Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered

by LiquidCaliban

Summary

Natasha (along with Sam and Wanda) suffers from a case of amnesia that may have (totally has) supernatural origins.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own MCU and whatnot.

Spoilers: Canon divergent post TWS, but details borrowed all the way through Endgame.

Summary: I know I said I wasn't going to remix my fic 'Amnesiac' to make it Natnesia-based, but then I had a dream about the second scene in this one and here we are.

- Inspired by Amnesiac by LiquidCaliban

The alarm blaring through Avengers’ HQ made it difficult to hear where the commotion was centered, but at least it did nothing to block out visual cues. Steve sprinted toward the blasts of light coming from the direction of the communal lounge near the living quarters. He nearly ran over Natasha in an intersection, headed in the same direction. “You better not be…”

“On my way to my son? Don’t even, Rogers.”

Shit. Shit! In spite of the fact that his pregnant wife was also putting herself in danger, Steve
increased his pace toward the lounge where James had been hanging out with Sam and Bucky while his parents handled some Avengers’ business. He actually did crash into Bucky as he rounded a corner. ‘Buck, what’s…”

“Daddy!” James shouted, leaping from Bucky’s arms into Steve’s. “Vision is broken!”

Natasha came up beside them in time to hear Bucky say, “One minute he was playin’ chess with Wanda and the next he was shootin’ the jewel thing off and it was like he’s another guy or somethin’.”

“We need to deactivate him,” she said, pulling a handful of Widow’s Bite discs from her pocket. “Steve, take James somewhere safe.”

“Nat, you can’t…”

“You’re right. You’ve got better throwing aim with these than Bucky.” She pulled James out of Steve’s arms to hand him back to Bucky after a quick kiss. “Go with your uncle, baby.” She dropped a few discs into Steve’s hand as Bucky carried a protesting James out of the area. “I think if we hit Vision with enough electricity, we can probably shut him down, so aim for his head or as close as you can get.”

Although Steve didn’t want to put her in any danger, he nodded in agreement. They had to jump over rubble in the hallway outside the lounge. A beam from the Mind Stone suddenly cut through the wall beside Steve. He ducked into the hole it had made once it disappeared and quickly surveyed the room. Wanda was unconscious under a table; Sam was nowhere in sight. Vision floated over the room, clutching his head as he yelled unintelligibly. Aiming his first disc, Steve flicked a perfect hit to the back of Vision’s head.

The blue crackle of electricity caused him to shudder, but didn’t bring him down. When he turned to respond to the attack, Steve saw that his eyes were an eerie glowing blue. Hadn’t he seen that somewhere before? There was no time to think about it as Vision let loose another burst of energy that Steve barely had time to dodge. As soon as he had his balance, he threw a second disc that hit Vision’s neck just as Natasha landed one over his ear. The discharge of electricity this time was enough to bring him to the floor.

Natasha caught Steve’s eye and held up a disc in each hand. He could read her well enough to move without a countdown and flung his two discs half a second after she released hers. In the moment before the four discs landed on Vision’s head, however, a final burst of energy from the Mind Stone hit Natasha, throwing her into the wall.

Steve froze, wanting to run to his wife but unsure if the threat had been neutralized. He got his answer a moment later as Vision collapsed to the floor, immobile. Steve rushed to restrain him with a cable he ripped from the TV, though he wasn’t sure it would be useful or even necessary, given that touching Vision’s body resulted in shocks even Steve could barely handle. He powered through because he had to check on Natasha.

She was unconscious when he knelt beside her, a bleeding gash on her forehead dripping onto the floor. “Nat? Nat, please.” He hesitated to do anything more than apply gentle pressure to the cut. What if she had a spinal injury? He needed medics and security and…

A whoosh and a clank suddenly relieved his lack of a communicator. Rhodey called out, “Steve? Natasha? Sam?”

“Over here!” Steve cried back. “I think we knocked out Vision for the moment, but Nat and Wanda
“Backup’s on the way,” Rhodey reassured, giving him a strong squeeze on the shoulder from the War Machine armor. “Tell ‘em where to look for Wanda while I find Sam.”

The next forty minutes passed in a blur as Rhodey found Sam unconscious under a flipped sofa while base medical staff arrived to treat the casualties. Vision, still unresponsive, was transported to what would hopefully be secure containment until they could determine what had made him lose control. Steve walked into the Infirmary after checking in with Bucky and comforting James to find that Natasha was awake and insisting on an ultrasound before her head wound was treated. He waved toward a groggy Sam, who was occupying a bed beside a still-unconscious Wanda before intervening in the argument between his wife and Dr. Cho.

Natasha was holding a wad of gauze to her forehead with one hand while she hiked her shirt up with the other. “Just get the damn gel and machine, Helen.”

“Fine! Not like the fetus needs that blood gushing from your head!”

“It’s not gushing anymore!” Natasha shouted to Dr. Cho’s retreating back. She turned her face toward Steve to accept a kiss. “Honestly. Is it so ridiculous that I want to be sure the baby’s okay before we deal with a little cut?”

“Do you feel okay?”

“Other than my head, I feel fine. I even got up to pee and there was no blood or anything.”

“You got up?”

“Okay, I used the bedpan because I stupidly reported some dizziness, but there was still no blood.”

He was about to argue further when a tech wheeled the now-familiar ultrasound equipment over to the bedside. Steve had learned all he could about the safety of the ultrasound during Natasha’s first pregnancy, then basically demanded a view of the baby and a doppler of his heartbeat at every opportunity; he couldn’t get enough of the technology that allowed him to feel like an active participant in bringing James into the world, though he would have eagerly taken over the morning sickness or general malaise if he could have. Baby Rogers #2 had yet to be named because they were waiting to find out the gender until the ‘halfway’ ultrasound, even if Steve was already thinking about a potential Samuel. Not that he would be unhappy with a Samantha. He really just wanted another healthy baby.

The oddly comforting trainlike chuga-chuga sound of the baby’s heartbeat came from the machine as the tech held the probe over Natasha’s barely-there belly. Steve grasped her hand. “We’re good.”

“Of course we’re good,” she replied, meeting his lips for a kiss. “It’s just nice to be sure.”

He forced himself not to let his forehead rest against hers, given her injury. “Don’t worry if you have to stay over tonight. I’ll run home to take care of Toby and James can stay here with Bucky…”

“Don’t worry, Steve. We’re going home tonight, as soon as I get some stitches.”

“I’ll be using my non-scarring dermal bonding solution when you actually let me treat you!” Dr. Cho called from across the room, where she was examining a just-revived Wanda.
Steve was just happy that his family would be going home healthy once they were allowed.

Natasha went from dozing to wide awake in the moment she realized that she was being spooned by a large, warm man. Damn, what had she done last night? The fact that she couldn’t remember told her that it had probably involved excessive alcohol; although there weren’t the familiar symptoms of a hangover, her stomach definitely felt off and she had a raging headache toward the front rather than the middle of her skull. Tequila instead of vodka, maybe? As she squirmed in the muscular arms gently encircling her, she realized that she’d definitely gotten laid and, based on her level of soreness, Mr. Muscles was working with a pretty big unit. At least she hadn’t hooked up with a ‘roider on one of her infrequent one night stands. Much as she liked working for SHIELD, she had needs that she wasn’t willing to fulfill with one of the assholes from the STRIKE team that she’d have to continue working with. The occasional night out with an anonymous stranger usually did the job just fine.

She still needed to make her escape before he woke up. She managed to get out of his embrace with some creative shimmying. Her clothes, however, were nowhere to be found. She had no idea what she’d been wearing, but still… Had he convinced her to strip down before they got to the bedroom? This big-dicked stranger might be better than she thought. She’d have to write down his address for future reference at the very least. She took a final peek under the covers to confirm that, yeah, she would definitely want to see him again.

It wasn’t until she’d grabbed a robe off a rack hanging over the closet door that she realized she might have made a huge mistake. The woman-sized robe – the her-sized robe – was a bridge too far. She’d obviously picked up a married man whose wife was probably out of town on business or something. She was an unintentional homewrecker. There was a time not so long ago that it wouldn’t have bothered her, but now… Hanging the robe back up, she slipped into an oversized hooded sweatshirt that hung down to her mid-thighs. She wasn’t about to go prowling around someone’s apartment in a wife’s robe or naked, thank you very much.

When she left the bedroom, she found that it wasn’t even an apartment, but the second floor of a house. What. The. Hell. She’d been drunk enough to let a man take off her clothes on a completely separate floor from his bed? Not okay. Drinking curbed, no intervention necessary. She padded downstairs in just that sweatshirt to find her own clothing, ignoring the no-doubt beautiful wedding and family portraits hanging along her path.

There was nothing in the living room in the way of far-flung clothing to indicate a torrid encounter, though there were a disturbing number of children’s toys. Great. She’d managed to hook up with not only a married man, but a married father. Now she was going to ruin the lives of a wife and at least one child if she didn’t find her damned clothes and get out of here. A quick sweep of the downstairs rooms revealed no strewn clothing. She couldn’t run if she had nothing to wear. She found herself in the kitchen, contemplating her situation.

The wife’s robe had fit her just fine, so it was possible the wife’s clothing would be passable for a late night cab ride back to her apartment, assuming she was in a suburb of the District that even had cabs running. She could always call for one, but…clothes first.

In spite of her determination to get out of this house, she paused in front of the refrigerator. She might be inclined to forgiveness if these were the kind of people who kept a bottle of vodka in the freezer. No such luck. She did pull out a pint of Ben & Jerry’s with an unfamiliar chocolate flavor that just called to her. If Mr. Muscles was going to cheat on his wife, ice cream was the least he could lose in the transaction.

She was sitting on a stool at the kitchen island, digging toward the bottom of the pint, when she
was suddenly aware of someone behind her. Mr. Muscles slipped an arm around her and pressed his lips against her neck. “Late night craving?”

“Stop that.” For some reason, she didn’t immediately drop her spoon and flee. “Weirdo.”

He chuckled and walked around the other side of the island. “Yeah, I should know better than to come between you and your Hulk-a Hulk-a Burning Fudge.” He pulled a spoon from the drawer where she’d found her own and asked, “You won’t be mad if I finish the Black Raspberry Widow, will you?”

“What are you even…” She was too distracted from asking about how he knew her nom de guerre as she found herself gazing at his light blue eyes, handsome face framed by a beard she wanted to comb her fingers through and a sculpted chest and abs that she wanted to memorize with her fingertips to… No wonder she’d gone home with this guy. He looked like she’d special ordered him off some kind of sex god website. Wait, what was she doing? She needed to come up with a coherent argument for getting out of here. Shaking her head, she said, “Look, just give me my clothes and I’ll get out of here. We can forget all about this.”

