Summary

Natasha Romanoff survived two brutal assassination attempts and an alien abduction, but recovering her physical strength doesn't mean it's all clear sailing. While she is no longer a
fugitive, it will be a balancing act to resume her place on the team and train her two proteges particularly when part of that brings her under the sharp scrutiny of a hungry media.

Steve and James remain all in, but they along with Tony and Clint are more protective than ever. Especially when Natasha is willing to risk her own mind to find the answers to the mysteries of her past. When an old friend asks for her help to deal with a new problem bubbling on the horizon, Natasha finds herself in the crosshairs of a new enemy.
Stars

Chapter Summary

Natasha enjoys a visit with the Barton family on the island.

Chapter One

Stars

Natasha

After an hour in the pool, Nat dragged herself out and said, “Uncle.” Lila laughed and hoisted herself up to sit next to her.

“You can’t say Uncle, Auntie Nat…”

“Sure I can,” she murmured bumping her shoulder to Lila, tracking Cooper as he bounded off the diving board and did a flip into the water. The kid was a capable swimmer, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t aware of his moves. Steve and James were keeping watch too, but they were kicked back under the shade of a tree talking to Clint while Nate climbed over the three of them, taking turns on where he would settle. Currently, he was sprawled across Steve, staring up at him with toothy wonder.

It made Nat grin to see Steve playing with him, and no matter that it seemed he was focused on whatever Clint was saying, he didn’t miss a move the toddler made.

Her heart gave a vicious little shake.

Lila poked her again, and she glanced down at her. “Are we done?”

“I think I am,” she admitted. “I’m beat.”

“You’re getting old, Auntie Nat,” Lila told her seriously, and Nat chuckled.

“You might be right,” she pushed upward and headed for her lounger to grab her hat and sunglasses. Lila trotted right after her and picked up a baseball cap and slipped it into place, then squinted up at her.

“I don’t have sunglasses.”

“Well, we’ll have to find you some.” She grabbed the sarong off the seat and tied it around her waist before flopping back on the lounger, despite her playfulness exhaustion wound through her muscles.

“I have an idea,” Lila announced.
“Does it require a cunning plan?”

“Maybe,” Lila dragged out the word, and Nat cracked an eyelid open to study her. The light dancing in Lila’s eyes was hard to ignore. This was the part where Laura and Clint usually told Nat she was spoiling the kids. It was also the part where Nat usually ignored them because it was fun and she didn’t get to do it often.

“Read me in.”

“Coop!” Lila bellowed before she scooted forward on her lounger to whisper her idea into Nat’s ear. Cooper bounded over and dripped cool water onto her heated skin as he joined them.

Shell hunting by the waves.

She could do that.

Blowing out a breath, she sent them off for shorts, more sunscreen and a proper hat for Coop. Like her, he freckled even if his were lighter in nature than hers. On her feet, she wandered over to Clint and the boys.

“Tired?” Steve studied her, seeing way too much and her initial instinct to cover it up was as much a reflex as anything. Part of letting them look after her was being honest.

“A little,” she admitted. The incident with the formless had left her with zero stamina. “But we’re going shell hunting on the beach, and I can handle a walk.”

“The kids can wait,” Clint said, and she shook her head.

“I want to go. Come with?” Yes, she wanted to push herself a little. James gave her an assessing look and then nudged Steve.

“Yes.” Steve said without needing James to verbalize the question, because he was already standing up. Nate gave her a sleepy eyed look and Steve handed him over to Clint who settled the little one against his chest. Nat ran her fingers through his dark hair. He was so sweet.

“I should slug you,” she told Clint with a cheerful smile.

“I’m base, so I’m safe.” He retorted. “Besides. Seeing them is good for you. Not to mention you’re the one who wants to go for a walk. So—shoo.”

Letting Steve and James conspire against her was one thing, but letting Clint recruit them was a terrible idea. Still, she really didn’t have it in her to complain. “How long can you all stay?”

“We have to leave early tomorrow,” he told her. “And Laura has dibs on you for after dinner.”

“Okay.”

She caught Steve’s hand and wandered over to meet the kids at the shelf steps leading down onto the sand.

The next hour or so passed swiftly, but she enjoyed watching Coop and Lila shell hunt. The sand was warm. If it got too hot, she’d wander toward the surf and let the water rush over her feet and cool her legs. Steve watched her nearly as much as he watched the kids, though they were both laughing at their antics. When the fatigue had her swaying, he rounded them up and gave Lila a ride on his shoulders before herding them back toward the house.
Laura had lunch laid out, and there was laughter, and stories and Nat fought to stay awake at least until Laura sent her and Lila both in to watch movies. Her nap lasted about ninety minutes, but when James brushed his knuckles against her cheek, she rallied. The afternoon was board games, and who knew that Steve Rogers could clean up at Monopoly or that Clint would cheat at the game of Life—well she knew that one—but her favorite was when they resorted to Pictionary. Coop and Steve were killing it with their art skills but James and Clint were hilarious and Nat loved the subtle and sometimes not so subtle dirty references in their clues.

Fortunately, Laura didn’t murder any of them as it went over the kids’ heads. Dinner, as it turned out, was a homemade roast, potatoes and oodles of vegetables. It was simple, but it was also the same meal Laura had made the night Clint introduced them—and it had become a favorite of hers.

Ugh, then she had to endure ninety minutes of the Bartons’ various favorite Nat stories, at least Lila’s were flattering. Still, her face ached from laughing and smiling. Laura sent the guys to do dishes while she and Nat herded the kids into bathrooms. Lila demanded a story for bath time, so Nat indulged her—reciting a couple straight from memory.

Dressed in pajamas, clean and sleepy, Cooper snuck in to Lila’s room and piled on the bed next to his sister. They wanted one more story and then he asked if she’d sing. “Really?” She made a face.

“Please, Auntie Nat,” Cooper implored her with the same puppy dog eyes his father used when he tried to cajole her into doing something she didn’t want to do. It was dramatically unfair.

“Fine, one song and then you both go to sleep.”

They opened their mouths to protest, but Laura slipping inside arms folded quieted them. “That’s enough, both of you. Auntie Nat has played with you all day, so one song and then you sleep.”

With a pout firmly in place, Lila said, “But we haven’t seen Auntie Nat in forever.”

It pricked Nat’s heart. It had been months; she’d missed a lot with the kids.

“And we’re going to see her for Thanksgiving in less than two weeks,” Laura reminded them. “So, one song, then sleep. We have an early flight tomorrow so we can get you both back for school.”

They made a face and Nat laughed. “Okay—how about one song now, and then I’ll give you one every night for Thanksgiving break?” The whole family would be at the Compound for Thanksgiving, and she could see them there, out of the public eye where they wouldn’t be tainted by knowing her.

“You spoil them,” Laura murmured when the kids both nodded excitedly.

“I’m Auntie Nat,” she told Laura, and met her smile. “It’s in my contract.”

“It is,” Cooper declared, immediately supporting the tale. “We put it there the last time we renegotiated it.”

Laura just rolled her eyes, but she turned down the lights and Nat tucked them both in, and then said, “Any requests?”

“Once Upon a Dream,” Lila demanded automatically and Coop rolled his eyes, just like his mom, but he didn’t complain. It was the same song Lila had asked for every single time they’d gotten her to sing them anything since Maleficent released.

“Close your eyes,” she told them, then pressed a kiss to Coop’s forehead and then Lila’s, before
she began to hum the opening bars. Having sung it so much, she at least knew the words by heart. As much as she despised Tchaikovsky, this particular piece wasn’t related to Ivan’s cues and the adaptation from the film had slowed it down and altered it further.

“I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream…” She sang it as slowly, and almost sadly as the Lana Del Rey version, and the kids both wore smiles and when she hit the last note, Lila opened her eyes and Nat shook her head. “Sleep,” she whispered. “I’ll see you in the morning, I promise.” Then she gave her another kiss before rising. Coop was already out, his chest rising and falling steadily. Lila curled onto her side, but relented and her eyes closed.

The ache in her heart seemed to grow, the beloved moments almost more bitter than sweet in some ways. She hated the sense of longing underscoring it.

Laura tugged her out of the room, and Nat caught the soft shoe of movement. She knew that cadence of motion. James had been in the hall, but he wasn’t there when she and Laura came out. They wandered downstairs, and out. The breeze coming in off the ocean was gorgeous and it pulled at Nat’s sundress and hair. There was a fire in the pit and a couple of bottles of wine propped in an ice bucket. The scent of the ocean accompanied by the warm breeze added to the atmosphere.

“What did you do with the guys?” Because the dishes had to be done by now.

“Clint is baby sitting your guys and our kids,” Laura announced. “He’s gotten to see you for months, tonight it’s my turn.”

Sinking down into a chair, Nat curled her legs under her. “Do I need to apologize?”

“Nope,” Laura assured her, then poured them each a glass of wine. As tired as she was, Nat wasn’t sure her alcohol tolerance would be up to sniff but one glass wouldn’t kill her. “I get it. I always have—you did what you had to and I know you wanted to protect us.” Laura lifted the glass toward her, “But you need friends, too. And while I may not be as demanding as my kids, I have missed you, you crazy Russian.”

Nat laughed and tapped her glass to hers, but her humor sobered quickly. “I missed all of you, too.”

The shadows danced thanks to the flickering flames and Laura settled back in the chair and put her feet up. “Do you want to tell me?”

She didn’t have to clarify what she meant. The echo of the question Nat asked her weeks earlier lingered around them. “I thought Clint already had.”

“He did, but you know Clint.”

Yes, she did. He told Laura the parts he thought she could help with, the pieces he didn’t think Nat would willingly reveal. He told her because he thought Nat needed her. Did she? She wasn’t so sure.

“Not yet,” Natasha answered finally. She’d been working hard to not think about it. The exhaustion, the need for sleep, and the coddling from the guys went a long way toward smoothing over those jagged pieces, insulating them. “I don’t—I don’t remember.” That admission hurt more than any of the rest of it. She had a child and she didn’t remember them—her.

“Doesn’t mean you haven’t felt it,” Laura pointed out, she sipped her wine and Nat glanced down at her glass before tipping it up and draining the whole thing in one swallow. She barely tasted it, but it was something fruity and a little on the sweet side. A dessert wine. “Something Clint can’t
tell you—or most men for that matter—mothers feel it, Nat. They feel it deep down, from the moment you conceive to giving birth to them to every single day of their lives. You are aware of them. Maybe they took your memories, but they didn’t take your heart.”

“Not all mothers.” There were some really wretched women out there.

“Nat, I know you. You knew even if you hid it from yourself and buried it deep.”

She reached for the bottle and refilled her glass. “How would I know?” She had been fighting her whole life. Fighting to be the best. Fighting to figure out the puzzle. Fighting the good guys. Fighting the bad guys. Fighting herself. Fighting her friends. How the hell would she know what she didn’t know she knew? Or felt? “You may not know this part, but…love is for children. That mantra—they taught me that so much it’s ingrained in my DNA. Emotions…emotion is a weakness that can be exploited.”

Exploited like taking James away.

Like purging her memories.

Like pushing Steve away and keeping him at a distance so he didn’t keep slipping in under her defensives.

Like Loki taking Clint…and then using what Clint revealed to him as a weapon against her.

Like Tony pushing for someone to believe in him, even when he didn’t believe in himself or worse, Tony pushing away the people he cared about so his death would hurt them less.

Emotions made people stupid sometimes, and she was no exception to the rule.

“But you don’t believe that anymore. If you ever did.” Laura made it seem a done deal.

“You sound very certain about that,” Nat said, looking at the fire rather than studying Laura. Laura wasn’t a spy or someone who filtered her emotions. Reading her could be too easy, even if Nat didn’t always understand what she telegraphed. Well, she understood it but she couldn’t comprehend how she was able to feel that way.

“A woman who believes love is only for children wouldn’t have risked her life to get her best friend back. She wouldn’t have changed her life to save strangers on the street. She wouldn’t have battled aliens or befriended soldiers out of time or forgiven someone who tried to kill her multiple times—mind controlled or not. She wouldn’t have developed a complex and secure relationship with children who see her as both protector and friend, and she wouldn’t give a damn what a woman who was married to her best friend felt about a divorce from the same best friend.”

The corners of her mouth dragged upward. “You are shorting yourself—you’re my friend, too, you know.”

“I do know…but would someone who doesn’t believe in love or caring even have friends?”

No.

“And I didn’t—for a very long time.”

“But you do now,” Laura reminded her. “And you’re apparently in a relationship with not one guy, but two. I mean there’s recovery and then there’s go big or go home.”
Nat blinked, then glanced over at her and met Laura’s teasing smile. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, no,” Laura chided. “You do not get to play dumb on this one. I’ve seen the way they watch you, but more, I’ve seen how you watch them. There’s a lot going on there and if the three of you have figured it out—then I couldn’t be happier for you. Trust me, I’m *not* judging.” She’d finished her wine and reached for the bottle when she added, “But I readily admit to jealousy—cause damn, Steve Rogers is not at all hard on the eyes.”

Nat pressed two fingers to her lips.

“Bucky’s not shabby either. Between the two of them, they seem to have every muscle type covered…”

“Laura.” Nat gaped at her.

“I was married, not dead,” Laura reminded her. “Just because you’re on a diet doesn’t mean you can’t look at the menu.”

At that, Nat leaned her head against the chair and laughed. “You’re terrible.”

“No, I’m just getting warmed up.” Her friend pointed a finger at her while still cradling her wine glass. “Happy looks good on you.”

“I think I liked it better when you called me a crazy Russian.” But she didn’t mind clinking glasses with her.

“Oh, don’t worry. I still think of you as the crazy Russian. But you’re our crazy one, so I get a little possessive.”

Shaking her head, Nat sighed. “You know I’m supposed to be comforting you…”

“Nah,” Laura said, stretching her arms and legs, then settling wine glass in hand above her abdomen. “I’m okay. The kids are great, they’re happy and they still have their dad. Couldn’t ask for much more.”

Sure she could, and the hint of longing in those words wasn’t lost on her. Studying Laura, she said, “You talk to me, I’ll talk to you.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“Pfft. Negotiation.”

A snort. “You taught Lila that particularly fine art of negotiation.”

Nat didn’t smile.

“Uh huh, I’m on to you.”

“Didn’t deny it,” she murmured, then took another sip of the wine. “Clint told me he was getting her a bow for Christmas.”

“Yes,” Laura sighed. “I am no longer fighting that battle. She has way too much of her dad in her.”

“She has a lot of you, too.”

“It’s not a competition,” Laura reminded her. “And yes, before you ask, there will be a time when I
ask you to teach her to defend herself. Especially if she keeps wanting to follow in her dad’s footsteps.”

Nat twisted in the seat to face Laura. “Keep her in ballet. It will strengthen her muscles, give her discipline, make her flexible and build her confidence.” And as long as no one ever used it to punish her or brutalized her with it, Nat wouldn’t kill them. “What do you know about her teacher?”

“Clint did a background check on every dance school within an hour’s drive and gave me a list of those that passed muster. He also does periodic spot checks on all teachers and coaches.” Laura said it all with a kind of mirth filled exasperation reserved for those who didn’t know just quite how dark the shadows were away from the fire. “Don’t worry, if any new names or faces show up, the kids are trained to let me know and I let Clint know.”

“Okay.” She sipped the wine. That was reasonable. Of course Clint had it covered. “How are you doing?” Laura hadn’t really answered the earlier question. Nor the offer Nat had made.

“Would you believe…better than I expected to be?” The hesitation in the response betrayed her.

“Maybe.” Nat wasn’t doing anywhere near as better as she needed to be. Standing back up from a body blow had been drilled into her, as autonomic a function as breathing in and out. Yet there was a hollow space carved out inside of her she didn’t know what to do with. Fighting, that was a reflex. Charging into battle a honed skill. Helping the alien life form go home and eliminating the threat of the sludge? All she had to do was survive the pain. These were not difficult challenges.

“And I’d be glad if it was the truth.”

“If it’s the truth?” Laura paused glass midway to her lips. then she sighed. “Dammit, Nat. Why do you see everything?”

“Bad habits are hard to break,” she admitted, studying the other woman. Then relented, because she deserved to know what gave her away. “You hesitated when you asked if I would believe you. Because you don’t want to lie to me, but you also aren’t ready to talk about Clint to me because he’s my friend, too and you don’t want to put me in a position where you think I’d have to choose—and probably because you’re worried about me after what Clint told you.”

Stretching across, Laura pinched her arm. The pain was negligible, and Nat didn’t react to defend herself even if the instinct to block had roused. It was an old habit, a reminder they weren’t in a spy novel as Laura had once joked. “Yes,” Laura admitted, as she settled back with another dubious smile. “All of the above. I’m here because we’re all worried about you—even your guys.”

It wasn’t hard to get Laura to talk, and she should leave it there but—if James and Steve were really that worried, then she should be doing more to fix it. “They talked to you?”

“No,” Laura admitted. “But they are talking to Clint, and I don’t need to be a super spy to notice they never take their attention off you. They always know where you are and what you’re doing. Bucky was even in the hallway earlier when you were getting Lila and Coop settled for bed.”

Yeah, she’d noticed that.

“So…no I’m not doing well with the divorce, it’s hard. But I get through every day because the kids need me to get through it. Clint needs me to be strong for them and for him…he doesn’t need to worry about us or if I’ll be okay or not. I’m not there yet, but I will be.”

“You know he loves you,” Nat told her.
“I do know that.” She smiled almost sadly before she drained the wine glass and Nat matched her. It would take more than a few glasses to make her tipsy, but between her tired, and the company, she was pleasantly mellow. After Nat refilled both their glasses, Laura said, “Sometimes I ask myself if it’s the right thing, and then I don’t know how to walk it back if it isn’t…because all the reasons are still there.”

“Do you still love him?” It was none of her damn business, except…

“You already know the answer to that, don’t you?” Laura eyed her. She’d shifted to sit sideways so they faced each other.

“Pretty sure I do,” Nat said.

“Yeah, pretty sure I do, too.” Laura sighed. “But he’s still Clint…”

“He’s always been Clint.” Dragging herself upright, she sat cross-legged and studied her best friend’s wife. “You told me I could always trust that constancy.”

“Yes,” Laura admitted. The wind tugged at her hair, and she pushed it away from her eyes as she turned her face into the wind and said, “But that same constancy means he’s always gone…always off to some new dangerous adventure. He’s got a broken leg and he was out there in the field with all of you.”

Nat lifted her glass for a sip, then said, “He got that broken leg because of me.”

“He got that broken leg because he won’t ever quit.” Sadness draped her frustration.

“Laura, would he be Clint if he did?”

The long sigh was all the answer she needed. No, Clint didn’t give up. He couldn’t sit down. He loved his family, but it didn’t diminish the responsibility he believed rested on his shoulders.

“Would you ever quit?” Laura asked her abruptly. “If you could walk away from it? Take Steve and Bucky and just go, would you do it?”

Not a question she was sure she could answer, but Nat considered it. The mission… The mission had changed over the years, but had she changed enough to grasp something like that with both hands? “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Before this week, I would have said no immediately. There is no…place in this world for me. I have clung to that like a life line, because it made swallowing everything I ever had to do easier. It made existing as a soldier or a spy—as a weapon—more palatable. People got to have dreams and places and homes…”

“Nat, you are a person.”

“It’s easy for you to say,” she told her, meeting her horrified gaze with quiet sympathy. “You have always been a person, Laura. You grew up and became the person you wanted to be, because of your education, your relationships, and your choices. You had those choices.” This was the part so few truly understood and that Clint had grasped it when she first met him, that he’d even been able to, had allowed her to trust him far sooner and more deeply than she ever would have believed.

“It’s a gift, what you have—what so many people have and they never see it for the gift that it is. You want your life to be a certain way, so you make the choices to create that life…”

“It doesn’t always work out,” Laura reminded her. “And you’re right…it is easy for me to say. I can’t—have never been able to imagine the life you had before Clint or the life you’ve lead since meeting him. I tell myself it’s better…it has been better, hasn’t it?”
“Yes,” she told her not certain at all if it were the truth, a lie, or somewhere in between.

“Even after SHIELD?”

“Yes,” Nat said slowly. “Losing SHIELD…realizing all the lies, and not knowing whose lies I’d been telling. That—it rocked everything I thought I knew. But I still had Clint, Steve…Tony and the other Avengers. I got James back…yes, it’s still better than the life I had before.” Looking back now, she had to admit the life she’d led at SHIELD had been as empty as the life she’d had before it—only with seemingly better goals, and a real friend, and the chance for more. Still, it had been empty life. One where she existed, but she didn’t live and that gaping hole in the center wasn’t just the past she couldn’t remember, but the craters left by loss that had never gone away. Pain didn’t need a name to exist, and she’d always been in pain.

Maybe it was why she’d never questioned it. Tipping the glass back she drained it and stared out towards the dark where the waves rolled in. This island was…she liked this place. A lot.

“It may not always work out,” Nat said finally. Germany hadn’t exactly worked out. Nor had the Accords. Bruce had definitely not worked out. Hell, she still didn’t know where he was. SHIELD had crashed and burned. “But it doesn’t mean you stop trying.”

The Avengers had almost not worked out. While it may have been Nick’s brainchild to begin with, they were so much more.

“I’m glad,” Laura told her, raising the bottle to offer a refill, but Nat shook her head and set the glass down. “You do know you can walk away, don’t you? That staying is your choice?”

Pulling her knees up, Nat lay her cheek against her knees and studied Laura. “Yes, and no.” She had a skillset…

“Yes,” Laura emphasized the word. “You could walk away tomorrow and those two men in there would clear a damn path for you.” The certainty made her smile. “You know they would. Clint would cover your exit and…just looking around this place, I have no doubt Tony would make sure no one came looking or if they did, they wouldn’t find you.”

“If something happened…” Something she could have prevented or Steve could have…or James…could she or they live with themselves?

“That’s the rub,” Laura pointed out. “That’s what keeps Clint walking out he door even when he promises to stay. He’s tired of breaking promises to me and I’m tired of asking for them. But you still get to choose, and I think you need to recognize that. You are a person, Natasha. They denied it to you. Then you wouldn’t or maybe couldn’t let yourself be one for far too long. You see the world as missions you need to complete, jobs you have to take because no one else can do them. You know what, maybe you’re right. But you’re also a woman who can choose to walk away…who can look at all the good you’ve done and say enough.”

“The red in my ledger…”

“You saved the world, at least three times that I can count right off the top of my head. There is no red in your ledger. Not unless you want to say it’s there, and that’s not the world saying you owe a debt, Nat—that’s you.” Laura set her wine glass down and spread her hands. “You deserve better—from you.”

“Maybe,” was all she would concede.

“Impossible,” Laura huffed, then she shook her head with a chuckle. “You’re impossible.”
“So people keep telling me…” She chewed her lip. “James and I tried to run away,” she told her quietly. “He remembers it…I don’t. We ran, and we tried to have a life. Away from everything, but that didn’t really work out.” Even with her sense of self in pieces, she had no trouble believing she would have given the effort her all. If asked right now, she could lay out an exit plan to vanish, and the world was more challenging with its observational tools than it would have been in the 70s.

Then again, with the Cold War adding to the rising tensions and chilly conditions, she’d have had to bury anything about herself that referred to her Russian roots. James likely fell back on his own heritage—if his memories had begun to restore in their months on their own and his freedom from the chair and hers from reconditioning. But she would have had to be someone else.

“There those people aren’t after you anymore,” Laura told her gently.

As nice as it would be to believe—there would always be people. Power wanted more power. People like Ross who saw them as a threat. People like Nick who saw them as an asset. People like Leonid and Alexei who saw them as a means to an end. There would always be someone.

Laura got the next bottle of wine opened, and glanced toward the house. Nat smiled. “It’s just James, he’s checking on us.”

“What does he think we’re going to do?” Laura asked. “Strip naked and run into the surf?”

“Well, he’d probably be moderately entertained by that, but we’re sitting out here in the dark next to a fire, with no cover and good exposure if someone was sitting on a yacht offshore with a long range scope.”

After removing the cork, Laura shook her head. “Do you want to go inside?”

“No, Friday monitors sonar and radar sequences on the island regularly, anything within range would have already been noted.”

Laura pursed her lips. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“And now you understand why I don’t know if I could ever walk away. How would I ever know it’s safe to relax my vigilance?”

With a sigh, Laura refilled their glasses then handed Nat hers after she set the wine bottle back in the ice. “Clint’s up on the roof, isn’t he?”

“Probably. I wouldn’t be surprised if Steve isn’t keeping watch on the other side of the house in case there are land approaches.” She sipped the wine, and slid back in the seat again. The fire was still flickering, dancing shadows everywhere.

“Nat…”

“I’m not ready yet, Laura,” she told her. “I can barely talk about it with James or Steve. I’m not ready to talk to anyone about it.” Even Clint. She’d tried that first day and then after—after she had to pack it away or she’d never stand up again.

“I’m here for you when you are,” Laura assured her and that wasn’t a surprise.

Glancing over at her, she raised her wine glass. “The same to you…and just so you know, I’m still rooting for you and Clint.”

She’d always root for them to find a way to make it work. They needed each other. Laura
chuckled, “Understood.”

The next bottle of wine passed quietly as they caught up on other things—the kids, Laura’s work, and Nat’s current status legally…it was still a little out there. They were dropping prosecution, but it didn’t do anything for her reputation—a fact that pissed Laura off but Nat couldn’t be bothered to worry about it. She’d rather just not have to deal with avoiding the law. Yes, she got to rejoin the Avengers, but she was benched per the team leader—Steve—and would be staying on the bench until Helen cleared her and Steve did.

Was that a problem?

Nope.

Was she really not going to share about Steve and James with Laura?

No, she wasn’t going to gossip about them, but she was happy with them and she wanted make a place for all of them, a place that was theirs…

How?

She had no idea.

Where?

Not a decision she could or would make on her own.

By the time the second bottle of wine was empty, Laura couldn’t stop smothering her yawns. She wanted to sit up longer but she needed sleep. Nat gave her a hug before sending her off to bed, promising to be up early for breakfast before seeing them off.

Alone again, she folded her arms and walked down to the sand. The fire was guttering, burning lower and lower and it wouldn’t be long before it was out if they didn’t feed it with more wood. The breeze whipped at her hair and her skirt. The tide was higher, the sound of the waves a soothing, rhythmic beat against the shore. The wine had left her a little lightheaded, but she was pretty sure that was the tired talking.

She’d never been this tired in her life—well—not in the times she could remember anyway. Helping the formless had drained her, literally and figuratively. The fact she’d slept without actually sleeping hadn’t helped either. Her serum worked when she rested and she ate, she had to produce the energy somewhere, and she was depleted at a cellular level. That information had given everyone a significant pause. Dr. Cho, however, didn’t believe the serum was gone, only hampered by the level of damage the radiation had inflicted on her. Radiation poisoning, go figure. But given enough time and rest, her history suggested she would recover. It was why, Helen told her, she had to sleep as much as possible. Rest. Eat. Sleep. No strain. Avoid stress.

The diagnosis and prescription were why they were here. The vacation—their first one. Tony offered up his house and island immediately—isolated, secure, and warm. Steve had made arrangements, and James had packed them. They were on a quinjet and out of New York the minute Helen cleared her for travel.

From the moment they arrived, the guys had been beyond solicitous and she supposed it was a testament to how bad she’d felt she hadn’t even resented their impulse to coddle her. Admittedly, it was so strange to not have somewhere they had to be. But today? Today she got to see and play with the kids. She got to spend time with Clint and Laura as well as Steve and James. That was pretty perfect in her book, and perfection just made her uneasy.
The lack of clouds gave her a clear view of the sky, and with the dark moon—all she could see were stars. They scattered across the night, and there was even a lovely view of the Milky Way. She’d forgotten what it was like to be able to see them so closely. Tipping her head back, she thought about the formless.

The stars on his/her world had been different. The sky had been purple…did it make it home? Would she ever know?

The light clearing of a throat alerted her to Steve’s approach before he wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and then pulled her back against him, threading his arms around her as well. “You okay?”

“Just…thinking,” she told him. “I know I should have come in when I sent Laura to bed.”

“No, you don’t have to do anything. But it’s getting a little colder. There’s a storm a few miles out, not coming this way, but…”

“The breeze.” It had gotten stronger.

“Yeah.” His chin rested against her forehead as he leaned his head to hers. “You really doing okay?”

“I’m better than okay,” she admitted. “I needed to see them and I didn’t realize how much.”

“That’s what Clint said,” Steve chuckled. “He figured you’d be annoyed until Lila got to you.”

Tears pricked her eyes. “She’s a good kid.”

“She certainly adores you.” A light kiss to her temple. “They all do. Can’t fault their taste.”

“Kids adapt so easily,” she said around the lump in her throat. “They forgive, accept, and adapt while adults are still trying to wrap their minds around what happened or what might be next.”

“That’s because kids have faith,” he answered. “Especially when they can trust their parents, and other caregivers.”

“It was like that with your mom, wasn’t it?” She covered one of his hands with hers, hooking her fingers against his.

Backing up a few steps, Steve tugged her with him and then he sank down in the sand and she curled up in the V of his legs. When he lay back they could both look up at the sky, she smiled. Busted—he caught her stargazing.

“My mother was…a wonderful woman. Looking back, I know she was stretched thin all the time, and always worried about me. Always trying to find the best way to get something done. But she was on her own. I think I’m even more grateful for Bucky’s mom because she helped mine, and I think my mom worried about me less because of Bucky and his mom and the rest of his family.” He sighed. “She had to be mom and dad, though.”

“Did she tell you stories about your father?” Nat frowned. James had known both of his parents. But Steve had only had his mother.

“Sometimes,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “On his birthday, on my birthday, and every once and while at Christmas. She would tell me something about what he liked or how he used to play a horn. She’d give me glimpses into his life, so I could know him better.”
She chewed the inside of her lip. Studying the sky, she blew out a sigh.

“What’s going on in there?” Steve asked, drawing a pattern against her hand.

“Just—so many questions. I’m thinking about the formless and whether they got home, if it worked. I’m thinking about Lila and Coop and the fact they get to grow up in a world where they know their parents love them, and who they are—they have that attachment and that history.” Interlacing her fingers with Steve’s, she confessed. “And I’m wondering what went through my mind when I realized I would be forgetting I ever had a child. That I would return to the idea that I couldn’t have kids. And then…and then… I’m chasing my tail.” She shook her head.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “Keep chasing it. You’re trying to figure out how you feel and that’s not an easy question to answer.”

“Yes and no. I meant it when I said I want to make a place for us, I want…I want to be here. I want to be with you both, I want…I want a life.” Every time she said it out loud…

“But?” Steve prompted her and she tilted her head back to study his shadowed profile. The longer they were out here the more her eyes adapted to what little light there was. She didn’t have his night vision or even James’, but she could just make out the shape of his jaw and the fact his head was angled toward hers.

“But I left my daughter somewhere…and she grew up never knowing me. Never knowing James. What questions did I leave her with? I know what it is to have no one, no mother or father…then I think I’m selfish because why am I sweating these details? Before a few days ago I didn’t even know she existed.”

“Do you want to know what I think?” He was so very careful with that question. Why not? She hadn’t really brought this up to either of them. Not since the day James told her, and not really since she’d woken up. Or since being on the island, they’d talked about easy things, more playful things, and they’d been tiptoeing around her and she’d just let them do it.

“Yes,” she said. “Always…I’m not going to break. I promise.”

“I think you’re right to feel anything you feel. You’re grieving, and you’re questioning, and you’re healing. You don’t have to justify what’s going on in there to anyone.” He cradled her closer and she smiled.

“You make it sound easy.”

“I know it’s not. I can’t imagine how this has to be for you. Buck—Buck can remember and I know it’s tearing him up. You can’t, and that’s sucking you in.”

“And you’re trapped on the sidelines while we do this.” It was so dramatically unfair to Steve. “You and I just…”

“Don’t even,” he told her. “Don’t even go there. Before we were lovers—before I told you I wanted more—before I even kissed you…we were friends. Our relationship isn’t new or at least I don’t look at as new. You were right there for me, even when I didn’t deserve it.”

It was her turn to twist. “What do you mean when you didn’t deserve it?”

“He means when he was too focused on saving my ass to look at what he was doing to yours,” James said from the darkness and Steve chuckled because he jerked a little. He wasn’t alone, she hadn’t realized James was there either, but she should have. They’d disappeared down to the
shoreline in the dark.

“Yeah, I meant that, thanks Buck.”

“No problem. You’re an idiot, but no problem.”

“Jerk.”

“Punk.”

She chuckled. “You do realize idiot is my word for you two, since I don’t have a punk or a jerk.”

“Yes, doll, we’re aware.” He drifted closer and dropped into the sand next to Steve, then bumped his shoulder.

Steve braced her, then gave James a shove. While she couldn’t quite make them out, she could definitely hear them. “As I was saying, before we were interrupted...don’t ever worry about being honest with me either. I’m not going to break. Your shared history didn’t scare me off before and...it doesn’t change anything for me. I wish I’d been there to help then and I’ll do everything I can now.”

“I’ll answer any question you have,” James said quietly. “Any question either of you have.”

It wasn’t the same…

“The only questions I have,” Steve said, “For either of you, are always going to be are you all right and what can I do?”

“I don’t know if I’m all right,” she admitted.

“I don’t know either,” James said. “Just—glad I’m here. Glad I get to be with Natalia again. Glad I get to have my best friend back.”

“And that’s enough,” Steve told them. “That will always be enough.”

“Steve?”

“Yeah Angel?”

“Are you all right?”

He was quiet for a long time, and finally he said, “We’re a mess aren’t we?”

That wasn’t an answer and it was one all at once. She smiled a little and rubbed her head against his shoulder. “Maybe…but you’re not alone.”

“Makes it a little easier,” Steve admitted.

Then James sighed. “I like this island.”

“Yeah?” Natasha reached through the darkness and he caught her hand in his. They were all staring up at the stars, or so she assumed as she settled back and gazed upward.

“Yeah. It’s quiet. I can hear myself think.” James continued to toy with her fingers. “I—like the air, the sky—the heat.”
“I like the heat, and the air, but I don’t like the silence,” Steve admitted. “It’s too quiet. I feel like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“I like it because you guys are here,” she admitted and that earned her a squeeze from both. “And I think I needed this more than I realized.”

“I’m glad,” Steve told her. “Very glad. It’s why we wanted to get you out of the city.”

“But you don’t want to be here?” She frowned. Was he only here because he wanted her away?

“No, it’s not that I don’t want to be here. I promise. It’s not—it’s not bad. Not at all. But we’ve been…buttoned down for so long. Securing everything, hell you and Laura sitting outside drinking alone and… I feel—exposed here and I worry we’re missing something because…” He sighed. “Hell. Maybe I did need this vacation after all, if I really am growing paranoid.”

That sounded like he was responding to something they hadn’t said. “We haven’t really slowed down in years.” She didn’t count the weeks after Germany. Their stress levels hadn’t gone down, at all. Not for any of them.

“No, we haven’t…but after, after what happened in that factory and you vanishing into that stuff,” the faint hint of a stutter in his voice raked through her. “I went a little crazy.”

That was the first time he’d discussed those moments with her, and she didn’t twist or turn over. She lay there, the steady thump of his heart beneath her reminding her he was right there.

“First you just—vanished into it, then it escaped and we couldn’t catch it and didn’t dare hurt it…and then we found you and you were so cold, Angel. It was like you were frozen.” His arms tightened around her. She never wanted them to see that, even as she made the choices she did. And knowing she’d do it again if the situation called for it. They shouldn’t have had to see it. But Steve exhaled before continuing, “I ripped into Parker, I pretty much ripped into anyone that got in my way. I couldn’t think straight, and Clint sat me down…”

James cleared his throat.

“Okay, Buck and Clint sat me down, but as I recall, Clint didn’t have a lot of favorable things to say about you either.”

“No, but I knew I was a wreck,” James almost sounded like he was smiling. “You’ve all been telling me it’s okay, maybe you should take your own advice.”

“Jerk.”

James chuckled.

“Clint said that since we can’t get drunk, we needed a vacation and a few weeks of doing nothing.”

*I told you keeping them even is your job and I’d help, not do it all.*

“Not sure I even know how to relax…”

“We’re not doing so bad,,” she murmured. “Are we?”

There was a beat then James started laughing. “You’re asking the wrong people, doll.”

She grinned and beneath her Steve began to shake with laughter. “Okay—” He stroked a hand through her hair. “Vacation time resuming…”
“We paused it?” Holding their hands and staring up the stars was a kind of perfect.

“No—well maybe a little,” Steve answered. “Are you tired?”

“Yes,” she confessed. “But I wanted to clear my mind before I slept again.”

“Still having bad dreams, doll?”

Every night. “Yes,” she said. “But I like this…can we stay out here a little longer?” She wasn’t the only one who had bad dreams. Steve had been restless on several nights, and she’d snapped awake to find James already awake, either staring at her or off into the distance. Sometimes, they were both awake and talking in low tones.

“We can stay out here for as long as you want,” Steve told her. “I like this, too.”

“Me three,” James agreed and he bumped Steve and said, “Share her, c’mon.” They shifted her around so she was snuggled right between them, and then James said, “Okay, favorite constellations?”

She recalled gazing at the stars as a child—then it had been about being anywhere but where she was. This though—she wanted to be right here, to savor it. “Are we supposed to have one?”

Steve groaned. “You had to ask him that.”

“Yes,” James sounded almost smug. “She did…so let’s discuss Andromeda…” James seemed to be in his element, and despite Steve’s groan, he added his own caveats and stories as they debated the different constellations and they took turns pointing them out to her.

She needed to get herself together. Steve needed her. James needed her. They needed her to be whole. They needed her to be there for them like they were for her… At the same time, she wanted to be right where she was, snuggled between them, insulated against the whole world on the isolated beach, picking out the stars and listening to their stories.

It was pretty damn close to perfect, and better than any dream.
Bucky and Steve don't sleep before it's time for breakfast with the Bartons

Chapter Two

Dreams

Bucky

It was just after four in the morning, Natalia slept, curled on her side one hand beneath her cheek and the other stretched out to where he’d been lying. Behind her, Steve stiffened then rolled off the bed so smoothly it was as if he’d been practicing how to jerk awake without disturbing her.

Hell, they both had.

Crouched for a beat, Stevie’s chest rose and fell rapidly. The flush of his face and the way he bowed his head a testament to the nature of his dream.

He’d seen her falling into the sludge again.

Bucky didn’t have to ask. It was the same image that pulled him out of sleep less than an hour after they’d coax her in from the beach and tucked her in. The fact she didn’t argue when one of them carried her up to bed or tucked her under the covers, or stroked her hair until she fell asleep shook him far more than he wanted to admit.

Natalia hated to be coddled or treated as anything less than a capable equal. While he had no problem with her actively leaning on either or both of them, the fact she wasn’t even fighting herself on it said far more about her condition than any of the horror stories the doc had given them out of her earshot.

Radiation poisoning.

Cellular degradation.

Concerns about long-term brain damage as a result of hypoxia, though those were harder to determine considering all the preexisting conditions. Or so Cho had claimed. She didn’t have enough benchmarks but said there were abnormalities in the brain scans. She also wasn’t an expert neurologist or neurosurgeon. Stark was tracking down the best to review the data while they whisked her away.

The thoughts were like whispers of smoke from the fire burning inside of him. Steve straightened, and his shoulders drooped then he glanced over his shoulder and met Bucky’s gaze. Without a word, Bucky pointed to the water bottles and coffee thermos he’d prepared before they went to
sleep. Another thing she’d missed, the preparations they took for long wakeful nights so they didn’t leave her alone.

A well Natalia wouldn’t have let that slide no matter how bad she was feeling. It was, without a doubt, how they’d been able to bring the Bartons in the day before and she’d not realized it until she’d actually seen them.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Steve rose, then he dragged the sheet and blanket up over her. Without one of them there, she got cold too easily. Considering she’d easily lost twenty pounds after the incident with the sludge, and her cheeks were hollow, the bones in her shoulders jutting, and the delicate hands even more so—they just couldn’t take the risk with a chill.

Silently, Steve disappeared into the bathroom. The door closed and he took care of business and washed up before reappearing, and sinking down into the matching chair on the other side of the little table occupying one corner of the master suite. No lights were on, the house was quiet—but with Steve awake, Bucky would do a patrol shortly—and they sat there, keeping watch.

Steve unscrewed one of the water bottles then drained it in a couple of long swallows. Stevie wasn’t doing much better than she was, on edge constantly and hyper vigilant. He’d been worried about bringing in the Barton family, not because they wouldn’t be good for Natalia but because it gave them more people to secure.

Clint, fortunately, had no problem with Steve mapping out a plan. Bucky had Natalia duty exclusively. Clint would handle his wife and youngest son. Steve would take care of the elder pair of Barton children. If an exit strategy was required, they would evacuate their targets and use extreme prejudice on any possible attackers.

Only once Stevie laid it out did he allow himself even a measured moment to relax. Prior to the Bartons arrival, he and Stevie always kept at least one of them with her. In the event of an attack, the plan was simple—the one with her got her out and the other dealt with the assault.

Stark’s assurances of the island’s security undersold it. However, Stevie wouldn’t rest on any one system of defense. They patrolled, inspected equipment, reviewed reports, and had Friday tied into their phones where she could give them regular status checks. Despite the tension between Stark and Steve, they’d worked together on this one and Steve seemed willing to rely on Stark’s security measures and Stark had implemented all of Steve’s requests.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Bucky sighed and then poured himself a cup of coffee. Natalia hadn’t yet snapped awake. So a good night so far. No dreams to torment her. Even if she didn’t talk about their content, Bucky didn’t have to ask. When he closed his eyes, a series of familiar images assaulted him but the most popular of late had been her plunge into that ooze and the way it closed over and around her.

Worse had been her expression. Calm. Resigned. Accepting.

It pissed him off on a level he couldn’t express. What was he supposed to do? Yell at her?

She’d been willing to die to get Parker out of that crap, and she’d succeeded. Then the damn thing had vanished on them. Parker had been beside himself, and shaken. No worse than the rest of them, though. Stark looked ready to lose his mind and he’d vanished into the sky to track it while Bucky and Steve covered the ground.

The sludge hadn’t been able to hide its tracks through the cold forest.
Steve took the thermos when he was done and poured his own cup. The triple brewed concoction actually worked on his system. He doubted it would really keep either of them awake if they were truly crashing, but for the moment, it helped bring clarity to the fog left by lack of sleep.

Staring in the cup, Bucky couldn’t shake the look on Natalia’s face when Lila Barton had raced out of the house and into her arms. It was like someone had driven a stake right through his lung and the sucking chest wound meant he couldn’t breathe as the blood bubbled out of him. Yet, he couldn’t look away from naked joy. The last time he’d seen that on her face—she’d been holding Mary Elizabeth.

The whole day, she’d glowed as she played with the kids. Even when she swayed with fatigue, it hadn’t been able to diminish the simple pleasure she took in the children’s company. When she and Lila had curled up together on the sofa and napped, it had shredded his heart. Steve and Clint had both tried to talk to him, but it wasn’t something he was ready to confront.

Especially when the only person capable of fully understanding the cost couldn’t remember and that was a price all its own. He drained the coffee in his mug and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. Steve tapped his arm once, then pointed to the balcony doors.

Nodding, Bucky grabbed the oversized thermos and his mug, while Steve scooped up his own and a couple of the water bottles. The door to the suite was locked, and Steve’s shield sat right next to the bed. Bucky had a gun and a knife stowed next to the bed, but he’d slipped on the shoulder holster when he’d gotten up.

Parting the curtains enough to be able to do visual checks, he let himself out onto the balcony. The whole of it dominated the seaward side of the house and was accessible primarily from the master suite, which dominated half of this floor, and included its own sitting room and a bathroom with a huge whirlpool tub. It was perfect luxury.

The breeze came in steadily over the ocean. A storm was visible in the distance, but it didn’t seem to be heading in their direction. The flashes of lightning over the sea were some kind of poetry he didn’t want to contemplate. Steve set the water bottles down, then reclaimed the thermos to fill his cup. Another half-glance over his shoulder and Bucky joined him.

Natalia hadn’t moved.

Not even a twitch.

“She’s healing so slow this time,” Steve said, his solemn and soft comment echoing Bucky’s own concern.

“If she has too much to heal, her body will target from worst to least. Sleep is the best thing for her.” It was a phrase he repeated to himself over and over again. Sleep might be the best thing for her, but failing to notice them leaving the bed. Not awaking when someone slipped inside the room. Her awareness…it had been compromised.

Or maybe…

“She did better yesterday,” Steve said quietly. “I shouldn’t have doubted Clint…”

“Nah, we’re okay to doubt him. But he was right to push.” Bucky would never begrudge the man his place. Natalia adored him, and trusted him on a level he didn’t think she trusted anyone else—even if once upon a time that faith and trust belonged to her Soldier. That left another ache in him, but he remembered and she didn’t. He remembered every stolen moment, every time they came
close to being discovered, and how reckless and daring she became when she wanted to prove to their masters they couldn’t control her. He remembered being the person she trusted most, as she had always been the one he had. No matter the situation, if they faced it together—they would win.

He also remembered patching her back together when they would assert their authority or Karpov would seek to make her a pet. The fights between Petrovitch, Karpov, and Madame B—they had been legendary, delivered with cold insults and carefully planned assassination attempts that each of the slippery bastards had managed to survive.

Just once he wished one of them had given him the order to kill the others.

No, Natalia had killed Madame B and Karpov.

“It’s just after five,” Steve said with a check of his watch.

“Then a good night.” It would only be the second one since they arrived. “What time are the Bartons leaving?”

“Around nine, breakfast first and then Clint will fly them back. The kids have school tomorrow.” Steve raked a hand through his hair before casting another look inside.

Time was a fluid thing when you didn’t have a schedule. It was Sunday morning. Maybe they should do something different that afternoon. Movies, then grill outside. Or grill outside, then movies. Natalia had been out in the sun a lot. Not that he could blame her. It was mid-November and there was snow on the ground in New York. Siberia would be an icebox. Moscow, a frozen wonderland. But they were sitting outside in shorts and Bucky had even begun to show the first signs of a tan.

Natalia needed to eat more. He hadn’t missed Mrs. Barton’s—Laura, he reminded himself mentally—watching Nat with concern when she picked at the food. She’d eaten some, but mostly she’d moved it around the plate so as to give the illusion she ate more than she did.

Steve wasn’t doing much better, but he’d dug his heels in when Bucky pushed him to eat more. They weren’t here about him, he insisted. They were here for Natalia.

Yeah, they were here for all three of them and they were supposed to go back in another couple of days. While they might want to pretend otherwise, Bucky wasn’t ready to let her go back. The team was waiting for her. Training with Parker and the witch. Missions with Steve—not that there was a snowball’s chance in hell Steve would approve her being back on the team until she was fully recovered. Still…

“I think we should stay a few days longer,” Steve said, giving voice Bucky’s internal monologue. “I think I expected her to bounce back faster…”

“You hoped,” Bucky said, then drained his coffee. “Me, too.” Because Natalia’s slow speed meant that whatever the alien had done to her left her in worse shape than they realized. It hadn’t helped that she’d been half-frozen outside in the snow and the cold. The blue pallor to her lips and the bruises around her eyes had only emphasized her paleness. “Is there any reason we have to head back on Tuesday?”

“No,” Steve said slowly. “I mean there probably is—paperwork, the team, and the Committee.”

“If there’s an emergency they know where you are.” Well, no, the team probably didn’t. Stark did. “Tony and Clint are the only ones who have our exact location or ability to contact us.” To his
credit though, Stevie didn’t sound upset about the fact. “Tony isn’t going to call unless it’s an alien invasion.”

“So we tell Friday to alert us to emergencies…” Bucky suggested. He’d told Steve he wasn’t all that interested in the team, or fighting again. But going in to the factory, backing him up—it had been like old times in some ways. Until Natalia… He shoved that thought away. He saw it enough when he closed his eyes; he refused to let it occupy his waking mind.

“That’s straightforward enough.” Steve set his mug aside and leaned back in the chair, legs stretched out. Dawn would be there soon enough. They should probably head down and start the breakfast prep after six. Then wake Natalia by seven. She would not want to miss the last couple of hours with the kids. “You know what worries me the most?”

“That she won’t be hard to convince?” It had already occurred to him. He adored that she was letting them take care of her, the fact she was though and not pushing back at all…it wasn’t a good sign. He’d seen her beaten, tortured, and sustain massive blood loss, and still push back against everyone around her. Yes, part of it was her training, but the rest of it was her.

“I don’t think we have to convince her at all. If we tell her we’re staying, she’s going to ask if that’s what we want…”

Probably. “The answer to that will be yes.”

Steve sighed before bracing his fist against his jaw and staring out at the darkened ocean. The tension around him was so taut, Bucky was pretty sure it would make a fine drawstring for a bow.

“Whatever else we do today—you and I spar.” Bucky told him. The slap of Steve’s gaze swinging at him had almost as much punch as his left hook. “You need to blow off some steam…” And before Steve could protest, he said, “And so do I.”

It was a cheap move, but effective. “You want to talk about it?” Steve worried, and all of that worry was laser focused on Natalia, leaving little if any care for himself.

“No.” Another lie. A small one, because he did…but he didn’t have the words for it. “You know, sitting on the stoop when we were kids and we talked about all the things we were going to do when we grew up…”

“What you were going to do, Buck,” Steve reminded him quietly. “I never really thought much about my future…”

“No you decided you didn’t have one.” Bucky corrected him. “Or if you did, it wouldn’t be pretty. I included you in my future plans, Punk.”

“Bucky…”

“No, don’t Bucky me. I get it… it sucked for you to be sick all the time. I hated it for you. But you looking back and feeling sorry for yourself—no, you don’t get to do that. You were the toughest kid I knew, and the only thing you ever quit on was yourself.”

Steve flinched, then glanced down at his hands.

“You took stupid risks for me, for the country, for your mom—now for Natalia and your Avengers.” Raising his hand, he asked for Steve to let him finish. “You will always be the guy who lands on that grenade because you’re still the guy who says you don’t have a future even though you want one so badly. That guy scares the crap out of me, Stevie. You were willing to let me kill
you to save me. You were willing to let Stark take you out if it saved me—or take out your friend, a guy you respect and care about—to *save me.*”

Steve frowned and his chin dropped.

“You will go to the wall for the people you care about and you will sacrifice yourself to do it… your relationships, your own happiness…” Bucky swallowed and shook his head. “I don’t want to beat up on you, Stevie. I really don’t. But when we were kids—we talked about where we were going to be and what we were going to do…”

“And we didn’t do any of it Buck,” Steve reminded him. “You wanted a wife and three kids, and all you did was chase skirts. Then you got called up and sent to a war you didn’t want to fight.” The harsh slap in those words pulled him up short. “No, I do remember. I get it. I get that we talked about the family you were going to have, and you kept telling me I would, too. That we would have Sunday dinners together, and every spring we’d take our kids to the ballpark.”

The last piece stung like alcohol poured onto an open wound. The closest he’d come was seeing her take a first step.

“Yeah, maybe I’m the punk who falls on the grenade, who volunteered for the human experimentation, who turned on every friend I’d made to save the only friend and brother I had from before…that last bit is on me, but I don’t regret it. I could wish I *hadn’t* hurt Nat. That I hadn’t *had* to fight Tony. That…I wasn’t the reason my friends ended up on The Raft. That I didn’t lead the mission that ended up with you lost. I wish *none* of those things happened. But I can’t regret doing everything I can to save you, to be able to be in the fight, to—make sure you got the future you wanted. Even if you were too busy eyeing the French resistance fighters, seducing the Italian girls, and if I recall correctly a Norwegian communications specialist?”

The corner of his mouth tipped up. “Greta…I forgot about her.”

Steve chuckled, and it went from mirthless and sad to just amused and resigned. “We’re not those kids anymore.”

That was the worst part.

“You and me…maybe just me…” He glanced through the parted curtain to where Natalia slumbered. The steady rise and fall of her chest, and the way her lashes seemed to kiss her cheeks reminded Bucky of those animated princesses trapped under some sleeping curse, yet suspended in a bubble of their own beauty, ageless and perfect. “Maybe I’m the problem here,” Steve continued. “I keep wanting to be what we were, but we’re not those kids. We’re not even in the 20s, 30s or 40s. We’re not fighting for every meal or stretching out the coins to make sure I can get medicine, and you’re not working three jobs and lying to me about how much the rent is.”

Bucky’s ears went hot. Yeah. He’d done that too. “Not going to apologize for making sure your ass didn’t freeze.”

“And I’m not going to apologize for wanting to pull you out of the frozen hell they were keeping you in.”

They locked gazes for a moment, and in Steve’s eyes he saw a reflection of his own resolve, and hopefully Steve recognized Bucky wasn’t backing down on this. Finally, Bucky nodded slowly and Steve let out a breath. “Then we stop trying to reframe the past…” It was the only thing the two of them could do. “We plan ahead from here.”
“We’ve been trying to do that,” Steve admitted. “But the past isn’t done with any of us yet.”

No. No it wasn’t. “She may never remember Steve, and she and I may have to accept that we’ll grieve our loss and move on.” Maybe…just maybe they could have that chance again. It happened once. Or was it too much to ask for a second miracle?

“Quitting isn’t in Natasha’s nature.” It was an understatement, but it made Bucky laugh softly and he reached for the water bottle, cracked it open and looked back out at the storm brewing in the distance.

“Sometimes I wish it was,” Bucky admitted. “Then I remember all the times she could have given in…she never did Stevie. They could have turned her into this horrible monster. She would be perfectly within her rights to not give a single damn about anyone. But they couldn’t do it.” Her humanity was so insanely bright. She warmed everyone around her.

“Buck…I’ve never seen her back down. And when you told her…” He didn’t have to finish it. When Bucky told her about Mary Elizabeth, it was like someone sucked all the air out of her. She’d been through hell, and that alien did whatever it did to leave her almost twenty pounds lighter, gaunt, pale, and exhausted and she still looked better now than she had when Bucky told her about their daughter.

“I keep asking myself if I told her because I’m selfish.” Admitting it aloud didn’t make it any less true than keeping it to himself.

“She needed to know.” The fact Steve echoed his own thoughts on it helped. “Clint told you the same thing, didn’t he?”

In fact, he had. Tipping the bottle up, he drained it then checked the time again. “Yeah, he did. So…the past isn’t done with us, and we’ll deal with it as we can. But we look forward, we help her look forward, too.”

“She’s already looking forward, Buck,” Steve murmured. “She told us that yesterday morning.”

“I guess she did…” She also told them why she made the choice she had, and even in telling her he would have done the same thing, he couldn’t suppress the flash of terror infused fury that she’d taken that risk with herself. Natalia didn’t get to risk herself. Not anymore.

And he would likely be as successful with that now as he had been fifty years earlier, he was sure.

Natalia would do what Natalia chose to do.

“She’s letting us take care of her,” Steve reminded him and it was Stevie’s turn to cajole him back up from the dark. It was as though they were sitting on an awkward emotional teeter-totter. They would push up or push down as needed to get them back to some kind of balance. “I never in a million years thought she’d let us.”

Bucky didn’t say anything. If he addressed that subject too closely, he’d plummet them both back down again.

“But that’s another kind of problem,” Steve added, then gave him a wry look. “You thought I wouldn’t recognize that her lack of pushing us away to do it on her own is far more telling of how bad off she is?”

Bucky raised his hands. “Not trying to keep things from you...sometimes I feel like I know Natalia better than anyone else alive. In many ways, I do. But I am still getting to know Natasha.”
“Is that weird for you?” Steve frowned. “I mean, I know it has to be weird but…how the hell are you handling it? How do you both stand up when the whole world keeps dropping on you?”

“You,” Bucky told him. “You’re definitely part of it. Hard not to see some hope when Captain America is in your corner.”

“You don’t give a damn about Captain America,” Steve scoffed and Bucky laughed softly.

“Nope. Never have. But that skinny kid from Brooklyn? Yeah, him I appreciate…and yeah…but just like we aren’t those kids anymore, she’s not that young woman…she’s had a whole lifetime to grow and to change, hell she’s had more than one.”

If they were a product of their experiences and their memories, did that make her more Natasha than Natalia? What happened if she got those memories back? Did they lose Natasha? Steve was crazy about Natasha. Clint was Natasha’s best friend. Natasha was aunt to those kids. Natasha was the Avenger.

Bucky cared about Natasha—but I love Natalia…and I still see the Natalia in Natasha. What had he told Stark? He wasn’t sure what she was to him, but he wanted her to live long enough for him to remember and find out?

They’d accomplished that.

Steve tilted his head back. “Do you see a future for us, Buck?”

“I don’t have to see it,” he told him. Because he’d been thinking about it since Natalia admitted she wanted one, she wanted to make a future with them. She wanted a life, and a place. She wanted to build it.

“No?”

“No,” Bucky confirmed. The sun edged the horizon, reds and oranges bleeding into the twilight kissing the sea. Another day. Another sunrise. They made it through. And he glanced inside to where Natalia slept and he smiled. “I could find my way to her in the dark and blind folded. My future is lying right there and sitting right next to me. I don’t have to see it to know we can make it happen.”

They sat in silence, watching the sun begin its slow ascent. The sunrises on the island were stunning. If Natalia weren’t so wan, he’d rouse her to see it. They would definitely make sure she saw one before they left.

“So we’re agreed,” Steve confirmed. “Another week?”

“Thanksgiving is less than two weeks away,” Bucky mused. When was the last time he actually celebrated a Thanksgiving? He hadn’t while lying lowing Bucharest. He definitely hadn’t with Hydra or the KGB or the Red Room. But Montana? His mind turned to the cabin. The fact Jason and Nancy Roarke still owned the land and the cabin meant it still belonged to them, maybe he could take her there when she was ready?

The first Thanksgiving he’d been too much the Soldier still, but on the second—when Mary Elizabeth had been a few months old…fuck. The pain fistig in his chest squeezed all the air from him. They had celebrated it. Natalia had indulged him, with a fond smile on her lips as he figured out how to roast a turkey. It had been absolute disaster of a meal, but they’d laughed and picked their way through the food and made it work.
“Buck?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine,” he lied, and Steve didn’t buy the response for a second but he only gripped his shoulder. “Thanksgiving is in less than two weeks,” he tried again, his voice hoarse as he swallowed back the pain. “Another week here, then we take her home. Should be a proper Thanksgiving this year. A real turkey, and all the dressing and pies…”

Steve squeezed his shoulder, the tightness offering him an anchor. “I’ll be honest, haven’t had one of those yet…”

“What?” Buck scrubbed a hand over his face. The bristle on his cheeks reminded him he needed to shave.

“Haven’t really had a sit down Thanksgiving or any holiday really. When I was living in DC, it was just me, and Nat would come by…I think that first Christmas, I was going to just hole up in the apartment and draw. STRIKE Team was always on call, and then…Nat showed up and dragged me out to get the most pathetic Christmas tree I’d ever seen. It was a couple of days before Christmas. Then we watched some really terrible Christmas movies and she kept…telling me all the parts she didn’t get…”

“She was interrogating you to find out what you liked,” Bucky said, a smile pulling at his lips. “She wanted to know what part of the holiday was important to you.”

“Yeah,” Steve said with a faint grimace as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I can see it now, but then…it was hard to realize…she never went to church when she was a kid, she didn’t know who the saints were, only half understood why Christmas was celebrated at all. The commercialization she understood and she loved the parades…”

“As you can imagine, holidays weren’t a big thing in the Red Room…when I was there, they acknowledged the new year, and it was a day where they were all told they were a year older and they would move on to their next year of studies. Occasionally they were given a free hour if it meant moving dormitories for the younger girls to the older rooms.”

Cold. Soulless. Bleak place.

“She loves the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” Steve said, smiling. “I didn’t see her my first Thanksgiving out, but the second one…we were on a mission. We’d been running ragged, and we got back…bruised to hell, covered in mud, and crap, and just…smelling awful. We split up at the showers, and when I came out she was waiting for me, foot tapping impatiently and then she dragged me back to my place—granted, I didn’t even realize what day it was, but we made it just in time for it to start airing on TV.”

Steve actually looked a little baffled.

“She didn’t even wait for me to unlock the door, she had her picks out and the lock open before I could get my keys out of my pocket. Then she deactivated my alarm and did…huh…she turned off the surveillance. That was the code she entered. Dammit…” He shook his head in wonder.

“Anyway, she kicks off her shoes, grabs a blanket and tells me I should turn up the heat it was freezing in there and climbed onto the sofa and wrapped up to watch the parade. I must have stood there for five minutes when she said, was I going to get the heat on and come sit down or just stand there in the doorway like an idiot…”
Bucky laughed. He could picture it. “She kind of takes over, doesn’t she?”

“Well…she does. Okay…” Steve said, still smiling, and maybe the shadows around his eyes were a little lighter. Another week here would be good for Stevie, too. They had a lot of things to sort out, not the least of which was her health, his mental health, and probably Bucky’s and Steve’s as well. Then there was their relationship; he and Steve had already discussed tentatively what it would be like to share her.

They’d teased her with the possibility—well Bucky had and Steve had played right along. His lack of stuttering embarrassment a testament to the fact their relationship had to have deepened, maybe at Niagara Falls.

Bucky ignored the twinge of that. They were allowed to make their own memories.

“It’s almost six…” He said. “Wake Natalia, and I’ll go down and start the breakfast?”

Steve nodded, then passed the nearly empty thermos over for him to take downstairs. “You think we’re ever really going to sleep again?” The need for reassurance echoed in that statement.

“Yes, Stevie, I do. But we can afford a few sleepless nights to chase her demons away.” After they defeated hers, they could take on their own.

Once back in the room, Bucky made his way silently to the bedroom door and unlocked it before slipping out. There was a quiet turn of the lock behind him and he nodded to himself. Stevie resisted the idea initially, but he couldn’t disagree it allowed both of them a measure of peace to know there was one more obstacle between Nat and the rest of the world.

Downstairs, he cleaned out the thermos and put it away before getting the coffee started. Then he secured his gun in a high cupboard. He’d be able to reach it easily, and the kids didn’t need to see him armed. While his socialization skills might be rusty, he hadn’t been born in the back of a bus and he certainly hadn’t been born yesterday.

He pulled out eggs from the fridge, and went for the pancake mix, then set bread out for those who wanted toast. He considered the potatoes. Natalia loved fried potatoes, so he set a few out and got to work. He had the batter mixed, the potatoes chopped and the eggs whipped and ready for scrambled eggs—which his younger sisters had preferred when they could afford eggs—and the syrup, jam and butter set out.

Clint was the first one to make his way into the room, he moved with slow assurance carrying Nate against one hip while using his cane to balance his bad leg. “Coffee?”

Bucky flipped the switch on the coffee maker. There was a French press, an espresso machine, and a single cup maker in the kitchen. He was fine with the regular straight up brewed joe.

Nate said, “Hi.” And Bucky cast a glance at him as Clint got him settled into a buckled booster seat. The one thing Stark didn’t have was a high chair—go figure—but they’d rigged something to work.

“Morning little man,” Bucky said to him, and held out his metal hand. Nate put his palm to it in a mimed high five they’d practiced the day before. “Does he do scrambled eggs?”

“Yeah, he likes them. We can start with toast.” Clint took over manning the toaster while Bucky got the first pan of scrambled eggs made up. He had the potatoes frying and the first stack of pancakes ready when Laura arrived Lila and Cooper trundling along sleepily next to her.
Clint took one look at his wife and handed her aspirin, a bottle of water, and went to pour her coffee. Bucky hid a smile, and then paused at the young girl staring intently up at him.

“Lila, it’s not polite to stare,” Laura said, sinking into a chair and cradling the coffee before she tossed back three aspirin.

“But he’s not Auntie Nat.”

“No,” Bucky told her agreeably. “I’m not. But I’m the one cooking breakfast, so what can I get for you?”

The eyes narrowed with a hint of skepticism. Arms folded, she canted her head to the side and Bucky schooled his features and met her stare evenly.

“Can you make waffles?”

“I can.”

“Can you make peanut butter chocolate chip waffles?”

“Probably,” he told her. “But I won’t.”

Shock filtered through those eyes. “Why not?”

“Because that’s not a breakfast food. That’s a dessert. I’m making breakfast. So you have one minute to decide missy, or I’m making a plate for you.”

Arms folded, Lila stared up at him like she had a hope in hell of winning this particular argument. Becca could do it much better. And the memory rushed around him like an errant breeze blowing in the backdoor, chasing away the dust and leaving him with a faint smile.

Becca would have liked this little moppet.

Hell, Bucky liked the moppet.

A long suffering sigh, then Lila finally conceded to say, “I will take a waffle please, and maybe some sausage?”

“Lila,” Laura said in a warning tone.

“Please,” Lila tacked on with the most insincere of sincere smiles and rolled her eyes.

“You got it, short stop. Go take a seat.” He pulled out the waffle iron and glanced at Cooper—who was already tearing through a half stack of pancakes like they were going to escape if he slowed down. Nodding to himself, Bucky got the waffle iron out, and heated up so he could make her waffle. Stark had all the toys. It was nice. Grilling the sausage took a few minutes extra. Laura stuck to toast and coffee; Clint helped himself to more eggs after Nate managed to demolish most of his.

Lila waited as patiently as he prepared her waffle, then added sausage to the side and a scoop of butter in the center. When he placed it in front of her, she stared at the waffle then up at him. “Do you make Auntie Nat waffles?”

“When she asks for them,” he told her.

“Waffles are Auntie Nat’s favorite.” She sounded like an authority on the subject.

A huff of breath, but as she said, “Would you make waffles for Auntie Nat when she gets up?”

“How far?”

Then he got a small, triumphant smile. “Okay, I like you.”

“Good to know,” he told her. “Haven’t decided on you yet.” Then he winked and went back to start on the next round of pancakes.

That earned him a shocked look and Clint chuckled softly. Before he could say anything though, Steve and Natalia made it downstairs. Lila would have bounced out of her chair, but Clint motioned her back to her food. Natalia drifted to her, and pressed a kiss to her forehead, then Cooper’s before she scooped up Nate to clean him up.

Plates stacked, Bucky brought her a plate, coffee, and OJ while Steve got his own and Clint went back to finish off the eggs. Bucky offered Laura more toast, but she shook her head and hugged her coffee. Natalia gave her a small smile as she settled into her seat, with Nate in her lap and grinned at the waffle. She shared both her waffle and fried potatoes with Nate.

There was more color in Natalia’s cheeks and Steve’s for that matter. When he caught Steve’s eye, there was just the faintest red to his ears and Bucky had to hide a chuckle behind his coffee. When the kids were done eating, they dragged Natalia off with them to get ready to go and Steve went to give Clint a hand loading what little they’d brought with them on the quinjet, and probably to let him know they were going to be staying longer.

They needed to let Stark know, too. Probably be polite to ask since they were staying on his charity. Though the man had houses everywhere it seemed, it wasn’t a bad goal to aspire to if Bucky thought about it.

He was clearing away the debris, rinsing the plates off and stacking them in the dishwasher.

“I should be helping with that,” Laura commented. At least she didn’t look quite so hung over now and had added water to the rotation with her coffee.

“You’re fine,” Bucky told her over his shoulder. “Just going to load the dishwasher. Natalia has been schooling me on the fact I don’t have to hand wash everything.”

“Has to be a little weird for you,” Laura commented carefully. “You weren’t under the ice like Steve but you haven’t really been part of the world either.”

“It’s not so bad,” he told her with a little shrug. “I always liked science fiction…and we’re a step ahead of jet packs, we have whole iron suits. So a machine that will do the dishes for me fits right in—though I suppose I expected there to be more robots.” Then again after meeting Vision, he was kind of glad that there weren’t robots everywhere.

Natalia told him he needed to watch something with Cylons if he wanted to see how bad robots could go. Maybe they could watch that this week.

It was her turn to chuckle. “I don’t know that I’d have one even if they were common.” There was something in her voice, so he set the last dish into the machine, and then closed it before facing her as he wiped down the counter. The expression she wore was thoughtful, and considering. “You love Nat, don’t you?”
The direct question surprised him probably more than it should have. Then again, this woman was married to Natalia’s best friend however their relationship was at the moment, and she obviously cared about Natalia. That much had been obvious from her arrival. Taking care of her and her children were part of Natalia’s contingencies, and while he hadn’t tried to listen to their conversation the night before, he hadn’t missed the well of genuine affection between them.

“Yes,” he told her, simply and directly.

“Good.” She smiled. “She deserves the best.”

“We agree on that subject,” he told her solemnly. Then he had to wonder, had she had this conversation with Steve? Or was he getting it first? If he was getting it first, how hard would it be to be in position to see this woman stare Steve down?

“I’m glad to hear it.” She didn’t flinch as she studied him. “Nat is part of my family, and the last time I met a guy she liked—he hurt her.” That gave him a pause. “Don’t do it.”

There was no threat, no promise of violence or other bodily injury, just a clear, crisp statement. “I’ll never hurt Natalia again if I can help it,” he promised.

“Excellent, because poisoning is not a skill I want to have to learn.” The gleam in her eyes said it was very much not a joke, but the corner of his mouth twitched anyway.

Message received. “I think we would all be happier if you didn’t.”

“Wonderful,” Laura said, then slid off her chair after finishing her glass of water. “Now I have to go chase down Captain Rogers. Would you mind terribly running interference with Clint for me?”

Bucky grinned. “I don’t mind at all, ma’am.”

Ten minutes later, Bucky sent Clint off to retrieve his children from where Natalia was sitting with them on the verandah. She grinned at Clint as he settled on the step next to her and bumped her shoulder. One eye on Natalia, Bucky kept the other firmly on where Laura cornered Steve by the quinjet.

The disbelief in his expression entertained the hell out of him. But Laura earned the disapproving frown and the folded arms in return. Good for Stevie, Bucky grinned to himself then pushed away to walk over to where Natalia and Clint were saying goodbye.

“We’ll see you guys at Thanksgiving, all right?” she was saying to Lila, and the little one had wrapped her arms around Natalia, holding her tightly. Would Mary Elizabeth have been like this? Adoring her mother? Demanding her attention all the time? Or would she have been more like him, trying to charm her mother into paying attention to her?

Who was he kidding? Their child would never have had to fight for Natalia’s attention. She’d been a fantastic mother. When she sang for Lila and Cooper the night before, it catapulted him back in time and he’d needed time to get his reaction under control.

Natalia walked the children toward the quinjet and Clint nudged him. “She’s still really tired.”

“We know,” Bucky told him. “Steve and I are going to keep her here another week.”

“Yeah, that’s what he said,” Clint exhaled, his gaze on her and his family. “Tony and Cho still have no idea what that thing did to her.”
“Stark find a specialist to look at her scans yet?”

Clint shook his head. “There’s one guy he really wants, but he’s being cagey. When I went to get Laura and the kids, Tony said he’d have to go knock on some doors. Hopefully he’ll have something, soon.”

Bucky slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans and nodded. “Here’s hoping. You have a nice family.”

“Thanks.” Clint eyed him. “You good?”

“Been better, but I like your kids…”

“They love their Auntie Nat.” He wore a wry smile. “Sometimes I think they like her more than me.”

“That’s not hard to believe.”

The middle finger response made him grin.

“Fly safe.”

“Yep,” Clint said. “I’m taking them home then it’s back to for more PT.”

Bucky studied him.

“What?”

“Not my place,” he said. Because it wasn’t.

“Spit it out.” Clint narrowed the distance and eyed him.

Meeting his gaze, Bucky said, “You have a family and they love you. Why aren’t you with them?”

He’d kill to have his back. All of them. He was lucky as hell to have a chance with Natalia again, and to have Steve back.

And he’d kill before he let anyone take them from him again.

“It’s complicated.”

“Then uncomplicate it,” Bucky told him. “Time marches forward. You can’t get yesterday back, so make the most of today, then be there for tomorrow.”

Expression tightening, Clint said nothing, then he looked at the jet where Steve disembarking with Natalia. The kids were on board as was his wife. “It’s not that easy…”

“Nothing worth it ever is,” Bucky told him. “But they’re right there. A dream you can make a reality…so work for it.”

Clint nodded slightly, then held out his hand. Bucky grasped it. “Since we’re offering the nickel advice… figure out a way to forgive her for taking that jump.”

He didn’t have anything to forgive.

But the archer held his hand a beat longer and locked his gaze on him. “You and Steve both…” you
were right there. It’s fucking haunting Stark, and neither of you can take your eyes off her for more than a minute at a time. Forgive her. So you can heal, too. Think about it.”

Then he was moving away and shaking Steve’s hand and giving Natalia a kiss before he moved aboard the quinjet. Bucky moved to walk over and join Steve and Natalia as the quinjet lifted off. She leaned against Steve, despite the earlier color in her cheeks and the hint of a smile on her face—she still appeared too pale.

Was he angry with her?

She’d gone to save Parker. If it had been him, he’d have gone after the kid, too. But they’d arrived in time to see her cut the webbing, and to drop. There hadn’t been any fear on her face or even anger. Just calm acceptance. She’d fired her grappling hook, and though he’d expected her to pull Parker out and sail upward with the line—she hadn’t done that.

Natalia’s green-eyed gaze met his.

No, she’d locked it onto Parker’s wrist and then let the sludge take her because it let Peter go.

She hadn’t even tried to save herself.

She’d surrendered.

The moment replayed in his dreams every damn time he closed his eyes.

Just like she had on the Amalfi Coast after she looked into his eyes. She’d put down her weapons and let the Soldier take her and hurt her. No fighting back. No fighting to survive.

Quiet. Profound. Surrender.

“Buck?” Steve said with a frown.

Why, he wanted to say. Why, he wanted to demand, had she let him do that? More, he wanted to shake her and order her to never risk herself again. Not for him. Not for anyone. She had to fight… she had to. He didn’t want to exist in a world without her. But he would gain nothing in asking. She didn’t know the answer. They could both guess why. And she’d already told them she had to save Parker, it was why she’d gone into the factory and made the choices she did.

She hadn’t wanted to die. She promised them that. He believed her—that confession had eased him on so many levels, but it didn’t answer what happened before…

Why the hell had she surrendered to him? Why had she let him hurt her that way? Worst of all, there was no guarantee they would ever have those answers. Considering the different things that happened to her—what she had survived. Did he really want her to remember those pieces too?

He sure as fuck hadn’t gotten to cherry pick.

“James?” The rasp of her voice prodded him out of the nightmare.

He dredged up a smile. “Just thinking about what we’re going to do for the rest of the day…”

“Whatever we want…” The hopeful note in her voice helped transform his forced smile into a real grin. He met Steve’s gaze and saw the echo of all his questions and concerns reflected there.

“I like the way you think.” Steve stepped into the breech and Bucky let out a breath as her attention swiveled off of him. He had to get himself locked down. “You wanted to soak for a while after
yesterday, said you were sore earlier?”

She snorted, but said, “If I take a bath, I’ll end up falling asleep in there.”

“That’s okay doll,” Bucky said, equilibrium snapping back into place. “We’d never let you drown.”
Nightmares

Chapter Summary

Confronting dark dreams and hard truths strains their boundaries

Chapter Three

Nightmares

Steve

As promised, they didn’t let Natasha drown, but she did more than fall half-asleep in the tub. The visibility of her ribs worried him, as did the faint jut to her shoulders. He was used to Natasha’s curves, and the sexy slink of her body—but always so fit, warm, and solid. She was almost paper thin, and while he’d always found her light, she seemed painfully so. Even her hip bones jutted out, like someone, or in this case something, had melted away anything extra from her—as if she possessed anything extra in the first place—and left only the fiery core, the barest bones of what made Natasha, Natasha.

Precious.

Fragile.

His.

His and Bucky’s.

In his best friend’s eyes, the same concern mirrored back to him. So they kept her cradled to one or the other, bracing her legs and her shoulders. They soothed her, and when she drifted off. They took care to dry her and slip her into something soft, and then looped his dog tags back around her neck. He hadn’t missed the way she’d curl her hand around them sometimes or the fact she seemed to take comfort in them. While Bucky pulled the blackout curtains to darken the room, Steve settled her in the bed and pulled the sheets over her. When she grumbled, he chuckled and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Go to sleep.”

“We’re on a damn vacation,” she muttered, eyes still closed. “All I’m doing is sleeping.”

“You’re healing,” Bucky told her, rolling onto his side and settling a hand against her abdomen. He’d taken a moment to rub down and dry while Steve got her in bed. “Listen to Stevie and sleep.”

The disgusted scoff pulled a real smile from Steve. The fact she was starting to resist hopefully said she was feeling better and relief washed through him like water draining out of a sieve. He ran a towel over himself to wick away most of the moisture before tossing it into the bathroom.

Lack of regular rest combined with the fact Nat was giving them pushback had him dragging on loose pajama bottoms and a tank before settling next to her. Like her, he didn’t really want to go to sleep. He didn’t want to miss her waking if she needed him, but he hadn’t been this tired…
“Come in…this is Captain Rogers, do you read me?” He braced his hands on the controls. The throttle wasn’t like any he’d seen in the other planes he’d been on and Schmidt had so many damn computers and flashing lights. There were reports spitting out onto the screens around him. Most were in German.

“Captain Rogers,” Jim Morita’s voice crackled out of the radio. “What is your…

“Steve?” Peggy. Tears burned in the back of his eyes. Weakness like he hadn’t felt since before Dr. Erskine injected him with the formula swam through his muscles. “Is that you? Are you all right?”

For a split second, he was back on the car, racing toward the plane and Peggy kissed him. The whole world had slowed, and he’d only been aware of the texture of her lips and the thrum of his own heart. Too soon, he was pulling away, then leaping onto the landing gear to get inside.

They had to stop Schmidt.

“Peggy,” he told her. “Schmidt’s dead.” The Commandos were safe. She would be safe. Hydra would finally fall.

“What about the plane?” Crisp, calm, and always so collected. The woman never failed to impress him.

He glanced at the controls, and tightened his grip on the steering controls. Ahead of him were clouds, and cold blue skies with icy water below. One of the screens showed him arcing north, but the trajectory would turn soon—and angle straight for New York.

For Brooklyn.

For the people who lived there.

For Bucky’s family.

“That’s a little tougher to explain.”

“Give me your coordinates,” she commanded him briskly. “I’ll find you a safe landing site.”

Even with the various numbers and readouts, the only idea he had was the green lines crisscrossing a screen with the hint of the land masses. That could be anywhere…Canada even. Not enough information, and reference points to make a guess. “There’s not going to be a safe landing.” By the time they reached anything resembling that, he would be too close to population centers. Peggy had no idea how many bombs were aboard. He wouldn’t put it past Schmidt to wire them for automatic detonation. “But I can try and force it down.”

The moment the words slipped his lips, he realized he’d already committed to the plan. He could prevent a massive attack on New York; he could end this last threat of Hydra once and for all.

Schmidt was dead.

Soon Hydra would be go too.

“I’ll get Howard on the line,” Peggy’s voice, though distorted by the radio, resounded with command. She didn’t want any argument from him. “He’ll know what to do.”

“There’s not enough time,” he told her. Even if she got Howard on, he would be at the curve in the
trajectory soon, and even checking flight speed, and adjusting the commands, the ship wasn’t slowing. It was entirely possible the controls had frozen or been damaged in the fight with Schmidt. “This thing’s moving too fast and it’s heading for New York.” He couldn’t let that happen.

He wouldn’t.

“I gotta put her in the water.”

“Please don’t do this,” she begged. “We have time. We can work it out.”

No. They really didn’t. Time had run out the moment he got aboard. “Right now, I’m in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer, a lot of people are gonna die.” He couldn’t let that happen. All that stood between New York and her destructions was Steve. He would be damned if he would be selfish with their lives. “Peggy, this is my choice.”

One last flip of the switches to shut down the two auxiliary engines. Nothing. No. There was no choice. He pushed forward on the throttle. Sliding the rest of the flaps into place. The ship fought him, the autopilot wanting to follow its course, but Steve could apply a hell of a lot more pressure and even though it bucked against his direction, the nose angled downward.

“Peggy?” Fuck, I’m so sorry.

“I’m here.” Tears coated the words. He’d made Peggy cry. Dammit, he…had to fix that. He couldn’t let her last memory be tear-filled.

“I’m gonna need a rain check on that dance,” he forced brightness into his voice. His mother would offer him those warm, real smiles as she told him he would get better. He was her powerful and strong angel, someday he would understand. Borrowing his mother’s confidence, he chased away the pain and injected it with the kind of bravado he’d never been able to pull off.

“All right,” she whispered, her words still wet. “A week, next Saturday, at the Stork Club.”

A real grin pulled at his lips. He had a date. An honest to God date. Look at him go. “You got it.”

“Eight o’clock on the dot. Don’t you dare be late. Understood?”

He wouldn’t lie to her, not even now. “You know,” he said with a hint of real laughter. The water was getting closer. The sun glaring off the gray water threatening to blind him. “I still don’t know how to dance.”

“I’ll show you how,” she said, and for a moment, just one sweet suspended moment, a smile underscored her words. There it was. Peggy’s smile was the most beautiful thing in the world. “Just be there.”

His hands began to shake along with the rest of the plane. The acceleration combined with gravity was jarring. “We’ll have the band play somethin’ slow.” He could almost see it. Peggy in her red dress, her hair all pin curls and her lips ruby and gleaming. Best looking dame in the whole place, and she’d be waiting for him—no, he would be there when she walked in the door. Never keep his best girl waiting. Grinning at the image, he said “I’d hate to step on your—”

The water was just there and the nose cracked against the first wave and Steve gritted his teeth at the blow. It slammed his head against the seat and then the glass gave way, and the water rushed in. It slammed into him, the pressure forcing him back into the seat and he fought it. But the combination of acceleration, mass, and the angle at which he hit the water turned the interior into
a vacuum, and he could barely think much less move against the force of the water. The cold surrounded him like a fist, and then he was blowing backward and he hit the bulkhead.

Darkness.

Then the water slammed into him again, and he was drowning.

The cold swarmed over him, and he froze in place, eyes open to stare at the gray cradle of his waterlogged tomb.

Darkness.

His eyes crusted as he tried to open them. A steel band squeezed his chest. The air tasted like ice on his lips. The world was frosted over. Then he couldn’t breathe, and his eyes closed.

Darkness.

The cold held him in a vise, nothing moved, even as he became aware of his surroundings. Icy. Frozen.

Was this his hell?

The ice?

“Bucky!” His hand outstretched forever to his best friend, falling into the cold and snow—left behind.

Darkness.

“I have to put her in the water...”

Darkness.

“Bucky!”

Darkness.

“Oh my God...this guy’s alive!”

Darkness.

Natasha falling into the sludge, arms crossed to keep them in front of her, then letting Parker fly up while she vanished inside of it.

Darkness.

“I got her!” Tony’s words flooding warmth through his system. Racing to her.

So cold.

Her skin was like ice.

Darkness.

Stillness. He couldn’t breathe.

“Bucky!”
“I gotta put her in the water!”

“I found her!”

Darkness.

“Steve!” A fist closed on his, the force of it sending pain up his arm and his eyes snapped open to find Bucky pinning him, his fist clenched in Bucky’s left hand. The metal rifled, shifting as he exerted force to keep him still. Steve sucked in breath, his gaze fixed on Bucky’s. The air wasn’t—cold, he wasn’t sucking in ice, and Bucky was right there. An arm braced against his chest holding him still, the other gripping his fist. Pinned.

The weight of him was real. The weight of Bucky, not the ice, held him down.

Then fingers feathered a brush down his cheek, and he jerked his head to the side. Natasha stared at him, her green eyes wide, the pupils blown huge in the dim room. Natasha.

Angel.

Alive.

Warm.

All the fight went out of him and he sagged back against the pillows. Bucky loosened his hold on him and lowered his hand. Steve’s palm landed on Natasha’s leg and he smoothed his fingers against the soft skin. Then she was curling against him.

“Steve, you’re shaking.” She pressed her lips to his ear and tightened her grip. Bucky hugged him from the other side. He was so damn cold. The weight of Bucky’s arm holding him down was gone, but the illusion of it remained.

“Breathe, Stevie,” Bucky told him. “In for four, hold for four, out for four.” The rhythmic words accompanied by the light beat of his palm against Steve’s chest took him back decades, and his breath escaped him in a huff of laughter that might have edged on tears as he tried to get his racing pulse under control.

“It wasn’t an asthma attack, Buck,” he managed to wheeze out.

The smirk on Bucky’s face expanded to a grin. “Did you hear yourself just now?”

Another laugh escaped him and he snaked his arm around Natasha and pulled her closer. She pressed her face against his throat, and the warmth of her breath on his skin banished the last vestiges of chill encasing him. “Just a bad dream.”

“Yeah,” Bucky drawled slowly. “Natalia and I figured that part out.”

Steve frowned, then shifted. Bucky gave him some space and Steve looked over Nat, Bucky had his fist…

“You were flailing,” Nat told him, meeting his gaze evenly. “Punching straight up. You didn’t lay a finger on me.”

Relieved, he sagged back. “Fuck.”

“Language.” The lighthearted smirk in Bucky’s voice pulled another snort from Steve, and he shoved his best friend off the bed. “Oof.”
Still, he wrapped his arms around Nat and held onto her. He didn’t have to close his eyes to imagine the ice, being locked down. Unable to move.

“C’mon…” Nat soothed him, rubbing her hand in a slow circle against his chest. “You’re safe.”

“I wasn’t in danger before,” he admitted, then shook his head. He shouldn’t say anything. She had enough issues.

“Okay,” she accepted his answer evenly. Too easily, which meant she hadn’t accepted it at all. Bucky popped up to sit, his expression intent on both of them. “What were you dreaming about?”

“Did I say anything?” He didn’t want to answer the question, but…

“My name,” Bucky told him, meeting his gaze. There were no questions in Bucky’s eyes. “You were screaming my name… Train?”

A single nod.

Was that all he said?

“You said you were going to put her in the water,” Natasha whispered, her voice quiet and calm. “Before you called out for James, you said you were putting her in the water. That was after the cube sent Schmidt away, wasn’t it?”

How much had that alien thing shown her? She’d described seeing him on the Valkyrie…but he hadn’t even known Natasha then. She was alive, sure—she’d been all of fifteen and still trapped in the hell of the Red Room. And Bucky? He’d been somewhere, being tortured and put back together by Hydra or Hydra inside the Red Room or some other vicious combination.

“Yes,” he admitted slowly, then swallowed. Parched, his throat ached and he shifted against the bed. He didn’t want to let her go, but lying there, even with Bucky and Natasha to bracket him was too much like being trapped under the heavy ledge of ice—aware of it and unable to move. The scrabble of panic crawled through his muscles, and he fought against squeezing Natasha too tight or shoving Bucky farther away. Neither of then were the problem. Then Natasha eeled out of his arms, sitting up on her knees to give him space and Steve pushed back and up until his back rested against the headboard and his arms were stretched over his upraised knees.

The shudder working its way up his spine couldn’t be allowed to get out. He didn’t want her to see him trembling, not again. Focusing on his breathing, he stared at the water bottle Bucky held out to him silently. Finally, when Bucky wouldn’t lower it, Steve reached to grasp it but Bucky didn’t let it go.

“My last nightmare was Natalia falling into the sludge.” The comment arrested him. “But it kept overlaying the one of me putting her in the chair when I recaptured her at Amalfi. The same acceptance was on her face.” His gaze never wavered from Steve’s. “I can’t escape it, so I don’t sleep. That’s kept me awake since we got here.”

With the last words, he released the bottle and Steve twisted off the cap. Natasha had gone perfectly still next to them, but like Bucky, Steve didn’t glance at her. The last thing he wanted was for her to blame herself in anyway. He didn’t blame her—he didn’t think.

“I’m on the plane… Schmidt’s gone. The Tesseract is gone,” he said the words slowly, measuring each one as if it would be the wrong piece to pull out and dislodge the careful, yet fragile balance keeping him in one whole. “I can’t change the course. I don’t know what all the equipment does, but I can read the tracking and the radar. We’re in the last arch before the trajectory will shift for
New York. There are dozens upon dozens of smaller airships and bombs all over the Valkyrie. She doesn’t need to launch a single man, because the Tesseract based weapons onboard will obliterate the city if we hit it. I can’t shift the flight, I can’t change the course…all I can do is put her in the water and hope it’s enough to smother the destruction.”

He lifted the bottle to his lips and took a series of long swallows until he’d drained it.

“I know what it means, so I tell Peggy I need a rain check, and when she orders me to meet her, I change the subject a little. Gonna be the last time I talk to her, don’t want it to be a lie…” His heart was a dead weight in his chest. Finally his gaze tracked to Nat’s, those green eyes enfold him. “I force the plane down, take the hit when it goes in the water, and then the water is everywhere, it’s pinning me to the hull and I can’t breathe…and then it’s dark. When I open my eyes again, I’m still there, but so much colder. Then it’s dark again. Over and over…until I wake and I can’t look past the ice, and I can’t stay awake…it’s hell. That’s my hell…until it changes and it’s Bucky falling off the train, over and over like on some endless loop.”

A tear tracked down down her cheek, and he lifted a hand to cup her face before wiping the tear away.

“And then it’s you—falling into that sludge.”

He could almost feel Bucky’s nod.

“You’re falling and it closes over you…and there’s not a damn thing I can do…but when Tony finally tracked you down…you were so cold Nat, even your lips were blue…”

“And I see you back in that chair as Leonid’s about to throw the switch,” Bucky filled in. “And I’m trapped in the cryo tube, aware that my whole world just froze even before my body did and I have no idea why.”

Steve traced the line of her cheek with his thumb. “And I’m back in the ice, the bands holding me still and I can’t move, can’t breathe… and I can’t wake up. You’re frozen…Bucky’s falling…and I’m trapped.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, the sweet husky rasp of her voice a balm to his senses. He could still look in her eyes, hear her voice, touch her skin, watch her breathe, and taste her kisses. She was still alive.

“I know.” He gave her a small smile, then glided his knuckles down her cheek to her shoulder, then her arm, until he reached her hand. “I’m not mad at you.”

“I am,” Bucky admitted, and Steve frowned at him. Nat didn’t glare or get ruffled; instead, she turned her attention to Bucky and waited. “I’ve been angry since I realized you gave yourself up, but I didn’t…I didn’t know it until I saw you disappearing into that sludge. I know…all the reasons why you did what you did. I know…you would make the same choice again. You wouldn’t hesitate.”

The cold icy fist that Steve had thought released him closed its grip on him again.

“But I hate it Natalia. You aren’t invincible.” The expression on his face reminded Steve of the Soldier. His voice—he wasn’t yelling or shouting, but the cool, even intensity in his words landed every syllable. “You can’t be so careless with your life. Do you get that? You have to survive…I don’t know what the hell I’d do if you weren’t here anymore.”

The very idea made Steve sick. The few weeks she’d been absent from his side because he’d been a damn fool, and left her behind—they’d cut him deep. Glancing at her, he caught her gaze when she turned those unfathomable green eyes on him. “You’re my home, Angel. I just found you—we
just found you. Buck’s right, I need you to not give up like that, I need you to fight.”

She bowed her head, and her curls tumbled down to hide her face. Keeping her hand in his, he waited her out, and he wasn’t alone. Bucky hadn’t stopped staring at her. “I wish…I wish you hadn’t seen it. I’m sorry it haunts you.” But she wasn’t sorry for her choice, and Steve really couldn’t ask her to be, “I don’t want you to…” She made a face, then sucked her upper lip between her teeth before lifting curtain on her eyes so they could see the anguish in them.

It hit him like a body blow. But she squeezed his fingers tight and Steve wasn’t quite sure which of them was the lifeline at the moment. Bucky had a hand on each of them. Steve hadn’t even realized it until Buck’s grip tightened on his biceps pulling him firmly into the present.

“My dreams change...sometimes I’m still in the Red Room, and I’m dancing…I can’t stop. If I stop, I’ll die. They shot one of the girls once, when she burst into tears because she couldn’t keep going. They shot her in front of us and we had to keep dancing.” The lack of diffidence in the words was nearly as horrifying as the story. The casual recitation of the dreadful event worse still. “Sometimes I’m the one pulling the trigger…other times it’s a neck I snap…or a neck I don’t and I turn around and they are the one who is pointing a gun at me.” A little lift to her shoulders. “There are others...there’s not getting in the way in time to keep James from shooting you and Sam in the car. There’s being triggered…and turning on all of you. There’s falling through space...and I can see the whole universe around me and I know it’s going to hurt, but if I can make it past the pain—maybe I get to go home.” Then she focused on them. “There’s losing both of you...because I’m not fast enough, not smart enough...not enough to figure it out before they come for you.”

She didn’t have to tell them how that must make her feel. Steve couldn’t shake the awfulness of it all.

“Angel…”

With a slow shake of her head, she lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his palm. “I made a choice and you’re paying for that choice. I don’t … you shouldn’t have to pay for my choices.”

“Bullshit,” Bucky threw out there like a live grenade. “We pay for each other’s choices because we want to...you said you didn’t want to die, right?”

“No...I promise...I wanted to make it back...to be here with you.” She looked from Bucky to him, and then back again. Steve didn’t doubt it. While she could be creative with the truth, she wasn’t lying.

Tipping his head back to rest against the headboard, he gave her fingers another squeeze. “You’re here.”

She looked like hell, and so beautiful it made him ache, all in the same breath.

“So are you,” she told him. “No more ice, Steve...never again.”

He wanted to believe her.

“She’s right Punk, you’ve got us in your corner.” Bucky chuckled. “And we have a stubborn as hell super soldier in ours...”

Tilting her head, Natasha said, “I’m pretty sure we can handle anything that comes for us.”

Anything. Except... He pushed the thought away. “Enough about bad dreams.” Lingering nightmares could discolor everything. They were here to give Natasha time to heal, not to make her
“worry.

“No,” she told him archly and he frowned.

“Excuse me?”

“I said no,” she rose up on her knees and after giving his hand another squeeze, slipped off the bed to throw open the blackout curtains. The sunlight bathed her in a golden glow, and when she faced them again, it highlighted the red in her hair and for a moment—he could almost forget how much saving that damn sludge had cost her. “I’ve let you both coddle me…”

When he opened his mouth to say something she held up a finger. Bucky folded his arms, his expression blank but Steve recognized the mutiny in his posture.

“I’ve let you both coddle me, because I needed it.” That was an admission for her. “And…I almost liked it…well some of the time.” The corner of her mouth quirked upward. “But…it can’t be everything for just one of us, that isn’t how this works. Partners, remember?”

With her hands on her hips and her bare legs set slightly apart, she looked ready for a fight. All at once, the unease holding him captive for days crumbled. “Partners also know when to sit each other down,” Steve told her evenly. “You’re exhausted, you’ve lost weight, you have zero stamina, and you’re hurting…physically and emotionally.”

“I might be compromised,” she admitted. “But so are you.” When Bucky straightened, she focused on him. “And so are you…”

“Never said I wasn’t doll, but we’re not physically beaten to hell. Not to mention there are two of us and one of you.”

She pursed her lips and Steve didn’t smile. “Are you suggesting I can’t take you both?”

“Trust me, at full strength—you’d kick both of our asses,” Steve had no trouble admitting it. “But currently? No.” Not when he could see her silhouette clearly through the gray shirt. “Get back in shape and we’ll revisit the issue.”

Natasha spread her hands. “Fine. But that doesn’t mean I can’t be emotionally supportive…”

Shoving off the bed, Steve closed the distance and slid his arms around her. “Trust me, you being here Angel is all the emotional support I could ask for.” When she twined her arms around his neck, he dipped his head and kissed her gently. She sighed against his mouth, and when she nibbled against his lower lip, he lifted his head.

He and Buck had batted a couple of ideas back and forth about taking her to bed, and keeping her there. Turning, he caught Buck’s eye, but his best friend shook his head slowly. No, not yet. She wasn’t ready no matter how much she pretended otherwise. Bucky warned him, and Steve had seen it himself, Natasha could and would push past her weaknesses even if it hurt her in the end. They could tease her, and maybe rile her up some, but not yet. In this area, he would trust Bucky’s judgment. He had the experience, and the very last thing either of them wanted was to hurt her. Slipping an arm under her legs, he scooped her up.

“Sunbathing or movie watching?”

Disappointment glittered in her eyes. “I was thinking gym…or maybe something more interesting for a workout.”
Buck closed the distance between them, and he caught the back of her neck and turned her face to him. The slow, lingering kiss he left on her lips silenced her. Steve had gotten used to having Bucky right there on the other side of her in the bed. Having him at hand to help looking after her, caring for her, and he chuckled softly as Bucky deepened the kiss and she groaned. She still clung to Steve, but she slipped one hand into Buck’s hair.

When Buck came up for air, Steve swooped in and nuzzled her lips apart, this time he dipped his tongue to stroke hers, and swallowed her low groan. The soft noises fascinated him. Even more, he had to admit, watching her kiss Buck turned him on and that was an aspect of him he’d never he would experience. Nat wasn’t the first woman he’d ever seen Bucky kiss… Drawing back, he drank in her heavy eyes and kiss-swollen lips and face flushed with color. But damn if she wasn’t the best woman he’d kissed.

Kissing her awake earlier before the Bartons left had been a real pleasure, but the longer they stood there, the more he reconsidered the fact she still need more rest. Neither he nor Bucky were willing to risk her at the moment, not when she seemed so fragile.

“No gym,” Bucky told her, tracking a finger down her cheek. “You’ve been enjoying yourself in the sun, haven’t you?” She’d even gotten a bit of a tan over the last few days. Steve had noticed his arms were darker, and his hair lighter. That was running every day—which he hadn’t done today but didn’t actually care. He wasn’t leaving them.

Nat tilted her head back. “You’re so mean to me.”

Steve laughed. “You like being coddled, remember?”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “You weren’t supposed to remember that part.”

“Never forgetting it, Angel.” Not when she wouldn’t likely let them do it regularly.

“Yeah, have to take it where we can get it.”

“Fine…movies, please. We can continue your decades of catch up.”

That sounded like a plan to him.

“That is if I really can’t convince you guys…”

“No, Natalia.” Bucky said bluntly. “We are not saying no forever. Just no for now…”

Steve set her down when she wiggled, and she smacked a hand against Bucky’s chest. “Mean.”

“I look at it as motivator for you to keep behaving.” He winked at her, and she stuck out her tongue, then tilted her head to look at Steve hopefully.

Burying a smile, Steve chuckled. “I’m with Bucky on this. Making out yes, making love no.”

“Party pooper,” she said, but she couldn’t quite hide her own smirk. Bumping her hip to his she said, “You’re lucky I like you.”

“You’re right,” he told her, amused as she sauntered across the room to grab some shorts and a tank top before disappearing into the bathroom. When the door closed, his smile vanished and he met Bucky’s concerned gaze. “I’m really okay.”

“I don’t believe you,” Bucky said. “But I’m willing to let you call the shots for now…you’re
hurting Stevie. I don’t like it.”

That alone would have been enough to buoy his mood, but the fact he’d just been kissing Natasha lifted him even higher. While she was up for pushing at them, she was still letting them look after her and that was everything.

“I know pal,” Steve patted him on the shoulder before he walked over to grab make the bed. “And I appreciate it…”

He wasn’t frozen in the ice anymore.

The door to the bathroom opened and Natasha peered at them as she brushed her teeth. Bucky burst out laughing at the faces she made and Steve grinned. Playful. Cheeks flushed. Eyes gleaming.

The Barton visit had definitely been worth the extra tired.

Or maybe it was just the three of them having time to just be.

“You know…maybe we do hit the gym today,” he said considering and her eyes lit up higher. “Don’t get any ideas, Romanoff. Your gorgeous butt is staying on the bench…but Buck and I can spar, and you can tell us what we’re doing wrong.”

Her nose wrinkled, but Bucky snorted. “I’m the one who trained her remember?”

To which she replied with a middle finger.

Laughing, Steve elbowed Bucky. “And she trained me. So we’ll see how good you really are, huh?”

The smirk on Bucky’s face preceded a laugh. “Oh, we will. You might be a little sore after.”

“Only a little,” Steve grinned. “I’m not worried about a little.”

After pulling her hair into a ponytail, Nat eyed them both. “Have I ever told you that you’re both adorable?”

By the time they left the room, they were laughing. Putting the gym off for an hour, they went to the kitchen for lunch. There was left over roast Laura had made the night before, and Nat staked a claim on a piece, and ate it with far more gusto than she’d shown her other meals.

After food, Bucky set up the movies on the screen in the cinema room for later—Tony had an entire suite set up just to watch movies with huge, oversized chairs and a big screen, and perfect darkness. It was both awesome and a little overwhelming. Natasha didn’t make much of it though Bucky, like him, tended to be more circumspect about their gawking.

The sparring actually helped more than he could have imagined. He and Bucky started off slow, testing each other’s defenses, then picked up speed. Nat sat on a mat, legs stretched as she watched them tangle. When Steve landed a kick and knocked Bucky right into the ropes, he’d given him a grin before charging.

An hour and a half later, they called time and landed on the mat, sweating, breathless, and laughing. Nat lay forward, elbows propped on the mat with her chin resting against her hands, and her legs in a full splits. It was stretching, not working out, and they’d both checked regularly to make sure she hadn’t moved toward the equipment. The yoga poses and postures pushed it a little, but since she did need the stretches and to rebuild her stamina, he let it slide.
There was a gleam in her eyes though that made Steve grin.

“Well?” Bucky asked. “What’s your assessment Natalia?”

“My assessment is I need you two to approve me getting off the bench so I can come play…that looked like fun.”

That earned her another laugh, and sweaty kiss from Bucky. “Behave while I shower. Stevie, you’re in charge.”

“Hey!” She protested but Bucky was already striding out of the room. He moved with far less stiffness and some of the shadows around him had faded. They were both struggling with Natasha’s risks. They both needed her safer, and Bucky had the added pain of having regained memories Natasha didn’t share anymore…and may never.

Dropping onto the floor next to her, Steve sprawled and put a hand against her leg. “How are you doing?”

“Restless,” she admitted as she straightened. “But I think I should be asking you that.” She gazed down at him, and he savored his view.

“I’m okay, Angel,” he told her. “I promise,” he added when she opened her mouth to protest.

“I worry about you.” The confession caught him off guard. “I have for a long time.”

“Nothing to worry about…I have almost everything I’ve ever wanted right here.”

“Almost?”

“Almost,” he confirmed. “I already screwed up the never hurting you part with Germany and the Accords, but I made up for it, I hope.”

The radiant smile softening her eyes warmed him, but then she sobered, “Tell me when you have nightmares…maybe…maybe talking about them will help.”

“Does it help you?”

She didn’t dismiss the question, but shook her head slowly. “I don’t like talking about them at all. Sometimes I’m so used to having them that when I sleep without one…it’s a rare gift.”

“You’re not alone either, you can talk to me about it. Like earlier,” he said, then stroked his thumb along her calf muscle. It was extended, and clearly defined under his hand. “Did that help?”

“I—” She hesitated, considering the question. “Does it ever feel like there’s so much that you can’t tell? But that doesn’t stop you?”

Every day. “Yes.”

“Then…it helped to tell you, because I feel closer to you. It helps to admit…to admit that I need you. I need you to be alive and well, and safe…and never afraid again.”

“Not a bad goal, but not terribly practical.”

She sighed. “I know. Is it bad that I almost don’t want to leave…”

“Why don’t we stay for another week,” he suggested. They hadn’t told her yet. Hadn’t let her
know they’d already made arrangements. He’d sent a message to Tony and Tony had agreed without hesitation. Promised to update him as soon as he talked to the specialists.

“Can we really be away that long? You have the team…” Concern filtered into her eyes. “We’ve already been here…”

“We can take as long as we need.” As long as she needed. “Tony knows where I am. If there’s an emergency, he can ping me. We’ve got a quinjet here. I’m a couple of hours away at most, at top speeds we can cut that down even more.”

Natasha chewed her lip. The fact she was torn at all confirmed he and Bucky made the right choice. “I’m supposed to be working with…”

“Parker and Wanda will both be fine.” Impatience cut through him on the first and she raised an eyebrow. “Parker can sit down and wait. Patience would be a damn good lesson for him. He’s got some things he can do and he can practice not rushing headlong and impulsively into dangerous situations that then lead others into even more precarious situations to get him out.”

“Steve…”

He raised a hand, palm forward asking her to wait. “When you’re back full time on the team, you can advocate for Parker all you want. When you’re back to full strength, you go right ahead and kick my ass about it. But until then, and you know what, even then, I stand by what I told him. He was reckless, impulsive, and behaved irresponsibly. He felt terrible, sure, but the consequence of his actions nearly got you killed.”

“They were my actions, Steve.”

“Oh, I’m very well aware of that, Angel. But you at least made a call based on decades of experience coupled with a very real awareness of what you were facing, and with the understanding that our comms were down. You recognized the risk and as much as I hate it,” he ground the last two words out before he got a grip and straightened. He needed to not yell at her. “You made the only call you could have in that exact moment.”

And yes, he fucking hated knowing that.

“But Parker? Parker had a job, and orders, he defied both, and went into a hazardous situation with no back up and no confirmation anyone could get to him, which then put you in the position to make that call.” He pinned her with a look, daring her to deny it.

“He’s a kid…”

“He suits up. He doesn’t get to fall back on that excuse.” And he was really surprised she’d make it for him. Even Tony hadn’t made that argument when Steve ripped into the web slinger.

She tilted her head. “I know.” The relenting tugged at his heart. “I just…”

“You care about him,” he said softening. “I know you do. And I know you would have gone in there for any other member of this team—but you like that kid, Nat.” He cupped her chin, and smiled at her. “It doesn’t make you weak to admit it.”

“Hush,” she pushed his hand off her then laughed. “You’re right though.”

“I’m writing today down,” he teased her and she grinned. “You just said I was right.”
“You two are still down here?” Bucky called from the doorway, his expression demanded what the hell from Steve.

“Waiting on you, slowpoke.” He said, then stood and held out a hand to Nat. She let him pull her to her feet. “And discussing hanging out here for another week. What do you think? Nat isn’t ready to go back.”

Buck didn’t miss a beat. “I’m game. Lots of movies, sun, heat, and Natalia…we have plenty to do.”

“Oh, now I’m something to do?”

It was Steve’s turn to laugh at the archness in her tone. He dropped a kiss on her temple as he led her over to Bucky. “You will be, don’t worry. I’m going to shower. Think you two can make popcorn?”

“We can probably swing that.” Bucky hooked an arm around her shoulders and nuzzled her with a kiss of his own.

“Steve?”

“Yeah Angel?”

“I’ll work on Peter…he won’t do that again.”

Oh, he rather doubted that. Peter Parker struck him like a kid who would be the first one throwing himself into the fire, much like the woman teaching him. “Sounds good. But only after you’re better.”

“Yes, sir.” She murmured and he grinned. “Don’t get used to that.”

They walked up together, and he left them to head to the kitchen while he continued upstairs to their suite. With every step his smile faded, but the earlier dread and unease didn’t rush in to fill the gap. She was recovering. It was slow—for her—definitely faster than it would be for anyone else. But he wanted her at one hundred percent yesterday, and he wanted her to have never been through whatever the hell it was the alien did to her, and he wanted confirmation that she was in the clear.

He had none of that, so…another week in paradise. Buck was right, they had plenty to do. Still, he fired off another text as he warmed up the shower and went to pull out some clean clothes.

Steve: Nat on board to stay. Status there?

Tony: Quiet. No calls for the team. Minor incident in Queens.

Queens?

Steve: Parker?

Tony: No. Vulture guy. FBI hasn’t been able to get a bead on him. He raided a depot. Cameras got pictures, but nothing we can use for facial recognition.

Steve: Talk to Parker about him. Nat said he was still investigating.

Tony: This after I told him to leave it alone. Not sure that sends the right message.
Steve laughed, and set the phone down, before ducking into the shower. A quick soap and rinse to get the soap off, he ran his hand over his jaw. The stubble had thickened. He could shave, but after the flicker of disappointment in Nat’s eyes when she’d seen his bare face, he decided against it.

Vulture guy. Guy was harvesting Chitauri tech and either selling it or using it to turn into weapons and selling those. Definitely on the down low and black market angles. But he’d been doing it long enough he evaded detection easily, and quiet enough, he hadn’t even gotten on their radar.

So how the hell had he gotten on the kid’s?

Tony had sent two more messages while he’d showered.

Tony: The problem is if I ask him about it, Pete’s going to think I want him looking into it.

Tony: I have Friday doing some digging for me. Far as I can tell, some of the earliest transactions for this guy appear to go back to 2013, but he would have to have been active earlier for that suit.

Looked like Tony and he were on the same wavelength. Steve considered the information. It made sense.

Steve: His armor. It’s probably from Chitauri scavenging. But didn’t you set up something with SHIELD to handle the clean up?

They hadn’t wanted all that weaponry to fall into civilian hands. Or inadvertently cause accidents or further disasters.

Tony: Bingo. Which brings up another sticky problem...

Why hadn’t SHIELD done something about it? They were in on the clean up of Chitauri tech and weaponry. Of course, that worked out so well Hydra had Loki’s scepter for years to experiment with.

Steve: Talk to Sharon? She would have the trustworthy former SHIELD contacts and at least a rudimentary idea of where they would have been looking if at all. I was doing STRIKE Team stuff and we were out of country more than in.

Tony had been dealing with a terrorist and his own mental health. All areas he’d kept quiet until the attack on his Malibu mansion, and then he’d disappeared. That lack of communication had cost all of them.

Tony: Oh. Better plan. Sharon can look into it. You got it Cap. I’ll dump this mess on her desk.

Tony: How is Natasha?

Steve stared at that message for a long time. He and Tony were still not one hundred percent after the eavesdropping. But they just had too many other irons in the fire to keep haggling over the one. Tony had backed him up when it came to Parker, and he’d been right there looking for Nat, and bringing in every specialist he could. He’d also gotten the investigation and prosecution against Nat dropped. While it hadn’t exonerated her—Steve doubted Tony would let the lack of clearing her lie in the meanwhile—it had meant they didn’t have to keep looking over her shoulder for the law.

Steve: Still rough. Still letting us take care of her. But better after the surprise visit.
**Tony:** Good. Anything you guys need?

**Steve:** Not yet. Thank you.

The messages halted there, and he considered sending another one. Texting was the most personal impersonal method of communicating he’d found in the future. He resented Tony’s spying on them, but he also got it. Bucky wasn’t wrong about his feelings where Nat was concerned. At the same time, could he fault the guy for wanting to do everything he could to protect her?

**Steve:** Tony? Is there anything you need?

He waited.

And waited.

Nearly a full minute passed then…

**Tony:** All good, Cap. See you guys in a week.

Steve blew out a breath. What had he wanted Tony to answer? He wasn’t sure. He checked a few other messages—one from Sam just letting him know all was well. Another from Wanda asking after Nat, and also assuring him all was well.

He sent them both a quick acknowledgement and reminded them to call him if he was needed, then he tabbed back to Tony’s message.

Unfortunately he didn’t have the right words here, so he closed the phone and locked it before sliding it into his pocket. Nat and Buck were waiting for him…and they would be home in a few days…

He’d check in on Tony the next day.

None of them would have gotten through this nightmare without him.
Chapter Summary

Natasha is struggling, but determined

Chapter Four

Wishes

Natasha

Three days after the Bartons’ visit, Natasha snapped awake from a nap to find herself alone in the living room. Someone had drawn the drapes, darkening the room and also tucked a blanket over her. Sitting up slowly, she scrubbed a hand over her face to chase the shadows away. More than ten days since she’d helped the formless go home, and for the first time, as tired as she was she didn’t feel like she was running on empty. On fumes maybe, but not empty. Improvement was improvement, right? The constant sleeping had long since gotten old, almost as old as the kid glove treatment, the coddling, and the kisses without results.

Granted, they both had reason to hold back and being held was very nice, but she wanted more. Needed more to… Rubbing her eyes, she suppressed a shudder. To what? Not think about all the things she didn’t want to think about? How fair was that to either of them? Leaning back against the sofa, she stared at the ceiling. No strength, no endurance, and completely dependent on two men who cared about her but needed her as more than a burden. How the hell was she supposed to watch their back like this?

It’s not watching their backs you’re worried about. The insidious little voice taunted her. They were both capable of taking care of themselves. Sighing, she closed her eyes. Nightmares. Dreams. They were two sides of the same coin.

“Natalia, you were pregnant and we had a daughter.”

They came for us.

I lead them away. I told you to take Mary Elizabeth and run.

Run.

Pregnant.

We had a …

“Stop,” she told herself and twisted on the sofa and glanced beyond it toward the empty kitchen, the dining table, and bar area. The wide-open layout boasted huge doors that could be thrown open on either side to let the sea breeze in. James never left windows open or uncovered if any of them
were going to be sleeping.

She was alone.

The first time she’d woken alone since they flew to the island. The first time she’d woken alone since she woke on the medical floor for that matter. Rising, she folded the blanket and laid it over the back of the sofa. Someone had cleared away the small plate and empty mug of tea from her snack—morning and afternoon naps, early to bed, and sleeping late. She had to be sleeping something like twelve to fifteen hours a day.

“Taking wrong. You will...suffer.”

That was what the formless told her. She’d thought it meant the pain but what if it meant this? She extended her hand and it trembled ever so faintly. What if it meant she would suffer for far longer? Pain she could handle, but this weakness? What...how was she supposed to...

“Stop,” she said aloud for a second time. She wasn’t ready to walk down that road. She’d told Laura she didn’t want to talk about it. She wasn’t ready to talk about it. James never brought it up, and she avoided the mentions since she’d told them she wanted to find her. They’d promised to help, to do whatever they had to…and then... “And then I told the formless I would help.”

Padding barefoot to the kitchen, she retrieved a bottle of water from the fridge. There were three large steaks marinating in something, along with two bowls sectioned vegetables and shredded lettuce for salads. Her stomach rumbled. She checked her wrist, but it was Tony’s bracelet not her watch, and she shifted to check the time on the stove.

It was after four.

Fuck, she’d been asleep for hours.

Again.


A glance outside didn’t reveal Steve or James out by the pool. She checked downstairs in the gym, and the workshop. Upstairs in their suite, and some of the other rooms.

They’d left her alone in the house?

That sent a tingle of apprehension up her spine. Curling her fingers around Steve’s dog tags, she pushed open the doors to the balcony and stepped out onto the long deck extending off the suite. It overlooked the back of the house and down to the beach.

There they were, standing side by side at the water’s edge, their attention on the distance. Steve’s shoulders were a little slumped, and James’ arms were folded. With their backs to her, she only had their body language to try and interpret. That and the fact they’d left her alone suggested something was wrong. Or maybe...

Maybe something was right. Maybe the inherent mistrust her actions had earned her had faded some. Hell, they’d both done nothing but look after her and cater to every need she might have. They fed her, took baths with her, sat with her in the sun, and carried her inside when she fell asleep. Cossetted, coddled and protected—in almost every way, it had been perfect. Except, she didn’t want to be a delicate or fragile princess who existed in the haze of a slow moving dream.

Then again, could she truly fault them? The first day she woke up she’d barely been able to lift a
water glass. A glance at her hands, then down at herself and she had to admit. She’d lost weight. A lot of it. Where there had been clear muscle definition in her arm, it had thinned, softened.

Retreating inside, she stripped out of the sundress she’d been wearing, and out of the panties, then walked into the bathroom and stared at herself critically in the mirror. In truth, she worked out and trained enough she’d rarely had anything spare on her frame. Compact muscle over muscle meant she could handle herself in a fight, and that conditioning was more important than whether or not she had curves or a waist.

But now… There was even less spare on her frame if possible. Her hips jutted more than they should, her breasts were slightly smaller, and her ribs a little more prominent. The definition of her abdominals had blurred. When the body didn’t have fat to harvest, it would break down muscle for energy. They’d been fixing her tons of food, but her appetite had waxed and waned, and in the absence of actually eating, her body had turned on itself.

Enough of that.

She had been eating since Laura and the kids had come. Clint had wrapped an arm around her just before he left and said she needed to take better care of herself. The guys couldn’t do it on their own. Those words had haunted her, chasing themselves in circles through her head. But she got it. Definitely enough.

She needed to eat. She needed to work out. She needed to take back control. No more sleeping her life away. It didn’t escape her that the only reason she’d survived the formless pulling the Tesseract and scepter radiation from her body was the serum. But the serum wasn’t a magic potion, it helped her survive, but she was still wasting away.

No wonder the guys didn’t want to leave her alone and no wonder she couldn’t entice them to more than kisses. They probably thought hugging would break her.

Clenching her fists, she flexed the muscles in her arms. Lip curling in disgust at her own weakness, she shook her head. Yeah. That was going to change. They’d taken an extra week, which gave her five, maybe six days tops before they needed to head back to New York. In her current shape, she’d never make the cut for the team.

Worse, in her current shape, she hadn’t been there for Steve or James. They weren’t sleeping. That much she knew. One of them was always awake. Their nightmares—she’d come face to face with one of Steve’s just a few days earlier and the rawness in his eyes when he first woke left her aching. They definitely deserved better than this shadow of a woman she’d been.

In this shape, she’d never find her daughter. Tears burned in the back of her eyes and she blinked them back furiously.

Enough.

Decided, she made her way to another guest room. Each room had been stocked with different types of clothes in different sizes as though Tony came here on the spur of the moment without packing and with random people who might need clothing…

She paused and snuffle-laughed. Of course Tony did—or had at least. Hell, he’d been outfitting her regularly whenever he felt like it. Shaking her head at herself, she went straight to the small wardrobe that had a selection of women’s swimwear. She’d actually found the razor back blue bathing suit she’d been wearing since she arrived in here.
But she’d seen a different suit that gave her a few ideas. She found it tucked beneath the red and gold one that was a little too meta Tony for her tastes, but damn if she didn’t want to tease him about his showgirl phase. The two-piece black suit made her grin.

“Bye bye bikinis.”

“Yeah, I bet you look terrible in them now.”

James had damn near echoed the sentiment when they’d been in Geneva. So…considering her waif like condition, time to see how terrible. She slipped it on, grateful it didn’t have strings that she had to tie. The bottoms were more t-backed than full and it left her ass somewhat on display.

The top had a halter that went around her neck, but left the back of her shoulders above the back strap bare. It cupped her breasts and lifted them, adding to an illusion of fullness that was definitely missing.

Had she lost a full cup size or what? Fuck, how much energy had the formless harvested from her?

Enough, she hadn’t been herself in days. Normally she avoided hospitals, doctors, and medical advice like the plague. She’d stayed a full day in the medical bay, and left only after Steve and James insisted she go back to Steve’s floor. Then she’d mostly slept there with one or both of them right next to her, and she… she didn’t remember much else. Tony had come to offer them the island, she’d been half awake, and she missed most of the flight.

No wonder the guys were so damn worried about her. It was as though even her capacity to think things through and react to them rationally had gone the way of her energy, radiation, and whatever else it had drained from her.

She left the dog tags in place, but slipped the bracelet off. Tapping it once, she said, “Friday, I’m leaving the bracelet in the room. Still at the house so assuming you can monitor me as needed but I’d prefer the privacy for a bit—and the lack of tan line.”

After snagging a sheer mesh white sarong and tying it so it rested over her hips, she headed downstairs. This was better. More her. Her straw floppy hat was on a hook next to the doors leading to the pool, patio, and steps that went down to the sand. Hat in place, she sauntered out into the breeze. The sun was like a hot kiss on her skin, and she had to smile. The breeze caressed her face, and tugged at her hair even as it pulled on her sarong.

They’d been in paradise for days, and while she’d been aware of it, it was like it had been happening for someone else. Her sense of self had been in pieces for too long, it was long past the time she put herself back together again. At the top of the steps, she stared down at the two men she’d grown so attached to—the two she already knew were more important to her than her own life.

Steve. Proud. Reserved. Yet, shy and earnest and so damn thoughtful he made her heart ache. Most would label him her polar opposite; there was something inescapably honorable about him. He’d never judged her for the dark past she dragged behind—if anything, he seemed more intent on showing her how much he cared about who she was now, rather than who she’d been.

James. Quiet. Intense. Yet, charming and dangerous, and he shared a starring role in her murky, uneven past. Of all of them, he was intimately acquainted with all of her ugly parts—and he remained steadfast at her side despite all the ups and downs, and attempts to kill each other. Their past could be mapped in the scars on their bodies and their minds. While he knew so much more about her now than even she did, he wasn’t remotely put off.
What were the chances she’d find herself involved with two men at very different points in her life, and that they’d be best friends? Granted, she and Steve had been allies, friends, and teammates long before they’d finally become lovers…but it had been there, quietly simmering in the background.

She might as well ask herself what were the chances she’d find herself involved with two men as profoundly affected by Erskine’s formulations as she had been. What mattered was they were together. The three of them had made it this far, and when they’d told her she never had to choose between them it seemed almost too good to be believed, but here they were.

The steps were warm beneath her feet, but she didn’t leave them to walk down on the sand. Steve and James had hardly moved. If they were talking, she couldn’t catch their words over the waves rolling in, the crystal clear water agitated. There’d been a storm some miles off shore or a chain of them. They hadn’t actually hit the island, but the effects of those storms reflected in the agitation of the water.

That could be a metaphor for their lives, and the effect they had on each other even when they didn’t know each other. A storm in one life sent ripples out to others. While she wanted to walk down and join them, she also enjoyed the quiet moment of observation. Steve turned his head slightly, glancing at James, and there was a smile on his face.

Solntce moya. My sun. The laughter rolling up the breeze pulled a smile out of her. He’d pulled her into his orbit, and she had no intention of going anywhere else.

James tilted his head back and his shoulders dropped. She could almost picture his rolling eyes and mouthing of why me?

Zvezda moya. My star. It was what he’d called her a few times. Soldat moya. My soldier fit him, too. But he was so much more than just her soldier. He was her guiding star…the relentless, inescapable tug of recognition and knowing embedded too deeply to be carved away.

Though their former masters had certainly tried.

James reached over and shoved Steve. Still laughing, Steve stumbled sideways a couple of steps and then his whole posture shifted as he half-turned.

Busted.

She met his gaze with a smile that only grew when James pivoted. Surprise rippled through their expressions. Probably because she snuck up on them, then again, James’ gaze dipped to her chest then lower.

So maybe the bikini did exactly what she intended for it to do.

Abandoning the steps, she walked across the warm sand smile in place. “Hey boys,” she said by way of greeting. “Miss me?”

Steve’s slow, broadening smile, warmed her more than the sun did. “You were sleeping for a while.”

“I know,” she said, reaching James’ first and wrapping an arm around him and getting pulled into a tight hug. It was nice to feel his arms around her, the contrasting sensations of metal and skin. “I’m awake now,” she murmured, and he let her go so she could turn right into Steve’s arms and give him a hug. The tentativeness lasted until she had her arms hooked around his neck, then he lifted her right off her feet and gave her a firm squeeze. It whooshed the air out of her lungs, but she could almost feel the relief radiating off of him.
Yes, she was definitely awake.

Steve inhaled deeply, his breath warm against her throat. Curving her hand into his hair, she stroked her fingers against his scalp. “I’m sorry it took me so long to really wake up.”

Fake it ‘til she made it. They needed her better.

A cool hand against her back, then James pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “You needed the rest kotyonok. But you look better…”

“You do,” Steve said, finally lifting his head to study her before slowly setting her back on her feet. “You really do…” Cupping her face, he peered at her eyes.

“Has it really been that bad?” She glanced from him to James, then back.

When Steve hesitated, she grimaced. Then he shared another look with James before he said, “You’ve been wasting away in front of us and we didn’t know what to do…”

“…we have been worried the alien did something else to you,” James admitted. “But Stark and the doctor had run all the tests, and they wanted to get specialists to look at the results. No one has been able to tell us anything.”

“Nothing except you were exhausted, and you showing some nutritional deficiencies. All Helen could prescribe was rest and food…” Steve let her take a step back, but he held onto her hand and James wrapped an arm around her from behind, his chin tucking against her shoulder.

They’d been right there all this time, and yet it felt like the first time she’d really spoken to them without the distant haze. “When…when the formless showed me everything that happened to it, it wanted me to understand it meant no harm. It had never meant harm. Instead, it had been harmed, but it wasn’t malicious or cruel. It wanted to go home, and it knew I had what it needed to get there…somehow. No, I’m not going to pretend to understand the science or the how.”

“But you had to help it, kotyonok, you told us this.” James spread his fingers against her abdomen, resting just above her scar. Tipping her face to rest her cheek against his hair, she gazed at Steve.

Okay so those half-remembered pieces weren’t a dream. “Well good. Because I’ve had my fill of sleeping, waking, and sleeping again.”

“Yeah?” Steve raised an eyebrow. “You think you’re just all better after one last nap?” It wasn’t quite a dare, but he made no pretense of disguising his concern.

“Nope,” she admitted, and almost laughed aloud at his poleaxed expression. “Shocked I’m admitting it?”

“Yes,” he responded without an ounce of shame. Then his eyes narrowed, and the tension around his eyes pulled at her. “Are you really feeling better?”

“More alert,” she promised him, because she didn’t want to lie, even if the lie might be easier to swallow, and then tugged at James to let her go so she could pull away from them and do a little spin. The breeze tugged at her hat, but she held it firmly in place with one hand. “I’m working on being more me. Not one hundred percent yet, but ready to start getting there.”

“No need to rush on our account, doll.” But the lazy smile on James’ face argued the opposite, because it didn’t quite reach his eyes. That they were both so worried was one thing. That they weren’t sleeping well and being plagued by nightmares was another. Her guys were hurting and
she’d been too checked out to fix it.

That stopped now.

“You know what I wish?” She raised her arms, fingers interlaced behind her head. The breeze was amazing, and it whipped at her skirt. Really, after decades spent in some of the coldest places on earth—she couldn’t imagine a better spot to “recover.”

“What?” Steve slid his hands into his pockets. Focused on her, he looked for all the world like he braced for her to offer up some outlandish idea. James had folded his arms, and his expression had blanked carefully.

Well…she had her work cut out for her.

“I wish we could go out dancing…and maybe have drinks at some nice place where we pretend we’re really on a vacation instead of keeping Natasha locked down so she gets better.” She slid them a look, because cards on the table—she got it. She appreciated it, but as she’d reminded Steve the other night… “With my partners. Then I wish that they would remember they aren’t in this alone, and that we can do things together, spend time and have fun… I wish I could wake up early enough to see a sunrise, and go for a run on the beach, and then come back and seduce one or both of you.”

Steve’s stoic expression cracked at the last.

The corner of James’ mouth curved, but it didn’t last.

No they were both prepared to deny whatever idea she offered because they were too damn worried about her breaking. While some part of her resented it, a quieter, and probably far more rational side pointed out they had zero reason to feel any other way.

She’d nearly died on them.

Really died.

No amount of dressing it up could change the fact she’d also accepted she might die no matter how much she hadn’t wanted to and still didn’t want to die.

She had almost died. And in the last ten days, she’d sunk down weighted by her weakness. Living had taken everything she had—everything they all had, and they were the ones carefully putting the pieces of her back together.

So no, she couldn’t be irritated with them. No matter what clicked and scraped away at the fragments of herself tumbling around inside. She built covers from air, so how hard could it be to just be herself?

“Is that all?” Steve asked when she fell quiet. “Because Angel, I’d love to take you dancing but we’re fresh out of night spots and I don’t know that you should be pushing yourself.”

“Tell you what doll, you stay awake for a whole day and we’ll see about dancing with you after dinner tomorrow, how’s that?” James made the offer like it was perfectly reasonable and rebellion roared through her. It was a thrill in her blood to prove him wrong. To prove them both wrong.

No one made those decisions for her.

