Compiled: The Entire Main Service Dogs for Superheroes (SDfSH) Series
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| Rating:               | Teen And Up Audiences                      |
| Archive Warning:     | Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings         |
| Category:            | Gen                                      |
| Fandom:              | Marvel Cinematic Universe                 |
| Character:           | Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Bruce Banner, Hulk (Marvel), Clint Barton, Natasha Romanov (Marvel), James "Bucky" Barnes, James "Rhodey" Rhodes, Thor (Marvel), Sam Wilson (Marvel), Peter Parker, Jessica Jones, Matt Murdock, Danny Rand, Luke Cage, Frank Castle, Stephen Strange, T'Challa (Marvel), Nebula (Marvel), Loki (Marvel), Wade Wilson, Jarvis (Iron Man movies), Misty Knight, May Parker (Spider-Man), Franklin "Foggy" Nelson, Karen Page, Pepper Potts, Phil Coulson, Happy Hogan, Claire Temple, Shuri (Marvel), Malcolm Ducasse, Wong (Marvel), Colleen Wing, Nick Fury, Carol Danvers, Mantis (Marvel), Peter Quill, Gamora (Marvel), Groot (Marvel), Rocket Raccoon, Drax the Destroyer |
| Series:              | Part 1 of Compiled Versions of Series      |
Compiled: The Entire Main Service Dogs for Superheroes (SDfSH) Series

by literally_no_idea

Summary

The entirety of the main Service Dogs for Superheroes (SDfSH) series, gathered into a single posting. Each part of the series will become a single chapter here.

Most of the series is rated "teen and up," but there are two chapters that are dark enough that they would better fit under the "mature" rating. Both of those chapters, (chapters sixteen (16) and seventeen (17)) are clearly noted as being darker in nature, with the specific tags for them listed in the chapter summary.
Edit as of 22 July 2019: I’m a dumbass and forgot that Wade is canonically pan. This has been changed to reflect that.

Handler Information:

Name: Anthony Edward “Tony” Stark

Gender: Graygender

Pronouns: he/him or they/them

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: both queer

Height: 6’1”

Weight: 225 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: cPTSD (with anxious, dissociative, avoidant, and aggressive tendencies), MDD (Major Depressive Disorder), ADHD, ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder), Insomnia, DSED (Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder), fear of abandonment, severe attachment issues, Selective Mutism

Animal Information:

Name: D.I.V.A. (Drastically Important Vital Assistant), “Diva”

Gender: Male

Breed: Landseer

Height: 30”

Weight: 150 lbs

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Handler Information:

Name: Steven Grant “Steve” Rogers

Gender: Trans Man

Pronouns: he/him
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: both queer

Height: 6’2”

Weight: 220 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with anxious, dissociative, and aggressive tendencies), Social Anxiety Disorder, Insomnia, stubborn tendencies

Animal Information:

Name: Verity

Gender: Female

Breed: Yellow Labrador Retriever

Height: 22”

Weight: 60 lbs

Handler Information:

Name: Robert Bruce “Bruce” Banner / Hulk

Gender: Cis Male

Pronouns: he/him or they/them

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: aromantic asexual

Height: 5’10” / 7’-8’

Weight: 128 lbs / 1,040-1,400 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: cPTSD (with anxious, dissociative, and avoidant tendencies), DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder), General and Social Anxiety Disorders, Bipolar Disorder type 1 (distinct hypermanic, hypomanic, and depressive episodes), ASD, Insomnia, Selective Mutism

Animal Information:

Name: Smash

Gender: Female

Breed: Dogo Argentino

Height: 26”

Weight: 88 lbs
Handler Information:

Name: Clinton Francis “Clint” Barton

Gender: Demi-Man

Pronouns: he/him, they/them, or ze/zem

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: biromantic bisexual

Height: 6’3”

Weight: 230 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: Deaf (can lip read usually, wears hearing aids, uses ASL), cPTSD (with anxious, dissociative, and avoidant tendencies), DP/DR (depersonalization/derealization disorder), Bipolar Disorder type 2 (distinct hypomanic and depressive episodes), Selective Mutism

Animal Information:

Name: Lucky

Gender: Male

Breed: Golden Retriever

Height: 23”

Weight: 65 lbs

Handler Information:

Name: Natalia Alianovna “Natasha” Romanova

Gender: Polygender

Pronouns: she/her, they/them, he/him, it/its, or fae/faer

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: aromantic pansexual

Height: 5’7”

Weight: 125 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: cPTSD (with avoidant, anxious, aggressive, and dissociative tendencies), AVPD (Avoidant Personality Disorder)
Animal Information:
Name: Lapushka
Gender: Female
Breed: Black Russian Terrier
Height: 26”
Weight: 80 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes
Gender: Neutrois
Pronouns: they/them or he/him
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: aromantic bisexual
Height: 5’9”
Weight: 260 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD, Dissociative Amnesia, BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder), AVPD, PNES Seizures (Psychogenic Non-Epileptic Seizures), Bipolar Disorder type 1 with mixed features, Schizophrenia, Narcolepsy, Selective Mutism, Sexual Masochism Disorder, ARFID (Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder [involves highly selective eating habits or disturbed eating patterns])

Animal Information:
Name: F.U.B.A.R. (Fucked Up Beyond All Repair), “Fubar”
Gender: Male
Breed: Caucasian Ovcharka
Height: 30”
Weight: 170 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: James Rupert “Rhodey” Rhodes
Gender: Cis Male
Pronouns: he/him

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: biromantic homosexual

Height: 6’1”

Weight: 240 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD, mobility related disability

Animal Information:

Name: Valor

Gender: Male

Breed: Anatolian Shepherd

Height: 32”

Weight: 150 lbs

Handler Information:

Name: Thor Odinson

Gender: Cis Male

Pronouns: he/him

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: polyromantic heterosexual

Height: 6’6”

Weight: 640 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with aggressive tendencies), Emotional Dysregulation

Animal Information:

Name: Sparkles

Gender: Female

Breed: (fawn) Pug

Height: 11”

Weight: 15 lbs
Handler Information:
Name: Samuel Thomas “Sam” Wilson
Gender: Androgyne
Pronouns: they/them or he/him
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: polyromantic polysexual
Height: 6’2”
Weight: 240 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with anxious and aggressive tendencies), MDD, GAD

Animal Information:
Name: Ava
Gender: Female
Breed: Greater Swiss Mountain Dog
Height: 26”
Weight: 100 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: Peter Benjamin Parker
Gender: Genderqueer
Pronouns: he/him, they/them, or she/her
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: biromantic bisexual
Height: 5’10”
Weight: 167 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with avoidant tendencies), MDD, GAD

Animal Information:
Name: Beter Barker Araneus
Gender: Male
Breed: blue American Staffordshire Terrier
Height: 18”
Weight: 60 lbs

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Handler Information:
Name: Jessica Campbell Jones
Gender: Demi-Woman
Pronouns: she/her or they/them
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: biromantic bisexual
Height: 5’7”
Weight: 124 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with anxious, aggressive, dissociative, and avoidant tendencies, as well as psychotic features), Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), BPD

Animal Information:
Name: Whiskey
Gender: Female
Breed: (brindle) Boxer
Height: 23.5”
Weight: 65 lbs

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Handler Information:
Name: Matthew Michael “Matt” Murdock
Gender: Aporagender (a gender that is “other” or apart from existing genders)
Pronouns: he/him or it/its
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: quoiromantic quoiisexual (quoi- means not knowing where one fits on the spectrum or not identifying with any of the existing labels)
Height: 5’11”
Weight: 185 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with aggressive, dissociative, and avoidant tendencies), blindness, SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder, overprocessing difficulties), ASD, fear of abandonment, RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder), MDD

Animal Information:
Name: Grace
Gender: Female
Breed: Beauceron (ears/tail cropped)
Height: 26.5”
Weight: 75 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: Luke Cage
Gender: Bigender
Pronouns: he/him or they/them
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: grey-aromantic (heteroromantic when experiencing attraction) heterosexual
Height: 6’6”
Weight: 425 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with aggressive, avoidant, and dissociative tendencies), BPD, concerns re: internal bleeding

Animal Information:
Name: Harvey
Gender: Male
Breed: (fawn) English Mastiff
Height: 33”
Weight: 200 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: Daniel Thomas “Danny” Rand
Gender: Nonbinary
Pronouns: they/them, he/him, or xe/xem
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: panromantic demi-bisexual
Height: 5’11”
Weight: 175 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD, DP/DR, RAD

Animal Information:
Name: Dewei
Gender: Male
Breed: Great Pyrenees
Height: 27”
Weight: 115 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: Frank G. Castle
Gender: Cis Male
Pronouns: he/him or they/them
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: heteroromantic bisexual
Height: 6’3”
Weight: 225 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD (with aggressive, dissociative, and avoidant tendencies), Bipolar Disorder type 1, ASPD

Animal Information:
Name: Sable
Gender: Female
Breed: (black with white chest) Cane Corso
Height: 26”
Weight: 100 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: Stephen Vincent Strange
Gender: Agender
Pronouns: he/him
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: aromantic gray-exual (bisexual when experiencing attraction)
Height: 6’2”
Weight: 180 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD, mobility and coordination difficulties, ASD, ASPD, HPD (Histrionic Personality Disorder)

Animal Information:
Name: Thelonious
Gender: Male
Breed: Great Dane
Height: 32”
Weight: 175 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: T'Challa
Gender: Genderflux
Pronouns: he/him, they/them, or she/her
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: biromantic asexual
Height: 6’0”
Weight: 200 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD, MDD, GAD
Animal Information:
Name: Ubunye
Gender: Male
Breed: Black Panther / Belgian Tervuren
Height: 27.6” / 26”
Weight: 68 lbs / 70 lbs

Handler Information:
Name: Nebula
Gender: Trans Woman
Pronouns: she/her
Romantic/Sexual Orientation: homoromantic homosexual
Height: 6’1”
Weight: 185 lbs
Diagnoses and Needs: cPTSD (with aggressive, avoidant, and dissociative tendencies), AVPD, ASPD, ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder), mobility difficulties, chronic pain, Social Anxiety Disorder

Animal Information:
Name: Quasar
Gender: Female
Breed: (red) Doberman Pinscher with prosthetics
Height: 30” (27” before prosthetics)
Weight: 95 lbs (85 lbs before prosthetics)

Handler Information:
Name: Loki Laufeyson
Gender: Yes (aka Genderfluid)
Pronouns: he/him, she/her, they/them, fae/faer, or it/its

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: panromantic pansexual

Height: 6’4”

Weight: 525 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: ODD, cPTSD (with aggressive, anxious, and avoidant tendencies), GAD, RAD

Animal Information:

Name: Aelfhun

Gender: Yes

Breed: Shapeshifter; dog/minature horse

Height: varies

Weight: varies

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Handler Information:

Name: Wade Winston Wilson

Gender: Genderfluid

Pronouns: he/him, it/its, or she/her

Romantic/Sexual Orientation: panromantic pansexual

Height: 6’2”

Weight: 210 lbs

Diagnoses and Needs: PTSD, Schizophrenia, Dissociative Amnesia, ODD, ASD (with echolalia), Bipolar Disorder type 2, BPD, HPD

Animal Information:

Name: Athanasia

Gender: Female

Breed: (red) Leonberger

Height: 29.5”
Weight: 140 lbs
Clint and Lucky

Natasha blames Clint for this.

She finds Clint when he comes home to the tower at 4am on a Saturday, which is fairly normal on its own, but he’s carrying a lump of fur covered in blood, and asking if Tony happens to have any veterinarians on site.

Tony does not, in fact, have any veterinarians on site, but a few quick calls and he has a veterinarian arrive within 30 minutes, dragging Clint along into a room on the medical floor to examine the dog in his arms.

Natasha waits with Clint in the hallway while the dog undergoes multiple procedures, and it's a little after 11am when the vet emerges, reassuring them that the dog is fine, he’ll just need a few weeks to recover, and Clint or someone else will need to keep a close eye on him to make sure he's safe and healthy.

They assure the vet that they’ll do that, and the vet brings the dog to them, leaving shortly after. The dog greets Natasha, whole body wagging with enthusiasm, then turns to Clint, and the dog puts his head in Clint’s lap, licking and nudging his hands until Clint starts petting him.

It might just be her, but Natasha thinks the dog has already attached himself to Clint.

By the end of the first week, Clint has named the dog Lucky, and every time Clint enters a room Lucky’s in, Lucky’s ears perk up, and he turns to look at Clint.

By the end of the second week, Natasha spots Clint sneaking Lucky some of the pepperoni off of his pizza, and anywhere Clint sits, Lucky curls up at his feet. If Clint stands up and walks away, Lucky slumps, watching him go.

By the end of the third week, Clint has started referring to himself and Lucky as “the eyes and the ears,” because “Get it? I’m hard of hearing but a great shot, and Lucky’s half blind but hears a lot? Get it?” Lucky follows wherever Clint goes, trailing behind him like a little duckling.
By the end of the month, Clint has taught Lucky some circus tricks, and Natasha watches Clint’s expression when Lucky does his tricks, sees the way his eyes don’t always quite match his smile. Lucky walks with Clint everywhere, and his body language positively lights up whenever Clint looks at him.

Watching Lucky perform circus tricks also gives Natasha an idea, so she takes a few days to do some research, approaching Clint about it one morning over breakfast.

“So, you and Lucky really seem to get along,” she says, filling up a mug of coffee and plopping down at the breakfast nook beside Clint.

“Yeah,” Clint says, grinning, “he’s pretty awesome, isn't he? He's so smart, too. And it's cool, having a dog around. It’s kind of like having a sidekick,” he adds, reaching down to scratch Lucky behind the ears.

“I’m glad he makes you happy, you deserve to be happy more,” Natasha says, and it breaks her heart a little when Clint just shrugs. “So, I’ve been learning about service dogs recently, and I was thinking maybe we could train Lucky to be an actual service dog for you. He seems to really love you, and like you said, he's very smart, so he’d probably be able to help you a lot.”

Clint pauses, fork halfway to his mouth. “A service dog? But don't you need to be like, disabled to have a service dog? I mean I love Lucky, but I wouldn't pretend he’s something he’s not.”

“Clint,” Natasha says, reaching out to put a hand on his shoulder, “I know you still have flashbacks about your dad. And just because you fake it well doesn't mean you aren't hard of hearing still. I've seen you flinch when someone comes up behind you with your hearing aids out. I know it's only sometimes, but Lucky could help. Psychiatric service dogs exist, and I think Lucky would be great for you.”

Clint finally takes the bite of food he's had on his fork, taking a moment to process his thoughts. He takes a few more bites before turning back to Natasha. “Okay. Yeah, okay. How do we train him though? I’ve never really had a dog before, and definitely not a service dog. Like, I think this is way out of my league to train.”

“Hey, you've already taught Lucky circus tricks, you know what you're going through
mentally and physically, and we’re both highly skilled humans who work on a team with literal gods. I think we can figure this out.”

As it turns out, training a service dog is both much easier and much harder than either of them had expected; Lucky learns quickly, and seems to love his job, but Clint has a hard time breaking some of his bad habits with Lucky.

“But he loves pizza!” Clint protests the first time Natasha tells him he needs to stop sneaking Lucky food from his plate.

“Exactly, and if you get him used to eating pizza with you, he’s going to start begging at the table in restaurants, and you’re going to get kicked out,” Natasha reminds him, and Clint grumbles, but keeps the rest of the pizza on his plate to himself.

Natasha still sees him sneak Lucky food from time to time, but, while she’s a little exasperated, she figures that Lucky’s smart enough to know the difference between home and public access behavior, so she gives up trying to discuss the problem with Clint.

It takes about six months to train Lucky his obedience commands and his actual tasks; Natasha thinks that it probably only took that long because she and Clint had to figure out how to train the behaviors in the first place, and they’d definitely made mistakes along the way, having to go back and redo entire weeks of training.

Lucky’s not perfect; no dog is, and Natasha wouldn’t expect him to be. But he’s almost always focused, and he performs his tasks correctly almost every time, without fail, so Natasha thinks they’ve done good. Some occasional refresher training, just to keep Lucky’s skills up, and he should have no problems at all.

The first time Lucky goes out in public, it’s just Natasha and Clint, and they go out for some coffee at a little place a few blocks from the tower. It’s a quiet little place, warm and cozy with lots of booths and tables spread around the room. They choose a booth so Lucky has more room to lay down, and he curls up under the table at their feet while they talk and drink their drinks.

When they go to leave, Lucky comes out from under the table, dropping into a heel beside Clint, and a couple of women nearby gasp, watching Lucky in amazement. “I didn’t even know there was a dog under there,” one of the women whispers, and Natasha feels a bit of pride, because that was all her, Clint, and Lucky’s hard work in training.
As they reach the door, a man stops them, putting his hand on Clint’s shoulder. “Hey,” he says, and Clint stiffens. It’s not very obvious, but Lucky presses a little closer to his side, looking up at him. “Your dog is adorable,” the man says, and Clint relaxes slightly, puts on a smile Natasha knows is fake and thanks him.

They walk out, and Natasha wraps an arm around Clint’s shoulder. “How are you feeling?” She asks, and Clint shrugs.

“Not bad? He does make it easier.”

Natasha smiles. “Good. You two are great together. You’re both really good for each other.”
Tony and Diva

Lucky has become a normal part of everyone’s life, especially Clint’s, and the team’s behavior starts to change enough to accommodate for Lucky in everything they do.

Most of it is minor changes; leaving extra space for Lucky to sit under tables, beside couches, and between people’s legs, breaks from activities so Clint can take Lucky outside to play or pee, and someone always carrying water and a bowl in case Lucky gets thirsty. However, Natasha starts to notice some significant changes around the tower, changes that only Stark could have made.

Constantly filtering dog water dishes start to appear on every floor that the team has access to, dog bag dispensers appear on the walls outside, a bucket of toys finds its way into the living room on the communal floor, and a section of the pantry is suddenly cleared out and replaced with bags of high quality dog food.

Natasha starts watching Tony more, watches the way he goes through his day, how he interacts with Lucky. Every time he sees the dog, he pauses what he’s doing, mumbling a hello and reaching down to scratch Lucky behind the ears. She even watches him pause halfway through assembling a new piece of tech, something she’s never seen him do before.

She starts to notice behaviors that she’s never picked up on before, or at least never recognized for what they were, and she suddenly feels like she’s been falling behind in her perceptive skills.

She sees how Tony refuses to take anything someone tries to hand to him directly, how he glances away every time, as if that will eliminate the situation entirely. He constantly has dark shadows under his eyes, he sometimes stumbles when standing up, and he drinks more coffee than can possibly be healthy, even if he were Thor. She keeps watching him, trying to decide if she should address the problem with him directly, until she encounters a dealbreaker situation.

They're all on the communal floor, sprawled across the living room and watching Tangled, because Thor seems to be oddly obsessed with animated movies. Steve comes back from the kitchen with more popcorn as the song “Mother Knows Best” plays out on screen, accidentally bumping Tony on the shoulder as he passes by. Tony flinches, and it's so subtle that Natasha almost misses it. Steve says sorry, and Tony just smiles and brushes it off, but his shoulders are still tense, and he doesn’t relax again until the scene in the movie changes.

She decides to ask JARVIS about it, and once she's convinced Jarvis that this is for the purpose of helping Tony, not harming him, she asks him about anything else Tony might need, and Jarvis tells her that Tony has trauma around water, so she adds that to her notes.
It takes her a couple of days to find a breed that would be best suited to Tony’s needs, and she ultimately chooses a Landseer, a large dog that can swim in case Tony ever gets stuck in water somehow. She doubts that will ever happen, but as a team of superheroes protecting Earth, they always need to expect the unexpected.

It takes her another week to find a breeder in Tennessee, three months after that for the litter to be born, and another two months before she’s allowed to go pick the puppy up. She gets first choice of the litter (perks of calling early and Tony being famous), and she flies out to Tennessee under the guise of going on a short reconnaissance mission, choosing the puppy and having the breeder hold onto the puppy until he’s about a year old.

When the puppy comes home (Natasha flies out again, this time disguised as a “vacation day”), she asks Jarvis to help her keep the puppy secret from everyone else, and he makes sure that she can sneak the puppy in and out of places without being spotted. She names the puppy DIVA, or Drastically Important Vital Assistant, because she knows the names Tony has given to his robots, and figures that giving Diva a similar name will help him fit right in.

She starts training Diva in basic obedience, and, after some more training mistakes (she’s never trained a puppy before, and it turns out to be different from training an adult dog, go figure), she starts him on advanced obedience after 3 months at home.

After 7 months home, Natasha starts working with Diva on his tasks. The puppy is still working on advanced obedience, but he’s ready to start learning his tasks, too, and he’s thrilled to learn new things.

12 months after bringing Diva home, when Diva is 2 years old, Natasha takes him to the vet to have his hips and elbows tested for dysplasia, as well as checking to see if his growth plates are fully fused. The results show that he’s finished growing and his hips and elbows are in the good ranges, and after a consultation with an orthopedic veterinarian, Diva is cleared to do mobility work. Natasha takes Diva’s measurements, ordering him a mobility assistance harness online.

Natasha takes Diva to a professional trainer with mobility service dog experience, and the trainer walks her through how to train Diva to brace properly. It’s not as hard as she’d thought it would be, but she’s glad she talked to a trainer about it, because the last thing she would want is to hurt Diva.

Finally, when Diva is two and a half years old, Natasha feels confident enough in his skills to take him to Tony. She’ll need to teach Tony how to work with him, and she’ll need to make sure Tony wants to work with him in the first place (though she’s confident he will), so she takes Diva down to Tony’s workshop with her, already wearing his harness.
Tony lets them in without even looking, too absorbed in the screen projection he’s working on. “What can I do for you, Agent Romanoff?” He asks, and Natasha walks Diva over to the desk behind Tony, putting him in a sit before responding.

“Actually, it’s what we can do for you,” she says, and Tony turns, frowning.

“‘We?’ Jarvis only told me you were coming down--” he freezes when he sees Diva, breath hitching slightly. “Oh my god. Who is this?”

“This is Diva, or Drastically Important Vital Assistant,” Natasha says, “He’s for you. I’ve noticed how much you’re struggling, and I’ve seen how you look at Lucky, so I figured a service dog of your own would be helpful.”

Tony tenses, turning around to collapse the holograms he’d been modifying. “You’ve noticed? So, is it that obvious, or--”

“No, it’s not obvious. Not everyone has the level of perception training I have. I think I’m the only one that’s noticed, and it took me a long time to notice, too.”

Tony relaxes a little, but he’s still tense. “Okay. Okay, so you got me a dog. What is he trained to do, exactly?”

“He’s trained in PTSD and anxiety alerts and response. Nightmare and night terror response. Blocking between you and others. Guiding you out of environments. Bracing to help you stand up. And he knows how to swim, in case something comes up.”

Tony’s eyes widen. “H-How did you know about…?”

“I didn’t. Jarvis helped me,” she says, “I convinced him this would be good for you.”

“Well. You were right, so. Thank you. How do I work with Diva? I don’t know what to do, obviously I don’t have a service dog, so--”
“I’ll show you. I’ll work with both of you, so you can get to know each other and how to work with each other. If anything I trained him to do doesn’t work, or you need him to do something else that I’ve haven’t trained him to do yet, just let me know, and we can train that together.”

It takes two weeks before Tony’s completely comfortable with handling Diva by himself; Natasha trusts him by the end of the first week, but he doesn't seem to fully trust himself, so she lets him adjust at his own pace. The other Avengers are confused at first, partially because many of them didn’t even realize Tony was struggling to begin with, and partially because everyone’s amazed at how well Natasha had hidden Diva from them all.

Just like they had with Lucky, however, everyone gets used to Diva’s presence, and he becomes just as much a part of the team as Lucky had. Tony’s a lot more protective of Diva than he is of himself, it seems, and he makes all kinds of dog-related changes to the Tower (“I was going to do it for Lucky, but I didn’t want it to be awkward, or make it seem like I was trying to bribe you for your dog,” he tells Clint one day when someone asks how he got everything set up so quickly.)

By the time Tony’s comfortable taking care of Diva himself, he’s created an entire floor in the Tower as an indoor dog park (complete with a self-cleaning floor, and a side room full of various dog toys), tennis ball simulators on every Avengers team floor (having actual tennis balls lying around isn't always safe for a team of superheroes who have to constantly drop everything and run out to save the world), dog bathrooms on every floor that are both human and dog accessible (because it’s not always the most practical for the dogs to have to go all the way outside, and the dogs still need a way to pee if everyone's on a mission), and self-replenishing dog food bowls that only respond to the dog whose bowl it is.

The first time the team decides to go out to eat somewhere, Tony frets over Diva’s gear for a solid five minutes before Natasha finally has to drag him out the door, reassuring him that he’ll be fine, really, and Diva will do great.

At the restaurant, the waiter just looks at Lucky and Diva for a minute before shrugging and seating them at a set of tables large enough for the whole team. Clint and Natasha trade a look, glancing at Tony, but Diva just places his head in Tony’s lap, sitting under the table at his feet with a sigh. Tony scratches him head absentmindedly, looking over the menu.

Dinner is uneventful, with only a few people coming up to ask for pictures, and it’s the calmest evening they could have asked for as a first outing for Tony and Diva. By the end of dinner, Tony seems significantly calmer and more at ease with himself, and by the time they get back to the tower, Tony’s already talking about newer versions of Diva’s gear, modifications to make it simultaneously more functional and more fashionable, possible add-ons and accessories, different colors, and more, and Natasha is finally completely confident that giving Tony a service dog was one of the best decisions she’s ever made.
Natasha knew that she’d started herself down a long and confusing road. She’d known from the moment that Lucky had put his head in Clint’s lap that if she trained Lucky to be Clint’s service dog, that she would have to help everyone else get their own service dogs, too. She had known that almost, if not all, of them could benefit from a service animal of some kind, and it would just make sense to try and give everyone that help if she gave it to one person. She knew all of that.

So after she got Clint and Lucky working together, she had started compiling a list of what everyone needed, what kind of dog would work for them, what she thought would fit each person best. Choosing Tony as the second service dog handler hadn’t been her original plan; to be completely honest, she had doubted that he even needed on to begin with. Realizing what he was actually facing had certainly been a shock to her, and thinking it through afterwards, she felt ridiculous for having missed it in the first place. But now, with Tony having Diva, Natasha decided to start with the first person on her list.

Rather than training the puppy in secret and surprising him, Natasha figured it was more reasonable to just talk to him about it first, and that’s how she found herself in one of the numerous labs in Avengers tower, watching Bruce work.

They’ve got an easy conversation going, and Natasha is steadily guiding the flow of the discussions towards service dogs, using Lucky and Diva to help her get there.

“Have you thought about getting a service dog yourself?” She asks, and Bruce pauses, looking up at her curiously.

“Well, yes. But I haven’t entertained that thought in a while. Planning on making the idea of training service dogs a real thing for yourself?” He says, stepping out from behind the table he was at to face Natasha better.

Natasha smiles. “Maybe. It’s certainly not the worst possible life to lead. Would a service dog be something you would want?” She asks, and Bruce nods, but then shrugs.

“Well, yes and no. I’d love a service dog, but I don't know how the Other Guy would do with one,” he says, body language drooping ever so slightly.
Natasha hums thoughtfully. “I get the feeling Hulk would do just fine with a dog. Next time he’s around, do you mind if I introduce him to Lucky, get a feel for how he feels about dogs?”

“Sure, as long as Clint is okay with it, obviously it’s a risk, so I’d want him to be sure that’s okay with him first.” Bruce says, pulling at a loose thread on the sleeve of his shirt.

“Not a problem,” Natasha says, and with that, she’s gone, leaving Bruce standing, confused and uncertain, in the lab.

Two weeks later, a “code green” is called during a battle, and when the battle dies down, they need to go get Hulk out of the streets of New York. Natasha gives Clint a look, and Clint nods, so Natasha makes a quick stop at the tower before heading out to find Hulk.

Lucky trots alongside her happily, heeling perfectly even though she hadn’t bothered clipping on his leash. They find Hulk down an alleyway, curled up in the tightest ball he can manage and breathing heavily.

“Hulk?” Natasha says, and Hulk lifts his head, eyes lighting up at her voice, and then he notices Lucky beside her, and makes a small noise.

“Puppy?” Hulk asks, and Natasha nods.

“Yeah, this is Clint’s dog, Lucky. Do you want to pet him?”

Hulk starts to nod, then hesitates. “Won’t hurt puppy?” he asks, and Natasha tries to hide her surprise, shaking her head.

“No, I don't think so. As long as you're gentle, it should be fine,” she says, and Hulk nods, putting his hand down on the ground for Lucky to sniff. Lucky walks up when Natasha points toward Hulk, and he sniffs around Hulk’s hand, licking the tip of one of his fingers and wagging his tail, body language relaxed when Hulk starts to giggle.
“Cute,” Hulk says, and Natasha nods.

“He is, isn’t he? Would you want a dog of your own, Hulk?” she asks.

Hulk positively lights up, smiling from ear to ear. “Yes! If Banner want,” he adds.

“Bruce definitely wants a dog too, big guy. Any ideas what you would want to name the dog?”

“Smash,” Hulk says without hesitation, and Natasha smiles.

“Smash it is.”

Natasha confirms this choice with Bruce; Bruce is completely fine with it, though he is surprised by Natasha’s explanation of Hulk’s interaction with Lucky. “He was really that gentle?” Bruce asks.

“I don't think you give him enough credit,” Natasha tells him. “He’s part of you, Bruce. He’s like a big kid, but he has a lot of trauma, and he just wants to protect you. That’s why he’s there, right?”

Bruce nods, but he still looks uncertain. “Yeah, right. I know that’s true, scientifically. Emotionally, it’s just a little harder to process.” Natasha puts a hand on his shoulder, smiling.

“You’ll get there,” she says, and then she’s gone again, and Bruce can’t shake the feeling that she leaves every conversation that way on purpose.

It takes Natasha three months to find the right dog for Bruce. She decides to get him a dog from the humane society, figuring that it will make him feel less guilty about having the dog in the first place if he can feel like he rescued the dog. She’s got notices in at just about every humane society across the country, and a few in other countries, looking for a dog that will be perfect for him. When she finds the dog, the dog is at a humane society in Oregon. She flies out to meet the dog herself, and she’s not disappointed.
The dog is a pure white female named Lucy, suspected to be a Dogo Argentino, and she’s one of the sweetest dogs Natasha thinks she’s ever seen. When one of the humane society staff first brings her into a room to meet Natasha, Lucy immediately throws herself into Natasha’s lap, wagging her tail so hard that Natasha thinks her arm might bruise.

She has Lucy evaluated by a few veterinarians, and gets special permission from the humane society to take her around the city for a few days, and she tests Lucy on anything and everything she can think of; she drops things, yells, jumps at her, and fake cries to test Lucy’s reactions; she takes her to a dog park, to a pet store, and to a busy part of town, and gauges how she reacts to everything from dogs lunging at her to people with walking sticks to small children to squirrels and rabbits.

After three days, Natasha is comfortable with Lucy’s reactions, and she goes back to the humane society, signing the adoption paperwork and taking Lucy, now officially renamed Smash, home.

Before she starts any training, Natasha lets Smash have a few weeks just to get used to the tower, the team, and everything else in her new home. While she was confident that she wanted a shelter dog for Bruce, she also wants to make sure that the dog will be a good fit before she goes any further.

She didn’t need to worry; Smash fits right in, quickly making friends with Lucky and Diva, and almost immediately becoming a team favorite. She even seems to figure out that she’s meant to be Bruce’s dog, practically gluing herself to Bruce’s side and following him everywhere he goes. When the team is gathered in the living room, she curls herself up on Bruce’s lap, and when Bruce heads down to one of the labs, she follows him, watching him as he works.

When Natasha starts training Smash, she decides to train Smash and Bruce together from the beginning, making sure that Bruce and Smash work well together and understand each other. They do great, and training doesn’t take long; the hardest part is just training out some of Smash’s old behaviors, which Natasha had expected and prepared for. Smash is already fully grown, and she’s been cleared for mobility, so Natasha teaches Smash to brace, showing Bruce exactly what to look for and expect.

Smash learns some of her commands faster than others; she learns most of her tasks quickly, but takes a little longer to learn her obedience commands. She mostly struggles with down-stays, wanting more than anything to just run around, but given enough exercise, she calms
down enough to hold her down-stays perfectly. She loves doing her tasks, and maybe she gets a little overzealous sometimes, tasking when she doesn’t need to, but Bruce doesn’t seem to mind.

Tony and Clint get into an argument in the kitchen while Bruce is in the adjoining living room, and as Tony and Clint raise their voices, Smash jumps onto the couch beside Bruce, draping her body across his lap and letting the weight of her body help decrease Bruce’s blood pressure. He scratches her behind the ears absentmindedly, trying to ignore the yelling in the next room over. Natasha watches the interaction from behind her book, smiling at how naturally they work together.

The first time the team heads out on a mission after getting Smash, it’s a mission in a different country, and they bring Smash with them. She sits on the plane in front of Bruce, resting her head on his lap and watching him carefully for any sign of distress. When he doesn’t seem to have any, and Bruce tells her it’s okay, she starts to wander around the plane, sniffing at the other Avengers in their battle gear, particularly interested in Clint’s bow and arrows and Steve’s shield.

Clint starts to look more and more nervous about Smash sniffing at his quiver of arrows, so Natasha digs around in the back of the plane before producing a large rope toy, holding it out to an entranced Smash. Steve gives Natasha a look, and she shrugs. “I figured one of the dogs might end up on the ship at some point. Even service dogs need to play,” she says, and Steve shakes his head but doesn’t say anything, so she plops herself down on the floor to play tug of war with Smash.

When they land, Bruce and Smash stay behind, waiting until either the rest of the team returns or a code green is called. After about half an hour, a code green is called, and Bruce turns to Smash, gently smushing her face in his hands. “You be good, okay? I’ll be back,” he tells her, and then he’s gone, leaving Smash on the ship. Smash lays down, huffing, and rests her head on her paws until her handler comes back.

With Hulk’s help, the Avengers get everything under control, and when the battle’s over, Natasha goes back to the ship, gets Smash, and heads out to find Hulk. They find him out in the forest, jumping from tree to tree, and when Natasha calls his name, he turns, running back over to them when he sees Smash. “My puppy?” he asks, and Natasha nods.

“Hulk, this is Smash. Smash, this is Hulk, your other handler.” Hulk sits down on the ground, holding out his hand palm up towards Smash. Smash immediately rushes forward, sniffing his fingers and then hopping up onto his palm, licking his hand. Hulk laughs, slowly raising his hand to bring Smash up to his eye level.
Smash’s entire body is wagging with excitement, tail beating against Hulk’s thumb as she steps forward and licks Hulk’s nose. “Good dog,” Hulk says, and Smash barks, jumping up onto Hulk’s shoulders and running across his shoulders to the other side of his head, barking happily the whole time.

Natasha smiles as she watches them interact. “Okay guys, ready to go back to the ship?” she asks, and Hulk puts his hand up by his shoulder, letting Smash hop back into his hand so he can lower her to the ground. Once Smash is back by Natasha, Hulk takes a deep breath, crumpling to the ground as he shrinks down, letting Bruce front again.

As soon as he’s back to Bruce size, Smash runs forward, standing over Bruce and licking his face until he blinks his way back to consciousness, looking up at Smash with a bewildered expression before smiling. “Hey, kiddo,” he says softly, and Smash steps off the side of him, barking and nudging his side as he stumbles back to his feet. “Are we headed home?” he asks Natasha, and she nods.

“Mission’s over, everything’s fine, Smash and Hulk had a really cute moment together. I’ll have to record a video of them together next time so you can see it,” she says, and Bruce nods.

“Yeah, that’d be cool. Let’s go home, I think I need a couple plates of food and a long nap.”

Natasha does, in fact, record a video the next time Smash and Hulk are together. When Bruce plays it back later, he watches as the two run in circles together, Smash chasing Hulk and jumping on his leg to tag him, then turning and running as Hulk chases her, reaching down with one hand to gently boop her nose with his index finger. The video is about 3 minutes long, and Bruce watches it on repeat, smiling as he sees just how happy they are together. Watching the video, he can’t remember why he ever worried about how Hulk would do around a dog.
On days where the team is out on missions in town or nearby, the service dogs, including Smash, are left at the tower under JARVIS’s attentive care, and while taking care of three dogs might not sound like much for such a brilliant AI, it has in fact been harder than anticipated.

One of the most difficult things had been the fact that each dog has separate access clearances to different parts of the building, something that was quickly discovered the first time that the dogs were left at the tower. While Smash and Diva both have access to Tony’s workshop, Lucky doesn’t, and it caused a bit of confusion when Lucky, following the other two dogs a little more slowly, couldn’t enter through the workshop door like Smash and Diva had.

“I’m afraid your access to the workshop is restricted, Mr. Lucky,” Jarvis had said, and the dog had let out a soft whine, plopping down to lay in front of the door. Realizing that Lucky hadn’t been allowed in, Smash had turned back and left the workshop, licking the side of Lucky’s nose in support, and Diva had followed them back upstairs when he realized he was now alone in the workshop.

The dogs had instead headed up to the indoor dog park, where Lucky had produced a large red and gold tennis ball (one of Tony’s own designs), and oh, the game was on. Because of Lucky’s partial blindness, the ball was programmed to make a whistling noise as it flew through the air, a warbling noise when it was just sitting on the ground, and a squeaking noise when it was being carried by one of the dogs. Jarvis helpfully used the floor’s ability to change shape to quickly create hills under the ball and cause it to go flying, and the dogs started the game.

“Lucky retrieves first. Lucky 1, Diva and Smash 0,” Jarvis called out as Lucky raced over to snatch the ball off the floor, pursued by the other two dogs, making it another few feet before Smash tackled him, carefully pulling the ball out of his mouth and taking off. “Lucky and Smash 1, Diva 0.”

The game continued for another 20 minutes until all three dogs were tuckered out, wandering over to drink from one of the no-spill, self-replenishing water dishes against the wall. The three dogs laid down in a small cluster, panting, until a dinging noise alerted them to their handlers’ return. The dogs leapt up, racing out of the room and down the hall to the elevator on the communal floor.

Their handlers emerged, covered in sweat, dirt, and blood, and each dog pounced their handler, jumping up and licking their hands as they laughed. Clint crouched down to scratch Lucky behind the ears, Bruce wandered over and collapsed on the couch, Smash leaping up to lay down across his body, and Tony just plopped down on the floor cross-legged with his back against the wall, Diva turning to rest with her body parallel to the wall and her head in Tony’s lap.
“Jarvis, how did it go? Were the dogs good?” Tony asked, still slightly out of breath.

“They did well, Sir. They attempted to enter the workshop, but due to Lucky’s lack of clearance, they instead entered the indoor dog park for a game of fetch. Lucky won, with a score of 9 to Diva’s 7 and Smash’s 4. However, I believe all three dogs enjoyed the game, but were more excited by the return of their handlers.” Tony nods as Jarvis relays the information, and Clint stands back up from petting Lucky, head tilted to the side quizzically.

“Really? Lucky won? Huh. I guess I underestimated your love of fetch, didn’t I buddy?” Clint asks, turning to Lucky, who licks Clint’s hand in response.

Tony runs his hand through Diva’s fur, humming. “So, I take it you wouldn’t mind dog sitting again, J?” he asks.

“Not at all, Sir, in fact, it would be my pleasure,” Jarvis answers, and he actually sounds a little pleased by the prospect.

“Awesome, thanks Jarvis,” he says, and it might just be him, but Diva also looks happy about the idea.
Bucky and Fubar

Having Bucky in the tower is… strange, at best. Tony certainly seems more on edge for about the first week, because no one’s quite sure how Bucky’s doing, mentally or physically, and Natasha thinks he’s probably just replaying what happened to his parents in his mind, so it makes sense.

It becomes a lot easier for everyone to sympathize with Bucky after he has his first seizure on the communal floor. It’s terrible, Natasha knows, that it had taken Bucky having an emergency for people to warm up to him, but she can’t deny the facts. After everyone sees him go from walking towards the dining room with a glass of water to collapsed on the floor, body thrashing in a puddle of water and surrounded by broken glass, it’s hard to be mad at the guy.

He’s awkward and guarded; he seems terrified that the next time he turns around, someone’s going to restrain him and mind wipe him again, but he’s a genuinely good person. Natasha had known this, and so had Steve; in the Red Room, the Winter Soldier had been a bit of a legend, but Natasha remembers the first time she’d encountered him. He’d been heavily programmed, but there was some of his original personality hiding below the surface, and Natasha had seen a man, a broken, terrified man behind his eyes, and it had been one of the more uncomfortable missions she’d had to go through with. Steve remembers Bucky from before the war, the Zola experiments, the Winter Soldier, everything, and it’s clear by his expressions that he just desperately wants his friend back.

The more Natasha watches, she knows that Bucky isn’t angry, just scared, and she watches the way that when one of the dogs comes up, he doesn’t flinch like he does when a human approaches him, and he reaches down to pet them as gently as possible, always with his flesh hand, never the metal one, like he’s scared he’ll hurt them. Natasha watches, and decides to move Bucky to number one on her list, just like she’d done with Tony. She really wants to get Rhodey’s dog, but she figures Bucky’s needs are maybe a little more immediate. So she watches him and waits, finally getting her chance to talk to him when he heads into the gym on the communal floor by himself.

“Hey,” she says as she enters, following Bucky without waiting because she knows he’ll suspect what she’s up to anyway, “can I talk to you, Barnes?” Bucky turns without startling, confirming Natasha’s suspicion that he knew she was there, and he gives her a quick look up and down before nodding.

“Okay. What do you want?” he asks simply, and Natasha’s glad he’s at least straightforward, if nothing else.

“You seem like you’ve had a rough time of it lately, both mentally and physically. I wanted to offer you some support.”
Bucky snorts, turning away from her and walking over to set up a punching bag. “I’ve already got Steve climbing up my ass about talking to him, or going to a therapist, or whatever else. I think that’s enough support for me.”

“I wasn’t talking about me,” Natasha says, “I meant a dog. A service dog, like Diva or Lucky, that could help with the seizures, and as much else as possible.”

Bucky stops where he’d started working on the punching bag and steadies it without turning to face her. “You don’t honestly trust someone as dangerous as me with a dog, do you?” he asks bitterly, “You do realize that I could snap and get a dog killed, right?”

Natasha shakes her head, even if Bucky can’t see her. “You could do that, but I trust that you wouldn’t. I’ve seen you around the dogs. Even Bruce isn’t that gentle when he pets Smash. I think a dog could be perfect for you. Someone who can help, who understands, but who isn’t obnoxious and overly pushy,” she says, and by the small exhale she hears, she thinks Bucky understood her dig at Steve. “Look, you don’t have to know now. But think about it. It could be good for you. And you deserve to be happy,” she adds, and then she turns and leaves, hopefully giving Bucky time to process that last sentence.

Bucky gets back to her two weeks later. He finds her in the communal kitchen at 3am on Saturday, and he stands with his back to her, staring at the coffee maker without moving, before he says anything. “So let’s say I wanted a service dog. How would that work? What do you need to know for this to work out?”

“Well,” Natasha starts, thinking about her words carefully, “I need to know what you need. What the dog would need to help with. What I need to keep in mind for their training. And I need you to be completely honest with me about it all. I might need to talk to Steve, in case there’s anything he’s noticed that you haven’t.”

Bucky nods, back still to her. “Okay. Yeah, okay. Can we talk about this on Monday? I’ll need a few days to try and…” he thinks the words over, “piece everything together,” he settles on.

“Sure. Noon on Monday?”

Bucky nods, and that’s that. Natasha heads to bed, and she thinks Bucky probably follows not long after.
On Monday, Bucky sits down across from Natasha at the dining room table on Bucky and Steve’s floor, and slides her the notepad he’d been writing on for the last couple days. He’s got notes scribbled all over the first two pages, and then a neater list on the third.

“I wasn’t sure what all you wanted to see so. I thought I’d just leave it all,” he says, and Natasha nods.

“No, that’s great, thank you. It’s important to know everything.” Bucky fidgets while she looks over his writing, then flips to a new page.

“Okay. Is it alright if I start a new list here?” she asks, and he nods, standing up to get her a pen.

“Alright. Based on what you’ve got here, I’ve got some ideas. Things I think might work, things that we might need to modify but that could probably work. You want to go through it all together?” Bucky nods again, so she launches into her ideas. About an hour and a half after Natasha had stepped onto Bucky and Steve’s floor, she’s leaving with a mostly completed list, and all that’s left is to check with Steve, too, but she suspects there isn’t much left to add.

The hardest part, Natasha thinks, is finding the right dog for Bucky. He needs a dog that’s big enough to brace on and big enough not to worry that he’ll hurt the dog. He needs a dog that’s friendly and sweet, but able to focus on keeping people away from Bucky sometimes, not letting them approach. Bucky needs a dog that isn’t afraid to use intelligent disobedience to help him, but is also able to listen to commands if Bucky really, really does need the dog to back off. He needs a dog that will be able to keep up with his super soldier energy, but spend days in bed if Bucky’s having a rough patch.

It’s a lot to consider, so Natasha takes her time, does some research, before finally coming to her conclusion. She finds a breeder that will have puppies ready to go to new homes in a few weeks, so she checks her passport, gets her plane ticket, and waits.

When she arrives at the breeder’s place, she’s actually a little underwhelmed. With the high price of the puppy, she’d expected a more elaborate, sophisticated home, not the small, cozy place she walks into on the outskirts of Нерюнгри. The breeder is kind, an older gentleman who leads her
back to a small bedroom that’s been converted into a den for the mom and puppies. The puppies are three months old, and even at such a young age, they’re already huge.

Natasha confirms with the breeder that she can do a few simple temperament tests with the pups, and then she sits on the floor, watching the puppies play. As soon as she sits down, three of the eight puppies immediately rush her, jumping into her lap and then running off, and she notes the color of the collars they’re wearing, mentally puts them on her “less favorable” list, and continues watching.

After a few more moments, another puppy wanders up to her, sniffing tentatively at her hands, and then crawls into her lap, placing its paws on her chest and looking up to sniff her face. Natasha watches the puppy, smiling, and places the puppy on her “more favorable” mental list, then decides to test one of the next items on her list. She picks the puppy up in her hands, and he flails for a moment before stopping, licking Natasha’s hand once and then settling.

Natasha puts the pup back on the floor, then pulls a small foam ball out of her pocket. She holds it towards the puppy, then tosses it a few feet away. The puppy follows its movement, turns to look back at Natasha, and then wanders over and picks it up, bringing it back to her. Natasha takes the ball, scratching the puppy gently behind the ears. She puts the ball back in her pocket, then quickly spins, slamming her hands down on the floor in front of the pup and shouting “boo!” The puppy takes a half step back, then steps forward, licking Natasha’s chin.

Mostly satisfied, Natasha stands, walking towards the door to go talk to the breeder. As she walks, she looks behind her and finds the puppy following a few feet behind, still stumbling a little over its huge paws, and she smiles. She talks to the breeder over a cup of tea, and after signing some paperwork and paying him in cash, she thanks him, goes back to the bedroom, and picks up the puppy with the blue collar, heading out after a last goodbye to the breeder.

The flight home is later that night, so Natasha finds the nearest pet friendly coffee shop and waits, keeping the puppy in her lap as she drinks her second cup of tea for the day.

The flight itself is uneventful, and Natasha spends it thinking about names for the puppy. When she gets back to the tower, she asks Jarvis to let Bucky know the puppy is home and they’re on the communal floor if he wants to meet him. Bucky’s down after about half an hour, and he finds Natasha carrying the puppy around in her arms, describing everything to him.

“What’s his name?” Bucky asks, and Natasha turns, holding the puppy out to Bucky.
“FUBAR,” she says, and Bucky takes the puppy, laughing even as he tries to hold back tears.

“Fucked Up Beyond All Repair,” Bucky says, holding the puppy with his flesh arm and very gently petting him with his metal index finger, as if he’s worried that he’ll hurt the puppy with his metal arm somehow. “Yeah. Yeah, that fits. Thanks, Nat.”

“Don’t thank me yet, we still have years of training to go,” she says, but she’s smiling as she says it, watching as Fubar puts his paws on Bucky’s shoulder and licks his face, and she has no doubt this will work out fine.

At just 6 months old, Fubar is already 75 pounds. He’s learning his obedience commands quickly, he’s gotten all of his vaccinations, and he’s taken to trotting around with Bucky everywhere he goes, even to the bathroom. While Bucky’s initially nervous about being left alone with Fubar, Natasha reassures him that he’ll be fine, and even if something does happen, Jarvis would never let anyone’s safety be put at risk, even Fubar’s, so Bucky rolls with it, and over time it’s obvious how much even just Fubar’s presence helps Bucky.

Fubar gets along great with the other dogs too, even if he does tend to annoy Diva with the sheer amount of puppy energy he has.

At 9 months old, Fubar is already starting to show behaviors that could be easily shaped into the tasks Bucky will need from him in the future, and, much to Natasha’s (as well as Bucky and Steve’s) delight, Fubar often seems to be able to predict Bucky’s seizures, whining and pawing at his leg a few minutes in advance. Even when he doesn’t manage to predict them, he’s already watched Steve’s response to Bucky’s seizures enough times that he’s started to help Steve set up around Bucky as soon as they start, grabbing a pillow for Steve to put under Bucky’s head and circling around Bucky to keep people away.

Natasha starts working with both Fubar and Bucky to actually train those behaviors or similar behaviors into tasks, and both of them are quick learners; Bucky starts carrying treats everywhere he goes, and on a few occasions Natasha’s woken up in the middle of the night and gone down to the communal floor to grab a cup of tea, only to hear Bucky and Fubar doing some training in the new practice room Tony had made. After discovering that Bucky would sometimes have to fake seizures for Fubar to practice responding, Tony had built a training room specifically for service dog training, complete with a padded floor for Bucky to fall on when faking seizures, fake
accessible door buttons in various styles, non-operational light switches on the wall, and dog ‘panic’ buttons (“that way, if Bucky needs help in the tower and Fubar can’t help, Fubar can push the button and it will alert the nearest person to come help,” Tony had explained).

Natasha sometimes just sits in the hallway near the practice room, listening to Bucky and Fubar train. She’s encouraged by the fact that every time she listens in, Bucky sounds optimistic and gives Fubar lots of praise, so they must be doing well together. Once or twice she’s also heard Bucky crying in there, but before she could even decide whether to go help she’d heard laughter, and a “thanks, Foobs,” and then silence, so she figures Fubar has it covered.

At a year and a half, Fubar and Bucky are doing a great job together, and Fubar seems to finally be growing into his paws at 145 pounds. The only tasks that Natasha hasn’t been able to introduce to the two of them yet is Fubar’s mobility tasks, but those will have to wait until Fubar’s old enough to have his elbows and hips checked for dysplasia, and Fubar’s doing great with all of his other tasks. He’s learned to work off leash, and with his good manners, Natasha has even started to go with Bucky and Fubar on short trips to public places.

Fubar wears the service dog vest that Tony had created for him (“What?” Tony had said when Bucky stared at him, holding the new vest, “You don’t really think I’d let any of you walk out of this tower without something stylish and designer on, do you? I cannot have your bad fashion sense besmirch my good reputation, Barnes!”), and trots beside Bucky, stepping away long enough to step into rooms, check for threats, and then return to a heel when he’s confident it’s safe for Bucky to enter.

Fubar has yet to have a problem with his public access manners, even after one particularly frightening encounter at a grocery store in which a Golden Retriever had rushed towards Fubar, growling and snapping, only for a man to come around the corner, picking up the dog’s leash with a quick “It’s okay, he’s friendly!”

(Bucky had been so shaken that Fubar had actually had to take the leash in his mouth and pull Bucky over to a secluded area in the back of the store, jumping on Bucky’s chest until he sat down on the floor and Fubar could do deep pressure therapy. When Bucky had been finally calm enough for Natasha to get him to talk to her, she confirmed that he was okay and then searched through the store until she found the Golden Retriever and it’s handler. She spoke to the man for a few minutes, and by the time she was done, the man looked a little pale but reassured her that he wouldn’t bring his dog back in again without better training. He was owner training the dog himself, and while Natasha could sympathize, she also wasn’t willing to budge, because that could never happen again. Ever.)
At 2 years old, Natasha and Bucky took Fubar in to be evaluated and have his elbows and hips checked for dysplasia. The vet took the x-rays and sent them off, then gave Fubar a full evaluation, informing them that as long as the x-rays came back okay, Fubar was in perfect health and absolutely set to do mobility work.

The x-rays came back about a month later, and Fubar was cleared for mobility. Tony made Fubar a custom, heavy duty mobility harness, Natasha showed Bucky how to train Fubar to brace, and they started working on Fubar’s various mobility tasks, everything from guiding to bracing to counterbalance. Within a matter of months, Natasha considered Fubar fully trained, and Bucky was confident enough in both Fubar’s training and his own capabilities to start going out of the tower on his own.

If the look on Bucky’s face the first time he and Fubar came home with an armful of things he’d thought everyone might enjoy from the store was anything to go by, then Natasha was once again confident that she’d made the right decisions in getting Bucky a service dog. Now, for the next person on her list. Hopefully there wouldn’t be any more new people she’d have to add to this list…
“God fucking damn it!”

“Jessica…”

“Oh fuck off, you Catholic asshole, unless you want to deal with these pieces of shit next time—”

“Jessicaaa…”


“…I don’t actually think you’re done swearing.”

“Well, fucking SUE me then, Murdock, that’s what you do for a living, right? Ugh, so annoying, you sound like Trish’s mom. ‘Watch your language, Jessica!’ ‘That’s no way for a lady to speak, Jessica!’ God, I hate you so much right now.”

Okay, maybe it was nosy, but Clint really wanted to see who these people were. They sounded like fun. Or, the Jessica person did, anyway. He wasn’t sure about Murdock. Figuring that his appearance as an Avenger should be conversation starter enough, Clint rounded the corner into the tiny alley, finding himself face to face with a very pissed off looking woman and a dude in… a costume with horns? No, wait, shit, that was fucking Daredevil, and okay, maybe the costume looks a little more Halloween than vigilante, but still.

“Okay, the costume’s not as cool up close, but still,” Clint said, and both people spun around to face him, Daredevil even putting his fists up in a defensive pose. Clint raised his hands, palms out in surrender.

“Whoa, whoa, don’t beat me up, I come in peace, I was just in the neighborhood and the conversation sounded interesting. And loud, seeing as I was able to hear it, so…” he trailed off, shrugging. “Anyway. Daredevil, huh? You’ve been in the news lately. You can do parkour, right? Because I think parkour’s awesome, but Nat’s always on my ass about ‘No, Clint, that’s impractical, just run normally.’ But like, that’s so boring, am I right?” The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen (presumably Murdock) tilted his head to the side.
“I’m sorry. Do I know you?” he asked, and Clint clutched his chest, feeling both mockingly and seriously offended.

“What? Are you telling me you’ve never seen me on TV or anything? Battle of New York ring any bells? I mean, Captain Stars and Stripes got more screen time than I did, and so did Iron Ass, but still, I was there, right in the middle, or, more accurately, on a building, but hey, that’s my specialty, right?” Silence again, and Clint was seriously starting to feel offended when the woman (Jessica?) laughed.

“Jesus, you talk a lot for an Avenger, you know that? But at least you’ve got good sarcasm. Murdock, this is Clint Barton, you know, Hawkeye? From the Avengers?” she said, and Clint frowned.

“Wait, why do you recognize me but not you? What am I missing?” Clint asked.

Daredevil sighed. “You’re not missing anything. I’m missing my vision, that’s all,” he said, and okay, now this made sense, Clint was still cool enough to be recognized, just not by blind people. But wait--

“Holy shit, Daredevil is fucking blind?” Murdock tensed, so Clint raised hands again, even if Daredevil couldn’t see him. “Whoa, hold on, sorry, that was rude, even by my standards. I’m not shitting on you, I just think it’s cool. I mean, I’m Deaf, so it’s nice to know I’m not the only deaf or blind hero out there.”

Daredevil frowned. “I wouldn’t say I’m a hero.”

“Bullshit. The news isn’t always flattering, but hey, it’s usually shit no matter who you are. Besides, if nothing else, your ass is flattering in that suit, so that’s got to count as some kind of heroism,” he said, and probably-Jessica laughed.

“He’s got a point, Murdock. That kinky suit of yours makes your ass pop.”

Clint nodded. “Okay, I definitely like you. Speaking of which, who are you, exactly?”
“Jessica Jones,” definitely-Jessica said, “and this is Matt Murdock.”

“Don’t tell him my name,” Matt hissed, and Jessica sighed.

“He already knows you’re blind, that you live in Hell’s Kitchen, and that you helped stop Wilson Fisk. He’s a fucking Avenger, Murdock, not a cop, chill your shit.” Jessica turned back to Clint. “Sorry, he’s one of those ‘oh no, my secret identity!’ types, as if people won’t figure it out eventually.”

