Summary

Steve and Natasha seek peace and happiness in each other as the future remains uncertain and the tragic past keeps haunting them both. Set right after Avengers: Infinity War and during Avengers Endgame.

Notes

Hi! The story is going to be my attempt at balancing angst, fluff, and hurt/comfort. My purpose is to make you smile, cry, wish for Steve and Nat to finally be together, surprised by the cliffhangers and mad at me for... Ah, yeah, there are likely to be some minor character deaths as this fanfiction is also my version of Avengers 4, though showed from Steve and Natasha's perspective.

I intend to write many chapters as the time jump between Infinity War and Avengers 4 is believed to be 4/5 years. We'll see how long it will take in case of my story. Expect some domestic stuff at first. English isn't my native language but I'm trying to write the best I can. Please excuse my mistakes. All kinds of reviews would be very appreciated. Feel free to tell me everything that comes to your mind after finishing the chapter. Feedback really motives to write more so don't hesitate. May this story help us survive until Avengers 4. Enjoy!
Prologue

*Between the wars we dance*

*Between the wars we left*

*Don't wake me yet*

*And still the rest*

*Hasn't happened, hasn't happened yet*

He couldn't count how many times he would just stand there, perfectly still, looking at the window and listening to the news or undisturbed silence.

The Avengers Facility. His home. Then why did he not feel at home?

3 weeks had passed since *the snap*. That's how people in the news called it whenever they talked about families that had suddenly fallen apart. About mothers whose children had disappeared from their arms. About husbands who had returned to empty houses. About kids orphaned in a matter of seconds. About different kinds of animals that had also turned into dust. About the half of the universe's sentient population that had vanished at the same time as the Avengers had lost the war.

These days Steve barely slept as closing his eyes alone brought too much risk. He was afraid of reliving that horrible day again, but the memories would always come back, one way or another, causing him to feel the ashes on his hands or hear Bucky call his name.

"You're doing it again." The words came from behind his back. "Thinking. It's dangerous to be left alone with your thoughts, Cap. You should know that by now."

"What else am I supposed to do, Stark? If there's a method to silence them all, I'll gladly give it a try."

Tony walked slowly to him, hands in his pockets. When he pulled out one of them, a set of keys hung from his fingers.

"You can always view your new apartment. Small but cozy, close to the center, a combination of modernity and tradition. No complaint will be accepted."

Steve took the keys, trying to imagine a new life that was awaiting him. "I don't know how to thank you," he admitted.

"Trifle." Tony looked away. "Buying an apartment for my fellow Avenger is easier than public speeches. They keep calling me, you know. In the end, I came back from space, right? I guess they expect some explanation. Iron Man must make some statement."

Tony had returned one week after Thanos' army had destroyed Wakanda, and the world had been shocked by the greatest tragedy in the history of mankind. Steve had been anxiously waiting for him as his missing friend got off the spacecraft in the company of an alien woman. He could still see that image before his eyes; Tony with blood covering his clothes, dust and ash on his skin, tired and broken like never before.

There was no trace of their old quarrel, which now seemed too distant to be remembered. Steve
looked at him and wished for Tony to break and show all his anger while Steve would serve as a metaphorical punching bag. Tony remained calm, professional, and restrained. Sometimes he sounded like former Tony Stark, prone to jokes and narcissism, but most often his thick walls would crack a little just to reveal the suffering even Iron Man himself couldn't hide.

"The public deserves to know the truth," Steve dared to say.

"Rhodey and Romanoff have already told them the truth, no matter how absurd it seems," Tony responded in a toneless voice. "A purple monster collected magic stones, appeared on Earth, killed an android with human intelligence, and wiped half of humanity by snapping his fingers. People find it hard to believe, not that I blame them. My job is to confirm this version of events, and also to explain why Iron Man wasn't present during the end of the world. That's the truth they do not need."

Something in his voice changed, and when he looked at Steve, it was obvious that his next words would not be simple but sincere. "I can't tell them that I met a man called Strange and after barely hours of knowing each other, he gave up the Time Stone for me. Shortly after that, he died in front of my eyes, never telling me why it was so important for me to survive. I can't tell them about a bunch of morons who were some kind of family and disappeared one after another. Most importantly, I can't tell them about the kid from Queens whom I was supposed to protect. He died right in my arms while begging me to save him… I couldn't."

"It wasn't your fault."

Tony looked toward the door and Steve realized that the moment of honesty had passed. There was still a cold distance between them and even a shared grief could not overcome it. Not yet.

"Romanoff knows the location of the apartment. I'll ask Happy to bring all your stuff." Stark turned to leave. "In the light of recent events, the government has more problems than chasing a rebellious old man. Enjoy your freedom, Rogers. It's the best thing you can do."

"Tony," Steve stopped him. "I'm sorry. For everything."

The only response he got was a quick nod. Tony walked to the door, passing Natasha on the way. Stark briefly laid a hand on her shoulder, and she gave him a slight smile.

Natasha.

Steve didn't know if there were any proper words to describe his reaction to Natasha's presence. It was as if during her absence he saw the world through a blurred lens. It was only in her company that everything became clear.

They had spent the last two years on the run. Changing their place of residence, struggling with the effects of previous events, Steve, Natasha, and Sam had been inseparable. Of the three friends, only two partners remained. Even now, no longer wanted by the authorities, Steve felt uncomfortable without Natasha at his side.

He was so used to her presence that even a minute without her seemed a torment. He was aware of this only when she finally appeared on the horizon, always ready for another adventure brought by fate.

"It's good to see you two get along with each other," she stated, leaning casually against the door frame.

"I can see some progress, yes." He glanced at her intently. "How do you know the location of my
new apartment?"

Her little smirk took his breath away.

"Oh, Steve. You didn't think I would let you live alone, did you?"

He had no intention of showing how much he was relieved at the thought of Natasha sharing a home with him. He was relieved. He really was.

Instead, he said, "I don't need a babysitter, Nat."

"That's not what I'm implying. You need a friend. A partner. You need someone who will be there for you. You need me, Steve."

"Maybe you need me too."

They looked at each other in silence, with smiles that they could not hold. Natasha suddenly approached him, finally admitting, "Maybe. Besides, we've lived together before. Remember sharing a bed in that ugly motel? Sam kept peeking at us from the floor. I can only guess what improper thoughts came to his mind."

Steve did not know exactly what made him blush. It might have been the memory of that night when Natasha had been sleeping so close that he could embrace her with his arms and fall asleep clinging to her back. Perhaps he would have done that if not for Sam.

It might have been the way Natasha's fingers brushed his as she gently took the keys from his hand. The only thing Steve knew was that the mention of Sam brought a certain nostalgia to this moment, reminding them both that two bittersweet years of living together were long gone.

Natasha grabbed his hand from which she had just taken the keys. Her touch was surprisingly soothing, and her voice gentled a little when she said, "Come on, Steve. Let's see our new home."
The apartment, as Tony had assured, was indeed small but cozy. It occupied one floor; two bedrooms with their own bathrooms and a commodious area divided into living room and kitchen.

Happy quickly delivered all their stuff so there was nothing to wait for. Steve opened the door of his bedroom and almost dropped his bags out of amazement as he saw the unusual decor. The walls were in a shade of bright blue, and on the right side, the view of the city could be seen behind a large window. There wouldn't be anything special about this room if it were not for a huge shield painted over the bed, reminiscent of the one that Steve used to fight with.

Damn it, Stark.

In the meantime, Natasha was not surprised that the walls of her room were of a grey color, and someone had painted two weapons over the bed with black paint. After all, it had been her idea.

In no hurry, Natasha unpacked all the clothes and arranged them in the closet and drawers. Under the pile of sweaters, she hid three guns and four daggers. Forewarned is forearmed.

Then she went to the kitchen, unfortunately as empty as her stomach. She sat on the countertop at the same moment Steve left his room, apparently having a lot of questions for Natasha.

"You knew the location," he started, getting closer to her. "You knew I would agree upon living together. You knew which room was yours. You've been here before."

"Great deduction, Sherlock. You got the reference?"

"Yeah." Steve shook his head as if to ward off the possibility of playing her game. "Did you choose this apartment?"

"Tony provided money, Pepper and I did the rest. After the snap you seemed really emotionally disturbed, more than any of us, so I decided to take matters into my own hands," she explained. "When you said you didn't intend to live in the Avengers facility, I made sure to find a new home for both of us. If you want me to move out, I'll understand."

Natasha watched Steve sit on one of the chairs and sigh heavily. He must have taken a shower because he was wearing different clothes than in the morning, and his hair was slightly moistened at the tips and on the beard. Sometimes she wished she hadn't been so perceiving over such details.

"I want you to stay." His eyes met hers. "Just the next time you plan something as important as buying an apartment, do not forget to consult that with me."

"Copy that, sir."

Under a playful smile, she tried to hide what impression his words had made on her. *I want you to stay.* A few nice words, nothing more, and yet Natasha appreciated how Steve tended to say important things without being aware of the seriousness of these words. Natasha, on the contrary, taught to restrain her feelings, adored every scrap of kindness and friendship she received from Steve.

"So… what now, Nat?"

"Let me think. The government is no longer chasing us, many of our friends turned into dust, there
are no aliens or Nazis trying to destroy the planet at this moment," she jumped to the ground, "Tony isn't building any new artificial intelligence, hopefully, our fellow green Avenger is no longer a threat, Thor's brother is gone as well. Maybe not necessarily in this order, but anyway, we have some free time before we get dragged into all this mess once again. Why don't we go out for a walk?"

Natasha handed Steve a cup of take-out coffee and began to walk towards a park.

"Iced Americano," she told him, "for America's greatest hero."

"Hilarious, Romanoff. Did you order the black one, as dark as your soul?"

They both burst out laughing.

"You're getting better and better, Rogers. Another month with me and you'll become a true entertainer."

In such moments the world seemed better, even if it had just been damaged. Natasha enjoyed every minute she could spend in Steve's company. She liked the way they called each other by their last names only when they were joking or teasing one another. There was too much respect and affection to keep their relationship formal.

Sipping coffee and peeking at him, she finally asked, "What do you think about the shield?"

"Oh, you mean the one on my wall?" Steve shrugged. "I barely noticed."

She allowed herself to laugh again, throwing back her blond hair and then taking another sip. Even as a trained spy, she missed out on the long look Steve gave her when her sweet laughter was carried by the wind.

"You know, if it bothers you there's always a magical solution called paint."

"It doesn't bother me, Nat. It brings memories, good and bad, but it's a part of me." He took a sip of coffee. "Though, I do find it kind of ironic; Tony takes my shield and then paints the image of it on my wall. It's either his unusual way of reconciliation or he's mocking me."

"He bought you an apartment and doesn't hold a grudge against you about the quarrel over Bucky," she reminded him. "I think you guys are fine."

He wasn't entirely convinced, but it was better not to go on with the topic. The sun was shining, the summer was just beginning and Steve did not want to spoil the day talking about old conflicts.

"How's Barton?"

Natasha hadn't expected this question. Not now, not when she managed to laugh for the first time in three weeks. She stopped under the guise of throwing out an empty cup, but in truth, she had to think out an answer. Talking about Clint was not easy. Shit, even thinking about him troubled her.

Steve didn't say anything as she sat on a bench, visibly delaying her reply. He was ready to give her as much time as she needed, but no time in the world could make her forget the sound of Clint's voice when she had called him to check whether he had survived the snap.

"The first thing I did when we got back from Wakanda was calling the three people I didn't know if were safe," she started, not fully recognizing her own voice. "Two of them didn't pick up. Fury and
Hill. They were last seen getting into the car, which was later found in the center of New York. That meant one thing. Barton… "She cleared her throat. "Barton picked up the phone, but sometimes I catch myself wishing he hadn't. He's completely devastated, Steve. Laura and the kids disappeared while they were all sitting on the couch and watching movies. He still has Nathaniel to take care of and if not for his little son, Clint wouldn't handle all of this."

After a moment of hesitation, Steve threw out his cup and took a seat next to Natasha. "We can visit him if you want."

She refrained from asking if he would do it for her. Perhaps he was worried about Clint almost as much as she was. After all, Barton remained their fellow Avenger, and Steve cared for all of his friends, not just Natasha.

And yet, his contact with Barton and even Banner would always involve Natasha in one way or another. She had personal relationships with both of them, while Rogers never developed any close connection with either Clint or Bruce.

"No, no, I don't think it's a good idea." She shook her head, and then glanced at Steve. "I told him he is always welcome here. So is Nathaniel. I can only hope he'll find his way back to the team."

"I'm sure he will."

His warm smile helped her to shake off the weakness she could only allow herself to show in his company. Steve moved awkwardly, as if he wanted to say something, hug her, pat her back like friends do, or grab her hand, but he looked down and put his hands in the pockets.

"I'm done talking about sad things, Steve," she said, standing up. "We have something important to do and I'm afraid that if we waste more time, our lives will end sooner than later."

"What do you mean?" He was clearly confused.

Much to his relief, Natasha explained, "Grocery shopping. There's no food in the fridge, and I'm starving."

Steve couldn't help but smile. He had fought gods, aliens, Nazis, and other enemies. Shopping was no challenge.

As it turned out, shopping involved quite an effort. Products had to be chosen carefully; it was important to buy only the necessary food. Steve hoped for thoughtful, sensible shopping, in which Romanoff would prove to be unfailing as in many other situations, but he quickly lost her.

He lost Natasha.

Somehow she disappeared inside the biggest supermarket Steve had ever seen. Letting out a heavy sigh, he put a piece of cheese and a carton of milk into a shopping cart. He pushed it towards the shelf full of various breakfast cereals. Remembering that Natasha liked the chocolate and honey ones, he picked up two bags of each.

"Nice of you, Cap."

Steve turned to see Natasha holding two bottles of wine. She flashed her most triumphant smile as if trying to say one thing: she found what she had come for.
"I thought you were hungry," he reminded her, crossing his hands over the chest.

Natasha placed the bottles in the shopping cart, "I still am, but alcohol, my friend, is always a good idea. Speaking of ideas…"

"What now, Natasha? Should I prepare for the worst?"

The answer was not to come fast. Natasha pushed the shopping cart towards vegetables and fruits. She chose fresh lettuce, a handful of tomatoes, two cucumbers and a few onions, then also some green grapes.

"Come on, Romanoff," he grabbed an apple before Natasha could, "don't keep me in suspense!"

Little did he know how much his impatience amused her. The whole presence of Steve, simply the fact that she had a chance to spend so much time with him and no one else, made her feel happy. Way more happy than she should have felt only three weeks after the deaths of their mutual friends.

"Ask me nicely." She took the apple out of his hand and put her other hand on his hip to move Steve slightly and therefore gain access to the rest of the fruits.

She had not expected, however, that under the influence of her touch, perhaps thinking too much into that gesture, Steve would turn redder than the apple.

An unusual desire came over her, especially considering the surroundings, to hug herself to Steve's body, feel his scent and hear his heartbeat close to her ear. When he moved out of her way, she decided to focus on picking apples that looked fresh. Apples. Not Steve. Not Steve's body.

What was happening to her?

"Could you please tell me if it has anything to do with our apartment?" Steve finally asked, as nicely as possible.

At first, she had to remind herself what their conversation was about. She had already forgotten about it, too busy with... packing apples. Natasha put them in the shopping cart and leaned against it, looking at Steve, who had already recovered from their intense moment. Had she? Not so much, but years of practice taught her how to hide emotions.

"It does, yeah. My idea is to invite our friends to some kind of a party," she explained. "People do it when they get a new house or apartment. Nothing special, just a few people. Tony, Pepper, Rhodey… Bruce."

"Are you sure about this? I don't want to list obvious counterarguments, for you are perceptive enough to realize that none of us is in the mood for fun. Especially Tony." His tone changed. At the moment he wasn't her flatmate doing grocery shopping - he was a leader who had to keep in mind the good of his team. "This is not the best time, Natasha."

"And when will the time be better? Most of our friends are gone and there's no assurance for their return. The Avengers have recently been rather a concept than reality. Don't you think it's time to change it? Just dinner, Steve. We will eat, talk, spend some time together."

"As far as I know, our cooking skills do not go beyond fried eggs and tea brewing."

Natasha reached for a tube of pasta from the top shelf, but as it was too high, Steve took off the box for her, smiling smugly at the same time.
"Don't make me wipe away that smirk from your face," she warned him. "We'll make spaghetti. There are a lot of recipes on the Internet. Now find tomato sauce and I will bring more alcohol."

"Alcohol?"

"If we want this dinner to work, we need as much alcohol as possible. So, next Saturday?"

Steve nodded, watching Natasha disappear again. This time, at least he knew the purpose of her small escape. He thought about her hand on his hip, the laughter in the park, her jokes, and her sincerity when she told him about Barton. He was dangerously close to crossing a certain border. Being more reserved seemed crucial in order to maintain something he didn't want to destroy.

Steve decided to focus on the upcoming weekend. He repeated to himself that it was just dinner. Nothing could go wrong.

As it would turn out later, everything was doomed to go wrong.
Music was playing in the background, quiet enough not to disturb any upcoming conversation when Steve placed spaghetti between small sandwiches and an avocado salad. The table was designed for six people so luckily no additional guest chairs were needed.

One problem solved, more to come.

"Nat, it's almost seven," he called.

She had closed herself in her bedroom about an hour ago. Shortly after, Steve had been surprised by the sound of the water filling a bathtub. Setting up the table, he still couldn't stop thinking about the fact that his bathroom was only equipped in a shower.

Although they had been living together for a week, Natasha's personal space remained a mystery. Steve had no rational reason to violate the privacy of his flatmate, although it was somewhat irritating that Natasha knew about the shield on his wall. Was her wall completely clean or was it covered with a symbol as well? What could it be? A spider? A weapon?

"Romanoff, come on! They might get-"

Speechless. That was the best word to describe Steve, who forgot what he had intended to say as soon as he saw Natasha.

She slowly closed the door behind her and smiled at him, her outfit available for him to see in all its glory. A cream dress reached up to her knees and emphasized all the curves of her body that Steve had been trying to ignore so far. Her blond hair was naturally curled for the first time since she had dyed it. The lips underlined with red lipstick quickly caught his attention, but they were not the most mesmerizing part of her stylization. Her eyes captivated him; green, surrounded by long black eyelashes, filled with amusement and sincerity.

"How do I look?" she asked, well aware of the impression she made on him.

Steve was looking at her with a mixture of many positive emotions she couldn't even name. And yet, for some unknown reason, it was not as flattering as it should have been. Natasha knew that Steve respected and loved her in some way, but there was nothing beyond his platonic admiration.

Captain America would never fall in love with Black Widow.

"G-great," Steve managed to say. "You look great."

She approached him. He found himself close to her, dangerously close, so that he felt the sweet scent of her perfume. Natasha gently rolled up the sleeves of his blue shirt, maintaining the eye contact.

Oh, if she only knew how he was desperate to drown in these beautiful eyes of her.

"Great? That's all you've got, Cap?"

There was a sudden knock at the door, the noise seemingly unnatural and loud in the middle of their innocent flirt. Steve's legs carried him to the door, though in his mind he was still with Natasha, and his hand reached out to touch her cheek...
James Rhodes handed him a bottle of wine, bringing him back from the path he should not walk. Natasha quickly hugged their mutual friend while Steve shook hands with Bruce Banner.

"It's good to see you, Dr. Banner."

"Thank you for the invitation and don't worry about the other guy. No chance for him to crush this evening."

Steve had no idea how to respond, but Natasha stepped in the right moment.

"Take a seat, Bruce," she encouraged him, placing her hand on his shoulder. "I'll make you a drink."

At the same time, she took the wine from Steve's hands, who accepted her help with voiceless gratitude. He stood by the door and watched Bruce and Rhodey sit at the table, talking about something with Natasha. Steve hardly listened. The sight of visibly sad Bruce reminded him of what he had been trying hard not to think about. It made him realize that, at some point, he and Natasha had created a bubble of stolen peace and happiness. The bubble disappeared, replaced by the brutal reality.

The arrival of Tony and Pepper did not make things better.

"I see that you have put some warmth into this apartment," Stark looked around, "but it still gives me claustrophobic vibes."

"Don't listen to my not-so-funny fiancé." Pepper turned to Steve, and also Natasha who suddenly appeared by his side. "Thank you for having us here."

"Make yourself comfortable, Ms.-"

"Oh, please, let go of this cold etiquette, Steve. Call me Pepper."

Steve could only hope that none of the guests had noticed the blush on his cheeks.

Of course, it did not escape Natasha's attention, but she was too busy thinking about another matter. Pepper looked different. She wore a loose dress, which did not quite fit into her well-known style. Also, as strange as it seemed, she was... glowing.

Natasha had to confirm her theory and she knew a perfect way to do so.

"Have a drink with me, Pepper," she suggested, heading to the kitchen. "With this large amount of testosterone in the apartment, we need backup."

As expected, Potts quickly yet subtly refused, "Tony is enough to handle so I get your point, but a glass of water will be perfect."

"Is it a day of roasting me, babe?" Tony asked when Pepper sat next to him. "You've been killing me since morning!"

Natasha glanced over her shoulder at Tony and Pepper bantering with each other, then poured herself some red wine and immediately drank it in one gulp.

*First glass.*

Steve accepted Natasha's presence with some kind of relief when she finally took the seat next to him. She filled her plate with spaghetti, and he tried one of the sandwiches.
"Bruce," Natasha said, winding the pasta around her fork, "I'm sure everyone would be interested to know what you were exactly doing the last three years."

There was no trace of accusations or regrets in her words, nothing that could point to her still being not over the way Bruce abandoned her. It had been a distant moment from the past, too far gone to devote too much thought to it. Natasha now perceived her treacherous affair with Bruce as the mistake of a blindly in love girl she should never have become. There was only a genuine curiosity in her voice.

Bruce looked confused as if she had told him to climb on the table and start tap dancing. Apparently, he did not trust her intentions, but he finally gave up under the pressure of five pairs of eyes.

"I… There's not much to tell," he started. "Hulk was mostly in control. One day Thor showed up and he… he brought me back." By the look he gave her, Natasha knew there was more to it. "I woke up on a different planet called Sakaar, where the other guy was a famous champion fighting in the arenas. It's a really messy story about Grandmaster, Valkyrie, Loki, Thor's evil sister, Asgard, and other things I can't even begin to understand."

"Thor has a sister?" Steve shook his head in disbelief.

"How long was Hulk in full control?" Rhodey asked.

"More than two years. I'm starting to think that now it will be the other way round."

"Hey, buddy, it's a good thing." Tony patted him on the back.

*Second glass.*

"And where the hell is Thor?" Natasha was the one to ask the question about the matter that must have been bothering all of them.

*Almost all of them* as Bruce turned out to be well informed, "Thor left to see how many of his people, those who had escaped Thanos' attack, survived the snap. He must find a new place for them to live."

It was a reminder of the great scale of the tragedy from a month ago.

The atmosphere became less friendly. In spite of all smiles and strenuous efforts to be cheerful, Steve could swear that none of gathered was in the mood for spending time together.

Natasha, meanwhile, could not get rid of the impression that Tony was looking at her and Steve differently than before. Though he seemed very busy with constantly asking Pepper if she wanted more food or water – what only confirmed Natasha's previous theory – he would always find the time to peek at the pair of hosts.

Emboldened by the warmth of wine in her throat, she confronted him, "Spit it out, Stark."

Unaware of the situation, Steve first looked at Natasha and then at the friend sitting opposite him.

"Tony," Pepper warned.

"For God's sake," Rhodes reached for a sandwich and explained with a full mouth, "he thinks you guys are secretly dating."
Bruce dropped his fork, Pepper rolled her eyes, Tony made an innocent face, Natasha blushed, not knowing if it was the wine or the revelation, and Steve... poor Steve choked on his beer.

Third glass. In one gulp.

"What... What makes you think that?" Steve said as soon as he stopped coughing.

"Well, Cap, do you really want me to tell you?" Tony teased.

He sounded like his old self as if all the pain had been forgotten for a little moment. Natasha, encouraged by alcohol and a chance to improve everyone's mood, decided to go with it.

"Your assumptions better be supported by rational arguments, Stark. I can always decorate my wall with your blood." She smirked. "It will match the guns."

Steve would have enjoyed the fact that he'd guessed the decoration in Natasha's room if it was not for fear of what Tony was about to say.

"Charming as usual, Romanoff. First of all, you were on the run for two years. Together. Wanda would escape in order to see Vision from time to time and Falcon... Well, he probably was a problem, but I'm sure you found him something to do. Honestly, when you, Natasha, came to me with the idea of living with Rogers in a separate apartment... it aroused my suspicion. You two could have stayed with us in our base, yet you preferred to live together. Please, do yourselves a favor and cut the friendship crap."

"Not convincing," Natasha determined.

She reached out for the bottle to have another glass of wine but Steve grabbed her hand.

"You've had enough, Nat," he explained, then looked at amused Tony. "We are just friends. If something changes, you'll be the first to know."

Steve did not know how he managed to put it all into words, or how the heck he allowed himself a loud admission that there was a chance for him and Natasha. Could it be? He felt quite disappointed but also shocked when Natasha let go of his hand, circled the table and bent over Tony and Pepper.

"Let's talk about the real couple here, shall we?" She put the brightest smile on her face. "How are the wedding preparations going?"

"The show begins," Rhodey murmured under his breath.

"We would call it off due to what happened a month ago," Tony confessed in a dramatic manner, "but there is a small, really small detail. Pepper, honey, I guess it's time to tell them."

Everyone looked at the engaged pair, and Natasha took advantage of the moment's inattention and retreated to the kitchen for another bottle.

Pepper touched her belly while saying, "I'm pregnant."

Natasha could only pretend to be surprised when she quickly hugged Pepper and kissed Tony on the cheek, hiding her beloved alcohol behind her back.

A general joy burst forth as if the birth of one being was able to cool feelings after the loss of many.
Bruce approached Tony and hugged him with sincere congratulations. Rhodey was delighted and at the same time slightly offended by the fact that he had not been given the opportunity to learn about it earlier. Steve was equally happy for his friends and their future descendant, but at some point, his eyes met Natasha's. There was something unusual in his face, something that even the most trained spy could not read.

Without a second thought, Natasha took a sip of wine straight from the bottle.

"You'll finally have a family you deserve, Tony," Steve said from the bottom of his heart.

Pepper, Rhodey, and Bruce took their seats again, the smiles on their lips still remaining. However, Steve and Tony stared at each other over the table; Steve honest, Tony uncertain. Natasha put down the bottle, and with sobriety incredible after three glasses of wine realizing that all the people gathered in this room had never been both as close and unfamiliar to each other before.

"You know, I once thought it would work out," Natasha spoke out, to no one in particular, her voice indifferent. "The Avengers. A group of people who could save the world and perhaps each other as well. Team. Friends. Family." She looked at Steve, then Tony. "That's why I fought for this team when you tried to break it. But there have been squabbles from the very beginning. We've been knowing each other for many years, but we've lived separately. We would meet only to save the world, for the first, second, and third time, and besides it, we had our own problems, lives, families... Shit, it took a half of the universe to disappear for us to have a dinner together."

Everyone tensed, but Tony managed to withstand her gaze and respond, "You're absolutely right, Natasha. By the way, take a note of this day in your calendar because I'm never saying it again." He earned her smile. "We're not a family. We're friends who, actually, suck at being friends. And despite everything, I'll be honored to marry the love of my life in the company of my friends. Rhodey, do not quote this in your best man speech. I don't want people to consider me tender."

"You wish." James grinned.

One hour later, when this emotional swing was over and the guests left the apartment, Natasha leaned against the door and sighed heavily.

"I really have no idea what I was thinking during that family speech. I swear solemnly that I will not drink even a drop of alcohol until... Steve, you okay?"

Rogers was sitting on a chair with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes settled on the wall. When he looked at her, there was no understatement, no need to guess his feelings. There was only sadness.

Natasha took the seat next to him, terrified at the thought that her behavior could bring sadness to the only person who knew how to make her happy.

"We've been through a lot together, you and I," Steve whispered, and Natasha nodded. "You are my family, Nat. I wish you saw me the same way."

She put her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes and simply enjoying his presence. "I was referring to the Avengers as a whole. You, Steve Rogers, are the closest thing to family I've ever had. Don't you dare doubt it."

You're my everything, she almost found herself saying.

Instead, she kept these words to herself. The most important thing was that her assurance was enough for him. Steve put his arm around Natasha and they stayed there for a long time, letting
time pass and the bubble of peace be reborn.
"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty." Steve felt someone's breath on his face, and the melodic voice brought him back from the nightmares. "We have no time to waste."

He opened his eyes slowly. Natasha was sitting on the edge of his bed, smiling, with her hand carelessly placed on his chest. The sunrays coming through the exposed window illuminated her hair, which had been once ardently red, now completely blond. Steve realized he didn't mind if such a view would wake him every day.

"Nat? What are you doing in my room?"

"In my defense, I did knock a few times, but it didn't do much." She stood up and opened his wardrobe as if looking through his stuff was an obvious thing to do. "Tony lent us a car, so I'm taking you on a little trip. Oh, this one." She threw him a shirt. "I like you in blue."

Steve was not awake enough to fully understand what was happening in front of him. He rose to a sitting position and looked at Natasha, trying to focus on the words preceding her charming compliment.

And finally, it dawned on him. The car, the early wake-up, the mysterious trip. Steve could not help but sigh heavily and fall back on his pillows.

"I told you I didn't want any celebration," he complained. "Can't we just order a pizza and stay at home?"

Natasha crossed her arms, glaring at him. Steve had to admit that there was something both sweet and frightening in her attitude.

"Don't worry, Rogers, there won't be any surprise party. No guests, no presents. Just you and me."

*Just you and me. As it always should be.*

"Okay, okay. Give me ten minutes." Steve got up, ready to take a quick shower and follow Natasha wherever she intended to take him. Bending to pick up his shirt from the floor, he asked, "Can you at least tell me where exactly we are going?"

But when he straightened up, Natasha was already gone.

---

*Two years ago…*

Steve got out of the car and looked at the small building in front of him. Landmark Diner Jr. was a place not so original or tempting to visit, but it was open twenty-four hours a day, even today. Tired of traveling, the fugitives needed it; a warm meal and a moment of rest after a few hours of driving.

Although he was very hungry, Steve could not silence the voice in the back of his head, which kept reminding him to take special precautions. In the end, baseball caps weren't the best form of camouflage.
"Sam," he placed his hand on Wilson's shoulder, "are you sure it's a good idea? Someone might recognize us."

"I know the owner, and this place never disappoints. Just trust me."

There was nothing left for him to do but submit to his friend's will. Especially that he was voted down, for as soon as Sam crossed the threshold of the diner, Wanda followed him without a second thought. The inside was mainly decorated in shades of beige, gray, and brown. Before Steve could look around, his view got covered by a stout middle-aged man who hugged Sam and patted him on the back.

"Somebody pinch me if it's not Mr. Wilson," the man said in a happy voice. "They are saying terrible things about you on tv. I would never... Oh, you have companions... Holy shit... is it..."

"Yes, Captain America himself," Sam confirmed, clearly amused while Steve felt rather anxious. "And this is Scarlet Witch."

After long greetings, stories about serving in the army, and assurances that their identity was absolutely safe, Steve, Sam, and Wanda sat at one of the tables. Even though they had found a place for a temporary break, the atmosphere stayed tense. The rest of the journey was still unknown. They had to be on the run all the time, sleep only in cheap motels, live in constant hiding... The prospect of such a future was not colorful.

Steve rubbed his face, not letting his thoughts slip in the wrong direction. Yet, he could not get rid of the impression that the images of betrayed Tony and Bucky in cryogenic sleep waited around the corner for a slight moment of weakness. It would be enough just to close his eyes and allow the remorse to settle in his heart.

"What about Europe?" Wanda asked, and only then did Steve understand that he had missed some part of the conversation.

"It won't be easy to leave the country," Sam answered. "We need fake documents, and even if we get them, this gentleman is way too recognizable." He turned to Steve. "Hey, Cap, you can always dye your hair green."

Before he could say anything, a familiar voice surprised him from behind his back, "Damn, that's a thing I wouldn't want to miss."

They all turned to look at their mutual friend. She wore a cloth cap, jeans, and a grey sweatshirt that was several sizes too large for her. Her characteristic red hair was mostly hidden under the cap. When she took her seat next to Wanda and pursed her mouth in a self-satisfied smirk, Steve felt his heart beat faster than it should.

Natasha.

Rogers had not seen her for many weeks, precisely since she'd helped him and Bucky escape. Now she was sitting opposite him, safe and sound, once again choosing his side, even though he would never dare to ask her to do so.

He attempted to say a few things, but none of the noises actually turned into words let alone sentences.
"You're late," Sam was the one to respond, a smile forming on his lips.

"Oh, come on, Wilson. I had to cover my tracks, but any fool can guess that I am with you." She looked through the menu. "Wanda, someone who would like to talk to you is waiting behind the building. Use the bathroom window. You have ten minutes before Tony notices his absence."

Maximoff hesitated only for a brief moment. She nodded, walked past Natasha, and left, almost running into the bathroom.

"Wait," Sam leaned towards Natasha, "don't tell me there is something going on between her and Vision."

"I won't tell."

"Am I the only one who thinks it's a bit weird?" Sam sighed. "I'll order a milkshake for you. Chocolate or strawberry?"

He had the perfect pretext for giving Natasha and Steve a moment of privacy. There were many unspoken things between them, but it was hard to put them into words.

When Sam left, green eyes met blue ones.

"Nat," Steve started, uncertain. "I'm glad you're here, I really am, but… why?"

"After everything we've been through together, Rogers, you shouldn't be surprised by my loyalty."

"Well, Romanoff, there's a chance you might be in the wrong business."

The smile that brightened her face seemed to be powerful enough to take part of the burden off him. He did not have to carry it all by himself anymore. Natasha was at his side, and with her, the world appeared much better. He couldn't help but reciprocate the smile.

At some point, Natasha took him by surprise and left a kiss on his cheek, whispering, "Happy birthday, Steve."

Now...

He had never expected to find himself in this place again, exactly two years later. He warmly remembered the friendly service, delicious food, and the reunion with Romanoff, but now things were way too different.

If not for the soothing presence of Natasha, who grabbed his hand and led him to the diner, Steve would probably retreat.

It was not an easy day. Every year his birthday reminded him of the lost time, and now there was also the painful thought that many of his friends were gone, while he had got another chance from fate.

The owner recognized them without a problem and offered hot dogs and milkshakes at the company's expense. Steve thanked and politely refused not to pay for their meal, but Sam's former friend turned to be exceptionally stubborn when it came to making others happy.

"I'm sad to hear that Mr. Wilson didn't make it." He escorted them to the table. "The world lost a very good man."
His words stayed longer in Steve's head when he was left alone in the presence of his close friend.

The best and perhaps the worst part of sharing his life with Natasha was suppressing the past. Every night Steve dreamed of Bucky uttering his name, fruitless search for Sam, Vision's dead body covered with Wanda's ashes, or Tony's empty stare. Every morning he woke up in his comfortable bed as if nothing had happened. Every day he lived by the illusion of happiness that he had never been destined to achieve.

"I didn't take you for a sentimental kind of person."

His own voice seemed unfamiliar to him.

"I'm far from sentimental," Natasha responded.

"Then what are we doing here?" He looked at her. "Please don't say that we spent four hours in the car just for you to drink a chocolate shake."