Not anymore.
She was too well trained to let any of that play out on her face, but she forced herself to look past them at the ocean.

Deep breaths to calm her pulse, and bring her even. She’d done some yoga the morning they sparred. With care, she’d been stretching each day. If she really wanted to dance, the gym had a decent floor. Her toe shoes probably weren’t here, but she could wrap and tape her feet.

If she really wanted to hit the gym, short of them tying her up, they couldn’t stop her. They had only exactly as much power as she allowed them, and she’d been giving them a lot. She’d given them everything. Because they needed it.

And so had she.

“Natalia?” James took a step toward her and she shook her head. He paused, but the energy around he and Steve grew more turbulent. The storm around them closed in. Unlike those raging out beyond the horizon, this far more personal one sharpened the air and put them in the unenviable position as her opposition.

The last thing she truly wanted was a fight, but maybe…

No.

No maybes.

If she laid out her plans to build back up her strength, they would fight. They were both braced for it and they’d clearly firmed up their alliance on the topic of her recovery. Wanted. Needed. Vital. The fact she was all of these things in their estimation would have had her cutting and running months before. It would be better to not be so attached. Safer.

But infinitely lonelier.

She’d been lonely for a long time.

So had they.

“I wish I could do something that would make you both feel better,” she murmured finally. “I wish I could paint away the image of me falling. Because I’m here…and I don’t want to be anywhere else….”

No, she wouldn’t fight them. They didn’t deserve it. Honestly, she’d put on the bikini to show off and entice them, and now all she wanted was to cajole them into playing with her and relaxing enough to take care of themselves.

“We’re fine, doll,” James told her, and he shifted so the breeze stopped pushing his hair into his face. “In fact, we were just standing out here debating whether a hot dog is a sandwich.”

The deadpan delivery would have sold her except for the faint surprise flaring in Steve’s eyes. So, honesty extended only so far. “Really?” She pursed her lips, and turned to start walking along the edge of the water. It didn’t surprise her in the slightest when they fell in with her.

“Absolutely,” James continued. “Steve doesn’t believe it qualifies. It’s a dog, we’ve eaten dogs for years and they come on a bun, but so do hamburgers. A sandwich is usually some kind of meat between two slices of bread.”

“Then by that logic a hot dog can’t be a sandwich, it’s a solid piece of bread forming a V and the
hot dog is tucked into the pocket.” The fact Steve actually countered the one argument with
another made her want to roll her eyes.

Fine, if they didn’t want to tell her whatever they were talking about, they didn’t have to. She had
wanted them to play with her, hadn’t she?

“But,” James pointed out. “A hot dog bun can be separated into two pieces, just most people
don’t.”

“Then it still doesn’t qualify as a sandwich, one piece of bread—not separated—and one link in
between.” Steve glanced down at her, the weight of his regard almost as tangible as the breeze.

“Stevie, you’re missing the point—sandwich is bread and meat, hot dog is bread and meat…”

“Actually,” she pointed out. “A sandwich is two slices of bread with something to fill in the
middle. You could put peanut butter on your hot dog bun and it would still qualify by your logic.”

“Why the hell would you put peanut butter on a hot dog bun?” The absolute outrage in James’
voice was almost enough to make her smile. “That’s like saying rooting for the Yankees is still
rooting for a New York to win.”

It was so tempting to wind him up. “You might as well ask why someone puts pesto and
caramelized onions on hot dogs.” Pivoting she headed back toward the steps, and if there was a
little extra sway in her hips…

Well, they were big boys. They could handle it.

“What frankly disturbing places have you been eating hot dogs?” James was right on her heels, and
she laughed.

“Don’t knock it until you try it,” she said over her shoulder. “I had one once with arugula,
guacamole, garlic aioli, blue cheese, and a fried egg.” She let out a little moan at the thought. But
Steve’s frank choke of disgust drowned it out.

On the stone patio, she walked over toward one of the lounge chairs and stripped off the sarong
before sprawling onto her stomach.

James’ eyes dilated and his mouth tightened, and he stalked over to the basket where the sunscreen
was stored.

Score one for Natasha.

“You’ve never sounded more Russian to me,” Steve told her almost mournfully. “Why would you
do that to a hot dog?”

Bending an arm behind her, she unhooked the strap so she could avoid lines. Steve dragged a chair
over to sit in front of her. “That’s not so bad, there’s a place in New Orleans where they coat the
hot dog in crushed Doritos, deep fry it and cover it in pulled pork and barbecue sauce.” She licked
her lips, and his nostrils flared.

Score two for Natasha.

James bumped her hip lightly as he perched on the edge of her lounge chair and then he was
spreading sunscreen across her shoulders and down her back. “Natalia, those are not hot dogs. A
hot dog has only three toppings—mustard, relish, or onions. You can even mix the mustard and the
relish, but the rest of that is sacrilege.”

“Is that the Church of Brooklyn talking?” Natasha stretched her arms up and laid her face down to hide her smile.

“Is that the…the hell are you talking about doll?” The Brooklyn in his voice just made her smile grow. “That’s a New Yorker talking. You want to tell me about halupki, stroganoff, pirozhki, or blini—I’ll take your word for it, but hot dogs—yeah, no more of that bizarre stuff.”

Still smiling, she said, “I don’t know, I really liked the one with cheese, marinara, basil, and pepperoni.” His hands went completely still on her bare back, peeking up, she found Steve staring at her mouth agape.

“That’s pizza Nat,” he complained. “A slice has pepperoni on it, not a hot dog.”

“Hmm…so if you fold a slice—you know that proper way you tell me to eat it, does that make it a sandwich, too?”

That got her a swat on the ass, and while it only stung a little, she glanced up to find James half-glaring at her, half-trapped in laughter. “Never…and I mean never…even when they wiped me to a drooling mess of a man—would I equate a hot dog with anything but a damn hot dog and no, a slice is never a sandwich.”

Amused, she said, “Good to know.” Then curled her leg up to poke at his arm. “Going to do the rest of me.”

Steve laughed, relief mingling in his voice. “You had me worried for a minute there, Nat.”

“Hmm?”

“That those kinds of hot dogs are real.”

“Oh,” she said sighing as James glided his hands over her ass, smoothing the sunscreen over each cheek and then down the back of her thighs. It was the closest she’d come to getting them to actually touch her like she wouldn’t break. She’d even take the sting of the smack. It wasn’t like it really hurt. “They are real…I’ll take you sometime.”

“You know what Romanoff…”

Something unlocked inside of her and she sighed. “I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

James chuckled. “She’s winding us up, Stevie.”

“And doing a damn good job of it.”

“Is that a complaint, Captain?”

A grunt was his only response and then James was rubbing her feet and she let out a little groan. She sunned her back for about twenty minutes, lulled by James and Steve discussing the changes in baseball, and the fact they would actually get to go and see a game in a few months. There was something just satisfying of listening to them make plans about something so banal. It was about a fun outing, not a mission or house hunting or even the pressure of would James join the team? Or what did they need to survive next? Or what happened to…? She choked that thought off.

It was normal. A kind of normalcy she’d observed in restaurants, on the street, in parks, and even
in theatres—but usually only as something ancillary to her missions. When Clint made plans it was about Little League, or building on some addition to the farm. Every once and a while, he’d enlisted her in picking out something pretty for Laura. Christmas at the farm had been normal, but she hadn’t gone as often as they had invited her.

Normal at SHIELD had been grabbing a shower followed by pulling on a clean uniform before walking into a debriefing with Fury or Hill, then being deployed again. Her apartment in D.C. hadn’t been bare because she didn’t want to decorate it. All told, she’d probably spent less than a month there stretched out over the three years she’d had it.

Hell, normal had become sleeping on Steve’s sofa and dragooning him into movie marathons when they weren’t out ‘sightseeing’ the new century or, more likely, running an op.

Normal at Avengers Tower had been breakfast with the team, usually full of bickering and one liners, followed by training and missions, when she wasn’t researching or running an op to track down a new cell.

Normal had never been just hanging out, cold beers in hand, discussing baseball, hot dogs, and whether season tickets could possibly be worth the astronomical prices. She could certainly afford it, so she’d call Isaiah when they were home and make sure she got season tickets for both of them, and her too. She didn’t get baseball, but she could learn it. If nothing else, it would be fun to listen to them bitch about the game.

Did they like other sports?

Back nice and warm, she rolled over and sat up to strip off her bikini top fully, then plucked Steve’s cold beer from his hand when the conversation between them stuttered to a halt.

Score point number three for Natasha.

James had left the sunscreen on the table nearby, so she took a swallow of the beer and handed it back with a quiet thank you before squeezing some sunscreen into her hand and then spreading it over her chest very well aware of their attention. A couple of passes over her abdomen, and then down her legs before capping the bottle and lying back.

“So do you have a favorite team with the Dodgers no longer in New York?” Because that had been a big damn deal. Apparently. It had incensed Steve when he found out, and James seemed to take equal exception.

“The Mets,” Steve said slowly.

“Definitely not the Yankees,” James added. “Not sure about the Mets yet.”

“They aren’t bad,” Steve offered slowly. “No designated hitters for one…”

Eyes closed, she angled her hat to keep her face shielded and relaxed as the heat beat into her muscles. The boys meandered around the baseball conversation, but they were very clearly distracted from the subject at hand.

“You are not fighting fair, Natalia,” James warned eventually. He cracked before Steve and in under ten minutes.

Good to know she hadn’t lost her touch.

“That’s because she fights to win,” Steve commented and something icy cold brushed her arm. “I
got you a beer of your own.”

“Hmm,” she smiled, and closed her fingers around the chilled bottle, before curling upward and sitting cross-legged. James had raked his hand through his hair a few times, it was tousled beautifully and a muscle ticked in Steve’s jaw. “Thank you.”

She tilted the bottle up to take a long drink, very well aware of the image she presented. No, she wasn’t fighting fair. She was alive, and she wanted to feel that way. No more wasting her life away sleeping. If they wanted to maintain this hands off policy until she reached some metric they had in their heads, fine.

Not touching didn’t mean not looking, and if she were honest—which admittedly she was trying to do—the weight of their gazes was almost enough to do right now. Wanted.

Desired.

Belonging.

The last snared her in a net and held her fast. She was where she belonged. Not on some mission to some remote part of the world, not on the run with every government agency looking for her, not fighting friends or tearing apart the only organization she’d chosen to believe in before the Avengers existed, and not fighting to survive against the only people who might have been her allies and sisters if their masters had ever given them a moment to breathe.

Hence, why they hadn’t.

“Hey,” Steve murmured, two fingers on her cheek. The chill refreshing against her sun warmed skin. “Where did you go?”

“No where,” she promised. “Just—thinking about being here…and how different it is…”

“It’s a good different,” James said slowly, chewing the words like they had an unfamiliar flavor. But she understood it…because it tasted almost too sweet, a confection that melted on the tongue. Too much would probably rot her teeth after it wound her up, but she wasn’t sure there could be too much of a world shared with them. A safe little bubble where they were all alone, unimpeded by life, the committee, the press, the problems—even the team.

But she missed the team.

Seeing Clint and his kids—Lila, Lila who was so earnest, fierce, and sassy, and Cooper with his quiet intensity and seemingly age defying focus. She could see so much of their parents in them.

Would Mary Elizabeth have been like she or James? Would their natures have shown true in her or would she have reflected the people who raised her? That question opened up another series, and while she didn’t shy away, she focused on a fragment that just bubbled to the surface, flipping over as if given sudden buoyancy.

They ran because she was pregnant.

She left her daughter because they’d taken James. Except—instead of following Ivan’s command, she’d gone back for him. Which meant she’d gone back for him for their daughter. Had she intended to steal him away again? Had she made contingencies for Mary Elizabeth if she couldn’t?

She had to have.
Tipping the beer bottle up, she took a long drink.

Only later had she left the KGB again, abandoned the Red Room and began the onerous project of burning it down, because they took James from her. Ivan’s command had kicked in and she’d floated through life, a dangerous shark slicing through predator-infested waters until…

Remy.

Henry.

Children.

Remy because he was a thief and street rat who was going to pick the wrong pocket and get himself killed. Instead of taking him in, she gave him skills and a place to stay. A safe house he could use, and she’d left him to his own devices, rather than try to control him.

But Henry…Henry’s father wanted her to kill him and that contract offered an adjustment to the moral compass guiding her in that moment. It would later lead Clint to her and slowly, inexorably, put her back on a path to meet Steve Rogers and reunite with James.

It also gave her the opportunity to know Clint’s kids. A full circle.

Had those kids appealed to her because of her own past or because of the child she’d left behind?

Mateo.

Another little boy, kidnapped to strong-arm his father and to manipulate her. Kids were a weak point. A pressure point that would get her to pivot.

Now Peter. He wasn’t a little boy, but he was still a kid—one who’d already lost his parents, his uncle, and survived—

“Angel.” Soft words, and gentle touch pulled her back to the present to find a pair of deep blue eyes reflecting deep concern while James wore his apprehension as a mask.

“I’m here,” she told them with a smile, and it wasn’t hard to summon it. “Don’t worry solntce moya. I was just…taking inventory.”

“Of?” James asked, the wariness in those eyes serving as a firm reminder of how well he knew her—well how well he knew Natalia, and she had so much in common with that woman even if they’d both lost pieces of her.

“Life,” she said and then drained the bottle of beer, before sliding to her feet. The sun had heated her from head to toe and even with the sunscreen, and the fact she’d begun to gain a bit of golden tan, she didn’t want to burn. There was no telling how much she had left to heal…

“You heal at an alarming rate, but based on everything I know about you—you get hurt at the same rate. Your body heals at the rate of most life threatening to least…it’s possible this has never healed fully because you have constantly been in a state of trauma or it did…and they repeatedly inflicted the damage.”

“Earlier scans indicated scarring on nearly fifty percent of the neural mass, most likely rewired neural pathways related to physical scarring on the cortex itself. That percentage is now down to forty-six.”
Healing from greatest threat to least. Scarred sexual organs and scarred brain. How did her body decide which took precedence? Had they jump-started it with BARF?

A hand glided over her hip halting her as she picked up her top. James studied her. “You’re feeling better still?”

“I’m thinking,” she admitted. She had dozens of puzzle pieces. “So that’s better, yeah?”

He nodded slowly, but his pupils constricted. Worry outweighed desire, and Steve’s expression told her much the same. That was fine, they needed time to see her recovery for themselves.

“I saw steaks in the fridge,” she said, dangling her bikini top and bumping James’ hand with her hip. “Which one of you is feeding me tonight?”

Steve’s expression relaxed and he raised his bottle to point at James. “That’s all Bucky, he swears he knows how to make a perfect steak…”

“Hungry?”

Not pretending to miss the double entendre, she brushed her fingers down his cheek to his throat and then across his shoulder as she moved to get her sarong. “Starving. And I definitely want another beer…”

They were up and following her as if she’d looped rope around them as she sauntered toward the house.

Score point number four for her. That was enough for now.

The next few hours were a treat though, they set up on the patio and she didn’t bother with the bikini top as she sat under the shade, legs extended in front of her, and a cold beer in hand while James supervised the grilling. Steve made a salad and they talked about everything from baseball to Star Wars to whether either of them were interested in sailing—she wasn’t, and she made that clear when they tried to drag her into the middle of that one. If she was sailing, it was aboard a yacht with all the amenities.

That earned her a scoff and James sketched out a catamaran or a traditional sailing ship, where it would be up to strength and skill to manage it. Steve added in some details, and by the time they were eating the steaks, they all had fresh rounds of beer and conversation moved on to the holidays.

Christmas, it seemed, required a lot more planning than the sad little tree she’d coaxed Steve into getting that one year. Tony traditionally threw a grand party about a week after Thanksgiving, and surprisingly the details for that holiday feast had already been decided.

“Laura and the kids are coming to the Compound. She, Wanda, and Clint are going to handle the cooking, but Rhodey and Sam are both competing for best stuffing and pumpkin pies—apparently their mothers were the best at both, so we get to be taste testers. Vision will handle the table, and the decorations under the supervision of Cooper and Lila,” Steve ticked it off. “Tony claimed entertainment, which means probably a couple of new game systems and he said you owe him at least one rematch on Mario Kart after last year…”

Last year.

They had celebrated Thanksgiving the year before. The team hadn’t been together at Christmas, missions and personal obligations—Steve had gone with Sam to his grandmother’s and to make
him look good for the girl at reception. Nat had taken Wanda skiing and Vision had come along for the experience when it had just been the three of them left at the Compound. She’d actually let the pair wander off on their own when they’d decided they’d rather visit bookshops and antique stores than the slopes.

She’d gone back to the Compound and handled monitoring so Vision didn’t have to divide his attention.

But Thanksgiving had been all of them at the Compound, with too much food to eat, and lots of alcohol, and marathon of video games battling it out for best player—a title she stole from Tony much to his protest.

It had been a fun day.

“Steve gets to play referee and supervisor in case of any squabbles, which it’s Thanksgiving—that’s going to happen. I’m going to make my ma’s cobbler—think I have it all mapped out in my head,” James offered.

“What do I get to do?”

“Be spoiled and watch the parade,” Steve said without missing a beat. “We invited Parker, but his aunt doesn’t seem to know what he’s doing so he may not get to stay for long.” Disapproval clung to that sentence, but she nodded. Peter needed to tell his aunt, but he wasn’t ready for that yet.

She enjoyed the parade but before she could protest the lack of a task, they bounded back to Christmas. “Tony’s party is the first weekend in December,” Steve said, cutting up the last of his steak. “Now in the past, most of the team starts taking off by the third week to head to their families…Tony’s not with Pepper, so not sure what he’s going to do this year. But we should make sure we invite him to spend at least some of the holiday with us. Clint’s family is going to be at the Compound.” The last was directed at her. “So I thought we’d stay out there, if you want to spend Christmas with them. Wanda will probably be there…Sam goes to his mom’s, and Rhodey has family he likes to see.”

“We should get a tree for our floor,” James argued. “Then we can go out to the Compound later on Christmas Day, but I think it should just be the three of us for Christmas Eve.”

That conversation shuttled back and forth, with each of them adding their wishes to the list. Nat ate about half the steak before she was full, but in all fairness, she’d eaten all of her salad, a hot bread roll Steve had heated, and her steamed vegetables. They had baked potatoes, but she’d waved that off. If she’d had one of those, she wouldn’t have eaten nearly as much of her steak. As it was, her stomach was bloated and felt over full.

And it had all been mouth wateringly good.

“What do you want to do, Natalia?” James hooked her back into the conversation as she picked up her water glass and took a sip. The sun had long since set, and they’d lit torches. The air, while still warm, had cooled with the absence of the sun. She’d slid her sarong around her shoulders, more because her skin kept goose pimpling and it was kind of nice to sit half-bundled in something thin and be warm.

Find my daughter was on the tip of her tongue, but the longing in those words echoed unspoken in the hollow she’d discovered when James told her the truth. While she could look, she also had to accept she might never get the answers she wanted, and as painful as it might be, she had her guys right in front of her…
“Whatever you want,” she told James. “It’s your first Christmas back with us…” For her, it was her first Christmas with him. “So whatever you want to do James.”

His smile revealed genuine laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and transformed his whole expression.

“I’m with Nat,” Steve added, bumping her leg gently with his. “You want it to just be the three of us, then that’s what we do.”

“Okay,” James said, still grinning. “This year it’s what I want…next year it’s what you want, Natalia…”

“Oh, no,” she said shaking her head. “Steve next.” For a split second, they both froze but she continued. “Next year Steve decides. You two have far more practice at Christmas than I do. I’ll take my turn the year after…”

It wasn’t until Steve locked gazes with James that she glanced between them. The wordless pulse of communication had them both seeming a little giddy.

“What?”

Steve recovered first, and he lifted her hand to kiss her palm. “Nothing…just really looking forward to our first of many Christmases.”

James let out a satisfied sigh and stretched back in his chair. “Agreed.”

An hour later, after she’d showered and changed into pajamas before curling up between them to watch a movie, she said, “I do want to help pick out the tree…I like the tree part.”

With an arm around her, Steve grinned, “No problem.”

“None at all,” James said, sprawling next to her, his fingers firmly interlaced with hers. “It’s a date.”

“We can go skating…” Steve suggested.

“Hot cocoa in the park… skating at Rockefeller Center… pick out a tree…”

“Candied nuts,” she added in. She loved the candied nuts they sold in winter, hot, sweet and fresh.

There was another glance between them, but she ignored it. They were relaxed and it was what she’d wished for earlier. If a few more wishes made them happy, then she was all for it.

“Maybe we should get a picture with Santa, too.”

That earned her a bark of laughter, and she grinned.

Score point number five for her.

She could do this, she could fit the pieces together, and be herself.

Right?
Clash

Chapter Summary

Natasha butts heads with both Steve and Bucky...

Chapter Five

Clash

Natasha

The shifting of weight woke her—thankfully giving her an escape from the cries in her dreams—and she cracked an eyelid at the hush of movement from the bed. James left the room on slow steady feet. But he wasn’t the one who had just left the bed. She didn’t miss the low burning light in the corner, the book sitting face down over the arm, and the cup of coffee steaming next to a half-finished bottle of water.

Steve had rolled off the bed and headed into the bathroom. Pushing upward, she glanced at the closed bathroom door then over at the pair of armchairs in the corner. Shoving the blanket back, she crawled across the bed on her way to the balcony doors. The blackout curtains were drawn, so it was hard to tell what time it was and there was no clock in the bedroom.

At least not a visible one. She’d just pushed the doors open when James returned and she glanced over her shoulder at the soft click of the bedroom door.

“You’re awake.”

“Surprise,” she told him with a smile, and then stepped out into the cool gray early morning dusk. A few bird songs drifted on the breeze, as they stirred toward waking. In the distance, a pink ribbon of light crept along the horizon.

The curtains rustled a few minutes later, and then James slid out to stand next to her as she leaned on the balustrade. “Hey,” he murmured, setting coffee in front of her and she smiled.

“Oh, I knew there was a reason I liked having you around.” She cupped her hands around the mug. The warmth seeped into her palms. The scent of it tangled with the sweet soft breeze carrying the ocean to her along with the tropical flowers she’d been noticing, but hadn’t actually identified. Maybe they could go explore the rest of the island. There were caretakers who had a house on the far side, but they’d been sent on vacation for the duration—a vacation that had been extended apparently to let Natasha and the guys stay longer.

“Yeah?” James smirked slowly. “It’s my coffee making, huh? And here I thought you just wanted me for my cooking skills.”

“It’s a toss up between those and your body,” she said without missing a beat, and took a sip of the

“Nat’s not…” Then Steve was there, and the sharpness in his tone drifted away. She resisted the urge to jerk around. Their normal had become worrying about her, constantly.

“Nat’s right here,” she said. “I think I may have stolen your coffee…”

“Nope, I made you a fresh cup…you wouldn’t want to drink ours.” James trailed his fingers down her arm. “I’ll grab Steve’s.”

There was a beat, then Steve said, “I got it. Stay there.” The worried note was still present, but his voice had softened some.

“He’s okay, doll,” James told her, still running his fingers up and down her arm. As much as she enjoyed the soothing motion, she wasn’t sure who needed it more.

The curtain rustled, then Steve was there handing a mug to James and they filled them from the thermos. The strength in that coffee filtered through the powerful scent and she laughed. “You’re right, I don’t think I could drink that.”

“We know,” James chuckled as he sipped his cup and continued totrace a pattern along her arm and shoulder. Steve appeared on her right side, his mug in hand.

Tilting her head, she stole a glance at Steve to find him staring at her intently. After another swallow of coffee, she lifted her eyes and met him stare for stare. “See something you like?”

The worried tensing of his eyebrows, which seemed to be locked into a permanent frown, eased and softened the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Chuckling, she glanced at the horizon and then leaned forward to rest her elbows on the balustrade again, coffee mug in hand as the ribbon of pink and red along the water’s edge grew.

She didn’t have to look up to know those two were staring at each other, having another one of their very nonverbal exchanges. They were more than allowed.

Finally, James broke first and asked, “Hungry?”


Down beat.

Up beat.

“Are you sure you’re up for that, Angel?” The skepticism in Steve’s voice should ruffle her. But she refused to let the irritation get under her skin. They had every right to fuss, particularly since she’d been allowing it. Hell with that, she’d reveled in it, some part of her lizard brain soaking up the attention. But more sleep wasn’t going to fix her. She was losing muscle mass, and the inactivity was going to kill the rest of her brain as much as her body.

She’d nap if she absolutely had to, but a good workout had often energized her more than eight hours of sleep. Or at least it used to. Maybe it would let her outrun her demons, if she sat still too long they were going to swarm her. The faint memory of crying played under the sound of the breeze like an old memory on a recorded over cassette. Maybe they already were.

“Nope,” she told him honestly. “Doesn’t mean I’m not going to try. Might not make it a half-mile.
But it will be a half-mile more than yesterday. ’Y’know?’” Then she’d start on the weights if she was still on her feet. Definitely some yoga. Even if she couldn’t find her pointe shoes—she’d bet even money they hadn’t packed them—she could still dance.

Tomorrow, she would do more.

The day after that, more again.

James stilled his fingers at the crook of her elbow, and the weight of his gaze all but demanded she look at him, so she made a show of taking another sip of coffee before straightening to meet his stern stare. “If you’re not sure you’re up for it…” he began, every syllable cool and crisp.

“Then why am I going to do it?” A thrill slipped through her blood. Coddling had been wonderful—she wouldn’t lie—but damn if she didn’t need a challenge and until the day before, she hadn’t realized how much. She needed activity. She needed to _move_. How much of that was old habit and how much of that was just her was debatable. Either way...

“Pretty much,” Steve finished for him and the element of doubt filtering through the words did irk. But what did she expect? Their confidence in her had been shaken, and rightfully so considering how weak she’d been.

“Because until I do it, we’re not going to know. We can imagine how bad it is or not. We can pretend that sleeping fifteen to sixteen hours a day is going to fix it, but…it hasn’t so far. I’m still tired all the time, and I don’t eat near enough.”

Shock registered in Steve’s eyes. Though she had to wonder what surprised him more, that she was aware of the issues or that she acknowledged them at all. Probably a little bit of both.

“Then you don’t go running,” James said firmly. “You’re asking to make it worse.”

“No, I’m assessing my mission readiness.”

For a moment, she thought they’d both stopped breathing. Then James let out a whoosh of air that rumbled like he’d actually growled. “You don’t have a fucking mission to get ready for…”

Challenge offered.

Pivoting slightly, she met the heat suddenly scorching those frosty blue eyes and even in the gray dusk of morning with the sun still a promise on the horizon, she couldn’t mistake his glare for anything but a threat to lock her down if she didn’t listen to him.

“I think standing on my own two feet is mission enough.”

Challenge accepted.

“The hell it is… two days ago you could barely get out of bed and take a shower by yourself. You haven’t just lost weight, you’ve lost muscle, and stamina. Your body hasn’t truly healed, and it shows. Now you want to go for a run?” Shoulders tense and jaw tight, he didn’t give her room to breathe with the way he glared. “You need to walk before you can run, Natalia. You can barely crawl at the moment. Don’t be an idiot.”

The thrill went out like hot metal being plunged into cold water. The steam billowed up and she considered turning her gaze away, but the longer James stared the more her resolve firmed. They coddled her because she _let_ them.
“Maybe we should take it slower,” Steve suggested, playing peacemaker.

“I’ve pretty much been at a crawl for days, I don’t think I can go much slower.” The point was to prove to herself she could, but they needed to see her do it. Needed to know she could take care of herself. They were tearing themselves apart to take care of her, and they needed her to be strong. “Look…”

Moving away from the balustrade, she put her back to the glass doors and faced them.

“You’re worried about me, and I haven’t given you any reason to not be. I’m tired, run down, and I needed to rest. Thank you both for giving me this time, but I’m not getting stronger. If anything, I feel like I’m getting weaker.” It was unacceptable. On any level. If something happened, she’d be less than useless in a fight.

“And you want to push it?” It was Steve’s turn to glare. “What point does that serve, Nat? To make us watch you suffer more?”

A dozen cutting remarks formed and dissipated unspoken on her tongue. They were scared. Both of them. Fear made them both a little irrational. If she hadn’t been mired so deep in exhaustion the last few days, she’d have seen the signs sooner. As it was, her need to lean on them coupled with their need to take care of her left them in a dangerous position.

They didn’t trust her with her.

She wasn’t entirely sure she trusted herself.

They were scared, she repeated internally. It was her fault.

She needed to prove something. To fix it.

Obviously a recipe for disaster in their books.

“Stevie’s right,” James said, his tone flattening out. He’d made a decision and since it was he and Steve against her, they’d won. Or so his expression suggested. It would be almost laughable if it didn’t mean there would most likely be a battle and heated words coming. “You’re not ready and we’re not going to let you hurt yourself.”

Let you.

“You’re awake for the sunrise, that’s great. Let’s see if you make it past breakfast before you need a nap.”

The almost dismissive you won’t was implied.

James drained his coffee, every movement jerky, and slightly off as if he were physically restraining himself from hitting something. Steve, who’d been silent since his earlier question, continued to stare as if he could decipher what she was really up to so he could stop it.

“Bucky’s right,” Steve said slowly. “You need to keep resting. If I have to, I’ll order you to rest. That was the point of this trip, those were the doctor’s orders, and…” He let out a huff of breath, and seemed to force himself to relax. Unfortunately, he couldn’t hide the way his jaw remained locked and tensed. “And Angel, you just—look beat.”

I’ll order you.
With one hand they snapped at her sense of self and the other they slapped her with guilt. No, they weren’t doing it on purpose. But what fragments she’d cobbled together over the last few hours trembled, and she fisted her control around them and kept them in place. Her sense of self had been in pieces. Her strength diminished. Her body weakened. Her mind…well, her mind was a labyrinth of death traps. That really wasn’t anything new.

Saying nothing, because every word she managed to not chew up and swallow sat bitter and acrid on her tongue. She drained her coffee and looked past them toward the sunrise. They had a right to their concerns.

They had a right to express them.

Wishing the coffee had washed away the acerbic words, she stared at the sunrise. The light was edging up over the water, reds, oranges, and pinks ribboning out to brighten the purple hued…

Purple hued?

She frowned. No, it was indigo, but even that color rapidly faded.

“Natalia?” James was right next to her and she hadn’t even seen him move. Shaking her head, she blinked up at him. “You went very pale.”

“I’m fine,” she told him. The sensation of free falling accompanied by the scattering of stars and the vibrant purple sky shivered through her senses. She still possessed enough self-awareness to not linger on that uncertain ground.

“No you’re not, doll.” James said after a heartbeat of studying her. “You should go back to bed.”

“Or maybe just…sit down,” Steve offered, but even trying to broker calm between them couldn’t overcome his concern.

For the first time since they arrived on the island, the sense of suffocation washed over her and threatened to smother her.

“Actually, I’m going to get another cup of coffee…” She had the foresight to hug the mug to her before James could pluck it out of her hand. “And before you say it, no, I’m still capable of pouring my own coffee. I can even walk up and down stairs. And since you need it proven to you…I’ll take my own damn shower without any company today.”

Pivoting, she headed back inside before she could register if her words left any marks on either of them. She’d slept in a t-shirt and shorts, not that there was anyone else in the house. It had been just the three of them since they arrived except for the Bartons all too brief visit.

James was a half step behind her before she even reached the bedroom door, and his hand slammed against it before she could grasp the handle. Electricity skated up her spine, and she turned her head slowly to meet his fierce gaze.

Let you.

I’ll order you.

“Am I prisoner James?” Bleeding every ounce of emotion out of those words, she forced herself to stop reacting. Physically, her strength had been compromised and there was no reason to doubt whether her reaction times would be off. In all likelihood, she was good for one short sprint and sharp burst of energy. It was fifteen feet off the balcony to the patio area below, but the swimming
pool would be reachable if she launched from the balustrade itself.

“Only as long as it takes for you to stop acting irrationally.”

Prisoner.

“Buck…” Steve was a few steps behind them, but his fierce expression had given way to one of conciliation. Maybe he’d fisted his temper with more finesse than James. “Nat’s not a prisoner.” The last he said to her, but he tracked his gaze back to Bucky. “That said,” he continued glancing to her again. “Angel…you’re restless. I get that.”

Not remotely possible Rogers, but you keep talking...

James and Steve were both faster than she was.

“…and we’re being overprotective…” Steve was still talking.

“Ha,” James scoffed. “Until yesterday, she barely noticed.”

Oh, she’d noticed.

“Which means we weren’t being overprotective. You’re a wreck Natalia, you let that damn alien thing use you up and spit you out like what happened to you didn’t matter.” Anger spilled out, discoloring every word. The flat weight of his metal hand on the door would be immovable.

There was a trellis located below the balustrade where fragrant flowers had bloomed each evening they’d been there. Sweet smelling perfume perfect for the tropical location though she’d often been too preoccupied with the sea breezes to pay them much attention.

“…and if you’re feeling good today, great…let’s not push it…”

If she pulled a feint, James would read it for what it was. The only way around him was to move when he least expected it and not slow until she was over the railing and swinging to catch the trellis. Then she could make it to the patio.

“Stevie…she’s not even listening to us.” The cold slap of words pulled her attention to James and she raised both her brows and stared. Schooling her features wiped away the emotion. Decades of training made the part fit like an old glove. Betray nothing. Share nothing.

All she’d wanted was to get her own cup of coffee.

“I’m listening,” she told him not bothering to blunt her curt tone. “But since you want to make all the decisions for me, I didn’t think you actually required my input.”

The verbal slap landed with a resounding crack.

“Unless you were looking for something else to lob at me as a weapon.” Her nostrils flared. This close she couldn’t miss the faint sheen of sweat to his scent, or the hint of the fragrant woodsy soap stocked in the shower.

His pupils constricted at the last and he dropped his hand from the door. “Natalia…”

“Don’t you Natalia me, Barnes.” And when Steve opened his mouth, she held up her hand. “Nor you Rogers.”

The verbal jabs actually left her bruised after she delivered them.
“This…” She motioned to the three of them. “This is my fault. I collapsed. But I’m not just a broken doll for you to fix.”

James winced, and raked a hand through his hair.

“Nor a dame in distress for you to rescue.”

Steve folded his arms, his chin dropping a fraction. Anger still thrummed through him, but he was listening.

“Partners.” She said, snapping her attention from one man to the other. “Are we or aren’t we?”

“Natalia…”

“Yes,” Steve answered and James actually jerked his head to glare at him. “We are,” Steve continued, ignoring James for the moment. “But you went into that factory on your own. You didn’t wait for your partners. You dove into that crap on your own. Also, without your partners. You let it suck you dry—wait for it, once again—On. Your. Own.”

Every strike landed, but she refused to look away as he closed the distance between the three of them.

“Is that what you meant about being partners, Nat? You talk a good game and then do whatever the hell you want?” He didn’t quite loom, but he was shoulder to shoulder with James. “Because that’s what landed us here, so your partners aren’t so keen on the idea of you taking another wild jump and landing it badly.”

Considering she just mapped two different ways to jump off the balcony, she almost laughed. Instead, she leaned against the wall next to the door and stared at them. Weariness swarmed through her and she shook her head. “No.”

“Good,” Steve said, and he blew out a breath. “Dammit, Angel.”

“I want to go get a cup of coffee. I want to try and take a run. I want to get back to feeling like me. Why is this a problem?” Did they think she couldn’t do it? Had she betrayed their trust so badly they no longer thought she could even be trusted to take care of herself?

Because that was not going to work for her.

“Khvatit skulit’, upryamyy otrod’ye.” James snapped off the words. “It’s a problem because we don’t want you to die or hurt or collapse. It’s a problem because you will push yourself too far, too fast, and you won’t think about it before you injure yourself.”

Stop whining, stubborn brat? “Speaking from experience?” At least Steve read her tone; he actually backed up a step.

“I know you, Natalia—better than you do.” The moment the words left his lips, James stopped.

All of the fight drained out of her.

Yes.

He did know her better than she did.

“Natalia…” Apology crawled through James’ tone.
“Dammit,” Steve swore.

She pushed her mug to James’ chest. And he took hold of it and tried to catch her hand, but she yanked it away and walked to the bathroom, and once inside, she slammed the door.

It was petty.

It was childish.

And fuck if she didn’t want to open it up and slam it again.

Wrapping her hand around the dog tags under her shirt, she leaned her head against the door and closed her eyes. James remembered her from before—he’d remembered everything, every erased moment had been reclaimed. He did know her. And Steve wasn’t wrong; she took a risk and hadn’t thought twice about it. Well, no she had thought twice, but she had to act. Peter was walking into that factory with no clue the rest of the team wasn’t in there or that there was a threat of sludge and more just inside.

The silence from the other side of the door weighed down on her, but she shoved it aside and stripped. The dog tags came off with the shirt and she caught them before they landed on the floor. Cradling them in her palm, she stared down at Steve’s name on the beaten metal.

Setting them back behind the sink, she walked over and turned on all the jets in the shower. Ridiculous thing with jets lining the wall of the glass doored, oversized shower stall. Hell it was more like a shower room. Helpful when the guys insisted on helping her shower, they were huge and they didn’t have to squeeze into this one.

After stepping under the spray, she let it plaster her hair down and planted her hands against the cool tile walls. The water cascading over her stung her skin with the force of the jets. She didn’t shift her steps to move away; instead she turned her back to the punishing pulse of water. It was like hundreds of mini fists pounding against her.

Was her skin really that sensitive? She twisted to glance over her shoulder at her back. She was a little reddened. Sunburn.

A choked laugh escaped her as she twisted again and faced forward into the water. Yes, the hot water hurt her sunburn.

Stupid, ordinary sunburn and it didn’t hurt so much as pull and sting. It left her skin too tight, or maybe that was the person inside her skin, who didn’t quite fit in the space anymore.

Shuttling that stupid thought aside, she washed her hair and took her time with it. Then she took the time to soap every inch of her. It also allowed her to stretch her shower-warmed muscles. Her back twinged, especially her lower back and she straightened and curled her fingers against the rougher skin near her spine.

Oh. Right.

She’d been shot.

That hadn’t fully finished healing when they’d gone after the factory. Hell, it felt like a million years before and it had what? Been barely a day? Or had it been two? Before the raid. She lost count.

In the great grand scheme of things, she hadn’t really thought about it. Or remembered.
Annoyed, she began a mental inventory to assess her full condition. Legs weaker than they should be. They weren’t trembling, but she was aware of the fatigue in her muscles from holding the position. She lifted one leg and the pull stretched her back, her shoulder, her quad. The same for the other leg. Flexibility present, but somewhat compromised.

Yoga and full body stretching went on her list immediately. She needed the flexibility to maximize her physical training.

Rolling her head from side to side, she stretched her neck muscles. The lower back pull as she rolled her shoulders forward echoed when she’d lifted her legs. The bullet had nicked her spine, but she’d been healing, she just hadn’t been a hundred percent...

And then she’d leapt into the sludge. The landing hadn’t hurt at all. It had cushioned her fall, insulating and protecting her before it began its mad flight. She hadn’t suffocated or suffered from any breathing struggles.

*That you remember,* she could almost hear James stressing. But for the time being she had to work with her memory. Faulty or flawed as it may be.

The formless tried to connect with her. The electrical impulses it sent through her system had stung, but nothing as bad as her bites. Still, she’d gotten jolted. Possibility of tissue damage. Then it harvested the residual radiation from her body and that had hurt like hell.

She’d forgotten how to think in the middle of it, then at some point, she’d just disconnected from the pain. Shunting agony aside so she could think past it was an old trick. Definitely did damage there, Cho described it as seeming like all the ATP from her cells had been depleted, and she was running on next to nothing. The cold where she’d been lying on the ground had slowed her metabolic processes.

Probably contributing to saving her life.

*Sorry Steve.*

A nightmarish memory she wished she could have spared them both.

Hands lifted over her head, she interlaced her fingers and stretched. The pull wasn’t so bad, but it still made her wince.

Drained.

*You let it suck you dry—wait for it, once again—On. Your. Own.*

Without any resources, her body harvested muscle and kept her down. Sleeping. Even digestion took energy and she hadn’t had enough of it, so she’d been sparing about what she ate.

Slumping, she rinsed off and then leaned against the wall. The cool tile felt good on her back. She was still healing, and she had lost weight, and she had been sleeping, and...

Fuck, she had been such a bitch to both of them.

They were scared for her and they had a right to be. Clearly they weren’t ready for her to push herself, but she still needed to know if she could do it pushing or not. She needed to move because it was all catching up to her, and she didn’t want to drown. But she couldn’t tell them that. Didn’t dare open that door, because once it opened, she’d never be able to shut it again.
Shutting off the water, she wrung out her hair, and then grabbed a towel to wrap her head before wrapping another one around her torso. Much like the day before, she assessed her physical condition with a critical eye as she dried off. There was still no noise outside the door.

While she’d half-expected one of them to shove their way in because she had the temerity to do something on her own, she was grateful they hadn’t. Her earlier resentment evaporated, but irritation still rubbed against the inside of her skin.

In the mirror, her back didn’t look as bad as it felt. It was pink. Not red. It was tender, but not hurting. In fact, it wasn’t even enough to hurt outside of the water striking it. The faint scar on her lower back, was harder to see. She could feel it with her fingers. A pucker of flesh, rougher than the skin around it. Most of her scars faded over time. Unless the damage had been too severe to heal properly or easily.

The abdominal shot had been one of them. She’d lost a lot of blood before Clint could get her to medical, and she hadn’t stayed there. Reopening the wound again and again as she went in search of the Winter Soldier.

It had still twinged when Nick dumped Tony’s assessment on her.

After drying off, she stared at her hipbones, then her shoulders. The loss of weight had to be the most troubling thing. She looked fragile.

Dropping her chin, she scowled internally, then went to work toweling her hair to get the rest of the moisture out. A fresh wave of resentment crept through her, a thief stealing out of the corners of her own mind. She’d made every single damn choice that landed her right here.

She’d gone to Oscorp.

She’d faced off with the hit squads on the street rather than ducking into the Tower.

She’d taken the shots because she hadn’t been in her tact gear.

She’d dropped on the motorcycle to go after Peter.

But, actions had consequences, and she wasn’t the only one paying for hers. Meeting her gaze in the mirror, she shook her head. After hanging up the towel, she scooped up the dog tags and slipped them over her neck before retrieving her abandoned t-shirt—she eyed it for a moment, not Steve’s, it had to be James’—then balled up the sleep shorts and panties. She’d get clean ones in the room.

Opening the bathroom door, she braced for round two though she intended to apologize.

The bedroom was empty.

Surprise spiked through her. The mugs were gone, the thermos, the left over water bottles. The door to the balcony had been closed the curtains drawn. The bed had also been made. But neither Steve nor James was present.

It took her no time to pull out a pair of clean panties, and then fresh shorts. After dragging both on, she dragged open the curtains to let the light in and stole a look toward the beach.

The guys weren’t in visible sight. In all likelihood, they were downstairs fixing breakfast and probably talking each other down from wanting to throttle her.
And before you start whining again, she told herself. Go apologize for being a bitch.

Then if a new fight starts, she could at least face it head on. Leaving the room, she ignored the drag of tiredness in her muscles, no way in hell she’d give James the satisfaction, and took the stairs at a quick clip. The best way to get over the fatigue was to simply face it. She’d fought plenty of battles with broken bones and bleeding all over the place. Right now, she didn't want to hear the damn crying again. Just... no.

Food.

She would eat. High dense proteins.

Then stretch.

They didn’t want her to go running on the beach, fine, she’d go for a walk or use the treadmills in Tony’s tricked out gym.

The smell of bacon hit her about halfway down the stairs, that and fresh coffee. They must have put another pot on to brew. Steve spotted her before James did and he opened his mouth, but she held up a hand. If she didn’t get to say it first, there was a good chance she’d just stew over anything else they hit her with. While it might not be fair, that was as reasonable as she was capable of getting at the moment.

“Buck,” Steve said over his shoulder, and James turned to see her. His stricken expression and bruised jaw gave her pause, but she steeled her shoulders. James moved a pan off the heat and turned off the stove.

“Natalia,” he began and he got further than Steve with that, but she raised her hand again and he hesitated. Wariness eddied between the two.

“I’m sorry,” she said, not tripping over the words. “You’re both—very justifiably worried about me and that’s my fault.” Steve frowned, but he merely braced his—also bruised—hands against the counter rather than trying to say anything. James’ expression went cool and unreadable, but she didn’t let that deter her. “I made some choices the last few weeks, and those choices are on me. Choices have consequences, my current state,” she said, spreading her arms and motioned to herself, “is one such consequence. I know I look terrible…”

“Nat…”

“Not done Rogers, when I’m done apologizing for being a bitch, you get to take another shot at me. But I’m finishing first.” She fixed a stare on him and didn’t miss the way the corners of his mouth tilted up.

Arms folded, he pressed two fingers to his lips and nodded.

“Thank you.” Deep breath. “I don’t want to feel like a burden to you or to anyone else. I don’t want to feel…incapable, either. I’m still healing… I’m weaker, I’m losing muscle. These are all dangerous things for me, and I need to address them. That means yes, I need to sleep and to rest, but I also need to work out and to stretch and to push myself. And yes James, I might be a stubborn brat, but you are forgetting that I’ve kept myself alive a long time, and this… being dependent on anyone—it’s a lot and I’ve been depending on you two. But no matter what my reasons are, or if I’m right to be this restless and agitated…neither of you deserved me taking it out on you.”

Blowing out a breath, she spread her hands and rocked a little from side to side. “So I’m sorry.”

There.
Silence stretched as both men stared at her. At Steve’s raised eyebrows, she nodded. “Done. Finished. That was my part.”

Instead of talking Steve and James looked at each other and did rock-paper-scissors. They both did scissors first, and repeated it. When they matched each other four times in a row, Natasha rolled her eyes and headed for the coffee. She had a mug poured when James said, “Dammit.”

A glance showed James with a rock and Steve with paper. The corners of her mouth twitched in spite of herself and Steve crooked a finger at her. Ignoring the rebellious part of her that wanted to flip him the finger because she wasn’t some pet to be called, she carried her mug over to where he pulled out a chair for her to take a seat in.

“First,” he told her after he got her settled. “I’m sorry. You weren’t wrong to push back at us, and in fact…probably the best thing you’ve done in days.”

Surprise flickered through her.

“You’ve been letting us take care of you, and I think I speak for both of us when I say that bugged us more than any other part of it. Not that we don’t want to spoil you and coddle of you, but you just…you weren’t you when you didn’t push back.” She split her attention to glance at James who just nodded. “And…” Steve pulled her back. “I’m sorry because you already explained your actions, and told us why you made the choices you did and I said I understood it…”

She opened her mouth, but he pressed his finger to her lips.

“My turn, Romanoff. Then Bucky gets his. Hush.”

Another smile pulled at her lips, so she just settled for brushing a kiss to his finger, and waiting him out. The knot in her gut that had fisted when the argument erupted began to unclench at reappearance of a familiar, if exasperated smile on his face.

“You didn’t deserve to have me throw that in your face because I suddenly had images of you rushing back into sparring or pushing yourself until you collapsed again.” His smile faded and he seemed to brace himself. “You aren’t ready to run on the beach or start punching a speed bag or pushing yourself with the punishing physical routine you regularly perform. You’re just not. I’m definitely not standing in line to watch you do that to yourself.”

Not unfair.

“That said… it’s your body. You are the only one who can tell us how you really feel. Talk to us about it, and let us help—even if it’s just working out a routine so you can start building again. I don’t want you down any longer than absolutely necessary, but I refuse to risk you because you’re stubborn. If that puts us on opposite sides… then we’re going to be disagreeing a lot.” He sighed and brushed his fingers against her cheek. “I’m willing to fight you to take care of you, Angel. If that makes you mad…well, I’ve always wondered what you ticked off looked like.”

James let out a laugh and Natasha had to bite the inside of her lip to keep from smiling.

Hands up, Steve backed away and said, “Tag, Bucky.”

Without a word, James circled the bar and pointed Steve toward the stove. “Finish up the omelets?”
He nodded, then James dragged a chair out and sat down turning to face her. “I’m not sorry we tried to stop you from doing something stupid.”

Well, that was direct.

Steve bowed his head and shook it.

“I am sorry that I used your memory against you. That… that makes me an ass. You did not deserve that and I will never do it again. I promised I wouldn’t try to hurt you and I…” James scowled, quiet fury radiating off of him. “You… mean more to me than my own life and yes, I do remember things about you that you don’t—but the only reason that is important right now is I’ve never seen you this hurt before or as devastated physically.”

That gave her pause. Steve glanced over at them, and she didn’t miss the shadows in his eyes.

“I never want to see you this hurt again,” James continued. He extended a hand to her, and she eyed it for a moment, then set her palm against his. “And I can not begin to tell you how angry I am at you for what you did. You took an unbelievably dangerous risk with your life, and there was nothing I could do. Nothing any of us could do… if I’d lost you… again… it would have killed me.”

The moisture in her mouth dried up.

“But that… is also not your fault because you are the same woman I’ve known for decades—brave, reckless, stubborn…”

“Bratty?” she supplied without irony.

“Yes,” he told her. “Very much so. The same brat who could stare Karpov in the face and feed him lie after lie without so much as a twitch, and then do whatever the hell she wanted to do.”

Nat gave him a little shrug and James sighed, lifting her hand to his lips and kissing it before saying. “I’m angry with you…”

And she deserved it.

“But I don’t want to be.”

“Well that makes two of us.”

“Three,” Steve added, carrying plates over to the table and setting the omelets with bacon and toast down in front of each of them as well as his own before retreating for silverware.

“I’ve got the orange juice,” James said, squeezing her hand and rising.

“I can—” She didn’t make it all the way to her feet or to the word help when they both pointed her to the chair again. One hand on her hip, she eyed them. “Okay, in the interests of making peace, I’m going to sit back down, but I am not a dog.”

“Of course, Natalia.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Nat.”

Assholes.

Seated, she crossed one leg over the other under the table and tapped her foot.
Returning with the orange juice, James said, “I am not angry because you went to save Parker. Not because you leapt into the sludge.” He’d said that before.

“For the record,” Steve said as he set the silverware next to her plate. “I’m pretty ticked off about the sludge and leaving the quinjet. I understand it, but it’s infuriating.”

“Noted,” she murmured, and brushed her fingers to the back of his hand. He cupped her nape, and tipped her head back for a kiss. The lightest of touches, a butterfly’s wings, that just left her hungry for more as he touched his lips to hers. Then he sat in the chair next to her.

James stared at Steve drily. “Done?”

“Mostly,” Steve said with a smirk that almost made Natasha laugh.

Almost.

Okay, this wasn’t funny. None of it was funny, and it took a lot to bite back the giggles that wanted to escape.

She covered her mouth with her hand and stared at James as she tried to keep the mirth inside. Inappropriate emotional reactions demonstrated a lack of finesse, control, and mental equilibrium. Which was enough to sober her.

He sighed. “Brat.”

“Yep,” she answered him. “Sorry, you’re angry at me, and you were telling me all the things you weren’t angry about.”

Pale blue eyes gleamed at her, but he couldn’t suppress his own flash of a smile. “Yes, I’m not angry with you because you’re a brat either…though it does push me.”

She kept her silence on that one.

Steve nudged her and pointed at the plate.

Rolling her eyes, she picked up her fork, and cut off a piece of the omelet and shoved it in her mouth and gave him a look like happy? He nodded, then resumed eating his own food.

James’ smile turned indulgent as she ate, and more of that tension let go. They were pissed at her. But they weren’t walking away. If anything, they were fighting with her because they wanted to be there with her.

Smile fading, James finally said, “I’m angry because it reminded me of when you surrendered to me on the Amalfi Coast.”

All of her humor fled. Steve went still next to her.

That.

Another piece she couldn’t remember.

He’d mentioned that before. The night Steve’s nightmare woke her.

“It reminded me of how you put down your weapons. You’d cut through the team with me like they were amateurs instead of highly trained special forces operatives. You could have escaped. I
hadn’t been able to get eyes on you, and you took them out like a shadow—then you stepped into
the light and looked me in my eyes and just stared at me.”

Natasha couldn’t look away from him and her eyes burned. The inexplicable sadness from the falls
roared through her and for a moment, just a moment, she could see him standing there in his full
tact gear, armed to the teeth with black smudges around his eyes to keep the sweat out of them. His
mask hid all of his features away, but the eyes—pale, empty, and cold.

All Winter Soldier.
Not her Soldier.
Not her James.
Just their weapon.

Her jaw trembled and she forced it to lock and blinked as the image transposing him slipped away.
The difference between that man then and the one sitting across from her were night and day.
James had gained a tan, his face had warmed and his slightly shorter hair left his face more visible,
and those eyes were anything but cold and devoid of life.

He was her Soldier, her James, and Bucky all rolled into one and no one’s weapon.

“You just... released the slide on the magazine and it fell free from the gun in your hands. You put
it down and one by one, you disarmed until all of your knives—what were left of them—were on
the ground and it was just you and me, and you put your hands up and behind your head.” Tears
coated his voice, and she set the silverware down. “You surrendered...you had this deep sadness
on your face and I had no idea what the hell it meant, but then it all went away and you looked
calm, peaceful even...and you surrendered. Even when I broke your arms, you just looked at me
and said it was okay.”

Steve’s knife bent and the metal let out a groaning sound.

“So...” James finished with a little cough, before scrubbing his hand over his face. “That’s why
I’m angry—you looked exactly the same way when you fell into the sludge. At peace. Calm. You
surrendered...and I can’t get that image out of my mind.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, then slid out of her seat and moved to climb into his lap, and then she
wrapped her arms around him.

“I know, doll.” He hooked his arm around her and buried his face against her throat. “And I need to
forgive you, but it’s taking me more than a minute...”

“Because I can’t tell you why,” she whispered, and felt more than saw his nod. Natasha sighed, and
leaned into him, running her fingers through his hair.

“Like I said, Angel,” Steve murmured quietly. “We’re a mess. All of us. But we’re going to get
through this... together.”

Twisting, she shifted to relieve the strain on her lower back and James grasped her hips and turned
her fully so she could sit on his lap with her back to his chest. Meeting Steve’s gaze, she said, “I’m
not going anywhere. I promise.”

It was the easiest promise she’d ever made and his sudden smile, and the way James squeezed her
so gently were worth it.
“Not sure I can promise to not be a brat though,” she admitted and they both laughed, then the last of the tension burst, and the taut band around her eased.

Steve nudged her plate toward her, and she drew it closer. When he switched to sitting where she’d been, she slid her feet in his lap and he gripped one bare foot in a very warm hand. “Wouldn’t have you any other way.” He told her and she grinned.

“I would,” James said and she elbowed him when he laughed. “But I’m not picky.”

A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye and she barely caught it to wipe it away. Neither of them missed it. “So…we eat breakfast, then what?” If they were doing this together, then they made the plan together.

Steve and James locked gazes for a moment as she took another bite. Only after she washed it down with orange juice did she catch James’ slight nod from the corner of her eye.

“We train,” Steve said. “Baby steps, but we train. Together.”

Natasha didn’t squee, or laugh, she just nodded slowly. Good. It would be good. She needed her strength. They needed her to be strong. “Would I be pushing it if I said maybe we could still go dancing tonight?”

They answered her in one voice, “Yes.”

Fine.
They bypassed the gym and headed out to the beach. The uneven sand made walking more fatiguing, and this after Natalia had begun to flag halfway through breakfast. The fact she finished the whole meal was impressive, it would have been more impressive if she weren’t forcing herself to eat. His jaw continued to ache every time he clenched it. Steve had slammed his fist into it seconds after she slammed the bathroom door.

Bucky had been out of line. Beyond out of line, and he regretted the words the moment he said them. He and Steve had just been discussing the fact they needed to see her push back against them, to start standing up for what she needed and the minute she did…

Fuck, he was an ass.

Then again…sometimes…

“Nat,” Steve said, stopping. She’d made it four more steps passed them, before she turned to look back. Sweat gleamed on her flushed cheeks, and her soft, sharp pants betrayed her labored breathing. “It’s almost mile…that’s enough.”

A mile, which was beyond too far, but she had a right to decide for herself even if it was like chewing glass for him to watch her do this.

Folding his arms, Bucky let Steve have this fight. He hadn’t wanted to cave on this point at all. Giving in would only encourage her to act foolishly, but Steve insisted if they cooperated they would be involved. As long as they were present, they could mitigate the danger she posed to herself.

Unlikely, but why not? The worst that would happen? She’d collapse and they’d be back at square one.

Hands on her hips, Natalia glanced from them to the ocean. Dressed in shorts and a t-shirt—his—that she’d pulled the hem up and through the collar to bare her midriff, she’d skipped shoes. Natalia was a dancer, she balanced better on her bare feet, and though she’d fought it, she’d needed her toes to clench in the sand when she’d nearly stumbled.

“A mile is nothing,” she said, and the wounded note in her voice scraped aside Buck’s irritation with Steve along with his anger at Natalia. All he wanted was to scoop her up, carry her back, and
keep her safely ensconced on this island away from the rest of the world forever if that was what it took to get her better.

“It’s a mile farther than you went yesterday,” Steve said, his tone so absolutely reasonable as he echoed her earlier claim it made Bucky want to laugh. The punk would push and push, he’d keep running until his asthma dropped him, then he’d drag himself up and try to keep going anyway.

He really should recognize the kindred spirit in Natalia. Though to be fair, she’d had to be stubborn or she would never have survived everything they did to her. All at once his humor vanished as reality crashed into him. “Natalia—this is not the Red Room. You are not on your own for your survival here.”

The dry look she sent him stoked his temper, but he banked it. He’d started it when he used his memory against hers. “I know you’ll both protect me.” Tilting her head back, she stared up at the sky. “But I’m next to useless like this and that’s…”

“Failure is never acceptable,” he said, reciting the old mantra. Steve opened his mouth, but Bucky raised a hand. “Failure is a sign of weakness. Weakness is unacceptable.”

“Pretty much,” she admitted. But that wasn’t all of it. She’d been holding back on many levels, or maybe holding back wasn’t the right word.

Ruthlessly suppressing would be better. More than once he’d caught her staring off into space, naked emotion brewing in her eyes and the shutters would snap closed the moment she became aware of it. It made him want to break through all the barriers, to take on her demons.

“And I get it,” she said without sounding like she much believed it. “I’m not in the Red Room. I’m not at SHIELD. There’s no mission that requires me to put it all on the line…”

“That’s not entirely true.” Meeting Steve’s questioning gaze, Bucky raised his eyebrows. Natalia did have a mission. One she’d listed off for them that morning. No matter how much he disliked the idea of a mission, if it was what she needed to stay engaged, then what the hell!

“Recovery,” Steve said with a small grin and a shake of his head, then he focused on her. “Your recovery is the mission.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do…I heal when I eat and I sleep, and I’ve been sleeping, but I have no appetite.” It was the first time she confessed what they’d both noticed. She rubbed a hand against her stomach, then made a face.

“You ate when Laura fixed dinner,” Steve pointed out. “Or at least tried. Then you ate more the next day. Angel…Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“The Roman Empire also crumbled and it never rose again. If I can’t…” Not finishing the sentence, she turned and headed back toward the house. It wasn’t that far, but she had an unsteady gait.

James frowned. If I can’t… Can’t what? Dammit, why did she keep shutting it all down?

“Natalia…”

She halted but didn’t glance back.

“Nat…c’mon,” Steve said, and he darted forward to poke her lightly. She didn’t dart or avoid, and Steve had to catch himself before he plowed into her. Frowning he eyed her then Bucky, and Bucky blew out a breath.
Natalia didn’t do moody.

Tired.

Pushing at others.

Now moody.

And she’d slammed a door earlier.

Steve threw him a questioning look because Natalia had started walking again, and she was slogging now. Bucky was done with this particular play. Catering to her mood, trying to cajole her back into a better humor, and supporting her need to push herself. Stalking forward, he cut around her and picked her up, putting his shoulder carefully against her hips rather than her stomach and lifting her even as he kept moving.

“James…what the hell are you…”

She lost her hat, but Steve caught it before the breeze could carry it away.

“Zhang Liu,” he said, his stride eating up the sand, Steve a half step behind him. Natalia slapped Bucky’s ass with an open hand blow and he almost laughed. There was some spark.

“Who?”

“Zhang Liu. Black market arms dealer. He smuggled weapons into and out of Russia in the 1950s. It was our fourth assignment; you took a knife to the thigh. Single penetration wouldn’t have been a problem, but one of the bodyguards managed to twist the knife, tore through a couple of layers of muscle and possibly severed a tendon.” They were at the stone steps and he climbed them. “We had a thirty-two kilometer hike to make the border and our orders were not to be noticed, and you bandaged your leg and then tried to pretend you weren’t hurting as you forced yourself to walk on it.”

At the side of the pool, he slowed.

“Sounds like me,” she said almost grudging, and she had her hands against his back before he tipped her up right and met her gaze.

“Oh, definitely you. You planned to make that hike, too. You’d have walked all the way back to Russia, ignoring your pain and further damage because you’re you.” Infuriating woman. Even the Soldier hadn’t known what to do with that information. “Injury after injury, you just took them because you knew you would heal so what did it matter? Pain could be overcome. I stole a jeep, and drove you back.”

“I doubt those were in our orders.” But there was a gleam in her eyes, a question and the self-doubt he’d begun to see lurking, the self-doubt that demanded she get up and push herself until she dropped faded.

“Our orders were not to be noticed. You bleeding and dying on the way to the border could have been noticed.”

“So we drove back and lived not so happily ever after…”

Not rolling his eyes, he stared at her. “No, you suggested we get a room for the night because we had fifteen hours until extraction and you wanted a real bed and a hot shower.” The corner of his
mouth kicked up.

“Did we?”

He shook his head. “Not that night… but you slept next to me. You insisted that I share the bed.”

“And you didn’t sleep?”

“It wouldn’t have been secure.” No, but he had watched her sleep. It had been the first time he’d allowed himself to contemplate how different she was from everyone else. “The locks on that place were a joke—but China taught me something.”

“And that is?” Still flushed and sweating, she wasn’t struggling or shifting her weight, letting him balance her without any effort on her part, paying absolute attention to his story with over bright eyes. Steve, on the other hand, eyed him with suspicion because he hadn’t moved away from the pool.

“Just because you won’t listen to reason doesn’t mean we have to do it your way.” And he dropped her in the water.

The split second of realization sent a shock across her face and then she was submerged. He slid his hands in his pockets as she emerged and glared at him.

“Swim,” he told her. “You’re buoyant, your muscles will need to work but you aren’t fighting gravity. You think you need proper exercise to get your appetite and strength up, then we do it in the water.”

Steve made a sound that suspiciously verged on laughter and Natalia turned her dirty look on him. Considering she was treading water and the high color in her cheeks had cooled, Bucky counted the benefits worth the cost of her ire. But since Steve thought it was so funny, he gave him a shove… only to get grabbed and yanked and then they were both in the pool.

“Ha!” The triumphant sound escaped her as Bucky emerged and then Steve was on his shoulders and they were wrestling. Natalia swam to the side and watched as they struggled to one up each other, and get to her first. By silent and unanimous decision, they’d made her base.

Bucky was almost there when Steve hauled him back and thrust him toward the other side of the pool. Only grabbing onto his arm kept Steve from lunging toward her. The water surged, kicking up splashes and waves as they beat on each other, neither of them really landed any hits and the water made wrestling a challenge and finally her laughter echoed across the water and they stopped, spinning to find her holding onto the side and laughing so hard tears were running down her face.

Lifting his chin in her direction, he caught Steve’s eye. The open grin on his face, and the bright laughter rolling off her relaxed the tension in his gut.

Still giggling, she hoisted herself out of the water. Her arms trembled, but she made it to sit on the edge, feet in the pool. He started toward her, and got a face full of water as she started kicking it in his direction.

Thrilled, he pushed the water back at her. And Steve turned on him, two against one? The splashing kicking the pool up into a froth, but Natalia was still laughing and Steve was grinning and Bucky couldn’t contain his own laughter. When Steve surged into the water between he and Natalia, Bucky glanced at her and raised his eyebrows.
It was just a moment of perfect sync, and then she nodded and lunged off the side. She landed right on Steve’s back, arms around his upper arms and she buried her face against his back.

Steve’s eyes widened, and Bucky got him with a few face fulls of water before he eeled around and got Natalia in front of him.

“Hey now,” Bucky grunted. “That’s not very gentlemanly.”

“Says the man who dumped her in the water in the first place.” But Steve wore an unrepentant grin, and Natalia was still snickering with one arm around Steve’s neck.

“Okay…I give, that was hilarious,” she said, swiping at her eyes. She pressed a kiss to Steve’s lips, a light brush, then reached out an arm to Bucky. He closed the gap immediately and she wrapped herself around him. And when he would have swooped in for a kiss, she shifted her weight and swung around and then she was dunking him and he got water up his nose. He pushed them both up, snorting and laughing.

“You give?” He demanded, locking an arm around her.

“Oh, yeah, I give as good as I get.” The spark in her eyes pulled a real laugh from him.

“Yes, you do.” Fisting a handful of her hair, he locked his mouth over hers. She sucked against his tongue, and he groaned as he broke the connection before he gave into the temptation. Lifting his head, he eyed her… “You want to tell us what this is all really about? Why are you so determined to punish yourself?”

Exhaling, she licked at her lips then grimaced. He didn’t take it personally. Chorine wasn’t tasty, even if she was. “It’s…stupid.”

“No,” Steve said quietly. “It’s not.”

This was the other thing they’d discussed after Steve slugged him. The way Steve saw it, Natalia might be pushing them, and even provoking a little but she was more pushing herself.

Steve climbed out and Bucky moved to the side Natalia in tow, he lifted and Steve caught her and carried her the rest of the way out, then Bucky hopped up to join them. Dripping wet, he stripped off his shirt and Steve did the same as they moved to the shaded patio.

“C’mon Nat…you wanted us to fight you, even if you didn’t want to fight. You wanted us to push away so what? You would feel like you had no choice?” Steve said framing it out.

After shoving the wet hair away from her face, she drew her knees up to her chest and then hugged her legs and stared at them. “I don’t know how to be helpless.”

“Doll, you’re the least helpless woman I know,” Bucky told her. “You’re hurt. You sustained some serious fucking injuries—injuries that could have killed you and maybe should have, except you’re extraordinarily stubborn and you fought like hell to live—thank you for that by the way.”

“Nat—Buck’s right. You’re not helpless. C’mon…it’s taking you longer to bounce back, but you’ve never been this hurt before, have you?” Probably a good thing to ask. Bucky was missing about thirty plus years of separation since they were taken from each other. Just because he’d never seen her this injured.

“Maybe? I’ve been shot. Stabbed. Beaten. Electrocuted.” She ticked them off. “Sometimes a lot. Even…even after James shot me…”
He winced.

“…that took me some time to heal, but…”

“But?” Steve prompted, and she looked from him to Bucky, and then back again.

Frowning, Bucky studied the play of emotion on her face. Natalia could guard her feelings and thoughts better than anyone he’d ever known. Even knowing her as he did, she could become unreadable and unreachable if she chose. That she squirmed while discomfort, sadness, and worry tangled with sparks of anger added another layer to his worry.

“Natalia…you can tell us anything.” Except maybe that she didn’t want them around any more. He would very much prefer those words never crossed her lips.

Lifting her chin, she met his gaze and said, “I can’t watch your backs. I’m…whenever I was wounded or down before, I went into a bolt hole. I disappeared. I didn’t risk anyone.”

Was that it? His gut sank, and then rose again as the foundation shifted. She was worried about not being up to fighting. “You would feel better if we left you here on your own?”

Steve gave him a sharp look, but Natalia shook her head before he could lodge an objection. “No—like I said, it’s stupid. The kids were here and I was exhausted. I could barely keep up with them. I’m not bouncing back. I want to train, and to spar and to get my strength, and I can barely walk a mile down the beach before wanting to collapse. Thank you for carrying me back by the way.”

“My pleasure,” he said. “Natalia, you are a difficult, stubborn woman.”

“You know, I’ve been told that before.”

“Hmm…you remind me of Steve.” Far too much actually, but now that he had that nugget of information. He could work with it.

“Hey,” Steve protested and Bucky grinned.

“Don’t deny it, Stevie. You’d rather lie broken and bleeding in an alley than ask for help.” Rolling his head from side to side, Bucky studied Natalia.

“That only happened once,” Steve argued. “And I wasn’t broken. My nose just felt like it was.”

Bucky snorted.

“That said,” Steve turned to Natalia. “Buck’s not wrong. You know I don’t sit things out even when I should. Weren’t you the one who thumped me for checking out of the hospital too soon?”

“If I don’t get better, I’m not going to be an Avenger,” Natalia said, locking her gaze on Steve. “It means you keep going on missions and into fights without me. I got back there once…and…”

Her jaw trembled and she swallowed hard.

“Angel…”

“Steve this is who I am…this is who I’ve always been if I can’t do it…if I lose this, too…”

“You haven’t lost anything,” Bucky told her, and he caught her hand. “Listen to me Natalia…it’s been a little over a week, it’s taking time. We have that time. We’re here on this beautiful island, and I imagine Stark will let us stay for as long as we’d like. Hell, he wanted to send us here before,
She laughed, but it was a self-deprecating one and it irked him. “I feel like I’ve lost me.”

There it was.

“You told me I had a daughter…we had a daughter. And James I don’t remember her, at all. I keep…I keep trying to feel it, to see her to know what it was I let go of…and I don’t.” Her voice cracked, and she shook her head. The lockdown she’d put into place had held for days, through all of it, and it was killing him to see her crumble under the weight of it. “This…and you remember her, and you need me to remember because you’re all on your own and you have to carry that burden and I can’t help you.”

His heart broke, and he dragged her out of that seat and pulled her into his arms as he sat down and cradled her to him. The tears slipping down her cheeks fell in silence, there were no choked sobs breaking out of her. The mute grief shredded him. After catching Bucky’s gaze, Steve nodded to the house. Understanding flared in Steve’s eyes, Bucky and Natalia needed a minute. Rising, Steve gripped his shoulder, then ran his knuckles against her back before leaving them alone.

Steve didn’t have to go, but Bucky appreciated it. Some things were still too raw and she’d been holding onto this since he’d told her. Even that first few moments when she’d leaned on them both and said she wanted to find their daughter had been fleeting. After enduring all of Cho’s tests and confronting the fact it was a possibility, she’d shut down and closed herself off and they hadn’t really had time since then to do anything much less talk about it.

Natalia was shaking, so he cradled her closer, one hand on the back of her head, the other flat against her back. The dampness from the pool, left a chill on her sunwarmed skin and he pressed his lips to her forehead, muttering nonsense in Russian. Half of it was just soothing sounds, and the other half an assurance she didn’t need to do anything for him.

When the tears finally slowed, he said, “Natalia…if you believe nothing else from me, believe this…you don’t ever have to remember. It won’t change how I feel, and it won’t make me value you any less.”

“That’s not the point,” she said lifting her head. The red rimming her eyes just brought out the green that much more. “You have to carry it all…you shouldn’t…you shouldn’t….have to.”

“Maybe,” he agreed slowly, then slid his hand down to cup her cheek. “But here’s the thing, lyubov moya…” This time the endearment registered, and he smiled as he smoothed her hair away from her face and let it sink in. “You and I have carried the weight of each other since we met. Since the first time I saw you surviving those brutal trials, and something inside me stirred. It took them years to break me, to shut Bucky away in some coffin in my mind and let the Soldier take root. In the space of a few short minutes, you captivated him and broke open my tomb.”

Tracing the lines of her face, he carefully brushed away the tears. He knew her face more intimately than his own. Hell, when he barely remembered who he was, he knew her. Even when he fought against the compulsions or they tried to eradicate his mind, they couldn’t remove her entirely. She was his, she’d always been his. And he would always be hers.

“You were the reason I survived. You carried our pain when I couldn’t, and I’ll carry it for you now. Yes, I miss our daughter more than I’d miss my own life,” he told her, the scab on the barely closed wound pulled raw again. “But I know you, lyubov moya, I know you did everything you could to protect her, and keep her safe. I know you wouldn’t have come anywhere near me or the Red Room if we were a threat. You came back for me…”
Cupping her face, he nudged her gazed up to his. The self-loathing in those eyes he was intimately familiar with. Blaming himself was so much easier than blaming anyone else. He’d been the one to fall. He’d been the one who hadn’t told Steve what Zola had done. He’d been the one to cave when they took him apart. He was the one who became the Soldier rather than the man.

“You did that Natalia. You held all of our pain in your heart and held it for over a year, and you protected our daughter. Do I wish that you could remember what she looked like? How it felt to hold her in your arms? Yes, a thousand times yes,” he admitted, and his voice thickened but he pressed on. “But that is also asking you to remember the agony of it. To remember having to make the impossible choice. The torture of a thousand cuts…and even if you can’t, I know you did it for me and I don’t want you to have to feel that again.”

A watery smile touched her lips. “It might be worth it…when the formless had me…and it was harvesting…”

Fuck he hated that word, but he held himself still, aware of her every breath.

“…what it needed from me to go home, I tried to compartmentalize, but it didn’t work and then…I heard you, and Steve—and even Tony and Clint yelling at me. Telling me I had to survive, so I fought the pain, fought to push past it to make it to the other side…and for one moment…” She swallowed hard, and he rubbed his hand against her lower back in gentle circles. The faint roughness to her skin near her spine, the scar that had yet to fade where a bullet had dug into her just made him angry every time he saw it.

“For one moment, I felt like I was being split in two and then…I heard a baby cry. I heard it, but it was so fast and so fleeting I never saw anything.” Fuck, she looked so lost. “Now I don’t know if I imagined it…because I want to remember or if I really did remember her.”

Pressing his forehead to hers, he slid his hand back into her hair and just kept her there. “That’s the nightmare, isn’t it?” She’d given them a list of bad dreams she’d had but… “That’s the nightmare that’s haunting you right now, isn’t it?”

The faintest of nods. “Sometimes I’m just trapped in the dark and I can hear crying, and I can’t find out where it’s coming from…other times, I’m fighting my way through every door and then…”

“And then…?” C’mon Natalia, you’re talking to me, love. Keep talking.

“Then I open the door and it’s just the Red Room on the other side.” Emptiness. “I made a choice to go back, and…”

“What? You decided to try and save me and that means you no longer have the right to miss her?”

“I don’t even know her James,” she whispered those last words, and then made a face. When she would have pulled away, he released her head but kept his arm around her and kept her firmly on his lap. He was behind those walls right now, and he wasn’t giving up the ground. “The only way to know her is to use Tony’s device and you guys don’t even want me taking walks alone, I can almost guess how well trying to use BARF will go.”

“What do you want to know about her?” He let the bit about Stark’s device slide, he wasn’t sure he was ready for Natalia to do that to herself and she was definitely not ready for it yet. The day before she’d made holiday plans, and future plans—with them. With he and Stevie, and he wasn’t the only one who caught it. Natalia was planning for years to come, not just today. He wanted that future with her even if it meant losing the past.
“I want to know everything,” she admitted. “What did she smell like, how big was she, what color were her eyes, how did she smile…did we even take pictures of her?”

He paused, they had but… “We had a Polaroid, you bought it in Canada when we were at Niagara Falls.” She blinked slowly. “You wanted to be normal, and we posed for the picture that we had someone else take and there we were, you and me, and her—though you weren’t showing yet. But you put that up in our cabin, it was always on our fridge. You would touch it whenever you went by it. There were others, a couple of you—pregnant—but I burned them.”

Natalia frowned.

“I’m sorry, I…I couldn’t leave evidence of it. We always knew they might catch up or follow. We knew…we would have to run, so we were always stripping away the personal bits, here and there…”

“But did we take pictures of her?” The question in those eyes would haunt him.

“We did—but I don’t know what happened to them.”

She groaned and tipped her head back, baring her throat.

“There was a lockbox I kept buried, and I would move it from time to time when I dug it up to add something to it.” He licked his lips. “When Clint and I went to the cabin, I went to find it. But it was gone…”

“The cabin is still there.”

He nodded slowly. She hadn’t asked about it before. “And I want to take you there when you’re ready.”

The thought of leaving the island to go and look danced across her expression, but it was fleeting and then gone. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“Then we wait until you are.” If it took until the end of time, then he’d wait. Smoothing his hand down her back to her hip, he added, “Natalia, look at me.”

Her gaze latched onto his.

“I love you,” he told her carefully. “You know that right?”

A shuddering breath escaped her, and she nodded slowly. Her pupils dilated a fraction, betraying her surprise or maybe not surprise, just how startled she was that he would admit it aloud. They never said the words before, maybe they didn't dare or didn't know how. The feeling though, that had never changed.

“She smelled like you with hints of talc and something indefinable. Maybe all babies smell like that or it was only her, but you would give her these little baths and we would wrap her in blankets after she was dry and dressed, and I would hold her…” He touched his shoulder. “Right here. Sometimes she would fall asleep against my chest and if I turned my head, I could press it against her hair. It was so soft, and it smelled like…hope and sunshine.”

Her lips curved. “Hope has a scent?”

“Yeah,” he said. It smelled like Natalia to him. “I don’t know how big is big for babies, I remember my sisters when they were born and she didn’t seem much larger than they. You could
cradle her in your arm and her tiny fingers couldn’t quite wrap around my index finger at first.” He held up his left hand and index finger. “But her grip was fierce. Her eyes were blue when she was born—but they darkened to this gorgeous green color. More you than me.” He grinned. He and Natalia had argued over that, she loved the blue eyes, and Bucky hadn’t minded one way or the other. Their daughter was perfect and while Bucky hadn’t been awake for much of the pregnancy, not the way the Soldier had been, there was nothing they wouldn’t have done for that little girl.

“She had a little dimple in her cheek when she smiled,” he touched his finger to Natalia’s cheek. “Her hair was reddish-brown, but it was also getting darker. You didn’t mind that…you said it would be more of a midnight sun with the darker hair and green eyes. I wanted it to stay red, like her mother.” He caught one of her damp curls and tugged on it lightly. “You said I was ridiculous and that she would be beautiful no matter what. And I told you of course she would be, she looked like you and you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever known—still are.”

“You loved her a lot,” Natalia whispered. “I’m so sorry I can’t tell you what happened to her.”

“It’s all right,” he stroked his hand down to her throat and then around to her nape. “I trust you.” If he could turn back the clock, and steal them out of those mountains and kept them on the move, he would. As it was…he knew her. Mary Elizabeth had been safe as aces.

Bewilderment filtered through her expression. “You trust me more than I do.”

“Maybe,” he told with a half-grin. “Or maybe I know just how far you go for the people you care about.” He almost tripped and said love. He’d already reminded her he loved her, and that was a word she rarely if ever used. Even when they’d run, love was for children, and they couldn’t afford to be children about it. They were allies, partners, and attached—it had to be enough. If Natalia needed to define love that way, he could live with it.

That she could love at all was something of a miracle to him.

“Natalia…you went into that sludge to save Parker. You threw yourself at me to save Steve. You drew me away on that street and took me on, even knowing exactly how dangerous I was. You came after me again in that cafeteria, to get between me and Steve again most likely because you knew Steve would come for me. You faced off with Ross and let him torture you to save Stark and the other Avengers. You threw yourself at Leonid and Alexei, risking your sanity, to get Clint back—and didn’t you take on a god for him, too?”

“Loki’s not really a god, but…yeah.”

“So, knowing all of this…knowing you, I have no doubts in my mind that Mary Elizabeth was safe. You didn’t come for me until you’d done that, it’s why it took you a year.” Combing his fingers through her hair, he studied her. “Believe me?”

“After the holidays… I want to go to the cabin. Maybe…maybe it will jar something loose for me.”

He nodded slowly. “We can do that.”

“And you haven’t said anything about BARF.” It really was a terrible name.

“I don’t want you to do that, but I won’t…I won’t stop you if it’s what you really want when you’re better.” As much as he would choose otherwise, this was going to have to be her call. It was her mind, and he didn’t want anyone to ever make those decisions for either of them again.

“How are we defining better?”
“If you have to ask, then you’re not there yet.” That earned him a quick, generous smile.

She wiped at her face and then leaned back a little as she blew out a breath. The dark cloud swarming around her seemed lighter, and even her shoulders seemed more relaxed.

“Feel better?” he asked.

“Yes and no?” She glanced to where Steve had been sitting, and Bucky waited her out. “I…I told Laura I wasn’t ready to talk about it. Even this…it helps and it make me want to know more at the same time…it’s all…”

“Jumbled.” It was a guess, and she nodded.

“When I said I was in pieces, it’s…maybe the formless did break me. I feel like I should be doing more. You two aren’t sleeping. You can barely bring yourselves to touch me. Yet…I’m lashing out or just languishing. I feel like my responses are all over the place.”

“Oh, he said slowly. “Maybe it’s what you need right now. Wait…” He held up a hand when she would have protested. “Hear me out, kotyonok.”

Her nose wrinkled, but she pressed her lips closed.

“You heal from the worst to least, yes?” That was how he’d always known she wasn’t recovering well. The presence of bruises. Which there were still a few on her, not dark or angry, but faded and present. He trailed his fingers to the spot over her spine. “You were shot, this was a dangerous wound and it required actual surgery. It was not fully healed when you went into that fight in the factory.”

“It wasn’t really a fight…”

He just stared at her and she mimed zipping her lips shut.

With a single nod, he continued, “But emotionally—you were already compromised. I’d broken your heart and that was a terrible shock to your system. Add that to the injuries inflicted by your formless when it wanted to go home…” And in a heartbeat he understood why she’d had to help it even at great personal risk. Because it was a being who’d been abused, just like she had, and all it wanted was to go home. “You’re asking to bounce back from blow after blow, and you’re not invincible.”

“You said that before.”

“And I meant it before…and I know it kills you to depend on us, because you want to be able to take care of yourself and in turn watch our backs.” There was no one else he’d rather have there. “But for now…can you just trust us to do this? Fight to get better, but don’t fight us.”

“You have to sleep,” she told him unflinchingly. “You have to rest, too, James. Both of you—”

He rose, sliding an arm beneath her legs so he could bridal carry her toward the door.

“What are we going?”

“To talk to Stevie, and get cleaned up, maybe have some lunch and then a nap.”

If she needed them to sleep so she could rest, then he’d sleep. She was letting him confront her demons, he could certainly confront his own.
They didn’t have to go far to find Steve. He was in the kitchen putting together a stack of sandwiches that would feed a small platoon. He was still in his damp shorts, and his hair had dried half standing up in places. His gaze swept over both of them, assessing.

“Hey,” Steve said. “You two okay?”

“No,” Bucky told him honestly, and then kissed the tip of Natalia’s nose when she gave him a surprised look. “We’re all still in pieces, and trying to fit the broken bits back together.”

She tensed against him, and then bit-by-bit relaxed as he rubbed a thumb against her skin where he held her.

“Natalia’s…got demons,” he said it slowly, eyeing her. “Just like we do. Only her demons aren’t going to let her get better unless we can choke ours out enough to let us rest for her.”

Straightening, Steve studied her. “You’re tearing yourself up over us and her, aren’t you?” It was a direct question, and the kind he appreciated Steve for grasping.

A slight nod. “I…I feel useless. Not something I’m comfortable with for a lot of reasons.” This was even more honest and direct than she’d been earlier in the morning. “You guys aren’t sleeping…and that’s…I want to do for you what you’re doing for me.”

“But you need to focus on you,” Steve told her. “You need to focus on healing, and feeling what you need to feel, and trusting that we’re not going anywhere no matter how hard you push.”

Bucky didn’t grin, but he wanted to clap Stevie on the back. That was exactly the right thing to say.

“You need to be Nat, my Angel, his Doll, and our partner. I’ve got Buck’s back, and yours.”

“And I have Stevie’s,” Bucky added. “You think the two of us have just been comparing crochet patterns?”

She made a sniffling laugh. “So we really weren’t discussing the perfect sandwich? Shocker.”

Steve laughed. “Yeah okay, that’s on us…”

“No, it’s on me,” Bucky owned it. “We were talking about you, and about how we’re both doing. Our nightmares. Our plans. What we’d like to see happen…mostly you.”

With a nod, Steve grinned. “Definitely you, but that’s what we do when we’re worried about you. We figure out what to do that we’re both on board for.”

“Well, pizza as a sandwich was worth it, so I’ll forgive you both for it this time.”

A laugh rumbled through Bucky, and Steve actually gave her the most baleful look. “You never get to decide on sandwiches, Romanoff.”

“I don’t have to, you made enough to feed an army.” She motioned to the stack. “So do I get to eat some or am I staying here all day?”

Bucky pinched her ass and she gave little start. “That’s for the sass, Doll.”

“You like the sass,” she protested and gave his hair a tug.

“I love the sass,” he said agreeably. “But…we’re all soaking wet and covered in chlorine. So I vote for showers, clean clothes, then lunch. And all three of us take a nap. Then we wake up and we’ll
take it from there.”

“Maybe some dancing?” The hope shimmering up to the surface wrapped around him like a lifeline. He glanced at Steve, needing him to say no this time, because Bucky didn’t think he could keep denying her anything. Not after she’d finally opened up about Mary Elizabeth and how it haunted her. If her mental health was at all tied to her physical, they had to keep her on even keel in both areas.

“I don’t see why not,” Steve said after a long moment.

Punk.

“We can always carry you while we dance,” Steve’s said, with almost a hint of a shy grin. “Well Buck can, but I remember enough of what you showed me, I might manage one or two.”

When she cast those big green eyes at Bucky, he groaned. “Fine…”

The curve of her lips was worth it though even with the dark smudges betraying her exhaustion. The crying had helped. Talking had helped. Showering, eating, sleeping and what the hell, even dancing would all help. Whatever she needed.

“But eating and sleeping first. You’re exhausted, so we’ll do this in chunks.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Natalia teased him and damn if that sir didn’t give him a little thrill, and from the gleam in her eyes she knew it, too.

“Brat,” he told her with a kiss, then headed for the stairs. “C’mon, Stevie. Showers, then food.”

“Just putting the water on for her tea.” He called.

“Suck up,” Bucky tossed over his shoulder, and Natalia smacked his chest lightly.

“You’re just sore cause you didn’t think of it.” Steve smirked as he caught up to them. Bucky smirked. But twenty minutes later, showered and changed, they got her set up on the patio then Bucky went to make the tea and get the sandwiches, giving Steve a few minutes with her and himself some time to get his own raging hard on under control.

He’d had decades of practice suppressing arousal, and keeping it from showing around others, even Natalia. But between her emotional openness and the fact she’d been teasing him on and off for a couple of days, he really wanted to sink inside her and remind them both they were still alive.

“Hey,” Steve said as he entered the kitchen.

“You’re supposed to be upstairs with Natalia,” he said frowning at him.

“She’s fine, curled up in a chair and staring out at the ocean…how are you?” Steve stared at him. Leaning back against the counter after flicking the electric kettle back on to boil again. It was hot so it wouldn’t take but a minute, Bucky folded his arms. “Surprisingly better. I knew something was eating away at her, but I didn’t know what exactly and I should have known.”

“You both have taken a lot of hits…”

“I’m okay, Steve…I don’t know that I would have said that yesterday. I’m fucking tired as hell. My temper’s on a shoestring.” He motioned to his bruised jaw and nodded to Steve’s knuckles. “I needed that.”
“Yeah, not a fan of having to deliver it though.” At least here they could be brutally honest. “But I’m…feeling a little ragged around the edges, too.” Which was as big an admission from Steve as it was from Natalia.

When Bucky became the emotionally stable one, he had no idea.

“Then we have our tea, and our sandwiches, and curl up with our girl and we both sleep, too.”

“And if she has nightmares?” It was what kept them awake.

Bucky made a face. “We’re part of the problem there, too. She’s worrying about us.”

Steve made a face, and then raked a hand through his damp hair. “Fair.”

“Stevie?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for giving us the time.”

“Always,” Steve told him without missing a beat. “I’m here, and when or if you want to tell me or involve me, great. If you need the time alone, I get it, too. Some things…”

“Some things are still private.” She had those moments with Steve, too. Just like he and Steve had conversations and memories of their own.

“Yeah.”

“Though did you have to cave on the dancing?” Bucky demanded before turning to pour the hot water over the tea in the pot. Steve had set the whole thing out ready to go.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you protesting,” his best friend argued back.

“Not sure I can tell her no anymore, not…she’s being as transparent as she can, and she needs us more than she wants to admit and I know I need her.” There would be no convincing him that Steve felt otherwise.

“So we don’t tell her no anymore,” Steve said, meeting his gaze.

“You sure you’re ready for that punk?” Because this was the one area where Bucky did have more experience and a hell of a lot more years with her. Steve's time with her had been interrupted. “I can always take a step back and let the two of you…” It had made him grin and razz Steve a little when he’d confessed to his first time, and that Natalia had been everything he could imagine and more.

Bucky got that.

“I’m okay, Buck,” Steve assured him as he grabbed the tray. “Believe it or not…we’re going to have days when it won’t be the two of us with her, it’ll be you or it’ll be me…but she needs us right now. That said…I have questions about the choreography but I figure she can…” His ears went red and Bucky grinned.

“Tell us what she wants and where she wants us?”

Rubbing a hand against the back of his neck, Steve nodded. This was still new territory and he wasn’t stammering, which would have happened before, and even the flush was fading faster than ever. “She’s a good teacher.”
“Hell yeah she is,” Bucky said with a slow smile. “Just remember…if you’re not comfortable, say something to her or to me, both of us. If this happens it has to be something we all enjoy or we make it worse for her and for us.”

“Fair…not sure how we know when she’ll be up for it.”

“Just like dancing Stevie, and you said it earlier…” Bucky picked up the tea tray and nodded toward the stairs. “We can do all the work if it makes her feel better.”

“Buck? One question?”

“Name it.” They were at the top of the stairs.

“You and she…haven’t done this with anyone else right?” There was an air of uncertainty, a hint toward the lack of confidence Stevie had experienced when they were younger and he didn’t want to be dragged into a date. This was the guy who never thought he could measure up, even when he was a twice the man most other men could ever hope.

“Nope,” Bucky told him, meeting his gaze. “You’re the only guy I’d ever consider it with. I had to watch her seduce other men, I never cared for it and I had to watch other men abuse her, and I killed some of them for that—not enough.” That was his shame, and another black mark in the book against their handlers that put them in that position.

“I hate that they ever used her for that—them, Fury—everyone.”

“Her body is hers again, and so is her mind…” Not all of it, but they’d steal it back a piece at a time if they had to and no one would ever be allowed to take it away again. “We’ll make sure of it.”

They locked gazes and Steve nodded. In this, they were absolutely on the same page. Everything else they could let happen naturally. By the time they got back to Natalia though, she’d dozed off in the chair on the balcony. Before, Bucky would have just carried her in and put her to bed, but now…he brushed her cheek until her eyes fluttered open.

“You still want to try and eat something first, Doll?”

Her body.

Her decisions.

A radiant smile softened her face and she shifted in the chair and grinned at Steve and all his sandwiches. “Only if you two help, because I cannot possibly eat all of that…”

“Oh, you thought all of this was for you?” Steve said, grinning as he set the tray down, and sectioned off a triangle of one sandwich, less than a quarter of it before setting it on a plate in front of her. “How’s this?”

Natalia laughed. “Ass.”

“That’s Captain Ass,” Bucky advised and grinned when Steve rolled his eyes.

“Don’t start.”

“Hmm…I rather like the captain’s ass,” she said, and Bucky snorted.

“Haven’t looked recently so I’ll take your word for it.” He poured the tea and she grinned. They
sat together, and he and Steve managed to kill about half the sandwiches he’d fixed. Natalia ate three.

Three of them, and it wasn’t in a rush, she nibbled through them while they talked and teased, and something in Bucky relaxed further. Nat had her feet propped in Steve’s lap, and she leaned back against Bucky’s arm. While she was still pale, and had dark bruises beneath her eyes, she seemed—lighter somehow, better.

By the time they’d finished lunch, and put the trays away downstairs, Natalia was curled up in the bed waiting for them and her nap. She hadn’t quite gone to sleep until she was lying on her side, her back to Steve’s chest, facing Bucky, and she had Bucky’s hand in hers.

“Now, you two go to sleep,” she told them, barely suppressing a yawn.

“Yes, Angel,” Steve told her, and pressed a kiss to her skull just behind her ear.

Bucky just pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it gently, then he drank in the sight of her, committing it to memory so when he closed his eyes, that was what he saw.

Just Natalia, safe, and warm, and tucked in between them.

Right where she belonged.

To hell with their demons.
When her eyes opened, she was half-surprised to find James still in front of her, eyes closed, with his breathing slow, and deep. His eyes lids didn’t flicker or move, hopefully that meant he either continued to sleep dreamlessly or with only the very pleasantest of dreams. Her hand still rested in his, though his grip had gone slack. The bruises beneath his eyes seemed even more prevalent than they’d been when he was awake. The time in the sun had tanned his pale skin, given him a warmer complexion and it looked good on him.

The weight against her back shifted, and soft breath huffed against her neck. The arm around her waist tightened a fraction. Then Steve pressed a kiss against her nape, and she smiled, before tilting her head slightly to find him looking at her with sleepy eyes. “Hi,” she mouthed the word, and he dropped a kiss on her nose before curling against her.

“Sleep well?” he murmured just behind her ear, the whisper of breath tickling her.

Had she? Steve had slid an arm under her head at some point and when he curled it to pull her toward him, she met his gaze. “I think so…if I dreamed…I don’t remember it.” And she didn’t. No crying this time. No shadows. Just…warm and safe and sleep.

“Good,” Steve nuzzled a kiss to her cheek, then enfolded her closer, wrapping his arm around her so he could clasp her shoulder. Warmer than a furnace, it was like being wrapped up in an electric blanket.

“So if I’m all wrapped up in a Steve burrito, does that make me a sandwich?” The question slipped out and Steve began to shake, and he buried his face against her throat as laughter rumbled out of him. Across from her, James’ eyes opened as he groaned.

“That’s awful, Natalia. Absolutely awful.” He said, then yawned, then tugged her hand up to his chest and let his eyes close again.

Steve was still chuckling. “You’re never letting that conversation go, are you?”

“Shhh,” James said, reaching past her to thump Steve. “Sleep.” His tousled dark hair half hid his face. He squeezed her hand and clasped it to his chest just over his heart.
“Think he’s really asleep?” Steve asked, his lips pressed right up to her ear.

“He’s tired,” she whispered, and carded her fingers through James’ hair. “I thought you were tired, too.”

“I am,” Steve admitted, but he shifted the weight of his erection pressed right against her ass. “Not sure I can go back to sleep.”

“No?” She murmured, tilting her head, one hand in James’ hair, and the other still clasped firmly against his chest. The steady thump of his heart had begun to increase, so he wasn’t asleep, but he was tired.

“No,” Steve said, but his eyes were closed and his impossibly thick lashes teased her in the half-light of the room. The blackout curtains weren’t fully drawn, letting in a sliver of sunlight. How long they actually slept she had no idea. “How are you feeling?”

The crying earlier had almost been too much. It hurt physically to cry. It hurt emotionally, and somehow, worst of all, it hurt mentally. She hadn’t been able to stop the tears, and James had just held her and murmured nonsense at her until she’d gotten it out. Her eyes were still a little sore, and her throat a little raw. “Truthfully?”

“Yes,” Steve and James answered at once, though James didn’t open his eyes.

Steve snorted, then lifted his hand from her waist to give James a little shove against the shoulder. Cracking an eyelid open, James pressed her fingers to him with one hand then stretched out and slapped Steve upside the head with the other.

The corners of her mouth curved, and she tucked her cheek against Steve’s biceps as he went to shove James again, and said, “You two are idiots.”

“Punk,” James said before covering her hand again instead of retaliating against Steve. She gave James’ hair the barest of tugs, and he winked at her.

“Jerk.” Then Steve tugged her ear with his teeth and a shiver raced through her until her nipples tightened almost involuntarily.

Eyes narrowing, James tugged her hand from his chest to draw one of her fingers between his lips and he sucked on it gently, and a whole different set of shivers went through her.

Then Steve scraped his teeth along the side of her throat just below her pulse point and she shuddered.

“You haven’t told us how you’re feeling, Natalia,” James said rather calmly as if he sucked on her fingers every day, then he captured her middle finger and dragged his teeth across the pad of her finger. Her hands were not that sensitive, but she couldn’t escape the frissons of electricity darting up from where he played with her fingers or from where Steve was kissing a path along her nape.

“Is this a test?” She exhaled the words on a laugh, when Steve actually began to suck on a point on her throat and he was going to leave a hickey at the rate he was going. One that would likely linger, too.

That heady thought went straight to her cunt.

“Do you want it to be a test?” Steve asked having laved his tongue over the mark he’d left.
Grinding her hips back against his, she smiled at his sudden whoosh of air. “I don’t know, Steve. Can you handle it?”

James chuckled, then turned her hand to press his lips against the heel of her palm. “Stop evading the question, Natalia.” He sank his teeth against the skin there and it had her clenching her ass at the rush of feeling, just enough pain to feel the bite adding an edge to the coiling tension aroused by the combination of his lips and tongue.

“My answer might kill this mood,” she admitted, more than effectively trapped with Steve’s arms around her, his mouth traveling the length of her throat to her ear, and James holding her hand captive even as her one free hand seemed obsessed with the softness of his hair. It wasn’t like she had any intention of shoving them away.

Even if making out was only as far as they took it. What had Steve said the other day? Making out, yes. Making love, no. She made a face. Stupid body and stupid healing not getting her better so they could revel in their very sensual location—not that they hadn’t found a way to have some fun amidst the exhaustion and the angst.

Tucking her hand back to his heart, James leaned in close and nuzzled a kiss to her lips. When he dragged her lower lip between his teeth, she tried to curl and stretch at the same time, and Steve’s low-voiced groan as she ground against his erection reminded her she wasn’t the only one getting turned on.

Mouth going dry, she met James searching stare. “You’re not going to kill anything, but we’re not pushing anything either without some guideposts. How are you feeling?” His voice might have thickened with need, the rawness there almost a caress against her very neglected breasts because all of their kissing had yet to go anywhere specifically fun, and she wasn’t quite in a position to force the issue even if she wanted to. Sometimes being the center of all that cleverness, and intelligence coupled with their strength was enough to make her drunk.

Behind her, Steve had stilled his teasing kisses and pressed his nose against her hair. She could hear and feel him breathing, even as he spread his fingers against her abdomen. The arm across her chest, holding her still wasn’t tight at all. If she pressed against it, he’d let her go, of that she had no doubt.

James tilted his head to the side, studying her. Relentless. He hadn’t been kidding if she didn’t answer, they were going to be here a while.

The man was almost as stubborn as she was.

“Worn out, drained, empty—almost scraped completely clean.” When his eyes narrowed at her description, she added with a small smile. “And at the same time, better. I think I needed to cry.”

Admitting that took effort, and she pursed her lips as she drifted her hand from his hair to his cheek.

“Yeah?”

She nodded slowly. “I can’t really explain it more than that. I’m still tired…but I slept well and no dreams.”

A nod. “No bad dreams,” James assured her.

“Don’t remember if I did,” Steve said, his breath tickling her ear. “Maybe the best sleep since we got here.”
“Yeah, I’ll second that,” James added.

A warm feeling spread out from her core at their admission. Another good thing to come out of their fight, they were letting her shoulder some of the weight again or maybe it had let them just vent some of their own frustrations.

“I’m glad,” she murmured. “I worry about you two.”

“Us?” Steve let out a soft huff of disbeliefing laughter. “We’re fine, Angel…you’re the one who worries us.”

“No you’re not,” she countered, twisting to look up at him. He leaned away, shifting his posture to rest his weight on his elbow and it freed her to roll onto her back. “You’re not both fine.” She looked from one to the other. “You’re stretched thin, having nightmares when you sleep, which is barely at all. We’re all a mess, remember?”

Steve’s expression softened. “Fair.”

“But you do feel better?” James pressed.

“Yes, James,” she promised him. The sadness was still there, like a low humming background noise. Now that she’d finally stopped plugging her ears, she couldn’t miss it. “I do…but maybe we should just stay in bed for the rest of the day.”

The corner of his mouth kicked a little higher. “You read my mind, Doll.”

Surprise flared through her. “Really?”

Leaning in, he claimed her mouth in a slow, heated kiss that stole her breath before his tongue stroked hers. She clasped his cheek, and groaned against his lips, then Steve ran his hand from her hip to her chest, and gently cupped one breast through her shirt. That was different and the excess amount of stimuli made her dizzy, and she had to fight to catch her breath when James lifted his head. His gaze went from her to Steve, and she couldn’t look away from James as he raised his eyebrows. They were doing that silent communication thing and as curious as she was…she didn’t want to see any rejection on Steve’s face, then his thumb skated over her nipple through the shirt, and she turned her head to find Steve studying her.

“Hi,” he said slowly, a grin teasing the corners of his lips. “How about we work on your stamina and see if we can make you feel a lot better?”

A laugh bubbled up through her. “My stamina, huh?”

“Hmm,” he murmured, then squeezed her nipple between thumb and forefinger. The pressure as firm as she’d shown him she liked, and she sucked in another breath, almost greedy for the sensations he evoked. “I was thinking about what we said about dancing.”

The coolness of James’ metal hand glided up the outside of her thigh, and then slid beneath the edge of her sleep shorts to massage the skin just below her hip. “We can do all the work,” James told her, and she eyed them both. Really? Both of them? At the same time?

She’d had her own private fantasy, and even mentioned it, but… “Steve?” She arched her back when he tweaked her nipple again and he dipped his head closer until all she could see were his blue eyes.

“I’m fine, Angel or I wouldn’t be offering. I promise.”
They’d only had that one night, and now…fuck she so wanted to take them up on this. Cupping his face, she studied him even as James began to stroke his thumb in circles against her thigh and setting off another storm of sensation to add to the steadily growing stream of them from everywhere they were touching her.

“Why don’t you kiss her, Stevie, and show her you’re serious.” The droll comment, pulled a smile from her, and Steve’s grin brightened.

“I can do that.” He claimed her mouth as his arm slid under her and she found herself rolling over to sprawl against his chest as he settled flat against the bed. His kiss turn slow, and sweet, small biting nips interspersed with a longer, slow invasion of his tongue delving against hers. The stubble on his cheeks scraped lightly against her, but she reveled in the presence of the scruff when she wasn’t pressing her hands against his shoulders to arch herself over him. James’ hand slid along the back of her thigh, a cool reminder he was still there and then her sleep shorts and panties were just gone, and the cool air was flush against her damp cunt.

Steve continued slid his hands down to the hem of her shirt, his hands were hot against her skin.

“Sit up,” James ordered and she had to break the kiss or no she didn’t because Steve sat up along with her, mouth still fused to hers. Eyes open, she met his and the blown pupils visible amidst the sea of deep blue had her stomach clenching. She sucked on his tongue until she felt her shirt lifting, and then there was a snort behind her and the shirt ripped in half on both sides, and she paused to glance down at the shredded cotton being tossed away.

“Eager much?” But the laugh bubbling up betrayed her amusement. One hot and one cool hand on her back had her half twisting to find James close enough to kiss so she stole one from him. Hands still braced on Steve’s shoulders, she enjoyed the ripple of muscle as he ran his hands over her sides, a featherlight touch down to her hips.

Releasing her, James bit lower lip once, then nudged her back to Steve. “Go entertain yourself. I have plans.”

That had her arching her eyebrow, but Steve caught a hand into her hair and she met his kiss with a smile, and slid closer until she rested breast to chest. The hands on her back roamed up and down and then curved over her ass for a moment, and a flutter went through her.

Was he about to…? A hand on her upper back nudged her forward gently, the weight of his hands careful against her flesh. The hint of sunburn prickled her skin, and then hot lips pressed kisses down her spine.

“Lay down, Steve,” James suggested…but Natasha curled her hands against Steve’s shirt first.

“Wait…” Both of them went still at her order, and she leaned away from Steve to catch the hem of his shirt and tugged it upward. “Not going to try and he-man this off you.”

Steve laughed softly, and released her long enough to catch the shirt and yank it up and over his head. It went sailing across the room somewhere and she spread her hands against his chest. The black and blue banding that had ribboned his flesh after catching her barely two weeks before had vanished like it never existed. Leaning closer she pressed a kiss to his pec, right where the worst of the purpling bruises had been.

Eyes lifting, she met Steve’s gaze and then she bit him carefully, sinking her teeth in until she was sure she’d left and impression and then sucking the flesh hard against her teeth. It took some actual effort, the man was a rock, and he let out a hiss of breath as she released him and straightened. “A
hickey for a hickey,” she reminded him and he was still laughing when he dragged her in for a kiss.

Sprawled against his chest, she gasped at the heat of his skin on hers. He really was a damn furnace, and she was far from chilled. James continued to stroke his hands down her back, careful over the spot near her spine and then he pressed a kiss to the knot of tissue. Before he trailed his mouth down to bite lightly against the globe of one cheek. She jerked in surprise, but Steve kept her still with her mouth firmly locked to his as he sucked on her tongue. Clever hands trailed along her sides, and then a cool one dipped between her legs even as James urged her hips a little higher. With her knees spread on either side of Steve, she could only imagine the picture she made.

Then she forgot all about that as two fingers glided against her labia and Steve answered her groan with one of her own. Arching over him meant she could slide a hand between them and she began to massage his length with one hand, stroking him through his shorts, and he stiffened at the contact.

One finger skated around her clit, then down to entrance and then back as if gathering moisture and she pushed her hips back to follow that finger, brazen as hell. They’d been teasing her on and off for days, never quite crossing the frustration line but still leaving her wanting. Steve made another sound as she tucked her hand inside his shorts and began to stroke the velvety length of his engorged cock.

Oh, it was every bit as nice as she remembered. Granted, she’d seen plenty of it, but the seeing and not touching or frankly being too damn tired to push it and get some touching in had been a crying shame she wanted to rectify. Leaving his mouth she kissed along his jaw, adoring the way his stubble prickled at her lips. She was going to get a beard burn, and she didn’t care.

Worth it, particularly based on the low sounds he was making as she teased her thumb over the crown of his cock. The little hisses of his breath as she caught him off guard only fed her need to add more contact. Kissing a path to his throat, she returned his earlier licking and nipping with a few love bites of her own.

James chose that moment to slide a finger into her cunt and she pressed back to take it deeper. Steve’s skin was soft at the base of his throat, and he smelt like sunshine, and sand, and a little bit like James. She smiled, to herself, and then James added a second finger, and stroked against that one spot that sent stars dancing across her vision.

“Fuck,” she exhaled and Steve laughed.

“Soon,” he promised, and then ran his fingers through his hair. Another kiss planted against the curve of her ass where it met her thigh, and all too soon James pulled his fingers out of her and she wanted to complain, but he murmured something soothing as he stroked his cool metal hand over her other cheek. It was Russian and endearing but she wiggled her ass at him anyway. He rewarded her with a soft chuckle, and then a light slap.

“Stay still, Natalia.”

“Hmmph,” she sniffed, and Steve’s pulse jumped as she nibbled a trail to his chest, then laved her tongue over the bite mark she’d left on his beautiful pec. The tiny indentions of her teeth created a tiny circles and the soft bluish bruise in the center made her smile.

After a small break in movement, then James pressed a cool, damp finger right at her anus and she went perfectly still. He was…

“Yes, Natalia?” He asked, checking with her, his finger poised right against the ring of muscle and
a shudder went through her. This was not an area she ever let anyone play and yet…

“Did we…” she hesitated, licking her lips, and glancing up to find Steve watching her with a hot, intent eyes. So much focus and all of it on her. Even with the heavy weight of his erection in her hand, she didn’t have a single doubt if she told them both to stop, they’d let her go right now and that would be that. Exhaling a slow breath, she said, “Did we before?”

“Yes,” James answered her, massaging her ass slowly. “We don’t have to. “

“No it’s just…”

“You don’t remember, and this is not something you do?” The question was so reasonable and he’d moved his finger, and she felt the absence.

“It’s not something I’ve ever trusted anyone else to do,” she admitted. “It’s…”

“This is all about what you want, Doll,” James promised, dipping the warmed metal fingers of his left back to her cunt, and gathering more of the moisture there and fuck, if she wasn’t wet as hell resting between the two of them just playing.

But it wasn’t the first time he’d played with her ass. He’d done that in Louisiana, more than once, and in the shower. Exploring, teasing, and she didn’t doubt for a second James was an ass man.

Steve touched her cheek with two fingers. “You’re safe Natasha, I promise.”

He didn’t have to promise that, she knew she was safe. Her lizard brain definitely did, she’d all but shut down and let them take care of her. But still she smiled. “I trust you,” she told him, and then glanced over her shoulder and met James’ steady eyes. The light from the slit in the curtains backlit him, her dark guardian, and soldier. “I trust you both.”

“Yeah?” He asked, curving his fingers as he pressed them into her cunt, and she shuddered. Steve covered her breasts with his hands, rolling her nipples and she flexed her fingers around his cock. The only person not being touched was James right now, and yet the weight of his attention closed in around her.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. The more she thought about it, the more she knew he wouldn’t hurt her. It might be uncomfortable, at least until her body adjusted but it was James, and it was Steve and they…they were worth any amount of discomfort. “Do you mind if I…” she nodded toward Steve and then down a little farther to where she was slowly massaging his cock again. “Give myself something else to do while you get me ready?”

His eyes flashed, and the sudden smile on his face stole her breath. “You do whatever you want, Natalia…you’re so fucking gorgeous, you know that?”

A lightness settled over her, this was beyond the easiest thing she’d ever done. There was no worry with either Steve or James. She grinned. “Not half as gorgeous as the pair of you.” With that, she turned and gave Steve another squeeze. “You okay with my plan?”

“You don’t have to ask,” he told her, and his voice was a little broken and rough. The slow, almost gentle stroking had to be as bad for him as James skating another round of little circles of her clit as she moved back, slowly walking on her knees until she straddled Steve’s knees. He was forced to let her go and he braced his hands against the bed when she released him to curl her fingers into the waistband of his shorts. James’ fingers slid out of her as she shifted to tug the shorts down, stripping them clean off, she eyed James where he stood at the foot of the bed, and licked her lips.
“You have way too many clothes on,” she said.

“I’m working on it,” he told her, and motioned her toward Steve. He was wiping his hands on something, and a flick of her gaze revealed the bottle of lube, and the washcloths, and what looked like a bowl of water—hopefully warm. Someone had been prepared. “Go play with your treat so I can play with mine.”

Another laugh bubbled up from inside, effervescent and freeing. Well, he wasn’t wrong, she glanced at Steve as she straddled his legs again, and then let her gaze travel to where his cock brushed against his belly leaving a small stripe of pre-cum. Reddened, and full, and her mouth watered because Steve’s eyes had dilated farther if possible, and he focused on her every move.

“Comfortable?” she asked, dropping forward to rest one hand on the bed next to his hip and cupping his balls with her free hand and rolling them gently, there was a spot just…Steve let out a groan and she smiled as she dipped her head, to wrap her lips around the head of his cock as she tilted her hips up, and then damned if she didn’t wiggle her ass.

There was a sense of adventure and fun in this moment, locked away in their paradise, the heavy weight of Steve’s cock against her tongue and the salty taste in her mouth as James massaged his hands over her ass, and then slid the fingers of his left hand into her cunt once again and she groaned.

She might have a bit of a metal fetish where he was concerned. With the bare thumb of his right hand, he teased her, slow, even strokes as he began to pump his fingers against her, she let him fuck her mouth onto Steve.

Beneath her, Steve’s quads had gone rigid, and she could almost feel the leash he kept on himself. He slid a hand into her hair, but he didn’t push or drag or try to guide her. Looking up the length of him, she wanted to smile at the way he met her stare and then he tilted his head back as she took him all the way to her throat. And James pressed the warm finger of his right hand—his touch was so damn distinctive—against the ring of muscle. The pressure had her holding her breath for a moment, even as he curled his fingers in her cunt. The steady press against her anus coupled with the warmth of the lube…

Oh.

More warm liquid smoothed over her anus before he worked his finger in and out. She wasn’t going to ask when he found the lube or set this up, but she pressed back to take his finger as she swallowed around Steve’s cock. He fisted the sheets, and his tip leaked an almost constant stream of pre-cum that she took turns lapping out with little kitten licks in between full thrusts to take him deep.

“Don’t let him come yet,” James told her and his voice was right at her ear as he added a second finger to her ass, and then locked his thumb down against her swollen clit. She came in a rush, of heat and moaned, almost choking on Steve’s cock as James scissored his fingers inside of her.

“You can come as many times as you like,” James continued in that deep, dark tone tremors eddied out and she rode that knife edge. “And now, he can.”

He’d added a third finger while the orgasm crashed over her, and she found herself pressing back to meet his thrusts as she swallowed around Steve, and then she rolled his balls and Steve let out a little shout as he came, and she swallowed, even as James began to suck on her earlobe and continued to thrust his fingers into her ass and cunt, alternating which hand stretched her.

Liquid heat pooled in her belly, that was the hottest fucking thing ever, and he was still toying with
her as she released Steve with a little pop. Steve lay panting and groaning as she rested her cheek against his quad. His cock stirred with continued interest, and she had to grin. Fuck, she didn’t think she’d ever get enough of how swiftly these two could recover and then James added more lube.

“You like this Natalia?” His voice was back against her ear, as she looked up at a wrecked Steve. “Steve all spread out in front of you, and me behind.”

She bit down on her lower lip as he eased his fingers in and out of her in a steady rhythm.

“What do you have any idea how gorgeous you are, skin flushed, lips swollen, with your ass in the air and taking my hand like it’s all you’ve ever wanted?” If he kept up this dirty talk, she might come from that alone. “I can’t wait to feel you around my cock, but you need to get Steve up again. You want both of us and you’re going to get it…”

A shudder worked its way up her spine, as her cunt clenched around emptiness. Fuck, she wanted that. She wanted that so badly. She wrapped her hand around Steve’s cock, and looked up at him again.

“Steve?” Her voice sounded nearly as hoarse as Steve’s had earlier.

“Right here, Angel,” he said, and he twisted his torso, so he could angle his head to look at her. “Working on it.”

Brushing her nose to Steve’s cock, she smiled at the tremor that went through it. She felt like that tremor, winding up further and further, as James kept teasing her. With slow, careful licks, she worked her way up from the base to the tip, and Steve let out a moan, as she sucked against the head and began to stroke him, slow and gentle. He was so sensitive after he came, but she wanted what James was promising and she wanted Steve to be a part of it.

Bless his refractory period, he was already growing stiffer and if history proved repeatable, he’d last longer this time. And the time after that. And the time after...

She clenched around James’ fingers, needing more as her cunt kept flexing around its emptiness. She wanted more. Swallowing as she stroked up, she sucked the rapidly lengthening cock toward the back of her throat, and then Steve let out a hiss, and she eased up on the pressure and pulled off him with a pop. Working him with her hand, she pressed kisses to his hips, and then to his abdomen, as James nudged her upward, he drove her with light pressure against her ass with every thrust.

Finally James eased his fingers away as Steve stretched up to kiss her. She was straddling his hips, and his mouth was a hot demand on hers, his hands against her breasts, and his fingers tweaking and teasing her nipples. Behind her the rustle of clothing hit the floor and then Steve moved to grip her hips and angled her forward and she pressed his cock right to her cunt rubbing against him.

She could get off just running him back and forth against her clit, but Steve said, “Let me Natasha,” and she released him and slid her hands up to rest against his shoulders.

A sheen of sweat made him slippery, but she was so hot all of a sudden, and it was like she was going up in flames as he fisted himself and then kissed her as he angled her to take him in, then impaled her slowly and the stretch almost sent her tipping right over into another orgasm. Head tipped back, she fought to catch her breath as he kissed her throat, and then there were hands against her back, urging her forward and Steve carried her back. Her nipples scraped against his chest, and it added another sensation, as she opened her eyes to find him staring at her.
“We’re going to do all the work,” James told her as Steve spread his legs a little, then his feet went flat against the bed and it stretched her as she pressed her knees deeper into the mattress and James smoothed a hand down her back and she felt the his bare legs there as he tipped her ass up, and struck his hand up her spine. “Relax,” he ordered, and unlike the source of their previous fight, she didn’t mind the fact he was taking charge at the moment.

Steve ran his fingers through her hair, then gathered it into a handful and tilted her head so he could see her face. “You okay?” Damn, she should be asking him that, but despite how blown his pupils were and how rough his voice, his intensity raced over her like a caress all its own.

“Oh yeah,” she said with a slow nod. She was better than okay, she didn’t think she’d been this turned on in her life. And if she had, fuck if she remembered it. There was a feeling of more lube against her anus and she held Steve’s gaze as he stroked a hand up and down her arm while the rest of him stayed still. He was a hot and heavy presence buried all the way to the hilt in her cunt, and then…

The slow hot burn of James pressing his cock right against the ring of muscle, and easing into her. “You okay, Natalia?” He asked, keeping his movements slow, and very shallow, barely more than the tip as he stroked a hand down her back, and then Steve stretched his hands down to cup her ass and holy fuck, he pulled her cheeks apart as if to make it a little easier, and there was a small smile on his lips as he continued to stare at her with eyes glazed over in lust.

Dirty talking James, check.

Hot, hungry eyed Steve, also check.

Absolutely turned on, and on fire Natasha? Double check.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “You can move, James…” Was that her voice? It was even raspier than normal and James continued to rock his hips, taking his sweet time pressing deeper into her and she didn’t think she’d ever been this full. Steve gave an experimental thrust up, and he hit her g-spot perfectly as James sank all the way inside and she couldn’t breathe, they’d pushed all the air out of her lungs, and it was a hell of an effort to even keep her hand planted against the bed, to keep from collapsing completely on Steve.

“You feel so good, Natalia,” James told her as he eased out and then slid back in, the same rocking motion pulling her up and down along Steve, and Steve let out a shudder.

“Fuck, Bucky…I can feel you.”

“Right?” James sounded so damn smug. “I wondered about that.”

“Bad?” Natasha asked, suddenly worried.

Steve abandoned his grip on her ass to slide up to her face and he pulled her closed and whispered, “Hell no, Angel…everything about you is perfect.” Then he was kissing her and every time James pulled back, Steve thrust up, and as he relaxed his hips, James would push in and Natasha forgot to think, or to do anything other than feel. Her awareness settled on where they connected to her and the scrape of her nipples against Steve’s chest, the feel of his tongue stroking hers, the weight of James’ hand stroking along her back, and then the strain as they found her rhythm, and they were right, they did all the work, moving and shifting her between them as they shuttled her along their cocks, every stroke sent Steve pressing right against the spot, and James speared into her, and there was a secondary spark that threatened to send her up in flames all over again.
James wound his fist in her hair, and murmured something, and then she was arching upward, supporting by Steve maybe because she’d long since lost her grip on the bed, and his skin was slick under her fingers. Head tilting, she met James’ kiss and sucked on his tongue, eager for more.

“So fucking beautiful,” Steve said, his voice possessing an element of awe, and he arched, his cock thrusting up as he caught her nipple between his lips and sucked on it hard. It sent another pulse to her cunt and then he moved to her other nipple.

Soaked in sweat, her body on fire, and her mind nothing but a light board blazing with pleasure, she wasn’t quite ready for Steve’s fingers to ghost over her clit, and then the gentle pressure to set her off like a bottle rocket, she clenched around both of them and James’ hips stuttered. She broke from the kiss as a long keening noise escaped her throat no matter how quiet she tried to be.

Steve came in a shout, the hot pulse sending up another flash fire as he thrust deep, and then James followed him, the hot rush a setting off another set of bursts as a second orgasm collided with the first as he rocked her forward, her pelvis against Steve’s and his trapped hand, with fingers on her clit. He rubbed again, and a third one hit, and they both hissed as she flexed and fluttered around them, and her mind went white.

Awareness came back to her in whispering layers, a hand stroking her back. A cool rag against her ass, then another on her cunt. The shifting hands, lifting and moving her, and when she finally managed to open her eyes, she exhaled and said, “Fuck me.”

James laughed as he washed the rag up her belly to her breasts. It was so cool and she was so deliciously sore. Even the gentle glide of the super high thread count cloth set off little quakes of reaction across her flesh. It felt so good and like too much all at once and she just didn’t have it in her to care. At some point, the dog tags had gotten tucked around her nipple, and James freed it before pressing his lips to her breast and then drawing in a hard, sucking kiss.

Another hickey.

She laughed, and he met her gaze with a cocky smirk. “I think we just did. But if the lady has any complaints, I have no problems with repeating the process.”

“The lady has no complaints,” she told him even if a wonderful shudder went through her at the promise of doing that again. The cloth wiped against her neck, then over her face, before he pressed a kiss to her lips. She glanced around the room, as he shifted and stood on legs that shook, she noted with a little bit of pride, and made his way toward the bathroom.

“What happened to Steve?”

“Water,” James told her, wetting a fresh cloth, and wiping down his cock as he glanced over at her. She rolled onto her side, letting her gaze wander over him. She hadn’t really gotten to appreciate him with Steve all sprawled out in front of her, and him so intent on her ass…

“Was it like before?”

He didn’t need her to explain what she meant, if his smile was any indication. After he wiped off his hands and then tossed the cloth away, he made his way back to the bed.

“Better,” he told her, and bent to press a kiss to her mouth before running his fingers lightly down her side to her hip. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” she told him, and stretched. The pull and the ache were fantastic. “Really good. Is Steve…?”
Before she could finish the question, Steve let himself back into the room and though he’d pulled on a pair of boxer briefs, he’d left everything else off and she smiled at him as he crossed the room. Her bite mark prominent right over his left nipple.

James circled the bed to reclaim his spot on her right as Steve came to settle on her left. Like James before him, he bent to nuzzle a kiss to her lips. “Steve is just fine, Angel. Actually, Steve is better than fine…you?”

A smile pulled her lips wide because fuck yes, she was great. It hadn’t freaked Steve out, and he looked relaxed, and spent. Pulling herself up gingerly, she sat with her back against the headboard. There was a twinge at her ass, a faint sting, and a definite sense of bruising in her cunt, but all of it the good kind.

“I’m wonderful,” she told him with what had to be a dopey grin, because his smile grew even wider if possible and he pressed a bottle of water into her hands before handing another to James. Tipping the bottle up, she took a long cool drink and rested her head back. Steve eased onto the bed next to her.

He massaged her thigh gently before taking a drink from his bottle. “Do you think I could…try that at some point?”

“You want to have her ass, Stevie, use your words.” The droll comment from James sent a flush of red up Steve’s neck, and Natasha smacked her hand against James’ chest.

“Be nice.”

“I am being nice,” James told her, and leaned over to leave another sucking bite against her breast that had her back arching, and her gaze collided with Steve’s. His mouth parted in a little ‘o’ and then he licked his lips. There was a gradual thickening inside his briefs, and she didn’t bother to hide her appreciation, then hissed as James moved to lick and suck at her nipple. She grasped his hair, and fisted it.

“Fuck…” she exhaled the word.

“If you insist,” Steve murmured, and then he wrapped a hand around her nape and he kissed her as James continued his sensual assault of her breast, teasing, nipping and sucking on her nipple until she was rubbing her thighs together.

Heat flushed her face, and then her water bottle was out of her hand, and she was flat on her back and James had her pinned to the bed, he glanced at Steve, and said, “You good?”

“I’m fine, you won fair and square, rock beats scissors,” Steve told him, but he didn’t retreat, instead he stretched out on the bed next to them and ran his fingers over her hair and then James eased her thighs apart, and nuzzled a kiss to her jaw.

They did rock, paper, scissors for who went next? Seriously?

“You good, Natalia?”

Was he kidding? A little dazed, and definitely overwhelmed, she curled her arms around his shoulders, and stretched up to press a kiss to the join where the metal met his scarred flesh and she felt more than saw his shudder. “Yes, James,” she whispered, and it was all the encouragement he needed to thrust into her, and she tilted her head back as he began to rock his hips, every thrust hitting that spot, and she found herself torn between looking up at him, and turning her head to see Steve.
They’d joked about trading her back and forth, but the feel of James filling her, fucking her right through Steve’s come left her breathless, and it wasn’t long before he sent another orgasm rattling through her system, and this time she did blackout.

When she roused again, Steve met her with a kiss, a little more water, before he turned her over and began kissing a path down her back. She wanted to turn at first, to touch him, but he gave her hips a gentle squeeze before pulling her up onto her knees and she understood. Head back, she whispered yes as he slipped his hand between her thighs.

She had no idea how long she’d been out, but her skin felt cooler, and there was very little come sliding down her thighs so that was something, and then he pressed into her cunt, the hard length of his cock splitting her open. The friction was almost too much, and she began to shake from it. When she would have collapsed, he pulled her up, cradling her as he began to thrust deeper. His lips were at her ear, and he whispered “Just let us do the work, Angel…you’re so fucking gorgeous all strung out, I want to draw you just like this.”

When he tangled his fingers in the chain of the dog tags, her body caught fire. There was something completely possessive in that action, and she didn’t miss the quiet demand in his words. She caught James’ gaze across the room where he perched on the edge of a chair drinking water, staring at them with a patient kind of heat as if he were biding his time and admiring her in the same breath.

A laugh broke out of her as if it were the most natural thing in the world for Steve to fuck her while James watched. Of course, Steve had been watching when James had her before and that left her whole body shuddering. Her mind shut off, and she reveled in the sensations. After Steve pulled another pair of orgasms from her, he came in a rush and then she was sprawled against the sheets as he fetched another cloth and began to clean her up.

She drifted, half awake, and half asleep. The next time she stirred, it was James who teased her with fingers until she was trembling on the knife edge of an orgasm before he slid into her. She was on her side, and he pushed her thigh up and she got to stare at Steve this time. In between, they kissed her, toyed with her, and let her pet them in turn, though she always seemed to drift off to sleep before she really got to play.

At some point the sun had set, Steve had retrieved sandwiches, and James brought up more water, she ate whenever they handed her something, and drank deeply from the seemingly unending supply of fresh water bottles, and when she was too sore for anything more, they ran her another bath in the huge hedonistic jet tub, and soaked with her in it.

“So…” she said idly, stretching her legs across James’ chest as she idled back against Steve, “Was the plan to exhaust me with sex so I stay in bed and eat…a lot?” Because boy had she eaten. She’d had something like five or six of the sandwiches over the last few hours, and drunk easily that many bottles of water.

“No,” James told her. “The idea was to give you a workout that wouldn’t break you, would keep you in bed, and let us keep coddling you.”

“Not to mention, you said you wanted to dance,” Steve said behind her, trailing a damp finger up her arm. “What did you think of it?”

“Now it feels like a vacation,” she admitted, and this time when she laughed, they were chuckling, too.
Chapter Summary

The morning after...

Chapter Eight

Time

Steve

Ice tried to box him in, but he snapped his eyes open before the frost could seal him up. His pulse jumped, but the sound of Natasha and Bucky’s slow, even breaths washed over him. Turning his head, he drank in the sight of her sprawled on her stomach, one hand on each of them and her cheek pressed flat against the bed. The pillows had landed somewhere, at one point.

They’d spent the better part of the last what—fifteen or sixteen hours—sleeping, having sex, eating, having more sex, and sleeping. Steve actually ached, and it had been a long time since his body was sore without having fought an actual battle. He didn’t actually think it was possible to make his cock sore, but even the vague stirrings of interest as he drank in Nat’s nude form made him twinge.

Beyond her, Bucky was flat on his back, right arm up under his head, while his left hand rested on the curve of her butt. The image of her face as she sank down on Steve, and then when Bucky pressed into her had permanently etched itself into his brain. He honestly hadn’t believed Nat could be any sexier or more gorgeous, and she proved him wrong, over and over.

