossible for Rogers to have any semblance of a normal life. Then the Accords happened and you can imagine the rest.”

Adam leaned back on his chair. “No wonder he was so withdrawn.”

Phil raised a cautionary hand. “It wasn’t just Dr. Foster’s supposed death, Adam. Steve Rogers had been in one war after another since he was twenty-three. We’re talking nearly a hundred years of fighting, here. And yes, I know about his stasis, but if you think those seventy years on ice was anything like sleep, you’re sadly mistaken. Between WWII, the fall of SHIELD, Sokovia, Ultron,
“Which was why Falcon had the shield,” Adam concluded. “Something tells me that won’t be a one-time deal.”

Phil shook his head. “No, not if we want him to live long enough to make it work with Dr. Foster. Luckily for everyone, Dr. Foster is very well-versed in dating an Avenger whose life schedule is considered insane, and whose self-preservation is suspect at best. On the upside, this boyfriend lives on the same planet as she does, so she’d probably be happy enough just with that.”

“So, we better damn well hope she comes home in one piece.”

“And make sure her safety is at least guaranteed by those of us who know what happened when it wasn’t.”

“I’m guessing that’s why you wanted me to watch the security footage,” Adam concluded. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to introduce the video to the UN. And explain in detail the August attack. SHIELD can’t because our loyalty is suspect. The Avengers can’t because they have personal interest riding on this.”

“I’m not exactly an uninterested party, Phil. Especially since I signed off on Barnes.”

“Adam, the video will prove you made the right decision.”

“And that would make me equally suspect as you because I would be proven right.”

“No, your judgment was right,” Phil corrected him. “You’ve been successful in straddling the fence between the interests of the US and the UN for nearly a decade. This is just another check mark on that.”

Adam sighed. “I guess I better do something. And fast.”

“Christmas is coming,” Phil offered. “Everyone could do with some happy news.”

Adam snorted. “With a video that shows Sergeant Barnes half roasted and missing an arm, holding onto what could be a corpse. Not to mention the HYDRA bastard.”

“And a partridge in a pear tree.”

Adam couldn’t help himself. He burst out into laughter at Phil’s humorous take on the fucked up situation, even though the fucked up situation had a silver lining.

“Yeah, okay. We’re not too rich to turn up our noses on a free gift like this one.”

“We can’t afford to.”

“If I’d known the video was going to stir up this much drama, I would have negged it,” Bucky groused as he turned off the TV.

“Oh, c’mon, it’s Fox!” Darcy crowed. “As long as they’re blowing gaskets because of you, you know you’re doing something right!”

Steve chuckled. “She does have a point.”
Bucky leaned back on the sofa and made a rude noise. “I got fanmail now. And for some fucking reason women and men are sending me their underwear.”

Steve didn’t bother to stop his laughter from bubbling out. He took one look at Nat who was quickly losing battle with her humor as she pressed her lips together.

“What the fuck,” Bucky protested. “I thought dick pics were bad. But underwear? Who the fuck wants some stranger’s used underwear?”

Darcy keeled over to her side; her head resting on Bucky’s lap as she howled with laughter. Bucky looked down at her with bemusement and brushed back some of her loose curls to stop them from falling into her mouth.

“I swear, was it this bad for you?”

Steve nodded, wincing as he remembered. “Yeah, I had people throwing me all sorts of weird stuff back in my USO days. And there were fans who couldn’t take no for an answer and tried to sneak in backstage. Thank God the USO girls were so tough. Some of them even had baseball bats.”

“Are you saying that your fans had to be beaten back by actual baseball bats?” Nat asked incredulously.

Steve nodded. “Yeah, the bats came out on more than few occasions to handle the more … passionate fans.”

“You can say deranged, Steve,” Darcy choked out. “Oh my God…”

Nat didn’t laugh out loudly. Instead, she curled in on herself. It would look like she was in pain had her shoulders not been shaking in hilarity.

