Strange motels and high-roller suites, natural and unnatural wonders, learning too much about your companions’ biological quirks, meeting new people (and some very old people), wrestling with moral quandaries, ingrained habits, and also an alligator, finding your way and losing your grip and finding each other…
The elevator stops on the 23rd floor of a seventies-era office tower, door hitching as it opens, revealing a tired corridor of unrented space. The suite has a dented brass plaque screwed next to the door, Kintsugi Consulting.

Bruce raises his fist.

Before he can knock, the door opens a hand span and a familiar voice says, “Been expecting you, I made coffee.”

“Hill’s a tattletale.”

Nick Fury leads him through a waiting room into an office. After a couple weeks on the road with Natasha Romanoff, Bruce can’t help but notice how the furniture is arranged out of the sight lines of the door and windows.

“Maria Hill is a world class spymaster,” Nick pours coffee into mugs that are just as unpleasantly dated as the decor. “She's betting I'm going to be the tattletale in this situation.”

Bruce bites the inside of his bottom lip until he can speak calmly. “She said you might know things, and that you might even tell them to me. To find her.”

"This used to be a psychiatrist's office,” Nick hands Bruce a cup of coffee and takes one of the chairs, soft worn upholstery and wide enough to curl up in. There are circular stains on the carpeting, darker brown and white limescale, where large potted plants were over-watered. “I hope that doesn't bother you.”

Bruce shakes his head out of politeness more than anything else. Nick Fury makes him more wary than any ghost of psychiatry past in the shabby earth tones of the room. “S’fine.”

"I already told Steve Rogers that I don't know where she is."

"He said that."

"Are you so cynical as to doubt Captain America?” Nick's mock incredulity is annoying. "Or did
you make the leap that any lie must have originated with me?"

“Neither.” Bruce knows something about Nick that Nick doesn't know he knows: Nick trusted Bruce with his life. Not when his back was to the wall, either, because he had that faked-death plan in his back pocket ready in case of emergency. Even more than keeping the US Army off his back and letting him wander for years until he was needed against the Chitauri, the idea of Nick Fury shooting up bleeding edge untested Banner tech is what gives him a warm fellow feeling toward the man. "You don't know where she is for certain. You have suspicions, but you're not going to share them with Rogers."

Nick shifts in his seat like the conversation has only now begun.

"When Natasha comes back," Bruce picks at the upholstery, hearing the stubborn hope in that *when* but letting it lie, "Steve can swoop in as a character reference, as a stamp of approval people can trust if she comes back to the team. Step one is location and assessment, and he can't be part of that if it goes to shit."

"Some other considerations in the mix, but that's the gist." Nick sips his coffee, leaning casually back with a leg crossed, and he's only missing a notepad propped on his knee when he asks, "Speaking of this...team...that Stark's looking to salvage from the wreckage, I'm surprised to see you of all people as their unofficial liaison."

"Stark's in the ICU."

Nick waves this off, "You know as well as I do he hasn't busted himself out yet because he trusts you to take care of this business instead. We all appreciate that, by the way. I have no interest in spanking that man with his own IV pole."

"His restraint has more to do with Nat's last message."

A momma bear intensity eats Nick's avuncular smile. "What message?"

"The last thing she told JARVIS before she disabled the connection was, *Give me three days, I'm goin' fishin'.* That was forty hours ago."

Nick's sigh is long and wearied. "I was afraid she'd done that."

"Done what?"

Nick stands up, drains his cup, and says, "Give me three minutes to pack."

First Stark, now Fury. Bruce wonders why people keep trying to take him on the road like a fucking vaudeville act.

~*~

Of all the people Natasha anticipates might reach out to her after the Senate hearings, in her strangely public state of purgatory, Pepper Potts is none of them.

The air had been clear between them since Natasha had chosen to blow her cover during the Stark Expo. Pepper appreciated that when push came to shove, she’d had the Romanoff she needed and not the Rushman she’d hired. Their interactions since have been brief but strangely warm, as if Potts only needed to know her ruthless practicality and her real name to consider her something like a friend. Surviving a crisis together is a quick way to manufacture a feeling of bonding.
That didn’t explain why Natasha had subsequently confessed to Potts that she didn’t have a real name, technically, or why Potts hadn’t seemed to care.

Natasha had filed this under weakness (exploitable), but lately she’s been re-filing a lot of similar items under miscellaneous (possible friend).

“I’m calling about a favor.”

Sitting on the Barton’s back porch, the breeze rifling through foil packets dangling from her hair, carrying off the stink of bleach and kool-aid, she doesn't hesitate. “Name it.”

It turns out to be babysitting.

Natasha says yes because Pepper isn’t calling in a favor from her, she’s asking for one. “It’s not so much a situation as the potential for it, but either way, you’re the sole person I know who could handle it.”

Pepper has spent the last eighteen months living with the nanogenetic infestation of Extremis. A major downside of being the high-profile CEO of Stark Industries, in a serious relationship with Iron Man, is that it exposes her to the risk of mad geniuses and their crackpot plans. A major benefit is that it also gives her access to maverick geniuses and their whip smart remedies. Unfortunately, unbonding Extremis from her cells and flushing it out requires a couple weeks of quarantine, because it suppresses her immune system and leaves her vulnerable to every passing germ.

Shedding the unbonded Extremis also makes her highly contagious for transmitting what Tony terms ‘the flaming fuck-you’.

“The medical team doesn't need to be second guessed by a worrywart engineer, and this is the only way to keep him out of their noses and out of my hair... It's better than letting him lock himself in a lab.” Pepper sighs, “They hit the road this morning.”

“They? Who's he traveling with?”

“Banner offered to take Tony away--he goes off alone sometimes, it’s a thing, like walking a dog, I guess. Usually somewhere remote, we charter him in and out. Remote is not soothing for Tony, but driving through remote is, so they compromised on a road trip to Long Beach.”

Compromise sounded like neither of them. Interesting. “Road trip?”

“There was talk of Mystery Spots and Alligator Petting Zoos and crashing barbecues. Hope and Crosby. Seeing the country and being awed and bored by its majestic landscape that just keeps going. Whether road hypnosis counted as meditation. JARVIS reports the purchase of an overnighted Annual Pass for the national parks--there was a lot of talk.”

Natasha doesn't point out that there's always a lot of talk from Stark, because Pepper mentioning it at all indicates his motor mouth might have edged into mania. “Any communication since?”

Pepper laughs. It’s not diplomatic amusement, nor closely checked sarcasm, but a contagious chuckle. “Tony's only gone radio silent twice in his life, so yes, the normal level of communication. Again, it's not bad, it's just…”

“You'd rather have one less thing to worry about.”

“You can say no; please do say no, you've got a lot going on, I get it. I only thought maybe a
distraction might be welcome, if you're interested.”

Natasha does not have a lot going on. Once Maria debriefed her about what she found in the Norfolk office, her orders were clear. *Cease and desist looting the corpse, Romanoff. Be safe. Don’t go so underground you don’t send a postcard. We’ll get together when the weather clears.* It was downright tender for Maria.

She imagines Stark inviting himself to some park potluck, slumming, pressing the flesh, Banner in tow with that detached bemusement he wears like a hazmat suit.

Natasha says, “Sure.”

This is how she finds herself on a road trip. She's going stir crazy, and even if she wanted to dive right back into what Maria’s building, she's too hot to handle, and it's too soon to tell if she'll ever cool off. She has nothing else to distract her from the yawning space beneath her feet left in the wake of betrayal, from the fear of losing a self she'd only just tentatively found.

~*~

A few days before, Natasha had let herself brood in an airport bar in the middle of the night, at the tag end of her hasty tour of ruined and renegade SHIELD offices across the continental US.

*She’d argued years ago, “It’s obvious the Army analysis is highly flawed. Banner’s a genius who’s been handed an incredible weapon. If he's such a danger, why hasn't he made a power play? Any power play at all?”*

*“Maybe he's trying to find a research position in villainy,” Phil straightened the crease in his pants, “the man collects postdocs like some people collect Red Rose tea figurines.”*

*“What are you implying,” Fury said, “that his letter from Durmstrang got lost in the mail?”*

*I’m saying we've put down a few rabid dogs over the years. Maybe he’s savvy enough to tread carefully.” Savvy was Phil's way of saying common sense; he had a very nuanced theory of intelligences, plural, and in his view Banner's academic gifts were as much liability as asset.*

*“No, I think he’s trying to control it,” Natasha said, “understand what happened to him, figure out what it means.”*

Fury leaned back in his chair to listen to her analysis, open to being impressed.

*It hadn’t been the first time she’d wondered if the reason she felt the pull of loyalty toward him was because he could make her want to impress him. Was it something in his affect, in his expression, that reminded her of the tutors so long ago? Or did it echo deeper, something paternal from before? She was officially an orphan, but she remembered that the kindness of the teachers in the Red Room had been familiar when she arrived. Someone had loved her, before. That's what had been exploited in the first place, her capability for love and loyalty.*

*She’d shoved all that back and said, “My operating theory is Banner wants to lock it down himself.”*

*Natasha had kicked around for years doing mercenary work, tasting and testing identities, banging on memories until they either resolved or broke apart, finding the bloody edges of what she could do, what she would do...and what she never wanted to do again. She'd been in a bad place she couldn’t see a way out of when SHIELD came to take her down, and the longer she knew Nick the more obvious it became that he’d sent Clint on purpose, to let him make the call between an arrow*
and a lifeline.

Fury shifted to get Natasha square in his field of vision. She hated when that look was aimed at her, putting pieces together that she hadn’t meant to be connected. After a long moment he rolled his hand, “Go on.”

“Either he thinks no one else can help him,” she shrugged, “or that no one can be trusted to.”

“Maybe he can figure out a cure.” Phil tagged in. “If there's a way to reverse it, he’s one of the few people qualified to find it.”

“You're assuming there's a cure to be found.”

“You know me,” Phil gave her his mildest smile, “pie-eyed optimist.”

“We all know it's a lot easier to open the can of peanut brittle than to get the fucking snakes back in,” Fury shook his head.

“With all due respect, sir, none of the candidates for the proposed Avengers Initiative are fun fabric covered springs.”

Natasha unfolded her arms and traced Banner's line of travel on the screen. There was no obvious rhyme or reason, but she had no doubt there was a method, or at least a rationale. The frequency of reported incidents and the severity of damage had both declined sharply, and that wasn’t because his alter was getting any better at hiding. “This is his version of quarantine.”

“Running and trying to blend in?”

“Isolation, analysis,” she said. “Once he’s confident he’s the one holding the leash, Banner might be approachable.”

“Here’s hoping we all have enough time for him to find himself, before we need either of them. Let him wander, we’ll bring him home eventually.” Fury tapped his desk screen to encrypt the file on R. Bruce Banner and open the file on Anthony E. Stark. “Meanwhile, we need to keep this guy alive…”

She wet her finger on her cold glass, and scribbled across the bar top like it was a map, picturing Banner's politely banked smugness to see her hopping from hub to hub amid the flaming ruins of her own life. Or worse, that knowing compassion he could wield like a misericorde.

She'd been telling herself those long weeks that she was doing a favor for Maria, eyes on the ground taking a real inventory of hard assets, sussing out the loyalties and agendas of the personnel left standing. That was true as far as it went. They all needed to hold hands and get their poop in a group, tactically-speaking, before the feeding frenzy got under way. Natasha’d had these conversations dozens of times now, patiently each time, always reminding herself that going over this ground again with another good agent was far better than finding another office cleaned out and burned down.

Much more preferable to let herself be pressed into the admission that Hill sent her out of DC to encourage the Beltway to lose interest, maybe to test that she was still able to move freely on her own recognizance. The worst were the offices manned by agents just a little too eager to reassure her and send her on her way. Norfolk made three so far.

Memphis had ended in a clumsy assassination attempt. El Paso had merely been embezzling. This last one…
Norfolk was why she fled to the farm. Like a wounded animal.

Natasha signaled the bartender, and the woman slid another gin and lime her way with a deft garnish of her dimpled smile.

She made herself smile back. Compliment the woman's hair, which was artfully streaked with purple. Pretend all it took was a little flirtation to cheer her up, like it hadn’t been years since she let someone cute take her home and make her body feel good. She hadn’t taken the phone number, but had left a generous tip. Random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.

Certainly beat the random senselessness of a bullet whistling down from cruising altitude to strike a name off a list. And dwelling on that certainly beat facing the long buried fear that had resurfaced in Norfolk.

During takeoff she twirled a lock of her own hair, rinsed a dull chestnut, and pondered candy colors. She used to be able to smudge her identity so easily, even after the battle of New York. She was rarely recognized in civilian clothes and straightened hair. It was a different game now, traveling under one of her precious few sets of subrosa papers, an identity she knew never made it into SHIELD records. She’d had to go brunette and layer her clothing to pad her frame, change up her walk and lean into her exhaustion.

The dark circles were a freebie, and Natasha left them bare. Bombshell spies don’t look like over-bred Persian cats, under eye circles dark like tear duct stains. Certainly not.

She took care, took a circuitous route and took her time, aware she could have been leading danger to the farm just to ease her mind, but she craved the stability of this family she visited like a comet. She wanted to apologize badly enough to take the risk.

Clint had been on assignment outside the US when SHIELD fell. It was the only reason he was still alive.

When Natalie Rushman had told a dying Tony Stark that she would spend her last birthday with whomever it was she wanted to be with, Natasha had pictured something like going home with that bartender, taking solace in the brief connection, humanity and easy pleasure, the profound comfort of skin against skin. She'd been willing to be that for him, to distract him, to keep him going long enough so that he could save himself with their help.

Yet that's not the comfort she reached for either, after all.

She wasn’t dying, but in the way a lone wolf wasn’t dying as long as it was hunting and hiding, as long as it was free from the trap. Without a pack, the end was only a matter of the weather changing.

She stowed her car in a copse of trees on the edge of the property and whistled as she walked up the long drive, giving them the opportunity for warning shots. When she got to the front porch, Laura was there.

She had always brought terrible things home to this woman. Peril, heartbreak, wounds, horrible secrets.

Laura swept down, embraced her, and hustled her inside.

Natasha was divested of her bag and her extra layers of hoodies, and folded into the evening routine like any other visit. Laura handed her a cold bottle of beer. Clint started dinner. The kids pulled her outside to run around and work up an appetite as the shadows lengthened. Lila showed
her where a spring storm had split a maple tree right down the middle, scrambling through the charred splinters to show her how each side was still growing, ready to drop helicopter seeds. Cooper led her into the dusty shadows of the pole barn to introduce her to a litter of kittens, just beginning to wobble away from their mother. Natasha stroked the mother cat’s ears, unusually maudlin from the trust she was being shown.

When the children went inside to clean up for dinner, she lingered on the back porch, feeling dazed and sore like she’d had shrapnel removed.

The screen door creaked open and Clint joined her, setting a small bundle of calico on the porch rail between them like a dare.

“Again?”

He rolled his shoulders, more eloquent with those ropy slabs than many people were with their hands.

“I lost the arrow, you know.” She sounded exasperated and defensive, which made her even more exasperated and defensive. “Laura’s work is too delicate for the field.”

The setting sun turned his squinting blue eyes to pale amber. “That’s why she cast you something different this time.” He nudged the bundle until she took it, pulled the ribbon, and let the fabric fall open.

On a simple silver chain hung a simple silver charm, a stapler the size of a dime, the grip enameled red.

“It’s from a movie,” Clint said, his face completely blank, teasing. “This milquetoast guy just wants to do his job, collating, stapling, but they keep fucking him over. Stealing his favorite stapler, moving his desk into the men’s room, not paying him. So he ends up burning the place down, running off to a tropical resort.”

Natasha clasped the necklace in her palm. “I’m sorry I burned your workplace down.”

“It was supposed to be a joke,” He sighed. “Some things you just need to kill with fire.”

After the kids were tucked in, Clint cued up the movie. It was a comedy, but in an early scene another character was hypnotized to deal with the stress of loathing his job, and...it wasn’t even a decision: Natasha's legs took her out into the kitchen before she knew it.

She grabbed a glass and filled it at the sink, eyes tracking the line of figurines marching along the window sill. Lighthouses, compasses, ship wheels, and treasure chests. She tried to drink.

She retched. Her temples ached.

She rinsed her mouth and crouched down in the right angle of the cabinets, tightening her limbs to keep from shaking, keep from making any noise.

Footsteps diverged, one set up the stairs, the other toward her. Laura glanced down on her way to the refrigerator, and every line in her body communicated ease and calm. The creaks and pipe thumps peculiar to the house told her Clint was showering in the master bath, aurally isolated even if he’d left his aids in. He was giving the two of them privacy.

Laura had been an analyst, never a handler, but she had the sensitivity. She pulled a bottle from the freezer and waited a beat for the expected jab about cold vodka being an American affectation, but
Natasha couldn’t even crack her jaw enough to speak.

“I’m sorry, I should have realized about that stupid movie. You know how Clint always focuses on the background characters.” Laura opened a cabinet with steady hands and took down two jelly jars. “I never told him, you know. He doesn’t know about the...magic words.”

She stood in front of Natasha with her bare feet, and Natasha told the little painted toenails, “The book...in the Norfolk office, there were photocopied pages.”

Laura sank down next to her, back against the cabinets.

“Poems,” she dragged a breath through her tightening throat, “none of them were familiar, not that way, but...the handwriting...”

“You recognized it.”

Natasha rested her forehead between her kneecaps. She tried to count each breath longer, telling herself she wasn’t really suffocating, and moreover she had always been too stubborn to quit. She wasn’t going to die. No. She was going to kill the wrong person, again, only this time she was going to kill someone she cared about instead of caring about someone she had to kill, and why had she thought she could come here as long as she came alone, she's more than danger enough--

“Hey,” Laura pressed her leg alongside Nat's, “heyyyyy, shhhhhh, easy, baby, I'm here…” It was nonsense, a vocal warm-up, a thrum from the woman's chest into the flesh of Natasha's arm, barely audible over her heart pounding in her ears.

It was stupid and grounding and she'd seen Laura do this for her children's nightmares, had heard the sound through doorways in the weeks after she got Clint back, and only then did it occur to her that she was having a panic attack.

How indulgent of her. She laughed at herself even as she was shaking apart.

“And what's so funny, there, Nat?” Laura crooned, letting her grab the vodka.

“This is what I get for not taking that bartender's phone number, banishing the demons the old fashioned way,” she took a swig. “This is what I get for trying to be authentic.”

“Sucks, yeah.”

They passed it back and forth, sipping. The kitchen tile was cool but unforgiving, and Natasha's left ass cheek went numb.

“So this isn't just about your career,” Laura leaned away, but only to bring her arm up across Nat's shoulders, “it's also about who you are.”

“A distinction without a difference.”

“Bullshit. You love us, and not because of proximity or some agenda.” Her fingers dug into Nat's upper arm, possessive. “You could have made nice and been charming and never let us in. But you took a chance on us. From the time I met you, you've worked out how to be honest, figured out how to let yourself care. This is nothing new.”

Natasha looked at the liquor. When Clint had brought her here for the first time she’d looked to him for how to tune her newly-minted agent identity to fit into this place. But they’d been run ragged with a newborn and medical leave, the house a dilapidated disaster, and they hadn’t given
her any expectations to work with. She’d had to improvise. It suddenly became imperative that these people, who’d brought her into the heart of their home when they were so vulnerable, understand how poisonous and dangerous she was. Radical honesty was born in this house.

“Because of Clint.” Laura said, “Because you knew, if it went bad, Clint would take you down. That’s what made us safe to love. That's why you came here.”

Natasha took a long pull from the bottle.

“This is what you're up against, you don't trust yourself. But you're somehow able to trust people who can hurt you; people who can kill you, but don't. It's ugly...but it's a place to start.”

~*~

When they start this trip with a local stop at Coney Island, Bruce and Tony are still working out the give and take of being on the road together. They eat coney's because Bruce refuses to eat New York style pizza, and Tony insists that he make amends for that insult by riding the Cyclone.

They're each of them trying very hard to make this work.

Bruce studies the wooden roller coaster for a long moment. He’s not a thrill-seeker, not because he worries about the other guy showing up, but because the other guy is always keeping a weather eye out for real danger. When there is none, Bruce is steady and hard to impress.

His main concern is whether he can put up with the shrieking.

It comes down to his deep antipathy toward weak floppy pizza, and the fact he keeps a pair of earplugs in his pocket for those days Tony controls the lab sound system.

It takes him a while to find Tony again afterward. Then he sees Coney Island has a bar. Stark’s in a corner booth, deep in conversation with a willowy tattooed lady and a gentleman in a three piece suit.

“Come join us, bunny.” Tony makes introductions as Bruce shakes hands. There’s a beer already waiting for him. “Claire swallows fire and swords. Jun is an MC and a blockhead. We're talking shop.”

“What kind of shop?”

“Body modification.” Claire presses her knuckles to her sternum, where a tattoo of a book spreads open across her flat chest; one page an illustration of a skeleton jauntily surveying sunny countryside, the other page a night scene with naked women flying into the treetops on the steam from their cauldrons. She turns back to Tony. “But what you're saying is, it doesn't hurt normally?”

“Not once it healed,” he says, “not for years.”

“Pressure?” Jun asks, “In other words, it doesn't hurt, but you can feel it in there.” Jun is dapper in a dove grey pinstripe suit, his lilac pocket square garnished with a trio of shiny ten-penny nails.

“Yeah, that's it.” Tony reaches up under his t-shirt to pull the silicon cap off of his arc reactor. He’d described it as something he designed for occasions when he didn’t want to be his own nightlight, but he’d put it on when they left the city and has worn it since. He’s also damped down his Starkness. Bruce is surprised how little he’s recognized, even with the fussy goatee. “Only now, because of the calcification and inflamed nerves, it occasionally hurts like hell.”
“I’ll bet.” There’s a reddened mark on her sternum from where Claire's been rubbing in sympathy. “Not a lot of room for error in the chest; and swallowing wrong hurts, even without metal involved.”

“You’ve consulted medical professionals as well?” Jun glances at Bruce.

He wonders what Tony told them, if anything; he has a flexible misunderstanding of what Bruce’s fields of study actually are. Bruce has even offered him a mnemonic, to little effect.

“That’s how I know it’s from bone growths,” Tony waves this away, “Dr. Ho has a whole interdisciplinary team itching to re-crack my chest and uninstall the upgrades. I just…”

Bruce chews his lip, waiting for Tony to come around to it.

“It’s not gonna help, is it?” Claire cuts him off by crossing her arms and leaning back. “Not all of the kinds of pain. Not the fear.”

“Still,” Jun raises his beer to finish it, “it’d help your chest.”

~*~

Natasha catches up with them in Philadelphia. No overhyped Liberty Bell for them, no Independence Hall; per JARVIS they have two tickets to a medical specimen museum.

What surprises her isn’t that this is Bruce’s idea of a tourist attraction, but that he’s convinced Tony to come along. The museum is too small for her to go unnoticed, but there's an attached garden courtyard with street access she can exit by. Before they arrive, she reconnoiters. The place is compact, but cleverly packed with cabinets of bones and growths, confounding instruments and interpretive plaques.

The anatomical models hit her like art, subtle but disturbing.

They’re teaching aides from when corpses were too ephemeral and photography too limited, sculpted of wax carefully tinted and labeled. One is a hand posed in graceful gesture, the skin turned back like bed clothes to reveal the tendons and nerves, a beautiful mechanism. She tries to look at it with the detached compassion of medicine, the human body as a puppet of meat and bone. Everyone’s. Not just hers.

The next model is a bust with the facial muscles from the neck to the crown laid bare, and the humanity and monstrosity slide together with memories of working her own face like a temperamental stringed instrument. Learning to play her expressions to the score she was given, struggling whenever the music stopped and she had to improvise.

Natasha lets herself chew the ragged side of a cuticle, teeth nipping at her own flesh, and exits to the gift shop to settle her nerves with kitsch and trinkets. She buys a t-shirt with a black silhouette of a conjoined infant skeleton, two bodies fused into a double rib cage and a single skull, surrounded by a cheery rainbow.

The garden is humid and thick with herbal scents, but the benches are in shade, a couple people crouched and sketching the carefully labeled plants.

Everything is so precise and meticulous in this place, chaos scaffolded in Latin and India ink. In one of her personal caches, a box of documents and money shrouded in heavy gauge plastic and buried, is a steno book where Natasha has tried to exorcise the ghosts and triggers as she’s come across them, analyzing with that same precision the pieces she was left with, dismantling the
mechanisms that were built in her mind by the Red Room.

She’s emptied out her east coast repository, a safe deposit box of blackmail material she cashed in for the file she gave to Steve, and the liquid assets she’s traveling on, now that her SHIELD expense account is no longer cutting reimbursement checks. Which leaves the lawyer in Chicago who manages the illiquid assets, the revenue streams, the trusts...and then there’s the steno book.

It’s been a long time since she added to the steno book, since she wrapped and sealed the layers of plastic, since she locked the box and buried it in a field. At the time it had felt like putting it to rest, the fevered workbook where she’d vivisected and analyzed every piece of implanted reflex and suggestion, ripping out and rewiring every trigger she came across, more infrequently over the years. She should have destroyed it, but could never bring herself to do so, as if at some point she’d need to show her work. Instead, she planted it in the ground like a lily bulb.

One last person shares the courtyard with her, an older woman preoccupied with paring her pencil to a point with a pocket knife, and eyeing the spiderwort like it owes her something.

Natasha doesn’t know when or if her erstwhile teammates will arrive for their unbeknownst check in. She pulls out her phone and opens up another museum website, clicking through the interactive web exhibit to download a pdf of Steve Rogers’ original 4F paperwork. She spends the next half hour texting him snapshots of the plants indicated for his long list of ailments.

She’s framing a shot of carnations, poppies and foxglove when one of the bugs she placed earlier picks up Bruce Banner. The channel indicates they’re by the skeleton of Harry Eastlack, who died locked motionless by excessive bone growth. Banner’s voice is low and fast, a syncopated slurry of technical lingo and Midwestern accent.

“Besides, if you really want it to work, you need to control the cellular repair mechanism so that when you chelate the agent back out, you’re reset to baseline. I don’t care how pristine the anatomy grows back, the last thing you want is an invasive cancer in your mediastinum. You got exceedingly lucky with where Dr. Yinsin was able to place the magnet housing in the first place, it’s not meant to be an open space—”

“That’s where the failsafe comes in—”

“Do you hear yourself, Tony? You act like this is a simple programming problem. There’s already a suite of failsafes—the fact that complex long-lived mammals have a lot of brakes on cellular repair in the first place is your failsafe! We can’t regrow limbs for a really good reason; turning all those embryo development genes back on spikes your risk of cancer astronomically, and you need to last more than a breeding season because you are not a fucking fruit fly.”

“So we do it the other way, Extremis Classic with a triggering event—”

“Are you shitting me?” Banner’s voice rises with tension, like he’s redlining the tach and refuses to shift gear. “No one is going to shoot you in the chest—”

“I’m not talking artillery—”

Bruce snorts, “Not anymore.”

“---we could even inject the agent after traditional surgery---”

“Oh, so you’re going to move your cardiac recovery suite into Level Three containment for who knows how long? It’s one thing to have Pepper walking around hale and hearty before we started knocking it loose from her cells, but post-surgery you’d be a risk to the med staff, and then what?
Let’s say you recover immediately and we start chelation, you’ll be cooling your heels in quarantine for an indeterminate amount of time. Because we don’t know, not yet. We think a fourteen day course will do, all the testing points that way, and Pepper decided it was worth a shot, but we don’t even know for sure if we can fully eliminate it.”

The sigh Tony lets out could be interpreted as concession, but it makes Natasha’s body brace. What reckless chance is he gearing up to take now?

Speaking of reckless chances, the reason she placed the temporary tab bugs in the first place was to check in with them without being spotted. She takes the side gate out into the street and walks briskly down the block, texting Pepper, why does Tony want to take your hot friend E for a ride? She adds a flame emoji. And a blue heart. And a light bulb next to a grinning pile of poop.

Their vehicle isn’t difficult to spot, a red Porsche Cayenne parked on the street with a New York license plate saying STARKV8. She’s got a line in through JARVIS, her mission to be a backup in the wings in case of disaster, but it’s clear now that she’s not being given all the information she needs. Natasha never expects to have all the information at the start of a mission after all, it’s her job to find it, and she’s got a bag of tricks she gleaned from her tour of SHIELD offices, like looting an empty desk for small change and binder clips.

She digs in her pocket as she passes by the car, fumbles her keys, and when she crouches to pick them up she flicks a magnet-backed transponder up under the bumper.

Later that evening she’s laying atop the hotel bed covers, just her shoes off, her tablet showing the dot on the map where the vehicle is parked in a suburb of Philly. James Rhodes’ mother Roberta lives there, still teaching, but on sabbatical to write a book. Natasha wonders which topics they’re discussing and which they’re avoiding; shared history, the military, university students, the dangers of heroism, the oppressive weather.

She’s spent the last three hours thinking she should eat, but failing to decide any further plan of action. She doesn’t even realize she’s angry until Pepper calls.

“He’s having a problem with the implant,” Pepper starts right in without saying hello. “Not the reactor, but the housing, the bone and nerves around it. They suspect it’s from exposure to the scepter, maybe interacting with output from the reactor, there’s a pathological healing response. Bone spurs, episodes of nerve pain.”

“I understand this is need-to-know,” Natasha flips through the muted television channels, “but as a babysitter, I should have all the relevant information. Does it compromise the suit?”

Pepper sounds frustrated, chagrined and tired. It makes her snippy and a shade whiny. “There is no suit. For a while it was like the terracotta army, but most of them were explosively decommissioned. He’s been working on the interface these days, more flexibility, modular pieces, so...I assume that yes, he’s building work-arounds.”

She can picture Pepper rubbing her forehead while she admits this. She bleeds the anger from her own voice and says, “Understood.”

“I’ll send you the layman’s summary of Dr. Ho’s consult.” Pepper adds, “But not as a babysitter. As a friend of the family.”

Natasha’s thumb hovers over the disconnect icon, but before she swipes she says, “Okay.”

The file comes over at the same time as Steve’s text of pretty sure most of these are poisonous.
She knows. She was trained on common household and garden poisons--after all, you never know when you’ll be deep in a domestic cover you can’t compromise and have to employ the more traditional black widow methods--but she shies away from sharing this with Steve. Instead, she texts back the dose makes the poison with a string of skulls, poops, toadstools, and green vomiting emojis, then reads the brief Banner wrote for Pepper from the doctors’ reports on Tony.

~*~

Tony calls Pepper when she finishes her last meeting, thirteen hours into the next day in Tokyo, and stretches out on the sumptuous and chilly hotel bed to listen to her unspool her thoughts.

The quarantine suite in the Tower is a fair approximation of her steel and glass executive office in Malibu, except for the lack of upholstery or carpet, the protective gear donned by the medical team, the two sets of doors, the decontamination procedures, the stink of disinfectant. All of these upsetting details are invisible on his screen, just her serene face haloed by the sun spectrum lighting as if it weren’t on the far side of midnight, just her calm voice lulling him with rapid-fire analysis sprinkled with dry snark. Be cool honey, Pep’s in control.

This is why he’s chilling out on the road. It’s much easier to sleep in a different bed when it’s in a different city.

She slips through an obscured door to a cozy apartment a bit larger than the office, and props the tablet on her vanity table. She changes out of her suit, backlit by the subdued light pollution of New York at night, and comes to sit at the table. Her t-shirt is a faded blue one she stole from him that says Scientists dream. Engineers do. The v-neck reveals a flat bump on her upper chest, the port catheter where four times a day, for two hours, the medical team hooks her up to machines that flush her like a radiator.

“I feel like I’m your magic mirror.” Tony thumbs the edge of his arc reactor. The quip isn’t enough to help him handle the peculiar intimacy of watching her wipe off her makeup, “La toilette d’Poivre.”

“Pottymouth.”

“You miss my mouth.”

“I miss all of you.” She reveals the fine gold wiring of her natural brows, the layered speckle of the countless freckles she doesn’t show the world. “But we keep ourselves busy, and we get through.”

She says this like she isn’t a miracle, like he’s a sweet idiot mistaking the quotidian as revelatory, like all those years he took her for granted were the real truth and this new thing between them is another amusing phase of his that she’s indulging. He shifts his weight on the hotel mattress, the headboard creaking, reminding himself that he’d promised not to go all bat cave batshit in the lab.

“What did the doctors say today?”

In answer, Pepper wads the wipe into her fist and heats it. This takes noticeably longer than the last time, and instead of glowing halfway down her forearm, the white heat only outlines her bones as steam leaks between her knuckles.

Her palm is coated in sticky ash, and with a moue of disgust she plucks another makeup wipe to clean her hand.

~*~

Bruce wakes up to a message from JARVIS from five in the morning, explaining that Tony had
only recently achieved REM stage sleep, and suggesting a layover.

He’s relieved the man’s getting some rest. Between the bone growths around the socket wall and the insomnia, the episodes of panic he’s only recently copped to, the gnawing worry over Pepper’s experimental treatment, there have been moments where he’s been as churlish as a sick toddler.

Then again, there have been moments like sitting in Roberta Rhodes’ backyard the evening before, seeing the utter joy with which Tony had absorbed the scolding she gave him about the trouble he keeps getting himself and her son into. Roberta had eyed Bruce while she was making Tony squirm, but he’d politely nodded and said, “Ma’am,” and let her skewer away. Seeing him blush was hilarious.

They’re killing time, using America as a gigantic waiting room during Pepper’s treatment, and taking the long way to Long Beach for the dedication ceremony of a STEAM learning lab at a city college, but that’s at the end of the month. Bruce suspects there’s a pilgrimage aspect to this, bringing him to the site where the first Iron Man lab crumbled into the Pacific. A kind of show and tell, integrating Bruce into his personal history like loading a software patch.

Bruce is guilty of the same thing, drawing Tony on a wandering journey across the highway system, running away from the problems at home only to find them dogging their heels at every step.

In fact Tony had coaxed him into the tower in the first place like a stray dog, luring him with tasty tidbits of research and lab equipment, and his strange complacent acceptance of both who and what Bruce was. That was the most difficult present to refuse in the end.

He’s still not quite sure what Tony’s deal is, or more to the point, how the man’s brilliance and insecurities and brittle aggressive affection aren’t immediately obvious to anyone who talks to him for more than five minutes. He’s consistently baffled by how many people reflect off the shiny surface, when Bruce can see right through the guy, the desperate need to stop fucking up, the fear of losing the few connections he hasn’t preemptively severed, the self-destructive itch to follow curiosity into burning obsession.

The drive to be a force for good. To be so hungry for the critical feedback of the few people he can trust that he outright provokes them. Pepper Potts, James Rhodes and his mother Roberta, occasionally Happy, and now, bizarrely, Bruce.

It’s a weight he finds unfamiliar and strange, but not unwelcome.

Bruce had told himself that if it got too weird he would leave. He did leave a few times, off to remote places where he could get a different perspective on the lab and the stocked kitchen and the quiet bed, where he could reassure himself that if he had to leave he both could and would...where he could let the other guy out for a bit, where it was quiet and safe and they’d be left alone.

He hasn't aired out the wanderlust since he came back to civilization eighteen months ago to news that Tony Stark was alive—which was even more of a shocker because he'd missed that the man was presumed dead in the first place.

Bruce scrolls through the curated list of attractions JARVIS had appended to the message, as he cleans up and gets dressed, but the chats he has in the lobby and at a bakery down the block are a better guide.

He makes himself wile away the afternoon absorbing art in a blocky white building stuffed to the gills with post-impressionist and African works, not just paintings and sculpture, but furniture and
iron work, jewelry and glass, masks and hinges, household goods and household gods. At first the small gallery rooms hem him in too close to fragility and beauty, but he thinks of his landlady in Kolkata dragging him to the far corners of that city on his days off, telling him about her own travels and discoveries. If Divya were here she’d catch his sleeve and lead him deeper into the collection, as if art en masse exerted a gravitational field, as if all of those minds infused each piece with potential energy, unleashed when his own mind sees them and completes the circuits.

It's healing to be in awe of humanity for a good reason once in a while.

His overfed brain in a daze, he stumbles through the bright sunlight back to the hotel, where the concierge greets him with a suggestion of a relaxing massage.

Bruce blinks. He considers.

He’s been indulging in a thought experiment the last few days, pushing his own boundaries by asking himself, what would Tony Stark do? It appeals to his sense of fairness for making a billionaire eat hot dogs from a cart even if he can’t actually take them directly from the vendor's hand. It's a dangerous game--occasionally WWTSD is a recipe for high octane disaster--but after hours of walking and days of traveling, being oiled and kneaded like a bread dough sounds intriguing. Tony schedules bodywork like it's engine maintenance, and gets a haircut and manicure before every board meeting like he's polishing up to compete in an equestrian event.

The concierge is holding open what looks like a tastefully bound wine list, but a look shows things like gentleman’s therapeutic stone massage and seaweed sugar scrub pedicure and warm spiced mud wrap. Not just dough, but gingerbread. “Sir?”

Having woken up more than a few times naked and filthy and sore, Bruce is amused by the idea of being slathered in mud, by a professional, as a luxury indulgence. “Sure.”

~*~

Tony has slept for fourteen hours straight and consumed two spirulina and coconut milk smoothies, and is off to the hotel fitness room when he sees Bruce lope across the lobby like bootleg footage of Bigfoot.

He moves like the recently-fucked, smooth and easy, but for Banner that indicates recently-hulked, except downtown Philly is not Hulk’s scene, and that boneless relaxation doesn’t set in until he’s consumed disturbing amounts of food and restlessly slept it off.

“Hey,” Bruce greets him with a smile that brightens his eyes, “you’re finally up.”

“Taking advantage of the hedonistic lifestyle of the road--god, even your voice is lower, what have you been up to, bunny?”

Bruce flicks a thumb back the way he came, “Spa stuff. Saw some art. Before that was the bakery, coffee and a great BLT. They make gluten-free macarons, if you want to swing by.”

“All macarons are gluten-free,” Tony adds, “couldn’t hurt to check them out, make sure for the sake of public safety. Once I’ve worked up an appetite. Want to come with?”

Bruce walks with him into the fitness room. “I feel like exercise would negate the hard work Cherise put into untangling my knots. I’ll spot you, though.”

“Deal. Did you get the whole package? Your skin is glowing and you smell like a savory dessert.”
“I feel fancy,” he smirks, “like I’ve been to the groomer.”

Tony surveys the room, walking past the machines to the weight plates and squat cage, the heavy bag that looks pristine. His warm-up is as brutally efficient as the rest of his routine, designed to rev him up quickly from a cold start or to expend nervous energy to wear him out for sleep. Free weights, back and core, unbalanced loads, all the things that help him control the suit in a fight.

Bruce helps him load plates onto bars and stands by to keep him from breaking or braining himself, they've done this before.

“We should find a good steam room, exfoliate the bejesus out of you with birch branches,” Tony racks the bar and they pull the plates off together, “it’s the only way to self-flagellate.”

“I’m not Catholic.”

“Not anymore, but I’ve seen you with the beads.” He saunters over to the heavy bag, like he’s scored a point.

“Ritual is soothing.” Bruce has tried a lot of things to solidify his connection to himself and reality over the years, meditative chanting is less fragile than a playlist you can’t access, or a touchstone that can be lost. He’s counted mantras with his fingers, the words a silent drone in his head tethering him. “It doesn’t mean I buy into dogma.”

“So how does the guilt fit into the program?”

Bruce seats his shoulder against the heavy bag, bracing through the hips, “In Brazil, I paid a guy to hit me in the face.”

Tony stops and squares up, fingertips just touching the bag.

“There was a whole program of katas and physical training, but that was the keystone, learning how to ride through the shock and pain and choose my reaction.”

Tony whistles, “No kidding. Did it work? For the most part, I mean, the helicarrier attack notwithstanding.”

“Explosions don’t count?”

“Absolutely not, the whole point of explosions is to fuck you up.”

Bruce shrugs, “It was kinda freeing, working through the violence separate from the emotions.”
Get in the Car

Get in the Car

“Admit I was right about the goat,” Banner says as he closes the passenger side door.

Natasha lounges poolside with an eye on the parking lot. She’s been debating a more open approach. She could run it like straight surveillance, hands off and unseen, but her appetite for that is lacking. She’s saved the world with these people, without any covert identity to hide behind. They are nominal teammates if or when anything Avengers level crops up again. If they can work together; when it crops up.

She's been spending a lot of time lately trying to be honest with herself, so she comes around to the conclusion that it’s not just the tactical disadvantage of poor team dynamics that bothers her. She’s uncomfortable with the manipulation of connections she’s re-filed under miscellaneous (possible friend).

What would be the alternative? She’s not sure. So she’s decided to play it sloppy, in part to find out.

“In my defense,” Stark brushes road dirt off the hood as he comes around the vehicle, “the last time I had goat, I suspect the kitchen staff was working in sub par conditions--”

“But I was right.”

“--what with the whole cave thing, so my reservations about a roadside shack were justified--”

“I lived for years on street food, I’ve got a knack--”

“For avoiding rats?” They amble along the white plastic fence next to the pool, well-fed.

“I was going to say, for finding the good home cooking kind, but yes, that’s a fair shorthand.” He snorts a quiet laugh.

Tony pauses, “What?”

“No, nothing.” Banner ushers him forward, lagging a step behind. “Just that I like being right.”
“About curried goat being delicious? You are a man of simple pleasures.”

In her peripheral vision just over the edge of her tablet, Natasha sees Banner look at her with a quirk of his eyebrows. She adjusts her sunglasses with his own signature gesture.

Hours pass but they don’t leave the motel, nor does Stark come prancing out in a hissyfit, both of which surprise her.

She slips on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and goes back down to the pool, lounging in the night breeze as a trio of older ladies soak in the hot tub and discuss all-weather motorcycle gear.

She pulls up the reader on her tablet, loaded with digital versions of the stack of worn paperbacks in the guest bedroom at Clint and Laura’s house. Journeys of ponderous prose and familiar worlds. The first hours, afternoons, long summer nights she’d spent in her own head, trying to fake being something approaching normal, looking for any escape or clue to release that crushing pressure of not having a mission, of floating lost without an imperative handed to her like guiding a missile. How were people supposed to make their own way in the world?

It’s near midnight when Banner appears, holding the gate open for the bikers on their way out. His concession to travel is to ditch his usual jacket and loosen his button-down. She wonders if he wears his pants two sizes larger in case of the Hulk, or if it’s just an excuse to have bigger pockets to carry more stuff. He stops a respectful distance from her lounge chair. “You’re out here late.”

“There’s a prom party in the room next door. I’m waiting for the alcohol poisoning to kick in.” She closes the tablet cover. “I’d call the front desk on them, but I’m keeping a low profile.”

“I can tell by the hair.” He draws up another lounge and settles back, mirroring her stretched out legs crossed at the ankle. “Nice t-shirt.”

“It goes with the hair.” She’d done it on a whim, thinking of the bright hair of the bartender she hadn’t gone home with, going to the Barton’s instead. Laura had joked about her own Manic Panic phase, and a few hours later she was no longer a brown-rinsed redhead, but a pale lemon blonde shading through cherry into black at the ends. Clint had called it her SHIELD break-up makeover, saying that it beat a drunken tattoo. Distinguishing marks are best kept disposable. “You’d be surprised how effective a disguise it is.”

“Perhaps the people who watch CNN don’t look that closely at women with candyfloss hair.”

She’s charmed by his assumption, so she lets him have it. “Got it in one.”

“You still smell faintly of kool-aid, by the way.”

“Yeah. It’s starting to bug me.”

The silence that follows is strange but comfortable. She watches a satellite cross the night sky, as soothing as a second hand sweeping a clock face. Banner must be tracking it too, because when it slips behind clouds she turns back, and his eyes shift from that spot down to hers. “Tony’s got some...thing...over at Aberdeen Proving Ground tomorrow morning. Which I am going nowhere near.”

“Kinda surprised you’re even this close to an Army lab facility. You used to be a lot more circumspect about even small risks like that.”

“Well,” he shrugs, “turns out I had a Project Insight target on top of my head for...who knows how long. At a certain point, risk becomes funny, you know?”
She exhales in the shape of a laugh and scans for Venus, finding it low and bright and pleasing to focus on as she packs away the unpleasant churn of emotion.

After a moment he continues, diffident. “The last couple years, I’ve been trying to find the sweet spot between paranoia and not tempting fate.” Things changed somewhat for him after New York, more people were watching, and Ross had less leeway than he’d had when everything relevant about Banner had been classified. “It’s a process. I’m workshopping a new lifestyle.”

“You’ll have to let me know how that goes,” she says, the hit of empathy making her uncomfortable. “I’m asking for a friend.”

“It’s a journey.” And he says it so dry and factual that she refrains from laughing at what she thinks is a weak accidental pun, out of politeness, until he slides his eyes toward her. “A road trip, if you will.”

She shakes her head, closing her eyes against an amused groan.

He lolls his head toward her, “Any plans tomorrow?”

“Besides workshopping a new lifestyle?”

“You want to get breakfast?”

“I appreciate your chivalry in buying me eggs the next morning,” she teases, “but you may be skipping some steps.”

She’s never heard his unconstrained laugh before. “I wouldn’t presume, Agent Romanoff.”

His smile lingers, relaxed mouth revealing the line of his teeth, his shoulders down and chest loose. It’s innocent. It’s also the closest she’s seen his face resemble the Hulk’s outside of transformation. Stark’s crackpot theories might have merit after all.

“Dutch, then?”

After a moment she extends her hand, “Natasha.”

His palm is warm, and he shakes her hand properly. “Bruce.”

He rises and names a time, she gives her room number, and as he leaves her poolside she asks, “Why haven’t you told Tony?”

“Haven’t I?” He walks backward a few steps. “Maybe you shouldn’t presume, either.”

~*~

Bruce watches Tony launch from the hotel roof like a bottle rocket, and then heads down to meet their erstwhile stalker for pancakes and bullshit.

He concedes that’s not a completely fair assessment when he sees her room is in fact next to the alcove of vending machines, a lanky kid wearing only tuxedo pants scooping a bucket of ice.

The kid grins, “S’up?”

Bruce nods, and they knock on adjacent doors.

Both open. A hand yanks the kid into his room by the waistband. Natasha simply offers the left
half of a smirk and asks, “Got wheels?”

“Tony flew solo to Aberdeen.” He dangles the fob. “We’re meeting up in Baltimore and figuring it out from there.”

“Good, I can leave the car here.” She shoulders her bag and takes the stairs down to the lobby. “I’ve already checked out. You want to get breakfast in Baltimore, then? Better options.”

“Are you...leaving your car here?”

“No.”

“Are you saying that because it’s not your car?”

“Right now I can’t afford to drive anything long enough for it to be my car.”

He stops her, hand on her elbow. She glances down at it, and they both understand that she’s allowed him the liberty. He wants the truth, though, so he doesn’t back down until she answers his question, “How much danger are you in?”

Her smile is rueful, “I pissed a lot of people off.”

It’s quiet between them for a while after that. Natasha doesn’t seem up for small talk, and Bruce is struggling with wanting to know what she’s doing following them in the first place, the precautions she’s taking, if she’s better off holed up somewhere until the shitstorm passes. He works the puzzle of it until she pulls out her tablet and starts giving him directions when they hit the city.

They park near the Inner Harbor, and she leads him to a small greasy spoon that’s cheap and filled with regulars. She’s tucked her hair into a ponytail through a worn Orioles cap she produced from out of nowhere, and as she doctors her coffee she says, “Ask already.”

“Pepper?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, that makes sense. But why?”

"Tony is the one thing she's not comfortable delegating."

"You're here to supervise a road trip?"

"I'm here as backup, just in case. HYDRA, AIM, random crackpots. She's glad he's not locked up in the workshop or the lab, but...it makes her feel better to have firepower in reserve."

Bruce had wondered if Pepper was motivated by a lingering concern over the Other Guy, but maybe the issue was not whether he would keep himself in check, or could keep Tony on an even keel, but making sure they had more subtle options if things went pear-shaped. "But that doesn't tell me why you said yes."

Natasha pulls in a deep breath and meets his eyes. Her makeup is too young for her to pull off in the morning light, when she has that expression on her face. Grim and self-mocking, and raw. “She asked me as a friend.”

He takes his time thinking that one over. The first thing he’d trawled the leaked SHIELD files for was his own name, and after that Tony’s. He’d laughed out loud at Romanoff’s parsing of Iron Man and Tony Stark as separate entities, each meriting differing tactical judgments. Bruce had
found her diagnosis of narcissism a serious misstep--his father’s court-appointed therapist had gone
on at length about Brian’s ‘narcissistic tendencies’, so he was intimately familiar with that dynamic
and how far afield it was from Tony Stark--and he was curious why SHIELD didn’t seem to have
trained profilers on the payroll. It didn’t take him long to see it was a deliberate poke.