More, watching Bucky have her was almost as hot as when Steve had her himself. Maybe Nat was on to something, maybe there was a bit of a voyeur in him after all. Another stir of his cock and he pressed his palm against it. No need for it to stand at attention if the little trickle of drool escaping the corner of Nat’s mouth was any indication. They’d well and truly exhausted her, and themselves and even the dreams of ice hadn’t been able to smother his mood.

Easing out from under her right hand, he tucked it onto the bed. The bracelet on her wrist cool against his fingers. The tangle of his dog tags lying against her spine was almost as appealing a picture as they had been hanging between her breasts. Still, there was something to the way they lay there with the vague hint of light through the crack in the black out curtains versus the curve of her spine. Then he looked at the puckered mark there and sighed.

A part of him wanted to run his fingers along her skin, to soothe the mark and smooth it away. Not that it would be that easy, but when she was truly healing, it would fade and he’d been watching for it, every single day they’d been here. Buck’s gaze had gone to it again and again, so he wasn’t alone.
Rising, he moved on uneven legs toward the bathroom. They’d wiped down more than once, and he was pretty sure they’d used most of the washcloths they had in the bathroom. He’d have to carry down a load of towels and wash them later. Tony might have staff that did all this, but Steve wasn’t into the idea of being the post-sex party they had to clean up.

The thought gave him a pause as he closed the door quietly before flicking on the light.

Post-sex party.

He’d actually participated in a sex party. Some distant part of his sensibilities paused to glance around like he should be shocked, but with an absolute lack of shame, he grinned. Still, Steve lingered his attention on the circular bruise she’d drawn over his pec. The teeth marks had already faded, and there was just a hint of the bruise left. Rubbing a hand over it, he sighed. There were some marks he’d rather keep.

After brushing his teeth, he checked his facial scruff. It was at a prickly stage—something he discovered Nat did not like on her thighs or anywhere near cunt. Fine, he’d save eating her out for later. That or go shave, and she’d given him a look when he suggested shaving, then Bucky had laughed at him before he’d wandered into the bathroom to do just that.

Ass.

Apparently, a clean-shaven Bucky was fine, but she missed Steve’s beard. Scratching at his neck, he grimaced and left it alone before switching the shower on to warm up before climbing in. The bath they’d soaked in with her had washed away most the sticky remains and sweat, but a morning shower helped. He debated going for a run, but considering they promised Nat to train with her, he decided to skip it.

After she’d slammed the door the day before, and long after he’d slugged Bucky for the careless remark, it struck him that it was the closest he’d ever seen her come to losing her temper. She’d been angry with them. Clint told him Nat didn’t get angry. Anger required emotional investment—and they’d pissed her off. If he needed any kind of confirmation about her feelings, that would have sealed it.

As it was…he hadn’t been kidding, he trusted her. He trusted she cared. She demonstrated it every time she glanced at him to take his temperature on a situation, to make sure he was included, and to verify he wasn’t feeling left out. He believed her when she told him she wanted to come back to them, to survive for them…so no, he wouldn’t go running. He’d save any workout to do with her.

If she got out of bed today, he’d see about taking her down to the gym. Treadmill. Light weights. Maybe he’d tape her hands for the speed bag, and let her hit his hands rather than the bag. That would be easier on her, right? Anything that would bring a smile to her face, but at the same time he wanted to check the hickey he’d given her. The color of it would give him a barometer for how she was doing.

Laughing a little at himself, he shut off the water and grabbed a towel to dry off, then hooking the towel around his hips, he gathered up all the used towels, and washcloths before flicking the light off and opening the door.

Pausing, he let his eyes adjust. Nat had curled onto her side, facing the bathroom, her eyes closed, and one errant curl falling against her cheek. Bucky lifted his head from the other side of her and gave him a little nod. Steve held up the armload of wash, and jerked his head toward the door. After another nod from Bucky, Steve snagged a pair of boxer briefs on his way past from the open dresser drawer—apparently he forgot to close it the night before.
Eh, he had other things on his mind.

He unlocked the bedroom door, and let himself out. Downstairs, he loaded all the towels into the huge washer including the one he was wearing, and got it running before opening the dryer. Bucky had run the bed sheets down the night before after stripping and remaking the bed when Steve was getting the bath ready. He must have come down later and shoved everything in the dryer.

Linens folded and neatly stacked, he dragged on his boxer briefs and headed for the kitchen. The semi-light outside promised they’d reached daytime but there was a distinct lack of sun, and a rumble of thunder said this storm hadn’t gone wide and avoided them like all the others. He went to pat his pockets, which he didn’t have, when it dawned on him his phone was upstairs.

He waited to get the coffee started, then checked the fridge for what food they had left. Tony had stocked the place to the gills, but they’d been cooking every day, and despite Nat’s skimpy appetite—at least until last night and he grinned at the idea of how much she had eaten—he and Bucky ate more than enough.

A couple of steaks, some hamburger meat, chicken, and one more sleeve of bacon. The sausage was gone, and the eggs were pretty low. He checked—three left. Still plenty of sandwich fixings, they’d eaten nearly all of the salad stuff.

One of the drawers had the cinnamon roll canisters. Steve liked those, so he popped out three of them, broke them up and started setting them up on a baking sheet before turning the oven on.

Wait. There was another deep freezer. Yes, they had more food. He’d almost forgotten it tucked away in the back of the pantry. He really did owe Tony for this place, the man had thought of everything. While he waited for the oven to preheat, he checked outside. The wind had picked up, and the dark clouds were ominous. He jogged out to gather up the loose loungers and stacked them together in the pool shed, under cover so they wouldn’t lose any cushions. The palms were all blowing inward, and the ocean was churning.

Inside again, he secured the door. Once the cinnamon rolls were in the oven, he jogged upstairs to grab his phone, and clothes. The shower was on and Nat was bundled in the blankets, he paused to smile down at her before forcing himself to not reach out and brush his fingers down her face lest he wake her up.

Phone in hand, he grabbed some shorts, and a t-shirt and once he was dressed he returned down in time to start the coffee on its second brew. Once he had his and Bucky’s coffee made, he’d set up the second pot so it was ready to brew coffee for her.

Funny, it was the first time since they’d gotten there that Bucky hadn’t done the morning coffee. He’d slept—they all had. It was nice. He checked the phone and there were three weather alerts, all about thunderstorms, but no cyclones or hurricanes, so just rough weather for the next twenty-four hours.

An excuse to stay in bed he supposed, and then he couldn’t wipe the grin off his face. He’d been iffy about the idea in the beginning but…

“Someone looks happy,” Bucky commented as he strolled into the room and Steve paused to study his best friend. He’d combed his damp hair back from his face, he’d definitely gotten a little darker from the sun over the last few days and the bruises under his eyes had lightened.

“Someone looks like they slept well.” Steve retorted and they both shared a grin. He motioned to the coffee. “Needs one more pour through.”
Buck nodded, then sniffed. “Cinnamon rolls?”

“Yeah, we’re running low on eggs, and only have the one slab of bacon left.” Then he motioned toward the pantry. “But the second freezer has stuff, just no eggs.”

“You check it yet?” Bucky asked as he eyeballed the contents of the fridge. Thunder crashed overhead, and they both glanced up as the lights flickered, but then went steady again.

“Nope, grabbed my phone first to check what the weather was doing.”

“Just storms,” Bucky said, as the thunder collided again and light flashed outside.

“Yep,” Steve kept an eye on the stove timer. It was almost time to pull the rolls out and his stomach was letting him know he hadn’t eaten enough. Bucky pulled out chicken, and set it on the counter, then wandered off toward the pantry and the other freezer.

“Huh,” he grunted.

“What?”

“Frozen french fries. Why is this a thing?”

Steve laughed. “They freeze everything. Apparently microwaving everything is a thing, too.”

The grunt in response amused him. He poured the coffee through to get the third brew going, then removed the cinnamon rolls to rest on the stove top. Once he had both trays out, he popped open the glaze and began to drizzle it across the pastries. His stomach had begun to growl in earnest.

Bucky walked out of the pantry with a stack of frozen steaks in hand, a bag of the frozen french fries and a sack of potatoes. “Those smell good.”

“They do,” Steve admitted, and didn’t wait for them too cool before he peeled one free and began to eat it. It was almost too sweet, but the cinnamon and the fact it was still warm and fluffy just made it taste even better. Bucky stacked the steaks in the sink, shoved the frozen fries in to the freezer, and then began to empty the potatoes onto the counter.

He stole one of the rolls and bit into while Steve polished off his first one, and then poured coffee for both of them.

“Fried potatoes for Nat?”

“Yeah, she can have the last three eggs, whip those up for an omelet while I chop these?” He washed down his cinnamon roll with a large swallow and Steve nodded. Between them, they decimated an entire tray and still got the potatoes cut, and the eggs mixed, and Steve set aside the second tray so they could at least save Nat a couple before he got the bacon going.

Steve wasn’t alone in checking the time, he caught Bucky doing it once or twice and they’d both glanced at the stairs. Nat was either still asleep or she’d wanted to take a shower before she came down. By mutual decision, they’d agreed to back off on hovering, but Steve couldn’t say he was a fan.

“Should we?” he asked after a while, and Bucky laughed.

“Thank you for breaking first, and no…not yet.” He eyed the time before he turned the bacon over in the pan. The sizzle of it, and the scent tangled with the cinnamon from the rolls, and Steve’s
stomach growled again. “We wore her out, and that was the point. So let her sleep for now.”

They were on their second pot of coffee when the rain hit. The force of it whooshed against the windows and they both turned to look. The pool was barely visible under the sheeting curtains falling down. Steve checked his phone again. The quinjet was parked on the other side of the house, and cloaked. Old habits, Bucky said and Steve couldn’t fault him. If necessary, they could evacuate, but it was still just a storm.

They glanced at each other and Steve drummed his fingers against the table once. “You check on her, I’m going to swap the towels.”

“Yes.” Bucky was out of the chair like a slingshot and heading up the stairs. Steve moved the towels over, and got the dryer started. Another rolling series of thunder rumbled over the house, and he didn’t focus on how much it sounded like bombs going off.

It wasn’t, and he didn’t need to worry about them.

Weird things set those memories off, and they didn’t concern him like the flashbacks to the cold. More they just made him a little jumpier. Part of the reason he avoided the fireworks on the 4th of July or the ones at New Year’s. The first time he tried to attend one of them, the sound set his teeth on edge.

He just caught the sound of voices, Bucky’s deeper baritone followed by Nat’s lighter one as he walked back into the kitchen. He flipped the switch on the pot they’d set up for her coffee, and he faced the door with a smile as she appeared tucked under Bucky’s arm.

There was a faint glow to her cheeks, more than just the hint of sun she’d been getting. And like Bucky, the shadows beneath her eyes had eased a little. Though she was moving a little slower in her steps, and she made a face as she slipped away from Buck and crossed the kitchen toward him.

“What’s…”

“I’m fine,” she told him. “That’s what happens when you ride all night, you get a little stiff.” The teasing comment pulled a laugh from him and he dipped his head for a kiss. After she wrapped her arms around him and he embraced her, closing his eyes as she rested her head against his chest.

“I’m way better than fine…my vacation just got real.”

Bucky smirked and reclaimed his coffee cup. “Stevie made you cinnamon rolls, Doll, you hungry?”

“Hmm.” She sounded thoughtful, and Steve fought the frown and the urge to scold her into eating something, then she said, “I’m starving actually. And I smell bacon.” Her stomach gave an audible gurgle, which matched Steve’s own and they both laughed.

“Go sit down,” he told her, and gave her another light brush of his lips to hers. “Buck, get the fried potatoes going?”

“On it.”

Steve delivered the tray of cinnamon rolls, though they had all cooled, to the table. Then got her coffee before refilling his and Buck’s when Bucky slid the cup toward him. Nat bit right into her cinnamon roll and let out a little happy sigh, and he stole another look at her and grinned.

The thunder rolled over them in constant thud of waves, and he caught Nat glancing up even as he and Bucky did as well. “So I’m thinking working out in the pool is off the list today,” she said her
tone idle, but she finished off her cinnamon roll and was in the process of reaching for a second as Steve carried her coffee over.

“Definitely no pool, weather’s probably in for the day.”

She laughed before lifting the mug toward her lips. Steve canted his head to study her, there was a brightness to her eyes that had been absent since she’d woken in the medical bay. He trailed his fingers down her cheek, and she tilted her head up to smile at him.

“You okay?” The quiet question fluttered over him, and he met her gaze as she studied him.

“I told you last night I was fine…”

“I think that was earlier this morning,” she corrected him with a hint of a teasing smile. “But I could have lost track.” Then she took another bite of the cinnamon roll.

“Possibly. I’m good, Angel. I promise…maybe a little tired after last night.”

Her eyes widened, almost the picture of innocence. Almost. “Oh, did I wear you out, Captain?”

“Since I woke up first, I’m going to say I won that round.”

Her laughter was its own reward.

“Omelet, Stevie,” Bucky called and Steve blew Nat a kiss before circling back around to get the omelet started. The scents of fried potatoes, and bacon overlaying the cinnamon rolls just made him hungrier. Once they got Nat’s plate stacked, they’d eat the rest.

Over his shoulder, he caught her reaching for a third cinnamon roll and he elbowed Bucky. His best friend twisted, and they both watched as she pulled the cinnamon roll in half before she took another bite. It had taken cajoling to get her to eat before, or pointing her at the food. Sometimes they’d had to resort directly to feeding her.

With a broad grin, Bucky looked enormously pleased and Steve couldn’t say he disagreed. She’d eaten sandwich after sandwich the night before, drunk the water, and played with him…the heat warmed his face and he turned to look at the omelet to make sure he didn’t burn it. She’d let them do practically anything they’d wanted, and had given as much as she’d taken.

It had been a damn good night, interspersed with naps, cuddling, and alternating wiping her down before they’d all finally soaked in the massive hot tub. And now she was eating, perched in a cushioned chair, one leg over the other as she stared out at the stormy day, her damp curls a testament to the fact that she’d showered just like they had.

Food plated, they returned to the table and he slid it in front of her while Bucky grabbed the rest of the bacon to carry it over along with some bread, and he was building a bacon sandwich that had Nat laughing around bites of food.

“Hush, Natalia,” Bucky warned her and Steve started snickering, too as he stole and then munched on some bacon. Still, Steve couldn’t get enough of the change in Nat. When she caught him staring, he gave her a quick smile.

“Feeling smug?” The element of challenge in those words beckoned to him.

“You could say that,” he admitted, and closed his knees against her foot as she curled her toes against the edge of his chair.
“Well, maybe you two shouldn’t have been holding out for so long,” she said, pointing her bacon at them. “I’ve been interested for days, you two were the ones holding back.”

“Hey, you looked like hell,” Bucky argued.

“Are you saying I wasn’t that attractive?” She was teasing. He knew she was teasing, but Steve was going across the street to avoid encountering even the possibility of answering that.

“I’d never say you were unattractive.” Apparently not Bucky though. “Only a fool would look at you and not see how beautiful you are, but then again, only a fool would fail to notice that you looked like hell, too.”

“Steve didn’t think I looked like hell,” she said, curving her head to look at him. “The only reason I couldn’t persuade him to put out was because you weren’t. Isn’t that right, Steve?” The voice of a siren, the smile of a temptress, and the eyes of a spy honing in for a kill…

“I’m not playing in those waters,” Steve said, definitely not willing to plunge into the dangerous tide. “You’re gorgeous even when you’re covered in muck and smell like a sewer, and since I was in that sewer with you—and I know for damn sure I noticed your ass while we were down there, I can say that honestly, we’re both idiots.”

“Suck. Up.” Bucky said with a mock scowl when Nat burst out laughing.

“You used to be the charming one,” Steve reminded him.

“So quit stealing all my moves,” Bucky said, winking once.

“You still have moves milli moi,” Nat told him. “Very, intense moves.”

She’d plowed through her omelet, and rose, empty coffee cup in hand before either of them could and crossed the kitchen to fill her cup.

“And Steve does not have to steal your moves,” she said over her shoulder. “Solntce moya has moves all his own.”

Before they could start comparing qualities, he asked, “What does sol-nit-se moya mean?”

Coffee in hand, Nat returned to the table. “My sun,” she told him. Then touched her hand to Bucky’s shoulder where the metal joined his body. “Zvezda moya…my star.” She leaned down and kissed Bucky lightly, and his whole demeanor softened for her. Then she slid back into her seat and let her gaze linger on Steve. “Solntce moya, my sun.”

Heat crept up his neck. “You said dor-o-goy once?” Or twice. She’d used it a couple of times the night of their date when he’d gotten her sushi.

Bucky chuckled, “It means darling, or dearest. We need to tutor you in Russian.”

Nat snorted as she stabbed her fork into her fried potatoes. The thunder was almost continuous overhead, and the lightning flashed in the darkened sky, but it was warm, dry, and comfy in the kitchen and more it was full of laughter and teasing. “I need to tutor him in Russian, your accent is atrocious.”

“Myrmra,” Bucky commented.

“Zhopa,” she retorted, and they both grinned.
“One of you teaches me or I’ll take a class online,” Steve informed them and they both laughed. Bucky had finished his food, and he stood, taking his dishes to the sink. “Might look into taking some classes anyway.”

“Yeah?” Nat smiled over at him, as she scraped up the last of her potatoes on the plate. He considered adding what was left on his to hers, but she was quite willingly eating.

“Yeah, actually. Took a look at some course catalogs, figure some modern history classes, some art classes, maybe even some computer classes…they couldn’t hurt.”

Her smile grew wider and Steve straightened under the weight of the approval in her eyes. “Take something fun, too. Music, or dance…” She wagged her eyebrows.

“The only person I’m dancing with is you,” he informed her without missing a beat. “And art classes could be fun, it’s been a while since I took one and…I like the idea. Maybe work on some graphic design.”

He’d looked up computer art and figured that would give him more incentive to increase his computer skills.

“If you need a tutor, I can help you with everything except the art.”

“You can help him with the art, Doll. Just pose for him.” Bucky laughed, and he rescued her empty plate and glanced at Steve’s with a raised brow. Steve shook his head.

“What about you Buck? You think about going back to school?”

“Maybe, don’t really care about it right now though,” he said over his shoulder. “I like how Natalia describes it, but I think I’d rather just get used to having the free time before I fill it up. Besides…I hear being an Avenger takes up a lot of time.”

A thrill went through him and Nat paused coffee cup halfway to her lips. He didn’t miss the startled look in her eyes. Buck had been pretty clear he wasn’t interested in the business anymore or fighting, and Steve didn’t have a problem with that.

“It can be time consuming,” Nat answered before he could think up an appropriate retort that didn’t scare him off the idea. “But worth it. I have it on good authority the team lead’s a pushover.”

It was Steve’s turn to snort. “He’s not that much of a pushover.”

“He is for me,” she countered, and the way her gaze caressed him gave him pause.

“Sometimes,” he had to agree.

“Well, we’ll see how it all shakes out when we’re back, but if the offer’s still open,” Bucky told him as he came back to the table and stood next to Nat’s chair, one hand settling on her shoulder. “I’ll train with you and Natalia to get up to snuff, then we can try working me in with the others.”

An element of skepticism existed there, but Nat covered his fingers with her own and glanced up at him. “It’d be good to have you work with me when I have to show Peter and Wanda something, you’re more experienced opponent, and I can go full speed with you. Both of you really.”

The invitation meant a lot, and Steve said, “We’ll figure all that out, though you need to get off the bench Romanoff.”
“Well besides the obvious, why is that Rogers?” Point for point, her dry tone matched his and he grinned.

“Because when Bucky and Sam start having to work together, you’re going to be in charge of those sessions.”

Bucky released a grunt of displeasure, and Nat stared at him.

“I call that cruel and unusual.”

“I call it the price of getting off your ass and back on the team,” he said, thoroughly enjoying the way her mouth rounded into a perfect ‘o’ before her eyes narrowed and promised him retribution.

“On that note,” Bucky said cupping her nape and tilting her head back before he gave her a very thorough kiss that had Steve adjusting his posture. Releasing her, Bucky brushed his fingers down her cheek. “I’m going to go take a nap. Stormy day, full belly, and pleasantly tired…” Sauntering out of the room, he waved at them. “You two play nicely.”

Nat watched him go, and then glanced back at Steve. She waited a beat then said, “Did you know?”

Shaking his head, Steve offered Nat one of the last two pieces of bacon, which she took one and then began to munch. “Nope. He hadn’t really said anything, not since he told me he wanted to sit out the fighting, he wasn’t sure he wanted to do it anymore.”

She looked thoughtful as she finished the bacon and Steve cleared the rest of the plates, but Nat stole one more cinnamon rolls before he carried the remaining ones away and he hid another smile. So much for lack of appetite.

“I don’t want him to make himself for me,” she finally said, and Steve glanced over his shoulder.

“He’s not, Angel. I would bet he’s been wrestling with it for a few days, maybe longer. But if he is, we put his mind at ease. You would be okay with him sitting it out?”

“Of course,” she told him. “But I don’t think he would be as okay as he might like.”

Steve had to agree. Just like Steve hated the fact Nat had gone into the factory without them, or she didn’t like the missions he’d had to take without her. They were a package deal, and that meant in and out of the field. “No, I don’t think he would either.” He stared toward the stairs where Buck had disappeared. Taking a nap was a great idea, but he wasn’t dragging Nat off to do it, he trusted her to make the call. That told Steve that Bucky liked what he’d seen in her this morning, and maybe, just maybe she really had turned the corner.

He tracked his gaze to her throat, but he couldn’t see the hickey he’d left from this angle.

“We’ll make sure he’s okay,” he reminded her. She’d been through the wringer. It had wrenched his heart to see her cry the day before. Even leaving her with Buck, and knowing she was right where she needed to be, he despised not being able to just fix it. Then because he wanted to keep it a little lighter, he added, “But you’re still going to have to rein he and Sam in.”

Nat chuckled. “Well, they’re just fighting over who is your real best friend. You’re a hot commodity, Cap.”

It was his turn to roll his eyes. “Maybe I should hang out with Tony more.”
Rising, she gave him a wicked smile. “Yes, you should do that anyway. You two need to learn to get along and it would set a wonderful example for Sam and James.”

Except Sam wasn’t hooked on Nat, but he got the point. She carried her cup over and there was still a small piece of cinnamon roll left in her hand and she held it up to his lips with a questioning look. Catching her hand, he ate the proffered treat, and sucked her fingers clean. The little hitch in her breath encouraged him, and he took her empty mug and rinsed it out before setting it in the sink.

“Want to try that dancing?”

She’d been so disappointed when they’d told her no, but the liveliness in her eyes and the swift warmth in her smile promised him it had been the right thing to say.

“You sure I’m up for it?” Of course, she couldn’t let it go without a little challenge, and Steve slid his arm around her and kept his pace sedate as he guided her out of the kitchen. It was dark throughout the lower level of the house, and flashes of lightning played like a strobe even as the heavy pelting of the rain served as a soundtrack.

“I think you wanted to dance, and you can put your feet on mine and I can do the work, or I can just as easily pick you up,” he offered, lifting her off the ground, then sliding an arm beneath her knees to cradle her. Mindful of the fact she’d been moving a touch gingerly, he headed for the main living room with its fireplace they’d barely used and wide open space and tall floor to ceiling windows—Bucky hadn’t been a fan though he’d liked their blackout function—and the thickly carpeted area. “I did promise you a workout.”

“Hmm,” she said linking her arms around his neck. “I’m pretty sure I got a workout and then some last night.”

A half step from the oversized sofa, he met her gaze. “Does that mean you want to rest some more or you up for pushing it?” His initial intent hadn’t been to get her naked, and yet now that he had her and it was dark, and stormy and they were alone—he really couldn’t think of anything else he’d prefer.

With light fingers, she stroked the hair at the nape of his neck, and then leaned up to kiss him. The slow brush of her lips on his had him opening his mouth farther, the gradual warmth flaming higher. When she dragged her teeth across his lower lip and held onto it with an almost proprietorial air. Finally, she let him go and then said, “I’m up for whatever you want to do Steve. You did something amazing for me last night…”

“Point of order,” he told her, and his voice came out a little hoarse. He sat on the sofa, and she twisted, until she straddled his lap and he cupped his hands under ass—mindful of how much they’d pushed the night before—and he made no pretense about his erection when the weight of her settled against him. “You did something amazing for me last night…”

Delight filled her expression, and Steve didn’t think he’d ever tire of it. He liked being able to get her to look like that. Arms entwined around his neck, she tilted her head back, and laughed. His gaze dipped to the hickey, and it was still dark black and a little blue on the edges. Bruised, and he leaned forward to press a kiss to it. Some part of him he barely recognized enjoyed seeing the mark there, but the rest of him had been rather hoping it was gone, because it would have said so much about her healing.

It had only been a few hours, he cautioned himself.

“You’re thinking awfully hard over there, dorogoi,” she murmured, and he met her heavy lidded
gaze as she tilted her head to study him.

“I want you better, Nat,” he admitted, then smoothed his hands against her back. “I can take anything as long as I know you’re right there. I’m so used to turning my head and finding you at my side that it feels damn awkward when you’re not.”

It felt alien if he were honest.

“I can deal with the Accords, and the Committee, Bucky and Sam jabbing at each other, and even Tony poking at me…but I can’t deal with you hurting. Everything in me just wants to make it better for you.”

“You do,” she assured him, but he didn’t want platitudes.

“You know what I mean,” he chastised her.

“Yes,” she said and pushed up on her knees, so she wasn’t quite riding him through their clothes, but it pressed her flush against his chest, and she nuzzled her nose to his. “You make me feel better, Steve. You make me want to be better.”

“Nat you don’t have to be better—you’re amazing just the way you are.”

And her smile grew. “Then you say things like that and make me want to see myself the way you see me.”

If only… The feeling in his chest swelled and expanded, she was his everything, and as he toyed with her hair, he didn’t look away from those eyes. A single light illuminated the room aside from the flashes of lightning, which had grown more intermittent. “I really wish you would,” he said, then wrapped one of her curls around his finger. “You are…okay…”

He had to get this out and expressing himself in poetry or flowery words was just not his thing, no matter how he tried. She could pull it out of him, somehow, and he refused to examine that too closely.

“When you went after Parker,” he said, packing away his irritation at her having been put in that position in the first place, and focusing on the woman who’d chosen without hesitation to go after the kid. “The lack of regard for yourself speaks volumes, Nat. You put everyone ahead of you. Civilians on the street, the team…me, Bucky…”

“You do the same thing, Steve.” When she would have squirmed back, he clasped her hips to keep her still.

“We’re not talking about me, Angel, we’re talking about you. When you leapt off my shield and caught an alien skiff flying at ridiculously high speeds—you were amazing. You didn’t hesitate; you just did what had to be done. You did it over and over…you could have run with Bruce, instead you ride the Hulk’s back all the way up to a flying city.”

Now there was a thought that could give him nightmares, but he just shook his head.

“You give everything, and you expect nothing. That’s the amazing person you are, and Natasha…I told you this before but I don’t know if you believed me, you take my breath away, and I don’t want you to ever give it back.”

And at the same time…
“But I need you beside me,” he told her. “I need to see you there…and then I know it’s going to be okay. Even in Germany…you had my back.”

Her eyes narrowed a fraction, and he deserved that. “You weren’t going to stop.”

“But you could have stopped me.” Because he wouldn’t have fought her. If she’d fired those bites at him, he’d have taken the stings, but he wouldn’t have fought her. If she’d put herself between him and the controls, he would have ceded the battle.

“I almost lost you a few days ago,” he said, blowing out a breath. “And I had a taste of what life without you was like when I was in Wakanda and that was before…”

“I rocked your world?” She asked, brightening a little, but her expression still deadly sober and serious.

“You’ve been rocking my world since I stepped on that hellicarrier, ma’am.” It was exactly where he wanted her to stay. Challenge him. Push him. Dare him. He was so alive with her, and if nothing else the days since she got hurt had proven that to him over and over. The night before had been different, and unexpected, and pretty damn erotic on the whole.

She tilted her head back and laughed.

He had no complaints.

“I’m serious,” he teased her, then pinched her butt gently and she eyed him in surprise.

“Steve Rogers…did you just actually pinch my ass?”

“Why yes, ma’am, I believe I did.” From challenging to somber to playful to flirting to sad and back to challenging, the mercurial shifting of her moods promised to keep him on his toes. So why not play with fire a little bit? “What are you planning to do about it?”

“Hmm…” She appeared to give it all due consideration, and then she climbed off his lap and he kept his hands close to steady her until she was on her feet. With a teasing smirk, she strolled over to the stereo system and its various remotes. She pressed two buttons, and then a third, and music began to play through the speakers, slow, melodic, and not one he was sure he’d heard before and she held out her hand to him, fingers curling. “Front and center, Rogers.”

Chuckling, he rose and clasped her fingers as she drew him away from the coffee table and sofa. After placing one of his arms around her at her waist, she slid her hand up to his shoulder and then clasped his free hand in hers, palm to palm.

“I’m failing to see this as a deterrent for pinching your ass,” he told her, because if he was going to play with fire, why not just jump all the way in.

“Didn’t say it was a deterrent,” she assured him as they began to move slowly to the music. He was careful to avoid her feet and then she just grinned at him as they moved slowly around the living room. “But I am getting my dance, so I win.”

Steve hesitated a step, and then started laughing. “You’re terrible.”

“I know,” she told him smugly, but she was leaning against his arm and it sank in slowly that she really was letting him do the work. She guided their steps, but he controlled the movement, and the speed, and then because he felt like it, he curled his arm, sliding it just below her buttocks because he didn’t want any pressure on her lower spine and lifted her so she rested against his chest and he
kept dancing.

“And I told you I would do all the work.”

“Touché,” she murmured.

The song segued into another, and he savored the quiet lyrical strains of music as he continued to move around the room, every step growing in confidence. It was the box step she’d taught him, but her eyes remained full of life, and the smile on her lips didn’t fade and every step buoyed him for the next.

When she wrapped both of her arms around his neck and claimed his mouth with hers, he slowed and just held her as their tongues dueled. Gliding a hand into her hair, he chased her kisses as he moved them toward the sofa. The lock of her mouth on his invaded his every sense. Every time he kissed her was better than the last, and it had become the drug he craved. With one knee he lowered them onto the sofa and settled her gently against the cushions.

Lifting his head, he flicked a look from her heated eyes to her swollen lips and the need for her went into overdrive. But they’d had a hell of a night, and as hard as the erection pressing against his leg had grown, he wasn’t going to risk hurting her.

“You good with this?” He asked and damn, she’d left him all kinds of rough voiced again. There was a redness to her cheeks…the stubble, but she didn’t look remotely upset.

“Yes,” she said, reaching for his waistband and unbuttoning his shorts. “So good…” He let her tug the zipper down before he pulled away from her questing fingers and dove in to take possession of her mouth. The storm, the music, and the occasional rumble of thunder all faded, all he heard were the little pants of her breath and the way his heart thundered in his ear.

Her nipples stiffened under the soft cotton, and he palmed one through her shirt, teasing it with the fabric. The way she began to squirm told him he was doing something right. When she tugged at his shoulders, he chuckled and kissed a path down her throat, spending a moment to lave over the hickey he’d left there, a soothing balm, before traveling lower and capturing her nipple through the shirt and sucking on it.

Nat let out a soft sound and then she shifted her legs, and bare toes brushed his sides, and he broke from his nibbling to catch her feet pushing his shorts and briefs down in one clever motion.

Surprise speared him and he met her heated gaze and laughed. “That’s cheating…”

But he didn’t wait for her reply before he just peeled her shorts, panties and all, right off as he stood, and kicked his own away. Off came his shirt, and when he reached for hers, she pointed a finger at him. “I like this shirt. It’s soft.”

“I like that shirt too,” he promised, all soothing touches along her thighs and then across her hips before he hooked the hem and guided it upward. “I like it off you.” Then she arched her back as they tugged it off together, lifting her breasts, and the marks and tiny bruises littering them from their play all through the night drew him like a magnet. The fact his dog tags rested right between her breasts was icing on the cake.

Palming one breast, he pressed his lips to the trail of little bites and bruises as he made his way to the other. Nat squirmed again and he gave one nipple a tight twist, exactly the pressure she’d told him she liked and her sudden gasp and stillness made him smile against her skin.

“I’m doing the work,” he reminded her between laving his tongue in circles around her free nipple,
and blowing against cool air to see it pucker tighter.

“You did all the work last night,” she moaned, when he sucked the nipple tight against his teeth and did another tug to the nipple he’d twisted. Her thighs rubbed together as she shifted and he eased his hand down to nudge them apart and she arched her hips to meet him, all need and heat.

“Trust me, Angel—this doesn’t feel like work,” he whispered, before easing a finger against her labia, carefully exploring her reactions. She’d gotten sore before, sore and bruised, but if anything she pressed upward, her feet flattening on the sofa and he smiled, as he teased little circles against her clit. Lifting his head, he watched the cascade of reactions play across her face and the moment he added some pressure, she tipped her head back and let out a soft sound that went straight to his cock.

He wanted to play with her like this for hours. Days. The rest of his fucking life. And he didn’t think he would ever grow tired of it. Pressing a finger into her, he marveled at how swollen the channel was around his finger as he sank it in to his knuckles, and when he added a second, she arched her hips to match him thrust for thrust.

Twice he brought her right to the edge, and then backed off, fascinated by how she would tense up and clench and the way little beads of sweat glistened on her breasts. Then her breathing would grow labored. He used his fingers, his lips, and his tongue—fuck he loved tasting her—but he wanted to know everything, and she let him play even when she went white knuckled, until…

“Dammit, Steve…”

He’d just eased away from her, his lips wet with her come and rested his cheek against her thigh. He’d been careful, spreading her with his hands to avoid too much chafe from his stubble.

“You need something, Nat?” He tried to keep his tone even, but it didn’t come out that way at all. He hurt for wanting her so bad, and his cock was so hard, he had a feeling he would make himself come just from playing with her.

Then a part of him wondered if he could—something to experiment with later.

She fisted a hand into his hair, and when she tugged he went willingly and then their lips fused and she licked herself off of his lips and he lost himself and even as she caught his cock and angled him just right, he thrust in, and they both let out the same shuddering moan.

There was no finesse, he just wrapped an arm around her and slipped his hand between her head and the arm of the sofa as he began to drive himself into her. Nat’s legs locked around him, and everything in the world narrowed down to every point of his body touching hers, and when she came apart, he swallowed her cries with a kiss. When his hips stuttered and he came in a rush, his vision whited out. He had no idea how long it lasted, but slowly he grew aware he was squashing her on the cushions.

When he would have moved, she slapped his ass, and a spark of heat warmed through him.

“Stay where you are,” she told him, lips against his ear. “I need this.”

If he were honest…so did he. And he buried his face against her neck and shuddered as her cunt fluttered around his softening cock with the little aftershocks running through her system.

They lounged there for five minutes or five hours, he lost all track of time, but he did shift them, trying not to slip out of her as he rolled them over and she sprawled above him. When she tucked her head against his chest, he began to run his hand down her bare back.
“Little nap,” she whispered, and he smiled. “Then round two.”

And his whole body gave a little shudder.

“Whatever the lady wants…”

Her even steady breaths tickled his skin, and he contented himself listening to her breath, and the storm, aware of how precious she was and how much he loved her. The words burned on his tongue, but he hesitated. It was a lot, and he wasn’t sure if she was ready to hear it yet.

Still…she had promised him next Christmas and the one after that, and the one after that…

They had time.

And now he was sure of it.
Chapter Summary

More of the day after, and Natasha is definitely feeling better...

Chapter Nine

Breathe

Natasha

The split-crack sound of thunder overhead hammered open the sky and the deluge swept against the house. The rough and tumble sound of it pulled her out of sleep. Head pillowed against Steve’s chest, she sighed softly. The steady thumping was his heart, and the warmth of his body radiated upward and kept away even the suggestion of a chill. It was still mostly dark in the living room, the storm screwed with her sense of time.

Then again, her internal clock had been on the fritz since she got hurt in the first place. Careful and quiet, she lifted her head. Steve’s breathing was deep, and even. His impossibly thick lashes marked his closed eyes, and the weight of his hands—one against her ass and the other one her hip—made her smile.

Like James, he had shadows under his eyes. They had not been sleeping, but he was now. No flicker of movement beneath his eyelids, and no shift in his breathing. Even his cock still tucked against her thighs, soft and quiescent, didn’t stir.

Settled there, she studied him in the soft illumination of the single lamp. He’d begun to grow his beard back in. The prickle of the stubble had left reddened and tender spots everywhere on her, and though she’d declined to let him eat her out the night before, he’d taken exquisite care with it that morning.

Steve Rogers possessed the steepest of learning curves. There was still so much about him she wanted to know. His desire to go to school excited her, his openness with their relationship delighted her, and the security she found in the friendship he and James shared grounded her.

As much as she wanted to linger here, her bladder registered its protests. With care, she eed out of his arms, mindful that her shifting weight didn’t disturb him. His hand tightened briefly, squeezing her ass, then slipped away as he tilted his head to the side, and settled with a half-sigh.

On silent feet, she rose and then pulled the blanket off the back of the sofa and pulled it over him. Out of contact with his skin, a chill raced over her and she picked up their clothes, carefully folding his and setting them on the coffee table before carrying hers toward the stairs. The stickiness on her thighs definitely needed to go and a rinse off wouldn’t kill her.
At the top of the stairs, she paused to look out the huge windows. The trees were blowing sideways, the rain came down in belting sheets and the whole world had gone this kind of dark, washed out gray. So totally different from the sun-drenched days she’d barely appreciated.

Oh, the irony. She began to feel a little more human and the sky falls in.

Then again…the sensual ache she experienced from head to toe was so much more desirable. Dragging her attention away from the storm-laden day, she headed for their suite. The door was closed, but not locked. It was dark in the room, the blackout curtains were closed and it took her a moment to let her eyes adjust. A single light was on in the bathroom, and the door was mostly closed. Was James awake?

But one glance at the bed said, no, he was sprawled on his back, beautifully relaxed and sound asleep. Closing the door with a definitive click, and dragging her feet as she walked to the bathroom were choices. He didn’t need to be startled awake. Not when he, like Steve, so desperately needed the sleep.

A little thrill curved through her that they were both worn out after a night with her. Then again…she smiled all the way into the bathroom. Setting her clothes on the sink side, she turned on the shower, and then caught a good look at herself in the mirror. The grin she wore was ridiculous. It made her cheeks ache, so why didn’t she just stop?

Their marks were all over her. Bite marks, finger impressions, and hickeys littered her torso and there were more than a few on her thighs. Shaking her head, she pulled her hair up and clipped it out of the way before emptying her bladder. The bath sounded good, too, but she was still just a bit on the tired side. If she slipped into the hot heat, she’d risk passing out and yeah, not an option.

In the shower, she turned her back to the hot water and reached for the soap, the sting of the water against her back was absent, and she glanced over her shoulder. There was a very prominent bite on her left shoulder that made her laugh, but the sunburn had faded.

Well, that was definitely a step in the right direction though the sunburn couldn’t have been the worst of her issues. Running soap over her arms, she closed her eyes and replayed the last twenty-four hours behind her eyelids. From fighting with them to the pool fight to breaking down…

She blew out a shaking breath, and turned in the water to rinse off the soap.

“Sometimes she would fall asleep against my chest and if I turned my head, I could press it against her hair. It was so soft, and it smelled like…hope and sunshine.”

“Her eyes were blue when she was born—but they darkened to this gorgeous green color. More you than me.”

“She had a little dimple in her cheek when she smiled.”

“Her hair was reddish-brown, but it was also getting darker.”

She could almost picture the baby. If she closed her eyes and focused only on his description, of the picture he painted, and the very real love in his voice when he described her.

The cabin was still there. The place they’d run away to. It was still there, and he wanted to take her to see it. Maybe…just maybe it would break loose the roadblocks to her memory.

Running a hand over her face, she made sure there were no tears before she shut off the water.
“I love you. You know that right?”

Mind-boggling as the concept was, she had known. It wasn’t a revelation to her, even when it ignited the thought she should go. They were too close. *Don’t trust anyone, even an ally can become an enemy.*

She and James had been enemies, forced yes, but enemies nonetheless. She and Steve had danced on that knife’s edge, adversaries more than enemies, and now?

Now she had them both, and they were building something real.

*Don’t get sloppy, leave no evidence of your presence.*

As she dressed again, her mind flitted to the framed pictures now in Steve's living room, and of adding more to them. There had been pictures of her pregnant, real, tangible proof. James burned them.

_To protect me._

She toweled off and then dressed slowly. Breathe, she told herself. Just breathe. Maintaining mission readiness had conflicted with her need for rest, and she’d been latching onto that rule for some sense of stability. But she’d broken all of the rules, and the sudden frenetic pump of her heart left her gripping the counter.


Including the most important one—*never get attached._

Nat met gaze in the mirror. “*You are a weapon, Natalia. A tool. Remember that, and remember you have no place in this world.*”

“Fuck off, Madame B. You’re dead and I’m still here,” she said the quiet words with every ounce of conviction and banished the ghosts.

Shaking off the cobwebs of the past, she flicked off all the lights save the night one James had on when she’d come up before opening the door. He was still on the bed, sleeping. From the even rise and fall of his chest, and relaxed features, it was a good sleep.

Warmth fisted in her chest as she leaned against the doorframe and just studied him. Folding her arms, she tried to imagine what it had been like to realize she was pregnant. She rarely had a menstrual cycle. Now and then, so intermittent she sometimes forgot about it. So how had she known? How had she discovered it before they had?

Changes to her body? She paid very close attention to it. Training demanded she recognize her own weak spots before anyone else could exploit them. So what did being pregnant feel like? What signs had she noticed? Tempted to crawl onto the bed and wake James, she made herself walk away. Both of her guys were exhausted, and they’d been looking after her for days.

It was about time she returned the favor.

Pausing, she glanced around the bags that were stowed near the closet and dresser. They’d arrived and pretty much unpacked or stacked. She barely remembered getting to the island. Maybe she’d been asleep when they arrived. It wouldn’t surprise her.

But for the first time in days, she wanted her phone and her laptop. Isaiah had probably lost his
mind with her off the grid for so long, and there had been research she was doing into…

Something.

Something with Oscorp. Her head hurt, and she rubbed her fingers in a small circle against her temple. With care, because she was still sore and there was a tingling as she remembered James running his fingers against her anus, as he worked her loose and before he…a shudder traveled from her toes to her breasts and back down again.

Turning herself on when they were both sound asleep was not her best plan, but then…she’d avoided any kind of anal sex. Ever. Even when her marks would have tumbled easier if she’d played along. That…

Was it the vulnerability or because those marks were definitely not James? How many physiological responses did she still possess from their time together?

Biting her lip, she ignored the pain flaring right behind her eye. Don’t get worked up about it. The last thing she needed was to collapse again; the guys were just barely beginning to give her room to breathe and to take a breath themselves.

Her backpack was at the bottom of the pile, tucked right against the dresser. Her phone was in the front pocket and dead as a doornail. The laptop was dead, too and the power supply wasn’t in the bag.

Well, fine. She left it in place and took the phone with her. A glance over her shoulder at James and she smiled at him. That tingling warmth spread through her and she wanted to ask him about their first time—what had it been like? Had it been quick and meaningless? Had the feelings happened first or the sex? Her training would say she’d seduced the Soldier to exert influence, but the idea she’d manipulated him at all made her sick.

And now, her scattered thoughts were bouncing all over the place and the headache increased. Compartmentalizing was a skill she possessed, so she needed to get some of this under control. Since when did she allow herself the luxury of being so disorganized?

Because you trust them… The insidious voice murmured in her ear. Because you broke. You broke and they didn’t leave.

If anything, they’d closed ranks.

Downstairs, she paused to check on Steve, and he was still asleep, and the rain continued to occlude the view with its sheeting curtains. As tempting as it was to go and run her fingers down his face, or even just curl back up with him, she resisted it as she had the pull to James.

She could quite easily drown herself in the need for them, and that wouldn’t do any of them any good. Drawing the door partially closed to the kitchen, she turned on a light, then got her phone plugged in to charge. While the guys had done nearly all the work—the corner of her lips kicked up into another stupid grin and she almost laughed at herself.

Giddy as a fucking school girl.

Or at least like the ones she’d seen on TV.

The guys had handled the cooking, and nearly everything in the kitchen, and everywhere else for that matter.
The giggle escaped this time, and she rolled her eyes at herself. The throb of the headache receded with every stifled laugh she let out. Fantasy becoming reality had been better than anything she could imagine.

Oh for fuck’s sake Natasha… She scolded herself and got the electric kettle started, and then went on the hunt for tea. They had several different blends. James had been making her a different type each day, but she just wanted a strong tea. Her stomach was over all the coffee she’d drunk. Too much. Though…oh, two cinnamon rolls left, she purloined both and started munching on one while she looked.

From the moment she found them, she was starving. The tea basket was in the cupboard next to the coffee and she’d almost finished her cinnamon roll by the time she’d picked through the basket to choose her tea. Waiting for the kettle to boil, she looked at the steaks in the sink.

Her mouth watered at the idea of grilling them, but the rain outside suggested the outdoor grill wasn’t going to be an option. She polished off the second cinnamon roll, then checked the vegetable drawer in the fridge. An onion was there, and a couple of green peppers, and a very sad looking bag of carrots. Too sad, no, no carrots. So onions, peppers, and steak…

The kettle clicked, and she got the water poured over the tea while she considered the options. The steaks were still pretty frozen, so she filled one sink with water and submerged the steaks, packages and all, into the water. So they would be dinner. But the guys were probably going to want lunch…

An idea kick-started in the back of her mind and she wandered into the pantry. Flour, yeast, tomato sauce, olive oil, garlic, basil, oregano…there had been a block of cheese in the fridge, but did they have… She checked the freezer and nearly cheered at the sausage, and pepperoni. They might be too small for a full meal, but they’d work on a pizza.

She carried her treasures out, then set the pepperoni and sausage in water to defrost. Tea brewed, she spooned some jam into it, stirred and then took a sip as she walked over to stare out the windows. Her phone released a little beep, and she turned to find the time flickering onto the screen as it adjusted for location.

Early afternoon.

Wow, they had slept, and then slept some more.

So she’d make two pizzas, a cheese one to start, then the pepperoni and sausage one after the meat defrosted. She’d wait until the phone was charged before checking her email and messages. Once she got back to work, she had a feeling it would take hours. Hours she wanted to spend on Steve and James. Excitement threaded through her and she put the phone down to keep charging and got started on the dough for the pizza crust.

This was going to be fun.

Bucky
Awareness skated over him, and he cracked an eyelid in time to see Natalia’s smile at him before she slipped out of the room. He stretched his arms above his head and then sat up slowly. Outside the storm still lashed at the house, but Bucky found himself savoring the sound. Pushing out of the bed, he drew open the blackout curtains and stared out at the rain.

He liked it because it isolated them. The sun and the blue skies, and the perfect days of heat on the beach had been amazing. But the rain left them in the bubble of safety created by the house far away from the rest of the world. Bracing an arm against the glass, he listened to the thunder, and studied the occasional flash of thunder.

A part of him almost wished they were in the mountains, under eight feet of snow. Craved it. Take Natalia and Steve and park them somewhere the rest of the world would never be able to touch them again. They could spend their nights exploring every way they could make Natalia come, and their days could be relaxed, with sleep and reading or just being together.

Raking a hand through his hair, he shook his head. As much as he longed to fulfill that fantasy immediately, it wasn’t likely. Those two were too committed to helping others. And it wouldn’t kill Bucky to be a part of that. Not if it meant keeping the pair of them safe. Then periodically, he’d steal them away again, for another week like this one or a long weekend—sans Natalia’s injuries thank you very much—and they could just be.

Turning from the window, he stared at the wreckage of the bed. The strewn blankets, and scattered pillows. He’d changed the sheets out the night before, but the room still smelled like sex and Natalia…

Fuck, they’d never had this kind of time before. The closest had been when they lived in Montana, and during her pregnancy, he’d almost been afraid to touch her. Always careful, always gentle, and after she healed from the birth—well they’d been very active until…

He shuttled those thoughts aside. Not focusing on the ugliness got him through the days. He wanted those memories of Natalia, savored them, just like he’d savor the night before.

A chuckle escaped him at the look of happiness on Steve’s face over breakfast. Stevie had really come through the night before. Bucky had told him he couldn’t imagine inviting any other man into that position with Natalia, didn’t think he could share her willingly. He’d been forced to watch her seduce others…

Forced to watch her be used.

But last night, Natalia’s surprised and unfettered joy coupled with Steve’s very real excitement usurping his nervousness had empowered Bucky in a way he couldn’t have imagined. Not only did he share her, he’d directed her, and the fact she and Steve took so much pleasure in each other, only fed his own pleasure…

His cock stirred and he had to stop picturing the way she’d looked on her knees, nose buried against Steve’s abdomen as she took him all the way to her throat, or how she’d pushed back against Bucky’s fingers and let him play with her until he could fit her onto Steve and then take her himself.

Fisting a hand around his cock he gave it a hard squeeze, just enough pain to tell it to calm down.

At the moment, all he wanted to do was go find Natalia and kiss her until her lips bruised and then have her again as if he hadn’t had her enough throughout the night.
In all fairness though… he didn’t think there would ever be enough time with her. Never enough moments. Every single one was precious to him because he knew what it was to lose her, to lose everything and that sobering thought killed his erection for the moment.

Remaking the bed, he got the pillows squared away, then cleaned up the scattering of clothes. Natalia had dislodged a couple of bags to find her backpack. He eyed the open front pocket of it with equal parts pleasure and disdain. Pleasure because she was well enough to even remember she had a phone. Disdain because he was not ready to deal with the rest of the world.

The Bartons, they were fine. Stark could show up even. He could deal with that.

But not the others. Not the ones she had to look after or train or fix or manage and sure as hell not the rest of the world that wanted a piece of her.

Fisting his temper next, he shook off the thought and finished making the room somewhat presentable before he went into the bathroom and ran a comb through his hair. A hint of stubble on his cheeks had him taking a moment to shave.

Razor rinsed out and face dry, he headed downstairs to seek them out. The pocket doors to the living room were only half open and Steve was sound asleep on the sofa. And the smell of sex down here was nearly as strong as it had been upstairs.

Well, go Stevie.

With a smirk, he followed the light and quiet music for the kitchen and pushed the door closed the rest of the way once inside the lit room. But the sight that greeted him had him stopping dead in his tracks.

Natalia had smudges of flour on one cheek, her fingers were painted in it, and she was rolling out what looked like a…

“You make pizza?” His jaw dropped, and his stomach rumbled, and Bucky wasn’t sure he could love her more than he did when she grinned at him. Her hair was all piled up on top of her head, baring her throat and leaving little ringlets to tease at her cheeks.

“I make really good pizza,” she informed him. But it wasn’t just the way she said it, it was how her eyes lit up and her face seemed to glow. Natalia had been coming back to them in bare inches, more like centimeters, and she’d been so pale. Even when she’d laughed, there’d been an element of hollowness to her.

Some of that came from the nightmares about Mary Elizabeth, the rest came from the fact she’d worn herself literally to the bone. She needed to heal, but the woman flipping and turning the pizza dough like a seasoned pro…

Natalia had more than turned a corner, she’d already made it halfway up the block. Savoring the sight in front of him, he made his way around to the fridge and retrieved bottles of water, one for her and one for him. Wetting his lips, he watched as she set the dough down and then turned to the second crust.

Not just one pizza, but two…

He loved being around her. He’d told Steve, back when they were in Venice and he barely had any idea of who she really was to him beyond a nebulous sensation, that being around her just made him feel better. From the shorts she wore showing off her legs, to the t-shirt hugging her braless chest to the chain around her neck and the bracelet on her wrist, she was so vibrantly alive at the
moment.

She bumped him with her hip, and keeping her flour coated hands away from him, turned her face up to give him an expectant look. Smiling, he set the water bottles aside, and cupped her face before lowering his lips to massage hers open with small nibbling bites, gentle licks, and then sweeping in when she let out a soft sigh and leaned in toward him.

Tongue stroking hers, he savored the hints of sugar, tea, and cinnamon on her lips and in her mouth. The angle forced her up onto her toes, and he slid a hand down to grip her hip, and balance her as he continued to savor every low moan, and sweet sound she released.

His earlier erection returned in full force as he skated his fingers down her throat to her chest, then began to massage one breast through the cotton. She’d asked him for a kiss, but the moment she kissed him back and traded every nipping stroke of his teeth against her tongue for one of her own on his, he lost all semblance of restraint over the desire now racing through him.

Natalia was alive. She was his again. They had a chance for a life. No handlers. No one to strip mine their memories or leave them lost to the shadows only to find and lose each other all over again.

Kissing down her throat, he dropped to a knee and then locked his lips around one of the hard points her nipples created against the cotton. Natalia’s breath came out in a long, slow beckoning sigh. How many times had they snuck away into corners, hidden from the cameras, out of sight of their handlers and abusers? How many times had he only been able to ease his fingers into her cunt, to massage her clit and then swallow her soft, nearly inaudible cries as she came on his hands? Fewer still were the days when she would take him in her mouth or when they had enough time he could fuck her properly.

The swell of her breasts below the shirt taunted him, and they were in the brightly lit kitchen, insulated from the world, safe, and they could have each other however they wanted, whenever they wanted. He gripped the edges of her shirt and tore it in half, releasing her breast only long enough to rip the cotton away, and then he locked over the blushing dark rose nipple, all stiffened to a point and sucked it against his teeth.

She’d always liked to have her breasts played with, even when she’d been sore and tender from nursing their daughter. She promised him his mouth was just the balm and he’d learned all the different ways to soothe and stimulate her. Her shorts were in the way and he glanced up to find her staring down at him with blown wide pupils, a flush in her cheeks and her flour coated hands planting on the fridge as if to keep herself upright.

“I love you, Natalia,” he whispered, and reveled in the full body shudder she released as he pulled the shorts off, the panties got tangled so he shredded those too and she let out a gasping little laugh, that was still almost inaudible.

The need to be quiet. To hide what they were doing, to keep it secret, and keep it safe.

They didn’t have to do that anymore. The only person who would hear them was the only person welcome to join them whenever he wanted. Bucky lapped at the neglected nipple as he massaged her clit. She was unbelievably slick already. He shifted to put her back to the fridge, and she let out a soft hiss at the cold and hooked her thigh over his shoulder. Her clit was so swollen that it stood out from its hood, and he grinned—very glad he’d shaved. There were hints of prickle burn on her thighs, but he wouldn’t irritate any of those.

Pressing a kiss to the marks Steve had left, he tracked his lips to her cunt as he thrust two fingers
into her. Natalia gave up keeping her hands off of him, and she sank them into his hair. Grinning in triumph as he eroded her control, he began to lick at clit, tiny, feathering tastes that just left him hungry for more.

Her cunt fluttered around his fingers as he thrust them, quivering and pulsing as she gripped at him. The muscle in her thigh went taut and locked down even as she held him tighter and began to thrust her hips forward to meet his fingers and ride his face.

Casting his gaze upward, he wanted to groan and then did, vibrating her clit until she released a wordless moan that wrapped around his cock and made him even harder. Her arousal flushed him with heat and he continued to tease and suck, alternating the force so that he drove her up and down, pushing her until she was right on the edge and then bringing her back down with him.

He lived for every moaning note, and he wanted her to hear her scream. He wanted those keening sounds she’d released the night before, and the slow cries as she came apart between them.

The next time she almost came, he pulled away and met her incensed gaze, a lazy smile pulled at his lips. “You taste delicious, Doll,” he informed her and enjoyed the flush spreading out over her breasts and up her throat. “So fucking sweet for me.”

“Yeah?” The husky note dripped with need, and he curved his fingers at the end of every thrust and she tipped her head back, matching his pace without an ounce of shame.

“Oh yeah…and you’re going to come for me just like this, aren’t you?” It was more of a demand than a request, but when her tongue swept over her lower lip, he regretted not stripping out of his own clothes already.

“That depends,” she managed to pant as he found the right spot and she rose up on her toes with each push, her thigh quivering next to his cheek.

“Oh?” He nosed forward and licked a stripe from where his fingers pressed into to her clit and a low note broke out of her.

Almost there.

“You,” she whispered, and then damn near whimpered as he still her fingers just at the edge of the spot she’d been writhing over.

“What can I do for you, Doll?” He invited her. “Tell me and it’s yours.”

“Milli moi…”

“Yes?” He should not be enjoying this so much but she was shaking against him, and she wasn’t hiding a single reaction. Nothing muted. Nothing cloaked. Just pure, naked desire.

“Don’t stop,” she told him, then her fingers tightened in his hair. “Don’t stop.”

“You want to come on my fingers then, lyubov moya? Is that how you want to come?”

She tapped her head against the refrigerator, her cunt flexing around his fingers, and her hips thrusting forward, but he kept her still, didn’t let her take what she wanted…not yet.

“Tell me lyubov moya, what do you want?”

Then she tipped her head forward as she tightened her fingers in his hair, those gorgeous green
eyes blazing. “You…now…please James…”

He pressed his face forward sucking her clit hard, as he thrust his fingers deep and her back arched as the broken little cry burst from her, and she soaked his hand and he lapped up the flavor, reveling in her grinding against his face.

He could eat her all day long and never get tired of it.

But he needed to bring her down…


He froze for a moment, glancing up from between her thighs to find her pupils had pretty much enveloped her eyes. Wrecked didn’t begin to cover it, and her cunt was swollen, and flushed deep pink, and all he wanted was to feel her coming for him again. She was a glorious sight writhing above him, thigh keeping him close as did her flour dusted fingers in his hair. They were probably both a mess and he didn’t have it in him to care.

He teased his nose against her cunt again, and feasted on her.

“Yes,” she let out a little triumphant sound and it made him laugh as she rocked her hips back and forth. Her tight channel pulled at his fingers, and he scissored them, stretching her. The image of how she’d taken his cock in her ass flared through his mind and his cock hurt from wanting her.

He’d planned a good morning kiss, and a little cuddling, but he reveled in the way she pushed him for more and the sting as she tugged at his hair. Her grip tightened on him with every stroke of his tongue.

She smelled delicious and was so damn sweet. Her musky perfume and the slick rapid sounds of his thrusting tongue and fingers filled the room. When another orgasm spiraled out of her, he pulled away, long enough to stand, freeing his shorts and shoving them down, and then lifting her so he could sink her down on him. She rolled her hips, legs locking around his waist as she dragged him deeper, and then she yanked his hair until their mouths fused together.

What he’d demanded from her, the need to take her apart with pleasure split through him and he braced a hand on the fridge, the other around her and began to drive into her spasming channel with deep thrusts. As he sank to the hilt, she kissed away from his mouth, and her fingers dug into his shoulders.

He found the right angle, and the right spot, and she cried out, the sound unbelievably sexy and exactly what he’d wanted. Then he angled to hit it with every motion, and it didn’t take long before she came around him again, clamping down on his cock, and something in him seemed to just unhinge and his orgasm rushed through him like a cataclysm.

The hand on her ass flexed, and he teased the pucker of her anus with just a single graze and she clamped down on him harder, the climax pulling a hard laugh from him. Even the promise of it set her off.

Then he was leaning into her as she held onto him tightly, their harsh panting the only sounds in the kitchen.

Pressing his lips to her shoulder, he mouthed a kiss as he tried to get his brain back on the right track as his body shook. Natalia began to comb her fingers through his hair, and the light rake of her nails against his scalp helped him spiral down.
“So…” she whispered. “You like pizza that much huh?”

The inane banality of the comment sent a burst of laughter free and he lifted his head to grin at her dazed expression and sultry smile.

“You have no idea how much…”

Natasha

By the time James was able to straighten and lower her legs, they both groaned. He’d slipped out of her but she was…staggered would probably be the best word for it.

“Stay there,” he ordered in a low voice still thready with need. His pale blue eyes were scorching hot, and his face was a mess from eating her out, not to mention the flour in his hair.

He was so beautiful, dark and fierce, and so kind and considerate…and she had to lean on the fridge because her legs were trembling so much she didn’t think she could still stand without some aid.

James vanished into the laundry room and then came back with washcloths. She just started giggling when he rinsed one under some warm water and then came back to wipe gently up her thighs, when he cupped it between her legs, she gave a little jolt.

“Too much,” she whispered. Too sensitive. Too…everything. Between Steve earlier in the morning and just now, she wasn’t sure she could walk straight or if she even wanted to for that matter.

“Shh,” James crooned, the soft sound wrapping around her like a blanket, and so damn decadent, she wanted to sink into it. “I’ve got you.”

After the warm washcloth, came the cool and that helped too. He wiped her chest, carefully circling her breasts. Even her nipples ached from the constant attention, and who knew she could complain about that? Not that she was complaining.

Done, he wiped himself down and then retrieved her shorts, the only piece of her clothing to survive. He stripped off the shirt he had yet to lose, and then tugged it over her before he held the shorts for her to step into.

“No panties?” She asked him in a lazy voice that made her sound like the cat who got the cream, and really, she had, hadn’t she?

“No,” he told her, pressing a kiss to the bare skin over her cunt. He traced his finger over it. Laser was so worth it. “I have a feeling your shorts aren’t long for this world either.”

A chuckle bubbled up inside of her. “That’s what happens when you hold out for so long…”

“I’ve held out for years, Natalia,” he reminded her and it sobered her humor. “I want you every moment of every day, never assume otherwise, okay?”

Her legs went to jelly again, and she reached a hand down to tug him up as he pulled her shorts into
place and then kissed him gently. “I missed you,” she told him. That first time—their tenth or eleventh or whatever number first time they’d shared in the shower back at the Tower weeks before—she’d told him then, but it bore repeating.

“I missed you, too,” he promised. “Never going to let us have to miss each other like that again.”

“No,” she agreed with him, then she carefully combed her hands through his hair. “You’re all dusty.”

“Worth it,” he said, then winked. “Can you stand?”

“I don’t know…but I still have pizza to make, though if you feel that strongly about dough, what happens when I pull the whole thing out of the oven?”

Playfulness lit up his face and it made all the air in her lungs back up. True pleasure shown in his eyes and his grin was daring. “I can’t wait to find out.”

“Maybe I do all the work for that one…” she tracked a finger down to his quiescent shaft and it gave a little tremble.

Pressing his thumb to the corner of her mouth he nudged her lips apart then swooped in for a kiss that had her toes curling and her fingers digging into his arms. The metal had no give, but the rills shifted slightly under the pressure. “Anything you want, Natalia,” he whispered against her mouth.

Then he made sure she was steady before he dragged his own shorts and boxer briefs back on.

After, he cleaned up the ragged remains of her t-shirt and panties. The shirt had almost survived…

The corner of her mouth kicked up, as she moved slowly toward the sink and with care removed the packages of sausage and pepperoni so she could drain it and wash her hands.

James returned after disposing of the shredded clothes and used washcloths with a stack of towels that he folded at the table while she drifted back to the pizza dough she’d been rolling out.

Where had she been on it exactly?

It took her a minute to reroute her neurons, all the ones not firing on the sexy soldier express, and every time she glanced at James, she found him watching her. The smile on his beautifully swollen lips made her heart beat a little faster.

Giddy like a fucking schoolgirl.

“When did you learn to make pizza?” He asked and she latched onto the normalcy like the lifeline it was.

“A few years ago…maybe the nineties. I got a job at a pizza place in New York, I was lying low…” The stone oven in the corner of the shop filled her mind’s eye, the rough voices around her, and the laughter—rowdy and playful, sometimes drunk. There was a game on television. World Series, and the joint was packed with people, most of them locals, and they were yelling at the TV. Their accents rolled over her like a comforting balm.

She’d gone to Brooklyn for no appreciable reason. She’d needed to get out of Europe, and she’d flown into New York and instead of leaving the city, she’d picked a borough at random and found herself a job. The owner was a second generation Italian whose family came over in the early 1900s. They’d opened their pizza parlor and everyone in the family worked there in some capacity.
It had been his accent that made her ask about a job in the first place. Dark hair, light colored eyes, and a quirky smile. The man always had a smile.

And his name had been James.

She’d learned to make pizza from a guy named James.

“Natalia?” James was at her side, concern all over his face and she smiled at him.

“I’m okay, I just—I learned to make pizza in Brooklyn,” she told him and surprise flickered through his eyes. “I had to get out of Europe, went to New York and I chose Brooklyn…maybe at random. But I found this place not far from the Navy Yard, lower income, but all good people and I blended in. They used to call me Irish.”

Fuck, she hadn’t thought about Emilio’s in forever.

“James was the man who owned it, he inherited from his father Anton who inherited from his father Emilio’s…”

“You learned to make pizza at Emilio’s?” Wonder creased his face and his smile grew. “You went to Brooklyn and stayed because it felt safe?”

“Their accents made me feel safe…it was the most ridiculous thing,” she said, lifting her hand as though to touch his cheek, but hesitated with the flour dusting them again. “I was there for a few months, James taught me to make all kinds of pizzas…I guess it stuck.”

She’d hated leaving, too. It hadn’t made sense to her at the time. It was a cover, a place to lie low, and she’d let herself get attached. Sure, some of that was to the people, but the rest of it…

“When we were in Montana…did you begin to remember who you were?”

He nodded slowly, then brushed his knuckles down her cheek. “Bit by bit…you had already found my name for me. You called me James…”

Another surprise flickered through her. It was how she’d thought of the Winter Soldier for so long, and it hadn’t made any damn sense. But every time she turned around, another reminder knocked into her of how they’d never been able to scrub him from her fully.

“You knew my name was James Barnes, that I’d been an American…but that was all you could tell me. You were going to steal my file to read it fully, but I wouldn’t let you,” James told her seriously. “Karpov nearly caught you the first time and you wouldn’t tell me the price for that information and but I wouldn’t let you do it again.”

Her nose wrinkled. What a disgusting thought… “And you’re sure I listened?”

“I hoped you did.” He sighed. “But in Montana…yes, my memories began to come back, first in dreams, and then bit by bit…I knew I was James Buchanan Barnes, I knew I’d been born in Brooklyn…I told you that was why I didn’t want to go to New York when we’d first come…some aversion to it. Maybe aversion therapy.” He shrugged. “I remembered Steve…did a little research on one of my trips to town…”

He stopped abruptly and then smacked a hand to his face as he wheeled away from her.

“James…”
“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It can’t have been that stupid.”

“What?”

“I did some research, asked at the library about news articles—particularly on Captain America. I wanted to know what happened to Steve. Maybe he was still alive you know…” The bittersweet revelation broke her heart. “Found out he went down not all that long after I died. Then I looked up my sisters. Becca was still alive, and I thought… more than once about sending her a telegram, then I’d think about you and Mary Elizabeth and I couldn’t do it.”

She set the dough on their respective sheets and put it aside to rise before cleaning up the mess so she could start on the sauce.

“I told you,” he said, his voice quiet as he paced back over to the towels and resumed folding them. “One night…when Mary Elizabeth was about three months old…I told you I’d remembered. I hadn’t… I hadn’t before then because…”

“You didn’t know if we’d make it,” she murmured. Unsurprised. “Telling me would have meant admitting what you had lost and might lose all over again.”

A single nod.

The somber mood stretched out between them.

“I told you stories about Brooklyn, about growing up there…and Steve. You liked the stories about Steve.” The corner of his mouth kicked up. “It helped to tell someone. It’s weird…”

“That you thought he was dead, and that he believed that about you, too?” The friendship between them was so vital to their existence. It was why she’d been so reticent before and remained so protective now. No matter what happened, she had to make sure those two always had each other.

“Yeah,” he said, exhaling as he finished the towels and then returned to open up his water bottle and watch her get the sauce going on the low heat. “I think…if he’d been alive, I’d have sent that telegram. I’d have…gotten us out.”

“I know,” she told him, and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “He knows that too.”

“If I’d known he was in the ice, I’d have gone to get him.”

She believed that, too. But how would either of them have ever known Steve could survive something like that?

Once the sauce was simmering, she retrieved the block of cheese to start shredding. It wasn’t mozzarella but it would work. James drew a pattern against the countertop.

“Think you went to Brooklyn because of what I told you?” The quiet note of hope in his question made her smile.

“Maybe,” she said. “It’s a lovely thought…that even when I couldn’t remember you, I didn’t forget.”

“We never truly forgot,” he said, touching a finger to her nose. “But I’m really fucking glad we remember now.”

Well he did, she had a few pieces. Broken shards. She wanted more though, and that was probably
obvious in her eyes, because his expression softened.

“New memories are good, too.”

That made her smile. “Yes, they are.”

The rush of rain outside and the wind covered up any sounds from the hall, but James turned his head toward the door a split second before Steve pushed it open. His hair was sticking up in different directions, and he’d dressed again. He glanced from her to James, then back with an almost sleepy smile.

“Hey,” James called to him. “Need coffee?”

“Maybe?” Steve said, shuffle stepping across the kitchen and she turned to meet the light kiss he gave her, and smiled again when he ran his knuckles down her cheek to her throat. His eyes lit up a little brighter for a moment, then he pressed another kiss to the corner of her mouth.

“Good nap?” She asked, returning to her cheese shredding.

“Definitely,” Steve answered while James got the coffee started. Then he said, “You know…I’m not even going to ask.”

At the comment, she twisted and James paused mid-pour to look where Steve was staring at the fridge…and the handprint that had pressed into the stainless steel door.

Nat licked her lips, and turned a grin on James who grunted and said, “Probably wise.”

“Course,” Steve said, pulling out a bottle of water from the fridge, then closing it to stare at the print again. “I’m also not explaining it to Tony.”

At which point Nat didn’t even pretend to not laugh, and she leaned against the counter giggling.

“Yeah…” James drawled. “Guess that one’s on me, too.”

Steve lifted his bottle of water like a toast and James answered it with one of his own. “How much do one of these cost?”

“We can find out.” James said agreeably. “Replace it, and then he’ll never know?”

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she laughed, and shook her head.

“I blame Natalia,” James said bluntly.

“Hey,” Nat lifted her head, and stared from one to the other. “Excuse me?”

“I can see that,” Steve agreed. “She’s very distracting.”

They toasted each other again and she rolled her eyes. “Yes, because I did that to the fridge.”

“Well, you did it to me,” James told her with a playful wink.“And then I did it to the fridge.”

Steve coughed, and then laughed. “So, I see it’s still raining…”

“Yep,” James drawled. “I figure after we eat Natalia’s pizza—did you know she made pizza?”

“Oh, you’re making pizza,” Steve’s sleep-laden voice brightened. He slipped an arm around her
and nuzzled at her neck. “You really do like us.”

“Sometimes,” she told him archly.

“You do,” he whispered, and nipped her earlobe then darted away when she went to elbow him. He turned to James instead and said, “So what are we doing after pizza?”

“I figured we could watch movies, pamper Natalia, make dinner, then take her to bed and get her naked—eat her out, take turns…you know, whatever makes the lady happy.”

There was zero reason in the world heat should flare all the way through her. She’d had James not even an hour before, and Steve a few hours before that, and that was after having them both all night, but she squeezed her thighs together at the very idea.

“Yeah?” Steve let out a breath, and when she caught his wondering gaze, she had to grin. She kind of missed the blushing, but the hungry look in his eyes more than made up for it. “Do we have to wait until after dinner?”

James huffed out a laugh and slung an arm over his shoulder. “I don’t know, Natalia…do we have to wait?”

They were the picture of sensual innocence, all angelic looks with downright devilish intentions.

Terrible men.

Wretched.

Teasing.

Tempting.

Hers.

And on that point, she could relent… “Maybe not—but definitely after pizza. I’m not going to risk ruining the dough twice.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chorused and then they were all laughing.

It was nice.

All of this…togetherness…it was really, really nice.

She really could breathe.
Chapter Summary

It's the last day on the island...

Chapter Ten

Throuple

Natasha

It was their official last day on the island, and after two—almost three hedonistic days—she was both eager and sad to leave. The guys had gone for a run on the beach and she was curled up on the chair on the balcony of the bedroom. She’d enjoyed the sunrise in Steve’s lap, with her feet in James’. In a couple of hours, she would head down to the gym and run through her stretches, and continue testing where her weaknesses were.

Unsurprisingly, she had issues with her stamina, but her flexibility was definitely up to snuff. Her healing seemed to be kicking back in finally, which was great, because the guys hadn’t been giving her much respite from the marathons of sex. Not that she was in any way complaining.

Her phone buzzed, and she gave it a dirty look. Even after she’d charged it a couple of days ago, she hadn’t really checked it. She’d sent a message to Isaiah, let him know she was alive, and well and would be in touch shortly. Then another to Clint to let him know she was bouncing back.

His damn near immediate response had reminded her of how checked out she’d been and she’d winced. They’d exchanged a handful of texts since then. The kids were fine, the team was fine, and everything was more or less quiet at home.

Home.

The Tower.

New York.

Yes, she supposed it had become something of a home. Not as much as the guys currently running on the beach, but more than nearly any other place she’d laid her head in years. If she closed her eyes and pictured “home,” she had to admit—it was the Tower she saw. She was looking forward to getting back. Mostly. She would see Clint and his family, Tony and Peter, Wanda, Sam, and Rhodey, and even Vision. She would be able to dance in her studio. She could actively go out to the Compound and work with the team... well, Steve hadn’t given her full clearance yet, but all three of them had sparred lightly—very lightly—the day before. It qualified more as the guys went after each other and kept removing her from the fight. It had given her a workout. While she’d tired out swiftly, she had still enjoyed it even when it annoyed her.

There’d be a tougher regimen at home—running, dancing, weights, and more sparring. She’d need
her speed and her strength particularly since she had Peter and Wanda waiting for her for training. But she’d only be supervising until Steve signed off on it and he wanted her to see Helen for medical clearance, even if she felt better. For now, she’d indulge the overprotectiveness, but… she was better.

Actually, she felt great. The soreness in her body had become just a pleasant sensual post-coital ache, and other than a nagging headache here and there, she didn’t need to sleep as much. They’d played in the ocean the day before, too. After the storm, the water had been this verdant blue and they’d romped like kids, water fights, and floating and she’d swum out near the reef. After she’d soaked in the sun, until James moved her to the shade.

Steve’s sketchbook had put on an appearance, too and James had been experimenting with the camera function on his phone including at least one naked snap of her ass that he asked her to password lock for him so no one else could see it. They’d all been having fun, frolicking, and just enjoying being. Even when questions crowded her mind, James or Steve or both would find a way to pull her out of her head.

So while she looked forward to going home, she almost hated the idea they were leaving the island. Turning the phone over, she stared at the message and a smile pulled at her lips.

Tony: So, a little bird mentioned you were better, and I thought I’d go to the source rather than bothering Capsicle or Terminator. How are you Red?

I am better. This place is amazing, Tony. I can’t thank you enough.

Tony: Never have to thank me. Glad you feel better. Coming back tomorrow?

Yes.

Tony: You ready to come back?

Yes. You ready to have me back there?

Tony: Complicating life and giving me hell? Oh look at the time… I have to go.

Nat just laughed. I’ll see you tomorrow.

Tony: Wouldn’t miss it.

Then her phone went quiet and she thumbed over to Clint’s message and sent him a middle finger emoji, just cause.

His response of a poop emoji made her snicker aloud.

Shutting the screen off, she turned her attention back to the beach and the way the water rolled in. She needed to get off her lazy ass and get moving. Rising, she gathered up her now empty mug, and carried it inside. Then she drew back the blackout curtains.

They’d stripped the bed each day and washed the sheets, trading them out for the set they’d washed the day before so she went ahead and got the blankets and sheets pulled off to carry downstairs. The room reeked of sex, so she pushed the doors wide to the balcony to let the fresh air in. Once she had the bed remade, she puffed a breath of air to push the hair out of her face, and then got changed into her workout gear.
Her sleep shorts—of which she had two left, and she needed to remind the guys to stop tearing them apart—and their t-shirts were comfortable for sleeping in, but not so practical for exercise. In the bathroom, she washed her face, then pulled her hair up into a loose braid up and out of her away. There was a very prominent hickey on her throat…and a second one to match it just below her collarbone.

Mouthy guys.

Both of them.

Then again, the earlier hickeys had taken time to fade, but Steve seemed determined to keep the one in place, which entertained her on some very basic level. Particularly when he took no small amount of glee in the act.

Her shoulders still jutted a little, and her hip bones remained more prominent than she liked, but she’d gained back three pounds in the last few days. The rest she would put back on as muscle.

Teeth brushed, she gave herself a visual once over before shutting off the light in the bathroom and then collecting the bedding. She’d have to come back up for the mug in a minute. It took her a couple of minutes to haul the linens downstairs. There was a load of clothes in the wash—Steve’s—and some towels in the dryer—James had carried this load down, so she took another five minutes to fold towels, switch Steve’s stuff over, and then start the linens running.

Whistling, she carried the towels back upstairs, and put them away, and then made a point to gather all of her surviving used clothing into a basket, and snagged the rest of Steve and James’ stuff as well, then set the mug in the basket to carry it down together.

If they were flying back the following day, they might as well take mostly clean stuff with them. She was barely winded by the time she carried the basket to the laundry room and set it on the side. The dryer had another forty-five minutes, so she set a timer on her phone before shoving it in her back pocket.

In the kitchen, she emptied the dishwasher from the night before and reloaded the handful of mugs from the morning, then checked the fridge. They’d long since run out of eggs and bacon, which was fine. The guys could live on pancakes alone, so she got everything set up and ready to go including a huge bowl of pancake batter, then set out the plates, silver, syrup, and butter.

Satisfied, she walked outside and found herself a warm spot in the sun and began to her morning stretches. The warm up required testing every muscle group, elongating the muscles and then pushing them to their limit, before relaxing and repeating the process.

The twinge in her lower back was still present, but greatly diminished from the previous discomfort. She was folded in half, hugging her torso to her legs when the wolf whistle announced their arrival.

“Now that is a beautiful sight to come back to,” James drawled and Steve laughed.

Straightening, she grinned at the pair as they climbed the stone steps. A light sheen of sweat on their faces, the easy grins, and the distinct lack of dark shadows beneath their eyes relaxed her.

“Good run?”

“No bad,” Steve said. “He’s still slow.”

James snorted, and elbowed him, but she just laughed. “You run with him next time, Doll.”
“I just might—though next time is probably not going to be on this gorgeous beach.” No it would be in a snowy Central Park. A prospective shiver worked up her spine. Still…it would be worth it. They had been making plans, and she had a load of Christmas shopping to do. She had all kinds of ideas for presents.

Especially for James, his first Christmas in she didn’t want to think about how long? No, they were going to do it right for him.

“Anytime you want to come with, I’ll look forward to it,” Steve told her and stretched an arm out as they reached her. She let him curl her in for a kiss, and then tilted her head back when James tugged on her hair and got one from him, too. They smelled like sunshine, and sweat, and sand.

“Warmed up?” From James, that question had all kinds of meaning.

“Yep, but I made up stuff for pancakes, figured we’d feed your raging metabolisms before we hit the gym.” She eeled away before he slipped his hand farther past her waistband and smacked his fingers lightly when he reached for her.

Steve snickered at him, and James just grinned as they followed her into the house. “Aww, c’mon Doll, we had to get up early and everything…”

Laughing, she wagged a finger at him. “Food, work, then play.”

He made a face and then sighed dramatically as he heated the griddle for the pancakes. “So pushy. I like you better naked.”

“Just naked?” She grinned, setting water bottles out. Steve thwapped James in the back of the head and James gave him a shove. Given their druthers, these two ended up wrestling like a pair of schoolboys very easily.

It was cute.

“Naked is a great place to start,” James grinned at her, but the warmth in his eyes was all teasing and affection. “But if you insist we have to work first…then we’ll earn our play time.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and slid around to lean against the counter next to her. “SITREP.”

It was a quiet, firm nudge. Every day, how was she doing—for real. What aches and pains did she still have? What was her energy level like? How were her bruises—though they made no pretense of not inspecting those themselves. Steve’s gaze had already gone to her throat, head tilted as he examined the hickey on her neck.

“Finished my tea after you two went for a run, talked to Tony via text and confirmed we’re coming home tomorrow. Checked in with Clint, he’s fine. Stripped the bed and remade it, got it in the wash—also moved your stuff to the dryer Steve, and took up the towels. James, I grabbed the rest of our stuff that needed washing and brought it down, too.” She hid a smile as she took a drink of water.

“Thank you for that stellar recounting of what you did—now tell us how you feel.” Steve gave her the eye, and she smirked impudently.

He was so much fun to razz and she had missed doing it. “I feel great…a little sore still. Course, the two of you aren’t really easy on the thighs you know.”

James just snorted a laugh.
Then sobering, she shrugged. “Faint twinge at the base of my spine.” She stretched a hand back to trace her fingers over the rough patch. It had shrunk, so that was something. Steve ran his fingers over it behind after she did and James craned his head to inspect it visually.

“It looks better.”

“Feels a bit better, too.” Steve hummed. “Still not sure I want you sparring full speed yet.”

“It doesn’t hurt unless I twist too much and even then it’s not real pain.”

The bland look he shot her told her he wasn’t impressed. “Light sparring, speed bag, and weights. Take it or leave it, Romanoff.”

She stuck her tongue at him. “I bet if I get naked James will wrestle with me.”

“You bet right, but it won’t be full sparring, it’ll be a full contact pin.” He winked at her, and Steve leaned his head back and groaned.

“You two are terrible.”

“Aww,” she leaned into Steve and wrapped her arms around him. “I’d wrestle with you, too.”

He gave her an almost indulgent smile. “Light sparring, speed bag, and weights. Nothing more until Cho does an MRI and tells me that your spine is good or that scar is gone all the way.”

Nat made a face and huffed out a breath. “Being a girlfriend sucks.”

James burst out laughing and Steve just grinned at her and gave her braid a light tug. “This is about more than being my girlfriend, yeah?”

The reality check in his eyes had her easing back on the teasing and she nodded. “I know…but I feel better. I feel like me. A more effervescent her, but whatever…”

His expression softened. “I’m glad, really glad and I want you to keep feeling like you. So do me a favor and don’t push it, okay? Not yet? Maybe not until we get the green light from Cho?”

She wanted to roll her eyes, or scoff and wave a dismissive hand. It was what she’d always done before. But… it was harder to blow off the concern when it was so genuine and hot on the heels of her being very much not okay. “Fine, but I’m going to grumble about it.”

“That’s okay,” he said with a sudden brilliant smile. Lifting her hand he kissed it lightly. “You can grumble all you like. Just no pushing it yet.”

“Really not sure what you call pushing it considering the various positions you two have put me in over the last three days.”

James just gave her playful leer as he carried the plates stacked with pancakes past. “We’re doing all the pushing then, Doll.”

The only thing that saved him was the food he carried. Still they were both laughing, and it was light and easy, and fun. At the same time, there was a current of tension running through all of them, and she wasn’t the only one who noticed. James flicked more than one look at Steve, and Steve spent half his time studying her, then James, and back to his pancakes as they settled at the table.

“Okay…” she said finished with her shorter stack—though arguably five pancakes wasn’t exactly a
short stack, and she’d eaten all of it without an ounce of hesitation. There would be burgers for lunch, and grilled chicken skewers for dinner. “What’s wrong?”

She glanced from one to the other, but Steve shook his head. “Not really something wrong.”

“Just not really interested in going back,” James admitted, and surprisingly, Steve actually looked chagrinned when he nodded.

“It took me a while to get settle, but I like it here…” Steve admitted. “It’s…”

“It’s nice,” she murmured. “It’s really nice.”

“Especially now that you are feeling better, Doll,” James added, tracing a finger down her cheek. “Could get used to this—maybe after a supply run.”

“I wish we could stay… to a point. But… there are people back in New York who need us.”

“They need you,” James said with a grin. “They need Stevie. They do not need me.”

“I need you,” she pointed out, and his smile grew. “But Steve was right…”

“I think I need to write this day on the calendar, that’s twice I’ve been right.”

She threw a napkin at him, and Steve gave her an unrepentant smile. It was good to see him relaxed, the weight of the world not resting so sternly on his shoulders or his brow. There was a lightness to him that had not been present when they met, and had in fact, he’d grown darker over time particularly after they found out about SHIELD and James.

But not anymore…

He was… happy.

“We needed a vacation.”

“Agreed,” James said as he cleaned off the last of his pancakes. Steve finished off his as well. “So when’s our next one?”

With a snort, Steve stood empty plate in hand, and reached for hers, and then James’ to stack them together. “Preferably when we’re not in need of massive R&R.”

“So when do you want to be?” She’d never been a fan of making future plans. Life had never been that for her, but these two needed them and she could bend.

“Hmm?” James squinted at her.

“When do you want our next vacation to be?”

“How about we start on Friday? That means we have Thanksgiving with everyone, then take off again.”

“Tempting,” Steve said before she could answer. “Not terribly practical. But tempting.”

“Yes,” James drawled. “I know. I just like the idea of not answering to anyone but the three of us. Not seeing anyone else isn’t so bad either.”

“You didn’t mind Clint being here,” she pointed out. Or the kids. James seemed to get on well with
them, and Nat had a promise to keep to Lila and Cooper after they got back.

“Clint’s family, he’s all right,” James told her and then pushed his chair back and stood. He went for more water as she wiped down the table, then the three of them headed down to the gym.

As promised, she taped up her hands and went to work on one of the speed bags while James and Steve actually sparred. Midway through though, she watched as Steve kept dropping his shoulder on the left and she wasn’t the only one who noticed it.

“Do you ever spar with your shield?” James asked as they circled each other.

“No, because I’d hurt someone with it.” Steve wasn’t wrong, except…

“You do when we’re team training,” she called out. It was how she’d gotten so proficient at catching it mid-fight, and the fact she could had saved her life, and his, more than once.

“Yeah, but I don’t fight against you with it, there’s a difference,” Steve answered, ducking under James’ swing then catching his arm and going for a lock.

“But I’m not Natalia,” James retorted, twisting free of the hold and sending Steve back with a solid kick that had him sliding across the mat. “And I come with armor of my own.” He flexed his metal arm as Steve rose.

“Fine, we’ll spar more with the shield.”

“Want me to go grab it?” Nat gripped the speed bag to still it. A little thrill skated up her spine. The shield had been tucked next to their bed for days. Steve had had no reason to move it.

Steve eyed her a moment, then James. Finally, he relented. “Yeah go grab it.”

Nat grinned and bounded out of the room. She was barely winded from hitting the speed bag, but her arms were warmed up and her muscles were still loose from stretching earlier. Lifting the shield, she slid her arm through the straps and closed her fist. It always amazed her how light it was considering the sheer level of damage it could take and deliver.

Half-dancing down the stairs, and she leapt the last three and slid toward the hall on the wood flooring. The giddiness of the last few days translated into a kind of playfulness she rarely approached training with, and yet at the same time, even if she didn’t get to actively spar, she got to have fun with them.

Arriving back in the gym, she slowed as Steve broke out of an armlock James had him in, and then blocked three rapid blows before he dropped and delivered a sidekick to sweep his legs. James barely avoided it leaping up and Steve was already on him, and they were fighting their way backwards across the mat, James playing defense.

It was a trap though. Nat bit her lower lip, the way James never fully settled his weight on his back leg, he was pulling Steve off balance. But his weight shifted to the front leg so while it looked like a rout, he was actually controlling the direction.

Steve wasn’t striking wildly, if anything, there was a concentrated focus, but every blow he tried to land James blocked but didn’t counter. Instead, he lulled him into a sense of complacency and Nat half winced because she saw it coming and the moment Steve dropped his guard after a hit because James hadn’t been countering, James pressed forward and slugged him.

But Steve surprised her, because he caught James’ left with both hands halting the hit and then
leapt and planted both feet into James’ sternum and knocked him clean off the mats.

He rolled and then flipped onto his feet and said, “Hell yes. Finally!”

Panting, Steve eyed him. “You are a maniac.”

“But you did it.” James looked pleased. “And for a minute there I thought you were going to fall for it… again.”

Huffing with laughter, Steve shook his head. “No, Nat beat the falling for the same trick over and over out of me a while ago. You switch it up, but you were keeping your weight on the front leg and dropping your right arm swings. You were just waiting for me to stop defending… so I gave you the opening you wanted when I had you in the right position.”

She wolf whistled, and they both looked at her, and then she grinned. “Nicely played, Steve. Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks?”

They both groaned at her and she jogged forward two steps and then twisted and swung sending the shield to him like a frisbee. Steve caught it one handed and frowned at her.

“Pfft, I’m fine. Not a single twinge. I promise.” No lie, she was feeling too good and a little too proud to hurt anywhere. Steve really had done well and James hadn’t been holding back. But now that he’d mastered that one, the Soldier would switch it up, he never let her have a win for long. What was the point? There were just as many other ways he could kill her, so better she learned them all right?

That wasn’t a memory so much as a knowing. She glanced at James, and found him eyeing her carefully. “You went pale,” he murmured.

“Just…had a flash of what Steve is likely in for the next time you two spar.” She licked her lips and headed for the mats where Steve watched her carefully.

“Yeah?” James asked.

“Yep,” she sauntered into place and faced Steve with a smile. “The same thing I’d do…he mastered that particular lesson, and he’s learning to read your physical cues. Now you change it up.”

“There are just as many other ways to take him down,” James said. “It’s how I trained you.”

“I know,” she said, throwing him a glance over her shoulder. “I—can hear it almost. It’s…weird. But I know. You never let me have victory for long.”

He let out a harsh laugh. “You were too cocky as it was, Natalia. You needed to be prepared for anything and you always rose to a challenge.”

“She still does,” Steve said and made no attempt to disguise the admiration in his tone.

The praise rolled over her and she squirmed a little. Time to change the subject. “You said light sparring, right?” Her hands were still taped and ready to go.

Steve sighed. “Maybe give it one more day?”

“Hey, no fair. You said light sparring earlier. Yesterday doesn’t count; you both kept after each other and moved me. And I’m up for it, Steve. Come on… play with me.” She slid a glance at
“Fine,” Steve said. “No full contact, slaps only.”

“That’s not light, that’s not even a spar.”

“Tasha…” Steve said, the warning in his tone, but she shook her head.

“Trust me. I may not be one hundred percent, but I need to get back up to speed and that’s not going to happen if you don’t at least let me try.”

James had been quiet for most of the debate. When she and Steve both looked at him, he raised his brows. “You want me to decide?”

“Tiebreaker,” Steve said. “You typically have more sense than either of us. Or so you claim.”

James’ smirk promised Steve was going to get it for that later, but Nat shook her head. Instead of arguing that position, she just asked, “Am I wrong to want to push?”

“No, Natalia,” James told her. “You’re not wrong to want to… but Stevie isn’t wrong either. The last thing either of us wants is to see you get hurt because you weren’t ready to be back in there.”

Not mollified by the very diplomatic approach, she nodded. “I can see the point. But I’ve also been in and out of injured status for years. If I don’t start pushing it, it will take me that much longer to get back to full speed. If we’re tagging in on missions, I’m going to be a liability until I am at full strength, which means… sitting out more missions and I’m not really thrilled with that idea.”

“But it may also mean avoiding further injuries,” Steve countered. “Nat, you’d run into a fight with broken bones… hell you have run into a fight with them.”

“And I handled myself fine. That’s how I was trained.”

They both grimaced.

Instead of answering her, they stared at each other and she stretched her arms behind her and then bent forward as she elongated her shoulders and pressed her clasped hands upwards.

Finally Steve set the shield off to the side. “Okay…”

Yes!

She straightened and faced him as he held up his hands, palms forward. “All you have to do is land hits on my palms.”

“You’re not going to fight back?” Disappointment crept through her. She missed sparring with him.

“Just try to hit me,” Steve told her drily and she made a face.

Fine.

She rolled her head from side to side, then studied him. Steve never started these fights and if the goal was only for her to hit him, then he definitely wouldn’t be starting it. Time to test the waters, she flowed forward, fists clasped loosely and Steve moved before her hand even got to him.

He never took his gaze off her as she pursued him, but he kept her running on the mat. Twice she came close, and both times he moved at the last second, leaving her punching air. Irritation scraped
through her, but she settled her breathing, and resumed her stalking.

“We can take a break whenever you’re ready,” Steve assured her.

“Generous,” she said with a smile. “Getting tired?”

“Nope, I’m good,” he told her cheerfully.

“Glad to hear it.” She pivoted and lunged for him and counted on the fact he’d move to avoid. She tracked the shift of his weight, and trusted her momentum to carry her as she spun and leapt in the same moment he shifted, and she struck with her foot, hitting his hand and then she tumbled up and whirled, landing her fist against the other as Steve stared at her in open-mouthed wonder as he shook his right hand. The punch probably hadn’t hurt, but she suspected the kick had.

From behind her, James let out a laugh. “She got you there, Stevie.”

Not smirking, she resumed her position and raised an eyebrow. Keep running away from her, fine. She could adapt. “You ready to go again?”

Eyes gleaming, Steve chuckled. “Bring it on Romanoff. That’s two. We going to ten?”

“If you can handle it,” she dared him, and his smile grew.

“Let’s go.”

As it was, it took her another thirty-five minutes to get all ten strikes, and she was dripping with sweat and carefully planning all the ways she was going to kick Steve’s ass the next time they went full contact. At the same time, she was exhilarated because panting or not, she’d done it and her body cooperated with barely any twinges to her spine.

More food, more sleep, and she’d be good as new in no time.

James pressed a cold water bottle against the back of her neck as she sat down to stretch and he squatted next to her. “You did good, Doll.”

“Part of me thinks it should have been a hell of a lot easier.”

“Hey,” Steve gave her a mock hurt look. “I’m not that bad.”

“Of course not, but you were fighting purely defensive. I didn’t have to defend against anything.”

“Couple more days, and we’ll get back to that,” James assured her. “And besides, Stevie wasn’t going slow, Doll. You had to pack speed into every move to keep up with him, and he’s getting better about not telegraphing his changes in direction.”

“True,” she admitted, and unscrewed the cap to the water and took a long drink. Her arms burned, and so did her legs, but it was a good burn. It was the kind of burn she wanted.

“You did good,” James repeated. “You want me to beat up your boyfriend for you?”

She laughed. “No, but you two feel free to spar. I’m going to cool down on the speed bag, and then do some weights.”

The objections flashed through his eyes, but he didn’t give them voice. Instead he glanced at Steve. “You good to go or has all that scampering tired you out?”
Steve retrieved his shield, and then curled the fingers of his right hand. “May the best boyfriend win.”

Nat did roll her eyes at that, and she let James tug her to her feet. “You two play nice.”

“We’re always nice,” the twin echoed responses just made her laugh and she blew a kiss to each of them.

Once she cleared the mats, they flowed right back into their earlier positions. Steve was more on defense this time, because James wasn’t holding back. More than once his metal fist impacted on the shield and the reverberations were impressive. She settled at her speed bag and went to work. The burn in her arms eased then began to climb again as she loosened her shoulders.

Switching it up to add high and low kicks to her strikes, she cooled down, then warmed up her legs again. The burn pulled at her quads and hamstrings, and the faintest pinch in her back, so she paused just in time to see James catch the shield, then Steve flipped them both and he almost had James in a pin when James shoved Steve up and over.

They were both laughing though as they rolled back to their feet.

Smiling, she finished her water and headed over to the weights. Lighter weights, higher reps. She needed to build stamina and endurance. Muscle would come with it.

Another whoop of laughter and she found James in a headlock with Steve behind him. The shield was lying a couple of feet away. But James was talking, and he dropped his shoulder and got a hand up between Steve’s arm and his throat.

He was talking him through the maneuver, then they repeated it and when James broke out of it, Steve was ready with a counter. But James added a twist to the lesson and it was Steve on the ground with James holding him in the headlock. Steve tried the same move but with variable luck.

She finished the last of her weights while watching them. The third time James got Steve in the headlock, Steve broke it, but he couldn’t quite pull off the counter. So instead he went for a rolling flip she favored and James let out a bark of laughter when he landed a few feet away.

“Not bad, Stevie.”

“Not so bad yourself.” They were done, laughing and clapping each other on the back. The same lightness from breakfast was back, and it practically hummed in the air around them. Steve was happy, and James... he caught her eye and flashed her a grin, one she couldn’t help but answer. James was happy, too. Even with all the memories restored and all that pain he must be able to see, feel, touch, and taste—he was smiling.

“You about done, Nat?” Steve called as he mopped the sweat off his face with a towel.

“Yep,” she answered, retrieving her empty water bottle and tossing it in the recycle bin before accepting the fresh one from James. He looped a sweaty arm around her, and she wrinkled her nose at the smell. They both stunk, course, she probably didn’t smell like flowers either.

A hard workout should leave you stinking.

“Showers?”

“Definitely,” Steve said with a nod, and they wandered out of the gym...it was the last time they’d use it and she spared a glance back at it. She hadn’t been kidding earlier. She really couldn’t thank
Tony enough for the last couple of weeks.

Showering took a little longer than she might have planned, particularly when not one, but both of them joined her and took turns washing her down. Course she refused to be left out of the fun, and it took some maneuvering but she got to give James a blow job while Steve fucked her to a near screaming orgasm. After, they had to rinse off under cooler water, but that lighter air held out.

In some ways, they were all clinging to it. She dressed in a tank top and sleep shorts because all they had left was lunch, packing, and dinner...maybe some movies in between or a walk on the beach and really—she’d seen no one. She could prance around naked if she wanted.

James grilled the hamburgers while Steve got his laundry folded and she swapped the linens into the dryer before loading her clothes and James—adding the rest of their workout gear, Steve’s included.

After, they ate lunch outside, and James broke open some of the last beers. It was warm, and beautiful as any day they’d shared there. She was tired, but it was a good tired. A solid workout soreness, coupled with some really great sex, and fantastic food, and even better company. Head tilted back against the chair, she stretched her legs out and grinned when a warm hand caught her feet, and then they were propped against a thigh.

“Tired?” Steve asked as he began to massage her foot.

“A little…and if you keep doing that, I’m never letting you go.” Because he got his thumb rolling right along her arch and she half-groaned at the tension he released there. She was absolutely shameless when it came to foot rubs, not that she ever had many.

“That’s not really a deterrent to make me stop,” Steve commented.

“Guess she’s keeping you then,” James drawled, then he reached over and tugged on one of her curls. “Good tired or bad tired, Natalia?”

“Oh, very good tired,” she cracked her eyelids open and smiled at him. “Amazing tired. I like this kind of tired.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah...how are you doing?”

“I’m good,” he told her. He and Steve were both sporting bruises. She’d taken her time about kissing every single one. “Really good.”

They glanced at Steve at almost the same moment and he was pressing his thumbs into the ball of her right foot and she wanted to purr like a cat. “I’m better than I’ve ever been,” he admitted. “Gotta admit...before this week, I didn’t really know how we were going to make this work. I mean I wanted it to, and I was going to do everything I could...but it works.”

“Yeah,” James said slowly. “It does.” He glanced at her, and she read the declaration right there in the naked emotion on his face. He loved her. He was happy and he loved her, and something in her just relaxed further if possible. Steve’s blue eyes shone when she caught his gaze, and his smile grew.

Oh, Nat. Don’t get too happy. Now you have something to lose.

But she ignored that little voice. It would never go away, and she’d had something to lose from the
moment she’d admitted she was attached. And to be honest, she’d been attached to James for far longer than she could imagine, and Steve…he’d made himself a spot pretty much from the moment they’d survived New York together.

“It works,” she murmured. “We work.”

“Best friend, best girl—best life.” Steve let out a relaxed sigh and moved on to her other foot, and she wanted to melt into the chair. “But when we’re back in New York…I want to take you out on another date, Nat. A proper one, out in public and everything.”

That might not be the wisest idea.

“Definitely,” James said. “A proper picnic in the spring or one of those carriage rides in the park maybe…” Though James paused to consider it, likely thinking of all the angles someone could come at them from.

“Still do things all three of us, too,” Steve added. “The skating in Rockefeller Center.”

“The tree,” James continued.

“Definitely. Christmas…New Year’s…training… plan another vacation. How do we do Valentine’s?”

James shrugged. “Definitely all three, but we do it our way. No one else’s expectations matter.”

“No one else has expectations,” Steve countered. “They all seemed to take the news fine.”

She studied Steve from beneath her lashes. “That’s because they haven’t had a chance to ask all their questions yet.”

Wanda had. Laura had. Clint had known for a while. Tony poked at them occasionally. Sam made no pretense about the fact he definitely had questions. But they’d deal with that when it came time to. Besides, she wasn’t sure how public they should be. She was still tainted goods, and that might discolor public perception for Steve. No way she would allow that to happen.

Steve and James traded ideas back and forth, things they could do as a throuple versus what they would do as couples. It was…adorable. They were full of suggestions for each other. Baseball. Hiking. Classes. Dancing. Playing tourist. Museums. Concerts. Maybe the ballet? James offered the last to her with a raised eyebrow and she just chuckled.

“Do we get time to sleep in between all these outings? Because otherwise, it sounds like we’re going to be really busy.”

“Definitely,” James said. “And we’re all sleeping in the same bed.” The last sounded very non-negotiable.

“Save for now and then when one or the other of us wants to steal away with Nat…”

Or Nat wanted to steal away with herself. Still…she hadn’t once wanted to escape them in the last few weeks. Even though they kept her neatly boxed between them, she felt safe, not caged.

“Acceptable—date nights for example,” James said. “Nat goes out with me, and we have the option of spending it in my room.”

“But whoever isn’t there, is welcome to join us later if they need it,” Nat said quietly, and both men
looked at her. “We all have bad dreams…no one gets left out.”

In perfect sync, they both nodded.

“So we stay on my floor?” Steve asked, sliding her a look. “Or are we going to look for a place of our own?”

The house thing again. Only…this time it didn’t sound so bad.

“Keep that in reserve,” she said after a long moment. “We need to gauge the temperature of how things are going once we’re back. Whatever we do, we talk to Tony.”

That earned her a small frown. But Steve nodded without comment. James, however, eyed her curiously. “Other than the Tower belongs to him, why do we need to discuss it with Stark?”

“Because…one, he’s my friend, and he’s Steve’s friend, and he’s been trying if not a friend, at least to be more than decent to you.” She paused a beat to let that sink in, and Steve sighed, and James nodded. “Second, he made it possible for us to all be together there in the first place, and here, and the chalet in Switzerland…he’s been there for us. I’m not just going to leave him without involving him somewhat. Whatever we decide to do or the place we decide to get,” she said, conceding the point because it was important to Steve. “We’re always going to have a place at the Tower, and I don’t want Tony to think we’re abandoning him.”

Tony was lonely and maybe Steve and James didn’t see it, but she did. The texts earlier told her as much, even in that simple exchange. The fact he’d been in touch with Steve regularly but Steve hadn’t told her much about it suggested those bridges needed some repairs.

Steve drained his beer, and then rose. “You two want another?”

“Sure,” James said, passing his empty to him, but Nat shook her head.

“I’m good.”

He smiled, and said, “Be back in a couple,” and then he disappeared into the house. Nat watched him go thoughtfully.

“He’s jealous of Stark, Natalia,” James told her quietly.

“I know,” she said, and then met James’ somber gaze. “But there’s a lot between them that needs to be resolved that has nothing to do with me.”

“It has everything to do with you,” he said. “It always will. Sometimes you don’t realize how profoundly you affect the people around you.”

“Not really good at this long-term relationship stuff.”

He snorted. “Fifty plus years, Doll. You need to try and sell that snake oil somewhere else…” Instead of pursuing that point, he said, “Just promise me something.”

“What?”

“If you want a fling with Stark. Don’t. Steve couldn’t take that.”

Nat frowned. “I don’t want to have a fling with Tony.”

A little shrug. “If you wanted one, I don’t mind. The guy is crazy about you.”
Nat blinked. Wait…Tony had a crush, yes, but… “Tony’s my friend, James.”

“Okay,” he said, spreading his hands. But he didn’t look wholly convinced. “Just be careful with Steve… he adores you Natalia, and for some reason, Stark worries him.”

“But not you.”

“I have the benefit of knowing you’ve always found me again,” he said, and while his smile was genuine it was also sad and a dark cloud stretched into their bubble of happiness. “You always come back to me. And all I really want is for you to be happy. But Steve’s my friend, too, Natalia. You could break him, and I know you don’t want that.”

“Of course I don’t. I never want to hurt him.” She glanced at the house. Steve was taking more than a minute to get the beers. “Tony’s my friend,” she said firmly. “I can’t control his feelings… and even if I could, I wouldn’t.” She refused to control anyone.

“Okay,” James repeated. “We’ll talk to him about our plans—once we have plans.” Not involving him in the decision-making, but the decision informing. “Fair?”

She nodded. It wasn’t… perfect but… “Should I go talk to him?”

“No,” James told her. “He just needed a minute, it’s been a long couple of weeks, and we’re all in a good place. Tomorrow… tomorrow we risk changing all of this.”

Tomorrow they added other people back into the mix. She chewed on that for another few minutes, and about thirty seconds before she was going to go find Steve anyway, he slipped back out. He handed a cold beer to James, then held out one to her. “I know you said you didn’t want another, but I figure I took long enough you might have changed your mind.”

He gave her a small smile, and she caught the bottle, then his hand. “Steve…”

“Angel, I’m fine… Tony… Tony pushes my buttons. And I gotta work my way past that. Because Tony’s a good guy and you’re right, he’s done a lot for all of us, me and Buck included when he really doesn’t owe us a damn thing…” He almost sounded like he’d convinced himself. “But I don’t know if I can be… impartial where you’re concerned.”

James just gave her a look, and she squeezed Steve’s fingers. “Tony’s my friend,” she said, and it felt like she was chanting a mantra. “And I’m with you,” she told him. “You and James. Can you trust that?”

She didn’t ask him to trust her, but he tugged her over to him and she slid into his lap easily and he pressed his lips to her hair. “I trust you, Angel. I do and I’m going to work on this, so be patient with me?”

“Do you really have to ask?” She nuzzled his jaw with a kiss. The bristles had grown softer as his beard filled in, and she was happy to have it back. “You’ve been patient as hell with me, I am more than happy to return the favor.”

“But it’s us, Stevie,” James said firmly. “The three of us. You gotta trust in that, too. We have each other’s backs… no matter what.”

“Agreed, and we don’t let going back change us…” Steve popped the cap off his bottle, then hers when she held it up to him.

“No, we don’t.” She raised her bottle and they clinked theirs to hers, and she relaxed against Steve
and met James’ gaze. He wasn’t wrong, and she had no intentions of letting Steve get hurt by her or anyone else.

They were hers, and she planned to protect them both.

But Tony was her friend, like Clint was her family—and she’d protect them, too.

They never did watch a movie. Instead, they just hung out together. They told stories, they laughed, and they played and gradually reclaimed that lighter air they’d almost lost. Then after dinner, and when all their laundry was done and packed away ready for the morning, they went to bed. With a spent Steve collapsed on one side of her stroking her hair, and James still pressed deep inside of her, she clasped Steve’s hand and smiled at him.

“Definitely not changing this part,” she managed between the thrusts pushing the air out of her lungs and when Steve dragged her mouth to his for a kiss, she dug her fingers into James’ shoulder. The orgasm caught her off guard, her whole body spasming as she locked her legs around James’ hips and he gave a stuttering shout before he came. They were a ragged pile, all three of them together, with Steve still stroking her hair, and James resting his head against her neck, while little aftershocks rippled between them.

But it was Steve’s blown pupils she stared into, and his lazy smile that pulled her own. No, they weren’t changing anything about them.

Not if she could help it.
“Tony,” Pepper said, her voice slow and patient. “I know Friday put the meeting on your calendar, because she assured me she did.”

“Must have been a different calendar,” he said, twisting on the rolling stool to move back over to the design table. He’d been trying to work the kinks out of the upgrades to Falcon’s wings, in and around trying to track down the top neurosurgeon in the city, a daunting task since the rising superstar had gone off grid following a brutal car accident. His colleagues offered recommendations for other physicians, but Tony wanted the best looking at those scans.

The man may have lost use of his hands, but he still had his mind. And maybe…maybe Tony could do something for him to work out a trade. He had a lot of equipment lying around that could be repurposed. He’d almost gotten Rhodey into the perfect exo-supports for his legs, lighter, and more versatile and synced with a neural implant.

“Tony!” Pepper snapped as the door to his lab opened and she strode inside. Wow, she didn’t look too bad. The slacks and blazer were working for her.

“Security breach,” he told Friday drily.

“Ms. Potts still has security access, Boss. You didn’t tell me to take it away.”

Yeah, okay that made sense. He raked a hand through his hair. It was just after nine in the morning. Why was Pepper even here? “Hey…Pepper. What’s up?”

She stared at him a moment, eyes narrowed. “Do you not recall we were just on the phone together?”

He spun back to the screen, and then tapped the green call line in the upper corner to disconnect from Ms. Potts. “Yes, about that…”

“The board, Tony, the board is expecting to see you today, it’s our last meeting for the year and then they go away until the end of January and you can work in peace.”

“But I put you in charge, so I didn’t have to go to those meetings,” he reminded her, bouncing off
the stool and heading across the workshop to the coffee maker. He checked his watch. Red was
due back this morning, and Barton’s family would be flying in later that night. They were
beginning to gather for Thanksgiving, which—he was weirdly looking forward to this year.

Oh right. He was in charge of entertainment. He needed to make sure they got the good karaoke
machine.

A long exhale reminded him she hadn’t left yet. “Tony, you promised.”

“No, I said I was working on schematics and I’d have prototypes ready by the end of the year. The
end of the year is still another six weeks away…unless someone changed the calendar and didn’t
ask me about it, in which case, that was just poor management on their part.”

“Do you have the designs?”

“I have lots of designs. What designs would you like to see?” He filled his cup with fresh coffee,
then checked the other mug on the counter. A sniff test said it was clean, and he filled it for Pepper
before adding the right amounts of cream and sugar.

“The designs,” she said with extreme patience, drawing out the syllables, “for the new StarkPad
and the auto driven car?”

“Oh, those designs…yeah I have them here somewhere,” he murmured, and carried the mugs over,
offering one to her and she took it and then looked from the coffee to him. “It’s early and you seem
a little overwrought, I’d offer decaf, but we both know I never keep it around.”

Coffee in hand, he returned to the planning table. The karaoke machine was a definite, maybe bring
out an ice machine to create a faux skating rink for the kids, they’d like that. Maybe a living chess
match, let the kids play the Avengers off each other…

Then again, that might hit a little too close to home.

“Can I see the designs?”

“No,” Tony said absently. “They’re still in the initial phases, you know I don’t like to show my
stuff off before it’s ready.”

“Tony, I have to show them something.” The exasperation in her voice climbed. “Help me out
here, they signed off on paying some exorbitant fees to clean up the Leipzig airport not only in
cash remuneration, but equipment, man hours, and much more.”

“And it’s a public relations boon, everyone who goes the Leipzig airport knows full well that Stark
Industries is there for the people.”

“But we still answer to the board… and they signed off on that, on the tremendous legal fees, and
the public relations counter-programming you wanted done… Tony, you promised.”

Turning on the stool, he met her gaze and sighed. “I’m not putting on a suit or doing a dance for
them,” he conceded. “I can use the holographic screens to project myself there, and show off a
future feature we can offer to StarkCommunications—when your family can’t be there, be there for
your family.”

Pepper blinked slowly, then took a sip of the coffee. “Oh… that could work.”

“Of course it will work, I have everything there I need to do it. So, you just go to the meeting and
Friday will buzz me with my cue and I’ll play my part.”

“And show them the plans for the new devices and upcoming vehicle development?”

“Probably not. You’re getting my smiling face.” He spread his hands. “Who can say no to this face?”

She finished her coffee and set it down on the worktable, the ring obscuring one of the pixels. “I can…. Have you reviewed the files I sent over? The letters? The reports?”

“Probably not,” Tony told her. “But I’ll put those on the list.”

She sighed. “Please do, and definitely show up for the meeting, but be ready to present them with something so they go to the holidays happy, and I can go to the holidays happy and you can enjoy your holidays because so help me Tony, if I am left standing there with my pants down in front of all of them…”

“We will have some very horny or very dead old men, because Pepper…you’ll slay them. Definitely get your meeting done in no time.”

“Oh my god, why did I say I would do this job,” she complained, head back as she turned to march away.

“Because you are an amazing human being and a brilliant woman, and you do a better job than I ever could.”

She waved a hand at him dismissively as she strode toward the exit. “Do not miss the meeting, Tony.”

“When is it?”

Pausing at the door, she didn’t look back and only said, “Friday, you have the details, yes?”

“I do, Ms. Potts. I’ll make sure Boss is on time.”

“Thank you.”

Tony waved at her then spun back around to the worktable and moved the coffee cup out of the way before he returned to reviewing… what was he working on? Oh, Wilson’s wings. He eyed the design, then flicked a couple of screens, and moved them aside.

“Friday, bring up the auto-driving car, and StarkPad modifications I was working on…”

Leaning back, he sipped his coffee and studied the various schematics as they began to pop up. The StarkPad improvements were more software than hardware, though he’d definitely managed to shrink it, make it lighter, and less prone to breakage. Earlier models bent… and he’d made sure their supplier for the particular components had been changed to someone more on the ball.

Flicking aside the car for a moment, he dragged the StarkPad bigger and then began scrolling through the source code for the primary operating system. What made this new tablet better than the previous models—and every other model on the market—would be the inherent security features. Code word keyed identity protections, coupled with GPS for setting off a 9-1-1 alert anywhere the pad could get a signal and it didn’t need much of one. Nat and Clint used a code word system, this would literally be a case of saying the right word and the device would make contact. Be ideal for those in bad situations.
Hands behind his head, he continued to review the data. There were expansions to the health profiles offered, allowing the patient to share their data with each provider, and update it with the provider’s notes, creating a clear and concise medical file available at their fingertips.

Draining the coffee from the mug, he set it aside, and pulled apart some of the more recalcitrant code and began to just rewrite it. There was always a better way, a more efficient method. He was almost done with that particular app when Friday said, “Boss, the quinjet has departed from the island, and is scheduled to arrive in three and a half hours. Should I alert Doctor Cho?”

Typing the last two lines he saved it and then glanced at the clock. It was almost eleven. That put them in close to three. “Yeah, ask Helen if she can be here by four.”

“Of course, Boss, and you should make your appearance at the board meeting in about ten minutes.”

“Board…oh…” He shook his head and pushed the rolling stool back to cruise over to another table. “Yep, go ahead and get the holoprocessors ready for me, baby girl, and then double check that we’ve cleaned out and restocked the fridge on Rogers’ floor, and on Red’s…then put in our usual order for Thai and Sushi.”

“For all four of you, Boss?”

“Yep…hmm... is Barton here or at the Compound?”

“He’s here boss, but he’ll be heading to the Compound in an hour. He has another session of physical therapy and then he will be going to pick up his family.”

“That’s right—okay, so just the four of us then.”

“You got it. You have eight minutes, Boss.”

“Yeah, yeah…” It had been a long two weeks since they left, and with only the sketchiest of reports on Nat’s status while he tried to find someone with the expertise to interpret the CAT scans of her brain they’d gotten. Helen hadn’t been happy with the cellular degradation or signs of radiation poisoning—all of which appeared to have faded, at least physically. But they’d need at least another MRI and CAT scan, and the neurosurgeon who ranked as the best in the country, perhaps even the world, wasn’t available to him. Falling off the face of the Earth after his car accident… Friday was running facial recognition for him. He was out there somewhere. They would find him.

Staring down at the report on the screen, he shook his head, then packaged it into an encrypted file and locked it on his private server before sending off an inquiry to the second best neurosurgeon in the world. Friday was running the standard background checks, but until Tony vetted the guy, he didn’t get to look at her scans.

Steve’s last report said she was feeling better, which was a distinct improvement over Clint’s description of she looked like crap when he’d gone down there. Tony had kept his distance, and he’d refrained from turning on the cameras because Rogers and Barnes put them all on privacy mode. Fine, of course, because Red would put them on privacy mode.

Her vitals he could read via the bracelet, and they’d been gaining in strength steadily, so that was another source of comfort. Texting her the day before had been more about finally verifying for himself rather than waiting for Steve to check in with him again. To say things were strained with the Great Red, White, and Blue Wonder was putting it mildly.

“Boss, three minutes.”
Tony pulled off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. “Friday go ahead and send a dozen white roses over to Pep for me, will you?”

“Sure thing Boss, you want the card to say something?”

“Yep… Sorry—you know me.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Because, he really had no interest in placating the fat fucks still sitting on the board. Sooner or later the last of Obadiah’s cronies would die off or be bought out—or frankly end up in jail. He was still working on that angle, though some of them were just slime they weren’t criminal. Maybe he’d ask Nat to look into them, she was really good at finding the right pressure point to squeeze.

It really was a pity, so, instead, he’d show off the hologram, and do his presentation to the board, which would end up with him insulting them, them getting huffy, and Pepper getting a headache.

Ergo, flowers.

“One minute Boss.”

Tony did a sniff check of his shirt, then slid his glasses on and rose as the cameras around him began to hum. He pulled a decanter of water over and poured it over a single ice cube, and when the screens went up giving him a good look at the board sitting around the table, he raised the glass and smiled, “Gentlemen, and ladies. Glad you could all find time in your busy schedules to join me today…”

He beat his personal record.

One member of the board walked out in five minutes.

He chased off four others at the ten-minute mark.

Then presented the app he’d just rewritten at the fifteen to the remaining seven while Pepper stared daggers at him.

Hey, she was the one who wanted him to show up. After wishing them all a happy holidays, he cut it off and then drained the water from the glass. “I’m going to grab a shower, take messages for me, okay?”

“Ms. Potts is already on the line…”

Of course she was… “I’m out, Friday,” he said and headed out of his workshop toward the elevator. The doors sealed behind him with a locking click. He’d been working in the lower shops over the last couple of weeks because Parker had been around. He came by every chance he got, and he always wanted to know how Nat was doing. As annoyed as he’d been at the kid for going into that factory in the first place, the kid was killing him with how worried he was.

In the elevator, Tony raked a hand through his hair then scratched at the scruff on his neck. He hadn’t shaved in a while, and if his earlier sniff test was any indication, he hadn’t showered in a while either. “Friday, what’s Parker’s schedule this week?”

“Peter will be dismissed from classes in an hour for the rest of the week. You invited him for Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday, and he indicated he would be able to make it after he had an early dinner with his aunt—she is scheduled at the hospital. Mr. Parker did ask if he could come
by later today, but you weren’t clear on whether he could or not. He asked Karen to ping me at noon to find out if you’d made a decision.”

The doors opened to the penthouse and Tony clapped one hand into the other and snapped his fingers as he made his way across the sunken sitting room to the stairs, and then jogged up them to his room.

Peter had practically haunted the Tower the previous week while Tony had been trapped in meetings with T’Challa and the Committee, and it wasn’t until he got back that he found him talking to Clint who was sending the kid home. Peter was desperate to see Natasha and to know she was okay.

Tony would have poked at her to call him herself, but…she was definitely not okay. Another reason he’d offered the island, and neither Rogers nor Barnes had slowed down in their haste to get her the hell out of New York.

Running the problem, he stripped and climbed into the shower. The jets hit him from every side and he closed his eyes and let the heat do its work. Knots in his back let go one by one. The vicious sensation of popping forced him to stretch. He’d spent too many hours hunched over the worktable, and drilling down on plans.

Straightening, he tilted his head all the way back until the vertebrae in his neck popped slowly and more tension released. “Friday, send Happy a message and tell him we need some time in the church.”

“Will do Boss.”

As soon as he got his shoulders free enough to rotate them, he washed his hair and the rest of him, then rinsed off before stepping out and into a towel. The heat in the bathroom dialed up, as the extractors pulled out the steam. He took the time to clean up his goatee and shave off the scruff. His hair was getting a little on the long side, but he tamed it easily enough. The warmth in the bathroom helped him dry off swiftly, and he hung up the towel before opening the door and the settings shifted to normal air.

He was pulling on a pair of clean jeans, and searching the stack of shirts for his Black Sabbath, when he finally reached a decision. Red would want to see Parker, and Red had gone in there to save Parker. So seeing Parker gave her tangible evidence that she had saved him. Rogers had ripped into the kid for his actions, and as much as Tony felt for him later—at the time…Tony had been kicking himself for even introducing them. Not totally fair, but then again, he hadn’t been in a totally reasonable frame of mind. Seated on the edge of the bed, he pulled on socks and then shoes. “Friday, reach out to Parker… invite him over for six tonight, tell him to call me on his way over.”

“So not right after school?”

Not if school got out at noon, and not before Helen got a good look at Nat. A little later also gave him time to take Rogers’ temperature and figure out if he had to run interference so Red could see the kid.

“Correct. Tell him six, have Karen and he ping us before he heads this way, and then go ahead and add his order to our dinner for tonight.”

“Got it, Boss. Mr. Hogan said he’d be by early tomorrow to take you to church.”
“Excellent.” He could use a good bout. He checked his watch, and then headed down to the sitting room. “Are those files Pepper wanted me to read up here or down in my lab?”

“Which ones, specifically, Boss?”

“The ones she was yelling at me about earlier?”

Friday went curiously silent, then said, “Not sure which those are Boss. Ms. Potts has sent over several files in recent weeks for you to review, some digital, many on paper. There were also two prospectuses, a financial report, and the crisis management in media relations research you requested for the integrated marketing campaign for the Avengers.”

“Oh, that’s ready? Where’s that one?”

“It’s on the bar, next to the box of Cheerios.”

“Thank you.” He found the thick brown folder in its messenger sleeve. Right, it had come a couple of days before, but he’d had the messenger hand it to security and security had come up and placed it on the bar.

That made sense, then he’d gone to his lab and forgotten about it.

After making some fresh coffee and building himself a decent sandwich, he carried everything over to the sofa and flipped open the folder to start reading.

The assessment included specific recommendations for each member of the Avengers, including types of appearances and best events to fit the image they needed to present. Getting the public on their side would go a long way toward the renegotiations. T’Challa had already proven an invaluable resource for changing the language as they reviewed each term. Though his father was one of the original driving forces behind it, T’Chaka himself had not drafted the final language.

No surprise, Ross had been a big influencer. T’Challa had located some of the original language from the first meetings, long before Tony or any of the Avengers had even heard about it. And they were using that as an initial framework. But as T’Challa was opening up Wakandan Outreach and building better relations, so did the Avengers.

Taking a bite of the sandwich, Tony began to flip through the report. Rogers and Wilson would be pretty straightforward in their appearances. Veterans’ events would score highly with the public, larger events for public consumption, more private intimate ones at VA hospitals and other rehabilitation facilities. Though Rhodey was also earmarked for those, however, a note was added about the potential conflicts with the fact he remained on active duty.

That might be a problem anyway. Rhodes hadn’t said anything directly, but Tony had gotten the impression retirement had been floated and there were even whispers of Rhodey training a replacement.

Two problems with that, Rhodey was War Machine, and Tony would never allow the suit to be reprogrammed for a new operator. Still, it was worth keeping in his back pocket for now.

The recommendations for Barnes were actually pretty interesting. In addition to possible veteran events, they suggested looking into honorariums for POW and those listed MIA. Perhaps working with the families of those who’d been left behind. That really didn’t sound comfortable.

But the last recommendation startled him… a minor notation indicated there were several groups working outreach with kids who’d survived gay conversion therapy. The note said it might be
outside Sergeant Barnes’ wheelhouse, but the listing of the types of torture and mental coercion and programming that went into the therapy made Tony blanch.

Barnes would be just as likely to hunt down the bastards doing the therapy and eliminate them. Tony would probably help. He finished his sandwich on that sour note, and then reached for the coffee.

Vision lacked anything other straight group public appearances. The android apparently was beyond the scope of their expertise—or creativity. They promised to identify other potential venues and notify him when he had time.

Barton got some VA notations—as well as the various Scout organizations, along with Big Brothers and Sisters. The bow and arrow must really sell the Robin Hood look, because Barton was every bit the covert operative they did not seem to notice he was.

Fair enough.

Scott Lang… yeah Lang wasn’t actually a member, but they were covering for him and there were several fairs and community events they thought he’d be a great fit for. Tony could always forward it to him and see if he were interested.

Wanda’s sheet was short, but there were several suggestions including War Orphans—that fit, maybe a little too close, and making some environmental efforts. Maybe some green events, and rebuilding efforts like Habitat for Humanity. Hell, Clint would probably enjoy those with her.

He was closing in on the last set of sheets, when he came to the recommendations for him, though they were all framed with the statement:

As time permits

Diplomatic functions, corporate and holiday events—he hosted enough of those. Tech events, big shock there. Tony Stark as a brand, it seemed, spoke for himself.

Probably true.

The last page was a single sheet, and he sighed.

Natasha Romanoff—no recommendations advised.

Tony flopped back against the sofa.

They were far more polite about Vision, because they didn’t know what to make of him. But Red? No, no recommendations advised. Not even an attempt at an explanation. Pushing forward, he flipped the folder closed.

Assholes.

“Friday, we’re going to need better public relations experts. Have SI let this group know we won’t be pursuing anything further with them. Then have two—no make it four—firms place bids and they have only one question each has to answer, and they will only receive the question after the standard non-disclosures and agreements to sealed bid format.”

“What’s the question Boss?”

“What recommendations would they make to increase public awareness and outreach for Natasha
Romanoff?”

“Got it.”

He pushed the folder away, then picked up his coffee and drained it. A glance at his watch said they were about two hours out, so he stretched out on the sofa and closed his eyes. “Wake me up when they cross into New York, Friday.”

“Of course, Boss.” The windows around him darkened and the doors whirred as they went into lockdown. Friday would keep watch, and she’d wake him up closer to when they got there.

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The chime began gentle, a soft warning as the windows brightened again, then AC/DC increased in volume, and Tony sat then scrubbed a hand over his face.

“How far out?”

“Fifteen minutes, Boss. Captain Rogers asked if you would have time to speak when they got in.”

Tony chuckled, a number of acerbic and probably not so polite responses danced across his tongue. Not giving voice to any of them had to be a sign of personal growth. “Tell him of course I do, and I’m looking forward to seeing Red for myself.”

He hadn’t seen her, not even a photo, since Rogers carried her out wrapped in a blanket with her head tucked to his shoulder and her eyes closed. Then, nothing…

He checked his watch. It was just two-thirty. So they were right on time. “How are we doing with Helen?”

“She’s already here Boss, and setting up on the medical floor. She said she wanted a chance to review Ms. Romanoff’s file before she did the new scans.” Understandable. And she could only access the file while in the Tower or the Compound under the direct supervision of himself or Friday. Red would be able to authorize whatever she wanted, but while her safety and security were entrusted to him, he’d be extra paranoid.

“Good. Good.” There was still coffee in the pot, so he made himself a large mug before brewing fresh in case they wanted any. In the fridge was a tray of sandwiches ordered up from the deli Friday reported that Red liked to get meats from. He set that out, it would be a tide me over for the super soldier metabolisms until dinner got there.

Then he hesitated…

“Friday, find out if Dr. Cho is planning to do those scans with or without contrasts.”

It didn’t take more than a half a minute for Friday to get back to him, “with contrast, Boss.”

Tony made a face. Yeah, he’d warn Red before she ate. He didn’t think she had anything remotely resembling a weak constitution, but that was before the sludge took her out for a joy ride.

A shudder worked up his spine and he made a mental note to never picture it that way again. His nightmares were evenly split between the moment she sank into the sludge and when he found her,
lips turned blue and skin almost frosty, in the snow. They’d joined the carousel of hell that included the cave, Killian, Happy getting blown up, his mother crying out for his father, and Pepper falling.

Just a real party bus in his head.