Bucky shook his head. “People are weird, no matter what century.”

Before Bucky could further comment on his and Steve’s ardent fanbase, their phones rang.

The groups dispersed immediately. It wasn’t a common occurrence where both Steve and Bucky were in on the same operation, so the handlers were on high alert and contacted every authority in the State of Massachusetts of the Avengers’ imminent arrival.

The attack was on MIT, of all places, right before the winter finals began. So, the campus was crowded with both students and staff, all hyped to the max thanks to various exams and thesis deadlines.

The attackers themselves were third-rate wannabes who had dreams of grandeur, but the student body was not. And Tony was furious that a group of nobodies went after his Alma Mater. Unfortunately, by the time the Avengers showed up, the terrorists were cornered into the Pierce Boathouse, holding hostage at least a dozen students and a family unfortunate enough to be touring the campus with their only child.

“I always hated that ugly building,” Tony said, his visor reading the body heat signatures in the boathouse. “Looks like Obie’s garage in Connecticut.”

“You have to be careful; it’s filled to the ceiling with rowing equipment,” Tony continued. “If any of those things gets hit, it’s going to turn into shrapnel and could kill anyone. I don’t think even Kevlar would be enough protection.”

“Are we sure they have a bomb?” Steve asked Tony.

“Yeah, they do. But from the looks of it, the bastards don’t know what they’re doing. I’m guessing their tech guy was the one that was shot earlier.”

“Which makes this entire situation even worse,” Bucky said, eyes narrowing. He turned to Nat. “So, steady and quiet.”

“Will do,” Natasha said as she exchanged her gun with a smaller one capped with a Stark-special suppressor.

“Go in quietly, immobilize if you can. Use deadly force if you must,” Steve ordered grimly. “There are kids in there, and some of them are young enough to believe they can be heroes.”

Clint checked in on the comms. “Tony, the Eisenhower looking building across the street from Pierce, what is it?”

“Burton-Connor, easiest house to break into,” Tony answered promptly. “Brick façade, so you could just scale it from the outside if ice isn’t a problem.”

“Never is,” Clint replied.

“Tony, fly-bys only but make it flashy,” Steve said. “Don’t engage them. Just get their attention. I’ll use the trapdoor from the river.”

Tony did just as Steve ordered, with his repulsors dancing across the Charles River, generating loud noises and making waves slap against the boathouse with great force.

Steve dove into the Charles and found the boathouse’s trapdoor that the schematics had revealed during the flight to Cambridge. Steve quietly broke open the lock and then waited the required five seconds to see if the terrorists had gotten wind of his presence.

The blast greeted him as he opened the door, driving him downwards into the river bottom. The concussive blow only shocked Steve for a second, so he was able to swim when the boathouse started collapsing into the Charles. Unfortunately he couldn’t clear quickly enough and the edge of the roof caught his right leg, smashing it and pinning him to the muddy bottom.

Steve screamed in pain, and swallowed the freezing water, which drove his panic deeper. He was struggling to free his leg when Bucky appeared next to him. Between the two, they managed to free Steve.

The icy currents were strong, but presented little problem for the two Avengers as they swam to the riverbank.

“This is the second time I dragged you sorry ass onto shore,” Bucky snarled as he tore open Steve’s damaged suit to reveal a horrific wound. “Maybe you should get a fucking clue and stop with the drowning, yeah?!?”

“Fuck you,” Steve hissed between coughing up what felt like half of the Charles River.

“Goddamn it, your leg is healing wrong,” Bucky hissed as they watched the bones shift.
“They got some of the best hospitals in the States right across the river,” Tony said as he picked up Steve in a bridal carry. “They’ll fix you up in no time.”

“SHIELD’s going to have a fit,” Bucky said, grinning.

“SHIELD can kiss my sweet ass.” And with that Tony flew towards Boston.