“Which clothes? And where are you going?”

She chose to address only his first question, “The clothes I was wearing when I got here.”

His eyebrows knitted together in the most appealing way. “I tossed your jeans and stuff in the hamper, but your shirt is still soaking in cold water in the sink with some OxiClean because there was a lot of blood on it. But where do you want to go?”

“I…” For the first time, not knowing his name bothered her. “Okay, guy. Mr. Muscles. I’m sorry I don’t remember your name, but I just want to go back to my apartment and sleep off my hangover and pretend this night never happened. That’ll probably be best for you, too, so maybe you can call me a cab and put my apparently bloody shirt in a bag while you lend me a t-shirt you won’t miss.”

“Nat, you…you’re not hungover. Why would you think you’ve been drinking? Or that you have somewhere else to go?”

Great. Just fucking great. Mr. Muscles knew her real name, knew her well enough to use a nickname, which probably meant… She grabbed a knife from the block on the kitchen island and pinned him against the refrigerator with the blade pressed against his throat. “What did you do? Did you roofie me? You son of a bitch, did you put something in my drink?”

“What the…Nat…” To her surprise, she was suddenly on her back on the countertop, disarmed with her hands restrained against the granite. He had even managed to position his hips between her thighs so she couldn’t hit him anywhere sensitive. That didn’t stop her from striking her heels against his tailbone. His voice didn’t even quaver as he said, “You are gonna explain what kind of game you’re playing before I go any further with this.”

He was strong – stronger than anyone she’d gone up against before. That should not have been a turn on, but…she changed her plan of attack, thrusting her pelvis against him now. In spite of the way his impressive muscles tensed as his loose pajama pants tightened, he didn’t release his hold on her. “Let me go, you bastard!”

“Stop fighting me, Natasha! You obviously got hurt worse than we thought today. Please, Nat!”

For some reason, his pleading cut through her panic for a moment. “Who are you? Just tell me who you really are!”
“Nat, it’s me. I’m Steve. I’m your husband. Don’t you know me?”

That was more than she was willing to accept. She resumed her struggling. “Fury wouldn’t approve that. Fury would never…”

She wasn’t sure how this Steve guy managed to make a phone call while keeping her at bay; she just knew that she felt slightly better about the situation when Nick Fury appeared in the kitchen to say, “Relax, Romanoff. Everything is fine.”

“You’re just lucky we were on our way here after both Maximoff and Wilson developed profound memory loss.”

Steve somehow didn’t feel better about the situation as Fury explained it, considering the fact that a pissed off, restrained Natasha was being loaded into a stealth ambulance. She hadn’t particularly warmed to the idea that she was experiencing amnesia, no matter what Fury said. Steve rubbed the back of his neck, wishing he could ride with her, but also concerned that his wife had held him at knifepoint not long ago. “Is Vision awake to explain this?”

“Not yet. He’s in some kinda coma state while Banner and Stark are running scans on the gem. All we know so far is that Wilson thinks he’s back at Lackland, which isn’t that hard to handle, considering that Maximoff is in a pre-Strucker Sokovia with her brother still alive, and Romanoff…well, you dealt with that.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat, thankful she’d attacked a pint of ice cream rather than a bottle of vodka. “Yeah, her early days with SHIELD. Have you talked to Clint yet?”

“On his way. Laura didn’t appreciate the early morning call ‘til she heard about the situation.”

“I can imagine.” From what he’d gathered in their kitchen, Natasha had regressed to a point soon after her KGB defection, when she didn’t trust many SHIELD agents outside of Fury and Barton. He was mostly thankful that James slept like a hibernating log once he got in his sleep zone no matter how much Toby barked and that it wasn’t entirely unusual for him to wake up to Uncle Bucky cooking him breakfast because his parents had been asked to save the world – or at least some small portion of it. Steve let his head drop. For all the issues they’d overcome in their relationship…. “I’m gonna have to explain to a KGB assassin who thought she could never have children that she’s three months pregnant with her second child and I’m the father that she’s been married to for the past six years, right?”

“The medical staff have already agreed to keep her strapped her into the soft restraints rather than using chemical ones, if that makes you feel better.”

“Not really.”

“Just try to put your actual relationship out of your mind for the moment. She’s still her regular kickass Romanoff self. She’s just…securely restrained. You love your wife, don’t you, Rogers?”

“Not helpful, sir.”

Fury stood and settled a surprisingly comforting hand on his shoulder. “Do your best for her.”

Steve took a deep breath and got ready to return to HQ.

Natasha opened her eyes to find she was sitting up in bed in an austere but modern hospital room.
When she tried to move, she made the further discovery that she was strapped to the bed, wrists and ankles restrained with padded Velcro wraps connected to strong cloth straps. Mr. Muscles was sitting in a chair at her bedside. She vaguely remembered him telling her his name, but it escaped her at the moment. For now, he was just the guy she’d fucked before landing in this bizarre situation that somehow involved her boss. “Is this some kind of sick game you’re playing? Because I can assure you that I don’t have a medical kink.”

“Wouldn’t want to hear about it if you did,” Nick Fury said, striding into the room with a woman in blue scrubs. “Apparently you slipped a restraint on the ride here and tried to strangle a medic.”

“The sedative they gave you was perfectly safe for the baby,” the woman added.

Natasha had to laugh. “Okay, is this some kind of test? Am I being punished for not realizing Mr. Muscles over there was a SHIELD agent?”

“No,” Fury said, though he looked like he was considering the idea. “I need to make some calls, but we’ll talk more after Dr. Cho finishes her exam. Try not to bite her or anything like that.”

She rolled her eyes, but went along with the doctor’s prompts. “Are you experiencing any pain or discomfort right now?”

“My head aches and I feel a little queasy. Also, I’m tied to a bed.”

“I am sorry, but that’s for everyone’s safety at the moment. Can you tell me who you are, where you are and what the date is?”

She huffed out a sigh but answered, “I’m Natasha Romanoff, I’m in DC but probably not the Triskelion because I don’t recognize this area and it’s May. I’m not sure of the exact date, but I know it’s May. The 10th maybe?”

She didn’t react, indicating that she was probably close. “And the year?”

“2007,” she replied confidently.

The doctor frowned. “I’m sorry, Agent Romanoff, but can you tell me the last thing you remember before you woke up this evening?”

“I…” Natasha thought back. Although the situation indicated that she’d gone out, probably to the bar where she’d hooked up with Mr. Muscles, she couldn’t remember any details. In fact, that last thing she could clearly remember was… “Budapest.”

“Excuse me?”

“Clint and I flew back from Budapest earlier today. I was writing up our reports because he…” She tried to pull her arms up, but only produced a slight jump of the bedframe. “Clint’s in Medical because he was shot. I was typing up the reports in the waiting room outside the OR. Is he okay? He must be, because I wouldn’t have gotten drunk and…”

“You weren’t drunk last night, Nat,” Mr. Muscles interrupted. He grasped her hand in spite of the fact that she immediately dug her nails into his fingers and tried to break at least one. “We had an incident here at HQ, you took a knock to the head, but Dr. Cho patched you up and we went home because we had to feed the dog and James was nervous about staying on base after what happened.” He pointed to the large mirror on the other side of the room so she could see the white bandage on her forehead, which the doctor removed to show a three-inch gash that looked like it had been glued together. “That’s probably why you have a headache.”
“Right, and you’re the loving husband who fucks his wife after a thing like that.”

“No, I mean, you wanted to, so we did…wait, you remember making love last night?”

“Hell no. Like I said, I was waiting for Clint to get out of surgery and the next thing I remember I was in bed with you with a hangover and hopefully not gonorrhea because I’ve definitely had sex recently.”

“Nat, I just…James is safe at home, by the way. Bucky’s gonna take care of him while you….while we…”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” she said, annoyed that he continued to act as if he knew her. “Can I speak to Fury? Or Clint? Hell, I’ll even take Agent Hill if she’s around!”

Mr. Muscles stood from his chair, excited. “So you remember Maria, too?”

“Dark hair, bitchy attitude, thinks I’m planning to stab her and might not be wrong about it?”

He paused. “Not exactly. Not now, anyway.” He leaned down for a kiss she dodged away from. His face absolutely fell in a way that almost made her feel bad. “You really don’t remember?”

“What am I supposed to remember?” she demanded. “Why won’t anyone explain…”

“It’s 2022, Nat, not 2007. You have an entire life to remember.”

She forced herself to remain calm, reinforcing in her mind the fact that this was some kind of test or messed up training exercise. “Unless somebody gives me a reasonable explanation about what’s happening really fucking soon, I’m going to…” A sudden wave of nausea cut off her creative threat involving organ theft and she threw up down the front of the hospital johnny they’d dressed her in. “Well…shit.”

The doctor handed Mr. Muscles a basin that he held under Natasha’s chin as she vomited again. Not hungover, my ass. As she continued to retch, he started stroking her hair. “It’s okay, Nat. Just get it up.”

“Stop…” After a few more dry heaves, she collapsed back. “I think that’s all for now.” She twisted her head away from his still-stroking hand as best she could. “I said stop that.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He set the half-filled basin on the bedside table. “I just…sometimes that makes you feel better, that’s all.”

“Right, well,” the doctor began, clapping her hands together, “a nurse will be right in to get you cleaned up, then I’d like to get an MRI if we can let you out of the restraints for a bit. The ultrasound we did last night was perfectly normal, but we can do another if you’d like. Steve?”

Steve, right. Steve nodded and said, “Do you think…that might help her accept some things? Be less combative?”

“Oh, you’re the first one I’m coming after when I get out of these.” Natasha gave her restraints another firm tug, though she assumed she looked less threatening while covered in vomit. Fortunately, the nurse came in with some towels and a clean johnny. Steve didn’t look like he was about to leave, so she said, “Do you mind?”

He smiled like a Cheshire cat. “Nothing I haven’t seen. Besides,” he touched the front of her left shoulder as the nurse removed her soiled gown, “You didn’t have this scar in 2007.”
“I don’t have…” She looked down to see that she indeed did have a pretty significant scar that he was currently outlining with his fingertip. Maybe an exit wound from high velocity round. It wasn’t fresh either, having healed into a shiny slightly mottled patch of skin that didn’t have the same sensitivity to his light touch that the surrounding skin did. Makeup wouldn’t feel like that, but if they’d put some material over her real skin… “So you people faked a scar. Big deal.”

“You got that in 2014, which I know because I was there. It was right before we destroyed the helicarriers. And the Triskelion, but that wasn’t on purpose.”