“No one other than a private investigator has yet,” Matt pointed out.

Clint’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it out, reading the message with a sigh. “Hey, hate to ditch out on such a thrilling discussion, but apparently they need me to save the world. Anyway, maybe stop by the tower sometime? I’m pretty sure Tiny Stank has enough room in the tower for at least the entire Swiss army, so I don’t think he’d mind having two more people come by, especially when one of them looks like as much of a snack as you do in that suit,” Clint said, gesturing at Matt and winking at Jessica.

“Does Iron Man have free booze?” Jessica asked, and Clint nodded.

“I’m pretty sure he owns stock in most alcohol companies, and he might actually own a few somehow.”

“Alright, I’m in then. I’ll see if I can drag ‘stick up his ass’ over here along. Maybe the rest of our little team, too, because otherwise Danny definitely won’t shut up.” Clint grinned.

“Sure, bring the rest of your team, as long as they’re as pretty as Matt but with none of the ass-sticks, but I really do have to go save the world now. See you again sometime.” Clint walked back out of the alley, then took off at a sprint towards the location from Natasha’s text. Hopefully this wouldn’t take long, he couldn’t wait to tell Tasha about this.
Rhodey and Valor

Natasha talks to Tony about getting Rhodey a service dog, because she knows that Tony’s closest to him and cares the most about him. Tony positively lights up when she asks, and he offers to help her pick and train the dog. “Don’t tell Rhodes though,” he says, “Trust me, he’ll overthink it otherwise.” Despite Natasha’s possibly better judgement, she decides to go ahead and trust Tony, and they start working together to find the perfect dog for Rhodey.

Rhodey actually has one of the shortest lists of needs out of the whole group. Rhodey needs mobility support (“the prosthetics I made still aren’t perfect, and it can be painful for him to walk a lot,” Tony tells Natasha), and he has PTSD from the military, but that’s where the list ends. While it’s still disabling, it’s certainly one of the easier task lists Natasha’s worked on recently.

The next step is finding the right breed of dog, and Tony beats Natasha to it. “Look,” he says one day in the communal living room, sliding her his tablet with a picture of a gorgeous fawn colored dog, standing tall and proud. “Anatolian Shepherd. They’re a local breeder. AKC registered dogs, and they’ve just had puppies. Size should check out, and the price doesn’t matter. There’s still a couple puppies up for grabs, and I bet we could get it arranged to get the one we want.”

Natasha nods. “Alright. When can we go look at the puppies?”

Tony checks the time, then stands up. “Right now. Let’s go, we can take my Mercedes.” When Natasha gives him a look, Tony shrugs. “What? Why should I wait when I have the chance to get my best friend more of the help he deserves?”

Deciding that she’d better go with him in case Tony just goes anyway and picks a dog that won’t be suitable, she grabs her coat and follows him into the elevator and down to Tony’s garage.

At the breeder’s place, Natasha shows Tony how to test the puppies’ temperaments, and he learns quickly, immediately taking on the challenge of testing two of the five puppies that they’ve decided might be good candidates. It’s a big litter; ten puppies total, and half of them seem like good candidates, which is genuinely impressive to Natasha. This is a good breeder, and a good litter. She might have to keep this breeder’s contact information in case they know people for other breeds she might want in the future.

Of the three puppies Natasha works with, one seems like a decent candidate after further tests, and
Tony holds up both of his two as possible candidates. They switch puppies, and eliminate one of Tony’s puppies, leaving just two. The final test, walking away from the puppies, proves Tony’s puppy to be the better candidate, and they tell the breeder, who refuses Tony’s money when he goes to pay for the dog.

“Thanks to you and War Machine, my family is safe,” the breeder tells them, “my daughter loves technology, and she was at the Stark Expo during the mess with those evil drones. She told me later that you and Colonel Rhodes lured them away from the Expo, and if you hadn’t both put your lives on the line, she might not be alive today. Consider this my thanks for your help.”

Tony still tries to offer the woman money, but Natasha just thanks her and drags Tony out of the house and back into his car. “Look, this is her way of saying thank you. It will make her feel better knowing that she didn’t take your money, no matter how much you’d like to give it to her. Just let her have that, okay?”

Tony begrudgingly agrees, and they drive home, and if Natasha sees a story on the news about a sudden donation to a local school’s STEM program on the condition that they support female students interested in the program, she pretends it’s a coincidence.

Training goes smoothly, and Tony invests almost as much time into training the pup as Natasha does. He chooses the puppy’s name (“Valor,” Tony says, “because Rhodey still hangs out with a lot of his old military buddies and his dog needs to sound cool if he’s gonna be working with War Machine. Besides,” Tony says more quietly, “if there’s any one trait Rhodey embodies most, it’s valor.”), and works with Natasha on all of Valor’s training, going as far as asking Natasha how and why she trains certain tasks in certain ways, and if Valor’s training is different from Diva’s.

Tony also makes Valor custom service dog gear as he grows, each piece of gear just as fancy and well-made as the last. Natasha tries to convince him that it’s not necessary, because Valor will grow out of the gear anyway, but Tony insists, and he seems so happy by the prospect of customizing gear that Natasha’s not willing to take that away from him.

In the process, Tony ends up making an entire production room for service dog gear (“because it’s different from making technology,” according to Tony), and he starts to go all out in customizing the other dogs’ gear too, asking Clint, Bruce, and Bucky for their opinions on some upgrades to each of their sets of gear.

As he makes more gear, he also starts making gear organizers for each team to use, and Natasha almost wants to roll her eyes at how far Tony is already taking his commitment to this idea.
However, Natasha has to admit that the gear is not only unique, but it’s high quality and suits each team perfectly. (She’d also be lying if she said that Valor’s “Dog Bless America” patch wasn’t pretty funny. Not that she’d ever admit that to Tony.)

When Valor is ready to be introduced to Rhodey, Natasha has Tony invite him to the tower for dinner, and when Rhodey accepts, they decide they’ll explain to him after dinner.

Rhodey fits in well with the rest of the team, even though he clearly feels a bit out of his league when everyone’s sharing funny battle and mission stories, and dinner goes well. When everyone starts to leave the table and head off to their own floors for bed, Tony pulls Rhodey aside and asks him to stay for a moment while Natasha brings him his surprise.

“A surprise?” Rhodey asks, eyebrows furrowed. “Tony, please tell me you didn’t do something stupid.”

“No, of course not! Well, I hope not. I don’t think so? Actually, I’m starting to have second thoughts,” he says, and Rhodey shakes his head.

“Well, if Natasha’s involved, hopefully it’s reasonable,” Rhodey says as Natasha brings Valor down the hall from the “dog living room” Tony had created (“What? The dogs deserve to have a calm space to relax,” Tony had argued when everyone had looked at him weird.), and Valor trots by her side wearing his red biothane harness and blue velcro cape, the cape covered in the patches Tony had made for him; “Dog Bless America.” “Working Service Dog, Do Not Pet.” “Mobility Assistance Dog.” “PTSD Service Dog.” “Serving Those Who Served.”

Natasha brings Valor to a stop, holding a stand-stay directly in front of Rhodey. Tony speaks first. “Rhodey, this is Valor. Natasha and I trained him for you. Uh, he’s your service dog. If you want him. I mean, yeah,” Tony finishes quietly, looking more and more fidgety by the moment. Diva pads up behind him, nudging Tony’s hip with his nose until Tony starts to pet him.

“Tones, this is… amazing. I… Thank you.” There’s so much sincerity in Rhodey’s voice that Tony actually looks surprised. “And you too, Natasha. Thank you.”

“Of course. Well, shall we show you what he can do? I can demonstrate, if you’d like,” Natasha says, and Rhodey nods. “Okay. so, if you’re having a hard time standing, or going up or down stairs, he has a command so that he squares his shoulders and you can put your weight on the
handle safely for a moment. Like this. Valor, brace,” Natasha says, and Valor squares off his body. Natasha grabs the handle of Valor’s mobility harness, pressing down gently.

Rhodey watches carefully, nodding. “So, how do I make sure he’s doing it right?” Natasha takes a moment to show Rhodey what to look for, already appreciative of Rhodey’s concern for Valor’s health and safety.

“You can also use the other handle just to rest your hand on without pushing down, if you’re just a little unsteady on your feet and need some help balancing. He also has a few different commands for PTSD. He’ll alert to panic attacks, help ground you if you’re dissociating or having a flashback, and he can summon help by barking or by using one of the buttons I’ve installed around the tower. Pretty ingenious on my part, I’d say,” Tony adds, and that makes Rhodey laugh.

“Yeah, okay. Anything else?”

Natasha answers this time. “He can block around you to keep people back, and he can check a room for threats before you enter the room. Here, like this. Valor, block.” Valor stands between Natasha and both Tony and Rhodey, his left side pressed against the front of Natasha’s legs. “Or, if you need him to watch behind you: Valor, cover me.” Valor walks behind Natasha, facing out behind her and moving his head side to side.

“He won’t actually hurt anyone, he’s just looking around, but it looks protective. And if you’re entering a room and worried about threats: Valor, check?” Natasha points toward the kitchen, and Valor walks to the kitchen doorway, looks around the room, then comes back over to Natasha, bumping her hand gently. “If he bumps your hand, it’s safe. How are you feeling about all of this?”

Rhodey shrugs. “I don’t… this was unexpected. But I do need it. I’ve been… I haven’t been doing so great lately. I could use the help. Are you sure he’ll enjoy working with me?”

“Why don’t we find out? Give him the command ‘heel,’ then do whatever you want. Walk around with him, test his other commands,” Natasha suggests.

Rhodey looks hesitant, but he nods anyway. “Okay. Valor, heel,” he says, and Valor walks over to him, turning so he’s on Rhodey’s right, facing the same direction. “Valor, block.” Valor steps in front of Rhodey, his side pressed gently against Rhodey’s legs. “Heel.” Valor turns, stepping back into a heel at Rhodey’s side.
Tony grins. “See? A natural. You both work together perfectly! I was right. This was a good idea. It wasn’t stupid. Right?”

Rhodey lets out an exasperated sigh, but nods. “Yeah, this was a good idea. Thanks again. Both of you.”

“Anything for you, honey bear,” Tony says, “now let’s get moving! We’ve got to get dog food into your car. And bowls. And other dog stuff. Come on!” Tony starts walking towards the elevator without bothering to get a reply, and Rhodey looks over at Natasha.

“Do we follow him?” he asks, and Natasha laughs.

“Is it ever up to us?”

“No, not usually.” Rhodey and Natasha walk to the elevator together, Valor heeling comfortably at Rhodey’s side. “Really though. Thank you, Natasha.”

Natasha shakes her head. “It’s no problem. I mean, after Clint got Lucky…” she shrugs. “It just seemed right. To try and help everyone.”

“Still,” Rhodey says as the elevator starts down to the garage, “You didn’t have to think of me, but you did. I appreciate that.”

For once, Natasha doesn’t actually know what to say, so she just nods, and the rest of the time they spend loading Rhodey’s car she just listens to Tony and Rhodey talk. As she and Tony watch Rhodey drive away, she thinks about what Rhodey said. Maybe she doesn’t have to do this. But she wants to. She’s not sure what to think about that, so she just puts the thought aside, instead thinking about the next person on her list. This will be interesting.
Natasha chooses Steve’s dog easily. She knows exactly what kind of dog she’s looking for, she’s found a breeder, and she’s waiting for the breeder to get back to her about when the next litter will be born when Steve solves the problem for her.

It’s 10am on a Sunday, and Natasha’s starting to worry because Steve goes to 8am mass and should be back by now, but he’s nowhere in sight. She’s actually wondering whether or not to call him when she hears the elevator ding, and Steve’s hesitant voice call “Hey, Nat? JARVIS said you were up here. Uh, can I get your advice on something?” There’s a scuffling noise, and Steve grunts. “Uh, maybe quickly?”

Natasha’s up and to the elevator in seconds, and as soon as the elevator comes into view she’s confused, because-- “Steve, is that a Labrador Retriever?” she asks, and Steve nods, still trying to keep the dog from running out onto the communal floor by holding onto the dog’s collar in a death grip.

“Uh, yeah, I’m not sure how she does with other dogs, and I wasn’t sure if it would be okay for her to be here, but I didn’t really know where else to take her, so uh. Yeah.”

Steve is stumbling over his own words so much that it sounds like he might actually start crying if Natasha doesn’t say something nice, so she does what feels natural. She steps forward, grabs the dog’s collar, and taps Steve’s arm with her other hand. “You can let go, I’ve got her,” she says, and Steve releases his grip on the collar with a sigh of relief.

The dog pulls to get out of the elevator, and Natasha turns with the dog, planting her feet, and the dog hits the end of Natasha’s reach and comes to a jolting stop, panting and looking around, whites of her eyes showing. “Steve, where did you get her from?”

“So, there’s-- there was this older lady that used to come to church every Sunday morning, Ms. O’Sullivan, and she wasn’t there this morning. I went to go check on her at her home, because I’ve helped her with her groceries before, and she just passed in her sleep, I guess. I called 911, but she had her dog in the house, and I didn’t want them to take the dog to the pound, so. I brought her home?” He blushes as he says the last part, suddenly becoming very interested with the way his shoes look, and Natasha rolls her eyes. Of course he just decided to bring an old lady’s dog home. Okay.

“Do you know her name?” she asks, and Steve nods.
“Verity.” When Natasha gives him an amused look, Steve shrugs. “She got the dog not long after we first met. It might have been because I suggested she get a dog for company. She might have named the dog with Captain America in mind. I don’t know.” Steve looks genuinely overwhelmed, and Natasha just pats his shoulder.

“It’s fine. Well, none of the other dogs are on the floor right now, so, Jarvis, keep the other dogs off the communal floor for a bit?”

“Oh, of course, Ms. Romanoff. All dog handlers have been informed as to the current situation.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Natasha lets go of the collar, and Verity takes off, running to the furthest room from them and then back, sniffing at anything and everything she sees.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Steve asks, and Natasha nods.

“Yeah, she should be fine. She’s nervous and maybe curious, but she doesn’t seem reactive. Besides, there was something I wanted to talk to you about anyway, and this might be the perfect time.”

Steve turns to look at Natasha. “Okay, what is it?”

“Well, how would you feel about having a service dog?”

There’s a rummaging sound, and then squeaking as Verity comes running down the hall, holding a plush pink bunny dog toy in her mouth, dropping it at Steve’s feet, who smiles like Verity has just brought him the best gift ever. “I think I could be okay with that idea.”

As it turns out, Verity seems to be a suitable candidate for Steve’s service dog. Once she’s over the initial anxiety of being taken from her former owner’s home and brought to a new place, she becomes more curious and enthusiastic than nervous, bringing Steve anything she finds that’s even mildly possible for her to carry.
By the end of the first half hour in the tower, Steve is surrounded by a pile of pillows, dog toys, blankets, and every sealed container Verity could find in the kitchen, from tupperware to some of Bucky’s prescription pill bottles. Steve is flustered, but Natasha finds it adorable, and she takes a few discreet photos on her phone before helping Steve put everything back.

They have Jarvis ask the other handlers if they can bring their dogs down to the communal floor now, and they get a yes from Clint and Bruce, a no from Bucky, and a “give me ten minutes” from Tony, so Natasha uses the time to see what commands Verity already knows. She can sit and down on command, but that appears to be it. However, she’s a quick learner, and Natasha’s already taught her to high five by the time Clint arrives with Lucky.

Lucky hurtles out of the elevator, tripping over his own paws, and Natasha has to hold back a laugh at his resemblance to Clint. Verity runs up to greet him, stopping a few feet away so Lucky can approach her first. Lucky sniffs her butt, and Verity returns the favor, both dogs’ tails wagging steadily at mid-height. After sniffing each other, Verity drops into a play bow that Lucky mimics, and then they’re racing off down the hall, paws skittering across the hardwood floor.

“I didn’t realize you had a new dog trained already, Nat,” Clint says, and Natasha shakes her head.

“I don’t. This is Verity, Steve’s new dog. She used to belong to a friend of Steve’s.” Clint’s smart enough to read between the lines, so he just nods, watching the dogs play.

The elevator dings again, and the doors open to reveal Bruce and Smash. Smash takes a couple steps out of the elevator, looking left and right, then turns back and nudges Bruce’s hand. They step out together just in time for Lucky and Verity to run directly into Bruce’s legs, knocking him to the ground.

“Watch out, there’s two dogs running around,” Clint tells Bruce, holding out a hand, and Bruce snorts.

“Yeah, thanks for the warning.” Bruce takes the hand Clint offers him, and Smash nudges at his side, moving to stand on the side of Bruce closer to where the other two dogs had run off to again. “I’m okay, go say hi,” Bruce tells Smash, and she nudges his hand one last time before running in the direction of the thumping noises that are presumably Lucky and Verity wrestling. “So, new dog already?”

Natasha’s about to answer when the elevator doors open for the third time, and Diva jumps out, Tony following as he wipes his grease-covered hands on his jeans. “Okay, so there’s another dog now? And no one told me about this? This is still my tower, right? I pay the bills? No one bought it
out from under me in my sleep, right? Because I feel like I should be told about these things first.” Diva races down the hall towards the sounds of the other dogs, and Tony just lets him go.

“It wasn’t intentional,” Steve says, and he looks genuinely embarrassed, “I just- I didn’t want her to end up at a pound all alone, or with someone who wouldn’t treat her right, and-”

“Whoa, Rogers, chill on the speech,” Tony interrupts, “I was joking. It’s cool. I kinda figured this was going to be happening now, you know, all the dogs. So relax, it’s fine. What’s the new kid’s name?”

“...Verity.”

Tony laughs. “Oh, that’s perfect, Star Spangled Banner and his dog, Verity.”

“Yeah, because ‘Patriotism’ just would have been too much, right?” Clint adds, and he and Tony high five while Bruce groans and Steve just sighs.

“Okay, jokes aside. She’s staying though, right? Because I can have her dog bowl set up by tonight,” Tony says, and Steve looks at Natasha, so she answers instead.

“Yeah, she’s staying. I think she’ll work out.”

“Cool. Then I’m gonna need Diva back so we can get set up in the workshop. Oh, and can I borrow your dog, Mr. Freedom? I’ll need measurements for her vest.”

“Sure.” Steve looks flustered, but Tony either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care, because he just claps his hands together excitedly.

“Right! Okay. Diva! Let’s go, kiddo! Verity! If you answer to your name, let’s go!” Diva comes barreling back down the hall, the rest of the dogs chasing him, and they all stop by their respective handlers, checking in. Verity runs up to Steve, licking his hands, but turns when Tony calls her name again from the elevator. “Come on, kid!” he calls, and Steve points her towards Tony, so she trots into the elevator, head tilted as she watches the doors close between her and Steve.
“So. I’m headed back to my lab, if that’s alright,” Bruce says, and Natasha nods.

“Yeah, thanks for coming down, Bruce. See you later. You too, Clint.” Both men nod, and when the elevator doors open again, they step back in with their dogs, and then they’re gone.

There’s about a minute of silence before Steve finally says something. “This will work out, right?”

Natasha smiles. “Hey, I’ve done this before. It’ll be fine. But we should maybe talk about what all you might want or need from Verity.” She heads back to the couch she’d been sitting on before Steve and Verity showed up, grabbing her tablet. “So, I’ve got some ideas of what might be good for Verity to know, tell me what you think.” Steve sits down on the couch next to her, and they get to work.

It’s fairly easy to train Verity; none of her tasks are mobility related, so the fact that Steve doesn’t know her exact age isn’t really a problem, and they won’t have to worry as much about her elbows and hips. They have her tested anyway, and she’s in acceptable ranges, so it’s no big deal.

The hardest task for Verity to learn is deep pressure therapy for Steve’s dissociation, and it’s mostly difficult because she has a lot of energy and doesn’t particularly like staying still for long. This works to their advantage for some of her other tasks though, including her anger intervention related tasks.

As part of his PTSD, as well as his general personality, Steve can be fairly quick to anger, and they train Verity to interrupt Steve if he starts to lash out. Generally, all Verity has to do is paw at Steve’s leg as an alert if he starts to get angry, but sometimes he’s harder to persuade, and Verity has learned to actually tackle Steve if he’s becoming too angry or aggressive.

Having Verity tackle Steve wasn’t necessarily intentional; however, in one of their training sessions, Natasha asked Steve to keep pretending to be angry even after Verity pawed at his leg, so he kept yelling, getting closer and closer to Natasha until Verity took a few steps back and launched herself at Steve, shocking him enough that he actually fell over. It was hilarious at the time, and Natasha realized later that teaching Verity to do that might actually be practical, too.

They also work on having Verity distinguish between Steve being jokingly mad and actually being mad, and she learns quickly, letting Steve keep going if he’s joking but stopping him when he’s actually mad.
When the day finally comes to test Verity in a public place, Natasha chooses a small restaurant she’s heard good things about, and she goes with Steve and Verity to make sure everything goes well. The staff are kind and accommodating, and it’s not until their food comes out that there’s a problem.

Due to the serum, Steve needs to eat a lot, so the server comes out with a tray piled with food, and people turn to see what table all that food is going to. Steve looks embarrassed, but the server is kind, and walks away once all the food is on the table. As soon as the server leaves, a couple kids come running over, screaming “PUPPY!” as they run. They drop down to pet Verity, and Steve holds out a hand to stop them.

“Sorry, kids, she’s working right now,” he says gently, and the kids pout, but walk away with quiet apologies. That should have been the end of it, but a woman (presumably the mother) approaches the table.

“How dare you tell my kids not to pet your dog! It’s not like it’s a big deal,” she says, and Steve frowns.

“Ma’am, she’s working right now, that’s why she’s allowed in the restaurant. I’d prefer people didn’t pet her, and even though it’s not dangerous to me if she gets distracted for a moment, you don’t know that, and if your children had distracted a medical alert dog, the handler could have ended up in the hospital,” Steve explains, voice a little tight like he’s trying not to yell.

“Well, I don’t think that you should act so entitled, Avenger or not,” the woman says huffily, and Steve goes very still. Time to see how good Verity’s training is, Natasha thinks, and she gets her answer moments later.

“It’s not entitlement, ma’am, it’s basic decency. If you use a car, or bus, or taxi, or the subway, you use it because it helps you get around better, it allows you to do more everyday. That’s what a service dog, or a wheelchair, or prescription medication is for people with disabilities. It’s a way to get around better, to do more everyday and access all the joys of life. So if you have a problem with people’s life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, maybe you need to choose a different country. I hear Russia has some space,” Steve says, and he’s building up to say more when Verity stands up from under the table, pawing at his leg.

Steve looks down, giving Verity a quick pat on the head before standing up. “Now if you’ll excuse
me, ma’am, that’s my cue to step out and breathe before this conversation gets out of hand.” He steps past the mother and walks out of the restaurant with Verity at his side, turning down the alley beside the building.

The woman stares, open mouthed, as Steve leaves, and then turns around to head back to her table. Natasha catches her arm before she goes. “Also, I’m sure you’ve seen the news coverage about me,” she says, smiling sweetly, “So let me inform you that harassing a service dog is a felony, and you could face a one thousand dollar fine or jail time if you’re found guilty. Alternatively, you could face me if I see you or your children harass a service dog again. So don’t let me see that happen. And remember, I’m a spy and an assassin. I see everything.” Natasha lets go of the woman’s arm. “Enjoy the rest of your meal.”

The lady walks away in silence, and Natasha turns back to start eating her food, waiting for Steve to come back in. The conversations that had stopped at the tables around them slowly start back up again, and Natasha sees the woman and her children leave with their food in to go containers a few minutes later. Steve comes back in, and they continue their meal and conversation, Verity resting calmly at Steve’s feet.
The Defenders Visit The Tower

“This looks a lot like Rand Enterprises.”

“No shit, Danny, every building owned by rich people looks the same.”

“Oh, no? This is at least more tasteful than the places Goldman Sachs owns.”

“You’ve been to-? Actually, you know what, I don’t care. Just shut up, Danny.”

Stepping into Stark Avengers Tower is a strange experience. There’s no one in the lobby, just a set of elevators, and Luke’s trying to figure out where the receptionist is when the ceiling starts talking, and sweet Christmas, he does not like that.

“Greetings, Mr. Cage, Ms. Jones, Mr. Murdock, Mr. Rand, and Mr. Castle. How can I be of assistance?” Matt jumps into a defensive pose, Danny looks up, and Frank’s hand immediately goes to what Luke guesses is a gun concealed in his waistband. Luke and Jessica meet each other’s eyes, communicating a silent ‘What the hell?’

Jessica answers the question with two of her own. “Who the fuck are you? How do you know who we are?”

“I am JARVIS, the personal AI of Mr. Stark. As the security system for the tower, one of my duties is to identify and determine the intention of any individual that enters the building. I have access to almost every online database on the planet, including those of most police forces. Each of you has been photographed or recorded at one or more police stations, and facial recognition has allowed me to verify your identities.”

“Cool, I’m talking to a robot. That’s not creepy,” Jessica mutters.

“Ms. Jones, I’m an AI, not a robot. The sophistication of my systems is far beyond that of the average robot,” the ceiling says, and does it sound offended? It kind of sounds offended.

“Alright, whatever. We’re here because Barton said we could be here,” Jessica tells the empty air,
“Very well. Give me a moment to confirm your access to the Avengers’ communal areas,” the ceiling (Jarvis?) says, and while they wait, Luke wanders around, trying to figure out how exactly the AI works. “I have confirmed with both Mr. Stark and Mr. Barton that you may enter the building, and those on the Avengers’ floors have been alerted to your arrival. Please enter the second elevator on your right. Mr. Murdock, may I inquire as to whether these directions are adequate?”

“How do you even know I’m blind?” Matt snaps, and really, he’s a Catholic lawyer, and he can’t even be polite to a computer? Luke is questioning the man’s sanity. Though he also dresses up as a devil and beats people up, so… okay, maybe this is his normal. Who knows.

“Once again, Mr. Murdock, I’m an advanced AI with access to police, public, and personal records. Your blindness is well documented. However, I do not know the exact nature of your abilities, so I am unable to come to a concrete conclusion as to how you perceive your surroundings.” Jessica and Danny have already started walking towards the elevator, so Luke follows, and he hears Frank’s heavy footsteps and Matt’s lighter ones behind him.

Matt sighs. “Okay, I should have realized that. I can generally follow any directions you would give a sighted person, unless they’re color based. That isn’t something I can tell apart.” They pile into the elevator, and Luke’s honestly starting to wonder if this is real life. This is real, right? He’s not dreaming, or hallucinating, is he?

“Noted. This elevator will take you to the Avengers’ communal areas. It is only accessible to those who have been approved by Mr. Stark, and will go into lockdown if any unauthorized individuals are detected. Going up.” The doors open in under a minute, which is truly unbelievable because Luke’s pretty sure they’re on one of the top floors of the tower and that was so fast, and Jessica leads them out and down the hall to a large open living room area. They’ve only had a moment to look around when the elevator dings. Frank’s hand goes back to his gun, and really? Is this going to be a thing?

“Hey, you actually came! And wow, you actually managed to get ass-stick here! Thank fuck, too, because I really wanted to see that perky ass again,” Clint Barton says, and Luke is confused, because this guy is an Avenger? Really? Huh. Frank lowers his hand from his waistband.

“Well, you offered booze, and even Catholic Guilt can’t refuse a good drink,” Jessica answers, and starts pointing to each of them in turn. “This is Luke Cage, Frank Castle, and Danny Rand, and you’ve already met Alter Boy.”
Barton looks them each up and down, and Luke’s a little uncomfortable, but Barton just shrugs. “Cool, well, I think you’ll each find someone you can get along with here. Frank, you and ‘Winter is Coming’ will probably be best friends. Come on, everyone’s in the gym training if you want to meet the rest of the team.”

Barton leads them down the hall, tossing open one of the doors and stepping through. “Hey, I brought the Avengers prequel, check ‘em out!” he calls out, and the people around the room turn to look at them, and Luke is seriously feeling out of place here now.

Tony Stark is the first to approach them, ducking out of the boxing ring and walking towards them, arms out wide. “Welcome! Barton told me he invited an asshole that likes alcohol, is that you?” he asks, pointing at Jessica, and she nods.

“Damn right. You better have some good whiskey, too, I’ve been drinking nothing but the cheap shit and I’m bored of it.”

Stark almost looks like he’s in love. “You’re my new favorite. Alright, follow me, I think I’ve got something you’ll like.” He gestures to the doorway behind them, and Jessica follows him back out of the room, looking mostly at ease, and seriously? Is Luke the only one who feels out of his depth here?

“Great, so, why are we here again? I was told to get my ass here or I wasn’t gonna like the results by one scary fucking lady, but now what?” Frank asks, and Luke’s glad that there’s someone here with even less tact than him.

Barton shrugs. “I mean, just wander, check the place out, whatever. You’re not trapped here, you can leave, Terminator, but I figured you guys might also enjoy a new set of assholes to argue with and some cooler weapons to mess with. Seems a little boring to me, being a vigilante and just sulking at home all the time, but hey, I’m not you, I’ve got a personality. So do what you want. Me? I’m going to go kick another bird’s ass,” Barton says, and then he’s walking up to Sam Wilson and squaring up to spar.

Luke glances at Frank, Matt, and Danny, looks around the room, and decides to just do it. He’s already here, might as well. So he heads to the corner Barton’s in, and starts walking around the room. It’s a huge room, and he’s impressed not just by all the heroes in the room, but also by the room itself.

There’s a row of huge, expensive looking punching bags, three large boxing rings, a shooting range through another door, some kind of obstacle course, weightlifting equipment, and some weird
climbing structures that reach the ceiling that Luke watches a teenager scale, touching the ceiling before jumping his way back down the structure, leaping from one little protrusion on the structure to another.

Luke gets about a third of the way across the room when someone taps his shoulder, and he turns to see Captain America beside him. “Hey,” the Captain says, “I don’t think Tony or Clint bothered to introduce any of you, or any of us, for that matter. Steve Rogers.”


“Nice to meet you. What do you think of the place, so far?” Rogers asks, and Luke shrugs.

“Don’t know what to make of it, really. I feel out of my depth.”

Rogers laughs. “Yeah, I get that. Would you be up to spar with me, or…?”

“I don’t know how well I could keep up with a super soldier, I might not be as good as you’re hoping.” Luke’s also not sure how to feel about the fact that he’s just been asked to spar with Captain America, but he ignores those concerns.

“Doesn’t matter, someone new is still someone new, and I have a feeling you’re wrong anyway. And please, just Steve. I’m not a fan of all the weird formalities.”

“Alright. Steve then. Sure, why not. I’m here.” Steve looks way too happy about this, but Luke follows him over to an empty area, squaring up. This will be fun.

Luke wanders off, and Danny takes that as his cue too, and decides to head straight for the row of punching bags. They look funky, and Danny’s willing to bet they’ve been specially engineered or something. One punch to the bag on the end proves Danny’s suspicion right, because the bag barely moves, and he’d started with a pretty decent swing.

Danny tries a few more experimental punches before calling on the Fist, and then he starts slowly building up strength with his punches again, and it’s not until he hits it with a decent Fist punch
that the bag actually swings with the force he would expect from a good hit on a normal bag.

“That’s an interesting trick,” an appreciative voice says behind him. Danny turns, and it’s Bucky Barnes, arms crossed in front of him.

“Not a trick, just energy,” Danny corrects, because he might be a little in awe of the people around him, but he might as well give them the right information. Maybe they’ll even believe him, too, they’ve probably seen even weirder shit.


“No, like chi. Life energy. But, to wield the Fist, you have to fight a dragon. I do like pop-tarts, though,” he adds, and this time Bucky laughs.

“Yeah, pop-tarts are pretty good. Fruit tastes different than it used to, including artificial fruit flavors, but they’re still good. So, a dragon? Sounds like some Lord of the Rings shit to me, but I’m also a genetically modified organism, so I don’t think I get to talk.”

Danny already likes this guy.

Frank hesitates in the doorway, and so does Matt. “What the fuck are we doing here, Red?” Frank asks, and Matt shrugs.

“Honestly? We’re here because Jones is terrifying. I don’t know, I guess I’m going to walk around. I’m not going to be rude enough to just leave as soon as I arrived,” Matt says, and Frank sighs.

“Fine. Yeah, okay. What could go wrong.” Frank heads towards the shooting range, because at least that he knows. Guns make sense. People? People are unpredictable, unreliable, and frustrating. Guns are consistent, non-judgemental. Frank can handle guns.

When he gets into the shooting range, there’s only one other person in the room, and she’s on the furthest lane down, so Frank just looks at the wall of weapons (there’s even a bow and arrows, Jesus Christ), picks an old-fashioned, double-barrel shotgun and grabs some shells, then sets up at
a lane three lanes down from Romanoff’s and starts shooting. He doesn’t bother putting on goggles or noise-cancelling headphones, partially because he doesn’t need them but mostly because he doesn’t trust these people enough to leave himself vulnerable like that.

Frank doesn’t really get to use old-fashioned shotguns often, just because they’re impractical when you’re going into a fast-paced, volatile situation, but he does enjoy the consistency of them, the two shots and then empty, reload, shoot, repeat. He’s gone through about 30 rounds when he realizes that Romanoff has stopped shooting, and he sets the shotgun down, turns to look, and finds her watching him in fascination.

“I don’t think I’ve ever actually seen anyone use that piece, it’s not the most practical for battlefields,” she says, as casually as if she’s just commented on the weather.

“Definitely not practical, but it’s steady, repetitive. There’s something nice about that, even if you can only do it in your downtime,” Frank says, and Romanoff nods.

“Agreed. Natasha Romanoff. Just Natasha works though.” Natasha holds her hand out, and Frank steps forward, shaking her hand.

“Frank Castle. Frank is fine.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Frank. Are you thinking of coming back again? Because I’m not opposed to a shooting buddy. It’d be nice to have someone else who can appreciate a good gun,” she says, and Frank nods. He has a feeling that she might feel the same way about both guns and people as he does, and the idea really does sound nice.

“Yeah, I think I can come back again.”

When Frank walks away, Matt’s left in the doorway by himself, and he really doesn’t know what to do at this point. He partially just wants to leave, but he still doesn't want to seem rude. He finally settles on just exploring the weird structures he’s sensing in the middle of the room, because he can’t actually figure out what they are, and it’s bothering him.

He walks up to the one without someone on it, and places a hand against it, feeling the vibrations from the ground caused by everyone walking around, and it helps give him a better picture of what
it is, but it’s still not great. It’s a weird shape, twisting and winding its way up to the ceiling, but there’s little bits of it that seem to be sticking out, and he seriously doesn’t know what it’s supposed to be.

He’s still trying to figure it out when he hears someone walking up behind him, and he turns, head tilted to the side. “What can I do for you?” Matt asks, and the person stops abruptly.

“Dude, did you feel me coming up behind you? Wait, are you kind of like me? Do you have like spider senses or something? Because if you do, that’d be cool, but also weird, because I thought I was the only one,” the person says, and Matt’s confused.

“Spider senses? Like Spider-man?”

The person’s heartbeat picks up speed. Excited? “Yeah, that’s me! Oh, uh, Mr. Stark says I need to get used to using my actual name with other heroes. Peter Parker,” he says, and Peter makes some kind of hand gesture? Matt’s not sure.

“Nice to meet you, Peter. I think Jones and Stark are going to get along great, because they definitely sound pretty similar. Daredevil, or Matt Murdock.”

There’s a pause, and Matt doesn’t understand why, and then there’s another hand gesture, and oh, he was probably holding his hand out, oops. “Sorry, didn’t realize you were holding your hand out,” Matt says, holding his own hand out this time, and Peter hesitates for a second before taking it, and then it seems to don on him.

“Oh! You’re blind! Okay. Sorry! Also, wait, so you do kind of have spidey senses! Probably? Maybe? Right?”

Matt tilts his head to the side. “I don't know what ‘spidey senses’ are, but I have enhanced hearing, taste, smell, and touch, so if that’s how ‘spidey senses’ work, then yes.”

“Oh. No, mine just let me know if there’s danger, or like possible threats I guess? But I don't have that, but that’s cool! Doesn’t it get overwhelming though? That probably gets overwhelming.”

Right now, Matt just thinks Peter is a little overwhelming, but that’s alright, Matt’s dealt with more annoying people that had worse intentions.
“So, tell me about you! You’re a whiskey person. Barton seems to think you’re pretty cool. What else? Cool powers? Anything fun? Oh, and what’s your name?” Tony leads Jessica to the dining room, walking over to an actual alcohol display case (this guy seriously likes alcohol, apparently), and pours both of them a good amount of whiskey.

“Jessica Jones, private investigator. I’m strong. I’m only fun if you just came from a funeral, but at least I’m not a lawyer, they’re fucking boring.” Jessica takes the glass Tony offers her, giving the drink a sniff before tossing it back in one shot.

Tony laughs and takes a more casual drink of his own, and holds the bottle out to Jessica so she can pour her own. She fills the glass to the top, and hands him back the bottle. “Actually, you already seem pretty fun to hang out with, so I think you’re underselling yourself. But what do you mean by strong? That can mean a lot of different things.”

“Strong, as in I can lift a car with my bare hands, and I can lift the back of a car and prevent it from going anywhere, even if you floor the gas.”

Tony sets down both the whiskey bottle and his own drink. “Interesting. Sounds a lot like Patriot and Cyborg back there. Does that impact your metabolism? Do you, I don't know, need more food than normal, or need more alcohol than normal to get drunk, and do the effects not last as long?”

“Whoa, slow the fuck down, I’m not your fucking science project,” Jessica says, and Tony holds his hands up in surrender.

“Okay, you’re right, rude of me. Change of subject. What’s up with your team back there? Because you all seem almost as crazy and chaotic as we are, and if that’s the case, then you guys definitely need to hang out here more, because I’m always accepting other annoying assholes, that’s kind of the cornerstone we built the Avengers on.”

Jessica shrugs, chugging the rest of her whiskey and leaving the empty glass beside Tony’s still partially filled one. “We’re just a bunch of idiots trying to help other idiots. I don’t really want to do it, but at this point, everyone and their dog thinks that I’m supposed to be able to help them because I’m some kind of freak. I just want to expose rich people that can’t keep it in their Armani pants and buy alcohol, but now I’m stuck in this Twilight Zone fuckery, so.”
Tony looks like he’s going to answer, but a voice from the ceiling interrupts. “Sir, Dr. Banner is coming down from his lab. Should I advise him of the current happenings on the floor?”

“Yeah, tell him that me and one of the new people are coming to meet him at the elevator. Shall we, Ms. Jones?” Tony asks, and when Jessica nods he leads the way to the elevator.

The doors open, and a dog comes stepping out of the elevator, looking left and right, and stops to watch Jessica for a moment before going back into the elevator, this time coming out with a nervous looking man beside it. “Brucie! This is Jessica Jones. Jessica, this is Bruce Banner,” Tony introduces, and Bruce holds out his hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Bruce says, and Jessica shakes his hand.

“Same to you, I guess? I don’t actually know much about you. I also didn’t know you had a dog?”

“This is Smash,” Bruce says, “And I think the other dogs are around here somewhere, aren’t they?”

“Other dogs?” Jessica’s maybe a little worried by just how excited Tony looks when she asks that.

“Hold on, I’ll have Jarvis call them! J?”

“The dogs are on their way, Sir,” the ceiling says, and Jessica’s still not used to that, but she’s a little more preoccupied by the sudden rush of fur and paws barreling out of another room down the hall towards them.

Sparring with Steve is a lot of fun, Luke discovers, and he actually holds his own better than he thought he would. They’re taking a short break, Steve having offered him some water from a small refrigerator in the corner of the room, and just as they’re about to start up again, there’s a shouted “incoming!” from the doorway, and then there’s a rush of activity as five dogs come running into the gym, tearing off in different directions.

“Verity!” Steve calls, and a yellow blur rushes towards them, slamming into Steve’s chest and
knocking the man to the ground. Steve laughs, trying to push the dog off. “Okay, okay, easy girl!” The dog, presumably Verity, climbs off of him, and walks over to sniff Luke’s hand, giving it a quick lick before going back to Steve, running in circles around him.

“So, this is normal then?” Luke asks, and Steve nods.

“Yeah, it’s starting to become pretty normal. Natasha decided to start getting everyone service dogs.” Steve scratches Verity behind the ears. “They were all taking a break while we were in here, but I guess this is our cue that it’s time to call it a day.”

Another dog runs up to Luke, an all white dog, and sniffs Luke’s hand. Luke watches as the dog runs back to the doorway, nudging the hand of a man beside Tony and Jessica, and then the man steps into the room, looking around. “Time for lunch, folks!” Tony calls, and, like kids coming in after recess, everyone just stops what they’re doing, heading for the door.


“Probably not. Wouldn’t want to intrude.”

Steve shakes his head. “You wouldn’t be intruding at all.”

“It’s fine. Maybe next time.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Steve promises, and he walks away. Luke looks around the room, and the only people left are the people he came here with today.

“So are we doing this again?” Danny asks as they all head towards the elevator together, “Because I’d love to do this again.”

“You’re weird,” Jessica tells him, “But probably. Stark has really good whiskey.”

“I guess so,” Matt says, and Frank shrugs.
“They’ve got a nice shooting range. I’d come back for that.”

Luke thinks about it for a moment before answering. “Yeah, I’d do this again.”

“Cool,” Danny says, grinning. “We could make it like a team building thing!”

There’s a collective groan. “Jesus, Danny, we’re not a fucking family.” The elevator reaches the lobby, and they all step out.

“C’mon, Jess, it’d be fun! Guys, we could be such an awesome team! Like the Avengers are! We could be like, I don't know, the Defenders, or something.”

Matt sighs as they step out onto the sidewalk. “Danny, that sounds stupid.”

“No it doesn't, it sounds cool!”

“You call yourself the Iron Fist. I don’t think you get to decide what ‘cool’ is.”

“Says the guy who goes by Daredevil!”

“I didn’t pick that name!”

“Neither did I!”

“You’re both stupid. Shut up or I will throw you into the fucking street, I swear to god.”

“...Sorry Jess.”

“Whatever.”
Natasha had put Stephen Strange near the top of her list because she figured the man didn’t have anywhere near as much or as good of a support system as many of the Avengers had. He spent a lot of time working alone, and while he claimed he preferred it that way, Natasha could see the tense body language he always arrived with, the way that he relaxed the more time he spent at the tower.

Learning about the car accident was a simple matter of searching Stephen’s name online and reading the news stories. He had been a famous, affluent doctor after all; it wasn’t hard to find news about him, even from before the accident. So when she reads about the damage done to his hands, she assumes that it probably still bothers him from time to time, even if he’s found a way to cope with it; Tony’s the same way about the arc reactor, even though he no longer truly needs it.

She chooses a reputable breeder from Kentucky, flies out and picks the puppy she wants, then comes home with the little Great Dane puppy, searching online for names and settling on Thelonious, “ruler of the people.” It’s a suitably pretentious name for a man whose reputation used to be entirely based on his pretentiousness. Natasha has a feeling the name will at the very least make Stephen laugh.

Thelonious grows quickly; he’s beautiful, with a dark grey, almost black coat and white patches on his chest and paws, and no matter what position he’s in, laying, sitting, or standing, he looks strong, smart, and proud. He learns his tasks quickly, even picking up on some of the other dogs’ tasks just by watching.

He lives to work, and on the few days Natasha had taken a break from training, Thelonious had looked positively distraught, wandering in circles around her until she finally gave him things to do. Natasha starts teaching him tricks just to keep him occupied, things that are fun, time-consuming, but also productive.

Natasha teaches Thelonious to open and close doors, cabinets, drawers, and windows, to turn lights on and off, to carry things both in his mouth and in his vest pockets, to pick up various objects off the ground, and to bring Natasha his own leash and collar when it’s time to go outside, among other things. He learns each task as quickly and faithfully as the last, and Natasha is genuinely amazed by his working drive.

She doesn’t start him on any of his mobility tasks until he’s old enough and he’s been cleared by his veterinarians, but once she starts teaching him those tasks, he learns them easily too. She asks Tony to help design Thelonious’ gear, and a day later he’s handing her what looks like a larger version of a compartmentalized jewelry box, Diva trotting happily at his side.
“So, there’s a few options there for Strange to choose from. There’s a heavier duty mobility harness that can accommodate some packs, packs included. There’s a wheelchair pulling harness, in case he gets pain in more than just his hands and wants to rest more. A saddlebag cape and bracing harness, a grocery carrying vest, a backpack vest, and mesh versions of the backpack and grocery carrying vests and the saddlebag cape. Is that good enough? I thought about designing something that would let Thelonious pull Strange without Strange needing to use his hands but still walking, but I wasn’t sure,” Tony rambles, and Natasha smiles, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s awesome, I’m sure he’ll love all of it. Thank you.” She takes the box from him, and then he’s gone, Diva following him, leaving Natasha to look through the box. She settles on the mobility harness with the packs. The mobility harness is made of dark red biothane with gold hardware, with a raised handle on the top, and the packs fit around the handle, clipping to the sides of the harness to hold them in place.

The packs are navy blue with velcro and emerald green trim, and Natasha almost wants to roll her eyes at the fact that Tony had matched Thelonious’ gear perfectly with Strange’s usual superhero outfit. Natasha finds a section of the box that has patches, and laughs at a couple of them, because of course Tony would make the puns “Time For You To Leave Us Alone” and “Staring is Strange (and Unappreciated).”

Natasha sets up the patches on Thelonious’ gear, gets Thelonious geared up, and then texts Stephen to come meet her at the tower, having Thelonious practice some of his commands while they wait.

Stephen shows up about an hour later, complaining about unnecessary paperwork, and stops abruptly when he sees Thelonious holding a down-stay at Natasha’s feet. “What’s happening here?” he asks, and Natasha stands, Thelonious standing with her.

“Strange, this is Thelonious. Thelonious, Strange. He’s a service dog for you, if you like him.”

Stephen shakes his head, even as he takes a step forward to get a better look at Thelonious’ gear. “I don’t need a service dog, as it happens, I’m a perfectly capable human being,” Strange says, but he’s already running a shaky hand over Thelonious’ head.

“Do you think Tony’s incapable?”

Stephen stiffens at the question, glaring at Natasha. “No, I don’t, I think he’s perfectly competent, better than just competent, in fact.”
“Then why is it okay for him to have a service dog, but not you?” she asks, and she watches Stephen try and fail to come up with a good reason, still petting Thelonious probably without even realizing it.

“And what is a dog supposed to do for me? I don’t think a dog can fix a problem that no specialist across the entire world could fix.”

“No, he won’t fix your hands, but he can help you carry things, retrieve things, open andclose doors, turn lights on and off, do small things so that you can take a break, let yourself rest occasionally. You don’t always just have to power through things, you can let someone help you, let Thelonious help you.”

Stephen just sighs. “Fine, I have a feeling you’re going to push for me to take the dog anyway. I’ll take him home with me. But if it doesn’t work out, I’m going to give him back to you.”

“I wouldn’t expect any different.”

Stephen leaves with Thelonious beside him, and Natasha flops on the couch with a groan. She knew the guy thought a lot of himself, but she didn’t realize just how hard it was for him to lower his guard. At this point, she might become a professional therapist just from trying to get the heroes around her to accept the help they deserve.

When Stephen and Thelonious arrive at the New York City Sanctum location, Stephen collapses into his office chair, closing his eyes and just taking a minute to breathe. He has a lot of paperwork to finish, and he really doesn’t want to, but it’s not like he has much of a choice. He rests there with his eyes closed until a wet nose bumps his hand, and he opens his eyes, glaring at Thelonious.

“Romanoff really got you roped into this, huh? And now you’re stuck here. You can go home soon, though, I’m sure she’ll have someone else that can take care of you.” The dog just watches him talk, tail wagging calmly. Ignoring the fact that he just talked to a dog, Stephen sits up, getting back to work.

He’s almost done with everything when his hands start to shake and he drops the pen he was using. Usually he has it under control, but sometimes he’s just too tired, or he’s having vivid nightmares, and he can’t focus enough to keep his hands steady. He stares at his hands, tries to will them to
stop shaking, but he can’t, and it’s too much, he’s too tired to handle this right now. He starts slipping into flashbacks before he can even process it.

*He’s hooked up to all kinds of monitors and equipment, pins in his hands, casts over his arms and legs, a heart monitor beeping behind him, an IV slowly dripping painkillers into his system. He keeps staring at his hands, because they’re mangled, bloody and ruined and he’ll never be able to operate again, he knows that, he knows it like he knows the artist, album, and release year of almost every song he hears, but he doesn’t want to believe it, he can’t believe it, because his job is everything to him, being a doctor is his whole life, he can’t just lose that now…*

When Stephen comes back out of the flashbacks, he’s fallen to the floor, chest heaving with panic, and there’s this heavy, comforting weight across his legs that turns out to be the dog, laying across his lap and watching his face. As soon as Thelonious sees that Stephen is out of the flashback, he’s standing, nudging at Stephen’s side and walking back and forth from Stephen to the doorway.

“What do you need to go outside?” The words come out partially slurred, Stephen’s brain still trying to catch up from the phantom pains and the last remnants of emotions and memories. He tries to stand, but his legs start to buckle, and before he knows it the dog is back at Stephen’s side, standing perfectly still like he’s waiting for a command.

He’s not exactly sure what the dog’s commands are, he hadn’t bothered to ask Natasha, but he assumes the dog will know what to do, so he grabs the handle of the dog’s harness with one hand and his desk with the other and pushes himself onto his feet, leaning on both the table and the dog for support.

Once he’s standing, Thelonious walks with him slowly to the doorway, and Stephen points them down the hall to his room. He lays down on his bed, and Thelonious disappears, coming back again with a bottle of water. “Now how did you find the kitchen so fast?” Stephen asks him, fully aware that he’s not going to get a response as he takes the water bottle, taking a few sips and then dropping his head back down onto his pillow. The dog lays down beside his bed, drifting off to sleep, and Stephen sighs. “Fine. I’ll ask Natasha what your commands are tomorrow.”

Stephen does, in fact, go back to talk to Natasha, and he takes Thelonious with him back to the tower. Natasha smiles when he asks her what Thelonious’ commands are, and she walks him through each of them, including the various tricks to help keep Thelonious occupied. She also gives him the box of gear Tony had made, describing each piece of gear and how it works, and he’s momentarily blown away by how dedicated Natasha and Tony have become to this idea.
Natasha walks home with him to help him carry all of the service dog gear and other dog-related necessities, and Stephen’s certain he saw a smug look on her face when she caught him petting Thelonious on the way home (so sue him. He’s a surgeon, not an asshole. Dogs need love and attention. So what.)
Group Dinner

New York’s villains seem to have taken the week off, so on Wednesday Tony announces a team dinner, telling the Avengers that under no uncertain terms are they allowed to miss this dinner. He says he’s inviting Pepper, Rhodey, Peter, and Strange, and that everyone is welcome to invite people they want, as long as they tell Tony ahead of time, but preferably now.

Clint asks if he can invite Jessica and Matt, Natasha asks about Frank, Bucky asks about Danny, Steve asks about Luke and Sam, and then it’s settled, dinner is set for Friday at 8pm on the Avengers’ communal floor and Tony sends invites out to each of the people who don’t live in the tower and they wait.

Natasha has the most food to prepare, mostly because she’s the most confident in her skills out of the group. Clint usually messes up at least one of the dishes and has to start over, Bruce makes delicious food but he’s always too nervous about messing up and spends half the time just second guessing himself, and Bucky is good, but he spends half of his time trying to keep Steve from messing things up.

Tony is not allowed in the kitchen to cook; the last time he tried to help out, he nearly burned the entire kitchen down. (“It’s my kitchen!” Tony had protested. “You caught a salad on fire, Tony. A salad.”) Most of the dogs are out with Tony in the living room except for Fubar, who sits in front of the fridge, watching Bucky work in case he’s needed for a seizure alert.

Natasha works on the fruit trays and salads at the counter by the living room, her eggplant parmesan is in the oven, and she has the ingredients set up on the island for the s’mores cookies, blueberry muffins, and cinnamon rolls.

Clint’s working on a loaded potato soup, his steaks are in a second oven, his banana bread batter is off to the side, and he’s pan frying some shrimp for the fettuccine Steve’s working on. Steve also has a pot of alfredo sauce going, and chicken and sausage in another oven; the chicken is for the other half of his fettuccine and the sausage for Bucky’s spaghetti. Bucky has marinara sauce to go with the spaghetti, a dish of macaroni and cheese in the fourth oven, and the ingredients for his salted caramel cheesecake laid out. Bruce is working on tomato soup and spring rolls, a key lime pie, and he has two sheet pans of roasted vegetables in the ovens with Bucky’s mac and cheese and Natasha’s eggplant parmesan.

Natasha listens to the men bicker behind her, swapping ingredients and complaining about all the hard work they’re doing. She rolls her eyes, chopping up a perfect row of strawberry slices, then
three more rows of kiwi, mango, and apple, and she repeats the pattern four more times before the elevator dings.

Tony leaps to his feet from his spot on the couch, practically running towards the elevator in his excitement. “Who is it?”

“The best wingman in the world!” Gets shouted back, and then Sam’s rounding the corner, tupperware container in hand.

“Aww, you’re not who I wanted to see,” Tony says, lunging for the container just as Sam lifts it up out of his reach.

“Whoa, that’s no way to treat the man who brought you white chocolate raspberry cheesecake cookies!” Sam drops the cookies off in the kitchen, Tony trailing him like a duckling.

“That’s a hell of a mouthful to say.”

“Yeah, and they’ll be a hell of a mouthful to eat, too, trust me, they’re damn good,” Sam assures him.

Natasha waves Sam over. “If you’re so confident in your cookies, maybe you can take over the blueberry muffins?” she asks, and Sam gives her a look of mock offense.

“Now, just what kind of one-trick baker do you think I am, Romanoff? I’ll show you how to make a real blueberry muffin,” he says, and he moves over to the right set of ingredients, measuring things out.

Tony wanders back over to the couch, complaining as he goes, and the dogs watch him come back over, Diva’s tail sweeping across the carpet as Tony reaches down to scratch him behind the ears.

“So, I’ve had your breakfast before, but I didn’t know you could bake, too,” Natasha comments, and Sam shrugs.

“Well, I always liked food, and after serving in the military, I needed an outlet. Kept having
flashbacks, nightmares. Still do, but baking helps. Besides, anything I bake, I can take to the Veterans Resource Centers around town, homeless shelters, you know? Helps me feel useful.”

Natasha nods. “Yeah, it’s always good to have something to look forward to, something to keep you going every morning. Personally, I just like a cup of tea.”

“Really? What kind?”

The elevator dings before she can answer. Tony’s leaping to his feet again. “Who’s there?”

“Your favorite!” Rhodey walks in with Valor at his side and two bottles of wine in his arms, and almost drops the wine when Tony wraps him in a hug.

“Honey bear! Good to see you! So glad you could make it!”

Rhodey laughs. “Are you happy about me, or the wine?” he sets the wine near Sam’s tupperware.

“You, obviously! I could buy myself better wine then what you can afford on military pay.”

Rhodey’s following Tony back to the couch when Natasha stops him. “Hey, Rhodes, can you get the cinnamon rolls set up for me?”

It’s a challenge, and Rhodey takes it. “Of course I can! Mama Rhodes doesn’t send men out into the world that can’t cook or bake.” He sends Valor into the living room to relax, and then starts working on the cinnamon rolls to Sam’s right.

“Nat, you’re stealing my people to talk to,” Tony whines, and then the elevator dings again.

“Stark, you better have the good fucking whiskey!”

Tony lights up as Jessica and Frank storm into the living room, slightly bruised and very sweaty, clothes splattered with dirt and blood. “On it!” he heads to the dining room for the alcohol, and Frank and Jessica head to the kitchen, washing their hands in the two separate sinks. Jessica
immediately heads back to the living room, but when Frank dries his hands, he spots Steve at the stove and frowns.

“Hey, are you trying to serve us shitty fettuccine?” he asks, and Steve turns, eyebrows furrowed.

“No?” Steve answers, but he sounds hesitant, and Frank just snorts, shouldering Steve out of the way.

“Then move, because you don’t know what you’re doing and it’s sad. There’s a box cake mix behind you, I assume you can do that?”

Bucky laughs, and Steve just blushes red, moving to work on the cake instead. “Sorry, don’t think we’ve been introduced yet, I’m Bucky,” he says, holding a hand out to Frank, who shakes it briefly, changing the stove settings for the fettuccine.

“Frank. Good to meet you. You’re the one that knows that dumb bastard, aren’t you?”

“That’s me.”

“Good, then explain to me how he doesn’t even know how to cook pasta?”

Bucky grins. “Well, Steve’s Irish, and he was a scrawny, sickly little thing as a kid, so he never learned to cook, and even if he had, all his mom ever cooked was potatoes because they were quick and easy, and she had learned from Steve’s grandma.”

Frank nods. “Alright, fine. But you seem to have it down pretty well.”

“Yeah, well, I learned to do everything, I used to cook for Steve if his mom wasn’t home, and after she died, I did all his cooking.”