"Actually, this time I ordered the strawberry one." Her smile faded when she noticed the sadness clouding his features. "Well, I thought a day out of the apartment would do you good. Perhaps we could have an honest conversation."

A waiter appeared at their table, placing two plates full of hot dogs and a shake before them.

"I'm always honest with you, Natasha. You know that." He grabbed one of the hot dogs and took a bite. "So, what do you wanna talk about?"

"Let's do it this way; we will ask each other two questions that we are curious about. The most important rule is not to avoid answering and to tell the whole truth."

"I wonder why it seems to me that this is not an idea invented spontaneously," Steve teased, forgetting about the whole world for a moment. "You may start."

Natasha only smiled mysteriously. She reached for a hot dog, which was not as bad as she had expected. Unlike Steve, she really enjoyed her time at the diner. He did not have the slightest idea of how much pleasure brought her the fact of being able to distract him from bad thoughts. For her, focusing on the present was simple, but Steve's emotional involvement prevented him from doing so. She had to ask him a private question, not related to the people he had lost.

And so it happened that there was an unresolved matter slightly bothering her, although Natasha deceived herself into thinking she didn't care that much.

"Did you call the nurse?"

His reaction was no surprise to her. He looked at her in amazement, but after a moment his expression changed as if he remembered who he was dealing with.

"Sharon? You know she's not a nurse."

"No stalling, Rogers."

Steve sighed, resting his elbows on the table and maintaining eye contact with Natasha.

"We've never been on a date if that's what you mean. We…," he paused, "we kissed once. I haven't seen her since then. I don't even know if she's alive."

Sometimes hiding feelings was not so easy, even for Black Widow herself. Natasha did not really
want to be disturbed by the thought of Steve kissing Sharon. Yet, for some reason, that picture was clear and irritating.

A silent voice in the back of her head reminded her that Steve had spent the last two years with her, not with Sharon Carter.

"You should call her and make sure she's all right," Natasha suggested in a neutral voice. "Who knows, maybe this time circumstances will be more favorable."

"Now's my turn." Steve clearly signaled that the subject of Sharon was finished. "If that's how you want to play, Romanoff... Have you ever been in love?"

They were walking on the thin ground, maneuvering between dangerous obstacles. Natasha took a long sip of the shake, which was cold enough to keep her mind clear.

*Sincerity. Steve remained the only person she didn't intend to lie to.

"There has never been a place for love in my life," she confessed, this once avoiding eye contact. "Every intimate relationship always had a deeper, dark motive behind it. It was forbidden for me to fall in love because love was seen as weakness. Black Widow cannot be weak. Bruce was the first person who made me feel something, but I guess it was doomed to fail."

"I'm afraid we're both unlucky when it comes to romantic relationships."

Natasha nodded thoughtfully, cupping the glass with her hands and ignoring the cold feeling on her fingers.

"Well, we're still young," she joked. "I mean I am. How old are you, again? Two hundred?"

"Congratulations, Natasha. You just wasted your second question," he retorted, though he was indeed amused by her attempt at improving his mood. "Two years ago, you showed up at this diner and decided to accompany Sam, Wanda, and me on the run. You said your choice was driven by the loyalty. Are you here with me now for the same reason? Do you think you're bonded to me by some sense of loyalty?"

"You saved my life," she answered quickly.

"Oh, come on, you don't own me. You saved my life, too." He hardly fought the urge to grab her hands. Subconsciously, he felt it wasn't the right moment. Not yet. "There must be something else. There always is."

In his eyes, Natasha could see what was distant, memories of war and pain, but also what he felt now. He stared at her as if her words could make his suffering easier to bear. She saw herself in the blue eyes of his.

In this way, she remembered the old life that now seemed to have been lived by a completely different person. A life filled with darkness, in which there was room for faint light.

"Fine. I'll be honest with you," she started, hoping her eyes would tell him what her mouth might fail to communicate. "You're a legend, Steve. Believe it or not, rumors of the great Captain America even reached the Red Room." He looked at her in surprise. "You were a symbol of hope, a proof that there was still a noble aspiration in the world. Getting to know you, fighting at your side... it was a life-changing experience, a chance to redeem myself. At some point, however, I realized you weren't just the beloved hero. Most of all, you are Steve Rogers. You make mistakes, you listen to your heart like an ordinary human being. It's not the serum that makes you special, but
"You didn't sign the accords and I thought it was a reckless thing to do but in the end, I followed you. You always have good intentions and I trust your judgment even if it means turning the whole world against us."

Her hands were cold, yet it did not bother him. He covered them with his own, hoping to share his warmth, just as she had shared with him a piece of her heart.

Time had taken Peggy. Hydra had taken Bucky. The Snap had taken Bucky again, Sam, Wanda, Vision, T'Challa, and half of the universe. But not Natasha.

At that moment, when she looked at him with respect and friendship, Steve realized he was a lucky man after all.

Chapter End Notes

Do you like it so far? I have so many ideas for next chapters that I think I'll divide the pepperony wedding into two chapters. There are a few scenes I'm looking forward to writing, not only between Nat and Steve but also of them interacting with other characters. Thank you for all the feedback!
The water in the tub was warm and filled to the brim with foam. Natasha lay with her eyes closed and her head tilted, sensing a gentle touch of water draining from her hair. She could spend all day like that.

Finally, half an hour later, feeling clean and rested, Natasha wrapped herself in a towel and left the bathtub. She put on her tracksuit trousers and T-shirt, then started wiping her hair. Her eyes met the reflection in the mirror. Once a month she had to dye her hair so that there wouldn't be any red strands trying to stand out among the blond ones. Now she was supposed to refresh the color to look her best at the wedding.

However, she decided not to do it. Red hair, just like the dark past or being an Avenger, was part of her. Steve had taught her to be honest not only with others but also with herself. It was high time she had accepted what made her unique.

The floor creaked under her feet as she moved from her private bathroom to the kitchen. She took out an orange juice from the fridge and poured half a glass.

At the same time, the door opened and Steve entered the apartment, clearly out of breath after a morning jogging. They couldn't look more different than at that very moment; Natasha freshly washed, with wet hair, Steve sweaty, in a shirt glued to his chest. She had to restrain herself from looking at his biceps too long.

"Hey," he greeted her.

His first destination after coming home was the fridge, from which he took out a bottle of water and began to drink as if his life depended on it.

"I almost pity you. You were running your ass off, while I was lounging in a warm bathtub."

"You know what, Romanoff." He shook his head and put down the empty bottle. "I still don't understand why you have a bathtub while my bathroom is only equipped with a shower. Where's justice?"

"Justice? Never heard of her," she joked, sipping her juice. "You can always ask nicely and maybe, just maybe I'll let you use my bathroom."

"I see you're in a good mood."

"Well, it's a happy day after all, isn't it?"

Steve looked at her, tempted to disagree. Nobody had been really happy in the last few months, and if anyone managed to feel joyful for a brief moment, remorse would immediately arise. At least in his case.

If Tony could actually pretend everything was fine, for his wedding to turn out to be perfect, perhaps he was the strongest of them all.

"Give me twenty minutes, then meet me in my room," Steve said.

Natasha watched him walk away. She put the glass down to the sink, hearing the sound of water in the shower. To say that she was curious would be an understatement.
One would think that the touch of an assassin had nothing to do with delicacy. Following this idea, the killer's hands were supposed to be rough, cold and dangerous, ready at any moment to clamp on the weapon or around the opponent's neck.

Yet, her hands were pleasant to touch. Natasha tried to be exceptionally gentle when she glided with a razor over Steve's face. He was sitting in a chair in his bathroom while she leaned over him, concentrating on her task.

Steve could not bring himself to look away from her. He noticed the focus and even a glimpse of amusement in her green eyes. He was able to see every detail of her face. She was beautiful and so close that there was no reason for him not to touch her cheek and recall the taste of her lips.

But, of course, he didn't do it.

They had been surrounded by a comfortable silence until Natasha finally spoke, "You know, I'm pretty sure you would be just fine without my help."

"I came to the conclusion that a woman's hand and opinion are priceless. Even when it comes to something as simple as shaving."

Natasha grinned, dipping the razor in the water.

"If you insist on my opinion," she put a wet cloth to his face, "I find your rebel look extremely sexy."

This time he did not blush, although it was his usual reaction to her compliments. Instead, driven by sudden courage, he touched her hand.

"You should have told me that before shaving my whole beard and half of the hair," he said, but it was rather to keep his head and mouth busy.

To prevent himself from making a huge mistake.

*If only she knew...*

"Oh, I do like the Captain America look as well. Come on, Rogers, you're not blind." With his hand on hers, she ran the cloth across his face, stopping in the corner of his lips. "You must know how people look at you. You're a catch."

Natasha could hardly stand on her feet. Her coquettish version, or maybe someone entirely different, wanted to sit on Steve's lap, put her hands on his face and kiss him like back then, undercover, or in a far more passionate way.

Instead, she pulled away from him and rinsed the cloth. Hiding feelings was easy, but not in his presence. With him, her skin seemed to be on fire, her body craved for his touch. Simple hand holding was enough for her to lose herself in this new, dangerous experience.

*If only he knew...*

Steve stood up, staring at the strands of blond hair scattered across the floor. At that moment, Romanoff imagined him with a shield on his back, in her favorite stealth suit of his, focused and ready to fight.

Natasha had no control over her own actions. Suddenly, imperceptibly she found herself right next
to him. She clenched her hands on his shirt and closed her eyes. Steve reacted both naturally and instantly. He pulled her closer, putting his hands on her back. Their foreheads touched, breaths mingled with each other.

"Nat," he whispered.

Her name in his mouth sounded like a promise, like a confession of feelings. Steve's gaze slid to her lips. He had her closer than ever, he felt her presence with all senses, yet he wanted more. He needed more.

"I… I have to go." Natasha opened her eyes, holding his shirt a bit longer. "Pepper is probably waiting for me, I promised to help her with the dress." She licked her lips. "See you at the wedding, right?"

"Yeah. Right."

They let go.

He couldn't believe what had just happened, a moment as fleeting as everything else in his life. Natasha ran her hand through her hair and left the bathroom. Confused and disappointed, Steve did not have a better thing to do than to sweep the floor. He had to draw his attention away from the crazy thought; he had almost kissed Natasha Romanoff. Almost.

"Mr. Stark highly insisted on providing maximum security. With due respect, Captain, I mustn't let either of you inside until I'm perfectly sure you don't carry any weapons."

Steve nodded understandingly, allowing one of the security guards to check him out for potential threats.

However, Happy Hogan barely looked at him, knowing that the famous Capitan America should not cause problems at the wedding of his friend. His gaze focused on Natasha, who rolled her eyes and pulled a gun out of her purse.

"All of it, Agent Romanoff," Happy ordered.

To Steve's sincere surprise, Natasha pulled up her long dress and took out two knives from the straps attached to her legs. She handed them to one of the guards, her lips quirking in a smirk. But, this was not the end. Hogan cocked his head, looking at Romanoff expectantly. Rogers wanted to comment on that, but then Natasha removed the cufflinks from Steve's sleeves, which turned out to be penknives. Everyone, including speechless Steve, looked at her in amazement.

"You know, Happy, these knives and guns… they are all just tools," she told him. "I'm the real weapon."

She walked past the security and stepped into the big hall. Steve followed her, still surprised and even slightly amused.

So far, he couldn't find an opportunity to talk to her about what had happened in his bathroom this morning. Natasha had been busy helping Pepper, and when they had met in the church, there had been no time for honest conversations.

"Nat," he called her before she would disappear among other guests.

Natasha turned to him, her expression difficult to read.
"I didn't intend to hurt anyone," she explained, assuming it was what he wanted to discuss. "I just want Tony and Pepper to be safe tonight."

"Well, it's nice to know you care," he admitted, looking her in the eyes, "you're a great friend, but that's not... I need to tell you something."

She looked stunning. Her blond hair was slightly tucked in the back - probably with a deadly hairpin that Happy had missed - and her lips were painted with red lipstick. The dress was of the same color and reached the floor. Despite the presence of many people, Steve again this day fought the urge to kiss her.

"What is it, Steve?"

Thousands of people around them, and she was the one who mattered.

"I... T-that's a lovely dress you're wearing tonight."

The universe laughed at him, and he wanted to fall under the ground. Natasha stared at him from under her long lashes as if she could read the truth from his face, but at the last moment refused to do so.

She turned away, leaving his hopeless self with a sweet promise, "Save me a dance, Captain Rogers."

*I'm gonna need a rain check on that dance.*

Steve chased away his nostalgic thoughts, hiding his hands in his pockets. Eighty years had passed, and he still didn't know how to talk to women. Moreover, he had never had the opportunity to learn how to dance.

"Troubles in paradise?" Tony appeared out of nowhere.

He handed Steve a glass of whiskey, which turned out to be a salvation for his baffled soul.

"I've known Natasha for years now, yet she remains a mystery."

"I'm afraid I don't have any advice for you." Stark took a sip of his drink. "Over an hour ago I married the woman of my life and we're about to have a son in three months. I'm only wrapping my mind around it, you know."

"Oh, so it's a boy." Steve smiled. "Have you chosen the name?"

It took a moment for Tony to respond, "Martin. Martin Peter Stark."

He moved toward the dance hall with Steve next to him. Entering the room, they saw many happy faces, most of them hardly recognizable by Rogers. Music was playing the background. In a few minutes, the young couple would go out into the center of the hall, greet the guests and ask them to take their seats. After that, the best man, in this case James Rhodes, would present a moving, amusing - and probably discrediting the groom - speech that would be remembered for many years.

"I see May Parker must have lost my wedding invitation." Tony sighed, stopping to look at Steve. "Well, we can cry over all those people who didn't make it or we can appreciate all those who came. I know what you're thinking, Cap. I know you keep thinking about the way to bring them back. You should stop."
"But there must be a way, right?" Steve wasn't surprised that Stark had seen right through him. "It's been three months and we behave like nothing happened, like we have to move on-

"We do have to move on, buddy. Look, I tried. I searched for the way until Pepper found me sitting all night in the lab and told me to catch a breath. I have a family now, Steve, and I can't risk losing it. I know it's hard, but we got to let go."

Steve looked away, his voice hardly recognizable, "What if I don't how?"

"Then hold on to Natasha." Tony placed his hand on Steve's shoulder. "We've lost so much and we still have so much to lose."

Steve watched Tony approach Pepper and Rhodey. Stark said something that made his wife and best friend laugh. Then Steve's gaze found Thor who had suffered as much as Rogers or perhaps even more, and yet he was smiling at some dark-haired woman. At last Steve's eyes met Natasha, who was standing at the buffet table, and Bruce was heading towards her.

He struggled with the desire to save Natasha from talking to her ex-boyfriend and spend the whole evening with her, as he always felt the best in her presence. She helped him forget.

But before he could even take a step, a figure from his recent past appeared on his path; a blond-haired beauty who apparently did not intend to miss the opportunity to reunite with her former almost-lover.

"Captain Rogers."

"Agent Carter."
Rhodey's speech made everyone both cry and laugh. Pepper had tears in her eyes but it wasn't caused by sadness. A sincere smile formed on her lips as she uncontrollably caressed her belly. Tony commented loudly on his best friend's words and pretended to be irritated by some funny anecdotes from his life, but when he hugged James and patted him on the back, Steve knew perfectly well how Tony was moved.

Soon, accompanied by Sharon Carter, Steve raised his glass in a toast to the two people who deserved nothing but happiness.

"They're cute together," Sharon said, taking a seat at the table.

"Yeah, they are." Steve did the same. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Your deeds, Cap, forced me to live on the run, but after what happened... I'm going back to S.H.I.E.L.D. Now, when the world is in disarray, there's a lot to do. We could use some help."

Although he had a beautiful woman beside him, his thoughts tended to drift toward another blond beauty. Therefore, it was only after a moment that the meaning of the words he'd heard reached him. He looked at Sharon.

"My good friend just told me that I should move on," he replied. "I have been fighting for as long as I remember, but victory never wants to come."

"Perhaps there's no such thing like victory." She took a ship of champagne. "You never called. Not even once."

"I'm sorry, Sharon. You risked so much for me and I didn't appreciate that enough."

His regret was honest. Sometimes he forgot how many people were involved in his actions, how many people were suffering or at risk because of his decisions.

"No, it's okay. The kiss we once shared... It wasn't supposed to be anything more, was it?" She gave him a slight smile, not really expecting an answer. "Are Agent Romanoff and the Falcon still by your side?"

"Sam is gone," his expression clouded over, "but Natasha is always there."

Sharon nodded thoughtfully and grabbed his hand. Steve did not feel what he always felt as soon as his skin sensed Natasha's touch. His heart didn't beat faster, his body wasn't craving for more and more. Instead, he felt a special sympathy towards Sharon. Squeezing her hand, he imagined Peggy looking at them and grinning.

Perhaps she would be proud.

Thor, Bruce, Valkyrie, and Nebula were absorbed in a conversation, but only single words would reach Natasha and be quickly forgotten. She played with an olive floating in her martini, trying to ignore the fact that, only three tables away, Steve and Sharon were holding hands.

She could not understand the feeling which filled her at that sight. In the end, she herself had pushed Steve into Sharon's arms many years ago, encouraging him to break through his barriers
and live a full life. It was true that even then, kissing him on the cheek in the cemetery, she had
known that her relationship with Steve had been headed in a direction none of them could have
foreseen. He had started to mean too much to her. That's why she had left. That's why she had got
her mind busy with Bruce.

Steve had always been the reason.

This time, she knew that there was no escape from that feeling. If Steve decided to ask Sharon out,
Natasha would not be able to isolate herself. She would stay by his side and bear everything just to
never lose their friendship. Their bond was too precious for her, even if it was meant to be nothing
but platonic.

"Natasha, you don't seem to be interested in our little chat," Thor drew her attention. "I believe that
the image of my dear brother does not give you pleasant memories, it's quite understandable, but I
have already made my decision and I hope that you will not blame me."

"Loki?" Natasha was honestly surprised. "What about him?"

"Thor just told us that he's going to Hel in order to persuade his sister to entrust him with an army
and let Loki come back to life," Bruce explained.

"Of course, knowing Hela it cannot be arranged amicably, but with the help of Valkyrie and all my
loyal warriors, I will succeed in saving my brother."

"You're too optimistic, your Majesty," Valkyrie said ironically, taking a large sip of vodka straight
from the bottle. "Screw this, I'm in."

Thor's smile seemed to be as bright as if capable of illuminating the whole room. Natasha managed
to forget about earlier thoughts as she was now lost with these strange revelations.

"Is Loki really worth it?"

She felt a pleasant quiver at the sound of her favorite voice. Steve appeared suddenly, unnoticed
even by her. When he rested his hands against the back of her chair, standing just behind her,
Natasha hoped no one noticed how much Steve's presence affected her mood.

"What do you mean, my friend?" Odinson looked at him.

"I don't mean to be rude, Thor, but Loki tried to enslave humanity and practically destroyed New
York. I am sorry about your loss, but is he worth another risk?"

Bruce and Valkyrie glanced at Thor, waiting for his reaction. Nebula seemed bored, and Natasha
struggled with the desire to turn to Steve.

"I'm not saying that my brother hasn't made many horrible mistakes, but if it was not for him, I
would not be here now." Thor's voice was calm and filled with emotion; something Natasha had
never heard before. "He helped me defeat Hela and save our people. He also gave the tesseract to
Thanos and therefore saved my life. In the end, Loki was a hero and above all my beloved brother.
Tell me, Captain, if there was a way for you to bring your friend James Barnes back, wouldn't you
use it?"

Steve only nodded, unable to say anything.

"Well, waste your time all you want." It was Nebula who spoke out, standing up. "I've got Thanos
to find and kill."
When she left, Steve took her seat and sighed loudly.

"She's a bit scary, don't you think?" Bruce whispered.

"I like her." Valkyrie shrugged. "Come with us. You might not be green and strong anymore, but we still could use some help."

"Yes, that's a great idea!" Thor patted Bruce on the back making him chuckle. "The Revengers need to stick together."

"The what now?" Steve muttered under his breath when the God of Thunder pulled him in a goodbye hug.

"Don't worry, my friend. We'll come back soon." Thor looked at Romanoff. "Take care of each other, you two."

Both Steve and Natasha looked at the extraordinary team in astonishment as Thor, Bruce and Valkyrie left to go say goodbye to Tony and Pepper and set on a new dangerous mission.

Sometimes the world was a mixture of people, situations, problems, dreams, and memories. Sometimes the world was too overwhelming for one to catch their breath. However, sometimes the world was limited to a particular person.

Natasha leaned her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her hand, staring at Steve from under her long lashes. He could not read the expression on her face, but he could see that there was a smile wandering on her lips, ready to appear and speed up his heartbeat at any moment.

She was so close, yet so far away.

"It turns out Thor and Bruce formed a new team outside the Avengers," she said. "They have the Revengers or whatever, Tony has a family, you and I-"

"...we have each other," Steve finished, looking for a clue in her eyes, for a reminisce of their morning moment.

"Yeah," her tone gentled a little, "and it all makes me think about Clint. He should be here today."

Steve wished he could to do something for Natasha not to worry about her best friend, but there was no way to fix what was damaged. He remembered Tony's words: *Then hold on to Natasha. We've lost so much and we still have so much to lose.*

So he got up, not knowing exactly what he was doing, and reached out to Natasha.

"if I may have the pleasure, Agent Romanoff, will you dance with me?"

"The pleasure will be mine, Captain Rogers."

She smiled at him tenderly and grabbed his hand. He led her to the dance floor, thinking of how he had never got his chance to dance with Peggy. This time he didn't intend to wait too long.

The music was calm, couples around them were hugging each other while dancing. Not far from them, Pepper put her head on Tony's neck, and he pulled her to him.

Happiness. How strange it was that it could be found in just one person?
He put his hand on Natasha's waist and pulled her closer. She placed her free hand on his shoulder, lifting her head to look at him. Lights flickered in her green eyes, reflecting from the chandeliers hanging above the hall.

"To be honest, I'm not good at dancing," he told her.

"Steve Rogers isn't good at something? Well, I guess you are only a human after all." She was teasing him differently than usual, the warmth of her voice made him want to keep listening to it and only it for the rest of his life. "You'll be fine. Just follow my lead."

"Yes, ma'am."

He did so, quickly finding himself in the rhythm of her steps.

It was a really nice feeling; swaying with her to the melody, sensing her smell and touch, looking into her eyes and imagining that this was the only view that existed.

She could easily become his whole world.

"How was the reunion with Sharon?"

"Not bad," he twirled her and then pulled closer, "but I guess she's not really my type."

"Oh, so there won't be any attempt at replacing me?" She pretended to be disappointed. "You know I wouldn't go easily."

"And you know there's no one who could replace you, Nat. Ever."

Maybe it was the music, maybe alcohol, maybe the general atmosphere of joy. No matter the reasons, Steve wanted to tell her everything he had hidden deep in his heart. He wanted to take her in his arms, turn towards the gathered people and tell them that thanks to this woman he still had the will to keep living.

"Tell me what you feel, Steve," she asked as if reading his mind.

"I feel grateful," he confessed.

"Grateful? For what exactly?"

"For you." As simple as it was, it left Natasha speechless. "You know, I dream about what happened in Wakanda almost every night. Sometimes my dream focuses on Bucky's death, sometimes on a desperate searching for Sam. Sometimes you're the one who plays the main role. Right after Bucky disappears, you run into me. I lock you in a tight embrace, there are no sounds around us. Just silence, just you and me." He stared into her eyes. "And then you say my name and disappear right in my arms; dust and ash left of you. When I wake up in the morning or in the middle of the night, sweating, it takes me awhile to recall that you are sleeping right behind the wall, that you are safe and sound. I cannot imagine losing you, too."

"Hey." She placed her hand on his cheek, her voice hardly louder than a whisper. "You won't lose me, okay? I'm not leaving you."

He did not know when they had stopped dancing, but now they stood in the middle of the room, embracing one another and looking into each other's eyes; two figures among many others.

Her eyes slipped on his lips, her eyes slightly shiny. Suddenly, she put her face to his chest,
hugging her cheek to the place where his heart was. Her fingers intertwined behind his back, and he drew her closer, hiding his face in her hair.

"I'm grateful for what we have, Steve. With you, I feel like I finally belong somewhere. I just…" Her voice was muffled. "I just don't want to change anything. It's good as it is. Do you understand?"

There was a strange, uninvited pain inside of him. Glad that Natasha couldn't see the look on his face, he closed his eyes. He was scared of admitting that her words deprived him of hope for something that had no right to exist anyway.

Feeling as if his happiness was slipping away through his fingers, he whispered, "Yeah, I understand. It's good as it is."
Sitting on the grass in the sun, Steve attempted at sketching. The figure in his small notebook was slowly becoming clearer; he penciled curly hair, then focused on the lips. But before he could draw their full shape, he saw Natasha heading towards him with two ice cream pints.

He hid his notebook in the pocket and smiled, "Please tell me you didn't take Hulk-A-Hulk-A-Burning-Fudge."

"It turns out we have our own flavors too," she told him. "Red Cherry Widow doesn't sound as fancy as I would like to, but I have a feeling that it's going to be very tasty."

She sat down beside him, straightening her legs and handing him his Ben & Jerry's ice cream pint. Steve burst out laughing when he read the name of the flavor.

"Chillin' Captain Choco… I bet Tony had something to do with it."

Steve tried his ice cream, which tasted of chocolate and mint. On this warm day, such a dessert was like a refreshing rescue, making him want to lie down on the grass and spend all day like that, looking at the sky, eating ice cream and feeling Natasha's presence next to him.

They sat in silence for a moment. Natasha brushed her hair back from her face, looking around. Nearby, a young man kept the kite airborne with his four-year-old daughter, while his wife was preparing a picnic, from time to time looking at her family and smiling sincerely.

"Okay, mine is too sweet." She winced, turning to look at Steve. "How is… Oh."

Her chuckle confused him.

"What? What is it?"

"You have some chocolate in the corner of your lips… Here."

He ran out of the air when she moved closer and touched his lips with her fingers. Her smile faded, and her hand remained on his face longer than it was needed, gently brushing his cheek and chin.

Yet again she was so close and he couldn't do much about it. It felt like forever; waiting for her to pull away and for the spell to be broken.

I just don't want to change anything. It's good as it is.

Then why was her touch so delicate? Why did she look at him in such a special way? Why would she give him a slight glimpse of hope if she wanted nothing more than a friendship?

"Steve…" He never found out what she had intended to say as they heard police sirens. With difficulty, Steve took his eyes off Natasha and saw four police cars heading quickly towards the center, "Steve, don't. It's not the best time for heroism."

She knew what he was going to do before the idea appeared in his head. He stood up, ready to throw himself into another fight, but Natasha grabbed his arm and turned him to her.
"They might need our help, Nat," he said firmly.

"You don't have your shield and suit. It's not your fight. Let the police handle the problem."

"You're going or not?"

Natasha raised her hands in a gesture of surrender and let Steve run in the direction of the fading sound. She gave herself a moment to curse his stubborn, reckless ass, and then followed him like she always did.

Two years ago...

"Let's give him five more minutes and then we go looking for him."

"Come on, Sam. He's buying Chinese food rather than saving the world. He'll be fine."

"He left an hour ago and the restaurant is two buildings away. I have a bad feeling about it."

Natasha was lying on the bed with her fingers intertwined on her chest and her eyes placed on the ceiling, which looked as if it was about to fall on them at any moment. The bed was not better. With each move, it made sounds that could be heard throughout the motel, not to mention the strange smell of sheet.

The bed creaked as she turned her head to look at Sam sitting on the second bed. Every night one person slept on the floor while the other two occupied the beds. To be honest, Natasha preferred to sleep on the floor, but today was not her turn.

It was Steve's.

"What are you trying to say?"

"You clearly don't see the gravity of this situation, Natasha." Sam sighed. "The government is chasing us, Wanda and Vision barely check in, and Steve remains anxious because of the whole thing with Stark and Barnes. I bet he's being transported to DC in the back of a suspicious truck as we speak."

Natasha couldn't help but laugh, "I didn't know you were such a softie, Wilson. It's Steve Rogers we're talking about. He can protect himself."

Half an hour later, Sam stood at the window, waiting for his friend to come back, while Natasha was looking at the door intensely. She didn't want to admit it aloud, but the fear started to form dark thoughts in her mind.

She shouldn't have let Steve go alone.

Her heart jumped in her chest as the door handle moved. She got out of bed at the same moment Steve entered the room.

"Finally... wait," Sam paused, confused as he saw his best friend. "Is it pizza? And what the hell happened to your face?"

Steve looked as if someone had taken his head and slammed it against the wall several times. Perhaps Natasha was not far from guessing the truth. Rogers had a black eye, a split lip and a red wound that crossed his cheek. He ran his hand over his disheveled hair, smiling stupidly and putting the pizza on the table.
"Oh, Steve." She approached him and softly cupped his head with her hands to check if he had broken something. "You really don't know how to stay out of trouble, do you?"

"In the alley, not far from here, five guys tried to hurt a young man. They were beating him with baseball bats. I couldn't just pass by." His eyes, usually gentle, were now filled with anger. "I hate bullies."

"We were so worried, man." Sam took a piece of pizza. "At least tell us they look worse than you."

Steve responded with a grin, and Natasha glared at him, though her touch remained extremely delicate.

"Okay, vigilante," she let go of him, "I'll get you some ice."

When she passed Sam, he smiled at her with his mouth full.

"Who's a softie now, huh?" he said so quietly that only she would hear him.

Immediately thereafter, his moan was heard in the room as she kicked him in the tibia.

Now...

Steve fell into a crowd of people interested in what was happening on the other side of the street. The area of a high office building had been taped off by police. Some of the cops called back up and tried to keep civils away from the danger, while others were making a plan of attack.

Natasha found herself right next to him, panting after running the distance which had been a piece of cake for a super soldier like Steve.

"You have a gun?" She looked at him with surprise as they squeezed to the beginning of the crowd. "What? You took one for the wedding."

"First of all, I took two. The other one was hidden under Tony and Pepper's table. Second, I don't carry a gun when I go to the park with my friend."

"Well, you don't need one. You said it yourself, you're the weapon."

Natasha rolled her eyes, almost able to see the adrenaline flow through Steve's veins. For the first time in months, he seemed to be alive. So when he stepped over the tape and headed for the cops, Natasha knew that the only thing she could do was follow him.

"Hey!" A police officer approached them. "Civils are not allowed here."

"How many hostages and kidnappers?" Steve asked.

"Gary, take these two-"

"Oh, I don't think you want to mess with Captain America," Natasha interrupted him, sitting on the hood of a car. "Or with Black Widow. Are you the commander here?"

The man looked at her. She saw him battling with himself, but there was no time to lose and he knew it. He would eventually give in. They all did.

"Captain Jacob Mordens," he told them in a professional voice. "There are forty employees inside,
most likely all on the ground floor in the main hall. Twelve kidnappers, one of them is about to start negotiations in five minutes. Everything is under control. We don't need any help of... people like you."

"With all due respect, Captain Mordens, I'm not going to stand back when forty lives are jeopardized," Steve said and even without his shield and suit, he still was able to gain respect. "Negotiate as long as you can. At this time, my partner and I will quietly slip into the building, neutralize the kidnappers and provide safety for the hostages. On our sign, you'll arrest the negotiator and step inside."

"No bloodshed, no waste of money." Natasha smiled, although she would rather come home and let Jacob handle this.

The captain was clearly dissatisfied, but one look at Steve must have been enough for him to realize that Rogers had no intention of obeying orders. When Jacob went to inform his fellow police officers and start negotiations, Natasha jumped off the car and stood next to Steve.

"I think these people don't care about money."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. "They want to cause fear and kill people for the sake of doing so. It's impossible to negotiate with terrorists, so let's hope that the situation will not turn against us." He glanced at Natasha. "Do you see the neighboring building? You could get to the roof through it and check all floors in case Mordens was wrong. There should be a backdoor somewhere; that's my way of entering. I'll fight as many enemies as I can and at some point, you'll join me."

"Copy that, Cap." She headed towards the second building but stopped for a moment, guided by irrational fear, and looked again at Steve. "Just... be careful."

When she ran away, Steve swallowed and went to the back of the building. As expected, there was an inconspicuous door that might have been guarded on the other side. He longed for his shield, but it was beyond his reach in the near future or maybe forever. So he took a flap of the trash, which was round and large enough to cover his head and chest. Leaning, he slowly pulled the handle and slipped inside.

Natasha cursed having listened to Steve's orders when she ran ten floors and finally found herself on the roof. The building where the hostages were kept was four meters apart. Widow's Line would make it way easier, but after all, she never said no to a challenge.

The flow of adrenaline allowed her to acquire the right speed. She bounced off and for a moment lost the ground under her feet, then she made a somersault and landed smoothly on the roof of the neighboring building. She opened the door and ran to the last floor. On each side of the corridor, there were offices behind the glass walls. No living being. Natasha started down the corridor toward the elevators, wondering if checking each floor separately would be simply a waste of time. Steve needed her downstairs.

At the same time, the sound of the raising elevator reached her and the door slowly opened.

Steve found himself at a buffet. There were three men eating lunch and laughing at the table. None of them noticed his presence, while he was able to take a closer look at them. Deprived of the masks, they all were dressed in black sets of clothes with bulletproof vests.

"So," he cleared his throat, "who wants to start?"

Everything was happening fast. One moment the door opened and two men noticed her. The next
moment, Natasha smirked. In the next she was already in the elevator, kicking one of the men down. The other one grabbed her hand, but she leaped on his shoulders, wrapping his neck with her legs. The elevator's door closed and the three of them started lowering.

Steve hit one of the opponents in the face while shielding himself with his makeshift shield against the attack of the other. He jumped on the table, bounced off and hit two men at the same time, knocking them off their feet. The third lunged at him and pinned him to the wall, but his punch was too slow. Steve ducked and pushed the man onto the pile of bottles standing on a shelf.

He was making too much noise. Rogers quickly ran to the main hall and found all the hostages sitting in the middle of the room. Five masked kidnappers turned to him and began shooting. Steve sheltered behind the pillar, knowing that he could not hide for long.

In the meantime, the elevator was too small for three people, especially if one of them was unconscious, taking most of the space. The second man hit Natasha in the stomach, depriving her of the air for a slight moment.

"Really?" Her eyes flashed with anger. "That's how you want to play? Fine. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

She took out a little thing from her pocket, which seemed to be a spider-shaped toy. She threw it in the face of the opponent, and the spider sucked on his skin. The man shouted as the electric shock split over his body and made him fall on his companion. Natasha took a deep breath and leaned over to find a gun. The elevator almost reached the ground floor.

Steve left his relatively safe place and attacked, quickly winning over the two closest enemies. At the same time, the elevator opened and Natasha aimed at the man running towards Steve, shooting him in the leg.

They quickly exchanged glances, then Natasha ran up, bounced off his shield and threw herself at the last two opponents.

The noise of fighting and shooting alarmed the police who entered the front door. Natasha allowed them to take the two men away, certain that they would rather be arrested than spend a minute longer at the mercy of Black Widow. Steve nodded to Captain Mordens, who had arrested the negotiator and now approached the hostages to calm them down.

It was the end. They made it.

Natasha sighed, but suddenly the ice froze her heart. She heard the sound of the elevator. Her mind was working faster than usual. She hadn't noticed the elevator going up. She hadn't checked all the floors. There were eleven kidnappers instead of twelve.

As the door opened, first she saw two men who were still unconscious, and then someone else. He aimed his gun at Steve.