That had led him into her files, and he’d stopped laughing. You save the world with someone, it
gives you a fellow feeling. Then you see them burn their own world down for the greater good, and
well...that only made it worse.

She’d testified before the Senate committee for hours, contained and professional as any career suit,
that honey and whiskey voice the only familiar thing about her until she’d cracked open and told
them off.

Tony had applauded from his workbench. Then he’d wrapped up early, and spent the next few
days folded into SI business with Pepper.

Bruce had spent that time alone meditating on the rush of emotion he’d felt watching Natasha call
the Senate committee’s bluff and walk out. He couldn’t sleep until he’d sorted out the envy and fear
and arousal from the anger and awe. Who was she to pick that fight in their name? Well for
starters, she was the one they subpoenaed. Probably because she wasn’t a god-like alien, a veteran,
a national icon, or one of the guys working on a treatment for the highly unstable tech AIM had
developed and unleashed. She wasn’t in a clear category, wasn’t currently being useful and used,
and she’d been key in dismantling the only group that could claim her.

She was the loose monkey wrench that had jammed herself into the gears. The machine had
stopped, but the gears are still grinding her even as she sips coffee and casually checks her
surroundings.

“I was surprised Tony joined you for the Mutter,” she says when their breakfasts come. “Medical
curiosities aren't his speed.”

“The engineering antipathy for squishy biology.”

“Not what I meant.” She tilts her head, “Dead specimens can't have their problems ameliorated
through technology.”

“True,” he laughs. “He owed me for Coney Island. Wooden roller coaster.” Bruce lays his hand
over the cup when the waitress comes by with the pot. “We have a deal, switching off who plans
what.”

“This is how you got him into a Motel 6?”

Pepper must have dropped the dime on them while they were still in the Tower, maybe even in the
elevator down to the parking levels. “I’m easing him toward camping.”

Her brow crumples, tentatively amused, “Why?”

Bruce smirks. “Why not?” It’s not like a series of cheap no-frills motels even comes close to the
panicked aching boredom of running, but Tony’s stretching himself, and Bruce is willing to round
up for effort.

They linger past the meal, exhausting the handful of neutral topics between them. Bruce describes
the Tower renovation, the suites and facilities prepared for the team for whenever they’re in New
York. Natasha doesn’t ask any follow up questions, as if the Manhattan square footage and the
Avengers as a team are equally irrelevant. He moves on to outline the breakthrough that put Pepper
in quarantine with the promise of being freed from Extremis, and whether it could be safely
harnessed for healing. He doesn't tell her about the ongoing argument over that one.

They edge around the fall of SHIELD, the congressional hearings, the legal limbo between
disavowal and whistle-blowing. She alludes to the fallout of being a saboteur and a savior without
the benefit of also being Steve Rogers.

“Which brings me here,” she says, draining her fifth cup of coffee.

“Seeing the sights.”

“Might as well.” She shrugs. “There’s the possibility of denaturalization, so before that happens,
why not seize the opportunity to see what I thought I’d been fighting for?”

Bruce is caught off-guard, thinking she’s talking about proteins losing structure before he switches
tracks from denaturation to citizenship, “Wait, denaturalization?”

She bobs her head as if this is nothing, checking her phone.

“How? Why?”

“Depending on interpretation,” she scoops up the check and slips out of the booth, “it’s possible I
may have lied on my paperwork.”

“About what?”

“That’s the kicker,” she says, shouldering her duffel, “I wouldn’t even know. Hey, I’ll see you
around.”

“Romanoff.” Bruce thumbs a fiver for the tip and follows her, but she’s already left the check and a
twenty at the cashier without waiting for change. “Natasha.”

She’s past the car when he catches up with her, and it occurs to him that she’s ditching him, that
this is why she brought her bag in with her in the first place. Maybe she got tired of waiting for him
to hit the can.

“Wait a minute.”

“Yeah, sorry, I lost track of time there.” He admires the coolness with which she’s blowing him
off. It almost sells. “I need to meet a woman about a car.”

“I’ll drive you--”

“Arriving in an SUV with a STARKV8 vanity plate defeats the purpose, actually.”

“One question.”

After a few steps she stops walking, laying her hand on a wrought iron gate leading into an
overgrown courtyard between buildings.

“Are you safer traveling alone, or with friends?”

Her answer is a curious look, almost wistful, and then she ducks through the gate.

Even though she picked up the check, Bruce has the creeping suspicion he’s started feeding a feral
cat.
The ‘99 Accord grumbles from a leaky muffler but sounds okay otherwise. There’s a hole in the dash where the radio’s been ripped out. The transmission slips between first and second, but Natasha can work around that. The vehicle is a dull silver with a grey interior and no identifying dents. She sets the parking brake, lets the engine idle in neutral, and low-balls the seller in the passenger seat. “I’ll give you four.”

“AC’s fritzy, but the car runs like a champ.” The woman narrows her eyes, which only emphasizes the harsh unblended lines of her eye makeup, the brow highlight like a naked fluorescent tube. The car smells of Palmers cocoa butter, with a lingering trace of tobacco and marijuana. She repeats the listing price, “Six.”

“Five.” Natasha points to the stains on the ceiling upholstery, “Moon roof leaks.”

She offers a phlegmatic shrug, “Only when it rains.”

Natasha laughs. “Five-twenty.”

“Five-fifty and you got a deal, hon.”

Natasha counts out eleven Grants and they sign the title over right there, the texture of the dashboard making the ballpoint skip.

She bums a cigarette when she lets the seller out at her house, sticking it behind her ear just in case. It’s been years since she’s had to smoke to sell a cover, but the scent of the car is making her crave both cookies and nicotine. After she gasses it up, she reaches to unzip her duffel and stops short with the sudden clear memory of setting her tablet in the door pocket of Stark’s stupid red SUV.

“Well, shit.”

It doesn’t take long to load the tracking app onto her phone and verify herself with JARVIS, it’s the annoyance of letting a detail slip. It’s harder to read on the smaller screen, with the glare of sunlight through the roof, so she crams it into the gaping hole in the dash where it’s propped in shadow. The node she placed on the bumper agrees with the reading JARVIS adds from the tablet, showing they’ve crossed back over into Pennsylvania.

Tony comes back from the Aberdeen Proving Ground all smiles, filled with the tension of an overwound spring and talking a mile a minute about Niagara Falls. Once they settle on their plan of attack for the Falls, Tony hits the highway and vents about the meeting.

The military brass have been pushing for SI to move back into weapons manufacture ever since they got out of it, but now they smell blood in the water. The debacle of repulsor tech ending up in HYDRA hands looks like a big opportunity for them, and they feel that Tony should be eager to make it up to America by giving them prezziess as well. It had been a long morning of Tony dismantling all those assumptions without burning too many bridges Pepper might want to keep open. Maintaining that the woman who now ran the company made her own damned decisions about it, with oversight from a board that was more than just Tony, and that Tony himself was immune to bullying appeals to his masculinity and love of country.

Bruce ponders the difference between the military hunting you like a big game animal, versus hitting on you like a stalker on a night bus.
Tony mutters darkly all the way north about how and when he should tell Pepper about the end run they attempted while she’s in quarantine.

“Sure, she’s working from in there, conferencing and everything, but if she were at liberty she’d be on a plane and paddling asses by 6am tomorrow.” He guns it into passing gear and weaves through traffic with the ease of breathing, forgetting the more sedate manner he’d been driving with thus far.

Bruce slips on his reading glasses, embracing the blur they give to distance, and pins his eyes to the tablet in his hand.

Natasha had left it in the pocket of the car door, undoubtedly by design. It’s the latest SI tech, but stripped of location information and half of the standard software. The browser history and cache files are pristine. It has, however, been loaded with a handful of books being read simultaneously. Beach reads. Like she’s on a vacation.

Tony settles into his version of contemplative silence; speed and a playlist heavy on early punk and 70’s metal. Bruce digs out the noise canceling headphones and peruses Natasha’s bookshelf. The Stand. Hitchhikers’. Huckleberry Finn. Shogun. Dracula. He’s read a couple, and he skims through a few more in the hours to Niagara Falls, trying to find common denominators. There’s nothing else on the tablet of any real interest, which doesn’t appear to be jailbroken. When they get to the hotel he sets it on the table next to his bed, charging with the cord he’d bought at a truck stop.

Late that afternoon, Bruce spots Natasha on the Rainbow Bridge stretching across the Niagara River. Between countries, over a gorge.

She’s chatting in German with a gaggle of tourists, taking group shots with a large DSLR. She’s wearing a blue t-shirt that says Rochester, a grey hoodie tied around her hips, and big dark sunglasses. Her hair is in a ponytail folded under and caught in the holder, so it looks plain blonde.

Bruce glances at Tony, but he’s too busy declaiming, “I really don’t see the point of chugging along on a tugboat just to get wet.”

“It’s majestic. You want company for Tony Bennett?”

“Are you implying you don’t want to spend a lovely evening with the Tonys? Because this makes no sense to me. Who doesn’t love Tony Bennett?”

“I’m Bennett neutral.” Bruce thinks he can just make out her voice, throaty with Germanic Rs. She’s coming closer, and he wonders how she’s going to play it. “But I really want to see you look like an ass in a big blue rain slicker.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. I can pull that look off.”

When Bruce glances back, she’s gone.

On the boat they’re tossed in the turbulence at the foot of the falls, looking up at one Great Lake spilling into another. Bruce feels the immense power thrumming through him, more exhilarating than some rickety roller coaster. He’s glad the rain slicker hides the way his ribs stretch when he breathes in the cool mist.

Tony’s thrown the poncho hood back, teeth set against the wind. The bastard’s right, he looks like a knight wearing a sky blue tabard. Even when he grips the railing and offers up his lunch to the foaming waters, he does it with such panache that Bruce applauds.
The high roller suite is empty when Natasha slips in. That’s good. It gives her home ground advantage if she’s been followed. This isn’t technically her hotel room, but it’s like borrowing a pen; most of them have ink, and are sturdy enough to stab with if need be. This suite is like all of Stark’s spaces, an empty jewelry setting, sleek, tasteful, bereft of soul.

Shifting rainbow light from the falls illuminates the suite through a wall of windows. She goes through the nearest bedroom and throws her duffel on the bathroom counter. She dials the dim light up to full brightness, and slumps on the ledge of the whirlpool tub to catch her breath.

She recognizes the travel kit, battered leather zipped tight. This is Banner’s part of the suite.

Days after he’d left the helicarrier suddenly--if not entirely unexpectedly--she’d retrieved his carry-on bag and took the liberty of an inventory. A few changes of pants and shirts. A notebook with half the pages torn out, the remainder thick with penciled numbers that turned out to be vitals, dosages, mobiles, all related to the clinical work he did. Medical paraphernalia like glucose test strips and a stethoscope, false identification, and very little money. His suture kit had been much nicer than the superglue and cheap skin stapler she carries in her own field medkit.

She’d taken boxes of them from work last year, indulging in the petty theft of boosting office supplies. It occurs to her that she might never get back to her apartment in Rockville where she’d stashed them.

She’s too exhausted to figure out if she should be sad about that.

Natasha stands to loot Bruce’s luggage, and the numbness and shock part like stage curtains. She leans hard on the sink, struggling to open her duffel as the knife slice on her shoulder screams at her for immediate attention. Pulling off her hoodie and t-shirt is easier, no fine motor control needed to yank it over her head with her good hand and spread it out on counter, to catch the blood and to count the holes so she doesn’t miss a wound.

The cut resistant fabric on the under tank did its job, the skin beneath unmarred. In the mirror she’s washed out nearly as white as her sport bra.

The bill she’s paying for not ending up dead tonight is itemized as follows: a deep cut across the flat of her outer shoulder blade, which gapes and wells blood, and a couple swaths of road rash from where she’d skidded to a stop just short of joining her assailant in a plummet into the Niagara Gorge.

She can use her dominant arm, but the angle is a bitch. She sinks a few staples in to stabilize the gap, and improvises a cross-tied compress from a bath towel she cuts into strips with her larger tac knife.

Natasha uses a soapy washcloth to scrape gravel out of her forearm and denim fibers out of her flank. Vaseline on the road rashes, then gauze and tape on the side, and an ace bandage around the forearm. She rinses the blood out of her under tank and hoodie, one handed but methodical, and hangs them to dry on the towel rack. She works the ruined t-shirt back on to absorb any more blood. No point in ruining a fresh shirt.

The light show of the falls has shut down by the time she comes out of the bathroom, past midnight. She sets the medkit and her gun on the coffee table, opens a ginger ale with hands that only tremble slightly, and stretches out on the sofa in the main room.
Bruce enjoys the show more than he'd expected, and the casino afterward even less. He heads back to the hotel, walking off dinner and trying to get Alfie out of his head. He murmurs tunelessly as he slips into the suite.

“...aaaand iiiiif only fools are kiiiiind, Alfieeee, then I guessssss it is wiiiise to b--sonofabitch!”

“Sorry.” Natasha lowers the gun. “I don’t normally startle. I’m a little on edge.”

Her forearm is bandaged, her lower orbital sockets underscored with pallor and bruise, her processed hair mashed into a ratty pouf from sleeping hunched over the couch arm. “What happened?”

“It’s been an eventful evening.”

“But the Germans seemed so friendly.” He’s bemused that he’s never seen her pull a gun on anyone else. That seems to be their thing. He enters the room slowly. She sets her feet on the floor, and swaps the gun for a white box, which she holds out to him. He turns on lights.

“The Germans were sweethearts. They invited me to a late lunch. The fight happened during the fireworks, someone got the jump on me.” She reaches behind the neck to ease her t-shirt over her head, revealing a shoulder wrapped in strips of bloody towel. “Where’s Tony?”

“Losing pocket change. He’ll be along eventually.” Bruce is impressed and disturbed by the extensive ad hoc medkit and what that implies. There’s fresh blood smeared inside the cover. She’s delicately peeling the toweling off her shoulder blade, not meeting his eyes. His physical exam habits are rusty, but it’s a relief to shift to vitals instead of trying to ignore her utilitarian sport bra and half mast jeans. He checks the hand sized bandage taped high on the swell of her hip.

“Presumably this was one of the people you’ve pissed off?”

She turns to reveal a puffy slash, suture staples poorly jabbed in and tearing loose. Bruises surround it like storm clouds, livid and ugly. “Standard mugger would’ve given up a lot sooner.”

“I take it in your experience muggers back off before it escalates to stabbing?” Bruce thinks of the dingy bus shelter that was the last thing he saw of El Paso, TX, before coming to in the scrub next to the highway in Alamogordo. Pants-shittingly close to White Sands and a teeming anthill of U.S. Army troops, and he'd still lost his wallet. He jokes wistfully, “Must be nice.”

“If he just wanted my money, he’d have surrendered when I had him dangling over the gorge.”

“Ah. But he didn’t.”

“So I let go.”

“I see.” He motions her into his bathroom, already occupied by her duffel and her laundry. He washes up and puts on the gloves from her kit, too small and tight on his hands. He sighs and carefully flexes his fingers, familiar with the catastrophic failure of ill fitting latex, but they hold.

She’s pale under the bathroom light, hair messily piled up, revealing an ashy scattering of freckles across her deltoids and upper chest, fresh blood welling up and spilling down her back. “I’m gonna start over, you’ve made a mess.”

“Fair enough.” She bends over the tub with her good arm propped on the far side, so he can wash out the wound, flex of triceps as she steadies herself. He works around the racerback of the bra,
then gives the tub a rinse before turning off the water. The skin is sliced through to fascia, but it
doesn’t involve the muscle underneath.

He supports her rib cage to help her sit up and jokes, “Niagara County Hydra cell?”

She braces hands on her knees, breathing in through the nose and out through pursed chapped lips.
“Longest friendliest border in the world.” Long breath and a swallow. “Millions of tourists from all
over the globe.” Another long breath, and she looks less green. “Reputation for kitsch and
honeymooners.”

“People still honeymoon here?” He coaxes her arm back to slacken the skin, and fresh blood runs
down like a closed eye spilling tears.

“They do it ironically.” Her jaw clenches as he pulls the edges of the wound closed. “I kissed
Rogers in a shopping mall to evade Hydra, because people generally look away from public
displays of affection.”

“Do they, now?” He keeps his eyes on task, setting the first staple with a click. “Not sure I follow
you.”

“Just saying that it wouldn't work here, in this particular place. People would smile and watch, or
keep glancing back, charmed. Niagara is for lovers. Context is everything.”

“Surely not everything.” Bruce sets the rest in a neat line, thinking anyone might be charmed
watching her put the moves on Steve Rogers. Would she climb him like an oak or pull him down to
her level?

“Context is key.”

He tapes her up, skin hot, but no other signs of infection.

She joins him at the counter while he’s washing his hands, moving slow and obviously stiffening
up. She digs in her duffle bag, apparently in no hurry to vacate his bathroom. Bruce finds himself
standing his ground.

He leans his hip against the counter and openly watches her. She pulls out soft athletic wear,
presumably to sleep in, brushes her teeth, then scrubs off the remnants of her makeup, bringing a
rosy flush to her skin. More easily marked than he’d expected, or maybe it’s recovery to baseline
now that the wound is clean and closed.

He drops his eyes and unzips his kit, going through his own evening routine. When he shuts off the
tap he catches the end of a quiet hiss. Before he realizes he’s reaching for her hands. “Stop,
just...stop.”

Natasha lets him ease the t-shirt back off the one arm she’s already put inside.

“That's how you popped out the first set, I’ll bet.” Bruce goes into his own bag in the bedroom.
She comes out, having quickly slipped into the soft bottoms, and he holds open a button-down
shirt. He’s relieved when she turns to slip her arms in, and bends her head to button it.

Bruce looks at the untended scratches on her nape, already scabbed over, the vulnerable curve of
how she’s holding her injured shoulder. Her fingers are slow and methodical, the pain and exertion
hitting her. Her feet are bare and several of her toes are crooked, but they all grip the carpet as she
straightens and sways a bit.
Her nail polish, the copper of newly minted pennies, is chipped and grown out. She’s not just freshly injured, but frayed at the edges for weeks before this.

He’s only gotten as far as he has in dealing with his damage by learning to be brutally honest with himself, by practicing the meditation stance of noting emotions and letting them pass through without passing judgement. Right now he notes that seeing her in this state does not elicit sympathy or compassion, but a kind of tenderness laced with surprise. “Your hair’s a mess.”

“Yeah, well,” Natasha scoffs, glancing over her shoulder, “people complain about the weather, and no one does anything about that, either.”

“See, that’s where the Avengers come in. We have Thor for both of those.”

This earns him a genuine snort of laughter as she plucks a small knife from the collar of the shirt, flicks open a blade curved like a claw, and slices the hair tie free. They both watch it fall to the carpet. Neither picks it up.

“When did you eat last?”

“Not really hungry.”

He waits for her to answer the question he asked.

She concedes with half an offhand shrug, “I had lunch with the Germans.”

Bruce gestures to the bed, “Get off your feet before you fall down.”

Behind him, she snorts softly and rustles the pillows.

He goes into Tony’s bathroom and texts him, I’m borrowing a dose of your pain meds if she’ll take them.

He’s had to pull them out a few times when Tony has gone grey around the edges, the creeping calcification around the socket wall of the reactor causing a knifing pain that sometimes goes away in a couple breaths, sometimes doesn’t, and a few times he’s even let Bruce win the argument to let him drive instead of gritting his teeth and waiting for it to subside. His phone pings as he’s putting his glasses on to read the prescription bottle.

I take it the double headed eagle has landed hard?

Y, btw I’m breaking into the minibar

jfc order room service you hobo
nevermind, done

The room is dim when he comes back with pills and a cold bottle of water. She’s curled up against the pillows on her uninjured side, her hand cupped and waiting.

“I heard the bottle,” she explains, “I figure you’ll watch my back.”

“That’s why you came here.” He sits with one leg on the floor watches her drink the water.

“Not the only reason.” She doesn’t elaborate further.

“Food’s coming. Not sure what. I think JARVIS actually placed the call to room service.”
Natasha rolls her eyes. Her color is better now that she’s not trying to keep running in the traces, but she seems smaller than life, taking up maybe a quarter of the bed.

Bruce unplugs her tablet and offers it. “I bookmarked your places.”

She pushes her face into a pillow, voice taking on the cadence of sleep. “You can read if you want, I’m going to rest my eyes.”

Bruce tries to sort through what she’s implying with the tablet, but in the space of a few breaths her body settles and she’s dozing. He suspects that whatever sense of watch he’s providing might depend on proximity; he’s seen her drop into a catnap like this with her foot propped on Barton’s leg, only to snap awake the moment contact is broken. He gently shifts the rest of himself onto the bed and opens up *Hitchhikers*.

~*~

“Be nice,” Pepper chides.

“I am,” Tony pours a measured tot from his flask, watching the whiskey flow over the ice. Every day he doesn’t take the painkillers, he gets to have a drink or two. Might as well pit one’s vices against each other, beat down the risk of addiction with his favorite crutch. “I absolutely didn’t take a picture of them passed out like tired puppies in a pile on the bed.”

On her end of the call there’s a quiet chime, and a click. “Oh, good grief--”

“I love it when you quote Lucy van Pelt.”

“--why does this feel more intrusive than reading her dossier?”

“I’m just jealous they can sleep like that.”

Pepper sighs. He suspects that even with the treatments and side effects, she’s sleeping better alone than she does next to him when he’s restless and jerks awake. She doesn’t say she’s getting more rest, and he doesn’t say that his sleep has tanked without her steady quiet breathing lulling him down. He can hear the crumple in her brow when she adds, “It’s just so weird.”

“I thought I’d only popped over to Canada, but honey, I’ve landed in the Twilight Zone.”

“Listen, you wanted to get into the superhero business, don’t get cold feet now that you have competition for being the weirdest one in the room.”

“Whatever you say, hot stuff.”

~*~

Natasha rouses in stages like surfacing from a deep dive. Whatever they’re giving Stark for pain is fairly heavy stuff. Judging by the breathing, Bruce has fallen asleep next to her, and she can hear footsteps in the main room. Her knife is where she left it beside her hand under the pillow, and she cracks an eyelid.

Through the blur of lashes, Stark stands in the doorway, glass in hand.

Natasha sits up with a show of bleary creakiness that’s more genuine that she’d like. She wonders how he’s going to play this. Will there be outrage at the surveillance, or a snide remark about SHIELD habits dying hard? Perhaps smugness at her being caught short?
He rolls the ice in the glass, then whispers, “No sudden moves, no change in sound level, and he won't wake up. There’s food. I brought fudge.”

She leaves Bruce sacked out on the bed, the dormant tablet propped between his lax forearm and a pillow.

Food is a fancy burger, and Natasha inhales it the moment she smells it. Injury spikes her appetite for meat, even a couple scratches and a handful of stitches is enough to kick the metabolism into gear. When she doesn't touch the fries, Tony hands over his untouched burger and she polishes that off, too.

The silence is not quite companionable, but it’s been worse. He brings over a small bag when she’s done, and sets out the blocks of fudge like a game of three card monte.

“You can play it neutral,” he sets down Swiss Chocolate, “or chilly and polite,” Canadian Maple follows, “or you could try being a real person for a little while.” he punctuates the last with Rocky Road. “Lady’s choice.”

She blinks and nabs the Rocky Road. “Do you really want to explore the symbolism here, or just have dessert?”

Tony plops down on the other end of the couch, and tries to cut a piece of Swiss Chocolate with the plastic knife from the fudge shop. “I’ve been told I have a soft marshmallowy center.” The knife shatters, and he bites into the block instead.

She flicks open her karambit and slices strips of Rocky Road, thin enough to melt on her tongue. “Perhaps Pepper was concerned about toasting you.”

“Touche. You, on the other hand, are the almonds.” His eyes narrow, considering. “They used to be poisonous too.”

“Your analogy is falling apart.”

“Maybe.”

Perhaps not marshmallow, but he is mellower than when she previously spent time with him. Not-dying suits him. “Banner isn’t chocolate fudge.”

“That’s your objection? I just called you nuts.”

She shrugs. She’s been called much worse.

“Well, you’re right, of course.” Tony bites off another chunk of fudge. “He’s mint chocolate swirl.”

It’s not much later that Bruce pads out, scratching his chest. Tony offers him a block of fudge as he passes, “Look, Dorothy Lamour showed up.”

He takes the overstuffed chair, and looks ready to fall back asleep, slowly unwrapping the fudge. It is indeed mint chocolate swirl. “Yeah, I’m still not watching any of those films.”

“Spoilsport.”

“I’m not interested in seeing Bing Crosby in anything.” Bruce tosses the flimsy plastic knife onto the table and holds his hand out to Natasha. She offers her open karambit, handle first. He cuts a few precise cubes of fudge and gives it back just as carefully. Natasha licks it clean, folds it back
up and tucks it away with a flourish, mainly to fuck with Tony.

Tony bites another hunk of fudge and stashes it back in the box. “You sharing the bed, too?”

Natasha says, “It’s a huge bed,” at the same time Bruce says, “I can take the couch.”

He meets her eyes with a thoughtful look. There's no reason to kick him out of his own bed, but she’s not keen on sleeping on a couch with her shoulder. The dregs of the meds blur the pain, but that won’t last, and now that her belly is full she’d like to sack out again.

Tony scoffs, “This road movie will never make it past the Hays Code now that the rooms are co-ed. I’m going to bed.”

Bruce shrugs, easygoing, a spark in his eyes. After the door closes he pops the last fudge cube into his mouth, sucks his fingers clean, and pushes up his glasses. “We can divvy up the blankets, if you’re comfortable with that. Or I’ll take the couch. You really shouldn’t be cramped up.”

“Works for me.” She closes up her box, sets it on the table.

“Tony invited you along for the ride just now. I’m inviting you, too. I think you’ll be safer.” He turns out the lights as she makes her way to his part of the suite. “We can work out the accommodations better tomorrow.”

“Or we could keep fucking with Tony.” She reaches for the bedding, but he shoos at her hands.

“Knock it off, I’m not redoing those staples a second time.” He arranges the blankets into two parallel spots, giving her most of the pillows. “I’m all for fucking with Tony.”

~*~

Bruce wakes up first, and orders breakfast. He watches the sky lighten over the falls, gently amused that Natasha Romanoff, ex-SHIELD agent, ex-KGB operative, presumed Avenger in reserve, snores. Barely audible, probably due to being run down and sleeping half on her face, curled with her back to him and wrapped in the blankets like a cocoon, but still. Human. Oddly gratifying.

That sentiment lasts until after breakfast, when she lets him take a look under the bandage.

She leans forward with her head bowed, palms spread on the bathroom counter while he pulls the tape free. The amount of blood soaked through the bandage concerns him. Even if he adds sutures at this point, the scarring will be rough.

Instead, the bandage pulls out a couple staples. The rest are buried in the fresh red skin that seals the gaping wound from the night before.

Natasha’s head remains bowed, but her eyes meet his in the mirror.

He kicks the bathroom door shut.

“You need to dig the staples out now.” She pulls a pair of tweezers from her jeans pocket. “Or I’ll have to cut them out later.”

Bruce plucks the tool from her fingers. The wound now looks like a welt from a belt.

She looks directly at him, and reaches over to gently tap her shoulder. Get cracking, she seems to say, or I’ll do a hack job myself. The hack job she could easily have done instead of pulling him
into the bathroom and letting him see this.

He takes his glasses from his shirt pocket and sets to work. The new flesh closing the wound is soft and bright red with blood supply, easily damaged, growing over the metal in lumps. He eases each staple free, blotting the blood that wells up in dots. He can’t help calculating the rate of accelerated healing, and once he’s taped on a fresh bandage he leans down to change the one on her side.

The abrasion is healed to a dusky pink, with a few patches of wet scab where gravel remains embedded. “Gonna have to debride.”

“Yeah,” she nods tightly, “it itches.”

He scrubs it clean with a hot soapy cloth, and she stands still as he applies antibiotic ointment and clean bandages to both wounds.

He gathers the metal bits and biohazard refuse, tying up the trash bag and washing his hands.

She pulls on a t-shirt with a faded graphic of a woman in Edwardian dress posing next to a massive barrel, emblazoned *Niagara Ladies Auxiliary - We’ll have a barrel of fun!* She crosses her arms, the wince so faint Bruce almost misses it, and says, “Spit it out.”

“Was it SHIELD?” The agency is in ruins and legal limbo, which boils down to clusters of rogue agents and HYDRA cells, and it’s only a matter of time before the shit hits the fan again.

“No.” Natasha says. “It was before that.”

The leaked SHIELD documents about her indicate she was working at a high level when she first surfaced as a mercenary, already implausibly young or extraordinarily lucky. “How long before?”

A smile softens her mouth, slow and lonely, and it occurs to him that with the tissue repair factor, he has no idea how old she could be. “The very beginning.”

When they step out of the bathroom Tony is leaning casually in the doorway to the sitting room, sipping coffee, shoes on and bags packed on the couch behind him. Bruce doesn’t unpack, as a lifestyle choice, so it doesn’t take long to gather his things together. Natasha plays it cool as she does the same.

“So Romanoff, as you know, nobody rides for free,” Tony takes her bag and keeps talking as he walks, to forestall any objection on her part to the chivalry, “so, gas, grass, or assassination?”
Who's Zooming Who?

They leave Stark’s plush candy apple colored SUV just inside the US border for Happy to retrieve, and they pile into Natasha’s shitty disposable Accord. She assumes it has less to do with stealth than with Bruce's offhand nostalgic remark about a car he owned in grad school.

After the first transmission slip, Tony shifts straight from first to third with an empathetic grunt directed toward the car itself. The weather is breezy through the wooded back roads of western New York, lapis blue sky with cotton ball clouds, the vortex of wind through the open windows redolent of chlorophyll and dust. He’s quiet for him, taking what seems to be the least efficient route possible. Natasha wonders if he thinks he’s losing a tail, or if he’s trying to stay off the beaten path for some other reason.

There had been rumors even before India that Banner took the Hulk out for nature walks in unpopulated areas, but no confirmed sightings and no evidence of damage to corroborate. She suspects he'd just gotten good at walking the dog.

“JARVIS, nearest auto parts store.”

JARVIS gives directions from Tony’s phone, seated in the cup holder.

Natasha meets Bruce’s eye in the side view mirror, but he shrugs the shoulder Tony can’t see and she doesn’t say anything. At the shady back end of the parking lot behind the store, Tony pops the hood and starts tinkering, talking to the vehicle as if she and Bruce weren't even there.

Bruce sniffs the air, and gestures her to a skeevy diner just down the block, where they eat phenomenal open faced sandwiches for lunch.

“So,” Natasha flips the mustard open and squeezes a puddle for her fries, “why are you keen to troll Tony?”

Bruce gathers his thoughts, fingers fidgeting in a way that Natasha's noticed is a side effect of brain activation in the deeper centers, awkward emotional truth working up to the surface. She hadn't expected to reach anything so sensitive so soon, but maybe the physical proximity of the night before has loosened up his reflexive defenses. Or maybe he's looking to recruit an ally to keep his lab partner from freebing Extremis. “Tony...has a strange sense of boundaries.”
“You’re a perceptive man to see that he has them at all.” Natasha adds, “I’m only half joking.”

“No, he plays a lot of things close to the chest, just…sex isn’t one of them. It’s not an issue, I’m a scientist, I can approach the topic clinically...and frankly, his proclivities are general knowledge, so it’s kind of fascinating to see how choosing a monogamous relationship has affected him. The narrative is that a guy like that is tamed by commitment, but...”

“He’s more like a strange mutt finding a forever home.”

Bruce glances down at the table to hide the flash of grin while he schools it from his face.

She can still see it threatening, and decides to poke at it. “I had ringside seats for their courtship.”

“I’m aware of that, actually.” The smile breaks free. “Colonel Rhodes has quite the tragicomic rant about the whole thing.”

“Coulson and I…we had several running bets. He was rooting for Pepper to embrace the CEO lifestyle and upgrade to a trophy spouse.”

“And you?”

“I was rooting for Tony to become that trophy spouse.” Natasha shrugs, “I like a dark horse. So why is it a problem now?”

“Aside from the cave,” Bruce sighs, frustration and equanimity intertwined, “I think this may the longest time he’s gone without sex since age thirteen.”

“That’s probably not true, he’s always been apt to disappear into his workshop for months at a time.” Natasha says, “But I will believe this is the first time he’s noticed.”

“What I’m saying is, be prepared for this to be a perennial topic of conversation.”

“Noted. Though I promise no sympathy.”

“He certainly doesn’t get any from me. It’s been years.”

“Yeah.” Natasha drags a fry through the mustard. For a while sex was a kind of hobby, exercising her own choice unencumbered by mission. Not that she had often lived up to that particular aspect of the Black Widow moniker -- after one assignment necessitated a handjob that ruined a pair of satin opera gloves, she’d learned to steer through those rapids -- but it had always been on the table. She’d been given training of a sort, charm and deportment and technical tips, the same way she learned any weapon; but regarding her own body the Red Room had excised her fallopian tubes and hymen, taught her how to fake virginity if needed, and left it at that. Genuine pleasure had always been a solitary pursuit, carefully hidden.

When she took control of her body and her life, it became an expression of self ownership, even when she brought in a guest. Then she found other ways to convince herself she was her own person, and her job hadn’t left much time or opportunity to scout for playmates. “It’s been a couple years for me, too.”

Bruce hides his surprise pretty well, all things being equal. He extends his hand over the table and shakes hers with a warm and sure grip. “Then let’s troll the shit out of him.”

She smiles, and slides a finger to tickle his palm.
They bring Tony a roast beef, with a side of gravy in a to-go cup that Bruce insists he try because it's homemade.

Tony washes up in the diner and strips off his stained tank for an Iggy and The Stooges t-shirt. He gestures to an array of bits and bobs laid out on the roof of the car. “That's all the glove box crap. I cleaned it out looking for spare fuses.”

“We're not going to have this car for very long.”

“Well then it'll give you a place to stash your gun in the meantime. Safety first.” Tony tosses her a small foil square, which she plucks out of the air. “Those are expired by the way.”

Natasha hops up on the roof, feet dangling down while she sorts through the glove box items. An old metal box of medicinal cough drops, cardboard 3D glasses, a half-filled Dunkin' Donuts punch card that she pockets, and four more condoms in a strip. She checks the code stamped on the foil. “I guess they do have expiration dates.”

“Usually you're aces at gun safety. Was SHIELD training just as dodgy as their recruitment?”

“Frankly, in my line of work,” Natasha says, “it doesn't actually come up.”

“No,” Bruce pipes up, cheeky, “I'm pretty sure it does.”

Tony points with the gravy cup as he dips his sandwich in. “Bruce should know, he's a scientist. Probably running a trial as we speak.”

Bruce shakes his head, dismissive, hands fisted in his pockets, “Anecdata.”

“Smoke and mirrors, gentlemen.” Natasha wings the condom at Bruce, and it bounces off his chest. “Combat and assassination aside, you get far better results from the possibility than the reality. That goes for sex and violence both.”

“The threat of violence,” Tony says, “the promise of sex.”

“Nope.” Natasha slips on the 3D glasses. “Strike that, reverse it.”

“The promise of violence,” Bruce's voice has that soft delicacy it gets when he doesn't want to spook an idea toppling dominoes of implication through his brain, “the threat of sex.”

She smiles at him, but he’s looking down at the foil packet at his feet with a complicated expression.

Tony balls up the sandwich wrapper and snaps his fingers toward Bruce's feet. “Keep America beautiful, bunny, come on, we're Avengers. We break enough shit.”

Bruce picks it up with a sigh, then comes to sweep up the rest to throw away.

Natasha jabs his arm with her knee. “Don't tell me you were a pouter about condoms.”

“There are just…” He crosses his arms, continuing in an undertone as Tony wanders off to check his phone, “The radioactivity is nothing like in the blood, but still, hypothetically speaking, I would insist on containment. But there are fit issues.”

She gives her blankest expression, “Really.”

“You asked.”
She actually hadn't, but she's not one to turn down free intel. “How so?”

“Are you asking for trolling purposes?”

“Maybe. Maybe I’m curious if you’re trolling me.” She’s still wearing the glasses, and she lets her eyes go unfocused so there’s a blue and a red version of him side by side. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“I still feel kinda bad about that.”

“You still kind of smirk when you apologize for it.” She shrugs, and hops down off the roof.

Tony decides to drive a long loop through the Allegheny National Forest, and Natasha concludes he’s in it for the twisty two lane roads themselves, driving like a craftsman planing wood. Proving he can get results even from a beater with a quarter of a million miles on it.

~*~

Natasha wrestles with how much intel she’s giving Bruce. He’s a gentle attentive listener, disturbingly good at inference and implication. She’s well aware he’s hard to misdirect for long. To be brutally honest with herself, his bluff-calling is part of his charm.

She’d found herself wanting to earn Steve’s trust, as a way to convince herself she could be found worthy by someone honorable and good. Now she’s trying to make Bruce see her, understand how her mind works, but why? To see what it takes to make him turn away from a monster? To test if his compassion extends to over-sensitive sociopaths?

When Bruce says, “Pull over,” it’s the first thing he’s said for hours.

Tony’s response is, “JARVIS, scan the beater. The other beater, not our beater,” as he coasts to a stop behind a ratty Chevy with a flat tire and a frantic young man pacing on the gravel shoulder. He pulls out his phone, which is scrolling text and specs, and pops the trunk.

Bruce gives her a sheepish look, then gets out of the car with a call of, “Hello, can we, uh, help?”

Natasha takes the debrief as Tony and Bruce work on the car. Tony’s taken the cap from his reactor as a kind of identification, and to help him see when he slides under the car to seat the jack.

“Nat,” she smiles at the young man, and nods when he gives them all an incredulous look of recognition. “Yeah, I’m afraid so.”

“On the down low?” He rubs his chin to indicate Tony’s fuller simplified goatee, and nods at her hair. “Pretty.”

“A friend did it, thanks.” She offers a handshake.

The car makes a rusted squeak as the jack takes off some of the load. Bruce spins the tire iron with a flourish and seats it on a lug nut.

“Henry,” the young man says. He’s sweating through his shirt, breeze flipping the ID badge at his belt. Pharmacy tech at a local hospital. “Boss doesn’t believe I got a flat on my third day of work, now they really won’t believe me.”

Natasha has enough details to see the shape of the problem, and where to apply pressure to solve it. “When’s your shift start?”
Henry looks at his phone and shakes his head. His mouth is so tight it almost stops his chin from trembling.

Tony inspects the donut while Bruce growls at the tire iron, trying to break a rusted lug nut free. “Stark,” she snaps, “keys.”

He digs them out of his pocket and tosses, and Natasha snags them out of the air. “Get your things, Henry, I’ll get you to work and we’ll drop off your car when it’s done.”

Henry debates for half a second before he grabs his backpack. There are advantages to her busted anonymity, and Stark’s rep for philanthropy certainly doesn’t hurt.

In ten minutes she’s dropping the young man off for his afternoon shift, still damp from the moist towelettes she’d given him to wipe off the sweat and dust. She understands the fragile structure of job, school, and finances they’ve saved from ruin, but she’s not sure she can take much more of Henry's stunned babbling gratitude.

“Hey, shh, hey; just tell me one thing,” she asks, “where's the best place to eat around here?”

A couple hours later Tony parks Henry's car in the hospital lot, with a full tank, and she drops off his keys and enough carryout to sustain a growing young man subsisting on ramen and raw nerves. Fried chicken and spare ribs, collards and beans, and cornbread made in a waffle iron. Henry knows his stuff, and the car smells heavenly as Tony takes the Lake Erie Circle Tour route until they hit a small municipal beach.

They eat, and shoo away gulls, and watch their shadows stretch toward the lapping waves. Bruce ditches his shoes and dozes like a beach bum. Tony looks up weird motels.

Natasha cheekily texts Pepper, You didn’t tell me this was a working vacation.

She spends a few minutes decrypting an email from Maria. She's avoiding the latest one from Isaiah, not ready to open up that whole business just yet, but Maria's is even worse. She’s glad to be surrounded by tranquil beauty with a full belly, to offset the news Morse has encountered some rather nasty tech aimed at forced compliance. The specs are sketchy, but Maria ends her email with, Compared to what we found in P’s safe deposit box, this is a Snoopy Snowcone machine: Don’t Panic.

There’s a bank vault in DC that contained her worst nightmare, a cancerous growth deep inside SHIELD before she even got there, and more than once she’s contemplated the balance of forces and loyalties that kept them from using it on her, what kept her in check enough or visible enough that it was easier to work around her than to take her down, take her into the vault, put a muzzle on her. Put a leash.

Hill had shown her and Steve the chair in the vault, then the three of them had shared a beer and very little conversation while Natasha drew up a supply list for the hardware store. Hill parted ways to establish an alibi. She and Steve had engaged in tangible catharsis. They left just enough of the mechanism to be damning evidence for the horrors perpetrated in that chair, and reduced the proprietary bits to a small plastic bin filled with finely grated motherboard and recyclable metals.

Steve had thanked her for her support, and thought she was being gracious when she said it was her genuine pleasure.

One night, after she’d hauled Clint out of Loki’s grip and he’d started to trust his own mind again, she’d stayed up late talking with Laura. Sharing a couch and a bottle of bourbon while snow
dumped down in the dead of night, warm feet tangled together under a fleece blanket, she’d admitted she worried that maybe there was still a trigger or two buried deep in her brain. *Magic words might work on fairies*, Laura had poked her toes with reassuring bluntness, *but humans are ornery beasts.*

The past couple months have taught her this wasn’t just paranoia, and those yellowed photocopied pages she’d burnt in an office waste bin mean someone, at some point, had found a lost lab book that might still be out there.

Her phone buzzes in her hand. Pepper asking, *How terrible was his pitch? More importantly: does this mean you’re back on the team?*

Well goddamn. Potts and Stark, they’re flanking her. She should have expected they’d be synergistic once they got together, the little shits. She doesn’t respond, not yet ready to tackle the details of Tony’s version of the Avengers initiative, what that could possibly mean now that SHIELD’s blown apart.

The mosquitoes swarm at dusk, feasting on her and Stark. They wake up Bruce and drive for forty minutes to the Nite Lite Motor Court. Bruce is hungry again, so they grab a spread of Szechuan food from a place he chooses seemingly at random, his nose a dowsing rod.

The Nite Lite is a coelacanth holdover from the seventies run by a Pakistani family, who are doing a brisk business leaning hard into the retro hipster vibe. Bruce unpacks the food and talks about things he's eaten on the road.

“Wings and limbs on skewers, basted and broiled. Viciously hot stews with turtle eggs bobbing in them. The mystery of what's inside the steamed dough.”

“I don’t care. I can eat anything wrapped in dough,” Natasha agrees, “And have.”

Tony snips, “I can’t tell if you're trying to be gross or fondly reminiscing.”

“Yeah,” Bruce says, snapping his chopsticks apart.

Pepper’s surely told Tony by now that she jumped the gun, but he still doesn’t give Natasha the pitch. He hauls in his tool chest, which turns out to be a portable server farm, because of course it is. He generates an impressive array of holoscreens, their blue light harmonizing well with the decor of cream and ultramarine, highlighting the nap of the flocked fleur de lis wallpaper.

Tony has a mirror of the data dump, complete with encrypted portion. As he’s chronically hacked into SHIELD with mixed success since boarding the helicarrier a few years back, he also has a respectable amount of supplemental intel that had since been wiped or redacted from the main cache. He’s been annotating and organizing it, not simply sending JARVIS through it like a spider but trawling it himself, bringing up search results and whole files to read through.

Natasha stretches out on one of the queen beds, Tony on the other. Bruce slumps in an easy chair with his feet propped on the end of her bed, ankles crossed. She scrolls through the record of their progress; filtered versus read, the notes and connections they’ve been making. What Tony’s shared with Hill, and surprisingly what Hill has shared with him.

It gives her a better idea of the machinations that have brought her here, to this motel room. She finds she doesn’t mind as much as she maybe should. Compared to implanted triggers and electrochemically-conditioned pliability, good old fashioned manipulation feels downright courtly.

She sets the tablet interface on the table between the beds. “While I respect your algorithm
“How gracious of you,” Tony’s smirk is all edges. Maybe he’s still peeved over the worm she’d left in JARVIS years ago.

She tucks into the carton of dumplings. “Can I ask why your new hobby is analyzing stale intelligence by hand?”

“Filtering is one thing.” He shakes his head once, decisive. “Whether JARVIS is a true AI is debatable, but he’s not a physical being. Even with years of data on user profiles, he misses certain kinds of stuff.”

“His argument is human nature.” Bruce’s feet twitch, like his thoughts have a jazzy beat. “That there are inferences and assumptions inherent in having a physical body, being a sentient social ape.”

She asks Tony with her own sharp smile, “You think you know enough about human nature to also beat a Turing Test?”

A spectrogram pops up on one of the screens, representing the audio signal of JARVIS’s voice. “Ms. Romanoff, I will take that as a vote of confidence in myself, instead of damning Sir with faint praise.”

She gestures with her chopsticks toward the screen, her point made. Bruce snersks.

Tony shifts his shoulders against the headboard, padded white leatherette with golden rivets. “For example, a computer would look at Banner’s grades and the social worker’s reports from sixth grade and think he was aces, adjusting well to his aunt’s home with no lasting damage or trauma.”

“In my defense, I am limited by the law of ‘garbage in/garbage out.’”

“Not just a computer.” Bruce stabs into his shredded pork, pensive. “Took me a long time to figure out it was just...that grief was more bearable than fear.”

Tony weighs the idea before giving a nod. “I can see that.”

Natasha directs her eyes into her carton, fascinated by the idea. That you might think you're doing well, but it's only in comparison to the hell you've escaped.

She thinks about Hulk’s huge arm, poised to backhand her on the helicarrier. She'd only run in the first place to lure him away from the labs and critical systems, to get him into the open space of the hanger. She knows now that he was already heading there, and was pissed to find her in his way. She had wondered if the hesitation that stayed his hand was recognition, or the realization she wasn't going to get in his way again.

She thinks now if he might have been recoiling from her fear.

Hulk likes elbow room, likes to fling himself through the air. It makes her think Bruce might have been a hider when he was small, hunkered down for safety and resenting it every second.

Natasha knew hiders in the Red Room. The ones who got small and quiet, who knew how to disappear before trouble hit, who could smell it like an approaching storm. The ones who overheard the most, who struck from unseen angles when they finally did make a move, doing what they could to survive. Natasha had never been able to hide like that, not even in the beginning when she was the smallest; her hair made her absence easy to spot, so her only option was to hit all...
her marks front and center, be visible and perfect, and hide her hiding in the spaces in between.

Sometimes even from herself.

That has been the hardest lesson to unravel and try to unlearn, hearing the tiny flicker of disquiet, knowing that to listen is a risk, that the hesitation alone could bring deadly correction or retribution…and doing it anyway, pulling that flicker of unease into the light, letting it speak, letting it change her.

Natasha does not believe in her inner child, that anything functional survived the Red Room, but she thinks she has enough original and manufactured pieces to put one together; she’s met enough good people and innocent children to recognize what belongs in such a persona.

To pass the Turing Test herself.

She eats and slides through screens, listening with one ear to Tony, tracking the jostle of Bruce’s feet through the mattress like an emotional commentary. Channels of information.

“What say you, Romanoff?”

She sets down the carton and opens up a bit, full and tired, wanting to distill it down as she closes her fist to disable each holographic screen one by one. “Right now it’s a skirmish level fight, which isn’t in the scope of the original Avengers initiative, much less the forte of most of the prospective members. Rogers is...finding himself. Barton is laying low. Hill is hustling for all she’s worth. It’s important to remember that HYDRA is also smashed and scrambling, and that they’re being actively picked off by semi autonomous SHIELD cells. It means there are dozens of small time players looking to score tech and points.”

She doesn’t add Stark in with that crowd--the last scion of the military industrial complex turned visionary futurist is certainly no small time player--but he gives her a sour look anyway, so she shrugs. He crinkles his nose and stuffs the last dumpling in his mouth.

“Counting coup, and trying to take pieces off the playing field.” Bruce stands creakily and holds out his hand for the key card and says, “I’m beat. You?”

“Sure,” she grabs her bag and follows.

“Night, kids.” Tony flings the screens back up with a sweep of his hand, and Natasha is not looking forward to trying to talk a bleary billionaire out of driving tomorrow. It’s past time to switch cars anyway, she could take her time sourcing the next one.

Journey’s end is in Long Beach many days from now. They can afford to lose some time. Hell, they can afford to lose it all and have the SI plane meet them at the nearest airport. She still hasn’t sussed out why it’s so important to go overland.

