Artemis

by ussgallifrey221b

Summary

While on a recon mission, the Avengers come across a new and mysterious superhero. Surprising them by appearing in the middle of a gunfight and vanishing in a flash of brilliant white light soon after, the group searches for the woman only known to the locals as The Mirage.
The air is cold and sharp, the chill from the lake bites the skin with a wicked fierceness. The only sound comes from the crunch of fallen leaves beneath heavy boots and padded paws. The world is quiet here. The red and orange trees shake and sway in the wind, as leaves fall gently to the frozen ground. The stillness of the forest is broken by a shrill whistle, followed by loud barks. A clambering of excited noises comes rushing towards her as the pack of dogs comes into view, proudly carrying their hunted find; a beautiful tan hare. They obediently drop it at her feet as she gives them well deserved praise. She grabs the animal by its hind legs and heads back to the house with the seven canines following behind her in perfect single file.

She’d been working with the new arrows today, still working out the kinks on them. The rabbit had been an easy kill, but she was curious how they would fare against a buck or a black bear - not that she was in the business of hunting protected bears. Nor were there any actually on the island, but only she knew that. She’d have to lay some fresh tracks tomorrow, there was word of a scout group coming within the week.

Following the familiar trail, worn down by feet and paws over the years, the forest gave way to the clearing where the cabin lay. The boys scattered, some going to the fire pit and some heading towards the porch. She took the kill around back to the kitchen door. Entering the old shed to clean it up. It was laid down on the stained table while she retrieved her kit, wanting to gut it before the animal started to sour.

The first incision by the neck allowed the soft fur to come away clean. She placed it in the nearby basket for later cleaning. With a snap, she pulled the feet away. And with a chop, the head was removed. Flipping the carcass onto it’s back, she made a small cut at the top and pulled upwards to avoid nicking the organs under the skin, cutting carefully downwards in a straight line. Pulling them out and letting them fall into the bucket at her feet. She grabbed for the liver, checking for white spots to ensure a healthy kill. Finding none, she finished portioning the meat out. It would be a big meal for one person. As usual.

Grabbing her freshly prepared rabbit, she headed back to the house. Letting the bite of the wind kiss her cheeks as she stared up at the smoke billowing out from the chimney. Watching as it rose upwards before hitting the shield, making it give off soft blue sparks, and curling back where it followed the curve of the engineered dome.

After getting the meat cooking in the cast iron skillet on the old wood stove, she made her way back out to the small garden. Carefully checking over the last few pumpkins - it would last her another month, maybe to Thanksgiving if she was lucky. Grabbing a few brussel sprouts and sweet potatoes for the dinner. The boys were all contentedly lounging in the yard, patiently waiting for night to fall.

Sitting in the worn wooden rocker, with her boots on the porch railing, she tucked into her meal. Enjoying the company of Ryder, who lay under her legs. His black fur contrasting with the faded wood planks of the porch. Her eyes moved from the serenity of the yard towards the calmness of the sky, with its streaks of blue and yellow and pink. Her gaze was distant and calculated, mind anywhere but here on the porch. The stars were starting to appear, bright and brilliant dots scattering across the dark blue vastness.

With a quiet clink, her plate was placed in front of the lead’s head, letting him lick it clean. She
ruffled his ears with a gentle smile.

In her bedroom, at last, she shed off her clothes, more than ready for the steady night to fall. The phone’s speakers playing the synth beats of her father’s old playlist. A feeling of serene tranquility falling over her as she sways to the song.

The black leggings were warm and comfortable. She carefully tucked the small silver necklace under her purple shirt, before pulling over the fitted black tunic. Moving over to her full-length mirror to sweep her hair back and away from her face. The familiar feel of the dark cloth mask over her face brings a small smile to her lips, feeling her heart rate begin to race with adrenaline. She draws her cowl up and over her head, allowing only her eyes to peer out from her covered form.

She strides towards the window, lifting it with a creak. She whistles out to the pack: a warning - be good. With a satisfied smile, she grabs the bow and quiver from her bed and the night vision goggles from her nightstand. And then she vanishes.

It’d been a week since they arrived in the small town, holed up in a cheap motel off the freeway, while Stark’s group was likely kicking it in some five-star resort downstate. Not that he would feel comfortable in that kind of environment anyway. After a few moments of pacing and lip biting, Bucky knocks at the connecting door. He hears the rustling of sheets before Wanda greets him with a tight smile.

“Anything?”

She shakes her head with a downturned look. His hands rest on his hips as he gives a knowing nod. It had been a week of recon and a week of on the ground work and no one had made any real progress yet. Wanda had been trained on the tourist area all day while he’d been scouting around the interstate. As usual, Sam had been their eye in the sky.

Wanda’s staring at him. His eyes widen in realization that he should probably be talking. “Sam’s getting pizza if you want?” He stumbles awkwardly.

She nods, giving him a small smile, “That would be nice, thank you, Sergeant.”

They were all still figuring this whole thing out, after the Decimation. They were all gone, for five years, but it certainly didn’t feel like that; more like closing your eyes. Of course, the elephant in the room was Steve. Wasn’t it always? Bucky had mused. The punk had gone back to place the stones and decided to stay there permanently. Bucky wasn’t stupid, he knew what the plan was. But it didn’t make it sting any less. They had just gotten a chance at something normal again. There were plans of getting him pardoned by the US government, coming back to the States, and starting over. With his best friend there to help him adjust to everything. But that’s all Steve wanted - a return to a normal life away from all the world saving. And he couldn’t really fault him for that. But did the guy really leave him alone in the 21st century with only Sam Wilson?

Hell, he didn’t even have Nat anymore. She was… she was permanently gone. He hadn’t actually told anyone about his long friendship with her, it just brought up too many memories of the Red Room and HYDRA. But she had been a constant in his life for so many years when he was there. Filling a void left by Steve, not that he could really remember him or his previous life at the time. He missed her. God, he missed her.
It had been six months since then. He went to trial, was acquitted, spent some time getting a full psych evaluation from S.H.I.E.L.D., and got the pleasure of trying to make amends with Tony. All without anyone to really lean on. But he did it. And now he was here with Sam and Wanda in a cheap motel doing stakeout on an illegal arms operation. Or they were suppose to - nothing out of the ordinary had actually appeared on their radar yet.

The motel door unlocks as Sam walks through with a stack of pizza boxes in one hand, seemingly talking to himself.

“No, we haven’t seen shit. Yeah, I - “ he places the food down with a huff on the small table by the window, looking increasingly agitated. He looks at the ceiling, counting his breaths. His foot taps impatiently on the stained green carpet. “Well, if you want to come take a look for yourselves - “ He bites his lip, clearly being cut off again.

Bucky can feel the beginnings of a laugh creeping up by his lips for the first time in two weeks.

“No, I understand that. I’m just saying - “

Wanda hides her smile into her shoulder as Bucky lets out a low whistle.

Having enough, Sam rips the comm out of his ear and throws it on the bed. “Stark can kiss my red, white, and blue ass. Fucking, sitting on some velvet lounge while we - “ he gives a frustrated groan as he drags his hands over his stubbled cheeks. He throws his hands up, defeated. “I’m done. They’ve got nothing. We’re waiting on something that isn’t here, man.” He looks to Bucky with a desperate expression.

Bucky, while actually agreeing with him, enjoys watching the episode of pure agony play out on Sam. He plops down on the edge of the bed. “Should probably do another scout of the docks,” he adds with a purposeful drawl, “Cap.”

Sam points a tough finger at him, “Better watch yourself, tin-man. My patience is in the negative right now.”

“It could not hurt, no?” Wanda saunters past them, lured by the aroma of the pizza.

Sam groans.

Bucky chides, “Two against one, man.”

The night breeze is crisp and cool. It’s unsettlingly familiar. Bucky watches his breath mingle in the air gently with each exhale. He’s perched on the rooftop of a small business, looking directly at the docks through his scope. He can hear the waves from the lake tumble over the rocks with a gentle lapping sound.

"This is not a lake," Wanda had said on their first night out.

Sam had been flying over the Straits, following the freighters. "Mhmm. I've seen lakes. I've been in lakes. This is not a lake. I can't even see the other side of the damn bridge."

He’s flying high above the water tonight, keeping a purposeful distance. This was their sixth night
doing this. Waiting for a shipment to come through and get loaded up for distribution.

His bones ache with the cold lap of wind rushing over him. Laying there with a trained eye on the dock, it all felt familiar. Distant memories always coming up through the fog of his mind. He remembers a winter scene, Steve was there, they were taking down a HYDRA base. He'd have to write that down later.

Wanda’s voice is suddenly in his ear, he shakes his head to focus, “Boys, we have trucks on the move. Northbound.”

Bucky drags his gaze away, focusing on the distant road where bright headlights move closer.

He hears Sam give a sigh of relief, “Fucking finally.”

Bucky watches the vans drive down the road, white and nondescript. He hears the soft footfalls of Wanda draw near, having flown from her position at the far end of the perimeter. She crouches down next to him.

“Eyes on the prize,” she murmurs as the vans clear the guarded gate.

Hovering just above the streetlights, he sees Sam’s drone. The drivers are out now. He can see the obvious lines of holsters hidden beneath their coats. “Two are armed,” he says into the comm. “Sidearms at least.”

“Noted,” Sam huffs.

As the group moves out of sight, Sam’s drone follows. “They’re out of range, lost contact.”

“Wanda?”

She stands, “On it.” The red light surrounds her fists as she flies up into the air. Bucky watches her fly overhead, where she lands on top of the security building. “Two pallets. Signing now, starting to load.”

Bucky watches his breath in the chill air, swirling up into the dark sky.

“Barnes, cover us. I’ve got a feeling it’s not just two down there. Wanda, on my mark.”

As the first van is being loaded, Bucky watches Sam come shooting down out of the clouds, his legs extended. With a swift kick, he slams his feet into the open door, crushing the driver’s hand with an excruciating scream. Wanda’s fists glow red as she warps the gun to painfully wrap around the other driver’s wrists. He hears bones snapping when she throws her energy at his knees. He falls to the ground with an audible groan.

The ‘ping’ of a bullet ricocheting off Sam’s vibranium shield makes Bucky move his position to the left, eyes trained on the driver. With a quick focus, the shot rings through the air and lands perfectly in the man’s left shoulder. He drops to the ground. Sam lowers the shield and stares up across the street at Bucky with an irritated gesture, “The hell? I had him!”

Bucky huffs an amused, “Felt left out.”

Sam points up at him, “Wait in line, tin-man.”

The roar of an engine pulls their attention to the gate as the vehicle crashes through it. Wanda strides over to Sam with a pointed look, “If you two are done?”
Seven men fly out of the rear of the truck, carrying rifles, pulled up in a firing stance. With a running jump, Sam sends the shield down upon the closest two guards, knocking them to the side. Bullets rain out as Wanda surges her power at another guard, his gun twisting into a mangled mess. Bucky aims at the last man to leave the truck, sending a bullet right to his calf. The guard stumbles, aiming his gun erratically towards the building Bucky’s on.

Bucky watches a ray of white light shoot across his line of vision, landing in the man’s chest. He collapses to the ground. “What the hell?”

Two more streak past, hitting the next guard in the back. Bucky turns his head to the left, seeking out the light source. Two buildings over, he watches the bright light fly across the street once more, emerging from pure darkness.

“Sam?” He calls out.

“Little. Busy!” He hears the clang of the shield as it bounces off the van and the groan of a man being punched by a strong right hook.

“We have a situation.”

“I’ll say!”

He fights the urge to roll his eyes. The pained scream of the final guard fills the air.

Wanda looks to Bucky, now standing with his rifle by his side, as her power drains from her hands, she follows his gaze. “Sam.”

Sam bounces the shield off the ground and catches it, throwing his hand through the harness. He steps forward and looks up. They watch the sudden burst of white light explode from the rooftop, pulling in on itself, then snapping out of existence.

“Okay, what exactly am I looking at here?” Tony’s voice reverberates in the small motel room. The blue holographic image picked up by Redwing hovers above the table.

“Hoping you might know.” Sam leans back in the chair, feet on the radiator.

"It looks like a journalist failed to turn off their flash."

Sam surges forward, "Nah. That wasn’t a camera flash, Tony. That was... it like - " he gestures helplessly, words escaping him. He looks at Bucky. "Barnes, you were closest to it."

Bucky pushes off from the wall he had been leaning on, "It... it was an energy source of light. It was too dark to see what was creating it."

"Uh-huh," Tony clicks. "Anyone have some useful information?"

"Arrows!" Wanda chimes in from the bed. "It was creating arrows."

"Hey, Barton, any special new powers you want to share with the class?" Tony's voice muffles as he apparently looks behind him.
Clint's voice comes in, "Do you have the arrows?"

Sam shakes his head, "Gone. Vanished. Left some nice marks though."

"Huh."

When they were cleaning up the area, waiting for the authorities to come and collect the smugglers, they had searched for those mysterious arrows. But there was nothing left. They had looked paper thin and were as bright as a full moon. Any sign of them had vanished the moment they pierced the skin of their targets.

"CCTV footage anyone? FRIDAY?"

A series of camera angles emerge in the holographic dome, rapidly playing. Bucky can see the one from the security building, but it's only captured the arrows shooting across the street; not the source. He leans forward, hand on the table.

"Boss?" The videos clear, revealing a single clip in the middle of the table, from the traffic cam at the far end of the street. Bucky can make out the shadow of a figure running up, then disappearing in a flash of white light. Another video flips down, showing a flash of light on the rooftop. The figure is still too dark to see, but then the arrows come.

"Great, we have another Legolas." Bucky can imagine Stark rubbing his temples with feigned irritation. "Energy signatures?"

FRIDAY brings up a large graph and a map of the area, pinpoints scattered across it. "Lunar in nature."

"Lunar? Someone's got moon powers?" Sam asks in confused astonishment. "And they're doing archery practice?" He raises his brow at Bucky, who just shrugs his shoulders - like this was the weirdest thing he's ever seen?

"Can we track it?"

FRIDAY pulls the map forward, letting the points glow. The first point flashes, right by the bridge. A line connects it to another, just a few blocks away. Then to the the streetlight, followed by the building across from the docks.

"Where'd it go?" Bucky questions softly, trying to trace it, looking for patterns.

"Searching." After a moment, the map zooms out to reveal the surrounding area. Three islands come into view. A dot appears in the center of the middle island. "The last signature can be found here, at 1:17 a.m."

The map shows the name: Round Island.

"Okay, clearly not the most imaginative bunch naming the place," Tony says after a moment. "We need to track those guys back to the source, but I'm sure a field trip wouldn't hurt. FRIDAY?"

"The island is too dense, boss. The quinjet has nowhere to land. The nearest landing strip is on the western island -"

"That'd draw a lot of unnecessary attention," Sam comments. "That place is a tourist trap."

"Okay, I know at least two of you can fly."
"Sure, we'll just do a two mile fly over. Just some freezing water in high wind, with a few thousand tourists watching."

"Do you have a better idea?" Tony questions with agitation.

Bucky paces in front of the dresser, tapping his hand against his thigh absentmindedly. Sam looks at the two of them, his hands laced together in front of him.

"Don't they have the ferries?" Wanda asks from her spot on the bed.

FRIDAY interrupts, "There are no docks on Round Island."

"Good time to have some teleportation powers," Sam muses with a smile.

"FRIDAY, how exactly does one get to the island?"

"Kayak, boss."

Sam barks a laugh while Bucky shakes his head with a smile.

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**Author’s Note:** Holy shit. Fun fact, I haven’t written anything in about a decade. I attempted three different stories before this one came flowing out of me. I currently have the first three chapters written, so bear with me as I have a pretty hectic schedule to work around. Writing only comes once I have my kids to sleep. Heads up, this story is basically my love letter to my home state of Michigan and Mackinac Island. Feedback would be amazing, as I haven’t had that since my highschool English class days.

This series is also cross-posted on my [Tumblr](http://example.tumblr.com), where you can also find moodboards and an official playlist on [Spotify](http://example.spotify.com).

Chapter End Notes

**Mentions throughout the chapter:**
1. The lakes in the story are the Great Lakes that surround Michigan. They are massive, some might compare them to a sea. But they are the largest freshwater bodies of water in the world.
2. These are real cities and locations. Google streetview them and take a look around.
3. The bridge in question is the Mackinac Bridge. It is the only way to drive from the lower peninsula into the upper peninsula. And it is TERRIFYING. It's a five-mile-high suspension bridge over the straits of Mackinac (the connecting point of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron). Not for those with a fear of heights. And the wind? God, that wind can move a semi truck back and forth. They'll close the bridge down if the weather is...
bad enough. Beautiful to look at. Awful to drive across.
“Hey, Miss Maggie. How’ve they been treating you lately?” She smiles at the curly-haired woman on the exam table, whose hand rests on her protruding belly, her eyes tired.

“Awful,” Maggie drags. “Pain right in here.” She points under her ribs.

Closing the door behind her, she makes her way towards the counter. Cleaning her hands with the sanitizer, she rounds the table and helps Maggie lay back down, her hands feeling her stomach carefully, “Only on the upper right quadrant?”

Maggie shakes her head, “Upper right, upper left, all of it.”

She gives a small laugh, “Nothing new then? Probably just have their feet lodged right up in there.”

After measuring her stomach and finding the normal thirty-five centimeter size, she gives a small thank you to the higher beings for not giving the woman any troubling signs of preeclampsia. Followed up by the strong heartbeat on the doppler. Helping Maggie sit back up, she walks over to the computer, “Looks like your urine came back normal - no protein, which is good. Little edema in the feet and ankles it looks like.” She turns with a smile, “Still planning on the C-section on the mainland?”