“Huh. Is it something you enjoy? Because I’m betting there’s tips you’ve missed about cooking for the last 70 years.” Frank leans over to look at Bucky’s pot of spaghetti, nodding in approval.
“I like it, yeah. Why, what’s changed?”

“Well…”

Natasha stops listening to the conversation when she hears the elevator again.

“I’m just saying, that kind of has a ring to it! ‘Power Man and Iron Fist, Heroes for Hire’” Danny says, and Luke groans.

“Danny, no, we’ve talked about this, I’m not a hero, and even if I was, that sounds like a terrible idea.”

Danny looks like he’s going to argue, and Natasha interrupts before he can. “Boys! Come help in the kitchen, will you?” Both of them wander over, and Natasha gestures at the counter in front of her and the island behind her. “We’ve got fruit platters ready to be organized, salads to mix, and cookies to make. What works for you?”

“Ooh, organizing the fruit platters! It’s like a plate-size version of feng shui,” Danny says, and Natasha points him to one of the plates.

“Have at it. Danny, wasn’t it?” He nods, so she turns to Luke.

“My name’s Luke,” he tells her, then thinks about it for a moment. “I think I might do better with cookies.”

“Cookies it is. We’re making s’mores cookies, everything’s ready for you over by Sam,” she says, and he nods, getting to work.

Stephen arrives a few minutes later. “Sorry for the delay, I had some paperwork to finish,” he tells her, leaving Thelonious over with the other dogs, who have now gathered in a circle around Tony and Jessica, both of whom are sitting cross legged on the floor and complaining about their teammates over a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of brandy.

“I can mix one of the salads,” Stephen offers, and Natasha pushes one of the bowls towards him,
working on arranging one of the fruit platters now that all the ingredients are at least ready for the last fruit platter and the other salad.

Peter arrives next, stumbling in a little out of breath and carrying a store bought fruit tray. “Uh,” he starts, seeing the platters Danny and Natasha are working on, “I’m sorry, it’s not homemade, but Aunt May was working, and I wasn’t really sure what to make, so-”

“That’s still really kind of you,” Natasha says, and she means it. She takes the fruit from him, setting it to the side. “You didn’t have much available to you, but you still made an effort, because you care about us. That’s what really matters. Now get over here, I’ll show you how I’m doing this fruit platter and then we can mix the salad together.”

Peter’s a smart kid and a fast learner, so Natasha already has him mixing the salad when Pepper arrives. Pepper stops across the counter from Natasha and Peter, watching them work for a minute or two, and then she hangs up on someone with a sharp “Listen, take my advice or don’t, but as CEO of Stark Industries, you may not like the consequences of ignoring this ‘stupid bitch,’ as you so eloquently put it.”

“Sorry,” she says when Peter freezes and Natasha raises an eyebrow at her, “it’s just been a long day. Anything I can do to help? Might be a good distraction.”

“There’s one fruit tray left to organize,” Natasha tells her.

“That would be wonderful.”

Everyone’s carrying plates over to the table when Matt finally arrives, looking embarrassed. “Sorry, I lost track of time,” he says, taking a seat at the table as the last few desserts are put in the oven, the timers are set, and everyone gets settled.

There’s a few moments of confusion as people pass dish after dish around, and then the conversations start up around the table. Natasha catches a few things here or there, but then she finds herself drawn to a conversation between Steve, Bucky, and Jessica.

“Tony mentioned something about you having a faster metabolism?” Steve asks.

Jessica sighs. “Of course he shared that information. Yeah, I do. I can get drunk, but it’s fucking
hard. So I prefer to just not really eat and spend all my time drinking instead, food makes it harder
to get and stay drunk. Alcohol helps keep the damn edge off.”

“Careful, Steve doesn’t like that kind of language.”

“I hate you, Natasha.”

Bucky looks shocked. “Wait, are you telling me that you seriously don’t eat? You just, what, drink
and try not to die?”

“Yeah, basically. Why, what the fuck do you two do?” Jessica sounds defensive, but either Bucky
doesn’t notice or doesn’t care, because he just shrugs.

“Well, Steve here eats about 7,000 calories a day, and I eat what I can. Ain’t always easy, can’t
seem to get myself to eat enough, but I’m trying. I wish I could get drunk, though, might help with
some of the memories.”

Jessica nods. “Yeah, I get that. There’s a reason I drink so damn much. I don’t trust myself if I’m
not at least partially out of it.” Well, that’s an interesting tidbit. Natasha knows why Bucky has
terrible memories, but she’s curious as to what happened to Jessica.

Apparently Bucky shares Natasha’s curiosity, because he asks, “What did you say you do for a
living again?”

“Private Investigator, public dumbass.”

Bucky laughs. “Fair enough. You and Steve would get along just fine then.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

Natasha still wants to know what happened to Jessica, but she files the question away for a later
date. She can always find the answers on her own; after all, she wasn’t a highly trained
international assassin for nothing.
The rest of dinner goes by smoothly; when most of the food on the table is gone and everyone’s plate is cleared or mostly cleared, the table is cleaned off, and then the desserts are moved to the table. There’s another short scramble for food, and then everyone’s trying the different desserts.

Sam’s cookies turn out to be a group favorite; “I told you,” Sam says, grinning from ear to ear when Tony takes the first bite of one of his cookies and moans. Bruce’s key lime pie is a close second, and he looks shocked that everyone enjoys it so much. Rhodey’s cinnamon rolls take third, followed closely by Sam’s blueberry muffins and Bucky’s salted caramel cheesecake.

Luke’s cookies, Clint’s banana bread, and Steve’s devil’s food cake are all amazing too, but they aren’t snatched up with quite the same enthusiasm as the other desserts; as it is, Peter manages to get the last three of Sam’s cookies by shooting them with his webslinger, pulling them in and shoving all three in his mouth at once before someone else can steal them. That gets a moment of stunned silence from the entire table, and then Clint is laughing so hard that he’s actually on the floor, and Lucky wanders up to lick his face, watching his handler for a moment before leaving the room again.

“Peter!” Tony starts, and the kid just shrugs, mouth still full of cookies, looking not even the slightest bit remorseful.

After that, everyone decides to call it a night, and the guests start to head out again. “Are you sure you can’t stay a few days longer?” Natasha hears Tony plead, but Pepper just pulls him into a hug, sighing.

“You know I want to, Tony, but I really do have to go finish up some business at the LA offices. I flew up because I know how rare it is that you all get calm nights, but I have to go back. I’ll be home in two weeks, and then I shouldn’t have to leave again for at least a month.” Natasha watches as Pepper leaves, and then as Diva nudges Tony’s hip with his nose, pushing the man towards the elevator and bed.

When the floor is finally quiet and everyone’s gone home, Natasha stays up for a while, first seeing what she can find out about Jessica Jones, and then working off some tension in the shooting range. She has a feeling that she’s going to need to make some changes to her potential service dog handlers list.
Jessica starts spending more and more time with Jessica, partially because she’s bored and partially because she wants to get to know more about Jessica and the rest of her team. Natasha’s found a breeder for Sam’s dog, and she’s waiting for the next litter of puppies, so while she waits, she figures she might as well try to get to know the new people, especially if they start to become a regular part of the Avengers’ lives.

Jessica’s an interesting person to spend time with. She drinks a lot, swears even more, and spends most of her time in bars, doing PI work, or taking on some kind of criminals. She refuses to call her teammates for help, but if one of them calls her, she’s there in under 15 minutes, helping out even if she grumbles and complains the whole time.

At this point, Jessica seems to have just accepted that Natasha wants to be around her, and she’s a lot nicer than she would have people believe; when Nat shows up at Jessica’s apartment in the mornings, Jessica already has a cup of coffee ready for her, made exactly the way Nat likes it, and she’s started keeping a small stash of the gross, dollar store candy that Natasha likes in her kitchen.

Natasha returns the favor; she almost always brings some of Jessica’s favorite chocolate along with her, and she makes it a point to bring some higher-quality alcohol occasionally. Jessica seems initially resistant to the idea of being given gifts, or anything nice, really, so Natasha tries to make it seem more like she’s just sharing the things she brings, not giving it to Jessica directly.

They spend a lot of their time complaining about their teammates, and Natasha loves listening to Jessica talk about her team. “Seriously, for a Catholic, he does some really fucked up shit, but he still hates swearing with a passion, like any ‘I go to church every Sunday, but fuck daily morals’ asshole,” Jessica complains after one night when she goes to help Matt get out of a particularly dangerous fight.

Natasha laughs, and tells Jessica about the time Steve had dislocated a guy’s shoulder for making advances on Nat, then scolded the guy for swearing in pain. It had been both a really ridiculous show of strength and completely unnecessary, because Nat could have shattered the guy’s wrist in one move, but she had appreciated the sentiment. It was nice to know that someone cared that much about her.

About three weeks after they start spending time together, Jessica asks Natasha a question she honestly hadn’t expected. “So, you’ve been training all these service dogs, right?” They’re
sitting on Jessica’s bed eating candy and drinking at 3am on a Tuesday, because nothing matters and time is irrelevant.

Natasha nods, not sure where exactly this is going. “I have, it started because of one dog, but it’s actually something I think I enjoy doing. Why?”

“I was wondering if you could get one for Luke,” Jessica says, and Natasha’s definitely confused now.

“Okay. What does Luke need help with?”

Jessica eats another two pieces of chocolate and washes them down with some rum. “Well, you said they can alert to medical problems. Can they alert to internal bleeding? Because like, Luke’s got unbreakable skin, but not indestructible organs.”

Natasha thinks about it for a minute. “I’m not entirely sure how it would work, but I can think about it,” she says finally, and Jessica nods.

“Cool. That’s all I’m really asking. He could use the help. I worry sometimes, because he’s a good person, and I’ve seen him almost die before because of internal bleeding, and I can’t-- I don’t want to lose him.”

“I know what you mean. I’m not sure what I would do if I lost Clint.” There’s a few moments of silence before Natasha speaks again. “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

If they weren’t both decently tired and drunk, Natasha’s pretty sure Jessica wouldn’t have said anything, but as it is, Jessica lets out a breath and starts talking.

“I was-- There was this guy. He fucked me up pretty bad, in more ways than one. He used me. My brain. My body. I didn’t know. I don’t know. It was a lot. And then, I’d started spending time with Luke, and he found out, and Kilg-- this guy controlled Luke, and I had to shoot Luke to get him to stop, and the bullet didn’t break the skin, but he started bleeding internally, and our friend, Claire, she finally figured out a way to help, but I was so scared that I had killed him. That I really was the monster I thought I was. And he’s okay now, but I don’t want that to happen again. I don’t want that risk again.”
It’s a lot to process-- Natasha had known there was more to the stories she’d found online about the incident with Jessica and that guy on the pier, but she hadn’t quite expected this. It’s easy enough to accept though, really; she’s dealt with literal Norse gods in recent years, so this isn’t the weirdest thing she’s heard lately. “It wasn’t your fault,” she says gently, and she knows how hard it is to believe something like that, but she’s also willing to say it as many times as she has to; she knows what it’s like to think that way, and she’s not going to let someone else get through that kind of self-hatred alone.

“Yeah, sure,” Jessica says, and her eyes are watering as she says it. “Just. See if you can help him, okay?”

Natasha nods, and they fall into a fairly comfortable silence, eating candy and drinking until they both crash at about 5am.

Natasha searches around for information that could help her determine if a service dog will help Luke, but it’s slow going. In the meantime, she gets an email back from the breeder for Sam’s dog saying they’ll have a litter in about six months, so she has a while to wait. She spends a few days doing research for Luke’s dog, but eventually decides to put that idea aside for the moment, and she heads down to the local humane society.

Natasha’s become a regular at the humane society, whether she’s looking at dogs for candidates as service dogs, volunteering to help with the animals, or just flat out spending time with some of the cats because she can, and one of the staff members, Riley, waves at her as she walks in.

Riley had been the one to meet with Natasha the first time she came looking for a dog, and they’re a good person; usually people freak out about meeting an Avenger, but Riley had just introduced themself with their name and pronouns, and asked if Natasha needed help with anything.

“Hey Nat! Looking for another dog?” Riley asks, coming out from behind the adoption counter.

“Yeah. Any new dogs you think might be good?”

“Well, we just got a male German Shepherd three days ago that might be good, and last week
we got a female Boxer that also might do well.”

Natasha thinks about it for a minute. “Can I meet the Boxer?”

“Sure! If you head back to visiting room four, I’ll bring her out to meet you.” Riley heads down the hall to the dog kennels, and they join Natasha in the visiting room, a brindle Boxer by their side. “Here she is! She was found as a stray, and we named her Sora. She seems to do well with most things; obviously she’ll need some training, but she’s a good kid. If you need anything, I’ll be at the front desk, just leave Sora here and come talk to me,” Riley says, and they slip the lead off of Sora, leaving Natasha alone in the room with her.

Natasha sits down on the floor cross legged, holding her hand out to the dog. Sora approaches her quickly, sniffing her hand, and then flops on her back on Natasha’s lap, wriggling happily. Natasha laughs, rubbing Sora’s belly. She takes a few moments to play with Sora, then starts testing a few things.

She stands up, crossing her arms in front of her and glaring at Sora, and Sora just comes up, trying to lick at Natasha’s hands to be pet again. Natasha keeps stepping away from her, repeating “knock it off” louder and more aggressively each time, but Sora keeps following her until Natasha sits back down again, gently scratching the bridge of Sora’s nose.

Natasha abruptly stops petting Sora, curling herself up into a ball and pretending to cry. Sora nudges at her hands and face, trying to get Natasha’s attention, and Nat goes back to sitting normally, petting her again.

She tries a few more things with the dog, and overall she likes the responses she’s getting, so she heads up to the front desk. “I think you’re right, she’s a great candidate,” she tells Riley. “Can we do the adoption paperwork?”

She heads back to the tower with Sora an hour later, and on the way she comes up with a new name for her. They arrive on the communal floor just as everyone’s settling down for lunch in the living room, and she lets the dog off leash to greet the people and dogs in the room. “Everyone, say hi to Whiskey,” she says, and based on the looks on everyone’s faces and the way Whiskey has already started to play with Smash and Verity, this won’t be a problem.

Whiskey’s training goes quickly; she’s naturally loving, and very good at ignoring negative
responses. Natasha figures that one of the biggest parts of Whiskey’s job will be getting Jessica to accept her help, so making sure that Whiskey will stubbornly persist with her tasks is crucial.

Natasha spends the first couple weeks just teaching Whiskey what responses she’s looking for, and teaching her the groundwork of most of her tasks. All of the tasks are for Jessica’s PTSD, so Natasha teaches Whiskey to check rooms before her handler enters the room, to block people from interacting with her handler, to guide her out of places, to help with nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and dissociation, as well as help with anger outbursts.

She teaches Whiskey to alert by pawing at Natasha’s leg, then jump up on her if she doesn’t respond after a minute or two. She teaches Whiskey to check rooms, then come back and bump Natasha’s hand with her nose if the room is safe, and Natasha teaches Whiskey to block between her and others. Once Whiskey has her tasks down, Natasha starts making it harder.

About two months after getting Whiskey, when Natasha starts to fake an outburst of anger, she doesn’t stop the first few times the dog paws at her, or the first few times she jumps on her, either. She starts moving to avoid Whiskey, but the dog follows her, still trying to task. She praises Whiskey and rewards her for doing so well, and then she keeps repeating the process, making it harder and harder for Whiskey to succeed in “calming her down.”

By four months, Natasha’s fairly confident in Whiskey’s skills, and she texts Jessica to tell her that she’s on her way over, getting Whiskey geared up in her black fabric harness and black velcro cape and heading out of the tower. Jessica meets them at the door to her apartment, but frowns when she sees Whiskey.

“What the fuck?”

If nothing else, Natasha always loves how blunt Jessica is. “This is Whiskey, she’s here to be your service dog.”

Jessica lets them in, but she’s clearly not thrilled about this. “And why did you get me a dog? You know I just use alcohol to cope, right? And naming the dog after my favorite booze isn’t going to just change my mind.”

“Maybe not. But she’s trained for you, and I think she’d really help you. You don’t have to keep her though. I got her from the humane society, and I can always surrender her back to them,” Natasha says, and Jessica glares at her.
“Yeah, that wasn’t guilt trippy. Fucking rude, Romanoff.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow. “‘Romanoff’? Thought we were first name basis, Jones.”

“Were, past tense. For now. Fine, I’ll keep the fucking dog, at least until you find a new owner. Headed out?”

Natasha leaves, and she knows that Jessica’s pissed right now, she gets that, she’d hidden this from her and Jessica hates surprises, but she has a feeling that things will work out. She doesn’t bother looking for a new owner, because if this doesn’t work out, she’s sure Whiskey will do fine with one of the others on Natasha’s list, but she’s confident it will work out anyway.

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Three days later, Natasha goes back to Jessica’s apartment, and Jessica answers on the second knock, something which has never happened before; usually Jessica yells that the door is open and goes back to drinking. Today, however, Jessica opens the door, actually looking mostly alert and… sober? Jessica steps back to let Natasha in, and closes the door behind her.

“So, you found a new owner for Whiskey by now?” Jessica asks, and Natasha can hear the tightness of Jessica's voice, the underlying tension of the words.

“No, I haven’t, not yet. I hope she hasn’t caused you too much trouble.” Natasha follows Jessica to the actual office area of her apartment, where Whiskey is laying underneath Jessica’s desk, sleeping. She wakes up as they walk into the room, yawning, and Natasha catches Jessica smiling fondly at the dog.

“No trouble at all, actually. You’re right, you trained her well.” There’s a moment of silence, and Jessica sighs. “Okay, fine. She’s been better than just no trouble. She’s helped. A lot. I’ve slept more in the last three days than I have in the last three months. I hate it, but you’re fucking right. Happy, Romanoff? Whiskey helps, and not just the actual booze. So I’d like to keep her.”

Natasha can’t keep the grin off her face. “That’s good, I’m glad she’s helping you. And I love you too, Jess.”
“Fuck off, Nat.”

Yeah, things are going to be okay between them. And now, since they’re back on a first name basis…

“So, I was looking into a dog for Luke like you asked me to, and I think it’ll work. I need some more information about Luke though, and I thought you could help with that.”

Jessica nods, gesturing at the chair in front of her desk. “Take a seat, let’s talk. I’m not a PI for nothing. What do you need to know?”
After Jessica gets Whiskey, Natasha realizes that they should probably start having dog play dates. Up to this point, it hasn’t really been a problem, because even the handlers that don’t live in the tower tend to come by pretty often; Rhodey has his own floor in the tower, but with his work for the military, he often has to travel to other parts of the country or even other countries for days or weeks at a time. Stephen doesn’t have a floor in the tower, but he usually comes to visit at least once a week. That means that both Thelonious and Valor still get some time to play with the other dogs when their handlers are at the tower.

For Whiskey, it’s different; Natasha visits Jessica’s apartment a lot, but Jessica rarely comes to the tower, and Natasha’s not sure if it’s because she doesn’t want to be there or if she doesn’t think she’s allowed to be there. She assumes it’s probably the latter. But Whiskey still needs to have time to play and interact with other dogs, so Natasha talks to Tony about arranging a play date. Since Rhodey is already home at the tower for the moment, they invite Stephen and Jessica to the tower for a week later, and then they wait.

In addition to the indoor dog park Tony had created, he’d also created an outdoor one beside the tower, complete with different sections for the different dogs’ preferences. The dog park is accessible only to handlers and dogs approved by Tony, and the gates can be opened either by the handlers or by JARVIS if everyone’s busy.

The park is divided into four sections; the first is a flat, open area of grass for dogs to play fetch, the second is a more uneven section of ground, with hills and mounds for the dogs to chase each other and wrestle on, the third is an overgrown area of shrubs, trees and bushes that resembles a miniature forest for the dogs to hide or explore in, and the fourth is a large agility course. There are benches all around the park for the handlers to sit, and concrete paths along the different sections for handlers using mobility aids to get around better.

By the time Jessica and Whiskey arrive, everyone else is already in the park, watching the dogs play. Valor and Diva are running in circles around each other, up and down the hills in the middle of the park, Verity and Lucky are chasing tennis balls that Steve and Clint are tossing for them, Thelonious and Smash are chasing each other through the agility course, and Fubar has disappeared into the bushes at the back of the park, nowhere to be seen.

Jessica takes Whiskey off leash, watching as the dog runs straight into the bushes, and there’s a thud and a loud bark, and it sounds like she’s found Fubar. Natasha waves Jessica over to the bench she’s sitting on in the back of the park between the bushes and the agility course, and Jessica joins her, collapsing on the bench with a groan.
“Long night?” Natasha asks, and Jessica nods.

“Fucking Murdock took on too many people at once - again - and I had to go save his dumb ass,” Jessica starts. “He doesn’t know when to quit, I swear to god. It’s like he has some sort of super sense for which situations are the most dangerous, and then he chooses those ones.” Jessica pulls a flask out of her pocket, takes a long drink, and holds it out to Natasha.

Natasha takes a sip and hands it back. “Well, if any of us were actually smart, we wouldn’t be doing this in the first place.”

“So true.”

They watch in silence as Smash leads Thelonious through the entire agility course perfectly, not once slowing down, and then as Smash tears off towards Verity and Lucky, jumping up and catching the tennis ball Steve had just thrown before Verity or Lucky can reach it. She turns around, still holding the ball, and runs back to the agility course, Verity and Lucky chasing her.

Steve and Clint just stay where they are, waiting for their dogs to come back and chatting with Rhodey. Stephen, Tony, and Bruce are deep in conversation, and from the looks of it they’re talking nerd, because Tony is positively bouncing with excitement.

“Mind if I join you?” Bucky walks up to their bench, and both Natasha and Jessica shrug, moving over so Bucky can sit on the other side of Jessica.

“I don’t think we’ve actually been formally introduced. I’m Bucky.” He holds his hand out, and Jessica shakes it.

“Formality is bullshit, but I’m Jessica.”

“I don’t know, it’s always just seemed rude to me to not introduce yourself, even if I’m recognizable on TV and in the Captain America museum exhibit.”

Jessica laughs. “Yeah, it does make introducing yourself kind of unnecessary. Though I’m not sure you exactly look the same as that kid in the museum photos.”
“I guess not. So, are you and your team going to come back to the tower more often? We’ve kinda been missing the extra company.”

“I don’t know that we’re even a team, really, but I don’t know. Just doesn’t seem like it’s our right to be here.”

Bucky starts to say something, but the conversation is momentarily interrupted by Fubar and Whiskey bursting out of the bushes, Fubar tackling Whiskey and jumping on top of her to wrestle. Whiskey kicks up with her paws and shoves Fubar off, causing him to tumble onto his back. She pounces at him, play bowing, and then runs off back into the bushes, Fubar following her. Bucky laughs.

“You’ve got a good dog there. There’s not many dogs that Fubar gets to go all out with when he plays. Most dogs get scared because of how big he is.”

“Yeah, well, we’re just reckless idiots like that. Self-preservation is just another word for ‘boring.’” Jessica’s phone chimes, and she pulls it out, reading the text with a groan. “Fuck it. Well, I guess I’ve got to go pull another dumbass out of a dangerous situation.”

“Matt?” Natasha asks.

“No, Danny this time. Fucking rich kid. Anyway, this was fun. We’ll do it again sometime?” Natasha nods. “Yeah, definitely. Go save your stupid teammate.”

Jessica calls Whiskey, and they’re out of the gates and gone in minutes.

“She’s really that bad with people, isn't she?” Bucky asks.

“Yes, yes she is. She’s a caring person when you get to know her. Once you’re important to her, she’ll die for you, but she’ll still be an asshole about it. That’s who she is.”
There’s a few moments of comfortable silence. “So, who’s next on your list?” Bucky asks, and Natasha smiles.

“Well, since you mention it, the next litter of puppies are actually going to be ready to go home in about three months for Sam’s dog, and then I’ve got a potential good litter coming up in six months for Luke.”

Bucky shakes his head in disbelief. “Is this your new other identity? Avenger by day, service dog trainer by night?”

“Maybe. I have to admit, it’s the happiest I think I’ve been in a while. I don’t know if it will be permanent though.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll think of something. It’s nice to see you so happy.”

Natasha turns to look at Bucky, watching the way he smiles when he sees Fubar. “Yeah, you too.”
Natasha flies home from Oregon with the new 4 month old puppy, and arrives on the communal floor to a “welcome to the family” party that Tony’s organized, because at this point he’s way too excited by every new puppy that comes home. They’re sitting around the living room eating cake with the dogs eating dog safe cake, and everyone’s trading ideas for the puppy’s name.

“Bark-con, like Falcon,” Tony suggests with a snicker, and Bruce almost falls out of his chair laughing. Okay, so they’re also maybe a little tipsy.

“Wingman? Wingwoman! Wingdog?” Clint makes himself laugh so hard that he spits champagne all over himself.

...Fine, they’re really drunk. So what.

“Ava,” Steve says quietly, from where he and Bucky are sitting on the couch side by side, watching their drunk teammates in confusion. “It’s bird related, but subtle. Pretty, too. I think it fits her.” The puppy in question wanders over to Steve, licking his knee.

Natasha thinks about it for a minute, trying to clear her head of the light buzz she has going (she has an enhanced metabolism similar to Jessica’s), and finally she nods. “Yeah, I like it. Ava. She’ll be Ava.”

Training starts a week later, once Ava’s had time to adjust to her new home and new routine. She won’t have nearly as many tasks as some of her fellow service dogs; however, it’s important that Ava can perform the tasks she does have exceptionally well. So Natasha starts training, and more than anything, she wants Ava to be prepared for all kinds of weird situations; she knows that Sam runs a support group for veterans, and it’ll be important for Ava to be able to focus on Sam and only Sam, even when other people in the room are struggling.

Natasha follows the same basic pattern she's used for the other dogs’ training, teaching a command or task until Ava has it basically perfect, then changing the circumstances to make the command or task harder to complete. She teaches Ava basic obedience on her own floor,
where there’s no other distractions, then moves to training on the other Avengers’ personal floors. She trains on Clint’s floor, first with the door closed between them, then with the door open so Ava can see Clint and Lucky.

She eventually moves Ava down to the communal floor, doing training in the dining room while everyone’s in the living room, or vice versa, until she finally has Ava doing all of her commands and tasks even with everyone else, including the other dogs, in the room around her. That’s when she starts to increase the difficulty even more.

“Hey Tony, do you mind helping with training for a moment?” Natasha asks one morning after breakfast, and Tony frowns but wanders over.

“Sure, what do you need?”

“I need you to fake a panic attack, so Ava can get used to only paying attention to her handler, not anyone else who might be upset,” Natasha explains. “Plus, it’s good practice for Diva.”

Tony nods. “Yeah, okay. How do you want me to do this?”

“However you want. We’re ready if you are.”

Tony takes a deep breath, then nods. As if a he flipped a switch, Tony starts to hyperventilate, stumbling his way into the kitchen and curling up in a ball in the corner, shaking and clutching at his chest. Diva follows him in, whining and pawing at Tony’s arms, and Ava tries to follow the other dog.

“Ava, heel,” Natasha commands, and Ava stops, hesitating between Natasha and Tony, before walking back over to Natasha and sitting in a heel by her side. “Good girl,” Natasha praises, giving Ava a couple treats. She waits for another moment or two while Tony continues his faked panic attack, his arms wrapped tightly around Diva, and when Ava fidgets slightly but stays by her side, she gives Ava another treat, and tells Tony that they’re good.

Tony stops, giving Diva a few full body pets and taking the treat Natasha hands him to give to Diva. “She’s doing well,” Tony says. “I don’t think I remember you teaching any of the other dogs this though.”
“No, I didn’t, not to this extent. But Sam works with other veterans, so I imagine emotions will run high sometimes.” She doesn’t elaborate much more than that, because she figures that anything that Sam wants to explain, he can explain on his own terms.

Tony nods. “Cool. Well, if you ever need more training help, JARVIS will know where to find me.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” As Tony heads down to the lab, Natasha heads to the gym to talk to her next training assistant.

“Hey Steve, can I get your help for a minute?” Steve reaches out to stop the punching bag from swinging and turns around to face them.

“What’s happening?”

“Nothing, I just need an extra person for this part of Ava’s training. I need you to fake an anger outburst, like you used to do when we were training Verity.”

Steve frowns. “Verity will react too, you know that.”

“Yeah, that’s not what matters, necessarily. I just need Ava not to react. She’s probably going to go to Sam’s support groups with him, so she’ll need to be able to ignore other people’s reactions.”

Steve nods. “I hadn’t thought about that. Okay. Now?”

“Now,” Natasha agrees.

Unlike Tony’s quick change, Steve builds his way up into yelling. “I kept repeating it in my head, over and over,” he starts quietly, “watching the same moment happen. I would watch Bucky pick up the shield, and the blast knocked him out of the train, and I saw him hanging on to the side, and I just, I almost reached him, I almost did, and then he fell, and I failed. I was a terrible friend.”
Steve takes a deep breath. “I watched my best friend fall because he picked up my shield, and at the time I thought he was dead, but he wasn’t, and I didn’t look for him, and I failed, I failed because he said he was with me to the end of the line and I just gave up on him. And now they expect me to lead a team of amazing people and I can’t, I shouldn’t, why don’t they get that! Bucky and I should have DIED. We should be gone, we should have been allowed to just go, and we didn’t get that! We didn’t get that, we didn’t get to let go of all of this pain, and we’re supposed to be GRATEFUL?”

By the end, Steve is practically screaming, pacing back and forth, and Verity is jumping on him desperately, but she’s barely causing him to stumble. Ava starts to step forward, and Natasha puts a hand out. “Ava, stay.” Ava stops, but she keeps standing, staring at Steve as he paces, still rambling at the top of his lungs about one thing after another. Natasha praises Ava, gives her treats, and then looks back up at Steve. “Okay, we’re good.”

Steve slows down, and the words seem to throw him off, which is just enough of a change that this time, when Verity jumps on him, he drops to the ground and immediately gets a lap full of dog. “Okay, okay, I’m here, girl, I’m here. Thanks, kid.” Natasha hands Steve a few treats, and he gives them to Verity, who takes them and then immediately licks Steve’s nose. Steve laughs. “So, did you get some of the training you needed?” he asks, and Natasha nods.

“Yeah, that was really helpful. Thanks, Steve.” She pauses before she says the next part. “And Steve. If you’re still struggling that much, there’s no harm in going to a therapist. I used to see one.” Another pause while she decides whether she’s really willing to share the rest. “Actually, I still do from time to time. It’s not perfect. But it helps. Tony knows some good people.”

She leaves with Ava, and Steve watches them go from the floor, Verity still laying in his lap.

Once Natasha’s confident in Ava’s training, she texts Sam, and then goes over to his house to talk to him. Ava is in her gear, courtesy of Tony; a straight-front black fabric harness with sewn-on dark grey fabric wings on either side, and a dark grey cape with dark red trim. It matches the Falcon gear Sam wears, and Natasha thinks it’s cute, in a dorky kind of way. (Tony made another harness without the wings, but he specifically asked Natasha to show Sam the one with the wings first.)

Sam opens the door when Natasha and Ava arrive, takes one look at them both, and sighs, stepping back so they can come in. “Of course Tony would put wings on her harness,” he says, but there’s no heat in the words. “So, what’s her name?”
“Ava. Steve named her,” Natasha says, and Sam laughs.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. So, I guess you remembered my comment about struggling from dinner that one night?”

“I did. You were already on my list, though. You’ve been there for Steve and I, and the rest of the team, through a lot. I figured you deserved some support too.”

“Damn right I do,” Sam says, and it’s clearly a joke, but Sam is also starting to tear up a little.

Natasha pulls him into a hug, and if she can feel his tears soaking through the shoulder of her shirt, she doesn’t mention it. “Always.” She waits until Sam pulls back, giving him a moment to collect himself if he wants or needs to. “So, should I show you what Ava knows?”

Sam meets with his support group a few days later, and maybe it’s silly, but he really does feel better with Ava by his side. The group is kind about the change, and a few people ask him if they think he could get them service dogs, too. He promises them he’ll look into it for them, and overall, he thinks this is going to be a good thing for him.

He runs into a few people in public who are less polite; people who doubt that he’s actually a veteran because of his age, people who think that he’s faking everything, people who don’t think PTSD service dogs matter. He shuts each of them down easily, but the worst encounter he has is a woman in a grocery store who tells him that she’s so glad a service dog helps him, “but those kids who claim to have PTSD are so rude, so disrespectful to veterans.”

“PTSD isn’t exclusive to veterans,” he tells her, but she shakes her head.

“Maybe if you’ve been in a shooting or something, but what else could possibly be so bad? All these kids claiming they’ve been ‘abused’ is so ridiculous. Just looking for attention, in my opinion.”
It takes all the self control Sam has (as well as a few different alerts from Ava) to not yell at the woman. “I can’t change your mind, but I can assure you that I personally know some people who have been abused as children, and I don’t doubt for a second that what they went through was painful and traumatic enough to cause PTSD,” he says, and the woman splutters, searching for an excuse.

“Well, but that’s not the kind of person I was talking about,” she says.

“Right. Lady, if you want to respect veterans, maybe you should also respect the people we’re putting our lives on the line for. My wingman died to protect the young, the innocent, the good at heart. He certainly didn’t die for people to spread this kind of intolerance. If you’ll excuse me.”

Sam barely makes it through the checkout and back to his car before he breaks down, sobbing in the back seat with Ava in his lap, a heavy weight helping to ground him in the present. He slowly comes back down from the flashbacks, and he realizes he’s ended up with Ava in his lap, his entire body curled around her like he’s trying to shield her. He cries for a few more minutes, running his hands through Ava’s fur, and she licks the tears off of his face, making him laugh. “Yeah, let’s go home. I promised you homemade dog treats, and you’ve definitely just earned them.”

He has nightmares about Riley, about what happened, but as bad as they are, every time he wakes up, Ava’s there, ready to help him, and if he’s being honest, this isn’t the worst life he could be living.
Frank Rescues Sable

Chapter Summary

This chapter is much darker than much of the rest of the series.

Tags/Trigger Warnings for this Chapter: graphic descriptions of violence, gun violence, animal violence, death, animal abuse, dog fighting, and blood.

If this could be triggering to you or you'd prefer not to read it, please feel free to skip this chapter. You can skip this chapter and it will not in any way affect your ability to read, understand, or enjoy the rest of the series.

Frank takes on a white supremacist group. They’re local, but with connections to other white supremacist groups across the country and in a few other countries as well, and they’re the core group that connects all the others. Frank finds it easy enough to get into the group; he matches the profile of the kind of person that comes to these events, and he doesn’t even have to worry about concealing weapons, because everyone here has at least two pieces somewhere on their person, usually a handgun and a rifle of some kind.

Frank is at one of their underground meetings, in a dingy warehouse that’s been shut down for the last three years and hasn’t been checked on in a while; there’s graffiti on almost every square inch of the walls, broken glass and cigarette butts and empty beer cans strewn across the floor. Frank walks through the crowds of people gathered throughout the building, trying to determine who’s the leader of tonight's party.

He finds the leader in a back storage room, sitting at the back of the room facing the pit that’s been created in the center. Three dogs are in the ring, one of them pinned under the other two and screaming in pain. Frank stops cold just inside the doorway, and someone in the room notices him. “Hey man, you wanna spot closer to the ring? This bitch is definitely gonna get killed.” Definitely not the right thing to say.

Frank slides the 9mm Beretta 92 out of his left boot, putting the bullet squarely between the man’s eyes. The man drops, and the people around him turn, already reaching for their own guns. Frank takes out the next 15 people in the room with the Beretta, ditches the empty clip and slides another one in. Everyone in the room except for the leader is dead in minutes.

He’s under no illusion that the room is about to be filled with armed white supremacists, but that isn’t what currently matters to him. He disarms the group leader, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt and yanking him around to use as a human shield. He drags him towards the door out of the room, grabbing guns off of dead bodies as he goes, and then he waits just inside the doorway. If he
stays here, he’ll have the advantage of both surprise and a concentrated point of entry.

Sure enough, people start to run into the room, guns at the ready, and Frank picks them off in rounds, slowly amassing a literal pile of bodies just inside the doorway. This gives him the added bonus of fear and distraction for each new wave of people that approaches and he keeps going, waiting everyone out.

By the time Frank’s emptied an entire clip into the group leader’s head and chest, the floor is covered in a pool of blood and Frank has to step on bodies just to reach the pit with the dogs in it. With the sudden commotion and change in events, the dogs have stopped attacking each other, and are standing around the edge of the ring, growling and whining. The dog that had been getting attacked is laying in a pool of its own blood, whimpering softly. Frank steps into the ring, kneeling down beside the bleeding dog.

“Come on, kid, let’s get a look at you,” Frank says, putting a gentle hand on the dog’s side. The dog flinches, and it’s all Frank can do not to empty the rest of the guns in the room into the dead bodies outside the ring. They’re dead already, Frank knows that logically, but can’t believe they would do this to a dog. He pulls out his phone and calls Jessica.

“Damn it, Frank, are you fucking kidding me, I just got home from saving Matt’s bitch ass, don’t tell me you did some stupid shit too.”

“Jones, call Romanoff. I’ve got a dog here that’s going to need a vet, and fast. I’m taking her to Stark’s place.”

“Shit. I’m on it. Anything else you need help with?”

“I’ve got two other dogs here. It was a dog fight. These dogs are going to need a place to go, but don’t bring Whiskey.”

“Okay, text me the address. I’ll be there in 30.”

Jessica hangs up, and Frank puts the phone back in his pocket, picking the wounded dog up. He carries her out to his truck, taking off his jacket and laying it across the backseat for her. He lays her down as gently as he can, gets in the front seat and drives.
Frank arrives at the tower at 1am, and JARVIS just directs him to the garage, telling him that Tony, Natasha, and the veterinary team will be down immediately. Frank’s barely parked when everyone comes rushing in, opening the back seat of the truck. “Jesus. Okay, we need to get her to the med bay. Mark, get an IV ready, Hannah, we’re going to need blood transfusions ready to go. I need anesthetics now, and Jason, set up the surgery room. Get the stretcher, let’s get her there.” The veterinarian directs the action, and Frank just stays out of the way. The veterinary team is back in the elevator with the dog in minutes, leaving Tony, Frank, and Natasha in the garage.

“She going to be okay?” Frank asks.

Tony nods. “Should be. Anita’s the best in the business. If anyone can do this, it’s her.”

Natasha waits with Frank in the living room on the communal floor, and they sit side by side, TV playing in the background while they drink some of Clint’s cheap beer and talk. Frank’s phone beeps at one point, and he pulls up a text from Jessica. She sent a photo of the other two dogs from the ring sitting in someone’s kitchen. “Malcolm volunteered to dogsit,” the next text says.

Frank sends back a ‘thank you,’ and Natasha rests her shoulder against Frank’s. “I’ll get them more permanent homes, if you’d like. I know a few people who have worked with rescues from similar situations before. They can live good lives,” she tells him and Frank turns to look at her, making eye contact.

“Thank you,” he says, and it’s the most sincere Natasha thinks Frank’s been with someone in a while.

They wait for another two hours before one of the veterinary staff, Mark, comes to talk to them. “She’ll be okay,” he says quickly when Frank stands up and starts walking towards him. “She’s going to need some very intensive care for the next few days, but she should recover completely. Dr. Garcia is amazing at what she does, and you got the dog here just in time. I don’t know where you got that dog from, and I don’t want to know either, but you saved that dog’s life. I’m glad we could help you with that. Dr. Garcia can tell you more about what you’ll need to do for the dog, but other than that, we’re done. Have a good rest of your night.”

The rest of the vet team leaves, and Dr. Garcia instructs them on how to take care of the dog. Dr. Garcia leaves, and Natasha turns to Frank. “Look, you’ve been awake for a while now. You can just crash here for the night, I don’t think anyone will mind. There’s an extra bedroom on my floor, if you want it.”
Frank shakes his head. “I’ll just go home, it’s fine.”

“Castle, you look like you haven’t slept in three days, and you’re bruised, bloody, and also covered in the dog’s blood, too. I think you’re allowed to just rest for once. You can even take the couch here, just get some sleep.”

Frank decides not to tell her that it’s actually been four days since he last slept, not three. “You’re not going to give up on this, are you?”

Natasha shakes her head. “Not a chance. Stick around, Bucky makes breakfast most days, and he makes some of the best french toast I’ve ever had. I promise, you won’t be disappointed.” She stands, heading towards the elevator.

Frank grumbles for a few minutes, but finally lays down on the couch. Fine, he’ll sleep here. But then he’s going home.

As it turns out, Frank ends up staying for breakfast. And then he goes to visit the dog, and he spends so much time worrying over her and making sure that she’s okay that he ends up being around for lunch, too. He spends most of his time with the dog, but he also finds himself spending time with the Avengers, who stop by to check in on the dog too.

“So, do you want to be the one to name her?” Natasha asks from the doorway, and Frank shrugs.

“I don’t know what I’d call her.”

Natasha hums, sitting in the chair beside him, both of them watching the dog sleep on the hospital bed in front of them. (Tony had insisted on letting the dogs have hospital beds too, arguing that a cage just seemed cruel and unnecessary, especially with JARVIS able to watch over the dogs at all times.) “What about Sable? She’s got really beautiful black fur.”

Frank agrees with her; the dog has a dark black coat with a large splotch of white on her chest, and while she’s also currently covered in stitches and bandages, she’s still adorable. “Yeah, Sable. That works.”
Frank stays almost exclusively in Sable’s room for the next week, and Natasha decides to text Jessica, because maybe she should add him to the list. Jessica confirms that it could be a good idea, and when Sable finally is recovered enough that they stop the medications keeping her asleep, she wakes up and whines until Frank starts to pet her, so Natasha thinks this might work out.
Helping Kids Testify Against Their Perpetrators

Chapter Summary

This chapter is darker than much of the rest of the series.

Tags/Trigger Warnings for this chapter include: homophobic language, rape apologists, religious fanaticism, references to the sexual assault of a minor, and other hateful rhetoric.

If these topics could be triggering to you or you would prefer not to read them, feel free to skip this chapter. You can skip this chapter and it will not in any way affect your ability to read, understand, and enjoy the rest of the series.

Tony’s in his workshop when Peter comes in to talk to him. “Hey, Mr. Stark? Can I ask for a favor?”

Tony turns, shrugging. “Sure, what can I do for you, kid?”

“Well, I met this boy named Tommy, he’s 8 years old, and I’m really worried about him. I got him out of a bad situation, but I found out recently that he’s being asked to testify in court, and like, the news hasn’t really been kind, and neither has the community, so. I thought maybe you and Steve and everyone could go help with the crowd? I’ve seen biker gangs do it before, and I think having superheroes help would be really helpful too?”

“Sure, if we don’t have any emergencies that day, we can probably do that. What is he testifying about?”

Peter falls silent, fidgeting with some spare parts on one of the work benches. “He was sexually assaulted by his babysitter, Judy.” A pause. “And his parents are gay.”

Tony freezes. “Christ. Yeah, we’ll definitely be there then. When is this happening?”

“Next week.”
“Okay, I’ll talk to everyone else, we’ll see what we can do.” Tony pulls up a new holographic screen, searching for more information on the case.

Peter breathes out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Mr. Stark.”

“Sure thing, kid.”

A week later, Tony pulls the limo up in front of the courthouse, and everyone looks out. They’ve got an impressive group in the car; Clint and Lucky, Tony and Diva, Peter in his suit (because everyone else is well known, but he’s still got a secret identity to maintain), Bruce and Smash, Steve and Verity, Bucky and Fubar, Rhodey and Valor, Natasha, Jessica and Whiskey, and Sam and Ava. From the looks of it, they’re going to need all of them, too.

The courthouse is surrounded by a crowd, and Bucky stares at the crowd in shock. “Why are there so many people here for this?”

“The babysitter was kind of a big deal in her community. Volunteered at homeless shelters, important member of her church, straight A student, that kind of thing. People are saying this is just Tommy making things up, because she would never do something like that,” Peter explains. “And his parents are gay, so she’s saying that she did it in the name of God to save him from his dads’ sins.”

“Fuck,” Clint says quietly, “This won’t go well.”

Jessica stares at the signs some of the people in the crowd are holding. “Fuck no it won’t. I hope you’re already to work your asses off. Because we’re going to be here for a while.”

“But take breaks if you need to, of course,” Steve adds, and Jessica glares at him.

“Whatever. This kid needs support more than we do right now. Fuck off with your ‘self care’ bullshit, Rogers, this isn’t the time.”

Tony clears his throat, stopping the argument before it can go any further. “Cool, well, let’s
do this, shall we? How are we going to divide up here?”

Natasha answers the question. “We’re going to line the path going up into the courthouse and keep people back on either side. When the kid gets here, we’ll send four people in with him, box him in and keep him safe. Bucky, Sam, Steve, you take the left side of the crowd. Jessica, Rhodey, Bruce, you take the right side of the crowd. Peter and Tony, you help with the left side of the crowd, and when the kid arrives, Peter will walk in front of the boy and Tony will take his left side. Clint and I will help with the right side of the crowd, and then Clint will take his right side and I’ll cover behind him. Clear?”

Everyone nods, so Tony drives them over to the parking lot, parks, and everyone piles out, heading back to control the crowd. People are yelling and chanting at full volume, and even Clint winces, turning his hearing aids down slightly. “Justice for Judy!” part of the crowd chants. Signs in the crowd read “Judy is Innocent,” “Model Citizen, NOT A Rapist,” “Gay is NOT Okay,” “Fags are Abominations,” and “Stop Oppressing Christians.” People take up the positions they’ve agreed on, and then they wait for Tommy to arrive.

Lucky starts to alert almost immediately, as do Smash, Fubar, and Whiskey. Jessica ignores Whiskey entirely, Clint and Bruce praise their dogs for tasking and then go back to focusing on the crowd, and Bucky reaches down to bury a hand in Fubar’s fur, trying to breathe and still manage the crowd.

Tommy’s parents show up with Tommy not long after the heroes arrive, and Peter, Natasha, Clint, and Tony quickly abandon their spots near the crowd to join the family, stepping into position around them while the others work to cover their spots, trying to manage the crowd as the people get more and more aggressive in their chants, pushing to get closer to Tommy and his parents.

As they walk Tommy to the courthouse doors, someone from the crowd makes it past Bucky and Sam, rushing at them only to be intercepted by Tony. “Sorry, sir, but now isn’t a great time, come back again later!” Tony says with his best false cheerfulness, pushing the man back towards the crowd of people.

“The boy’s a liar! My daughter would never do this! She’s a child of God!” The man yells in Tony’s face, and Tony just keeps walking the man back towards the crowd, Diva at Tony’s side.

“Blah blah blah, okay, just stay over here, sir, thanks!”
Tony heads back to the group, and Diva tucks back in between him and Tommy so the kid can pet the dog while they walk. They make it to the door, and once the family’s inside, the heroes all step back. One of Tommy’s fathers, Sebastian, takes Peter’s hand, looking like he’s about to cry. “Thank you, for everything. This has been so hard for Tommy, but you helped him speak his truth, you got all these wonderful people here to come stand up for us, and you’ve done so much. I don’t know how we can ever repay you.”

Peter holds the man’s hand in his own, trying to comfort him. “You don’t need to repay me. You’re here for your son. That’s what matters. We’ll stick around until after the trial for you, if you want.”

The father nods. “That would be amazing. Thank you.” He turns to Tony, Clint, and Natasha, making eye contact with each of them. “Thank you to all of you.”

The family heads into the courtroom, and the heroes head back out to talk to the others. “Buck, Steve, we’ll take over for now, go take a few minutes,” Tony tells the men, and he and Peter take their places.

“Bruce, Jessica, you two take a break too,” Clint says, and he and Natasha take over. They trade in and out for the next three hours while the trial continues, and when the family is back at the doors again, the same four walk them back to their car.

“How did it go?” Peter asks, and Tommy’s other dad, Don, shrugs.

“I don’t know. I think we’ll be okay. Tommy did a great job, though.”

Tommy shakes his head. “I-I think I forgot things, or maybe said things wrong, I’m not sure, it was just so scary and there were so many people, and--”

“Whoa, slow down kid.” Tony stops everyone, and crouches down until he’s face to face with the boy, Diva stepping over to the side. “Look, I’m Ironman, and even I get scared. Sometimes I mess up the things I want or need to say. It happens.”

Tommy looks at him, wide eyed. “Really?”

“Really. Every single one of the Avengers can personally guarantee that.”
“Yep, it’s true,” Clint says, “And it happens to me too. I’ve forgotten important information more times than I can count.”

“Me too,” Natasha adds. “I used to be a super secret spy, and even I mess up.”

Peter nods. “I also mess up. Actually, I mess up a bunch, but that’s okay, we all do. The important thing is you tried your best, okay?”

They continue walking to the family’s car, and when they get there and Tommy is in the back seat, both dads come around the car to talk to the heroes. “We can’t thank you enough,” Don tells them, and Sebastian nods.

“If it hadn’t been for all of you, I doubt Tommy would have been able to do this at all. You gave him hope and confidence at a time when even we couldn’t comfort him. We’ll always be grateful for what you did for us.” The family leaves, and Tony lets out a deep breath.

“That was the hardest thing we’ve done in a while, right? I’m not the only one who feels unbelievably drained right now?”

“I think I need a four hour nap,” Clint groans. “Let’s go get everyone and go home.”

They take the limo over and pick up the rest of the heroes, and almost everyone looks like they’re ready to collapse. By the time they reach the tower again, Bruce and Peter have already fallen asleep in the back, and Tony has to wake Bruce up to get him back inside, but he chooses to just carry a sleeping Peter rather than wake him.

Almost everyone goes back to their own floors in the tower, except for Jessica and Sam, who crash on the couches on the communal floor, and Peter, who Tony lays down on the other communal floor couch and covers in a blanket before heading back to his own floor. Tony has a feeling that everyone’s going to need some sleep after all of that, and any service dogs that went with them are going to be having one hell of a long work day, but Tony’s not upset about it. Helping the kid was worth it, and he’d have no problem doing this again.
The litter Natasha was hoping to get Luke’s dog from doesn’t work out. None of the pups turn out to be good candidates, so Natasha contacts another breeder that should have puppies in about eight months, and arranges to look at their pups when it's time. Until then, there’s not much she can do about Luke’s dog. Frank, however…

Frank spent almost the entire while Sable was recovering by the dog’s side, waiting for her to feel better. When she woke up the first time, she had whined until Frank started petting her, and for the first few weeks after that, she would cry whenever Frank wasn’t in the room.

Eventually, Sable was cleared to go out onto the communal floor and meet the other dogs, and Natasha arranged to have her meet the dogs one by one, because Frank had gotten so overbearing about Sable’s safety around the other dogs that she’d only just barely convinced him to allow this. She did agree with him though; Sable’s last experience around other dogs was her getting attacked, so while she might be fine physically, who knows how she’s doing emotionally.

They had decided to have Sable meet Thelonious first, and while Stephen would deny it later, he was immensely proud that his dog was considered the best reintroduction for Sable to other dogs. They had Thelonious out of his gear and off leash in the living room before Sable got there so she could decide whether or not to even enter the room on her own.

Sable followed Frank into the living room, but froze, tail tucked between her legs, when she saw Thelonious. Thelonious didn’t even pay attention to her, doing tricks Stephen was asking him to do to keep him busy, and when Frank sat down on the couch not far from Stephen and Thelonious, she slowly made her way over to him, keeping Frank between her and the other dog. Thelonious still didn’t react, and eventually Sable just curled up beside Frank, eyes still watching the other dog.

Over the next few weeks, Natasha and Frank kept having Sable stay in the same room with Thelonious until she was comfortable, and then they started introducing the other dogs. They brought Valor next, because out of the other dogs, Valor was the calmest. They repeated the same process for Valor, Whiskey, and Ava individually, and once they’d built up Sable’s confidence, they had her meet all four dogs at once.

It was slow going; Sable had a lot of confidence to regain, but she was getting better, and eventually they started to introduce the other, more energetic dogs, until Sable was comfortably interacting with the other dogs. She still got a little tense around other dogs at first, but she was never reactive, never aggressive; Natasha had to admit that she was impressed, because even the most gentle dogs can be provoked, but Sable was always gentle, always willing to be hurt rather than hurt someone.
Natasha had originally planned to train Sable without Frank knowing and present her to him fully trained, but the pair were practically inseparable, so Natasha just modified her plan. “Hey, Frank,” she calls from the kitchen, watching Frank and Sable cuddle on the couch (because, no matter what Frank might claim, they were definitely cuddling). Frank turns to look at her. “So, you and Sable get along well. Ever thought of having her trained as a service dog?” Frank snorts.

“No. Don’t know what she’d do for me. Besides, I don’t live the kind of life that’s safe for a dog.”

Natasha walks over to sit on the other couch beside him, curling up in the seat. “Well, PTSD service dogs exist, for one thing. You might also want to look into Bipolar Disorder, type 1. I think it makes sense for you. And when I talked to Jessica, she agrees that Antisocial Personality Disorder fits. You both are in that category.”

Frank stares at her for a minute. “What are you, a fucking shrink? Thought I was done with those pieces of shit when I got my identity changed.”

“No, not a licensed professional, but when I was being trained in the Red Room, one of the things we were taught to do was identify all ‘weaknesses’ in a target, and make reasonable inferences based on those observations. It wasn’t half assed training, either. I can probably diagnose more accurately than most licensed professionals.”

“That’s insane. But according to you, I am too, I guess. Yeah, fuck it, I guess I’ve got issues with PTSD, or something. So what’s the plan?”

Natasha loves how honest and realistic Frank is. She explains the plan, and they start training the next day.

Frank’s a quick learner, and Natasha actually loves working with the guy. He’s smart, practical, and he thinks ahead. Most of the stupid shit he does is motivated by emotions, but that isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s all about how you use it.

So Natasha shows Frank what to do, and watches as he teaches Sable himself. They’re a flawless
pair, and Frank clearly enjoys the work. Once Frank’s figured out how to train the different tasks, there’s only task that really requires Natasha’s help. It’s one she’s taught to about half of the dogs so far, and she’s mostly just there to be sure that Sable gets the task right.

The task is a hallucination check; it helps the handler figure out if something they’re hearing or seeing is real, or if they’re hallucinating it. The command they use for the task is “who’s there?” Natasha teaches all of the dogs this command in both English and ASL, because even though she, Clint, and Tony are currently the only ones fluent in it, sometimes the handler is too frightened to say the command out loud.

Sometimes, while having panic attacks or flashbacks, the handler is too scared to speak out loud, in case the person or thing they’re hallucinating is something that could hurt them, so Natasha teaches each of the handlers how to use both the English “who’s there?” as well as the signed “who?”

It takes 10 months to fully train Sable, and Frank spends almost all of his time working or playing with her. Natasha snaps at least three discreet pictures of the pair play wrestling. For data collection purposes only, of course. They do great together, and while Natasha’s sad to see them go, she’s glad that Frank’s comfortable enough with both himself and Sable to take her home with him.

The biggest problem Frank encounters while taking Sable with him is that people judge her by appearance; she’s a 100 pound black Cane Corso, and people are quick to assume she’s dangerous, especially with Frank beside her.

“You can’t come in here,” the waitress at a local diner tells Frank, “only service dogs are allowed.”

Frank stops just inside the door. “Ma’am, excuse me if this is blunt, but are you fucking blind?”

The waitress looks torn between confusion and panic. “N-no?”

“Great, then you can read the patch on her vest. Sable, block.” Sable steps in front of Frank, left side against the front of his legs, and the waitress looks at the patches on the right side of Sable’s vest. The vest is black velcro with white trim, and the patches read “PTSD Service Dog,” “Stay Back: Handler Has Killed For Less.”
The waitress swallows, reaching for a menu and dropping it twice with shaky hands. “Sorry, sir, my mistake. Follow me.” Frank sits at the table, thanking her, and enjoys the rest of his meal. He’s still pleasant, courteous, but he’s not going to be forced out of places.

In another instance, Frank had actually ended up leaving the restaurant. He’d fully intended on enjoying the Italian food (he missed his mom’s cooking, and while he could definitely make some damn good pasta, he couldn’t manage everything, not in his shitty little kitchenette at home), but the manager had demanded that he leave, claiming that they didn’t allow animals in.

“She’s a service animal,” Frank had told the manager, trying to remain calm.

“I don’t care what you call it, you can’t bring it in here. Take the mutt home.”

Frank had stood up to face the man, and he had a good 8 inches and 90 pounds on the guy, he could take him, when Sable stepped between them, pawing at Frank’s leg. “Fine,” Frank had growled, “We’re going. Expect a lawsuit.” They left, and Frank texted Natasha with the address, explaining what happened.

A week later, Frank found a letter someone had slid under his door and opened it to find a handwritten apology from the manager of the restaurant, as well as an offer for an entire meal, free of charge. Sable would be allowed to join him.