She swipes the keycard next door and reveals a fevered Spanish colonial vision of deeply carved wood, thick upholstery in shades of avocado and dark red on the verge of clashing, the room dominated and pulled together by a king size chenille bedspread in a sublime mellow gold.

Bruce’s sly grin as he takes in the decor amuses her as much as the room. In dribs and drabs, Natasha has spent years in hotel rooms all over the world, in safe houses and squats, in barracks and quarters, but she still doesn’t know how Tony finds these places any more than she understands how Bruce can sniff out home cooking at a strip mall.

“This...this was my favorite combo plate back in Albuquerque. Carne adovada, enchiladas with
green chile, fragrant Spanish rice…”

He sounds dreamy, like just talking about food is making him hungry yet again, and she has to ask, “Are you okay?”

“I uh,” he clears his throat and his cheeks flush. “The jack broke, after you left with the kid. I caught the car, without thinking. Tony wasn’t even in danger, it was just reflex.”

“Caught the…? Oh.” Natasha can’t help studying him. Certainly it wasn’t a full transformation, given the intact state of his admittedly roomy clothes, but it speaks of increased control over and above what he displayed in New York.

He spreads hands out, placating, “Listen, I’m not going to be offended if this arrangement doesn’t work for you anymore--”

“Bruce,”

“--I can bunk with Tony tonight if there isn’t another room available--”

Natasha shoves him down on the bed, which has the desired effect of derailing his runaway train. She looks down at him, arms crossed. “Let me get this straight. The jack broke and the car started falling.”

He hasn’t twitched from the position he fell in, on one back elbow with the other arm stilled in midair. “Yes.”

“Your instinctive reaction was to…?”

The midair hand turns palm up, the fingers curling, “Catch the bumper.”

“And you hulked out?”

Bruce’s eyes flit up and to the side, “I’d estimate it was more like twenty…ish…percent?”

“Before or after you reached out to catch the car?”

His hand drops onto the bed. “Well, my arm didn’t tear off and the car didn’t hit the ground, so, evidence suggests the whole thing was one movement.”

Natasha flops back on the bed next to him. He looks down at her for a long moment, then shifts his elbow to lay beside her. It’s enough to demonstrate her point, but she pushes herself to underline it. “Tetrodotoxin B.” Bruce had created the drug to suppress human metabolism to the extent it was indistinguishable from death.

“B for bust, like all the others. I moved on to endogenous techniques, got some traction with those.”

He means the meditating, the physical disciplines, the lifestyle modifications trying to tweak his own chemistry from within. “You gave the drug to SHIELD.”

“I gave one sample,” he corrects, “to Nick Fury. For safekeeping.”

“That’s funny, he told me you suggested he shove it in his terrarium with all the other broken leashes.”

The mattress jostles with what could be a fidget or a chuckle. Guilty amusement, she decides.
“Either way, now it’s another piece of tech left lying on the board.”

“Allow me to very vaguely reassure you,” she says.

He turns his head to look at her, and his eyes are mellow brown, perfectly ordinary if you overlook the kindness in them. Overpowered civilians, smartasses. Nick’s dream team of misfit toys, and she has a place here. Perhaps.

“Someone I care about trusted you with their life. Worked out pretty well.” Nick had trusted Banner enough to dose himself and escape his assassins through the valley of the shadow of death.

“Lemme guess, someone still officially dead?”

“Mmmm.”

“I’m strangely cheered to suspect that Nick Fury is still out there in the world, thinking ill of me.”

She grins, “I’ve felt that way about Stark.”

Bruce murmurs, “And then there’s Stark.” The bedspread reflects golden warmth on his skin, and laying here with their feet on the floor above the covers suddenly feels more fraught than the sleeping next to each other has.

His hand lands on hers between them, a squeeze and a pat, and then he rolls to his feet and takes his duffel into the bathroom.

Natasha strips the covers from the bed to rearrange them. She can still feel his fingers closing around hers, like an afterimage. She’s watched his hands, the play of muscle in his forearms, and she wonders if just the one arm got bigger when the Hulk reached through Bruce to catch the car from crushing Tony. Or was the manifestation more subtle, green lacing through the muscles and tendons along the lines of force? That would have to be it; deadlifts work nearly the whole body, after all.

No surprise he’s calling it an early night, shuffling out in loose shorts and a t-shirt, and turning out his side table light. He’s thumbing through his circlet of beads.

Natasha sets her bag next to his on the bathroom counter, both of them carry on, though hers is more densely packed.

Bruce has a whole system of light fabrics that take up very little space, pants where the lower legs zip off that Tony teases him about. His wallet contains thin cards of laser printed metal, pop-out camping tools like fish hooks, a fire-starting kit wrapped in a bundle of paracord the size of a deck of cards. A compass and a Fresnel lens. His sole concessions to civilization are a Tower security pass, a credit union debit card, the sheaf of C notes he tips from, and a New York driver’s license.

Tony has two hard cases and a duffel. One case is a modular suit she’s only seen the helmet of so far, and it’s noticeably updated from even the video clips from six months ago. The other is his tool chest and server farm. The duffel is a strategic collection of jeans, t-shirts, a couple jackets for evening. She sees Bruce’s influence, considering how he’d packed for a weekend in Monaco like it was an expedition to Mars.

Natasha’s one heavy bag is half equipment, and half an assortment of clothing she’s constantly rotating out. She picks up shirts and shoes, jackets and accessories whenever she has a chance. Her makeup is a modest well-honed palette and the skill of years; she changes her style to blend locally, and even seemingly barefaced she can alter her features and coloring. Add to that the first
aid kit, toiletries, weaponry, the toys and trinkets she gleaned from her SHIELD office tour, and the handful of items from the two personal caches she’s already emptied on the east coast--what she couldn’t liquidate or preemptively bequeath--well, the whole point of a go-bag is that it can’t hold your whole life, just enough to recreate the essentials when or if you ever land somewhere safe.

A suit and a server farm, for example. Or lower on the hierarchy of needs, food and fire. Natasha stows her toothbrush and washes her face clean. She pads into the darkened room and slips into bed, sliding her hand under the pillow to place the karambit within reach.

She props the tablet between them as if reading, but focuses past it to look at him. When he’d offered her the out, he’d kept to the conceit that this was just a ruse, a way to poke at Tony for being heartsick and mopey. As if it hadn’t been evolving into something that eased them both.

~*~

Bruce leans back far more than needed to allow the pregnant waitress to set down their lunch. Tony covers the awkward gap in conversation with a flourish of his napkin, asking him, “Fort Necessity or Cucumber Falls?”

The interesting thing about these two on the road is the dynamic itself--for all his aloof demeanor like he’s only along for the ride, it’s very clear that they both feel Bruce sets the pace for this slow-roll adventure. He says, “I like waterfalls,” and tucks into his food to yield the floor back to the previous topic.

Natasha continues, “My point is that all of these things Maria Hill is hashing out--chain of command, separation of powers, protections for citizens and civil rights, select review committees--these are tools that break down when they’re exploited by people acting in bad faith. The World Security Council was supposed to be a brake on SHIELD, and while they weren’t the ones infiltrated by HYDRA, they still okayed going nuclear on the eastern seaboard at the drop of a hat.”

“Drop off a…” Bruce shakes his head, but doesn't finish his sentence, biting a shrimp and tossing the tail to the plate with a click.

“The new economy includes aliens,” Tony waves a hand, “get with the times.”

Aliens, gods with head banger hair, legends who traded in their fashion sense for an extra helping of morality, monsters with academic CVs a mile long, Tony fucking Stark. Natasha's been out of her depth for years now, she's never let that stop her. But never let it be said she doesn't learn from her mistakes. Hallowed ideals can be hollowed out, and institutions subverted, but personal loyalty has saved her more than once… And yet she's so much more comfortable leaping off of buildings. “Bureaucracy, checks and balances, those will only get you so far.”

“A crappy system we’re working on is better than sitting around doing nothing. The next time some grandiose bully with a fusion drive comes knocking I want us to meet them with more than our dick in our hand.” Tony says, “I’m not trying to solve for humanity, here, just help us survive.”

Bruce lets another empty shrimp tail drop. “Give humanity a chance at evolving to be the grandiose bullies with fusion drives.”

Tony looks perturbed. “Well that’s pretty grim, bunny.”

Natasha tilts her head, considering.
“Good motives don’t protect you from doing terrible things,” he shrugs. “People rationalize all kinds of heinous shit. Just ask our former Veep.”

Tony points a finger in emphasis, “I know he’s been banging on the drum of family values, like his daughter’s bone cancer was some kind of martyrdom he’s been through that justifies using desperate people as guinea pigs, but that kid doesn’t deserve to have those lives pinned on her. It’s bad enough her father thinks she’s broken. What an ass.”

“Pretty effective self-delusion on his part, though.” Bruce says. “How do you propose to counter that kind of error?”

“Well, his wife filed for divorce over it. Her statement was scathing,” Natasha says. “Maybe if he’d run that brilliant scheme by his partner first it would have saved him a world of trouble.”

“Where oh where will I find someone willing and able to pick apart my grandiose schemes?” Tony’s eyes flit around for a bit and then settle on Bruce with a flutter of eyelashes. “Will you make me the happiest man in the world--will you be the Avengers’ official buzzkill?”

“I’m not your Jiminy Cricket,” Bruce smiles amiably, “Fuck off.”

“That’s exactly the kind of input we need, mon lapin.”

~*~

The older man in front of Tony at the counter has been lodged there for several minutes. He’s bow legged and work-scarred, and sports an extravagant horseshoe moustache that’s snow white and frames his blunt chin like walrus tusks. Tony shaved clean that morning, as a lark and maybe to forestall being recognized as easily in random gas stations like this.

The man continues to rattle off numbers and code like a ticker tape, which the clerk punches into the lottery machine with fingers of such delicate slimmness they remind Tony of chocolate dipped pocky.

There is no pocky on offer at this establishment, besides, Tony’s arms are already full with his haul of chicharrones, bugles, cheap sunglasses, hot cheetos, and a cold cup brimming with 44 ounces of diet Dr. Pepper.

Tony glances through the windows to his companions, then taps his sunglasses down his nose to watch the interplay at the pump.

Natasha stalks around the car, wielding the squeegee like she’s giving each window a close sensual shave. Bruce seats the pump spout into the tank, and the way he side-eyes her ass might as well be a billboard that they are most certainly not fucking, yet.

She scrubs at the bugs on the windshield, rump wiggling just over the edge of plausible deniability. His forearm flexes as he tops the tank off past the automatic shut off.

Jesus, that much heat’s a fire hazard around fuel.

~*~

Natasha is well-acquainted with down time; just as she’s worked to be opportunistic and quick, she’s worked to be patient, to learn how to kill time as well as people. She does soft reconnaissance out of habit, the way Clint still reads the back of cereal boxes at breakfast even with the internet in his pocket. She talks to strangers wherever they stop, for lunch or for a hike along a picturesque
stream, to peek into their lives and rifle through their brains. Context might not be everything, but it’s key.

Stark is ill-suited to the aimlessness of waiting out Pepper’s quarantine, but Bruce is sheepdogging him hither and yon, like a docent touring him across the American highway system.

Their progress is not linear, it’s exploratory.

Bruce has walked these roads in ruined shoes, clothes damp with rain and sweat, eating in soup kitchens, making his way on buses and trains, and then on cargo freighters to do similar elsewhere. She wonders if he had any specific hustles, or if he mainly relied on his gender, color and diction to cadge his way. He’s far better provisioned this time around, even when Tony books them in a musty chain hotel for the night, and he’s taking his time to check out the things he couldn’t when he was fleeing underground. He tips extravagantly at every unmanned produce stand they see.

She’s intrigued that, being shoved out the door and told to go play, Tony Stark decided to follow Bruce Banner on a pilgrimage to roadside America, with its old houses converted to niche museums, its scenic turn offs, its shacks shilling soft serve and fireworks, its antique malls recycling a century’s worth of used consumer goods.

It occurs to her that Bruce seeks out venues where he can be around people he can engage with superficially. A nod and a smile, a brief chat about whatever is physically at hand, and a cheery leave-taking. The gas station snack of human interaction.

In contrast, he’ll talk for hours in the car with her and Tony. The debate about transhumanist concepts in *Inked* and *High Times* lasts a hundred miles, and leaves her craving a cigarette so badly she makes Stark go into the station to pay when they need to fill the tank. When they hit the road again Bruce takes shotgun and curls around in the seat to converse with her about the books on their shared tablet.

Bruce is not a close reader of fiction, so instead of interrogating the texts, he interrogates her.

He listens to her savage James Clavell’s take on sixteenth century Japan, his questions sparse, but setting her off on lengthy tangents about power structures, religion, Bushido, navigation, cultural appropriation, and 1970s American masculinity.

She realizes she’s been ranting when Tony catches her eye in the rear view mirror, sucking at his ridiculously large beverage, beaming with amusement.

“He tried, bless his heart,” she settles against the back seat, “but it’s far more interesting reading between the lines of Sei Shonagon.”

That night *The Pillowbook* appears on the tablet, Bruce’s bookmark already at twenty percent.

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“I thought you were off playing with your friends?” Pepper smirks.

“They were very outdoorsy today, and I got sick of being eaten alive by mosquitoes, so I’m hiding out.” Tony lounges peevishly on the hotel bed. He’d gone as upscale as he could find in Erie, PA, amenities and a gorgeous view of the water. When they showed up, two thirds of them streaked in sandy mud, he’d tipped well when the valet parked Romanoff’s beater with a straight face. “They never bite him, and they’re apparently afraid of her, so I get to donate all the blood.”

“I give a fair amount myself these days.”
“No one has sympathy for my predicaments.”

“Nope, none.”

Tony smiles, feeling everything ease as she teases him. Maybe she’ll be in the mood for the present he left her. He pops up and throws the bolt on the door. “You done with work for the day, honey?”

Her eyes narrow and her fingertips trail along the neckline of her black wrap dress in a promising way as she asks, “...why?”

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Tony answers the door wearing a hotel bathrobe, a head mounted VR rig, and a single neoprene glove studded with sensors. The uncapped arc reactor and the tiny LEDs on the rig give his sweaty face an ethereal gleam, like the ghost of a drowned sailor. He doesn’t say anything, just lifts his eyebrows expectantly.

“We, uh...” Bruce fidgets, glancing at Natasha and back at Tony, “are you okay?”

He makes an offhand sweep with his bare hand, mouthing, fine, but that only draws the eye to the isolated petting motion of his gloved fingers. He mouths, what’s up?

“We’re going to get something to eat, are you--”

Tony says aloud, “False alarm, honey, I’m taking you off mute,” and slams the door.

In the strained silence of Natasha’s stifled laugh, the muffled one-sided conversation continues.

“It could have been an emergency, pumpkin, I had to check. They’re gone now, honest, it’s just you, me, and the hot glove--” There’s a distinctly Pepper Potts yelp through the cheap hollow steel of the door. “But Haptic Overlay TeleTouch is exactly--okayokay, fine, if it’s the glove or the name I’ll stop using the name, sure. But feedback, give me feedback…”

Natasha hooks his sleeve and pulls him into the parking lot. Bruce lets her, still parsing the whole scenario and failing to keep from picturing Pepper in her quarantine suite, bawling Tony out while writhing on some ill-defined paired component.

After Natasha starts the car, still chuckling, all he can say is, “I really hope they aren’t routing that through JARVIS.”

She shoots him a studying look, “Why not?”

“Doesn’t that seem like a consent issue? Or at least proper etiquette not to involve an AI?”

“I doubt Miss Manners ever wrote a column on the do’s and don'ts of tele-fingering.”

“Oh my god,” Bruce wipes his face, “this is worse than college.”

Natasha turns at the intersection, heading toward brighter lights. He should start looking for a place to eat, but instead he watches the colors sweep up her face. “You’re the only one here who had a fairly normal college experience. Stark was fifteen at MIT.”

He sighs. He knows it would have been hell for a prodigy like Stark to be dropped into that, no matter what privileges it came with. It was hell for Bruce to be gifted among kids his own age, even without the weight of legacy and expectation. Some of that surely plays into giving community colleges STEAM labs like handing out full-size candy bars at Halloween. What kind of
kid was Natasha, though? Obviously brilliant, and far more socially adept. He lets himself ask, “And you?”

She parallel parks on the street with a few decisive swoops. There’s a block of hipster joints, Thai and salads and fancy pubs, but he stays buckled and watches her mull it over.

“I’ve been a student.” She corrects herself, “Posed as. I know what a lot of lives look like, not just to wear them as costumes, but to live in them like you live in a hotel room. I haven’t...I haven’t really thought about my own experiences as…”

“As what? Worth sharing?”

“...as a life, I guess.” She shrugs, and whips the key out of the ignition so fast he’s surprised it didn’t break off. She’s already crossed the street when he comes around the car, calling over her shoulder. “I need another burger, does this place look good?”

He accepts her change of subject. “Let’s take a sniff.” J Wellington’s is a bit up its own ass, with twee names on the menu that are the opposite of descriptive, but the fries are hand-cut, and Bruce’s stomach growls when they walk in.

Natasha orders what amounts to a burger with a burger on top, and Bruce goes through his repertoire of amusing college anecdotes. He’s only got about a meal’s worth, but that suffices.

She sucks the dregs of her milkshake and says, “You think it’s safe to go back yet?”

“I’m a theorist, what do I know about R&D?”

She smirks and points a finger, “You’ve considered the boundaries and consent of a being of artificial intelligence.”

“Boundaries and consent are kind of a hobby horse of mine.”

Natasha transfers her straw to the metal blender cup and kills that as well. “I’ve got a question.”

Bruce licks his lips, and thinks that yeah, he’d like to ask a few himself. “Shoot.”

“Why do you let Stark drive?”

“He likes it, and I don’t care.”

She tilts her head.

“He sleeps better after a long drive.” Tony seems to find an unwound satisfaction in it, as if his sense of self expands out to the mirrors and fenders, as if something vital relaxes whenever he’s inside a machine, in a mutually responsive feedback loop with it. It occupies him, gives him a break from obsessing about Pepper, or about his hoard of stolen and leaked intel, or how to support a stable of thoroughbred superheroes without SHIELD running interference. “Less demands to go play pool at two in the morning.”

“Well here’s hoping Pepper virtually wears him out.”

He clinks his glass against her metal shake cup.

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Natasha lets him check her injuries again when they get back. Her healed flesh is tender and
stinging sensitive, but his hands are warm and damp from scrubbing in the hotel sink. He dabs superfluous ointment and reaches for the gauze.

“That’s more superstition than necessity at this point, Doc.”

“Maybe I don’t want bacitracin on the sheets.”

“Don’t be so fussy, a mess can be fun.”

“Ha.” Bruce tapes down the gauze, and there’s a strange softness on his face in the mirror that catches at her, makes her want to give him something else. He’s taken her enhancement well enough, his curiosity tempered by respect.

“We had classrooms,” she makes her eyes unfocus, the motel bathroom becoming a glinting blur so she won’t close read his reactions and be steered by them. “Matrons and nurses, then teachers and coaches. You might think of it like...how superpowers train gymnasts, from early childhood. We slept together in a big room at first. As we got older they fostered competition, first in the training rooms. We could earn privileges. Then we could earn them from each other; I take, you lose. Eventually, no place was safe. No one. We were honed. But we let ourselves be made into weapons because we believed.”

“What,” his voice is just above a breath, “what did you believe in?”

“That it was necessary. That it was good. That we were protecting something precious, we were chosen to fight for a whole country, and had worked hard to make ourselves worthy.”

Natasha can’t even pinpoint the moment she realized it was a lie, that it wasn’t Russia against the world, that most of the rest of the world was too big to care about Russia or her enemies, unless or until they came barging in to have a proxy war in the backyard. That she was just another proxy, a tool or a toy, and that all the high-minded ideals meant less than nothing when you were as streamlined and unconnected as a missile flying to a target you never chose in a world you never really knew.

“That sounds lonely.”

“More so when I left.” She shrugs, “Funny what you miss. What you don’t.”

The tension only ratchets tighter, and she can’t help catching his eyes in the mirror, immediately focused and reading the raw compassion on his face. His ability to weaponize empathy is extraordinary. Does he really see into her, or is he reacting to a reflection of himself he sees in her? She gives him a soft smile, “Better to starve than keep eating poison.”

“Cheery.” His smile is rueful and knowing.

The knock on the door is two-fisted, slow and sharp, a line of percussion on the edge of familiar.

“Gonna be a long night, then.” Bruce squares his shoulders. “You up for pool? Sometimes it’s darts, or skee-ball.”

Natasha considers the shirt on the bathroom counter and then leaves it there, answering the door in her jeans and bra. “What song is that?”

Tony ignores the question and her state of dress, eyes sliding between her and Bruce. He’s freshly showered and wearing the cap over his arc reactor once more. “There’s a late night miniature golf and go-kart place down the road. Any takers?”
She turns to Bruce, “Hey, maybe you’ll get to drive after all.”

~*~

Bruce doesn’t get to drive after all, as the go-karts are occupied by a group of men with moustaches and matching t-shirts that say *Groom Squad*. Half the moustaches are fake fur or flapping paper, but the camaraderie is genuine as they careen around the track singing and laughing.

It’s times like this that Bruce can look at the life he thought he’d lead, with Betty and a career and a house with a dog and a couple kids, and realize that it was just as much of a pipe dream back then as it is now. He’d have been hard-pressed to find a friend to stand next to him if he’d married Betty, much less sell out a go-kart track.

Natasha breaks into his reverie with the flat observation, “That’s the most wholesome bachelor party I have ever seen.”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Stark’s not sleeping.”

So they’re having this conversation. Tony’s paying at the entrance, a squat fiberglass rocket ship that houses putters and a scrawny teenager with big eyes and bigger teeth who looks too young to be up this late even during summer break. “He crashes eventually. This is better than the alternative.”

“Building obsessively, shooting tech directly into his bloodstream.”

“We’ve talked about how that’s an incredibly bad idea. At length.” Bruce shoves his fists into his pockets. “He might almost believe me.”

Natasha laughs. “Oh, he does believe you. He just doesn’t think he has a choice.”

Bruce doesn’t find that funny at all.

The course is a mishmash of pirates and spaceships and graveyards lit with neon tubes and blacklight paint. Bruce’s sole experience with golfing was a couple very uncomfortable outings trying to impress his girlfriend’s father, who was at the time conning him, and would later try to enslave him. The surreality of an astronaut with a peg leg planting a Jolly Roger flag, or a King Kong hazard wearing a gauzy white Fay Wray dress, doesn’t even come close.

The real show is Tony and Natasha sharing a cutthroat competitive streak. He’s gotten used to Tony’s uncanny ability to plot trajectories, to throw and catch and manipulate objects in three dimensions even when he can’t physically touch them. Natasha is almost as good, but she can do it with her whole body.

Bruce stops keeping track of his own strokes, and it eases some of the twitching that’s been throwing him off.

Tony sends the ball bouncing off a lunar lander’s foot, swirling through a depression in the green like a slingshot through a gravity well, and then simply has to tap it into the hole. Natasha makes the same shot with two far less impressive strokes, but swings the putter while standing on her head, lemon cherry hair catching in the astroturf and glowing in the blacklight.

“Brava!” Tony claps and laughs, “Next time we also do shots.”
They establish a bedtime routine, sharing their preferences, and if need be they shift the bed to a better spot where it can occupy the overlapping circles of their Venn diagram of comfort. Natasha likes to start out curled on her right side, but not if it means having her back to a window, while Bruce only needs to see the door from wherever he’s at.

There are things they haven’t talked about. That they take turns changing while the other unmakes the bed, dividing sheets and blankets, folding the comforter at the foot of the bed for whoever gets chilled. That they rarely use the television. That when it’s a double, they still share, and use the second bed for their bags.

Natasha reads. Bruce moves through a series of stretches and poses, rolling his neck and shoulders loose, opening his hips and flexing his lower back. It isn’t a set routine but he always ends in corpse pose, breathing slow through the belly before rising up to flop on the bed.

She offers the tablet but tonight he shakes his head, sets his glasses on the side table and stretches out on top of his covers, ankles crossed. He pulls the circlet of wooden beads from his pajama pants pocket and tucks his arms across his chest. He thumbs through them one by one, eyes closed.

She thinks he might be daring her to say something. She doesn’t. She turns out the lights, curls up by the headboard and brings up her bookmarks, dialing the tablet illumination so she can still make out his hand resting in the crook of his elbow. He methodically thumbs bead after bead until he hits the bigger one with the string ends sticking out, then he reverses, brow smoothing as he moves back and forth and she reads while keeping him in her peripheral.

Natasha is tracking it, what he chooses to settle himself with, what it might correlate to. She might be starting to enjoy it a little too much, this wary controlled person loosening the tension on his spring when he’s alone with her, purposefully, methodically, letting her see some of the mechanism.

He’s reaching to set the mala on the table by his glasses when a tapping begins.

The neighbors must have a mirrored floor plan, their bedroom right on the other side of the wall. The moment the sound registers with Bruce his grip tightens and he pulls back, beads still in hand like that will be his chosen method of dealing with this, too.

The headboard is now tenderly kissing the wall on every thrust.

Natasha stops pretending to read, propping her head on her hand and blatantly listening. She can hear that they’re both talkers, but not what they’re saying.

There’s a delighted shriek. Bruce stops thumbing his beads.

The answering voice teases, there’s more laughter, and the thumping renews in earnest, driving and breathless and it’s obvious that the someone who is laughing is also coming their brains out.

They’re listening so intently that it’s jarring when Bruce swallows with a click. She can smell his skin, and sleep is now the last thing on her mind. She wonders if he ever laughed in bed, if he was playful. Her unattended tablet goes dark.

“I’d give that a solid 8.5,” he says, voice tight with control. “How does the Russian judge score?”

Natasha wets her lips to speak but there’s a luxurious groan through the wall. It seems that it’s a taking turns thing. One of the voices begs, the other sweetly taunting, and the taps now have a
rocking quality, ramping up and easing back, ratcheting in intensity and pushing the other voice into a keening desperation.

“Ah yes,” Bruce says into the dark, throaty amusement, “the freestyle portion of the program.”

She realizes that she hasn’t answered him now for long minutes, and that he’s watching the effect it’s having on her, the city light coming through the gap in the curtains glinting in his naked eyes, his pulse visible in the hollow of his throat.

“I think the Russian judge is going to take a shower.”

He sits up against the headboard as she climbs out of bed. His one leg is propped up, the drape of the sheet nearly as blatant as the erection he’s clearly concealing.

She closes the door behind her, but not before she hears the quiet groan that comes from this side of the wall.

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Bruce considers a few things once she throws the lock on the bathroom door. He chooses not to turn the television on, since it’s not going to drown out the steady calling to God coming through the wall, and that...that he’s kind of digging, to be honest. He’s also digging the shower running, the idea of her hot and bothered enough to beat a retreat and possibly beat off.

He debates not doing anything with it himself, and for a long while he sits there listening to the loud sex on one side and the careful white noise on the other, sorting through his thoughts.

She’s always been gorgeous and dangerous, and his appreciation of that has always been irrelevant. A leopard doesn’t care that humans think its spots are beautiful, and Bruce has been content admiring from afar and not being prey. But sleeping next to her has humanized her, made him doubt some of his assumptions. Made his attraction to her personal. He wants Natasha. Not the lush mouth, but the smirk; not the curves, but the swagger; not her whisky voice, but the way it teases almost enough to cover how much she does care, about Tony, about her citizenship and the work she wants to do, maybe even a bit about Bruce.

The humanity of her, not distant and cold but careful, practical, touchable after all, at least by the passion coming through the wall. Is he really going to be able to sleep if she comes back out of the bathroom all wet and sated and he’s just been pondering his own hard dick like a philosophical question? Curling under the covers next to him and dropping off like she does, one hand tucked under her pillow next to her carbon steel claw of a knife, that whisper of a snore in the small hours, those cold crooked toes infiltrating his covers and gripping at his calf once she reaches the sprawling stage of sleep.

He digs into her duffel to borrow her hand lotion, and tugs one out with an ear to the shower.

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Her legs are a little shaky from going a few rounds before turning the water cold and then shivering herself dry. When she gets out the room is dark, cool and quiet, Bruce rolled in his blankets pretending to sleep.

She appreciates the thoughtfulness of that. It’s all so civilized.

Once she settles in he sighs, and she drops off quicker than she expects.
Natasha takes shotgun, which leaves Bruce the backseat to sprawl out. She’s obtained a detailed paper map, the main purpose of which seems to be another way to poke at Tony.

“Got a sextant in there, too?” Tony downshifts to pass a sedan. “Why don’t you float a magnetized needle in a bowl of water on the dashboard, tell me where north is?”

“I’d have made a diorama but it wouldn’t fit in the car.”

“Nice.”

Natasha deftly refolds the map so their current sector is showing, and advances the lead on a silver mechanical pencil to make notes.

Tony shudders.

While they snipe good-naturedly about cartography being dead, Bruce pulls up the interface for the server farm in the trunk, and logs into Tony's hoard of SHIELD data.

Tony's thorough search on Natasha Romanoff included the leaked list of her known aliases and skill sets. Slipping through the SI background check was one thing, but Tony had recently traced her as the person who infiltrated JARVIS enough to get Agent Coulson into the penthouse of Stark Tower shortly after Loki came through to Earth.

She’d installed a discrete back door into JARVIS during her time working at the Malibu house, which went undiscovered by both the AI and it’s constantly tinkering creator for two years. Then she wrote a worm exploiting that back door, while on the redeye from Moscow to Kolkata, uploading the code to Coulson in New York during a short layover in Dubai. That was the night she’d lured Bruce to the outskirts of town and then beyond. Tony has dissected and diagrammed the logic, which is elegantly written and brutally honed - if she’d wanted to, she could have taken down the whole tower from that little mouse hole in the code.

Bruce glances at her via the passenger side mirror, head bent as she idly makes notes on her map with one hand, the other thumbing through her phone for roadside attractions.
“Lacey’s Gatorama?”

“Only if I can pet one.”

She pencils it in, “I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Don’t feed Tony to a gator,” Bruce chimes in, “I’d be sad.”

Tony lays a hand on his chest and presses his lips together as he catches Bruce’s eyes in the rear view mirror. “Thanks.”

Bruce opens up a chat window with JARVIS to help him research. It’s not just what he finds, it’s also the pattern of negative space in what he doesn’t find.

He compares the SHIELD personnel files for Agents Barton and Romanoff, knowing they were partners before she was reassigned with Capt. Rogers - but despite her unorthodox recruitment at the business end of his arrow, her file is a brief pamphlet in comparison. They both list training, testing, a steady progress of promotions and successful fieldwork, more analytical assignments as their clearance levels rose. However, Barton accrued wounds like a scrappy alley cat, while Romanoff skated by with only minor injuries and cursory physical data.

Her blood type of O+ is flagged, that she is under no circumstances a safe donor, despite her admirable antibody profile.

Bruce initiates a new search, aiming for intel on biological enhancement work done in the USSR. He filters out anything that would ping his own files, already familiar with the mix of half-truths and bullshit in all of the super soldier serum work done in the United States.

He looks back, and then farther back to when the Soviets were cleaning up post-WWII, when they swept up their own bitter dose of HYDRA tech and brainpower. He nets nothing, but lack of evidence is not evidence of lack. Sometimes it’s evidence of erasure.

Natasha gathers and twists her hair, stabbing the messy bun with her mechanical pencil to hold it fast. Her unbleached roots peek red like spring buds.

He turns his eyes back to the tablet, scrolling through the pre-SHIELD resume JARVIS has compiled on Romanova, Natalya Alianovna.

She first pinged their radar as a mercenary in December of 2001, ostensibly having just turned seventeen, a prodigy of targeted destruction. Agents Silva and Trovato wrote a detailed brief about tailing her through Berlin after a hit and losing her in a biergarten where they had all exits covered. There’s a familiarity in their language, lapsing into shorthand in one passage. Bruce does a sideline search on what they had teamed up on in the years before Berlin. He finds a fire that took out an operating theater and the cardiac unit of Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore. Six people sniped in the streets of Sao Paolo during morning commuter traffic, identified later as most of the remaining members of a tontine.

Natasha Romanoff, if she really were born in late 1984, would have been eight years old during these cases. Agent Silva later submitted the analysis recommending the kill order Barton disobeyed.

Tony’s upgraded his four hour road mix with more female vocalists, but it’s still punk and rock punctuated by bluesy ballads. Hole, L7, Bikini Kill, X-Ray Spex, relieved by Ella Fitzgerald’s cover of Cream’s *Sunshine of Your Love*. Natasha curls against the door with her eyes closed, socked feet propped on the dash, wearing Bruce’s noise cancelling headphones. Bruce keeps
digging into the earlier collaborations of Silva and Trovato.

A body found in the Moscow District of Riga, Latvia. He skips Agent Silva’s verbiage on the power dynamic leading to the hit and the political fallout it created, in favor of the forensics report detailing superficial burns and deep ligature marks on the throat. Agent Trovato wrote up the case before that, of a body found in Testaccio, Rome with similar perimortem wounds. That time, fiber evidence was collected from the victim’s dinner jacket: four hairs of the same length and origin, caucasoid, naturally shed, razor cut, rich in pheomelanin, i.e., a natural redhead.

Respectively, these cases were from 1982 and 1974.

Bruce wonders if this is why Fury teamed her up with Steve Rogers, inadvertent time traveler. He also wonders, if indeed she's been kicking around shrugging off serious wounds for decades, what lessons she might be able to teach about a more human scale of accelerated healing than either Extremis or gamma mutation can offer.

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“I like this, this feels right, you know, like a great pair of underwear, no riding up, no bunching, no constriction...this is ridiculous, look who I’m talking to. You don’t even wear any, and you, you keep knives in your bra.”

“Just the one,” she says, conjuring her karambit with one hand and stealing Bruce’s unused coffee cup with the other. She uses the ring of unglazed porcelain on the bottom to sharpen the claw shaped knife, wrist gliding sideways to follow the curve of the blade.

Bruce chuckles, eyeglass lens poised between his open lips, the crooked skyline of his bottom teeth visible until the vapor of his breath condenses. His fingers catch a fold of his shirt, ready to polish.

“Barbarians the both of you,” Tony gripes fondly, “honing your weapons at the tabl--”

“Side of ranch?”

“--yikes,” he startles from the waitress’s snappy delivery, and the over laden plates coming at him at eye level. “I'm sorry, what?”

Stark's jumpy. Not all the time. He moves through the world okay, especially given how little he's ever been around regular people, but then, he's also low-key trying not to be recognized, so he isn't doing the Tony Stark public persona either.

The waitress repeats, “Ranch,” her eyes deadening as she reads his confusion as being pretentious about the condiments. In a corner deli in a low rent part of town, that's a red flag you're a bad tipper and annoying to boot.

Bruce tags in with a mollifying pat to Tony's forearm and a half smile for the waitress, “Just the ketchup's fine.”

It’s an interesting dynamic. A man who has everything, who is skittish of touch and covers it with charisma, who believes in people in the abstract, who is very powerful but terribly vulnerable...and a man who's used to having nothing, who can wear awkwardness like protective gear and still melt into a crowd, who thinks people are the ultimate predators but believes in them anyway, who is exposed but invulnerable.

They operate under specific gentleman's rules. Bruce doesn't point out Tony’s addictive tendencies or screeching trauma, and Tony doesn’t point out that Bruce is a misanthrope who's too smart for
his own good.

Certain flavors of crowd, some situations, make Tony anxious like a high strung dog, survival instincts kicking in hard and pathological, too often unrelated to his real risk level.

For her and Bruce the groove is cut much deeper. A set of reflexes running in the background, influencing the seat they chose, the booth, their awareness of windows and the thickness of walls, the way they channel surf the conversions around them, tracking waitstaff and customers, and clocking the traffic outside.

Tony starts describing the Mandarin's crash pad in Miami, in the service of making some kind of point about alligators and why it's vital they stop at Lacey's Gatorama, when she and Bruce twig on the slow roll of an SUV turning the corner onto the main road.

It's a dark blue more nondescript than black. It stops for a light it could have easily made. The tinted windows drop down.

Bruce's eyes sweep the exits.

Natasha has already plotted out two and a half trajectories through the deli, and slipped her hand to her back holster, by the time the windows are all the way down.

Her thumb pauses on the snap release, and she pulls her hand around and reaches slowly for her lemonade instead, catching Bruce's attention and calmly taking a sip.

Bruce gives the vehicle a closer look, and spots the toys and occupied carseat in the back. He catches her eye, and when she shakes her head slightly he exhales and takes a long drink of his soda.

Tony natters on about the Gatorama.

~*~

Bruce sits at the picnic table like a civilized person while Natasha perches atop it cross-legged. The rest stop is completely empty except for their car, and she scouted the building and the surrounding woods before she let anyone go in.

While they wait for Tony, she’s been making up stories about the initials and genitals carved into the wood, and Bruce has been failing to pretend he’s not amused by them. She’s carving realistic veins onto one of the more robust dicks.

“I think you’re defacing Ohio state property.”

She nods, her lips pursing with concentration as she curls up thin ribbons of wood. “You going to rat me out?”

“Nope.”

“When most people say that, it’s because they’re scared of me.” She smiles, “I like that with you, it’s because you just don’t give a fuck.”

“See, there’s where you’re wrong.” He slides to another subject, “Are those wings?”

“Roman custom. A charm of a winged penis would ward off the evil eye. From children, especially boys. Also, conquering generals. You know, the vulnerable and valiant making their place in the
world.” She circles back, “So you object to the minor vandalism?”

He smirks, but she’s looking at him now with that placid expression that raises his hackles, makes him feel wide open. He circles back to the false alarm at the deli. “The people you’re watching out for, do you really think they wouldn't use a child as cover?”

“I absolutely think they would.” Natasha’s thumb slides along the dull spine of her knife. “Just not in that scenario. It would take over the narrative to involve a child.”

“The narrative,” he repeats the word but it doesn’t make sense in context. “And what would be the narrative?”

She rolls her shoulders, perhaps mulling over her approach, then asks, “Do you want the soothing civilian explanation, or the plain-speaking one?”

“Plain-speaking, please. I’ll let you know if I can’t take it.”

“Okay. We’ve got three potential targets in this car. Right off the bat, I’m eliminating you. Which leaves two.”

He quips, “I’ve got a Project Insight target ID number that says otherwise.”

“That’s different. Bullets are cheap, and lines of code are free.”

“Are you’re implying I was a gift with purchase?”

“I’m saying you’re no longer a mission goal worth sending out a trained disruption squad for, with all the risks of engaging on the ground.” A blue jay squawks and she sights it in the copse of trees. “Setting you off like a bomb isn’t a worthwhile stunt unless you’re in a highly populated area. Even then it might not sell these days, because you’ve built a track record of friendly deployment of the other guy, with solid control otherwise. They’d have to keep poking at him to get any civilian injuries or body count, and that’s nothing they could spin once the cell phone videos came out.”

He huffs like someone getting stitches, but she keeps going.

“Tony is a hard target, but they don’t need to take him out completely. AIM proved you can count major coup by hitting him on his home turf, even if they squandered that advantage on megalomania and personal vendetta. Given some self-control, they could have turned that into a story about how SI should get back into weapons manufacturing, or how the Iron Man tech is essential to national defense but not in the hands of Tony Stark...it was really good fodder for a lot of different power grabs.”

“Luckily, broken people aren’t good at gauging their own best interest.” He says it like a tired joke, like a crack about the weather, but she takes it as the truth it is.

“Exactly that,” she says, “but a small focused group, acting politically? It comes down to the story they want to tell.”

Under her renewed scrutiny he scratches the back of his head. “And you? What would be the story there?”

“For me as a target...they either want to disappear me, like they tried in Niagara,” she flashes an uncomfortable smile, “or take me out and make it as ugly as possible, so they can spin it as reaping what I’ve sown.”
Bruce's mouth tightens. “That’s the sum of your analysis?”

Her expressions flicker like a glitch, then settle into a wry twist of the mouth. “Gone or discredited, either way I’m off the field and the team takes a hit.”

These are the things that surprise him about Natasha Romanoff; the breadth of her education, the depth of her thinking, her strange mix of compassion and chaos...and the fact that he’s learning to be both scared of her and scared for her.

“It’s important to appreciate the small pleasures in life,” Tony proclaims as he saunters across the grass like he owns the place.

Natasha blinks and turns to Tony. “Spoken like a man approaching his fifties.”

“Mark my words, Romanoff. One day you too will learn to celebrate that which you take for granted.”

“You mistake me for someone who takes anything for granted.”

“Right, I guess you just look like an optimist compared to Ms. Mary Sunshine over here.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” She winks at Bruce like their previous conversation was a shared joke.

“Don’t tease him.” Tony dons yet another pair of sunglasses. The lenses are always red shifted, but these have a thick crossbar over the nose like a boy’s bike. “The enforced celibacy alone would make me a rage monster. I’m going to go get some Bugles.”

Natasha carves silently for a while, then says, “Is it terribly difficult?”

“What, the dry spell? You should know. We’re in the same boat, you said.”

“Yes, but I’m not tied to the mast.”

“Okay, I get the Odysseus reference,” Bruce squints, “just not the why of it.”

“You can’t, right? Isn’t it a trigger?”

“Why did you assume that?” He doesn’t ask her, Is that why you’re okay sleeping next to me, is that how I’m safe?

She folds her knife and tucks it away, her analytical look no longer bland. “Heart rate. Sympathetic nervous system, hormone spikes.”

“Anger,” he corrects, “threat.”

“So simple arousal isn’t a trigger. There’s an emotional component. Still could be tricky.”

“It’s really not.” He shakes his head. “But it does make me think our neighbors the other night have way better sex than the average SHIELD analyst.”

“Are you saying you’re always sweet and tender?”

He laughs. “Maybe it’s nostalgia, but I remember it being fun.”

She plants a hand on the wood and leans toward him, tilting her head like an owl. Under the table Bruce clenches his hand and pretends he doesn’t like the hair raising on his arms.
Tony strolls back, cone-shaped corn chips stuck on his fingers. He nibbles them off and makes a show of inspecting the feathered wings now carved mid-flight on the original gouged penis. He pulls down the sunglasses to look at her over them, “You have the soul of a poet, Romanoff.”

Her wrist angles up, the tip of the knife now pointing to his chin. “Take that back.”

“Put googly eyes on it and I will.”

She spikes the knife into the glans and spins it in a circle, then again, then incises a thin ribbon of wood to make a lopsided grin.

~*~

Bruce stares up at a corkscrew of coaster track arcing across the clear blue sky, until Tony and Natasha race past upside down.

He crunches into the cone of his ice cream, and ambles off to meet them.

Natasha had set out to ride all thirteen coasters, to which Tony had remarked, “Are you even tall enough?” She’d bought them both matching t-shirts with a checklist on the back and they’ve been working their way around the park ever since. In between, Bruce has dragged them onto the friendlier rides, anything that spun or tilted or plowed through a plume of water.

He’s spent the last hour walking through a shady grove, feeding turkeys and petting baby goats and watching a glassblower make a snowman. He’s already kind of checked out of the whole amusement park experience, but he knows better than to suggest quitting before either of the thrill junkies have blinked.

Tony’s been solid so far, the man drinks adrenaline on the rocks, but when he and Natasha exit the last coaster he's tense in the jaw, and jovial in a hard edged way. Her upper arm is right up against Tony’s as they walk. When they get to him, Bruce digs for the marker for the list, but Natasha shakes her head and takes point a step ahead, weaving a path through the milling people.

“How about lunch? Lunch sounds great.” Tony lifts his sunglasses to wipe the sweat from his nose, notes the angle of the sun and corrects, “Dinner sounds even better. Let’s get the fuck out of Sandusky and get something to eat.”

“Okay.” Bruce already has the keys and everyone’s pocket bits, anything that could fly off or out at speed except for Tony’s sunglasses, which he suspects stay on his head through sheer force of will. Alternate theory: magnetic implants.

The crowd thins as they get into the long stretch of parking lot, and Tony reaches up under his t-shirt and pulls the silicone cap from his arc reactor, stuffing it in his pocket. The glow is distinctly blue in the golden light of evening, and he rubs the heel of his palm around the socket wall. More unnervingly, he lets Natasha put her arm around his waist and drapes his across her shoulders. “Bruce I owe you; you’re right about wooden roller coasters.”

“It’s the superfluous movements.”

“The jostling is ridiculous. You can feel the wind swaying the whole structure.”

“Steel smooths out all the vectors, wood amplifies them.”

“Gives a man agita.”
“Exactly.”

“Give Romanoff the keys.” Tony lays across the back seat, and washes a dose of medication down with a water that’s been sitting in the center console all day, so hot it’s audible in the way the bottle crinkles. He’s curled on his side for the first few miles away from the park, hand in front of him so his wrist presses against his chest and blocks the light of the arc reactor.

Filaments of bone are trying to lock the damned thing in place, when the rib cage is meant to flex with every movement, every breath. If Extremis can be safely removed from Pepper, Tony will be next in line to receive it no matter how many hours Bruce spends trying to convince him otherwise. It took all his stubborn cunning just to get the man to wait even this long, until there was an exit strategy. Possibly.

“Bruce, we’re going to table your chuck-wagon expertise for tonight,” The pain has receded enough to take the brittle edge off Tony’s voice, “for we must pay homage to the King.”

Natasha looks back through the gap in the seats. “Are you using the royal we?”

“No, there’s a mouse in my pocket. He also wants Burger King.”

JARVIS’s voice comes muffled from Bruce’s pant’s pocket, Incorrect on all three counts, Sir. But left at the next exit regardless.

~*~

Tonight’s accommodations are a luxury two bedroom flat converted from warehouse space, in which the decor is trying way too hard. Natasha determines that it’s an investment or showpiece fuckpad, quirkier than a hotel but sterilized of personal household furnishings.

Tony slips the cap back on his arc reactor so the light doesn’t mess with his translucent phone, and proceeds to text and speak with Pepper simultaneously. As he passes he pulls off his checklist t-shirt and tosses it on the bar. “I’m turning in, kids. Don’t stay up too late.” He takes the upper loft bedroom, leaving them the smaller main floor one with a door.

Natasha scavenges a bright red kettle and the two least asymmetrical mugs, taking the tea tin from Bruce’s duffel while he catches her up on Coney Island. He digs out the laundry marker and draws precise check marks on Tony’s t-shirt next to the last group of coasters, from Mean Streak through Corkscrew. He gestures, uncapped marker caught between his fingers. Natasha shrugs and strips to her sport bra and fresh pink scars, and he fills in her checklist while she buses the mugs and takes her bag to their room. She’s divvied up the blankets when he joins her.

Natasha waits until Bruce has finished his slow stretches, has spent some time laid out flat on the floor in corpse pose, and is climbing sleepily into bed before she breaks the quiet. She doesn't ask him about sex, or about triggers, because she really wants to and he's expecting it.

Instead she props her elbow, head in hand as she watches him settle, and says, “Not a bead night?”

He pauses in drawing off his glasses, looking at them for a beat before setting them on the bedside table. A sliver of light shines under the door, enough to see by once the eyes adjust. “Is that the question you really want to ask?”

“Fair enough. How does praying come into it at all?”

“It’s not praying.” He thumps his pillow and wraps it around the back of his head. “It’s chanting.”
“My question stands.”

He laces his fingers across his belly, which rises and falls slowly a couple times before he speaks. “My landlady in Kolkata lived in the flat above mine. Divya. She’s the one who connected me with the clinic I was working out of, she and her husband ran a pharmacy. Divya...had spiritual interests, and a scientific approach. I think it was an excuse to explore, a way to meet different people.”

She doesn't have to picture Bruce dealing with someone poking at his bubble, it's a daily theme, and not just from Stark. Bruce is a magnet for people who can't leave well enough alone.

“Kolkata is a good place for meeting people.”

He snorts.

“I’m not making fun, really. A bustling metropolis...it’s a good palliative for physical loneliness. Human companionship without much interaction.”

“You are making fun, Natasha. Making fun of both of us.”

Smart and savvy. Why do conversations with him always push her in over her head? Why does she enjoy it so much?

Bruce fluffs his pillow, as if his nervous gesture will allay any discomfort he may have caused. “Divya could have been an anthropologist. Always something new, from a different corner of the city.” There’s a twitch at the corner of his mouth, fondness and the trace of exasperation. “One day she noticed that I meditated, so she gave me the mala. She made the case that chanting, even silently, helps distract and focus.”

“Distraction and focus are two different things,” Natasha says, “arguably diametrically opposed.”

“Exactly; distract the chattering parts of the brain, so the mind can focus. Or maybe give the chattering something to focus on so the mind is free to expand. Either way. I’m agnostic enough to use whatever works.”

Natasha watches him breathe for a little while. “You have a mantra and everything?”

