**Better in the band**

by imnotinameeting

**Summary**

Being in the band is always better than just watching the show.

All Kate wanted was to earn a little extra cash by writing the history of Stark Industries. What she got instead was an encounter with the Tesseract, an overturned life, a group of remarkable misfits, and a new purpose.

Having feelings for her best friend is great, unless revealing them will cost her everything. Is her new life worth being close to Steve, but never close enough?

**Notes**

This is my first publicly posted story. Be kind! Give suggestions. Do you like the first person pov or would third be an easier read?

I've found many different renderings of Stark Tower, so I've made up my own.

The story starts with the Battle of New York. The Winter Soldier is still at large, but who knows what the future brings, right? Originally, I wanted this to follow the movie timelines, but things may have to bend a little.

I own nothing but my own characters and any mistakes.

Feedback is fuel!
Chapter 1

At no point in American history did a child dream of being a teacher for the money. I’m damn good at what I do and I love it, don’t get me wrong, but I am far from working just for the fun of it. A full teaching load at a nearby college, adjunct work, and the occasional piece of writing got me a small one bedroom apartment with an alcove I pretend is a library. On nice days I walk to work. On rainy days, the humid press of the subway is killer, but still a better option than showing up in front of my students like a drowned rat. Long taxi rides were for sex columnists, tourists, and billionaires with their names on buildings. Or they could use their jet packs, I guess. The world is weird.

Thus, in the eternal search for funding for exciting things like rent, a new laptop, and enough to maybe squirrel some away for a wrinklier version of myself, I found myself standing outside one of the many, many sleek conference rooms in Stark Tower. Sure, they have a corporate history already, but not a good one. I could do better. I just had to convince them that a new one was not only needed, but something they should pay me for. Writing samples had already been submitted, CV reviewed, initial interviews completed. Today was the day. Today was the final interview with the higher ups in Marketing and PR. I was one of three candidates at this point. I think I did pretty well, assuming they don’t go with the flashy presentation from the razzle-dazzle marketing firm.

New York-slick I am not. Not that there’s anything wrong with that level of polish. I have two good suits and was wearing the black pant one. It was tailored and then re-tailored and still managed to look presentable. Small drop earrings and my necklace tucked into my dark red shirt. Stupid, patriarchal, uncomfortable, and once sexy-as-hell black leather heels that I’d buffed within an inch of their lives hugged my feet. I felt pretty good. Confident in a completely nerve-wracked kind of way.

It turns out that today was also the day that aliens descended upon New York.

General office buzz died down and one by one people in the office stood and went to the windows. After 9/11 and the introduction of the Hulk and Iron Man and various other powered people, New Yorkers were on high alert for the non-standard. Seeing cranky-looking giant armored space centipedes made us all stop and stare. Well that was certainly… non-standard.

One by one then all at once, as if there was a mental signal, we began running to the stairs. No thank you, no thank you. Not getting stuck here. The hallways were full of scared but impressively determined people. Stark obviously hired well. To help keep the crowds calm as the building occasionally shook, the security guards guiding us down the stairways repeated that the call had gone out to evacuate through the basements to the subway tunnels and away from the city.

Here’s the problem of being me. I’m nosy. OK. I’m nosy and stubborn. I’m nosy, stubborn, and have an admittedly overdeveloped sense of responsibility. What? Everyone has their issues.

“Is anyone hurt? I’m a First Responder. I can help!” I yelled at a security guard above the din of escaping people. “Can you hear me?”

Touching what I assumed to be an earpiece, he responded with, “Ma’am. Everything is under control. I need you to head downstairs.”

I laughed, not at all semi-hysterically. Oh sure. Angry alien-spewing death robots are flying by and occasionally colliding with the building, but we’re cool. Security Guy was jostled and swept along down the stairs with the crowd. Jostled right out of his earpiece.
Damnit. I had to know. Someone could be hurt.

Picking up the small device, I pressed it into my ear, wincing at the volume. “Get ‘em down the stairs and out. Levels 1-40 almost clear and 40+ headed south.”

I sighed, momentarily boneless with relief. Thank God.

“Negative. One civilian sighted on the roof. In need of evac and medical.” “Get as many out as we can. Count the negs later.”

The roof?! What in all that is holy is someone doing on this roof?! This roof that is so very many stories up? They couldn’t just leave him there, not injured and alone.

With legs pumping, I was two floors up before the shoes had to go into my jacket pockets. What? Once upon a time they were expensive and I wasn’t about to leave them behind. On one floor, I ran in and found an office-worthy med kit near the break area. No real bandages, but some alcohol, gauze, and plastic stitches. Better than nothing. Being thrown against the cabinets with another building tremor was super fun. That is going to bruise for sure.

Up up up. I mean, I’m in decent shape from walking all over the city, but this kind of climb was not my thing. Dear God, I was going to die of asphyxiation before I got to the top.

“Damn aliens. Damn freaking tall buildings.” Wheeze. Is the oxygen thinner up here?

One more level to go. I stopped for just a minute to breathe and heard the building’s security alarm while searching for my phone. My bag and all my notes, presentation materials, and laptop had been abandoned below.

“This is not a test. The Emergency Broadcast System has been activated. If you are within broadcast distance of this signal, proceed to your nearest subway station and begin an orderly evacuation to the outer boroughs. Tune in to local news and radio stations for more information. This is not a test.”

Cool. Thanks Emergency Overlords. That doesn’t help me at all.

Taking a deep breath, I ran up the last flight of stairs, opened the door, and pushed out into the sunshine.

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So many questions. What is the world is that machine doing? Why is there more than one person up here? Why did it feel like I’d interrupted? Why is that woman wearing a black onesie? Where is the guy in need of med- ah, he’s there near the… spinning blue light machine thing opening up a hole in the sky. Whoa. Holy shit. Look at all those… aliens? Monsters? Dehydrated space demons?

Oh. Oh look. They’re staring at me now. Apparently, I just busted in and was standing there like an idiot. “Um, hi. We have to get out of here! If they hit the building any more, it could fall. And that is not how I choose to die.”

Ignoring the stares of the redhead, I moved to the older man sprawled on the floor and tried to assess his condition. Not looking at the edge, not thinking about how far down it goes. Not doing it. “Sir, can you stand?”

He frantically waved me away. “Go! Get back! There’s nothing you can do here.”
I heard the woman talking but it didn’t seem aimed at us. “Sir, I’ve just climbed more stairs than any sane person is supposed to climb in a day. At least let me help you.” He seemed to deflate a little and let me approach him. He had a pretty good bump on his head that was bleeding a little and maybe a few bruised ribs, but nothing life threatening.

We worked together to get him standing and I tried to move him over to the doorway, but he redirected us to a laptop stand in front of the machine.

“I think I can fix this! We can close the portal.” He turned to the other woman, “Take the sceptre and push it through the energy barrier to the Tesseract. The beam will be disrupted and the portal should close.”

Ah, the beam. I’d been so focused on my patient that I hadn’t allowed myself to really see what I’d walked into. It was oddly beautiful. The beam was a brilliant clear blue that pushed up up up into a sight that absolutely took my breath away. On a roof at the top of the city, surrounded by strangers and aliens, I saw space. Actual black, starry space. It took me over. The pushing winds and screaming alien gliders and beam fell away to silence and stars.

A hand on my shoulder brought me back with a gasp. Turning to its owner, I discovered that she was right behind me. To the end of my days, I’ll be proud that I didn’t step back. This was one intimidating woman. We were almost the same height, but she seemed to tower over me. Unblinking and unflinching.

“Who are you?” She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head a little, making her look somehow even more predatory.

With a bright flash of light, the blue beam pulsed brighter. “We have to do this now! There’s no time!”

The woman picked up the large sword… ax… sceptre… thing and tried pushing into the force field surrounding the spinning cube. This was a Tesseract? What was it? More questions, no time for answers. This entire situation felt like a pop quiz that I’d forgotten to study for. Only with scary aliens and weighing stares.

She strained, trying to break through the energy barrier. Her feet slipped a little on the concrete flooring with the effort. I didn’t have to look up to see death pouring through the hole in the sky. I could feel it. Everyone left in Manhattan could probably feel it.

And just like that, I put my hands on the end of the scepter and pushed too.

Surprised eyes meet mine. “Like I said. This is not how I’m going to die.”

Under her breath, she said, “I don’t know. Could be worse. There could be meetings. And forms.”

“And Powerpoints!” I met her smirk for smirk.

Slowly, inch by maddening inch, the tip of sceptre pierced the barrier. It was like we were trying to push the damn thing through concrete.

“We can close it! Can anybody hear me? We can shut the portal down,” the redhead yelled so that those on her comms could hear. We were close enough together that I could occasionally make out someone speaking on the other end.

“A NUKE?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN THERE’S A NUKE COMING?!” Astonishment made my feet slip too. The sceptre retreated a few inches.
The woman next to me growled, “Don’t stop pushing! We’ve only got three minutes. Stark has a plan.”

“Stark? Tony Stark?” I pushed harder. “What is even happening today?!”

Laughing a little, she said, “Oh, you’ve got no idea.”

With just under three minutes to destruction, we edged ever closer to our goal.

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I almost missed the red blur that shot by us when she demanded, “WAIT! Stop pushing. He needs more time!” I thought pushing was hard but not pushing but not losing ground was agony. I don’t think I’ve ever felt every single muscle in my arms before. She began murmuring something to herself that sounded a lot like angry Russian. Within seconds, we were both shaking with the effort of almost but not touching the square.

“NOW!” We leaned and ground our teeth for the final effort.

Plink.

The blue corona that exploded from the square was a physical blow that knocked all three of us down and back. I lost track of the others when the back of my head hit the roof and the world twisted and roared. A few feet away, the sceptre teetered on the building’s edge, undecided if it would fall or stay. It took me two fast tries to stand before I wobbled forward to try to save it.

I tripped over something in my drunken path and missed the handle, pushing it so that it spun like fan blade. Shit! It was going over the edge! If it touching the Tesseract was explosive, what would happen when it shatters on the sidewalks below?!

Scrambling faster on hands and knees, I watched it tip over and start to fall. With a final, deeply uncoordinated lurch, I actually grabbed it!

Heat and shock and pain, so much pain. I heard myself cry out and felt muscles spasm. Before the world went black, it seared through me in blinding blue.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Dealing with the immediate aftermath, on a small scale.

The first thing that came back is the pain in my head. Breathing hurt. The sunlight was agony and I didn’t even have my eyes open. I groaned and it sounded very far away.

Someone else let out a low grunt and the world came crashing back. Keeping my eyes closed, I sat up slowly. After a minute or two when the spinning slowed, I dared a glance. Ten fingers, two arms, two legs. One black suit that would never see another tailoring. And one damn shoe that I’d tripped over. The scrapes, blisters, and bruises I’d take an account of later. If only everything wasn’t so loud. And so damn bright.

“Are you alright? Hey! Are you OK?” The man called out. He’d recovered quickly. The woman was already standing, seeming to shake off the explosion with remarkable alacrity.

“Dr. Selvig, come on. Let’s get you off this roof.” So they do know each other! She got him over to the door while I did my best impression of a newborn deer.

Gingerly handing him over to me, she looked me over. “You good?”

“Yeah, just a little shaky. Better than nuked, so I guess the plan worked then?”

“Ongoing.” She looked around, searching for something, and turned back to me. “Can you get him downstairs?”

Looking back at Dr. Selvig, I shrugged. “Yeah, he seems ambulatory. We can call for help in a few floors, I think. Let’s do this.”

She was gone. Like, poof - gone. I spun around trying to see if she was just behind me. Wow.

“She does that.” He gave me a little smile.

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I’m not sure how long the trek down the stairs took, thanks to our various bruises and general dizziness. A peek through glass lobby walls showed streets that looked a lot more like a war zone than city streets. We were shuffled into an already full subway car at the Stark Tower station beneath the building. Blessedly, the ride was fairly short and mostly quiet. It felt like the whole city was in shock.

Eventually, there were emergency personnel and help and water and somewhere to sit in the sunshine. Bliss.

The EMTs made their rounds. One confirmed Dr. Selvig’s bruised ribs and put in few stitches to close his head wound. I had a mild concussion and a few blisters and scrapes. We’d stayed together, familiar faces in this kicked ant mound of people.
I finished the rest of my water bottle and squared my shoulders. “Dr. Selvig do you have people coming for you to take you home? Do you need help finding them?”

“No. I’ve been sending texts and some of them seem to be getting through now. And you? Do you have people?”

“I’m OK. I thought I’d see if anyone around here needs help. Emergencies always need more hands.”

He stood slowly, extending his hand. “Speaking of which. Eric Selvig. I should say thank you to my rescuer...”

I couldn’t help but laugh a bit as I shook his hand. “All this time we’ve been together and I never introduced myself. My mother would be ashamed. Kate. Kate Wallace.” Our hands were gritty, but firm. “And I think we rescued each other.”

I double checked that he was OK and was in contact with his ride before we parted ways.

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It was a long walk home. A long, long walk. I’d worked my way up the chain of command at the triage site until I found someone that could point me in the direction where I could be most useful. It was remarkable. There were quite a few small injuries like sprained ankles and cuts from glass, but fewer true emergencies than I had expected. At least at this evac point. Whoever had organized the evacuation had gotten people out well before the majority were in true danger.

There were enough medical personnel and other First Responders that they forced some of us to get out from underfoot. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who’d done some training after the Towers. I’d wanted to stay but the headache I’d been ignoring and the efforts of the day hit me like a train. With no taxis, no busses running, the subway diverted to help with evacuation efforts, and no way to pay for them, I joined the army of walking zombies that trekked across Manhattan.

At least the elevator in my building was working. I don’t think I had another flight left in me. Since my keys were in my purse, the Super let me in. Sometimes, I just love that old man. As soon as the door was closed, I started stripping and hissed as the grit on my ruined suit brushed my scratched palms. Stumbling, already mostly asleep, I collapsed face down on my bed and passed out.

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Do you ever sleep so deeply that it takes a minute after you wake up to put together the pieces of your life? Looking around my bedroom, the day slowly came back to me. Oh right. Aliens. Hole in the sky to space. A nuke! Dr. Selvig, hope he’s OK. The Ginger Ninja. And the Tesseract cube. Blue. No wonder I slept so hard. I’d been a part of a scifi movie.

I sat up and immediately regretted it. Apparently, while I was sleeping, my body decided to give me all the aches and pains of a 120 year old woman. I had T-Rex arms and felt like I’d shoved a month’s worth of leg days at the gym into one afternoon. However, blessedly, the headache was finally gone. With slow, careful steps, I made it to the bathroom and flipped on the light.

Holy. Shit.

I was disgusting. I remembered a sci-fi movie, but apparently, I looked like I’d been chased in horror film. My hair was matted by some dried blood in the back, my skin was splotchy with dried sweat and dirt, and there were dark bruises from where I’d been shoved down. I was just grateful that they were bruises and not the broken skin that I thought I’d felt.
Hot showers really are just one of my favorite things ever.

After getting clean, inhaling a huge breakfast, and taking a couple of strong painkillers, I felt human again. Until I saw the news. My city was hurting, but this was New York. We weren’t about to let some blustery space invaders make our knees buckle. No, it was the footage of battle that was my first shock. THAT was what was going on below us as we dealt with the cube? No wonder the building kept shaking. The Hulk used it like a jungle gym. Once, I recognized a flash of ginger hair. There was a guy in a red cape fighting alongside… Oh my God. OH MY GOD, I could practically feel the Humanities professor inside my soul gasp. That was Captain America. THE Captain America. I guess they finally found him. Or was it someone dressed as him? Either way, my lessons on World War II were about to get a lot more student involvement.

Aliens, superheroes, and a man from history? The world was definitely a weirder place than the one I woke up in yesterday.

The second shock came as I was doing the breakfast dishes.

“I know, Tom. As many times as I watch this footage, I can barely believe it,” said the smooth voice of one news anchor to the other. “Coming up next, we look at how the recovery efforts of the last three days are affecting New Yorkers.”

I went cold. Three days?! No, that can’t be right. I rushed over to my desk and stared at where my laptop should be. No phone either. Damn it! Back to the television to look for the date on the channel guide.

FUCK.

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I’d slept for three days. THREE DAYS. I sat down heavily onto the couch and put my head between my knees and breathed deeply. No wonder I was so hungry. I didn’t even know people could sleep for that long at one time. Was it the concussion? That’s not a normal side-effect of a minor head injury, but yester-three days ago wasn’t a normal day.

Where is it? I couldn’t find the cut on the back of my head where I’d struck the wall. There was no bump even. The blisters on my feet were gone. Three days wasn’t that long but maybe it was enough for a bump and some irritated skin.

My hands wouldn’t stop shaking.
Chapter 3

Transportation had normalized while I was asleep, so the next morning I walked into a battered Stark Tower and tried to pretend like I’d never seen the roof. Just another worker bee, that’s me.

It was pretty impressive how many employees were already back at work. The lobby wasn’t quite as busy as the last time I’d been in it, possibly due to the demolition and construction outside, but there were enough people in it to see that business was getting back to normal already. For me, the news stations were kind enough to list what schools and universities had cancelled classes. No students until Monday. Extra days to get some grading done once I got my laptop back. Yay!

Charles, the named badged security guard at the front desk, was definitely a bouncer in another life. “Can I help you with something ma’am?”

“I was here the other day, during the, um, the attack and I left my phone and things in the conference room. Do you have a lost and found or something?”

Charles looked at me briefly before handing me little name badge of my own. Visitor. “All abandoned items have been moved to the second floor security office, just in front of the elevators.” And with that, he’d already turned to the next person in line. OK then, not the first time today that he’d answered that question.

I stepped off the elevator and almost directly into the next line of people. Seriously? There had to be 30 people in line and we weren’t even inside the actual security office. With a sigh, I joined the end of the line and tried not to feel underdressed. I hadn’t really anticipated being in the building very long, so I hadn’t dressed up. My dark gray button down and distressed (OK, old and “well loved”) skinny jeans were tidy. Fortunately, my favorite pair of red Chucks were comfortable and fairly free of construction dust. It was a ponytail kind of day and the heat had given my auburn hair a bit of a wave. My side-swept bangs weren’t glued to my face yet though, which was a plus. A quick check in the reflection from an “Innovation is who we are!” framed poster showed that my makeup was still in place. The slight sunburn from the roof and subsequent walk home had been replaced with a bit of a tan. Not too bad. If I ran into anyone from the university, I could hold my head up.

We’d moved all of 2 people forward. With no phone to play with, I opened the paperback I’d shoved in my back pocket, pushed the pen I used as a bookmark into my ponytail, and lost myself in the history of Operation Dynamo.

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By the time I’d made it inside the security office and actually up to the desk, I had an entire week’s worth of lesson plans written on the book’s flyleaf - how the interplay of politics, media, homefront programs, and even music of the time helped shape the outcome of the operation. Seriously, books are so much better than phones.

“Name.”

“Kate Wallace.”

“Floor you left your belongings on.”

“I didn’t leave them, they just didn’t come with me.”
The efficient woman behind the desk blinked at me.

“Sorry, I think it was 74? Conference room 7424B.” I know it was because it took forever to find and I was nearly late to my interview.

The woman typed the information into her computer and frowned at me. “You said your name was Kate Wallace?”

“My whole life.” I could feel the man behind me shuffle impatiently.

She squinted at me and picked up the phone by her screen. “This is Anya on Security 2. There’s a note in this file to call this number if someone came to pick up Kate Walla-. Yes ma’am. Right here. Security 2. Yes ma’am.” Hanging up the phone, she nodded to the wiry security guard that had been leaning on the wall beside the office door and then to the door behind her.

“Look. I don’t know why you had to call someone. I just need my stuff and I’ll go. Seriously, no big deal.” What was going on? A small voice in my head hoped that they wanted me to wait so someone in HR could tell me that I’d gotten the job. A more practical voice argued that something was about to happen and it probably wasn’t what I wanted to hear.

“Please come with me ma’am,” Wiry asked, although it wasn’t much of a question.

“Is there something I should know? Is everything OK?”

He held open the door for me. Well, at least he was polite about separating me from the crowd.

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I didn’t have to wait long before the security private office door opened. A polite young woman relayed that she was there to where my things were stored upstairs. One awkwardly silent elevator ride later, she shuffled me along to yet another Stark conference room. After I declined her offer of water or coffee, I was left to my own devices.

I was higher up than when I’d interviewed. It was quiet and, after a few minutes of waiting, kinda boring. The view from the floor to ceiling windows was too great to ignore. It was a fantastic vantage point to see the scope of the repair work being done far, far below. I got close to the glass and tried to see down as far as I could. A wave of dizziness had me step back, close my eyes, and take a few deep breaths to settle a flare of panic. I never used to be afraid of heights. But then, I’d never dangled myself over the edge of one of New York’s tallest skyscrapers to catch a spinning scepter either.

The door swung open again. This time it was not the polite young woman, but the Ginger Ninja.

“Hello. Admiring the view?” She joined me by the windows. The fact that she was wearing normal clothes didn’t make her any less intense.

“As long as you look out and not down. Good to see you again.”

She agreed with a low hum. Her face grinned at me. Her eyes did not and a welcoming hand did not reach out to take mine. OK, not a warm and fuzzy kind of lady. That’s cool. It isn’t like we helped to close a hole in space together or anything.

We made polite, if somewhat stilted, small talk for several minutes while I tried not to stare at expertly disguised cuts on her lovely face. Turning back to the view, she commented, “This city is crazy. Do you know, I was approached by a morning show about what happened? They’ve
promised an on-air interview and maybe some online articles.”

I gaped at her. “Really? Don’t they have enough coverage already?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Everyone should get their 15 minutes, don’t you think?”

I watched the construction for minute before answering. “If that’s what you want, then go for it.”

“So I shouldn’t see if I can get an interview for you too? I have the producer’s number somewhere,” she said patting her pockets.

“No. I’m good, but thank you. I don’t have anything to say would help New Yorkers sleep better at night.” I shrugged. “And besides, if my students found out… they have a hard enough time concentrating without introducing my experience to their orbit.”

She stilled beside me. Turning to face her, I was held in the tractor beam of her gaze.

“So you’re a teacher that can keep a secret?”

“I didn’t realize that it was a secret. But yeah. I deal with confidential information, so it’s just one more conversation not to have.” Granted most of my previous experience with keeping secrets revolved more around student information and those of my own discretion. This would be my first secret involving an averted nuclear attack on American soil.

This time when she smiled, her eyes did too. “Perfect.”

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Ginger Ninja, who finally introduced herself as Natasha, guided me down a rabbit warren of hallways and to a new set of elevators. She texted on one of those new sleek Stark Phones. After pressing her hand against a silver plate on the wall, she turned back to me as the elevator doors swooshed open.

“Your stuff is just up a couple of levels.” The doors closed and the elevator began to ascend.

“No buttons. How does it know where to go?”

She shrugged and tilted her face up just a little. “Oh he knows.”

He? Oooook. Handprint security doors, buttonless elevator, unknown destination. Queue creepy music. Was my laptop really worth all this? Yes, damnit. Grades were due soon, all my passwords were all nice and programmed so I didn’t have to remember them, and there were important documents and photos that I didn’t have anywhere else. I really needed to backup more often. And besides, that laptop was the first thing I’d bought with my savings years ago; I loved it. “Look, I’m putting a lot of trust in a relative stranger here. You seem lovely but for all I know, you’re taking me out back to whack me,” I joked. “I just need my bag and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Whack you? Are we in an 80s gangster movie?” She smirked a little. “No whacking. At least not today.” Comforting.

The elevator doors opened and we stepped out into what could have been an entirely different building. This didn’t so much look like a lobby as a very, very large living room. High ceilings, modern furnishing, and a light breeze. I stopped, absolutely gobsmacked. Sure the sofas looked expensive, but they were covered in clear tarps and pushed aside to make room for the makeshift workbenches and blueprints. The window letting in the breeze was completely missing in several places and the floor… the dark floor had body-sized gouges in its marble circled in yellow safety
What the hell had happened here?!

“I - what - how - ?” I pointed around the room to ask, but Natasha had already made her way across the room and I had to rush to keep up.

Knocking on the glass door while opening it, Natasha strode into a conference room cum office. Computer and machine parts littered the sizeable conference table, sitting next to more blueprints, empty snack bags, tools of various sizes and shapes. The chair was empty.

Natasha narrowed her eyes and sighed. “He couldn’t sit still for 5 minutes? Excuse me.”

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My messenger bag was by the door. While I waited for Natasha to return, I checked to make sure that everything was inside. No luck on checking messages. My phone’s battery didn’t register. Oh well. Any messages had been waiting and could still sit for a bit. The knot that had formed inside my chest finally loosened. It was all there.

I settled the strap across my chest as a familiar, if battered face walked stiffly into the room. Seeing me, he spoke into his phone, “I have to call you back.” Where Natasha was all restraint and watchfulness, Tony Stark practically bubbled with energy.

The handsome genius stayed in the doorway, blocking me in. “I don’t remember hiring a new cleaning crew. That is what you’re doing right, cleaning out, I mean up, my office?”

“Well, you haven’t hired me yet. I’m still waiting on that call back.” I reached into my bag and showed him my phone. “Although my phone is dead, so who knows.”

He left the doorway and took a quick peek into the bag. “What, no Stark Tech? I’m hurt.”

I grinned. “I promise I’m not here to clean you out, Mr. Stark. Natasha brought me up here to get my stuff. I’ll get out of your way. Hey-“ He snatched my phone and put it on a charging plate. It immediately booted up and started drawing power. Neato.

Acknowledging the phone purloinment, he continued, “While we wait for Miss Romanov.”

I stepped forwards the billionaire, “I just, um, I just wanted to thank you Mr. Stark for what you did the other day. That was incredibly selfless-”

“Selfless is what I do. What was it that I did again? The new wing at the children’s hospital? Paying off the school loans for the engineering students at MIT? I really am a giving guy.” He rifled through some documents on his desk.

Wow. Somehow both a huge brag and an amazingly philanthropic statement. And I’d dropped two dollars in a homeless man’s cup this morning. Yeah. I was totally out-leagued.

“She means the nuke.” Natasha was back.

Tony stilled and hung his head a bit, saying almost bashfully, “Oh.”

I blinked at him. Suddenly, before me stood not the billionaire braggart, but someone that genuinely didn’t know how to acknowledge sincere thanks.

“Wait, what? We’re just telling state secrets now? Because if we are, I have a few doozies that
make for great bedtime stories.” Aaaaand just like that, the mask was back.

“She was the one on the roof with me, Tony. Kate Wallace.” Two considering sets of eyes stared into me.

Ping. Pingping. Ping p-p-p-p-p- ping! Saved by the cellphone.

“Well someone is popular.” Mr. Stark handed me my phone. Seriously? A 60% charge in, what, three minutes? Maybe Start Tech was on something.

“Oh you know, no rest for the wicked,” I murmured, scrolling through the messages. Including one from Stark Industries.

We regret to inform you…

Isn’t that just peachy.

Extra glad I got my laptop back now since it would be a while before I could replace it. Money wasn’t tight exactly. I had a rainy day fund. It was just better prepared for spring showers than thunderstorms. Maybe I could pick up another class or two next semester to try and make up the difference. So much for a little breathing space this summer.

I certainly wasn’t going to bum out in this room. That’s for later. When I’m not with a captain of industry and a ninja.

“It’s not often I’m ignored. Kind of a new sensation.” Straightening my back, I looked up from my phone to see Mr. Stark almost scenting the air. “I don’t like it. Feels like… normal. Why would anyone choose this?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. It was time for me to go. Keeping my tone light, “Well Mr. Stark, you know what they say. Some are born normal and some have normality thrust upon them.” I faced the two of them. “Thank you for keeping my stuff safe. And my city too.”

“And you, for the you know, roof assist.” I nodded at Mr. Stark, but he’s already turned back to his machine pieces. OK then.

Natasha’s grip was firm and I couldn’t help but smile at the guarded woman. We’d made it to handshaking! Next, the moon!

As I walked back to the elevator, I looked back and saw Mr. Stark through the glass. He was staring out the door with a serious expression and playing with a pen in his hand. If I wasn’t unnerved before, I certainly was now. That was a mind at work.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Some brief violence in this chapter. Also, I’ve added initials to text messages to help keep the conversation train on its tracks.

Things went back to normal. Well. As normal as NYC can get after an alien attack and learning of the existence of demigods. After a few months, the Avengers hubbub died down a bit after its team members scattered to the wind for a while, but never truly went away. They became part of the new normal.

It was easy enough to fall into routine again and I got too busy to dwell on things I couldn’t say or couldn’t explain. Morning classes, office hours, subway across town, afternoon classes, dinner from a nearby takeaway, grading and lesson planning until late, news or tv until bed. Rinse and repeat. Sometimes I allowed myself to be dragged along to a bar with colleagues or what few friends tolerated my hermitting ways. Yes. A very exciting life, I know. Most days I didn’t mind. I truly loved teaching.

Occasionally, and especially on the days when I altered my routine and walked through the park or did something truly crazy like window shop, I’d get an uneasy feeling. There was never anything or anyone over my shoulder. No shady figure under a lamplight or sinister laughter from the dark. Sometimes, I just felt like someone was watching. I never felt physically unsafe. Like if I looked hard enough, stared into reflections like they were one of those impossible 3D pictures, I’d see it. And as quick as I’d realized it was there, the feeling would pass.

And so did time. I saw an enormous number of Iron Mans… Iron Men?... Hulks, and Captains America over Halloween. And, eventually, a Natasha.

She came behind a group of kindergartners that lived in my building and rang the bell with an amused, “Trick or treat.”

I opened the door to her and greeted with a, “Interesting company you keep these days. A bit shorter than the last guy I saw you with.”

A laugh! Real and everything. Yep. Badasses come to visit me and I make them laugh. No big deal.

“They’re about the same emotional age, so I hardly noticed.” Natasha took a piece of candy from the bowl.

Realization. “You know where I live.”

“Nice place too. Pre-war?” She could basically see the entirety of my living space from where she was standing. Her appraisal was somehow both flattering and unnerving. Sharp eyes missed nothing, I was sure.

“Yeah. I like the character of the place and the light. Hey. So. What’s up?” I needed a beer. Visiting ninjas warranted a beer, right? She nodded when I offered her one too.
“Oh you know. I was in the neighborhood.” The doorbell rang again and I passed out more sugar. Not the good stuff though. The good stuff was just for me.

Natasha had made herself comfortable on the sofa and was idly leafing through my grading stack. “How are classes? That module on the Berlin Wall seemed to go over well. I liked that you kept 99 Luftbalons in the original German. It loses something in translation.”

“That was a fun one. The kids really respon-” I froze, bottle halfway to my mouth. “IT WAS YOU! You were the one watching me!” I was on my feet. I knew I wasn’t crazy!

She raised an eyebrow at my sudden stance. “Not always me. We had to keep an eye on you. Saying that you can keep secrets is entirely different than actually doing it.”

I sat down again. Feeling like I was being watched was entirely different from knowing it. “Oh. Yeah. I said I wouldn’t, so… I didn’t. And if I had loose lips?” Her casual posture tightened for a moment. Ah. “Fair enough, I suppose.”

We drank and each sank more into our seats. The trick-or-treaters had tapered off. Natasha sighed and leaned her head on the back of the sofa.

“How are classes?” I was as surprised as she was that I’d asked. “It isn’t my business, but you just seem… worn out I guess? Do I need to use my teacher voice on Mr. Stark? I’ll bring out the wagging Finger of Doom too!” Teacher Voice was just one step below my ultimate weapon - Angry Teacher Voice.

She gave a genuine smile. “No, Tony’s just Tony. I can handle him, hyperactivity and all. Getting everyone to play nicely together is a different thing entirely. I’ve been in interrogation rooms that are more fun. We’ve just been busy since…” She shrugged. “Well, since.”

“I can imagine.” I barked a laugh. “Actually, I probably can’t. I only see the stuff that makes the news and not everything you do makes the news.” We shared a conspirator’s grin.

Her phone buzzed and she stood. “My ride is here.”

“Natasha, not that I don’t appreciate you giving me some trust, but why tell me now?” I couldn’t let her leave without knowing.

“There aren’t many people that know what almost happened that day. Having someone trustworthy these days is important. And probably more important soon.” OK. That wasn’t foreboding or anything. My stomach now resided in my shoes. She broke the serious atmosphere with a smirk and said, “Tony hates the company SI hired for the corporate history by the way. If only there was another option.”

I closed and locked the door, quietly reviewing what had just happened. Her ride! I rushed over to the window, opened it as wide as I could, and leaned out - just in time to see her slide onto a motorcycle behind a large man and drive away.

***

I slammed my door closed and locked the door with shaking hands, leaving a red smear on the wood. With arms wrapped around my possibly-cracked ribs and sinking to the ground, I cried until I couldn’t breathe. And then I cried some more. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

~20 minutes earlier~
I was shocked down to my core that I was enjoying this. I was not the kind of girl that ‘went for a run.’ My running outfit wasn’t cute, color coordinated, or flirty. I always thought I’d fit in more with the kind of girl that was vaguely pissed off about having to wake up at the crack of dawn to put on gym clothes that doubled as clothes to wear while painting a wall instead of being asleep like a rational human being. And yet, here I was. Enjoying the burn in my legs and the early November air in the park. Earbuds in and feet pounding in time to ZZ Ward as she dared him to Move Like U Stole It. Go me! Maybe if I did this more, I wouldn’t be the sad, slow gazelle the lions would eat first. Who knew!

Not too long ago, the sun had finally given up and let the night roll in. The park was quiet and fairly empty, which was perfect for ending my lap with a single-woman race to the street. I totally won (and also lost, but I ignored that). The cooling temperatures felt good as I stretched as I walked home.

I was so involved in the music and my post-run cool down walk/stretch that I didn’t see the two figures leaving an alleyway and falling into step behind me. I missed them walking faster until there was one on either side. And when the one closest to the building grabbed my arm, he used my surprise to pull me behind a dumpster and hissed at me to shut up.

The stone wall was rough as my head ricocheted off it. It was easy for them to push my flailing arms away, because I was seeing four of them. I tried to call out for help and a sharp slap split my lip and I tasted blood. I was down on hands and knees and the full weight of what was happening fell on me. I was out-numbered, out-muscled, and out of view from the street. Hard hands grabbed the armband with my phone off my bicep and I foolishly scrambled to get it back, exposing my middle. A hard kick to the ribs brought me low and I curled up to protect against the next one. Other hands gave me a thorough pat down, finding the scant cash I kept in a side pocket of my leggings.

Second to the pain of the beating was the serious fear of what could happen next. They’d shown no interest in anything but my belongings, but the lizard part of my brain had taken over and I was all emotion. Pain. Fear. I was hurt. I wanted to run away as far and as fast as I could. And under all of that was a layer of shocked, growing rage. How dare they? How DARE they? I’d lived in this city that I loved for years, quietly living my life, never hurting anyone. I was a good person. I taught young adults how to think bigger than their neighborhoods and experiences. I paid my taxes and voted. I learned how to help people in pain. I freaking helped close a hole in space!

Another kick caught my arm, rather than my ribs, but it was my hands that burned. Fire ants crawling under my skin, eating away at my nerves. I gasped as the feeling spread up my arms.

They actually took a step back as I screamed. A hand raised to slap me again and I had had ENOUGH. Fear and pain and the fact that I was kneeling faded away and all I saw was blue.

***

~Back to Present~

Once my heart rate had regained more of its normal rhythm, I scraped myself off my entryway and went to shower on autopilot. As the numbness faded and my first aid kit was put back under the bathroom sink, I began to breathe again. Or tried to anyway. There was no makeup that would cover this up. I looked exactly like what I was - someone who had just experienced a severe mugging. And in what would be the first of many times, I was grateful for bags of frozen peas and Ace bandages.

I wanted to call the only person in my life who had any kind of experience with real violence and whateverthell had happened before I ran away.
But I didn’t have her number. And besides, what would I have said anyway? “Hey Nat, listen, I was just mugged and maybe killed two guys by hitting them with a big blue wall. Call me back when you have a mo? Cool, thanks. Best to Tony.”

At this moment in time, I would have been my most sophisticated and erudite self with, “Natasha, hey. It’s me. Kate. Kate Wallace. Call me when you have a minute. Or not, if you’re, um, busy. OK. Yep. Bye.”

I went to bed and didn’t leave the apartment for a week. By the time I did, I was fully healed and was fairly certain that what I’d seen had been a result of shock and desperation.

We are the best liars when we lie to ourselves.

***

Thank God it was Thanksgiving. It was more difficult this year to keep the kids focused on major events of the last century when the entire world was wondering about the future. It was hard to blame them. Natasha as Oracle was a worrying thing, but nothing seemed to be exploding. At least that the public was hearing about.

I was out of steam and on the tail end of yet another migraine. They’d been happening quite a bit since the mugging, a scant two weeks ago. Physically, I was fine. I hadn’t quite stopped flinching when something moved in the corner of my eye, but I’d get there. I’d changed my routine to run in the morning or at lunch. Without headphones.

There had been invitations to Thanksgiving celebrations extended, but holidays were for families and since I didn’t speak to mine, I was happy to do my own thing. What I’d really wanted was to sleep late, watch the parade, and have a threesome with my sofa and an entire pumpkin pie. Where no one could judge me for breaking out into occasional dance with the performers and eating Reddi-Whip straight from the can.

A third of the way through my pie and happy with my yoga pants decision, I got a text.

Watching the parade?

Blink.

Maybe. Who is this? (KW)

Your favorite trick-or-treater. (NR)

Ah. I see you have my number. Tony? (KW)

Like I need his help. Plans tomorrow? (NR)

I paused to watch Spongebob loom over the bundled-up population below like a giant square god visiting his zealots.

Thinking about going to the park for a while to enjoy it before there’s snow. Good people watching tomorrow. (KW)

Good people watching now. ;) (NR)

The Ginger Ninja sends winky faces? Sure. Why not. Speaking of people watching:

Were you around two weeks ago? Was anyone in my part of town? (KW)
I nibbled on the end of my fork while I awaited her response.

*No. Dealing with an upstart. Why?* (NR)

*Just checking.* (KW)

*Tony wants to see you tomorrow. Follow up interview. Told you he hated them. Security will let you in. 2:00.* (NR)

Well now. I raised my Reddi-Whip in triumph. A chance at redemption!

*Why through you and not HR?* (KW)

*He doesn’t like them either. I already told him you’d be there.* (NR)

*Sweet bike, btw. Vintage?* (KW)

*Just the driver.* (NR)

*See you tomorrow?* (KW)

*Assuming Tony’s ego doesn’t burst through the rest of the building.* (NR)

? (KW)

*Keep watching.* (NR)

Oh sweet rocket thrusters, there was an Iron Man balloon.
Thank you for the kudos and comments! They make my day.

Also, First Responders are amazing. I hope I’ve treated them and those who risked themselves that horrible day kindly.

What in the world do you wear to a follow-up interview when the last time you interviewed there, your suit was destroyed during an alien invasion? Feathers? An Iron Man shirt? A backpack filled with emergency supplies and a road flare? In the end, I decided on a mirror of what I wore last time but in navy and purple. Because you just don’t wear flip flops to a meeting with a billionaire. Not even this billionaire.

Super glad that I left early, thank you multitudes of Black Friday shoppers. Not even extraterrestrials will stop a good sale hunter! This time, Security knew who I was and was waiting for me. That he silently walked me to the elevators and used his palm print to activate the elevator before stepping out wasn’t intimidating at all. Nope.

This place is like Wonderland, everywhere I went seemed to have a different personality. This level was definitely Alice meeting the Caterpillar. There were a series of conference rooms, each with frosted glass walls. Standing in front of mine was my own Cheshire Cat. Curiouser and curiouser.

Natasha looked good. I mean, she always looked good, but she seemed more relaxed than I’d seen her. No handshake this time, but a full, welcoming smile instead.

“Hey. Ready?” A woman of many words, this lady.

“I mean, the bar is pretty low for interviews at this point right?”

She went to open the door for me and paused. “Show no fear.” WHAT?!

And with that, the Cat brought me before the Caterpillar and his friends before joining them. That’s right. Because a job interview with Tony Stark wasn’t stressful enough, he brought buddies. Buddies that had been on the news. Buddies with superpowers. Buddies, I gotta say, who really raised the attractiveness ratings in this building.

Holy shit. I was interviewing before the Avengers.

***

Show no fear. Show no fear. My mantra. What wasn’t I afraid of that I could concentrate on? Pancakes? Delicious, but not applicable. The NYC subway system. Moot here. A room full of students? Yes! That’s the one. Imaging an audience naked was never helpful, but superimposing a student status to each of the people before me did a lot to calm my nerves.

“Natasha says that I should hire you. Granted, she said it with a threat of bodily harm, but she seems to like you.” The Cat in question rolled her eyes.
“Well Mr. Stark, there’s no accounting for taste.” A sandy-haired man I didn’t recognize smirked, but said nothing.

“Eric Selvig even reached out and recommended you. Said you were smart and steady. And he’s really more Thor’s contact than mine, so that was a random call to get. I’m not even sure how he got my number. I have to give Prince Valiant more credit, I didn’t think he was exactly touch screen savvy.”

Sure. Of course this surreal discussion included the casual mention of Nordic demigods using cellphones and not, say, the traditional inquiries into where I saw myself in five years or my writing strategy for a project this size. Totally normal.

“Dr. Selvig? That was kind of him.” I’d often wondered how the older academic was doing. I’d Googled him and was tempted to reach out but had made that “no spilling the beans” promise to Natasha.

“Yep, he’s a peach.” He ‘hmmed.’ “If you’ve watched the news at all, you know Dr. Banner and Captastic over there.”

Dr. Banner gave an awkward smile and a little wave. Captain Rogers just gave a nod and mumbled, “Ma’am.” I made eye contact with each and tried not to linger. Didn’t want to seem like I was in awe. But I was. Yep. Little bit.

“Then Barton and Romanov.” Ah, the sandy-haired man.

As Mr. Stark pushed at the tablet in his hand and screens jumped to life on the large monitors behind me, I tried to jump in. “Hello, I’m-”

He stood and leveled that intense stare again on me again. “Let’s just take a look at what they like so much, shall we?” Typing, typing. “Dr. Kate Wallace. Born in nowheresville New Hampshire, oldest of three bouncing babies to Rose and Alistair.”

“Hey! How did you get those?” Flashed up on the screen were family pictures of the five us, all smiles. These weren’t public photos. That sneaky bugger! “You broke into my laptop!”

“You left it in my building. Accepted on scholarship to NYU at 16. Graduated with departmental honors. Awarded a little thing called the Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford where you drank tea with your pinky in the air and did postgraduate things.” More photos flashed up, many of which I knew weren’t in my personal files. This was beginning to feel a little intrusive. “PhD in Humanities with a focus on modern history. Dissertation entitled…” He stopped to read it off his tablet like it wasn’t already memorized. “How shifting syncopation and harmonization of interconnected cultural systems affect human social evolution in twenty first century America.” He paused. “What, did you use that entire year abroad to come up with that title?”

Right. He’s THAT kid in the class. Give that kid an inch and he’ll lose all respect for you. Be bold, Wallace! “Well, sir. I apologize for not having a single equation, robot, explosion, or Stark Girl in the paper, but it did exactly what I needed it to do.” Too much?

“You’re quite sassy for someone being interviewed in front of heroes. And I’m not done yet. What do you do after all that exemplary scholarship? Join a think tank? Head a humanitarian non-profit? Make millions in the private sector advising corporations on how best to lure impressionable new buyers? No. You accepted Columbia’s paltry offer, made tenure early, teach additional classes at City College, live in a one bedroom in Morningside Heights, trained to be a First Responder, and occasionally run upstairs when everyone else is rushing down.”
We stared at each other, taking measure.

“That was you? On the roof?”

I turned, realizing that one of the others had spoken during Mr. Stark’s soliloquy. It was the Captain. He was sitting forward in his chair, elbows on the table, and expression focused and serious. Oh my.

“Yes.” I’m so lyrical sometimes.

“And you’re a First Responder. Why? You seem pretty busy already.”

After a deep breath, I said, “9/11. I was a junior at NYU when the attack happened. The whole city was… As soon as I graduated, I got certified. With everything all those people did… What right do I have to do any less?”

It got quiet again.

Bringing it back to the interview, Mr. Stark asked, “When you picked up your impressively out-of-date paperweights a few months ago, why didn’t you ask me for the job then? You got the email while I was standing there. It was the perfect time to pull that string.” He had that look again.

I shrugged. What kind of person did he think I was exactly? “That’s not, look. If this is going where I hope it’s going and you’re going to offer me this job, don’t do it because of what happened on the roof. Do it because you like my writing or because you are enjoying this little interplay we’re having, which I can tell you are, or even because you want to see how long a title I can give SI’s history. But don’t do it if you think I haven’t earned it. I don’t want it that way.”

He was smiling in a way I found to be disconcerting.

“Sorry, I soap box when I get all fired up.”

One by one, Mr. Stark collected nods from around the table. “I’m not hiring you for the SI history job.”

“Oh. OK.” That spun me a bit. What was this song and dance all about then?

“I’m offering you a different job. One where you get to interact with me everyday, so it is everyone’s dream job. And also these paragons of…” gesturing vaguely at the table, “lesser things.”

“Tony.” Dr. Banner looked exasperated. Whereas I was just confused.

“I want you to shadow us, Earth’s mightiest heroes, and tell our story, warts and all.”

Whoa. “Your story?” Apparently when I’m flummoxed, I lose any attempt at complex speech.

“We all agreed, and once you’ve spent any time with us you’ll understand what a big deal that is, that we need someone who could understand us and what we’re doing while also having unimpeachable qualifications and the ability to construct a sentence. While also not being a huge downer. The next few years are going to see change and threats on a scale that hasn’t been seen maybe ever. Someone needs to record what happens, what we do, and why. We won’t be able to do our jobs if they see us as the bad guys.”

“...You think I get you?” This was a lot to digest.
Natasha answered, “Yes. You do.”

I digested that. It’s true. “I do.”

“You’re taking the job.” Mr. Stark was so sure. I had to poke him.

“Probably.”

“Probably?!” He was gratifyingly aghast.

“Well we haven’t talked terms yet. What if what your demands are unreasonable?”

“UNREASONABLE?!” He spun to face the assembled group. “OK, you can go now. This isn’t
going to be pretty.”

Almost as one, they settled back into their chairs. Barton snuggled down and said, “Oh no. I’m not missing this.”

***

It ended up being a rather… spirited… negotiation. “OK, I can agree to start on Monday, but I’m
finishing out the semester. And I’m keeping my classes next term; they’re already on the books.”

“You’re going to be too busy for undergrads. If you haven’t heard, I’m kind of a handful.” He said
it with almost no sense of irony. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Mr. Stark, of that I have no doubt.”

“It’s Tony. I only make the women I date call me Mr. Stark.” That roused a few snickers from
around the table. “Start Monday, finish the semester, 1 class in the spring.”

I eyed him, looking for an opening. “I’ll arrange for a colleague to take my classes at City College.
3 classes in the spring, no summer school, 2 in the fa-.”

“Done.” He had a thing for cutting me off. He wrote on a piece of paper and flicked it over to me.
“Your salary.”

I stuck it in my pocket.

“You’re not going to look at it?” He seemed appalled on a fundamental level and sputtered when I
shrugged.

“I trust you.” He grunted and played with his stylus.

We shook hands and he left with a, “See you Monday.”

Dr. Banner and ‘Just Clint’ came up, congratulated me and shook my hand before they headed out.

Captain Rogers was so much taller than he seemed on television. “You did well with him, Tony.
Most people seem to just see Stark and immediately agree with what he says.” Firm handshake.
Small smile. “That was fun. Ma’am.”

I watched the super soldier walk away. I’d have to think on that.

When I turned to Natasha, she was watching me in that considering way of hers.
“What?” Stop looking into my brain like you can read my soul!

“Not sure yet.” She leaned against the conference table next to me and bumped my hip with hers. “Steve’s right. You did well.”

“Well. I had good backup.” I decided I liked Natasha. Underneath that tempered exterior was one cool chick.

She bumped my hip again and we headed out.

This was going to be fun.

***

In a partially full subway car, I reached for the paper in my pocket. With a deep breath I opened it and blinked hard. Two, three, four times.

With a whoop, I did my best Mary Tyler Moore air hat toss that crumbled into a wide Cabbage Patch. Sometimes you choose the groove and sometimes the groove chooses you.

Tony was quite the generous employer. Maybe I’d stop and pick up a new suit or two. And a new pair of heels. And a nice bottle of wine. And pay my phone bill.

I was so happy, I decided not to glare at the people who had backed up when I’d begun celebrating.

Chapter End Notes

I've been considering having occasional chapters from Steve's point of view, once I find his voice. What do you think? Good idea/bad idea?
You know what you never expect when agreeing to work for superheroes? Paperwork. Dear sweet holy God, so much paperwork.

Even my brand spanky new Stark Phone needed three forms. The biggest contracts I’ve ever seen in my life were the Non Disclosure Agreement and application for security clearance. I may have signed over my eternal soul, but I was so tired of reading legalese that I didn’t even care. For a tech firm, this was a lot of tree death. The picture on my company ID looked dazed because it was the second take. The first take wasn’t for the photo at all, but a retinal scan. Apparently, most people don’t pose and smile when having their eyes mapped and totally creep out the young guy holding the scanner. Weird.

A brusque woman from HR dropped me off at my new office. I mean. I know it was an office because there were chairs and a desk. However, that’s where the resemblance stopped and the feeling of being hazed took over. I had a strong feeling that in its previous use, this space was definitely a storage room. Beige walls were chipped in places. The back of the door had dents on the lower half. The overhead light and only source of illumination didn’t hum or blink, but certainly didn’t create warm fuzzies. The desk was actually enormous and was once a really nice piece furniture. As soon as I could, I was going to find something to shove under its back leg to stop it from wobbling. The guest chair had seen better days, but was surprisingly sturdy.

And yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that SI employees once used this room as a quiet, private retreat where, when the stresses of their jobs and their daily lives got to be too much, they could step away, close the door, and lose their shit. Having screamed their lungs raw and put new dents in the door and, I don’t know, murdered a hobo, they could return to their schedules with a fresh, clear outlook.

But the once-over I gave the room was nothing to the one the HR lady gave me. She obviously had questions for me and judging by her face, none of them cast me in a good light. I know, I know. I didn’t really have that designer Stark aesthetic and yet I was hired anyway. Go figure, fancy lady.

“IT will be here shortly with a laptop for you and after your security clearance goes through, you’ll need an updated badge.”

“I know this is a ridiculous question, but what exactly is my title?” All this time and all this paperwork and I still didn’t know.

She sniffed. “You’ll have to ask Mr. Stark that.” She handed me a Post-It and a key. “I was told that you need access to the historical file storage area. Here’s the room number and key to get in. No one goes there, so don’t lose the key. And don’t take the boxes home. They’re SI property.” She answered her phone and left me to my office.

I’d cancelled afternoon classes today so that I’d have time to settle in. With no computer and nowhere else to be, I headed out to find the historical file storage area.

***
You know why no one ever came here? It was halfway down a basement hall, out of sight of the elevators, right next door to any number of childhood nightmares. The structure and design were solid, clean and well lit, but the room gave me the heebie jeebies. If Natasha snuck up on me down here, I might have an actual heart attack.

Happily and somewhat shockingly, the lights didn’t horror-movie flicker. I stood and stared. Storage “area.” Not storage “room.” This place was not small. There were boxes of various sizes stacked on steel shelves nearly seven feet tall. There didn’t seem to be much of an organization system beyond an occasional date label, but that didn’t mean the years were sitting together. And there were easily 80-100 boxes.

My hand came back black from dust when I opened lids. Gross. I reached up to look in a box a the top and once again realized that the world was not designed for short people. With no ladder, a desire not to be knocked unconscious by a box falling on my head, or SHUDDER find whatever might be living on top of the boxes, I’d have to climb the shelves to get to high boxes. Racing out of Stark Tower while screaming and stripping like a crazy person because a spider fell down my shirt was not the first-day I wanted to have.

Or second-day. Or ever. I was going to have bring some paper towels, a lot of Windex, and Raid with me next time I came down here.

The silence was becoming a bit oppressive, so I put on a little phone music with my clean hand and hoisted myself up the shelves. Happily, the tops of the boxes were relatively creature-free. City dweller or not, I did not mess with mice. Or spiders. Really, anything smaller than a cat and I’m out.

Before I did anything in this room, it needed organized. I hummed along to my playlist and began pulling boxes.

***

Most of the boxes from the 40s, yes the 40s, were pulled and put into a pile near the door. I was itching to get into them, but promised myself that this room would be better organized before I got to examine the contents. #NerdGoals

Jamming out to the light vocals of Earth, Wind, & Fire where I too remembered the 21st day of September, I appreciated the way the music echoed off the walls and the slickness of the linoleum. I did a little smooth hustle and a tight spin and then felt my spirit briefly leave my body and the room tinge blue when there was a rap on the door. Instead of shrieking, my body decided to stage a gasp, forcing an inhale of a box top’s worth of dust. While my lungs tried to simultaneously cough and breathe, a large hand carefully patted my back.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!”

Goddamn it. It was he of the square jaw and beautiful baby blues, Captain Rogers. Way to play it cool. As soon as I could take a full breath again, I may just go throw myself into traffic.

Finally inhaling, I croaked out, “I’m fine, I’m fine.” He guided me over to sit on a stack of boxes. Which I promptly fell through.
With a butt stuck at the bottom of a box and knees pushed up to my chest, I started to giggle.

Captain Rogers was frozen, arms out like he was trying to catch me, handsome face completely flushed. “Are you- are you OK?!”

There was no holding in the laugh any more. The poor man looked mortified. When he saw I wasn’t hurt, his posture relaxed and he reached out to help me out.

“Yeah, I’m goo-oops!” I’d stood on spilled papers from the collapsed box and, being me, immediately slipped. There was no gentle giggle stage this time. I immediately went right to belly laughter. “And I’m back in the box!”

While Steve didn’t join me in my silliness, he did chuckle a bit. The smile was genuine though. It was a great smile.

“OK, let’s try this again.” He cleared a little space with his foot before helping me out. He held onto my hands this time until I was firmly planted and then stepped back, looking around. “What is all this?”

“Welcome to the Historical File Storage Area. Home of lost paperwork, Jabberwocky-sized cardboard questions, and somewhere, the Ark of the Covenant.”

He quirked an expressive eyebrow and said, “JARVIS said you were down here. Not exactly what you signed on for.”

I shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I think it has a little something.” We looked around at was now quite the mess.

“What are you doing down here anyway?”

“Excellent question. I’m kind of entertaining myself by organizing the…” I gestured vaguely. “Muddled memory of SI. You know what the lady says: Begin at the very beginning. It’s a very good place to start. Ideas don’t just burst forth fully grown like Athena. They start as marginalia and memos and scribbles on cocktail napkins. How can I do justice to the story of The Avengers without knowing how it started? How can we appreciate where we are and see where we’re going without remembering why we started.”

He looked at me a little strangely.

“Sorry. I did it again, didn’t it?”

“Nat really was right, wasn’t she?”

“I hope so, but then I suspect she’s almost always right.” That got a snicker.

“Tony and Nat are taking care of something. I heard you needed a tour. Do you have time?”

Grabbing my phone and locking up behind us, “For you Captain Rogers? Always.”

“Steve. Call me Steve.”

“Kate. Nice to meet you Steve.”

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“Oh hey, who’s Jarvis?”

“Good evening Dr. Wallace. It is good to meet you.”

I straight-up jumped. “What? Who?! Steve’s hands were clasped in front of him, his head bowed. Was he… he was! “I see you smirking at me over there, Captain Smirkypants. Now explain please!”

“Smirkypants? Really?” He’d given up trying to hide it. The stinker.

I could feel the heat in my face.

“Kate, meet JARVIS. JARVIS is Tony’s AI. He’s all over the building and in Tony’s suits. You can ask him just about anything.”

“He’s everywhere?”

“While you are in this building, you can request ‘Privacy Protocol’ and I will monitor only for emergencies or medical distress. I try not to intrude,” said the disembodied English voice. Robo-Butler was tres fancy.

“OK. I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you.”

“He’s actually pretty useful,” Steve added. “Like a talking encyclopedia.”

If JARVIS he seems crazy high-tech to me, I couldn’t imagine what Steve’s experiences have been like since he woke up. Was defrosted. Revived?

We stepped inside the elevator and I was surprised not to feel crowded by being in the small space with the big man. He seemed to be purposefully At Ease. Ah, default stance for uncomfortable people everywhere. I’m fine, I’m cool. Can this be over soon?

I finally focused on our reflections in the doors and blurted out, “OH MY GOD!” I was filthy. AGAIN. There was a black dust streak across my cheek where I’d been absentmindedly pushing the bangs out of my face, large dark smudges on my pant legs from wiping off my hands, and, as I turned around to check out my back, a huge dusty smear across my butt from where I fell. “Why didn’t you tell me?!” I tried hitting some of it off, but only seemed to make it worse.

The very polite man with the very large smile offered me a handkerchief from his pocket. “I thought you knew.” Yes. Playing in traffic was definitely on my to-do list now.

Hiding my face in the handkerchief, I said quieter, “Oh my God.”

I’d managed to improve the state of my face when the sass-machine next to me added, “You, uh, missed a spot. Kind of here-” He gestured to the rest of me and snickered.

I couldn’t help but snicker back. “Ya think?” Sighing, “Great, great first impressions on my first day.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just me.”

I stopped dabbing at my pants, risked a glance at him in the elevator doors, and digested that for a moment.
We exited on the floor where I’d met Tony for the first time. “Can you point me in the direction of a washroom please?” He gestured and I turned heel.

I managed to get most of the schmutz off my skin and my clothes, but Steve’s handkerchief was mostly black and gray now. Holding it in my hands, I tried to think of the last man who’d offered me a handkerchief. It had been a long, long time.

But then, Steve had been frozen for a long, long time. Simple gestures like this weren’t commonplace any more and, at least to me in that moment, only seemed to highlight how different he was. Not long after his return was announced, the news ran reel after reel covering the Smithsonian exhibit about Captain America and his Howling Commandos. Those men probably had handkerchiefs too. It would have been normal for them. And Steve was the last of them. I was no stranger to loss, but not on his scale. The thought was a sober one.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just me.” “Don’t worry about it. It’s just me.” “It’s just me.”

For a man who was admired by so many for his selflessness and bravery, he didn’t seem to believe it much. It hadn’t sounded like false modesty when he said it either. Actually, he’d said it like he meant “it’s just me.” No inflated pride, no iconic starred shield held in front. He was just Steve.

His offhand comment a few days ago about people only seeing Stark and not Tony was pretty telling too. Being seen only as one thing, be it Iron Man or Captain America, was incredibly limiting. Didn’t leave much space for the man behind the mask to have a life of his own.

I blew out a long breath. Just Steve was dealing with a lot. He didn’t need a writer drooling all over him like all the Captain America groupies outside. No matter how much his smile lit up his face or how strong his hands were in mine.

No. This was a man that desperately needed a friend. And, if I showed myself the same kind of honesty, I needed one too. Maybe if I was really, really lucky, I’d found a group of them.

So I dried off my hands, stuck the doomed cotton square in my pocket, pushed back my shoulders, and went out to start my tour.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Steve's first chapter! I'm curious/nervous/excited to hear what you think. He's a bit in his head for this one, but won't be forever.

The top floors of the Tower were unusually peaceful with most of the team on assignment. Bruce was tucked away in his lab and Steve was quietly enjoying a documentary in the common room and contemplating a run on his way home.

The last few weeks had been so focused on running down actionable leads for SHIELD, that even he needed a little down time. Which was why he’d been so irritated with Tony’s calling that Dr. Wallace needed a tour and was already in the building. Sure, she seemed competent and he’d really gotten a kick out of watching her spar with Tony. But damn it, he just wanted one day to himself.

With directions from JARVIS on where to find the woman, Steve’s grumpy mood evaporated upon finding her. Dancing. Enthusiastically. Between shelves of boxes. Not exactly the professional image she’d portrayed in the interview.

He watched in amusement for a minute or two before she finally turned and saw him. And then immediately began to choke in surprise. He could have sworn that her eyes had been dark, but they looked blue when he tried to help her inhale. Must’ve been a trick of the light because when he helped her out of the box, they were back to a deep brown.

She’d surprised him again in the elevator. Since the serum, not many people let loose in front of him, seeing the shield first. Which made her reaction to her reflection even funnier when she visually chased her own tail. He’d been trying not to notice the marks on her ass since he helped her out of the box. Any more than he’d noticed Natasha’s. Which he definitely had not. They were teammates of a sort now. And that meant something to him.

He wondered if he’d said something wrong when she rushed off to the washroom. Wouldn’t have been the first time he’d stuck his foot in it when talking to a woman, without really knowing what “it” was. Her expressive features had slipped into a look of serious contemplation but she came back in a… determinedly friendly mood. He wasn’t sure what had shifted and didn’t know her well enough yet to ask.

The tour had gone well, he thought. Steve had shown her the floors that her security clearance allowed, which were basically the gym, conference and strategy rooms, residential areas that were under construction, and common areas. All of which had been tastefully decorated for the holiday. It was kind of nice being on the more knowledgeable side of things for a change. He got so tired of feeling out of the loop.

The labs were off limits for now, so JARVIS had summoned the shy scientist for hellos. The PhD and MD seemed to hit off, discovering shared campuses and weighing the merits of their favorite campus bars. Unlike when Tony and Bruce were immersed in their science jibberish, she’d noticed that he was left out of the conversation and had extended and invitation to both men for the next time she went. It was nice. To be included that way.
Leaving to go way home, she held the elevator doors open and called out to him, “Hey Steve! Do you think Tony would care if I stop wearing suits to work? This job is going to cost me a fortune in dry cleaning!” The doors closed on his laugh.

***

Only a few minutes later, the doors opened to reveal another, more familiar redhead.

“You’re back early.”

“Got bored.” Natasha perched on the back of the sofa. “Ran into Kate on the way in. Said she had a productive first day and that you gave her a tour.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Show her anything interesting?”

Steve rolled his eyes and tried not to blush at her not-so-subtle innuendo.

“This is going to be a thing with you, isn’t it?”

“Getting you a date?” She smiled wolfishly but took pity on him. “What you you think? Strategically. Will she work out?”

He sighed, considering. “Like you said. It was her first day. She’s not even cleared yet.”

“Gut feeling?”

“You trust her.” At her nod, “Then that’s enough for now.”

***

Steve didn’t see much of their newest recruit for several days. New intel had come in that he’d been waiting for and it absorbed his attention. Occasionally, he’d see her in the mess, completely wrapped up in some file or talking with Natasha. He was a little impressed with the ease and speed with which she’d befriended the cagey spy.

Making friends had never come easily to him. He’d always been on the periphery, missing too much school to join groups and being too asthmatic to play sports. It had been Bucky that had decided that they were friends one day, much to Steve’s astonishment. And that one decision had ended up changing their lives.

Steve knew what Tony saw. The man was not subtle. They worked together well when it mattered, but he found the billionaire to be insufferable. Thor was a soldier; they understood each other. Clint and Bruce weren’t really around much, Bruce in his work and Clint just kind of evaporated between deployments. He’d once asked Natasha about where the eagle-eyed archer ran off to, but she’d gently told him to leave it alone. Natasha was… she was an incredibly capable partner. The few times she let the trained mask slip, he saw someone he liked and wanted to trust.

Even now, he was slow to socialize. The switch from a nobody to Captain America had been great in so many ways. But it had also backed up his theory that people responded to Cap, not Steve.
Slipping into the shield gave him purpose and a voice that was respected, followed. Even as it separated him from them. And few so far had tried to see the man behind it. Bucky had always seen him. Peggy too, all the way back to basic training. And God, he missed them. Everyday. He ached with it.

“Is this seat taken or is this a private brood?”

Steve’s head snapped up. Kate was standing across the table, a teasing smile on her face. He’d come up here to the smaller conference table on the Avengers private floor to escape eyes and noise and had, apparently, completely spaced out.

“I wasn’t brooding. I was focused. On, ah,” he tapped his computer but it had turned itself off. Shit. He closed the top and quickly asked, “How are you?”