“Unless you want to do me a favor today,” she says with a tight smile. The cramps clearly weren’t letting up; poor woman.

She shakes her head, “Thirty-five weeks is a little too early for that. I’d argue for bed rest, but I know your boys keep you busy. Keep your feet elevated at the least, lots of water. By now you know the drill.”

Maggie nods. Four boys under eight, she was an old pro at this, but it definitely didn’t make the third trimester any easier for her. With her husband, Ryan, working as a dray driver most of the week, she was stuck up in the small workers' village with the boys. Now that the weather was taking a dip, she was sure they were going to go a little cabin crazy as well. And she thought seven dogs were a handful.

“We’re coming into the final stretch, just a little longer now. I’ll be seeing you back here in a week, right?”

“Unless someone wants to make an early appearance,” she smiles hopefully.

Gathering her clipboard and heading to the door, “They better not! When you’re ready, go ahead and get dressed and head out to reception. I’ll see you next week!”

Sitting at her desk, she goes over the final paperwork. Fingers gliding over the keyboard with purposeful clicks. She's barely had time to process the past twelve hours.

She had been downtown, keeping an eye on the western gas station when the sound of gunfire rang through the air - like a lot of gunfire, something that wouldn't come from just one person breaking and entering. It wasn't typically her forte to deal with that kind of thing, but she had to investigate it. She knew who was on patrol duty at the time - it was the new recruit, AJ, and she didn't want to rely
on him to handle something of this magnitude. She had gotten closer and closer to the water, realizing the fight was going down at the docks.

It's not like she had expected the Avengers to be there. And they probably could have handled it themselves since they were the professionals, but she had just gone in without thinking things through like a complete idiot. *Like Jack,* she had realized numbly.

At least she wasn't front and center when it happened, she had managed to get to a rooftop a few yards away. But they had spotted her. Hopefully, they wouldn't mind her butting in like that. But she had admittedly panicked when the guy on the roof had stood up unexpectedly - because when the hell did he get there? He also would have had a great view of her, maybe they were already looking into it. And she just had to get out of there. So she fled. She really should have followed her father's advice. She had made herself seen to the wrong people and it was gonna bite her in the ass, she was sure of it.

She hears the long stride of Dr. Morgan’s steps before he even rounds the corner. Oh, he looks lost. This should be interesting. He stops at her desk. His salt and pepper hair looks more ruffled than usual.

“Dr. Smith.”

She dips her head in recognition, “Dr. Morgan.” She closes out of her email and swivels in the old office chair to face him, “Problem?”

“Crutches?”

She leans back in the chair, bobbing forward and back, thoughtfully, “Isn’t there a spare set in room seven?”

He shakes his head, “Taken yesterday.”

“And a wheelchair won’t work because...?”

He bristles at the question, “They insist on staying the full week. And their B&B doesn’t have an elevator.”

Tourists. It was always the tourists. She worries at her necklace for a moment before standing to stretch her arms above her head, enjoying the successful crack and pop of her back. “I’ll head down to the store, see if I can’t convince Michael to lend them out. Call over to Bois Blanc for a spare. Then we’ll fill out an order for a few more. We’ll need them once the snowmobilers come across.”

He nods and hurries back to his exam room. She closes out of her account and makes for the stairs, shrugging on her coat as she walks. With her hand on the door, she turns back to her receptionist, “Linda, I’ll be back, heading down to the store!”

“I’ll hold down the fort for you, Diane,” The older woman salutes with a smile. How long had she been using that name? How many people knew her as Diane Smith? If only they really knew.

The harsh wind had finally died down for the afternoon as she unlocks her bike from the rack. The leaves rustle along the paved street. The place is far quieter now that the main chunk of fudgies had retreated for the year. She pushes off, heading down the incline to the street, making her way towards one of the few businesses left open for the year.
Sam had been bouncing back and forth for far too long, anxiously moving away from them to stare at the distant island and the ferry moving (slowly) towards the marina. Stark had shelled out for three tickets. His group was stalling the operation in Detroit in favor of coming upstate to follow the breadcrumbs of the smuggling operation. But he wanted Sam’s group to look into the energy signature on the neighboring island in the meantime. Even though it had been apparently helping them out the previous night, it was considered the safer option to investigate it further - just in case.

“Samuel,” Wanda chides behind her black scarf, “You are making me anxious. Stay still.”

He moves back towards them, eyes still on the ferry. His hands were shoved into his coat pockets. “I want to know what we’re dealing with over there.”

“A ferry,” Bucky smiles. He should have tied his hair back, constantly having to move the wind-swept strands from his face with each strong gust. Even his coat is having a hard time keeping the lake's wind from chilling his bones.

Sam stops to glare at him, “You know what I mean.”

“Then ask someone,” Wanda adds roughly, having had her fill of Sam’s nerves for the day.

He looks at her with a stunned expression. His face screws up as his voice drips with sarcasm, “Oh sure, no problem. Hey, have you guys seen any crime-fighting archers that vanish into thin air around here?” He lets his head fall back with a short fake laugh.

“You mean The Mirage?”

The group turns to look at the worker. His gloved hands pause the work of wrapping a rolling cart of luggage.

Bucky steps forward, “I’m sorry?”

“Yeah,” the man sets the roll of plastic wrap down. “Uhm, here, lemme just - “ he pulls his phone out of the neon green safety vest. He taps it with his finger a few times, scrolls through something then holds up a YouTube video for them. They crowd closer to see.

The video is shaky at best, dipping up and down with a nervous hand. It locks in on a figure in black standing in front of three men, all tied to a lamppost. The person behind the camera makes a gasping sound and the camera drops down to their feet. It’s drawn back up, albeit zoomed in far too much. Hearing the sound of the person filming, the figure turns toward the camera. With a flash of brilliant white light, they disappear. He pulls his phone away, “There’s a ton of them on there.”

“Is there, uhm,” Sam scratches the back of his head. “What exactly is that?”

The man tucks his phone away, arms crossed. “Like you said, crime-fighting archer. Showed up a few years back, disappeared with The Vanished, and now she’s back. Doing her thing.”

Wanda looks at him with a concentrated stare, “She?”

He nods, “Yeah, take a look for yourself. She had a partner for a while? But we haven’t seen him for some time. Just her now.”

Bucky pulls his hair back in a frustrated grip with his gloved hand, ”Where'd she come from?”
He lowers his head thoughtfully, "Think she's from here." He takes in Sam's wide eyes, "What? Can't have a superhero from Michigan?"

“And… she’s good?” Sam tilts his head, taking up a similar stance with his arms crossed.

“Look, I know a lot of people have an issue with superheroes these days, but around here we like her.” He gives them a pointed stare - as if he’s expecting an argument. They look at each other with amused expressions. Apparently, civilian clothes were doing the trick for them today. “She’s stopped a fair share of traffickers trying to get over to the U.P. from here. That’s enough to gain our trust.”

Bucky shuffles his feet, fighting the bitter wind. “What’d you say her name was?”

Sam winces when the ferry’s horn blows as it sails into the marina. The man grabs the plastic roll, moving back towards the cart. “Not sure what she goes by. It’s the news that coined her The Mirage - that’s the one that stuck. She’s not exactly out there giving interviews.”

Bucky lets the name play in his head. A mirage? It was certainly one way to describe what he had seen.

On the way to the island, they sit down below the deck with the four other travelers. Huddled together on the white plastic benches near the bow of the ship, they can see the waves splash as they hit the side of the ferry from the large viewing windows. No one seems to be paying them much attention. The rocking makes Bucky's stomach slosh uncomfortably. Wanda's leaning over the back of her seat to look at Sam's phone.

“First mention of these two is in 2013.” He scrolls through the archived article, scanning for info, “*Armed robbery thwarted.*” He scrolls further down and gives a bark of a laugh, “Man, look at this.”

He holds the phone up. There’s a blurry image of two people in full black, wearing ski masks.

“Early days,” Wanda smiles.

“Looks like she’s upgraded since then,” Sam brings up a more recent photo. Clearly, someone was eager with the flash, as the girl is shielding her face. Her dark clothes are finally shown in more clarity, however. Bucky can see the hints of purple mixed with the black. Every inch of her skin is covered, even her eyes are hidden behind a set of black goggles. It reminds him too much of the Soldier’s uniform.

Bucky anxiously drums his fingers against his knee. Sam bumps his shoulder with his own, his eyebrows raised in a silent question. He straightens, attempting to aid in the conversation, “Why that island though?”

“Uninhabited, hard to get to if you can’t zap yourself there.”

He hums in response, not feeling totally assured of the answer. There had to be more to it than that. "But there weren't any more after that one last night?"

Sam pulls back, "I don't think so?" He looks to Wanda for verification, she nods.

"So, what, she's hiding out there or living there?" Bucky taps his foot against the metal legs of Wanda's bench.
Wanda has her phone out now. "Maybe she kayaked away," She suggests. Scrolling through her phone for a moment, she gives a small breathy laugh before shoving it towards them, "Look at this!"

The article is titled: Kidnappers captured by local heroes, Artemis & Apollo. There's a blurry photo of two dark figures on the Mackinac Bridge. Sam rolls his eyes at the picture of a graffitied wall further down in the article. In golden spray paint is a half sun connected to a half circle, with a single arrow between them. Sun and moon. Seems the local news couldn't decide on a name for them yet.

"Popular with the locals, unknown to the rest of the world," Sam muses.

Bucky turns his head towards him, "Not a bad life." He leans back against the bench, "Sometimes it's better if everyone doesn't know your name and face."

Sam gives him a pained look of understanding. He nudges him lightly, "Don't worry, man. We'll all forget your ugly face eventually."

With plans for the spare crutches to be sent up to the medical center, she browses the shelves of the grocery store. Grabbing another container of salt, a five-pound bag of rice, and a small bag of chocolate covered pretzels. Michael rings her up, talking excitedly about the amazing deal he got on the new shipment coming at the end of the week. She smiles appreciatively and wishes him a good night as she heads outside to her bike.

The bright blue sky is fading into the deeper tones of the night. She shuffles her bag of goods into the rear basket. The ferry's horn blows as it disembarks for the night. Lights outside The Pink Pony are turned on as the street dies down. A small trickle of tourists and mainland workers make their way off the dock.

She waits for the carriage to pass her, nodding her head at the driver, Clarissa, who gives her a friendly wave. Pushing away from the curb, she heads towards the library. She scoffs at the tourists standing in the middle of the road; they would never learn. Carefully pedaling around them, she comes to a breaking halt when she spots the small group across the street. She pulls off to the side, grabbing her phone for the sake of looking busy.

They followed her here. There was no way the Avengers were taking an October trip to the island for fun. And being the local, she knows there aren't any crimes going on here that require them to take over - not on the island at least. Her heart races and she can feel her blood pressure spike. Fuck.

Carefully, she peers over at them. Captain America has his phone out and they're looking at the end of the street, towards the Fort, completely oblivious to her. They have bags thrown over their shoulders, clearly ready to stay for a night. Or hunt her down. She needs to get home.

She tries her best not to speed to the end of the street. Following the gentle curve of the road, passing the library, to the small white house on the water. The waves were crashing against the rocks as she unlatched the white fence gate. She watched the street warily for a moment, eyes seeking out the faces of the famous trio, but was pleasantly surprised to see that she wasn't followed.

Once inside with her bike, she leans against the front door with a heavy sigh. This was so fucked up. If there was ever a time that she wished for her brother to be here, it was right freaking now. He was
better at plans; at strategy, but definitely not sticking to that set blueprint, that's for sure. Running a shaky hand through her hair, allowing herself a moment to have a full freakout.

The house is dark and dusty from misuse. It was her dad's plan all along after he was given the place when he was working in the medical center in the 90s. She has a lot to do. With an attempt at a calming breath, she pushes off from the door with her bag in hand and vanishes to the cabin.

It's a step up from their previous lodging, that's for sure. The resort on the east end of the island is almost completely empty besides them. Checking in under the fake name Stark had given, they situate themselves in the two suites. It overlooks a tennis court and a small park. Beyond that is the lake. Standing in front of the sliding patio door, Bucky can see the shine of the Round Island Lighthouse to the south. The yellow glow sweeps across the water; making the lake glitter with manufactured sunbeams.

Sam's tapping away on the laptop at the table, a satellite image of the island on the small screen, "It's completely covered by forest. The lighthouse is the only known structure." Bucky pulls away from the door to peer over Sam's shoulder. "But the last energy signature was here - " he points at the dead center of the island.

"A flyover won't show much, even with night vision," Bucky muses thoughtfully. Sam turns to him with a, far too excited, smile. Bucky backs away, "No."

"All hands on deck, Barnes."

He runs his hand over his face, feeling sick already.

Sam stands with a grin and clamps his hand down on Bucky's shoulder, "I won't drop you."

He scrunches his face in disgust, "I hate you."

Sam steps away to unpack his gear from the duffle bag. He's dripping with glee, "Wouldn't have it any other way, tin-man."

The computers in the downstairs bedroom show everything functioning perfectly. The bear tracks had been carefully laid out, leading to the shield and off to the side of the fake den. It worked for all the campers that made it to the island, it wouldn't hurt to try it on them. Her boys were comfortably enjoying a night inside. She wasn't really sure what she should do here. This wasn't exactly a common occurrence in her life.

And she couldn't even be sure that they were actually following her, or that they would come to the island at all. But she had to cover all her bases. Maybe they already knew her identity. With all the technology those guys had access to, it might be easier to crack the code than what the local news had been struggling to do for the last ten years. They could easily be at the office asking around for her. Or standing outside that house on the water.
She carefully checks the cloaking shield's integrity once more. Praying to whatever gods were listening that they wouldn't come to the island. She didn't need the Avengers suddenly thrown into her life.

Bucky is dropped, unceremoniously, on the rocky ground surrounding the lighthouse. He lands solidly, in a crouch. As he stands, he glares up at Sam who descends a few feet away, "I hate you."

His wings fold in on his back as he turns to Bucky with an amused smile, "Let me know how you plan to get back, then."

Wanda was already there waiting for them by the treeline. The glow of the lighthouse ran across the birch trees - their only light source going forward. Bucky gives a final look at the main island, the gentle glimmer of the downtown street and docks seem so far away now.

"We fan out. I'll take the southern shore, Wanda to the north." He strides towards Bucky, "and the non-flyer will take the middle stretch."

Bucky sneers at him as they walk towards the forest. Wanda stops near a small metal sign to read the warning listed, "Ooh, they have bears." The flash of the rotating light illuminates her smile, making it look more sinister than it actually is.

She clenches her fists anxiously as she watches the cameras surrounding the cabin. Maybe she got a little too cocky, just like he had. She should have never shown herself like that. She had been more than content to be the neighborhood hero in this stretch of the world. The Avengers could have New York and take on the aliens and AI intent on destroying the world. She could do small town cases. She could have just done that and been fine and never been found.

She gnaws at the inside of her cheek and worries at the silver chain around her neck.

Bucky’s able to follow a small path at first, worn down ever so slightly, to a small clearing. Fallen trees and branches are shoved together in a pyramid fashion. Looks like the work of kids. Maybe a camping spot, judging by the ring of rocks in the center of the clearing with remnants of ash contained within them. The moonlight breaks through the trees and gives him a better visual of his surroundings.

His heavy combat boots crunch the leaves and twigs as he navigates the twisted path of rocks and fallen timber. He pauses to assess his direction. The hair on the back of his neck bristles as the wind blows through the darkened woods. He can hear the rustle of leaves making their way to the forest floor. But it’s quiet. A little too quiet. And then he looks down at the large animal track in front of him. It looked fresh in the wet dirt.
“Sam?” He says quietly into the comm, “Think Wanda was right about those bears.”

The gentle static rings in his ear before he hears a giddy, “Oh, my!”

*There better not be any lions or tigers with it.* He quietly stresses, “Sam.”

“You have a gun, Barnes.”

For killing and maiming people, yes. For a giant bear, it would work better as a club. He shudders before trekking forward, sidestepping the track as he goes.

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The beeping of her pager almost sends her through the roof. Allowing the remainder of her nerves to calm down, she looks at the message and frowns.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She checks the locks one last time before patting Ryder’s head, grabbing her go bag, and vanishing.

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Wanda walks next to him as they close in on the center of the island. Carefully looping to avoid the tracks of an animal that was apparently very close by. They spot the white of Sam’s uniform coming from the east towards them. Bucky shoulders his rifle as they near him.

“Nothing?” He asks the pair.

“Not even a bear,” Wanda sighs.

Sam furrows his brow, thinking up the next course of action. Redwing buzzes towards them from the south shore. The drone had been keeping an eye in the sky, centered in on the last known location of the energy signature. Bucky turns, hearing a low rumble. Sam drops his arm and they follow his gaze. The sky above them is suddenly blindingly bright as two figures fly down to them. Tony’s mask flips away as Rhodey touches down with a loud metal ‘thud’.

“Hey guys, we were in the neighborhood. See anything about two minutes ago, right over there?” He points at the trees a few feet away.

They stare at one another, confused. Tony sighs and brings up a holo-map between them. Three energy signatures appear, one directly where they’re standing. Sam steps forward with a shake of his head, staring at the blue map. Bucky and Wanda had been walking right toward that, he should have seen something of that bright intensity from a mile away. But he hadn’t.

“FRIDAY?”

“Scanning the area.”