Frank went to the restaurant that night and ordered their osso buco alla Milanese, in a table in the back with Sable at his feet. The manager even came out and apologized to him directly, though he looked like it pained him to do so, but Frank didn’t particularly care. And he had to admit, the food really was as good as he was hoping it would be. The fact that it was free didn’t hurt, either.
The second litter Natasha looks at has a good prospect for Luke’s dog. Part of the problem is she’s limited by gender; Luke’s a big guy, and even in some of the largest dog breeds, the males barely get up to the size she needs for his dog. But she lucks out in the second litter she looks at, and she takes the 3 month old English Mastiff puppy home from Virginia the same day.

She’s already picked a name for the dog; Harvey, meaning “battle worthy.” She texts Tony a picture of the puppy in the passenger seat, and starts the drive home. She carries the puppy up to the communal floor of the tower, and finds everyone waiting in the living room, excited.

“Welcome home, Harvey!” Tony shouts, and then everyone’s surrounding Natasha, trying to pet the new pup.

“Okay, okay, hold on, boys, you’ll all get to pet him, he’s not going anywhere,” Natasha reminds them, rolling her eyes, and they back up so she can put the puppy down on the rug between the three couches. Dogs and humans alike plop down on the floor on their bellies, playing with Harvey. It’s good socialization for Harvey, if nothing else, so Natasha just goes to grab some different treats and see what Harvey prefers, that way she’ll be able to keep his attention when they’re training.

Natasha’s barely gotten the treats out of the walk in pantry in the kitchen when she finds herself surrounded by dogs, all of them waiting for a chance to earn treats. She laughs, waving them away. “Back up, you dorks, this isn’t for you.” The dogs retreat to the living room, and she follows them, one of each type of treat in her right hand and her clicker in the other.

She taps Clint on the shoulder, and he scoots over from where he’s laying in front of Harvey so Natasha can sit, holding the treats out for Harvey to sniff. She runs through a few quick commands with him, giving him at least an idea of what sit, down, and paw mean, and watches his reaction to each of the different treats. He loves duck and lamb treats, she finds, but he still likes everything else except for salmon. She makes a mental note of it, then puts away the clicker and settles on an armchair to watch as everyone continues playing with Harvey.
She texts a picture to Frank and Jessica of the heroes and their service dogs in a circle around the puppy, with the caption “bring Whiskey and Sable, it’ll be fun :D” Jessica sends her back a middle finger emoji and a thumbs up emoji, and Frank sends back a “No.” Whatever. She’ll win him over eventually.

It takes Natasha longer to train Harvey that it had for most of the other dogs; she has to go through some trial and error to figure out exactly what Harvey will be able to alert to, and how to get him to alert to it properly. With a condition like Luke’s, she has to get a little creative to make training work; she needs a way to recreate internal bleeding without actually injuring herself, so she asks Tony if he can figure out a way to make something that could replicate the issue. He gets back to her three weeks later, handing her a small, sac-like object.

“Okay, so, it’s made with a thin mucous membrane, and if we draw some of your blood we can fill it with that and then insert this into, like, some part of your body where there’s space. I’m an engineer, not a doctor, I can call Dr. Cho to help with that part. Then, when you’re ready to do the training, you just activate it with the blue button on this remote, and it’ll release a small portion of the blood onto the outside surface of the membrane. When you’ve gotten the training response you need, then just click the green button, and it’ll reabsorb the blood and you’ll be good as new again.”

Tony hands her the remote, and Natasha takes a moment to just stare at him. “You created this in three weeks?” she asks, and Tony shrugs.

“Well, you said you needed a way to make this work, so. I’m all about fixing problems. Besides, this could actually have a lot of practical applications in emergency rooms, if I can figure out a way to make it controllable and small enough to move between organs, which I’m sure I can figure out, because hey, I’m a Stark, it’s kind of what we do. This could be a way to help people with internal bleeding problems or life threatening injuries around the world.”

Natasha just shakes her head in disbelief. “Okay, well, let me know when Dr. Cho can get here to help with this, if she thinks it can work. Either way, can we do a blood draw today? I’m going to just have Harvey practice with alerting to the blood itself, for now, before we have him learn to do it when it’s actually inside me.”

Tony smiles, gesturing to the elevator. “Let’s go up and meet Brucie in the lab, I’m sure we can get this done in no time.”
Natasha teaches Harvey how to alert by pawing at her leg, then starts training Harvey to alert to blood itself. She’s done enough research to feel confident that this is the best way to start training his medical alert tasks, so she gets a small sample of the blood Bruce had drawn for her out of the box in the fridge (helpfully labeled “Natasha’s blood, don’t take”), and smears some on her ankle.

She holds her ankle out for Harvey to sniff. Once he’s sniffed the blood, she asks him to alert, and she praises him when he does. She repeats this a few times, first having him paw at her leg, then asking him to nudge her leg near the blood with his nose. Then she wipes the blood off, smears some more by her knee this time, and repeats the process. When she’s had him alert to that a few times, she wipes the blood off again, praises Harvey, and ends the training session, taking the puppy to go play tug of war in the living room.

When Harvey’s gotten the hang of alerting and indicating where the blood is, Natasha starts putting the blood in two places, showing him how to alert and then indicate both places. Then she starts putting the blood in places where Harvey can’t see, under her pant leg or under the sleeve of her shirt, so he has to alert and point it out by smell alone.

She tries tricking him by putting some of the blood in her mouth, but he figures it out quickly enough, and when he starts to alert correctly and consistently to wherever Natasha puts the blood, she decides he’s ready, and asks Tony to call Dr. Cho.

Dr. Cho flies out from South Korea a week later, and confirms with Natasha that she’s willing to do this. “I trust that Tony’s device works, but I still want to hear it from you directly that you’re sure about this,” she tells Natasha.

“I’m sure, Dr. Cho. There’s no one better in these respective fields than you two. And if this can help someone else, I’m all for it. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in the past; I’m not going to make the mistake of letting someone else get hurt again if I can help it.”

Dr. Cho nods, and then Natasha is put under anaesthesia while they perform the procedure.

Natasha wakes up in a hospital bed in the med bay with a barely noticeable scar just above her right hip and Tony’s reassurance that everything went fine, the scar is just so they’ll be able to find the
same spot to take the device out again later. She’s cleared to leave the med bay the same day as the procedure, so she takes the opportunity to continue Harvey’s training, because there’s no time like the present.

She starts Harvey’s training session, going through some of his basic obedience commands and other tasks, and then she takes out the remote, pressing the blue button (“just remember,” Tony had told her, “blue lets the blood out, green puts it back in. Blue, Bad. Green, Good.”) a little light on the remote blinks, letting her know it worked, and before she can even say anything, Harvey alerts. “Show,” she asks, her command for him to point out where the blood is, and he nudges right above where the scar is. She praises and treats him, then presses the green button, and the light blinks twice to tell her they’re good again.

Natasha practices a few more times just holding the remote, and when she’s confident in both the device’s safety and Harvey’s alerts, she puts the remote in her pocket, activating it using the braille Tony had added to the buttons to figure out which one to press. She continues doing short training sessions with Harvey over the next few weeks, and when he seems to have figured out the pattern, she starts pressing the buttons at random times while working on other parts of his training. Without fail, he alerts and indicates the right place, and Natasha’s honestly impressed.

She goes to talk to Tony in his workshop about creating more of the devices so she can vary placement and number of injuries, and he just grins at her, pulls open one of the drawers of his desk and reveals three more of the devices, smaller than the first. “I thought you’d never ask,” he says. “Let me call Dr. Cho again.”

The second procedure goes just as quickly and smoothly as the first, and Natasha wakes up to three new small scars, one just above her stomach, one near her left collar bone, and one at the base of her skull. She’s a little nervous about the last one, but Dr. Cho reassures her that it’s fine. “Mr. Stark and I talked about it. With the size of his devices, they’re composition, and the placement, there shouldn’t be any problems. I wouldn’t have put it in if I wasn’t confident in it’s safety.”

It’s still a little unsettling, but Natasha nods, because if Dr. Cho is confident, it’s okay. It’ll be fine. Really. She does ask Dr. Cho to stick around for a moment while she tests that one, and once she’s tested it four times without any problems, she finally relaxes and apologizes, and Dr. Cho flies back out to South Korea. Natasha decides to take a day off and continue Harvey’s training in the morning.

Natasha finds that Harvey is really, really good at his job. No matter which of the devices she
activates, he alerts and identifies them consistently during training sessions, and eventually Natasha
starts taking this part of his training the rest of the way, activating the devices at random while in
the living room on the communal floor. He alerts every time, and Natasha’s genuinely amazed.
She takes him on a trip to a pet friendly cafe, and when she activates the devices there, he
continues to alert accurately. Confident, she texts Jessica asking if Jessica can get Luke to the tower
later that day. Jessica asks if she’s invited too, sending an alcohol emoji, and Natasha snorts but
texts back yes. Jessica tells her they’ll both come by the tower around six, and Natasha heads home
to let Tony and the others know.

Jessica and Luke arrive at exactly six pm, and Jessica has Whiskey with her. “You still haven’t
explained why we’re here,” Luke is telling Jessica, and he hesitates when he sees Tony, Natasha,
Bruce, and Dr. Cho waiting for them in the living room. “I’m not about to get killed, right? This
isn’t some Get Out movie bullshit, is it?” Jessica laughs.

“No, it isn’t. get your ass in here, Luke.”

“Subtle, Jess,” Natasha says dryly, and Jessica shrugs.

“What? Just tell him.”

“Actually, I’m with Jessica for once, can we just tell me?” Luke asks, and Natasha grabs Harvey’s
leash, walking him over to Luke.

“Luke, this is Harvey. Jessica was explaining the internal bleeding problems. We think he could
help you.”


“He’s a medical alert and PTSD service dog. He’ll be able to identify if you’re bleeding internally,
and where, and he’ll help keep you awake until someone can come help you,” Natasha says,
holding out the leash. Luke takes it.

“Okay, but how does he know how to do that? I really doubt you’ve had tons of people willing to
just suddenly bleed internally so you could train this. You didn’t go out and attack people to do
this, did you?”
Tony takes the question while Natasha’s still trying to figure out if it’s a good or bad thing that Luke thinks she would just attack random people for this. “No, absolutely not! Why would we do that when you’ve got three brilliant brains in the room that came up with a much better solution! Really, it’s ingenious, if you ask me, I’m amazing.”

“That’s so smart!” Jessica interrupts, “But I came here for booze, that was the deal. So are we going to drink, or what?”

Tony makes a wide gesture to the dining room. “After you, Funshine Bear.” He and Diva follow Jessica and Whiskey out of the room, and Luke turns back to Natasha.

“So, they made implantable devices that could simulate internal bleeding, without the actual damage,” Natasha explains, “Tony designed them, Bruce double checked them, and Dr. Cho triple checked them and then implanted them. That’s how I trained Harvey to alert. He’s been almost perfectly accurate and consistent.”

Luke’s eyes widen as he processes that. “You actually had devices put inside you… just so you could train a dog for me?” He sounds surprised. “Where were they? Won’t that leave scars?”

Natasha points out where the three would be under her shirt, then turns to show him the spot at the base of her skull. “The scars are temporary. It’s just so Dr. Cho knows where to take them back out from, and then she’ll get rid of the scars entirely.”

Luke nods. “You put a lot into this.”

“It’s a minor inconvenience to me. It could be life or death for you. That was an investment I was willing to make. One that I wanted to make.” She lets that sink in for a moment. “So, let me show you what his commands are, and I’ll be able to send you on your way.”

Luke leaves a half hour later with Harvey at his side, and Jessica leaves with Whiskey not long after that, dropping a very, very drunk Tony into Bruce’s arms with a snort and a “he’s yours now,” hopping in the elevator and leaving before Bruce can respond.
“Bruuuuucie,” Tony whines, “I want one for Christmas. She’s so fun to drink with, we have to bring her back again.”

Bruce maneuvers his way under Tony’s right arm, Smash standing on Bruce’s other side and Diva taking Tony’s left, and he looks over his shoulder at Natasha and Dr. Cho. “You guys will be fine, right? I think I need to get him back to his bed. He should know better than to drink with someone with an enhanced metabolism, but he still does it.”

Dr. Cho nods. “I think we’re okay, Dr. Banner. I’ll call you if we need you.”

Bruce, Tony, and the service dogs head to the elevator, and Natasha and Dr. Cho follow behind them, waiting a few seconds before pressing the elevator button again. “You understated your commitment,” Dr. Cho tells Natasha while they wait. When Natasha raises an eyebrow questioningly, Dr. Cho shrugs. “I’m not saying that there was much risk in doing the procedures with Tony, Bruce and I involved, but still, having something put into your body and then taken out again, especially when it’s something that’s never been tested before? That takes a level of commitment beyond what most people would do, even for themselves. The fact that you would do that for someone else shows a lot about the kind of person you are.”

The elevator dings, and the doors open. “Now let’s go get those out of you.” Natasha steps into the elevator with Dr. Cho, and she thinks about what Dr. Cho said. She’s not sure how to feel about it, but she’s also finding herself thrown off by people’s comments more and more lately. She still hasn’t figured out how she feels by the time she’s put under the anaesthesia, and when she wakes up groggily after the procedure’s finished, she doesn’t quite remember the conversation, but she can’t ignore the feeling of relief that the devices are gone.

She takes a few days to recover after, even though she doesn’t necessarily need to, just because she thinks she needs a break before she starts working on anything else besides Avengers business anytime soon.
Visiting A Children's Hospital

Chapter Summary

This chapter involves the superheroes visiting children in the hospital, which means that some heavier topics will come up in this story. If that's not something you'd feel comfortable reading, feel free to skip this chapter, it won't affect your ability to enjoy the rest of the story.

Warnings include: suicidal thoughts, ableism, and child abuse.

Clint comes home from a Deaf meetup one night and taps Natasha on the shoulder to get her attention. “Hi Clint, what’s up?” She signs, because Clint doesn’t wear his hearing aids when he goes to meetups.

“I was wondering if we could go to the children’s hospital this weekend. Donna’s kid, Aurora, is sick, and I thought we could help cheer them and the other kids up,” Clint signs back, and Natasha nods.

“Yeah, we probably can. Do you want to ask everyone, or should I?”

Clint shrugs. “I can tell them tomorrow, but maybe you can text Jessica, Frank, and Luke? I don’t have their numbers.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Thanks, Nat.”

Natasha smiles. “No problem. Now get over here, I need someone to watch this movie and drink tea with me. The captions are already on.”

“Give me a second to make my hot chocolate. I’m not drinking your leaf water, Nat.”
They manage to get just about everyone to go to the hospital; all eleven of the service dog teams, plus Natasha, and the front desk guy looks positively overwhelmed at the idea of having that many visitors there. Clint asks if they can go around to see the kids, and the guy nods, tells them they can go anywhere except for the intensive burn unit and the various surgery rooms, but they’re welcome to visit any of the other patient rooms. He gives them Aurora’s room number, 425, and then they’re headed into the elevator so they can drop Clint off at Aurora’s room first.

Clint goes into the room, waving, and Aurora’s face lights up when she sees Clint and Lucky. “Clint!” She signs, “Why are you here? Did my mom tell you what happened?”

“Yep,” he signs back, “Your mom asked if I could stop by with some friends. Want to meet them?” Aurora nods rapidly, and Clint waves the rest of them in.

Aurora’s eyes get wider and wider as everyone enters the room. “Iron Man is here?” She signs at Clint, but Tony signs his answer back instead.

“Of course! Can’t have a good friend of Hawkeye’s feeling bad without at least one awesome visit!”

“You know ASL!” Tony and Aurora continue their conversation, and Natasha interprets for everyone else in the room.

“Hey kid, we’re going to go say hi to everyone else, is it cool if we leave you here with just Clint?”

Aurora nods. “Yeah, of course! Thanks for coming by, Mr. Stark.”

“Please, just Tony. It was nice meeting you, Aurora.”
Everyone steps out except for Clint and Lucky. “Alright, who’s ready to go talk to more kids?” Natasha asks the group in English, and there’s no objections, so she just leads them down the hall, poking her head into the rooms to see if there’s anyone who might want to say hi to them.

A girl a few doors down stares at Natasha, mouth hanging open, when Natasha looks into the room. “Hi, would it be okay if we came in and said hi?” Natasha asks, and the girl hesitates, grabs a pen and notepad off the side table by her bed, and writes something down, holding it out. Natasha steps into the room, taking the notepad.

“Not too many people, please. It’s too much. One or two people is okay?” The girl’s note reads, and Natasha nods.

“I think I know someone who’d love to spend time with you. Are you okay with dogs?” The girl smiles, nodding. “Okay, one second.” She hands the notepad back to the girl, going back out into the hall. “Hey Bruce, you want to hang out here? She doesn’t want lots of people, but she’s okay with a person and a dog.”

Bruce smiles. “Yeah, sounds good to me. I’ll see you guys later. Have fun saying hi to everyone.” He and Smash head into the room, and the rest of the group continues down the hall. The next room that has a kid in it that Natasha thinks would be willing to talk to someone is on the other side of the hall as they’re walking back towards the elevator, a boy curled up on the bed crying softly, and Natasha has a feeling she knows who might do well with this one. She knocks on the door gently, and the boy stops making noise, looking up at her with wide eyes.

“Hi,” she says. “Sorry to bother you. Would you be okay with some company?” The kid hesitates, looking like he’s trying to figure out if it’s a trick question. “No pressure, I promise. I’ve got a guy and his dog here that might like to say hi to you, if you’re up to it.” The boy nods slowly, and Natasha looks over her shoulder. “Tony, you and Diva want to go say hi? Just be a little quieter than normal?”

Tony nods, stepping into the room with Diva at his side, stopping just inside the doorway. “Hey, dude. How are you? Mind if we join you?” The boy looks shocked that it’s Tony, but he shakes his head, and Tony sits down in the seat furthest from the bed, giving the boy space. “I’m Tony. What’s your name?”

“Gabriel,” the boy whispers.
“Nice to meet you. This is Diva, Nat named him after my personality.” That gets the boy to smile a little, and Natasha trusts Tony, so she slips back out of the room, and she and the rest of the group get into the elevator, heading down to the third floor.

On the third floor, they meet a boy in a wheelchair who actually starts to cry when he sees Rhodey enter the room in his own wheelchair, Valor at his side. “I didn’t know-- you’re like me,” the boy says, almost reverently, and Rhodey smiles.

“Well, I’m not sure that’s true. I don’t think I’m nearly as cool as you are. And I love your bracelet,” he says, pointing at the boy’s rainbow bracelet.

The boy positively lights up. “T-Thank you, I snuck it in with me. My parents would kill me if they knew. Dad says I’ve got enough of a target on my head as a black man without being gay.”

Rhodey frowns. “It’s not easy being black, but it’s even harder when you have to try and hide part of who you are, too.” Rhodey seems content to stay here and talk to the kid, so everyone else leaves quietly, heading to the next room.

The next room they stop in is a boy who smiles at Natasha brightly when she looks in. “Hi there! You’re not here with news people, right? Because I definitely don’t have a flattering enough hospital gown for this shit.”

Natasha laughs, and waves everyone in. “Nope, no cameras, just a bunch of idiots and their dogs.”

“Cool! I think I know most of you. Hey, aren’t you the dude that made the world look all funky that one day?” He points at Stephen, who rolls his eyes, but nods.

“Yes, that was me. Dr. Strange.” The boy tilts his head to the side.

“What, so turning the world into a kaleidoscope is just your hobby? I mean, I guess it probably doesn’t pay well, so fair enough. Any other cool hobbies I should know about? Also, if you’re a doctor, know of any good treatments for fibromyalgia yet? Because I’m really, really getting tired of taking four medications and still being in pain.”
Stephen sits down in the chair by the boy’s bed. “Well, actually, the secret to solving pain issues is apparently to become a practitioner of the mystic arts, but I’m not sure how to generalize that skill yet. Or if it’s even a good idea to do so.”

“Damn, dude. That sounds a little out of my range. Wait, you’ve got pain issues? What?”

Everyone sneaks out of the room while Stephen and the boy talk, heading to the other rooms. Just as they’re headed back to the elevator, there’s a clattering noise and a deep sigh from the last room, and Bucky, who was walking at the back of the group, leans against the doorway. “Everything okay?” he calls.

“Yes? Maybe?” Another clattering noise. “Ugh, okay, no, not really. I might need some help.” Bucky walks into the room with Fubar, and everyone waits outside, Natasha going over to look inside the room. There’s a kid laying on their back on the floor, prosthetic leg on the floor a few feet away from them. Bucky holds his flesh hand out to the kid, who takes it, standing up. “Thanks, man. I still haven’t quite gotten the hang of this leg yet. It’s so weird, you know? Like it works, but it doesn’t?”

Once the kid is sitting back on the edge of their bed, Bucky picks their prosthetic leg up, handing it to them, and gestures at his metal arm. “Yeah, I get it.” The kid seems to finally recognize Bucky, and they grin.

“Oh, this is cool! I’ve seen you on tv.” Bucky tenses, but the kid continues talking, seemingly without noticing. “I mean, they weren’t really supportive of you, but I don’t think you’re a bad person. I think you were hurt. And that makes people do bad things.”

Bucky relaxes, taking a deep breath. “Yeah, yeah you’re right. Think I can give you a hand--” he takes his metal arm off, holding it out, “with your prosthetic here?” The kid laughs.

“Yeah, please. I’m Nina, by the way, she or they pronouns.”

Nat steps back from the doorway, and turns to lead everyone else back to the elevator. They head down to the second floor.

The kid in the first room Natasha looks into sighs. “I’m still fine, okay? Seriously, I get that it’s for my safety, but I’m getting really goddamn tired of people looking in every 15 minutes.
What would I even be able to use in this room to kill myself? There’s nothing dangerous in here, unless you count me.”

Natasha raises an eyebrow. “Well, I don’t think I’m who you’re expecting, but I can assure you that I’m also pretty dangerous, and so is my friend back here,” Natasha says jokingly, and the kid looks over.

“Whoa, hi there! You’re right, you’re definitely not who I was expecting. Who’s back there, though?”

Natasha waves Jessica forward. “This is my friend Jess. She’s 48% dangerous, 50% asshole, and 2% human being.”

Jessica nods. “Damn right. How the fuck did you get stuck in this place, anyway?” She walks in with Whiskey, hands in the pockets of her leather jacket, and the kid shrugs.

“Apparently self-hatred is frowned up here. Who knew? Anyway, I’m Shayla, your dog looks badass.”

“Man, I hate being expected to have self-preservation. The dog’s name is Whiskey.”

“Please tell me you have some actual whiskey with you, too.”

“Sorry, not today.”

“Damn.”

The rest of them leave Jessica there and move on.

The next room is a kid who’s wrapped in bandages and hooked up to an IV. They look over when Natasha looks in, and the kid smiles.

“Hello. It’s okay to come in, I promise it’s not contagious and I’m not an Ancient Egyptian
Natasha chuckles. “Okay. Are dogs allowed in?”

“As far as I know, yes. They said the burns weren’t bad enough to put me in the burn unit, so I’m guessing we’re fine.”

Natasha steps in, and waves everyone else in. “We’re going around the hospital today, thought we’d drop in and say hi.”

“Just for me? Aww, you shouldn’t have.” The kid looks around at them all, and their gaze falls on Steve. “Uh. Hi. You’re from the 30s or something, right? Do you miss it?”

Steve shakes his head. “Not really. I miss my friends, but things are better now. More people are allowed to be themselves.”

“What about, like, gay people?” They ask quietly, and Steve frowns.

“Of course. Everyone should be allowed to be who they are. Why?”

The kid hesitates. “Well, I. I wasn’t sure if you would-- my mom’s a fan of yours. She told me you were a Christian, and that you would agree that God doesn’t make mistakes.”

Steve crouches down beside their bed. “I don’t think God mistakes. I think God makes gay and trans people beautiful, exactly the way they are: as a gay or trans person. Anyone who says otherwise is lying.”

Luke steps forward too. “My dad is a preacher. We disagree on a lot of things. But we agree that people are who they are, and you should also treat people with love. I think a lot of people forget that Jesus spent a lot of time around ‘sinners,’ and he always loved them.” The kid looks like they’re going to start crying.

“Thank you. I’m Delilah, by the way.”
“I’m Luke. It’s nice to meet you.”

Steve steps back again. “We’ve got more kids to meet, but it was wonderful to meet you, Delilah.”

They let Luke stay with Delilah, and move on.

There’s only one other room with a kid currently in it on this floor, and they actually throw a tissue box at the door frame when Natasha looks in. “If one more fucking person asks how I’m doing, I’m going to physically fight someone,” the kid shouts, and before Natasha can respond, Frank steps into the room with Sable at his side.

“Whoa, that’s no way to treat someone you haven’t even spoken to yet, christ, kid, fucking chill,” Frank says, and the kid glares at him.

“Who gives a fuck? People are gonna ask the same useless questions, give me the same shitty advice, and then claim I’m not even trying. Maybe if someone was actually helpful I would start to do better!”

Sable paws at Frank’s leg, and the man sighs. “Yeah, fuck it, I get it, kid, I do. You wanna at least tell me what’s going on and I’ll see if I can tell you something new? I have a feeling I’m not quite the same as all the professionally nice people here, because I’ll be brutally honest with you.”

The kid glares, but nods. “Fine. But everyone else needs to leave, I’m not a zoo animal.”

Only Nat, Sam, and Steve are left, and they make a hasty retreat. “First floor, boys?” Natasha asks, and they both nod, so they take the elevator down. Natasha knocks on the first door, and there’s some coughing, and then a kid’s voice answers.

“Yeah? Please don’t come in if you’re sick. Even if it’s just a cough or something. Please.” Natasha turns to Steve and Sam, and they both shake their heads.

“None of us are sick, but we have two dogs with us,” Natasha answers.
“That’s fine.”

They all go into the room together. The kid on the bed is wearing a colorful mask on the lower half of their face, but their eyes give the impression that the kid is smiling weakly at them. “Sorry about that. My immune system is pretty bad, I can’t risk getting sick. The mask helps, but it’s not perfect.”

Steve’s the first one to respond. “That makes sense. I used to be the same way as a kid, except back then we didn’t have masks that awesome looking.”

The kid laughs. “Captain America, right? You used to be the same way?”

Steve smiles. “Believe it or not, before I got this body, I was a scrawny little dude, a strong wind was almost enough to get me sick or knock me over. But I had my friend Bucky, and he helped.”

“How. What did you get diagnosed with?”

“Well, back then, we still didn’t know a lot of what we know now, but I had a lot of things.”

Sam and Natasha smile at Steve and the kid, and leave the room. Sam steps into the next room down the hall, and gets immediately met with a “holy shit, are you Falcon? You’re Falcon, right? The dude that fights beside Captain America?” Natasha keeps walking, because she’s pretty sure Sam’s going to be there for a while. At the end of the hall is an occupied room, but the lights are off. When Natasha looks in, she sees a German Shepherd in a harness laying on the floor beside the bed, rigid handle coming up off the harness.

Natasha knocks lightly on the door. “Hi, my name’s Natasha, I’m here to just say hi and talk, if you want.”

The kid’s head turns to face the door, and while their eyes meet hers, they don’t actually see her. “Sure? Your voice is familiar. Do I know you?”

“I’m from the Avengers,” Natasha says, and the kid lights up.
“Oh my god, that makes sense! Uh, sorry, I’m blind, that’s why I asked,” the kid clarifies. “I’m Tyler, he/him pronouns.” Tyler holds his hand out, and Natasha takes it, shaking his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Tyler. How are you doing?”

Tyler shrugs. “I’ve been better. I’m kind of used to the endometriosis pain, but it’s been a while since I’ve been so constantly misgendered. I just want them to get the procedures over with and go home. My parents are supportive, and they’ve tried talking to the doctors, but everyone keeps calling me by my dead name.” There’s a pause. “And I keep thinking about how I probably won’t be able to have children of my own. I’m already struggling with fertility because of the diagnosis, but then with transitioning…” Tyler takes a deep breath. “It’s hard.”

Natasha nods, even if Tyler can’t see her. “Yeah, I understand that. I don’t know how much you’ve heard about me from the news and everything, but I’m actually sterile. I can’t have kids. I want children in the future, maybe. But I’ll probably have to adopt. I know it shouldn’t hurt as much as it does, but I wanted to have my children myself.”

Tyler smiles sadly. “Yeah. I’ll be happy to give kids a chance to have a better life by adopting, but I also just wish I had the choice in the first place. I’m not even sure I’d be allowed to adopt, because I’m blind.”

“Don’t be so down on yourself. I know a very competent lawyer who’s blind, and if it ever came down to it, I could get you his number, if you wanted help advocating for the right to adopt.”

Tyler tilts his head to the side. “Really? That would be awesome.”

“Of course, he loves helping people, that’s why he went into law in the first place.”

“Can you tell me more about him?”

Everyone meets up about two hours later to head home, but they’re all feeling a little high
They take up the entire back corner of the restaurant, sharing stories about the kids they spent time with.

“I know you didn’t really get to spend much time with them, but Aurora is seriously such an awesome kid,” Clint tells them between bites of a cheeseburger with hash browns and a scrambled egg on it. “They’ve been trying to figure out ways to advocate for Deaf acceptance and for better accessibility in public space. There’s still a lot of struggles for Deaf people across the country to be able to access life.”

“The girl I talked to, Mona, she’s trying to advocate for acceptance for autistic people like her. She says that because she’s mostly nonverbal, people rarely take her seriously, and she’s trying to change that,” Bruce adds. Natasha interprets for Clint, because it can be hard for him to hear everyone clearly in loud environments.

Rhodey shakes his head. “I wish the kid I talked to had that kind of confidence. Kai’s still so terrified of just being himself. I really wish it wasn’t true, but the black community can be pretty homophobic and transphobic, ableist too. And maybe we have reasons to be scared, but we still shouldn’t be hurting our own kids like this.”

Tony puts a comforting hand on Rhodey’s shoulder, then takes his hand off so he can interpret for Clint and give Natasha a chance to eat. “Give it time. You’re a really vocal advocate, and that helps, you know? You’re helping kids everywhere be more proud of themselves. The kid I talked with today, Gabriel, he’s bisexual, and his parents are far less than accepting. He’s scared to report them because he doesn’t want to end up in the child care system.” Tony pauses, taking a shaky breath when Diva puts his head in Tony’s lap. “I was always scared to talk about what my dad did. Because a bad home felt better than none at all.”

Steve frowns, and he looks like he’s about to say something so Bucky cuts in quickly. “Nina was one awesome kid. She could definitely appreciate a bad joke. And they had a really, really kind heart. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so willing to just treat me like a human being from the beginning, not since the Soldier.”

“Andrew had been through some shit,” Frank says. “Kid was ready to fight anyone that walked through that door because he didn’t trust anyone to give a fuck about what he had to say. He just needed someone to listen to him and be honest with him for once in his damn life.”

Jessica nods, chugging half her soda in one drink. “Shayla was the same. Needed someone to take her word for once without assuming. Which, seriously, why does everyone seem so fucking convinced that they’re allowed to just tell kids what is and isn’t true about
themselves? It’s bullshit. And people wonder why we all turn out so goddamn jaded and hateful.”

“Well, aren’t you just a ray of damn sunshine?” Sam cuts in, rolling his eyes. “I was talking to Cypress, and the kid was just really tired. For seven years ve’s been trying to tell people about ver symptoms, and ve only just got diagnosed with hypothyroidism earlier this week. Why don’t we just take people seriously and treat their problems like they matter? Kid was funny as hell too.”

Luke shrugs. “And it’s everything too, isn’t it? I was talking to Delilah, her mom gave her second degree chemical burns using chlorine because she found out the kid was trans.”

“I can’t believe the mom told that girl that I would have agreed with that behavior, too,” Steve says quietly, voice strained with emotion. “I joined the army to get rid of bullies. I don’t understand.” Steve sighs. “But I talked to a great kid today, Luna. They told me they’re a nonbinary girl, and I think that’s amazing. And they’ve apparently come up with masks that can help people with weak immune systems? I wish they’d had that when I was a kid. So many people I knew could have been helped by that.”

“We still have a lot more to learn though,” Stephen adds, “I was talking to Max about his fibromyalgia. It’s a diagnosis of elimination, meaning no other diagnosis properly fits his pain. It also means that it’s very difficult to treat. He’s in so much pain, and even I don’t know how to help him any better than his doctors are already doing.”

“There’s also a problem with professionals dismissing people for one reason or another. Tyler, the boy I talked to, has endometriosis, so the doctors misgender him as female because of it. And he’s blind, so he’s also had issues with his guide dog being allowed to accompany him. There’s a lot of changes that need to happen in the healthcare professions so everyone can get the help they deserve.”

There's a few moments of silence while everyone processes that. “Okay, but how excited were the kids about the dogs?” Clint asks, and the table bursts out in laughter. “They were so excited to see the dogs! It’s like we weren’t even famous, the dogs were so much more important!”

“As it should be,” Bucky says with a straight face, but he starts laughing again almost immediately. “Are we going to do this again? We should do this again, right?” he asks, and Steve nods.
“Yeah, I’d love to do this more often.”

There’s a chorus of “agreed” and “yeah,” and everyone goes back to enjoying their food.
Weekly movie night in the tower is interrupted by Thor storming out of the elevator, dragging Loki along by a death grip on his arm. Everyone jumps to their feet; Natasha has already drawn the knife she keeps in her boot just in case, and Clint scrambles back until he’s standing behind her, Lucky immediately blocking in front of him.

“Tony, I need you to keep Loki safe for me,” Thor says, and Natasha finally has a chance to take in the gods’ appearance: they’re both covered in dirt, sweat, and blood, and Loki looks shaky on his feet.

“I don’t think I like that,” Tony says, “you do remember what he did last time he was here, don’t you?”

“Yes, obviously. But this is a matter of life and death. Please. I’ll be back for him soon. Just a few weeks, at most.”

Tony hesitates, but finally nods. “Okay. Fine. But only for a few weeks.”

Thor nods. “Thank you.” He lets go of Loki, walking back to the elevator, and Loki stumbles, barely catching himself and managing to stay standing. Loki takes a look around the room and holds his hands up in surrender.

“I know you don’t want me around. I understand. I’ll leave, I just need a moment. Thor shouldn’t have brought me here.”

Tony shakes his head. “No, I’d rather have you where I can keep track of you. I have an empty floor that I’ve been holding onto in case Thor or someone else wanted to move in. You can stay there. JARVIS will take you down in the elevator. If you need anything from here, you have to wait until we’re not here, or until everyone currently on the floor has agreed to let you come up. JARVIS, make note of that.”

“Noted,” Jarvis answers from the ceiling, and Tony nods.
“Alright, go.”

Loki leaves, and it’s not until the elevator doors click shut that everyone starts yelling.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” Clint demands.

“You can’t be serious about keeping him in the tower,” Steve says.

“This is fucking insane, I’m going to fucking kill him if he stays,” Bruce adds.

“Why did Thor think it was okay to bring him here?” Natasha asks.

Tony shouts over all of them. “Damn it, I don’t know, but you don’t really want him wandering all over Earth without any supervision, do you?” That causes an uncomfortable silence. Tony sighs. “I don’t like this either. But what choice do we have?”

For the first week, whenever JARVIS asks if Loki can come to the communal floor, everyone either says no or just leaves the communal floor entirely. They all have their own reasons for avoiding the god; Clint still has nightmares about being under Loki’s control, Bruce hates Loki for trying to manipulate him into dissociating, Tony can’t quite shake the image of the void of space whenever he sees Loki’s face, Steve gets pissed every time he remembers Loki forcing those people in Germany to kneel, and Bucky has heard the team talk about Loki before, and he’s already had enough brainwashing for a lifetime, thanks.

But it can’t last forever; with how often someone’s on the communal floor, Loki hasn’t been allowed up in over a week, and JARVIS explains this to Natasha while she’s sitting up drinking tea one night after a particularly vivid nightmare.

“Ms. Romanoff, I hate to intrude, but Loki has requested access to the communal floor, and I’m inclined to oblige, as there is no food on his floor and he hasn’t eaten in five days.” That’s something Natasha hadn’t thought about, and she’s a little surprised that Tony hasn’t had food delivered to Loki’s floor, though with everyone trying to just ignore his existence in the tower, maybe it makes sense. Jarvis repeats the question, and Natasha pushes those thoughts aside.
“Sure, Jarvis, let him up.” She has no intention of leaving; she came here because being on her own floor with the memories from her nightmare was starting to feel claustrophobic, and Loki’s not going to be the one to force her back there. The elevator dings, and Loki steps out, freezing when he sees Natasha.

“I can leave,” he says, and Natasha shakes her head.

“No, it’s fine. You wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want you here. I’ve been forced to go without food before. It’s not something I would do to someone intentionally, no matter how I feel about them as a person.”

Loki comes into the kitchen, but he’s still moving around like a frightened animal, and Natasha honestly can’t even blame him; it’s not like she or anyone else has been particularly welcoming to him since he got here. Once he’s closer, though, Natasha can see how red his eyes are and the dark shadows under them, and she frowns. “Not sleeping well?” She asks.

“Not particularly. But it’s not unusual for me, so it doesn’t matter.” He opens the pizza box on the counter, leftovers from the team’s dinner, and stands there to eat the remaining half of the extra large pizza, shoving the food into his mouth as fast as possible, as if it’ll be taken away from him any minute now.

“Insomnia, or nightmares?”

Loki finishes the pizza, wiping his hands off on his pants. “Why all the questions? I can’t imagine you’re genuinely concerned about my wellbeing.”

“And maybe I am. Maybe I feel that I’ve misjudged you in the past, and I want to fix that.” Natasha stands up to make a second cup of tea, because damn if she doesn’t love the box of fancy teas Tony had gotten for her last Christmas.

Loki watches her move around the kitchen, stepping out of the way. “You wouldn’t enjoy what you hear.”

“Try me.”
Loki turns out to be right, but not in the way he had originally thought; Natasha listens to him explain his side of things, and it’s official, she hates Odin, even if she’s never met the guy. She also doesn’t like the way this Thanos guy sounds, and she seriously hopes that Loki’s right about Thor being able to stop him. And sure, she’s still not the biggest fan of Loki himself, but she can’t deny that with a life story like that, some terrible actions on Loki’s part isn’t entirely unreasonable.

She’s quiet for a few minutes after he’s finished speaking, and Loki appears to misinterpret the silence for anger towards him, standing up from where he’d settled into one of the stools by the kitchen. “Well. I’ve intruded long enough. I’ll be leaving now.”

“No, wait. Don’t go. Just… Why didn’t you just explain all of this to begin with?”

Loki gives Natasha a puzzled look. “Because it was clear that I’d already hurt all of you, in one way or another. I didn’t want to impose more than I already have.”

Natasha smiles. “You have met Tony, right? He’s got a pretty big personality, but he’s also got a good heart and good reasons for why he is the way he is. We do more than just tolerate him; we love him, flaws and all. But it was harder for us to do that when we didn’t know what was going on. And sure, maybe that’s unfair of us, but it’s still the truth. We’re more likely to care about people when we know the motivation behind their actions. And it sounds like you had pretty good motivations.”

Loki’s quiet for a moment, and then he nods. “I’ll have to keep that in mind. Thanks for letting me come up here.”

“No problem.” Loki starts to head back to the elevator. “Oh, and Loki?” The god turns. “If you’re hungry, I’m pretty sure JARVIS can get food sent to your floor. There’s also food here, and you can have anything you want. My floor has food, too. Just ask JARVIS, and I’ll have him let you onto my personal floor.” Loki nods silently, and then he turns, goes into the elevator, and is gone again.

Natasha sighs, draining the rest of her tea and putting the mug in the sink. She heads to the elevator and back to bed, and she hopes Loki knows that she meant everything she said.
She gets confirmation that Loki understood her when JARVIS gets her attention in the shooting range three days later. “Pardon me, Ms. Romanoff, but Loki is requesting access to your personal floor.”

“Sure, he can go up there, and I’ll join him in a minute,” Natasha confirms, efficiently emptying and cleaning the guns she was working with. When she gets to her floor, Loki’s digging around in the freezer with his back to her, so she clears her throat from where she’s standing in the doorway so Loki will know she’s there without her risking getting stabbed. He whips around, hand twitching like he was about to draw a weapon, but he relaxes when he sees her.

“Sorry, I thought-- I haven’t gotten used to being around people again.”

Natasha shrugs, walking over to join him in front of the freezer. “It’s fine. I still keep a knife in each of my boots no matter where I go, just out of habit. You do what you have to do to feel safe. So, what are we in the mood for?”

“I’m not sure, I’m not even entirely sure how half this stuff is supposed to be eaten,” Loki says, looking back into the freezer.

Natasha thinks about it for a moment, then closes the freezer. “Hold on, I have a feeling I know something you might like.” She opens one of the cupboards and pulls out a box of spaghetti and a can of sauce, then starts rummaging around for a good pot and pan. “When I introduce you to Frank, don’t ever tell him I actually like the boxed stuff, he’d flip his shit.”

“Okay? What even is it?”

Natasha turns on one of the stove burners. “Pasta. Get over here, I’ll show you how to make it, and if you like it, you can take some of it down to your floor with you in case you want to make it yourself.” Loki joins her at the sink, and she shows him how to estimate the amount of water needed. “Okay, so, that’s the water we need. Now, we put it over here, let it heat up. I always add a little salt, personally, and then we wait for it to start boiling.”

Natasha leads him through how to cook everything, and when the food’s done, she sets up two plates of it, setting them down at her small square dining room table. “Alright, tell me how it tastes, and if you say ‘like shit,’ I’m going to blame it on you for helping me make it.”
Loki laughs, sitting down across from her. “You probably wouldn’t be wrong.” Natasha takes a bite of her own, that way Loki can see for sure that it’s safe, and he watches her, mimicking the way she’d used her fork to scoop some of it up, and trying it himself. He moans around the first bite, and Natasha grins.

“I’ll take that as a five star review?”

Loki swallows, grinning back. “I also haven’t really eaten in three days, and before that it had been about 2 weeks since I had an actually decent sized meal, so I wouldn’t get cocky so soon.”

“Hmm, we’ll see about that.”

Natasha can’t say she’s happy with what Loki’s done in the past, but she also can’t find it within herself to hold a grudge. If anyone would understand the importance of second, and third, and even fifteenth chances, it’s her. So she finds herself building a comfortable, steady relationship with Loki. He’s a smartass, as clueless as Thor had first been about human customs and culture, and he’s traumatized. He’s scared and alone in a place he had once done damage to, surrounded by people he’d hurt, and he doesn’t know what to do with any of that, so he keeps falling back on old coping mechanisms; being aggressive, deceitful, and standoffish. Yeah, Natasha can definitely relate to the guy.

So she’s not surprised when JARVIS says that Loki’s asking to talk to her, but she’s definitely surprised when he says that Loki had deemed it “urgent.” She meets Loki just outside the elevator on his floor, and he holds his hands out to stop her from going into the living room. “Okay, I just want you to know, I didn’t know it was there, so this is news to me too.”

“What?” Loki leads her into the living room, where an honest to god deer is standing in the middle of the room. “I… That’s not you, right? You’re not making that happen?”

“No, and it is apparently not from Earth, it’s just imitating one of your planet’s animals. I think it’s from the planet Thor and I came from when he left me here a few weeks ago. It must have taken the form of something small so it wouldn’t be noticed.”

Natasha stares at it, making sure not to look away in case it attacks. “So a shapeshifter? And it changed to this form now why, exactly?”
“I believe it was imitating the animal in the show I was watching.”

Natasha shoots a quick glance at the tv. *Bambi*. Okay, sure, why not. “Can you communicate with it?”

Loki shakes his head. “Not necessarily. I can both send and receive basic ideas, but nothing specific.”

“Okay. It doesn’t seem aggressive, so that’s a good start. Will its body language change to match the species it’s imitating? Do you think we could get it to take the form of a dog? JARVIS?”

“Ms. Romanoff, based on my resources, it does appear to be emulating the behavior of the deer it has taken the shape of. Do you have a preference of what kind of dog you would like it to take the shape of?”

Natasha thinks about that for a second. “Maybe an Afghan Hound? Long hair, black with tan and white, female?”

“One moment, Ms. Romanoff, allow me to recreate a three dimensional hologram to place in the room.” There’s a pause, and then a holographic Afghan Hound appears in the center of the room beside the deer.

The deer approaches the hologram, and there’s a shimmer of light as the deer transforms into a copy of the dog. “Awesome, that’s something I can work with. Loki, can you try and ask it to keep that form? Just, stay that way for now?”

Loki nods. “I can try.” He stares at the dog for a moment, and then chuckles. “They agree, but they want to meet other dogs.”

Natasha shrugs. “Yeah, sure, why not? Let me go talk to the rest of the team.” She heads back to the elevator, going up to the communal floor. Tony, Steve, and Sam are there with their dogs, and they’re playing Mario Kart, trading insults. They’ll have to do. “Hey boys, are we willing to let the dogs do an introduction right now?”
“One second!” Tony doesn’t even look away from the screen, but Sam does, and when he turns back, his character’s kart has fallen over the side of the track.

“Man, that’s not fair! You can’t just banana peel a man when he’s distracted! How are you even this good at rainbow road, anyway?”

“I’m a civilian who flies around in a suit with an AI and thousands of stats flying across my visor at any given moment, what do you expect? …Also I was rich as a kid, so I got the beta versions of these before they ever even went to market.”

“I knew it!”

The game finishes, and all three men turn. “So, something about an introduction? Who’s the new dog?”

“No name yet,” Natasha says, “but they’re… different. I’m asking you to try to be calm if something weird happens, okay? And I need you to give Loki permission to be up here.”


“JARVIS, can you tell Loki they can come up now?”

There’s a few moments of uncomfortable silence before the elevator dings and Loki steps out, the shapeshifter at his side. The shapeshifter trots up to the other dogs, and they sniff each other before stepping back. The shapeshifter looks at Loki. “They’re asking if they’re allowed to change form,” Loki tells the group.

Steve’s head snaps up. “Change form? What kind of weird drugs are you on?”

“Sure, let them,” Natasha says, “Might as well.” Loki must communicate this, because there’s suddenly two Ava’s in the room and the Afghan Hound is gone.

“Okay, what the hell!” Sam shouts, scrambling back until he’s balanced like a cat on the back of the couch. “You have got to be kidding me. There is no way this is real.”
Steve doesn’t move, but he looks confused, and Tony leaps to his feet, circling the two identical dogs. “That is fascinating! A shapeshifter? Where’d you get it from? How does it do that? I feel weird not having a name for them, do they have a name?”

Loki looks like he can’t figure out which question he’s supposed to answer, and Natasha just elbows him. “You get used to it. Just answer one question at a time, he’ll know what you mean. It’s a weird skill of his.”

“Yes, a shapeshifter. I believe it followed me here from the planet Thor and I were on before. I don’t know how it does that, but presumably it does so using the power of Yggdrasil, that’s where most mystic beings draw their power from, including myself. And they do not have a name. Perhaps Aelfhun would work?”

Tony continues to circle the dogs, taking this in. “Aelfhun, like it. Don’t know what it means, but cool. God, there’s still so much that human science doesn’t know, this is amazing. I still don’t like you though, Ebony Dark’ness Dementia Raven Way,” he says to Loki, who nods.

“I would not expect this to change your opinion of me.”

“So what, we just have a shapeshifter around now too?” Steve asks. Sam starts to slowly lower himself back onto the seat beside Steve. “And we trust Loki about this why?”

“He’s not as terrible of a person as you think, Steve,” Natasha says, “And before you ask, no, I’m not being mind controlled.”

Sam holds up a hand. “Uh, hate to interrupt, but can the shapeshifter change into something besides my dog? I’m a little uncomfortable with this right now.”

Loki looks over at the pair of dogs, and one of them morphs back into the Afghan Hound. Ava walks back over to Sam, hopping up on the couch beside him and resting her head in his lap, and Aelfhun walks back over to Loki, sitting beside him. “I think I’ll go,” Loki says, pointing back at the elevator. “I think you’ll want time to talk without me present.” He leaves, and Aelfhun follows him.

Tony goes back to sit on the couch. “Okay, let’s discuss this civilly. What are we discussing?”
“We’re discussing why Loki should be trusted, and what we’re doing with the shapeshifter,” Steve says, and Natasha moves to sit on the couch to Steve’s right, because this is going to be a longer conversation.

“I started talking to Loki a couple weeks ago. It was late, and I wanted tea, so I was on the communal floor. Loki came up needing food. He looked like he’d been crying, so I asked. I think we’ve made a lot of assumptions about him based on what Thor told us, but we never actually talked to him, and I think that was our mistake.”

It takes a while to explain; when she’s finished, all three men look positively mortified.

“Fuck,” Tony says softly. “I hope you’re going to explain that to the others, too, because you’re right, I think we’ve really, really messed up.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. “If all of that is true, then Loki’s not the person I have a problem with.”

Sam stands up, stretching. “Okay, well, I’m definitely not qualified to deal with this shit. I agree that Loki doesn’t sound like the real asshole here, but I’m also tired, and I was originally here for Mario Kart? So, I think Ava and I are going to head home.”

Natasha nods. “That’s fair. It was good to see you, Sam.” Sam leaves, and Natasha turns back to the other two men. “I’ll have JARVIS send a video copy to everyone else of what I just told you. I have a feeling some of the others are going to need more time and space to adjust to this idea. JARVIS?”

“Done, Ms. Romanoff. The video is preceded by a warning about its contents.”

“Great. I’m going to go talk to Loki. If we play this right, I might have a job for Aelfhun.” She heads to the elevator, and when she reaches Loki’s floor, he’s laying on his back on the couch in the living room, tossing some kind of sphere in the air. Aelfhun is curled up in dog form beside the couch. Both of them look up when Natasha walks in, and the sphere disappears into thin air as Loki sits up.
“I’m guessing it’s time for me to leave?”

“No, not today. I told them what you told me, about Thanos and Odin. They agreed that we’ve judged you unfairly. I’m having the same explanation sent to everyone else. It might take a while for everyone to adjust, but you get to stay. That’s not really what I wanted to talk about, though.”

Loki looks confused. “Okay? What are we talking about then?”

“How familiar are you with the concept of service animals?”

Natasha and Loki start training Aelfhun the next day. Loki’s Allspeak is only slightly more accurate than simply reading dog body language, but Loki does manage to ask if Aelfhun is willing to be a service animal. According to him, the answer is a resounding “yes,” though Natasha had figured as much when Aelfhun had tackled Loki, laying on his chest and licking his face.

One of the more exciting parts of training is that both Aelfhun and Loki are capable of shapeshifting. It takes a large amount of energy, so they both usually have to rest after changing form, but Natasha gets to see both of them change forms at will. She has to admit, Loki is gorgeous regardless of gender, and the look on Loki’s face the first time Aelfhun had changed into a miniature horse was so good that she honestly thought she was going to die laughing.

Aelfhun’s shapeshifting does make Tony’s job of making them gear harder though; at first, Tony keeps just making new versions of gear for each of Aelfhun’s forms, but eventually he just makes gear that’s incredibly adjustable so it will fit regardless of the form Aelfhun takes.

Loki still doesn’t spend much time around anyone besides Natasha; after the recording of Natasha’s explanation had been sent to the other members of the team, Tony had ended up calling in a team to repair the fist-sized holes in the walls on Bucky’s floor and the arrow-pierced walls on Clint’s floor. As it was, Clint hadn’t talked to Natasha for two weeks after the video, and it had been quite possibly the worst two weeks of Natasha’s life, because she didn’t want to lose the one person she’d come to trust with her life even more than she trusts herself.
If there’s resentment towards Loki among the Avengers, there’s even more among the people of New York, so the first time Natasha, Loki, and Aelfhun go out in public late one evening, Loki shapeshifts into his more feminine form and Aelfhun chooses the form of a Mountain Cur dog. The outing goes fine; they choose one of the nicer cafes in New York City, and besides the occasional glance over, no one bothers them. Natasha’s grateful for that, because she’s honestly not sure how well Loki would do with being confronted so soon.

When they get back to the tower, Loki hesitates in the elevator before stepping out onto his floor. “I don’t think I can thank you enough, for everything you’ve done for me, even after all the ways I’ve wronged you, and the people closest to you,” he tells her, and Natasha shrugs it off.

“I once told you I had red in my ledger, and you asked if it was possible to wipe out that much red. I still don’t know the answer to that question. But I know that the person we are changes from one day to the next, for better or worse, and I think the person we are now, the person we’re trying to become, that’s what matters more. So maybe you’ve fucked up before. But if you’re a better person now, then that’s the person I’ll treat you as, not the person you used to be.”

Natasha gently pushes Loki until he steps out of the elevator, Aelfhun beside him, and she smiles as the doors close. “Good night, Loki.”
Thor still hadn’t shown up about two months after he had left Loki at the tower, and it’s been a month since Loki had discovered Aelfhun’s presence, so Natasha decides it’s about time that she tries to get everyone more comfortable around Loki and Aelfhun. She talks to Loki about it and then sets up an animal play date, invites Jessica, Luke, and Frank, and waits for the day to come.

Natasha asks Loki to wait until at least four other teams have showed up before he joins them on the indoor dog park floor, so she’s there by herself when Steve and Sam arrive with Verity and Ava. “No Loki?” Sam asks as the dogs run in, chasing each other around the perimeter of the room.

“No yet, I thought it’d be better if he came later on,” Natasha explains, her sentence interrupted halfway through by Ava whining as Verity speeds past on her left with a loud bark.

It doesn’t take long for everyone else to arrive; Bruce and Frank take the longest to arrive, Bruce apologizing for getting too caught up in his work, and Frank just grumbling about “keeping that dumbass in the gimp suit from getting killed.” Loki still hasn’t showed up, and Natasha’s about to ask when the elevator dings and Loki steps out, Aelfhun trotting at his side in the form of a Pharaoh Hound.

There’s a few seconds of tense silence when they walk in, but then Smash is tackling Aelfhun, both dogs tumbling across the floor in a mass of fur and limbs, and then they’re running off, Smash leading Aelfhun towards the corner of the room she and Verity have taken over. Bruce looks somewhere between uncomfortable and mortified. “Sorry,” he tells Loki, and if it falls a little short of actually apologetic, Natasha pretends it doesn’t.

“It’s perfectly alright,” Loki says, “they’ve been wanting to play with other dogs for quite some time now.”

“I thought you said they were a shapeshifter?” Bruce asks, eyebrows furrowing.

“Well, yes, but whatever form they take is what I refer to them as. Do you have people with fluid genders on this planet?” Bruce nods, so Loki continues. “It’s the same principle. However they want to be seen is how you refer to them.”

“Interesting, is genderfluidity more common on Asgard?”
Natasha is pulled out of listening by Frank tapping on her shoulder. “Hey, can we talk for a minute?” Natasha nods, turning to face him. Frank takes a deep breath. “Are you still doing this service dog thing? Because I wanted to know if you could get Murdock one.” Natasha frowns.

“Sure? What does he need one for? I doubt it’s for the blindness.”

Frank snorts. “No, it’s not for that, but he really can’t keep telling people that the bruises and cuts are from falling down flights of stairs, he’s starting to sound less like a clumsy blind person and more like a guy that’s trying to hide his BDSM kinks, though maybe he’s into that too, he’s a train wreck. Nah, it’s because I think he’s got some pretty bad PTSD, and something weird with his senses, not really sure how to explain it.”

Natasha tilts her head to the side. “What kind of ‘something weird’ are we talking about?”

“Well, sometimes when I drag his ass out of fights, he curls up in a ball, covers his ears with his hands, and starts rocking back and forth while humming to himself.”

*Sounds like sensory overload*, Natasha thinks, but instead she just nods. “Okay. What else can you tell me about him?”

She spends a little while talking to Frank, until his phone beeps and he reads the message with a sigh. “Speak of the devil himself,” Frank says, “I’ve gotta go save his dumb ass. Thanks for doing this. I worry about the bastard.” Frank leaves with Sable, and Natasha’s about to go hang out with Clint when Luke calls her name. She wanders his direction instead.

“What’s up?” She asks, watching as Harvey and Thelonious wrestle.

“Do you think you could get Danny a dog? It’s okay if not, you’ve already done a lot for us,” Luke adds quickly, “but I think it’d be good for him to have a dog too.”

Natasha’s not sure if she’s glad or concerned that everyone is starting to come to her about getting dogs for other people. She pushes away the conflicting emotions, focuses on the conversation at hand. “Sure, what does he need help with?”

By the end of her conversation with Luke, Natasha’s got a good idea of the kind of dogs she’s going to want for both Matt and Danny, and the kind of tasks she thinks would help them. She
heads over to stand by Clint, bumping his shoulder with hers. “Hey,” she says. “How are you doing with Loki in the room?” Clint shrugs.

“Fine? I still don’t feel totally comfortable around the guy. But... I see what you meant, about him. And if I could forgive us for what we used to do, I don’t know if I really have the right to be mad at him.”

“You’re still allowed to be mad about what he did,” Natasha reminds him, “the only thing that’s changed is the reason. I’m still pissed about what he did to you. But I don’t think the person he is now is the person he was then.”