She slid into a chair and sighed. “The Battle of the Boxes is nearing an end, I think. They’re finally organized enough to start really reading. I’ve opened some and it is a weird grab-bag time capsule inside. One from the 70s actually had a Twinkie in it.” She shivered.

Steve perked up at the reference. “Twinkies? They still make those?” He remembered the sweet treats being around when he was kid. Funny what sticks around.

“Oh sure. You can buy them just about anywhere. They’re an apocalypse staple. But I didn’t reaaaally believe their shelf life until today. How’ve you been? I haven’t seen you around.”

Steve drummed his fingers on the laptop. “We’ve been getting conflicting chatter out of Eastern Europe about a new cell…” He paused, smiled ruefully, and pointed, “That you aren’t cleared to hear about yet.”

She grinned back and he liked that it seemed authentic. “So same old, same old huh?” She had no idea. Taking a deep breath, “Does that mean you aren’t busy?”

He could feel his eyes narrowing. “Why? This feels like a set up.”

She nodded vigorously. “Oh this is totally a set up. You’re tall and brave and I could use your help with a project, but only if you have time and don’t mind. Truly, no pressure.”

He sighed a little internally. She wanted Cap’s help. “I’ve got a little time. What exactly do you need?”

Kate leaned forward, eyes bright. “Got a shirt you don’t mind getting dirty?”

***

He was impressed with the organized mess she’d made of the file room. There were boxes and papers on every surface but the actual shelves, which were smeared and covered in what could loftily be called grime.

“You know Tony has cleaning crews that could do this?”

She was pulling up her dark auburn hair into a knot on her head in an efficient manner and looking around at the piles. “Yeah, but they’d just move things around and I’d have to start again.” She
threw him a roll of paper towels. “And besides, this way we can hang out and be productive at the same time. Nothing bonds like dirt.” She pulled on rubber gloves. “Better suit up.”

He grunted in amusement and pulled off his button up, leaving a white undershirt behind. She’d conspicuously turned away and busied herself with finding the cleaning solution when he’d started to unbutton. That was a change. It seemed like most women in this century, and some in the last, didn’t have a problem with staring. Their hungry appraisal had always made him a bit self-conscious.

“So what’s our plan of attack, General?”

She smirked at his phrasing. “Clean the shelves and wipe off the outside of the boxes and oh! Watch out because some of them are pretty fragile. The bottom dropped out of a couple of them already. Then we’ll reload the shelves and be done. You take high and I’ll take low.” She tugged on her ear. “But, ah, don’t try and sit on one. I hear they’re not too stable.”

He winked, amused. “You know, I’ve heard that rumor too. Can’t imagine how these things get started.”

She blushed and winked back. He decided that he liked this playful side of her. “It’s just terrible how these things get started. Next you’ll the me that people ride the elevators looking like a chimney sweep.”

“Kids these days.”

Maybe this was a job for just Steve after all. He turned back to the room. “Well just cleaning up doesn’t sound too scary. Where does the bravery come in?” He knew he was teasing her, but she made it so easy.

The woman before him shuddered. “Gah. Spiders. Twinkies weren’t the only things I’ve seen.” She shrugged. “No rats though.”

He absolutely froze. “Rats?! I don’t do rats.”

She held up her hands, “Hey hey! No rats, big guy. I said no rats.”

Even so, he picked his way to the shelves with a little more caution than before.

***

They cleaned in amiable silence for a few minutes before Steve stopped cleaning and spoke. “No. I don’t understand. This is an underground, temperature controlled room in a building younger than I am. How can these be so dirty?!?”

Kate slowly stood and faced him, head tilted to the side, hands full of dark paper towels. “You know. I. Ah, hmm. I have no idea and I’m a little embarrassed to admit that the age of the building never occurred to me. I just assumed they were old and full of… molted ego maybe?”

He barked a laugh. “That would explain the grease. JARVIS, any ideas?”

“Of course Captain. The historical file storage room is next door to the the original but now
decommissioned HVAC trunk distribution venue. At various times throughout the life of the building, the filter system vented into the space next door and leaked into the room you are currently in.”

She blinked. “Oh. Gross.”

JARVIS continued. “I have been monitoring particulates in the air and levels are well within safe ranges. It is also worth noting that low levels of radioactive material have been slowly climbing since the room was filled but are also within safe ranges.”

They both dropped whatever was in their hands and took a step back.

“JARVIS, can you locate the radioactive material and send someone down to safely dispose of it please?”

“My pleasure sir.”

She looked at him in amused shock. “You know, this job gets weirder every day.”

That got a full laugh from the super soldier. “You’re telling me. I swear, some days it still feels like I’m going to wake up at any minute back in Brooklyn a foot shorter. That there’s no way real life can be this strange.”

They started back at their respective shelves.

“You know, I think that’s a perfectly rational feeling. When Morse developed the telegraph in the 1830s, the telegraph lines were rumored to have the souls of the operators in them. Edison founded the first electric power company in the 1880s and lit New York and people saw it as a beacon in the dark. While you were asleep we cured polio, went to the moon, put a tiny computer in everyone’s hand, and then one day a kidnapped billionaire invented a new form of energy out of scrap metal. It seems like everyday the world gets just a little bit weirder. Hell, earlier this year aliens attacked and a demigod with a magic hammer helped to defeat his shapeshifting half brother. I grew up in this world and it’s a lot for me to cope with most days.” Steve’s swipes slowed as he watched Kate form her next thoughts as she herded small mountains of dust, the wheels visibly turning.

“I can’t imagine what the world would look like if I woke up 70 years from now. Or how I would deal with the compounded strangeness of it. What you’re doing, Steve, how you’re adapting and reacting… you’re probably the sanest person I know.”

He was stunned and profoundly grateful that she didn’t look up at him just then.

“You never got a chance to meet Phil Coulson, did you?” He eventually asked.

Pushing hair out of her face again, she answered, “Nope. Should I have?”

“Loki killed him. I didn’t know him long but he would have liked you. Same outlook, I think.”

Startled eyes met his own. “I’m so sorry. Did he have family?”

He was making good progress on the top shelves on this row. “No. Pepper said there was a cellist or something. What about you? Anyone waiting for you at home?”

She stopped and lifted an eyebrow at him. “Are you asking if I’m single, Steve?”
He flushed, suddenly aware of how he’d phrased his question.

“What do I need to call HR?” Of course it was Natasha. She had an incredible sense of timing. He lowered his head to his chest and sighed.

Kate just quirked a smile at him. “Just me and the 140 or so students I see on a weekly basis and the lovely old guy in the cafe that makes my morning coffee order.” She stood and stretched in interesting ways, making Steve force himself to look at the newcomer before his gaze lingered too long. “Hey Nat. Congratulations, you’ve just been conscripted to the dust removal brigade. Welcome to the fight, soldier.”

The woman standing in the doorway easily caught the rubber gloves thrown her way, but made no move to don them.

“Afraid of a little clean up work, Romanov?” The Russian eyed him stoically.

“Usually I’m the one making the mess.” He was amused when Kate’s eyes got a little bigger, like she either didn’t know or had forgotten Natasha’s background. “Actually, I heard that you have a little radiation problem down here. I’d rather not be my own nightlight.”

They worked together, telling stories and making each other laugh. Eventually, Natasha took her leave and it was just he and Kate again. He knew that he’d gotten quiet and she’d noticed. Rather than call him out and make him explain, she’d just nudged him and given him a small smile and kept right on talking about her students. Steve took a moment to wonder at the situation and appreciate the way it made him feel… considered. Normal. Like he’d made a friend.

A strange reality indeed, but maybe one that had a bright side to it too.
Natasha had eventually joined us in cleaning the file room. Actually, it had been pretty fun. Hanging out with the oddly matched pair made the work go quickly. With as well as the two reportedly fought together, I’d thought that they knew each other well, but they were still getting to know each other too. It placed us on a kind of equal social footing.

Before taking her leave, Nat told stories of when she and Clint were on assignment in Colombia that even had Steve clutching his chest in laughter. He’d described Howard Stark’s circus of inventions at the World Exposition of Tomorrow (hello early Epcot), including anecdotes about Bucky and how they’d done some serious penny-pinching to afford their dates. When he gotten quiet, I described some of the more creative excuses students had given me over the years. My all time favorite - one guy tried to convince me that his chlamydia prevented him from completing his term paper because it hurt when he sat on the wooden desk chair in his dorm room.

Steve eventually lifted his head again and seemed quietly glad that I hadn’t made a big deal of his lapse. We all had those moments, when a sudden memory pulls you into it like quicksand. His sand just ran a bit higher. Then again, in the timeline of Steve’s life, Bucky hadn’t even been gone a full year.

As Steve replaced the last box, we were interrupted by a nice young man with what looked like a lunch cooler with the super-recognizable radiation symbol. JARVIS directed him to a normal-looking box. With, swear-to-God, rubber salad tongs, he removed a plain white ceramic coffee mug and placed it in the cooler. At their befuddled expressions, he shrugged and said, “I know. It’s never the thing you’d expect.” And then he left. Like he’d just been there to deliver lunch instead.

I’d promised to buy Steve several rounds in thanks for his help. The sun was bright when I left the building. It was the most enjoyable all-nighter I’d pulled in a long, long time.

***

It had been several days since I saw a member of the team. JARVIS said Tony was in California and others were out on a mission. On one hand, it was reassuring to have such talented people to solve such problems. On the other hand, I had no idea that they would need to be called upon so frequently and that was unsettling. There was so much more going on than the news reported.

It was a finals week and, in the words of a very wise hobbit, I felt like butter spread over too much bread. Apparently, every student I had that semester on both campuses suddenly wanted to see me during office hours and, because I’m a sucker, I’d agreed to set up appointments during the times I had already mentally promised to SI. There were drop-ins instead of lunch and end-of-year departmental work instead of dinner, so I’d basically devolved into a being that was ¾ protein bar and ¼ coffee. Which all meant that I wasn’t getting to sit down and concentrate on the Avengers history until after 7 pm. I’d work until I couldn’t read decades-old handwriting any more and cab it home at midnight.

A knock at my door broke my concentration. “Yeah! Come in!”

“Hey Kate, I thought I’d come by and s-OH… my...” Bruce stood in my SI office doorway, looking around my office, both terrified and overwhelmed.

“Bruce, hi! Sorry that I haven’t been down to see you. I’ve been-”
“Tracking a serial killer?” He gestured and ended up following a trail of yarn with a finger.

“It’s not that bad!” I looked around and tried to see it the way he did. To help keep the timeline straight and try to find connections between boxes and decades, I’d requisitioned huge bulletins boards for my walls. I had an overall timeline with bits of yarn trailing to clusters of details and notes. Occasionally, the ideas would overlap and the yarn would stretch farther to connect the cells. “There is just so much information to organize spread throughout so many boxes that this just seemed like a logical way to…” Oooooh, yeah. I see it now. “Make it seem like I’ve absolutely lost my friggin’ mind. Awesome.”

The dark haired man ducked his head but I saw the smile. “Don’t worry about it. I tend to get a little lost in my research too.” He took a tentative step closer to the timeline. “Do you mind if I?”

“Please.” I rubbed my eyes and stretched. It had to be close to 10. Just a few more miles to go before I sleep.

Bruce slowly wandered from one data cluster to another. Quiet. Furrowed brow. Pointing at something that caught his eye. Still quiet. Come on man! Give me a nod, a grunt, something! I really should feel bad for making my students feel this way. But I don’t. Insert evil laugh here.

FINALLY, he turned to me. “This is good work.” YAY! Go me! “Fury didn’t mention that the Avengers idea went so far back. Is that a picture of a young Howard Stark? And nothing after, what, the late 80s? This is fascinating.”

“I’m glad you think so! I’m assuming that’s when the files started to go digital. I really wanted to get as much done as possible while the others are out and my clearance is pending so that I can start the new year strong.” YAWN. “And, you know, justify my salary and stuff.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing it when you’re done. Has Steve seen this yet? He might be able to fill in some of the early blanks.”

“Nope, just you. But I have a whole collection of things to go over with him. Hey, who’s Fury? Or what is a Fury?” A lot of things had been in the boxes, but nothing with that name.

He blinked owlishly at me and looked around, gaze stopping on my open school bag. “Ah. Finals already? I remember that. More work and not enough time.”

Sigh. “Tell me about it. I’m counting the days until break. I might be in ground then, but the grades’ll be in.”

“At least it’s quiet here. Tony likes to blast music while he’s working.”

“Yeah. I think I’m the only person on this floor. Quiet doesn’t begin to cover it.” The area around my office was so dark in the evenings that it sometimes felt like I was working in outer space, adrift in a pod built of fluorescent bulbs and stress.

“Why don’t you come upstairs? We’ve got good coffee and Jarvis keeps the fridge stocked with fruit and snacks.” He was back to the doorway and gave a quiet laugh when my stomach chose that moment to make itself known.

“I won’t be bothering anyone? I don’t want to be in the way.” The idea of a little bit of simple civilization was tremendously appealing. God I could use some coffee.

“Not at all. It’s fine.”
I yawned in answer. “OK. But if I bother you, please tell me and I’ll vamoose.”

He picked up my bag. “Deal.”

***

“Bruce. You made me a green smoothie? Seriously?”

He smiled sheepishly. I was beginning to suspect that under that reticent exterior lurked the heart of a wise-ass. It made me like him. Wise-asses are my people.

He’d been right; it was just the two of us up here. And the most complicated coffee machine ever designed by man. Actually, all of the appliances were high end. Which is perhaps not shocking, seeing as whose tower we were in, but the sheer amount of gourmet stainless steel was impressive.

“This kitchen set up is amazing. It makes me want to find complex recipes and discover a talent for preparing cuisine,” I commented as I gingerly sipped the green concoction, while settling myself onto a bar stool at the island. “This is pretty good. What’s in it?”

“Kale, banana, green apple, chia seeds, avocado, wheatgrass, and some other stuff. I keep it in bags in the fridge, if you ever want to make one when I’m not around.”

I glanced suspiciously between him and the drink. “You put lawn into your smoothies?” I was drinking yard. And it was making my body practically purr at the influx of vitamins that didn’t come in bar form.

“You said you liked it!”

“Oh I do. Just… lawn.” He bounced right back from snark to sincere that it seemed mean to tease him. “So do you do the cooking around here?”

“No. Mostly Tony caters but there is always a stocked pantry. If there’s anything you want that you can’t find, I’m sure JARVIS can get it for you.”

“It would be my pleasure, Dr. Wallace,” said the AI in question.

“That’s very kind of you JARVIS. Thank you.”

The fancy-pants coffee maker next to the fridge began to steam. “It seems like a strong cup of coffee may be in order. Cream and sugar?”

Blink. “Just milk please.” I looked at Bruce in astonishment.

“I know. But you’ll get used to it faster than you think.” He cleaned the blender and wiped down the counter. “Listen. We haven’t gotten a chance to really talk and now isn’t best time, but… this is a good group of people. Don’t let them… us… If things get to be too much… I’ve talked with Natasha and am looking forward to seeing the video. You deserve to be here. You can handle it.”

I could feel the blood rush to my face. He was just so earnest, all fidgety hands and tilted head. Hold up. “There was video?”

“Security video, but it cut out after the sceptre touched the cube. Tony has JARVIS trying to recreate it.”
“JARVIS, I’d be very interested in watching that video once you’re done.” Very interested. Things were still mostly a blur after the explosion. I had pieces but not the whole picture.

“With Sir’s permission, I’d be delighted to share it with you.” Sir? Hard eye roll, Tony.

“I’m headed to sleep. Don’t forget to save a little in the tank for the next few days. It’s-”

“A marathon, I know.” I smiled at him. “Good night Bruce.”

I set myself up at the dining table and spread out. It was nice feel a little less isolated, which was weird since I was still the only one on this floor. It just felt... homey, I guess.

Sip. Groan. “God damn, JARVIS. This is probably best cup of coffee I’d ever had.”

“So glad you enjoyed it ma’am.”

***

Going upstairs became part of my pattern. I’d bring up a box or two, JARVIS would make coffee, Bruce would visit, and then I’d buckle down. Bruce’s visits were so regular that I wondered if the AI had set a reminder for him to leave the lab. I didn’t mind. It gave us a chance to know each other a bit. He wasn’t super excited to talk about Harlem and politely refused when I asked about what it felt like to become the Hulk. Instead, he described working in India and the out-of-the-way places he’d visited along the way. It helped me set a timeline for him and get, at least the start of, an understanding of his motivations and processes. Penance was a strong motivator, city destroyer or not.

However, two questions regarding his work and the man came to life. I had very little idea what he was talking about, but tried to absorb as much as I could. It was like a graduate level class that I hadn’t known that I’d needed to study for. He just so animated that that particular recurring nightmare didn’t reach full naked presentation level. In fact, I planned to read a few of his published papers over Christmas so that we had something more to talk about than just smoothies.

He seemed more comfortable around me too. Every so often, he’d bring up a tablet and work quietly in a nearby armchair. More often than not, he’d start snoring. And the man could SNORE. I would not have been surprised in the least had it been the Other Guy making that noise.

JARVIS, watchdog that he was, would find a reason to rouse Bruce and send him along. I really was quite fond of the polite AI.

Finals were almost cover, thank any deity listening. All the normally assigned projects had been returned and the final push was to get exams graded and entered. My lesson plans had been approved. I was truly in the home stretch and what I needed was one of those deliciously gross green smoothies with a coffee chaser and I’d be fine. Yes. And then a surgical stapler to pin my eyelids open. One terrible thought kept running around my foggy brain - maybe Tony was right. Using that feeling as fuel, I filtered through one of the final boxes and set things aside to add to my wall of crazy.
Of all the chapters so far, this one has gotten the most rewrites. What do you think? Do you like the canonical characters so far? I’m hoping to keep them as true as I can.

Things pick up soon, they just need a wee bit of bonding first!

Steve was exhausted. Two weeks of chasing down leads in Eastern Europe led them ultimately to a small village in eastern Belarus. It had been pouring rain for several days and they’d had to go house to house, trying not to leave too many muddy footprints to give away their position. Eventually found what they’d been tipped to - and it seemed that in 70 years, not much about had changed.

The team’s unsavory discovery had been in a particularly pedestrian cellar - on the outside, at least. It had taken Natasha all of 7 seconds and half a smug look to pick the lock. Once inside, the concrete room hadn’t been 200 square feet. There were the scattered print-outs, broken computer paraphernalia, and partially erased scientific calculations that seemed to accompany hasty exits.

The part that had set Steve’s nerves on edge was the surgical table. It seemed both out of place and well used. There were restraints, but no bodies. No cloudy jars with misshapen specimens. No brightly colored syringes. Just rows and rows of empty shelves.

Natasha echoed his suspicion that the place had been hastily wiped. From his place in a nearby tree, Clint used comms to call them outside, a strange tone in his voice. Steve left their small SHIELD dispatch to begin taking what they could from the cellar. Outside, Clint guided them to where the forest started nearest to the cellar.

“If I saw what I think I saw, you’re going to want to watch where you step. I hope I’m wrong.”

“Hostiles? Hostages?” asked Natasha quietly as the two on-foot Avengers picked their way beyond the treeline, following a rain gulley. The hard rain had shuffled the forest floor, washing some areas nearly clean and creating detritus dams in others.

“But any more.” Steve’s voice was flat as the archer joined them. Poking out of the ground at odd angles were fingers. Toes. Elbows and knees. Some skeletal and some flesh. Bodies. They were walking on bodies.

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It was very late, or very early, and he was grateful to be back. The trip had reminded him of an earlier time with a different group of soldiers. Occasionally, it felt as though he was walking through a memory, like two film reels occasionally overlapping. He’d heard the Howlers talking to him and once he’d even responded. Fortunately, the man who’d overheard him had shrugged it off. Steve had been able to push the feeling away, but the more tired he became, the more it happened. It was days like this that he wished he could get drunk. The solace of brief forgetting.

Damn, he needed sleep. Tony had built each team member an apartment here in the tower, which
was good as Steve couldn’t have mustered the energy to drive anywhere else tonight. Which was a
down because he’d forgotten to ask JARVIS to restock supplies in his small private kitchen before
he’d left.

The communal kitchen was dark and the lights didn’t turn all the way on when he flipped the
switch. “JARVIS? Why aren’t the li-

In a quieter tone that Steve had ever heard the AI use, “My apologies Captain. Doctor Wallace is
asleep and I did not want to wake her.”

“She’s here? Now?” It had to be 4am. He walked over to the sofa but didn’t see anyone.

“At the table, sir.” The lights came on a little brighter and did indeed show a figure at the table.
She’d fallen asleep at her computer, head held up by a raised fist.

“How long has she been here?”

“She has been working here each night since you left on assignment, regularly until after midnight.
Tonight, Doctor Wallace has been asleep for less than 60 minutes, sir. Shall I wake her?”

Steve looked at the sleeping woman. He could empathize with that level of exhaustion.

“No. I’ll just take some eggs and go.”

“Yes sir.”

As quietly as he could, which made him all but silent, Steve gathered everything needed for
scrambled eggs and was nearly out of the kitchen before he heard a quiet sigh. He turned back just
in time to see the figure twitch in sleep, causing her head to fall off her fist and hit the keyboard
with a thunk.

“Ow! Fuck!” Kate rubbed her forehead and looked so confused that he couldn’t help but laugh a
little. “Steve? What you are doing here?” She looked around a little, face confused as she took in
her surroundings. “What am I doing here?”

“JARVIS said that you were working late. You feel asleep.”

“I did?” She rubbed her eyes and tried to blink herself awake, expression open and surprisingly
vulnerable. “Sorry.” She stood and swayed a little. “Bruce said it was OK. But I should, um,” her
nose wrinkled as she yawned hugely. “I should go home.” Brown eyes tried to focus on him.

He decided that she was in no condition to go anywhere and was a person he could actually help
tonight. Change of plans. “I’m about to make some scrambled eggs. Want some?”

“Sure. I like eggs. Eggs are good.” He walked back to the stove and began to make them
something to eat.

“Sometimes, my ma used to make me eggs before she went to work.” He didn’t know why he was
talking about this. He just couldn’t seem to stop. “Bucky’s would put milk in hers but Ma would
use water instead. We didn’t always have milk and when we did, she’d say ‘Why waste perfectly
good milk when it can go in my coffee?’ We both knew she was trying to stretch out the eggs to
feed us both. I guess I still like them that way.”

She was quiet while he finished cooking. “Here we go. Do you want ketchup? Clint likes it with
his.”
She was asleep again, head resting on a bent arm. Steve sighed and put the plates down.

“Come on sleepy.” He shook her shoulder and her eyes slowly opened and then tried to focus on him.

“Steve! I’m so sorry. You were talking and cooking and I just couldn’t keep my eyes open. But I made the deadline!” She stood, raised a triumphant hand, and swayed again. He wondered if she was still mostly asleep.

“Don’t worry about it. Why don’t you lie down on the sofa and go back to sleep?”

“I’m OK. Not that tired. You’re just-,” she pointed at him and then somewhere near him and then back, “How are there two of you?”

He chuckled then, feeling a bit lighter from her silliness. “That’s just what Tony needs. Two of me.” He steered her to the sofa by her shoulders, but she stumbled a little. He caught her. She rested her head briefly on his chest and patted his arm.

“I don’t know. Could be fun. Thank you for the eggs. You smell nice. I guess I am pretty tired. Maybe just for an hour.” She practically slithered out of his hands to lay on the sofa. “You should go to bed too. Everything will be better in the morning, right? Tomorrow’s a brand new day. That’s what they say. Oh I rhymed.” Another huge yawn and she pushed her face into the throw pillow with a deep sigh. “Thanks.”

He wasn’t entirely sure how those thoughts were connected and he was fairly certain Kate wouldn’t remember talking with him come the morning. But sleep did sound good and he suspected it would come a little easier now. Pulling the blanket from a nearby chair, he quietly laid it over her. She was out.

As he left with his eggs, JARVIS was already lowering the lights again. Steve didn’t turn back. He didn’t want to see the forest growing over her body.

***

None of them were early risers the next day. It had been the kind of mission that made internal peace hard and it showed. Steve was the first one up. He showered again, wishing the hot water would cleanse the inside of his head. He’d slept, but had nightmares where old friends were under the trees instead of the poor souls they’d found. Not exactly restful.

The drip of the coffee pot was hypnotic. The massive machine made types of coffee he’d never heard of, but it brewed one hell of a pot of coffee. And after the brown colored water that had been available when he’d been deployed, he made it a point to have a cup any morning he was in the tower.

Natasha came in, nodded, leaned on the counter next to him, and watched the drip. Not long after, Clint joined them in much the same fashion.

“Wow. You guys must really like your coffee.”

Without turning around, the sandy-haired man grunted, “Hey Doc. Late night?”

Kate folded up the blanket and tried to straighten her mussed clothes. “Yeah. I was so close to being done that I just pushed through. Must have fallen asleep.” She looked at her laptop on the table and pointed back at the sofa. “I don’t entirely know how I got there.”
Steve grinned at her. “I do.” Natasha raised an eloquent eyebrow at him.

Kate paused a long moment. “You were there! Were there two of you? And you cooked? Was that a dream?”

“Have these kind of dreams often? Need to see a doc, Doc?” The archer chuckled hollowly when she pointed at him.

“No teasing before coffee, Barton. That way lies dragons.” She started gathering up her stuff to head out.

Natasha finally spoke. “Don’t go. Clint’s going to make pancakes.”

“I am?”

“You are.”

“I am.”

“Actually, I should head out so you guys can start your day. I could use a shower and you probably want your space back.” Kate went to move around Natasha, who snatched her bag and slid it back to the table, making Steve smirk. “But I…” He’d been on the receiving end of the look Natasha gave the other woman and was entertained to see it had the same effect. Palms up in surrender, “OK, OK, I’m staying.”

Steve handed her a cup of coffee. “I think that’s your official welcome to the team.”

Usually in the morning when they were all together, Steve enjoyed the banter. It seemed very normal and humanizing. Today, Clint’s audience of three were nearly silent. He knew it was not out of anger or secrecy, but from the lingering effects of the last two weeks.

The pancakes were good and plentiful. Steve could feel Kate’s eyes softly bouncing between them. She didn’t seem uncomfortable, more assessing than anything. Finishing her plate, she wrapped her hands around her coffee mug and broke the silence.

“So. Want to tell me what happened? You don’t have to give specifics, if that makes it easier to talk about.”

Steve looked at her sharply, expecting to see frustration or accusation. But she was leaning back in her chair, patiently waiting, expression solemn but open. He sighed. He had no idea where to start. Apparently, neither did Nat or Clint, their silence speaking as much as his. The minutes stretched on. It should have been uncomfortable. It should have made him angry that their privacy was being invaded. But no one left.

Kate got up and began refilling their mugs. “Granted, I haven’t really known you very long and have never seen you after a mission, but I’ll guess that things didn’t go well.” She put her hand on his back while she poured for him. It was warm against him.

She took her seat again and met Natasha’s glare. And still no one spoke. Steve hadn’t really expected them to.

Kate finished her coffee and stood. “OK. I’m going to head out. At least talk to each other about it.” She retrieved her bag. “So one of the healthy coping mechanisms the public is encouraged to indulge in is to raise a glass. In the spirit of spirits everywhere, I will be at the Bar at the End of the Universe in Morningside Heights at 8. You are welcome to join me. We can talk about
anything. The weather, whatever ridiculous toy that’s impossible to get this year, world politics, why Clint defiles his eggs with ketchup. Whatever you want. Even if it’s nothing.” At the doorway, she turned. “You should come. The cheese fries are amazing.”

They waited until the elevator doors closed before moving. One by one, they left the kitchen.

***

It was a fairly quiet day, which didn’t really surprise Steve much. He’d had had to write up a report of what had happened. He hadn’t enjoyed writing reports in ‘43 and he didn’t enjoy it now. Amusingly though, the report forms hadn’t changed that much.

He’d been at the heavy bag since the debrief. Four bags in and his body was finally beginning to tire. At first, he’d been taking out his anger about being too late to help those people. Then at the slowness of the labs coming back with information on the room. And finally at himself. For not making better decisions that would have gotten them there faster. There are always different decisions. What-ifs that have, will, and would continue to haunt him. But that was part of it - being team leader. Some days, he didn’t mind that burden. Bore it with pride. Other days, like today, it was suffocating. He had fought so hard, so hard to be given the opportunity to help his country. Instead, he was here. And had to deal with shit like this that stained his soul.

He leaned on the punching bag and caught his breath. What he needed was a chance to clear his head. Get perspective. So that when the lab results came back, he’d be ready.
After the heartrendingly silent breakfast at the tower, I’d gone for a run hoping that the crunch of snow under my shoes would hypnotise my brain into providing some kind of insight. I sat on a bench with a hot chocolate near the fountain and watched the people of New York pass by in their winter favorites. Nothing came, but it was nice to stretch those desk-ridden muscles again and air out the space between my ears. One restorative shower, clean clothes, and actual vegetables later, I felt human again.

I just wish I knew how to help the team. I’d even called a colleague in the Psychology department, but almost everything he offered would sound condescending from a non-mental health professional. He did say to let them talk and actively listen. That I could do. And so I went back to my drinking strategy. It wasn’t so much about the alcohol as it was about the camaraderie.

Reminding them that they had each other and me as a support system might be the best I can do. And if they wanted to tell me, I would listen. If they wanted to play poker, I would lose. Either way, it would be something done together.

There had been a bar in this location under various names and personalities since before Prohibition. When I came here as an undergrad, it became The Bar at the End of the Universe and my own Cheers. In a loving nod to Douglas Adams, Phil, The Bar’s owner, main bartender, and self-amusing interior designer, had fashioned it after an English pub. But, if you looked closely, the football pennants were for Mars United and TranqSea. There was even a vintage-looking poster campaigning for Zephod Beeblebrox. There were chesterfields and modern ghost chairs, cheap beer and strong liquor. This place was weird, familiar, out-of-place, and totally comfortable. I loved it.

I was in my seat at 7:30 and feeling anxious. It wasn’t so much that I was afraid of looking foolish sitting alone, God knows I’d bellied up here solo before. If no one showed, did that mean that they didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to go out, didn’t want to see me? The only way I could see my job with them working was if they accepted me. Tony had hired me, but without the team’s continued buy-in…

I’d snagged an old wooden table in the back with wide, comfortable chairs. The place was busy but not crazy. We’d be able to talk and hear each other without other tables easily listening in. I ordered a good dark beer, kicked my feet up onto a chair, and pulled out a book from my purse and settled in.

“You seriously brought a book to a bar?”

I jumped. Couldn’t help it. Natasha was seated across from me. I hadn’t even heard her pull out the heavy chair. “Jesus Nat!” I took a deep breath and finished my beer. “And yes, I always bring a book with me. Surprisingly useful things, books.” She smiled, but it was tired. “Can I get you a
“Drink?”
“Stoli with a twist.”

I barked a laugh. “Really Romanov? Vodka? Don’t you think that’s a little on the nose?”

“Book. In a bar.”

“Touché. One Stoli with a twist coming up.”

We sat quietly for a while with our drinks and watched other bar patrons. “So your plan. Bring us here. Absorb the life around us to counteract what we saw? Remind us that the world keeps turning and life’ll find a way? You really think that’ll work?”

Well goddamn. “I hope so. Plus the drinks are cheap and not watered down.”

She slowly looked around and then made eye contact with me as she took a sip. “Could work.”

“What could work? The humanity plan?” I jumped again and Clint smiled, amused. Come on man. How many small heart attacks could one person take in an evening? He seemed better though. Not back to his joking self, but better. I hoped he’d found someone to talk to.

“I know it’s corny, but this is my first… emotional intervention. I’m still learning.”

“It’s fine. It’s nice that you’re trying. Don’t expect too much though.”

“Clint, you need a hug in the worst damn way.” He laughed and Nat covered hers with a cough. I really liked that about their relationship. Even now, with Nat’s back to the door, Clint faced it. She watched one direction and he the opposite. I’m certain that were one to see something suspicious, the other would know by just a flick of the eyes. Bit creepy? Yes. Totally awesome? Also yes.

“Since I’m not ready to share and care, how about a friendly game of darts?” A raised eyebrow asked his partner. Nat responded with “Mongolian rules?”

“Can’t. No zipties.” Say what now?

“Sao Paulo?”

“I don’t want to pull my gun in here.” He harumphed in response.

“Berlin.”

“No cheating this time.”

“It wouldn’t be Berlin rules then.”

“Well. Cheat better.”

They wandered over to the darts area, bickering over rules and allowances. I know it would never happen, but if they wrote an autobiography, I would read every single word.

I watched them play for a while, seeing them relax into the familiar rhythm of the game. Although their version of the game seemed to involve using the reflection of Nat’s glass to see the board. Shaking my head seemed like the only thing I could do. Maybe I could convince them to teach me to play later, as our bonding activity.
Steve walked in as I rose for a new beer. He immediately scanned the room and nodded to the darts players and then looked for me. The bar seemed to shrink a little as he made his way over, all easy grace and blue eyes.

Just keep swimming, Wallace. Steve is friend, not food.

I gestured over to the bar and he met me there. “Hey. I ran into Bruce on the way out and he said he’d join us next time.” That was disappointing. I’d been hoping he’d come out and loosen up a little. The man was wound super tight. I mean. I know why, but still.

“Well, we’ll just have to have fun without him tonight. What can I get you to drink?” I leaned over to catch the bartender’s eye. Phil was good people. He gave me a nod that waggled his Santa beard and headed over before Steve could answer.

“Hey Doc. Same again?”

“Please. So nice I’ll order it twice.” He pulled the beer and kept talking, the way of many a bartender.

“Who’s your date? You bein’ good to my girl here?” He tried to glare sternly but just ended up looking confused. “Have we met? You look familiar.”

Steve stammered a little, “I’m not… We’re not…”

Poor man. Although watching him squirm was kinda fun. “Phil, meet my friend Steve.”

Steve gave me the weirdest look, but extended his hand and Phil shook it slowly. “Sir.”

“Are you sure we haven’t met?” The cogs were turning. “You been on TV?” He still hadn’t released Steve’s hand. Lightbulb. “Son, anyone ever tell you you look just like Captain America?”

Ha, son. Phil was 65 if he was a day, but Steve had decades on him. I leaned an elbow on the bar. This was entertainment.

“You know, I get that a lot.” Smooth.

“Phil. Let go of the man’s hand. It’s not a tap handle.” He blinked hard and finally let go.

“Don’t you sass me missy. I’ve known you since you were just a slip. Just because you’re all fancy now doesn’t mean you can- Holy shit.” Ah. He’d finally placed the tall man next to me. “You really are-”

The man in question stiffened just a little. “My FRIEND, Steve.” I made direct eye contact with Phil, who began to nod his head slowly, processing.

“And those other two who sat with you? They’re also-” Phil’s eyebrows waggled like caterpillars on his forehead. Subtle.

“My friends. Yes.” I could feel Steve watching us interestedly. “I brought them by for a quiet drink. Can you help us out with that?”

“Yeah, yeah. Of course.”

“Great! Steve could use…”

He shrugged. “A beer.”
“And so a beer he’ll have!”

Steve pulled out his wallet from a back pocket of his khakis. The plaid shirt and beige pants should have made him look like a fuddy-duddy. Instead he looked charmingly old fashioned. The bemused smile helped too.

Phil put out a hand to stop him. “You’re money’s no good here. Anything you and your friends want is on the house. Any time.”

Steve shook his head, “Sir, I can’t-”

“Bullshit.” He relented some when Steve continued to protest. “How about a trade? You keep this one here out of trouble-”

“Hey!”

“And we’ll call it payment for services rendered. Although she’s a troublemaker, so better keep those eyes open.”

They both turned to me and smiled conspiratorially. I narrowed my eyes in mock indignation. “I don’t think I like this look thing you two’ve got going. Fortunately, you can make it up to me with a double order of cheese fries.” I sniffed and stuck my nose in the air, shot Phil a wink, and went back to the table.

Before joining me, Steve shook Phil’s hand again. “He seems great.”

“He really is.”

“Known him long?”

“I’d come here as an undergrad to study. I wasn’t old enough to drink, so he made me endless cups of coffee and slipped me food that I couldn’t pay for. He even helped me study to get into grad school and then after-” I had to stop and clear my throat. I wasn’t ready to talk about that yet. Steve let it slide. “I tried to pay him back after I got my first paycheck and he got so angry… I don’t know why he decided to be so kind, but I’m grateful.”

Steve held his glass out and we silently toasted. He sat back and stretched long legs out. “So we’re friends, then?” He wouldn’t meet my eyes and I realized that we’d waded into deep waters. I hadn’t even known we were swimming.

“You think I’d hang out with a bum like you if we weren’t?” Still no eye contact. “Yeah, Steve. Of course we’re friends.” Whoa. I, whoa. I felt warm all the way to the tips of my toes, there was so much power in that smile that it could have powered Coney Island for a week. I knew I was smiling back like a fool. It was a reflexive action. When Steve Rogers smiled at you like that, there was no not returning it.

He tilted his head back onto his neck, closed his eyes, and lost the smile. He breathed deeply three, four, five times. Then he sat forward, forearms resting on the table, fingers playing with his glass.

“We were too late. Months of gathering intel, weeks of on-the-ground recon, and we were too late. They’d cleaned out the lab.”

“OK. That sounds frustrating but not like it should have done this to you guys-” I gestured vaguely between him and the darts players. Natasha must have seen my motion, because she
stopped her partner and they joined us.

“What part d’you get to?” asked Clint.

“Seriously. After the songlessness and dancelessness this morning and self-centered worry that it wasn’t so much that you didn’t want to talk but that you didn’t want to talk to me? What part did you get to?” Amy Sherman-Palladino would be proud of how quickly I got that out.

Natasha smirked like it was her job. “Lighten up Kate. Couldn’t give it up so easily. Not that kind of team.”

“And…” Steve stared her down.

Rolling her eyes, “And sometimes we need a little intervention.”

8 shots were put down in front of us. “Phil!”

“I saw them head over all serious. In a bar, serious means shots. Enjoy.” The man had a liquor sixth sense. Hands down, my favorite super power. With a squeeze to my shoulder, he left us to ourselves.

Clint held up a shot and waited until we all mimicked. The mood immediately shifted from snark to something resembling an exhausted acceptance of failure. We drank. The second round was held up and I could feel weight settle onto their shoulders like a cloak. This time, we held before drinking. Each of the eyes before me stared at their glass, but looked inward. I was still missing pieces of what had happened, but I knew that look. I’d worn it. The feeling of furious defeat lay heavy, inescapable. We drank.

I drew patterns in the condensation on the table to give us all minute. A familiar hand set down another round.

“We found bodies buried in the treeline behind the lab. Last count - 27.” Clint closed his eyes and sighed. “Men, women. A couple of teenagers. No one over the age of 40.”

27 people? Jesus. “I’m so sorry. That’s awful. Who would-”

“Can’t tell you that yet,” Steve broke in, giving the other two The Look. Yes, yes, my clearance. It had to come through soon, right?

Nat carefully flipped her glass over, slowly placing it on the table. “It look a while to count the bodies. They were missing a piece. All of them. Arms, legs, hands. It looked like something was grafted onto some of them and then ripped off. Others had injection marks.” She shuddered. Seeing Natasha shaken was seriously scary. “Everywhere. Like marinating meat.” She swallowed heavily and looked away.

We drank. The burn was welcome. I caught Phil’s eye and signalled for the bottle. He brought two, bourbon and icy vodka, and clean glasses. The good stuff. Nat helped herself and Clint to the vodka. I poured bourbon into my glass and Steve’s. I had no idea how to help them. But I could listen and would for as long and as dark as they’d need to go.

We sipped and swirled and in bits and pieces, they each filled in the story until it was complete. I tried to absorb what I’d heard. Like a balm to the soul, a truly massive plate of cheese fries was delivered to the table and three-quarters of us perked right up.

“Dig in. Phil’s cheese fries are one of the great comfort foods of the modern world,” I said, pulling
a fry with gusto. “There’s even magic at the bottom of the pile.”

Steve looked interested, but dubious. “What are they?”

I smiled widely at him as the other two dug in. “Cheese fries? Pretty much what they are named for. French fried cheesy seduction on a plate.” Natasha stared at the starchy pile and then nodded in agreement. Steve blushed a little and it made me grin wider.

“And the magic part at the bottom?”

“Queso - a supremely melty cheese.”

“So the magic is more cheese?”

“The best magic is always involves more cheese, Steve.” He reached over and chose a heavily laden fry and pulled and pulled, the cheese doing its best stretch for him. It broke, swung up, and hit him square in the nose.

A huge delighted smile broke across his shocked face like a sunrise. As he rubbed at his nose, the four of us dissolved into hysterics, the release of of alcohol-lubricated laughter a blessing after the intensity of the last few weeks.

The rest of the night flew by. The debate of items to add to Steve’s List o’ Must Dos got quite heated at times. We closed the bar. Phil offered to give me the keys to allow us to continue, but it was time. I kissed his cheek in thanks. He gave the others enthusiastic handshakes.

Nat and Clint caught a cab back to the tower. It seemed important to Steve that he walk me home. I had stopped jumping at shadows since that awful night in October, but I was glad for his company. Woe be unto he that tries to mug this man.

With coats buttoned tightly closed, we walked into the wind, chatting about the neighborhood and the businesses we passed by. He was easy to talk to and with cold-reddened features, seemed more like the young man he was and less the renowned team leader.

He walked me to my building and hesitated, as if unsure how to proceed. I realized that he’d probably not walked many women to their doors. Fortunately, it was too cold to linger. I squeezed his arm, thanked him for seeing me home safely, smiled at him one last time, and headed inside. In the elevator, I remembered how gentlemen in old movies waited outside until they saw a light in the window before leaving. I zipped inside, flipped on the light, and rushed to the window.

Steve gave me a quick wave before resuming his walk home. I’d like to believe that the bounce in my step was from the rather copious amounts of drink I’d consumed, but realized that I wasn’t nearly as drunk as I should’ve been.

Chapter End Notes

Question for you, reader-friend, would you rather have one very long chapter that may take a bit longer to post OR half of a very long chapter posted per norm?
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

OK! This one's a beast, but I didn't want to divide it. Hopefully, the emotional impetus for Kate's "awakening" comes through. Possible trigger warning for panic attacks and explosions. (Do you like trigger warnings included?)

Shout out to Clement Clarke Moore's 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.

I'm really curious to see what you think!

Steve's up next.

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house

Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,

In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;

Since our evening at the Bar, I hadn’t seen much of Nat and Clint. Apparently, enough information had come back and they wanted to run down a few leads with nefarious sounding contacts. I’d lured Bruce out of the tower to see a new exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History about Henri Becquerel. He was like my own personal docent, explaining the early days of his scientific discipline. The man was meant to be a scientist.

Steve and I began running together in the mornings. To be more accurate, Steve was running and I was in the market for new lungs. He was capable of speech while I shot a lot of finger guns. The sassy bastard had started to make them back at me when he lapped me. Sometimes there would be coffee or breakfast after. But the closer we got to the holiday, the more he withdrew.

This morning I surprised him by hailing a cab for us to Midtown instead. We stood in front of the biggest Christmas tree in America, surrounded by last minute shoppers and lightly falling snow.

“I can’t believe they still do this.” He had so many emotions flying across his face that it was hard to get a read. But I brought us here for a reason. Time to get personal. Deep breath.

“When I was a kid, there was this huge gorgeous 200 year old oak tree in the front yard overlooking the house. Any family picnic, game, camp out we ever had was under that tree. I learned to read and dance under it. Had my first kiss hiding behind the trunk. I could see it from my bedroom window. After my parents died, I hated it. HATED it. Until one day, I realized why. Every time I looked at it, I could feel them again.” I had to look away for a moment. Steve waited silently. “Trees are like that, I think. It’s hard to explain. We see them and we see time. What came before. What will come after.” I had to cup my hands and breathe into them to bring the feeling back.
Steve looked down at me, face guarded but listening. “And now?”

“And now, every so often, I find an old beautiful tree like this one, although it’s usually dressed a little less formally, and stand in front of it and remember. The trick is not to conjure or to wallow. Just a little visit to remember.” He nodded, understanding.

We stood silently, apart but together - the lights of the tree in our eyes.

The cab home was quiet. Steve saw me to my door, as he’d done after every run. I had the key in the lock before he spoke. “The last time I saw that tree, Ma was with me. We shared a hot chocolate and listened to the carollers. She loved Christmas.” He scuffed his shoe in the slush on the stoop. “Last Christmas, I was overseas. There was a brief ceasefire and we were holed up in this tiny village. We couldn’t have fires because of the light. It was so quiet, but a few people made it to the church and began to sing. And then the men began to sing too. Even Bucky, who was a better dancer than a singer.” He smiled and it broke my heart a little. “Thanks for taking me there today. I needed a little… remembering.”

On impulse, I hugged him. Hard. If ever there was a man that needed hugged more often, it was Steve Rogers. “Thank you for telling me that. Merry Christmas Steve.”

The children were nestled all snug in their beds;

While visions of sugarplums danced in their heads;

And ma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,

Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,

“Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.” I sincerely hated this movie. It made my teeth ache from all the sweetness. Strangely enough though, it was Nat’s favorite movie and Steve hadn’t seen it. So here I sat. The last one awake, all three heroes sound asleep.

Tony was due back in the morning, just in time for Christmas Eve day, and I was finally going to meet the famed Pepper Potts. He had invited everyone to a big team brunch to celebrate the holiday. I was a little nervous. I hadn’t seen Tony since my interview and I didn’t really know what to expect. While the others lay peacefully, I used the light from their Christmas tree to write small status updates on my various discoveries for Tony. Better to be prepared.

Eventually though the tv turned dark, Bruce’s ungodly snores evened out, and the room took on a fuzzy dream-like quality as drowsiness took over. With a look around, made it a point to remember this moment before sinking into the warm marshmallow embrace of sleep. The last thing I saw before succumbing to sleep was the bokeh glow of the tree.

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,

I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.

Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

“Dr. Wallace. DR. WALLACE.” I jolted awake. “Good morning, Dr. Wallace. Sir has landed and has requested your immediate presence at the helipad.”

“He what? What time is it?” I was the only one in the common room. It was early outside, the city sky still December-dark. I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Moving quickly in the mornings had never been a skill of mine.

“It is 4:43. Sir has requested your presence at the helipad in 13 minutes.” Not even 5am? Not cool, Stark. I stretched and went to the just-brewed coffee at the machine. Ah the delicious return of sentience.

With my overnight bag, I quickly changed into fresh clothes, tidied my ponytail, and brushed my teeth. Before the crack of dawn, this was as good as it was going to get. Touched up makeup was for daylight meetings.

The thwop thwop thwop of the spinning blades bullied its way through the sliding doors of the helipad. Tony beckoned me from inside the helicopter. I ran low, knowing that the blades wouldn’t reach my head even if I stood straight, but body unwilling to believe me. Better safe than decapitated.

One of the ground crew (can they still be called ground crew when we were many, many stories up?) closed and secured the door. We were off! The cream leather interior was quiet. No noise cancelling headphones for Tony Stark.

“Tony! Good to see you! This is awesome. I’ve never been in a helicop-”

A hand came up to silence me while his eyes kept scanning his tablet. “Reading. Talk later.”

My eyebrow raised, but I respected his wishes. Instead, I watched the city shrink and fly beneath us. What was happening?

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,

Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,

When what to my wondering eyes did appear,

But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer,

We landed less than 20 minutes later at a small airstrip outside of the city. Tony led me inside a rather boring looking building with a, “Good to see you too. Here, this is for you. Merry Christmas. We’ll get briefed on the plane. Hope you don’t get airsick.” He handed me my new security badge, complete with new ID picture that I didn’t remember even taking. JARVIS must have lifted it from internal security footage. Efficient, yet also super creepy.

“Thanks. What are we-”
“Sorry it took so long but DOD and SHIELD wanted to be nanoscopically thorough. It’s like they don’t trust my decisions.” I was really going to have to talk to him about his habit of cutting me off mid-sentence, but power walking through the halls of some strange building didn’t seem the place.

“SHIELD?” He ushered me through a generic-looking door. Suddenly we were in what looked to be a locker room full of people that were putting on what I had to assume was body armor. What the hell?

“Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division.” It was Nat. She had on most of the black bodysuit I’d seen her wear on the rooftop and was tucking in a white tank top.

“Yeah, “SHIELD” is better. But, ah, what is it exactly?”

She gestured for us to follow her to a larger set of lockers in the back, raising her voice to be heard over the noise. “Think of us as covert peacekeepers.”

The whole team was here. “Hey Doc. Gearing up?” asked Clint.

Before I could answer, Steve cut in. “No. She’s here to observe and report only.” Nodding at me, “Good morning.”

Bruce patted the bench next to him and I joined him. “This is all suddenly so real. And surreal.” Natasha was fully in her suit now and was adding guns and knives to various holsters. Clint already had his bow in hand, ready. Steve was tightening straps across his iconic armor, looking every part the Captain. I felt someone watching a live action character selection in an advanced computer game.

Beside me, Bruce seemed to know what I was thinking. “I know. Impressive isn’t it.” I nodded, numbly.

“What about you?” He was just sitting there, in what looked like yesterday’s clothes.

“I’m always ready. Although I’ve learned to carry a change of clothes. Just in case.” He nudged a small gym bag near his feet. Oh. Oh right. Self-eyeroll.

Tony finally put down his tablet. “OK then. Let’s do this. That is, if we’re all finally ready.” Said the man in a Black Sabbath tshirt and jeans to a group of heavily armored and armed people. I couldn’t decide if he was snarky-brave or snarky-suicidal. But, as it was Tony Stark, it was probably both.

With a little old driver so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment he must be St. Nick.

More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,

And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:

The jet, scratch that, quinjet would get us to eastern Latvia in 6 hours. Latvia, a country I knew the name of, but couldn’t find on a map. The closest I could get was a vague “Eastern Europe.” And now I was flying there at incredible speed in a dark, military, and decidedly uncomfortable super
secret plane filled with very serious ops specialists. I’d had a lot of weird days before, but this one was quickly climbing in the ranks.

Tony had prompted Steve to “take it away, Cap” not long after we were airborne. Steve had explained the mission, everyone’s roles and goals, and contingency plans. I’d never seen people so instantly focused. They’d gotten a lead on the people from the Belarus job. Apparently, a new village was showing similar patterns and the team was not about to let that happen.

I watched them all for a while after the briefing. Clint and Tony were in the cockpit, taking turns flying. Nat looked enviably comfortable all stretched out across a few seats. This could have been a coffee shop, for all she looked. Bruce was reading and had headphones on. A couple of black-clad soldiers came up and Steve relayed orders to them. He went back to the small command table and had studied the map some more. They all seemed in control, if impatient to arrive and get started.

I had a book of modernist poetry in my pocket, but was too jittery to imagine concentrating enough to actually read it. I wanted to pace, to run, to MOVE. Anything to burn off some of this nervous energy.

Steve came to sit next to me, his armor loosened for the flight. “Hey. You look a little… overwhelmed. Are you clear on what you are supposed to do?”

I sighed and leaned my head back against the rigid seat. “Observe and report. Stay on the jet with Bruce. Do not get off the jet. Do not attract attention to the jet. If Bruce gets called, I am to stay my ass on the jet.”

“And you understand everyone’s roles? Who is doing what and why?”

“I think so. Tony is going to suit up and provide air cover. Clint will be in the trees watching for danger. You and Natasha will be on the ground with the ominous-looking guys in the back that will provide you backup. Bruce stays with me unless there’s a Code Green. You will approach the building from the cover of the forest, hopefully catch them before anyone else gets hurt, and make arrests. Right?”

He nodded approvingly. “Right. Any questions?”

“Is it ridiculous that I’m worried that I didn’t bring my passport?”

Steve looked astonished for a second and then threw his head back and absolutely crowed. Laughing long enough that he gripped over his heart and had to wipe his eyes. I knew I was grinning like a loon, but I couldn’t help it.

He calmed down enough to ask, “Anything else?”

“How do you do this all the time?! Sit there all calm and collected while I’m over here trying not to freak out because I have no idea what’s going to happen and who will get hurt. Patience has never been my virtue and I know my job is to watch and learn and listen but what if something goes wrong? I don’t know how to fight! I’ve thrown one punch my whole life and granted it broke his nose, but that was more luck than skill.” I knew I was talking too fast but the words were like a waterfall now. “If this plane doesn’t land soon, I’m going to crawl out of my skin, which might actually be a blessing because these seats are awful and my ass has been asleep for hours. You guys are putting a lot of faith in me and I know I’m just watching, but I don’t want to let you down. And I just. I just…” My hands were shaking so I furiously shoved them between my knees to hide them. I closed my eyes so that I wouldn’t have to see the disappointment on Steve’s face.
I could hear him “hmm,” deep and even. “I almost backed out of Dr. Erskine’s procedure.” He smiled ruefully when I opened my eyes in astonishment. “They don’t put that in the books do they?” He breathed out heavily and ran a hand through his sandy hair. “Packed up my trunk, got dressed, and stood at the barracks door all night, which was really saying something at that point. I was sure he’d made a mistake. I wanted to fight and do my part, but knowing what was supposed to happen and not knowing what could go wrong… I don’t think I’d ever been so scared in my life.”

He paused and leaned his head down to catch and maintain eye contact. “But when morning finally came, there wasn’t time to be scared any more. I knew what had to be done and Peggy was there to support me. You’re nervous now and that’s OK. When the time comes, you’ll be ready. And if you need me, if you need any of us, we’ll be there.”

It was easy to look at the uniform and see Captain America. But all I could see was Steve, the sweet guy that was so much more than he appeared. “Thanks.” Any more and I’d start to cry. Didn’t matter that I was touched and grateful and coming down from an emotional storm. I WOULD NOT cry.

Nat walked back from the cockpit and nodded at Steve. He bumped my leg with his and stood, shoulders back, again the team leader. “We’re 10 minutes out. Final prep.” He was loud enough to be heard at the back of the jet.

My ears popped as we descended. SHIELD, Captain America, Hawkeye, Black Widow, Iron Man, the Hulk, and me. I wondered if their hands were shaking too.

"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now Prancer and Vixen!

On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Donner and Blitzen!

To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!

Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"

Obviously, they didn’t know about the rule where you were supposed to stay seated until the pilot has turned off the seatbelt sign and the plane has come to a complete stop. Bruce and I were trying our best to stay out of the way as everyone else on the plane lined up for final inspection. The SHIELD group leaders seemed satisfied with their people and gave Steve the OK.

“Again, we’re going in silent, so watch your comms. We have an unknown number of hostiles inside so stay alert. Do not advance until I signal. Any questions?” Steve stood by the door, tall and very serious, every word their commander. “Good. Doors open in 2. Come back safe.”

Each of the Avengers team made visual contact with each other and then with me. Their intention was clear - Stay in the Plane.

To help hide the aircraft, we landed on the other side of a wooded area near the village. The doors opened and the team slipped out., the only sound a soft WHOOSH from the boosters in Tony’s suit. SHIELD groups filed out the door and immediately blended into the landscape. It was very impressive. And only made me feel more out of place.
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too—

Bruce was tense but in control as he handed me a little comm earbud of my own. It seemed like hours before I heard Nat quietly report, “Village appears empty. Approaching building doors.” Running over to the windows, I tried in vain to see my team. Tony had assured me that the action would be recorded and that I wouldn’t need to actively take notes. He didn’t want a mission report, but my experience and observations. At this particular moment though, having something tangible to do seemed incredibly attractive. This silence, this waiting was making me crawl out of my skin.

Taking a year off my life, Steve spoke. “We’ve breached. Move in.” As one, SHIELD personnel rose to their feet and did that crouch walk that soldiers did in movies. Huh. Well, one point for cinematic realism. Go team.

Bruce sat on his heels. “I wish I could say that this is the worst part - the waiting. I mean, it’s almost as bad as the not waiting.” At my frantic shushing, he added, “Oh, we can talk. Our comms aren’t active unless you click them on. They can’t hear us.”

I wanted to yell at him about inappropriate comedic timing. But mostly, I just kind of vibrated. “Does it get easier?”

“No. But you learn to deal with it.”

“I guess I’ll have to if I want to keep this job. And I really do.” He sat cross-legged and gestured to the floor next to him. I joined him. He motioned to have me echo his movements. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Maybe Bruce was on to something here.

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.

We’d been listening to comm chatter for several minutes. They had cleared the upper levels of the structure and were now moving down to the underground levels. Bruce and I were suddenly standing, intensely focused on the yelling coming through. I looked to the normally calm man beside me to translate ‘action speak.’

“The door to the sublevels was locked, but Steve kicked it in. Three, no, five lab techs have been arrested. Gun fire on the levels below. Natasha is leading SHIELD teams down to the next level.” More yelling. It was like a language immersion course. I was beginning to interpret commands
through the noise. “There are people down there in…” He paused and disgust washed over his face. “In cages.”

He tapped his ear. “Cap, do you need medical back up?”

“Steve’s hurt?! Anyone else?” Oh God.

Bruce shook his head in a negative. Relief made me wilt, but he kept talking. “How many? Jesus, Cap, we aren’t equipped for that. I’ll call in local support.” He went to the cockpit and began placing the order.

I listened, frozen in place. It sounded like the team was setting the captives free. Then gunfire. I’d never actually heard gunfire before but knew in my marrow that’s what the sound was. The screaming, I was more familiar with.

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.

I was pressed up against the windows like I could push my face through the glass. We could see thick dark smoke blossom above the trees. Clint began calling shots and warnings to the ground team.

“Friendlies are panicked and scattering. Headed to the trees. Jesus. There are kids.” More gunfire. “Heads up! They’re not the only ones out. If you’re done with playing locksmith, we could use a hand out here.”

There was finally something happening outside my window, but instead of a triumphant team, a single figure appeared between the trunks. He was still too far away to see clearly, but was making quick progress. Not long after, others began to join him. They ran like plinko, no discernible pattern other than away.

Bruce was at my side watching them come. We both jumped when Tony somewhat breathlessly cut in. “Banner, we could use your expertise out here.”

The man in question swallowed hard. “Code Green?”

“No. There are some villagers that aren’t going to last until local backup arrives. Barton will cover you. Time for a house call.”

Bruce grabbed the plane’s medkit and pushed the button to open the door. “You’d better stay here. Don’t know how many are out there.”

I nodded, an easy agreement. I had no plans to run out into that leafy gauntlet. I yelled, “Be safe!” but he was already gone.

I was alone. And the door wouldn’t close. Naturally.
His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!

His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!

His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,

And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow;

Giving up on the button that closed it, I pulled at the door until my shoulders ached. Goddamnit! I refuse to be the girl that dies early because she was too stupid to work a door!

My struggles were cut short when large pockmarks started appearing on the outside of the plane with metallic bangs. Coming in a line at my head. It took me an embarrassingly long moment to figure it out. Whoa! Hey! Someone was shooting at me! Fan-freaking-tastic. I spun back into the relative safety of the cabin. The bullets weren’t penetrating the hull, just puncturing the outside. OK. OK cool. Breathe in. Breathe out. Don’t pass out.

I booked it back to the windows, peeking around them this time to avoid being a target. The runners were closer now, which meant that their pursuers were too. Bits of tree trunk exploded as bullets missed their marks. I couldn’t see the shooters yet, but their victims were now pretty clear. Well. Their forms were clear, but their faces and clothes were obscured by soot and splashes of red.

Shockingly, they ran passed the plane or away from it. From through the door but still inside the cabin, I waved and offered what safety I could. They must think that it belonged to whoever had done this to them. I could help, convince them to come aboard or at least hide behind it, but I’d have to go outside to do it.

It did not go unthought that my team didn’t have the luxury of a bulletproof room right now. Even if there were, I doubt they’d use it. Through my comm, I had been listening to them interact and strategize and shout warnings. I couldn’t break in just to ask if it was OK if I got out please. I’d just have to do it.

The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,

And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath;

He had a broad face and a little round belly

That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly.

That’s the thing about teachers. We’re terrible at following instructions. Giving them, no problem. But following them? Yeah. Good luck with that.

I’d watched enough war movies to know to keep a tree at my back when pausing in a fire fight in a forest. Not nearly as out of breath as I thought I’d be, thanks to my morning runs with Steve, I leaned against my leafy friend and tried to get my bearings. The plane was still in sight, but I wasn’t in the path of the runners yet.
I ran low from one cover to the next, hearing the zip of metal tear through the underbrush. Oh this was stupid. I could have found another way to help, but I was committed now. Obviously, my team name would be Deathwish. Or Dr. Deathwish. Yes. Might as well use that degree for something out here.

Finally! Someone! Waving frantically, I got his attention. “Go that way! Get in the plane! It’s safe!” He looked at me in confusion. Oh right. Probably didn’t speak English. Good job, Kate. Run out into gunfire, without a weapon, and yell at people in a foreign language. I was crushing this rescue business.

Fortunately, everybody understood “I’m an airplane” charades, thumbs up, and pointing. He nodded and actually did what he was told. This tactic worked on four more people.

About ten feet from me, I found a young man about the age of my students but dazed and clutching at an arm that looked wet. I had to leave the safety of the trunk to get his attention. Understanding my instruction, he took a step towards me. We both saw a small, black thing sail towards us and land at his feet. His terrified eyes met my own.

And then the grenade exploded.

I had a single short instant to before he was just gone in a clap of light so bright that I was blinded. Without having a chance to brace myself, the concussive force of the blast picked me up, threw me several feet backwards, slamming my head, shoulders, and back against a tree.

Leaves on the ground were cool and wet against my face. Air invaded my grateful lungs and I lay there, just breathing and taking stock. It took a while before my arms and legs would follow instructions and organize themselves into a crouch and allow me to stand. Photo flashes danced behind my eyes and everything sounded like adults in Charlie Brown. My clothes had small rips in them and had begun to wick blood from cuts underneath. At least, I thought it was my blood, but it could be his. Feeling the tickle of something down my right cheek, I wiped it on my sleeve. Red.

The intense pain faded more quickly than expected. Maybe I’d hit my head harder than I thought. I really had to stop doing that.

All at once, sound returned to normal and I could hear the comms again. The team beginning to control the village and warn people away from the trees. Enemy gunmen were using explosives to try to slow the villagers’ retreat.

Wow. Thanks guys. Well spotted.

The ground began to shake and heave as more grenades fulfilled their purpose. None were as close as the first one, but the trees had had enough. No longer able to hold fast, some began to drop limbs or fall completely.

I ran.

A group of three people were redirected to relative safety. It was time for backup. I activated the little device, kind of shocked that it was still in my ear.

“It is getting pretty dicey out here guys. Are you headed back yet?”

“You should be safe inside the jet. It’s tested for worse than this.” It was Tony.

“Yeah, about that…”
“You left the plane, didn’t you?” Somehow, Nat sounded more exasperated than surprised.

Steve sounded pissed. “You’re in the forest?! It isn’t safe. I told you to wait.”

The ground shook again and the trees around me shivered. I sympathized.

“You know, I’d picked up on that. There were people that needed help. I’ve been sending them to the-” A wail cut off my speech. Any adult knew that sound. Somewhere close by there was a child screaming.

“KATE?! Are you OK? Come in!”

“Steve. There’s a kid out here. I can hear it. Oh my god.” Heart in my throat, I began running toward where I thought I’d heard it, stopping every so often until I heard it again.

“Stay where you are. We’re coming in.”

“No! I can find it.” The child screamed again. “I’m close. Just please hurry.”

Olympic hurdler I am not. More than once, my foot slipped or got caught under something and I fell. The second time, I worried that I’d landed badly. My hands and feet were tingly, like electricity was running under my skin.

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,

And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;

A wink of his eye and a twist of his head

Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;

I found her. She was maybe 3, still round with baby fat. Standing out in the open, screaming as the ground shook under her.

“I see her! I see her!” I shouted into the comm.

“Get her and find cover. I’m almost there.” Steve was coming! Not having time to wonder how he knew where I was, I just thanked any deity listening.

She was too terrified and overwhelmed to run from me. Man, I get that, kid. I really do. Kneeling in front of her, I gave her a light-speed once over. She didn’t seem hurt, just filthy and terrified.

“It’s OK. It’s OK. How did you make it all the way out here buddy? You don’t speak English, but it’s OK.” I tried to sound calm. She shied away when I went to pick her up. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

The side of a truly massive tree next to us burst in a flash of light and thunder, broken wood spewing out like hail. I barely had time to pull the girl to me, covering as much of her as I could. She clung to my leg like a vine. With a heavy groan, the tree collapsed onto its neighbor, snapping the other in two, pulling them both to the ground. Where we were standing.