She resisted the urge to correct him. SHIELD only had one helicarrier. Oh. Oh! How had she not realized this sooner? It was probably the headache. She looked down with a laugh as she spotted a few more unfamiliar scars before the nurse pulled up the clean johnny. “Okay, I have to give credit where credit is due. This is a very convincing simulation. You slipped in the interrogation a little too soon, but otherwise, you almost had me. The guy you got to play Fury was actually pretty good!”

“Nat, what are you…?”

“Drop the act, Steve. It’s pretty obvious I’ve been captured and you’re here to extract information. Let me save you the trouble. I’m never gonna talk and SHIELD’s never gonna negotiate. You lose. Thank you for playing. Better luck next time.” She ignored the rest of Steve’s – no, he was going to get the fake name she chose from now on – Mr. Muscles’ useless blather and focused on her escape plan. If that doctor was serious about an MRI, she could behave until then and make a break when they undid the restraints to get her into the machine. In the meantime… how durable could these restraints be against a determined master assassin?

“Well, this is bad,” Maria declared as Steve left Natasha’s room after almost twenty minutes of ineffectual pleading. Even the ultrasound hadn’t done any good, as she shrugged and blew it off as ‘obviously fake.’ Maria went on as he sagged against the wall beside her. “A 2006 edition of Romanoff who thinks we’re the enemy is not a safe situation. Tread carefully, Steve.”

“Thanks.” He’d been hoping for something a little more encouraging, but Maria was nothing if not a realist. “How’s Sam?”

“Fine, other than his memory and a dislocated shoulder. He thinks he’s still in training at Lackland and was in a helo crash. I almost lost it when he asked if his buddy Riley got hurt too.” She sighed. “I’m definitely not mentioning anything about our relationship until he stops calling me ‘Ma’am.'”

Although Steve felt for his friends, he couldn’t help but focus on Natasha right now. “Probably for the best at this point.”

“Don’t worry, Steve. Stark and Banner are working on a way to use the Mind Stone to reverse this. As long as Wanda doesn’t realize she has powers and Natasha can’t murder anyone, we should be okay.”

“You really think she’d…”

“Yes.”

“Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine,” he muttered under his breath.

“I’m telling you that you can’t look at her as your pregnant wife right now. She thinks she’s cornered, and that makes her even more dangerous.”
“But she…I can’t hurt her. And I won’t let anyone else hurt her.”

“She’s not going to give you the same consideration when she gets free if we don’t find a way to get through to her.”

“When she gets free?”

She shrugged. “Just a matter of time. I’ll see about having everyone armed with tranq darts with that baby-safe sedative.”

Steve was left alone to stare into Natasha’s room through the two-way mirror. She obviously knew she was being observed because she was staring right back. Her determined gaze held none of the warmth he’d grown used to, none of the light or sweetness; there was only anger, cold calculation. He suddenly understood why the Black Widow was so feared and respected. The longer he looked, the more he worried he wasn’t going to see that other woman again. He couldn’t lose Natasha like this, not when she was still right there and…

Just as he felt something inside him straining to the breaking point, he heard a voice that made him want to sob with joy. Clint didn’t pause his conversation with Fury, but he did acknowledge Steve with a nod as he approached. “…just sayin’ if this doesn’t work and she doesn’t believe me, it’s gonna be a problem.”

“I have faith in you, Agent Barton,” Fury replied. “Now get in there and hope she doesn’t have another bout of morning sickness.”

“Please. Laura once puked on my pillow when she was knocked up with Lila then rolled over and went back to sleep.”

“And you, what, found it later?”

“Did I not mention my head was on the pillow at the time? Anyway, gimme five minutes with Nat and she’ll stop looking through the mirror like she can see us and is plotting our gruesome deaths.”

Steve held his breath as Clint went into the room.

Natasha was careful not to reveal that she had found a rough catch on the bedframe that she was now using to saw through the strap holding down her left hand via subtle friction, instead staring at her own reflection in the mirror on the assumption that someone was out there watching her back. Probably Mr. Muscles, the incompetent interrogator who tried to throw her off with the suggestion that she was the kind of woman who ‘made love’ even though he’d drugged and… She shut that particular complication out of her mind, reasoning that she’d had sex with people she didn’t want to before to get her job done and probably would again. There was every chance she’d wanted to fuck that мудак anyway, considering that he was handsome and built like a marble god, the exact type she’d choose. Still, there would be no mercy for him as soon as she snapped through this restraint.

She turned her attention to the door as it opened and she was barely able to conceal her surprise when Clint walked in. He looked older, somehow. He was probably just dehydrated after his surgery, which… “Should you even be out of bed right now?”

“Why not?” He plopped into the chair at her bedside, not looking like he was in pain or favoring his arm or chest.

“Clint, you got shot yesterday and…” she sighed heavily. “You’re not Clint. You’re just some actor, like Fake Fury.”
“Maybe. Seems like a lot of effort just to ask you a buncha questions we’ve known the answers to for years. You actually did complete all our reports from Budapest while you waited for me to get better. Then, once you found out I wasn’t gonna die, you went rogue for a week and came back after hunting down and killing every member of that unfortunate arms cartel. Fury probably would have chucked you in the stockade if you hadn’t brought back a couple servers-worth of intel on linked operations. I healed up just fine, by the way.” He slipped out of his plaid flannel so he could pull up the sleeve of his t-shirt to show her a scar partially obscured by a heart tattoo with the name ‘Laura’ inside. He’d told her about his secret life with his wife and year-old son that supposedly no one else at SHIELD knew about. Someone had obviously talked. Copy-Clint didn’t seem bothered. “Wanna she the one on my side, too?”

“You get some cutesy ink to cover that up, too?”

“Nah, that one’s au naturel. I’m more interested in how I can make you believe the truth.”

“Which truth is that? The one Mr. Muscles and Fake Fury were pushing that it’s really 2022 and I’ve got amnesia? Or that this is an interrogation?”

“Hey, does it make more sense that you smacked your head and can’t remember a few years or that some big bad captured you and set up an elaborate environment, complete with actors to play your friends and invented a whole biography for you that includes stuff you think is completely impossible, like you having a kid and being pregnant with your second?”

“It’s called Occam’s Razor and every good spy knows enough to throw in complications to skew perspective.”

“Okay, sure. But if you at least feel like maybe you want to be able to trust someone right now…” He stood and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “You were bleeding out in a little side chapel in Wawel Cathedral. You told me later you were planning to hide in the catacombs but couldn’t make it. At the very least, you figured you could claim sanctuary. And when you did…”

“You laughed at me.” She flashed back to that moment in Krakow when she’d resigned herself to death, having successfully eliminated her three targets only to be shot with a pair of arrows simultaneously. She’d stumbled down a street in the Old Town, taking cover in the trees of a park before crossing a main thoroughfare to toward the cathedral and castle, a vague thought about seizing the high ground flitting through her head. The idea about the catacombs had only come to her when she’d seen a sign inside the cathedral. If she had to die, she could do it amid the Polish kings. She had been so sure that the man standing over her with a bow in his hand was going to kill her in spite of her mindless whisper, ‘Sanctuary.’ But he hadn’t. He had laughed and said, “You’re not the hunchback in Notre Dame.”

“That’s right. And you criticized me because I pronounced ‘Notre Dame’ like the university instead of the French way. Then I bandaged you up.”

“You left the arrows in because you didn’t want to hurt me worse by pulling them out, but you did cut the shafts down.”

“Uh-huh. And you remember who picked us up?”

“Sitwell. He told you that you were crazy for bringing me in and that Fury was even crazier for giving you the green light to do it.”

“Yep. Came and got us in that ridiculous teal green Fiat Panda and bitched the whole way back to the quinjet in the suburbs. I think you passed out from blood loss partway there, so you might not
remember the ride.” Clint leaned back and sat down again. “Course, Sitwell turned out to be Hydra and now he’s dead. So maybe don’t put so much stock in his opinion. ‘Sides, you turned out pretty good.”

This was insane. Insane. She’d read the report Clint had written of the incident and the details didn’t go so far as to include what they’d said to each other. Even if he had discussed it with someone, there was no way… This was way too…

In spite of her attention to her conversation with Copy-Clint, she hadn’t stopped trying to free herself. Just as she was beginning to believe that she really was talking to her friend in 2022 and the rising urge to vomit was a result of morning sickness, she felt the strap break. Her observations while she’d been restrained told her that the knots were easily released if she could actually access them, so all she really needed now was twenty seconds and a distraction. She quickly settled on a classic ‘emotional woman’ feint and sniffled. “Am I really…Clint, how can this be real?”

“Hey, Nat, it’s okay.” He jumped up again and wrapped her in an awkward hug. “We’re gonna figure this out. You’re gonna be fine.”

“I…” She stopped fighting the nausea and threw up over his shoulder and down his back.

“Aw, Nat, no…”

As he turned to look at the mess, she swung her arm up, striking him across the side of his head. By the time he’d recovered from the shock, she had freed all but her left ankle, and she was out of the hospital bed when he rushed her. Ignoring the screaming pain as her catheter pulled out, she landed a blow to his throat, followed by a knee to his abdomen and a front kick to his balls. Copy-Clint folded with a gasp just in time for Mr. Muscles to rush into the room. He held up his hands like he wanted to surrender or calm her down. Fat fucking chance. “Natasha…”

He caught her first punch, but her second landed on his ribs; there was no give, barely even the feeling that she’d hit flesh rather than a solid surface. He continued countering her rather than trying to go on the offensive, staying between her and the door no matter what she did. How could this son of a bitch be so ready to…

“Got the tranqs!” Agent Hill shouted as she burst through the door.

“Wait!” Copy-Clint commanded, having recovered enough speak. “You seen Odette?”

“He cut Hill off with a sharp gesture as Natasha stopped trying to get past Mr. Muscles, repeating, “You. Seen. Odette?”

“No, just Odile,” Natasha replied with the countersign.

Clint nodded. “Check the lake?”

“I’ll tell Siegfried.” She sank to her knees. No one could have known the appropriate code phrases but Clint – the real Clint. And if he was really Clint, then it really was 2022 and… Mr. Muscles – Steve – caught her as she passed out without the aid of Hill’s tranquilizers.

Steve brought Clint a clean t-shirt as he walked into a hospital room to find him cradling a large icepack against his groin. He groaned as he shifted on his gurney. “Ugh, she hasn’t hit me like that since she found out that normal people pull their punches when you’re sparring. Those bastards
who trained her never taught her that.”

Steve nodded, still shaken by what had happened. Although she had been securely restrained and acting as if she was starting to understand and believe the truth, Natasha had still managed to free herself and fight. It was both physically and emotionally exhausting. “What, um, what was that you said to her?”