Clint nods slowly. “Yeah, I guess. It’s just a lot.”

“I know. But we’ve adjusted to major perspective changes before, we can do it again.”

“True. Also, did I hear something about you training more dogs, or was that a hallucination? Because I still can’t quite believe just how good Stark’s hearing aids are.”

Natasha smiles. “You did hear that, and it was real. I thought I was mostly done with this, but I guess not.”

“When are we ever done with anything we start? Anyway, tell me more, I’m interested, I thought I heard something about that snack in the suit getting a dog?”

“Stop being horny, Clint.”

“No. And I still want to hear more.”

“Whatever. Fine. So apparently heightened senses comes with a drawback...”
Peter's Mission

Peter literally loves spending time at the tower with the Avengers. And, okay, maybe he needs to chill just a little, but Aunt May loves spending time with Ms. Romanoff, so it should be fine, right? Yeah, totally.

After Aunt May found out he was Spider-Man, she’d needed a few days to just calm down because she was really, really worried about him getting hurt, but then she found out that he was wearing a suit made by Mr. Stark, and she wanted to meet with him to talk about the suit’s safety features, and well, it had just kind of kept going from there.

So it’s Peter who’s sitting in Bruce’s lab when Bruce’s sensor readings start to go wild. “Whoa, that doesn’t look good, is that bad?” He asks Bruce, pointing at the screen, and Bruce swears when he sees the readings.

“You’re right, it’s not good. I’m still not entirely sure what those readings mean, other than some kind of interdimensional portal, but this is the third time this week, which isn’t comforting.”

“Do you want me to go check it out?” Peter offers, and Bruce frowns.

“I don’t know if I’m comfortable with that. If you got hurt and Tony or your Aunt May found out, they’d kill me, Peter, you know that, right?”

Peter nods. “Yeah, I know, but it’s not a big deal, I’ll just sneak over there, take a quick look, and tell you what I see. I’m a lot more inconspicuous than anyone else on the team, you know? I can do it fast, no one will even know I’m there.”

Bruce hesitates, but he seems to agree with Peter’s logic, because he just sighs. “That’s true. I don’t like it, but it’s true. Fine. A quick look, nothing more. Don’t you dare try anything stupid, okay? Do not take after Tony, try to take after Rhodey. Rhodey is at least somewhat reasonable.”

Peter jumps to his feet, grabbing his bag. “Of course, yeah, Mr. Rhodes, not Mr. Stark, I promise! I’ll be right back, Dr. Banner!” He’s gone before Bruce can say anything else, and Bruce is already regretting this idea.
Peter finds the place no problem, and he crouches on the roof of the building next to it, watching and listening, because he promised Dr. Banner he wouldn’t do anything stupid, but he can’t hear very well from here, so he decides to get a closer look.

He jumps over to the roof of the actual building he’s checking out, and then slowly starts crawling his way down the side of the building, listening for conversations from any of the windows. “It’s almost functional, just a few more tweaks,” a woman’s voice says.

“I don’t want to wait any longer. Have it done by tonight, I needed the enhancements ready to go by yesterday,” a man’s voice snaps, and Peter crawls closer to the window, listening.

There’s a pause, and then the woman’s voice, slightly panicked. “There’s something outside the window!” She hisses, and Peter freezes. Oh shit. He’s barely had time to start scrambling away when an arm reaches through the window, sending glass flying everywhere, grabbing his leg and yanking him into the room.

When Peter isn’t back after three hours, Bruce definitely doesn’t start to panic, Smash just happens to conveniently push him to the floor so she can lay in his lap in a manner similar to how she usually does deep pressure therapy as a task. Okay, so Bruce is panicking. He tries to come up with a good solution, but he can’t really think of one, so he’s going to have to tell Tony. Fuck.

The message he sends Tony reads “Peter went on a mission. Hasn’t returned. My fault,” and Tony’s storming into the lab 3 minutes later.

“Where is he? How long? What kind of situation am I walking into?” Tony asks.

“Three hours. A laboratory in Brooklyn. No idea, but it’s been causing these sensor readings.” Bruce spins the screen to face Tony, who frowns.

“That looks like an interdimensional portal. Rudimentary, but still. Alright, I’m going now, but you should stay here to keep an eye on those readings. I want Clint and Steve to come help out. JARVIS, inform them?”
“Done, sir. They should be there in about 30 minutes, based on current traffic patterns.”

“Awesome. Don’t tell May or Natasha, I don’t need either of them killing me or the kid before we can be sure of what’s happening.” And just like that, Tony’s gone again, and Bruce drops himself into the chair in front of the sensor readings. Hopefully Peter’s okay, or not even Hulk will be able to keep Bruce safe from Tony’s rage.

Peter’s head is swimming a little, and he blinks, trying to shake the feeling off, but the bright lights of the room don’t help. He squints, looking around, but his view of the room is suddenly blocked by a woman’s face. “Amazing! We’ve been trying to pull different versions of you through the portal, but now we have the one from our universe! Or, at least, I assume. Wow, you’re a young one, aren’t you? Huh. And is that original web fluid? Oh, this is going to be so much fun, I can’t wait, between your DNA and the web fluid, I’ll have new data to work with for months. Months!”

Something pokes Peter’s left arm, and he looks down to see an IV drawing some of his blood. Oh, that’s not good. He definitely should have worn his suit from Mr. Stark, but he’d figured Mr. Stark probably could track it, so using his own was probably a better idea. Nope, definitely a bad idea. “Wait, stop,” Peter tries, but his head is still swimming and the words come out jumbled. The woman frowns.

“Sorry, sweetie, didn’t quite get that. Oh, there we go! Time to switch bags, I can start using this on the first dog right now! Gosh, it’s so cool having a test subject I can work with that doesn’t occasionally glitch. Okay, let’s do this.” The woman switches the bag of Peter’s blood for an empty one and walks over to a set of kennels Peter hadn’t noticed before, injecting some of the blood into the IV of one of the dogs.

The dog whimpers, and then starts crying and whining, and Peter winces, because if the DNA really is working on the dog, then he remembers how uncomfortable it had been when his body was adjusting to it the first time, and that dog is definitely not having a good time right now. The woman comes back over, switching out bags again. “You might run out of blood on me, but that’s okay, better that we don’t have to worry about spider-people besides ones of our making, I hope you understand,” she says, and Peter wants to reply but he starts feeling really, really dizzy, and his vision fades out before he realizes it.

“JARVIS, can you locate Peter?” Tony asks as he comes to a stop, hovering above the building in his suit.
“It appears that the only life forms in the building are currently on the third floor, last room on the left,” JARVIS reports, and Tony flies down, going through the broken window, which can’t be a good sign.

The only person in the room besides Peter is a woman in a lab coat. She’s crouched in front of the chair Peter’s tied to, and she’s… drawing Peter’s blood? She stands when Tony enters the room, and Tony doesn’t give her a chance to speak. “Nighty night!” He says cheerfully, using a suited up hand to hit her on the head just hard enough to knock her unconscious.

He steps out of the suit as she falls to the floor, taking a moment to look around. There’s 15 dogs in kennels on the far wall, and there’s three bags of blood on the counter behind Peter, all labeled “Spider Man, Earth SDfSH.” Tony has no idea what the last part means, but he assumes that must be Peter’s blood, and when he looks at Peter himself, the kid is incredibly pale. Shit.

Tony sets up a new IV to replace the blood, hooking Peter’s own blood up to it, then carefully removes the other IV, bandaging his arm where the needle had been. He’s just finishing clean up when Steve and Clint come in, Steve’s shield and Clint’s bow both raised. “Only one person, on the floor,” Tony says, and Clint walks over to grab her while Steve comes over to look at Peter.

“He’s okay?” Steve asks, and Tony shrugs.

“I think so? They drew most of his blood, I’m reversing that process now. He’ll be awake soon, and then I’ll find out what else they might have done. You and Clint just take care of the woman, find out what this whole thing was about to begin with.”

Steve nods, and he and Clint leave, dragging the unconscious woman between them. Peter wakes up a bag and a half of blood later, blinking slowly. “I. What’s going on?” the kid says, words slurring, and Tony puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey kid. Take it easy, you lost a lot of blood, we’re putting it back now. Questions can wait for a few more minutes.” Peter nods shakily, and Tony walks over to look at the dogs in the kennels. 14 of the 15 are barking and jumping at the bars of their cages, but one is just curled up in a ball, whimpering. Tony stares at it, frowning.

“Gave ‘em blood,” Peter mumbles, and Tony turns.
“What?”

Peter blinks a few times, and Tony replaces the now empty bag of blood with the last bag from the counter. “They gave some of my blood. To the dog. I think it changed the dog, ‘cause I can feel my senses tingling towards them.”

Tony walks back over to the cage with the curled up dog, opening the door and taking out the dog’s IV. The dog stands on wobbly legs, then steps out of their kennel, even though they’re in the top of the three rows of kennels. Tony lunes forward to catch the dog, only to have the dog walk sideways along the bars of the other kennels, then jump down to the floor and pad up to Peter, sniffing the boy’s knee.

“Hi,” Peter says, laughing a little. “Yeah, we’re the same.” Peter turns to look at Tony. “We can’t leave him here, or someone will have access to a dog with enhanced DNA. Can we take him home?”

Tony says yes before he can think about it, and damn it, he really cares about this kid. The last of Peter’s blood is back in Peter’s veins, so Tony takes out the IV and bandages Peter’s arm. “Alright, kids, let’s go home. I think I can carry both of you with the suit.”

A small blood sample from both Peter and the dog back at the tower proves Peter right; the dog now has DNA almost identical to Peter’s, and seems to possess the same powers too. Aunt May chews out Bruce for letting Peter go in the first place, and Bruce looks completely terrified by her anger, but she stops the second Peter comes into view, wrapping him into a hug in the middle of the communal floor living room surrounded by the various heroes.

“Don’t you dare go out again like that! You should know better than to go out on missions that Natasha could easily have done. Just because you have these powers doesn’t mean that you should take every possible situation as an excuse to use them!” She holds him in a death grip of a hug for a few minutes, until the dog bumps her leg with his nose.

“Who is this?” She asks, reaching down to pet the dog, and Peter shrugs.

“He doesn’t have a name yet, but he has my DNA now, so I’m thinking maybe Beter Barker?”
Tony groans, and Bucky stops, trading a look with Steve. “What does that even mean?” Bucky asks. “Is he having a seizure? Is that a thing? What’s going on?”

“No idea,” Steve says, looking equally confused.

“Peter, no, you’re scaring the old men, don’t make me responsible for the heart attack of a national icon,” Tony says, and Peter stops.

“Oh, sorry Mr. America, Mr. Barnes! It’s a meme. Uh, maybe Araneus, then? It used to be a constellation, but not anymore, but it’s a spider related thing.”

“Meme…” Bucky asks.

“I’ll explain later. Fine, Araneus works,” Tony says, “and actually, that’s kind of cool, I like it. You’re such a nerd, kid.”

Peter grins. “Well, that is why I’m an intern at Stark Industries, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, something like that.”
A few days after Peter’s mission, Tony approaches Natasha in the shooting range. “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

Natasha puts the gun she was using down and steps back from the lane, walking over to where Tony’s standing by the door, Diva waiting just outside. “Sure, what’s up?”

“So, you saw the dog that has Peter’s DNA now, right? Araneus? Do you think you could train him to be a service dog for Peter?”

Natasha smiles sadly. “You know, I was actually planning on talking to Peter about that. He still has the nightmares about his parents, and flashbacks about his uncle, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know you knew about that.”

Natasha shrugs. “May and I talk about him a lot. Apparently he also sleepwalks sometimes, wanders around their apartment and occasionally sits down and just screams or cries for an hour or two.”

Tony sucks in a breath. “Jesus. Okay, well. I just wanted to ask. Uh. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Natasha goes over to Peter and May’s apartment on Friday night so Peter won’t have to worry about getting homework done while they talk. She’s already talked to May about it, so when she arrives, May just steps back to let Natasha in, calling Peter to come down to the living room.

Natasha and May sit down while they wait, talking about Araneus and the other dogs until Peter comes racing down the stairs, Araneus following close behind. “Oh! Hi, Ms. Romanoff!
I didn’t know you were coming over. Is everything okay?”

“Everything's fine, Peter, I just wanted to talk to you about Araneus.”

Peter’s face falls. “Oh. Do you have to take him away? Because that’s okay, really! If you have to, that’s fine, but he’s just a really good dog, so I want to make sure he’s happy wherever he ends up, and—”

“Pete, no, I’m not taking him away,” Natasha interrupts, “I was wondering if you wanted to work with me to train him as a service dog. For you,” she clarifies, and Peter’s eyes widen.

“Wait, really? That’d be so cool! I mean-- hold on, don’t I need to be disabled for that?”

“Yes, and psychiatrically, you are. You’re telling me that you don’t find the fact that you sneak out of classes to hide in closets and cry to be pretty disabling? Or the fact that you fall asleep in classes because you’ve been having night terrors?”

Peter shrugs. “I mean, I guess? But it’s not like I’m failing my classes because of it.”

“The fact that you’re far above the rest of your classmates in general doesn’t mean you’re not struggling psychologically,” Natasha points out, and Peter drops down to sit on the carpet across from the couch, Araneus immediately resting his head in Peter’s lap.

“Yeah, okay, that’s true. So, how does training work, then? Is there a special way that has to work? Wait, probably not, because you trained everyone else’s dogs, right? Can I help?”

“No, there’s no special requirements, and yes, you can help. Come by the tower tomorrow and we can start training?”

Training doesn’t take long; Araneus and Peter are both very fast learners, and it takes them about three months to finish training to a point where Natasha is comfortable letting Peter take Araneus places with him. There’s a bit of resistance from the school about letting a service dog come to school with Peter, but Natasha settles that by going to the school personally to
talk to the principal, and soon Peter and Araneus are going everywhere together.

Part of the resistance to letting Araneus come to the school had probably been the fact that Araneus is an American Staffordshire Terrier, and that resistance translates into other public access places too. There’s a few times when Peter had ended up texting Natasha from a back alley, asking for her help because he couldn’t get the staff to listen to him, claiming he was just a “kid with a dog,” and Natasha had quickly settled those disputes as well.

It had taken a few times for Peter to even be comfortable texting Natasha for help; Peter had been surprised at how willing Natasha was to help him, but she had just smiled and ruffled his hair when he told her as much, telling him that “Us spider folks have to stick together, you know?” Peter had just accepted that answer, because what do you even say to that? And besides, he appreciated the help, he wasn’t going to look into it too deeply. And if Natasha was doing it because it also made her feel like a mom of sorts, the same way Tony felt a bit like Peter’s dad whenever he helped the kid out, well, no one needed to know that. It could be her secret.
There's a scene of very brief, non-graphic violence that involves amputation in this chapter. It shouldn't be triggering? But I could be wrong.

Peter was pretty sure he’d met just about every other superhero or vigilante in the New York City area, but as it turned out, he was wrong. He discovered this while on patrol one day, when he heard gunshots and a “Boo-yah, motherfucker! That’s right, don’t mess with me! Woo!” Peter swung his way in the direction of the shouting until he found himself looking down at a dude in a suit surprisingly similar to his own, minus the blue and white and the spider design. Okay, so a red suit. Whatever.

“Hey, you can’t just kill people because you feel like it! Are you trying to give us a bad rep? Who even was that dude?” he calls, landing a few feet away from the guy, who turns to face him.

“Uh, he was a bad guy, obviously! He had it coming. Who are you? And why do you kinda look like Mini Me?” the guy says, stepping forward and crouching down to look at Peter. “Huh. Are you the spider… man? You don’t look like a man. Kid, more like. Is that you?”

Peter steps back, glaring in a way he hopes is still conveyed through the mask. “Spider-Man, yeah, that’s me. Who are you?”

The guy bows dramatically. “Your friendly neighborhood Deadpool, at your service.”

Peter’s not sure if he hates him or finds him kind of cool. He’ll roll with hate for now, because…

“Why are you killing people though! Non-lethal force is fine? It works great? Jails are a thing? I mean, what the fuck, dude?”

Deadpool tilts his head to the side. “Huh. Didn’t think about that. Good point though. Anyway, see ya!” Deadpool starts to walk away, so Peter webs his hand to the wall before he
“Whoa whoa whoa, hold on! Can we maybe talk for a minute?”

Deadpool looks at the web on his hand. “That’s impressive, but sorry kid, I’m busy.” He pulls one of the swords off of his back and cuts his own hand off.

“Dude! What are you doing! Are you insane?” Peter shouts, and the guy laughs.

“Yes, probably, but it’ll grow back, chill out.” Peter grabs the guy before he can keep walking away.

“No, seriously, okay, now I’m concerned. Are you okay? Is this normal for you? Because I’m pretty sure just shooting people a bunch and then cutting your own hand off is not normal at all, and like that’s maybe something you should talk to someone about? Like I’m just saying?”

Deadpool stops, turning to face Peter and pulling his mask off. Peter recoils a little, because okay, he hadn’t expected the guy to look like that. “Listen, kid, I’m really, really fucked up, and you’d be better off walking away. You patrol, what, in Queens? I’ll stick to Brooklyn from now on. Sound fair?”

Peter shakes his head. “No, not fair, because you probably need help. I know some people, you could actually get more support and stuff, so--”

“Stop! Seriously, kid, stop it. I had a support. I had my girlfriend, and she died because of me. No one else is going to die around me unless I’m the one who kills them. So go away. Just fucking leave. Pretend this never happened, I’ll stay out of Queens, and everything will be the way it used to be.” Deadpool pulls out of his grip, storming off and leaving Peter standing in the alley, hand still outstretched. He’s not sure what to do with that information, so he just goes home, but he can’t get the guy’s words out of his head.

As it turns out, he runs into Deadpool again two weeks later, in a different part of Queens. Deadpool is walking down the sidewalk whistling Vivaldi, and Peter’s confused, because this definitely doesn’t seem like the same guy from before. He lands in an alley a few blocks
ahead of Deadpool and waits until he hears the whistling come closer. “Psst!” He hisses, and the whistling stops as Deadpool rounds the corner, coming down the alley.


Peter frowns. “We met, a couple weeks ago. Do you not remember? You said you would stay out of Queens?”

“Oh! Right! Yeah, sorry, I forgot about that. Anyway, how are you?” Deadpool turns to look at the air a few feet away from Peter. “Don’t say that, he’s right in front of us, and that’s rude!” He turns back to Peter. “Sorry, did you answer? I might have missed it.”

Peter’s really confused. “Uh, I’m doing good? How are you?”

“Doing good! I was just about to go get some food. Chimichangas, preferably. Or, actually enchiladas, but I like the way ‘chimichangas’ sounds. Chimichangas. Yeah. Are you hungry? Food? You’re young, right? Probably need lots of food if you’re still growing. Come on, I’ll buy, let’s go!”

Deadpool starts walking away, whistling again, and Peter’s really not sure what to do, so he just follows him, because he has to admit, he is kind of hungry. It’s one of the drawbacks of the spider DNA, he’s always hungry, but he hasn’t been willing to ask Aunt May to buy more food, because she’s already working so many overtime shifts as it is, and he doesn’t want to ask Mr. Stark, because that would just be awkward. So food sounds good.

Deadpool leads them to a small food stand a few blocks further down, waiting in line, and Peter shifts uncomfortably beside them as people start to stare. He wants to leave, but he’s also really not sure what the proper etiquette is in this situation because this is so unbelievably weird, so he just waits, assuming this must just be normal for Deadpool to do. Hopefully. He’s so confused.

“Four enchiladas, two chimichangas, and two cokes, please,” Deadpool says when they get to the front of the line, then pays and steps over to the side. “I assumed you probably like the same kind of thing as I do. You seem like you would. Plus, what I just ordered is amazing, so I’m sure you’ll like it no matter what.”

“Uh, sure, okay.” Peter’s met some weird and confusing people in the past, and people usually
tell him that he’s weird, confusing, and overwhelming himself, but this guy has him beat. Peter doesn’t have the slightest clue who this guy is or what he’s like. His entire personality seems to change every few minutes, and it’s incredibly distracting.

“Oh! Hey, I never even gave you my actual name. Did you want that? Is that important to share? Probably. So, my name’s Wade, nice to meet you officially kinda,” Deadpool says, holding out his hand. Peter takes it.

“Peter. Nice to meet you?” He’s saved from having to come up with something else to say when their number is called.

“Oh, food! Come on, this shit is the best. There’s an alley nearby that I usually eat in, keeps people from being weird and staring and shit, and it prevents people from bugging you while you eat.” Wade grabs the food, leading Peter down the nearest alley and plopping himself on the ground. “Alright, here we go. Drink for you, half the food for you, shitty plastic fork, and napkins, because grease is a bitch to get out of these suits, am I right?”

Wade pulls off his mask and starts eating his half of the food, so Peter crouches down across from him, letting the top part of his suit fold down to his neck so he can eat. Wade watches it happen, wide eyed. “Whoa, okay, that’s way cooler than my suit. Can I have one of those? Where did you even get that? I want one.”

Peter shrugs. “Like I said last time we met, I know some people. People that could totally be a good support system, by the way. They’re, like, awesome. Seriously. I think you’d like them.”

“Nuh-uh, nope, we talked about this, kid, I don’t care who they are, I’m not putting them in danger. Besides, I usually don’t do well with all those ‘lawful good’ hero types. I’m more ‘chaotic neutral,’ at best.”

Peter laughs. “Oh, dude, no, they’re not all lawful good. I’d say a few of them are in the ‘lawful evil’ range, actually, but most of them are like, ‘chaotic good,’ probably.”

Wade gives Peter a look. “Really? Okay, maybe I’d be fine around them then. But still. Not doing it, so give it up, Charlotte’s Web.”

Peter raises his hands in mock surrender, then goes back to eating his food. Maybe Wade doesn’t want to talk about it, but Peter’s pretty sure he can figure this out easily enough. He
happens to have a former international spy in the family.

Peter texts Ms. Romanoff later that evening, giving her a brief description of everything he knows about Wade and asking for her help figuring out what the guy’s deal is. Ms. Romanoff texts back two hours later asking how Peter met Wade. Huh. So apparently Wade’s important for some reason? Or maybe not safe for Peter to be around?

Peter texts back the story. He bounces his leg while he waits for the reply, and Araneus wanders over, putting his head in Peter’s lap. Peter stops bouncing his leg and slides down to sit on the floor, Araneus climbing all the way into his lap, a warm, comforting weight. Ms. Romanoff texts back 37 minutes later, not that Peter was counting, telling him to try and avoid the guy for now. He sends her a thumbs up emoji and taps Araneus gently behind the ear so the dog stands up, letting Peter walk over and climb into bed. He can worry about this in the morning, he’s too tired for this right now.
Danny and Dewei

Natasha has got to stop spending time with heroes and vigilantes, because they keep just finding even more heroes and vigilantes that she’s never heard of before, and it’s getting out of hand, but then again, Natasha’s supposedly a hero herself, so she has a feeling she’ll never escape having more and more people in need thrown her way. Oh well. Retirement’s for quitters, anyway.

She’ll deal with Wade Wilson another day, though, because today she’s focused on getting Danny’s dog. She’d originally planned on getting Matt’s dog first, but she just can’t figure out exactly what kind of dog to get him, and even if she does go with a German Shepherd, it’ll be awhile before anyone’s supposed to be breeding again, so it’s Danny’s turn instead.

She meets the breeder at the man’s house in Minnesota, and picks the puppy that seems like the best candidate, a cute little male that she already has a name for: Dewei, from Chinese, meaning “noble” or “of great principle.” If she had chosen a girl, the name would have been Yong, also from Chinese, meaning “brave.”

Natasha flies home with two month old Dewei, and back at the tower, he’s quickly welcomed into the family.

Dewei takes a bit longer to train than some of the other dogs Natasha’s worked with; it’s not that he has a lot of tasks in comparison to the other dogs, he’s just a bit stubborn, and it takes a while for Natasha to convince him to actually listen to his commands consistently. Once he’s trained, however, he does a damn good job; he works hard, performs his tasks consistently, and is calm and confident in public space.

Natasha gets Luke to send her Danny’s number, and then she texts Danny asking him to come to the tower. Danny sends her back “sure! :D” and Natasha’s tempted to roll her eyes, because he reminds her a lot of Peter, and she’s not sure she’s ready to deal with two dumbass kids, one’s already enough. But she waits for Danny to show up, and when he arrives on the communal floor he stops when he sees Dewei.

“Lord of Light,” Danny breathes, “is he for me? He’s got to be, he has the calmest energy I’ve ever seen in a dog, holy shit, Nat, he’s gorgeous.”

Natasha grins, walking Dewei over to him. “Yeah, he’s yours. He’s probably going to need a few
weeks to warm up to you, he’s definitely more stubborn than some of the other dogs I’ve trained, but he’s all for you.”

Danny nods. “Yeah, yeah of course. What’s his name?”

“Dewei.”

“Yeah, that fits him perfectly. Okay, so, how do I get to know him better?”

Natasha walks Danny through working with Dewei over the next few weeks, giving both of them time to get used to each other, but Dewei already seems to bond better with Danny than he ever had with Natasha. Danny and Dewei move together so fluidly that it’s hard to imagine they ever didn’t work together, and Natasha’s happy for both of them.

She takes Danny to a restaurant for his first time in public with Dewei, and they do absolutely amazing. Natasha’s a little blown away by just how much food Danny’s capable of eating in one sitting, and Danny shrugs when she asks him about it over his fourth plate of pancakes. “Summoning chi to use the Fist takes a lot of energy, and that energy has to come from somewhere. It kind of helps that I’m me, so I’ve got access to just about all the money I could possibly want and as a result all the food I could possibly eat.” Danny points at the last of Natasha’s fries. “Can I?” Natasha slides the plate across the table to him, and he finishes off the fries, too.

“How are you feeling, about having Dewei?” Natasha asks.

“Pretty good. He’s a really great dog, Natasha, I can’t possibly say thank you enough times. I was also wondering, can you get Matt a dog? I think he really needs one.” Natasha smiles.

“Yeah, so I’ve been told. I’m definitely working on it.”

“Awesome.” Danny leans back from the table. “Hey, do you think I could order another plate of pancakes, or do you think they’re tired of me ordering more things by now?”
“As long as you pay them, I really don’t think they’ll care.”

“Cool, because the blueberry pancakes sound really good too.”
Going to Gay Pride

Going to gay pride is half Tony’s idea, half Clint’s. Clint is proudly bisexual, and Tony is very proudly queer, so they’re both excited to go in general, and then they find out that Steve and Bucky haven’t been to pride before, and they immediately decide to fix this problem. “We’re going to pride!” Tony announces to everyone in the living room, “So put on the gayest shit you have and let’s go!”

Everyone scrambles to their feet, because fuck yes, pride is always fun, and no one in the room is both straight and cis, so they’re always excited for a chance to represent. Natasha texts Peter, Jessica, Frank, Luke, and Danny, because she knows Peter, Jessica, and Danny are part of the LGBT community, and she’s not sure about Frank or Luke but she figures they might enjoy going anyway. She would text Matt, but she doesn’t have his number yet, so she figures that someone else can text him if they think he’ll want to go.

They don’t talk about their identities often, but as they all gather back on the communal floor after changing clothes, Tony holds up a huge stack of gift boxes. “Okay, folks, here we go, gift time before we leave! Clint, this is for you, Loki, here’s yours, Steve…” Tony goes around the room until almost everyone has a box. “Well, what are you waiting for? Open them!”

Everyone opens their boxes, and there’s a series of gasps around the room. Each box has new service dog gear for the teams, made to match the identities of the handlers: Lucky has a set in the pink, purple, and blue of the bisexual pride flag, and another set in grey, blue, and white for the demiboy flag; Smash has a set in the aromantic colors and another in the asexual colors; Sam has a set in the polysexual pride colors and another in the androgyne pride colors, and so on.

Tony is still holding five boxes, and Natasha gives him a look. “I figured Peter and Jessica and them would want pride gear too. I wasn’t sure about Frank or Luke, so theirs are just in rainbow.” The handlers change out their dogs’ gear, and then they’re off to pride.

They meet the other handlers at the pride festival in Central Park, and Tony hands out the gift boxes to them. “I’m actually aromantic and bigender. Heterosexual though,” Luke says.

“Yeah, and I’m heteroromantic, bisexual, and cis,” Frank adds, and Tony nods, typing it into
his phone as a note for later. While the handlers gear up their dogs, Natasha asks about Matt, since he’s not with them.

“He didn’t want to come. Said it’s too loud,” Jessica says, and Natasha nods, files that information away for later. Once everyone’s ready, people split off into smaller groups to wander around, and Natasha finds herself with Jessica and Clint, walking from booth to booth.

They’re slowly making their way around the festival when they hear yelling a little ways away, and Nat, Jess, and Clint trade looks, heading that direction. They find Steve, Bucky, Tony, and Sam face to face with a group of anti-gay protestors, arguing at full volume while their respective service dogs try to get them to walk away.

Diva is nudging repeatedly at Tony’s hip, Ava is circling Sam, trying to slowly move him away from the protestors, Fubar has his own leash in his mouth and is flat out trying to yank Bucky backwards, and Verity is jumping up on Steve, finally succeeding in knocking the man to the ground and laying on his chest to force him to stay down, but Steve is still yelling from the ground.

“Since when is being gay a sin? Whatever happened to love your neighbor? You don’t get to pick and choose the parts of the Bible you like! What happened to don’t judge? What happened to basic human kindness? What the fuck is your problem? I didn’t come out of the ice for this bullshit!”

Fuck, Steve must be mad if he’s swearing like that. “Jessica, can you grab Tony? Clint, you got Bucky? I’ll get Sam and Steve,” Natasha says, and the other two nod, moving towards their respective people. Natasha grabs Sam first, because Steve is at least not moving towards the protestors, so that’s a start. “Sam, don’t do this, you know they want to get a rise out of you, don’t let them have that,” Natasha says quietly as she grabs Sam’s arm, and the man huffs.

“They have no goddamn right to ruin this event for young LGBT people, they’re such assholes,” Sam says, and Natasha plants her feet just as Sam starts to pull forward, only barely keeping him from getting any closer to the protestors.

“I know, I agree, but you’re not going to win if you hit them, you know that. Sam, you remember what you told me about not being able to hit racists? Because people will automatically demonize you for it? You know that’s what will happen if you hit one of them. Don’t do it, Sam, come on, please.”
That makes Sam hesitate, and he stops pulling, taking half a step back. “You’re right. Fuck, you’re right. I hate them so much, Nat. I want to hit them so bad.”

“I know. But walk away. There’s so much joy here today, there’s so much positivity, go out there, don’t stay here. You deserve better than this.” Natasha lets go of his arm.

Sam sighs. “Yeah, okay. Yeah. Thanks, Nat.”

“Don’t forget to thank Ava, too. She’s the one that stopped you before I even got here.”

Sam scratches Ava behind the ears. “Yeah, she’s a good kid. Alright, I’m going to go get her water. Thanks again.” Sam walks away with Ava, so Natasha turns back to Steve, who’s trying to get back up but keeps getting stopped by Verity jumping on his chest. Natasha walks over, crouching down beside him.

“Steve, it’s not worth it. We need to leave.”

“Nat, they’re being fucking pricks to people who are happy, what kind of shitty Christians do they think they are? I swear I don’t give a damn what anyone has to say about it, I’m going to knock one of these fuckers on their ass.” Steve tries to sit back up again, so Natasha shoves him down again with a hand on his shoulder, helping Verity.

“I know, Steve, but punching them isn’t going to help, you’re just going to make them feel justified in being assholes. So come on, for fuck’s sake, Steve, you’ll prove your point better if you just wrap yourself in a rainbow flag and make out with someone who isn’t a woman.”

Steve goes still, then nods. “Yeah, okay. Let me up.”

Verity steps off to the side, so Natasha takes that as her cue to step back as well. Steve stands and walks over to where Clint and Bucky are standing, whispering something in Bucky’s ear. Bucky’s eyes go wide, and then he grins, nodding, and Natasha already knows where this is headed.

The two of them walk back up to the group of protestors, and Steve gently takes Bucky’s face in his hands, pulling him into a slow, gentle kiss. As they kiss, both Steve and Bucky raise their hands closest to the protestors, flipping them off. The protestors’ chants come to a
halting stop, and there’s some grumbling and a few fake gagging noises, and then the protestors are walking away, shouting slurs over their shoulders.

Steve and Bucky pull apart, both of them grinning. “Still just bros?” Steve asks, and Bucky nods, laughing.

“Still just bros. So fucking worth it to make them leave.”

Tony and Clint make whining noises in the background, and everyone turns to look at them. “We’re feeling kind of left out now,” Tony complains, and Steve laughs.

“Next batch of protestors we see, I’ll kiss you instead, and I’m pretty sure Buck wouldn’t mind doing the same with you, Clint.” Bucky nods, and both Tony and Clint perk up, turning to each other and high-fiving.

“Yes! Success!” Clint cheers.

Natasha rolls her eyes. “Alright boys, come on, there’s still so much more to see around here. Jess, you coming?”

“Fuck yeah, let’s go,” Jessica says, and the group heads towards the nearest booth.
Matt and Grace

It’s been three weeks since Natasha gave Danny his dog, and she still hasn’t made any progress on choosing a dog for Matt. She’s sitting up at 11pm in the living room on her personal floor, trying to find a dog online that she thinks would be good for him, but she’s drawing a blank, and it’s really starting to get on her nerves. She sighs, pushing her tablet to the side and standing, stretching as she pulls on a hoodie and heads for the elevator.

“Ground floor please, JARVIS,” she says, “I’m going on a walk. Text me if I’m needed for anything?”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff,” Jarvis answers. “Enjoy your evening.” Natasha steps out into the lobby and heads out, walking towards Hell’s Kitchen. Maybe she can find some inspiration if she just heads that way, who knows, she’s seen stranger things happen lately. She’s walking through a neighborhood when she sees a dog chained down outside on the front lawn of one of the houses, and she stops, walking over to crouch down on the sidewalk in front of the house.

“Hi, kid. Mind if I come say hi?” Natasha holds her hand out, and the dog stands up, slowly walking as close to Natasha as the chain allows. Natasha carefully approaches, keeping her body low to the ground to seem less threatening, just in case. The dog isn’t showing any signs of aggression or fear, but it never hurts to be sure.

She gets close enough for the dog to sniff her hand, licking her palm, and she’s about to start petting the dog when the door to the house opens with a bang, and the dog skitters backwards, cowering in fear. “What are you doing to my dog?” The owner demands, and Natasha glares at the man.

“Being kind to her, petting her, something you clearly never do,” Natasha says flatly, and the man glares back at her.

“The bitch doesn’t need kindness, she’s meant to be a guard dog, but she’s always been fucking miserable at doing anything right.”

Natasha has the knife drawn from her boot and pressed to the man’s throat before she can think about what she’s doing, which is probably a sign that she needs to go back to doing her mindfulness exercises, but she pushes that thought away. “Every dog deserves kindness. Do you think police dogs bite people on command but refuse to bite their own handlers because their handlers abuse them? Do you think that dogs would protect small children with their fucking lives because they’re scared of the children? You’re exactly the kind of person that abuses their children.
for fun.”

She slides the knife back into her boot, stepping back away from the man, who’s standing perfectly still, his back against the wall of his house. “I’m taking the dog.” Natasha walks over to where the chain is bolted down to the ground, yanking the spike out of the ground and gathering up the chain in her arms.

“Fine, I didn’t want her anyway.” the guy calls, and Natasha just flips him off over her shoulder, walking back to the sidewalk and patting her leg to call the dog over. The dog follows her slowly until they’re out of sight of the house, and then Natasha crouches down, holds her hand out again and when the dog licks her hand, she scratches the dog behind the ears, smiling.

“Yeah, you’re a good girl. Let’s get you home. I think I know the perfect person for you.” They head home, the dog trotting happily at Natasha’s side, and Jarvis lets them into the elevator without question, taking them back to Natasha’s personal floor.

Once they’re there, Natasha grabs one of the cereal bowls out of her kitchen cabinet and fills it with water, setting it down for the dog, and undoes the collar, dropping the chain in a heap in the corner. She settles back down on her couch, grabbing her tablet again. She’s going to have some work ahead of her.

In the morning, Natasha names the dog Grace, and she texts a picture of Grace to a group chat with Frank, Luke, Danny, and Jessica, with the caption “meet Grace!” and a smiling devil emoji. The responses make Natasha laugh.

Frank: Thank fuck, someone needs to look out for that dumbass.

Luke: Thanks Natasha! We appreciate it.

Danny: she’s so cute!!!! :D :D omg, call her hellhound so she can match daredevil!! can u train a dog to parkour? u should train her to parkour!!

Jessica: don’t be a dumbass Danny. but also that’s funny as fuck. do it Nat. good luck with getting Murdock to accept the help though, he’s seriously a self hating idiot.
Natasha rolls her eyes, putting her phone back in her pocket, and takes Grace down to the communal floor. No one’s there yet, so she asks Jarvis to warn everyone about Grace being there, and she gets to work on testing Grace’s commands and treat motivation. Grace doesn’t know much of anything, but she’s starving and takes every treat Natasha offers her, and Natasha seriously has to take a few deep breaths to calm herself down so she doesn't go back and actually stab that guy. Who treats a dog like this?

She hasn’t had much time to get herself any more worked up when the elevator dings, and Steve and Verity step out, still a little out of breath from their run. “New dog, huh?” Steve asks, and Natasha turns, nodding.

“Yeah. Can she meet Verity?”

Steve nods. “Sure. Say hi, Verity.” Verity steps forward, tail wagging, and Grace waits until Verity’s only a few feet away before moving, stepping forward slowly and letting Verity sniff her. She sniffs back, and the dogs have just started to get used to each other when Bucky and Fubar come out of the elevator, Bucky still in his pajamas and yawning as he heads towards the kitchen to start making breakfast.

“Say hi, Foobs,” Bucky says, and Fubar wanders away from his side to meet Grace. The rest of the team slowly makes their way to the communal floor because no one wants to miss out on Bucky’s breakfast, and each of the dogs slowly gets introduced to Grace, letting the new dog adjust to everyone.

It’s not until everyone’s had at least one cup of coffee and one plate of Bucky’s food that most of the room finally starts to wake up enough to talk to anyone. “So, what’s the name, and who are they for?” Tony asks Natasha, pointing his fork in the dog’s direction.

“Grace, and she’s for Matt.”

“Oh thank god,” Clint says, “That man’s got issues. And not just the sexy kind, like how his suit accents his ass just a little too perfectly, but also the non-sexy kind, like genuine mental health issues.”

“Yes, thanks for the clarification, Clint, and for the completely unnecessary horniness this early in the morning,” Bucky says from where he’s making the next batch of french toast, and Clint shrugs.
“What? It’s true.”

Natasha sighs. “Yeah, well, I’m going to need to start her training soon. And Tony, I want to talk to you about some stuff for Matt besides just service dog gear.”

Tony perks up. “Sure, I can do that. Give me a minute to drink another cup of coffee or two, and I’ll be right with you.”

Natasha talks to Tony about making Matt sensory friendly noise cancelling headphones, because she figures that most of the ones on the market probably aren’t going to be comfortable for an already-overwhelmed person with super senses, and Tony jumps on the project, coming up with a few different options over the course of three weeks. She also talks to Tony about making sure that all of Grace’s gear is equally sensory friendly, and he jumps on that project as well.

While Tony works on gear, Natasha works on Grace’s training and health, taking her to multiple veterinarians to have her hips and elbows checked, her growth plates checked, and to get their opinions on what to do for Grace’s weight. The overall conclusion is that Grace has a naturally fast metabolism and high energy and working drive, so she’s going to need a lot of food to keep her healthy.

Her hips and elbows come back in good ranges, her growth plates are good, and by the veterinarians’ best estimate she’s about three years old, so Natasha works on basic obedience with her while Grace builds up strength and muscle mass, and when she’s at a healthy weight, Natasha starts teaching her all of her different tasks.

She starts with teaching Grace how to get help if Matt’s hurt. She’d thought about it for a while, and she’d finally decided to teach Grace both how to stay beside Matt and bark for help as well as how to leave Matt’s side and go looking for someone to help. If Matt was already overwhelmed, Grace barking was only going to make it worse, and if Matt was in a place without many people around, Grace was going to have to go find help for him.

Grace is a quick learner, and even when Natasha asks her to get help while on Natasha’s personal floor, Grace goes to the elevator, gets in, and waits for JARVIS to take her to a level with people on it to get help. Tony had made her a patch that says “If I’m alone, my handler needs you! Follow Me!” and it seems to work, because the three times Natasha had sent Grace to get help, she’d returned with a different person from the tower each time, first Steve, then Bruce, then Rhodey.
Natasha’s honestly proud of Grace’s ability to task. She teaches Grace how to retrieve any of the noise cancelling headphones Tony’s made if Natasha asks for them or if she’s mimicking Frank’s descriptions of Matt’s sensory overload, curled up in a ball with her hands over her ears. She also teaches Grace to do deep pressure therapy when Matt’s experiencing sensory overload and to alert Matt to changes in the environment so he doesn’t have to worry about being “truly blind” with the headphones on.

She teaches Grace to do both guiding out of environments and standard guide dog work, and how to do a lot of the same PTSD tasks that most of the other service dogs know as well. Based on what his teammates have told her, Matt can struggle in crowded environments, seems to have various triggers related to cars and boxing matches, and he has a significant temper, so Natasha teaches Grace to alert to anger and anxiety episodes, to block between Matt and others, and to indicate who’s in a room and where, because despite the heightened senses, Matt still sometimes feels better having what he perceives confirmed as true.

When Grace has learned all of her obedience commands and tasks and she’s consistent on all of them, Natasha gets Matt’s number from Jessica and calls him, asking if she can come over. Matt agrees, giving her his address, and then hangs up. Natasha gears Grace up and heads out from the tower.

Natasha hasn’t even raised her hand to knock on the door when Matt answers it. “You brought a dog,” he says, leaving the door open and walking back towards his living room, and Natasha steps inside, closing the door behind her and following Matt.

“Yes, I did. Her name’s Grace.” Matt walks into the kitchen, pulling out two glasses and filling them with water from the sink. He hands one to Natasha, then moves past her to sit on the couch.

“You do remember the part where I have heightened senses, right? I don’t need a guide dog, the cane is just for appearances.”

Natasha sits down in the chair across from the couch, and Grace lays down by her feet. “I know you don’t need a guide dog, and the heightened senses are exactly why I got her for you. I talked to your teammates. They think you’re experiencing a lot of sensory overload, and that you have significant anger issues and past trauma. I haven’t spent much time around you, but from what I’ve seen, I’m inclined to agree.” Natasha leans forward. “This isn’t meant as an insult, Murdock. It’s meant as support. Because despite what you might have learned in childhood, or church, self sacrifice isn’t necessary.”

The joke is enough to make the corners of Matt’s mouth turn up in the beginnings of a smile.
“Fine. So what all does she know?”

If there’s one thing Natasha loves about Matt, it’s that he’s clear, concise. He’s a lawyer, so he weighs arguments for a living, and he knows when he’s in an argument he can’t win. “A lot. I’ll teach you two how to work together. Shall we start now?”

Matt nods, so Natasha stands up, and starts to walk Matt through Grace’s commands.

It’s a few weeks after Matt and Grace start working together that Natasha gets a text from Matt. “Can Tony make Grace a suit kind of like mine?” The text reads. A second text comes through almost immediately. “Apparently she wants to do DD work with me. And she’s good at keeping up, too.” Natasha shakes her head in disbelief, but she goes down to Tony’s workshop, because that’s almost all the man seems to do, and asks. Tony’s face lights up like it’s Christmas.

“Oh, I would love to make that happen. Give me a few hours, I already had some rough schematics going, but I’ll need to make sure it’ll work properly.” Four and a half hours later, Tony appears on the communal floor with two bundled up suits.

“Okay, so. Grace’s is highly adaptable, it’ll adjust around her. Think like my suits from Mark 46 on that have nanotech. Easy to get on and off, and she’ll be able to run, jump, twist, turn, and even pee and poop, the suit will make openings for her to do her business, because I’m guessing Murdock is out doing his thing for more than just a few hours. It’s virtually indestructible, shock absorbent, and completely covering. I made one for Murdock, too.” Tony hands her both suits, reaching down to scratch Diva behind the ears absentmindedly. “If they need any improvements, just have him let me know, okay?”

“I’m sure they’ll be perfect, Tony. Thank you.” Natasha takes the suits into the elevator with her and calls Matt, letting him know she’s on the way. He confirms that he’s at home, and Natasha meets him there, giving him the suits. “Tony made one for you, too,” Natasha says when Matt holds the two suits out in confusion.

“I’m fine with what I’ve got, I’m kind of attached to it,” Matt tells her, “but I’ll hold onto it just in case. Thank you, Nat.”

“Of course. You matter to us, Murdock. We’re always going to do whatever we can to help you.”
By the end of the week, the news outlets are talking about Daredevil’s new sidekick, dubbing her ‘Hellhound,’ and Danny sends a text to the new group chat that includes Matt with a picture of the headline that he puts an image description for, and the caption “didn’t i tell u that was a good name?!?!” Natasha rolls her eyes, but Jessica beats her to the answer.

**Jessica:** Danny, shut up, no one cares.

**Danny:** ur just mean :(

Matt seems happier, though, and Natasha gets various texts from his teammates over the next few weeks.

**Jessica:** Hey Nat, thanks for getting Grace. I haven’t been dragged out to go save his ass in a few weeks, so he must be making at least slightly less stupid decisions. Thanks.

**Danny:** thanks 4 getting matt the dog!! he’s doing better, even if he’s still being grumpy about it :/ we love you!!

**Luke:** Claire hasn’t had to resuscitate Matt in a while, and the worst injury he’s gotten lately was two cracked ribs, so that’s a pretty big change from his usual 4 broken ribs, stab wounds, gunshot wounds, and barely enough blood to be alive, so thank you. I don’t know how we can ever repay you.

**Frank:** The dumbass in the gimp suit must be doing better, because he’s actually useful in fights now. I avoided a bullet in my thigh thanks to him finally being at his best. Pretty happy about that.

**Matt:** Hey, Natasha. I owe you thanks. I didn’t realize how much I needed Grace’s help. She’s made me realize a lot. And I think she was exactly the support I needed. I love Foggy, but sometimes he’s a little overbearing. Thanks again.

Natasha’s feeling pretty good about everything so far, and with Matt’s dog now out of the way, she has a problem she’s been meaning to address. Time to go find a Wade Wilson…
Advocating for disability rights is something that becomes second nature to most of the heroes. Tony in particular is really good at it, and Natasha assumes it’s because of how much of his life he’s spent in the spotlight already, whether he wanted to or not.

He makes tweets, facebook, instagram, and tumblr posts, and even snapchats and youtube videos in support of service dog teams, disability rights, and accessibility. He brings it up in interviews and press statements, talks to both famous and unfamous disability advocates, and ensures that every Stark Industries building is made with fully accessible design.

It’s really not much of a surprise when the Avengers are all on Ellen together and the topic comes up. “So, in the last few years it seems like you’ve all started to get service dogs. How did this come about?” Ellen asks.

“Well, it was all Natasha’s idea,” Tony says, because everyone usually leaves the interview questions to him, “after Clint came home with Lucky, who was a stray at the time and had just been hit by a car, she decided to train the dog to help Clint, and I guess it just kept going from there.”

“So, Natasha, what made you think ‘Oh, a service dog would be good for them?’” Ellen focuses on Natasha, so she answers.

“Well, I think that because of what we do, people forget that we’re still human. We still bleed, and cry, and struggle, just like anyone else, sometimes even more, due to the higher-risk situations we find ourselves in. As the world will probably remember from the leaked Hydra documents, I used to be an international spy. You don’t get that far in that business without getting exceptionally good at reading people. So I saw the people I care about struggling, and decided to do something about it.”

Ellen nods. “People have accused many of you of faking disabilities to be allowed to bring your pets with you in public. What do you say to those people?”

Steve takes the question. “I’d say that those people have some ableism they need to look at in themselves. If people can believe that I’ve been enhanced by a serum, that Norse gods exist, and that a man can have his cells mutated by gamma radiation, why is it so hard to believe that someone has a disability? We might have gained a lot from what made us heroes. But we lost a lot, too. We lost a sense of normalcy. We lost people we loved and cared about, and we lost a lot of our privacy by being stuck in the public eye. We shouldn’t have to lose the right to keep the details of
our health to ourselves while still being respected, and neither should anyone else. If someone tells you that they're disabled, believe them. Because God knows we’ve had to come a long way to believe it ourselves.”

When April arrives, so does the stigma around autistic people, and it’s not something that any of the autistic heroes particularly appreciate. On the street level, there’s only so much Wade and Matt can do; Wade spends as much time as possible trying to find and protect the kids whose families are advocating for Autism Speaks against their children's will.

He talks to as many other autistic adults as possible to encourage positivity in the streets, if not in the homes, and he of course spends as much time as possible wandering the streets himself, seeing as his suit is the very definition of “red instead.” He walks with Athanasia beside him, the service dog dressed in a bright red vest with only two patches: “Service Dog,” and “Acceptance, not Awareness.”

Meanwhile, Matt spends more time working in the courts; he meets up with autistic clients, encourages them to speak their truths and advocate for rights, acceptance, and protections under the law, provides the legal standings and precedents to back their stories and push for legislative changes. It’s difficult work, and Wade often sends the people he helps to Matt in the hopes that Matt can get their cases to the forefront.

April isn’t the only time Matt advocates for rights, of course, but it is one of the best times for changing policies around autistic people, what with the surge of terrible comments and stories and ads that Autism Speaks forces out into the world. Matt encourages his clients not to be afraid, is as open with them as they are with him, allowing himself to stim freely, without fear. Grace sits at his side, her own red vest with the patches “Handler May Experience Sensory Overload, Give Us Space,” “Service Dog,” and “Red Instead.”

Tony, Stephen, and Bruce, on the other hand, are working on the global scale, and they have a lot more to work with in terms of public perception; Tony paints one of the Iron Man suits solid red, and every professional suit he wears is some shade of red, never with a trace of blue. He publicly donates money to the Autism Self Advocacy Network, both national and international, and makes a show of denouncing Autism Speaks both professionally and unprofessionally.

At different times, he has tweets, Instagram videos, Facebook videos, and tumblr posts of him reacting to various Autism Speaks ads, usually with some version of gagging as his response. He reposts other autistic people’s articles and stories, posts studies and articles supporting vaccination and reassuring people that no, vaccines do not autism, and no, even if they did, that’s still not a
problem, being autistic isn't a problem.

Diva joins him in almost every video, tail wagging as he stares at the phone Tony records on, usually laying on Tony’s lap on the couch because the Autism Speaks videos always put Tony on edge, and having Diva do deep pressure therapy helps more than Tony likes to admit.

Stephen speaks out against harmful stereotypes of autistic people, and encourages autistic people to be themselves. He records the way his hands shake, shows the difference it makes when he stims, how even just humming to himself, tapping his foot focusing on the rhythm helps steady his hands.

He fights against functioning labels, reminds people that “high functioning” and “low functioning” are just ways of making people feel “less” or “more” based on how they fit into society.

He explains as much during one particular interview: “As superheroes, we don’t fit into society. We do not match people’s idea of a ‘normal’ human being. But that doesn’t make us better or worse than anyone else. It makes us different, and it means we have to approach the world in a different way. But it doesn't make us any less human. We try our best. We do what we can. We bring a new type of reality into the spotlight, but that doesn’t make us wrong, or even right. It just makes us people.”

Bruce is quite possibly the best in terms of public influence. When the Hulk isn’t fronting, when it's Bruce himself, he’s the perfect image of what people expect from an abuse survivor; quiet, timid, unsure of himself, kind, and caring. Which, in all honesty, it shouldn’t matter whether he’s a “good” survivor or not, but public perception of autistic people still has a long way to go, and Bruce is nothing if not personable and agreeable.

So when April comes around, Bruce does interview after interview, internet post after internet post, press conference after press conference, and speaks the truth that he still struggles to speak sometimes, even with Smash at his side, nudging his hand with her nose in reassurance, standing between him and others when someone gets too close, when Bruce is too overwhelmed.

He tells everyone, in oral speech or other communication strategies, that he is one of many, many autistic people, Tony and Stephen included; that we are not dangerous, if anything, we’re in danger. In danger of being hurt, ignored, and pushed aside, by a narrative that Autism Speaks would rather shout over autistic people rather than listen to our stories.

That if the public is willing to accept and love a Norse god of thunder, an enhanced super soldier, and two former spies, why is it so hard to accept and love the autistic people in your day to day life? If you can accept that a Norse god struggles with different cultural norms, and you can explain
them to him, why can’t you explain them to the autistic people who feel the same way? If you can accept Iron Man, in all of the flashy red and gold, why can’t you accept the autistic person who flaps their hands, or hums to themselves, or does anything else that doesn’t affect you?

And at the end of the month, they’re all still going to advocate for themselves, for other autistic people like them. Wade, Matt, Tony, Stephen, and Bruce will constantly advocate for acceptance, for love, for kindness and understanding, and they’re not going to limit themselves to just one month of the year to do so; but when the spotlight is on autistic people, when the spotlight is on the debate over what rights autistic people should have, they’re going to lead the way into that spotlight, and remind people that autistic people should have the same rights as you, because we’re people, and basic human rights should just be the beginning, not the end, of what we as autistic people deserve.
Natasha’s plan to talk to Wade Wilson and figure out what his needs might be gets interrupted by Thor’s sudden return to Earth. He says he’s defeated Thanos, and he’ll be able to take some time to stay on Earth for a while. It’s weird, having the god back so suddenly, but everyone adjusts around him, and he and Loki decide to just share their floor of the tower, seeing as there’s multiple bedrooms on each of the personal floors anyway.

A few days after Thor’s return, he starts to ask questions about the service dogs, asking whether or not he can have one too. Natasha tells him she’ll think about it, and one night while she’s curled up on the couch on her personal floor Tony requests access to her floor. Natasha grants it, and Tony comes strutting into Natasha’s living room.

“So! Thor wants a dog, right? And you’re going to get him one, right?” Tony asks, and Natasha shrugs.

“I’m not entirely sure what a dog could do for him. Anger and anxiety alerts and intervention, I would say. But I also don’t know what breed would be best for him.”

Tony grins. “That’s what I was thinking, too. I have a great idea for a dog for him. Do you trust me? Can I go get his dog for him and bring the dog back to you?”

Natasha hesitates, then nods. “Yeah, okay. Sure. Just bring the dog up here again.”

Tony immediately starts heading back towards the elevator, yelling over his shoulder. “Yep, definitely! Trust me, you won’t be disappointed!”

Tony comes back to Natasha’s floor an hour and a half later, holding a small bundle of fur. “Ta-daaa!” Tony shouts, holding the dog out, and Natasha bursts out laughing. It’s a pug, a small, smush-faced little puppy with big, bulgy eyes. “She’s amazing, isn’t she? I think we should name her Sparkles, like lightning sparkling, you know?”

It takes a solid three minutes before Natasha’s able to breathe enough to take the puppy,
holding her up to look at her. “She’s perfect, Tony. Honest to god perfect. You’re amazing. Yeah, alright. How old is she? And where did you get her from?”

“She’s six months, and she came from a litter that the owner wasn’t expecting. She was the runt of the litter, no one else wanted her.”

Natasha nods. “Okay, awesome. I’ll start training tomorrow then, it shouldn’t take long. Thanks, Stark.”

Tony grins. “You’re welcome, always willing to help.”

Training only takes about two months, because Sparkles’ tasks just involve alerting to Thor’s anxiety or anger and then grounding and distracting Thor through interaction. Natasha teaches her how to do all of her commands on leash from the ground, but she also teaches her how to task while in Thor’s arms or lap, because with how big Thor is, she’ll probably spend a lot of her time just being carried around.

Tony makes her a small vest that has replaceable patches, and Natasha walks Sparkles into see Thor with her vest on. “Friend!” Thor says as they enter the communal floor living room where Thor, Loki, Rhodey, Clint, and Tony are sitting on the couch, playing Super Smash Bros Melee, “Who is the small one for?”

“She’s for you,” Natasha says, walking Sparkles over, and Thor picks the dog up, frowning as Sparkles’ breath comes with wheezing noises.

“How does she breathe like that? Has she been wounded? Has she been in combat?”

Clint and Tony burst out laughing, and Loki and Rhodey immediately grab cushions off the couch, smothering the other two men’s laughter under the pillows. Natasha has to hold back a grin. “No, she hasn’t been wounded, that’s just how she breathes. It’s part of her breed. Her name is Sparkles.”

Thor nods. “We had little creatures on Asgard that were similar. Thank you, Nat. I’ll be glad to have Sparkles with me.”
“Should I tell you what she does?” Natasha asks, and Thor nods again, so she explains.

The first time the team goes out for dinner after Thor gets Sparkles, they’re asked to wait in the entryway, and the manager comes out, frowning, and tells them that they don’t want Sparkles there, because she’s “not a service dog like the other dogs.” Before Natasha can say anything, Tony steps forward, coming face to face with the woman.