It happened so fast, that I didn’t have time to move us. I saw the heavy shapes descend on us and
knew there was nothing I could do to stop it. Gasping, I futilely shot my hands up, as if I could stop it from crushing us both.

And they didn't.

I blinked and choked in a breath. We were still alive. The trees had stopped just inches from us, the whoosh of air still ruffling my hair. Glancing at the child velcroed to my leg, I confirmed that she was OK. Still screaming, but alive.

I must be in shock because everything felt like it was in slow motion, my brain playing catch-up from seeing the end come so close. My arms were still raised from trying to stop the impact. It actually looked as if I had. But it wasn’t me. Couldn’t be me. There was no way I was holding up multi-ton wooden instrument of death.

But I was. No. I was holding up a glowing blue… wall?... shield? that was holding up the leafy doom in a large circle above us. And it was beautiful. Glowing points of light winked inside it like the night sky while movement rippled through like a cloud passing overhead. It hummed and I felt as much as heard it. Low and persistent.

“Kate?!”

“Steve? I stopped it. How did I do that?” I felt drunk. And not the fun “drank a little bit too much with friend and now I want to dance” drunk. No, this was definitely more the “this is hitting me all at once and I can’t find my friends and there are so many people here” drunk. As much as my brain was slow and mushy, my body buzzed.

Forcing myself to look away from the twinkling blue, I glanced at Steve. He was completely still, staring.

“How are you doing that?”


The big man had to bend down to avoid touching the wall. Prying the child’s arms off my leg, he gathered her up and looked me over.

“Your eyes… Your hands…”

Too distracted, I hadn’t noticed them. As soon as I did though, my entire body began to shake. My heart was racing and each shallow breath seemed to come faster. Not now. I could not have a panic attack now.

“Steve, please hurry. Get her out of here. I don’t know how long I can hold this.”

“I’ll be just over there, OK?” He used the same tone of voice I’d tried on the girl earlier. I must be freaking him out. I was certainly freaking myself out.

As he left, I examined my hands. They were the same incandescent blue as the wall. Thin overlapping glowing lines twined down my forearms until they were lost in my sleeves. The feeling of electricity ran in a steady flow down to my feet.

What was going on?!

“Что, черт возьми?” [What in hell?] Natasha had joined Steve and stood gobsmacked. Or as
Tony, Clint, and Bruce brought up the rear. Oh good. I could lose my shit in front of the whole gang. Perfect.

Once they’d recovered, Tony raised his hands and ordered JARVIS to run scans. “Hey there Doc. How you doin’?” How was Clint so calm? Bruce caught my eye and made the breathing motions from before. It helped.

My muscles protested from being locked in a strange position for so long and my arms began to shake a bit more. The blue wall followed my hands. The mass on top of it began so shudder and limbs shifted. A medium sized branch slid off and landed on its end. As it leaned against the edge of the wall, the humming became a buzz and I had to reposition my weight to maintain my balance. A section of it fell at my feet, neatly sliced through.

Shit. Shitshitshitshit.

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;

“Guys. I’m starting to lose it over here. Can’t hold it up any more and I don’t know how to stop it either. If I let go, the tree falls. What do I do?”

Having conferred quickly as a group, Steve spoke for them. “Tony is the fastest so he’s going to fly in and bring you out. Count of three.”

“OK, yes. I like fast. Fast is good. Let’s do that.”

I saw the flare of booster rockets. The tinny voice announced, “One.”

“But what if I can’t turn it off! That branch is a log now! I don’t want to hurt-”

“Two.”

A red and gold comet shot under the wall, grabbed me, and flew out from under the falling mass. The crash as it hit the ground was shocking.

Seconds later, Tony gingerly touched down back at the plane with me still in his grasp. “Three.”

I scrambled away from him. “Stop! No! Get away from me! I don’t want to hurt you! Please!”

He made no move to come closer. “Calm down Sparky. You’re switched off.” He was right. The glow was nearly gone. The tingle too. I was dizzy with relief. Not sure I could stand at the moment, I sat there and watched the world narrow. As we waited for the others to catch up, Tony retracted his face plate. “JARVIS finished putting together the video from the rooftop. It’s an interesting watch. Oscar for best special effects.” I just stared at him, too overwhelmed to really
process what he was saying. “We have a lot to talk about when we get back.”

He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight—
“Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!”

Getting in a sealed, pressurized, inescapable steel can where I could spontaneously ignite a blue wall of who-knows-what and kill everyone aboard or breach the walls, causing the plane to crash thereby killing us all in another way just didn’t sound like a good idea. In the end, Bruce promised to give me an injection of something to calm me down once we were in flight.

On my third try with the seat belt mechanism, Nat came to my rescue. “Let me help you. You’re in shock.” I think I just stared at her. “Bruce is going to need to take a look at you when we’ve leveled off. Some of these scratches are going to need stitches.”

“She’s tougher than she looks, right Sparky?” Stark sat across from me, ubiquitous tablet next to him.

Steve had been leaning over the entrance to the cockpit to talk to Clint, but turned at Tony’s comment, arms crossed. “What are you talking about Stark?”

“Just that maybe there’s more to our Doc Wallace than we initially thought.”

We hit a pocket of turbulence that caused everyone to grab for something steady. “Sorry! Sorry,” Clint called back. Tony abandoned needling Steve to sit as co-pilot.

The turbulence had jostled me just enough to break through my daze. Like a light switch, all of the broken skin and bruises suddenly flared to life and I couldn’t help but wince.

Steve crouched in front of me, eyes moving from one injury to another, quietly taking stock. “Natasha’s right. Definitely going to need stitches.” He slowly reached out and pushed my hair back to get a better look at the cut over my eye. Wincing, he turned my head to examine a bleeding scrape I hadn’t known was on my neck. “What happened? Were you attacked?” His voice was quiet and calm.

Nothing came out, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Grenade. Didn’t hit me, but was it close.” My breath started to catch. “I made it but… he… he didn’t.” I had to close my eyes, but when I did, I saw the boy’s face. Eyes open it was.

Steve sighed heavily. “Can I see your hands?”

Even without my explicit consent, my body jerked back into the seat, hands curled as tightly into my chest as my bones would allow. “NO!” I could feel the panic coming back and it was absolutely terrifying; the what-ifs began to build and grow like an anxiety-filled balloon in my chest. I think he could tell. I have no poker face when it comes to potentially cutting my friend in half.
“Kate, you’re safe. No one here is threatening you. You’re hurt, but we’ll fix you up soon. Now, take a deep breath for me. Good. Another one. If you need him to, Clint will land this plane right now and I’ll bet you five bucks that Tony won’t say a word about it.” We breathed together for a minute or two. “Better?”


He shrugged. “Our medic, Kowalski, knew what to do. A couple of the guys would occasionally get the jitters. That’s what he called them. After a while, we all became experts.”

Bruce came up behind him. “Hey Doc. Still want that shot?” I shook my head. “How about I clean up some of those cuts? I think there’s a some bandages and a few butterfly closures left.”

Steve sat next to me while Bruce poked around until I cursed at him. The sadist laughed a little. “There she is.”

Not too long after, bandaged up and completely drained of adrenaline, as much as I tried, I just couldn’t keep my head up any more. If only one of my many talents was sleeping upright like a horse. “Just do it already and stop squirming.”

I thought he was asleep, looking maddeningly relaxed on these damnably uncomfortable seats. With an imperious and amused raised eyebrow from Steve, I surrendered. Hands still tucked securely under my chin, I rested my head against his shoulder. I didn’t want to sleep, to close my eyes and relive the day’s events. But I was just so very tired and Steve was so very steady.

The last thing I heard before finally succumbing was the murmur from my pillow, “Merry Christmas Kate.”
Chapter 12

There had been a lot of furtive whispering after Kate fell asleep on the flight back about what had happened and what to do next. He’d initially intended to wait until she was out and then move over to talk with the group. But then she’d gotten the jitters and had looked at him like he was the only thing in the world propping her up. He wasn’t sure anyone had quite looked at him that way before. So he’d stayed.

Several weeks ago, Tony and Fury had come to an agreement and arranged for a SHIELD-authorized medical unit to be set up at the tower. This would be its first real test. Other than the obvious questions about what was happening to his friend, the rest of the team had gotten their fair share of scrapes and bruises, but nothing life threatening.

Kate had slept against his shoulder the whole way back, hands held protectively to herself. She’d been withdrawn and compliant as they transferred to the helicopter then the tower. He suspected that the defensive phalanx the group had erected around her hadn’t gone unnoticed, but she said nothing.

The medical team was ready for them and had whisked her silent form away to do an initial exam. Natasha had gone in with her, taking up the same watchful caution that she’d shown with Clint after he was released from Loki’s control. While he tried to wait patiently for their results, he’d ordered the doctor on call to check out the rest of the team. A nurse had tried to clean his few small cuts, but there was no way that he wasn’t going to be here when Nat came out. Besides, they’d started to heal already. The bruises would be gone by tomorrow.

Tony practically ran out once he was cleared. “Keep Sparky calm while Banner and I review the scans JARVIS ran while she did her Atlas impersonation. Don’t let her destroy my building.” For once, he and Steve were on the same page. That usually only happened when they were under fire. The ever-vigilant part of Steve’s brain whispered that maybe they still were.

“Notice you kept the suit on.” Clint leaned against the reception desk next to him. “Afraid she’s going to light up again?” Steve eyeballed the protective vest the archer still wore. The smaller man shrugged. Before he had a chance to reply, there were sounds of a struggle and a large thud came from the exam room.

Expecting to see a repeat of what happened earlier, the two men were somewhat surprised to see no blue at all. Instead, kneeling on a subdued and red-faced doctor was Natasha. She did not look happy.

“Oh shit,” murmured Clint.

In as icy a tone as Steve had ever heard, Natasha growled, “She said stop.” Her captive struggled, but was easily held down.

Behind her, still seated on the exam table was Kate. Before snapping his attention back to the man on the floor, Steve ran his eyes over his friend. She was in a hospital gown but had no more bandages on her than those Bruce had applied. Her flushed face wasn’t even clean.

“What is going on in here?” This was unacceptable.

The squirming man all but yelled, “I was just trying to take samples! That woman was combative and refused.”
Natasha bounced, eliciting a winded grunt from her captive. “If by taking samples you mean trying to physically overpower her while holding a scalpel and threatening restraints.” Steve felt his blood pressure rise, which was really saying something for his enhanced condition. Restraints?! Where the hell did SHIELD dig up this guy?

“I had to defend myself! Who knows what her trigger is and I need biological samples before quarantine.”

“Defend yourself from what?! She’s still bleeding!” Clint got involved.

Everyone began trying to talk and then yell over each other and it set his teeth on edge. “QUARANTINE?!”

The entire room jumped into defensive positions as loud metallic banging thundered throughout the room. Trying and probably failing not to let it show on his face, Steve was astonished to see the bedraggled redhead angrily banging a metal bedpan against a stainless steel instrument sheet.

“She is standing right here and is perfectly capable of speaking for herself.” Steve was relieved to see that some spirit had returned as she put down her drums. She’d been so hollow-looking during her transport. “Nat, let the doctor back up please. He won’t try anything again, will he?” The pointed glare both women shot the indignant physician only seemed to fan his anger.

“I still need those samples. Mr. Stark and Director Fury made it clear that we are to run the full barrage of tests.”

“I am more than happy to provide what samples I can. But not for tissue and nerves that I am still using.”

“You should be restrained and sedated. You are a danger to every person in this building!” He was going to tie her down and cut into her? No. Absolutely not.

“I’ve heard enough. You’re done. Natasha, make sure he gets out of the building. I don’t want to see his face again.” The smile the spy gave him was deeply troubling. Not for the first time since they’d met, Steve was just a bit unsettled.

The doctor surged forward, getting in his face. Steve had stared down men much more dangerous than this pitiful excuse. He let some of his anger show before taking a step forward, forcing the smaller man to retreat. Step by step by step. Until the doctor was forced out into the hallway into a group of onlookers. “Leave. Now.”

A small, but very firm hand on his arm interceded. “I got this Cap.” Nat slid around him and began marching the stupidly belligerent doctor down the hall.

“Clint, tell Stark I want to see him.”

“Remind me not to make you mad,” the grim-faced man said and walked away.

He stared into the crowd. “I have a team member in need of medical attention. Who can help her?” A petite Indian woman in doctor’s whites stepped forward.

“Chief Longcross was always an asshole. We’ll help.” She turned to the assembly behind her. “I’m going to need a new sterile instrument tray, warm water, and sponges.” The small woman stepped up to him and met his gaze. “Please step aside Captain.”

He took up a watchful position from beside the bed. Kate was seated again, but her eyes were
wary. Taking a place in front of her patient, “Dr. Wallace, my name is Dr. Divya Mandalaparti, Dr. M if you like. I’m sorry for the standard of care that you’ve received so far. That is not how we treat our patients. If you’ll allow me, I’d like to clean you up, set a baseline for your vitals, and then take samples and scans to try to help you figure out what happened.” At Kate’s flinch, he stepped forward. Dr. M held up a hand. “We can do that without being invasive.” She glanced at him. “Now, before we proceed, Captain Rogers, would excuse us-”

“He can stay. I, ah, I’d like him to stay. Just in case. If that’s OK with you, Steve?” Big brown eyes looked up at him.

“Yeah. I can always step out and come back if you need later.” Her grateful smile made him clear his throat.

A nurse with the requested items came in and closed the door. “This is Nurse Sanders. She’s going to assist and take some notes as we go, OK?”

“I’d say the more the merrier, but… Let’s just do this. I need to know.”

The doctor looked Kate over. “Do any of these hurt more than others? You’ve got quite a collection.”

The patient kind of shrugged. “I don’t even know any more; they’ve all kind of blended together. The smaller ones, I guess? Is that weird? The bruises too.”

Steve found himself holding his breath as the sponge dipped in and out of the water. He tried not to watch as mud and dirt was washed away to reveal pale skin.

At the doctor’s surprised grunt, he had to ask, “What?”

“From the dried blood here, I expected to find a deep gash. But there’s nothing. All through this area, nothing.” Kate hissed as the warm sponge cleaned broken skin on her knees. “Sorry about that. Looks like you skinned your knees up pretty good. Some impressive bruising too.”

“Oh you know. If I’m going to do something stupid, might as well really do it.” He smirked, having been in hospitals enough to recognize bravado. God knows he’d used it himself more often than he could count. Dr. M reached for Kate’s hands, which were immediately retracted and held tight against her chest. “No.”

“OK. I won’t touch your hands. Is that where it came from? The blue light?” At her shocked look, the doctor continued, “Dr. Banner called ahead with a preliminary report so that we were prepared for you. If not me, do you think you could let Steve look them?”

That startled them both. He recovered first and moved to stand in front of her, but Kate shook her head. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Her voice was quiet.

Holding out his hands palms up and responded in kind. “Then don’t.” She rolled her eyes at him and very slowly uncurled her arms. He saw her hesitate and freeze up.

“Steve, I don’t think I…” She took a deep breath. “Can you help me?”

“Of course. Just breathe.” On her exhale, he shot her a supportive smile and trailed his hands down her forearms until resting his fingers on hers, letting her get used to him. Her skin was warm against his; she seemed always to be warm. He waited for several heartbeats before working his fingertips to slowly pry open her stiff fists. “God, Kate.”
The doctor moved up to hover over his shoulder. He’d nearly forgotten she was there.

He glanced up to try to catch Kate’s eyes, but they were fixed on his motion. Rubbing circles onto her palms, carefully avoiding the bleeding half moons, darkly singed fingertips, and angry scoring down the length of her fingers, he internally winced and cursed. These had to be incredibly painful, even more when clenched hard enough to bruise bone. How can he have not done something earlier?

“You can relax your arms now. I want a peek under Dr. Banner’s handiwork.” He released Kate’s hands and she let them lie loosely in her lap. Dr. M reached and peeled back the now dark gauze on Kate’s neck. “Stand by. I may need to replace this immediately.” The nurse nodded and held a new white square at the ready.

Although crusted with dried blood, the flesh under the bandage was smooth. The doctor and nurse leaned forward in surprise, looking between the soiled gauze and skin. “I don’t understand. From Dr. Banner’s notes, this area should need stitches and was expected to scar. Was there an error in the field?”

“No. I saw it. Banner was right.” Steve was genuinely shocked. He’d recognized the wound as something that would need attention and care to heal.

“What? What’s wrong?” Kate’s eyes were beginning to round in alarm.

“There’s no wound here. Nothing at all.” Dr. M began to unstick the matching bandage over Kate’s eye.

Again, the only sign of injury was the blood on the bandage.

“We really need to talk with Tony.”

***

He’d been excused soon after that. Dr. M wanted to complete a full examination of her patient, top to toes, and then begin running acronym-based scans. Kate seemed more in control now and had even asked that he scare up something for her to wear, as her own clothing had been whisked away for study.

“I’m not about to wander around Avengers tower with my ass hanging out of paper dress.” Despite the blush he knew was all over his face, Steve laughed, relieved that her moxie seemed back in place.

A nurse had offered up scrubs for Kate and he’d taken a moment to stash his gear and shower. Someone in the building in the village had gotten in a lucky blow and there was a dark bruise across his ribs. It was tender, but would be gone by the morning. He wore a dark shirt to cover it. He was not the focus here.

The two of them entered Tony’s lab, joining the rest of the team. “Stark! Want to explain why one of your doctors downstairs wanted to slice into Kate for samples on your orders?” He was beyond angry.

The man in question turned from the screens in front of him, exasperated. “We need samples and
scans to determine what exactly is happening to Sparky here. It was only a few swabs. She’d feel more pain from a paper cut.”

“Tony, swabs were hardly what that doctor was trying for. You don’t use a scalpel for a cheek swab.” Natasha was in it now too. Good. Maybe Stark would listen to her.

Bruce looked confused, “A scalpel? For a cheek swab?”

“He said that he needed nerve, muscle, and skin samples.” Kate’s voice was calm, but with an undercurrent of horror. “He wanted to tie me down. If it hadn’t been for Nat, he probably would have.” Clint reached out and squeezed his partner’s shoulder.

Tony looked honestly taken aback and walked to stand in front of her. Steve moved to block his path. “Back up Stark.”

Speaking around him, the man said, “I’m trying to apologize here. Want to move your human shield?” Steve rolled his eyes. Why must the man always be so… Stark?

She stepped partially around him. “Steve. Please.” He crossed his arms and stepped away. But not far. “Do I need a shield around you Tony?”

The billionaire didn’t hesitate. “No. I asked for swabs and scans. I’d never ask, never allow anyone to do that to you.” He swung his head to meet the other’s eyes. “Into any of you. Into anyone. I am many things, handsome, witty, multi-field genius. But I am not a butcher. I’m sorry you were put in that situation and will do everything in my considerable power to make sure it never happens again. What was this hack’s name?”

“Dr. Brian Longcross,” Clint answered.

“JARVIS? Remove Dr. Longcross’s access to the building and SHIELD. If he ever comes back, I want to be notified immediately. Also, contact the New York State medical board.”

“Already done Sir.”

“He also said it was done on Fury’s orders.” Tony’s head swiveled to meet his own. For once, Steve acknowledged the man he saw there. And this one was pissed off.

“JARVIS. Set up a call with the Director. We need to talk.”

***

They’d taken a break to cool off and were reassembling in the boardroom for debriefing. Personally, Steve thought it was ironic that it was the same room in which Kate had interviewed all those weeks ago.

As they were getting settled, a young man with a cart of food and coffee laid out a large selection of sandwiches and coffee.

“Dig in, dig in. Dr. Mandalaparti sent me an update on your test results, Sparky. Apparently, you’re dehydrated and in need of quite a few calories.”

“That was quick. Don’t test results usually take 24 hours or something?” She was delicately
picking up sandwiches pieces, trying to keep the new bandages on her hands clean.

“I’m an impatient man with a fortune. Why wait when I can already know? Now. Gather ‘round kiddos. Let’s start this story at the beginning.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

You guys! Thank you for all your kudos and comments and everything! Your support means so much to me.

Happy Thanksgiving!

“Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess that lived in a tower, although in this case, it was May and she was interviewing for a lowly writer position.” Tony really did love an audience. “And while her reviews were impressive, she just didn’t have enough… flash.

“Tony. For real?” I was too tired for antics.

“No interruptions. As I was saying, this unfortunate princess didn’t have the sense it takes to make a dollar and ran toward trouble when it fell out of the sky. In her zeal to help, she met a scientist and a former Soviet. This is where it gets interesting. JARVIS, roll the footage of what happens next.”

The room had obviously gotten an upgrade since I was here last. A clear screen rose down the length of the table, dividing us in two. JARVIS’s pieced together security footage was shot from somewhere above us and the building next door. We watched as Natasha and I grappled with that damned sceptre. The view switched to one from Tony’s suit as he flew by. Nat caught my eye through the glass with a serious look. Neither of us needed video to remember that part. I saw Tony look away as the video momentarily changed to the several of those writhing armored space worms swimming in a black sky.

The video refocused on us making that final impossible push. There was no sound, but I didn’t need it to hear the Plink as we struck home. I heard it in my sleep some nights.

Several watchers sat back in their chairs as a blue corona burst forth from the cube and knocked us down and sent the sceptre spinning. Looking no more graceful than I’d felt, I watched myself fumble the pick up and then lean, dear sweet Newton, so very far over the edge of the building to reach for the twirling thing. It was my turn to briefly look away.

“JARVIS, zoom in on the sceptre.” It still wasn’t much of a zoom, but it was enough to see my hand grab not the staff, but the glowing blue cube. I could feel eyes darting between me and the screen, but I was busy remembering how painful that had been. Eventually though, the silence and looks became pointed.

“What?!?”

“Kate, the last person I saw that touched the tesseract disintegrated and shot into space. And then it burned through steel and fell into the sea.” I’d never seen Steve more serious.

Anything but the thought “He DISINTEGRATED?!” was washed from my mind. I knew I looked shocked, but FUCK. He DISINTEGRATED?!

“And that obviously didn’t happen. So what did?” Clint chimed in.
I sighed and tried to embrace the furor that was inevitably in my path. “I went home and woke up three days later.”

Tony watched the held my gaze as others exclaimed around me. “And?”

“And, it is possible, now having listened to Dr. M, that I may have written off some early signs that something was possibly different.”

“Excellent hedging. What did your incredibly well educated yet non-medical mind decide?”

“Well Dad,” got an excellent eye roll there. “It is possible that I mistook some of the various injuries I received from being a nosy-dumbass as less severe because… they healed while I was sleeping.”

Tony half-smiled and twiddled the pen in his hand. “Horses not zebras.” I nodded back instead of smiling, feeling too brittle.

By now the others had quieted. “I saw your eyes in the file room when I surprised you that first day. They were blue. Yesterday wasn’t the first episode. Was it?” Goddamn it, Steve. Did you have to see everything? Aren’t there greater problems for your strategic mind than me? And by God did he look angry.

“No. It wasn’t.” I really didn’t want to talk about this, but now was the time, it seemed. “A week or two after Halloween, I’d gone running in the park and it got dark. I still had my headphones on on the way home and missed two guys hiding in an alley. They pulled me out of view and roughed me up a little.”

“And by a little you mean…” Clint looked very solemn. They all did.

I hesitated and took a deep breath before answering. “Slammed my head into the wall, beat me up a bit, stole my stuff,” master of the understatement, me. “Scared me enough that I just kind of… lashed out, I guess? I still don’t remember what exactly happened. They kept hitting me and it just made me so very angry and I needed them to stop. Just that there was a flash of blue and they were knocked back. I ran home and locked the door. It wasn’t… pretty. I don’t run at night any more.” I left out jumping at shadows for weeks afterwards.

“Why didn’t you reach out to someone? You obviously needed help.” I had earned a Furrowed Brow from Steve. Guilt crept up my neck and turned into something resembling resigned indignation.

“Who would have believed me? The nice doctors in the psych ward with the tight jackets and padded rooms? Reporters that are rabid for news of the strange? Getting locked away or being called an attention whore on the nightly news were not on my list of things to do right then. And besides, I’d just been hit in the head quite a lot and wasn’t even sure what I saw. I figured that two head injuries in less than six months was doing weird things to my brain. Not long after, we met in this room. And here we are again.”

A quiet settled in. Natasha softly spoke, “When you’re ready, I’ll show you a few defensive moves.” I nodded my thanks and she grew still again.

“So it happens when you’re scared, angry, or hurt. Remind me to start putting Xanax in your coffee.” If Tony wasn’t careful, Steve was going to grind his jaw to pieces one of these days.

“Or I could show you how to meditate.” Bruce looked at me with such understanding that I had to blink away a sudden uncomfortable moistness from my eyes. “Is there anything else? Any
physical symptoms?”

I had to think on that. “Um... tingling in my hands and feet, I think. Like when your nerves wake up from being asleep. It doesn’t hurt, just feels of kind of uncomfortable.” I wanted to flex my hands just remembering it, but they’d stiffened up inside the bandages. Shouldn’t have tried. Trying hurt and just intensified the ache. Dr. M’s painkillers were beginning to wear off. Naturally, Steve saw me wince.

Looking at my cotton-clad hands, he asked the billionaire, “What about the healing factor? Some of her wounds have already healed. Others are as bad as in the field.”

“I’ll answer questions about my health, thanks. Dr. M told me that she doesn’t have enough data on that yet. She’ll conduct several exams over the next couple of days to track my healing progress. Which mostly sounds like a lot of waking me in the middle of the night to see if I’m still alive, which hopefully I will be. Tony, do you mind if I-”

“JARVIS, arrange for a guest suite for Sparky. Clean out anything considered mildly stressful.”

“My pleasure Sir.”

He winked at me and I had the overwhelming urge to stick out my tongue at him. But I had the feeling that I was going to owe him. Especially when I told him that I’d need a replacement security badge. All those months of waiting for clearance and I lose the silly thing in some forest, just hours after getting it.

“You could do this from home. We could send someone for the exams.” I liked Bruce, I really did.

“No. She needs to be here.” Natasha was firm. But I understood why.

“She’s right. I need to be nearby, just in case.”

Steve sounded exasperated. For all the insight he had before, he didn’t catch on to this? “In case of what?”

“In case it happens again… you can stop me before I hurt someone.”

***

“You know, it is a shame Tony’s so stingy with his space.” Steve and I stood in the entryway to the guest suite. He watched me wander around the kitchenette and living room area. Everything was in a cool, modern color palette. Comfortable, but a little impersonal. “This is easily twice the size of my place. And way fancier. That Wolf range would have paid for my rent for a good month or two.”

“You should see the quarters he set up for us. My entire apartment growing up could fit in the living room.”

“I’ve not spent much time in Brooklyn. You’ll have to give me the penny tour one of these days so I can see your old stomping grounds. I think it’s as old as Morningside Heights. We can compare notes. I love my building. You should come up and see it instead of stopping at the stoop.”

He looked a little surprised.

“What? What’d I say?”
“I’m guess I’m still not used to how fast women are with their invitations now.” I spun around, mouth agape. He did not just say that. The Man with a Plan but Without a Clue blushed red. “Not that I mean that you or modern women are fast. Just more casual. Uh, not casual-”

It was hard not to laugh. He was so genuinely flustered. “Let’s just skate right on by that, shall we? Dr. M will be stopping by in about a half an hour and I’d hate to have to explain to her why you’ve passed out from blood loss to your extremities.” That got me a relieved and exasperated smile. “Now. Come watch the news with me until she gets here and I can finally, finally pass out.”

The very efficient and trustworthy Dr. M proclaimed me still alive, which meant that Tony ratted on me. Stinker. My fingers were doing better, in that they still hurt like fury, but the burns were better and the open fissures had started closing. My skull, neck, and shoulders were still badly bruised, but the results of the initial scans she’d taken eclipsed their damage. Apparently, when I’d struck the tree after the blast, there were definite signs that I’d broken some vertebra and pushed others out of alignment, fractured my collarbone, and nearly cracked my skull. Glad I was already sitting down. Even Steve looked astonished.

When asked to explain how I’d been able to walk again after just a few minutes, she’d just shrugged. Telling me that someone would be back in 4 hours for additional exams and that she’d like another full scan in 8, Dr. M rewrapped my bandages, gave me a couple of painkillers, and went on her way.

We sat in silence us two. We sat and we sat and we sat and we thunk thunk thunk thunk. When the Seussical stopped running through my subconscious, I went to the kitchen and started opening cabinets until glasses were found so I could take a pill. One of the cabinet doors wouldn’t latch and I kept trying to close it. Until I was slamming it over and over and over. “GODDAMNIT!”

A masculine hand reached over my shoulder and held the door closed. “Stop.”

“What is happening?! I broke my SPINE and got up and walked away?” I spun to face him. He was much closer than expected. I had to look up to see his eyes. “How the fuck does that happen? People just don’t get up from a lick like that and keep on ticking. I seem to be generating blue walls of Godknowswhat that held up two huge damn trees.” SHIT and now I was going to cry. Perfect. I hate crying in front of people. “This isn’t a super soldier thing or a Hulk thing or a whatever that guy is in Hell’s Kitchen thing. It’s only a me thing. Only me.” Talking became hard because my breath was unsteady, so I hung my head instead.

A masculine hand reached over my shoulder and held the door closed. “Stop.”

“A heartbeat went by and then a pair of very strong arms pulled me in for a hug. “Yes. This is happening to you. But you are not alone.” He shook me a little. “Do you hear me through that thick, newly-healed skull of yours? Tony is on it and if anyone can figure it out, it’s him. And if you tell anyone that, I’ll deny it.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “Especially with Banner in his corner. Natasha plays it cool, but she’s adopted you. You should have seen Clint clear a path when you needed help. And me? We’re friends. Can’t get rid of me now.”

Exhaling long and low, I rested my temple on his chest and put my arms around him too. Good grief the man was broad. Laying his head on top of mine, we just stood there. Eventually, the heat from his body, even breath, and just plain Steve-ness lulled me to calmness. And so we stood there. Just breathing. Giving and accepting comfort.
A flash of headlight. The horn from oncoming traffic. Breaks screamed and the car fishtailed on wet pavement. Impact jarred down to my bones. The world tilted and then spun over and over. Windows shattered as the car’s frame closed in on us. Flying through the windshield and landing hard. Pain radiated from my center and exploded everywhere.

I knelt and stood, trying to test my balance. The gray streets bled to grass and leaves. All around me trees exploded, loud and messy. Raised arms tried to protect my head as I ran. But there was nowhere safe. Breathlessly, I ran and ran. A figure stepped out from behind a trunk and reached for me with wide eyes and outstretched hands. Until he met the same fate as the trees. Heat burned through my hands.

Waking up with a long gasp, it took several moments before the flames in my vision died. Trying to shake the fire out of my hands, I was grateful to just feel the burn and not see blue.

It had been five days of the same dream. Five days of blood samples, bodily inspections, and enough scans to make me glow in the dark. At least after the first 48 hours, Dr. M’s minions moved to every 8 hours instead of every 4. It may have been that I growled at a few during sampling. Maybe.

I was completely healed. No scars, no pain. A medical miracle. A perplexity to modern science. A genetic abnormality that refused to leave her room for the first three days. Oh, I’d had visitors, but none had been able to lure me out of what I felt was safe seclusion. I hadn’t even been home yet.

It had been Pepper whose visit had surprised me most. Fortunately, I was between morning medical minions and had been quietly reading. In another set of donated scrubs and not a lick of makeup, I felt incredibly under-dressed when she introduced herself. But she’d been nothing but kind as we shared a pot of strong tea. Pepper described Tony’s focus in the lab and how he seemed to be nearing some sort of decision. She wanted to make sure that I had everything I needed and even brought me Stark Industries sweatshirt and pants.

But it was what she’d actually come to say that had meant the most. “You have to leave this room. You have to. Tony says you haven’t had an incident since you came back. If you’re not ready for the city, come to breakfast later.”

“What if something happens and I hurt someone? I don’t think I could live with that.” I couldn’t help but sigh. “Everyone seems to be expecting me to explode or shake it off or be some kind of new super hero.”
“Well nothing can happen here. Don’t get me wrong. Tony will let turn this suite into your own Grey Gardens, but aren’t you a teacher? Don’t classes start soon?” Damnit. She just had to bring up my students. I’d been trying so hard not to think about them. “Don’t do it because you need to prove something to Tony or Steve or anyone. Do it to prove it to yourself. Do it because you can and you should. And because eventually Christmas break will be over and you’ll be in a classroom again.”

Before I could do more than consider what she said, Tony burst through the door and ran passed us into the living room area. Pepper stood, obviously concerned.

He spun around and immediately looked her over and at to me and back to Pepper, a mask of “I’m not worried about you!” on his face. Ah.

“Oh, I just thought I would come check and see how Sparky’s doing? How’s, ahm, the blue magic lightning today? Still dormant? Did I miss the sponge bath again?”

“Tony!” Pepper exclaimed.

“What? I’m just being a good host.” He was all casual, hands in pockets. Pepper looked exasperated.

“Nothing to report Dr. Stark. All quiet on the blue front.” It was easy to put on a mask of confidence. Like putting on a coat.

He less than aimlessly wandered over to Pepper and put a hand on her waist, steering her to the door. “Excellent. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have a fast to break.” He suddenly made solid eye contact for the first time since blowing into the room. “Unless you’d like to join?”

By God, he was sincere. Aw. I met Pepper’s glance. “I’ll try.” And shocking even myself, I meant it.

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Yesterday’s breakfast with the team had gone surprisingly smoothly. There’d been no fanfare or ostentatious greeting. Just more of Clint’s breakfast magic and the kind of well-intentioned banter I’d experienced before. I wasn’t ignored, just folded in. It was… nice. A small step towards normality.

That day, Steve had shown me how to properly use a treadmill and that hadn’t been embarrassing at all. If I learned nothing else, it was that I needed a more supportive workout bra. Nat wasn’t allowed to start beating me up until Dr. M signed off. I started learning meditative breathing with Bruce and it had seemed to help, which I was grateful for. Clint had guided me through how to use a bow and we both decided from my misfired shots that hit more lighting fixtures than targets that my efforts might be better directed elsewhere.

Tony had that look that smart kids get in classes that aren’t challenging any more. I had a colleague that called it the ‘Trouble is Coming’ look. JARVIS had compiled and analyzed and done impressive things with data I was sure. In addition to helping me make sure my calm wasn’t damaged, Bruce was reviewing my DNA. That’s right. My actual DNA. There had been many a-side glancing discussion between the two. I had a sneaking suspicion what the next step in the Great Wallace Study would be. And it scared the bejesus out of me. The more frequently the side-glances happened, the more I felt that Trouble is Coming.

I was going running with Steve this morning and was feeling pretty good. The nightmares had
stayed away for the first time since The Incident and I felt, dare I say it, a bit rested.

During my tour of the gym facilities yesterday, I’d borrowed some shorts and an SI tshirt. It was still nice to wear something that wasn’t held up with a drawstring. Granted, an elastic waistband wasn’t a huge step up, but it was something. I’d washed my face and fixed my hair into a respectable ponytail. My bangs even cooperated, wonder of wonders. I was fit to be seen by those poor souls awake at this hour.

The sun was barely up but, somewhat out of character, I didn’t care. Today was New Year’s Eve day and I was going to leave the nest. I really owed Pepper a cookie basket or a spa day or something. The woman was a cream-clad persuasive force of nature.

Steve was waiting for me at a side entrance at street level. No one should look that good or that alert at this hour. It was just rude.

“Mornin’. I thought we’d go a different route today. Through the city instead of the park.”

I hesitated at the door. I’d pumped myself up for the emptiness of the park. Not the morning stretch of New York’s city streets. He stepped up next to me and looked out at the cars passing outside. “I’ll be with you the entire time. You’ll be safe. I promise.”

I watched other early rises walk by. “And everybody else?”

He looked down at me, winked, and then made finger guns at me. I laughed very loudly in astonishment. Nerd.

I think he was making it up as he went. Some lefts, some rights. He avoided large empty spaces. We went by bakers and stopped to smell the bread. We saw today’s papers being thrown to newsstands. The city and the sun came awake as we ran, moving from sleepy murmurs to the din of early business hours. Steve was good to his word. He stayed with me the whole time. It was like he was slowly turning up the volume of the world until we were fully submerged. Clever, clever man.

Somehow we ended up back at the tower. I was winded and sweaty and knew that I was going to be sore and I didn’t care at all. OK, I cared a little bit. But it was nice to get out and be in the city that I loved. On the elevator ride back up to the private levels, we grinned at each other and I tried to catch my breath.

“Thank Steve. I needed that.”

His grin because a full on Steve Rogers smile. “Any time.”

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Back in my SI sweats and squeaky clean, I was enjoying watching Bruce try to cook. He was trying for some kind of baked egg thing and was struggling. For a scientist that worked with minute biological samples, the man sure struggled with egg-sized things. And vegetables. And, apparently, greased baking pans.

Clint and Nat and I acted as his amused audience. Bruce had refused our offers of help and was trying to juggle sauteing vegetables, grating cheese, and frying sausages. He was “just winging” the recipe. Heaven help us.

We’d been simultaneously heckling and applauding the man when the inevitable happened. At least inevitable to those that had basic cooking experience. The grease in the sausages reacted with
the over-high heat from the gas range and caught on fire. No one had noticed when the sudden burst of flames made me start to breathe heavily and sweat. They didn’t see me jump and throw my arms up to protect my head when he dropped the heavy bowl of eggs and the ceramic bowl burst on the floor with a sharp crack. In retrospect, I suspect it was my bar stool being knocked over as I retreated from the room that gave me away.

I made it out of the common area and around the hall corner before my breath ran out. The calm, logical part of my brain knew that I was safe. That the hallway was quiet. That no one was trying to hurt me and that the safe place I’d found would not betray me by exploding.

The reactions of my body did not agree. It was fairly certain that all of that was wrong and that I was once again in that thrice-damned forest.

“Dr. Wallace. Your vitals are extremely elevated. Do you require assistance?” JARVIS questioned, ever-watchful.

“Don’t worry about it. I got her.” Clint was here. “Hey there Doc. How ya doin’? Mind if I join you?”

I tried to stand from my crouched position but was shaking too badly and couldn’t quite do it. It took me a few tries before chattering out, “Can’t breathe.”

Before I was done getting out the words, he was seated beside me, cool as a cucumber. Speaking slowly and calmly over the blood rushing in my head, he looked around. “I see 5 things. Horrible gray carpet. A scratch on the wall. Your auburn hair. My black shirt. A soulless piece of artwork.” He held my wrist and took my pulse. “4 things you can touch are my hands, the softness of your shirt, the smooth paint, and the laces of your shoes. What are 3 things you can hear?”

My muscles were beginning to loosen up and my breathing eased. “Your voice. The air conditioning. JARVIS.”

“Good. 2 things you can smell?”

“Burned breakfast. Your cologne.”

He smiled. “Excellent. What is one thing you can taste?”

I grimaced. “Something bitter.”

“That’s probably your adrenaline wearing off. We’ll get you some orange juice in a few minutes. That will help get rid of the taste and raise your blood sugar.” Releasing my wrist, he looked me over, sharp eyes assessing. “Now, breathe with me.” I mirrored his controlled inhales and exhales for a few minutes. “How are you doing now? Better?”

I was. Wow. “Yeah. Thank you.” We sat there quietly a little longer. “How did you know how to do that?”

“I’ve not always been the amazingly collected man you see before you. You aren’t the first one to get triggered panic attacks.”

Huh. Well. I guess that made sense. “Do you still get them?”

“I think we all do, just not as often because we’re used to this life more than you are.” I blinked up at him, suddenly struck by his words. Only knowing them for a few weeks had given me a peek into their world. What had their time been like before the Avengers? People as complicated and
amazing as these were not built by days spent in feather beds. But then, this wasn’t my first rodeo with life either.

“How do you deal with it?” I hated how weak my voice still sounded. “Do they ever stop?”

Leaning his head back against the wall, Clint said, “I saw a therapist for a while. He taught me that ‘5 things I can see’ technique. Now… Natasha and I lean on each other when we need it, although sometimes I go in for a tune-up.”

I nodded slowly. Maybe getting a little help wouldn’t be so bad. “Anybody you would recommend?”

He stood and reached out a hand. “I’ll have JARVIS email you with a name.” He must have seen my embarrassment. “Getting help isn’t a weakness. Learning new tools to help yourself makes you stronger.” He helped me stand. “Now. Do you think you’re up for pancakes? Assuming that Bruce hasn’t destroyed all the eggs.”

I patted the wall on the way back to the kitchen. “Thanks for looking out for me JARVIS.”

“My pleasure Dr. Wallace. Glad to see you’re back to normal.” Well, maybe not normal, but with a plan to get to new normal. And that’s not nothing.
Chapter 15

I’d retreated back to my rooms to take a nap and maybe finish my book. Between the run with Steve and the breakfast debacle, my batteries were low. In the early afternoon, I had a repeat visitor. Tony was back.

“So, JARVIS tells me you had a bit of a meltdown this morning. Do I need to call in my structural engineers?” I wanted to take offense, I really did. But his expression was more concerned than teasing, which was an interesting change from The King of Quips. But since he was still Tony, he helped himself to a sprawl across the sofa.

“Your walls live to see another day.” I joined him in the living room. “I hear that the party decorations are all up and the champagne is chilled for tonight. How many people are coming?” We’d been “invited” to the party in early December with the oh-so-Stark reminder that it wasn’t an invitation so much as a mandatory event. Apparently, his New Year’s Eve parties were legendary. I’d been looking forward to going, but in light of recent developments…

“Oh just a few hundred. Guest list is not my purview. Pepper tells me where to be and I show up. The perfect system. But that’s not why I’m here.” He bounced up and sat down again, clearly uncomfortable with whatever it was he came here to say.

“Tony, it’s OK. Whatever you need to say, just say it.” He was making me nervous.

“You can’t come. You are officially uninvited. Your invitation that asked for plus one is now a minus two. I’m sorry, but it wouldn’t be safe.”

I really wanted to let him swing for a while, but he just looked so… was this an embarrassed Tony Stark? “Let me guess, lots of fireworks and loud music and unpredictable camera flashes?” He nodded. “Tony, I totally get it. I was actually going to bow out tonight, mandatory attendance or no. Fireworks should be outside, not one of your guests.” Throwing himself all the way to the back of the sofa, the relieved man closed his eyes and sighed. “Do I need to invite you to join me this evening? Take a little break from the glitz and glamour?” He opened his eyes and just looked so tired. I was reminded that I was not the only one that saw things this year.

“You’re Tony Stark. You can do anything you want. Call up the jet and whisk Pepper away to a mountaintop somewhere and turn off your phone. If you’re really needed, JARVIS will tell you.” That got me a rueful smile. It was startling to see the man behind The Stark sometimes. “As amazing as that sounds, and it really does, with great power comes great party responsibilities.” He went to the kitchen and began rifling through the cupboards. “Right. JARVIS, contact catering and have them send down something for dinner. Impress me.”

“Chef recommends a tasting menu of duck, kobe, and langoustine. Might I suggest pairing the Chateau Margaux or Rothschild?” the polite English voiced asked.

I choked. “You will NOT serve me the Margaux or the Rothschild. They are heavenly but entirely too expensive to drink alone. I’d be delighted to share either with you, but not tonight.” It had been, God, years since I’d tasted either. And the expression on Tony’s face was just as delicious.

“And just what do you know about expensive wines, hmm? Have you been holding out on me?” I couldn’t help but grin at him.
Dinner was a feast and I had the company to match it. It had been set up for me at the big dining table in the common area so there were enough seats for everyone as they stopped by before changing into their finery. Everyone but Clint, who had slipped away into the night. Ninjas will be ninjas, I guess.

Once again grateful for an elastic waistband, I puttered around the tower. With everyone at the party, it was a little like being locked in a department store overnight. If the department store was tricked out with an impressive and also terrifying gym, superhero quarters, science candy store, and personal British robo-butler.

So I did what any sane, responsible, serious adult would do when left on their own in such a place. I had JARVIS play 80s and 90s pop, put on clean gym socks, and pretended I was in a montage video.

I slid on the marble floors, shimmied, walked like an Egyptian, moonwalked, and headbanged my way through my history at SI. Walking on sunshine down by my office, I had a thought as brilliant as any the Avenger wunderkind imagined. By the time that Old Time Rock and Roll was over, I’d collected mandatory supplies to last me until well after midnight.

And so it was that a little after 11 on New Year’s Eve, I found myself leaned back in a tremendously uncomfortable office chair, socked feet up on that massive but now clear desk, reviewing the crazy serial killer yarn now adorned with colorful twinkle lights, elbow deep in apple-cranberry pie magic. Damn but Tony’s caterers knew them some pie.

“Well don’t you look cozy.”

“Steve Rogers, what are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be mingling with the glamorous and well-connected?” The tuxedoed man himself was leaning in my doorway, hand in pocket, looking for all the world like… a man that could wear the hell out of a tuxedo.

He shrugged. “I heard there was a pie missing. Came to investigate,” saucily said while eyeing the two-thirds of the baked good in my lap.

“If I’m sharing this pie with you, you’d better have something good to trade.” Bringing a bottle of champagne out from behind his back, Steve laughed as I cheered.

Sinking into the only other seat available, he closed his eyes and exhaled. “It is so quiet here.”

“Yeah, that’s why I ended up here. No loud fireworks bangs, no noisemakers and thumping bass, less chance of accidentally freaking out and cutting someone in half. Also, my elegant evening wear is a little casual this year. So win-win.” He grinned at my sweats and somewhat disheveled ponytail and stood. In one of those moments that earned a special place in my long-term memory, he took off his tuxedo jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and loosened his bowtie. “Well that’s not fair. You still look amazing and I’m still in sweats. Pour the champagne, Rogers.”

Trying to distract me from his blush, ugh charming, Steve rummaged around nearby offices for mugs. By the time he came back, my ponytail was much tidier and there weren’t crumbs on my chest. Yes. I’m that classy.

After popping the bubbly (with no flinch from me, yay!) and filling our mugs, he took his seat and reached out and pulled my chair closer to his for easier access to dessert. His ‘happy pie face’ made me giggle. Not sure how he went from debonair to dork so quickly. I made him smile back
though, so I didn’t care.

We gorged ourselves companionably for a few minutes before, with mouth full and gesturing with his fork, Steve asked, “So what-a, is all this?”

Oh right. He hasn’t seen my crazy-made-manifest yet. “This, my masticating friend, is the story of the Strategic Scientific Reserve, the predecessor to SHIELD.” He got up to inspect the walls more closely. “It was officially formed in 1940, but there was marginalia that suggested discussions long before then. The SSR was absorbed by SHIELD in 1948. There are various mentions of hijinks and shenanigans, many of which Howard Stark seems to either have instigated or participated in. And knowing his son, that is perhaps not shocking. At some point in the early 80s, one of the SSR sites was repurposed for a science and technology school. The last box was from 1984, so my sources stop there. Unless Tony fingales me access to SHIELD files. I just sent my final report to him. I can send it to you too, if you want.”

I’d worked damn hard on that report too. It was artwork.

But right at this moment, I could have said that strippers had taken over SHIELD and now required that all agents be expert pole dancers, for all Steve responded. He was stuck at the Project Rebirth section, completely absorbed by a cluster of photos.

He stood quietly for a minute or two before I joined him. “I’m sorry. I should have warned you before you came down here and were hit with a ‘This is Your Life’ surprise.”

Steve just kind of grunted. “It’s fine. I just… didn’t expect to see them.”

I remembered my self-imposed side project and fished it out from under the desk. Carefully plucking the very official and very stodgy photos of Colonel Phillips, Howard Stark, Abraham Erskine, and Peggy Carter from the wall, I tried not to notice how Steve’s eyes greedily followed them.

Inside the “Steve Box” was a brown leather folio. I tucked the faces into the acid-free photo section so they’d be safe and handed the packet over.

I received a quirked eyebrow in return. He really did have eloquent eyebrows.

“It is just some stuff I found that I thought you might like to have. Photos that I found, as well as originals of various notes and pages that might interest you.” He was silently leafing through the photos and had stopped at one of he and Bucky in their uniforms laughing at something. A slow flip showed a few candid photos of the Howlers. That got a half smile. I’d even stumbled across one of Peggy in a fantastic looking hat.

“I have one for Tony too. But yours has something really cool in it.” I quickly found the page with my prize on it and get it back to Steve. It was an official SSR document with quite a bit of foxing around the edges. His eyes got wide as he realized what it was. Under the heading about final selection for Project Rebirth was a list of names. His name was circled and labelled with the handwritten: A. Erskine.

He looked at me and back to the document. “I’ve never seen this. Where did you get it?!”

“It was in the box with that radioactive mug we found. Tony worked his Tony magic and made it safe to handle. I thought you might like it.”

He softly closed the folio and cleared his throat. “Thank you.”
I shrugged. “I think they were always meant for you. I just put them in a book.” He was still quiet and it was beginning to freak me out. “...Did I overstep? I can monologue if it would hel- OOF.” With barely enough time to register the tight hug, I stumbled a little as Steve let go and sat back down.

“Gonna make me eat the rest of this pie alone?”

Blink blink.

As we finished the pie, he told me stories of how he used to celebrate in Brooklyn as a kid. I countered with tales of New Hampshire winters. We had just enough champagne left to raise our glasses as the cheering from the party flooded softly down to us. JARVIS wished us a happy new year, relayed a message from Tony that Steve “had 10 minutes to get his star spangled butt back to the party or he was sending Happy to find him,” and then began to play Auld Lang Syne. Our laughter at Tony’s message sobered as the words of the song conjured memories of loved ones very much missed.

Steve had decided to walk me to my door, which I thought was gallant but unnecessary. I’m a big girl and am perfectly capable of walking down a secure hallway and opening my own door. But the man was in a tuxedo with his bow tie undone, so my protestations were minor. I was weak.

And it distracted me from the Christmas tree by my door. We all had them, our own personal holiday sentries. I understood the team had versions inside their rooms as well. He must have seen my distinct eye aversion and tensed, glancing around.

“Something wrong?”

I faced him directly, angling myself away from the source of the festive scent, and put an I’m just fine face on. “All good.” His dropped head and raised brow disagreed. “Fine. Sometimes the tree is a bit much. Sometimes it is fine and beautiful and makes me smile. And other times, it just…”

“...Reminds you of what happened?” God. The kind eyes were gonna kill me. “I can move it for you. It’ll be like it was never here.”

“No. I really don’t want to make a fuss. And sometimes, it’s fine and it reminds me of home. And I miss that.”

“Tell Tony why and he’d probably replace it with the kind of tree from your front yard. Or just the actual tree.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “You’re right. But I’ve never told anyone about that. Well, until recently.” His smile faded to a kind of thunderstruck expression. I don’t know why, but it made me blush. “Anyway. Thanks for spending your New Year’s with me, Steve. I’m glad you did.”

Since he still hadn’t really moved, just quietly stared at me, it was my turn. “Don’t freak out. But I’m going to hug you now.” And I did. Slowly, as if he’d swat at me or run away any second.

It took a few heartbeats, but arms came up to hug back. Pretty tightly actually. He even put his cheek on the top of my head for a second or two. He really was touch-starved, wasn’t he. Well. Who wasn’t these days. We could work on that.

It wasn’t until I was closing my door that I finally heard him say, “Happy New Year.”
Steve stretched, enjoying the feel of the smooth sheets. For the first time in months, he’d actually slept late. Tony hadn’t let his mandatory guests leave until the sun had peeked between the buildings. Steve replayed the evening in his head. All this time as The Captain and he still wasn’t used to the dog and pony that came with it. Well, maybe that wasn’t entirely true. He was used to it. He just didn’t enjoy it. All the glad-handing and introductions and assumptions just didn’t feel authentic. That skinny kid inside his brain kept whispering, “Who the hell are you pretending to be?”

He’d been consciously making his way to the bar for a refill. True, the alcohol didn’t affect him, but holding a glass gave him something to do with his hands. Plus, Bruce was standing there looking distinctly uncomfortable. Maybe if they teamed up, greedy-eyed strangers would back off for a while.

They’d talked for a time. Steve didn’t know the other man well, but Bruce seemed as much at ease as he felt. An hour or so before midnight, the scientist had made his excuses and retreated to his rooms. Before the elevator doors had even closed, Natasha appeared beside him.

“Couldn’t hack it, huh?” She’d worn a black gown that reminded Steve of a bombshell - gorgeous and incredibly dangerous. Mentally, he grinned. She’d have been right up Bucky’s alley but totally out of his league. It would have been fun to watch.

“How come he gets to leave and we’re stuck here?”

“Yeah. Meeting Miss New York was a real hardship.” Tony. Perfect. “I tell you. You plan and you plan and you plan. You invite interesting people and order the best food. And your honored guests try to sneak out.”

He couldn’t help the smirk when Nat teasingly asked, “Didn’t Pepper plan the party?”

“Details.” Stark sipped from his champagne and surveyed the sparkling crowd of strangers. “Go on. We’ll cover for you for an hour. JARVIS says she’s in her office, wherever that is.” At the surprised look Steve was sure was on his face, Tony rolled his eyes and looked away. “No one should be alone tonight. Don’t make a big thing about it.”

At Nat’s nod, he made a break for it. With JARVIS’s help, he’d found Kate’s office and paused to take in a lay of the land. Clad in clothes that looked way more comfortable than the monkey suit he’d been forced to wear, she was quietly humming while devouring a pie. He loosened his tie before making himself known.

The pie was like the company - warm, homey, sweet, and sometimes a little tart. Her office, with its remarkably uncomfortable chairs, felt like… well shit, it felt like his bed this morning. Like finding a place to just relax and be. And it had a great dress code.

The photos had taken him by surprise. He’d suddenly been reliving moments. The first time Phillips showed something other than contempt as he delivered the news that Bucky was MIA. Peggy walking into the pub in that dress that made him feel like he was seeing in color for the first time. And then her confidence when standing up to what felt like the entire military. Erskine approving his enrollment forms. Stark’s glee every time a new side-effect from the serum was revealed. The smell of campfire that the Howlers used to heat their dinners.
Laughing with Bucky.

The folio with Erskine’s choice, his name, sunk him. He couldn’t seem to draw in enough air. It was all too much. And then her nervous talking filtered through and he used it like a ladder to climb into fresh air. Since he didn’t think he could ever express how much her work meant to him, he’d hugged her. He had to.

They’d laughed and told stories and generally enjoyed the other’s company until the midnight singing reminded them why there were there last night. He’d appreciated her slide into silence as he remembered all the people that were missing from that little room. And wasn’t just a little surprised to see the holes in his soul also reflected in her eyes.

She’d surprised him again at her door. He’d been teasing her, testing the edges of their burgeoning friendship. And then she dropped another bomb on him. She’d shared how she’d learned to cope with the loss of her family and then just casually dropped that she’d never told anyone else about it. He remembered seeing her struggle while she’d talked with him, but he’d assumed that it was due to the emotional retelling. Not a first telling.

He was used to people giving him intel, but as Captain America. Less so as Steve. It wasn’t so much that he knew something that others didn’t. It was that she’d been so casual of her trust in him. Like they’d already been friends for years and that level of trust was assumed. The warmth it created hadn’t been fully present in his life since the Howlers, Bucky, and Peggy were all together. How did she do that?

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He’d knocked on her door for breakfast. Several times. Leaving Kate to her sound sleep, he’d had a quiet meal. Apparently, the team had really enjoyed the party.

“JARVIS, would you please ask Kate if she would like to join me for a run?”

“I’m sorry Captain Rogers, but Dr. Wallace is no longer in residence.”

All the warmth from last night suddenly became a cold stone of fear. She was gone? Did she run or was she taken? The tower was full of strangers last night. Anything could have happened.

“Are Tony or Natasha awake yet?” Something inside clenched at the thought of their involuntary absence.

“No. Shall I wake them? I do not believe Sir will welcome being disturbed at this hour.”

So they were still here. That was something. “When did she leave? Did she seem under duress?” Mentally, he was already running through the things he was going to need before sprinting out the door, who may have taken her and what their motives might be. And ignoring the way his insides had petrified.

“Dr. Wallace seemed in good spirits when she left at at 7 this morning after her check-in with medical personnel.”

He hadn’t realized that she was still under Dr. M’s care. Well, if she had touched base with them first, that meant that she was probably OK. Yes. She was definitely OK.

Although maybe he’d find her and make sure.

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He took a guess and headed to her apartment. Apparently, on the way over, he’d worked himself up over what could have happened. He may have knocked on her door with a little more force than was strictly necessary. Especially when no one came to answer.

“I’m coming! Take it easy!” Well. She was here.

The door swung open and there she was. Looking pretty irritated, if he was honest with himself. But her expression quickly changed to surprise. “Steve? What are you doing here?” He pushed passed her into the apartment, scanning the room and checking the corners. Empty. “Uh, what the fuck man?”

He realized that he was standing in the middle of her living room, not having explained himself at all. “Sorry, I- sorry. You left and I just had to make sure that you were OK.”

“And barging in and looking around for what? Bad guys holding me hostage in my own home?”

He could feel the blush move up and take over every single skin cell. God, he was an asshole. Of course she was fine. He ran his hands over his face and through his hair. “Yeah. I may have been worried. But I can see that you’re fine. I’ll just go.” Go and dig a hole and maybe never come out again.

“’I left a note on my counter. I figured you’d see it. Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. Do you want, um, some water or something?” She didn’t wait for an answer before bustling off to the small kitchen off the living room.

He looked around, actually seeing it. It wasn’t a large apartment, but it was comfortable. Lived in. A quilt folded over the arm of the sofa. Shoes toed off by the door. A book open face down on the coffee table. A kitchen chair pulled out and dishes in the sink. There was an alcove with a desk and many, many books. Some were battered paperbacks, there was a stack of textbooks and reference materials with papers stuck in as bookmarks. Lining one shelf, somewhat set apart from the others, were leather bound books that looked cared for more than the others.

Suddenly he felt as if he was intruding. This was her home. She hadn’t invited him here. Well, she had once, but not today. It wasn’t like seeing Nat’s quarters or Banner’s or even Tony’s spacious rooms. They slept and bathed there. Passed time. She lived here. It was like taking a peek into something personal and hidden.

She was watching him from the main room. Like he was some kind of exotic animal that she never expected to find in her home. With a shake, she seemed to come back to herself and relax when he took the glass of water. “Make yourself at home. Please.”

Tucking her legs under herself, she sunk down in to an upholstered armchair and gestured for him to take the sofa. It was surprisingly comfortable, even for someone his size.

“I figured it was a good day to come home. Haven’t had a Code Blue since we got back. And I just really needed to wear my own clothes again. Really anything but scrubs and sweats.” She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the chair. “And I really really wanted to be home, you know?”

He grunted. Yeah, he knew. For the first time since coming in, he really looked at her. In those tight jeans that were popular now, a dark sweater, and hair pulled up in a ponytail, she looked completely at ease for the first time in days.

“I can see why. It’s a nice place.” She smiled, eyes still closed. “You look better. Not, ah, that
you looked bad before. Just better now.” The smile became a smirk.

“The amazing restorative powers of a shower and a nap in your own bed.” He settled in and mimicked her pose. It was so quiet here. He could feel tense muscles relaxing. “So you were the first of the sleeping beauties to awaken, I take it?

He chuckled. “Even Natasha was still in bed.”

“Alone?”

Arching a brow at the amused woman in front of him, he shrugged. “Not sure I’m brave enough for that bed check.”

They chuckled together. “I hate to do this to you, but I need to submit my lesson plans and do a final review of my first mission report. It shouldn’t take more than an hour or so. If you want to stick around, I’d love to show you this Italian place around the corner. They make a ravioli that will literally change your life.”

“How could I pass up life changing ravioli?”

He thumbed through various books for a while, but wasn’t really in the mood to read. She had a television, but he didn’t want the noise to bother her. So he watched for a while, typing away on her laptop, occasionally cursing the parentage of the people that designed the website. The sofa was very comfortable. And long enough for him to stretch out. The windows were open and a light breeze occasionally bubbled through. The stone inside him loosened and he was warm again.

***

The sound of rustling papers and the smell of coffee pulled his eyes open. When had he fallen asleep?

Warm brown eyes glanced up and met his own. She’d curled up in a chair by the window where she’d been reading. He admired how the sunlight came through the windows and set her hair aflame. “Hey big guy.”

“How long was I asleep?” He had to clear his throat, embarrassed by how gravelly it sounded. Get it together, man. You slept for decades. This was just a nap.

“Two hours or so. You were really out. Coffee?” She grinned at his enthusiastic nod.

He sat up and the quilt that had been over him, pooled on his lap. He hadn’t noticed getting covered? Damn. Trying to get to his feet, she put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

While she poured the coffee in her small kitchen, he folded the quilt and tried to get his hair under control. “Sorry about that. I don’t usually do that.”

She came back with a mug in her hands and a smirk on her face. “What? Superheroes can’t need a nap sometimes? Please. I take it has the highest compliment that you did. Also, that is a magic sofa, so really you had no chance.”

“And the quilt? Was it magic too?”

“Nah. But if you have a nap, you need a quilt. It is basically the law.”

“The law?”
“Hey man, I don’t make ’em. Just enforce ‘em.” He was halfway through his mug before she spoke again. “So. What’s up?”

He finished his coffee before he started talking. And it was a long time before he stopped.

It turns out that ravioli can be delivered.

***

Steve stood panting, hands on hips, at the center of the Brooklyn Bridge. Facing Manhattan, one of the best views of the city. Behind him, the streets of his youth. He watched New Yorkers flood by, some stopping to stare at the strange man standing in the wind and snow.

Yesterday’s conversation still rattled around in his head. He felt like something was on the edge on happening, like just before a storm. Like just before a decision was made that would change his life. In those moments when he thought something had happened to the team and to Kate, he’d been afraid. Truly scared that people had been taken from him. Leaving him alone. Again.

He’d barely come out of self-imposed exile intact. He wasn’t sure if he could do it again.

He knew that no one would stop him if he turned south of the Hudson, rented a small apartment, found a quiet job, and spent his days in peace.

And yet.

When he took the plane down into that black water, he never expected to reemerge. Didn’t think he’d feel the same sense of purpose, be driven to a common goal. Find a group of people who not only shared a vision, but were willing to work and sacrifice for it.

He ignored the frigid wind that caused goosebumps to crawl up his skin and constrict his lungs. He’d been colder than this.

Without being able to explain why, he knew that he wasn’t done yet. He wasn’t so arrogant to think that the fight couldn’t go on without him. That good men and women wouldn’t stand in front of trouble and refuse to move. He’d been found for a reason, sacrificed his life twice. A different man walked into Camp LeHigh than came out. Another one out of Azzano. A new one from a German train. The one awakened from the ice… new again but still old. Still him. And not him.

Captain America was needed. In this new age of instant data and instant transformation, people needed a reminder. A symbol. In that, Coulson had been right. He could provide that. Fight to protect this country in the light and in the dark. Peggy and Phillips and Stark and Bucky and so many more had worked to form the foundation of SHIELD. They set the standard and the path. He could do this for them. He would do it for himself. Now it was his turn to hold the door. Until a new man came through. And he knew he wouldn’t have to do it alone.

Steve turned back the way he came. They weren’t ready yet. It was time to get to work.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Apparently, glycogen is a real thing that needs replenished after lots of energy is expended. I have no idea if it can be scanned and measured, but if anyone could do it, it would be JARVIS. Also, in case you haven’t noticed it yet, I have zero medical background.

Also, Merry Christmas everyone!

If you’re interested, this is the dress I’m trying to describe. Ob-sessed. https://www.boutiquefeel.com/i/product_detail?productId=e0a9d77c-43da-49cd-b1aa-9066e6d77e99&utm_source=Pinterest&utm_medium=post&utm_content=ads&pp=1

______________________________________________________

“Tony Stark, you are an asshole and I hate you.”

The hyper-focused genius in question half smiled but kept working. “Only part of that is true. And if you’d stop dodging the probes, we’d be much further along. Now hold still.”