“Secure sign/countersign. We came up with a few when she first came to SHIELD so she’d know if the messenger was trustworthy if I couldn’t be there myself, but that one was just ours. Never had to use it before now.”

“Then you…”

“Relax, Cap. We stopped needing that kind of thing long before she even met you. Once she decided that Fury wasn’t plotting to kill her or have someone kill her, she settled in pretty good. Not like I have to remind you about meeting for the Avengers thing in…damn, has it been ten years since then? We really…”

“Wait.” Steve flashed back to Loki’s attack, his first experience with the modern incarnation of SHIELD. “Vision’s eyes. When he was shooting everything, I saw his eyes and they were just like when Loki used the scepter to control…” he trailed off, not wanting to remind Clint of that particularly difficult time. “Er, I mean…”

“Magic brainwashing, yeah. Oh! You think Loki has something to do with this?”

“No idea, but we know that the Mind Stone was originally in the scepter and it’s in Vision’s forehead now. There has to be some connection.” He started to pace around the small room. “We need to contact Thor to make sure Loki is still contained. Even if he is, maybe he knows something about how the Mind Stone works.”

“I can hobble down to Ops and tell Hill what’s up, send out the message. I take it you’re gonna hit up the lab and demand they fix Vision?”

“Something like that.” Before leaving the Infirmary, he checked in with Dr. Cho to find out if anything had changed with Natasha – still unconscious and now restrained with stronger bonds – and to let her know where to find him. With renewed hope, he crossed the compound in the early morning sunlight to the isolated building where Vision had been sequestered. During the walk, he pulled out his phone and dialed a familiar number.

Bucky picked up on the second ring. “What’s up?”

“No news yet, but we’re running down some leads. How’s James?”

“Stuffin’ his face. Hey, PJ, wanna talk to your dad?”

James had yet to swallow when he came on the line with a garbled, “Hi, Daddy! Uncle Bucky made meat omelets! There’s bacon an’ sausage an’ chicken an’”

“That sounds pretty good! You’re being good for him, right?”

“Of course, Daddy. He said we can take Toby to the dog park and the playground today. Will you be home later?”

“I don’t know, pal. We’ve got a lot going on right now.”
“Tryin’ to help Vision, huh?”

“Yeah. Did you have a bad dream about it?”

“No, but I miss you and Mommy. Is she there?”

Steve pressed his fist to his mouth, forcing himself not to cry out with his feelings in the moment. “Uh, she’s on the other side of HQ right now.”

“Tell her I love her. And I love you, Daddy!”

“Love you, James. Can you put Uncle Bucky back on?”

Toby barked in the background when James told him to say ‘hello’ as Bucky said, “So…”

“Just keep him occupied. I’ll let you know when there’s actually something going on.”

“’kay.” Bucky had a peculiar talent for conveying long sentiments in brief syllables. This one said, _Don’t worry because I’m taking care of James for as long as you need me to._ “Talk later?”

“Thanks, Buck.” Steve disconnected the call just as he arrived at the lab facility. Hopefully, Tony and Bruce had learned something in the past hours that would help get Natasha, Sam and Wanda back.

When Natasha awoke this time, her four-point restraints were now stainless steel chains. She was also no longer in a private room, but some kind of ward with two other patients, with a large window giving them a view into a larger clinic space, teeming with personnel in scrubs and unfamiliar uniforms. The uniformed people were clearly guards, armed with automatic weapons. The entire set-up certainly looked more modern than she was accustomed to, but so did movies that took place in space. This could easily be another set, designed to make her think she was…

Clint, though. Clint would have died before he gave up those code phrases. But what if he’d been compromised by other means? Or what if someone had found out about Laura and baby Cooper and threatened them to get what they wanted? Could she really trust anyone right now?

“Hey. Hey, Red. You awake?”

She turned her head to look at the other patient, a fit man she estimated to be in his mid-thirties who hadn’t been manacled to his hospital bed. Not a threat if she could get free. “Can I help you?”

“Just makin’ conversation.” The man grinned and snapped off a jaunty salute with his left hand, since his right arm was in a sling. “Airman Sam Wilson. Were you on the chopper with us?”

“What?”

“Sorry, but I picked up a head injury and can’t remember much past the crash. Hope I don’t get bumped back to the next indoc class.”

“What class?”

“Superman School, Red! You’re lookin’ at the Air Force’s top future Pararescueman! That maroon beret’s gonna look good on me!”

“Aren’t you a little old to be training for Special Ops?”
“Says you, Ms. MILF. I’ll have you know I’m my Mama’s 22 year old baby.”

“Sure you are.” Natasha rolled her eyes and leaned as far forward as she could to get a look at the other patient on the ward, a girl who was pretending to sleep. “Her, I would believe if she said 22. What’s her story?”

Sam got out of bed and took the few steps over to her to say in a low voice, “Says her name’s Wanda. She’s got an accent. I think she’s some kinda refugee. Keeps talkin’ about a place called Sokovia and askin’ about her brother. You ask me, he got himself killed tryin’ to escape.” His voice returned to a normal volume as he asked, “So what’s your deal, Red? How come they got you cuffed?”

She lunged forward just to seem him flinch back. “They’re afraid of me.”

“Uh-huh.” To her surprise, he leaned in to tug on one of the chains restraining her. “Should I be afraid?”

“Depends.”

He cocked his head in a familiar gesture. “On?”

“On whether you help me or whether you piss me off.”

“I suggest you don’t piss her off,” Agent Hill said as she came into the ward.

Sam immediately snapped to attention. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“At ease, Airman.” He assumed a less rigid posture, though he remained at parade rest. Hill shook her head in what could almost pass for amusement. “Romanoff, how are you feeling?”

“Oh, y’know. Or not. You don’t strike me as the type who’d approve of being chained to a bed with no pants, Agent Hill.”

“Show a little respect, Red,” Sam hissed at her before saying, “She just woke up, Ma’am, so she may still be a little disoriented. Ma’am.”

“Oh my God, Sam, relax!”

Sam looked shocked while Natasha had to laugh at the sudden outburst from the ever so repressed and controlled Hill.

She recovered quickly and turned back to Natasha. “I know you don’t remember Bruce Banner, but he’s coming over to take some scans of you, Sam and Wanda. He and Tony just invented a scanner based on what they’ve been doing with Vision and they’re the only ones who know how to use it. And we think it’s best that Tony not be here.”

“No, please, keep talking like we have any idea who these people are.”

“I just want you to prepare you, because his appearance is…unusual. We don’t want anyone to freak out.”

“Why do you think I need that lecture, Hill? Some of the things I’ve seen would make you shit your granny panties.”

Hill smiled, which just annoyed Natasha. “I’m gonna remember you said that when you eventually remember the Chitauri.”
“Go away, Hill. It’s bad enough you’re one of the few people I recognize without having to interact with you.”

“Just…” She sighed and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Wait, was Hill wearing an engagement ring? What a strange detail to fake, unless it wasn’t fake and it really was 2022. She didn’t say anything else before she left.

Sam waited until she disappeared from view of the windows to plop back into his bed. “Damn. There’s somethin’ about that woman.”

“She’s just…” A firework suddenly went off in Natasha’s brain and she nearly broke her wrists as she tried to sit up. “Sam, what year do you think it is?”

“Uh, ’scuse me?”

“You said you have memory loss, right? So what year is it?”

“2004.”

“And I think it’s 2006…” she murmured. Raising her voice, she called, “Wanda! Hey, kid!” When the girl didn’t stir, she switched to her limited stock of Sokovian phrases, “Do you know what day it is?”

All pretense of sleep was pushed aside as Wanda turned over to give Natasha a hard look. “You speak Sokovian,” she eventually said.

“Some. What year is it?”

Wanda stared at her without speaking for a long moment. She eventually said, “2011.”

“Then we’re all experiencing memory loss. If we go out on a limb and assume it’s really 2022…”

“Wait, it’s what?!” Sam asked.

“…or even if it isn’t, we all have the same major symptom. Maybe we were having weapon tested on us or we were all in some kind of military accident.”

“Yeah, except I’m the only one in the military here,” Sam protested.

“I’m a SHIELD agent, so…Wanda, you’re Sokovian. Any connection to the US?”

“None.” Wanda looked suspiciously toward the windows before slinking over to Natasha’s bedside. A red, wispy energy came from her fingertips, surrounding the shackle on Natasha’s wrist. “But I could not do this before.”

The cuff unlocked with soft click. “Any chance you’re gonna do the rest for me?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it,” Steve declared from the door.

Natasha would have argued if she hadn’t looked up at that moment and seen the green monster standing just behind her supposed-husband.

Okay, that was a pretty impressive prop.

Steve tried not to sympathize with the panicked look in Natasha’s eyes as they tracked Bruce’s
movements around the room. She hadn’t even reacted when Steve had reluctantly refastened her cuff. To be fair, it had taken the team quite a while to get used to the merged Banner-Hulk even when they’d known what Bruce had been attempting. And had grown used to the regular Hulk. It was a blessing that James only really remembered this new Professor Hulk. While the rest of the people in the room were now persuading Wanda, unexpectedly aware of her powers, back into bed, Steve took the opportunity to speak to Natasha again. “How are you feeling?”

“Angry. Frustrated.” Her gaze never left Bruce. “Not nauseous anymore, so that’s a nice change.”

“I’m sorry.”

She finally made eye contact as Bruce began his scan of Wanda with a large silver device. “You want me to be nauseous?”

“Nat, I…” He smiled at her teasing, in spite of stinging tone that accompanied it. “I know that you’ll probably just say they’re fake, but…would you like to see some pictures of James? Our son?”

Her expression was inscrutable for a moment. Then she shrugged. “If you put in the effort to make them, I guess I can at least look at them.”

He eagerly pulled out his phone and called up the photo gallery, populated almost entirely with family pictures. He tapped on one from the previous weekend, Natasha catching James as he came down the slide at the playground they frequented, Toby bouncing around in the background. He scrolled through the day, which included pictures of him pushing James on the swing, James and Toby playing fetch, Natasha hugging James as Toby licked her face…

“Cute. Not what I would have imagined for myself, but cute. I like how you included the dog. Are they totally fake or did you replace your real wife with me in some existing photos?”

“Nat, you are my wife.” He went back through the gallery, showing her pictures of their family at home, at the zoo, at HQ… “I thought Clint convinced you…”

“He convinced me that you people can corrupt anyone, and that’s what I’m going with until I see some real evidence that this amnesia bullshit, which you’ve apparently tossed some other people into – I haven’t quite decided if they’re actors or victims of weapons testing that we were all guinea pigs for, but…if I see some evidence it’s real, I might be a little more trusting. Maybe stop trying so hard, Steve.”