He raises his brows but doesn’t open his eyes. “Divya gave me one that had been given to her. At a Buddhist temple in LA, actually. Said I didn’t have to believe anything, I just needed an open heart. Or the best approximation I could manage.”

“Divya got to know you, then.”

“Yes, clever.” Bruce’s voice is getting syrupy slow, settling into his chest. “It helps, though. It’s a wheel for the hamster to run on, tires it out, lets me rest.”

She slides her arm under her own pillow, coaxed down by his sleepiness. When she speaks she can hear her own tone pitching soft and slow. “You don’t think anyone’s listening?”

“That’s the point, Natasha; reaching a state where even I’m not listening anymore.”

~*~

Tony paces the balcony the next morning in track pants and a tank, feet bare. He’s talking low and nearly constantly, which means he’s talking to Pepper, who is also going nonstop right back at him. Natasha remembers Pepper’s briefing about Tony that first week at SI, that it would be easy
to think that he just likes to hear himself, but the opposite is true, he’s a radio station broadcasting while his brain is listening silently in the booth. Sometimes it’s background noise, sometimes information, sometimes signal jamming.

He's been eerily quiet on this trip, exhausted without tipping into mania, comfortable enough to give his motormouth a rest.

Bruce sips tea and scrapes sleep crust from the corners of his eyes. Natasha has learned that this grogginess is uneven, or perhaps more precisely, parts of his brain wake up before others, and it takes time for all the filters to click back in place. At this stage of drowsiness he’s capable of shredding an article’s method section with extreme prejudice, scrawled equations, and multiple f-bombs. He could just as easily be asleep in a handful of heartbeats.

Natasha finishes her last set of tricep dips, feet on the dresser and hands on the bed, giving herself a launch as she tucks backward to land square on the mattress. She ponders doing a handstand. Clint would understand it would be to practice balance and muscle control on an uneven surface, the agitation to get some training in whenever you can on the road, keep one’s edge on a sedentary assignment. She thinks in this situation it could be off putting, or seen as grandstanding. This isn't minigolf, after all.

Bruce’s face cracks in half on a yawn, punctuated by ball scratching that's only halfheartedly discreet.

Natasha decides that she’s overthinking this, and rolls forward to frame her forearms around her head, tightening to unfurl herself toward the ceiling. She breathes into the position, her mind’s eye visualizing the springs pinging under her arms, feeling the weight center through the top of her head, the column of her spine inverted.

Tony continues talking and pacing, only giving her a flick of an eye through the open patio door. She can hear that Bruce’s face is pointed down at her tablet when he asks, “So how’d you pick your reading list, anyway?”

She waits a beat, like maybe he hadn’t noticed that she’s kind of occupied. Not because that’s a strangely personal question. He has no idea it's based on the bookshelf in the Barton's spare bedroom, airport paperbacks and cheap classics editions, half of them puffy from summer sun or bathtub humidity.

“Hmm?”

She eases her legs down into a split, easier to balance, and also stalling. She doesn't want to offer an effortless lie, but the truth requires too much context.

“Comfort reading,” she finally offers, “I spent a lot of time in a particular safe house, recovering from injuries. Those were on the shelf...some of them I liked and wanted to reread, others I never got around to. Figured this was as good a time as any.”

Natasha rolls upright and watches him scroll. She likes looking at his mouth when he's in thought.

“A character is very much like a cover,” she continues. There’s a slub in the fabric of the bedspread, and she runs it under her thumbnail as she puts it into words. “Just...most of the time a character is trying to get at a deeper truth than the basic societal assumptions, while a cover is built to leverage them.”

“Reverse the polarity.” Tony chimes in from the doorway.
“I was thinking more swords into plow shares,” she counters.

“That’s because you’re a tactical thinker and not a scientist.”

“Referencing sci-fi tropes doesn't make you a scientist.” Bruce stretches into another yawn, back cracking in several places.

“I honestly can’t decide if that was evidence more of pedantry or of snark.”

Bruce reassures him, “It can be both.”

“You’re a treasure.”

“Yeah, so you say.”

“If you’re trying to figure out how to be people, Romanoff,” Tony scratches under the rim of his arc reactor, “you might be in the wrong company.”

“Story of my life, gentlemen.”

~*~

Throughout this whole ordeal, Natasha has continued to receive her weekly emails from her lawyer, Isaiah. None of them have been about her considerable potential legal trouble.

She’d met Isaiah (not a criminal lawyer, but a criminal and a lawyer) and his sister Carrie (not to be confused with Sister Carrie, the great American novel by Dreiser) on one of the early missions SHIELD had given her as a probationary agent. It was a training wheels op, a Russian mobster milk run on the east coast, and she'd made friends with Isaiah out of boredom. He’d been looking for an out for years, and extracting the siblings was Natasha's first under the table job on the credit side of her ledger.

He’d become her lawyer out of a mixture of gratitude and exasperation, telling her that if she was serious about balancing her books, she’d need expert assistance. A person who could vet the side jobs she did until New York splashed her face all over the news. A person she could trust to make her money work--not for her, but alongside her.

The weekly emails have been a stable constant for years now, punctuated by quarterly meetings. They give the status on her investments and properties, and vague updates on what he calls her penance projects, endowment funds funneled anonymously to survivors of her sins. Lately, Isaiah’s sign-offs have been increasingly desperate requests for an in-person meeting.

This latest contains one news item (a new water heater installed in the San Jose rental house) and no requests for a meeting, just a simple phrase: Proof of life, or I’m starting the death clock as of when you left the Senate floor.

Natasha has always held something back; control, information, assets. Starvation can be an effective goad, and she didn’t want to give her enemies any weapons to use against her. She’d hoarded leverage--like what she’d spent to get that file for Steve--so she’d never be desperate and powerless again. A year after her death, though, it would all dump into the penance projects. You can’t take it with you, after all.

But what if she let it all go beforehand? What if, no matter what ignominious end came for her, it was all out of her hands, her legacy already secured? Let Hill and Stark have the hoarded intelligence and whatever closure it might bring, let Nick have the offshore accounts to pad his
retirement, just walk off into the sunset. Trade in the fear for grief, see if it's easier to carry.

That’s where it hangs up for Natasha. What do you do with yourself after that?

~*~

Bruce slouches to the side when he drives, the other arm propped over top of the wheel, fingers curling. Stark calls it his *mean green Detroit lean* when he tosses him the keys to the beater.

“I'm from Ohio.” Bruce protests, glancing at Natasha. She shrugs with a shake of her head. It’s her shitty Accord, but she’s content to be chauffeured in it.

“So's Chrissy Hynde.” Tony climbs in the back, rubbing resentfully in a careful circle around his reactor. “JARVIS, roll *Brass in Pocket*.”

JARVIS, in stereo from Tony’s phone and muffled from the large hard case behind the passenger seat, says, “*Of course, sir.*” The portable lab server is more massive than what he’d brought aboard the helicarrier, but he’s changed the case design so it looks like it holds A/V equipment instead of long guns.

“*Sir, I’m not able to access the vehicle or its sound system. Shall I engage Boombox protocol?*”

“Put another dime in the jukebox, baby.”

An hour later Tony sprawls in the backseat, one sneaker propped on the window. Like a napping baby, engine hum and the rocking of the road have soothed him down. Or perhaps, tucked in a fast moving vehicle with two incredibly dangerous people on lookout, he finally feels safe. An mp3 of a thunderstorm rumbles impressively from the Iron Man helmet lodged between the front seats. The rest of the armor is tucked away in a slim metal briefcase in the trunk.

Natasha’s been staring at Bruce’s hands for...she has no idea how long, watching the play of light across knuckles casually draped over the gearshift. The wrist that rides atop the steering wheel has a pale stripe of tan line. “When did you lose your watch?”

He checks the rear view mirror, but Tony’s out. Bruce sighs, “It’s a point of contention.”

“How so?” She turns in her seat, propping a knee against the helmet. “I know for a fact he’s got a wardrobe of them, so it’s not like he can’t appreciate a good wristwatch.”

“See, that’s where we disagree. He thinks a good watch is one where the band pops open instead of breaking if the arm suddenly gets bigger.” His thumb taps against the wheel for a few beats. “I think a good watch is one that doesn’t have a location tracker.”

Which is interesting, because Tony hadn’t seemed like the kind of person to take in a stray, much less try to put a collar on it. Given the tan line, it’s a recent development, and she follows it back. "Project Insight hit him that hard?"

"The names, specifically."

For some reason they both stop talking as he passes a semi, quiet until it’s far behind them. "Not the weaponization of repulsor tech?"

Bruce shifts his head and flicks a thumb, a nonverbal yes, *well.* "You can't stop weaponization, really. You can only choose not to participate yourself."
Natasha's exhale is sharp and amused, but still not a laugh. "I like that: you can't stop it, but you can choose not to participate." She nods slowly to herself, chewing it over. As a philosophy it feels woefully incomplete. "What if you are what was weaponized?"

He glances at their sleeping charge, then looks at her for a long calculated moment before doing a circuit of his mirrors and putting his eyes back on the road. "Especially then. That choice is what makes you more than just a weapon."

Natasha thinks of the way a marionette becomes a real child, by being brave, truthful, and unselfish, but what she says out loud is, "Great. I'm Pinocchio."

It’s when she catches his furtive glance that she realizes she’s wiping her palms on her thighs, back and forth, the texture of the denim grounding her, proof she’s not in a wooden school desk, in the dark, listening to the scratch and whirr of the projector and trying to memorize the breathy singsong diction of Snow White. She looks back and can feel the unspoken threat that her life depended on doing well, but that’s a trick of memory. Little Nataliya had still believed her place in that room was an honor, a privilege, something she chose to strive for and succeed at. Only later did she come to understand she’d been raised by wolves.

“How about this,” Bruce begins, so delicately that she knows he’s seen through her, seen the shudder in her belly as she pushes the memories down. “How about we treat each other like human beings, regardless if we think it's technically true or not?”

Natasha doesn’t point out the absurdity of a highly trained scientist suggesting they fudge the technicalities. Her compromised humanity isn’t so much a sore spot as it’s a long-healed broken bone aching with the weather, and...his attempt at a soothing gesture unnerves her further. “Professional courtesy, or benefit of the doubt?”

Bruce’s hands are soothing, almost deferent whatever they touch, even driving on a sparse turnpike on a sleepy afternoon, the deeply grooved habit of presenting a mild and reassuring front. His words are just as deliberate when he asks, “HYDRA ever try to recruit you? Feel you out?”

“On the contrary, they were scrupulous around me.” She's spent a lot of downtime comparing the files with her experiences, looking for any clues she might have missed about what was going on. “To the point of sacrificing minor objectives and personnel to keep me in the dark.”

She'd been tempted to add the casualties from that mission in Rzeszow to her tab, where she got close to exposing a tech shipment that could be traced back to Sitwell, and he’d liquidated her whole support team outside the city just for an excuse to pull her back. She suspects it was infighting, someone aiming her at Sitwell to take out a rival, and him demonstrating a ruthlessness that would discourage further attempts.

She goes back and forth on how culpable she is for those slaughtered agents, a useless circle of thought, but it beats thinking about reasons why they didn't just kill her, thinking about the rainy day they might have been saving her for.

“So,” he smiles, pausing until a peal of thunder rolls out of the helmet, a tempest in a teapot. How many times has he listened to this particular storm, to work with its cues? “They took one look at you and added you directly onto their naughty list.”

Natasha does laugh at that, and they lapse into an amiable quiet that's charged but soothing, like the ersatz rain. She hunkers down in the seat and closes her eyes as if to rest them, but it's to keep them to herself, keep the preoccupation to herself.
She is sick of being used, of manipulation being her primary means of interaction, which is why she's exploring other options. Camaraderie, play, maybe even something like friendship. This is how she found herself on a road trip to begin with, bedding down with an uncertainly celibate teammate for the unspoken companionship. Seeing how far she can push, even in the absence of an agenda. Surprisingly far it turns out.

Bruce has always been rather blase about her charms, but these nights have taught her that even an ascetic misanthrope can appreciate a little company in the dark.

That she's let herself indulge in another crush is arguably stupid, but it makes her smile, a true secret living and dying in her brain without being shared. Perhaps it's an experiment to see how much impact her own thoughts have on her reality. Does it even exist if no one sees it? Can she define herself with no audience, no mark, no one putting her in hot water to coax the thread loose and unwind the silk from around her?

Is there even anything inside the cocoon? Aside from the dead larva of who she was supposed to have been? She told Steve she was off to figure out a new cover, and then promptly fell back into running errands until Maria benched her. Now she’s dangling at loose ends, but starting to enjoy the view.

~*~

Bruce had expected Natasha Romanoff to pass over the landscape like the shadow of a cloud. Wasn’t that what spies did? Instead she churns across the land on mud terrain tires, getting dirty, tossing up sod, changing color as the soil does.

She flirts with clerks. Do you have a tip jar? I love your ink. Be a shame if someone keyed that guy's car, wink.

She pulls phone number slips off bulletin boards and makes inquiries about jet skis and Doxie Scot puppies for sale. Is it a Seadoo or a Kawasaki, pronouncing it Cow-a-Sock-ee though she's fluent in Japanese. Have the puppies been socialized, she asks, turning to look at Tony, I've got an older dog who's awkward at making friends.

She made them stop at a rummage sale, where she picked up local slang along with t-shirts for a buck apiece. When they stop in rural areas she hikes, in cities she takes off for a run, calling it scouting. Bruce suspects it’s just as much restlessness as reconnaissance. She switches up her face each morning, trying makeup techniques on for size, and Bruce is starting to spot the kind of thing that catches her eye, the shiny bits and pieces of camouflage she’s likely to paste onto the next day's papier-mache persona.

Thing is, it's all costuming. She isn't committing to any role. Even when she adopts a different voice or accent to chat with strangers at a scenic lookout, Natasha remains a steady presence. Not a plausibly real person, but a specific and occasionally off-puttingly strange person. Curious and analytical, physically driven, with a vein of wry goofiness that exasperates Tony, but is starting to give Bruce serious pants feelings.

~*~

She must have dozed. Bruce has moved on to Bengali soft rock, lost in thought, tunefully mumbling lyrics. He has more eclectic musical taste than Tony, but he listens deeply and repeatedly, fingers dancing along with chord changes he's memorized just like the words.

She watches him from under heavy lids, playing possum, letting a drop of saliva collect at the
corner of her mouth. Nothing sells realism like a hit of ugly, the skunky note of indole in the flowers.

He shifts, and she sees that he’s hard.

Interesting.

Now that she knows his celibacy isn’t a matter of safety, but of choice, she wonders what he’ll do - ignore it, give it some subtle counter pressure, will it away? What had he actually done the other night while she was in the shower?

She studies the line of him through the thin fabric of his travel khakis, stretched tight across his lap. He wasn’t boasting after all, at least regarding girth. The sequestered blood supply is not affecting his driving, despite the faster respiration, the agitation apparent in his mobile mouth and his thumb running along the sewn ridge of the leather steering wheel cover.

She lets her head loll over a bump in the road, slipping on the glass an inch. She focuses on pacing her breathing without it being too uniform. Giving him privacy of a sort, until he exits the turnpike and Tony pops awake at the change in velocity.

After checking into an old dame of a Victorian renovated into a bed and breakfast, Tony sets up the lab server in the music room and sifts through reports from R&D. Natasha roots through her bag for the upper middle class yoga outfit, throws her bleached hair into a folded over ponytail that hides the black cherry ends, arms very lightly, and tells Bruce she’ll be out scouting for at least an hour.

“Oh...kay,” he says, eyeing the aggressive coziness of their room as if he doesn’t want to be left alone with the autumn shades of calico and the basket of snacks.

She heads out into the early evening.

Their lodging for the night is in a small town that’s survived the new economy by cleaning up into quaint, and courting intrastate tourism. She jogs past blocks of similar houses that are still people’s homes, run down at the edges, toys in the yards, gardens settled into the extravagant growth of midsummer. She tries not to picture what Bruce might be doing with his free time while she fills her lungs full of warm night air. This thing in her head isn’t about him, after all...just the idea of it.

It’s not the first time she’s filled idleness with obsession. She’d been fascinated with Laura for months after they met, prosaic and artistic and unattainable, her slim hands and her scents of beeswax and milk and jeweler’s pickle. Her expressions so real they were a force of nature, eroding Natasha's defenses like flood water washing out a road. She’d shared her terrible memories instead of her tender feelings, reflexively self-sabotaging in a way that didn’t blow up the first true friendships she’d ever had. Better to incur the repulsion of Clint’s spouse than the messy rejection of them both. Instead, Laura had kept asking harder questions, and Natasha's desire for the exotic had mellowed and deepened into affection for a real person.

Of course sex is easier, Laura had said, years later when they aired it out like laundry, you learned that pleasure could be your dirty secret, could be turned to your advantage. But friendship and love were the forbidden weaknesses.

Whatever. This thing with Banner is just something to do with her eyes. Even in her head, it’s separate from the room sharing. She doesn’t think too hard about the room sharing, except that she’s slept pretty well knowing he has her back.
On the main drag she smiles at the pedestrians she passes, idly checking out the hand-dyed yarn store, the ice-cream parlor, the outdoor outfitter that skewed heavily toward fishing and hiking, the wine and paint studio named with a painful pun. Past the center of town there’s a park with a millpond, the trill of water over a fish ladder a contemplative sound.

Natasha drops into a stroll to emulate the other park patrons, and stops to pet a mismatched pair of mutts, grey-muzzles and happy tongues. Their owner Joyce is a retired teacher, and they end up talking about children's art. Natasha suspects most of Joyce's conversations end up in similar territory.

“I just think the world would be such a better place if people were encouraged to keep drawing and molding clay and making things,” Joyce says, her caftan shifting in the evening breeze. It’s striped green, like malachite, and she’d painted it herself.

“Even after they grow up?”

“Especially then.”

Natasha thinks about the elaborate doodles Steve draws on meeting agendas. She thinks of Laura’s hands paring infinitesimal slivers of wax off of a carving that she’ll cast in silver, tiny and perfect. “Not everyone can make things, though.”

Joyce rucks up the side of her caftan to reveal yoga pants on which she’s sewn her own pockets, lumpy with dog biscuits. She gives them to Natasha to give to the mutts. “When you paint a room, the stains on your hands are crap, right?”

“Visually or just a bummer?”

“Both. Do you agree?”

Natasha has never painted a room with anything other than blood, but that’s a quibble. She nods, and gives the dogs biscuits with both hands.

“When you make something with intention, to express an idea, that idea leaves your head, it becomes a thing.” Joyce’s knuckles don’t straighten all the way anymore, but she spreads her fingers to full extension, “Now it’s an idea that exists outside of your mind. Doesn't matter if it was an accident or planned, the skill in the hands, whatever. That piece exists now. Someone else can pick it up.”

Natasha thinks, *a shard of glass slices deeper than a blade*. Joyce is waiting for a response, and she lets herself say it out loud. “Broken glass cuts cleaner than a knife.”

“See? You understand what I'm saying,” Joyce’s smile is broad and contagious. “Art can be dangerous, and unavoidable. Once a piece is out in the world, it can be taken in by another mind. It’s a primal drive to make stuff, that’s what I’m saying. It’s part of our humanity, not the province of only certain special people.”

It’s an off-putting idea. The only thing Natasha has done that comes close to art is the steno book, broken pieces of her life scratched into paper to try to understand them. According to Joyce, they’re art. They feel like nuclear waste. “Some ideas shouldn’t be out in the world where just anyone can pick them up.”

“That’s why we should help everyone learn to understand the process instead of thwarting it, you know? Just because you encounter an idea doesn't mean you have to agree with it, let it into your house.”
Natasha scritch soft floppy ears with both hands, grounded by the weight of the dogs leaning against her legs. “I'm mostly good at making trouble.”

Joyce cackles, clearly no stranger to trouble herself, “Who said you had to give that up?”

She ends up promising the woman she’ll give it a try; it’s not the strangest proselytizing she’s ever encountered, and she tells herself that her picnic table vandalism might already count as an art project. Eventually the sticky sweat and the mosquitos drive her back through the quiet neighborhoods to her own mismatched mutts, the iron monger and the trouble maker.
Playing in Traffic

Chapter Notes

Road Mix - Ch 5 - Playing in Traffic
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Ain’t it Hard - Banditos
Wicked Campaign - Modest Mouse
Let's Face the Music and Dance - Tony Bennett w/ Lady Gaga
Make Up - Delta 5
Light in Places - Peaches
~*~

Playing in Traffic

She keys into the room to find Bruce eating crackers in her bed.

One could argue that it’s his bed, he’s the one to decide what or who he brings into it, be it snacks from the welcome basket or public frenemy number one, but the way he hunches so the crumbs fall on the nightstand belies any territorial claim. He spreads soft cheddar from a tub, smushes another cracker on top, and shoves it into his mouth whole.

“You’re fine,” she waves a hand, dismissing both his concern and his offer to share. “I once spent thirty hours hiding in a waterlogged duck blind with Barton.”

“So you’re not kicking me out of bed for this,” he knuckles his glasses up and gathers his trash, “but only because your standards are shockingly low?”

It’s the kind of crack she’d make herself, so it doesn't merit any answer beyond a smirk. She takes her duffel into the bathroom to shower and change.

When she comes out he’s finished with his own evening routine, and only her bedside light remains on. Once she’s settled he asks her, as if continuing the sentence from earlier, “Or maybe you're working hard because you're on a mission?”

Prickly cold washes over her. She kicks her legs to sit up in bed, and turns the light on. She could swear she still smells the smoke of the burning trash can, paper curling into carbon, falling into ash, blameless Shakespearean sonnets written out in a hand that evoked pure dread the moment she recognized its quirks.

Elbow propped, Bruce rests his head on his hand. His glasses are off, but she knows his prescription, knows it’s for small print from being in his forties, and an astigmatism in the left eye because his father was right handed and aimed for the head. He can see her just fine even with the lamp behind her, and he’s studying her.

Bruce may have been a hider, a watcher from the shadows, but Natasha has never had that option. She’s always had to throw herself into a situation to learn it, put herself completely on the line to have any chance at gaining control. She begins to speak even as she struggles to slow her racing heart.
“I...don’t have missions. Not anymore. Just...skills and habits...I’m…” Her whole body clenches against the urge to tell him about the category of miscellaneous (friend)--which makes no sense, she gives pieces of herself away all the time, for authenticity, for leverage. This should be easy. All she can picture is Nick with that baleful expression, like it hurts him to see her struggle to be human. She forces her fingers to release the sheet balled in her fist. “Frankly...I'm winging it.”

Bruce has a lot of tainted smiles; from bemused, to wry, to a downright sneer. This is the first time Natasha has clocked genuine fond pleasure on his face, in the way his eyes crinkle and glint.

“Goodnight, Natasha,” he says, cramming his pillow between his arm and his head, and unwinding with a sigh.

She looks at him for a long moment, trying to figure out how that follows.

One soft brown eye slips open, his better one, the other buried in the pillow. The smile flickers back. “I can’t wait to hear your nickname when Tony finds out you’re here as a real person, just another stray Avenger.”

She snaps off the light and hunkers down. “Just because you let him call you bunny, of all things.”

Natasha wakes in the middle of the night when his back presses against hers with a soft grunt. He’s pleasantly warm, and down deep in sleep, the movement of his ribs so subdued she has to keep very still to feel it. The casual intimacy is fascinating, trusting himself to dream at her side, letting her see his coping strategies, sharing an evening and a morning routine. The way he shakes her ankle when he comes back from the bathroom, nudging her off his share of the mattress. The mundane humanity is, for her, dangerously exotic.

She likes his hands. They are too big for his frame and yet so carefully deployed. She shifts her arm back to lay along his, their open hands resting side by side on his hip.

~*~

Bruce wakes when Natasha's toes slip out from under his calf. The driving rain doesn’t cover the heavy tread on the balcony.

She reaches into her bag next to her on the floor and comes up into an armed crouch. He scoots off the foot of the bed, staying low, watching her approach the sliding doors from the side and hook a finger into the curtain to open a peephole.

She hisses, “Stark!”

Tony brings lashing rain in with him, warm and wild compared to the chilly white noise of the room’s air conditioning. He’s soaked, in pajama pants and half of his armor, jet boots and one gauntlet powered up and his helmet on with the mask up. His chest is bare, the arc light gleaming.

Natasha pulls Tony out of the sight lines of the window as Bruce asks, “What the hell, man?”

“Couple shady types checking out the car. Man and woman, shoes like Feds. Picked up at the end of the block by an older guy in a late model SUV. Sent a scout drone to follow, but this weather is crap for the tiny flyers.”

Natasha starts arming and dressing from her duffel right in the middle of the room. Modular pieces of armor dart between the curtains and land on Tony as he stomps half a turn to give her privacy. He lifts an eyebrow when Bruce stands there agog, and snaps his bare fingers right before the other gauntlet forms around his hand, “Throw some pants on and check out the car? Be a shame if they
left a nasty surprise and we brought down property values in the neighborhood.”

“Yeah. Yeah, they don’t need our drama,” Bruce grabs clothes, and Tony gives him the keycard for his room across the hall to access the portable lab equipment for scanning.

They split in three different directions with one focus. Natasha and Tony head out for an hour of reconnaissance in the direction the flyer chased after the snoops. Bruce checks out their own car remotely, and then from inside the vehicle, finding no sign of explosives or tampering, no detectable bugs, but that just makes it safe to tow away. They can write the beater off easily, only losing the snacks Tony’s shoved into every crevice.

Bruce ends up pacing the balcony at two in the morning, trying to decipher the emojis that just pinged onto his phone after the stream of updates from JARVIS. A bumblebee and a brick, what the hell? The rain has dwindled to a wet spitting breeze through the trees, and he’s not sure if he’s more concerned that they’ve found trouble, or that there was never any trouble to find.

With a whine of repulsors they land, Natasha clinging piggyback on the armor, drenched and rosy-cheeked when she hops off and pulls her hood back. Tony’s armor detaches and folds, zipping back to the case Bruce hauled from across the hall with the lab server.

Natasha peels off her soaked hoodie and tosses Tony a towel, ducking into the bathroom for a ruthlessly quick and hot shower.

Tony grabs a t-shirt from Bruce’s open bag, and lays his palm on the lab server parked on the loveseat. “We recovered the flyer in a parking lot a couple miles away.” The video starts a fast-forward playback on a holoscreen, nausea-inducing, the scout drone buffeted by winds before being slammed into a building by an unlucky gust.

Bumblebee meet brick.

“Screen grabs,” Natasha commands, rubbing her hair dry as she rejoins them.

JARVIS cascades a series of the least blurry frames, and apologizes, “No facial recognition available, nor decipherable license plate.”

Natasha flips through the shots, zooming in on several with flicks of her fingers. She grunts, “SHIELD motor pool.”

“The gift that keeps on giving.” Tony’s suit clicks back into briefcase mode, ticking and steaming on the luggage rack.

Natasha calmly reminds them, “I’m on HYDRA’s wish list.”

The close coziness of the house is ominous and constricting. Bruce rakes through the welcome basket to give his hands something to do. “They’ve had a million chances to take you out in retribution.”

“You’re good, Nat,” Tony says, uncapping his flask, “but we both know they only have to keep throwing snipers your way until they get lucky.”

“Maybe,” she says, “perhaps they hold out hope that I’m recruitable.”

The silence drags out as Tony pours a scotch. He sets it down next to Natasha, an offering, before he asks, “Why would they think that?”
“There’s tech.” She flicks her damp hair back over her shoulder, dismissive. “Rudimentary, blunt force, destructive methods. Former Agent Morse rooted them out. They were trying to reinvent the method Pierce used to control the Soldier.”

Tony swears.

“Hill assures me it was a dead end on that score. Still dangerous, though, to the wounded, the fragile. Anyone new to interrogation who’s never fought to stay themselves,” she smiles at Tony with a callback to earlier, “anyone who takes it for granted.”

Bruce walks carefully to the sliding doors that lead to the balcony, and presses his forehead to the cool glass. Thunder rumbles, another storm band on its way, and the incipient violence reassures him.

“Pierce had salvaged the real deal, when he took possession of the Soldier, but he kept them both locked down, in a bank vault. He erred on the side of too much secrecy, and that project has been eradicated.”

Tony stretches out next to Natasha, his voice is rough, “Tech gets lost, misplaced.”

“Steve and I took it down to metal filings and slag.” Natasha slips her feet under the quilt. “The Soldier remains MIA, but no news is good news.”

Bruce mutters to the glass, “Weapons remember they're human.”

“Cheers,” Tony taps his flask to Natasha’s mug and they drink.

“I’m gonna get some ice,” Bruce says when he's halfway through the door.

~*~

Natasha looks pointedly at the ice bucket he’s left behind, but Tony waves this off. “He’ll pace and he’ll be back. It’s when he goes still that there’s trouble. If he’s working through the agitation, he’ll tire himself out.”

“Everyone sleeps sometime.”

Tony snorts. “Even me.”

Natasha repeats, gentle, dimming the lights, “even you.”

“Eventually.”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the rest requirements for pilots.” She shifts to lay her head down, murmuring low. “But even if you can’t sleep, you get some benefit from resting your body, your eyes, figuring out how to drop your mind into a lower gear.”

Tony grunts, digging in his pocket.

“Shut off your phone.”

“Shut off *my* phone?”

“Fine, hand it to me.” She slips it under the pillow next to her karambit, aware she’s been given a sacred trust. “Tell me something about engineering.”
“That’s vague as fuck.”

“Why doesn’t your wafer thin phone break? It’s glass, right?”

“Well, yes and no,” he petulantly resettles his body, but when he continues his voice is lower, his one hand still gesturing but slower. “It’s a composite glass, doped with potassium atoms, it increases the hardness and surface tension.”

“Doped how?” She’s whispering now. “Close your eyes and describe it.”

“Am I supposed to feel creeped out or turned on?”

“You feel how you feel,” she shrugs enough to jostle the bed, and he snorts a little without opening his eyes. “You want me on the team. Do you trust me?”

“You’re making this contingent on whether the insomniac can fall asleep in your presence?”

“When you put it that way it sounds unfair. I was trying to help you focus by engaging your competitive nature.”

“So Black Widow is the treat balanced on my nose that I get to have if I’m a good boy?”

“You need to figure out how to take care of yourself, how to reset. How to rest when you can.”

“This part sucks.”

“I know.” Natasha wishes she could just upload this into his brain instead of trying to teach him what she doesn’t even remember learning herself. “And you know this, that to operate at this level, to be there for the people who need you, you need to do better. You can’t burn every resource against every problem to prove you’re strong enough to carry all the weight. You’re smarter than that, so start acting like it. You want a team? Learn how to play on a team.”

“You’re so mean,” Tony punches his pillow into a cradle for his head. “Do you bully Bruce like this?”

“He already knows how to quiet his brain,” she says, “better than I do.”

~*~

Bruce drags a pillow off a patio chair and sits on the front porch. The storm rolls through over several hours, giving him a well-earned calm. Storms used to rile Hulk, Bruce’s skin crawling in anticipation of each crack of lightning, as if bracing for physical blows. This storm doesn’t sound like his recording, but the rain pattering through the leaves, and the thunder rumbling in the clouds, remind him that he’s capable of transforming an unpleasant stimulus if he works hard enough. They reassure Bruce that intentional exposure, making new connections, is a powerful tool for change. For healing.

The fact that Tony didn’t come back to the room all twitchy and pacing is compelling evidence that Natasha is good for him in a similar way. That he’s learning from her.

Tony wants to salvage Nick Fury’s idea of a team of defenders, and Bruce has been treating this like an idle fascination that would burn itself out if he didn’t encourage it. Sure, he’d be there if needed, in some vague capacity, down the line. The apartments in the Tower for the rest of the four were an embarrassing overreach Bruce didn’t dwell on, since he was the only one actually living in New York, and if Tony wanted to be profligate with his real estate for nostalgic or romantic
reasons, well, that was his choice.

This is the first time Bruce can see how a team might work, how a brief working relationship can dig disturbingly deep roots, when that work is so dangerous, so fraught. Context is indeed key. She’d even warned him, but unlike Tony, Bruce hasn’t been learning from Natasha.

He’s been operating under the assumption that this was a lark, a game they were playing with themselves like flicking a finger through a candle flame.

~*~

Just before dawn, Tony’s phone pings under her pillow. He’s dead to the world, and it’s only a simple text from Bruce, across the hall, checking in. Team playing. Natasha gathers her things and heads into Chicago ahead of them, but she bends a little and leaves a note with a meetup spot.

She writes it on a postcard and slips it under the door, across the hall.

It’s not a lie when she says she’s doing advanced scouting, though it’s not for their safety, it’s for her own ability to land on her feet should the worst happen. Second worst—deportation would be second worst. The very worst would be finding there’s another chair out there with her name on it. Either way, this meeting with Isaiah is months overdue, and if he finds out she was so close to Chicago and still avoided him...

The sky is still washed with sunrise colors, but Isaiah texts back within minutes with an address.

It’s a private office in a co-op work space, a couple floors in an aggressively modern building with a view of Lake Michigan. The room is dominated by pop art that’s too large for the walls, and a retro metal mail cart holding empty banker boxes, their contents disgorged into neat piles on a black acrylic work table. The man behind the piles looks unassuming, his hair the color of wet sand, his physique an uneasy combination of bones and softness, middle age padding him like snow falling on sharp crags.

Natasha sets before him a bear claw and a coffee so strong she’s surprised it hasn’t eaten through the paper cup.

Isaiah looks at the offering, and looks up at her. He’s letting his bloodshot eyes speak for him.

“I would have warned you, if I had time, but I couldn’t risk it. I wouldn’t risk identifying you.” Natasha laces her fingers before her and continues, more diffident, “I am sorry.”

“If you hadn’t taken my advice after the Battle of New York, and moved everything into clean fresh IDs, there would be nothing left to discuss. So let me take this moment to say, firstly, you’re welcome.”

“Thank you.”

“You thank me now, but I haven’t told you how much of the portfolio I saved. I got your media mail packages, by the way, which is not the same as answering your email—and did you keep that shit in a basement somewhere? It reeked. I’ve been working my ass off for the last six months quietly dissolving and transferring and reinvesting, all the while keeping the funding streams going for the penance projects, and you send me musty dossiers and stacks of drugstore money orders.”

She swallows. “Hit me.”

Isaiah stands, holding court over the stacks of funds and trusts and accounts. “I saved everything.”
She drops her eyes, unable to find words for what this man is for her. She extends a fingertip and pushes the bear claw closer to him.

He sits, slumping, “You’re killing me, apology accepted, sit down already.”

“You are the best,” Natasha smirks. “That’s why I trust you with more than my life.”

“I should hope so,” he spins in the fancy office chair, not meeting her eyes either, “considering how little you value your life.”

Natasha’s mouth is dry, but she needs to get this out before she can’t. If she plans for the worst, she can get on with trying to learn how to hope for the best. If her legacy is safe, it won’t matter when or how the end comes.

“Settle in, kiddo, it’s going to be a long day. You want a fizzy water? They have everything here. People even bring their dogs, if you’re into that kind of thing.” Isaiah clearly is not. “Why are you not sitting down?”

“Here’s the thing,” she’s been around Tony too much, using one of his filler phrases, “what I need you to do...is protect everything I’ve worked for...from me.”

After a long studying look he comes around the table, drops a hand on her shoulder, and steers her into a chair. He leaves the room, muttering, and returns with a blonde Labrador and a blister pack of allergy meds. He locks the door, pops the capsules out, and gestures to the dog, “Pet it, and tell me all about this new bullshit.”

“Did you just steal someone’s dog?”

“Borrowed. It’s fine. I told him he just needs to knock first when he wants her back.”

The dog’s tag says Gracie, and when Natasha reads it aloud, she wags her tail and licks her hand. “She’s a cuddler,” he chases the pills down with the coffee, “some kind of therapy dog, I guess.”

“You ‘borrowed’ someone’s therapy dog?”

Isaiah wrinkles his nose, “Emotional support dog, whatever. It’s fine. Get talking, kiddo.”

Gracie inserts his nose, “Emotional support dog, whatever. It’s fine. Get talking, kiddo.”

What? I’m not going to hug you.”

~*~

The postcard confounds Tony until Bruce explains, “She copied my handwriting.”

“Show-off,” he smirks. “What do you think she’s doing? Clearing out city corruption before we get there? Ooh, maybe these coordinates are a dead drop?”

“Dunno--”

“That’s sounds fun!”

“--but she took the car.”

“Oh thank God.”
Tony rents something small and turbo-charged, and wallows in the sound system all the way to Chicago, turning the AC up so high he has to run the windshield wipers for the condensation.

Cooling their heels at the rendezvous, Bruce finally has to ask, “You think we drove her away?”

"What are you talking about, she's a master spy, she's great with people."

Bruce can't tell if Tony's kidding or not, he plays with contradictory statements like a shell game sometimes, the truth visible and hidden simultaneously. He sighs and opens a sketch program on his phone, drawing a quick axis. "The Y coordinate is...well, the ability move through social interactions, like swimming through water..."

"Let's call it charm."

Bruce labels the vertical axis 'charm'. "The X axis is getting to know someone, the expectation of increasing knowledge and trust."

"What is intimacy." Tony says it like he knows he just aced a Double Jeopardy question.

Bruce hesitates, plotting out the curve in his head before committing to labeling the horizontal axis 'intimacy'. "Okay, yeah, intimacy." He draws a curve that starts high, dwindles slowly, then sharply declines. "That's when she runs out of spy skills."

Tony laughs, takes the phone, and pulls the curve back up in a jagged line. He labels the nadir of the curve 'needle in neck' and the climbing section 'family vacation'.

“Looks like a shitty roller coaster,” Bruce observes.

“Yes, uh-huh.” Tony agrees. “So I guess we'll see if she shows up by lunch.”

~*~

She makes the rendezvous with barely enough time to scout the campus and feel her belly growl before she spots the two of them ambling across the quad toward the sculpture in the center.

Tony's fanning himself with the postcard. Bruce is surprisingly wearing a t-shirt, and unsurprisingly eating an ice cream cone. She wants to steal it.

“Chicago Pile-1, the first self-sustaining fission reaction on planet Earth, December, 1946.” Tony stops reading the plaque when he spots her. The monument is a thick knot of metal that's abstract but evocative. “Is this supposed to be a mushroom cloud?”

Bruce suggests, “Memento mori?”

“Eh,” It does have a skull quality to the shape but Natasha's stomach growls again so instead she says, “looks kind of like a popover.”

Bruce takes a last big bite of ice cream, decent chocolate gelato in a sugar cone, then lets her steal it, though to be honest it doesn't even feel like petty larceny. The graphic on his t-shirt is a red-eyed flying blob captioned Mothman believes in ME, too!

He takes the postcard from Tony and broaches the subject reluctantly as they walk away from the Atomic Reaction Monument. “So...why does this look like my handwriting…”

Advanced scouting, meet-up at 41.7925° N, 87.6010° W
“Being able to recognize and, if need be, replicate someone’s handwriting can be a very valuable skill.” Natasha says.

“And he’s your target for forgery?” Tony shakes his head, only partially faking his disgust.

Natasha feels a little squiggle of discomfort in her stomach. It’s a fair question, and the only answer she can come up with is that she didn’t want to pull Tony’s pigtails, she wanted to tug at Bruce’s. She digs out the keys to the latest disposable vehicle she’d picked up and lobs them at Tony. He snatches them out of the air with a jingle. “I’m parked a couple blocks away.”

In fact it’s Isaiah’s sister’s old car, a nondescript silver Corolla with hastily scraped off bumper stickers, but it’s got clean paperwork, a full tank of gas, and some camping equipment in the trunk that she threw in for free. Never let it be said that woman wasn’t grateful for being saved from the mob.

Even with his face obscured by sunglasses, Tony looks crestfallen for half a second, then pushes up his sleeves and pops the hood.

~*~

Bruce takes a seat on the curb in the shade.

Natasha crosses her arms, watching Tony place a sensor net around the engine for JARVIS to scan a 3D model of it running, while he crouches under the steering wheel and connects his phone to read the car’s codes.

This goes on long enough that Bruce quips, “Why do I feel the urge to apologize for him?”

It’s not like he expected a laugh, but instead she drops down next to him on the curb and says, “Socialization. Likely a survival reflex; the need to smooth out all potential conflicts in your group, because in your experience, escalation is swift and dangerous.”

He chuckles, noting the slight uptick in his heart rate, exactly like being spotted in a crowd. He’s let himself become stupid with wanting her. It’s a fluke, a lark, a flood in the desert. “You’re swift and dangerous.”

“I’m hard to read,” she looks down, and deliberately touches her leg alongside his, “I’m sorry. I’m actually working on that.”

“You’re not…” he shakes his head but doesn’t finish out loud, because it’s already uncomfortable enough and he doesn’t know how she’d take you’ve never been hard to read. He craves skin against skin, the scent of her blooming in his nose. He awkwardly cups her knee, and is surprised when she slips her hand around his forearm and rests her head on his shoulder.

Maybe she’s like The Pillowbook, in that understanding isn’t in the reading, but in the interpretation of context.

~*~

“I’m making the executive decision,” Tony blows past the exit to the hotel, sliding back into the left lane he likes to live in, “to keep driving until I recover from lunch.” He punctuates this statement with a little hip lift and a loud rip of a fart.

Natasha closes her eyes and sets her head against the window frame. “Fine by me. I can take the wheel when you get tired.” She has to shout, since all the windows are rolled down, air tearing
through the car. The AC works, but the last thing they want is a sealed compartment.

“I’m not going to say I told you so,” Bruce is hunkered down in the back seat reading, ducked out of most of the wind, “But I will say, *duh.*”

“That’s enough out of you.” Tony points a finger at Bruce. “Actually, it’s enough out of all of us, but since this doesn’t seem to be stopping anytime soon, let’s at least vent across the countryside. I don’t think I could stand to be shut in a room with myself right now, and I’m saving Romanoff from having to smother you with a pillow.”

“Smother me with her farts, you mean.” Bruce tosses something onto her lap. “I’m fine.”

“Jesus, that’s *you*?”

“Sorry, Stark.” Natasha throws the pine tree air freshener back at Bruce. “Not everyone plays trumpet like you do.”

Bruce points out, “You did call a blanket pardon when this started about sixty miles back.”

“I didn’t think I’d reap the whirlwind.” Tony punches the fan to a higher setting, and she gives the whole car her middle finger.

“That’s our Natasha,” Bruce jabs the back of her seat, which she ignores, “silent but deadly.”

They make it another thirty miles before bailing out to despoil the men’s and women’s restrooms at a Target just off the highway. They sprint carefully across the parking lot. Bruce ambles after, cursorily searching symptoms to confirm his suspicions about their ill-fated lunch. Inside, he takes a basket and gathers supplies.

“That’s a lot of Gatorade,” Tony meets him in the pharmacy aisles, his amber sunglasses only emphasizing that his skin has turned the color of school paste.

“Got an assortment,” Bruce rips open a box and pops pills into Tony’s palm, “enterotoxins are a nasty ride.”

“Let’s skip the gross diagnosis, what’s the gross prognosis, doc?” He selects a blue bottle and cracks it open.

“About a day of shitting yourself blind.”

“And this’ll put the brakes on it?”

“Oh no, not at all. You actually want to flush it out as long as you can keep hydrated. That’s to dull the cramping, help the headache.”

“You don’t have to be so smug about it.”

“It’s one of the few upsides of my metabolic derangement. Just let me have this.”

They turn the corner and come across Natasha staring at the displays of nail polish like the wall of color holds the key to redemption, if she could only decipher it.

“Romanoff, I’d like to invite you to the worst sleepover ever.”

“I heard,” she sounds even more glum than she looks, “you have the most disastrous parties, Stark.”
Bruce reaches into the box but she plucks it out of his hand and rips off a dose, examining the packaging before peeling it open. She chooses a bottle of grape to drink. Meanwhile, Tony finds the polish that most closely matches the red of his armor and waggles it in front of her.

She nods, knocking the pills back, “It’d look good on you.”

“I was thinking for you.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Your toes are a mess, and I know for a fact redheads can too wear red.”

“It’s not the color I object to, Stark, it’s the shade. I’m not a race car, I’m not wearing your logo.” She takes a plum shade and unscrews the top, brushing a stripe on her thumbnail. Tony swatches a gold on his own, but they both shake their head at it.

They bicker about pinks while Bruce inspects a bottle of black that catches his eye, trying to discern if he’s imagining the sheen of purple. Tony finally cracks it open for him and flicks the brush on his thumbnail, closing it and handing it back before wandering off down the aisle. The paint feels strange and cold on the nail bed, tiny flecks catching the light in a wash of inky purple.

“Get it,” Natasha murmurs, taking his thumb between her fingers and turning it under the fluorescent lights. “It makes you smile.”

He grins to share the joke, but she’s wan and serious, and he closes his fist around the bottle and nods.

They go another round before they hit the road, and make it just in time to the nearby rental cottage Tony had booked from the restroom, Natasha insisting on driving and then grimly speeding like she’s late for a funeral. Perhaps her own. Tony cursorily inspects the twisty scenic drive through the woods, the beds of wildflowers, the charming Alpine finish carpentry inside.

“It’s a cute place,” Natasha sprints upstairs, “I kind of feel bad for it.”

Tony locates the first floor bathroom and sighs like he’s made it to goal. “Thank fuck it’s a two-holer.”

“Wait, does this…” Bruce gestures to his surroundings, as far from the no-tell motels as they are from the high roller suites. “Does this actually look like roughing it to you?”

Tony waves this off and gingerly curls into a nearby armchair.

Bruce leaves them be and spends a quiet evening on the patio out back, reading, and watching a deer graze in the deepening shadows under the trees, and frustrating the mosquitoes who keep circling around and then darting away with a whine. When he turns in he spends most of the night alone until Natasha crawls under the covers at dawn, damp from the shower.

He grunts in question, and her answer is a tired moan. She shivers for half a minute before he pulls the extra layer from the foot board and rolls her up like a burrito, and she drops off into sleep with a long thready exhale that’s too exhausted to be a whimper.

Bruce has been up for hours when Tony shuffles out into the main room and declares, “I’m holding a grudge, by the way, nothing personal.”

“Bad night for you too, then?” Natasha calls from the stairs, still washed out but not as grey.
“Feeling any better?” Tony asks her with a sardonic brow.

“Are you still in the fiery stage?”

“I’ve stopped pooping pure napalm, if that’s what you mean.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, it’s not over until the well runs dry.”

Bruce asks, “I take it no one’s up for brunch?”

“I love you like a brother, so don’t take this the wrong way,” Tony opens the fridge and lobs a Gatorade to Natasha, “but fuck you, bunny.”

Natasha cracks open her drink with a reluctant nod.

“Yeah, that’s fair enough.”

Restless and eager to escape the resentment, Bruce takes the car into town. Against the odds he finds a bookstore to hang out in, to hide out in--more coffee and comic shop, but he’s not picky. There’s a group camped out in the corner who are either plotting a haunted house or a student film project. He orders a decaf mocha, and peruses the shelves until he gets a crick in his neck.

A store cat keeps watch from atop the manga shelves. Bruce reaches up to let him sniff his fingers, smiling when he purrs and accepts a tribute of scritches to his cheeks and ruff.

The proprietor Noreen is bubbly and bright, and when she checks in Bruce suspects she’s sussing out the middle aged white guy to see if he’s lost or confused. He asks for recommendations for graphic novels and a place for lunch. They have the strangest conversation about Tony and Natasha, veering between vague and specific with no middle ground between, but then she closes her eyes with a satisfied nod. When she hands him two books, Bruce laughs, because even the styles of art remind him of his friends.

He makes his way back to the woodsy cottage with deli sandwiches and a couple quarts of chicken soup, a Sandman compilation for Natasha, and for Tony, The Erotic Misadventures of Namor.

When he gets back they’re sharing the bed in Tony’s room, which is closer to the bathroom than the one upstairs. They’re in fresh sleepwear, an old Mythbusters episode on the television, and Tony is painting her toenails with the black purple polish. Natasha’s hair is piled in a loose ponytail, Tony’s fresh from the shower. All the windows are open, a cool breeze from the woods rolling in. Bruce unpacks his loot, shucking out the plastic wear and opening the bottles of ginger ale.

“Apology accepted,” Tony cuts a matzoh ball in half.

“I didn’t do anything wrong, actually.”

Natasha sniffs dubiously at the soup.

Tony flips through the comic, tilting it in centerfold directions and blowing Bruce a kiss. “I see this has fan service for Pepper as well, nice pick.”

“I aim to please.”

Natasha snorts soup.

~*~
It’s not the first time they meet in the middle of the mattress, but this time they're awake and neither of them shifts away or slips out of bed to the bathroom with a murmured excuse. Bruce feels Natasha sigh, a small movement, but frightfully honest from this angle, and he decides to push forward with it instead of push her away.