We been at this for hours. I’d been summoned to the lab where Trouble Wasn’t Coming. It had arrived. Tony and Bruce were trying to spark a reaction so that I’d create… summon… enter ominous verb here… the blue wall. They wanted to work through a series of stimuli in an attempt to narrow down the reaction impetus. We were nearing the end of the “try to zap Kate with random currents of electricity” section. It was just super duper fun. After a while, I couldn’t help but try to avoid the business end of the elegant scientific cattle prod.

“I’m sorry. When was the last time someone repeatedly electrocuted you as part of the scientific method? Are we done with this yet? OW!” I shot Bruce a dirty look. He’d snuck up on me, the stinker. He nodded at Tony, who looked… resigned maybe?

“Well you refuse to emulate conditions from the original incident, just so that you can wear a pretty dress and hobnob at a party you shouldn’t go to. You didn’t go to my party, not that I’m jealous.”

I refused to get punched in the face and then have to go to a school function. Where there was every chance I’d get punched in my metaphorical face. “It is a mandatory party hosted by the president of the university to kick off the year. I can’t not go.”

“We have work to do here.” I see Stubborn Tony was back.

“I have work to do there. I’m going. The fact that I have a new dress for it is just a bonus.”

Bruce spoke up from behind me again. “He’s not wrong, Kate. This is more important than some party. If the university fires you for it, maybe that’s for the best.”

I was absolutely fucking floored. “How can you say that? You of all people know how much teaching means to me.”
Tony answered this time. “You teach rich kids about music and art and make them read about things that have already happened. Hardly life changing stuff.”

“It isn’t like you were actually teaching them something useful like math and science. Do they really need to know another pretty story about silly people that have been dead for years?”

I gaped at Bruce. “First of all, rich kids? Seriously Tony? Second, math and science makes the world great, but the arts are what make the world worth living in! Don’t you think that metal band on your tshirt would agree, you pompous billionaire. Bruce, I’ve seen how music affects you. You need it. Need it. Why are you saying this?”

I had to spin to face each man. They’d literally made me dizzy with anger.

“Maybe you aren’t that great a teacher. We already know you aren’t good at following instructions. Maybe if you were, you’d have stayed on the plane and that kid wouldn’t have died. How old was he again?”

Even Bruce stepped back at Tony’s statement. So aghast and furious, it took me a moment to find my voice. And when I did, I was marching the man I’d thought of as a friend until he was backed against his own glass wall. My voice was low and sharp.

“Fuck you Stark.”

Betrayal. Hurt. Fear. Incandescent fury. I could feel my breath coming so fast that my whole body tingled. I was so caught up that I missed Bruce’s first few attempts to get my attention.

”Kate. KATE. You need to back up.” He carefully sidled up next to Stark, who I now realized had very wide eyes. “Your hands are glowing.”

I moved into the center of the test area, but didn’t take my eyes off the bearded asshole.

“JARVIS, tell me you were running scans.”

“I never stopped. Dr. Wallace has a very high heart rate. Might I suggest contacting Dr. Mandalaparti?”

I really hate being talked about and not to. “No! If we’re going to do this, we’re going to goddamn do it. Now stand back.”

Using the emotions that boiled right under my skin, it was easy to remember, and unfortunately relive, the mugging and tree fall. I thrust my arms out and pushed.

Just like before, the blue wall burst forth. Just like before, it was completely beautiful.

“I’m not sure how long I can hold this. Do what you need to do.” The scientists bustled around me, talking to JARVIS and each other in a language that I assumed was a different form of English.

After a couple of minutes, Stark spoke again. And when he did, the blue sparkled with flashes of white. Interesting. “OK. Gird your loins, we’re going to test the properties of the edges.”

He and Bruce took turns either throwing, leaning, or pushing different objects against the perimeter of the wall to see, I assumed, if they or it would be damaged. In the end, it looked like a short range battle had ensued in the lab. Glass and metal of varying widths, rebar, plastic, wood, compounds I couldn’t identify all neatly bisected. A long-armed robot rolled away shorter. Heavier objects made me shift my stance a little. Like leaning into a strong wind.
I could feel that initial shock of anger wearing off and with it my energy. When the wall started to blink and fade, I showed my gratitude by sitting heavily in a nearby desk chair. Super powers were exhausting, man.

We observed the silence before JARVIS chimed in. “Sir, might I suggest that Dr. Wallace be examined by the medical team after each successful test? Dr. Wallace, please inform the medical team that your glycogen levels are dangerously low.”

Yawning, I barely got out, “Will do.”

Starting for the door, Bruce ran interception. “You know we only said those things to make you angry enough to trigger a powered response.”

“Yeah. I get that. Congrats. It worked.” OK. Maybe I was still pretty pissed off. I left the lab without saying anything else.

***

Having filled my prescription of a huge sandwich, some Gatorade, and a pickle, I waited for the elevator. Not knowing how long the tests were going to take, I’d brought my party paraphernalia with me. There was enough time to calm down, carb up, and get ready. I was looking forward to some restorative chill-time.

Which is why I sighed internally a little when the doors opened to reveal that Steve was already its occupant. I liked him. I really did. But I was not in the mood for company. Even his. Even when he smiled in greeting.

“I hear things went well in the lab earlier.” News travels fast apparently.

“I suppose so. They were able to get some readings.” Leave it alone, Rogers.

“Tony and Bruce should continue running tests until we have a better understanding of what is happening and how to control it. We need to know how dangerous it is. The sooner we know more the better.”

He caught the side-eye that I’d thrown. “We” indeed. Ever since he’d come to the apartment and talked through some feelings around having a purpose in the modern world, Steve had been decidedly driven. I’d wanted to put off today’s tests until after the party, in case something happened that might preclude me from attending. Mandatory only has one meaning. I’d only agreed to go through with it today at his persistent urging.

He wasn’t even carrying himself like normal. Even now, he was standing ‘at ease.’

“What?”

“How to control it? Do you mean how to control me? Perhaps we should remember that we have other responsibilities and don’t want to be poked and prodded as part of a daily balanced breakfast.”

“I just meant that the team can benefit from every resource—”

“Oh I get it. And I’m willing to participate.” Why was this elevator running so slowly? “But I am not a rat to be tested and controlled or a resource to be tapped on demand. This is not a we decision. This is my life. My body. You and the rest of Earth’s mightiest heroes decide nothing.” Finally the doors opened. I needed to get out before I dug in. “Excuse me.”
I could feel his eyes on me as I stepped out and walked to my defacto rooms.

***

It took my entire sandwich, a hot shower, and the better part of *The Big Chill* soundtrack before I’d stopped mentally yelling at the men in my life who thought they could or needed to control my decisions. Knowing that Tony and Steve had good intentions was different from feeling it.

I was hoping to talk to Nat and get her perspective and maybe have a little girl time, but JARVIS said that she was out of the country. Yes Alice, people come and go so quickly here.

Focusing on the job to do tonight, I mentally reviewed my plans for the remainder of the school year and those plotted out for the next so that I could readily answer relevant questions.

Sometimes playing dress up is fun. And sometimes it is like putting on armor. I contoured, powdered, moisturized, and smoothed. Hair was curled, polished, and arranged.

Thanks to my SI salary bump, I’d been able to splash out and buy the dress that had been calling my name for months and my very first pair of Louboutins. Skinny jeans were one thing for curves, but this dress highlighted as much as it concealed. Sleeveless and knee-length, it clung without being too tight. The v-shaped neckline ended below my breasts and nodded to cleavage while still being dignified. Black sequins winked. Between the daily running with Steve and the magical effect of a perfect pair of black satin pumps, my legs and butt looked… well like they almost belonged to Natasha rather than me. Girl could work it.

Even my stubborn hair had cooperated tonight. Shiny and softly curling, I’d pinned one side back over my ear. It left the long, quietly sparkly earrings free to dance as I turned my head.

Makeup was good. A soft but strong eye, barely rouged cheeks, and a pink-nude lip and I was done. And incredibly proud of the results. Shaped like my mother, I had hips and boobs that made finding dresses like this a challenge. I know it isn’t good to boast, but damn I looked good. Strong, feminine, confident. That greedy weasel, Stanley Matthison, in the chemistry department didn’t stand a chance this year. Tonight’s donors would be eating out of my hand.

Enjoying the flush of that little self-ego boost, I gathered up my clutch, phone, and realized my jacket (a blissful cobalt trench) was over a chair in the common room, I double checked my teeth for lipstick and went to retrieve it.

***

Thanking God for elevators, because stairs in these shoes - not today Satan, I heard their voices before I saw them. Steve, Bruce, Tony… and Pepper, yay! While part of me wanted to turn right back around and risk hypothermia, the woman wearing the dress wasn’t having it.

Ha. Control this. With my best head-up, high-heeled, badass chick walk, I strutted passed them to my jacket. They stopped talking.

Turning around to face them, “I have that university function tonight. Just on my way out.”

You know. I never really thought I’d put that expression on a man’s face. But damn. It felt *good*.

“Kate, you look incredible! That dress is gorgeous on you.” Pepper came over to get a better look. She wasn’t shabby herself. Yoga pants and a button down would have looked silly on someone else, but Pepper made it look chic. She might be my fashion hero.

“Thank you. I had been hoping to wear it to the SI party, but that didn’t quite happen.”
Tony stepped forward a little. “Anytime you want a party for that dress, let me know.” Pepper hit him in the chest and rolled her eyes. I just raised an eyebrow. Not ready to forgive you just yet, man.

“This is, what, a donor party? I don’t miss those. I was never very good at all that.” Bruce had his hands in the arms of his sweater and looked weary. Like I was going to jump down his throat. Although, I guess to be fair, I’d been pretty openly hostile earlier.

I smiled a little at him and said, “It isn’t my favorite thing to do, but it’s part of the job, you know?” He seemed to relax slightly.

Steve still hadn’t said anything, just stayed leaning against the counter. At this point, I couldn’t tell if it was the dress or if my anger in the elevator had caught him aback.

“OK. Well, I’m off. I’m heading home after the party but’ll be back for my stuff in the morning. Have a good night.” With a kiss on the cheek from Pepper, I sashayed out.

Before the elevator doors closed and an arm slid through, I heard Tony call out, “Hot for teacher Rogers?”

Steve slid through and stood next to me. We both blushed.

He cleared his throat. “I owe you an apology. I got a little caught up in the objective and pushed right by the person. Tony showed me the recording from earlier. I guess I didn’t realize what the tests would mean for you. They basically put me in a metal coffin and shot me full of serum. I don’t have to re-experience a trauma when I put on the suit.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it. “And I know you aren’t just some resource to be exploited. You’re my friend. We’ll go at your pace and if you decide to walk away, I’ll support you. I’m sorry.”

Well shit. He was so hard to stay mad at when he was all empathetic and remorseful like that.

“Thank you. I really will do my best. But there has to be a better way to trigger a manifestation and until that happens, I’m going to have to go slow.”

He nodded and we stood companionably until the elevator reached the lobby.

“Can I give you a ride to your party? Kind of an apology gesture?” He looked so suddenly vulnerable that I had to say yes.

Beside one of Tony’s sleek cars, he took my jacket and helped me slip it on. I saw him swallow heavily.

“Kate, you really do, look beautiful, I mean.”

I smiled before getting in. “Thank you. The benefits of a good dress.”

Closing the door, he seemed to say to himself, “It’s not the dress.”

I really hoped this blush would go away before I got to the party.
“You’re getting better, but you have to stop flinching every time you fire the first round. It’s shifting your stance and making you hit off target.” Clint hit the button and my target sheet zipped towards us. The fact that he could see the teeny bullet holes made me feel like my grandmother, squinting to read.

“Dude, I’m still not sure why I’m training for this. I’m a report jockey, not an international woman of mystery.” Seriously. If I never got off that plane again, I’d die a happy woman.

The concentric circles arrived. I was nowhere near the center, but I’d started hitting the paper at least. Clint had decided that I wasn’t ready for the silhouette forms. He was probably right.

“You know what Cap said. Every person that may step into an active situation has to be trained. Even the non-coms, but especially those nearest the team. He’s pretty serious about it.” A fresh sheet zipped down the line. “Now, regain your stance. Right foot a little farther back, good. Now squeeze the trigger this time, don’t yank it.”

I flinched. Clint sighed.

“I know, I know. Don’t look at me that way. I’ll get it.”

“At least you stopped closing your eyes.” If a man could look exasperated, amused, and impatient all at the same time, he would look like Clint.

He watched me shoot for a few more minutes before calling back the last target sheet. I ended up high-fiving myself for hitting inside the largest ring on all six of the shots this time. We walked over to an interior room for continuing lessons on how to clean my new Glock. I did OK. At least well enough not to get Blank Face. I hated Blank Face. It was basically the “head pat-can’t believe I’m stuck doing this-you should be acing this already” of his facial expressions.

“So your party went well? Lots of dancing and professorial conversation?”

I nodded. “I think so. Although, no dancing and most of the conversation was comparing who got what grant and got published in which journal. Or glad-handing the donors and convincing them to give you money for your project or department.”

“Sounds… really terrible actually. Good hooch?”

Ha. Hooch. “Yeah. The drinks are usually very good. High proof means high donations. And it isn’t so bad. Part of the job. Once you hit your levels, it is a matter of finding people to hang out with until you can slip away.”

“And the Humanities department is the place to be?” He sounded doubtful. Rude.

“We have our moments. Dorothy Shanahan got so blitzed at the summer event, that she got on the table and started reciting the Wife of Bath from The Canterbury Tales. The dean’s wife was scandalized. It was awesome.” He looked at me doubtfully. “The one where the wife outlives five husbands and-”


“It was hysterical! All Chaucer at parties has since been banned.” We laughed together. He was a
cool guy. “You just have to avoid the engineers, unless you need an ice luge built, but that’s really more for their departmental functions. Math and Humanities have, perhaps unsurprisingly, an ongoing feud, so screw those guys. The Classics people are pretty cool. Philosophy is to be avoided at all costs, unless you need a little green to get you by. Business and PoliSci are basically what you’d expect, particularly in this political climate. Personally, I like hanging with the History crowd. They have the best stories, outside Lit.”

He stared at me for a long minute before shaking his head. “And you all compete?”

“Oh totally. We all need funding. Fortunately, Humanities has a few die-hard sponsors. Usually all I have to do is show up, shake some hands, see some grandchild photos, and I’m good. If I happen to kick Stanley Matthison in the financial balls, it is a good night. I hate that guy. Like Chem is so cool. Please.”

We started to clean up. “You probably could’ve skipped it. Tony would fund your entire department for a decade if you asked.”

I sighed. “I know. But that’s not how I want it to work. I’m good with sponsors and donors, but a patron? Feels like leaving money on my desk in the morning.” We were quiet for a minute or two. “I don’t want to be dependent on him for everything. What if this doesn’t work out? What if he gets tired of me or I rage quit? I can’t go back to starting from scratch again. I’m too old and too tired.”

Leaving the gun range, we headed for the gym. Nat had made him promise to teach me to throw a proper punch before she got back. I was both wary and excited.

“You can’t be that old. You’re what, 28?”

“31.” 28? Hair toss.

He barked a laugh. “You don’t look that old.”

“Er, thanks?” Steve was taking out some frustration on a heavy bag. Geeze. Glad I wasn’t the bag. I nodded in his direction, bringing Clint’s attention to the soldier. “And I hear that’s going around.”

“Speaking of the man in charge, I hear you two are getting along well.”

Shrugging, “Yeah. I mean it hasn’t been long, but we’re friends.”

“Mmmm.”

“Dude. Don’t make me flinch-shoot you.” Wallace, you will not blush. You will not!

“Whatever you say. Did you call that number I gave you?”

“Yep. I have my first appointment next week.”

He nodded and grunted in approval. “Now, same as yesterday. Right foot forward, hands up.”

***

I’d been called to the principal’s office. Or that’s what it felt like. Other than last week before the party, Tony and I hadn’t really spoken. We weren’t not speaking; we just didn’t seek the other out. Pepper had stopped by and we’d chatted about the first day of class and how things were
going. She didn’t mention him and I didn’t ask. It was all very Bechdel positive.

But now I had to see him and I was having a presumptive anxiety moment. I’d argued with him and yelled at him and hugged him, but all in my head, typically while showering. I don’t know what it is about having imaginary arguments, but they seemed very shower-centric.

But after all that mental barrage, I’d worked up a good mad. A good mad with a side of resignation and indignation. And a dash of respect. The man did stand up to a crazy person that was generating an unknown substance/energy/thing. Props to the brave suicidal crazy man. I guess. But did he have to be such a dick about it?

Having been standing in his lab for a length of one eardrum-puncturing hair metal song, my impatience won out. Naturally, in the brief silence between songs. Because that’s how my life works.

“STARK!”

He flipped up the metalworking face-shield thing, its official name I was sure, to reveal a sardonic expression. “You don’t have to shout, Doc.”

I crossed my arms and started at him. How he wasn’t deaf, I’ll never know. “JARVIS summoned me.” I’d wanted to have a light “whatever” voice, but failed. Flat it was then.

He exhaled and stared at me. I waited for him to speak, clenching and unclenching my jaw.

“When did you lose your security badge? On the plane?”

That took a think. “I… still had it on when I got off the plane. Maybe when I tripped or… after the explosion?” Amongst all the crazy emotions of the day was guilt. After weeks of waiting, I had that badge for the length of the flight. “Why?”

Mr. Frenetic was up and moving, organizing his tools and sorting small bits of whosits and whatsits galore. I’d put money down that he had at least twenty thingamabobs.

After organizing his space and his mind, he spoke again. “Someone tried to use your credentials to log into the SI system this morning.”

Blink. “What? Why?” He’d gone from fast, quick movements to total stillness. Watching me. My reactions. “You can’t think that I-”

“Would run out into live fire to try to save people you’d never met as a cover story for strategically dropping your brand new security credentials for your nefarious cohorts for purposes yet unknown? No. I didn’t consider that at all.”

I took a beat to consider him. “You know. Sometimes I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not.”

That earned me a bright smirk, if such a thing was possible. It died as soon as it shone. “About the other day. We needed to get a reaction from you to try to generate the energy field. I may, may have taken it a little far.”

Energy field? We’d come back to that. Time to do the hard work. Talking about feelings. “What you said really hurt me. You knew how hard that was. I still wake up in the middle of the night. And I suspect you have your own ghosts and that just makes it worse because you know how I’m feeling. I understand you needed a catalyst, I get that. But we have to find a different way to summon the blue whateveritis. Where you don’t tempt fate and I don’t want to rip your limbs off.”
He cleared his throat. “I owe you an apology.”

“OK. I’m ready.”

He glared at me, but there was a smile in there somewhere. Moving to stand formally, he bent at the waist in a slight bow. “Doctor Wallace. Please accept my apology.”

That charming bastard. “Forgiven. Never break up with Pepper. She’s a saint.”

“Don’t I know it.”

I jumped up and sat on one of the work tables. “So. Energy field? You’re done with analyzing the test results, I take it?”

“Waiting on Banner for the gross biology part. He’ll be back tomorrow, but he’s seen the results. Try not to explode with impatience before then Sparky.”

WHY did I like this man again?

“Speaking of impatience, have you had a chance to review the report I submitted?” I’d been weirdly nervous about it. Made me feel like a college freshman all over again.

He slapped down his welding mask, tried speaking, and tilted it up again. “Paperwork really isn’t my department, but I skimmed it.” I.e. he’d read the whole thing. Meeting my eyes directly, “Nat was right.”

Warm and fuzzy on the inside, I replied, “Good. I’m glad.” And I was. These were my purpose inside the team and I was determined to do them well. “As far as missions, I know Nat and Clint have been on one or two since Latvia. Do you want me to get their notes for reports or are they recorded too?”

He breathed a laugh. “Can you image how many pieces they’d find me in if Natasha found out that I’d been recording her. Only the group missions are recorded. Those are the only ones that need your... special attention. So until we put on our Sunday best again, enjoy the downtime, keep shooting holes in paper, and continue opening young minds.”

And with that he snapped down the mask and promptly forgot that I was still standing here.

***

It was, in fact, nearly a week before I saw anyone from tower. And then, it was in the most unlikely of places.

“Don’t forget, your first drafts are due in my Inbox on Wednesday.” The lights in the auditorium-style classroom slowly came up. Most students sat toward the front, but there was a lone figure slumped near the back. “Come to office hours if you have questions.” Blue baseball hat, brown leather coat. There sitting in my classroom with an amused smile was none other than the man himself. Stop smiling like a loon. Get control of your face, Wallace! You are a serious teacher! “None of that Courier New business and playing with the margins. And if I see a five paragraph essay format, you’ll be diagramming sentences for a month!” Reconstituting corporal punishment, real smooth.

When the last of the students had filed out, my visitor sauntered down to the front.

“Aren’t you a little old to be auditing my class, Captain Rogers?” He didn’t seem to be limping or
visibly hurt. Tired maybe?

He smiled. “Just taking advantage of that GI Bill.” Glancing around, “So this is you huh? Tony should have you lead more meetings. You had, what, 60 or so students today and kept their attention the whole time?”

I finished packing up my bag and nodded at him to follow me. “I have a couple of different classrooms this semester, but that one is my favorite. 61 today. Freshman Comp is a mandatory class across the disciplines, so it is always packed.” We chatted and wove our way through the hallways and up to the floors that housed professor offices. Unlocking my door and then unburdening my arms, I let Steve look around.

I loved my office. This level had architecturally interesting windows and a great view. I’d inherited dark wooden bookshelves that were now full of reference books, rolled maps, works-in-progress, journals, some key vinyl and a record player. I had a massive whiteboard that was full of various historical timelines for different classes and notes to myself about what should be added to what lesson.

Below the obligatory wall o’ framed degrees was perhaps the least supportive sofa ever constructed by man. I mean, it was probably super comfy in the last 70s when it was new. Refurnishing the Humanities department offices was not high on the list of budgetary concerns.

Steve had gotten sucked into my bookshelf. Not so much as a nerdy doorway to Narnia, as quiet exclamations over places he’d been or things that he remembered. The turntable generated an eyebrow raise.

“I thought no one used these any more. Too old fashioned. Music through your phone instead.”

“Oh, most of what I have is on my phone or in my cloud, but some lessons are best emphasized with the intended vehicle. There’s an 8-track player in a box somewhere.” I realized something. “Hey! No one recognized you. I thought the hat and jacket were a bullshit camouflage, but it worked. Do you use it all the time?”

He sat on the sofa and I took the armchair. I tried not to snicker when he immediately tried to resituate to a more comfortable posture. Such a sadist.

“People don’t expect to see me in a normal place, so normal clothes just reinforce that belief. Doesn’t work on little kids though. They immediately see right through it.”

“Ah context. The mind’s fickle mistress. It is good to see you though. You and Nat didn’t seem to get much notice on this last mission and you were gone awhile. Anything up?” It was good to see him, albeit somewhat strange. Steve Rogers was on my horrible sofa. In my office. It was a bit like Santa Claus walking in off the street and asking for a pastrami sandwich. The mash of my worlds was a little surreal. Context, indeed.

“Maybe. We headed back to Latvia to see if there was any lead from the security break. JARVIS got more data than we did. Despite going over the entire eastern part of that damn country.”

Blink. Wait. “But Tony said that my credentials were only used to try to log in to the system. You mean they actually made it through?!” Oh shit.

He sat forward now, forearms on his knees. Serious Steve. Oh shit.

“No. Full access was denied. Your badge hadn’t been updated with that day’s codes, since we
were in the air. It did give whoever used it just enough time to get a foot in the door. Apparently, they tried again this morning.”

“And they were stopped again?”

“Not before running a search.”

That’s not so bad, right? “A search for what? Did SI get hacked?”

“A search on you. They were looking for information on you.”

Ohhhh shit.
Hello reader-friends! I've got some big plans for this story, the next of which is beginning to unfold.

Anyway, I just wanted to say thanks for being here. Hope you're enjoying reading the story as much as I am writing it!

Small thing - do you like chapter titles?

Steve watched confusion and fear battle across his friend’s features. Not that he’d doubted her innocence in the hack, but the blood draining from her face confirmed it. No one could do that at will.

He wished he more details to share, but Tony was being uncharacteristically tight-lipped.

“About me? I don’t understand. I’m nobody.”

Kate looked at him with those big brown eyes and he felt his insides twist. “Tony is bringing everyone in as a security precaution. Even Pepper, although that seems like more of an excuse to see her. Is there anything you need from your office before we head out? You might not be able to come back for a few days. You don’t have classes tomorrow, right?”

Of course, he knew she didn’t have classes tomorrow. Just like he knew where her office was, where the exits were, and how to get out of the building without being seen. The briefing had been thorough.

A line appeared between her eyebrows as she looked at him, obviously thinking through what he’d said. “Not come for a few… Why can’t I come back? I have students scheduled for office hours and a departmental meeting tomorrow. It isn’t like I can just pick up and go.”

Nat’s small but clear voice in his ear, “Route 1 is clear. You have 5 minutes or so before classes start letting out again. If I was them, I’d use the confusion as cover.”

He walked over to her windows and closed the blinds. “Grab what you need. We need to go.”

She stood but was still obviously confused. “I don’t understand.”

“Cap, do you copy?” Nat’s voice in his earbud again.

He touched the little device and Kate’s gaze on him sharpened. “Copy.” He picked up her purse and handed it to her. “Kate, we need to go.”

“Is that- You have an earbud- You didn’t just stop by to say hi, did you.” It was fairly obvious that she was no longer speaking to him, so much as working through it. “You’re here for me. Why are you here for me? A friendly face. Make me feel safer, yes. And to… keep me safe maybe? But why? I don’t unders-” She focused on him again and her eyes got even rounder in alarm. “Because you’re on a mission. I’m the mission. Whoever hacked SI found my information and knows where
I am. And you’re here because they’re coming?! Today, now. For me?!”

He was kind of impressed at how quickly she put together the pieces. She looked around her office and started shoving files and her laptop into a messenger bag. Grabbing water bottles from under her desk, she asked, “Do we need supplies? What am I packing for? I have protein bars here somewhere.” Yep, he’d lost her. Time to refocus and get out.

“Just get what you need. We’ll pick up supplies if we need any, although I’m sure the safehouse will have some.” He tried not to smile, he really did; she was just so flustered and trying so hard.

“Don’t you smile at me Mr. I Know the Plan! This is only the second time I’ve been evacuated from somewhere. And the first time involved aliens! I don’t know what to expect!” Freezing suddenly, “Oh God. I hope they’re not aliens.”

She slipped the bag over her shoulder over her coat and held her purse close to her chest like a life preserver.

“Three minutes, Cap. Get a move on.”

He turned and put a hand on her shoulder. Leaning down a little to make direct eye contact on her level, he spoke calmly. “Take a deep breath and act like nothing is wrong. I’m here. Nat’s on comms. We’ve got you.” He shook her just a little. “Now. Dr. Wallace. Are you ready?”

Nodding once, she took a deep breath and said, “Yes.”

He touched the earbud. “We’re moving.” Opening her office door, he did a quick scan and took her hand. And they moved.

***

Natasha drove. And, surprising Steve, talked amiably with Kate the entire way. Well, not so much with her as at her. Kate’s responses were mostly nonverbal. Shrugs and grunts mostly.

They pulled into the parking structure and wound down passed the public area to the place where only SHIELD and the Avengers had access.

They sat in the now silent vehicle, grateful to have made it to safety without incident.

“This is the safehouse? Stark Tower. REALLY ?!”

He grinned at her exasperation, but Nat answered. “Oh just wait. You have much to learn, young padawan.”

Kate rolled her eyes but answered, “You’re a little young to be Yoda, aren’t you? Unless you have an amazing anti-wrinkle cream. And if that’s the case, it is rude not to share.”

Yoda? Yet another cultural reference he didn’t understand. Great.

He waited before the utility elevator doors closed before nodding at Nat to punch in the code using the floor keys on the wall panel.

“Do you ever notice how much time we spend in elevators in this building?” Kate asked.

“Would you rather use the stairs to get to the top floors? I’ll pass.” The two women seemed to have a companionable friendship. He wasn’t even sure the spy allowed herself to have civilian friends until Kate.
“Eh. Been there, done that. It’s not nearly as much fun as it sounds. Steve, what are you doing?”

He’d moved to hold on the handrails. “Just wait for it.” They started descending.

“We’re going down? What—” The cabin stopped and the lights turned red. A quick sweep of lasers ran from the ceiling to the floor, scanning each of them. “...the fuck?”

“Identities confirmed,” intoned JARVIS.

And with that, they began to move sideways. Natasha was able to keep her footing, but Kate stumbled a little. “You guys. Seriously. What is happening?”

Moments later, the doors opened to a utilitarian looking landing with an armed guard stationed in front of heavy metal doors.

He turned to his friend and his mission. “Kate, welcome to the Castle.”

***

“Never before have I truly appreciated the depth of Tony’s paranoia. I don’t know whether to be impressed or deeply concerned. But for sure, we are not in Kansas anymore.”

On another day, Steve would have laughed at that. Right now, he just wanted to get some answers.

Instead he said, “Come on. Let’s find the others.”

Surprising him, Natasha cut in. “Actually Cap, I’m going to show the good doctor to her quarters. We’ll catch up.” The academic in question was turning in circles trying to take everything in. Speaking so that only he could hear, Natasha continued, “She needs a minute to reboot. If Tony throws anything at her right now, she’ll freak out.”

She was right. He’d been so caught up in the process of getting Kate here that he hadn’t stopped to consider why Nat had been talking constantly or Kate’s long silences. He thought she’d been OK, but now realized that she was just in shock.

Steve reached out and took the woman by the shoulders and forced her to look at him. “Kate. Hey. Nat’s going to take you to your room to settle in, OK?” He could see her pulse pick up. Her hands came up and held his wrists very tightly. “She’ll be with you the whole time.” Next to him, he could see the spy smile and shake her head in agreement. “I’ll see you later.” He took her hands in his. They were shaking a little, but still warm. “You’re safe here.”

“OK. Bye Steve.” A robotic answer and then Natasha was leading her down a different hallway towards the bedrooms.

He watched them go for a minute before heading out to find the team. He’d been here only once before and found that his memory served him well, allowing him to find the ‘war room’ with only one wrong turn.

This was a strange place. In his day, it would have been called a fallout shelter. Tony called it the Castle and, of course being a Stark, it was as luxurious as the sky-facing rooms it mimicked, just smaller. The floors were carpeted and there was art on the walls. The expensive air even smelled vaguely of fresh laundry.

It was the lack of windows that he found to be the most subtly disturbing. It was like being stuck in the world’s nicest rat’s maze. Steve knew it was the most secure place in New York City, maybe
even the state, but he didn’t think he’d be able to breathe fully again until he was topside.

He found the billionaire alone in the war room, conducting a barrage of screens. With a flick of the wrist, the images disappeared. Technology in this century was just crazy.

“Any trouble with our dear doctor?”

“No. She’s a little shaken up, but she’s tough. Natasha’s with her now, helping her get settled in.” He sat heavily into one of the nearby chairs and tried to release some of his leftover tension. “Anything new from JARVIS?”

Tony sighed and pulled out a granola bar from somewhere. “No. They covered their tracks incredibly well. Good enough that it isn’t just one well-funded person. This sort of hack takes time and money and skill. And since I know it wasn’t me, well, it is only a matter of time before we catch them. But I did get an alert from the Columbia servers that someone used her school badge ID to gain onsite access to restricted areas of the library. JARVIS is scanning the university and nearby security videos for facial recognition, but without a starting point, even my expectations of success are low.”

“The library? Why?” Steve could feel his jaw muscles tighten as his teeth ground together. “How far behind us were they?”

“About four minutes.”

“Well gee Tony. All your computers and surveillance technology and you were only ahead by four minutes. Cutting it kind of close, aren’t you?”

His concern was making him lash out. His temper’s favorite target was always Tony.

“You could have pulled her out of class and widened the gap but no. You had to play teacher’s pet.”

He rolled his eyes. “Stark!”

“Boys, play nice. This is hardly the time to measure who has the biggest worry.” Natasha came in and took a seat.

When she came in alone, his temper gained a new target. “Where’s Kate? You were supposed to stay with her!” Goddamnit, he couldn’t depend on anyone. She must be climbing out of her skin.

“Relax, Cap. She practically pushed me out the door. She said she needed some time and would find us.”

He sat for fifteen or so minutes before he couldn’t stand it any more. Barely registering the continuing conversation behind him, Steve went in search of his friend.

It didn’t take long before he found her, standing outside of one of the bedrooms.

“Hey. You OK?” She seemed better. No longer shaking, but staring at something in the bedroom. “Whose room is this?”

Still not meeting his eyes, “Tony’s. The doors are all open here. Ironic, don’t you think?”

It looked just like all the others. Luxurious but without personality.

She pointed to the desk beside the bed. “That’s the scrapbook I gave him. The one with clippings
from the storage boxes. He brought it down here. For safekeeping, I guess. ...I didn’t think he’d even opened it. But it’s here.”

He stared at her a moment or two. She was calm. The shock had worn off.

“You never know with that guy. Are you up for meeting with everyone?” He wanted answers, but if she needed more time, he’d make sure she got all she needed.

Nodding, she turned to face down the long hallway. “I was looking for a bottle of water or something and got a little lost. All the hallways look the same.” She stared at her hands, opening and closing them. “I feel like there’s a minotaur down here. Around the corner. Down the hall. But the more I think about it, the more I think it’s me. I am the runner and the monster.”

She finally looked up at him, as if realizing he was truly there for the first time. She blinked and he watched as she slid on a brave face like a mask. For him? For herself?

“We all have our demons. Today is just your turn. Tomorrow it’ll probably be Tony’s. You’re safe down here and the team is doing everything we can to find the hackers.”

Sending a half smile at him, she said, “You really should give him a chance you know. He and I don’t always see eye to eye, but he’s actually a good guy. Once you get passed his armor.”

“The guy just bugs me.” Truer words.

“Maybe so. But he brought that down here to be safe. He brought us here to be safe.”

“I know, I know.” They stood together and looked down the empty hallway and thought of what and who was at the end of it. “You ready?”

She shrugged and started walking. “So I guess this means our morning runs are on hold for a while, huh?”

Chuckling, he replied, “Maybe you can show me some of your other moves.”

She stopped walking suddenly and looked up to him, eyebrow teasingly raised.

What? What had he said now- oh. Oh.

“There’s a small gym down here. With treadmills and weights and machine things. And a sparring area. You could show me your punches. You wouldn’t have to pull them with me. That’s-a, that’s what I meant.” Smooth. She didn’t notice his embarrassment at all. Nope.

He tried not to watch her hips sway as she started walking in front of him again. Sparring. He’d meant sparring. The Bucky that lived in his mind was laughing his ass off.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Hello Reader-Friends, I'm a little late with this chapter. Explanation and eureka happens and it required some (ie quite a bit of) editing. This is really the first of two or three parts associated with the trip down Castle way. The other bits should be less internally focused.

In other news, a thousand hits!!! HOLY COW YOU GUYS!!! Thank you so much for reading and commenting and kudos. It means so much to me.

I slammed both hands onto the wall and tried to pull air into my lungs. My awareness of him behind me, the feel of his hand on my neck and arm, sending a shudder through my body. Thighs burning from constant use, all I wanted to do was to collapse. But I knew he was still coming for me, closing in. So I ignored the burn in my muscles and the sweat in my eyes and kept running suicides. Nine more laps to go today. That’s five more than yesterday. Ten more than the day before. The whole time the events of the last several days a constant and inescapable reel in my head.

Castle Day 1

I took a long drink of water and then slowly exhaled before speaking. “So. Let me run through what you’ve just told me, because we’ve been here for hours and have covered a lot of ground.” We were gathered in Tony’s war room. These meetings were becoming uncomfortably commonplace. “Twice in recent days, my personal information has been exposed, including my expected location at any given time. I can’t go back to Columbia because it would put my students at risk. I can’t go back home because it is both insecure and the obvious choice. I can’t contact anyone outside this room because it could put them at risk. When the walls start to close in, I can take a private, interior elevator up to the top floors to visit the sun. In the unlikely circumstance that I need to leave this building, one of you must go with me. Just in case.’”

Tired, solemn faces nodded.

“Moving beyond sewing a shadow to my feet, we have no idea who the hacker or hackers are, other than they seem to be interested in me. And what’s special about me that has drawn this attention at this time and not at any time previous? My special fucking powers. Which have changed my actual DNA in ways we are still determining, but we now know to be of the same energy signature as only one other thing on the planet - the Tesseract. So the likelihood of that being problematic is low. Because Loki seems like an incurious, forgive-and-forget kind of villain.”

A few smirks. Bruce opened his mouth to speak, but I wasn’t nearly done yet.

“My cells regenerate at a highly advanced rate so that maybe only massive damage will kill me, which hopefully isn’t foreshadowing. Although, to be fair, massive damage would have killed me before too. Let’s see, what else. Ah! Now that we know that the blue manifestations are energy-
based, Bruce was able to reexamine my test results and determine that unless I replenish my energy reserves after using it, the power will literally eat me alive. But at least I’m not radioactive.

To recap my recap, cats and kiddies, a group of ne’er-do-wells who somehow saw my spanky new powers manifest are after me for reasons I have no bandwidth to ponder. Said powers I have to figure out how to control before or while they kill me. Oh, and I have to give up the career that I have spent my entire adult life building. Am I missing anything?”

My host cleared his throat and spoke. “You have to stay here.”

“Right! Thank you, Tony. So before I allow myself to be secreted away in this beautiful, claustrophobic paranoia palace, I am going to that damned roof for some air. From which I may or may not see if these new abilities include flying towards the second star to the right and straight on til Goddamned morning, because Darlings, this shit is one fucked up fairy tale.”

I’d hesitantly stood in the doorway to leave, part of me already on the roof, part of me still at the table. “I sound like I don’t know what you’ve done for me. I’m not. I promise to be better tomorrow. But tonight I think I’ve earned the right to not be OK.”

***

At some point over the last several months, my life had turned into something I barely recognized. Aliens, Avengers, magic staffs, explosions, and super powers. I hadn’t dealt with everything as the calm, cool, and collected adventuress that the movie-version of character me would be. No. I’d freaked out. Again.

Put me before a panel of solemn-faced, judgmental academics, a hateful old woman, or a room of wealthy debutantes, and I’d be fine. Hell, I’d gotten into this position because I’d run in the direction of trouble. But put the image of my students in danger or, apparently, invade my life and I’d fall apart. And I was so deeply tired of falling apart.

For once, she let me hear her coming.

“I’m not really going to jump.”

“You’d have to get close to the edge first.”

Nat wasn’t wrong. I was sitting against the wall next to the door. Still couldn’t make myself approach the edge without breaking out into a sweat.

Settling down next to me, my friend the ginger ninja closed her eyes and inhaled the frigid night air. She didn’t rush to speak. I liked that about her.

“I barely remember my home. I was taken when I was very young. For me… it is easy to be brave when its other people. Strangers. They’re real but not yours.” We neither of us looked at the other. Even a spy needs her space. “Last year, I was in the middle of an interrogation when Coulson called to tell me that Clint was… compromised. In trouble. It turns out that Loki had used the sceptre to control his mind. It was like someone had taken my safe place away.

In my adult life, in this particular line of work, I can count the number of times I’ve been truly scared on one hand. Half of one hand. Governments fall. Aliens attack. It’s easy. Put a friend in real danger and it’s different. It just is. That’s why we fight in teams and have backup. Beyond having a purpose, having someone to fight with, to fight for… Look, the moral of my story is that what you’re feeling is normal. Someone has threatened your safe place.
So take a day. Then figure out what you’re going to do about it.”

***

Steve and Clint were the only ones left when we reentered the Castle, sitting in the modestly-sized (for Stark anyway) living room. Each had a glass in his hand and Clint handed Nat and me one too. Scotch. Mmmm. Very good Scotch. Three points for House Stark.

“So, flight isn’t one of your new abilities then Doc?” the archer teased.

I sat on the edge of the sofa prim and stiff, embarrassment pulling my the manners of my childhood to the forefront, trying to force a smile. “Not yet.” My drink was empty. He refilled it. “I owe you all an apology. My behavior was flippant and derisive and ungrateful. I’m sorry.”

Steve smirked and clutched his chest. “Well I’m terribly offended. Barton?”

“Deeply, deeply offended. Never heard language like that before in my life.”

Natasha just smiled into her glass.

That night, I slept with the door open so I could hear their voices.

***

Castle Day 2

The voices were gone when I woke up. There was a note next to the coffee pot from Steve saying that he’d be back after lunch. The fridge was stocked with various ingredients and already prepared foods. I wasn’t hungry, so I took my favorite breakfast of life-giving coffee and sat quietly in the living room.

The rooms were eerily silent. Hollow but for me. Creepy, fascinating, and kind of ‘post-apocalyptic last man alive’ feeling. The noise of the brewing coffee had been thunderous.

I’d expected to wake up and be deep in the emotions of last night. But instead my eyes had opened to a feeling that only seemed to emerge in calm moments where my unacknowledged mind had made a decision that the conscious me was waiting to hear.

So the lack of sound was perfect. Sitting on one of the comfortably modern living room arm chairs, legs crossed and hot caffeine resting on my ankles, I waited. I’d been through this before. OK, not the people are trying to kill me issue, but the ‘things and/or I must change if I want circumstances to change.’ The first time was at 10. Then at 16. Again at 22. Each time I had had to make a conscious decision to swim or drown.

And here it was again. Succumb to the fear and allow it to steal my life, my career, and the growing friendships with my altitudinous neighbors. Move in to this subterranean submarine of a panic room and hide. Or… do what? Embrace being a self-cannibalising amateur power player? I’d still be forced to give up my life and career.

My coffee cup was nearly empty.

What did I want? Did I really, really want? I really really really wanna… not be afraid. Have some control. Keep seeing my students grow. Find a way to meaningfully contribute to the group.
And maybe do my part in helping to defend my city. Still be me.

I was always going to run to the roof, toward the noise, keep a hand on the wound. That’s how I got into this mess. Maybe it could get me out too.

Suddenly, the answer bubbled up and I wasn’t listening any more. I knew.

Well. Holy shit.

“OK.” I stood, ready. “OK.”

Castle Day 3

I’d asked JARVIS to keep everyone out again today. There were things I needed to try without an audience, even such a supportive one. Steve had relayed several messages through JARVIS expressing concern over my decision to hermit and requests to talk. I was touched but there was no room for him today. The whole space was filled with me.

Tony had been quiet, which I took to mean that he was getting occasional reassurances from JARVIS that I wasn’t dead. Natasha had only said, “See you tomorrow.” Perceptive woman.

Yesterday had been long. Exhausting in mind and body. It had taken a while to empty the work out room. There were still the heaviest weights in the corner because super soldier, I am not.

I’d spent hours and hours in that mostly empty room. Talking to myself. Sometimes to JARVIS. Trying to access the blue trigger without falling apart. If I was going to be useful to myself and others, I could not become pudding. I could not and would not. Not in a boat, not with a goat, not in a box, not with a fox. Not with a breakdown, not during a takedown. I will help the man with shield, I will help the genius sealed. I will help the spies, I will.

I will… take a nap soon, Sam-I-Am. Thinking and rhyming in anapestic tetrameter could only lead to Seussian madness.

At this point, generating the energy field wasn’t a problem. All I had to do was be in those horrible moments and poof. Blue. And then… pudding. A full afternoon of that and the temptation to call Steve for comfort was so strong. But this was not something he should shoulder. I was not a puzzle for Tony to solve. Each of them would do their best to help.

But as I refused to be their resource weeks ago, I refused to be their problem now.

So I stopped for a high protein snack and a sit down and called in a different kind of backup.

***

“Thanks Dr. Gilliam. I appreciate you taking my call. I know it was a bit unconventional.”

The older woman smiled at me through the video conference interface. She had the most amazing white streak in her hair. “I’m glad you called. Please tell Mr. Jarvis that his technological help was much appreciated.” I smiled, knowing he’d heard her. “If you need me again, I’m here.”

The screen went dark and I slumped in Tony’s expensively comfy office chair. Had I pretended to be the big billionaire high-powered muckety muck and say things like, “Buy low and sell high!” while sitting in his chair? Me, no. Of course not. I stood on the desk and did it. In a power pose.
Even though Dr. Gilliam had signed the incredibly huge NDA Clint had given me, there was no need to tempt fate. Tony’s office was the best place for the call since the wall behind the chair was empty. The devil, after all, is in the details.

It felt good to talk to someone about what was going on. Without judgment or recrimination. We’d met in person once, so she had a baseline understanding of what had happened. I liked her. I trusted her.

Sure it had taken her a couple of minutes to get her head around superpowers and Avengers and whatnot, but that seemed only reasonable. We’d talked about medications that would help with the panic attacks and I was sorely tempted. But since I relied on emotion to generate the blue and dulling my access to it seemed counterproductive. But God, not feeling so on edge, so tempting.

Instead we worked on techniques for when I knew I might be walking into a triggering situation and what to do if it caught me by surprise. It was comforting to have that toolkit in my back pocket. And an emergency prescription of some pretty strong Xanax.

And then, the hard work had begun. We had talked for a long time. Talked and talked and talked. I cried. I yelled. I had a panic attack, which ended up being very useful for practicing my technique. In the end, we developed a working plan where I would remix my cocktailed feelings of anger and terror to a more productive milkshake of protection and defense.

It sounded so easy. Simple. Just breathe and refocus.

Sure, sure.

***

Goddamnit. I was crying again. In the cumulative time since I came back from England nearly a decade ago, I hadn’t allowed myself to cry as much as I had in the last few weeks. These tears were different. Adding to the emotional soup that was me in this moment, were the ingredients of disappointment and frustration.

In order for me to save my own life, I had to conquer this. HAD TO. I had already lived through so much and fought so hard that to give in, to give up now.... No.

Breathe out slowly and think. Can’t change having these powers. But they don’t seem to have fundamentally changed who I am. So that means, like the size of my feet or the length of my femur, they were just a part of me that I can’t change. So I had to own them.

Breathe in. Focus on protection. I stopped those trees from crushing the child. Me. I protected her. I did that. Could I do it again?

Yes.


Don’t overthink it. Try again. Nothing.

Mean it this time. And again. And again.

Blue!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your kind words! You guys are amazing!

The next chapter is taking forever. Blame Steve. He's being reticent and is slowing the process.

Castle Day 4

Grabbing a muffin from the ridiculous stack sitting on the counter, I smiled into the sunshine. It was good to be topside again. It had snowed and the city looked like a movie set. I was the only one in the shared kitchen. I’d missed its shared purpose. And the coffee machine. God, the coffee machine. It should be its own food group.

With a hot cup of bliss, I stood in the sunshine and turned my face into it like a plant. Not much heat to be had, but even with my eyes closed, it was freeing. As a student, leaving the depths of the library, a place I truly loved and that made me feel safe and gave me strength, for the city streets had felt like… well, honestly, it felt like taking off a tight bra after a transcontinental flight. Relief. Man was not made to live in the dark.

With JARVIS’s help on timing and making an Avenger-sized portion of scrambled eggs and bacon, I killed time until they joined me. Nat was first, silently nodding her good morning. Her tangible un-surprise at seeing me was bolstering. Tony and Bruce showed up together, debating the benefits of some fluid. Steve was only seconds behind them, frustration evident in his walk.

“Stark! You’ve had enough time. Finalize the gel or move on to something else- Oh! Good morning.”

It isn’t often that one gets to surprise a superhero. Unfortunately, my snigger leached away some of the smooth factor. Worth it.

“Hey guys. Wanna see something cool?”

***

They stared at me. For a long time. Wondering if I had pieces of actual egg on my face, my pride flagged a little. I’d been so excited to show them my progress, but now was beginning to picture retreating back to the safety of the Castle. Energy levels were low. This was the longest I’d been able to hold it yet and felt exhaustion creeping in.

One last time, I conjured the blue and threw it above my head like an enormous humming pizza that never actually left my fingertips. With a careful flourish, I brought my tingling hands together, shrinking it until it was the diameter of a dinner plate. Pulling them apart, it became the size of Steve’s shield. I let it disappear and exhaled slowly.

Not a single tear. And I could not stop myself from smiling like a crazy person. I’d done it! A repeatable outcome! Oh yeah! Who’s the woman?! I’m the woman! Oh yeah!
“-JARVIS, bring up the scans of what just happened. I want to see-”

“-glycogen levels and compare to the gel results. Pull up a comparison of radiation levels-”

“-only defensive? Could it be used as a-”

“-get in close to do any real damage-”

“-right in half. But could it stop a projectile?-”

They’d completely bypassed me and gone directly to brainstorming as a group. All at once. Like pressing unpause on a song.

The room spun and I had to grab the back of a chair, plant my feet, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. Time to equalize my energy levels. Pulling my back-up bacon from the warming drawer, I dug in. Back-up bacon is life.

At some point, they noticed that I was no longer standing where I’d been and looked around.

Halfway through my secret pork stash, “Oh no. Please. Keep talking about me like I’m not here. You know how I love that.”

With a smirk from my ninja and an eye roll from Tony, they joined me.

“So this is what you’ve been working on down there all that time? JARVIS! I told you to report progress like that to me. Not cool, buddy.”

Shrugging, I poked back. “I asked him very nicely to give me some time to work on it. I guess he just likes me better than you.”

"You seem… calm…" Oh Bruce. Ever the chatterbox. “I mean- better. Less like you want to tear Tony into tiny pieces and forcibly feed them to me.”

Ha. “Well, I mean, the day is young.”

“So. Does this mean you’re ready?” Nat was intense, serious. There was a deeper meaning to her not so subtle question.

Steve just watched in weighing silence, head tilted and arms across his chest.

***

While bolstering my spirit, back-up bacon didn’t really do much for my energy levels. I mean it helped some, but not for long. After agreeing that I was ready, for MY plan though they didn’t know it yet, this powered person needed one hell of a nap.

Waking up several hours later on the Castle’s sofa, I had flashbacks to the first time I’d discovered that my body was too old to drink tequila that way and bounce back. Eyes still shut, I pulled the quilt tighter under my chin and tried to decide if JARVIS was sophisticated enough to cook me dinner or if I actually had to get up.

A quiet, “Good evening, Ms. Van Winkle,” decided it for me.

“You’re one to talk.” He was sitting across from me, all relaxed and amused. “Super Snoozer.” I sat up slowly. And realized that there had been no quilt when I’d curled up for my nap. I raised my eyebrow at him.
He smiled back. “I hear it’s the law.”

I failed at standing on the first try. Woo. Steve didn’t seem surprised though. “Do you think you could eat something?”

This was for sure building to something, but my stomach took that moment to turn into an angry lion. The ache in my head silently answered it. “Uh, probably.”

He pulled what looked like a ketchup packet out of his sweater pocket and tossed it over to me. “Tony and Bruce have been developing this. Stark says he got the idea from a gel that marathon runners eat to stop muscle cramps. He says that they’ve added in concentrated vitamins, proteins, sodium, dextrose, and other supplements to help replenish and stabilize you afterwards.” He eyeballed the packet doubtfully. “Apparently, it’s food of somekind.”

Amused at his reaction to it, I opened the small plastic pouch. Fine dining this was not. But if it stopped me from essentially digesting myself and got rid of this damned headache… It was whiteish. Too much stuff shoved into it to be clear. Which also made it… kind of… not solid exactly. Not squishy either. More like a fruit jelly that had been left uncovered for several days. Sticky Silly Putty.

“Bottoms up.” I squeezed it into my mouth and chewed at Steve’s salute.

Ohhhhh it was a little gross. But better than it looked. Moderately. Ten steps down from gummie bears. Three steps up from mucus. And strongly pineapple.

He was watching me very closely, waiting for my reaction. The more I chewed, the more sour it got until I couldn’t school my features.

He laughed when I coughed and harder when a pillow came hurtling at his face. The lout easily caught it and put it tidily back on the sofa.

“That good, huh?”

“Steve, anyone ever tell you that you’re pain in the ass sometimes?”

That sassy grin again. “Many, many times.” He relaxed into the chair. “How are you feeling? Any better now?”

Did I? I was certainly looking forward to brushing my teeth, that was for sure. And I was less hungry. There were still the makings of a sizeable sandwich with my name on it in the fridge, but I wasn’t itching for it.

Sighing out a yes, I mirrored his position and enjoyed being nearly pain free. Headaches, man. Such a bully.

“You’ll have to tell Tony it helped. He’s been tinkering since you locked us out.” He paired the last bit with The Eyebrows of Gentle Disappointment. Goddamnit. Adorable and effective.

Be strong! Resist the puppy dog pull!

“I did. Took a spa day, had a schvitz. Got a mani pedi. You know, had some “me time.””

Eyebrows.

Ugh, fine. “I needed to do some heavy thinking. And you all, especially you big guy, you fill a
room. The space in my head. Not in a bad way, don’t look at me like that. Of all the voices in my head, yours is by far my favorite.” Aw, bashful Steve. “This new power and what it does is a lot to take in. I’ve read the books and histories. Can plot the hero arc and I know what comes next. But it means that I have to give up everything else. And I don’t know if I’m ready for that. Actually, I know I’m not... There’s still so much I want to do. But the chance to help you and team is a gift. The saving people thing is also pretty cool, I guess. So that’s what I needed space for. To weigh my options and think about what I really want without influence. And, you know, the whole using the blue without becoming useless mush.”

He blew out his cheeks and let that sink in. “So. Did you come to a decision?”

Nodding slowly, “I think so. Still working out the details. And everything is moot if I consume myself in the process.”

My favorite non-human chose that moment to make himself known. “Excuse the interruption, Doctor Wallace, but my scans show that since ingesting the glycogen replacement prototype, your metabolic levels have nearly normalized. With your permission, I’ll transfer the data to Dr. Mandalaparti and to Sir’s lab.”

Wow. Literally, deus ex machina. It happens outside Greek tragedies. Who knew?!

With a strange look from Steve at my sudden maniacal giggling, can’t imagine why he thought I was nuts, I choked out, “Yes. Please do.”

That lovely sandwich I’d been dreaming of evolved into spaghetti and meatballs. A seriously big pot of spaghetti and meatballs. There isn’t a lot I can cook thanks to the New York City food delivery network. But for comfort carbs, I make a special effort. My sous chef and Betty Crocker handled the meatballs. The two of us spun around the kitchen nodding along to a melange of hits from Steve’s childhood and from mine. It was a weird combination, but it worked.

Plates and mouths full, we settled onto the sofa and talked about nothing important. It was nice. Chill. Simple. I didn’t have to expound upon my teaching philosophy or play to departmental politics. There was no pretending to be interested. No feigned amusement. Hanging out with Steve was like sitting by an open window in a stuffy room. I suspected that this was the core of him. Skinny or Super. Genuine, witty, self-deprecating, and totally charming.

I was sad to break the banter, but I had to ask.

The ice cream in my bowl was gone. “So. Earlier. This morning. You were noticeably silent. Tell me. I’m a big girl. I can take it.”

He licked his spoon clean before putting the bowl on the coffee table.

I could feel my heart rate picking up with nervous energy. He was the team leader. In the end, he would decide. But even more than that, he was my friend. His opinion mattered to me. And because he was Steve, it mattered a lot.

Suddenly, he looked very tired. “I think you made excellent progress in a short amount of time.”

“Steve.” Come on man. Don’t make me drag it out of you.

“You came out of Castle more determined and more in control.”

Dude. “Steve.”
“You can grow and shrink the field. Makes me wonder if you can reshape it completely.”

“Steve!” Stop avoiding it goddamnit! Talk to me!

“Fine! You were calm in a controlled environment surrounded by a group that supports you. Manipulating the field for five minutes isn’t the same as doing it under fire. If you pass out in the middle of the fight, the team will ignore everything to save you. We don’t leave a man behind. And that means that whatever else we’re facing will suffer. You have made huge progress and with training you’ll eventually be a strong member of the team. But you are still a liability.’

Ah.

I’d asked for honesty.

I didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t wrong. It was too soon to have me in the field, which I totally agreed with and wasn’t sure if I even wanted. But… I couldn’t help but feel deflated. And embarrassed. I’d been so pleased and puffed up that I overstepped. In front of everybody. Ah hubris. You humorless bitch.

I stood and picked up our empty bowls to take to the kitchen. When I was smooshed against a wall of chest with two very strong arms.

“And I am so proud of you.”

Well shit.

Ice cream bowls held away from our clothing, I could only lean into him to return the hug.

He kissed the top of my head and I finished bussing our dessert. The cool air of the fridge felt good on my hot cheeks as I retrieved two water bottles.

We continued our conversation about nothing well into the night.

**Castle Day 9**

*We gotta get out of this place*

*If it’s the last thing we ever do*

*We gotta get out of this place*

*Girl, there’s a better life for me and you*

The music was so loud that my belting along seemed completely silent. But *man*, The Animals had the right of it. I do gotta get out of this place.

Since the incursion onto campus, nothing had been heard from the hackers. Tony said they’d gone dark. Which also left me in the dark, as it were, and I was bored silly. Tony refused to let me have my laptop for security reasons (more easily avoided with Starktech, he reminded me). My lesson plans had been set for weeks and were, I assumed, being covered by a colleague. Which meant that I either owed them a teaching debt of the same kind or, shiver, a significant order from whatever school fundraiser their kid was schilling next.
I’d caught up on Game of Thrones (Team Arya!), reread *The Name of the Wind*, yelled at the videos from perky spin instructors who both motivated and made me hate them, rearranged the living room, started a biography about Margaret Thatcher, shared with my therapist, and trimmed my bangs.

In between long periods of trying to stay busy, my Fortress of Solitude had visitors. Nat introduced me to real Russian vodka and how to hold a blade without bleeding. Occasionally both lessons happened simultaneously. Clint came down each afternoon, sometimes joined by his partner, and we worked on trying to hit their persons with my person. Physically, I had yet to land a blow. On the other hand, my smack talk was also terrible. So mostly I provided them entertainment.

When I wasn’t training with them, usually in the mornings, I was in the carcass of the gym calling, manipulating, and dismissing the blue. The pineapple supplement packets didn’t get any tastier. Although I did feel markedly better after eating one. So that was a huge step forward.

When there was the opportunity to leave Castle (never actually the building, to my irritation), it was to upgrade my status from mole rat to lab rat. It was a good thing I healed so quickly. Between Dr. M and the boys, I’d given enough blood to be a husk. Bruce kept reminding us that he was not ‘this kind of doctor,’ which had made Tony start calling him Bones. Bruce was amused, but by the third day was over it. That was a man that could give a pointed look.

The whole process was much easier than before. I didn’t have the same level of stress reaction and they didn’t treat me as “a resource.” Not wanting to defenestrate them helped a lot. Behind his bluster, Tony had wordlessly confirmed that I was OK each time it started to be a bit much. I’d never tell him, but occasionally what Pepper saw in him shone.

And then he’d go back to being Stark and need poked between his ribs, big sister style.

Dr. M had a theory that my healing worked with a kind of biological triage. Despite having scrapes and bruises that were easier to repair, she thought that my back had been treated first because it was the most traumatic injury.

Fortunately, there wasn’t a humane way to test that hypothesis.

Steve never came to see me during the day. I’d asked for updates, but he kept his answers very general. “Tony’s still looking. JARVIS is analyzing data patterns. The others are reaching out to their contacts.”

We’d make dinner together, never anything crazy. Meatloaf. Stew. Carbonara. I’d describe that day’s training progress. Sometimes we’d talk and listen to music. Take turns playing a song and tell a story about why we liked it or what we remembered when it played.

He reinforced what I’d already known. I was crap at poker but had a strong poker face. God knows that I’d had years to hone it.

I was introducing him to important cinematic treasures that avoided war and time travel, like The Godfather and Jurassic Park. Every time Sam Neill leaned on the triceratops and it breathed got me. No matter how many times I saw it. I had been a little girl playing dress up that also loved dinosaurs.

I couldn’t wait to show him Monty Python and the Holy Grail. The glorious moment he used his hands like a coconut to emulate a galloping horse as Tony rushed off in the suit would make each day down here worth it.

Almost.

Queued up tonight was a masterpiece of dramatic tension, stars in the stars, and man’s ability to overcome obstacles with the mystical magic of duct tape. Apollo 13.

For some reason, I’d cleaned up a little. Put away the joggers and tshirt. There had been a small selection of clothing of all sizes and styles in the closet that I’d been working my way through. There’d been an amusing morning when I’d wandered around in a ball gown. Because what says safe house like super formal wear. This evening was my own pair of perfect jeans, because nothing hugged better and I loved them forever and always, and a very dark green fitted button up that made my Irish show. Bit of makeup, earrings, and my necklace.

He was obviously running late, so I’d started the mac and cheese without him. Not there when I finished. When my plate went in the dishwasher. Or when I gave up and went to bed.


Disappointed by what? Hanging with Steve had become part of my routine. I looked forward to seeing him. I mean. I’d cooked and stuff.

Oh damn. I felt stood up.

Stood up by a guy that didn’t know he was even standing me up. Because he was my friend.

And the scared me just as much as the hackers.

Houston, we have a problem.

Sometimes a bit slow on the uptake, it wasn’t until the next morning that I thought through why he hadn’t come. Why none of them had called. Surely if Steve couldn’t make it, then he’d have had one of them call. But none had. Which probably meant that they were together. Go team. Out of the tower. On a mission. And-

Sonofabitch. They had a lead.
Chapter 22

Castle Day 5

Yesterday had been quite a day. He’d been so relieved to see her. Three days of self-imposed solitude were more than enough to make him worry. He didn’t like not being able to talk with her. Make sure she was OK. Especially since the last time he’d seen her, she’d been barely holding it together.

In the days of her absence, the team had done its best to find leads, using SHIELD’s databases and their own contacts to search for answers. The two spies had disappeared into the world for 48 hours. Clint came back empty, but Nat had just the whisper of something.

The waiting and the emptiness made him itch. He’d wanted to be a soldier and not a spy for a reason. Ignoring that he didn’t lie, he liked action. Forward motion. A goal and an enemy. Whispers in the dark were not what he fought.

They’d taken turns talking with her coworkers and few friends. Steve had been surprised at how few people appeared to really know Kate. Professional respect, occasional side remarks about how she mostly kept to herself, a rival in the chemistry department. No one had any real insight.

He’d chosen to be the one to talk to Phil. Steve had really liked the man who seemed to genuinely care about his friend. Having people look out for him for no reason had made quite a difference in his own life. 70 years later, he could no longer thank them. But he could pay it forward to those he found today. The Bar hadn’t been open long when he’d stopped in, so they’d had a long, quiet talk. Old timer to old timer.

Steve hadn’t wanted to tell her that she wasn’t ready. That what she’d done wasn’t enough. It was too close to the Phillips that still whispered in his ear. But allowing her in the field would put others in danger. She’d been so proud and had made impressive progress. Eyes and smile so wide. But he wouldn’t lie. Give her false hope. He knew how cruel that could be.

Continuing to impress him, the woman beside him had taken it well. Better than he ever had. With a straight back, she’d moved to clear their dishes and regroup. He couldn’t not hug her. So he did. He’d been doing it more and more. And he was looking forward to doing it again. Assuming she didn’t wise up one day and see the awkward kid he really was and push him away first. ...And the more time they spent together, the more he hoped she might stay.

Castle Day 6

Their first good lead had come on the heels on what Tony called a brute force attack on the Stark Industries company servers. The building’s computers had flickered on and off and employees ran like someone had pulled their string. Even The Great Stark had jumped onto the nearest computer terminal, furious that someone had made it passed his security.

This was why technology didn’t have all of Steve’s trust. He preferred the more honest face-to-face punch approach to a brute force attack. At least then he’d know who was doing the punching. This behind-the-screen subterfuge was cowardice and a distraction from their primary objective, finding the people that were hunting Kate.
Because that was what was happening.

“What do you mean there was a second attack?” Steve had planted his fists on the table and was trying to keep his composure.

Tony responded, “Not so much a second attack as an invasion inside the attack.” He didn’t immediately explain, which only ramped up Steve’s impatience. “Don’t pop your top, Cap. This isn’t great news but it is still news. The brute force attack was a smokescreen. While we were dancing to their beat, they used the confusion to break through my firewalls and complete a targeted search. Which is very impressive actually.”

Beginning to understand Stark, he ground out, “What did they find?”

“Sparky’s medical files. They got in, found and accessed only those files, and got out. Whoever executed this was very good. Not as good as me, but who is.”

He thought that through. “So they’re still looking for her. Which means we have leverage.”