She didn’t shy away from the hand he stroked down her forearm. “I just want you back. James asked me to remind you that he loves you, by the way.”

“Uh-huh. Well, you can tell imaginary James to go to hell.”

Steve’s effort to keep the hurt off his face was relieved by Bruce’s approach. He waved the scanner in her direction. “Nat, I just need a minute to…”

“What the fuck is your deal?”

Bruce sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “I know this is very confusing and you probably don’t want me here…”

“Why wouldn’t I want a ten-foot-tall green giant standing over me instead of selling me vegetables?”
Steve tried to jump in, “Nat, Bruce is a good friend and he…”

“He’s a fucking green creature! What kind of future is…”

Bruce silenced her by grasping her face in one hand while he ran the scanner over her head with the other. “All set.”

“What the actual fuck?” she shouted, clearly not done with Bruce. “If I wasn’t cuffed right now…”

“You’d what?” The old, angry Hulk reared his head for a moment before his normal demeanor took over. “I really don’t care about your threats, Nat. I just want to help you get back to yourself.”

“It’ll be okay.” Steve leaned down to peck Natasha’s cheek, though he left the ward with Bruce shortly after, still not confident about the way they were handling the situation. “So, how long do you think it will be before you’ve got a cure?”

“Steve, we haven’t even analyzed the data yet. I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

“Sorry. I just…I feel like we’re on a deadline, here. I don’t want to have to explain to James why his Mom doesn’t know who he is.”

“We’re doing our best, Cap, I promise.”

“I know, Bruce. I just want my wife back.”

“Try to be patient. Thor told us that Loki is secure, but his people are still looking into their archives about the Mind Stone to try and figure out what happened and how to reverse it. We just have to keep working.”

Steve told himself to remain positive. “Thanks, Bruce. Don’t let me keep you from working.”

“You’re not. I’m just wondering if more convincing measures might be needed.”

“How can I…” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “I can’t bring James in when his mother doesn’t know him.”

“I just think it’ll be hard for her to deny she’s his mother when she sees they’ve got the same eyes. Just a suggestion.”

Steve sank into a chair outside the Infirmary, cell phone in his hand.

Natasha was trying to multitask, processing the presence of the green monster man somewhere nearby while reassessing her chances of escaping. She would no longer be able to count on Wanda’s strange powers, as the girl had agreed to have her hands wrapped up in some mitten-like restraints because she was afraid of her own red, wispy stuff and Sam had declared himself loyal to whatever nonsensically named American entity was claiming to have captured them. The gullible idiot just assumed that their captors had to be American based on their accents. Natasha was alone again among facsimiles of her colleagues, plus some random other players who could be working for almost anyone and had turned Clint to their side. Her only real hope was contacting him and turning him back, or finding out what kind of game he was playing to bring down this operation and free her.

“That beard guy – the one who came in with Jolly Green – he said he was your husband, didn’t he?”
In spite of the fact that she was putting out her best ‘leave me alone’ vibes, Sam couldn’t be
dissuaded from socializing. Natasha would have turned to Wanda’s go-to – faking sleep – if she
wasn’t so interested in maintaining surveillance. “People say things. Doesn’t make them true.”

“Sure, I just…you shoulda seen your face when he was showin’ you those pictures on his little
electronic thing.”

“iPhone.” That was definitely a bothersome detail. She’d had a SHIELD-issue smartphone for over
a year, but the one Steve had been holding was more advanced than even that, never mind the
basic one that had been released to the public. “Isn’t the Air Force up on the latest tech?”

“Dude, I just replaced my RAZR with a Sidekick, like two months ago. I have no idea what a
iPhone is.”

“Seriously?” Either this guy really did think it was 2004 or he’d been really well coached. She tried
to think back to any significant events of that year. Hitting on one that she only knew about
because her assignment had taken her to Boston at the time, she asked, “Who won the World Series
this year?”

“Goddamn Marlins. Knew I shouldn’ta bet on the Yankees after what they did to my Braves in the
‘90s, but I learned my lesson.”

She shook her head. “The Red Sox won in 2004. There were riots in Boston.”

“Nice try, but it’s the middle of June and the Sox are, like, a little over .500, I think. Unless…is this
like, Back to the Future where you come back in time and tell me who to bet on?”

“Why would I do that? I don’t even know you.”

“Yeah, but maybe we’re gonna meet and this is some kinda business arrangement. We should
probably exchange numbers.”

“Smooth. Also, pretty bold for a guy who just asked if the tall, muscular, bearded guy was my
husband.”

“Hey, you said it wasn’t true and I don’t think that hot brunette is interested so…”

Natasha had to chuckle at the thought of Hill being interested in anyone, even if she was wearing
an engagement ring in this little scenario. “You’ve got strange tastes, Sam.”

“They keep the women pretty far away from us during training to minimize distractions. Uh, not
that I think women shouldn’t be allowed…or that women can’t…um…look, I just think it says a lot
that you’re chained up and Eastern Europe over there has weird mittens but no one thinks the guy
training for Special Ops presents a threat. So…” He held up a fist. “Equality. Yeah.”

Natasha shook her head. “When I get out of here, I’ll try to knock you out so I don’t have to kill
you, okay?”

“Gee, thanks.”

She tried to turn her full attention back to her escape plan, but Sam immediately launched into a
story about a night at a dive bar outside Lackland that ended with him bailing out his buddies.

Steve met Bucky’s car at the entrance of the main building of the compound, rushing to the back
door of the SUV to greet his son. “Hey, buddy!”

“Daddy!” James didn’t wait for the buckles on his car seat to be released before he reached out for a hug. Steve grasped him as he squeezed the clasps and pressed the buttons until James was freed to pull him into a real hug. The angle allowed Toby to show Steve his appreciation via doggy kisses.

“You having a good day with Uncle Bucky?”

“Yeah, we went to the playground and I went on the monkey bars! I did it all by myself and I didn’t even need Uncle Bucky to catch me!”

Steve laughed as he held his son to his chest. James began to squirm before he had the urge to let him go. “Daddy, you’re hugging really tight!”

“Sorry, pal.” He carefully set James down. “I just love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Daddy. Where’s Mommy?”

“Buddy…” Steve knelt so he was at his son’s eye level and took a deep breath. He always did his best to be honest with James, but that didn’t always translate into tact. That had always been Natasha’s forte. Steve tried to explain, “Mommy is in the hospital right now because she lost her memory. Do you know what that means?”

“Mommy doesn’t know that Toby had an accident on the carpet last week?”

“Um, no. She doesn’t. But she also doesn’t remember you or me and it’s gonna be really hard for all of us until the doctors can make Mommy better, okay?”

James didn’t look sure, but nodded. “Can I still see her?”

“I think it might help her if you do, but there are some things I have to tell you about before you do, because I don’t want you to be scared.”

“Why would Mommy scare me?”

Steve wasn’t entirely convinced that he’d reassured James almost an hour later. Although he understood that Natasha didn’t know who he or Steve were and didn’t realize what year it was, he also seemed to think that she would forget what she didn’t remember when she saw him. He also didn’t seem to accept that Natasha had to be in handcuffs right now. Steve had run out of ways to explain the situation. He still wasn’t sure about taking James to see Natasha, but he’d never been able to deny those eyes.

Natasha continued to joke with Sam between attempts to get out of her cuffs. There was only so much she could do without a free hand or particular tools. She was systematically tugging the chains along the bedframe in search of a weak spot when she looked up through the windows. Steve was watching her again, but this time he had a little boy in his arms. This particular little boy looked like a very young version of Steve with reddish-blonde hair and green eyes. He was the same little boy from the pictures Steve had shown her, but his eyes hadn’t been so obvious in the photos.

There was no way…none whatsoever…Natasha felt her throat tighten as Steve carried the little boy into the ward. She almost wished she could reach out the same way he reached toward her. “Mommy!”
Steve set the boy down on her bed and he proceeded to wrap his arms around her neck and cover her face with kisses. She returned a few in spite of herself. There were even tears welling in her eyes. “I… I…”

“It’s okay, Mommy. Daddy told me that we just have to love you extra hard right now until you get your rememberies back.”

“I’m… I…” The little boy chose that moment to lean back and smile, causing her to almost completely lose it. Her perception of reality had never been more askew. Even as a child in the Red Room, she would never have been able to feign that level of attachment, that kind of love at such a young age… “I’m sorry.”

The little boy – her son – continued to smile as he dove in for another hug. “I love you, Mommy. I hope you can come home soon!”

She pressed a kiss to his cheek as Steve picked him up. “C’mon, James. This can’t be a long visit because Mommy needs her rest.”

All of her questions and doubts about her memory loss disappeared as she watched the little boy with her eyes carried out of the room in his father’s arms, still reaching for her. His gaze only diverted from her once, when he saw the amnesiac Airman. “Hi, Sam. You have to remember, too! Love you, Mommy!”

The moment Steve and James left the ward, James still visibly shouting through the windows, Sam turned to Natasha. “Okay, you gotta admit – that was freaky.”

That final statement stuck in her mind more than anything. “He knew you.”

“Hey, I maybe just look like someone the little brother knows. He definitely knows you, though, Mommy.”

“Please don’t.”

“C’mon, Red. You just had toddler cuddling on you. You’re gonna tell they trained a little kid, who, by the way definitely looks like you made him with help from Beard Guy, to pretend some stranger was his Mom?”

“It could… someone could do it,” she replied, wishing desperately that she lived in a world where that wasn’t true. Just because her own training wouldn’t have produced such results, there was nothing to indicate it couldn’t be done via alternate techniques. If this really was a creative interrogation, they’d selected just about the cruelest torture, forcing her to imagine a future she knew she could never have, making her believe and hope and…

Sam was suddenly standing beside her, dabbing under her eyes with a tissue. “Hey, hey, it’s okay, Red. The way that kiddo was lookin’ at you… bet he’s a Mama’s boy. And I say that in the most complimentary way possible, because I myself love, respect and appreciate my Mama like nobody’s business.” He folded the tissue around her nose. “Blow.”

“Thank you.” She pulled herself together and decided on a new course of action. “What if we accept what they’re telling us? What if we do have some kind of targeted, specific amnesia?”

“Says the woman so opposed to that explanation they had to chain you down. You sayin’ now… oh, no. I got you. Get ‘em to trust you so they let you up then unleash hell, right?”

She shook her head and looked through the window until someone made eye contact. “Hey! Get
Fury in here. Tell him we want a briefing or something.”

Once the frightened tech had rushed off to fulfill the request, Sam asked, “Is Fury that bald pirate guy with the leather fetish?”

Natasha had to smile at the characterization, but did fill in, “He’s the Director of SHIELD.”

“And you trust him?”