Time seemed to be slowing down. Natasha knew what would happen before she could fully digest this idea and the potential consequences of her actions. Nothing mattered. Only Steve. As in slow motion, she threw herself in the direction of Steve, simultaneously shielding him with her own body and shooting towards the elevator.

The man got hit at the same moment when a huge blow into her chest knocked the gun out of her hand and threw her to the ground. Cold crawled over her body, ready to sink inside, dim everything else.
Strong hands embraced her firmly, holding her weak body.

"Natasha? Natasha, l-look at me!" A familiar voice was trembling, she could hardly hear it. Everything seemed to blur; sounds, images, feelings. "Stay with me. Nat, please…"

He appeared for a moment, real and clear, his face full of sorrow and pain. Her Steve. She felt the warmth of blood in her mouth when she tried to smile at him. He was so precious, and she wanted to tell him how much he meant to her.

"Steve?"

As she closed her eyes and fell into darkness, there was no one to follow her.

Chapter End Notes

I know that the most important part of the chapter is its dramatic end, but apart of that, I'm interested in your opinion on flashbacks and fighting moments. Also, the names of ice cream flavors suck, I'm aware of that, but I couldn't come up with anything better. Thank you for all the comments, they always manage to make my day and motive me to continue writing!
"Your life must be extremely boring, Captain Rogers, if you're willing to interfere with the police's work."

"My duty is to save lives." Steve's voice was as cold as ice.

"Is it?" Ross sat back in his chair. "What about Agent Romanoff's life, then? As far as I know, she was the one to save your life after she blindly obeyed your orders. Not the first time someone close to you has suffered because of your actions, am I wrong?"

Tony turned away from the window and glared at the Secretary of State, "Okay. That's enough."

What an irony. Over two years before, in the same place, Tony stood on the side of Ross and the accords, and Steve felt that he was losing ground. Now Stark specifically shortened his honeymoon to provide Natasha with proper health care and to support Steve in the fight against the government.

Steve would have been more grateful if it was not for the fact that he couldn't feel anything. Even Ross did not make him angry. It was as if someone had turned off his energy and deprived him of the will to live.

Five horrible days seemed like five years. Five days without her.

"Natasha took a bullet for me." He looked Ross straight in the eyes. "She is the last person I would like to hurt, yet she's in a coma because of my recklessness. It's a debt that I will never repay and a sorrow that will never go away. So excuse me, Mr. Secretary, but I need to go back to my friend. It's the least I can do."

Steve and Ross stood up at the same time, and Tony instinctively took a step toward them.

"I cannot let you walk out of here without any consequences, Captain, and just hope that I won't hear about your heroic deeds in a matter of weeks."

"What are you saying?" Stark asked.

"I officially prohibit Steve Rogers from engaging in any activities that require the use of force and are contained in the competence of the appropriate authorities." Tony snorted, but Steve did not even blink. "From this day you have no right to name yourself Captain America. The suit and the shield do not belong to you. Have a peaceful life as a civilian, and one day, if Thanos returns... we will find you."

"I might not be willing to help."

"Oh, I find it unlikely to happen. After all, your duty is to save lives; your own words."

Thaddeus Ross walked out of the room, leaving Steve painfully aware that he was still capable of experiencing anger. Burning, furious anger. He leaned his head and hands against the wall, closing his eyes.


Steve felt cold sweat pouring over him, fear squeezing his heart. He slowly turned to his friend, not
allowing himself to think that Natasha could... when he wasn't by her side... because of him... no, please no.

But in the next moment, Tony patted him on the shoulder, his voice soothing as he explained, "She is waking up."

The feeling was similar to emerging from murky, deep water. The surface was getting closer, the rays of the sun reflected on it and submerged into the depths. Natasha took a breath and opened her eyes, blinking a few times before her eyes adjusted to the brightness of the room.

Her mind worked like a machine that quickly absorbed data and recalled memories. Pain under the heart and numerous tubes attached to her body allowed her to get an idea of the situation. She had been shot. She was in the hospital.

"Steve?" Her voice sounded like it came out of sandpaper.

"I'm here," he whispered, gently grabbing her hand. "It's okay. I'm here."

She turned her head slightly, ignoring the pain. He was sitting in a chair next to the bed, clearly tired, but the feeling of relief lightened his face. Natasha guessed that he had not had any sleep for a long time.

"How long?"

He knew what she meant.

"Five days. You... you saved my life, Nat."

"Well, I'm not sure if it was worth it." She managed to smirk. "You look like shit."

Steve chuckled, and his eyes shone with held back tears that she would never have expected. He took her hand in both of his and lightly touched it with his lips. Just like five days earlier Natasha came face to face with death and miraculously won, now she was afraid that her heart would pop out of her chest.

"I really don't want to interrupt you, lovebirds, but I'm afraid that soon things might get very awkward here."

Natasha turned around in surprise to see Tony standing by the window and staring at them with a tender smile.

"Stark?" She felt Steve letting go of her hand. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Well, I've been standing here for ten minutes. You know, for a trained spy, Red, you aren't very perceivable." He was clearly enjoying this situation. "You guys are cute, by the way."

Steve had forgotten his presence, so now he looked away, uncomfortable. It was both frightening and wonderful how hearing Natasha's voice and seeing that she was okay unlocked in him the ability to feel many emotions at once. Including embarrassment.

"Too bad I'm not in the best condition to kick your ass," Natasha answered back, smiling. "Where's Pepper? You're supposed to be on your honeymoon."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." He approached them. "Hawaii is wonderful, you have to take my word for it, but there is something special about making sure that your friend gets adequate health care in a
private clinic and lives long enough to kick more asses."

She felt a surge of friendliness towards this wonderful man and grabbed his hand, making it clear that she was truly grateful and happy with his presence.

"This teary atmosphere is rather overwhelming, so maybe I'll give you some privacy, I know you want it, Steve, and I'll go tell Clint to visit you, Natasha. He's probably dying to see you. Oh, bad use of words."

Natasha watched Tony leave, and it took her a moment to realize the meaning of what he had just said.

"Clint is here?"

"Yeah, he arrived yesterday morning," Steve said. "Nat… I… It was my fault."

The change in his voice made Natasha look at him again. Rogers - a man of honor respected by everyone around him - now seemed to shrink in himself. He looked as if someone had taken away some part of him and Natasha realized it wasn't just about what had happened. There was something else, but she knew that sooner or later he would tell her the truth.

"Come on, Steve, it's not your fault. If you want someone to blame, blame me. I didn't check all floors."

"You would never find yourself in that building and you wouldn't need to shield me with your own body if I had not pretended to be a hero that I no longer am. Maybe Ross is right." Steve noticed the confusion on Natasha's face. "He found out and forbade me to use force or even refer to myself as Captain America. Unless Thanos comes back, I'm just a civilian."

"Son of a bitch," Natasha drawled.

He couldn't help but smile, grabbing her hand once again.

"Tony had the same reaction. Anyway, it doesn't matter. The most important thing is that you're okay." He caressed her skin with his fingers. "You scared the hell out of me, Nat. The thought of losing you… There's nothing more terrifying."

His eyes resembled the rough sea, his touch was warm and pleasant, and his words touched the deepest recesses of her heart.

"Come here," she whispered.

When he sat on the edge of her bed, she reached for him. He hugged her tightly but carefully, hiding his face in her hair. Natasha stroked his neck and back, closing her eyes and focusing all her senses on Steve's presence. There was no pain, just peace.

Lying in bed was not her favorite way of spending time. Of course, after exhausting days of saving the world, such rest was very recommended, when happening in a comfortable bed and preceded by a hot bath. But the hospital, no matter how modern, made her wish to come home as soon as possible.

*Come home with Steve.*

That day the biggest challenge was forcing Steve to get some sleep or at least something to eat.
Finally, after long persuasion and sweet smiles, he only agreed to go buy a cup of coffee from the vending machine. Before leaving, he assured her that he would always be close, only a few steps away from her room.

Natasha could enjoy her privacy for less than two minutes as another person dared to visit her. She had not seen her best friend since the battle at the airport, and she felt her heart squeeze when their eyes met.

Clint cleared his throat, closing the door behind him, "Hi, Nat."

"Hey."

Years of house arrest and months of lonely son upbringing left their mark on him. Someone who did not know him well would only notice the dark circles under his eyes and would blame them on the lack of sleep. Natasha, however, knew Clint better than she knew herself.

Barton was a wreck of a man. His hair was thinner than she remembered, his voice hoarse as if he rarely used it, and his skin pale. When he approached her and took the place previously occupied by Steve, Natasha couldn't help but think that if she touched him, he would break up into small pieces.

"I didn't expect to see you in New York anytime soon," she said.

"Honestly, it was a spontaneous decision. Two days ago, I called Tony, um, for some private reasons, and he told me about you. I had to come." He looked at her, his little smile resembling the one she used to cherish. "How are you feeling?"

He was hiding something from her. It was so obvious that almost painful. Natasha decided not to let him know that she had looked through him and to play the game of his choice.

"I'm fine, though somewhat distressed. I had fought with Chitauri, gods, and androids, but couldn't handle a guy with a gun." Natasha pursed her mouth in a smirk. "My ego suffered the most damage."

"Undoubtedly. I spoke to Cap in the morning. He blames himself for what happened."

"Well, you know Steve. He tends to think he's responsible for the whole world. It was my decision to follow him and save his life. In fact, I would gladly do it again... What?"

Clint stared at her in a strange way until he leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms on his chest.

"Nothing." He shrugged. "You just talk about Cap in a different way. Your face lightened up at the very mention of him. I heard you two are living together. Is it something serious?"

Natasha was surprised by this sudden attack. Her own body betrayed her as her cheeks flushed and she cursed herself in mind for underestimating Clint.

"Don't be ridiculous, Barton. It's Steve Rogers we're talking about."

"And? Just because he's a hero out of everyone's dreams and an old gentleman doesn't mean you don't deserve him. Of course, you two are from different worlds, but in the fight, as in everyday life, you are perfectly complemented. The way you talk about him and how he was worried about you, not leaving your bed for a second... With him, you share something completely different than with me or Banner. I know it scares you, Nat, but you deserve to be happy."
A long silence reigned in the room. It was rare for Natasha not to know what to say, especially in the company of her friends. But when it came to Steve, everything else suddenly ceased to have meaning, and she would get lost in feelings and unspeakable fears.

She was overcome with anger. Having no intention of talking about Steve with someone she had once trusted infinitely, and who now seemed unfamiliar to her, Natasha laughed bitterly.

"You want me to be happy, Clint? Then tell me what's going on. Why did you call Stark?"

"You're always changing the subject instead of opening up—"

"While you're unable to answer one simple question," she interrupted him, her voice sharp as a razor. "You cannot just hide from the world, from your best friend, and then suddenly appear, interfere in things you have no idea about and pretend to care."

Clint rubbed his face, leaning over as if he was carrying a huge weight on his back, "I do care about you, Nat. Don't ever doubt that."

His voice was filled with sadness and Natasha struggled with remorse for treating him unfairly. She reached for his hand, and he flinched under her touch.

"Then stay." Her tone gentled a little. "Take Nathaniel and come here. There's plenty of place in the Avengers Facility. We can be a family—"

"My family is dead!" he shouted, pushing her hand away and standing up. "Laura, Cooper, and Lila disappeared right in front of my eyes. Nate is crying all the time, missing his mom, and what am I supposed to say to him when he grows up? That his dad, an alleged hero, helplessly watched his whole family die? Staying here, getting involved in all this crap again… No, Nat, I don't think I can do it. The Avengers have lost and I don't want to keep fighting if everything is already gone." His voice broke. "I c-can't, Nat. I'm sorry."

Natasha thought about Laura smiling over a cup of tea. About Cooper riding a bike in front of the house. About Lila sitting on her lap and calling her Auntie Nat.

She held back tears of helplessness, wondering how it could have happened. How could they have allowed so many wonderful, innocent people to die? Her heart was crying for Bartons, Fury, Sam, Wanda and many other people, but she found the strength in herself. She always did.

For the second time that day, Natasha tried to comfort a person she loved, not letting herself to long for such pleasure that was crying in someone else's arms. Ignoring the pain in her chest, she left the bed to hug Clint.

"We're all broken," Barton whispered, "but you're the strongest of us, Nat."

Thinking about Steve being just a few steps away, and about Clint embracing her, Natasha closed her eyes and smiled sadly. She had fooled them both.
Together

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Martin Peter Stark was born on 27 November, bringing light to the broken world. The mother and the baby felt perfectly well and were quickly released home. Pepper was able to spend days resting in her bed while her husband and friends remained in full readiness to take care of the boy.

Steve could hardly believe his eyes when he watched Tony rock Martin in his arms, satisfy every whim of Pepper, smile and laugh as if his life made sense again. In addition to being a full-time hero, husband, friend, and billionaire, now Stark was above all a father. At some point, Steve had sincere tears in his eyes as he hugged his friend and promised to always be there for him.

There was nothing unusual in the fact that Martin's birth changed the atmosphere in the Avengers Facility, just like it made both Pepper and Tony behave differently. Pepper, although she should rest, wanted to have everything under control, while Tony could barely break away from his son. Rhodey was always close, ready to help the parents. Steve and Natasha were also eager to visit their old home, spend a whole day with the Starks and return to their apartment only for a night, long feeling the pleasant effects of being an uncle and an aunt.

What surprised Steve the most was Natasha's approach to Martin. He knew her well enough to have seen her in different situations during common missions, living together or on the run. But he had never imagined that he would get to see Natasha in a new role, completely different from all the others.

One day, when everyone was sitting together in the kitchen, Pepper tried to prepare some food, but Tony kept arguing with her that she should take a seat and let him do the job. Suddenly Martin began to cry, but before anyone could react, Natasha was already with him.

Steve froze, enchanted by the scene that was happening in front of his eyes. Natasha started to rock the baby to sleep, humming a lullaby. Her voice was an angelic undertone, her smile... Steve could not recall seeing such a soft smile before. Natasha usually smiled mockingly or playfully, putting her lips in a smirk and leaving a wide smile for special occasions. But this smile... it must have been only reserved for children.

Martin fell silent in her arms, gazing at her with blue eyes, probably as enchanted as everyone else in the room. Natasha looked up and found Steve. She gave him only the last bit of her smile, then gently handed Pepper the baby.

There was something soothing in this very moment. Especially when Tony leaned over and kissed Martin on the forehead, and Pepper looked at them with love, forgetting the trivial argument.

The truth was like a blow to the stomach, sudden and painful. Looking at the picture of the Stark family, Steve finally realized it. He realized that he would never fully understand Tony's happiness because he would never experience it himself. In his wartime life, there was no place for a family.

He also realized that Natasha felt the same way. She could not have children, and like Steve she was doomed to fight many battles, to crave for unreachable peace. Her smile, that unique smile, was the remnant of innocence taken from her in the Red Room.

Steve didn't care about others possibly noticing his gesture. He simply grabbed Natasha's hand and
looked at her so that she would know he was there for her as she always was for him. It suddenly
dawned on him that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Whether as friends or partners
or as something more... it was not important. He needed her and nothing more. No children, no
shield, no hero name, nothing that was long lost in the past or unavailable in the future.

She was enough for him.

Only a red jacket hung in the closet. The same one that Wanda had once borrowed from her.
Natasha touched the material with her fingers to sigh after a while and close the wardrobe with
resignation. Then something caught her attention. There was a piece of jewelry on the floor, and
when she crouched down and took it in her hand, it turned out to be her necklace with an arrow-
shaped pendant.

She smiled slightly as she had long forgotten about this symbol of her friendship with Clint. He
hadn't called her since their conversation in the hospital, but nevertheless, he was present with her,
even in the form of this little thing. Natasha put on the necklace and stood up at the same moment
Pepper walked into the room.

"Here you are! Please don't leave me alone with the boys again."

"What did they do this time?" Natasha asked, amused.

Pepper sat on the bed, clearly delaying coming back to the living room.

"Martin sleeps peacefully and instead of giving him a break, Tony is continually checking on him.
Rhodey is baking a cake, but I'm afraid it will end with him setting the kitchen on fire. I have no
reason to complain about Steve and it's exactly what irritates me. He is too perfect."

"Well, believe it or not, but even Rogers has some flaws. We just haven't figured them out yet."

They both laughed, enjoying the moment of respite that only being in the company of another
woman could bring. Natasha sat next to Pepper, unintentionally playing with the pendant. It was
Christmas Eve and for the first time, she had the chance to spend it with the people she loved. Yet
nostalgia crept into her mind and it was so unusual that she didn't know how to deal with it.

"He has trouble noticing the things that are right in front of his eyes," she said in a low voice,
looking at the door. "He thinks I'm strong simply because I never cry for those we lost. It's not like
I don't care, you know?" Pepper nodded, listening to her carefully. "And I don't see crying as a sign
of weakness. I'm just... I'm afraid that if I let the tears flow, they'll never stop."

"If you tell him, Steve will understand."

"He also doesn't know that I've been lying to him. Actually, perhaps I've been lying to myself as
well."

"Is it about your feelings?" Pepper smiled in a friendly way.

Natasha shook her head, responding with a smirk, "Why the hell am I telling you all of this?"

"It might be a Christmas miracle or maybe, just maybe Natasha Romanoff is softening under Steve
Roger's influence."

"Don't be ridiculous, Pepper." Natasha stood up. "We should go back unless we want another battle
at the airport. Too soon?"
Pepper laughed, leaving the room. Together they headed down the corridor towards the living room, from which suspicious noises could be heard.

"You should tell him, Nat," Pepper said before any of the boys noticed them, "for I'm certain he feels the same way about you."

Although the square was completely filled with people, Steve and Natasha found a place from which they had a good view of the roof of One Times Square. Exactly twenty minutes remained till midnight. Steve handed the hot chocolate to Natasha, whose rosy cheeks proved how cold it was. The cup was so big and the chocolate so sweet that they had decided to drink one together.

Now, watching the red lips touch the cup, Steve wondered if it had been a good idea after all. Sometimes he would catch himself thinking about taking Natasha into his arms and reminding himself of the taste of her lips. Then he would remember her words from Pepper and Tony's wedding, and it could be compared to having someone pour a bucket of cold water over his head.

I just don't want to change anything. It's good as it is. Do you understand?

He still didn't.

After a month of wasting time at the Avengers Facility, Steve and Natasha had chosen to spend New Year's Eve with each other. They watched movies and TV shows all day long until they finally dressed warmly - though apparently not warmly enough - and went to see the ball drop with the rest of the New Yorkers.

"I'm glad this year is ending," Natasha said, throwing away the empty cup.

"Yeah, it's been a hell of a year." Steve really didn't want to recall the snap. Not today. "But there were some good moments."

Natasha looked at him with interest, "For example?"

"Oh, you know. Pepper and Tony's wedding, Martin's birth, Christmas, every moment you and I spent together except the one when you were bleeding out in my arms. I guess what I'm trying to say is that this year would be much worse if not for you. You've saved me in more than one way."

"You've saved me too, Steve."

He still couldn't quite believe how easy it was to sink into her green eyes, into her melodious voice, into all her posture that emanated self-confidence, but also gentleness towards him.

Ten minutes left.

"Any New Year's resolutions?" he asked.

"Not dying sounds difficult enough, so I will not demand too much from myself. But, after a second thought, I could eat more vegetables."

Steve burst out laughing, barely paying attention to all the people around him who were pushing forward to see the main attraction of the event. As always, when there was no danger and no need to fight, only Natasha mattered.

"I personally intend to be less reckless."

"Wow," Natasha poked him in the ribs, unable to hide her amusement, "bold of you to assume it's
possible."

"I'm glad you are having so much fun, but you might freeze before midnight."

Steve took off his jacket and helped Natasha wear it. It was warm, soft to the touch and so huge that Natasha felt like she could hide her whole body in it.

"What about you?"

His first instinct was to smile as he responded, "The serum and seventy years in ice prevented me from worrying about situations like this one. It helps me behave like a gentleman."

"I'm pretty sure skinny Steve was a gentleman as well."

Five minutes left.

Natasha hid her hands, not for the first time full of admiration for the pockets of men's jackets and coats, because if she wanted she could easily fit both hands and a phone in one pocket. No exaggeration.

However, a certain detail surprised her. Her fingers encountered a small object with a rough paper texture. After making sure that Steve was busy waiting for the ball drop, like everyone else, she took out the item and took a look. It was a notebook in the size of her hand.

After a short hesitation, she opened it. Steve replied to her mention about his younger version, but the general noise around them made it hard for Natasha to hear. Frankly, she did not even try as she was too busy looking through the pages.

On some of them, there were sketches full of details pointing out that the author had spent a lot of time drawing selected objects. New York City, Stark Tower, marvelous view of Wakanda, shield, Mjolnir, Sam's wings… Her fingers stopped on one of the drawings, which was different from others as it did not represent an object but a person.

It was a portrait. It was a portrait of Natasha herself.

The hair that reached to the shoulders was straight and framed her face. She did not smile, but neither did she look serious or sad. Using only a pencil, Steve managed to capture every detail of her appearance, making it look like a black and white photo rather than a drawing.

In the meantime, the Times Square Ball began to descend.

"It's a beautiful view," Steve said loud enough to be heard.

When he turned to look at her, she hid the notebook in the pocket.

Where else am I gonna get a view like this?

"Yes," her gaze never left him, "it is."

Ten seconds to midnight. Ten seconds through which neither Steve nor Natasha moved, and their eyes spoke more than any words. Steve noticed something in her face that he'd never seen before, and Natasha understood that maybe her feelings were not unrequited and absurd.

10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...

The ball rested at midnight to signal the start of the new year. At the same moment, a new chapter
of their life began, a new stage of the relationship that was the most important for both of them.

When everyone cheered, Natasha stood on her toes, took Steve's face in her hands and pressed her lips to his. The world on all sides of them swirled and then ceased to exist. Steve, though lost at first, quickly found himself in the situation he had been longing for. He put his arms around Natasha and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss.

She tasted the way she had on the escalator, but the kiss seemed different. This time it was real, not meant to confuse the opponent. It was filled with honesty, feelings gathered over the years and hope.

"I was wrong, Steve," she whispered when their lips parted to take a breath. "I was terribly wrong."

"Oh, Nat..."

She was searching his face for any reaction to her deed and words, afraid that it all was just an illusion that would soon disappear. But he ran his hand over her cheek and smiled, filling her heart with unlimited happiness.

The next moment he kissed her as if his life had depended on it, and she let him take control. Two halves, so different from each other, set out on a journey to become one.

Chapter End Notes

That was my Christmas gift for you and I hope you enjoyed it. As usual, I encourage you to leave comments; I cherish all of them and they motivate me more than anything else. Also, there are a lot of parallels and foreshadowing in my story, so read carefully :D Happy Holidays & New Year!
The smell of toasts and coffee woke her up. Natasha hardly ever felt so rested, opening her eyes and getting accustomed to the morning light of the sun that illuminated her room through the windows. She turned on her back and nestled in this new, previously unknown feeling. She was strangely calm as if everything was in the right place, and every possible problem remained in the past.

So that's how happiness looks like, she thought.

This morning Steve went jogging as it had become his habit and always reminded him of Sam. Later, he visited a bakery and returned home with a sudden thought it was the high time to turn his quiet feelings for Natasha into something serious. And as they say, the way to woman's heart is through her stomach.

She found him in the kitchen, where he was preparing a breakfast worthy of the royal family. He did not notice her at first, so she took a moment to look at him. He stood with his back to her and put a toast on a plate. She wanted to approach him, embrace his back and kiss him on the neck, but they were not yet at that stage of the relationship. As the matter of fact, she did not know exactly who they were to each other now. Maybe nothing had changed. After all, it had been just one kiss. Maybe Steve was not going to...

"Good morning," he said, sending her one of his best smiles that made her legs weak. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah. Very well."

Natasha sat at the table, trying not to look at him too ostentatiously. Was he always so sexy?

"I couldn't decide what to prepare, so I made toasts and scrambled eggs." He handed her a cup of coffee. "No sugar and no milk."

"You really know what I need. Thank you."

Steve sat down on the other side of the table and put two toasts on his plate. Only now did she notice that his hands were shaking slightly, and her gaze brought a faint blush to his cheeks. He was as nervous as she was. It relieved her a bit.

Usually, for Natasha, contacts with the opposite sex came easily. She could seduce, lie, use and abandon, but things with Steve looked completely different. He remained her closest friend, and she cared about not ruining the special bond between them. She felt like a teenager who was falling in love for the first time. She had experience in meaningless romances, but she knew nothing about true love. What she felt for Steve… It was new and beautiful.

"Do you have any plans for today?"

"I promised Pepper that I would help her buy some clothes for Martin." She took a bite of her toast. "I bet it's only an excuse to spend some time away from Tony. He's overprotective."

"Well, I'll check on him and then... maybe... I thought we could go somewhere. You and I," he
stammered, avoiding her gaze. "There's an Italian restaurant two blocks away."

Natasha froze with a cup of coffee raised to her lips. She smiled warmly, struggling with the temptation to throw herself at Steve and shut his lips with a passionate kiss.

"Steve, are you asking me out?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'm not good at it." He rubbed his neck. "Would you like to go on a date with me, Nat?"

Inside she was screaming with joy, but outside she remained calm, hiding a smile of triumph behind the cup and responding, "I thought you'd never ask."

Being in her company was like breathing clean air. Steve mostly valued moments spent alone, just the two of them, because then he could focus only on her and forget about the whole world. He felt more comfortable with her than with anyone else.

That's why he was terrified by the prospect of expressing feelings in public. Going to a restaurant was associated with gazes of strangers, overhearing conversations and their moment getting interrupted by a friendly but somewhat obtrusive waiter.

All fears, however, were dispelled as soon as they ordered pasta and wine. They never lacked topics for conversations, so even now there were no problems with words, although both of them deliberately avoided mentioning the kiss.

Natasha looked as stunning as ever, or even more, although it was not a black dress that intensified her beauty but her captivating charm. She was extremely relaxed and amused when she held a glass of wine in her hand, stared at Steve from under her long eyelashes, and her smile rarely disappeared from her red lips.

"I found your notebook," she suddenly confessed.

"I know." He laughed at the glimpse of surprise in her eyes. "Come on, Romanoff. I'm neither blind nor stupid. I pretended not to notice anything because I was curious about your reaction."

"It was quite an emotional reaction, wasn't it?"

He bravely endured her gaze. Steve had known perfectly well that she would be the first to mention the kiss. Yet, he decided to ignore her provocation and see if she would mention it again.

Black Widow wasn't the only one to play games.

"I rarely sketch, and when I do, I try to focus on the things that matter to me." He attempted at speaking with indifference, winding the pasta around his fork. "The drawings have sentimental meaning, just like your necklace reminds you of Barton."

Instinctively she raised her hand to the necklace and stroked the pendant with her fingers.

"But there was no association with Peggy Carter in your notebook," she pointed out.

Steve lifted his head and looked at his best friend in amazement. Even in the worst nightmares, he had not expected that on their first date Natasha would touch the subject of Steve's first love. It was only now that he realized that for a long time Peggy had not entered his mind even for a moment. Only Natasha was always present in his thoughts.
Although she would not admit it even to herself, Natasha wanted to be assured that Steve's heart did no longer belong to the deceased woman. She had to be certain that she was not about to compete with the memory of his old love.

"There's a compass with her picture... I keep it in my room. Nat," he reached over the table and took her hand, "I painted only your portrait. I could draw a weapon or a spider or whatever, but I chose your image."

"I appreciate it, Steve, but if we're really doing it... I need to know if you still love her."

He wanted to kiss her, hug her and prove to her that only she mattered. Steve found it hard to believe that there was so much confidence in her, and at the same time, she doubted her worth, the possibility of someone falling in love with her.

"Part of me will always love her, just as part of me will never quite come to terms with the loss of my mom, Bucky and Sam. Part of me will always miss the past and regret it cannot be changed." He caressed the palm of her hand; his voice as soft as his touch. "But now I'm here with you, Natasha. You bring joy to my life and encourage to stop recalling what is long behind me. You make me feel alive and happy. You're the one I'm dying to kiss again. You're my future."

Natasha lowered her head for a moment, and when she looked at Steve again, her eyes were filled with love, and her heart beat quickly with emotion. She gently took her hand from his grip and rested her head on her hands.

"You lost," she said with a smirk.

"What?"

"You mentioned the kiss. You used the word."

Of course. Typical Natasha Romanoff responding to his confession with a joke. He couldn't help but smile. Sometimes he thought she could read his mind and outwit him before he could even notice.

"For real?" He shook his head. "You're impossible."

Suddenly, she stood up, circled the table and put her hands on Steve's shoulders. He forgot about the whole world and felt the heat pouring all over his body when Natasha leaned over and whispered in his ear, "I'll let you in on a little secret: I'm dying to kiss you, too."

He did not need more. They left a big tip and crowded restaurant behind. Natasha pulled him by the hand towards the apartment, and Steve didn't mind, knowing that he would follow her to the end of the world and back if she asked him to.

It turned out that opening the door could be quite difficult when someone was kissing you on the neck.

Finally, the lock gave in, and Natasha turned in time to meet Steve's thirsty lips. They entered the apartment, letting the door close behind them. Steve picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. They had been indeed dying to kiss each other. Just like their earlier kiss had been full of feelings but a little uncertain, this one suggested that it would not end there. Natasha felt her body burn as Steve would take her breath away with each passionate kiss.

Instinctively he headed to his room, but then Natasha forced herself to break away from him and
lead him to hers. After all, he had not seen it yet. Steve looked around, his breath coming out in a short, gasping pant.

"So," he mumbled, "where's the legendary bathtub?"

Natasha laughed, and then he kissed her again. She wanted every moment to look like that. To be filled with happiness and excitement, be kissed like never before, to be constantly assured that she was the only one.

She was going to pull him towards the bed, but Steve stopped her. He leaned his forehead against hers, their heavy breaths mingled in the air.

"Don't you think it's a bit too fast?" he whispered.

"Right. It's the first date after all." She licked her lips, already missing his. "We're not like that."

"Exactly."

For a moment it seemed as if they really meant it, as if they were ready to keep the remains of decency. As befits a gentleman, Steve pulled away. They stared at each other in silence, stupid smiles adorning their faces.

"But," Natasha started.

"Yes?" Hope could be heard in Steve's tone.

"We've lost a lot of time. We've known each other for years, and only now have we dared to be honest with each other about our feelings. We don't know how much time we have left. I only know that I want you. So bad."

Steve was afraid he would explode if he did not kiss her again. So he did, this time gently and slowly, enjoying every second. Natasha unbuttoned his coat and helped him take it off. Then she took off her jacket and sat on the bed without taking her lips away from Steve's as he leaned over her. She unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hand over his bare skin, making him shiver under her touch.

So damn beautiful. Steve Rogers just for her.

She fell back on the pillows, and Steve took off his shoes and leaned over Natasha, resting his hands on either side of her head and spending a long time looking at her. He did not kiss, he did not touch, he just watched. He admired.

Her hair, scattered on the pillow, was red with blond highlights. It had almost come back to its natural color, to the furious red he truly missed.

Waiting for her consent, he asked, "Are you sure it's what you want?"

Natasha turned him over so that now she was leaning over him. She ran her hand over his chest, then his neck, until she finally stopped on his lips.

"I'm sure, Steve. I really am. Remember how I asked you what you wanted me to be? Years ago, in the car?" He nodded. "Back then, becoming your friend was the best option. Now I want to be more."

"You already are, Nat. You are my everything."
There was so much of innocent honesty, so much beauty and love in him. She wanted him, she needed him more than air. So she kissed him, undressing him slowly and letting his hands wander over her body to get to know every inch of her skin.

That night, just like every subsequent one, their world was limited to only two of them. They were not heroes, they were not victims, they were not the embodiment of their suffering. They were just two people falling in love with each other in the way they both deserved; boundlessly, purely and sincerely.

Chapter End Notes

I know you might find it strange that they're so happy right now, that quickly in the story, but they have to get some sweet love before all the pain they have yet to experience. Ha! Don't forget to tell me what you think :)

Two years ago...

"Would it really kill you if you slowed down a little?" Sam was panting as he reached Steve and rested his hands on his knees. "You know, when there was a chance to get a super serum, I stood in the line for an extraordinary wittiness."

Steve couldn't help but laugh, "And how did it end for you? You barely keep up."

They decided to go back to the hotel. Steve still had the strength for the next circle around the lake, but Sam had just finished another bottle of water and was throwing glares at his enchanted best friend.

"Saying on your left is not helping either, but I guess there must be some cons of spending the whole time with a living legend."

"And a former assassin," Steve reminded him. "You do not seem to complain about Natasha, at least not as often as about me."

"I don't wanna risk my life, dude. Jeez, I need a rest." Sam took a sit on a bench. "In fact, sometimes I cannot resist the impression that she has the softest heart of the three of us. At least in relation to you. Whenever you two make eye contact, I become a third wheel."

It was ridiculous, and yet...

Steve crossed his arms over his chest, previously covering his head with a hood. There were a lot of people in the park, and they risked enough, jogging every morning and almost every night getting involved in situations where they would save random civilians. With Natasha and Sam by his side, it was easy to forget that he was wanted by the government.

"You both are my friends, Sam. No favoritism."

"Yeah, of course." Wilson waved his hand carelessly, at the same time making it clear that he was not buying it. "I don't mind your eye contacts, because I know you won't do anything them. If, however, you ever dare to go for it, I have a few dates in my calendar reserved for being your best man. Just saying. I got great anecdotes for the speech."

"Oh god, you're truly the worst."

It was the most beautiful aspect of staying on the run; the fact that despite the still painful memory of the fight with Tony and goodbye to Bucky, Steve was still able to smile and laugh. All thanks to Sam and Natasha, who did everything in their power to help him move on. And he loved them for that.

"Okay," Sam stood up, "let's get back to our disgusting room."

"You sure you can walk?"

"Ha, so funny. You sure you can bear another five minutes without Romanoff?"

Steve patted Sam on the back in response, his smile never leaving his lips. For a moment, everything was perfect.
Now…

He had never seen Thor like this before. Horror and astonishment on his face were enough for Steve to realize that the worst had just happened. Fear squeezed his heart, thoughts wandered towards the people, his people, who remained in various places, too far to reach them all.

And then he heard one word. One word that broke his heart.

"Steve?"

He turned around. Everything happened in a few seconds. Bucky moved toward him but suddenly began to disappear in front of his eyes. His body fell down, but before it could touch the ground, it disintegrated to dust and ashes.

Steve was not able to make a sound, name the thing that had taken Bucky away from him for the last time. His legs lead him to that place. He crouched and touched the ash with his hand.

That feeling was worse than death… He felt helpless. Helpless looking at how Bucky disappeared. Helpless listening to Rhodey calling for Sam. Helpless finding Vision's body and discovering Wanda's ashes covering it. Helpless in the face of the end of the world.

"Steve?" He heard the soothing voice, so familiar and beloved. "Wake up, Steve."

Wakanda swirled around him. He opened his eyes and saw Natasha. They were in her room, where he had woken up every morning for the past few weeks. Natasha wore his shirt and sat cross-legged on the bed, watching him closely. Her hair was drawn back into a messy bun and her face lacked makeup. One look at her helped him calm down.

"Bad dream?"

She touched his face, brushing away the strands. It was only then that he understood that he was sweaty and tired as if he had run through half of New York or had fought with every former enemy. Steve rose to a sitting position.