Bucky turned to watch the hostages being swarmed by emergency personnel even as Natasha single-handedly and rather ungraciously dumped the five men responsible for the attack into the waiting arms of the FBI agents.

It was only then he saw multiple cameras pointing at him, and the wide-eyed stares. Bucky was only too well aware that his status as a member of the Avengers was superseded by his previous incarnation as the Winter Soldier.

So, it wasn’t until one of Barton’s arrows glanced harmlessly off his right side that Bucky realized he was holding Steve’s shield.

“Rockin’ the wet look there, buddy,” Barton said conversationally over the comm.

Bucky grinned and shook his head, ignoring even more cameras pointing his way as he walked up the bank to join Natasha as she dealt with the officials. Maybe it was because the mission turned out as well as could be, or the fact that no one was shouting slurs at him. But whatever the reason, Bucky’s old Brooklyn accent came out strong, and with it no small amount of charm and sarcasm.

And though he didn’t speak much to the public, with everyone’s cameras recording, James Buchanan Barnes finally emerged from the icy shadow of the Winter Soldier.

Nurse Jackson didn’t get paid anywhere enough to deal with this shit. Not that treating Captain America was a shitty deal. Especially since he was involved in that harrowing rescue at MIT and nearly drowned in the process.

No, what she didn’t want to deal with was the army of non-descriptive government agents parked in front of her station, all looking like they were one phone call away from locking down the entire hospital.

“Director, with all due respect, Captain Rogers is of sound mind and conscious right now. Which means I cannot override his medical treatment.”

The non-descriptive, mild-mannered agent had the pinched look down pat. “I understand that, and I am not…”

Jackson tipped her head sideways and narrowed her gaze. “I wasn’t done speaking.”

The stranger reared back slightly, as if had been decades since someone had dared to interrupt him.

“And he has not authorized anyone to read his medical files, or release it to any governing body.”

“But there is no guarantee the information will be safe here.”

“Which is why I have it only on paper,” Jackson said.

“Where is it, then?”

Jackson looked at him with something akin to pity. “I’m not telling you where his file is.”
“You realize you’re actively obstructing a government agency from carrying out their duties.”

“Director Coulson,” Steve’s voice rang down the hall. “Leave the poor lady alone. She doesn’t have the files ‘cause I have it with me!”

Coulson looked abashed by the announcement. Jackson didn’t drop her challenging glare.

“Like I said, the patient is conscious and aware of his surroundings. Furthermore, as he is an active member of the United States Army, any and all medical information, as necessary, is to be released to the Pentagon, with the patient’s express permission, of course. Or his health agent should he become incapacitated mentally.

“Anything else, Director?”

Coulson’s smile was genuine if also strained. “Thank you for your help, Nurse Jackson.”

The female agent standing right behind him gave Jackson an impressed look before following her boss to Captain Rogers’ private room.

“Don’t get paid enough for this,” Jackson muttered as she collapsed into her chair.

“Who does?” Iron Man asked, as he materialized from around the corner.

“Buddy, I can’t deal with you right now,” Jackson warned as she shook a cautionary finger at the superhero camped out in front of her.

Tony Stark emerged from his glorious million-dollar tuna can and the first thing he did was give her a wink.

“No worries, I’m here to drop off some information. I also wanted to warn you that in matter of minutes the good Captain will be climbing the walls. In fact, he’s going to try everything in his power to get the hell out of here. You mission, should you accept it, is to prevent him from doing so.”

Jackson’s jaw dropped open. “What? How in hell am I supposed to stop him? With charm and grace?”

“I haven’t a goddamn clue. I never could, but I thought you might like some warning.”

Jackson made a strangled noise protest as she watched Tony Stark saunter down the hallway, with his goddamn suit floating behind him like some garish shadow.

“Captain Rogers,” Coulson greeted the patient. “MIT would like to extend their thanks for the help the Avengers gave today. The hostages are physically unharmed, though I’m guessing more than few will be experiencing residual trauma for a while.”