He echoes her sigh, and nestles his shoulder against her back. He’s missed the sound of someone falling asleep beside him, the warmth and breath, the companionship and the scent of skin. He feels grounded for the handful of seconds it takes for her to roll away.

Natasha sets her tablet on the side table. Then she burrows back against him on his side of the bed. He slides his hand up to smooth her hair between their pillows so it won’t poke up his nose, and he rests his cheek on the crown of her head. Sleep hits him like a ton of bricks.

~*~

She showers, listening to the faint strains of argumentative collaboration, but when she comes out, Bruce turns away, suddenly quiet.

“No one believes me that he talks this much.” Tony complains to Natasha as she comes to stand beside him at the kitchen bar, “I’m lab partners with Snuffaluffagus.”

“I believe you.” Natasha brushes his shoulder with hers, noting that his color is much better this morning. “And if you ask nicely, I’ll even shoot you in the chest.”

“Well I know you would.” Tony jostles her shoulder back and stares at Bruce. “See? Some people love me.”

She lays out her makeup kit on the table near the window, small plastic packets of pure pigment, jars and tubes of media, an array of brushes. She moisturizes, and opens the compact to see what her complexion is doing today.

“There’s a bigger mirror in the bathroom,” Bruce offers, setting two mugs of tea on the table but not pulling out the other chair. It doesn’t sound like a suggestion so much as clarifying consent.

“Light’s better here.” Natasha clicks the correction pen and starts brushing over her most recent scars.

The tea is hot, russet, and deeply funky.

He carries the stash with him, like Stark’s flask of scotch. She’d been trained that this kind of thing was an affectation, unnecessary weight and fussiness that kept one from traveling light, being flexible.

It’s affecting to watch Bruce pull the tin from his sparsely packed bag, take out a pressed button of fermented black tea, unwrap it from the twist of tissue paper, and break it apart into leaves. The details shift with improvisation. The first time had been at a gas station, upending a lid to hold the leaves, rinsing and then brewing them in the hot water from the red tap on the coffee machine. He’d given her a look and then taken a thermal cup from the shelf, pulled off the plastic, and brewed the leaves again for her. The drink evolves with subsequent brewings, the leaves unfolding and the funk turning fruity, but it’s the ritual that intrigues her, that a person who travels so light considers this a small comfort worth carrying, worth taking the risk of missing when it’s gone. Worth sharing with her.

He sips, blatantly watching now.
She mixes her shades and proceeds to put on a face, shadowing her eyes in a way that rounds them, highlighting her cheeks fuller, and then layering on a highschool kid’s smokey eye. She twists her hair up into two loose knots like cat ears, then packs her kit away.

Bruce huffs, half a smile on his face, and says, “Ta-da.”

Her fingers fiddle with the zip of her makeup bag, and then delve past the packets and pots to catch the tiny calico bag jammed in the bottom corner. She plucks it open, and draws out the silver chain with the stapler charm dangling. She unhooks the clasp.

Bruce twitches, sloshing his tea. He sets it down, and pulls off his glasses.

She rehooks the chain behind her neck. He cleans his lenses with his shirt, like an embarrassed cat bathing, pretending he hadn’t taken an aborted step forward to assist.

~*~

Tony uses the back of his comb as a straight edge, drafting out the hard lines of the pattern like marking out a blank for machining. He cleans up the negative space using a safety razor with a gold-chased handle, then buzzes the goatee back with a small clippers.

It takes remarkably little time for such a fussy pattern, but perhaps this is the point, a show of dexterity and precision, a definition of self out of chaos.

Natasha admires it a little. When she puts on a face in the morning, she must always choose first which face that will be, and how much of herself will be in it. Tony always chooses the same, is the same, he always meets his own eyes when he looks in the mirror, whether or not he likes who he sees. The rest is just grooming.

Lately she’s been trying to change the makeup without changing herself - being present as Natasha out in the world without a layer of guise, or as close to it as she can get. If sometimes she thinks of Laura's openness, or Isaiah’s frankness, or Maria’s cheerfully vulgar practicality, these are more examples than covers. It’s more like a cue for Natasha to remind herself how she behaves with these people who’ve seen enough of her to know her.

She thinks maybe Tony and Bruce might be starting to recognize her as well, might be able to tell, the way Clint does, when she’s working a persona instead of being herself.

Maybe.

At the car, Bruce lobs his satchel into the trunk and tells Tony, "We need to find a laundromat at some point today.”

Days ago, Natasha availed herself of the laundry service at their posh digs on the shore of Lake Erie, everything coming back clean and folded and on Tony's tab.

Tony’s only response is to blink and dig out his phone. Bruce's eyes flick to her, inquiring, daring, as if there isn't already enough daring going on in this car, peer-pressuring a billionaire to drop his vintage boutique concert t-shirts in some dodgy machine that runs on quarters.

He smirks.

It’s unmistakable that this trip, this journey if you will, is not about traveling or sightseeing. It’s about keeping Tony busy with a remedial course in vagabondage, while Bruce processes his trauma by revisiting the road at a leisurely pace, with regular meals and spa services.
The laundromat is called *Slick Willy's*, which is the most entertaining part of the errand. The rest is two hours of fluorescent lighting and the stench of competing fabric softeners, Tony pacing the banks of the machines while Bruce keeps watch on their shared load of clothes. They kill the time brainstorming a real Mystery Spot, one that isn’t carpentry and parlor tricks, but a theme park built on the principle of Clarke’s Third Law about advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic.

Natasha’s contribution is that she knows punters. “Gentlemen, I think you’re overestimating the attention span of the general public. And also not appreciating how little it takes to amuse a human being.”

Freshly laundered and repacked, they drive until Natasha recognizes a town name from Clint’s circus anecdotes, and directs Tony off the highway.

It's not until Bruce cocks his head in the rear view mirror, curious, that Tony signals and takes the off ramp. It’s not much more than a one-horse town, and she makes them stop at the Dairy Queen for a cone before getting to the point of the detour.

“I admire your dedication,” Tony gestures to the liquor store as he cuts off the engine, “but did we need to go this far for a dig about my drinking?”

Natasha stands and closes the car door with decisive force. “When have I ever given you shit about your drinking?”

He has the sense to look chagrined.

Bruce is the one who looks past the store into the field behind and spots the thirty foot tall metal dragon. He skirts around the building, drawn to the beast as if by magnetism. Natasha goes in and buys twenty bucks worth of tokens for the dragon, and Tony joins them a moment later with a half pint bottle wrapped in a paper bag.

Bruce thumbs a coin into the box and the dragon comes to life, jaw unhinging to release a jet of flaming propane.

There’s a metal knight off to the side, of finer construction with a jaunty pose like he’s dismounted from flying in on the creature’s back, but that’s nothing compared to the sheer joy of making a dragon belch fire into the sky.

An hour and two more trips for coins later Tony clicks his seat belt back on and turns to Natasha, “Okay, you’ve made your point about punters.”

It’s good they don’t have much ground to cover that day. Tony is jittery, easily distracted by the billboards shilling small businesses and religious tenets, and he spends a manic half hour in the tractor supply store picking out the perfect piece of tiny die-cast metal farming equipment for Pepper. Tony lets Natasha take the tractor out of his hands.

"Where is she going to keep this?"

"On her desk."

Natasha starts to shake her head, remembering Pepper's clean desk, her preference for neat systems of folders when paperwork was unavoidable, the one kinetic sculpture because she liked to watch motion like a cat, but a fish tank was too gaudy and messy. Tony's expression is equal parts smug and proud. Maybe he is getting better at gifts after all. Pepper Potts heads an international conglomerate that develops and distributes intellicrops, she might get a kick out of a tiny tractor on
her desk.

Bruce inspects a tiny Bobcat, fiddling with the scoop and spinning the tires, opening the door to the cab and checking to see if the steering wheel turns.

"It should be something she can play with," Natasha says, "when she's on a conference call."

~*~

As they’re seated Tony places sensor tabs on each corner of the booth and his phone in the middle. A perimeter sparkles around the volume of space over the table and then winks out. He slaps a pair of gloves in front of Natasha. “Put these on.”

Natasha leans her crossed arms on the table. They’re brown canvas work gloves with white dots glued to the knuckles, miles away from the sensor gauntlet he referred to as the HOTT glove, but still concerning without context. “Why?”

“I need to start calibrations for the Rescue interface.” Tony opens the menu and pretends to peruse. “Your hands are the closest I’ve got to Pepper’s.”

“Patently untrue. She’s significantly taller than both of us,” Natasha says, “More importantly, you need to make sure the lubricant is skin safe, redheads have tricky metabolism.”

“The machine lubricant, or…”

Natasha’s sole reply is a blink.

“No, sure, you’re right. I’m glad we’re collaborating.” Tony pushes the gloves closer to Natasha. “And I’m not talking size, but configuration. Relative finger lengths, angle of the elbow, these affect the way the hands move in space and hence the inputs into the system will need to be tuned.”

She lifts one of the gloves, considering.

Tony actually gives her time to think, turning to Bruce to ask, “Chicken fried steak comes from what animal again?”

“Cow.” Bruce’s rote tone indicates he’s answered many variations of this question for him.

“Don’t know why I can’t remember that.”

“I’ll give you a mnemonic: it’s schnitzel.” Natasha waves the gloves at Stark, “Are these the ones you found in the last car?”

“I may have repurposed them, yes.”

“I’m not wearing them.” Natasha tosses them before Tony. “They smell like gasoline.”

Tony folds and slaps down his menu, giving her a peevish look. “What happened to team playing?”

“I bought a hot glue gun to make those.” Tony’s lip twitches with annoyance. “Seems like a waste.”
“Start a Pinterest.”

Bruce digs a pen out of his pocket and holds it up like a truce.

Natasha spreads her hands on the table. Tony plucks the pen. They spend the next ten minutes debating the anatomical landmarks of Natasha’s hands and forearms, Tony inks dots of uniform diameter on her knuckles, the tips of her nails, her finger pads, the edges where her palms crease. JARVIS records her eating and drinking, gesturing. She arm wrestles Tony in a slow motion pantomime.

While they wait for their sweet potato pie, Bruce folds his paper placemat into a thick flat triangle. They both look at it blankly, and he has to explain the whole concept of paper football.

“You never struck me as a sports guy,” Tony says, holding his hands up like goal posts.

“I think it’s important that you both understand,” Bruce watches Natasha stand the triangle up under one forefinger and carefully aim at it with the other hand, ”that this is completely unrelated to real football.”

“So is American football,” Natasha flicks her finger and bounces the triangle off Tony’s nose.
Hot on the Trail

Chapter Notes

Road Mix - Ch 6 - Hot on the Trail
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Oh Bondage! Up Yours! - X-Ray Spex
Surface Envy - Sleater-Kinney
Pistol (A. Cunanan, Miami, FL, 1996) - Modest Mouse
Stray Dog - New Order, w/ Iggy Pop
Motel Room - Elise Davis
~*~

Hot on the Trail

It's one in the afternoon when they get to Lacey’s Gatorama, but the gravel parking lot is empty, and the chain link gates are being yanked shut by a weedy young man in a polo and cargo shorts.

Tony sucks his teeth. “Supposed to be open until five on a weekday.”

“Don’t know what to tell you,” Natasha says, “maybe don’t believe everything you read on the internet.”

“Hey man,” Tony saunters up to the gates, hands in his pockets in a gesture of diffidence.

“He stole that from you,” Natasha tells Bruce out of the corner of her mouth, “but you’re way more convincing.”

“Thanks.”

“Even though you're less sincere.”

It’s not like she’s wrong, and Bruce sighs to keep the guilty smirk from his face. Tony’s own native charm reads more superficial than it actually is. The silicon cap blocking the arc reactor gives enough ambiguity that the people who recognize him do it with a wink and a nod, feeling like they’re in on a secret. The people who don’t just treat him like a random person, and it’s been odd to see him bask in their polite disregard.

When Bruce was on the run he’d perfected expressions to help him blend into his surroundings without much conversation. He was often the exhausted commuter offering a faint smile, a brief assist, a bland quip about the weather, but he’s let himself relax into this trip. Sauntered into a taqueria with Tony Stark in tow and ordered in rusty Spanish. Carped with a Canadian tourist in a hotel lobby about the impossibility of getting a decent cup of tea in the States. Been recognized, swallowed down the urge to flee--What Would Tony Stark Do?--and made gracious small talk like a pleasant facsimile of a real human being.

The young man at the gate has floppy hair the same shade of desert khaki as his polo. It's embroidered drew, the beginning An snipped out, the thread holes in the thin cotton fabric labeled over with blocky marker. He is no longer An-drew, but The Drew. “Closed for the day, sir.”
“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tony says. “Hey, quick question, just curious, do you guys do party rentals?”

“You three a party?” The Drew’s politely banked suspicion sweeps them all as he chats with Tony through the chain link about the updated summer hours--later on weekends, earlier on Wednesdays to clean--and that they’re running on a short crew to boot since Sloan’s out with a baby.

“Short crew, huh?” Tony glances at Bruce and sidles closer to the gate, “maybe you could use a few extra hands?”

The Drew steps away to have a hushed conversation via walkie talkie.

“Tony…”

“What? This isn’t the schtick? Helping out?”

Bruce looks to Natasha, but she gives him a pout and says, “Don’t be a party pooper, bunny.”

Tony slaps her five to the side, the crack of contact dead-on though neither of them looked at their hands.

Since their sick day sleepover they’ve been thick as thieves, painting each other’s toenails and swapping training methods. To stretch their legs at the last rest stop, Tony had stood braced solid with arms out like a scarecrow while Natasha climbed up, over, and around underneath him like he was a jungle gym. Functional strength and core stabilization; something for everyone. Her thighs stretched and flexed, the muscles alongside the furrow of her spine thick like power cables, her pants slipping down as she worked, revealing the dimples just above the crack of her ass.

Bruce had stood next to her abandoned sneakers, hands in his pockets in sweaty fists.

The Drew walks back and lets them in, and locks the gate behind them. He leads them to the center of the little reptile park. All the walkways converge on a fountain, water cascading over two painted concrete gators standing rampant and touching forepaws like heraldic lions on a shield. A woman in her sixties holds court before the fountain, rangy with a pot belly, hair pulled back into a puff of a ponytail. Her jeans and Gatorama polo are worn and stained, heavy rubber work gloves pinned under one arm.

Lacey holds out her hand for Tony to shake, and he introduces them as themselves.

“I hear you want to visit my park,” she says. “Problem is, there’s a lot to do before sundown and I’m short on crew. I take good care of my guests, but I take even better care of my animals, and right now the animals have dibs.”

“It’s okay, we can take care of it, you and me,” Drew knocks his shoulder against hers in solidarity, rougher than he intends and reaching to steady her. Lacey takes it with the fondness you’d give an exuberant puppy. “Chester’ll get what he deserves.”


Both Tony and Bruce brace themselves with the expectation that whoever the hell Chester thinks he is, he might just have invoked the Wrath of Romanoff.

In answer, Lacey spins Drew around to show off the silk screened back of his shirt.

A cartoon alligator rears up to bite at scaly letters that spell out Chester! “That’s my baby boy.
Caught him in my pool, I did, forty-two years ago, back in Florida. Now he’s thirteen feet, eight hundred pounds. Look at that smile.”

The cartoon gator sports a rakish grin even more charming than Tony’s.

“We need to muck out his wading pool,” Drew says, in a bored monotone that completely fails to hide the dare. “Means we have to wrangle him.”

“Nine times out of ten, yeah.” Lacey adds, “He likes to lounge on the drain.”

Bruce expects Tony’s wide crinkling smile. He’s been braced against it since he made assurances to Pepper that he would do his best to keep the man safe, which wouldn’t have been necessary if said man ever bothered to differentiate danger from dares. It’s when Natasha smacks Tony’s elbow with barely contained glee that Bruce really feels betrayed. Her expression could almost pass for stoic if you didn’t know to look for the manic gleam in her eye.

“As my associate points out,” Tony rubs his arm and dons a more professional demeanor, “we’d be happy to assist.”

Lacey studies them through eyes slit almost shut, and says, “Chester has been with me longer than anyone else in my family.”

Natasha says, “This is our version of a kitten in a tree.”

“If a hardworking small business owner like yourself can’t trust the Avengers in a situation like this,” Tony spreads his hands, “what good are we frankly?”

“Non-profit educational and animal rescue organization.”

Tony utterly fails to hide the smirk, but it ends up looking like an invitation to mischief, “I happen to know of a couple educational grants that might fold into your mission.”

“Let me give you a tour,” Lacey’s grin is framed by dozens of smile lines as she hooks her arm through Tony’s, and starts pointing out the different types of school groups and hands-on learning experiences available at the Gatorama.

They convene in Chester’s enclosure, a grassy lawn with a willow for shade and a shallow concrete lagoon, which is slowly draining. Himself hunkers in the depths. Like all gators, his height is his smallest dimension, but the ebbing water reveals inch after inch of spreading lengthening primeval threat.

Drew chats with the reptile as he plays the sprayer over the concrete, “I'm not gonna hose you, buddy, I know you hate the cold. Oh hey, looks like you took out another goose.” Clumps of sodden feathers become visible to the rest of them as he and Tony rinse down the muck. He asides to the guests, “It’s okay, he likes poultry, and Canadian geese are a-holes.”

Natasha slides the roll of duct tape Lacey gave her onto her wrist like a chunky bracelet. “Does that count as home defense or delivery takeout?”

Bruce shakes his head, “That's a mammal kind of distinction--”

Lacey adds, “One that ain't hungry.”

“--so just chalk it up to enrichment?”
She nods. “Better than a duck, anyway; the kids get squeamish about ducks. You know, I didn’t expect him to be that good with a hose.”

“He gets a lot of practice trashing his workshop, and not trusting anyone to clean it properly.”

Drew scans the grotty lagoon, takes a big breath, and grabs an industrial push broom to tackle the mess of goose remains and gator scat.

Natasha says, “He’s also an enterprising lad.”

“He was gonna be an Eagle Scout, but,” Lacey’s offhanded tone doesn’t conceal the warm pride, “I told him to set his sights higher.”

“Gonna?” Bruce asks. He was never interested in boy scouts, for all Tony teases him about good deeds and camping, but he can see a kid like Drew taking to it like a gator to a drain.

“Yeah, fuck ‘em.” Lacey’s expression hardens, dismissive, “They missed out on a good kid because of their dumbass rules. Same with his dad, kicked him out last year so he stays with Sloan now. Fuck all of ‘em.”

“Well there’s no copyright on trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, or reverent.” Natasha ponders the kid, and says, “He reminds me of Steve.”

Lacey snorts, “Must know a lot of Steves.”

“I do,” Natasha agrees. “But I was thinking about Cap.”

Lacey squints at her, through her, looking for the sarcasm and not finding it. “I wish his mama was alive to hear you say that.”

Bruce watches Natasha shrug, struck with the fact that she’s embarrassed by the earnest turn in the conversation. She mutters, just audible, “Tell Sloan, then. Family is as family does.”

Lacey grunts, “Amen to that.”

Drew shuts off the spray hose when water starts to gather again in the lagoon, yelling to Lacey, “Drain needs a scoop out.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna have to wrangle Chester off it.”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce says, “what?”

“Wasn’t joking earlier, son, he’s parked right over it.”

Tony and Natasha look like she just declared it’s Christmas morning.

She gives the three of them a painfully brief precis on how to effectively lay hands on nearly half a ton of muscle, scales and teeth. Tony nods sharply at intervals. Natasha studies the animal. Bruce continues shaking his head and interjecting to no avail. Lacey lights a cigarette, and his friends wade off into ankle-deep pond water with the exact same excitement they’d boarded roller coasters with a few days before.

Tony lands first but Natasha lands better.

“Maybe I should have made them sign a waiver, but…” Lacey waves the cigarette, then shifts
downwind of Bruce and yells, “Cover his eyes! Makes him sleepy!”

“Yeah, lemme get right on that,” Tony barks, “oh wait, I left my satin eye mask at the last hotel.”

“I could rip your shirt off,” Natasha says with a manic grin that matches the massive one she's trying to duct tape closed.

“I’d rather not get gator shit in my arc reactor socket,” Tony spits muck, “thanks ever so.”

“I'm sorry about these two.” Bruce grabs the back collar of his shirt and pulls it off, dodging a snap to fling it across Chester's eyes. “They are a very specific type of insane.”

Lacey laughs, cigarette in the corner of her mouth, and turns on the spray hose. She and Drew tag team a quick scrub-out of the drain, which flows free with a belching gurgle that makes everyone cheer. Twenty minutes later everyone’s cleaned up, and Tony and Lacey are in the gift shop, talking Maria Stark Foundation grants and picking out a Chester piggy bank for Pepper.

Chester snaps a raw chicken out of the air, sending a plume of water up from his filling lagoon.

Natasha breathes, “Incredible,” and leans against Bruce’s arm. His skin tingles with the contact, bared by the Lacey’s Gatorama t-shirt that replaces his sacrificed button down. Too soon, she straightens and underhands another plucked roaster in a lazy arc into the enclosure. Chester shags it like a collie, and she coos, “Who’s a good boy?”

Bruce smirks, “It’s him, isn’t it?”

She tilts her head, giving him a sideways look that drops the bottom out of his quip.

He pulls his lips between his teeth. Her eyes drop to his mouth.

He startles when his phone buzzes in his pocket.

Natasha bites her own lip, and pitches another chicken.

“Hey, Pepper, hey,” he turns to take the call, “so how are, uh, how’re things?”

“Well as can be expected. Have you guys made it to the cottage in Mark Twain Forest yet?”

“Yeah that’s tonight, but uh, we had a slight delay, Tony suggested a detour, you know how it goes--and Widow, she was interested, so…”

“Cut the shit, Tony already told me about the alligator.” Bruce winces and draws a breath but Pepper cuts him off, “Is anyone in the hospital? Kidnapped? No?”

“Uh, no.”

“At you’re doing great. Seriously. I just need to borrow Tony in an official capacity for, like, a day, tops.”

~*~

Tony yanks open the trunk. “All it takes is a few assholes in top brass to start tooting and suddenly it's a marching band on parade.”

Bruce steadies the lid to keep it from rebounding on his head. Tony shoves aside tent and sleeping bags to access the case with his armor, all the while biting off invective.
“They’re bluffing, they have nothing, we’ve delivered in good faith on every government contract, and we don’t owe them a bid on anything further to do with weapons tech. It’s that same top-down Hydra bullshit—I bet it’s fucking Fischer, he thinks he’s Santa and Stark Industries is his fucking workshop.”

Natasha racks the nozzle back onto the gas pump. “General J. R. Fischer?”

She has their full attention now. It’s the first thing she’s said since Tony got off the phone with Pepper, red hot and ranting as Bruce drove out of the Gatorama parking lot. She’s chilled despite the summer sun pouring down on them.

She’s thinking of handing over some of her deadman files to Tony.

She lifts her hand to indicate a medium height and says, “Balding, sad white moustache, famous for—”

Tony finishes along with her, “cheating at golf.” He slams the trunk closed. “That’s the guy.” He’s leaving his bag with them, more tellingly he’s also leaving the server farm, and he sets the encased suit at his feet but doesn’t activate it. She recalls his description of a dog with a treat balanced on its nose, waiting patiently.

Natasha exhales slow, and pulls her phone out. “I have some files. They’ll give you leverage.”

“You have blackmail files on US military leadership?”

“Don’t be shocked,” she reassures Bruce, “it’s only a handful.”

The quiet grunt he makes sounds like it wants to be disapproving, but instead lands on aroused.

“Part of a diversified retirement plan,” she explains to Tony. It’s a little joke now, the notion of a peaceful denouement. Why keep denying herself, and laying resources aside for a future she likely won’t reach? Why not go out in a blaze of all her contradictory impulses? These two are certainly good company for that. “I’ll get the information to Pepper.”

Tony grabs her by the shoulders and lays a big kiss on her forehead. “Thank you.”

Natasha wipes her skin and waves him off. “Fly safe.” She walks off into the empty field next to the gas station lot to dial Isaiah. Partway through the call she hears Tony take off behind her.

“Are you still on this death-cleaning kick?”

It’s the disagreement they had in Chicago. She wanted to get her house in order, and he kept asking her if she felt ‘more self-destructive than usual’. “Are you gonna do it or not?”

“Far be it from me to pass up an opportunity to schmooze with Pepper Potts.”

When she walks back the car’s parked away from the pumps, and she reaches for the station’s door before she spots Bruce. He’s leaning in the deep shadow of the propane corral, waiting for her.

She tells him, “Everything’s set.”

“Okeydoke,” he drops the keys into her hand, hot metal in her palm. He doesn’t even try to make conversation until she shuts the car off in a flea market parking lot forty miles later.

Pepper has texted her in the interim, Bruce is using your call sign again instead of your name, but it sounds like an endearment now. Thoughts?
Natasha marks it as read, and doesn’t reply.

He stretches, creaky like the car door, t-shirt riding up the way his button-downs never do. “People-watching? Or do you need fresh leaves for your ghillie suit?”

A smile breaks free on her face, not simply knee-jerk charm, but warmth like when Laura teases her. Of course he’s seen that her travel bag has a rotating stream of locally sourced bits and bobs alongside the equipment stable of weapons, boots, makeup, tactical gear and gadgets. It’s that he understands it, comparing it to what a sniper wears to blend into the environment. She shoves her shoulder against his. He catches her fingers and gives them a small shake, but they don’t part, they tangle.

They walk like that through the tables of clothes and toys and antiques, only letting go when he points out a hideous silk scarf, green and black and gold. Natasha recognizes it as quite pretty for 70’s vintage Hermes, and dirt cheap besides, and she buys it and ties it up into her hair.

Natasha checks out a table full of hand-knotted rosaries, to see if they have anything like Bruce’s mala. Instead she spots a swarthy plastic figurine of Jesus with a van dyke very like Tony’s.

She hands the figurine to Bruce. On impulse, she leans in close and hooks her thumb in one of his back belt loops.

He runs his thumb across the garish sacred heart and chuckles.

On impulse, she buys it, and keeps finding excuses to touch him. He takes that, too.

They buy the last two churro ice cream sandwiches as the food trucks are closing up, and eat them sitting side by side on the hood of the car. The low evening sun turns golden on their backs, their shadows merging on the pavement in front of them. Natasha has become familiar with Bruce’s sleepy skin scent, but the hot summer day has given it an edge like black pepper. He’s zipped off the pant legs of his travel khakis, which look ridiculous and ought to be off-putting. It just makes her want to cup her sticky fingers over his hairy knees.

Instead, she pulls out her karambit and whittles at the figurine, paring off the long hair and shaping the bleeding sacred heart into an arc reactor.

~*~

Natasha had scrubbed clean in the Gatorama employee locker rooms, throwing her hair into a pony and stealing his Mothman t-shirt. Or maybe it was in her bag because she ganked it earlier. She’s knotted the extra length, and the shoulders slope down, the lowering sun setting fire to the peach fuzz on her nape, the bright new growth at her hairline like spring buds, like blood seeping, like red velvet peeking out from under frosting.

Bruce drops his gaze to her hands, and the thin shavings of plastic dropping onto her thigh. She’d taped the alligator’s jaws with brutal efficiency, ripping it off the roll with an effortless snap of her wrist, and now she works that claw blade with a feather light touch, coaxing the shape from the plastic. More interestingly she’s left her face unattended, and her thinking expression is endearingly sullen, bottom lip pushed out.

He’s reluctant to get in the car and head the last few miles to the cottage, and not just because he likes watching her whittle. He’s been basking in her handsiness, taking advantage of the endorphin high she’s been coasting on, and he figures it’ll end when they stop for the night and it sinks in that there’s no Tony to tease right now.
It’s stupid, and a shade exploitative maybe, and certainly not smart to keep throwing more fuel on the fire. Might as well rip off the band-aid while he still can.

And yet he keeps sitting there with his thigh pressed oh so casually against hers as she scowls and scrapes.

“Should we get something to eat?” She blows plastic bits from the Jesus Stark and wipes her blade clean. “I’m not hungry yet, but the cottage in the forest won’t actually be made of gingerbread.”

“Has a kitchen, though. We could swing by a grocery store.”

“You offering to cook?” Natasha tucks her knife away, “Because I can order in a dozen languages, or I can follow box instructions. But I can’t cook.”

“Yeah, I’ll uh, make something,” Bruce says, “for us.”

He can almost hear the whoosh of kerosene hitting open flame when she pecks a kiss on his cheek and smiles at him, and slides off the hood scattering scraps of tan plastic.

~*~

Bruce Banner has opinions about groceries.

She’s watched him rake through the bacon for the meatiest pack, thump and sniff produce, and peer suspiciously at the dates and ingredients on packages. The fluorescent lighting is tawdry, the worn linoleum vulgar, and yet every time he shoves his glasses back up his nose it hits her like a cheeky burlesque shimmy.

Natasha white knuckles the shopping cart as he pops open cartons of free range organic eggs. She takes the offensive and teases, “Why not go all out, doc, and get the vegetarian fed?”

He glances at her over his lenses, “Because chickens are omnivores. Specifically, they need methionine and lysine, and in a pasture they get it from bugs.” His fingertips nudge the dozen to inspect their shells, his words professorial but his soft tone more suited to an assignation outside of office hours. “Chickens are a way for humans to turn insects into more palatable food with better storage potential…”

She stands on the bottom rack of the cart, trying to make it pop a wheelie, looking to channel the restless energy. “Hard to make a quiche with earthworms.”

“True,” he sets the eggs next to the bacon with a pointed look to stop fucking with the cart, “but if all you’ve got is a worm, might as well try for a fish.”

“I’ve gotten better results baiting with pieces of hot dog.”

“If I have a hot dog,” he pauses for a beat, then grabs half and half, “I’m eating the hot dog.”

The evening has cooled by the time they find the cottage deep in the woods, but she hasn’t. She squishes her chewing gum onto the middle of the dashboard, and presses the Jesus Stark figurine in place.

“What Would Tony Stark Do?” Bruce mutters.

“Fuck off to Manhattan,” Natasha flicks an eyebrow, “while you make me breakfast after all.”

She’s at loose ends as she takes in the picturesque stone house with its sweeping wraparound
porch, the wood floors, overstuffed furniture and big vase lamps, the lacy curtains and rounded plaster doorways and massive fireplace. The narrow stairs up to the second floor give away the age of the building, but it has enough bedrooms and baths to accommodate Tony’s dream team, even if you couldn’t cook for them all in a kitchen this small.

Natasha leans against the counter while Bruce puts away the food. Even the hum of the window air conditioner can’t drown out the roar of cicadas and crickets outside, the beat of blood in her body as she contemplates completing a trifecta of risky decisions for the day.

Jump on a thirteen foot alligator: check. Bruce is still wearing the souvenir t-shirt, riding up as he crouches to stock the fridge, exposing his worn belt and the pale skin of his lower back.

Hand over hard-earned blackmail material so Tony Stark can choose not to participate in weaponization of his tech: check. Which is why she’s alone with Bruce in the first place.

Close the distance as he stands, and slide her hand up under the cotton and around his waist, fingers grazing the soft hair on his belly.

Check.

“Yeah,” Bruce catches her wrist and slowly turns, “I need you to stop that.”

Natasha looks down. His tendons stand out with tension, but the circle of his fingers is a loose cuff around her wrist. She meets his eyes.

He lets go. “It’s not funny anymore.”

“Wasn’t meant to be. Anymore.”

He squints, mouth in a pout of thought, and she raises her chin. His respiration kicks up, and her own body responds, flooding her with awareness of her balance, the table and chairs nearby, the mass and breadth of the body in front of her as if she could swing around him like he was anyone else. He’s not. Her tongue pulls her bottom lip under to be pressed by her teeth.

“I’m not gonna play chicken with you, Natasha,” his voice is low and strained, “and I’m not going to be toyed with.”

“There’s a third possibility.”

His laughter grinds to a stop when it doesn’t dispel the tension, and he changes tactics, turning to press his modest advantage of height to look down into her face, “That you want to fuck me?”

He’s close enough she has to choose which eye to look at. “I thought you weren’t going to play chicken, Bruce?”

“That’s my whole point.” He paces away, jabbing his fingers through his hair. “I get it, you know? Tony’s built from impulses and lightning fast connections, no gap between thought and deed, and he thinks, hey, I’ve got the other guy all locked down. So I can be a brake for him, too. He’s wrong.” Bruce turns and paces back, and the raw honesty in his face is more unnerving than a thrashing alligator. “This stopped being about fucking with Tony three states ago. Now you’re just fucking with me, and I’m not...I’m not immune, or a monk, or a practice target.”

Natasha closes the distance so she can feel the reflected breath of her own words, “Four states.” Then she licks the tip of his nose.
He startles a fraction, just enough that he doesn’t flinch when she lays her hands flat on his chest. Fuck it all, she thinks, she’s tired of holding everything in reserve, just for once let the universe sort its shit out without endless consideration and maneuvering on her part. How’s that for playing both sides? Worst case scenario is an awkward work relationship in the best case nebulous future where she makes it out alive and he decides to be a team player after all. Bring it. “I thought you said you were fun?”

Bruce swallows, but the tease in his voice isn’t smooth enough to cover the note of self-derision. “I look like fun to you?”

“Yeah,” Natasha says simply, “you do.”

Bruce makes a move because he will always call her bluff, and he will always be shocked when she doesn’t fold, but escalates. She thinks he likes that shock, just as she enjoys delivering it. He picks her up by the waist and sets her back on the counter as if to put her away, but she cages him with her legs and tells him, “I could ride you down to the floor.”

“The threat of sex, Natasha?”

“Not the promise of violence, then?” She kicks off her sneakers behind his back, thump, thump. “I was being vague, kind of an inkblot question, but I like where you went with it.”

“I’m not interested in being your Evel Kenevil death-defying stunt.”

She opens the cage, gives his hip a nudge with her heel as if to shoo him off. “If you don’t want this, I’ll stop.”

He shakes his head, “Stop making me be the guy who always has to say no. To Hulk, to Tony. Now to you.”

“Well I’d prefer if you said yes.” Natasha leans in and inhales the scent of his skin, and rumbles quiet in his ear, “I’ve thought a lot about sucking your cock.”

Bruce swears like a prayer, but doesn’t make any move.

She plucks the collar of his shirt with her teeth. His hand comes up to touch her elbow, and she’s not sure if even he knows, just yet, what he means by it, so she stills, and whispers, “And what would you like?”

He leads with his eyes, as if pressing his lips to hers is like threading a needle. For all his bluster, the kiss is reverent, as delicate as his fingertips trailing up to cup the side of her neck like palming a moth. She’s the one who offers the first slip of tongue, a gentle dart that catches his breath.

~*~

Bruce holds her face in his hands, her mouth plush velvet, and breaks contact to pull her t-shirt off. She strips his over his head and flings it to the floor behind him, somehow wriggling out of her jeans still perched on the counter, impatient as he kills the harsh overhead light and flicks switches until the dining nook chandelier comes on instead. It’s made from a wagon wheel, but the bulbs give a soft glow. He hauls over a chair.

Natasha leans back on her braced arms, staring down as he loosens his pants and takes a seat, as he slides a hand up one calf and sets her foot on the arm of the chair, as he nuzzles up her thigh.

“Dawdler.”
“Easy,” he murmurs against her skin, feeling the nudge of her other heel along his shoulder, “it's been a while.” Bad idea or no, he’s not one to skimp with half-measures. It’s been too long not to take his damned time. She’s not the only one who’s had a thousand miles of idle thoughts.

“Need to do some recon?”

“Maybe.” His hand scouts ahead as he gently nips. Her breath catches, and her leg angles open more to reveal ginger hair, soft lips she invites him to touch, to taste. “Maybe just savoring.”

Natasha cards through his hair and coaxes him, and he follows to the gorgeous ruffled silk of her, and he loses himself for a good long while.

She’s so wet her cream drips over his chin, pools in his palm and snakes down his wrist, and he seals his lips against hers and suckles her clit, feeling her grip around his fingers in waves like thunder rolling in with a storm. He thinks about what it would feel like to ride that out inside her, holding her down, holding her up.

Her leg is a hot solid weight on his shoulder, drawing him closer, her hand in his hair locking him in place.

She curls forward, somehow leveraging herself to fuck his face as she crests the wave, and then she goes utterly silent and jerks hard, and only his hand pinning her hip against the counter keeps them in any kind of contact, as she milks his fingers and floods hot into his mouth.

Her face is sweaty and a bright hot pink that matches her nipples and her hair. Bruce meets her gaze as she draws her heel up his back, smoothing the nape of his neck with the sole of her foot, as he continues to rock his hand slowly.

Natasha reaches over and pulls a dish towel from a hook, offers it. He slides the pad of his thumb across her clit, countering her question with a question.

She shivers and nods, eyes falling closed and head falling back against the cabinet.

Yeah, he thought so.

The fingers in his hair are gentler than her words, “Just don't be cocky about it.”

He snorts into her bush.

Some time later she plants that bare sole at the join of his neck and shoulder and shoves him back without ceremony.

He stares up at her, and cracks his jaw. Her laugh is ragged. She's swollen open like a beacon.

“Yeah?” He asks.

She crooks her finger and kicks the chair away as he stands, bracing her legs around him as he pulls her mouth to his again. She digs her heels into the muscle of his ass, hands raking down his chest and belly, huffing with amusement when she finds him poking up from his pants.

He groans at her touch, warning, “I’m close,” and lets himself watch both her hands wrap around his dick, her thumb sweeping across the glans. He’s never been much for pre-come, so he adds his own grip, wet with her slick. She catches his rhythm like she’s breaking into a musical number, licking his earlobe into her mouth and crooning softly into his ear, and his whole body shudders as he angles away and spurts into the sink.
She combs fingers through the sweaty hair at his nape, and scratches lightly down his chest, pressing her forehead against his temple as he comes back to himself. “Hey there.”

“Hey.” His fingers shake as he opens the tap wide and washes his hands, rinsing down their mingled come. She keeps petting him almost fondly, which he’s blaming on the endorphins, but he’s not too proud to take it. It’s been a long damned time since anyone looked at him like that, once they found out what he was.

“I need to replenish my vital fluids. I seem to have left them all over your face.”

They settle into the cottage for the night, Bruce puttering in the kitchen while she brings in the luggage and portable server. She chooses the bedroom in the shady back corner of the house, the queen bed already positioned to specification, and she cranks up the window AC to arctic.

When she gets out of the shower she air dries in the blissful chill, and when she comes downstairs the scent of cooking is another hit of pleasure. She takes a moment at the foot of the stairs, but before she can gather herself against the sudden pause, Bruce pokes his head around the doorway and beckons, “Soup’s on.”

Natasha sets the table, falling back on her more extracurricular training as an accessory to dinners on the farm. “I have to ask, did you also fry the bacon shirtless?”

Bruce shrugs as he portions out frittata, and says, “Stuffy in here,” which she takes as a yes.

“Well it’s not bullets, I guess.”

He points the spatula at her, “You said it, I didn’t.”

“We both think it, to some extent.” She tilts her head, “What’s another scar?” They sit beneath the wagon wheel chandelier and demolish the food, which is not in fact a frittata, but a cheesy crustless quiche, as delicate as the bacon is hearty.

“You have a scar,” he strokes the pad of his thumb on the side of her bottom lip, near the corner. “Can’t see it, but I can feel it.”

Natasha braces for the question, for the conversation about her healing factor, for the bottomless curiosity of a brilliant biologist (among so many other disciplines, including it seems, cunnilingus and quick cuisine).

“Does it…” Bruce licks his own lip, “does it affect sensation? Should I avoid it, or ignore it, or…?”

She catches it between her teeth and drags it free.

Natasha lounges on her side, one hand propped, one leg hooked over Bruce’s thigh, pinning him down with pressure. He’s stretched out next to her, an arm wrapped around her back. He’d been fondling her ass, but now he’s twitching and clutching at her, entirely distracted.

She’s giving him the opera glove treatment.

Okay, that’s not exactly correct. Long ago she’d sacrificed that pair of black satin opera gloves
because a hand-job in a semi-public theatre box was enough of a distraction and illicit thrill for her mark that she didn’t need to bring much of herself into the performance. That man spent the small remainder of his life in his refractory period, so even when they were alone later it hadn’t come up again.

This, on the other hand, is sheer unadulterated delight.

Natasha rearranges the hideous silk scarf pooled and layered between her gentle palm and the thin hot skin of Bruce’s cock. It’s a compromise, between the lack of condoms at hand and his wariness.

“We can save the fucking for later,” she’d whispered in his ear, loving the way it made him squirm, “but I bet I can still fit this beautiful cock in my mouth.”

Calling him beautiful also made him fidget, she learned, but he covered for it by bringing her hand into play instead. “Never trusted the pullout method, especially now that there’s a minuscule--but measurable--rad dose involved.”

The less she pushed that boundary, the more he relaxed, watching her with eyes half-lidded. Natasha is not surprised that Bruce likes the tease, likes to give it up inch by inch, and she loves the chance to really wind him up slow, see him fray fiber by fiber. The sounds he’s making now are delicate, awed, slow gasps and open-mouthed vowels cut short. He’s so hard he's purple with it, the frenulum under the head of his thick cock taut like a bowstring. She wraps a fist around the base of him and doesn't stroke, just pulses her grip and savors the answering flex of his muscles.

This coaxes a full out groan from him and he curls into her, laying his head in the crook of her neck and sliding a trembling hand to cup her cunt. His temples are sweaty. "M'gonna ruin your ugly scarf."

“Be my guest,” She gives him a twisty stroke, just a bit slower than the rhythm of his hips, making him feel it, making him push for more.

He suckles at her neck and moans again, his hand twitching at her lips, the heel pressing indirectly at her clit and she relents, working him in earnest now as he nods his head against her, breath catching, gulping, catching again as he comes.

~*~

Bruce wakes up at dawn, restless and desperately needing to piss, but caught in the strangeness of his situation. For a long moment he stares at the person sharing his bed, originally under the guise of some half dare, half pretense. In the half light he can be honest with himself.

She’s maybe looking to prove that he’s general population, someone she can have fun with and still be a professional, even an Avenger perhaps. Don’t worry, I’m not counting you as part of the team, but I still trust you. That’s an odd thought, the Black Widow using him as a kind of teddy bear, someone physically in her corner, someone she trusts enough to watch her back. Watch her sleep.

Watch her sleep half on her back, arm thrown over her eyes and breathing so slow and shallow he finds himself staring at her nipple moving nearly imperceptibly like a minute hand on a watch. That’s a hard nipple. The other one looks much softer, mismatched and so human, like her crooked toes.

Bruce rolls out of bed, leaving his glasses on the side table.

~*~
It’s gently raining, the scent of ozone and greenery and wet stone refreshing when Natasha opens the front door.

Tony has set up camp on the big stone porch, his locator bracelets on, and a rendering hologram rotating in front of him. “Pull up a chair, we’re on a layover.”

Natasha holds out Bruce’s glasses.

“He fucked off early this morning. He does that.” His tone is deliberately casual. “We sit tight, he’s usually back for dinner.”

“Something happen?”

“I could ask you that.” Tony sets the diagram spinning. “Could be the weather. Hulk likes mud.”

“He do this often?”

“I think he’s been doing it that way for a while, yeah. Walk the dog.”

Natasha reaches out and stops the wire diagram from spinning, then scrunches it smaller. It’s a firing battery for one of the helicarriers they took down in the spring. “How did it go?”

“Pepper used your files like a rolled up newspaper. SI’s peaceful future is secure.”

“You certainly look thrilled.”

“Mission accomplished, very handily. We owe you. It’s just,” Tony sweeps the diagram down, and the air between them populates with file trees and documents…the SHIELD datadump.

“It’s one small battle in an unending war.”

He gives her a sour look, as if her equilibrium is the most offensive part of her response. “They were compromised from the beginning. Good and evil pulling on the same rope for decades, the evil people angling the rope a little toward chaos every year, taking the long view. Only a few good people lasting long enough to see any kind of pattern, much less figure out that the reason it steered badly was the bum fucking wheel. I’m surprised they waited as long as they did to take Fury out, honestly.”

“He was hard to gauge. And at the end he had to get on board Project Insight to stay in the loop. Still trying to steer SHIELD away from the rocks, trying to get Steve up to speed enough to see it, and help wrestle the wheel back on course.”

“He should've brought you in earlier.”

Natasha doesn't correct him that it was Maria who finally brought her in, overriding Nick when he was vulnerable. Nick regretted how he’d played it, how he'd had to play it, but all affection aside, his reluctance was completely justified. “Is that what this is all about? Recruiting me? Collecting all the good SHIELD pieces?”

Tony shakes his head, darting to his feet and pacing the porch. “If there's any agenda it's Pepper's, seeing if we can play nice when the world isn’t in the balance.”

“I'm very nice.”

“You're a lot of things, Natasha.” He leans back against the stone rail, arms crossed. A dragonfly flits around his head, and his eyes are oddly soft. He takes a deep breath. “We do need you.”
Natasha laughs, catches sight of Tony’s peevish expression, and laughs harder.

“Listen, I'm not here to give you the patriotic speech, to make a case for America as a country or a cause. Our ledger is just as bad, frankly, as the one you’re looking to balance. But I know what you do when you’re against the wall. You throw down. You run the numbers on civilian losses, you figure out where you’re most needed, and you fire yourself like a fucking missile. We need the first two; your team needs you. Your brain, your wickedly practical heart. Your ability to jam a spear right through the bullshit and shut it the fuck down.”

“Shut up, already, Tony.”

He gives her an eyebrow waggle. “You’re thinking about it.”

“So shut up before I stop thinking about it.”

Tony's grin transforms his face.

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Road Mix - Ch 7 - Ass in Gear

~*~

Break Into Your Heart - Iggy Pop
To Be Alone - Hozier
I Need a Truck - Warren Zevon
America (Closing Time) - Allen Ginsberg mixed with Tom Waits
Hard As This - Lindi Ortega

~*~

Ass in Gear

Arms crossed, muddy hiking boots planted astride the plastic shopping basket, Natasha ignores the buzz of her phone in her pocket.

She posted a bunch of photos earlier, sunsets to Pepper, overloaded diner plates to Steve, vultures and crows to Maria, cats and dogs to Clint. To Sam, she sent a shot of Chester’s taped jaws, her thumbs up in the foreground. It’s lunch time on the east coast and replies are heating up, but she’s busy pondering her options in countries and condoms.

If the second worst thing happens, if she’s booted out as a scapegoat, she has no official country to go back to. The FSB would love to have her, even if they had to make a deal with Hydra to get her in proper working order once more, but she has contacts in the EU and further abroad that could run interference. She doesn't need America. Why should she feel beholden to a jingoistic mercenary country that, as Stark points out, has a ledger leagues dirtier than her own?

She’d defected from the patriarchal gestalt of Russia, which had tried to mold her into the ultimate femme fatale, loyal to the glory of the state because where else would a barren woman belong? Certainly not to herself. In contrast, America had given her a uniform she could take off, and opportunity to go find herself. It was in the liminal space between pie-eyed ideals and stultified bureaucracy, but it had felt like a new start, and she’d made some progress. She’d learned that family wasn’t blood, it was choice. She’d started to make choices for herself.

Her phone buzzes away, unheeded. Now those choices are all she has left, and they feel too capricious and messy. How does one build a life based on miscellaneous (possible friend)?

Just because this is where her friends live doesn’t mean she should help them clean their house. Spilled blood, broken trust, shattered beliefs. Natasha Romanoff isn’t any more American than any other immigrant with eyes open, looking to turn sweat equity into a stake in a shared outcome. This country is a lurching idealistic ad hoc mess of pain, brilliance, work, ingenuity, violence, whimsy, exploitation, and hope. Tony’s drive to wield a hose and broom as well as harness the sun. Pepper and Maria’s principled machinations of commerce and state. Clint’s determination to live well as the best revenge. Bruce’s discerning nose to spot value amidst the wreckage.

Natasha plucks a box at random and checks the date code with a sigh. Bruce.
He’d settled the blankets around her when he left the bed that morning, when she’d sleepily thought he’d just stepped out to the toilet, trailing his fingers along her calf and foot. She’d planned to jump him when he came back to bed, counter that tenderness, watch his face in the dawn light as he came, bed-head and stubble and hoarse morning voice.

Instead he’d hared off into the woods. Hopefully that’s a minor detail. She was right after all, he is fun, and the distraction of...whatever this is…is worth the effort.

Her previous guest stars had been easy, eager to oblige and then quickly split for everyone’s comfort and safety. Natasha’s never had to coax before, never had to ply this much truth and dare, never had to take a partner's preferences into consideration. She’d always met them where they were at, both psychologically and location-wise, and they either did their own shopping or she used her own supply.