"Kind of," he sighed. "I already told you I dream about the snap almost every night." Natasha nodded. "You know, the last few nights were really peaceful. Feeling your presence, I had no dreams and I could sleep all night but it turns out the nightmares are not over yet."

Her voice was soft and full of understanding when she asked, "Was it about Bucky?"

Natasha read the answer from his eyes. She put a quilt over them and lay down, resting her head on Steve's chest. He began stroking her hair, staring at the wall with unseeing eyes.

Being in a romantic relationship was something extraordinary for them. At first, they were afraid that their feelings might destroy their long-built friendship, but it ended up quite the opposite.

On the one hand, nothing had changed. They were still close to each other, they still lived together, they would still tease each other at every possible moment and constantly support one another. They were still friends watching movies together, going for walks and eating ice cream named after them.

On the other hand, everything had changed. Now they woke up in one bed and their faces were the first and the last thing they saw every day. Now, watching the movies, they could cuddle, and while walking, they could hold hands like a real couple. If they had previously created a bubble of
stolen peace and happiness, now it grew to the size of the whole world. Their world.

They did not even visit The Avengers Facility anymore, too busy to think about anything else. For the first time, Steve put his own luck at the pedestal and chose to enjoy what he had not lost. Natasha cherished every little moment, surprised at how wonderful life could be when you didn't think about the past or worry about the future.

"Nat, I've been wondering," Steve started.

"Hmm?"

Filled with curiosity, she raised her head to look at him.

"Maybe we could stay here all day. In the bed."

She kissed him, smiling. Her fingers traced the shape of his lips as she whispered, "Sounds like a plan."

He also smiled, pulling her closer. Every morning was beautiful when he woke by her side. Each kiss was like a breath of life in his lungs, and every touch was like a spark leaping through his skin.

Sometimes, at moments like this, he was ready to tell her how he felt. Speak three words; those three words that would seal everything, that would take away the possibility of retreat. He did not need a chance to escape. Nothing was as certain as his feelings for Natasha. Sometimes he would open his mouth, but at the last second stop himself, afraid to state the obvious thing.

The sound of the phone brought him back to reality. Natasha struggled to get away from him but managed to reach her phone lying on the bedside table. She got utterly confused at the sight of the name appearing on the phone screen.

"Who is it?"


Viewed from outside, the headquarters of S.H.I.E.L.D. was an inconspicuous, dingy building in Brooklyn. To get inside, one had to reach the door hidden behind huge garbage cans. Nothing interesting.

At the threshold of the door, each visitor was scanned by a small device built into the frame. It could detect any abnormality able to indicate the presence of artificial intelligence or an extraterrestrial being. It was still not enough to impress Natasha.

"I'm glad you came," Sharon said, leading her down a corridor whose floor was illuminated with a bluish light.

"Honestly, I did not expect a phone call from you. It's Steve you have better contact with."

She really did not want to sound so cold as she could not help but imagine the kiss between Sharon and Steve. It was stupid. Jealousy didn't fit her at all, especially that she had won Rogers' heart. Not Sharon.

"With all due respect, but without government's support, Steve Rogers has no right to call himself Captain America. Well, the building looks like it looks, but we don't hide. We operate according to
the law. Steve is not an agent, so we cannot get him involved. You understand it, Agent Romanoff," Sharon looked at her, "don't you?"

"That's cruel."

"That's the truth. Follow me."

They turned into another corridor, this time much wider. There were rooms without doors on both sides. One of them was a training room as Natasha quickly realized. They stopped to take a look. The room was twice as large as her entire apartment. On the side walls hung exercise gear, including ropes, weights, and daggers. One half of the room was empty, the other seemed to be an obstacle course. At the back, there was a climbing wall.

Natasha felt a sudden desire to stay here longer, overcome all obstacles, try each weapon. She felt the urge to fall into a fight, lose herself under the influence of adrenaline and the strong will to survive.

"We have many new recruits who need training provided by real experts," Sharon admitted with a smile, apparently well aware of Natasha's excitement. "Obviously, it would not be your only job. S.H.I.E.L.D. officially returns to service to fix the world after what happened last year. We are going to find the missing agents, stop the riots caused by the snap, provide care for the orphaned children and so on. For this, we need not only novices but also experienced agents who are not afraid to risk their lives, saving others."

They went on. Natasha noticed, among other things, a buffet, a smaller training room, and a door with the word ARMORY.

"Who exactly is this we?" Natasha smirked. "I can only see you here."

"Everyone is at the meeting with the new director. I was given the duty of showing you our new place. Most of the rooms are not yet equipped, but knowing the generosity of our director, we should be ready to fully start working in less than a month."

They stopped at the door behind which the meeting with the mysterious director was happening. Natasha leaned against the wall, feeling both excitement and anxiety at the thought of returning to S.H.I.E.L.D. She did not know whether it was a good idea.

"Have you made your mind?" Sharon asked.

"Maybe. Who's this new director?"

There remained a certain distance between them, but if they were going to work together, they needed to start trusting each other.

"You're about to find out soon enough, Natasha. I mean, you're right to have doubts. S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't arouse warm feelings because of all that HYDRA did. For the past few years, the organization was operating in secret, under the leadership of Phil Coulson, and later Jeffrey Mace. Now we have the chance to rebuild the agency from scratch."

"Phil Coulson?"

Natasha had not thought that something might surprise her more than the phone call from Sharon Carter. And yet.

"Oh, you didn't know? Fury managed to save Coulson shortly after he was believed to have been
killed by Loki. Currently, he's nowhere to be found, nor is his team consisting of very talented agents, including Melinda May and Daisy Johnson."

"Holy shit," Natasha whispered.

At this very moment, the door opened and the new director of S.H.I.E.L.D. came to greet her in his unusual way.

"Language, Agent Romanoff," he smiled, "didn't Cap teach you any manners?"

Natasha sighed, angry at herself for not having predicted it. Stark. Of course, it was Stark.
Natasha sat on a desk, nonchalantly crossing her legs and appearing impossible to be dominated. Stark had a lot of explaining to do and she did not intend to make it easy for him. By the way, a new job, though not yet fully started, had a great impact on him. Tony looked healthy and neat as, dressed in a suit, he adjusted his tie and stood next to the window, sending Natasha a friendly smile that was supposed to calm her down a little. She almost laughed.

Even the convicted has a chance for a moment of hope before getting beheaded.

"Could you please get off my desk and sit in a chair?"

"No," Natasha smirked.

Tony rolled his eyes, "I'm your boss."

"Not yet. I am less and less interested in all of this, and we haven't even come to the issue of remuneration yet."

It was going to be a difficult conversation. Resigned, Tony went to the cupboard standing by the window and took out two glasses with a bottle of Scotch. He poured alcohol and handed her a glass, which Natasha accepted with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

"Drinking with your employee, huh?"

"You said it yourself, we're not there yet."

"I'm drinking with a friend. Stubborn, redheaded, dangerous friend. Believe me, Nat, I would have told you about my plans much earlier but you and Steve stopped visiting us. A few weeks without any contact. Pepper and I began to think that you had escaped to some mysterious island."

"We were… busy."

Natasha took a sip, afraid that the corners of her mouth would rise involuntarily at the thought of the last weeks. She wondered for a moment whether it was better to tell Tony the truth or keep her relationship with Steve a secret. But could it ever be a secret? Every look, every mention of each other, every stupid smile... Everything was a confirmation. Natasha was a trained liar, but her feelings for Steve remained the only honest thing about her life and she did not want to change it.

"Busy?" Tony enjoyed it way too much. "You mean Rogers finally stopped playing the innocent boy?"

"You better tell me why we're here, Stark. Isn't the role of husband and father enough for you?" Natasha leaned toward him. "You're not an agent."

"But that doesn't mean I cannot act when I have the means and the possibilities. With my help, S.H.I.E.L.D. can become what it has always had the potential to become. I bring innate leadership and manual skills and money, you bring experience and the will to fight."

"S in S.H.I.E.L.D stands for Stark now, I see."

Tony took a sip of alcohol and put down the empty glass. Natasha owed a lot to him and valued him as a longtime friend, but it wasn't right. She felt as if she had been acting behind Steve's back.
As if she had been betraying him.

"You don't have to be so skeptical, Romanoff. You and I are quite similar. We refuse to talk about the snap, we never cry in the corners. You were trained to hide feelings, I learned to do it because of my father. You still have red in your ledger to clean, I always feel that what I do is not enough." He looked her in the eyes. "Come on, Nat, you have to admit that being a retired agent is not for you. You and I... we are Avengers and we need something to fight for. S.H.I.E.L.D. will provide it."

She wanted to punch him in the face for mentioning her past. And even more for being right. For seeing through her. She stood up, put down her glass with liquid splashing on the bottom and walked to the window. There was a view of the Chinese restaurant. If she opened the window, the smell would probably reach them here. Not so appealing neighborhood for a modern organization protecting the world.

And yet it was meant to be her new place. She would wake up with Steve by her side and then come here every single day. She would train inexperienced agents, exercise every batch of her body, ease the tension at the shooting range, do what she was the best at. Then she would fall asleep at Steve's side, slowly losing him for something that had once consumed her and wanted to do it one more time. It was a thought, a stupid conviction that she must atone for her past mistakes, that she owed her blood and tears to this world.

"Steve," she muttered.

"What about him?"

"Do you think he'll be happy, knowing that we risk our lives when he stays at home, completely powerless? Steve is always the first to fight, you know that. Sharon says we can't get him involved..."

"Because we can't, Nat. It hurts me as much as it hurts you but we can't." Tony stood up and approached her. "If Ross found out about Captain America running with a shield and knowing about each of our missions, then everything would end sooner than it really started. Your boyfriend must understand that it was his own recklessness that led him to this. I've done a lot for him, but I can't do more. If one day the mission is too serious and additional help is needed, I'll personally request for Rogers to be returned to duty. That's all I can promise you."

Natasha nodded, having to accept the truth. She sat in a chair, as befits a real employee. Tony took a seat opposite her, apparently pleased that they had come to some sort of an agreement. Well, they had not started haggling over the salary yet, and Natasha was too broke to show mercy.

"You didn't kill me when I called Steve your boyfriend," he pointed out with a grin.

It almost made her laugh. Her new boss really had a death wish.

Steve tried to be as gentle as possible when his fingers touched one of Natasha's scars. It was under her shoulder blade and in shape resembled a spear frozen in the air in the middle of its flight towards an enemy.

"São Paulo," Natasha explained. "A lot of blood, a lot of lives taken."

"It's okay. You don't need to say anything."
She smiled slightly as Steve once again proved to understand her more than anyone and accept despite all the mistakes of her past. Natasha sat leaning against his chest, gliding a foamy sponge over her wet skin. The bathroom smelled of rose bath liquid, and the warmth around them encouraged Steve to settle for a snooze in the hot water.

"You're beautiful," he whispered.

He laid a kiss on her scar, and then on her braided red-blond hair. Natasha giggled, turning her head to look at him while smearing his face with foam.

"You always flirt with women like that? Kissing their scars and calling them beautiful?"

Steve laughed under his new white mask, "No, only with you. You're the first woman I've had such a close relationship with. You're my first so many things, Nat."

Natasha kissed him on the lips, feeling the bitter aftertaste of rose bath liquid and scolding herself for previous doubts. She had been afraid of Steve's reaction regarding her new job, but he had never been as charming as he was at the moment. She would gladly stay with him in this bathtub for the rest of her life if she could, but her skin began to wrinkle from the excess of water.

They dressed in cozy pants bought a few days before. Steve's pants were a few sizes bigger but of the same light grey color. Natasha also put on a white T-shirt and walked barefoot to the kitchen to prepare some snacks. Steve moved from a warm tub to the comfortable couch, having a serious task to do; find the right episode. Where had they left off?

"I find it a little unfair that you men can walk without a shirt whenever you want, and women are branded for showing a scrap of skin" Natasha admitted.

She brought wine, two glasses, a packet of sweeties, and a bag of popcorn.

"Feel free to take off your shirt, Nat. I won't mind."

"Of course, you won't mind, you horny mass of muscles." She handed him a bottle of wine, amused. "I guess Tony was right; you stopped playing an innocent boy."

Steve gave her a questioning look, opening the bottle and pouring wine into the glasses.

"You didn't talk to Stark about our relationship, did you?"

"Not really, but he knows anyway."

"You want me to put on my shirt in the name of equal rights?"

"No," she laid her feet on his lap, lying comfortably with a glass of wine in her hand, "I like the view."

For the rest of the evening, they watched Game of Thrones, wanting to catch up on all episodes before the new season would begin. Natasha almost managed to forget how bad her day was. She almost forgot about Sharon, Stark, the training room and new duties that were supposed to come into effect the very next day.

Steve, meanwhile, could not concentrate on the screen. The taste of wine and Natasha's presence were soothing, but his head was boiling with an overflow of thoughts. He did not know whether S.H.I.E.L.D.'s return was good news.
"I can't believe Coulson survived," he told Natasha when the last episode ended. "Fury used his death to make us work together. He gave me Coulson's cards covered with blood, for God's sake!"

He really didn't want to sound so bitter, but the weight of Phil Coulson's death rested on his shoulders. One of the many deaths that followed him. The only one that was used to control him.

"You'll never hear an apology from Fury, Steve." Natasha sighed, putting away the empty bowl. "Phil is believed to be gone. This time for real. You can't change the past."

"I know." He closed his eyes. "I know."

Natasha hesitated, for a moment staring at his chest rising to the rhythm of even breaths. Then she sat up straight, playing with her glass. She had to ask. She had to be sure.

"Steve, are you mad at me?"

Her voice sounded extremely uncertain as if it had belonged to someone else. Taken aback, Steve turned his head and looked at Natasha.

"Why would I be?"

"You know... because I chose to return to S.H.I.E.L.D. Because I'm going to fight without you by my side. Because I'm ready to leave you here all alone."

If he felt a bit rejected, Steve did not let her know. He moved closer to her so that she could see the truth in his eyes.

"What kind of person would I be if I was angry with my girlfriend for improving her skills and earning our living? You are a warrior, Natasha, and I understand that." He smiled, putting his hand on her cheek. "I would like to be able to accompany you, but if it's not possible then I can only support you in every decision you make."

"Girlfriend," she tasted that word in her mouth. "I love it."

Steve laughed, letting her sit on his lap. He took her face in his hands, suppressing all doubts. They will soon disappear and she didn't need to know about them.

"Back then, whenever I would fight, no matter on which side, I could do my best because I knew I had nothing else. Nothing mattered except a well-executed mission. Now I have you. I have a home and a person to come back to."

She kissed him and he pulled her closer, assuring her, "And I will always wait for you. Well, perhaps not only me."

Natasha leaned back to look at him; her green eyes shone under the influence of wine and emotions.

"What do you mean?"

The day ended with the latest news, perhaps the most surprising of all when Steve confessed innocently, "I want us to get a dog."
"What did you want to talk about?"

"Tony," Rhodes answered and Steve sighed, having foreseen it. "You know, he behaves normally if such a word can be used to describe Tony Stark at all. The point is that no one has access to his new lab, and he spends all the time there, doing God knows what."

They crossed the street and walked down an alley between many shops and restaurants. Steve was too excited to get troubled by all the possible ways in which Stark could end up creating the next Ultron.

"It's probably something S.H.I.E.L.D. related. He wasn't chosen the director only because of his money but also because of his skills. You have nothing to worry about, Rhodey."

James nodded, though he did not seem fully convinced. Personally, Steve didn't feel certain enough to say that whatever Stark had in plan, would turn out to be safe and good for everyone. All he could do was to trust him and not judge him too quickly. Never again.

"By the way, where are we going?" Rhodes looked around. "I've never been to this side of the city."

Steve smiled, "Animal shelter. I'm about to adopt a dog."

When he had revealed his amazing idea to Natasha, she had looked at him with amusement, hardly believing his words. Busy training new agents and still skeptical about getting a dog, Natasha had refused to accompany him. He had finally decided to go alone, but Rhodey had called him and they had met halfway.

James was surprised at his statement. It was ridiculous, Steve knew it, but at the same time a dog, a new friend was what he needed. He could not explain it.

"I thought Tony was exaggerating when he told me that you and Natasha were a thing. Now I can see it's serious. A dog? And then what? A wedding? Adopted children? Does Natasha know?"

"Of course, Natasha knows." Steve looked at his friend. "She doesn't quite understand it but she will, when she sees our new family member."

They stopped in front of the shelter. James laughed and patted Steve's shoulder.

"I'm afraid you're too far gone, Cap."

With stupid smiles on their lips, they both went inside. The view was unusual; dozens of lonely abandoned animals waiting for someone to take care of them. Rhodey knocked on a cage with a black cat who hissed and waved his paw in response. James stepped back reflexively, and Steve, holding back a chuckle, headed towards the dogs. For some reason, that cat reminded him of T'Challa.

Too bad he couldn't adopt them all.

A shelter worker, a twenty years old boy, approached him and began presenting available breeds, but Steve barely listened. He was guided by his heart that led him to the very end of the room. There his gaze came upon a happy look of a four-legged creature. Delighted with received
attention, it came closer and tried to squeeze its muzzle through the crevices.

From the first look at that happy face, Steve knew that puppy was the one.

"Hi, buddy," he said softly, crouching to take a closer look at his new friend. "Will you come home with me?"

He reached out, and the dog licked his fingers which were still separated from it by the bars. A wide smile on Steve's face was a result of a great love filling his heart.

"Very good choice." The worker approached them. "Mix breed, five months old."

The dog had a white and gold fur and looked like a small ball of happiness that had been destined to enter Roger's life. He, not it. Steve couldn't wait to take him into his arms and show him to Natasha.

He raised his head and saw Rhodey smiling at them.

"Love from the first sight, isn't it? I might have a little suggestion about the name."

"No way, Steve." Natasha pulled him by the arm to get far from the group of young recruits who were overly excited at the sight of the famous Captain America with a puppy in his arms. "We can't call it Sam."

"Him," Steve corrected her. "Why not? It was Rhody's suggestion and I couldn't agree more. Just look at him, Nat. Isn't he the cutest thing you've ever seen?"

He stretched his hands, and the dog immediately licked her face. Natasha managed to stay serious as she wanted to be the one who would listen to reason. Steve was too lost in this love for the pet.

Wherever Sam Wilson remained at that moment, he probably looked at them and rolled his eyes. And she couldn't blame him.

"Okay, let it be. Did you take Sam to a vet?"

"I did, Agent Romanoff," Steve confirmed as if he had been one of her students and reported on a successful mission. "On the way, we also bought some food. I know I should take him home and wait for you there, but what can I say, I feel like a teenager who just got a perfect gift."

It was not difficult to imagine Stark and Rhodey talking in one of the not-so-distant rooms about how Natasha and Steve's relationship was pretty much confirmed. They did what? Adopted a dog? Impossible. Natasha only hoped that none of them would appear here. Curious looks of the recruits were enough for her. She felt the presence of a few girls who hid behind the door of the training room while they were talking in the corridor.

"To be honest, I'm surprised they let you here," she confessed.

"Tony says he won't mind if I visit you from time to time. All the missions are to be discussed in rooms designed only for agents anyway."

It made her think that Steve might accidentally come across Sharon, but she quickly put the thought aside. Some strands had escaped her braid, so she brushed them back from her face with a tired gesture. Lack of exercise for several months resulted in a bad physical condition and, though the conversation with Steve was a form of desired rest, she had to get back to work.
"I need to-"

"I know," he interrupted her, staring longingly at the obstacle course visible through the gap in the door. "Duty calls. See you tonight?"

"Actually, I'll stay a little longer." Her words attracted his gaze. Steve pressed the dog closer to him, and Sam licked his chin. "I'd like to use the shooting range. The first mission can happen at any time and I want to be ready."

Steve nodded and leaned close to her, but Natasha avoided his kiss not without pain. Her students' eyes were on them, although Steve stayed completely unaware. She laughed to ease the atmosphere and stroked the dog's head.

"I shall protect my reputation," she explained, opening the door wide. "Deadly Black Widow, remember?"

She closed the door, separating Steve from the world he was not a part of. He stood there for a moment, still, trying to digest the situation. He understood Natasha, her jokes, her aversion to showing her feelings in the workplace. At this point, she was an agent and a teacher, and he was an ex-soldier who should not interfere. He understood it too well.

But something hurt him, deep in his heart. To see these rooms aimed at training living weapons, to see Natasha getting fully engaged in her new purpose, to see Tony having new secrets... It was awful and Steve just felt helpless. At home, it was easy to pretend everything was fine, but here the reality hit him in the stomach.

Maybe he will never be Captain America again. Maybe he will never raise his shield to fight. Maybe his life will never make sense.

Sam moved in his arms, bringing him back to reality. Steve walked down the corridor, wanting to leave the building as soon as possible. He heard Rhodey's voice behind him as he was probably coming back from Stark. Ignoring him and his own grim thoughts, Steve left the headquarters of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Two years ago...

A massive firework display provided a stunning spectacle as the lights flickered into life. Hundreds of guests, gathered in the rich man's villa because of his fiftieth birthday, came out to admire the illuminated sky in the garden. They held glasses of champagne in their hands, smiled and staggered under the influence of alcohol.

None of them noticed Steve, who was sitting on the steps of a small house on the hill overlooking the party and the fireworks. The rich man owned that house as well, but it was his son who used to live there. As the boy was currently traveling around the world, he did not show up on his father's birthday.

Unfortunately for the man. Fortunately for runaways who found a new place to stay in.

Steve took the last look at his flip phone and closed it. He had long ago stopped waiting for a call from Tony. That evening, however, sitting alone in the cool of the night, staring at strangers and loud fireworks, he felt an unwanted surge of nostalgia. He felt as if control over his own fate had been seeping through his fingers.

At any time, someone could recognize them, notify the appropriate services, and they would end
up in a high-security prison with no one left to help them.

"You okay?"

Natasha. She approached him silently and sat on the steps. He moved a bit to make room for her.

"Yeah," Steve responded, hiding the phone in his pocket. "Where are the others?"

"They're looking for something to eat. That villa must be generously filled with food and booze."

Steve looked at her, visibly disgusted at what he had just heard. She wore a hoodie and smelled of a forest as she had spent the last moments searching for wood to set a fire. Natasha smirked, predicting every next word of his.

"That's called stealing, Natasha!"

"That's called survival, Rogers," she said in a calm voice. "No offense, but if it were not for you, we would never be here. You have no right to judge us, especially not when we're just trying to survive another day."

The fireworks show came to an end and the guests slowly began to go back inside. Dresses with shoulder straps were not intended for such cold air. Still, they remained in good mood; laughter and conversations reached them without making any sense. Finally, the door closed behind the last guest and only the sound of muffled music and hooting from the forest could be heard.

Usually, the silence in the company of Natasha was comfortable and pleasant. Now it seemed unbearable. But when she got up, ready to leave him alone, Steve shuddered at the thought.

"Sam, Wanda, and Vision should be back soon. Are you coming or are you gonna sit here when we sin by eating stolen food?"

He smiled, grabbing her hand.

"I'm sorry, Nat. I shouldn't have said that. Can you…" He lacked words when he held her hand, feeling her warmth and softness. "Can you stay with me? Just for a couple of minutes?"

For a long, painful moment he thought she would leave him, taking his heart with her. It was not until she sat down next to him, letting go of his hand that Steve calmed his breath.

Sometime before, when in Sokovia they were ready to face death together, Steve realized the existence of feelings for Natasha. Feelings that he could not name and which were strong and true. In the company of Sam, and sometimes also Wanda and Vision, he had no chance to examine them in depth, to see if Natasha felt the same. Now, sitting with her on the steps and looking up at the dark sky, he knew that these feelings had never disappeared.

He did not know - how could he possibly know - that Natasha felt the same. For her, it had begun earlier when Steve had told her in Sam's bedroom that he would trust her with his life. Frightened by her own weakness, Natasha had moved away from Steve and then redirected her interest to Bruce. All leading to this moment and to the surprising realization that these feelings had never disappeared.

"You've never told me why," he whispered. "You've never told me why you betrayed Tony for me. You once said it was loyalty, but you were loyal to all your friends, not just me. Then why? Why me, Natasha?"
Because I have feelings for you, Natasha almost heard herself saying. Because I cannot imagine losing you. Because I’ve never been as attached to anyone as I am to you. Because my head was with Tony, but my heart was and always will be with you.

Partly for an act of sudden courage, partly to delay the answer, Natasha touched Steve's face with her hand. She could feel the hair on his beard as he wanted to keep it growing, not allowing Natasha to approach him with scissors.

Her mind involuntarily turned to the memory of a passionate kiss on the escalator. Had she kissed him only to distract Rumlow? Had she, deep inside, wanted to taste the lips of Captain America?

Now he was not a legend from stories that reached her throughout her whole life. He was not a hero who had fought by her side for the last few years. He was a lost man who stood for what he believed in. He was her friend whom she would die for. He was Steve.

She wanted to kiss him, this time for real.

"You're a good man, Steve Rogers," she finally answered his question. "You have my undying loyalty. So I'm sorry, but you will not get rid of me quickly enough."

Steve smiled, covering her hand with his. At the same moment Sam, Wanda, and Vision emerged from the darkness. A pile of food levitated over them, surrounded by a red glow flowing from Wanda's fingers.

Natasha withdrew her hand and opened the door, letting happy friends and delicious food inside. Steve watched her walk in and send him the last glance. He took a moment to shake off his emotions. He had almost kissed Natasha and he regretted it hadn't happened.

Finding happiness deep in himself, he went inside. No matter what, having everything or nothing at all, one thing remained unchanged; Natasha was always with him.
Where's My Love, part I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve had known it would eventually happen, but when that day came, he was far from ready. With heartache, he watched Natasha pack up and leave for a secret mission, not revealing any details nor being able to give him the exact date of return.

"It's just a few days, Steve," she assured him; her voice soft and her touch gentle as she stroked his cheek. "I'll be back before you miss me."

Little did she know. He started missing her at the very moment she left a farewell kiss on his lips. He missed her for the rest of the day, and also when he fell asleep in an empty bed. He missed her the next day, which he spent on walking Sam out, watching *Friends* and lying on the couch with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He missed her the second day when he woke up in the morning, certain that he couldn't bear it anymore.

Pepper did not seem surprised when he crossed the threshold of the Avengers Facility with a small dog at his side. It was his second home and only here Steve felt comfortable; even despite all the memories and without Natasha. The more that Pepper greeted him cordially, offering lemonade and chocolate cookies.

"Tony loves them," she explained. "Lately all he does is eat cookies and work in his lab."

Sam climbed on his hind paws to look into the cradle, where Martin was sleeping completely innocent and unaware. Steve realized that children and dogs had a lot in common. As he was not destined to raise his own kid, at least he had a puppy to take care of and to watch him grow.

"What exactly is he working on?"

"I wish I knew." Pepper sighed, taking a seat next to him at the kitchen island. "Rhodey and I tried to find out, but Tony is always having the right excuse. You know him. He'll joke, smile and promise that there is nothing to worry about."

"Maybe there's really nothing to worry about."

"Or maybe he's going to do something stupid and heroic because he's never really come to terms with what happened on Titan."

It was the darkest scenario, but very possible. Steve hid his face in his hands. It was enough for him that Natasha risked her life with no partner to watch her back. He jumped to his feet, deciding that he would not allow the situation to develop without his control. Maybe he couldn't be a hero, but he could still be a friend.

"I'll go talk to him," he said. "Don't worry, Pepper. Tony has a family now and the last thing he wants is to risk losing you. I'm sure of that."

Pepper smiled, picking Sam up and responding, "And you shouldn't worry about Natasha. She'll always come back to you."

His feelings must have been written all over his face.
Steve walked through the corridors, seeing the places he knew by heart. He passed Wanda's bedroom, a training room that had not been used for three years, and then also the old lab of Tony and Bruce. They hadn't lived long together, yet some beautiful moments remained in Steve's memory, still fresh as if the Avengers had never been divided. It was his home.

He had expected Stark to locate his new lab at the headquarters of S.H.I.E.L.D. to be both the director and the brilliant mechanic at the same time. Tony, however, preferred to work in the comfort of his home with his wife and son staying close and his agents being one phone call away.

The sound of the knock on the metal door echoed up the stairs. It was a bit strange that Tony had chosen to lock himself up behind the heavy door that could only be opened by the scan of his eye. Steve strained his ears for any sound, but he didn't even hear the footsteps of the host who opened the door and blinked several times to get used to the light falling from the corridor.

"Oh, Capsicle. What's up? Don't say you miss your girlfriend so much that you remembered the existence of your handsome, charming friend."

Steve tried to see anything over Tony's head, but the gap in the door was too small, and the lab seemed to be in darkness.

"We need to talk."

"It sounds scary." Stark began to retreat, and Steve held the door with his hand. He still had a lot of strength in him. "Did you see my wife? That beautiful woman upstairs? You can talk to her. She's a good listener."

"Just tell me what you're working on, Stark."

Tony looked as if he was seriously considering hitting him in the face. In the end, rightly so, he must have come to the conclusion that fighting Steve Rogers was not the best idea. With a theatrical sigh, he returned inside, leaving the door open. Steve followed him.

The lab was shrouded in darkness, but Stark clapped his hands and the blue lights flashed on all sides. Steve narrowed his eyes. He saw tables covered with various tools and plans. There was Iron Man's old armor near the right wall. On a different table, documents with the S.H.I.E.L.D logo were arranged in perfect piles. Some of them had Stark's signature.

At the very end, under the back wall, stood a metal table covered in shadow that the ubiquitous lights did not reach. Something was hidden under the black sheet and lay motionless. There were several machines nearby, but Steve could not guess their use.

"I had a very good reason not to tell anyone, alright?" Stark approached the table. "At least try to understand before you start judging me hastily."

This suggestion offended Steve, but well... maybe he deserved it. He stood on the other side of the table, and then Tony pressed the button of one of the machines and took off the sheet. At first, the lights flashed and all the machines produced a short, high-pitched sound. Then screens appeared in the air, filled with information, the meaning of which reached far beyond Steve's scientific skills. Then his gaze rested on the thing lying on the table. Or rather, the body. He shivered, unable to make a sound.

Memories flew before his eyes. He remembered it perfectly; the body lying on the grass, covered with Wanda's ashes.

Vision.
He looked the same, inert and colorless. There was no Mind Stone in his head as it had got replaced by glowing tubes connecting him to the machines. Steve noticed that his own hands were shaking as he touched Vision's arm. Tony stared curiously at his friend, expecting an attack that would not come.

"From what I know, Shuri was tasked with destroying the Mind Stone and leaving Vision in a state of functioning. Inspired by her idea and with a little help from Bruce, I managed to come up with a way to bring Vision back to life without the help of the Mind Stone. He'll keep all his memories and skills but he will be... hm, less human. Over time, of course, he can develop basic human reflexes as well as emotions. Because of the wedding, Martin and the whole S.H.I.E.L.D. director thing, I couldn't take care of it earlier, but I think that in a few weeks' time Vision will have been fully alive."

That was it. The stimulus Steve needed. The only hope to repair the harm done by Thanos. To save at least this one existence. Steve thought about Wanda and her pain when she had sacrificed her love in the name of humanity, all in vain. About her disappearing over the body of her lover, welcoming death with gratitude.

Steve swallowed and looked at Tony, finally seeing all the pain that was hidden deep in his eyes. They had to save Vision for Vision himself, but also for Wanda and for Tony. Rogers couldn't bring his friends back, and Stark couldn't bring the boy that had been like a son to him. But they could bring one person and they both knew every life mattered.

"How can I help you, Tony?"

The successful mission lasted one week. They managed to save several dozen children, between the ages of five and fifteen, who had been captured by traders. The whole situation filled Natasha with disgust. She found it hard to believe that there were actual people who profited from *the snap* by finding orphaned children and selling them abroad.

She would have shot all of them willingly, and perhaps even cut off several parts of their bodies. She would have watched them bleed and beg for mercy. Unfortunately, that was not an option. As a leader of new agents, she had to remain a role model and be content with the traders going to jail. Besides, the assassin times were long gone.

Now she sat on one of the benches occupying both sides of the Quinjet. Having not heard Steve's voice for the whole week, she barely restrained herself from making a phone call. She was supposed to see him in two hours so she could wait that long. Moreover, she felt many eyes on her and there was no chance for privacy. Those people relied on her in every matter and were ready to fulfill her every order. She did not want to show them her weakness, and Steve was her only weakness.

Weakness and at the same time strength.

Bored with staying in one place, Natasha got up and walked to the end of the jet. In search of a moment of pleasant isolation, she came across one of her agents.

"Worden." She approached him. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm just admiring, Agent Romanoff. Isn't it all fascinating? I'm flying a super-fast plane, and I cannot stop thinking about how it must feel to jump with a parachute. Maybe you could tell me about it?"
Natasha held back a smile, taking a few steps closer. On the wall next to her was a lever that opened the door of the jet. She knew very well that Steve tended to dive off without a parachute to protect him from the fall. She only wished she could ever see his landing. Did he do it with grace or just the opposite?

"It is an extraordinary feeling," she admitted. "At first you feel that you are weightless. You fall down, you don't hear anything, the world around you narrows to clouds. The air pushes against you from all sides until you finally open the parachute and everything calms down."

Worden grinned, leaning over the wall.

"Aren't you… scared when it happens? You might die if the parachute doesn't open or," he paused, "if you don't have it."

Natasha looked at him with suspicion, trying to understand the meaning of these questions. This boy was not the type of student who asked any questions.

"Well, you die before you reach the ground. There isn't much time to think about. Why are you asking me all of this? You don't intend to do something very stupid like jumping from the Quinjet, do you?"

"No, of course not. You do."

There was a sudden, ominous glow in his eyes and Natasha realized it was not her agent. It was not Charles Worden. It was not even a man. As soon as that thought appeared in her head, the creature standing in front of her pulled the lever. The last breath escaped Natasha's lips as the air sucked her out of the jet.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to divide this chapter into two parts as there won't be any time jump between the scenes (see what I did here? time jump?). The next part will go on minutes after this one and you'll find out more about Natasha's fate, mysterious villain and Steve's reaction. I'm slowly building the action leading to Avengers Endgame, and the storyline introduced in this chapter is loosely connected to Captain Marvel. Stay tuned and remember to leave a comment. Every review inspires me to write more. It works like a magical self-confidence booster so don't hesitate!
Where's My Love, part II

He found her in Tony's office. She did not notice him at once, busy with looking through some papers. Her red hair with blonde ends was tied in a braid. Several lone strands hung on either side of her face. After a few days of separation, Steve only wanted to hug her tightly, to feel her warmth and smell, yet he refrained from pursuing his whim. Instead, he leaned against the door frame and cleared his throat.

Natasha looked up and the fear flashed through her face as if she had been caught red-handed. It lasted so briefly, however, that Steve thought he had simply imagined it. Especially that his girlfriend smiled and focused all her attention on him.

"I know we were supposed to meet at home, but I couldn't wait any longer," he explained.

And then she crossed the distance and fell into his arms. She kissed him hard, eagerly, wrapping his neck with his hands. He pulled her close to him, surprised and pleased at the turn of events. She must have missed him too.

"By the way, what are you doing here?" he asked when Natasha finally allowed him to take a breath.

"I had to write a report about the mission. I should give it to Stark personally but he's not at work."

"Right. Stark." Steve sighed. "I need to tell you about his new idea, but it's rather confidential information. We'll talk about it at home."

He grabbed her hand and they left the office, not caring if anyone could see them together. His relationship with Natasha was not something to be ashamed of. It was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to him, and he did not intend to hide his happiness from the world.