Outside, the weather was the same gray it had been for the last week, snow swirled in the air. A couple of storms over the weekend had turned the city streets into a slushy nightmare. Temperatures were promising to be frigid over the holiday. His watch detailed it was just above freezing right now, but not for much longer. The sun was already on the downswing toward the west.

“Friday, let’s funnel some supplies and food out to the various shelters. It’s going to get bad tonight. And ask for some volunteers to bring thermals out to those who won’t come in.”

“I’ll take care of it, Boss.” Friday gave him a beat before continuing, “King T’Challa has sent word that he plans to be back in New York later this week. He recognizes it’s a holiday, but wanted to know if you would be available for the next meeting.”

“We’ll make time. Let him know my annual holiday party is next week, standard invitations.” He debated Thanksgiving for a moment, but… “If he’s in town Thursday, let him know he’s welcome to join us at the Compound. Have we heard from Lang?”

“Yes, Boss, Mr. Lang indicated he appreciated the invitation, but he wanted to spend the holiday with his ex-wife, daughter, and the ex-wife’s husband.”

Tony pondered that for a moment, then just snapped his jaw shut. Good for them. “Great, send something out there…flowers for the ex-wife, maybe…I don’t know, a pie for their dinner, and something fun for the kid.”

“Should I just guess what she would like?”

Rolling his eyes, Tony glanced up at one of Friday’s cameras and gave her a look, “I don’t know Baby Girl, why don’t you see if she has an Amazon wishlist or something.”

While he didn’t think Friday had achieved laughing or fully mocking him status yet—it had taken JARVIS years—she definitely seemed entertained when she said, “I’ll get right on that, should I sign the gifts from you or the Avengers?”

“Avengers.”

Yes, Baby Girl may not be mocking him, but she definitely got him. “Speaking of our party, how is the planning for that coming?”

“We’ve secured the venue you wanted, security has approved the changes you listed as required, and nearly everyone invited has RSVP’d already, and there were only a handful of declines. You have several requests for an invitation, but you wanted to keep the number under five hundred guests.”

Absolutely. “Did we get the band I asked for?”

“Yes, Boss. They were very excited to get the offer.” They were a cover band from Queens, and they did killer seventies and eighties rock.

“All right, sounds good. Food’s all ordered for Thanksgiving Dinner, and the supplies are in…oh
right…Karaoke machine, and something to create an ice rink at the compound. We can put it in one of the big training warehouses, that way the kids can play and we don’t have to worry about aerial surveillance.”

“Did you have a preference for the music on the Karaoke machine?”

Tony chuckled.

“Right, dumb question Boss. On it.”

Was he forgetting anything?

He’d finished the cup of coffee when Friday said, “I gave Captain Rogers clearance to land, they are touching down in stealth mode on the eastern landing platform.”

That would bring them right to the penthouse. Perfect.

Leaving the mug in the kitchen, he made his way from the kitchen to platform, it was located above the open balcony on a secondary deck. He didn’t hurry, sliding his hands into his pockets as the quinjet shimmered into existence as the cloak dropped. The rear ramp descended and the tension quivering through his muscles relaxed a fraction as Natasha strolled out, Barnes a half-step behind her. She had her head tilted back, laughing at something Barnes must have said and the naked adoration on his face seemed to be mirrored on hers as he draped an oversized jacket on her shoulders.

It was a kick in the gut, but he ignored those changes. He hardly thought any of them were celibate. Instead, he focused on how she looked. A hint of a tan had warmed her pale skin. No longer pale and wan, she looked flushed with vitality. The cold air smacked against him as he stood in the open doors. The breeze caught her hair and tugged at it, and when she turned her head and spotted him, her smile grew and Tony relaxed.

Alive.

Vital.

Still…

“Did you forget to feed her or something?” The remark earned him a dry look from Barnes. But damn she had always been lean, but she still seemed almost too skinny.

“No, they didn’t,” she answered for them.

Two weeks must have been longer than he thought, because he half-expected her to just flick him on the nose and keep walking. Instead, she paused and gave him a hug. It didn’t linger near as long as he would have liked. It also told him that it wasn’t his imagination, she was definitely not at fighting weight yet. But leaning away he studied her face…

“Do I pass inspection?” The dry comment pulled a half-smile to his lips.

“Undecided. Dr. Cho is waiting to see you, however.”

Those deep green eyes blinked at him, and then she sighed, “Really, Tony?”

“Yes, really, Red.” He gave her upper arms a light squeeze. Definitely lost some muscle tone there. Then he nodded to Barnes, and met Cap’s steady gaze. “Captain’s orders.”
“Thanks,” Steve said drily when Tony tossed him under the bus. “Do we have time to drop out stuff off, or is she literally waiting inside?” Despite the initial sarcasm, the last part didn’t sound remotely like a complaint.

“She’s in the medical bay,” Tony said, letting go of Nat and stepping back to invite them in out of the wind. Barnes had a couple of bags, and Steve had two more. Nat’s backpack was slung over Barnes’ arm, and she folded her arms as she followed him. “I told her we would be down by 4, but she’s here so we can go earlier if you’d like. There are sandwiches,” he said pointing toward the kitchen. “I’ve also got on fresh coffee.”

He didn’t miss Nat’s inhale, and faint smile even as she gave him a bemused look. Sliding a hand in his pocket, he ran a hand down the back of his hair to smooth it as Steve gave a little nod to the elevator. “Buck and I will take this stuff down and come back up before you head to the medical bay, okay?” His gaze was firmly on Nat, and she raised her eyebrows.

“I can help…”

“We got it, Doll,” Barnes said, and he didn’t hesitate to brush a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Eat, catch up with Stark, and we’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Parker’s coming later,” Tony volunteered, and he wasn’t sure why he trotted that into the middle of the conversation, but he didn’t miss the faint tightening of Steve’s jaw. “He’s been worried about you, but if you’re not up to seeing him tonight, I can put him off. Just think sooner would be better than later…”

Natasha shot him an unreadable look before she glanced over to Steve, but Cap just gave her a quick little smile.

“It’s fine, Nat,” Steve said. “We won’t be long.” Then they slid into the elevator and were gone.

“Trouble in paradise, Red?”

“No, Tony. Paradise was pretty perfect,” she said, pivoting to face him. The steady weight of her scrutiny was something he hadn’t even realized he’d missed. He motioned her toward the kitchen. “And before you ask, yes, I do feel better, no I’m not at one hundred percent, but I will get there. Yes, I’ve lost weight, but I’m pretty sure most of it is muscle.”

He wasn’t.

“And yes, I will see Dr. Cho to settle all three of you down so you don’t worry. But I’m fine.” In the kitchen, she pulled down a mug and glanced at him. He shook his head, he’d had enough for now and his nerves were already jangling like someone attached one too many electrodes.

Having done that and given himself a Hell of a shock before, he recognized the sensation.

“Now that we’re all caught up on me, how are you doing?” She poured the cup and he chuckled.

“We are hardly caught up on you, but that’s okay. I’ll play. I’m great. Pissed off the board today, and you know how much that brightens my week. Got everything ordered for Thanksgiving, you’ll be ready for the fifteen to twenty pounds all that cooking promises.”

Her snort made his grin widen. Coffee in hand, she perused the sandwiches.

“T’Challa is back in town later this week, going to have another sit down for the new Accords. If
you’re free, want to sit in?” The invitation just fell right out there, granted, he’d wanted her input, but he wanted to give her some time to reacclimate.

“Maybe…let’s play it by ear?” The circumspect response disappointed him more than it should.

“Of course.”

“Holiday party next week?” She said eyeing him.

“You know me so well, and you’re coming.” It wasn’t a request.

“We’ll see if anything fits…”

“I can get you a new dress, I’ll even throw in tuxes for Barnes and Cap, they need them anyway… got some plans for future events, scrub-a-dubbing our Avengers image and all that.”

“Oh, that should be entertaining,” she said as she took a sip of her coffee and picked out one grilled chicken sandwich and set it on a small plate. Then she divided it in half. “But your parties are usually great when you don’t blow up the ice sculptures.”

There she was, the teasing glint flickered in her eyes and Tony spread his hands in mock outrage. “That was not me.”

Leaning on the counter, she set her coffee aside and picked up the sandwich. “Oh right…that was me.”

“Exactly,” he declared, and took his life in his hands as he flicked her nose. “So my party my rules…that means you can blow up all the ice sculptures you want.”

The look she gave him had him reconsidering that offer.

“Or not… you know, I’m easy.”

“Tony…”

“Really,” he said spreading his hands. “In fact, no ice sculptures at the party at all, got that Friday?”

“Not even the Snow Castle?” Everyone was a comedian now, including his AI. Then again… the snow castle was going to be a cool look in the middle of the room, a nice centerpiece to get people talking to each other instead of at him. He grimaced, rocking his head back and forth.


“Second Red, having a debate with myself.”

“That’s going to take longer than a second,” she commented and the dry remark made him smirk.

“Just for that…keep the snow castle and add a red haired queen to it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You just want to start trouble.”

Leaning against the counter, he grinned at her. “Trouble is my middle name.”

“I thought it was Edward…”
“Not as sexy unfortunately.” He wagged his eyebrows and she laughed softly. He gave himself a mental fist bump at the reaction. “Still…going to be a blast…best holiday party in years, I hired this kick ass cover band—”

“You’re not sleeping.” The quiet words slammed the brakes on his excitement.

Wry smile. “You know me Red.”

“I do… but you’re not drinking either.” There was a note of approval in her voice.

“Nope, dry as a bone and clean as a whistle.” He waved his arm down himself. “Pure blend Tony Stark, the brand of champions.”

“Are you okay?”

The flip always was right on the tip of his tongue. A familiar response to a question very few people ever asked him, and she was one of those that mattered. If she’d asked him before yesterday morning, his answer wouldn’t have been the same. As it was, with her standing right in front of him, alive, and well—he could settle for a little truth, “No, but I am better than I was yesterday, and I’m pretty sure tomorrow will be better than today.”

After taking a bite of the sandwich, she chewed it thoughtfully and studied him. There was no judgment in those eyes, but he didn’t doubt for a minute she wasn’t considering all the ways to pull a spy whammy on him. Not that she needed to, he was telling the truth.

Refreshingly different that.

“I’m glad you’re home,” he admitted, then tapped the counter. “In fact, I was wondering if I’d have to come down and evict you slackers if you decided to stay much longer.”

“Liar.”

Relief swarmed through him as she let him off the hook with a teasing grin.

“Tell me about Peter.”

And he sobered just as quickly. “Kid’s had it rough. Don’t know if Rogers told you…”

“He said he tore into him. Not the exact content, but…I imagine for Steve to yell it was probably not fun for Peter.”

“No, and yeah, Cap was harsh but he wasn’t wrong.” It wasn’t hard to admit that. “Peter fucked up.”

“Yeah,” she said, wiping her hands. “But we’ve all done similarly headstrong things…”

“There’s a reason I took away the suit.” Not a chastisement, but an observation. Red had been the one to give it back to him.

“I know,” she said, hands flat against the counter, and her expression almost pensive. “I still think it was the right call, but… I’ll talk to him. How is he though, really?”

Was she blaming herself for the kid’s choices? He could sugar coat it, but she wouldn’t thank him for that. “Not terrible, but not great. He’s been running his patrols, but he’s…he’s blaming himself. It hasn’t been easy to tell him it’s okay but still ask him to take responsibility at the same time.”
A tightrope if ever there was one. While he did want to make the kid feel better, he didn’t want to at the expense of him making another dangerous decision in the future.

“Part of why I wanted him to train with you,” Tony admitted, shoulders slumping some. He never imagined having Nat train him would almost get her killed. “You’re usually the sensible one.”

“No I’m not,” she told him bluntly. “I’ve just been around long enough to predict some things, and Peter going into that factory was predictable. So, that’s on me, too.”

“Yeah, we’ll agree to disagree on that one.”

“You don’t have to agree with me for me to be right,” she said, and then the elevator chimed announcing the super soldier’s return.

“But I’m more right, cause I’m me—which completely negates you being right if I don’t agree.”

She just shook her head as he turned to welcome Rogers and Barnes back. They’d both changed, long sleeves and with the sleeves pushed up to the elbows and jeans. Made sense, the island was a hell of a lot warmer than New York.

“You two want to eat before we go to the med bay?” Nat asked before Tony could say anything.

“I’m fine,” Barnes told her. “And you know as well as I do, Steve isn’t going to relax until the MRI says your spine is fine.”

Tony couldn’t fault his logic.

“Come on Angel,” Steve said, holding out a hand. “I know you hate medical. The sooner we’re there, the sooner it’s over.”

For a spare second, Tony half-thought she was going to turn Rogers’ down, then she said, “On one condition.”

That got her a pair of baleful looks and Barnes just sighed. “Natalia…”

“Oh, don’t you Natalia me. I’ve been very cooperative.” She swept a look at the pair then included Tony in her gaze. He raised his hands.

“I just pay for everything and make people look better, he’s in charge.” He pointed a thumb at Steve.

The comment pulled a reluctant laugh from the aforementioned Captain, and Steve said, “Thanks, Tony.”

“Anytime, Cap.” His grin was real, and the one Steve answered with at least relaxed some of the tension hovering in the air around him.

Spreading his hands, Steve raised his eyebrows. “Name your conditions.”

“It’s like Let’s Make a Deal, without the crazy costumes…are you going to take what’s behind door number one or door number two, Red?”

“Shush,” she said, flicking his nose this time, and the corner of his mouth quirked up before he could stop it. Yes, he had missed her. She made her way over to Rogers and Barnes—Steve and Bucky dammit—he really needed to stop thinking of them by their last names. Even when they irritated him. “You lose the light sparring restriction when she clears me.”
“You don’t know that she’s going to clear you…” Steve began, but Nat folded her arms and simply stared at him. “Angel, c’mon…”

No response, just a continued stare.

Steve exhaled and said, “I’ll think about it, and that’s the best you get, Romanoff. I need to see more than just clean test results. Clear?”

Bucky just shook his head as he looked from one to the other. Tony wasn’t sure what he expected to happen next, but Nat throwing her hands up with a huff and a laugh, then saying, “You do know I’m only going to listen for a very short while longer, right?”

“I know,” Steve admitted, then slung an arm around her as they headed for the elevator. “I’m just counting on every minute to get you back to 100 percent before you decide to blow me off and do whatever the hell it is you want to.”

Her laugh floated back and Tony shook his head as he followed. Barnes fell into step with him, and Steve held the door so they could all filter in. Leaning back against the wall, Tony didn’t miss a single nuance of the ease in which Nat leaned against Steve or the very possessive arm he was keeping around her. Barnes held the door when they reached the med level, and Tony headed out first. Friday had probably let Helen know they were coming, and sure enough she was waiting for them with a brisk, professional smile.

“If you’ll come right this way, Ms. Romanoff… we’ll get you changed, get our blood pulled, and then run the battery of tests as fast as we can.” Even Helen seemed to have grasped Nat’s dislike of all things medical.

“Thrilling,” Nat said as she trailed after the doctor, and glanced over her shoulder before stepping into an exam room to change. “If I’m not out in five minutes, you better come and get me.”

“Three,” Barn—Bucky promised with a half-smile as he folded his arms.

The silence lasted about thirty seconds, then Steve said, “You got a minute later, Tony?”

“I’ve got all the minutes, Cap. What’s up?”

“Wanted to go over where we were with things.” With things?

He shrugged a little. “Parker’s coming by at six, if Red’s up for it and you have no major objections.” The latter was a concession on his part. “Tomorrow will probably be tied up at the Compound with the Bartons, and Pete’s coming to Thanksgiving dinner, invited anyway, and I’d like any hard feelings worked out before then.”

Steve nodded slowly. “All right… let’s see how Nat feels after all this.” His gaze went to the door. Medical tests were a bitch for Red, that much had been viscerally clear the last time they’d gathered for Helen to run a battery of exams and that was before Red got shot or damn near died from whatever the alien did to her.

“If you two want time when Spider-Punk is here, I can hang out with them,” Bucky said.

“Might work,” Steve said glancing at him. “Good with you?”

“Sure thing, Cap. I got all the time in the world.”

“Were you ever able to track down the neurospecialist you wanted?” This from Barnes—dammit
Bucky—who hadn’t taken his gaze off the door to the exam room. Tony would bet money he had a mental clock running.

“Not yet. Got feelers out. Let’s see what we see today?”

The door to the room opened and Nat shuffled out in her hospital gown. “You know, Tony—with all your money and brains, you can’t design something better than these ugly monstrosities?”

“I’ll get right on that, Red. Get you the latest and most stylish, but you have to promise to never need to wear it.”

She flipped him the finger, and he grinned. They joined her on the way to the MRI room, where she slipped off her bracelet, and then the tags from around her neck, and handed them both to Steve. “Keep those for me.”

“You got it.” Then he brushed a kiss to her forehead. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m great, gonna put myself through the wringer, and don’t you forget it.” Despite the light tone, there was a definitive air of seriousness to it. Bucky caught her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“We’re right here, Stark and all.”

“Really,” Helen huffed. “At some point, it would be nice if you’d trust that I’m not going to do anything nefarious.”

“It’s not you Doc,” Nat told her cheerfully, and she patted Tony’s arm as she passed him and walked into the room with the oversized MRI. “In this instance, it’s definitely me.”

She laid down and placed her hands over her stomach as she stared at the ceiling.

“How long?”

“About twenty minutes,” Helen told her. “Then we’ll inject the dye and another twenty minutes. The CAT Scan, we’ll do last. So maybe another thirty minutes on top of those.”

“Yay. An hour… Hey Friday?”

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff?”

“Can you crank the music in here?”

“Absolutely Ms. Romanoff.”

Helen moved out of the room, and the MRI engaged. A minute later, music blasted through the room, almost drowning out the loudness of the machine as Nat disappeared into it.

“Here’s hoping we get an all clear,” Bucky said.

“Yep,” Steve answered, folding his arms and leaning against the wall where he could see her.

The blatant worry they’d not worn when she was with them tugged at him. “She’s going to be fine,” Tony told them, answering the internal nudge. “No matter what… we’ll make sure of it.”

Steve cast him a small smile. “I hope you’re right—I want you to be right.”
Me too. But Tony didn’t give any voice to that little bit of doubt, and just nodded his head confidently. Cap needed him to be cocky and arrogant, then he was happy to help. “It’s me. Of course, I’m right.”
Chapter Twelve

Results

Bucky

Like Steve, Bucky kept Natalia in line of sight. She’d been faking her calm all the way into that room. Everything about her had been a little too bright, a little too still, and a lot of white-knuckled control. When Stark brought it up initially, he half-expected Steve to give some pushback. Ambushing her with medical fresh off the quinjet wasn’t tactically sound, much less kind. Then again, they needed the confirmation—Steve especially—that she had healed. On the way to their floor, he’d kept an eye on Stevie, but he’d been relatively calm even with Stark present so maybe Natalia had convinced him to stop reacting with kneejerk jealousy. Bucky got it, he really did. He’d had his own issues with it over the years, but more because of what she’d been forced to do.

And she never chose anyone else when given the chance… until Steve. Steve he could live with. As for Stark, he’d deal with it if it became an issue. Shrugging off the absent thoughts, he split his focus from Natalia to the screen Dr. Cho was studying as it lit up with the scans, layer after layer, depicting Natalia’s form in varying shades. Red, green, blue, and even oranges, and yellows. He had no idea what any of it meant.

The screen with heart rate and blood pressure, however, he did. Her heart rate had climbed initially, but it was stable now, and her blood pressure had begun to lower. The music in the room must give her something else to focus on. The quiet outside the room, however, dragged at Bucky’s nerves.

“How’s it looking, Doc?” Stark moved to stand nearer to Dr. Cho, his attention on the screen.

“We’ll know shortly. Though based on the way she was moving, I’m inclined to believe we’re going to see improvement. The scar on her lower back has definitely shrunk. It also didn’t appear near as inflamed as the last time I saw her. Good color. Good cognitive responses. But those are all subjective analysis based on observation.”

In other words, without tangible proof, she was unwilling to commit to a diagnosis. Bucky spared Dr. Cho some scrutiny. She’d been all too excited about testing Steve’s blood back at the Compound, but he wasn’t sure if her enthusiasm was for the science itself and the mystery, or for what she imagined she could do with the blood.
The need to protect Natalia kept him bound in barbed wire, it had from the moment he’d begun to wake up in Switzerland when the Soldier was free to be near her again without their handlers dictating a mission. She’d survived long enough for him to remember her, to remember everything about her, and more—for him to be with her again. He could die the next day and he would die a happy man, but he had no interest in dying.

He wanted decades with Natalia, at least as many as they’d already had stolen from them, and more. But Cho had several opportunities to examine her now, and he saw the same excitement in her eyes as she stared at the screens. She’d already seen some of Natalia’s healing, but this would be her definitive proof.

Stark’s attention to the doctor kept Bucky on alert, too. He kept close, but just over her shoulder. His gaze tracked everything she did, from pulling up earlier scans and data, to reviewing Natalia’s status when they brought her in from the factory in Jersey—fucking Jersey, nothing good ever happened there.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he shook off the irritation and glanced at Steve. He’d not moved a muscle since Natalia went into the device. With a hand on his shoulder, Bucky pulled his best friend’s attention to him. Despite the last few days and the relaxed air, tension and worry filled Steve’s gaze. Bucky gave him a squeeze.

She was going to be fine.

All they were finding out right now was whether she needed a few more days of rest and recuperation or not—and frankly, Bucky hoped not. Because her impatience with it was beginning to show and short of locking her up, she would do exactly what she told Steve earlier—whatever the Hell she wanted.

With a sigh, Steve relaxed his folded arms and slid his hands into the pockets and nodded. Stark caught Bucky’s eye and raised his eyebrows and jutted his chin toward Steve as if to ask if he was all right.

With a nod, he motioned toward Cho and Stark gave him a faint smile before returning to his watchful position. Of the three of them, Stark would know if she pulled something with his equipment sooner than he or Steve would. He could also roughly interpret the medical data, which was why Steve had been willing to leave getting the brain scans reinterpreted by an expert to him.

His phone buzzed, and Bucky backed off a couple of steps before pulling it out of his pocket. Steve had pointed out his comfort with modern tech was far greater than Steve’s own, but Bucky hadn’t slept away all the decades. While he hadn’t been alive and awake for as long as Natalia, he’d adapted with the turning of the years and the improvements.

**Barton:** Picking up the kids. You slackers back yet?

**At Tower.** Got back… a little over an hour ago.

**Barton:** How is she?

**Good. Real good. Except Cho is running tests. In MRI now.**

**Barton:** Ugh.

**More or less.**
Barton: How are you and the golden child?

That’s a movie reference isn’t it?

Barton: Maybe. I’ll never tell. Don’t evade.

He’d listed Barton as family because the guy had a way of investing in all of them. And while his primary concern remained Natalia—their friendship meant everything to each of them—he never seemed to forget to check on him or Steve, often both. Bucky suspected Barton checked with Steve about how Bucky was doing as often as he asked Bucky about Steve. Solid intelligence gathering. He got their opinions on Natalia, but he also went to the source. Part of the reason he’d visited was she needed to see the kids, and he needed to check on her.

Missing the island already.

He could admit it. The flight had been fine, save for a steadily growing awareness that they were getting farther and farther away from the intimate bubble they’d occupied. New York was home—correction Brooklyn had been home, but home was wherever Natalia and Stevie were—but it was also where demands on their time and the implied danger of their jobs awaited.

This was not the first time he’d been in this med bay in the last month, and he sincerely doubted it would be the last. Steve and Natalia were both likely to get hurt, and even being in the field with them—he could only prevent so much. He had to make his peace with that part.

Barton: Make plans to get away again. Easier to reacclimatize if you know where the exits are.

Already talked about it. Hard to know when will be good.

They’d made lots of plans, and after the holidays Natalia wanted to go to the cabin. That would be far from a vacation. So maybe after, they should plan one. Steve wanted to find a place, and they couldn’t keep borrowing Stark’s houses…

I want to set up a safe house… somewhere quiet. Where we can go to get away. Think you can help?

Natalia would be his first choice to ask, but he wanted to surprise her. Surprise them both. It might help massage the divide between having their own place and staying at the Tower.

Barton: Yes. Talk about it this weekend. Figure out where you want it to be.

Sounded good to him.

See you tomorrow.

The kids would be at the Compound. Natalia would want to see them. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be as much of a gut punch this time, he was better prepared to see Natalia’s deep affection for Barton’s children and theirs for her.

“All right, Ms. Romanoff,” Dr. Cho was saying into a microphone. “I’m going to come and do the injection for the contrast. How are you doing? Do you need a break?”
“Doc, if I walk out of here, I’m not coming back.” Steel underscored the weariness in those words. “So let’s just get this over with…”

Dr. Cho said, “Give me a moment and I’ll be right there.” She crossed to a cabinet and opened it, Stark making no pretense of not monitoring her every movement. The cameras above whirred quietly. It was so low as to be almost inaudible, but even Steve glanced toward the corner. The camera had reoriented, tracking Dr. Cho. Friday was also keeping an eye on things.

After drawing up a syringe full of liquid, she eyed Stark briefly then showed him the syringe. “Gadolinium.”

“It can have unpleasant side effects,” Stark stated. “It’s why we didn’t use it before.”

That right there was why Bucky was happy to have Stark with them.

“Yes, and before she was dramatically weaker, and suffering from radiation poisoning. I didn’t want to introduce anything to her system. This should be fine now.”

Rubbing his jaw, Stark eyed the syringe, then the doctor. “Use the barest amount necessary.”

“Of course,” Dr. Cho said without sighing or changing her expression in any way, and yet her tone suggested her patience for all of them was rapidly wearing out.

Not that Bucky gave a damn except right now she was the only doctor Stark seemed to at least partially trust.

Once back in the room, she pulled the tray with Natalia lying on it out of the machine then held up the syringe so Natalia could inspect it. Steve stiffened when her pulse jumped and Stark sighed. “Okay, we’re all going to start needing some Valium for these appointments.” The resignation in his voice made it quite clear he wasn’t complaining so much as worrying.

“I don’t think there are enough drugs on the planet to help in this case, Tony,” Steve admitted. “She hates everything to do with medical and has every reason to feel that way.”

Yes.

She absolutely did and that was based on what she remembered. What Bucky remembered—no, he shook his head. He’d seen some of the tests they’d run on her, been forced to stand there while they let some wounds go untreated because they wanted to test her serum. The scientists and doctors often delighted in the amazing results.

Bastards.

Dr. Cho was explaining the potential side effects including nausea, headache, dizziness, numbness, and a feeling of malaise or exhaustion. Steve pinched the bridge of his nose on the last.

“I already have a headache Doc so just get on with it.” Natalia’s words snapped Bucky’s spine straight and Steve frowned. When he glanced at Bucky, Bucky shook his head. No, he hadn’t known she had a headache.

“Could come from being in the MRI machine itself,” Stark offered, and he nodded to her vitals. “Her blood pressure is up, and it’s really loud inside that thing. About 110 decibels, and she has Friday playing music.”
Not really comforting, but Bucky nodded.

Dr. Cho finished the injection and Natalia rubbed her arm where the needle had gone in and then settled her hands on either side of her laid out like a corpse on a slab…

He squeezed his eyes shut briefly and clenched his hands. The last thing he ever wanted to imagine was that. It brought to mind the corpses in Azzano, the trafficking victims and their twisted and mutilated bodies with their Y-incisions, and seeming horror trapped in the rictus of their faces.

A hand gripped his shoulder, and he found Steve steadying him this time. He blew out a breath and forced himself to steady his respiration. They had another what? Hour of this to go? If he was ready to tear apart the damn thing, he couldn’t imagine how Natalia felt.

And to think, only a few hours ago, they’d all woken up in the same bed with Natalia curled up next to him, one leg between his and her hand right over his heart. He could wish they were still there instead of this.

Dr. Cho was back at the monitors and she had the earlier MRI up on one of the monitors with another highlighted next to it. “Okay, this looks good here. See this…” she motioned to a blob on the screen.

Steve and he both moved closer. The image looked more like Natalia’s shape up close, and the part she was noting was Natalia’s spine.

“That’s larger,” Bucky said.

“Extremely,” Dr. Cho told him with a glance over her shoulder. “There are others along her spinal cord. If I didn’t know better I would almost imagine these are older injuries being inflamed by whatever it was the alien did to her. We still don’t have any concrete information. The brain scans were different and then some, but my field is genetics and I only did a year of rotation in neurosurgery before I moved on. I know enough to be dangerous and if I were looking at this scan in a normal person, I’d expect creeping paralysis.”

“That’s not paralyzed.”

“No, she isn’t.” Dr. Cho hit a key and the scan on the wall looked more evenly distributed. He and Steve both leaned forward.

“The spot is still there,” Steve said slowly.

“Yeah,” Stark agreed. “But significant smaller, and none of the other spots are present.”

“So that’s good, right?” Bucky confirmed. It sounded good. It looked like what they were going for.
“I will reserve my opinion until we’ve finished all the scans,” Dr. Cho said, her tone neutral. “But I will say I am cautiously optimistic. The status is what I would call miraculous for a patient two weeks after such an injury.”

Steve and Stark exchanged a look, and Stark shook his head, then rubbed a hand along his jaw. “Let’s just stay focused on Red, shall we Helen?”

“Of course, Tony. I told you—I understand why you want to keep this quiet, but you have to admit…”

“No,” Stark told her sternly. “I don’t. Neither do you. We’re here just to check her medical status and readiness. Nothing. Else.”

Dr. Cho nodded with an air of disgruntlement.

Bucky looked back in the window to where Natasha waited as the machine did its job. He didn’t have it in him to feel bad for Dr. Cho. Natalia was a person, not an experiment, or tool, or medical miracle.

If the doctor couldn’t be trusted with the information, she could disappear.

Steve

Like Nat, Steve nursed the beginnings of a headache, only his was wholly stress induced. That and the fact he kept grinding his teeth. He’d told himself to relax for the entirety of the flight back. Tony had messaged him earlier to let him know he’d have Helen on site and available to give Nat a checkup.

The fact he wanted to read more into what Tony wrote wasn’t like him at all, and the day before, when Nat said something about talking to Tony before they moved out, it had just—set off a nerve he hadn’t realized still vibrated fully. Later, Bucky had even said something to him but Steve shook off the offer to talk. Bucky had no problems with Tony, at all. So maybe it was all in Steve’s head.

Then they arrive at the Tower and the first thing Nat does was give Tony a hug and it aggravated Steve. Even telling himself it wasn’t remotely reasonable didn’t help. When he deliberately left she and Tony alone, he had to admit, he wanted to hurry back but he wouldn’t let himself.

“You gotta trust her, Steve,” Bucky had said when they were in the elevator.

He did trust Nat.

So why the hell did all of this bug him so much? That preyed on his mind as much as anything else. But currently, with Nat in the MRI machine and Helen going over the full scans, not to mention her fascination with Nat’s serum and Steve wasn’t going to pretend she hadn’t come to that conclusion on her own at this minute.

He was profoundly glad Tony was standing right there, keeping Helen on track and giving Nat someone to tease, and even answering questions.
“We worked well together—I think we’re trying to work together now. But we’re not friends,” Steve admitted.

“No,” Tony said slowly, letting out a long breath. “We weren’t. We pretended to be…we were colleagues and we both mistook it for friendship. Some of that’s on me, I’m not good at the friends’ thing.”

“Other than the Tower belongs to him, why do we need to discuss it with Stark?”

“Because…one, he’s my friend, and he’s Steve’s friend, and he’s been trying if not a friend, at least to be more than decent to you.”

He and Tony weren’t friends. He wanted to be…and maybe that was the problem. They’d found a way to be allies, but they weren’t friends. Everything Stark did for the three of them began with Nat. He flicked a look to the clock and did his best not to let out another sigh.

How had time slowed so dramatically? Since when did twenty to thirty minutes take this long?

“Relax,” Tony said quietly. At some point, he’d moved to drop back next to him, though his attention remained solidly focused on Dr. Cho who had another set of screens and scans open. Bucky had shifted, angling himself more between the doctor and the glass to the room with the machine so he could keep his gaze on both.

“Easier said than done,” Steve admitted. “She seems fine, she’s been getting stronger, and more impatient…”

“But… Red is known for playing it cool with her injuries and not letting anyone know it actually hurts.”

“Yes.” For some reason, it mattered that Tony got it. “So I’m not just being an over-reactive jerk?” Nat had definitely not called him that, but after they arrived, he would have had to be blind to miss the defiance in her eyes. And she’d stated bluntly her days of cooperating with his orders in this area were dwindling.

He was frankly amazed it had lasted this long.

Amazed, and maybe a little humbled that she’d trust him that much.

Tony chuckled. “Cap, you’re a lot of things, but you have good instincts—most of the time.” He patted him on the arm. “If you think something’s up…something might be up.”

That…did not comfort him. He frowned. “I don’t want to think anything’s wrong.”
“But your gut is telling you otherwise?” Tony asked, then checked his watch before glancing at Cho studying the screens, her own arms folded.

His gut wasn’t weighing in on this so much as his heart.

A small chime went off, and the MRI machine quieted. The sound, even behind the thick doors and walls was aggravating to Steve. He couldn’t imagine how bad it had to be for Nat.

“You’re doing great, Ms. Romanoff,” Helen said. “CT Scan is last, and I need to come put the cage on…”

Bucky’s fists clenched and Steve blew out a breath.

“Yay,” came Nat’s droll response.

When Helen opened the door to the room, Bucky walked in right behind her. The tray with Nat on it had been pulled out and Helen had a collar and head cage she was going to wrap around Nat’s head for the scan.

“Easy Cap, we did this one before,” Tony told him. “ Doesn’t hurt, isn’t going to do anything to her but let the machine target more specifically.”

“She was unconscious before.” He forced his arms to relax, because Bucky had a hand on her hair and he was talking to her and Helen both. But it was too low for Steve to catch more than a couple of words. “This is going to be harder for her.”

“That’s what we’re here for Cap, look…” Tony motioned to the monitor with her vitals. Her pulse had leapt when Cho mentioned the cage, but it was calming again. “Barn—Bucky has her.”

Bucky.

Steve glanced at Tony sideways. He always called Bucky by his last name with precious little variance. When had that changed?

“Yeah, it sounds awkward to me, too.” Tony admitted with a wry smile. “But I’m trying it on for size. He’s here for the long haul…so…I figure—owe it to him to try.”

That was… “Generous,” Steve said slowly.

“Not so much. It works out better if we all get along, right?” The look Tony gave him made Steve wonder if Tony was aware of his feelings. Nat used to say Steve had no poker face, but he’d gotten better.

He hoped.

“Yeah, I’d like that…but no one would blame you—”

“I promise,” Dr. Cho said, her voice rising slightly. “Not longer than twenty-five minutes, but the CT Scan of your brain is necessary. Once we’re done, hopefully, we’ll never have to put you in this machine again. If—if it would help, I can give you a mild sedative, it can calm you down. It might need to be a stronger dose considering your metabolism but…”

“I’ll be fine,” Nat said firmly. “I’m not a child. Just put the thing on and let’s get this over with.”

“Natalia…” Bucky said. “I promise you can punch things after.” Then he added, “Nyet, ne yeye.”
Nat actually laughed at the response, and Steve felt the clamp on his chest lighten. Tony pulled a device out of his pocket and looked at the screen.

*Translation: No, not her.*

He snickered. Steve’s lips twitched. Bucky told Nat she could punch something, and she must have looked at Helen. Helen led the way out of the room with an expressionless Bucky right behind her and Tony let out a little guffaw. Try as he might, Steve couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

With a wink, Bucky rejoined them but nothing disturbed his placid expression as Helen got the machine running again. Wiping at his eyes, Tony headed over to the displays and said, “Well, how are we looking now?”

“Just pulling it up… now.”

Steve and Bucky took a step closer. Tony stood side by side with Helen as they stared at the different images. Moving from left to right, Steve assumed they were in the same order she’d shown the earlier tests.

“It’s remarkably smaller under contrast,” Helen said, enhancing the area. “Look, striations are visible. She’s restoring nerve function…I can’t even do this. At this rate—a few more days, and you won’t even be able to tell it ever happened. If we could lift some of the marrow, we might be able to produce…”

“No,” Tony, Steve, and Bucky all said at once.

Helen pivoted to face them, but she turned her attention from Steve and Bucky to Tony. “Mr. Stark, I understand your reluctance and Ms. Romanoff’s—but if we could identify the exact cells doing this—we might be able to transplant some into Colonel Rhodes. Restore full spinal function for him.”

“Human testing is illegal, Doctor Cho.”

“This wouldn’t be human testing—it obviously already works in Ms. Romanoff.”

Bucky took a step forward and Steve gripped his shoulder. The promise of violence wreathed him.

Helen seemed to sense the threat because she looked at them imploringly. “I’m not a monster,” she told them. “But all my life I’ve worked to perfect the restoration of the human body, to erase genetic defects and to heal wounds faster and more efficiently to improve quality of life. Captain Rogers…your serum—it’s an amazing thing, but no one has ever been able to replicate it. With Ms. Romanoff…”

*She was in the back seat of the car, half-frozen from her time on the icy roof in the barely there dress. Clint had her wrapped up in a coat and an arm around her to share body heat. But the fact Nat had the serum and told them—it stunned him. Another secret. Another lie.*

“The point is…I didn’t understand what was done to me when it happened. Later, I…didn’t want any more experiments. No more being lashed to cold metal tables. No more poison in my veins. I don’t even like seeing a doctor for a gunshot wound. Everyone wants to be you, Steve. They’ve been hunting the secret for decades. Hydra sent the Soldier to kill the Starks for that formula they used to make more Winter Soldiers.” Every word she spoke cut him. “Your blood, the remaining vials of it, were a hot commodity after the war if you go by the stories. Bruce turned into the other
“guy trying to recreate it. You came out of the ice and everyone wanted to know how you survived, to dissect every part of your biology that did that for you.”

“But the world isn’t going to take apart Captain America,” Clint finished for her. “Everyone would fight it, they honor you too much. Even now…”

“Me?” Natasha shrugged, her expression one of fait accompli. “I’m just a cold-blooded killer and a criminal. They’d dissect me in a heartbeat. So no, I kept my own secret. I killed the scientists who did this to me—the ones I could find. I destroyed any records.”

“Ms. Romanoff can’t help you, Doctor Cho,” Steve said slowly, his grip on Bucky firm even though the muscles in Bucky’s shoulder vibrated with tension. If Bucky wanted to be free of him, he’d break the hold probably before Steve could react. Helen was terribly fragile, and Bucky had no compunction about eliminating threats to Nat.

In this case, Steve couldn’t disagree with him.

“She can’t,” Steve continued. “Because no one knows the secret of it and it’s bound to her DNA. Just. Like. Mine.”

“But her DNA is more flexible than yours, Captain Rogers. And I know that success might be unlikely, but don’t we owe it to Colonel Rhodes to at least try?”

“No,” Tony answered this time, and he was a lot closer to Helen and looking about as friendly as Bucky at the moment. “One, because I gave my word to Nat. Two, because you’re a doctor and you took the Hippocratic Oath. You swore to do no harm, and whether you understand this or not, believe me when I say that if you even attempt to go down this road you will be harming her. And third, and most importantly, no one in this room is going to allow you to go any further, and we would all very much appreciate it if you don’t put it to the test.” He glanced at Steve, then Bucky and finally back to the doctor. “As for Rhodey, he would never go for it—either putting Nat through that or himself for the possibility. He’s fine. I believe him when he tells me he can live with it. Even if I don’t like it. I have to respect a lot of things that I don’t like. The question is can you respect this and let it go?”

Helen sighed, and then sat down slowly. “Of course I can. You’re right, I did take the oath and I meant every word.”

Bucky didn’t relax and neither did Steve.

“And perhaps I get too enthusiastic…I just see how it could help people.”

“But you have to see how it can hurt them, too. In this case, it would hurt her.” Tony finished. “I like you Doc…I like her more.”

“My apologies,” she said quietly, rising to face them, hands pressed together. “Sometimes my enthusiasm for what can be done…overrides whether it should be done. It won’t happen again, with Ms. Romanoff or Captain Rogers or anyone else you ask me to treat.”

There was an innate sobriety to the statement, and an echo of real guilt in Helen’s eyes. Steve believed her. Tony studied her a beat longer, then nodded. Bucky didn’t relax, but he did unclench his fists.

“It’s okay,” Tony told her. “I get it. I really do—and when I let my enthusiasm get ahead of my
good sense, people get hurt. You were one of them.”

Her expression turned rueful. “Yes, well, point taken.” She returned her attention to the screen. “The blood work will be back tomorrow, but if her brain scans show as much improvement as I see on the MRIs, then I would feel confident in saying she could be approved to resume her training, but I would caution returning her to full mission readiness—at least for a few more days. The difference is remarkable, and at this rate, I would expect her to be at one hundred percent in a week at the absolute most.”

Nat could go back to training. She’d enjoy that. And she had grown much stronger over the last few days. Steve wasn’t sure he was ready to relax his vigilance just yet. But… he liked having the information confirmed.

When the chime indicated the machine was done, Nat disengaged the cage around her head and had it off, and herself off the table before Dr. Cho even made it in the door. Sweat dampened her face and soaked through her gown and Steve’s heart twisted.

“We’re done,” she said to Dr. Cho, and it wasn’t a question.

“Yeah Red, you’re done,” Tony answered. “C’mon…let’s let you go get changed.”

Steve had a hand out to her and she clasped it as soon as she was out of the room. Her hands were like ice, and he walked her to the exam room she’d used to change before. Holding the door open, he glanced at Bucky and raised an eyebrow. He shook his head once, but his gaze never moved from the doctor.

Yeah, Steve couldn’t disagree with that. Inside the room, he closed the door and leaned against it as Nat tugged at the gown with stiff, jerky movements.

Pushing away from the door, he caught the back of the gown and snapped the flimsy plastic buttons off, and let it all fall before pulling her against him and wrapping his arms around her. When she pressed her face right to his chest, he ducked his head, covering her from all angles.

“You’re safe, Angel,” he promised.

**Natasha**

From 0 to Shitty in nothing flat. She hated medical. She hated medical tests. The shaking racked her whole body. The music had helped, but she couldn’t escape the sound of the machine or the fact she was trapped inside of it. Claustrophobia had never been her issue—but she hated the feeling of being trapped.

“You’re safe, Angel,” Steve repeated, and he ran his hands up and down her back, the motion soothing.

“I hate medical,” she murmured finally as the trembling eased bit by bit. She hated the weakness more. It was like she shut down and went into fight or flight. She could endure it, but that was
what it was—endurance.

“I know, and I promise—not going to make you do it again.” He sounded so genuine, yet…

“Liar,” she managed to tease, then leaned back to meet his startled gaze. “You don’t fool me, Rogers. First time I break a fingernail out there, straight back to medical I’ll go.”

His eyes brightened a fraction, then narrowed. “I’ll give broken fingernails a pass, but if you skin your knee…” He let the warning dangle out there, and she laughed and pressed her forehead to his chest. The steady thump of his heart relaxed her. She hadn’t missed the tension when she stalked out of the MRI suite, nor the worry in James’ eyes when he came in to talk to her before they put the cage on her head.

She’d seen her own worry reflected right back at her, and he’d asked Helen a half-dozen questions, and even then, Nat recognized James would put a stop to it all if she balked even a little.

Oddly enough, that knowledge made her feel better. The certainty he would extract her no questions asked even if he, like Steve, needed the comfort of Helen giving her the all clear. It was part of why she’d let Helen take the blood for the standard CBC and Metabolic Panels she wanted to run. Friday would monitor the equipment running the tests and all the results would be locked down—just like everything else.

“What did we come back again?” she asked. They could still be on the island, drinking cold beers or swimming in the ocean or hell, having sex on a lounger by the pool.

They never actually got to that.

“Because our friends are here,” he reminded her gently. “And our family is here.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “We…” Lifting her head, she met his gaze and struggled for a smile when he cupped her face.

“You don’t have to pretend,” Steve told her. “It sucks, and you’re upset. Now I heard Bucky promise you that you could hit something… want to get dressed and hit the gym?”

Fuck yeah, she did. Rising on her tiptoes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and Steve lifted her right off her feet as he kissed her. The soft movement of his mouth against hers soothed the jagged little pieces stabbing at her. Twice in the MRI, she’d half thought she was back in the chair, and once… once… she swore she could hear the tanks rolling through Red Square for a military parade.

Steve teased her tongue with his, but he kept the contact light and gentle, teasing her into chasing his tongue to demand more. When he finally released her, he murmured, “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“It’s okay.”

“No,” Steve said firmly, and he eyed her. “Listen, Angel… You did all of that because I needed to know you were okay. You said you felt better, you told us you were getting better, and you know your body better than we do…”

“After this week, that’s a little debatable,” she said without an ounce of shame. The quick curve of his lips betrayed his amusement, but then he sobered.

“Let me apologize,” he told her in his no-nonsense voice. “Please?”
“Okay, but—really, I’m okay now. It sucked, but we needed to know and it’s probably better to know. Do you feel better knowing?”

His nostrils flared, and she got it. When she turned the questions around on him, it annoyed him. But it was important. It mattered to Steve. Steve mattered to her.

“Yes,” he admitted. “I do feel better now. Helen said she felt confident letting you resume training, and maybe a couple more days before missions, no more than a week.”

She scrunched her nose. Another week? Really?

“But,” he continued. “We’ll train, and if a mission comes in and you feel ready for it…”

That was a concession.

Canting her head to the side, she studied him. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” he said with another slow nod, his eyes warming “I trust you. And I know you’re going to push yourself, it’s who you are. You need to be you.”

Some of the dread curdling in her gut went away. “Thank you,” she exhaled the words. A part of her wrestled with telling him about the flashbacks, but he was already upset at himself. She’d survived them, and telling him would only add to his guilt. Guilt he didn’t need to feel.

It was her turn to stroke his cheek. “Maybe a couple more days won’t hurt anyone. I can sit out that long unless it’s a real emergency and frankly…I need to train. It’s been two weeks, that’s like six months in dog years.”

He chuckled and set her on her feet. “Then get dressed, Romanoff. I think you wanted a real spar.”

Oh. She straightened, and then bumped her hip to his. “That’s not the only real thing I want, but one of them can wait until later.” He laughed, and gave her a nudge. After dressing swiftly, she said, “We need to get changed to work out.”

“We can do that,” he said, then pulled out her bracelet from his pocket and slid it over her wrist. She smoothed her finger over it twice so it locked into place, then he pulled his dog tags out of his other pocket and draped them around her neck. “Much better.”

A little more settled, she took his hand as he led her out of the room. Helen stood in front of the displays with Tony and James on either side of her. James cut a look at her and the chill in his eyes warmed.

“There she is, c’mere Red, you need to see this.”

“Meh,” she said, but crossed over to join them with Steve. “You’ve seen one brain you’ve seen them all.”

Tony paused, then gave her a slow look. “And you had to go and make it weird.”

“Ha,” she smirked, then leaned into Steve, and hooked her fingers with James’ when he shifted to drift closer to her. “So Doc, what’s the verdict? Am I as nuts as I think I am?”

“Actually—you look well…” Helen had flicked the screen to something that looked like a brain and it had a lot of occlusions and crisscrossing lines.

“Looks like something a kid built out of too much Play-Doh.” Pretty sure it had been she and Coop
doing it with every different color of the clay stuff he’d had.

“Well, it’s not an inaccurate analogy,” Helen said with a faint smile. “We still need to find a specialist Mr. Stark trusts to read these, but you can see remarkable areas of scarring and bruising all the way through your cerebrum here to the hippocampus and medial temporal lobe to the hypothalamus. I would—again if you—” She stumbled over the phrase, cast an apologetic look at her. “—we were dealing with someone normal…”

“It’s fine Doc, I’m definitely in the weird category. Go on.”

Steve’s arm tightened around her and James squeezed her fingers. Those areas were related to memory and emotion, among many others.

“So if we were dealing with someone else, these are all signs of a pending coma, and potential brain death. This is why I told Mr. Stark we needed a specialist to look at these. There are veins of dark running through several of these areas, and based on what Mr. Stark could share about the sludge and what research we had, I would guess this had something to do with that. Otherwise it could be necrotic tissue.”

Steve grew tenser next to her and she began to rub her hand in slow circles against his back. Just a light reminder she was there and most assuredly not brain dead.

“Today,” Helen continued and pressed a button and the brain on the screen looked just like the last one, still shadowed in places, but the veins of black had decreased. “There is what I believe still significant damage, but could literally just be the landscape of your brain itself. Making this relatively normal. The black veins as you can see here and here, are definitely shrinking. Have you been experiencing any mental fatigue? Headaches? Kaleidoscoping? Maybe difficulties with memory?”

Natasha almost laughed at the last one. Almost. But instead she said, “Have a bit of a headache now but the machine was very loud. Otherwise—lots of fatigue but that’s going away and while I couldn’t tell you if it was mental or not. I was sleeping fifteen hours a day.”

“Sometimes longer,” James offered. “But the need seems to have reduced, yes?”

“Yes.” She squeezed his fingers.

Turning Helen faced her. “Your blood work will be back tomorrow, and if there’s anything concerning, I’ll let you know but in reality—I don’t expect to see anything.” She motioned to the screens. “You’re recovering beautifully. I’d love to do more scans in a month, but I doubt you’re interested.”

“Sorry Doc,” Natasha told her and she meant it. Mostly. “I’m not a big fan of the profession even if you’re okay.”

“I understand,” she said quietly. “In the interests of full disclosure, and because you are my patient, I would like to apologize for being so excited about what I could learn from your medical results. It was highly unprofessional, and inhuman frankly. You deserve better, and if you choose to trust me in the future, I guarantee—I will give you only my very best efforts and expertise.”

Yeah.

Natasha wasn’t going to ask. Tony had been watching Cho with kind of dangerous focus since Natasha had come out of the room, and he’d shifted his weight when the doc began her apology.
Whatever she’d said or done—Natasha could guess. But she kind of liked the doc—in as much as
she liked any doctor, so she’d rather skip it.

“Okay. Fair enough.” She let go of Steve and James both to extend her hand. “Thanks for being
patient with me.”

“Thanks for being my patient.”

The wry comment earned her a half-smile and Nat chuckled.

“Have a Happy Thanksgiving Doc, I have a date with a speed bag and some sparring.” She glanced
at Tony.

“Might want to save that Red, dinner will be here soon.”

“Yeah,” she told Tony as she headed for the elevator, Steve a half step behind her, but James
remained where he was. “No. I want to work out first, then I’ll eat. Need to earn the calories. Feel
free to join us if you want.” The elevator opened at her approach and Steve held the door as they
both glanced at James.

“I’ll catch up.”

“We’re going to change first,” Steve told him, and then he let the doors close. They traveled a
couple of floors quietly, then Steve asked. “You don’t think Bucky is going to threaten her do
you?”

“No,” she told him. Because she really didn’t think he would. “But I bet he glares with quiet
menace while Tony does.”

His sigh ended with a chuckle and he shook his head. “You know…you’re probably right.”

“See…” she said grinning as the doors opened to their floor. “That wasn’t so hard was it?”

Free of med bay her mood bounced back, and she was so ready to dive into her workout clothes,
and go pound some of the stress out of her muscles.

She was halfway to her room to get clean workout clothes when she hesitated and said, “Steve?”

He paused at the door to his room, eyebrows raised.

“It’s okay that I invited Tony to join us right?” First night back, she really didn’t want this getting
off on the wrong foot.

“Yeah, Angel, it’s fine. Parker is coming, too. And Tony ordered dinner, so… it’ll be good to get
caught up. I do have one favor to ask though.”

She steeled herself. “Okay, name it.”

“If there is sparring with Spider-Punk you let me or Bucky do it while you supervise…you can still
spar with one of us, but…let’s give you a little more time to build up before you take him on, fair?”

Fair. Reasonable even. Steve trusted that neither he nor James would hurt her because they would
be hyper aware of their strength where she was concerned. Peter, though wary of his own strength,
may not be as confident in his ability to control it.

“Okay.”
His sudden bright grin at her easy acceptance buoyed her mood further.

“But you better be ready to bring it, Rogers,” she called as she sailed into her room. “You owe me for that crazy game of chase you called sparring yesterday…”
When the last bell rang, Peter was up and out of his desk, backpack over his shoulder and on his way for the door. Ned missed the last day before the break because his family had already gone out of town. Flash Thompson was less snarky than usual, but Peter was pretty sure he had a cold. Either way, Flash couldn’t even work up a sneer when he patted Peter on the shoulder and said, “You know what I’m thankful for Parker?”

Peter didn’t have to ask, he just waited as Flash walked with him a few steps.

“I don’t have to see you for the next week.” With that, Flash gave him a light backslap and wandered off.

Maybe the holidays put him in a mood. Peter was almost out the door when he ran into Liz or narrowly avoided running into Liz because she had her head down and her gaze on her phone.

“Hey,” he said, neatly balancing all of his weight on the toes of one foot as she brushed just scant centimeters away from him.

She blinked at him, her eyes a little unfocused as they adjusted from staring at her phone to staring at him. “Oh, hi Peter. You going anywhere for Thanksgiving?”

It was one of the things Peter had always liked about Liz—she was kind. She always asked how he was doing, and even when he was particularly weird, she just smiled and accepted him. An awesome thing in his world considering just how really weird he was most days.

“Nah, my aunt has to work. Gonna probably just—hang out and watch movies or something.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I wish you could come to our house for Thanksgiving, but Daddy has a crazy work schedule and sometimes he sleeps during the day.” She gave him a small smile.

“Thanks, I get that. Aunt May works a lot of late shifts, too.” Which meant he didn’t see her as often in the evenings as he would like. But May was awesome, and she made the most of whatever time they had together. Mr. Stark had invited him for Thanksgiving with the Avengers, and he was both terrified and thrilled at the invitation. “You know,” Peter offered before his fledgling confidence faded. “If you want to do something or just—you know, get out of the house—you can
call me. If you want.”

Her smile grew and notched up in warmth. “Thanks, Peter. If I can, I’ll send you a text okay?”

“Okay,” he said, and he fell into step with her toward the door. “Okay. That sounds good.” But instead of following him out the doors, she paused and looked at her phone again. “Everything okay?”

It was usually the question she asked him, but the hesitation in her expression, barely there before it was gone again, made him frown. Natasha said he had to get better at reading people, and not just assume. But he didn’t know what Liz’s expression meant other than he got a weird antsy feeling all of a sudden. Then just as soon as it hit, worry for Natasha crashed right over it. She might never get to teach him what she’d meant, Mr. Stark insisted she’d be better and back before he knew it.

But it’d been two weeks and he definitely knew she hadn’t been back.

“Oh, it’s fine, really. Dad’s running late to pick me up.”

“Um…” Peter raked a hand through his hair. He had a skateboard attached to his backpack. The ice that came in with the latest blast of cold air would make the sidewalks treacherous. Not for him, but then... he had great reflexes. What he didn’t have was a car—or a driver’s license. “I can… walk with you to the subway.”

Lame, Parker. Just lame.

“No, it’s fine, thank you, Peter.” Another smile. He was racking them up today. A wistful part of him wished he could be more appreciative. “Dad will get here. I’m just going to hang out and read. Have a happy Thanksgiving.”

“Yeah, if you want…” Wait. “I mean… have a happy Thanksgiving, Liz.”

Another quick smile, and then she was walking away and everything he wanted to say kind of clung to his tongue like the words were as sticky as his hands. Dammit. With a sigh, he reached for his phone to check on what Mr. Stark said about coming to the Tower—at least there he could work on a project or something and try not to think about the fact Natasha wasn’t back yet. No news was supposed to be good news, right? She almost died saving him. Saving him from a reckless decision, like Captain Rogers said, it was his responsibility and actions that put her in that position.

But he’d tried to save her, he had... he’d hoped. Just before the sludge pulled him in—he’d gotten her away.

Captain Rogers, Mr. Stark—none of them wanted to hear that part. And he’d only gotten a brief glimpse of her, eerily still and pale on the quinjet, no one would let him close. If it weren’t for Mr. Barton…

Phone in hand, he jerked to a halt as apprehension ran over him in a wave. The brief warning allowed him to snap his head up in time to meet Michelle’s bland expression.

“Hi,” he told her. Michelle was weird. Kind of like him weird. So he thought she was interesting. But she was—not the friendliest of people. Not unfriendly but... yeah, weird was the only word he could come up with like his mental vocabulary was glitching out in the Ws section and sticking there.

“Hey.” That was it. No opening to say anything more. But not a dismissal either. If anything, she
stared at him expectantly. It lasted a beat longer, and he glanced over his shoulder then back at her, his phone still in his hand.

“Did…you need something?”

A small smile. “No.” Then she nodded at him before she put her hand on the door.

“Um…Happy Thanksgiving.”

“I’d rather not celebrate a holiday popularizing the tall tale of some big meal shared between White Settlers and the Native Americans based on a myth told by Abraham Lincoln to promote unity during a time of great civil upheaval.” But her smile was pleasant enough.

“Oh. Okay.” Peter said with a slow nod. “So—have a good week off?”

“You too.” Then she pushed the door to let in a blast of cold air and disappeared.

So. Weird.

Good weird.

But weird.

Finally, he looked at his phone. There was a message from Karen.

*Mr. Stark and Friday said you could come to the Tower at six, but we should call first in case anything changed.*

He didn’t whoop. Six was hours away, and he kind of wanted something to do now. The restless feeling inside his skin wouldn’t go away. Making a face, he debated going to the library, or maybe take the long way back to the apartment, and see if he could find any good salvage on the way. Or… he was debating maybe heading to midtown and making a swing by Oscorp. There were still questions from when he and Natasha went.

Maybe he should never have told her about the sludge there, but she was also the only one who knew about the spider and the fact it happened at Oscorp. She had kept his secret, because no one else asked him about it—well except Mr. Stark but he’d literally just shown up out of the blue at his apartment. Then again, even after getting to know Mr. Stark, Peter hadn’t volunteered the information and maybe he should, but he didn’t want to tell it was… private.

Like his parents.

And he’d told Natasha that, too.

When Mr. Barton found him hanging out at the Tower the previous week, he’d invited Peter to have a pop and a sandwich, then told him to go home and rest. Natasha would be back soon enough. He was nice and Mr. Stark was great, but…

His phone buzzed and he glanced at it having half-forgotten it was in his hand.

Aunt May.

**May: **Sorry kiddo, I have to work earlier than I thought. Looks like the flu is running through the staff. I might have to stay at the hospital tonight.

His heart sank.
May: You said Mr. Stark invited you to Thanksgiving?

Blowing out a breath, he typed in.

Yes, but I was going to eat lunch with you first. I can try to cook. When home?

He didn’t know the first thing about cooking a turkey or a ham. But there were videos, and instructions.

How hard could it be?

May: I might have to stay here on the campus. But I don’t want you on your own.

Stay. All night and all day?

May…you need to sleep.

May: I will kiddo. I’ll sleep here. Think Mr. Stark will let you stay at the Tower tonight? Maybe tmo 2?

He’d crashed there a couple of times. He had a whole guest floor Mr. Stark would send him to, and he’d said something about giving Peter his own floor. The floors at the Tower were orders of magnitude larger than the apartment he shared with May.

I’ll be fine. I can bring you tday dinner at the hospital, Thurs 12? Tmo 2 if you want?

May shouldn’t be on her own.

May: You’re the best. Thurs is fine. I wanted to wait for you to get home, but they are really short-staffed.

Okay. Love you.

May: Love you, 2x as much. Don’t forget to text me about staying with Mr. Stark.

Yeah.

He’d text her.

Sliding the phone back into his pocket, he pushed open the door and walked out into the blast of cold air.

His ears burned a little, but his jacket kept him mostly warm. All around him, kids were streaming out to meet with friends, some headed to the buses, a few—like him—would head for the subway. More had cars picking them up—even Flash. There was a driver opening the back door of a car to let him climb inside.

Agitation skated through him, and all of a sudden, Peter wanted to just be anywhere else, so he dashed down the steps, and then jogged toward the subway. Home first, then he could poke around. The last word he’d had on the Vulture had been a junk site out near Long Island.

He could make it there and back to the Tower by six?

Mind whirling as he ran, he wished he could just pull on the suit, and head up and swing.
Too much daylight though, and too close to the school

The weather called for another snowstorm to hit sometime on Wednesday, this atop the mountain of snow they’d gotten the week before followed by the ice over the weekend. It would be a mess. Speculation said the airports would close. The subways would shut down at noon on the next day. Travel advisories were in effect. And Peter now understood why May planned to stay at the hospital.

They couldn’t afford to lose any staff to the weather with so many already out with the flu. Okay, understanding that he watched four different how to make a turkey dinner videos on YouTube while on the train. They had purchased a very small turkey over the weekend, and it was in the fridge and already defrosted. So that was the first step.

When they got to his stop, he slipped out with a half dozen other people getting off at the same place and dashed up the steps. Skateboard in hand, he dropped it, and then kicked off. The sidewalks weren’t as slick, salt had done its job, but he still enjoyed the challenge of whizzing around pedestrians hurrying to get out of the icy breeze, and had to only leap twice to keep from killing himself.

Reflexes were great.

Back in the apartment, it was cold. So he checked the thermostat and kicked it up a little. May had already turned the faucets on to drip and had cabinet doors opened.

He had all the things he needed—sort of—set out on the counter, and he watched another video on the prepping of the Turkey then eyed the five pounder May had found. She didn’t like to buy the huge ones anymore—they hadn’t in years. A small turkey for their small family. They could enjoy it and not be wasteful.

Peter could probably eat the small thing.

“Peter,” Karen said via the small Bluetooth earpiece he was wearing. “You seem stressed.”

“No,” he told her. “Not really.” He checked his watch. He still had hours to go. “I’m just… researching.”

“Can I help you with the research?” Of all the things he’d missed when Mr. Stark took away the suit, Karen was definitely chief among them. She was—a friend. Kind of.

“No—I mean you could, but I have this.” He wanted to make the dinner for May himself. It had been the two of them for so long it would be strange to not have her around on Thursday, so he wanted to make it special for her. Then he’d go have Thanksgiving with the Avengers. Speaking of weird…

“Very well. I’m here to help. Based on the weather reports, however, we should begin our journey to the Tower no later than five.”
“Have they changed how bad it’s going to be? I thought the storm started tomorrow?”

“Rapid temperature drops will create freezing conditions not conducive to comfort or well being. Icing is also being highlighted in the warnings. I will continue to monitor and keep you apprised.”

“Thanks, Karen.”

“Of course, Peter.”

So should he cook the dinner now and box it up and take it to the hospital on his way to the Tower? If it was going to be that bad…

He stripped off his hoodie. And checked the instructions to preheat the oven, then he rolled up the sleeves on his shirt.

He had four hours until he could be at the Tower. The turkey should take two…and the side dishes were all out of a box and didn’t look hard to fix. He could do this.

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Head in his hands, he stared at the charred turkey. It didn’t look golden brown at all. It looked…burnt. He ruined the turkey. He’d followed all of the instructions, and it…had blackened bits on the edges. The stuffing was on the dry side and clumped all together in a block. The canned vegetables at least, he didn’t ruin those.

Everything had been going fine until he pulled out his web shooters and had to clean out the tubing. Then he’d been tinkering with it, and he kind of lost track of time. Karen reminding him he needed to leave in five minutes had him launching back into the kitchen to pull the disaster out of the oven.

An hour later than it should have been in there. He’d thought he’d set a timer, why hadn’t he set a timer?

“Peter, Friday has confirmed you can head to the Tower, and also stated that Mr. Stark has ordered dinner for you. But you seem distressed. Is there something I can do?”

“No,” he said with a sigh, then cut into the turkey. The edges were charred, and blackened, but the interior was too pink, and not wholly cooked. How did he do that?

Picking the whole thing up, he dumped it in the trash along with the bad stuffing and wincing the whole time. He checked his watch. He could go pick up another smaller turkey maybe, and try to cook it again. But the corner grocery had been out and they’d had to go over to May’s favorite shop in Brooklyn to find the small one they’d bought.

Maybe he could stop by there on the way to the Tower. Yeah, he could do that and there was a kitchen on his guest floor. And if Mr. Stark let him stay—he had an open invitation, right?—he could cook everything there. It took Peter less than ten minutes to clean up, and that the oven was turned off. He sacked up all the trash to drop in the cans downstairs, then ran to his room to get his backpack, suit, and a change of clothes. He stuffed his laptop into the bag, too.

Coat first, then backpack, and he grabbed the garbage bag before locking up and heading downstairs taking the steps two at a time. The temperature outside had definitely plummeted.
Karen was right about that.

Wow.

He ran all the way to the subway station, and then down the stairs. Barely resisting the urge to leap the turnstiles, he used his card and made it to the platform at the same time as the train. It took a few stops, and he was bouncing impatiently by the time he departed the F train and ran up the stairs to the street, and then a block over to the store. Sliding inside, he did a mental tally of how many people were in line to check out. It was… just five-thirty, he had to get the supplies, and then back to the station, hop the F train back to Rockefeller, then switch to the B train toward Columbus Circle.

He could do it.

Sprinting to the back of the store, he stared in all the cases at the different turkeys. Some of them were huge. They didn’t need huge. They needed something he could make for May.

And they were frozen.

Grimacing, he checked the weights. How long did it take to defrost a turkey? Google said a few hours, but it would go faster if he submerged in water, and kept at room temperature. Okay…he could work with that.

The smallest he could find was nine pounds, and it was a brick of icy weight. It was also going to cost more than he expected, but he had some extra in his savings. He could make it work. He grabbed four boxes of the boxed stuffing this time so he could not screw it up. He had a can of cranberry sauce in his backpack from the apartment, and he grabbed a couple of cans of green beans for good measure.

Then he had to wait in line. He was tapping his foot rapidly by the time the three people in front of him were checked out. It was almost a quarter ‘til six when he managed to get out of the store with his sacks and raced back to the subway.

He barely slid between the doors of the F train heading back to Manhattan just before the doors shut and then he leaned on the railing. He was going to be late.

Again.

Mr. Stark was going to kill him and after he’d said Peter could come.

Touching a finger to his ear, he activated the Bluetooth, “Hey Karen?”

“Yes Peter?”

“Can you tell Mr. Stark I’m running late, and give him my apologies and I’ll be there soon?”

“Of course, Peter.” A moment later. “Mr. Stark said to take your time, you don’t have to rush. He did suggest you get changed before you drop into the gym, he’s working out and said you should join him.”

“Okay.” He’d get Friday to drop him at the guest floor first. Then put up his stuff and put the turkey in the sink.

Twenty-five minutes and one B train missed later, he was almost to the Tower when he had to slow down. There were often tourists out front and Natasha had shown him a couple of ways to slip
them and come in the side. If he had to, he could duck somewhere, put on the suit and just go in from an upper floor.

“Peter, the garage entrance is clear,” Karen assured him. “Security has been cleaning out the tourists because of the weather, but we should avoid the front doors.”

“Got it.”

Three minutes later, he was leaning against the wall of the elevator rocketing up to the guest floor Mr. Stark let him use. Once there, he set his bags down in the kitchen and put the turkey in the sink—it fit—which was cool, then filled the sink with water. Unpacking his backpack, he changed into sweats and a t-shirt. After, he checked his web shooters and debated putting them on or just taking them with.

Grabbing his bag, he jogged back to the elevator and then let out a relieved breath as Friday took him the training room level. He was only thirty-five minutes late. As soon as the elevator opened, he launched out and hurried to the gym.

Pushing the door open, he called, “I’m sorry Mr. Stark, I was going to be on time and then I burned a turkey and I had to go find another one, and then I missed one of the trains and…”

Across the room, on the mats, Natasha had Captain Rogers in a thigh lock and literally rolled, tossing him over her. She laughed as he landed flat against the mat then bounced up to his own feet to face her. “Pfft, go easy on me.”

She looked… great.

Still grinning, she turned and faced him. Peter knew his mouth was open and he was gaping. But she’d been almost blue the last time he saw her, blue and still, and her eyes were closed and it was like…

His heart hammered and he blinked rapidly. It was like when…

Without thinking, he just turned around and left. If he stayed, he was going to cry and he didn’t want to cry in front of her or Mr. Stark or Captain Rogers.

Bypassing the elevator, he was in the stairwell and flying up, leaping from rail to rail. Then he was back on the guest floor level and Friday let him in and he made it all the way to the far side of the apartment and into an empty room before he just leaned against a wall and slid down it.

It had been just like Uncle Ben.

Cold.

Still.

Not moving.

And his fault.

All over again.

Digging his palms into his eyes, he tried to push back the tears leaking out. She was okay. She was really okay. He didn’t get her killed.

The elevator chimed softly, and he tried to swipe away the tears as the sound of soft footsteps
approached. Still sniffling, he squinted up to find Natasha crossing the room to where he sat and she slid down the wall and sat next to him without a word. There weren’t even that many lights on so it was all shadows, but he could smell a hint of something sweet under the sweat. Sweat from working out.

She was well enough to spar with Captain Rogers.

Knees up, she sat with her hands crossed against her belly. When he swiped at his eyes again, he stole a look at her profile. Calm just radiated off of her, and he stared a bit longer. Then she tilted her head and looked up at him. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said and it came out kind of thick and broken. “You’re back.”

“I’m back,” she confirmed.

“You’re okay?” He swallowed. He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to ask, she was clearly okay. She was sparring with Captain America and throwing him around the floor.

“I’m better,” she said. Then with slow, almost hypnotic movement she raised her hand and then her eyebrows. Oh, she was asking permission. Sniffing once, he used part of his shirt to wipe his eyes and then nodded.

Carefully she lifted her hand to his hair and then she brushed it away from his face. Some of it was sticking to him. Awareness of the sweat soaking the back of his shirt, and making his skin clammy swept over him. “I’m kind of gross. Sorry.”

“I’m kind of gross at the minute too, it’s okay.” She trailed her fingers down his cheek, and then Peter turned and she had her arms around him as her knees flattened and he buried his face against her shoulder. “Shh, malen’kiy pauk. YA zdes. Ty v bezopasnosti.”

He had no idea what any of it meant, and he didn’t care, he just kept his arms around her torso and held on. Even kneeling because he had to twist around and she was slighter than him—something he hadn’t even fully realized until he’d had to catch her in the factory, and he’d sent her up to the ceiling, using the webbing to get her out of reach.

“Why?” he asked. “I tried to save you, why did you do that?”

“Because I had to save you,” she murmured, still stroking her fingers through his hair with one hand and rubbing small circles against his back with the other.

“But I had my suit.” He shuddered. When she’d locked that thing around his wrist and he’d gone flying up, he’d thought they were both out and then he twisted arm still in the cuff to see her disappear into that stuff.

“I don’t care,” she said quietly. “That stuff wanted me, Peter.”

He went still and then lifted his head. “What?” His eyes hurt, his nose hurt, even this throat hurt.

“That stuff,” she told him, moving her hand from his hair to his chest, and resting it above his heart. It was a gentle pressure, but even as he moved to sit cross-legged next to her, he didn’t pull away from the contact. “The formless—the sludge—whatever you want to call it. It wanted me. It needed me. And since it had been reacting to me whenever I was near it, I knew it wasn’t going to run away from me. It would have kept coming. It had to. I had to get you out of it.”

He swallowed. “You could have died.”
“I know,” she told him, and she said it so simply he—he couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

“I don’t want you to die…no one should die for me. That’s…”

“That’s what, malen’kiy pauk?” She tilted her head, eyebrows raised. “Your job?”

Another hard swallow, and he nodded. “Yes, and I thought I had…and then…and then I was out and I looked back and you were disappearing…and then they found you and you were cold and you were still and not responsive.” A full body shudder worked through him. “If I hadn’t gone into the factory…it was my fault.”

“No,” she said quietly and firmly. “Do you bear responsibility for breaking orders and rushing in there? Yes. But I followed you, and it was wholly my choice to go into that stuff, to get you out, and it was wholly my choice to let it use me to go home.”

“Go home?” He straightened. Confusion weaved through the tangle of emotions knotting inside of him.

She patted the floor next to her, and he moved, settling back against the wall. Then on a whim, took her hand in his. She smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. “How much did anyone tell you about the formless?”

“What a lot…just… it was sentient, and that—it was gone when they found you. We tried tracking it, but the signature was gone and then everyone wanted to get you back here. I—” He’d tried to stay in medical, but everyone sent him away. Wanda took him to get something to eat, and she tried to talk to him, but all he wanted was to go back down. The next time he had… “Captain Rogers told me I couldn’t see you, and then he told me all the things I’d done wrong. He was really mad and he was right…”

“Sometimes, and you did make some choices that had consequences. Were they bad choices?” Nat gave a little shrug. “Peter, if you’d gotten into the factory and gotten Dr. Connors out without the sludge having infected him or breaking loose, what do you think we would have said about your choices?”

He frowned. “Um…that I broke protocol, but…that maybe it was okay because I saved the doctor?”

“Maybe,” she told him, not letting him off the hook. “Or maybe I would have taken the suit away again, and grounded you for another month. Because listening in the field is a vital skill, particularly when you lack experience.”

He winced.

“That said…the formless needed me because my cells had some kind of radiation from when I closed the portal to New York.”

He’d heard about it, but not enough to fully get it. The news and reports were very circumspect on that part. “I don’t know how you did that.”

So she explained it, and then described the bombardment she’d taken.

“And it never really hurt you?”

“Nope, I was fine. Didn’t even know it was an issue. But that stuff—the sludge, or you know I’m going to call it the formless, because sludge is just mean now that I know what it is.”
“Okay.” He could accept that. His skin wasn’t trying to crawl off his body and his heart wasn’t hammering so hard. The weight of Natasha’s hand in his was nice and he tilted his head to lean against her and she didn’t move away. “So, the formless needed your radiation?”

“Mostly. It was alien life form, it had been trapped here on Earth since the 40s after Johann Schmidt began experimenting with the Tesseract.”


“It told me,” she said, and he opened his mouth then snapped it shut. “I know, I don’t know if I’d believe me either. But it showed me things that I couldn’t possibly know, and I think it showed me where it was from…the stars were different and the sky was this almost purple sheen…it was…”

“Alien?”

She chuckled. “Yes, it was an alien…and it wanted to go home.”

“Like ET?”

“Well with less flying bicycles and spaceships and more using the residual radiation I had to transport itself there.”

“How did it do that?” His mind started firing off on a dozen different ways it could use matter to translocate itself, but most of those were only theoretical. “And—is that why you looked so…?”

“Terrible?” She supplied with a small smile.

“Natasha,” he said slowly. “You looked dead. You weren’t responsive and no one would tell me anything. You were cold and still and your eyes were closed…and you looked like Uncle Ben did when…when I found him.”

All at once that fist in his chest squeezed so hard, he thought he’d never be able to take another breath.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” she told him, and he let out a shuddering breath. “And I really can’t explain it more than it asked me if it could because it desperately wanted to go home. I asked if I’d survive, and it didn’t know. It didn’t want to kill me, and I wasn’t particularly keen on dying. But in all the time it had been here, it was hurt, and experimented on, and carved up.”

“You had to save it,” he said, understanding flaring within him. “Like I had to go after Dr. Connors, and like I tried to save you…” Tried and failed.

“Yes.” A single syllable of an answer and she gave his hand a squeeze. “Just took me a hot minute to bounce back from it all. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know sooner. I spent a lot of time sleeping.”

Lifting his head, he tipped it back to rest against the wall. “I’m really glad you’re not dead.”

“Me, too.”

“Are you mad at me for going in the factory?”

“No,” she told him, and he frowned.

“But I didn’t do what I was told? I—I had to save the doc and I didn’t check the comms.” He hadn’t even admitted that to Mr. Stark or Captain Rogers. Especially not after Captain Rogers yelled at him. “I mean I should have. But I didn’t know they were down. And I was right there…”
“I know.”

They sat there, saying nothing else, and then Peter licked his lips. “I kind of freaked out down there, didn’t I?”

“It’s okay,” she said. “We all freak out now and again. Are you hungry?”

The minute she asked he was suddenly starving. “I could eat…I tried to make a turkey today. It didn’t go so well.”

“No?” She pushed up to her feet, still holding his hand and he rushed to follow her up.

“No,” he said, and then glanced around the darkened floor. There wasn’t a lot here, just some furniture, and couple of bedrooms and a room Tony said he might convert into a workshop just for Peter’s use, which would be…awesome. “I burned it…and it was still kind of raw inside. I don’t know how I did that.” He motioned toward the kitchen as she led him out of the empty room and toward the elevator. “I had to buy another one, and I’m trying to defrost it so I can do it again.”

At the elevator, she paused, gave his hand a squeeze, and then pivoted to head to the kitchen. He trailed behind her.

“Why were you trying to make a turkey, Peter? Friday—can you turn up the lights in here?”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff.”

Peter squinted at the sudden brightening. Natasha stared at the turkey in the sink, with her hands on her hips. “Good, you put it in water.” She tested the surface of it. “Why were you trying to make one?”

He explained about May having to work and that she would probably be spending the next couple of days at the hospital. He added May wanted him to see if he could stay at the Tower, but he hadn’t asked Mr. Stark yet even though this guest floor was the one he’d been allowed to use before. The change in May’s schedule still bummed him out. They always spent Thanksgiving together, and since she couldn’t—he wanted to take her a real turkey dinner and stuff.

Natasha listened for a long moment, then nodded. “All right, tell you what—tomorrow I have to spend some time at the Compound—you should come with us—when we get back. I’ll help you do this.”

“You know how to make a turkey?”

She smiled. “I know how to do all sorts of things malen’kiy pauk.”

“What does that mean?” He tried to repeat the last couple of words, but he probably butchered it.

“Little Spider—someone used to call me that.” She grinned.

“Oh.” A warmth spread through him. “I like that, too…and I can’t ask you to make the turkey and stuff. I wanted to do it for my aunt, and you’re just getting better.”

“I can supervise you just fine, and if nothing else, I believe I have cooked a turkey before and if not, I know the perfect resource…”

If not? Wouldn’t she know? He frowned.

“For now,” she said, linking her arm through his. “Let’s go up to the penthouse. Tony ordered food
for all of us, and I got to work up an appetite, and you said you were starving.”

“I’m sorry I ruined the workout.” She had been sparring and then he’d gone and just—
“Sometimes…sometimes it’s all too much, the lights, the noise, what I’m feeling…” It was why he’d like that the rooms were dark when he’d made it to this floor.

“Do you feel better now?” She studied him. “I could go get your food, and bring it back. We could sit here and eat together or I can leave you alone if you’d like…”

“But aren’t Mr. Stark, and Captain Rogers waiting for you?” And—and Bucky. Natasha had gone away with the captain and Bucky. He didn’t really get that, but they’d been gone at the same time as her.

“They’re big boys, they can handle a meal without me. Tell me what you need, Peter.”

He fidgeted, and then glanced at his empty hands and then around. He’d had a bag…it was sitting five feet from the front stairwell doors where he’d dropped it before bolting across the room.

“You think Captain Rogers is still mad at me?” He didn’t want to make him mad again.

“He already yelled at you once,” she reminded him. “Besides, I’ll protect you—didn’t you see me kicking his ass earlier?”

A smile worked free, and he laughed. “Yeah…I did. It was pretty cool.”

“I know,” she said, her voice dipping to a teasing note. “I like getting to train with Steve. Took him a long time to work up to hitting me back when we first started a few years ago. But he’s a good fighter and a good partner. Still—I like to win.”

“Yeah?” That kind of surprised him. “You don’t seem that competitive.”

Natasha laughed. “I’m not—most days.” Then she winked, and he grinned again. “C’mon. Before they eat all of our food, and then we have to rough it.”

In the elevator, he frowned. “It’s not really roughing it here, is it?”

“No,” she admitted, leaning against the wall. Like him, she’d cooled off while sitting there, but even with her hair pulled up some of the wisps escaped the ponytail and clung to her face. “Not really.”

Another laugh worked out of him as she made a face and stuck her tongue out at him. It was ridiculous, and yet, it dislodged all those hard bricks from his chest. He could take a deep breath. Some of the gray of the world retreated. Aunt May still had to work, and he’d still burned his first attempt at a turkey, but Natasha was alive, and she was okay.

The doors opened to the penthouse.

“You take that back, Bar—Bucky,” Mr. Stark was saying. “Chicago pizza is not crap.”

“Compared to Brooklyn pizza?” Bucky said laconically. “It’s barely qualified as crap.”

“Have you even had Chicago pizza?” Mr. Stark demanded.

Peter followed Natasha out of the elevator. The three men were arrayed in the living room with Mr. Stark sitting smack in the middle of the sofa, while the captain and Bucky occupied a couple of armchairs. There was a spread of food in front of them including sushi, Thai, and deep-dish pizza.
Mr. Stark scoffed, then twisted on the sofa. “Red, get over here and set your boyfriend straight. Wait…one better…I’ll say Red’s pizza beats Chicago pizza. So there.”

Natasha chuckled.

“Natalia’s pizza is Brooklyn style,” Bucky said with a kind of lazy confidence and a smirk.

“Wait… Red, no! You made pizza while you were on the island?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Yes, Tony, I did, but I can make more later.”

“You make pizza?” Peter questioned, keeping halfway wary eye on the captain as Natasha sat on the floor on the other side of the coffee table. Peter dropped down to sit next to her.

“I make excellent pizza.”

“Yes she does,” came three enthusiastic endorsements.

“Thank you for not eating all the food gentlemen,” Natasha told them as she cracked open her chopsticks, and then reached for some of the sushi.

“Do I just…” Peter began, a little surprised no one commented on his fleeing, and kind of hoping it would stay that way.

“Eat whatever you want Kid.” Tony waved him to the food. “What are you drinking?”

“Water is fine, Mr. Stark, thank you.”

Bucky was already handing a bottle of water to Natasha, and she passed it to Peter. Then Bucky rose and went to get two more. Peter caught Captain Rogers studying him and ducked his head.

“Peter is going to stay on his guest floor for the next couple of days if that’s all right with you Tony,” Natasha said just as Peter stuffed some of the pizza in his mouth. He went wide-eyed and glanced from her to Mr. Stark, but he had too much cheese and sauce in his mouth to protest.

“And if it isn’t?” But Mr. Stark’s amused smile said he was joking. “I mean, I don’t know why I would have keyed a guest floor to him.”

“Eh, he can stay on my floor if it wasn’t,” Natasha told him with a dismissive flick of her fingers to which Mr. Stark just laughed.

“It’s always okay Kid, just make sure your aunt knows.”

“She does,” Peter admitted. “She has to work. And she didn’t want me staying on my own.”

“Well then, we’ll make sure we look after you, set curfews, and give you chores…you know honest work.”

Peter laughed and stuffed more pizza in his mouth. Chores for Mr. Stark were fun, because they usually involved the workshop.

The conversation was fun, Mr. Stark brought up Peter’s affinity for Star Wars references. Which was cool, because Peter could argue a lot of points about the old movies. Turned out Bucky hadn’t seen some of the films, so when they voted to watch one, Peter picked Raiders of the Lost Ark, cause Indiana Jones was kind of cool and it was kicking Nazi butt.
They rearranged in the living room and Peter was sitting with his back to the sofa, right in front of Natasha, and she was curled up next to Bucky who’d moved and Mr. Stark and Captain Rogers settled in the chairs as the screen came up. It didn’t occur to Peter until both Bucky and Cap glared at the Nazis that they’d actually fought them.

He wanted to ask questions, but he wasn’t sure if he was allowed. When the movie was over, he turned at Bucky’s shushing sound to Mr. Stark’s proclamation that the special effects were still cutting edge despite the time since the movie aired. The lights had come up, and Natasha was sound asleep.

“I’ve got her,” Bucky told Captain Rogers as he lifted her. “Thanks for dinner, Stark—”

“Tony,” Mr. Stark said. “Let’s try to work around the weirdness. Just call me Tony.”

Bucky hesitated a beat, then nodded. “See you in the morning, Parker. We’ll have breakfast around eight usually. So come up.”

“Yeah…okay…and I’m Peter.”

The captain chuckled and then Bucky was gone, carrying Natasha into the elevator.

“You good, Kid?” Mr. Stark asked, eyeing him.

“Yes, sir. Sorry about—running away earlier.” He shifted his stance from foot to foot, aware that Captain Rogers was still present.

“Don’t sweat it,” Mr. Stark said, and then motioned to Captain America. “We wanted to talk to you for a minute, are you up for that?”

Without Natasha right there? “Um, sure?” He folded his arms and curled his shoulders a little. He glanced from one to the other.

“Peter,” Captain Rogers said. “First…I owe you an apology.”

What? Peter blinked.

“I lost my temper with you, not something I’m proud of,” the captain continued, his expression reserved and calm. He didn’t shy away from meeting Peter’s eyes. “I won’t make excuses for it, but it was uncalled for.”

“But I still…didn’t listen to orders. I still put Natasha in danger…”

Mr. Stark raised, a hand to kind of motion him quiet, but Captain Rogers shook his head. “Yes,” he said, almost directly contradicting his headshake. “But…as has been pointed out to me, you made a tactical error, that Natasha then based her decision on to go after you. We are all responsible for our decisions in the field, which is why teamwork is critical. You’ve—been training with her, but not with the team as a whole…”

Well, mostly because he wasn’t an Avenger.

“So, the responsibility for you being in the field in the first place is on me.”

Peter blinked again. This was not how he expected the conversation to go.

“I didn’t keep you from joining us, I gave you an assignment and a task, and I was well aware that Natasha would be keeping a secondary eye on you.”
A little shaky, Peter swallowed. He’d really wanted to impress her out there.

Impress them all. Call that an abject failure to prove the hypothesis.

“I put you in the position where you had to make the decision you did. You went off book because you wanted to save someone,” the captain continued. “You put Natasha in the position to have to make a call to get you out. So we all made decisions that put us in that place. Regardless, while you deserved a reprimand, I shouldn’t have lost my temper. Period full stop.”

“I still feel like maybe I deserved it,” Peter said slowly, but he shifted his weight.

“A part of me wants to think the same, because it would absolve me of the responsibility for putting you out there in the first place. But no, I have to accept my part in it, and I hope you’ll accept my apology.” With that, he offered his hand and Peter unfolded his arms, still surprised that Captain America was apologizing at all because…well for any number of reasons.

He took his hand slowly and said, “Thank you, Captain…would you accept my apology for not thinking it all the way through? I really wanted to save Dr. Connors and I really tried to save Natasha, too.”

“I know you did…and you can call me Steve.” He gave him a firm handshake and Peter blew out a breath.

“I’d like to do that again, sir—Steve.”

The unease of having to face him just sort of dwindled away. Then Mr. Stark clapped his hands. “Well since we’re all taking responsibility, I’m the one that brought you into all of this in the first place, Kid. So let’s all learn from this and make sure I don’t handle any more recruitment. Sound good?”

Cap—Steve rolled his eyes, and shook his head chuckling. “Nice, Tony.

“Sometimes…all right Kid, let your aunt know you can stay here and tell her to reach out if the hospital needs anything. You know where to go, right? You good with the guest floor? You can stay on Red’s since she made the offer.”

“That would be kind of weird though, wouldn’t it?” Because that meant Natasha didn’t stay on her own floor, but she was staying with Steve and Bucky, and maybe…yeah…that was weird.

Steve shrugged. “It’s nice and she wouldn’t have said it if she didn’t mean it, but stay where you’re comfortable.” But he didn’t offer his floor. “Just show up for breakfast or Natasha will probably come looking for you.”

“I’ll be there,” Peter said, and it was kind of nice knowing he had somewhere to be.

“See you tomorrow, Peter. Tony.”

“Night, Cap,” Mr. Stark called, but he didn’t move from where he leaned against the back of the sofa arms folded. Peter tried to smooth down his shirt, and then looked at Mr. Stark. “I should have told you she was all right,” he said quietly, but when Peter began to shake his head, but Mr. Stark held up his hand. “Look Kid, I’m trying to apologize here.”

“You said she’d be fine,” Peter told him, because he had. He’d said it a couple of times.

“Yeah, but there’s a difference between saying she would be and knowing she had been getting
better. I should have told you…”

“She—she said it drained her of radiation.” He licked his lips.

“From what we can tell, yeah.” Mr. Stark nodded. “She had a whole battery of tests today, Doc said she looked good, Cap says she looks good—she was kicking his ass.”

Peter grinned a little.

“Red says she feels good.”

“But she fell asleep…” He didn’t hang out with them often or like really at all. So maybe that was normal?

“Well, she is still recovering and it was a long day.” Pushing away from the sofa, Mr. Stark wrapped an arm around him and walked him toward the elevator. “I didn’t tell you she was here because I wanted to surprise you, and about thirty seconds after you walked in I realized what a bad plan that was. For what it’s worth, Red smacked me in the back of the head.”

Another grin worked free, before he sobered. “I really like her Mr. Stark. And I really thought I’d gotten her killed.”

“Yeah, I like her, too Kid. And let me tell you a secret, Red’s damn hard to kill. She’ll outlast us all.” Mr. Stark braced his shoulder. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah—I’m better. She and I talked…”

“She’s good at that, too. Okay… go get some shuteye.” He nudged him toward the elevator. “And no sneaking off to the lab to work all night, that’s my gig. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Will you be at breakfast?” Peter asked, putting a hand against the door.

“Probably—depends on when I get to bed. Now go, shoo…” Mr. Stark waved him off and Peter let go of the door and blew out a breath as the elevator descended.

When the doors opened to his floor, he hesitated.

“Friday?”

“Yes, Mr. Parker.”

“I’m—I’m going to get my stuff and go to Natasha’s floor for the night. Is that okay?”

“Yes, Mr. Parker. Ms. Romanoff has given you access to her floor. I’ll hold the elevator for you.”

“Thanks.”

He jogged over to grab his duffle bag, and the backpack, then glanced at the food in the kitchen. “Friday I’m going to leave this stuff here for tomorrow, okay?”

“That’s fine, Mr. Parker. The climate control will help with the defrosting, I can warm it up in here a couple of degrees.”

“Thanks, Friday.”

Then he was back on the elevator and she whisked him to Natasha’s floor.
When Friday let him out, he glanced around the space. It was—really nice. Warm, and colorful. Not full of furniture though. There was a room he’d bet was hers, and then he found another one that looked like a dance studio with mirrors and a dance barre. He didn’t really want to sleep in her room…cause that would be weird. Walking over, he set his stuff on the table, and then fell onto the sofa.

He sent a text to May to let her know he was definitely staying at the Tower, and that he’d had food and was going to sleep for the night.

His eyes shut before he ever saw a response.

The sofa was really comfortable.
Hands grabbed her, forcing her into place and locking her down. Wrists shackled. Head fastened with metal prongs digging into her scalp. She couldn’t move her legs, or her arms. No amount of squirming pulled her free. The room was cold, the chill numbing her to the bone and it stank of antiseptic-coated copper. People bled in this room. A laugh tried to ascend to the surface, a single bubble in a sea of misery. She had bled in this room.

There were hands on her face, squeezing her jaw, the pressure brutal until it forced her mouth open even as it threatened to break her jaw and then a rubber guard was shoved between her teeth. A hundred angry voices buzzed around her, a litany of charges, and a scoff of dismissal. The last thing she wanted to do was open her eyes, but since when had the world ever given a damn about what she wanted?

A slap, this one hard enough to make her jerk against the containment, digging the prongs into her flesh. They would leave a mark. Warmth trickled down her face.

Better blood than tears.

Steeling herself, she reached for every ounce of discipline she owned then forced her eyes open to stare into the empty, cold gaze of the Soldier.

Soldat.

James.

Zvezda moya.

Lyubimyi

He stared at her impassively, as though she were a stranger, a mark.

“It’s okay,” she whispered around the guard between her teeth. She’d pushed them all, and she was right where she needed to be. “It’s okay.”

Around them, technicians and guards moved. A body was being dragged out. Her mind catalogued it. Three bodies really, the other two went down in the hall and their programmer—she took him out as soon as she was in the room. The bastard programmed the chair. She’d remembered him
and if she got no one else on her way in here, she wanted him dead.

Single points of failure.

If she couldn’t cut off the head, she’d take out the spine.

Still, she ignored their movements. She ignored the guards arrayed behind James with their electric prods. The ones beyond them with their guns—including the one pointed at James as if they didn’t care about shooting him to get to her. She kept her gaze fixed on James. A year—more than a year since the last time she’d seen him and they’d erased him.

Again.

At least… at least they’d forget together.

Tears burned in the back of her eyes, but she refused to shed them. Refused to give into sentimentality and attachment. She had to separate herself—the woman she’d been was going to go away—better to let her go without a fight. They would be safer then… Wi—

“Do it.”

James’ chilled eyes never warmed and the world went white.

She snapped her eyes open to the darkened room just as a slice of light cut across it from the bathroom. The pound of her heart combined with the white laser burning in her brain and the taste of metal in her mouth sent a wave of nausea over her, there and then gone again as she twisted to track the light. Steve stood framed in the doorway to the bathroom, a wince on his face.

“Sorry, Angel, just going to run. Go back to sleep.”

She pressed a hand to her face and then blinked slowly. The dream—fuck was that a dream—slipped away the longer she lay there. Nebulous and hard to grip, it slid through her mental fingers like so much smoke. Yet, the distinct sensation of unease and loss wouldn’t go away.

Shifting, she rolled toward Steve’s side of the bed, intent on getting out of it. But an arm wrapped around her middle and drew her back against him. “Natalia?”

Squeezing her eyes shut against the sudden sharp stab in her heart, she rubbed his forearm soothingly. “Steve is going running…”

There was something wrong with that idea…

A kiss against the back of her neck, then his hand flattened against her abdomen. At some point, the shirt she was wearing had rucked up—she barely remembered James carrying her into the bedroom or stripping her out of her clothes when all she wanted to do was go to sleep. But he’d made her brush her teeth—thank you—and helped wash her face before pulling her against him and letting her drift off. Steve had come in just as she sank and she roused only when he climbed in on her other side, and his hand rested against her back.

“Natalia, you’re cold,” James made a noise, then he shifted and dragged the blanket up. The guys often kicked it off. They burned so hot, she rarely found herself that chilly. Still…

“Steve’s going running.” she repeated like a broken record. The water was on in the bathroom.
“He likes to run, and yesterday was tough on all of us. Routine is good,” James soothed, but an undercurrent of worry slid through his sleep-tinged voice. “You’re going to have a long day today, too. A little more sleep…”

Why wasn’t he getting it? The stabbing pain into her eye was annoying her, and she forced her breathing to slow. Pain could be compartmentalized, she just had to step aside from it. But this was like a river of superheated liquid metal wrapped around a cone being poured through a funnel.

Not that she wanted to focus on it. Twisting against James, she let out a little grunt when he tightened his arm before releasing it finally and letting her roll over to face him. The bathroom door opened, and light sliced across the room and then shut off before Steve bent down. His breath ghosted her cheek a split second before he kissed her.

“Go back to sleep, Angel. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

Couple of hours?

Then the bedroom door closed behind him.

“Natalia?” James asked quietly, and she focused on the dark in front of her. Somewhere in that shadow, James lay watching her with his far keener night vision. He and Steve both could see right through the damn shadows.

Not that she was jealous of it or anything.

“It’s freezing outside, James,” she said slowly, her mind stumbling over the hot metal spikes to track down why Steve going running set off warning bells. “Ice storm freezing.”

His indrawn breath told her he got it. With a gentle squeeze of his hand to her hip, he asked, “Are you okay on your own?”

“I can go with…”

“Yeah, no,” he murmured then pressed his lips to her forehead. “Sleep, lounge—take a bath if you want. Or use your studio. You don’t handle the cold as well as we do.”

She also didn’t have panic attacks over the cold.

“I’ll look after him, lyubov moya.” He was off the bed swiftly, and across the room to the door. “Stevie…” he said as he closed the door behind him.

Flopping back against the pillows, she pressed a hand against her chest and then closed her fingers around the dog tags. Squeezing them, the metal edges bit into her palms and gave her something else to focus on besides the killer headache. Only after she caught the sound of the elevator chiming a few minutes later did she slip out of bed.

In the bathroom, she filled a glass with water, and then drank it all before turning on the shower. She stood under the spray for ten minutes, breathing in the steam and letting it relaxed the knotted muscles in her neck. Bit by bit, the headache receded. She reached for the shampoo when the first drop of blood splashed against the tile, and she touched a finger to her nose.

More red came away and she tilted her head back, then worked the soap through her hair. The bleeding would stop. Probably overdid it the day before—and she was not sharing that fact with anyone. Overdoing it was normal for her. By the time she finished her shower, the bleeding had stopped and she cleaned up the tile to erase any evidence.
One towel wrapped around her hair, and another around her torso, she stepped out into the bedroom. The air was chillier, but not frigid. She took the time to run lotion over her legs and arms. Once done, she towed the rest of her hair and patted down her hair before pulling on a clean pair of panties and a comfortable bra. In the closet, she found—new clothes and shook her head. There were at least a half dozen new pairs of leggings, as many shirts, a couple of dresses, a new sweatshirt, and a dark gray hoodie hung right on the door that she knew for damn sure belonged to Tony.

Fine, she’d sneak in and rearrange his closet. Then put his hoodie back and get a different one.

It would serve him right.

Still, she checked the shirts and had to laugh at the different sayings on each one. The humor helped with the headache. Aware of the cold, she went for a pair of warm yoga pants that could also double as stylish cargo pants. Though they hung a little loosely on her, forcing her to cinch the waist a little tighter. The t-shirt read *I advise you don’t mess with me, I know karate, kung fu, judo, tae kwon do, jujitsu, and 28 other dangerous words.*

A thick pair of socks completed her ensemble and she debated snagging the hoodie off the door, but skipped it in favor of heading over to James’ room, and she stared at what he had—an oversized black one lay over the back of a chair and she lifted it. A sniff test told her it was mostly clean and all she could smell on it was him. Looping the arms around her waist, she tied it in place. Once she got the coffee started, she checked the time. It was a little after five in the morning. The sun was not up, and the cityscape still boasted some snow coverage, but the ice glinted off light poles below.

James was with Steve, and Steve said a couple of hours, which meant he planned to push himself. They hadn’t really been on the island. More than her, yes, but not as much as he usually did. So on the one hand, getting back on some kind of normal schedule was a good thing—on the other—after Steve’s nightmare about the ice and the fact he’d been awake and at least somewhat aware from time to time while trapped in it…

A shudder worked through her. Just no. She would happily have gone with him even if she got frostbite. But James understood and he was out there. So…

“Good morning, Friday,” she called.

“Good morning, Ms. Romanoff. Welcome back.” The AI had greeted her the day before, but they’d all been a little preoccupied with the uncomfortable tests. Or at least she had been.

“Thank you. I’m going to do some cooking, so would you cue up one of my playlists for me? And then give me a heads up when Steve and James get back to the Tower?”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff. Which playlist would you like?”

“Hmm… surprise me. Half volume though…” Then because he hadn’t been sleeping, she asked, “Has Tony gone to bed yet?”

“Mr. Stark has in fact, not gone to bed yet, Ms. Romanoff. He is currently in his workshop.”

And because there were times when Friday was absolutely literal, because she could be, Nat asked, “Is he asleep in his workshop?”

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff. He passed out on his sofa there about forty-five minutes ago, I have secured the workshop and continue to monitor. He asked me to wake him at eight. Do you need me to
“Not at all. Let him sleep. Can you tell me how Peter’s night was?” One of the reasons she didn’t want Friday monitoring her was she appreciated her privacy, and she didn’t want to intrude on theirs, however, Peter had a hell of a shock the night before and Tony needed looking after.

“He went to your floor to sleep, and he is also sleeping on the sofa.” There was a hint of amusement there and Nat chuckled. “Based on Karen’s observation, he slept soundly with no signs of actual distress.”

Good. No bad dreams.

“Excellent, thank you, Friday. Kick up the music and return me to privacy mode please.”

“My pleasure, Ms. Romanoff. I will chime in when Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes return.”

The music came up slowly, and it was an instrumental from one of the first movies she saw after she abandoned the Red Room and the KGB once and for all. Ironic…she’d always loved this soundtrack. Pushing her damp hair away from her face, she stared at the kitchen.

A flash of the chair danced across her mind’s eye, seared there like some kind of brand and she could almost feel the metal prongs digging into her scalp. Bits and pieces of the dream fell like broken glass, cracking and shearing away when she tried to look at them.

Her nose tingled, and she pressing her knuckle against it, then stared at the blood on her finger. Dammit. That needed to stop. Okay, think about something else. She used a tissue, and then once the bleeding had stopped, she tucked the bloodied tissue into a Ziploc bag, and then stowed it inside another plastic bag before shoving it in the trash.

After she washed her hands and poured her coffee, she set up the other brewer to start when Friday told her they were back. Then she went to the pantry. It was fully stocked…excellent.

Apple stuffed croissants and some pirozhki—maybe with scrambled eggs and bacon stuffed inside them? It would all take time, effort, and focus. Exactly what she needed…

By the time Friday chimed in to say Steve and James had returned, she was stacking her third and fourth trays of pirozhki onto the rack to cool and slid in the pair of apples stuffed croissants trays. After pulling her oven mitts off, she hit the button on the coffee maker to begin their coffee brewing. She’d finished her second cup, and switched the kettle on to make tea.

While she’d been preparing the croissants, the sun made a split-second vain appearance, then lost the battle against the heavy gray clouds. Sleet had begun to fall, and she had Friday pull the weather report for her after she tracked down her phone again. The fact she’d forgotten about her electronics or at least had gotten complacent about them, irritated her.

The forecast still called for significant amounts of snow, but right now it was ice falling and their arrival back at the Tower relieved her. The doors to the elevator chimed open as she began the pour of the coffee back into the coffee maker to do the second brew.

Steve and James were both red-cheeked, chapped, and Steve at least was rubbing his hands together, gloves tucked under his arm.

“You’re up,” James said, sounding almost half-disappointed.
Grinning, she said, “And I’ve been cooking—well, baking really. But plenty of food. How was your run?”

There was still flour on the counter along with the mixing bowls and rolling pin. She had a lot of clean up to do, which she could start now. But it had taken time to clean and cut the apples, to simmer them with some brown sugar and cinnamon while she got the pirozhki ready. Once they were in the oven, she tackled the apple stuffed croissants.

Steve pushed the hood back away from his damp hair and they were both staring at her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Steve answered slowly. “I just figured we’d do pancakes when we got back, and wake you up…”

“Yeah,” James grumbled, then elbowed Steve. “But some punk had to go running.”

“No one told you that you had to come,” Steve countered and shoved James back. Then the little push-wrestling started, and Nat had to hide a smile as James got Steve in a headlock. She half-expected one to give the other a noogie. But they broke apart with a laugh, and Steve stripped off his hoodie and said, “I’m going to shower and change. Be back out in a sec.”

She wolf whistled as he stripped off his shirt on the way to his room and he hesitated, then glanced back. For the first time in several days red flushed up his neck and she didn’t think it had anything to do with the cold. With an almost shy smile, he chuckled and shook his head before disappearing into the bedroom.

James wrapped his icy cold arms around her and pressed his equally cold lips to her neck. It took serious willpower to not squeal or break his arm. Her nipples went hard as a rock and not in a pleasant way as he nuzzled her throat.

“You’re freezing,” she complained then rubbed her hand against his right one.

“I know,” he murmured and hugged her tighter. “But Stevie was fine,” he whispered close to her ear. “I think he really just wanted to run.

“Thank you,” she said, rubbing against his cheek, and then he slid his hands down to her hips.

“Anytime, Doll. Nice hoodie.”

She gripped the sleeves as she eyed him over her shoulder. “And I plan on keeping it today.”

“I got no problem with you wearing my clothes,” he promised and kissed her lightly on the lips. “But I am going to boil myself in the shower.”

“Go,” she said with a grin, and gave him a little shove. “Hot coffee when you come out, and food…”

“And woman,” he said with a wink and she laughed.

“Flirt.”

“You love it.”

The involuntary smile keeping her lips wide answered that retort. So she pressed a kiss to her fingers and blew it after him. Instead of his bedroom, though, he ducked into hers.
It had to be the shampoo. He liked hers better. She’d had her suspicions before, but now she made a note to stock her shampoo in his bathroom, too. Then she’d see… then again, he preferred to sleep in her room so maybe that was why he preferred her shower.

Nat turned and poured the coffee back through for the third brew as the kettle boiled, and she poured tea. Outside, ice plinked against the broad glass windows and she almost wished they had a fire going. Maybe she could talk Tony into a gas fireplace with hot rocks. He had one in the penthouse. Steve definitely needed one on this floor.

The music switched to Simple Minds, and she danced from foot to foot, head rocking to the beat. Another song she loved unironically. Don’t You (Forget About Me). She should introduce James and Steve to the entire library of John Hughes films. They would probably not approve of any of the men—well boys in them.

That could be hours of entertainment for her. James would like Home Alone, especially the third one. Kid foils international spies. She snickered to herself and kept an eye on the time as she danced. The headache had receded, she’d compartmentalized the weird dream-memory-thing, and she was in a great mood. The kids were at the Compound, Peter was safe and sound on her floor, Tony was asleep, and Steve and James were back from their run in one piece despite the crappy conditions.

At least they could use the quinjet to get to the Compound.

When the coffee maker finished, she danced backwards as the music segued to Tears for Fears. How long had it been since she even listened to this music? After pulling out two mugs, she turned around and found Steve watching her from the doorway to his room, arms folded and a small smile on his face.

She grinned and danced in a little circle, then set the mugs down. Still moving, she danced over to him and caught his hands. He chuckled, and lifted his arm to twirl her and she spun, then he caught her and moved her backwards with a simple box step and then she laughed as he spun her out again and then she rocked her hips as she danced back to him.

“You are in a mood,” he said, chuckling as she danced with her back to his front.

“Is that a complaint?”

“Never,” he promised. Everybody Wants to Rule the World segued into Mad World. And she turned and rose up on her tip toes and gave him a soft kiss.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

Dancing away, she skipped back to the kitchen. The scent of the croissants and apples filled the air. Steve was still grinning as he poured his coffee. James rejoined them wearing the dark gray hoodie from the front of her closet over a t-shirt and jeans. Hiding a smile, she kept dancing.

“Fair is fair,” he told her as he caught her and turned her around, then dipped her before giving her a little kiss.

She laughed. “It looks good milli moi.” Then she winked as he set her on her feet and went for his own coffee. Steve had piled three pirozhki onto his plate and claimed a spot at the table, then went back to his room and returned with a digital tablet.
And so it began… he tapped the screen and stared down at it as an email program opened. She recognized it. Well, they’d basically focused on her to the exclusion of all else, and she didn’t recall Steve even glancing at email while they were on the island.

Fuck, she needed to look at her own. And call Isaiah. Probably needed to do a safe house sweep, too.

“What’s up?” James asked Steve as he settled onto a chair with his own pirozhki and coffee. He pushed out a third chair with his foot, and gave Nat an expectant look.

“I’ll be there when these are done,” she assured him, and while she wasn’t dancing around anymore, she wasn’t exactly standing still as she tapped her foot and nodded her head in time to the music. The hip sway she couldn’t help. Good music demanded she move.

“Just haven’t checked the inbox in a couple of weeks,” Steve said then took a bite of the egg and bacon stuffed pastry, he paused then took a second bite and developed the most sinful look on his face. Pleasure flushed through her as he looked up and away from the email.

James chuckled. “Natalia makes excellent pirozhki,” he said it with the confidence of having eaten it many times, and she turned away before she sighed. After concentrating on fixing up her tea, she took a sip to cover the reaction. Sometimes… it grated that he got it all back, and she still had so many holes.

“Yes, she does…Nat, these are incredible.”

Her smile resurfaced and she said, “I’m glad.” But James caught her gaze, and the quiet sympathy and a hint of apology in his eyes told her she hadn’t covered it fast enough.

At the questioning raise of his eyebrows, she shook her head. She would be fine, and it was only a momentary slip of self-pity. Then the oven dinged and she was pulling the hot croissants out and adding the trays to the rack. It was now full of hot deliciousness.

“Oh…damn…” James took in a deep inhale. “That smells better than apple pie.”

“Kind of impossible,” Steve admitted around his last mouthful of pirozhki. “But…Buck’s right. Are those some kind of turnover?”

“Apple stuffed croissants.” There was something nice about making something with her hands. She’d pulled it all together from scratch. “I like baking.”


“You forgot, she can kick your ass,” Steve reminded him with a shove.

“That’s your thing,” James countered. “But I certainly don’t mind it.” His pale blue eyes filled with such warmth, she couldn’t stand the emptiness in them as the one image overlaid the present, and she maintained her stillness, sipping her tea with perfect deliberateness rather than tip her hand.

Beyond them, the ice outside turned to snow, and big fat flakes began to fall. The one part of winter she had enjoyed—those first snows with their huge, soft flakes and deceptive beauty. It painted the world white, clean, and fresh—and could kill just as sweetly as the cold leeched away your life.

“Nat,” Steve said her name, but it wasn’t until he said a second time, that she blinked.
“Sorry, what?”

His eyes narrowed and she wanted to groan. “I just asked if the croissants are ready to eat or were you taking them out to the Compound?”

James bit into a pirozhki, but she wasn’t fooled. His attention riveted on her. She shrugged a shoulder. “They are definitely ready to eat,” she informed him, and set aside her tea, before crossing over to pluck a couple of the still warm croissants off the tray and set them on his plate. “I made them for here, but we can take out the leftovers. No one gave me a cooking assignment for Thanksgiving.” So she would be helping Peter with his dinner for his aunt. Right, she needed to call Laura or pull her away at the Compound to get a quick rundown. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask James, but…

Steve caught her hand and studied her. “Hey… you okay?”

Another shrug. “I think I’m just restless. I spent the last couple of weeks sleeping… and then playing. Or playing and then sleeping.”

“Has Helen called?”

“No, why would she?” That pricked the balloon of her good mood—faux attempt or not.

“She said she’d call about the blood work if there was a problem,” James answered, but his gaze was on Steve and not her. “So no news is good news. And I told Spider-Punk to come to breakfast at eight, so I expect we’ll see him shortly.”

“Okay,” she said, then glanced at the food. “Hopefully teenagers like pirozhki, or I guess I can make pancakes.”

“Hey,” James said with a laugh. “You don’t have to say it like it’s a bad word. You like pancakes.”

“Not every day, milli moi,” she teased, aware Steve was still studying her, but he pressed a kiss to her cheek before he carried the croissants back to the table and she got busy cleaning up the island where she’d been making the pastries.

She didn’t miss James motioning Steve off with a shake of his head. Fuck, she was being awkward and obvious.

Fess up.

“It’s weird to be back,” she admitted. “I know I have a lot of work to do, and contacts to reach out to…and I owe Isaiah probably three hours on the phone so he can rip into me for disappearing on him, and there’s money in my accounts now… well there better be, if the clients haven’t paid after all that nonsense, I’ll have some other issues to deal with.”

She carried the mixing bowl and rolling pin over to the sink, and said, “And I’ve got my own training to get back under my belt, work with Peter…and I promised Wanda. I know that just because they dropped the investigations and so-called warrants, the backlash from that isn’t going away anytime soon, and we have the holidays and then after the holidays…”

After, she wanted to go see their cabin. She wanted to…remember.

Wiping the counter down, she said, “And while I want to do some of it…”

“The rest of you just wants to go back to the island,” James suggested and she caught his gaze. He
got it, there was a distinct understanding in his eyes. “Natalia, no one is going to make you do anything. If you aren’t ready to be back on the team or anything else, you don’t have to.”

“I know, James. I really do.” After depositing the last of the refuse in the trash, she glanced at Steve. “So I’m a little wired, and the baking helped.”

All of it was true, but she was just not ready to discuss that dream or the fragments of it she remembered or why it had left her so unsettled.

“Okay,” he told her. “One day at a time… Angel. Right now, train, visit with Clint and his family, hang out with Peter… whatever you want to do.” He held up his StarkPad. “And if you feel the great urge to tackle my inbox and take care of it, I won’t complain.”

She laughed. “Steve I didn’t do your email before all of this went down.”

He affected a frown. “You didn’t… what did you do?”

“Everything else,” she retaliated, but she was still smiling. “Besides, you’re already making me take care of James and Sam. I think that’s enough work for me.”

“Hey,” James protested. “I can take care of kicking Sam, Natalia. Don’t worry.”

Steve groaned—for real this time—then, sobered. “Nat… tell me the truth, do you want to be back on the team?”

She missed the team. She really did. Her primary goal had been to get them back together, and she’d succeeded—they all had. Tony and Steve were working out their issues, she got rid of Ross—that let Steve and Tony sway the Committee to get everyone’s pardons.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I just don’t know if I’ll be good for the team.”

“Angel…”

“Stevie,” James said before she could. “Listen to her, we don’t have to agree, just listen.”

“I don’t have to listen, Buck. She’s going to say she has red in her ledger, that her reputation and her certain skillset make the world look at her in one way—that she lived in the shadows because that’s what she knew and because of me, you are now in the bright sunlight and everyone is staring, and because of Ross they are only focusing on the extreme negatives…but Nat—that’s exactly why you need to be out there and standing with us because all of that is just noise. Who you are is a hero. Who you are is the best of us… and I don’t give a damn what the world sees, I care that you see it.”

“Yeah okay,” James said after a moment. “What he said.”

The corners of her mouth tipped up and she shook her head. “You two are dangerous.”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve said, pushing away from the table. “But never to you.”

Yes, but they were dangerous for her in so many other ways. Licking her lips, she tracked Steve as he crossed over to the counter, and then leaned in and pressed a kiss to her nose.

“You are my favorite person,” he said. “You have to be my favorite Avenger.”

James burst out laughing, and she couldn’t help it, so did she. “Well, if you’re going to put it that way…”
“I do,” Steve said, then he slid a sideways look at the apple croissants. “Is there a rule on how many of those I can have?”

“Depends, are you going to pay the cook?” Because he was being adorable, and she knew for damn sure he was doing it on purpose.

“Anything the lady wants…”

Before she could reply, Friday chimed in. “Mr. Parker is on his way up, Ms. Romanoff and Boss just stumbled into the shower.”

“Raincheck?” She asked.

“Definitely,” Steve said, then slid his hand to her cheek before kissing her lightly. “It’s going to work out, Angel. We can do this… you believe that right?”

“I believe you,” she told him and smiled as his eyes softened.

“I believe in you, too,” he said, then straightened as the elevator chimed. Nat took a deep breath and then relaxed as she put away the worries and the concerns, packing them into the corners where she could and would deal with them later.

For a split second, she caught James’ frown before his own mask snapped into place. Steve was already smiling.

“Hey Peter, sleep well?”

Nat turned and had to bite back another smile. Peter’s hair was damp, but there was still an imprint on his cheek from where he’d slept on the sofa on her floor.

“I did, thanks,” he said, then nodded to James and finally smiled at her. “Thanks for letting me use your floor.”

“Anytime,” she told him and meant it. She wasn’t ready to give up her floor, or her dance studio even if she was living full time on Steve’s and didn’t have any inclination to leave. She needed her own space for when she needed it. “Just remember that on Tuesdays it will cost you three tacos.”

Peter blinked, then said… “Okay, I can do that.”

Steve laughed. “Come on, you hungry? Nat’s made a whole spread of food. Do you like pirozhki?”

“You made all this?” Peter gaped, then stared at the croissants and the pirozhkis.

“I told you, I know how to do lots of things,” she chuckled, and waved him toward Steve. “They have scrambled eggs and bacon in the pirozhkis and apples in the croissants. But you better get a croissant fast, because Steve just threatened to eat them all. And he has the appetite to give you a run for your money.”

“Really?” Peter eyed him then the food, before stacking his plate.

“Maybe,” Steve told him. “Let’s find out.”

Natasha went to the fridge and pulled out the orange juice, and then got glasses. She nearly missed James slipping out of his chair and claiming her empty mug before he started the kettle going again. At his questioning look, she nodded. Yes, she would like more tea.
By the time Tony joined them, Peter had packed away four pirozhkis and asked her if she could show him how to make some for the dinner he wanted to take May the following day. James had snagged two of the croissants and Nat sipped her tea while perched on the now clean island.

“Hey Red,” Tony said. “Coffee?”

She pointed to the fresh pot she’d started after getting out the OJ.

“God, you’re the best. Never leave me,” he said, his voice still sleepy and his step staggering.

She laughed. “Just drink your coffee, Tony and eat food so the coffee doesn’t eat your stomach.”

Peter made a face at the description. Tony paused at the trays, half of which were now empty. “These look like…” He picked up one and sniffed it. “Those pirogues…wait is that right? Clint got them in Vienna.”

“Pirozhkis,” she told him.

“Natasha made them,” Peter volunteered before he bit into another.

Tony squinted at her. “Planning to poison me?”

“I’ve had plenty of opportunities, and you’re not dead yet,” she told him drily.

“Good point,” he down half his coffee and put two of them on a plate, then paused to eye James where he leaned against the counter next to her. He squinted from him to her, then back again. “Nice hoodie.”

James just smiled. “I liked it.”

Then his gaze tracked back to her. “Nice shirt.”

“It’s good, if inaccurate.” At his raised eyebrows. “I know quite a few more.”

He laughed, then Tony walked over to join Steve and Peter at the table. “Okay, Cap…game plan for today.”

Steve leaned back in his seat, and said, “I’m listening.”

“Fly out to the Compound, quick team meeting. Sharon’s going to be there, but only today. I invited her for Thanksgiving, but she’s flying out later tonight to meet family. We need to just get a feel for where we’re all at, and I can do a brief on the status of the Accords at the moment, touch base with everyone? Sound good?”

“You sure you want me leading, Tony?” The dry question had an element of challenge in it, but Tony didn’t miss a beat.

“Hell yes, in fact, I would be thrilled if after today the only jobs I had were paying for things, design the things, and make us look cooler. Trust me…I am more than happy to follow your lead.”

Natasha hid a smile behind her tea.

“Then I like the team meeting idea, but we’re all coming together for the holidays and Clint’s family is there, so let’s keep it very brief. Status updates from everyone. Maybe a list of what each person needs or is there something else they’d like to be doing. Did you get any callouts while we were gone?”
Just like that, Tony and Steve focused on each other. The verbal tennis had Tony bringing Steve up to date, as well as giving him a list of what Tony had done in the aftermath of the incident with the sludge. Including the fact the material that was still in his lab was now inert, had zero energy readings and might as well be a rock.

“You kept that stuff here, St—Tony?” James cut in.

“Well it was already here, and I didn’t think about it at first…” Tony shrugged as he stood to get more coffee. “But it’s not even reacting to Red’s blood. So it’s done. Finished. Useless. Figured we could keep it if Red wanted a souvenir.”

“Thank you?”

“You’re welcome.” His smirk just made her shake her head, but then he added, “And I still have all your souvenirs from Oscorp in my lab, so anytime you want to go through them and tell me what you were looking for, we can get that wiped off the to-do list.”

Peter shot her a glance, but she shook her head slightly. “I’ll look at it after Thanksgiving,” she told Tony. “Hopefully it’s nothing since the formless is gone.”

“Fair deal,” Tony said and filled his cup.

The weight of James staring at her didn’t slip her notice, but she only nudged him with her toes and he shifted over to lean closer to her leg. “I’d prefer a short meeting,” she said. “If we’re getting opinions. I promised Peter I’d help him with a project, and Lila and Coop are going to be there, too.”

“You can skip if you want,” Steve told her, but his sweet countenance didn’t fool her.

“Yeah, no,” she told him, wrinkling her nose. “The one and only time I missed a meeting, you saddled me with scut. I’ll be there.”

Steve grinned. “It wasn’t scut… I just had you handle mission reports. You’re better at them anyway.”

“That’s like the very definition of scut, Cap.” She rolled her head from side to side. “Besides, I’m not back full time yet, so I can have my pick of assignments.”

“Except for…”

“Yes, I know, except for keeping James and Sam from killing each other.”

Tony actually snickered, and said, “Better you than me,” under his breath.

James bumped her. “Natalia will be on my side.”

“Yes, but Natalia will still tell you when you’re being an idiot,” she said, and some of the morning’s unease slid away at the hint of a twitch to his lips despite his narrow-eyed expression.

“Fine, you can tell me. No one else,” the last he added with a smirk. “Not even Stevie.”

Peter made a choking sound, and Nat caught him with a hand pressed against his mouth as he cough laughed.

“It’s fine, malen’kiy pauk, you can laugh at them. All three of them can take it.” She patted James’ chest when he tensed at the endearment.
A chime sounded and Nat tilted her head up.

“Yes, Friday?”

“Agent Barton asked me to pass on a message, Ms. Romanoff and the message is, Move your ass, Tasha. The kids expected you an hour ago.”

She grinned. “Well, I guess I should move my ass…Friday, is he still on the phone?”

“No, Ms. Romanoff, he had to go. He ducked out to a side room to call me.”

“Damn…if you get a chance and he’s looking at a screen that the kids aren’t—just send him the middle finger emoji for me.”

Peter cracked up and James grinned.

“I will do my best, Ms. Romanoff.”

She hopped off the counter. “That’s our cue. I’m going to go find shoes.” She glanced at Peter. “Did you bring a heavier coat?”

He nodded as he stuffed another croissant in his mouth. And motioned to the ceiling, then reverse and pointed at the floor.

“Finish, rinse off the plate, and then go get it. Meet us in the penthouse, quinjet is on the deck outside it. Tony are you going out with us on the jet or taking the armor?”

“Jet,” he said. “And I’ll go get my coat, too, Mom.”

Him she flipped off. But he only smirked.

“Go get your shoes, Angel. I got clean up in here. You want us to box up the rest to take to the Compound?”

“Save the croissants,” James said in a stage whisper. “You want to keep the croissants here.”

“I can make you more,” she answered the same amount of subtlety.

“True. Fine, pack it all up.” Then he held up two fingers and pointed at him and Steve, then Peter held up two hopefully and Tony raised his hand.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “I can make you all more,” she reminded them, but headed for her room. Laughter broke out behind her and she blew out a breath once she nudged the door shut. The dream was still in pieces but each one seemed to leave a little slice in its wake, a paper cut that went far deeper than her flesh.

Every time she tried to focus on it, to sort the fragments out, pain lanced right through her eye. So, the obvious solution was don’t think about it. But that didn’t sit right with her either. She untied James’ hoodie from around her waist and slipped it on, then grabbed boots from the closet and a heavier coat, some gloves and a knit hat.

She knew winter and how to dress for it.

Her phone buzzed on the dresser as she pulled her boots on, and she grabbed it.

Pepper’s name appeared on the screen, and she tapped the message.
Pepper: I hope this works; Friday said she’d connect the messages. Do you have time this week to meet? Privately? I can come to you.

That was… odd. Yes. Time and place. I’ll be there.

Pepper: I’m in town. Friday? Coffee? Somewhere not the Tower?

Want me to come to you?

Pepper: Do you mind?

Not at all. I’ll be there by nine unless you want earlier.

She knew where Pepper’s apartment was in the city.

Pepper: 9 is fine. Thank you Natasha.

See you Friday.

She pursed her lips, the closed out the message when James slipped into the bedroom. He studied her for a beat, then said, “Are you okay? Really?”

He missed so little.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Still working on that. Not ready to talk about it yet.”

With a slow nod, he said, “Whenever you’re ready. “

“I know,” she said with a smile, and then stood. Leaving her coat on the bed, she walked right over and into his arms. Closing her eyes, she burrowed her nose against his shirt and wrapped her arms tight around him.

No questions, he just cupped the back of her head with one hand and ran the other up and down her back. After a quiet minute, he said, “Malen’kiy pauk?”

“It suits him…”

“It suited you,” but there was no reproach in his voice.

“Do you mind?” She leaned away to study his expression.

“No,” he said, then traced a finger down her cheek. “But you will always be my little spider.”

“Chernaya vdoja.”

“Da, that too.”

“Soldat moya,” she answered, pressing her hand to his chest over his heart.

“Da, lyubov moya, always.” His expression gentled, no masks and no guarded eyes, just open affection.

It helped.

Steve knocked once on the door before he opened it, and he eyed them. “We good?” His gaze fixed on her, and he knew. Just like James did. They both knew she wasn’t saying everything.
“Yes,” she promised. “Just—getting my head together. Lots of people at the Compound.”

“Yeah, and Buck’s going wearing Tony’s hoodie. Think they’re going steady?” The fact Steve hadn’t missed that, pulled a genuine smile from her and Bucky laughed.

“Too late,” he said. “I’m taken.”

“Idiots,” she murmured, then rose on her tiptoes to kiss James, before turning and giving Steve one. Then she retreated to grab her coat. In no time, they were all in jackets and hats, and in the elevator with the boxes of treats for the Compound.

They might all be idiots, but these were her idiots. Even when her eye twitched and the needle of pain dug in a little deeper.
Natasha slipped right into the pilot’s seat with Peter hanging over the back of it. She was explaining everything she did and had him repeating back the various controls as they departed the Tower against the steady wind lashing snow at the city. Ice had pelted him and Bucky on their run, but it had turned to snow, fat huge falling flakes while they ate, and now the snow was coming sideways and the weather conditions now warned of an impending blizzard.

“Hey Pete,” Tony called, and the kid twisted around to glance at him. “Hospital is running on full power, no need for generators yet and I managed to call in a couple of favors to get a couple of caterers to bring in food for them today. So Aunt May should be in good shape.”

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” Peter said with a wide grin. “She texted this morning and said she was sleeping in an on-call room for a few hours, but she’d let me know when she woke up.”

“Good deal.”

Bucky leaned back on the bench seats opposite Steve, a stack of boxes with the pirozhkis in them next to him while Tony sprawled farther up the same bench seats a StarkPad in one hand. The way Nat handled the quinjet, Steve would never suspect the storm was raging outside.

The run had been good, but coming back to Nat having turned their kitchen into a bakery—and by the sheer volume of what she’d baked, she’d been at it since just after he and Bucky left. He wasn’t the only one concerned, but she’d seemed in a genuinely good mood for the most part. Yet, he couldn’t escape the feeling something was off, and she’d admitted as much.

Instinct told him to push, don’t let her erect any barriers because she could dig in and entrench herself behind them. Experience, on the other hand, reinforced his belief she had a right to her privacy. He would just have to be vigilant, and thank God for Bucky, because Bucky could push her in ways Steve wasn’t willing. He’d also motioned Steve to back off some, so he had.

Her mood elevated with Clint’s message, her eyes brightened. So, despite his own lack of interest in diving back into the fray, Steve looked forward to arriving at the Compound. For the first time since they returned post-Accords, the team would be all together. Maybe he was being selfish, but he’d missed having Natasha there, right on his left, covering his back, and keeping him grounded.
At the same time, her reluctance worried him. Was he asking for too much? Like the health check with Helen?

Speaking of Helen, Steve pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked his messages. One from Sam asking when they were coming, another from Sharon saying she would be at the Compound by nine—which meant she’d probably arrive just before or after they did. A message from Rhodey with a reminder they usually had a call-in with the Committee on Mondays, he and Tony had taken the last couple of weeks—and more in the intervening months—did Steve want to take that over with Sharon the following week?

Did he?

Not really, but it was his job. He’d take the first couple with Sharon and then see about letting Sharon handle those and brief him after. Tony and he were on the same page about insulating the team from the Committee’s influence, especially while the Accords were still being renegotiated.

“You want to give it a shot, Peter? We’ve got another ten minutes, you can get a feel for the cruising…”

“Oh, Red…” Tony straightened. “Kid doesn’t even have a driver’s license.”

“Like that ever stopped you,” she said over her shoulder. “Or me, for that matter.”

Peter laughed. “Are you sure it’s all right?” His gaze went from Tony to Natasha, but his expression said he was hungry to try it.