Steve winced as his bones were knitting, correctly this time. The medical staff had the horrific distinction of breaking them in order for the bones to reset properly. And they had to do it without giving him any pain medication, since his body burned through those so quickly as to render them useless.

It took only few more bones snapping together for three agents to make their excuses and leave. Which left Agent May and Coulson by Steve’s bedside.

“Do you want some … beer?” May asked, wincing as another bone snapped in place. “Hell, how
about a hamburger? A blow to the head? Something to get your mind off everything?”

Steve gave a choked laugh. “Nah, I’m used to this. But a burger does sound good, if it’s not too much trouble.”

May never had the chance to answer as Tony entered the room.

Coulson didn’t even bother to turn around. Steve suspected Phil had a special innate Tony alarm that went off whenever Stark was in close proximity.

“How can I help you?” Coulson asked politely, still refusing to face Tony.

“Not today. I thought you guys might like to know Foster’s arriving in two hours.”

“What?” Steve asked in a weak tone.

Coulson slowly lifted his face until he was staring at Tony. “Dr. Foster?”

Tony smiled, eyes bright with happiness. “No joke. We got the message fifteen minutes ago. They’ve entered our solar system, and Quill’s put on full throttle. I don’t know if Jane has aggravated him to the point that he’s willing to risk his skin. But whatever the reason, Star-Lord is hot to dump her on us.”

Steve didn’t bother to check if his bones were finished healing. He started getting up but was immediately shoved back into his bed by May.

“No, buddy,” Tony said. “You can’t move until your leg’s healed.”

Steve looked up at his friend, belligerence outlining every muscle in his body. “What did you say?”

“When Jane lands, she’s going into isolation to make sure she hasn’t brought back any hitchhikers in her system. So, there won’t be any chance for exchange of bodily fluids until she’s cleared.”

May looked at Tony with something akin to admiration and exasperation, which made her weirdly resemble Pepper. “Does the Compound have the facility for such an event?”

“We have. I built the isolation chambers myself when we received the first transmission.”

“And once Dr. Foster is in medical care, then what?” Phil prompted.

“Oh, we have presents for the Guardians. You know, to say thank you for playing Uber for Jane. Pretty much across the entire known universe. The Compound’s also prepping for an impromptu ‘holy fuck she’s alive’ dinner party. Pepper kiboshed on the idea of serving alcohol, so no worries there, Agent Agent.”

“What presents are you planning on giving to Quill and his friends?” Phil’s mild tone belied the hawk-like gaze with which he studied Tony.

“Something they asked for a while ago, actually,” Tony answered smugly. “And few other interest tchotchkes.”

“Any chance SHIELD could be in the greeting party?” Phil asked.

“Oh, you’re more than welcome to say hello, though I can’t promise the visitors will be able to speak English. Remember Groot?”
Steve had to bite back his laugh. “Oh yeah, that guy.”

“And Drax, who’s roughly the same size as Thor, and has zero sense of humor.”

“So, I’ll be there,” May said. “I don’t have any sense of humor, either. We’ll get along just fine.”

Tony didn’t say anything. Instead, he gave her a once-over and shrugged. “Sure, the more the merrier.”

Another snap had everyone’s attention riveted once more to the patient.

“How many bones did you break?” May asked, wincing.

“Shattered, actually.”

“It healed completely wrong,” Tony finished. “Well, Captain, as soon as you’re done grossing out the SHIELD agents, you’re more than welcome to join the party at the Compound. It should be interesting.”

“Give me twenty more minutes,” Steve pleaded.

“Nope, gotta go now. Pepper’s waiting for me.”

With that, Tony’s suit encased him. He gave a jaunty wave, opened the window, and flew off.

“He does know how to make an exit,” May said conversationally.

“Don’t worry, Captain. As soon as you’re done we’ll take you back to NY,” Phil offered sympathetically.