"Or we could visit him," Natasha suggested. "I'll see for myself what he is working on."

That possibility did not really please him. He wanted to spend the rest of the day with Natasha. Only with her.

"What about Sam? I left him alone in the apartment."

"Come on, Steve. I'm sure Wilson can take care of himself."

If Natasha broke up with him, Steve would be less surprised than at that very moment. He stopped, letting go of Natasha's hand. She took a few more steps, then turned and looked at him. Suddenly he understood. Something was wrong. Something was thoroughly wrong.

She stared at him in silence for a moment, then snorted and waved her hand, as if she remembered something that was in the back of her head, but could not name it until now.

"Oh, sorry. You meant the dog. How foolish of me!"

Her laughter echoed down the illuminated corridor, but Steve did not even blink. Fear crept under his skin, whispered the worst scenarios in his ear, fastened his heart rate. It was not his Natasha. His Natasha would never forget about the death of their mutual friend. Not after all they had been through together.
His voice sounded dry when he spoke, "I met Sam while jogging. You arrived to pick me up because there was a mission ahead of us. What did you say back then?"

Laughter froze on her lips, and her hands slid in a careless gesture to hip-girdled weapons.

"It was long ago. I don't-"

"Natasha said she was there to pick up a fossil," he interrupted her. "You're not Natasha."

Before his opponent could attack, Steve threw himself into the fight. Though that creature had Natasha's face, its eyes glowed ominously, depriving him of any doubts. They hit the floor and rolled through the corridor with their arms and legs clasped together. Steve felt what he had not felt for a long time: a familiar rush of adrenaline, blood boiling in his veins, hands prepared to deal blows.

In the battle against Natasha, his chances would not have been so great, but the person claiming to be his beloved had only her body, not physical skills and years of experience. Steve freed himself from the grip, bent over his opponent and punched the creature in the face. The first blow, then the second, then the third. It was not only adrenaline that pushed him into the fight. It was fear; the tremendous fear for the person he loved the most. For the person who could have been already dead.

Suddenly, the body under him began to change. Steve watched in horror as the bright skin turned green and the red hair disappeared. Under him appeared a creature he had never seen before. Steve struck again, this time not feeling any inhibition for the irrational thought that he could hurt Natasha. It was not her, just a monster who wanted to take her away from him.

"Where is she?!!" Steve screamed. "Where is Natasha?"

The best thing about the S.H.I.E.L.D. suit - created by Tony Stark himself - was not that it perfectly fitted every curve of the body. Not even that it was waterproof and impact-resistant. Numerous hiding places for guns, knives and other gadgets were not that great either.

While falling down and feeling the breath of approaching death on her neck, Natasha concluded that the best feature of the suit was the invisible pillows built into it. When a large mass of air pressed against the body, inflated pillows detached themselves from the suit and joined together above one's head, creating a kind of parachute. It was this invention that saved Natasha's life.

She landed in a cornfield, far from home, at first unable to calm down. When she finally disentangled herself from the parachute, the legs buckled under her as if they had been made of a fragile material. Natasha took a deep breath, placing her hands on her knees and leaning in fear that she would end up vomiting.

The fact of having been pushed out of the jet still did not fully reach mind, but at least she was sure she had not been betrayed by a member of her team. Every agent knew about the parachute, and the one who had claimed to be Charles Worden had certainly intended to kill her.

She had to warn the others.

Her transmitter did not work, neither did her phone. So she started to walk through the field, hoping that on the way she would come across a house or gas station. Her legs were still trembling with every step, and the world kept spinning before her eyes. She cursed her naivety. How the hell had she not noticed anything? How had she overlooked the fact that one of her agents had disappeared and an extraterrestrial being took its place? It had been a mistake that no real leader should ever
Having walked many miles, overcoming both cornfield and a forested road, Natasha found a dingy pub. Her only hope.

"Listen," she leaned over the bar, "I just want to make one phone call."

"Sorry, sweetheart, but we got a policy. You order something, you can use the phone."

The bartender looked at her dispassionately, wiping a pint of beer with a cloth. Sweetheart. Natasha sighed resignedly. She knew how to deal with men. She could use her charms or simply knock him off. She was too tired, however, to put on any of her trained masks.

So she ordered tequila and headed to the back of the pub, where there was a telephone booth next to the bathroom door. She struggled with the temptation to call Steve. As desperate as it might seem, she just wanted to hear his soothing voice. But Natasha knew well enough that although Steve would do anything for her, he did not have the resources to help her get out of here.

She leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes, putting the phone to her ear, "Tony? It's me, Natasha. I need your help."

It was raining. Steve could hear the drops hitting the windows as he ran up the stairs. He opened the door and found himself on the roof. The wind intensified by the helicopter greeted him right away, and the rain attacked his body, making his clothes immediately wet. But it did not matter. She mattered... only her.

Natasha got out of the helicopter; her red hair was dissolved and formed a raging tangle around her face. Even in the dark of the evening, Steve noticed how tired she was.

Their eyes met and when Natasha breathed a sigh of relief, Steve felt his heart squeeze with longing. However, as he took a step forward, Natasha slowly raised her left hand with a gun aimed straight at him.

"Nat," he began but no other word left his mouth.

Steve stood still, glancing at her, unable to let out any sound, even breathing seemed difficult. He wanted to come up to her, he wanted to take her into his arms and assure her that he would not allow anything so cruel to happen to her ever again. He would do it if it were not for anxiety on her face. Her heart and her mind were battling each other, and he understood. He waited.

"Prove it's really you," she said; her voice strangely weak. "Prove you're my Steve. Please."

He was all wet and cold. The helicopter engine turned off and the pilot run into the building, but Steve barely registered his presence. He was fully focused on Natasha who so far had trusted him immensely. Now even her trust was shaken and they were both devastated by that fact.

She wanted to be sure and he was ready to do anything he could to make her feel safe again.

"We first met on the Helicarrier and were introduced by Coulson. Our enemy may know this and many other details of our life together, but there are some things that only I know. The things about you, Natasha." He relaxed a bit, letting himself dive into memories. "For example, you always sleep on the left side of the bed. You have a favorite mug, the white one with a black border. You often toy with your necklace and you are not even aware of it. I know you find Titanic a very sad and romantic movie, although you would never admit it out loud. I know how much you miss Sam,
Emotions on her face changed with each successive word. Fear, uncertainty, hope, understanding, amusement, surprise. Natasha had never been so easy to read, and Steve had never felt such a great need to name everything that was hidden in his heart. Words flew uninterrupted.

"I also know that you like our puppy more than you think. In fact, you have a big heart that can accommodate huge layers of love. Every morning I wake up at your side and I cannot help but admire how strong you are. Yet, I would like you to know that sometimes you can let go. Being a human is not a weakness." He smiled slightly. "There is something that no one but me knows. I... I fell in love with you in Sokovia, when you were ready to die at my side. When you admired the view... Nat... I need you to know that you were my view. I wanted you to be the last thing I'll ever see. That's when I realized that you were the person I'd been looking for. The right partner with shared life experience. The best friend who would never leave me. My love that could overcome any adversity."

Natasha lowered her gun and hide it in the scabbard.

"Well," she ran her hand over her wet cheek, "it's really you, Rogers. So dramatic and so romantic. I knew it was you after the first sentence."

He approached her and took her face in his hands, brushing away the hair stuck to her skin. He wanted to feel her presence and see the green of her eyes when he was to say the most important words. The words he had not used since his mother's death.

"I haven't finished." He grinned, letting a lone tear fall down his cheek. "I love you, Natasha Romanoff. I'll always love you."

The rain was still falling, attacking them from every direction. Natasha hugged herself to Steve's strong body, pressing her face against his chest. He put his arms around her, trying to protect her from the whole world. His words echoed in her head, words beautiful and sweet, words she did not managed to repeat. Not yet.

She climbed to her toes and closed Steve's lips with a gentle kiss. The days of separation, even being thrown out of the plane were worth this one moment. Natasha now felt like she could actually fly. As if she could do anything.
The Choices

Two years ago...

"My fiancé and I were wondering if you could help us choose a perfect place for our wedding." Natasha grinned, leaning her head on Steve's shoulder.

"It would be my pleasure." The young manager gave them a curious look and saw what she must have seen every day; a couple in love who wanted nothing but to spend their whole life together. "Do you prefer the ceremony to occur indoors or outside? We have a great hall and a beautiful garden."

"Indoors," Steve responded.

"Outside," Natasha said at the same time.

They quickly exchanged glances. Playing yet another role came easy for Natasha. Steve felt quite embarrassed, even though it was not the first time they had pretended to be a couple. There was nothing he could do about his thoughts wandering toward their kiss on the escalator.

"You know what? I'll let you choose, honey," he turned to Natasha, "I trust you completely."

According to the plan, he was supposed to leave Natasha alone, but just before, something tempted him into leaving a kiss on her forehead; a gesture of a future husband. He felt her stiffen under the influence of his soft lips on her skin. He knew her well enough to suspect that he had managed to surprise her, but the expression on her face did not change. She watched him walk away, then sighed exaggeratedly, focusing on her mission to divert the attention of the manager.

"Ugh, men! They're always making us do it all by ourselves."

Steve slipped into the staff corridor and looked around fearing the possibility of being noticed.

"Falcon? Do you copy?"

"I'm on the roof, Cap. Our suspect is staying in room 209. Four guards in front of the door. Two on the balcony. Wait... Oh shit."

"What? What is it?"

"You'll never guess who just entered the building. We're screwed."

Indeed they were. Natasha was about to stop fooling the manager and go to the van in which they had to transport the gun smuggler to their hiding place and interrogate him. Suddenly, however, she felt someone's arm wrap around her waist.

A familiar voice spoke right beside her, "Here you are. I need to speak to you and my future son in law."

"Dad," she stayed in her role despite her heart beating too fast at the sight of Nick Fury, "hi."

Half an hour later, the four of them sat in the small room of the guest house. The atmosphere was far from friendly. Having failed a serious mission, none of them was in a mood to talk. Confused Sam sat on the bed and polished his gun. Steve stood with folded arms and prepared himself mentally for a reprimand. After more than a year of living on the run, they finally got caught. He
had no idea whether Fury was on their side; at any second the army could break into their room and handcuff all three of the fugitives.

Natasha thought about getting arrested as well, but she was rather curious than worried. Fury must have put some effort into searching for them, and he never did anything without a reason. They were both sitting at a small table. Fury took a sip of his coffee as if he had been just a guest who visited his old friends for a Saturday's chat.

"I know you took down a terrorist organization dealing with Chitauri-fueled weapons in Syria," Nick told them. "And now you tried to catch a man who sells weapons to terrorists. Well, it's nice of you that you still try to protect our country. It's a pity, though, that by doing so you jeopardize the actions of people assigned for that kind of job by the government itself."

Sam looked up, and Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"As we speak, Stark is arriving in Los Angeles because of a conference that happens to be at the same place where the suspect is staying. In fact, this is just an excuse for Iron Man to handle the guns problem. Legally, with minimal use of force, without looking over his shoulder for fear that someone will recognize his face and put him in jail."

The silence that reigned in the room was thick and heavy. Steve rubbed his face with his hand, not believing what he had just heard. Tony was in the same city, entering the same hotel that Steve had left just an hour ago. If only he had stayed a little longer, they would have met.

Steve looked around and met Natasha's eyes. She had betrayed Tony to be here with him now. They both felt that they had failed him. And now they almost did it again.

"You're on the run, act like it," Fury added. "You can play night vigilantes like Daredevil but that's all. Finding you was easy. Too easy. Vision disappearing to meet Wanda is not helping either. You can always end it, you know. You can come back."

"For what?" Sam asked. "To get arrested again? That option doesn't appeal to me."

"We will figure it out. You are the Avengers and the world needs you."

Natasha snorted, but it was Steve who spoke, "Clint and Scott are under home arrest. Bucky is in cryogenic sleep. Thor and Bruce are god-knows-where. Tony..." He paused. "Tony hates me. I'm sorry, Fury, but there is nothing to come back to."

Fury sighed, and Natasha felt sudden anger at him. What had he expected? That he would speak to their conscience and convince them to come back? Steve's moral sense was greater than anyone could have imagined, even Natasha, but nothing was able to turn him back from the path he had chosen.

"Can you give us a minute?" Nick requested. "I need to speak to Natasha."

He surprised her. Sam got out of bed and stopped by the door, grabbing the door handle and looking expectantly at Steve. The latter hesitated for a moment, but then followed his friend. Natasha heard them wonder who the hell Daredevil was as the door closed behind them.

"They may think I'm spying for you," she said, leaning back in her chair.

"I doubt it. Rogers and Wilson trust you with their lives. Actually, that's my main concern."

Natasha did not belong to people who immediately - by words, facial expressions or gestures - let
others know what they were feeling. She had been trained to never seem weak. That's why she looked at Fury with interest and indifference, though inside she was boiling with anger.

"Come on, Romanoff," Nick leaned his elbows on the table, "you're the smartest here. You're a cold logician, you calculate your every move and you always listen to your reason. However, looking at you right now, I can't help but worry that you're letting your emotions cloud your judgment."

"What are you implying, Nick?"

"I think you're too attached to Steve Rogers."

If she got up and left, if she laughed it off, or began to deny, she would make it clear that he was right. He was right only in some part; yes, she was attached to Steve Rogers more than to a partner. Yes, she had stayed with him for personal reasons as well as professional ones.

However, Fury, like many others, was blind to Natasha's inner struggle. He did not know how hard it was to fight for her own redemption after the troubled past and at the same time face the adversities of the present. With Steve, she felt she was doing the right thing. Even if it meant hiding from the government and saving people outside the shadow of the Avengers or Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.

So she only asked in a cold voice, "Anything else?"

"Yeah. I like the hair." He pointed at her blond strands. "You know, you remind me of someone. She was a real heroine, very stubborn, funny, in a sense unaware of her greatness. Perhaps you'll get to meet each other one day."

He stood up to leave. Natasha also got up and stopped him hallway to the door, "Nick?"

They looked at each other; two people who did not know who they really were to one another. Natasha saw him as her mentor, as a kind of father figure. Many years before, he and Clint were the most important to her for she had no one else. Now, however, with Steve and Sam probably waiting at the nearby bar, Natasha hesitated.

Nick respected her, maybe even liked and treated her like his own daughter, but he did not understand her. She realized it at that very moment. After so many years of acquaintance, he couldn't look at her without seeing a spy first, a person second. He did not trust her immensely, which he had proved when he had faked his death and let her mourn him. He did not believe that she was capable of being honest and that there was no hidden agenda behind each deed of hers.

That's why she had chosen Steve and planned to keep choosing him for the rest of her life. He was the only one who saw her as an equal. He did not see her only for her past, he did not analyze her every move. He trusted her the way she trusted him, and their relationship was genuine above everything else.

*I'm not the person you think I am,* she wanted to say. *I'm better.*

"Take care," she whispered instead.

"You too, Natasha. You too."

Back then, watching him leave, Natasha had not a slight idea that she would never see him again.
"His name is Trek. Like in Star Trek," Tony told them, winking at Steve. "He's one of the Skrulls - technologically advanced race of reptilian humanoids that possess shape-shifting abilities. He claims not to have killed Charles Worden, explaining that he only stunned and gagged him. Anyway, he gave us Agent Worden's location. I sent a rescue mission five minutes ago."

Steve saw relief on Natasha's face. He knew she blamed herself for the whole situation, so the news that no one had died under her command was exactly what she needed. She smiled at him when he put his hand on her shoulder, but then she opened her eyes wider as if something occurred to her.

She went to the desk and pushed Stark away, who pretended to be indignant, though he was probably as curious as Steve.

"Skrull," Natasha repeated, more to herself than to them. "I once came across this word while searching through Fury's files."

"Seriously, Romanoff?" Tony rolled his eyes. "You even had to sound Fury out?"

"Especially him. Look."

Steve and Tony stood on both of her sides. In front of them, a blue screen flashed in the air, with words written many years before by Nick Fury himself.

Skrulls: shapeshifting abilities right down to the individual's DNA. They can replicate the recent memories of the person that they are copying. Planet: Skrullos (destroyed). Status: innocuous. Related: Kree, Talos, Mar-Vell, Captain Marvel.

"Well, well, well," Tony whistled. "It turns out Fury had an encounter with aliens long before he met Thor and Loki."

"Captain Marvel," Steve read out loud. For some reason, this name took root in his mind. "Is there more information about all these listed… things?"

"Not really," Natasha replied. "Fury only mentions them but gives no further information." She turned to Stark. "I want to interrogate him."

Tony did not try to argue with her, just as he did not object to Steve staying at the headquarters as he had refused to leave Natasha's side. Together they went down the stairs to reach a laboratory and several cells hidden underground.

The Skrull sat on a chair in a small cell with walls made of thick glass. The detainee did not see the corridor or hear any sounds, while anyone outside could listen to the conversation that was about to take place.

Natasha looked at Steve for the last time and went inside. Tony and Steve stopped behind one of the walls. Trek raised his head with pointed-back ears when he realized he had a visitor. He was dressed in black clothes, his green hands laid on his lap.

"Agent Romanoff," he greeted her; his voice hoarse but somehow warm. "I apologize for pushing you out the plane. It was unkind on my part."

"I don't hold a grudge," she assured him. "I just want to know the reason. You stun one of the agents, try to kill me, then you impersonate me and... what's next? What was your plan?"
"First of all, you must know I had no choice."

"There's always a choice." Natasha took a step towards him. "Who sent you?"

Steve folded his arms over his chest, watching the scene taking place behind the wall. Trek seemed to be willing to co-operative but he was also scared. Not of Natasha, though. Perhaps not of any human being. Stark cleared his throat.

"Deep down, you know the answer to that question, Agent Romanoff," Trek said and Steve felt chills all over his skin. "He killed half of us but it was not enough. He needed someone on Earth. Someone who would get to the Avengers and gather information about Tony Stark's secret plans. He threatened that he would kill us all. I lost my wife. I cannot lose my daughter."

Thanos.

Steve turned to Tony, who stood completely still, looking through the glass at Trek. Before Steve, however, managed to ask at least one of the questions that appeared in his mind, Natasha preceded him. She slammed the door and clenched her hand on Tony's tie, forcing him to look at her.

"What is he talking about?" Her voice was razor-sharp. "What does Thanos want from you? It's not about Vision, is it? There's no reason why Thanos would want him. What else are you working on, Tony? What are you hiding?"

Stark gave the impression of being absent as if the mere mention of Thanos had transported him to the point where he had almost died at his hands.

Steve was terrified. Terrified that this was not the end. That Thanos was still out there, that he could appear at any moment, that he knew about Tony working on something before Stark’s close friends did. Steve was also disappointed. A few days earlier, Tony shared his plans concerning Vision with him. What's more, he allowed him to help. At the time, Steve had felt that they had been at the same level, that nothing could come between them ever again. Now it turned out to be a lie.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you," Tony finally answered, avoiding eye contact.

Natasha pulled away from Stark and grabbed Steve's hand.

"Okay, Tony. Keep your secrets as long as you want." She lowered her voice. "Just make sure that whatever you're working on, none of us is going to die protecting it."

Steve and Natasha walked away, leaving Tony far behind and knowing perfectly well that they would fall apart at that very moment if they did not have each other.
There was something magical about her. About red hair slipping through his fingers. About full lips that kissed his neck, evoking pleasant shivers. About sincere smile that appeared every time she raised her head to look at him. She was magical.

He took her face in his hands to glance closely at her green eyes. Natasha froze over him with her lips parted slightly as he traced the way through her skin with his fingers. He touched her right temple, then her cheek. She closed her eyes when his thumb reached her lower lip. Feeling the tension in his entire body, the eagerness to kiss her again and again, Steve could not resist. He rose on the pillows, but as soon as their lips brushed against one another, Natasha threw herself on the bed, laughing and dragging him with her.

It was like a summary of their relationship, in which there was room for playfulness, for teasing and bantering, but also for honesty and seriousness. A few days before, they had Skrulls and Tony's secrets in mind, and now they only focused on each other. They would go crazy if they did not spend at least a short moment every day to pretend that the world was only limited to them. Their bubble of stolen peace had long disappeared, but they were desperately struggling to keep at least part of it.

Half an hour later they still were on the bed in Natasha's sun-drenched bedroom. She laid on her right side with her head placed on her hand, dressed only in Steve's white shirt that reached her mid-thigh. The rays of the sun shone on her hair. He leaned against the headboard with a sketchpad on his lap. Biting the tip of the pencil, he aimed at creating a plan in his head and then pouring it into the paper.

"Steve," Natasha whispered sensually, "I want you to draw me like one of your French girls."

Although he understood the reference and took it as a clear joke, Rogers blushed all over his face right to the tips of his ears.

"Well, I think you have to get rid of my shirt for that to happen, my love."

She buttoned the top button of the shirt, making it clear that his idea was not an option. Her long, black lashes fluttered as she stretched herself in the sun like a cat who found a cozy place and did not intend to leave it.

"Do it again."

Steve put down the sketchbook. For some reason, he had problems concentrating, "Do what?"

"Call me your love."

He wanted to fulfill her request. He wanted to take her in his arms for the hundredth time that day, though it was not even twelve yet. He wanted to kiss her deeply. He wanted to tell her that she was his love. And that henceforth he would always call her my love if it pleased her.

A pathetic sound behind the door forced them to break away from each other. Natasha sighed and stood up to open the door. As soon as she did, Sam ran into the room, jumped onto the bed and found himself in Steve's arms, licking his master's face.
"Unbelievable." Natasha leaned against the door frame, crossing her arms over her chest. "Before you even blink, I'll be competing with him for your attention."

Steve burst out laughing and Natasha, unable to hold it back any longer, quickly joined her boyfriend. Satisfied Sam settled himself comfortably on Steve's lap, and when Natasha lay down to stroke him, he gave the impression of being the happiest dog in the world.

Vision slowly opened his eyes. He was not a human so there was no need for him to adjust his eyes to the brightness of the room. However, it took him a moment to understand the situation, and Natasha could easily imagine the cogs working in his head when individual memories fitted into the right places.

"Mr. Stark," he said; his voice unchanged.

Natasha felt the tension escape from Steve's body who was standing right beside her. She knew what he thought. One life saved.

"Welcome back, buddy," Tony greeted him. "How do you feel?"

"Alive, sir. Other than that... well, I don't feel anything."

Vision rose to a sitting position and rested his feet on the ground. He was not aware of how many months he had spent on that very table, immobile and lifeless. Now he stood up slowly and turned to face them, as if only now noticing their presence.

"Captain Rogers, Agent Romanoff. I believe I have missed a lot."

So Tony told him everything without sparing any details. He talked about how Thanos had got the last stone by killing Vision, and how by one snap of his fingers he had erased the existence of half of the sentient universe. He talked about their friends disappearing around them one by one. About months of mourning and about the attempt at coming to terms with what had happened. He also talked about Thanos sending a Skrull to spy on the Avengers; about the existing risk and a non-existent chance to change the past.

Steve listened with his jaw clenched, motionless and lost in thought. Natasha, meanwhile, focused on watching Vision, expecting any reaction from him. When Tony finished speaking and fell silent for a long moment, overwhelmed by painful memories, Vision gave each of them a look.

"What happened is enormously tragic. I offer my sincere condolences."

Natasha snorted, unable to stop herself. Stark glared at her, but she could not just stand and listen.

"You lost someone too, remember?" She turned to Vision. "Wanda. You loved her."

"I did, yes. I remember." Vision endured her gaze. His voice was calm... too calm. "I remember asking her to kill me. Unfortunately, I'm unable to name what I felt then. I understand that you expect me to be sorry, Agent Romanoff, but you must understand it's impossible. Human feelings are beyond my reach, even those I had once experienced."

And yet Natasha could have sworn that she had noticed a flash in his eye as soon as she had mentioned Wanda's name. But maybe she was desperate to see anything.

She remembered perfectly how, remaining on the run, Wanda would slip away to meet Vision. And how later she had decided to go with him to Stockholm. She remembered Sam ridiculing this
strange relationship and Steve refusing to comment upon it. Natasha had wanted best for her, treating Wanda like her own sister. Now Maximoff was dead, and the love of her life felt absolutely nothing about it. Because of Wanda, this fact hurt Natasha.

Before anyone could continue the topic of complicated human feelings, Pepper ran into the lab with horror in her eyes. Tony was the first to notice her, "Hon, what's w-"

"You need to see this. All of you."

And she ran back. Without hesitation, Tony rushed after her. Steve and Natasha exchanged scared looks and climbed the stairs together. Vision was right behind them.

Steve did not understand the problem at first. The living room seemed normal; the TV was on, the table was set with cups of coffee and tea, Martin was sleeping wrapped in a blanket on the couch, and Sam was right next to him on the floor.

As he was not a big fan of technology, he only paid attention to it only when it was needed. But Tony and Natasha noticed immediately what was wrong. TV. The news. All of them looked at the screen. Pepper covered her mouth with her hand, and Steve felt his heart go up to his throat.

Several places in New York are under attack. The buildings in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and Hell's Kitchen are being destroyed. Casualties are predicted in numbers above one hundred and are still growing. The police are not able to reach each of the attacked places, as every few minutes the terrorists take the next target. According to an unofficial source, several witnesses have seen green creatures that are able to turn into every human being. It is possible, therefore, that New York is a victim of yet another alien attack. In the hearts of frightened New Yorkers, a question arises: has any of the Avengers survived the tragedy of the snap and will they come to save us?

It was as if he was walking in his sleep, not feeling his own legs. Steve went to the window and rested his forehead against the cold glass. In the distance clouds of smoke were hovering over the city. The world was burning right in front of him.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Natasha. Of course, it was Natasha. She did not look at him with the tenderness he had seen that morning. Her eyes said one thing - they were going to fight.

"I talked to Ross." Tony entered the room, holding his phone. Everyone looked at him expectantly. "Cap… You're in."

Steve felt as if he'd woken up from a long coma. Beside him, Natasha formed her lips in a barely visible smirk. Vision seemed ready for action despite the fact that he had literally come back to life minutes ago. Rhodey, who had arrived after seeing the news, stood next to the door wearing the War Machine suit.

"Romanoff, one part of the city will be yours. You will receive a group of agents under your command. Rogers, Rhodey, Vision and I will each get a separate part. The Skrulls can change to every human being, but as far as I know, they are not skilled warriors. Don't get fooled." Stark turned to Pepper. "Honey, I need you to stay with Martin. Happy will be here in a moment. Should anything happen, use the Rescue suit. Okay?"

What could happen? The question appeared in Natasha's thoughts, but she did not utter it aloud. She saw Pepper nod and instinctively get closer to her son sleeping on the sofa. Sam, as if awakened by the tension in the room, stood by Martin's side, watching the gathered with watchful
eyes. Although he was small and harmless, Natasha felt a sudden love for this brave dog.

"But I don't have my shield," Steve pointed out.

There was an inconceivable excitement on Tony's face, "Oh, I've been waiting so long for this. Follow me. Both of you."

He pointed at Steve and Natasha, then started walking down the corridor. They followed him, not really knowing what to expect. With each step they moved away from the living room, passing the bedrooms. Finally, they reached an inconspicuous room. It was deprived of any furniture; there were only dusty cardboard boxes on the floor. Tony approached one of the walls and found a button. A secret passage to an even more secret room opened before them.

Steve held his breath and Natasha's eyes widened. This room was also devoid of furniture, but when the lights flashed over them, it turned out that all the walls were occupied. There were various kinds of suits behind the windows. Under each of them was a label with the name of the potential owner. Spider-Man had three suits, each in a red shade. There were also costumes for Doctor Strange, Scarlett Witch, Falcon, Thor, Hulk, and Hawkeye.

Natasha, of course, stopped behind the glass that was signed with her hero alias. Black Widow. Her suit was black and covered every scrap of the body except the face. It seemed convenient and practical. There were also various types of weapons, including black widow's bites, taser disks, expandable batons, and a few types of guns and knives.

"Holy shit," she whispered to herself.

It was like Christmas.

She turned to see Steve and Tony standing at the very end of the room, where the entire wall was occupied by Captain America's equipment. Steve forgot how to breathe properly when he looked at his new, beautiful stealth suit, which was deceptively similar to the one he had used while overthrowing hydra. The suit, however, was not the most important thing.

Only the glass separated him from his shield. The shield he had not seen for three years. The shield, which was his old shield, and at the same time a new one. Tony had made some improvements, and now he opened the glass-case.

"Go ahead, Capsicle," Tony encouraged him. "It's all yours."

Steve carefully removed the shield, threw it in the air and caught it, weighing it in his hand. It was lighter than he remembered and Steve felt subconscious that it was also way more persistent.

"I ameliorated it over two years ago. It's been waiting for you since then."

"Two years ago?" Steve looked at him in amazement. "But, Tony… two years ago…"

"Yes, you were on the run and I was angry with you. However, I never ceased to believe that we would once again stand on the same side. And here we are."

Tony and Steve stood opposite each other as they did many times before, but they had never been as close as they were now. In the end, they became true friends.

"Hey, old man! Watch out!"

Natasha shot. Three bullets bounced off the shield and fell with a loud crash to the ground. None
left a trace. Steve looked up from the shield, gazing at her in shock and fighting the cruel feeling of déjà vu. Stark let out a strangled cry, and Natasha lowered her gun.

"What the hell, Romanoff?" Tony screamed.

"I just wanted to make sure that Captain America was still in good shape. Get your butt moving, boys. We have lives to save."

She left with the suit in her hands, ready to kill, protect and risk. Black Widow in a nutshell. At that moment, Steve loved her more than ever, and his love mixed with a wonderful feeling of adrenaline. He also took the suit and followed his warrior girlfriend, tossing his beloved shield. Walking behind them, Tony must have found Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers the strangest couple in the world.

Chapter End Notes

I know I often say it, but please leave a comment. Every chapter is over 2,000 words long and you can read it for free, so please take a few seconds to write a few words. It would mean a lot :)
"I hate to leave you." Steve sighed. "We'd be better off fighting by one another's side."

Natasha looked at him closely. He acted seriously and aroused respect in his stealth suit and with the shield slung over his back. His hands, clad in gloves with bare fingers, leaned on his hips. If it were not for the fact that they had no time to lose, Natasha would love to kiss him.

"I know, but this way we can save more lives. Just… be careful."

"The last time you told me to be careful, you were the one to get shot protecting me." He squeezed her hand briefly. "I'll see you soon, Nat. That's a promise."

He wanted to get on the motorcycle but she stopped him. She knew that if she did not do it now, she might not be brave enough to do it any time in the future... or not get a chance to do so. All it took was to utter the truth, and sincerity was the only thing he ever expected from her.

"Steve," she spoke in a whisper, "I never said it back."

Somehow he understood right away. The expression on his face changed. He turned back to look her in the eye.

"It's okay. I know that you don't feel comfortable talking about your feelings. You don't have to say it."

"But I want to." Her lips formed into a soft smile. "I love you."

Those were just words, confirmation of what Steve had already known, and yet hearing it all was like waking up from a nightmare and entering a beautiful reality. He forgot for a moment what he was supposed to do. He would fulfill Natasha's every whim. He would sacrifice himself and the whole world for her if only she asked him to.

He grinned and got on the motorcycle, fearing that if he stayed in the company of Natasha even a minute longer, he would not be able to leave her.

"I just realized I have never kissed Captain America." She crossed her arms on her chest. "You look hot in this suit."

"Well then, I guess we both have something to look forward to."

Natasha watched him drive away, leaving a trail of tires on the asphalt. At the same time Iron Man, War Machine and Vision left the building and took to the air. Natasha jumped on her motorcycle and followed Steve for a while to separate with him later and head to Queens.

It felt like Chitauri invasion all over again. There was chaos on the streets of New York. People fled in horror, the buildings disintegrated in the blink of an eye, the smoke hovered over the city, covering it in the terrifying darkness. Although the situation resembled the one from many years ago, this time the enemy was different. Back then, the Chitauri had been flying above the ground, destroying everything around. Now, Skrulls remained in hiding, impersonating random people,
setting a fire and attacking by surprise.

Not for the first time, Natasha saw Thanos destroy the world with the help of his minions.

"Two blocks of flats are burning," one of the agents informed her. "What are the orders, Agent Romanoff?"

She realized how scared they were when they all raised their heads to hear her commands. They never experienced such a thing before but that was what this job required - to always be ready, even if the meant fighting extraterrestrials.

"Help the police evacuate the street. Be careful. Everyone who acts strangely should catch your attention."

When they dispersed, Natasha clasped her hands on her batons and ran straight into the flames.

In the meantime, Steve did not have to wonder how he would recognize an opponent who could look like everybody. As soon as he got there, something threw him off the motorcycle. He fell to the ground, rolled down, and stood up, pulling out his shield and throwing it at the same moment as four men moved toward him. The shield hit each of them and returned to Steve's hands, who pressed it to him, watching four angry faces turn green.

They quickly raised and attacked. Steve ducked before being hit by one of them, then leaned forward and cut the second one's legs out from under him. The third one shot him with a laser weapon. Steve shielded himself and hit the fourth enemy in the stomach.

Two minutes later they all laid unconscious, and Steve ran on. Brooklyn, his Brooklyn was being destroyed in front of his eyes.

Suddenly he heard a cry. He headed towards it and saw a woman who was crushed by the ruins of a building. Steve put his shield to the back and began moving pieces of debris. Then he took the released woman in his arms and approached the police. Among the police officers and victims was Captain Mordens, who nodded to Steve, this time not commenting on his presence. In the case of an attack of such a large scale, Captain America's help seemed obvious.

The woman had scratched and covered with blood legs, but she could still move her feet. When Steve gently put her on the ground, she grabbed his wrist and said in a broken voice, "Thank you."

Steve did not fight for praise and cheers. He did not want his name to be chanted, and being known by the whole world didn't give him any satisfaction. Yet at that very moment, after months of sitting in the house with the knowledge that Natasha and their friends lived the life from which he had been cut off, the gratitude of this woman gave him the strength to keep going.

When he released her hand and took a few steps, something extraordinary happened. A thunderbolt opened the sky and hit the ground in front of him, raising clouds of dust into the air. Steve had already seen it and could not help but smile at Thor, who was standing in the middle of all the commotion. Rocket and Nebula accompanied him.

"You're always showing off, Thor," he greeted the God of Thunder.

"It's good to see you too, my friend. Thought you could use some help."

Stormbreaker flew into the air and hit dozens of people, including two police officers. It was not until their bodies became green that Steve noticed they were all Skrulls and Thor had known it right away. How? It did not matter. Steve had a strong backup so he went on fighting with only one
goal: to save those who couldn't save themselves.

Meanwhile, Natasha pulled the last person out of the building before the explosion shattered the entire facade and threw them both forward. A temporary ringing in her ears made her struggle to get up. She checked on the rescued elderly man and raised to her feet only to be immediately knocked down.

"Nat? You okay?"

A boy with the face of one of her agents clenched his hands on her neck. Still stunned by the explosion, Natasha felt her eyes fill with tears. She lacked air; her legs kicking desperately under the body of her opponent. Using the remnant of her strength, she reached for a knife and stabbed the boy on the hip.

She dropped him off her and sat up, breathing quickly and pressing her fingers to the comms, "I'm fine, Steve."

"Guys, we have a problem." It was Tony speaking. "All this attack on New York is only a distraction. Someone broke into the Avengers Facility and S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters. Pepper and Martin are safe. Let's meet at home."

The very thought of Thanos ordering the assassination of thousands of people only to distract the Avengers caused anger in Natasha. She shot the rising Skrull and headed toward the motorcycle.