Steve glanced at Bucky, and his best friend shrugged with a bemused glance. After Peter fled the training room the night before, Natasha hadn’t slowed as she paced across the floor, popped Tony upside the head, and then followed Peter out asking Friday where he’d gone. Every ounce of color had drained from the kid’s face, like he’d seen a ghost. The guilt of having probably contributed to that reaction had stabbed Steve.

Bucky, on the other hand, said, “He’ll be fine, Stevie. Kid just took a shock. Natalia will know how to talk him down.”

She did that for all of them, didn’t she? She was better. He had to keep telling himself that. Still, he sent a text to Tony and asked about the blood test results. The small ping from Tony’s tablet had the other man glancing at him. He shook his head once, then he replied via message.

Friday said she should have the final results in a little under two hours, they ran full panels. But nothing to worry about yet.

Okay. That helped.

He mouthed thanks.

Then Peter was seated in the co-pilot’s seat, and Bucky reached up to lock his hand around a safety bar, and Tony pulled a seatbelt over to strap in. Steve chuckled, but he had to admit, he grabbed a safety bar, too.

“Oh, one hand on the stick, the other on the throttle. Balanced force. Watch the altimeter, you want to keep her even, we’re not descending or ascending. Feel the force of it?”

“Yeah…” Peter said, his voice a combination of excitement and nervousness.
“You have the con, Ensign,” she told him, her tone dry. “Maintain course and heading… tell me what you see and what you feel.”

Tony snorted. “Make it So, Number One.”

Nat just lifted her hand, her middle finger up and Tony chortled. A grin pulled at Steve, and he shook his head. Bucky just raised his eyebrows and Steve said, “Star Trek.”

“Got it…on the list.” His best friend had always loved the science fiction, so his list had way more of it than Steve’s, but Nat seemed to like them all. They were still on the first series, or Steve was. He’d made it as far as the first season, but he’d backtrack to get Bucky caught up.

Peter handled the flight right until Natasha took back over the controls and walked him through the landing verbally with the same patience she once explained the espresso maker to Steve, and maybe a hint of the same amusement. The moment she had the controls, Tony released the seat belt surreptitiously while Steve and Bucky released their grips on the safety bars.

The whole jet pivoted as she brought them down gently. She tugged her knit cap on, and then zipped up her jacket before grabbing her gloves. “You guys might want to let me go first…”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “No problem, Doll. But why?”

She laughed and hit the button for the ramp. “Ambush.”

Then she was striding down the ramp at speed, breaking out in a run at the bottom as a series of snowballs hurled to where she’d been. She barely tucked and rolled before she was grabbing a hand full and sending it winging back at her attackers. Fortunately, the sideways blowing snow in the city was not quite as bad here. The snow fell, but still in fat flakes coming straight down.

Peter raced after her and dove right into it. Tony paused a beat, then glanced at him and Bucky. “Think we’d really destabilize the odds if we got involved?”

“Oh, I think so…” And then Bucky handed the boxes to Tony and jogged down to join in the fun.

Steve laughed and shouldered his shield. “You want cover?”

“Nah,” Tony said, and his gauntlet snapped into place, and a shield extended from it in front of him humming. “I’ll cover me. Go give her a hand.”

A grin pulling at his lips, Steve slung the shield onto his back and charged out recognizing a distinct whoop as Sam’s. So it wasn’t just Barton and his kids.

This would be fun.

Laura

Standing at the broad windows just beyond the kitchen in the common area with a cup of coffee in her hand, Laura shook her head as the quinjet touched down. Clint had the kids in position behind snow forts, while Wanda and Sam had gotten into place as soon as Friday alerted them to the
imminent arrival. Rhodey sat in a chair with his own mug of coffee. Their front row seats as it were.

“Five bucks on Clint getting the first score off Nat?” Rhodey offered.

Laughing, Laura said, “Ten on Nat. She knows this is waiting for her.”

Vision, who had spent the morning with her as she made breakfast and practicing making fried eggs, joined them. “As she has been recovering, would that not also impede her ability to anticipate the attack? Agent Barton has fortified them to provide a strong crossfire between the positions they’ve selected, and Wanda will most certainly be able to fire her collection of snowballs rapidly.”

“It’s not about speed,” Laura told him with a smile. “It’s about preparation. Clint’s good, and he knows the smart positions to take. He’s giving them the best chance to score a few hits, and they’re heavily armed with snowballs…” He’d looped the kids and Wanda outside early. The heavy snow had hit them before dawn, and there was plenty to weaponize. It kept the kids from getting too restless—Lila had been pouting about the fact Auntie Nat hadn’t been waiting for them at the Compound, but all of her upset vanished when Clint proposed the ambush.

“I’ll take that action,” Rhodey said. “I think the fact she’s been off instead of here is going to give them an advantage. Though even odds, Tony’s going to walk right into the first snowball.”

Vision pondered that. “I’ll place ten on Mr. Stark, he has an abundance of caution and precautions against such ambushes.”

The android likely had a point. But it was fun to play along so Laura lifted her coffee mug to gesture outside. “We’re about to find out…” The ramp to the quinjet opened, and there was a flash of a red knit cap as Natasha hurtled out of the quinjet, and she rolled as snowballs whizzed past where she was. She came up with a snowball in her hand and flung it straight to where Clint stood. He ducked, but she was already moving.

Laura laughed, and Rhodey shook his head. “Dammit.”

“It’s not over yet,” she comforted him.

But the next few minutes were probably some of the most entertaining she’d spent in a while. A kid appeared right behind Nat, and he bounded over the snow like it wasn’t there, and leapt, twisting as snowball soared above and below him. Hot on his heels, Bucky appeared, and he blocked a snowball with his arm, and followed to where Nat had vanished behind a drift, and then they rose as one, throwing snowballs in two different directions.

Sam let out a yelp as three hit him in the chest in rapid succession. Wanda blocked a fourth, but then got pelted with one from…of all people Steve! Rhodey snorted as Tony sauntered out and snowballs melting on the shield he held in front of him, and he walked right through the heavy snow fire zone, shielding the boxes in his arms, and arriving at the doors dry as a bone.

“As I suspected.” Vision stated calmly, and Rhodey pulled out a ten and slid it across to the android. The billionaire dropped his boxes in the kitchen, and then poured coffee before joining them to survey the battle.

“You should get out there, Tones,” Rhodey encouraged him.

“I’ll go if you will,” Tony smirked.

Steve and Bucky were making inroads with Wanda and Sam, pushing them out of position while
Nat focused her attention on Clint. The kids were nowhere near as precise in their hits, but the teen with Nat made a point of darting and avoiding any that got close, and when he scored a hit on Cooper, Laura’s son let out a shout but his face lit up and he redoubled his efforts.

Lila broke cover and Nat tackle pounced her, rolling and she took two hits in the back from Clint as she and Lila landed in the snow. Grinning, Laura had no problem sliding a ten toward Rhodey.

“That’s cold,” Tony commented. “Using his own kid?”

“You want to see cold?” Laura grinned until her face hurt. “Watch Nat lure Lila over to her side.”

“Spy whammy.” Tony nodded sagely.

Nat looked so much better than she had on the island. Even at this distance, Laura could tell she was moving better. She and Lila disappeared briefly, and she glanced to where Sam took hits from both super soldiers, and Bucky barely managed to get his arm up and Steve his shield before Wanda sent a series of snowballs flying at them.

“That feels like cheating,” Tony observed. “But it’s still entertaining.”

“She is using the skills at her disposal,” Vision countered. “As are Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes.”

“ Didn’t say they weren’t,” Tony told him, glancing back at Vision. “But it feels like cheating when other players are limited like Sam.”

“Fair, but Mr. Wilson also chose his position well so that Wanda could provide some cover for him.”

“Point.” After raising his coffee mug to toast the point, he took a sip and shifted to look to where Clint had been. Lila had raced out from where she’d disappeared with Nat, and Nat hurled two or three snowballs after her…all three missed.

Then Lila pounced her dad, and he had to drop the snowball in his hand to catch her. His maneuverability limited by the leg brace, he didn’t have anywhere to go when Nat popped up and caught him square in the middle of the chest with a snowball. He fell back against a drift, miming that she got him. And Lila lifted her arms in triumph. Cooper was sneaking up on Natasha, but Laura didn’t doubt for an instant that she was aware of him.

She kept her hands at her sides and turned at the last minute. Coop managed to catch her in the chest and neck and she flopped backward all loose-limbed to land in the drift next to Clint. The pair of them were probably hamming up their falling and based on the laughing faces of her children, they were doing it well. Then the teen who’d followed Nat suddenly swooped Lila and Cooper up before all three of them fell into the drift alongside Clint and Nat. That battle was over.

Across the field, Wanda squealed as Cap got her with a fast series, and she held up her hands in surrender. Bucky, on the other hand, tackled Sam right into the snow.

“And on that note, time to get hot drinks ready…” Tony chuckled as various sums of money
changed hands.

“The kids are going to want Auntie Nat’s hot cocoa, so I’ll just get the stuff out for them.” She smiled. “Thanks for having us this year, Tony.”

“Hey, you’re always welcome,” he told her. “Thanks for coming. Really looking forward to tomorrow.”

She didn’t miss the surprise on Rhodey’s face, but she patted Tony’s arm once, aware that he didn’t like to be handed things and that he kept touching to a minimum or so Clint had told her. Nate let out a cry on the monitor just as she got to the kitchen. He’d slept through the whole snowball war, but he was too young to play yet.

“I’ll get him if you don’t mind, Mrs. Barton,” Vision said. He was fascinated with her kids, which was good, because they were fascinated with him.

“Thank you,” she told him, and her heart warmed as he moved smoothly away. Her family was together again, and they’d added quite a few members. Nat was home, and her kids were happy and she and Clint had actually enjoyed a nightcap together without the kids or anyone else to buffer.

It definitely helped her look forward to the rest of the week…

**Tony**

The snowball fight survivors made their way back inside, most of them sporting reddened faces, bright eyes, and snow-laden clothes. Clint and Nat brought up the rear, with her bracing him as he made his way through the snow carefully. Bucky paused, keeping an eye on the pair while Sam fell into step with Steve, razzing him. Wanda, on the other hand, moved ahead to help Peter corral the kids. The common room lit up with noise as they spilled inside.

“Hey Tones,” Rhodey said, and Tony moved closer obligingly so they didn’t have to shout. The kids were louder than he expected, Peter included.

It was kind of nice.

“What’s up?”

“So I was talking to Sharon yesterday about the Department of Damage Control, they were the division tasked with the final clean up after New York.”

Tony nodded his head. “Hoag—Anne Hoag ran it, at least back then. Not sure if she’s retired by now.”

“She’s not, but she’s not taking Sharon’s calls.” Rhodey tapped his fingers against the side of his mug. “And she’s not taking mine.”

That was a problem. “We’ll bring it up at the team meeting.” He tossed that idea around as he followed the action around them. Clint poked at Nat as she got him to a chair, then she had Lila
right up against her legs as she tried to strip out of her coat. Bucky reached over and snagged her coat, gloves, and hat. Then Nat was bending and helping Lila out of hers. Everyone was talking over everyone else, but Cooper had Nat’s hand as soon as he was out of his coat, and she let the kids pull her into the kitchen.

Steve raked a hand through his hair as he listened to Sam. Bucky made his way over to the pair, still in Tony’s hoodie which amused Tony. Though he wasn’t sure if the other man was sending a message or just fucking with him. Could be both.

Peter laughed at something Wanda said as Vision joined them bouncing the baby Barton and it was...both weird and kind of nice in the same breath.

“Earth to Tony,” Rhodey nudged him and he glanced down.

“I’m here Platypus, we’ll figure it out. You know…only ninety-nine problems at a time.”

“Seems to be working out for you so far,” his best friend grunted, and that was an admission. Most of the time Rhodey had two modes, hang out and party or kick Tony’s ass. They’d been in kick Tony’s ass for so long, he’d begun to think hang out and party was a myth.

“It is working out for me, isn’t it?” Tony grinned and bumped Rhodey’s arm lightly. “You got anyone in Damage Control we can tap as a resource?”

“Maybe…was talking to Sam about it earlier. He says one of his vets actually works there, but it’s…a slippery slope.”

“Confidentiality,” Tony got that. “But if he can see about feeling the guy out…”

“It’s a girl,” Rhodey told him drily.

“If the gender matters to his charm, then that could be better.” Then again it might put Sam in a bad position. “If he can’t, let’s see if we can find someone who does. I’ll call Maria Hill, she still works for me, I think.” Then again, she might not. He hadn’t spoken to her in a few weeks. That was definitely on him. While he was working on getting Nat and the guys stateside he didn’t want anything related to Nick Fury in their orbit.

Ugh. Nick. Tony grimaced. He might actually be a good resource for this, too.

“Tell you what, let’s see what strings we can pull. I’ll be back…you want more coffee?”

“No,” Rhodey said. “I want the magic hot cocoa.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tony told him. And he did. He loved the stuff. Nat had made him an addict and he hadn’t had any since Switzerland. Since her super soldier toys were tied up with Sam, he might even score a mug at the head of the line and catch up with her.

Before he could take a step in that direction, Rhodey caught his arm. “What are you doing?”

“Standing here talking to you,” Tony told him blandly. “But I was on my way to get in line for cocoa.”

“You know the rules—we don’t interfere with the making of the cocoa.”

Shaking his head, Tony motioned to the kitchen. “The kids are already doing that. I’m reinforcements.”
“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, man.” Rhodey let him go with a sorrowful shake of his head. “I’ll just sit here and revel in my cocoa when you get bounced out of yours.”

Snorting softly, Tony made his way across the room. The pockets of conversation swelled and dipped with laughter, stories, and in the case of Sam and Bucky, verbal jabs. He passed Clint who had his leg up and his head tilted to focus on his wife, who shook her head at him. Giving the Bartons a wide berth, he made it into the kitchen without intercept.

Lila and Cooper were both perched on counters, and at some point, Peter had migrated in here as well and currently leaned against the counter out of the way, so Tony settled in next to him.

“I’m not sure I’m gonna keep going to ballet,” Lila complained. “I thought it would be more fun.”

“Dancing is fun, but it also has rules,” Nat told her as she kept watch over the milk simmering on the stove. She had a huge pot of it, and a stack of chocolates and spices sitting out. It never failed, no matter how many times he tried to watch every step she made, he didn’t see them all.

“But it’s boring…what good are all the positions if all we do is all of them over and over?”

“Hmm… Friday help me out here. Something fast with a beat.” The music in the kitchen kicked up and it was more 80s pop, but Nat liked it. And she’d lost her boots somewhere so she went through the positions at speed, and finished with a spin.

Lila’s eyes went wide. “That’s ballet?”

“No, that’s what I can do because of ballet.” She winked and Tony hid a smile.

Hopping down, Lila followed Nat as she slowed it down and repeated the steps moving closer to the stove and away. When she got her going and they were on the beat, she switched it up like Michael Jackson, rocked her hips into it and Lila burst out laughing. Cooper abandoned trying to be cool and jumped down to join in.

The three shuffle stepped and then went through the different ballet positions—or at least Tony assumed they were—before they got back to dancing in what was almost near sync…and then Nat slowed herself to match the kids’ speed.

Spinning, they faced him and Peter and Nat raised an eyebrow. Tony spread his hands and coffee mug in hand mirrored them. He could dance—no where near as well as them, but he caught Peter’s whoop as the kids laughed—

Then, Nat pivoted abruptly and said, “Oh shit!”

The milk was bubbling too high, and she got the heat down before it scalded over as she checked it.

“Mommy,” Lila called. “Auntie Nat said a bad word.”

With a wicked grin, Nat eyed Lila. “Traitor.”

“No tattling, Lila,” Laura called at the same time Clint said, “Cap doesn’t like that kind of language, Nat.”

More laughter erupted and Nat said, “Close your eyes, kids.” Lila and Coop did it without missing a beat, and Nat flipped Clint off. “Okay, all good.”

Chuckling, Tony retreated to lean back against the counter. “You should jump in next time,” he
told Peter.

“Yeah, I was good right here Mr. Stark, but you made that almost look cool.”

“Of course I did—” Wait. “What do you mean, almost?”

Nat’s laughter riveted him for a moment, almost long enough to forget Peter’s dig, but then, Tony swung around to eye Peter’s wide eyes and twitching lips.

“Almost?”

Now the kid was giving him hell? “Um. That’s not what I meant Mr. Stark…maybe?”

“Maybe?” Despite his affected outrage, he had to admit even the teasing was kind of nice.

Sam

His hands warmed up as they stood near the sofa in the common room. Rhodey had one end of the large dining table, and Clint the other. When his wife moved over to talk to him, they all sort of scattered as if by unspoken agreement. Sam didn’t know the whole story and despite his own curiosity, he didn’t want to intrude. Steve was catching him up on his and Tony’s plans for the team meeting.

Instead of letting them talk, Bucky followed them after he stowed his, Steve's and Nat’s gear somewhere. Steve shifted to make room for Bucky, but the other man just planted himself against the back of the sofa and stared at Sam—or no, he was staring past Sam. Arms folded, Sam eased a glance back as Wanda and Vision passed by, Wanda carrying baby Nate who made grabby hands toward Steve.

Steve chuckled at the kid and gave let him grab a hand. Yeah, Bucky was watching Natasha in the kitchen with the kids. Turning back to face them, Sam blinked at the sudden animation in Bucky’s face as he held up his metal hand for Nate to high five, which he did very gently, then Wanda and Vision carried him down the hall toward the living quarters.

Expression turning impassive once more, Bucky met his stare with a hint of a smile.

“That’s just creepy, man.”

“Nothing wrong with babies, Wilson. You should get out more.” The bland tone pulled a chuckle out of Steve.

“Don’t start, either of you. Nat’s busy and we’re not interrupting the cocoa.”

Sam would have argued, but Steve had a point, so he went with, “She looks good.”

“She’s better,” Steve told him and then he leaned against the back of the sofa, not quite mirroring Bucky’s posture.

“Good,” Sam said with a nod. “Stark didn’t fill us in on much, you know after. Just said you two took her somewhere to rest.” And that was it. Even Clint had been circumspect on it, and Sam
knew for damn certain the guy knew more than he let on. It was like there was a private club between those four where she was concerned. “But you’re back or is this just a holiday stopover?”

Cause Nat looked ready to be back, if he judged it from how she was moving outside.

“We’re back…” He trailed off as Sharon appeared, and she made her way from the office wing toward him, Steve, and Bucky. Like the rest of them, Sharon was dressed in casual clothes. She’d arrived earlier for the meeting, and had coffee with him and Rhodey as they discussed the Department of Damage Control.

“Sharon,” Steve said with a nod.

“Hey Steve,” she smiled. “Sergeant Barnes. Sam.”

Bucky didn’t correct her, but he did nod.

“Welcome back,” she told him, then glanced at her watch. “I was coming to see if you wanted a briefing beforehand or during the meeting.”

“I should say congratulations,” Steve answered and offered his hand. “We haven’t really talked since you got the job.”

“No,” she said, smiling, then shook his hand. “We haven’t and thank you.”

“So what exactly does your position entail?” Steve asked studying her.

“Primarily, I’ll interface with the Committee. I’m the one who presents all the mission reports, and I’ll be the one who answers any questions about the decision making in the field. In addition to that, I’ll also be the one who brings their requests to you. We’re working on leveling the playing field at the moment while the Accords are being re-negotiated. I guess I’m kind of the hall monitor for both sides, they aren’t going to be giving specific orders, though their requests for intervention should take some heavier weight. Also if there’s an area where you feel strongly the Avengers should intercede, the Committee will in turn give it equal and due consideration and additional weight based on the Avengers’ expressed interest.”

“So you’re basically a messenger,” Bucky said, squinting at her and Sam frowned.

“Man, she gets interrogated by them, that’s more than a messenger.”

“She’ll get interrogated by us, too. The point is—what power do you have to be effective at—whatever it is you’re going to do?”

“Buck,” Steve said quietly, and Bucky just shrugged.

“Well Sergeant Barnes, that’s a fair question. My goal is to protect the Avengers so none of you end up under the thumb of any one entity. How effective I’ll be remains to be seen, but I’ve got practice handling blowhards, so that should take care of some of it.”

A faint smirk creased Bucky’s lips and Steve sighed. “Look…”

Before he could finish, music blasted from the direction of the kitchen and it got everyone’s attention as Nat started dancing with the kids. Even Stark got in on the action, and then Nat was darting back to the stove and Lila declared she’d said a bad word.

Laughter rippled out at Clint’s response to it and Nat’s follow up. Still grinning, Sam turned to see
Bucky’s expression was probably the most human it had ever been, but it erased to impassive the minute he caught Sam staring. Heh. Sam had his number now, but Steve’s frown kept him from commenting.

“So she really is back,” Sharon said. “Huh. I wasn’t sure if she would come back when they dropped the charges.”

Wait, did Sharon not…? Ignoring Bucky’s serial killer stare, Sam looked questioningly at Steve who answered with a quick shake of his head.

Great.

Sharon had no idea Nat had been with them all along.

Way to keep it complicated.

“So, what did you want to do Cap?” Sharon returned her attention to Steve.

“Do you have a lot that needs a pre-briefing? Or can it wait for the full meeting? Since we haven’t had one in a while, it would probably be better if everyone got caught up at the same time.” Then he hesitated, and said, “Has the rest of the team been briefed on your new position?”

Sharon shook her head. “I don’t know. Sam and Rhodey know, I think Clint does. Vision most likely but I haven’t really seen Wanda to talk to her, and you two have been out of town. I didn’t officially start until last week, regardless.”

“Okay. Then let’s do it at the meeting. In the future, if there’s something specific you want to bring up to me, we’ll tackle those on a case-by-case basis.”

“And if you’re not available, I should go to Tony?”

“No, I mean for straight up Committee, maybe, but Nat’s going to be running second in command once she’s back up to full speed,” Steve said, and he met Sharon’s gaze evenly. “That going to be a problem?”

“Not for me,” Sharon said. “We’ll get all the kinks out of the system.” But Sam could see lots of problems with that scenario, not the least of which was Nat’s actual legal status. It was great to say they’d dropped the charges, but it didn’t mean the end of the problems.

Still… Cap had faith and he’d been the same about Bucky and look where they were with that. “Not like she hasn’t had the job before,” Sam commented, and Sharon grinned.

“I heard a rumor to that effect, you know…” Sharon’s smile dimmed though, and she looked more thoughtful than worried.

“Hot cocoa!” Lila yelled. “It’s ready! Last one is a rotten egg.”

“Lila,” Laura sighed, but she was chuckling.

“Have you ever had Natasha’s cocoa, Sharon?” Sam asked because while everyone else seemed comfortable, it was giving him hives to stand here with the woman he tried to set Steve up with when he was apparently seeing Natasha on the way down low, like off the map low. There was just a little too much weirdness. Besides, he told him, Bucky looked like he wanted to say something else, and maybe it was better to avert potential disaster.
“No,” Sharon said wryly. “I don’t think I would have believed the Black Widow made hot cocoa, or fought snowball wars or danced with kids. Today’s very illuminating.”

“C’mon, I got an in with the lady in charge, you’re going to wonder what you’ve been doing wrong your whole life that you haven’t gotten to enjoy this before.” When he extended an arm to motion her ahead of him, she chuckled.

Lila and Cooper were leaving the kitchen with mugs of cocoa piled with whip cream and heading for their dad. Rhodey already had a mug in front of him and so did Clint.

“If you say so,” she said with a chuckle, before heading in the direction of the kitchen. Sam was hot on her heels. He didn’t think Natasha knew what he did, but he would rather her not find out Sam fixed Sharon and Steve up.

Nat didn’t seem like the type to really hold a grudge.

But then again, she didn’t look like a woman who could kill a man with her thighs or fire a rocket launcher at their heads.

Wanda

Nate giggled at her as she got him changed. He’d managed to spill an entire cup of juice on himself somehow. Vision was using a towel to dry off his own chest. “I am sorry, Wanda. I did not think he would turn the whole thing upside down.”

“It’s fine, babies do things like that. It’s how they learn.” Nate was a good baby, too. Easy going, except when he was hungry, a fact he’d proved the night before when he yowled—loudly. “Besides, he’s a sweetheart, aren’t you?” She’d never been a fan of baby voices, but working with some of the reclamation in Sokovia and seeing displaced families coming together, she’d spent time around lots of kids the same age as the Barton children, including Nate.

Nate gave her a two-tooth smile and she tickled his stomach before pulling the overalls up and fastening them. Since she had to change his clothes anyway, she’d gone ahead and swapped out the diaper. Laura had mouthed thank you to her when she’d rescued Nate from Vision’s rather startled custody. At least the juice hadn’t gotten on Nate’s hair and the rest of him cleaned up easily.

“That’s going to be sticky,” she warned Vision. “You might need to use warm water to wash it off.”

“I am noticing,” Vision could affect his own clothing, so the fact Nate spilled juice on his “shirt” didn’t have as much impact as if he’d done it to Wanda. Once Nate was all dressed, she scooped him up.

“Would you like me to wait for you?” It was the least she could do. Vision was making every attempt to repair the distance between them and while Wanda wanted to do the same, it was far more difficult on her part. She couldn’t quite get past the fact he’d been the one to take her into custody. It had been because of him—and herself—she’d ended up in that shock collar and straightjacket.

“You do not have to,” he told her gently. “I know you are still struggling.”
“I wish I wasn’t,” she told him. “And it’s—it’s easier when others are around.” Which wasn’t terribly fair to him.


Rocking Nate from side to side, she studied him. “Do you? Because I don’t.”

“Well, perhaps no, but I endeavor to explore why…” He hesitated. “Human emotions are complicated Wanda. You and I have both discovered this, and while I very much want to re-earn your trust, and your friendship, I understand it may not be as simple for you as I—I do not feel I have to forgive you for anything.”

“Not even pushing you through the floor and towards the core of the Earth?” The damage she’d done to the Compound had been significant, but they’d apparently managed to repair it. Of course, it also required refitting three floors and ceilings as well as filling in the half-mile trench.

Vision canted his head. “You did do that, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Wanda admitted. “I am sorry if that hurt you.”

“It did not,” Vision told her. “It was not—comfortable. But you did no permanent damage, and I was able to extract myself relatively quickly once I regained normalized density.”

Nate tugged at her hair, and she pulled a couple of toys from the floor to float them up. Once she had him entertained she studied Vision once more. He was so earnest, and there was a kindness to him. Before he became Vision, when he was still a seed of Ultron, she’d seen Ultron’s destructive tendencies and plans to destroy all of mankind. The sheer eradication of the populace in order to preserve the Earth itself.

But Vision—Vision had none of those tendencies. He’d come for her when the city had fallen, after she’d defeated the last Ultron suit…after Pietro. Her heart had been empty then, but Vision had come and he’d been kind to her. Even when he’d been her jailor, he’d attempted kindness.

“I’m glad I did not hurt you.”

“Yet, I have hurt you,” Vision said slowly. “As much as I may wish otherwise, my actions directly or indirectly caused you to experience pain. This was never my intent nor my desire.”

“I know,” she told him. “I do…and I’m working on it.”

“Whatsoever you need, Wanda, I hope you know, I shall endeavor to provide.” He glanced at Nate, then her. “If what you need is for me to keep my distance and to give you—space? I can do that.”

“Not too far,” she told him. “I do—I would like to still be friends.”

“As would I.” Then he glanced down at himself once more. “I’ll go and clean up then meet you out there. As I recall, you were a great fan of Agent Romanoff’s—Ms. Romanoff’s hot cocoa.”

“You know you can call her Natasha,” Wanda reminded him.

“She made that offer to me once, but I feel that—as I have with you—I have done her a disservice. She saw clearly what even I did not despite my logic and rational understanding of the facts. So in some part, I am responsible for the last few months and the persecution she suffered at the hands of Secretary Ross.”
Keeping Nate grabbing for the toys and occasionally letting him have one, she said, “I don’t think
Natasha sees it that way, but if you do—then speak to her like you did to me. Apologize. She needs
friends. We all do.”

Vision nodded. “I will take that advice, Wanda. And I will see you at the meeting.” Then he turned
and walked right through the wall and she sighed. They’d been working on that, and maybe it was
her turn to feel guilty for making him uncomfortable.

She’d told Natasha the truth, though. She wasn’t sure how to forgive Vision. A part of her
understood his actions and his choices, and she believed him utterly about his intentions and his
desire.

But another part of her…

That part was still sitting in a shock collar and a straightjacket, and when she looked at Vision she
saw the being who handed them the key. Blinking rapidly, she sent Nate’s toys back to where they
were and patted his back when he complained.

“Let’s go find your mommy, shall we?”

Peter met her in the hallway as she followed it back to the common room, he had two mugs of hot
cocoa. “Hey… I wasn’t sure you were going to make it back so I got yours for you.”

“Oh, thank you.” She glanced at Nate. “Do you mind carrying it while I take Nate back to his
mother?”

“Nope,” Peter said, with an easy smile. “Mrs. Barton is pretty cool. She’s going to help Natasha
and I fix a turkey for my aunt.”

“She is rather nice,” Wanda agreed. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.” He’d been torn up about
Natasha’s injuries. They all had, and Wanda had tried to make Peter feel better. In some ways, he
reminded her of Pietro in more than just his name. But where Pietro was always running too fast
and was as easy to anger as he was to make happy, Peter was a deeper thinker.

Laura spotted her as they reached the common room and swept over to rescue Nate. “Thank you
for taking care of changing him,” she told Wanda, and brushed a kiss to her cheek. “He can be a
handful.”

“He’s a beautiful baby, and I love looking after him. So if you and Clint wanted to take an evening
over this week, I would be happy to watch all of the kids.”

“I could help,” Peter volunteered. “You know if I’m out here, or you let me know.”

Laura chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind, but I think they’re almost ready for their meeting so drink
your hot cocoas.”

Speaking of which, Peter passed Wanda’s to her, and she cradled it. It was hot, and sweet, and
deeply chocolatey. There was a bite in the spice, something that sent warmth zinging from her
chest to her toes. “So good.”

“It really is,” Peter admitted. “I didn’t know she can make all the things that she does. It’s cool.”

“Natasha is full of surprises,” Wanda told him and they drifted over to the sofas and chairs where
Clint had moved and Rhodey had joined them. Steve stood near a chair Bucky occupied, and Nat
perched on the arm of it. Tony was standing a couple of feet away, talking about a meeting with
T’Challa later in the week regarding the Accords, and Sam was…staring rather interestingly at Sharon.

Oh, that was new.

Hiding a smile, she took a sip of her hot cocoa and grinned when Clint crossed his eyes as she caught his gaze. Peter gave her a quick smile as he moved to stand near Natasha and Tony. When Wanda reached the sofa, Clint patted the seat next to him and she sat carefully listening to Tony discuss issues with the language in the Accords. She really didn’t understand it all, but he sounded positive about the changes they could affect, so she hoped for that.

They could all use something more positive, and she had to admit, Tony had been working toward that all along. Natasha’s presence was simply more proof. Fingers crossed, he’d be as successful with the Accords as he’d been about bringing them all home.

**Clint**

Frankly, he’d attended worse meetings. This was more like distant family getting together and playing catch up after a long separation. In a way, the Avengers were something of a dysfunctional family. Ironic, with his own family in attendance for a Thanksgiving the next day—a holiday they were all spending together. His work family and his personal family—two islands he’d fought to keep separate for years and only one ship had ever ventured between them.

Speaking of her, Clint studied Natasha as surreptitiously as possible. Very little slipped past her, and she always seemed to know when someone watched her. Clint had similar situational awareness, but not cranked up to an eleven like hers was. Then again, he’d also not grown up somewhere the person standing next to him might very well shank him to secure their place. So yeah, her keen attention to the shifting temperature within a crowd or the change in pressure when someone stared at her a beat too long, he got it.

She looked good.

She looked really good.

Still too thin. The weight loss had alarmed him when he visited him on the island, even more than he’d let on Steve or Bucky. It was as though someone had worn away everything not essential to her being her, and when she’d been honed to a fine point for so long that left precious extra to be erased.

At the same time, she came to life with the kids and she even mustered the energy to tease him. But daytime naps? The deep dark shadows beneath her eyes? The fact she was sleeping long hours…no, none of that had been Natasha, and he’d seen her at her worst and near dead. When the guys mentioned they were going to stay another week, he’d been all for it.

Now, she was back and she seemed more like her old self. Maybe a little warmer and more receptive to the people gathered around—nearly every person in the room had a tangible connection to her. Not all, but most. Yet, she’d made time for every single one of them, along with cocoa, and she fit in like the missing puzzle piece, bringing it all together.

As great as she looked, something was off. Even after the romp in the snow and the dancing in the
kitchen—he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. The fact a current of tension wound around Bucky and Cap told him.

Sure enough, as Steve asked for them to go around the room and list off what items each one of them needed individually, whether it was training or time or simply just a personal item like time off, Natasha’s gaze shifted to meet Clint’s.

Busted.

Wanda mentioned training.

Nat quirked an eyebrow. He flicked his fingers, signing, Beer later?

Rhodey gave a rundown on his current physical therapy and that Tony’s braces had him almost back to normal, but he was going to need more time before he was ready to be in the suit again.

A half-nod, then she signed, Problem?

Vision brought up his ongoing studies in human nature, and perhaps that as a team, they all needed to look at rebuilding bridges.

He shook his head. Do I need a problem to have some of your time?

Tony ticked off his current plate load with equipment upgrades, the Accords, and building PR recommendations the team could work off of. He’d have more on that later.

When she snorted, he grinned and they snagged Bucky’s attention and Cap’s. For a split-second, he met Steve’s gaze as Nat glanced at Bucky, and then she smirked. Steve’s shoulders relaxed and Bucky just put a hand on her thigh, and his expression relaxed.

Sam discussed his work at the VA and he thought one thing they needed to do, maybe not all at once, but in smaller groups maybe was confront some of the issues that separated them personally and professionally.

Nat slid a look back to Clint, widened her eyes like oops and he pressed a finger to his lips to keep from laughing. This was hardly the first time they multi-tasked their way through the meeting, but it might be the first time Captain America bust them for it.

Bucky looked at Sam and said no thanks, and then said he didn’t need anything.

Eh, if they got in trouble, Nat could take him, and his grin twitched a little wider, and she shook her head at him as if she could read his mind.

Sharon said she would like to meet with all of them as well, as time permitted, but she wanted to be seen as an asset and an ally, and if that meant earning their trust, she was willing to do that.

You’re terrible, Natasha signed.

Steve said they were all good ideas, but first and foremost they needed to concentrate on training, and though Clint and Rhodey were still on restricted duty and Natasha was taking a few more days, they could still all participate based on their experience.

You’re worse.

Then she stuck her tongue out at him, and Wanda giggled next to him, which was abnormally loud in the suddenly quiet room.
Without missing a beat, Natasha said, “Clint wants to add upgrades to the game room so we can have competition nights again…”

Clint opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. Because that wasn’t a bad idea. “I second that,” he said.

“You can’t second your own idea,” Tony told him. “But I’ll second it, just make me a list of what you want added…” Probably more like Natasha was the one who actually suggested it, but Clint wasn’t going to split hairs. The billionaire hadn’t made any secret of his affection for their resident spy and considering how hard he’d been working to get her back on the grid, Clint wasn’t going to give him hell about it. Nat needed all the friends she could get.

“Paintball,” Clint suggested. That could make for some wicked fun wargames.

“Is not a video game,” Tony argued. “But I like the idea.”

“We need a pool table, there was one at the Tower,” Sam suggested.

“Still not a video game,” Tony said with a snort. “But again—I like it. So what next?”

“Oh, what about a VR system?” Peter offered.

“Kid, you’re not officially on the team. As a junior member, you don’t get a vote.” But Tony’s grin as he said it robbed the statement of any sting.

“Well I’m on the team,” Wanda said. “And I agree with Peter, VR would also be useful for training, don’t you think Natasha?”

With a perfectly serious and sober face, Natasha said, “Absolutely.”

Then it devolved into suggestions for different game systems, and even Rhodey suggesting Tony design them a genuine holodeck and he threw that down like a challenge. No way that would ever end badly.

Leg swinging idly, Natasha grinned at Steve without a hint of repentance for totally derailing the meeting.

Not that Cap looked really upset.

Huh… they really were like a family and better, like they all belonged here. And maybe for the first time, everyone was really seeing it.
Chapter Summary

Every relationship is different and requires some understanding

Chapter Sixteen

Understandings

Natasha

The meeting kept devolving into laughter as the suggestions flew for creating the best rec room on the planet. Knowing Tony, it would exceed expectations. Since they weren’t going to get any more business handled, she decided to go find Laura and get that turkey lesson. She’d also promised Lila time, but before she could say anything to Peter, Sharon caught her eye.

“Can I borrow you for a second?” The former SHIELD agent didn’t look behind Natasha, though Nat could feel Steve’s attention settle on her as he moved around the chair and James had sat forward.

“Sure. In here…?” She motioned to the noisy room, though she seriously doubted it.

“Maybe in one of the offices?”

“Sure…mine is still here. Maybe.” Then Nat grinned and pointed a thumb toward the hall running opposite the one leading to the residences. Patting James arm and giving Peter a little nudge with her foot, she said, “I’ll be back. Play nice boys.”

Catching Steve’s questioning gaze as she turned, she smiled. This was fine. Then she led Sharon out of the room and down the hall. The first office had been Stark’s when he was there and the stack of StarkPads on the desk suggested it still was. The next one, a little larger and with the very comfortable sofa was Steve’s. She’d taken a few naps there before and after reviewing training or mission reports. The next one was a conference room where the team meetings could be more formal—not that they needed formal.

The third office, though, had been hers and while she hadn’t personalized it, there had been a few of her things still here. The jacket on the back of the chair and the duffle bag in the corner, however, were not hers. Maybe the things here had been packed up during one of the warrants. But the mug on the desk said Please step away from the desk, I’m not talking to you today.

Definitely not hers.

“Well, shit,” Sharon groaned.

And that told her whose stuff it was.
“It’s fine,” she told her, waving her into her own office. “I obviously wasn’t using it.”

“Yeah, I’ll move. If you can give me a couple of days, I’ll track down a space right after I’m back. I can just take the stuff here now and you can have it back.”

Natasha waved it off and crossed to perch on the edge of the desk. Not like any of the furniture was handpicked or anything. Tony had furnished it. “Like I said, I wasn’t using it.” There had been a painting on the wall of the Avengers post New York—well of Iron Man, Captain America, Thor and the Other Guy in an impressionistic form. Neither she nor Clint was featured in it. But she’d grabbed it at a fundraising auction and given it a prominent spot. “So what’s up?”

Hopefully that was around somewhere.

Blowing out a breath, Sharon closed the door and circled the room to her desk. “First… how are you? I haven’t seen you since Germany.”

“I’m peachy keen,” Nat told her without missing a beat. Sharon studied her with the training of someone in special services, which meant, someone looking for elements of deception whether intentional or not. Nat had helped with some of their training, but Sharon hadn’t been in one of her classes. Probably a good thing. “How about you? You seem to have landed on your feet.”

“Well, we’ll see. I got relegated to pushing paper in a sub-basement in Langley, so this is leagues above that.” Nat made a face and Sharon nodded. “Exactly. But before we get into the liaison piece… did you ever have much contact with the Department of Damage Control?”

Raising her eyebrows, Nat shook her head slowly. “Not after the immediate aftermath of New York. They were a division put together on the fly with resources of the U.S. government, some SHIELD oversight, and Stark Industries funding. Tony paid for a lot of the reclamation and rebuilding efforts beyond the damage to just Avengers Tower.” Nat tilted her head, thinking. “Anne Hoag was the presidential appointee recommended by… the World Security Council. I vetted part of her background, but only the parts Nick asked me to verify. They checked out, and I was on another assignment before they were on the ground. I know they were probably called in to clean up D.C. but I was busy then.”

Sharon snorted softly. “Weren’t we all… did you know about Dylan Grazer?”

“Hydra? Yeah.” Nat nodded once. “Not every person in SHIELD was. Less than thirty percent all told, but they put their people in key positions. Resource management and STRIKE teams, heads of science divisions, anywhere that allowed them the greatest access to direct funds, resources, research, and to reap the benefits.”

Disgusting as it was, she had to respect their tenacity and effectiveness.

“I used to date him,” Sharon admitted with a grimace.

“Sorry?” Nat raised her brows. The other woman laughed and shook her head.

“It’s fine, at least I only slept with him once and he was…well let’s just say, giving wasn’t a talent.” Her smirk was easy, and almost relaxed. Everything about her said she was a friend and an ally. But Nat reserved her opinion. Sharon was also highly trained as a SHIELD Special Services agent, which meant she’d been schooled in how to slip in under the guard of others.

“So what about the DODC?”

Flipping a StarkPad around, Sharon tapped the screen to activate it. “This Vulture guy has been
repurposing old Chitauri tech, now the DODC was supposed to have cleaned all that up.” She tapped through screens, and Nat studied the image. This was the guy Peter had continued to investigate, and they’d had a couple of run-ins, including one where the guy had tried to kill him. “And yeah, before you say it, I know it’s crappy quality on the image. Friday attempted to clean it up, but near as we can tell, he’s running some kind of digital disruptor, it keeps…”

“…pixelating the images, creating a distortion to avoid facial recognition.” She was very familiar with that piece of tech, as well as some of the low-tech ways to get the same result. “May I?” She motioned to the StarkPad.

“Please.” Sharon leaned back and Nat flipped through the images. Then studied the lists of alleged appearances and speculation on what he was doing. “It’s thin. Too thin to make it actionable. What I’m trying to do is trace where he got his tech, see if I can create a timeline. SHIELD tracked the enhanced, both people and items.”

She knew this, but she let Sharon talk. Sometimes it helped to verbalize the issue aloud. Images from the ferry disaster were included, as well as notes from the FBI on how they’d tried to take the Vulture and his men into custody. They’d managed to scoop up one guy, but he wasn’t talking.

That might be worth a visit.

“But if this guy was on the Index, we don’t have access to it. The leaves the DODC…they were established to prevent civilians from getting their hands on Chitauri tech. I don’t know if you know, but last month there was a large seizure from aboard a container ship on approach to the New Orleans port.”

Oh, she was aware. “Coming from?”

“That’s just it—the manifest possessed a curious lack of details. No one knows where the items came from or who the intended recipient was. DODC was involved, but their reports are need to know, and friends at the CIA said they’ve been compartmentalizing more and more. They don’t work with Homeland beyond informing them if they are taking over a site.”

Not a lot in the reports that she didn’t already know. “You’re right,” she said, setting the pad down. “It’s thin. So what do you expect me to do about it?”

“You’re…in a grayer area than I am.”

Very true.

“And…” Sharon leaned forward and folded her hands together on the desk as she met her gaze. “You were closer to Director Fury than I was, he tasked me to watch Steve and provide protection, but I didn’t work with him on a daily basis.”

Nat remained impassive and listened.

“Since his death, we’ve had precious little access to the intelligence I know he had to keep off the books, including the last viable copy of the Index. It wasn’t in any of the files you dumped onto the Net. Nor was the DODC…”

“Probably not. Revealing the Index would have put a lot of genuinely innocent people in danger,” Natasha admitted. The Index itself had possessed an encrypted self-delete code. When she’d opened the floodgates, it had vanished. A lot of Nick’s files had. If she were to bet, it probably activated when Nick scanned in his left eye. “Have you talked to Maria Hill? She was Nick’s right hand. I don’t think he did anything she wasn’t at least tangentially aware of.” Not even die.
“We’ve had exactly two conversations,” Sharon admitted. “The first one was more or less thanks but no thanks and the second was to make an appointment.”

“Is she still at Stark Industries?” That was where she landed in the immediate aftermath. Tony’s attorneys blockaded her when Congress came calling. Nat could have done the same thing, but someone had to say something and she wouldn’t let them go after the other Avengers.

“Good question, I’ll ask Tony about that.” A quick smile flashed over her face. “Thank you.”

“And you’re not an idiot, and knew all of that, so why did you really want to talk to me, Sharon?”

The other woman’s smile faltered for a second, then she sighed, “Fine, I was trying to make nice before we had to deal with the uncomfortable topics.”

“We’ve made nice,” Nat pointed out. “And neither of us needs to play these games.”

“The Committee is uncertain about you,” Sharon told her. “Which may be the king of understatements. They’re making nice right now to placate Tony, they feel his investment in clearing you makes him unwilling to be conciliatory in other areas if they keep dragging their heels.”

“Okay.”

“As you are aware, they’ve dropped pursuing any charges with relation to the Accords. The U.S. has also backed off on continuing to pursue charges of espionage and terrorism, among others. Many of the member countries have taken a step back—France and Wakanda have both been huge proponents in your favor, while other nations—Russia, for example—are less circumspect. Though for now, they have withdrawn their requests for extradition. Between you and me, I’d avoid any trips to the country for the time being.”

None of that was surprising, though she would prefer if Tony would stop putting his neck out there for her. “Okay.”

“In light of that, and their awareness of the team’s desire for you to be reinstated…I’m supposed to inform you that it will be probationary until the new Accords are ratified and the Avengers have signed, including you.”

Nat shrugged. “Supposed to? Does that mean you aren’t?”

“This is one of those gray areas, because probationary means you wouldn’t have standing to lead the team in Steve’s absence. He’s made it clear today that you’re second in command. But if I tell you that you’re on probationary status and I have to write reports on your performance as well as… give an evaluation in three months of my feelings on where you stand as a team member, that second in command thing becomes a point of contention with the Committee.”

“If you tell Steve or Tony it’s going to become a point of contention with them.” That wasn’t even a question.

Sharon nodded. “Exactly, so this is me not telling you about the Committee’s desire, because as the official liaison, I feel like it would be a step back at a time when we need to be taking steps forward particularly during a delicate phase where the old Accords are not going to be enforced, but we are supposed to respect them as much as possible until the new Accords are decided upon.”

“All right,” Nat said nodding her head from side to side. “How much will this hamper you being able to do your job if this is the hill you’re choosing to die on?”
“Well, as with all things, that remains to be seen. I have a certain amount of discretion. Observing the team, reviewing mission reports, asking for explanations of anything I don’t understand so I can represent all of you to the Committee—these are supportive requests. The support and goodwill on both sides. And while I don’t know you very well, and I only know your reputation from when you were at SHIELD, I know some people that I respect trust you. I have to take that into consideration.”

“Don’t get fired over it,” Natasha suggested as she stood. “As for the rest of it… do an evaluation, don’t do an evaluation—I don’t care about that part. Don’t lie to Steve and Tony about what you’re being asked to do. If you plan to turn it down, or use your discretion—great. But if they feel like you’re keeping things from them, it’s going to make everyone’s jobs that much harder.”

Leaning back, Sharon studied her for a beat longer. “You really are impossible to get a bead on.”

At that, Nat smiled. “Annoying isn’t it?”

“A little bit.” Sharon stood, and held out her hand. “For what it’s worth, I appreciated what you did for them even if no one else did. We both had jobs to do and they weren’t fun considering what was at stake.”

Shaking her hand once, Nat said, “If you were looking for fun, I think you’re in the wrong business…”

“I don’t know, blowing shit up can be fun.”

“True.”

A quick smile, and while they were not what Nat would call friends, they could probably work together. But she’d reserve judgment on whether she could trust her or not. This could all be an elaborate set up to lull her into opening up so she could report to the Committee. Not that Nat could blame Sharon. She was right. They all had jobs to do, and sometimes, they weren’t fun.

“On that note, I need to get out of here,” Sharon said as she checked her watch. “If I am going to make my flight.”

Nat didn’t comment on the possible weather delays. “Have a good holiday, and we’ll see you back next week.”

“Yes,” Sharon said, then motioned to the office. “And I’ll clear out of here. You should have the office closer to Steve’s if you’re going to be his second.”

Another shrug. “Like I said—you’re welcome to it. I can just use Steve’s office…I was in there most of the time anyway…” She would find out about her painting though.

Hopefully Tony stored it somewhere.

“Natasha…”

She paused at the door and glanced back at her. “Yes?”

“Thanks.”

“For?”

“For…not trying to interrogate or intimidate me. You could have and you didn’t.”
Nat smiled. “I didn’t?” The hint of mild surprise in her voice did it every time. Sharon frowned. She was quite probably asking herself what she missed. “Huh.”

Not elaborating, she left the office and headed back for the common area. Just as she passed Steve’s office, the door swung open and Steve grasped her arm and tugged her inside, closed the door and then pinned her to it in one smooth motion.

“I’ve killed men for less, Rogers,” she warned him, but the corners of her mouth twitched when he grinned widely.

“Then I’ll count myself lucky because this would be the way to go,” he murmured, then closed the distance and pressed his mouth to hers. The kiss lit her up, slow and deep and wet and demanding. The weight of him pressing her against the door was delicious, and when he slid his thigh between her legs, she groaned and sucked on his tongue.

He had a hand in her hair and another gliding beneath the waistband of her pants. It was like sensory overload, and she arched her hips to grind against his thigh. When he began kissing along her jaw, she tilted her head back.

“Friday,” she exhaled. “Secure this door and full privacy mode, please.”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff.”

The door locked behind her and the glass in the office darkened, obscuring anyone from viewing inside, and Steve flexed his thigh and she bit her lip. Fuck that felt good. He had a hand cupping her ass, and then he bit down on the soft spot between her neck and shoulder.

When he released her ass to push at James’ hoodie, she tried to wiggle out of it, but all she succeeded in doing was adding more pressure to her clit where she was riding his thigh, and Steve lifted his head wearing a sinfully wicked smile. “Need some help?”

Heat flushed through her system and she raised her eyebrows before gliding her hands under his jacket and shoving it off. He had to let her go and he tossed it, then she went for his shirt and stripped it up and over. The ripple of muscle just pooled more moisture into her mouth and when he dropped the shirt, she leaned forward and traced her tongue against the spot she’d bitten him before. The marks were long gone, but she scraped her teeth lightly over his flat nipple, then dragged her nails along his back.

He made a low sound in his throat and then he had James’ hoodie pushed down, trapping her arms behind her back, and she arched an eyebrow. There was something hot and electric in his eyes and it intrigued the hell out of her. He stole another kiss, locking his mouth to hers until all she could taste, breathe, and feel was Steve. The hoodie fell away and his palms were hot where they pushed up under her shirt.

This was usually the moment her clothes got shredded. Their patience was not legendary...

“No ripping,” she said between licking and biting kisses.

“Hmm?” The sound rumbled from his chest when he sucked her lower lip between his teeth and she groaned. Everything in her was going hot and soft, and she wanted all of the clothing off too.

“I don’t have a change of clothes,” she told him, breaking away from the kiss long enough to pull her shirt up and over. He unsnapped her bra, then covered her bared breasts with his hot hands before she could get totally disentangled. The firm twist and pinch of his thumbs and forefingers on each nipple sent a pulse straight to her cunt.
Drunk on the feel of it, she pushed her pants and panties down even though the bra was still hanging off her arm by one strap and then she got her fingers on the snaps to his jeans as his mouth laved kisses to her throat. A shudder worked its way up her spine, and then he glided a palm down her abdomen to cup her cunt, and she wanted to grind against his hand the way she had his thigh.

She was all kinds of turned on and bordering on frustrated. She wanted more. His jeans opened and she had her hand wrapped around the silken steel length of his cock and his breath stuttered. When he lifted his head, his pupils were blown and she smiled.

“Hey Steve…”

“Angel.” Oh, the low throaty note in his voice. She squeezed her thighs around his hand, biting her lip when he pressed the heel of his palm to her clit. Oh, the little starbursts of need it ratcheted through her system.

“Let me go—just a minute…” She asked between panting breaths. He made a noise of protest, but his hands slid away from her and she wanted to whimper at the absence, even if she locked that sound away. Releasing his cock for one moment, she pulled his jeans and boxers down to the floor, leaving them both only in their socks. Shaking off the bra, she didn’t rise immediately; instead she laved a kiss to the leaking tip of his cock, lapping up the pre-cum as Steve’s breath grew harsher and punctuated.

Glancing up, she locked gazes with him as she swallowed him into her throat and began to work her tongue along the heavy vein beneath. He looked so wrecked, and it served him right—ambushing her with hot sex.


Pulling back, she teased his tip with her tongue before swallowing the heavy weight again and they both groaned when the head of his cock grazed against her throat. Twice more she repeated it, sucking, teasing, and pulling. But when she lifted her palm beneath his balls, he whispered, “Wait…” The hard syllable as much a plea as it was a command.

Pulling off his cock with a pop, she licked her lips before grinning up at him. “Yes?”

“Need you, Tasha,” he whispered, then he was lifting her up and she had her arms around him as he glided her into place and with one thrust filled her cunt. The pressure pushed all the air out of her lungs and she tilted her head back as she arched her hips, locking her thighs around him and crossing her ankles behind his ass. He braced her with both hands on her hips, holding all of her weight as he began to rock into her. She rotated her hips, moving them like a dance and added a twist to every thrust. He shifted the angle just a bit then began to hit the right spot each time.

Her sensitive nipples rubbed against his chest, and then his mouth was on hers, swallowing her low groan as his tongue mirrored his cock, thrusting and demanding, tasting and giving, and then he adjusted the angle a little more and he was hitting her clit against his pelvis with each upwards push, and Nat began to unravel. Digging her nails into his shoulders, she sucked his tongue hard and fisted his hair before he drove into her so hard the tension shattered in an orgasm that had her clenching around him.

Steve pushed her through the first, and second orgasms right to a third before his hips stuttered. She clung to him desperately, drunk on the way his mouth felt against hers. In one blazing hot rush, he came, and he staggered back a couple of steps and then sat abruptly on the sofa, the motion making them both groan as he speared into her, still thick and pulsing as he released. Then she pressed her forehead to his collarbone as he cradled her close.
As he softened, he slipped out of her with a low hiss, and then he tilted his head back and nudged her chin up. If she looked anywhere near as wrecked as him—there would be no doubt where they’d gotten off to—or that they’d gotten off. The idea made her laugh, and she grinned at him even as the come dripped onto his lap.

“So…I vote for post-meeting coitus as a regular thing,” she suggested, and that earned her a long, deep laugh and then he pulled her close and kissed all the breath out of her.

Murmuring against her lips, he said, “That’s definitely a rule I can support…”

“Or get behind?” She asked, waggling her eyebrows teasingly and he groaned.

“Now I have that image in my head…”

“And that beautiful desk over there…” She nuzzled her nose against his beard. It was softer again, and while it still left her with a bit of whisker burn, she adored it. After a gentle nibble of his earlobe, she murmured, “Picture sitting at your desk, meetings over, and all that paperwork waiting for review. I pop by, because you want to go over it all…with me.” A lick tracing the lines of his ear and he shuddered. “Then I move around the desk, and lean over, no panties…just a skirt. All you have to do is flip it up, and get behind the plan right then and right there.”

“Fuck,” escaped him on a breath. “You keep talking and I’ll be going over you on the desk right now.”

Lifting her head, she grinned. “Who says I don’t want exactly that?”

“Because there’s still a common room full of people out there and they all want something from us—you in particular.” He rubbed his hands against her hips. “Needed to have you to myself…just for a few minutes.”

Smoothing her hand in a circle against his chest, she arched back and lifted herself up. His gorgeous blue eyes were almost too normal and she smiled. “Feeling better then?”

“Much,” he promised, drawing little patterns with his thumbs against her skin, but making no move to end the contact. “I’m so damn glad to have you back here, back with all of us, and I don’t want to share you with any of them. Not one minute of your time.”

The possessiveness in those words would probably worry her from anyone else, but not Steve. “What do you need, Steve?” She nuzzled her nose to his. “You were asking the rest of the team to share where they were at and what they needed—what do you need?”

“You,” he told her. “Just you. You in my life, Bucky back with us and I’m a happy man.”

She smiled. “Well that’s an easy need to fill.” Then she kissed him, slowly, carefully, and paying great attention to massage his lips apart before teasing at his tongue with hers. He slid his hand down to her ass and pressed her forward and down until his cock pressed against her slit and she rested against his chest. Contact. Her thighs rubbing along his, and her hands running up and down his arms.

A nip. A lick. Then a sucking chase first of his tongue, then hers. The caresses of her hands and mouth brought his breathing back to normal and slowed the hammer of his heart. When she finally lifted her head again, she smiled at his swollen lips then traced her finger along the bottom lip.

“You have me, Steve,” she promised him. “I’m right here. You can feel me, right?”
“Yeah Angel,” he whispered. “I can…you have me, you know that right?”

“I do,” she assured him. Then pressed another kiss to his lips. “I’m attached, remember?”

He chuckled. “Not just this moment, but give me another minute and I can make that happen.”

Steve Rogers and sex jokes. Her life really was complete. Laughing, she lifted her head. It felt like forever since the island, since they’d laughed like this and it hadn’t been more than a day.

“We can make this work,” she told him.

“I know, Angel.” He tucked one of her curls behind an ear. Man, her hair was probably a disaster. Braids it was. “Thank you for letting me have my way with you.”

“Oh, I promise—it was my pleasure.”

They lingered another couple of minutes, Nat resting in his lap, curled against him. Eventually, though, they had to get up. Thankfully, Steve’s office also had a small private bathroom so she could clean up, and they could both wipe down the sticky. Her clothes were a little rumpled, and her curls were a mess, bedhead had nothing on her. She reached into the cabinet over the sink and pulled out some hair ties.

With a grin, she said, “You have a bathroom right here, of course, I hid stuff in it.”

He chuckled, watching her pull her hair back into a french braid. Wisps escaped it to curl against her cheeks. With a single finger, he traced the redness of the beard burn. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m not,” she told him. “I’m the one who likes the beard…and this is a good length. I like this length.”

“Duly noted,” he said with all seriousness. “Should we do regular checks…just to make sure the length is up to your standards?”

“Keep it up, Steve…and I’ll never let you out of bed.”

His eyes lit up. “Who says I don’t want exactly that?”

She grinned and then they both laughed. As soon as she had the braid tied off, he pressed a very gentle kiss to her lips.

As Steve opened the door, Sam nearly leapt out of his skin as he gaped at them. He’d been coming from the direction of her former office—or maybe still her office—at least the one she’d left Sharon in. Not that it mattered whether it was hers or not.

Steve’s office was definitely working for her now, even better than before.

Sam stared at Steve, then her as she tied James’ hoodie around her hips. “Okay, now that’s just not fair, you two.”

“Don’t be jealous, Sam… Steve can still hang out with you.” She told him with a grin and a wink. Then glanced at Steve as she passed him. “See you in a few.”

“Definitely,” he told her, and then she sauntered up the hallway.

“Really, man? You gotta be like that?” Sam’s protests were a little too glib and a little too bright.
“Like what, Sam?” A little smugness suited Steve. “Nat and I had to have a quick meeting.”

“You look like you had a quick something…”

She didn’t laugh, but she wanted to. Sailing around the corner, she followed the chatter in the common room. Peter perched on the floor next to coffee table with Cooper building what looked like an engineering feat of Legos. Wanda was at the table with Clint and Lila. Clint took one look at her and mouthed *Really?*

She just smirked.

Tony was returning to the common room from residence hallway carrying a small box and he gave her a once over, then just shook his head. “Having fun, Red?”

“Oh, you know me…” She grinned. “Hey Peter, when you get done, let me know…I’m going to talk to Laura about our project.”

“Will do,” he said. “Cooper’s been trying to get this Death Star together for a while, and my friend Ned has one, so I said I’d help.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Tony stopped at the table and set the tools down before he joined them on the floor and she paused. He eyed her again, “What? I’m helping…”

“Don’t weaponize it,” she told him firmly.

Pure innocence shown on his face, and she wasn’t buying it. “Hey, Red—it’s me.” But he put his hand over the box.

“Uh huh.” The corner of her mouth twitched and then he grinned wider.

“Come on…a little anti-grav never hurt anyone and I can make it rotate for him, hover off the floor.”

Cooper turned wide eyes on her. Scarily enough, Peter’s gaze mirrored Cooper’s and she rolled her eyes. “Fine, it can fly, but not higher than five feet and absolutely no lasers.”

Tony huffed. “Fine. No lasers.” Cooper gave her a happy grin and Peter laughed as she turned away. Then Tony said, “But we could do mini-missiles…”

“Tony.”

“Not doing a thing, Red. Cross my heart.”

They were going to burn the Compound down.

Oh. She paused and backed up a couple of steps. “Hey Tony?”

“Yes, Red?”

“There was a painting in my old office…do you know what happened to it? The post Battle of New York one?”

“The Simpson?”
She nodded once.

“Probably in your room. Hey Friday…” Tony straightened his glasses, and they lit up as if becoming active. “Give me the inventory of Red’s room here at the Compound.” After a moment, he nodded. “Yep, it’s there. Got boxed up, but they weren’t allowed to remove anything, so I had them store everything back in your room. Want me to have it sent to the Tower?”

“No…not yet anyway. Thank you, though.” He’d protected her stuff. She didn’t have a lot of it. Knew better than to get attached to things. But she liked that painting…it…it marked a change in her life. It probably wouldn’t matter to anyone else or have much more than conversational value, but she liked it.

“Anytime,” he promised her. “Take an inventory, let me know…we’ll get it squared away. Now…shoo, we engineers have a Death Star to build.”

“God that sounds ominous,” Rhodey said as he came to stand next to her and looked at them.

“You want to help, don’t you Platypus?” Tony grinned at him.

Rhodey made a face then said, “Kind of. Yeah.”

“Well come on then…you can be in charge of security. Red doesn’t trust me.”

With a laugh, Rhodey looked at her. “She’s right. But I got this…”

“Then I’ll leave them in your hands,” she told him before heading toward the kitchen. The hot cocoa had been great, but she wanted a cup of tea and then she needed to pick Laura’s brain about turkeys and Thanksgiving Day recipes.

“Hey Auntie Nat,” Lila bounced over to grab her hand. “Can we do something now that the meeting is done?”

“We can, but I have to talk to your mom first. What are you and Wanda doing over there?”

“Coloring, talking to Dad. Wanda’s figuring things out.”

“That’s important,” she told her. She found James in the kitchen with Laura showing her something on a tablet screen, something he flipped off as soon as she walked in.

Subtle.

“Mom, is there lunch yet?” Lila asked as Nat headed for the kettle. She bumped James’ hip with hers and he caught the end of her braid and gave it a tug. Then grinned at her.

“There will be in a few minutes. You want to help me make it?” Laura’s focus was on Lila, but Nat didn’t miss the quick grin she hid at her and James.

“Depends,” Lila said cagily enough. “What are we making?”

Laura laughed. “You sound like your dad.”

“Cause we don’t want to make things we don’t like to eat.”

“Fair enough.”

James pressed a kiss to the spot behind Nat’s ear, and then he took in a deep breath before he
chuckled. “Have fun?”

“You know,” she murmured. “I did. Enjoying your plotting?”

“Someone has to take over the world,” he teased, and she grinned. Then pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“Want help?”

“You’re the first person I call,” he told her. “Promise. Tea?”

“Yes please,” she said and he gave her hip a squeeze before he tucked the tablet away on another counter—out of her reach—then got the electric kettle filled and started it brewing.

Laura and Lila decided on roast beef sandwiches, because there was plenty of fresh sliced roast beef, two types of cheeses, and three different kinds of bread. Nat and James helped, forming an assembly line with Laura supervising. Lila would run the sandwiches and chips out to each person as they were assembled. Steve and Sam had wandered back out to the common room and were watching Tony, Rhodey, Coop, and Peter with interest as they constructed their Death Star and Tony worked on a small anti-grav engine to get it up and rotating.

Because really, what else did you do but power up Lego toys?

Once the sandwiches were done, Nat munched on hers with the tea James fixed and he settled in next to her as Laura eyed her. “So…what did you want to know how to make?”

“Peter has a turkey he wants to fix for his aunt,” she filled Laura in on the details. “I may have made one at some point…” This time she glanced at James, and he nodded once. So may have was definitely had. “But I have no idea if it was any good and I need some tips so I can guide him.”

“How big is it?”

“About nine pounds.”

“Is it defrosted?”

“It was on the way when we left. It’s been in water since yesterday.”

Laura tapped her lip. “Okay, and I’m assuming he wants to do this all himself with just you supervising and being on hand for support?”

“Pretty much. His aunt’s his only family. She means the world to him, so he really wants to do this for her.” Having been an orphan, she could appreciate the idea of making much of the one person who put you ahead of everyone else.

All kids deserved that.

James squeezed her hip gently.

“Okay… well, let me give you the quick and dirty way to do it. It’s not perfect, but it usually makes a decent turkey that won’t be dry as a bone. You want me to write it down or just give you the rundown?” Laura knew her well enough to know, she had a good memory.

“Auntie Nat,” Lila said, staring at her with a stack of plates in hand. “I thought you were having Thanksgiving with us.”
“I am,” she told her. “Right here. I’m going to get so stuffed from all the food, you’ll have to roll me to the sofa.”

She took the plates from her as Lila giggled, but despite the laughter, she wasn’t mollified. “Then why do you have to know how to make a turkey?”

“Because I’m going to help someone else. And your mom is one of the best cooks I know.”

Laura hid a smile as Lila eyed her then Nat.

“Well, why doesn’t this other person come here? If you have to go help them, then you’re going to have to leave and you were supposed to spend this week with me.” Reproach filled those eyes, and Nat sighed.

When Laura would have said something, Nat shook her head. “You know what,” Nat began. “Laura, do you and James mind putting together that list for me while I go talk to Lila?”

“G’ahead Doll, I’ll remember what she says and we’ll write it down.”

“Lila,” Laura said. “You behave. Auntie Nat’s not just here for only you. We’re all here together.”

“I know, but she’s my Auntie Nat.”

James bit back a smile, and Nat held out her hand. “Come on. I need to go check out my room, anyway. You can come help me and we can talk, okay?”

Hand clasped in hers, she led her out of the kitchen and at Clint’s raised brows, she shook her head. No, this was a conversation for her and Lila.

Steve lifted his chin at her, then smiled and Sam glanced between them and chuckled. They’d just turned into the residence hallway when Rhodey said, “Yeah, arming the turrets is the same as lasers and missiles.”

“But it’s just pressurized air—and spitballs,” Tony argued.

Yeah, she’d let the guys handle that one.

It was almost surreal walking down the hall. She passed Rhodey’s room, which was at the front of the hall, then Wanda’s room, and Vision’s which were next in line going back and forth across the hall. Sam’s was just passed there, with Steve’s door on her left, and Tony’s was at the very end in a master suite he never used, but hers was sandwiched right between the two.

The suites themselves were large, with little sitting rooms, bedrooms and other individualized amenities. Lila skipped beside her, but it had been a long time since she walked through her. And for a while there, she hadn’t expected to ever re-enter the Compound.

At the door, she pressed her palm against the security reader and the door unlocked.

“Are you moving, Auntie Nat?” Lila asked as she bounced in. There were boxes lined up, most of the art was back on the walls—though they had a fresh coat of paint. The divots she’d left with a throwing knife were missing, as was the spot where Sam had bounced Steve’s shield once.

That had been a funny night.

The carpet was new, and she could almost smell the fresh carpet glue. So they’d probably torn this place apart like her floor at the Tower. But Tony had it all cleaned up. The painting she’d asked
about, the Simpson, sat propped next to the fireplace.

There were a pair of blades sitting neatly in their frame. Gifts from Tony that she enjoyed, but she’d framed them rather than lose them in a fight.

She didn’t always manage to get her knives back.

“No, I’m not. But I was gone for a while, so some of the stuff had to be stored.”

“Oh.”

Nat crossed over and sank down on the new sofa. It was a slightly different shade of gray than one she’d had, but it was just as soft and comfortable. “C’mere.”

Lila bounced up onto the sofa and looked at her expectantly. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, but I think we need to talk about the fact I was gone for so long, and now you’re worried I’m going to disappear again.”

“I’m not,” Lila lied, ducking her head and pulling her feet up until she sat cross-legged. “But…you said you’d sing to us every night, and that we’d get to hang out and play.”

“I did. And I know I wasn’t here last night, but I’ll sing you a song right now if that’s all you want.”

Lila stole a look up at her, and there was the same look in those eyes Clint had when he didn’t want to talk about something he really needed to talk about.

“Or we can talk about how me being gone made you feel, and you can let out being mad at me, because keeping it all in here,” she told her, tapping her chest. “It’s not so good for you.”

Bottling stuff up wasn’t good for anyone. She’d bottled life after life, and when those bottles cracked open…sometimes really ugly stuff got out.

“I’m not mad at you Auntie Nat.” Another lie. Lila shifted.

“Not even a little bit?”

“No, you had to save people. It’s what you do. And sometimes…looking after other people means you can’t look after us.”

“I’m always looking after you,” she promised her. “Even when I can’t be there.”

“But that’s not the same,” Lila told her solemnly.

“No, but it does mean I always care,” she said, then she smoothed some of the hair away from Lila’s face. “Even if you can’t see me. Maybe especially when you can’t see me, because I know I’m always thinking about you and keeping you safe. You may not know it, but I do.”

“I know you say that,” Lila said slowly. “What I don’t understand is why other people are more important than me or Mom or Coop or even Nate.”

And this wasn’t just about Auntie Nat.

“Other people aren’t more important,” she began, then held up a finger when Lila would have protested. “But there are different ways we care about people. You’re safe at the farm, right?
Daddy has done everything he can to make it a safe place for you, and you can play outside, and go to school, and be with your mom and your friends, and you’re not afraid?”

“No, I’m never afraid. I know if anything bad happened, I know what to do, and I know you and Daddy and Mommy would take care of it.”

She smiled. “Yes we would…but Lila, not everyone has a me or a daddy or a mommy. Sometimes they just have themselves.”

Natasha had no one. No one who came to save her. No one who protected her from the bad things.

Well, she’d had no one except James…and they’d taken even that away from her. Then she’d had to wait years before she found someone else willing to take that risk. His daughter was sitting right in front of her wearing a troubled, but thoughtful expression.

“Who saves them if they don’t have anyone?”

“The Avengers,” she told her. “The police. The fire department. The people who put other people’s lives ahead of their own. There are some things you need Mommy to fix. Some things you need Daddy to fix. Sometimes, you and Coop can do it on your own.”

“Sometimes we need you.”

They had never needed her in that way, not really. If she had her way, they never would. But she didn’t correct her. “Sometimes you need your teachers or the police or the fire department, or a big group of friends, and sometimes it’s the Avengers. And it’s not just about us. We’ll always look after and protect you, but we have to protect the people who don’t have anyone, too.”

“Does Peter not have anyone?”

“He has an aunt.”

“Like you?” Lila’s eyes brightened.

“Sure,” she said. “Yes, like me. And she’s all he has.”

“But he has you now, and Uncle Tony, and Uncle Steve and Uncle Bucky.”

Uncle Bucky? Nat’s smile grew. Okay, she rather liked that. It was sweet. “He does. But he’s just one person, there are a lot of others out there who don’t have someone who can fight the fights we fight.”

“Even though when you fight them it means you can’t come home?”

She sighed and wrapped an arm around Lila. The little girl burrowed against her with absolute trust. “Yes, even when we can’t come home. It doesn’t mean we care about them more, Lila. It means we care. It means we have to do something to help.”

“I don’t like missing you,” Lila admitted.

“I don’t like missing you either,” she told her, then kissed the top of her head. “I like playing games, and coloring, and watching movies, and running out to chase butterflies…” A most ridiculous waste of time and Nat adored it. Lila got to be the little girl Nat had never been able to…She got to be the little girl Nat hadn’t gotten to raise, too.

Her heart squeezed.
“So I guess you have to help other people—even if it means we can’t hang out when you do.”

There was an important distinction here, though. “Lila, sweetie, I do have to help, but it’s more than that. I want to help. I want to make things better for other people. I want to make it so they have the same chances you do.”

Lila frowned, then looked up at her. “I wish you didn’t have to. I wish… I wish Daddy didn’t have to. That feels selfish.”

“It’s okay to be selfish, sweetie—as long as you understand, and I promise you, I’m telling you the truth—you are one of the most important people in the world to me. You matter.”

“Auntie Nat?” The strain on her face as she chewed on whatever question she held inside.

“I’m right here,” she told her, and Lila sighed.

“It’s okay if you have to help other people. Just…can you not disappear again? I don’t like it when they say bad things about you and I don’t like it when I can’t talk to you.” Then she added in a quieter voice, “And I don’t like it when Daddy has to be gone, too.”

“I will do my very best,” she said. “I don’t like being gone either.”

“Do you think Daddy does?” The soft question was almost inaudible and Nat closed her eyes and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“I know he doesn’t, Lila. I know he wants to be there. Always.”

“You promise?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Your Daddy loves you. He loves all of you.”

“Even Mommy?”

“Definitely.” She told her. No doubt in her mind. “It hurts him when he can’t be there.”

“But he still went… even when Mommy told him if he did he shouldn’t come back.”

“I know he did… but you know, your daddy went because he believed he was needed and he was needed. I wouldn’t have made it the last few months without him.”

Lila leaned away abruptly and stared at her. “Daddy went to save you?”

“Not at first. He was trying to save a lot of people,” she told her, then combed her fingers through Lila’s hair, gathering it carefully, and Lila turned, twisting to sit with her back to her so Nat could braid it. They’d done this a hundred times. “But your daddy knew I was in trouble, and he came to get me even when I told him he shouldn’t.”

“Cause you needed his help.” Pride infused Lila’s voice, and Nat smiled.

“Yeah, I did. But we don’t tell him that, because he gets a big head.”

Lila giggled. “I missed you, Auntie Nat.”

“I missed you, too.”

They sat there for a few more minutes, and she got Lila’s hair braided beautifully and tied off, then
the knock at the door had Lila bouncing over to answer it. “Hi Daddy,” she grinned up at him.

“Hey Bug, your mother is looking for you. She said something about ice cream… and starting the pies.”

“Oh!” Lila swung around to look at Nat. “I gotta go. I’ll see you later?”

“Of course you will,” she told her.

“And it’s okay to help Peter, Auntie Nat. If you have to call me to sing to me on the phone, that’s okay too.” She blew her a kiss, and then raced out of the door and down the hall.

Clint stood there for a long moment watching her go, then he looked back at Nat. She patted the sofa next to her, and he shut the door as he shuffle limped over to the sofa and then sat down next to her. And just like his daughter, leaned his head against her shoulder.

“How much did you hear?” she asked, combing her fingers through his hair, gently scraping his scalp with her nails.

“Pretty much all of it…wasn’t going to listen and then…”

“Yeah,” she said, understanding. “She misses you.”

“I miss them, too.”

“Then why are you in here leaning on my shoulder instead of out there with them?”

He rolled his eyes. “Because I miss my best friend, too. You keep disappearing with your boys.”

Chuckling, she rubbed his arm. “You know, I’m still your best friend, even if I’m with Steve and James.”

“I know,” he sounded remarkably like Lila in that moment. “But I still don’t like it.”

There was a beat. Then they were both laughing, and she hugged him. Aware of the tightness of his arms as he held on, and the fact that a couple of those tears on his face weren’t just from laughing, she embraced him with the same fierceness.

She was his best friend, and that was what she was here for.
Peter was almost sorry they had to leave the Compound. Mr. Stark had actually gotten the generator working to hover the Death Star, while he, Coop, and Rhodey had most of it assembled. There were still some parts to finish but they would work on it the following day while waiting for food. Or so Mr. Stark said.

The whole day had been fun. Better fun than he’d expected when he left school the day before. Then Aunt May would be tied up at the hospital for the next couple of days, Natasha was still near death, and Peter’s friends were out of town or busy.

Sprawling in the seat, Peter stared up at the ceiling. He’d gotten to attend an actual Avengers meeting, and while they ribbed him and called him Kid, no one had treated him like a child. Natasha’s hot cocoa was amazing, the snowball fight had been a blast, though next time—maybe tomorrow—he wanted to go up against Bucky and Steve. He had to hold back against the kids and Clint, not that he minded, but he’d gotten a look at Wanda going all out against Steve and that looked fun.

Maybe he and Wanda could team up against Bucky and Steve. Though he wasn’t sure where that would leave Nat, she’d probably team up with Clint, and she was sneaky. She could get all of them.

“Did you have a good time, Peter?” Steve was sitting opposite him, while Bucky had claimed the co-pilot’s seat next to Natasha and Mr. Stark sat farther down the same bench as Peter checking his plans against something on a tablet.

“It was awesome,” he said without hesitation. “I really didn’t think the Avengers played that much, but you’re all cool.”

Steve chuckled. “It was good to have everyone together.”

“It was, and I was thinking—if we do another snowball fight tomorrow, I wanna team up with Wanda and take on you and Bucky.”

“Oh ho, those are fighting words, pal,” Bucky called over his shoulder.
Natasha laughed. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

“Don’t encourage him, Red,” Mr. Stark said without looking up from the tablet. “Next thing you know, we’ll be having foot races.”

Peter grinned when Steve laughed. “I don’t think he needs to race us on foot,” Steve countered. “Not when he can swing.”

It was late afternoon, and the city looked like something out of a snow globe. It was still snowing—it had been at the Compound as well—but it was just falling steadily rather than blowing sideways. He sent a message to May to let her know he was back at the Tower and wanted to make sure she was doing all right. It might take her time to answer. She’d sent a couple of messages telling him she was fine, the hospital wasn’t overwhelmed so far, and they were all crossing their fingers because they hadn’t had any issues with the power.

Mr. Stark assured him, if they did, he’d take care of it. Peter believed him. Natasha had gotten recipes and instructions from Mrs. Barton, and she’d also disappeared for a little while with Mr. Barton. He seemed a little subdued when they came back and Natasha had perched on a chair next to Steve to watch them work on the Death Star for a bit before Lila asked for a story, then Natasha and Wanda had taken turns telling her different tales.

Peter had caught some of them. They sounded fun. But he didn’t think he could get away with asking for her to tell him some stories too. He was fifteen, not five.

Still…

“When we get back,” Natasha said over her shoulder. “We’ll get started on prepping the turkey. It’s going to take a few hours to cook.”

“Should we order in?” Mr. Stark asked. “You didn’t eat much today, Red.”

The fact he pointed the fact out made Peter sit up. and he didn’t miss Steve’s sharp frown in Mr. Stark’s direction.

“She had a sandwich at lunch,” Bucky said smoothly. “Just like the rest of us.”

“Well, I had three,” Peter volunteered. He was pretty sure both Steve and Bucky had more than one. “I could definitely eat more.” Now that Mr. Stark brought up food, his stomach began to remind him it had been a few hours since they’d had sandwiches.

“What would you like to eat, Peter?” Natasha asked, but she didn’t comment on Mr. Stark’s observation. “We’re fifteen minutes out, so if we order now—we might see it this evening…though not sure we want to make some poor kid do delivery in this weather.”

“I can go get it,” Steve volunteered, and he raised his eyebrows at Peter. Mr. Stark gave him a look like pick something, and Peter frowned. Then Mr. Stark nodded toward the pilot’s seat, and Steve nodded.

Oh.

They wanted him to pick so Natasha would eat, too? But what if he picked something Natasha didn’t like?

“Um…” She was Russian, and she’d eaten pizza with him, and Chinese. “Wait…Aunt May and I had these little kabob things when we were in Brighton Beach a couple of years ago—they had a
funny name but those were good.”

“Why were you Brighton Beach, Peter?” Natasha sounded like she was frowning.

“Aunt May didn’t want to go all the way to Coney Island, and she likes some of the shops there.”

“What is wrong with Brighton Beach?” Bucky asked, and he turned his head to study to Natasha.

“You could call it Little Odessa, zvezda moya. Just surprised me.”

“Huh… shashlyk?” Bucky twisted the seat to look back at him. “Skewered lamb with onions and peppers and some lemon to squeeze on them?”

“I think it was steak,” Peter said. “But the rest sounds right. Anyway, that was good. Brighton Beach is probably too far, though right?”

“East Village has a Ukrainian area—would that be close enough, Nat?” Steve gave him a small thumbs up and Peter grinned.

“Yes, they have a couple of places there that make passable shashlyk. They will do it with most kinds of meat, so you can choose whatever you want.”

“Hey Buck, feel like a run to the East Village?”

Bucky grinned. “We can do that. Doll, you want lamb or steak? Or something else?”

Natasha didn’t answer immediately, then said… “If they have lamb, I’d prefer that and jacket potatoes—the right way with a salad.”

“Sour cream or sunflower oil?” Bucky asked, and Peter grimaced. He wasn’t the only one; even Mr. Stark made a face.

“Either is fine,” Natasha laughed. “Now pick whatever the rest of you want, I can eat anything. You don’t have to eat Russian for me.”

“I’ll take two beef, and a lamb…and maybe a chicken,” Peter said, then glanced at Mr. Stark, “If that’s okay, I know it’s a lot.”

He waved airily. “I’m getting used to the huge food budget. Get what you want…I’ll try a lamb and a chicken. There are a couple of places there that deliver if you two don’t want to go out.”

“I’m fine with going to get it. Gives Peter and Nat time to work on their turkey, and we can pick up anything else we need for tomorrow,” Steve said settling the argument. As soon as Natasha touched down on the landing deck, they split up with Steve and Bucky leaving to get food. Each man gave Natasha a kiss before they headed for the elevator, and Peter directed his attention elsewhere.

He caught Mr. Stark’s sympathetic look, then Natasha turned to face them. “Okay, I’m going to go get into comfy clothes. I think we’ll cook on my floor, if you’re okay with that Peter. I’ve got all the dishes and Friday said Tony restocked everything else before we got back.”

“That I did Red…that I did.”

“Thank you. Can you bring the food up Peter? I can start setting it up while you get changed.”

“Absolutely…” After his disaster in the kitchen the day before, he found himself strangely looking
forward to the cooking. “You coming Mr. Stark?”

“You know, Pete…why don’t you call me Tony? It’s getting a little weird that you’re on a first name basis with everyone except me.” Which didn’t really answer the question. Natasha smiled at Tony—yeah that felt weird—and he grinned at her.

Adults were also more than a little peculiar sometimes. “If you want me to, Mr—Tony.” It even twisted his tongue to try and say it. He was Mr. Stark. But he’d try. “Are you going to join us?”

“If you want…” He glanced at Natasha though, as if to check if it were all right with her.

“More the merrier. Go get changed though—and take a shower. Or you’ll be up all night.” She crooked her finger at Peter. “Let’s go malen’kiy pauk. We have work to do.”

“Evening showers don’t make me sleepy, Red.”

“Sure they don’t,” she answered as she slipped into the elevator. It stopped at Steve’s floor first to let her out. “I’ll see you in a couple of minutes.”

Fifteen minutes later, Peter walked out of a different bedroom on Natasha’s floor. He hadn’t even realized it was there until Natasha directed him to a secondary suite. It had its own little sitting area, a stack of video games, and two more bedrooms. He’d taken her advice to Mr. Stark—Tony, and showered before he changed into clean sweats and a shirt that said *You matter unless you multiply yourself by the speed of light squared… then you energy.*

Natasha laughed when she saw the shirt. She’d let out her braid, and he thought she’d showered too, because her hair was damp. Dressed in a dark green tank top and black and white striped hoodie, half zipped up. She also had on dark leggings, and thick socks that came halfway up her calves.

“You cold?”

“A little, but it’ll warm up here soon,” she said directing him to the counter. “We need to unwrap the turkey, and take out the innards.”

“It has innards?” Oh man. He was now doubly glad he blew the first turkey.

“Yeah, I’ll show you,” she said, ruffling his hair. “Did you really have fun today?”

“I did,” he told her. “Told Aunt May that I had a blast, she was glad. She’s doing okay, too. Think we’ll have time tomorrow for me to take this up and eat with her before we go to the Compound?”

“We’ll make time,” Natasha assured him as she moved to pull out pans, and dishes. She had his boxes of stuffing lining the counter, along with the vegetables. “Does she have a favorite kind of pie?”

“Um… cherry.” Then heat scorched his face as he got the last of the plastic off the turkey. The legs were all tied together, and Natasha motioned to them.

“Go ahead and take off the bondage gear, then you’ll find the innards literally inside it. They’re all packaged up so you can just pull them out. And cherry, huh?” She went to the pantry and studied in the interior. “Friday…are there any canned cherries in the building, somewhere? Or fresh, though I doubt we have fresh.”

“There are two cans of cherries in the common room kitchen pantry, Ms. Romanoff. They are
sixteen ounces each, and were purchased less than a year ago. So they will not be expired.”

“That’ll work. Is it regular cherry, Peter or black cherry?”

“You don’t have to make a pie, too,” he protested, but his stomach rumbled and he had to swallow some spit. Cherry pie happened to be his favorite, too. “But regular cherry is perfect.”

“I have a feeling, I need to make at least two. And it’s no problem,” she said. “I’m going to run up and get the cherry filling. You take a couple of paper towels and dab the exterior of the turkey, and the inside. Make sure you don’t leave any paper towels sticking to it, we just want to clean it up a bit. And I’ll be right back.”

Natasha cooked like Aunt May did, conversationally and telling him what to do with pretty explicit instructions. His phone dinged and he paused mid pat to check it.

Liz: Hey Peter, didn’t want you to think I forgot. We’re going to see my mom’s sister first thing Friday and I won’t be back until Sunday. Raincheck on doing something?

Disappointment vied with excitement. He’d wanted to do something with her, sure, he’d asked. The fact she had to go out of town was a great excuse, and it looked like he might be busy with the Avengers and hopefully Aunt May would get some off time to spend with him.

So, the fact she couldn’t make it was disappointing. But she asked for a raincheck, so she did want to do something…

Debating the best way to respond to the message, he started and stopped typing several times. Each time he erased the sentence. The elevator dinged and Natasha was back with the cans of cherry filling, along with Mr. Sta—Tony.

“We did put coffee on your floor right, Red?” He had indeed showered, shaved, and changed into a Led Zeppelin t-shirt and black sweats.

“You did the shopping,” she retorted, setting the cans down as Peter chewed his lip and considered just saying, cool, he’d see her on Monday. But was that enough? Too much? She gave him good news and bad news in the same text.

“Correction, Friday did the shopping…and yes she did. You want coffee or tea? Or can I bribe you into making more hot cocoa?”

“Depends on what you plan to bribe me with,” Natasha laughed, then moved over to the turkey and carefully peeled off the paper towel Peter had left stuck to the top of it. “Everything all right Peter?”

“It’s…if someone…I mean…if a girl gives…a friend, not a girlfriend…just a friend, who could be a girlfriend…maybe…” The words were twisting and tripping out as he debated the message then looked up to find Tony and Natasha studying him.

“If a girl…” Natasha prompted.

“I mean…a friend…”

“We got that, Pete,” Tony told him as he stood there holding the electric kettle. “What about her?”

“If she…let’s say I asked her if she’d like to do something this weekend, you know—get out of the house because her dad works long hours and sometimes sleeps during the day and Aunt May does
that and she’s a great girl—Liz, I mean, not Aunt May. I mean Aunt May is great.”

“Okay, so Liz is great and her dad works long hours.” Tony set the kettle onto the base and flicked it on.

“Exactly. She’s—really great. Smart. Pretty. Funny. Anyway…um…I asked her, and said she could text me.”

“And I take it she’s texted you?” Natasha asked gently as she lifted the turkey and set it into a huge roasting pan.

“She did.” He held up the text to show them.

“Got it,” Tony said, and his face was sober without a trace of a teasing smile. “Trying to figure out how to answer it?”

“Yeah. How did you know?” Peter blinked.

“Because contrary to popular opinion, I wasn’t hatched and once upon a time I was a fifteen year old boy.” He glanced at Natasha and she raised her hands.

“I was never a fifteen year old boy.”

That actually made Peter laugh. “I’m being ridiculous, I get that. But—she told me we can’t get together this weekend and that kind of sucks.”

“But she wants a raincheck,” Tony pointed out. “And that’s kind of cool.”

“It is cool,” he said, so relieved. Tony got it. Natasha turned away, her lips twitching, but Peter didn’t mind. “She’s—really nice.”

“You really like her,” Natasha commented and it wasn’t a question.

“Yeah,” he answered. “So what do I say? I mean I don’t want her to feel bad, but I don’t want to let her think I don’t care if she can’t make it, and at the same time, I want to acknowledge the raincheck…should I just ask her out for another day?”

Tony and Natasha glanced at each other and he said, “Okay Red, you’re the girl. What would work on you?”

She snorted. “Be honest. You’re sorry you can’t see her, but you get it. You’ll see her Monday, and don’t ask her out via text. Unless…have you been on any dates with her yet?”

“Oh, Red’s got a point,” Tony pivoted. “Women appreciate effort. Texting isn’t an effort—if you’ve been out that’s different though.”

“Why?” Peter asked, glancing back and forth as he typed in the first part of Natasha’s suggestion.

“Because if you have a relationship, you have that person’s voice in your head, you can hear their teasing notes and their inflections. You know enough to hear them. If you don’t, then it leaves everything open to interpretation.” Natasha’s explanation made a lot of sense.

“Oh, so…I’m sorry I don’t get to see her over the weekend, but I get it—family comes first. We’ll catch up on Monday and I hope she has a good holiday?”

“Perfect,” Tony told him and Peter typed it in and hit send. The relief made him lean against the
“Thank you,” he told them. “Both of you.”

“You’re welcome, Peter. Now, put the phone down and wash your—”

His phone buzzed again.

**Liz:** *You too, Peter. Maybe next weekend?*

Something in his expression must have given him away because Tony slid next to him and glanced at the screen. “Well, look at that.”

“She asked me!” Did that break the rules they’d just established?

“Well don’t leave her hanging, Pete…” Tony nudged him.

Natasha had pulled out honey, and was in the process of peeling an orange. “Give him a minute, Tony. But if you do answer more than sure, you’d like that, I would suggest giving her some options to choose from.”

“Bring her to the holiday party,” Tony said, snapping his fingers.

“What?” Peter went hot then cold in the same minute and he stared at Tony. “Party?”

“I have an annual bash every year, you’re invited, Kid. Bring your girl. I’ll even send a car to pick you both up, you can escort her in style…”


“Um… will there be dancing?” Peter gnawed his lower lip. Could he really take Liz to a Tony Stark party, would she like that? Those were big-ticket events, and he wasn’t even sure he wanted to go. It was Tony, but still…

“Dancing. Live band. Christmas tree. Food. Drinks. You name it, it will be there. I know how to throw a party. She’ll love it.”

That sounded overwhelming and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe that’s too much? And I don’t really dance Mr.—Tony.”

“Red can teach you,” Tony said without missing a beat. “Can’t you Red?”

She sighed. “I have no problems teaching you to dance, Peter, but you don’t have to take her to the party if you don’t want to. That might be a lot for a first date.”

Ugh. First date.

Peter slumped back against the counter. He just wanted to spend some time with Liz, maybe hang out and go to a movie. A fancy dress party… “Would I have to wear a suit?” Then he looked at Natasha. “Will you be there?”

She smiled, and clapped a hand over Tony’s mouth before he could say anything more. “I’m sure a nice button down and a jacket will do just fine, and we can help with that if you need it. Yes, I’ll be there if you want me to be. Tony already told me I had to go.”

“Did you not want to?” Because he didn’t want her to have to do anything like that. Was it getting
really hot in here?

“Peter,” Natasha said, releasing Tony and gliding over to him. “Peter look at me.”

He snapped his gaze up, and she put a hand on his chest, and then took his and put it against hers.

“Breathe Peter. It’s going to be fine. Just breathe with me. Inhale slowly,” she took a deep breath, and he mirrored it, then when she released it, he exhaled. “Perfect, just breathe. In through the nose and out through the mouth.”

The flush of heat eased off and his heart stopped hammering so hard he could hear it in his ears.

“It’s okay, Kid,” Tony told him quietly. “Whatever you want to do with her.”

“I can—I can ask about the party, Mr.—Tony.” He had to get used to that. “I just…I’ve never been on a date before. And I really like this girl.”

The slow, steady beat of Natasha’s heart calmed him more, and she kept breathing with him.

Finally, he relaxed a little and said, “I’m okay.”

“Yes?”

He nodded, and she let go of his hand so he could lower it, then lifted a hand to his cheek.

“Good. What do you want to do?”

“I want to ask her to the party,” he said slowly, then licked his lips. “I mean she’ll probably say no, but I want to ask. And if she doesn’t…you can teach me to dance before then?”

“I can,” she assured him. “We’ll do some of the easy stuff, so you’re comfortable.” She moved away and washed her hands.

“Okay…I can do this.” He lifted the phone and typed in Next week sounds great. I’ve been invited to Mr. Stark’s annual Christmas party. Want to come with?

There. He’d done it. He read the message again. Maybe he should have said more. But no, he sounded enthusiastic right? They said don’t ask her out on texting, but she asked him first so that changed things. Tony was pouring coffee and Natasha was stuffing two whole peeled oranges into the turkey.

Right. He was supposed to be making turkey.

But he couldn’t take his gaze off the message.

The three little dots seemed to last forever.

Tony murmured low to Natasha, but Peter couldn’t miss it. “Should we do something else?”

“He’s fine…could you get out the mint tea…and maybe make one for Peter, too. It will be soothing.”

“Got it,” he said, and Peter could almost feel the weight of his glance, but Peter still couldn’t look away from the screen. It was a yes or no question—how hard was it to answer? Sweat began to bead along the back of his neck.
“Pass me the honey,” Natasha asked, and Peter turned to try and look for it, but Tony already had it and he passed it over. Honey and oranges on turkey, sounded—neat. Wait… Peter glanced over as Natasha added honey to the inside of the turkey and then began to paint it along the outside.

“I’m sorry,” he said abruptly.

“For what?” She raised her brows.

“I’m supposed to be doing this…and I’m just…”

“Handling an important matter,” Natasha finished for him. “And I plan to explain exactly what I did. You want to help me make the pie crusts instead?”

“We’re having pie?” Tony asked before sipping his coffee.

“For Aunt May—she likes cherry pie. It’s her favorite.” His mood brightened. May would be so surprised. He couldn’t wait. “And yes, I would…if you give me just one more…”

The phone buzzed and he held his breath before looking at the screen.

Liz: My dad said he’d think about it. I’ll ask him again at the end of the weekend. But I would like to go. Thank you for asking me.

“Yes!” Peter leapt up in the air.

“I’m going to guess it was a positive response,” Tony said drily.

“Very astute of you, now leave him alone. Peter wash your hands, and let’s go over what we’re doing with the turkey.”

He was in a kind of blissed-out state. Natasha was alive and she was back. He’d spent the day with the Avengers. It was awesome. He was making a turkey for Aunt May so they could have Thanksgiving dinner together at the hospital. It would help him show her how important she was to him. Liz said yes to going out with him. Even if her dad ultimately said no, Liz wanted to go.

Even aware of the looks Tony was giving him and the fact Tony was in the kitchen helping Peter and Natasha to make the dinner for May, he couldn’t shake the excitement. Natasha told him how long the turkey needed to be in the oven. The honey and oranges would keep the turkey moist, and give it excellent flavor. Laura, Natasha mentioned, also insisted it would help the meat fall off the bones.

It made him hungry just thinking about it. They’d finally slid it into the oven, and Natasha pulled out the flour to start making piecrusts and he couldn’t believe it—she was making it from scratch.

“You know Red, they have ready-made crusts,” Tony pointed out helpfully.

“And they have caterers who cook as well, your point?” It was like she dared him to tell her she was wrong. But Tony only raised his hands in surrender. They were funny together.

In a weird way, it would be neat if they were dating. Then he could hang out with both of them all the time. Well, when they weren’t busy, and he wasn’t… Of course, Natasha was dating… Steve? Or maybe Bucky?

The more he thought about it, the more it made his head hurt a little. So he focused on rolling out the piecrust as she showed him what to do. They had just gotten it layered into the pie dishes when
the elevator opened. The smell of the food they brought with them had his stomach growling all over again.

“Go eat,” she told him. “I’ll finish this up.”

“But you’ve done most of it.” Peter didn’t want her having to do it all.

“I don’t mind,” she told him. “It was your idea, and you’re still taking it to her and you put the turkey in, you can put the pies in when it’s time, too.”

Tony moved out of the kitchen where he’d been hanging out when Steve and Bucky carried the food in. She directed them toward the bar as she rolled out another crust. The shashlyk kabobs were good, and Peter settled on the floor of Natasha’s living room to eat the table. She was the last to join them, but Bucky had a plate for her and she settled on the sofa right between him and Steve.

“Is it bad out there?” Tony asked. “Friday’s monitoring the power grid. So far no fluctuations.” It was kind of cool how right on top of things he was. Who else worried about the power grid for the whole city?

“I’ve seen worse,” Bucky answered, but his gaze was on Natasha’s plate until she picked up one of the kabobs and took a bite. The fried potato jackets were almost as good at the kabobs, and she had three on her plate. Peter had finished most of his. “They’ve officially closed the subways though, and there’s limited traffic out there.”

“Trucks are still plowing,” Steve added. “But we didn’t have any trouble getting down there. If this keeps up, tomorrow may be a challenge.”

“Think I can still get out to Queens to take May her dinner?” It would bum him out if they’d done all of this and then she still didn’t get to eat it.

“I’ll fly you myself if we have to,” Natasha assured him. “Don’t worry.” She tilted her head back to look toward the clock on the far wall. “The turkey has another couple of hours, then we’ll check it, and once it’s ready, we can set it aside and bake the pies. The sides are all going to be much quicker, and I’ve got some containers around here that we can use to transport it.”

“T’ve got something if you don’t,” Tony offered. “Right Friday?”

“Of course, Boss. We have a little bit of everything here. Even items you’d never use in a million years.”

Natasha laughed. “Friday’s getting wise to you.”

“Yeah, not sure if I’m a fan or not yet.” But Tony didn’t sound remotely uncertain. The conversation turned to the following day’s plans, and when Natasha caught Peter staring at the last two kabobs and two potato jackets on her plate, she raised a brow.

“Sorry,” he admitted. “I’m still a little hungry…”

She leaned forward and extended the plate across the coffee table. “I’m full. Go ahead.”

“You sure?” He did not want to find Steve, Bucky, or Tony frowning at him after the weirdness about food on the quinjet.

“Very sure. Don’t worry about them,” she told him, and he took the plate before stealing a look at Steve who nodded without any recrimination. His and Bucky’s plates were both empty, but Tony
still had a kabob on his.

“Yeah, no,” Tony told him, moving his plate away. “You got Red’s, you don’t get mine.”

That generated more laughter.

“You going to be down here a while, Doll?” Bucky asked.

“Probably until the pies are done and we’ve got everything ready. I shouldn’t be that late. Going somewhere?” Natasha’s attention was on Bucky.

“Yeah, we were talking about Star Trek on the way to get the food and Steve said he’d watch that first season with me to get me caught up. Unless you wanted to watch it again…”

“No, go watch it. It’s good…I mean I’ve seen it a dozen times, so I won’t be lost if you want to ask me questions.”

“Sounds good,” Bucky said, then gave her a kiss that had Peter staring at his food, and then Steve kissed her, too.

Yeah, he really didn’t get that and he really wasn’t sure he could ask that question. He stole a look at Tony who just waved him off and mouthed later. Oh. Good.

Maybe Tony would tell him what was going on.

Not that it was any of Peter’s business.

“You hanging out, Tony?” Steve asked as he and Bucky cleaned up the debris from dinner.

Tony shrugged. “Might head to the workshop in a few. Got some stuff to keep me busy until morning.”

That earned him a frown from Natasha, and Peter resumed contemplating his food. Nothing to see there, nothing to listen to.

“What time are we heading out to the Compound?” Bucky asked, standing behind the sofa, and Natasha leaned back to look up at him.

“Laura said dinner would be at two. But we’ll go after Peter has dinner with his aunt which is at noon, right?” She glanced at him.

“Maybe eleven. I’ll check in with her in the morning to see when she has time in her shift.”

“Sounds good,” Bucky said, and bent down to give her another kiss before he murmured something in her ear. Her grin grew and she laughed.

“I think that can be arranged, zvezda moya.”


“Night, Capm Bucky.” Tony stretched his legs out in front of him and then Steve caught Natasha’s hand as he walked past, giving it a squeeze, then the other two were gone.

Natasha shifted over to sit in the corner spot where Steve had been. “Still hungry, Peter?”

He’d finished the rest of her food, and he considered the question. “I think I’m good. But if there
was anymore…” When he glanced at Tony, the other man grumbled and held out his plate. Peter didn’t quite chortle, but he did grin. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony waved him off then pulled up his phone and checked something on it.

“Problems?” Natasha asked lightly.

“No, just—trying to decide what I want to do. I still have upgrades on Falcon’s wings to do and I’ve been working on some stuff for SI, but none of it is really talking to me.”

“I don’t mind if you hang out,” Peter told him. “I mean, Steve and Bucky could have watched Star Trek here, too.”

“James needed a break,” Natasha told him, propping her head on her hand. “He was around a lot of people today, but he just wanted to go and be quiet.”

“Oh,” Peter said. “Did you want to go, too?”

“I’m fine, malen’kiy pauk. I told you I’d help you with dinner and the boys are fine without me for a few hours.”

He couldn’t help it, he grinned. “Cool. Maybe we should watch a movie?” He looked at Tony. “You could pick it tonight, since I got to pick last night.”

Tony quirked a brow at Natasha. “You want to watch a movie, Red?”

“I don’t mind,” she told him. “I am avoiding looking at my phone or my email so this is another good excuse.”

He laughed. “You never duck work.”

“I’ve never taken several weeks off before either. I think I liked it.” She picked up her mug, and stood. “How about I make you cocoa and you pick out a movie.”

“Any requests?” Tony called, giving Peter a gleeful look when Natasha said cocoa. Not that Peter could argue now, that hot cocoa was phenomenal. Maybe she could show him how to make that for Aunt May, too.

“Hmm… nothing holiday oriented.”

“Got it,” Tony said, then put his glasses on and said, “Friday give me the carousel, I want to see what my options are.”

“And Tony…”

“Yeah, Red?”

“We should spar the next time you’re free,” she told him. “I’m supposed to keep it light for a few more days and you box pretty well from what I remember.”

“I like my spleen where it is, Red.”

“I promise, I won’t break you. And you need the practice, too.”

Peter almost laughed at the comment, but Tony made a face until he caught Peter looking at him. “Fine,” he said. “Not tomorrow…maybe this weekend. I want to be able to enjoy my dinner.”
She chuckled, and Peter grinned. “Can I watch?”

“No,” she and Tony answered in the same breath.

Darn.

Peter finished off the last of Tony’s kabob, then began to clean up his plates and grabbed his empty can of soda and carried it all into the kitchen. He scraped off the trash into the container and turned to see Natasha humming as she poured milk into the saucepan.

“Where did you learn to fix all this stuff?”

“Here and there,” she told him.

“Did your parents teach you?” May had taught him to make some stuff. His mom had, maybe taught him to make toast, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. But he couldn’t really remember her in the kitchen that much.

“No,” Natasha said with a faint, if wry chuckle. “I learned to make some basic soups when I was very young and we all had chores to do. I could chop vegetables by eight, and I could sear meat by ten. But it was always the most basic of fair…I think I learned to make my first meals when I had a job as an undercook in a hotel.”

“Undercook?” He’d never heard it called that. And she worked in a hotel?

“Sous chef? Not quite the same thing. It doesn’t translate well. Anyway, I learned to make a few things there. On another job, I made the acquaintance of this lovely baker in Austria...she taught me out to make pirozhkis and pies, and croissants.” A little shrug. “She died a few months ago. But she was a very sweet woman, and very patient with me.”

“Is it...weird to ask why you didn’t go into cooking for a living? I mean—you’re really good.” Peter never imagined being Spider-Man, it kind of happened and now he couldn’t not do something. But had Natasha had other options? Since she had other jobs?

“Oh, well, I’m not that good,” Natasha said, flipping open a cabinet and reaching back behind something on the first shelf before she extracted the huge bars of chocolate. “And I only like to cook for people I know, not strangers.”

“But you worked in a hotel.”

“I did do that, I also worked in a bakery. Once I worked at an embassy, and I even worked for Tony,” she kept her voice light, and she nodded to where Tony had come to stand at the opening pass through between the kitchen bar and the wall. His expression was equal parts sadness and concern. “But I don’t think I ever cooked for Tony then... just mixed drinks and hangover remedies.”

Tony rubbed the back of his neck and chuckled. “Probably a good thing, Red. I’d have patented your hot cocoa and kept you.”

Peter frowned. “Did you always want to be the Black Widow?”

And maybe he shouldn’t have asked that question because it kind of landed with a thud—at least with Tony, who scowled at him.

Natasha moved to pull something else out of the cabinet, a spice, and said, “Actually—I suppose I
“You had to be the best, so I trained, and I worked hard, and I got there. But if I hadn’t wanted it—I wouldn’t be here. So, yes, Peter, I like to cook. I like being able to make hot cocoa for my friends, and I like being able to help you with your dinner for your aunt. But I wanted to be the Black Widow, so cooking for a living wasn’t really in the cards for me.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter said, guilt crashing down on him. “I probably shouldn’t be so nosy.”

“I don’t mind,” she told him. “And if I don’t want to answer a question, I won’t.” She was pouring hot cocoa into a mug. “If you hadn’t become Spider-Man, what did you want to do?”

“I—always thought I’d study engineering, or maybe bio-chemical work. My dad was something of an engineer. May told me he was really good at making just about anything work. So maybe that… I hadn’t really decided? I mean, I knew I had options, and I like science, but I wasn’t sure which field. And now…” Now, he wasn’t sure about anything. High school took up a lot of time, and he had a hard enough schedule balancing his patrols with his homework. Did he go to college and make it that much worse? And MIT was on his list, but it was in Massachusetts…

“And now what?” Tony asked, taking his hot cocoa from Natasha before she could set it on the counter in front of him, and putting a hand on her arm to stop her from moving away. Peter didn’t get the questioning look, but Natasha shook her head and nodded to Peter before returning to the stove to pour her own.

“I don’t know how college fits in now. I’m Spider-Man, and some of the schools I was looking at are a lot farther away from Queens than we are right now. Can’t be a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man if I’m not in my neighborhood.”

“Don’t dismiss it out of hand,” Tony told him as Natasha handed Peter a cocoa. “You’ve got a solid mind and a bright future, you just need the education and experience. Not going to college would be the greater crime.”

Mug in hand, Natasha waved them out of the kitchen. “Did you pick a movie, Tony?”

“How does Avatar sound?”

“Oh, blue aliens are cool,” Peter said with a grin. “And it’s neat how they made the fake bodies and could transport their minds into them and control them.”

“Great, can you two give me about five minutes? Maybe ten?” Natasha asked and Peter nodded.

“Something up, Red?” Tony eyed her, and she shook her head.

“Nope, just going to go keep a promise. I’ll be right back out.”

She disappeared into her bedroom, and Peter took a sip of his hot cocoa.

“You looked like you had questions earlier,” Tony said pulling his glasses off and tucking them into the collar of his shirt.

Probably not a good idea to ask them when Natasha had only left the room for a couple of minutes. “No, I think… I mean it’s none of my business.”

Tony chuckled. “Maybe, but don’t assume anything, not where Red is concerned. If you want to know something, ask her.”
“I don’t want to be intrusive—that’s rude.”

“Sure, but Red already told you she won’t answer any questions she doesn’t want to answer.” Tony lifted his hot cocoa and toasted him. “You need to be around more often. Twice in one day I got her hot cocoa. This is an event.”

Peter laughed. But before he could say anything, a sound drifted out from the bedroom. The low husky notes of a song gained gradually in volume. He could tell the moment Tony heard her because his frown disappeared and he turned to look toward her bedroom. The walls muted the words, but not the lyrical strain of it.

Natasha had an amazing voice. He’d heard Aunt May sing and she was hilarious, and some of the girls at school did at a talent show, but this was…

He glanced at Tony and mouthed wow. Tony nodded, then pulled out his phone and tapped something on it.

Peter took a peek.

Fri, you recording this?

Privacy mode, Boss.

Tony made a face.

They both edged toward the bedroom, heads tilted. It was—something about a dream. He couldn’t quite get all the words, but… Peter felt like he’d heard this song before somewhere, maybe it was something recent? Who was she singing to?

Neither of them moved as they listened, but the moment she stopped singing, Tony straightened and jerked his head toward the living room. Then changed his course and re-routed for the kitchen just as her door opened.

“Hey Red, was just going to make some popcorn, you want any?”

Natasha didn’t protest, and Peter kept stealing looks at her as Tony found some microwave popcorn and put it in. Like Peter, he was glancing at Natasha, too.

“I sang a lullaby to Lila boys,” she told them as they settled around the sofa in her living room, this time Tony on one end and Peter sitting on the floor with his back to where Natasha was sitting.

“Oh,” Peter said with a grin. “That’s cool.”

Tony chuckled. “And you said I was almost cool in the kitchen dancing, but Red is cool when she sings a lullaby?”

“Well, she’s cooler than you,” Peter told him, and laughed at Tony’s expression. He wasn’t alone. Natasha chuckled as she ruffled his hair.

“Behave boys, it’s going to be late when this is over.” Without further complaint, they dimmed the lights and the movie came on. Tony flicked popcorn at him. The first two times it bounced off Peter’s cheek, the third time, he turned his head and caught it with his mouth. Natasha smacked Tony and he released a grunt. But at least he didn’t throw any more food. But, it was also a little strange, they were just watching a movie and drinking hot cocoa, but Peter found himself just grinning periodically, because it was a really good strange. The turkey was in the oven, and the
The movie was even better than he remembered it.

At some point, Peter leaned his head against Natasha’s knee, and she ran her fingers through his hair and his eyes kept getting heavier and heavier. He wanted to keep watching the movie. Snapping his head up to keep from nodding off, he glanced back when Natasha slipped out from behind him and moved to the kitchen.

Rubbing his eyes, he twisted to see Tony sprawled along the length of the sofa, his head on the arm of the sofa. His eyes were closed and he was out. Natasha was taking the turkey out of the oven, and by the time Peter stumbled into the kitchen to help, she’d already put the pies in.

“Go to bed, Peter,” she said, and her voice was firm. “Go brush your teeth and go to bed.”

“But the pies…”

“Will be cooked in forty minutes and then set out to cool. I’ll make up the stuffing and the veggies and put them in containers for you. Go on.” She gave him a gentle nudge.

He took two steps, then turned around and caught Natasha up in a hug. He was taller than she was, and he picked her right up off the floor.

“Thank you,” he said, and then nearly ruined it by yawning.

She chuckled. “You’re welcome, now put me down and go to bed. Shoo.”

He did as she asked and he was rubbing his eyes all the way to the bedroom she’d told him to use. Peter barely had the energy to brush his teeth, and when he curled up under the covers, he was yawning so hard he couldn’t see straight.

“Hey Friday,” Peter said before he passed out totally.

“Yes, Mr. Parker?”

“Can you set an alarm for me—” He broke off mid-yawn. “I want to be up before breakfast at 8.”

“Would 7:30 work for you?”

“That’s great,” he said, then burrowed down and closed his eyes.
Thankful

Chapter Summary

Bucky is thankful for a lot...

Chapter Eighteen

Thankful

Bucky

Steve leaving the bed woke him this time, and Bucky lifted his head to track Steve’s movements across the room. With a sigh, his best friend flipped on the light in the bathroom, and Bucky squinted at the sudden brightness. “Go back to sleep,” Steve told him in a low, soft voice. “I can run by myself.”

Rising on an elbow, Bucky glared at him and Steve went still. Then in a quiet voice, trusting Steve’s hearing as he’d trusted Bucky’s. “Do I have your attention?”

A single nod.

“It was ice storming yesterday, Natalia worried about you and so did I. That’s how this works, we take care of each other. Which means I run with your ungrateful ass if you insist on freezing it off. Is it icing this morning?” He wasn’t angry. Hell, he was used to Steve being more of a punk than this. Once he got something in his head, it took an act of God and all his angels to dissuade him. Even then it was a fifty-fifty thing. Seventy years later, and they still had the same kind of disagreements.

Probably shouldn’t take as much comfort in it as he did. Steve worried about everyone, just like Natalia. Bucky worried about them, period, full stop.

Returning to the bed, Steve retrieved his phone and flipped it over. He squinted at the screen. “Just snow—apparently three feet of it overnight.”

That wasn’t light snow, well it was in Siberia, but the less Bucky thought of that frozen hell the better. The only bright spot in that desolation was curled up next to him, her breath teasing his skin as he rolled onto his side and settled his right hand on her hip. The slow, even breaths said she was still in deep sleep. Another perk of their sojourn island, they didn’t wake her often by moving around her. The trust warmed him on the most basic, and primal level.

“And another foot expected before noon.” Frowning, Steve circled the bed. “Friday, windows to fifty percent if you wouldn’t mind…maintain sleep mode as well, Natasha is still asleep.”

She didn’t acknowledge his command verbally, but the windows lightened allowing them an unobscured view of the darkened and icy covered world, heavy with snow. Steve glanced to the
street below and grunted. “I’ll use the treadmill today—Friday, resume sleep mode again, please.” The glass darkened as Steve headed back to the bathroom.

“Great, have a good run,” Bucky told him and settled back against the bed, face to face with Natalia and admired the unguarded innocence in her face. She’d laugh in his face if he told her it was that innocence that had drawn him from the very first day.

No matter what they’d done to her, how brutal the training, and how wickedly sharp she performed her assigned tasks—she’d always managed to hold herself apart from the machinations. It was that same spirit that lured the Madame Bs, Karpovs, and fucking Ivan Petrovitch’s to try and bend her to their will. Even fighting for her life, her mind racing through everything she needed to do to survive, her body reacting out of instinct—she didn’t kill without an element of remorse. Those trying to kill her? Absolutely. The rest, though? No, she wasn’t heartless at all.

“You know I could use some company,” Steve said, the quirk at the corner of his mouth betraying his bullshit.

“Call Sam, I’m sure he’d love to hear it.” Bucky wasn’t moving. He’d planned to wake Natalia slowly the day before, guarantee her three or four orgasms before she left the bed. She deserved it after the hellish trip through medical that she’d taken purely for their benefit.

He’d never felt like more of an asshole and Stevie was the same way.

“You know, Sam would say that’s cold,” Steve continued, really fucking with him now. Rising on an elbow, he snagged Steve’s pillow and flung it across the room. Steve barely caught it before it would have hit him in the face.

“Yeah, yeah…I’m going…” Thankfully, he had the grace to close the bedroom door before he laughed. Punk. On the upside, he hadn’t stewed about leaving Tony with Natalia when they’d retired to watch Star Trek. Bucky needed the quiet, and Steve had just worked on his sketchpad while Bucky watched the show. It wasn’t terrible, and he liked the stories.

When he’d finished a few episodes, and the clock passed ten-thirty, Bucky had gone back to Natalia’s floor to find her removing a pair of pies from the oven and setting them on a rack to cool. Most of her floor was dark except for a low light in the kitchen. Tony was sound asleep on the sofa, a blanket thrown over him and there was no sign of Peter.

She smiled at Bucky when he moved to join her on silent feet. There was stuffing on the stove, and another saucepan of gravy, and a third with vegetables. A small container of what looked like cranberry sauce waited on the counter. A turkey sat golden, and gorgeous inside a roaster, partially uncovered and cooling.

It smelled fucking divine.

Sliding up behind her, he pressed his lips close to her ear, “You’re showing your softer side.”

With a little shrug, she tilted her head back and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “I like him.” Yeah, she liked the kid. He got that. This was a lot of liking.

“Can I do anything?”

“Keep me company for a few more minutes?”

Not even a question for him. He moved to settle in while she finished setting up the gravy into a
travel container. Then the stuffing. The vegetables were strained and packed away. Natalia had prepared a feast for Spider-Punk and his aunt, but there was enough here to feed—okay realistically enough to feed him and Steve, and maybe Spider-Punk if no one else wanted some.

“Problem?” he’d mouthed the word, barely letting sound pass with it, respecting the sleeping engineer a few feet away. Based on what Bucky had seen, Tony needed the sleep.

“I feel like it’s missing something…” Then she’d turned those eyes on him and the silent question crashed through him. Just as it had at the Compound when she mentioned she might have made a turkey before. The little sharp points of pain—the shared past he had access to, and she’d been denied. Beyond that, a brittle shell chipped and worn, but present with fresh gloss. Though she’d evened out after they arrived at the Compound, the earlier issue hadn’t vanished entirely.

He shook his head slowly. “This is plenty. Trust me, Doll.”

“I do,” she whispered, so swiftly and with such ease, he’d smiled. “Okay, this is enough…” She wiped down the counters and then set the pans and utensils in the sink to soak. Washing up would likely wake Tony. They could take care of it in the morning. She turned off the light in the kitchen and reached for his hand, he didn’t bother leading her, just took advantage to scoop her up and carry her to the elevator, as soon as the doors opened, he set her down inside and then winked.

“I’m going to bed, Friday. You may resume full monitoring on my floor. Tony’s asleep on the sofa there, secure mode please.”

“Absolutely, I’ll keep an eye on them. Good night Ms. Romanoff, Sergeant Barnes.”

The AI had definitely warmed up to him. “Good night, Friday.”

Then they were back on their floor and Steve was happy to see her. They dragged her onto the sofa with them to sprawl and watched a couple more episodes, before all three of them piled into bed, and contented themselves with slow, lazy kisses until one by one they dropped off. Steve tumbling first, then Natalia, and Bucky had spent his time just watching her as he did now.

He’d whispered in her ear the night before when he and Steve were heading out that he wanted to watch her dance again. It was something they’d shared, in many ways, their first intimacy. The Soldier valued those early mornings, ninety minutes each day spent observing her grace in motion, ostensibly evaluating her physicality and skill to employ in their combat training.

In truth, the Soldier might have begun with that idea, but he’d continued for years every chance he got because he simply hungered for the sight of her. In those mornings, when she danced, she’d become her purest self utterly untouched by the ugliness they swam in, and sometimes…damn near drowned in.

Bucky closed his eyes and pushed the darkness away. It was always going to be there. It was as much a part of him as the woman in front of him, but when he was this close to her, he refused to let it taint the air she breathed.

No, he wanted to wake her slowly, languorously and pile all of his love onto her. Steve had done a fantastic job of elevating her mood at the Compound. Bucky had almost kicked himself for not having the same idea; then again, she’d gravitated back to them over and over. Alertness swept over him, whenever she checked their positions. Similar to the awareness humming through him when she left his line of sight.

He’d disliked it when they’d been on a mission, and he didn’t much care for it now even when
they were “off-duty.” Natalia, however, would never put up with him keeping her in his sights all the time. Once upon a time, she tweaked him for being too protective. Considering all that had happened, could he be too protective?

Never.

Her nostrils flared now gently as she breathed. Then her nose scrunched. While part of him wanted to start kissing a path to her cunt and let her wake with his tongue on her, he wouldn’t. Not without her permission, not when she was asleep and vulnerable, trusting him to look after her. Never would he abuse it, no matter how hard or aching he might be for the wanting of her.

A frown tightened her brow, and he trailed his fingers up to smooth his knuckles down her cheek. Once. Twice. Then the frown eased, and her face relaxed. No bad dreams, not on his watch. Her eyelashes fluttered, and he smiled slowly as she opened her eyes to the dark. Steve had left a light on in the bathroom, the night light, too low to be intrusive, but enough to let her see him.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he murmured, and a smile softened her lips.

“Hi.” Rolling onto her back, she stretched her arms up and chest arched as she elongated her legs. A low groan sounded, and then she rolled back to him and slid her leg over his as her hand came up to rest against his chest. Nose to nose, she smiled. “ Fancy meeting you here…” the sleepy sound in her voice tugged at him.

Nudging his thigh up between her legs, he trailed his fingers along her side. “I’m a lucky man.”

“Yeah?” She asked, then lifting her hand to her mouth, and he got it. Breath check. Amusement speared him when she cupped his cheek, and the rasp of stubble was audible against her palm.

“Oh yeah. Want to brush your teeth?”

Her eyes went wide, then she smirked. “You don’t?”

Nothing about her could smell bad to him. Then again… he let his gaze trail down her as he wrapped a hand on her hip. He had some plans, and shaving… “I need to shave,” he told her.

“Can I shave you?”

He blinked. Not quite what he had in mind but… “If you like.”

“I would,” she said, her words carrying an element of promise before she feathered a kiss to his lips, and squeezed her thigh against his. “I like it when you let me take care of you.”

A groan stretched out through him. He couldn’t argue with her there. “Anything you want, Doll.”

A delighted smile curved her lips, and she rolled away to slide off Steve’s side of the bed. Bucky had barely pushed himself upright, when she stripped off her nightshirt—Steve’s this time—then slid her panties off. Drawn as if by an invisible tether, he was off the bed and right behind her into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth while he took care of business, and she did the same while he did.

There was a comfortable intimacy to it. Since clothing was optional, he lost the t-shirt and boxers, utterly unconcerned about the gradually hardening length of cock. There was something to be said for anticipation.

After they’d both washed their hands, and she washed her face, she pulled a chair out from the
vanity and draped a towel over it for him to sit. Then she heated up the water.

Mesmerized, he watched her moving around the bathroom half drunk on the sight of her and the rest just adoring her. She laid out a canister of foam, before she retrieved a couple of washcloths and a hand towel from the little cabinet. Then she pulled out a straight razor from a case stored beneath her sink and inspected it with careful attention before washing it. She passed it to him to check it. The blade was very sharp, and it was Natalia, so he knew she kept it honed perfectly.

They knew how to take care of their blades, weapons or otherwise. Approving the razor, he passed it back to her. She set it on the counter, then soaked a wash cloth. After wringing the hot water from it, she filled the sink and moved to straddle his lap. Bucky settled his hands on her hips as she settled into place. The heat of her slit gliding over him just made him smile.

Pressing the hot washcloth to his face, she warmed his skin and he was torn between closing his eyes and drinking in the sight of her sleep-rumpled, with her curls in a riot. When his face was warmed, she sprayed some of the shaving cream into her hand and then began to spread it over his jaw, beneath his chin, then up to his cheeks and finally above his lip. The care and precision didn’t let an ounce of the cream drift anywhere else.

He let his lashes dip, like a cat in the sun and savored the feel of her petting him, and the teasing brush of her nipples against his chest as she leaned closer and from side to side making sure she had him how she wanted him. “This wasn’t how I planned on waking you this morning,” he told her, and the quick curve of her lips said she was well aware.

“But you don’t mind, do you?” She wiped off her hands on the wash cloth she’d used to heat his face.

“Not even a little, Doll. Especially since I have plans to eat you out until you scream—better to do that with smooth cheeks.”

The little hitch in her breath made him smile. She licked her lips as she reached for the razor, but she kept her hand away as she balanced it, then met his gaze steadily. “You’re okay with me shaving me?” She telegraphed every move as she brought the straight razor into his line of sight.

“I trust you, Natalia.” To prove his point, he lifted his chin to give her his throat. The sight of her biting her lower lip and the feel of her thighs clenching almost made him smile. Had she thought he’d reject the idea once they were here? Maybe. His Natalia was learning to trust him again, learning to believe he meant every single word he said, and learning to believe in him period. He could be patient. She trusted him enough to sleep beside him, and to sleep even when he moved around her. Every moment was a gift.

“Thank you, James.”

“Always, lyubov moya.” He sighed at the first gentle scrape of the blade along his skin. He could hear the hairs cutting, but the swipe was so gentle, and the blade so sharp he didn’t feel it at all. No, all he could feel was the weight of her balanced on him, and the warm softness as her cunt heated his cock. There was a special kind of pleasure in the slow torture of contact with minimal motion.

She shifted her weight, rocking carefully to the side to do his cheek, and the pressure squeezed his cock sweetly. Then she eased to rinse the razor, and it left her cunt teasing him. Again, and again as she shifted on his lap while she shaved his face clean. His eyes drifted shut with the image of her intent green eyes filling his mind. He loved everything about this woman. How she understood him, even now. How she modified her behavior so easily to avoid triggering him. How she, like he,
always asked to be allowed the pleasure of touching because they’d been able to control so little.

No one else understood them on this level. How could they? He didn’t need anyone else to understand. Not as long as she was there, and he would do everything he could to give her the same. He almost sighed in disappointment as she finished, then she was leaning away, her breasts against his arm as she rinsed the blade off for the last time, then there was the sound of the water draining, then running, and finally another hot cloth against his face and this time, he did sigh.

She rocked against him once or twice, and he opened his eyes to drink in the sight of her flushed face, and warm smile. The pressure of his cock at that angle couldn’t possibly be more than a breath of a teaser. He moved his hand to press two fingers closer to her clit and she tilted her head back as he began to circle them slowly.

“Do you like that?”

“Da,” she whispered, the single syllable trembling. When she eased the washcloth from his face, she closed the distance, and rubbed her cheek to his, first the right, then the left as she arched her hips and rode his fingers with exquisite slowness. They were in no hurry, he wanted to play with her, and when she brushed kisses down his throat, he chuckled.

“Do I pass inspection?”

“Hmm…” Head lifting, she met his gaze and smiled. “I believe you wanted something else this morning, James…”

It was all the permission, he needed. He gave her clit a last gentle squeeze that made her gasp, then stood, arm locked beneath her ass to keep her with him, and carried her right back to the bed. With care, he settled her against the sheets, and the drag of her cunt leaving his cock was almost enough to entice him to hurry along.

Almost.

She stretched out in front of him, and when he trailed his fingers down her chest, he lingered to draw the dog tag chain away from one nipple and set it smoothly between her breasts. She watched him from beneath half-lowered eyelids, and made no pretense of her reaction when he circled one taut nipple, and then the other. Playing with her breasts brought her pleasure, teasing them—it amped her up and her hips bumped a little in protest as he kept his touch feather light.

Down her abdomen, he drew patterns, then paused at the scar he’d left there. The puckered skin a reminder that blood and pain decorated their history, binding them together. More, it served to remind him they’d survived. He nudged her thighs apart and she let her knees fall open, her gaze lavishing him as he slid to his knees and dragged her close to the edge of the bed. Satisfied with the angle, he lifted one of her legs and kissed the inside of her thigh before setting it on his shoulder, then he glanced up the length of her and smiled.

“I am so thankful for you, Natalia,” he told her, meaning every single word. “Thankful to have spent decade after decade with you. More thankful than you know that we kept finding each other and thankful that you never gave up on me and never let me give up on myself.” He leaned forward and blew a breath across her glistening folds, the sweetness of her cunt flushed deep pink, and her clit swollen and visible from beneath its hood. So much to love, and savor, so much to enjoy. “Happy Thanksgiving, lyubov moya.”

Then he buried his face against her cunt, locking his lips around her clit and giving it a hard tugging suck. Her orgasm struck so unexpectedly, he had to smile as she let out a cry, everything
clenching around him and he began to lap up the musky decadence of her release. He planted a hand on her hips when he eased from slow strokes of his tongue to beginning to suck her clit slowly, and this time, he added two fingers just gently pressing into her. The clench of her muscles gripped his fingers and when he crooked them, he had to keep her pinned as she writhed.

Fuck, she was absolutely gorgeous as she abandoned all poise, need, desire, and pleasure twining together, and he nipped, sucked, and licked her through another orgasm as he eased his fingers in and out in a gentle thrusting motion, just helping her come down before he wound her up.

That was two…

“James,” she bit off his name, and he chuckled against her. The demand in her voice beckoned to him, but he had a mission and he wasn’t letting up until he achieved it. She lifted her hips, and she got one leg locked on his shoulder, but he kept his other angled to pin her free leg down. He increased the speed of his fingers as he began the slow, careful swirls of his tongue around her clit. She was so sensitive right now, he didn’t want it to hurt. Only sensual torture for his Natalia.

“Dammit,” she groaned.