She has condoms in her kit back at the cottage even now, plain unlubricated latex she lifted from SHIELD supply stores, for a hundred off-label applications in the field. But monsieur has opinions to go with his substantial girth, flared at the base and the tip like an ancient pillar. One she’d like to install in her own architecture once she gets this technicality sorted to his satisfaction.

Natasha’s phone pings again and she seizes on the distraction, pulling it out with one hand while she rakes a variety of boxes off the shelf with the other, letting them tumble into the basket at her feet. Let him decide. Hopefully he can dress his cock better than the rest of him.

Her thumb taps the screen as she crosses the drug store to trawl the snack aisle. Sam’s reply underneath the alligator photo is a snap of Steve sleeping, in a cat-like curl against a train window, a low shaft of sun glossing his eyelashes and the flyaways from his cowlick. The message is, “America already has a pet, thanks.”

America has a lot of pets, she thinks, but before she can reply her phone pings again with a photo from another blanked number, cc’ing Sam. How is she in a fucking group chat?

The photo is a turn of trail she recognizes as Rock Creek Park in DC, one she’s run with Maria several times. The focus of the shot is a spindly-legged coyote. It’s tagged, “not all animals want to be pets”.

Natasha pays for her prophylactics and snacks, spending the drive back pondering the new back channels forming post-SHIELD like trails through a forest, and the ramifications of forging even more personal connections so intertwined with work. It occurs to her she’s maybe calling Bruce’s bluff about not wanting to be on the team, about being aloof in general.

The lack of clarity, the dearth of deliberation on her own part, that’s what bothers her. She’s been at loose ends since...well, since she saw those photocopied sonnets in Norfolk.

Maybe he’s right to go off for a nice long think in the woods. The rain has left everything fresh looking, cooler under the forest canopy than it had been in town. There’s a rod and reel in the trunk with the camping equipment, and a picturesque creek a short walk away. Her lack of bait is beside the point, just standing in the flowing water casting and reeling is relaxing.

She pulls up to the cottage in the overcast afternoon gloom. The Jesus Stark on the dash is back lit by the warm glow of the lights though the living room windows, yellow and blue. The real thing is no doubt busily gesturing through holographic interfaces, because that’s what you do in the midst of lush arboreal beauty. Bruce had said it like a slogan, what would Tony Stark do? He’d rub your nose in his quirks to get your raw reaction, that’s what. As if Bruce himself didn’t have a habit of pointing out to you he was dangerous.
Lest you expect a leisurely morning follow-up fuck, let me remind you I’m still a monster. As if Natasha weren’t as well, in her way, as dangerous and monstrous under the skin. As if this isn’t the first time a serious attraction to someone wasn’t drowned by fear for their safety, concern for their well-being as a regular normal person in prolonged contact with...her.

He’s maybe not the only one concerned about exposing the other to their own particular brand of poison.

She pulls her phone to silence the notifications and sees the latest photo arrive. At first glance the shot is badly framed. A crook of shoulder and a familiar brown chin, angled to protect a smoky black ball of fluff, palm cupped under its rear, a paw and pointed ear tips reaching in turn as if the kitten is also claiming Nick. Clint is in the picture behind them, as half a shadow outlined on the pole barn wall, which shows how carefully the lens was aimed after all.

All of these people talking to each other now, the aimless social chatting that builds familiarity. Connection. Trust. Maybe not as flimsy as it seems.

Natasha sails through the living room, dropping the bag of snacks in tribute, and Tony grunts in reply as he types madly, multicolored lines of code scrolling. Upstairs she unzips Bruce’s satchel and loots through his survival gear, pulling out the thin metal card laser etched into punch-out fish hooks. She leaves an assortment of condoms in exchange.

On her way back though the living room she calls out to Tony, “Goin’ fishin’, be back tonight.”

“I’m not cleaning it.” He adds in pauses between bursts of typing, “Or cooking it. Or eating it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then have a ball.”

In the underbrush by the stream she spots a large wet hand print darkening the bark of a maple, puddles pressed into the mud by a splayed row of toes and a kneecap the size of a hubcap. The footprint is larger and wider than what Bruce leaves on a bath mat, but the same high arches, same big toe shape. Pointed upstream.

Natasha makes a great galumphing noise heading downstream, where a shallow riffle runs into a deeper pool.

~*~

Bruce comes back to himself in a patch of soft grass next to an outcropping of wet rock, a spring trickling down the hill into a stream that he can hear burbling.

He rises up on his elbows. The grass is mashed down in a well around him. The birds are raucous, a hare rustling a few yards away to chew at another patch of grass. The crepuscular animals are making hay while the dusk darkens.

Go play, he’d said that morning, until the streetlights come on. It's what his mom would tell him when things were bad, when she was trying to handle her husband, divert him or wear him out before hustling Bruce through a quick meal and an early bed. It's a time frame he and Hulk both know, memories of escape into peace. It's still a leap of faith, letting go, letting himself be subsumed, letting himself (go out) go dark voluntarily. But the other guy has been offering his own positive reinforcement, giving over more memories when Bruce comes back, like, see, asshole, I'm not what you thought either.
There’s a whizzing sound in the stream bed, followed by a plunk and a slow smooth ratchet. Someone is fishing.

They've been in the stream since before Hulk sat down, before he changed. now that pieces of the day are seeping back to Bruce. He'd been drawn in by the whistling, which has since stopped. The bass line of *Sunshine of Your Love*, from Tony's road mix. But Tony's a trained pianist and a tabletop drummer, not a whistler. He sure as hell doesn't fish.

Bruce brushes off wet leaves and steps carefully down the stony slope to the water’s edge.

Natasha stands knee deep facing the other bank, the cut off hems of her jeans wet. She’s wearing Bruce’s rain jacket, the sleeves also rolled, but it’s travel wear, meant for that treatment. He sits down on a large flat rock next to her boots and a basket of gear, and rinses his muddy feet.

She shifts her footing to give him a sidelong look, and casts again. “I’m surprised how little wildlife cares about the big guy.” She gestures up the hill, then slowly reels. “A fox and her kit watched you settle in, and the mom gave you quite the sniffing once you fell asleep. Your Bruceness coming back is what drove them off.”

The fancy stretch pants Tony had devised don’t bounce back completely until washed, so they hang loose and bag at the grass-stained knees. Bruce pulls out the drawstring and ties it. “Maybe they still instinctively remember megafauna. Anything over a certain size they assume is herbivorous, like a mammoth.”

“Or a moose.”

“A six foot tall beaver.”

“A Sasquatch.” Natasha makes her way across the rocky stream bed, looting his rain jacket pockets. She hands him his glasses first, then a bottle of water. “Or are we too far east for that, do you think?”

“I wouldn’t know, I’m not a cryptozoologist.” He cracks the bottle and drinks. “Or a cryptid, thank you very much.”

She offers a pair of aqua socks and a packet of dried strawberries.

“I usually walk back barefoot,” is all he can think to say.

Natasha shrugs and pops a couple powdery strawberries into her mouth. His mouth waters sympathetically with the imagined tartness as she packs her fishing gear in the basket. It’s darkening fast, and he’s ravenous, losing body heat now that he has a fraction of his previous mass.

He pulls on the aqua socks, which are tight but workable. He shrugs on the coat, which is so warm from her skin it makes him shiver with relaxation, and he wonders if maybe one of the reasons he went out like this was to deny himself these physical comforts. To keep himself from expecting them. Not realizing she’d just pragmatically bring them to him when he finally came around.

Her hand flies out, shoving him hard.

Bruce hits the ground in the shadow of the trees, “Hey!”

“Shh!” Her gun appears, tracking the indigo sky.

He registers the buzz of the drone engine and scrambles back toward her through the leaf litter,
sticks poking his palms, “Nat, don’t shoot! It’s mine!”

Natasha straightens, barrel gleaming in the waning light bouncing off the water.

“It’s okay, really, it’s mine,” he repeats, slowly reaching his hands out, easing them downward, just shy of touching her rock solid grip on the gun, “I’ll bring it down, okay?”

She holsters the weapon, wary, and Bruce whistles the homing command.

It flits down like a flitting dragonfly, and comes to rest on the ground where he kneels wearily. He flips it over and quickly keys in the override to open the access plate. He pulls and pockets the drive, and then disables the electrocorrosive fail-safe.

Natasha gathers her basket and drops gracefully down beside him like a bird alighting. Bruce thinks about getting up, the damp leaves soaking his pants, but he only gets as far as thinking about it.

“When you...if I wasn't here, that is...” her diffidence is more awkward than she’s aiming for, truth leaking out, “would you sleep in the rough, like this? After?”

“He usually hangs around until dawn, but...we’re working on compromises.” Bruce slots the access plate closed and folds the drone, pulling out the carry handle. It’s about the size of a Cornish hen, shiny with sensor panels. “Trust, but verify.”

“Hence the drone.” Her chuckle is mirthless, but not directed at him. She skates her fingers over the handle. “I saw it in the trunk, but I’d assumed it was a solar charger.”

“The FRND is based on commercial market drones, but heavily modified.” He reluctantly climbs to his feet as she takes the drone and inspects the camera array with the light of her phone. “My peace of mind, not Tony’s.”

She leads him back to the trail. “FRND doesn't fit Stark Industries naming convention.”

“Flying Remote Narc Drone.”

“Don’t all drones fly?”

“Not the Mars Rover.”

She reaches back to catch the sleeve of his jacket, like leading a toddler through a busy store. The flare of annoyance is quickly swamped by clawing hunger and exhaustion.

“More of an exploratory machine, and less death from above.” Natasha says. “If it got into the wrong hands, though...”

Bruce laughs, “Also my automatic hard drive self-destruct, my override.” He can feel the slur in his voice, tongue thick, feet like lead.

“And what have you learned from your field observations of the subject?” She takes point, her steps sure in the inky black even as she holds the phone to illuminate his feet.

“You looking to compare notes?” His glucose level is in the shitter, undoubtedly. He’s pondering the practicalities of adding capillary blood draws to the drone when they hit the gravel path.

She’s still got a handful of his sleeve, steering him across the front lawn and up the porch into the warm light of the big stone cabin.
Tony has procured a great deal of food, laid out buffet style under the wagon wheel chandelier, but he points Bruce up the stairs instead, “Shower, then refuel.”

Bruce waves him off and trudges up the stairs.

“Is he wearing my aqua socks? I’m only asking because I want to know which one of you looted my duffel bag.”

“This strawberry thing,” Natasha shakes the pouch, “is it an indulgence because you’re away from Pepper and her allergies, or do you just vaguely associate that flavor with not being able to connect with her?”

He narrows his eyes, then sharply tilts his head up the stairs. “Prepare for a restless night.”

“What?”

“We shared a double after he did this in the Finger Lakes, took a walk in the woods, ate enough for three lumberjacks, muttered in his sleep all goddamn night. I can now apologize and ask for my glasses in Spanish, Portuguese and Bengali. Though the Bengali leans toward medical phrases.”

He holds out his hand.

She hands them back in a gesture of truce.

“Thik hoye jaabe means it’ll be alright,” Tony offers. “After this he’ll sleep like the dead again.”

Bruce’s rain jacket now smells like Natasha, and she’s squirreled a variety of condoms in the pockets. He takes each kind between finger and thumb, gauging the diameters through the packaging. Too small and they tend to roll back up like a cartoon window shade, which is neither safe nor suave.

He tosses the discards into the night table drawer, scattered over the Gideon bible like flowers on a coffin. Bruce’s burning questions have only ever been answered through observation and empirical testing. Which will have to wait until his legs aren’t shaking.

He plops on the edge of the bed and thinks that he kinda fucked himself with how he spent his day instead, giving her another out just in case, when he could have rolled over and had her for breakfast. Let her have him. The implication of fellatio is also quite clear from the inclusion of flavored options.

Sometimes, Banner, you’re an idiot. But you are capable of learning.

Natasha sits cross legged on the bed next to Bruce as he twitches and murmurs in the dark, a small window open on her tablet running JARVIS’s latest translation software. Tony wasn’t kidding about the aftermath. Dukkhito and desculpa and cuanto lo siento. Phrases of apology, lo lamento muchisimo, maap korben, perdoname, worn smooth like the mala beads still in his bag.

Natasha had assumed that walking the dog was a kind of catharsis, but it seems more like dredging a channel instead, which makes this the cathartic process, the sorting and venting of emotion happening in the aftermath. It’s fascinating. She wonders if he’s processing all this fear of self, in
discrete sessions of altered consciousness and recovery, or if he’s simply re-wrapping the bandages after airing out the wound. The phrases roll from his lips with practiced ease. What is he sorry for, exactly, in so many shades of regret and in every society he’s moved through?

He’s curled around the curve of his overfed stomach, arms wrapped around the pillow balled up under his face. From the light of the tablet she watches the tension crawling in his shoulders as he moves on to the topic of lost glasses, which sit belly up on the nightstand as he fretfully mutters, *voce vie meus oculos? Mis lentes? Anteojos? Chashma?*

The friendly narc drone is back in his duffel, but still gives her pause. That doesn’t feel like a guy with no intention to ever share his talents with a team. That feels like field training. Self work. Safety precautions.

In another window Natasha punches up the Gutenberg site and pecks out letters in the search bar, fingertip over the link.

Bruce draws a deep breath and curls tighter. *Kee shamushha? What is wrong? Ekhan kyamon laagchhe? How do you feel now?*

She swallows hard, and makes herself download the collected sonnets of Shakespeare.

Bruce flinches awake.

Natasha’s hand hovers for a long moment, then she sets her spread palm between his shoulder blades. He kneads and punches his pillow, his midwestern accent rising up like sweet revenge, “M’ keepn’ you ‘wake—”

“Shhh,” she strokes his clammy skin, and he burrows his head against her hip. He sighs and his legs sprawl out, his sweaty hand resting around her shin. The index unfolds on the tablet and she murmurs, “Thik hoye jaabe.”

Pinned down by the sweaty weight of Bruce, grounded and unalone, she bookmarks two sonnets.

~*~

The sun is up past the windows when Bruce wakes, sheets tangled around his legs like he’s been roped at a rodeo. He’s glad Natasha isn’t here for all the gelatinous joint popping as he gets his body upright and moving. The back end of post-Hulk recovery is actually kind of pleasant when it’s free of accompanying havoc, like the scent of ozone and petrichor after a storm when there aren’t also paths carved by tornadoes.

Tony is in the living room cleaning guns, but what gives Bruce pause is the look of unholy glee as he twirls the cotton swab in his fingers, lightly anointing the slide of a familiar Glock 27 with oil in a few choice spots.

“That’s…?” Bruce answers his own question with a low whistle. Though it still means Natasha’s likely out for a run with several knives and possibly a second gun strapped to her person, that’s the piece that lives at the small of her back, the first one on and last one off.

Tony smirks. Bruce heads into the kitchen. Gestures of trust among gun nuts. How did he end up with these two, anyway? It’s not like he set out kibble, or tuna. He’s not a great listener. So why does he feel this creeping sense of responsibility?

It should bother him more.
Bruce chews his lip as he puts a kettle on and sorts through the leftovers. He pulls out a pan and some eggs, and throws together a bastardized fried rice that draws Tony first, then a sweaty Natasha peeling off a pair of leather tactical gloves. She’s a mess of tree bark and leaves, scratches and burrs, grass stains on her knees and elbows and the thoracic curve of her spine. She eats so fast the empty plate is still hot when she busses it and heads upstairs.

“She’s a growing...whatever the hell she is.” Tony waves his fork, dismissive. “I didn’t know you could cook.”

Bruce sits down with his own plate and mug of tea, explaining, “This isn’t actually cooking, you realize that, right? This is heating up leftovers.”

“This is hot food, with an egg that doesn’t smell like carbon and sulfur.” Tony scrapes up the last bite. “Might as well be alchemy.”

“You fire up the electric arc furnace the way most people bake off a pan of brownies. You synthesized a new element in your glorified garage. Your smoothie recipes specify temperature and viscosity over dozens of steps. How can you not work a stove?”

“I also put together an excellent cheese plate.” Tony rinses his dish, his tone blatantly casual. “Hey, I'm gonna do some test fights, shake out some new protocols. I'll be back around noon so we can head out to the barbecue.”

Bruce doesn't blush, but it's alarmingly close. “'kay.”

“You need me to pick anything up, while I'm out?” He reaches up under his tank and pops off the silicon cap, “From, like, the tri-state area?”

“No,” he stolidly keeps his eyes on his own plate, hotly aware of his pulse. “I'm good.”

“Yeah,” Tony murmurs as he leaves the kitchen in a cloud of flying armor pieces, “So it'd seem.”

~*~

Natasha listens to his tread on the stairs, waiting until he can see her before stripping her sport bra and kicking aside her shorts.

His fingers flex on the banister. “You wanna shower first?”

“Dunno, do I?”

Bruce shakes his head, and then his hands are on her, and then his mouth, and when she climbs atop him he lets her set the pace until she grinds him down into the bed so hard the springs squeal, and he finally wraps his arms around her and thrusts up into her, hard and glorious.

He shudders and she rises up on her knees, working her clit, rocking him inside of her as she brings herself off again. His one hand kneads her breast, the other between them to keep the condom seated as she squirms, his knuckles against her lips as she bears down and comes.

Natasha looks down at him, hair mussed and expression pleasantly stunned, and she grins.

“Yeah?” he pants.

She leans down and kisses him with languorous softness, until they both part to gulp breath, then pats his heaving chest and heads off to the shower.
Natasha drives. As if to herself, barely audible from the backseat where Bruce rides directly behind her, she talks.

Tony’s kicked the front passenger seat back so his lap can accommodate a mini holographic projection that he’s ostensibly working on, as if he isn’t attentive to her describing an impressive number of grounding techniques to address anxiety and insomnia.

Bruce is surprised that she’s a parable teller. She’s so analytical, but then again...he thinks of her describing possible ambushes in terms of the narrative that could be spun from them, the tablet full of doorstop beach reads that she can lecture on extemporaneously and interdisciplinarily. Her career may have been dominated by SHIELD until very recently, but her work was knee-deep in the human condition, and her co-workers were people processing a lot of stress and trauma--she could write a book filled with name-redacted case studies.

He can’t help but imagine her testing these psychological techniques on herself, as methodically as she’s evaluated ways to strengthen her core. As methodically as he's custom built his own repertoire.

“Might be worthwhile to try a weighted blanket.”

Tony scoffs and maximizes a display window, flicking at computational parameters with several fingers and running the modeling simulation again. “If you’re suggesting the armor is just a glorified swaddler, I will seriously deck you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“If it makes you feel better, you can certainly try.” Natasha shrugs, “I’m just saying compression might be a thing to explore, that’s all.”

Tony gives Bruce a look, seeking an assist.

Bruce has been content to listen to her herd him through this conversation like a sheepdog gathering a flock, fascinated to watch her work, holding out hope that it might help. He clears his throat, “You know, there’s always CBT.”

Tony jabs at his project. Natasha frowns at Bruce via the rear view mirror, and says, “Electroconvulsive therapy seems like an extreme starting point, even for Stark.”

“No ECT. CBT,” Bruce is taken aback, considering the advanced psychological lingo she’s used so far. He explains, “short for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.”

“Oh,” her hidden smirk in the side mirror is nigh on pornographic, but she keeps playing it straight, “so not short for Cock and Ball Torture.”

Tony snaps, “I feel like we’re getting farther away from it.”

Bruce expects him to take the opportunity to swerve the topic to sex, and is admiring how deftly Natasha gave him that out, to release the tension before he turns contrary...but after a beat, Tony turns to him and asks, “D’you think it might help?”

Bruce has a terrible thought.

It’s ludicrous--didn’t he already tell Tony his idea of seeking professional help was to pay someone to hit him in the face? Who in their right mind would ask him anything about mental health? But he can sleep most nights, he can control his shit most days, and he isn’t currently reeling from his
world blowing up in his face. Emotionally, mentally, he’s arguably the most stable person in this car.

How the hell did he find himself here?

~*~

They’ve parked on the grassy verge between the road and a soybean field, gnats buzzing in the afternoon sun while Tony impulse buys heirloom tomatoes and pint boxes of green beans from a woman giving him the side eye. Natasha can tell she recognizes him, and is wrestling with whether it would be impolite to say so. Tony is trying to pretend that she doesn't, but getting flustered by also pretending he knows what dilly beans are.

“A little help here?” Tony hollers over, waving at his haul of produce, like he’d totally take the pint cartons from the woman’s hands if only they weren’t so heavy.

Bruce slides the sunglasses he’d stolen from Tony down out of his hair and dons a soft befuddled expression that Natasha interprets as just as much a ruse as any of hers. She hangs back and lets him make small talk with the stand owner, introducing them all with a playful smile as Toby, Bill and Nina.

The woman gives him a wink, and waves at Natasha. Bruce hands over the boxes of tomatoes and green beans to Tony, who takes them without a blink, and they head back to the car.

“Dilly beans are a canning recipe.” Natasha pulls back onto the road. “And Toby is a dog’s name.”

Tony rolls his eyes at Bruce. “Bill’s terrible at covers.”

Natasha shrugs. Bruce is terrible at cover names, but he’s surprisingly good at blending in. She grabs a handful of the green beans to nibble raw, crisp with chlorophyll and sun.

“And how do you know so much about irrigation?”

“I don’t.” Bruce reaches between the seats to select a tomato, striated and the color of dried blood. “But I know if you ask any farmer about water or weather she’ll have strong opinions.”

“Even a nice Midwesterner.”

Bruce says, “Polite reserve is worlds away from nice,” at the same time Natasha says, “Midwesterners are good at hiding the murder in their hearts.”

“Harsh, Ms. Romanoff,” Tony tuts. Bruce smirks at her in the mirror, tomato seeds on his chin. “To hear you talk this way about the heartland of your adopted homeland.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that. Any of that.”

Bruce wipes off the seeds along with his smile. Tony notices the shift in mood, and she can feel him decide to dig in instead of ignore. “You can’t tell me you’re worried about your citizenship? You gave Congress the finger; I can state with authority that there’s nothing more American. Some partisan sour grapes won’t change that.”

Natasha bares her teeth. “I plan. It’s what I do. I’m always thinking tactically. This is one possibility, so I’m planning for it.”

“Yes, I’m sure you put nuclear detonation computer models to shame, crunching all the scenarios
while you’re hanging out on the road with us—is this your farewell tour, then?” Tony turns to face her in the seat. At her lack of reply he tosses his sunglasses into the center console, which is missing the lid. “Pull over.”

She gives him a dismissive look.

“I’d grab the wheel but you’d kill me. Pull the fuck over.”

She doesn’t want this to be a thing.

“Natasha,” Tony’s voice is rough and quiet, “please.”

This is going to be a thing. She coasts onto the shoulder and slips the engine into park. She’s clenching her jaw so hard her teeth squeak.

The car is terribly quiet. Bruce is contemplating the rest of his tomato, doing that thing where he’s pulled everything in and most people’s eyes would skate right over him. Tony is silent for so long Natasha finally looks at him.

“That’s not going to happen.” He is unshakable, his look a promise, and it infuriates her because for all he’s been through, he’s never been up against a wall he wasn’t able to bust through...and Natasha has often had to climb and dig with a spoon and break her hands bloody shoving firecrackers into the cracks of the mortar.

“Goddamn it, Stark.” She sets her forehead against the steering wheel, shaking her head and chuckling. “You going to grease some palms? Buy me a better citizenship? Write me off as a charitable deduction?”

“I don’t need a checkbook, Romanoff. I’ve got lawyers and PR teams who’ll come in their pants at the thought of being unleashed on your behalf. We saved New York. We, Romanoff. The Eastern fucking seaboard to be exact, given the payload of that missile; a little planet called Earth, given the fleet that would have come pouring out of that hole if you hadn’t shut it down. And now, you just teamed up with Captain Fucking America and took down a corrupt organization and saved--how many citizens was it Bruce?”

Bruce clears his throat, reluctantly re-inhabiting his shell enough to add, “Project Insight had identified and located two hundred thousand targets for the initial culling. That was to be the pilot test. If subsequent waves were politically viable, the algorithm had already identified another twenty million people.”

“An organization I worked for.”

Tony opens his mouth to interrupt but stops when he sees her fist clench on the gearshift.

“Believed in. Infiltrated by Hydra from the beginning. That’s who was dialing in those targets. That’s who was deploying me.” She shakes her head. “I was not expecting to become a good person, when I joined SHIELD...that’s not what I can offer. I was expecting to...do good, to balance out...to wash off some of the blood.”

Tony eyes the horizon. “It’s always been about target discrimination, hasn’t it?”

“Of course you’d see it that way.”

“Then enlighten me.”
She wets her lips with a tilt of her head, “I can be very specific when the mission calls for it. Subtle. Unseen. Like in Harlem.”

Bruce’s eyes snap to hers in the rear view mirror.

“I can observe, eyes on the ground, and I can act from the shadows. I can analyze the load point, the keystone person or opinion, and I can...pick them off, or persuade. More of the latter at SHIELD. Still didn’t keep me clean. I trusted the wrong people. I let myself be used.”

Bruce sits back. “Precision versus accuracy.”

Tony nods once, decisive. “This is what Hill keeps coming back to. Solid intel, trust but verify, checks on power. The Avengers are in reserve, so now is the time to hammer out how this is all going to work the next time we’re needed.”

“Yay,” Bruce mutters, eyeing his tomato for the next bite, “team building.”

Natasha has no response to this except to keep driving.

Tony spends the next couple hundred miles going over what Maria and Pepper have been putting together. Funding, organization, the web of contacts Maria has been consolidating ever since SHIELD blew apart all over the Potomac basin. He asks her, “So how do we put this together?”

Natasha talks about re-configuring the machinery of an agency, the scaffolding of support staff and the expertise of analysts. She fiddles with the stapler charm and thinks about the box of skin staplers in her linen closet, paper staplers, staple guns, the analysts and programmers and project managers and purchasers and accountants. You need more than a superhero team, you need the people who support and direct and administrate all that. She thinks about the catalytic combination of Pepper Potts and Sharon Carter.

Natasha is maybe a bit peeved that it’s Tony who’s breaking her quarantine, bringing her back into the circle for the re-imagining of a better SHIELD, but she can see her place in this.

She is not Margaret Carter. She is not the guiding force or the right hand. She is the left hand, the consulting Cassandra, the fulcrum that will weigh the heart of this thing against a feather.
At the Crossroads

Chapter Notes

Road Mix - Ch 8 - At the Crossroads
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Smoking Section - St. Vincent
This Is Not Surreal - Lindi Ortega
La Femme Tornade - Shoofly w/ Johnette Napolitano
Say My Name - Peter Moren
~*~

At the Crossroads

The text pops up while they’re still on the highway: *hey, do you need a house sitter? I have very reasonable rates. this is M btw.*

House sitter. Natasha hasn’t been to the apartment in Rockville for a solid month, back when Maria came over to hash out the tour of field offices as Nat did laundry and cleaned out her fridge, disposed of anything compromising with an eye toward warrants and stalkers. Her lights are on remote programmable timers, all her post goes to a virtual mailbox, and anything unexpected is taken care of by the concierge down in the lobby.

This M isn’t Maria, though.

Natasha contemplates the emojis sprinkled throughout, the very deliberate casual tone, and the fact that the teenager down the hall is reaching out to a neighbor she’d only talked to a handful of times over a couple years. You buy a few boxes of fundraiser candy bars to grease SHIELD bureaucracy, you give someone a heads-up about their lost dog, you chat a little in the fitness room on holiday break, suddenly you live in their phone for them to text you whenever they feel like it.

Back in December, Emma was a young sixteen, braces and baby fat and hyperintelligent resentful rebellion. She lived in the building whenever school was out, no local friends, her father working long hours, and her heavily pregnant stepmom closer to her own age than not.

So it’s M now. Natasha thinks about The Drew picking out the embroidery to edit his work polos. She remembers printing her American name out on form after form when she went legit, ditching the terminal V for a double F like paired fists.

She texts back, *you looking for some extra cash?* She leaves *and a place to crash* implied. Tony eyes her over the seat, but doesn’t ask.

Bruce takes a left too soon off the two lane road, and the dirt track dead-ends at an old abandoned farmstead.

Tony eyes the sizable graveyard at the edge of a copse of trees. “I don’t think this is the family reunion we’ve been invited to, bunny.”
“No shit,” Bruce mutters, spinning the wheel and spraying gravel.

Natasha braces the keg belted next to her in the back seat, and goes back to texting: *send a selfie of your left hand*. She pulls out the tablet and remotes in to start adding a profile to the abandoned apartment’s security system. Bruce takes out his annoyance by swerving around the deep chuckholes in the road, jouncing everyone whenever he hits one at speed. She flexes her legs against the floor and pins the keg in place with her hip. Tony grabs the oh-shit handle and sways like a peevish orangutan.

A couple miles farther down the road there’s a little park on a hill, the picnic shelter surrounded by camp chairs and dining flies, horseshoe spikes and cornhole boards and a volleyball net, children and dogs and a mixed pack of teenagers slinking off along the creek. The car park has overrun onto the grass, and Bruce sighs when he turns the car off. "We're in the middle of nowhere. How do you know this guy again?"

"Saved my ass in Tennessee, let me use his news van."

They’re met by a sweet nervous guy with Tony’s facial hair, and a werewolf tattoo on his forearm.

“Gary, my man. Is it a full moon, or did you get the tat touched up? Just kidding. This is Bruce, and Nat,” Tony drapes his arm along Gary’s shoulders, fingers digging pointedly into the man’s deltoid, “This is Gary, who’s promised not to be weird about this. Right man?"

Gary nods and waves them over where a length of potluck buffet terminates in a bevy of coolers and a cadre of barbecues, filling a heaping plate for Tony as Natasha and Bruce deploy their weaponized charm on a lot of people who look like variations of Gary who aren't trying to look like Tony, including the pack of children infesting the nearby playscape.

Tony is feted and fussed over, in a way where the extended clan is making him and his friends as comfortable as possible, while also making Gary as uncomfortable as possible. Bruce plays a version of volleyball with an indeterminate number of other people, two frisbees, and a dog. He might be the only sober party, including the dog. Natasha is shooed to the matriarch's table under the permanent wooden picnic shelter.

The wizened elder holding court had motioned her over, and as she deals Natasha in she introduces herself as Mimi, her sisters as Dee and Lucky. She doesn’t say what the game is, or ask Nat if she wants to join.

Tony thought he was teasing when he called her an old soul, but this happens to Natasha sometimes. People who are old, who are strange, who are close to death...sometimes they see.

Pinochle. Natasha spreads out her hand of cards and tries to remember how to play without dredging up too much of that concurrent identity; it wasn’t one she'd crafted when her brain was her own, but one implanted in the years before that, and imperfectly wiped away. She sifts suits and tricks from sense memories of naugahyde card table tops and sticky sloe gin fizzes. That had ended with a double assassination in the suburbs, one of her first missions.

Lucky asks about her trip so far, and Natasha seizes on the subject to ground herself in the present. She talks about the road; the food and the people, the weather and the animals, and the fact that when she fishes she doesn’t bother using bait, she just likes to stand in a stream and cast.

She and her partner Dee don’t lose too badly, or at least Dee doesn’t take it personally. Mimi gets one of the great granddaughters to fetch plates for the four of them, and deals her in again.
Natasha thanks the girl, and eats everything on her plate. Lucky settles back, satisfied.

Dusk falls. Mimi shuffles. Dee reaches back and someone hands her a barbecue lighter, and by the time her arm returns a handful of citronella bulbs are set down in the center of the table. She lights them, and this seems to be the cue for the tiki torches to come into play, islands of flickering light scattered like sparks leading to the bonfire off in the distance behind Natasha.

Tony is in the makeshift parking lot with his head in an engine, lit by the hard glare of a work light hanging from the open hood.

She can hear Bruce behind her, talking with a couple of the teens about personal essays and reference letters.

Lucky reaches between her feet and pulls up a heavy glass growler. Natasha can tell by the way the light comes through it that the contents are high proof.

“You want a cup?” Mimi asks.

“I don’t need a cup.” Natasha says.

Lucky uncaps, takes a swig, and slides it left to Natasha before picking up her hand.

Natasha hooks her finger in the grip and lays it across her forearm to take a pull. It’s less than a Russian-sized shot, but still a healthy tot. Dee takes it from her using both hands, like it’s a precious baby and it’s her turn to dandle it on her knee. While she passes it along, Mimi watches Natasha. The alcohol burn flares and recedes, a lingering warmth in her throat, and she lets out a laugh as the ache hits her bloodstream.

“A girl could get a buzz off of that,” she says, “What do you call it?”

“Darlin’,” Mimi smiles, “that’s distilled sunshine.”

“Mule kick,” Lucky chimes in, taking another drink.

Dee fans out her hand of cards, the backs of her hands like a parchment map unrolling, “Popskull.”

Fireflies spark in the field behind the three women. The rest of their family, descendants really, have receded, gathering around the bonfire with sleepy children tucked in laps, and marshmallows speared on sticks. Tony passes a flask back and forth with the older men, watching the flames and talking quietly. Bruce...is sitting on the hood of their car, laying back against the windshield and staring up into the night sky.

“How long have you been distilling this?” It’s smooth for moonshine.

Mimi’s eyes glitter hard in the light from the candles, the distant torches, the roaring fire behind Natasha, “How long have you been alive?”

Natasha smiles, but Dee clucks her tongue, arranging cards in her hand, “A woman doesn’t like to admit her age, do they Lucky?”

“I’ve also heard that women should play stupid. Mulligan.” Lucky throws her cards back toward the deck, only just missing the smoldering coil of dark green citronella that’s joined the candles. “But I think that’s a crock of shit. Especially when something important is on the line.”

Natasha lays her hand down under Lucky’s even stare. The atmosphere has congealed around the
four of them, chilly with risk. She’s not exactly sure of the legalities of her carrying concealed in any state, now that her federal issuing agency is in the process of being dissolved and dismantled by the State Department, but her Glock 27 still rides at the small of her back nonetheless.

“No need for that, girlie.” Mimi pulls out a standard deck and starts shuffling, riffling the cards with ease despite knotted joints, and dealing out for poker. “It’s you that you’re here for. Now, split the jug with us and play your hands. You can bet whatever’s in your pockets.”

Occasionally the old, the strange, those close to death can read Natasha, see her difference. On the other hand, Natasha always reads people. These women...it’s not that they are old, or that the veil is thin for them...they are bigger somehow. Like Thor, like Loki. They are beings you must meet on their own ground. She looks at the half gallon of high-proof spirit and she knows the deal without being told. Her training and the changes made to her will give her an advantage, but she’s no Steve Rogers. She’s going to be compromised.

She’s going to let herself be compromised.

Natasha picks up the cards. When her turn comes, she takes a deep swig from the growler and places a bet from her pocket.

The things that come from her pockets...well. A small blue plastic gun with a trigger that clicks. Next time, a lead soldier with a rifle on his back and bearing a red flag. Then a length of pointe shoe ribbon, brown with old blood. Her pocket is always empty after she places her bet, and yet there is always something to pull out when her turn comes again.

Dee sets a lump of sloppily painted ceramic down as her bet, a misshapen Black Sambo ashtray designed to catch ashes in a hollowed out watermelon the child is also eating. Mimi lays down a kodachrome photograph of a Vietnamese woman, girl clinging to her, labeled 3/68. Lucky delicately unfolds a paper so old it looks like a worn handkerchief. Natasha reads the faded bill of receipt for an orphan from the New York Foundling Hospital, stating that Morris, Lulu, age 6, will now live with the family of Mrs. H. J. Spiegel of Estherville, IA. It’s dated 1912.

“Not as a daughter, you understand. As a farmhand. Still,” she indicates the other horrid items in the kitty, “that’s why they call me Lucky.”

Natasha reaches into her pocket, and her hand closes around a doll head. She knows, even before she draws it from her pocket.

Porcelain, with honey brown human hair like corn silk. It has the face of little Drakovna, her grey eyes wide and feral in the moment she recognized Natasha as the monster every child knows is waiting, in some hidden corner, to kill them. And Natasha had.

She sets her cards down and gently draws the hair back from the face. The glass eyes aren’t grey after all, but a slate green.

Lucky snags the pointe shoe ribbon from the kitty and hands it to her. She ties the hair back from the translucent porcelain face, the contrast of brown blood and candlelight adding copper flecks to the hair as she ties a stiff bow, and sets the head into the middle of the table with the rest. Natasha reaches for her cards but there are now just two, staring at her face up; the seven of clubs and the ace of spades.

“Hit or stay?” Dee asks, sliding the growler over with a slosh.

Natasha had once been forced to listen to hours of Clint talking blackjack strategy and carnival
cartomancy. He’d been trying to keep her conscious, despite days of injuries and the freezing temperature of the cells, his fingers poking up through the grate to touch her wrist whenever the guard paced away. Checking her pulse. She’d been too cold to shiver when the extraction team arrived, deliriously trying to explain to Clint that of course diamonds were melancholic, clubs were sanguine, and spades being the suit of war must make them choleric. The benefit of a classical education is that once you see enough patterns, you can spin them out like cotton candy, make them dance to your purpose.

She can’t remember if she should hit or stay at seventeen.

Mimi is the only one with a hand, the eight of diamonds and a card face down. She draws a third card, the six of spades.

Natasha can hear that Tony has joined Bruce, sound of hood dents as he climbs up next to him, remarking on the ridiculous number of stars visible. “Is that the Big Dipper?”

“I don’t know. Probably?”

Natasha cradles the jug on her forearm. The citronella flickers and fumes.

“What do you mean, probably?”

“I don’t know constellations.”

“Heresy.”

“Apparently you don’t, either.”

“I’m more engineer than scientist. Honestly, they could revoke your lab coat.”

“Constellations are random and based on point of view. Meaningless pattern recognition. You know what’s actually interesting about stars? They make new elements.”

“Spoken like a physicist. You have no romance.”

“Anything that isn’t hydrogen had to be atomically fused in a star...”

Natasha takes a long drink of moonshine as Bruce winds himself up.

“...so every goddamned atom of every molecule was first shit out by dying stars, and then collected by cosmic forces into machines complex enough to experience starlight and bitch about their friends having no soul.”

“I take it back, bunny.”

She can almost hear him shrug. Hearts are phlegmatic.

She licks the alcohol burn from her lips and says, “Hit me,” and doesn’t let herself hesitate to flip the card. Three of hearts, for a total of twenty. Mimi reveals her own five of hearts, for a total of nineteen.

In a blink the kitty is gone, the coins and cards and ugliness spirited away, only a burning coil of citronella and four pairs of hands on the table. A polished handful of dice carved from bone scatter across the wood as Mimi laughs, “You’ve thrown in your lot, baby girl,” but that’s a trick of the flickering light.
“Caught a chill, there, child.” Dee takes her left hand and chafes it, “Been outside too long.”

“I’ll get her people.” Lucky braces a hand on Natasha’s shoulder as she stands, “take her on home.”

“No home, just a hotel,” Natasha says, numb and buzzing, “Always a hotel, or a bunk, or a bed from a life that doesn’t exist. There’s a lost girl sleeping in my bed like Goldilocks—”

“Come on, high roller, it’s time to hit the road.”

Natasha shudders like someone’s walked over her grave. Her eyes won’t focus, the blur palpable like a pressure headache, but most of the cars are gone and there are knots of people saying goodbyes. Bruce crouches down next to her and peers into her eyes like he can actually see anything in the dark.

“Tell me you and the Golden Girls had help killing this,” Tony shakes the growler, only a splash at the bottom remaining. He tries to pull Natasha to her feet but she reflexively turns the momentum against him, only barely averting his forehead from slamming into the table. “Natasha, Christ!”

Bruce sniffs the dregs of the popskull and blinks from the vapors, swinging around to look hard at Mimi, who’s the only one left. “Is this paint thinner?”

“Easy, baby boy. She’s old enough.”

Bruce bites out, “Old enough to go blind?”

“You know a quicker way to open the third eye, sweetie pie?”

Tony’s second attempt ends in a headlock that threatens to black him out as they stagger away from the shelter. “Bruce! Stop picking fights; help me pour Romanoff into the car.”

Bruce pushes them apart and stands between them, anchoring Tony in place by a fistful of shirt, his other hand splayed open toward where Natasha sways on her feet. She sees the park is empty, crickets sawing and a lone cicada whirring for dear life.

“Come on,” he says, bending his elbow to offer his forearm and nodding toward the car, “let’s hit the road.”

Tony starts the car, and the chime of the open door cuts through the confusion just enough. She lays her hand on Bruce’s forearm, and he carefully draws her into the beam of the headlights.

Every mile or so as he searches for the highway, Tony pulls over so she can vomit into the gravel on the side of the road. “Well, at least we’ll know if we’re going in circles, right? Like breadcrumbs, only disgusting.”

Natasha spits a few times, and reels her upper body back into the car, muttering, “My god, do you ever stop?”

JARVIS, being the only other entity in the car who speaks Russian, answers her in kind, “In fact, Sir does not.”

“JARVIS, stop chatting up the drunken Russkie, right or left, buddy?”

His tone is baffled and apologetic, “All coordinates and satellite mapping indicate no fork in this road, Sir.”
“Shit. Bruce?”

Bruce opens the door to stand on the running board and peer down each fork for a long moment, taking deep slow breaths that aren’t exactly scenting the air, but aren’t not, either. He finally points to the left.

~*~

Natasha reaches between the seats and slides her hand around Tony’s forearm, purring in French. He lets go of the gear shift and scrapes her hand onto Bruce’s leg, responding in kind and then shifting into English for Bruce, “Mademoiselle is craving a cigarette something wicked.”

The hand slips into Bruce’s pocket with surprising skill. “Do I look like I smoke?”

“You look like her current vice.”

He squirms to keep it from turning into a game of pocket pool.

They have another rapid fire exchange, Tony shaking his head and Natasha throwing her bottom lip out pugnaciously.

“I told her you’re the one heading into the store when we find civilization. She declares that if she can’t buy Gauloises there it isn’t civilization, but her American slumming brand is Pall Mall.”

Natasha squeezes Bruce’s thigh and leans back abruptly. She spills more French, and he doesn’t need to speak it to decipher the distress in her voice. Tony veers onto the shoulder and skids to a stop. She lurches half out of the car and retches, painting the gravel and scrub with bile and moonshine.

“Okay, maybe setting that on fire would not be the best idea,” Tony says, “but she probably won’t be so flammable later on. So, totally up to you and your ethics about self-medication and enabling relapsing addiction.”

Natasha retracts her body into the car.

Bruce offers a bottle of water as Tony asks, “Feeling better, pumpkin?”

She groans in Russian.

“Given up on English entirely, then?”

She rinses, spits, and pulls the door closed. “Home, Jeeves,” she titters a morbid laugh.

Tony steers back onto the asphalt and Natasha rides the momentum into a slump across the backseat, flinging an arm to brace against the center console.

Bruce lays his forehead against the cool window glass. It’s going to be a long night even if they do find their way back onto the map.

~*~

The satellites are fritzy and the stars are obscured, but the thump of train tracks finally provides a bearing for Tony to work his way back to a state route, and eventually a KiwkShop bathed in the reassuring glow of sodium and fluorescent light. Natasha is silent in every language now, eyes jittering to track the late night travelers all around her, mouth pensive. Bruce relents and buys her a pack of cigarettes, doling them out as loosies as she drinks Gatorade. Natasha acquiesces to his
hydration scheme, bending her head when he flicks the lighter, tilting back to blow the smoke at the underbelly of clouds where heat lightning flickers. Fake grape and burnt tobacco hang in the muggy air.

Natasha leaves her head rolled back and closes her eyes like a trust exercise, with the concrete block wall at her back, and Bruce and Tony triangulated between her and the parking lot.

“What do you mean sunspots,” Tony looks like he’s texting while on a call, but he and JARVIS are trying to pin down the glitch, “the whole earth is between us and the geosynchronous satellites, and the sun…”

After a few rinses her belly settles, and she’s exhausted when they finally park for the night, unmoored and craving the warm welcome black of sleep. The hotel room is blissfully chilly, the sheets smooth and heavy, Bruce’s hands graceful in their efficiency as he unhooks her bra and scratches the path of the band across her back, and gently pulls the karambit from her grip. He sets it on the nightstand with his mala.

Natasha burrows into bed in a borrowed t-shirt, stripped of weapons and damp from a cool washcloth.

A few breaths later he slips next to her and takes her hand, fingers curled against her pulse, and it tethers her just this side for a long moment, before she lets herself tip backward into the black.

~*~

Bruce tucks pillows around Natasha to prop her up in the recovery position on her side. Even blind drunk, one sock still dangling off her foot, she’d chosen the half of the bed where she could curl up and see all the exits.

The covers are undivided, but he’s far more concerned about the alcohol poisoning, so he sits up next to her and keeps an ear on her respirations, a finger on her pulse.

He thinks that this evening doesn’t square with anything he knows about her; the wariness, the control, the constant calculation of risk. He decides that she’s just as frayed as Tony, maybe more. This is the kind of shit you pull when you can’t make any sense of the pieces, so you toss them all up in the air and let them land where they will. When you’re sick of trying to keep everything in place, you embrace the chaos. You drink the ayahuasca and see what shakes out.

He figures that maybe between him and Tony, she felt safe enough to exit her own mind for a little bit, hanging out with the elders of the clan. Trusting them to watch her back, even if she didn’t tell them she was doing so.

“Were you walking your own dog?” he asks rhetorically. “Is that what this is?”

Her breathing has evened out, and it’s probably safe for him to stop monitoring and get some rest himself. He settles a hand on her back, the rise and fall lulling him down as well.

~*~

Natasha wakes up to a syncopated thumping that she assumes at first is her head, except it's slower than the pulses of pain behind her eyes. She holds her breath, but the soft steady shift of breathing continues, and the various parts of her body start relaying damage reports.

She’s draped over Bruce’s back, her hand tucked under his belly and one leg slotted between his. The patch of t-shirt under her cheek is wet with drool.
Worse yet, he’s reading.

She rolls off as neatly as she can, closing her eyes against the clamor of stomach and brain.

All he says is, “Your knife is on my side table, FYI. It seemed like the safest option.”

“Good thinking.” She can’t recall if she’d slipped it under the pillow or if he’d had to pull it from the inside pocket of her bra. She finds she doesn’t care either way. It rests in the circle of his mala, corralled.

“I’m full of great ideas. Like what’s on your side table.”

The pills are still in their single-dose packet, and the purple drink is foggy with condensation. When she comes out of the bathroom the room is arctic cool and the blackout shades are drawn tight. He hasn’t moved from where he lays reading, and Natasha feels like a stray animal being coaxed, but she also feels like utter shit, so she crawls back in and sleeps until noon.

"Late breakfast,” Tony chirps in the lobby. “We can talk about whether we do my thing first or Bruce’s thing.”

Natasha plucks off his sunglasses and slips them onto her own face. They’re dark, mirrored and polarized, and lend everything a deep rose tint. “And what things are these?”

Bruce says, “Camping,” with a self-satisfied grin at the same time Tony raises a beguiling brow and says, “Spa day.”

Natasha stifles a raw burp and shakes her head at them both.

“First aid’s first.” He unfolds another pair from the pocket of his black leather jacket, which is buttercream soft like he’s been finely upholstered. He turns to Bruce and says, “The greasiest spoon you can find, mon lapin.”

Bruce ambles past the parking lot and finds a diner around the block, done in shades of brown and harvest gold, but it smells good enough to soothe the remaining churn in her stomach. Not only does Tony not tease her for the night before, when the waitress comes around with the coffeepot he turns her cup over, and then doctors the brew with sugar and a slosh from his flask.

Bruce shakes his head, “Hair of the dog is not the best idea, Tony.”

Tony starts peeling open pods of half and half. “It works.”

“No, it doesn’t.” He draws his fingers across his eyes, “Dehydration is the main issue at this point.”

They bicker quietly over hangover care, and she is faintly disoriented that they’re talking about her, sitting in the same booth. She watches, fascinated.

“Not to brag,” Tony’s on the fourth pod, “but I feel like I have the edge on experience here--”

“You’re not fixing anything, just messing more with glutamate levels, you’re only delaying rebound.”

“Hence the greasy breakfast--”

“Okay, eggs might be useful, the aminos could help liver chemistry, but caffeine is a diuretic--”
Tony tuts and slides the cup over to Natasha. Bruce slumps down in the booth, his eyeroll melodramatic.

She studies the cup and says, “Tell me it’s not the Laphroaig in that flask.” Just the thought of peat smoke and seaweed paired with diner coffee is enough to tense up her stomach.

“Jameson.” He explains, “Blended whisky travels better.”

“I feel like you’re making that up.”

“He’s making all of it up.” Bruce mutters into his own cup.