“Sam, don’t be dense. I just told you he’s the head of an intelligence organization. He’ll say anything to achieve his aims.”

“And you wanna talk with him, why?”

“Because I think his main goal is restoring his assets, of which I’m absolutely one and I think you might be another.”

“Yeah, except I’m USAF.”

“In ’04 you are. Who’s to say you’re not working for SHIELD in ’22?”

“Not a terrible guess, Romanoff,” Fury said as he came in, “but you, Rogers and Wilson here destroyed SHIELD back in 2014. I approved, of course, and Hill assisted. Now you’re all Avengers, but we’re not about to get into that now. Now, I think you’re more interested in learning about what happened yesterday.”

Even Wanda stopped pretending to be asleep when Fury said that. Clint suddenly appeared with a laptop that he made sure to hold at an angle Natasha could see. Fury tapped a key and a video began to play. “This is security footage from the communal lounge of the living quarters at roughly 1600 hours. Wilson, you can see the back of your fat head on the sofa with Barnes on the other end. Rogers Junior is between you two. Maximoff, you can see part of your arms toward the corner of the frame by the chessboard. Then…”

A burst of yellowish light filled the screen and a body was thrown across the room. The other man, Barnes, ran from the room clutching something in his arms. Natasha gasped, “James!”

“Yeah, Barnes got him outta there. Here’s Wilson.” Sam made an attempt to tackle the floating… man? shooting the beams of light from his forehead, but was hit and collided with the back of the sofa. “So Vision is out of control for thirty seconds or so, just blowing up the place until…” Steve ducked into the room and threw something that looked like a Widow’s Bite disc at this Vision thing. Natasha saw herself sneaking in. She and Steve worked to hit their adversary with enough electricity to knock him out, but not before she was hit by the final burst of light. Fury cut the feed as Steve rushed to tend to Natasha’s unconscious body.

“So, that’s what happened. Vision went nuts for reasons we don’t yet understand and the three of you were caught in the line of fire. Your memory loss is linked to this incident and we’re doing all we can to reverse it.”

It was unbelievable and ridiculous. Natasha listened as Sam and Wanda asked Fury about who this Vision was, which led to an explanation about something called the Mind Stone and a brief recap about an alien attack in New York and some further nonsense that nevertheless answered a lot of questions. Natasha felt her nausea ramping up again as she listened to Fury talk and talk, an unusual circumstance for him.

Clint seemed sensitized to her expression and held up a basin for her. There was nothing but
greenish bile in her stomach to bring up, but she continued to retch for a few gasps even when she had nothing left. She did notice that the rest of the group had moved away a few steps, even as Clint stayed at her side. “When was the last time you ate, Nat?”

“No idea.”

“Okay, let’s get you a tray. Fury?”

“Yeah, it’s almost dinnertime and Helen’s been on my ass about starving the pregnant woman. You’re on IV fluids, aren’t you? Just don’t think this means you’re getting out of those cuffs, Romanoff.”

Clint frowned as Fury walked out, but Natasha nodded. “Fine. It’s probably safer for everyone to keep me restrained until I get my memory back. There’s no telling when I might see something that changes my mind about what’s going on.”

“No, you’re getting your right hand out because I ain’t gonna feed you.”

“But I’m left-handed.”

“Exactly. I’ll sit here with a taser or something and watch you pretend to be awkward with a fork in your right hand until you’re finished and lock you back up myself.”

“Fine.” When he continued to frown at her she said, “Seriously, Clint. I’m hungry and I promise I’ll eat whatever I’m given with a plastic spork that can’t be used to pick locks. Are we good?”

“We’d be better if you could remember anything past Budapest. Shit, Nat. We can’t have that as the high point of our friendship. How’m I gonna tell Lila that Auntie Nat isn’t gonna teach her to sing that Les Mis song for her spring musical audition?”

“Did you really just put those words together in a sentence that makes sense?”

“Hey, I’m not the one who dreamed a dream or whatever. Lila’s fourteen now, by the way. Coop’s eighteen and Nate is seven. Try not to punch me when I unlock you, huh?”

She stretched her arm when he did, appreciating the blood flow through her muscles as she went through a series of movements to maximize her range of motion. She continued rotating her arm through a planned sequence as the promised tray was set on the over-bed table by a cautious tech.

“Thanks.”

Sam pulled the cover from his main plate and shouted, “Chicken parm! I got chicken parm and green beans, penne and did I mention the chicken parm? Plus salad and chocolate pudding, plus water, apple juice and ginger ale? I know I’m not at Lackland now!”

Natasha stabbed at her own identical meal with the plastic spork she’d predicted would be provided in the least threatening manner she could manage. Clint didn’t react from his seat at her bedside. She went at her salad more aggressively, in spite of the fact that she couldn’t open the small packet of Italian dressing. She managed to shovel the majority of the meal into her mouth because she really was hungry. As she was finishing the offerings on her tray, she realized this was a good opportunity to check one of the other things that had been bothering her. She reached down the front of her johnny on the pretext of scratching an itch.

The scar she’d ascribed to creative make-up was still there, feeling completely real. She tried to find some sort of edge to peel up, but there was nothing. Clint piped up, “If you’re done eating and feeling yourself up, I should probably cuff you again.”
“Yeah, sure.” She positioned her hand to be restrained again.

He hesitated to snap the bracelet back around her wrist. “Either you’ve decided we’re telling the truth and you really do have amnesia or you’re going along with this because you’ve got an even deadlier plan to unleash your horrible vengeance?”

“Leaning toward the former.”

“Thought so.” He secured the cuff around the bedframe rather than her wrist. “I’ll just get this tray out of your way, huh?”

“You realize that you might as well have just unlocked them all, right?”

“Maybe, but I figure you should at least have something to do while you think about how to get the catheter out. I heard someone say something about a bigger balloon after you yanked the last one out, so…just a warning ‘cause it sounds painful.”

She was definitely feeling how much of a mistake that action had been between her legs. “If I’m going to be up and around, they should probably just take it out.”

“I’ll tell a nurse to be in here in a minute, so feel free to spread your legs.”

“Don’t be gross, Clint.”

“Eh, I can always have Rogers come down if you’d rather hear that from him.”

She vaguely recalled Fury referring to James as ‘Rogers Junior’ during his narration of the security feed. “I take it Rogers is Steve?”

“Yup. You married Steve Rogers.” Clint waggled his eyebrows. “You.”

“I have no idea why you find that so amusing.”

“Aw, the Russians didn’t learn you up real good about Captain America?”

“What does World War II have to do with my husband?” She found it odd that ‘husband’ felt less foreign than ‘World War II’ in her mouth, but it could have been because they’d always learned the history of the Great Patriotic War in the Red Room. “Is he related to Captain America or something?”

Clint just laughed and refused to explain. At least he was the one who had to tell the onrushing guards that her ensuing headlock was a purely playful gesture that he totally deserved.

Steve was playing Avengers action figures with James in the living room of their HQ suite, the lounge still a wreck from Vision’s rampage. The coffee table was proving an insurmountable obstacle for the robots trying to defeat Captain America and Black Widow, with whom James was defending the high ground. Steve wasn’t entirely clear on who the robots were or why they were attacking; he just knew that he had to make a lot of ‘beep-boop’ sounds while a small plastic version of him growled ‘take that!’ while flinging a flimsy shield. James had first suggested that they have to fight the Hulk with no memories of his friends, but Steve had shot that one down quickly.

Bucky suddenly flew Yoda over the robots, saying in a funny high-pitched voice, “You can’t defeat Hypno-Toad and his robot armies!”
“Uncle Bucky, Yoda’s from *Star Wars*, not real life! Plus, he’s a Jedi and they’re good! He’d be on Mommy and Daddy’s side!” James shot back – literally, with a spring-loaded projectile that came with the Black Widow action figure for some reason. “But maybe Darth Vader is controlling the robots with the Dark Side!”

“I dunno, PJ, Hypno-Toad here looks pretty shady to me.”

“What’s ‘shady’ mean?”

Steve missed a no doubt fascinating definition that would require lots of correction later as he rose to answer a knock at the door, which also caught Toby’s attention. He opened it to find Clint standing there with a somewhat nonplussed Natasha, dressed in standard light blue medical scrubs. Clint gave him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “Hey, Cap. Bad news is she still can’t remember you, but the good news is she believes she’s got amnesia and we’re on the up and up with her.”

“Dr. Cho thinks it might be better to get me out of the Infirmary for a while, but that might just be to relieve some stress on her staff.” Natasha met Steve’s eyes for a moment before looking away again. She turned her attention to Toby, who was nudging her hands and whining for some affection. “I’m staying in some kind of guest room for now, but I just wanted you to know what was…” She trailed off as a shriek of laughter came from behind Steve and Toby immediately rushed off toward it.

“James and Bucky are just playing,” he said dismissively, more interested in Natasha’s sudden change of heart. “What convinced you? Or…you don’t have to answer that if it sounds like something someone trying to convince you would say. Not that I’m not trying to, but…that’s because it’s real and the truth and not…I’m just glad to see you up and about, okay? And I totally understand that you’ll want your own space until you remember the past fifteen years. I just…can I hug you?”

She chuckled and gave him the half-smile he loved. “Well, I did wake up naked with you, so… bring it in, Beard Guy.”

It felt so good to have his wife in his arms that he took his time appreciating the feeling before asking, “Beard Guy?”

“Sam gave you a nickname. I thought it was weird since he has a beard too, but,” she reached up to comb her fingernails along his jaw, a gesture with which he was intimately familiar, “your beard is better.”

“Um, thanks.” He forced himself not to push for more and reluctantly let her go. “Did you want to see James?”

She glanced to Clint, as if asking for permission. “I think I would.” Before he could step back into the suite, she added, “Dr. Cho did another ultrasound before she discharged me and the baby is fine.”

“Good.” He reflexively reached for her flat stomach, catching himself at the last moment. “Sorry.”

She smiled and pulled his hand the rest of the way to settle on her belly. “It’s okay, Steve. This is strange for both of us.”

“Thanks, Nat. Anyway, come on in.”

Clint followed her, an unspoken security guard. Natasha was tentative, moving slowly through what should have been a familiar space. A smile broke across her face as she caught sight of James
in the living room, but it disappeared just as quickly.

Steve almost didn’t catch her as she surged forward and he knew he wouldn’t have been able to restrain her without hurting her if Clint hadn’t been there to grab her from behind. “Nat, no!”

“Don’t you know who that is?” she hissed.

James looked absolutely terrified, standing between his flailing mother and his frozen uncle. “Mommy? Are you okay?”

“You’re allowing our son in the same room as the Winter Soldier?”