“Sorry, have you read the ADA? You know, the Americans with Disabilities Act? Because if you haven’t, here’s some fun facts: there’s no breed requirement, or size requirement, and a service dog only needs to have one task that helps mitigate the handler’s disability, which his dog has. Fines for denying access to a service dog when that dog is behaved and under the handler’s control, which she is, can be in the range of one thousand dollars.”

Tony gets practically nose to nose with the woman. “Is this really the hill you want to die on? Denying a Norse god and Avenger the right to eat some goddamn steak? Because there’s hundreds of other restaurants in New York City, even in the world, that I could easily get us to, but we chose yours. So are we going to eat here, or should I find another restaurant to give a large tip to?” The woman splutters, and Tony nods. “Yeah, we’ll eat somewhere else. Let’s go, team!”

They find a nice little restaurant a few blocks down that has great food, and Tony tips them a few hundred dollars before they leave. If Natasha’s being honest, she’s glad they ended up here instead, the food was amazing.
Natasha and Lapushka

Ever since Natasha got Diva for Tony, Tony’s been thinking about how to repay Natasha for it. And as she trains more and more dogs for all of the other heroes, he wonders if she’s ever thought of getting a dog for herself, and then he knows exactly how he’s going to return the favor.

He makes an active effort to help choose and train Rhodey’s dog, partially because he just loves Rhodey but also because he wants to see how exactly Natasha trains the dogs. He helps make the gear for all of the dogs, helps Natasha with Ava’s training, and then he gets to pick Thor’s dog, and when Natasha confirms that he made a good decision with Sparkles, he finally feels confident enough to try and get a dog for Natasha.

He spends days searching through dog breeds and mixed breeds, trying to find the perfect dog for her, and he eventually settles on the Black Russian Terrier. There’s plenty of breeders in the US, but Tony decides to go straight to the source to get the dog, so he finds a breeder and flies out to Moscow, Russia, meeting with the breeder and picking the puppy he wants.

He knows for sure that he wants a female puppy, he thinks that fits Natasha somehow, and he ends up bringing a small, 2 month old puppy home with him, and he names her Lapushka, because he’s heard Natasha use that as a form of endearment before and, after checking the translation, he had thought that “little paw” was also an adorable name.

Tony trains Lapushka in basic obedience, using Diva to help show Lapushka the responses he’s looking for, and she learns quickly, watching Diva and mimicking his behavior. Tony takes Lapushka to her vaccination appointments, introduces her to the other dogs in the tower as secretly as possible, and crate trains her for when he’s in the workshop, just because he doesn't want her to get hurt while he’s working.

By the time Lapushka’s eight months old, she already has basic and advanced obedience down while in the tower, so Tony makes her a small vest with “in training” patches and takes her to pet stores, doing more training with her there. He uses a clicker to train her, and he constantly has other customers coming over and asking him how they can train their dogs too. He shows them, asking that they kindly not mention anything about it online because it’s a surprise for Natasha.

When he’s sure that Lapushka has all of her obedience commands down, Tony starts teaching her all of her different tasks. He teaches her to clear rooms, summon help, block and cover, alert and respond to anxiety, flashbacks, and nightmares, do deep pressure therapy and grounding, and to distinguish between hallucinations and reality, tasks that many of the other dogs know as well.
He also teaches her a task that he’s pretty sure none of the other dogs have been taught, teaching her how to perform interventions if Natasha tries to self harm. Tony’s seen Natasha self harming on a few different occasions, and it’s always subtle; scratching at her hands, a too-precise-to-be-accidental cut on her arm, bruised and bloody knuckles from where she’s been working on a punching bag without wrapping her hands properly. They’re all actions that could easily be mistaken as carelessness, but Tony knows better; he’s seen those same behaviors or similar ones in himself before.

So he trains Lapushka to interrupt when he starts to fake those behaviors, either nudging or pawing at his hands or legs to get his attention and stop him from hurting himself. When he’s finally confident in Lapushka’s training, he puts her in a heart shaped, pink velcro vest with pink trim and takes her down to meet Natasha on the communal floor.

Most of the team is gathered on the communal floor, taking turns racing each other in Mario Kart, but when Tony walks in with Lapushka, they all stop, and Rhodey pauses the game, smiling. “You can’t just pause because I was winning,” Natasha complains, but whatever she was going to say next is cut short when she spots Tony and the dog. “Oh my god,” she says softly, and then she’s off the couch and crouched down beside Lapushka, running a hand through her fur.

“Tony, you didn’t,” she says, and the whole room is silent as she stands up to meet Tony’s eyes.

“I did. Surprise?” he says, fidgeting nervously until Diva puts his head under Tony’s hand, and Natasha swallows, eyes welling up with tears.

“What’s her name?”

“Lapushka.”

Natasha lets out a choked up laugh, blinking as the tears start rolling down her cheeks. “‘Little paw,’ of course. You paid attention to that.” She takes the leash that Tony hands her, and then she’s wrapping her arms around Tony, pulling him into a tight hug. “Thank you, Tony.”

“Of course, Nat. You’ve done a lot for us. For me. You’ve earned this. You deserve this.”

There’s a few moments of silence. “What all does she know?”
“Most of the PTSD tasks you’ve taught the other dogs. And self harm intervention.”

Natasha laughs, wiping the tears off of her face. “Yeah, you noticed that too, huh. I. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“This is sweet, but I was about to beat you at Mario Kart,” Bucky says from the couch, and Natasha turns, smiling.

“Oh, you’re on, Barnes. Come on, Lapushka, we’ve got a game to win. And get over here, Tony, I’m going to beat you at Rainbow Road as soon as I kick both Rhodey’s and Bucky’s asses.”

Tony grins. “Let’s go then, Romanoff, I’m not scared of you.”

The first time Natasha goes out with Lapushka, they go to a little diner Natasha loves, and some overconfident asshole decides to take that as his cue to try and harass them, and Natasha’s honestly just bored of this shit. Seriously, don’t these guys realize who they’re dealing with by now?

The guy approaches her with a whistle and a “Hey baby, why don’t you let me serve you better than your dog could ever do?”

Natasha barely manages not to roll her eyes. “No thanks, I’m just here for a cup of coffee and an omelet, I’m not in the mood.”

“Aww, come on, honey,” the guy croons, leaning forward into Natasha’s personal space, and she turns to give him a cold look.

“You don’t want to do that,” she warns, and the guy frowns.

“Don’t be a bitch, I could give you a really good time,” he says, reaching for her arm, and
Natasha’s standing, shoving the guy’s face down onto the table and pinning his arm behind his back before he can even touch her.

“Sir, I politely told you not to touch me. My service dog doesn’t change the fact that I’m a current Avenger and former international spy. Walk. Away. Now.”

She lets go, and the guy stumbles back to his feet, backing away. “Fine, yeah, whatever.” He leaves, and Natasha settles back down in the booth, using some napkins to dry up where the guy hitting the table had caused some of her coffee to spill over onto the table. She enjoys the rest of her meal, and if the rest of the customers look anywhere from slightly to very frightened of her, well, that’s not her problem. She tips the waiter well in apology for causing a scene, and then heads home.

On another occasion, she’s in a store in the mall picking out some new jackets when a man starts making kissy noises at Lapushka, and this time she does roll her eyes, turning to face the man. “Please don’t distract her, she’s working.” She goes back to looking through the racks of clothes, and as she’s standing there Lapushka steps behind her, blocking, so she turns to find the man petting Lapushka, cooing at her even as the dog ignores him.

“Sir, I already told you, please don’t bother her, she’s working,” Natasha repeats, and the man scoffs.

“So? She’s a dog, what do you expect? People are going to pet her, get over it.”

Natasha’s seriously getting tired of this shit. She calls Lapushka back into a heel as she faces the guy. “She’s a service dog. She’s not meant for you to pet. She’s meant to be working. And she’s not your dog, either.”

The guy reaches for Lapushka again, and Natasha grabs his outstretched arm, twisting and flipping the man down onto his back on the floor in one swift move. “As I already said, don’t touch her. Service dogs are permitted in public space because they’re considered medical equipment. They’re part of their handlers, so when you assault my service dog, you’re assaulting me. Do you really want to be the person that assaults public figures? Or the person that assaults disabled people? Because that sounds pretty shitty to me. Find a new hobby, asshole.”

Natasha goes back to the jackets she was looking at, grabbing the three she likes, and when she
turns back around, the guy is gone. Good. She really didn’t feel like washing blood out of her clothes today.
Finding Wade Wilson turns out to be harder than Natasha had initially thought. He has seemingly no pattern to his behavior, no rituals, and no consistent personality to make inferences as to what he might do on any given day.

Natasha finally ends up just waiting him out near the empty warehouse he seems to call home, and when he comes home 39 hours after Natasha had started keeping post nearby, still in his suit, she jumps on her chance to talk to him.

“Excuse me, sir!” she calls, following him down the alley to the door of the warehouse, and he turns, head tilted to the side like a confused puppy.

“Sorry, do I know you? You look familiar, but like, Betty White familiar? Like a household name of some kind? Not that you look that old, I mean jesus christ, you’ve got it going on, if you don’t mind my saying so--”

Natasha cuts him off before he can go any further. “You’ve met a friend of mine before, Spider-Man, and I wanted to meet you myself.”

Wade nods. “Yeah, Peter! Small kid, right? We had enchiladas. Kid packs away a lot of food, but hey, don’t we all, am I right?” He puts his shoulder to the door of the warehouse and shoves his way in, holding open the door with a flourish. “After you.”

Natasha follows him through the warehouse as he starts tossing gear off, flinging it around the room at random. There’s a couch in the middle of the warehouse, a bookcase filled with everything from Goosebumps to War and Peace, a mini fridge that appears to be filled with Capri Sun and beer, and a couple cardboard boxes that Natasha has no idea what might be inside. Wade drops his katana swords on the floor, his belt on the bookcase, the gun strap from his leg on top of the mini fridge, and his mask gets flung over his shoulder in the direction of the door.

“So, what can I do for you? Usually if someone visits it’s the X-Men trying to get me to convert to ‘better morals’ or some 20th Century Fox, Disney bullshit like that, so I hope that’s not your goal,” Wade says, grabbing a beer from the mini fridge and plopping down on the floor despite the perfectly good couch four feet to his right, and Natasha stops by the bookcase.

“No, that’s not my goal. Peter was worried about you, I thought I’d come talk to you. We’ve got
some pretty fucked up people back at the tower, myself included, so you probably wouldn’t feel too out of place around us. And we could support you.”

Wade snorts so hard that beer comes out of his nose. “Yeah, okay, sure. This feels like a setup for a weird collaboration of some kind, but sure, why the fuck not. I’ve done dumber shit for more boring reasons. So, take me to your leader, I guess? Will I get sued for saying that? Fuck it, I already said it. Let’s go.”

Natasha really can’t get a good read on this guy, but Peter was right, he definitely needs help and he definitely won’t be that out of place among the Avengers.

It takes a few months for Natasha to get anywhere close to understanding Wade, and by the time she does, she’s learned a few key facts about the guy. He’s smarter than he lets on, funny enough to keep up with Clint and Tony’s sarcasm word for word, and caring. He puts up a pretty good front as an asshole, but even though some of it might be true, Natasha’s also seen the way he puts his life on the line for Peter and Matt (because even though he reassures them all that he’s incapable of dying, that’s still a hard call to make) and she’s seen the way he interacts with the dogs.

It’s like seeing a whole new person. He treats the dogs with a sort of reverence, almost, and Natasha has to muffle a laugh the first time she sees him lean down to plant a masked face kiss on one of the dogs’ heads, the dog in question, Fubar, just licking Wade’s mask in return.

Natasha takes some time to think it over, but she really can’t imagine not getting the man a dog at this point, and seeing how he took to Fubar so well, she decides to get him a fluffy dog of his own. She finds a breeder in New York with Leonberger puppies, and she jumps on the opportunity, coming home a few hours later with little Athanasia.

Despite the number of tasks Natasha needs to teach Athanasia, training doesn’t take very long; Natasha’s gotten really good at this by now, and it’s fairly easy to repeat the process. However, Natasha takes a much longer time to work on Athanasia’s bombproofing, because knowing how Wade is, his dog is going to need to be able to roll with the most ridiculous of situations. Athanasia is fully trained after 10 months, and Natasha takes her to meet Wade one day when he’s in the tower, visiting with Peter.

“That’s a new dog, right? There’s a dog there, right?” Wade asks when Natasha and Athanasia
arrive on the communal floor, and Natasha smiles.

“Yes, she’s real, and yes, she’s new. Wade, this is Athanasia. She’s your service dog, if you’re willing to take her.”

Wade starts to reach forward for the leash, and then hesitates. “I like the name. Athanasia. ‘Deathless,’ right? That’s clever. But I don’t think it’s safe.”

Natasha’s heart breaks a little, because no matter how many people she meets that don’t feel like they deserve good things, it still reminds her of herself, and it still makes her sad that someone feels that way.

“You’ll do just fine, Wade. I don’t give dogs to people unless I’m confident that the dog will be safe and happy. I trust you. Trust yourself.”

Peter pipes up from the other side of Wade on the couch. “It’s true, she thinks everything through. She also wouldn’t have let you anywhere near the tower if she didn’t trust you. I’ve seen her break men’s wrists just because they looked at a teammate the wrong way.”

Wade actually takes the mask off before he reaches for the leash again, and there’s tears in his eyes. “Thank you,” he says, and Natasha gives him the leash, putting a hand over his.

“You’re welcome. You deserve it.”

Wade goes home with Athanasia and all of her gear, throwing it over his shoulder in a giant sack because “it makes me look like Santa, right? I mean, missing the white, but I’ve got the red part of the uniform down!” and Natasha doesn’t regret her decision in the slightest.

Natasha’s reminded of how well she’d trained Athanasia when she gets a text from Wade that includes a picture of him soaking wet, sitting beside a river with Athanasia draped across his lap, and the caption “she pulled me out of the river! to be fair, I had it handled, but still, thanks Nat.”

Natasha rolls her eyes, sends back an emoji to reflect that, and then continues with Lapushka up to
her therapy appointment. She has a feeling her therapist will be glad to see her smiling, and that’s always a good way to start a session.
The conference continues, and T'Chaka stands at the podium to speak. T'Challa listens, but focuses more of his attention on the room and its occupants, tracking everything as best as he can. He’s so focused on the people in the room that it takes a moment before he realizes what’s about to happen, and by the time he’s started to move, it’s already too late.

He’s holding his father, watching him die, as everything falls apart around them. He sees the light fade from his father’s eyes, and T’Challa feels lost. He knows that his father believes that he’s now in a beautiful afterlife, but for himself? T’Challa doesn’t know what he believes.

He hopes his father is right, but he doesn’t know, and that’s terrifying, because what if T’Chaka is wrong, and he’ll never see his father again, and this was it, his father died knowing that T’Challa hadn’t saved him, hadn’t protected him.

T’Challa wakes with a start, sitting up in his bed in Wakanda, chest heaving as he scans the room. Everything is the same as it should be, but one of the royal panthers, Ubunye, is sitting at the foot of his bed, looking at him with piercing yellow eyes. T’Challa tilts his head, looking back at the panther.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” he tells Ubunye in Wakandan. The panther stares back at him, then turns and slinks out of the room, resuming his post with the other panther outside the door.

T’Challa watches him go, then lays back down in bed in the hopes of falling asleep. Sleep doesn’t come, and T’Challa sighs, standing and pulling a robe on over his pajamas, wandering down to Shuri’s workshop to see if she’s there.

She is, working on some new technology for the outreach centers they’ve established around the globe, and she doesn’t even look up when T’Challa comes in.

“Nightmares again?” she asks, and T’Challa hums in agreement, standing behind her to watch her work.

“Again. Shouldn’t they be gone by now?”

Shuri shrugs. “It’s different for everyone. I still don’t have a quick solution for PTSD or
nightmares, brother. That hasn’t changed.”

“I know. I didn’t come to ask about that, I just came because it’s interesting, watching you work. When you’re not messing with me, of course.”

“But what’s the fun of creating things if I can’t yeet you across the room every now and then?” Shuri asks, saving her designs for now and turning to face him.

T’Challa shakes his head. “You don’t need to ‘yeet’ me across rooms to enjoy inventing new things,” he points out.

“Yeah, but it’s a nice added bonus.” Shuri heads for one of the tables nearby that’s covered in different gadgets. “Come here, I’ve got some new things for you to try.”

T’Challa narrows his eyes, suspicious, but he follows her over anyway.

Three days later, T’Challa has nightmares again. This time, he dreams about the first fight with Killmonger, about falling down the waterfall into pitch black.

*He’s dead, but not fully, and as a result, he isn’t in the beyond, isn’t with his father and his ancestors.*

*Instead, he’s in empty, dark space, and no matter where he goes, he can’t see anything, can’t hear or feel or taste anything, but he can smell blood, and he can’t tell where the injuries are, can’t figure out what’s happened, or where he is, or what he’s supposed to do. He starts screaming into the darkness, in the hopes that someone, anyone, will hear him, will help him.*

T’Challa wakes up to someone screaming, and it takes him a minute to realize that he’s the one screaming. He stops, but he’s still panicked, still can’t shake the tight, uncomfortable feeling in his chest.

He looks around the room, and spots Ubunye at the foot of the bed again. “What?” he asks the panther, and Ubunye looks at him for a moment before hopping up onto the bed, landing lightly
beside T’Challa, and then curls up to lay in T’Challa’s lap.

Startled, T’Challa immediately lifts his arms up, then slowly lowers them, placing both hands on Ubunye’s back and petting him.

Ubunye purrs, rolling over so T’Challa can rub his belly, and T’Challa obliges, petting the large cat until he starts to yawn again and falls back asleep.

Ubunye becomes a constant in T’Challa’s life; T’Challa has nightmares, wakes up, and finds Ubunye waiting to help him. He becomes more and more accepting of the panther’s help, and it causes a change in T’Challa, because Shuri asks him about it over breakfast one morning.

“Are your nightmares gone?” she asks, and T’Challa shakes his head.

“No, Ubunye’s been helping me through them.”

Shuri gives him a weird look. “Are you saying that one of the royal panthers is, what, royalty by day, service animal by night?” She pauses. “Actually, I guess that makes sense, that’s kind of what you are, right?”

She starts laughing, and T’Challa rolls his eyes, because it’s a good thing for Shuri’s sake that their mother is busy in a meeting and couldn’t join them for breakfast.

“Yeah, yeah. Very funny,” he says. “But maybe you’re onto something. Maybe he could be something like that.”

Shuri gathers up her dirty dishes, shrugging. “I don’t know, but if you want him to be a service animal, you might need to start working on that now, because you’re going to the US soon, aren’t you? Can you take him there?”

T’Challa frowns. “You’re right, and I don’t know. I’ll ask Stark.”
From: T'Challa (tchalla@wakanda.gov)
To: Tony Stark (iamironman@starkunlimited.com)
Subject: US Service Animal Laws?

Mr. Stark,

I have a trip scheduled soon to meet with the Avengers team and other heroes in New York in three months. One of the royal panthers, Ubunye, appears to be taking on the roll of some kind of service animal for me. Can he accompany me? Will this be a problem?

King T'Challa.

From: Tony Stark (iamironman@starkunlimited.com)
To: T'Challa (tchalla@wakanda.gov)
Subject: RE: US Service Animal Laws?

T'Challa,

why are you so formal all the time? King of Wakanda, right, I get it, but like, we’re friends, right? it’s all good, no need for all that. anyway, the laws say only dogs and sometimes miniature horses, but I’m pretty sure Shuri can figure something out to make that happen. otherwise, I think you’d be better off asking Natasha, she’s the better service animal trainer. I’ll let her know you’re asking, she’ll message you. I’d give you her number or email myself, but I don’t want to die anytime soon. I’m sure she’ll be in touch though.

With love,

Tony :D
T’Challa gets a text an hour after Tony’s email comes through. He’s waiting outside Shuri’s workshop while she tests different ideas for cloaking Ubunye to take on the appearance of a dog while they’re in the US.

**Unknown Number:** T’Challa, I heard you’re looking to make one of your panthers a service animal. -Natasha

**T’Challa:** Yes, that would be the goal.

**Natasha:** It takes a lot of work, and I’ll be quite honest, I’ve never worked with a panther before, let alone trained one as a service animal. But I don’t doubt it can be done. Are you hoping to bring this panther in public with you on your trip?

**T’Challa:** Potentially, depending on whether that would be reasonable to do. Would that cause any disturbance in public?

**Natasha:** No, not anymore than the rest of us. But if you want to do that, you’re going to need your panther trained ahead of time. Can you fly out here between now and then, and will your panther adjust to the new environment well, or would they do better training in Wakanda?

**T’Challa:** They should be fine anywhere, and that might be best, for them to get adjusted to the US before going in public for the first time.

**Natasha:** Great. Get them ready to go and fly out when you’re ready. We’re still here at the tower.

T’Challa puts his phone away, going into the workshop to talk to Shuri.

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Shuri has a solution for T’Challa by breakfast the next morning, and she stumbles into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing at her eyes, holding a small square device, about the size of a dog tag.

“Did you not sleep last night?” Ramonda asks, and Shuri shakes her head, pouring herself a cup of coffee that she dumps two shots of espresso into.
“This was important to T’Challa,” she says, sliding the square device across the table to T’Challa as she sits down. “There you go. It’s a camouflaging device, it should make Ubunye look like a Belgian Tervuren dog, which is similar enough to a black panther that the device won’t have to work as hard to maintain the camouflage, just to be sure. Test it before you leave, but it should work. You can just put it on his head and push the center of it twice. Oh, or you can clip it to a collar so it’ll just look like a dog tag, and then just take it off when you no longer need him to look like a dog.”

T’Challa picks the tag up, turning it over in his hands. “Thank you, Shuri.”

She shrugs. “He helps you. That’s what matters. Now go, check that it works and then go meet Natasha at the tower so you can train together. She’s a brilliant woman, but training is still going to take time.”

T’Challa finishes the rest of his food, rinses off his dishes, and then heads out to find Ubunye. The camouflaging device works perfectly, and Ubunye doesn’t even seem to notice the difference, so T’Challa texts Shuri a picture of him as a dog, then deactivates the device and takes Ubunye to gather their stuff and get on one of the ships headed to the US.

In the US, Natasha and Tony meet T’Challa and Ubunye on the roof as they get off the ship, both of them accompanied by their service dogs. Both dogs stay at their handlers’ sides, but they’re clearly interested in meeting Ubunye, and once the ship has taken off again and they can all hear each other properly, T’Challa steps forward to greet them.

“Thank you for helping me with this,” he says, and Natasha smiles.

“It would be very hypocritical if we didn’t. Besides, you’re a friend. We’ll always help in anyway that we can. Not that Wakanda really needs our help.”

Tony nods. “Definitely. You all have way better tech than I can even begin to imagine. And you’re a lot better people in general, too. Can the animals all introduce themselves?”

T’Challa agrees, and both handlers allow the dogs to greet Ubunye, the three animals circling and sniffing each other for a few minutes before going back to their respective handlers.
Tony leaves, talking about some new suit idea he’s working on, and Natasha and T’Challa are left behind, and Natasha turns to him.

“Ready to start training today, or do you want a day to relax first?”

T’Challa thinks about it for a moment. “Can we watch how some of the service dogs work first?”

Natasha nods. “Sure. There’s a lot of us at this point, so you’ll have plenty of examples. Follow me, there’s an extra personal floor Tony had made in case you wanted it, we can drop your things off there, and then we can go to the communal floor, I’m pretty sure they’re having a Harry Potter marathon because Bucky, Steve, and Luke haven’t seen all the movies yet.”

They get T’Challa’s things put away and then head to the communal floor, where they find just about everyone they know gathered: Loki, the full Avengers team, including Rhodey, Sam, Stephen, and Thor, and the “streets team,” as Tony’s taking to calling them, or Jessica, Frank, Matt, Danny, Luke, Peter, and Wade. Tony’s sitting there too, and when Natasha frowns at him, he shrugs.

“Bucky said, and I quote, ‘get your ass up here, even my arm doesn’t need any upgrades right now so if you don’t leave the workshop I’m dragging you out by my high-tech prosthetic.’ He made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

Natasha laughs. “Fair enough. Folks, do we want a quick animal introduction before we carry on?”

Sam pauses the movie, and everyone sends their service animals over to meet Ubunye, and there’s a few minutes of confusion as they all greet each other, which gets even more confusing for a moment when Aelfhun takes the opportunity to shapeshift into a black panther to match Ubunye, and even T’Challa takes a surprised step back.

“Is that normal?” he asks, and Loki raises a hand.

“That would be mine. Sorry, they still haven’t quite learned the manners to ask before doing that when we’re in the tower.”
T’Challa nods slowly. “Okay. All manners have to be learned somewhere, I suppose. Can they change back?”

Loki calls Aelfhun, says something in Asgardian, and the shapeshifter returns to the form of the Saluki it had been in previously.

With the animals all introduced, Natasha and T’Challa settle in on the floor, Natasha between Luke and Bruce and T’Challa between Jessica and Peter, and Sam starts the movie, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, up again.

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Natasha, T’Challa, and Ubunye start training the next day, and they start with just basic leash manners.

“I’m sure he already has basic and advanced obedience down, as a royal panther, but he might need to be on leash while in public,” Natasha explains, fitting Ubunye with a dark purple biothane collar Tony had made for him last night.

It takes a moment for Ubunye to adjust to having the leash dangling between him and T’Challa, but once he’s adjusted to that, he heels just as well as he does off leash, and Natasha starts to work with them on tasks, adapting things as they go based on T’Challa’s needs.

Training doesn’t take long at all; as it turns out, with Ubunye already trained in advanced obedience, task training only takes a month and a half, even with practicing both with and without the camouflaging device, which, in a way that even Tony can’t explain, is somehow capable of also adjusting for the vest Tony makes for Ubunye, changing Ubunye’s appearance to include both the vest and the collar Ubunye wears, making both look the same but in a size that’s perfectly proportionate with Ubunye’s dog form.

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The biggest problems T’Challa seems to encounter are when people in public don’t recognize him. He doesn’t mind, honestly, and in fact he prefers not to be recognized, but it does cause more problems than it solves when he gets stopped by businesses and police alike.

The worst service animal related situation he experienced was with a police officer who hadn’t recognized him, and had decided that T’Challa was up to no good while in a Target. In reality,
T’Challa was there to get cream cheese and raspberries, because according to Sam, he needed them for a cookie recipe he wanted to make for T’Challa to take back to Wakanda that he said was “the best cookie you’ll ever have in your entire life, I guaran-fucking-tee it.”

The police officer, however, had decided that T’Challa was, according to his report later, “probably going to rob the cashier,” and he had put his hand on his gun, telling T’Challa to freeze and put his hands on his head.

Slightly exasperated, T’Challa had done so, but in the process had forgotten about the leash attached to his wrist, and while raising his hands Ubunye’s collar had slid over the panther’s head, fastened too loose on their way out the door. When the collar slid off, the camouflaging device came with it, and then Ubunye was standing in full panther form beside T’Challa.

The police officer, panicked and not thinking clearly, had immediately drawn his gun on Ubunye, and T’Challa had been forced to jump in front of the panther, his suit assembling around him just in time to deflect the bullets.

T’Challa had slid the collar back on while he was still blocking the officer’s view, and when he stood back up to face the police officer, Ubunye was once again in dog form, and the officer, now realizing who was in front of him, had hastily apologized, leaving embarrassed, and T’Challa had just paid for the two things he came for and gone back to the tower.

It was in the news later, and Sam had looked he was going to have a panic attack about T’Challa almost having died trying to get him his ingredients. T’Challa had reassured him that it was no big deal, and besides, Sam was right, these cookies were definitely worth dying for.
Please be aware that there is a scene in this chapter in which an animal is being hurt. The description of what’s happening is as non-graphic as possible and is about two lines long at most, but it’s still there. If you’d rather not read that, you’ll want to skip the two paragraphs after this line/paragraph:

"Tonight, she’s walking through part of downtown New York when she hears yelping and a woman’s voice yelling."

If there's one constant in the heroes' lives, it’s that things never stay calm for more than a couple weeks at most, and even that’s rare. Not long after T’Challa goes back to Wakanda, a spaceship appears in the sky above Central Park, and while no villain seems to have stepped out yet, that’s not the kind of thing you leave to chance.

The Avengers head over to investigate, only to find a group sitting at the bottom of the ship’s ramp, eating what looks like a picnic meal.

“Good afternoon, folks, I’m sorry, but you weren’t on the guest list for Earth today, may I ask your names?” Tony says, landing the suit and walking forward, the suit folding away down to his shoulders.

The person in the group that looks like a human jumps to his feet, frowning. “Uh, I’m pretty sure I’m allowed to be on my own home planet,” he says, “and since when did humans turn into a real life version of Space Invaders?”

Tony scowls, and Steve steps in front of him before he can say anything that could cause a fight here.

“We’re just making sure everything’s fine here, we just want to meet you all. I’m Steve Rogers,” he introduces, holding out his hand.

“Peter Quill,” the man answers, shaking his hand and then turning to point at the other people in his group.
“That’s Gamora, Drax, Rocket, Groot, and Nebula.”

Tony’s head cocks to the side. “Are those prosthetic enhancements?” Tony steps forward to look at Nebula, only for her to move gracefully to her feet, knives sliding out of her sleeves as she takes up a defensive pose. Tony takes a step back, raising his hands. “Whoa, sorry, didn’t mean to piss you off. Just curious. They look kind of painful. Speaking from experience, improperly managed tech in your body sucks. I bet I can help, if you don’t stab me first.”

Nebula stands up straight, relaxing a little even as she continues to glare at him. “What would a human know about that?”

“Most humans? Not much. But a human that had a miniature reactor in his chest that used to keep him alive? Quite a bit. Tony Stark, by the way.”

“This is really fun and all, but I was kind of enjoying lunch here,” Peter interrupts, and all eyes turn back to him.

Tony shrugs. “Sorry,” he says, voice lacking any note of apology. “We’ll leave though, you don’t seem like you’re planning on taking over the planet.” Tony turns back to Nebula. “You can come with us, if you want. I’ll fix those prosthetics for you.”

Nebula hesitates, like she’s not sure what to think of that, and she turns to give Gamora a questioning look.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Gamora says, “Rocket said it’s not something he could do just on the ship and not when it’s actually part of someone’s body, so maybe he can help. It’s up to you. But we do have to leave today, so if you stay, you’ll be here for a while.”

Nebula looks between the two groups, then slowly starts to walk over to Tony, who grins at her.

“Awesome. Trust me, this’ll be great. You won’t regret it. Mostly.”
Tony spends most of the afternoon analyzing and tinkering with Nebula’s prosthetics, talking to her while he works.

“So, why all the prosthetics in the first place?” he asks, typing calculations on a screen near the table he has Nebula sitting on.

“My father decided I wasn’t good enough, and that for every failure, he would replace part of me with a machine, to ‘fix’ me,” Nebula says, watching as Diva wanders over to sniff her, licking her fingers and walking back over to Tony.

Tony pauses, looking up to meet Nebula’s gaze. “Huh. Sounds like our dads had some things in common,” he says softly, clearing his throat as he turns back to the calculations he’s working on. “Anyway, we should have you out of here soon. I can do more, but this will at least be enough of a change for you to let me know what does and doesn’t work, okay? Then we can do some more adjustments in, I don’t know, a day or two.”

Nebula nods, so Tony gets to work on actually making his calculations reality.

They have dinner with the rest of the team later that night, and Nebula stands off to the side, awkwardly holding her plate of chicken tikka masala and naan. Tony notices, and waves her over to the couches where everyone is gathering.

“Come here, you can watch with us. Bruce made dinner, so he’s picking the movie, but he has some pretty good taste in both food and films, so I’m sure you’ll enjoy them both.”

Nebula sits on the couch beside Tony, mimicking the way he eats the masala and watching The Little Prince. It’s not a bad movie, and so far the people seem pretty nice too. Nebula’s not willing to befriend them all yet, but she can see that they have good intentions, if nothing else.

When the movie’s over and everyone starts to head to bed, Tony shows her down to another floor that he says is hers, if she wants it (“I have tons of spare floors, we seem to attract more and more superheroes every single day,” he explains so casually that Nebula wonders how often this really happens), and as he gets in the elevator, he says he’s going to buy her clothes, he has an approximate idea of her size based on their interactions today, and the elevator
doors close before she can argue or ask any questions about that.

True to Tony’s word, Nebula wakes up the next morning to a large stack of boxes in the hallway just outside the elevator, with a note taped to the top that says “anything you don’t want, leave in the box, otherwise I hope you like them. come join us for breakfast on the communal floor, if you’d like -Tony,” and when she opens the boxes, she finds a wide range of clothes in all kinds of patterns and colors.

She tries on a black sports bra, a baggy plain black shirt, a pair of underwear and plain black jeans, and she finds that everything fits just about perfectly. She’s not entirely surprised; she could tell just from the speed with which Tony had worked on her prosthetics yesterday that he has the kind of mind that can provide accurate numbers, calculations, and estimates on the fly, so him finding clothes that fit her probably wasn’t hard for him.

What does surprise her, however, is how he’d managed to find clothes that she would want to wear, also. Most people assume that she prefers tight fitting shirts, but that’s only because that’s what she’s worn her entire life; she’d never had a choice in the matter, just wearing what Thanos or Ronan had given her, so to have someone give her the chance to wear something different is shocking, to say the least. She can see tighter fitting clothes in the boxes, too, but clearly Tony had wanted to give her options.

She digs through the boxes until she finds a pair of socks, shoes, and a soft, dark grey hoodie, and she pulls those on, figuring that the less alien and out of place she looks, the more comfortable everyone else will be around her, so it’ll be better to cover as much skin as possible. Finally satisfied with her appearance, she tosses the rest of the clothes onto her bed, leaves the boxes in the hallway, and heads up to the communal floor.

“Hi Nebula,” someone greets the moment she steps out of the elevator, and she frowns, because she doesn’t see anyone until she turns the corner into the living room, spotting someone in the kitchen, cooking, a dog sitting near them.

“You saw me from over there?” she asks, and the person turns, shrugging, their metal arm making the action look a little awkward.

“No, I heard you. One of the effects of the serum, I can hear more than most people. I heard the hum of your prosthetics,” he explains, turning back to make sure the sausage and bacon he’s cooking doesn’t burn.
“I don’t know your name,” Nebula says in a change of topic, because she’s not quite sure what to do with that new information, and she can maybe figure it out later if she knows this person’s name.

“Bucky Barnes,” he says, “And you’re not really going to find much about the serum online, if that’s what you’re curious about. Even Steve and I aren’t really sure what all the serums can do. Doesn’t let us die, apparently, makes us constantly hungry, we can’t get drunk, and we’re high energy, we both have to do a lot of exercise just so we don’t feel like we’re going to go stir crazy. Who knows what else. What’s your story, though? Because from one person with a prosthetic to another, that shit sucks, and usually doesn’t have a happy story behind it.”

Nebula’s saved from having to answer when Steve comes through the living room, talking to another man who’s a little out of breath, both of them accompanied by dogs.

“No, seriously, this isn’t fair,” the other man says, “you’re, what, a hundred years old?”

“A hundred and one this year,” Steve confirms, and the other man groans.

“Exactly! You should not be able to run that fast. And I’m starting to think you gave Verity some kind of serum, too, because Ava should definitely be able to outrun her.”

Nebula expects this new guy to be freaked out when he sees her, but when he and Steve spot her, the guy just nods his head at her.

“Hi, g’morning. You new? I’m Sam.”

“Nebula,” she says, and Sam just nods, heading for the fridge.

“Cool. You want orange juice? There’s a ton of shit in here, so you can have your pick. There’s also coffee, and tea, but don’t touch Natasha’s fancy Russian teas, I’ve seen her kill for less.”

Nebula’s having a hard time believing just how easily these people adjust to everything around them, and she wants to ask about that, but she has another question in mind too.
“Why all the dogs?” she asks, and Steve answers from where he’s setting the table.

“They’re service animals. Do you have service animals, where you’re from? And actually, I have no idea where you’re from.”

Nebula shakes her head. “No, Thanos always wanted to get rid of as much unnecessary life as possible. Animals would have fallen in that category. I’m originally from Luphom, but Thanos murdered my family and took me as his kid, so I guess technically I’m from his ship, and then the Guardians’ ship, after they rescued me.”

“Huh,” Bucky says without missing a beat, “You might want to talk to Loki. I bet you two could relate on some things. Anyway, service animals. They help people who are disabled. Like, PTSD, wheelchairs, seizures, all kinds of things.”

Nebula seriously, seriously doesn’t understand how these people are so calm about everything. What have these people gone through?

“Is it bacon day? Oh, fuck yeah, it’s bacon day. Bucky, you’re my favorite!” Tony shouts as he enters the kitchen with his dog, and Bucky rolls his eyes, gently smacking Tony’s hand away from the plate of bacon.

“Yes, it’s bacon day, no, you can’t have any yet, and I’m not your favorite, bacon is your favorite, I just make the bacon.”

Tony nods. “Yeah, that’s true. Fine, I need coffee anyway. I had some new ideas about your prosthetics,” Tony points at Nebula, “and now I’m excited. After breakfast, workshop, yeah?”

“Sure.” Nebula follows Tony over to the table, sitting down while they wait for Bucky to finish cooking and the rest of the team to show up.

It doesn’t take long; pretty soon, the dining room is filling up with people, each of them introducing themselves to Nebula finally. When Loki introduces himself, Nebula stops, staring at him for a moment.
“I remember you,” she says finally, “You’re the one Thanos tried to kill. Your brother was the one who killed him, and got me back to the Guardians’ ship. I thought I was going to die there. If you hadn’t challenged him, if you and your brother hadn’t challenged him, I might be dead right now.”

There’s a minute of silence while Loki tries to come up with a reply and fails, and then the Bucky starts carrying the food in, and Loki’s saved from having to answer, because as soon as they’ve eaten, Tony drags Nebula down to the workshop to work on her prosthetics some more.

“How did the modifications feel so far? Anything really good, really bad?” Tony asks, “And the clothes? Anything you hated, anything else you wanted?” Nebula shrugs.

“Modifications just feel different. A little better. The clothes were great. You picked exactly the right sizes.”

Tony grins. “Cool! Oh, also, I don’t know what kind of pronouns you use. Most of us just let people use whatever they assume, but we do have preferences, if you ask us. I’m a he or they pronoun person.”

“I think she,” Nebula says, “I was a boy when Thanos found me, but he didn’t want competition, so he forced me to become a girl, become his daughter, so I could be more like Gamora.” The words leave a bitter taste in Nebula’s mouth as she says them.

Tony frowns. “Well, what do you feel like you are? What do you prefer? What feels right?”

Nebula thinks about it. “She. Maybe it’s years of conditioning, but I don’t know if I could be a ‘he’ again.”

“Hey, if that’s what works for you, that’s what works for you. Doesn’t matter how you got to that conclusion. If you really think it’s just abuse, you could talk to a therapist, they can help you figure that out, but I think that if you’re happy with this, then that’s fine.”

Nebula nods. “Then I think I’m happy with this.”

“Alright. She pronouns it is then. So, your prosthetics. I was thinking, maybe I need to work
It takes weeks for Tony to get Nebula’s prosthetics to a place where both he and Nebula are happy with how they’re working, and in that time, he and Nebula bond a lot. They actually have quite a bit in common; fears of abandonment, lack of trust in others, and fathers that were abusive, ran empires of one kind or another, and forced their kids to do things that they weren’t comfortable with.

When Nebula’s not in the workshop with Tony, she spends a lot of time wandering around alone, seemingly trying to avoid people, but it’s hard when there’s so many heroes around the tower all the time. She’s not actually trying to avoid people, necessarily; well, she is, but mostly because she’s sure that no one’s going to want her around, so when people approach her, she’s actually a lot more friendly than she seems.

Natasha, in particular, seems to try and interact with her, and Nebula’s not entirely sure why, unless it’s just because she wants another person who’s more feminine to talk to, but even that doesn’t make sense, because almost everyone in the tower seems to be not cis or strictly female, including Natasha.

Whatever the reason for it, Natasha spends a lot of time with Nebula, trying to convince her to spend more time with the rest of the team and interact to varying degrees of success. Nebula discovers that she sucks at Mario Kart, is great at Super Smash Bros Melee, and has absolutely zero talent for dancing, and all of the people that either live in or come to the tower seem to like her.

Still, Nebula tries to avoid people, and decides that even if the people in the tower like her, she doubts she’ll find the same sentiment with other people outside the tower, and so she limits her adventures outside to after dark only, and that works pretty well for her most of the time, but apparently not tonight.

Tonight, she’s walking through part of downtown New York when she hears yelping and a woman’s voice yelling.

“Fucking dog, digging through the trash! Are you fucking kidding me? Third time this week, couldn’t bother someone else, could you? I’ll fucking take as many chunks out of you as
you’ve taken out of the trash bags, you mangy mutt!”

Nebula runs in the direction of the yelling, following it down a back alley where she finds a woman kneeling over a dog, hacking away at the dog’s body with a butcher’s knife.

“Leave the dog alone,” Nebula says, and the woman turns, sneering at her.

“Oh what? What are you going to do, scratch me? You don’t look like you could put up much of a fight anyway, you’re swimming in that hoodie.”

Nebula lowers the hood, and the woman pales when she sees Nebula’s blue skin and metal face.

“I said, leave the dog alone. Or holes in your trash will be the least of your worries.”

The woman scrambles to her feet, dropping the knife and running back into her business through the alley door.

When Nebula’s sure she’s not coming back, she rushes over to the dog, pulling off her hood and wrapping the dog in it. The dog whimpers as Nebula picks it up, and she shushes the dog quietly, carrying the dog back to the tower as fast as she can without hurting the dog too much in the process.

“JARVIS,” she says as she enters the lobby, “Get Stark. There’s a hurt dog.”

“Absolutely, Ms. Nebula,” JARVIS answers, “please enter the elevator and I’ll take you to the animal medical bay.”

Nebula takes the dog into the elevator, getting off on the floor JARVIS drops them off at, and she’s barely set the dog down on the bed in the nearest room when Tony comes rushing in.

“What happened, how bad is-- holy shit. Hold on, I’m calling Anita back.”
He steps out, and in 15 minutes there’s three people rushing into the room, pushing Nebula out.

“We need space, we’ll let you know when things are looking better, but right now we need the room.”

Nebula waits outside in one of the chairs in the hallway, and Tony sits beside her.

“Where did you find the dog?” Tony asks.

“Back alley. Woman was stabbing it,” Nebula explains.

“Jesus. They’re going to need a while, you know? Why don’t we go down to the communal floor to wait. You like green tea, right? Besides, where we sit won’t change how long this will take.”

Nebula follows him down to the communal floor, and she makes green tea for herself and raspberry hot chocolate for him, because she’s heard the stories about what happens when he makes things in the kitchen himself, and they sit and wait, talking about their childhoods, because that’s usually what they do when they’re both up late, and right now, at least it takes their minds off the dog being worked on upstairs.

It takes seven hours for the veterinarian team to get the dog stabilized, and when Hannah, one of the assistants, comes down to talk to them, she looks exhausted.

“She’s doing about as good as she could be,” Hannah explains, “She’s had a lot of blood loss, and there’s so much damage to her body that she’s still barely hanging on as it is. Stark, you’ve done prosthetics before, right? Do you think you could make some for the dog?”

Tony nods. “It might take me a minute to figure out exactly how to make it work, but I’ve had some more practice recently.” He sets down his mug of hot chocolate, reaching a hand across the counter towards Nebula. “I’ll be back. That dog’s not going anywhere, not if I have a say in it.”

Then he’s gone, following Hannah back to the elevator, and Nebula’s alone on the communal floor.
Nebula stays up, waiting, and it takes another five hours, and at this point the other Avengers have come stumbling down to the communal floor for breakfast, and while they still ate breakfast, one look had been enough for all of them to leave Nebula alone, Bucky only interacting with her enough to set a plate of food in front of her that she ignores, staring at the elevator and waiting for Tony to come down.

He does, stumbling in with the vet team behind him, all of them looking positively drained.

“Okay. She’s going to make it,” Tony says, and Nebula can’t help the wave of relief that washes through her with that knowledge. “She’ll need time to adjust to the prosthetics, and she’s going to need a long time to recover before she’s ready for that, but she’ll be okay.”

Dr. Garcia nods. “He’s right. I would have said that dog had no chance, but with Tony’s help, she’ll be fine. It will take time, though. Go easy on her, okay? I’ve already told Tony the recovery procedure for her, and if Tony forgets, I’m sure JARVIS will have a record of it.”

“I do, Dr. Garcia,” JARVIS confirms from the ceiling.

“So, with that said, my team and I are going to go crash on one of the empty floors for a little while, none of us should be driving like this. Other than that, take care. And Tony, do try calling me when it’s not an emergency sometime, yeah?”

“Noted,” Tony says, already headed for coffee and the plate of food Bucky grabs from where he left it in the microwave to keep warm for Tony.

The vet team leaves, and Tony and Nebula both finally eat breakfast. As soon as she’s done, Nebula heads up to see the dog, and she’s a little startled by what she sees; the dog has prosthetics that look incredibly similar to Nebula’s, covering various parts of the dog’s body where she had been missing sections. The dog is unconscious, and Nebula sits in the room, watching her sleep while she listens to JARVIS’s rundown of the dog’s recovery plan.

After the dog recovers, Nebula doesn’t really see them again, and she just assumes that they must have given the dog away to a better home, seeing as everyone here already has dogs of their own to take care of. She doesn't mind, necessarily, but she does kind of wish she knew where the dog had gone to, so she could be certain that the dog was in a better place, but she
just settles on the knowledge that the people here are good people, and they would do what’s best for the dog.

She’s almost put the dog out of her mind entirely when she gets a text from Natasha asking her to come to the communal floor, and she does, confused as to what the problem might be. When she steps out of the elevator and into the living room, however, she finally figures out what’s going on.

Everyone’s gathered there with their dogs and, in the middle of the room, Natasha is standing with Lapushka on one side of her and the dog Nebula had rescued on the other side, geared up in a harness and cape with patches that read “Service Dog, Do Not Pet,” and “This Is My Handler, She’s A Little Broken, But She’s Still Good.”

Nebula steps forward, speechless, and takes the leash that Natasha hands her. “Nebula, this is Quasar. Quasar, Nebula,” Natasha introduces, and just like that, Nebula loses it, collapsing in a heap beside Quasar and wrapping her arms around the dog, sobbing. She can feel her prosthetics malfunctioning slightly, but she doesn’t care, just holds onto the dog, her dog, and cries.

“Thank you,” she says, when the tears have stopped for the most part, “Thank you.”

“You’re one of us,” Natasha says, “And you deserve love and support too. I was looking at a dog for you already, and then you brought Quasar home, and Tony and I figured that it was just meant to be.”

Nebula sniffles a little, wiping the tears off her face, and she looks up at Natasha and Tony. “Thank you.”

“Hey, you haven’t seen the best part yet!” Tony says, standing. “Sam and Frank made cake, so we’re going to have a real, proper party. You haven’t had good cake until you’ve had Sam’s, and Frank’s is just as good. You get first piece, come here.”

Nebula follows Tony over to the kitchen, taking the plate of cake he hands her, and she and everyone eat cake while Natasha walks her through all of Quasar’s commands. As she sits there, Nebula thinks about how she never expected to actually have a family to call her own again, but now she’s pretty sure she’s found one here.
Like any other dog, service dogs still need maintenance training sometimes to make sure that they’re doing good on all of their commands, and with so many teams now, it’s easy to set up group training sessions for the dogs. One calm Saturday, everyone gathers in the training room Tony had made for the dogs, and they start training as a group first.

One by one, each handler gives their dog commands, making sure that their dog will focus on them and only them. They run through obedience commands; sit, down, stay, come, heel, leave it. Each dog does well, and once each handler has finished all of their commands, they break up to work on commands with their dog individually, using the number of other teams in the room as distractions. Then, they increase the difficulty again.

Half of the handlers take off their dog’s gear, releasing their dogs so they’re officially off duty, and they start to play with the dogs while the other half of the dogs continue to work. They switch halfway through, so that the dogs that were still working are now off duty and the other dogs are working again.

It’s good practice; Diva almost messes up while tasking when Smash runs up, squeaking a toy in his face and running off again. The dogs do great, and with all of the dogs having worked so hard, they take the dogs to the indoor dog park, giving them some time off to play.

They’re fun to watch; dogs literally jumping over one another to catch frisbees, chasing each other in circles, wrestling in large piles of fur and paws, and running across the room, bouncing from one activity to the next.

Natasha watches them all, keeping an eye on Lapushka, who’s currently wrestling with Ava. She sees Fubar stop mid jump for a frisbee, dropping back down to the floor and running over to alert Bucky to a seizure. Bucky scratches Fubar behind the ears, following the dog to the corner of the room and laying down, Fubar under Bucky’s head to help prevent him from being hurt during the seizure.

Rhodey is sitting on the floor on the other side of the room, Valor laying down across his legs to help with his pain. Wade calls Rhodey’s name, and Rhodey taps Valor’s paw. Valor stands, bracing so Rhodey can put a hand on his shoulders, standing up and walking over to where Wade and Danny are talking. At Rhodey’s cue, Valor runs off to join Quasar in a game of tug-of-war.
Grace jumps over Sparkles, running over to climb into Matt’s lap where he’s curled up on the floor, rocking back and forth slightly with his hand tapping an unsteady rhythm against his thigh. Grace pushes at Matt until he stands up, grabbing her collar with one hand and letting her guide him out of the room so he can take the time to manage his sensory overload.

As Natasha looks around, Bucky finally sits up from his seizure, Fubar hopping to his paws and licking Bucky’s face while the man giggles, running his hands through Fubar’s fur. Bucky’s just standing up and Fubar’s running back over to continue his game of competitive frisbee with Aelfhun when Tony walks up to Natasha, pulling her attention away from the rest of the room.

“They’re doing great, aren’t they?” Tony says, and Natasha nods.

“Yeah, they are. We got lucky, with such good dogs.”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t think it was luck, I think they just had a really, really good trainer.” He turns to look at Natasha. “You know how much you’ve helped all of us, right? You do realize how important this was, for all of us?”


“Have you thought about making this a full time thing? Training service dogs? I’m sure there’s other disabled people that could really benefit from service dogs but they just can’t get one or train one themselves.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure if that’s a commitment I’m willing to make yet.”

Tony nods. “Think about it, maybe. You’re good at this. And I could still make all the gear for the dogs you train.”

Tony walks away, and Natasha’s a little glad for the space, because what Tony’s talking about is a lot for her to consider. She’ll probably have to talk to her therapist about this, she’s not sure this is a decision she can make on her own.
Thanksgiving dinner is a bit of a struggle; they’ve got 32 people coming, but only 16 places at the table, so Tony builds a square table that they put in the living room, moving the couches and other furniture to use as seats around the table, and they decide that half of them will sit at the “kids’ table,” as Tony dubs it.

With 32 people attending the dinner, the next dilemma is what to do for food; There’s only so much that the Avengers team can cook in the tower on their own, so they enlist the help of their guests to get all the cooking done. They decide to make the dinner a potluck, and since there’s also a generally shared sentiment of hating the fact that Thanksgiving originally comes from colonizers taking the land of the Native Americans, they decide to make it a “represent diversity” potluck, with everyone encouraged to make their favorite dishes from other countries.

Tony organizes the whole thing, finding out who’s cooking what and helping organize who cooks where. By the day before Thanksgiving, everyone’s figured out where they’ll be cooking at; many of the guests are cooking at their own homes, but some of them are coming to cook at the tower.

Thanksgiving day, the guests cooking at the tower start to filter in. Misty and Wade head up to Bruce’s floor to help Bruce make some traditional Brazilian food, recipes he’d picked up while he was living in Brazil. Rhodey, Peter, and May work in the kitchen on Rhodey and Tony’s floor, making the turkey, stuffing, and cranberry sauce. Stephen goes to Bucky and Steve’s floor by himself to make green bean casserole, claiming that he works better in silence (which Tony knows is a lie, Stephen doesn’t work better in silence, he just works better with music and no one else talking, but since Tony is the same, he doesn’t comment).

Natasha, Bucky, and Clint work on some traditional Russian food on Natasha’s floor, Nebula works on zucchini bread on her own floor, and Loki and Thor work on traditional Asgardian food on their floor. On the communal floor, Steve works on fruit salad, Foggy makes ham, Karen makes carrot cake, Frank makes both lasagna and tiramisu (because he “doesn’t trust any of these dumb fucks to make Italian food correctly”), and Pepper makes a few different fresh salads.

Everyone else is cooking from places outside of the tower; Sam, Coulson, Matt, and Happy each cook at their own homes, making vegan meatloaf, cornbread, apple pie, and corn on the cob, respectively, Luke and Claire cook Puerto Rican food at Claire’s apartment, T’Challa and Shuri make traditional Wakandan food at home in Wakanda, Jessica and Malcolm make mashed potatoes and sweet potato casserole at Malcolm’s place, and Wong, Colleen, and Danny make traditional Chinese food at Danny and Colleen’s place.
The only person who isn’t actively involved in cooking something is Tony himself, so he takes the opportunity to go get his contribution for dinner, carrying it into the communal floor kitchen with a flourish. “Ta-da! I made pie,” Tony says, and everyone spins to face him, concerned, only to relax when they see what he’s holding.

“Tony, you don’t get to say you ‘made’ pie when you just bought it from the store,” Steve says, and Tony glares at him.

“Says the guy who’s just dumping pre-cut fruit into a bowl as ‘fruit salad,’ you didn’t actually make that, you know,” Tony says, and Steve clenches his jaw but doesn’t say anything, just turns back to his bowl of fruit.

Tony internally cheers for his win of a comeback. Tony, 100, Steve, 0.

Tony once again takes on his role of welcoming committee, greeting everyone that comes in and showing them where to put their food. They’ve asked everyone to put their dishes into two separate containers, one for the adults table and one for the kids table, so Tony organizes where to put the food on both tables, then directs each person to their seat for the night.

A few other things get added to the tables as well; small bowls of olives, other little things that weren’t big enough to put in large serving dishes.

Everyone finally settles in for dinner somewhere around 7pm, and when they’re ready, Tony asks JARVIS to calls the dogs, most of whom have all been kept off the communal floor until the commotion of everyone coming in dies down. While most of the dogs had been elsewhere in the tower, Fubar had stayed with Bucky, because Bucky had worried that he would have either a seizure or a dissociative episode, despite taking his as needed meds for both, Aelfhun had stayed with Loki, because Loki had been worried that the new guests would still hate him for his past, and Ubunye had stayed with T’Challa, mostly because Ubunye had just refused to leave T’Challa’s side.

With that in mind, each of the handlers around the room gives JARVIS their permission to call their dog, and they start in on dinner while they wait for the dogs to arrive.

Diva looks up when Tony’s voice comes from the ceiling. “Diva, ready to go to work,
kiddo?” Tony’s voice says, and Diva wags his tail, hopping up from where he’s been laying on the floor of Tony’s workshop letting Dum-E brush him out. Diva runs to the door, pushing it open with his front paws and waiting at the elevator for JARVIS to take him to where Tony is.

The elevator doors open, and Diva steps in, gently bumping noses with Smash. Diva loves Smash, because she’s smart like Diva and she works with Bruce, and Tony likes Bruce and Diva likes him too. The elevator takes them to the communal floor, and Diva’s immediately hit with smells. So, so many good smells. But he’s working, so he ignores the food smells, heading to the dining room where-- Yes! There’s his handler!-- Tony is sitting at the head of the table.

Diva bumps his nose gently against Tony’s hip, sitting beside him on the side closest to the door, because he’s supposed to stay on the side of Tony by doorways. Tony gives him a quick scratch behind the ears while he talks with Misty, and Diva leans into it, soaking up the attention while he watches his friends enter the room.

Verity sits down beside him so she’s between Steve and Tony, and Diva likes Verity, because she’s smart and fun and also she likes to knock Steve over, and Diva admires that. Valor walks past them to reach Rhodey, and Diva likes him too, even if he is kind of quiet and formal sometimes.

Lapushka heads towards Natasha, and Diva really, really likes Lapushka, maybe because he got to be her big brother while Tony was working with her, or maybe because she’s so good to Natasha and Diva’s really glad that Natasha let him work with Tony, because he loves Tony, or maybe he just likes Lapushka because she’s really cool. Again, Diva’s not sure.

Smash and Sable are also on that side of the table. On the other side of the table, Ava, Quasar, Harvey, Thelonious, and Ubunye are all settled at their handlers’ feet. Diva can’t see everyone else in the living room, there’s a wall, but from where he’s at he can see Fubar, Grace, and Araneus, and they all seem to be doing fine, so Diva focuses his attention back on Tony.