Early on, Tony had manipulated Kate’s digital footprint, which had been a new phrase for Steve, and had eased the security around it as bait. The team had been using it to deploy decoys in order to try and lure out whoever was watching. JARVIS had detected a trace as soon as the security was changed. Whoever was waiting, was watching.

Of the three fishing expeditions they’d fabricated, a fake dentist appointment had garnered the most interest. Nat had taken Kate’s phone to create a trail and had worn enough of her friend’s belongs for a decent disguise. Clint had trailed at a distance, while Tony monitored from above. Steve had walked a parallel path across the street, hyperalert.

The objective was to capture and interrogate. They needed more intel and he was looking forward to the interrogation. Days of waiting and pretending everything was fine for Kate had worn down his patience. She deserved some answers and peace.

In the end, there were no arrests. Which didn’t mean they hadn’t seen anything. On at least two occasions, he himself had tracked at least three different individuals. But they were very well trained and he’d barely done more than glimpse them. Nat had gotten the closest and said she had enough for a facial recognition sketch of one.

That had been a long night. As powerful as JARVIS was, the world had a lot of faces.

**Castle Day 7**

“Might have something. Latvia and Belarus weren’t the only places with labs like the ones we found. Someone’s been setting them up all over.” Natasha had just gotten back from wherever it was she went when she met with contacts from her old life. She’d come back with her mouth set in an angry line and cold eyes.

Bruce spoke up, “For what? What are they looking for? SHIELD didn’t have though data from the two sites they raided to put together a full profile.”

The Russian took a moment, poured herself a drink from the service on the conference table. Steve could tell she was still thinking over what she’d learned. “Not looking for something. They’re trying to create something.”
With a sinking feeling, Steve replied, “All those bodies. Those people…”

“Failed experiments. Whatever they were trying for, they haven’t done it yet.”

Stark, whose uncharacteristic quietness had made Steve’s nerves set on edge, finally spoke. “And you think they witnessed Sparky’s little show in Latvia and saw their answer?”

“And her files confirmed it. Goddamnit Stark. So much for your impenetrable security. Since, what, they can’t find her, they wanted her medical files instead? How long will that hold them off?” He was so frustrated. For all the boasting about technological superiority, it had barely been a roadblock.

“Don’t you think I don’t know that? Or are you so caught up in your righteous protection that you are blind to the fact that we all want to help? Or does it have to be Captain America to the rescue?”

He was in Stark’s space so fast, he didn’t remember moving.

“ENOUGH!”

The dark polished wood of the conference table cracked under Bruce’s hands. Every single person in the room froze.

“Dr. Banner—” Steve started to say, but a strident finger from the furious man silenced him. Super soldier or not, he did not want to bring out the Hulk.

“THIS IS NOT HELPING. You want to find this guy? Find him. You want to stop another town from being slaughtered? Find him. You want to help Kate? Find him. But I don’t want to hear ONE MORE ARGUMENT. IS THAT CLEAR?”

He stared down each of them before sitting heavily in his chair.

It took the rest of them several more beats before joining him. When The Big Guy spoke through Bruce, they listened.

***

The remnants of their shared lasagna still littered the kitchen area. Neither of them had made it before and it had only survived the oven because JARVIS had set his own timer. It had been fun, if more than crispy on the edges. Normal. Or at least, their new normal.

Their new normal where he kept things from his friend. Steve knew it would be another night of feeling like a heel as soon as he made it back to his own rooms. He wanted to tell Kate everything that was going on. She deserved know. But the team had agreed that it would just agitate her and make the waiting worse. But he wasn’t happy about it.

Until then, he relished their time. Listening to records, playing cards, watching movies. She was easy to talk to. Empathy without pity. He’d told her stories of the war. Of being a skinny kid with a short life expectancy and a long stubborn streak. He even started talking about Bucky. It had been such a long time of keeping those memories quiet, that it felt, for a while, like his friend was just in the other room. Not… Well, not.

She’d described growing up in a big house in New Hampshire and family vacations at cabin on the lake in the White Mountains. College classmates and her students. He knew there was a big part of her life that she didn’t talk about. But that was OK. They’d get there.
Castle Day 9

Tony had several screens live but was watching one intensely. “Facial recognition panned out. Meet Iosif Verenich, once of Moscow, now a proud member of whatever group will meet his prices.”

Verenich. Not a name Steve had ever heard before, but now one he’d never forget. Late forties, balding, stocky. Humorless wide face. Distinguishing mark a tattoo of three small overlapping circles under his left wrist. Not a man to be taken lightly, but also one that would blend in to a crowd.

“And who is the highest bidder today?” Clint stood in the doorway, arms folded.

JARVIS broke in, “Forgive me, Sir. I alerted the others as soon as a positive identification was made.”

His creator waved it off and continued. “Come one, come all to the greatest show on Earth. Next in the ring… everyone’s favorite nightmare - the clowns!” At then, at least it looked it to Steve, Tony reached into the image and threw it into the open air. All around them, different views and pictures of Verenich hovered.

Natasha walked through an image of the arrest record and pointed at a second figure in a different video. “She’s been twenty feet behind him the entire time. His shadow.”

Technology? He was learning, but not at a speed that would be useful here. But strategy? He did nothing to disguise the gleeful anticipation of a target. Goddamn finally.

“JARVIS, can you scan the footage from previous missions see if there are any more people that appear repeatedly?”

“Of course, Captain.”

“And then compare Verenich and those with him to known mercenary groups.”

Mentally, he was already running through preparations for immediate departure. Get the shield. Suit up. Find Verenich and track him back to where he was hiding, in case there were others. Take them. Get answers. Find the source. Stop it.

Easy. But bite by bite wasn’t enough, wasn’t fast enough now. He was hungry for a meal.

“Captain, there are a total of five individuals that appear throughout the videos. Verenich is the only one that is present in all three. They do not appear to share a common affiliation. I am running facial recognition now.”

Tony ordered, “Track their movements in the city. Is there any overlap?”

“Calculating.”

***

His wristwatch read 12:45. He’d been sitting in this van for hours like a stooge. Nearby Natasha was slowly sipping coffee in an outdoor cafe. Clint had found a roost that overlooked several streets at once. Tony was the last to leave the tower, taking the extra time to create a reason for
Kate to be out on the street tonight. Rockets don’t hide well in the dark, so he was also in a van in the search area. And Tony was about as excited about it as Steve was.

They just dealt with it in very different ways. He exercised the serum’s power on his jaw by grinding his teeth and then plotting out all the different paths of infil and exfil to the various buildings, stores, and bars. He wasn’t happy about being stuck here, but at least he’d be prepared.

Tony just wouldn’t shut up. With JARVIS scanning whatever wavelengths he scanned for suspicious chatter, the billionaire was left to people watch. He seemed to be playing some game where he made up things about passersby.

“That woman hasn’t told her date that she’s running away with his assistant to Prague in the morning. There’s this waiter that keeps coming back to one particular table. He’s working up the courage to tell the man in the leather jacket that he’s the love child of the man’s tryst with a belly dancer in the late 90s. There’s a couple sharing a cigarette that—”

“Stark. Get off the line. You’re not as amusing as you think you are.” Natasha sounded tired.

“Oh I’m exactly as funny as I think I am.” He sighed out. “They’re not coming tonight. I’ve updated the calendar and cell phone location four times and not a peep. Nothing suspicious except for some kid with quick hands collecting wallets that aren’t his.”

This was not what he had pictured all those hours ago in the tower. Other than narrowing down the sightings area to this five block radius, they’d made zero progress.

Zero progress and zero dinner. There’d been no good way to contact Kate to tell her that he’d be missing their mac and cheese plans without alerting her that something was going on. He could have lied or only told part of the truth, that he’d be on a mission. But he’d already told enough half-truths. He’d find a way to make it up to her. Maybe they could actually go see a new movie, instead of staying in and watching an old one.

At 1:30, they called it.
Chapter 23

In which punches are thrown and confusion is sown.

“We can still call this off if you need more time.”

I tried very hard not to snap at him. We had rehashed, rehearsed, and reviewed the plan over and over and I just could not do it again. The one thing I wasn’t ready to do was retreat. I knew that Steve was just looking out for me and making sure that I stayed safe. But the more he doubted me, the more determined I became. And it wasn’t like I wasn’t a stubborn person when we started. I’m just contrary that way.

Natasha gave him a long look. “Steve, it’s time for the real thing. Disguises aren’t working and Tony’s traps came up empty. Even the chatter has died. They’ve gone to ground. We need to act now while there’s even the suspicion that they’re still in New York.”

The tall man looked distinctly unhappy with us both. “And if something goes wrong? You’re willing to put her, one of our own, at risk?”

My eyebrows shot up at that. One of our own? Strong words from a man that had kept me in the dark about what they’d been doing while I was underground. But there was a larger issue here. “And if they give up waiting and go off to find a new village? Hardly a fair trade, is it?”

“It isn’t a trade at all. We don’t trade lives.”

A change of scenery from the war room, the living room was full of people. Hail, hail the gang’s all here. At this point, no one was sitting. Too much nervous energy. We were about to leave and it was too late to think about doubts. If I started now, after working so hard to pump myself up and be strong… Well. It wasn’t really an option. This was an important part of stopping Verenich and whoever hired him. But it was an even more important part of my plan.

MY plan. Mine. Where I didn’t have to give up my life. And where I can still help my team. It was going to be one hell of a fine line to walk. I don’t see how I had a choice. But they had to stop treating me like glass. I had to show them that I was made of sterner stuff. But first, I had to believe it myself.

And so, once again, I was getting off the proverbial plane. This time I did it with full knowledge and an incredibly vivid imagination full of everything that could and would probably go wrong, because hey, it’s me. Murphy’s Law has always proven to have a sense of humor that way. Like when aliens attack on an important interview day. Or my favorite barista substitutes my morning coffee with (gasp) decaf after an all night grading bonanza. Or vibrator batteries that die at important moments.

Their bickering faded into the background, becoming almost an expectation at this point. I suspected that it was part of their process. Psych each other up. Get the blood pumping. At some point, JARVIS and I were going to review footage and see if I was right.
I was totally right.

Eventually, I was sitting in a car with dark windows trying to pretend that I was not awkward and angry around Steve. We were waiting for the others to take their places along the route. Today’s excitement was going to occur along the running tracks by the river by the Brooklyn Bridge, where I was to meet an imaginary friend and lure out my stalkers. Finding a deserted place in New York City where I might be casually discovered was much harder than, well, none of us expected. Because, oddly, I just didn’t typically run along the docks alone in the middle of the night. Silly me.

Things had gotten weird with my blond friend. I’d attempted to be normal around him. At first, I’d tried to hard to be super casual. Which for some reason made me louder than I usually was. Like I’d turned into an ugly American overseas trying to communicate with a non-English speaker. I then overcorrected to cheerleader perky. In my entire life, I’ve never used that many invisible exclamation marks in one conversation.

Steve, bless his befuddled heart, had taken it like the heavyweight he was. With a wary smile and a little extra physical space. The perky thing had really thrown him.

And then they told me about the failed recon missions. Natasha wearing a Kate disguise. Tony impersonating me online. Their shared decision to protect me from the truth of Verenich, the villages, and their suspicions of the ultimate goal. I’d been livid. Too angry to have a chance to be afraid of Verenich and who hired him.

But if I’d exploded at them like I wanted to, would they always see me as a hot head, hysterical under pressure. Oh, they’d forgive me before too long. But there’d always be that little bit of doubt about whether I could hack it. And that was something that could not happen.

So I’d done my grandmother proud, which rankled almost as much. But no one did WASPy unemotional coolness better than she. I’d mentioned my disappointment and acknowledged that they were doing what they thought was best, and then got down to brass tacks. The emotion I’d deal with on my own later in some healthy way. Like developing acid reflux.

So here we sat in agonizing, self-interrupting hell watching the clock count down.

“Do you have any q-”

“Nice to be running again- oh. Sorry. What were you saying?”

"Nothing. What about running?"

“It’s… never mind.”

Pause of decades.

I was saved from wandering the barren field of my small talk by a modern phrase from a classic man. “Hey… are we… OK?”

Were we?

Do I tell a guy who was quickly becoming if not already my best friend that apparently my subconscious maybe possibly could be beginning to think about thinking something else? And that I had no idea how I felt about that? Or how to handle it? Or that I never thought I could possibly even come close to maybe thinking about thinking about that again? Especially when the object of my confusion not only didn’t see me that way and should see someone less… complicated.
Aaaaand I’ve been staring at him while having the internal monologue of a junior high girl. Perfect.

There he sat. Patiently and subtly braced for an answer he may not like. While waiting to save his friend (and also small villages and perhaps stop something larger blah blah blah) by risking his own life. This was not something to lay at his feet.

That’s it. Yeah. Not the time or place. Definitely not because I was chicken shit. Nope.

Yet it wasn’t as “simple” as that. Nothing ever was, really. Wrapping around the realization of the other night was the feeling that not only had he not told me because he thought I couldn’t handle it, but that all our quality time together had just been part of the ruse. And if that was true...

“You didn’t tell me. After all that time together. I get that you thought you were protecting me and I appreciate the sentiment. But you can’t protect me from my life. I got off the plane that day. I caused all this.” Playing with my fingers, I avoided his gaze. Why must emotion be so damned hard to talk about. I desperately wanted to lighten the mood with some comedic relief, but this had to be said. So that I could look at myself in the mirror. “I thought you, of all of them… would’ve trusted me enough to let me be a part of fixing it. To at least let me try. It hurts. I know you knew how m-

He cut me off with a touch. I watched in fascination as his big hands reached out to cover my own. Turning my hands up, slowly stretching his warm callused fingers to gently trail down the length of my palm. I think I stopped breathing. He drew small circles across my wrist before trailing down to my fingertips, twining our hands together.

“You’re right.” His voice was so soft, mesmerizing. “We should have involved you from the beginning. I should have trusted you. I do trust you. And I’m sorry.”

I looked up into blue eyes that were much closer than I’d expected. The doubts and anger fell away in the weight of his stare. My attention was shifted when a surprisingly lush lower lip was pulled inward and released.

The air was heavy between us, expectant, and made me dizzy, pulled to the heat of him. Of their own volition, my eyelids closed. On my inhale, his nose brushed mine and breath feathered across my mouth.

“This is our one minute warning, kids. Time to double knot those laces,” Tony announced on our comms.

I opened my eyes to find Steve moving to open his door, looking at me with the same guarded look as when we originally got in the car. Snapping back to a normal, definitely-not-leaning-forward-with-the-intention-to-be-nearer-to-you position, I slipped my game face back on to hide my deepening embarrassment. Had that actually happened or had I daydreamed it? I mean, I had an A+ imagination, but... Yet my fantastical friend was as artless as ever.

“Copy.” Steve replied flatly. “Ready?”

Not quite yet. But soon.

***

Here I am. Just a woman alone. Running by along the river. Just pausing to stop on my run to retie my shoes by the side of the bridge, take a #runnershigh #runnershairdontcare #Hudsonmarathonofone selfie, wait for my friend Edwin, and generally kill time. Tra-la-la-la. No
threat here.

As long as no one looked at the drum tattoo my pulse was beating, hopefully I appeared to be exactly what I was pretending to be. The quick breaths were from running and not nerves and fear. Sure.

Actually, I had been running for a while to set the electronic trail for them on my phone. A nice, neat little path to come accost me. On one hand, it felt like freedom to get out of Castle and the tower and see new faces, to feel the cold wind numb my nose and cheeks, to visit my city. On the other hand, it was hard not to gallop to the would-be rendezvous point. Knowing that someone was probably following me made it very difficult not to keep a normal pace and not flee. This was creepy. And refreshing. Like an old school M. Night Shyamalan movie.

My pause was taking too long and beginning to look forced. I braced various limbs against the stone foundation and stretched. And stretched. Double checked that Tony’s pineapple proto-packets were in handy places in case of emergency.

Ever since they’d broken through Tony’s firewalls, he’d been extra security conscious. Pepper now had a panic button disguised as a necklace. He’d assured us that comms were fine to use so I had an extra tiny one in my ear, but there wasn’t a good way for me to just suddenly start responding. Runners didn’t typically break out their cellphones mid-stride and anyone who’d been watching me knew that I didn’t run with headphones. Any more.

So when their occasional encouragements became actual updates, it was kind of a relief from the building anxiety of waiting.

“Male runner, blue shirt, pacing you but fell back. He’s fifty feet at five o’clock.” Natasha.

The morning before, she and I had done an intense hand-to-hand review. Where to hit. How hard. When. And then she’d punched me right in the face. It was shocking. I’d never been punched before. The offrontery of it was only slightly paled by the fact that it fucking hurt! The look I’d given her was as black as my eye, but I knew if she really wanted me down, I’d be down. She made to hit me again, but I stepped back. “Don’t be afraid to get hit. No matter how good you are, it is going to happen. Being afraid of it wastes time and energy. Pain is temporary. You heal. Take the hit and use it to get inside their space before the swing reaches its potential and hit back. Go for the eyes, the nose, or the groin.” Clint had eeever so slightly flinched. “You aren’t winning a niceness contest, so don’t be polite. Use your fists, elbows, knees, feet. Bite if you have to. Stop them before they stop you. And when you get the chance, you run.” She popped me again. Shit fuck OW! “But don’t forget to dodge.”

“Thirty feet.” He didn’t look like much, but was openly staring. In a normal situation, his gaze would have been rude. Now it gave me goosebumps.

“Sparky, you ready?”

Ha, no. “Mmmhmm.” My heart was in my ears. I don’t know what I was bracing for, but I was braced.

The runner just moved right on by.

Oooook. Never mind then. Go about your business. Breathe out, everything’s fine. My legs are definitely not noodles.

I moved over to sit on a nearby bench, but thought better of it. I’d never be able to sit still and the
bouncing knees would betray my nerves. Wandering over to look at the water seemed like a better idea.

Until a set of hands reached out from behind an alcove I hadn’t seen and pulled me out of sight of the jogging trail.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay. My computer decided to blue screen on me and I just can't write on my phone.

Side note - Go see Captain Marvel! Higher, farther, faster baby!

He wasn’t tall, just a few inches more than me from the feel of his body giving mine an unwelcome and vice-like hug from behind. He’d had pastrami for lunch. Dude. Breath mint before kidnapping please.

I was grateful for the smell. It made him less of a faceless nightmare figure and more human. I mean, I was grateful, but I’d never be able to enjoy another pastrami on rye.

With arms pinned to my sides, the only way to conjure the blue would be if I was willing to risk severe self-injury. And I rather liked my legs attached to my torso, thank you.

With Nat’s instruction in mind, I took a deep breath, dropped my head and threw it back. Right into his nose. He yelped and cursed and so did I. That hurt! But he didn’t let go.

In my ear, the voices of my friends blended into just Steve’s. “Hold tight! We’re coming!”

I knew they had my back, but it was nice to hear. Their tussle happening outside my field of vision. Just had to hold it together long enough to buy time, not allow myself to leave this place, and not die. Easy peasy. ...Sure.

“Let me go!” Ever articulate.

The goon behind me was silent, but the man that walked out from behind me somewhere was not.

“Stop squirming Dr. Wallace and we won’t have to hurt you.” It wasn’t Verenich. It was some guy who wanted to grace the cover of Hoodlums Monthly. Tall and thin, dark slicked-back hair, black leather blazer, and a sneer. Assuming that his buddy was the short and stocky I thought he was, I’d been nabbed by the Cliche Brothers.

Playing into that idea, I slid into the role of damsel in distress and pretended to go boneless in a faint. Short Goon dropped me a few inches before catching me again around the upper arms and chest. He pulsed his arms to squeeze the goods. Gross.

But it did mean that my hands were free again.

Tall Goon. “Stop messing around and bring her.”

Taking a deep breath, I brought my hands up and pushed the blue. Nothing happened except letting them know that I was awake. Fantastic.

Nervous laugh. “Oh. Hey guys.” Crapcrapcrap!
Tall Goon took a step towards me and I pushed again. Success! The glowing plate was only as wide as my shoulders, but it would be enough. Raising it fast and hard and ducking my head as much as possible, I smashed it into Short Goon’s face. Over the familiar hum, the shocking sound of impact was like celery breaking in half. That was going to leave a mark. He dropped heavily to the ground.

However, before I could stand straight, Tall Goon took advantage of my raised arms and punched me in the middle.

The air rushed from me in a sharp *hooo* and the blue fluttered out. Falling onto my knees, a position he did not deserve, I struggled to breathe with a strained groaning noise. I’d read about getting the air knocked out of you but hadn’t understood the panic of suffocating or what a vulnerable position it left me in. It was only supposed to last a minute or three, but my eyeballs were pulsing in time with my racing heart.

“Kate! What’s going on? Are you—” sound of punching, sound of punching, “OK? Kate?!” Steve rang out in my ear. I had no breath to answer.

Tall Goon took that moment to gloat. Asshole. “He didn’t want us to hurt you. But he isn’t here yet. And accidents will happen.” His words were ridiculous but his hits were not. A quick open hand slap and then a hard backhand forced me down farther onto my hands. Heat flared across my face.

*Why do men like him always choose the slap? It was so insulting.*

Running my tongue over my teeth to make sure they were all still there, I tasted blood and knew my lip was split. Suspected a bloody nose too. And from the throbbing, probably another black eye. With my face turned away from him, I felt my lungs finally expand and greedily gulped in as much air as I could. Not nervous or scared any more. I was *pissed*. As the breath returned, so did the tingle in my hands.

When he bent to hit me again, I was ready. Moving out the way at the last minute, I grabbed his extended arm and pulled hard. Overbalanced, Tall Goon fell to the ground beside me. Holy shit! It actually worked!

He started to rise and I scrambled onto his back with all the grace of a drunk cowgirl. Dude was not happy. Bucking and cursing, Tall Goon did his best to throw me off. Channeling my best Natasha, I punched him as hard and fast as I could in the back of the head until his head ricocheted off the concrete. He didn’t move. Ha. How do you like it, you walking trope?

The hard metallic sound of a gun cocking froze every muscle in my body. Apparently, Short Goon had awoken. And was armed. Shit.

“Hands up. Stand slowly. Do anything I don’t like and we’ll see how well those magic powers work with a bullet in your shoulder.”

Persuasive bugger. “OK, OK.”

Turning around, I saw Short Goon still unconscious. It wasn’t that he was balding, wide-set, or… Verenich. It was that he was wearing a pink polo while also being Verenich. Blink.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to shoot me. Somebody wants me in one piece after all.” Don’t give away that I recognized the crazy, gun-wielding stalker mercenary.

“I’ll just have to get over it.” Well OK then. He’s not pretending at all. “Although, technically, a few holes will still leave you in one piece.” Creepy, evil smile made my hair stand up.
He raised the gun and fired.

Fhwoop! Fhwoop! Fhwoop!

I stared at the three flattened shells at my feet. It turns out that the blue IS a shield against projectiles! I don’t even remember conjuring it. Yay survival instincts!

“Oh they are going to love you.” It was super time to go.

Taking a chance, I used the blue as cover and rushed him, bowling him to the side. Not quite knocking him down, he regained his footing quickly, but I was already hoofing it. Back towards my team.

He was fast. Running in the park had been about endurance, training, and the pleasure of the experience. Not bursts of speed. Flo Jo, I am not.

Verenich was closing in. His hands tightly grabbed my arm and managed to spin me around so that we collided. I managed to block a hard hit to the head with my arm. Yanked back by my neck, the villain swung several vicious jabs at my ribs and seemed to enjoy the snapping sound they generated. You never think about your ribs until someone introduces them to a blunt object. And then FUCK it hurts.

Things started to get a little gray around the edges. Stumbling a little, I planted my legs to stop from falling and nearly threw up from the pain. Come on healing powers! Don’t let me toss cookies and pass out during my first fight! It’s just a rib or three!

Finally, finally figures rounded the corner. Nat and Steve. My angels in body armor and furious faces.

Steve yelled out my name in a tone I’d never heard before. Verenich turned, distracted for one brief moment.

It was all I needed.

“HEY ASSHOLE!” The mercenary turned back to me. Just in time for me to execute a perfect, full strength field goal kick right into his balls.

He whimpered and fell to the ground, clutching himself. With any luck at all, I’d stopped the Verenich family line.

With my would-be kidnappers down, I hobbled over to the wall and put my weight on it, hiding a gag in the process. Note to self, protect the ribs better next time.

Nat stood over Verenich, but he wasn’t going anywhere. Especially with the hit she used to knock him unconscious. Steve joined me at the wall, taking in what I assumed to be my most glamorous appearance ever.

“Jesus, Kate. I leave you alone for 2 minutes.” His words were joking, but his eyes were cataloging.

“I got bored. You guys were taking forever.”

Nat finished her recon of the area and joined us. “I see you’ve been making new friends.” I carefully shrugged. She extended her arm and held out the three shells. “Care to explain?”
I could actually feel Steve’s anger. At me? At Verenich and the Cliche Brothers? Both?

“Well. Turns out they weren’t so friendly. And that the blue can stop a bullet at close range. So we all learned something today.”

Suddenly I was being hugged again. Only this one was a lot more welcome than the last. Steve was tall and solid. I rested my head on this chest and welcomed the comfort. That was until he squeezed a little harder.

I tried to keep the whimper in, I really did. But I’d already let my guard down just enough that it got out. Damn stupid ribs.

He immediately released me. With quick, sure hands, Nat begun to pull gently at my shirt, trying to raise it up to assess the damage.

She paused a minute before saying, “No entry wounds. It looks like a broken rib or two though.” I saw Steve make communicative eye contact with her as she rolled my shirt back down. What, it was just some bruising. I mean, it was some hella impressive bruising that made deep breathing incredibly painful, but still.

“Ha! You should see the other guy.” Shouldn’t have laughed. Shouldn’t have done it. Ow. Owowow.

“We’ll talk about that later. For now, let’s get you back to Dr. M.” Steve was not amused. Gone were the soft touches and confusing intimacy of the car. The man before me was hard restraint and controlled anger. How can he be that mad and still be such a good hugger?

But this wasn’t about the car. Or him. Or even about Verenich.

This was about me.

And I had completed my mission.

***

Those of us (apparently, just me and a few agents) in need of a little mending or were a touch overprotective had gone straight back to the Tower. The rest oversaw the transfer of prisoners to the SHIELD site. Dr. M did love her scans. Even having gone straight back to see her, my ribs already shown signs of mending. Two broken. Another cracked. That fucker Verenich hit hard. By her estimates, I’d be completely healed within 36 hours. All the other damage like skinned knees and hands and various facial injuries were basically surface. Didn’t mean they didn’t hurt though.

I had an hour before the debrief began and all I really wanted was a hot shower and a couple of minutes to quietly fall apart. The adrenaline had worn off and with it my energy. My outsides were a mess. My insides were a mess. And my shit needed to be together before I saw the team. Or at least they needed to believe it was together.

My face and middle ached. Taking a short break before making the trek up to my borrowed rooms, I tried to sort through my thoughts. I’d never been in a real fight before. Not just any fight either, one with heavy purpose. For them, my abduction. For me, a chance to prove my mettle.

At the time, I had zero qualms about hurting those men. But now… I did and I didn’t. They would have done far worse to me than incapacitation. I had defended myself. But I’d gone in with the intention of stopping them however I could. Part of me, a bit I was not looking forward to
examining later, was even spoiling for the confrontation. And I was profoundly, deeply grateful that it had stopped when it had. Believing that anyone could be pushed to homicide was one thing. Doing it, which had become a new and unsettling possibility in my life, and living with it… was something I was happy not to be currently experiencing.

The knuckles of my right hand were an angry red. No wonder the team often wore gloves as part of their uniforms. I rubbed at the joints and remembered other hands that had so recently held mine. I think. I mean, fairly sure it happened. Although perhaps making it imaginary would be less embarrassing. Granted, there hadn’t been all that many to remember, but I’d never had someone jump back like that from nearly kissing me. If it hadn’t been imaginary, it meant that he didn’t want that. Me. If it hadn’t been imaginary, it meant that I… we had nearly ventured into dangerous territory.

But no line was crossed. Nothing had actually happened. I was probably making a big deal out of nothing. Something to examine later when my emotions weren’t rattling around a pinball machine.

What I needed was a little time to find my game face again. Not to see the man himself walking into my med bay room with his face still set in its fierce lines from earlier.

His voice wasn’t much warmer. “What the hell did you think you were doing? They could have killed you or taken you.”

“Steve, can we talk about this after I clean up?” Before Dr. M bound up my midsection, I persuaded her to let me clean up first. After nearly being abducted and then kicking the ass of three grown men, I had earned me a long, hot shower. With the fancy hair products. And the super fluffy towels. Running my tongue over my teeth, I added cleaning them to my list too. Maybe I could talk to Tony about adding another flavor to the proto-packets. That pineapple really didn’t mix well with the taste of blood. And it stuck to my teeth. Berry maybe?

Steve stepped forward to loom over me. “You were reckless and put yourself, the team, and the plan in danger. Do you have any idea what could have happened?”

Right. Woman up, Wallace. I found my mental bootstraps, stood up, and got inside the big man’s space, just like Natasha had taught me. “Yes. In addition to being a woman, a city-dweller, briefed on the gruesome findings from Latvia, and the target of this craziness, I’d say that I have a fairly good idea.” I returned his look, glare for glare. “I didn’t back down from those men today and I’m not going to back down from you. I’m in this now, whether you like it or not. And right now, I’m going to finish cleaning up so that a nurse can bandage my ribs and we can get on with our day.”

With that, I sidestepped around my friend and protector and headed towards my temporary quarters. Above ground.

Along the way, I certainly did not repeat to myself in exasperation, “Whether you like it or not?” Good grief, Charlie Brown.

Chapter End Notes

I'm curious to see what you think of the next chapter. It has been rewritten a lot and some plot revelations happen.
Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Scary Natasha is fun to write. Serious Steve is serious. He'll eventually lighten up though. Those blue eyes need to sparkle!

I know Ubermensch is German and not Russian but it is exactly the word I want. If I revise this any more, it will never get posted. So here we go!

(I've realized that there is a space between any italic or bold word and punctuation. I don't know why. I don't know how to fix it. Making me nuts. Forgive me please!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hold tight! We’re coming!”

She’d disappeared from sight and he’d temporarily frozen, rooted in place. And he missed the large group of armed personnel that poured out of nearby buildings and vehicles. Even with several SHIELD agents as back up, the team had been nearly overwhelmed. It wasn’t that their numbers had been great. He’d faced enough overwhelming odds before not to be intimidated by this group. It was how well armed and what they were armed with that leveled the field.

Steve suddenly had a clear memory of how, as a kid, he’d seen two Brooklyn street gangs face off. Armed with whatever they could find, broken bottles, makeshift clubs, knives, and brass knuckles, the two sides had seemed like terrifying armies. He and the rest of the onlookers quietly turned around and made their way home. Now, blessedly free of onlookers due to some kind of rerouting from JARVIS, he stood his ground. Team strong at his back and shield in his hand.

Never thought of himself as a gang member, but he had to admit that it wasn’t far from the truth. He just didn’t expect for it to feel so familiar. But then, this wasn’t his first group of ragtag hooligans either. And that had felt pretty damn good then too.

But they were hardly armed with broken bottles. These sonsabitches hit like a ton of bricks, thanks to metal braces hidden under their clothes.

“Anyone else think this looks weird? Like a bus full of accountants pissed off some weirdly athletic soccer moms?” Clint noted through comms.

Natasha piped in, “What? You didn’t get the dress code memo? This is a business casual fight only.”

There was more chatter, but he tuned it out. Jab, block, shield hit, chest kick, punch, parry, step forward, repeat. Get to Kate.

Any progress he made was sidelined when the newcomers upped their ante.

“Heads up. Looks like they turned the power on.”

He had no time for this. “Push through, we’re almost there.”
“Hey Cap! We could use a-” Grunt. “-little super soldiering over here!”

Growling at Stark in exasperation, Steve turned to look for him. Could the man not handle a few armed fighters on his own? What was the use of having that fancy suit if-

Stark and the team were not behind him as he’d expected. They were a fair distance back and pushing at a line of eager combatants, several of them shooting energy beams up at Stark, who hovered and dodged. A couple of agents showed signs of battle.

He’d plowed forward and left them behind. Hadn’t even noticed. Lost his focus. They weren’t exactly helpless, but they were still his.

With a frustrated sigh and and look at where he’d last seen her, Steve turned back.

***

He’d been trying to listen to her interactions with whoever’d grabbed her, but the sound of the fighting around him all but drowned her out. It was a miracle he’d heard it, even with the dramatically reduced numbers. But he knew that noise.

“Kate! What’s going on? Are you-” He threw a hard cross at the man in front of him and turned his shield to angle the deflection of an energy beam into the side of a building and not the assembly around him, “OK? Kate?!” Another wheeze followed by the sound of a sharp slap was his only answer.

“Steve!” Natasha yelled to catch his attention and pointed to her comms. She’d heard too.

Returning fire to someone on the ground, Stark chimed in. “Sounds like Sparky could use a hand. I hate to keep a lady waiting. You two go get her. Barton, let’s clear a path.”

***

His eyes found her first. Swaying, but upright. The blood on her face making her skin seem even paler. They’d hurt her.

They’d hurt her.

Panic fought with the heavy, solid rage that filled him. She wasn’t trained in hand-to-hand or resistance techniques. What had they done to her?

“KATE!” Ignoring that he barely recognized his own voice, he focused on the stout man instead. He didn’t look without damage either. A part that Steve didn’t like to recognize inside himself smirked. Even more when he saw how she took Verenich down. Damn.

Pushing down anything but the feeling of relief, he focused on her. Split lip, slow bloodied nose, a black eye, bruising across both cheeks, but a quietly… triumphant look about her. The realization that the wounds hadn’t started to heal yet meant that there was something worse, something hidden.

The spent shells in Natasha’s hand made his emotions burst to the surface. One more friend in danger under his watch. What good was having these abilities if friends just kept slipping through his fingers? At least this one was still within reach.

She stood there joking, trying to make light of nearly being abducted or killed. Well he couldn’t laugh about it.
Nor could he stop himself from reaching out and pulling her into a hug.

She felt good there. Real. Safe. Her dark red head rested against his chest and something that had been tight inside him since they got out of the car loosened. Maybe if he pulled her a little closer, he could breathe again.

And he could. Until she whimpered and went stiff in his arms.

Any relief he’d felt immediately froze inside him. Oh God.

Like the shadow she was, Natasha stepped in from nowhere and began to examine Kate’s torso. She diagnosed broken ribs, caught his gaze, and, when the other woman looked away, shifted their gazes to the unconscious men around them. He knew that the spy’s shuttered expression mirrored his own.

***

With her face still set in its most intimidating lines, Natasha sat across the table from Verenich. She’d been there for an hour. Silent. Staring. Furious. Steve was not ashamed to say that sometimes, Natasha scared him.

With only death looks from the interrogation room, his mind wandered.

Confronting Kate had been an experience. A confusing one. She’d met his anger with a stubborn streak that brought out his own.

He liked the fire she showed. Cheeks flushed and those brown eyes that glared up at him had a light in them… The temptation to move nearer, to reignite what Tony had interrupted in the car was so sweet. Stepping so close to her to emphasize his point was a mistake.

He didn’t know if he was relieved or disappointed when she’d stormed out. But it was better. Yes. It was better. Now was not the time to be distracted. People were depending on him and if today was any indication, when Kate was involved, his attention was definitely divided. And agents had gotten hurt. One more burden he’d have to carry.

It wasn’t that he thought she couldn’t eventually defend herself or be a good team member, with training. She’d kept herself from being taken by three experienced mercenaries, which had honestly surprised the hell out of him. She’d done that from the day they’d met, surprise him. He hadn’t lied, although he never lied, when he’d said that he was proud of her hard-won progress while in the Castle. Actually using it in the moment like that hinted at the work she’d done and how far she’d come since Latvia. With time, Kate would be a true asset to the team.

And that scared the hell out of him.

But the greater good was what was important. The greater good. She would be able to help a lot of people.

He didn’t want to go back to life without her friendship. Somehow, she’d snuck right by the walls that had protected him so well after waking from the ice. That he’d felt so drawn to her, had allowed himself to indulge in the feeling of more… It was a fantasy. He’d chosen to wear the mantle and with it came responsibilities.

So he would be a friend. A teammate. A captain.

He straightened and stood at ease. The decision was made. It was the right one. The one that
would benefit the most people. He was just one man.

And over time, the heaviness that lay like a fist inside him would become just another scar. A reminder and a warning.

***

Verenich had held out for nearly 52 hours before talking. It was like he’d waited until he knew all of them were on the other side of the glass watching.

“She is the Übermensch. Can you imagine it? An army with the power to stop bullets and cut men in half with a flick of the wrist? A highly trained, unstoppable assassin. There is no price I would not get for her.”

Steve’s hands clenched so hard they ached. He’d been forced out of the interrogation room after his fists left indents on the metal table in his exasperate anger. The mercenary had leaned back as much as his bolted chair would allow, but sneered at the display of temper.

Bastard.

“You were going to sell her? Who was the buyer?” Clint’s voice was deadly cold. Steve approved.

The prisoner replied, “You hid her very well. But I am patient. I waited. I knew she would come to me eventually. You Americans. So impatient.”

Natasha this time, “So you didn’t have a buyer lined up? We would have found you within hours. Seems like a waste of time, just sitting there, accepting offers. Lazy.”

“I did not say that she was for sale.”

“You were going to use her? You’re a nobody.”

Steve itched to wipe the smug look of the man’s face.

“A nobody with very powerful friends.”

They digested that for a moment. “So she was a gift? And what were you going to get in return? Money? Power?”

Verenich paused long enough that the spies leaned forward into his space until he flinched.

“She is their fee! I was to create a being of power and in exchange, I would be initiated into the next circle. A task to prove I am worthy.”

Everything suddenly became clear. All those lab sites. The mangled bodies. He’d been trying to create an enhanced person.

Natasha had obviously come to the same conclusion. Beside him, Tony’s eternal fidgeting stopped.

“You killed entire villages to prove that you’re worthy ?!” Clint ground out.

“They want results. The methods are not important.” The man just shrugged. “She appeared like a gift. All I had to do was take her.”
“Psychopath,” spat the woman in question. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Bruce step up to stand next to her. Good. Comfort by proximity.

“When are they coming for her?”

Surprisingly, Verenich gaped up at Clint. “Are you mad? I cannot contact them without having her in my possession first!”

Nat jumped on that information. “So they don’t know about her?”

He could hear his friend hold her breath, waiting the response. But the man didn’t answer.

“DO THEY KNOW?!”

“NO!”

They seemed to exhale as a group. An agent stepped into the room briefly to give Nat and Clint bottles of water. Their captive jealously watched the liquid disappear. He’d been given nothing since arriving. He deserved nothing.

Nat finished half her bottle and put it on the table outside of his reach. Condensation gathered on the outside and pooled around it. He reached for it but was stopped by the handcuffs.

“Thirsty?”

The man swallowed heavily. “They will kill me. You will put me in prison. But they will kill me and make it last. An example to others that even inside the great SHIELD, I am dead.”

Although he didn’t stop leaning on the wall, Clint spoke. “If you are already dead, why not tell us? We stop things like them.”

“How can you stop something you did not even know was there?”

Natasha finished another quarter of the bottle. A small trail of moisture wound its way down the indentations of Steve’s fists and wet the man’s fingers. He swallowed again. His teammate went up again in Steve’s estimation. She was very good.

“Who?”

Nothing. Every cell in Steve’s body wanted to go in that room and get the answer. It was sheer force of will that he stayed in place.

“If I have to ask again, we will walk out of this room and leave the door unlocked. Your friends will have no trouble finding you.”

“They’ll kill me for just saying the name.”

“-Alone. Handcuffed to a table.”

Clint added his voice. “Just a name. A word. Say it.”

“I can’t. No one says it and lives.”

“-Vulnerable in this isolated, soundproof room.”

“We won’t let them get in. You’ll be safe. Just say it.”
“I CAN’T. I won’t.”

Steve could see the pair’s choreography have its effect on Verenich. Panic rising in the man as the
their voices blended together. Threats and persuasion Threats and persuasion. Blended together
until they were nearly the same.

“-It will probably be days before someone walks by again. Days of their focused, uninterrupted
attention.-”

“You can do it. Just say it. So easy. Just a word like any other.”

“NO. I CAN’T.”

“-Or, you can tell me who they are and you get to choose how you go. When you go.-”

Verenich bounced his gaze between spies, eyes surrounded by white.

Eventually, Nat sighed and moved towards the door, Clint shaking his head and following.

“OK! OK.” They stopped at the door. “I don’t have a name. I call a number and leave a message.
Eventually, I get a call back from a machine reading a message with instructions. That is how
they are. Deniability at every stage. All I know is the name of the organization.”

Clint pulled a piece of paper and pen out of his pocket. “Write.” Verenich complied.

“The name?”

“They are known as the Ten Rings.”

If he hadn’t been watching Natasha, Steve would have missed the look that passed over her striking
face.

On their way out, she left a pistol and a single shell on the desk.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for liking and reading and commenting! You make me happy literally
every day.

I’m super curious to see what you guys think of this one. Let me know!

Also, if you'll forgive me, can I borrow your collective memories for a moment? I'm a
re-reader. Books, fanfic, posts, whatever. Love it. I have been trying to find a
Steve/OFC story where she works logistics for the team (due to a now healed injury, I
want to say?) and he doesn't know her identity at first. I know it isn't a lot to go on, but
it has been a hot minute since last I saw it. Need incentive beyond my undying
gratitude? First person to find it for me will get a character named after them!
Beside him, Tony inhaled sharply. Kate stepped forward to place a hand on the man’s shoulder.

What? Goddamn it, he was out of the loop again. Before he could open his mouth, the interrogators joined them.

“Tell me, tell me he didn’t just say that.” Tony’s voice had an edge of hysteria in it that Steve’ had never heard before.

“He also said that they don’t know. They don’t know, Tony. They aren’t coming. They aren’t.”

Steve looked down at his friend, the first time since he’d left her in the tower. Her entire sympathetic focus was on the dark haired man. She stepped closer to him and Tony took a deep breath and placed his hand over hers. They parted and Kate gingerly sat down again.

For the first time since their argument, he allowed himself a moment to really see her. He hadn’t waited for her after their argument or turned when she’d joined them later. But he didn’t need to see her to track her movements in the room. Just knew where she was. He chose not to linger on that thought.

If it wasn’t for the dark circles, she seemed back to normal. Seemed. The bandages were off and even the bruising was gone, but she carried herself as if expecting pain. Part of him wanted to gather her up as he’d done by the river. But now, he suspected the action would be unwelcome. And a bad idea. So instead, he crossed his arms and ignored the pressure of Natasha’s stare.

“I thought you were going to protect him,” Bruce demanded from the far corner of the room. The man had placed himself as far back from the double sided glass as possible.

Natasha’s cool gaze cut to the scientist. “If he is involved with the Ten Rings, he was already dead. It was a mercy.”

“How can you know that? This is a secure facility. Even we had to call ahead.”

Tony piped in, “Because they can get anywhere at any time. To any one. You think this little building can hold them back?”

Great. Semi-hysterics. Just what they needed right now. But Tony did seem genuinely afraid. Kate moved to stand next to the man again. Steve watched in silent amazement as she took her phone and spoke quietly into it before handing it over. Stark held it to his ear, nodded once, and left the room.

“What was that?” Not a great way to enter the conversation.

Compassionate eyes turned cool as she answered, “Doesn’t matter. He’ll catch up later.”

He could feel his own narrowing. “If something has happened, then I need to know before it puts someone else in danger.”

Once again, she got into his space and glared up. Bad idea, Rogers. You are just full of bad ideas
It was Clint who said, “The Ten Rings were behind his abduction in Afghanistan. They destroyed the convoy on the way back to Bagram and threw him in a cave for three months. I’d say Stark’s earned a little leeway when it comes to them, don’t you, Cap?”

Well. Shit. Now he fell like a jackass. It was so easy for him to forget that under that bluster was a man that had suffered. The group was quiet as each absorbed the weight of Clint’s words.

“Maybe we all need a break. Take an hour and regroup?” Bruce suggested.

CRACK!

Spinning around, they saw a red spray of blood and brains on the white walls of the interrogation room.

Kate gasped and spun away, covering a shocked mouth with her hands. Banner cringed, but the rest of them, himself included, consciously relaxed the defensive postures they’d thrown up.

His voice was quiet. “One hour.”

***

One week. He hadn’t seen or heard from Kate in one week. Ever since they’d returned to the city after final debrief, she’d made herself scarce. Before leaving again, Natasha had checked up on her and reported back that everything was fine. Tony said Kate’s report of the Verenich situation had been submitted and he’d procured himself a copy. It was both comprehensive and… empty. There was none of her in it.

He’d been deployed on a recon mission to Eastern Europe. They’d received word that Verenich may have had a final lab there, but he’d found no evidence. Thank God.

He wasn’t sure how it was possible, but the tower seemed quiet. Empty. At first, it had been nice. Between that and the flights, it’d given him some time to put his head back on straight.

But he missed his friend. And he was worried about her. So he made a call.

***

“Aw come on! He was clearly on base! Is the ump blind?”

“No, but you are. He was a mile out!” Steve stared at the man, aghast. He’d been coming to The Bar every night for the last few days. On the phone, Phil had said that Kate showed up once or twice a week and that he was welcome to wait. So that’s what he did. After the fourth night, the man had taken pity and turned on the ball game for him. It was a kind move, even though the Dodgers weren’t in Brooklyn any more.

“I don’t know what happened between the two of you and it isn’t my business…”

Ah. The Talk. “We’re just friends.”

The bartender eyed him. “Mmmhmm. You say ‘friends,’ but you’ve been sitting here for how long now? On just the off chance she shows up?”

Steve could feel the blush rising, so he bought some time with a swallow of his beer. “I may have stuck my foot in it. But I’m not wrong either.”
“Well then you have a choice to make. Be right, have another beer, and ignore that you miss her. Or apologize, ask for forgiveness, talk it out like the man you are, and move on.” His stare made Steve shift on his bar stool. “That girl is worth eating a little crow over.”

He smiled at the other man’s protectiveness. “Is this the part where you threaten to knock my block off?”

A bark of laughter answered him. “She doesn’t need an old man like me fighting her battles. I’d just hate to see that pretty mug of yours get all messed up.” The look turned hard. “But don’t you add to those scars. You hear me?” He nodded towards the door. “Heads up. Here comes Trouble.”

She looked great. Really great. She’d obviously come straight from the college, all dolled up for class. And totally out of his league. Which was just fine. Because she was his friend. His friend wearing an outfit that hugged curves as she walked… Knock it off, Rogers.

The smile she gave him lit up the room and he felt his face return it as a reflex. Until he realized it was for Phil. He hadn’t realized just how much he missed that smile until it melted off her face when she saw him.

He stood as she approached and claimed a stool, leaving an empty between them. “Kate.”

“Hey Phil. Can I get a bourbon rocks please?” She sighed and turned to him. “Steve.”

Phil set down the drink in front of her, but didn’t walk away as Steve’d hoped. “Go easy on the guy. He’s been coming in every night just to see you.”

And just like that, he wanted to crawl back into the ice. “Thanks buddy.”

The other man just gave him a shit-eating grin and left them alone.

“So. Every night huh? I had no idea you had such an addiction to cheese fries.” Her flat tone didn’t match her teasing words.

“There’s more cheese at the bottom. How can I resist?” Stop talking about cheese fries, you boob.

They sat in awkward silence. They were getting good at them. She wasn’t making it easy on him either, sitting there swirling and sipping her drink. Barely even looked at him since they sat down.

Well he hadn’t been sitting here night after night to not say anything. “How are you?” Smooth.

“Oh you know. Busy. Suddenly found myself with triple the class load for a while as payback for covering me while I was out.” She shrugged. “Still better than having to buy all the vaguely stale cheddar popcorn and cookie dough from each boy scout troop in the city of New York. I mean, it would be different if Thin Mints were involved, but whose luck gets them Thin Mints?”

“I… What?” Just, what?

She yawned. “New day, old problems. How’re things in the tower?”

“Tony’s back in California. Bruce is with him. Natasha and Clint are…”

“Out in the world confirming that the Ten Rings aren’t on their way to wreak havoc on an unsuspecting population by creating an army of enhanced people and/or tracking me down and using my DNA as a shortcut?”
Again, he was impressed with how quickly she put together those pieces. She must have seen it in his face.

“Steve, it wasn’t that hard a puzzle. Dollars to doughnuts you were out there too. It is what you do. You got my back.” She turned the full force of her gaze on him and he held his breath. “At some point, you’re going to trust me to do the same. I wasn’t wrong on the Hudson. Everyone has a start somewhere. Mine just happened to involve the Avengers and a major terrorist organization.”

Well, shit. How was he supposed to answer that?

“I wasn’t wrong either. You put agents in danger and are damned lucky none of them died, Kate.” He somehow managed to keep his voice even. He just wanted to shake her. Didn’t she see the danger she’d put herself in?

Phil seemed to sense that the conversation wasn’t going well. He quietly sidled up, refilled their glasses, and left the bottle.

They each took a long drink before she spoke again. “Then train me.”

He stared. Openly. Without any effort, his memory acted like a flip book, overlaying her recent injuries to her now healed face and body. Then Natasha’s from the Battle of New York. Then Tony’s. Clint’s. Bruce’s haunted eyes. A woman’s body in the forest. From the war. Bucky’s as he fell.

When he came back to himself, she’d taken a hold of his arm and was saying his name in a low, concerned tone. He shook her off.

“No.” Her open expression slammed shut.

“You think I can’t do it.”

What? No. He closed his eyes and sighed. “Because I think you can.”

“...then why?”

Time to lay out his hand. “You’re my friend, that’s why. All I could think about that day was what had happened to you. Where you were. If they were hurting you. How they were hurting you. If you were even still alive. I was halfway to you before I even realized the rest of the team was in trouble. People got hurt because I lost focus. You’re a distraction.”

She sat back on her stool, a rush of expressions crossing her face. Taking a long drink from her glass, she turned back to him. This time, she was all business.

“No.” Her open expression slammed shut.

“You think I can’t do it.”

What? No. He closed his eyes and sighed. “Because I think you can.”

“...then why?”

He muddled that over. “You were lucky. Verenich’s men weren’t heavily armed and didn’t intend to kill you.” Softening his voice, “I wish I could say that you’d never have to do more than you did. But you’ll have to be prepared for more. Are you going to be able to handle that?”

She puffed out her cheeks, blew out a long stream of air, and then spoke quietly. “I mean. Probably not. That’s never something I thought I’d be in a position to consider. But I never
thought I’d be able to even play a small part in helping people this way. I don’t want to hurt anyone. But… Verenich. The things he did to those people… If there was even the outside chance that I could help stop something like that from happening again, I have to try.”

He shifted to watch the game on the television for a minute. He still didn’t think she knew what she was asking for. “And what about teaching? What we do isn’t always covert. You didn’t want to put your students in danger before. Why now?”

He liked the steel he saw behind those warm brown eyes. Admired her determination. The way she stood up to him. “Fewer classes. True training. And for times that may be not so secret, that’s something I’ll need Tony’s help for. And timing? Isn’t that the thing about cockroaches? Where there is one you see, there are more you don’t?” She played with her empty drink. “And besides, I can’t ask you guys to do something I won’t.” Watching her hands roll the glass between them, he tried to shove down the sudden memory of how they’d felt in his own.

“So you have a plan.”

“I don’t have a song about it with a patriotic beat, but yeah. I have a plan.” She took a deep breath and he suddenly realized she was nervous. To talk to him. “But it won’t work without your support.”

Something in him was just a little disappointed. “Captain America’s support won’t matter if the others don’t fall in.” His glass was empty now too, but he stared into it in an effort to school his expression.

He felt the stool next to his shift and she slid into it.

“Cap is great, don’t get me wrong. Big fan. Bought the tshirt and everything.” Her shoulder bumped his arm until he looked at her again. “But I need yours. Steve. My friend. The giant dork that shoots those damned finger guns at me and is incapable of watching movies without asking questions, eats truly hideous amounts of pasta, and falls asleep on my sofa. I can’t do this without him.”

He cleared his throat. “If this is what you want, even though it scares me… Terrifies me… "you have my support. It’s what friends do.”

That smile was for him again and he was warm from the inside out.

“Friends.” She said it like a statement, but, somehow, it felt like a question.

The warmth inside him bloomed into something hotter when her gaze flickered to his mouth. He forced himself to not respond.

She turned back to her drink and joined his blind stare at the television. Without looking away, she smirked and teased, “So. I’m a distraction huh?”

“Shut up.” God help him.

Chapter End Notes

Time to start heating things up a little? I mean, it's still Steve so he still has no idea how to talk to women so there will be missteps.
Drop me a note and let me know what you think!
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Have you ever tried to control a crush on a friend? It can be hell on a hot day. It'll be interesting to see Steve's side of this particular exchange.

Thank you to everyone that has read, commented, or liked! You guys are awesome and so appreciated. Feedback is fuel!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was hard to believe that it was June already. The end of term had come and gone in a blur of exams, office hours, time spent at the shooting range, and counting bruises. The kid gloves were most definitely off.

There were days of improvement and many many days of… less improvement. I spent a lot of time flat on my back and not in the fun way that Nat liked to tease about. On the occasional well-dodged attack or those few times where I actually managed to land a hit, her slight head nod of approval was like winning the fricking lottery. It did make the next one she threw extra-hard though. Life’s a balance.

I accompanied the team on a raid to stop a Portuguese arms dealer where, happily, I stayed my ass on the plane. Bruce even started teaching me Pallankuzhi, an mancala-style game he enjoyed during his time in India. We played while tensely pretending that 97% of our attention wasn’t focused on listening for sounds of distress from our teammates over comms.

The mission had gone well, for the most part. There’d been an explosion that they’d been a little too close to and those not in metal suits had come back to the plane with minor injuries.

Since the damage was superficial, I administered first aid, glad to have recently completed a refresher course. Nat had some decent scratches across her elbows and forearms from where she’d fallen. Clint had been behind her and close enough to the flames that it was like he’d gotten a sudden sunburn across the back of his neck and arms. He was not excited to have bandages stuck on his angry skin. Better those than an infection from untreated scrapes. Steve, overly-responsible overachiever that he was, had turned around to check that his people had made it out and so had gotten both hit in the front and thrown backwards to the ground.

The spies were easy enough to help. They almost seemed amused by my nursemaiding. Clint had even asked for a lollipop. Steve was a different story. I’d basically had to bully him into letting me help him.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Give it a minute and it’ll stop.”

My eyes narrowed. “Do you want pieces of building inside you because you’ve allowed the skin to heal over them? That sounds pleasant to you?”
His eyes narrowed in return. “Maybe.”

“Just sit down and let Doc help you, you big baby,” commanded Clint. Natasha just pointed at his seat until Steve gave in.

His armor had done its job and had protected most of him, save for a few places. The helmet, however, had once again been in his hand and not on his head. He seemed wary of me. Like I actually planned to hurt him. As if.

I reached for his head and he jerked back. “Calm down, big guy. I’ll go slow and if it hurts too much, I’ll back off, OK? We’ll go at your pace. Just take a deep breath and I’ll go in.”

A smirk and a raised eyebrow met my words. Behind me, two assholes laughed. “Geeze, Kate. This isn’t his first time. Get in there already.” That Natasha. Soooo funny.

“Don’t worry about me. I can take it all. Just talk to me while you do it.” Did he… did STEVE just participate in a sex joke?! Just when I thought I couldn’t blush any harder.

“Just hold still. I need to make sure that thick skull doesn’t have more concrete in it than when it started.” He started to laugh, so I put my hands in his hair and pulled until his head was close enough for me to reasonably manipulate.

“I didn’t know you were in to hair pulling, Doc!” This time, the helmet did come in handy as my patient threw it straight at the archer.

“Having friends is such a gift.” Even slightly thickened by sweat and dust, Steve’s hair was soft. I slowly slid my fingers around his scalp, trying not to be distracted by the feel of him and concentrate on finding the occasional bit of debris instead. I hadn’t been this close to him since our evenings in the Castle. Concentrate on your friend, Wallace.

A pocket of air shook the plane and my fingers nearly missed the first obstruction. “Oop, found one. Going to extract it. Ready?”

He made a noise of agreement that stilled as I worked out the small piece of stone. It hadn’t been in very deep, for which I was grateful. No stitches required.

As I worked, his breathing evened out and shoulders relaxed. I found a couple more pieces before I was done, narrating as I went. The cabin had gone quiet while I’d been concentrating and I looked up to find Clint leaning into the cockpit talking with Bruce and Tony while Nat had fallen asleep. Suddenly, the area felt much smaller.

“Ready for Phase 2?” I couldn’t bring myself to speak at full volume. It seemed wrong.

Apparently, he thought so too. With soft voice, the man under my hands asked, “Phase 2?”

Gesturing to his ribs, “whatever is happening there.”

“Huh?” Had he seriously forgotten about an injury? Maybe it was someone else’s blood. He unzipped his armor and pulled up the side of his undershirt, a mess of blood distracting me from some a lightly tanned, smooth, well muscled- NOPE.

“Steve! Doesn’t that hurt?! I had to crouch down to get a better look. The alcohol wipe made him suck in his breath and flinch away.

“Stings!”
“Sorry! Sorry.” Most but not all of the blood was someone else’s, thank goodness. I couldn’t help but run my fingers gently over the nearly closed wound. It looked like someone had taken a red pen and marked across his side. “Remarkable.” His skin was warm under my hand, but not the heat of infection or fever.

“Thanks. I think.”

I shot him an amused smirk. “Steady on, soldier. Your healing abilities, not your… ah, not that you aren’t impressive…” Oh God. Stop talking.

Looking down at me in my crouched position was a rather smug and entertained face. I stood and assumed my favorite power pose, handily also acceptable outside the classroom. Hands on hips, feet apart, direct eye contact. It steadied my nerves and gave me a breath to remember that above all else, I was the mistress of my feelings. Students, administrators, and Pepper’s personal secretary had all backed down when I did this and meant it. The super hero before me just sat back, ears a bit pink. That’s better.

“Those cuts on your face, the one under your collar, some are already healing a little and they need cleaned. I may have to reopen one or two.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine in a minute.”

Stubborn. “You really want dirt under your skin? So unsanitary.”

With a sigh, “You’re the doctor.”

“Damnit Jim, I’m a professor not a doctor!” A blank look met my grin. “Oh buddy. We’re totally adding Star Trek to your list. Most iconic split infinitive in television history.”

“Such a nerd.”

“Says that man that brought books to basic training. Now, let’s clean up your face, shall we?”

If running my fingers through his hair had felt… this was even more. With one hand holding his head steady and the other trying to gently dab away foreign particulates, I had no choice but to lean in to close to see what I was doing.

Turbulence took advantage of my unsteady position and threatened to knock me over. A strong pair of hands grabbed my hips. “Whoa there.”

Whoa there indeed. Small tremors continued, so the hands stayed. “Don’t want you to lose your balance.”

“Right. Balance.” Why did I sound so quiet? What had he done to the control I’d just had?

The abrasion on his cheek was basically only dried blood under my thumb now. The one on his hairline was a bit messier. “This may sting.” Ever so carefully ignoring the feeling of his hands still on me, I used the alcohol wipe, trying to cause the least pain possible. The man didn’t even flinch. Realizing that this probably wasn’t even the hundredth time he’d been bandaged, I glanced down to comment. To find blue eyes staring at me.

Oh.

I had to clear my throat before asking, “I need to get a better look at your neck. Can you, um, just tilt your head a little?” Maintaining eye contact, he accommodated and I moved up and loosened
his collar. And grimaced.

“That’s not your happy face.”

“No, no it is not. How did you not ask me to do this one first? There is literally a piece of glass in your neck!”

“I’ve been distracted.” I felt my eyebrow shoot up of its own accord. Damn, Rogers. When’d you get so smooth? “A building exploded.”

Oh. Right. So glad this monologue was internal.

It wasn’t big piece, but it was in there. Happily away from any source of major blood flow. Putting squares of gauze on his shoulder for easy access, I breathed deeply to steady my hands. Which was a mistake. Underneath the smell of the alcohol disinfectant, sweat, and the growingly familiar acrid smell of discharged powder... was Steve. I indulged in a moment of trying to identify what it was before locking away that curiosity in a little box to be ignored until it could be examined privately.

“OK. Try not to move. It’s in there pretty good.”

Once loosened, the glass came out smoothly from Statue Steve. Thank God. It took several pieces of gauze before the bleeding slowed and the bandages were secure. I think I stopped breathing while waiting to see if another would be needed. It held.

Finally satisfied, I turned my head to check on my patient. And couldn’t look away. He was close. Very close. And I was snared by the intensity in his eyes.

Not sure if it was his proximity, the way his hands tightened on my hips, or the flicker of his gaze to my mouth, but suddenly we were leaning forward.

This time, I saw him pull away. Rather than fully retreat as he’d done in the car, he placed a soft kiss on my temple as he rose. Already walking to the restroom, he called back, “I’ll finish up. Thanks for your help.”

Blinking a minute, I sat there and replayed the last minute or two. It had happened again. And just like before, I was left feeling confused, embarrassed, disappointed, and... scared. Steve was my friend. Or at least, I thought he was. Other than occasionally running into him while training or on this trip, he hadn’t been around much since our discussion at The Bar. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He’d been around. Just not when I was there.

I’d missed him. And had almost ruined it. Clearly, whatever had just nearly happened, again, was making him uncomfortable. And if that was what was keeping him out of my life... well. I was a grown woman capable keeping herself under control. It seemed like if I wanted Steve Rogers in my life, then friendship was where it stopped.

Blinking back the moisture that my eyes were clearly developing to counteract the dryness of the cabin, I cleaned up the medical supplies and then returned to my seat on the other side of the plane.

I chose not to acknowledge the watchful eyes from the Russian who had obviously only pretended to be asleep.

When Steve eventually returned, I chose not to acknowledge him either.
“Just let me die!” I fell to the ground, back cushioned by the grass of Central Park. “Keep going! Save yourself! Tell the bards of my story so that I will live on.”

“I leave no man behind,” retorted the amused blond.

“Weren’t you in the Army? Isn’t that a Marines thing?” Air, I needed more air. We’d been running for miles. My lungs burned and my legs were jello. But I’d done this to myself.

We’d started our friendship as running buddies, so it seemed like a safe place to retreat to. As much as I wished we were movie buddies or watching paint dry buddies. At this moment though, I’ve settled for oxygen bar buddies.

The awkwardness after the plane had been short-lived, thank goodness. Almost like it never happened. However, dreams of warm, smooth skin, a handful of blond hair, and hooded blue eyes made it hard to sleep. But, by the time my coffee had kicked in, my determination did too.

I made the conscious choice to refuse to let it ruin our friendship. He didn’t always make it easy on me though.

“Captain America supports all branches of the military.” He started stretching and I looked away. The tight shirt was bad enough, but there was no need to self-flagellate. Ever since I’d decided to ignore any growing feelings for him until they went away, my awareness of him had ratcheted up. It was really quite inconvenient. “Although Steve could use some water.”

I laughed and he joined me. “Steve refers to himself in the third person now? Kate thinks that’s a little silly.”

“Kate does, does she?”

I returned to my green bed. “She does. Although she also wonders what Steve wants to do for his birthday. Kate hopes it isn’t a marathon.”

Chuckling, he finally sat beside me. We quietly watched other runners enjoying the relative coolness of the early morning.

“I’ve never really been a big birthday guy. There was never enough money to really do much.”

I opened one of the now strawberry flavored proto-packets and offered him another. At the raised eyebrow, “What? They were initially inspired by a runner’s supplement.” He declined, but the nutrients were helpful. “Not all of us have superhuman stamina.” Stretching one leg out in front and bending the other, the frustrating man looked like the picture of relaxed reclination.

Back to the subject at hand, “So you and Bucky never celebrated? I find that hard to believe.”

Smiling at the memory, he replied, “Oh we did, but in small ways. One year, he saved up until he had enough for two good tickets to a Dodgers game. We drank beer and ate hot dogs and cheered until we were hoarse.”

Aw. “Sounds like a good day.”

“One of the best.”

“Tony wants to throw you a huge party, you know. Fireworks, something called a ‘Cap-cake,’ and
dancing girls. The works.” We’d been filled in on the details during training yesterday. I wasn’t really in a good space to really want to go, but that’s what friends do.