Sam searches through Redwing’s recordings. Bucky walks towards the darkened trees, Tony quickly moving in front of him to take the lead. He holds his arm up as he scans.
“It’s the same one, boss. But I should remind you of the most recent one on the other island - “

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony stops abruptly to turn back to Sam. “While the Girl Scouts were out exploring, the thing showed up over on the other island, at the medical building.”

Wanda steps forward, “It’s not a thing, Tony. It’s a girl.”

Tony’s eyebrows raise with interest, “What, like Luna Girl or…?” He glances over at Rhodes, pulling a face, “Oh, I’m sorry, am I the only one getting roped into watching Disney Junior with my kid?”

Rhodey laughs with a shake of his head, “You’ve fallen a long way from grace, Tony.”

He scrunches his face up as he shoulders past Bucky, “Come on, Troop.”

As they follow Tony to the shoreline, Bucky can’t help but look back at the woods, still searching for a sign of something. But he finds none there. And, after a moment, he carefully treks out to the rocky beach with the others.

Chapter End Notes

Mentions throughout the chapter:

1. Mackinac Island is a small tourist trap in between the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan. It's one of three islands within a ferry ride away from the central cities. It's known for it's charming old buildings, historical markers, fudge, and the fact that there are no cars allowed on the streets (besides emergency vehicles). You get around by walking, horses, carriages, or bikes. Snowmobiles in the winter months. It has under 500 year-round residents.

2. Round Island is a mile away, it is uninhabited and part of the Hiawatha National Forest. The only building is the old lighthouse. People can kayak there from the main island and camp.

3. Bois Blanc is the last island and the largest. It's population is under 100 people and it gets nowhere near the amount of tourists that Mackinac does.

4. Ferry boats are the main way to the island. Usually about 15 - 30 minute rides. Mackinac and Bois Blanc have airports as well for small aircraft. Two dock points are in Mackinaw City in the lower peninsula and St. Ignace in the upper peninsula.

5. "Fudgies" is the islander way of referring to tourists. Because of the crazy amounts of fudge that is made on the island.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She appears in the basement storage room. Catching her breath for only a moment, she books it to the stairs. Shouldering the door open to the sound of screams. Tanner is there to greet her with a tight smile.

"Came as soon as I could," she ties her hair back as she strides towards the young nurse.

"We have her in room three, ambulance is ready to take her to the airport as soon as the mainland gets back to us."

She forces herself to breathe, desperately trying to push away any thoughts of the people looking for her. The people who were very near and could very well be asking around for her. Now she was Dr. Smith. Reaching the room in question, she toes the door further open, "Miss Maggie, what are you doing here?"

The woman groans. Tanner hands her a pair of blue gloves.

"How far apart?" She asks him softly.

"Four minutes, but she's only at eighty percent effacement, two centimeters dilated."

At that, she raises her eyebrows. She places her hand on the woman's knee, "Maggie, I'm gonna need to have a feel, okay?"

Maggie nods her head, eyes squeezed tightly shut. Tanner helps the woman bring her knees up to her chest as she grabs the bottle of lubricant. After performing the exam, trying to be as gentle as possible, she tosses the used gloves into the trash.

She pulls her nurse to the side, "False labor would be ideal, but she's up to a three and a half now. We need to have her transferred to a NICU center. We don't have the proper equipment to deal with this here. Get mainland on the phone again, she's progressing and we need them here now."

He hurries out of the room. She sits down by her patient, letting her squeeze her hand with each contraction. Trying to focus on this moment and not the reality she had just escaped.

They're sitting in the large presidential suite Tony had managed to book at the resort. Definitely not obvious to anyone at all that the Avengers were staying there. Sam's pacing in the living area, shaking his head.

"We should be tracking down that ring, Tony. Not going on some mystery superhero chase."

Tony's leaning against the large dining table, arms crossed defensively, "Well, I don't like mysteries. And anyway, Fury has them now. He'll give us the relevant info when he gets it out of them. In the meantime, this seems like a better use of my resources."
"For what purpose?"

Tony shrugs, nonchalant, "I want to replace Barton."

Rhodes tuts at that. Wanda steps down from the raised platform of the kitchen, "Where is Clint?"

Tony looks at the large bay windows suddenly, Sam follows his gaze, "Tony?"

"He's out," he replies lightly, stepping away from the couch.

Sam's stare tightens, voice dropping down an octave, "Out where?"

Tony moves further away, keeping his front to Sam as he backs his way around the couch, moving towards the master bedroom. "I told you, I don't like mysteries."

Sam rolls his eyes and faces Bucky, knowing when to pick his battles when it came to Stark. "I know how Steve felt now."

Bucky gives him a small smile.

“Hey, man, sorry about the wait. We had to call in our obstetrician for coverage. We’ll get someone to see you soon.”

Clint relaxes on the bed, “Don’t worry about it. It’s all good.”

The young nurse leaves, probably to attend to the screaming woman a few rooms over. He grabs the scanner from under his leg. The thing lights up like Christmas. He had been looking into the most recent signature, it was at some little house by the water, but no one had been around to ask about it and the place was properly secured and dark. He was about ready to start picking the lock when Tony had commed him about another signature and he was suddenly in a hospital with a 'sprained wrist'.

"I don’t care what you do. Throw yourself off the Fort or something, just get in there!" Tony had told him.

He sits up, let’s his boots touch the floor. He waits a moment before going to the door. They’ve got someone on a stretcher with a group of attendants following after. Perfect time to go searching.

She had insisted on going in the ambulance, of course. Possibly for more than the obvious reason of being the most experienced person for the position in case the labor began to progress any further. She had assured Maggie of the options the mainland would have for her - something to stop labor, even. But if it came down to it, she would be in the best location for delivery. The dark streets blurred by. It was always a strange sight for the Islanders to see one of the only three vehicles out on the road. It had more than a few people opening their doors and pulling their curtains to the side in curiosity as they passed.
The urge to vomit rose exponentially when they made it to the tarmac of the small airstrip. Sitting off to the side, beyond the medical evacuation helicopter from the mainland, was the infamous Avengers quinjet. God, they didn't even hide it out of view. It was gonna be a gossipy island tomorrow.

She barely even acknowledged Ryan and the boys at first. But then Maggie was clutching her hand and instinct took over for executive function. She helped them get Maggie loaded up and gave her the best “everything will be fine” she could manage. Even convincing her husband to join her, like, what you’re just gonna leave your wife to do this alone? Go, you idiot! We’ll take care of the boys. It’s not like she had a coherent plan for everything going on anyway.

Brian takes the ambulance back to the center and Todd gets everyone loaded up in the police cruiser the boys had used to get to the airport.

“Yeah, I’ll keep an eye on them. Grandparents won’t be able to get here until morning anyway,” she had told him as he drove them back to the small workers' village in the center of the island.

Tony has his head in his hands as he sits in the brown leather club chair, “What do you mean you lost it?”

“It was there, lighting up like crazy, and I got out to look for this thing,” he takes a bite of the pepperoni pizza and continues with his mouth full, “Could’ve helped if you told me I was looking for a chick. Not just some,” he swallows, “random energy blob.”

Tony points a finger at Bucky, “Blame the Scouts for not relaying relevant information to me first.”

Rhodey holds his arms open in question, “Well, she didn’t vanish again so, where exactly did you lose her?”

Clint licks the grease from his fingers, rubs his hand against his thigh, “they were med-evacing someone. Some pregnant woman, I think?”

Bucky groans and Sam’s face twists, “Tony, can we drop your fox hunt now?”

He holds his hands up defensively, “Was there a single other woman there, cause I don’t think random vanishing acts should be performed in late pregnancy.”

Clint lolls his head to the side thoughtfully, “A doctor and a nurse.”

Tony extends his hand enthusiastically at Sam, “See? Progress!” He turns to Clint, “And did they both leave or - “

“I mean they both went out and the nurse came back?”

Tony claps his hands together, “Good, I can work with that. FRIDAY? Gonna need some personnel files, schedules, pay stubs, company picnics - whatever you can find me.”
It's three in the morning when Tony successfully pulls up the profiles of two women in the living area. Clint's snoozing on the sofa and Sam's at the kitchen island on his phone - having tuned out Tony's voice two hours ago. Everyone else had disappeared to their rooms in favor of sleep over whatever Tony's so intent on discovering. Only Bucky is awake and interested at this point, which he can tell annoys Stark. But the man still wants to have his moment, so he puts up with the less than ideal audience.

The faces of two women light up in the holographic dome over the dining table.

"Okay, we got a Doctor Smith and Nurse Practitioner Doud." He swipes the Doctor's picture, bringing up a small profile. "Diane Smith, obstetrician on the island since 2018 - FRIDAY, do we have an address or something to work with?"

A map of the island comes to the forefront. Zooming in to just south of the bay, to a small house on the water. Bucky leans his weight towards Tony, eyes still focused on the map, "Isn't that where an energy read was?"

"Yeah, Barton was scoping it before he went to the hospital."

Bucky nods in recognition, even though Tony isn't even looking his way.

"Previous jobs, college degrees, a birth certificate, family?"

A picture of a man in a doctor's coat pulls up in front of the woman's picture, "Her father, Anthony Martin."

Bucky sees the birth and death dates before FRIDAY even has the chance to say "deceased". Graduated from the University of Michigan in 1982. A few different residencies across the state. On the island since 1997. Died of a stroke in 2016.

Her degree is pulled up next to his picture.

They go through Margaret Doud's profile next. A recent resident on the island with a large extended family. More available information comes up. College degree, a highschool diploma, mentions of six different previous jobs, even a few profile pictures.

"She's only been here since 2021, where our mysterious archer has been dealing out kicks since - "

"2013," Bucky interrupts.

Tony turns to actually look at him, "Should I even bother?" He swipes the nurse's profile away without an answer and begins to pace around the table. He claps his hands together, making Clint stir on the couch. "I want to say 'jackpot', but it seems too boisterous."

Bucky steps forward, swipes the man's picture away with his right hand to reveal the girl's face again. "Why the chase?"

Tony saunters up next to him and crosses his arms thoughtfully as he stares at the holo picture, "The world is just coming back together again. Thanos is gone, yeah. But God only knows what else is out there. I want to know who I can rely on." He turns his head towards Bucky, "We're shorthanded, I want everyone I can trust on my ship, you know?"

"Wouldn't more people make it sink?" Bucky asks.

Tony screws his face up, "What are you, Grandpa Drax now?"
He lets out a genuine laugh. Tony softens. Bucky rubs his stubbled jaw tiredly, "So, what's the plan?"

Tony pauses for a moment, squints at her picture, "I don't know, lunch at the Grand?"

He hums in reply, "Think she knows? You guys didn't exactly hide the jet, did you?" Tony looks away. "She might be running now. Won't be easy to track down."

"It's a little island, everyone knows everyone here," he says defensively.

Bucky turns his body towards Stark and questions, "But would they rat her out to us?"

With a full hour of sleep under her belt, she is awoken to the cries of a toddler. She forces herself up from the worn plaid couch, back feeling incredibly tight. With a yawn and a stretch, she makes her way to the stairs. It had been a long night filled with a sense of dread that she couldn't push away. Feet feeling heavy and loud with each step. She opens the door with a creak to see the two-year-old shaking the railing of his crib.

"Hey, little man," she coos as she swoops him out.

He pushes against her chest with his feet, "Where's mumma? Mumma home!"

"No, buddy. Your mumma's at the hospital having a baby, remember?" He whines as she sways back and forth. She didn't even know what time it was. The sky was still dark, but that's typical of October mornings. The toilet flushes in the adjacent room. So, not just the baby was up, it seemed. "Wanna get some breakfast, bud, after we change your butt?"

He looks around the room for a moment before snuggling into her arms and quietly saying, "Okay."

In the kitchen, staring down the mess, she resolves that she'll at least take care of the dishes for them before they get back. The eldest boy, Alex, is already on the couch watching TV with his breakfast. She still needs to wrestle the twins up for school.

"What do you kids eat, hmmm?" She asks the giggling toddler. "Probably brussel sprouts and liver, right?"

"Nooo!" he laughs, weaving between her legs with his sippy cup to avoid her tickles.

She can do this. She can totally handle this until their grandparents arrive. And then she can have her panic attack and maybe go into hiding or something. But in the meantime, she's gonna toast some pop tarts and slice up a banana.

The living room smells of wet dog, which only makes her think of her seven back on the island. Goddamnit.

"I let Sadie out, but it was raining."

She looks at Alex, then down at the muddy pawprints. She can do this.

The twins, Tyler and Eric, are finally dragged out to the living room. Perking up slightly when they realize their mom isn't there. But then they remember their doctor is the one taking care of them and
they lose some of their gusto.

"You guys are good to go?" She asks the three boys as they line up by the door with their backpacks and helmets.

"Mhmm," Tyler replies as he snaps his bag on.

She stands back to let them head out, "Okay, just know your grandpa's probably gonna be here when you get home."

"Yeah. Okay, bye!" He says hurriedly, trying to distance himself as soon as humanly possible.

She grabs Oliver as he tries to make a run after his older brothers. She chides him lightly as she carries him back in. What does one do with a two-year-old when the reality of her situation is sinking in harder and harder? She turns on Disney Junior and lets him pull out every toy they own into a giant pile in front of the couch.

Cleaning up the kitchen and keeping a trained eye on Oliver, she tries to formulate a plan. But nothing sticks. Everything she thinks of ends up in some god awful disaster. It's not like she wants to spend the rest of her life running, not when she had carved something out for herself here on the islands. But she doesn't want the Avengers breathing down her neck either.

What was the worse thing to happen if they found her? They want her to cease and desist? They want to keep watch of her? They want her for the team?

Everything her dad had warned them of, of being too public, was being jeopardized. But who's fault was that? After he had died, she went out and started working on her powers anyway. And that first fucking robbery they stopped. It was like seeing the sun for the first time - they couldn't get enough of it. They flew too close to that sun. And she had just gone and thrown herself hurtling headfirst towards it the other night by getting tangled up with the Avengers.

Bucky watches Sam and Wanda hop onto the yellow carriage - Sam looking heavily annoyed by the situation. Tony had them split up to search the island. Clint was down at the docks, keeping an eye on the ferries. FRIDAY was activated in the quinjet down at the airstrip. So, unless the girl vanished again, they had eyes on all the possible ways off the island. Everyone else was tasked with recon. Which is how he found himself downtown, attempting to blend in with the other tourists.

Stark had made a failed attempt to call the hospital for her. Claiming his wife needed an obstetrician. But the receptionist had said she was out and could get another doctor for assistance. When pressed for Dr. Smith's schedule, he had been told that was private information and the best she could do was get another doctor to help his wife.

If he didn't watch himself, he was going to make the whole island aware of the Avengers and their intentions.

With the hood of his coat pulled up - both for the disguise and the actual weather - he makes his way to the end of the street. Passing the shoppers looking for end-of-the-season bargains and older couples looking to "see the colors!", whatever that meant.

Clint had mentioned checking out the place last night but never made it inside. It's only a house away
from the small library, right on the water. As he nears the white picket fence, he can see the distant horizon of the mainland beyond the tumbling waves. The yard is lightly covered in weeds. And where most of the houses on the island, especially on the main street, are heavily decorated and gardened this one is uncharacteristically bare. Giving the sense that no one actually lives in it.

He gives a casual look up and down the street before opening the gate. Following the stone path to the tiny cement porch, covered by white latticework. The blinds are drawn on every window. Even though he knows it's a lost cause, he knocks on the front door. Twice. But no one comes and there's no sound from inside. He moves along the side of the house, arriving in the back to the view of the lake only a few yards away. There's a single red adirondack chair in the grass, faded by the weather to a rusty pink. The backdoor is easy to pick open.

The first thing he notices is the musty smell. Followed by the complete minimalism of the place. It reminds him of his apartment in Romania, so many years ago now. He carefully treks across the floor. Passing a bathroom and a door to a bedroom. They're both empty of life. With only a single twin bed in the bedroom, no sheets covering the mattress. The front room is just as bare as the rest of the house, besides a faded blue couch and a lone bicycle leaning against the wall.

She probably uses the house as storage and to keep up appearances to the neighbors. Stark did say there was an energy signal here, just before she went to the other island. But if she wasn't living here, then where was she?

It's somewhere around the third hour of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, where she's struggling to keep her eyes open, that she hears the saving grace of a knock at the front door. Oliver perks right up, running towards the front of the house as he excitedly babbles "papa, papa, papa". She is beyond ready for an expert to take over at this point.

She really should have been more aware, maybe she can blame it on the anxiety and lack of sleep. But it still comes as a complete surprise to her when she opens the front door and the air comes rushing out of her lungs.

"Hey, oh - I'm not intruding, am I?"

Oliver clings to her leg as she backs away from Tony Stark. He, seemingly oblivious to her reaction, walks right in.

"Nice place, very up north fishing cabin." He walks right past her and into the kitchen.

"It's not mine," she stutters - rooted to the floor.

He pauses, standing behind the back of the couch, "Oh, I know that. Just babysitting, right?" He turns his attention to the TV as Mickey starts singing, "Wow. I'm just grateful mine was never into this." He crosses his arms and glances back at them. "Her forte was more PJ Masks. Considering my career path, I suppose it makes the most sense. I mean, her third birthday was just that, but on a whole other level - "

"I'm sorry, what is happening right now?"

His face drops, "Think it's obvious. But we don't need to talk shop in front of the kid if that's your concern."
She squints, barely processing the entirety of the moment yet, "Yeah, that'd be… that'd be preferable."

"You know, it's funny what you hear in the grocery store. Apparently, your pal Maggie was in labor and somehow you ended up on kid duty. Is everyone on this island that prone to gossip?"