Diva wants to make sure the other dogs are doing okay, and that the other handlers are okay, but mostly because he wants to make sure that they’re not going to upset Tony, and if they’re fine, then it’s more important to focus on his handler so Tony doesn’t upset himself.

Everything seems to be going fine, so Diva lays down, facing out towards the living room, just in case, because he can still pay attention to Tony even when he’s looking the other way.
They’re partway into dinner when Diva notices some stress sounds and smells coming from
the living room, and he gets up to investigate, because even though Fubar, Grace, and Araneus
look calm, something else might be wrong. He pads over to the doorway, because Tony
doesn’t mind if he wanders a little when they’re at home, and that’s when he sees the glint of
various weapons under the table, plus really subtle fear smell and that’s not good, that’s a bad
sign. It’s a little confusing though, because his friends’ handlers seem perfectly fine, laughing
as Sparkles’ handler, Thor, holds up a hand with food on the ends of it.

Diva walks back to Tony’s side, nudging his hip with a small whine. Tony looks down at him,
frowning. “I’m fine,” Tony says, and Diva’s not sure what that means, exactly, other than
Tony doesn’t understand, so Diva walks over to the doorway and back, nudging Tony’s hip
again. “Okay?” Tony says, standing up, and yes, good, that’s what Diva wanted. He drops
into a heel beside Tony, in case he’s needed.

Tony’s definitely a little confused by Diva’s behavior, because he feels fine, he’s not stressed,
but something in the living room seems to be upsetting Diva, so he follows the dog to the
doorway, groaning when he finally sees what’s happening at the kids table, and yes, now he’s
sure that calling it the kids table was a good idea.

“Peter!” Tony scolds, and half the table bursts out laughing. Thor, sitting on Peter’s right, has
olives on each of his fingers, and is now frowning at Tony, confused.

“What’s wrong? Peter was simply showing me one of your ancient Earth customs,” Thor
says, and Tony shakes his head in disbelief, turning to stare at Loki instead.

“You really didn’t say anything?” he asks.

Loki just points at Jessica, who’s sitting on his left. “She threatened to throw me out the
window if I said anything, and while a fall from this tall of a building wouldn’t kill me, it
wouldn’t be comfortable, either.”

Jessica nods. “Damn right. Come on, Stark, it’s fucking funny, you really can’t tell me you
wouldn’t have done the same.”

“I would have done the same, you’re right, which is exactly why I’m mad at Peter, because
he’s supposed to be better than me,” Tony says, turning back to Peter as he finishes his
Peter practically droops. “Sorry, Mr. Stark,” he says quietly, and Tony sighs, because damn it, he can’t stay mad when the kid has those fucking puppy dog eyes.

“Fine, yeah, it’s fine, whatever. Just… don’t tell Pepper I let you off the hook. She’ll never let me live it down.”

Peter brightens up again. “Sure thing, Mr. Stark! You have my word.”

Tony turns to the rest of the table. “And those of you that were threatening other people at the table, for Christ’s sake, would you please repeal your statements of violence?”

There’s a pause, and then the sound of at least one knife being put back into its sheath and at least one gun’s safety being put back on, and Tony wants to slam his head into the nearest wall. “Or put your weapons away, apparently, fucking hell, you guys, really? Really? We’re having Thanksgiving dinner.”

Tony heads back to the dining room, dropping into his seat and reaching down to run a hand through Diva’s fur. “Good job, kiddo. Okay, what were we talking about?” Tony directs the second part towards May and Rhodey, who he was talking to before the commotion started.

“Your MIT stories,” Rhodey says with a grin, and Tony rolls his eyes. Right, that.

Diva finds himself dozing off at Tony’s side when they’ve settled back down at the table again, and he wakes up when the food starts getting moved off the table, being replaced by even more food. Once the food has been rearranged and things calm down again, Diva drifts back in and out of sleep, until this round of food gets taken away again and then people are standing up, and all the dogs are being sent to the nice room down the hall.

Diva leads the other dogs into the room, flopping on his favorite dog bed with a huff, and the other dogs spread out around the room on the various beds and blankets on the floor, listening to the calming music playing from the ceiling.
Diva doesn’t think they’ve been there long, just long enough for Sable to fall asleep and start drooling on Diva’s tail (which, okay, gross!), when their handlers’ voices start to call them from the ceiling. Diva stands, stretching, and follows Smash out of the room, down the hall to the living room, where the table is gone and the couches are back where they normally are.

Their handlers are standing or sitting around the room, holding different bowls that smell like the food that was on the tables earlier.

“Diva,” Tony calls, and Diva heads over to his handler, prancing just a little as he walks.

“Okay, ready?” Tony says, and Diva doesn’t know what that means until Tony sets the bowl down in front of him, and he’s confused, because is this like those times when Tony drops food and Diva’s not supposed to pick it up? But then Tony says “Go ahead,” and that’s Diva’s food cue!

Diva sniffs the bowl, looking up to confirm with Tony one more time, and when Tony nods, says “Yes!” Diva starts eating, and holy shit, it’s good, Diva can’t remember ever being allowed to eat this before, but it’s warm, and soft, and tasty, and fuck yes, this is what Diva is talking about, this is way better than the dry chunks Diva eats normally.

When Diva’s licked the bowl clean, Tony chuckles, picking the bowl up and petting Diva’s head. “Happy Thanksgiving,” Tony says, and Diva doesn’t know what that means, but he hopes it starts happening a lot more often. He still won’t eat food like this unless Tony says he can, but he really, really wants Tony to say he can eat this stuff sometimes.

Diva looks around the room, and based on the shouts of “Hell yes!” from all his friends, Diva has a feeling that all of them want this to happen more often too.
Chapter Summary

There is a brief mention of violence in the third paragraph. To avoid that, just skip the paragraph after this one:

- The guy turns, trying to locate the source of the “Beep Me,” Kim Possible text tone Wade has set on his phone, and Wade sighs. “So much for subtlety.”
- Other than that, enjoy!

Wade’s phone goes off while he’s trailing his current mark, some asshole that’s been going around killing people dressed as a clown (which, really, is just unfair, Wade definitely is the crazy clown for this universe, and DC has no right to let their villains enter the Marvel verse. But, Wade digresses.)

The guy turns, trying to locate the source of the “Beep Me,” Kim Possible text tone Wade has set on his phone, and Wade sighs. “So much for subtlety.”

Wade jumps up from where he’s crouched in the bushes, pulling the gun out of the holster on his right hip and shooting the Joker directly between the eyes. It’s a clean shot, but the sound attracts the attention of all the people in the Joker’s base, and then there’s hundreds of bullets being fired in Wade’s direction, and really, can they get any more predictable?

Wade fast forwards the story, skips to after the shooting ends, and pulls his phone out, checking his texts.

**Scary Momma Spider:** T’Challa’s in town. Doggy play date tomorrow, outdoor park, 8 am?

**Wade:** fuuuuuck yeah!! :D

Wade puts the phone back into his kevlar bra (it’s good for holding phones, shut up. he’s lost too many phones because they fell out of his pockets or got riddled with bullet holes), and heads home to the warehouse, humming Fall Out Boy songs as he walks (it’s not a phase mom, it’s who I really am).
He crashes on the couch, taking the Capri Sun and leftover taco Athanasia hands him, scratching her back near the base of her tail, her favorite spot. She rests her chin on Wade’s knee while he eats, tossing his trash over his shoulder on the floor somewhere because he just doesn’t feel like doing anything with it right now. He sets an alarm on his phone for 7:30 am, and falls asleep not long after.

Wade wakes up to his alarm blaring, just a loud screeching siren because otherwise Wade can’t tell it apart from the hallucinations, and he silences the alarm, sitting up. “You ready to go play, darling?” he asks Athanasia, who wags her tail in response at the same time that a voice in his left ear says “No, Wade, let’s just sit here and throw knives at the wall together.”

Wade pauses, then signs “who?” at Athanasia. The dog perks up, looking around, then relaxes by Wade’s side. Okay, definitely a hallucination then. Good to know.

He stands, pulling off his suit he’d apparently fallen asleep in last night (damn it, it’s gonna take forever to get the blood stains out now. wait, no, that’s why the suit’s red in the first place. good thinking, past-Wade, good thinking) and he changes into a skirt, a pair of sandals, and a Guns N’ Roses shirt, opening the door of the warehouse only to find that it’s snowed overnight. Fantastic. Fuck you, author, I look good in this skirt.

Wade sighs, shutting the door and changing into a pair of jeans, a pair of Converse, and a pink “I <3 NYC” hoodie. He grabs a half-eaten corn dog out of the mini fridge, pops the top on a beer, and checks Athanasia’s bowl to make sure she’s already finished breakfast. She has, and Wade’s once again reminded how grateful he is for Tony Stark’s crazy tech, because otherwise he’d suck at remembering to keep Athanasia’s bowl full.

Wade heads back to the door, waving Athanasia over and clipping on her off-duty collar and leash. “Okay babe, let’s go!” He pulls the door open, waiting for Athanasia to step through before following her out.

It takes them a while to get to the park. They’ve barely stepped through the gates, Wade taking off Athanasia’s collar and leash (because otherwise Sparkles has a habit of biting down on the dogs' collars and riding the other dogs around the park) when a snowball smacks into Wade’s shoulder. Wade looks up to find Natasha and Thor snickering, high fiving behind the snow barricade they’ve built.
“Wade, help me out! SOS!” Peter shouts, the spiderling crouched behind a poor attempt at a barricade of his own, and Wade narrows his eyes as he takes in the scene, flinging himself behind the barricade beside Peter.

“How could you give up on your own adopted spider son?” he shouts at Natasha as he starts building up the barricade into something actually functional, and he ducks down as a snowball goes flying over his head.

“He started it!” Natasha shouts back. “I will not be disgraced by a teenager, spider relation or not! Victory or death!”

Wade reaches down, making a softball sized snowball of his own. “Victory AND death!” Wade jumps over the barricade, rushing headfirst towards Natasha and Thor’s barricade, dunking the snowball over Natasha’s head and then fleeing back to Peter. He’s almost made it when what has to have been a basketball-sized snowball slams into his back between his shoulder blades, sending him sprawling into the snow.

“Save yourself! Abandon ship!” he shouts at Peter, and all four combatants break into fits of laughter.

Steve has to admit, he didn’t think he’d ever like Jessica, but the more he’s gotten to know her, she just reminds him more and more of Bucky. She’s constantly complaining about having to pull her teammates out of dangerous situations and she’s mean, but in a way that makes Steve think less of “heartless individual” and more “tough love” friend.

So he’s not entirely shocked when he and Bucky end up building a snowman with Jessica and Luke, Jessica and Bucky both making entirely unnecessary commentary while Steve and Luke do most of the work.

Steve, Bucky, and Sam had almost been the first people to arrive, arriving not long after Matt had shown up, and they had mostly stood around discussing different movies and tv shows until more people started to arrive. Jessica and Luke had shown up together, and it had been Luke’s idea to make a snowman, saying that he’d never actually made a snowman before but he’d always wanted to. They’d gotten to work, and that’s when Jessica and Bucky had started making suggestions for the snowman’s construction.
“Give the snowman only one arm,” Jessica says, and Bucky snorts.

“Give it a scowl instead of a smile,” he adds, and Jessica elbows him in the stomach. “Ouch,” he says, deadpan, and Jessica rolls her eyes.

“Whatever.”

When Clint comes into the park, he takes a moment just to get oriented with who’s where, and then he heads for Danny and Tony, because of course the rich kids would hang out together, why not, but Clint has more important plans for both of them.

“Hey!” Clint signs, and Tony turns, grinning.

“What’s up, Bird Shit?” Tony signs back, responding in English as well so Danny can follow the conversation.

“There’s snow everywhere, and you haven’t made any snow angels yet? Really? I would have thought that’d be right up your pretentious alley,” Clint answers in both ASL and English too, because he figures Danny probably doesn’t know ASL. He doesn’t need to be signing, necessarily, he has his hearing aids in, but he definitely likes signing, and ever since he found out Tony can sign, he’s been using that to his advantage to test Tony’s signing skills.

Tony looks mildly exasperated. “Well, I’m already an angel, why do I need a snow version of myself?”

Danny, on the other hand, positively lights up. “Wait, can we do that? I want to do that! I haven’t made snow angels in forever!”

Clint gives Tony a questioning look, and Tony grins. “Oh yeah, it’s snow angel time.”

They choose a small open area of the park to make their snow angels, but their attempts are quickly foiled by the dogs running up to see what they’re doing or by dogs wrestling nearby.
Dewei jumps over them as they make their snow angels, leading Quasar around in an attempt to get the other dog to play, but Quasar looks partially terrified and partially just uncomfortable, like she can’t figure out what the snow is but she definitely doesn’t trust it.

Quasar finally steps around the men as they sit up, building up her confidence by walking around in the flattened snow from their snow angels, and Clint sighs. “Well, it was worth the try,” he says, a little disappointed that Danny didn’t get the nice snow angels he probably wanted, but Danny looks even happier, if it’s possible.

“So, wait. There’s paw prints in the angels, because dogs are angels on their own!” Danny says, practically glowing with excitement, and Clint watches him, amazed at his positive outlook. Maybe he should spend more time around Danny.

When Steve and Bucky get pulled into making the snowman with Luke and Jessica, Sam wanders off, looking for someone else to talk to. It’s not that he doesn’t like Luke and Jessica; but there’s only so much to do when making a snowman, and honestly, Sam’s more just in the mood to talk and watch the dogs right now.

He spots Bruce standing by himself over by the agility equipment, and Sam heads that way, watching as Ava runs that direction too, racing up behind Thelonious, who’s doing circuits through the agility equipment. Thelonious stops when Ava approaches, turning to face her. Ava baps Thelonious on the nose with her paw, then dodges out of the way as Thelonious lunges, chasing her around the agility course.

Sam laughs as he passes them, and he can see Bruce grinning even from a distance. “They’re such smart dogs, and somehow they still manage to be total idiots, huh?” Sam asks, and Bruce nods.

“Yeah, well, you haven’t seen what Smash and Diva are doing yet, have you?” Bruce looks pointedly behind Sam, and Sam turns to see Smash and Diva literally bouncing up and down in the snow side by side, like confused dolphins.

Sam starts laughing again. “Okay, yeah, I hadn’t seen that yet. Damn, for dogs that have such intelligent handlers, they’re not always that bright, are they?”
Bruce laughs. “Tony might be smart, but he’s still kind of an idiot.”

“That’s what I heard from Pepper! I told her that for all the serum did for Steve, it doesn’t seem to have helped with his common sense. Got any good stories about Tony that Pepper wouldn’t already have mentioned?”

Bruce grins. “Have you heard about his first attempt at replicating Peter’s web fluid?”

“No? Do tell.”

“First, you have to understand that Tony’s a mechanical engineer, not a chemist, and Peter’s web fluid is all chemistry. Well, Tony tried to make some in his workshop, and accidentally wrapped his desk in an impenetrable bubble of web fluid.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was, because then I wouldn’t have been the one that had to fix it! Tony’s hands were literally web-glued together by the palms. It looked like he was praying!”

Matt had been the first to arrive at the dog park, mostly because he’d known the snow was coming and had prepared accordingly, waking up early to beat the crowds and accidents on the roads that might cause him to have to detour to reach the tower.

He lets Grace into the park, pulling out the squeaky pitchfork toy she likes and tossing it into the bushes at the back of the park for her to chase. (The toy had been a gift from Tony; Matt had rolled his eyes when he’d realized what the toy was meant to resemble, but Grace had immediately gotten attached to it, and Matt hadn’t been willing to take it away from her. He doesn’t let her play with it very often, the squeaking sound puts him on edge, but it’s not so bad if they’re outside where the noise isn’t trapped in a small space.)

Aelfhun had come out by themself not long after, immediately rushing to tackle Grace, only to have Grace jump straight into the air above them before they collided, then turn and tackle Aelfhun instead. (Matt can never quite tell what gender or form the shapeshifter has taken unless someone tells him, because Aelfhun usually takes the appearance of one of a number of similar dog breeds. He can, however, tell that it’s Aelfhun and not a random other dog.
because there’s some kind of weird energy that comes off the shapeshifter that confuses Matt’s senses a little.)

Other dogs and handlers arrived at random intervals, and groups slowly started to form, handlers and dogs settling into different activities. Matt distinguishes between handlers easily, each of them with a distinctive enough smell, voice, and body mass that it isn’t a problem. He tracks the dogs the same way, though on occasion he confuses some of the more similar dogs.

Matt listens to Fubar (it takes him a moment to confirm that it’s Fubar, not Athanasia) and Sable wrestling in the snow, and barely contains a snort of laughter when Fubar pins Sable down, only for Sable to kick her paws up and send Fubar flying with an undignified squeak.

Valor (too small to be Harvey) apparently catches the interaction, because he runs over and tackles Sable, Fubar following seconds behind. Matt's momentarily concerned that this will scare Sable, but then he hears all three dogs’ tails swishing through the air and snow, and Sable’s heart rate hasn’t spiked noticeably, so he decides that they’re probably fine.

Matt lets his senses wander, picking up snippets of conversation in between paying attention to the different dogs’ actions. He’s tracking Grace and Harvey, who have taken the frisbee Luke had brought and broken it in half trying to take it from each other, when someone taps his shoulder.

Matt turns, picking up on the whir of mechanics as he does. “Nebula, hey. What’s up?”

“Stephen and I are trying to make a small snow house, but it keeps collapsing. We thought you might be able to figure out how to keep it upright?”

Matt nods. “Yeah, that’s no problem. Are you making an igloo, like a circular house, or are you making a literal small house, like a square one?”

“A square one.”

“Okay. Lead the way.”
Frank was the last to arrive, and he looked like he was in a bad mood, so Rhodey intercepted him almost immediately, calling him over from where he’s sitting on the bench closest to the gate. With all the snow, using his wheelchair would have been a hell and a half, but today is also one of his worse pain days, so he’d ended up putting Valor’s harness on just so he could make it into the park, and he’d taken it off once he’d sat down.

Frank comes over to join him, grumbling as he sits down. “People on the road are fucking idiots. Seriously, I don’t care how deep the snow is, it’s not that hard not to spin out onto the fucking sidewalk.”

Rhodey shrugs, watching as Araneus, Verity, and Athanasia run around the park together, alternating between wrestling with each other and antagonizing the other dogs in the park. “Well, they say New Yorkers are stubborn, they never said we were reasonable.”

“Don’t I know it,” Frank agrees with a sigh. “So, any fun new weapons in the military world? I mean, you are only Air Force, but still.”

Rhodey turns to glare at Frank, who’s now grinning at him. “Fuck you and your Marines bullshit. Yeah, we’ve got some cool new things. Weapons you could only dream off.”

Lapushka is wandering the park as if she’s searching for something, probably Lucky, Rhodey figures, because if they’re not near each other they’re usually hiding from each other. In a sudden spray of snow, Lucky leaps out of the snow in front of Lapushka, causing the other dog to stumble back with an expression on her face that Rhodey can only describe as scandalized.

“Well, it ain’t easy trying to get high-grade weapons as a civilian, especially as a vigilante.”

“Can’t say I relate, but maybe I can get you a chance to check out some of our higher grade weapons on base, if you want. As long as you don’t steal anything.”

Rhodey watches Whiskey reach down into the snow, pulling out what might be a large snowball with legs, but is probably Sparkles.

“No promises.”
Loki finds himself talking to T’Challa, switching off throwing the tennis ball for Ubunye and Aelfhun’s game of competitive fetch.

“Do you ever get tired of having to explain things to them? From what I’ve seen, your country’s technology is far beyond the scope of anything any other country has come up with,” Loki says, throwing the tennis ball almost to the other end of the park.

T’Challa shrugs. “Sometimes. I’m at least glad that they’re willing to learn. I had worried that Stark would be intimidated by the sheer amount that he did not understand, but he has actually been incredibly interested rather than offended.” Ubunye reaches the tennis ball first, running back to them in panther form and giving the ball to T’Challa, who throws it.

“Agreed. I assumed Stark would resent his lack of knowledge about Yggdrasil and the power and energy from it, but instead he just asked me to explain everything, and even stopped me a few times to have me slow down, or elaborate more on specific terms.”

Ubunye retrieves the ball again, handing it back to T’Challa, who throws it again. T’Challa looks like he’s going to respond, but then Aelfhun suddenly transforms into a cheetah, catching the tennis ball just before Ubunye reaches it, and Loki splutters.

“Aelfhun! I’m sorry,” he starts, only to find T’Challa smothering a laugh beside him.

“Well, he chose an appropriate species,” T’Challa says, a mischievous glint in his eyes. T’Challa’s phone whistles, and T’Challa checks it, sighing. “I must go. Being a king has its downsides. We’ll talk again sometime?”

Loki nods. “Yeah, absolutely.”

T’Challa leaves, and Loki spends a moment watching as Aelfhun transforms back into a Greyhound, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re the worst,” he tells Aelfhun as the shapeshifter wanders off. Just as Loki turns to go find someone else to talk to, a large clump of snow comes flying towards him, slamming into his face and dropping Loki on his back in the snow.

There’s a set of whoops and cheers, and Peter’s voice shouting “It wasn’t me! I blame Thor!”
Loki just lays on the ground, resigned to his fate, and stares up at the grey, cloudy sky. He hates them all. He really, really does.
When they reached December, Bucky expected the tower to become one giant Christmas decoration, because it just seemed like the kind of thing Tony would do, and he was right; it only took until December 4th for Christmas trees, wreaths, lights, and other decorations to start lining the halls and filling the rooms on the communal floor.

What Bucky hadn't expected, however, was to wake up December 23rd and find a menorah on a small table outside his bedroom door, the shamash and first candle apparently lit the night before, and a small box in front of the menorah with “To: Bucky” printed on a small sticker on the top. Bucky picks up the box, ripping the paper off and opening it.

Inside is a pile of gold foil covered chocolate coins, presumably meant to be gelt. When Bucky removes all the chocolate gelt, he discovers another, even smaller box buried underneath, that he opens to reveal a miniature dreidel. The dreidel is blue and white, the letters on the sides embossed in silver. Bucky turns it over in his hand, trying to figure out who would have left this here. He figures it was probably Steve, but then Steve’s bedroom door opens, and Steve looks over, frowning.

“I didn’t realize you still celebrated Hanukkah,” Steve says, and now Bucky’s really, really confused.

“I… don’t? I mean, I still believe, but I don’t really practice my faith, not anymore. I thought this was you.” Bucky gestures at the table, and Steve shakes his head.

“No, I kept meaning to ask you, but I guess I just forgot, too caught up in everything lately. But if it wasn’t us, who set that up?”

Bucky wishes he knew the answer to that question.

Bucky tries to figure out on his own who would be the most likely to find out Bucky’s religion, and who would put in the time and effort to actually set up a menorah for him, but by the end of the day Bucky still isn’t really sure. It could be any of them, really. Maybe not Rhodey or Thor, he just can’t picture either of them knowing, but Tony, Clint, and Natasha are all likely options. Could be Loki, or even Sam, maybe even Bruce, but Bucky is more doubtful about those three.
Regardless, when Bucky goes back to his and Steve's floor later that night, he finds a box of new Chanukah candles under the table, and he replaces the first, melted-down candle with a new one and adds the second candle. Fubar watches him, sniffing the candles and the table curiously.

He repeats the blessing quietly: *Ba-ruch A-tah Ado-nai E-lo-he-nu Me-lech ha-olam a-sher ki-de-sha-nu be-mitz-vo-tav ve-tzi-va-nu le-had-lik ner Cha-nu-kah. Ba-ruch A-tah Ado-nai E-lo-he-nu Me-lech Ha-olam she-a-sa ni-sim la-avo-te-nu ba-ya-mim ha-hem bi-zman ha-zeh.* (Blessed are You, Lord our G‑d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light. Blessed are You, Lord our G‑d, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers in those days, at this time.)

Bucky lights the two candles with the shamash candle, watching the light for a moment before going to bed, Fubar trotting happily at his side.

When Bucky wakes up the next morning, there’s a new package on the table, this one slightly larger than the last, another “To: Bucky” label taped to it. He opens it, and finds another pile of chocolate gelt inside, dumping it out on the bed. Fubar gives the chocolate a quick sniff, then turns to pick up the discarded wrapping paper, dropping it in the trash while Bucky opens the next box.

Inside the second box is a bracelet, braided leather with an engraved metal plate that reads “יקאב סנראב” or “Bucky Barnes” in Hebrew. Bucky stares at the bracelet for a moment, speechless, and then slides it over his flesh hand, where it fits perfectly on his wrist. Bucky thinks about it for a moment. It could only be Natasha, Clint, or Tony, because they’re the only ones who could determine his wrist size with such accuracy without needing to measure his wrist first.

It’s probably not Clint, because this would be outside Clint’s comfort zone in terms of gift giving, and it’s probably not Natasha, because she would have gone for something slimmer and sleeker, a thin metal chain rather than braided leather. That leaves Tony, which is simultaneously shocking and not surprising in the slightest.

Bucky is surprised because he’s not sure how Tony found out that he’s Jewish, he thought Tony probably still secretly hated him, he’s amazed Tony hasn’t already tried to ask whether he liked the gifts or not, and so far Tony hasn’t tried to do anything particularly ridiculous as a gift. On the other hand, Bucky probably should have expected this.

Tony has the kind of personality (and trauma history, for that matter) that makes him want to please
everyone, Tony seems to be capable of finding out anything he wants to know, including the beliefs of his teammates, he’s actually far more likely to personally make gifts for people (usually some kind of technology) than to buy impersonal ones, and he does seem to try and only get people things he thinks they’ll like, like the teas he buys for Natasha every Christmas.

Still, the fact that Tony did all of this just for Bucky makes Bucky feel a little overwhelmed and... loved. That even after everything, Tony cares enough about him to try and respect his religious beliefs and holidays.

So when Bucky goes up to the communal floor to make breakfast, he waits until Tony comes in to grab coffee to say something.

“Hey, Stark,” he says, as casually as he can manage, “Can you stick around after breakfast? I wanna talk to you about something.”

Tony stiffens almost imperceptibly, but nods.

When breakfast is finished and everyone else has left to go do whatever it is they’re doing this morning, Bucky heads into the kitchen to wash dishes, and Tony follows him, taking over to dry the dishes that Bucky hands him.

“You put a menorah outside my room,” Bucky says after a few moments of the sound of dishes clinking in the sink, and Tony nods.

“Yeah, I did. Was that okay? Sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep or anything, I just figured, with all the Christmas stuff, it didn’t seem fair to just not acknowledge your holiday, too, but I also didn’t know how you felt about anyone else knowing, so I figured just having it by your room was enough? And I read online that they usually put the menorah by doorways, so I thought maybe that was close enough? And--”

“Tony, it's fine,” Bucky interrupts. “Actually, I really appreciate it. I don’t really actively practice Judaism, anymore, but I still believe. I just don’t really bring it up because, well, let’s be honest, there’s some strong anti-semitic ideas in this country nowadays, and it just never seemed very important, with everything else going on. It was a little surprising, at first, to see that outside my door, but it’s comforting, too. So thank you.”

Tony opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, then seems to decide against it, nodding
silently instead and taking the plate Bucky hands him to dry.

After a few minutes, Tony speaks. “So, Christmas is tomorrow. Are you okay with receiving Christmas presents, too? And, I don’t know, did you want to move the menorah up here instead? I wouldn’t mind lighting it with you, if you wanted, and I’m pretty sure everyone else would be happy to stick around, too.”

Both questions take Bucky by surprise, and he takes a second to recover before answering. “Yeah, Christmas presents are also fine. And yeah, that would. That would be really nice.”

Tony and Steve move the table from outside Bucky’s door to the doorway from the hallway into the living room on the communal floor, across from the Christmas tree in the corner that has presents stacked all around it.

Bucky can’t quite get rid off the tight feeling in his chest that he would normally associate with panic, but that he currently identifies as gratitude. He never thought he would reach a point in his life where anyone besides just Steve would care this much about him, especially after the Soldier, and now he not only has Steve back, but even the one person that he probably hurt the most cares enough about him to learn about his religion.

Despite his best efforts, Bucky can’t help but get a little choked up while lighting the candles that evening when he hears Tony, Steve, and Natasha all reciting the blessings with him, albeit in varyingly bad accents.

This time, Tony hands him his gift in person, once again in a slightly larger box. Under the chocolate gelt is a single, perfect plum. Bucky’s torn between laughing and flipping Tony off. He does both, and everyone else looks very confused, but Bucky can’t find the motivation to explain when he has a perfectly good plum to eat.

The next morning, Bucky makes his way up to the communal floor to make breakfast, only to find Natasha and Clint already there, making pancakes side by side. They look up when Bucky comes in, Fubar trotting at his side.

“Morning! Merry Christmas, and Happy Hanukkah! Well, again,” Clint says, and Natasha flicks
“Come help us make pancakes, we’ve got a lot of people coming over to open presents this morning, because Tony apparently decided it was important to invite everyone and their dog, literally,” Natasha says, and Bucky wanders over to look at what they’ve made so far.

“Hmm, you’ve got some good ones here, but a few of these are kind of burnt,” he says, and Clint whines.

“Hey, I’m Deaf! How was I supposed to know it was burning!”

“You’re Deaf, Clint, your eyes and nose work just fine.”

“I hate you.”

“Likewise. Move over.”

Christmas present opening is a hectic affair; it takes a while to get the right presents to the right people, and then there’s heroes, dogs, and wrapping paper covering every available surface as people unwrap their gifts.

Some of the gifts are ones Bucky had expected people to get; Tony gets Natasha a new set of different teas and Jessica two different bottles of whiskey, Rhodey gets Peter a shirt that reads “Never Trust An Atom, They Make Up Everything,” and Natasha gets Clint a tag for Lucky’s collar that reads “Lucky” fingerspelled in ASL and Steve a sketchbook and a glass “swear jar.” (Steve glares at her when he unwraps it, reaching into his pocket and putting a dollar inside without breaking eye contact. “You didn’t even swear,” Clint says, confused, and Steve, still not breaking eye contact, says “You can’t hear my thoughts.”)

Other gifts were more unexpected; Natasha gets Jessica three different bags of candy, Peter gets Bruce an adult coloring book titled “Calm the F*ck Down,” and Clint gets Frank a potted plant. (“I named it Cerberus,” Clint tells him, “but you can rename it, I don’t think it will mind. It’s a succulent, so you shouldn’t be able to kill it unless you’re intentionally trying to.”)
There’s more gifts going around than Bucky can keep track of, and he’s a little too preoccupied with his own gifts anyway. He’s got quite the pile; a cookbook from Frank, with a few handwritten recipes written on a folded piece of paper in the front cover, a book on ASL from Clint, because Bucky had talked to him about wanting to learn the language, and a new deep dish pizza pan, also from Clint (subtle, really).

A leather jacket from Jessica with the left sleeve crudely cut off (asshole, Bucky thinks, rolling his eyes. Though to be fair, he got her seven different stress balls, so they’re probably even), a set of multicolored hair ties, ribbons, and scrunchies from Loki, because they’ve both complained about their long hair getting in the way more than once, and a stack of origami paper from Danny, because Bucky’s been trying to learn how to do origami as a way to pass time and calm down after therapy sessions.

A book titled “The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F*ck” from Sam, a 1,000 piece dog puzzle from Bruce, a “Cute Cats Farting” coloring book from Peter, that Bucky just… doesn’t even know how he’s supposed to feel about, an emperor penguin and chick plush with an adoption certificate and species fact card from Natasha, a box of homemade Asgardian candy from Thor, and a blanket with sleeves and an attached note from Rhodey that says “figured the metal arm is cold in the winter, this might help keep you warm.”

A jumbo, squishy, foam yellow ducky from Wade that Bucky finds strange but oddly endearing, a button Bucky can pin onto his shirt that reads “Please Don’t Touch Me, I Don’t Like It” from Nebula, a service dog patch from Luke that reads “Chief Medical Officer” with the Star Trek insignia, because Bucky had mentioned that he liked the show, and a box of plum-related things from Matt, including two scented candles, a jar of plum jam, and a plum scented soap, all of which confuses Bucky until he realizes that Matt can probably smell the plum scented shampoo he uses, which would be weird if Bucky didn’t already live in the same building as two fucking Norse gods.

It’s the last two gifts, however, that really tug at Bucky’s heartstrings. The first is from Tony, a box the size of a mini fridge that Bucky opens to reveal a large, weighted, navy blue hoodie that Bucky pulls on and finds fits perfectly, followed by a soft cotton navy blue weighted lap pad and, underneath that, a massive weighted blanket in a navy blue chenille material, big enough to fit Bucky’s king size bed (because Tony doesn’t do anything by halves). Bucky runs his fingers over the soft material, looking up at Tony, who walks over with a questioning look on his face after only a few seconds of Bucky staring at him.

“Thank you,” Bucky says, gesturing at the box, and the corners of Tony’s mouth turn up into the tiniest smile.

“I figured, with Hanukkah, it’s not really traditional to give gifts besides gelt, but I still wanted you to have these, so. I’m really glad you didn’t mind celebrating Christmas, too, otherwise I would have had to find a way to give these to you without being awkward about it.”
Bucky laughs. “Yeah, you would have been awkward about it, too.”

“Rude! And after I just gave you such nice gifts,” Tony says, pouting like a child, which only makes Bucky laugh more.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. But seriously, Tony, thank you.”

Tony nods. “You’re welcome. It’s the least I could do, really.”

Tony walks away before Bucky has a chance to say anything, so Bucky turns back to his next, and last, gift instead, his gift from Steve.

It’s a small, square package, and Bucky tears the paper off gently, because it looks like it might rip if he isn’t careful. He’s right; the paper peels away to reveal a small photo album with a wood cover, the front cover decorated with Steve’s careful art. There’s a picture in the center of the front cover, a picture of Bucky and Steve during the war, standing side by side with their arms around each other’s shoulders.

On either side of the picture, Steve’s drawn some detailed flowers and vines, and above and below the photo, in Steve’s neat scrawl, are the words “Bucky: I’m With You To The End Of The Line.”

Bucky flips through the album, which is filled with pictures in chronological order from childhood until now, some of just Bucky, some of just Steve, but most with them together, from the day they met when Bucky dragged Steve out of a fight he was clearly losing (“I had him on the ropes!” Steve had protested, and Bucky had rolled his eyes, using the sleeve of his jacket to wipe the blood off of Steve’s face where the cut above his eye was still bleeding a little. “Sure you did, you wore him down for me,”) to the picture Clint had gotten of them the other day, sitting on the couch side by side with the dogs at their feet, laughing at some stupid joke Steve had made about the movie they were watching.

Bucky can’t help getting a little choked up, and he stands, rushing over to Steve and wrapping him up in a hug before Steve can even get a word out, knocking the wind out of him with the force of the hug.

“Oof,” Steve manages, “I guess you opened your gift, then?”
“I did, you sappy punk,” Bucky mumbles into Steve’s shoulder, and Steve finally reaches up, hugging Bucky back.

“Jerk.”

Later that night, when everyone else has gone home, the people that are still living in the tower gather back on the communal floor as Bucky repeats the blessings and lights the four candles on the menorah. Tony hands him another box. This one has a blue and white striped tie at the bottom of the box under the chocolate gelt, and Bucky takes that back to his floor along with all of his other gifts from the day.

The next four days mean four more nights of the team joining Bucky to light the menorah, and four more gifts from Tony: a spatula with the word “latkes” on it, a Star of David cookie cutter (and yeah, Bucky’s starting to notice a cooking and baking theme in a lot of his gifts, but he’s okay with that, he’s just glad that everyone at least likes his food), a snow globe with a menorah inside, and a “Mensch on a Bench” Dreidel Dog, a white stuffed animal dog with a blue dreidel pattern on it and a blue dreidel shaped patch over one eye that makes Bucky happier than it probably has any right to.

When everyone’s started to head to the elevator to go to bed, Bucky stops Tony before he can leave. “Thank you,” he says, and Tony turns to look at him, grinning.

“Of course! I’m glad you liked the dog,” Tony says, and Bucky shakes his head.

“No, not just that. I meant, thank you for doing this. All of this. You didn’t have to check what my religion was. You didn’t have to go out of your way to accommodate that. You didn’t have to put in the time and effort to learn the traditions, and set up a menorah, and get gelt, and learn the blessings so you could say them with me. You didn’t have to do any of that, but you did it anyway, and that means a lot to me. Thank you.”

Tony looks momentarily speechless, but he shakes it off quickly. “You’re important, Barnes. You deserve people that care enough to make sure that you’re never excluded from something for no reason.”
“Can I hug you?” Bucky asks the question before he can overthink it, and he’s about to retract the statement when Tony hugs him, pulls him in tight and hugs him in a grip that’s stronger than Bucky would have expected, what with Tony’s height, but then again, Tony’s a mechanic and a superhero, Bucky’s not sure why he’s surprised.

He hugs back, and then both men let go, stepping away. Bucky’s a little unsure of what to say at this point, he still doesn’t really hug many people besides Steve, so this is kind of weird, but Tony saves him from having to worry about it.

“You matter, Bucky. Just, hold on to that thought, okay? But also, hold onto the thought that I love your blueberry pancakes. Hold on to that until morning, because I’d really love some of those?”

Bucky laughs. “Yeah, I can do that. Good night, Tony.”

“Good night, Bucky. And happy Hanukkah.”

“Happy Hanukkah.” Bucky goes to bed feeling more cared about than he has in a long while, one arm around his new Dreidel Dog and the other resting over Fubar’s chest. Bucky drifts off, falling asleep listening to Fubar snore.
They Learned What?

While Natasha explains to each handler what she’s taught to their service dog, she also has a few neat little things she’s taught to some of the dogs, her version of failsafes based on what she thinks is important. The first people to discover this are Steve and Tony.

Steve and Tony are trying to decide on lunch, and in the process they get into a mock argument over which is better, Italian or Irish food.

Steve jokingly gets into Tony’s space, glaring at him. “How dare you insult my mama’s cooking,” he says, and Tony’s grinning, about to say something back when a yellow blur flies across the room, slamming into Steve and knocking him to the ground.

Steve splutters, trying to sit up only to have Verity jump on his chest, keeping him down.

“Whoa, Verity, it’s okay! I was joking! I thought Nat and I taught you the difference between serious and joking,” he says, frowning, and he looks up to see Diva blocking between him and Tony, giving Steve what can only be described as a doggy glare.

Tony’s eyebrows furrow, and he looks between Verity and Diva, frowning. “Seriously, kids, we were joking, what’s going on?”

As if appearing from thin air, Natasha walks by, a plate of Sam’s chocolate chip cookies in one hand and a cup of hot chocolate in the other.

“Oh, I taught them that. Good job, Verity, Diva,” Natasha praises, and when Steve and Tony turn to stare at her, she shrugs.

“What? We've gotta keep the man in the can safe.” She winks at Tony, and then she’s gone, walking away and taking the elevator back to her personal floor.

Tony clears his throat, turning back to Steve. “Okay, that was weird. She’s terrifying, right? It’s not just me?”
Steve shakes his head. “No, it’s not just you. So, uh. Why don’t we order both Italian and Irish food?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Bruce is the next person to discover one of the dogs’ secret tasks. He’s working in the lab, analyzing samples when his hand slips and he cuts his finger on one of the glass microscope slides.

He hisses, dropping the slide, and quickly grabs a cloth from nearby, wrapping his finger in it. He walks over to the sink, cleaning the cut and bandaging it, before heading back over to clean up the mess.

He finds Smash standing in the way, and she refuses to move, even when he asks her to. He stares at her for a minute, trying to figure out what’s wrong, when he notices a drop of blood on the floor, directly below her, and he smiles sadly.

“Yeah, Natasha taught you that, huh? Good girl, Smash. Hold on, I’ll clean that up.” He holds out the paper towel he’s holding for her to sniff, then reaches down, wiping up the blood and then using a disinfecting wipe to clean the floor completely. As soon as he’s done, Smash steps out of the way, dropping back down to lay beside the table Bruce was working at.

“Alright. Let’s get back to work.”

Sam’s feeling fine during one of his group therapy sessions, so he’s kind of surprised when Ava nudges him, and he looks down, watching as Ava wanders over to one of the other men in the room, gently nudging the man’s knee, then walking back over to Sam, nudging his side again.

Sam watches her, scratching her behind the ears, and he waits until the end of the therapy session to pull the man she had nudged, Andrew, aside.

“Hey, how are you doing, man?” Sam asks, and Andrew shrugs.
“Not great? I mean, it probably shouldn’t be a big deal, but. Well, the nightmares are getting worse, and I just can’t seem to shake them, you know?”

Sam nods. “Yeah, I know what you mean. What we can’t deal with when we’re awake, our brains try to deal with when we’re asleep. Doesn’t make it any easier, though.” Sam pauses. “Have you ever thought of getting a service dog?”

Andrew fidgets a little, not quite making eye contact. “I looked into it not long after I got home, but I don’t know. What if I hurt them? What if I couldn’t take care of them?”

“You’d do just fine, Andrew. I’ve seen you, in here. You care about everyone you meet, every time you look at Ava you smile just a little, and even when you’re upset you seem more upset with yourself than anyone else. Listen, try applying to some organizations. I can give you a list of reputable ones. If they think you wouldn’t be suitable as a handler, they’ll let you know. Otherwise, trust them. This could be really helpful for you.”

Andrew nods. “Okay. Yeah, okay. Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem. I’ll see you next week?”

“Yeah, see you next week.”

When Sam gets back to his car, he texts Natasha.

Sam: I thought you taught Ava not to approach people in my therapy groups?

Natasha: Mostly. I did train her an exception to that rule. Did you talk to the person she nudged?

Sam: Yeah. He’s having a pretty rough time. I did my best to help.

Natasha: Good. That command is called “outreach,” by the way. Just a way for her to help you do your job right :)
Sam: Uh-huh. First of all, rude? Second, thank you.

Natasha: You’re welcome. Come by the tower soon, we miss you :(

Sam: You don’t miss me, you miss my cookies.

Natasha: Same thing. Thanks!

Sam: I didn’t even say yes yet?

Natasha: You didn’t have to.

Sam rolls his eyes, but he puts the phone back in his pocket, starting the car and driving home with a quick stop at the store first, because he knows Natasha’s going to want his white chocolate raspberry cheesecake cookies. She didn’t have to say anything, either.

Clint’s doing some target practice in the shooting range Tony had designed specifically for him (a room with a learning AI that could direct targets around the room to make it more challenging for Clint, because he never misses and Tony really, really wants to put that theory to the test) when he discovers Lucky’s trick.

He’s just emptied a quiver of arrows, and he sighs from where he’s crouched on his perch, one of the overhangs built into the wall specifically so Clint could sit on them. “And now for my favorite part of practice, gathering all my arrows again,” he grumbles to himself, but he hasn’t even taken one foot off of his perch when Lucky wanders up, holding an arrow in his mouth.

Clint takes the arrow, head tilting to the side as he watches Lucky move around the room, gathering Clint’s arrows and bringing them back to him.

“JARVIS, can you video call Nat for me please? Using the camera for this room in general?”
“Of course, Mr. Barton.”

A hologram video of Natasha pops up in front of Clint. “What’s up?” she asks, and Clint points over at Lucky.

“Did you train him to do that?”

Natasha watches for a moment, then a grin slowly spreads across her face, and she nods. “Yeah. I call it ‘taking the arrows to Legolas.’”

Clint can’t help it, he laughs. “Okay, that’s fair. If you tell Tony, I’m shooting you though.”

Natasha’s eyes go dark so fast that Clint shivers. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“That’s true, you scare the shit out of me, Tasha.”

Natasha’s eyes brighten up again. “As it should be. Happy shooting, Katniss.”

On one particularly frustrating occasion, Stephen finds himself needing to look into the future at possible outcomes for a situation, and he sits down on the floor of his bedroom and closes his eyes, taking some deep breaths and focusing his mind. He calls on the time stone, and starts to look forward into all the possible futures.

It’s overwhelming; he’s only ever done this once before, and it wasn’t a particularly fun event last time, either, but at this point he can’t see another option for the situation. He watches millions of outcomes play out, some almost exactly the same, others so drastically different that it’s almost hard to conceptualize.

He reaches the end of all the possible outcomes, 10,300,075, and then tries to reach back for the current reality, but he just... can’t find it. He’s gotten so bogged down with the possibilities, that he’s lost track of the actual, present day reality.
The millions of possibilities start to flood his senses, jumbled and confusing and overwhelming, and Stephen’s starting to wonder how long this can possible continue for when something slams into his body, and he’s thrown back into reality, the time stone shutting as Stephen’s brain disconnects from its power, trying to get his bearings.

He’s flat on his back on the carpet in his bedroom, and Thelonious is standing over him, licking his face. Stephen’s not sure whether to be grateful that he’s back in reality or disgusted that his face is being licked by a dog. He decides to be disgusted, pushing Thelonious off.

“Gross,” he tells the dog, but Thelonious is still looking at him like he puts the stars in the sky (he doesn’t), and he gives up on being disgusted, settling for resigned. “Fine, well done. Thanks for getting me out of that. I’m guessing Romanoff taught you that.”

Thelonious wags his tail, and Stephen takes that as a good enough answer. He stumbles to his feet, using one hand resting lightly on Thelonious’s shoulders to steady him. “Okay. Let’s go eat something, and then we have work to do.”

After the situation has been handled, and turned out the way Stephen knows means it will resolve itself, he texts Natasha.

Stephen: You taught Thelonious to tackle me?

Natasha Romanoff: Yes. Tony said you had a weird freak out once, and he had to shake you to get you out of it. We call that command ‘hard reboot.’

Stephen rolls his eyes, because of course that’s what they would call it.

Stephen: Thank you. I think.

Natasha Romanoff: You’re welcome :D
The first time it happens, Bruce thinks it must be a fluke.

By the fourth time, however, he can’t deny that this is definitely something Natasha must have taught Smash. They’re not even in New York, they’re in Hong Kong, so there is literally no possible way Smash could have or would have done this if it wasn’t something Natasha had trained her to do.

He pulls on the pair of pants Smash brought him (always purple, the pants are always stretchy, purple sweatpants), and follows Smash back to the ship from where he’d woken up after the battle had ended and Smash had led Hulk away from the city, letting him change back to Bruce away from prying eyes.

When they reach the ship, everyone else is waiting for them, and they take off as soon as Bruce and Smash are safely on board.

“Did you teach Smash to bring me pants?” Bruce asks quietly, and Natasha smiles at him, handing him the headphones he usually uses when he’s changed back after missions.

“Yeah. That’s her ‘cover up’ task. I figured that we needed to do something so you don’t get arrested for public indecency,” she says, winking at him, and okay, yeah, Bruce kinda wishes he hadn’t asked, because Clint is barely containing his giggles, Tony is clearly laughing from his spot in the pilot’s seat, and Steve looks like he has second hand embarrassment. Still…

“Thanks, Nat,” he says, putting on the headphones, and she gives him a thumbs up just as the music starts to play.

Wade knows that Athanasia has a lot of tasks she’s learned, including a lot of practice with intelligent disobedience, but he wasn’t exactly expecting this trick that Natasha had apparently taught her.

He’s just minding his own business, walking down the sidewalk with Athanasia, when someone starts to yell insults at him from the other side of the street.

“Yo, you’re just like an off-brand Spider-Man, dude, and not even a good one! You should leave the vigilante stuff to people who actually know what they’re doing!”
Wade fucking hates people. Which, okay, that’s a lie, but right now this guy is making it hard for him to remember why he likes people. “I’m keeping your ass safe, maybe don’t be a dick about it!” Wade shouts back, and the guy just keeps walking down the street in the same direction as Wade, yelling insults at him.

“No one could love you and all of your bullshit, just get over it,” the guy yells, and you know what? No, that’s the last straw, Vanessa loved him, and that means something to him.

“Listen buddy--!” Wade starts, about to just run across the street and hit him, when the world spins and Wade suddenly finds himself staring up at the sky, 140 pounds of fluff laying on his chest and licking his face.

“Damn, Atha, move!” Wade grumbles, but she stays put, holding Wade down, and he sighs. Typical. Leave it to Natasha, or the fucking author, to just not let him do his own thing. He relaxes, takes some deep breaths, and Athanasia finally moves, standing beside him as he gets to his feet.

Wade turns around, walking down the sidewalk back the way they’d come from. “Fine, let’s go home.” He texts Natasha.

**Wade:** Seriously Nat? You made my dog pin me to the ground?

**Scary Momma Spider:** Yeah. It’s called ‘anchor.’ I’m proud of her. Give her treats from me.

**Wade:** You’re the worst.

**Scary Momma Spider:** Yes I am. But Athanasia’s not. Give her treats.

**Wade:** Fine.

Wade sighs, entering the warehouse he and Athanasia call home and closing the door behind him, walking over to one of the boxes in the room and tossing Athanasia a treat. He doesn’t like it, but she still did her job well, so she deserves treats for that. Still, fuck Natasha. And the author, fuck them too. Rude.
Fubar has a lot of cool talents, and Bucky’s sure he hasn’t discovered even half of them yet, but he learns one of them after a particularly bad flashback on the communal floor in the tower.

The flashback was one of the worse ones; taking out four SHIELD agents on a mission, and the mission had been compromised part way through, forcing him to take on all four agents at once in hand-to-hand combat. He’d succeeded, but he’d broken a few ribs in the process.

He comes back down from the flashback breathing heavily, reaching out for Fubar and blinking blearily when he doesn’t feel him anywhere nearby. As he adjusts to his surroundings again, reassuring himself that he’s in the tower, in the living room on the communal floor, he spots Fubar a few feet away, laying down with Bucky’s metal arm underneath him, and Bucky frowns, head tilted to the side.

“How did you get that off of me?” he asks Fubar, and he startles when a voice answers him.

“I taught him that,” Natasha says, and Bucky turns to find her sitting at the counter in the kitchen. She stands, carrying the cup of tea she was drinking and another cup that she hands to Bucky, which turns out to be raspberry tea, one of Bucky’s favorites.

“So, you taught Fubar to take my arm from me?” Bucky asks as Natasha settles down on the rug across from him, and she shrugs.

“If it seemed like you were no longer responding? Yes. I figured you’d feel better knowing that you couldn’t hurt people as easily when you’re having flashbacks. It’s something I’ve always worried about for myself, too.”

Bucky nods. “You’re right. Thanks, Nat.”

Natasha hums, taking a sip of her tea. “Do you want to talk about it? The flashback?”

Bucky thinks about it. “No, I’d rather drink tea and do something calmer. Can we play Scrabble?”
“In Russian, or English?” Natasha asks, and Bucky grins.

“Both. Do you accept the challenge?”

Natasha grins back at him. “Absolutely. Let’s do this.”

After Peter starts taking Araneus to school with him, he starts to get more and more relaxed at school, not worrying quite as much about his every move because he knows that Araneus has his back. This apparently comes with unfortunate side effects, which Peter discovers after Araneus knocks him over in the middle of P.E. class.

They’re running laps around the gym, and part way through, with no warning, Peter finds himself on his back on the floor, with Araneus licking his face.

“Everything alright, Parker?” Coach Wilson asks, and Peter sits up, waving a hand.

“I’m fine! Just tripped, sorry!” he gets back to his feet, going back to running around the gym, glancing at Araneus at his side in confusion.

Then it happens again a week later, and Peter’s starting to wonder if Araneus is catching some kind of symptom that Peter doesn’t realize he’s showing, so he texts Natasha.

**Peter:** hey Nat, Araneus is acting weird. he’s knocked me down twice in P.E. class now. any idea why?

It only takes a few minutes for the reply to come through.

**Natasha:** Yeah, I taught him that. You sometimes start walking or running on the wall instead of the floor without noticing when you’re feeling calm, didn’t want your classmates to learn your secret identity.
Peter reads the text, head tilted to the side while he thinks about it. Huh. He never realized that.

Peter: cool, thanks! i think? did you have to make him tackle me though???

Natasha: You’re welcome, and yes, yes I did. Get back to studying, nerd.

Peter sighs, but he tosses the phone onto his bed, working on his chemistry homework.

Steve learns another interesting command of Verity’s early one February morning, when a sudden blizzard leaves him and 59 other people trapped in a church with no power and no heat. They’ve scrounged up every last available blanket, coat, and piece of fabric they can find to help keep everyone warm, but it’s still not enough.

Families are gathered together under blankets for warmth, and Steve had elected to go without anything else at all, reassuring Father John that he’ll be fine, any effects from the cold won’t last long thanks to the serum, so it’s no big deal.

Father John had given him a strange look, but he hadn’t argued it, going to help the rest of the parishioners as best as possible. Steve helped as best he could, helping to rearrange the prayer candles around the room to make as much light as possible and helping to comfort and reassure everyone in the room, but when there was finally nothing left to do, Steve found himself curled up in one of the aisles, blowing on his hands and rubbing them together to try to keep them warm.

It wasn’t frostbite or pneumonia or even hypothermia that Steve was worried about, necessarily. He knew that the serum would kick those no problem. He just couldn’t stop thinking about the past, couldn’t help remembering the way he’d had to carry some of the soldiers under his command back to base in World War II, how they had died, sometimes because of bullet wounds, sometimes from hypothermia or pneumonia alone. He had brought their bodies back because he wanted their families to at least have their bodies, have their loved ones back even in death. He can’t shake the feeling that he should have done more, should have helped them before it got this bad.

Steve can’t shake the fear of those last few minutes in the Valkyrie, knowing he was going to die, knowing he was going to die cold and alone in the middle of the ocean. He remembers hitting the water, and there were a few cold, terrifying moments as the ship filled with water and sank, lower and lower, and he kept breathing in water, feeling like he was choking, and then he watched as
everything faded to black, and he wasn’t sure if it was because of the depth of the ocean around him or the lack of oxygen.

He’s pulled out of the memories as a weight presses down on him, moving around and jostling him side to side, and he finds Verity bouncing around in his lap, fidgeting and rubbing against his chest in this cat-like way, and Steve’s confused, because it’s like she’s-- it’s like she’s trying to keep him warm with her own body heat. Steve is left momentarily breathless, and then he wraps an arm around Verity, pulling her in and rubbing her belly, her back leg kicking Steve’s legs in response.

“Good girl, Verity. Good job,” he murmurs softly to her, burying his face in her fur and just taking a few deep breaths, steadying himself. “Good job.”

When the blizzard has passed and the church has finally been dug out of the snow, power restored and everyone heading home, Steve goes back to the tower, finding Natasha on the communal floor and pulling her aside from where the team (including Sam, Peter and May, and Jessica and friends) are sitting around sharing stories over hot chocolate and marshmallows that have been toasted over the stove.

They step out into the hallway, and Natasha looks confused.

“Everything okay?” she asks, and Steve nods.

“Better than okay, actually. You taught Verity to help me in the cold, didn’t you?”

Natasha smiles at him. “I figured with your past, that might be important. It made sense. Now, are you joining us for our group idiocy? Because there’s a mug of hot cocoa and a s’more with your name on it by the stove. Not literally, but still. Come join us, Steve.”

She walks away, and Steve sighs, following her. He’s not sure how he’s ever going to get her to stick around long enough to accept a compliment, but he’ll figure it out. That’s what friends are for.

Luke can’t figure out why Harvey keeps acting so weird. He ends up going to Jessica to complain about it, because she’s had Whiskey for longer than he’s had Harvey, so maybe there’s just something simple he’s missing.
“I don’t understand it,” he says, sitting across from Jessica on her bed, because she still hasn’t bothered investing in more than one couch, her bed, and the chairs at her desk. “He does so good most of the time, and then sometimes, during conversations, he just tries to push me away from the person I’m talking to.”

Jessica hums, taking a drink of whiskey. “Well, are there any patterns? Things you’re talking about, types of people you’re talking to?”

Luke thinks about it. “Actually, every single time it’s been a woman, and we’ve been talking about getting coffee sometime.”

Jessica spits out her mouthful of whiskey, laughing so hard that Luke’s a little worried that she might choke.

“What? Why are you laughing? What did you do?” he asks, and Jessica takes a few minutes to collect herself.

“I didn’t know she would actually do it, holy shit,” she gasps out between her laughter, and Luke frowns.  

“Jessica .”

Jessica sits up. “Alright, alright. I asked Natasha to teach Harvey to push you away from women if one of you mentioned coffee. We called it ‘cockblock.’ I didn’t think she would actually do it, but that’s funny as shit.”

Luke rolls his eyes. “Do you know how to stop him from doing that?”

“No? Ask Nat, she trained him, not me.”

Luke grabs his phone, texting Natasha.
Luke: Hi Nat, I’ve just found out about Harvey’s ‘cockblock.’ Can you train him to stop doing that?

Natasha: Yeah, that's easy. Come by the tower, I'll show you.

Luke stands, calling Harvey over. “Okay, I’m headed to the tower. I hate you, by the way.”

“No you don’t.”

“No, I don't. But I’m still mad. See you later, Jess.”


Rhodey doesn’t normally use a wheelchair, thanks to the prosthetics Tony’s made for him, but sometimes the prosthetics break down, or he’s having too much pain, or he needs to go out for a really long time and he’d just rather use a wheelchair. Today is one of those days, and while usually things are fine, he’s run into a problem.