Something changed in Steve’s expression and he suddenly and briefly looked… wolfish. Interesting. “Dancing girls huh?”

“So Steve Rogers! I feel like there’s a story there!”

That ridiculous man turned to me and the wicked smile widened. “More than one.” Well then. He stood and helped me up. “For another day. Once more around?”

“Sadist!”

And with another of those damned eyebrow waggles, he was off leaving me cursing and trailing behind. At least the view was nice. The park was pretty too.

Chapter End Notes

I have my ticket for Endgame. Legit nervous, you guys.

No Thanos for me! But Winter Soldier is coming soon… Mwahaha!
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

You guys. You. Guys. I admit it. Endgame messed me up. Usually I write or edit a little everyday, but it was a good 4-5 days before I could talk to them again. Without revealing any spoilers, it left me heartbroken, hopeful, pissed off, and full of feelings about various story arc endings. Did you like it? I'm taking my dad to see it this weekend, so we'll see if it elicits the same response.

But that's why this chapter is late. Blame the Russos.

This chapter contains both perspectives, just as a heads up. I'll try not to do that too often.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I expect you in DC by September first. No more excuses. STRIKE can’t keep picking you up on the way to the objective. New York isn’t the only place that needs our help, Cap.”

Steve glared at his de facto CO. He didn’t particularly like Director Fury. Didn’t trust The Spy, as Stark had put it. But SHIELD seemed to be thriving under his leadership and Steve could respect that.

“Yes.”

Walking out of the director’s office and into the elevator, he couldn’t help but mentally argue with the man. New York was his city. His family was buried there. Brooklyn held the memories of growing up. Its family-run restaurants and shops weren’t that different from those in his memory. God knows the alleys still smelled the same. And Manhattan, once seeming so glamorous, had become his home. Hell, he’d defended it from aliens. Time may have changed it some, but the city he knew was still there, peeking out at him.

When he’d woken up after they found him in the ice, he’d been alone. Now there were familiar faces and morning pancakes. He’d gotten comfortable.

Natasha and Clint were coming with him, which he was grateful for. Bruce would come and go as he always did, searching for his bit of peace. Tony probably knew about Fury’s plan to move SHIELD, but Steve doubted that the billionaire would follow. Although between splitting his time between California and New York, Tony really hadn’t been around much lately. Not that they spent much time together. But Tony was a fixture in his life now, whether he liked it or not.

Kate was in New York. They’d spent the last few weeks regaining lost footing, the process taking less time than he’d feared it would. It was like they’d agreed to not acknowledge what happened on the plane.

After the skirmish in the city, he’d avoided her. But he missed her. Making her laugh. The way her expression turned foxy when she teased him. The way she actually allowed him to talk about his past without making him feel out of place. Several lazy days had been spent in one of their apartments just reading or taking turns playing music. Turns out that he really liked some of the
more modern stuff. It was nice to feel like he had a friend again. Easy.

Not that everything was always easy. Sometimes, it was hard. Uncomfortably hard.

Especially when his cursed near-perfect recall bubbled up memories. Of warm, sure fingers threading through his hair, holding his face. Focused brown eyes. His hands holding lush curves, trying to be a gentleman and not let them explore. Teeth worrying a lower lip that looked so soft that it made him want to taste it. It was easy to imagine other scenarios for the shapely figure kneeling and leaning in low while her hands smoothed across his skin..

She had no idea how hard it was not to watch her, face so close. Always so surprised to catch him looking. She probably didn’t notice his goosebumps raised by her relieved exhalation onto his neck as she eased bits of glass and concrete from his body.

She was a magnet. He needed needed to touch her. And that was a bad idea. A fucking terrible idea. If only his body agreed. Excusing himself to the head was the only way to not make that mistake. And he’d had to do it quickly, before she noticed just how stimulating he found the whole situation.

It had taken quite a while and a stern but silent lecture in the mirror before he was in control of himself again to reenter the cabin.

When the metal doors swooshed open into the building’s lobby, Steve still had no idea how to tell her that he had to leave. He had less than two weeks to figure it out.

************************************************************

In the end, Steve was en route with a SHIELD team to northern Africa for his birthday so the party was postponed. Which was especially sad as my gift was time-sensitive. Not particularly original, but hey.

So on the anniversary of our nation’s founding, I sent a selfie over my new super fancy hyper encrypted StarkPhone to the birthday boy while I waited for Tony to finally show up. I was wearing a Yankees baseball hat, had plain black cap in my hand, and was showing off the two tickets to this week’s Yankees game.

Happy birthday! We’ll catch a game when you’re back in town. (KW)

I didn’t have to wait long before my phone pinged. His face beamed back at me and from the walls behind him, it looked like he was still aboard the jet. The dark haired man seated next to him did not smile for the photo. Or seem like he smiled much at all.

Thanks! Only one Yankees hat? Do we have to share? (SR) Fuck, he was adorable.

Black for you until you choose between the Mets and the Yanks. Only one right choice though. No pressure. (KW)

Looking forward to it. Beer’s on me. (SR)

Shaking my head, Oh no you don’t. Full birthday package. Beer, huge foam finger, and all. (KW)

The term ‘birthday package’ had just slipped out, but it made me blush. He seemed to skip right over it. I wasn’t flirting. Steve was my buddy, my pal, my lazy Sunday movie watching cohort. Cohorts don’t flirt. And I had most definitely not thought about his package. Very unbuddy-like
thing to do.

*You want to give me the finger? I thought we were friends!* (SR)

*LOL. Every time we go running.* (KW)

*LOL?* (SR)

*Laugh out loud. Keep up, old man.* (KW)

*Old man? Weren’t you just begging for death? Sure it isn’t Lungs On Life support?* (SR)

*GASP! Rude!* (KW)

*Left On Liberty Island?* (SR)

*One time! That happened one time! It isn’t my fault they didn’t do a headcount before leaving the dock.* (KW)

*And you could have stopped them if you hadn’t laughing your ass off by the statue. Asshat.* (KW)

*Couldn’t. Too funny. You just had to get that last photo. And they turned around eventually.* (SR)

*CAPTAIN AMERICA at THE STATUE OF LIBERTY?! Selfie of all selfies.* (KW)

*LOL.* (SR)

*Look at your new tricks, old dog!* (KW)

*Be safe! Play nice with the other agents. Come home safe, soldier.* (KW)

*You can’t order me around, I outrank you!* (SR)

*You, sir, Captain, sir, are a goofball.* (KW)

*“Enough with the googly eyes, Sparky. Time to take off those clothes!”*

*“Tony!” The scoundrel. He’d walked right by me to his workbench, but I didn’t need to see his face to know what expression he wore.*

*“OK. Clothes on. But assume the position so JARVIS can do a full scan.”*

*“Doctor Wallace, I keep up-to-date records on all Avengers and ancillary team members. There is no need to inconvenience yourself.”*

*“Killjoy.”*

*“Thank you JARVIS. I am both creeped out by and appreciate your records. Tony, please assume the position so I can kick your ass.”*

Spreading his feet shoulder-width apart and arms straight out at his sides with a flourish, the billionaire winked and brought up his screens.

*“Doctor Wallace, let me introduce you to your combat suit. Comments, questions, concerns, gifts for the god of all things amazing?”*

Staring at his latest creation, I couldn’t stop smiling. “I have some thoughts.”
“I like that polish on you.” Natasha wiggled her drying fingers at my compliment. “Jungle Red?”

She chuffed a laugh and responded, “Code Red. Black is an interesting choice,” motioning to my own painted pretties.

“Matches my new suit.”

“Damn straight.” We clinked glasses. She was the only one on the team to have seen it so far.

Girls night a la Romanova. We’d been trying to schedule it since she’d come back from wherever it was she’d gone to after Verenich was captured. Between her missions, my training, and school starting up again, there hadn’t been a lot of overlap between us. Grabbing drinks, video calls, or the occasional meal were all we’d really managed.

It turns out, I missed her. And, suspected by the strength of the hug I’d been given earlier, she maybe felt the same.

So here we sat. Just two ladies chillin’ in lawn chairs on the roof of my apartment building, drinking a stolen bottle of Tony’s good vodka while our fingernail polish dried, learning how to use a variety of rifle scopes, discussing the benefits and drawbacks of defensive techniques, and postulating the future of our spy agency. Yep. Just a normal girls’ night.

“You really aren’t feeling it?”

A quick internal check before I answered, “Maybe a little, but it’s more like a light buzz than what more than my share of this bottle should be doing. Although you seem to be holding up admirably too.”

She shrugged. “Russian.” An ever-so-slightly shaky hand toasted me as she took another sip. “Steve can’t get drunk either.”

“Yeah. Super sober soldier. The man can’t half drink though.” I watched a couple being served dinner at a cafe a block and a half away. “Clint seems to hold his own too.”

The spy snickered. “Unless it’s tequila. Want to have some real fun? Get that man drunk on tequila.”

I liked this open version of Natasha. Somehow she seemed less like a loaded weapon and more like my friend who also just happened to be super dangerous. It was a fine but important distinction.

We stayed until the sky was dark and city lights became stars.

After a long period of quiet, “I’m relocating to DC. SHIELD is setting up a base there and Fury wants a stronger presence from senior agents.”

Taking a minute to absorb that before responding, “But you’ll still be in Manhattan all the time, right?”

She shrugged her inscrutable shrug.

A thought occurred to me, “What about the others? Tony and Clint and Bruce and-”

“Steve?” A corner of her mouth quirked up. “Tony really isn’t based anywhere, but he’s staying
here. So is Bruce, since his lab is here. Clint comes and goes.” She turned to fully face me. I felt weirdly pinned in place. “I’m surprised Steve hasn’t talked to you about it. You two are so close. I’m sure he’ll tell you in his own time.”

It was my turn to shrug, trying not to be stung by Steve’s omission.

“Is that why he’d barely look at you after the Hudson? Because it seemed like something else a couple of months ago on the jet. Am I wrong?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek for minute, trying to figure out what to say. “I, ah. I thought I felt something. That maybe there might have been... something. But he made it pretty clear that I was wrong. Which was…” Mortifying. Confusing. Disappointing. “So it doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters! You deserve to be happy. You both do.”

“It takes two.” Like a coward, I hid behind my bangs. “You read my file?” She nodded. “All of it?” She nodded again, slower this time. I’d expected that. Natasha was not one to not do her homework. I suspected Tony had too. Neither had said anything, which was more unusual for one than the other. “Then you know that I was happy. For a long time. And why it was so different from the rest of my life. Then when he, when Max... died… It took... but I have a good life now. A career, friends, a purpose. I’ve never even hoped to find anything like this. Maybe I’ve had my happiness. Maybe hoping for more, especially with someone...” I closed my eyes and leaned my head back so that all I saw was night. “God, I’m just so confused.”

It had been years since I’d said his name. Not even to my therapist. It didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. More like an old wound that sometimes ached. I don’t know how I felt about that.

“You don’t think he’d want you to move on? To find a good person to build a life with?”

Time for a little turnabout. “You mean like Bruce?”

She gaped at me for a moment before answering, “We aren’t talking about Bruce. We’re talking about you and Steve. He’s a good man.”

“He’s the best man I know.”

“Then why not-”

“Because he doesn’t want me!”

Letting that echo out into the darkness for a minute, she stared at me and raised one perfectly manicured, imperious eyebrow. “Bullshit.”

“He’s my friend, Nat. And whether I like it or not, he’s also my Captain. If I try and fail at something with him, assuming that he’s actually interested which at this point seems deeply unlikely, how could we work together after that? Right now, I’m part of the team. I get to keep his friendship, be with you guys, make a difference. Life is better in the band than in the crowd. It just is. If it fails, how could we work together any more? I could lose everything!”

I’d gotten a little worked up and she let me gather myself before responding. “So dramatic.”

“I know, right?”

We laughed quietly and went back to our scopes.
“So Bruce. You guys would be good together. He’s rather dashing in a tweed covered hottie kind of way. Which, believe you me, is not actually a thing that happens in academia. The man’s basically a bespectacled unicorn.”

“Shut up.”

“Seriously, Nat. He’s an exceptional mind and a kind man, you-”

“Shut up. I’m not ready to talk about this.”

“You’d be great together. Anything I can do-”

“I will kill you in ways you can’t imagine and bury your body in holes across the globe.”

Well. Ok then. She won, but I still gave her my best shit-eating grin. Super spy has a crush. We neared the end of the bottle and there were no more couples to watch have their dinner.

“I know I teased you, but you can’t tell Steve, anybody about this. Promise me you won’t.”

The mask was back, but there was some calculating going on behind those eyes. Nuh uh. No ma’am. I put my black-painted pinky out. She shook it in hers in sacred vow.

“Promise.”

Chapter End Notes

So I think it is finally time to start working in some adult situations, but slowly so they don’t seem jarring. Hopefully, they're believable. Advice?

Also, it is almost Winter Soldier time! Yay!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I’d originally planned this as one long chapter, but the second half is taking some extra time to tweak.

Thank you to everyone for reading, liking, and commenting! You guys blow me away, you really do!

I’d been on tenterhooks waiting for a over week for Steve to tell me that he was leaving. Every phone call, text, long silence sent a sliver of ice through my blood.

But I knew I’d be OK. My life before was a good one. Even now, my students had some bright minds sprinkled amongst the box checkers. My building was going co-op, but thanks to SI and an endorsement from the man himself, I had a hefty down payment and the board’s good graces.

...But I’d gotten used to being better than OK.

It had been ten months and I’d gotten used to having friends again. Enjoyed that Clint got my obscure references. How Bruce somehow looked like he’d been asleep two minutes before a meeting started and how quietly kind to her friends my Ginger Ninja turned out to be. I’d see Tony around more often than the others and relished the feeling of ‘brother’ that had been missing for so very, very long.

Completely understanding that neither would actually need one to get in, Nat and Steve now had keys to my front door. She had accepted hers with a rather surprising kiss to my cheek. Steve had just kind of twirled it as he looked out at me from under those absurd lashes. For a man that was always honest, he did have this occasional way about him that left me guessing.

I liked that Steve felt comfortable enough in my home that he didn’t accidentally stand at ease and allowed himself to really relax. And laugh. God, how my chest filled to bursting when he laughed that way. More often than not, he was spending nights on my sofa (although he’d proclaimed it to be his sofa now), saying he could actually sleep there. Twice I’d bullied him into my bed. Although, in trade I’d slept in the living room. Better to not poke that chained bear. But the man should sleep in a bed after returning from a mission.

Bad/Good enough that he’d lay on his sofa, all stretched out, a leg bent at the knee, an arm thrown over his head, turn and look at me with this little smile. That little smile was insanely dangerous to my well-being. It stalked dreams, making me wake aching and restless, trying to bury after-images in the cool side of the pillow as reality filtered in with the melancholy morning.

I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed having another person sharing my space. Finding and maintaining a relationship with a roommate seemed like Hell on a hot day. But with a friend, someone like Steve, it just seemed… normal, I guess. Other than his enormous stupid boots, he wasn’t underfoot. The bright exception being when I’d broken his nose after he’d tried to wake me from a nightmare. I’d felt terrible, but not sorry. A woman living alone breaking out of a violent dream by a large dark figure bending over my bed. Not saying he deserved it, but as a quick learner, he ducked next time.
At least I hadn’t accidentally cut him in half.

I’d be OK. I’d been alone before. Oh I’d see them again on missions, but it was hardly the same. But now, as ridiculous and cliched as it was, there’d be these super sized holes in my life that weren’t there before, one a little more prominent than the others.

The small voice that I tried to ignore wondered if they’d miss me too.

***

We were supposed to be hanging out and cheering on the Yanks as they played in Seattle. Instead, I was watching Steve’s knee bounce at what felt like lightspeed as he crushed the pile of my carpet.

I am not a fidgeter. By the sixth inning, it was either kill him or stop him. Reaching over from my side of his sofa, I pushed a firm hand down on his knee. He practically leapt into the air.

“DUDE?!”

He stood there, wide-eyed and gaping like my target had been a bit higher instead.

“I’ve been reassigned to DC.” The laugh at his expression that was bubbling to the surface at his sudden near levitation died. I’d almost begun to believe he was staying. No boxes. No suitcases. Hell, even his laundry was waiting to be picked up for cleaning, just like normal. The others were making their preparations, but he was who he was and maybe he’d gotten SHIELD to make an exception.

The little bit of hope that had been my life preserver deflated as he stared at me, waiting for my reaction.

Rising to my feet, I let the smile I’d been holding for days now finally fall. The back of my throat burned and I felt heat behind my eyes. “I know.”


“Last week.”

“Last week?! Why didn’t you say anything?”

Eyes now narrowing and hands becoming fists on my hip, “Well shit, Steve. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Registering my anger, the man had the grace at least to apologize. “I’m sorry. I really am. I just didn’t know how.” He reached out and gripped my shoulders. “I really am.”

I had to clamp my lips together to stop them from trembling. Be strong! “You can face down a battalion of friggin’ Nazis but you can’t tell me you’re leaving?!” Blue eyes shone down at me, something in them now that I couldn’t read. “When?” God, I did not want to know the answer.

He stared at me for several moments. “Friday.”

WHAT?! “Friday. As in day after tomorrow Friday?”

At his slow nod, I shook off his hands and stepped back. “Were you even going to tell me? Or was I just going to find your suite in the tower empty? Jesus Steve.”
“What? No, of course not!” Offended brows drew together and his jaw clenched. Well too damn bad. Two days?! Really?! “I just needed a little more time.”

I couldn’t stop shaking my head. Couldn’t seem to say anything. Had to get out of here. Two days???

The door slammed behind me. Hands braced on the stair rails, I bent and hung my head to catch my breath. Apparently, fighting with Short Timer Steve was on par with climbing to the top of Stark Tower. Knowing he was leaving in two days was getting pushed back down those stairs.

Finally catching my breath long enough to truly inhale, a sob escaped before I could get my hands over my mouth and smother it. For the first time in a long time, I realized that all I wanted was to go home and find it empty.

And then saw that I was, in fact, still standing in front of my own door.

Patting my pockets, please please please.

GODDAMNIT! And of course, of course, no keys or cell phone. Closing my eyes, I sighed loudly into the empty hallway.

Steve answered when I rang the bell.

“I live here. You leave.”

***

Nothing good happens after 2 AM. But not tonight. Tonight I was on a mission to prove Ted Mosby wrong. May the televisions gods forgive me.

Hours ago, I threw my best friend out of my apartment. I’d crawled into bed and cried until I fell asleep. Only to wake up an hour ago, feeling like I had black eyes and hangover and counting down the hours on the alarm clock until they would leave. I’d never been one of those pretty criers. The ones in movies who have a single tear meander down their face and barely need a tissue. Often while staring out a rainy window. No. Bloodshot eyes and a blotchy, puffy face stared back at me in the mirror. Hollow. Which looked better than I felt.

Two days. Well. Less now. Two days before everything changed. Again. Two days to shove in months of time spent with the people that mattered most to me. And what a surprising, stubborn, frustrating, generous, challenging, remarkable, all the verbs… group of people they turned out to be. What a surprise he turned out to be. I brushed away new tears, knowing that there was time for them later.

I washed my face, fixed my hair, put on my very best big girl pants, grabbed a thermos, and headed out. Which is how I found myself, via a brief short stop to the communal kitchen, at Steve’s door just before 1 AM, a time reserved for short term visitors or emergencies.

I knocked and waited. Confirmed with JARVIS that he was, in fact, inside and knocked again louder.

A solemn, breathlessly shirtless, messy-haired, sweatpants-wearing Steve answered the door.

Aaaaand I’d completely forgotten what I came there to say. FOCUS, WALLACE.

If only his expression wasn’t so guarded.
I pushed by him, barging into his living quarters.

“Get your pants on, Rogers. We’re going out!”

***

“The Empire State Building?”

He’d been nearly silent the entire cab ride, instead bouncing between staring out the window and at me. Hadn’t put up a fight though when I’d basically kidnapped him. Good sport, that guy.

“Yep. Come on before they stop running the elevator.”

With a glance up the length of the iconic building, he followed me inside. We were the only ones in the long ride up, but not the only ones on the observation deck. A smattering of people quietly cruised along admiring the view.

The security guard approached us. “I know you folks just got here, but we’re closing in 45 minutes.”

I thanked him and guided my friend over to an empty bench and an unobstructed view of the city. Ever the gentleman, he’d been carrying my thermos when we’d left Stark Tower. Setting it on the bench, he wandered over to the edge to look down and waved me over.

Trying to breathe through the light-headedness I neared him, concentrating on his face instead of the King Kong-sized drop down. This is perfectly safe. Thousands of people are up here throughout the year and none have fallen. There are plexi-guards to stop that. Perfectly safe. Stupid hands. Stop shaking!

I lasted all of two minutes before deciding that having a panic attack was not something that would fit in well with my plans. Retreating to the safety of our bench, I left him to admire solo.

Not long after, he rejoined me with a wistful look. “I had no idea this was open so late. Aren’t you afraid of heights?”

“The city that never sleeps needs a good view. And there is no better one in the city, despite how hard Tony tries.” I shrugged and chuckled a little. “And yeah. Heights are not my thing, but some things are worth the risk.”

The lights on the deck were low, so that it was easier to see the surrounding vista. It created a soft, close atmosphere.

I opened the thermos and poured a generous amount of its contents into the lid. With an appreciative sigh that always happened with good coffee, I took a sip and shared the cup.

Looking surprised and pleased, Steve asked, “JARVIS’s?”

“Good view. Good coffee. Good friend. I’m sorry I threw you out.”

The warm summer wind blustered across the deck and swirled our hair. It didn’t seem fair that it only seemed to make him more attractive while I’m sure I looked vaguely homeless. Catherine Linton wandering the moors has never been a good look on me. When he reached over and tucked errant strands behind my ear, I was glad that it was too dim to see my blush.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I meant to.”
“I know.”

“So what else is on the plan tonight, General?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “So I outrank you now? Good to know, Captain.” Damn, I was going to miss that smile. “Well. Since we only have two days, I thought we’d make the most of them and do things that you can only do in New York City. DC is great. But it doesn’t have a view like this.” In the distance, lightning arced and the wind picked up again.

“No. It doesn’t.” His gaze shot warmth through me, before it shifted away to the streets below.

Refilling the mug again, we sat quietly and took in the living city around us. The silence between us peaceful, comforting. I knew from the tightening of my throat that looking at him would start the tears again, so was very surprised when an arm reached over and pulled me to his side.

Daring a glance up, he wasn’t looking at me either, but handed me the coffee. I took a sip and savored the moment, writing it into memory with indelible ink. An infinite sky, the golden lava flow of the traffic below, and someone I cared very much about holding me near.

Eventually, the security guard cleared his throat behind us, reminding us of the time. We were the only ones left.

“So what’s next?”

***

We strolled, enjoying the different personality of the city at night. Sharing a warm bagel from an all night bakery, we’d listened to street musicians. Wandering into a gallery, we watched a performance art piece of a person in a full rabbit costume cleaning a kitchen for a while before a sudden clap of thunder had startled me. My gasp and following giggle drew withering looks from fellow patrons, so we’d hightailed it.

After running through raindrops, we enjoyed an hour or two in a gaming bar, where the big guy had trounced me at skeeball and I had my revenge in air hockey, and we were ready for breakfast. Or whatever breakfast is called at 4 AM. An all night diner had pancakes for me and, Holy God, just an obscene amount of waffles and bacon for Steve. Not once did the conversation falter or my enjoyment of tonight wane.

He told me about plans to work with STRIKE and how he looked forward to being part of a team of soldiers again. Of the apartment that SHIELD had set up for him, although he hadn’t seen it yet. He was excited and I tried to be excited too.

I filled him in on Natasha’s plans to bring in a specialist to continue my training and the amazing excuses my students were giving so early in the term. It was not a good semester to be a grandmother.

Mostly, I tried to be in the moment and not to think about what happened after they left.

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“Last stop.”

The gates to Central Park had just opened and we strolled in, too full to move more quickly than that. Joggers and dogs and their humans shared our space.
“I’ve been here before, you know. This place has been around a while, even longer than me,” he teased.

“But I bet you’ve never been here for sunrise, have you, smartass?” He laughed his big laugh and we found a dry spot under an enormous tree and sat on the grass, facing field, and wood, and skyline.

My yawn triggered his own. I stretched my legs out next to his and chuckled. We party hard.

He tried to casually look around, but with how his eyes assessed, he was completing a security sweep.

“Chill out, man. We’re good here. Just you, me, and that literal early bird over there.”

Shrugging, he replied, “Can’t help it. Open spaces. They don’t bother you?”

Dude was definitely a New Yorker. Open spaces indeed. I turned to watch the bird dig for its breakfast. “Nope. At least not right now. You’re here. I’m safe when I’m with you.”

Something tickled my ear and I, being the grown up woman that I am, squealed and squatted away what I was sure was a many-legged, skincrawl-inducing bug.

And there was Steve Rogers, Captain Freaking America, Mr. Responsibility himself holding a long blade of grass and wearing the biggest shit-eating grin I’d ever seen. He laughed so delightedly that I had to join him.

We settled down and the freshly washed sky began to bleed into watercolors between the buildings, painting the park in pinks and oranges.

Kicking his foot with mine, “I’m going to miss you, you know.”

He was quiet next to me. Serious. “Come up for Thanksgiving.”

“OK.” One of those big boots kicked mine.

We stayed until my eyes started to close on their own. He took me home and stayed under my window until I waved at him through the glass.

It was Thursday now. They left tomorrow.
“You know, I really thought you’d have more stuff.”

Natasha shrugged. After doing a little party planning, I’d come over that afternoon to help Steve pack. We got his few boxes all squared away, so I’d gone in search of Nat to offer the same assistance.

“Most of it is already in DC. Some of us haven’t been procrastinating as much as others.”

Sigh. “Even so, I’d started to believe that it wasn’t happening.”

A sad smile met my own. “I know.” The smile turned sly, “How was your night, by the way? I heard you knocked on the someone’s door in the middle of the night.”

I was immediately beet red. “It wasn’t like that and you know it.”

“Shame.”

“How’s Bruce?” I shot back.

In a new evolution of our friendship, super ninja stuck her tongue out at me. So I returned the gesture.

“Dear Penthouse, I thought I’d find my two employees diligently packing, but instead found-”

“Stark. Two things. First, only I am your employee. Second-” a pillow flew with deadly precision and hit him square in the face. I gave its originator a high five.

He had the good grace to move on. “Yes, well. Are we leaving soon or what? I’m tempted to start the remodel early.”

We both knew that he had no intention of doing anything to the Avengers quarters. Tony liked to talk a good game, but he was all bluster. If anyone not on the team made a move or a mention in that direction, he shut them down hard. I think we’d grown on him.

Looking down at my dusty clothes, “I need to clean up first. Gimme… 45 minutes?”

“A real 45 minutes, not a ‘I’m going to make them wait an hour and a half’ 45 minutes.”

One raised eyebrow thrown his way and the man retreated. “Fine, fine. JARVIS, tell the others we’re wheels up in 45.”

“Of course, sir.”

Just us again, I asked the knockout beside me, “I brought options. Help me pick?”

Precisely on time and ironically without the menfolk, Nat and I were bundled into a town car headed for The Bar. No common taxis for Tony Stark, no sir. Phil had agreed to close the place for tonight so that I could throw a going away party. Figuring since Tony was right in that he really did pay for everything, I was sponsoring this team-only shindig so that he could be a guest
too. We were even all dressing up some, according to the dress Nat had chosen and the one she wore that flattered her assets so skillfully.

However, when we arrived, people were pouring steadily into and out of The Bar. There were dark-suited bouncers flanking the doors. There were flash bulbs and even a couple of groupies. So far, I’d easily avoided landing in any headlines and that’s how I preferred it. Anonymity was key.

What the fuck was going on?

A beaming billionaire opened the car door. “Don’t be mad. But I may have tweaked the plans a little.”

Nat and I got out and he shepherded us inside. The inside really wasn’t that different, but there were actual waiters and delicate-looking hors d’oeuvres and so many people! The rather fancy looking patrons seemed like they’d be more comfortable in a trendy rooftop bar.

My heart started to race at the cost. “Tony, I can’t afford this! Who are all these people? Where’s Phil?”

He gently grabbed my arms and caught my frantic gaze. “Not that I don’t appreciate your gesture, I really do. You’re a peach.” Pepper came over to join us, all golden smiles for Tony. “But this is a milestone! We should celebrate! So I reached out to a few contacts that owed me a few favors gratis and here we are. Phil’s still here. Insisted that he oversee things, great guy. Little overprotective, but great. Refused to sell, but the night is young. Don’t worry about the tab.” He brought me in for a hug and spoke in my ear. “Just because they’re going, doesn’t mean you are. You have a place for as long as you want it. Stick around. Learn some stuff. We’ll show ‘em what they’re missing.”

It suddenly occurred to me that I wasn’t the only one feeling left behind. “Thanks.” I kissed his cheek, touched.

He released me and immediately walked into the crowd. Pepper squeezed my hand. “Emotion makes him uncomfortable.” He’s not the only one, lady. I cleared my throat.

“You knew?”

She shrugged and smiled. “Tony loves a party. Believe it or not, this is fairly restrained.”

With advice from Nat, I’d put down the casual summer dress and chosen a vaguely-Grecian navy silk dress. One sleeveless shoulder was slightly wider than the other and draped across to meet the gather of fabric from the skirt at one hip, creating a soft, asymmetrical pencil skirt shape. With hair pulled back into a low pony and gold drop earrings, I’d liked the simplicity of the look. Beige heels that I’d regret wearing later that Nat said made my legs look long. Soft makeup and a red lip to finish. Nothing was on too much display, but made me feel feminine. Pretty.

Now, seeing the elegant cream dress Pepper wore, the nods given to familiar and stylish passersby, I suddenly felt like I’d stumbled into one of my parents’ parties. I’d been mentally ready for cocktails with the team, not my first Stark Party. Maybe this was a bad idea. Running my hands down my skirt, I nervously tried to push out any wrinkles from the car.

“Don’t worry, you look amazing.” Shifting her gaze over my shoulder, “Doesn’t she, Steve?”

Rather mouth-drying himself in a fitted black button down and gray trousers, his appraisal and answer brought heat to my cheeks. “Always.”
One of the upper crust bumped into Pepper. She shot him a polite smile but the exasperation she showed us was clear. “Most of these people only here until the novelty wears off in an hour or so.”

“I need a drink.” I left them both to the crowd and made an embarrassed bee-line for the bar.

After an awkward minute of trying to get the strange bartender’s attention, I was joined by the source of my flight.

“You really don’t know how to take a compliment, do you?”

He was back, shirt stretched across a broad chest as he leaned one arm on the bar. Oh poor buttons. Those damn blue eyes meeting mine in amusement and… flirtation? Surely not. He’d made himself very clear on that subject.

Someone behind me backed up suddenly and knocked me into Steve. “Oh! Sorry.” That look remained. And birthed even more butterflies close up.

“Any time.”

Holy Casanova.

“Rather dashing yourself, big guy. This is a good look on you. A little different from the uniform, but not bad.”

A slow smile made my breath catch. What was happening? Part of me wanted to run. Other parts definitely wanted to stay.

“The shirt?”

The crowd pushed him closer. To me and the cliff we faced. Do I jump? His pupils dilated and he bent his head. Looming over me. Just a little. My voice caught as something in his expression shifted, stealing my breath and making my skin tingle. The din of other people dropped away and, for that moment, it was just the two of us.

“Doc! There you are! What a shindig. Steve, my boy! Good to see you.” Phil. The band that was pulling me towards Steve snapped.

I took a deep breath and stepped away from temptation. Thank God for Phil. ...I think. Steve backed away so the older-looking man could hug me and before shaking his hand.

With a cryptic look at me, Phil said to Steve, “Give me a minute with my girl here.”

He waited until it was just the two of us before I asked, “What’s up?”

“Oh I think you know what, missy.* Uuuuugh. I did know what. And didn’t need the concerned look to reinforce it. ‘He’s leaving. This is his goodbye party.’”

“I know. I know!” Sighed a, “Fuck.”

The white beard parted in a sad smile. “I’m not telling you what to do. Just don’t wanna see you hurt. You know I’ll be here either way.”

That got him a hug. He had been there for me after Max died. Taken me home from the hospital. He’d made sure that my fridge always had something in it and that I knew someone cared when the world had dissolved around me. I would always be grateful for his presence in my life.
My team was dispersed in the crowd, all doing their own things. An armchair in a seating group opened and I sidled over to grab it, giving the polite nod of “I acknowledge you as a human, but have no desire to interact.” Happily, our social contract was honored and I was left to people watch in peace, the occasional martini as good company. There is a time and place to be a social butterfly.

Pepper was right. Tony didn’t have any more surprises up his sleeve and so about 90 minutes in and the crowd thinned out considerably, opening a clearer view of my team. Nat and Clint were back at darts, this time with a group of admirers cheering them on. Pepper and Bruce stood at the bar in deep conversation. Tony and Phil made quite the pair, a spirited debate their entertainment. I wondered if my guardian angel still owned The Bar. Somehow the invite list had included a cadre of older gentlemen that now shared war stories with my favorite soldier. They laughed and carried on and Steve looked so at home that it made me smile. What he didn’t see or chose to ignore was the small group of “admirers” tracking his every move, wearing smiles that are typically reserved for hunting prey on savannas.

Sitting alone watching the team was getting to me. There would be time enough for feeling sorry for myself later. Tonight was a party. Time for some music.

$3 of spent quarters and a little polite conversation with a clingy stranger later, I meandered my way to the gaming pair and waited for my selections to spin up. The earlier watchers had lessened, the spectacle of near perfect bullseyes having lost its shine. Which, in the end, suited me just fine. The knot of self-pity that had grown in my chest loosened under their easy company. By the time I’d put accidental new holes in Phil’s wall, hey I did actually hit the board too, the feeling had completely left. Clint’s fond exasperation had nothing to do with it, I’m sure.

It look a few bars before the music made its way through and she registered it, but the surprise on Nat’s face was worth the wait.

“You didn’t!”

I laughed and took the hand she offered as 99 Red Balloons came on, the English version. Phil had an eclectic song selection, but it didn’t extend to foreign language selections. Together we did our very best Molly Ringwald in The Breakfast Club and got our 80s on. Clint even abandoned being Mr. Super Cool Archer and bopped a little with us. The song ended and we bowed to a smattering of applause. None of the fancy and fabulous had joined us and I was more than a little embarrassed to have forgotten they were there, but at that point, there was not a rat’s ass given.

Eventually, guests petered out and it was just the core of us. Just the way I’d hoped. Phil had entrusted me with the keys after delivering unto us his blessing of a triple order of cheese fries, accompanied by enthusiastic and only slightly drunk cheers.

The party was fun, but the afterparty was exactly what I needed. Easy. 87% drama free. Tony and Steve continued to bicker, but only about vitally important matters like the best route the cars should take back to the tower. It was a nice change from the posturing that had been happening more and more often. Storytellings of shindigs past, on what sounded like all seven continents. Bruce and his early science bros had gotten smashed and made their own LSD. At one point, Nat kicked her partner unsubtly under the table during the middle of a tale about drinking with a priest and the head of the local mob in Novosibirsk that apparently also involved something redacted. Tony partyed with penguins and a pair of Swedish twins in Antarctica. And it sounded like my favorite soldier had quite the fete in Paris while on leave that I would certainement follow up on later. I even told on myself. There was this one gaudy night where a particularly rambunctious alumni sprinkled special mushrooms onto the passed appetizers. We had woken up 18 hours later in the planetarium, mid-flight to Alpha Centauri.
“How is it that even your drinking stories are nerdy?”

“Don’t be jealous, Tony. Penguins are cool too,” I teased back.

We stayed until the morning’s paper hit the front door. To me, it felt like an ending. Rarely have I been so happily wrong.

It was Friday now. They would leave today.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think? Should Phil sell The Bar to Tony and stay on as Manager? I know he isn't exactly a round character, but I love Phil. Everyone should have a Phil.
Chapter 31

I wiped tears out of my eyes and tried to catch my breath before dissolving into another fit of helpless laughter. These people were crazy. Cray-zee. Everything was a competition, whether it started that way or not. Per my special request, bless him, Clint had decided to cook farewell pancakes. That he flipped with increasing height and aplomb. Which only served to provoke Tony, although how or why is beyond my understanding. The male ego is a mystery unto itself.

And that was how the kitchen and its still snazzily-dressed occupants were now partially covered in batter. The alcohol was wearing off and the time slowly crept its way into our collective thoughts.

“While I don’t actually care what a second rate city like DC thinks of me, I’d hate to get batter all over the chopper, leather seats or not.” It looked like the skillet had sneezed on Tony, thick pancake innards spattered across his shirt and face.

“Tony, you got a little something riiiiight…” I gestured to his cheek, unable to keep a straight face.

The battered billionaire scooped up a full ladle of would-be breakfast and tilted it back threateningly. “You think that’s a good idea, Doc? Mocking your boss?”

I jumped out of my seat to keep the island between us. “Pepper went to bed hours ago,” causing surprised guffaws from the team.

Grabbing the bowl for easy reload, Tony began to pick up the pace, chasing me around and around. Handily, there were human shields readily, if not enthusiastically, available to hide behind. When he did finally get me, “Betrayal! Et tu, Brute???” to the barely contained amusement of a serious scientist, who dodged at the last moment, allowing me to be doused.

“OK, OK. Before I have to hire a decontamination team, let’s call this,” he gestured vaguely to the mess, “complete and reconvene in 30ish to head out. Sparky, see you soon.” He grabbed a completed pancake, rolled it like a cigar, took a bite, and headed out.

Bruce and Clint gave me good hugs, each saying to come up and visit soon. Bruce had a lab in both locations, allowing him the freedom to come and go as desired.

Natasha squashed me to her in a fierce embrace that lasted far too short. She didn’t look back before walking away. Which was OK. Gave me a chance to breathe through the sudden emotion.

A drop of batter slid from my brow down my cheek. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.” Steve was far too immaculate. I sneakily grabbed a handful from the bowl before following.

The ride and walk to his quarters was brief and quiet. The balance of the evening’s events, morning’s levity, and pending departure very fragile indeed.

I groaned in bliss as last night’s heels finally got cast aside and my poor feet got to enjoy the plush living room carpet. Why, WHY did we do this to ourselves just because the shoes were beautiful? But damn, they were.

An amused, if hooded gaze met my own. “Better?”

I inched up close to the big guy as I reached for my overnight bag. “Nearly. Couldn’t help but
notice you emerged unscathed.”

The squeaky clean paragon before me smirked. “I learned how to duck a long time ago.”

“Is that so?” It was shocking that the Great Strategist hadn’t noticed my theft. “Then what is on your face?”

Confused blue eyes met my own and I tried so hard not to grin like a maniac.

A fistful of batter was slowly smoothed down his face, brow to chin, dripping on that broad expanse of chest. My hand finally ran out of ammo and I could no longer hold in the giggles.

“You did not just do that.” Couldn’t help but smile for all I was worth. A small grin ticked at his mouth.

“Me? Never.”

Sparkling blue looked down at me and one long finger dipped into the mess on his cheek and slowly traced it down my nose, sharing the wealth.

We beamed at each other, enjoying the moment. With a sigh and a duck of his head, Steve stepped aside and allowed me first dibs at the bathroom to clean up with the teasing warning not to use all the hot water.

Dressing up occasionally was fun, but it was good to feel like my normal self again. And be batter-free. Eventually, a fresh-faced Steve joined me in the living room, putting his olive duffel by the door.

In quiet voice, “Well. It’s time.”

Moving quickly, I ran up and hugged him. Tight as I could. Those strong arms that once calmed and comforted me, did so again. The telltale tightening at of my throat and burn of the back of my eyes weren’t helped when a head was rested atop mine.

“Oh Scarecrow, I think I’ll miss you most of all.” The words were choked, but the soft laughter in my ear was testament that they were understood. I knew I couldn’t ask him to stay. Steve Rogers was my friend. But he was also Captain America; who was I to stand in the way of that. Didn’t mean I had to like it though.

We let go and a somewhat uncomfortable soldier said, “I’ve never had a dame, a-uh, a girl cry when I’ve shipped out before.”

“You aren’t shipping out, you oaf. DC isn’t that far.”

Eyes dipped down to meet my own. “Exactly.” He slung the duffel over his shoulder as I’d seen many a serviceman do in the movies. That inscrutable look he sometimes got was back. “I’ll text you when I get settled.” We tried to smile at each other, not wanting the last glance of the other to be a sad face.

Ah! “Wait, no! I have a housewarming gift for you to take to your new place! I almost forgot!” Damn my memory! “2 seconds!” Already on my way to the kitchen where I’d hidden it in a cupboard, I kept talking. “Don’t get too excited, it’s just a small thing.”

“You didn’t have to do me anything.” He’d dropped the bag and joined me in the kitchen while I rearranged the pots and pans to get to my prize. In my desire to surprise him, I may have tucked it
away a bit too thoroughly. With a triumphant cry, I pulled out the box.

Standing next to me, he took the brown box and peeked inside, one of those eloquent eyebrows quirked up in curiosity. Really, he could conduct an entire conversation with those things. “Is that...?”

At my nod, he fingered the quilt folded inside. He’d slept under it so often recently that it only seemed right that it should go with him. I went to slip out of the room to say goodbye at the door.

Until a hand reached out to gently take my own.

I turned back, nearly asking what was wrong, until I saw his face. This time the expression he wore was one I’d never seen him wear. Like he had something to say but wasn’t sure how.

We met in the middle like it was planned and everything in my brain… just… stopped. His lips were so soft. And God, so good. We didn’t move, didn’t push the kiss, just pressed and breathed and felt...

Steve moved a little. And just that little bit meant everything. He tilted his head a bit more and used a sure hand to rub circles behind my jaw, moving me into a better position. Morning stubble pricked my fingers and the contrast with his mouth was so delicious that I couldn’t help but lightly scratch the hair at the nape of his neck in appreciation. It was even softer than I remembered. I could taste the pancakes he’d eaten and needed more.

Apparently, I wasn’t alone.

Where did the man learn to kiss like this?!

Opening my mouth to breathe him in, the cool metal of the refrigerator was suddenly against my back. On our next inhale, I nipped at his lower lip and he closed the distance between us with a low groan. His body was a warm breathing wall against mine with a hand softly massaging my hip and making my knees weak.

Until that hand smoothed up my spine between my shoulderblades and was eclipsed, absolutely eradicated by the tongue that teased its way between my teeth. I made a soft, greedy, needy sound that felt like it came from deep inside as I chased it. Steve gave a low hum in return and abruptly things felt more intense.

Want burst inside like a thick bubble. My own hands found their way to massage the broad plain of his back, pulling closer and exploring… Oh, oh my. Slow savoring intensity began to twist and slide between us as he rounded my hips to lower back.

I think I said his name.

And it broke the spell. Steve jumped away like he’d been burned. Grabbing the box and duffle, he retreated to the door. I stayed in his kitchen, back to the fridge, sucking in breaths and trying to catch up with what had just happened.

“I have to go. I’m sorry.” The door clicked closed behind him as he left.

I just made out with Steve. Steve. And he kissed me back. Boy, did he kiss me back. I could still feel the heat of his body against mine, taste his mouth. Already craving more.

For a minute, I let myself feel it. Giddiness. Need. Relief that, by the sounds he’d made (whose memory still made me flush), he wanted me too. That Steve, my best friend, my Captain-
…

…Oh no. What had I done.

Having stayed in his suite, fairly certain from his exit that he didn’t want followed, I watched the SI helicopter fly off just a few minutes later.

Some time later that evening, my phone buzzed with a text from he who I still hoped was my friend. Accompanying it was a photo of a living room someone had obvious decorated with Steve in mind. Masculine, patriotic, vintage, and oddly… sepia? Maybe it was a photo filter. Did he even know how to use such a thing? But there, laid across a brown leather sofa like a rainbow in squares, was my gift.

_I forgot to say thank you._ (SR)

I’m sure he meant the quilt. At least, I’m fairly sure he meant the quilt. And that giggle most certainly did not come from me. Certainly not.

How in the world do I reply to that?

_My pleasure._ (KW)

***

We all talked and texted regularly, but as Nat’d suspected, I didn’t see as much of them after that. Although their presence was still felt. She’d even handpicked two options for my new trainer. Melinda May, who was on assignment, and Carolain Black.

Carolain was awesome. Terrifying, but awesome.

Outside the gym, she was bubbly, vivacious, and funny as hell. Inside the gym, she was an entirely different person. Serious, precise, intent on kicking my ass like she was actually trying to kill me. My bruises had bruises. Dr. M finally got to monitor a broken bone from nearly start to finish. At one point, I suspected the two were in cahoots. Outside of end of terms, I don’t think I’d ever been this physically exhausted.

On the other hand, I was finally beginning to show steady improvement. My punches actually landed and kicks felt strong. She ran me all over the mat to up my footwork game until it basically became choreography. Turns out all those dance lessons and solo dance parties actually came in handy.

My skill with firearms, however, did not seem to be getting any better. I could hit the paper target page, but whether inside the circles seemed due to luck only. Somewhere, I knew that Clint was making That Face at me.

Carolain was also the first person to provide a true assessment of my abilities. We’d been sparring for a few days when she’d stopped and demanded a demonstration of how I manipulate the blue. Over and over. Make it shrink and grow. Can I change the shape? Can I use it one handed? Can I throw it? From that point on, my training included as much physical instruction as practice with my abilities. Going through so many of the protopackets was making me hate the flavor of strawberries.

On one of my afternoons off, I was cleaning my apartment while being serenaded by Frank Sinatra, because nobody could make a broom into a dance partner like Frank. She says she knocked, but _hello spy_ I never heard it. There was Carolain, not laughing at me like I’d expected, but
scrutinizing instead.

“Do that again.”

Natasha and Clint may have started my training, but Carolain shaped it. In the months and years that came after, so much of what I learned and what I became started with that time with her.

***

I’d gotten spoiled with all of Tony’s car services and found myself splurging more often on taxis than before. Oh how far i’d come since walking into Stark Tower that first day. Today, however, since the sun was shining and the wind smelled like autumn, I’d walked a while before catching the subway. The ride home seemed to stretch out rather than distract me, as I’d hoped. It had been over a fortnight since I’d heard from the team. Well, the team sans Tony. According to the Master of Malibu, they’d been on assignment since almost arriving in DC back in September.

While he and JARVIS had assured me that they’d be in touch as soon as the coast was clear, I’d texted all concerned like a worried den mother with a phone tree. Patience was never my virtue. Really, it wasn’t any different from when they were gone and NYC-based, but somehow it was worse.

So distracted by balancing the what-ifs and leafing through the mail looking for a special envelope from England, I nearly slipped on the manila envelope that had been thrust under the door. Having waited to open it until my arms were as empty as my dinner plate, curiosity was also ready to be sated.

It had been weeks since my last episode. The blood leaving my face made the room spin and I had to hold my hands out in front so that their shaking, eruptive blue didn’t destroy my coffee table. Couldn’t seem to catch my breath. Heart beats whooshed whooshed whooshed whooshed in my ears.

“Dr. Wallace, you are experiencing an intense panic attack. Do you require assistance?” Tony had installed a small, remote version of JARVIS in my apartment and phone after the team left.

Spread out on the wooden surface in front of me were a dozen or so super-sharp photos. Of me. Running. Buying milk at the corner market. Getting out of the car with the other day at The Bar in my blue dress. One looked like it was taken from inside my classroom for fuck’s sake. Another was obviously in the subway. From this evening. I hadn’t even changed my clothes yet.

My first thought was Steve, but he was in comms black out. Teeth chattering beyond my control, “T-T-T-Tony! Call Tony!”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Poor Steve. Overworked and alone at the holidays.

Chapter Notes

This is a little bit of a transitional chapter, because we're going through a time jump.

While it hasn't been a year since I started writing this, it has in the story timeline. Hard to believe! I want to say a big, heartfelt THANK YOU to each of you for reading. Kate and Steve are just getting started and I'm excited to see where they go.

As we transition to "part two" of the story, what have you liked best so far that I should continue? I'm 100% open to suggestions!

You guys are amazing and I am grateful for you!

Steve wiped the blood from his mouth and pushed away from the wall with a grunt. This was the third raid in as many weeks and he was tired of having the same fight each time. Getting sloppy.

It turns out that SHIELD had not been quite as thorough as he’d expected them to be when rounding up Chitauri weapons. Now they were appearing in places all over the world. STRIKE was sent in to handle the more dangerous power signatures and he was getting damn tired of cleaning up an avoidable mess.

“Cap, you clear?” The gruff voice carried through comm. Rumlow was a good soldier. He followed orders and hit like cement truck. Something Steve couldn't put his finger on sometimes... like the man was watching a little too closely. But he got the job done and was a good second.

A hard right cross and the Steve’s attacker was unconscious.

“Clear.” He pulled keys off the body and opened the locked door, finding their objective inside. “Converge on my position. The weapons are secure.”

Again.

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She sighed low and sweet as his fingertips teased down her spine before dipping into the back pockets of her jeans to squeeze. She rolled her head and he took advantage of the greater access, sliding lips from ear to shoulder, breathing heat into her skin.

She said his name and he shuddered. She still tasted like coffee.
“Cap?”

She never called him that. Steve. Always Steve.

“Time to wake up, Cap.”

He jerked awake. For a moment, he saw her sitting there on his coffee table, smiling that smile he liked so much. He blinked and auburn hair became a brighter red, brown eyes lightening to green.

“Natasha.”

Sitting up and scrubbing a hand over his face, he let the quilt fold into his lap, concealing the remnants of the dream.

He’d only been home a few hours and had immediately collapsed onto the sofa. Even his bones were tired. Although desperately wanting sleep, he’d dug deep and mustered the energy to unlace his boots. No shoes on the furniture. Didn’t matter if it was 1936 or today. Some things were always true.

Like the comfort of a quilt. Stretching out and pulling it up, he’d closed his eyes and let its familiarity wash over him. It still smelled like her. Citrus and coffee. He’d fallen asleep, remembering that she tasted like coffee too. Apparently, his imagination had taken that memory and run with it.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, “What are you doing here?” He didn’t bother asking how she got in. Hopefully she hadn’t been there long. He refused to be embarrassed about a dream but was grateful that exhaustion made it hard to blush.

She got up and rummaged through his refrigerator. “How can you only have water and ketchup in here? I thought people that lived through the Great Depression always stockpiled.”

“You have to be home long enough to shop.” He let the age crack slide.

All those months ago on the bridge when he’d decided to re-embrace the call to arms, he may have overshot. Felt like he spent more time on the jet than anywhere else, taking and giving orders. Not given a peek at the big picture was not what he’d envisioned when he’d accepted Fury’s offer to head STRIKE.

“I bet that neighbor would give you a cup of sugar.” She handed him a bottle of water and perched on his counter to drink hers. Why couldn’t she just sit in a chair like a normal person?

Now there’s a problem. “You’re talking to my neighbors now?”

She just grinned at him. “She’s cute. You should ask her out. Unless,” gaze flickering to his lap, “you have someone else in mind?”

He did not have the patience for this today, even if it was nice to see a familiar face. “Why are you here?”

“You know those plans you have for Thursday? Well, someone forgot to inform the Chechens. Fury has a lead on-”

“Let me guess. More alien tech.”

“And just a bit of black market, weapons-grade uranium. Could make things pretty glow-in-the-
dark out there for a while.”

He hung his head and sighed. Thursday, day after tomorrow, was Thanksgiving. “And we can’t go now because?” Maybe they could be back in time.

“Well. You were having a nap.”

He stood and stretched. “Do I have a time for a shower?”

“As long as you don’t get distracted.”

For the love of Pete. “Romanov.”

“I’ll be here when you get out. Since we’re teaming up for a while, we’ll head over together. Wouldn’t want me wandering the halls giving your number to random and attractive neighbors.”

Never before had he been so tempted to flip off a woman. Stepping into the shower, he thought about the expression on her face. Sure, she’d been teasing. But part of her was very serious, as if testing his reactions.

A completely different Natasha met him in the living room. This one he didn’t get to see often. One with an open expression, animatedly talking to someone via videoconference on her phone.

“Ah, the man himself. Say hi, Steve!”

She swung the phone around and there was his favorite professor, waving.

He walked over and leaned in behind the spy so that Kate could see both of them at once. “Hello. Good to see you.”

And it was. She was at home at her desk, what was left of the late afternoon sun shining in. There was a pen stuck in her hair. And a fading shiner on her left eye.

After all these weeks, he still wasn’t sure how he felt about Kate’s visit. The first few calls had been awkward. He hadn’t known how to bring up the kiss. So he didn’t. And she didn’t. Not that he blamed her. He’d run out of there so fast, it was amazing that she’d even spoken to him again at all. Not his proudest moment.

Mostly, because of his schedule, they called and texted instead of using the video function. The last time he’d actually seen her had been a quick trick-or-treat call at Halloween. His favorite were the rarest, ones where they ended up spending an evening together, like old times. Talking about everything and nothing important. It was nice to have someone in his life again to have “old times” with.

He’d been so afraid that he’d messed it up.

It was a hell of a kiss though. Well. More than one. Hell of a kiss.

“Nat says you have something to tell me?”

He tried not to clench his teeth. And failed.

“You two talk. I’m going to powder my nose.” She left him with a smirk over her shoulder.

An auburn eyebrow lifted as she waited for him to speak, eventually asking, “So, how was your day?”
“Oh you know. Same old, same old.” They grinned at each other.

“I’m assuming this is about Thursday?”

“Yeah.” Her grin fell before she stuck it back on, a little brittle. It twisted inside him. “I wouldn’t cancel if it wasn’t important. I’m sorry.”

“Fate of the world?”

A rather undignified snort escaped him. “More or less.”

“Need another pair of hands? I’ve got two blue ones at your disposal.” She wiggled her fingers and the tips turned the promised color before fading away. Impressive improvement.

“Next time.” He knew he could only protect her for so long, especially from afar, but dealing with potential nuclear weapons was something he could spare her. Instead, he pointed to her bruising. “How’s training?”

She actually looked confused before touching the healing skin and wincing. “Actually improving, contrary to the evidence. One of these days I may even get to show you my new party tricks. If I was as an effective a teacher as Carolain, my students would all have perfect recall. The university would have crazy lawsuits against it, but by God, they’d remember the Berlin Wall.”

He chuckled politely, added ‘Berlin Wall’ to his to-do list, and they lapsed into silence before he spoke again.

“See you at Christmas?” They’d already talked about how she couldn’t leave during end of term.

Natasha rejoined him and they shared the screen.

“Actually, no. I’ll be on a plane Christmas morning. I got that fellowship at Oxford- the one I applied for a while ago? The dean wants me there for holiday parties to kick off the spring term.” She chewed anxiously at her bottom lip. He made a point not to watch it.

Hiding his disappointment about not being able to see her for the foreseeable future, as the Russian chimed in, “You’re not nervous are you? The woman that helped save New York?”

The woman in question blushed scarlet. “Not sure helping to push a stick qualifies. But Oxford… yes. No. I don’t know. Both? I mean, it’s been a while since I’ve guested, but the last time I was there wasn’t… I wasn’t my best self. It feels… heavy, you know?”

Natasha nodded seriously. “I know.” He looked between them, sure he’d missed out on something.

When neither explained, “Does Tony know?”

Smirking, “Yeah. We talk a lot these days. At his special request, Carolain is coming with me, so she can kick my ass on two continents.” She laughed and it made them both grin. “You’re the world travellers. Just point that super fancy jet to that little island in the North Sea on your way back from yet another of those exotic locales. I’ll have warm beers waiting for you.” She smiled and there was this twinkle there that hadn’t been there before. He liked it.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

“…Steve…” She looked right on the edge of saying something, expression suddenly intense before

He hung up and stared at the blank screen.

Nat beat him to it, “She did it again.”

He couldn’t help but grunt his agreement. She’d seemed off the last few times they’d spoken, but brushed off his concern. Maybe if they finished early in Chechnya, he could visit and figure out what was bothering his friend.

***

Thanksgiving was marked only by a red-nosed selfie of Kate with the Iron Man parade float. Without spending too much thought, he saved it to the phone’s memory. Rumlow caught a glimpse of it and made a crude comment about redheads that Steve found he didn’t appreciate. His second did not enjoy standing the overnight watch for three days either.

Natasha turned out to be good company on longer deployments. She was frighteningly effective both in and out of combat. Otherwise, she kept her own company or his, the men not warming to her and she not attempting to befriend them either. Occasionally, he’d play with the picture of her with the Howlers. Peggy had won them, and him, over almost instantly with her brash refusal to take anything less than their respect. Natasha… he’s not sure if she’d have been adopted, feared, or flirted with. Not that she’d have let them make that choice without her say so. Although they’d’ve been lining up to help her decide. Bucky and Dum Dum at the front.

Dealing with the Chechens took longer than estimated. It was like trying to play Whack-a-Mole on the boardwalk. They were incredibly well-funded and knew the terrain. Just when he was sure they’d been nixed, another skirmish would start. In the end, however, the time was worth it. The intel they gathered kept them busy for nearly a month afterwards. And the Chitauri SHIELD cache grew. Again.

Although he’d never admit it aloud, Steve was feeling pretty sorry for himself as he walked into his building just after 2 am on Christmas Day. Even on the front and when he was living with his mother and they had no extra money, they’d found ways to celebrate. Bucky would come over in the evening with a small cake from his ma and the three of them would eat the entire thing.

This year, he hadn’t had time to decorate or buy gifts. Except the knife that had caught Natasha’s eye that he’d taken off the corpse of the local Chitauri-weapon fan club president. Who knew she’d be so easy to shop for?

All he wanted to do was feel clean, find something vaguely edible in the freezer, go to bed, and wake up on a day that didn’t highlight all the things that were missing.

And yet, he didn’t regret giving up holidays to make things safer. There were servicemen and women who didn’t get the chance to come home, whether it be to an empty apartment or not. He’d probably still be in the field if Fury hadn’t forced him to take a few days.

Deep into planning out how to make the most of his leave- laundry, cleaning, replace frozen and dry goods, collect and open his mail… that he nearly walked into the bound pine tree leaning against his door frame.

Unlocking his door, he turned back to the tree, rotating it to see if there was a note. The string holding it broke and several long branches snapped out.

“Hey! OW! Watch it!” A surprised and irritated voice yelled at him from the other side of the
He was **stunned**.

“Kate?!”

She peeked out from behind the greenery and waved, a little embarrassed. “Surprise?” They stared at each other for an awkward moment before that smile of hers broke through. He grabbed her and hugged hard. God, he needed to see her.

Her bags and coat were strewn on the floor, “Did you sleep in my hallway?”

She blushed. “Pfft, no. That would be stalkery and sad.”

“Come in, come in. How long have you been here?”

He transferred her bags into his living room and helped her manhandle the tree inside, harder to do now that it wasn’t quite so travel-friendly. She carried in a two large handfuls of grocery bags.

“Oh just long enough to be grateful for heated hallways and meet some neighbors.” She stretched, rolled her head, and sighed. He had a flashback to an interrupted nap. “My flight leaves at 8, so I need to be at Dulles at 6. Which means I need to leave here at…?”

“A little after 5:00.” A very quick trip then.

“Great. So we have about an hour before Nat and Bruce arrive, which means that you, big guy, need to preheat that oven and get comfortable. They can help us decorate the tree.”

“Bruce? Nat? It’s two o’clock in the morning.” His head spun a little. Self-pitying and alone to preparing to host a small party with someone he’d only hoped to see in under five minutes.

That smile grew and he knew it was on his face too.

“Which makes it still technically Christmas Eve. Last time we actually spoke, you sounded like you needed a reminder. So I changed my ticket to a stopover when Nat said you guys were on your way home and did a little running around. Seriously dude, preheat that oven.”

The little salute he gave made her snicker. “Ma’am yes ma’am!” Preheating started, he watched her begin to empty the shopping bags. “We aren’t baking?”

An arched eyebrow met his questions. “Burned pie isn’t the best way to ring in a holiday. Now, your mission Mr. Phelps should you choose to accept it, and you should, go clean up and come back ready to work!”

“Mr. Phelps?”

“Add Mission Impossible to your list. TV and movies. Both are great.”

Standing quietly in his bedroom, he finally identified the feeling he was having, a little sad that it took so long to figure out. He was **looking forward** to the next few hours. Not as something to strategize or shoulder, but to enjoy. With friends.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay in posting! A beautiful teeny kitten, a reorg at work, and an emergency root canal in the same week quite knocked me down for a bit. Oof.

Poor Steve. How betrayed or at least disappointed he must have felt at Fury's confession and SHIELD's direction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clean and putting on comfortable, fresh clothes, Steve realized that he wasn’t as tired as he’d thought. The smell of pie in the oven and fresh pine almost distracted him from… was that singing coming from his living room?

He watched her from his doorway, enjoying that she hadn’t noticed him yet. He traced her figure, taking his time. The last time he’d seen her, he’d used his hands more than his eyes. Today, singing quietly and dancing to Christmas carols in his kitchen, she seemed like his friend again. Which was a change from kiss-tousled temptation he’d left in New York. And yet the two images kept overlapping in his mind, creating the urge to slide in behind her, kiss her neck and make her smile.

Having her here was confusing. Crossing that line had been… a mistake? Maybe. Something he’d been thinking about for months? Absolutely. Still thought about? Obviously. Putting her in danger and splitting his focus? Yes. Did he regret it? ...

But he was completely sure that, for the first time since he’d moved in, this apartment felt like home.

But he was lurking and it was getting weird. Time to make himself known.

“What do you mean - I needed reminding?” She was pouring out popcorn into one of his big bowls. Did he even have popcorn in his pantry? “Fresh popcorn but not pie?”

She jumped and pointed at him, pretending to be stern. “There is always time for good popcorn. But we’re just going to string it to put on the tree this time.” Her hand reached out to slap his own. “So stop eating it!” She was quiet for a minute before continuing, not quite meeting his gaze. “I think sometimes you get so wrapped in being The Captain that you forget that you’re Steve too. I know they’re the same person… just don’t lean too heavily on the mantle that you forget about the man, OK?”

She finally looked up and found him staring at her. He couldn’t seem to look away.

The carol playing switched suddenly to something loud and lively and it broke their connection.

“What do you need?” Those brown eyes widened slightly. “To help get ready?”

She relaxed slightly and pointed to the tree. “The lights need putting on. There’re a few strands in one of those bags.”
The tree was already set in a little stand by the fireplace. She had been busy. He got to work. Between the unfurling of the tree and the carols playing, it was beginning to feel… right. He started to hum along with the music.

They caught up as they worked. Kate told tales on her training and students and he of those under his command. The lights gave the room a cheerful, colorful glow. From her magical grocery bags, she produced mashed potatoes and Brussels sprouts and ham to reheat in the oven. His stomach growled and her laughter made him chuckle.

She caught him watching the bags. “If you think this is impressive, put Mary Poppins on your list. All I wanted when I was little was her carpet bag. And Julie Andrews is always delightful.”

He made a mental note to add it to his list later. Wasn’t about to step away from this cozy conversation. “That’s a lot of food for four people.”

“I’ve seen you eat. I’d say there’s enough for tonight and a meal or two for leftovers.” With a teasing smirk that he was beginning to like very much, “The pie is cooling. You could sneak a piece before they arrive. I won’t tell.”

He returned her smirk full force. “Oh, I’ll wait for the main course. Sometimes the anticipation makes it taste even better.”

The words were out before he knew it. They both caught his entendre at the same time and flushed.

He let the moment slide.

Not long after, guests arrived, hugs distributed, and first noise complaint received from the elderly Mrs. Jennings next door. Turning down the music, he returned to find the man who wore the softer side of the Hulk looped in popcorn garlands while one of the world’s deadliest assassins arranged artful swags of it throughout the branches.

Opening her final bag, Kate waved him over. Somehow, she’d managed to find “vintage” ornaments. Inspired more than aged, the brightly colored shapes reminded him of the fragile glass and more robust tin ornaments from the Christmases of his childhood. She’d done her homework. He had to clear his throat.

“I’m sorry there isn’t a star for the top. All they had left were those creepy angels whose eyes followed me when I moved. No possessed dolls on trees. Unless you like that kind of thing, in which case I’m never visiting again.”

They laughed and Nat jumped up, rummaged around in his kitchen cabinets, and grabbed the aluminum foil.