Oliver unclenches his grip finally, peering out from behind her at the strange man. She crosses her arms, "Probably not as bad as seeing a quinjet parked on our runway."

The wince is small and barely noticeable, but it is there.

Feeling a little more confident, she moves forward defiantly, "Or maybe a few pictures of Iron Man doing a flyover last night. That'd probably get the people talking."

He crosses his legs as he leans against the back of the plaid couch, "And what about your little trick, magic, thing? Lot of people talking about that around here?"

She falters, "I - I don't know what you're talking about."

He raises his eyebrows with a small twitch of a smirk on his lips, "Okay. We can play that game."

Oliver steps next to Tony and taps his leg with a small Iron Man action figure. He looks down at the touch and smiles at the kid.

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She can recall everything from the past two hours, but she's still a bit dumbfounded as to how she ended up in the Seabiscuit with Tony Stark. They're locked away in the far corner booth, with his back to the rest of the cafe. As if she needs everyone to see who she's dining with.

"That's you, isn't it?" She stares at the picture on his phone that he pushes across the table. It's her from before the Decimation in full disguise. He takes a sip of his coffee.

She nods her head numbly, "Yeah."

"Huh," he takes it back from her, stares at the picture a little longer. "Homemade?"

"Local."

His lips twist up in an amused smirk, "You have a local superhero tailor?"

She shakes her head slowly in her hands as the beginnings of a headache form behind her brow, "No, but they do the job."

He taps his hand absentmindedly against his white mug, "Up for a redesign? Maybe some modifications?"

She raises her head suddenly, eyes wide, "I'm sorry?"

"Generic leggings probably aren't the most bullet resistant or flammable," he swipes through his phone nonchalantly.

Her head tilts to the side, "What are you - "
A large hulking figure saunters up to Tony. For his credit, he only glances down at the man's feet in recognition. He takes another sip of his coffee, "Take a seat, icebox."

The man pulls his hood back, revealing his long brown hair that's pulled into a bun on the back of his head. He sits with his back to the bar. His eyes bore into her with a calculated stare.

"I have to do everything, honestly," Tony mumbles with a trained gaze on his phone.

She stares at the man's gloved hands. She recognizes him somehow.

Tony waves a noncommittal hand in his direction, "I found your Mirage, Barnes. You can thank me later."

"I don't - " The man starts with a rush.

"No, no. Your frozen expression is thanks enough."

Barnes leans back in his chair awkwardly. She gets it, as they sit in uncomfortable silence as Tony continues on his phone. She folds her arms on the table, tapping her fingers on her coat sleeve. A waitress comes by for his order, but much like she had done ten minutes prior, he waves her off with a no, thank you . A moment passes.

"You fight good."

She looks in surprise at the man. His face is neutrally drawn. She can't help herself as she mutters, "Oh. Thank you, Shang."

Tony pulls away from his phone, "Did you just Mulan him? That sounded like a Disney reference." He points a joyful finger at her before looking at Barnes with a grin, which falters slightly at the man's expression. "What? I have a kid," he says defensively, before adding a softer, "Touchy."

The man doesn't remove his gaze from her. It's unsettling. Barnes . It sounds familiar, but she still can't place it. He leans forward slightly, "You don't live here."

She pulls a face, "I do. I live right down by the library."

He shakes his head, "No, you don't. That place is empty."

She looks at Tony, brows drawn, "I mean, I know you were tracking me down, apparently , but you sent someone to, what, scope out my house?"

He pulls his coffee mug away from his lips, "Maybe if you didn't go on the run from us - "

"How would you feel if the Avengers were coming after you?!" She questions with a slight panic.

"Okay, probably . Because they're the good guys," Tony drags. She settles back in the booth with a bristle. He looks over at Barnes, "You broke into her house?" The other man falters. Tony runs his hand over his forehead, "Excessive. The word I'm looking for is excessive. But it does draw the question," He looks back at her, "Where is your little hideout?"

She opens and closes her mouth without an answer. "I don't…"

Tony finally places his phone down on the table, "Things will probably work a lot easier if we don't have to drag every little thing out of you."

"Is this an interrogation?" She settles her arms across her chest.
Tony leans back in his chair thoughtfully, fingers tapping on the edge of the table, "No? Just a friendly lunch between common interest acquaintances."

She hums in reply and lets her arms slowly drop to her lap. "I have a cabin over on Round Island."

Tony's head does a curious tilt, "My girl scouts scoped that place out last night."

She bites her lip to hide a smile, "Yeah. I know."

Tony looks over at the other man, "Hey, ice cube. Did you fail to mention something?"

His arm flexes as he draws his hands into fists, "We saw nothing over there, Stark."

"Well did you look under the island?"

The other man stares at Tony. Feeling the need to end his misery, she interrupts, "Cloaking shields."

They both turn to look at her.

She drops her hand on the table, feeling a heavy weight settle in her stomach. "My cabin is under a cloaking shield."

Tony raises his brows in interest, "Can't get those at your local store."

"You'd have to ask my father where he got them. It was all his idea."

Bucky leans forward, "Why?"

The weight becomes heavier now, "Think two kids with abilities won't draw some attention? This was before you," she gestures her hand at Tony, "were flying around in your suit. Better to have us hidden from sight."

"You said two, right? Where's your partner - I'm assuming it's the two of you in all those articles?"

She feels nauseatingly sick. Looking down at her hands for a moment, she misses the look shared between the two men. She finally speaks with a soft voice, "My brother, Jack."

The way she says it must make the meaning clear, because Tony only says, "My condolences." Then he pauses his hand, "Wait, did you say Jack. Like, Jack & Diane? The Mellencamp song? Did your parents know that song is about - "

"We didn't know that when we chose them. We were five."

Barnes shakes his head with a confused look, "Chose them?"

She tries to roll the kink from her shoulders to little avail, "Again, keeping us out of sight meant fake names. My dad he... he had this playlist with that song on it and we heard it, like, every day. It was the obvious choice."

"I'm guessing Smith isn't your last name either," Tony comments lightly.

"The Smiths were on the playlist too," she adds lamely. Her brother wanted to call himself Freddie Mercury originally - there were four Queen songs on the playlist - but her dad thought it might have been a little too obvious.

Tony drums his hand on the table, deep in thought. Barnes can't seem to meet her gaze now. "Why
"the hiding?" Tony catches her furrowed expression, "I mean, I'm sure a vanishing kid could raise some questions. But even before the Avengers, it's not like the world was skimping on people with weird abilities. I'm kinda surprised Xavier didn't pick up on the two of you."

She shrugs, "You'd have to ask him for his reasoning. And you mean Charles Xavier? You'd have to be a mutant to get picked up for his school. My dad tried that, but - "

"You're not a… so what, you were hit by radiation or something?"

"Not a lot of that kind of thing up here. No chemical explosions, or nuclear reactions, or radioactive bites," Tony flinches at that, "Just normal human DNA. He tested that too."

Tony looks her down with a calculated stare, "So, what exactly are you?"

"Your friendly northern Michigan superhero?"

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Mentions throughout the chapter:**

1. NICU stays are no joke, I speak from experience. They are the worst possible thing in the world for a parent to experience. Good for the babies, heartwrenching for the parents. 0/10, would not recommend.
2. "See the colors!" This is a known phrase in Michigan. The old folk love to go on road trips to see the changing leaves during the fall. A lot of people go to Mackinac at the end of season to catch them.
3. Fort Mackinac was built on the 150-foot limestone bluffs of the island in the Revolutionary War. It's currently a living history museum with reenactors and exhibits throughout the restored buildings.
Chapter 4

Tony had been systematically avoiding the person who had been calling him for thirty minutes as she had attempted to answer more of their questions. His finger pushing the *ignore* button more purposely with each call. Then Barnes had his phone buzzing, some basic burner flip phone. And he had actually answered, listening for only a moment before holding it up to Tony.

“This is why I put you with Sam, you’re not a team player,” he begrudgingly takes the phone from Barnes’ gloved hand. “Oh, hey, man. What? *No,* must have some, uh, cell reception issues up here - ” he trails off as he gets up from the booth, heading towards the bar.

She drums her fingers on the dark wood table, “So, you broke into my house.”

He gives a small groan, running his hand over his jaw, “It was… I just - ”

She stops him before he can strangle himself with his own embarrassment, “It’s fine, I guess. I don’t even live there, obviously.” She pushes away from the table, leaning against the upholstered seat, “My dad got it when he became the head doctor on the island. We stayed there for a year while he worked on the cabin.”

His expression is finally looking more relaxed, the muscles in his jaw aren’t so tightly bound now. He doesn’t look so intimidatingly cold. She shrugs her coat off, getting the feeling that they aren’t leaving anytime soon. He rubs his hands together and she finds it a bit strange that he still has his gloves on.

“That was you on the roof the other night, wasn’t it?” It had been hard to see him properly through her massive adrenaline rush. And the night vision goggles hadn’t helped much either. But his face looks incredibly familiar. She just can’t place how she recognizes him.

He gives her a small nod, “Yeah.”

She nods slowly, crosses her arms over her chest, “So, you’re like an agent or…”?

His eyebrows raise with widened eyes for a flash of a second. He glances back at Tony who is still in the middle of his call - as if he was surprised by what she had said. “Something like that,” he mumbles.

Finding the conversation hitting a wall, she looks around the cafe. Usually, it’s packed this time of day. But with the limited number of tourists, it’s far quieter than she’s ever seen. She can just make out the few people on the sidewalk outside. She likes this time of year when the traffic dies down and everyone gets a chance to breathe again. It’s a time for the residents to reconnect and have the usual *thank God that’s over* look in their eyes.

She fiddles with her necklace as she eyes the two people outside. The man is looking up and down the street conspicuously. The woman he’s with just pushes past him to open the door to the cafe. The redhead spots her right away as Captain America trails after.

“You got off easy, Buck,” The man sighs as he walks over to their table. “My ass is gonna be sore for days.” He points a finger at her as a way of greeting, “What do you people have against cars over here? This isn’t 1873.”
She’s a bit taken back, admittedly. After spending almost three hours going toe-to-toe with Tony Stark, her gusto was starting to wain. She gives him the generic islander answer, “It’s been that way since 1898, actually.”

He slides into the booth, hands resting on the table in a loose clasp. “I’ll give you this, the people out there are eating it up. Go on a cute little horse and buggy tour or whatever. But you’re gonna tell me that you all bike around here in the winter - well, everyone besides you, I’m assuming?”

She bristles at the implication, “Snowmobile, actually. And we’re not that outdated. We haven’t escaped the future,” She gestures towards the windows, “We have a Starbucks.”

He laughs, “Well, hot damn. Y’all are on track to becoming Wakanda up here.” That makes Barnes shake his head with a laugh. The man tones it down enough to extend her a hand, “Sam Wilson.” Tentatively, she shakes it. “See you already met Stark and tin-man.”

She pulls her hand back, “Yeah, one hunted me down and the other did some breaking and entering.”

He gives a toothy grin, “Sorry ’bout that. I doubt this one apologized for it.” Sam gestures his head towards Barnes. He’s got an agitated look about him now as he shakes his head, gloved fists clenching - like he’s ready to start arguing.

She shakes her head before the other man can struggle out a reply, “It’s okay. I was just telling him that I don’t even live there. Probably just saw a dusty shell of a house and my bike. Gotta keep up appearances somehow.”

Sam leans back in the booth, runs a finger across his chin, “Why the ruse? Do you need these people thinking you live here for some reason? Superpowers and all that aside.”

She gnaws on her lip for a moment before answering, “It was just the safer option when we were kids - “

“We?”

“Her brother,” Barnes says for her.

She nods at Sam, “Yeah. Just easier to have us in a safe house off the grid.”

He eyes her for a second, “And where exactly is this off-grid safe house?”

“About a mile and a half away, over on the island you guys were searching last night.”

His brows raise and he looks at Barnes, “See! I knew we were missing something over there.” He turns his attention back to her, “Bet it’s right in the center of the place, saw a massive energy reading there. You got a bunker or something?”

She shakes her head and waves a tired hand, “Cloaking shields, camouflages the whole place.”

“And as much as I want to check those out,” Tony saunters up to the table with the redhead by his side. “Papa Fury wants us up to the Soo Locks,” he looks down at Sam, “we have a reliable lead.” After sliding the flip phone back to Barnes, he grabs his coat from the chair and shrugs it on, looking down at her, “We’ll be in touch.”

Sam leans back, “That’s it?”
“Uh, yeah,” Tony says plainly.

Sam waves his hand between her and Tony, “All this runaround and we’re out, just like that?”

Tony drops a fifty down on the table, not even looking at Sam, “Yep. Let’s move it, Cap. I can hear the Locks calling.”

Sam gives in with a shrug, standing up to join them. Barnes moves to stand as well, but Tony stops him, “Down, Soldier. You’re staying.”

“Tony, what the - “

“Stark, you have no - “

He cuts them off with a loud shhhsh, “Ah-ah-ah. We still need eyes here, not just because of our new friend,” he smiles at her; it seems fake. “They’re calling for another shipment in three days at the St. Ignace docks. We’ll keep Barnes and Barton here.” He looks at Sam and the woman, “You two head up there and do your reconnaissance with Rhodes.”

Sam folds his arms across his puffed out chest, “And you’re gonna be where?”

Tony screws his face up, as if the answer was obvious, “A very important classroom Halloween party.”

Sam drops his arms in defeat and looks over at the seated man, “Sorry, Buck. Can’t fight a man wanting to see his kid.” He slaps his hand down on Barnes’ shoulder, “We’ll see you.”

The two of them leave the cafe. Tony leans across the table to extend a small card to her, “Seriously, we’ll be in touch. Call me if this one breaks into your house again or something,” he jerks a thumb at Barnes. He stands and gives the man a lazy salute, “At ease, popsicle.”

He pulls his phone out and holds it to his ear as he leaves, talking to someone on the other end with an excited tone. She watches him pass by the cafe windows and out of sight. Her hands drop to the tabletop, Stark’s business card between her fingers. She looks at the man across from her, “I’m sorry, what just happened here?”

It’s a mutual decision to head out after a full ten minutes of silence. She walked beside him, unsure what she should do now. All that earth-shattering anxiety had led to this? Tony Stark giving her a simple keep up the good work with a mention of modifying her costume in the future. They didn’t tell her to stop. They honestly didn’t do much of anything besides giving her a self-induced panic attack. What the hell was she supposed to do now?

They stop in front of May’s, standing under the blue and white awning, as the quinjet ascents from the airport in the north. The two of them watch it fly into the distance as they’re surrounded by the warm smell of fudge and the loud chattering of bargain shoppers.

He looks down at her, his gaze is softer than it had been in the cafe. But his voice is still low and steely like it’s been out of use for a while, “So, now what?”

Shrugging, she pulls her coat closer to fight the brisk wind, “Sounds like you have your mission.”
She notices the slight twitch of his broad shoulders. As a group of women passes them, he pulls the hood of his coat back up, making it obscure his profile a little more. Strands of his brown hair fall into his face, escaping the loose bun he had tied them into. *God, where does she know him from?*

“Yeah, sounds like it,” he mutters with a glance towards his dark boots. He lifts his gaze after a moment and his eyes meet her stare. “What about you?”

Another shrug, “Stark didn’t tell me off or give me a slap on the wrist. I’ll do my thing here. Be the small town hero, or whatever, while you guys handle the world ending stuff.”

He nods, stuffs his hands into his coat pockets and turns to brace his back against a particularly strong gust of wind. He looks like he has something further to say or ask of her, but the sound of the Doctor Who theme song starts playing in her back pocket.

“Shit, sorry. One second.” She apologizes softly. Pulling her phone out, she swipes to answer the call from work, “Hey, Linda. What’s up?”

“*Sorry to bother you, Diane. You weren’t answering your pages. Mainland’s been calling for you.*”

She bites her lip, it must be about Maggie. She uses her free hand to pull her windswept hair from her face. “Well, I’m downtown now. I can be there in… a few minutes?”

“*Okay, I’ll hold them off until then. See you in a bit!*” The older woman ends the call with a cheerful tone.

She puts her phone back into her pocket. What a fucking roller coaster of a day. Looking back at her silent companion, he looks apprehensive. Shaking her head with a smile, “You know. I heard a lot of nicknames today, but I never actually got your name.”

The edges seem to soften. He has blue eyes, she realizes softly. The laugh lines around them crinkle as he squints against the afternoon sun. He’s hesitating. It looks like he’s thinking it over, for some reason, before he finally says, “My name is Bucky.”

God, it sounds familiar - she should definitely know this guy. She nods with a warm smile, “Well, Bucky. Maybe I’ll see you around. It’s certainly been… interesting.”

She turns to leave. “What about you?” She pauses, looks back at him. Sheepishly, he continues, “You said that Diane wasn’t your real name.”

She tuts, amused, “You think after twenty-some years, I’m just gonna give that out?” A genuine laugh escapes her lips. She can almost forget the complete lack of sleep and madness of the past few hours. He smiles back at her. “I’ll see you, Bucky.”

He tilts his head down in reply, scuffs his boot against the cement as she heads up the side street to the medical center.

Luckily, it had been a relatively uncomplicated labor. Baby Preston only had some minor issues to attend to in the NICU - fluid in the lungs, lower than ideal oxygen levels - but he was on a good track. After scheduling a postpartum checkup for Maggie, she is bombarded by the second shift nurse, Sara, who is eagerly holding out her phone.
“Did she send over pictures of the baby already?” She asks as she grabs the nurse’s phone.