“Shh,” he murmured, lifting his head and pressing kisses to the inside of her thigh where it quivered. “I’m playing with you, Natalia.”

Her breathing came in shuddered gasps, and she looked down at him, stretching her hand to touch his hair. “I want you…”

“And you’re going to have me,” he promised. “But I want you to come at least one more time.” When he dipped his head and began to lick, suck, and nip in earnest, she unraveled, chanting a series of little curses as he pushed her. She was so close, that when he slipped his left hand beneath to press his thumb right to her anus, he braced himself as she went off. Her keening cry as she came was music to his ears. Fuck, he loved that they could be as loud as they wanted, whenever the hell they wanted.

It allowed them to reclaim another part of their lives. He was going to take them all back.

Every.

Fucking.

One.

They would have everything they’d wanted, everything they’d been denied, and have it often.

He petted her down until she lay there panting, and then began his slow ascent to cover her. He didn’t make it halfway before she had her legs around his waist and then he was tumbling onto his back. Even half prepared for it, he laughed as she pinned him, hands on his shoulders and knees flat on the bed to either side of him.

Pupils so dark and wide they tried to swallow the sea of green in her eyes beckoned to him, but she was already closing the distance and licking his lips open to kiss him. He stroked his hands up and down her sides, then her back as she dug her fingers into the muscles of his shoulders, then she caressed one hand down his left arm. He was nowhere near as sensitive despite his awareness of her, but she never shied away from his touch or touching him.

Then she had his cock in her hand, and she stroked him from root to tip, then down again, and it was his turn to gasp as she tangled her tongue with his. While hardly a battle for dominance, more
a wrestling match he was more than happy to lose, and then she angled herself to sink down on him and they were both groaning.

Then Natalia rose and he ran his hands up her chest, massaging her breasts as she began to ride him. He lifted his hips to meet her as she rose and fell. The sheath of her cunt wrapped around him like a hot glove, and his cock ached with denied need.

When she stilled abruptly, he stared up at her, and then released a hissed breath as she lifted slowly, all the way to his tip and her eyebrows rose as if daring him. Then he fixed his hands to her hips, but he didn’t force her down. He waited, perched on the knife’s edge, and then she sank down all the way to the hilt and paused there, holding him firm within her. The first flutter of her inner walls squeezing against him, and he bit off a curse.

Her soft laugh was another kind of reward. Twice more she repeated the move, abandoning him, almost to the point he wanted to plead, and then sinking down until he wanted to weep from it. Too much and not enough colliding, and then she stroked her hands down his chest, as she began to move, gradually resuming the cadence of bringing him to the edge, and when she stopped again, he surprised himself with a growled, “Natalia.”

Then her laughter turned full-throated. “What is it milli moi? Did you want something?”

“Yes,” he bit off the word and flexed his fingers on her hips. Despite his own need, he loved the flushed color of her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes, and the wicked smile on her lips. “You.”

Another stroke as she rose and fell, her inner muscles tightening on him again. She knew exactly what she was doing. “But you have me…”

“More.” He could probably go for prettier words, but it was taking every ounce of his will to keep from flipping her over and satisfying them both.

“Yes, milli moi?” She slowed again, then settled as she sprawled against him, her breasts mashing to his chest and her lips hovering above his. A sheen of sweat clung to them both, and he met her gaze openly, uncaring if his heart was in his eyes or his desire in his voice.

“You, Natalia. Only ever you.”

When she brushed her lips to his, he locked their lips together, then dragged his right hand up to her hair, tangling in her curls. They brought their mouths together and then apart for several gasping, near breathless kisses.

“How do you want me, zvezda moya?”

How did he not want her?

A kiss to the corner of his mouth, then along his jaw, and finally she reached his ear, and cunt clenched around him and his hips thrust upward once, he had the leverage to take what he needed, but not the angle to give her the same. So he wouldn’t, not without…

“Have me, zvezda moya…however you wish.” The whispering caress of those words hit his system like a surge of electricity.

It was all the permission he needed to flip them over. Pinning her to the bed, he slid his arms beneath her, bracing her shoulders with his hands as he kissed her slowly, and then whispered, “I love you.”
The hot, wet kiss she welcomed him with had the coiled tight tension snapping in his system and he began to drive into her, every thrust angled to hit the right spot and when she began to shudder in response to his every motion, he smiled against her mouth.

His balls dragged up tight against him, but he was there, right on the edge of release all over again. He wanted her to come, one more time and he shifted a hand down to her hip, then lifted her so he could improve the angle and they were both gasping against each other, and at the same time, fighting to maintain their kiss because he wanted to touch her, everywhere. His cock stiffened to pain, every silky glide of her heated flesh the most blissful torment. Finally, she clenched around him, her whole body going rigid as that soundless cry of hers gave way to a low scream and his body released. His orgasm proved a fierce firestorm fanned higher and higher because of the denial, and his hips stuttered as he came and then he thrust deep and let her hold him, kissing the cries from her mouth.

When their kisses slowed, becoming brushes, and tastes, and then finally just their breath mingling, he continued to lie there. He had most of his weight braced on one arm to keep from crushing her, and he didn’t know if he could move. It was as if every part of him spilled out and into her.

Gradually, he grew aware of her stroking her hand through his hair, nails scraping lightly at his scalp as her free hand roamed his back, soothing, petting, and stroking. He shuddered, and his cock gave another pulse. At this angle, he could stay in her even soft, and he didn’t want to leave.

“Zvezda moya?” the soft beckoning of her question pulled his head up, and he met her wrecked expression with a slow smile. Undone. They’d come apart together and lay in a tangled heap. He didn’t care where he ended and she began, only that she was there.

“Hmm…”

“If this is what you do for Thanksgiving… what are we going to do for Christmas?”

The question took a moment to sink in, and then laughter stirred through him and he kissed her. “Brat.”

“Hmm…maybe.” She flexed around him and a groan choked off his laughter. Fuck, he felt that everywhere. “But your brat.”

“Oh yes, definitely mine.” He was never letting her go. Though… “Do you need me to move?”

“No,” she sighed out the word, still stroking his back. “This is nice…I like this.”

So did he. They’d have to move eventually, but until then he buried his face next to her throat, pressing the occasional kiss to her skin as they dozed. He never quite went to sleep, but his heart slowed and her pulse evened out. The chime of the elevator’s return roused him, and he chuckled.

“What time is it?” Natalia asked, the rasp of her voice rougher. She needed water. He had to move…

“We need to shower,” he told her. “If Steve’s back, it’s almost seven.”

“Oh, you may carry me into the shower. I give you permission.”

Laughing, he eased upward and they both hissed as he finally slipped out of her. The air was cold against his cock, and he’d rather spend the day in bed, feasting on her.

But they would have company soon. They needed to make sure the kid got his dinner to his aunt,
then they had to head to the Compound… The day before had left his head aching, but not in a bad way. It was overload, and today would be much the same.

“Come on,” he murmured, standing on legs that shook more than he expected before scooping her up. She wrapped around him bonelessly, and he carried her into the shower. He flicked the water on and pressed a kiss to her lips before he carried her right under the first blast of cold spray.

Her squeal made him laugh, even if her punch to his right shoulder promised to leave him bruised. “Asshole,” she exhaled, not fighting to yank away from him. Fortunately, the water heated swiftly in Stark’s expensive Tower, and she had her head tilted back into the warm water.

“Yes, I am,” he told her with extreme fondness. “But we’re both more awake now.”

“There were nicer ways to do that,” she told him, the reproachful look bordering on teasing.

“I did the nice way…do you want me to do it again?” Then he turned to pin her against the shower wall and she laughed. Like it was any kind of threat to dissuade her.

The door to her bedroom opened, and Steve said, “Peter’s awake early and on his way up and I’ve got coffee started. Angel do you want tea or coffee?”

Still grinning, Natalia called, “Tea sounds wonderful, Steve. Thank you—french toast, too? Please?”

“Anything you want,” he assured her. “And Buck—you two aren’t quiet and I’m not having that conversation with Peter.”

Bucky stilled his hands on her hips and she laughed harder. “Fuck off, Steve…” He said it cheerfully enough though and Steve’s answering laugh was full of mirth at Bucky’s expense.

“Pretty sure you already did that…” But he closed the door before Bucky could respond.

Natalia gave him a wicked look.

“What are you thinking?” He raised an eyebrow, and she eased onto her feet before running her fingers across his chest.

“That we know how to be quiet,” she reminded him as she began to kiss a path down his chest. “And I do believe my four to your one, needs a little more balancing.”

Then she closed her mouth around the tip of his cock, and he pressed his head back against the tile and closed his eyes. His whole body went on alert, focusing completely on her.

And she was right, he did know how to be quiet. He inhaled at the pull of her mouth against him and all his blood ran south.

If Steve had to explain it—well, would serve the punk right.

Their shower stretched closer to twenty minutes, but Natalia’s smile was worth it and he was never saying no to the feeling of her mouth on him. She hummed as she ran lotion over her arms and legs, and he sat on the edge of the now made bed, watching her pick out clothes. There was a distinct hickey on her breast, and a matched set on the inside of her thighs. The one Steve left on her throat the day before had all but faded.

Just like the marks she left on Bucky would be gone by morning. More was the pity.
They’d just have to do it again.

“I can hear you from here,” she said over her shoulder. “Yes to all of it.”

He laughed. She pulled on a sleeveless dark green turtleneck, then added a pair of black leggings, and slid her feet into socks, then boots. Even with wet hair, she was a picture. She fixed Steve’s dog tags so they hung outside the shirt. Steve would like that. Tony’s bracelet was secure on her wrist. When she crossed over to him, he hooked a finger through the chain, and tugged her down to sit on his lap.

Peter had arrived already, he was telling Steve all about some blue alien movie. It would probably end up on a list somewhere.

“Hey,” Natalia said, stroking his cheek. “What’s up?”

He curled the chain around his finger. “I keep thinking about whether I should give you my dog tags—the ones we found in Azzano.”

Expression sobering, she studied him. “Okay.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to…” Because he appreciated why Steve did it, and it made perfect sense to him. She’d dropped those dog tags into his hand when they’d been standing in that hellish file room with the chair a hundred feet away, and he’d… “It was another life,” he told her. “Even remembering everything—it wasn’t Bucky Barnes who fell in love with you Natalia, not at first. The Soldier has that claim, and Bucky fell later, I promise. But the Bucky Barnes who fell into that ravine—he was a hotheaded, impetuous charmer who loved anything in a skirt, and was always after the next good time. He wasn’t the man who could have held a candle to you.”

“He was also the man who looked after and defended his best friend, who took care of his younger sisters, and who went right back into a war he didn’t want to be in when he could have gone home—all because his best friend was still there.”

“Yeah, that punk.” Bucky shook his head, smiling a little. “I want to give them to you, and at the same time…I want to give you something else. Something…that’s us, that’s been us for all these years. Not that flawed man…who arguably, didn’t deserve a dame like you.”

Head tilting to the side, Natalia cupped his face. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“How am I being ridiculous?”

“Because that man you were—that man is still in here.” She pressed a hand to his heart. “That man with his charm, and easy smile, and capacity for caring and protectiveness—he never went away. He had to have been there or the Soldier wouldn’t have looked at me twice. We were not trained for caring, James. I had to learn it somewhere…”

“You taught it to me,” he promised her. “You woke me up, you reminded me of what it was…”

“Then we helped each other,” she whispered and pressed her forehead to his. “And I am thankful for you, too. Thankful you survived, that you are you and you are whole… you could hate everyone, and you don’t.”

Fuck, he loved her.

“So give me the dog tags, don’t give them to me…the only thing I need from you is you.”
Releasing the chain, he caught her fingers. “I just wanted you to know I wasn’t overlooking giving them to you… I didn’t want you to think that for some reason you weren’t worth them.”

“You are worth them, too,” she told him, and he sighed. How did she always hear him even when he didn’t know what he was trying to say. “Sergeant Barnes, Bucky, soldat moya—James. You are all worthy of those tags. They aren’t a lie, just another piece of your truth.” There was a thrill to hear her use Bucky to refer to him.

Another kiss to her lips, and then he sighed. “We should go out there…”

“Or we can sit here for as long as you need to, I know yesterday was a lot for you.”

And here he’d thought he’d hid it well.

“Yes James,” she said with a throaty laugh. “I know, I’m scary.”

He grinned. Even before he had it all back, she’d constantly amazed, delighted, and in some ways intimidated him. Not now, no—now she was a definite delight and he valued every single quality that made her, her. But then, the half-formed man he was bridging the chasm between Soldier and Bucky, he’d been out of his depth with her.

“I was going to say amazing,” he said without missing a beat.

She looped her arms around his neck and kept her forehead pressed to his. The scent of bacon, pancakes, and eggs along with the definite allure of coffee made his stomach grumble. He could go days without eating, or he used to be able to. If necessary, he probably could again.

Still, he could ignore it for now and just savor the quiet with her. However, when her stomach grumbled, he lifted his head. Tony wasn’t the only one who noticed her limited appetite the day before. She’d devoured her sandwich at lunch, and after the disconcerting morning, he hoped it meant she’d settled. The shashlyk at dinner calmed him more. He’d have gone clear to Brighton Beach if it meant she ate. The East Village was nothing.

Today already seemed better.

Natalia didn’t want him to hover, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t keep watch.

“Come on,” he said, lifting her onto her feet before rising. He smoothed out the duvet, and then let her take point to the door. The minute they walked out there, Peter would want her attention and if Tony wasn’t already there, he would be shortly. There would be more at the Compound, more noise, more people, more needs and it would be nice, but he was already looking forward to calling it a night and settling back in with Steve and Natalia only.

Game face on, he followed her out to the big open room. Peter was already seated at the table, eating like someone was going to take his food away. He grinned at Natalia as soon as he caught sight of her. “Morning,” he said around a mouthful of food and then had to take a long drink of milk to keep from choking.

“Good morning, Peter… try to just eat or talk, not both at the same time.” She made her way around the island and curled up against Steve, and then gave him a kiss as he paused in his pancake flipping.

Peter’s ears went red, and Bucky hid a smirk. No Tony yet.

“Sleep well?” Bucky asked the kid as he made his way to the coffee. Steve flipped the electric
kettle on again, and motioned to where he had Natalia’s tea ready to go, she just needed to add the water.

“I did,” Peter said. “Mr. Sta—Tony.” The kid gave himself a visible shake. “Tony was still asleep on the sofa, but Friday said she was going to wake him at eight.”

“Good,” Natalia said, pouring the hot water over her tea while Bucky filled a plate with bacon, pancakes, and eggs. Steve had switched pans and started on Natalia’s requested french toast. “How was your run, Steve?”

He chuckled. “It would have been better outside, but it’s still snowing.”

She gave him a pleased little smile and sipped her tea. When Steve caught Bucky’s eye, it was all Bucky could do not to smirk and point out, see, she worries too. But he managed to refrain as he dropped into a chair across from Peter.

“Natasha?” Peter called and she turned her attention to him. “I saw all the food…it looks amazing. And smelled fantastic. I can’t thank you enough.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome. Has your aunt let you know when you should be by?”

“She said eleven would be good. She’s been on shift since two this morning, and she’ll take a break at eleven, and after she eats, she’ll probably get a nap in. With the way the snow storm seems to be going, she may not be home until later this weekend.”

Bucky frowned, but Natalia only nodded slowly. “Well…we can take the quinjet over, and I’ll set it down close so you can take the food in, and I can come back and pick you up when you’re ready. Then if she is stuck there this weekend, we can pack up more meals to take over—you should probably leave any leftovers for her, too.”

Peter bobbed his head, then asked, “What if someone sees me getting off the quinjet?”

“We can handle that,” Steve told him. “We can maneuver so we land away from cameras, and the cloak will help. Course it might show the snow collecting in mid-air, which would be strange.”

Natalia waved that concern off. “There’s a parking garage at the hospital, and no one is out in this weather if they can avoid it. It’ll be fine. If they do notice—you’re staying with Tony Stark, it’s hardly something new for Tony to have flashy transport.” In the middle of her comment, the elevator chimed opened and the man in question strode in.

“You taking my name in vain, Red?”

“Nope, just commenting on your need for fast vehicles and flashy arrivals.”

“That is true,” he said with a nod and helped himself to the coffee they brewed for Natalia.

Peter grinned, then twisted around to face Bucky. “We still on for another snowball fight today?”

The kid was so much like Steve, Bucky didn’t know whether to be amused or pained. Hopefully, he wasn’t as hardheaded. “You call Wanda? You might want to make sure she has your back.”

Steve set Natasha’s plate on the table in front of the chair between Bucky and Peter’s, six slices of french toast, along with some powdered sugar and eight pieces of bacon. Bucky eyed the food then Steve, and he shrugged. She wasn’t going to consume that much. But he couldn’t blame him for trying. Natalia just laughed and pinched Steve before giving him a kiss and then sitting down to
“Hey, Friday?” Peter called.

“Yes, Mr. Parker?”

“Were you able to reach Wanda?”

“She’s in the shower, Mr. Parker, but I will ask her as soon as she is out.”

“Thank you.” He grinned.

Tony eyed the food, then glanced at Steve. “Can I help myself or is the rest for you?”

“Go ahead,” Steve told him. “I’m going to make round two in a minute, anyway.”

Bucky was most of the way through his pancakes, and he could definitely eat another stack. Peter brightened right up, so that was two of them and Steve could always eat.

“You know,” Steve said. “If Wanda isn’t up for it, no reason we can’t go one on one on one.” He refilled his mug, and waited for Tony to clear the kitchen and settle at the table across from Natalia.

There was an air of anticipation about Stevie, and Bucky just shook his head as Peter looked thoughtfully from him to Steve and back. This was exactly how Steve got him into trouble.

Course, Bucky couldn't say he hadn't started his fair share, so he kept his mouth shut.


“No bet,” she said with a laugh. “They are all equally capable of winning it.”

And she wasn’t pitting any of them against each other. Was it any wonder that she was the smartest among them?

“Then why don’t you take them all on, Red?” Tony dared her, and Bucky shook his head. They could be out there for hours if he and Natalia decided to take it seriously, and he'd rather just play in the snow than run combat ops. Course, they could make it a training exercise for the kid.

“Because I have an unfair advantage,” she said with a smile. “I don’t fight fair.”

“Exactly. I could clean up on that action.” Tony rubbed his hands together like he was some kind of evil genius.

Maybe he was.

Bucky finished his pancakes and smiled, Natalia had eaten four of her six halves of french toast and was currently nibbling on the bacon. “Why don’t you jump in, Tony?” He said, eyeing him. “I’m sure you have a suit that would work, keep everything even.”

Three seconds after the words left his mouth, he grimaced. Probably not a good idea to challenge the guy he and Steve nearly killed with any kind of fight—even a snowball one. There was a beat of silence, and Natalia glanced at him. Steve paused to look at all of them, the only one remotely intrigued by the idea was Peter.

“That would be so cool, Mr. Sta—Tony. Then we could even team up if we wanted or keep it a
“four-way fight.”

Before Bucky could say anything more, he met Tony’s speculative gaze. “You know what Bucky,” he said slowly. “You’re on. If Wanda’s not up for it, we’ll have some fun.”

Peter pumped his fist in the air, and then carried his plate to Steve for a refill. Steve caught Bucky’s eye and shook his head. Bad idea was written all over his face.

Yeah, he really should have thought that one through. Then again, if he were to disinvite that would make things even more awkward.

“Gonna put ten on me now, Red?” Tony pressed.

“Nope,” she told him, not missing a beat. “You’re just as capable as them. What you lack in strength, you make up for in cunning.”

Tony leaned back in the chair and he smirked.

Natalia brushed her fingers against Bucky’s knee and he stole a look at her. She gave him a small smile, it was going to be okay. It could have been worse, but Tony rolled with it so—maybe things were better. This could be a good sign.

“But I still think we should make it interesting,” Tony announced. “In fact… since you’re all invited to the holiday party next week, let’s do it this way—the winner gets the first dance with Red, any takers?”

Yeah. That was worse.

He really should have thought that one through.
Leaning back, she put her feet up and stared out the window as the snow continued to fall.

“So what did he say?” Clint prompted her, his voice close thanks to the headphones. He’d answered on the first ring. The volume on the other side told her the kids were up, and a good portion of the team was already in the common room and kitchen. Laura supervised in the back, and Clint had muffled the phone, but she caught him say she didn’t need him at the moment and Nat did.

Despite wishing otherwise, he wasn’t wrong. So she’d waited patiently, watching the snow thicken on the hospital roof from where she’d parked the quinjet on the top floor of the parking structure and angled as close to the wall as she could. The cloak was set to vibrate periodically to help shed the snow and keep them obscured.

“He was quiet for a really long minute, long enough James began to twitch and even Tony got uneasy, then Steve smiled and it was a real smile,” she said, and that was the part that had her questioning it. “Said it sounded like fun, and he was in. Then the air around the three of them relaxed and they teased in earnest.”

“Okay,” Clint said evenly. “Besides the fact that Tony suiting up and engaging in a fight in the cold snow, even a snowball fight, with your boys is quite possibly a terrible idea—what about all of that bothered you?”

Natasha had kept her opinions to herself during the breakfast. Peter had been relaxed, laughing, and having a good time. He also seemed genuinely excited about the potential snow battle. Even more when Tony told him to not pick Natasha’s brain for strategy since that would be cheating. James then countered since Natasha was training him, it would make more tactical sense for her to get involved. Steve then added a couple of genuine teasing remarks about the fact she’d trained Steve, too, that meant he should get similar advice and Tony then said ha, Natasha was going to spar with him soon so did that qualify? James hadn't been impressed, since he'd trained her. And around and around, they went.

As she recounted the whole of it to Clint, she danced a small blade across her fingers, then twirled it, forward and back. The tiny dagger wasn’t more than an inch and a half long, and it was
perfectly balanced for throwing.

“All right then, Tash,” Clint said softly. “What bothered you?”

All the questions she wanted to ask, she didn’t. Instead, she just stared at the snow. Peter had gone inside to have dinner with his aunt, practically bouncing with excitement over being able to bring her such a full meal. Tony had offered to throw in a bottle of wine until Natasha pointed out if May was on duty, she couldn’t drink it and Peter was too young. They’d found some sparkling grape juice in the back of a pantry on the common room level, who knew how long it had been there but Peter seemed happy about it.

Right now, Natasha would kill for a drink.

“C’mon Tash,” Clint coaxed. “I can hear all the words you’re not saying cycling around in there, let it out. I can’t help if you don’t paint me a picture.”

“Steve and Tony are not…”

“Friends?” her best friend asked bluntly. “In other news, water is wet.”

“You know, they’re adults…”

“They’re idiots,” Clint supplied.

“That too, but they’re adults. They can find a way to resolve their issues and they have been. They’ve been working together for weeks. We’re back at the Tower, and they seem to be getting along and then…”

“And then?” Clint prompted. She could almost hear him roll his eyes.

“You know if you want to go, you just have to say so.” She didn’t need to be dumping this on him anyway.

“If I wanted to go, I’d tell you to fuck off and hang up. I’m not shy,” he reminded her. “Talk. To. Me.”

The day started off beautifully, and she’d been practically humming after the morning wake up call with James. Sometimes it was just all passion, hot, heady, and consuming and other times it was teasing and playing—today it had been all of that and emotional, too. Sex had so many different flavors, and she couldn’t wait to discover every single one with them.

Then…

“I didn’t say anything at breakfast, because Steve seemed okay with it or at least intent on pretending well enough and I’m not sure if he’s really okay with it or if he wants to be okay with it—or if he’s forcing himself to be okay with it because Tony and I are friends.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Tasha, you can read men like an open book—hell you can read most people like an open book—if you think Steve’s jealous, he probably is.”

But she didn’t want him to be. “There’s nothing to be jealous of.”

James’ words from the island slipped back out to taunt her. If she wanted a fling with Tony…
“Okay. I assume you told him that.” Clint kept his tone neutral, it was the same voice he used when he gathered mission details from her on a debrief. The corner of her mouth kicked up. He promised once he’d never judge her.

He hadn’t.

“I did, but I picked Steve and James…I’m with Steve and James. Why be jealous of Tony?”

“Again, you’re not an idiot, Tash. You know people—men in particular.”

“They’re not marks,” she said slowly. She would not look at them that way. None of them. “I couldn’t get past that with Matty—it killed any chance of a relationship. I trusted him only so far and he knew that.”

“Murdock was an asshole,” Clint said bluntly. “He wanted to change you.”

Maybe. It didn’t matter.

“Matty’s part of my past. I don’t want to make a mess of this Clint—and I was having such a good time this morning and now all I am wondering is whether those three are going to inadvertently end up in a fight like Siberia again.” A fight that had left Tony damn near dead, James without his metal arm, and Steve wrecked. They couldn’t do that too each other again. The team might not survive a second go-round, not when they had barely begun to repair the past.

She didn’t think she would survive it either…

“You’re not making a mess of anything, Kid, seriously. I saw all three of them yesterday. I’ve never seen Tony so relaxed. If I’d known building Legos with Coop would do it for him, then I would have introduced them sooner. Peter is good for him, too and Rhodey isn’t just staring at Tony like he’s about to sprout a second head. So for what it’s worth—he’s doing fine. Steve? He looked damn happy especially after your naughty meeting.” The element of teasing in his voice brought a smile to her lips. “And Bucky’s probably the most relaxed around other people I’ve seen him in a while.”

“They’re all still watching me.” Side glances, quick looks, and even measuring stares. All three of them checked on her constantly.

“Yeah.” Clint didn’t deny it. “So am I.”

“You’re different,” she said, dismissing that. Clint always watched her. Always checked to make sure she was good just the same way she checked on him. It was second nature to watch his back.

The same way it was second nature to watch Steve’s, and Tony’s—and now James’, or maybe James’ again. A headache pulsed behind her eye.

“I’m different because I’m the best, and I was here first…well…save for Bucky,” he still kept his tone light. “The point is, you scared the hell out of all of us, and you look great, Tash. You’re better. But you forget I saw you right after, and I saw you a week later on the island when you still looked like death warmed over. You freaked them out, it’ll take time for them to normalize.”

Even Peter had been panicked when he saw her again, but he was young and already recovering. He thrilled to the idea of the four-way snow battle, so maybe that would make it different. Maybe she was overthinking all of this.

“Did you always want to be the Black Widow?”
“Look, Kid… You don’t like it, just tell them. You know… they’re not going to expect us, we could always make it interesting and play hell with their plans. A five-way snow battle, you and me against all of them. Think we could take them?”

“Actually, I suppose I did.”

“Nat?”

Better blood than tears. Steeling herself, she reached for every ounce of discipline she possessed and forced her eyes open to stare into the empty, cold gaze of the Soldier. Her Soldat. He was gone. He stared at her as if she were nothing more than a stranger… a mark.

Metal prongs dug into her scalp, the restraints locked down her wrists, forearms, chest, legs, and ankles. She couldn’t even twist in the seat. The room stank of antiseptic-coated copper.

Her Soldat was gone.

She was about to join him.

This was what she’d wanted.

No… she couldn’t lie to herself. She’d wanted to get him out, but instead… She pushed those thoughts away. Compartmentalize. Forget. The choices she’d made as Nancy Roarke, the life she’d lived, the… Pain speared her heart. It was over.

She was Natalia Alianova Romanova. She would only ever be her. The Black Widow.

This was her choice…

“Natasha!” The snap of Clint’s voice punctured the bubble and she squeezed her eyes shut at the blossoming pain behind her right eye. It seemed to set her whole head on fire like so many white-hot needles were being jammed inside. She tasted copper on her tongue and shuddered. “I’m here…” Had she bitten her tongue? She ran it against her teeth, but felt no injury. Then a trickling tickle at her nose had her pressing her finger to her nostril.

Fucking nose bleeds.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “I am probably overthinking all of it. Steve said he wanted to work on it, and maybe this is his way of doing it.”

“Maybe so,” Clint said slowly. “Does it bother you if they manage to get along?”

“Hell no,” she told him, keeping her eyes half shut. It was so damn bright even with the dark clouds. The snow was so thick and continued to fall steadily still. It was like early spring in Siberia. Or…

There was snow on the ground and it shouldn’t have made her feel at home, and yet it did…

The sound of almost ringing in her ears ramped up, like a single tone getting louder and louder. She dug the heel of her hand against her eye, ignoring the metallic taste on her tongue.

“Then let them do what they do,” Clint continued in an odd voice. The tone wasn’t… what was he saying? “If you want, I’ll help you smack them around. Then I can get the first dance at the party.”

She snorted and then winced. That hurt. Tipping her head back, she closed her eyes and focused on breathing. In for four. Out for four. “You know,” she said, licking the blood off her upper lip, then
grimacing. She needed to clean up before Peter got back. She’d get up in a minute. In for four, out for four. “I didn’t agree to the terms of their bet.”

“Well, sucks to be the winner I guess,” he almost sounded like he was laughing, almost. But his voice was off…

“You okay?” The day before with Lila had been tough, and she hadn’t forgotten it.

“I’m fine,” Clint said. “How about you?”

“I’m great,” she lied, because she would be—eventually. After the last couple of weeks, she wasn’t going to freak anyone out with nose bleeds. Or land her ass back in medical. She shuddered. No thank you. “Just don’t want there to be drama today. Is that selfish?”

“Absolutely,” he said without a hint of remorse. “It’s Thanksgiving, the holidays always have drama. Welcome to what it’s like to have a family.”

Ice slithered along her spine. She’d had a family before, for a moment. That hadn’t ended well.

“Look, Tash—if we make it through the day without a food fight or any accidents in the skating rink Stark’s people are setting up for the kids, we’ll be in good shape. Relax, we’ll have fun and if the guys get to be too much, just come sit with me. We can play poker or something…”

Humor bubbled through the dread. “You suck at poker.”

“So you already know you’ll have a better time with me.” Glib. Easy. Teasing.

“Am I screwing this up, Clint?” The abrupt question wouldn’t surprise him.

“No, Kid, you’re not. To be honest, I expected you to get cold feet long before now.”

A wet laugh escaped her, and she shoved out of the chair to go in search of tissue. The flow of blood trickling from her nose seemed to have stopped. She hoped. “Thanks, I’m not sure whether to be amused or offended.”

“Definitely amused—when you’re offended, you get even.”

That pulled another smile from her. She found a tissue in the little bathroom and checked her face in the mirror. It was less blood than it felt like. She dabbed at it carefully, and then put pressure on the nostril to stop it entirely.

“Look, you haven’t been on a mission in weeks because you were recovering. You’re building a relationship with two guys and I’m not going to pretend I get how that works, but you haven’t been the relationship girl.”

“I’ve had a relationship with you for fifteen plus years,” she pointed out, because while he wasn’t wrong—their friendship had to count for something.

“I’ve had a relationship with you for fifteen plus years,” she pointed out, because while he wasn’t wrong—their friendship had to count for something.

“Yeah, that doesn’t count.” Or not. “Tasha, you and me? We’ve seen each other at our worst. There is nothing you could do that would ever make me walk away. Punch you in the head? Sure. Just the same way I expect you to punch me in the head.”

“I have punched you in the head.” And slammed it into a metal railing.

“You did and I thank you for that regularly. But we’re different. We’re partners, and we accept each other exactly as we are.”
Leaning against the wall, she checked the tissue. Still fresh blood, so she pressed the tissue back into place.

“Relationships make demands, whether they intend to or not. They take time, and focus, and a willingness to compromise.”

“If you and Laura didn’t work Clint, what hope do I have?” The minute she asked the question, she sighed. Was that all that bothered her? She wanted it to work with them, and it was—so why was she so damn unsettled? Why couldn’t she shake this damn headache?

“Laura and I have a lot of history, and even if our marriage didn’t work…I’m not disappearing on her and she isn’t cutting me off. We’re—working on it. Relationships are work. You three are just beginning to build, you can’t expect it to be perfect overnight and it may never be perfect.”

No. She didn’t need perfect either. She and James had history. Decades of it. The pain in her eye flared again and she grunted.

“Yeah, okay—I’m done pretending nothing is wrong. What’s going on Tash?”

“Just a headache,” she said. “Been getting them on and off for the last couple of days. Maybe a little longer. Just—it’ll pass. Do not tell me to see the doc.”

“No, I wouldn’t unless you were dying,” he promised. Of course, he’d made her see one in the past when she wasn’t dying. It wasn’t a new thing for them.

“And don’t tell Steve and James.”

“Uh huh…so you’re keeping this from them.”

“No, I’m just not advertising it.” She was splitting hairs. They both recognized it. “Clint, we’ve been back twenty-four hours, I spent the first two and a half hours in the Tower back in medical enduring all of Helen’s tests…I’m allowed to not say anything. It’s a headache. It will go away. They all have.”

“How much longer ‘til the kid is done?” He hadn’t made her any promises, and she really didn’t expect them. At the same time, she knew Clint would watch her back.

She checked the time. They’d been there an hour already. “Thirty minutes? Maybe forty-five at the outside.” Peter had been in such a great mood when he carried the food inside.

“Put your feet up, take a nap. Meditate. And this is me not asking why you didn’t go back to the Tower to wait. With the quinjet, it’s what? Five minutes? Ten tops if you go slow?”

“I wanted to call my best friend, and the snow is pretty….”

“…and you’re alone for the first time in weeks.” Sometimes he knew her too well.

“See you soon.”

“Tash?”

She waited.

“Promise if the headaches get worse you’ll tell someone. You can tell me if you don’t want to tell them, but promise me.”
She did not want to make that promise.

“You can promise me or I can call them right now, you decide.”

“You’re an ass,” she complained without any heat.

“That I am. So your promise or my call, what’s it going to be?” The firmness comforted. This was how he’d handled her when she’d first come in, when she’d needed that kind of steadiness. Needed clear cut lines and tangible consequences. It had taken them both time to figure it out, but he never gave up on her.

“I promise,” she told him. Her promise meant something, to both of them. She avoided the word if she could because it was a commitment, an oath, and betraying that wouldn’t sit well with either of them.

“Thank you,” he said gently. “Now, go rest and we’ll see you out here—and I really hope you have ice skates, this thing they’re putting out in the training garage is huge.”

Natasha chuckled. “I’m Russian, of course I have skates.” But she didn’t cut the call and he waited her out. “Thank you, Clint…”

“For?”

“Everything.” Too much to be listed. For sparing her. For giving her a second chance. For giving her a shot at a real life. For being her friend. For sharing his family with her. For coming after her in Vienna. For not letting her sink back into the Red Room when they came for her. For being there for her with Steve and James.

“Thank you,” he said in response. “For everything. I mean it.”

For looking after his family. For not killing him when he came for her. For taking his offer. For stretching and trying even when she’d hated every minute of the deprogramming and SHIELD adaptation. For getting him back from Loki. For coming for him when Leonid and Alexei had him. For being there for him now with Laura.

“Idiot.”

“Don’t go getting soft on me now, Nat.”

“Too late,” she said, then put her hand up to the headset. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“I’ll be here.”

She clicked it off, then took the gear off her head as she checked her face once more. The blood was gone. The dull ache and throb remained but the blood was gone.

Back in the pilot’s seat, she pulled out her phone from her jacket and stared at the messages on the screen.

Tony: Did you get lost on your way back?

Steve: You’re watching Peter’s back, aren’t you?

James: I’m sorry. I didn’t think before I invited Stark to a snow fight.
**James:** He and Stevie have set the rules and penalties, I think there’s enough now listed for a new Accords.

**James:** Might not be as bad as I thought. They’re laughing.

**James:** You okay, Doll?

She smiled. Well, that could be good news, though.

To James she wrote, **Penalties? And I’m fine. Wanted to talk to Clint, and I’m sitting here watching it snow.**

To Steve she wrote, **Watching it snow. Waiting for Peter. Having fun?**

To Tony, she sent a middle finger emoji.

Her phone buzzed almost immediately with all of their responses and she chuckled. None of them needed an immediate reply so, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

Two minutes later her phone buzzed again and she glanced at the screen.

**Peter:** Aunt May is so happy! You are the best. Ready to go when you are.

She sent a text to tell him she was where he left her, and then scrubbed a hand over her face before firing off a message to the guys at the Tower that they were heading back as soon as Peter was onboard.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she concentrated on breathing. The dull throb was still present, but it would pass.

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The great Thanksgiving snowball fight lasted for nearly two hours. Natasha had enough at about the same time Peter ended up in a tree and James had to dig himself out of an avalanche of snow while Steve drove Tony back with a series of pelting fastballs. Laura offered to pour her a glass of wine while she, Wanda, and Vision began the process of getting the food laid out. Rhodey, Sam, and Clint were glued to the action, with Cooper right alongside. Sam had complained, at first, then he watched Steve pitch James bodily over a snow fort, and decided maybe this round wasn’t for him.

“We’re about ready?” Natasha asked Laura as she pulled on her coat.

“You’re not walking out there…” Laura frowned and glanced out the window. James had Steve on the run now, and Peter was going for Tony. The rules said Tony could only fly as high as James could jump, and Peter wasn’t allowed to use his webs to pin anyone down. There were a dozen
other rules and caveats, she hadn’t listened to most of them on the flight out. Her head had been hurting, that at least seemed to have abated.

She drained the glass of wine Laura offered her then smiled. “I dare one of them to hit me with a snowball.” Then pulled her hair out from the collar of the jacket, and headed for the door. Wanda was right behind her. “I can handle this on my own,” she told her.

“I know,” Wanda said, pulling on her own coat as they slipped out the door to the deck. “You need a witness to say they started it.”

Natasha almost laughed.

Almost.

The shouts coming from farther afield of the main Compound pulled them toward the woods. The heavy snow in the city hadn’t been much lighter here, but between their antics, they’d actually managed to clear a path, or at least packed it down.

Tony had Peter, and flung him, and what looked like an arsenal of snowballs right at Steve. James intercepted, catching Peter, and Steve barely got his shield up in time. There were more shouts, followed by laughter.

“Well, at least they sound like they’re having fun,” Wanda said with a grin. “Looks like it, too. I think.”

“That they do.” And Natasha, for one, was very relieved. For all the rules, and penalties, and debates—they were getting along and they were playing. All four of them. Peter, she had no doubt, but James was still finding his footing some days, and Steve and Tony tended to irk each other, and there was a lot of history at least between the adults. “How are you doing? We haven’t had that much of a chance to talk.”

“I think I should be asking you that,” Wanda said with a nudge. “But I’m—I talked to Vision and he understands that I need time, and he’s promised to not press so much.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Wanda spread her gloved hands. “I don’t know how, I’m torn. I like him, but I’m not comfortable and I don’t know how to make myself get there.”

“Time,” Natasha told her. “Time and maybe learning to defend yourself in other ways will give you the strength to not feel like his betrayal could cause you harm like that again.”

A frown tightened the younger woman’s forehead. “You think I’m worried it’ll happen again?”

“Only a fool would say what has happened to them once can never happen again.” Natasha was no fool. “No, you make yourself stronger by identifying the threats, then identifying the ways to defeat them. So they can’t be used on you again.”

“I… that’s an unsettling thought.”

“The truth often is,” Natasha said, bumping her shoulder lightly. “But you can take it.”

“I hope so,” Wanda exhaled. “I really do.”

As they reached the first clearing, Natasha acted on instinct and tackled Wanda into one of the
drifts as a massive snowball flew past where they’d been standing.

“Oh shit,” Tony said then hovered over to them. “Civilians on the field,” he yelled. He held out a hand to her as she glared up at him, and she let him pull her to her feet and then they both pulled Wanda up.

A sound whistled through the air and Tony released an energized shield from his gauntlet. The snowballs hit it and sizzled to steam as they melted as she and Wanda dusted themselves off.

“Lay off Pete,” he called. “Natasha’s out here.”

“Hey!” Peter called and then he bounded out of the trees to land on the snowy ground and then tugged off his mask. “Hi.” His cheeks were ruddy and red, his hair disheveled, and his eyes gleaming.

Even Tony looked brighter, and the shadows beneath his eyes gone.

Fine, maybe she really did overthink it all.

James and Steve jogged over, and they were flushed, bright-eyed and there was laughter wreathing them as they shoved each other.

Children.

All of them.

She found herself grinning, and Wanda said, “Now I’m almost sorry I didn’t want to play today.”

Peter brightened at that. “We could go again later…”

“Maybe,” Wanda agreed.

“But for now, pack it in. Food’s ready and Laura’s put together a feast. You all need to clean up to go eat.”

“Then we’re calling it?” Tony asked, but his attention wasn’t on her but on Steve, and Steve nodded. They were all in gear—Steve and James included. Full tact gear to let them throw and hit as hard as they wanted. None of them holding back, and Tony’s armor was dinged in a few places to prove it.

That probably meant they were all bruised.

It only reinforced her opinion.

Children.

Adorable.

But children.

“All right,” James conceded, and he gripped Peter’s shoulder. “You’re not bad kid, crazy, but not bad.”

Peter laughed. “You started it…”

“And now we’re finishing it.” He gave his shoulder a squeeze.
Tony flipped his gauntlet over, palm up. “All right Friday—give us the scores. We’re calling it.”

Scores?

Wanda glanced at her and Natasha shook her head. If they discussed how they were scoring for a snowball fight, she had missed it. As it was, when she quirked a brow at James, he just shrugged and gave her such an open grin, she relaxed. He looked like he’d had fun. So did Steve for that matter, he slung his shield onto his back, though he still panted a little, he was catching his breath, flushed and laughing when he clapped James on the shoulder.


“Holy crap, you’re all just one point apart,” Peter said with a grin. “What did I do wrong Friday?”

“Hold that answer, Friday. We can dig down on the scores later. Let’s just finish this up and get the ladies back inside.” All of their breath was visible as they spoke, and the snow had continued to fall though it was lighter now than earlier. Nat caught one of the snowflakes on her tongue and then chuckled.

“Artistic scores, Captain Rogers, 201. Spider-Man, 331.” Peter whooped at that and Steve just chuckled. “Sergeant Barnes, 200.” James rolled his eyes and muttered something about art not being necessary in war. “Iron Man, 350.”

“How?” Peter gaped.

“Iron Man created the whirlwind of snowballs, in an elegant fractal composition,” Friday explained. “Karen and I agreed it was quite stunning, and visually appealing. While everyone else delivered interesting performances, Iron Man’s use of repulsors and polarizing the ice allowed for a more graceful delivery before he pelted Captain Rogers who earned several technical points in his own defense.”

“Well…how about that. I win.” Tony closed his fist and the screen shut off. “You and me, Red. First dance. It’s going to be epic. Got any particular song choices?”

“No, not really—can we eat now?” Her nose was cold, and she didn’t want to sport another nose bleed because of the drier air.

“Aww, not even a kiss for the champion?” Tony was pushing it.

“Sure, let me get right on that,” she drawled and then crossed over to flick him on the nose. “There you go. Now move it Shellhead.” She stretched a hand to Steve, and he caught her fingers with his, and then James was offering her an arm and she slid her arm through his. They were freezing.

Steve laughed and pressed a cold nose to her cheek and she hip checked him.

“Lead the way, Wanda,” she nodded her head toward the house.

Tony snorted a laugh and said, “Last one back has to take the first song in karaoke later.” Then he shot up, helmet closing as he fired his repulsors and soared toward the Compound.

“Oh…no…” Peter launched forward and raced across the snow.

Wanda cast a look at her with an apology. “I don’t want to do that, sorry!” Then she lifted off, propelling herself up and toward the building easily.
“Well if we all three get there at the same time,” Nat said leaning her head against Steve’s arm. “We’re not last.”

James chuckled. “Tony likes to bet.”

“He does,” Steve said, with just the barest edge of testiness. “Sometimes he likes to keep pushing to see how far people will let him go.”

“It’s how he knows people care,” she said quietly. “The more people let him get away with, the more he knows they just want him for something—money, prestige, to get laid…something he can give them. Selfish and greedy people will often enable to worst traits in others.”

“So when we push back and tell him no?” Steve eyed her, as they took a leisurely pace back to the house. As chilled as her face was, this was kind of nice. They’d all been out here romping since they arrived. “It makes him feel appreciated?”

James gave her a sidelong look. “Really?”

“You’d be surprised. Boundaries are good for people, especially creative ones who push themselves harder than anyone else around them would be willing to do.” It wasn’t hard to see Tony’s abandonment issues. They were rooted in his father’s neglect, his mother’s death, the loss of the family butler he’d adored, and the betrayal of the man who’d been like a second father to him. Partner all of that up with his hard drinking, hard-partying lifestyle, and it was a recipe for disaster. Tony had been looking for something to fill the void for years—Iron Man answered a lot of those questions.

And created new ones.

“So, what you’re saying is we should tell him no more often?” Steve sounded pleased if puzzled by the idea.

“I’m saying…that it’s okay to tell him no. It’s okay to push back if you see it going south, and it’s also okay for him to keep pushing. He’ll do it until he’s sure we won’t abandon him again.”

James made a humming sound, and she squeezed his arm.

“Okay, freezing now. Not a heavy enough jacket.” The words were barely out of her mouth when James scooped her up and raced ahead, Steve letting off a 

hey and then they were just at the deck with Steve skating ahead a spare inch when James set her on her feet.

“Sorry, Natalia…you sing much prettier than I do.” Then he was inside behind Steve, both men standing in the doorway wearing comically mixed expressions of contrition and amusement.

Children.

Rolling her eyes, she crossed the last few feet stomping the snow off her boots and waved them inside with a grin. “As if singing is the worst thing I’ve ever done…”

But she didn’t miss Pete and Tony high-fiving over something as she shrugged out of her jacket, and then she pulled off her snow soaked boots and set them to the side to dry. The heated air inside was bliss on her cold face, and she couldn’t imagine how chilled the rest of them were—then again, she’d done maneuvers in the snow. Running kept the blood warm.

“Let’s go, everyone grab a chair, and no, Lila,” Clint said, raising his voice. “You can’t bring the coloring book to the table. Mom worked hard on the food. Go put that up, wash your hands and get
to the table. Coop—you too, let’s go.”

Wanda carried Nate around on her hip, and she threw Natasha an apologetic smile. “Sorry about abandoning you.”

“Don’t worry,” Natasha said, rubbing her bare arms to get them a little warmer. “We still have training to start next week. We’ll work it out.”

Peter jerked his head up and Wanda swallowed. Natasha smiled. Steve came up behind her and ran his hands up and down her arms.

“Cold?” he asked with a small frown. “Want me to go find you a sweater or a hoodie?”

“I’ll be fine in a minute,” she said, leaning her head back and then smiling as he gave her a kiss. He and James had both changed or at least stripped out of the tact gear. They were both in long-sleeved pullovers and jeans.

“Oh, well how about this?” Steve wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against his chest. He was still a furnace despite the cold and the softness of his sleeves warmed her arms.

“That’s not too bad,” she sighed, just letting him hold her weight up.

“Hey,” Laura said, catching her hand. “Sorry Steve, I need to borrow our girl here.”

“What’s up?”

“You’ll see, take this,” she ordered, pressing the wine glass in her hand, then leading her toward the long trestle table they’d set up. There was seating for everyone present and room to push the chairs together if necessary. The table was filled to the brim with food.

James was already at the table, standing behind one chair, with his hands on two more. Directly across from him were Tony and Peter. With Sam farther down on the left, and Clint had the head of the table with Cooper on one side of him, and Lila on the other. Lila waved at her. Wanda had the chair between Cooper and Peter, while Rhodey had moved into the seat on Tony’s right. Laura must have the last chair at the end next to Nate. She nudged Natasha toward James. She was sitting between the two of them. That made sense. And Steve was sitting between her and Nate, which was kind of sweet.

Laura glanced around. “We’re missing one… where is Vision?”

“He said that this was a family meal and since he did not eat, he didn’t want to intrude,” Wanda said the last with a bit of exasperation. Natasha caught her eye and lifted a brow. Wanda shook her head. She was fine.

“Well that’s ridiculous…” Laura glanced at the ceiling. “Friday would you please ask Vision to join us? If he doesn’t want to be here, that’s fine. Otherwise, we would like him here.”

“I have relayed the message, Mrs. Barton.”

A moment later, Vision appeared and Nate clapped his hands. “I apologize if I offended you, Mrs. Barton.”

“Not at all offended, and I told you to call me Laura, Vision. Now come take a seat. Lila—can you scoot a little closer to Dad?”
Vision inclined his head, and then he moved to stand behind the last empty chair.

“At some point we sit right?” Tony asked in a stage whisper across the table. Natasha schooled her smile, but Lila laughed.

“Yes,” Cooper said in the same volume of a stage whisper. “But if you keep talking, Mom will make us keep standing.”

That earned a second round of laughter at the table, and Natasha folded her hands on the back of the chair. She’d had Thanksgiving with the Bartons before. Laura liked to say what they were grateful for before the food began.

“I have a tradition,” Laura said. “My family knows this, and every year we’ve spent together, we’ve done this. Nat even joined us one year and I think it was the only time I ever saw her speechless.”

James snorted, but Clint’s chuckle reminded her of how he’d teased her for the next three months for the way she’d stared at Laura so skeptically. Who stood and made a list of what they were grateful for?

With light fingers, James trailed his hand up and down her back. James was definitely a person who made such a list, as he’d amply demonstrated that morning.

“Anyway,” Laura said giving her a little smirk. “This year, I thought we would do something different. Every person at this table has lost something this year, and the world nearly lost the Avengers. Cooper and Lila have talked about the Avengers a lot at school, and they’ve talked to their friends, and their friends’ friends. We’ve heard from teachers, and parents, and people on the street… you might be surprised to know that even where we live—where the Avengers are never seen in person or very rarely…” She stared at Clint. “Or even when they are, they don’t realize one is standing right there—you are important. You touch lives, and you change them. So if you’ll indulge me… Coop?”

From the look on Clint’s face, he had no idea about whatever this surprise was. A frown flickered across his face, and he glanced down at Cooper who pulled a letter out of his pocket and unfolded it.

“On Thanksgiving, we are encouraged to show our gratitude and to say thank you. Even though we should do this all year long,” Cooper read, his voice slow and steady. “Every year, Mom and Dad ask us to go around the table and to say what we are grateful for…and sometimes it’s a Playstation or a new doll, and sometimes it’s for Dad coming home safe or for Mom making our favorite pie, but we have to find something to be grateful for. This year—Mom asked us to share why we’re grateful for the Avengers because we’ve heard so many stories and you need to hear them too.”

Everyone focused on Coop as he read, with varying expressions of intensity ranging from amusement to endearment to discomfort. Tony fidgeted a little. Natasha caught his eye, and gave him a small smile and then took a deep breath and let it out. Gaze locked on hers as she repeated the motion, he frowned briefly, his expression tight and then he blew out a slow breath. Gradually his shoulders relaxed and his breathing evened again.

Next to her James continued to trail his fingers against her back, the action probably self-soothing. Steve had gone a little stiff, and she shifted to put one her hands atop his and he flexed his fingers so hers slotted between his. Peter remained riveted on the kids as did Wanda. Rhodey had a glass of wine in his hand, much as Natasha did. Tony had no alcohol in front of him, and she’d thank Laura for that later. Laura paid attention to the kinds of details most others wouldn’t.
“But as we talked, we realized we had so many things to be grateful for, and we wanted to write them down.” Cooper paused and looked at them with an apologetic smile. “It’s long—but the food will be worth it, I promise. Mom’s a great cook.”

That earned him more laughter.

“Coop,” Lila said sternly. “Don’t go off script.”

Cooper rolled his eyes, but then he looked at the letter. “In no particular order—Mom said we had to add that because we didn’t go in any order.” This time Natasha bit back a smile. How long had Laura had the kids working on this?

“Uncle Tony, we’re grateful to you because you opened your homes and your life to all of the Avengers, and to the people that came with them. We’re grateful to you because when you see a problem, you try to fix it. We’re grateful for your intelligence, your creativity, and the fact you make really cool suits of armor.”

Across the table, Tony elbowed Peter. “See, he knows I’m cool.”

More laughter.

“I’d like to say I’m also really grateful for the hover engine in my Death Star.” Even more laughter, and Clint was shaking his head.

“Uncle Steve,” Cooper continued. “We’re grateful to you because you were the first Avenger.”

The table went quiet. “You were an Avenger when none of the others were here yet and you fought the Nazis to make us safer. You saved people then, and when you woke up here—you save people now. We’re grateful that you live up to the stories we read about you, and that you really like our Auntie Nat.”

More than one knowing look got thrown their way, but Nat merely smiled. Cooper was tickling her.

“Wanda—we’re grateful that you’re more like a sister than an aunt, and we’re grateful for you because you can make things move with your mind.” Cooper then looked up at her seriously. “We’re grateful to your brother, because he saved our dad…and we want you to know I’ll be your brother and Lila your sister and when Nate’s older, I bet he’ll want to be your brother, too.”

Wanda blinked back tears, and then hugged him. “I’d like that.”

Clint ruffled Cooper’s hair and Rhodey made a small sound like a cough, but Nat caught him wiping at his eyes, and he wasn’t the only one.

After a swallow, Cooper looked back at his letter, “Mr. Wilson and Colonel Rhodes, we haven’t gotten to know you as well as some of the other Avengers, but we want to. We’re grateful to you Colonel Rhodes because like our dad and Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes and Mr. Wilson, you served your country, and you continue to serve it. You were wounded in battle, and we’re grateful that you’ve never quit.”

Rhodey smiled at Coop and touched a hand to his heart as he lifted the wine glass to toast him. “Higher. Farther. Faster. Only way I know.”

Coop grinned at him. “Mr. Wilson, we’re grateful that you opened your door to Auntie Nat and Uncle Steve when they were in trouble. You didn’t have to help them, and you did. We’re grateful that you became a friend, and an Avenger, and Dad says sometimes the only sane one, so we’re
grateful to that.”

That got a huge roar of laughter, and Sam smirked. “Sane one. I like that.”

Done, Cooper passed the letter across the table to Lila. She grinned shyly, and Natasha leaned slightly so she could see her.

“We’re grateful to Vision, because he’s weird and different and curious. He asks the best questions, and we’re grateful to see our world through his eyes.”

The android in question inclined his head. “Thank you, I appreciate your kind words.”

With a bright grin, Lila looked back at the letter. “Uncle Bucky…”

James gave a little start, and his hand stilled on her back.

“…we’re grateful for you because you’re Uncle Steve’s friend, and now he’s not so alone in our time. We’re grateful that you were there for Auntie Nat long before she was our aunt, and that you make really good waffles, and that you really like Auntie Nat, too.”

Steve squeezed her fingers, and James let out a breath. “Anytime you want, I’ll make you waffles.”

Lila beamed. “Peter, we just met you, but we’re grateful for how fun you are, and that you’re a part of the Avengers family.”

“You’re also really good at Legos,” Coop added.

Peter grinned.

Finally, Lila looked up at her dad. “Daddy, we’re grateful to you because you love us, and you’re always doing your best to help everyone. We know that when you can’t be with us, it’s because you’re helping others and it’s important for you to do that. We want to be like you…and help everyone, too.”

Nat blinked as Clint’s eyes gleamed, and he caught Lila up and lifted her for a hug. “I love you, too Bug.” Cooper hugged his dad from the side, and Clint blew out a breath.

Tony reached forward for the water glass and took a drink. James’ hand tightened against her back and Steve ran his thumb up and down the side of her hand.

It was like—the sweetest kind of torture, it made her heart hurt and at the same time, she couldn’t bear to ask them to stop. Especially when they looked down the table at her.

Lila held up the letter and said, “Auntie Nat, we didn’t write down why we were grateful for you because there were too many reasons. But we’re grateful because you made sure daddy came home.”

“And we’re grateful,” Cooper added. “That you came back, too. We missed you.”

Then Laura said, “And I’m grateful that you knocked some sense into Clint when he really needed it.” Nat stared at her a beat, at the raw emotion in her eyes, and then glanced at Clint. Had he finally…?

He nodded once.

He told Laura about Loki.
“And I’m grateful you said yes,” Clint said. “Never looking back on that day with anything but fondness.”

Aware that everyone was looking at her with varying emotions, Natasha chuckled. “And I hate you all…”

That got another round of laughter, but Natasha lifted her wine glass and one by one everyone picked up a glass—some with water, some with wine, others with soda or juice.

“To the Avengers,” Natasha said. “Friends and family.”

“Friends and family.”

They raised their glasses and after everyone had a sip, Tony said, “Can we please eat now?”

Laughing, Laura waved them to the food. “Dig in.”

Chairs scraped back, and everyone took a seat. Nat found her hands captured on either side, each one squeezed, and then they let her go as the food began to make the rounds. Glancing at Laura again, she studied her friend, and Laura smiled. It was the most at peace Nat had seen her in a while.

Clint had told her a piece of his truth.

It was about damn time.
Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving winds down lazily, and everyone is aware that downtime can be fleeting...

Chapter Twenty

Downtime

Steve

Steve hadn’t been this full in he didn’t know how long. The snow fight had been fun, and while he’d had some reservations—particularly with Tony deciding to make dancing with Natasha a prize—he had to admit, the point system, and the challenge of it all had been almost freeing. Neither he nor Bucky had held back and Peter packed every bit the wallop Steve remembered. Tony was no slouch in his armor and since the only weapons they were allowed was the actual snow itself, it forced them to be creative and to plan out every maneuver.

They’d also taken turns teaming up, he and Bucky or Bucky and Peter, once Bucky and Tony and Steve had done the same. It was the kind of exercise they used to do when Thor was around, freeform brawling without the kind of structure needed in a combat simulation or group training.

Maybe they had to do something like it again with everyone, push boundaries and see how they reacted as individuals and who would naturally gravitate to whom. They’d decimated the meal—of which Natasha ate a fair portion, including a slice of peach cobbler prepared by Laura and Lila while Bucky and Steve helped Peter with the cherry pie Natasha had made, there had been apple pie as well, and just—so much food. Eventually, they’d tackled clearing the table, scraping off plates and boxing up the leftovers. Everyone was going home with something, surprisingly enough.

Once the dishwasher was loaded and a second stack waited for it to finish running, Tony had given the kids the decision of what to do next—ice skating or karaoke. Now, they were all gathered out in the training warehouse he’d had transformed into a beautiful skating rink, and the air was cold, biting, and Steve leaned against the railing watching Natasha and Wanda lead the kids out onto the ice.

It shouldn’t have surprised him that Nat could skate or that she even had her own pair. When she’d pulled them out, Bucky had taken one look at them and stolen them to clean up the neglected blades left in the back of her closet. She’d been doing the same for Lila’s blades, and Clint had taken charge of Cooper’s. Sam offered to do Wanda’s as Sam’s were already honed and ready. She’d passed, happy enough to do it herself.

Peter didn’t have skates, but Tony had the foresight to bring in pairs in every one’s sizes. Bucky had given them a dubious look but was cleaning up the pair he’d picked out for himself while Clint
sat next to him talking in low tones. There was even music playing in the makeshift rink—not quite Rockefeller Center, and a smile pulled at Steve’s mouth. He was looking forward to the night he and Bucky took her down there.

But outdoors it would be different than inside the cavernous warehouse with its icy air and biting chill.

“Not skating Cap?” Tony asked, holding out a large cup of covered coffee to him. Though, Steve had to sniff it a second time, it wasn’t quite coffee. “Toffee nut mocha latte,” Tony explained before taking a sip of his own. “Compliments of Laura.” He stumbled only a little over her name. The adjustment from formal addresses seemed to be spreading like collapsing dominoes around the group.

“Not yet,” Steve told him. “Wanted to watch.” Wanted to savor. “It’s good to have the team back again…” He trailed off into a laugh as Sam began to pick up speed and Wanda chased after him. Natasha shook her head and stuck to where the kids were skating.

“You know,” Tony said slowly, leaning against the rail next to him. “You’re not wrong…it’s nice. Nicer than I expected…could even say better than I hoped.”

A snort of laughter escaped. “I didn’t know I could hope for this.” He took a sip of the coffee—well the dessert coffee. The strong flavor of the coffee didn’t soften under the addition tastes of chocolate, toffee, and milk. If anything, it enhanced it. Not sickeningly sweet. He tried a second taste. Not bad at all.

“Yeah,” Tony said quietly. “You know what the Barton kids said—got me thinking.”

“That could be dangerous,” Steve commented and Tony rewarded him with a quick smirk. Nat was right; Tony did seem to need the pushback. Why did he ever doubt her?

“Sometimes,” the other man agreed. “Sometimes it is…but…they were right in that, there are things we should say thank you for, or at least, express our gratitude. Especially when we don’t seem to have much to be grateful for…or maybe more especially.”

Steve glanced from where Natasha flowed backward on her skates watching Cooper and Lila who pursued. She moved like she merely glided over the surface, never touching quite touching it.

“Thank you for having my back, and Bucky’s,” he told Tony. “Even if it was the very last thing you ever wanted or needed to do.”

Silence met his statement, and Steve turned slightly. Tony stared out over the ice as Bucky rose, his skates on and walked over to slide out there. Clint laughed and made a rude gesture at him that just made Bucky grin. It would never quite be the same grin he’d had when they were kids, but it was close. Events like this—friends, and family, and holidays… Natasha, they all brought out that familiar smile.

“I appreciate that,” Tony said slowly. “I do, and it’s not so bad anymore. Not—that guy out there,” he said, pointing to where Bucky began to pick up speed on the ice as he joined Wanda in going after Sam, but he sailed past them both and said, “On your left,” to Sam and it made Steve laugh at Sam’s snort of outrage. Then the racing was on. “He’s not a weapon anymore. That gives me more peace than I would have expected.”

Steve could understand that. “I’m glad it does. I don’t know that I could have pictured us here after meeting in London. I couldn’t picture what we were going to be doing when we caught up to her much less what came later…”
In truth, the Avengers seemed over, and this—being back together, he and Natasha had a relationship, Bucky was back with them—all of this was a dream. Especially the part where he and Natasha were together. He couldn't have imagined it. Yet, here they were a few months later.

Instead of answering immediately, Tony took a sip of his coffee. “I was tempted to dump you and Bucky and just take Nat and Clint and go home.”

That—really didn’t surprise Steve.

“But she wouldn’t have gone for it,” the other man continued. “She was right…about a lot of stuff.”

“Yeah, she was.” She was right that it was more important they all stay together and not how. She was right about the road they’d all taken wouldn’t end well. And if he could roll back time, he’d stop and listen to her a little more. Asked them to help him bring in Bucky, asked her to help him, rather than trying to get ahead of the curve. “At the same time, I don’t know if we could have slowed down to do it differently.”

“That’s a polite way of saying we’re both stubborn and intractable?”

The corner of Steve’s mouth kicked a little higher before he took a sip of the coffee.

“That’s fair,” Tony continued as if Steve had actually answered. “But this—this is only the beginning. We’ve come a long way…but we still have a long way to go.”


“That’s the next big hurdle.”

Peter joined the others on the ice, and while Bucky had switched from skating forward to skating backward like Natasha, Wanda and Sam were still following him and they were talking—there was almost the sound of laughter. So that looked good.

Skating over to Natasha, Peter was gesturing wildly and his voice vibrated with excitement.

“Liz must have texted him,” Tony said, motioning to Peter with his coffee cup.

“Girlfriend?”

“Not yet—but he asked her out so he’s got his fingers crossed.”

First dates were tough. Steve glanced at Natasha who wore an indulgent look as Lila caught her hand and she began to pull her in figure eights. Nat would have been an incredible mother. The reality of that sentiment crashed through him.

“So I have a question for you,” Tony said, pulling at Steve’s attention but he watched as she kept moving, and talking to Peter and the kids. Movement on the other side of the rink got caught his attention. Laura had come out and she’d settled on a bench right next to Clint and his head tilted toward her.

“What’s that?”

“Are you opposed to Peter continuing as a junior member of the team? Training here, working with Nat—maybe running some ops—later, when he’s a little more seasoned.” It wasn’t an unfair question.
“Does he want to be a member of the team?” Steve liked Peter, he was a good kid. Headstrong, impetuous, but full of heart, and his loyalty was unquestionable. But he was a kid. Did they even have the right to involve him at his age?

“I think he’d like it if he were asked,” Tony said. “He fits in, gets along with everyone—Red’s fond of him. I think it would be good for everyone, and he’s fresh. Doesn’t have a lot of preconceived notions about things. He’s far from cynical.”

“He’s too young to be cynical.” Though at fifteen, Steve had been working as a delivery boy at the pharmacy, and picking up paper routes, and pretty much anything else that would put some money in their pocket for food and medicine. Bucky had a job at the docks, in addition to the schooling, his mother insisted they both keep doing.

Fifteen seemed pretty young now, even if it hadn’t then.

“I’ll talk to Natasha about it, and then the three of us can talk to Peter. I don’t mind if he trains here, and I don’t even mind if Natasha keeps training him.” Though he could hope Peter was less cavalier with himself because Natasha wouldn’t be. He’d personally prefer not to go down that road again.

“Sounds like a plan. Now for the next question, how much do you want to be involved in the redrafting of the Accords?”

Steve grimaced. “It would be hypocritical if I said not at all, wouldn’t it?” He really didn’t want to deal with the politics or the politicians.

“Maybe, a little. But it’s not your comfort zone.”

“No, not really.”

“Then if not you, I already want Red involved. Red’s going to see the problems in the language, and she can parse intent from definition swifter and more cleanly than most. It would be good PR to keep her up front, too and to have the Committee actively engaging with her.” All reasonable, and Tony wasn’t wrong. Natasha could read people, too, and in those meetings, she’d be invaluable to Tony.

“Promise me you won’t leave her to face them on her own? I know she can handle it, I don’t want her to have to. I want there to be witnesses every step of the way so they can’t pull something like Ross did—” Especially since that bastard was still out there somewhere. He might have had his claws clipped, but he wasn’t toothless. Not yet.

“You have my word,” Tony said in a rare moment of solemnity. “Worked too hard to get her back here, won’t leave her back open for anyone to try and stick a knife in it.”

“Then talk to her, if she’s game. I think she’d be the best one of us there with you and T’Challa, and her endorsement would carry weight with everyone.”

There was a beat, then Tony said, “It didn’t before…”

As if he had to remind him. “No, it did. It made me question my own choices a couple of times. But I dug in my heels, and I didn’t want to compromise. We’re not those people anymore. If she signs off on it, especially after everything that happened—I’ll listen this time.”

“Fair enough,” Tony said, then winced as Peter narrowly avoided colliding with Cooper, and kept the kid from going down. “That would have left a mark.”
“This was a good idea,” Steve told him, glancing to where Bucky was winding his way toward Natasha and Lila. Buck would have been a great dad, too. He wanted to ask Tony to help him look. Tony probably already was, it was the kind of thing he’d do, quietly without a word to anyone, begin investigating so he could find their daughter.

“Yeah, not bad.”

“Surprised you’re not skating.”

“Don’t know how,” Tony admitted. “Never learned, never had the desire to learn.”

Then why would he… because he wanted to do something nice for everyone else. Wanda’s laughter carried from the ice where she and Sam were skating in circles, and Bucky had reached Natasha and matched her figure eight patterns with Lila.

“My tailor is coming to the Tower on Monday, so you and Bucky need to make time to get measured so we can have your tuxes ready for Friday.”

Once upon a time, he would have protested. He didn't care for the fancy dress events, but this was one of the rare ones that seemed important to Tony. “Long as we don’t get called out, just let us know what time.”

“10 work?”

Steve nodded. “Ten works… are you going to be offended if we pay for our own suits?”

“You have no idea how much,” Tony answered with a grin. “Save your dollars. I’m having a dress made for Red, too, so let’s keep it fair and you don’t think I’m overstepping with her.”

Which planted him right on the line they’d managed to neatly avoid despite his betting Natasha’s first dance earlier. “You’re friends, right?” Steve kept his tone even and met Tony’s gaze.

“Yes, we are,” the other man didn’t shy away from the eye contact.

“Then I don’t think you’re overstepping.” As much as it was the right thing to say, Steve fought the urge to add anything more to it. He trusted Natasha.

They both winced as Peter collided with Sam, who inadvertently took down Wanda. Wanda managed to save herself, and Buck caught Cooper before he could land in the middle of it.

“So maybe a bounce house would have been better…” Tony said, chuckling.

Maybe.

Then Steve tracked his gaze to where Natasha moved into a slow spin, she’d been showing Lila and Lila repeated the motion, but not quite as easily. Natasha repeated it, and she moved almost from standing still to a slow spin that tightened and tightened until she spun in place and then stopped.

Step by step, she took Lila through it, and when Lila finished a solid one, she gave her a high five. After, Natasha held up a hand as if telling Lila to stay put, and then began to move, skating backward around the whole rink, picking up speed.

Yeah, Peter and Sam needed to not pull any antics right now, but Bucky had already tapped them as they made it to their feet and they shifted to the middle, just as Natasha neared Lila, she did a
leap and spun before she landed on one skate and then continued, picking up speed.

Cooper whistled and Lila was clapping along with Wanda.

When she whizzed past them, the cool breeze of her passage brushed his face and carried a hint of the shampoo she favored. She leapt and did a spin in the air, and then landed and leapt again.

But instead of continuing around the rink, she began spinning, then caught one leg and had it arched up and over her head as she caught the skate itself and kept spinning and then she let it go as she slowed and finally turned like a ballet dancer, arms up as she skated in a small circle skates angled out.

Whistles and applause broke out and then Clint yelled, “Showoff!”

And Steve found himself chuckling along with the others.

“You know, it doesn’t even surprise me that she can do that. How much you wanna bet she had a cover as a figure skater?” Tony asked and all of Steve’s humor dried up.

It wasn’t a bet he wanted to take or even prove. “Don’t ask her.”

Tony pivoted to look at him. “What?”

“Don’t ask her if she ever had that cover—if she did, it was probably something they made her do or programmed her or some other horror story—and look at her Tony, she’s laughing and playing with the kids. Don’t ask her.” There were so many old, scarred over wounds within her. How had Clint put it? Sometimes secrets weren’t about deception but about self-preservation.

“I won’t,” Tony said softly. “Wasn’t planning on it—well, yeah okay maybe I was, but I wouldn’t have meant anything by it.”

“I know,” Steve assured him. Oddly enough, he did. Tony cared. A hell of a lot and he had been killing himself to do right by her. At the same time, he wanted to know everything about her. Steve couldn’t fault that, he soaked up every drop of her past she cared to share with him, even the ugly parts. Maybe even especially those, because he wanted to protect her from anything related to it. “I know you don’t. So does she…”

“Peter asked her if she always wanted to be the Black Widow last night.” The engineer sighed, and shook his head. “I was all ready to intervene, and she just handled it. Told him, she supposed she did. Kept her answers pretty much G-rated, no salacious details. It seemed to roll right off her.”

“Maybe that did… but that…” He said motioning to where she was now guiding Lila on skating with one leg out like they were flying. Like Steve, Bucky was tracking her every movement. Wanda had skated over to join them and Nat was showing her, too. “That’s a fragment of beauty. Let it be about this and the kids, and having fun.” If she volunteered that it was otherwise, fine. But they didn’t need to poke at that wound.

“Sold,” Tony assured him.

“Thanks,” Steve said before draining his coffee. “And thank you for this.”

“That was all Laura…” Tony waved off his comment. “But you’re welcome…”

Setting the empty down so he could dispose of it later, Steve folded his arms. The cold rolling off the ice didn’t seem so chilly and the bite in the air wasn’t bothering him as much. Instead of
wandering off, Tony just settled in and they watched together.

Not a bad way to spend an hour—especially when Sam and Bucky decided to race and Bucky spotted Sam a whole lap. Without even glancing at Tony, Steve said, “Ten on Natasha.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Tony laughed. “Yeah, okay. I can see it. But I’ll spot you that action.”

Steve added a fresh ten to his wallet twenty minutes later.

Tony

It had been a whim to take the coffee to Cap. The ice skating was a hit with everyone except Cap. He’d isolated himself to one side of the rink, and Tony wasn’t the only one who noticed. Natasha glanced in his direction several times, and so had Bucky. Laura had picked up on it, too, apparently—hence the coffee. Cap’s expression didn’t reveal any distress, but his posture wasn’t relaxed either.

Initially, Tony hadn’t planned to hang out. He was stuffed, and the meal had been loud, and noisy, and there had been a lot of laughter, and nearly a few tears. It was probably one of the best meals Tony had ever attended, and he’d dined with a few heads of state in his time. Boring bastards.

Still, once he and Steve started talking, Cap began to relax. Watching Natasha skate was a treat, watching Sam and Bucky get verbally spanked by Natasha was even better. Though, if he’d been able to actually hear what she said would have been nice. Either way, Pete was having a good time, so was Wanda, and she’d been in a relatively good mood most of the day. Clint and his wife were making eyes at each other.

Who said married men couldn’t have game?

Here was hoping that worked out.

Rhodey had actually gone to watch a football game, and probably to take a nap after the meal, and Vision had wandered off to do whatever. And hanging out with Cap, well it wasn’t so bad.

“You know, I’m trying to remember the last time I celebrated Thanksgiving…”

Steve cast a look at him. “Last year we had an op…made it back in time for the parade—”

At the abrupt stop, Tony frowned at him. “Problem?”

“Natasha didn’t watch the parade today.”

“She probably recorded it.” If she didn’t and wanted it, he and Friday could probably figure something out. “Yeah, you guys had an op last year, and the year before that—we had a quick meal at the Tower.” He’d catered it, and they’d set it up buffet style. Red hadn’t shown up for that one.
“Natasha wasn’t there…she was still working on her covers, and coming and going then.” Steve frowned.

Tony shrugged. “Pepper and I went away for Thanksgiving the year before that…” He’d still be in making it up to Pepper mode, after Killian and Extremis from the holiday season before.

“But we had to call you in…”

That was right. “Bruce was having problems with that code.” He’d had to leave Pepper on the island. He’d thought it would take him a few hours, then it turned into a few days, and she’d eventually made her way back to California on her own. He barely got to spend Christmas with her that year. That had not been a good year. Not as bad as the year prior, but definitely not good.

“The year before that was your first year out of the ice…”

“Yeah, and Natasha showed up at my place in DC and watched the parade. Said she never missed it. And as far as I know, she hasn’t but…”

“Lots going on now,” Tony offered. “Maybe she just got distracted.” Then again, how often did Red get so distracted she forgot things she liked to do. Of course, she had disappeared on them when she took Peter to have dinner with his aunt. “Maybe she watched it on the quinjet and that was why she didn’t come back while Pete was having dinner with May.”

Steve’s expression relaxed abruptly. “She could have…”

“No, but… just didn’t think about it this morning, and I should have. I missed that.”

“Don’t sweat it, Steve,” Tony advised. “Really, just don’t. She could have watched it on the quinjet or recorded it for later. Or maybe this year, the parade of the rest of us was enough.”

“Possibly.” Not that he sounded convinced.

Natasha had skated Lila over to the edge and the little girl was getting out with Clint’s assistance. Cooper was right behind her, and the kids went with their parents to get out of their skates. Natasha leaned against the railing, talking to Bucky and Sam. Oh, to be a fly on that wall. The fact she’d kicked them off the ice with a few well-placed words that Tony hadn’t even been able to hear was worth losing ten bucks to Steve.

Next Natasha skated over to them and Steve’s expression warmed. “Having fun?”

“I am, actually,” she answered with a smile, and her gaze swept over to include Tony as well. “This was a great idea, Tony.”

“I’ve been known to have those from time to time,” he told her with a wink. “Kids done for now?”

“Yeah, I think they’re going to have some family time.” Her smile grew a notch brighter. “We’ll see them later this evening. Maybe.”

Tony nodded. “Got it, we let them find us, we don’t go looking for them.”

“Thank you,” Natasha said. “I want to give them all the real-time together we can…” Behind her, Peter and Wanda were moving in lazy circles, talking. The kid really did fit in well with the team. Despite his misgivings after the factory incident, the night before cemented his belief that Natasha
was the best person to take charge of his training. The way she’d handled both him and Peter, and the food she cooked. Course, it could be the near nine hours of sleep Tony got, a virtually unheard of number, played some part in his current good mood. Her sofa was comfortable. He may have to swap it for the one in the penthouse. Or get Friday to order him another one like it.

“We can drag everyone back to the Tower, leave them the Compound for the weekend,” Tony suggested. He had the room.

“No,” Natasha said, shaking her head. “Wanda said she volunteered to watch the kids at some point this weekend, I might do the same.”

Steve chuckled. “You win, either way, give Clint time with Laura and get to play with the kids.”

“This is true,” Natasha said with a wink. “Are you up for skating or just going to keep watching?”

“I’m good with watching,” he told her. “Really—Tony and I are talking, and I’ve got the best view in the house.”

Okay. Cap was getting smooth. What happened to his life? Tony hid a smirk.

“Yeah, so why don’t you go show off for us some more, and then we’ll head inside for karaoke. You owe us the first song.”

Her indelicate snort just made him grin wider. “Let me guess, you already have a song picked out.”

“I could, if you want me to, but I thought I’d leave it up to you.” It would be safer that way, and he really wanted to hear her voice up close and personal.

“Generous.”

“So glad you noticed.” He winked and she rolled her eyes.

“I’m going to skate a little more…or we can call it and head back to the Compound if you want.”

“Skate,” Steve told her. “Sam and Bucky still have skates on, so does Wanda…go skate.”

“Be done soon…” She leaned over and Steve dipped his head, and she gave him a kiss. Tony decided to behave and not stick his face closer for a kiss, because she’d likely pop him one. The nose flick earlier had been funny though.

And he won his dance with her. It wasn’t quite the date he envisioned, but he could make it work.

When she pushed off to skate away, she began a lazy circuit weaving around until Bucky caught up to her and then she began skating backward, talking to him as she went. Completely comfortable in her environment, a flush to her cheeks—hard to tell anything had happened to her. The jacket disguised the weight loss, though her face definitely had some hollows still in it.

Pulling out his phone, he flipped through the screens until he reached the blood work reports. Cho only noted that all of her panels were in the normal or extra-normal range for Natasha. The cellular degradation they’d seen post radiation drain was gone, and if anything, her red blood counts were up in the healthy range, nearly fully restored if not improved.

Based on blood work alone, she was in perfect condition. Tony glanced over as she and Bucky joined Wanda and Peter. Steve glanced at him, “I’m going to go get us more coffee—the real thing this time.”
“Sounds good,” Tony said. “The break room over there should have a single cup maker, if we want to rough it.”

Steve laughed at him. “You coming or you want me to bring you one?”

“Oh, I’ll definitely take one, just going to look at some reports while we wait.”

“Don’t forget it’s a day off for you, too,” Steve reminded him.

“No rest for the wicked, Cap.”

Moving away from the rail, he dropped to sit on one of the benches. The room was damn chilly, but his coat had a heated thread running through it, and he activated it to push away the cold. Flipping through Cho’s observations, he found nothing to worry about. She believed that Natasha’s natural healing ability had kicked in, and that based on all the current results she stood by her decision that Natasha could resume her duties within a few days. The only caveat was the brain scans.

An alert popped up on his phone, and he tabbed to Friday’s interface.

**Friday**: Dr. Strange was seen at Metro-General Hospital within the last hour. A Dr. Christine Palmer was treating him. He appeared, then disappeared from scans. Follow-up does not actually show him entering or leaving the hospital by conventional methods.

**Why didn’t you alert me to this earlier?**

**Friday**: Nothing to report, Boss. I couldn’t actually get a lock on him. A message has been left for Dr. Palmer indicating our request to reach Dr. Strange, but we’ve had no response so far.

Dammit. Fine, he’d make a personal call on Dr. Palmer if he had to, there had to be some way to grease these wheels.

The smell of coffee accompanied Steve as he returned with two capped disposable cups. He passed one to Tony. “Problem?”

“This damn doctor I’m trying to find,” Tony admitted. “Best neurosurgeon in the country, possibly the world. A genius and gifted as hell. Had a car accident a few months ago, hurt his hands—probably can’t do surgery anymore but he’s still got his brain, he sees things other doctors miss.”

“Natasha.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Yeah…it’s the only thing we have left to check, and if Banner were here, we could ask him.” Tony shrugged. “I’ve been doing some research on it, but… I want an expert opinion.”

He could almost feel the weight of Steve’s stare. “What does your research tell you?”

Tony glanced out to where Natasha was laughing at something with Wanda while she worked with Peter to skate backward. “Not enough.” Not enough to fix it if there was a problem, and her continued memory loss indicated there was a problem. Long term exposure to that chair could have changed the landscape of her brain, but Bucky got his memories back. Theoretically, he’d been exposed to it more often than she had… “Too many variables that I can’t account for… but I’ll figure it out, Cap. I promise.”

“Never a doubt in my mind to be honest.”
It was probably the nicest thing Cap ever said to him.

Natasha

Sprawling on the bed, she carded her fingers through James’ hair where he lay with his head against her stomach. They’d come back from skating and divided up for a bit, Wanda wanted to shower and Peter wanted to check in with his aunt. Tony went in search of Rhodey, while Sam went to look for leftovers. She, Steve, and James had migrated back to her room for a little quiet time before karaoke.

Steve walked over to the bed, wiping his hands on a towel. “You two look wiped.”

She laughed, and James just grunted. “I’m tired, but not—tired. Does that make sense?”

“Too many people. Good people, just too many of them.” James said. “But I like being Uncle Bucky. That was a plus.”

“That’s definitely a plus.”

After returning to the towel to the bathroom, Steve came over and fell on the bed next to her. Bouncing she and James and she laughed again. Steve looked better, now that they were off the ice. James grumbled at him, but then settled his head back on her abdomen. Holding out an arm, she sighed when Steve pressed a kiss to her neck before settling his head against her shoulder.

She’d worried about him earlier, he’d been holding himself so stiffly. If not for Lila, she’d have abandoned the ice skating—then Tony showed up and whatever they talked about relaxed him gradually. James had noticed it, too. Told her not to worry, Steve would be fine.

“So… do we have to go back for the singing part?” James asked.

“Yes,” she told him, then flicked his ear and he muttered. “It’s your fault,” she continued.

“Mine?” He twisted to look up at her.

Steve smiled against her throat. “Yeah, you dropped her on the deck and made her last. So she has to kick off the karaoke.”

“Oh,” James said slowly. “Right, I did do that.”

“So yep,” Steve sounded altogether too cheerful about the fact. “It’s your fault we can’t just stay right here.”

“Hmm…” James lifted his head and looked around. “This is a small bed, Natalia.” Lying horizontally, his legs were off the edge. The bed in her room at the Tower was an oversized king. This was barely a full.

She snorted. “I didn’t share it with anyone except Clint occasionally when one of us had bad dreams. Wanda once after she had a nightmare and… no, I crashed in Steve’s room that night.
Steve never slept in here.” Steve had a queen sized bed in his room.

“No,” he said quietly. “It wouldn’t have occurred to me to ask either…”

“Even if we shared a bed on some ops? And a couple of times I ended up next door with you?” It was kind of funny in a way. He’d been horribly embarrassed the first time they’d had to split a single bed in a dingy hotel room and offered to sleep on the floor. She told him she’d sleep in the bathtub before she made him sleep on the floor.

He slept in the bed, but he hadn’t moved an inch from his side of it. When James sat up, Steve shifted and rolled onto his back, tugging her with him and then he was laying against the pillows and she had her head against his shoulder. She much preferred sleeping curled up to him, where he touched her easily and stroked her arm. Her eyes grew heavier. It was…

James glanced over his shoulder at them, and his expression softened. “If you keep cradling her like that, she might go to sleep.”

“Shh,” Steve mimed as a whisper. “You’ll ruin my plan.”

With a laugh, James pushed off the bed and began to move around the room. Shifting, Natasha watched him exploring and her eyes drifted half-shut. Steve was rubbing small circles against her arm, and it was just nice, and warm and the thud of his heart was a steady cadence…

She snapped her eyes open. They still had plans for the evening, and it had been nice to have the team together. James was staring at something on her dresser and she tilted her head even as her eyes started to drift closed again.

“What are you looking for?” Steve asked.

“I don’t know—” James admitted. “Natalia lived here, and…there’s a painting out there she was asking Tony about yesterday, and there are knives in frames, and little pieces of personality.” He picked up a tiny replica of the Statue of Liberty and held it up. “And then she has this?”

Natasha laughed, and he glanced at her. Making her eyes open, she said, “That was the first thing I bought myself after I came to SHIELD and got clearance to be on my own. I had an apartment in DC, got a car, drove to New York and spent the day wandering around like a tourist. It was raining like hell, and I took a ferry out to Ellis Island, did the tour, and then climbed the Statue of Liberty. Got that in a gift shop and brought it back. Actually, I got two of them…”

At their curious looks, she made herself sit up and scoot to the side to lean back against the headboard and Steve sat up to sit next to her. If she kept lying on him, James was right, she’d go to sleep.

“One for Clint to prove to him I could spend a day not working.”

James chuckled and looked at the little souvenir. “And you kept it all this time?”

“I don’t have a lot of things,” she admitted. “I probably should have taken it with me when I left the last time, but… I didn’t know how close Ross and his men would be, so I grabbed my bag, my weapons, and my laptop and left my comms and went.”

Steve clasped her hand. “We can take it back to the Tower—we can probably take anything from here you want to the Tower. I’ve got some stuff in my room I could probably take back, too.”

“Or leave it here, we might be using these rooms more now that I’m actually able to come back
“Then we’re getting you a bigger bed,” James said. From the dresser, he walked to the stacked paintings against one wall and began to flip through them. One in the back he pulled out and Natasha laughed. She’d forgotten about that one.

“I picked that up in Battery Park, a few weeks after we defeated the Chitauri.” It was the Statue of Liberty, but with New York spread out behind it, and the Avengers tower was clear in the background as well as the devastation from the attack, but the portal was closed. It was like someone tried to capture those seconds after everything just stopped, and the sudden and abrupt quiet punctuated by wailing sirens and crumbling buildings all reflected in the painting itself, but the statue was untouched and gleaming.

Steve studied it. “It’s not bad work…”

It was tragic and hopeful in the same breath.

“If you paint me something, I’ll hang it up,” she told him.

“What if I painted you?” The question actually made her shiver.

“Well…depending on what I’m wearing…”

“…or not…” James suggested as he put the painting back, it was in the front now where she could see it clearly.

“Oh not,” she agreed. “I’d still hang it.”

“If it’s a nude it goes in the bedroom,” Steve said firmly. “Or somewhere else that’s just ours…” She rather liked the idea of him painting her nude. How much trouble could she get into if she kept distracting him?

“Maybe the safe house in Queens at first,” James suggested. “Speaking of which, do we need to check on your places?”

Natasha groaned, she didn’t want to think about work just yet. “No, Isaiah would have taken care of it. I need to call him before he takes a hit out on me.” At James’ sharp look, she held up a hand. “Joke.”

“Not funny.” The scowl only made her smile though.

“It’s a little funny.”

Steve poked her gently. “No, not funny.”

She made a face. “Pfft. Fine. After you meet Isaiah, you’ll know why it’s a joke.” That was another item on her to do list, authorize James and Steve with Isaiah and make sure he set up access to her accounts for them. The trusts were already in place, but that represented only a portion of her holdings. Clint knew about the safe houses and the vault. The guys needed to have access to those, too.

“Why don’t we go out tomorrow and get a tree,” Steve said.

“While it’s still snowing?” James asked. “You think the lots will be open?”

She and Steve answered at the same time, “Yes.” Then she continued, “It’s Black Friday and forth.”
All the sales will be on and a lot of retail outlets will fight to be open if they can get the streets cleared… but I can’t go first thing in the morning.”

“Well I didn’t mean right away,” Steve told her. “But why not first thing?”

It had been a while since she’d been at the Compound, so she said, “Friday, privacy mode please.”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff. Boss just asked me to remind you that you have to open the karaoke tonight so don’t get too comfortable in here. His words, not mine.”

Natasha laughed. “Tell him to keep his pants on, we’ll be out soon and if he’s nice, I’ll make cocoa.”

“I have that recorded, Red,” Tony answered in lieu of Friday. “And I’m always nice.”

“Bye Tony—privacy mode, Friday.” She cut off his protests and then there was silence. At James’ raised eyebrows, she shrugged. “It’s been a while, I didn’t know if my protocol was still up.”

That mollified him.

“Anyway,” Steve said. “You were saying about tomorrow?”

“I’m going to dance in the morning,” she said, not missing the smile on James’ face. “It’s been forever, and I need the workout, then I’m going out.” She debated not saying where she was going, because Pepper seemed to indicate the need for privacy, but… she hadn’t explicitly asked for it beyond the meeting location. “Pepper texted me yesterday, she asked if I would be free to meet with her tomorrow.”

“Tony’s Pepper?” Steve asked. “Did she say why?”

“Nope,” she told him, and then pulled out her phone and scrolled to the messages before handing it to him. James crossed over to fall on the bed in front of them, and he read them next.

“She wants you to come alone, is there a chance this is a trap?”

While she could fault James for feeling that way, she had to fight to keep from laughing. “I doubt it. Pepper runs Stark Industries, I’ve known her for a few years. I wouldn’t say we’re friends but we’ve been friendly. Friendly enough that I’m willing to go meet her. She has an apartment in the city, I’ll go and see her, have breakfast or whatever, and then I’ll head back to the Tower afterward.”

The pair exchanged a look. Concern plain as day that they made no attempt to conceal.

“No, I would prefer neither of you went with me, as Pepper isn’t expecting a third or fourth for that matter. I’m perfectly capable of getting there and back…” She raised a hand. “And before you say I’m still recovering and the authorities only recently dropped the investigation, I know all of that. I’ll be cautious.”

Blowing out a breath, Steve said, “Would you mind if one of us drove you over and picked you up?”

“Yes,” she told them. What she wanted to say was she wasn’t going to disappear on them. But their worry had nothing to do with her suddenly changing her mind or vanishing. Clint was right, she’d scared the hell out of all of them, and this might be the consequence she dealt with for a while. “I do mind, and I’m not a fan of you two getting antsy every time I’m out of sight.”
“You took Peter to deliver his aunt’s dinner today by yourself,” James pointed out.

“And I never left the quinjet, that Tony can track even in stealth mode and I had on my bracelet,” she reminded him. “However, I do not want to pick a fight. If I tell you no, James is likely going to follow me anyway and freeze on some rooftop getting a sightline on her apartment.”

He didn’t deny it.

“So…yes, you can drive me and drop me off. Then I’ll let you know if I need a ride back. I’ll compromise—but this isn’t going to be the long term plan guys, I come and go sometimes, I need that freedom.” She wouldn’t be leashed, not even by them.

Catching her hand in his, Steve lifted it to his lips. “We’re never going to ask you to do that, Nat.”

James neither agreed nor disagreed, and the solemn look in those eyes promised he was not on board with that plan. One fight at a time. They were still all new at this, well… mostly.

“You can’t say never, Steve,” she told him, glancing at him sideways. “I will ask that you say nothing to Tony yet about me going to see Pepper. I don’t think she wants him to know.”

“Do you trust her Natalia?” James asked, and if she told him yes he would relax and that would be that, but…

“I don’t mistrust her,” she said simply. “Pepper Potts is a highly intelligent and organized woman who managed Tony Stark for years, and now manages his company like she was born to do the job. She’s been face to face with a lot of disasters and comes out the other side relatively sane all things considered.” Particularly the Extremis, and everything that went down with that.

Steve, who knew some of that history, nodded. “Pepper’s a nice lady, she can be formidable when she’s trying to get things done. But I’ve never had a reason to mistrust her, Nat’s right.”

“She usually is,” James said. “Fine, we’ll take you and one of us will be up the block, I’m sure there’s a coffee place somewhere, they seem to be on every corner.” And that was that.

Groaning, Natasha leaned her head back. Steve pressed a kiss to her temple. “Is it so terrible we care?”

“No,” she admitted. “It’s not…”

“But you do not want to be caged,” James said. “Not even by us.”

“No,” she said slowly. “And I know it’s not a cage…it’s concern, and I’m working on it.”

“We all are,” Steve agreed and then kiss her hand again. “We keep talking, don’t assume, and we find a way to make it work.”

“You know I’ll have jobs or missions or moments when I’m out there without you both, right?” Because that was the nature of the business. She and Steve worked together a lot, but they’d also separated and handled different elements of missions. She and the Soldier had to have been the same.

“One step at a time,” James said. “After your meeting with Pepper,” he continued moving them on. “What’s next?”

“Probably a workout if I’m up for it, and maybe some sparring?”
“How about we do a light workout, limited sparring—then shower and go out to dinner, the three of us and find our tree?” Steve suggested.

Natasha laughed. “Didn’t you want to go skating and see the tree at Rockefeller Center when we got our tree?” Not that she was opposed, but Steve was like a kid with the idea and while it was adorable, he hadn’t skated today.

“Yes,” Steve said. “We’ll get some hot pretzels, maybe some hot apple cider, and find the perfect tree. Let’s face it, we’ve had some quiet days, they’re not going to last and I want us to have that memory.”

Okay.

She couldn’t argue with that.

“We can skip the skating if you don’t want to do that,” she told him. “But I’m game for all of the above…”

“*All* of the above?” James asked, stroking her calf.

Grinning, she poked him. “I still have to sing.”

The disconsolate look on his face made Steve laugh. “Sorry pal, you did that to yourself.”

“He did it to all of us,” she reminded Steve, and he kissed her lightly.

“True…so, we go, you sing and then we head back to the Tower for an early night?”

It was a solid plan, but it meant she had to put off talking to Tony again, and that was all right. She’d gotten him to agree to box with her, and there was a workout and light sparring on the agenda for the next day. If her sparring was with Tony, she could ask him about B.A.R.F. She’d avoided thinking about since getting back, or at least not thinking about it too closely.

But she was getting better. She was stronger, the skating, the sparring, all her tests… Beyond that, Tony needed the outlet, and getting him to sleep the night before had done him a world of good and she needed to answer some questions.

“Then come on,” James said, scooping her up and putting her on her feet, before giving her a light kiss. “I have all kinds of plans for you tonight, and they don’t involve clothes or other Avengers.

“You have plans?” Steve countered. “What if I have plans?

“My plans involve you, Punk,” James said and she wrapped her arms around him as Steve laughed.

“Now who’s easy to rile?”

Both of them, but it was still nice to just sit in the quiet. “All right… we’ll enjoy all of our plans back at the Tower, because I had plans too.” Suddenly, she had both of their attention.

After giving each one a kiss, she sauntered away for the door.

“What plans?” Steve asked when she didn’t elaborate.

Smiling, she glanced over her shoulder, let her gaze drift over Steve, then James, and let out a little sigh. There were so many worse things than her life at the moment. “You’ll see…”
“We’re in trouble,” Steve said quietly and she didn’t miss James’ firm assent.

“But I think we’ll like this trouble,” James told him and clapped him on the arm.

She thought she might like this trouble, too.
Chapter Summary

Thanksgiving wraps up with throuple time, and Natasha meets with Pepper the following day.

Chapter Twenty-One

Favor

Natasha

“You have a gorgeous voice,” Steve told her as they rode the elevator up to his floor. After leaving Tony in the penthouse, they’d taken Peter to her floor first, and she’d nudged him toward the guest room. The teen was dead on his feet and staggering. She got his shoes off and left Steve and James to get the kid into a change of clothes so he could sleep, but he was out before his head hit the pillow.

Instead of a quick song, they’d stayed for nearly two more hours. As it turned out, the karaoke had been a lot of fun. “Thank you,” she said, tilting her head up. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

There was a flush to his face when James laughed and added, “Choir boy here always had a great voice.”

“Peter’s good, too. Wanda though…” They all made faces. “I need to work on that with her.” Poor thing cracked more than a few notes, but she took an A for effort. Tony had surprised them all when he got up there with Peter, and she’d joined them for one song, too. Sam, however, Sam was a total ham and she’d ended up singing three duets with him, and he wanted to hijack her to a real karaoke bar.

Just… no.

“I’m surprised you never got up there,” Steve countered to James. “You let Sam have all those songs with Nat, and didn’t say a word.”

She’d missed having Clint, Laura, and the kids there for it, but the fact Clint and his family were taking time to themselves was well worth the trade off. Clint had told Laura about Loki. It was a solid step in the right direction.

“I get to sleep next to her every night, he can have a few songs,” James countered and Natasha just laughed. Neither he nor Steve was a fan of being the center of attention. James gravitated to the edges, and she wasn’t going to fault him for it.

“He also makes a wonderful audience to sing to,” she said, defending him as the doors opened to Steve’s floor. “Not that you’re a slouch.”
Three steps out of the doors and she was up and turned around and being kissed. The speed left her breathless, but she wrapped her arms around James and hitched her legs to his hips. After the morning wake up, she should have expected the ferocity in his demanding licks and deeper, tongue sucking kiss, but as it was all she could do was hang on.

When he finally let her up for air, he said, “Better. I’ve been wanting to do that since you did those spins on the ice…I will never tire of how graceful you are when you move.”

While she usually had her involuntary reactions under control, she couldn’t suppress the wave of heat his words conjured.

His gaze softened as he pressed his forehead to hers. “You mean it about dancing in the morning?”

“Absolutely. The studio is sound proof so it won’t wake Peter up, and I’ve missed dancing, too. You are both more than welcome to come and watch.” She didn’t usually perform for an audience, the dancing was about her and her body and movement, and there was a freedom she found there, but she wouldn’t tell either of them no. Especially not when James lit up at the idea.


James gave him a bemused look. “That’s not how that game works.” But he released her to let Steve wrap an arm around her and steal a kiss. Being manhandled constantly should lose its charm, it really, really should.

But there was something exceptionally hot and wild about the fact they were always so damn careful with her, cradling, maneuvering, and handling her with such extreme gentleness that it could leave her ready to scream in frustration and then flipping on a dime, one or the other could push her right up against a wall or steal her into an office, and all that power focused on her left her a little drunk.

She threaded her fingers through Steve’s hair, gripping lightly when he swallowed her moan and he palmed her ass with a squeeze. Her boots were coming off, and she broke the kiss a moment to find James hauling them off, then peeling away her socks before Steve was kissing her again, and her pants were being peeled down.

“I take it…” She managed between kisses. “We’re going… with… someone… else’s… plan…”

Then Steve kissed a path down her throat, and she shuddered as the air flushed against her naked ass and she was pressed back against James. The cool metal of his palm flattened against her abdomen as he braced her easily and kept her off the ground, then Steve’s hot palms were under her shirt and pushing it up and over, careful of the chain on the dog tags.

“No plan,” James told her, nipping her ear. “Just decided I wanted you naked.”

“And I’m agreeing with him,” Steve said, tossing her shirt, unsnapping her bra and slipping it off. She hadn’t gone armed out to the Compound, other than the blades in her boots, but James had taken care of those along with them.

She was staring up at Steve from where she leaned back against James’ chest and shoulder. The heat in his eyes licked over her and she smiled. Raising her hand, she cupped his cheek and stroked his beard slowly. It stilled him, his palms cupping her breasts.

“Angel?” A world of questions lived in that single word, but only one he really needed an answer for, and she understood that. Was she okay to keep playing?
“Whose plan do we go with tonight?” she countered, turning her head so she could rub her forehead against the faint stubble on James’ jaw. The close shave she’d given him this morning had begun to give way to his natural growth. The bite of it on her skin left her tingling.

“Rock, paper, scissors?” Steve asked, the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile, and she stroked her foot up his leg slowly. She barely had her toes on the ground—barely. She certainly wasn’t the one keeping her weight up.

“We’ll put a pin in my plan,” James said, nuzzling her temple, then kissing his way to her ear. Steve rolled her nipples, the pinch sending a pulse straight to her cunt as James tugged on her earlobe. The heat had to be on somewhere, but the air around them seemed far chillier when compared to the heat rolling off them. “You come up with good plans,” Steve argued. “You said yours involved me.”

A snort. “Did yours not involve me?”

Then James spread his fingers and dipped them down to her cunt. Fuck, she was already wet in anticipation for those magic hands, a fact he was very soon aware of as he glided a finger along her labia.

“They pretty much began and ended with Angel naked and writhing.” His hot eyes held hers a moment, and her breath hitched as he continued to pull and massage her breasts, but then his gaze dipped to where James parted her labia and began to massage her clit. Little bolts of excitement wound tighter through her.

“Not a bad idea, needs a little more coordination and maybe a few details,” James commented. “Such as?”

Fuck her, were they really having this conversation? Steve replaced one his hands with his mouth and she lost track of James’ answer because between the suction of Steve’s lips, the increasing pressure of James’ fingers, and the heat of both of them caging her in, and her vision began to white out around the edges.

“… or we could do that,” Steve said with a dark chuckle. “She described for me how she could bend over a desk in a skirt with no panties… been thinking about that for the last day or so.”

The hard evidence of James’ arousal pressed against her ass, but they were both still completely dressed. “She likes to tease, and be teased…as evidenced.” He gave her clit a squeeze and she shuddered.

“She’s not sure she’s a fan of being discussed in the third person.” Well, she wasn’t entirely opposed to it either.

“No?” Steve gave her a concerned frown, and then he sank one of his fingers into her cunt all the way to the knuckle and she let out a harsh breath. “You feel like you’re enjoying it.”

“Agreed,” James said, swirling his two fingers over her clit and then Steve added a second finger and crooked them and she bucked against their hands. There was no leverage here. She shifted her weight to lock her legs around Steve, but he had one leg and James released her clit to grasp the other. “Shh, Doll…and we’re feasting…trust us, we’ll make sure you enjoy it.”

“Since we’re on the part about deciding whose plan we’re following,” she said between panting breaths and licking her lips. “Do I get a vote?”
“You have the only vote that matters,” Steve told her before he dropped to his knees and James shifted her weight and her legs and she was spread wide. Then Steve nuzzled a kiss to her labia, his nose bumping her clit even as he began to thrust his fingers. The tickle of his beard coupled with the motion of his mouth and she banged her head back once against James’ shoulder and then twisted as his mouth found hers. She had no idea how long they kept her suspended there, edging toward an orgasm and then backing off again. Trapped, contained, and being eaten out with particular thoroughness on Steve’s part, while James kissed her, licking and biting her lips until she couldn’t taste anything that wasn’t him.

When they finally let her come, she let out an undignified cry, that had Steve beaming up at her, his beard all damp with her come and his eyes shining.

“Fuck me,” she whispered as they eased her shaking legs together.

“Well then,” James said. “If you insist.”

They ended up in her room, with her on the bed, on all fours, and then James was sliding into her in one hard push that had her pressing back to meet him. Thinking was highly overrated, and when Steve appeared in front of her, naked, cock straining, all red and flush, she fought to grin through her gasps because every thrust of James knocked her forward, triggering little spasms through her post-orgasmic bliss and frankly, she never wanted it to end as he wound her higher and higher.

Crawling forward with James hips pumping into hers, she managed to get her mouth around Steve’s cock, and unlike the day before, he didn’t pull her off. Desire hazed through her, filling every crack and crevice, leaving her humming for them. Every stroke. Every lick. Every taste.

James came first, the hot rush lighting her up, and then she had enough breath and spare thoughts to stroke Steve’s balls, once. Twice. And he gripped her hair, his breath a hot gasp as he said, “Angel…”

The warning, she appreciated, but she didn’t pull off, aware of James’ breathless weight against her, where he was still pressed deep inside and resting his face against her spine. She lapped up every drop until they collapsed together in a boneless heap. She was pretty sure she blacked out in there somewhere, for a few seconds. Because James shifted, pulling out to fall next to her on the bed, naked and sweaty limbs wrapped around hers.

There was a kiss to her eyelids, and when she fluttered them open, Steve had moved and he smiled at her.

“What?” she croaked, and then grinned at the wrecked sound of her voice. What these two did to her.

“We didn’t finish deciding whose plan we’re following…”

Muffled laughter floated up behind her and James pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “Trade?”

“I can go with that,” Steve said, and then she was rolling over, and she found herself nose to nose with James as Steve’s hands moved down her back. “You’re so beautiful Natasha… I’m so thankful for you.”

Those words again, and like that morning when James heaped the praise on her, she went slow and soft everywhere. Or maybe she was still blissed-out from the orgasm.

“So beautiful,” James repeated. “So fucking gorgeous.”
“You good Angel?”

Maybe her brain was short-circuiting from the sex, but she only managed a low groan as he began kissing his way down to her ass, and then he stroked a finger between the cheeks. “At some point Buck, you need to show me how to get her ready…”

“No problem, Punk,” James told him closing the cool metal hand over her breast. The contrast in temperatures roused her, and she pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth and began to nuzzle his jaw. “Maybe tomorrow night.”

“I’d like that. Put up our tree, lay Angel out in front of it, and then have her until she’s shaking from it.”

Oh. Fuck her. So would she… and then Steve pressed into her cunt and she forgot how to breathe because James kissed her, sucking what was left of her air. She dropped her hand to palm James’ balls and then wrapped her fingers around his gradually stiffening length. When he broke the kiss, she licked her lips and gave him a firm squeeze. He hissed out a breath.

“Ease up a sec, Stevie…” His voice was almost guttural. Then they were shifting her, and she was crawling between James’ legs as Steve shifted to follow her onto the bed, and then he began thrusting again, and this time it was James she swallowed into her throat.

Who needed a plan anyway?

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James and Steve piled into the car with her, and she had to swallow a laugh as she turned it out of the garage and drove up and onto the street. James had the backseat, directly behind her while Steve was in the passenger seat. The SUV was one of Tony’s that she’d borrowed.

“At some point, remind me to ask Tony about my car,” she said as she drove, not focusing on the fact she wasn’t in a photo static veil. She had her hair pulled back and clipped at her nape. Otherwise, she dressed in comfortable cargo pants, a long-sleeved turtleneck—the boys had left one too many marks on her throat and they were fading but she wasn’t sharing—a reinforced leather jacket and several of her weapons back where they belonged including a knife behind her belt buckle, her garrote on her right wrist, and a gun tucked into the concealing holster within her jacket.

Arming up had earned her a frown from Steve, but James added a couple of small incendiaries—they would effectively take down a door if necessary—to the inner pocket of her jacket as well, and pulled out a pair of throwing blades with her forearm sheathes.

She wasn’t planning on trouble, but she refused to discount it either.

“The ‘Vette?” Steve asked, throwing a glance at her.

“Yep, it was parked here when we went to Lagos, and… haven’t seen it since.” Sometimes Lagos felt like the day before, and other times it felt like it happened years prior. “Not sure if it got impounded or what.”

If the government took it, it might be a while before she got it back. If ever. Which would suck, she
rather liked that car. Traffic wasn’t horrible, but it wasn’t great either. The snow had ceased for the
time being but the forecast suggested it would be back by evening. In the meanwhile, the plows
had done their job and the streets were passable.

She took 57th over to Park, then turned north and smiled. Steve chuckled, and she knew he’d
recognized it.

“What?” James asked from the backseat.

“Natasha leapt off my shield right back there, like she’d been doing it her whole life and caught a
ride on a flying alien skiff.” Pride wound through Steve’s tone.

“You wonder why I want someone with each of you,” James muttered, and Natasha caught Steve’s
eye and matched him grin for grin.

“It worked out,” Natasha assured him, but squeezed Steve’s fingers when he caught her hand.

“It worked out,” Natasha assured him, but squeezed Steve’s fingers when he caught her hand.
“Pepper’s got a place a couple of blocks up, facing the park. Penthouse apartment. I’ll pull up out
front, and you two can figure out who is driving…”

“…and you text us or call when you’re ready to go.”

“I can always cut back through the park,” she said. “It would probably be faster.” Considering
she’d already caught up with traffic.

“Then one of us—” Steve said, with a glance back at James. “Or both of us can walk with you. Just
a few more days, Angel. Let’s let the dust settle, and make sure you’re at one hundred percent.”

She waved a hand. Yeah. She got it. She didn’t like it—well she liked that they cared, but not that
they wanted to smother her—but she understood it. “I know,” she assured him. “There’s a nice
place up about a block over on Lexington, and a parking garage, I think.” The other problem with
bringing a car, they had to park it.

“We’ll be fine, Doll. Stevie and I can stay out of trouble for a couple of hours.”

Natasha caught his gaze in the rearview mirror. The steadiness in those eyes eased away some of
her discomfort with the fact they wanted to wait and escort her door to door. It was sweet, even if
she was not inclined to being protected. James didn’t act like this was anything new, so maybe it
wasn’t. Maybe he’d had to insist before or maybe it hadn’t even been a debate before. They
weren’t letting it be a debate now.

When they reached Pepper’s building—twenty minutes of snarled traffic later—his mood wasn’t as
even, but neither protested when she leaned over and kissed Steve, and then James was at her door,
opening it to let her out, and giving her a brush of a kiss that didn’t quite connect while his gaze
scouted everything around them. Rubbing her hand against his chest, she sighed. “It’s okay,” she
told him in a low voice. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know,” he said, but he didn’t quite sound as firm in the conviction. “The last time I let you out of
my sight though…”

Yeah. She got that. But then Steve circled the car and clasped James on the shoulder as much to
comfort James as to comfort himself.

“I’ll see you both soon,” she assured them, then headed for the doorman who was already moving
to open the door for her. She didn’t have a purse, relying on a wallet instead and it had her old
Stark ID in it if she needed it to get past security. When the doorman nodded to her and then
flicked a glance behind her, she knew damn well the guys hadn’t moved yet.

A spark of recognition alighted in the doorman’s eyes, not for her, but she’d bet for Steve, and Natasha sighed.

He better get moving or there was a chance he’d get asked for an autograph—then again that could be funny, too.

Eight different cameras covered the lobby and the doors. The man behind the security desk, like the doorman, was armed. Another security guard—dressed in a nice suit and looking for all the world like a host at a restaurant—stood near the elevators. Three points covered from this entrance, and to accompany the other two points for the building access on the far side. Five armed guards, probably sixteen to twenty camera positions.

The security had Happy written all over it. “Good morning,” she said, meeting the security guard’s gaze evenly. “Natalie Rushman to see Ms. Potts. I’m sure she’s expecting me.”

The Rushman ID had been compromised, but it was the name Pepper first met her under and usually the name she left for Natasha anywhere they’d met after she’d been reintroduced as Agent Romanoff. It was a polite, but firm jab to remind her of the deception even if Pepper had also thanked her for helping to save Tony, Rhodey, and the other civilians at the Expo.

In other words, Pepper had appreciated the assistance but disdained the lies.

Natasha couldn’t fault her for that.

The security agent typed something on his computer, but he never quite took his gaze off her, nor did the one standing by the elevators. She could penetrate the security, three men here, two on the other side. Two knives, a bullet, and the rest she could take hand-to-hand. But those cameras weren’t static, they were controlled somewhere else, likely under manned-observation with a redundancy and if Stark security remained as thorough as Happy and Tony required, there were redundancies buried in redundancies.

Pepper lived in this building. It would be well defended.

The guard at the computer met her gaze and the flicker of recognition sparked in his dark brown eyes even as his eyelid twitched. She gave him credit when he didn’t start sweating. He also didn’t call her on the alias, instead, he picked up the phone and pressed two buttons then waited.

“Yes, Ms. Potts, Natalie Rushman is here to see you. She says you’re expecting her, but she is not on the priority clear list.” He waited a beat. “Of course, I’ll send her right up.” He hung up the phone and nodded to the elevators. The strain in the three men relaxed a fraction. So were they always this on edge? Or was something up? “If you’ll go to the elevators, Ms. Rushman, Ferdinand will open the penthouse elevator.”

She nodded and then strolled away. Steve and James were still parked on the street just outside the building. Catching sight of them from the corner of her eye, she pulled her phone out of her back pocket and sent I’ll text you when I get up there. If you don’t hear from me in three minutes, you’ll know it’s a problem.

If that didn’t make them feel better, she didn’t know what would. Ferdinand nodded politely to her and keyed the elevator doors open, then he stepped inside after she was against the back wall, swiped his card, entered a code, then turned the key again.

Yep, definitely Stark levels of overkill. Not that she could fault Tony. Pepper mattered to him.
“Have a good day, Miss.” Ferdinand nodded to her and stepped out before the doors closed. The ride to the penthouse was swift, and the doors opened to the penthouse itself, much like it did at the Tower.

“I understand that,” Pepper was saying, a headset on as she walked out of the kitchen with a pair of coffee mugs, and she motioned with her head toward the living room. “Agreed, this is exactly why we consented to the safety checks requested by your government prior to opening the new Stark Tower in Hong Kong.”

Natasha crossed the room and accepted the coffee mug Pepper offered her. The other woman made a face at whatever was being said to her on the line. Phone in hand, Natasha sent a message to James and Steve, all good. Will text when done.

“Mr. Borjigin, if you could assure Mr. Tong and the other representatives that you have our full attention and respect, I would appreciate it. I’ll be flying to Hong Kong in ten days to inspect the facilities personally and I would be honored to take him on a tour of the tower.” She waved Natasha toward one of the soft white suede chairs as she settled in a different one. A laptop was open in front of her, as well as two StarkPads and she had her phone propped on the arm of the chair. Despite being dressed in yoga pants, and a soft cashmere pullover sweater, she was obviously not taking the day off.

Curling one leg beneath her, she sipped her coffee as she listened to whatever response the businessman on the other end of the phone said, then she replied in perfect Mandarin, “You honor me, and I thank you and offer you blessings.”

Pepper had definitely been practicing. Natasha hid a smile as she took a sip of her coffee. As expected, it was perfectly blended.

“Until then, I’ll take my leave,” Pepper completed the farewell, and then relief swarmed her expression as she tapped off the headset and pulled it away. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries. Problems in China?” An obvious assumption, but breaking the ice with small talk might be simpler.

“No more than usual,” Pepper said with a sigh, and then checked her phone. “Just a moment.” Hitting a button, she had the phone on speaker.

“Yes, Ms. Potts?”

“Janine, I’m going into a meeting and I don’t want to be disturbed. My calendar says that was the last phone conference of the day, can you confirm?”

“You have a call with Abigail Burns scheduled for lunchtime today, do you want me to reschedule that?”

Natasha studied the minimalist decoration of the penthouse. It was all clean lines, and light, with a number of postmodern pieces to offset the coldness so much white and silver might otherwise promote.

Pepper checked her watch, then looked at Natasha. “Janine, we’ll keep that on the books but let her know we may have to reschedule for next week if this meeting runs long.”

“Of course, Ms. Potts. Anything else I can do for you?”

“No, after you let her know, make sure I have all her contact information and then you log off and
go spend time with your family. Thanks for coming in so early so I could take these calls.”

“Thank you, and do try to enjoy the holiday weekend as well.” Then Janine was gone, and Pepper lifted the mug to take a big swallow of her coffee. “Sorry about that,” Pepper said. “I’d hoped to be done with that call before you arrived and it ran long.”

“It happens,” Natasha said. “As I recall, it happened more often than not when the other party set the agenda.” Pepper was punctual if anything, and always scheduled her calls for exactly how long they would need if she was the driver behind the call.

“True,” Pepper said with a sigh, and set the mug down before closing her laptop and moving to sit forward as she focused on Natasha. “You look good, by the way.”

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the compliment. “You look far more relaxed than you actually are. Have you been keeping up with your yoga?” Because despite her casual attire and location, there were hints of stress in the tightness around her eyes and way she massaged her temple as if pushing back a headache. Pepper ceased the action abruptly, then shook her head with a small laugh.

“You always see too much and while I used to find that vaguely frustrating after learning Natalie was Natasha—I am afraid I need that particular talent at the moment.”

The comment straightened Natasha’s spine and she dropped the pretense of meeting all the polite beats. “What’s wrong?” The sensual haze and languidness in her muscles leftover from the night before and her dancing evaporated. Pepper had only asked her for one favor in the time since she’d learned the truth about Natalie Rushman. This would be the second, which meant it had to be important.

“First, let’s go eat, I had brunch ordered in and I’ll brief you on everything.” Rising, Pepper led her to the silver domed platters lining a sideboard in her dining area. “I had them send up some pastries, fruit, yogurt, and there’s bacon and sausage, probably some ham. A little bit of everything.”

“That’s fine,” Natasha assured her. She’d had breakfast with Steve and James before leaving the Tower, but she added some fruit and yogurt to her plate regardless. It made others comfortable when you ate. They settled at the table with their coffee and their food.

Though Pepper buttered some toast and moved the fruit around on her plate, she didn’t actually eat anything. So Natasha set her fork to the side and cradled her coffee cup.

“Tell me what you need Pepper,” she said, meeting the other woman’s gaze. Having seen Pepper both at her wit’s end because of disaster and on top of her game, she was familiar with the push-pull of professionalism and control versus out of her depth.

Something had her on edge.

“Fine, I wanted to ask you how you were doing and play catch up since everything went wrong, but to be honest—you’re here and you look great, and the government isn’t pressing charges, and your reputation is in tatters, I know all of this. I can actually do something about one of those items. But—how are you, personally? I have no idea if this is all something that would affect you or you’d shrug off because of…well the work you did for SHIELD before SHIELD became the problem.” That was a polite way of putting it.

“I’m fine,” Natasha answered without hesitation. “I appreciate everything you did to help Tony
bring the team home. And—everything else will sort itself out or not. That’s not something you need to worry about.”

“Well as long as Tony worries about it, I’ll have to worry about it.” The clipped tone held no anger, just resigned patience. “But you’re right, we’ll sort that out as we need to.” Crossing one leg over the other, she leaned back in the chair and a professional mask settled over Pepper’s features. Understanding that need to exert some control over her interactions, Natasha waited her out.

She didn’t have to wait long, Pepper sat forward and steepled her hands together. “Stark Industries has received a number of threats our security has deemed credible. Several we’ve turned over to the FBI, and as usual, many of them specifically focus on Tony.”

“That’s not unusual.” SI filtered dozens of those threats some from general nutjobs writing a letter to actual threats from people who were prepared to deliver on them even if they weren’t equipped. Then there were people like Vanko and Killian.

“No, it’s not. However, as usual, Tony doesn’t take any of them seriously. And—that’s fine. It’s his right to dismiss the threats. I, on the other hand, cannot.” Pepper pushed up from the table and Natasha tracked her as she crossed to where she’d left her StarkPads, she picked up one and returned with it. Accessing it, she brought up a report, then passed it over. “As you can see, there were a number of threats coming from a variety of sources but the language is all the same.”

Scanning the contents, Natasha scrolled through the pages. The assessment deemed each of the attached threats to be from the same source though they arrived in a number of different ways from posted letters to electronic delivery and others were posted on social media sites. Some even had photos with them.

Tony Stark is a menace. He creates the problems he has to defeat.

Stark Industries is still a war-mongering corporation devouring the corpses of its former competitors all at the behest of the maniac who owns the company.

They call Stark a hero, but dressing up a snake and putting it in a suit of armor doesn’t change the fact it’s a snake.

Afghanistan kidnapping: reality or hoax? How Tony Stark fooled the World.

The articles were mostly posted on websites with no more credibility than a tabloid if they had any at all. She tabbed to a browser and pulled one of the sites up. Immediately the StarkPad warned her about cookies the site wanted them to download and it had already blocked. A couple of strokes got her into the source code for the site’s basic front. It was created in the last year, and though it had hundreds of articles, most of them circling the same logic as calling Tony’s imprisonment a hoax, there were more detailing his work on Ultron and that Ultron was still out there—just waiting for Tony Stark’s reputation to take another dive. What city would they lose then?

Flipping back to the report, she read through each of the threats that had been scanned in. Linguistically they possessed a similar cadence and familiarity with the language; they also cited specific keywords and hot points that would alert security to the serious nature of their threats. The fact there were so many coming from seemingly multiple sources also indicated a high functioning intelligence with possible sociopathic tendencies.

Or a very clever mind seeking to distract with a ruse.

Helmut Zemo’s name leapt out at her from one of them, and she flipped to that letter.
Helmut Zemo was a patriot. He recognized the threat of Stark from the beginning and took specific actions to end the threat of Tony Stark’s Avengers, his personal weapons of mass destruction.

It continued in the same vein, suggesting that Stark should take Zemo’s place in prison.

Doing a quick search, she skimmed for Ross’ name.

Not mentioned.

She searched her own.

Seven mentions.

Steve’s?

Two mentions.

One by one, she went through the other Avengers, from Rhodey to Wanda to Vision. Vision came up four times, all questioning how Tony Stark could be allowed to create artificial intelligence with the capability of such destruction and harm—they even cited Rhodey’s injury in there.

Her name came up in combination with Tony’s reputation as the Merchant of Death—of course, he had a pet assassin.

She snorted.

Beyond this collection of threats dating back to shortly after Leipzig was when the first arrived, they’d gained in heat and vitriol over the intervening months. The threats grew more overt after she took out Ross though.

Three letters, all dated in the last six weeks, calling for Tony Stark to surrender himself for justice or justice would be coming for him.

“Tony’s read these?” She eyed Pepper.

“I doubt it,” Pepper admitted. “I was there a few days ago, and he acted like he had no idea what I was talking about.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, he could have read them and dismissed them. Downplaying it is how he protects everyone around him.” It was why he hadn’t told Pepper he was dying, hadn’t even attempted it until the clock counting down on him began to strangle him.

“I know, but he’s also been so focused on getting you back, that I don’t think he’d worry about these even if he thought they were genuine. He has his suits, he can defend himself.”

But it wasn’t just himself, it was his company and the people who worked for him. The people who were as much the public face of it as he was.

She typed in Pepper’s name to the threat report.

Forty-one threats, all mentioning Pepper by name.

Pepper Potts enables Tony Stark’s madness. Without her, he could be rendered toothless. Maybe she should think about that before she pushes forward another of his death projects.

“Tony hasn’t read this,” Natasha said without preamble. Harming Pepper wouldn’t render Tony
toothless; he’d be out for blood. The considerable layers of security around Pepper would be more than enough to convince even the most obtuse of her value as a target. She’d been targeted in the past, and Tony had nearly lost her…

“To be honest, I didn’t think he would. He just—he doesn’t see those threats as something he needs to react to, and again, he’s been very preoccupied with the Avengers.”

The Avengers. Ross. The Accords. Peter. Tony had a lot on his plate, and it didn’t show any signs of slowing down.

“I can look into this…” She told her. “You’ve got good people if they’ve already identified the similarities. Are all the threats you’ve received documented here? Including the ones unrelated to these?”

“Yes, but—not all of them are credible. Some are standard corporate games, trying to sack out the stock price in places, while others really are trying to cut into our profit margins. They don’t seem to be personally directed at Tony anymore than they would be any majority stockholder.”

“But some bother you.” Because Pepper wasn’t asking her to do what her very capable security department had already begun.

“Yes, because Tony tends to get very mono-focused when he’s working on something, that’s when…that’s when problems like Vanko happen or Aldrich Killian. He doesn’t always see the effect he has on others, or he dismisses it because he can’t control public opinion and doesn’t want to—or he used to not want to. That’s also changed. If you’ll tab over to the next set of files in the tree.”

Natasha backed out of the threat assessment and moved to the file marked PR.

“Tony has had us asking for bids from a number of different PR firms to rehabilitate the Avengers’ image, in particular—yours which most of them don’t want to touch.” There was no apology in Pepper’s voice, just facts. “I warned Tony you were toxic, and just because the prosecutions have been dropped, the damage done by the leaked stories, news conferences, and constant speculation have made you radioactive.”

It was almost funny, recent events considered, but Natasha didn’t laugh. “I’m aware, dropped prosecutions doesn’t mean they can’t be resumed.”

“Exactly.” Pepper said, meeting her gaze then picking up a piece of toast. “But if you can help me with this—watch Tony’s back, maybe help me figure out where the threats are coming from and if they really are something this person or people are going to act on so we can nip it in the bud—I’ll help you with your PR problem so Tony can focus on other things.”

A PR problem suggested life in the public eye. Not a life she ever sought to lead. Even leading the Avengers with Steve, she’d taken a step back to let him handle the public face. He was the one they wanted to see. Him, Tony, Thor, and even Bruce… Though Bruce would rather have chewed nails than do a press conference and since pissing him off was a bad idea, even the media learned to back off some.

“To do what I do… standing in front of people defending my reputation is not really how it works,” she told Pepper. “And you don’t need to offer me quid pro quo.”

No, this was a threat against Pepper and Tony both, and by extension everyone around them. Including…
She flipped back to the reports, and did a search.

Peter’s name didn’t come up. Switching to the full file of threats, she did a broader search for the name Peter Parker.

One mention. Pulling that up, she only found him listed on a website that had documented the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all Stark employees, including intern Peter Parker.

Fuck.

Washing down the bite of toast, Pepper said, “That website has been scrubbed, and I’ve asked Friday to monitor for any sites that begin listing personal information of Stark Industries employees and she takes them down if they show up.”

Just because Peter’s name was on the list didn’t mean he faced a direct threat. He was one amongst thousands of names who were employed by SI. But…

“And I meant what I said about the PR, I’m dating a guy…”

That snagged her attention.

“I met him Las Vegas a few months ago, he’s a marketing expert and does freelance PR. He’s really good at his job, and he says he’s always loved a challenge.”

Did Tony know she’d met someone?

“No, I haven’t discussed my personal life with Tony. We don’t do that anymore, at least not—until I know this is going somewhere. He’s a nice guy, and I enjoy his company. He doesn’t need to have Tony Stark breathing down his neck because Tony decides to randomly get protective.”

The only way Tony hadn’t noticed was he’d been busy, but that wouldn’t last…

“And don’t worry, I’m bringing Marc with me to the party next Friday, they’ll meet then. You don’t have to keep this a secret, and you can meet him as well. See what you think, and Natasha… before you tell me that you don’t want a media blitz to clear your name, you need it. The Avengers need it cleared, or at least rehabilitated and Tony needs it because he is putting himself firmly between you and the rest of the world. His attorneys. His money. His company. His reputation. He’s putting it all on the line to protect you.”

“I’m aware,” she responded quietly. “I also know I’d rather have my fingernails pulled off than do a round of talk shows and appearances. The first most people heard of me were the congressional hearings, and those didn’t leave a good taste in their mouths.”

“No,” Pepper agreed with her. “They didn’t…but nothing is impossible. You protect Tony, get to the bottom of this for me, and I’ll take care of tackling the issues with your reputation and help you modify public opinion. It’s already started… but there is just too much negative noise. We need to generate positive noise.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Give me a few days to dig down on these; can I get access to Stark servers? And how are you keeping all of this from Friday?”

“Oh course, and yes,” Pepper said as she finished her toast and rose. She retrieved her laptop and the coffee pot. After refilling both their cups, she settled in front of the screen and opened it. “I’d
prefer not to use Natalie Rushman if you don’t mind, since that cover was part of the published
dossiers on you. Even if they aren’t still out there, you’re still you and I’d like to not let our targets
know you’re looking into them.”

Targets. “You think some are in the company?”

“I can’t dismiss the idea, can I?” Pepper said wryly. “After Obadiah…and then other employees
proving to not be who they said they were.”

Fair. “Try Nadja Rasmussen.” That cover was already intact, if a tad thin and it was already related
to SI.

“Who already has executive level access courtesy of Tony Stark.” The dry tone gave Natasha
pause. “Well, that’s convenient.”

And a little bit of snippiness.

The question was did she want to explain it? She hadn’t asked Tony to do that, and the idea had
been she was using the cover to return from Spain. Then he’d moved her seats around, given her an
upgrade and sent a car to pick her up at the airport.

“Yes, I’m authorizing you to senior executive—however if you try to make a sweeping change I’ll
have to approve it.”

“That’s fine,” Natasha assured her, and drained her coffee. “Is there anything or anyone else you
want me to investigate while I’m in there?”

Because Pepper had decent instincts. She’d been suspicious of Nat from the beginning, but there
had also been jealousy involved until Natasha’s assignment had her leaving Tony with Coulson and
she returned to SI to shadow Pepper. Then for a short while—things had stabilized between them
and they worked well together.