Then she noticed him. A boy, about 13 years old, sat at the wall of one of the buildings with a comic book in his hands. Uncertain of her own reasons, Natasha came up and crouched right beside him. The boy's eyes widened at her sight.

"You're one of them." He spoke with admiration and interest typical of a child whose dream was being fulfilled. "You're an Avenger."

"That's right." She smiled at him. "I'm Natasha. What's your name?"

"James. My name is James."

Steve arrived at the same time as War Machine and Thor landed on the ground. Bruce and Hogan walked quickly toward them. The first hadn't taken part in the fight, so Steve guessed that the Hulk stayed elusive. There were so many questions, so many things to explain after months of separation. Steve had not seen Bruce and Thor since the wedding of Tony and Pepper, however, the circumstances were not conducive to friendly chats.

He took notice of the fact that Natasha was nowhere to be seen.

When everyone gathered and Bruce greeted Steve with a shy smile, Pepper appeared in front of them dressed in a suit resembling those worn by Tony and Rhodey. She was holding Martin in her hands. After a while, Iron Man landed next to her and took over the child who cuddled up to his father's chest. Stark's nanosuit disappeared as if it had never been there.

Steve involuntarily sighed, thinking about how long it always took him to put on and take off his suit.

"Oh my God," Bruce approached Tony and Pepper. "You got a son! I'm so happy for you guys."

"I would be happier if nothing threatened his life!" Potts turned to her husband. "Ten men broke
into our home. Happy and I managed to get Martin and Sam out of here just in time. Can you finally tell me what Thanos wants from you?"

"Who's Sam?" Bruce seemed confused.

Suddenly Vision landed on the ground. At the sight of him, Bruce jumped back and looked questioningly at Thor, but his friend was just as surprised. Vision informed Tony, "The item was moved to a safe place, sir. Its location is only known by me."

"Enough." Steve pushed his way through his friends and approached Stark. He wanted to see the expression on his face. "Many people have died today, Tony. Thanos knows you're working on something and he'll do whatever it takes to stop you. I owe you a lot, but if you don't tell us what it's all about, neither I nor Natasha will risk our lives for you."

Steve felt Bruce and Thor's eyes on him, but he was only interested in the truth. He was tired. Tired of the fact that people were dying around him, and he couldn't do anything about it.

"I… I didn't want to give you hope," Tony explained, his voice weak and sorrowful. "There are still months of work ahead of me. More than once, someone will try to stop us. We will fight, protect that item, maybe somebody will die and I'm not even certain that it will work out in the end. But... but if it does, we will not save only one person. We will save much more. We'll save Parker, Barnes, Wilson, Maximoff and all those who cannot be with us right now."

"What is it? What are you building?" Rhodey asked.

A heavy silence reigned among them. It seemed to Steve as if the whole world had stopped and calmed down. Even Martin, sleeping in his father's arms, was completely quiet. Steve feared to breathe and look at his companions not to disturb the silence. He waited for Tony's response, terrified and excited at once.

"The Gauntlet. I'm building our own Gauntlet."

Chapter End Notes

Here's the last chapter before the Avengers Endgame premiere. When I started writing this fic, I thought I would finish it before the movie, but new ideas kept appearing in my head and it's still far from over. I hope whatever happens in Endgame, you won't lose interest in my fic. I can assure you that my version will be different, though it's hard to say how much different. Have fun while watching the movie! Don't forget to take some tissues!
Everyone gathered in the living room: Tony, Steve, Natasha, Thor, Bruce, Nebula, Rocket, and Rhodey. Pepper took Martin to his room, while Happy and Vision left to see if there had been more attacks at the S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. When Natasha had arrived with a thirteen-year-old boy and announced that he would stay with them for a while, only Steve and Bruce had paid attention to her. Everyone had been concerned about the Gauntlet case.

Now Natasha stood by the window, from where she had a view of the yard. She watched James give Sam a retrieve training by throwing a stick and encouraging him to get it. They both seemed happy and for a brief moment, Natasha forgot about the purpose of the meeting.

That was until Tony finally started talking, "Our Gauntlet will be slightly smaller and adapted to human strength so that the power of stones does not harm the user when used only once. I'm not sure about the second time, though, but I see no point in using the stones again."

"How are we going to get the stones?" Bruce asked.

"Nebula," Tony looked at his unusual friend, "did you find Thanos?"

"I did."

"Great. We attack Thanos, we take the stones and one of us snaps their fingers. Voila! Of course, the construction will take some time, and Thanos might attack again. We need to-"

"It won't work." Nebula stared into space; her voice calm and cold. "I only reached my father because he let me. He was not alone. Destroying half of the universe was not enough for him. Using the stones, he assembled an army so large that they would destroy the entire Earth in a blink of an eye. He revived his children and brought my sister back." She looked at Rocket. "With the help of the Time Stone, he found her in the past and took her with him. That Gamora is still loyal to him. What I am trying to say... Tony, there are no more stones. After repeated use, the stones returned to their places in time and space. I'm still alive because Thanos allowed it. He wanted you to know that nothing could be done. Nothing."

Stark dropped into the chair as if somebody deprived him of all energy. Natasha put her hand on his shoulder, but her eyes fell on Steve. He sat hunched with his chin resting on his interlaced fingers. Part of her wanted to know what he was thinking about all of this, while the other part was afraid of what she could see inside his mind.

"So what?" Rhodey stepped forward. "We're gonna give up? What about a time machine? We live in a world of superpowers, aliens and talking raccoons. There must be a way to time travel."

Rocket threw him a glare, and Tony hid his face in his hands. Natasha regretted that there was no way for her to ease his pain.

"We can attack Thanos," Thor suggested. "It won't bring anyone back, but at least it'll give us some sense of justice. Valkyrie and Loki could help us."

"Loki is alive?" Steve raised his head.

Thor and Bruce attempted at adding something but Nebula silenced them.

"I was not the only one who tried to kill Thanos. A woman called Captain Marvel found him just
after the snap. Thanos stopped her with the stones, but he did not kill her. He is weaker than before, but his army cannot be torn. There is not enough of us, besides killing him won't change anything. Thanos won't attack again. He achieved his goal."

Steve, Natasha, and Tony looked at each other. They all heard that name before: Captain Marvel - a mysterious figure from Fury's files.

"Loki and Vision are alive. Thanos brought his daughter from the past," Steve whispered to himself. "There must be something."

"Excuse me," Tony stretched out. He seemed older than half an hour ago as if the lost hope had deprived him of all his strength. "I need to figure a way to time travel."

He left the room and Natasha sat on the back of his chair. Although many months had passed since she had lost her friends, only now did she let herself have hope for a reunion. This hope disappeared as soon as it appeared, but Natasha could not stop wondering if, perhaps... somehow...

Everyone was absorbed in their own thoughts. Finally, Natasha went to the center of the room and, so as to lighten the atmosphere, she asked, "Anyone fancy a peanut butter sandwich?"

With hands in his pockets, Steve crossed the lawn. He tried to get Nebula's words out of his head, but it was not so easy. He kept thinking about Bucky, Sam, Wanda, T'Challa and all the people they could have saved if they had done something earlier, if they had searched for Thanos together, if...

A slight smile appeared on his face at the sight of Sam. Steve crouched and ruffled the dog's fur, but his four-footed friend quickly ran away, almost knocking over the boy waiting for him.

"He really likes you," Steve noticed, standing up.

"Is it your dog?"

"Mine and Natasha's. Natasha is the lady who brought you here."

James had messy red hair and blue eyes. He looked malnourished and neglected, but after he got food and Peter's old clothes from Pepper, he had enough strength to run with the dog around the facility and not worry about being surrounded by adults.

Now he sat on the grass, crossing his legs. Sam lay down next to him, and after a moment Steve joined them, feeling uncomfortable looking at the child from above.

"I know." James stroked the dog's fur. "She's Black Widow. She's my favorite Avenger. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love all of you guys. I even have a comic book about you, Captain. I just think Black Widow is the most badass."

Steve felt a wave of warmth spread through his body. He sat with his back to the sun and looked at the boy whose presence was surreal and unexpected. Yet, Steve could not get rid of the impression that they had been always meant to meet.

"I get it, kid. She's my favorite too. Would you like to be a hero like us one day?" Steve asked and James nodded eagerly. "You know, every hero has their backstory. What's yours?"

He told Steve everything.
James Rivers was born in New York. His mother worked as a teacher, and his father was a baker. They lived well in their small apartment in Brooklyn. All until the parents died in a car accident, orphaning an eight-year-old son. The boy was taken care of by his grandmother living in Queens. They lived together for four years until one day, while walking in the park, the woman disappeared just like many other people around James.

He did not know what to do, alone and scared. He returned to the apartment and from then on all he did was to survive. Nobody cared about the young boy who stole food from the shops and slept in stairwells. His grandma's house was taken over by the government as there was no one to pay for it. There were people who helped him by giving him food and allowing him to take showers. Social services came several times, but then James would disappear for a few weeks, living under bridges or between garbage dumps.

When Queens got attacked, he was tired of running away and just sat against the wall, squeezing a comic stolen from a child. That's when the heroine found him. He heard about her many times from the mouths of strangers or saw her on the screens of television sets on the shop displays.

"I'll understand if you take me to the orphanage. I am only a child, I can't help you save the world," James finished in a sad voice, weeping a lone tear and hiding his face in Sam's fur. "I've been stealing. It means I'm a bad guy, right?"

Steve denied it immediately, feeling his heart crumble into pieces inside his chest. Now he understood why Natasha hadn't left him alone.

"You did what you had to do to survive," he said, remembering his old conversation with Natasha under fireworks. "If anything, it means you're a very brave young man."

It was like a big win when James looked up and smiled. Sweet dimples appeared in his cheeks. Seeing the child's carefree face, Steve came up with a crazy idea.

The car hung at the very top for one terrifying second. Steve's heart gave a little flutter and his stomach dropped when they started going down a steep hill on a roller coaster. James and Natasha yelled happily. Finally, getting out of the car, James asked for another ride, and Natasha leaned on Steve's shoulder, laughing sincerely.

Then they approached the game booth, where you could win something for shooting down all six images of zombies. Natasha was the most suitable for this task. Steve and James stood aside while Natasha took up the toy weapon and shot down all the targets with no problem. Ironically, she won the Hulk-shaped mascot. She handed it over to James and stared at Steve who didn't hide his smirk.

James and Natasha went on one more ride, while Steve decided to find something to eat. Half an hour later, they sat together on a bench, eating fries and drinking milkshakes.

"You think we could go on the dodgems?" James asked.

"Sure," Natasha answered, taking a sip of her milkshake. "What do you think, Steve?"

"Okay, but that's it for today. It's getting late."

After the ride, hitting each other with dodgems and endless laughter, the three of them returned to the Avengers Facility. Pepper chose for James one of the empty, unoccupied rooms.

Natasha made sure he brushed his teeth and went to bed. Although he was excited about everything that had happened in the last few yours, James was also tired. He wrapped himself in the quilt and
watched Natasha, who came to the door to turn off the light.

"Mrs. Romanoff," James whispered. "It was the best day of my life. Thank you."

She turned to look at him. His hair was messy, and his eyes filled with sincerity. She fought a strange temptation to kiss his head. After all, they only knew each other for several hours. He was a nice kid, but not hers. Why the hell had she brought him here? Why had she given him hope?

"You can call me Natasha. Or Nat. Goodnight, James."

Natasha closed the door and leaned against it, taking a deep breath. Steve's footsteps helped her focus. He approached her, wearing a jacket and probably being ready to leave. Right. It was time to go home.

Instead, she hugged him, inhaling a familiar scent. He embraced her, pulling her closer. He was not surprised at all by her tenderness; he wanted it himself. After the attack on New York, after what Tony and Nebula said, after spending time with James... They both needed one another, lost in this new reality. Their world was cracking and at the same time was heading in a new, uncertain direction.

"We need to move on, Nat. They're never coming back."

As painful as it was, the truth had to be accepted.

"Let's stay here for a night, okay?" She raised her head to look at him. "Just in case James wakes up and feels alone."

There were already many people in the house, but Steve didn't feel like mentioning it. He nodded and pulled her back to him. Natasha leaned her head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. He hid his face in her hair. The night found them embraced so tight as if they were afraid that if they let go, the world would end.
The following weeks were calm and free of surprises. It seemed that everyone finally came to terms with the fact that the past couldn't be undone. Tony, after finishing the Gauntlet that was not needed anymore, decided to devote time to directing S.H.I.E.L.D. and focus on his duties as father and husband. Pepper was happy as never before, and one-year-old Martin seemed to grow with every second.

Others also did well. Thor helped his people find a new home, but he would also occasionally show up on Earth to spend some time with his fellow Avengers, especially Bruce. The latter worked on restoring the Hulk back. Rhodey, Nebula, and Rocket watched over the galaxy, waiting for suspicious signs that might indicate Thanos' activity, but nothing ever happened. Okoye and Natasha often contacted each other, but it was just to make sure the other was okay.

James stayed longer until he became an inseparable part of Steve and Natasha's life. He brought innocence, light, and goodness. James, just like Sam and Martin, was the source of hope in the broken world. He reminded them that there were things worth fighting for, but also things worth stopping fighting for.

On this sunny day, when their peace was to be destroyed once again, the Avengers Facility did not look great. The kitchen was covered with flour, while milk cartons and dirty dishes could be found in every spot of the room. In the center of all the chaos stood Steve with a frying pan in his hand. His hair was messy; he wore a dirty apron and smiled at his small audience.

"Watch carefully for you're about to learn how to make perfect pancakes," he announced in a serious voice.

Natasha rolled her eyes and James stifled a giggle. They both watched Steve toss a pancake. Unfortunately, he tossed it too high and the pancake stuck to the ceiling. Natasha and James looked at each other in silence and two seconds later burst into loud laughter, almost falling off their chairs.

"Well, I admit it did not go as planned," Steve looked up with his hands on his hips, "but you could show some understanding."

"Oh, babe." Natasha rushed to give him a kiss on the cheek. "It just happens that cooking is not-" She paused when the pancake broke away from the ceiling and landed on Steve's head with a loud slap. James could not take it anymore. He slid to the floor, and his whole body shook with laughter. Natasha would join him if it was not for Steve who looked like a lost puppy.

She brushed some cake from his face and put her finger to her lips.

"Mmm! It tastes quite well. Sit down, Steve. I'll take care of the pancakes."

Steve obediently took a seat by the kitchen island, and James, who had calmed down a little, handed him a wet cloth.

"You think other Avengers are coming for dinner?" James turned to Steve. "I'd love to see Thor's lightning bolt again!"
"Maybe. I wonder what is taking Rhodey so long."

As if on cue, Rhodes walked into the kitchen, holding Sam on a leash. In recent months, the dog had grown so much that now, when he got set free and quickly ran to his master, Steve did not have to lean over to stroke him.

"This dog's energy could power the whole city," Rhodey gasped, looking around the room. "What the hell happened here?"

"Hurricane Rogers," Natasha replied casually with her back to them so that no one would see the smile wandering around her lips.

However, Steve could easily imagine the smile he loved so much and which was often the result of jokes about him. Old James shook his head as if it was all too much for him and helped young James carry the plates and cutlery to the dining room. Sam followed them, happily wagging his tail.

Taking advantage of the rare moment of respite, Steve approached Natasha. She was putting the last pancake on the plate when he took her in his arms and kissed passionately. She had a sweet smell and an even sweeter taste.

"You know, Nat, I've been thinking about all of this... I think we should let James move in with us." He looked into her eyes to see her reaction to his words. "We have a spare bedroom in our apartment since I'm sleeping in yours. We could find him a school, he had avoided education for too long. We... We could be a family. James, Sam, you and me."

"Does it mean you want to adopt him?"

"Yeah, I guess. Do you want the same?"

Instead of answering, she kissed him again, dipping her fingers into his hair. When he slightly pulled away from her to take a breath, he noticed she was smiling. Never before had he seen her sincerely, boundlessly happy, and this view itself filled him with a warm feeling.

"Give me all the pancakes!" James screamed, running into the kitchen with Sam by his side.

Steve and Natasha looked at each other, agreeing upon one thing: letting James into their life was the best decision possible.

"I need you to punch me in the face."

"You what now!?"

Bruce smiled innocently, taking off his glasses and putting them on his desk.

"I'm trying everything that could bring my other side back," he explained. "I took epinephrine, but the Hulk needs a trigger in order to show up. Please, Nat, ouch!"

Having punched him in the face, Natasha rubbed her sore hand with her eyes fixed on Bruce and his possible reaction. Although she seemed completely calm, her heart beat faster at the thought of repeating the situation from many years ago, when she had luckily survived the Hulk's attempt at killing her.

However, Bruce's face did not contort with a grimace of rage and did not turn green. He winced...
because of the pain, but he was still a harmless, somewhat awkward scientist. Natasha took his glasses and gently put them back on his face.

"Admit it. Did it give you a little satisfaction?"

Natasha smirked, shaking her head, "No. No. I don't hold any grudges against you, Bruce."

She felt his look at herself as she began to walk around his laboratory, touching the test tubes and looking into his notes.

"Maybe you're taking it wrong. Hulk disappeared because of fear. You won't bring him back by stimulating your body to be filled with adrenaline out of fear or anger. You two have tried to disown each other for too long." She reciprocated his gaze. "Do not think of him as a weapon in case of trouble but as part of yourself. Accept him."

They stood in silence for a moment, separated from each other by a long table. Bruce was nervously playing with his fingers, and Natasha crossed her arms on the chest. What once had been between them had long ceased to exist. Natasha only hoped that it would be possible to rebuild their friendship.

"It would have never worked out between us, would it?" Bruce guessed. "Even if I had stayed."

"I suppose it wouldn't," Natasha agreed.

"Deep down I have always known you would end up with Steve. Back then at the party, before the appearance of Ultron... Cap said he had seen you flirt up close. I think there was already a thing between you two. I'm glad you finally dared to do something about it. He's a good guy, Nat. He loves you the way you deserve."

She smiled warmly, feeling as if a heavy weight had fallen from her heart. However, before she could say anything, Rhodey entered the room.

"Nat? There's something you need to know."

The tone of his voice did not promise good news.

Steve entered Martin's room to find Tony and Nebula leaning over the child, who was lying in his crib and staring at his dad and the blue lady with interest.

"I could teach him how to fight," Nebula suggested. "How to sneak up without any sound, how to cut a throat, how to-"

"Great." Tony interrupted her. "I'll call you when my son is big enough to carry a sword."

He seemed to be hardly holding back his laughter. Nebula shrugged, eyeing Martin suspiciously. Steve did not know whether to be amused or terrified, so he just cleared his throat to get attention.

Tony asked Nebula to look after the baby and left the room with Steve.

"What's up, Capsicle? Please, tell me you need some advice regarding your relationship with Natasha. In the end, I'm married and more experienced than you, even if you're about fifty years older."

Normally, Steve would be annoyed with him, but right now he really needed Stark's help. While kissing Natasha in the kitchen a few hours before, a crazy idea had come to his mind. Now the
more he thought about it, the more sensible it seemed to him.

The problem was that his idea required taking special measures and doing something he had never done before. Although he'd rather not get anyone involved in his plan, Tony knew more about *that thing* than Steve.

"Actually, yeah, you're right. It is about my relationship with Natasha but I don't need your advice, Tony. I need your help."

An unpleasant shudder passed through her body as she anxiously read all the files. It looked like a description of her past: hundreds of people killed, a red trace of blood trailing behind her. However, this time it was not about her crimes but someone else's. Black Widow had worked under the covers, following orders and blurring traces. That person, called Ronin, remained on a killing spree, guided by his own motives, not caring that someone would catch him in the act.

Rhodes glanced at Natasha, who had not made a sound since he had introduced her to the matter.

"Ronin appeared a few months ago. He has assassinated hundreds of members of mafias and terrorist groups in Europe and Asia. It's hard to trace him, although there are reasons to suspect that he is now in Japan." James displayed the picture on the interactive air screen. "I didn't think you should know about it until today when one of the street cameras in Tokyo helped uncover his identity."

Natasha leaned forward as the files fell out of her hands. The man on the screen wore a hood and a katana slung over his back. He looked completely different. She had seen him for the last time when he had visited her in the hospital. Over a year had passed, but Natasha could still recognize the face of her best friend. Now he seemed like a stranger.


Rhodey looked at her helplessly. The truth was like a blow to the stomach. When she enjoyed her new life with Steve, her desperate friend decided to ease his pain by turning into a murderer.

From far away they could hear the approaching steps and a bit of conversation.

"I know one place in Manhattan where…" Tony fell silent, noticing Natasha and Rhodey. "Look who we have here, Rogers. Your girlfriend and my best pal. You two look very miserable, by the way. Did someone die?"

It was supposed to be a joke, but the impression on Tony's face changed when he saw the picture. Steve turned to Natasha. Realizing how bad she must have felt, he immediately approached her but as soon as he attempted at hugging her, everyone froze. A voice spread across the room that did not belong to any of them. A familiar voice that they were not supposed to hear ever again. And yet.

"Hi, guys. Can anybody hear me? It's me, Ant-Man! I know that some time has passed. Almost two years! Unbelievable. Anyway, I don't really know what's going on and someone has to explain it to me. Cap? Falcon? Anybody?"

To say that Steve was surprised would be an understatement.

"It's Scott Lang." He couldn't believe his own ears. "How is that possible?"

Rhodey turned on the view from the front camera. A man was standing in front of the door, waving and babbling. Steve and Natasha exchanged glances. As if that day was not strange enough, it
turned out that maybe not all hope was gone.

Chapter End Notes

We're in the Endgame now. 7 more chapters to go + the epilogue.
Hope, Sweet Hope

"We thought you were dead, Scott. Where have you been?"

Steve didn't want to step into that state of mind when he would voluntarily give in to hope and let it overshadow common sense. However, he could not change the fact that the sight of Scott Lang, safe and sound, made the future look brighter. It was a real breakthrough.

"Yeah, well, that's complicated." Scott walked around the room, gesticulating frantically. "Two years ago, I found myself in the so-called quantum realm. A kind of microscopic universe. To get there you have to be very small. I spent last two years there. Someone was to get me out of there, but... Hope... I lost Hope."

"We all did, man," Rhodey sighed.

"No, you don't understand. Hope is... she was my girlfriend. She was to take me out, but she died in the snap. I'm telling you all this because even though I was gone for two years, it felt like two hours. The quantum realm is governed by its own laws. Time works differently. We don't have control over it yet, but what if we did?"

Natasha, who had been sitting in the chair and thinking about Clint, now looked up and met Steve's curious look.

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"I've been wondering... what if we could jump into the quantum realm at a specific point in time and jump out of it at a completely different point, like, for example, before Thanos? We could use it as a sort of time machine. I know, it's crazy."

"Tony," Steve turned around, "you think it's possible?"

Stark leaned against the door frame with his arms crossed over his chest. He knew a lot about science, and he was the only one to decide whether this idea was insane or could actually work. It was hard for Natasha to read the expression on his face. Rhodey shifted uneasily. Steve held his breath.

"Possible? Yes. Easy? Hell no. We need a logical and, above all, safe way to implement this plan. Even the smallest mistake can end tragically. I have a wife and a son. You two," he pointed at Natasha and Steve, "you have a new family. You still have a daughter, Lang, am I right? We all have a lot to lose."

"It's the risk worth taking." Natasha stood up. "We owe it to the people who are not in this room to try."

A heavy silence reigned in the room as everyone tried to digest what had been said in the last minutes. Steve closed his eyes, for the first time in a while letting himself have hope. He might see Bucky and Sam again.

Natasha thought about it too. She went to the window and looked at the empty area, which should have been filled with training Avengers. She might get Clint his family back. She might reunite with Wanda, Sam, and Fury.

They both might stop feeling guilty for being happy.
"So how do we do it?" It was Rhodey who broke the silence. "Are we going to go back to that hell of a day and stop Thanos from snapping his fingers?"

"It wouldn't change anything. I'm not an expert on time travel, but I sincerely doubt that the future can be changed," Tony answered. "If I'm not mistaken, every change in the past creates an alternative reality in which the timeline looks different from that very point. The reality in which we live remains unchanged."

"Then the only chance to win is to stick to your original plan," Steve added, glancing at Stark. "We already have the Gauntlet. Now, using the quantum realm, we need to collect the stones and do our own snap."

Scott dropped into a chair, flipping his legs over the backrest, "Okay, so it's settled. God, I've missed a lot, haven't I? I'd be happy to listen to your stories, but maybe we'll order a pizza first? I'm starving."

They got to work almost immediately, engaging everyone who could help in any way. Tony, Bruce, and Rocket built a platform on which they had to stand in order to go back in time. Stark also made the suits inspired by Ant Man's costume. They would allow them to survive in the quantum realm. Scott brought Pym's Particles which could change the size of any living being.

It was important to choose the right points in time to collect the stones. They all gathered in the living room to share their knowledge.

**The Reality Stone.** According to Thor, they could get it from Asgard as it had been once in possession of his ex-girlfriend, Jane.

**The Power Stone.** Rocket told them about his friend Peter Quill who had got the stone from an oceanic planet called Morag. The idea was to find it before him.

**The Time Stone.** Tony knew it had belonged to Doctor Strange. After all, that stone had saved Stark's life. It seemed to be easy to get as Stephen Strange had lived in New York. But then again, would he give it to them voluntarily?

**The Mind Stone.** They could remove it from a past version of Vision, but resorting to force was not the best option. Fortunately, there was another way. The stone had been taken by S.H.I.E.L.D. after Loki's attack at New York. It would be enough to make sure that the stone never reached the organization.

**The Space Stone.** After Loki's invasion, Thor took it to Asgard.

"Guys," Natasha rose from the couch on which she had been laying with Tony, "if we choose the right year, there will be three stones in New York."

"Shut the front door," Bruce said, visibly impressed.

Everyone looked at Natasha, leaning out of the places where they were sitting or lying. Steve send her a smile. He had always known how brilliant his girlfriend was, but one thing still did not give him peace.

"What about The Soul Stone?" he asked. "We know nothing about it."

"It was on Vormir," Nebula explained. "It's a dominion of death, at the very center of Celestial existence. It's where Thanos murdered my sister."
"Sounds like a nice place," Scott concluded.

Steve made himself comfortable on the pillows that Rhodey had put on the floor. He sat deep in thought, ignoring all the voices around him. For some reason, he had very bad feelings about the most mysterious stone.

The last rays of the sun fell through the gaps in the curtained windows. Natasha sat cross-legged on the bed, wiping her wet hair with a towel. She had spent half an hour in hot water, but there was no way for her to fully relax. Lost in thought, she touched the arrow-shaped pendant that hung on her neck.

It did not take long for Steve to join her. He also had wet hair but, unlike Natasha, he had chosen to take a shower, wishing for cold water to wash away all of his doubts and fears. He wasn't sure if it worked. Especially when he saw Natasha sitting quietly, thoughtful, barely paying attention to him. He remembered the moment of their first honest conversation in Sam's apartment. It seemed to him that a thousand years had passed since then.

He sat down opposite to her without saying a word. She didn't need any words. She needed his presence, and he was ready to sit with her like that all night, even if they wouldn't talk or sleep at all. Every second spent with her, no matter in what way, was everything to him.

At last, she raised her head to look at him. He saw something in her green eyes that he had never seen before. Natasha always pretended to be the strongest one, not to be emotionally involved. Even right after the snap, when Steve had acted like a complete mess, she had stayed with him, keeping it cool. But now he saw the pain in her eyes that had been buried deep down. The pain she had hidden from everyone, even from him.

"I'm going to find Clint." Her voice sounded extremely weak. "He should be here when his family returns."

"Okay, I'll go with you."

Natasha shook her head, smiling faintly. She put her hand on his cheek, and he nuzzled into her touch.

"No, Steve. I need to do it on my own. I want you to stay here to take care of James and help the team. Can you do it for me?"

There was something intimate and peaceful about the way she spoke to him, how she looked at him, how she touched him. He nodded and took her in his arms, feeling that he needed her closeness more than air. Natasha clasped her hands on his shirt and put her chin on his shoulder.

Finally, there was hope. There was a miraculous chance to save everyone. So why did they both feel as if it was the end?

"Time travel is possible," Natasha whispered. "It means you could go back to Peggy."

Steve stiffened, surprised. Natasha slowly moved away from him and reached for the object lying on the bedside cabinet. It was a compass. Steve knew it too well. Having taken it from Natasha, he opened it to see the picture of Peggy. He had not been looking at it for a long time. There was no need. He did not feel anything anymore, maybe just a little bit of nostalgia.

"I found it while preparing your room for James. Don't get me wrong, Steve. I don't undermine your love and honesty towards me. I just know how difficult it was for you to adapt and how long
you lived in the past. If you feel such a need, I won't judge you if you take the opportunity to see her again. To have that dance. And if something happens to me..." She hesitated. "You can go back and stay there. You deserve it."

"I love you, Natasha, but I must admit that it's the stupidest thing you've ever come up with." He got out of bed, closed the compass and put it on the cupboard. "If something happened to you, I would never leave James, Tony, Wanda, Sam, Bucky, and our dog behind. Well, it does not matter anyway, because nothing will happen to you, do you understand? Look at me, my love." He bent the knee on the floor next to the bed. "The last two years with you have been the best time in my life and I wouldn't give them away even in exchange for an eternity with Peggy. You are the love of my life, Nat. Whatever happens, I will always be with you. I think I know how to prove it to you."

Natasha was already on the verge of tears, but at that moment she held her breath, guessing what Steve meant. He quickly confirmed her assumptions, taking out a small red box from his pocket.

"Tony helped me choose it. I was going to arrange a romantic dinner once we've got everyone back, but now I think it's not worth the wait. We've lost too much time. I'm not wasting another minute."

He opened the box, revealing a subtle ring. His hands were shaking, his eyes were tearing, and his voice broke slightly. Natasha could feel the tears running down her cheeks. She had never cried in his presence before. She wiped them with a hysterical giggle. No one had ever loved her so much. No one ever proposed to her. No one ever put her on a pedestal. Steve was her first in many ways.

She attempted to say a few things, but none of the noises actually turned into words let alone sentences. Natasha could only watch Steve smile warmly at her and take the ring out of the box.

"Natalia Alianovna Romanoff," he looked her straight in the eyes, "will you marry me?"

There was no decision to make. The answer was as simple as breathing. As simple as loving him.

"Yes, I will."

When he put a ring on her finger, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him up on the bed, kissing him tenderly. At that moment, it was easy to believe that nothing could go wrong. That their love would last forever.
Best Friends

She moved like a cat, quietly and nimbly, hidden in the shadow of buildings. Yet, he must have been aware of her presence. No matter how much he had changed, some skills and habits were impossible to get rid of. Once a spy, always a spy.

The rain was drowning out what was happening in the middle of the street. Natasha took a few steps closer. Five bodies lay on the ground in puddles of blood. Five Japanese men were still alive, less or more injured. They stood between their dead companions, knowing perfectly well that the same fate was awaiting them.

"It's true what they say about you," one of them said in Japanese. "Wherever you go, death follows."

The hooded figure shifted barely noticeably. A samurai sword appeared in his hand. Natasha couldn't wait any longer. She ran ahead, feeling raindrops attacking her body. She electrocuted the two closest men, then jumped on the third and squeezed his neck with her legs. He lost consciousness almost immediately and before he fell to the ground, she had already attacked the fourth. She threw a taser disk at him, but then the fifth man clasped her from behind, squeezing her arms and waist. What a fool. I'm trying to save your life. She punched him in the stomach with her elbow, then turned and hit him on the head with her baton.

Natasha took a deep breath, looking around. She found herself in the middle of the massacre. Five dead bodies, five unconscious survivors. Finally, she looked up at the hooded figure. He hadn't moved, he hadn't tried to stop her. Even so, his sword was now aimed at her. She took a few steps toward him until she felt the tip of the sword touch her chest.

"Are you willing to die for these men?" His voice was as unfamiliar as his appearance.

"No. I'm willing to die for my best friend. You might know him. He's an Avenger, a retired agent and a huge pain in the ass. Does that description ring any bells with you?"

She had come a long way to get to him, and for a moment she began to wonder if that hadn't been a mistake. Perhaps Clint Barton was too far gone. Perhaps she would join Ronin's countless victims and never see Steve again.

After a minute that seemed like an eternity, he finally slung the sword behind his back. He took off his hood and the rain ran down his face contorted with pain. Natasha barely refrained herself from a sigh of relief. It was still him.

Clint let out a pitiful sound, something between a moan and a snarl, "Damn it, Nat! You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you." She reached for him but hesitated halfway. "It isn't who you are, Clint. You're a good person, and your place is with your family."

"Family? My family is dead! I have nothing left."

She involuntarily shuddered, withdrawing her hand. Despair, the sense of loneliness and injustice all spoke through him. He probably hadn't meant to devalue their relationship, but she could use it for her advantage. She just had to recover from this blow.

"It's good to know how highly you think of me and Nathaniel," she said coldly. "If we're really
nothing to you, then fine, continue your vigilantism. I'll bring Laura and the kids without your help."

She turned to leave. It was cruel to inform him in such a way, but she knew Clint well enough to understand his motivation. At that very moment, he needed a cold bucket poured over his head rather than a tender pat on the shoulder. And of course, he took the catch.

He grabbed her arm and turned her around. All his attitude, voice, facial expression... Everything had changed in a span of seconds.

"What... What do you mean?"

Now was the time for gentleness, so she explained warmly, "We found a way to bring everyone back. I know it sounds ridiculous, but time travel is real. We're going to collect the stones and do our own snap. All the remaining Avengers are at home, ready to do what's necessary. You're the only one missing."

Clint stared at her intensely. She knew that look. She had seen it on the faces of Steve and Tony. It was the look of the recurring hope; amazing view, but also disturbing. Hope was easy to lose.

When he put his arms around her uncertainly, Natasha assured him of her trust by hugging him tightly. The rain was still falling, and their bodies were completely soaked. It did not matter anyway. Even the bodies lying around them did not matter. At least not right now. Natasha closed her eyes, leaning her chin on her friend's shoulder. She had always wanted the Avengers to be together as a real family. In the end, she might have succeeded.

"Someone has to test our theory and make a time jump. Any volunteers?"

"I'll do it." Steve took a step forward.

Tony looked at him from behind the computer. He seemed more amused than surprised by his willingness to take the risk but didn't comment upon it at first.

Everyone gathered in a huge hall with the platform for time travel and devices connected to it. Tony and Bruce took the initiative over the project. Steve didn't have much to do. He had to suit up, stand on the platform and wait.

"Oh, Rogers, Rogers..." Tony shook his head, apparently no longer able to keep his thoughts to himself. "Natasha's not here to stop you so you're taking the first opportunity there is to be reckless."

"He'll be fine," Scott said happily. "You'll be fine, Cap! You got this!"

He lifted two thumbs up, grinning. Thor mirrored him without hesitation, but they failed to enthusiastically affect Nebula, Rhodey, and Rocket.

Steve tried to smile, but he had to admit to himself that he did have some doubts. He was not afraid of not coming back. His team would find a way to save him if things went wrong. He was afraid of what he could see and how it could make him feel.

"Your chances of success are equal to the risk of failure as no one has ever undertaken a journey in time," Vision added in a monotonous voice, and Tony rolled his eyes. "However, my calculations..."