“It’s not what you think…”

“He shot me last year! I almost died on a road…”

“Outside Odessa,” Clint finished with her. “Yeah. I found you. It was bad.”

She continued to struggle between Steve and Clint, “He’s an assassin who shouldn’t be anywhere near a child, much less my child!”

“But, Mommy, it’s just Uncle Bucky!” James cried.

Totally at a loss how to calm down the situation, Steve went with the only idea that popped into his head and leaned down to kiss Natasha. After moment, she was kissing him back. It probably would have lasted longer had Clint, who was still holding from behind, not cleared his throat to indicate his awkward position. Natasha slowly opened her eyes and looked up at Steve. “That was nice.” For a moment, he thought he was in a Disney movie and had just solved the curse with true love’s kiss, but then she continued, “But I’m still gonna kill him.”

Expecting the onslaught this time, Steve simply picked Natasha up and carried her toward their bedroom, trusting Bucky and Clint to sort out James for a moment. He took it as a good sign that she stopped fighting half-way down the hall. He set her on the edge of the bed and knelt in front of her, hoping she wouldn’t take advantage of her superior position while also demonstrating that he trusted her not to. He could almost hear the argument she was having with herself in her head, so he took her hands in both of his. “The man out there is not the Winter Soldier anymore. He’d been brainwashed by Hydra to carry out difficult missions but you helped me rescue him and get his mind right.”

“And why, exactly, did you want to rescue him?”

“This is gonna sound crazy, but…” Steve recapped his old friendship with Bucky, losing him in World War II (which led to a long digression about his own life and its 70 year interruption), finding out he was alive but not himself, everything he could think of. “And after you and Sam helped me track him down, our friends in Wakanda were able to heal him. He’s one of us now and he would never, ever do anything to hurt James.” He gave her hands a gentle squeeze. “Okay?”

“No. It’s not. But none of this is. I wake up thinking I had a one night stand but it turns out I’m in bed with my husband and I have a whole life I didn’t have yesterday that includes my son calling a man who tried to kill me ‘Uncle Bucky.’ How could any of that be okay?” She pulled her hands away to scrub them aggressively over her face.

He moved to sit beside her on the bed, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “We’re gonna find a way to fix this.”
“I hope so.” Her tone was anything but hopeful. “At least I can be secure in the knowledge that my alleged husband is a good kisser.”

“Well, you make sure I always get a lot of practice.”

She allowed him to demonstrate until Clint knocked on the door to check on them. “Uh, Barnes peaced out about ten minutes ago and the little man wants to see you.”

Steve waited for Natasha to nod before he called out, “Yeah, we’re coming.”

Natasha was starting to feel very conflicted about how much she liked the life this version of her had built, with her family and friends and career as a superhero who made a habit of saving the world. She could hardly wrap her mind about how she could have wiped the red from her ledger so decisively that she’d allowed herself these things. Even the damn dog seemed to know and love her. It was all too good to be true. And yet…

Toby was napping on her feet and James was snuggling against her side on the couch, reading a colorfully illustrated storybook about an alien attack on New York that she and the Avengers successfully fought off. She was most amused that, while she and Clint were wearing their usual suits, Steve was dressed in a red, white and blue monstrosity with a matching shield. She also recognized the green monster man, but not the other two characters fighting on their side. She tapped her finger against the robot in red and yellow. “Who’s this?”

“Iron Man. He doesn’t always get along with you and Daddy because he’s a arrogant mustard, but you’re still friends. He has a new suit now that’s more red.” He flipped the page to a full panel of a blond in armor holding up a big mallet. “And that’s Thor! He’s from Asgard and he can shoot lightning with his hammer! He’s awesome!”

They went through the rest of the book, with James explaining the battle while Natasha asked questions. The story ended with a scene in a damaged restaurant and James shouting, “Shawarma!”

“So, the Avengers won the battle and then went to lunch?”

“Something like that,” Steve said, smiling from his seat on James’ other side. “Took me almost two years after that to work up the courage to ask you on a real date.”

“And Daddy’s the bravest man there is!” She watched her son look up at his father with adoring eyes before he turned them on her. “But Mommy’s so tough when she fights bad guys that even Daddy is scared!”

“Do you think I’m scary?”

She noticed his hesitation before he said, “No.”

“I scared you today when I saw the…when I saw your uncle, though.”

He ducked his face into her stomach while shaking his head, wrapping his small arms around her.

“I’m sorry, James.” She stroked his soft hair. “I’m so sorry. I just…I don’t want you to be scared and I want to protect you and I want to remember you and be your mom and…”

There were suddenly two small hands clasping her tear-stained cheeks and the small boy she wanted so desperately to really be hers was staring earnestly into her eyes. “You’re the best Mommy ever and me and Daddy will tell you everything even if you can’t remember.” He leaned
forward and planted a sloppy kiss right on her lips. “‘Sides, you still give special Mommy kisses and hugs, so that means you remember some stuff.”

Steve gave her a half-grin and made a kissy-face at her over James’ head. It was true that they had some excellent kissing chemistry, which could indicate she had retained some physical memories even if her biographical ones were gone. She reached out to pick up one of the action figures on the coffee table. “So, it looks like you’ve got some cool toys here. I think this one actually looks like a man I met in the hospital.”

“That’s Sam!” James became excited as he took the winged figure from her hand. “He’s the Falcon! He’s got wings and a jetpack and he gives you air support! And he watches cartoons we like with me and he was Daddy’s bestest man and…”

She smiled as James went on, showing her his other Avengers action figures and explaining the things they could do. She was most interested when he held up ‘Wanda, the Scarlet Witch’ who had ‘special magic powers’ that allowed her to ‘throw stuff real far or make it blow up,’ and ‘Vision,’ who was a robot with ‘a magic gem’ that gave him ‘super special powers.’ James looked sad as he held the Vision figure. “He’s usually really nice, but he was scary last time I saw him.”

Steve reached out to rub James’ back. “Yeah, buddy. We don’t know what happened to Vision, but we don’t think he did anything on purpose. Once Bruce and Tony help him, we think that will help Mommy, Sam and Wanda. That’s good, right?”

“Yeah!” James reached out to grab the Captain America and Black Widow action figures. “Then you can go back to leading the Avengers!”

As he involved the toys in a play battle with some figures that looked like the aliens from the storybook, Steve sidled over to her. “You are a good mom, y’know. Loving but firm. He knows I’m the soft touch while you provide the appropriate consequences.”

“You make me sound like a disciplinarian.”

“Only when necessary. He mostly does the right thing himself because of you.”

“Steve, I…” She got another excellent kiss to silence her protest. “Is this how we always resolve disagreements?”

“Uh, not exactly. We’re pretty good about talking. And other things.”

She ran her fingertips over the head wound that was mostly healed by now. Modern technology could explain the rapid healing. If it could reverse brainwashing and allow an infertile woman to get pregnant, healing flesh wounds was probably a breeze. She let her head drop against Steve’s shoulder as their son declared victory against all adversaries in the action figure war.

Steve tried not to get overly invested in Natasha’s amorous overtures over dinner in the galley and afterwards in their quarters in spite of Clint’s continued presence, but he still found himself on top of her in their bed at HQ after tucking James in. He pressed his lips to hers as he thrust into her. “Nat, you feel…”

“Shut up, Steve.” She angled her neck just enough to allow him to kiss a line from her jaw to her collarbone. He pushed into her again with the feel of his hands on her hips.

“Oh, Nat…”
“Steve!”

“Natasha!” he cried as they reached an almost simultaneous climax. She panted underneath him, clutching his body against hers, tracing her fingertips over the muscles of his back and arms as she ran her hands over him. He kissed her deeply. “I love you so much.” He watched the fight in her eyes before saying, “You don’t have to say it back. I just want you to know how I feel.”

“But I do love you! You’re the love of my life and we’ve made such a wonderful life together.”

“Natasha…”

Steve’s eyes snapped open in his dark bedroom, alone. Well. At least his subconscious was in full agreement with his conscious mind, wanting his wife back so desperately… He sighed and climbed out of bed to clean himself up and change his pajama pants. That certainly hadn’t happened in quite a while, but it had been a pretty nice dream, the kind he only usually had when she was away on a mission for extended time.

As he crawled back under the covers, he thought back to earlier in the evening. Although Natasha had been a little more open with him, she had still decided to sleep in a room of the guest suite the Bartons used after she and Steve had put James to bed. Steve couldn’t lie to himself; it hurt to look at Natasha and see a virtual stranger looking back at him. She had shown some sparks of her usual self with James. And when they kissed. Steve would just have to accept that they might…

“Cap! Hey, Cap!” Tony shouted over the internal comms. “You awake?”

He rubbed his eyes. “Something happened?”

“Vision looks like he’s starting to rise and hopefully not shine too much. I told Bruce to take off ‘cause God knows we don’t want Professor Hulk losing his mind, but maybe you could run down here and help me out?”

“Help you how, exactly?”

“I dunno, pick up some heavy things? Sing the national anthem? Don’t you want Vision to wake up?”

“I can’t just leave James alone.”

“Kiddo’s sleeping, isn’t he? Just get one of your babysitters to come over. I mean, I understand that Barnes needs all the beauty sleep he can get, but…”

“No, not Bucky. Nat doesn’t trust him right now and she’s got enough going on without coming over here and finding the Winter Soldier alone with James.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard they let the Red Menace out of the Infirmary. Why can’t she just hang out? Isn’t she there anyway? Why are we having this conversation?”

“She’s staying with Barton for the moment.”

“Whoa, didn’t realize she regressed that far. Hope Laura doesn’t find out.”

“That’s not… just shut up, Tony. I’ll be there in a few minutes, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Arrange your childcare and I’ll call Rhodey to keep me company in the meantime.”

A quick conversation with Clint and a peck on the lips from Natasha later, Steve was running
toward the lab on the edge of the compound. Rhodey was already there, arguing with Tony. “Did you not see what he did to the lounge? Did you get hit with an amnesia beam like three of our friends?”

“All I’m saying is that maybe he might react poorly if he opens his eyes and sees you targeting him!”

Rhodey narrowed his eyes, but lowered his armed repulsors and his minigun. “I’m keeping my armor on, though.”

“I totally support you in that. Hey, Cap. Nice of you to join us.”


Steve had to smile, as Rhodey sometimes liked to needle Bucky that James was actually named after him because he was such a good role model. “Nat’s not trying to kill everybody and James is taking it in stride. It’s about the best we could hope for at the moment.”

“I’m sure whatever Bruce has been up to will help.”

“What am I, demoted to glamorous assistant?” Tony whined petulantly. “Should I put on my corset and wait to get sawed in half? Rhodey, don’t answer that.”