Steve looked at May, “You know how to fly a jet?”

“Trust me, it’s easier to list things Agent May does not know than to make one about what she does know,” Phil said. “In fact, she’ll stay with you, in this room.”

The threat was clear. Behave, or you’ll find yourself staying overnight. Captain.

Absolutely no one believed Agent May when she told them that Captain Rogers’ pout could rival that of a five-year-old’s.

Darcy was practically dancing in place as she looked up at the night sky. Bucky had to stop himself from grabbing hold of her, because the entire landing site was covered in a sheet of thin ice, and the last thing Darcy needed was a concussion.

Still, her joy was infectious. They had hoped and prayed this day would come. And now that it was here, pretty much everyone was at a loss on how to behave. So there were outbreaks of nervous laughter as everyone waited for Jane.

Bucky looked down at his hands and wondered what people would say to Jane when they faced her. What he would say.

What do you tell someone you thought dead? That there was a fucking memorial on their behalf? And an empty grave complete with a gravestone, lauding their achievements? And that your friends had to backpedal and destroy the fucking thing because they were overjoyed by your survival and horrified by their betrayal?
Forgive and forget? Here, have a beer? We missed you so much we DVR’d all your favorite TV shows because we couldn’t help ourselves? Pizza or Chinese for dinner?

Sorry to tell you, but your boyfriend was a dumbass and won’t be here to greet you ‘cause a building fell on him.

Not for the first time Bucky wanted to punch Steve, even though his latest mishap was more of bad luck than bad planning. Still, the desire to hit his best friend after such a fiasco was pretty much ingrained in Bucky, so much that it was practically an involuntary response.

Darcy bounced like a rabbit until she was in front of him. Her eyes bright with unshed tears.

“Janey’s coming home,” she whispered, resting her entire body against his. “My scientist bestie’s almost home.”

Bucky leaned down and kissed her hair. “Yeah, she is.”

“Everything’s going to be different,” Darcy said. “A human being has traveled across the universe on a human-made Bi-Frost, and then came back on an alien space ship, piloted by a dipshit but a human dipshit.”

“And knowing Foster, she probably has enough data to drown the entire Compound in research for the next year or two,” Bucky said drily.

Darcy’s smile was radiant. “Ain’t it great? No matter what, Janey is still Janey.”

Bucky’s gaze softened. “Yeah, that is great.”

Bucky understood what Darcy didn't want to say while being surrounded by strangers.

*Things will change, but they will remain the same. Not because they’re infallible, but because they’ve been through changes before, and know how to handle whatever is coming down the pipe.*

“We have a visual,” Tony announced, his voice thick with emotion.

The personnel surrounding the landing site tensed up, and more than one held their breath in anticipation as an aircraft, approximately the same size as the smallest Learjet, slowly swooped down before landing gracefully in the lit area. It wasn’t Quill’s spaceship, so Bucky guessed it was an exploratory craft of some sort.

And yet no one raised their weapons as the door slid open and a small ramp smacked onto the ground.

Without warning Jane appeared in the doorway before jumping right from the ship, completely ignoring the ramp altogether. She skidded badly on the ice before gaining her balance.

“Jane!” Darcy yelled and tried to run towards her.

Bucky grabbed hold of his crying girlfriend even as she struggled against him.

The only visible change was Foster’s hair which had grown long. She looked around with tears in her eyes, her hands pressed against her mouth.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony said, his voice shaking with emotion. “It’s so good to see you.”

Jane waved at the crowd. “Hi, I’m Jane Foster and I’m home.”
She spotted the containment suit and put it on without a fuss. Only then did Bucky let go and watched Darcy as she ran headlong into Jane’s open arms.

The two women sobbed openly, not caring that strangers were watching. Truth be told, no one did care and more than few strangers watched with tearful gazes. Erik joined them. And for a moment, the trio that started Jane’s intergalactic journey so many years ago in New Mexico huddled together in solidarity.