She sips. “But I grudgingly respect your ability to pull a decent Irish Coffee out of your pocket.”

“Yeah, you’re halfway to your bartending badge.” Bruce sighs and catches the waitress, “Three waters, please.”

Natasha drinks the Irish Coffee and two of the waters, eats the eggs and hash and sausage gravy with enough hot sauce to give Tony pause, and feels miles better when she walks out of the diner, flanked by the two of them now arguing about who’s methods had accomplished the turnaround. All biochemistry aside, she let go of the rock face last night, and her safety line caught her. That’s something worth knowing.
Natasha swings the hotel door open with her hip, and the blinding sun hits hard.

Tony exits past her and melts down to a grim tension in his jaw. It’s hard not to take the solar onslaught personally when the desert’s nearly killed you. She feels the same way about winter, bad memories of brutal cold and frozen blood, numbness laced through with knifing pain. The sun stabs her sore hungover eyes, but it’s preferable.

Bruce swings his duffel crosswise on his back and strides across the parking lot like he’ll breeze right past the car and hit the highway walking.

Natasha wonders if the sere landscape feels like home to him, if his nomadic journey from South America to the Subcontinent was only from opportunity, or if he enjoys hotter climes. Pepper would know where they charter the flights for his excursions away from New York. Of course, she can also ask him directly now, with no other pretense than that she’s curious. The way Laura asks her questions; because she likes Nat and wants to know her better. That’s a fascinating thought.

“So we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Her aching eyes are why she’s decided on the spa first and then camping. “How’d we get to Santa Fe? It’s not on the itinerary, as vague as that is.”

“Yeah about that,” Tony starts the car and kicks on the blowers full blast, “we may or may not have driven through Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, or all three, before Bruce finally pointed us toward New Mexico.”

She side-eyes Bruce as he loads up the trunk. “A net of geosynchronous satellites encircles the earth, and you fall back on a guy with a compass?”

Tony’s mouth purses into a shape more suited to a bill. “Except he couldn’t find his compass.”

Bruce shoves the trunk lid down, “Someone looted my gear to go fishing.”

“I would never touch a man’s compass without consent.” Natasha suspects her playful smirk is compromised by her tense forehead and general pallor, so she teases even more, “It's a shame no one thought to float a magnetized needle.”
“Very funny,” Stark says, “and for your information, that didn’t work either.”

“Waste of time,” Bruce mutters, face turned up to bask in the sun. “Those state-shaped magnets are trash.”

“So how did you two…?” She gestures, implying, *find your asses from your elbows.*

Bruce pretends to be distracted by something on the horizon. Dozens of pairs of sunglasses between them and he’s squinting like a cowboy, hair a wind-blown mess, worn button down rolled up his tan forearms and open at the throat, oblivious to the lonesome picture he paints.

“Home turf advantage, I suspect.” Tony clears his throat and changes the subject, “Since we’re leaving the soybean steppe and driving into the godforsaken desert, can I upgrade the car now?”

She crawls over the center console to tilt the vents, aiming the feeble air conditioning at the back seat. They’d talked it over days ago. He’d offered to reimburse her for the Blue Book value, or have it trailered anywhere she chose, but she’d liked the idea of stringing him along for a while first. There’s been no evidence of surveillance for several states, but then again, you tire a big fish out by playing the line before you haul it in. “It won’t hurt to switch things up, get this car back to my contact in Chicago.”

Bruce drops into the passenger seat, “Just so long as we shift over the camping gear.” He pops the Jesus Stark figure off the dashboard and reaches back to tuck it into the snack sack behind the driver seat.

“Fantastic. So I’ll have something delivered while we’re in The Russian Steam Room.”

Tony is a connoisseur of bodywork. Natasha finds the prospect of an authentic banya in the southwestern desert unlikely, but curiously American. Whatever hybrid hydromania is in store for them, she’ll put up with hours of aimless harp music if it gets her someplace quiet and shady with a cucumber water. Maybe they’ll have mint tea? All pseudo-Slavic pretensions aside, a little steam and a lot of sweat would do her good. “Looking to fortify yourself for sleeping in the cold high desert tonight?”

“I promised bunny the venik experience.” What he pantomimes looks less like therapeutic tapping with leaves and more like self-flagellation.

“Promised?” Bruce says, “or was that threatened?”

“I’d take your snark more seriously if you hadn’t waxed poetic about that spicy mud wrap in Philly, you dirty boy.” Tony throws a grin into the backseat, “Have you ever partaken of a good schvitz and smack, Romanoff?”

She closes her eyes against the sunlight boring tunnels into her brain. The steam room, the banya, was part of a healthful upbringing, one of the ways her childhood had seemed normal up until she understood it wasn’t. A luxurious steam in the winter, the girls’ voices rebounding off the white tile. Camaraderie.

The last time, it had been silent except for the steam, the rustle of birch leaves, the slosh of ice water. The last time, Nataliya had staggered out of the winter woods half starved, not the *sole* survivor of that ruthless culling disguised as a final training exercise, but the last one still standing on her feet. The one who had risen to the top of the slaughter, having earned the privilege of healing. They had revived her in the banya, before moving on to far more experimental interventions.
That had been a very long time ago. A light touch on her cheek makes her open her eyes. Bruce has craned around between the front seats to offer the pair of sunglasses she'd stolen from Tony earlier. She slips them on.

“I’ve swung a birch broom in my day, if that’s what you mean. Gets the circulation going. Good for a cold. It was part of training, actually.”

Bruce squirms back into his seat, still turned toward her, seat belt digging into his neck. The car is ominously quiet.

“Chill guys,” Natasha runs her knuckles down his arm, and flashes a saucy smile at Tony in the rear view mirror. “This’ll be fun.”

She's with friends now. Friends who can kill her, if necessary. Friends who can maybe save her, too. It's a start.

~*~

Tony’s rented out half the spa for the afternoon, and they breeze into the steam room suite on the winds of his public-facing charm.

The aesthetic is Nordic by Southwest, rounded stucco and clean lines, curved wood and gorgeous pottery, all in a sunset palette spiked with evening blue. With her bleached hair dusky cherry at the ends, her faded jeans and sage green tank, and her lingering hangover pallor, Natasha blends in like a rattlesnake coiled around a cactus flower.

She slides the sunglasses up into her hair and returns his look, open and assessing, and he breathes out a quiet laugh at himself, thinking, *snake handler.*

~*~

The luxurious banya suite has an anteroom of cedar and sandstone, padded chaises and stacks of white towels, tilt buckets of cold water mounted on the wall, a pair of Japanese soaking tubs, and a frosted glass door to the steam room. Another nook leads to discrete showers, with hooks and benches for changing, robes and thin sheets for modesty. On a low table next to a tea set, there’s a collection of felted woolen hats.

“What’s with the elf gear,” Tony picks up a gnomish cone, “is this a short joke? I’m not wearing a winter hat in a sauna.”

“Keeps your brain cool, so you can sweat more.” She sorts through a horned helmet, a witch hat, a bicorn and a tricorn, and various felted flowers.

“Insulators work both ways; clever.” Bruce picks up a felted plant pot and describes making an evaporative cooler from two terracotta pots and some wet sand.

Tony whispers, “He was never gonna be really happy until I agreed to the camping, was he?”

“For all his expertise, he's kind of lo-fi.”

“Deconstructed.”

“Mm-hmm.”

He tries on a red hat that tapers in concentric bands.
“Suits you,” Tony nods approvingly, “very New Wave.”

She sits and unzips her boots. Tony points out a traditional bell shaped hat embroidered with the spa logo and a phrase in Russian. “With light steam,” she translates, adding, “also the title of a seventies Soviet romantic comedy.”

“The hell you say,” He looks appalled and delighted.

“People still watch it at New Years, like people here watch It’s a Wonderful Life at the holidays.” She shrugs, “The starting premise is that every city has the same streets and apartment blocks, down to the same locks on the doors, but uniformity can’t stamp out luck and passion as forces of chaos.”

Bruce looks darkly intrigued.

She gathers her hair in a loose high bun. “Fur hats and snow, and drunkenness, and lovers flirting by playing guitar and singing gloomy poetry while the other tenderly listens.” Words have power, no matter what Laura says. She shakes her head to settle herself, “It’s sweet, actually.”

Bruce runs his thumb over the embroidery, с легким паром.

After the showers she drapes a sheet around herself, tied at the shoulder toga party style, and chooses the mad top hat with a felted tag proclaiming in this style 10/6. The boys look like ketchup and mustard, Bruce in his red Devo hat and a sarong-tied sheet, Tony in a waist towel with a bright yellow daffodil blossom on his head, naked arc reactor glowing.

“Stylish,” she smirks, “The color goes with your night light.”

“He said I couldn’t pull this look off.” He jerks a thumb, “But maybe he just wants to shine, too. Now that we’ve developed the metamorphic fabric tech, I’m thinking about a spring Hulkwear collection.”

“Hulk por Homme?”

“Utilikilts.”

“He does have nice calves.”

Bruce hides his smug chagrin by inspecting the buckets and branches.

The steam room is well-appointed with bundles of oak leaves soaking in buckets of hot water. Bruce sprawls out on a lower bench, and Natasha sets herself delicately on a towel. The humidity is comforting, so different from the baking blinding brilliance outside.

Tony methodically works through a series of chest and arm stretches, grunting as his rib cage pops and clicks as the muscles warm up. He eyes her, straightening, “You’re sniffing like Bruce in freegan mode; what’s up?”

“Been a long time.” She takes another deep breath of expensive volatile oils and steam, a contrast to memories of birch and blood, strangely restorative like a makeshift hangover remedy. A year ago, a month ago...even a day ago...she’d already have a smile at the corner of her mouth to wrap around the ready words, sleight of tongue to distract and disarm. It’s not there. Anyway, it hasn’t served her well, lately, so fuck it. This presents some novel options.

Bruce doesn’t turn his head, but one eye slits open to watch her through the lashes. Maybe not so
novel, considering his ability to force an honest response from her at will.

The way Tony pries his own chest open to expose his heart like a dare.

“The last time...I had passed a very rigorous test. Deep winter, scarce provisions. What...should have been...hard choices. I prevailed over the competition. Brutally. Girls I had trained with, eaten with, slept next to.” The steam gathers, obscuring, soothing. “I was...I didn’t even know I was injured until they cleaned me up, stitched me up, I’d been so focused on the mission. On survival. It wasn’t until I was on a bench like this...alone, that it sunk in.” Shivering as the cold leached from her bones, her only company the hiss of steam and the voices of Madame outside talking to the scientists about the next phase in store for her. “Bad memories.”

“We’ve all got those,” Bruce says, shifting to close the gap, “files full.”

“A lot of them don’t make it into files.” Tony ladles the rocks for more steam and sits. Her scientists now flank her on the bench. Perhaps no less arrogant than the ones who altered her, but certainly older, wiser, doing their damnedest to be ethical, to do good. Fellow travellers.

“It’s fuel,” she says, “and a map of where I never want to go again.”

In the billowing vapor, Bruce presses a hot kiss to the point of her shoulder.

After a little longer they break to the anteroom for herbal tea, with pots of honey and raspberry jam for sweetener. An attendant offers a menu but Tony shoos her toward Bruce, and he orders for them all.

In due time they go back into the sauna. Natasha pulls a venik broom from its soaking water and waves steam down from the ceiling on them all like a consecration.

Bruce cleans his glasses with a corner of his wrap skirt. “Pepper’s latest test results look promising.”

Tony nods tightly.

She heads out, offering him privacy to speak, but they both follow like ducklings, and watch rapt as she doffs her hat and tilts a bucket of icy water down on her head. Glorious. They step under their own buckets and Bruce gestures, giving her the honors. She pulls the ropes with a wicked grin, the splashing punctuated with a yelp and a grunt.

Tony shakes water from his hair and levels a look at Bruce, “You want to have this conversation?”

Bruce wraps a towel around his shoulders, curls dripping, “I’m willing to concede that Dr. Hansen’s technology, with appropriate modifications, could be a beneficial treatment.”

Natasha pours herself more tea, doctoring it liberally with jam and stretching out on a chaise. The heat of her body is already drying her sheet toga, this oasis pressed on all sides by the desert air.

“Here’s the thing, Tony,” Bruce leans forward on his knees, fingers laced together and squirming against each other in aborted gestures. “I will not help you with this like it’s some hot rod mod in your garage.”

“That sounds less like no and more like conditions. Pepper invited Dr. Ho to consult on her treatment team last week.”

“I believe that’s to bring your cardiologist up to speed,” Natasha interjects, “in case you get any
bright ideas.”

Bruce sips tea innocently, “I didn’t rat you out.”

“Nobody had to rat you out,” she tells Tony’s sour look, “you’re lit up with bright ideas like a Christmas tree.”

They sweat again, cycling hotter, and take turns whacking each other with the oak leaf brooms. Tony’s drumming skill comes to the fore as he brandishes one in each hand, alternating light and lashing strokes, gathering clouds of steam to press into the skin. When they exit this time there’s nothing for it but to plunge into the shockingly icy tub, shouted laughter echoing off the sandstone floor as she and Tony splash each other and Bruce shakes water from his head like a dog.

The tea tray now includes a trio of vodka shots. She downs hers with a glance to Bruce and a murmured, “Medicinal.”

They pop into the steam just long enough to balance out the chill. By the time they exit the showers, squeaky clean and wrapped in fluffy robes, the food has been laid out.

Lamb chops and beef pilaf and cheese dumplings, smoked fish and stuffed cabbage and pickled veggies and salad served alongside the entrees. It’s babushka food, home cooking from generations back, meant to fuel you through strenuous growing seasons and severe winters by turns. They eat it family style, with sour cream and sauteed mushrooms and dill and gallons of black tea, while Bruce lays out his conditions for research on Extremis.

“Full scientific and ethical review, properly published, replicated--I know that no one wants to rerun studies when they could be doing something new, but you get what I’m driving at. Real science, above board. Informed consent from everyone who might possibly be exposed during your treatment, procedure, and recovery.”

“Don’t look so smug,” Natasha advises Tony, “you’ll make him regret agreeing to go along.”

He quips, “Voice of experience?”

She sips her tea instead of reading Bruce’s face as he chides, “Tony.” If he had regrets about taking any of her offers, she doubts she’d be the last to know. Like steam, his honesty is intense and purifying.

They linger over dessert crepes while a masseuse works each of them over by turns. Natasha stretches out on the table last, while Bruce compiles a list of groceries he can cook over a campfire that evening, and Tony catnaps on a chaise.

Natasha suspects Bruce’s reluctance to work on Extremis comes down to the temptation. If the technology can be controlled, if it works to rebuild Tony’s mangled chest, could it be adapted to seek out and eliminate the gamma-sink cells that trigger Bruce’s transformation? What if it doesn’t work? What if it does? He’s refrained from asking directly about her healing factor. That’s not oversight on his part, it’s self-denial out of consideration for her, in the interest of safety for everyone. Natasha understands that dread; even if she could be taken back to normalcy, it’s too late to live that kind of life.

Forward is where the second chances are, and it’s not like you can go backward in any case. Forward brought her here, heading into the woods to sleep under the stars with these fellow travellers, comrades, this nascent pack learning to run together.

~*~
Tony strolls out to take delivery of his vehicle, while Natasha sits sipping cold tea and Bruce lingers near the exit to the steam room suite, dithering.

The only stress left in his body right now is the thrum of arousal and the restraint of keeping his eyes gentlemanly in mixed company. It feels ridiculous, to keep indulging this tension between lust and self-denial. They’ve fucked for fuck’s sake, just yesterday morning.

Bruce turns at the click of her cup on the table to find she’s closed the distance. Her jeans skim every curve, her hair in waves from the steam, her skin glowing delicious. The silver charm gleams at the base of her throat, the red enamel of the little stapler like a pinprick of blood.

She looks at him like she wants to ask a question, or maybe eat him alive.

He asks, “You okay?”

Her answer is to curl her arm around his neck and fit herself against him. He cradles her face and lets himself tumble into her kiss, want sweeping over him like a flash flood. She walks him backward until the wall presses his shoulders, and she slides a thigh up his like she’s going to climb him, but instead grinds against him, tilted on one leg to angle that sensual friction to her own sweet spot.

Bruce breaks the kiss to get a better handle on the situation, reaching down between them to undo her jeans, but the denim is weird and stretchy, so he slides right in and cups her. She suckles his earlobe and he slips between her lips and does his nimble best to make her pant in his ear.

Natasha swears when she comes, trembling, and when her hands reach for his tented fly he shakes his head. “Why wolf when you can wait a little while and savor?”

“Gonna share my sleeping bag?”

“We can zip together, but we’re still sharing a campsite with an insomniac.”

She chuckles and takes his wrist, her darkened eyes pinning him as she sucks his wet fingers dry.

He draws her by the chin and kisses the sweet musk from her mouth.

Camping will be fun, but on the other side of that is a luxury suite at the Bellagio. He can bide his time if it means not having to keep an eye out for wildlife or Tony Stark.

They divvy up the shopping list and knock it out at a strip mall in Flagstaff.

Bruce knows how they shop, Natasha’s gaze sweeping with seeming boredom until it focuses like a laser, Tony zooming through aisles like a shark, hands darting for each item without slowing down, so he’s not surprised to find them already at the car when he comes out with the groceries.

Another parking lot surrounded by chain stores, hooked into an interstate, one of millions of fractal spurs in a pattern sprawling across a continent, but the sight of these two people waiting for him gives him a pleasant thrum in his chest.

*It can’t just be endorphins from the steam room, Banner,* he thinks, catching the unease between them from several paces away, *you’re in deep now.*

Tony paces impatiently with a handful of floppy plant stems. Natasha sits in the opened back hatch, watching him but not listening, running a length of ribbon through her fingers.

“See Romanoff? No trackers, no needles, no bugs. It’s mistaken identity. I got the most
nondescript crossover I could stand, so there's a million of them everywhere.” Tony flings the bundle of tied stems into one of the terracotta pots they’d bought, and greets Bruce, “Some poor bastard left a romantic gesture on the wrong car.”

Bruce stashes the groceries. The flowers are large O’Keeffe style lilies, traces of white deep in the blossom throats, the cups all parched brown and papery. The stems had been wrapped with the wide satin ribbon Natasha now plays with, pale pink sprinkled with rusty brown stains.

“Serves them right,” Bruce holds out his hand, “for not doing it in person.”

Natasha drops the ribbon in his palm and hops out of the car on her own, and that’s when he sees she’s stolen his mala, sliding loose down her wrist. She says, “I’m sure they’ll get around to that eventually.”

It sounds less like a promise and more like a threat. Bruce disposes of the trash, and they hit the road, racing the sun to get to their campsite on the Canyon rim while there’s still light.

~*~

Natasha starts a fire.

Tony dumps out the tent and its hardware, stares at the scattered pile for half a minute, and then puts it up with the ease of humming a jingle. Bruce makes his evaporative cooler from the plant pots and wet sand, and packs it with cans of soda to chill. He pokes at the red hot coals in the concrete pit, and starts cooking.

Baked potatoes, halved peppers cupping sunny side up eggs, and a skirt steak he rests longer than he grills, and then slices thin.

Bruce feeds them and Tony gives them shelter.

Natasha writes communiques to Maria.

Rotted lilies, tied with pointe shoe ribbon, left under the windshield wiper. No need for a note, the whole thing was a message. A hand reaching out from her past to snag her, like the hand that copied out those sonnets she found in Norfolk.

Writing the brief for Maria is a calming exercise in emotional distancing, each tersely coded phrase a piece of bloody gravel scrubbed free from her skin. These are symbolic of implanted triggers and original Leviathan and Red Room program materials. Operative(s) placing item has access to deep off-record resources, and continues to make forays. Asset and technology procurement remains an ongoing threat to multiple parties.

Multiple parties meaning not just her, but especially Barnes if anyone can find him. The tech that Agent Morse had busted might be a cheap ineffective knockoff, but if there’s another chair somewhere like the one Steve had helped her destroy...that’s bad news for anyone with power or skill that could be weaponized.

I still haven't gotten a damn postcard, Maria replies. I have people looking into it, cui bono and all that. It takes time to follow the money. Send me anything more you find. Be safe and chill out. Drink Stark's scotch. Have the other one teach you to meditate or something.

Or something.

~*~
The horizon is gilded like a page. Around them on the ground it gets darker, but the light in the sky transforms from the glowing smear of sunset to a glittering black panorama, the Milky Way a rising vapor made from distant stars.

Tony breaks the silence, gesturing above them, “There can be such a thing as too much perspective.”

Bruce gives it an appraising look, but he came of age under these skies, and he finds them far less mysterious and confounding than he does humanity. “Nah, the sky is the sky, not perspective. That’s a crowded city. All those people, each the center of their own world, and I’m just moving through.”

“All those other stories, that you can slip into and out of.” Natasha swirls the dregs of her root beer. She’d called cities a cure for physical loneliness, the press of humanity close enough to an embrace, but now he’s watched her slip into people’s stories, and he’d figured those connections fed something deeper in her. Maybe it doesn’t count unless someone manages to slip into her story as well.

Maybe that’s why she opened up in the spa, not just to be understood, but to make them real for herself in turn. He finds he wants to push into that mutual understanding. “Once you learn how a particular city works, what the rules are for keeping your elbows tucked in...it’s comforting to become a tiny part of that. For a time.”

“The longer you stay, though, the harder it becomes to drift out.” Her voice is dreamy, a contrast to the tension of Tony holding so still. “The more people you might hurt.”

Bruce sets his empty can down so he doesn't crush it in his hand.

“Anything you pretend deep enough, involve enough other people in to reinforce it, can become real.” Natasha straightens, “You’ll become who you choose to be, what you practice. Stagecraft becomes magic. Discipline becomes character.”

“You reinvent yourself, just like that?” Tony snaps his fingers, as if he hadn’t done the very same thing, wandered in the desert and come back changed.

“Don’t make it sound easy.” Her eyes spark in the firelight. “There’s a difference between committing to a role and deciding for yourself who the hell you really are. What you would choose to die for.”

“What you might have to live for.” Bruce adds, thinking about his inability to veto his own existence, and coming to grips with carrying on, finding meaning in it. Choosing the risk of staying in one place long enough to make real friends again, choosing to reach a hand out to the other guy as well.

Her “yes,” sounds like a prayer.

~*~

Natasha understands moving forward, playing a bad hand as best she can, choosing to use her talents in the service of protection, being willing to die for something important. Living, though. What has she been living for? To balance out her sins, to hold the line between the innocent and danger.

To carry out her own brand of martyrdom just as contrived and constricted as Bruce’s when she found him in Kolkata, doling out asthma inhalers and anti-malarials on faked credentials. Good
work, but far from the best work he could be doing, and not a well-rounded life. Nothing like what she’s been pushing Steve toward for the last year or two: friends, real connections.

“I’ve thought a lot about airspace, before, low earth orbit...but never actual space,” Tony gestures up at the vault of heaven, his personal hell. “It’s just a skin of atmosphere up there, nothing at all between us and anything that wants to come at us. We’re more protected around this damned campfire from animals.”

“I never thought the universe cared whether we lived or died.” Bruce shifts, like he hasn’t done the reading for class. “I’m still not used to the idea of big things out there taking an interest, willing to destroy a world to prove a point.”

Tony says, “Too close to home.”

Bruce’s laugh is bitter. “In more ways than one.”

The fire crackles and coyotes howl in the distance. Everyone here has wrestled with becoming their own nightmare, and Natasha’s experience reaches further back than either of the other two. She knows that understanding comes from the inside out, the same as transformation. Once you have the pieces, you can rearrange them as you see fit.


Bruce’s dark eyes reflect the amber flicker. It’s a mere whisper when he says with half a smile, “Monkey wrench.”

“Well fuck,” Tony says, “I can't believe you found her nickname first, bunny.”

~*~

Tony shakes them awake before four in the morning. The altitude and the night wind presage the coming fall, and they layer hoodies and jackets against the chill. He breaks camp with Tony while Natasha brews coffee. There are always places to get coffee on the road, if you aren’t picky, but she goes through the steps like a ritual, like it’s important to take the heat of the campfire with them even after the pit is soaked and stirred into safety.

Natasha inspects the car while they pack it, the promise of a clean getaway after their little side trip to watch the sunrise. They walk in the dark to the shuttle stop.

The bus drops them off at the rim of the Canyon. A hushed gaggle of visitors congregate in the viewing area to the left, headlamps bouncing like spotlights as they set up camera tripods.

He follows Tony and Natasha to the right instead, hiking down the switchbacks of South Kaibab Trail by the muted blue phone glow. It’s not long before they’re alone at the end of the trail, stuck out like a thumb into the velvet black of the Canyon. The emptiness around them is palpable, the dark holding an actual void. It’s the illusion of the road ceasing to exist beyond the headlights, made real before them.

They crowd against the chill, shoulder to shoulder. Tony stashes his phone and mutters, “It’s darker than goddamned space.”

Natasha intones into the dark with cheeky sarcasm, “Ooh Ahh Point,” but her caramel voice sends shivers through Bruce, lush thoughts following. He reaches, brushes against her hand, but Tony jostles her other side and she turns, and unscrews the thermos. Bruce doesn’t want any coffee, but
Tony was right that Catholic habits die hard, so he takes a sip in turn.

Night drains out of the bowl of the earth, light painting down the facets of the Canyon. The silence feels sacred, as if the dawn choruses they’d heard elsewhere would be too riotous to accompany the immensity revealing itself before and below them.

Tony exhales. When Bruce glances over, he mutters reverently, “That’s a hole alright.”

Bruce has spent decades studying the power of the cosmos, so you would think a hole in the ground wouldn’t faze him, but the opposite is true. If anything, knowing the scale and forces involved makes him even more vulnerable to the awesome power of nature. There’s a reason it’s his life’s work despite the danger and destruction. His reply is simply, “Stone and water. And time.”

A sob startles them both.

They look up the trail to the rest of the tourists, but it’s Natasha. She clenches her hand around her mouth to muffle a broken laugh, shaking her head, “Who knew it was so damned big?”

For long moments, Bruce can’t even move.

“Well,” Tony finally says, “the Canyon gets to a lot of people.”

“No,” Natasha turns to them, eyes brimming wet in the burgeoning light. “This whole country. This whole planet.” She flings her arm out, the most heedless gesture Bruce has ever seen her make. The wind is kicking up. She faces to the sun, sobbing and laughing, “So big and so small at the same time.”

He feels like maybe he’d get his equilibrium back if he moved a few yards to the side. If he stepped out into open air and dashed himself on the Canyon floor.

Tony reaches over to rub across her shoulder blades, slow and firm. That makes her squeeze her eyes shut, so he chides, “Fuck you too, Romanoff,” and pulls her into a rocking hug.

Bruce opens the thermos and pours coffee down his throat.

When she let herself have a good cry, Betty would sob like a heartbroken toddler, and that made it doable for Bruce. She cried like asking a question. He could answer it with comfort and kleenex and a cold rag for her swollen eyes.

At the Canyon, Natasha is all sharp spasms of breath and strangled sounds of anguish. Overwhelmed and rusted shut. The way you cry when you can’t stop vomiting. When you can’t risk waking someone up. It spears him in place with misery, his heart pounding, all the earlier erotic musings washed away in memories of fear and helpless anger.

Tony pats her back, rocking from foot to foot, murmuring stupidities like, “mother nature, what a diva, am I right?” and “that’s it, killer, glasnost the fuck out of it.” She rubs her thumb up and down the side of his neck like working a worry bead.

He attempts a joke, “Now you’ve made Tony’s face leak,” but it falls unheard.

Eventually she blows out a quavering breath and swears, and Tony chuckles. They let go, ruefully wiping their faces on their sleeves, but they still move as if connected. It’s a dance of fondness, swiftly following distress, and it spikes suspicion through Bruce like a flash of lightning.
Back up the trail he sits down on the roadbed to wait for the shuttle. He can’t read Tony’s look as the man digs through his jacket pockets to offer her honeyed cashews. The asphalt is warming up under the rising sun, but still cold under his ass.

The shuttle bus comes, and he files onto it behind them, a dead stick floating on a river of chatter as the other tourists replay the sunrise and enthuse about the views.

An older woman reaches over the bench to squeeze Natasha's shoulder, as if uncontrolled crying is any kind of normal response to landscape, no matter how sublime.

“It’s never about the last straw,” the woman offers her more tissues, “but that was a pretty amazing last straw, wasn’t it?”

Natasha blows her nose with a few short unladylike honks, and it’s ridiculous isn’t it? The way she can bend the people around her. Her laugh is thick with tears and snot, “Go out with a bang.”

The woman looks at the solicitous Tony and the taciturn Bruce, pats Natasha with sorrowful sympathy, then sits back in her own seat.

Tony whispers, “That lady probably assumes you’re dying.”

She honks once more, and coughs her voice clear. “Well aren’t we all?”

They stumble off the shuttle like evacuated trauma victims. But that’s her shtick, isn’t it. The show of vulnerability that lets you make all the wrong assumptions about her, and about who's really in control. She’s in a precarious situation, does Bruce really begrudge her doing everything in her power to secure a measure of security?

To be fair, Tony’s recruiting her just as hard. Hell, Pepper had sent her out here in the first place. You could count on one hand the number of people Potts trusted with Tony, and still have your choice of digits free to pick your nose.

Bruce might be on that short list, but one could cast his friendship with Tony in a mercenary light as well. His work during the invasion, and his subsequent SI salary and researcher title have greatly improved his safety and quality of life, and have opened up stunning opportunities for doing good work, even to the point where he’s considering taking the other guy into the field on purpose.

So what if she’s solidifying her position in the new power structure by ingratiating herself by every method at hand?

Then again, interested parties had been trying to kill Agent Romanoff for decades. The way her healing factor shrugged off that shoulder injury, the deep-grained habits of surveillance...is she really in as much danger as she’s insinuated? There’s no way to know for sure, is there?

~*~

Natasha takes the wheel on the drive to Las Vegas, sucking down the bucket of half ginger ale and half soda water Tony had bought her. He’d also palmed her a packet of aspirin along with the keys, sly like tipping a valet. She wonders if Potts had trained him on this protocol, or if he’d extrapolated from the moonshine incident. If so, he most certainly remembers more than she does.

The lack of cigarettes, and the specificity of the drink, makes her think it’s the former. She’d forgotten that crying is a lot more dehydrating when it’s for real.

Kind of like sex, crying wrings you out in a good way if you let it, but when you’re out of practice
it makes the strangest places sore. Even after the aspirin kicks in, she still feels a little tender.

Natasha had been taught that she’d been claimed by her country, that it was her family now, her pride, her reason for existing. Za Rodina; for the Homeland. It’s importance took up space in her head, even after it was gone. By the time she became an American in earnest, she didn’t need or want to belong to anything as hollow and ephemeral as a nation. How twentieth century. Please. Fool me once.

Leave it to this stupid country to take her at her word, and instead demonstrate its complexity and its rejection of definitions by presenting instead a hollow space. A gouge through time, eons of geology laid out like an open book, sitting there oblivious to the hundreds of millions of people scattered from sea to shining sea, with their dogs and their hustles and their lunch specials, their generations of trauma and their drooling babies and their sulky teenagers making their own lives in hopeful defiance.

Their festered bouquets, and their silly nicknames, and their falling apart at the drop of a canyon. America doesn’t care about you, either. Isn’t that fucking refreshing? So behold this gorgeous sunrise, have a good cry on your friend’s shoulder, and get back to work.

Tonight is Las Vegas, tomorrow the ribbon cutting at a community college in Long Beach. Stark’s science, tech, engineering, art, and math learning lab, the first of dozens he has planned across the country. This century’s version of Carnegie libraries. A project so personal he’s not only showing up for the ceremony, he’s written his own little speech to give.

She’s not the only one making plans. Putting her resources where her mouth is. Thinking about their legacy.

~*~

“What say you, Chatty Cathy?”

Tony’s taken them back through Flagstaff, Vegas still hours away, and when Bruce focuses back on the conversation it feels like they were talking about lunch. “Food sounds good.”

“Sheer genius,” Tony rolls his eyes, “grocery store for snacks, then. Nat can keep the wheel, and I’ll get a table somewhere good for tonight.”

They split up at first, but Natasha meets him at the confluence of produce and prepared foods. “You look like you’re about to start a fight with that California roll.”

“What, like aiming it at a hipster? Or arguing with it directly?”

“Even money.” She idly peels a tiny leaf from a brussels sprout in her hand and nibbles it raw. “You’ve been in a funk since dawn.”

Words queue up behind his teeth, but there’s no good way to ask someone if they’re for real, or what they could possibly want from you really. She isn’t wearing any makeup, and her eyelids are kind of puffy and pink. Bruce says, “Just thinking.”

Her smirk leans to one side, “I got that much from the smoke coming out of your ears.”

He puts the packet of sushi down as an indignant squawk pierces the produce area. “ Fucking hell,” Tony strides over, voice rising, “I’ve taken you to Nobu!”
Natasha laughs when Bruce picks it back up.

It’s not bad, Tony’s performance of sheer outrage a piquant sauce.

~*~

Tony is struck by how quiet the car is.

Romanoff’s clearly delicate, Bruce looks like he got a stick jammed up his ass while he slept on the ground, and Tony has taken a half dose of his meds because camping doesn’t agree with him either, but he wants to get some work done to take his mind off the desert zipping by outside the windows.

Pepper’s being cleared by the medical team, but is adamant about not being seen in her quarantine chamber, or even New York. She texts him arrangements for a meetup in Malibu, after the lab dedication in Long Beach. He tells her to bring along the HOTT glove’s home component for an upgrade. She refuses that request as well.

Tony hits the next item on the list, bridging JARVIS into the SUV’s computer and tapping into the sensor net he’d rigged up to record how Nat drives.

When she’s deep in thought, Romanoff moves through traffic like everyone else is standing still. That’s vital information to have for the navigation interface.

She’s got mosquito bites on her neck and shoulders, and the hickey that had been behind her ear, where she couldn’t see it in the mirror to cover it, has now faded completely.
Road Hypnosis

Chapter Notes

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Roman - Mashrou’ Leila
Hotel Anywhere - Cold War Kids
Dilaudid (Marrtronix Version) - The Mountain Goats
For My Next Trick I'll Need a Volunteer - Warren Zevon
I Am Disappeared (Acoustic) - Frank Turner
~*~

Road Hypnosis

There’s a lot of give in the joins of the suit, and Tony tailors and taps out specs all the way back through Flagstaff, then he turns to the training interface. He knows he’s overdoing it, but it beats the subdued hush of the car barreling through the desert.

Natasha listens to soulful Lebanese indie rock at a level Tony finds almost subliminal, and she doesn’t sing along like Bruce with his hipster Bengali top forty.

An hour in he asks, “You even speak Arabic?”

“Barton does, I don’t,” she says, passing an RV like it’s standing still, like she’s flying low across the landscape into the blue horizon. “Weirdly, that’s why it’s restful.”

Bruce kills the time into Vegas lying in the backseat reading, knuckle knocking against the screen to turn the page, his morning funk untempered by the open stretch of the desert, or the cool bright artifice of the oasis. Tony wants to blame dyspepsia from grocery store sushi, even though he knows Bruce is impervious to such onslaughts. He suggests a nice lunch when they hit their suites at the Bellagio.

Natasha shakes her head as she ditches her boots and scrolls through her phone, and Bruce heads down to the gym. Tony follows leisurely.

He has no intention of working out himself, the hitch in his chest from sleeping on the ground now pinching and clicking by turns. That’s what he gets for being chivalrous and letting Nat choose the spa before camping instead of after. He gets a smoothie, which is too sweet, and finds Bruce in the studio off the main gym.

There’s only two people, an older Asian lady going to town with a kettlebell like she's spring-loaded, and Bruce. He’s bent like an A-frame, so Tony approaches from the side where he can be seen, pulling down a mat and carefully stretching his back. Bruce props his feet on the wall behind him, and then reaches one leg up to the ceiling, splayed fingers blanched with tension as he fights for balance. Clearly Romanoff is upping his handstand game.

He works through a progression of poses, but it’s not the sleepy time routine that ends with him playing dead on the floor. This one is full of inversions and torsion and isometric tension, the yoga
equivalent of taking it out on the heavy bag. His pensive mood infects Tony, and without a project to distract him, he starts working on the situation at hand.

If he just starts talking, Bruce will listen, but he won’t engage. The man has a lot of momentum, especially when he’s ruminating. Tony needs to warm him up, draw him out.

When Tony’s brain goes faster than itself it gives him schematics, visual metaphors -- maybe that’s why Natasha tells him stories instead of telling him off, giving him pictures to think about. Regardless of technique, he’s got a realization on the tip of his tongue, and he’s accustomed to the luxury of brainstorming with Bruce. “I’d say penny for your thoughts, but I don’t carry cash. And don’t deny it; something’s up, you stink of brooding.”

He plants his feet back on the wall, “I’m not brooding.”

“That frown is literally upside down and I still don’t believe you. But you don’t need to share, that’s fine, I can share instead.” Tony gives the kettlebell lady a thumbs up as she leaves, then stops pretending to stretch and sits down on the mat. “You know what I think about?”

“Sandwiches? Metallurgy? Sex?” Bruce bites the words out, consternated, “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“All of the above actually, at some point or another in the day. But I’m talking about specifically when I train.”

Bruce drops his feet back to the floor and blows out a breath. “Can’t even begin to guess.”

“I think about Harry Houdini.” Tony returns his blank stare for a long moment.

“Okay, fine.” He rolls back to sit on his heels, “I’ll bite.”

Tony hands him a foam roller, his own shoulder blades aching in sympathy. “Houdini boxed, and he dabbled in physical culture, that old-timey strongman stuff. It helped him keep limber and strong for his stage work—he could take a punch to the gut and you’d break your hand before breaking his smile. But to pull that off you need to train, and you need to brace for the blow, engage the muscles.”

“That’s why it always hurts to the face; not enough muscle to absorb the hit.”

“And a sucker punch is gonna hurt no matter what.” Tony shifts closer, “A sucker punch when you’re already delirious from appendicitis? And then you lurch around on stage repeatedly passing out, because the show must go on? Well, you die in your early fifties.”

“You think about that when you train? The death of Harry Houdini.”

“Yeah,” Tony needs him to follow where he’s going with this, even though he’s still brainstorming his way to the point, “especially when there’s pain, which is, you know, the status quo these days. How far do I push to build as much strength as I can, versus what’s just gonna hurt me? I think about how even Harry Houdini had no fucking clue. None of us do, not even Romanoff.”

Bruce is the only person he’s ever met who can convey sarcasm with only a blink. “Have JARVIS summarize a PubMed search on the dose-response curve for exercise. Hire a fitness coach. Don’t get sucker punched.”

“Thing is,” Tony points his forefinger upward, and then taps Bruce’s chest with it, like chiming a bell, “everyone gets sucker punched some time.”
“I know a guy in Rio who’ll help you train for that. Very reasonable rates.”

Tony counters, “I know a gal upstairs who’ll do it for the kicks.”

“You think I’ve been sucker punched?” Bruce’s smirk is sly, and sad. “Or was it you?”

Tony turns to look at him sideways, with squinted eyes. That’s the problem with spit-balling out loud, his mouth is not safety rated. Romanoff undoubtedly practices her parables just like everything else, deadly aim without breaking a sweat. Nothing like the sopping mess she’d become that morning, ambushed and overwhelmed like Pepper losing it on a rooftop at the last fucking straw.

“No…I was thinking she might be Houdini.”

He doesn’t clock Bruce’s reaction to this, because Pepper calls to tell him she’s being cleared out of quarantine bright and early tomorrow morning. He’s giddy with the idea of a dinner double-date.

~*~

Natasha sweeps the room for devices, and dials Maria back. She cracks open a mineral water and pads barefoot to the smoked windows of the suite, digging her toes into the cool carpet as the call connects.

“First thing’s first: I’m not kidding about the postcard.”

“I dunno,” Natasha has a stack of them in her bag, but hasn’t been able to make herself drop barefaced location flags into the US mail, “I can’t think of anything to say that isn't cliché.”

“Some clichés exist for a reason, get over yourself, it's a fucking postcard.”

She laughs, “And secondly?”

“There’s a rumor of a demo planned soon on the left coast,” Maria says, “tech and weapons sales, an auction to interested parties.”

“HYDRA cells?”

”Natch. Whatever’s on sale, it’s chumming the water for all the big hungry fish. We intercepted four sealed bids, tracked a couple back through financial sources, and we’re obtaining warrants. The other two we’re looking to infiltrate on an org level to kill the roots.”

“So, have I cooled down enough now to work with,” she asks, “or have circumstances made you less fussy?”

Maria purrs, “Once you drop your charges off in Malibu, do you want to go hunting?”

“Since I’m in the neighborhood.” The placid fountain pool stirs to life, to the sound of muted trumpets. “If you want to pass along any info, I could check out the seller.”

“I’ll send a dossier by courier, once I actually have intel to give you.”

“Any development on my secret admirer?”

“Romanoff, if you can’t handle your own love life, I sure as hell can’t help you,” Maria snarks. “Seriously though, I’ve got bupkis. I was down to looking up the language of flowers on wikipedia.”
“Lilies signify humility, purity, the restoration of the soul after death.”

"Second and thirtieth anniversaries, Easter. But there’s no trace of any the material you outlined in the databases, the mirror sites, or the physical files you’d secured before you went on vacation with the geek squad.”

Maria wraps up the call, but follows up with a text: Keep on your toes, mon petit chou, I’ll be in touch.

She texts back a thumbs up, a monkey face, and a wrench, tosses the phone on a chair cushion, and takes in the echoing show tune as the fountains spray in choreographed bursts. Maria’s command style is to cajole and challenge, to bolster an agent’s confidence by playing things light. I broke cover because this stupid helmet’s bugging me, not because you’re going into shock from a rifle round through the shoulder. Listen to me remix your trigger content like an in-joke: on your toes, my little cabbage. Very funny, Maria.

Natasha smiles, appreciating the intent behind it. In the meantime, she might as well enjoy the luxury suite, and the geek squad.

She’s drawing a bath in the whirlpool tub to ease her mosquito bites, thinking about a roll with Banner on soft sheets and maybe a nap before a fancy dinner on Stark’s tab. Then see if Bruce is good for another round. Why wolf when you can savor, he’d said, when she was still coming down from the quickie he’d given her at the spa. That’s what she gets for being turned on by self-control, by challenge and surprise. Since then she’s been savoring the thrum of his voice and the way his eyes had gone hot and dark as she’d sucked his fingers like a promise.

Her phone buzzes. Not the thrill she was contemplating. She swipes open the screen, expecting details on dinner tonight.

Steve cuts straight to, “I need your expertise.”

Even in a fluffy bathrobe she balances her weight into a fighting stance as she answers, “Go ahead.”

“If I send you photos, will you delete them after you’ve taken a look?”

“You have my word.” The real trick of Steve Rogers is that for years now she’s been able to look at him and also see the runty punk inside, agitating against every injustice so he could go out swinging for a cause instead of sputtering out from failing lungs or heart...and she still can’t help wanting to join his fight. She gives him a disposable email address as she shuts the taps.

She brings the photos up on her tablet. Close-ups of a pocket notebook, held open in Sam’s hands. It’s well-thumbed but neat, bookmarked with brunet hair elastics. The pages are covered in cheap ballpoint, black and flashes of red.

One page is a careful inventory of isolated phrases like smell of shoe polish and newspaper ink and slept on fire escape in August. Another is devoted to a mix of English and Russian words for weapons and tactical gear, and she can see immediately that they’re grouped on the page in the rough position where one would likely keep them on one’s body (the word нож flecks the page like polka dots, because you can stash a knife almost anywhere). Gun is always in English, and always scribbled out with red ink.

“Where did you find this?”

“Tracked down a room he rented in Zagreb.” His throat and jaw audibly flex, straining out the
emotion so he can report. “He’d been there long enough to--the word for it now is freecycle?--some furniture. Milk in the fridge was still good. Aside from clothes, this was the only personal item we found.”

Memories and nightmares pulled out like shrapnel, like gravel from a wound. Sterilized into inventories, and laid out into diagrams. Another Red Room runaway reworking their mind out on paper. The girls had been closely monitored, forbidden from keeping anything like a diary, but Barnes had been a marksman and a sniper, he was accustomed to training with a data book to dial in his accuracy, used to noting conditions and writing field reports.

Of course it would make sense to analyze his own mind like learning an unfamiliar weapon. She’d done the same thing, after all.

“Why does he keep running, Nat?”

“Isolation. Analysis.” She zooms and magnifies pieces of the images. “Quarantine.” There are ominous shapes around the borders of one page that she hopes he hasn’t identified as the vault machinery from the viewpoint of the chair. It’s a vain hope, given Roger’s ability to visualize. “I’d say it’s because he doesn’t feel safe.”

“I’d do whatever it takes to keep him safe.”

“He probably suspects as much. And maybe he'll let you, one day, when he feels safe for you to be around.”

“That’s not the answer I wanted.”

“Bet it’s the answer Sam already gave you.” Natasha deletes the images, and runs a utility to scrub the traces from the tablet. Gunshot wounds aside, she can’t bear to look at the man’s injuries laid bare. She can barely stand to look at her own.

“Sam thinks it might be a good sign.”

“If it's any consolation, I agree that he left that book for you to find. There's no way his tradecraft is this shitty on accident. And if, for whatever reason, it is...” she slides the tablet away from her, and doesn’t elaborate on scenarios where Barnes would be decompensating so badly. The less said about that, the better. “If he was that scattered, you’d have caught him.”

~*~

Bruce keys into the room to find Nat watching the fountains in a bathrobe.

She appears still and vulnerable, framed by thousands of hyperactive jets and lights. At the window he can hear the muted roar of the water and the brassy trumpets as they fail to convey anything meaningful to the tune of All That Jazz.

“I liked Niagara’s slow-mo show better.” The morphing washes of color at the falls were peaceful, an adornment of natural beauty. “This is firehoses trying to make jazz hands.”

Her chuckle is goofy, irreverant like a fondling hand. “Computers can’t dance.”

“Presumably there’s a person programming it.”

“Evidently they can’t dance, either.” She shrugs, turns away from the window. “The Canyon’s a hard act to follow in any case.”
His own laugh feels downright caustic. “I guess we’ll see.”

“Meaning?”

“No, it’s...” he shakes his head, forcing the unease down, “it’s fine.”

Natasha slides her hand up under his t-shirt, skimming his belly, fingers tangling in his chest hair. He pulls the tie free on her bathrobe, and lets her strip him as they kiss, soft and slow, a balm on his cagey nerves.

Touching her is a luxury that puts this whole city to shame.

They walk to her bag on the table, and he nibbles her neck as she unzips it. She bares her shoulders, the robe falling to the floor. There’s a spot behind her ear that makes her throw her head back and shudder, but the goose bumps down her arms and the flush on her chest are more satisfying testaments that his effect on her is mutual. She selects a condom packet and gracefully turns and sinks, taking him in hand.

She’s naked on her knees with hungry reverence, but she is in complete control, nuzzling her cheek along his cock as her fingers skate along the shape of him, tickling his balls and dragging across his thighs and belly. She devours him languidly with her gaze as she tears the foil packet, revealing a purple prophylactic with a scent of candy.

“Is that grape?”

Natasha smirks and slips her tongue into the reservoir tip.

“Show off.”

Eyebrows dancing, she applies the latex with her lips and a happy hum.

Bruce widens his stance to steady himself. Being blown has always built slow for him, exactly because it requires him to relinquish control and let his partner please him. To just take it without giving. But there’s such joy in the way she’s handling him, like he’s an instrument she’s eager to play. Her chin is wet, her green eyes glistening and dark.

She slips a hand down to stroke herself in tandem, and oh, that is unfair, the way her eyes flutter shut, and the breath through her nose hitches with amplified pleasure.

He pets a thumb along her cheek, fingers riding her open jaw as she takes fully half of him, lips flush to her twisting fist, riding the intensity as she drives herself closer. The head of him just fits between the arch of her teeth, her tongue surging against the sweet spot underneath. She moans, gutteral, and the vibration makes him want to thrust, to break the intimate sensuality into raw physical connection. He’d expected the condom to take the edge off but the heat transfer is so close to bare, would he even notice if the latex gave way?

Bruce is hit with the intrusive thought of coming down her throat, hot and nasty, and with that image he’s a lot closer to the edge. It’s only calculating the unnecessary rad dose per milliliter of ejaculate that sobers him. Radiation hot, morally nasty.

He threads fingers through her hair and eases her off, coaxes her to her feet. Her chest is flushed like heat rash, like radiation burn, and he thinks about her healing factor, living proof that what he was trying to create is possible despite his spectacular failures, a show of vulnerability belying her true resilience.
Natasha drags him into a kiss, deep and slow and dirty. He slides a hand down and they finger her together, so lush everywhere he can touch, “You’re so wet already…”

She chuckles, breathless, “Came while I was sucking you.”