“Have you seriously not heard?”

She looks down at the Twitter post. A picture of Iron Man flying right over the bay.

“There’s a ton of them!” Sara snatches the phone back, swipes it a few times, then shoves it back into her stunned hands.

Another picture, stealthily taken in front of Marquette Park. It’s pretty blurred because of how zoomed in it is, but it’s definitely Sam and the redhead woman on a carriage. The text overlaying the top of the picture reads: Avengers rolling in XD.

“Wish I could have seen them, but we’ve been swarmed.” Sara doesn’t seem to take in her silent reaction. “You were just downtown, right? Did you see any of them?”

She hands the woman her phone back, “What? No. That’s like… wow, so crazy.” Her tone doesn’t sound the least bit convincing, but her nurse doesn’t even notice as she excitedly swipes through more pictures.

“Yeah, right? Like, their Instagram said they were taking a little vacation or something?” She holds the phone back up. This time from the official Avengers account. It’s taken from Iron Man’s suit mid-flight, as all you can see is his hand doing a peace sign in front of the Mackinac Bridge.

“Wow, yeah, that’s so, so crazy.”

She wants to vanish. But she holds it together. Even after Linda starts going on about seeing War Machine on her way to work that morning. And how he looked to be an incredibly fit, young man. Somehow, she manages to escape - using Maggie’s kids as the perfect excuse, commenting on her lack of sleep. Her wonderful receptionist instantly tells her to go home. Which she does, vanishing to her cabin as soon as she reaches the bottom of the stairwell.

Clint leans against the door frame with his arms crossed. His eyes squint and his nose turns up at Bucky. He scratches his elbow. “You know, I’ll never get used to that smell,” he gestures his hand at the gun oil on the table. He strides towards him. “Nat always used that stuff.”

Bucky turns his head at the mention of Natasha, but he doesn’t reply. Choosing to methodically reassemble the Glock in his hands instead. It’s something to focus his energy on, something that doesn’t require emotions to handle. Nat would probably make a snarky comment about it if she was here.

Clint’s gaze is distant. He knew her too. Bucky forgets that sometimes. It was two different lives she had lived. He never really had the chance to see the Avenger Black Widow - the woman free of the Red Room and HYDRA’s cold grasp. He can’t help but wonder what she would think of him now.

And then there was that girl. It’s like she didn’t recognize him. His face had been plastered on the news for months following the battle against Thanos. All the footage from his trial had been played on every major station. He was one of the most discussed people in American news coverage for at least a full month. You know, once everyone got over The Vanished returning and the chaos that ensued from all of that. But somehow, she hadn’t known who he was.
The other man plops down in the chair next to him, sitting backwards on it and resting his arms on the back. He rests his chin on his crossed arms as he watches Bucky finish up with the firearm.

“She cool?” His jaw bounces on his arms as he speaks.

Bucky glances at him as he wipes his hands off on the old stained rag.

“The vanishing archer,” Clint elaborates when Bucky doesn’t reply.

He places the gun in its case. “She seemed,” he pauses, looking for the right word, “out of her depth.”

Clint scoffs, “Most people are when faced with us.” He laughs, raises his head off his arms, “Tony found her, yeah?”

Bucky nods.

“Few hours with him would put any sane person on edge,” he smiles and leans away, hands holding the back of the chair.

Bucky rolls the brushes up in the cloth case and caps up the oil and cleaner bottles. His movements familiar muscle memory at this point.

Clint rubs his face with a heavy hand, “God. Three days till we have movement, yeah?”

“That’s what Stark said.”

He nods, “Damn. Told Laura and the kids I’d be back by the 31st.”

Bucky stops himself from just nodding in reply. Settling his hands in his lap instead, “You probably could.” He watches the other man’s brows raise. “Three days out. If it’s anything like the last collection, it won’t be heavy security.”

“Yeah, except they were caught and they’re probably expecting something like that again.”

Bucky tilts his head back and forth thoughtfully, “Maybe. Or they saw heading up north in the jet - think we’ve left the area.”

Clint leans forward, “What, you think it’s a red herring or something?”

Bucky shrugs, “Could be. Or they might just be focusing their efforts to the source.” He relaxes in the chair, crosses his extended legs. “We have three days of waiting here. Shipment won’t come in until the first. Could be home and back, if you wanted.”

Clint eyes him, waiting for the ball to drop, “And if I’m not?”

Bucky flexes the dark vibranium arm with mechanical whirs, “I could probably handle a few armed guards on my own.”

Clint smirks, “At your age, grandpa?”

Bucky’s able to smile at that nickname with a little more affection than the others he’s been given.

Clint pushes himself off the chair, standing with a stretch, “Well, I guess if it went south, you could always call the Great Lakes Avengers for help.” He looks down at Bucky with a grin.
Bucky scrunches his face, “Are they seriously calling themselves that now?”

He laughs, “Yeah. So, you better put them on speed dial. Or,” he grins, “You could always grab the new girl.”

Bucky prides himself in the fact that he didn’t flinch.

But the other man must catch the look in his eyes because Clint laughs, “I’m kidding, man.” He pauses, “So, what? You plan on doing the tourist thing here for a few days?”

Bucky leans in the chair, drums a metal hand against the wooden table, his voice distant, “I have no idea.”

Clint slaps a hand down on his right shoulder, “Take a break or something. Think you’ve earned it by this point.”

He heads to the bedroom without even looking at Bucky or his tightly drawn expression.

Take a break? What the hell did that even mean to Bucky Barnes? He had been on the run for two years. In cryogenic stasis for another two. Technically disappeared for five. And had only been out from the government and S.H.I.E.L.D’s hold for a month and a half. Here he was in a resort hotel on an idyllic island, with nothing and no one to take up his time. Hell, he couldn’t even remember the last real vacation he had experienced before the war. Bits and pieces came through the mush and fog from time to time. When he was hit with certain scents or heard a particular phrase, or even in moments where a sense of déjà vu overcame him - then it would trigger a memory or a sense of familiarity that he would have to piece together and track through.

He remembers Coney Island, forcing a small Steve to get on some terrifying ride. Brighton Beach in the dead of a blistering July with his sisters and mother. Needless to say, it had been a long while since Bucky had experienced anything resembling a break.

It feels a bit strange to be back out on the job. Considering the past two days. But she does it regardless, finding a sense of completeness as she braces against the strong wind coming from the lake. She’s on the mainland, right by the old point lighthouse, sitting on a weathered picnic table. Her eyes are trained on the party store across the street. This is what she was supposed to do. This was her area of expertise - not a massive gunfight against a group of illegal arms dealers. Just small town petty thieves and wannabe arsonists. Maybe the occasional trafficker or kidnapper, if she heard anything on the state police radio. But it looked like it was gonna be a slow night. Which wasn’t bad, all things considered. She’d rather have this over Avengers-level missions any day. Absolutely. One hundred percent.

She pulls her gaze to the lake. Just beyond the middle of the bridge, a grouping of bright white lights on the water give a stark contrast to the darkness of the night. A freighter has snagged Line 5 with its anchor, again. The leak had been contained, thankfully. But the Roxxon Corps Safety and Containment ships were still out there dealing with the aftermath. Nobody in the area had actively approved of the pipeline going directly under the bridge, in the middle of two giant freshwater lakes. Environmental agencies had been protesting the idea since the beginning. And yet the giant oil industry had won the heart of the governor and now, it seemed, they were always on the brink of a man-made disaster. A spill of any magnitude could damage the fragile system of the area.
Maybe if her brother was still here, he would have made an elaborate plan to infiltrate the local branch of the company. He would have had great plans to shut it down at the source. They would have celebrated their illustrious victory over the business tycoon. They would have done so many things.

She brings her knees to her chest and hugs them tightly. It’s to stay warm against the chill of the night, she tells herself.

Chapter End Notes

**Mentions throughout the chapter:**

1. The Great Lakes Avengers are known in Marvel comics for protecting the area around the Great Lakes. They’re much lesser known superheroes.
2. Line 5 is, unfortunately, a real pipeline. Though it was put in during the 50s. And yes, environmentalists do hate it, because there have been breaks in it. And the whole freshwater habitats and wildlife are greatly endangered by it.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He spends the first day holed up in the room because he can't actually bring himself to leave. There's nothing wrong with that, of course. A little voice tells him it's safe here; he can stay here and lay low. It's hard to get out of that mindset after all this time. So, he sits at the table, on the couch, on the too soft bed. He goes over each firearm with a Q-tip - every spring and coil is carefully cleaned. There are enough leftovers from the group in the fridge to sate his appetite for the morning and afternoon. A dismal spread of complimentary coffee from the resort to fill his mug.

He stands by the large bay windows in the living area, forcing down a cup, staring at the adjacent island. It's dotted with red and orange and yellow trees. Even though he knows he can't see it, he trains his gaze on the middle of the island. He wonders what her cabin is like. He wonders if she went back there yesterday. That girl's gotta be going through a whirlwind after having them track her down. Even though she had thrown herself into the middle of their mission the other night.

The day passes by slowly and that's okay. There's nothing on the comms from Sam or even Stark. He's already mapped out the freighter docks on the mainland and has a working plan in progress for the night of the next shipment. It seems they have little concern about delivering their cargo right next to the Coast Guard station. Maybe they know something about that: they could have the patrol rosters down or even a person on the inside.

The docks are in a surprisingly residential area too, jutting out on a small peninsula. He won't be the sniper this time. There are no adjacent buildings with a proper line of sight. He'll have to be on the ground doing it the old fashioned way. Maybe Clint won't be back in time. That wouldn't be the worst thing, he could handle it solo pretty easily.

The soft vibrations of his phone buzzing against the table pull his attention from the view. Bucky strides towards it and places the coffee down.

*Hey, Bucky. Just checking in. How are you doing today?* The text from Ingrid, the S.H.I.E.L.D appointed therapist, reads.

This was still new territory for him. The texting, yeah. But talking about anything, let alone what he was feeling, with a relative stranger - that was still uncharted territory. How was he supposed to open up about that kind of thing when he felt nothing most days?

He slowly thumbs out a reply. *Fine I guess. Have two days to myself.*

Her text comes in rather quickly. *A vacation? That sounds like a good opportunity to do some of the things we talked about.*

Yeah, right. Like that was gonna happen. He texts back a simple: *Maybe.*

She's probably used to his attitude by now when it comes to these things. Her text is calm and sweet as usual. *It's always worth a try. You know I'm here 24/7 if you need anything. Take some time to reflect and breathe. I'll see you at your next appointment, Bucky.*

He flips the phone shut and drops it next to the cold coffee - not that he wanted to drink it anyway. All he wanted to do was throw himself into a mission or research or anything to keep himself busy. During the day, he didn't want to think about things outside of the job he was currently on. Sleep
constantly reminded him of the past, he didn't need it drugged up every day if he could help it. Some might say that kind of thinking was counterproductive. Nat would probably make a pointed statement about how much of an idiot he was being. Though, she would be kind about it, in her own way. She knew his past, she knew what decades of nightmares were like. Everyone else didn't get that. They tell him to take a break like he's deserving of it or even capable of taking one.

It's a full hour later when the ache of hunger in his stomach is pulling him from his thoughts. He had looked through the leftovers again - down to three slices of pizza and a handful of protein bars - and even eyed the room service menu, but the stuff they had were for far more sophisticated palates. His hand hovers over the small pile of protein bars. He gives himself credit for not relenting and just eating one for a meal like he would have done a few years back when he was still on the run.

Bucky recalls a small burger place across from where he and the girl had been standing yesterday. He hesitates to call her Diane, knowing full well what it's like to live by a name not your own. Even now it takes repeated insistence that he isn't the Winter Soldier, or James, or even Mr. Barnes (Peter was the only one calling him that, to be fair). His hand flexes above the coat draped over the back of the chair. With a split moment of indecision, he snatches it up and heads out of the room.

Where the streets had been previously busy with tourists on bikes and carriage rides, as he heads towards the downtown area, only a lone biker passes him on the street. The extravagant houses and manors he passes are expertly decorated for the season. Tasteful decor on the grand porches and sprawling green lawns. Dried corn stalks and hay bales, orange and white banners, large and purposely stacked towers of pumpkins.

With his hands in his pockets, he tugs the coat closer as he walks downhill, past the local marina. The breeze coming off the lake pushes against him with gentle waves. The few boats that are left tied to the dock bob up and down in the water.

Even across the street, the large green park under the old fort is empty. There are no costumed performers up by the canon now. It seems overnight everything on the island had shut down.

Just as he's following the curb of the sidewalk onto the main street, a large procession of workhorses come trotting down it. Three men lead four horses each. Reins in one hand, extending their other out and whoa -ing when they get too far out of line. He stops to watch the large animals and their handlers. One mare walks further out from the group and whinnies at him. The lead quickly pulls her back into line and they make their way right down the main street.

There's a handful of tourists still out and about. Some grab their phones to capture the horses. Most are looking into shop windows, eager to get the best markdown deals.

Bucky walks under the balcony of a hotel on the bay that has little shops and bars tucked in around the entrance on the street level. He peers into one of the shop windows with a hand drawn 75% off sign taped to it. Brightly colored hoodies hang from a suspended shelf and tote bags line the window sill.

He eventually makes his way to the small restaurant. Keeping his head down and his voice soft as he orders his meal. It doesn't take long at all since he's only one of three customers there. The smell of the deep fryer and the aroma from the grill send his mind reeling through foggy memories. Resolving to write them down later, he thanks the man at the counter quietly and grabs his tray.

Bucky ends up sitting at a small table in the back of the establishment, situated in front of the large windows that look out at the bay. The spot is right in between two major ferry line docks. As he eats, he watches the array of people milling about as they wait for their departure. The last of the horses are being loaded into the lower deck of one of the ferries. He wonders if any are kept on the island in
the offseason.

When his meal is finished and his stomach feels more content, he continues down the main street. A few of the businesses have already closed up for the year. Standing in front of a storefront with the name Baxter’s on the window, he looks down at an antique gold-framed picture of a woman. Smaller frames with the same picture are scattered around the larger one. Coffee mugs, t-shirts, a music box - all with the woman's face. There is a black and white photo of the woman holding hands with a man, staring deeply into each other's eyes. It reminds him of his parents. The picture looks to be the same decade as their old wedding photo. Bucky can remember it had sat upon the mantelpiece in a curved white frame the entire time he had lived there. Pictures of him and his sisters eventually surrounded it. But he only remembers that one photo with stark clarity.

He crosses the street to avoid a large group rushing towards the docks. Walking further down, he stops in the middle of the crosswalk to gaze down the side street. He can just make out the roof of the medical center behind a large house at the end of the block. He can't help but think about that girl again.

The way Tony had obsessively searched for her made him wonder what plans he had made for the future. Bucky didn't think it was as simple as wanting to know who he could rely on in case of another emergency. Did Tony want her on the team or something? It all seemed a bit strange, having him stay on the island instead of getting a place closer to the mission point on the mainland. Did he want Bucky to keep an eye on her? He didn't exactly keep quiet on when and where the shipment was coming in either. Did he want the girl to show up?

He forces himself to keep walking. At this end of the street, there's barely a sign of tourists. Walking past two large bed and breakfasts on either side of him, he moves to a small open park on the water. A family is flying a kite there. Bucky sits down on a weather-worn picnic table and stares out at the lake. He can see the red and white lighthouse just a mile out. And his mind fixes on her again. Things would probably be a lot easier if Tony involved anyone in his plans. Then maybe he'd know just what the hell Stark expected him to be doing here for the next two days.

Admittedly, this wasn't how she usually spent her time off. Finding comfort in the garden or surrounding woods, hunting small game, practicing on the archery targets - those were the common activities. But this? Curled up on the old couch, surrounded by her pack of dogs, watching an old VHS from the eighties with a bag of chocolate covered pretzels in her lap? This was fucking survival mode.

The bloodhound, Angus, with his head on her lap, whimpers in his sleep. He was always the big baby of the group. She smooths a calming hand over the red fur of his back as the music starts to swell.

Jack used to laugh his ass off at the hallway scene. They always wanted to recreate it, had they ever attended public school. He had settled for running through the house, singing at the top of his lungs, "I wanna be an airborne ranger! I wanna live a life of danger!" Even now, she can perfectly picture him sliding over the kitchen table and jumping over the couch. He always thought he was a John Bender or a Ferris Bueller. She thought that wasn't too far off from the truth.

There was a lot to process in her mind. Which is why she was avoiding it completely. Her late-night excursion had resulted in nothing but numbing feelings and distant memories. Everything felt
jumbled and wrong. She could pull the confident act off, but only for so long. Then she was here; under a pile of blankets and dogs.

It had been three weeks after dad died, that Jack had set this same thing up. Pulling her close and letting her crumble in a safe space. No one had been there for her when she returned from her five-year disappearance. And as comforting as her dogs were, it definitely wasn't the same.

It had taken four months before she was ready to return to work. And even now, she hadn't fully processed everything through. Then this whole thing with the Avengers happened on top of where she already was. Suddenly, it was too much to handle and she was back to a crumbling mess. She would allow herself two movies, maybe three if things were desperate, then she would need to pull her shit together. Too many people relied on her now. The people in her professional life and the people in her secret line of work.

Shoveling another handful of pretzels into her mouth, she remembers the next shipment. Tony hadn't been hiding that information from her. It makes her wonder, makes her curious if that was intentional or not. She shouldn't care. Shouldn't be worried about something that can be easily handled by two professionals. And yet… part of her wants to catch that opportunity dangling in front of her again.