Helen joined them with a tablet in her hands. “This is for you. So you’re aware of what procedures you’ll be going through for the next forty-eight hours.”

Jane carelessly took the tablet and looked around the group. “Okay, so …”

Bucky answered the question in her eyes. “The dumbass got hurt earlier today. He’s doing fine but the docs won’t let him go until he’s fully healed.”

Jane’s smile was teary but genuine. “Business as usual, then?”

Bucky laughed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

She gave a thumbs up. “Good to know.”

With that she returned to Rocket who had piloted the craft and was waiting in front of the ship.

“Thank you, for everything. And I mean it,” Jane said with a fond smile. “And please do tell the people of Xander I am grateful for their patience and hospitality.”

Rocket nodded. “Yeah, I will the next time we’re robbing the place.”

Jane barked out a laugh. “Maybe not then.”

“Groot’s gonna miss you,” Rocket said softly. “I don’t think he had such a good teacher before.”

“He was an excellent student,” Jane said proudly.

“Go, your people are making me nervous,” Rocket said, pointing his weapon at the humans surrounding them.

Jane leaned down and hugged him fiercely before following Helen. Rocket gave a huge sigh, as if his heart was breaking just a little.

“Damn fine lady,” he muttered. “And a decent pilot, too. Once we got her love of speed under control.”

Bucky shook his head. “Had no idea about that.”

“Made Quill all nervous every time she got into the pilot seat,” Rocket said, then looked up at him closely. “Hey, you’re the shiny arm guy.”

“I am,” Bucky answered readily. “So, we have some gifts for the Guardians. For all you did for us.”

Rocket shrugged. “The least we could do after what you guys did with Thanos.”

He then looked at the stack of airtight crates off to the side.
“Any interesting weapons in there?” he asked, curiosity already perking up.

“No, can’t have that,” Tony answered with a crooked grin. “But it’s all good. Trust me.”

Rocket looked up at Tony. “Good stuff?”

“Have you ever had pineapples? Strawberries?”

“What are those?”

“Food of the gods, my friend,” Tony said. “The best and freshest Earth could produce. And some of the best alcohol money can buy.”

“Really?” The gleam in Rocket’s eyes was genuine. “Well, then I better load them up!”

If anyone thought it was hilariously bizarre watching a talking raccoon use a trolley to haul the crates, they wisely remained silent.

Darcy was babbling mile a minute when Bucky showed up. Jane was in a isolation chamber, which sounded horrific, but Darcy had the foresight to turn the room into something akin to a five-star hotel, complete with WiFi and top-of-the-class entertainment unit.


Jane looked tired but in good spirits. “No. Darcy was giving me the latest updates on our favorite shows.”

“I haven’t even begin to scratch the surface, not that it matters. Everything’s been DVR’d, so you’ll catch up.”

“Okay,” Jane said. “I think you should get some rest.”

“Janey, it’s not even seven!” Darcy protested.

“Then some food. I know you. You probably haven’t eaten since lunch. Well, except for coffee.”

“Tony had a bit of a party earlier,” Bucky explained. “There was around-the-world buffet and I mean just that.”

“Oh, as soon as I can, I’m going to eat my body weight in Indian food,” Jane stated adamantly. “We lived on MREs while traveling. Which makes sense, but I do miss spicy food.”

“Forty-eight hours, Janey.”

“FYI, Steve touched down fifteen minutes ago,” Bucky informed her. And was rewarded with a smile of delight from Jane. “And getting changed ‘cause the idiot was still wearing his Captain America getup.”

“Okay, tell him not to rush,” Jane said. “I don’t want him…”

Darcy blew a loud and very long raspberry. “Yeah, try harder there.”

Erik joined the group. “Your labwork is being done right now. And the moment we get anything, we’ll tell you, Jane.”
“Thank you, Erik,” Jane said.