He’s on one of the Air Force bases, in a meeting with some of the other Colonels, and he’d left for just a moment to use the restroom, only to find on his way out of the bathroom that the door button to get back out wasn’t working.

Valor presses the button once, twice, three times, but it doesn’t work. Rhodey wheels over to try it himself, but it’s not working, and there’s no one else in the bathroom and the cell service in here is shit, so Rhodey’s stuck.

He sighs, leaning back in his wheelchair, resigning himself to just waiting for someone to show up, he’s too tired to care right now, when Valor starts whining, pawing at the bathroom door. Valor never does that, and it makes Rhodey jolt upright, watching the dog with concern.

“Valor, bud, do you need to go out?” he asks, and Valor glances back at him briefly before going back to scratching at the door.
“Damn it,” Rhodey mutters under his breath, wheeling up to the door and locking his brakes in. “Okay, bud, let’s give it a try. I’ll just open it, and then we’ll figure it out from there, I guess.”

Rhodey grabs the handle, pulling the door towards him, and he’s holding it open, trying to figure out what to do when Valor steps in front of him, nudging the door open further, so Rhodey lets go, watching as Valor pushes the door all the way open and stands with his side against it, keeping it open.

“Huh,” Rhodey says, watching Valor curiously, “What do you know? That's a neat trick.”

They head back to the meeting, but as soon as it’s over Rhodey texts Natasha.

Rhodey: Did you teach Valor to hold open manual doors?

Natasha: Yeah, figured accessible doors don’t always work properly. Guess I was right?

Rhodey: You were right, and you just saved my ass from being stuck in a bathroom for the next hour and a half. Thanks, Nat.

Natasha: Anytime :D

Jessica discovers the trick Whiskey had learned after an evening of nightmares and flashbacks had lead her to the nearest bar and as much cheap alcohol as she could afford. She’s tired, and very drunk, and very pissed off, because there’s a guy on the other side of the room catcalling her, and she’s going to fucking lose her shit, right here, right now.

She’s already had a bad day; she’d taken on a new case about a possible kidnapping and manipulation of a kid, mostly because the family had been turned down by at least three other P.I.s and they’re clearly worried, and Jessica felt bad turning them away.

However, with the new case comes old memories, and she’s been hallucinating Kilgrave all day,
his voice whispering in her ear, and she can’t seem to avoid him when she’s asleep, either, so she’d hoped that getting piss drunk would help, but the guy across the room isn’t making it any easier.

“Come on, sweetheart, just smile!” he calls, and that command, right there, ‘smile,’ is what breaks her.

She gets to her feet, storming across the room with her hands balled into fists at her sides. “You know, what, asshole?” she says, voice quickly building to a yell, “Say that one more time, and for the rest of your life your own smile is going to look pretty fucking miserable with your teeth missing!”

She’s two thirds of the way across the room when she crashes to the floor, face first, and she’s flipping over to see what tripped her, only to find Whiskey standing up from where the dog had dropped into a down right in front of Jessica’s feet.

By this point, the bartender has come around from behind the bar, standing between her and Potential Violent Assault Case #35.

“You need to leave,” the bartender says, and Jessica grumbles as she gets back to her feet.

“Fine, fuck you too. Whatever.”

She goes home and crashes on the couch, because she knows from experience that the hardwood floors in the office are much easier to clean vomit off of than the carpet in the bedroom.

It’s not until she sobers up later the next day that she fully processes exactly what Whiskey had done the night before, and she calls Natasha, who picks up on the second ring.

“Jess, what’s up?”

“Did you teach my dog to fucking trip me?” Jessica asks, and there’s the sound of fists hitting a punching bag on the other end of the line, heavy breathing and the creak of chains as the pounding sounds stop.
Natasha laughs between breaths. “Yeah, yeah I did. I call it ‘damage control.’ Did you like it?”

Jessica scowls, and she hopes Natasha can sense that through the phone. “No, I didn’t fucking like it, I’ve got a fucking bruise on my cheek and a headache.”

“But you don’t have your thirty-fifth lawsuit being filed against you, do you?” Natasha asks, and Jessica hates her for knowing that shit.

“Ugh. Whatever. Fine. Thanks a lot, Nat.”

“Love you too.”

Jessica hangs up, flopping back down on the couch as Whiskey wanders up, licking her hand and then heading for her food bowl.

Fine, it’s a helpful command. So what. Jessica will take that confession to the grave.

Tony learns a second trick of Diva’s when he’s at a Stark Industries gala, wandering around the room and trying to appease all of the guests as best he can. This is honestly one of Tony’s least favorite obligations, partially because he’s never been particularly comfortable at formal events, and mostly because he’s terrified of messing up, of causing someone to leave the event with a bad impression of the company that makes them stop supporting Stark Industries’ endeavors.

Tony’s been walking around for at least an hour now, and has been pulled into a group conversation with four of Stark Industries’ top financial supporters, where they’re all asking Tony question after question about his designs, the research and development department’s ideas, and the projected course for the company in the next few years, all of which are questions that technically, Tony isn’t supposed to be answering at all.

Tony, however, is answering their questions as much as he can without revealing too much, because he’s quite honestly panicking about having any of the people in this conversation back out of their support for the company, and if that means leaking a little of his and R&D’s designs, well, that’s probably just the cost of business, Tony supposes. He’ll just have to work extra hard to make even better designs that will blow any designs he’s explaining right now out of the water.
Tony’s only about five minutes into the conversation when Diva starts nudging at his hip, whining and shuffling his paws, and Tony frowns.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to get back to you, ladies and gentlemen, we need to step out for just a minute,” Tony says, leaving the conversation and taking Diva outside, stepping out into the cool night air and walking Diva down a back alley to give him a chance to pee, only to have Diva just stare calmly back at him.

“Really? We left, just so you could stare at me? What was that?” Tony asks, and Diva just looks back at him, wagging his tail. Tony sighs.

“Whatever. You know what, I want to go home. Can we go home? We were there long enough, right? Pepper can yell at me later.”

Tony walks Diva back to the front of the building, getting his car from the valet and heading home to the tower, stopping on the communal floor to see if anyone’s awake to talk to, because it’s still pretty early in the night and Tony’s bored.

Natasha is sitting on the couch in the living room, nursing a cup of tea and watching Queer Eye on Netflix. She pauses the show when Tony and Diva come in, smiling up at them.

“Welcome back, Tony. Hot chocolate?”

“Sure.” Tony follows Natasha into the kitchen, leaning on the counter while he watches her. “So, Diva started whining and got me to leave the gala, but he didn’t even need to pee or anything. Any idea why he might have done that?”

Natasha puts the mug of milk in the microwave, then turns to face him. “Yeah, I taught him that. You don’t always know when to leave a situation that’s not good for you. I call it ‘party’s over.’”

Tony groans. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you? I was dying of palladium poisoning, Nat, give me a break.”

“No, I’m never letting you live that down, you literally peed in your own suit, Tony.”
“It has a great filtration system!”

“I don’t care, Tony, it’s the principle of the thing.”

The first time Sable performs her secret trick, it confuses the hell out of Frank.

He’s curled up in bed, not willing to give enough shits to get out of bed and go do something, when Sable wanders up beside the bed, grabs his phone off the nightstand, and then takes off with it.

“Hey!” Frank shouts, and when Sable doesn’t come back, Frank gets out of bed, tosses on a pair of pants and a shirt and follows Sable, finding her standing just outside the front door (how the fuck did she open the door?) holding her leash in her mouth and with Frank’s phone on the ground in front of her.

Frank sighs. “Fine, we’re going on a walk. Let’s go.” He picks up his phone, tosses on a pair of shoes, and puts Sable’s leash on, following her as she leads him straight to the tower and its outdoor dog park. Frank takes off her collar and leash, letting her into the park and settling down on a bench, watching as Sable runs in circles in the park, making Frank smile.

He texts Natasha, asks if she and Lapushka want to join them, and they’re at the gates a few minutes later, Natasha walking over to join Frank on the bench while the dogs chase each other through the bushes in the back of the park.

“How’s it going?” Natasha asks, and Frank shrugs.

“I just wanted to sleep today, but Sable stole my phone, so I guess we were going on a walk.”

Natasha nods. “Good. I taught her that, by the way.”

“You what?”
“Yeah, well, depressive episodes only get worse if you just stay in bed. So I taught her to make you get out of bed, by any means necessary.”

Frank narrows his eyes. “What do you mean by ‘any means necessary?’ I need you to elaborate on that.”

Natasha shrugs. “You’ll see.”

Frank sighs. Sure, whatever. He didn’t need to know, anyway.

Thor learns Sparkles’ trick one day when the team is out having dinner, and someone decides to question whether Sparkles is actually a service dog or not, telling Thor to his face that Sparkles is just a pet, and he needs to leave her at home.

Thor tries to be calm, and the other Avengers try to help, but the person is adamant that Thor is faking Sparkles as a service dog, and he’s just started to stand up to confront (and probably fight) this person when, from under the table, Sparkles howls at full volume, and the room stops, Thor turning to stare at Sparkles in confusion.

“I don’t understand,” Thor says, and Natasha raises a hand.

“That would be me. I call it ‘battle cry,’ it’s her command to get your attention when you’re angry,” she explains. While she’s talking, the person who had originally questioned Thor slips away, using the distraction to leave before Thor does get around to fighting them.

Thor shakes his head. “That makes sense, but that’s not what I meant. She yelled ‘peanut butter.’ Of all things, why peanut butter?”

Most of the table breaks into fits of laughter. Even Natasha can barely hide a smile.

“Well, that may have been what I used to train her. Asking a dog to howl on command isn’t always easy.”
Clint is laughing so hard he’s actually crying. Loki’s barely doing any better.

Thor nods. “Well, she has performed admirably.” He sits back down, reaching down to pet Sparkles’ head before turning back to the group. “So, what were we talking about again?”

Matt isn’t even really aware of Grace’s trick until the day after it happens. He wakes up with a start, reaching around blindly (no pun intended) to try and get his bearings. A hand grabs his.

“It’s okay, Matt, relax. It’s Foggy. You’re at my house, Claire and I are here.” Matt stops, reaching out with his senses. He’s on Foggy’s couch, Foggy’s crouched beside him, Claire is in the kitchen behind the couch, and Grace is laying on the floor off to the side.

“Foggy? Why am I here?”

Foggy moves to sit on the couch, careful not to sit on Matt’s legs. “Well, apparently you were out Daredeviling last night and fell into a dumpster, hit your head pretty hard and got knocked unconscious. Besides a concussion and some cuts and bruises, no major wounds, but when Grace couldn’t get your attention, she apparently came and found me to help you. I texted Natasha, she called it the ‘Lassie’ trick.”

“That does sound like something Natasha would do. Anyway, if I’m fine, then why am I here?”

“Because you’re an idiot, and both Claire and I wanted to chew you out. When we’re done being mad at you, you can go home, but first we want to yell at you for being an idiot.”

Matt groans. He already doesn’t like this new trick of Grace’s.

Aelfhun’s skill turns out to be way more fun for Loki than he ever could have anticipated. They’re in a pretty bad situation, a mission gone wrong that has Loki, Thor, and Aelfhun trapped in a room with potentially dozens of enemies coming.
“What do we do?” Loki hisses, and Thor grins.

“Let’s do ‘get help.’”

“No! I am not doing that again, I hate it,” Loki says, glaring at Thor.

“Come on, we need to do something,” Thor argues, and before Loki can say anything, there’s a shimmer of light, and Aelfhun transforms into a tiger, jumping into Loki’s arms.

Loki and Thor both stare at Aelfhun in Loki’s arms for a minute, and then it dawns on Loki.

“Okay, let’s do ‘get help.’ Ready, Aelfhun? Thor, you’re going to open the door. One, two, three!”

“Get help!” Thor yanks the door open just as dozens of enemies approach the doorway, and Loki flings Aelfhun at them, Aelfhun roaring with his claws extended, tearing through enemies while Thor and Loki take out the stragglers.

When they get back to the tower, sweaty, covered in blood, and exhausted, Loki takes a shower, then heads up to talk to Natasha. He finds her in the gym, working on a punching bag.

“Nat,” he says from a distance, because say what you will about Natasha’s peripheral vision, Loki is not taking the chance of getting hit because Natasha didn’t realize he was there.

She stops, turning to look at him. “Yeah?”

“You taught Aelfhun ‘get help’?” he asks, and Natasha grins.

“I did. Did it work?”

“It worked perfectly, that was amazing. So, did you specifically teach them to turn into a tiger for that command?”
“What? No, but that’s good thinking. Give Aelfhun some extra treats for that.”

“I will. Thanks, Natasha.”

“You’re welcome.”

Danny’s talking to a man on the street about his role as the Iron Fist when he hears a voice behind him yell “Hey, buddy, are you gonna pay for that?” He turns and finds Dewei trotting towards him with a hot dog in his mouth, the street vendor he’d apparently gotten it from glaring at Danny.

“Sure, yeah, sorry about that. Why did you give him a hot dog, though?” Danny asks, walking over to pay the vendor, who shrugs.

“He had a service dog vest on. I assumed he was doing something you asked him to do.”

Danny guesses that’s fair. “Okay. Sorry about that. Here.” he hands the vendor a twenty dollar bill. “Thanks for the hot dog, and thanks for being so accepting of service dogs!”

Danny reaches down to take the hot dog from Dewei, walking away and eating it as he goes, even though he can’t figure out why Dewei did that.

A week later, Danny’s talking to a woman in the park about how different New York City is from K’un Lun, when he hears a “Oy, that dog just stole one of my pretzels!”

He turns, and Dewei is trotting away from another street vendor, carrying a pretzel in his mouth.

“Dewei!” Danny chastises, running over to the man’s cart. “Sorry about that, I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately. Here.” he hands the man a hundred dollar bill, following where Dewei has already started to walk away.
“Dude, what the hell?” Danny asks, taking the pretzel from Dewei, but the dog ignores him, continuing to walk, and Danny just sighs, munching on the pretzel in one hand and texting Natasha with the other.

**Danny:** hey nat, dewei is stealing food from ppl now. any idea y?

**Natasha (Black Widow):** Yeah, Colleen and I talked when I was training Dewei, and we taught him that. It’s called “Silence is Golden,” because according to Colleen (and Jessica) you don’t know when to shut up about K’un Lun and the Iron Fist shit.

**Danny:** y didn’t u just say something?! :( 

**Natasha (Black Widow):** Because this was funnier, lmao. Besides, you need to eat a lot anyway, right? With using all that chi? So really, we’re doing you a favor. Just have Dewei carry money too, or, even better, stop telling every stranger you meet about your bullshit. We’re New Yorkers, Danny, we don’t give a fuck.

**Danny:** rude :( but ok

Danny starts having Dewei carry money in a pocket on his vest that says “Money Here.” He has to refill the cash inside at least once a week, sometimes more, but he doesn’t really care. Besides, as it turns out, Dewei has good taste in food.

Nebula was already having a bad day before she saw the evening news with the rest of the heroes in the tower.

She’d had nightmares most of the night, and then she’d had this uncomfortable, restless feeling all morning and she’d gone on a walk with Quasar to try and get rid of it, but all she’d managed to do was make herself nervous and tired, and her body just hurt, everything hurt and no matter what she did she couldn’t seem to get the pain to go away.

She’d tried all her normal tricks; weighted blanket, cuddling with Quasar, laying down on the couch with her feet up against the wall and her head drooping down the front of the couch, recalibrating her prosthetics, even meditating, but nothing helped. So she’s already on edge when
the team is watching the news before Jeopardy and a news story about a trans woman is played.

“What should have been a fun night out turned into a 911 call when a group of women having a ‘Girl’s Night Out’ were interrupted by three men who attacked the trans woman in their group, authorities say,” the reporter says, and Nebula freezes, heart pounding in her chest.

And it’s stupid, Nebula thinks, because the story obviously isn’t about her, but she just keeps picturing all the people over the years who had hurt her when they’d realized who she was, what she was, and she panics, runs out of the room and into the hall before she can process what she’s doing.

Her prosthetics start to malfunction, popping in and out of place at random, and she tries to control them, but it seems like every time she’s gotten one back to normal another one messes up, and it’s too much to handle, she’s too tired for this--

Her train of thought is cut off when Quasar walks up, pushing another of Nebula’s prosthetics back into place with a satisfying click. As Nebula watches, Quasar starts to push at the different malfunctioning prosthetics with her nose, and Nebula quickly starts to help, doing the ones Quasar hasn’t gotten to yet.

When everything is back in order, Nebula scratches Quasar gently behind the ear, murmuring her thanks. She looks up when she hears footsteps approaching from the living room, and finds Natasha poking her head out into the hallway.

Nebula knows for a fact that Natasha is able to walk without making a sound, and tends to do so simply out of habit, so walking with heavy footsteps had been an intentional choice to give Nebula warning that she was approaching, and Nebula appreciates that.

“Everything alright?” Natasha asks, and Nebula nods, standing up.

“Yeah. Quasar was helping me with prosthetics issues.”

Natasha smiles. “Good, I was hoping she would do that. Tony and I worked together to train that. We called it ‘team rebuilding,’ a way for Quasar to quite literally help you get yourself together when you’re overwhelmed.”
“Thanks, Natasha.”

“No problem. Now come on, you’re going to miss Jeopardy, and no one would want to miss out on Tony and Rhodey proving their statuses as insufferable know-it-alls.”

Nebula rolls her eyes. “You’re right, it would be a damn shame to miss out on that,” she says dryly, but she follows Natasha anyway, because she loves this band of misfits, despite (and sometimes even because) of their massive egos.

Natasha has no problem making threats of violence against others, or describing in detail exactly what she thinks of some asshole’s unwelcome advance on her, but she does have a very hard time actually admitting to the things that hurt and trigger her.

There’s good reason for this; she’s been a spy her entire life, and you don’t survive as a spy by spreading personal information and weaknesses like gossip, but it does mean that, even though she actually has a trusting and caring support system now, she still sometimes bottles things up, cries about them in private and tries not to let it show.

Now is one of those times. She’s just come home after literal days of being on a mission, one where she’d had to resort to all of her old methods, all of her old techniques as a spy to get the information she needed. So she probably should have expected the way that when she comes home, the first thing her body does is lead her to her personal floor, into the bathroom and into the shower, curling up on the floor and finally letting go with a broken sob.

She can’t have been there for more than a minute or two when she nears nails click across the tile floor, and she sees Lapushka standing in front of her, Natasha’s current favorite box of tea in her mouth. Natasha laughs softly, taking the tea from Lapushka.

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. Let’s go,” Natasha says, standing up and walking out to the kitchen with Lapushka at her side.

She asks Tony about it in his workshop later, when she’s taken a shower and her head is finally clear enough from the mission that she can process what happened. Tony just grins at her. “It’s called ‘self care.’ It might be the only hidden talent Lapushka has. It might not be. You’ll never know.”
Natasha contemplates that for a minute. “So, you're still a little mad about the whole ‘Natalie Rushman’ thing then, I take it?”

Tony’s grin looks positively shark-like now. “Well, we all have our secrets, right?”

“Uh-huh. Thanks, I think?”

“You’re welcome. Now get out, I’m working on improved designs for your Widow Bites.”

Natasha doesn’t need to be told twice.

Shuri teaches Ubunye a new command behind T’Challa’s back, mostly because she thinks it’s funny but partially because T’Challa really needs to get his shit together and talk to Nakia about his feelings.

So the next time T’Challa runs into Nakia with Ubunye by his side, and he freezes up, struck by just how beautiful Nakia is, he finds Ubunye suddenly shoving him, head butting the back of his legs until he stumbles forward, crashing into Nakia.

“Uh, I’m sorry,” T’Challa says, regaining his balance and stepping away, but Nakia just laughs, pulls T’Challa into a hug.

“It’s fine. I think Ubunye’s trying to tell you something, and maybe you should listen to him.”

T’Challa nods, hugging Nakia back while he tries to steel his nerves. “You’re probably right. Nakia, would you like to go to dinner with me?”

He pulls away, and Nakia smiles. “I would be honored to do so.”

They make plans, and T’Challa walks away feeling better than he has in a while. When he tells Shuri what happened, Shuri doesn’t even bother trying to hide her excitement.
“Yes! I knew that was a good idea. Well done, Ubunye,” she says, walking over to one of the tables and tossing Ubunye a treat from a bag of them she has in the lab.

T’Challa’s confused. “What was a good idea?”

Shuri grins. “Teaching Ubunye to push you into Nakia if you freeze when you see her. I call it ‘antifreeze,’ and it worked!”

T’Challa rolls his eyes. “You’re the worst.”

“Hey, I got you a date!”

“You’re right, you did. But you’re still the worst.”

“Love you too, brother.”
When Carol comes back to Earth, the first thing she does is meet with Nick Fury. Well, at least, that was the plan.

What actually happens is Carol enters the building that Nick’s pager is in, which appears to be SHIELD headquarters, if the people in suits surrounding her with their guns drawn is any indication. Carol raises her hands in surrender.

“Don’t shoot, I’m just looking for Fury,” she says, and there’s a pause as the agents look around at one another. Carol frowns. “You know, Nick Fury?”

One of the agents steps forward. “Who are you?”

“Carol Danvers. Look, Fury can clear things up, can you just have him come out here?”

“Agents, if you don’t mind.”

“Director Fury.” The agents move aside, and Fury steps in front of Carol, eye looking her up and down, evaluating.

“Tell me something about yourself that only we would know,” he says. Good, he’s learned since the 90s.

“I was dressed for laser tag when we met. You?”
Fury’s expression doesn’t change, but his eye brightens a little. “I have three names. People call me Fury. If I ever have kids? They’ll call me Fury.”

Carol doesn’t bother keeping the smile off of her own face. “So, ‘Director Fury,’ huh? when did that happen?”

“A long time ago. Agents, we’re fine here.” The agents disperse, shooting glances over their shoulders at Carol and Fury, but either Fury doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. He turns, gesturing for Carol to follow him.

They enter what must be Fury’s office, and they sit on either side of his desk, Fury sitting down with a sigh. “So, Danvers, what are you doing here?”

“You haven’t used your pager, I finished what I was doing, and I wanted to come home. I was bored, and I wanted to know what you’ve been up to. Seriously, Fury, what have you been doing? It’s been, what, 20 years or something? Where’s Goose?”

“24 years. A lot’s happened since you left. Goose died 18 years ago. We’ve got a team of heroes now, that fight for Earth. They’re a mixed group, but they’re effective.”

Carol straightens up in her seat, because that’s new. “Really? Can I meet them? And what kind of heroes are you talking about, street level, or my level?”

Fury smiles. It’s a small smile, and Carol’s starting to wonder when Fury stopped smiling, but at least this is better than the unreadable expression he had earlier. “Maybe a little below your level. I think you’ll like them. If you fly to meet them, you might even make Stark so curious that he’ll forget to hit on you.”

So apparently some things haven’t changed on Earth. Good to know. “Where are they?”

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Carol lands just outside the tower, stepping into the lobby and looking around for anyone that might give her an idea of where in the tower she’s headed, but there isn’t even a desk, just a wide open space with elevators at the back of the room. She’s heading for the elevators when a voice comes from the ceiling.
“Pardon me, but I don’t have any information about you on file. Could you please identify yourself?”

Carol recognizes an AI when she hears one. She doesn’t bother looking around for the source of the voice. “Carol Danvers, friend of Nick Fury.”

A pause. “My apologies, Ms. Danvers. Are you looking to access the Avengers’ floors?”

Carol snorts. The ‘Avengers.’ Of course Fury named them after her. “Please.”

“May I ask, are you allergic to dogs?”

That’s a weird question. “No?”

Another pause. “The team has been informed of your arrival. Please enter the elevator to your right, Ms. Danvers.”

Carol steps into the indicated elevator, waiting as it takes her up dozens of floors a second. “Carol is fine. Who are you?”

“I am JARVIS, the personal AI of Mr. Stark.”

Carol nods. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, JARVIS.”

“Likewise, Carol.”

The elevator doors open, and Carol steps out, walking through the doorway into a living room filled with people, at least half of them either holding or resting their hands on weapons.

“So, am I guessing that you’re not huge fans of guests?” she asks, and one of the men at the front of the group, who looks surprisingly unarmed, steps forward.
“Well, yes and no. Guests that I know? Yes. Guests that apparently know Fury but who none of us have heard of before? Not really. Let’s just say we don’t like surprises.”

Carol smiles. “You’re definitely Fury’s team, then, he hated surprises too. Still does, apparently.” She looks around at the group. “You can draw your weapons all you want, I can’t exactly get rid of mine. I am a weapon. Photon blasts and all. Do you have any food? Maybe some good beer? I’ve missed home.”

The other man who was standing at the front of the group groans. “You already sound a lot like Tony, except you apparently get along with Fury. This is sounding more unbearable by the minute.”

The first man grins. “Oh yeah, this is going to be fun for me, and terrible for him. Tony Stark, Iron Man, at your service, and you are?”

“Carol Danvers, Captain Marvel.”

Tony laughs, elbowing the second man. “Oh no, Cap, you’ve got competition! For fuck’s sake, guys, put the weapons away, if she wanted to kill us by now, she already would have.”

“Now you’re catching on,” Carol compliments, and Tony beckons for her to follow him towards the kitchen.

“Here, I’ve got some decent beer in here somewhere, if that’s really what you want, but I’ve also got some of the best of every variety of alcohol, so just name your poison. Let’s see, you want pizza? We’ve got tons of weird shit in here, again, name it and it’s yours.”

Carol follows him, passing the mass of people still staring at her with their hands twitching at their weapons of choice. She’s dealt with worse, this is nothing. “Just beer, for now. What kind of pizza?”

She takes the cold pizza and beer Tony hands her, leaning with her hip against the counter while she eats. “Damn, that’s good beer. But I also haven’t been back on Earth in 24 years, according to Fury. Speaking of which, what year is it?”
“2019,” Tony supplies.

“Huh. Well, I’ve missed Earth. It’s still home. Like what you’ve done with the place so far though, the technology’s definitely better.”

“That would be thanks to me, mostly. So, photon blasts, you said? Is that anything like repulsors? Because I definitely have some questions about how I could make my suit a little more ‘bio’ and a little less ‘tech,’ if nothing else than for convenience of suiting up.”

“Are repulsors high-density projected energy beams that can vary intensity based on use, from just heat sealing something to burning holes through solid metals?”

“Yes!”

“Then yes.”

Tony leans forward on the counter, eyes wide and bright with curiosity. “Will you let me do tests on you? Sorry, that sounded shitty. Will you let me scan your biochemistry so I can try and figure out how your photon blasts work?”

Carol shrugs. “Sure. As long as you’re only going to use that information for helping people, not hurting them.”

Tony pulls down on the collar of his shirt until it lowers enough that Carol can see the glow of something on his chest. “I got a hole in my chest because I used to sell my designs to governments, companies. I don’t do that anymore. Everything I make is just for me and the team, and for keeping people safe, not war torn.”

“Then yeah.”

A voice comes from behind them. “Okay, you’re being nerds. Besides your inevitable love affair, what’s happening here? If you’re a friend of Fury’s, and you’ve been gone for 24 years, why come back now?”
Carol turns, and the man with the literal bow is walking towards the kitchen, frowning. “I came back to Earth because I’m done with what I had to do, and I missed home. Pretty sure I already mentioned that.”

The woman that had been standing beside bow-guy steps forward as well. “Sorry if we seem suspicious. Fury’s not exactly the kind of person that has friends.”

The guy Tony called ‘Cap’ nods. “He said the last time he trusted someone he lost an eye.”

Carol can’t help herself. She laughs, which only makes the group stare at her with even more confusion.

“Oh my god, that’s what he said? That overdramatic liar, I can’t believe this.” Carol’s wheezing, clutching her stomach.

There’s a flicker of surprise across the woman’s face. “Then what did happen?”

“He was messing with a cat -- well, a flerken -- named Goose, and it scratched his eye. Oh my god, and he had you all believing that he was some total badass! I’m definitely making fun of him for that, holy shit. Have none of you been around long enough to have met Goose?”

Bow-guy and the woman share a look. “No, but Coulson’s also never mentioned a cat?” bow-guy says.

“This is amazing. Wait, now that it doesn’t look any of you are going to stab, shoot, or smash me, what are all of your names?”

Tony starts pointing everyone out.

“Clint, Natasha, Steve, Bucky, Thor, Loki, Nebula, Rhodey, Bruce.”

Carol nods. “Nice to meet you all. So, what do each of you do? Like, what are you capable of? Because Fury said you’re all maybe close to my level of hero.”
Tony laughs. “I somehow doubt that. Well, maybe Thor and Loki, and Nebula.”

Thor takes that as his cue to talk, apparently. “I’m the God of Thunder, Loki, my brother, is God of Mischief.”

Nebula looks a little lost. “I’m… well, I used to be… I don’t…”

“She’s a skilled assassin and fighter,” Natasha cuts in. “Like Clint and I. We’re former spies and assassins.”

“I’m just a scientist,” Bruce says, and Carol’s about to question how that makes him a superhero when he adds “but I was affected by gamma radiation and my other alter is a giant green monster, Hulk.” Huh. Interesting.

“We’re soldiers enhanced by a super soldier serum,” Bucky says, pointing at himself and Steve.

“And Tony and I both operate suits with repulsors and other things that Tony designs,” Rhodey finishes.

Carol looks around the room again, nodding. “Cool. Hey, so JARVIS asked if I was allergic to dogs. Any particular reason why?”

Tony grins. “Yep. JARVIS?”

“On their way, Sir.”

Carol turns just in time to see a small horde of dogs running into the room, going up to who she assumes are each of their respective owners. “So, everyone here has a dog?”

“Yeah. Natasha trained them as service dogs. They help us with our disabilities,” Steve says, scratching his dog behind the ears.
Carol aims her next question at Natasha. “Can you train cats for that?”

Natasha shakes her head. “No. Well, technically, yes, but they can’t go anywhere with you, like service dogs can. Why? Did you need one for yourself?”

“No, but I did have an idea…”

Carol spends most of her time either with Nebula or Tony, finding that they’re generally the only two who can understand most of what she talks about. She’s sitting with Nebula in a dingy bar a month after she arrived, drinking cheap beer and talking about some of the weirdest shit they’ve ever seen in space, when Carol gets a text on the phone Tony had given her.

Natasha: I found her!!!

Attached is a picture of a black cat with a white splotch over its right eye, which is clearly blind. Carol gasps, typing back her response.

Carol: She’s perfect. Bring her home please?

Natasha: Already on the subway home :)

Attached is a picture of Natasha sitting on the subway, a carrier in her lap.

Carol: You’re the best <3

Carol turns back to Nebula, smiling apologetically. “Sorry, Nat finally found a cat for Fury. Can we do this again sometime?”
There’s a weird expression on Nebula’s face, but she nods. “Sure. This was nice.”

“Yeah. You want to go back to the tower with me?”

“No, I’ll stay for a while. Have fun.”

Carol hesitates, but she knows how important choices are for Nebula, so she waves, says goodbye, and heads home.

Carol finds Natasha on the communal floor, sitting on the couch with Lapushka at her feet and the cat in her lap. Carol comes over to sit by her, taking the cat when Natasha hands her over.

“She’s perfect. When do we take her to Fury?”

“I was thinking in a week, that way we can give her time to adjust to being in a home, and we can get the supplies we need for her. Besides, Tony’s going to need her measurements for her vest.”

Carol grins. “Let’s take her to Tony.”

As promised, a week later Carol walks into SHIELD headquarters, Natasha following at a short distance, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible with the backpack over her shoulder and the newly designed box Tony had made in her arms. No one questions them; the last agent who had stopped Natasha had been red with embarrassment by the time Nat was done with them.

Carol knocks on Fury’s door. Fury’s voice answers.

“Unless the world is coming to a screeching halt and spontaneously combusting at the same time, you better leave me the fuck alone.”
Carol rolls her eyes. How dramatic. “Neither is happening, but I’m coming in anyway.” She pushes the door open, just as Nick starts to stand.

“Danvers, seriously?” he asks, and Carol holds up a hand to cut him off.

“Trust me, you’re going to like this.” Carol clears her throat. “Natasha?”

Fury’s eye narrows. “What are you--”

“Here she comes, deputy director Scorn!” Natasha says brightly, walking in with the lid of the box opened. It’s a black box about two or three times the size of a shoe box, with a soft black lining and a plush pillow at the bottom. Laying on the pillow is Scorn the cat, in her “Emotional Support Cat” vest, black with black velcro and patches that read “Emotional Support Cat,” “I am my owner’s SHIELD,” and “Petting Will Be Met With Fury.”

Fury himself stares between Natasha and Carol with his one good eye, and there’s flashes of anger, confusion, and exasperation there. “You’re kidding,” he deadpans.

“No, but she’s kitten!” Carol says, grinning, and Natasha laughs. Fury looks enraged.

“Why.” It’s not a question, so much as a command for explanation. Natasha beats Carol to an answer.

“Because none of us knew you even had a cat before, and from what Carol’s told us, you were a lot happier when you did. Besides, we all have service dogs now, and none of us are the director of SHIELD. Come on, Fury, we got you all of her supplies, too. Tony’s even said he’ll deliver anything you need directly to your door or P.O. box, wherever it is that you actually have things sent to.”

Fury eyes both of them (pun intended) for a moment, then sighs. “Set the box on the desk, and leave whatever supplies you brought. And fuck you, Romanoff.”

Natasha smiles, an actual genuine smile, and sets the box with the cat in it on his desk, dropping the backpack on the floor. “Seriously, Fury, we did this because we care, not
because we’re assholes. But believe what you want to believe.” She leaves, and Nick looks in
the box, reaching in to pet Scorn.

Carol watches him, smiling. “She’s not a flerken, either. Real cat, all around. Tony, Bruce,
and I checked twice. So your other eye is safe.”

Fury snorts. “Yeah, I sure as fuck hope so. Stark’s got a lot of talents, but I don’t think
functional prosthetic eyes is one of them yet. And even if it were, I don’t know if I would trust
him with that.”

“You really don’t trust your team. After how we met, I know why, but you should let them in.
You still call them all by last name. Don’t you think they’ve earned more of your trust than
that?” Carol watches as Fury moves the box to the floor behind his desk, sitting down with a
sigh.

“Maybe. I’ve been in the spy business a long time, Danvers. I don’t know if I’m still capable
of that kind of trust.”

Carol shrugs. “Natasha and Clint have it. Bucky has it. Maybe it’s time you had it, too. Just
think about it, Fury. You’re missing out. You’ve got a really good team out there, and they’d
welcome you in if you let them.”

Carol leaves before Fury can argue, and she meets Natasha at the car.

“How did it go?” Natasha asks as Carol buckles into the passenger seat.

“Well, it’s Fury. It’ll take time. But I think he’ll come around. He’s stubborn, not an idiot.”

Natasha nods. “Very true. I know at least nineteen other heroes who were pretty similar.”

Carol looks at Natasha. “I think you mean twenty.”

“Maybe. In any case, are we going home? Are you sticking around for a while?”
“Yeah, I think I will. Rhodey and Bruce have good taste in food. And I’m hoping Sam will bring more cookies soon.”

Natasha laughs. “Yeah, I’m sure he will. Home it is, then.”

“Home it is.”

It takes two weeks.

Carol’s in the living room, kicking Tony’s ass at Mario Kart, when JARVIS interrupts. “Pardon me, Sir, Ms. Danvers, but Director Fury is requesting access to the Avengers’ floors.”

Tony pauses the game. “Really? Huh. Sure, let him up, why not.”

They both head out into the hall just as the elevator doors open and Fury steps out.

“Pirate Fury! What can we do for you?” Tony asks, and Carol loves how few shits Tony gives about anything.

Fury just rolls his eye. “I’m taking the advice of a friend. I was wondering if I could join the team for dinner.”

Tony freezes, shocked, but recovers quickly. “Uh, yeah, sure, you’re not going to shoot one of us, are you? This isn’t going to turn into a murder mystery? No ‘it was Director Fury, in the dining room, with the butter knife,’ right?”

Fury laughs, and that seems to startle Tony even more. “No, it’s not. Just dinner. Right, Carol?”

Carol smiles. “Right, Nick.”
There’s a pause, and then Tony shakes off whatever thoughts he’s currently having. “Uh, right. So, are we still finishing this game of Mario Kart? Because I think I can make a comeback.”

“In your dreams, Tony.”

“Oh, it’s on. You coming, Fury?”

Nick gestures towards the living room. “After you, Tony.”

Chapter End Notes

Emotional support animals are NOT the same as service animals. I just really liked the idea of Nick Fury with an emotional support cat.
Mantis tries to keep to herself. She knows that the rest of the team isn’t a fan of her empathic abilities, and she understands that; the more time she’s spent with them, she’s started to let her own emotions develop more, started to try and understand more about the world she hadn’t realized she was so separate from.

Despite her best efforts, though, she can’t help wanting to spend time with the team; she wants to be around them, wants to have friendships with them, wants to be a part of their lives. And they seem to want her around too; they constantly try to include her in things, and she appreciates that, but they also sometimes forget that when they touch her, she picks up on their emotions.

A hand on her shoulder here, a handshake or high five there, and she gets a clearer picture of their emotions than she thinks they meant for her to know. They’re more sad than they’re willing to admit; she can feel their joy, their more fleeting emotions, but under it all is a strange layer of sadness, of worry, that she had never experienced living with Ego.

Peter’s is buried deepest; it’s a dark, swirling grief that sometimes fades to wisps, but it’s always there, a faint feeling of pain and loss. Mantis has seen this grief come to the surface before, when Peter lost Yondu; he had played every song on the Zune Kraglin gave him four times each in the week that followed, and at night, when everyone else was sleeping, Mantis had heard him in his room, listening to Awesome Mix Vol. 2 at high volume to hide his crying.

Rocket’s is almost as deep; heavy, clouded pain, a turmoil of emotions bundled together, shame, grief, loneliness, hurt, doubt, anger, spite, resentment, defensiveness, swirling so far below the surface that if Rocket didn’t talk about his emotions when drunk, Mantis would be the only one who knew about his emotions, but even then, usually the others are too drunk to remember in the morning.

Groot’s is buried about halfway down, but it seems to grow, similar to how Groot himself grows; it starts small, just the roots of sadness and fear, and slowly develops, sprouting into more specific emotions. Worry, concern, hurt, anxiety, disappointment, guilt, loneliness, and loss branch off of the roots of sadness and fear, and they seem to wilt and grow over time, depending on what happens in that time.
Gamora’s is a bit below the surface, but not very deep; more like she’s consciously keeping her emotions back, holding down burning resentment, flooding panic, whirling self-doubt, and dark, crushing loss. Mantis is constantly surprised by how well Gamora hides that storm of emotions, each one seemingly as powerful as one of the four elements themselves, yet Gamora never visibly shows a single one.

Drax’s moves up and down below the surface of his consciousness as fluidly as water; it surprises Mantis, actually, because she’s never met someone whose emotions and memories could be so calmly, casually fluid. Admittedly, she hasn’t known that many people, but even the other people she’s met have never had the ability to just leave their emotions alone that well.

That doesn’t mean that Drax’s pain is any less than the others’ pain, he just… doesn’t seem as motivated to repress or incite it in one situation or another. He has such deep, painful loss inside of him that Mantis actually finds it a bit jarring every time they talk, how he doesn’t even seem to acknowledge it.

So when they travel back to Earth and meet up with Nebula and her new dog, Quasar, Mantis talks to Nebula about what Quasar does for her, asks for Nebula’s permission to use her psychic empathy to feel Nebula’s emotions.

After making Mantis explain why she wants to know, Nebula lets her, and Mantis is amazed to find that Nebula’s emotions have changed drastically since the last time they spoke. Where Nebula used to have pain and loss deeper than Gamora, she now has an underlying sense of warm, blanketing safety. The pain is still there; but it’s softer, less defined than it used to be, like something has worn away at the pain and dulled it.

Mantis thanks Nebula for her help, and then she goes to find Natasha; the team had decided to stay on Earth for a little while and stay in Stark’s tower, so Mantis doesn’t have to go far. She heads to the communal floor, looking around for Natasha, but she can’t find her. She’s just wandered into the gym when a voice comes from the ceiling and wall beside her, startling her.

“Pardon me, Ms. Mantis, may I assist you with something?”

“Who’s there?” Mantis asks, looking up.

“My name is JARVIS, I am the AI for Mr. Stark.”
Mantis puts a hand against the wall, searching for any emotions. There’s… something, there. It’s not what she’s used to, but there’s definitely some form of being there. “AI?”

“Artificial Intelligence. I was created by Mr. Stark, given a name and voice to resemble a former assistant of Mr. Stark’s.”

The feelings in the wall turn into something warmer, and it takes a moment for Mantis to identify the emotions in this new being. Fondness. JARVIS must care about Tony. “Oh. It’s nice to meet you, JARVIS. Do you know where I can find Natasha?”

“Ms. Romanoff is located on her personal floor. Would you like me to inform her that you are looking for her?”

“Yes, please. Thank you,” she says, and JARVIS doesn’t respond, presumably talking to Natasha instead. She tilts her head to the side, still trying to figure out why JARVIS’s emotions feel so… weird, is the only way she can describe it. Like he has emotions, but they’re in some kind of different language that she doesn’t know.

She’s staring at where his voice had come from someone taps on the doorway behind her, and she turns to find Natasha standing in the doorway with her dog beside her.

“JARVIS said you were looking for me?” Natasha asks, and Mantis nods. She takes a step forward, but stops when she sees Natasha lean backwards, even if it was barely noticeable.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to be intrusive. I can only sense your emotions through physical contact, please don’t worry. I just want to know if you can get service dogs for my team.”

Natasha frowns. “Who on your team needs one? And for what?”

“All of them. They’re very… hurt. They have a lot of emotional pain they do not want to talk about. I don’t want to make them talk about it if they don’t want to, but Quasar seems to have helped Nebula so much, and I want my friends to feel better too.”

“Okay. Can you tell me what emotions we’re looking at? Because I’m going to need to train the dog to help them with those things, specifically. Also, how much space does your ship have? You’re going to need space for the dogs, and all of the gear they’ll need. Food, water,
“bowls, space to move around, that kind of thing.”

“We don’t have a lot of space,” Mantis admits, but Natasha just nods.

“I think I have an idea. Follow me, I’m going to need something to take notes on.”

Natasha leads Mantis out to the living room, grabbing a tablet and pulling up a blank page on it. “Alright. So, what emotions are they each having? And how do they seem to act, when they show those emotions?”

Mantis explains, and by the end of their conversation, Natasha agrees that she can get them a dog within the next four months that should be able to meet their needs, so now all Mantis has to do is get the team to stay that long. When they go to get everything they need off the ship, she asks them if they can stay that long, and everyone just shrugs and agrees. Now Mantis doesn’t have to worry about that, and all she has to worry about is getting the actual dog from Natasha.

Three and a half months later, Natasha tells Mantis that their dog is ready for them, and Mantis brings the team to the communal floor, having them sit on the couches.

“Seriously, Mantis, what’s going on?” Peter asks, and Mantis wrings her hands, smiling nervously.

“You’ll have to trust me, okay? I just, I thought this would be a good idea for us,” she says, and Peter frowns.

“Yeah, no, you’re concerning me. What is it?”

“Natasha?” Mantis calls, and Natasha steps in from the hallway, walking into the room with Lapushka on her right and a beautiful dog with black, white, and light brown fur on her left.

“Guardians, this is your therapy dog, Hope,” Natasha says. Lapushka stays standing on her right and Hope sits on her left, tail sweeping across the floor happily.
“I… what?” Rocket asks, and Natasha faces him.

“Mantis says she’s picked on all of your emotions before, and she’s worried about you all. She saw the work that Quasar’s done with Nebula, and she thought this could help you. Of course, you’re on a ship with limited space, so getting all of you service dogs wasn’t exactly realistic. But getting you all a therapy dog that happens to have the task training of a service dog? That made more sense.”

Gamora nods. “So, what does Hope know? What does she do?”

Natasha smiles. “Can I let her show you herself?”

“I am Groot.”

“He says yes,” Rocket translates. “And it’s a ‘fuck it, why not,’ from me.”

Drax nods. “Yes, that’s okay.”

Peter and Gamora share a look. “Sure,” Gamora says, and Peter nods, so Natasha unclips Hope’s leash from her collar.

“Go ahead,” Natasha tells the dog, and Hope runs over to Mantis, leaning against her legs and nudging Mantis’ hands until Mantis starts to pet her. Mantis gasps as the dog’s emotions flood her senses. Hope’s entire energy is warm and comforting, and… loving. She’s exuding joy and love, and it’s so overwhelmingly nice that Mantis sinks to her knees on the floor, wrapping Hope up in her arms.

“Good girl,” Mantis tells the dog, and she’s amazed when the words make Hope’s joy and love spike. Mantis sits back on her heels, letting go of Hope. “Go,” she tells the dog softly, and Hope pads over to Peter, putting her head in his lap and looking up at him with adoring eyes.

“Wow, okay, you’re sweet,” Peter says, scratching Hope gently behind the ears. “So, what, we just get to have her? We take her on the ship with us?”
“Yeah, what about food?” Gamora asks. “She’s going to need enough food to last a long time, and we’ll need to be able to feed her things from other planets, too.”

“Tony, Nebula, Mantis, and I worked that out. We’ve made a mixture that should last a pretty long time, and we’ve made a list of foods from other planets that should be safe for her to eat. I say ‘should’ because we don’t know the chemical composition of the foods Mantis and Nebula described, so we’re working off of comparison. But if you introduce things slowly, you should be fine.”

“I am Groot.”

Rocket sighs. “Yeah, what the hell, why not. We can keep the dog. It’s not like it’s the worst decision we’ve ever made.”

Natasha nods, handing Hope’s leash over to Mantis, careful to avoid touching each other. “Well. I’ll leave you all to talk.”

Natasha leaves, and Mantis turns to the group.

“This was a good decision, right?”

Drax shrugs. “It could be a good decision. It could also be the worst mistake ever.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Helpful. This is a good decision, Mantis. Thanks.”

Mantis really hopes Peter is right, because she just wanted to help, and she’s hoping this wasn’t too presumptuous.

One day, a few months after they’ve left Earth and are back on the Milano, Peter starts acting weird, and Mantis can’t figure out what’s wrong, but she doesn’t want to be rude and question him about it. He’s been distracted, quieter than normal and spending a lot more time in his
personal quarters.

Mantis is starting to think that she’s going to have to ask him about it when Hope stands, following Peter to his room, and Mantis relaxes, because Hope should be able to help. It takes a little while, but about 40 minutes later Peter comes back out, Hope trotting at his side. Peter’s eyes are red like he’s been crying, but he seems much happier.

“Everything okay?” Gamora asks, and Peter nods.

“Yeah, yeah. Today’s just the anniversary of my mom’s death. That’s all. It’s stupid, really, it’s been years, but I’m still not really over it.” he stares out the window of the ship, sighing. “I miss her, you know? And after Ego, and Yondu… well. I don’t have my family anymore. I mean, you’re all my family, but--”

“But it’s not quite the same.” Gamora stands, joins Peter over at the window. “You’re all my family, but I do still miss my parents. What could have been if Thanos hadn’t killed them.”

“Yeah.” There’s a few minutes of silence while Peter looks out at the stars. He turns, taking a deep breath. “Anyway, do we have any other jobs we can do?”

“There’s one that has a decent pay out, should be easy, too,” Rocket says, pulling up the details on the screen in front of him.

“Cool. Let’s go do that.”

Rocket gets really drunk. The job they had taken the day before had gone wrong, and it had almost looked like Groot was going to die, and it had left Rocket completely shaken, worried that he was going to lose his best friend. So when they get back to the ship, Rocket drinks an unsafe amount of alcohol, and starts scream-crying at everyone, aiming his gun at everyone in turn to keep them away from him.

“Touch me and I’ll shoot you, Quill!” he shouts, shaking with the effort of holding himself back. “You wanna mock me? I’ll make sure you can’t mock anything ever again!” Rocket’s just started to raise the gun towards Peter’s chest when a blur slams into Rocket, knocking him over and sending his weapon flying off to the side.
“What the fuck!” Rocket struggles under Hope’s weight. “Get off me! Are you fucking kidding me!”

Hope stays laying on Rocket, licking the top of his head like she’s trying to groom him, and Rocket just… stops. He takes a shaky breath, pushing at Hope’s chest, but when she still doesn’t move, he just lays down, covering his face with his hands and sobbing. “Fine, fuck you, you know what? Whatever. Whatever. I don’t even care. Fuck.”

Everyone watches as Hope slowly moves to lay down beside Rocket instead of on top of him, resting her head on his chest as Rocket slowly drifts to sleep, exhausted from his outburst.

Mantis is just glad that Hope was as helpful as she had imagined.

On another job, they’re sent to help find and rescue a girl from the people who had kidnapped her, and the person who hired them either didn’t know or didn’t care to explain the actual details of the girl’s kidnappers.

When they find the girl, she’s in some kind of combat training room, fighting off four attackers at once. All four attackers turn when the team enters, and Gamora takes them out quickly, incapacitating them.

“Sora?”

“That’s me,” the girl, probably in her early teens, answers. “What can I do for you.”

“We’re here to take you home,” Peter says, and Sora hesitates.

“Really? Is this. Is this another test?”

Gamora kneels down so she’s face to face with Sora. “This isn’t a test. I’ve been where you are. It’s a terrible place to be. We’re going to take you home, to your parents. Your real
parents. Not these people. I can’t convince you this isn’t a test. I know that. But you have to trust us.”

Gamora stands up again, holding out a hand. Sora takes it, and the team leaves. They get Sora home to her parents, and both Sora and her parents sob as they hug, glad to finally be back together. The team takes half of the actual amount that the parents had offered for the job, and they go back to the ship.

They’re sitting around in the kitchen, having dinner, when Hope walks up to Gamora, pawing at her leg and whining. “What’s wrong?” Gamora asks the dog, and Hope just nudges her hand, still pawing at her leg until Gamora crouches down low enough for Hope to jump in her lap, causing Gamora to drop down to sitting on the floor, Hope laying across her legs.

“What--” Gamora starts, but Hope sits up, licks her face once, and then lays back down on Gamora’s lap. Gamora starts to pet Hope, and within a few minutes she’s hyperventilating, clinging to Hope like she’s worried she’ll completely fall apart if Hope moves.

The team watches, in varying degrees of shock, until Gamora finally gets her breathing back under control, looking up. “Sora reminded me a lot of myself,” she says quietly. “I was already training for combat at ten years old. It hurts to know that this is still happening to other kids.”

There’s not much anyone can say to that, so the team just moves to sit on the floor with her, continuing dinner from the floor, Hope still being a warm, comforting presence in Gamora’s lap.

Mantis can’t begin to explain how grateful she is to Natasha for Hope. With Hope’s help, the team has slowly started to become calmer and more confident, and Mantis can tell even through the briefest contact with her teammates that Hope is helping to soften the pain of their emotions.

Hope’s been helping Mantis a lot, too; when Mantis uses her powers, both intentionally and accidentally, to feel other people’s emotions, she often needs comfort after, and Hope has such a calming, soothing presence and such steady, positive emotions that it always helps Mantis, gives her something to ground herself after a particularly difficult day.
Mantis gets a chance to thank Natasha when the team manages to get their picture taken as a group, Hope sitting in front of them and smiling with the goofiest dog smile on her face. Mantis sends the picture to Natasha using the communicator Tony had designed for the team to use to communicate back to the heroes on Earth, with the caption “thanks for giving us Hope.”

Natasha sends back a heart emoji, and even without Natasha saying anything directly, Mantis is pretty sure she understood Mantis’ double meaning.

Chapter End Notes

Therapy animals are NOT the same as service animals. I just thought that a therapy dog would be more realistic for the Guardians than multiple service dogs.
Clint yawns, pulling his cup of coffee closer. It’s 2am, and he and Natasha are sitting in some little 24/7 diner, drinking coffee and eating dessert, because it’s too early for breakfast and chocolate lava cake is really good.

Lucky and Lapushka are sleeping at their feet under the table; Lucky had gone to grab Natasha when Clint had woken up with nightmares and couldn’t fall back asleep, haunted by the memories from his childhood. Natasha had taken one look at him and signed “coffee and ice cream?”

Clint’s grateful that Natasha knows him so well. He’d pulled on a baggy shirt and a pair of pajama pants (because it’s too early in the morning for jeans), and followed Natasha and the dogs to the elevator, not bothering to put his hearing aids in, because he trusts Natasha and Lucky to keep him safe.

Natasha already has the dogs’ vests on, and she hands Clint Lucky’s hands free leash, which Clint puts over his shoulder, signing “thanks” as the elevator takes them down to the lobby, the floor numbers changing on the readout above the elevator doors, along with a readout of how long until they reach the selected floor.

Tony had added the second part after Clint came to live at the tower and Clint had mentioned wanting to know exactly when the doors would open, because it helped him know exactly when to move and made him a little less jumpy when the doors opened because he couldn’t hear the gears moving to warn him.

They reached the lobby, and Natasha and Clint walked to the nearest open diner, shoulders touching as they walked because it helps Clint to have a physical reminder that Natasha’s there.

They both ordered coffee at the diner, Clint ordered a chocolate lava cake and Natasha ordering a sundae, Clint signing his order to Natasha for her to tell the server, because Clint is way too tired to deal with this right now.

“So, do you want to talk about the nightmares?” Natasha asks, and Clint shrugs.

“It’s nothing I haven’t had before. Dad yelling. Couldn’t really hear him, my ears were ringing and everything sounded like it was underwater. A lot of the same memories. I don’t know why it’s bothering me so much tonight.”
The server brings their coffee over, and Natasha thanks them, dumping a few packets of sugar and a bunch of creamer into hers, stirring it. Clint knows she isn’t a huge fan of coffee, she’s always preferred tea, but she’ll drink coffee as long as it’s sweet enough. She takes a sip, and it must be sweet enough, because she takes a longer drink before setting the mug down again.

“Just because you’ve had these nightmares before doesn’t make them any less painful,” she signs.

“Maybe not. But I still just wish I was over it by now. I’ll talk to Dr. Kayode about it in our next session. Hey, do you have any other service dogs you’re training soon?”

Clint knows it’s a bad transition, but he also knows that Natasha’s not going to push it. She’ll file it away for another day to question him about it, but she’ll at least drop the topic for now.

“No, not anytime soon. But eventually I’ll have to train new dogs for all of us.” The desserts arrive, and Clint takes a bite of his chocolate lava cake. It’s exactly as good as he was hoping, and he must have moaned, because Natasha is watching him with a smirk on her face.

Clint takes a drink of his coffee. “I never thought about that, about us needing new dogs at some point.”

Natasha shrugs. “Yeah, it’ll have to happen eventually, but for now I think we’re good. Besides, Tony might be able to help me train the dogs in the future too, he did a really good job with Lapushka.”

“She does seem to be really good for you. Tony’s a much better person than we initially thought, huh?”

“Definitely. Even we make mistakes.” Natasha breaks eye contact, stirring her coffee with her spoon absentmindedly. Clint frowns, waving his hand in her peripheral vision until she makes eye contact again.

“Hey. It’s not your fault. You and I both know that Tony’s just as hard to read as we are, maybe more so. You couldn’t have known that.”
Natasha nods. “Maybe. Hey, I had this reporter contact me, said he wants to interview me about the work I’ve done with all the dogs, how I trained them, how I evaluated you all, that sort of thing.”

“Really? Who are they?”

“Clark Kent, from the Daily Planet.” Natasha eats a few spoonfuls of her sundae.

“Did you research him?”

Natasha gives Clint a look that can only be described as insulted. “Clint. You cannot be that fucking stupid.”

Clint snorts. “Fine, okay, sorry. What did you find about him?”

“Not much. Works at the Daily Planet. Adopted by Jonathan and Martha Kent. But get this- there’s no birth certificate. No birth records at all. It’s like he exists, but he doesn’t.”

“So a spy like us?”

Natasha shakes her head. “Anyone in our line of work would know to make their new identity as solid as possible, so either he’s an amateur or he’s not actually from Earth.”

“You think he’s from another planet? Like Nebula or Loki or something?”

Natasha shrugs, eating a spoonful of her sundae. “Maybe. I won’t know for sure until I meet him. Whoever he is, whatever he is, I’m pretty sure I can take him. And if I can’t, it won’t end well for him anyway, because we’re meeting in a restaurant. Anything he does will be well documented.”

“Do you want me nearby, just in case?”

“Sure. But it should be fine.” The server drops off the check, and Natasha glances at it, pulls thirty dollars out of her wallet. “Ready to go?”
Clint nods, and they stand, the dogs standing from under the table and stretching. Natasha pays the bill while Clint and Lucky wait outside, and they start the walk home.

“Thanks for the coffee and dessert,” Clint signs.

“It’s no problem. I’m always here for you.”

“I’m here for you, too. Are you going back to bed when we get home? Because I think I might be able to beat you at Super Smash Bros Melee now.”

“Oh, you’re on, Barton.”

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