It wouldn't hurt to just be in the area when it's going down, right? She'll think on it for the next two days. For now, this is where she'll be. Safe and entirely alone - dogs aside.

Chapter End Notes

Mentions throughout the chapter:
1. The old timey photo of the woman? It's a movie still of Jane Seymour from Somewhere in Time. It was a movie in the 80s that was filmed on the island. They're known for it there, people flock to the island because of it - scout out locations from the film and even dress up in 1910s clothing during a weekend at the Grand Hotel (a central spot in the movie). Her and Christopher Reeves (aka. Superman) were the main couple. Very good movie. There is a shop called Baxter's (which is also featured in the film) and they have this window display in tribute to the movie.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Oh, man. This chapter took me a lot longer to get out than I had anticipated. My youngest got vaccinated last week, followed by a few days of rough teething. I was too preoccupied with pain management duties to write out more than a few paragraphs a day. Today, as I was trying to power through the last half of the section, my toddler was using me as a personal diving board while screaming, "mommy, mommy, mommy!" in my ear. By some miracle of the gods, I was able to get this finished up and posted today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone had their own traditions when it came to the end of the season, typically falling right on the last day of October each year. The seasonal workers would usually do their last hoorah with a bar crawl, leaving the island within the week with massive hangovers and hazy memories of their last few days. The first responders would jump into the freezing lake water to prove who could withstand the frigid temperatures - the victor always got their free meal at the Mustang afterwards - Aaron was the reigning champ, six years in a row now. But everyone at the medical center? They did the much tamer breakfast at the Pancake House. Three people would draw the short straw and stay behind, with the promise of breakfast being brought to them later. The restaurant always managed to stay open long enough to cater to the hospital staff, then they closed down for the season as well. It had been that way since the early nineties before her dad had even moved to the island.

She was expected to be there, especially after returning only six months prior with The Vanished. So, that's how she found her sleep-deprived ass at the long table next to the buffet. Plopped in a chair next to Tanner, who was equally exhausted but only because he had just gotten off his shift for the day. She had done thirds for her residency; never again, if she could help it. Crime-fighting and actual medical work were two different things. She would take the superhero business over just a week of third shift any day.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to live without these pancakes for another seven months," Tanner moans around his fork.

Linda scoffs from across the table, "You could always learn to cook something for yourself."

He shakes his head with a mouthful of chocolate chip and buttermilk goodness, "Not the same! No one makes it like Molly."

She cuts through the Belgian waffles with her fork, trying to enjoy the rare indulgence. The sweet sting of the strawberries and the rich softness of the whipped cream tangle in her mouth. Tanner was right, nobody did it like the old family-owned business.

The lively conversation from the opposite end of the table slowly makes its way down; encompassing the group.

Dr. Morgan points his bacon at Jeff, the phlebotomist, "I'll one up you! Three person collision on the fort because some genius individual thought it would be better for their circulation if they walked
down the walkway backwards. Try to explain that to the eighty-five-year-old with a broken wrist and fractured hip."

"Didn't we catch her trying to smack him around with her purse later?" The image alone generates an uproarious laugh from the table.

Once the noise dies down slightly, Sara joins in with her own, "Got a more recent one for you. Two teens in with broken arms because they were straining to see the Avengers flying over to Round Island - fell right down the stairs at Arch Rock."

She just about chokes on her waffles.

"No shit," Ben says with a stunned splutter.

Sara nods, "Iron Man and War Machine. Though someone said they saw Captain America heading over there too."

"That doesn't sound like a vacation."

Tanner, finally having had his fill, joins in, "Wonder what the heck they were doing over there. Not like we have an alien invasion going on."

"Not anymore!" Someone says gleefully. The table laughs again, ready for the slow days of the offseason to set in.

The laughs trail off into a comfortable silence, before someone ponders, "There's always the Mirage."

Tanner just about shoots out of his chair, while she tries to maintain the appearance of not having a full-blown internal freakout. "You think they're recruiting her for their team?!!" He asks excitedly.

"I hope not! We need someone looking out for us up here."

Linda glances over at her through her thick-rimmed glasses. She tries to take more purposeful bites of her cold meal. The older woman's eyebrows raise as if to say: you doing okay? She gives a short little nod in return.

The saving grace of the beeping Power Rangers communicator sound comes from her purse. Looking for any excuse to keep out of the conversation, she pulls out her phone. She gives an excited squeal. All signs of tension and anxiety leave her body as she holds up her phone.

"We got baby pictures!"

Linda makes a grab for it with a loud whoop! “Finally! Let’s see that little cutie - aww!” She holds her hand over her heart and gives a soft sigh before Ben is grabbing the phone from her.

The staff in the NICU had draped a pumpkin bib over Maggie's little boy, sleeping contently in the uncovered bassinet. She thanked the lord that he was finally breathing room air. All the plugs and wires were gone now, besides the heart monitor attached to his little foot. His cheeks were red and chubby, his nose scrunched in that permanent newborn scowl. A little green and white striped cap was high on his head, exposing the soft brown strands of hair. His parents were probably smitten beyond belief.

An hour later, as the restaurant is closing down for the year, they walk out onto the breezy street. Jeff and Sara holding the styrofoam to-go boxes for the three left at the hospital. Someone’s calling for a
commemorative selfie to celebrate the end of the season. Just as she's pulling her scarf tighter, Linda loops her arm around hers.

"How are you holding up?"

She looks down at the touch and gently pulls away, "Fine? Just ready to go home."

Turning towards the camera, everyone gives their best smiles. Three pictures are taken before someone’s muttering about getting back to work and she can already see that Tanner’s ready to pass out on the nearest pile of pumpkins. A few are slowly backing away from the request of another selfie - Jeff takes off in a full sprint, making for a good laugh. As the group starts to disperse, Linda walks along beside her.

They walk further down the main street before she starts becoming persistent, "I mean it. You haven't been yourself since you came back."

She avoids the woman's stare, "Of course not. Bit of a jarring experience finding out you've been dead for five years."

They're almost past the last ferry dock now, their little workgroup is far behind them. Linda places a gentle hand on her arm, forcing her to stop. "You know what I mean, ever since - " She pauses to look up and down the street with a wary eye, "ever since your brother."

Once again, she pulls away from the touch, bringing her hands up to cross over her chest protectively - wanting nothing more than to crawl into her safe husk of a shell. "Yeah, it's... I'm fine, really."

Linda looks like she's rearing up for another comment, but she stops short. The gentle breeze tussles her short, tightly-curled gray hair. Taking a steadying breath, "I think you should talk to someone about this."

She huffs an indignant laugh, "Sure, I'll just go lay it down on some therapist. Hash out all of my problems."

The older woman gives her a pointed look. "Well, thank goodness you can't just zap yourself someplace where nobody knows you. Right?"

Feeling deflated, she takes a step back. With her eyes on the ground, she gives a small and childish, "Sorry."

Linda places a gentle hand on her shoulder, "I'm saying it because no one else in your life will."

Since there were just so many people in her life who knew about her powers.

She tilts her head back to focus on the cloudy gray sky above her. Anything to keep the emotions down under the surface. She feels the soft pats of the woman's hand. Taking a moment to gather herself, she looks back at her.

Changing topics, she's asked, "Plan on giving out candy tonight?"

She shakes her head, "You know how it gets on Halloween, think I'll be more useful if I'm out."

The implication is clear. They never stayed on the island for the holiday. It was a time for teenage pranksters and college kids to try and make a name for themselves in their social circle. The island kids were well behaved and had more than enough supervision to keep them contained. Things would get more out of control on the mainland. She would be there. Not at the next shipment point.
Not at all.

Linda gives a sad smile, thoughtful, "Your brother didn't either when you were gone."

That sounds about right. She nods her head in acknowledgment, unable to get the words out without feeling the tear gates opening. She's able to keep it together for the interaction.

The older woman finally lets her hand fall to her side. "Well," she says slowly. "Keep the world safe but keep yourself safer." She gives her a tight smile, "I'll see you at work."

She watches the older woman head off down the side street. The breakfast group was already gone. The only person left on the street was a man looking in a storefront window on the other side of the block. She tugs her coat closer, pulls her purse higher on her shoulder, and walks down the sidewalk to the empty house.

Pushing the gate aside, she recalls how the house once looked. Her dad would go all out with decorations. On Halloween, the kids would stay in the workers' village in the middle of the island. But the last Saturday of the month before the holiday, the island held a small parade down the main drag for the kids. The school was the last stop on the route and her dad would always be outside handing out the good full-sized chocolate bars. They couldn't bring themselves to keep the tradition up after he died. Eventually, the parade ended with the shopping district before kids could even get to their house.

Standing in the front yard, she can still see the orange and black streamers. The old blow molds; faded over the years. The giant smiling Jack-o-lantern, the wispy ghost, the scarecrow. They're all sitting in boxes now. Collecting dust.

Once inside the house, she thinks about the night ahead. She knew her brother kept up their little tradition when she was gone. Five years of him doing it solo. This was the first year it was just her. She'd head to Mackinaw City first, then St. Ignace. She wouldn't go down to the docks. She wouldn't go down there, she was determined on that. Completely. One-hundred percent. Determined.
thick canopy of brightly colored trees to his left and the lake to his right, he found the small beaches rather strange. Instead of the familiar sand, there were small rocks and gravel. Then, further down, stacks of rocks lined the waterfront. Little pyramids of flat gray rocks, precariously balanced on top of large boulders. Soon, the small shoreline was filled with nothing but cairns. There were even stacks further out in the water, surprising to find them still intact.

This part of the island was the most serene. It was so distant from anything resembling the hustle of the tourism district. Stray houses were scattered along the hills, in between deep forests. The natural beauty of the place wasn't lost on him, but he didn't feel like he fit in with the landscape. His scenery was dark rooms, sterile medical tools, and frozen white tundra. And before that, hazy memories of brownstones and alleycats, smog and car horns, loud disputes at two A.M. and sweltering hot summers in tightly packed tenements. This wasn't for him. But he still couldn't knock the beauty of it. The houses in their grand old design almost reminded him of the places along the boardwalk. The whole island seemed to be stuck in an early twentieth-century vibe.

It hadn't taken him long at all to make the loop of the island. And he never ran across another person until he passed the small school. He kept his head down, turned his body to the lake, gave nothing away. He passed the little house on the water, with its overgrown weeds and chipped white siding. Couldn't help his thoughts drifting over to the girl again.

And then, when he was passing the large hotels and shops on the main street, he had spotted her - right by the entrance to the ferry dock. He had found himself staring into a closed shop window, but he could still hear her talking to the older woman - even though their voices were quite hushed, it was one of the few things he could thank the bastard serum running in his veins for. They were talking about her, but openly. The woman knew about her; about her powers. He wondered how many people knew. His eyes followed her as she walked down the street, to her house he bet. What was she planning to do that night? Part of him wanted to run after her and see if she had any intentions of being at the docks. He wanted to make sure she wouldn't be there. Though a part of him was curiously wondering how she would hold up in that kind of situation. But he knew what that would look like to any passerby. Like her friends and neighbors needed to see the Winter Soldier talking to her as if that wouldn't raise a series of questions.

He had forced himself to keep moving. Eventually, buying a premade sandwich from the downtown grocery store, which he had finished eating by the time he had returned to the resort. His bags had been packed for a day now. He had done a simple workout in the living area. Showered. And waited.

The ferry unloaded five people, probably working on the mainland during the day. And he had been the only passenger for the trek back. The lake was dark now, the waves a bit stronger than they had been in the morning. The sunset was magnificent on the horizon. Casting hues of gold and pink across the water and the ferry. By the time they had made it to the marina, the sky was a dark blue and the full moon was climbing higher. Small stars sprinkled the sky.

And now he was here in the dingy motel by a fish market. Waiting.

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The last of the houses on the residential street had finally turned off their porch light for the night. The gaggle of excited costumed children had returned home with their bags of goodies an hour ago. While the hooded teenagers had made their way out with toilet paper and eggs, a bottle of vodka stolen from their parents’ cabinet.
The coffee steaming from his cup was bland and bitter tasting. They never cleaned the damn coffee maker here. It was probably the same damned stuff they were drinking back in ‘85. The machine was heavily stained with spilled drinks and it made the most atrocious noise when it was brewing - something akin to a dying seal that had taken up blowing on a bugle in its last moments. But it was something to rant and rave about in between shipments.

Sipping from the cup as he surveyed the dock, staring up at the steel grey freighter with its faded Roxxon Corps logo. The workers were unloading the pallets with the old beat up fork truck - the damn thing was running only on a prayer at this point. At least the lake was calm tonight and the breeze wasn’t too strong for a change. And better yet, the cleanup on Line 5 was finally done and the stupid fix-it boats and their bright as heck lights were out of the water.

Mark saddles up next to him with the electronic MC40 he can never get to work when he holds it. What was so bad with using a damn pad of paper and a pencil? Did everything have to be so technologically advanced these days? The guy doesn’t even look up at him as he works through his checklist, “How’s it going, Hank? How’s Sal?”

He lowers his cup, “Eh, just happy I got to see the grandkids before I came in.”

“Aw, yeah? It’s always fun at that age. What was it this year?” He shoves the device into his pocket.

He gives a small smile, remembering the eager faces on his doorstep, “Andrew made himself a robot costume, Kenzie was some princess from Disney - all blue and sparkly, Meghan was a shark.” He chuckles, “Eric brought over David, he was a little old man.”

Mark laughs, “God, how old is he now?”

“Six months.”

“Don’t all babies look a little like old guys anyway?” He wipes his brow. “Come on, old man. Think we got some candy in the break room. I’ve already got these guys checked in and the boys are almost done unloading. Trucks should be here at one and four.”

As they head for the building, he bristles as the hair on his neck seems to stand on end, he stops. “You ever get the feeling you’re being watched?”

Mark looks back at him, “Been watching too many Halloween reruns on AMC, huh? Don’t think Mike Myers is out to get you, pal.”

He wants to laugh at his own sense of unnecessary paranoia, turns sharply when he catches something dark and shiny moving in his peripheral, “Did you see that?”

The younger man looks behind him warily for a moment, before awkwardly chuckling, “The hell is in your coffee, man?” He walks toward him, wraps an arm around his shoulders and tries to move him forward, “Come on, let’s get you inside.”

He resists, planting his feet firmly on the pavement. He wrenches himself out of the loose grasp and spins around to the freighter, “What the hell?”

They stare at the empty dock. Kevin is hunched over the wheel of the fork truck, unconscious or dead, god help him. But there’s not a single worker moving or even in the vicinity of the dock now.

He turns to look at Mark.

There’s a sad look on his thin lips, “I’m sorry, man. Wish you would have stayed inside.”
He sees the barrel of a gun and then he’s falling backwards. The bright light of the full moon overhead. The shattering of the old ceramic coffee mug - it had been a gift from Sally. The throbbing pain shooting across the back of his head. His vision blurring. And then darkness.

A blinding white arrow shoots across the street, emerging from the darkness, and lands perfectly in the center of the tree. Five heads whip around to look in her direction. She smiles behind the mask, gives a little wave.

“Fuck this, man!” The one with the clown mask takes off running.

Two others back away, dropping the carton of eggs before breaking out in a dead sprint. The remaining two look at each other, trying to puff out their chests. An arrow drags the hat off the left one’s head and lands it in the tree. He screams, books it across the yard and over a fence. The last boy holds up his hands.

“Just a prank, ya know?”

An arrow lands between his feet.

He runs.

Dropping down from the tree branch across the street, she laughs. It was almost ten now. And this was one of the few things she had spotted all night. It wasn’t so bad. This was easy, they were relatively harmless. Definitely more her speed.

The best moment of the night, by far, had been when she appeared on the small residential block. A woman had been running at her, full sprint. She had reached for her bow reflexively, but paused when the woman stopped in front of her with an out of breath, “You have to meet my daughter!”

She had quickly apologized for running at her but had merely seen her appear and gotten too excited. Her daughter, McKenna, was six. She was dressed like the Mirage. With a spray-painted PVC pipe quiver and foam arrows.

“But watch this!” She had said. And then she was blinded by bright white LEDs. The strips ran up and down her legs, arms, and torso. The little girl tapped the button twice. “Just like you!”

Holy shit.

She nodded and gave her two thumbs up, unable to bring herself to actually have anyone hear her voice for the first time. She was even bribed into taking a picture with her, because… how could she not? She was the hometown hero. And this? This was just insane.

She had seen another girl, maybe about ten, dressed as her. Not quite as impressive as the little light show McKenna had done, but it was still a good costume. However, it had been the boy next to her that had made her stop. The familiar royal blue and gold finishings of his cloak. The golden mask and quiver. Apollo.

It should have been expected. Their images had been everywhere for a full decade. The whole area knew what they did and they respected them for it. But it still took away her ability to breathe properly. She ran to a secluded side street before she disappeared, out of sight, to another part of town.
It was too quiet. They knew what to expect here. But it was still way too quiet. The gentle waves against the metal dock were barely even making a dent in the atmosphere. Every goddamn instinct was screaming \textit{it's a trap, it's a trap, it's a trap}. He had been across the street at the eerie little playground, watching. And there was nothing: no movement, no sounds of workers, \textit{nothing}.

Clint was late. He should wait for him. Make a plan together. He hadn’t even seen a truck pass by for pickup yet. It was still so early.

Bucky makes his move, keeping to the tree line. As he nears closer, he can see through the high chain link fence. The large freighter is docked. There’s only a few pallets unloaded. But they’re unattended. It couldn’t be that easy.