Bucky looked at his buzzing phone and grinned. “Steve’s coming.”

“Ahh, time to make ourselves scarce,” Erik said wisely and ushered everyone out of the room.

Darcy looked at Bucky with an interesting gleam in her eyes. “So, do you have plans?”

“No, I figured you got about a million things to do,” Bucky answered.

“Yeah, no,” Darcy grabbed his hand. “C’mon!”

Bucky allowed her to lead him clear across campus to the residential complex. She didn’t bother to take the elevators and instead dragged him up the stairs and into his living quarters.

She peeked into Steve’s bedroom and saw a mess of clothes and socks. “He’s really, really gone to visit Janey right now?”

“Yeah. Why are you asking?”

She shoved him unceremoniously into his bedroom. “Remember that thing we talked about before everything went to shit?”

Bucky suddenly felt a hot flush from head to toe. And he could’ve sworn his left arm heated up too. “Um, yeah.”

Darcy wiggled her brows.

“I thought you wanted to wait until Jane’s…”

“Back. She’s back. And Steve isn’t going to leave her side until she’s out of isolation. Which means I have about two days to start making that fucking dent in your celibacy calendar.”

With that Darcy performed a hypnotic shimmy while pulling her arms in towards her body, which left her sleeves dangling uselessly. Suddenly her hands reappeared with the right one holding her bra.

Bucky couldn’t fathom how she managed that interesting maneuver since she was still wearing a wool sweater, a long-sleeve t-shirt under that, and a fucking down-filled coat because the goddamn wind chill was -11°F.

Darcy fluttered her bra to get his attention. “Is that a yes? No? Maybe…”

Bucky didn’t bother to answer. He took out one of his many, many knives, grabbed the bra from Darcy before opening his bedroom door. He nailed the knife into the wood at eye-level, hung the bra from its handle and slammed the door closed.

He then locked the door, and just for good measure, Bucky quartered another knife into the space between the door and its frame, making it nearly impossible to open the door without resorting to violence.

“Sweet,” Darcy whispered. “Um … got any condoms? I’m on the pill but I want to make sure.”

“Sweetheart, I bought a packet in August.”

Darcy, bless her, looked tragically disappointed. “Just a packet?”
Bucky’s lupine smile was both predatory and gleeful. “The Commissary calls it Captain’s Special. Let me show you why.”

With that he leapt clear across the room, and tackled Darcy onto bed. She responded with a loud ‘whoop’ while trying to wiggle out of her coat with Bucky still on top of her, determined to kiss her senseless.

Fortunately for everyone living on the same floor as Bucky, the room that was adjacent to his was Steve’s study. So, most on that floor were spared of the noises that emanated from the bedroom. Unfortunately, those who lived right above and below Bucky’s bedroom weren’t so lucky, and were forced to vacate by midnight if they wanted to have a wink of sleep for the foreseeable future.

Without reservation, everyone who caught sight of Captain Rogers stopped dead in their tracks, and gaped as he made his way to the Medical Wing. Helen had kindly updated him on Jane’s condition, and it looked very promising for her. So, his emotions were flying ever so high as he dressed in his best suit and leather wingtips. He topped the entire elegant ensemble with a deep blue cashmere coat and silk scarf.

Still, Steve was nervous enough that he had to force himself not to tap the bouquet of tulips against his leg, keeping beat with his pace. And it took some attention for him to balance the coffee tray as the paths were icy and slushy at the same time.

Still, with some grace and luck, Steve entered the medical wing with nary a wet spot on his clothes or his shoes.

Erik took one look at him and gave a low whistle. “Looking good there, Captain. Got a hot date?”

Steve’s smile was blinding. “Yes, I most certainly do.”

“Go, can’t keep a lady waiting,” Erik said with a wink.

“No, I can’t.”

Steve stood outside the isolation ward, wondering what he was going to say. What Jane would say to him after everything she’d been through.