“Long stakeouts sometimes require creative ways to waste time. One thing that always seems to be in abundance is takeout containers.” Concentrating, her nimble fingers creased and folded until she held up a wicked-looking shape. “You say throwing star, I say tree topper.” Steve affixed it in place and they all stepped back to admire.

He had to admit, it was a pretty good tree.

The lights were shining in her eyes. The same way they had on another cold winter’s morning standing before another tree. Steve suddenly realized that Kate would also have been alone at Christmas and was doubly glad that she’d appeared at his door.
As they had their dinner/breakfast, Pepper and Tony called in from California with a giant stuffed rabbit peeking in the background and Clint from wherever he was. An old barn?

While it wasn’t quite like being in the tower, it was comforting to have all the voices together again. Filling in the apartment like an inflating balloon, pushing out the darkness that had been creeping in just hours before.

They laughed, told stories. Bruce talked about his latest research in the language that only Tony seemed to understand. Pepper, to their collected surprise, actually offered to fly them all to a private island for New Year’s. Pointedly saying without Iron Man suits. He and Nat shared anecdotes of their experiences with STRIKE, the lighter ones. Tony wanted to know if everyone had gotten his Christmas cards. No one had. Kate made a strange point to say that she only found junk mail. Steve had expected that the billionaire would explode as he always did or make snide comments about the trustworthiness of the postal system. Instead, he just nodded and said that he’d look into it. Kate had laughed it off and served the pie.

He joined in at times but was just as happy to sit back and let the sound wash over him.

Apparently, he’d been quiet for longer than he thought. Kate caught his eye and looked at him questioningly from the other end of the sofa they shared. He was sprawled at one end, arm over the back, legs kicked out in front of him. Invading her space.

He kicked her foot and smiled just a little. I’m fine. Missed you.

One side of her mouth tilted up as her attention seemed to return to the group. She kicked back. Missed you too.

He wasn’t sure what this was, what he felt, what he wanted. But this feeling in his chest, something a lot like happiness, friends, her foot against his. It was enough. And more than he’d ever expected to find again.

***

He didn’t see her after that for almost five months. Once, he made it as far as being in British airspace before Fury rerouted the plane, saying that the dissident cell he’d sent Steve’d to dismantle with had already been dealt with.

They talked regularly. When he wasn’t on assignment. They weren’t collecting alien tech any more, back to their original mission of counterterrorism. Still cleaning up after SHIELD though. Not all the time, but enough that his exasperation stayed eye level.

He was in DC more too. Forced to attend meetings with SHIELD leadership. Be the trained monkey at parties once again. At least Stark’s parties had a mix of people. DC parties seemed to be full of politicians and all the various bulwarks that held them up.

Natasha was often at his side now, their partnership still finding its legs. Clint had only accompanied them on one mission. It had been good to see the man. Stark had been attacked not long after Christmas. STRIKE had been on assignment when it happened and so they had only been able to watch as the idiot tested the devil. Steve’d reached out as soon as communications were stable, but had only received a perfunctory “Fine. Now.”

The time stateside came with curses and blessings, as it always seemed to. More time to explore the city on his runs, finding a route around the Mall. Time to bump into his neighbors. He’d made peace with Mrs. Jennings after her noise complaints. The nurse across the way always seemed to be
in the hallway coming if he was going or the other way around. She was cute. But he was busy.

Too busy to get on a plane to the UK for warm beer. Or so he told himself.

The last time he’d seen Kate, she’d been walking out his door, Natasha and Bruce waving from behind him as he’d hugged her goodbye. Trying to put all his gratitude for her visit into it, he’d held on until her phone beeped with another notification that the taxi was waiting. She’d turned her face up to him, for a moment, he’d thought… but she’d kissed his cheek, smelling of holiday and damned coffee, ordered him to be safe, wished him a Merry Christmas, and then headed out.

That night was one of his best memories since coming out of the ice.

And it was why he didn’t visit her. They were friends, first and foremost. Friends.

The warmth that bloomed in his chest every time he heard from her was definitely because of their friendship. Anything else would just be a bad, dangerous idea.

Despite how much he loved a bad idea.

***

He liked Sam Wilson immediately. The man had known who he was and hadn’t shown the grasping deference he’d gotten used to from others in this city. Maybe he would go to the VA. See what that was about and be with people he understood.

But for now, he had a mission report to finish and wanted to use the rest of the flight to get it drafted. Give him some time to cool off before he hit off Natasha’s head again. She was obviously under Fury’s orders on the Lemurian Star, which was just perfect. The man had a hidden agenda on a secret mission. Secrets within secrets.

Maybe Stark was right about him. An infuriating thought.

***

He’d wanted to ask Peggy if she knew about Operation Paperclip. Carriers that size had obviously been in the works for years. He couldn’t picture her agreeing to the scheme, knowing how hard she’d fought in the war against this idea. Fury’s plan gave Steve the same hard knot in his stomach he’d had when the newspapers starting talking about the invasion of Poland so long ago.

His trip to the Smithsonian to see the Captain America exhibit with Paperclip tumbling through his thoughts… was damn confusing. To see the faces and hear the voices of The Howlers and Bucky, feel the ghost of them at his side- and see those huge, programmed guns ready to cut down targets—was he even on the right side any more? Everything was so mixed up now. Little was as clear as it had once been.

But this was SHIELD. SHIELD that fought with Tony and Clint and Bruce and Natasha and Thor. People he trusted. Peggy had been a founder. He should feel at home or at least on board with their goals.

But every part of him disagreed with the plan. He wasn’t sure how to proceed with SHIELD if and when the helicarriers went up.

But didn’t, couldn’t ask Peg. She was so fragile. It made him ache. He didn’t want to spend what time was left with her talking about his suspicions. Her moments of lucidity were fewer and fewer.
Each time she wavered and saw him again for the first time, he held her hand and prayed she didn’t see through his smile to the jagged pieces those episodes ripped in him. And he wouldn’t waste their time together. His girl deserved peace. Her mission was done.

***

Kate was coming to town for a visit, taking a quick break from finishing her semester in Oxford. Georgetown had invited her to speak at a conference this weekend and she was going to sleep on his sofa. Or that’s what she thought any way. No guest of his was sleeping on a couch. He was taught better than that.

When she was sitting across from him, face lit up from whatever she was excited to be talking about, it was easy to forget that she was making a name for herself in her field. In demand from more than just Tony and the team. She was impressive all on her own. She impressed him all on her own.

Hearing the stories of the vets at the VA hit him hard. Reminded him that not being OK was normal too. That everyone had moments of confusion and pain and embarrassment. And they were so much braver. No serum to help their bodies heal. The strength to meet in groups like this one, Sam’s, and express feelings he couldn’t.

The phone in his pocket buzzed as he went to start up his bike.

Still up for a couch surfer? (KW)

Always. Have your key? (SR)

10-4 good buddy. See you soon! (KW)

Looking forward to it. (SR) And he was. Mostly.

Knowing Kate would be there in a few hours, he made quick progress home to clean up a little. He was eager to see her and the feeling made him nervous. He thought he’d moved passed the kiss. Chalked the dreams up to loneliness and warmth to friendship.

Getting a date would be easy, at least according to Natasha. She’d probably even make the call for him. But he hadn’t wanted to. He wasn’t interested in the short term again. At the time, his body had been new and the attention was unfamiliar and exciting. Sure, taking someone home might distract him for a while, but Peggy had shown him that it didn’t mean much without a sense of connection.

His neighbor, the nurse, was in the hallway again. It was like she knew he’d been coming up the stairs. She was cute and they did seem to keep the same hours. Maybe starting a new connection before he saw Kate again was a good idea. If there wasn’t an empty spot in his life that way, her role in it would be safe. At least... in theory.

As he scaled the outside of his building to investigate the music coming from his apartment, Steve reflected on his interaction with the nurse. He liked their banter. It was over quickly and she didn’t take him up on the use of his laundry facilities, but the little bit of hope she did give him made him smile. He tried to ignore that the feeling didn’t reach his insides.

Flicking on the light and finding Fury in his living room had been the first of many unfortunate surprises. They’d bugged his apartment. Infiltrated his damn neighbors. They were already in his cells, his training, Peg’s legacy, and now the only space he could call his own and they’d invaded that too. But, if Fury was to be believed and he did, Heaven help him he did, even his mission was
compromised.

He’d thrown his shield with all the betrayal and rage that moment bred. And the sonofabitch on the roof caught, threw it back like DiMaggio returning a pitch, and then vanished.

Emergency sirens broke through his haze. He met them just in time to see Fury wheeled into the ambulance.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me and continuing to read!

Next up are the months between Christmas and Winter Soldier for Kate. She’s got some cool new party tricks and gizmos.

I’m playing with the timeline a little, but a 5 month separation seems kinder than 17 months. That’s a long time to be without a certain blue eyed boy.
Warrior fan kung fu is a real thing. It seems to be mostly defensive, so Carolain is altering it to include some offensive sword fighting techniques.

Poor Steve, man. Told to trust no one, even his closest friends. Fortunately though, they've got his back. The stubborn fellow just has to believe it.

THANK YOU for reading! I hope you enjoy it. Drop me a line and let me know!

I wiped the blood from my mouth and pushed away from the wall with an oh-so-ladylike grunt. This was the third active op in as many months and I was starting to feel more confident, despite having to take my licks in the process. Getting better!

In between teaching, meetings, and university events, Carolain and I moved beyond the classroom, as it were. Or at least expanded from the slightly nicer than improvised gym facilities in my guest bedroom. Which was good, as learning to sword fight was turning out to be hell on my drywall. With her access to SHIELD files, my tireless trainer found leads that were too small for a traditional team to resolve. Recon of a potential terrorist recruiting cell that turned out to be nothing, fortunately. And a hospital with a miraculously high success rate had surgeons with enhanced abilities and great security. Not illegal, just unlikely. My sneaking and silent-run skills got a good trial.

The first “real” action we saw was at the Port of London. Human traffickers. We were outnumbered, but used surprise to our favor. For some reason, I thought it would be like in the movies with lots of one-liners and extended fight scenes. But it was quick. And nobody died. Thank God. I didn’t even have to break out the blue. I did, however, get to stretch my new and improved ass kicking muscles.

And it was amazing. We made a difference, a true positive difference in those people’s lives. What’re a few bruises in exchange for that?

It was also the first time I got to use my combat suit, which was pretty spiffy. Couldn’t let my now super secret identity get out.

For I am Batman.

Only I had black faux-tweed reinforced elbow patches on my suit because Tony thinks he’s funny.

The second incident was a little more violent. OK. Quite a bit more violent. Carolain had us following up on leads that turned from warm to hot to actively in-progress in the span of a single evening. Members of the royal family were visiting schools around London and a hitherto dormant IRA cell was planning an assassination attempt.

Thanks to Tom Clancy, even I knew that the IRA preferred paramilitary tactics and so finding them in that parking structure was our best opportunity to stop the attack before it happened. It was also my first true foray against aggressive and armed attackers. My attempted kidnappers so long ago in
New York had tried to shoot me, true. But they hadn’t wanted me dead.

These certainly did.

Fortunately, I had been trained by the best. Nat and Clint and Carolain were all very different. But also hugely efficient. I spun and kicked and used the blue like it wasn’t my first time. Carolain had combined the energy field and my dance background, although calling it a background was incredibly generous, as a basis for a type of warrior fan kung fu. I could block, redirect, and attack. Thanks to some truly inspired engineering from Tony and just A LOT of practice with the blue, I had handles so that I could touch the edge of the circles without blinding pain.

Tony had teased that I’d leveled up, but he’d been very excited upon seeing how I could now change the shape of the energy circle to a long, thin-ish oval. With some concentration, the circle could be split into one for each hand or just held in a single hand.

Apparently, like all genius child engineers, he’d fantasized about constructing a lightsaber and had thrown himself into the project with a single-mindedness that was intimidating in its focus. Even tracking down some vibranium from a source I was told not to ask about to use as a handle framework.

That was the man that created the arc reactor in a cave.

That was also the man with whom, ever since he’d disappeared for several days after the incredibly foolhardy taunting of a crazy person with his own army, I had a standing weekly call. It turns out, I liked the bearded wonder and looked forward to our chats. Which was usually me just nodding and laughing.

As soon as I’d heard about the attack on the Malibu mansion, I’d contacted Pepper with an offer to come back and sit with her while they dredged the shore. No one should have to do that alone. And then again while she waited for his return. Rarely have I heard someone so terrified and relieved at the same time. So I, like the rest of the world, just waited and watched for his reemergence. Which happened during the middle of lecturing. I’d had to turn my back to the class to allow for a moment of composure. Stupid Tony and his stupid bravado.

The handle was essentially two pieces. I could use one on the edge of each of the circles like I was holding a fan or channel the blue into as thin and long an oval as I could and combine the handles into a sword grip.

I could rip into stone, wood, metal, whathaveyou. But people? Just huge, Mount Doom-sized reservations about cutting into people.

Less when they were trying to kill me, but even then. Carolain said that I had to stop apologizing during a fight.

From the shadows, we stayed to watch the London police arrest the cell. When the ambulances came to collect the wounded, I made sure that Carolain didn’t see the tears that I couldn’t seem to stop. No one had died. But some would bear scars for the rest of their lives.

I started talking to Dr. Gilliam more regularly after that. Good therapists make such a difference.

***

What did not help at all was finding a shadow figure on the sofa in my dark sitting room. Carolain had plans that evening, so I knew it wasn’t her. Nor was it shaped like her.
A part of me wanted to run. Fast. Right now. I could feel the explosion of adrenaline push my heart and lungs into overdrive.

But a bigger part of me was pissed. *PISSED.* This asshole broke into my home and was trying to intimidate me. Dramatically waiting in the dark like an angry parent or stalker. I couldn’t think of anyone who knew my identity except for…

Motherfucker.

The room lit a soft blue as I allowed some of the anger reach my eyes. It wasn’t enough to fully light the space. I couldn’t see his face, but could now make out his shape and that there wasn’t anyone else waiting in the room.

Dude was big. And wearing a long dark coat. At night. Indoors. I couldn’t see a weapon, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have one. Reaching into my pockets, I palmed Tony’s fan handles.

“Forget your camera, asshole?”

He took a step forward. Reflexively, I pushed the blue through the handles into a fan in each hand, one shielding and one ready to attack.

The figure raised his hands, mimicking peace. He moved slowly and turned on a nearby light.

“Dr. Wallace. My name is Nick Fury. It’s time we had a talk.”

So. No camera then.

***

Still up for a couch surfer? (KW)

Always. Have your key? (SR)

10-4 good buddy. See you soon! (KW)

Looking forward to it. (SR) And I was. Mostly.

Sitting on soft, green grass, phone dangling from my hand, and sun warm on my face, I watched the Thames flow. Initially, there had been rowers gliding by but that had been a good while ago. In a very short while, a taxi would arrive to take me to Heathrow and then on to DC. The notes for my presentation and clothing were packed and ready. I’d never spoken at Georgetown before, but the content was firmly in my bailiwick so *those* nerves were at a minimum.

What had my insides in knots was who I was seeing. Steve. Natasha. It had been five months of texting and phone calls and videoconferencing. We’d talked about so much and yet I’d never found a good time to bring up my new skills, extracurricular activities, conversation with Director Fury, or the photos.

Photos that had continued to arrive under my door once a week even here. Like weird stalker greeting cards. They didn’t come on the same day or the same time of day. They also didn’t seem to come from the same camera, if photo quality was to be believed. Tony had installed JARVIS-style security outside my rooms to try to catch a glimpse of the deliverer, but much to our eternal frustration, were only shown a time loop.

We also didn’t talk about the kiss.
I’d waited for Steve to bring it up. So scared that what we’d done had taken away my friend. Which isn’t to say that I’d forgotten about it. It became a part of The Unsaid. The things you keep to yourself because saying them aloud gives them power.

Like: I miss Max. But not as much as I used to. I think he’d be OK with that. I miss my family (not my grandmother, not ever her); I think they’d like the one I’m finding now. I miss being alone in my office and evenings with Steve in the Castle. I forget that Natasha can be scary and the occasional casual reminder is jarring. I stared at a piece of plastic mistletoe for 20 minutes before putting it back on the shelf. I wished I had it for goodbye. I hate warm beer but I’d drink a lake of it if the company was good. ...A friend doesn’t kiss like that.

The alarm on my phone beeped. Time to head back and meet the taxi.

***

Natasha looked shaken. I hadn’t even made it down the hospital hallway yet and found myself running, small carryon barely in tow. For her to look that way…

Steve had left a voicemail telling me to find Natasha at a hospital in DC. Not to go to the apartment. He sounded weird, strained. A less than awesome surprise to discover when the plane landed.

I was hugging her before she knew it was me, I think. Which was, in itself, a testament to her level of shock. Checking her over, there were no visible injuries at least, before recognition seemed to kick in and she hugged me back. So hard.

She pulled me into a surgical viewing room, a tall solemn brunette woman already inside watching too. With Steve. He didn’t turn, shoulders tight and head bowed, caught up in the grisly sight before him. Although he too seemed unhurt. Thank God.

I stepped between them for a closer view. Nick Fury. Sooner than I’d expected to see him again. And more of him than I’d ever expected to see. Poor man.

It took a moment before Steve registered my presence.

“Hi.” His voice was deep and strained. Distant. I wanted to hug him, as I’d done Natasha, but it seemed unwelcome.

“What happened?”

They were quiet for a short moment before Natasha spoke, as if I hadn’t. “Tell me about the shooter.”

Shooter?! I inspected Steve again, but saw no injury. Some small tears in his clothing, but no blood.

Apparently, Steve had been there during the attack. From a man with a metal arm. What the hell.

Fury had three slugs in him, Nat guessing that they were Soviet-made. My nearly unflappable friend swayed for not even the length of a heartbeat. Which, for her, was a huge freak out. without having long to dwell on why that scared her so, the doctors pronounced time of death.

A short, surreal time later, I watched Steve and the woman who introduced herself as Maria Hill say goodbye to the body. We all stood apart from the other, grief and shock or awkwardness (maybe just me) taking up all the space in the room.
Nat lay her hand on Fury’s head and emotion pricked my eyes. I looked away to give her some privacy and examined Steve instead. Everything about him was closed off. Posture. Expression.

Still looked good though. Angry worked for him.

Stop it, Wallace.

Boxing those thoughts up and setting them aside, I looked closer at the super soldier. It wasn’t like his eyes were shrunken in or he had a face full of bruises. But something was definitely wrong. Like he’d been hit once already and was expecting another.

I caught his eye briefly when he looked up from staring at the floor and gave a half smile. Not only did he not return it, but a deep furrow appeared between The Brows as his gaze refastened on the scuffed linoleum.

OK.

I tried not to let the sting of his reaction linger. It wasn’t like I’d expected a ticker tape parade or something. But the last time I’d seen him, his smile had warmed me through. Being near him made me feel safe. And now he wouldn’t even look at me.

I needed a minute to regroup and went to see what wonders the hospital vending machines held.

***

Watching the vending machines being refilled was oddly therapeutic. Old out, new in. More options, fresh choices. Were everything that simply done.

Two more faces joined my silent audience. Neither of them happy.

Nat, “Why was Fury in your apartment?” An obviously lying Steve claimed ignorance and Nat, being Nat, called him on it. In a different circumstance, I’d’ve snickered.

It took a moment to recognize the hard man that called Steve back to SHIELD. His aware sneer after the frank appraisal of my person showed that he recognized me too.

This was the man that had Steve’s back? Did not fill me with warm fuzzies.

The big guy and I watched my ninja stalk away.

I’ve never been good at outlasting uncomfortable silences. “Sooo. How was your day?”

The ghost of a smile flew across his face. “Oh you know. Had better.”

“I’m sorry about Director Fury.”

“Thank you.” He’d gone from avoiding me to staring with an unsettling intensity. I don’t know what he was looking for, but damn was he looking for it.

“So, I was, uh, thinking. With all this going on, you probably don’t want a sofa surfer. I’ll find a hotel and we can catch up after my presentation tomorrow. If you want. That is. I know you’re busy. With,” gesturing feebly all around us, “the fallout of all this.”

It was a risk. Whatever was going on with him seemed to be affecting how he felt about our friendship. I was willing to give him space if he needed it. And hope that it didn’t last too long or become a galaxy.

Because I missed him.
He’d paused a worryingly long time before answering. “That might be a good idea.”

Oh. He took me up on it.

I nodded too many times and excused myself to do a little internet searching, disappointed but wearing my Big Girl Pants. The man from STRIKE called for Steve again as I stepped into a nearby empty lounge for a quiet place to run my search. And maybe thicken my skin.

***

Jet lag is an asshole. It didn’t seem to matter that Georgetown at generously paid for a first class ticket. I had time travelled five hours into the past to be in a hospital environment charged with an energy I didn’t understand, and my body was mad about it. Apparently, my super duper healing powers didn’t extend to being sleepy.

Which is what I discovered when I was abruptly awoken by a loud, nearby thunk. Who needs a fancy hotel when you can get a terrible neck crick from falling to sleep in a horrible hospital chair. Double rainbow. Ow.

And then the source of the thunk filtered through my foggy brain.

Steve had shoved Nat into the wall and was pinning her there with the force of what appeared to be barely contained anger.

The phone in my back pocket buzzed and I looked at it on instinct.

“SHIELD ALERT: STEVE ROGERS IS A FUGITIVE. CONSIDERED HIGHLY DANGEROUS. DO NOT ENGAGE. REPORT SIGHTING IMMEDIATELY.”

What the hell had happened since I had gotten on that plane?!
Between the jet lag, adrenaline drop, and hypnotism of watching the trees pass by, I leaned my head against the backseat window and existed in the warm space between drowsy and asleep. Lost in their own thoughts in the front seats, Steve and Natasha sat quietly. My mind wandered back through that long day’s experiences.

Their confrontation at the hospital had been nearly surreal. The weight of Steve’s anger had not at all been diminished by the anachronistic hoodie he’d been wearing. Really. It was like Stephen Hawking wearing an “I’m With Stupid” t-shirt while explaining the physics of black holes.

Steve, “Where is it?” Where is what?

Natasha, “Safe.” Yay? But why did that feel like a bad thing?

Steve, “Do better!” Whoa, big guy. That’s about enough of that.

Teachers are told to never step between fighting students, lest we get hurt. But the risk here seemed worth it, at least via verbal insertion. “Guys, guys! What’s going on?

I got an eye flier from each of them, but no direct response. They continued to argue as I listened and learned. Apparently, Fury gave something data-related to Steve and Nat knew about it. And there were pirates involved? Like ARRRR pirates?

Nat claimed to know who killed Fury and told what felt like a ghost story. That left her scarred and scared. And anything that seemed to unnerve her that way… The Winter Soldier must be one scary dude.

At her procurement of a flash drive, Steve finally stepped back and we all seemed to breathe a little easier.

Or at least they did. They may not have been on great terms, but when turning in sync to face me, I was intimidated. Straight up. Which made my stubborn streak rear its head and straighten my spine.

“What the hell is exactly going on here?” I showed them my phone screen. “And why does it say that you’re a fugitive from SHIELD?”

The tall man gave me a hard look. “You going to turn me in?”

Honestly shocked, “What?! No!” I knew Steve. Whatever was happening with SHIELD was obviously a misunderstanding. Because it was Steve.

Stoic consideration and a curt nod for us to follow him was my answer. We carefully snuck out of the hospital to become Ghost hunters.

Who you gonna call?

***

My childhood lended itself much more to supper clubs than boosting cars. Learning how to pick
some locks as part of Carolain’s training was not the same as what I now faced. And it wasn’t like I could Google “How to hotwire a car.” In addition to being super obvious to anyone looking at my search history, Nat had destroyed my phone. Not just the SIM card. The entire damn thing.

Not at all sorry, the other woman had just said, “Hope you’ve backed up recently.” Sigh.

We were at the mall. Because when I go on the run with super heroes, I always stop for an Orange Julius first.

With no phones or comm devices, we’d given ourselves 15 minutes to complete our tasks and split up. Nat and Steve to find a place to read the USB drive. Me to procure us transportation. The division of labor was suspect, but I was least likely to recognize whatever was on the drive.

I was on the clock.

We’d picked an entry that didn’t have valet, which was a shame. Car thieves on tv just slipped on an ugly valet blazer and drove off with a Porsche.

I’d just have to get sneaky.

Hiding my stuff behind a bush, I stood on the curb, openly impatient like my friend was late to pick me up. If this was going to work, I needed a large-ish group of people walking into the mall. Ideally, still putting their keys away. Then “all” I had to do was walk back through the doors behind them as part of the gang and exercise my pickpocketing skills. Which I did not have.

What could go wrong.

Thank goodness for trusting middle-aged men who don’t see women like me as a threat. I was able to get close enough for an “accidental” brush and grope. Unsavory? Totally. But it did the job.

Grabbing my bag and pushing the location alarms on the key fob brought me to my prize. Whoop whoop. Ah! Truck it is.

I picked up my passengers on time and immediately drove away, waiting for the truck’s owner to come storming out at any second. Twenty minutes outside of town, Steve took the wheel since he knew where we were going.

Camp Lehigh. Birthplace of Captain America. In New Jersey, of all places.

***

They of the front seat were quiet for a long while before Nat spoke, breaking through my mental wanderings and bringing me back to the present. “Where did Captain America learn to be OK with stealing a car?”

Steve, “Nazi Germany. And we're borrowing. Take your feet off the dash.”

I smiled to myself, not having to open my eyes to see her expression. For a guy that broke the rules when they impeded his path to what he felt to be right, Steve could sure be a stickler.

Natasha, “Alright, I have a question for you, oh, which you do not have to answer. I feel like if you don't answer it though, you're kind of answering it, you know?”

Heavy sigh from the driver, “What?”
“Was that your first kiss since 1945?” Well. Hey now. Steve kissed somebody? Did she mean me or was their 15 minutes in the mall way more exciting than mine? Did he tell her what happened?

Steve, “That bad, huh?”

Natasha, “I didn't say that.” She couldn’t say that? It was Nat? Shock quickened my breath. Granted, I hadn’t told her that it had happened, but she knew about my confused feelings.

Steve, “Well, it kind of sounds like that's what you're saying.”

Natasha, “No, I didn't. I just wondered how much practice you've had.” This was beginning to feel pointed.

Steve, “You don't need practice.” My eyes opened and bore into the back of her headrest in front of me.

Natasha, “Everybody needs practice.”

Steve, “It was not my first kiss since 1945. I'm ninety-five, I'm not dead.” Couldn’t help it. I looked into the rearview mirror and found blue eyes staring into mine. The shock of direct eye contact, now, kept our gazes locked until traffic pulled them away.

She paused, seeming to tease him again, “Nobody special, though?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but merely smiled to himself instead. I’d’ve given more than a penny for those thoughts.

I went back to looking out the window. It wasn’t like I grew up pre-war, served in the military, and volunteered for an experiment that probably should have killed me.

Maybe… the experiences we had shared together… But then again maybe not… fuck. I’m too tired for deep introspection. Maybe finding that hotel had been a good plan. Boundaries.

Purposefully tuning out the rest of their conversation, I allowed myself to retreat internally for a while. This was going to be a long trip and I needed to be able to still interact and be strong for me and for them. Because I still had no idea what was going on and why exactly we were on the run. But they were my people now. God help me.

***

We pulled up to our destination in relative silence. About an hour ago, Steve had finally shared the full story of Operation Insight, Fury’s warning, and his escape from the Triskelion.

We’d needed a minute to let the whole thing sink in. I had so many questions. Starting with- He suspected that I’d been betraying him? Actually entertained it? Hurt. Disappointment. Insult. I thought, hoped his faith in me would have been stronger.

On the other hand, finding out that the foundation he’d depended on was cracked and crumbling from underneath him. And the sand under that was also full of vipers. Trust no one, indeed.

But…

As far as Insight went, how could anyone think this was a good idea? Eliminating possible enemies in huge numbers… Only who decided who the enemy was? How accurate could it truly be? Which mean that civilian casualties were nearly guaranteed. This was the modern Manhattan
Project. A weapon so terrifying as to compel peace.

Because that usually worked.

The entire thing was ludicrous. No wonder Steve had problems with it.

From his description of Alexander Pierce, it was easy to see the zealot behind the plan. Serious. Hyper-focused.

But there had to be more to the USB drive than a location. Obviously. Pierce was willing to burn Steve, Captain Freaking America, for it.

And why Lehigh of all places? We’d find out soon though. We had arrived.

Watching Steve walk around what was a true ghost of his past was odd. A kind of reversal. Dressed in modern clothing, technology of undetermined worth in his pocket. The buildings around us rusty and paths overgrown with weeds.

He stopped to look at a flagpole, of all things, expression turning inward. For the second time that day, and despite being hurt, part of me wanted to run up and hug him. Again, felt like it would be unwelcome. Like keeping us at arm’s length, despite opening up about Insight.

I didn’t like the wariness in his manner. It felt like starting over, even at a detriment.

Pulling me from searching for any sign that someone may have been here recently, Steve brought our attention to an apparently misplaced building.

“Army regulations forbid storing ammunition within five hundred yards of the barracks. This building is in the wrong place.”

Nat shot me a grin that clearly said “nerd.” I would have teased the big guy about it, but he’d pulled ahead to whack a lock off the heavy door with his shield. The ultimate multi-tool.

The inside of the building had a dusty, hollow smell. The echoes of typewriters and telephones and people shocking in the silence. On the far wall, an early and familiar logo.

“This is SHIELD,” Nat noted.

Quietly, as if hesitant to disturb the past, I agreed, “Where it started.”

In an adjacent file room, we stood before old framed portraits of Howard Stark, Peggy Carter, and Colonel Phillips. Their faces already familiar from my research.

I slipped into memory for a moment. The three of us in a different, although barely cleaner file room. Laughing together.

Definitely a different time. Made my heart hurt.

Nat pointed out Tony’s rather dashing father and then asked about Agent Carter. Steve paused, focused entirely on the photo before walking down an aisle, something having captured his attention. I shot the Russian a questioning look, fairly certain she knew exactly who the subject was. What was she hoping to gain?

We joined Steve by a bookshelf he seemed fascinated by. Little cobwebs barely moving. Enhanced eyesight was no joke.
“If you’re already working in a secret office…” Like in a horror film, the bookshelf slid open. Both exhilarating and creepifying. “Why do you need to hide the elevator?”

We stepped inside and it slowly began to descend.

“I wonder if Howard had his own Castle down here. Like father, like son?” Steve’s wistful grin was gone almost as soon as it’d appeared.

The elevator opened into a room full of ancient, dormant computer reels centering around a platform holding several access terminals. And deep blankets of dust. My sneeze echoed back to us.

Nat expressed her astonishment that this couldn’t be the data point and I couldn’t help but agree. I wandered around the rows and rows of machinery. The only footprints I found were my own. How many miles of computer tape was this?! And what on Earth was on it?

I heard a third voice and quickly rejoined the group, but only found my friends.

A heavily accented voice proceeded, “Ah Doktor Wallace. Good of you to join us.” The fuck? It was coming from the computer?

Natasha explained, “It’s some kind of a recording.”

The computer spoke again, “I am not a recording, Fräulein. I may not be the man I was when the Captain took me prisoner in 1945, but I am.”

Couldn’t stop my head from whipping around to gape at Steve. It couldn’t be!

Looking as shocked as I’m sure we did, he explained to Nat, “Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked for the Red Skull. He’s been dead for years.”

Zola. The bespectacled monster that helped Johann Schmidt develop energy weapons, killed Allied soldiers, tortured Bucky, and contributed to the reasons that Steve was on that damned plane. Sonofabitch.

The disembodied voice continued, “First correction, I am Swiss. Second, look around you. I have never been more alive. In 1972 I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body, my mind, however, that was worth saving on two hundred thousand feet of data banks. You are standing in my brain.”

I’d been walking around his neural pathways. Should have kicked the machines as I went. Robbed him of a memory or two.

Zola went on to explain how Operation Paperclip recruited key Axis scientists for research purposes after the war. And how he took advantage of his second chance in so many way.

My attention was hijacked by Zola’s smug proclamation: “Cut off one head, two more shall take its place.”

In the Captain’s voice, Steve demanded, “Prove it.”

The filthy computer screens began to show old footage of the man who had to be the Red Skull surrounded by his HYDRA army. A quick glance at Steve. From the stories he’d told me over the last few months about his experiences with HYDRA, I wasn’t at all surprised to see nearly every one of those impressive muscles tensed to the point of vibration.
Complete with visual aids, Zola explained how and why HYDRA insinuated itself into SHIELD. Of how they’d secretly nurtured and guided crisis leading to war and, ultimately, lay the path to their end goal - control.

The footage of Howard and Maria Stark’s car crash made me gasp aloud. The information on Fury’s death, recent as of this afternoon, was ghastly.

“We won, Captain. Your death amounts to the same as your Life; a zero sum.” I jumped when Steve suddenly smashed the computer screen. A new one simply came to life. “As I was saying…”

The video footage switched to a familiar face. Tony’s. Kneeling and bleeding with automatic weapons pointed at his younger face. I got lightheaded as the flag behind him registered. I knew that flag. It reappeared behind the now familiar face of the head of The Ten Rings as it gloated as Tony’s California home was destroyed.

The voice continued. “We are not the only ones.”

“You have allies? You’d trust people outside of your organization?” I’d finally found my voice.

“Trust? We do not trust. We watch and we wait for opportunities, pulling information from resources in place even inside our rivals. And some very interesting information we have gathered.”

The video switched again. To me. Snippets of me teaching, training in the tower (which was supposed to be secure), through the window of me learning to sword fight in Oxford. A low res one of me running between trees in Latvia. Out with Steve. Running in the park. From across the street into my apartment, seeing the photos for the first time and losing control of the blue. Fighting in my combat suit the parking garage.


“Oh Doktor. You have been such a fascinating subject to watch. It is no wonder why they watch you. There are others, but you- you have such potential. A shame it will be wasted. You could have been such… an asset.”

I must have gone into shock a moment because when Zola’s voice reentered my brain, the smug bastard was threatening us. Steve tried to throw his shield at the closing doors and missed. Surely a sign of his emotional state too.

Nat broke in, “We got a bogey. Short range ballistic. 30 seconds tops.” Oh my God.

“Who fired it?”

Jarring me down to my shoe leather, she spat, “SHIELD.”

Strong hands pulled me hard into the small computer access area under the terminals in the ground next to Nat. With a jolt, I realized that it was the first time he’d touched me since I’d arrived. Holding his shield high in front, it seemed as if he planned to stop the missile just through sheer will. If the missile knew what was good for it, it would have diverted. But it didn’t, hitting the building straight on. Walls and ceiling began to collapse and my friend started to yell against the weight of the rubble as it pushed against us.

At least this I could help with. If Steve covered our fronts, I could at least save our heads. Hands thrust high, I called the blue and grit my teeth against the immediate weight against it. Everything
seemed to be shaking. Steve pressed his back into me, as if trying to help hold me up.

The dust rose up around us and it became increasingly difficult to breathe. A chunk of cement made it over Steve’s shoulder and hit Nat. She collapsed, but I couldn’t stop to help her. Small stone chips flew at us like bullets, most deflected by vibranium, but a few slipped by.

With a final groan, the world righted itself and stopped its shimmy. Our foxhole glowed from the light I generated.

Steve lowered his shield, but I couldn’t stop the blue. Without it, would the rubble come down on us? Being crushed by stones is not the way I want to go, no offense to Giles Corey.

“Are you alright?” The sudden quiet made my ears ring and he had to repeat, “Are you hurt?”

Everything, everything hurt, but nothing in particular. I looked him over, but the dust and grit were a perfect injury disguise. “Just get us out of here!”

With a grunt of agreement, he carefully and quickly began the process of digging us out.

Picking Nat up like an unconscious rag doll, the super soldier carried her outside the hole.

“The second I let go, there’ll be a cave in.” The effort of prolonged, continuous use was exhausting. I may have no choice about when to let go.

The man with a plan responded. “I’m going to grab your wrist and pull you out. Let go on 1… 2… 3!”

A mile outside of the camp, Steve turned the truck’s headlights on and guided us onto the highway. Back to DC.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, I've procrastinated posting this chapter because the next one is proving difficult. Confronting Steve about his lack of faith keeps coming out as petulant instead of sincere.

Turns out that confronting a fictional friend is just as hard as in real life.

Getting closer though! And who could stay mad at that big galoot for long?
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

After managing to not get sick while on a cruise ship for 12 days to a land of new allergies, I sat next to a kid on the flight home that sneezed on me. You guys. So sick. Better now, but my goodness it knocked me down. The moral of the story is beware 6 year olds with the sniffles.

ANYWAY. It was nice to pick the story back up after having been gone. I missed Steve and Kate and YOU! Thank you for all your kind comments and kudos. They mean a lot to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After learning about the depth of HYDRA’s infiltration, Insight, SHIELD’s apparent moral ambiguity, and then the possible betrayal by people he considered friends, Steve was drained. The ride back to DC had been quiet, each taking stock of their injuries and absorbing Zola’s intel.

Natasha had woken from unconsciousness, but seemed to sense that he wasn’t in the mood to talk. After eating one of Tony’s packets, Kate had passed out in the backseat. No startled eye contact through the mirror this time. She’d only roused after he’d parked. Hadn’t slowed them down after they ditched the truck in a relatively safe place and beat it to Sam’s.

What a sorry group they’d made knocking on the vet’s door. Dirty. Sore. But together. Sam’s was another name to add to the long list of people that had been kind to him throughout the years. Now cleaner, on the outside at least, he was ready to scrub the air too.

Starting with the person trained in deception.

He found her sitting quietly, seeming to stare at the sleeping figure in the bed next to her but eyes unfocused somewhere in the middle range. He knew that stare. Had just seen it in the mirror and didn’t like seeing it on someone else. Somehow both empty and crowded.

She lied, just a little, about being OK. But what she said next, he knew was the truth because she finally let her guard down enough to show him real vulnerability. That was the person he was sure he could trust. And was so very grateful that he could.

Natasha, “When I first joined SHIELD, I thought I was going straight. But I guess I just traded in the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but… I guess I can’t tell the difference anymore.”

He assured her that she owed him nothing, despite her insistence.

And when she asked, “If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life, and you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it?” He felt some peace in saying yes.

“So you’re friends again then?”

Natasha recovered before he did, her astonished smile fading. “And you? You used to say that trusted me, but not enough to tell me about what you’ve been doing. What was that in the parking
garage? I know it was you.”

“And your control has been improving, so what happened in your apartment that made you lose it like that?” He didn’t mean to gang up on Kate, but she had some things to explain.

The recumbent figure sighed and sat up, tucking her legs underneath like a child. She looked better than in the truck, less exhausted, but still more worn out than he’d expected. Hopefully, it was just jet lag and not something truly wrong. He’d have to start paying more attention, which was difficult as he’d been avoiding looking at her full on. As if doing so would make his brain consider if she was truly friend or foe. By keeping her in his periphery, at arm’s length, she seemed less real. Less demanding of that answer.

He faced her now.

Her jaw clenched before she answered. “Fair enough. I was going to talk to you about all this during my visit anyway. Only without all the theatrics. I’ve been working with SHIELD to complete small operations as part of my training exercises. The parking garage was stopping an IRA cell from making an attack in a public place. We were successful, if you’re wondering. The first time I got to use the blue for something other than a zippy light show.” The tension briefly left her face as she beamed at them, full brilliant wattage. “And it was amazing!”

“Tony made you a suit.” He didn’t phrase it as a question. It was probably only a matter of time before Stark built her something.

“We’ve been fine tuning it for a while now.” How long had she been moonlighting? And why hadn’t she told him? ...Not that he told her everything either. Damnit.

“And the headpiece? That’s new.” Steve blinked at the Russian. Apparently, he was the only one who didn’t know. Great.

Kate grimaced. “A necessary evil. It hides my hair and face below my eyes. We tried one that covered everything, but it looked like I was a lost movie extra looking for a green screen. Hardly intimidating. And it itched.” She gestured at him. “Actually, the very first one was inspired by your helmet. Except I’d actually wear mine.”

He’d missed her teasing and smiled just a little before realizing something. “Wait. You said you were working with SHIELD? When? Who brought you in?”

“A couple of weeks after I started teaching this summer, Director Fury broke into my rental and we had a chat. Got the whole spiel and everything. Felt very official. Totally going in the unauthorized memoir.”

This time, the spy beside him looked just as shocked as he felt.

“So you’re an Avenger now?”

She barked a laugh, “No! Can you imagine? I’m hero support at best.”

“...So Fury was there to-”

“Give me the responsibility lecture. The secrecy talk. The chain of command command. And then we had a beer.” Raising her eyebrow pointedly at them, “A warm one.”

Not rising to the bait, despite feeling appropriately chastised, Steve returned to his earlier question. “And the apartment?” She rolled her lips and actually looked a little hesitant. “Kate?”
“The apartment, I know, I know. It’s just—” With a deep breath, “OK, so not long after you guys moved up here, I started getting these creepy packages each week. That was the first one. It scared me... a little. I didn’t deal with the initial surprise of it very well and lost control for a minute or two. That’s what you saw.”

He sat forward, elbows on his knees. Tightly pulling the big reaction he wanted to have to one that was controlled. Wouldn’t pop the delicate bubble they were building. This had happened and he’d been miles away. Completely unaware. “What were in the packages?”

“Are. What are in the packages, you mean. Photos. Of me. They come once a week. Every week. Apparently, no matter where I am. Little reminders that someone out there is watching. And wants me to know it. So that’s fun.”

Natasha had gone completely still, except for narrowed eyes. “And you have no idea who’s taking them?”

“Nope. Tony set up this complicated camera system to try to catch them in the act, but they just keep hacking it. Making him nuts. In a different context, it would almost be funny.”

“Except,” and he was hesitant to awaken these particular demons again, “maybe we do.” The two women turned their considerable focus on him. “If we believe Zola, it isn’t HYDRA. The only other group he insinuated was Ten Rings.”

His audience went silent.

Nat was the first to recover. “And you think he was telling the truth?”

Not knowing how to answer, he just shrugged and sat back.

After a minute or two, he couldn’t help the small smile that broke through. At least on one front, he had an enemy. And that he understood.

The former spy noted his change of attitude. “Well, you seem pretty chipper for someone who just found out they died for nothing.”

“Well, I guess I just like to know who I'm fighting.”

Stepping into the doorway, Sam gently interrupted. “I made breakfast. If you guys... eat that sort of thing.”

He got up and ran some water over his face and wash his hands. Again. Needed a minute to gather himself. Tony knew about the photos. Knew about the suit. Hell, he built the damn thing. Natasha knew too. Did Bruce or Clint? Fury talked to her about the Avengers Initiative without consulting him, although that was hardly a surprise.

Closing his eyes from his reflection, he felt the water droplets slide down his face and fall into the sink.

He felt powerless. Useless. And jealous. He hated it.

What was the point of all this work, this sacrifice if he couldn’t protect the people he cared about? On the small scale and on the large. It was his job, for fuck’s sake. Literally, his purpose.

Toweling off, he could hear the two women talking quietly and gave them a few minutes. At one point, Nat snorted. After a strong hug, she left.
He didn’t immediately rejoin his friend. He knew that’s what she was, especially after SHIELD tried to kill the three of them. She’d followed him without knowing why or where. Just because she trusted him. He owed her more than his jealousy and misplaced anger.

She looked different than when he’d seen her at Christmas. Still the same. But different. Not muscular exactly, but stronger. A particular part of his brain was happy to see that the curves he appreciated were still there.

He missed her. More than he’d realized. The way her eyes seemed to see what he didn’t and lips found everything to be inexplicably and quietly amusing. How her gaze sought him out, trying to share the joke. How he couldn’t wait to hear what strange connections she’d made to things he’d never heard of and the expression of delight when he was genuinely interested in explanation. How full her smile made him feel. And how he wanted to move closer to her when she teased him, voice low and smirking, or challenged him, strong and unafraid.

Phone calls were great. But he’d missed her.

Her mask was a little stronger too, slipped on more easily and stayed on longer. He knew part of that was his fault. Pushing her away. Shutting down her attempts to get him to open up. Hell, he’d been a coward and actually said she should stay somewhere else. Not something he would look back on with pride.

Seeing that she seemed to be waiting for him, he rejoined her.

Without preamble, she said, “We need to talk.”

“Yeah. We probably do.” That mask slid over her features again, smoothing them out to stoic polite detachment and he sighed, long and slow.

“I’m sorry.”

His head snapped up in his surprise. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you about working with SHIELD and the photos, oh, and the new things I can do with the blue. You don’t tell me everything either. That’s fine. We don’t have to be those kind of people, I guess. And I get that SHIELD just turned its back on you and that HYDRA assholes are embedded in it. ...But you thought I could be one of them? Really? After everything? That’s pretty hur-“

Kate took a deep breath and sat up very straight. He began to realize how much he’d offended her when she continued, “You know what, it doesn’t matter. When this is over, I’m going to finish the semester in England and then go home to New York and you’ll do your thing here. Decide what you want to do. Trust me, don’t trust me. You’re my friend, Steve. Even if you don’t think I’m yours. Ball is in your proverbial court.”

That stopped him cold.

“No.”

She blinked at him, confusion creeping in. He’d hurt her. This person who had done nothing but be his friend. Sure, she hadn’t told him about what was going on in her life even while they talked about so much, but he hadn’t pried either.

Rubbing the back of his neck, trying to find the words to explain. “Not no exactly. Just, there is no court, no ball. I’m sorry too.” Scooting forward so that she would be sure to hear him clearly, “I
never should have thought what I did. You didn’t, you don’t deserve it. Why didn’t you tell me about the photos?”

“You were saving the world and wouldn’t have been able to do anything about them. And I didn’t want to-” She gestured vaguely with her hands.

“Distract me?”

She corrected him, even as her cheeks pinkened, “Burden you.” They both looked away.

“You’re my friend, Kate, probably my best. Nothing you could tell me would be a burden.”

She popped a quick disbelieving expression. “Oh? Not even that a second nefarious, secretive, and incredibly dangerous organization has its eye on interfering in our lives. As if HYDRA wasn’t enough?”

Easy. “Not even then.”

“OK. I promise to be more forthright about things that impact my life like that. Especially when they could affect the entire team.” She was still so serious.

His turn. “And I promise to be a better friend.”

“You weren’t a bad friend. You’re actually a great friend, probably my best too. Don’t tell Nat. But if you feel that I’ve done something to shake your trust in me, maybe tell me before freezing me out, yeah?”

“I can do that.” Tense muscles began to loosen.

Until, she studied him long enough that he worried. “You were a bit of a shit.”

“Not the first time I’ve been told that.”

“Probably not the last.”

“And you - You can tell me things. Anything. Friends don’t run. Or judge. I know there are things you don’t like to talk about and that’s OK. But, I’m here. When you’re ready.” But there was more she needed to say, he could tell. “What?”

One side of her mouth quirked up before trouble crept through her features. He reached out to take and squeeze her hands. He smoothed his thumbs over the backs of her hands, calming them both. Slightly calloused but sure in his own, they squeezed back.

“What’s coming- it’s going to be bad, isn’t it?”

He shrugged. Oddly, not as worried as when the three of them had knocked on Sam’s door.

“We’ll get through it.”

That got him a half smile. Sam called them again for breakfast and they stood. He turned to leave, stomach actually growling.

“Hey Steve.”

He turned back and suddenly found himself with a redhead wrapped around his chest. Hugging her back, his head atop hers, the warmth he’d missed seeped back in. Long after was polite, they held
on, not ready to let go.

I missed you too.

Chapter End Notes

Having some trouble finding Sam's voice. He's an amazing character and I want to do him justice. And soon, Bucky! Or at least Winter Soldier.

I've been playing with whether or not Bucky gets his own chapters. What do you think?
We were up against the Secretary of the World Security Council. The WORLD Security Council. Who was also, conveniently and with impressive side hustle, head of HYDRA. Oh God.

And why was I the only one who seemed concerned? Seriously. My fellow fugitives seemed… nonplussed. But then, this probably wasn’t their first rodeo with a missile-wielding executive sociopath.

...But looking at it that way, it wasn’t mine either. At least this one hadn’t been a nuke. What a crazy, startling change my life had gone through since that day.

OK, Sam was also a little thunderstruck. As the only other vaguely normal in this guerrilla foursome, there was a sense of kinship building there.

The man was charming and smooth as hell too, which didn’t hurt.

Thinking of him as “normal” was shaken when he presented his “resume.” Who willingly put on metal wings to swoop into and out of a firefight? Yep. He was going to fit in great.

What a bunch of wonderful weirdos we are.

Steve already liked him. Whatever happened in Bakhmala earned Nat’s respect, which wasn’t an easy thing to do. When he earnestly said, “Dude, Captain America needs my help. There’s no better reason to get back in,” he got me. What can I say? I like it when people respect my friends.

It was deeply amusing to leave both of our Big Strong Men waiting at home. Steve had not been thrilled to step aside, but it wasn’t like he could sneak onto a military base and go unnoticed.

Clad in two dark suits from my luggage and carrying the ultimate in disguises (clipboards, borrowed name badges, and slightly harried expressions), Nat and I encountered shockingly few problems on base. We talked our way through the first locked gate and Super Spy lifted the key card to the second. The third required a retina scan. At least the door did. The unreinforced walls several feet down from the entrance didn’t.

A small blue oval cut through the steel wall like a sharp knife cutting through tough steak. I definitely noticed the effort it took, but it was easier than expected. While I worked, Nat took the strange opportunity to chat.

“Only Steve could randomly make friends with a pararescuer with a super suit. What are the odds of that?”

Without stopping, I started to giggle at the absurdity. 100% professional cat burglar, yep. It wasn’t even that funny, but once you start with the church giggles, you just have to ride it out.

“That’s better. You were looking a little tense.”

Ah. Sneaky sneaker. “Just stealing multi-million dollar secret tech from a secure military installation. Nothing to be tense about.” Halfway done. Good thing we aren’t that tall.

“Eh, we got this.” She crossed her arms and leaned on the wall, watching for a minute before asking, “You really thought Steve and I were a thing? I mean, the guy does have a little something, but…”
“You like ‘em green and nerdy?” My only answer was narrowed eyes. I wanted to shrug but those muscles were otherwise engaged. “I don’t know, man. You two work so closely together all the time and seem to understand each other. You’d be formidable.”

“Just what every girl wants to hear about her relationship.” The sass was strong with her today. “Fictional or otherwise.” It suddenly felt like her eyes were cutting through the steel now and the steel was me. “And whatever chemistry you see is nothing to what I see.”

The relief of finishing the hole made me miss making any kind of retort. Not sure what to say anyway. I didn’t know if I wanted to be happy or terrified about her comment or if she was teasing because she knew I was confused.

When the would-be-door didn’t fall in, we looked at each other in brief bewilderment. I reached out a finger, placed it against the cool metal, and tapped it.

Nothing happened.

“How cool would that have been?”

The amazingly collected woman next to me snorted before saying, “Push?”

“Push.”

Once the foot’s worth of wall cleared the rather tidy cut outs (hair toss), it still didn’t fall over, although it teetered a little. We snuck through the gap. In the light of our handy dandy Home Depot pocket flashlights shining over innocuous boxes, I enjoyed the flavor of Disappointed Strawberries from a protopacket. They still had a texture problem, but we’d moved on from Really Not Raspberry and Just Barely Blueberry.

It took a minute, but Nat found the box we needed and I severed the hinges to avoid setting off the numerical lock. Steve was going to have to find a way to tell the base to reinforce all areas of a room/box/etc., not just the traditional openings. Use those $100 hammers that my taxes buy, guys.

“You are very convenient to have along.”

Aw, thanks. “That’s me. The human Swiss Army knife.”

We stared at the contraption for a minute, realizing that we were only halfway through the plan. Had to get this not small box out of the base unnoticed. Relatively unnoticed. There was a very large hole cut in the wall, after all.

Only a few minutes later, Natasha, The Problem Solver, calmly drove our getaway Camry through the gates to the rendezvous point. I’m sure the car’s original driver would be just fine. When he regained consciousness. And got out of that closet.

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Forgiving myself the mental pun, Falcon was a hoot. He’d been filling our waiting with anecdotes of he and Steve. Smart Ass and his running, such a nerd, I swear.

We’d split up again. Steve and Nat were on a nearby rooftop while Sam and I were safely on the ground. Like sane people. For now. While we waited for our target to finish his fancy lunch and come outside so we could kick off The Plan, Sam and I were enjoying the cafe/observation point. I needed protein and he needed caffeine. Perfect idea.
Waiting for my laughter to die down, Sam asked, “So you’re Kate, huh? The Kate?” Oh that smile was capital T Trouble.

“Um, not sure what you mean by The, but I guess so? And you’re The Sam Wilson? From song and story?”

I could see myself reflected back in his sunglasses. I looked stiff and consciously tried to unclench. Not all the way better, but some. Now I was just awkward instead of uptight.

Sam’s smile stayed, but in a pinned-on kind of way. Dude should totally play professional poker. He looked at me and the therapist in him saw through his eyes. God, I wanted to squirm.

“I’m glad you guys ran into each other that day. You’re good for him. He needs friends.”

He slumped back and drank his coffee. “Steve’s a good guy.”

I picked at the remnants of my sandwich. “Yes. He is.” Where had this pressure come from?

“He seems to bring out the best in people. Being Captain America, and all.”

That rankled me. “That happens because he’s Steve. Not because he’s Captain America.”

Sunglasses got taken off as he leaned in. “Damn straight.” He kicked back again and tossed one foot on top of his knee. “You know, you three are quite the group. I can see how close you are.”

“They’re my people. And grand theft auto does that.”

He smiled and the tension broke. Whatever had just happened, I think I passed.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect from meeting you. The way Steve describes you guys, you sounded bigger than life. Thanks for what you did in New York, by the way. That took balls.”

I blinked, having forgotten that Steve had once asked for permission to talk to Sam about my experiences that day.

Shrugging, “I don’t know about balls. I guess I… didn’t really think. Just reacted.” It was my turn to lean forward. “Everybody keeps thanking me and, like, I don’t get it. I just did what anyone else would do. It wasn’t like I was the one to divert the nuke or fight the aliens. I just helped Nat push a fancy stick. It wasn’t like I risked my life to be a pararescueman in live firefight in occupied territory or anything. You are the one that should be thanked. Not me.”

“How many people did you pass on your way to the roof? Did anyone turn around? You may not see it as something extraordinary, but it was. And that fancy stick? Your effort helped close that wormhole. It didn’t matter that you didn’t take out a hundred of those assholes while you did it. You did something great. Own it.”

I had to clear my throat. “Well shit, Sam. I bet you are an awesome counselor.”

“You know it!”

“Although I still contend that anyone could have been me in that scenario. I just wanted to help. Isn’t that why you joined up? To help?”

“Yeah. I saw what was happening and wanted to do what I could. That’s why I help at the VA too.”
“So between you, me, Nat, and Steve, we’re just a bunch of well-meaning overachievers?”

“Pathologically.”

We enjoyed the breeze for a minute or two in now companionable silence before Sam went on alert.

“He’s out. Here we go.”

I watched Mr. Cool Under Pressure play his part in our melodrama. Everything was happening as planned, which was a miracle unto instead really.

Walking up to the bald, sweaty double agent, it was my turn to take the stage. I gave my most *you’re so screwed* smile. “Agent Sitwell. Please follow me.”

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“It isn’t too late, you know. We could get off on the next floor and just walk away. The organization I work for is very generous to its friends.”

He’d been silent in the car on the way here. Which made his sudden question seem even more desperate.

“Once, early in my career, I had the distinct displeasure of having a plagiarist in my class. He wasn’t the first nor the last, but he still holds the honor of the most unrepentant.” The man standing beside me had the gall to look bored. “He reminds me a lot of you actually, Jasper. Can I call you Jasper? Doesn’t matter, I’m doing it. I literally caught him selling a paper and taking an order for a new one. The little toad didn’t even deny it when I confronted him. Offered to deal me in if I slipped him the names of a few students that were falling behind.”

“Sounds like an enterprising young man.”

“His father was on the board of directors, so my complaint was buried. My career, threatened. He even stopped hiding it from me, all brash pride and condescension.” That birthed a despicable little smile. I really wanted to be able to point to him and think I KNEW IT, LOOK AT HIM. But he seemed normal. The Wormtongue aspect to his persona only shone through since I knew he was HYDRA. “He got so full of himself in his tacky little empire that he ended up drawing the attention of a member of the Student Ethics Committee. Who couldn’t be bribed or bullied or coerced.”

“Oh tell me he was expelled,” snarked my… hostage? Aw, baby’s first hostage.

“The kids he’d been in business with were delighted to turn him in to save themselves. Every person, including his father, disavowed him and left him to swing.”

He rolled his eyes while watching the floor numbers rise. “Blatant moral, Dr. Wallace. Although I’m not sure what it has to do with me.”

“No? It seemed so apropos. And a lesson about reaping and sowing that you apparently didn’t learn the first time.”

Serious side eye.

“I believe this next bell tolls for thee, Jasper.”

Side eye turned into alarm.
The doors dinged and opened on one super irritated super soldier. Who promptly grabbed Sitwell’s collar and hauled him out of the elevator, throwing him onto the roof. It was disturbingly gratifying.

And hot.

I’d been steadfastly ignoring that. I mean, the physicality was nice, no doubt. But the little saucy wink he threw me as Jasper flew through the air… I mean. What was I supposed to do? NOT blush? What a nice super power that would be.

Nat gave me a nod and a smile when I joined her in the middle of the roof. The middle. As far as I could make it without starting to lose my shit, which would be majorly uncool in front of our involuntary guest.

Steve was already backing Jasper up to the ledge, in his face, threatening. There was enough wind so high up that it muffled their words for me. But I didn’t need to hear. We’d talked through what they would say, but I still jumped when Nat kicked Jasper off the roof. I mean, no matter how prepared you are, seeing a man fall off a building was always going to shock.

And so was seeing Sam land in front of me.

All that metal and jet pack and red goggles. I didn’t it expect it… him… to be so graceful. Somewhere, there was a metal theme song playing.

“Pretty impressive, huh?” With that cocky smile.


Jasper cowered as his would-be flight instructors approached wearing their serious faces. I almost felt pity for him. Almost.

Having had the fight scared out of him, Jasper started spilling his secrets almost immediately. Naming targets.

“You! A TV anchor in Cairo, the Undersecretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa city. Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, her, anyone who's a threat to HYDRA! Now, or in the future.”

Shut the front door! ME?!

Steve, “Kate? The Future? How could it know?”

“How could it not? The 21st century is a digital book. Zola taught HYDRA how to read it.”

It was reassuring that Steve and Nat looked as confused as I felt.

Jasper continued, as if it was obvious, “Your bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, e-mails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores. Zola's algorithm evaluates people's past to predict their future.”

The sum of a person’s choices, lives. Fed through an algorithm for what purpose? What insight could HYDRA possibly be- Wait, I know this plot. I know it. I’ve taught it and seen it in the world already.
Thoughtcrime does not entail death: thoughtcrime IS death.

The prescience of George Orwell had always awed and scared me.

My entire body flashed cold as each of the pieces of data we’d gathered fell into place and I could finally see the story arc.

Jasper, “Then the Insight helicarriers scratch people off the list. A few million at a time.”

“Fuck.”

The shock of hearing Steve curse for the first time should have been momentous. Instead, I barely heard it over the rushing in my ears.

A few million at a time.

Steve was right.

Fuck.
As the least likely person without a jet pack strapped to them who SHIELD was not currently searching for, my next happy task was to find a good car to “borrow.” Not sexy, but delightfully low altitude.

I didn’t mind this particular errand. We were all a little bit in shock after learning about the scope of HYDRA’s plan.

Nat and Sam were minding our increasingly twitchy captive on the roof. Steve rode down in the elevator with me. Neither of us spoke. “Are you OK?” seemed like a stupid, small question.

Instead, a warm, large hand reached over and held mine. He squeezed once before releasing me when the doors dinged open.

The heat from the sunshine should have been calming. But compared to Steve’s silent support, all it did was suffocate.

The solitude and relative quiet gave me a chance to pull my thoughts back through the cotton that Jasper had stuffed into my head.

Millions of people.

Including me. And maybe Phil, Dr. M, Dr. Gilliam. Certainly Steve, Nat, Tony, Pepper, Bruce. So many others.

Less than two years and I’d managed to attract the attention of no less than four powerful and often terrifying groups. The Ten Rings. HYDRA. SHIELD. The Avengers.

And now I was partly responsible for saving millions of lives…

...Couldn’t seem to get enough air. Hands shook as I pushed the sudden sweat from my face and regretted looking up. Spinning. The buildings were too tall. Too close. It was too much. Too too too. The pressure. What happens if I fail. If WE fail. Millions of people. MILLIONS. Oh God.

Five things I can see. A shockingly shitty blue car. A man crossing the street at the far intersection. Scaffolding. Gum on the sidewalk. The searing reflection of the sun on the windows high above.

Four things I can touch. Four things… The granite wall behind me was cool and slightly pitted against my palms. And forehead. The grout was rough. Edges of the tiles were perfect right angles and sharp when my fingertips pushed against them. Tony’s smooth, round-edged design for handles that masqueraded as a fancy belt embellishment and housing to my mask.

Three things I can hear. Traffic on nearby side streets. A police siren shrieking its WHEEWOOWHEEWOOW, already on the chase. The soft snap of broken caution tape in the wind.

The super structures that minutes ago had been dark and looming, now just stood as they always had. Indifferent parts of the city landscape. My lungs expanded as the pressure lightened.
Two things I can smell. Tang from the sun-warmed metal of the scaffolding. The soft citrus of my body wash that somehow still managed to cling even now.

My heartbeat was almost calm.


Closing my eyes, I turned my face to the sun, feeling a small breeze, and just breathed.

Better now, more in control and missing Clint, I was able to survey the street with a critical eye. There were more cars than people around on this block, which was handy for our plan. We had our choice of getaway vehicles.

I had gone from a clean legal record to multiple grand theft auto in one day. Yay me?

The lack of other faces made one stand out. I’d originally clocked him as another tourist, but he wasn’t taking photos of the nearby art installation.

He was taking photos of me.

As soon as I noticed him, he noticed me noticing him. And winked. Then turned and began walking back towards the busy end of the block.

DAMN not having cell phones! With a quick glance up at where I knew the group on the roof was waiting, I mentally shouted an apology before booking it after the photographer.

There was no time for subtlety in my pursuit. Especially not with someone that seemed to taunting me as he wove between unsuspecting people. A smile over the shoulder and dart behind a group taking a selfie. After nearly losing him behind a passing commuter bus, I started paying attention to where exactly I was. Later, JARVIS and I were going to do some sleuthing.

I just wasn’t fast enough. There were too many people and the city in the way. Putting on what I considered to be a burst of speed that Steve would probably have called a light jog, I gave it one final push. This was the first glimpse of the elusive paparazzi that had been tormenting me for so long. And if I didn’t catch up, maybe the last.

Another block and I stopped. I wasn’t catching up. And was only increasing the distance from where people were counting on me. SHIT.

Releasing a growl of frustration, I turned around and ran as fast as I could back to where I should have been.

I’ll get you another day, my pretty. And your little camera too.

***

Of course, of course, they were already in a car and waiting for me. A sedan. A mid-sized sedan. Could they not find a compact? Because five grown adults, one with Herculean proportions, shoved into a compact while on the lam from a major government organization AND an evil shadow agency were basically required to do it in the smallest car available. While the music from Keystone Cops played while we snuck into the Triskelion.

What a pretentious name for a group of buildings. But getting back in to stop the helicarriers was the plan and Sitwell was our entrance key.
I slid in next to Nat in the backseat and immediately heard from Steve.

“Where were you? Everything OK?”

“I, uh,” glanced at our captive and blue eyes followed mine. And nodded. “Later. I promise.”

Jasper could not have been more panicked looking if he tried. Yet still managed to find the energy to be smug. “Dr. Wallace. I take it you’re going to miss your lecture at Georgetown? What a shame, you worked so hard for that.”

I knew I was gaping at him, but I just couldn’t get used to being the object of surveillance. Although goodness knows I should be. But it was always creepy. Always.

It was nice that the other non-HYDRA people in the car turned to give him Looks of Death. Aww. Natasha even shoved her elbow sharply into his ribs. True friend.