“Fuck, oh,” he moans. “Put your hands on the window.”

She grips the picture window frame and props a leg on the marble sill. He runs his hands down the muscles of her back, her flaring hips, and then he lines up and pushes into her, until her ass is nestled against his groin.

She squeezes around him, urging him to fuck her with hungry sounds in her throat, but he braces a forearm up between her tits and bows her backward until he can see their reflection in the glass. Her plump lips are wrapped around his cock, her clit a rosy pink pearl against his shaft, and he strokes them as he fucks into her slow and hard.

It’s beautiful and crude, railing her against the picture window as she clutches at his head to jam his mouth high on her neck to gnaw behind her ear, giving up on her balance as she gasps, her breasts pressed to the squeaking glass as they thrust together.

He bends her more so her tits jostle freely, taking part of her weight and notching his own pleasure even tighter, strumming her clit as she clenches.

It’s too much, the way she seizes in his arms and pounds back against him, the yearning sounds of her pleasure crescendoing and taking him with her over the edge.

Knees shaking, Bruce withdraws and ties off the condom. Natasha pulls him down with her onto a nearby couch with a hiccuping laugh, and that’s when he sees the fucking fountains spurring again down below. His hair is sopping with sweat, but she pets through it as they come down.

She’s amazing. His admiration of her increases, even as it reinforces the creeping suspicion that he’s being played.

~*~

Between the morning spent driving and the knee trembler, Natasha is looking forward to a self-indulgent soak before dinner, but Bruce is the one who disentangles himself first. He draws back, head propped on one hand, the other in a fist pressed into the cushion between them. His expression reminds her of cold undertow.

Whatever he’s been chewing over since this morning, she thinks, here it comes. “Let’s hear it.”

“You really are incredible.”

She can taste the cynical admiration, the suspicion, bitterness chasing away the afterglow. She swallows like stretching a sore muscle. “How so, Banner?”

“Consolidating resources. Climbing to higher ground.” He gives a shard of a smile. “Persuasion.”

Natasha takes a deep breath. It’s her own fault, really, for letting her guard down. She’d just been thinking that she enjoyed his ability to challenge her, to surprise her.

He’s watching her, wary. She analyzes the situation, discarding several tactical responses. He knows he’s jabbed her, and it’s not that he doesn’t care, but maybe it’s to prove to himself that he doesn’t, or that she can take it.
“You think I’m playing you. Playing Stark, and Potts, to some end.”

Bruce’s chin firms, “Tell me I’m wrong.”

What could she possibly say? He isn't wrong that she's forming alliances, though he’s dead wrong about how and why. In this very moment of accusation and held breath it’s too late for explanations and discussion, of how she’s been testing the hypothesis of miscellaneous (possible friend), how she’s been lifting her vision beyond restitution, to build a community, and a legacy.

Natasha makes herself stop analyzing.

She has no mission objective to steer toward except the most frightening: to keep looking into her own heart. To find the ember of disquiet and to blow on it gently, to coax it into flame and let it destroy and remake.

She leans over to place a chaste kiss on his lips, letting hurt flare into a hot coal of resentment. He lets her, and she doesn’t know if he keeps his eyes open. Natasha doesn’t.

She rises with a pivot on the ball of her foot, heading to her bag in one smooth motion. Within minutes she showers, arms, dresses, zips up her bag and her boots, muscle memory honed from decades of swift changes and nimble starts. Bruce is still naked on the sofa when she exits the bathroom, his mouth and forehead crumpled with tension and oddly unreadable. Well, then. She’s played this scenario out a few times now, each time ever more sincere on her part, so let’s see if he’s just like the rest, or if he has any more surprises up his sleeve.

“You know,” she tells him at the door, with complete honesty, “this was lovely, while it lasted.” She wings her keycard to bounce off his chest.

“Where are you going?”

She answers over her shoulder as the door closes behind her, “Deal’s off.”

~*~

Leaving...Bruce has always been the one who does the leaving.

It has meaning, it has purpose. It was what his mother couldn't accomplish, though she tried. It's how he knows, that for all the destruction he's responsible for from the other guy, he’s not as vicious as his father. Leaving means embracing personal failure for the greater good. It's painful sacrifice, and protecting the vulnerable. It's better than staying and hurting someone you love.

Bruce hasn’t ever been left before. It also sucks, he finds.

He should know by now there are real risks to calling her bluff. And yet, the last thing he expected was for Natasha to up and leave. He’d been braced for her to laugh it off, deflect, argue, evade. It doesn’t make sense for her to have left, does it?

Banner, he scolds himself, she walked out on a Senate Select Committee, daring them to hold her in contempt. If she ain’t bluffing, she certainly won’t take shit from you.

~*~

Natasha had hidden away her last bruised heart above two flights of metal gantry stairs, tending her wounds in a high dark corner like a barn cat, distracting herself with plans to take down SHIELD.
Nick had climbed those stairs with the same resolute will that he’d used to cross the valley of the shadow of death. She’d given him a reassuring smile, *no harm no foul*, but he’d pushed for truth between them, made her understand why he’d shut her out. Made her say out loud that it had still hurt.

The admission had been humiliating. Since then...she's begun to see it differently. She understands now that Nick needed to apologize, needed to insist that she give her own heart the dignity of acknowledgement. You can ignore your feelings to survive, but that doesn’t make them a pointless self-indulgent hobby. Ignore them too long and you end up flailing about like an asshole, trying to deflect and self-soothe, breaking down at the last straw. Lashing out in fear.

She’d been right that Bruce was a hider, the kind of scared kid who watched from the shadows and struck when they saw an opening. When she'd lost her grip at the Canyon, he’d been frozen, recoiling from her outburst. Now he’s trying to prove she can’t be hurt after all.

That she really is in control. That they aren’t all just making it up as they go along.

She keeps running into this brick wall of her own rep, her history tripping her up yet again. Anger and shame, and a ground glass sprinkle of disappointment that this *one man* who’s been *so good* at calling her bluffs, in the end, still doesn’t really see her. She’s spent her life looking easily through everyone else’s masks without realizing it was a superpower; at some point she should finally fucking learn to pull her own mask off, if she ever wants to be seen as herself.

A few hectic blocks from the hotel Natasha finds a diner. It’s a forties pastiche, formica tables with a pattern of streamlined silver triangles, and naugahyde booths the color of cherry pie, crust and filling. She takes a corner booth.

Like everything in Vegas, it’s designed to look like a movie set and be easy to clean. Pretty and unmarred for the enjoyment of guests, the appearance kept up by constant renovation and a discreet phalanx of janitors and service staff. Just like there’s no hero, no elite team, no lone wolf without support, resources to heal, a place to rest.

Her duffel is a dense weight in the booth next to her. She should figure out her next move at some point, but she’s unsettled and shaky. She orders coffee, and asks the waitress what’s good. She doesn’t parse the answer, just nods with a smile and says, “The second one.” It’s not like she’s going to eat it.

Loss feels like being poisoned. That’s why we fear it in the first place. Broken glass cuts deeper than a knife. She pulls out the stack of postcards and a pen from the outer pocket, and starts doodling.

~*~

Tony corrals them for a late lunch at the Japanese place right in the hotel, a fountain-side patio table where they can nosh on sushi and he can decompress about Pepper and the lab dedication the next afternoon. Mostly about Pepper.

His first clue should have been Bruce sitting with his back to the water, nose in the menu like he’s reading the fine print, but it doesn’t click until several minutes later. “Hey, where’s Nat?”

“Left.”

“Off scouting?”

Bruce hums, “Probably.”
“There a reason? Something suspicious?”

The man shrugs, squints. His energy is weird, and this is fucked for sure.

After a long moment, Tony says delicately, “Bruce?”

He knuckles his glasses up and gives him a glance, “Yeah, Tony?”

“She didn’t tell you where she was going?”

“She’s around, I’m sure.” Bruce’s fingers tighten on a napkin. “She can take care of herself.”

Tony breaths out a soft, “Sonofabitch, Banner,” and runs his hands through his hair.

~*~

Vegas is full of retirees, so the elderly gentleman at the next booth lingering over gardening catalogs and a slice of apple pie is only strange because Natasha recognizes him.

It takes her a moment, because Dick Ermis was in human resources, and had cut back his hours as he neared retirement, focusing on training at the field offices. Natasha had cultivated better contacts in HR who were at the Triskelion full time, so she hadn’t filled out her entry on Dick past a few mental pictures.

His favorite Girl Scout cookies were shortbread trefoils, dunked into coffee he drank from a Shakespeare in the Park mug. He always corrected himself without prompting when he referred to women coworkers as ‘girls’, but he still kept doing it. He thought he looked like Efrem Zimbalist Jr. from The FBI, which aired back when television changed to color - and he had a case if you discounted the grey hair, with his strong straight nose and hooded eyes sloping into laugh lines - but the salient fact was that he was mentioning it decades later.

She’s about to mention it on Maria’s postcard when the waitress sets down a heroic farmhouse breakfast, and Dick props his elbow on the booth between them with a smile.

“I admire your ambition, but then I always say ‘an army marches on its stomach’.”

“Napoleon,” Natasha supplies. He doesn’t seem to recognize her back.

“Pardon?” He shifts in his seat so he can see her better.

“That’s who you heard it from.”

The laugh lines shift into displeasure for a flash, unhappy to be corrected, then he chuckles and shakes his head like he’s dismissing a gnat. “Still sharp, Ms. Romanoff. Glad to see you landed on your feet after all that...mess.”

She shrugs and tucks into the beans and the American fries. She’s hungrier than she realized, awkward ex-coworker notwithstanding. “Your retirement was timely.”

He nods to himself, scraping his fork to gather the last crumbs of pie. “What brings you to Sin City, so far from home?”

Home. She thinks about her apartment in Rockville, the only long-term lease she’s ever had, and yet still only a place to recover, to stash supplies, a stage dressed for a life she doesn’t miss playing at. There’s a neighbor girl sleeping in her bed and eating her porridge who’s undoubtedly lonelier right now. Natasha may be suspected and adrift, but at least she isn't seventeen. “Sometimes you
find yourself in the wrong place, that’s all.”

“That’s terrible.”

She stabs into the eggs, but the yolk is too cooked to run into the potatoes. Bruce had made her eggs over easy with thin unbroken skins of white over thick golden unset yolk. He'd given the pan a little jiggle before flipping them, like the wiggle of a cat rump before pouncing, and she’d thought: that hand can also catch a car.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Dick scoops up his coffee and pauses, hovering in a half crouch between the tables. He looks hopeful, a little eager, and it feels like a loose thread to pull.

She gestures with her fork, and he slips into her booth. The waitress comes over, tops up her coffee and raises a brow. Natasha mouths a reassurance, and the waitress refills Dick’s cup as well, tearing off his check.

“You left your catalogs on the other table,” she points out.

“I have all I need.” Dick smiles and taps a packet of sugar substitute into his cup. He watches Natasha, fond and paternal.

Her free hand slips down off the table before she’s consciously aware of the shift in tone, from paternal to proprietary. She reaches for her coffee with the other hand.

“You’ve been so brave, for so long, in enemy territory more often than not. But as they say, ‘without torture there’s no science’.”

Her hidden hand freezes halfway to her holster, thoughts splintering, eyes locked with the old man’s. That Russian idiom is usually translated to another rhyme, no pain no gain, because the sentiment in literal English sounds so cruel. “What do you know about science?”

“I am the only one left, from the old days,” his voice sheds the impish American accent, and drops into the bass registers of patriarchal authority. “The glorious project.”

“The Red Room,” she breathes in a whisper. She searches his face, but finds no familiarity beyond their brief interactions at the Triskelion. His treasured famous resemblance was no doubt purchased.

“And even farther back there was Leviathan.” He sips, rueful, “Though I was too young and hasty back then. If I’d known the serum would become so refined, with such long-lasting effects, I would have bided my time instead of volunteering for a prototype. It would have given me more leverage later on, when I defected to SHIELD.”

“As they say,” Natasha pushes her plate away, “youth is wasted on the young.”

“It hasn’t all been bad. It gave me time to outgrow my idealism,” Dick waves his hand, “as you certainly have, I learned to be more practical about my assets and my loyalties.”

“Your timing.” It can’t be a coincidence that instead of finding the auction, the seller has already found her. “Your golden years will no doubt be filled with interesting projects.”

He leans across the table, eyebrows scrunched, “My expertise is highly valuable.”

“What do you want from me - Dick - aside from reminiscing?”
He lays his hand on her wrist, fingers wrapping around with surprising strength given the swollen knuckles. Even if he was a junior clerk on the Leviathan project, he’s far spryer than he has any right to be. “What I want is to bring you back into the fold. You are impressive, the best of my work. It’s time to take your place, where you belong.”

Bruce had pointed out that HYDRA had never tried to recruit her...was it just this simple, that they had always assumed she would come when called?

“You’ve made me so proud, girl,” he says, like praising a dog.

She lets her eyes well up. After New York, Steve had said *we did good today*. Clint tells his kids, *I’m proud of how hard you worked*. Nick...from the beginning he’d given her options; she could have put her tools down and become a civilian. He gave her the ability to say no, and recognized her contribution when said yes. Now this musty nightmare from her past offers a pat on the head and casts her years of toil and struggle as his due tribute, as his own achievement. *You are the best of my work.*

As if she’d been on a shelf, held in reserve until he needed to cash her in. Maybe the lilies weren’t even supposed to be wilted. Maybe he didn’t realize you can’t leave something like that unattended and expect it to keep.

He’s selling the forced compliance tech. Not the knockoff Morse had found, but the real deal, as sketched in the notebook left in Zagreb. Richard Ermis from HR is the guy who kept the machine in the vault oiled and humming. He can build another one.

~*~

“You don’t think she’s coming back this time,” Tony accuses, “What did you say to her?”

Bruce scoots his chair back, “How is this my fault?”

“You’ve had a bug up your ass ever since this morning, and now she’s ditched us.” Tony leans back and crosses his arms. “Look, I get it, you two...let he who is without sin cast the first bone, I’m not the guy to give any romantic advice--”

“You think?”

“Fine, whatever, your funeral - more importantly, *we need her.*” Tony leans in close and serious, “This may not be your thing, you can hang back as long as your conscience tells you to, that’s fine Bruce. But this team is *needed*. We have to get it together before the shit hits the fan again.”

“Tony…”

“Rogers, remember that guy? The one Hydra tried to assassinate in broad fucking daylight, but then he rallied the troops and took them down instead? That guy? Is not on board without Romanoff. And since Thor’s a free agent and Barton’s off the grid, that’s it, bunny.”

Bruce sighs. It never occurred to him that he could actually hurt her. Kill her without meaning to, without even knowing until he got back into his right mind...well that’s everyone within miles of him at any point, isn’t it? It’s a possibility that edges further down the bell curve with time, with every time he sinks down and comes back clean. But hurt her?

“She knows this game inside and out, the players, the agendas, the pitfalls.” Tony sits up straight. “She’s brilliant, she fights like holy vengeance, and she’s wily as fuck. We need her.”
“I know that.” All his talk about treating each other as human beings, snuggling in the dark, but he still thought of her as some kind of changeling, invulnerable, ever-strategic. He was not going to be caught out. Played. So he called her bluff, drew first blood. They’d been practicing kindness with each other, tea and sympathy, and somewhere along the line he’d gained the power to hurt her. She’d given that to him, and he’d been too stupid not to use it.

“But most importantly? She’s the Waco Kid right now, Bruce. Everyone wants to be the one to take her down. She’s human, whatever the Soviets did to her. Just like Rogers is human despite that posture and that chin. You share a bed - shared? - you know she has to sleep sometime. That’s how she got nicked in Niagara, no one to watch her back. Or did you forget that’s why we were all in the car together?”

“She’ll be fine.”

“You know, I think that’s the first time you’ve told me something you know is a lie.”

~*~

Natasha has always played the parts people handed to her, and then improvised their expectations into weapons against them. She’s been aching for the parameters of a mission like quitting a drug, but now that she has one, she’s balking at the idea of shoving herself into someone else’s expectations.

Especially this bastard, this low level Red Room functionary who’d managed to fail up for generations until he was playing Renfield to Alexander Pierce. But while Pierce was skilled at exploiting his image as a benevolent power, Natasha is a master at turning all kinds of expectations into traps, assumptions into weapons.

The elders at the picnic had told her that a woman playing stupid was a crock of shit, especially when important things were on the line. It’s a nice sentiment. She’s coaxed her heart into an open flame, and she resents the very idea of dousing it.

The women also told her she could bet whatever was in her pockets.

Dick says he’s looking to sell his expertise, but she can hear in the way he talks about it all that it runs deeper, he’s looking to be important again.

“You’ll find buyers,” she tells him, “but you won’t find a patron to replace Pierce. You’ll be patronized, perhaps.”

“What do you know of it, girl?” Dick occupies himself fixing his coffee, spoon clinking.

“Given some lab space, maybe a couple staff who aren’t a good fit elsewhere, treated like a long-shot R&D project where the budget shrinks every year. HYDRA didn’t just lose personnel. Between the scuttled helicarriers and the frozen accounts, they’ve lost billions in resources. How are you going to convince them to fund a boondoggle?”

“A blade right into the heart is no boondoggle. This isn’t wholesale slaughter from above. This opens up a world of strategic interventions. You don’t need much firepower if you choose your targets wisely.”

Most little girls are admonished never to take candy from strangers. It’s a good rule, but Natasha was taught the opposite; to take it and make them choke on it. “You may need to work on your elevator pitch.”
“Once they see you, they’ll know I have the goods.” He sips, self-satisfied. He relishes the chance to correct her, to rein her in. “You were marked down for elimination. That was the recommendation of the agents who’d hunted you across Europe. And yet here you are. How are you so sure you weren't transferred from one inventory to another?”

And for a long moment like freefall, she isn't sure, her eyes dropping down to the silver shapes in the table top. What wells up is anger. How dare he tell her that Clint was some bagboy? That Nick would let himself be a catspaw?

His fingers gently circle her wrist, and his eyes narrow a flick at the speed of her pulse, like a cat about to pounce. “Do you know my favorite poem?”

“No,” her own voice sounds farther away to her ears than his, and this is like being seven again, before she’d put a harness on her fear and learned to ride it, and the shame of finding herself back there makes her want to weep.

“Sonnet 94. It starts out like this,” he leans forward, “They that have power to hurt, and will do none, that do not do the thing they most do show, who, moving others, are themselves as stone, unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow…”

He pauses, perhaps knowing the wave of dizziness that sweeps over Natasha with nauseating familiarity, the rattle of film through a projector, the pervasive grit of coal cinders under her soles in the winter, her fingers stained with ink and blood and ash.

“…They rightly do inherit heaven's graces, and husband nature's riches from expense; they are the lords and owners of their faces, others, but stewards of their excellence.”

The photocopied pages in Norfolk might as well have been bubblegum wrappers compared to his melodious baritone and the dry heated parchment of his grip.

“The summer's flower is to the summer sweet, though to itself, it only live and die, but if that flower with base infection meet, the basest weed outbraves his dignity…”

He lifts his chin, expectant, and she answers like a rote prayer, the first flawless American English she ever perfected, a high schooler’s bored classroom Shakespeare recitation belying the deep groove cut into her mind by the words, “For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds. Lilies that fester, smell far worse than weeds.”

“I have a task for you.” The old man smiles, and Natasha’s hidden hand wipes down the thigh of her blue jeans, over and over.

~*~

Bruce spots the karambit under a chair. He kneels, and fishes it out, dropping into the chair with a soft swear.

The little claw knife should be tucked into the cup of her bra, or under her pillow, always within reach. It must have tumbled away when they were fucking, but she’d hustled out so fast she hadn’t noticed it was gone.

She hadn’t laughed, or doubled down, hadn’t acted caught out or frustrated in any way. She’d been honest, more or less, from the moment he spotted her by the hotel pool just outside of Baltimore. Clever and controlled, but true.

He opens the knife, tests the edge with the pad of his thumb. At the pool he'd talked about trying to
find the sweet spot between paranoia and not tempting fate.

So let’s play out the null hypothesis, that her aims at least included manipulation. People manipulate to get something they want or need, in the best way they know how. Because they can’t ask or demand; because they don’t trust, don’t expect a positive response, and can’t simply take.

What could Bruce give her that she couldn’t already get in spades from other people? Not power, money, protection, access...but people do shitty things for irrational reasons all the time, out of habit, or to prop their egos, to gain power over another...but Natasha is too restrained, too careful, too confident for petty games. She uses the right tool for the right job, for a reason. So what could she possibly need or want from him?

Different angle; what had she been getting? From the moment she crashed in their hotel room in Niagara, until right before she walked out a couple hours ago, what had he given her?

Care. And then he took it away. And then she left, to protect herself.

He tries not to think of those crooked toes burrowing under covers to slide under his calf.

Bruce pockets her knife.

~*~

Dick has a job for her, a test run. Eliminate retired agent Silva.

“It won’t be hard to make it look like an accident. She's old, maybe she gets confused, miscounts her medications,” he gestures to his old table, though the gardening catalogs have long been cleared off, but Natasha gets the gist.

“Domestic poisoning.”

“Household accident. She slips and breaks her neck in the bathroom. It's not the first mistake she ever made, but you’ll make sure it’s her last.”

“A good faith demonstration.”

“On both of our parts, is it not? She was the origin of the kill order, after all. Then the real fun begins.”

Natasha slings her duffel across her shoulder, and stiffs him with the check.
Lemon Law

The sun beats on Natasha’s shoulders, but the black visor of the helmet cuts the glare bouncing back off every scrap of metal on this highway heading south. Wind blows up her long kevlar fabric sleeves and into the vents of her riding leathers. The earbuds plugged into her phone mute the rumble of the engine, but can’t cut through the poem spinning like a song caught in her head.

The admonishment is...was?...rooted deep, the wave of shame a fundamental response laid down early in her training. The words had risen over her like a numbing wave, and she couldn’t breathe through the sense memories of chalk dust and spilled ink and ashes, burnt gunpowder and menstrual blood, zeal and loneliness hitting like a knee to the diaphragm. She had failed, but she’s being offered a chance to redeem herself. That’s useful, even if it isn’t the truth.

That she has a separate truth, that it overrides even a deep trigger implanted so long ago, that’s worth knowing. It settles the rattle in her chest she’s had since Norfolk.

Dick had paused when he saw her fear, and he had leaned closer. Savoring. Preening. When the final couplet had spilled from her mouth from muscle memory, he’d patted her hand, self-satisfied, and just like that the wave had broken inside of her.

She knows who he really is, and she knows what she has to do. From a certain angle it’s what she’s been doing all along. A blade in the heart.

For all his talk of assets and loyalties, Dick had been preoccupied securing what he saw as the most valuable asset available, the tech. He’d skimped on making friends and contacts, even in HYDRA, so aside from the buyers he’s courting, he’s running a very small team. He’d waved away the fact that she’d picked off a quarter of his crew in Niagara, one less cut of the proceeds to pay out.

She changes lanes. In her side mirror, a former SHIELD motor pool vehicle a half mile behind her adjusts position to keep her in sight.

Behind her opaque visor Natasha smiles, and slips off the highway onto a dirt road marked Private Right of Way.

She cuts the corner between 95 and 62, riding on the service road alongside the Colorado River Aquaduct. In favor of not losing her, the agents openly follow, and that tells her a lot about their
mandate and their habits of thought - however they feel about their boss, they follow Dick like balls. They’re to monitor her success and, if necessary, ensure her compliance.

She parks her bike on a culvert over the canal, the shadows lengthening into stripes across the ground.

The Red Room had always deployed her without in-field support, disposable, deniable. It had taken her a while to see Coulson as a resource and a safety net instead of a babysitter, to be capable of running her own team in the field herself. The balls park a quarter mile away and just sit there, a backup crew in case of weapon failure. Clint would call them stupidvisors, useless while still breathing down her neck.

They’re treating her like the Soldier.

She peers down at the translucent blue ribbon flowing over a concrete bed, a trickle diverted from the Colorado that’s still patiently carving the Grand Canyon deeper year by year. Depending on the flow speed, maybe even the same water that sparkled at the bottom of the Canyon that morning as she sobbed her heart out onto Tony’s shoulder, as Bruce festered into silence. That’s another loose end to come back to at some point, when she isn’t working.

When she sighs, the wisp of humidity from the water is heavy with the sharp funk from the creosote bushes all around. In the desert, that’s the smell of rain, but it reminds Natasha of petroleum-soaked railroad ties, and burying her secrets like a sacrifice at the crossroads.

She hops the fence.

~*~

“This time, she’s the one who took a walk,” Tony disassembles the mechanical pencil he stole from Nat, “well, ride, I guess.”

“She’s not exactly off the grid if she’s using the AmEx I gave her, even if she’s rented a touring cycle and a full suite of gear.” On the screen Pepper rolls her clothes like sushi, fingers neatly tucking.

“Maybe she just needs out of the car for a spell.”

“Right, and Banner’s pouting about something completely unrelated. This is so high school.”

Bruce rolls his clothes too, but with a haphazard efficiency, shoving them down into his satchel. Shoves a lot of stuff down, but who’s surprised at that? “I’m impressed you can actually imagine either of them as teenagers.”

“Actually not that hard to picture, just terrifying.” She offers, “I’ll reach out after I land in LA, take her to dinner, let her decompress. Maybe you’re right about her needing a breather from you two.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised it wasn’t me that pissed her off.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Your confidence gives me wings, honey.” Of course...stabilizing wings. He assembles the pencil and starts sketching on the complementary stationery. Repulsor jets in a crossbraced configuration, swiveling like on a dragonfly, for a woman who towers over him both barefoot and in her death-defying heels.
The lead keeps breaking under his sharp quick movements—graphite on wood pulp, for fuck’s sake—so he turns the pad and makes a note to develop a stylus with a nanite reservoir to doodle directly into interfaces and onto components. He wants to be back in the lab, back in his own bed, and on the eve of reunion he gives in to the physical craving for her touch. He looks up to catch her smirking fondly on the screen. “When are you getting in tomorrow?”

“About the time you give your lab dedication speech. You’ve been copied on my itinerary.”

“Did you include several hours of me going down on you?”

Pepper zips her luggage shut like a reverse strip tease and says, “It’s implied in the entry for ‘down time’.”

~*~

Capturing takes minutes but clean-up takes hours, waiting to hand them off to Maria’s team.

Leaving a trail of corpses is morally wrong, and often tactically self-defeating, but it certainly is more convenient than waiting in a rapidly cooling desert for a team to haul up from Phoenix to take custody. Of course dead men also don’t get bored and anxious and then talk, and these two drop intel as they turn on each other in clipped whispers.

One is paranoid that Dick has sold them out now that he has the Black Widow at heel, the other is cynical that the forced compliance tech was always some MKUltra bullshit and now they can’t even sell the dream.

“Doesn’t even work in demo mode,” the cynic mutters, “tomorrow’s gonna be a shit show.”

The paranoiac continues to fidget against the zip ties, growing more peevish with his partner, “You think we’ll even see tomorrow?”

“Drama queen, yes. Or she’d have stuck us in the ground instead of the fucking perp cage. I swear, you newbies kill me, you’re all about the high signs and code phrases, but to get any real shit done you need to know policies and protocols back to front—”

So you can dance around them like Sitwell, Natasha thinks, when he slaughtered her whole team in Rzeszow to keep her from discovering his involvement in HYDRA. He did it so deftly she didn’t find out the real story until she’d read the paper trail knowing he was malicious and not bureaucratically stupid. Then again, even the cynic here is no Sitwell, since it never occurs to either of them that she’d bugged them before locking them in their own prisoner transport back seat.

Even more damning, they really thought they could detain her in it, if push came to shove. Natasha had already been shoved into a cage today, only to find that she’d stripped all the screws out years ago.

She leans her weight onto the seat of her parked bike and keeps one bored eye on the SHIELD car, looking through their phones. She builds a bigger picture with the choice bits dropped into her earbud by his disgruntled employees. Even after a long career in human resources, Dick Ermis has no ability to recruit or retain talent.

She debriefs Maria as she watches the panel van trundle back onto the highway, laden with prisoners. She bundles up to ride into the cool desert night, south and east from the high Mojave into the low Sonoran.
Dick’s number flashes on her phone and she slides into the right lane, taking a beat to get into character. She’s glad that she’d balked back at the diner, it gives her options outside of the dutiful daughter role. He wants to play patriarch, she’ll match him with angry babushka. She clicks the call live and lays into him in outraged Russian, uncompromising as iron, selling out his team as self-serving hacks who got themselves caught and nearly blew the whole mission.

Angry babushkas have endured a life’s worth of stupidity and injustice, and have grown incapable of not calling it out. It’s the opposite of not giving a fuck; it’s the rebellious hope of giving all your fucks away like a legacy before you die. They are often mocked, because it’s vexing to take an old woman’s fury seriously.

It’s still satisfying to deliver it.

His own Russian is spare, too many decades in English have dwindled his working vocabulary, but he slips into the corresponding role of bemused condescension like a reflex, right where she wants him. Once she completes her task, they’ll meet back in Vegas, and proceed from there. The next phase, he assures her, will make everything right.

He’s gonna sell her out, but not yet. He needs something else from her first. That’s fine. She’ll perform, and put him at ease, and when she brings him down it’ll be for good.

Natasha ends the call and laughs into the wind.

An expose rips open the trench coat. If the target is wearing a respectable suit underneath, all you’ve accomplished is taking his coat off so he’ll stay awhile. If you time it properly, he’s naked, and the case against him is danglingly obvious.

~*~

The town of Salome, Arizona is so small Natasha parks the bike outside of it. She pulls a lungful of smoke and lets it rise from her open mouth and nostrils, carried off on the night breeze as she walks into town. She has a handful left of the pack Bruce bought when she was drunk, but this is the last one she’s gonna smoke.

“I have a prototype,” Dick had written in his auction description materials, “Fragile. Single use. But she proves the principle.”

Even now Maria’s team is converging on the auction location, Tributaries, a seaside retreat center near Malibu founded by young idealistic hippies and monetized by older jaded new agers. The kind of place that offers seminars in consciousness hacking, tantric workshops illustrated with soft-focus photography of lotus blossoms, qi-gong flavored hikes through Big Sur. For a consideration fee, they will host your business conference in their scenic redwood lodge overlooking the sea. Hipster white people with straight smiles in fields of organic vegetables and French lavender, a very elite idea of wholesome cross-cultural humanism. Perfect for a guy who lauds Shakespeare but doesn’t get dick jokes.

She takes a last drag, thinking of Bruce eating roadside produce he vastly overpaid for, meditating in his worn sleep shorts on a ratty Motel 6 carpet, using a mantra his landlady gave him as a jest. God help her, she misses the bastard.

Natasha licks her fingertip, pinches the cherry out, and tucks the half-cigarette back into the pack. It’s the last one she’s allowing herself, after all.

She cases around the low flat house and the gravel walks. Guadalupe Silva, retired Agent of
SHIELD, does indeed have a spectacular garden, even in the sparse light of a new moon just waxing into a visible crescent. The lush vegetation of Dick’s catalogs is a far cry from the xeriscaped alien beauty Silva has cultivated in her backyard. Bordered beds of yucca and agave with flower stalks projecting improbably, squat barrels and prickly paddles of cacti. A wall near the house is colonized by honeysuckle and a white flowering variety of nightshade, ghostly in the dark, their scents mingling with mesquite and cooling rock.

She spots the woman herself under the fat trunked date palm, a slowly sweeping spot of dim violet light in the inky black. She’s wearing yellow shooting glasses, and in her other hand is a long tool.

Natasha holds up her open palms, and walks onto a path so her boots grate in the gravel.

Silva’s hand darts with a crunch, and when she draws back there’s a wriggling scorpion pinched in the tool. She begins conversationally, “If you wanted to kill me, at any point, I’d already be dead. Even if you wanted it up close and personal.” She deposits the arachnid in a big plastic jug with several others, and finally looks at Natasha. “But instead, you blew SHIELD’s brains all over the internet. Exposed HYDRA. You’re making my retirement veeeeery interesting, baby girl.”

“I get that a lot these days.”

“Getting shot at a lot, too, I imagine.” She flicks off her canvas gloves and takes Natasha’s chin between her damp fingers. In the moonless night and half-unseen glow of the ultraviolet lamp, her eyes look like black holes drawing Natasha in through the yellow lenses. “Aside from finally showing some mileage, you look like hell.”

“I age,” Natasha confirms, “just slowly.”

Silva’s mouth presses with empathy, with regret, “I learn, just slowly.”

“You weren’t wrong. About me. Not really.”

“That’s what Barton said, when he came around years ago. That I didn’t even know the half of it, both good and bad.” Silva sets the tools and the jug of scorpions on her patio, where they will get full fatal sun come morning, and looks back as she slides the door wall open. “You coming in?”

Natasha follows.

“The worst part,” Silva takes her into the kitchen, sky blue with gingham dish towels and bright red pans, “maybe not the very worst part, given the body count and the blow to public trust, the impact on the Potomac wetlands—wonks will wonk, you know? Before and after I was in the field, I was an analyst, alpha and omega—aside from everything else, the part I feel the most?” she sighs, “is that I keep digging up the dead. Who was dirty? Who was oblivious? Who was playing both sides?”

Natasha has wasted weeks trawling the archive, asking those same questions.

“Who was caught playing monkey in the middle?” Silva pulls a pitcher from the fridge, the contents murky through scratched plastic. “Like Carl.”

“Your partner, Trovato.”

Silva pours glasses for them both, iced tea with stained slices of lime and lemon. “When he was killed, I cleaned out his desk. I found the report on the BI—on you. He was just as adamant about your threat level as I was, and he echoed my recommendation to eliminate you as a political disrupter, but he never filed the report to the directorate. I reviewed it, and I filed it, and I never
knew why he’d sat on it.”

“Why did he?” The tea is surprisingly tart, just enough sugar to take the edge off.

“I think we were only supposed to locate you. They weren’t planning to kill you. That was me being naive. When the time was right, they’d gin up the paperwork to ‘eliminate the threat’, but send a retrieval squad instead. Once a full chain of command was established under Pierce, I think they were going to tug on a lot of leashes.” Silva drains half her glass and tops it up from the pitcher. “In filing the report too soon, to the wrong boss, I ended up calling dibs on you for AD Fury’s division.”

“By being the first to lay out a case for my assassination.”

“You were supposed to disappear into Pierce’s collection. Instead, Nick sent Barton to bring you in like a feral stray. Alive, above-board, an asset that could be trained to become an agent.”

Without any sarcasm Natasha breathes, “God bless bureaucracy.”

“There’s evidence it accelerated their timelines, made them sloppy.”

Natasha drinks her tea, and the refreshment makes the rest of her body feel gritty and hot. “I’m sorry, about your partner.”

“Carl Trovato was compromised.” Silva chews on her lip, pensive, then continues, “He had proclivities—not just encounters, but lovers. That was career-ending intel not so long ago.”

Proclivities is a telling word. “He was gay?”

“Bisexual. I found out from his wife Helen, after. She knew all about the fellows; they married in college, and I think they shared a boyfriend or two over the years. But there was that paranoid executive order from Eisenhower in the fifties, that gay people couldn’t work for the government. Carl served his whole career with that sword poised over his head, that someone could drop a dime on him that he also slept with men, and then he’d be fired.”

“So HYDRA had a hook in him.”

“As long as they didn’t pull too hard and rip it out.” Silva shakes her head. “As long as they didn’t tip their hand that it was a conspiracy, and not just a few guys jockeying for promotion. Subtle pressure, occasional favors.”

The threat of sex, the promise of violence.

“He was killed in the line of duty.” Silva’s hands wrap around her empty glass, small and sturdy, a babushka’s hands. “I was with him at the end. He was gone before the paramedics came.”

Natasha doesn’t want to ask the follow-up, but Silva’s an analyst, she reads the weighty pause.

“Yeah. In retrospect it’s clear we were set up during that fucking op. Don’t Ask Don’t Tell was changing the landscape, so they were losing that threat over him. Maybe he knew something more by then. He gave me his cornicello, told me to wear it like a charm. I had to wash his blood off it.”

Even as her mind supplies an image of watching Clint bleed out while she’s calling for medical evac, the punch of fear and sorrow is shaken off like any physical blow. That reflex is the only reason she was able to function when they were trying to locate him and the Tesseract. Do the job, deal with it later. Or never. Never is preferable. “That must have been horrible, I’m sorry.”
Silva studies her curiously for a long moment, then reaches into her gauzy cotton shirt and pulls out a carved twist of coral, the cornicello. “He never copped to being superstitious, but who does? I’ll tell you I’m not, and yet here it is. And I think it did protect me, over the years. Gave them pause; what might I know?”

“They ever try to feel you out on that?”

“I had a sit-down with HR over my report on you.” She gives a disgusted huff. “Was I overreacting to my partner’s death, seeing threats where there weren’t any? How could I be concerned by this little wisp of a thing that haunted Cannes and Gstaad and international talks, and was no doubt just hunting for a sugar daddy with connections? Was I envious? Perhaps menopausal?”

“That meeting with HR, was it with Richard Ermis?”

“Bertie Harper. That guy was ancient but refused to retire,” Silva waves this off, “AD Fury heard about the meeting and had a shit fit, they farmed him out to Norfolk to file microfiche until he kicked off. Things got quiet after that blowup, I was back in analysis. But they probably spent years wondering how much Carl and I had figured out, searching for an opportunity to take me out that wouldn’t look suspicious as hell.”

“Yet here you are.”

“You as well,” Silva taps a finger to her forehead in salute.

“Bertie Harper,” Natasha pulls out her phone and runs a search on a SHIELD database mirror site, murmuring, “Smiles disarmingly at things that aren’t funny, cardigans and anachronistic sexism?”

“Bertie should damn well should be dead by now, the old coot.” Silva’s eyes narrow, “Then again...Watery blue eyes, short guy syndrome he tried to cover with charm, liked to let you know he was a Patron of the Folger Library?”

Silva swears when she sees the photo on Nat’s phone.

“He sent me to kill you.”

~*~

Natasha has just secured a booth at the diner when her phone buzzes. She’d expected an inquiry from JARVIS, having used the expense card Pepper had given her to rent the touring motorcycle and the gear, but instead it’s Isaiah.

“Thanks for shipping the car back; is there a reason all the smuggling compartments are packed with snacks? Are you travelling with a squirrel, or perhaps a pothead?”

She wets her lips to answer but he barrels on.

“Also, why is the Rockville apartment getting groceries delivered now? I feel like this has turned into an afterschool special about eating disorders. Also, the divine Pepper Potts asked how I knew you, the other day, so I said I was your fifth cousin twice removed.”

“Listen, I’ve got a meeting right now, I’ll circle back to this when I’m not on a mission.”

“When did this turn into a mission? You better not be blowing me off.”

“Scout’s honor.”
“I returned my Eagle badge years ago, kid, never looked back.” Isaiah sighs, “Good hunting, I guess.”

When Dick sits across from her she doesn’t say a word, just leans forward so the cornicello swings out of her cleavage.

He claps his hands together and swells with pride, saying, “Excellent, yes, excellent,” and orders dessert for them both.

Natasha tries to look pleased, as if she’d worked hard for that approval, as if she were still a child who’s survival depended on the kind of capricious care that could be mistaken for love, and taken away as punishment.

~*~

Bruce wanders through Las Vegas, unnoticed by everyone except security and service staff, people with name tags heading off the floor or to the kitchen, catching his eye with fellow feeling at the bright madness all around. He feels like stage crew, apart from both performance and audience.

He’d gone out walking to think, but all he could muster was deepening uneasiness in the pit of his stomach. It’s after one in the morning, Natasha is incommunicado, and they’re set to leave for Long Beach bright and early. He should rest his eyes if nothing else, he’d offered to drive so Tony could polish his speech.

He keys back into the room and sees the curtains have been racked wide open to show the quiet pools of the fountains. On the balcony table is a steaming cup.

A swirl of leaves unfolds at the bottom, just visible through strong amber brew fragrant like autumn leaves. It sits atop a postcard.

It’s a kitschy image of a cowgirl riding a jackalope the size of a horse. On the back Natasha has drawn a crude phallus and scrotum in marker, then added with delicate ballpoint strokes an exquisite set of feathered wings. Small block capitals across the top have been shaded to look carved, spelling TENACITAS PER ASPERA, and across the bottom the note is in her own handwriting instead of his, small contained letters with looping flares and large capitals.

Buck up there, Camper.

P.S. Maybe you can use this as a bookmark.

your Miscellaneous (possible friend).

It’s not until he’s looking at the shards of the cup at his feet, the leaves strewn across the balcony, that he realizes the uneasiness in his stomach had been fury at himself. He kneels down and presses his forehead to the warm wet concrete.

Breathe. Swallow. Breathe. So you’ve fucked up, what’s new about that? Things can either be fixed, or not. Usually not. No amount of melodrama will remove suffering already inflicted.

~*~

Romanoff holds court in the Bellagio’s Lily Bar, but only if you know where to look.

She’s chatting with the bartender, an older guy with transition lenses and a moustache like a snowy lamb pelt, who’s serving her a red cocktail in a rocks glass. She’s in what Tony thinks of as her
civilian light armor, motorcycle boots and a brown leather jacket with more buckles and zips than one would expect, no doubt full of surprises. Armor and armory. With her hair in a French twist so only the bottle blonde is on display, she fades into the warm gold and mulberry decor.

Natasha watches him take the padded stool beside her and tells the bartender, “Stosh, the Laphroaig, two glasses.”

Tony sniffs the cocktail at her elbow and wrinkles his nose, “Peaches and cough medicine.”

“It’s called a Redheaded Slut.”

Tony leans over the bar and dumps it in the sink. Stosh sets their glasses and the bottle, gives him a wink, and rinses the sink on his way to the other end of the bar.

“I thought it was funny.”

“Your sense of humor is surreal and cruel.”

“Not the worst thing I’ve heard.” She pours scotch for them both. “I’m on the team, Stark. We’re solid, and I’ll let you know if that ever changes. You’ve recruited the Black Widow. And Natasha Romanoff, since you make the distinction.”

“I’ve made the distinction since I pissed you off in Pepper’s office and you threatened to have me bounced.” He sips, the scent of smoke and sea an old friend. “I feel like that’s when we really met.”

She tilts her head, curious. “Not when I stuck a needle in your neck?”

Tony waves this off, declining to explain that exasperation is the great revealer; that once he pushes that last inch and sees the monkey-threat face, or the frustrated sobbing, or the clenched teeth, or the pleased bafflement, that’s when he knows who he’s dealing with. He also doesn’t mention that when he’d looked at her sleeping curled against the headboard in Niagara, he’d seen that same person; stripped of pretense, brilliant, determined. Only now she’s also frayed. Prickly.

“You look well-rested,” he says, instead of asking how she is.

“Nice try,” Natasha sips at the scotch. He wonders if she even likes the taste, but then she seemed to enjoy Bruce’s funky tea, and Tony suspects it’s smoked over a dung fire and aged in a rotting log.

“Right. So tell me honestly...who told Steve Rogers about rickrolling? Was that you, or Barton?”

“Neither.” She chuckles. “That was Sam Wilson.”

“Aha...bent sense of humor as well as sweet flying, do you think he’d be interested, once the team is up and running? I can make a very cherry set of wings.”

“I’ll pass that along.” Natasha shifts her glass to wet the side, watching the legs form trails down the glass as the alcohol evaporates.

“What’s this about, really?”

“Taking my ball and going home?” Natasha fiddles with her drink, her mouth bunched ruefully, like the inside joke is that she’d even have a home. “I’m wallowing in the self-indulgence, it’s a luxury.”
“You know, and I know, that it's not tactically sound right now to fly solo.”

She laughs. “Ah see, that’s the luxury. Pretending for a while that I’m capable of making a choice that isn’t, on some level, mercenary.”

He narrows his eyes but it’s not some conversational feint, just weariness, a self-loathing so old it’s part of the furniture. It’s strange to think her internal monologue is as insane as anyone else’s. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I have a lot more respect for your mercenary tendencies than to think you’d target Bruce as a power play. And I’m not just saying that out of ego--you’re already more than halfway into Pepper’s pants.”

“You two have a strange relationship.”

“We talk. Out loud and everything.”

“Oh, I believe the out loud part.” The deflection is offered as banter, but might as well be blood in the water.

“But on the subject of strange relationships, strange bedfellows, getting some strange, you forget I’ve been along for the ride here. A seduction this awkward would be a discredit to a skilled schemer such as yourself. No way.” Tony knocks back his drink and exhales the scent through his nose, watching her. “If anything, I’ve gained more respect for your ability to placidly watch Pepper and I flail toward each other.”

“I couldn’t interfere in that.”

“Mission scope? Professional boundaries?”

“There was money riding on you figuring everything out in time.” Her voice is light, her face composed, but she doesn’t quite meet his eyes. “It was generally felt that blank spots on the Periodic Table would be a lot easier than personal relationships, and the mission priority was national security.”

"Shows what you know. Being with someone is not that damned complicated. Hard, yes. Complicated, no."

“I’ve got a question for you then,” Natasha traces the marble veins of the bar with a fingertip. When her words come out they’re choked, “Which is better, loyalty or love?”

“Love.”

Her hand stills.

Tony quirks his head, “Did my lack of hesitation startle you?”

Her shrug is as good as a nod. “You’ve been betrayed out of love?”

“There are very few people who can tell me off, Romanoff. Who can jab the truth into my neck when I’m being a stubborn ass. I keep those people as close as they’ll let me.”

She drains the rest of the scotch. Her voice is rough from more than just from the alcohol, “You put a location tracker on Banner.”

Tony smiles hard, his reaction to being caught out, “Another person who can very easily tell me to go to hell. Which he did. So no, I don’t keep tabs on bunny.”
“How small was it? What power source? Was it disabled/enabled at the point of the tracker, or remotely?”

Tony feels the tension shift from his cheeks into his jaw. “He said no.”

“Me, Stark. I might be saying yes.”

“Wait, you want me to track you?” The shake of her head is small, ambiguous in direction, but the self-disgust that flashes across her face makes his stomach churn in sympathy. “What the hell’s going on, Nat?”

She fiddles with the delicate gold chain at her throat, a coral pendant obscured in her cleavage. It’s a distraction move, to draw the eye away from her face to more lush pastures, but he doesn’t take the bait. To outward appearance she looks tired, perhaps in need of an aspirin and a quiet room away from the overstimulation of Vegas. Tony can see she’s wrestling with devastation. “I caught up with some old friends.”

“Tell me. Please.”

~*~

Bruce sits on the balcony floor, on concrete tinted and textured to look like Tuscan plaster, and gathers the broken pieces of the cup. They're blood warm, tea leaves wetly clinging. His mala’s been stolen, but he still has the words his landlady in Kolkata gave him, the counsel that detachment isn't indifference, it's examining your desires without judging yourself for having them, and then choosing the ones you want to guide your actions.

Sometimes, he thinks, identifying your emotions and desires and reactions… It's like recalling what you've been eating as you're vomiting, and trying not to let it jam up in your nose.

~*~

“Please,” Tony asks again, “let me help.”

Natasha doesn’t catch herself until she’s dug into her jacket pocket and the cigarette is bobbing from her mouth. She doesn’t have a lighter, or a steel and flint like Bruce, and she put her last fire out at the Canyon like a good camper, and it’s not like you can even smoke anywhere these days anyhow. She snatches the cigarette away, paper ripping at her lip, and she laughs.

The forces that made and kept her a free agent were simple but effective: bureaucracy, and the fact that people are ornery beasts. Magic words don’t work on ornery humans, Laura had told her...but then she’d also called please and thank you magic words.

I’m sorry, said with feeling in someone’s native language.

Maybe those are the kind that work on humans.

“I’m not going to bust your balls about team work, Nat. Take that as read. So what’s the job, what’s the mission?”

I had to keep the circle small, Nick had said, you would have done the same thing. That was the problem, and if there’s anything she’s good at it’s solving a problem.

A lighter comes skittering down the marble bar top. Without breaking eye contact with her, Tony snags it from its trajectory, nods a thanks to Stosh, and flicks the flame into life.
She draws hard, the smoke a warm stretch in her lungs, and exhales, “So much for good intentions.”

“It’s Vegas,” he shoos his hand, “indulgences and dispensations are their major export. That’s why I won’t tell Mr. Convertible Pants you’re wearing a garment with zip-off sleeves.”

“Always a gentleman.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Tony reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket and sets a pencil on the bar. Her mechanical pencil, that he must have stolen days ago.

She picks up the slim metal tube, unable to explain why this feels like a tender gesture, but she clicks out some lead and starts writing on a cocktail napkin. Natasha brings him into the circle, a little bit.

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