She’d seen the universe she always dreamt of visiting. Stars that I would never see, not even in pictures. What if … what if this world, this life isn’t big enough for her now that she had a grand adventure? What if she wants to keep on exploring? After all, her Bi-Frost could get her there.

Suddenly the door in front of him slid open. Steve turned around to see who had triggered the sensors and found Natasha. With a feline smile she shoved him through the entrance.

Steve barely managed to keep hold of the tray and had to perform a full spin to get his balance again.

“Steve?”

Jane’s voice gave him the courage he didn’t have only seconds before. Steve slowly turned around and faced Jane who was getting up from her bed; the scientific journal in her hand falling onto the floor.

“Steve?” she asked, her voice sure and steady despite the tears falling down her face.
“Oh God,” Steve whispered, studying her with the intensity he rarely used on a person.

Realizing he needed to talk to Jane instead of standing like a statue, Steve sat down on the armchair in front of the barrier that separated her room from the rest of the ward.

“Are you okay? Bucky told me you were hurt earlier today.”

Her question about his welfare almost caved in Steve’s chest. He closed his eyes and mentally counted backwards from ten to regain control.

Steve looked up at Jane and wordlessly placed the tulips and her favorite espresso drink on the tray that slowly slid through the containment barrier. There was a brief flash around the tray, sterilizing its contents before arriving on Jane’s side.

Jane took the drink and tulips in her hands. Her first sip was delicate, but the satisfaction that bloomed on her face was an outburst of pleasure. She then looked down at the cheerful flowers, their riotous colors belying the fact that it was freezing December outside.

“You look dressed up. Did you come from a meeting? Or a press conference?” Jane asked as she sat across from him.

Steve smiled at Jane. “When a lady throws herself off a building to save your hide. And then travels across the known universe so she could spend time with you? The least you could do is show up on your first date dressed properly.”

Jane tried to cover her laugh but the flowers and the coffee cup made that impossible. Not that Steve wanted her to. If he could Steve would make sure Jane would laugh every day with such carefree abandon.

“So, about Eddie…” he began with a teasing grin.

Jane’s eyes widened. “You actually took in the Bilgesnipe?”

Steve shook his head. “No, I did something far worse. I didn’t stop Bucky and Darcy from going to a local animal shelter. They said it was for some charity thing, but I have my doubts.

“They came back with a cockatoo whose name is actually Eddie. Its wings are damaged so the bird can’t fly, but it can swear with the best of them. I’m pretty sure both Nat and Bucky have been teaching the bird to curse in Russian. Eddie is now living in the labs, by the way. Darcy even made a room for it in one of the supply closets. Did you know cockatoos can live up to 100 years? And Eddie is only a teenager.

“The goddamn bird might outlive us all, if Hulk doesn’t mistake it for a noisy drumstick.”

Jane had to put down the coffee and the flowers because she was laughing so hard, she nearly toppled off her chair. Steve sat back and watched Jane as she fought to keep herself upright and mentally noted their first date as a resounding success.

Soldier out of time, was what Loki said about him. The demigod was both right and wrong in that ruthless summation of the man born to Sarah and Joseph Rogers on July 4th, 1918.

Captain Steve Rogers was a soldier, and he made peace with that fact. And for a soldier, there was no such thing as small victories; all victories mattered, period.

So, even with Jane encased behind an impenetrable barrier, and him sitting only five feet away,
Steve felt like he had all the time in the world, and that was a good thing. Finally.

fin.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, thanks to all the readers who stuck along for the ride. And those of you who made comments, your encouragements meant a great deal even though I didn't respond. I used to back in the days of yore, but unfortunately it became an obsessive thing with me, and I ended up dreading it. So, I stopped writing fanfic for few years just to stop the spiral from overwhelming my thoughts.

Now, I offer music instead. And hopefully you guys will enjoy the selection!

Bugle Boy!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!