He rushes to the small outbuilding. With a running jump, he grabs the roof and pulls himself up in relative silence. Crouching, his eyes sweep over the entrance. Still nothing. Not even a guard. He slides down the other side of the blue building, feet hitting the fine gravel with a \textit{crunch}. Another sweep, and still nothing is out of place. Striding towards the main building, he throws his back to the siding and peers through a lit window over his shoulder. Fuzzy screen savers bounce across the computer monitors and a cup of coffee sits on the desk. Chairs are pulled away from them haphazardly. He pulls the gun from his back, shouldering it before rounding the corner. His gaze sweeps across the dock, unblinking.

He spots the shattered white mug and small blood splatter on the ground a few yards out. He pushes his back to the building and trains his eyes on the large foreboding freighter. There’s no one on the unlit deck. His gaze drops to the pallets. All regular cargo - a pallet of lumber, a pallet of black tubing, another one with concrete blocks. There has to be more than this.

Sudden movement on the other side of the fence draws his attention.

\textit{“You started without me,”} he hears in the comm.

Clint looks slightly out of breath as he takes in the surrounding area.

\textit{“I got impatient.”}

He hears a breathy huff in reply.

\textit{“Place looks cleared out.”}

\textit{“I have a feeling it’s not,”} he says tensely.

Clint scales the fence, making it sway and creak. He lands with a solid \textit{thud} behind a pallet of bagged concrete. Dropping down and out of Bucky’s sight.

Moving behind pallets and heavy machinery, they make their way closer to the ship. A beat-up yellow forklift was abandoned a few feet away, a pallet still on its prongs with plastic-wrapped bags of sand. Clint places a foot on the accommodation ladder, it gives a metallic creak under his weight. He leans fully into it with a gentle bounce. Pulling an arrow out, he looks at Bucky.

"How many?"
Bucky gazes at the freighter, "Fifteen, maybe thirty max."

The archer nods. With a smile, he sighs, "Another day at the office."

Clint heads up the ladder, with Bucky following behind. The archer moves his gaze quickly, shifting from place to place. While he keeps his steady, sweeping across with an unblinking focus. Their footfalls are heavy on the metal ladder as the ascend to the deck. The first bullet whizzes past Clint the minute his head appears over the railing.

"Jesus," he breathes heavily, ducking behind the metal framework. Looking down at Bucky, he huffs, "Three, at least. At eleven, twelve, and three."

Bucky nods in acknowledgment. With his gun tucked under his right shoulder, he jumps up and grabs the railing with his metal hand, flinging himself over and on to the deck. Standing from his landed crouch, he draws his gun back up and aims at the first guard behind the barrels. One down with a scream, clutching his shoulder. The other peers out from the cabin and takes a shot to the femoral shaft. He sweeps the deck and takes aim at the guard peeking out from behind the back of the crane. The first shot clips the side of the heavy machine. A bullet flies past his head, three inches to the right. Another aimed for his chest is easily sidestepped. Striding across the deck with heavy thuds, he gains a better line of sight and takes aim. With another shot ricocheting off his left arm, he fires at the man, who goes down with a startled gasp.

Clint jumps over the rail, walks purposely up to him, eyes searching the upper deck for another assault. Lowering his bow, he shoves against Bucky's vibranium arm - he allows the archer to move him.

"The hell was that, you reckless son of a bitch?" He mutters harshly.

Bucky shrugs his shoulders and lowers his gun down. After a moment to slow his pulsing heartbeat, he stalks off, wordlessly, towards the cargo hold.

He hears the irritated mumbling behind him, "Oh, nothing, Clint. Just trying to get myself killed, Clint. Being a brooding tough-guy is my schtick, Clint. Just being a suicidal maniac for fun, Clint."

At the edge of the open cargo hold, he peers down at the wrapped pallets. In the far right corner, four men are diligently moving items off one of the pallets. The minute one of the men spots him crouching on the ledge, the bullets start flying. He moves his way behind a heavy barrel, watching over his shoulder. Clint is a few feet away, behind a pallet.

"You just had to make them angry."

Bucky scoffs with a roll of his eyes. He recalls their positions down in the hold. Calculates the given trajectory and objects directly under the ledge.

Clint looks behind him, a bullet pierces through the plastic wrap on the pallet. He turns towards the soldier. "I'll go up the right, they won't have a clear sight line unless they move. You take the left - "

Bucky pushes away from the barrel and takes a running leap down into the cargo hold.

"Or not!" Clint shouts from above him.

The guards scramble behind the stacked pallets as he crouches down. He can hear Clint running down the side of the hold. Arrows fly down with skilled accuracy. This was easier in his mind: make himself a big target and have Clint pick them off from behind.
With the last guard down, Clint slides down the ladder into the hold. He eyes the guard nearest to him and gives a rough kick to his head to knock him out.

"See therapy's working out for ya. Maybe some team building is in order." His chest heaves with deep breaths.

Bucky rolls his shoulders, chest puffed out slightly, "Shut up, Barton." He strides to where the men had been unloading in the corner.

Clint trails behind him, "We could do trust falls! You trust me, don't 'cha, Buck?"

He stops in front of the torn plastic wrap, mutters to himself, "The hell?"

They crouch and pull the shredded wrap to the side. Among pallets of construction materials, they stare at the heavy black items. Not illegal firearms, like they had been expecting. But large hand-held drills, with a glowing blue light stripped down the sides.

"The fuck are these?" Clint picks one up and immediately drops it with a heavy thud when a bullet clips his left arm.

Bucky turns and takes aim at the guard peering out from a hole in the bulkheads. He drops dead, leaning out of the purposefully cut hidden passageway. Clint slumps over, hand covering the bloody wound.

"That fucking stings. Jesus." He pulls his blood-covered palm away and wipes it on the pallet wrap.

Bucky eyes him. Clint waves a hand his way, "I'm good, I'm up."

They stalk towards the hole with wary eyes. Bucky shoves the guard inside and to the right and looks down the tight corridor. The slam of a metal door has him stepping through the passage and sliding sideways down the hall. Clint follows behind him. He stops in front of a strange cutout on the exterior bulkhead. There's a small latch. He pushes it open and pokes his head out into the open air. The lake is a few feet beneath him. A trail of bubbles rises to the surface as something moves further away from the ship, something large and fast. He watches it disappear into the dark lake.

At a dead end, they move back to the cargo hold. Clint takes another shot to his forearm.

"Come on, man!" He slides down the bulkhead with a heavy groan.

Bucky hurries past him, stepping over his legs, gun raised as he looks out of the opening. A more precise round brushes past his hair. He pulls back behind the wall, before taking aim at the guard by the pallet. And another further down.

He steps out once the gunfire stops. Along the ledge a group emerges, guns drawn. He tilts his weapon up and shoots. A bullet to the thigh and stomach. Another takes a shoulder hit. Something pings off his left arm. And then a bright white arrow lands in the third guard's sternum. He falters for only a moment, before moving to fire at the last three. Bullets and arrows made of moonlight fly in the cold night air. Once the last guard falls back with a pained groan, he steps out further into the hold. He turns and looks up at the ledge.

"The hell are you doing here?" He calls up.

She shrugs, lowering her bow, "I was in the neighborhood."

Vanishing from the ledge, she reappears in front of him. Shouldering her bow, she pulls her goggles down and around her neck, along with the black mask that covered her nose and mouth. The moon
reflects in her eyes. He holsters his gun on his back.

"Should probably thank her!" Clint huffs as he walks out of the passageway.

Her eyes glint playfully. Bucky smirks. She turns and gives a tiny gasp, only audible to his ears.

"You good?"

Clint waves her off, "Nothing I haven't seen before. Get it fixed up when I get back to the motel."

She walks forward after a moment of hesitation, fingerless-gloved hands reaching out. "Let's see it then." He pulls his hand away. She clicks her tongue, "Gonna need stitches."

"I can handle that," He strains with a pinched voice.

She looks back at Bucky, "There's three men unconscious in the office. Some bruising to the head from blunt force trauma, but they'll be fine. Captain's cabin was the same. Think you guys got the main culprits. Though," she trails off, gaze flicking between them, "I did see some underwater sub diving out of here with at least three guys in it."

Bucky nods, "Saw that too. Looks like they were after those." He gestures at the half pallet of industrial drills.

She tilts her head, eyes squinting, "What the hell do they want those for?" She shakes her head after a moment, looks back at Clint. "Stitches."

He groans, "I told you, it's nothing."

With a hand on her hip, she points at him, "If only there was a doctor here. Oh, wait, there is." She points at herself with a grin.

He laughs, "Thought you were an OB?"

She nods, "I am. Which means I'm excellent with doing up stitches."

Clint shudders at the implication. Bucky shifts his weight awkwardly.

Reaching out to the archer, she wraps a hand around his left bicep. "Come on, Hawkeye. Let's get you fixed up."

"What the -"

They disappear in a flash of white light.

Bucky stumbles back. Looks around for a moment before holding his hands up in a defeated what the hell am I supposed to do now gesture. Just as he's making for the rusted red ladder, a flash of light appears behind him. He turns. She grabs his arm, thin fingers circling around his right bicep.

"You too, soldier."

A protest is on his lips before he feels like he's being pulled through a vacuum, his body folding in on itself, squeezed through an impossibly tight channel. His vision is blinded by bright white light.

The ship is quiet. The waves lap against the freighter in the moonlight.
Chapter End Notes

Mentions throughout the chapter:
1. Most tourists are off the island once summer's over. Some stay for the fall colors and what not. But the main shops and businesses and hotels close their doors come November 1st. People will make their way to the island during the winter months, but the type of tourists that come over won't be experiencing the high traffic and usual haunts.

2. "The brooding tough-guy schtick," is a line pulled from the comic Tales of Suspense #101, where Clint and Bucky team up and he says this exact same line to Buck.

Author's Note:
Comments are what fuel me to keep writing, especially during moments of writer's block <3
Chapter 7

He stumbles forward as his feet hit the wooden floor, catching himself on a thin table in front of him. Clutching the dark grain surface as he desperately tries to catch his breath. His chest heaves with each ragged inhale.

Soft footsteps fall behind him. “Sorry, didn’t want to just leave you there.” She says as a way of explanation, circling around him.

He realizes that Clint is leaning back on the green and white plaid couch in front of the table, his head tilted back to look up at Bucky. His brow is creased, sweat beading at his temple. “Yeah,” he bites, “fucked me up too.”

Bucky’s finally able to steady himself, carefully pushing off the small accent table to stand and take in his surroundings. She’s disappeared down a hallway, a light illuminates the wooden wall outside of a room. Emerging from the bathroom with her black cloaked tunic off, she’s just wearing a purple long-sleeved undershirt now. She has a black bag in her hand which she sets down on the worn coffee table next to Clint’s feet. And then she’s moving behind Bucky. He watches her walk into the kitchen.

There’s a clink of glass bottles as she opens the white cabinets and then she’s holding up a green and a blue bottle. “I’ve got Tanqueray and Bombay Sapphire. Pick your poison.”

Clint groans, rubs his hand over his face, “Host’s choice.”

She hesitates for a moment, weighing her options, before putting the Tanqueray back. She pulls a tumbler from another cabinet and pours a good amount into it. As she passes by Bucky, she gives him a tight smile, “Make yourself at home. Call your guys. Whatever you need to do.”

She hands the drink over to Clint, who downs it hard and fast, as she preps her things. Sitting down on the coffee table in front of him. As she’s snapping on gloves, Bucky sweeps the room. Behind him, a back door with an unlocked deadbolt. The seafoam green counters and white cabinets above them. A wood stove. Baskets of vegetables and a rack of dried herbs by a small window. There's a snap of a bottle cap from the couch and then the sharp inhale of Clint’s breath. The strong scent of alcohol stings his nose, making him turn away.

It’s probably more sterile than what they would usually do up themselves. He wonders if this is her going into doctor mode or not. She seems more determined, more serious. Which is something considering where they just came from and the fact that two of the Avengers are currently in her house.

Her black bow and quiver are lying on an old kitchen table, with stacks of papers and receipts. The walls are hand-hewn dark wood, slatted with some gray material in between. He wonders if her dad did this all by himself. His gaze moves up to the wooden support beams, cross-hatched across the ceiling.

“Sorry,” she mutters to Clint as she begins the first of the sutures.

The small hallway with two doors, one on either side. The open back staircase with small white lights wrapped along the railing. She must have solar panels out here.

The front door, with three unused locks, and a window next to it. The world is pitch black outside. Probably has an amazing view of the night sky from here, so far from the city and it’s streetlights and
In the corner, on a compact beige entertainment center, was an old boxed TV with a built-in VCR. The connecting shelves were filled with stacks of old VHS tapes. So many of them were shoved and crammed in to fit, that there were actual piles on the floor.

“See, wasn’t that bad. Now, let me do the other one.”

His eyes fell to the small table in front of him. A black-and-white picture of two teens: a stone-faced boy and a brightly smiling girl with her arm draped over his shoulders. He looks up at her, carefully tying off the first stitch, and then back to the old photo.

The odd clicking above him grabs his attention. As he tilts his head to look up at the ceiling, the sound moves across the floorboards. Slowly at first, then breaking out into a run. As thunderous steps rush down the stairs, it’s only instinctual for him to reach for his gun, but he stops short when the head of a black dog comes into view. The large animal bounds over to her. He expects it to jump on her, but it surprises him by instantly calming and sitting obediently next to her. It’s head held high, it stares him down with the most unnerving look he’s ever received from a creature before. Sharp teeth showing, the dog snarls at him. She gives a quick high-pitched whistle as she finishes up the last of Clint’s stitches, making the dog relax back to a neutral expression. Very protective.

Tying off the suture, she removes the blue nitrile gloves and stands with a stretch, “Need another shot?”

Clint lurches forward, standing with a heavy grunt, “Nah, I’ll go call it in.”

She nods, “Bathroom and spare room are down the hall. Or the porch, if you prefer.”

He gives her a nod, flexes his arm. She moves to the side, to let him pass, as he strides towards the front door. The moment he opens it, a loud clambering sound comes rushing forward.

“Jesus!” He jumps to the side as three large dogs come bounding into the house. They run right up to her, sniffing her out in the group, and do the equally unsettling action of sitting at an obedient attention next to the large black dog.

After a moment, Clint massages his forehead with a heavy hand, “Uhm, I got a lot of questions. But, I gotta make this call first.” As he heads out on to the dark porch, he mumbles, “Good lord.”

The dogs move to the side as she walks towards him. “How about you? Need a drink?”

Not that he could get drunk even if he tried, and boy, did he wish he could right about now. Instead, he shakes his head.

She hums in reply, places her hands on her hips, “What about coffee?”

Musing on it for a moment of consideration, he says, “Coffee would be nice.”

That gains a smile from her, “Can do.” She moves into the kitchen, he turns to watch. Her movements methodical, familiar, as she pulls out three white mugs.

He finally has the clarity of mind to remove his firearms. Putting the safety in place, he sets the rifle on the kitchen table next to her bow. Removing the clip from the unused Glock, he puts the sidearm next to the M249. The room is warm and comfortable compared to the frigid night air they had left
behind. It’s hot enough to make him unfasten the collar of his dark blue jacket and tug a few clasps free.

She’s staring, he realizes before he even turns around.

She must notice this by his sudden freeze up, because she quickly murmurs, “Sorry, just… probably should have realized you were the Winter Soldier a lot earlier.”

He turns, looks from her to his arm and gives it a small flex; the metal *whirs* with the movement. Fanning his fingers out and back in to a fist. The soft light in the kitchen reflects against the black and gold.

“I - I know your trial was aired, like, nonstop these past few months,” he raises his gaze towards her as she continues with a rush. “I just couldn’t watch it. When I got back,” she leans against the gray-speckled countertop, “I was catching up on five years away and it was just way too much. The governments in ruins, the food shortages, the religious rhetoric - it was driving me crazy.”

Three months of his time back from the world of the dead had been spent on a Congressional hearing. Probably thanks to Stark, it was able to go through so quickly. His face was a central figure in the national news segments for a long ass time. Even now, Fox was dragging his name and image around. Help save the world and you’re still just a HYDRA operative to some people.

Not to mention the complete collapse the world had experienced five years ago. Countries were desperately searching down the chain of command for their next president and leader. England had the eighteenth person in line to the throne become the new monarch (Queen Zara definitely managed to turn a few heads). France had a far-right president come into power and that had sparked some major protests for two years before military control became the main form of enforcement. The economy had just about collapsed. But, by the time everyone came back, the world was starting to flourish again. Pollution was down, unemployment was at the lowest possible rate, inflation was down. And then they all came back and there was a second crisis.

The man who had been president in 2018 was suddenly back and wanted to know why the hell he couldn’t continue being president in 2023 if he hadn’t been voted out. Even though two major elections had taken place when he was gone, he was still demanding another vote. People who had a job when they vanished were now replaced by new workers. The guy working in the mailroom you hated? Yeah, he was your boss now. Stores that were making orders and shipments for half the population became incredibly overwhelmed by the sudden increase of consumers. The food shortages were some of the worst. The lines stretched for blocks. It looked like the panicked shopping before a natural disaster. Or the old soup kitchen lines he was more familiar with.

Everyone was happy to have these people back, of course. Well, not some religious groups. Which had determined they were either alien imposters, members of Satan’s army come to challenge God, or part of a government experiment gone wrong.

It had been a hellish few months. Nothing had really been set in stone or properly fixed yet. But it was starting to smooth out finally. And for him? He was finally cleared from the Most Wanted lists and wasn’t labeled as a threat to society anymore. For the most part. Even after they saved the world and brought everyone back, some people still didn’t want a group of superheroes running around - they thought they were just glorified vigilantes.