"I think we can start," Bruce interrupted him. "Ready? I'm counting to three. One... two... three..."
His friends disappeared. Steve found himself in a whirl of colors, particles, and points in time. And then everything began to form in the shape of the place where he had once visited. He landed on the grass and looked around.

The landscape seemed inconspicuous; far-stretching meadows and fields, goats grazing, one lonely cottage. A shiver passed through him. Although it was hard to guess the location at first glance, Steve knew perfectly well that he was where and, most importantly, when he wanted to be. Wakanda.

He headed for the cottage. As the door had been left open, it was easy to overhear four people talking. He clung to the wall and peeked inside through the window. Something in him revived anew when he saw the scene taking place in front of his eyes. When he saw himself and Natasha, only two years younger. And especially when he saw his two long gone friends, who were now very much alive.

"You can't do this, Romanoff!" Sam exclaimed dramatically. "I trusted you! I thought we were friends! Please, Natasha. Don't do this."

Steve barely restrained himself from running into the cottage. All he could do was to stand still, watch and listen. Sam's familiar humorous voice was like finding a source of water after wandering in the desert.

Natasha threw the last card on the table with a loud, "UNO!"

A strange atmosphere reigned in the room. Sam kept pretending to be disappointed but clearly had a great time. Steve knew he didn't care about losing. Natasha made a victory dance if you can call it a dance; she was sitting in a chair and making waves with her hands. It lasted only a few seconds, then she leaned back with her arms crossed behind her head, smirking in triumph.

The old version of Steve looked at her with unconcealed admiration. Steve almost burst out laughing, realizing how far from subtle he had been when it came to his feelings for Natasha. How hadn't she noticed his loving glances before? She was a master of awareness and perception, after all, and Steve was a walking disaster. Both then and now.

He was too absorbed in watching himself stare at Natasha that he realized just how confused Bucky must have been. Steve let out a breath, barely standing on his feet. Bucky. He sat in a chair and looked at his companions, not understanding what was happening around him.

"Can anyone explain to me what this game is all about?" he asked.

"No," Sam took a deck of cards and began to shuffle, "it's better that way. You look funny when you don't know what is going on."

Old Steve put his hand on his friend's shoulder, sending a scolding glare to the other friend. Sam raised his hands in a defensive gesture, and Natasha reached for a glass of water, still smiling.

"Don't listen to him, Buck. I don't know what's going on, either," Old Steve said. "Do I look funny to you, Sam?"

"You look funny to me." Natasha shrugged.

"You know what, Ro-"

The scene blurred in front of him and Steve shouted in despair, wanting to stay there longer.
He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he was again on the platform in the company of the Avengers. The truth hit him hard; he had returned to the point in time when Bucky Barnes and Sam Wilson were dead. His legs were so weak that he could barely stand on them.

"Steve?" Stark saved him from falling. "You okay?"

"It works, Tony. It works."

They exchanged meaningful glances. Tony gasped and held him stronger, helping him get off the platform. Steve barely paid attention to the surroundings, still living in memory that had just been played right before his eyes.

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Natasha toyed with her engagement ring like she often did with her arrow-shaped pendant. She didn't think of herself as a sentimental person, but it gave her a feeling of safety to know that she had two things that reminded her of the most important men in her life. The two men who had saved her in so many ways.

One of them was her best friend. He had entered her life when she had needed him most. Although his orders had been completely different, he had offered her a chance at redemption. Now she could repay her debt by saving him from his own demons.

The other one was everything to her. He was her partner, her friend, currently also her fiancé. It still did not quite reach her. Looking for Clint, she did not have time to think about what had happened a few days ago. Steve had proposed to her and she had said yes. Unbelievable.

A smile appeared on her face. She did not even feel the Quinjet sway slightly. Happiness was at her fingertips; marriage to the love of her life, adoption of a wonderful kid. James... She should get something that would remind her of him when she was on a mission, just like the necklace and the ring. Natasha sighed. Maybe she was sentimental after all.

"Let me guess," Clint broke the silence, looking at her hand. "When I was gone, you and Steve overcame the denial phrase and now you have a house at a lake and a group of adopted children."

"Close enough," Natasha smirked. "When you were gone, Steve and I got closer. We even have a dog now. During one mission, I met a boy and decided to take care of him. He had nothing. He reminded me of someone."

"He reminded you of yourself."

"Yeah. His name is James. We're going to adopt him when it's all over and his grandmother comes back. Of course, if he doesn't mind. If he wants to stay with us."

Clint had been sitting right in front of her, but now he took a seat next to her and took her hand in his. She dared to reciprocate his gaze for the first time since they had left Tokyo. Ronin seemed to be already gone. Barton looked at her with tenderness, and in his gaze of a broken man, she found real empathy.

"I'm sure he wants it as much as you and Steve do." He smiled faintly. "So, we're heading for the wedding?"

"No," she shook her head, "we got a world to save. It takes priority over any personal matter."

"Come on, Nat, don't you think that you have already lost too much time? Right now everyone needs hope, and what gives you hope more than the happiness of your loved ones? The world may
end tomorrow. You deserve a moment of happiness before it happens. You deserve it more than anyone."

Natasha smiled at him, leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. A piloting agent informed her about approaching their destination. She knew their family was waiting for them. It reminded her of something.

She opened her eyes, gently took her hand from Clint's hand and looked her friend straight in the eyes, "Where's Nathaniel?"

He hesitated.

"Uhm… Remember how you got shot and I visited you in the hospital? I told you that I had found out about the accident from Tony. You wanted to know why I had called him. You see, Tony helped me find a trained agent who would take my son to a safe place and take care of him. To answer your next question, Tony did not know about my plans. He would never let me go on a killing spree. That's all my fault."

She rose from the bench as they started approaching the ground.

"I'm not here to judge you, Clint. I won't tell you that what you've done is terrible because you know it yourself. You know it will stay with you forever. We all must live with our sins."

The quinjet landed in front of the Avengers Facility. Before the door opened, Natasha and Clint exchanged glances. Noticing he seemed rather anxious, she sent him a comforting smile. As expected, the four of the six original Avengers were waiting for them. When Clint left the jet, Tony, Bruce, and Thor approached him to say hello.

Natasha stood a few steps further, watching her family reunite. Suddenly, she felt a warm breath on her neck and this was a sign that she was indeed at home. Steve hugged her from behind and kissed the back of her head.

"It works, Nat," he informed her. "Time travel works. We can collect the infinity stones."

He moved away slightly when she turned to look at him. She leaned her hands against his chest, and her ring shone in the light of the night.

"We will, honey, we will. But first, let's get married."
It seemed to be the most beautiful day of their lives.

Natasha and Steve's wedding was nothing like the one of their friends. Tony and Pepper had set up a party for a hundred people, reserving a church and a huge ballroom for the occasion. Meanwhile, Natasha and Steve decided to get married at the lake, next to the Avengers Facility. A provisional flowery altar was made, while Tony agreed to conduct the ceremony. There weren't many guests: only the Avengers, their loved ones and several agents.

James was entrusted with the wedding rings. When the time came, he stood at the altar, and Steve ruffled his hair. To say that the groom was stressed would be an understatement. As a leader, he was often at the center of attention, but now he felt uncomfortable when watched by all the guests. He was aware of the absurdity of his fears. They were his friends. They had come there to enjoy his happiness.

All the anxiety disappeared as soon as he saw her.

Watching her slowly approach, he couldn't help but smile. It seemed as if his whole life had been leading up to that moment. As if he was born, and then spent seventy years in the ice only to get a chance to marry this absolutely wonderful woman. Being a man out of time had never felt so good.

Led by Clint, Natasha was walking down the aisle. She looked stunning. Her red hair with blond tips mostly fell down on her shoulders. A few front strands were fastened at the back of her head so that they would not fall on her face. She wore a thin white dress, purchased spontaneously two days earlier.

Steve let out a held breath as Natasha stood at his side. It was her place, now and always.

After a brief introduction, it was time for their own vows. Natasha and Steve stood in front of each other, and the world narrowed to the two of them. There was no Tony standing just two steps away. There was no Clint placing his hand on James' shoulder. There were no friends looking at them expectantly. Only two people mattered; two broken people who had found one another and who intended to spend their remaining time together.

"Eight years ago, I woke up in this strange world and did not know if I would ever find a way to fit in. I thought that the best was behind me, that I lost everything I loved," Steve confessed, beginning his vow. "So when Fury recruited me to the team, I thought it was just another job, another way to do something good. Not even in my wildest dreams did I suspect that I could meet the love of my life."

Natasha looked at him with love as he tried to put into words everything that had been happening in his heart in recent years.

"Still living in the past, I couldn't fully appreciate what I had, and I had everything. I had you, Nat. We were partners and friends, but we could have been something more. I took you for granted and part of me regrets all the wasted time. But was it really wasted? After so many years spent on growing a strong bond between us, what we have now is stronger than if it was to begin earlier. On this important day, standing in front of you, I-I want to remember only the good memories." His voice broke slightly from emotion. "There's a beautiful past behind us filled with mutual respect, support, and friendship. Now, I hope, there's a beautiful future ahead of us. I want nothing more than to be able to call you my wife and to love you till death do us part."
Steve wiped a single tear from his cheek, and Natasha gave him a sincere smile. Her eyes were slightly glassy.

"It's gonna be hard to beat THAT," she joked.

Several people laughed, reminding Steve of their presence. Natasha looked at her hands, wondering how to begin. In the hustle and bustle of wedding preparations, she hadn't thought much about her vow. Steve was a natural leader capable of giving long speeches. She had been taught not to express her feelings. And maybe that was what she should focus on...

"I'm not good with words. If someone had told me that one day I would have to make a speech about my feelings, surrounded by loved ones, I would have probably laughed, or rather punched that person in the face. " She giggled nervously, raising her head to look at Steve. His encouraging gaze gave her courage. "And here I am, overwhelmed with love and devotion. I am no longer that girl who took feelings as a weakness. I have not been that girl since the day I met you. You were a hero, a living legend who turned out to be just a human being after all. A man who made mistakes, but remained faithful to his beliefs. With you... thanks to you, I became the best version of myself. I no longer allow the past to define me. I am no longer afraid of feelings because they are not weakness. They give me the strength to keep fighting. Eight years ago I found a family and a true love. Today, I want to celebrate that by pledging myself to you. Till death do us part."

She reached out to wipe away the tears from his cheeks. Then Steve and Natasha exchanged rings; their hands shaking and their faces gleaming with joy. James stared at them in admiration. Clint smiled under his breath.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," Tony announced enthusiastically. "You may kiss the bride."

There was a huge round of applause and the petals of white roses sprinkled in the air as Steve pulled Natasha to him and pressed his lips against hers in a tender kiss. For this moment to last forever, Rhodey managed to capture it in the photo.

Before someone could come up and congratulate them, Steve raised Natasha from her feet and carried her in his arms. Her contagious laugh lingered in the backyard as the party began.

"Happiness," Tony handed him a glass of champagne, "it suits you."

Steve looked around the living room. Thor, Bruce, Rocket, and Scott sat on the couch and laughed at something. Rhodey walked among the guests with Martin in his arms. Sam ran behind him happily. Sharon talked to Nebula and Vision. James and Clint could be seen through the window, sitting on the terrace and eating hamburgers. Natasha picked up a strawberry when Pepper said something to her. Their faces brightened with smiles.

"Well, we're both very lucky," Steve noticed. "We have beautiful wives and incredible sons. Tomorrow, we will save those who cannot be with us today."

Stark raised his glass, "To us; two lucky bastards."

They took a sip of champagne, watching the party and enjoying the atmosphere of blissful joy. It seemed that nothing could disturb this beautiful day. That nothing could destroy the bubble of happiness and peace that absorbed them all. And yet Steve feared that it was all too fleeting. It felt like a dream that could come to an end at any second.

"You know, sometimes I catch myself wondering how our relationship would look like if the snap had never happened. If Wilson and Barnes had been still alive."
"Tony…"

"During her vow, Natasha called the Avengers her family." His gaze wandered to the laughing
Natasha and Pepper. "I still remember that dinner in your apartment when she rightly said that we
weren't a family, maybe just friends. Her opinion has changed because our relationships have
changed. You and me, you and Nat, me and Nat... We're all closer now. It may sound harsh but... I
think you had to lose Barnes again to realize that there are others who love you and deserve your
attention."

Steve put down his glass, avoiding eye contact. The truth hurt. Not that only Barnes had been
important to him. He had cared for them all. And yet, four years ago, he had chosen Bucky over
Tony. Stark forgave him, but he remembered. Would Steve make the same choice today? Would
he dare to accept his feelings for Natasha if she were not the only person who always stood by his
side? If it were still about the three of them, that is, them both and Wilson?

"So what? Are you trying to convince me that I am to be happy that half of the universe died
because it made me a better man?"

"No, Cap. You've always been a good man. Just keep in mind that the snap took a lot from you but
it also gave you a lot. When everything goes back to the way it was, don't forget the last two years.
Don't forget that I'm your friend."

When he looked at Tony, the truth dawned on him. Stark was afraid of losing him again.

"I won't," Steve promised, smiling. "I won't let you get rid of me that easily."

Tony patted him on the shoulder and headed for Rhodey and Martin, making silly faces to his son.
Steve watched him leave, then took a glance at every member of his huge family. There was so
much to lose...

She smiled at him with that one special smile reserved just for him as he held out his hand to her.

"May I have this dance, my love?"

Taking her hand in his, Steve led her into the garden. The music was calm and slow, barely audible
through the open door of the terrace. He put his other hand around her waist and pulled her closer.
Natasha placed her chin on his shoulder, closing her eyes and focusing on the warmth of his body.
She would always recognize his scent and the sound of his heartbeat.

Her best friend. Her husband. Her everything.

"You're getting good at this," she noticed.

"I guess it's a matter of finding the right partner," he responded, and she could feel him smile. "The
first and last time we danced, you told me that you didn't want to change anything. That it was
good as it was. You never explained why."

Natasha opened her eyes. Nobody inside the house paid any particular attention to them, as if they
wanted to give them a brief moment of intimacy between the wedding and the mission. She felt a
certain twinge of regret that they could not set out on their honeymoon but, after all, they had years
of being together ahead of them.

"I was just scared," she admitted. "Our relationship was too important to me and I didn't want to
destroy it. I thought it would never work out between us. A true legend and a former assassin? It
seemed impossible… And here we are."

"And here we are," he repeated with a smile.

If she could, she would stop this moment. She would immortalize it like a photograph and go back to watch it every time she wanted to. Or... She would stop the moment and stay in it forever, cuddling into Steve's body, listening to his voice and forgetting that there is something else outside of him.

Natasha rested her hands on his shoulders and leaned back to look at him. His blue eyes were filled with happiness and love, however, knowing him better than herself, she managed to catch a glimpse of uncertainty in them. She was well aware that her green eyes expressed the same emotions.

"Steve… A difficult mission awaits us and you know that as soon as Thanos finds out about our plans, he will attack. There will be a huge battle and there will be casualties."

"Let me stop you right here, Nat." He put his hand on her cheek, and she nuzzled into his touch. "It's our day and we shouldn't talk about work. We have each other and that's not going to change."

"But it might." Her eyes glistened with held back tears. "Listen to me, okay? You once risked everything for Bucky. You started a war with the government and your friends. It was very noble and very foolish of you, but I don't want you to do the same for me, do you understand? I hope it won't happen, but if a moment comes when you have to choose between me and the rest of the world... You must promise me that you won't choose me."

Steve pulled away as her touch burned him, but it was her words that burned a hole in his heart. He turned around, running his trembling hand over his hair. For the second time that day, a person dear to Steve used his brotherly love for Bucky against him.

"We don't trade lives. I... I could never... I love you, Natasha." He turned to look at her. "You're my wife."

The expression on his face shook her to the bone. She opened her arms and he hugged her, clasping his hands on her back.

"I love you too, Steve. I know it's hard, but please... Promise me that you'll do whatever it takes to save the world. Promise me you won't choose me."

Natasha took his face in his hands, and he nodded slowly. The look in his eyes was sad but fierce. It was a look of a man who had already sacrificed a lot and who was afraid that one day there would be nothing left to sacrifice. Although Steve was a child of war and had been fighting various wars for most of his life, he only wished for peace at this point. Even if it meant that he would never raise his shield again.

But peace was never an option, so he whispered, "I promise. And if it's the other way around, and it's down to you to choose between the world and me, will you make the right call? Can you promise me you won't choose me either?"

"I promise."

And although none of them had any intention of lying to each other, they didn't know how they would behave when such a situation indeed took place. The choice might have seemed simple, yet nothing was simple when you could gain and lose everything.
It took Steve a moment to return to reality. James helped him as he walked over to them, holding Sam in his arms. Without a second thought, both Steve and Natasha pulled him into a group hug. For the next few hours, Natasha and Steve enjoyed their happiness, dancing, laughing and talking, but the fear remained in their hearts. And when the time came, they were both ready to face the worst. Together.
"We'll be back before you know it." Steve crouched down to look James in the eye. "Aunt Pepper will take you, Martin, and Sam to a safe place, okay?"

The boy nodded. In spite of his young age, he'd been already through so much that he knew the taste of the fight for survival. Natasha did not want him to grow up in such a world. In a world where his parents could disappear for many days with no assurance of coming back. Therefore, if they really were to adopt him, some things had to be changed. She hesitated before she put her hand on his shoulder.

"And then, when we're back and it's all over," she spoke softly, "you could stay with us forever. We could be a family."

James first looked at Natasha, then at Steve and finally exclaimed, "I'd love that! My grandma will understand. Just bring her back."

After a few long hugs and the last promises that they would see each other soon, Steve and Natasha stood side by side, watching James grab Pepper's hand and leave the house. Outside, Happy was waiting by the car, ready to take them far away from here. Tony stood by the window and waved to Martin.

It was the most difficult part before heading to the past, but it was inevitable. Thanos could learn about their plan at any moment and attack. Letting the kids stay would be too risky. The Avengers Facility was no longer a safe place.

Steve flinched as he felt Natasha's hand slip into his. Their eyes met, saying more than any words could've contained. There was something comforting about the fact that even though it seemed the most difficult of all their common adventures, at least they had each other. Everything, even a clash with death itself, was easier when he had Natasha at his side.

"Let's talk it all through again," Tony suggested when the squeal of tires informed them that they were alone. "Bruce, Scott, Vision and I go back to New York in 2012. There are three stones, as Natasha noticed. Thor and Rocket, you go to Asgard. Rhodey and Nebula, you find the Power Stone before Quill does. Cap, Nat and Clint, you are tasked with getting the Soul Stone. Be careful. We don't know much about that Vormir planet."

"You sure you don't want to go with the Earth team?" Natasha turned to Steve. "Clint and I can
"We've just got married, Nat. I'm not leaving you even for a minute."

She rolled her eyes, but deep down, she cherished the thought of having her husband and her best friend beside her. In this way, she could simultaneously keep an eye on them and do her part of the mission.

"It's going to be the longest minute of my life," Clint sighed, which cost him a nudge in the stomach by Natasha.

Everyone climbed on the podium, wearing ugly but necessary suits in a white-red shade. Natasha stood between Steve and Clint. She gave Rhodey a smile as their eyes met for a moment.

"Remember that we don't know the exact rules of time travel," Steve spoke out. "Be careful not to interact with your past versions and not to mess with the timeline more than it's necessary. The priority is to collect the stones. While doing so, keep each other safe. The fate of humanity depends on us. Do you want to add something before we start?"

Scott raised his hand, "I got to say you're a great leader, Cap. I could list-"

"Just don't die," Tony concluded, ignoring Lang's efforts at complimenting Steve. "See you all in a minute."

Natasha barely suppressed a mocking smile. She put on her helmet, taking a deep breath. Time travel; that was definitely something she hadn't been trained for. Steve hold her right hand, while Clint grabbed the left one. Their soothing presence helped her focus.

Steve's last thought was that he had never been to space as the world around him swirled and he once again found himself in the Quantum Realm.

Vormir was a rocky planet. A purple-navy blue sky stretched above them as they climbed up the highest peak. The atmosphere was not conducive to friendly chatter. Natasha would have enjoyed the chance of being in space, had it not been for the fear that crawled under her skin and spread all over her body. She remained tense and ready to fight as if at any moment something could leap out of the bend and attack.

"It's a long way from Budapest, huh?" Clint broke the silence.

Natasha slowed down to walk with Barton, letting Steve take the lead. Her friend had regained some of his spirits since she had brought him from Japan, but now he seemed as nervous as she was. This mission was something far beyond the scale of their qualifications and experience. And yet here they were, on a distant planet, two people without super-powers, guided by a super soldier. Natasha attempted at laughing it off.

However, the smile froze on her lips as quickly as it appeared. When they approached a thing that looked like a cave at the top of the hill, a hooded figure appeared before them. Natasha reflexively clenched her hand on the gun slung over her belt.

"Welcome, Steven, son of Joseph," the figure spoke with a German accent. "Natasha, daughter of Ivan. Clint, son of Edith."

Steve saw his past materialize in front of him. He took a step forward, disbelieving his own eyes and ears. He had expected that getting the stone would be very difficult, but to face one of the
demons of his past? He hadn't seen that coming.

"Red Skull? What the hell are you doing here?"

"In 1945, during our last encounter, Captain, I suffered a fate worse than death. I was teleported by the Space Stone to Vormir and cursed to serve as the keeper of the Soul Stone."

"Where is it?" Clint asked.

"Down there."

Red Skull's gaze traveled towards a cliff several dozen meters away. Clint moved in that direction, but at one point stopped. Even from where stood, he must have seen how far down to the ground they were. The whole situation did not please Natasha. Red Skull knew her father's name. This fact alone made her want to scream.

"We've come a long way to get that stone," Steve said. "Give it to us, and we will leave without a fight."

He shivered when Red Skull pulled down his hood and looked at Steve as if he could read all his thoughts.

"It is not that simple, Captain. There are certain rules." Red Skull took a few steps towards the abyss, passing by Natasha and then Clint. "To ensure that whoever possesses it understands its power, the stone demands a sacrifice. In order to take the stone, you must lose that which you love. A soul for a soul."

Clint let out a strangled sound and looked at Natasha. She, without controlling her legs, sat on the nearest stone. Of course. It all made sense now. Understanding and gaining some control over the situation brought her relief, as long as you can feel relief just before you lose everything. Steve's eyes stared dully from his face etched with pain and suffering.

"No," Clint was the only one in denial. "There must be another way. There's always another way, for God's sake!"

"There isn't." Natasha's voice was calm and unfamiliar. "Thanos came here with his daughter and came back with the stone. He sacrificed her."

She hid her face in her hands. What she felt was real physical pain, but she could not identify its source. Natasha had lost so much. She had lost her parents, Sam, Wanda, Fury, Maria, Bartons... Her life had always been filled with huge amounts of pain and she could endure it all with Steve by his side. She couldn't lose him.

And Clint... He had saved her, and now he had to save his family. She would rather kill herself than let him die. So, there was no choice to take. She didn't want to die, no, but to live without her husband and her best friend? That was not an option.

She remembered her conversation with the Skrull.

*At first, you feel that you are weightless. You fall down, you don't hear anything, the world around you narrows to clouds. The air pushes against you from all sides until you finally open the parachute and everything calms down.*

But there was no parachute. There was no chance of surviving. Natasha was almost amused by the irony of this; the Skrull had predicted her death. When she considered the possibility of falling to
her death, Steve was watching her carefully. He was trapped in his own hell, and every way out seemed worse than the previous one. He had his whole world in front of him and would sooner destroy everything and everyone than sacrifice it.

He held his breath as Natasha got up. She turned to both of them and brought a comforting smile to her lips. She had fooled them before, making them believe she had been strong when her heart had been breaking. She had consoled them while bearing her own pain on her shoulders. And now… she had to do it one last time.

"It should be me," Natasha told them. "You both love me. You both can sacrifice me."

A disbelieving snort escaped Clint. His eyes glistened with tears. Natasha took a step toward him, but then Steve cupped her face with his hands and forced her to look at him. The pain in his blue eyes mirrored her own.

"No, I won't let you do that." He shook his head. "James is waiting for you, okay? You can't leave him."

James… She didn't want to think about James.

"He'll have you." Natasha closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them, there was sudden strength in her voice. "You promised you wouldn't choose me over the rest of the world. It's time you kept your word."

"That promise goes both ways." Steve turned to their third companion. "Barton, I need you to keep an eye… Barton!"

Clint, taking advantage of their momentary inattention, began to run toward the cliff. Natasha broke free from Steve's touch and followed her friend. Adrenaline helped her focus. She reached Clint and threw herself at him, knocking him to the ground. Then she turned him over and aimed her widow's bite at his chest.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Saving my family," he responded.

Natasha was never going to find out if he meant his dead wife and children, or maybe her and Steve, or maybe both. Steve ran past them and Natasha electrocuted him without a second thought. When Steve's body collapsed, Clint grabbed Natasha's face and hit his head against hers.

Two against one. She was desperate to keep them alive. They were desperate to keep her alive.

Clint threw her off him, but such a blow could not stop her for long. He managed to get up and take only three steps for Natasha attacked again. She jumped on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his neck. It was her characteristic grip and it always worked. She arched back until she touched the ground with her hands, and Clint, trapped beneath her, landed on his face.

The cliff was not far away. Natasha started running, but Clint's arrow exploded right next to her leg, knocking her to the right. She hit her shoulder hard and barely held back a cry of pain.

Meanwhile, Steve shook off his temporary inability to move. Normally, black widow's bite would knock everyone unconscious but he was not like everyone. He blocked Clint's path and gave him a long look.

Barton pulled the bow back with another arrow nocked on the string, "I cannot let you die, Cap. Natasha needs you."
Steve clenched his hand on his shield. He stood between the abyss and the two people who were begging for death and whom he had to save at all costs. Clint released the arrow that bounced off the shield and fell to the ground. It exploded at the same moment Steve ran to Clint and hit him in the face.

In the hand combat, Barton had no chance. He got a blow in the stomach, and then again in the face. He dropped to his knees, barely catching his breath. Steve turned around, looking for Natasha, and froze. He saw her rise, wince with pain and move towards the cliff. A few steps more and she would lose ground under her feet and he would lose her forever. So he ran to her and threw the shield.

He was to remember that view; that one time he hurt the person he loved most. As the shield hit her in the head, Natasha spun on her toes and fell right into Steve's arms when he came running to catch her. Unconscious, she seemed fragile and delicate.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, gently putting her on the ground.

Steve wanted to get up and do the necessary thing, but it was too late. He raised his head to meet Clint's gaze. Barton stopped on the edge of the cliff and smiled, saying his last words, "Take care of her, Steve. I'll be okay."

"Noooo!"

A shrill roar escaped his throat as he watched Clint take a step back and disappear behind the edge of the cliff. That's how the ultimate loss felt like. Tears flowed down his cheeks as he hid his face in his wife's hair. He had never hated himself as much as at that moment. He had failed them both.

A great gust of wind shook the entire planet in the act of accepting the soul of Clint Barton.

He sat in warm water reaching to his ankles. Natasha lay in his arms, quiet and calm. He pushed back a stray strand of hair from her face. He was afraid of the look on her face when she would wake up. Steve wondered how to explain it all to the rest of the team. Were they going to blame him? He did blame himself, doubting that he would ever stop feeling so much guilt.

Why be a hero if you cannot save everyone?

Natasha moved in his arms. She winced in pain and opened her eyes slowly. It took her a while to get used to the unusual orange light. Eventually, she noticed him and smiled slightly, reaching out to touch his face with her fingers.

"Steve? What…"

The place where she was, the circumstances of the arrival on Vormir, the fact that she was alone with Steve... everything quickly formed into a logical whole. The realization dawned on her. She drew back her trembling hand, defending her mind from the truth, closing herself to it. The truth hurt so much that she didn't know if she was able to handle it.

Then it appeared. The orange-glowing stone landed on the palm of her hand. It was a confirmation of her worst assumptions. Natasha stared at the Soul Stone, cursing this mission, Thanos, the snap, and herself for failing to save the person who had saved her.

_In order to take the stone, you must lose that which you love. A soul for a soul._

"No," she cried. "No, no, no!"
She broke down and sobbed like a child. It was as if something finally unlocked the part of her that had been forbidding her to cry for all those years. Steve's heart crashed inside his chest when he hugged her and stroked her hair, letting her cry into his shoulder. Just as she always had been there for him, now he was there for her. He did not know how to deal with it, and whether it was worth it. Steve only knew that when Natasha suffered, he suffered as well.
Stay With Me, part I

Three days after the first snap...

She found him standing by the lake and throwing stones into the water. Each of them reached far, bounced off the surface, and then sank. He seemed focused on what he was doing, but Natasha knew it was just a distraction. Lately, even basic tasks had been just a distraction done to free the mind from thinking about what had happened.

Steve turned to look at her, and she stopped a few steps away from him. Despite the years they had spent together, she wasn't able to read the expression on his face at that very moment. She didn't know if he was relieved to see her or wished it had been someone else. She was only one person, and, on top of it, with the dark past. How could she ever replace the people he had lost? How could she ever be enough?

"Anything about Tony?" He asked, his voice cold and calm.

Natasha shook her head, letting the unspeakable truth hang between them in awkward silence. Steve picked up some stones and returned to his distracting activity. Not knowing was the worst.

Tony had gone to space and never came back. No one knew whether he had died with half of the universe or had been personally killed by Thanos or if something else had happened to him. The possibilities were endless, and it made his friends lose their minds.

"We split in a quarrel," Steve spoke when Natasha had begun to think that her presence was the last thing he needed. "I chose Bucky over him. Tony never forgave me, and I never managed to say goodbye to him. I didn't even say goodbye to Sam. He died all alone."

Only now she understood that he didn't try to cut himself off from the rest. He needed help but refused to ask. So Natasha came up to him and grabbed his hand, stopping him from throwing another stone.

"Sam knew how much we cared about him," she assured Steve. "And Tony… he'll be back."

"I hope you're right, Nat." He intertwined his fingers with hers, and tears glistened in his eyes. "Because I don't know what I'm gonna do if he doesn't."

There was so much pain in his eyes, and his voice was so broken... Natasha could barely bear it. She climbed on her toes, kissed him on the cheek and hugged him. Steve, longing for the last dose of light in his life, curled to her with his whole body.

It felt as if he had been hanging over the edge and Natasha had been the only one to keep him steady. He did not want to let her go. Not now. Not ever. He closed his eyes and for the first time in three days, he didn't see Bucky scatter into dust and ash. Natasha’s touch brought him relief.

"You're not alone, Steve," she reminded him, and he expressed his gratitude by pulling her closer.

The second snap...

The whole Avengers Facility was overcome with grief. Steve passed Tony and Bruce, who carefully placed all the stones in the gauntlet, and headed to the back of the building. Bruce, during a meeting in the past with someone called the Ancient One, merged with the Hulk and now they
were one person. It was beyond Steve's understanding and he did not even want to think about it.

He opened the door and stepped out onto the patio. He knew she would be there and he wasn't wrong. Natasha sat on a bench in the shade of trees. An arrow-shaped necklace hung from her hand. Her engagement and wedding rings shone on her fingers as she looked up and met his gaze.

Steve had never seen Natasha in that state. Even shortly after *the snap*, she had remained strong, comforting everyone around her and making prudent decisions. Now, however, she could not hide her feelings anymore. Steve wanted to give her some time, but there was not much time to lose.

He hesitated just for a second before he approached her and asked softly, "May I?"

"Of course."

She moved to the right. A little too far, in Steve's opinion. There was still a lot of space between them when he sat down. He hardly restrained himself from putting his arms around her. His gaze fell on her hand as she played with her pendant. Her eyes were red, but there were no more tears. For some reason, the calmness in her voice and on her face was more heartbreaking than if she had fallen to the ground and began sobbing.

"I'm sorry I electrocuted you," she apologized, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm sorry I hit you in the head and... I'm sorry I couldn't save him."

Whether he wanted it or not, the image appeared before his eyes: Clint standing on the edge, taking a step back and disappearing forever. Steve leaned forward, resting his hands on his knees and staring at the plants growing under the windows. Too many people he cared for had died in front of his eyes, and he could only watch it happen and then remember until the end of his life.

"It's not your fault," Natasha whispered. "It's mine. I brought him here. I used his guilt against him so he would help us. He died because I loved him."

"No, Nat, that's not true." Steve looked at her in shock. "Clint knew the risk. He died to save his family and to redeem himself. It hurts, I know, but he made his choice and we should respect that."

"What about my redemption?"

"Oh, honey." He put his hand on hers. "You wiped out the red from your ledger a long time ago."

Her eyes rested on their hands. Steve couldn't get rid of the impression that even though they were sitting right next to each other, there was a wall between them difficult to be demolished. For a painfully long moment Natasha seemed indifferent to his words, and then, breaking his heart once again, she slowly took her hand from under his palm.

She stood up and her necklace fell to the ground. Neither of them noticed it. Natasha put her hands on her waist and began to walk around the patio, stubbornly avoiding eye contact. She fought with herself. She fought with what she felt and with what she thought was right.

"*The snap* brought us closer, Steve. We found shelter in each other. You have become my shield and I'm your anchor. We've built something beautiful on a huge tragedy. Many times I felt guilty about it. Well, it shouldn't matter anymore, should it? They'll all be back soon. They'll let us be happy."

"Natasha," he started, standing up.
"Just let me say it, Steve." She extended her hand to him, forbidding him to come closer. The whole situation frustrated him more and more. "My best friend is dead, do you understand? He is dead, and I cannot stop wondering what would have happened if you had been the one to fall off that cliff. If I had woken up in that lake to find out that I would never see you again…" Her voice trembled. "It's not okay. We made a promise and it… it… it didn't mean anything."

Tears flowed down her face. Steve reacted automatically. He came to her and she struggled in his embrace for a moment to let go eventually. He cupped her face in his hands, kissing her wet skin. She finally dared to look at him; the fear and despair in Natasha's eyes were unbearable. He leaned his forehead against hers, inhaling her familiar scent.

"It's okay to love someone so much that you would rather set the world on fire than lose them," he spoke in a whisper, caressing her hair. "I know that now. I also know that we will get through this. We'll save our friends and we will have a wonderful future. We deserve it, Nat. After everything we've been through, together or not, we deserve it."

Natasha nodded, letting those sweet lies daze her. She was so absorbed in her feelings and Steve's soothing presence that she did not hear anyone open the door.

It was Scott who peeked at them quite embarrassed and said, "Umm, guys, sorry to interrupt this intimate moment, but… you know… It's time."

They stood around the gauntlet that was laying on the table. Each of them wore their suits, ready for an immediate reaction if something went wrong. There was too big of a chance that something could go wrong.

"So," Rhodey broke the silence, "who's gonna be the unlucky bastard to save the world?"

They exchanged glances. The options were clearly limited, although no one pointed it out aloud. Natasha moved from one foot to the second. She would not handle another loss.

"I shall try," Thor decided. "I'm a god. The infinity stones won't kill me."

Rocket looked up at him skeptically, "This huge confidence of yours will lead you to the grave someday."

Bruce left the line and approached the table. He was now both a man and the Hulk, but his voice remained familiar and very human. Natasha watched him closely, remembering their last conversation about him accepting his other side.

"It should be me," he said, taking the gauntlet in his hands. "I think the Ancient One made me who I am for a reason. Perhaps she foresaw this moment. I have to do it."

"Be careful." Natasha smiled faintly at him.