Steve was about to come out with his own snarky response when Vision, who had just been twitching slightly on the examination table, sat up. Rhodey flipped his mask down and redeployed his armaments, Tony grabbed some sort of scanner and Steve approached cautiously. “Vision? Are you in control?”

“I believe I am, Captain. Did I do much damage to the facility?”

“The base we can fix. We’re more concerned about our friends right now.”

“I have injured someone?”

“Natasha, Sam and Wanda are all suffering memory loss.”

“And it was related to this.” Vision touched the Mind Stone in his forehead before swinging his legs off the table and moving to stand. Rhodey immediately took on a more threatening posture, but Steve waved him back. Vision’s eyes were no longer that strange swirling blue, but their normal color. He went on, “I assure you, it was never my intention to harm anyone. I felt as if I was not in control of my own body. I cannot understand why this occurred.”

“How do we make sure it doesn’t happen again?” Rhodey asked.

“Again, Colonel, I do not know. Perhaps it is safer if I remain confined for the time being.”

“But do you think you can do anything about Nat?” As an afterthought, Steve added, “And Sam and Wanda?”

“You misunderstand my intentions, Captain. I can see that Mr. Stark and, I assume, Dr. Banner have been working on the problem. I shall assist them while remaining in isolation. I believe it will be safer for all involved.”

“Right. So…” Tony clapped his hands together. “Cap, sorry to get you up in the middle of the night. Rhodey, you can hang out or go on a pizza run, your choice. Bruce is probably set up in the
main building by now so…unless you’ve developed some kind of scientific expertise beyond your PhD in disapproving glares, nighty-night.”

Rather than feeding into the tension, Steve reminded himself that Tony had been awake and working nonstop for hours, having left Pepper and Morgan at home the moment he had been called in to help. “Okay. You want me to ask someone to send coffee or something out?”

Tony actually seemed to soften just a bit. “Nah, we got a pot on. Go get your old man sleep.”

When Steve arrived back in his quarters, he found that Clint was sprawled on the couch, snoring with his mouth open. In spite of looking as if he was completely out, he waved as Steve passed. Natasha was occupying her usual side of their bed, awake and reading from a tablet. She greeted him with a small smile. “Hey.”

“Hey. Uh, Vision’s awake, so he’s helping to figure out the memory thing now, but there’s nothing really happening yet.” He shifted from one foot to the other. “So…”

“Just sleep on the other side of the bed, Steve.”

“Only if it’s okay with you.” He removed his shoes and socks but kept on the t-shirt and jogging pants he’d worn to the lab. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Considering how we last woke up…” She held up her tablet to show him what she’d been reading. “I think I can trust Captain America to be honorable.”

“Ugh, is that the Smithsonian Exhibit Catalogue?”

“Clint showed it to me. Turns out I married quite the American hero.”

“Is that why you’re trying to tempt me into bed with you?”

“No, I just find it interesting. For me, I defected from the KGB – the antithesis of all things American – about two years ago. Kinda weird I managed to swing so far to the other side.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.” He slipped under the covers, being sure to remain closer to the edge of the mattress than the middle. “Just so you know, our relationship isn’t really based on any American or Russian psychological stuff. We just spent a lot of time working together and it kind of went from there.”

“Oh? And what did we learn working together?”

“Mutual respect for each other’s skills, strengths, intelligence. You actually helped me acclimate to the 21st century a lot because you treated me like a real person instead of some weirdo in a flashy costume.”

“Then you still wear the action figure, storybook, museum exhibit suit?”

“No, it’s pretty toned down.” He’d gone back to the darker stealth suit following the Ultron fiasco, but he wasn’t about to tell her about that right now. “You’ve told me you like the dark blue on numerous occasions.”

“Bet it brings out your eyes.” She swept through several screens on the tablet. “I’ve been reading up on the rest of the team, too. Strange that I’m even involved, given all the technology and magic and space god involvement.”
“It’s not just about powers. You’re a leader, Nat. Everyone respects you.”

She gave a derisive snort. “Sure.”

“Nat…”

“Y’know, I never thought I’d be good enough for all this. And yeah, I believe it, because on the off chance you could train a four year old to treat a stranger like his mom, you could never get a dog to…” The tablet fell to the side, forgotten, as she wiped furiously at her eyes. “I just…there’s this huge gap between who I know I am and who you all think I am and I just don’t see any way… It’s real, but it also can’t be real. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“Hopefully you’ll just be able to remember it soon.”

“Steve…” She picked up the tablet and set it on her nightstand before turning off the lamp. “How did I end up married to such a Pollyanna?”

“Um, I just …” His mother had read him that story many times, but he’d never seen the movie. Or the movie Disney had made while he’d been on ice. He noticed that Natasha had turned on her side, away from him. “…good night?”

“Night, Steve.”

He settled under the covers and clicked off his own lamp, confident that he’d have his wife back soon.

Natasha awoke with the thought that she’d either been restrained or wrapped around a man in the past few days every time she had opened her eyes. This time, she had apparently maneuvered herself across a king-sized bed and hooked her left arm and leg around Steve, who was already awake and doing his best to look innocent. She let her fingertips drag over his chest before tangling in his beard to say, “Morning.”

“Um, yes. Good morning.”

“I guess my subconscious wants to snuggle.” She pulled away to relieve his discomfort. She wasn’t about to tell him how sweet she found it that he was worried about her feelings in the moment, in spite of their actual relationship. She didn’t think she’d ever been with a man who had regrets in the morning not related to being duped by a master spy, assuming he lived long enough to realize it. She fought the urge to dive back into his embrace in favor of getting out of bed. “The clothes here are all mine, I assume?”

“Yeah. I can just step out if…”

She heard him exhale audibly as she pushed her shorts off, followed by a practiced sweep to remove her tank. “You’re good.”

He was muttering something about Lou Gehrig to himself in the corner by the closet by the time she had dressed in jeans, a shirt and hoodie.

“Steve?”

“Yes?” he squeaked.

“I’ll be in the bathroom for the next few minutes, okay?” She went through a familiar morning
routine in spite of the fact that she was already dressed, taking care not to splash any water as she washed her face.

He was fully dressed and standing awkwardly in the bedroom when she was finished. “I brushed my teeth in the kitchenette and James is already up.”

“Okay.” She eyed at him while he continued to look at her with something akin to devotion. “Breakfast?”

“Yes! The galley should have…”

A voice from the intercom broke through, saying, “Asgardians incoming! Avengers and amnesiacs, report to the lab!”

Natasha rushed through the next minutes, not even questioning the presence of the Winter Soldier running beside her with a large automatic weapon, as Clint had been left behind to care for James.

When they arrived at the designated site – it was a strange mark on the grass, not a lab, but whatever – they encountered a man that Natasha recognized as Thor and a woman in a flowing, silky gown. Thor said in a deep voice, “My friends, I am afraid that we are to blame for Vision’s outburst.”

The woman spoke up, “We apologize for our involvement and we understand that you are upset. We are here to right the wrongs that have been done.”

Thor continued, “My mother, Queen Frigga, was the one to discover the reason for the discharge of power from the Mind Stone.”

“Indeed. It is my own fault for allowing Loki free access to the Asgardian Library without first curating its contents. He found a text that allowed him to access, via focused meditation and a forgotten spell, his previous connection to the Mind Stone.”

The mention of Loki provoked a stronger reaction in Natasha than she would have expected although she had only James’ storybook to rely on for information about him. She balled her fists at her thighs, annoyed by her lack of pistols in spite of the fact that there were two people in mechanized armor aiming high caliber weapons at the target, plus the green monster man, the Winter Soldier and her super soldier husband flexing for a fight. For his part, Thor didn’t raise his hammer or make any sudden movements. “Mother has found a way to block Loki’s influence on the Mind Stone. She can also heal the minds he has affected, if you will let her.”

Natasha turned to Steve. “Can we trust them?”

“I assure you that you can trust my mother as you trust me,” Thor offered.

“I don’t even know you.” She looked back at Steve. “Well?”

He nodded decisively. “We can trust Thor and if he says it’s okay… Welcome to Earth, your highness.”

Frigga bowed her head with a smile. “If you take me to Vision and those affected, I believe this will not take long.”

Sam, Wanda and Hill were waiting at the lab with Vision when the large group arrived. Frigga performed a strange examination of Vision that involved sprinkling a purple powder over his forehead and whispering what sounded like incantations while everyone else stood silently
watching and waiting. She eventually stepped back. “I believe I am ready to begin. Would you like to go first?” she asked, holding her hand out to Natasha.

To her surprise, Sam stepped forward. “No. You should do me first.” When a chorus of argument went up, he silenced it in a loud, confident voice, “Look, I’m just a regular dude who didn’t have to be restrained when he woke up after whatever this was. I can’t do any weird magic and I don’t have a kid counting on me plus a bun in the oven, so if something goes wrong on the first attempt, you can fix it before you try it on Red and Wanda. Does that make sense to everyone?”

Natasha was about to thank him for his bravery when Hill rushed forward to wrap him in a hug. “You’re going to be just fine, Sam.”

He looked happily shell shocked when she pulled back, but still stepped toward Frigga. “Let’s do this.”

She positioned him a few feet away from Vision, moving behind Vision herself to grasp his head. With her fingertips touching the Mind Stone, she whispered another incantation and…

Natasha dug her fingers into Steve’s forearm as the yellow beam of light from the security footage shot out and enveloped Sam. Rather than throwing him back, he remained standing in its glow. The beam retreated when Frigga ceased her spell, leaving Sam standing with his eyes closed. After what felt like an eternity, he smiled and opened his eyes. “Damn!”

This time when Hill rushed to him, he readily opened his arms, even picking her up and swinging her around. “Girl, even 22 year old me was wrapped around your finger.”

“As it should be.” She kissed him soundly. “Welcome back, Sam.”

Natasha couldn’t help but laugh, as she wasn’t the only one who’d changed drastically since 2006. She let Wanda go next, watching the same process occur again with similar success. Now that it was her turn, Natasha was almost reluctant. With all the evidence in front of her, how could she still doubt the truth? It was at that moment that Steve leaned toward her to whisper in her ear, “I love you.”

She nodded. “Let me get back to you on that in a minute.”

Natasha took her place in front of Vision, not returning what she assumed was meant to be a comforting smile from Frigga before the yellow beam was upon her. It felt warm, tingly almost. Scenes from her life played in flashes inside the light, showing her kissing Steve at their wedding reception, fighting an army of robots, laughing with Maria on a girls night out, shouting as she was seized by a contraction during James’ birth, trying not to scream as a bullet tore through her shoulder… It was all there and it was all real. It was hers.

She opened her eyes just as Steve swept her into his arms and she was able to say with absolute honesty, “I love you, too.”

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