He nods, “You really didn’t miss much with it.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, “I caught bits and pieces from my coworkers. Still,” she sighs, “Should have figured it out. Bucky Barnes is the name in all the history books. A Bucky mixing with
the Avengers? I’d blame it on my level of sleep deprivation for not realizing it sooner, but even then I don’t think it’s a worthy excuse.”

Stretching her arms over her head, he hears an audible crack, and then she’s pulling her hand over her mouth as she yawns.

“With this line of work, you don’t get a lot of sleep.” She tilts her head to the side, “Well, both lines of my work, I should say.” There’s a playful glint above the dark rings of exhaustion in her eyes.

The coffee maker starts pouring the dark roasted brew into the kettle.

His mom always used the old hand grinder. It’d be five in the morning and he’d hear that thing cranking coffee beans downstairs. She always got up early and had it ready for his dad. The smell of it wafted through the apartment. It was so much better than the horseshit they drank in Europe during the war. Nothing he’s had since has been able to compare.

She pours a cup for him and one for herself. Walking over to hand it to him, she asks, “Need anything for it? Milk, sugar?”

With a shake of the head, he takes the bottom of the mug into his right hand, sliding his fingers around the handle once she’s passed it off to him. She walks over to the small fridge, grabs a yellow bottle from it to pour into her own mug.

As he sips on the warm drink, he looks down into the brown eyes of the beagle seated at his feet. Its tail wagging slowly back and forth on the wooden floor. He looks over at the small blue island where the three other dogs are sat, staring up at their owner. He coughs. She pulls away from her thoughts to look over at him.

He sweeps his hand across the room, “You like dogs?”

Her laugh is warm like the coffee, “I have seven.”

He mouths seven? with a sense of stunned wonder. He couldn’t even convince his parents to let him bring in a stray alley cat when he was a kid. Couldn’t imagine the look on his mother’s face if he had brought in seven giant dogs to their old apartment.

“Mhmm,” she nods after taking another sip from her mug.

They’re all different breeds from the looks of it. The beagle at his feet, the black Labrador who had come down the stairs and snarled at him, a red Irish setter, and a black and white pointer. All hunting dogs, he realizes.

And then she says, “I’ve had them since I was a kid.”

He splutters into his coffee. Looking back down at the dogs, he’d guess they were no older than three; at the most. Not a trace of age or a single gray hair speckled through their fur. He raises his brows.

She shrugs, “Got ‘em when I was seven. Or just about to turn seven.”

“*How*?"

Staring at him like he’d grown a second head, she elaborates, “I wanted a dog for my birthday. I bugged my dad for one and he kept saying no. Didn’t want to have to take care of one and transport dog food over here or whatever.”
He looks over at the Labrador, it’s staring right back at him.

“So, that night before my birthday, I remember wishing for a dog. But then I got greedy, and cause I was turning seven, I wished for seven dogs. Morning comes around and I had seven dogs.”

*What the actual fuck*.

Her smile is awkwardly held as she shrugs again, “*Believe me*, I know how weird that sounds.”

Bucky stares, unblinking, for a long moment. Then he eases out, “I’ve met a talking tree and a genetically enhanced raccoon. In our line of work, this really isn’t at the top of my list for *weird.*”

Her smile is gentle and smooth.

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When the archer came back inside, she gave him a cup of coffee as well. Having finished her own a while ago. Bucky had taken a seat in a chair at the messy kitchen table, slowly nursing his own drink; his gaze distant.

"Thanks, by the way," the man says, gesturing to his stitches before holding out a hand, "I'm Clint."

She shook the firm grasp, "Diane."

His eyes squint with amusement, "No it isn't. But," he pulls his hand back with a grin, "I'll just keep throwing names out till I get it right."

Smirking, she crosses her arms over her chest, "Oh, really?"

He nods, determined. Bucky leans back in the kitchen chair, suddenly interested.

"So," he starts, mouth gaping for a minute as he tries to find the right word. "*Anastasia* - " his lips curl up, unsatisfied, " - *nope, not it.*" A shake of the head, arms crossed over his chest, "What exactly is your thing? Vanishing archer lady?"

She can't help the flinch that rushes through her, but she pushes on, "Basically that. Grew up hunting with my family, just got really good at it. And," holding her palm up, forcing a gentle white glow to appear, "some lunar powers for good measure."

Bucky sits forward in the chair, eyes trained on her hand. Clint raises his eyebrows; looking impressed.

"You don't turn into some crazy werewolf on the full moon or anything, do you?" he asks quietly as he watches the curl of white light dancing on her palm.

She shakes her head with a laugh, "Yeah, *no*."

"Huh." Clint tilts his head to the side, "So, how exactly did you get this happening?"

She turns suddenly to look at Bucky, the light vanishing as she holds out a hand, "What's in the serum? The one running through your veins?"

He balks, "I, uh -"
She nods, looking back at Clint, "Same. I have no idea." Giving a helpless shrug, "Where he was injected with something, I was just born with it. Normal human parents, zero mutations, no radiation or experimentation - just weird powers."

Bucky clears his throat, voice rough like gravel, "Did your brother have that?"

She pulls back slightly, "Unexplained powers? Yeah. Solar, though."

"Moon and sun? Whose idea was that?"

Another shrug, " Beats me. Sounds like God was just having some fun that day." She gives a small laugh, her look a bit distant, "Always thought it was because I was born at night and he was technically born after midnight. I got the nighttime powers and he got the daytime ones. But, I don't know."

Clint hums and Bucky relaxes back into his chair, finding his cup of coffee very interesting to settle his attention on. Clint looks around for a moment before focusing back on her.

“So, it’s not just arrows?"

She shakes her head, “Those are new. Been crafting it for a few weeks. Mostly, it's just kind of a light show.”

With a crack of her knuckles, she rolls her hands together - as if she were molding a ball of clay. The gentle glow of white light emitting from her grasp, rounding it out into a small sphere. She lets the globe roll over the tips of her fingers and down her right arm. Popping it off her shoulder to catch it once more in her hand. She let’s it spin on her finger, smiling at the chance to really show off her powers for the first time in a long while.

And then she’s pulling it back into the palm of her hands, crushing it down into a flat beam. With her right hand extended back, she chucks it across the room with shocking accuracy. Their heads whip to follow its path, watching the dagger land in the center of the front door.

“Huh.” Clint turns fully to stare at it.

Leaning back against the island with a confident smile, “Go ahead. Touch it.”

He looks back at her for a second, before shrugging his shoulders. Walking towards the door, Clint extends his hand. It looks exactly like a regular throwing knife, edges and minute details visible through the glowing monochromatic light. With his fingers brushing against the butt of the handle, it starts to dissipate, breaking off in small flecks of light before vanishing entirely.

Clint looks back over his shoulder, voice soft, “It’s cold.”

She nods, crossing her arms, “Yeah, I hear the moon is pretty cold in comparison.” Looking over at Bucky with a small smile, she adds, “Jack’s was hot to the touch. Less white, more golden.”

He gives her a nod, looking equally astounded as Clint - who’s still staring at the mark left in the door, fingers tracing over the chip.

Pushing off from the island, she steadies herself, “Well, I’m sure you need to get back. But, before I drag you two over to the mainland, can I at least offer you breakfast or something?” She smirks at Bucky, “That is, if you two eat that sort of thing?”
At four in the morning, she makes them pancakes. Scooping mix from a large striped canister on the speckled countertop, sizzling butter in a cast iron pan on the wood-burning stove in the corner of the kitchen. Clint, with his feet kicked up on the armrest of the couch and a hand splayed over his face, snores away. Bucky leans on the island, watching her move about. It reminds him of his own mother. A green dress and white apron, flitting between rationed food. Patting his cheeks affectionately before he would head out the door each day. Her kitchen has touches of outdated decor, causing something to pull at the deeply seated memories.

On the wall opposite the stove, a dark wood shelf holds jars and quarts of canned food. So self-sufficient out here, but being on her own he isn’t too surprised. The beagle, which she had called Max, is still hanging out by his feet. He’s the main beggar when it comes to food and attention, she had said with a bright smile that wrinkled up her laugh lines. The dog occasionally peeked around the corner to check on her but seemed content with where he was. The other two had meandered into the living area by the fireplace. However, the Labrador, which seems to be the lead, remains right by her and stares Bucky down.

Adding a seventh pancake to the stack, she pours more batter down into the skillet as well as a small glob of butter. Her shoulders drop, feet bouncing on the floorboards, then she’s turning around with a bashful smile.

“Don’t usually get company over here, especially not, you know,” her hand gestures over at him and the sleeping Barton. “First time for everything, I guess.” Gripping onto the edge of the island, she rocks herself back and forth.

Giving a small nod, his gaze focuses back on the unnerving stare from the dog. “They eat?”

“Huh?” She follows his gaze behind her, laughing gently, “Yeah, they definitely eat. I, uhm, I grab bags from a store on the mainland and just zap over here. Doesn’t raise any questions. They don’t know me over there, only on the islands.”

He hums. And then another question hits him, “What about your dad?” Her eyes widen at the mention. “How’d he get over?”

“Uhm,” She startles at the smell of a pancake starting to burn. Quickly turning back to flip it over, her shoulders hunched - every bit of her posture tense. When she finally replies, it’s into the crook of her shoulder, barely looking over at him, “There’s a tunnel - sorry, just a second.”

Bucky waits for her to slide the especially crispy pancake onto the plate and the skillet off the stove. Turning back towards him, she extends a hand out, beckoning him forward. Another hand on the knob of the door behind her, the Labrador moves to the side. It gives a small creak when she opens it, walking out into the dark morning light - the faintest bit of purple starting to stretch over the skyline. Stepping out onto the small wooden steps, he gazes up at the smoke billowing into a curved shield - it gives off just a faint blue zap when it grows too close. Then he notices the gentle white glow illuminating from her hand.

Tossing the orb into the air, the light scatters - hovering just above the ground - creating a tiny trail of lights. She follows the path along the back of the house and he follows her. Standing in front of a
root cellar, she pulls one of the doors to the side. And then she’s tossing a ray of light down into the darkness.

“Not a secret torture chamber, promise.” Her lips are tight with the attempted joke.

She heads down first. The walls are lined with shelves of more canned food. Baskets of potatoes and crates of apples. A chest freezer against the far wall. And next to that, a small wooden door. Opening it, she moves to the side, gesturing for Bucky to look into the small space. Poking his head around the doorframe, he looks down at what appears to be a manhole cover.

“Ladder down to the tunnel. Comes up in the closet at the decoy house on the island. It’s a two-mile walk.”

He turns his attention to her, pulling back into the main cellar, “How?”

Shrugging, she rubs at her elbow, “Another question I don’t have an answer to. My dad, he - “ She falters for a moment, choosing her next words carefully. “He… he never told us how he did this stuff, just why. I don’t know what connections he had to do this and I kinda don’t care.”

It definitely raises a lot of questions in his mind. Being protective of your children, he can understand - especially when they have some crazy powers going on. But the amount of money and effort it would take to build a tunnel that long under the lake? And to make it safe and withstanding of weather and ships? That seemed far out of the reach of a simple island doctor. Not to mention the advanced cloaking shield. Where was the money? Where were the workers? It sounded easily like a HYDRA string, but he knew Stark did a lot of work in the security sector as well.

“He just wanted us safe from them.”

His gaze draws tight, “Who?”

Another small shrug, “He just called it a serpent. With those leaks a few years back, I’m pretty sure he meant HYDRA though.”

He can’t help the slight hitch in his breath, “Why you?”

Her eyes are steel, hardened by years of shaping from her father, “What we can do is special, beyond anyone’s understanding. They want it, and they want to use it.”

“For what?”

She shakes her head, fingers digging into her thigh, “I don’t know. But he seemed pretty adamant about it growing up. Didn’t ask questions when it came to that.”

Bucky wants to push her for more information, but then he can feel his phone vibrating in his pocket. His look is pained when he sees the ID on the screen, but he answers it anyway.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, don't mind me, just wondering where the hell you two are."

Tony looks agitated, moving away from the screen to work on something out of Bucky's line of sight.

"And does Barton have his aids off or something? Because I'd much rather be having this conversation with him."
Bucky shakes his head, giving a low exhale to steel himself, "What'd you want, Tony?"

Tony rolls back to sit in front of his phone, "Jesus, Grandpa. Hold your phone so I can actually see you."

Bucky lifts his arm higher, brow quirked with frustration. He chances a look over at her beyond his phone. She's gazing down at her feet, trying not to impose on the call.

"Clint mentioned an underwater getaway sub? You didn't feel like chasing it or…?" Tony smirks. Bucky wants to throw his phone on the concrete floor. Tony squints, "Okay, seriously. Where are you? Turn on a light or something."

A glowing sphere is tossed next to his head, out of sight from Tony. She gives a little shrug and a small smile. Gesturing towards the stairs, she signals that she's going to head back up. He gives her a nod, watches her climb up the steps and out of sight.

"Did you find anything?" He ignores the previous question entirely.

"Uhm, yeah." He hears the rustling of a wrapper as Tony shoves a piece of candy into his mouth. "Have some radars showing something moving under the bridge. Looks like it's still just hanging out down there right now." Looking up from the images on his desk, "Said there were hand drills?"

"Industrial, high-tech, unmarked."

Tony tuts, head cocked up in thought. "Well, I doubt they plan to topple the bridge. Maybe you should check in with our local resident hero and see what she knows. She's probably around somewhere."

Bucky groans at the realization that Stark probably has their signals right now.

"Would really help if you could breathe underwater. But, I guess I'll see what I can't send your way to check it out. I'll dig around here. Tell Merida I said hi."

And then the call is disconnected.

Dropping his hand, he lets out a long calming breath. Shoving the phone back into his pocket, he heads up the stairs. The light fades from behind him. The sky is lightening up now, a hazy pink and yellow as the sun starts to rise. Bucky takes in the surrounding area. The wooden house is in a small clearing, a heavy forest beyond the curved cloaking shield. Raised garden beds by a blue shed that's paint is chipping.

He heads back inside, savoring the warmth and pleasant smell of food. There's a plate waiting for him on the island. An unlabeled pint of real syrup next to it.

Swallowing her own mouthful, she says, "I can get you guys somewhere discreet whenever you're ready to go. I know a few places over in St. Ignace that are out of sight."

He nods, carefully cutting the stack of pancakes. "What's under the bridge?"

She tilts her head, "You mean under the Mac? Besides water, I'm assuming is what you meant?" She smirks, then stabs another bit of food with her fork, "Just a pipeline. Runs directly under the bridge, connects the two peninsulas. Why?"
She had gone out to feed the dogs a few hours later when Clint had finally woken from his stupor. It was easy enough to fill him in on the short call from Stark and the few pieces of information that she was able to give him.

“I don’t know why they’d want to drill on it. Freighter just hit it all the time. So, it’s clearly not an oil spill they’re looking for,” she had mused to him.

Clint drums his fingers on the table, feet kicked up on a chair, “Are we sure it’s related? I mean, that the drills are for damaging the pipeline? Could be transporting or working around it for something.”

Bucky acknowledges him with a slight dip of his head, before adding, "Hard to say if the pipeline's even related to it."

Clint nods, "Could just be a docking point, right?"

The door creaks as she steps back inside. She unzips her coat and pulls off her beanie and fingerless gloves. The same gloves she had been wearing the night before on the freighter.

"You guys want to head back yet or - "

The phone on the kitchen table starts vibrating.

Clint slides his finger across the screen to accept the call. Before he even has the chance to answer it, Tony's already speaking over him.

"Put Katniss on."

Clint raises his brow with a curious head tilt before handing her the phone. She looks between the two men before holding it up to look at Tony Stark.

"Hey," she mumbles.

"You're the local girl. How do you access the bridge towers?"

She blinks rapidly, "Uhm, what - "

"The big bridge, two towers, five miles of suspension, man-made marvel. How do you get inside them?"

She straightens considerably, gaze sharpened. "If you don't mind being seen, there's access right along the sidewalk."

He crosses his arms. An amused smile playing at the corner of his lips. "And if I don't want to be seen?"

With a shake of her head, "Sorry for repeating, but why?"

He sighs, rolling away in his desk chair, his voice a little more distant, "Because, I have shots of this thing."

Bucky looks over at Clint. The other man shrugs.

"Sent out an old suit, doesn't matter. What does - " Tony rolls back into view with a laptop held up to the camera. "This bad boy is nasty. And it's parked right at the base of the north tower."
The image zooms in on a small tunnel between the dark sub and the column of a tower. And then it's moved away as Tony is brought back in focus.

"Zero security up top, which means -"

"It's all down below," Clint adds thoughtfully.

Tony nods, "Something's happening under your bridge and I'm not sure it's just a pipeline. Which looks fine, by the way. Environmental hazard, but structurally fine."

"What exactly do you want us to do here, Tony?" Bucky steps forward with a gruff tone.

Tony runs his temple, "Well, ice pop, I was thinking you could do something useful - like, investigate it."

"There's a way -" She interrupts. They all turn towards her. Puffing out her chest, her voice trembling slightly, "There's a way into the tower that's out of sight. But you're gonna need me to do it." Her gaze falls to Bucky, then to Clint. The fear in her eyes is obvious. "Either one of you scared of heights or tight spaces?"

Chapter End Notes

**Mentions throughout the chapter:**

1. Some nicknames for the Mackinac Bridge include: the Mighty Mac, the Big Mac, and simply the Mac.

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