Pepper looked thought thoughtful and she speared some fruit with her fork and swirled it through
the yogurt. Hesitation glimmered in her expression, and Natasha waited her out again. Pushing
Pepper was a way to get the doors to close. If she was considering asking, it meant she’d sensed
something or had a niggling feeling…

“Can you be exceptionally discreet?”

“I never told Tony you kissed me after everything that happened at his party if that’s what you’re
asking.”

A red flush touched her cheeks. “It wasn’t—but thank you for reminding me of that.”

Natasha smiled. “You’re welcome, it wasn’t a bad kiss all things being equal.” The lightness did
what she wanted it to, Pepper relaxed and she laughed. It had been a bad few days for her, Tony
had gone off the rails, and he’d been locked down at his house, she was trying to clear out the
fallout from Rhodey taking the suit and pushback from the board. She’d pulled out a bottle of wine
in her office while they’d been working late, and put away most of it, and then the second she’d
asked Natasha to get.

“You know, I wondered at one point if you would ever use that against me,” Pepper admitted. “But you never brought it up. And, I appreciated that.”

“You were lonely, Pepper,” Natasha told her easily. “Lonely and a little overwhelmed. I was flattered.” And she had been. But sleeping with Pepper wouldn’t have advanced her cause at SI, and it would have only made things more awkward with Stark and her both.

“The man I’m dating…” Pepper said. “When you meet him, can you—just tell me what you think of him?”

“Your PR expert?” Natasha had a first name. She’d need a last. But she could figure that out, chances were the pair had dined out somewhere.

“Yes, and I know, I just said he would relish the challenge of working on your image and yes, I do like him very much. But…”

“But you don’t want to be burned. You don’t have to explain it to me. I can do a standard background on him.”

“I’ve done that,” Pepper admitted. “SI didn’t find anything questionable in his history, but you…” She eyed her. “You see things even when we don’t want you to see them.”

Natasha inclined her head. “So you just want my impressions of him and nothing else?”

“For now, if that’s not too much to ask on top of the rest of this.”

“It’s not,” Natasha assured her. “I’ll tell you what I think after I meet him.” If anything was off about him, she would take a deeper look. Since Pepper said SI ran a background check, she’d take a glimpse of it while working on the threats. “Have you upgraded your security?”

“I have,” Pepper admitted. “Standard procedure, and after the holiday party, I’m going to Scotland for a few weeks.”

“After Hong Kong.”

Pepper frowned, then shook her head. Had she forgotten Natasha had been present when she said it on the phone? “Yes, after Hong Kong. That trip is not on the books and there will be no promotion.”

“Understood. And Scotland is also off the radar?”

“That’s my hope. Two weeks of vacation, and I’ll be back before the New Year. Christmas is…”

“Difficult.” Pepper didn’t have to explain.

“Yes.”

“And Friday? How are you keeping all of this from her?” Because Pepper hadn’t answered that question.

“Like I said, you notice what others overlook. As for Friday—she is aware of all potential threats. She keeps them on file, and if we have images, we make sure she has those as well. But if Tony doesn’t want to hear about it, she won’t say anything. She is somewhat limited…”
To the specifics. Yes, she was. However, Friday had found ways to sidestep some commands by taking them literally by the letter. Good, she could talk to Friday about this.

“If you think I should cancel Scotland,” Pepper said slowly, but Natasha shook her head.

“No, you wouldn’t have planned the trip if you didn’t need it and going quiet might take some of the attention off of you,” Natasha said. “Don’t forget, it’s very cold there this time of year in Scotland.”

“I know, and I’m looking forward to curling up by a fire, drinking something warm, and catching up on reading that isn’t just reports.”

“Have you read the new Waterman?” The romantic suspense author entertained Natasha, and she wholly blamed Pepper for introducing her to the series in the first place. One of the books had been lying around the Malibu mansion and Natasha had read it one evening while waiting for Tony to need his assistant Natalie.

“I haven’t, but I have it on my e-reader and it’s top of my list.”

“Let me know how it is, I haven’t had time to pick it up,” Natasha said, rising with her empty plate and cup. “Oh…while I’m thinking about it, does Maria Hill still work at SI?”

“Part-time,” Pepper admitted. “She scaled back after the Avengers had their falling out, and I’m not sure what she’s been doing. Why?”

“Sharon Carter is the new Committee liaison for the Avengers, and she’s been trying to track Maria down, but she won’t return her calls…”

“I’ll take care of it,” the CEO said. “She’s still employed by SI and we’re still the primary underwriters for the Avengers.”

“Why haven’t you asked Maria to look into this?” She studied Pepper, the faint flicker of an eyelid, the slight increase to her respiration, and didn’t miss the impatient huff.

“Would you believe I trust you more than I do her?”

Yes. Natasha would believe that. Because Pepper, for some reason, did trust her despite everything. That much was clear from her honest answer. And definitely gave her food for thought.

“Okay.” Natasha left her dishes in the kitchen, then returned. “You have a call in a few minutes.” She’d been here for a couple of hours. “So I’ll let you get to it unless you have anything else you needed to discuss…”

Pepper stared at her for a long moment, weighing something but ultimately she shook her head. “I’ve asked for enough. If you find out anything, let me know and I can turn it over to the FBI.”

If Natasha thought the FBI could handle it, sure. “I’ll take care of it. If you get anymore, let me know.”

“Absolutely. And—I’ll see you next week at the party.”

“Can’t wait,” Natasha told her.

“Do you need a dress…?” The question stopped her.

“No,” Natasha assured her. “I’m sure…Tony has already ordered something for me.”
“Yes, he does that.” They stared another beat. Finally, Pepper nodded again. “If you need anything else, contact me. The number I used is my direct line. I assume yours is a number I can reach you on if I have anything?”

“Yes,” she told her. Picking up the StarkPad, Natasha said, “I’ll get this back to you after I copy the data.”

“Keep it,” Pepper said, rising to walk her to the elevator. “It’s encrypted, and you will have an easier time getting through the firewalls at SI with it.”

Natasha would manage either way, but she tucked it under her arm. Then she held out her hand and Pepper surprised her by grasping it lightly before leaning forward and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“You weren’t a bad kisser either,” she murmured. “But I never said that.”

Natasha laughed. “Noted. Stay safe—do you have a panic room here?”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s also wired to Friday so if I activate it, Tony will know.”

Another nod. “The elevator warns you someone is coming even if security is bypassed?”

Pepper almost rolled her eyes. “Natasha, security is fine. I promise.”

She nodded once. “Fine, I’ll leave that alone.” For now. But she’d be back to inspect it. “Maintain your vigilance.”

“You too,” Pepper advised.

“Always.”

The elevator opened and she stepped inside. Pepper nodded to her, and the doors closed. Leaning against the wall, she didn’t even have to press a button, it took her straight back to the lobby. Pulling out her phone, she sent a message to Steve and James.

She had a lot of work to do.

Pepper had good instincts.

Natasha agreed with her.

Those threats were too numerous and from too many sources. They were a smoke screen, intent on dividing and splitting resources to investigate all of them. Something or someone was coming for Tony.

Not on her watch.
Steve drove on the way back, and she sought to relax in the passenger seat, feet on the dash. The StarkPad rested on her lap, but she was still turning the problem over in her head. They didn’t ask her about the conversation, and for the moment, she was glad of the reprieve. Without a doubt, they wanted to know and they’d listen, but she still needed to get a feel for the whole issue and not just Pepper’s worries, but the actual SITREP.

“Tony called,” Steve said as he turned on 5th and headed toward 59th. It was almost lunchtime. “T’Challa will be at the Tower shortly.”

“Oh.” Hell, had she forgotten he was going to be there? Or had she known? Not that it mattered.

“Be good to see him again,” James commented from the seat directly behind her. It was funny, he’d sat behind her when she’d driven, and he sat behind her with her in the passenger seat. Sliding her right hand back, she smiled when he caught her fingers and squeezed them gently. “The last time I actually saw him was right before I went into cryo.”

Steve flinched, the motion barely perceptible, but Natasha stretched her left hand over to rest on Steve’s thigh. The contact earned her a swift smile. “You know we’re borrowing the car, you shouldn’t have your feet on the dash.” It was half-hearted at best, and she grinned. Then he blew out a breath, and said, “I’m looking forward to seeing him, too. The last time I spoke to him was when he called Tony and let us know he’d seen you in Spain.”

“We made our peace,” she said. “He offered me safe haven in Wakanda, but I think he suspected I was heading back here.”

“You’d like Wakanda, Natalia,” James said, his voice warming. The closer they came to the Tower, the more at ease he sounded. She shouldn’t be surprised, it had taken a lot for him to let her walk into the building alone. One day at a time, she reminded herself. One day at a time, and one step at a time. “It’s beautiful…”

He and Steve took turns telling her about what they remembered of the country. James hadn’t actually seen much of it, but what he had seen had obviously impressed him. Steve was more circumspect, it was beautiful but he hadn’t really taken time to enjoy it.
“Why the hell not?” James asked. “You were there for a few weeks after I went into cryo, right?”

Steve covered her hand on his thigh. “I… I spent my time in the lab when I wasn’t with the team.”

“The lab,” James sighed. “Dammit Stevie…”

“Yeah, the lab, Jerk. I stayed down there because I literally just had you back, for real after two
two years of looking and several hellacious fights. I understood why you wanted to go into cryo, but I
wasn’t ready to just walk away and pretend you weren’t there.”

Leaning forward, James put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “The point of me going into cryo was so
you could live your life, and wouldn’t have to worry about me. And so I wouldn’t risk hurting
anyone else if someone out there still had my triggers.”

“Then you’re an idiot as well as a jerk,” Steve groused. “Did you seriously think I’d just skip out
of there and everything would go back to normal? Like I never found you at all?”

“Hoped, and at least you would have known where I was instead of having worry.” The patience in
James’ voice frayed. “But I should have known better.”

With a half laugh, Steve glanced back at him and said, “Yeah, maybe you should have.” Then he
exhaled and squeezed her hand once before putting both hands on the wheel to make the turn onto
59th. Steve was nothing if not a careful driver.

“Maybe we see if T’Challa would let us vacation there.” The idle speculation in James’ voice
pulled her half around in the seat and she glanced at him. He met her gaze with a smile as he settled
back in his seat. He still held the fingers of her right hand lightly.

“We just had a vacation. Might have to settle for Coney Island when it warms up,” she teased.

With a snort, James said, “You say that like it’s a bad thing, Doll. I’ll win you a teddy bear. My
aim’s a damn sight better now even with their weighted bottles.”

Steve chuckled at both of them and Nat leaned her head back against the seat. The lackluster light
of the day and the deep gray tint to the skies promised more snow. It was piled everywhere, turning
dingy and dirty with the passage of traffic, but stores were open and sales were on.

There was a crowd outside the base of the Tower. Some had signs, others were taking pictures, but
there was a heavier crowd than the weather might suggest. Were they hoping Tony might pop out
in his armor? Or Steve would stride through the lobby? Thor had come down once, determined to
be available to the people.

Natasha had to rescue him ninety minutes later. He lasted longer than she expected. A laugh almost
slipped out at the memory. He liked people. Loud, bombastic, and cheerful, he liked everyone. But
apparently, people were far more polite on Asgard and didn’t try to overwhelm him unless they
were looking for a fight. He also didn’t have to worry about crushing the average person on
Asgard, either.

After that, he made only the most periodic stops usually with one of them on standby to pluck him
back out. Still…

These people came every day. They were so common a sight as to be ubiquitous. They hadn’t
noticed the SUV, but Steve continued down the block, and then turned to follow the circle before
turning into the drive leading to the garage. Security kept an eye on the area, and the door began
rolling up as they turned.
There was a fifteen-second window right here where a car could be boxed in before the garage opened all the way. But four visible cameras covered the angles, and that didn’t count the cameras placed more skillfully. Friday had eyes everywhere here and with good reason.

But they were in and the door closed behind them without incident. Steve slid into a parking spot and eyed her. “You okay?”

“Yep,” she told him. “Just thinking.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it lightly, buying James enough time to slide out and open her door. Maintaining her grip on the StarkPad, she winked at him. As they stepped into the vestibule with the elevator, Friday welcomed them back.

“Boss has lunch ready in the Penthouse, and King T’Challa has already arrived if you would like to go up. Mr. Parker also asked me to leave you a message, Ms. Romanoff.”

“Thank you, Friday. Can you pause us at Steve’s floor on the way up?” That earned her a pair of curious looks and she smiled. “I just want to drop this off.” She held up the StarkPad and they nodded.

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff.”

“And what was Peter’s message?”

Friday played a recording, and Peter said, “Aunt May is off shift, and I’m going home to hang out with her. Mr—Tony has a car taking me, so I didn’t have to carry the rest of the food on the subway, not that I minded. But May and I are going to do movies this afternoon and evening, and finish the leftovers. I plan to patrol tonight, but I’ll be back tomorrow for training if that’s okay. If it’s not, just leave me a message and we can figure out another day…and…if tomorrow is okay, think we can do a dance lesson, too? Right, well. I’m going to go. Thanks again, Natasha.”

“Thank you, Friday.”

“You’re welcome, Ms. Romanoff.”

“Dance lessons?” Steve asked as the elevator carried the three of them toward the penthouse.

She chuckled. “There’s a girl.”

James nodded once. “There’s always a girl.”

“And he doesn’t know how to dance,” Steve said with a shake of his head.

“That’s what he said, and Tony invited them to his Christmas party and there’s always dancing, so…”

Steve’s expression softened. “You’re going to teach him so he can ask his girl to dance.”

“Yep.” She bumped him with her hip. “I taught you so you could dance with me.”

The elevator paused at Steve’s floor and she strolled out. “I’ll be right back.”

In the bedroom, she walked over to her laptop and pulled it out. Then she linked the two devices, to sync up the data. She had search programs she could run on her laptop and other databases she could access. Better to keep the two separate for now.
Leaving both on the dresser, she stripped out of her coat and stowed the incendiaries and her shoulder holster. Probably not necessary to greet the King of Wakanda fully armed. Pulling the clip out of her hair, she shook out the curls and checked her appearance in the mirror real quick. Yeah, she’d do.

James and Steve had ditched their coats as well and stood at the open elevator waiting for her. “All good?” James gave her the once over, his gaze went to her wrist, her belt, and her boots.

Yes, she was still armed, but she didn’t doubt there weren’t knives in each of his boots. But like her, he’d also left his gun behind—probably in his room. Steve just gave them bemused looks, but he had his shield on his back when they came in from the car, and it was currently parked next to their sofa so she just bumped her hip to his and they laughed.

Tony and T’Challa were standing next to kitchen bar when the elevator let Natasha and the guys out in the penthouse.

“There they are… back from the wild perils of Black Friday shopping?” Tony said by way of greeting and Natasha almost snorted. “What did you buy me?” The last did make her laugh though.

Steve strode ahead, hand extended to greet T’Challa, and James was a half step behind him. Natasha followed more slowly. Like Tony, T’Challa dressed casually, though his casual seemed a little more formal than theirs. His smile was easy, and his manner relaxed. Tony, on the other hand, watched her instead of Steve and T’Challa’s reunion. T’Challa seemed particularly pleased when James greeted him.

Raising her eyebrows, she met his gaze. Was something up? She’d worn her bracelet today, it would have been more suspicious to leave it off and Tony could have easily tracked her to Pepper’s and just as easily listened in. Despite his eavesdropping the month prior, she trusted him to not push it. That didn’t mean she wasn’t prepared for it, though.

But he shook his head, then nodded to T’Challa. So whatever it was, he didn’t want to talk about it now. She flicked a look to the clock and then back, and Tony nodded. That was fine, they could discuss it later.

James stepped to the side, and it was her turn to say hello to T’Challa. “Ms. Romanoff…”

“Your Majesty.” The sum total of their complicated interactions were a brief meeting just before his father died, time spent with him in the immediate aftermath, then the hunt for James, and finally facing off against him to let Steve and James go. The next time she’d spoken to him it had been via hologram. This was different. When T’Challa extended both of his hands, she took them and smiled when he squeezed them once.

“I am pleased to see you well, Tony indicated you were recovering though he has been circumspect on the details.”

“Couldn’t have been too important then,” she said, waving it off. “You look better.” The change in his demeanor remained, up close, she would have to say it was the arrogance. It had been polished off in some way.

“As do you.” Fair, she’d been bruised to hell during their last conversation. “I was asked to pass along a very specific message to you.” The hint of a smile he wore as he released her hands had her lifting her eyebrows. “Nakia would very much like to know when you’re going to call her for a shopping trip.”
Amusement filled her. “As soon as I hear about a good sale, I’ll be sure to reach out. Though if you would not mind returning a message to her for me?”

She had an avid audience in Tony, Steve, and James though they were moving about getting drinks and Tony was pointing them toward the table already set for lunch.

“I would be honored.” T’Challa was either in on the concept, or used to such disseminations. Maybe both.

“If she wants company, all she has to do is ask. I’ll make time if I’m able.”

“I will let her know…” He motioned to the table as the guys had already moved over there. “She has been speaking of you to one of my generals, and I should warn you, that there is currently a great deal of interest in persuading you to visit Wakanda.”

“Really,” Tony said drolly before she could respond. “Red’s caught the eye of some eligible gent, imagine that.”

T’Challa laughed, and Steve hid a smile before saying, “I’m guessing here, but is the general in question, Okoye?”

“It would be indeed, Captain.”

Steve pulled out a chair for her and Natasha bit back a smile, none of them sat until she did. It was both sweet, and silly, but she leaned more toward sweet. “Does she want to date me or fight me?” Because her dance card was definitely on the full side. She was seated next to Steve with James across from Steve and T’Challa facing her, and Tony had the head of the table.

“I cannot speak for her dating habits, but I would imagine it’s your fighting skills that appeal to her. Nakia insisted you took out two men in a moving vehicle before taking down an entire safe house.” T’Challa unfolded a napkin as both Steve and James gave her a long look.

“Anything is possible,” Natasha said, and then glanced at Tony—who was also staring at her with the same assessing look the guys were giving her. “In fact, James has told me how beautiful Wakanda is, and Steve said he thought it was lovely, but unfortunately didn’t get to spend as much time admiring it as he could have.”

“I would be honored to have you as my guests,” he said. “Perhaps once we have settled the Accords. You, and the other Avengers of course…”

Tony chuckled. “You won’t have to ask me twice.” The laughter rippled around the table relaxing whatever element of tension held them captive.

“Yes, I am sure my sister would enjoy speaking with you at length on your various projects…”

The sister who had saved James was a woman Natasha wouldn’t mind meeting. Definitely, a thought worth exploring, and if Nakia found some human traffickers she’d like assistance with, Natasha wouldn’t mind helping out. Though she hadn’t been kidding about a full dance card. When T’Challa began discussing the scope of redrafting the Accords, she half-listened. The cobb salad in front of her was tasty, but she wasn’t that hungry yet.

Oscorp. They’d been testing her blood, breaking it down and they’d created something called Oz. Then there was the spider that had bitten Peter, in addition to Connors and Stillwell’s work on the formless. Was that Oscorp et all or just the two scientists?
Training Wanda and Peter. She needed to set up a session with Wanda, they had discussed it some yesterday while skating, but they hadn’t actually scheduled a time. Peter would be back the following day, and she wanted to accelerate some of his lessons. Particularly since he hadn't let go of his investigation into the Vulture, and likely wouldn't. Another issue she should delve into.

Pepper handing her this investigation right now wasn’t precisely the best timing, but threats never waited to be convenient. Tony picked at his salad, his attention focused on T’Challa as he remarked on the peculiarities of different delegates and the various requests for alterations they were suggesting. He wore the same expression when he stared a problem in his workshop, his attention to detail might seem lacking if one only judged him by his public persona. Yet the Tony she had gotten to know had borderline obsessive personality traits when confronted with an issue he wanted to solve.

The Accords were definitely in that category.

They held the weight of his attention, which lent credence to the idea he wasn’t applying any of that considerable brainpower to the threats against him. Tony had lived under the onus of threats most of his life. A coping mechanism would be to dismiss them from having any real power over his life by not wasting time worrying about them. He had some of the best security in the world, and he surrounded himself in layers of armor from his company to Friday to the Avengers to his own suits and considerable intellect.

She’d feel him out today while boxing, if she could lure him into the ring. T’Challa’s presence might keep him preoccupied. There was always the next day and the day after that. In the meanwhile, she’d do her research. She could also start digging deeper into Oscorp, and training with the kids as well as the Avengers would need to take precedence over Oscorp, but not over Tony and Pepper’s safety.

Pepper was seeing someone. She picked up her glass and took a drink as she shook her head. Catching James’ frown, she met his gaze and he canted his head a fraction. Was she all right? Flashing him a small smile, she nodded once. Preoccupied, yes, but she was fine. Steve ran his fingers against her thigh and she flexed the muscle as she glanced at him. He wasn’t quite looking at her, his attention on T’Challa and Tony. Hiding another smile, she glanced back to James who rolled his eyes, and then she took another drink of water.

In and around all of this, they still needed to pick out a tree and she had to arrange using B.A.R.F. with Tony. Maybe get some answers. It had given her some of her memories back before…

“…that’s where you come in Red,” Tony was saying and she snapped her full attention back to the conversation. “The French representative has been cultivating extensive support in the EU, but the Germans are a hard sell—probably because of Leipzig. You have a knack for schmoozing almost as well as I do—and if you take point with them on the language requests they have, I think this will start shaping up nicely.”

“You want me to negotiate with Committee delegates?” He’d mentioned wanting her input on the language, but he actually wanted her to get face time with diplomats who as recently as a couple of weeks earlier had been calling for her arrest in all their various languages.

That would be ballsy even for her.

“What you may not be understanding, Ms. Romanoff…”

“Natasha, Your Majesty,” she told T’Challa. At this point, he’d more than earned the informality.
“Ms. Romanoff is a mouthful.” One fewer syllable was still one less.

“As you wish,” T’Challa smiled. “And I am T’Challa. Formality is for events and formal interactions.” She inclined her head, accepting the offer. “As I was saying, the French have actually come around to being one of your greatest advocates. They were the first country to drop all charges against you, and have even lauded you for your actions in foiling a terrorist attack in Paris.”

Oh.

“Having spoken to Adrien Devereux on several occasions,” T’Challa continued. “I am confident he will be more than happy to discuss their thinking with you and give us a leg up on the negotiations.”

“If the French like her so much, why would we need a leg up?” Steve asked. He’d finished his salad, but James hadn’t touched his. Then again, he hadn’t prepared the food—none of them had, it had been here waiting. She had only taken a few forkfuls of her salad, so she picked up her plate and passed it diagonally to James.

“Mind swapping?” He had a chef’s salad and she could eat either. Surprise flickered briefly in his eyes, then he smiled as he lifted the plate he hadn’t touched and exchanged it for hers.

“Because every nation has an agenda, Captain,” T’Challa said. “It is merely the nature of the negotiations. When my father first sought to build the Accords, his primary goal was to create accountability so that disasters like those that happened in Lagos might be mitigated or at least—contained.”

James took a bite of the salad, and smiled and Natasha cut one of the egg halves into segments before taking a bite.

“In his eyes, it was not just the actions you took to contain criminals like Brock Rumlow—an American terrorist acting against the interests of Nigeria and other world interests—but also why you chose to take them. Should it have been the Avengers who went after him instead of the Lagos police or Nigerian army… for example.”

“Rumlow was a former Hydra operative within SHIELD turned free agent and mercenary—yes, he was a terrorist but his actions threatened far more than just the workers at the CDC facility he attacked…” Steve said, frowning. “But I see your point. We had been tracking him, when we received actionable intelligence he’d put together a team for a job in Lagos—we didn’t have enough details other than he might be hitting one of their police stations.”

Which at the time hadn’t made much sense, but Rumlow’s actions in the aftermath of the Triskelion had bordered on the sociopathic and moderately insane.

“Understandable, and Natasha was successful in recapturing the virus they stole, preventing it from being unleashed. This is laudable…but Rumlow’s attempt to kill you threatened a crowd and…”

“T’Challa,” Natasha interrupted quietly. James had ceased eating and even Tony had grown tense. “We’re all familiar with what happened in Lagos. Granted, only two of us were there.” While not quite a verbal slap, she shouldn’t need to remind either him or Tony that their information on the incident all came second hand. “And while we regret what happened to your countrymen, and would have avoided it if at all possible… it is difficult to take strict measures such as the rules of engagement and apply them to the boots on the ground. We were there… in the midst of the fighting in a heavily populated area of the city.”
The Wakandan king inclined his head. “Then perhaps you can answer a question that neither Tony nor myself have been able to provide to anyone on the Committee…”

“Which is?” Steve asked, and the defensiveness of his earlier tone had faded, but didn't leave him entirely.

“Why didn’t the Avengers involve the local police or military?” Tony supplied. He'd leaned back in his chair and held a glass of water much the way he would have a tumbler of scotch and swirled the liquid around the ice. Natasha bumped his foot with hers, and he took a drink before setting it down. “I can guess a dozen different reasons why we wouldn’t… but Red’s right, you two were boots on the ground and no one has ever asked you.”

Steve slanted a look at her, and she shrugged. “I can explain it if you want,” she told him. “I was the one who made the call.”

“You made the suggestion,” Steve answered her with a pointed look. “I made the call.”

“You trusted my advice.” Which was what it boiled down to, and Steve nodded once then lifted his hand palm up in a gesture of surrender before motioning her to continue.

Meeting T’Challa’s gaze directly, she said, “For the last decade, corruption in their local police departments had been on a steady incline, more and more human rights abuses were being reported, but nothing was happening with regard to them. There were a number of high profile criminals operating freely out of Lagos because they greased the right wheels. Though numerous investigations and calls for reform occurred, the same people were running those departments that accepted bribes and protection money with few if any exceptions. In all likelihood, Rumlow had paid the fee to keep them off his back. I would have, and Rumlow, despite being an ass wasn't an idiot. He knew we would come after him, he wanted us there. Steve in particular, but he didn't only try to kill Steve. The police did not engage during the robbery despite the very noisy battering ram and explosion they created to tear down the walls to get into the CDC facility, one located less than a block from that actual police station. They didn’t intercede when a grenade took out an armored vehicle Rumlow and his men were using. Nor did they get involved during the foot chase through a crowded market place.”

She had everyone’s attention.

“I was the boots on the ground. I was in that armored car when Rumlow dropped the grenade in there, me and two of his men. They didn’t make it. I was in that market, and Sam used pinpoint targeting with Redwing when he went after his two and kept his distance to avoid stray fire in the crowds. I went for hand to hand in an effort to do the same. In a standoff, there was a policeman not fifteen feet from my position. He didn’t even put down his drink.”

T’Challa sighed.

“So…based on my experience in and out of the country over the last several years…” Decades really. “…I told Steve that informing the police would buy us more trouble than it would help. Particularly if they were already bought and paid for. As for the military… Corruption, bad leadership, and insufficient training have hollowed out Nigeria’s military. They are losing to the Boko Haram. Again, we would be threatening more lives to involve them than we already had to deal with. As it was, we were a small unit—four people—our singular goal, take down Brock Rumlow and prevent him from achieving his goal. The lives lost were deeply regrettable, and I told you and your father once, and I will tell you again, we apologize for what happened.”

The silence elongated and then T’Challa nodded his head slowly before glancing at Tony. “You’re
right, she will convince them where we cannot.”

“Red—this is why you have to talk to the French for us. Not only do you speak their language, you were there at every incident they cite as being part of the reason behind the Accords.”

“They’re going to ask her about Ross,” James said quietly. He wasn’t wrong.

“That’s possible,” Tony said. “She won’t be meeting with any of them alone.” He looked to Steve. “One of us will always be with her. The point is…you were there. You know why the calls were made. Everything that was done before…” He glanced at T’Challa and the other man nodded once as if granting his permission. “Everything King T’Chaka did, he did in good faith, but also as a king in mourning and needing to act in the defense of his people and without the actionable intelligence of exactly what happened.”

“Only the fallout.” Natasha speared some lettuce, cheese, and ham and took a bite. Helping with the language was one thing, active negotiations? That could—weeks of commitment. But it would also put her in Tony’s back pocket…and she could watch his back more effectively.

That would require a lot of stretching on her part. Not impossible, but she had a lot of action items in need of her attention.

Still… “So you’re saying the French are willing to meet with me, and I’m assuming other diplomats from the EU, what happens if the other members don’t want my involvement?”

Steve squeezed her thigh lightly. Yes, she had his support. She knew that and adored him for it.

“One fight at a time, Red,” Tony leaned forward, his expression intent. “This puts you out in front of the Avengers, but it also shows you driving the taking of responsibility as arguably the one Avenger most affected by all the mistakes made on both sides.”

She did not want to be in front of anything. “I have to think about it.”

“Take your time… but we need a decision by Monday.” At least Tony didn’t want it that afternoon. “That’s when we’ll be meeting with Devereux.”

Staring at Tony a beat, she found herself looking forward to boxing more than she had earlier. “We’ll discuss the making of plans and appointments in the ring, sound good?”

“Just don’t break me,” he said, and took a drink.

“Nat…”

But she covered Steve’s hand with hers and shook her head. Not now.

“…before you tell me that you don’t want a media blitz to clear your name, you need it. The Avengers need it cleared, or at least rehabilitated and Tony needs it because he is putting himself firmly between you and the rest of the world…”

The rest of the meal passed amicably enough, and thankfully they moved off the topic of the Committee, diplomats, and the Accords. James asked after Shuri, and T’Challa shared a couple of funny stories about his sister. Tony brought up his Christmas party the following week, and T’Challa said if he could extend his trip, he would be delighted to attend and perhaps he’d invite Nakia.

Natasha had smiled at the last. It would be interesting to see the other woman again. By the time
the meal drew to a close though, she was more than ready to get changed and head to the gym. The dancing that morning had been a boon to her system. It had pushed her and left her pleasantly sore and aching.

Or maybe that had been the night before.

Either way, she had tension coiling in every muscle and she needed to burn some of it off.

T’Challa had to go, however, the duties of a monarch were extensive. Tony escorted him down in the elevator, dropping she, Steve, and James off on Steve’s floor.

“I hope to see you on Monday, Natasha,” T’Challa said as she stepped off the elevator. “I would be happy to attend those first few meetings in a show of solidarity.”

“Thank you, T’Challa. I’ll let you know what my decision ends up being.” Taking that step would put her firmly in the spotlight. Positive or negative, she’d spent too much time in it the last few months—since she’d dumped all her covers onto the Internet. Then Ross feeding the media frenzy and pushing for indictments for everything from the murder of Nick Fury to treason and espionage.

Ironic.

She headed straight for her room, and had half her clothes off when she realized Steve had followed her. He leaned against the doorjamb, arms folded.

“It’s fine, Steve,” she said. “I told Tony I’d think about it, and I meant I’d think about it.”

“You don’t have to do it,” he said slowly.

“I know, I don’t.” But they might need her to stand up there, face those diplomats the same way she had Congress.

The whole thing made her stomach turn. Boots off, cargo pants off, she pulled on a pair of leggings, then stripped out of her bra and switched it for a sports one, before she pulled a tank top on over it. Untwisting the chain on his dog tags, she faced him as she pulled out socks from the dresser.

“Tony talked to me about this yesterday…” He blew out a breath. “You—you know people. You can read them, assess their motives…it’s part of why he wants you involved. Everyone has an agenda.”

Dropping to sit on the edge of the bed, she pulled on her socks. “Politicians and diplomats as much as anyone else.”

“Exactly. But…and I mean this, Angel. You do not have to do this. It’s not full public exposure…”

“But it might be,” she finished for him, and then glanced around for her shoes. Straight boxing and she’d need her shoes. “I’m glad Tony talked to you about this ahead of time.”

“He wanted my input,” Steve admitted. “He wanted to know if I’d be okay with it…because it means putting you out there, potentially cutting into your work with the team, and the two of you would be spending a lot of time together.”

Finding them put away neatly in her closet, she almost laughed. That had to have been Steve or James, she usually left them stuffed under the bed. But with all three of them sleeping in here, that had the chance of becoming problematic.
“And are you okay with it?” Asking the question took some effort on her part, though she kept her tone even. Because it sounded very much like Tony asked Steve for his permission to ask Natasha to do something.

There was so much wrong with all of that—but they were all trying, right?

“I agree with him you’re the best person for the job,” Steve avoided the direct answer to the question. “I also have my reservations about the position it puts you in and I don’t want them to twist or manipulate anything you do or say to their advantage.”

Still not an answer.

“That said, I also don’t want to be the one doing that negotiating. You have the capacity for diplomacy beyond all of us. Tony and T’Challa—between them they’ve got the posturing, the position, and the influence that demands others listen to them. But you? You can charm and entice even the most recalcitrant person into at least considering your point of view even if they can’t fathom how you got there in the first place and desperately wished you hadn’t made them think about it.”

The admission cracked through her irritation. “Do you need me to do this?”

He dropped his chin to his chest for a long moment, and then lifted it as he met her gaze. “No, Angel. I don’t. I need you to make the best choice for you.” Not quite a lie. He didn’t want to need her in that position. He didn’t want to need her to have to act. So he was choosing to not need her to do it.

The obvious follow-up questions, were did the Avengers need her to do it, but the more pressing, did Tony need her there—Tony who had been handling so much of this on his own for months and who had been fighting to get them all back. He wouldn’t have maneuvered the invitation the way he did if he didn’t think he needed her.

“Okay,” she said, then gave Steve a small smile. “I’ll think about it. I need to do some research.” She knew every single member of the Committee. She knew some of their dirty little secrets, too. She’d made it a point to know after everything that went down…

Ross still had some friends there.

Not as many as he used to, but even one could be problematic.

Shoes on, she stood up. “Are you going to get changed?”

He waited until she’d crossed to him, to wrap an arm around her and pull her close. “I wanted to talk to you first. Tony talked to me, but I didn't know they were going to be asking you today. You’re going to box with Tony, right?”

“That was my plan, yes.”

Steve traced his gaze over her, and then chuckled, “Don’t break him.” The echo of Tony's earlier request amused her.

“You’re no fun.” Then he made her a liar by kissing her, gently and sweetly and with just enough heat to make her back arch. “Well, okay—you're a little bit of fun.”

He chuckled. “Light sparring, okay? Don’t overdo it.”
She did not roll her eyes. “I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will. And yes, I’m going to get changed. Buck and I may get some sparring in while you box with Tony. Glad you got him to agree to train with someone else, actually.” Tony’s past avoidance of training with the team had been another bone of contention. Steve gave her a squeeze, then stepped out of the door so she could exit. James sat in one of the kitchen chairs, pulling on his shoes.

She gave Steve’s hand a squeeze as he pulled away to head to his room before crossing over and running her fingers through James’ hair. “Did you like the salad?”

“Yes,” he told her, and then smiled. “You didn’t have to swap though, Doll.”

“I like both, and you needed to eat. The elderly really need their fiber.”

“I heard that,” Steve called from the other room. “Don’t sass us old lady.”

She laughed, and James pressed his forehead to her sternum as he chuckled. “It’s not nice to call a dame old, Stevie. Where are your manners?”

“My manners? What about Natasha’s? What happened to respecting your elders?”

“Well…” James said, leaning back to look at her. “He kind of has a point.”

“Pfft,” she scoffed dismissively. “Fine, I’ll be nice to you geezers.”

“Geezers?” James laughed as he gave her ass a squeeze. “You’re going to get spanked you keep it up.”

This was better. She could focus on this and not on the ninety-nine other problems. “I’d like to see you try.”

She had her attention on James, but she hadn’t missed the soft swish of Steve’s shoes as he left his room. Nor the shift in the air as he approached. A thrill raced through her blood. She really did like to play with fire sometimes.

“You sure about that, Doll?” James’ smile grew devilish. “You know I do like to make what you want happen…” He had his hands on her hips, and she covered them lightly, curling her fingers around his index and middle fingers on both hands.

“I know…you spoil me sometimes,” she admitted. “Both of you.” The moment his weight shifted onto the balls of his feet as he prepared to rise, and likely trap her between he and Steve, she tugged his hands and pulled him slightly off balance, then twisted to take advantage of his momentum. Releasing her grip on him at the last second, she ducked out from Steve’s arm and let them collide as she raced for the elevator.

Bless Friday, the doors were already opening as she slid between them. “Emergency close,” she ordered. “Training rooms please…” And they closed on a pair of startled faces skidding to a halt as she laughed. Leaning back against the wall, she glanced upward. “You have beautiful timing Friday.”

“Thank you, Ms. Romanoff. Was there an actual emergency or were you merely teasing Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes?”

“Maybe a little bit of both.”
They’d be right behind her, but the adrenaline buoyed her mood and she was deep into her stretches when they arrived. James just smiled at her, pure charm and innocence. Yeah, he was going to get her back for that.

She couldn’t wait.

Steve just laughed at both of them.

Twenty minutes of warming up later, she watched Steve and James begin to circle each other on the mats. She’d give Tony another few minutes, he might have still been talking to T’Challa, or gotten a phone call, or suddenly remembered the catalyst for turning iron into gold. Sometimes his brain just worked that way.

About thirty seconds from when she was ready to call him, the doors to the training room opened and he came inside dressed in sweats, with a hoodie over his tank top. “Sorry Red, T’Challa and I needed to hammer out a few more details.”

“I figured,” she said, keeping an eye on Steve as James sent him flying. But Steve tumbled, and rebounded to his feet, and avoided James’ follow up strike neatly. There was still a moment of hesitation, a resistance to fighting against a friend. He may never lose that completely. At the same time, he wasn’t quite pulling those hits either, because he got James’ left arm in a lock that was giving him trouble.

“So, on a scale of zero to Hulk, how pissed at me are you?”

“I’m not angry,” she told him, sparing him a glance as he began to do some stretches. The lunges were well balanced, but his legs were too tight. He needed to limber those up more. “I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

“Yeah, nice try. You weren’t thrilled.”

“No,” she told him. “I wasn’t. I’m still not. But it’s a rational call, a solid plan, even.”

“But…?”

He twisted a little too fast from side to side, and she huffed out a breath. “Stop,” she ordered and he paused. “Slow your movements down, you twist or bend too swiftly you’re going to pull something. Warm up, slow bends, start at the top and work your way down.”

For emphasis, she pushed her arms out in front and then went into a lunge. Her warmed muscles let her stretch farther, and she held it.

“Stretch slow, and deliberate. Hold until you feel that burn, and then gradually release. Then repeat.”

He nodded once and mimicked her motion, his expression intent. “Okay, now get back to the but part…”

“Tony, you’re not stupid. Don’t play dumb.”

“Thank you, I’m aware—genius, remember?” On his fourth lunge, he was going a little lower and his shoulders began to loosen with every extension of his arms. “Don’t avoid the question.”

“You know the caveats. You even did your research, I’m not the public face of anything. Nor should I ever be.”
“There we’re going to have to agree to disagree. You have a past.” He completed the lunges and began to do side bends. “Welcome to the club. I was a drunk playboy for a couple of decades. We’ve all left our marks.”

She wasn’t having that debate with him.

“They have zero reasons to take me seriously—except that I am Iron Man.”

“A fact you have well-informed the world about. These are not the same thing, Tony. You’re comparing apples to sauerkraut.”

He paused mid-stretch and grimaced. “That’s a horrible analogy.”

“My point.”

Straightening, he faced her. “You’re intelligent, erudite, highly trained, and skilled. You have put your life on the line regularly for as long as I’ve known you, including to save my life. You’ve been with the Avengers every step of the way, even when some of us, myself included, checked out. Even when the Avengers split, you were still out there doing the job.”

“And if I walk in there to negotiate this, and fight for that recognition, I’m never not going to be in the spotlight.”

“I hate to break this to you Red…but that ship sailed.”

“Not entirely. Memories fade. Scandals vanish.” An almost disbelieving laugh escaped her in a single sound. Wasn’t that the base reason cited by those threatening letters and articles? How he’d seemingly absolved himself of his sins? “Tony, you being Iron Man has washed a lot of your scandals from the zeitgeist. You hear Tony Stark and the average person thinks Iron Man.” Even his enemies. “They don’t think about the drunk playboy who slept with every Maxim cover model.”

“A,” he began, holding a finger up. “That was one year’s worth of issues. And B, March and I had a scheduling conflict.”

“Yeah but the Christmas cover had twins on it,” she reminded him drily. “I do my research, remember?”

He actually looked almost abashed for a split-second, then he smirked. “Yeah, it did…and they were… wait, why am I explaining this to you? You know all about doubling up on your pleasure.”

“But my point stands—that’s not what people think about when they hear your name.”

“And it’s not what people think about when they hear yours, either.” Tony countered, then unzipped his hoodie and she blinked at the shirt he was wearing. It wasn’t a tank top at all, it was a muscle shirt.

*The Black Widow League* scrawled across the front of it, along with an hourglass, and the words *Saving the world, one life at a time*.

“What the hell is that?”

“Surprise,” Tony told her. “Don’t worry, I got shirts for everyone. This is your fan club, and there are currently more than a hundred thousand members from eight different countries and it’s poised for take off in the U.S., there’s a groundswell of support for it and a very vocal advocacy taking to
social media platforms in your defense.”

“You didn’t…”

“Nope,” he said. “Well, I mean I bought the shirts. Got them for everyone. Had Friday looking
since T’Challa told me about the group that sprang up overnight in France. Happened in the weeks
after Paris.”

Natasha wasn’t entirely certain how to react. A fan club? The Black Widow League? It sounded
like a club for little old ladies and their knitting projects in the Victorian style or something…

“You’re a hero, Red. Get used to it.” Then he nodded to the ring. “Grab your gloves, time for me to
take you to church.”
On his way toward the boxing ring, Tony passed the mats where Steve and Bucky grappled. The last few weeks had been a strain on everyone, but the last few days had seen a lot of those cracks and crevices begin to fill in. He’d dropped their shirts off for them on their floor as a surprise—and at least three different styles for Red, along with another hoodie since Bucky took the last one.

Setting his water bottle aside, he left his hoodie on before pulling his gloves out of the bag, a second pair for Red and the headgear. It took her a beat, but she caught up to him as he wrapped his hands, then he nodded to the gear. She eyed the headgear briefly then stared at him again.

“Wear it or we don’t box. Your call, Red.” But he kept taping his knuckles. The last session he had with Happy had been cut short, and though Tony avoided sparring with the rest of the team without his armor… she’d made a good point. Trust had to start somewhere and training with them—Steve, Bucky, Wanda, Vision, Sam, and Peter—needed to happen.

Training with Nat first was just a perk.

“I rarely wear protective gear when I spar,” she said slowly, picking up the padded headpiece.

“I’m aware, but this…” he said, motioning to himself, “…houses a genius-level intellect, we don’t want to harm it.” He motioned to her head. “Your brain? Precious resource that has hardly ever been handled with care.”

Still, she looked dubious. This after being a ghost for weeks, and they were nearly a month post encounter with the formless—he hated that name, not that it was much better than sludge. ET might have needed to go home, but traveling via Black Widow Express had done its damage. They were just a couple of months past her dropping into a coma and then had her brain screwed with again. No. Just no.

Facing her, he sighed and gave her the earnest eyes. “C’mon, Red, indulge me.” They worked for Parker.

She set it down, but reached for her hair and pulled it back and tied it into a ponytail, before reaching for the wrap for her hands. “Fine. If a picture of me in that shows up somewhere in the Tower or the Compound or anywhere…” She eyed him.
“No pictures,” he told her, too pleased she agreed to it. Behind them, Bucky went flying as Steve kicked him at the end of a tumble. Then the two hit again. He’d reviewed a couple of the surveillance tapes on their spars multiple times—including a couple where they sparred Natasha. There had been numerous recordings over the years of Steve and Nat sparring, but the one of she and Bucky had been damn near brutal. Having fought Steve and Bucky two on one, he found himself almost morbidly curious about what it was like when they let go with each other.

“No pictures?” Natasha asked quietly, and he found her studying him as she slipped the headgear on. He did the same before he shrugged. The snowball fight had been exposure therapy. And he’d even managed to enjoy it. Okay—he’d had fun. He was man enough to admit. Still…

“Exposure therapy isn’t always the healthiest option,” she told him lightly. Too lightly.

“Pot,” he called her as they tugged their gloves on. Then tapped his gloved hands to his chest. “Kettle.”

“Try that the other way around.” A hint of a smirk creased her lips, then her gaze dipped to his shirt. “Is that for real?”

“Yep.” He checked his watch, then keyed in the command for sound dampening, and the thud of Steve and Bucky hitting each other muted. He suppressed a shiver of relief. Yes, he could still see them fighting. But he didn’t want to listen to it. She arched an eyebrow and he shrugged. “Frees us up for real talk…”

“Rules?”

“Mixed martial arts are right out.” Yeah, that was a hard no. She’d kick his ass around the ring. “How about we stick to straight boxing?”

“Standard twelve 3 minute rounds?” Why did it not surprise him she knew the rules?

He nodded once. “Friday, keep time for us.”

“Of course, Boss.”

“Clenched fist attacks only, no strikes below the belt, in the kidneys or the back of the head or neck,” he continued. “You should definitely avoid my face, too.”

“I can clean it up if I leave a mark.” The flicker of teasing there made him grin.
“I know.” He held out his gloves and she tapped them with hers. Friday rang the bell and he circled her keeping his fists up.

She matched his pace and then reversed direction, and he narrowly avoided the first strike. Having seen her fight, he knew she wasn’t going full speed.

“So you planning on talking to me during this?” He darted forward with a double tap to test her defense. She avoided both and caught him lightly on the arm with a blow. They were both testing the waters.

“What did you want to talk about?” Was that a trick question?

“You’re annoyed with me.”

“That’s hardly anything new for us,” she reminded him before she closed the distance. While he got a couple of solid hits in, but she drove him back toward the ropes, backing off only when he hit one.

A grin pulled free. Boxing was as much strategy as physical ability to dish out and take hits. He’d always enjoyed it, especially when he had a problem that refused to unravel. Abandoning the ropes, he dove back into it with her, and she matched him hit for hit. He didn’t try to pull his punches but he also didn’t want to hurt her. While he knew damn well she could pack a hell of a lot of force into her blows, she wasn’t doing more than striking and then moving away. The padding on the gloves helped, but it still smarted when they landed a solid hit.

“Maybe not, but we’ve come a long way, Red. You want me to start?”

“If you’ve got something on your mind,” she challenged, then ducked neatly avoiding his next swing.

“Let’s start with the fact I eavesdropped a few weeks ago.” Three blows hit him in rapid succession and he blew out a laugh, getting his arms up to block the fourth.

“Do we need to discuss that?”

“I thought you might need it,” he admitted. He did. “Even if you didn’t—you deserve an apology.” In the immediate aftermath, she’d been—fragile. Not a word he usually associated with her and he needed the fight with her about it. He needed her to take that pound of flesh.

The bell rang and they both relaxed a beat and he caught his breath as he stared at her.

“Are you really sorry, Tony?” The dare in her eyes demanded the truth. Then she rolled her head from side to side.

Was he? “I overstepped.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I was worried.”

“I gathered.” She was not giving him an inch.

“But that’s not an excuse.”

“No, it’s not.”
The bell rang and her fists came up, shoulders relaxed and she came after him, moving like a prowling cat. “So…I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“But you’d do it again.” A near hit accompanied each word, two feints, and then she got him in the right shoulder with a blow that left him wincing. That would hurt the next day. He might need to do some icing after the bout.

“If I thought it would help you…” He wanted to tell her no, but she kept him dancing. “Probably.” Yet, the fact she knew this and still wore his bracelet was a form of acceptance. He needed to upgrade that thing. He’d had the tweaks on the server for the last several weeks. Maybe he’d pull those out tonight and modify them. An open channel of communication whenever they needed it could be really beneficial.

“Thanks for being honest.” The dry remark made him grin.

“It’s me.”

“Yeah,” she said, and he reversed directions, and caught her in the side. The oomph of air made him wince. “I know.”

“Okay… your turn.” It wasn’t over. He’d invaded her privacy, but she still wore his bracelet. She was still talking to him. And frankly, he was glad he knew. He needed to be able to protect her, help her, and so far he hadn’t turned up a single tangible lead on her child. He’d keep looking though.

“Why do you want me out front on the Accords?” She switched it up, and the blow to his abdomen sent the air whooshing out of him. “Keep your guard up.”

“Yeah,” he coughed, mirroring her. “Need to put you back in the ring with Happy.” At least that earned him a laugh. “And I told you why upstairs…”

“No, you gave the answer that encourages everyone else to put me out there. T’Challa, Steve, even James. But why do you want me out there? Why do you want me involved? Be more deliberate in the footwork, you’re overcompensating and it’s not as distracting as you think.”

“Every one is a critic. And I want you because I want to work with you, and I know the worst—‘He ducked a hit, then blocked two more as she drove him backward. ‘—mistake we made was we just took the Accords they handed us.”

Sweat dripped down his face, and he miscalculated, and his blow glanced off the padding close to her jaw. Wincing, he yanked back and nearly ate her glove in the face and probably would have if she hadn’t pulled the hit. They weren’t wearing mouth guards, but it was hard to talk around them. His heart raced, and his blood pounded. The panting breaths made it a little harder to talk.

“Guilt tends to create a negative paradigm when it comes to decision-making.” Their gloves bounced off each other as she blocked with her forearm and drove his hit up. The bell rang and they both dropped back a couple of steps. Her face was damp at least.

Tony concentrated on his breathing. “Is that why you agreed to it? Guilt?”

“No,” she said. “And no.” The honesty gave him pause. “I know how dangerous I am. How dangerous we all are, and I… I’m used to having leashes. You know this.”

He fucking hated that term. “And that right there is why I need you on this. Because you have a unique perspective, even if I dislike how you got it.”
“We all have unique perspectives, the Accords affect us in different ways. They create a framework for you, a measure against which you can apply restraint or at least you hope it will. Then again, the moment the Accords get in your way…” She raised her brows, then the bell rang and he charged forward. Natasha flowed with his motions, retreating in a neat pattern, blocking regularly, and then she ducked and spun to circle him and he kept up the pursuit.

“You’re not wrong,” he said. “But we have to create something that provides a safeguard against abuses.” He narrowly blocked her right, then her left got him in the shoulder again. She never went for his left shoulder or arm. “It’s better in our hands than someone else’s…”

“Now you sound like Steve,” she reminded him of the core argument Steve delivered in the wake of Ross’ presentation.

“Well, he wasn’t altogether wrong, and neither were you when you said we needed to keep at least one hand on the wheel,” he commented, striking with his left in a series of quick jabs. She blocked three of the five.

“You weren’t totally wrong either,” she stated, no longer fleeing his attacks, and turning to drive him back and he was dancing to play defense. “The point is that every situation is unique. How we handle incidents as a team is going to be strategically different from how we face off with an enemy one on one.”

“Rules of engagement require certain parameters,” he said, considering the debate. “Concrete incidences we can point to and say this is why we made those choices.”

“But those are fluid and ever changing. Watch your left, you leave it open too much.” Her breath matched his, the words riding explosive pants as she suddenly, dropped spun on her feet and rose as he passed cleanly over her head and she caught him in the side with a glancing blow. “How do you measure the value of potential civilian casualties against the life of one man? Or woman?”

“You’re talking about negotiating with terrorists,” he clarified, then pulled a punch as the bell rang. Dropping his gloved fists to his hips, he walked slowly and fought to get his breathing under control. The race of his pulse jackhammered against his ribs.

She tilted her head back, stretching her arms behind her. “I’m talking about personal stakes. Do the rules apply to every situation? What if the threat is to one of us but not all of us? Ethics and morals are two very different things.”

“No one left behind,” he said. Why was that even a question?

“Even if saving that one person could injure so many more?” She raised her eyebrows, daring him. “What if the escalation on your part leads to escalation on theirs? The U.S. makes a super soldier, so Russia counters with the Black Widow program… and that in turn pushes other programs. The fight to create the best—you could end up with another Leonid or Red Skull.”

“…or Bruce,” he wiped the sweat from around his mouth with the back of his arm. The bell rang and she relaxed her knees, and brought her hands up. “Or we get another you. Not every result is negative, Red. We can’t come up with a solution for every single variable—there are too many.”

“Exactly,” she said, and they came together, and retreated in a flurry of blows. He caught the side of her headgear again and this time, she delivered a love tap of her own to his. The blow rocked him a little, and he nearly bit his tongue. “We can’t conceive of everything that could come up, so how do you write Accords that don’t hamstring us when we might need the option to exercise our own expert judgment—as in Lagos or when you invaded Killian’s compound with your homemade
air pistols and zero armor?”

The fact she knew that didn’t surprise him. He went after her again, his blood pumping and fighting to guess how she’d move. He’d seen her hit a speed bag, but never straight boxing. The retreats and advances enticed him every bit as much as they challenged him. “We can’t—that’s why we need the text to give us some latitude for judgment calls.”

She whirled, the graceful motion sending his arm past her and she was behind him. He nearly tripped over his own two feet as he fought to slow his momentum and pivoted to face her. “Then what’s the point of Accords if we want latitude to ignore them when we decide they don’t apply or they will prevent the saving of lives? Get your left arm up. You drop it too much. You need to avoid hits there.”

“Because we’re the experts,” he argued even as he tightened his left. “We’ve been doing the job. We’ve got a team leader with an indefatigable sense of right and wrong, a pair of cunning spies trained in information gathering and parsing, an android with an artificial intelligence not hampered by emotional commitments… a couple of highly trained soldiers one who probably has the highest EQ of us all and the other so familiar with the rules of engagement, his judgment is rarely suspect.”

“A genius with an obsessive desire to fix everything, a couple of kids fighting to find their footing in a greater world, including one who is committed to not harming anyone to the point he’ll get himself hurt first. And those spies are also coldly capable of making a hard call where others would hesitate.”

Okay, that stung a little, but she wasn’t wrong.

“We might need someone to make those hard calls, the person who can see past the smoke screens and bullshit.” Sweat dripped past his eyes, and his lungs were burning. Natasha slowed thankfully, because he was getting rapidly tired of chasing her. Then the bell rang. Bending from the waist, he sucked in several hard breaths trying to get oxygen into his lungs. “Those kids are going to learn, that’s why they train with those of us more experienced.”

“Friday pause the bell,” Natasha ordered, tugging off one of her gloves and moving over to the corner. She grabbed a bottle of water and unscrewed it before holding out to him.

“I’m fine,” he said, but his pants made him a liar and she just stared at him. Right. He took the water, carefully balanced between his gloves, and tipped it to his lips. The lukewarm water was cool on his throat and he drank it greedily. She opened a second and drank her own.

“The point, Tony, is you need to sell this document to a hundred and seventeen governments, none of whom want to surrender the judgment calls because what if those calls go against them in some way?”

“Well,” he said, breathing hard. “You’re not wrong.” Steve and Bucky weren’t sparring anymore. They’d moved toward the weight equipment, but they were both glancing at the ring periodically.

“I know I’m not,” she said, leaning against the side as she drained the bottle in her hand. After, she lowered it and said, “And I might be popular with the French delegates, but without a three-quarters majority, you’ll never get the new Accords passed. If they start pushing back, they might start thinking you’re more trouble than your worth.”

He laughed. “Never.”

“You never know…”
“Maybe not, but this right here…” He said motioning between them. “This is why I need you, Red. You see all these angles and you’re not afraid to call me on my crap. What you said to T’Challa earlier—I don’t think anyone’s has explained to the Committee what happened in Lagos or D.C. or New York.”

“Have they even asked?”

He finished the water, and the hard double pound of his heart eased. Rubbing his chest once, he sighed. “They had Ross.”

“So they never asked.” She set the empty aside, and pulled out another and held it up toward him, but he shook his head.

“You’re right.” He could admit it. “They should have asked us.”

“We should have made them listen.” There was a fierceness in her words that gave him pause.

“You went to the formal signing…” She’d been the only one of them to go. He’d been in Geneva following Aunt Peggy’s funeral, but he hadn’t attended the signing. Natasha had seemed the best one of them to go. She was the co-lead with Steve and if Steve wasn’t signing that made her team lead.

A single nod on her part.

“Were you planning to make them listen?”

If the explosion hadn’t happened… If T’Chaka hadn’t died… If Zemo hadn’t set them all up…

“I don’t know.”

Now that surprised him. “No?” He handed her his empty, and she set it next to hers before rising and getting her hand back into her glove. The burn along his shoulders and down his arms was welcome. Even the tightness in his back had given way as his muscles heated up. He bounced a couple of times.

“The decision was handed to us as fait accompli,” she pointed out. “Ross brought it to you first. Did he inquire about input or simply tell you that if we continued to operate out of the U.S., we would have to comply or be retired?”

“He did, in fact, bring it to me as a done deal.” Tony wasn’t too proud to admit it. Six months after Pepper had walked out for the last time—moving her things with her in a clear show that she wasn’t returning—and on the heels of Charlie Spencer’s mother confronting him following his MIT presentation, Ross walked into the Tower and dropped the Accords on Tony’s coffee table.

“Did he say done deal?”

His breathing gradually resumed to normal. But he shook his head slowly.

“You don’t remember, do you?”

Meeting those green eyes that saw far too much, Tony’s stomach sank. “No.” Did he fuck this up? Was this him not listening?

“Tony,” she said his name so softly, but it pulled him back from the edge and he zeroed in on her. “This isn’t on you.”
“But I’m the one who walked him into the Compound to drop it on all of you. I—signed off on it.”

“So did I.”

Only after he had. Only after he’d made a decision he didn’t debate or discuss with them. He as much presented it as a done deal. Her support had been incalculable and unexpected and amazing. He flexed his hands in the gloves. “Ready to go again?”

“If you are…”

“Unpause the bell, Friday.”

“Resuming countdown. 20 seconds, Boss.”

“We had good intentions, right?”

“Yes.” The single word confirmation was everything. Then the bell rang and he went after her again. The next three rounds passed in near silence. They traded blows, blocks, and a couple of times he got her good and grimaced when she retaliated in kind. There was gonna be a bruise on his right side later, but he needed the hits.

What the hell had Ross said to him? He’d been drinking—he was always drinking. Secretary Ross showed up at the Tower, he wanted a sit-down and Tony had been in the workshop, toying with… a blow caught the rubber guard on the side of his head and he snapped his attention to Natasha.

“Ow,” he said wryly.

“Stop self-flagellating. Pay attention to where you are,” she punctuated every word with a flurry of soft jabs, interspersed with one to two harder ones. “To what you are doing. It doesn’t matter if Ross said it or not.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“It is,” she insisted and the bell rang, leaving them facing each other. Was that eight or nine rounds so far? Nearly thirty plus minutes, and he was winded—again. Fuck. He needed to spend more time in the gym. “We can’t change the past, Tony. We can learn from it. We can forget about it. Or we can dwell on it until we drown.”

The irony in those words wasn’t lost on him. The bell rang, and he lunged for her. She blocked and met his blows easily. “It’s easier said than done…”

“I know.”

“And if it was my mistake…”

“Then you’ve made up for it already,” she told him, and she pushed his fist away and it was only scrambling that kept him from taking a second punch to the gut.

“Just like that?”

“Hardly,” she countered. “It’s done, Tony. We are moving forward.”

“Then you’re in?” Because so far, she’d refused to commit and he could do it, he and T’Challa, they could probably pull it off. But it would take a lot of blood, sweat, tears, and effort. His patience with the politics wore thin, and he was tired of the near misses and losses. She’d damn near died on him, and she’d have died with her name still stained and never tasting the freedom she
deserved.

“I told you I’d think about it.”

Frustrated, he landed his fist harder than he intended particularly when she didn’t dodge as he’d expected. She stumbled and then grinned.

“Like that, did you?” A thrill chased through his system.

“I like that you’re not holding back anymore,” she countered his next hook with a block, then caught him with a love tap of an uppercut.

“Ha,” he said, and a laugh worked free. “Come on Red, say yes. You and me, we could have a lot of fun.”

An odd expression danced across her face, and she missed a step. Natasha never missed a step, and he caught her hard, right in the chest. The blow sent her back a few feet and he hesitated.

“You all right?”

“Yeah,” she said, coughing once and waving him off. “Sorry—just threw me a minute there.”

“If having fun throws you, we need to talk about more than just the Accords.”

Her snort made him grin, and then she started to close the gap but the bell rang and he spread his hands.

“Oops.”

She rolled her eyes and then rolled her head from side to side stretching her neck. He bounced in place a little, keeping his blood pumping. “What can I do to convince you?”

“Can we change the subject?”

That should have been his first clue. “Do we have to?”

“I have a question for you.”

That was his second, and he shook his head. “No.”

“Tony…”

“No, Red. B.A.R.F. is off limits to you right now.”

Her eyes flashed.

“I get it…there’s a lot you want to remember, but I have my reasons.”

The bell rang and she was coming for him. He played defense, but her expression never turned tense. “And those are?”

“You’re still recovering,” he offered, and took a hit to the lower left side, she’d hit well, and he winced. Right. Guard his left.

“I’m practically recovered, Cho said so. Next?”

“The last time I offered it, you ended up in a coma.”
“I had a concussion.”

“And currently you have brain damage.”

The hit caught him right in the lower right of his jaw and he landed on his ass. Fuck that hurt.

“Okay,” he said, picking himself up slowly as she backed off. “In retrospect, I could have put that better.”

“Maybe so,” she said.

“But I’m not wrong.” He met her stare for stare. “I’ve seen the scans.”

Her fists were up, but she didn’t close the distance.

“Red…”

“Tony, there are things I need to know. The only way I find them is putting the puzzle pieces back together…”

“And if the attempt rips you to shreds, there’s a chance of never putting it together. Even worse, a greater chance of losing you altogether.” He wouldn’t budge on this, not now. “I’m not saying never,” he continued and put his fists up before heading for her again.

“I heal.”

“You haven’t yet… not this damage.”

“I healed four percent the last time I used it. That’s what Friday said based on the scans.”

“Baby Girl is amazing, but she’s not a neuro specialist. She saw a marked difference of four percent, was it truly improvement?” He jabbed. “We don’t know. Then you took a sludge bath as a glorified Duracell, so no, I’m thinking until we get those scans evaluated and I put the whole system through its paces to reduce the mental fatigue, you’re not touching B.A.R.F.”

Her lips compressed, and he wanted to tell her something else. Anything else.

“I know what this means to you, Red.”

“You don’t,” she retorted. “Because even I don’t…”

That hurt on a couple of different levels. “But I can imagine.”

The bell rang and they separated. He paced away from her so he could work his jaw a little looser. The knock had clacked his teeth together. They might need mouth guards the next time they did this. He scanned the room, half-expecting to find Steve and Bucky watching them, but neither was present.

“Friday, hold the bell.”

He pulled off his gloves and then stripped off the headgear. Sweat soaked through his shirt, and left the back of his neck clammy.

“Red, I want to help you,” he said as he turned to face her. “I want it more than anything. If I could wave my hand and give those memories back to you, I would.” That might be a little lie. There was more buried in her psyche than just her child. They might be resurrecting an entire graveyard of
demons to locate one angel. What had she called her past? A shit show of epic shit show proportions? “But I’m worried on a lot of levels and exercising caution right now—it’s the right thing to do.” Yes, from him that was a stretch; but he’d had a lot of hard lessons drummed home in the last few months. Losing her. Finding her. Getting her home. Damn near losing her again.

Yes. He was exercising some fucking caution.

“Right now…exercising caution right now is the thing to do?” Disbelief tangled in her words.

“Yes, because I happen to want you around for a long time to come and I won’t risk your mind. It’s too damn precious.” The words to me lingered unspoken on his tongue. She was too damn precious to him. “Friends don’t let friends charge the gate because what they need desperately is on the other side. You might survive bashing your head against that wall. You might even heal from it. I’d rather build you a suit that got you inside or beat the damn thing down myself.”

She tugged off the gloves, and then stripped her own headgear. The sweat had her hair plastered to her face, and her skin gleaming. The hints of color left by the tropical sun and the flush of exertion warmed her skin.

“I need you too much to risk you that way, Red.” That admission cost him, but he didn’t shy away from it. “I’ll do anything I can for you, anything else…but not that.”

Dropping the equipment, she sank down to sit on the floor of the ring and blew out a breath. “I don’t know how to get it back otherwise.”

“That’s the problem,” he said as gently as he could, and dropped to sit facing her. “We don’t even know if it would work.”

“We got some things back on the quinjet…and it…I put together other pieces later.” She scrubbed her hands over her face, and it yanked at him. Natasha was always in control, and right now she was like a raw nerve, vulnerable and exposed.

“Give me a little longer,” he asked. He wouldn’t beg—well maybe he would. “I’m trying to find the right specialist to look at your scans. Someone who knows what they’re doing. Everything that happened to you—it’s left a mark, and maybe…maybe a few months stepping back from the team, and fighting…” But even as he said it he knew she’d never go for it.

“You think if I stop getting hurt, eventually all of it will reverse itself.”

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe we’re spitting. We know you healed enough once to have a child. But you’ve got all that scarring again, and you’ve been taking a lot of body blows Red. The fact it’s taken you this long to be back on your feet after the sludge…that worries me.” What they didn’t know worried him more. How many times had she been put in the chair? Helen said for her to have suffered the kind of scarring she had and to still be in that shape with her healing, the injuries had to be inflicted repeatedly. So how had they continued that at SHIELD? Had she been put back in the chair while she was at SHIELD? What happened in those hours between their capture and her appearance in Leonid and Alexei’s little house of horrors? What the hell were those veins of darkness in her brain scan? Had the formless done something else to her?

Those were right off the top of his head.

She crossed her legs and sat forward, studying him. “It scared James and Steve, too.”

“I’m aware, but they got to see your improvement, they were there to hold your hand and worry over you. I watched Steve carry you onto that quinjet, barely responsive but stable. I—I’m not
doing that again. You look out for me, you push me when I’m sliding. You challenge me to do better. When I stumble…you pick my ass up.” He wasn’t proud. She’d carried his drunk ass to bed enough times to have earned a fucking merit badge. Dusted him off. Poked him when he needed it. Saved his life. “Maybe all I can do is watch out for your reckless ass, and if that means telling you no then I’m going to tell you no.”

“I don’t care what it costs me…”

“But I do. You don’t get to do this… I refuse to let you slip away.”

“It’s not your call…”

“Yeah that argument doesn’t work on me Red, see—it’s my technology and you’re my friend, ergo—not happening.” It didn’t take an expert to read the disappointment in her eyes.

There he went—disappointing her again.

“You’re a good friend, Tony,” she said the words so quietly he almost didn’t hear them. Then she stood, reaching for her gloves. Scrambling up, he caught her arm.

“Red…”

“It’s okay,” she said, and the earlier emotion had drained from her face. Her mask was firmly in place.

“No, it’s not.” He gave her arm a squeeze and didn’t look away from her. “It’s not okay until I can fix it for you.”

“Despite my behavior to the contrary, this isn’t on you Tony.”

“It is when you ask for my help.” He blew out a breath. The whole damn thing made him helpless. “I’m looking for her,” he admitted. “I don’t have a lot of details to go on, but… I started looking as quietly as possible. Friday and I are keeping it discreet.”

“While you juggle the Accords, your company, the team, my medical care and a thousand and one other things?” The lack of surprise in her voice warmed him. Maybe he was predictable—to her. That was okay. She got him on a lot of levels.

“There’s not a lot I’m not going to do for you. I haven’t gotten anywhere… Clint gave me the names you guys were using but they’re dead ends. You covered your tracks really well.”

It was piss poor comfort, even admiring how canny she had to have been to wipe out any trace of her path. It wasn’t the time period, though arguably that didn’t help. Natasha could do it now.

“Red… talk to me. I’m working on it…”

“Are you really?” The direct question didn’t surprise him. “Or are you telling me that because you want me to back off on asking?”

“A little bit of both,” he admitted. “I have been trying to figure out the best way to tweak it. I’ve been distracted…” More than a little bit. “I’ve been… focused on a lot of other things. I’ll move it to the priority.”

“You don’t have time for that,” she said, and even if he appreciated being let off the hook, he didn’t want to be.
“Well, if my bestie backs me up… comes and works with me, I will be able to make the time.”

A hint of a puzzlement flickered through her eyes.

“Wow, my ego can take the bruising, how quickly you forget.” He grimaced. Poor choice of words. “Think about it. We were *so close* in college, I went all the way to Europe to lure you back…”

A laugh escaped her and he grinned. Catching her hand, he gripped it lightly.

“That’s better,” he told her. “I’m not giving up, Red. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” she told him, then gave his hand a squeeze before she let him go and reached for the gloves. “It’s probably better to wait anyway…”

“Because?” Red didn’t give up on anything. The idea she would give any ground put him on alert.

“Because we have a lot on our plates… and you’re right. You do need my help.” Then she met his gaze. “I don’t know that walking into those negotiations is the way to go… but I’m not discounting it either.”

“I need you. Everything else is what it is,” he reminded her. “If you really don’t want to do this, no one is going to make you—I mean your fan club might be disappointed.” He tapped his chest. “And as a card-carrying member, I have to tell you—nothing you choose to do will change my opinion of you.”

The mask over her expression eased and she sighed. “You know what you need?”

“Yes.” He leaned forward and presented his cheek. “For you to kiss my jaw and make it better.”

She pressed her fingers to his face gently and pushed him away. “No. You need more practice in the ring. Your pulse got too high, your breathing too rapid.”

“Gee, Mom. I eat my vegetables.”

Yes, she was changing the subject and he backed off. She’d asked him for a favor, and he’d had to tell her no. She was letting him off the hook even if he wasn’t.

“And you need to hit the gym regularly.”

“I do it when I have time…”

“You need to make time.” She walked over to the side of the ring and slid out between the ropes. For a moment, it struck him. He’d been standing in a ring when he met her. That flash of *déjà vu* took him back. When she stepped down from the ring and glanced back at him, she raised her brows.

The same dark red curls spilled out of her ponytail, even the recalcitrant locks that escaped curled. The fathomless green eyes that offered him a puzzle to solve, and had proven an exercise in endless fascination for him, they’d become almost a familiar comfort.

He cleared his throat. “What do I get if I make the time?”

Opening a bottle of water, she studied him. “What do you want?”

*You.* “Some mixed martial arts, and booty boot shorts wouldn’t hurt.”
“Pretty sure Happy would look terrible in booty boot shorts, and he doesn’t do mixed martial arts.”

Nice.

“No, but you do.”

“I don’t do booty boot shorts.”

“Damn. We can’t all be perfect.”

The corner of her mouth kicked up. “You could wear them.”

He glanced down at himself, then over at her. “You really think I’d find that discouraging?”

Canting her head to the side, she said, “No, probably not.” She pulled out another bottle of water, she held it out to him and he followed her out of the ring and then sat on the edge. After taking a seat, he patted the edge of the ring next to him.

While he waited for her to join him, he opened his bottle of water. “You have a lot on your plate, you really want to keep training with me, too?”

She bumped his shoulder. “We’re friends, right?”

“You tell me.”

“You take things I hand you.”

*She’s my friend.* It’s what he’d said to Rhodey.

The realization sank in and he glanced at the water bottle in his hand for a moment. He had taken things from her.

More than once.

“Point.” Tipping the bottle up, he took a long drink. She was his friend. “I’m not a great student.” He wanted more, but he’d take friend.

“I don’t expect you to be a student,” she said, kicking her legs idly. Her gaze was across the room. “You’d be a sparring partner. As you can imagine, I don’t get to box a lot.”

“You mean killer thighs isn’t a boxing move? Damn, and here I thought I’d get your legs wrapped around me.”

“Haha…”

“Well if we mix it up, I may get that after all.” He chuckled, not that he was all that eager to have her throwing him around the way she did Cap. He didn’t bounce back that easily. Rubbing the spot on his chest where the ARC reactor used to sit he said, “Or we can just order food and watch TV a couple of times a week.”

“That doesn’t keep your heart in good shape.”

“I don’t know, my heart feels pretty good after we hang out.”

Her snort made him grin.
“See, I’m fun to be around. You’re in a better mood, aren’t you?”

“I wasn’t in a bad mood before.”

“Liar,” he nudged her again, and she flicked his ear. That was more like it. “Will it make you feel better if we make a date in the ring a couple of times a week?”

“No, but it would probably help.”

He grinned. She cared. And he was in vast danger of pushing this beyond the boundary of friendship. Pushing off the ring, he hopped to his feet and said. “Want to grab a shower and then come up for snacks? Or come up for a shower and then we’ll go down for snacks?”

“Tony…”

“Hey… I didn’t say shower with me. Though that’s always an option if you’re interested.”

She sighed and he grabbed the gloves to pack them into the bag. He’d need to clean them up at some point.

“You need to stop.”

“Yeah… not sure I can. You see, I have a condition.” He planted his hand against his chest.

“You’re being an ass.”

“That, too.” He sobered. “Twice a week, boxing and Accords planning.”

“You think you’re clever, don’t you?” But there was no denying the amusement curving her lips.

“Nah, Red. I know I am.”

She rolled her eyes.

“C’mon, let’s go get cleaned up and talk some more if you want—about anything you want.”

“Not tonight,” she said as she stood.

“No?” Packing away his ego, he had to ask. “Hot date?”

“Going to get a Christmas tree.”

“That’s so…” He searched for the word.

“Normal.” Then she smiled, and there was an element of happiness in her expression he refused to dissuade so he choked off the smartass remark that came to mind.

“Sounds like a plan,” he offered instead. “I should probably take advantage of the quiet and get some work done.”

“How late were you up last night?”

He shrugged. “Not that late.”

“Don’t stay up all night.”

“I get my best work done on sleep deprivation. There’s a lot worth depriving myself.” Time to go.
He was about to get maudlin, and neither of them needed that. “Go on Red, go find your boys and your tree. I want to hear all about it tomorrow.”

“Tony?”

He scooped up the duffle and paused.

“We’ll figure it out. All of this stuff… OsCorp. The Accords. The team.”

“I know,” he said, giving her a wave and heading for the door. Then, he paused and pivoted to find her where he’d left her, but her speculative gaze rested on him. “You worried about me Red?”

“Just staring at your ass.”

He smirked. “I thought so.” Then he winked, and resumed his course for the door.

“Tony…” at her call he paused, and glanced back to find her still studying him.

“Red?”

“Every morning. You and me, down here. You train and you learn more than boxing. I’ll step up for those meetings with the Accords.”

He didn’t quite gape. “Every morning?”

“Every morning. That means you sleep. You get time off if there’s a mission, but otherwise, you and me. Right here. And you train with me, everything.”

“You’ll take meetings with the Committee, you’ll get up there with me and take them on?”

“Yes.”

Let her kick his ass every day, then she’d help him kick the Committee’s ass every chance they got? “Do you have time for that?”

“We’ll make time.” She raised her brows. “Take it or leave it.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” Then the corners of his mouth curved. “I’ll take it.”

“See you in the morning.”

“First thing.” He didn’t grimace. “I’ll be here.”

“Don’t make me come look for you…”

Continuing to the door, he called, “I don’t know—that could be fun.” Then again this was Red.

“You won’t think so.”

“Don’t tempt me!” He called and then he was out, and didn’t slow until he stepped onto the elevator, and then his smile faded. “Penthouse, and Friday…”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Put the bracelet on monitoring when Red leaves the Tower.”

“Boss, Ms. Romanoff has expressed firm disapproval of you monitoring her communications via
the bracelet."

“Don’t want to eavesdrop, Friday. Just want to know where she is and that she’s all right. When they’re back, just put it back in neutral.”

“Understood, Boss.”

She was onboard to help, and he got even more time with her. Time for her to kick his ass, but time nonetheless. He could work with that.

As he stepped into the penthouse, he set the duffle down and headed for the shower and then some pain relievers. He was going to be sore. “Okay Friday, what’s next?”
Chapter Summary

The throuple escapes for a couple of hours of tree shopping...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Four

Trees

Bucky

“Three,” Bucky said, holding up his fingers. “Two with hot mustard, one with sugar and cinnamon.”

“You got it.” The air was positively biting. The gloves he sported and the heavy jacket covered his arm. Those coupled with the baseball cap bought him some anonymity. They were at their third tree lot. Steve was being a punk about the type of tree to get and Natalia kept winding him up, forever finding something just not quite right about the trees he picked out. It was glorious. They’d set out in the SUV, but left it parked a few blocks away as they rambled along tenth to the various pop up stands.

It wasn’t like they couldn’t carry whatever tree they found back, but Steve was loath to have Natalia on the streets that close to the Tower, not again. So they’d moved south toward Hell’s Kitchen because Natalia said the best place to get trees was a pop up shop off 10th.

After paying for the hot pretzels, Bucky headed back into their latest lot. They wouldn’t find the perfect tree here, not with Natalia teasing Steve and enjoying herself. But he was content to let them look. Particularly after how off she’d seemed since they left her meeting with Pepper Potts.

“Steve it’s ten feet tall,” Natalia said as he tracked them by their voices. Bucky almost smirked as he found them studying what was indeed a ten-foot tall blue fir.

“It’ll fit,” Steve said. “We’ve got high ceilings, and it’s got good width.”

“Hmm,” she murmured, then took a step back and tilted her head to the side.

“What do you think?”

“It’s a good color,” she said thoughtfully, tugging a glove off her hand to run it over the needles gently. “It’s soft.” Steve’s expression brightened. Bucky waited for it as Natalia made a show of circling the tree. “But I don’t know…”
And there it was.

She’d leaned back against Steve and they tilted their heads at almost the same time. Laughter expanded like a bubble in his chest, and Bucky had to bite back a snort. Stepping out from between the trees, he held out the cinnamon and sugar bathed pretzel to Natalia. The swift brightness in her eyes was ample reward, and Steve eyed him then nodded to the tree.

“She’s not sure about it. What do you think?” Like Natalia, he took his pretzel—with hot mustard for a kick—with enthusiasm.

“Spasibo,” Natalia said, before taking a bite of her pretzel. The glee in her eyes when she met his gaze pulled the laughter to the surface. Her raised eyebrows dared him to throw in his comments.

“It’s a good tree,” he said. Still, as he joined them in facing it, he found his head tilting like theirs did. “It’s crooked isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Natalia said.

“It’s not so bad.” Steve reached out a hand to straighten it, but then it leaned again.

“It’s too heavy on one side.” Natalia pointed out before she licked the sugar and cinnamon off her lips. “It’s a good tree…”

“But it’s not the perfect tree.” With a sigh, Steve nodded and they resumed their strolling through the different trees of the pop up lot. Bucky divided his attention between tracking them and monitoring the people around them while he finished off his pretzel. It was exactly the right thing to hit the spot. A slice or a hot dog next. Unless they picked out a tree or found a place to stop in and eat. He wasn’t eager to choose a restaurant though. The snow had begun drifting down again around lunchtime, but it had slowed. The air was almost colder, and the weather forecast said they were in for another six to ten inches in the next twenty-four hours.

Natalia bumped his hip, and he gave her a quick smile. He and Steve had to leave while she was boxing with Tony. It had been fine until she struck him with a hard jab to the face that knocked him on his ass. They couldn’t hear what they were saying, thanks to whatever dampening field Tony had engaged. Friday said it was because Boss wants to concentrate. At the same time, neither he nor Steve saw her strike as a slip. Whatever Tony had said, she’d popped him for it.

Rather than stare at them and try to interpret, they’d finished their workout and returned to their floor to find the shirts someone—most likely Tony—had left for them along with a couple of packages addressed to Steve. Post-showers, Steve filled him in on the so-called fan club. Bucky wasn’t sure what to make of it, so he did some web searches while Steve unpacked some new framed photos.

Natalia on the island, standing at the water’s edge in her hat and black bikini, the wind pulling at her sarong and her head tilted up and to the side to give them the perfect lines of her profile. Another of her curled up against Bucky’s chest, sound asleep while he read a book. That had to have been their first week on the island. There were two more. Natalia and all the Bartons, Lila hugging her on one side and Clint with his arm around her on the other. It had been a spontaneous picture from Wednesday evening.

“How are you getting these developed and framed so fast?” Bucky asked as Steve passed over the last one. Natalia, Peter, and Tony were prominent in the image, she was staring down at Tony, Peter, and yes, Cooper was there, too as they worked on their Death Star. The most humorous part was all three males had the exact same hopeful asking expression on their faces.
That had to have been when Natalia told Tony no lasers, but he said something about making the toy fly.

“Friday helps,” Steve said before carrying the framed photos over and adding them to the shelves. There was one more in the box and Bucky lifted it out slowly.

Natalia on the ice, spinning.

“For your room?” Bucky had asked, his gaze riveted on her. She’d been so fucking graceful. He’d seen her skate before, mostly for missions, but playing with the kids she’d been… well, she’d been a dancer on the ice and he loved to watch her move.

“Nope,” Steve told him as he dropped into an armchair and reached for his sketchpad. “Yours.”

Bucky had blinked at him then down at the image.

Steve chuckled. “I’d try for one from when she danced this morning…”

“Privacy mode.”

With a nod, Steve flipped to a blank page before picking up his pencil. He glanced at the photos he’d scattered on the shelves.

“We need to get one of her and Wanda,” Bucky commented, tracing his fingers over Natalia’s upraised arms.

“We’ll get more. More with us, and the others. Fill all these shelves with pictures of her life.”

Tangible evidence of her presence in their lives and everyone else’s. He glanced to the family photo with the Bartons. Photos of the life she had now. “Thanks, Punk.” The emotion socked him. Steve was giving her proof she could hold onto, the kind of personal pieces they’d always had to cut away before.

Steve hadn’t said a word, just smiled and started sketching. Bucky carried the photo to his room, and set it on the nightstand. It would be the first thing he saw and the last thing he saw on those rare occasions he slept in here.

Opening the drawer of the nightstand, he’d pulled out his dog tags, and then he’d hung them off the edge of her photo.

“Oh my god!” A girlish voice whisper-squealed yanking him back to the present. Natasha shifted her weight, and Bucky tracked the source to a pair of teen girls staring at Steve. “That’s him, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

No way Steve didn’t hear them. They weren’t exactly quiet, but he angled his head away, and adjusted his ball cap.

“Go,” one of the girls encouraged the other. And she shook her head and gave her friend a shove.

“Go and ask.”

Natalia hid a smile, and then faded back a few steps until she vanished in the trees. Bucky scanned, evaluated, and dismissed the teenagers as potential threats. But like Natalia he moved out of the direct visual, keeping Steve and the girls in his line of sight. Just because someone didn’t look like
a threat didn’t mean they weren’t. It didn’t remotely surprise him when he caught sight of Natalia’s black knit cap moving next to a pair of trees just behind the girls. They had them in a perfect cross fire if necessary.

The weight of the gun in the holster beneath his jacket was a comfort. But these were teenagers, and they were all agog at Steve.

“Excuse me,” one of them said, her voice nervous but hopeful. The dark skinned girl flashed a fast smile as Steve turned to face them. The abashed look on his face squaring away to a professional smile. “You’re Captain America, aren’t you?”

He offered his hand, courteous as always. “Steve Rogers.”

“Oh my god,” she repeated, then clasped his gloved hand with her own. “You’re really him.” Her friend hurried over.

“Hi.” The second girl was almost breathless. “I’m Trish, this is Alyssa.”

Bucky caught Steve’s gaze briefly and had to bite back a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Steve said, shaking Trish’s hand once Alyssa released him. Apparently Alyssa had lost the power of speech. “I hope you both had a good Thanksgiving.”

“We did…” Trish enthused. “Are you here to get a tree?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Mostly just looking.”

“Yeah, us too,” Trish said, bumping her friend’s shoulder but Alyssa remained almost mute. “Could—do you mind if we get a picture?” She held up her phone.

Bucky debated going to rescue him, but Steve gave a determined smile and said, “If you like.”

The girls crowded in with him, but Trish had trouble angling the camera to do the selfie because they were so much shorter than he. Steve gave her a hand and lifted the camera up and snapped the pic easily. Trish’s eyes were the size of saucers, and she clapped the phone to her chest. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” Then he extracted himself. “Have a good evening.”

The girls huddled together over the phone, and Steve moved away, and Bucky paralleled his path, but kept one ear out for the girls.

“Oh my god, that was really him and he touched my phone.”

It was the most ridiculous thing ever, and Bucky couldn’t help grinning when he caught up to Captain Red-Faced. Natalia melted out of the shadows between the trees as he got there, and she hooked her arm through Steve’s.

“Not a word,” Stevie said, giving her an affectionate look. “Not one word.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. But we should move on…”

“Yeah, we haven’t looked at all of them,” Steve said, but he already angled toward the exit.

“I know, but they’re probably posting that picture to Instagram and Twitter, and tagging your location.”
With a last look at the girls, Bucky followed them out of the tree lot and they continued down the block. Walking a half step behind them, Bucky covered their backs.

“Fine, fine.” Steve cast a look back at him. “All good?”

“Just fine,” Bucky assured him. The sidewalks weren’t crowded, but there were enough people to keep him on edge and his vigilance high. “You know,” he continued idly. “It occurs to me, we might need to look at decorations at these places.” Those had also changed over the years; there were so many options.

“That’s a good idea. We should look for stockings, too.” Steve glanced down at Natalia. “Should we pick up stockings for the others out at the Compound?”

“You two are going to hose everything down in tinsel, aren’t you?” Despite the hint of sarcasm, her expression softened.

Closing the distance as they had to wait for a light to cross the street, Bucky wrapped an arm around her middle and pulled her back against his chest. “And mistletoe. Everywhere.”

She laughed. The sound relaxed him, even with the horns, the stacks of snow they had to avoid, the jostling crowds—anticipation permeated the air. Most everyone was hurrying to take care of their shopping or meeting friends or like them, combining the two ideas as they strolled along. With their breath frosting in the air, Bucky paid attention to Natalia’s coloring. She was bundled warmly in a knee length coat, scarf, knit cap, and gloves.

“That could make doing anything time consuming if I have to map a path around all the mistletoe.” The teasing made him laugh, and as the light changed, he tracked the vehicles verifying cross-traffic stopped before they stepped off.

The lightness of her mood and playfulness of her comments were in direct contrast to her demeanor post-lunch and boxing. When she’d come up from the gym, sweaty and sporting a few new bruises, she’d disappeared into her room for a shower after dropping kisses on them. After a couple of hours, they’d attempted to roust her with hot tea and some leftover pie. She’d taken the tea, but wanted to work some more, promising to wrap it up in a bit so they could go shopping.

Arriving at the next lot, Natalia’s smile grew and Bucky could see why. The trees here were lush, lights strung across the railings, creating a path of fairy lights through the trees and chasing away the shadows. Christmas music piped through the speakers, and there was a distinct scent of spiced cider amidst the pine.

“Cider?” Natalia asked, but was already pulling away from both of them without waiting for their answer. “My treat!”

“We can all go,” Steve said, and she gave him a look. Yes, they’d been crowding her. “Or I can start looking around up here—what about a wreath, Buck?”

“Sure,” Bucky said, moving to keep Natalia in his sightlines as she headed to a cart. They didn’t exactly have a front door, or a fireplace to put a wreath over, but Steve made a great show of examining what they had. This lot had to be twice the size of the others. Right next to the cider vendor was a candied nut seller hawking his wares.

He could, reasonably, just go get in that line and it would put him within arm’s reach of her. There were three people ahead of her in the line, but she tapped her foot lightly to the jaunty Christmas melody.
“You could be more subtle about it,” Steve said, abandoning his study of the wreaths.

“I don’t want to be subtle,” Bucky told him. There were more people at this lot than the last. It was deeper into Hell’s Kitchen. Families moved amongst the trees, young couples, and more than one grouping of teen males or twenty-somethings just hanging out. Some had cider and seemed to just be catching up, but there were three lingering near enough to where the checkout stand was for the lot, that it seemed more suspicious than casual.

And one of them was armed. The distinct curve of the weapon against his side threw off the line of his coat.

Natalia now only had two people in front of her. A man in dark sunglasses made his way along the sidewalk in their direction. Considering the hour and the darkness, it stood out until Bucky caught sight of the walking stick. Moving on, he kept a running tally of positions. Most of the people in and around this section of 10th were civilians, shopping, laughing, or otherwise trying to get through the holiday shopping crowd.

“She tell you what Pepper wanted?” Steve asked quietly. They’d debated it briefly over coffee while they waited for her to finish up. But Steve only knew Pepper tangentially via infrequent social events. She ran Tony’s company and had once been Tony’s girlfriend, though that no longer the case.

“No, I figure that’s what she was working on this afternoon.”

“Yeah me, too.”

She was one person away and the blind man had moved into the line for the candied nuts, his head angled.

“You know if we’re both standing here when she gets done…”

“She already knows we’re here,” Bucky dismissed the concern. Since they’d taken her Pepper’s that morning, and brought her back—their arguments had not changed. Natasha had only glanced at them once since getting in the line, but he had no doubt she was aware of them. Most likely, she soaked up the conversations around her. Changing the subject, he tapped Steve with his elbow.

“You going to let her talk you out of another tree?”

Chuckling, Steve shook his head. “I can’t really fault the issues she’s pointed out. And this is our first tree…it should be perfect.”

“It will be.”

Finally, it was Natalia’s turn. Whatever she said to the vendor transformed the man’s weary expression into a smile, and he seemed to brighten. Then he was pulling three large cups with hot, spiced cider and Bucky had to admit, his mouth watered at the thought. He’d already served the previous customers from the same stainless steel urns. One of which had been sipping his steadily as his wife argued with someone on a cell phone—her mother from the sounds of it.

Holiday plans.

There was a twist in his chest. Even when they had little, they’d always piled together on Christmas, his parents, his sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles—some coming all the way from Staten Island to spend the holidays together. Steve and his mother were always invited. Crowded and noisy, the gifts were simple—handmade scarves, new sets of gloves or hats, sometimes socks—those were often the best because his always ended up worn down and darning couldn’t always
save them.

Three cups in hand, Natalia turned to join them and her gaze sweeping the crowd as she moved. The woman arguing with her mother ended the call with a huffed sigh. It was easy to be impatient with family when you took them for granted—even more when they were still around.

Natalia caught his gaze as she carried the cups to them, the inquisitive light in her eyes tugged at him. She passed a cup to Steve, then took a sip from the second cup before passing it to him.

Dammit. His heart squeezed again. She never missed a beat and it was as natural as breathing for her to sample the items to prove to them they were safe. He’d thought that particularly quirk might fade with his restored memories but the Soldier in him wouldn’t allow it. Dropping a kiss on her lips in silent thanks, he slid an arm around her shoulders and nodded to the lot.

“Shall we?”

“Let’s,” Steve said, toasting them with his cup. As they made their way through the shop and into the lot itself, Bucky kept his head on a swivel.

“Oh…” Natasha said, a charmed note and he turned as she tugged away from under the shelter of his arm. The ornaments she’d found broke a laugh from his chest.

“Really?” Steve gave a resigned sigh, but followed when she held up a tiny replica of his shield. Right next to it was an actual miniaturized Captain America. She put two of each of those in a basket she snagged from the counter. Laughing, Bucky put a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder and gave him a squeeze before stepping closer. “Those aren’t really traditional ornaments.”

But the grin pulling at her lips, heart stopping and carefree, silenced his objections. “It’s adorable.” She pulled one off a hook that looked like Thor’s hammer, and then an actual Iron Man, not just a symbol but a miniature replica of the suit. Two of each went into her basket. Laughing, Bucky put a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder and held it out to her.

A laugh escaped and she beckoned for a second one. More than happy to grab it for her, he snagged a Vision from the same rack. Like the Iron Man armor, it had a lot of the detail down. It took him a minute to find a second one. Frankly, Bucky thought it was a little creepy. Steve got into the spirit and added a War Machine, then went back to hunting along the different racks.

Natalia dropped to a crouch to study the ones lower down and reaching into the back she pulled out a Spider-Man, the ornament was poised like the kid was mid-leap. It didn’t remotely surprise him when she rooted through and pulled out two more like it.

Steve moved along the wall, frowning. He picked up an ornament that looked like the green guy, weighing it in his hand with a thoughtful expression and then he glanced toward Natalia who was creeping along the bottom, checking every single ornament.

Then she let out a cheerful little, “Yes!” Rising, she held up two of what had to be the little witch. The hair was right, and the red outfit, but the features were terrible. Still, Natalia’s excitement was contagious and he grinned. She set them in the basket and walked over to where Steve stared at the other guy ornament.

Holding it up to Natalia for her inspection, Steve asked, “This one okay, too?”

“It’s fine,” she said, claiming the ornament and dropping it in her basket. “We have to keep an eye out for the Black Panther one. According to the sticker near the Scarlet Witches, there is one. I want to get a couple for a present.”
“I’m not finding you or Sam,” Steve said, his voice dropping to match hers in quiet tone.

“We’ll keep an eye out for him.”

“And for you,” Bucky told her. He would want one of hers, as well.

She snorted, not too indelicately, and said, “I really doubt there will be one of me. I’m going to go buy these, and then we’ll head out to the trees?”

Not waiting for their answer, she made her way to the register.

“We’re finding one for her, right?” he asked Steve in a low voice.

Steve already had his phone out. “I’ll make one if I have to.” His scowl deepened as he studied his phone, then it and the phone vanished as Natalia returned. Bucky took the bag from her hand, and then motioned for Steve to lead the way. Natalia trailed right behind him as they eased past the other customers to get out of the crowded little store and outside where the trees sat under the twinkle lights and the music surrounded them without the buzz of the crowd.

Bucky took a deep breath as soon as they were back in the cold air. The room had been getting tighter and tighter with more people walking in off the street. Steve caught Natalia’s hand in his and they turned toward the edge. There was always a pattern to Steve’s meandering. The trees along the perimeter were designed to get people to walk into the lot, which meant they had to be the best looking ones.

They’d swept and shoveled the snow strategically, creating winding paths through the trees, and layering it around the base of the trees as if they were in the forest. Natalia swayed to one of the songs as they circled a fluffy seven-foot blue spruce, head tilted back to study the top with a small smile. Then her teeth scraped over her lower lip and Steve elbowed him.

Yep, he saw it. Backing away a couple of paces, he scanned the area around them. Most of the customers were on the other side of the lot or moving through the middle. The tree was stable and straight. It seemed even thicker from this angle. Natalia leaned in and took a deep breath. Steve slid an arm through the branches to grip the trunk. It passed inspection because he nodded as he dropped to check the base. The branches extended almost all the way to ground. The scent was sharp, sweet, and refreshing amidst the chilly air.

The tree would look really good in their sitting room. The lot sold tree stands so they could grab one here. They’d have to move the furniture a little and create a space for it along the wall with the shelves. Maybe string some lights on the shelves and light up the new pictures Steve had framed.

“What do you think, Angel?”

They already knew the answer to this question, but Natalia’s shining eyes as she took a sip of her cider was all the confirmation Bucky needed.

“I like it,” Steve said.

“Shift the furniture around, we can put it on the wall next to the shelves…” Bucky said.

“…add some string lights to the shelves so it extends out from the tree.” Steve read his mind. “Star on the top?”

“Thought you’d want an angel.”
The soft laugh Steve released widened Bucky’s grin. “I want Angel under the tree, and in front of it.”

“You’re both idiots.” Still, she laughed, then just as quickly her expression muted as she pivoted and Bucky straightened. They’d both noticed the movement at the same time. The blind man from the candied nut cart stood a couple of feet behind her. “Hi Matty,” she said by way of greeting.

“Hey Matt, where did you get…” A slightly shorter man with reddish blond hair pushed through the trees behind Matty and Natalia glanced at him. Bucky shifted his stance, and Steve moved to glide closer to her. “Seriously?” The reddish-blond stared at Natalia. “Of all the tree lots in all the world you show up at this one?”

“Foggy,” Matty said. “Be nice.”

“He is being nice,” Natalia said, a smooth smile in her voice. “He didn’t even call me a bad word.” Steve closed the distance at that.

“I did that once, Natasha…once.” Foggy hadn’t missed their movement and he focused on Bucky briefly, but more on Steve. “Captain Rogers. Franklin Nelson.” He held out his hand and Steve glanced at it once, then took it in a brief handshake.

“Friends?” Steve asked Natalia, not the pair in front of her.

“Matt Murdock,” she said motioning to the man in front of her and the name struck a chord with Bucky. This was the guy she dated. “Steve Rogers—and James Barnes.”

Matt inclined his head. “Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes.”

Foggy shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Nice to meet you both. We should probably let them get back to their Christmas tree shopping, Matt…” Foggy glanced at Natalia. “Or whatever it is America’s Most Wanted is getting up to tonight.”

“Not anymore, Foggy,” Matt said, his hands balanced on the walking stick in front of him. “The charges were dropped. Be nice. I want to talk to Natasha for a moment.”

“Bad idea, Matt…” Foggy said in a low voice that he probably didn’t intend to carry.

Natalia dipped her chin, amusement radiating off her. Yet her stance was not relaxed.

“Foggy.” The single sharp intonation of the other man’s name had him grimacing. Then he cast a look at them and turned on his heel.

“Happy holidays, Foggy. It’s always so good to see you.”

The other man frozen mid-step then gave her a pained if polite smile before hurrying away.

“You shouldn’t pick on him, Natasha,” Matt admonished her, though his lips were twitching.

Natalia shrugged. “He started it.”

Apparently, that was the end of that part of the conversation. “Do you have a minute?”

“I have all the minutes,” she told him, but the balance of her weight stayed on the balls of her feet. “What’s up?”
Matt Murdock possessed a lean build, but the suit he wore could easily disguise muscle. A slightly larger side could give him the appearance of ranginess. He didn’t shift his weight like Foggy. He stood squarely, his head at the slightest of angles as though he concentrated on their words, but there was something about the way he held himself.

This wasn’t just a blind man who was—what the hell did Murdock do? Law? Was that what Stevie had said? He was a lawyer.

“Privately?”

Steve’s shoulders tensed.

“Is it personal or professional?” Natalia asked.

“A little bit of both.”

Tilting her head, Natalia seemed to study him. “Important?”

“It could be.” It was like they had their own code.

“I trust them,” she told him and Matt’s expression shifted minutely.

The surprise didn’t linger long though. “That’s new,” he commented.

“Lots of things are.”

“Mr. Murdock?” Steve probed when the man went quiet.

“My apologies Captain,” he said, turning his face as though drawn by the sound of Steve’s voice. Bucky didn’t buy it though; something was off about the guy. There was more here…

Of course, he knew Natalia. It wouldn’t surprise Bucky if there was much more to the blind man than met the eye. No pun intended.

“It’s been a long few weeks,” Matt continued, then he shifted to face Natalia once more. “Things have improved since the last time we spoke?”

“Yes.” That was it with no elaboration and Bucky didn’t blame her. Impatience crept through him. They came here to get a tree, not to spend time with whatever he was to her. “What’s wrong, Matty?”

A faint smile. “Why does something have to be wrong?”

“Because you’re uneasy, and you want to ask for my help and you hate asking for my help.”

“I don’t hate it.”

Dead silence.

“Okay, I don’t hate it all the time. I used to dislike it,” Matt admitted. “But that was usually because your methods weren’t always mine.”

She chuckled. “That’s changed as I recall.”

“Not entirely…” Matt gave a little shrug. “Foggy would tell you not enough.”
“Foggy’s opinion never mattered to me.” But Matt’s had. That put Bucky back on his heels and he studied the other man more carefully. Whatever they had, hadn’t ended well, but they obviously both still cared—but he wasn’t any kind of competition. Even Steve seemed to pick up on that, his shoulders relaxed but his expression intent. Regardless of all of the above, Matty was a stranger and an unknown quantity. His past relationship to Natalia notwithstanding, Bucky didn’t have any reason to trust him.

Matt canted his head for a moment, then said, “I need to go… can I call you?”

“Do you have your phone on you?”

He fished into a pocket then pulled it out. After he pressed a couple of buttons, he passed it to her. She added her phone number into his contacts, then passed it back.

“What did you list it under?”

“Sidekick.”

He laughed at the very dry remark as he slipped it back into his pocket. Matt caught her hand and tapped something. “I’ll talk to you soon, Captain—Sergeant.” Then he was moving away, tapping the walking stick but moving without an ounce of hesitation.

Natalia pivoted to face them and said, “Sorry about that—shall we get our tree?”

“Anything wrong?” Steve asked, not ready to let the so-called casual encounter go. Bucky studied their surroundings, they’d remained remarkably free of other customers so far, but that likely wouldn’t last.

“I don’t know,” she told him. “He tapped a name. That I’d rather not discuss here.”

“Okay,” Steve reached up and tore the tag off the tree. “Then let’s get our tree.”

After they’d paid for it and a stand to go with it, and the tree had been bundled, Steve hauled it up over one shoulder and though he’d rather keep his hands free, Bucky moved to “balance” it so they didn’t catch attention for the size of the tree neither of them had any trouble carrying on their own.

The trip back to the SUV was uneventful. Natalia pointed out a small bar just around the block, so they secured the tree and then headed indoors for food. It was a light crowd, and Bucky found a booth in the back, away from the windows with a good sightline on the door and the rest of the place. The stripped their coats, and Natalia scooted into the round booth, and Steve took the outside like Bucky. Her position put her out of sight of the main door, so Bucky allowed himself to relax some.

She nudged his knee with hers. They ordered drinks—beers for all three—and burgers, stacked with onion rings and a plate of chili cheese fries to get started. Once their waitress disappeared and they were left with their cold beers, Steve looked at Natalia expectantly.

“I’m not spoiling our night for this,” she said as a preamble.

With a shake of his head, Bucky covered her hand with his. “You’re not ruining anything, Doll. We’re still having a good time, yeah?”

Head canted, she smiled at him the corners of her mouth barely quirking upward. “You’re hating the crowds, and Steve’s worried about Matty showing up.”
“Correction, I’m concerned because that didn’t feel like a casual encounter.”

Ten points to Steve. It didn’t feel like a casual happenstance to Bucky either. “He was outside getting the candied nuts.”

“I know,” she admitted with a sigh, and leaned forward. No one was seated near them, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be overheard. “I saw him. But Matty and I have a deal that I stay out of his way and he stays out of mine.”

“That’s what he meant about things changing?” Steve pressed.

“More or less.”

“And the name he tapped?” Bucky asked.

“Fogwell.”

“The guy with him? Thought he called him Foggy?”

“He does,” she told Steve. “Fogwell’s is a gym—it’s probably where he wants me to go if I need to meet with him rather than his office. Foggy gets huffy.”

Bucky tipped his beer back for a long swallow. “That’s a word for it.”

“He’s a decent guy, he just—thinks I’m bad for Matty. Which is fine, because Matty and I are not a thing and haven’t been in a very long time.” The last she said with a firm look at each of them. “I don’t even know if I’d call us friends anymore, we’re not quite friendly, but…if I needed him, Matty would show up. And when I asked, he did show up.”

“So if he needs you, you will.” Steve didn’t quite sigh.

“It’s probably nothing,” she said, rubbing his arm. “Now, can we get back to our evening?”

Steve caught Bucky’s eye, and Bucky gave a little shrug. There wasn’t much more they could do than they already were. Natalia attracted the most interesting group of people into her orbit if Matty ended up needing her for something, she’d have he and Steve to back her up.

“Agreed,” Steve said with a nod. “We have the tree and some ornaments… what else do we need?”

“Still need the tree topper…” Bucky began and the conversation wound through the different colors of lights, whether they should blink or not. The tension that had tightened Natalia’s shoulders during her conversation with Matty relaxed.

Apparently Steve had some strong feelings on color—made sense. He also liked the fatter lights, while Natalia liked the smaller ones, and the multi-colored runners. Bucky didn’t give a damn, except the debate about lights filled Steve and Natalia both with animation and laughter.

By the time they demolished the chili cheese fries and the burgers arrived, they’d decided on mid-sized multi-colored and white lights they could alternate. After taking a bite of his burger so he could eat, Natalia pulled up a website on her phone and checked the area around them for the stores that would have the kind they wanted, then she found more decorations that she showed them. Anything that made her expression light up was an automatic yes from them, but Steve tapped some ornaments shaped like antique frames thoughtfully and Bucky had an idea of what he wanted to do with those.
Tinsel kicked off another discussion, Bucky liked the garland but Steve wanted the old fashioned beads. Having strung a number of those together over the years, Bucky thought the blue garland or the silver would be better with the lights. When they were halfway through the burgers and they still couldn’t agree, they tossed it to Natalia and she said, “Why not do both?”

The same shop with the lights, also had the garland and the beads, she was adding them to her shopping cart during the meal. The tree topper Steve did not want to get online, even when Natalia pointed out she was going to pay for the items and they could pick them up on the way to the SUV. Modern conveniences were very convenient.

“It should mean something, so should any ornaments we get.”

“So if we have a few this year, that’s fine, we can add to it over the next few years,” Bucky said, following his line of thought.

“So we’re done then?” Natalia asked, holding up the phone to show them her shopping cart screen. “Nothing else we want to get for it tonight…because there was talk of decorating the tree and other activities that I don’t want to have to put on hold because we didn’t buy the right things.”

Steve cupped her nape and kissed her, “We’re done…”

“No, we’re not,” Bucky decided, draining his beer. “We need all the mistletoe.”

This was their first Christmas all together, his first Christmas in decades. At least the first meaningful one… Mistletoe was a vital component. Steve pulled out his wallet and counted out the bills to cover the check, and they got their coats, hats, and gloves on and were just about to turn toward the door when the waitress came back.

“Hi…” The Asian girl couldn’t be more than twenty, but she had been very professional throughout their meal. Not making eye contact longer than necessary, not hovering over the table, and more or less not staring, so the way she riveted to Natalia put his teeth on edge.

“Hello,” Natalia said, buttoning up her coat. “The meal was great, and so was the service.”

“I’m glad, and I’m sorry, I told myself I wasn’t going to do this, but you’ve been over here laughing and smiling and having a good time and I thought if I bothered you it would spoil your evening, but… I don’t know if you’ll ever come back so…”

Steve had shifted his stance slightly, he and Bucky were a half step in front of Natalia, they could block any move this girl decided to make but Bucky wasn’t reading threat off her and Natalia hadn’t tensed. If anything she seemed patient.

“It’s fine, what can we do for you?”

“Oh, well…I mean you’re cool and all…” she said then dropped her voice to a whisper, “Captain Rogers…and I know you, too Sergeant Barnes…read about you in the paper. Glad to know you’re finally home.”

No, her interest was Natalia directly.

“But you’re…” she lowered her voice as she moved a bare inch forward. “Natasha Romanoff, right? I mean you look like her…and apparently you’re dating Captain America and that’s wow…I won’t post that anywhere. I understand discretion.”
“Mindy was it?” Natalia said gently.

Mindy flushed. “Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

“What can I do for you?”

She pushed her hands into her apron and pulled out her pen and the notepad she’d taken their order on. Bucky could see it all there, including a sketch of Steve’s shield, and the Avengers A. “Can I have your autograph?”

There was a beat and Natalia blinked.

A sense of satisfaction poured through Bucky, and Steve’s smile gained an air of smugness. They both glanced at Natalia who exhaled slowly. “If you like,” she said finally as if she couldn’t fathom why the girl would ask her.

“You’re awesome,” Mindy admitted, stealing a glance to the other customers then looking back. “What you did? Giving up your security and anonymity to save lives? That’s—I don’t know if I could have done that and you put it all out there. “ She held out the pen and pad to Natalia who took it. “I hope I’m half as brave as that in my life.”

She wrote a quick note then signed her name and handed it back. Mindy hugged the pad to herself, and beamed.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Natalia said slowly.

Still hugging the notepad, she said, “I so want to ask for a picture with you, but that would really not be cool.”

Natalia stunned him when she said, “No, it’s all right. I’ll take a picture with you if you like.”

“Really?” Mindy gaped.

With a little shrug, Natalia fixed her knit cap so it sat more evenly, and Mindy hurriedly pulled out her phone and stuffed away her notepad. After sliding between Steve and James, she moved to stand next to the girl, and tracked the phone as Mindy held it up. Mindy’s smile was a thousand watts of thrilled and Natalia’s smile was a little more reserved but she put her cheek close to Mindy’s as the girl snapped the photo and then straightened.

“Did you want one with Steve?” Natalia offered gently. Mindy turned wide eyes to Steve, then to her and shook her head.

“I don’t want to push my luck.”

Steve chuckled, and shifted over to stand next to Mindy, then snaked a hand to tug Natalia back when she would have gotten out of the way and they framed the young woman, Bucky hid a smile as Steve snapped another selfie and Mindy was dazed. For a brief moment, Natalia stilled but then she shook it off and squared her shoulders like she’d made a decision.

Bucky knew that look well.

“Thank you.”

“No,” Steve told her firmly. “Thank you. Have a good holiday.”
Bucky quietly slipped another twenty out of his wallet and added it to the table. He palmed a pen out of Mindy’s apron while she talked to Steve and Natalia, and wrote the name of the Black Widow League and the website on the receipt. It was one thing to tell Natalia how good she was; it was entirely another when a perfect stranger did it. Passing Mindy her pen back, he nodded to her and followed Steve and Natalia.

They’d attracted some attention, but Natalia didn’t try to hide her face or look away. If anything, she met every gaze with another small smile, as they left the bar and headed down the block to pick up their lights and garland. There was another tree lot not far from where they parked, he’d take a quick trip in there to grab some mistletoe.

“So do you think you’re going to end up on Instagram?” Steve asked her gently.

“Maybe.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?” It wasn’t an unfair question, Bucky wondered the same thing.

“I… am undecided on that.”

After they had their purchases, a dozen sprigs of mistletoe and he had managed to buy a small crystal star from the same lot where he got the mistletoe without her catching on, he slid into the backseat behind them and leaned forward. Their earlier mood had buoyed back to the surface.

“Home?” Steve asked.

“Definitely.” Bucky was tired of people, and he just wanted the two of them secure because he was still turning over the fact she’d taken the picture with the waitress over in his head. Natalia lingered in the shadows, she avoided compromising her identity and that…

Bucky didn’t get social media, but he’d seen enough to recognize how much influence it wielded. Natalia could have said no, she chose to say yes.

Natalia had decided to help with the Accords. Her reticence over lunch coupled with her resistance when Steve broached the topic with her—those were expected. Natalia was a spy, if she came in… if she became a known face…

Yet she was already a known face. Ross plastered her all over the media. What anonymity she’d managed to carve out for herself after she dumped her file on the Internet, Ross had taken away.

She was taking it back.

When she twisted in the seat to look at him quizzically, he smiled.

She was going to put herself out there.

The threats were going to increase.

“Looking forward to putting up the tree?”

Outside the snow that had threatened all day began to fall.

“Can’t wait,” he said, leaning forward to touch his fingers to her cheek.

Fine, if the threats came, he’d be ready for them.
A few hours later, Bucky extended an arm to take the bottle of water Steve handed him. Natalia lay on her back, staring up at the tree. They’d shifted the furniture, set the tree up, and strung it with lights and garland. Then they’d shut off the overhead leaving the only illumination from the tree while outside the fatter flakes of snow continued to fall beyond the windows. From this angle, he enjoyed how the light caught on the flakes.

“I like this,” Natalia said, staring up at the light patterns on the ceiling. Steve chuckled and trailed a cool water bottle along her abdomen. They were all sweating, and warm, their skin humid from exertion. She curled her toes and shifted with a groan.

Turning his head, he marveled as Steve sank down to slide an arm under her and shifted her so she lay almost boneless against his chest. The bruises from her earlier bout with Tony had already begun to fade, and for the first time since Natalia disappeared into the sludge, he relaxed.

A contented silence stretched over them. Friday had the floor locked and would store all messages to pass on to them in the morning unless there was a real emergency.

Goosebumps raced over her flesh, and Bucky sat up and snagged the blanket off the sofa and then dragged it over her. As much as he didn’t want to cover up all that gorgeous flesh, he didn’t want her to get cold as the air cooled the sweat on her skin.

Stroking her leg through the blanket, he studied the way the light played over her face and when her gaze dipped to his, he smiled. She traced her fingers lightly over his brow and down his cheek.

He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. She gave him another smile, then touched her fingers to her lips and pressed them to his. A kiss.

“We’ll have to make another trip out so we can go to Rockefeller Center,” Steve said absently, running his fingers along her arm. He’d drained his water and sprawled against a chair.

Sitting with his back to the sofa, Bucky glanced at him. “We have time. And with the snow, probably would have been too cold anyway.” Steve had struggled some inside the training warehouse with its ice rink. But he’d held it together. Bucky hadn’t liked the way the air tasted, but if he focused on taunting Sam when he wasn’t watching Natalia, that helped some.

They were all messed up in their own ways.

“That’ll be nice,” Natalia murmured and then shifted to stretch her legs across Bucky’s lap. He fixed the blanket and then rubbed her leg gently, more to remind himself she was right there. He’d just been balls deep inside her, and she’d come around him, pulling him deeper and tighter. Then he and Steve had traded as Bucky worked her ass open, and they’d had her again. Steve enjoyed the lesson, and Natalia had actually giggled as Steve had to pause periodically, keeping her impaled squarely on his cock as he worked his fingers to stretch her. “Not the cold,” she amended as if realizing she drifted.

There was something deeply satisfying in the fact they could relax her so completely.

“We got it, Angel,” Steve assured her, and smoothed her hair to the side so he could press a kiss to her shoulder. “It’s getting late.”

It was nearly midnight, and they’d had a long day. “Don’t want it to end,” she murmured.

She wanted to sit up a little longer, Bucky had no problem with that. Leaning his head back, he turned his attention to the lights above. He had to head out to the Compound the following day… Clint was going to give him a hand with finding a good location for a safe house for the three of
them, a place they could use as an escape hatch from the rest of the world.

Clint could know where it was. Bucky had already decided on that. He would be the one person they told. Natalia trusted him with those secrets, so he would do the same.

“What’s on your schedule tomorrow, Doll?”

“Too much,” she said with a rueful smile. “I suppose now would be the time to say I’ve decided to help with the Accords and take those meetings…”

Steve met his gaze. Bucky found no surprise there. “We figured,” he told her. “You sure you’re okay with it? You’re going to be public.”

“I have been already though,” she said, echoing his earlier thought. “This will help the team.”

“Nat… I know what I said earlier about you being the best person for the job. But I don’t want you to put yourself through this just for the team. We’ll make it work regardless.”

“I know,” she said. “I really do. But… you were right. Tony was right. Hell, even T’Challa sees it. And it would be selfish of me not to step up. I’m not going to fade into obscurity again no matter how much I might wish it. That… that pretty much ended a couple of years ago.” When she’d put her file out there. “I was just… hanging on with the vain hope because anonymity was how I did my work.”

“The type of work you do has changed though,” Bucky reminded her. Personally, he had no problem if she never went undercover again. He’d rather she was right in front of him, at his side, or just behind him, as long as she was somewhere he could put his hands on her and keep her safe. No more separations, artificial or otherwise.

“True. I blame Captain America,” she told him with a wink.


“You have hopelessly corrupted me,” she informed him, playfully sagging as though defeated.

“Is that what you call it?” Steve asked with a laugh.

“Maybe. Then again, I’ve corrupted you, so I guess fair is fair.”

Bucky snorted.

“Still, if we can make our lives safer and our job easier to do, and soften the friction between the Avengers and the world governments, then… I want to do that.”

“Okay,” Steve said, and though he’d told her she didn’t have to do it, there was no mistaking the relief in his eyes. Natalia was meticulous and cunning, putting her on the Accords would protect them all because she would be ruthless in their defense. But even amidst the relief, there was a hint of apprehension because this would be tough on her.

“You still didn’t answer me about tomorrow,” Bucky nudged her. “Spider-Punk is coming over for training.” That much he gleaned from his earlier message.

“Yes, and Tony and I are training in the morning—after I dance.” The last was a gift for him, and Bucky smiled. “I need to see if Wanda wants to come here or if I should go there, but she’s been very patient waiting for me to get back to her training, and I want to get started on that. Probably
need some time on the range. It’s been weeks.”

Now that could work… “Morning for Tony and Peter, then see if Peter wants to go to the Compound with us, and you can work with Wanda, then meet me later at the range.” While she trained with Wanda, he could talk to Clint.

“Room in this plan for me?” Steve asked as he tipped his bottle up to drink.

“Oh, I think we can find something for you to do…” Natalia stretched, and the blanket fell away from her breasts. “You have all those reports to go over and get caught up on, and that lovely desk in your office…”

“You might need to come give me a hand.”

Natalia wore a small smirk. “You never know what might come up, but I’ll definitely go over whatever you’d like me to.”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky squeezed her foot. “You’re trying to incite a riot, aren’t you, Doll?”

“I’m trying to incite something…” She grinned for a beat, then her smile faded. “I do have some other stuff I need to work on and I want to see the kids. I might need a research day on Sunday.”

“On or off-site?”

“Depends on what I track down. There could be hunting involved.”

“This for Pepper?” Steve asked. They hadn’t prodded her, but if she planned to take a job...

“Yes, and for the moment, I can’t share the details. I need more concrete facts before I can act.”

“Fill us in before you have to move?” Bucky knew sometimes she’d have to make a call, like she had in the factory, to go in without waiting for them to get there. But he’d like to avoid it as much as possible.

“I will… Monday is the meeting at the U.N.” She made a face. “I have no idea how long that’s going to take yet.”

“It’ll be fine,” Steve said. “Buck and I can step up with Peter if you’re tied up too much. If you want us to, we can with Wanda as well.”

“You going to take Sam and Bucky back?” she said with a teasing grin.

Steve, the little punk, shook his head slowly. “Nope, they’re all yours.”

“Don’t worry Doll, I can just gag Sam while you’re gone.”

She laughed and Steve groaned. Not that Bucky was looking forward to her being gone at all. But they couldn’t follow her into those meetings. Tony would stick close to her, and he didn’t doubt for an instant that the other man would watch her back.

The silence stretched out. Eventually, they unwound themselves from the floor, and Bucky snagged up the abandoned clothes as Steve cleaned up the water bottles. They trailed into Natalia’s room and she slipped into the shower to rinse off. They followed her, one at a time. It was with a floating kind of ease.

When they finally curled up in bed, Natalia’s back pressed to Steve’s chest and her head tucked
against Bucky’s shoulder, and her hand spread out against his heart, she yawned slowly and then said, “Thank you for tonight.”

The bed trembled with Steve’s suppressed laughter. “It was our pleasure, Angel.”

“Really,” Bucky added and pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “It was ours.”

She was the first to drift off tonight, and Steve followed shortly after. Bucky lay there, listening to the gentle harmony of their breathing, almost in perfect sync. He pushed off sleep, preferring to savor the moment.

The world was waiting for them just outside those doors, but in the meanwhile, they had this.

He had her.

Chapter End Notes

I freely confess, I had to put on Christmas music to capture some of this considering how sweltering it is outside.
“You are a cruel, heartless individual, and I don’t like you anymore.” Flushed and sweating, Tony glared at her.

“Uh huh. Your twenty-second breathing break is almost up, stop wasting air.” They’d begun their morning with wind sprints, racing from one side of the gym to the other as fast as possible beginning at thirty seconds, then a one-minute rest break, then again over the course of ten minutes until the sprint lasted sixty seconds.

He snorted, then said, “I still don’t like you.”

“I’m not sure how I’ll survive… go. Double slams.”

Despite his complaints, he grasped the battle ropes and began raising both of his arms and then slamming the weighted rope as hard as he could, and then repeated. He had to go for twenty seconds, and he got ten in. She managed twelve.

“Impressive, break.”

He paused, panting. Dressed once more in his The Black Widow League muscle shirt, the sweat had already soaked through the back of it. No verbal complaints this time, he had to get his breathing under control. His heart rate and breath control had been a concern during the boxing. Sweat slicked her skin and her arms and back were burning, but she craved it. This was the kind of workout she’d been missing.

They needed to up his cardio game, strengthen that muscle. Friday had given her a medical briefing the day before when she’d asked for an evaluation on his cardiac performance.

Tony could do this, it would be uncomfortable for him, but he fought in his suit for hours before and just taken the punishing toll on his body. Another perk allowed her to build up her own endurance and stamina again.

“And go. Double arm slam jumps.” The leaping jumps twinged her back, but she ignored it. The muscles there had suffered a trauma. Healing while flat on her back or side, sleeping for weeks hadn’t let her stretch those muscles as much as they needed. Between this and the dancing, she’d
They went through snakes, grapples, hip tosses, squat jumps, burpee slams, uppercuts, and figure eights.

Her arms were rubber when they finished and Tony dropped to lie on his back, a hand pressed to his chest, and in between gasps of air he said, “You’ve done it… you’ve killed me.”

“What?” He stared at her, disbelief etched into his face.

Like him, she was trying to recapture her breath, but it was coming back to her faster. “Sit. Up.” She grasped his hand and pulled him upright. “Lying down, puts pressure on your rib cage, that puts pressure on your lungs.”

“I don’t have lungs anymore,” he retorted. “They caught fire five minutes ago.”

Rather than respond verbally, she just rolled her eyes. Taking his hand, she pressed it above her heart, then put hers over his. Tapping two fingers to the back of the hand she held to her chest, she said, “Breathe. Inhale between the beats I’m tapping out for you. Fill your lungs as much as you can.” She counted it out to four. “Now release.” Another four. “Inhale.” Four. “Exhale.” Four. She kept the beats quick, then began to slow them down so he was holding the air longer.

With each breath, he took air deeper and his chest expanded and his heart rate slowed from a wild gallop to a canter. The stress tightening his expression eased. Not wanting him to drop all the way to resting, she waited until it was at ninety beats per minute when she released his wrist and dropped her hand.

“Better?”

Withdrawing his hand slowly, he took another breath and then let it out. “Ancient Russian secret?”

“Yep. It’s a mystical thing—we call it breath control.” With a smirk, she rose and held out her hand. “Let’s go Shellhead. You’re not done.”

The horror on his face almost made her laugh aloud, but she would give him credit he clasped her hand and let her pull him to his feet. “What’s next Madam Torturer?”

“Oh, I haven’t begun to torture you yet.” She smiled. “Speed bags. Tape your hands. Five minutes, let’s work on your left.”

“I thought you wanted to do more than boxing,” he challenged, but he moved a little stiffly. She studied his posture and gait as they headed for the speed bags. Diverting to the cooler, she grabbed a pair of bottles she’d pulled out earlier. Cold water wasn’t good for him while he was overheating, no matter how good it tasted. There was the faintest of limps on his right. But she didn’t think it was the leg. She passed him a water bottle, then grabbed the tape.

Knuckles ready, she watched him as he went through a standard warm-up on the speed bag. The shoulders were a little looser than the day before, but he was still pulling that left. James had done a number on that arm, wrenching it when he broke out of the facility in Berlin. Tony had taken more damage during their fight in Siberia. He’d hurt it in Afghanistan, along with the rest of him, and again when he fought Vanko in Monaco.

“How much feeling do you have in your left hand?” The question slowed him, and he glanced at
her before resuming his hits. With conscious control, he was striking more with his left but it still lacked the force of his right.

“Most of it,” Tony hedged.

She waited him out, unscrewing the cap on her water bottle and studying the move.

“About sixty to seventy percent on a good day.” He didn’t look at her following that admission. “Most of the time I don’t notice it.”

“Probably wouldn’t, we compensate when there’s a loss of sensation, or even an added one. Pain can become noise that just fades into the background, so is the lack of it. How does it affect your gauntlets?”

“It doesn’t,” he said, slowing and then snagging the water bottle to take another drink. His breathing regulated a fraction faster than earlier. “I’ve been making the necessary adjustments as I go, and the suit makes up for the lack of strength, and I can control it. It’s not a big deal.”

If he were anyone else? Probably not. But he was Tony Stark, and he had a laundry list of people who wouldn’t mind seeing him hurt if not dead. Any reduction in performance of a limb could compromise his overall safety.

“We can work with it,” was all she said, however.

“That sounded suspiciously patronizing,” Tony said with a smirk.

“Oh, when I patronize you, you’ll know it. Finish up that speed round, I’m going to do my five minutes, and then I think we’re going to work on some grappling.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to be wrestling people, Red. Suit, remember?”

Moving to the speed bag next to his, she went through her own series of hits and strikes as he resumed. “Sometimes you don’t have the suit.”

“And I can make weapons.”

“On the fly, in the middle of a fight?”

“It’s been known to happen.” To his credit…

“You’re not wrong,” she admitted and didn’t miss the flash of his grin. “But you’re also not an idiot. For every contingency we come up with, there’s always the one we didn’t consider. It’s the ones we don’t think can hurt that can sometimes come back to bite us on the ass.”

It didn’t surprise her when he didn’t argue.

She gave him another five-minute break after the speed bags, but kept him on his feet and walking with her as he gave her his impressions of the problematic delegates. Russia, for example, was hardly a surprise, though China and Japan were other concerns. “They’re inscrutable,” Tony complained. “And I’ve had a lot of sit-downs with corporate guys in both countries. China can be difficult, but you usually know where you stand with them.”

“We’ll handle it. We start with the EU—that’s twenty-eight delegates from as many countries.”

“That’ll be week one. Week two is where we tackle the South American signatories, and week three, we’ll go for Pan-Pacific which is where Japan will come into play. T’Challa is taking care of
Africa and the Middle-East, if they request meetings with you, because by then—it’ll be clear you’re engaged in the process, he’ll have your back for those.”

That left the U.S. Canada, some Central American nations, Russia and China. The first on that list and the last two couldn’t be ignored. They were all going to have issues.

“One problem at a time.” She tapped him on the arm, and motioned him over to the mats. Sliding off her shoes, she nodded to his. Then she stripped off her socks and the air was cool against her feet. Her toes were bruised from the dance earlier, but it had been wonderful to sink into the music. She’d almost forgotten James and Steve were there, they’d been so quiet. After, she’d sent them off to run while she rinsed off, grabbed a protein shake and headed down to the gym.

Tony had only been fifteen minutes late.

That was practically early in Tony Time.

Facing him, she said, “Grappling, it’s popular in a few different martial arts, but we’re going to use a combination style similar to Brazilian jiu-jitsu.”

Skepticism filled his expression and he folded his arms. She could practically hear the counter arguments he had to already be forming.

“It’s a combat sport, though I admit, the way I learned it—not so much a sport. It’s ideal for you though.”


“First…it focuses on grappling and ground fighting. You’re typically in your suit, and you have your toys in ready reach.” She would not bring up Berlin.

“Didn’t help as much as I would have liked in Berlin,” he admitted. But apparently, he would.

“Kept you from getting shot in the head.”

An uncomfortable silence stretched between them. “Point,” he said finally. “It’s okay Red, I get it. Not a place where we should debate the rights or wrongs in that moment.”

Natasha shrugged. “Tony, I can look back at that and recognize what I did right, and what I did wrong. I was trying to not kill James—for Steve as much as for myself maybe…” Though there was another truth in there. “I still didn’t know who he was to me or why I felt that familiarity, but if the choice was stopping him or letting him hurt anyone else—I was going to stop him.” But she couldn’t quite push that to kill, even as fast as she’d been and as hard as she’d hit him. Killing him would have broken Steve.

Tony nodded once. “Understood.”

“All right,” she continued, grateful he let that thread go. “The point is, not every person we fight or run into issues with is going to be armed to the teeth with specialized tech or jacked up on Extremis…”

“…or an enhanced super soldier?” The dry comment made her smile.

“Point. You built Veronica to try and contain Bruce. Vision can attempt to contain Wanda.” She didn’t add that he’d helped to “build” Vision or at least repurpose him. “For each enhanced individual, we have to have contingencies.
Another short nod.

“But that’s less than one percent of the population…”

“That we know of,” he amended.

“Fine, that we know of. There are plenty of average people who want to take us out, too. So let’s assume that you’re in a situation where you have no suit, your tech is not working whether it’s broken or unavailable and it’s you against…”

“What a biker gang? And let’s never assume my tech doesn’t work.” He sniffed. “My redundancies have redundancies.”