Everyone except Bruce stepped back. Scott and Rhodey put on their helmets. Tony created a nano-shield and ordered Friday to shelter the whole building. Thor stood before Nebula and Rocket as if he wanted to protect them. He seemed genuinely disturbed by the heroic act of his friend. Steve noticed he had two hammers but decided to ignore it. He stood by Natasha and raised his shield. Only Vision did not react at all.

When all the windows got shuttered, darkness prevailed. The only lights came from the stones and Stark's shield. Bruce began to put on the gauntlet. Natasha couldn't help but feel as if she had been watching it in slow motion. The stones glowed with a blinding light. Bruce started screaming in
pain as the gauntlet touched his skin.

"Bruce!" Thor shouted. "Take it off!"

"No!" Steve looked at Banner. "You okay, Bruce?"

Bruce's green face twisted with pain. Natasha covered her mouth with her hand, barely restraining herself from running up to him.

"I... I'm fine."

Bruce groaned as he raised his hand. Everyone held their breaths when he snapped his fingers.

The light blinded Natasha for a moment. She heard Bruce scream as he fell to the floor, dropping the gauntlet. Steve ran up to him immediately, just like Thor. They bent over their friend who curled up in pain; his right arm looked completely destroyed. Tony cooled it down. At the same moment, the windows got uncovered and the sunrays lighted the room.

"I shall inform Loki and Valkyrie," Thor said. "They'll arrive with my army."

Making sure his friend would be alright, he went out the back door. Scott and Rhodey came to the window, waiting for some obvious changes. Natasha sat next to Bruce and touched his healthy arm. He was slowly recovering. On the other side of the wounded man remained Steve, who glanced at Natasha briefly. Nebula carefully lifted the gauntlet, and Rocket prepared his weapon.

Tony looked around the room, but his words were directed to Bruce, "You did great, buddy."

Banner closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, his sad gaze fell on Natasha.

"I tried to bring him back," he confessed. "Clint. I tried to bring him back but I couldn't."

Her hand instinctively went to her neck, where she didn't find her necklace; she must have lost it. Natasha sighed heavily and touched Bruce on the shoulder. She was grateful to him, but she could not put it into words.

"Did it work?" Steve formed the question that might have been present in everyone's minds.

To Natasha's surprise, Vision knew the answer and delivered it without any emotion, "It did work, Captain. I can feel her. I can feel Wanda."

The relief that flooded Steve could be compared to the feeling of rain on the skin after a long-lasting drought. They exchanged glances with Natasha. Wanda. It meant that the others came back too. They lived. They were somewhere there. They would all reunite soon. He almost laughed as Tony patted him on the back.

Then the phone rang. It disturbed Natasha so much that it took her some time to realize that it was her phone. She took it out of her pocket and held her breath as she saw the name on the screen. Tears formed in her eyes, but they did not flow.

Her hand was shaking as she pressed the green button and put the phone to her ear, "Nick?"

"Natasha, thank god! What the hell did just happen?"

At the sound of that familiar voice, she barely refrained from a cheerful exclamation. She raised her head to look at Steve, whose whole face emanated hope. But before she got the chance to explain everything to Fury, she heard Scott make a horrifying sound.
"GET DOWN!"

In the next second two missiles fell on the building and destroyed the whole Avengers Facility.
"Steve? Wake up, buddy. Yeah, that's my man!"

A temporary ringing in his ears made it difficult to concentrate but with Tony's help, he managed to get to his feet. Steve picked up the shield that must have broken away from his back during the explosion. He looked around and came to three terrifying conclusions.

First of all, their home no longer existed. The missiles left nothing but rubble and ashes behind. In some places, a fire raged, others were flooded by the lake. Secondly, he only noticed Thor and Tony. There was no trace of the rest of the team. Particularly the lack of Natasha shook him from the inside, but he wouldn't let the fear take control over him. He needed to focus.

Thirdly, the author of the whole attack was approaching. Huge ships hung above them, and the blue light shone from the largest of them. In the middle of it, already on the ground, Thanos appeared in the company of his children. Without the infinity stones, he might not be such a great threat, but it didn't change the fact that his army outnumbered the Avengers and could easily kill them all.

When Steve, Tony, and Thor stood together, preparing for the battle of their lives, not far away their friends struggled with the effects of the explosion. The water pushed Natasha toward the huge hole in the floor that led to the sewers. But before she could fall into the darkness, someone's hand tightened on her wrist.

Nebula pulled her back, holding the gauntlet with her other hand. Natasha coughed up the water that had gathered in her lungs. Beside them, Rhodey was trapped under the heap of debris. However, before Natasha managed to help him in any way, Vision appeared and used his beam of radiation to create a way of escape for Rhodey.

"Come." Nebula pulled Natasha by her arm. "He'll find the green guy and the idiot. We'll be more useful outside. Thanos has arrived."

Natasha vacantly realized that the idiot referred to Scott when they started to work their way through what had been once her home. At the sight of Steve, alive and not yet injured, Natasha breathed a sigh of relief. Quickly, however, the relief turned into fear when Captain America thoughtlessly run straight towards Thanos. Iron Man rose into the air, and Thor called a thunderbolt, holding two hammers in his hands. Meanwhile, Black Order scattered in all directions.
"My sister is there," Nebula stated in a cold voice.

She handed Natasha the gauntlet and ran away, taking out two daggers. Natasha watched her leave, unable to shake off the shock. She had a tool of mass destruction in her hands and didn't know what to do with it.

"What?! Nebula, wait! What am I supposed… oh shit."

Adrenaline flowed through his veins when Steve threw himself on Thanos. His attack was quickly repulsed and he ran out of the air when he hit the ground. Even Thor encountered difficulty despite his thunderbolts.

The fight could not be lost, not this time, and that thought alone forced Steve to get up and repeat his attack. He struck with his shield and fists to be defeated again and again. At one point he hit a rock and his shield cracked a little; blood spilling from his nose. His chest ached. His head ached. His whole body ached. He looked up with difficulty to see Tony lying in his armor, apparently unconscious.

"Did the previous loss teach you nothing?" Thanos asked, clenching his fingers around Thor's neck. "It is in your nature to fight the battles that are doomed to failure. I do, however, am thankful for your perseverance while collecting the stones. This time, when I snap my fingers, there will be no survivors."

"I've got a better idea." Steve blinked in disbelief as Loki appeared next to him surrounded by the green glow. "Leave my brother alone."

Everything happened fast. The sky seemingly opened and Steve could swear he saw winged animals between the clouds, led by Valkyrie riding a Pegasus, though he might have as well imagined it due to his head injury. Trying to fight against Loki, Thanos released Thor, who fell to the ground. Stuck in the ground, Mjölnir moved and then flew into the air. Steve stood up just in time to catch it with his right hand.

Observing this scene from a distance, Natasha hold back a scream of joy. That's my husband. Her jaw dropped as she watched Steve's body shine with electricity and jump to attack Thanos. Punched by the hammer, the opponent flew backward, and Steve landed neatly on his feet and punched again.

The next moment something hit Natasha in the head, making her fall to her knees. She lost the gauntlet which rolled over the ground too far from her reach. Natasha raised her head just in time to defend herself from another blow. She picked up her batons and repulsed the spear attack. Her enemy turned out to be Proxima Midnight, and her face was distorted with rage.

Steve had never felt such power. His body was electrified, the hammer in his hand was extremely light in touch and moved as freely as the shield. But even if he was finally worthy, and even if they were assisted by Thor's army, Thanos remained too strong. Black Order joined their father, ready to kill anyone who stood in his way.

He lost Mjölnir for a short moment and that was a starting point of his defeat. Thanos hit him several times, then abandoned him like a rag doll with its strings cut off. His legs trembled under him as Steve tried to get up for the hundredth time in the last few minutes. His hands shaking, he wiped the blood from his face; there were too many wounds on his body to locate its source. Then he attached his half broken shield to his hand and rose.

If that was how his end was supposed to look like, let it be. At least Natasha wouldn't be there to
witness it. He took a deep breath and convinced himself not to give up. After all, he could do it all day.

"Cap, do you copy?" A familiar voice spoke in his earpiece. "Cap? Can you hear me? Steve… On your left."

Steve looked up and tears flowed involuntarily down his cheeks. He couldn't believe his own eyes. Magical portals appeared everywhere and people, who he had not seen for two years, were crossing them one by one and joining the battle. Suddenly Sam appeared to his left and flew over him.

Moved and overwhelmed with relief, Steve could only watch and so he did. He watched Bucky emerge from one of the portals. He watched T'Challa nod at him. He watched Tony rise from the ground and look at Peter. He watched Scott, Bruce, Rhodey, and Rocket finally join the fight. He watched the birth of hope.

It escaped Natasha's attention as she electrocuted the opponent and rushed to get the gauntlet back. Before she reached it, Proxima Midnight's hand tightened on her ankle and knocked her over. Natasha hit the ground and lost her breath. Thanos' daughter turned her over and put the spear's tip to her heart.

"Black Widow. You'll pay for what you did."

"No," a voice behind her answered. "She has nothing to pay for."

A red energy blast knocked Proxima Midnight out with enormous strength. Her body landed exactly on Okoye's raised spear, killing her at once. Before Natasha's mind could even attempt at comprehending what had just happened, Wanda reached out and helped her up.

Natasha had so much to say, but no word left her mouth. She had just faced death in the shape of a terrifying alien, and now she reunited with one of her friends who she had missed every day. She looked at Wanda and wanted to explain everything to her, thank her for help and tell her about Clint, but she had no idea how. The more so because Wanda's expression changed when she looked around as if someone was calling her name, though Natasha did not hear anything.

"Where is he?" Wanda whispered. "I can feel him."

As if summoned, Vision landed next to them and picked up the gauntlet. Natasha and Okoye exchanged glances and joined the others at the right moment, for Thanos' servants left the ships and began to jump onto the ground. The enemy's army was still much bigger than theirs, but now the Avengers had a better chance at the win.

Steve stood at the head of his people with the hammer in one hand and the shield in the other.

"Avengers," he waited for Natasha to appear on his right side and only then finished, "assemble."

They smiled at each other and charged into the battle. If they were to die that day, they would do so in the company of their friends. Steve jumped into the air, summoned a thunderbolt and killed twenty monsters around him. Natasha took out her batons and attacked anyone who dared to cross her path. Sam covered their backs from the above. Once again, they were a team.

At some point, something caught their attention. A ball of light hit one of the ships and destroyed it completely, significantly reducing Thanos' chances at calling his backup. Suddenly Vision got attacked by Ebony Maw. Natasha watched in horror as the gauntlet fell from his hands and headed for the ground. She rushed towards it, but someone turned out to be way faster than her. The
unidentified light changed into a woman who caught the infinity stones and landed just before Natasha.

She was a beautiful, young woman with blond her and a superhero costume; her whole figure emanated with light. One look at her would convince anyone that she was insurmountable.

"Captain Marvel, I believe." Natasha guessed with a smirk. "What took you so long?"

"Space traffic jams. You seem tough. Wanna help me get to the purple asshole?"

Before she could answer, they were surrounded by other heroines. Natasha recognized Wanda, Okoye, Shuri, Nebula, and Valkyrie. Even Pepper was there in her Rescue armor. It was a sufficient answer. They all moved ahead, fighting their path to Thanos. Wanda and Carol charged together, both possessing enough power to wipe Thanos to ashes.

Suddenly, Steve threw the hammer to Natasha. At first, she thought he was crazy. And then she wielded Mjölnir as it was nothing and defended herself in the fight against Cull Obsidian who had appeared behind her back and Steve had noticed that. Her opponent was huge and extraordinarily strong, but Natasha felt powerful enough to face him. At the moment she could beat anyone. Steve watched the sparks leap over her skin, and her hair hovers in the wind. That's my wife.

"I always knew you two were worthy," Thor admitted, killing another monster with his Stormbreaker.

"This is madness," Loki concluded as he threw his daggers in the air. "It should be impossible for a valueless human being to possess the power of the god of thunder!"

Steve ignored their conversation, for his attention was drawn to two scenes taking place on opposite sides of the battlefield. On the one hand, there was Natasha fighting with Cull Obsidian, on the other, there was Tony facing Corvus Glaive. He could only help one of them.

The decision was made for him when Rhodey and Bruce appeared at Natasha's side. So Steve looked at his wife for the last time and with the shield in his hand, he headed to rescue his friend. He knew from experience how difficult Stark's opponent was to defeat. He threw his shield at the enemy, and then Iron Man shot into his chest and knocked him to the ground. Steve ran up to Tony, who didn't wear his helmet, and helped him get up. Not far from them Wanda and Carol towered over Thanos. His chances were very little against the two powerful women.

"Thanos is losing," Steve noticed with clear hope in his voice.

"His death doesn't mean our victory, Cap. His army is too numerous. Even if their leader dies, they will fight to the end. We may win, but it will cost us too many victims."

Steve had to admit that he was right. Each of their people was more or less wounded, and many strangers had already died. He could not let anyone he cared about join the casualties. He looked at Tony and opened his mouth.

Then he felt it. As if something had ripped him from the inside. Tony's eyes widened in shock. Steve looked down and saw the tip of Glaive's blade protruding from his stomach. Corvus had attacked him from behind, impaling his body.

Bucky and Sam came out of nowhere and attacked. Glaive pulled his weapon out of Steve's body and began to defend himself. Tony reached for his friend, and Rogers leaned briefly on his shoulder.
"Steve." Stark seemed terrified.

"It's okay, Tony. I'll be okay."

Stark helped him sit up and hesitated for a moment. They exchanged last glances and then Iron Man flew away to kill Corvus Glaive. Would they ever see each other again? Steve wasn't sure. He put his hands on his stomach, trying to stop the bleeding. His fingers quickly became red. Bucky came running to him and took him into his arms. Steve smiled at him faintly; they were about to find out how the end of the line looked like.

"There are too many of them!" Rhodey shouted to Natasha. He was hardly visible from under a group of monsters attacking him.

Cull Obsidian kept punching Banner in the face. Natasha jumped onto his back and with all her strength, she used the hammer to hit him on the head, smashing his skull. Blood spattered on her, and the dead body fell on barely conscious Bruce.

Thor appeared next to them with the gauntlet. Natasha handed him Mjölnir, promising herself that she would never touch it again. The gods were cool with all their magic tools and tricks, but she was tired of all this.

"There is only one way," Bruce said, surprising Natasha. He gently took the gauntlet from Thor's hands. "Only one way to ensure that you'll be safe."

Natasha did not know if he was talking only to Thor, or to her, or to all of them. All she knew was that her heart stopped for a moment, and the fear paralyzed her. For the second time that day, she watched Bruce put on the gauntlet. Tony came over and tried to stop him. Thor shouted in despair.

The second snap happened at the same time as Nebula stabbed Thanos in the heart. Natasha was the witness of the first thing. Steve saw the other one.

Then everything came to an end. Their opponents began to disappear, leaving only ashes behind. Rhodey got saved. Nebula hugged her sister. Tony looked across the battlefield at Strange. Bruce dropped to the ground and his eyes stared up at the sky, not seeing anything.

"Noo," Thor cried. He leaned over Bruce and gently closed his eyes with his hand.

If Natasha was to describe what she felt at that moment, it would probably prove too difficult. She was sore, tired and broken. Tears run down her face as she mourned the two men she had loved and lost too soon.

A light touch on her hand made her shiver. She turned to see Sam. Since his return, she had not had the opportunity to greet him, but the moment did not seem appropriate. Sam didn't utter anything, but the expression on his face spoke a lot. Natasha understood right away. She did not need words. Sam's eyes told her that the worst had happened.

The only thing she could do was to ask, "Where is he?"

He moved through the ruins, and Natasha followed him. She had never been so scared before. She passed Peter talking quietly to Shuri. She passed Rocket and Groot leaning over their dead friend. She passed Wanda who hid her face in her hands; her body shook with sobs. Vision sat beside her and apparently had no idea how to ease her suffering. Natasha did not know if she was crying because of her boyfriend, or if she had found out about Clint.

Sam stopped, and Natasha finally found *him*. Her heart broke into a million pieces.
"Don't do anything stupid when I'm gone," Steve whispered.

"How can I?" Bucky smiled through tears. "You're taking all the stupid with you."

Steve had lost him so many times. He had watched him die twice. He had watched him leave for reasons he had no influence on. The reversal of the snap was supposed to be a chance for them to catch up. To finally get the life they both deserved, but now it seemed impossible. Bucky had come back, but this time, it was Steve who had to leave.

With difficulty taking another breath, he closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he saw her. She stood next to Sam. Most of her hair ran from the braid, scattering around her head. Her face and suit were covered with blood, dirt, and ashes. He saw traces of tears on her cheeks what made him realize at once that he was not the only person she cried for.

"My love…"

Bucky got up so Natasha could take his place. She sat on the ground and put Steve's head on her lap. Every touch, every change in the position of his body ached, but he tried not to let her know. She had always been strong for him. Now he should be strong for her.

She brushed the wet hair from his forehead, "We won, Steve. It's over."

"I saw you fight, Nat. I saw how amazing you were. I knew you would wield the hammer." He cleared his throat, and the blood flowed from his mouth. "You've always been worthy. You've always been a heroine. I also know that you will be an excellent mother and that you'll take care of James for us both. I'm very proud of you."

It was only then that he broke apart as it dawned on him that his dreams of being James' father would never come true. Natasha shook her head. Even dirty, tired and desperate, she was still beautiful. Steve regretted that he would never see her walking barefoot in his shirt again. That he would never paint her. That he would never kiss her lips and touch her skin.

"Don't, Steve." She gave a strangled cry before bursting into tears. "Don't say goodbye."

"It's okay..."

"No, it isn't. We deserve to be together. We deserve to be happy, you said it yourself. I don't want to be a heroine. I don't want redemption. I… " Her voice broke. "I just want you to stay. Please… Stay with me."

In his imagination, he found himself standing in Sokovia with Natasha beside him. Her hair fluttered in the wind, and he stared at her as if enchanted. She was ready to die with all those people they couldn't save. At that moment, nothing else mattered. He fell in love with her all over again.

"It's okay," he repeated, putting his trembling fingers on her cheek. She covered his hand with hers, nuzzling into his touch. "There are worse ways to go. Where else am I gonna get a view like this?"

Lost in memories, Natasha looked around. Dust and ashes were floating in the air. Their friends surrounded them from a distance. The sunset illuminated the rubble and the surface of the lake. It was magical, but Steve's gaze stayed on his wife. She had always been his view.

It was so cold. He closed his eyes, seeking peace. She leaned over and left a kiss on his forehead. She pulled him to her chest, ignoring the blood and the fact that Steve did not move. Natasha hugged him, knowing she would do anything to hear his heartbeat. It couldn't be the end.
As her heart ached for one more gaze, one more touch, one more confession of love, she could only utter one painful word, "Steve?"
James' hand tightened on hers as they headed towards the lake. The boy looked around at the assembled. He had already heard about many of those heroes or seen them on television. He knew some of them personally, having spent the last few months at the Avengers Facility. Others remained a mystery to him, so he just glanced at each of them with interest.

Covered in black, almost everyone was there. Bartons stood close to the lake. Pepper held Martin in her arms. Peter, Rhodey, Happy, and Vision stopped beside them. Sam put his hand on Bucky's shoulder. Wanda crossed her arms on her chest with an inscrutable look on her face. Not far behind Valkyrie and Loki stood side by side. Scott and Hope held hands. Carol and Fury. T'Challa, Shuri and Okoye. Doctor Strange and Wong. Sharon and the agents. The Guardians had already left as they got to mourn their own friend.

For Natasha, those faces were a reminder of how much she lost and gained two days before. If grief had a scent, it would smell like the air at that moment. Natasha and James squatted by two wreaths floating on the surface of the lake. A bow was placed on one of them, while the second had a pair of glasses. Natasha plaited two lilies into both wreaths and stood up to take a place next to Sam.

Tony and Thor pushed the wreaths deeper into the lake. Everyone watched the flowers flow slowly, taking with them the memories of the men they represented. Natasha stealthily wiped a lonely tear from her cheek. Saying goodbye was never easy, especially when it meant the final farewell. She would never see Clint and Bruce again, and that thought was enough to crush her from the inside.

She probably would have fallen apart if it hadn't been for James' soothing presence and the awareness that she was not alone.

Finally, the time came for a little bit simpler farewells. Natasha was afraid of approaching the Bartons, but she breathed a sigh of relief as Laura drew her in a cordial embrace. They promised each other that they would stay in touch, and then Natasha watched Laura and the kids get in the car and drive away.

_They're safe, Clint, _she thought. _Your family is safe. We won. I just wish you were there to see it._

When Thor approached and hugged her, Natasha patted him on the back in amazement. They were never close. Over the last few years, she had created meaningful relationships with all the original Avengers except Thor. Actually, they barely ever spoke to each other. This time, however, they shared a common loss. In one way or another, they both loved Bruce. So when she watched Thor disappear with the other two Revengers, she knew she would miss him.

Natasha turned to James, realizing their time together was over. As long as his grandmother remained his legal guardian, Natasha's possibilities were limited. She managed to negotiate that the boy would be under her protection on weekends. This, however, was about to change. Natasha had already applied for adoption, and James' grandmother, a sick old woman, knew it would be the best option. Natasha and Steve loved him as if he had been their own son.

"Happy is waiting in the car," she said, messing with his red hair.

"Yeah, I see." James looked down. "Mom… could you tell dad that I miss him?"
"Of course, I'll tell him. You know what? I suggest next time we visit him together. On Friday?"

"Yeah, on Friday. See you on Friday."

James got into the car and waved her goodbye. Natasha grinned at him once more, but her smile faded when she looked around. The Avengers Facility was gone. On the one hand, she had the ruins of her home, on the other the lake that carried the wreaths towards the setting sun. One phase of her life came to an end and Natasha was simultaneously scared and excited about the next one.

She was on the brink of breaking apart, but then Rhodey appeared, offering her a helping hand. He put his arm around her and they both went through the ruins to join their friend. High above them, Captain Marvel rose to the sky and disappeared, leaving only a trail of light behind.

Natasha laid on the couch with her feet on the lap of one Sam, while the other was happily licking her face. If it were not for how dejected she was, she would have noticed the comedy of the situation. She took a long sip of beer, and her dog jumped to the floor as his attention got suddenly drawn to Bucky.

"Let's sum it all up." Sam opened another bottle. "We were gone for two years, although for us it felt like two minutes. In those two years, you lovebirds got married, adopted a dog and took care of a kid who, by a freakin' coincidence, shares the same name with Steve's best friend and has the same shade of hair as you."

"Correct," Natasha admitted.

"I can't believe you named your dog after me."

"Dogs are cool," Wanda added.

"In Steve's and my defense, it was Rhody's idea, not ours. Besides, Steve called him the cutest thing he's ever seen, and since he reminded him of you... well, you should rather consider it a compliment."

"He is cute," Bucky confirmed, holding the dog in his hands. "Who's cute? You are!"

Watching the Winter Soldier speak sweetly to the dog and let him lick his face was something Natasha did not know she needed. It unlocked something in her. She chuckled for the first time in a while. Wanda also laughed, sitting on the sofa and choking on the strawberry she had just put in her mouth.

"You never call me cute," Sam sighed as he pretended to be jealous.

Natasha knew that the whole purpose of this conversation was to amuse her, to forget for a moment about the nightmares that prevented them from sleeping. They lived together in her apartment. Wanda slept in Steve's former room, and Sam and Bucky in the living room. Natasha would wake up in the middle of the night, panting and frightened, painfully struck by the fact that there was no Steve beside her. It was not until she left the room, poured herself a glass of water and heard Bucky and Sam bantering that she calmed down. She kept reminding herself that she still had people worth living for.
Tony lived with Pepper, Rhodey, and Vision at the S.H.I.E.D. headquarters. Now, however, he stood by the window and did not join the conversation. He was extremely quiet. Natasha raised from the couch, took two bottles and went to the person who had been with her for the last two years.

"Wanna grab a beer with an old friend?"

She handed him one of the bottles. Tony accepted it with a faint smile. He seemed to be far away with his thoughts. Maybe he was with Pepper and their son. Maybe he was with Peter in Queens. Maybe he was in Wakanda. Maybe he was somewhere else, in a place no one else could reach.

"It's been a long time since we met," he noticed. "You were a mysterious secretary and I was a terrible boss. A lot has changed since then, hasn't it?"

"I'm not so sure. You're still a terrible boss."

Tony smiled, and Natasha felt warm in her heart at the thought of making him a little less miserable. She took a sip of beer and rested her head on Tony's shoulder. They had been through too much together, but neither of them was a type of person who would waste time on sentiment or wallowing in self-pity. As they both used to bury their feelings deep down and yet be overwhelmed by their excess, Natasha often saw her reflection in him.

"You know, when Doctor Strange saved my life, I thought my destiny was to die in the final battle. That's why I really wanted to enjoy my time with Pepper and Martin, and with you, Steve, Rhodey, Happy. And then it all happened. When I found out that Clint had sacrificed himself... When I saw the blade impaling Steve's body..." Natasha closed her eyes, listening to Tony's trembling voice. "And when Bruce snapped his fingers... I thought it should be me. I was prepared to die but I wasn't prepared to lose them."

Natasha nodded, understanding him more than she could express it with words. At first, she had felt the same, but now she understood that she shouldn't blame herself for what she had no influence on. Death would come for all of them, and though each loss seemed to be the end of the world, she had to let Clint and Bruce go.

"We would've never defeated Thanos without you, Tony. You figured the way to time travel. You brought Vision back." She looked at Wanda, who seemed absorbed in her conversation with Sam and Bucky, but Natasha knew she listened. "You restored Steve's faith in the idea of Captain America. You saved me when I got shot. We can't hate ourselves for surviving, Tony. We have to move on."

"Well, that's what I'm planning to do. I decided to resign from S.H.I.E.L.D. and say goodbye to Iron Man. There are a lot of heroes who can take my place. Peter is back. That's all that matters. I'd like to devote all my time to my family. You know, our house burned down and it would be nice if someone built a new one. Preferably far from New York, in the forest, next to a lake. Ugh, I must be getting old because I feel very emotional," Stark joked. "When Steve wakes up, you need to visit us. We'll arrange a huge reunion with lots of alcohol and no aliens trying to kill us. Just a bunch of former heroes eating snacks, getting drunk and finally getting to live their lives."

"When Steve wakes up," Natasha repeated and it sounded like a promise.

Tony turned to the others and lifted his beer, "To Steve Rogers!"

Sam, Bucky, and Wanda stood up, raising their bottles. Natasha looked at each of them. If four years ago, after a clash at the airport in Germany, someone had told her that one day the four of
them would gather together and make a toast to her husband, it would probably make her laugh. Now, however, everything seemed to be in its place. Tony and Bucky were reconciled. Sam was a part of the family. Wanda handled the Vision situation better than expected. All these people were incredibly strong and Natasha loved each and every one of them.

"To Steve Rogers!"

Five months later…

Natasha unveiled the windows, letting some natural light into the room. The view of Wakanda was breathtaking. Bathed in sunlight, the buildings, mountains, and fields attracted attention. It was easy to forget that two and a half years ago a huge battle had happened right there, the effects of which had been felt to this day.

Outside the building, the city seemed to buzz with life, but inside it was quiet and peaceful. As usual, Natasha sat down in a chair and touched the hand resting on the bed. She knew the texture of his skin by heart. His entire body was a map she had learned during many beautiful moments spent together. The only thing she could do was to hope that those precious moments would come back eventually.

"It's been so long, Steve," she said in a soft voice. "Why won't you wake up if your wound has already healed? Shuri and T'Challa consider putting you in the ice. Naturally, the final decision belongs to me. I'm your wife. I know that you wouldn't like to wake up from cryosleep one day and find out that you have lost a lot of time again. That the people you love are gone. But… You cannot stay here forever. That's why I'm asking you to wake up. I'm begging you, Steve… wake up."

She leaned over him and brushed her lips against his. The memory of their first kiss flashed under her closed eyelids. Not the one on the escalator, though it was also wonderful. She imagined the one at Times Square. She remembered the ball dropping, the crowd around them, her portrait in his notebook, their emotion-filled glances, and finally the kiss.

"Your fight is over but not your life. There's still so much for you to experience. We can rest now, Steve. We can be happy together. All you have to do is come back to me." She kissed him on the forehead. "Come back, my love. Come back."

A knock on the glass forced her to return to reality. She raised her head and saw Fury in the corridor. She picked up a device that informed her of the patient's every activity. If Steve woke up, she would find out right away. She carried it with her all the time, but it never made any sound. Reluctantly, she let go of Steve's hand and left the room.

Little did she know that when she closed the door, Steve's fingers moved a bit.

Natasha crossed her arms over her chest and started walking through the corridor. On one side, there were windows occupying the entire wall, and on the other, there were various rooms; some were closed and had a small glass that allowed you to peek inside, like Steve's room, others were completely open.

"How's S.H.I.E.L.D.?

"Prospering," Fury answered. "Many agents have returned to service. Stark did a lot of good work, so it was quite easy to step into his place. We could use some more experienced staff, though."

"Don't look at me, Nick. I'm not joining S.H.I.E.L.D. for the third time. Agent Romanoff is gone."
"And Black Widow?"

"Black Widow was created against my will. I was a weapon made to kill, mislead and betray. I managed to clean my name, but this is not the life I chose. If the world needs me, I will come. For now, I'm neither eager to appear on the battlefield nor to impersonate someone else. I used to have nothing, now I have a family. Being Natasha Romanoff is enough for me."

Fury paused where the corridor forked and looked at her intently with his one eye. Natasha couldn't guess what was in his head and didn't want to know that. She still felt the bitter aftertaste of their last meeting before the snap.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you, Natasha," he finally said to her surprise. "I thought your attachment to Steve Rogers would be your doom. It turns out he brought out the best in you."

"Oh, excuse me, can you repeat that?" She smirked. "Did you say that you were wrong? I'll need that recorded for future reference."

"Don't test my patience, Romanoff."

What Fury really wanted to say was that he enjoyed her happiness, even if it had lasted only two years and he hadn't got the chance to experience it. Natasha understood him perfectly and felt a surge of relief. That's what she wanted from him; the words that would confirm that he did not see her only as a spy, but as the person she really was.

Then it happened. The device in her pocket began to give a long, annoying sound. Natasha raised it with her trembling hand and saw a glowing green light. In the next moment, she was already running through the corridor. Everything ceased to matter. She forgot about Fury, she did not pay attention to the people she passed. She reached the goal and put her hands on the glass. There were several doctors in the room and Shuri with T'Challa. At some point, she noticed the man sitting in the bed.

Steve turned his head and their eyes met. When a beautiful smile graced his face, five months of torture came to an end. Natasha finally regained her heart.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

It's the end, isn't it? I must admit that I didn't want to write the epilogue simply because I didn't want to say goodbye to this fic. It's been a pleasure writing each and every chapter, even those difficult scenes involving more than two characters. It's been a pleasure creating a story about my otp and splitting in the face of avengers endgame. It's been a pleasure reading your comments and seeing the rising numbers of kudos and bookmarks. Thank you to all of you who kept commenting under new chapters and to the silent readers whom I now encourage to tell me all your thoughts regarding my fic. I hope the end won't disappoint you :)

Between the wars we'll stay

Fading echoes spin away

Lost in memories, in memories

And still the rest

Hasn't happened, hasn't happened yet

With his hands in the pockets of his jacket and a nostalgic smile wandering over his lips, Steve admired the view from behind the windows of his new home. The house was out of New York, surrounded by forest, much larger than their apartment; big enough to accommodate a family of a retired soldier, a ballet teacher with deadly history, their fifteen-year-old son, an old man who had just begun his life, Captain America, and a cute dog.

"How does it feel like?"

Sam looked at the shield that he uncertainly held in his hands, "Like it's not mine."

"It is now," Steve assured him. "You're a good man, Sam. I can't imagine anyone better for this role."

Giving away the shield, Steve felt as if he was losing a part of himself, and yet it seemed most appropriate. For many years, he could not see the world beyond battlefield and devotion in the name of the greater good. It was only Natasha, or rather the prospect of living by her side, that made him see the sense in putting down the weapon and enjoying every day.

One day he would miss it. Maybe in a year, maybe the next day. But even if it happened, he would have his wife and son with him, who would never cease to remind him that there were enough heroes protecting the world, and he could finally rest.

He patted Sam on the shoulder and watched him walk out onto the terrace, run to the garden and join his friends. James was just examining Bucky's metal arm as they raised their heads to look at Sam. Steve couldn't hear what they were saying, but judging by the sudden burst of laughter from the three of them, he guessed they were having a good time. Sam the dog jumped high to reach the shield.
Steve could spend all day watching the people he loved. The very sight of them made him happy. Yet, he experienced full happiness only when familiar arms embraced him from behind. She was so quiet and graceful that he hadn't even heard her coming. He interlaced his fingers with hers and placed their hands on his chest.

Natasha. His Natasha.

"You sure about it?" She hugged her cheek to his back. "Your middle name is recklessness, and staying at home doesn't involve much risk unless you set the kitchen on fire. You'll get bored, soldier."

He couldn't help but chuckle, "I find living with you far from boring."

Taking his words as a challenge, Natasha stood on her toes and kissed his neck, just below his left ear. Her hands - accidentally, of course - slipped from under his and pulled his shirt up slightly. When her cold fingers touched the bare skin, Steve inhaled loudly.

He turned to her, lifted her and kissed her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and let him carry her to the kitchen where she sat on the island. Everyone could see them from the garden through large windows, but that very thought didn't stop them.

For five months, Natasha had sat at his bed and waited for him to open his eyes, react to the sound of his name, and win one last battle. Now that she got him back she wasn't going to let him go. She kissed his lips, cheeks, neck, and her hands followed an invisible trail through his muscular body.

"I almost lost you," she whispered.

Not knowing what to say at first, Steve brushed some of the lost strands away from her face. Her hair was now completely red, straight and shoulder-length, just like at the beginning of their friendship. He often regretted not loving her back then. They would have spent much more time together without wasting it on meaningless love affairs and understatements.

"But I came back to you," he smiled softly, "and I'm never leaving you again. Actually, I'm pretty sure you'll be the bored one in our relationship. I'm not so interesting without the suit and the shield."

"Don't be so modest. Captain America was a hot addition, but it's Steve Rogers I fell in love with. That gentle, muscular man with a big heart and low bullshit tolerance."

Steve laughed, pulling her closer and pressing his forehead to hers. They closed their eyes; breaths mingling with each other.

"I love you, Nat. I love you more than I ever loved anyone and I'm looking forward to spending the rest of my life with you. I don't need the shield or the hero name to be happy and fulfilled… I just need you. You are enough."

He always knew what to say to make her feel like the whole world was at her feet. The more that her whole world closed in the person of this handsome gentleman, who took her face in his hands and glanced at her with love.

Natasha was about to steal another kiss when the sound of a car parking next to the garden caught their attention. Steve helped Natasha get off the island and they both walked to the window at the right time to see the Stark family and their friends get out of the car. Tony carried Martin, while Pepper had her hands laden with food containers. Glasses clattered as Rhodey started removing beer crates from the trunk. Wanda and Vision rushed to help him.

"With you? Always."

Holding hands, they went down into the garden and headed towards their family. Behind them, there were years of fighting side by side, saving each other's lives and supporting one another in difficult situations. Before them, they were years of waking up and falling asleep together, years of peace and happiness.

And even if hard times were yet to come, even if their love would ever be put to the test, it didn't matter. They would go to the ends of the world for each other. Nothing seemed a real obstacle, nothing could tear them apart as they were going to approach every new thing in the same way: together. And together, they were invincible.

THE END

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