The closer we got to our end location, the squirrelier Jasper acted.

“HYDRA doesn't like leaks.”

Sam, 100% done with our captive, “So why don't you try sticking a cork in it.”

All business, Nat and Steve reviewed the plan and Jasper apparently just realized his part in it.

“What?! Are you crazy? That is a terrible, terrible idea!”

Something landed on the roof of the car. And then an arm smashed his window and pulled Jasper through it. Into oncoming traffic. He barely even had time for a full scream.

Nor did we.

Eventhough I’d seen her in action, experiencing Natasha move was crazy impressive. Barely having time to process Jasper’s defenestration, she unbuckled my seatbelt and unceremoniously shoved me down below the seats. As she propelled herself into Steve’s lap and pulled his head down while pushing Sam away. In the span of about 2 seconds.

Avoiding the bullets that came at us through the roof. Where my head was. And Steve’s. And Sam’s.

Steve yanked the emergency break and whoever was surfing our car continued his momentum to tumble ahead of us. Metal arm scratching the street to stall his progress.

Not just stall. The damn thing gouged into the asphalt.

“What The Hell Is That?!” No one answered me.

Even just standing still, the figure was terrifying. There was such promise of violence.

Nat raised her gun. Someone rammed into us from behind. Hard. My shoulders struck the back of the seats in front of me, but there was no time to even feel if it hurt. Whoever hit us was pushing us towards the figure.

And I knew who it was from Nat’s description. Who it had to be. Metal arm. Mask.

The Winter Soldier.
My hindbrain was scrambling back as far and as fast as it could. I did not want to be any closer to whoever, whatever he was than I had to be.

The sonofabitch flipped onto the car again and more glass shattered around me. A sound that I would forever deny, a squeaky EEP, escaped. I couldn’t help it any more than the shocked curse Sam made as the FREAKING STEERING WHEEL was ripped out of his hands through the windshield.

The car was being dismantled while we were still inside it!

Proving how much better at her job she was than I was at mine, Natasha channeled her training and fired at the heavy footsteps above us. Which disappeared, just in time for us to be hit from behind again.

Then things happened very quickly. Without the wheel to control our direction after the impact, we ricocheted off the concrete barrier, which saved us from migrating into traffic. Small mercies.

From the barriers, we fishtailed. Uncontrollably. Center of balance gone.

Steve looked over his shoulder at me, expression helpless, scared. “Kate! Jump!” Back at the two beside him, “Hang on!”

In the space of a single inhale, he grabbed Nat and Sam, broke open his door, caught my wide eyes one more time, and pulled them out.

I had no time. Not fast enough. Again.

The world turned and spun and spun and I was in the middle of glass and metal-filled clothing dryer. The freeway and the sky and the upholstery became a kaleidoscope. Thrusting me back into a wet night, slick roads, and the face I knew so well, deformed into a twisted tangle.

And then I was free.

Through the windshield, through the back window, out the side. I don’t know.

Still I tumbled, hard, bringing my limbs in tight to stop flailing.

Unconsciousness never called me, the road under my face never dimmed. But everything sounded underwater. Far away.

Only my breath was loud.

It took a moment for my eyes to focus on anything but the shine from the diamonds surrounding me. Beautiful. The one nearest to my fingers was rough and skittered away at my touch. Beyond the scattered pieces of sunshine, bright colors began to merge into shapes.

Sitting up, I looked at my hands. Fingers wiggled. Toes moved inside my shoes. It was hard to think. Slow. Everything was slow.

My left side hurt the most. Scraped, bleeding. A sharp, hot pain in my shoulder. But alive.

Drumming very loud and very close and getting closer sent me crab-walking backwards until my back was against a wall.

No, not drums. But fast and biting. It popped whatever soap bubble my head was in and everything hit light speed.
High caliber gunfire. Too close together to be anything than automatic.

The wall shielding me was our wreckage. Shapes hiding behind cars were Nat and Sam. Yelling my name and gesturing me over. But I didn’t see Steve? Where was Steve?!

I had been down less than 30 seconds. Which felt like an hour. The theory of relativity, I suppose.

Couldn’t get to my friends in time. But I could still help. Getting to my feet and picking up a heavy piece of littered car part, I snuck around the side of the wreck. Playing peekaboo with The Soldier and several armed henchmen. As you do.

It was probably too late for full coverup, thank you cellphone cameras, but I slid the small metal circles off Tony’s handles, pulled them apart to show delicate mesh between them, stuck them behind my ears, and activated the mask that covered the lower half of my face any way.

See Mr. Fancy Robo-Killer, you aren’t the only one with impressive gear.

Front Henchmen opened fire at Nat and Sam, stopping traffic on both sides now. Rear Henchmen were so focused on the targets ahead, that two fell victim to my car part o’ doom before the last turned around.

And fired at me.

Or at the space where my face was, had the blue not stopped the shells. I advanced, keeping the downed car between me and The Soldier, hiding as much as I could. One swept leg and some blunt force trauma later, the shooter was down too. I deactivated the blue shield. Waste not.

Holy shit. Carolain’s training was no joke. I hadn’t even hesitated before engaging that guy. That was new. And something to consider later.

“Damn. Didn’t know you had it in you,” said a voice from behind me. I turned so quickly, it took a moment for the world to catch up.

“Sam!”

His faced changed to sharp concern. “You OK?”

Huh? Oh. The hand that rubbed across my brow came back warm and wet. But I didn’t feel much broken skin. If small wounds were nearly healed, I probably didn’t have any big time damage. Yay healing powers!

“All good.”

He gawked at me for a moment before grinning. “Cool trick.”

We started sneaking over to the edge of the overpass and reflexively ducted as a large explosion threw Nat off the overpass. Or at least she let it appear that way. God, that was close.

“We’re all a little mad here.” Giggle. OK. Maybe I had a little internal head trauma after all. “We’ve gotta help them!”

More gunfire. From below this time. Nat maybe? She did love her guns. Returning fire and one homicidal problem solved itself as The Soldier jumped off the edge onto a car below. Just jumped. Like it was nothing. And then stalked her like the apex predator he was.

Front Henchmen slide down ropes beside him and immediately began shooting with some massive
sounding thing. At Steve. Of course at Steve.

From somewhere, Sam pulled a knife. “On it.” He charged the last henchman near us and proved what a well-trained person can do with a small blade when properly motivated. Nice.

I looked at the ground. We weren’t so high that vertigo was a real issue, thank Newton. Broken legs would take too long to heal for me to be helpful. And sounded uber painful. Definitely marking that as a last resort. But there were ropes. Granted, I had zero mountain climbing skill, but they were still a better option than doing nothing. With a deep breath, I clambered up to balance on the itty bitty ledge.

Seeing my intent, Sam yelled, “Wait!”

Below us, Steve used his shield to redirect weapons fire back at the Front Henchmen. Nifty trick. Ten points to Gryffindor! Yes. Definite head injury.

“I got this!”

I wasn’t sure if he meant me or Steve, but took it as my queue anyway. Trying to ignore the shooting between Sam and the remaining Henchmen, I tightened my grip and… felt like one of those sticky creatures little kids threw at the wall to watch the things walk down the wall. Small movements at first, but then quickly moving to big and barely controlled before landing sloppily on the ground. But I made it. No broken bones. No bullet holes. A win in my book.

It didn’t take long to catch up to my team. Or to figure out where they were going. Just follow the crowd of screaming, fleeing people and run contra-flow.

Turns out, a crowd of screaming, fleeing people also screamed and fled from me. In my mask. One woman actually scooped up her kid as he pointed at me and cried.

It was hard not to take it personally. But as long as they were headed away from danger, that’s all that mattered.

I got to Nat just as she was shot. Pulling her back into the relative cover of an abandoned car, it was odd to see so much blood on my hands that wasn’t my own.

We turned just in time to see The Soldier take aim and fire. Shells tinkled down at our feet as the blue sheltered us.

Sam had yet to make his reappearance; who knew what was happening for him right now. Steve was fending off the attack of an enhanced psychopath. Nat hurt was the last straw. Feeling my pulse ping like sonar from behind my eyes to the tips of my fingers, I was well and truly pissed. You don’t get to hunt and hurt my friends.

She wasn’t in good shape, but of the two of them, Steve needed more immediate help. With wide eyes and a shake of her head at sussing out my plan, she whispered, “Are you insane?!”

Hearing the resounding BONGGGG of The Soldier’s metal fist hitting Steve’s shield shook my bones. Time to get into the ring.

I barely registered Steve’s panicked sounding, “KATE NO!”

Handles clicked together and my sword cut through The Soldier’s gun. I had a brief moment to see that the glow was more white than blue before he rolled back and pulled out another, only getting off a few truncated rounds before I sliced through that one too.
Cold, angry eyes glared at me over his mask. Bring it on, Cranky. I’m done playing.

I spun low and kicked out to hit his legs, fury fueling my speed. He jumped higher than a man should be able to and came down with The Arm like a hammer. I had just enough time to split the handle and summon two fans. They crossed and blocked his hit. But pushed me to my knee.

I rolled and he followed, swinging. Back on my feet, I attacked again. Swirling and slicing and trying to find a hole in his defense. He was heavy and, damn, was he fast. But I was fast too. He couldn’t reach through the blue to hit me, but every blow that landed reverberated down my skeleton.

But our dance had given Steve sufficient time to come up on his other side.

The Soldier drew a handgun and was distracted enough by the bullets ricocheting off Steve’s shield that I could wrench it from his hand. It jammed in mine when I tried to fire it. Guns were really not my thing.

Trapped between us, he advanced and retreated so fluidly, it seemed like choreography. Steve got his human arm and I got the metal. My fan blades skittered down the edge of it, making it screech.

And then he took the shield from Steve. Oooooh shit. And like a fool, he tossed it away. Granted, it was, holy shit, halfway into the side of a van, but he still threw it.

Back to knives. The man was deadly with a gun, but a damn dervish with a blade.

Steve and I were nearly side-by-side now. How The Soldier balanced us was impressive. I was by far the less skilled fighter, the few brain cells I had not dedicated to this exchange were amazed that I was still alive, but provided enough interference to split his focus.

The rage I felt helped me hold my ground, but barely. I blocked, parried, thrust, cut, sliced, countered, and tried my damnedest to break his rhythm. But he just adapted. While fighting Steve. Captain Freaking America.

I did not, however, successfully dodge a strike to my left shoulder. There was a pop and the recently repaired joint drooped. I yelped, suddenly only able to focus on the pain. God DAMN that hurt!

Steve deflected the metal fist that shot out toward my head and shoved me out of the way.

Stumbling, I could only watch as a knife bit through van like a can opener, chasing his head. Tactician that he was, Steve yanked his shield back and used its side to dig into The Arm. Hell yes!

A strategic flip to evade Steve and The Soldier’s mask fell to the ground. Payment for his escape.

I knew that face. How did I know it?

Steve recognized him first, astonishment and disbelief plain in his face and open stance.

“Bucky?”

...Oh my God.

It couldn’t be. It literally couldn’t be.

I wanted to look at Steve, but worried if I did, if I’d miss the next attack. All my righteous energy
bled out onto the ground and left me feeling like a deflated balloon. Exhausted.

Speaking for the first time, The Soldier demanded, “Who the hell is Bucky?”

And then he was kicked over by a well-timed Falcon appearance and nearly shot with a grenade launcher. From Natasha. Injured, badass Natasha. OK, girl. I see you. Hell yeah.

The smoke cleared and The Soldier was gone.

Bucky. Was gone.

Quickly replaced by a whole aggressive contingent of hypermasculine HYDRA assholes. Lead by the biggest one of them all. Rumlow. I super hated that guy.

We had no more fight left in us. Steve was in shock. Nat was shot. My shoulder was quickly healing without being put back in place, making my teeth ache from clenching so hard through the pain. Sam was outnumbered.

I’d never been arrested before. If that’s what this actually was. But then, I’d never been kidnapped either. No matter what, it had been one hell of a day. And it didn't feel like it was over yet.

Chapter End Notes

He's here! Bucky is finally here! He's going to be an interesting one to write.

Man, I really wanted to work in A Big Moment for Kate and Steve in this chapter, but a fleeting look and some comfort was all they got this time.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve’s head spun and the back of his hand came back bloody when he wiped it across his nose. It wasn’t broken, but still hurt like a sonofabitch. And he’d dropped the small bag of groceries his ma’d sent him out to buy. Swell.

Pinching the bridge of his nose and leaning forward, a stance he was very familiar with, his voice came out congested and nasal. “Buck, ya didn’t have to do that. I’dda been fine.”

Trying to get his dark hair under control, his street fighter-in-arms let out an amused huff. “Yeah, I know. You were knocking their blocks off.”

On his way home from the market, Steve had come across Bucky with a small group of neighborhood guys. Waving at his friend had caught the group’s attention and it had begun. Taunting. Name calling. Nothing original. As if Steve didn’t already know that he was short and skinny. That girls only went with him out of pity.

Which is when Bucky started throwing punches. And, good friend that he was, Steve jumped right on in. The fight hadn’t lasted long. The group was more bark than bite.

Anger born of embarrassment quickly faded to resignation. This wasn’t the first time Bucky had stepped in and defended him and probably wouldn’t be the last. But goddamnit, he shouldn’t have to.

“You don’t have to see me when you’re with the guys. It’s OK. I know we’re still friends.” He blamed the watery eyes on his nearly-broken nose. He was so tired of being weak.

“Hey!” When Steve couldn’t bring his head up to meet his friend’s eyes, a bloody-knuckled hand came up to rest on his shoulder. “I’ll always know you. Doesn’t matter who’s around. You’re my brother. Even when you attract trouble like a magnet.”

Releasing the smaller man, Bucky started pick up dropped vegetables to give Steve a chance to collect himself.

A refilled crumpled grocery sack later, he was ready to speak again. “Thanks Buck.” He sheepishly returned the boyish grin he knew so well.

“Any time, pal.”

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Steve was numb. He could hear Rumlow and Rollins talking, but it was far away. Being shoved to his knees, put in cuffs at the wrists and ankles, and metal bars around his chest. So far away. And he didn’t care. It didn’t matter. None of it mattered.

Bucky was alive. And didn’t recognize him. Didn’t even seem to know himself.

Nowhere in that furious mask did Steve recognize his friend. Except he was unmistakable. He knew that face, as surely as he knew his own.
It was Bucky.

But how? Why? What did this mean? And what THE HELL had happened to his friend?

“It was him. He looked right at me like he didn't even know me.”

Sam, “How's that even possible? It was like seventy years ago.”

Feeling like it punched him right in the gut, he knew. “Zola. Bucky's whole unit was captured in '43, Zola experimented on him. Whatever he did helped Bucky survive the fall.”

Beside him, Kate caught on. “They must have found him and…”

He nodded.

“None of that's your fault, Steve.” Natasha ground out.

She was wrong. “Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.”

“Nat? Hey, hey! Keep those eyes open. Sam, she’s been shot. Can you reach her? We have to stop the bleeding.” Kate’s voice held a note of command to it that he didn’t normally hear. As Sam tried to stretch his own chains to reach the Russian, Steve looked at Kate.

Like him, she was in specially-made restraints. Her palms were secured to her forearms in metal bands. She couldn’t use her power without cutting off her own arms. Effective, in a sadistic kind of way.

She was hurt. He’d heard her shoulder crack during the fight and it hung too low to be in the socket. The cuffs were obviously heavy, by the way she grimaced each time they caused her arms to droop and pull on the injured joint. Pain had made her pale and the bruises from where The Winter Soldier… Bucky… had hit her stood out, but the strength in her concern for Nat was reassuring.

She hardly seemed like the furious woman that fought beside him only minutes ago. He wasn’t sure who that was. Or what to think about it. Not that he could focus on that right now.

Unable to reach the gunshot wound, Sam turned to their captors and demanded, “We need to get a doctor here. We don't put pressure on that wound, she's gonna bleed out here in the truck.”

Kate was getting agitated beside him. “Yo! Low rent Shadow Stormtrooper. Yeah, you. You going to do something to help or just sit there with your blaster up your ass?”

Sam looked at Kate incredulously. Until one of the guards pulled out an electric rod and attacked and incapacitated the other guard.

Maria Hill? What the hell was she doing here?

“Ah. That thing was squeezing my brain.” The look on Sam’s face would have been funny, if they were in a different situation. “Low rent Shadow Stormtrooper. Really?” To him, she asked, “And who's this guy?”

“Sam. He's a friend.”

Maria was already patting down the unconscious guard for his keys. “We’ve got about four minutes until we reach the rendezvous. There’s a van waiting that’ll take us to secure location outside the city.” Surprisingly, she freed Kate first, handing over the handles from her pockets.
“We need a hole.”

The redheaded nodded as she stretched the kinks out of her good arm. “On it.”

He hadn’t seen her use her power one handed yet. She’d mentioned something, but seeing it was impressive. She was already halfway through cutting through the truck floor when Nat and Sam were freed, yet already applying the much needed pressure to her wound. Hill started on the bars across his legs.

“90 seconds.”

They froze as a loud metallic THWANG announced the completion of their exit, the cut away piece falling loudly on the swiftly moving street below. After a few moments when nothing was heard from the driver, Maria tried his locks again. Unsuccessfully.

“Damnit. It won’t work. You’ve got a different kind of lock. The driver must have it.”

He smiled grimly. “It’s like they don’t trust me.” But why did the guard have keys to Kate’s restraints?

“70 seconds.”

With a sharp intake of breath, Kate stood and turned to him. “I got this. But hold very, very still.”

Blue light lit up her focused face like a welding torch. She sliced through the lock on the bar of his chest almost delicately until it popped free. Leg completed next.

Crouched, she leaned her head against his knee for a moment and caught her breath.

“You OK?” Her face was pinched and she had to shake her head a little before her eyes focused.

“I could use a minute. And a protopacket. Or three.” The energy packets had been confiscated with their weapons.

“30 seconds. Sorry.”

The woman at his side sighed. “Or not.”

“You’re doing great.”

She smiled tiredly at him, tugging at something inside him when he saw just how drained she was.

With 5 seconds to spare, each of them crouched by the hole, ready. The truck stopped at a red light. Maria jumped straight down.

He blinked. Oh. Below them a manhole cover had been slid aside, allowing them direct access to the sewer. Out of sight of the trail cars and borrowed camera eyes of SHIELD/HYDRA. Smart.

“Aw man. Some smells you never get out.” Sam did not look excited, but jumped down anyway.

Nat followed, although not as gracefully as he’d seen her move before.

“If I jump, I’ll pass out.” Kate didn’t look like she was exaggerating, swaying slightly. Shit.

“I’ll catch you. Count to three and jump.”

It wasn’t a long drop into the dark, twelve feet maybe. Hill was passing out light sticks from a bag
she didn’t have before. He appreciated the foresight.

Good to his word, Steve caught his friend, a pained, strangled noise escaping her. Behind him, Sam shuffled up the metal ladder and pulled the manhole closed with a grunt.

Knees buckling, Kate grabbed a fist full of his tshirt to stop from dropping and sagged against him. Her panting breath was warm on his chest.

Relieved, dark eyes stared up at him in surprise. “You actually caught me!”

“Said I would.” She grinned up at him and he couldn’t help but return it.

Her gaze shifted to his mouth and he remembered coffee. How her body moved under his hands. The same that pressed against him now. How soft-

“We’re three blocks southwest down here then back to the surface where there’s a van waiting. Hill’s voice snapped his head back. Leaning in?! What was he doing?! They just escaped, were on the run, in a sewer, with injuries. Timing impeccable as always. “Time to move.” Yes. It was.

With a slightly stunned expression that she quickly hid from him, Kate moved away to walk next to Hill.

Sam sidled up next to him as the women gained some ground.

“Hey man. Looks like you got a little something right...” gesturing to his disheveled shirt with a knowing grin.

Self-consciously, Steve adjusted his collar. “Shut up.”

“No really, that was a nice little moment back there.”

“Sam.”

They’d made it about two blocks before Nat stumbled against Sam, who’d been halfway supporting her.

“Wait!” Kate moved over to her friend. “Bring the light rods over here. I need to see. And a belt. And some clean cloth, if you’ve got any.” Clean? Here?

Hill huffed in annoyance. “We don’t have time.”

“Find it. We’re doing this now.” Her voice was strong. Commanding. He liked it.

For fuck’s sake. Knock it off.

It was testament to how badly she felt that Natasha didn’t argue or put on a brave face. Since she was one-handed, Kate talked them through how to use Steve’s belt and Sam’s undershirt to fashion a shoulder tourniquet. It wouldn’t hold forever, but it would for now.

He tended to forget what it was that initially brought her up to the roof that day. Nothing flashy. She didn’t want attention. Just to help.

There’d been a van waiting for them exactly where Hill said there’d be. The ride outside of the city had been quiet, each rider running over the day’s events. Steve couldn’t keep his thoughts from focusing on any one thing. HYDRA’s reemergence. The Winter Soldier and... is Bucky. Kate fighting beside him. Seeing Sam as Falcon. Natasha bleeding. Rumlow, perhaps not the
surprise he should have been. Bucky. Bucky. Whatever was coming next.

Exhausted. He was just exhausted.

Inside the safe house, well less of a house than maybe a dam, Steve watched as a slightly limping Sam handed off a pale and solemn Natasha to a doctor. Kate lagged behind, propped up with his help. He tried not to let the occasional nudge against his own bruises to show on his face.

But then, he couldn’t help the shock that showed not minutes later.

“About damn time.”

Fury. Alive. He hadn’t thought anything else could have shocked him today. Wrong again.

“Lacerated spinal column, cracked sternum, shattered collarbone, perforated liver, one hell of a headache.”

Good God. Amazing the man was still alive. Oh, and a collapsed lung.

Despite having her wounds actively tended, Natasha was the first to speak, but echoed his thoughts.

“They cut you open. Your heart stopped.”

Fury replied, “Tetrodotoxin B. Slows the pulse to one beat a minute. Banner developed it for stress. Didn’t work so great for him, but we found a use for it.” Turning his one good eye to focus on Kate, “Speaking of Banner’s work, Stark sent over a package for you. Dr. Russo?”

The graying doctor finished tying off Nat’s bandages and retrieved a box from behind one of the plastic curtains creating the de facto surgical room.

A elegant eyebrow quirked up as she examined the box. Sam held it for her, as her shoulder hadn’t been reset yet. Blood beating muscle on the triage hierarchy. “It’s been opened. That’s a federal offense. And how did Tony know where to send it? Or that I need it?” Excellent questions.

Deadpanned, “Put it on my tab. And I may have contacted him through unofficial channels. Thought you might need a little backup.”

Steve could feel himself bristling. “She has backup.” Nat and Sam both nodded. Her sunshine smile hit him like a searchlight. Damn. He’d missed that.

“Protopackets!” Her delighted exclamation was warming. “Like, a lot of them.” Her eyes widened and her voice almost seemed reverent. “New handles. Wow. A… giant wad of cash… OK.” He watched her unfold a sheet of paper, read it, smile, and then tuck it back in the box. “Aw. He sent me a care package.”

“Nothing for the rest of us? Sounds right.” Nat’s voice still wasn’t as strong as he’d like. But her spirit hadn’t flagged once. Made him respect the hell out of her even more.

The doctor approached Kate, but she redirected him to Sam. She fumbled trying to open a packet one-handed and when Steve reached out to help, batted his hands away with, “Eyes front Rogers.”

Right, back to the discussion at hand. “Why all the secrecy? Why not just tell us?”

Hill answered, “Any attempt on the director's life had to look successful.”
Fury, “Can’t kill you if you’re already dead. Besides, I wasn’t sure who to trust.”

Steve could completely understand that.

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Her yell of pain crawled up his spine and made his ears ring. He’d been forbidden to be the one to reset her shoulder as his strength may have accidentally injured the joint further, which would have killed him. And he wasn’t a doctor, which sealed it.

Instead, he’d held her still as Dr. Russo maneuvered her into position and seemed to pull very hard until a deep pop echoed off the concrete walls. After being set into a sling and with instructions to apply the blue squishy ice pack to the shoulder and swallow some painkillers, the doctor left them alone. The others were grabbing a quick meal and before they’d agreed to reconvene to discuss next steps.

He moved around to stand in front of her, needing visual confirmation that she was OK. After several of those packets and some medical treatment, the pain was mostly gone from her face.

With gentle movements, he brushed back the hair that had fallen free of her ponytail and tucked it behind her ears.

He was suddenly very aware that he hadn’t been this close to her, alone, in a long time.

“What?”

“Hmm?” He couldn’t help but trace the shape of her face, fingertips catching on small, rough patches of dried blood at her hairline.

“You’re looking at me like I’m made of porcelain. I’m not broken. Give me an hour, a sandwich, and shower and I’m good to go. Slide a nap in there and the world is my oyster.”

Such a smartmouth.

“I know you’re not porcelain. That fighting you did, which was against orders by the way… not bad, Dr. Wallace. Although you dropped your left elbow, which is why he got a hit through- Hey OW!”

She pulled away from poking him in his bruised ribs. “Well Captain Rogers, it seems like all of us walked away from that a little worse for wear.”

He wiggled to the side to evade her finger and laughed. Wholeheartedly. Ah, God. He needed that.

This time it was her gaze that looked him over. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah, just bruises. I’ll heal in a couple of hours.”

She smiled ruefully and smoothed down the front of his tshirt. It was interesting and soothing. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

His voice was quiet. “I know.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “Honestly… I have no idea. Or how much it matters today.”

Warm, tentative fingers pushed between his own.
“Hey. Look at me, big guy.” He did. She was so serious. “Of course what you think and feel matters. Of course it does. You’ve had one hell of a day. Which is just part of what is turning out to be the weekend from hell. Which seems to be an extension of your experience since waking up. Yet all of that pales in the face of the face we just saw. I can’t imagine… If I saw… The fact that you’re still standing-”

He closed the gap between them and kissed her.

He wasn’t hurried, didn’t rush. This wasn’t the fever of New York. Everything she was saying, the way she said it. The fierce image of her fighting alongside him and then nudging his foot at Christmas, that soft, happy smile on her face. He was overcome.

Making no move to release her hand, he slid his other up the soft curves of her neck, angling for more. Although the sling blocked her some, she was warm and delightfully soft against his chest as she pushed to get closer. Not impatient, but rising up to meet him.

God. She was so sweet.

He broke the kiss to breathe. Thinking they were done. Apparently, they weren’t. Pulling down on his hand, she leaned up and took his breath away with just his name. He kissed her again, releasing her head, hand skimming behind to hold her. He’d missed their casual hugs. This was even better.

Steve wasn’t sure how long they were there and didn’t care. He was lost. Without urgency, silken lips and teasing tongue kept drawing him in. Occasionally, a little sigh would escape her and a rumble of his own seemed to answer. He was lost.

Eventually, the spell was broken by a different kind of sound. Her stomach growled. She broke away with a laugh and flush that he was a little proud to be responsible for.

Resting against him, she murmured, “Timing is everything.”

He tilted her face back up and answered, “Isn’t it.”

One final slow, sliding kiss and they let go. He liked that her eyes stayed closed for a moment or two after he pulled away.

As she began straightening her clothes, he realized that the pleasantly dazed expression she’d worn had become wary. He had to duck down to catch her eyes.

“What?”

After a minute and with a deep breath, she answered, “I’m just waiting. To see what happens.”

Oh? Oh. She’d expected him to run like he had last time. “Still here.”

A wheel turned inside that head and a more shrewd look appeared. “If you did that because you think I’m weak or are trying to convince me to stay and tend the home fires, bum shoulder and super soldier or not, I will kick your ass from here to Tuesday. You get me?”

Don’t smile, don’t smile. She’s serious. “Yes ma’am.” He let his voice drop lower and closed the gap between them again. “And no one could call you weak. You’re part of all this now. Whether you like it or not.”

She glared up at him, not backing down, defiant but thoughtful. He liked what he saw there.
“I think I do.”

He wanted to kiss her again, the urge to draw her even closer strong, but there wasn’t time. So he backed up a respectable distance. “Good. Me too. Lunch?”

She nodded. “Lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

Well. Hopefully the kiss happened at a believable moment. (fingers crossed)

Just a heads up that my next update will probably be a week late. I have a little medical thing that may keep me down for a few days. Nothing terrible or major, but combined with the Storming of the Castle in the next chapter or two, I don't want to rush it.

Here’s a question for you, I keep vacillating - what Insight takedown team should Kate be on? With Sam or Steve? Of course I'm leaning to Steve, but it may make more logical sense for the two non-super soldiers to be a pair.

PS - HOLY CRAP YOU GUYS. I broke 100,000 words! When I started this, I wasn't sure how long it was going to be and I still don't. Thank you for sticking with me all these many chapters later!
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything about this place was hard. The walls. The damned chairs. The facial expressions of the people gathered around the table. The decision before them. Us. Before us.

Six people, three identical computer chip blades, and a plan under development. Against the decades-laid plans of HYDRA, an unknown number of double agents, STRIKE, and, The Winter Soldier. With millions of people on the line. Oh yes. Bound for success, we were.

I’d agreed with Steve when he’d said that I was in it now. I was. I am. There was a small voice in the back of my lizard brain that told me to run. Far. Hide. That everything would change and I would be left exposed. Vulnerable. But it was shouted down by the stronger voice that saw the scales and knew them to be true. Millions of lives or one life. The team needed all the help it could get. And I was not about to let them down. Not even if my life depended on it.

Which it did.

There was a brief discussion about contacting Tony, Bruce, and Thor, but whatever would happen next would happen too soon for them to arrive. Although Tony’s show of support with a simple note of ‘Give ’em hell, Sparky,’ had meant so much. I missed him way more than I’d expected.

Fury, “We have to assume everyone aboard those carriers is HYDRA. We need to get pass them, insert the server blades, and maybe, just maybe, we can salvage what's left…”

To no one’s shock, Steve disagreed. “We're not salvaging anything. We're not just taking down the carriers, Nick, we're taking down SHIELD.” So that was now HYDRA, STRIKE, The Winter Soldier, and SHIELD. Cool cool. “You gave me this mission, this is how it ends. SHIELD’s been compromised, you said so yourself. HYDRA grew right under your nose and nobody noticed.”

The two men postured a bit, each thinking they were right. I suppose they both were, so some extent.

Finally, a nearly beaten Fury almost apologized. “Look, I didn't know about Barnes.”

I winced. Granted Bucky was the metal elephant in the room, but perhaps now was not the time to address it.

Steve was done with Fury’s shit. “Even if you have, would you have told me? Or would you have compartmentalized that too? SHIELD, HYDRA, it all goes.”

Surprisingly, Agent Hill agreed.

From his seat at the table’s head, a now defunct reminder of who was in charge, the Director looked to each of us, gathering our buy-in.

Nat just leaned back like the badass she was, face as solemn as church. Someone I want to be when I grow up.

At my turn, my voice deserted me, restricted by a sudden lump in my throat. I nodded and it was enough.
“Don’t look at me. I do what he does, just slower.” Damn, Sam. Nice.

Defeated now, Fury, “Well... Looks like you're giving the orders now, Captain.”

Steve stood straighter, the weight of our gazes and so much more heavy on his shoulders. I knew the Captain could handle it, but I was so very sorry that it was something else for Steve to carry.

***

It was Nat’s turn to use the shower facilities, so a vaguely refreshed Sam and I walked out to join Steve on the bridge into the dam. He looked so alone.

With the object of our concern on the far end of the bridge, Sam said, “You done anything like this before?”

“Storming the castle, you mean? No. You?”

“Yes and no. I’ve flown combat missions into enemy occupied territory that had low success odds, but this... I think the only person who’s done something like this is that man right there. So I think that tips the odds just a little in our favor, don’t you?”

“You’re a positive guy, you know that?”

A rueful grin was my answer. “One of my many charms.” He stopped walking and turned to me. “When it comes time, when this is all over and you want to talk to someone that's been there, I’ll be there.”

A different sort of lump in my throat this time. “Thanks.”

The cheeky look was back. “Although I may not be the only one.”

The heat in my cheeks distracted from the moment, which I suspect was his goal. Sneaky, clever Sam.

“Shut up.”

He laughed and we started walking again.

“You’re starting to sound just like him, you know?”

My turn to laugh. “That such a bad thing?”

“No. No, it is not.”

***

Sam was already moving back towards the dam. I wanted to run after Steve. Chase him down and tell him to be safe. Not do anything stupid. Or hero. Or stupidly heroic. That the way he spoke about meeting Bucky again terrified me. Because it didn’t matter that I was confused about what may or may not be between us. He was my friend and I didn’t want, couldn’t lose him because he depended on a memory to save him.

That when he kissed me like that, soft and sweet, hand in mine, I was lost. It had felt unreal, how such a big guy could be so gentle.

Instead I watched him go. I had my own preparations to start.
Fury’s hideaway had an interesting closet. A variety of sizes and selections from scrubs to wet suits to evening wear. Happily, there were also a few SHIELD combat suits. Maria had found a long, narrow one that would fit her easily and was helping me find a shorter, curvier one for me.

I missed the suit Tony had made for me, but it was safely back at Sam’s. Or I assumed it was. Who knew if his place had been raided. The thought was sobering. He was a good man and despite being brave/foolhardy enough to help us, didn’t deserve his life being turned upside down. Steve attracted a very high class of people as friends, that was for sure.

“You’ll have to wear your hair up.” Maria’s voice broke through my thoughts. “Regulations dictate that hair should be tidy and off the neck.” She pointed to her own and I nodded.

“I hadn’t thought of that. Thanks.” I held up an appropriately sized suit. “This one maybe?”

She narrowed her eyes in consideration. “That’s an older design. It’ll do if we can’t find anything else, but let’s keep looking.”

I wasn’t sure if I liked Maria exactly. I didn’t dislike her, but couldn’t get a read on the agent. She seemed incredibly competent and Fury trusted her, points in her favor. She’d offered to help me in here, but there was the feeling of being weighed. Guess I’d just have to wait to see if I passed muster.

I zipped up the suit and looked at myself in the cracked full length mirror. A onesie was a strange choice for a uniform. Did SHIELD agents have bladders so well trained that as soon as the zip went up, the bio needs went down? Obviously designed by a man.

Echoing Maria’s movements to twist and turn and offer Tai Chi fighting movements, she nodded in approval. “Not bad… Murphy. You’ll do.”

Huh? I looked down and saw that the suit came with a name tag. Murphy. I blinked at it for a moment, wondering who she was. How Fury got her suit and where she was now. Hopefully, she was SHIELD and not HYDRA.

I undressed as quickly as I could, feeling suddenly suffocated. Uniforms served many purposes, one of which was to make the wearer feel a part of a larger unit. One of many. Comfort in numbers.

But it wasn’t comforting. It was too tight. Wearing another woman’s clothes. I wasn’t SHIELD. I wasn’t military. I was a Humanities professor playing dress up in a deadly game that was all too real.

“ Weird feeling, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Putting on a uniform for the first time.”

Oh. Hard to tell if she thought I was excited or freaked out. Probably better if she didn’t know the full truth.

“Yeah. Definitely weird. The last time I wore clothes that matched someone else’s, I was a bridesmaid.” Purple. Taffeta. Mutton-sleeved nightmare.
She folded the suit for me as I’d dressed and handed it over to me with a snarky smile. “At least you can have these altered and wear them again.”

Maria Hill. Driest Snark Mistress ever. Right then, I decided that I liked her.

***

Whatever this thing was that I was eating, it wasn’t beef stroganoff. Oh, it was labelled beef stroganoff. And maybe that’s what it dreamed of being, like people singing in the shower dreamed of being on Broadway. What it actually was was brown. Brown in color. Brown in texture. Brown in flavor.

I ate it because the other MRE choices were enchiladas and chilli. I actually loved enchiladas and chilli and didn’t want to ruin them forever. Chewing as fast as I could to avoid it lingering in my mouth longer than was necessary.

And yet Nat, Sam, and Steve tucked in like it was actually food. Sometimes I didn’t understand them at all.

Our dinner conversation swung between intense strategic discussions and stilted pleasantries. It was exhausting and it was about to get less fun.

I’d waited as long as I could for a good opportunity. One of those seven second conversation gaps offered one up.

“So. I owe you an answer for why I didn’t have a car waiting when you came down with Sitwell.” Three pair of eyes focused on me. The others just looked confused but didn’t say anything. How to phrase it without saying I had a panic attack? “I was taking a minute to scope out the street,” Not a lie, “and there was this guy that was taking my picture.”

“Tourist?” Fury asked.

I shook my head. “I thought so at first. But he was definitely taking my picture in particular. And he winked at me and ran away.”

He followed up with, “He couldn’t have been just taking your picture because you’re cute?”

“That’s not what he was doing.” Surprising me, it was Maria that spoke. “She could tell. We can always tell.” Nat bobbed her head in somber agreement.

With a disbelieving smirk, Fury added, “So we’re basing this on women’s intuition?”

Proving their intelligence matched their survival instincts, Sam and Steve instantly froze. Dr. Russo had excused himself a while ago, smart man that he was.

I tried very hard not to snap at him. “And you never had a gut instinct?” Popping my neck, I continued, “He was taking my picture, winked, and ran. No, not ran. He taunted me and when I ran after him, always stayed just ahead of me, looking back and making sure that I saw him. That I was following. He was leading me away. I don’t know where or why. But… I think I know who.”

Steve’s voice was low and furious. “The Ten Rings.”

I nodded.

Nat, “Pretty bold.”
I nodded again.

“But how did they know where we were?” Sam chimed in.

Shrug.

“I don’t know what to do about it or what comes next,” I was so tired. “It seems like a problem for a different weekend. But now you know what I know.”

Dinner ended soon after, but the planning had yet to begin in earnest.

***

The night wind was cool on my face. Everything, every single freaking thing about The Plan raised my blood pressure. I could literally feel the remarkable pulse of it through my brain.

I’d hoped that the walk out to the tree line would’ve burned off some of the impotent energy birthed by our final decision. But the walk had turned into a stomp and the energy had only fed on itself. If I’d been a different academic, I’d be green.

Nat was going to impersonate a member of the World Security Council, which was pretty cool. Fury would make a dramatic entrance as he only seemed to do things dramatically. Maria would support everyone from a hijacked computer terminal. Steve was to replace a chip on a carrier. Sam was to replace a chip on a carrier. Fucking I was to replace a chip on a carrier.

Me. Alone. Sam would get me on the carrier and then, clock ticking, I would make my way through what was essentially occupied territory to replace a guidance chip. And then get out again. And if I failed, if any one of us failed, then all our efforts were moot.

The icing on the stress-cake wasn’t if I didn’t succeed. Oh, the number of suddenly not-alive people would be on my head, but I’d also be not-alive. Which would probably be good, as how does one live with that? At yet, weirdly, that wasn’t what got my goat. What had so impressively gotten my dander up was pure selfishness. We were going to expose all of SHIELD’s secrets. All of them. Including my involvement. My life laid bare. Name, power, complete missions, small though they be. I wouldn’t be seen as another SHIELD agent. Oh no, not me. Close to the Avengers and had powers? I’d be lucky to walk out of the building and not be immediately for “examination and protection.”

In exchange for my participation in tomorrow’s events, I offered my life in all its definitions.

And I was pissed because I wanted to have my cake and eat it too. Career. Powers. Friends. Maybe more than friends. The ability to help. The ability to go grocery shopping without having to wear a disguise. Damnit, I wanted it all.

But then, so did Natasha. And all the loyal SHIELD employees that had worked for much longer than I.

Once again this was about me. That my information was being released made me terrified. That it was without my ability to truly say no was infuriating. And knowing that I was being selfish just made me even madder at myself.

So I was back to being mush. Tomorrow, I’d zip up that borrowed uniform, do my best to replace my chip, remember that I’d voted yes to the data release, and try to remember that I was defined by more than my career.
But tonight, sitting under a tree in the dark, I put my head on my knees and cried.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe not the best end for a Thanksgiving post, but the chapter has good Nat and Steve moments to make up for it! Nat was so calm and collected when she released SHIELD's data in the movie. I'dve been freaking out and terrified. Thus this chapter.

Thank you everybody for your suggestions on what carrier team Kate should be on! I sincerely appreciate the input. I ended up rewriting this twice. She started on Sam's team, then Steve's. But I think I have an idea for her carrier experience that will play to her particular story line well. I hope!

HAPPY THANKSGIVING! I hope you have a wonderful day, no matter your plans.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

A little friendship and fluff before the action starts.

It took a long time before I was ready to go back inside. I wasn’t angry any more, just so terribly cold. And had no idea what the day after tomorrow would look like. Or if there would even be a day after tomorrow. But I was calm. And ready to start facing The Plan head on.

Since the strategy was set, it was a quiet evening for us, all told. An old tube tv and the bunny ears barely made the local news come through. It was background noise. Someone produced a deck of cards and Sam and Steve ran low key game of poker with players that came and went.

I lay awake in the makeshift dormitory listening to them breathing. Even this well hidden, the human tendency towards safety in numbers had us pushing sofas and cushions from various offices and lounges into a large empty room, one of the few with windows.

I felt like a tube of toothpaste that had been stepped on by The Hulk. Two dimensional. Flat and wrung out. And yet, I couldn’t sleep. Rather than toss and turn and risk waking those with the amazing and deeply frustrating ability to sleep tonight, I snuck out on silent, stockinged feet. A short search had furnished me with paper, pen, and envelopes. It took longer to find the words. I sealed the letters and stared at them wondering if I’d said enough.

“That’s a big envelope,” Nat sat down across from me. It was gratifying in a small way to see that she looked worn out too. With my nod of permission, Nat spun the envelope to read the addressee. “Tony?”

Shrug. “Everybody needs an executor.” She nodded with a silent Ah.

I’d ask Dr. Russo to deliver the letter to Tony if I didn’t make it or to return it to me when the dust settled. My requests of the man of iron were fairly simple. Deliver the other letters I’d written, mostly to the team members and Phil. Take care of my bartending guardian angel. Befriend Steve. Marry Pepper, have lots of beautiful genius babies and be happy, an easier request than the one before it. Instructions on burial and asset distribution. I already had a will, but it hadn’t been updated in some time. And now it was passed time.

“I’ve looked all over this damned place and the only alcohol is in med bay. I will not be returning to this safe house the next time I flee a secret terrorist organization.”

I stared at her and burst out laughing. “You never fail to surprise me. Although not shocked that you have a mental AirBnB listing for safehouses. Just out of curiosity, where’s the best one?”

She joined me, grinning. “Rome.” Made sense.

“Worst?”

“Florida.” Also made sense.
“I can’t believe my last meal tomorrow is going to be a peanut butter protein bar.”

“Could be so much worse. Could have raisins.” Ugh, shudder. We listened to the silent hallways for a moment. “Did you know that Carolain was a florist before she was recruited to SHIELD?”

Blink. “Uh, no. I did not.” The intimidating woman that kicked so much hardcore ass was a florist? Blink again.

“Yes. Not everyone has a tragic backstory. Sometimes, they just have drive and talent. It isn’t something she talks about. Thinks people will respect her less. But I think it makes her more impressive.”

Pointed stare.

“Subtle, Romanov.”

Eloquent shrug. “Drive and talent. Trust both and take opportunities when you have them. Or, if you don’t have them, make them.” She leaned over suddenly and grasped my forearms tightly. “If we didn’t think you could do this, you wouldn’t be doing it. I don’t care how stubborn you are. If you don’t trust yourself, trust us. Fury, me, Steve. Captain America thinks you can do it. Believe in us. We believe in you.”

My eyes were watery again. I nodded.

She continued. “Don’t get killed. I’ll be so pissed at you if you die.”

“Back at you, sister.”

Something in what I said brought out the emotion in her too. She blinked rapidly and let me go. Soft footsteps padded down the bare hallway towards us.

Nat left with a nod to Steve as he entered the room. This was really turning out to be quite the high traffic area.

His hair was ruffled from sleep and he needed a shave. But the look definitely worked. The vaguely too small shirt and baggy sweatpants helped too. My goodness.

We hadn’t talked about the kisses since they happened. Many, many other priorities. I wasn’t sure whether I was grateful or disappointed. Despite my conflicted feelings about starting something with a friend, I did want to do it again though. That much I knew.

He sat on the sofa and turned on the tv. Flipping through the Ginsu knives and must-have nonstick skillets, he eventually settled on a familiar movie. The occasional static line ran up and down the screen.

He patted the sofa and I joined him.

“Can’t sleep?” His voice was deep and rumbly. It was… very pleasant. He cleared his throat.

Drawing my legs up under me, I snuggled into the worn upholstery. The sweatshirt and pants I’d found for sleeping were comfortable but hadn’t managed to fend off the chill that had settled so deep inside. “Didn’t mean to wake you, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

We watched Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks talk quietly on screen. “I love this movie. They don’t
make too many romantic comedies any more.”

“They did when I was a kid. *Bringing Up Baby, Meet Me in St. Louis, The Philadelphia Story.* Bucky would sneak me in the back and we’d catch a double feature. Especially in the summer. The theaters were cool inside. Why don’t they make them any more?”

“I guess we got jaded. Boy meets girl seems too simple now. Is girl too quirky for our apple pie hero? Does she have a boy back home already? Does boy have a boy back home? Were they secretly trying to ruin the other’s life, fake their own death, and run away with the money?” I shivered. “It can’t be a simple thing.”

Blue eyes moved from the screen to me. “Why not? Sometimes things are just simple. Look at her,” gesturing to Meg, “She seems to really like him. He seems to like her too. Simple.”

I smiled. “In theory, yes. But she’s engaged to someone else and is only there because she heard his young son called a radio station to say how lonely his dad was and then wrote her letters pretending to be him. Very Cyrano. She might be attracted to him, but she knows it’s a gamble that could mess up both their lives.”

Well. Wasn’t that saying something.

He yawned hugely and I couldn’t help but giggle at him. “Go back to bed, Steve. I’ll be OK.” Instead he wiggled down and stretched his long body out on the sofa, lower legs in my lap. “That is not what I meant.”

“But I like it here. We haven’t watched a movie together in a while. And besides, you’re warm.” Perfect time for another shiver. He frowned. “You’re not, are you?”

“Not all of us are space heaters.”

He stared at me, a little line forming between his brows. Lifting his arm, he tentatively held out a hand.

Not having any idea what he wanted, I high-fived it.

He sat up and laughed so loud, I was afraid he’d wake the team.

My eyes narrowed and I waited for him to explain. He just shook his head.

“Finish the movie with me. Stay close and I’ll keep you warm.” We both had red ears now. He tentatively put an arm around my shoulders, drawing me close. Quietly, he asked, “Is this OK?”

Too drained to play coy, I rested my head on his chest. “Yeah. This is OK.”

Another half hour and my eyes were starting to close. He yawned again before speaking. “Are you ready to go back to bed now?”

He was so toasty. I burrowed closer. “No.”

Sighing, “I need to... one second.” His arm snuck behind me and wrapped around my waist. And then he leaned back and took me with him. I see what you did there, Rogers. Smooth.

Now partially laying atop him, the lightbulb went off. Wallace, come on. Catch up already. This is what he’d wanted earlier. Hard self eye roll.

It should have been awkward, but it was just nice. His body heat melted through me like my own
personal human torch and I could feel stress-cramped muscles finally relaxing. It was hard to tell what had fended off the chill. His warmth. His closeness. His support. His… rather impressive person...

“Better?” His voice was soft again.

“Almost.” I wiggled my hands under his chest and he yelped.

“Cold!”

I laughed lightly and enjoyed the combination of the feeling of defrosting fingers and the smooth skin above them. “Now I’m better.” I wiggled them in appreciation and he squirmed. Looking down at him, I gave an evil smile. “Captain Rogers, you aren’t ticklish are you?”

Blue eyes darkened, which was interesting, and he wriggled again as I teased him. “You wouldn’t.”

Yawn. “Me? Never. Too cozy.” For someone so well muscled, he was very comfy.

I was almost asleep when he spoke again. “They’re meeting at the top of the Empire State Building?”

“Good place, right?”

I fell asleep to his rumble of agreement.

***

After the initial shock passed of waking up wedged between the back of the sofa and a sleeping Steve, I’d taken a few minutes to luxuriate. It hadn’t been great sleep. And it certainly hadn’t been long enough. But I felt warm and safe and calm. Or so very far beyond freaked out about the day that I’d come full circle back to calm.

It had been a long, long time since I’d woken up being held. Nearly tucked under his chin and hidden from view. Explaining how we both fit on this not overly large sofa, I had to extract my leg from between his before attempting to move the arm that had wrapped around me. When Sam’s embarrassed cough had roused Steve. There was a moment before total alertness had come back into his eyes that had made my breath stutter. Surprise. Vulnerability. Awe. Heat. It made me want to push in closer.

Sam stepped out into the hallway at Steve’s request.

“Sorry.” His voice was doing that gravelly thing again. It made me bunch his tshirt in my hands reflexively, before smoothing it out again in apology. He didn’t seem to mind.

“Good morning.”

A very serious and very close face looked down at me. “Morning.” It wasn’t often that Steve sported true scruff and I couldn’t help but run my fingers across it. One day there would be a beard. And it would be glorious.

Blue eyes closed and my palm was slowly nuzzled by a sleep-warmed cheek. In a snap, my entire world narrowed to the feel of him. His lips were soft under my thumb.

Another cough from the hallway heralded voices. Our time was up.
“I should get dressed.”

I rose to move by him and he caught my hand. Just like he’d done all those months ago. I squeezed it. It wasn’t the time, but I smiled at him as I let go.

The rest of the morning was busy. Preparations and breakfast and plan reviews, oh my.

They were laughing, jovial even. Convivial. Chipper. Affable even. On the outside. The smiles didn’t last long and the teasing was tense. I wasn’t sure how to participate and was afraid of making it worse, so I had sat quietly and just ate my protein bar, which sat heavy in my stomach. It wasn’t until we headed to the locker rooms where today’s preparations were stored that the tension finally broke.

It was weird. As the clothes, our trappings of normal life, were stripped off, each of us discreetly facing no one else, and we seemed to relax. Goddamn it, it helped. Seeing everyone on the same page, as a team was reassuring in the shadowy places in my terrified soul. Score one for uniforms, I guess.

A onesie was still a weird choice though. Can’t convince me otherwise.

Pulling up the zipper to the top of the ridiculous garment, it seemed to suddenly shrink and grow tighter. The zip tab stuck and wouldn’t let me free. No one else seemed to be having trouble. I stepped forward and put my hand into the locker where only I could see it. Not terrible, but definitely tremors.

Damn it, I thought I was done with this. Facing into the sad and rather forlorn locker, I closed my eyes and let the others’ voices become whitenoise, cleared my mind, and just breathed. Bruce would have been proud.

Recentered and once again as comfortable as I’d ever be in someone else’s clothes, I turned to find Steve in… holy vintage pin-up, Batman… his original uniform.

I mean, it was vaguely ridiculous. Super patriotic, unnecessarily large shoulder pad armor plate things, utility belt that held extra ammo and, I don’t know, dental floss maybe. It didn’t have nearly tough enough armor, managed to have negative camouflaging abilities, and made me want to stand up and positively salute. And then see how necessary those straps were to keeping it up or if, oops, strategic bits and pieces would just fall off revealing all that tanned, smooth skin...

Suddenly my breathing changed for an entirely different reason and I understood why impending possible death was such a turn on.

There is something seriously wrong with me.

Fortunately, the object of my objectification was going over final details with Sam and didn’t notice me. Despite the physical closeness we’d gained in the last day, I wasn’t sure we were up to outright ogling. Moving from friendship to ignoring the kiss in New York to making out before lunch and then waking up beside him seemed to have picked up speed to rival Tony’s boosters. I didn’t really know where we stood. Part of my brain wanted to dig in her heels and emphasize what I was risking. The other part of my brain was distracted by butterflies.

So I did the only thing I could do right now. I boxed it up to deal with after we saved millions of people from untimely death. Like a goddamn professional. Slash coward.

Fury, bless and curse him, broke in. “It’s time.”
Between Christmas shopping/wrapping and a surprise root canal and, really, some pretty bad writer's block, this chapter is a full two weeks late.

You, my reader-friends, can help me decide. We know Kate has her own carrier to reprogram. What I've been struggling with is how she boards it. Via straight assault like Sam and Steve? Or insinuation? Combination of both maybe? I know what is going to happen ON the carrier. I just can't GET her there in a way that seems true to her character that I've been happy with so far.

So what do you think? Please can you rescue me?

Also, MERRY CHRISTMAS!
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Reader-friends. Writer's block is real. Real, I tell you! I have been staring at this chapter FOR A MONTH. And yet wrote the next one in 3 days.

The glare of white pages compounded with a complicated several weeks and here we are. Things have not been great, but it feels good to be writing (productively) again.

Anyway. Thank you for your patience and for sticking with me!

The Plan. Save lives. End HYDRA. Arrest Pierce. Stop the Winter Soldier. Somehow save Bucky. Those were what Steve knew he should be focused on.

But as the small troop picked their way through the small forested area across from the Triskelion, all he could think about was not looking at his teammate. She walked in front of him up the small hill and the way that navy blue material cupped and slid and pulled was damn distracting. Damn distracting.

Such a change from last night. When he’d passed Nat last night in the hallway, she’d shot him a concerned look and mouthed ‘Help her.’ It was unusual enough for the guarded woman to be so obvious that his worry had spiked. Kate sat there dwarfed by the overly large borrowed clothing. The hollows under her eyes had seemed massive. That steel he so admired still holding her head up. She’d contributed to their earlier strategy sessions, but had withdrawn soon after. He’d been so wrapped up in finalizing the details that it had been a while before he noticed she was gone.

Sam had stopped him from following, saying that she needed some space. The man, unsurprisingly, had been right. When she quietly reentered, it felt like his chest could expand again.

That in itself set off internal alarm bells. He knew he needed her in his life. He’d missed her more than he’d even expected. She helped him feel… normal. Like himself. She made it OK to not feel like he fit in to all of the modern world, because he fit in with her. He suspected it was one of the reasons she’d integrated so easily with the team. She made it easy. Probably didn't even know she was doing it.

He didn’t regret kissing her earlier. He wanted to again, given the chance. But if it didn’t work out between them… Their friendship was something he wasn’t sure he could risk.

But, man. For the first time in a very, very long time, did he want to.

To be safe, he’d kept it light. They watched a movie together and relaxed. She’d seen it before and he could feel the familiarity leech the tension out of her tense muscles. It was nice. To be able to help her that way. But he also knew that if he treated her like glass, especially when she was feeling vulnerable, she’d be furious and push him away. And Steve really preferred it when she wasn’t mad at him and twisting his insides into frozen knots.

Waking up this morning had been… unusual. He hadn’t expected either one of them to be in that
position or still there at all really. Surely one or the other would have woken and gone back to bed. In his experience, limited though it was, women weren’t there when he woke up.

And he’d certainly never had one tucked against him so trustingly while they slept. Steve had felt her wake, tense, and relax again. It was curious. The things it made him feel. It also gave him a chance to quietly enjoy before opening his eyes to see her reaction. She was soft and firm and sweet and tempting all at once. Her light breath on his neck seemed to make his entire body aware of every point of their intersection.

He ran through the batting averages of the entire Dodgers 1941 roster, the year they won the pennant. Now was not the time for a physical reaction to morning or the proximity to such unexpected temptation. She was exhausted. He was going to face an actual ghost from his past. They had barely spoken about what was going on, what this was. It was better, wiser to give them both space, stay still, and gather his energy. But it didn’t mean it wasn’t pleasant.

Then Sam’s cough had broken in to the moment. Kate had seemed just as surprised as he felt. The things that passed through her expression made him want to pull her closer.

Sam coughed again, less subtly this time.

“Sam, can you give us a minute?” He had to clear his throat to get the bass out of it. “Sorry.” She did that thing where she gripped and then smoothed his tshirt. The action was both stimulating and calming.

Her, “Good morning,” was quiet.

He thought he answered, but a slow hand reached up to touch across his face and he forgot. Brown eyes drew his own before sliding down to watching the thumb that smoothed across his mouth. All sensation in his body seemed to narrow down to that one action. Despite having just decided to keep his guard up, he found himself leaning into it.

Another cough. Goddamnit. He leaned back.

Her smile and her hand were warm before she disappeared around the corner.

Bells. So many alarm bells.

Sam plopped onto one of the surrounding chairs. “Sleep well?” The man had the audacity to laugh at the irritated look Steve shot him. “You ready for all this?”

He ran a hand over his face, feeling the whiskers that needed shaving. Was he ready? There was nothing of his old friend left in the man he’d fought yesterday. Except… except for one short second where the Soldier had seemed to recognize him.

“The plan is solid. There are some challenges, of course, but I think we’re well equipped to reach our objectives, assuming we each operate at peak, which we will. I believe in us.”

“Yeah man. Because that’s what I meant.”

What? Oh. Ohhhhh.

He was saved from replying from the others filtering into the sitting area. Breakfast was a quick meal, but full of talking and some quiet laughter. Protein bars, coffee, the threat of death. It felt familiar, comfortable.
To pause and adjust their gear, Steve’d chosen an outlook just far enough away from the Triskelion to be out of all but focused scanning range, but close enough to cover ground quickly. Straps were secured and tightened, new comms checked.

The determined woman surveying the river and city in front of him was different than the one who fell asleep against him last night. This one had found her feet or was giving an admirable performance.

She and Maria were talking quietly when he and Sam joined them. Natasha and the Director had peeled off some time ago to start their own missions.

“Half a league, half a league, half a league onward!”

“Hardly the valley of death. And we are definitely not 600.” He enjoyed the shocked face she showed him. “What? You’re surprised I know a famous battle poem?”

The look transformed into that delighted smile that once again warmed him through. It was that expression that he committed to memory as she stretched the obscuring mask across her lower face. Her eyes still sparkled though.

She tugged up the layer of extra clothing they’d discussed. Tac pants and shirt and a repurposed SWAT vest. Checked and rechecked her vest straps. Opened and closed the various pockets holding her energy packets. Tapped her ear comm.

That anxious feeling of ants under the skin before walking onto the field, he knew it well. Over time, he’d gotten used to it, but it was still there. A reminder of how much was at stake.

A tight black cap covered her hair. Or tried to.

He reached out to tuck the errant strands inside the cap. “You good?”

She shrugged in return. “Well I should be walking up to a podium right now while concentrating on not tripping, but I guess this is cool too.” Her intense stare was beginning to unnerve him. “Don’t. Don’t do anything… stupid, OK?” Sam and Hill joined them. “Any of you.”

Sam gave a soldier’s grin. “Beers after?”

Hill, “You buying?”

“Cap’s buying. He’s got that retroactive Army paycheck burning a hole in his patriotic pockets.”

He smirked. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d opened a tab for his team. And, with strong suspicion, it wouldn’t be the last.

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For a building that had bio controls running through it, the service elevator was remarkably easy to fool. They’d saved themselves climbing twenty or so flights with a “borrowed” security badge. That energy was better reserved for the fight to come.

The small device that Hill used to simulate satellite interference worked like a charm. The uniformed guard had even stepped out of the way without causing a ruckus when they entered.

Accessing the structure’s intercom, he took a deep breath and concentrated on what needed to be said. It wasn’t good news. But it was important. A call to arms for those who stood loyal to
SHIELD to once again defend the right. He believed that good people existed within the organization. Just like he knew that when called upon, the faith placed in them would stand true.

The water sluicing from the carrier doors was almost beautiful. It would have been even better had they not been trying to hitch a ride before they flew tens of thousands of feet up.

Sam and Kate ran beside him, one cursing steadily under her breath. She had been particularly nervous about this part of their plan.

At the edge of the drop off, they paused. This was it. Barring need of rescue, this is where they split up. Wide-eyed and breathless, Kate grabbed his hand, shaking it in goodbye as they’d planned. With cameras everywhere, there was no need to advertise how well they knew each other. He returned it for a moment before pulling her in close for a hug. Damn the cameras. Friends hugged. But there it was. That thing between them. Even under layers of kevlar and assorted armors.

Sam, “We got incoming.”

He released her and she nodded up at him. Shaking Sam’s hand, “Be safe.”

She pointed at both of them. “Don’t forget. Steve’s buying the first round. Be there or I’ll be pissed.”

With an amused huff, he watched Sam’s arm circle around her waist and she clung onto the flier with all the terror she possessed. A whoosh of air blocked the sound of the two of them as he jumped, but he trusted Sam not to drop his cargo.

Eventually, what did flow quietly to his comms were the reassurances given from one friend to another that they’d landed and she could let go now. No seriously, she could let go now. He couldn’t take off again with her koalaing.

Dispatching those who immediately tried to cut him down, Steve wished he could see her to make sure she was actually OK, but it was imperative to the plan that her face stay as concealed as possible. And he was on a different carrier, which didn’t help.

Instead, he kept it short and simple. “You good?”

Disbelieving words answered, “My knees are on vacation and my heart,” gasp of air, “wants out of my chest through my throat, but yeah. All good. Sam’s already on his way.”

A windy voice broke in a minute later, “Hey, Cap, I found those bad guys you were talking about.”

Shit. “You OK?”

Explosions burst above him. “Not dead yet.”

Each of them dealt with their own impediments. He could hear gunfire and explosions and grunts of effort. Battle sounds.

Occasionally Hill broke in for checks. “Falcon, status?”


“Doc?” They had spitballled different code names for Kate, but had decided to keep it simple. “Doc report.” She still didn’t answer. He paused behind a stack of supplies to listen. “Come in
Doc. Cap, Doc is potentially MIA. We may need to proceed to Plan-”

“IT’S BUSY!”

Despite how irritated she sounded, her voice made him sag in relief. Just a little.

It was several breaths before she spoke again. “Nearly there. Stop distracting me. Everything’s five by five.”

“Eight minutes Cap.”

“Working on it.” He pushed inside.

Sparing a look upwards, he grimaced. Why were there always so many stairs?

***

It wasn’t that people didn’t notice him in the stairways and hallways. It was just that they all seemed to be fighting one another, too engrossed to really see him.

Hill called in. “Falcon, where are you now?”

“I had to take a detour! I’m in. Bravo locked.”

“One down, two to go. Steve, location?”

“I’m in. Proceeding to target.”

“Uh, Steve? ...I mean Cap? I don’t know if you’re near a window, but we’ve got company on the ground. The Soldier just took out our air support.”

He wasn’t surprised. They’d even planned for this. From what Natasha knew of The Winter Soldier, he wouldn’t stop until he’d completed his assignment. And he was obviously not done yet.

Part of Steve dropped through the floor. He’d known that a confrontation with his old friend was inevitable. Hell, he’d stolen the old armor for this purpose. But he’d kind of been hoping to complete his assignment before it happened and he could concentrate on breaking through the brainwashing. The real option of having to hurt his brother made his insides solidify.

The other part was ready. Spoiling for it. Bucky. He would be reclaimed and come back to himself and Steve would have his friend back. Not be so alone.

Unable to voice any of that, he replied simply. “Copy.”

Several flights up and many hallways later, three quick beeps in the comms was Natasha’s signal. Fury had landed.

Hill, “Charlie Carrier’s forty-five degrees off the port bow. Six minutes.”

He opened the door in front of him and found a dozen or more barrels aiming at him. Closed the door. Nope. No that way. Below him, feet pounded up the stairs. Cut off. Using the shield, he broke a window. “Hey Sam. I’m gonna need a ride.” And then he jumped. Time to take the long way up.

They’d only landed on the upper carrier deck a minute and when Bucky appeared from behind a
storage box and kicked him hard, shoving him off the platform. Shit! Hands scrambling along steel and trying not to lose his head, Steve’s fingers found a loose weld and dug in. Swinging himself up onto the ledge and heading back in, he tried to catch his breath. Fuck that’d been close.

He reassured those shouting in his ear that he was OK. But Sam was grounded. No more back up. For him or Kate. Great.

“Falcon?” Hill again.

“Yeah?”

“Rumlow’s headed for the Council.”

“I’m on it.”

“Doc? Status?”

“Approaching target now.”

He smiled as he ran. She’d nearly done it. With a minimum of back up.

The smile fell as he saw who was waiting for him on the catwalk.

“People are gonna die, Buck. I can't let that happen.” The cold stare that answered him was entirely The Soldier. “Please, don’t make me do this.” No recognition. Not backing down. Steve threw his shield at his oldest friend, ignoring the double beep and status updates in his comms.

The chip dropped from his hand.

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