She pointed to him. “You don’t have any tech on now.”

“No, but I have Friday.”

“For the sake of this argument, Friday cannot intervene.”

“Of course she can…”

“Friday,” she said. “Are you allowed to harm me?”

Tony blinked.

“Currently, Ms. Romanoff, my overriding protocols have you placed under a protective status it would be counter to my protocols to harm you.”

She met Tony’s gaze and he blinked.

“So if I attacked Tony right now, what would you do?”

Silence.

“I would do my best to incapacitate you without harming you because Boss’ defense is the priority, but he has—”

“Stop.” Tony interceded. “I get your point. We don’t need to finish that thought, Friday. Ever.”

Tony had what? She eyed him.

“Get back to the part about why I need you to kick my ass,” he said, his jaw setting.

All right then…

“Attack me.”

“Excuse me?” He said.

“Attack me. Come on. Just come and get me, Tony…”

He frowned.

This was always the most challenging part it seemed, especially for members on the team. The only one who never hesitated was James. They didn’t want to attack her. “Trust me, Tony—attack me.”
“I trust you just fine,” he said with such sharpness it demanded she believe him. “I also trust that you can kick my ass.”

Laughing softly, she said, “I’m not going to kick your ass—today.”

“Thank you for that caveat.”

“I will kick your ass if you make me ask you again. I want to show you a couple of moves, and then you’re going to use them on me until you can do them smoothly.”

Disbelief filtered through his expression. “Can I ask the point?”

“The point is you need other methods to defend yourself if your tech is ever compromised. You’re a popular guy with all the right and wrong crowds. These moves are perfect for you the same reason they’re good for me.”

He scratched his jaw. “Which is?”

Save her from his need to deconstruct everything, then again, it was what made him good at what he did. “Because it’s ground fighting, and it allows a smaller, weaker person to defend against larger, stronger opponents with proper technique and leverage. I’ll never beat Steve in an arm-wrestling match.” If he ever truly got her pinned and managed to lock down her limbs, it was over. “Same with James. But, if I can get them to the ground and get them in a joint-lock or chokehold. I win.”

Head cocked, Tony nodded slowly. “So this is flying thighs of death?”

The corner of her mouth kicked up. “Not exactly, but it does share some attributes. Now. Attack me.”

“I am so going to regret this,” he muttered then charged at her. She let him grab her arms and then she was up, thighs locked around his waist and they hit the mat. Her feet locked behind the small of his back and she braced his chest to keep him from closing that distance. Pausing, Tony glanced down at her legs, then at her. “Kinky.”

“Focus.” She flicked his nose and he winced. “This is a closed guard.” She flexed her legs to apply pressure. “I’ve got your lower body trapped, now I have to take care of your arms. You do not want to keep your hands back or what I am doing here…” She had her hands flat on his chest. “It’s instinctive to create distance, but in grappling, the more distance you give your opponent, the more control you’re ceding to them. Try to break out of the guard.”

He twisted, but she rolled with it. The push and pull yanking him back to his knees even when he tried to stand up.

“Fuck,” he grimaced. “Damn thighs of death are squeezing the air out of me.”

“That’s to my advantage,” she told him. “Fighting demands a lot of air, you need oxygen going to your muscles. Start strangling that oxygen and even a giant gets weaker.” She lightened the squeeze as he stillled. “Now from here, on my back, I can take your wrist, and grip your collar.” She had a handful of shirt in her right hand and his left wrist in her right. Then I yank you in…” She pulled him down and turned her head slightly, so his face went to her shoulder, and his hands were trapped between them, right against her breast but she ignored that for the moment. There weren’t a lot of options in this position. “I’m not just pulling with my arms. You’re arguably going to be stronger than I am… physiologically, men outweigh and outmatch women in base strength. I’ll never assume I can control you with strength alone. I need
the leverage and I’m using my legs to help get you into this position while I control the direction with my arms.”

“Got it,” he said, his breath huffing against her shoulder.

“That’s one move. Another,” she continued releasing him so he was upright but still locked in the guard. “Is to grasp your left knee here, and cross my right arm up to get your left shoulder. And yank,” she pulled and flipped, then he was on his back and her forearm was over his throat. But her legs were still locked around him, pinning him so his hips were up and he had no leverage.

Loosening the hold, she rolled back over and he laughed, still locked in.

“You never let go of the waist, unless you are ready to give them an advantage. Hands on my shoulders like you’re going to pin me.”

No snark or arguments, he flattened his palms to her shoulder.

“A little tighter, I’m not going to break.”

His hands flexed and then he put the pressure there, shoving her shoulders to the mat.

“Better. Now I’m down, I’ve got you in the closed guard, but your hands are still free. You can get them around my throat, or pull up and slam my head back.”

He grimaced but didn’t interrupt.

“I do not want you to do that.”

“Thank God,” he exhaled.

“The point is for me to take you out, not let you hurt me. Bruises I can survive, crushing my skull or choking me could kill me.” She met his gaze evenly. “Just like it could kill you. So...pay attention. This move might be better for you because it will work to your advantage to apply your strength with the leverage.” She moved her left arm to hook around the outside of his right. “Now I reach across your chest, and grab your collar or jacket, shirt whatever the opponent is wearing—solid grip on clothing, something you can’t just flex to break my hold on it.” She wrapped her right around his neck and cupped the back of his head, pulling with both as she adjusted her hips, she pulled his face to her chest. “Control the head and now it’s unlikely you can knock me out before I squeeze all the air from you and you pass out.”

“Got it,” he repeated, his voice muffled against her shirt. “But this arm is still free.” He poked at her ribs. “God I hope you’re not ticklish.”

Not there she wasn’t, but she didn’t comment. “Yes, you could get a few blows in there, crack some ribs, but can you do it long enough and fast enough to break my grip?”

She let him go and then unlocked her legs from around his waist. Scooting back and rising to her knees. He sucked in a deep breath, and then met her gaze. “And you want me to do that?”

“That’s lesson number one. Perfect the guard and the close hold, and then we’ll work on the next step.”

“Yeah, I’m nowhere near as flexible as you are Red.”

Brushing off the comment, she pointed at him. “You will get more flexible as you continue to
work on this, no one is an expert overnight. So let’s just start with the hold.” She scooted forward. “Wrap your legs around my waist.”

He shifted to lay on his back as she moved up between his legs and he laughed.

“Focus, Tony.”

“You’re not helping, Red.”

She smacked his thigh hard enough to make it sting her hand and he winced.

“Fuck.”

“Better?” She smiled at him. Yes, grappling turned some guys on. It happened. That wasn’t what they were here for.

“Yes, and ow.”

“You’re welcome. Now…let’s go, legs around me.”

“I hate you,” he grumbled without any heat, but got his legs around her and then locked his ankles with a grimace. She twisted once and broke it.

“Again.”

“Ugh. I really hate you.”

“Stop being a baby,” she told him. “You’ve been wanting to get me on my back for years according to you. Now’s your chance.”

He peered up at her, then smirked. “You do have a point.” He got his legs around her and it took her a couple of twists to break it.

“Better. Again.”

They repeated it until she couldn’t break the thigh hold without really hurting him—and that was a lesson for later—and they were both sweating. He got in a couple of arm locks to pull her down, and as it turned out—he was ticklish and a little skittish about having her hands pinned to his chest.

When she finally called a halt to it, he flopped on the floor while she dragged herself up for water. “It gets easier,” she promised him.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Yes, I’ve had a few decades of practice, but you’re already moving better than you were when we started.”

“Tell that to my hips tomorrow,” he said, then forced himself up to take the water she handed him.

“I will. We’ll stretch again tomorrow. Eventually, you’re going to have to get here early enough to do your stretches so we can dive into the training right away, but we’ll build to that.”

“You know,” he said idly as the doors to the gym opened. Steve and James were back from their run. “I was feeling kind of guilty about making you go to all these meetings cause I know it’s going to be uncomfortable for you no matter how well you play it off.”
“Not feeling so guilty anymore?” She asked, amused.

“Nope,” he said, as he dragged himself to his feet. “Not even a little.”

“Good.” She tipped the water bottle up and took a long drink. “Then we’re definitely even on that one.”

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I still hate you.”

“I know.” She patted his cheek. “Now go shower. You smell.”

As he walked for the door, she studied his gait. The faint stiff limp from earlier was gone. Okay, so it was muscles and tendon flexibility. She could work with that. By the time she was done, he’d be able to do those moves in his sleep. Based on the research she’d done the day before, it would be better if that was sooner rather than later.

As he passed Steve, Tony bumped him on the shoulder with his fist. “My respect for you has gone up a lot this morning, Cap.” Then he repeated the move with James. “You too Terminator.”

The corner of James’ mouth kicked up, but Steve just bit back a smile.

“You good to make it upstairs, Tony?”

“Bite me, Red,” was his only response as he continued out of the room.

“Just walk it off, and cool down before you hit the shower.”

He waved his hand and then the doors closed behind him as he disappeared. When James and Steve stared at her a beat, she shrugged, “You said don’t break him. He’s not broken.” But bend him?

That she could do.

James laughed, and Steve just shook his head. “Breakfast, Doll?”

“Yes. I’m starving and…”

“Ms. Romanoff,” Friday said. “Mr. Parker will be here in about forty-five minutes.”

“Thanks, Friday. If we’re still on our floor just send him up.”

“Of course…”

“Oh, and Friday?”

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff?”

“Order some biofreeze and liniment if Tony doesn’t have it in stock and when he asks for a pain reliever tell him I said he should use those on his muscles first.”

“I’ll take care of it, Ms. Romanoff.”

Steve leaned down to give her a kiss as she walked over to them. They were all a sweaty mess so she wasn’t complaining. “I thought you said you didn’t break him…”

“He’s not broken.”
“Poor guy,” James said. “I almost feel sorry for him.”

She pinched James and he grinned at her unrepentant.

“C’mon, let’s go eat before you have to torture Spider-Punk…”

She managed a quick shower—turned quickie thank you Steve—, a change into fresh workout clothes—no *The Black Widow League* shirts for her, damn Tony for leaving her three different kinds—, and a breakfast of eggs, sausage, toast, and fried potatoes without the stack of pancakes the guys were having—James definitely seemed angling for favored status that Steve had well-earned with the added photographs on the shelves though she still needed one of the two of them— before Peter arrived.

Drinking iced green tea, she checked her messages. One from Clint confirming she would be out at the Compound later that day—she said yes. Another from Laura asking her if she had time before they all had to leave on Sunday—she promised she’d make time. A third from Pepper with an update regarding the security files, she’d given her access to all of them including those deemed *not credible* because the non-credible ones hadn’t been open the day before. Fortunately, Pepper didn’t ask her for an update which she appreciated, but she sent her one anyway.

“You know, I didn’t miss that phone on the island,” Steve said as he flipped the page in the paper he’d brought back with him from their run.

“Nope,” James responded, but he had a digital tablet of his own open and his brow furrowed as he read. “But we knew it was coming.”

“Sadly,” Steve responded, setting the paper down and rising with his mug—and James’ after James pushed the empty to him—to cross to the counter where she sat, conveniently next to their coffee pot.

“Poor babies, am I ignoring you?” She asked, giving Steve a light kiss as he reached for the carafe to refill his mug.

He sucked on her bottom lip lightly, then pressed a kiss to her nose. “A little, Angel. But we’re being greedy.”

She met his gaze for a beat. “We’re going to get busier.” Peter was already on his way up, and they still had stuff for all of them at the Compound and they’d been damn lucky. No one had needed the Avengers this week, but that peace wasn’t going to last.

“I know,” he said, cupping her cheek. “We’ll make the time though, Angel.”

She glanced from him to the tree, and then to James, and blew out a breath. “Good.” Steve gave her another kiss, then had the mugs in hand to return to the table when the elevator chimed. Peter bounded inside, red-cheeked from the cold and wearing a grin.

“Good morning.”

It was impossible to not want to at least smile in response to his enthusiasm. “Good morning, Peter. Have you eaten?”
James straightened as he and Steve both added their greetings to hers.

“I had breakfast with May. She has another double-shift today.” His gaze shifted to the sausage and eggs still on the warmer even as he spoke. “But… you know, I could eat.”

She, Steve, and James all pointed at the food.

“You guys are great,” he said with a grin and dropped his backpack with a thud as he went for a plate.

Natasha hid a smile. There were two more messages, one from Matt that simply said *Sorry to intrude last night. May not need help after all.*

With a shrug, she typed in, *Let me know.* She could have added a dozen other items including the fact he hadn’t really been an intrusion. Those might all be polite, but she hadn’t appreciated the ambush whether she was in Hell’s Kitchen or not. But she’d been honest with the guys, if Matt needed her help, she’d help him.

The last message was from a blocked number with only the words *call me* followed by a phone number. Copying the number, she sent it to Friday. *Trace this number for me?*

Friday responded with *VOIP line. Will need it to be activated.*

*Thank you.*

**Friday:** *Would you like me to use a robocaller to activate?*

There was just something kind of vicious and amusing about that. *Please,* she sent.

**Friday:** *It may take a few minutes.*

*No problem.* She typed in. *Thanks, Friday.*

Peter scarfed the food at speed like he’d never eaten before, and she glanced up as he grabbed a glass from the cabinet, then opened the fridge for milk. The level of comfort in their kitchen was almost endearing.

“You patrolled last night, right?”

“Yep,” he said, taking a drink from the milk before he’d even gotten the jug back into the fridge. “Do you need a report?”

“Just—give me a rundown on what happened.”

“Stopped a mugging, saved a Christmas tree, dropped a couple of armed robbers off at the precinct, found a guy’s dog who snapped his leash and took off—*big dog…*” Peter mimed the size with his hands. “Like huge. Lots of slobber. Followed a couple of radio cars to their call outs, but they didn’t need me. Helped a lady with her lights, because she and her husband were arguing about who was going to put them up—oh, and Liz called.”

The last really wasn’t a part of the patrol. “And your Vulture investigation?”

He grimaced. “Nothing. Not even a peep. I even went back to a couple of the places I encountered their trucks, and I haven’t seen any sign of the weapons. Think there’s a chance the FBI got them?”

“Doubtful,” she mused. “Finish up and we’ll head down to the gym.”
There was a beat where he stared at her before he drained the milk glass. “Are you up for sparring?”

“I’m up for a lot of things, but you’re sparring with Steve and James today—after your lesson.”

Peter actually swallowed hard once, then looked over to see James grinning at his digital tablet. Steve nodded. “We’ll go easy on you.”

“No,” she said. “They won’t.” Bouncing off the counter, she said. “C’mon, boys…”

Restless energy thrummed through her. They straightened up from breakfast, and headed down to the gym. Peter leaned in close in the elevator and said, “Um…do you think we can still do a dance lesson today?”

The call with Liz must have been positive. “Did her dad say yes, yet?”

He made a face. “Still a firm maybe, but Liz thinks he will because her mom is working on him.”

Natasha nodded. “We can do that, we have to head out to the Compound, too. Want to come with?”

“Oh, another snowball fight?”

“That’s not the only reason we head out to the Compound, pal,” James told him.

“You know,” Peter said as he trailed after them into the gym. “That’s not a no.”

Natasha laughed at James’ pained look and she bumped him with a hip. “Okay, Peter, hit the mat.” She went over to the duffle bag she’d left earlier and pulled out a blindfold.

“Oh man…” He grimaced. “That again?”

“And again until you have it down.” She walked over and wrapped the blindfold around his eyes. Once she had it on, she gripped his shoulders and moved him to the center of the mats. “Paying attention?”

“Yes.”

“All right, you’re in the center of the mat right now. Just move where I guide you.” She walked him to each of the four corners, then around the perimeter, then back to the center. “Got that?”

“I think?” He didn’t sound so confident.

“Do you want me to walk you through it again?”

“No, no,” he hurried on. “I got it.”

“Good.” She caught James’ gaze and nodded. James crossed toward them on silent feet. “All right, this is how today’s lesson goes. James is on the mats with you. He’s not going to hit you—yet.” Peter’s relief went from ten to zero in the space of one word. “But the point is not for him to hit you. The point is for you to hit him.”

“Wait… what?”

“You need to hit him. Doesn’t matter where, yet. You just need to a score a hit on him. If you can do that, we move on to the next lesson.”
Peter’s frown tightened. “But he can’t leave the mat?”

“No, he cannot leave the mat.”

“And I just have to find him and hit him.”

“Yes.”

She’d told James what she was considering before he left to run and he’d agreed. It was a good lesson. “You can do this, Peter. Remember, sight is just one of your senses. You have others.”

His muscles were tense under her fingers. She gave him a light squeeze, and paced away from him.

“Okay,” he said, turning his head as if to follow the sound of her steps, which she made no attempt to mask. Steve had taken a seat on one of the benches, and she settled next to him and crossed one leg over the other. “So…” Peter called. “When do I start?”

James stood less than a foot behind him.

“Now would be good.” She focused on Peter’s stance. Uncertainty marked his movements, but he didn’t rush in any one direction. Instead, he stilled and had his head tilted. James, however, was motionless and betraying nothing. His steady gaze rested on Peter. When Peter took two steps forward, James matched them and maintained his distance.

The gym smelled like sweat, and so did the area around the mats. There was no escaping it considering how much they’d been using the area the last few days. Still, James had grabbed her shower after she and Steve left it, and he’d used her products so the most Peter might smell was shampoo that smelled like hers. It was a clue, but would he use it?

Another couple of steps and then Peter began to move with a little more deliberateness. He paced to the corner, and James stayed with him, holding back a half foot farther than the single step he had been only when Peter stopped at the edge.

“Any rules about asking for advice?”

“Use your senses,” she told him. “You can hear, you can smell, you can taste…and you can feel.”

“But if I can’t find him, I can’t feel him.”

“Air pressure changes,” she said. “The shift of it when someone is closer versus farther away. Air moves Peter. Even when you’re moving slowly, you’re displacing the air as you move spot to spot.”

He pivoted abruptly, and James backed off matching him step for step as Peter moved forward. It was a dirty trick; his motion matching Peter’s so closely minimized the sense of the air disturbance.

“Okay,” Peter said slowly. “But he’s as quiet as you are if he’s even moving.”

Steve slid a hand over her thigh, and the faint rustle of his skin against her leggings had Peter stopping abruptly. She slanted a look at Steve, and raised her brows. His innocence was so feigned, and she rolled her eyes. James mouthed punk when she glanced back at the mats, and she grinned.

Hands flexing, Peter clenched them open and closed. More than once, he moved to a corner of the mat and James avoided him neatly. Steve shifted in his seat, and she could almost feel the strain it
was taking on both him and Peter. Mounting frustration was another problem to be confronted and overcome.

“How do you find something you can’t hear or see?” Peter asked after another fifteen minutes passed with him seemingly no closer to finding James than he had been when they began and Steve grimaced.

“You’ve mapped the field of combat, right?” She asked rather than informed.

“Yes, thirty-one steps from corner to corner. So, roughly the shape of a square with sides of 21.92. That’s 480.4864 square feet. And I’ve crossed nearly every inch.” His frustration climbed in the last few words.

“Yet, James is within that square footage. Slow and deliberate is not locating him. What else can you do?”

He stopped moving, hands on his hips and his head angled down. This was a challenging lesson, and they only got harder. But Peter was a smart kid. He could figure this out. Ideally faster than he was, but… He snapped his head up and lunged forward, bounding a hard leap to land at the far corner and James raised his brows as Peter rebounded and back to flip toward him. He tracked the motion, and then slid to the side letting Peter pass him without contact.

Steve clenched his teeth, and she covered his hand with hers. Stroking the back of his hand gently. It had taken Steve a minute to figure this one out, too. So she got it.

After another ten minutes and still unsuccessful, Peter yanked the mask off. “This is impossible.”

He lasted five minutes longer than she expected. Meeting his harried and frustrated gaze, she said, “It’s only impossible if you let it be.”

James tapped him on the shoulder and Peter whirled, startled and stared at him. “You weren’t doing bad, pal, you need to be open to everything your senses are telling you, not just one.”

“No one can do this,” Peter argued. “And you’re impossibly quiet. I can hear Natasha breathing and I still couldn’t hear you.”

He could hear her breathing because she wasn’t trying to be quiet, but neither she nor James corrected him.

Patting Steve’s hand once, she stood. Peter’s agitation had him raking his hand through his hair, and he seemed torn between anger and tears. Crossing to him, she held out her hand for the blindfold.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he said after he surrendered it.

“I’m going to show you. It might be easier for you to see it once, then we’ll try again. Sound good?” She kept her voice soothing, and her expression gentle. Peter nodded once.

“I’m sorry I’m not good at this.”

She chuckled. “Believe it or not, once upon a time I doubt I was very good either.” But she’d had a much more dangerous learning curve, not that he needed to experience the same level of brutality. It could be done with patience. She squeezed his hand at the look of disbelief on his face. “Go on, go sit with Steve.” Then she leaned close and whispered, “He knows exactly how you feel.”
“Thanks for that,” Steve called, and she grinned as she let Peter go and winked at Steve.

“Shall I, Doll?” James asked and she handed him the blindfold.

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Never.”

She pivoted so James could pull the mask over her eyes and secured it. He brushed his hands over her shoulders, and then leaned in to murmured, “Ty mne nravish'ya s zavyazannymi glazami. Derzhite eto na potom?”

Discipline kept her from laughing aloud at his request to keep the blindfold for later. “Khoteli by vy sderzhat’ i otslep’at’ menya?” If James wanted to tie her up, she’d let him. It might even be fun…

He choked a little, and she smiled.

“Play nice,” Steve called.

“Oh, I’m being very nice,” she commented, but James gave her shoulders a squeeze and then the faintest breath of air against her arms as he moved. If Peter hadn’t been there, she bet she’d have gotten a smack on the ass for that one.

Worth it.

Closing her eyes beneath the mask, she waited a moment.

“Ready, Nat?” Steve called.

“Hmm-hmm,” she said.

“Begin.”

She pushed away all other thoughts. James wouldn’t stand right behind her. He knew better. Particularly after his trick with Peter. No. Peter shifted restlessly, but she could almost feel Steve leaning forward as he watched. James would not adjust his stance, he’d hold still until he saw where she went.

So she backed several paces to the corner. Unsurprisingly, the only air moving was her. He wouldn’t follow her.

While she should be focusing, she couldn’t help the thrill skating through her.

This was going to be fun.

Blocking out the sound of Peter’s breathing, she also discounted the shift of fabric on wood. There was a different sensation to it—even in her ears. James would smell like her shampoo, but he had his own distinctive scent. He’d had pancakes to go with his eggs that morning. Pancakes smothered in butter and syrup.

Maple.

Head canted, she tested the air and began a slow pace to the right, moving sideways. The vague notes of vanilla could be coming off of her, as could the citrus—but she had no pancakes. Even his kiss that morning had a hint of maple on his lips.
Movement to her left had her pause. The scent was to her right, but the movement on her left.

He took his shirt off.

Pivoting, she struck out and hard once.

There was an oomph as his hand closed over her fist and he pulled her to him and she slid her leg right between his and hooked it behind his knee. One hand on his forearm over where he gripped her, she yanked and twisted, and they went down together.

“How did you do that?” Outrage and awe vied for dominance in Peter’s tone.

“Not nice, Natalia,” James chuckled as she tapped him twice. He still had her arm, and she had her knee planted right against his balls. They could both take the pain, but there was no reason they needed to. He released her and she shifted upward gracefully and stripped off the blindfold before offering him a hand.

Sure enough, his shirt lay a few feet to her right. “You tried to cheat,” she said, grinning.

“And you almost fell for it.” Reproof decorated his tone.

“Who says it wasn’t a feint?” She smirked.

“Me.”

“Pfft.” She bumped him, then grinned as she faced Peter. Steve wore a proud smile and he winked at her. “So…what do you think I did, Peter?”

“I…I don’t—you were making a beeline for his shirt all of a sudden. You backed into the corner, then went still, then moved with a sidestep to get to shirt…and he moved, but he was moving so slowly. How?”

“Come here,” she said, curling her fingers. Peter bounded over to her. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she turned him away from her. “Close your eyes.” She still had the blindfold in her hand. “What do you hear?”

“There’s a whumping noise from the compressor in the air conditioner.”

Steve’s eyebrows climbed.

“A whoosh of the air coming through the vents.” Peter canted his head. “I can hear you breathing, it’s soft, a little whiff. I can’t tell if I can hear your pulse or if I’m feeling it.” She took her hands off of him and spread them away. “Feeling it. Okay—I can hear Steve, he just sucked in a breath when I said that about your heart. The mat beneath us is crinkling a little as you shift your weight…why can’t I hear Bucky?”

“Sniper breathing.” Natasha slowed her breath, and Peter turned his head to the right as if turning an ear to her.

“That’s creepy,” Peter commented, and she laughed.

“Okay, keep your eyes closed. So now you understand that breathing may not give a person away, and you can’t see them. What can you smell?”

“Citrus and vanilla, I tried that, but it’s stronger on you.” Peter made a face. “And this is me not asking why either of them smells like you.”
Steve laughed aloud at that and James just grinned.

She flicked her fingers at them, but Steve was still laughing.

“Anyway…” Peter said, the corners of his mouth twitching. “I can…smell the mat and there’s sweat in the air and…” he frowned. “Something…smells sweet…syrup. I can smell syrup.”

Natasha smiled because Peter made the leap with the next part.

“His shirt had syrup on it,” he exclaimed, then he whipped around to look at James. “She’s right, you cheated when you took it off.”

With a shrug, James said, “Your task is to find me. Mine was to not be discovered. If they can smell you coming, it won’t matter if they can’t see you.”

Twisting, Peter faced her and Natasha held up the blindfold. “Sense noise. There’s a lot of it. You have to figure out a way to selectively eliminate the data you don’t need. Steve and I breathing—we weren’t part of the exercise. And you’re right, if we all smell like the same shampoo, then it’s a distraction and won’t help you target.”

He glanced at the blindfold, then at her. “Can I go again?”

“You can. Are you up for playing defense this time?” At his frown, she held out the blindfold to James and took a step backward. “Do the honors please?”

He murmured something about inciting a riot in Russian and she just laughed. Then he got it secured and she took a couple of steps back.

“I can’t see anything. But James is going to attack me. Take a couple of steps back, Peter.”

“How did you—you know, I’m not going to ask.” He retreated and she faced James.

The air moved and she blocked the hit and turned away it away from her. It stung, but it didn’t really hurt. She caught the next one and then ducked as the second passed harmlessly over her head.

The next strike would come from the side, and she turned rolling along his arm and then adding a small kick to send him past her. He tsked, and then his steps went silent, and she waited, controlling her breath. The sense of motion came from behind her and she tumbled forward, tucking and rolling and twisting as she came up and her palm slapped against his.

“You’re telegraphing,” she said.

“This is a demonstration, Doll.”

Pulling off the blindfold, she raked her hand through her hair and pushed the curls out of her eyes.

“That’s defense, Peter. If he lands a hit, it will sting, but it’s not about hurting it’s about defending. Want to give it a shot?”

“Okay,” Peter said. “And then can we do something easier?”

She patted his cheek before she slipped the blindfold across his eyes and secured it behind his head. “This is the easy part, Peter.”

“Oh.”
“You can do it. Remember. Isolate the information you need—focus on it. All you need to do is block the blows, or turn them away.”

“Can I kick him, too?”

“Just be aware I kick back,” James said from his right and Peter turned. He had a hand up and nearly blocked the blow but still took a sting of a slap to his shoulder. Natasha retreated and stood at the edge, arms folded as she watched.

James varied the strikes, all open-handed, and most with his right hand. Peter blocked more than half. But he wore a frown, visible despite the blindfold. When James began to vary the hits and pick up speed, Peter went from blocking more than half to less than a third.

The little smacks had to hurt, and Peter’s frustration rose.

“Breathe, Peter,” she said. “Feel the air moving, pay attention to what your mind is telling you. Even when you can’t see—you’re used to processing visual data. You can feel where the strikes are coming. Block them, move around them…”

Peter leapt suddenly and flipped over to land on the other side of James.

“Or he can do that,” Steve said.

Peter whooped and this time when James struck forward, Peter dipped backward and James’ hand passed harmlessly over him. The next strike, he caught and then pushed the arm away.

His average climbed, he was back to blocking more than half, and when he caught James’ arm and the next time, he turned it out and James stepped in to catch him with the left and Peter jumped, pushing up and over and then landing a couple of feet away. When he pivoted immediately, hands up ready to defend Natasha clapped her hands slowly.

Even James grinned, and when Peter stripped off the blindfold, a flush crept over his face.

“Not bad, pal,” Steve said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Not bad at all.”

When Peter glanced at her, she nodded slowly. “Much better.”

“I could almost feel it there at the end, especially that last thing—were you going to hit me with the other hand?” He turned to James.

A single nod. “Yes.”

“It was like apprehension crawled all over me. Weirdest feeling—kind of like on the street that day we went to Oscorp.” He looked at Natasha. “Wish I’d trusted it then.”

“You have good instincts,” she told him. “We keep training and you’re going to have experience to pair with those instincts.”

He grinned, and then blew out a breath. “What’s next?”

“Feel like taking me on?” Steve asked and Natasha chuckled.

“Didn’t I already do that?” Peter said, his grin growing.

“You did… no webs for you this time.”
“No physics-defying shield for you.”

“Sounds like a fair fight,” Steve said. “You know unless you need the blindfold to be tricky.” The teasing light in his eyes kindled a challenge in Peter.

“Is that okay, Natasha? If I spar with Steve?”

“Knock yourself out,” she told him. She’d mentioned earlier he would be sparring with Steve and James, but the last—she checked the clock—almost ninety minutes had been tough on him. “Not literally though—either of you. Let’s say—thirty minutes? Then we can get cleaned up and grab some lunch before we head to the Compound.”

“Or we can eat there,” James said, checking his phone. “Clint says Laura is making her tacos, and that you’ll hurt all of us if we don’t make sure you’re there.”

“Tacos.” Her stomach growled. Laura made the best spicy chicken tacos, and her beef tacos were so rich. Clint was not wrong. “Check that, make it twenty minutes.” Then she glanced at James. “Tell Clint if there aren’t any when we get there, I’ll blame him.”

James laughed. “I think he knows, Doll. He just begged me to make sure you didn’t miss them, cause you’d get him for it.”

Pleased, she returned her attention to where Steve and Peter faced each other going over the rules. It amused her to hear Steve reciting the same rules for Peter she’d given him. A slap fight to five. If they had time, they’d do a rematch.

“Five on Stevie?” James murmured against her ear.

Tilting her head back, she said, “Okay. I think Peter might surprise us.” Maybe not yet, but definitely soon.

“Doll, that kid is full of surprises.”

Well, that was true enough.

What Peter had in agility and strength, Steve matched with sheer tenacity. Admittedly though, when Peter escaped by lunging up the wall and crawling on it, she’d been amused. Even learning the number Friday traced for her went nowhere didn’t diminish her mood. When she tried to trace the VOIP, she ended up in a stacking trace of IP addresses that seemed to go on to infinity.

Maria or Nick most likely.

She ignored the message in favor of heading to the Compound and sending a message to Wanda before she slid into the pilot’s seat of the quinjet. Tony joined them, showered, dressed casually and smelling of liniment and lemon. At least he wasn’t moving too stiffly.

“Hey Pete, I see how it is. I introduce you to Red and suddenly I’m last week’s cool news.”

“Had training today, Tony,” Peter sounded abashed. “But I’m free after tacos. Natasha has training with Wanda, then later we’re doing the dance stuff, right?”

“Yes, Peter,” she said, closing the rear hatch and warming the engines. Slipping the headset on, she
completed the control check and then lifted off.

It was a cold day, with the snow finally tapering off in the forecast the following day. Still, it made for a pretty flight as they left the city and angled north toward the Compound.

Laughter rippled from the guys behind her, she smiled. Her muscles were sore and she was more than ready for a half-dozen tacos. Wanda answered in the affirmative regarding an hour of training. Wanda had never been fond of the physical side of training, so the fact she wanted it should assist them in drilling down.

She’d boxed with Tony to get a feel for his skill level and physical condition. His competence wasn’t a question, and he understood boxing enough to pull his hits more often than letting them land. Still, it gave her a baseline to work from much as the first night she’d met Peter. So this afternoon, she needed to see where Wanda was compared to their last training exercises months earlier.

Rolling her head from side to side, she stretched her neck as they followed the river, and then angled through the defense screens for the Compound. It impressed her initially that Tony had the foresight to fortify their defenses with anti-aircraft and radar jamming which could be activated to screw with targeting systems.

Then again, it was Tony. Overkill was his middle name.

The paranoid skeptic within her appreciated his level of attention.

Once she’d settled the quinjet onto a landing pad, she went through the cycle of powering down before she slipped off the headset. James held out her knit cap, and she pulled it on with a grin. Tony hit the ramp button and the wind rushed in to greet them. Steve had their duffle—they’d all packed a change of clothes but stuck to the workout gear for now—as well as his shield in case he needed it. James had a secondary duffle with weapons and tact gear, his and hers. Steve had more tact gear stored at the Compound.

Their arrival was noisy, populated by talkative kids and hugs all around. Cooper grabbed her hand cause he wanted to show her the Death Star actually hovered. Apparently, someone had taken the time to add working lights and **faux** lasers.

“They don’t hurt anyone, and it’s cool,” Tony said definitively.

That was funny enough. Funnier still—Sam had picked up a TIE fighter and X-Wing sets that Cooper wanted to know if they could gear them up similarly. Laura shot her an exasperated look when Tony practically lit up and invited Coop to bring his stuff down to the workshop.

“After food,” Natasha reminded them. “Cooper go wash up and help your mom.”

“And after lunch?” He looked from her to Tony.

“You’re on, Commander. We’ll have them up and running in no time.” With Tony’s firm assurance, Cooper hurried back to the kitchen to wash up and help his mother get the food to the table.

Clint dumped Nate on her and then pressed a kiss to her cheek before saying, “He’s going to spoil them.”

“It’s half the fun,” she admonished him, and bounced Nate lightly as he giggled. “Why do you think they like Auntie Nat best?”
“Uncle Tony is going to take a run at that title. Look out Auntie Nat,” Tony called as he dropped to sit back on the sofa.

Peter laughed, but Lila grabbed his hand and said, “You have to help too. All the kids help and then we get something cool.”

“All right.”

Before she headed to the kitchen though, Lila looked at Tony and said, “And no one beats Auntie Nat, she’s the best.”

Grinning, Natasha leaned in and blew a raspberry against Nate’s cheek and he burst out in another fit of giggles. “Hear that? I’m the best… and how are you, Nate?” He tugged at her hair and she danced with him lightly as she carried him to the kitchen.

The baby had gotten so big, too big and too fast. When he pointed down, she set him down carefully and held onto his hands as he tried to walk. The pull in her chest as he penguin stumbled toward the kitchen ached.

When Nate wanted back up, she happily complied. James met her at the bar separating the kitchen from the dining area and held up his hand. Nate gave him a high five and then stretched his arms toward Steve who leaned over her shoulder to say hi to him.

“Hang on little man,” Steve told him. “Let me finish help carting the food.” And by carting, he meant the huge trays with all the fixings. Laura had to have made over a hundred tacos. Nate tucked his head to Natasha’s shoulder and she gave him a little squeeze.

Friday announced lunch to the missing team members and Sam hurried in.

“Where’s the fire, Sam?” Rhodey called, following him at a more sedate pace.

“Gotta get my food before Steve, Bucky, and Peter. They can probably eat all of it by themselves.”

“Too late,” Bucky said. “This is our platter. You’ll have to wait for the next round.”

More laughter rolled over the group, and Natasha chuckled as she swayed with Nate secure on her hip. Wanda arrived, dressed for a workout, and looking determined. She had her hair pulled back in a ponytail and a hoodie on over her tank top. No cosmetics, no rings, and none of what she used to embrace that defined her style.

While that style may have changed, trauma did that; Natasha wanted to see if boosting her confidence would let her reclaim it.

The next thirty minutes passed in laughter and playful arguments. Natasha sat next to Nate’s high chair and watched him demolish his soft tacos while she made a sizable dent in her stack of spicy chicken tacos that Laura made extra spicy. They were perfect. Conversation rolled around the table in waves—the holidays, training schedules, heading home to visit families for Rhodey and Sam.

Outside of Clint, they were the only two who had other family. Well, Peter had his aunt, but she didn’t know about his other life… The rest of them were mostly orphans either through time or circumstance. Turning that over in her head, she tapped Nate on the nose so he’d stop mashing his taco and she helped him scoop some up and fed it to him. He was a messy eater like Lila. She had played with her food, smearing more of it on her than she managed to get in her mouth.

More meals ended with Lila in the bathtub than anything else at this age. Cooper hadn’t been quite
as messy, then again he’d been constantly hungry so that may have accounted for how much food he ate versus what he wore. Laura grimaced at Nate’s mess, but Natasha waved her back to her food as she wiped off his messy hands and then scooped him up.

“I got this. I haven’t gotten to play with him much. Eat… I’ll go wash him up and change him, and we’ll be right back. Won’t we?”

Nate picked at some of the cheese on his shirt, and she chuckled. There was something adorable about making messes without any fear of reprisal. But some kids were fastidious by nature, they just didn’t like anything mushy touching their faces…

Pain bloomed behind her right eye and she almost stumbled. She caught herself and leaned against the wall. Thankfully, she was out of sight of the others as she pressed the heel of her hand against her eye.

Nate patted her cheek and the pain spiked, but she breathed through it. Pain could be endured. “We’re okay,” she murmured to him. The heat of it pierced her skull, but as she forced her breathing to steady she straightened. “Well… that wasn’t fun.”

With intent eyes, Nate stared at her and she pressed a kiss to his messy face.

“C’mon, let’s get you cleaned up.” She made it to their rooms without any incident and Friday opened the door for her.

“Ms. Romanoff?” Friday inquired.

“Yes?”

“I detected a spike in your blood pressure and heart rate.”

Once inside, she got Nate stripped out of his dirty clothes.

“Just a headache, Friday. A little too much excitement. Nothing to worry about.”

After she swapped out his diaper, she glanced over the things Laura had laid out for him. The Captain America footie sleeper made her laugh. “What do you think, Nate? You want to be Captain America?”

He gave her a two-tooth smile and she picked it up and unzipped the front. Though he was a wiggler, she blew raspberries against his belly until he was giggling too hard to resist her getting his legs in and then his arms. As she zipped it up, he stretched his hands up to catch her curls.

When she shook her hair at him, tickling his face he started laughing and the sound rippled through her. The sickening sense of déjà vu and this time, the pain in her head had her clenching her teeth.

Breathing through it, she was almost grateful for Nate grabbing a fistful of her hair and yanking. The pain along her scalp helped her differentiate from the other.

“Yes, Auntie Nat needs to pay attention, doesn’t she?” Sitting up, she worked on her breathing while Nate clambered to his feet and hung onto her as he balanced. The door opened behind her and she blew a breath at Nate to make him giggle again.

“Natasha?”

Wanda.
She glanced over her shoulder. “Did I hijack him for too long and they sent you to rescue him from making Auntie Nat his favorite?”

A vague smile touched Wanda’s face but she glanced behind her and then closed the door. “No… I…” She grimaced. Wanda caught the headache. “I wasn’t trying to listen, I promise… But you were in so much pain all at once.”

“It’s fine,” she assured her. “Really. I’m fine now. Probably just need more water. I’ll get a bottle in me before we head to the training room.”

She scooped Nate up and stood. It didn’t matter a damn that it made the room sway. If she could finish a job with a pair of bullets in her, she wouldn’t collapse from a little bit of a headache now.

The serious look on Wanda’s face didn’t ease as she took a couple of steps toward her. “Your nose is bleeding.”

“Friday, privacy mode voice-activated only, and erase all conversation since Wanda entered the room.”

“Acknowledged, privacy mode, voice-activated engaged.”

“Can you take Nate?” She handed him over and Wanda took him easily, then Natasha headed for the bathroom one finger pressed to her nostril. She used a tissue and applied pressure.

“Natasha?”

“It’s just the dry air, it’s cold outside and we spent a lot of time out last night looking for a tree.” The steady thump of her pulse echoed in the cavern carved out by the spike in her eye. She met Wanda’s gaze evenly. With every breath, she packed it all away. “It’s fine…”

“If it’s fine, why did you go to privacy mode and ask Friday to erase our conversation?” It was a good question.

“Because Steve and James worry, and Tony does regular health checks on me. If Friday reported that, I’d end up back on bed rest or in a severe disagreement with them. I have no desire for any of the above.”

Troubled, Wanda said, “But you’re recovered…”

“Yes, and they still worry.” Natasha checked her nose, and the bleeding had stopped, and the pounding pulse drumming in her skull slowed. “See…” she faced her. “Fine.” She cleaned up, then flushed the bloodied tissue, and stepped out of the bathroom.

“We can postpone training today…” No amount of genuine concern on her part could dispel the disappointment edging her.

“Nope,” Natasha said, folding her arms. “You’ve been waiting on me for weeks. Today’s all about evaluation. We figure out where you are, and what we need to focus on. I’m going to be helping Tony with the Accords, which means lots of meetings, so time is going to be finite. You’re not going to be lost in the shuffle of all that.”

“I don’t want to…”
“You’re not,” Natasha told her firmly. “I want to do this. You asked me to train you. I want to train you. I want you to feel safe.” To never feel like someone could take that sense of safety away from her again. Not without a hell of a fight.

“If you’re sure…”

“I am.” Then Natasha smiled. “Unless you’re changing your mind… you weren’t fond of the physical training before.”

“I was a bit of a brat about it,” Wanda countered, and then she soothed Nate. He’d been gradually laying his head down and his eyes were heavy. “I just didn’t see the point then, I do now.”

“All right, then let’s get this guy back to his mother and we’ll head to the gym.”

Wanda studied her for a minute then caught her hand in a light grip. “Tell me you’re really okay and I’ll let it go.”

“I’m fine,” she assured her. “Now stop worrying. That’s my job.”

Shoulders relaxing, Wanda gave her a real smile. “I’m glad, because I’m really looking forward to this and stealing you away from everyone. We haven’t gotten to talk that much…not since…”

Not since she’d broken down in Natasha’s arms. Giving her hand a squeeze, Natasha nodded. “I know. So come on,” she wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Let’s sneak off before they notice and we can see how much you like me after…”

“That doesn’t sound ominous at all.”

Natasha grinned and she ignored the little thump-thump twitching behind her eye. She was fine. “It’s going to be fun… you’ll see.”

As they left the guest quarters, Wanda laughed. “I don’t know if that makes it any better.”

“Well, then let’s call it an adventure, yeah?”

By the time they reached Laura, Natasha achieved equilibrium. They got Nate handed off and she waved Steve and James back to their chairs. “Ladies only, boys.”

“Going to braid your hair?” Sam teased.

“Could be,” Natasha said as she and Wanda headed for the gym. “Or could be we’re working on the next group training session—you were looking a little rusty out there during the snowball fight. Might want to work on that hand/eye coordination.”

“Girl, what did I ever do to you!”

She laughed and turned to walk backward. “It’s nothing personal, Sam.” She infused her voice with total innocence. “It’s business. And my business is kicking you into shape.”

James laughed. “I’ll help!”

“Oh, he—heck no! You do not get to team up on me.”

They moved out of earshot before she heard James’ response. But Wanda’s laughter was worth it. “I’m really glad you’re back Natasha.”
“Me too, Washenka. Me too.”
Defending

Chapter Summary

Nat works one-on-one with Wanda, spends some time on her investigation with Friday, and then Tony crashes her dance lesson with Peter...

Chapter Twenty-Six

Defending

Natasha

“Do you know the difference between offensive fighting and defensive?” Alone with Wanda in the training room, Natasha had switched the lights to natural, while the gray skies offered only muted light, the effect gave the shadows more texture and closed the room around them more like a bubble of privacy where confessions were acceptable versus under the harsh, glaring light of the overheads.

Despite her eagerness to dive in, Wanda’s nerves reflected in the way she couldn’t quite stand still. They’d ditched their shoes and hoodies, leaving them both in tank tops and leggings. The room was cool, and goosebumps rose over her skin, but she ignored it. The chill would pass once they got moving.

“The type of fighting you use?”

“Is that a question or an answer?” Most of her earlier headache had receded, though the dull ache of it lingered like a bruise.

The younger woman frowned, her eyes narrowed a fraction as she stared at Natasha. Red flickered around her fingers, and then she clenched her hands. The fact her control still frayed with stronger emotions was another facet of their training. Still, Wanda was already aware of the slip and exerting some discipline so Natasha didn’t need to call attention to it. Her slips made her self-conscious as it was.

“It’s a question, actually. I’ve seen you fight, and I’ve seen what you can do, but I can’t always tell what’s defensive or offensive.”

“If you can’t always, that suggests you can sometimes.” Natasha kept her posture relaxed. Beyond fighting itself, Wanda needed to do some basic physical training—running, weights, and flexibility training. She wouldn’t need it at Natasha’s level or even the level Natasha planned to push Tony, but she needed enough to give her confidence in her own physicality.

“I’ve seen you pull a gun right out of Sam’s hands, strip it, and knock him on his ass. That would be defense, right?”
“Stretch,” Natasha instructed and slid down into a split. Her muscles were all warmed up. “Start with the legs, and let’s do extensions for your arms and sides. We want to warm you up.”

With a fair amount of grace, Wanda settled and stretched her legs out in a wide V. She couldn’t quite do the splits, but she didn’t need to. Reaching for her toes, Natasha stretched her other arm up and over her head as she folded her body. “Press to the point you feel the strain, then only a fraction past that. Hold for thirty seconds if you can, then relax and do the other side. We’re doing this ten times for each side.”

At least Wanda didn’t complain about every instruction. Keeping an eye on her form, Natasha matched her extension for extension.

“The only difference between offensive and defensive techniques is intent and goals. In offense, you want to hurt someone. Sometimes it’s maximum damage or overwhelming force to take them down.”

“When you cleared sentries at the base in Colombia.”

Natasha straightened slowly then moved to stretch to the other side. “Correct. I didn’t want to give them time to defend themselves, so speed and targeted brutality accomplished the goal—well that and the bites, but the point is the same. The bites are a weapon. They aren’t offensive or defensive until I use them.”

Straightening from the final stretch, Wanda held up her hand and the red light began to wreath her fingers. “Like my powers…”

“Precisely. You can create a shield or make toys dance, you can lift people or things and throw them. The powers aren’t inherently one thing or another—it’s all about how you use them.”

Natasha twirled her finger. “On your back, full bend if you can do it, if not just go for a bridge.”

She showed her both and then rolled up until one her hands and feet touched the floor, and she arched her back. The twinge in her lower back was a faint memory, still there but no longer inhibiting her.

“So what I learn to defend myself…”

“…you can use to hurt someone. Yes. 30-second holds, see if we can get you to a minute.”

Wanda wasn’t in a full backbend, but she was close.

She took Wanda through a whole series of stretches, elongating her hamstrings, warming up her quads, and the obliques. She demonstrated stretching her arms, and heating up her biceps, triceps, hands and more.

“Essentially, the three things you have to remember—your goals, your needs, and your capabilities. You train so that your body reacts from muscles memory…”

“I thought you say act, not react.”

“I do,” Natasha nodded once. “But when someone attacks you unexpectedly…”

She lunged at Wanda, already keeping her body loose for the blast that picked her up and tossed. She twisted in mid-air, allowing her shoulder to take the brunt of the fall on the mat before she rolled and bounced back to her feet to look back over her shoulder. Wanda had both hands pressed to her mouth. “You have to be prepared to react appropriately.”

“Natasha…”
“Nope,” she said, holding up a hand, and returning to where she stood. “I did that on purpose, I knew what you’d do and I’m going to tell you right now, if your choices are toss someone on their ass or let them hit you? You toss them on their ass every single time.”

“But you weren’t going to hurt me.” The trembling in her hands, the faint sheen of sweat on her face, and the dilation of her pupils all reflected the fear response.

“Let’s be clear, Washenka,” she gentled her tone yet kept it firm. “We’re going to spar, and if you don’t defend yourself and practice, I am going to hurt you. That’s the nature of the training. Lunging at you doesn’t usually mean someone is about to give you cuddles…” Particularly not when she set the stage with the lighting, the quiet, and the isolation.

Natasha had seen the surveillance. She understood what they did. It was how she’d gotten every name and taken care of it personally.

They needed to address her fear on multiple levels.

“But—I could have hurt you.”

With a shrug, Natasha said, “Am I unaware of your abilities?”

“Well…no.”

“Have I not trained with you in the past?”

Wanda bit her lip. “Yes.”

“Have you or have you not thrown me more than once while getting a grip on what you can and can’t do?” Considering she’d landed against a wall more than once, and had been black and blue following some of those earlier sessions, she was deeply aware of what Wanda could do beyond rip open her mind and let the past flood out.

“I still don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt anyone…”

“Not even the men who terrorized you?” Natasha wasn’t being kind, but there was a mental block here, one that could cripple her if Wanda let it.

“Yes…no…” Wanda paced away, agitation a riot over her and the red began to swirl along her skin.

Natasha kept her posture loose and relaxed. If Wanda lashed out, she needed to minimize the damage as much as possible.

“It’s not that simple,” she argued.

“Of course it is,” Natasha pushed. “If you elect to not harm them, to turn the other cheek as they call it—then you are allowing them to hurt you.”

“No,” Wanda denied. “I’m not. I’m…more powerful than the average person. If I’m not careful I could kill someone.”

Exhaling softly, Natasha tipped her head to the side. “Wanda you have killed people.” It was a calculated risk. If she kept running from it, however, the reality would trap her at the worst possible time.

The red increased, a haunting glow swirling over her skin and Wanda’s eyes blazed red before she
closed them and clenched her fists. The door to the training room opened and Natasha had a hand up. Whoever was charging in there to help needed to stay out.

Not moving, Natasha let her work through it. The pulses snapped out like tendrils, and when Wanda opened her eyes, her breathing came out in a shudder and then the glow in them dimmed and she took a staggering step forward, Natasha had her in a hug before she dropped to her knees.

Behind them, the soft shush of a shoe preceded the door closing.

“I’m sorry, Natasha…”

“Nothing to be sorry about, you controlled it.” She told her, stroking her hair. “You took a minute, caught your breath, and locked it down. You didn’t let your fear and your guilt take over.”

“I hate that I’ve killed people.”

“I get that,” she told her. “I really do. But you can’t resurrect the dead, so you have to learn from it. You have to make up for those mistakes.”

“I feel like I’m forever crying on you.” The shaky admission accompanied a sniffle as Wanda lifted her head.

“Well, fortunately for you, I dry.” Natasha leaned away a fraction to study her. “Trauma—it doesn’t just go away because we want it, too. It doesn’t go away just because we talk about it once.” Or if they talked about it never. Hers had been bottled, compartmentalized, erased, and repeated so often, she’d adapted to it. It was as much a part of her as her hair or skin. Wanda wasn’t her.

Wanda never needed to develop that level of intimacy with her pain.

“Better?” she asked, gripping Wanda’s arm lightly.

“I think so… it’s like there’s this balloon in my chest, and it gets bigger and bigger—and it hurts and then…”

“It pops. That’s called anxiety.” Natasha had endured a long litany of lectures on the subject. Later, once cleared by SHIELD, she did her research so if she ever had to go through evaluation again—which happened at least a half dozen times—she had the right models for her answers.

Evaluations.

SHIELD evaluated her every few months in the beginning, then at least once annually. Full debriefing, and… those memories were a little sketchier. Shaking that off, she put it on the backburner for the time being.

“Addressing it, looking for methods to cope with it, and address what triggers the reaction can help make you more comfortable. That said, anxiety is also a survival mechanism. It helps drive us into fight or flight, dumping adrenaline into our systems, minimizing non-essential functions, increasing respiration for oxygen, and fueling us to survive.”

“So, it’s a good thing—sorta—but too much is not a good thing?” The wet laugh held more disbelief than humor. “That’s complicated.”

“The best things are.” Yes, Wanda was doing better. “All right, enough of the tears. We’re here to work.” She squeezed her arm once, then stood. With the earlier agitation seemingly under better
control, Natasha motioned her back toward the center of the mat as she rolled her head and shoulders. The redness there from the impact might very well bruise later.

Hopefully not until the session was done and she could cover it before Wanda noticed. They both paused for some water, and then faced off on the mat.

“So, you have your powers. But what if you didn’t…or what if using your powers will cause more problems than it solves?”

Wanda nodded.

“The goal in any conflict is survival. Survival may mean running, or it may mean killing.” She wasn’t going to sugarcoat it. Peter struggled with the idea that a loss of life may end up being something he couldn’t control. “You don’t have to want to hurt someone for it to be your only option. You can’t control their options, but you can control yours.”

“I’d prefer not to kill anyone.”

“That’s a goal to work toward then, in the meanwhile, you train—you build your strength and flexibility, and we train you to fight without your powers. That means you have multiple levels of defense, but if it comes down to you and them—you better use everything you have to save yourself. Clear?” She locked gazes with the younger woman, and Wanda nodded slowly.

“Got it.”

“All right, I’m going to show you a few moves. We’re going to keep it simple today. Ideally, you’re going to master each scenario and I’ll leave you with some practice to do, and we’ll build on each set of moves until you have a series down. We want your body to react to the training, but your mind prepared to adapt and act.”

“Oh, is that all?” She chuckled.

“No, that’s the easy part.” Natasha’s sober expression had Wanda’s eyes widening. “Now, focus. Let’s talk about the ways you can control someone. Most people who want to hurt you are probably going to grab you. So take my arm.”

Wanda wrapped the fingers of her right hand around Nat’s biceps.

“Good. Now, to act when someone does this… you want to control their wrist—in this case your right—with a hand—in this case, my left—so that I’m free to grab onto their triceps with my right hand,” she demonstrated the move slowly. “You could go for their underarm, but it’s easier for them to pin your hand there, so go for the back of their arm, here. If they have a shirt, you can fist the clothing, to.. You’re going to pull, now if they’re all jacked up, twice your size—they aren’t going to move very much, but you can use them to pull yourself past them.”

She pulled Wanda forward even as she lunged herself past her.

“Maintain your grip here, we’re not letting go just yet. Now, if you’re bigger, you’re going to pull them past you—you’re taller than I am, but we may be better matched on a strictly physical level, we’re going to end up like this—you’ll come forward and I’ll go just behind you. Either way, you’re now behind your assailant. You drop the wrist and use that same arm that you were hauling them forward with and wrap it around their neck like a clothesline, then lock your left arm right behind their head, gripping your shoulder or triceps of the right arm to create what we call a rear naked choke.”
She repeated the move and had her arm locked around Wanda’s neck with her left forearm bracing the back of her head in a loose chokehold. Wanda curled her hands instinctively against Nat’s forearms.

“This gives you two advantages. The best way to break this is to break their face. So rather than have their head slam back into your nose, you control the head. You control the head, you can control their movement and you’re behind them. It’s harder for them to shake you off, but there are a couple of ways.” Like being slammed into a wall. But they’d get there.

“Still, you don’t want to try and choke them while they are upright. See it’s a bit of a strain for me to hold you here like this because you’re taller. You might do a reverse guard, locking your legs around their sides and yanking backward, pull them off balance and then you can have your feet on the ground.”

“I’ve seen you do that,” Wanda exhaled. “You did that to Steve.”

Yes, she had.

“If the taller person is off-balance, it gives the shorter person the advantage—unless they know to drop their weight and eel out of it, or apply specific pressure to the elbow joints—but we’ll cover that later. You don’t have to take them all the way down, you’re literally creating a hangman pressure on their throat, applying force to interrupt blood flow and that’s lights out. You can conceivably crush the trachea if you apply too much force and then it’s life out. Do not be afraid if it’s a choice between their life and yours.” She released her and stepped back to face her. “The trick is to keep them off balance so they can’t retaliate. Steve, for example, is almost a foot taller. So I’m going to hitch myself to his back, lock that hold and yank backward in an attempt to drop him to a knee. If he’s on his feet, he can race backward and slam into a wall. A couple of hard blows can dislodge you. So you want to avoid that.”

The corners of Wanda’s lips twitched. “Does he slam you against walls often?”

Natasha gave her a dry look. “Focus.”

“I am… and I have so many questions.”

“Uh huh, attack me.”

“Do guys like that?” Wanda’s eyes practically danced, humor replacing the earlier bleakness. It was cute, but distracting.

“Depends on the guy, now—let’s go, I want to walk you through this a couple more times.”

Wanda gripped her arm, and Natasha walked through it slowly, repeating the moves. After she had the younger woman in a choke, she asked, “They both sleep with you, right? Does that ever get awkward?”

“No, it doesn’t.” Releasing her, she faced her again. “We’re doing this again. Feel the pressure I’m using?”

“Yes, I got that. Don’t really squeeze.”

Natasha went faster, spinning Wanda as she got her in the chokehold. Wanda slapped her arm once and she released her. Wide-eyed, she glanced at Natasha.

“Once you master technique, you master speed. Your greatest advantage as someone smaller is to
be faster. Most of the people I’ve fought over the years never expect me to do what I do. They never expect the speed, and by the time they realize how quick I can be, it’s already too late.” Facing her again, she added, “And we’re not applying the pressure now because we’re practicing. Before we’re done, I expect you to take me down—at least once.”

“I—”

“Don’t say you can’t. You won’t know how much pressure to exert if you’ve never done it and let me be frank, the bigger they are, the more force you need to apply. So—one more time, then you go.”

With a sigh, Wanda clasped her arm. “Have you ever—you know with Steve and Bucky at the same time?”

She pulled Wanda into the move, then took her off balance and all the way to floor. “Do you think your focus should be on my sex life or your training?”

“Training,” Wanda said with a hint of strain and Natasha released the hold. Then she gave her an unabashed grin. “I’m just curious. You seem… happier.”

“Curiosity is fine, nosiness is not.” She tapped her gently on the nose once. “Now, your turn.”

They took their positions, and she gripped Wanda’s arm.

“I—I just want to know how it works? I mean, I know the basics but… it was never really…”

Natasha sighed internally, but blanked the reaction from her gentle expression. “It was never something you enjoyed or had much say in?”

Flushing, Wanda nodded once. “Sometimes it was nice, but never… I never felt as happy as you have seemed. Like the day before Thanksgiving, when you came back from talking to Sharon and…”

Tipping her head to the side, Natasha said, “If you want me to give you tips on sex, I can. But I’m not discussing anyone else.” Steve and James deserved their privacy. “Now, control my wrist and get me in a chokehold. Tick tock.”

“I’d much rather talk about your sex life,” Wanda admitted, and she didn’t quite get the hook around Natasha’s throat right. “Girl talk. Like when we used to talk about that show the Player…”

“I’m not a reality television show, and you need to use more force to pull yourself, I’m slightly smaller so you can try to yank me forward, but you’re better off just using me as leverage to get yourself in the right position.”

Huffing, they returned to starting position. “So—what about hypotheticals?” Natasha clamped her hand onto Wanda’s forearm and she completed the moves more neatly and had her head controlled but…

“Better, except you didn’t take me off balance.” Demonstrating she dropped to her knees and Wanda released her abruptly as she lost her balance. “I still have some control. That won’t always work to break the hold, but you are giving me opportunities. Put the grip back on the way you had it.”

The lock around her throat in place, Natasha pushed backward abruptly and Wanda was scrambling. Her grip loosening as Natasha drove them off the mat.
“Tighter, and pull me off balance before we get to that wall.”

The arms around her neck flexed and then Wanda stumbled as she dropped to her own knee and then Natasha was half bent backward and it gave her less purchase with her feet.

She could still break it.

“Better.”

Wanda panted a little, but she walked her through it a dozen more times. Each time she tweaked her speed, her grip, and whether she pulled her off balance.

Satisfied she had the general idea, Natasha motioned her back to the mat. “Okay, let’s try a couple more defensive moves.”

“Can we talk about hypotheticals now?” Wanda had snagged the water bottles from the wall and pulled them over with a wave of her hand. Cute and an effective demonstration of her control.

“Depends, what kind of hypotheticals did you have in mind?”

“Okay,” Wanda said with a grin as she unscrewed the top of her water bottle. “Hypothetically, you’re with two guys…”

“Nice try. Next hypothetical.”

“Natasha… please? Who else am I going to ask these questions to?”

“I wouldn’t suggest the internet,” she murmured, then took a swallow of her water. “Wanda, is there someone you’re interested in?”

All the curiosity in Wanda’s face slipped away. “Not…exactly.”

Did Vision even have the equipment danced across her mind, but she didn’t ask it. Not particularly when Wanda wasn’t that comfortable where Vision was concerned at the moment. “Then is this satisfying some prurient curiosity or a genuine need for knowledge?”

“Haven’t you ever just—wanted to gossip with someone about all the naughty bits? I used to have a friend…Yasmin, she and I were close for a couple of months, and we used to wonder and compare notes…and then well she slept with Pietro and I really didn’t want to know about that.” Wanda made a face. “But—you know while we were close, it was fun.”

“And… I’m the only other girl here.”

“Well, except for Laura and Lila—and I think it would be uncomfortable with Laura. That would mean talking about Clint.” Wanda grimaced and Natasha chuckled.

“So talking about Steve and James is fine, but not Clint?”

“Well…Steve and Bucky are—not Clint. Clint’s more…”

“He’s just Clint. And it would be like talking about Pietro getting laid.” Not that Natasha had any trouble razzing Clint about his sex life, and had even given him some pointers from her own experience.

A smile pulled at the corners of her lips. That had been a very entertaining conversation with lots of alcohol for him. Though…he had asked her advice a few months later, so… what did she know?
“Exactly. I don’t really know Bucky and Steve’s...kind of like a big brother, but not really so it’s not quite so icky.”

“Uh huh.” Draining her own water bottle, Natasha moved in a circle to keep her muscles warm. “Fine, I’ll give you three questions. Will that make you happy?”

“Only if they include three answers,” Wanda said, her whole demeanor brightening.

“Good response. I’ll answer them if it doesn’t compromise Steve or James. I’m not discussing what is very personal for them.” Not with anyone.

“Well…” Wanda lowered the water bottle. “Okay, that’s fair. I didn’t really think about it that way.”

“Girl talk is fine, advice is fine… but I’m not going to discuss them the same way I won’t discuss you.” Or Tony or Clint or Peter or anyone else who confided in her. “Some things are not meant for public consumption.”

“Even if you have sex when you’re at work?”

“I wasn’t at work,” she reminded her. “I was visiting friends and family. And again, personal choices as long as they do not interfere with active duty or compromise missions are exactly that—personal choices.”

“Accepted.”

“And that was one of your three questions.”

“Oh crap,” Wanda said with a half-scowl, half-laugh. “Fine…um… okay.” She lowered the water bottle. “This might be too personal but—did it just happen you know—you got carried away and all three of you ended up together or did…did you talk about it ahead of time?”

“Communication is vital, particularly when you are dealing with feelings. It’s easy to assume and if you do, that can lead to misunderstandings.”

“Wasn’t that awkward?”

“If you can’t talk about what you need or want with someone, you shouldn’t have sex with them.”

“Wait—that was three.” Wanda fisted the empty plastic bottle, crushing it.

“One more… and last one. We have about ten more minutes and then I want to give you exercises to add to your routine and we can set up our next training session.” She still had Peter’s dance lesson to get to, and research to do.

That… and she was tired.

Though she shoved the last part away for the time being.

“How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“When you want someone—when you really want to pursue a sexual relationship… with them or anyone?”
“When your pleasure matters as much to the other person as their pleasure does to you—then you know. Sometimes—sex is just sex. It feels good. Sometimes it’s more. But if you’re uncertain, and you can’t say whether your needs are as important? Then I’d avoid it until you are.” Because Wanda never needed to use sex as a weapon, and she’d had enough bad experiences in her life. “Does that help?”

Wanda nodded. “It does… can I get three questions during our next spar, too?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Focus, let’s go.”

She spent the next twenty minutes walking her through how to break a hold so she could just simply get away. When Wanda managed to finally do one, however, sloppily, Natasha called it for the day. She went over the equipment, the workout routine, and how much she wanted her to do and reminded her to stretch.

“I am going to be helping with the Accords, so Steve or James can train with you if you’re at all comfortable with that on the days I can’t be out here. And if you’re not, that’s okay for now, but we need to work on more team stuff as well. I’ll try to come out at least two days this week for a session, but it might be in the evening.”

“Okay,” Wanda said. “And I can always text if I have questions.”

“Yes,” Natasha had pulled out two more waters, and then said. “But if I’m slow to answer, it’s nothing personal. Each of those exercises are designed to help you build up strength and stamina in the muscles you need it in. So don’t skimp on them. Trust me, I’ll know if you have been.”

“I won’t,” she said. “I promise.”

They were almost to the doors when Wanda asked, “Does this mean I get my three questions?”

“About college classes at SUNY? Absolutely.” Distraction offered.

“College classes?” Distraction received.

The common room wasn’t as crowded as it had been over Thanksgiving. Laura and the kids were absent; Sam was sprawled on the sofa watching a game on the television while Rhodey sat on the other sofa filling out some reports.

“Hey,” Sam said as they passed him.

“Hey. You look like you’re still one piece,” she said, patting his shoulder, and then nodded to the television. “Who’s winning?”

“Do you care?” He grinned.

“Not even a little.”

“Your boy took off with Clint, probably to the range, and your other boy is back in his office.” Sam gave her a cheeky smile.

“And Tony’s in the lab with Parker,” Rhodey offered. “If you’re looking for them.”
Sam laughed and reached over to tap his knuckles to Rhodey.

“Friday?” Natasha said.

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff?”

“Did I ask where anyone was?”

Behind her, Wanda smothered a giggle.

“No, Ms. Romanoff. I believe Mr. Wilson just likes to live dangerously and Colonel Rhodes should know better.”

There was a downbeat, then an upbeat and Wanda burst out laughing.

Perfectly neutral, Natasha said, “Hmm… you look bored Sam, want to head over to the gym with me and go a few rounds? Just to brush up?”

“Nope, I’m great,” Sam said firmly, patting the sofa. “I’m just going to go back to watching the game and minding my own business.”

“Okay. Maybe next time.” Natasha grinned when Rhodey caught her eye, and she winked. He laughed and Sam twisted to look at her again.

“What did I miss?”

“Nothing,” she told him innocently. “Why, did you hear something?”

Leaving it there, she headed for the residence hall. She wanted to wash her face and clean up before she dragged Peter out of whatever project he was doing with Tony.

Still laughing, Wanda gave her a quick hug as they reached her door. “I really have missed you.”

“We’ll have to work on your aim,” she assured her, and gave her a quick squeeze before leaving Wanda to head to her own suite. Once inside, she leaned against the door and closed her eyes. The dull throb of her head had faded, but she could still feel it like that whole area was just tender.

Pain could be controlled.

“Friday, privacy mode engaged?”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Pushing off from the door, she headed for the bedroom. Steve brought a change of clothes for them, but she wanted something else for the dancing lesson. A skirt was usually best, but she’d see what she had. “Have you had a chance to review the files I copied over yesterday?”

“I have, I agree with your assessment that the multiple threats are likely a smokescreen, designed to preoccupy security resources as each thread is pursued.”

She’d kind of hoped she was wrong about that, even if she knew she wasn’t. Rubbing her right shoulder, she nudged open the closet. It—was exceptionally organized by color rather than style of outfit, which was how she usually managed it. Some of the clothes though had the tags still on them.

Tony had replaced whatever items had been wrecked.
“So let’s shuttle those to a separate file,” she said. She rolled her neck from side to side, stretching the muscles. The ache behind her eye had diminished. She’d promised to tell Clint if it got worse. It wasn’t worse. She could still manage it. Pain and she shared a long acquaintance. “We need to follow-up, of course, verify what SI is already doing. I’m correct in assuming SI has a follow-up team on those particular threats?”

“You are, Ms. Romanoff. I tagged their updates so they will feed directly into my systems. Currently, they are tracking IP addresses. As you can imagine, the postings and emails were routed through proxy servers all over the world. I will continue to monitor, but I believe being a drain on resources is the point.”

“Agreed.” She pulled out a three quarter sleeved hunter green dress. It was made from jersey fabric and would hit her mid-calf. It also wasn’t something she’d had in there before, but she appreciated the simplicity of it. “So if we set aside all of those… how many are we left with?”

“Forty-seven credible, eighty-four potential yet insubstantial, and one hundred forty-seven not credible.”

“Tony really likes to piss people off.”

“Unfortunately, Boss has never been known for his half-measures.”

Natasha laughed. “No, no he is not.”

After hanging the dress on the door, she stripped out of the workout clothes and winced at the pull in her shoulder. A glance in the bathroom showed the early signs of dark under the reddened mark. Definitely needed to hide that under some clothes for the rest of the day. It wouldn’t take long to heal but Wanda had made progress. She did not want to impair that in any way.

She pulled her hair up, and out of her face and pinned it, before she turned on the shower. “Friday, let’s begin by separating the credible threats into three columns—business-related, personal, and Avengers. How many cross all three?”

“Seventeen.”

“Of those seventeen, let’s parse for geographic area and rate the language for keywords and other signifiers.”

“Should I apply the same logic to the other columns?”

“Yes, but hold those results, we’re going to want to do the same with the potential, and the non credible. Also, take all the non credible and sort them into a file from most to least serious, and download them to my laptop. I’ll review those tonight.”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff. Is there something, in particular, you’re looking for?”

“Yeah,” she said, stepping under the spray. “The person who means it.”

“Understood.”

It didn’t take her long to wash off the sweat from, then rinse off. She toweled dry, and then used lotion on her arms and legs. After hanging up her towel, she paced over to the dresser and checked for clean panties and bras.

It was surreal to be in the room. Like—it did and didn’t belong to her anymore. Turning, she
looked toward the post-Battle of New York painting and stared at it as she dressed. Comfort existed in the image of destruction. Buildings could be rebuilt, wounds could be healed… and though there had been lives lost, they’d saved so many more.

They’d survived and so had the city and its people.

The painting gave her hope. It should go back to the Tower with her. She could put it on her floor if Steve wouldn’t like it on his… and she definitely should take the Simpson.

Rising, she shook off the malaise and went to grab a pair of heels.

“Friday will you tell Peter to meet me in the open gym upstairs?”

They didn’t use that one as much. It was more for drills, but it had a wide-open floor plan. She walked out to her little kitchen and got a glass of water.

“Mr. Parker will join you directly, Ms. Romanoff.”

“Thank you, Friday.”

“Of course, and Captain Rogers is at the door, shall I let him in?”

“Yes, thank you.” She finished draining the water and reached up to release her hair from the pins as Steve stepped inside. “Hey, finish all your paperwork already?”

“No,” he said with a laugh, and closed the distance to give her a kiss. “You look very nice…. is the skirt for me?”

Laughter rippled out of her. “I’m so sorry, I’m saving this for another man.”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you now?”

“I’m afraid so…” She rubbed his chest over his heart. His eyes gleamed with humor even as he fought a smile. “I’ve just got a soft spot for men who need to learn to dance.”

“Damn,” he said, shoulders sagging. “So I guess I’m all out of luck.”

“Well, maybe not all out of luck. But this dress is not for you…” She took a step back and swished the skirt. “Though if you like it…we could always save it for later.”

“You look great in whatever you wear,” he said with a chuckle, and brushed another kiss to her forehead before pulling her in for a hug. It was nice to just have him all wrapped around her and she closed her eyes. “How was the training with Wanda?”

“Trying to convince me you didn’t watch via the monitors?” She hadn’t put the training room in privacy mode, and she hadn’t expected them to not check on her.

“How much trouble am I in if I were to say—hypothetically—have watched?”

Smiling, she gave him a squeeze, but let her eyes stay closed so they could rest while she listened to his heartbeat. “Hypothetically? Not as much as you might think. However…” She pulled away and glanced up at him. “You need to loosen the grip, just a little.”

His arms eased and he dropped his hands to her hips. “Sorry was I squeezing…”

“Steve.”
He frowned. “I know… I’m being overprotective.”

“Yes. You are. I’m not mad that you watched. You needed to see I could handle it.”

“It was hard as hell not to go down there when she threw you…” The admission cost him something and she rubbed a soothing circle against his chest.

“Yeah, Vision did show up.”

Steve nodded and then he straightened the chain of the dog tags around her neck. They lay against the green dress and he smoothed his fingers over them.

“We need to talk to him.”

“He’s probably worried…”

“He also needs to loosen his grip.” At the description, Steve frowned. “Solntce moya, I understand, you are worried about me. But I’m fine. I adore that you want to keep me safe, but I don’t want to be bound in cotton and fluff and kept insulated from the world. It’s not good for either of us.”

Rubbing his thumbs in circles against her hips, he sighed. “I know. I… want to tell you I’ll stop and then… “

“One day at a time, okay? But I can take care of myself and I trust you to do the same. I can’t be your second in command if you can’t trust me to take care of the team as well as myself if you’re not standing right there.”

They needed to protect her. She got it. She’d been allowing them the last few days. Her recovery had sapped a lot out of her. But they were back and…

“I’ll try, Angel. I promise.”

“That’s all I need.” Rising up on her tiptoes, she kissed him. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a dance lesson to give. Then I was going to the range, but Clint and James already have I may put that off for later.” A small concession on her part. She could use the range at the Tower the next day and she’d rather see how much improvement she needed on her own first anyway.

“Whatever you want… and I guess I’ll go back to reading reports.” The crestfallen look he gave her made her smile.

“You know… Sam looked like he didn’t have anything to do. You could probably get him to tackle a few of those and write summaries for you.” She tilted her head, affecting the show of thinking about it. “It would be wonderful practice for him.”

“You know… that’s not a bad idea and I just saw him staring at the game half-asleep.”

“I usually have a few decent ideas.”

“More than a few.” Another light kiss. “See you in a bit?”

“Yes. Let’s see how my toes feel after this…”

He linked their fingers to walk her to the door and then paused. “Angel?” When she glanced up at him, he was studying her. “You’re really doing okay? It’s been a long day and you’ve done a lot of training.”
“I’m fine. A little tired. But I feel good and I’m getting things done.”

He nodded slowly, then gave her hand a squeeze. “Don’t overdo it, okay?”

“Sadly, there’s no chance that I won’t overdo it,” she reminded him. “I’m me.”

With an exaggerated and aggrieved sigh, he bowed his head. “Bucky’s right…”

“Hmm?”

“You are my karma.”

She laughed. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Yes.”

The laughter helped chase back the shadow of worry and the lingering ache in her head. The dancing would do the rest.

She made her way up to the open gym. The steps led to the dark gray and marble hall with the crenelated accent wall. It was all rather—upscale—for a gym area. But the floors were ideal for events, and if they ever hosted one at the Compound, it would likely take place in the open space up here and in the gym which could easily double as a ballroom. The wide windows lining it could all be opened to air it out and there was an extendable deck.

Stark ingenuity strikes again.

Hands clasped together behind her back, she paced through the quiet marble hall and paused to study the wall. She’d spent more than a few hours standing in front of that wall, contemplating… well… everything.

That sense of disconnect wavered through her and she shook her head. In the open gym, the windows were clear and gave a brilliant view of the snow covered grounds, the quinjet landing pad, and the training building currently housing the ice rink from one side while the other offered an unfettered view of the trees, and the river. The snow was tamped down in places, paths where people had walked compressing it.

There wasn’t much more than fifteen or sixteen inches out there. Nothing like the winters in Russia, and yet it reminded her of those long, cold and dreary days. Day in and day out, always the same. Training. Blood. Brutality. Training. Betrayal. Beauty. Training.

Every day marked by surviving to the next.

Her life was so very different now.

Populated by people who couldn’t possibly comprehend…

James knows.

Some of it. James knew enough. She met him when she was eighteen. Though she only had fragments of that very first meeting—well the first one she was conscious for—she had the video of the other.
Where... were those tapes?

Were they still at the chalet in Switzerland?

The rush of steps pulled her to the present and she turned as Peter skidded into the room. “Sorry! Tony and I were working on tweaking my web shooters, and I wanted to finish tweaking them.”

A second set of steps announced they had company and Tony wandered in, his hands also clasped behind his back.

“Tony said he could offer some feedback on the lessons...”

“He did, did he?” She eyed the engineer, eyebrows raised. “What feedback would that be?”

“Well I have great faith in your dancing skills, Red. But there’s more to taking a girl dancing than just...”

“Dancing?”

“Exactly.”

Peter swung his gaze back and forth as they spoke.

“Enlighten me?”

“I’d be happy to,” he said with a grin and crossed the floor toward her, and extended his hand. Setting her hand in his, she just barely managed to not roll her eyes when he lifted it to his lips to kiss the knuckles. “You look great. I love the color and the shoes... they’re perfect. Just like you.”

Peter made the faintest of choking sounds, and Tony eyed him. “Sorry,” the teen said.

“What were you planning on saying to her?” Tony challenged him.

With a grin, Peter spun to look at her and he bounced from his toes to heels and back again. “Thanks for doing this. You’re the best.”

“Hmmph. Not as polished.”

“But far more genuine,” Natasha said, and tugged her hand from Tony’s. She eyed Peter for a moment. “Lose the hoodie. You’re probably going to be a suit, but we’ll do this as just the basics for now.”

“You aren’t going to have him ask you to dance?” Tony offered. “He picks her up, tells her she looks great—or thanks her for going works, too. But that’s not getting her on the dance floor.”

“Well,” Peter said, stripping off the hoodie and looking around the wide open space before tossing it to the far side by the door. “No, I figured we’d get in the car then and ride to the event. So we’d talk.”

“Okay,” Tony nodded, stroking his goatee. “What are you going to talk about?”

Natasha rolled her eyes, and Peter grinned as he said, “Stuff—you know, school stuff. Academic decathlon stuff.”

“Stuff,” Tony huffed out the word, and slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “Kid, you have to have a little game. You can talk to her about school anytime... this is your chance to impress
her. For example…” He pivoted to face her.

Oh, this should be good.

“Red… what would impress you?”

“Not much.” Long practice kept her expression completely neutral. Tony made a face and gave her a pointed look then nodded to Peter who stared at her with high hilarity in his expression. Sighing, she looked at Peter and said, “Fine, showing up on time, being polite… maybe being yourself. I like people who are genuine and honest about who they are, and don’t try to pretend to be what they think I need or want.” With a glance at Tony, she dared him to make the next smartass remark, but he surprised her. He nodded.

“Yeah I can’t disagree with that one.” He smoothed his hand over the back of his hair. “So you pick her up, you thank her for coming—that’s a really good line I might borrow that. Get in the car, and be yourself. Then you arrive at the holiday party…” He paced a slow circle around them, one hand in his pocket. “There will be press and lots of flashes going off. A rope line and red carpet.”

Peter’s eyes widened.

“So there will be someone there who opens the door,” Natasha said picking up the thread. “Security. It’s very tight at these events, anyone in a uniform inside the ropes is going to be security but they’ll be dressed in really nice suits. You let them do their jobs.”

“Precisely,” Tony agreed as he came to a stop next to her. “After you get out, offer your girl your hand, and then hold her hand and walk with her up the carpet. You don’t have to smile or wave, and don’t rush. She’ll be in heels. But security will keep the people back, and then you’ll be inside.”

The more Tony spoke, the more Peter relaxed even if he was still bouncing on his feet a little.

“Inside, you can check your coats, and then you’ll be shown to the party room—it’s a huge club space at the old Metro—used to be Studio 54 back in the day, the original one. It’s perfect. We’ve got the whole joint.”

Wait… they weren’t having it at the Tower? The last couple of Christmas bashes had been there. Granted, people everywhere, but far more secure and Friday on full monitoring.

“There will be a live cover band and tables set up on all the different levels—there are three of them.” Tony extended a hand as he described it. “Dancing on the first one with open bars, and a scattering of high top tables for people to chat at. On the second level will be the dining room. No assigned seating—well except for the Avengers. I put us all at one table, it’s just better that way for now. You can be at that table with your girl or choose a different one. Just let me know…”

“Wouldn’t that be a problem if all of a sudden I’m sitting with the Avengers?” Peter asked. “Won’t she figure out that I’m you know—Spider-Man?” He said the last part so low as if he expected someone to overhear, she had to smile.

Fortunately, Tony didn’t give him grief. “You’re interning at Stark Industries in the research and development division—I am research and development… wait, I am. You want to work on the self-driving car with me? It’s got some kinks in the system, but it would make a great automation project for you.”

“Oh…how are you handling the road interfaces with changing traffic patterns and accidents?”
“AI responsiveness,” Tony said, and they both grinned.

“And we can talk about that later,” Natasha intruded gently. “While I’d enjoy hearing how you plan to loop the AI into a wireless system while also providing enough firewalls to keep it from being easily hacked—we’re here for a dancing and apparently date coaching lesson.”

Snapping his fingers, Tony pointed at her. “You’re right—and that’s another thing, Kid. Don’t go down the rabbit hole of design and development unless she’s into it because that’s the fastest way to bore your date into finding someone else to dance with.” The wry cynicism masked a lot of hurt.

“It’s all right to talk about it some,” Natasha told them, more Tony than Peter. “Just don’t let it be the only thing you discuss. It’s fun to show off and to dazzle, but no one wants to feel left out of the conversation.”

“So if she’s into it—we could keep talking about it?”

“Absolutely,” Tony said. “Okay—where was I? Oh right, second level is food. It’s informal, eat when you’re hungry, go downstairs and dance when you want or head up to the third level where there will be sitting areas and sofas for conversation and the music will be a little more muted, but still present. The live band though, they’ll have at least two full sets, and the first one will kick off the night and I get the first dance with Red, and then the party will be in full swing. Any questions?”

“Yes,” Peter said, looking from him to Natasha. “How much of the dancing is formal and how much of it is just fun?”

Pressing a finger to Tony’s lips, she silenced him before saying, “All dancing should be fun. If it’s not—then you’re doing it wrong.”

Peter raked his hand through his hair. “Okay… so… How do I do this?”

Capturing her hand, Tony pulled her fingers from her lips. “Well I usually just, ask her to dance, and then pull her close and…” he started moving to a gentle waltz and he could lead. Gliding her around in slow circles. “But it depends on the music and the venue—the holiday party will be all about fun.” He paused them, still holding her and having entirely too much fun. He still smelled of liniment, though, so it must be helping. “Friday, give me some AC/DC.”

“I am not…” Natasha began, but he was already moving pulling her to grind and bump before letting her go to dance toward her and then away.

“Come on Red… show the kid how it’s done.”

“Come here, Peter…” She caught his hand and then started rocking her hips and her steps. “Just move with the beat.”

Tony strutted toward them and Peter laughed.

“You mock,” Tony told him. “But the ladies never tell me no.”

“Natasha does,” Peter argued but he’d let go of her hand and started relaxing into it.

She laughed at Tony’s expression as he said, “You know, Kid. I don’t know why you have to wound me like that.”

“You can take it, Tony,” she said.
“Yeah…I can. But he doesn’t need to take advantage of it.”

The best part of it was Peter lost some of the shyness, because the more Tony cut loose and danced, the more Peter relaxed. She had to give Tony credit, it was a good call. As the music segued from AC/DC to Led Zeppelin and then to Christmas music. They danced in and around each other, all three of them. Tony squired her for a few bars to give Peter an idea about leading, and then she danced with Peter, correcting his form gently.

Then they’d switch back to rock or even pop, and Peter bounced and did a backflip. Spreading his arms, Tony laughed. “Keep it on the ground, Pete. There will be a crowd and the point of dancing is to get close to your girl…” Tony danced up behind her, but she caught his hand before it hit her hip, and shifted so he moved to the side.

“And we’re not teaching him that,” she informed him as Peter’s ears actually went red. “When you feel like a little bump and grind Peter, make sure she’s interested and have a blast, otherwise… keep it open and fun—just like this.”

Tony kissed her fingers and let her go. “Yeah, definitely listen to Red. Dial it down, Friday…”

Peter was sweating, and Tony’s shirt was damp.

“Feeling better?” Natasha studied Peter’s flushed face and he nodded.

“I am…that was… a lot easier than I thought it would be.”

“You have two experts at your disposal, Kid. You’re going to have an epic first date.”

Peter’s grin grew.

“Of course, that leaves the challenge of what to do for date number two,” Tony said absently and Peter’s expression crashed.

“You’ll be fine,” Natasha assured him. “Just remember, she wanted to hang out with you before you mentioned the party.”

“That’s true,” Peter exhaled. “That’s true… think we could do this again? You know later this week? I really don’t want to step on her toes.”

“We’ll find some time,” Tony said. “Right Red? We’ve got some meetings, but we’ll make some time for that before Friday…oh right, the tailor is coming on Monday for Bucky and Steve… you need to head over right after school on Monday so I can get your suit ordered too.”

“I’m sure it will be fine.”

“That’s great… you guys really are the best. Even if I don’t think you should be paying for my suit, Tony.”

“It’s my party, my rules. I’m getting Red a dress, and soon as you get me your girl’s size, we’ll get a dress sent over to her, too. Best Christmas party in a long time. Can’t wait.”

It was that enthusiasm that had her biting her tongue.

“Why don’t you go get a drink and cool off,” she said to Peter. It was already late afternoon. While the dancing buoyed her, she was tired.

“I will—and Tony, thanks for the t-shirt, I’m glad to be in The Black Widow League!” Peter shot an
almost bashful look at her, but his eyes were shining. “And yes—I’ll wear it to school on Monday.” Then he was jogging to grab his hoodie before he continued out of the room.

“Really, Tony? You got him a shirt.”

“Got him a membership, too. He was happy to join up. What can I say Red? You’re popular!”

This time, she rolled her eyes. Then, she thought about the girl at the bar the night before. Mindy.

She’d been so… happy to meet Natasha.

The whole concept just baffled her. Still…

“Hey Red,” Tony called from the door. “You coming?”

Yeah, she was. Back at the Compound, on the team, hanging out with Peter and Wanda, living with Steve and James… laughing with Tony…

Why did it feel like the bubble was too full?

Shaking off the vague sense of dread, she caught up to Tony as he said, “So, if you’re not doing anything, you owe me a rematch in Mario Kart and I demand satisfaction…”

“You do know you’re annoying sometimes, don’t you?”

“Only sometimes?” Amusement curled in his voice. “I’m definitely stepping up my game if it’s only sometimes.”

She shouldn’t laugh, it only encouraged him and yet—it was funny.

“Let’s see where everyone else is…and then yes, I could go for some Mario Kart.”

“Yes!”
Moments

Chapter Summary

Sometimes you have to take a moment--or four.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Moments

Clint

Rapid-fire, they emptied their magazines with Clint firing his last shot a split second behind Bucky. His shoulder complained, but his time had improved. Every day for the last few weeks, he’d made time to hit the range. Clearing the magazine, he hit the recall to pull the targets up. Stark had a full assortment of toys on the range, but Clint still enjoyed paper targets.

The center of Bucky’s made him snort with laughter. A clean grouping in the center in a perfect circle, and he’d also added two eyes, and a mouth. “You know, of all the things I thought you’d be like… smartass was not high on my list.”

Leaning his head to the side, Bucky stared at the middle finger salute Clint had created. “A sense of humor must be truly shocking for you.”

“There’s humor…” Clint said motioning to his art before pointing to Bucky’s. “Then there’s go ahead, fuck with me, I dare you, humor.”

“True.” The smirk on the other man’s face made him laugh.

“Modesty becomes you, man.”

“One should never be modest about the truth. You ready to go another round or want to ice the shoulder first?”

“You also see too damn much,” Clint complained as he flexed his shoulder. “It’s not as bad as it looks. Still need to rehab thanks to hyperextending some of the tendons before they got me into surgery. Bullet wound is healed. Almost good as new…”

“Yeah?” Bucky put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed just enough to send a pulse of pain through it.

Knocking the hand off, Clint shook his head. “I said almost good as new.” Ass.

“Don’t overextend it, you’re healing but you still run the risk of re-injury.” The dry comment made Clint laugh.

“How many times have you had to say that to Nat?”
“Too many. Now I just sit on her.”

Leaning against the partition, Clint snorted. “When she’s well enough to kick your ass for that…”

“Exactly.” Bucky with his memories was an altogether different kind of man. Awareness and history combined to give him a solid base of confidence. “She’s still cooperating—for the most part. Not going to last much longer.”

“Lasted longer than I expected it, to be honest. But she looks good. Still underweight. How are the rest of her injuries?”

“Doc gave her an all-clear on most of them, spine looks good and is finally healing properly. She’s sparring, but let Steve and I take point on Spider-Punk. Kid’s good, but I’d rather he not slip with his strength where she is concerned. Not until…”

“One hundred percent. Agreed.” Bucky really knew her, but more—he understood her. As much as Steve adored her, Nat could probably still fool him. He was getting better at reading her, but he didn’t have the experience to call her on her crap. Or maybe it was just that Cap liked to see the best in everyone. Bucky on the other hand…

“She’s going to be fine, Clint,” Bucky said. “We’ll take care of her.”

“Good, or you’re getting an arrow in your good shoulder and we’ll see how you like it.” They locked gazes for a beat, and Bucky nodded once. They understood each other. Another reason he liked the guy. “Talk to me about the safe house you want to buy.”

He’d been thinking about it since Bucky mentioned wanting to get a place for them. What they’d need, where they’d go, and a small part of him thought Bucky was putting the cart before the horse… Then again, he couldn’t argue with their history. Maybe he was going a little fast by anyone else’s standards, then again Nat pretty much defied the standards and a sixty plus year history definitely landed outside anyone’s definition of it. Even his. Then again, Clint and Laura had only been separated for a few months and it was… harder than when he’d been on deployments. She’d always been there when he came home, and now… now he wasn’t certain what they were.

“Buy or build. Maybe buy and rehab,” Bucky admitted. “Friday, where is Natalia at the moment?”

“She is still in the training building with Ms. Maximoff.”

“And Steve?”

“Captain Rogers is in his office.”

“Thank you, if either heads for the range, please inform me. And go into privacy, voice-activated mode please.”

“Of course, Sergeant Barnes.”

Definitely Nat’s influence. Clint checked the gun before he moved over to the table to clean it. “You’ve got that routine down.”

“Natalia is far too clever to keep things from, so I have to plan accordingly. The only two who know about this are you and I.”

Bucky didn’t have to tell him Steve lacked a poker face. He showed some improvements, but if
Bucky wanted to surprise both of them—Clint could live with it. “So what did you have in mind?”

“You saw the cabin in Montana.”

One nod. Clint wasn’t likely to forget it anytime soon. The idea of Nat having had a life in the palm of her hand only to have it all taken away would haunt him even as it made him doubly glad of the call he’d made. She deserved it a thousand times over. “Remote, a little rustic, cozy.”

“Yes, and the additions were all done by hand. The only ones in and out were Natalia and I.” He didn’t mention his daughter and all things considered, Clint didn’t bring her up either. It made his gut clench to think of that kind of loss. His kids might not see him every day, but he couldn’t fathom losing any of them for decades without knowing what happened to them much less losing them at all.

“Security is a priority.” That wasn’t even a question. “Location—pretty much anywhere can be made quinjet accessible. Do you want it car accessible?”

“Maybe. A part of me wants a place close enough to the city we can be at the Tower or the Compound if called in…”

“And the rest wants it far away, where you can be untouchable, like the island.”

“A few hours, but yeah.” Bucky reloaded, then secured his weapon before tugging the duffle over and pulling out a StarkPad. “I’ve been looking at the kinds of places, and studying locations. The purchasing, though and making sure it can’t be linked on paper or digitally to any of us…”

“I got it,” Clint said, twisting to look at the screen as Bucky tapped it open. Some of the houses had a lot of windows, though treated glass made them opaque from the outside. “You’re going to want to upgrade anything like those…”

“Definitely.” It wasn’t even a question. “I’d also need to know the best sightlines…”

“To booby trap the locations.” They shared a glance. “I hear you. So these four are the styles you’re thinking?” Most of them had a cabin look to them, heavy wood beams, and all but one were two stories. The fourth was a ranch style, sprawling with a wide wrap-around covered porch. The green roof seemed to almost blend in with the heavily wooded lot. Not a lot of sunshine, but the camouflage would help protect from aerial detection.

“They’re the ones I liked the most, but I really don’t care what it’s like—Steve and Natalia might, I just care that it has everything they could need.”

“All right, let’s do this…what do they need?”

Folding his arms, Bucky studied the images. “Six bedrooms in addition to a master suite, an office space, a library, a studio for Steve, a dance studio for Natalia, a fireplace in the master suite and living rooms, and bathrooms for each of the bedrooms, and one for guests. A good-sized kitchen, like the one on the island, would be good—large enough for preparing big meals or baking. Natalia likes to bake. Double ovens. Double fridges, and at least one deep freeze. Two generators. We might have to be on the grid, but I don't want to be dependent on it.”

As Bucky ticked off the requirements, it sounded less like a safe house and more like an escape hatch. Holding up his hand, he waited for Bucky to pause before he said, “Seven bedrooms including the master suite?” That would not be a small house.

“Need room for you and your family if you come to visit.”
That answer startled him.

“That answer startled him.”

“Natalia got pregnant once, it doesn’t mean it will ever happen again,” Bucky admitted, meeting his gaze evenly and answering a question Clint hadn't let himself consider since learning it had happened at all. “But you are her family, you, Laura, your kids—I want this place just for the three of us, but that doesn’t mean you wouldn’t visit. I think it’s better to be prepared.”

“And you want this as a safe house?” Clint scratched his chin. “This is more, this is your way out if you leave.”

“Doesn’t mean we wouldn’t come back, means—we need something just for the three of us, where we don't have to be anyone else. A place for us… that’s what this needs to be.”

When he’d rehabbed the farmhouse, he’d picked it for its isolation. Close enough to a town for supplies, but far enough away and off main roads that anyone coming out would be noticed miles before they got to the house. He had traps and contingencies. “You’re going to want a safe room.”

“Yes. Fortified shelter, probably in a basement depending on how we set this up.”

Tapping the images to scroll through them, Clint considered their options. “The Compound is ninety miles from the city, give or take. It’s a fifteen-minute quinjet ride.” Switching screens, he pulled up a map, and then used a ninety-mile radius to draw a circle.

Leaning forward, Bucky studied the highlighted zone. “There.”

It was a wooded area farther up the river valley, and there were no main roads, just tiny local ones. “That’s a good region. Next step, we scout it and see what’s available. Even without a house on it, the land isn’t going to come cheap.”

“I know. But I have about two and a half million dollars that cleared my account while we were gone. And another million in back hazard pay on its way.”

“Nice,” Clint said with a shake of his head.

“Yeah, three and a half million for seventy years serving Hydra. Not really sure that’s a winner, but it gives me the money to take care of this. I want her safe…”

“We’ll take care of it. Got some free time this week?” His kids were leaving the next day and so was Laura and the Compound was going to feel horrifically empty. This… this could fill those hours and days and weeks before he brought them back for Christmas.

“Field trip?” Bucky asked. “Yeah, going to have a lot of time with Natalia helping Tony and Steve picking up the reins back here.”

“Well, we’ll use the time to our advantage. Scout the location and see what we find. We can use training as an excuse. The land is more important than the house.” Clint straightened. “We can build anything. Been adding on to the farmhouse for years. Might not be ready by Christmas…”

“It’ll be fine either way—and no one will know. Just you, we’ll trust you with the location.”

“That way when you go, no one can follow or just drop in unexpectedly?” Scratching the back of his neck, Clint debated whether he should pull on that thread or not.

“Basically.”
Maybe he should. Nat had needed some time to herself on Thanksgiving. “Having problems?”

“We went out for a tree last night, ran into Matt Murdock—or he ran into us. Said he wanted to talk to her, but had to go before he could tell her what he needed.” Irritation scraped over those words. “Natalia has told us it did not end well.” Then he glanced at Clint. “She indicated he is an ally…but…”

“Something off about the guy?” Clint could sympathize. He had a damn good idea about what Matt’s secret was, not that Nat had ever betrayed him. Still…

“Yes. I know Natalia has a history I don’t share, I’ve met Remy…”

Clint snorted. “He’s a pain in the ass, but he isn’t so bad. Remy talks a good game, but he never lets her down, at least not in the few interactions I’ve been present for.”

“And Murdock?”

Diplomatic or not? “He’s a dick.” That was about as diplomatic as he could get.

“Did he hurt her?” The very unfriendly tone promised a very unfriendly reaction.

Not willing to light a match to the kerosene just yet, Clint shrugged. “Yes and no. Nat—Nat kept things to herself, always played close to the vest. Everything compartmentalized. Murdock was the only other place where it crossed boundaries—work and private life.” Not that she’d had much of a private life then, and maybe that had contributed to the problem. It was in the year after she found out about Laura. “But she couldn’t tell him what she did. He guessed, but she would never discuss her work at SHIELD or why she would disappear, sometimes for weeks at a time. Best I can tell, he pushed her to make a choice…made it an ultimatum.”

Yeah. Murdock would owe him his life for this one. If Nat ever wanted to tell them of the number Murdock did on her head, then Clint would back their play. The only reason he hadn’t shot the asshole was Nat said to leave it alone and leave him alone.

But now the guy was popping back up. Bucky had made no such promises.

“And she didn’t choose him.” Bucky saved the map on his StarkPad, then closed the screen.

“No, and he told her it was because she was incapable of putting people first.” At Bucky’s dark look, Clint shrugged. “I told you. Dick.”

Clint offered to shoot him, more than once. And he’d been halfway there tracking the little shit down when she intercepted him and asked him to leave Murdock be. While that wasn’t fine, he could live with her request as long as Murdock left her alone.

But this was the second time in a few months he’d popped up.

It might bear a closer look. Might even help distract him from Laura.

“You want to go again?” Bucky nodded to the range.

“I do…but give me a sec.”

He moved to the armory, storing the gun first in one of the locked cages, before moving to another. He pulled out the compound bow and a quiver of high-density poly-carbon and composite arrows. The bow felt right in his hand, and he flexed his fingers around it.
Bucky glanced at the bow, then him. “You ready for that?”

“We’re about to find out.”

After slipping the quiver into place, he moved to his spot and keyed in the request for an arrow target. “You know, if you really want a workout… we have a training arena with moving targets.”

Interest gleamed in Bucky’s eyes. “Is it geared for single-player only?”

Clint grinned. “Nope.”

With a slow smile, Bucky slid on his ear protection as Clint did the same. Pulling an arrow from the quiver, he slotted it into place and despite the faint tremble in his hand and the pull on his shoulder—it felt good to have the bow back where it belonged.

Locking his gaze on the target, he let the arrow fly.

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**Laura**

She’d spent the early part of the afternoon finishing up the laundry, and getting the kids packed. Cooper and Lila supervised Nate where she could see him, while they gathered together their things. Coop was worried about how to pack the Death Star, and even more worried that the X-Wing and TIE fighter weren’t put together.

“Uncle Tony will fix it,” Lila told him. “We’ll be back at Christmas, too.”

“But—I just got them and I…”

“Cooper,” Laura chided him. “Play with Nate, and help your sister. We’ll talk to Tony and to your dad.”

“And Peter!” Lila piped in with a happy grin. “He’s really nice and he helped with the Death Star.” The shining eyes, when she brought up Peter, had Laura hiding a smile. Lila was a little young to be nursing a first crush, but it was also sweet. As teens went, Peter was a good one.

“That’s true.”

“Can I go find him now?” Coop was already halfway to the door.

“No, you can keep doing what I told you while I get us packed.”

Dragging his feet, he slumped back down on the floor next to his siblings. “Why do we have to go back anyway? It’s nice here.”

“Because we don’t live here,” Laura reminded them. “We’re guests and we came for the holidays.”

“And we’re coming back, right Mom?” Lila was letting Nate play with her crayons and thankfully, pulling them away from his mouth each time he considered biting on it. “No Nate, color…like
“Yes, we’ll be back for Christmas to spend with your dad.”

“And Auntie Nat,” Lila added.

“Will Uncle Tony even be here then? And what about Peter? He does have a family maybe he won’t be here for Christmas, then the ships won’t be done…”

“I’m sure we can work something out. The Christmas break is a couple of weeks.”

“But if I went and found him now, then we could get answers to all of those questions.” Cooper made it sound so completely rational that Laura paused for a moment mid-fold before she caught herself.

“No,” she said. “If you ask again, I will take the ships away and leave them here. You have your answer, Cooper, do not keep asking over and over.”

“Fine…” he huffed and plucked a crayon from Nate. “Don’t eat it, color with it.” Then he put it in Nate’s hand and held his hand as they colored. Despite his frustration, he showed patience similar to his sister for his brother.

Laura smiled and turned back to her packing. She was very fortunate that Cooper and Lila were so good with him, and there had been some natural resistance, in the beginning, jealousy over how much time the new baby took up and then they pitched in to help and she always showed them appreciation for their assistance.

“You don’t want to go home?” Lila asked quietly, the hushed voice wasn’t that low and Cooper shrugged in response.

“I like it here. Dad’s here. I don’t see why we can’t stay.”

That was the crux of it. The kids had missed Clint, and she couldn’t blame them. She missed Clint, and the last few days had probably been the best days they’d spent together in a long time.

“Dad could come home,” Lila said. “But he has to stay here, for now, to get better. This is for the Avengers, and we’re not Avengers yet.”

“We’re almost Avengers,” Cooper argued. “We could be, Peter is training with them.”

Lila made a little sigh. “He’s still older than us and he can do crazy things like those high jumps. And he’s really funny.”

“What does funny have to do with it?” The curl of disgust in Cooper’s voice had Laura hiding another smile.

“Because I like that he’s funny—no Nate, don’t eat that one either. Color, see like this…”

“We could do it. Dad doesn’t have special powers, and he’s an Avenger.”

Around and around they went in circular conversation. Cooper dreaded leaving, and Lila not as much. She seemed more at peace with it, but having the definitive date when she got to see her father and Nat again seemed to help. Laura wished it would help Cooper.

When she had everything packed except their pajamas, toothbrushes, and clothes for the next day, she rescued them from Nate. “I’m going to give him an early bath.” He hadn’t napped after Auntie
Nat changed him into his Captain America sleeper, and he’d been rubbing his eyes on and off. Lila offered to help her, and Cooper began cleaning up the crayons without her asking.

An hour later and after she fed him an early dinner, she tucked Nate into his guest crib. It was bigger than the one at home, but it had high rails and he hadn’t tried to monkey his way out of it yet. His eye rubs had given away to yawns and she’d hurried through food to get him in bed before he got cranky.

“Friday, Nate’s sleeping.”

“Understood, Mrs. Barton. I will monitor the youngest Barton and alert you immediately if he wakes. The room is secure.”

“Thank you, Friday.”

“You are welcome.”

Cooper and Lila had gone in search of Auntie Nat who was in the common room according to Friday, so Laura let herself out of the guest quarters and followed the hallway until she wound her way back to where she could hear laughter and noises from a game.

Amusement speared her when she found Cooper and Lila sitting in Tony and Nat’s laps, controllers in their hands as they played Mario Kart and they were bouncing them and miming the movements of the cars. Behind them on the sofa, Peter perched on the back of it, and he was rooting them on alternately. If Lila was in the lead, he was rooting for Coop. If Coop edged ahead, he started cheering on Lila.

It was the most adorable thing she’d seen in a while and she dug out her phone to snap a couple-three pics. And she wasn’t the only one Rhodey was standing off to the side, and he’d snapped a couple as well.

“You’ve got it, faster…red button!” Nat was saying. “Red button now.”

The little pink cart zoomed forward and then they were across the finish line and she put her arms up. The pair of them cheering as Cooper and Tony laughed at them.

“Rematch! We demand a recount!” Tony said. “Don’t we Cooper?”

“Yeah, rematch!”

“We should probably let Peter have a turn,” Nat was saying and Lila looked back at him immediately and held out her controller.

“You can keep playing,” he said. “I’m fine with watching.”

“Actually…” Laura said, interrupting and everyone’s gazes swung to her. “Can I steal Nat away?”

“Sure,” Nat said, and glanced at Peter. “You’re up.”

Lila hopped up so Nat could stand and Peter dropped into her spot. Lila looked uncertain for a sec, but Peter patted his leg. “It’s okay, I can do the noises, but you might have to help me. Natasha’s better at that than I am.”

“Okay!”

“You ready to take us on Kid?” Tony said with a grin, but Laura didn’t miss how he tracked Nat’s
movements for a moment before focusing on the kids again.

“We can do this, can’t we Lila?”

“Yes!”

“Kids…” Again their gazes swung to her. “Behave, and take turns so everyone can play.”

“We will!”

“Mom!” Cooper said. “Uncle Tony said he’d get the X-Wing and TIE fighter together after dinner. But we might have to wait to add flight for Christmas.”

“Did we thank Uncle Tony?”

Tony chuckled. “Yes, he did.”

“Let’s go!” Lila said. “Ready Peter?”

“I’m ready.”

Natasha laughed as the vrooming started, and Peter and Tony seemed to be trying to outdo each other in sound effects.

“Friday is ordering pizza for dinner,” Natasha told her as she followed her toward the kitchen. “So no more cooking for you. Tonight you get to relax, I think you’ve been busy enough the last few days taking care of everyone.”

“It’s not so bad,” Laura told her. “In some ways, it’s easier to cook for so many versus two and a half appetites that vary from starving to couldn’t be bothered.”

“I can’t really argue with that,” Nat agreed. She looked so cool and put together in her green dress. “I may just be greedy, I like your cooking.”

“Well if you get some time, come out to the farm, and I’ll cook anything you want.” She reached into the fridge and pulled out two bottles of red wine and held them up toward Nat. A lower key visit would be good for all of them. A return to a sense of normalcy.

Whatever that was.


“Sorry to steal you away from everyone,” Laura said once they were settled in Nat’s suite. Nat pulled out two glasses and set them on the coffee table before she went to change out of the dress.

When Natasha padded back out in loose black pants, and a white tank top, she said, “No apologies needed. I really haven’t gotten to talk to you since the island, and we’re due some wine.”

“Yes,” Laura said. “We are.” She got the first bottle open and filled their glasses. “Even more… I need to talk to you about some very specific things.”

Natasha settled onto the opposite end of the sofa and curled her leg under her as she picked up the wine glass. “I’m listening.”

No shying away from her gaze, no worried frown or tensed expression. Natasha just lifted her wine as she focused on her and took a sip.
“How are you?” She’d kept watch over her the last few days, in and around the playing in the snow, playing with the kids, flirting with the guys, and looking after Peter—going so far as to get a recipe to help him make his own holiday dinner for his aunt. This all on the heels of how she’d seemed when Clint took them to the island to see her. She’d been so…wrecked.


“Okay, and no other lingering after-effects?” Because Nat had shown up at the farm with cracked and broken ribs before and not said a word. Pain tolerance like that was unhealthy.

“Like? Still getting tired? Yes. I’m also out of shape, three weeks of not training will do that. But I’m working on it.”

Snorting, Laura lifted her glass. “If only I was as out of shape as you.”

“Stop that,” Nat poked her with a toe. “You’re beautiful.”

She’d also had three kids, and had the hips to prove it. “Thank you.”

“Now tell me what’s wrong,” Natasha said. “Clint talked to you, so I was hoping that was a good sign.”

“It wasn’t a bad one,” Laura assured her. “And I was mad at first…really angry that he waited until now to let me in even that far.” Which was a massive understatement. When the confession fell from his lips, she’d been stunned he’d suffered something so life-altering, and then hurt that he couldn’t share it with her. That he hadn’t trusted her to know it. That…he’d turned to Nat for that comfort. He had to have. “And I was angry with you.”

“Because I didn’t tell you, either.” It was a good guess.

“For a little less rational reasons, but yes… You knew that happened to him. You knew it was going on and you didn’t tell me. Why?” In all the years Clint had been out there, it wasn’t until he partnered with Natasha that she began to truly trust he’d walk back in the door. “Why didn’t you tell me when it happened?”

Nat took a swallow of the wine, then said, “Compartmentalization. It was a need to know, and in that moment… all you would have had was what I had—someone had come through the Tesseract, a being known as Loki. Our information on him was relatively thin. As in… a few lines in a report on Thor. The information on the Tesseract itself was code word classified. All Coulson told me when he called me in was that Clint had been compromised, I had no true details until after I picked up Banner and brought him to the hellicarrier. I was running on minimal information.”

After draining the last half of her wine, she reached for the bottle and refilled her glass and then topped of Natasha’s when she held it out.

“There… then it was all moving fast. Loki allowed us to let him capture him in Germany, Thor reappeared, then Clint led a strike squad onto the hellicarrier itself, damn near took the whole thing down.”

A chill wrapped itself around Laura. Clint had told her some of this, the details he had and he’d been very careful in his phrasing—each word had hurt him to say.

“Long story short…the other guy got loose…”
“And he nearly killed you,” Laura said. That point Clint had emphasized. The fact Nat could have
died and Coulson did die, and they were both his fault.

“Well, the love tap hurt, I won’t lie. Thor, however, was in the right place at the right time and
managed to help me avoid that. When Fury said Clint was heading for the containment level, I
knew he was there to let Loki out so I went after him. I wasn’t letting him go back to that monster.”
And she took him alive. Someone else might not have been so generous.

“Then you knocked some sense into him, literally.”

A single nod. Natasha exhaled. “Then New York and the Chitauri. I knew Clint was hurting, and I
knew he was struggling, but he—compartmentalized and I always thought when he was finally
able to go home… that he told you and I didn’t ask him because…”

“Because that’s not how you two work. You always have each other’s backs, you’d burn the world
down for each other, but you aren’t going to stick your fingers into the other’s wounds without a
pressing reason.” Clint’s words. The behavior and the affection stuck out a long time before when
he’d admitted how much he’d come to value her. This after admitting he would never have killed
her the night he’d been sent to take her out. Even if she had turned down his offer for SHIELD.
He’d have walked away from that assignment.

“Yes. I’m sorry you didn’t know after. I—keeping secrets is what I’ve always done. A part of me
understands exactly why he didn’t tell you.” That didn’t surprise Laura either. “But part of me was
disappointed when he told me he hadn’t, too.”

That did.

“Why disappointed?” She was still trying to sort her feelings out on all of this. Clint’s trauma, the
mind control, the suspicion at work—the fact they’d taken him off the STRIKE teams and Nat had
been reassigned to Steve. The fallout and the consequences of what happened to him, even the
growing distance at home and the fact he stayed away more and more—it all traced back to that
one incident and she had no idea of it.

“Because you two were perfect,” Natasha told her solemnly. “You were what I thought a real
relationship would be like… better than how it worked in television and movies.”

“No relationship is perfect,” Laura told her gently. Because even as angry with her as she’d been,
angry that Natasha had been his rock when it should have been Laura, she couldn’t find it in herself
to blame her. Natasha loved Clint and she’d protected him. She’d made sure he came home to his
kids.

“Maybe.” Nat shrugged a little. “I’m just glad that he told you.”

“Me, too.”

“Does it change anything?”

Laura sighed. It changed a lot.

She just didn’t know how much.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m still working on that part.”

Natasha nodded slowly. “Is there anything I can do to help?”
No. Then again Natasha was her friend, too. A fact she proved time and again as she did now, just by asking the question.

“Well, you could give me all the down and dirty about you, Steve, and Bucky—do they tag out like in wrestling or are you splitting your nights? Or oh my god, are you having sex with both of them at the same time?”

When Nat just stared at her, Laura shrugged.

“Come on, let me live vicariously—you have two beautiful men who are absolutely crazy about you, and you’re stunning. As physical as all three of you are, that has got to make for some absolutely fantastic positions.”

Tipping the glass of wine up, Nat drained it. “And hearing all about it will help?”

“Well, it can’t hurt,” Laura said, grin widening. “C’mon, just a couple of really good details. How perfect is Steve? I mean… really.”

Nat looked at her wine glass for a moment before she refilled it once again. “Well… they say serum takes good and makes it great.” She glanced at her from beneath her lashes. “Before the serum, Steve definitely had to have been good.”

Laughter bubbled up through Laura. “Details. I know you can do better. Are we talking this long?” She held her hand away from the wine glass about five inches or so.

Nat reached over and widened the range.

“Bucky, too?” Because while Nat deserved every wonderful thing that could ever happen, there was a tiny bit of Laura that remained envious.

She lifted her wine glass and smiled.

“So, perfect then? Both of them?” She eyed Nat, who finally let out a sigh.

“Yes, they are both perfect… Steve has a magnificent Adonis belt, and he’s every bit as hard muscled as you might imagine from looking at him. James is… he is carved from marble, the imperfections created by his scars and the arm make him perfect.”

A slow smile pulled at her lips and Laura leaned back as she sipped her wine.

“You like them.”

“More than a little,” Natasha answered.

“At the same time?”

“You really want every salacious detail?”

“That tells me there are salacious details, and yes… I do want to know. You finally have girl talk for me to pick your brain for.” God knew Laura had gotten a couple of lovely tips from Nat over the years. “And I know you’re not shy.”

“I’m not… but they’re different.”

“I know,” Laura said, reaching over and putting a hand on her leg. “It’s what I’m here for, I promise. No judgment. You can tell me anything, I’m a vault.”
Nat rolled her eyes, but Laura didn’t take offense. “Fine, three questions, of which I have already answered one. So choose carefully.”

“Oh, you do love me…” Okay, what did she want to know?

“Maximum number of orgasms they’ve given you?”

“In one night? Or one round?” The small smile she wore told her the answer was going to make her jealous regardless.

Okay, maybe she hated her just a little bit.

Sam

“This one is just a detail of the repairs done at Leipzig with the Stark Industries underwriting it.” He held up the file. “Essentially, we cost them about ten and a half million bucks. The Committee wanted an accounting of the full reparation.”

Steve sighed and glanced up from the file he was reading. “Has it already been sent to them?”

“I’m going to guess yes, though I’m not seeing anything here that confirms it.” Sam hadn’t been thrilled about reading through stacks of files that covered everything from equipment orders to mission reports, and in some cases were only half-done.

“Put that in the maybe stack with a sticky note that we need to verify the status with Rhodey or Tony, we may have to ask both.”

“Got it.” So far that had been the last four files Sam had gone through. Steve was still reading his one. “What’s that one?”

“It’s the post-Leipzig after-action report, detailing injuries and battle readiness, as well as…” He sighed.

“As well as?”

“As well as T’Challa and Tony’s notes on Nat letting me and Bucky go.”

“Ouch.” Sam could imagine the biting comments in Tony’s report.

“Yeah,” Steve said, resting his forehead against two fingers as he braced his elbow on the desk. “There’s… a lot of stuff here we need to think about.”

“Like?”

“The fact we all broke off into individual groupings for the fight. The lack of teamwork. Division of resources regarding containment versus elimination.”

“Man we weren’t trying to kill ‘em,” Sam said. They’d wanted to steal their quinjet when they
realized they were at the airport. If they hadn’t shown up, they were going to get on several different flights and meet up on the other side. That had always been the plan.

“No. Tony didn’t want to kill us but there’s a question in the report that says essentially, the choice not to take lethal action led to more destruction.”

“Okay, that’s good, that he didn’t want to kill us?” He couldn’t quite put his finger on what was going on with Steve and Tony. One day they seemed fine and in tune. The next day there was a distance between them. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, lifting his gaze but his eyes were distant.

“Then what’s the problem, Man?”

“It’s what he didn’t put in here…”

Sam gave him a minute, but Steve wasn’t completing his thoughts. “What didn’t he put in there?” he asked finally when Steve didn’t finish.

Closing the folder, Steve set it to the side and moved on to the next one. “He didn’t detail Siberia, the only notes at the end were on Zemo, and the murder of the psychologist along with the suggestion that Bucky had been set up. And it stops there.”

“Oh. You know you’ve never really talked about Siberia, either.”

Steve nodded. “I know.”

Glancing at the report in front of him, he flipped it open and grimaced. Equipment and maintenance on repairing the compound for a half-mile hole punched through the multiple floors and into the Earth. Base cost, 1.5 million to reinforce the structure, and repair the physical damage after filling in the trench itself as well as sinking a metal pylon into the hole as insurance against resettling causing permanent damage to the Compound.

The monetary costs were astronomical, and didn’t even take into account the incidents leading up to Leipzig and the financial burden they accrued. If Sam were Stark, he’d be pretty pissed at all of them, too. But he didn’t seem to be holding a grudge. Not that Sam knew him all that well, but he’d been engaged, and conversational, and if he had to sum up his behavior, he’d probably lean toward charming.

“Steve…”

“Yeah?” He didn’t glance up from whatever held him engrossed in the latest report.

“What happened in Siberia?”

Though he hadn’t looked up, he wasn’t reading the report anymore. Clint had said Sam treated Cap like his hero rather than his friend, a good, if flawed man, but still a man. He’d been turning that over in his head for a while, and he couldn’t fault Clint for the assessment. It hadn’t started out that way. At first, when he’d met him running, he’d seen the lost look in Steve’s eyes, the disconnect, and the way he was there but not really a part of his surroundings. Sam had seen that on a lot of soldiers’ faces and he’d seen it in his own eyes.

The closest to grounded Cap had seemed was when Natasha pulled up in her sexy, sweet ride to pick him up. But he hadn’t really known either of them, even when they showed up to ask for his help. He’d thrown himself in, all in. Captain America needed his help, hell yes he was going to
show up.

But Steve wasn’t acting himself, not as bad as he’d been before Sam found out about Natasha, but still noticeable.

Exhaling, Steve straightened and leaned back in his chair. He tapped the eraser end of his pencil against the desk lightly. “Zemo set us up,” he said quietly. “He did all of that—set a bomb at the Accords signing which killed T’Challa’s father and injured a lot of people, framed Bucky, killed the psychiatrist they would have sent for his interrogation so he could replace him, set off the EMP—all so he could trigger him and get information about that base in Siberia.”

“He was going after the other five Winter Soldiers, which was why we pulled together a team to go out there and stop him,” Sam said. He knew most of that. “We fought, Rhodey got hurt, Nat let you go, and you and Bucky went to Siberia. Tony came to see us on the Raft and he told me what went down with Zemo setting up Bucky and playing the psychiatrist, it’s why I told him where you were going. So what happened in Siberia?”

He’d only told Tony because he believed him when he said he was going as a friend. But the next Sam saw Bucky, he was missing his metal arm and going into cryo and Steve—Steve had been irrevocably changed and distant.

“When we arrived, we had to get inside—and Tony found us. He told us what he’d learned about Zemo and we penetrated the silo’s security, it was several meters down.” The distance was in Steve’s gaze again. “Zemo had killed the Winter Soldiers, he went there for information—a tape—that proved Bucky had been dispatched to kill Howard and Maria Stark.”

Holy.

Shit.

Sam stared at him.

“Tony…Tony couldn’t take it. He wanted to kill Bucky. He snapped. I got in the way. It… didn’t end well. That’s why I didn’t have the shield. I left it there, and I got Bucky out of there.” A muscle ticked in Steve’s jaw. “T’Challa had caught Zemo, he’d followed Tony, and he had me follow him to Wakanda…and you pretty much know the rest.”

Sam was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact Bucky had killed Stark’s parents. That was… how the hell did you get over something like that? “Tony just let you go?”

“He didn’t have much choice, he was down.” Steve sighed and tossed the pencil on the desk. “I left him there, and I didn’t think about the fact I’d smashed his ARC reactor. I was trying to get him to stop, just not kill Bucky. I didn’t want to hurt him, and then I left him there. He’s alive because Nat tracked him… she got him out, and got him back to the States, even though they were already hunting her by then.”

Sam sank back against the sofa, the folder just resting on his lap and he sighed. “That’s…”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “I messed up. I made a call and it was the wrong one. Not, stopping him with Bucky. I couldn’t let him kill him. Bucky was the weapon Hydra used, he would never have done it otherwise. Tony’s grief… I got that, too. But I should have told him, about Hydra killing them.”

“Man… you knew that before?” Just when he thought he might have gotten a grasp on this information, Steve offered up that gem.
Another nod. “Zola told Nat and I when we found him at Lehigh, indicated that when history wouldn’t cooperate, history was changed and he listed the Starks as targets and deceased. Hydra had them killed. I never told him.”

“You didn’t want to hurt him.”

“Pretty much. He’d already grieved them once, what did telling him achieve?” Steve raked a hand through his hair and sat forward. “I didn’t want to be the one who caused him more pain, so I said nothing and ended up causing him some of the worst pain of his life. So, that’s what happened in Siberia.”

He met Sam’s gaze and Sam blew out a slow breath. “That’s… a lot. How the hell are you two even talking now?”

“Natasha.”

Sam should have figured.

“We both went looking for her, and we both wanted to make up for how we’d treated her in and around the Accords. She was the only one fighting to keep us all together, and she was the one who paid the highest price for it—left behind by me, and cut out by him.”

That made sense.

“Is it enough to repair that bridge?” Because hell, Tony talked to Bucky and treated him like a person. The distance was with Steve.

“We’re working on it.” Steve tapped the file. “This… this tells me he was more hurt than he was angry. It’s not something I’m proud of.” But that didn’t seem like a revelation. Steve must have known how hurt Tony was. The report just drove the point home.

“But you’re still here and so is he… that’s something.”

Steve nodded. “It is and I owe him more than I can ever repay, because despite everything… he’s got our back.”

“You talking to someone about all of this?”

“Nat. Sometimes Bucky. Tony.”

“I meant someone not intimately involved.” Every single one of the people he mentioned had skin in that game, some of them had all of the skin.

“I guess that’s going to have to be you.” Steve smiled faintly.

“I gotcha,” Sam said. “Anytime.”

Silence draped them a moment and they both looked at their folders.

“And if you want to talk to me about Nat… and what being with her is like, I’m all ears.” He managed it with a straight face until Steve gave him the ‘Captain America is disappointed in you’ face, then he grinned.

“Noted, but I’m good on that front.”

Sam chuckled. “I bet you’re good.”
“Don’t be crude—get back to that stack and I’ll get through these so we can be caught up.”

Chuckling, Sam flipped open the next folder. “Probably have a hot date tonight…”

“You know,” Steve said idly. “I can always ask her if she has a friend.”

“That’s cold man,” Sam said, shaking his head. Then again… there might be someone, maybe. No way did he plan on jinxing it by bringing it up.

“You started it,” Steve said. “Maybe we’ll take you out to dinner and some pool.”

“Thought we were working on reports,” Sam suggested, preferring to derail this side conversation.

“All right, I was just saying…” Having Steve parrot his own words back at him burned a little, but Sam laughed. At least the dark cloud around him began to clear.

“Yeah, you’re saying a lot when all I want to know is does Nat get freaky, I mean she looks like the type to get freaky. You and Bucky together would be kind of freaky…”

Steve stared at him—correction, Steve glared at him.

“Then again,” Sam said with a smile as he looked at the next file. “I can mind my own business. I am perfectly capable of doing that.”

Nat was so definitely the type to get freaky.

Lucky bastards.

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Natasha

She and Laura had demolished both bottles of wine and were most of the way through a third Nat found stashed in her kitchen when Steve, Bucky, and Clint came in search of them. Laura, more than a little tipsy, took one look at Steve and Bucky and burst into a fit of giggles that set Natasha off.

Clint gave up on getting them to read him in on the joke and flicked Nat on the nose before he corralled Laura out for water, coffee, and pizza—not necessarily in that order. Nat had been making her drink a glass of water in and around the wine. While she would have preferred to stick around in her suite or better yet, move the party over to Steve’s with the much bigger bed—the pizzas had arrived and the kids wanted to stories and a song because they would be leaving earlier the following day to get settled in before school started on Monday.

While she hadn’t had near enough to drink to make her even a little drunk, there was a pleasant kind of mellow suffusing her. The conversation with Laura had gone to the most charming and silly places. She didn’t think they’d ever had a talk quite like it before, and Laura pointed out Nat had never been in a place where she could share such intimate details of her life. Even being careful, what she had told her seemed a lot.
“When Clint was the only man you spent time with personally, he’s who we discussed.” Never Matty. Never Bruce. Never even Steve really—not until after SHIELD fell and even then she was circumspect about what she said. She avoided personal relationships and attachments. Clint had been her one weakness.

Now she had so many more.

Still, Laura confessed she and Clint had nearly kissed the night before, and while she didn’t know what to think she’d asked Nat if she should put a hold on the divorce proceedings.

“Unless you’re absolutely sure that divorce is the only way this ends for the two of you… then yes. Put a hold on it. But the only people who can answer that are you and Clint.”

“He’s not going to change, Natasha.”

“He’s Clint.” Take him or leave him. He could be the biggest pain in the ass and she wouldn’t trade him for anything in the world. But Nat wasn’t married to him, and she didn’t expect him to be anyone else.

Or maybe she just didn’t judge people by their mistakes.

She really couldn’t.

The laughter around the pizza, watching Laura watch Clint and catching Clint watching Laura even as the kids weaved in and out. Tony and Peter were competing over who could get their ship TIE fighter for Tony and X-Wing for Peter, together faster. Sam kept giving her speculative looks but when she raised her eyebrows he just held up his hands.

She’d chase that down later. Natasha braided Wanda’s hair as she braided Lila’s. It was nice. Relaxed. James and Clint were plotting something, and they both smelled of gunpowder and sweat. Just how long had they been at the range? Steve had settled in with Coop for Mario Kart and it seemed to tickle Cooper because he was actually good at it.

Yeah, no one expected the super soldier to have skills at video games. Steve just wasn’t crazy about them like everyone else.

It was a nice evening, populated with laughter and hugs, and stories and warmth—and Natasha soaked it in, but as soon as Lila and Cooper were tucked in and she’d read the two stories and sung them three songs, she kissed them both and then said goodnight.

Peter beat Tony by scant seconds on the build, and they were arguing all the way to the quinjet. Humming, she stored her paintings in an empty rack before slipping into the pilot’s seat. Steve dropped into the co-pilot’s seat and grinned at James when he came to just lean against the back of hers.

She half-listened to Peter and Tony’s “argument” which boiled down to a bet on a rematch. The debate on who was the child in that relationship would be epic. By comparison, Steve and James discussed the holidays, their run the next day, how her session with Wanda went and James revealed Clint had picked up his bow.

Natasha smiled as he described it. He could use his bow.

It didn’t matter that he was rusty or a little out of practice.

He could use it.
The wound to his shoulder and the further injury inflicted by Alexei and Leonid hadn’t robbed him a skill he’d honed his whole life.

Something unclenched in her soul that she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding tight for the last couple of months.

His leg was healing. He had his family around him. Laura was debating the divorce. He could use his bow.

Clint would be okay.

When Steve brushed her arm, she smiled. The thrill she got out of that news on top of Wanda and Laura’s pursuit of details about sex with James and Steve left her buzzing inside her skin. As soon as she touched them down on the landing pad, she went for her paintings but Steve grabbed them first and James had their duffels.

One more responsibility before she could escape to Steve’s floor with the boys, she looked at Peter. “Staying here tonight or going home?”

“Um…” Peter thrust a hand through his hair. “It’s snowing again, at least the forecast said it would be heavy tonight and May’s staying at the hospital. Do you mind if I sleep on your floor again?”

“Not at all,” she said. “You going down now or continuing your debate over whether you’re the grandmaster toymaker or he is?”

“Hey,” Tony squawked. “I resent that. I’m the grandmaster, he’s obviously the padawan.”

Flicking her fingers at Tony, she continued to study Peter. He shrugged. “Actually… we were working on the web shooters and I could do a few more tweaks on the suit if I can use the lab?”

“Ha. You have come to the right place. Kiss Natasha goodnight Peter, and follow me.”

Peter actually pressed a kiss to her cheek, then grinned. “Night, Natasha.

“Good night, Peter.”

Tony leaned forward as though to mimic Peter’s kiss and she put her hand on his face and gave him a light shove away.

“Aww. You didn’t mind when Pete gave you a kiss.”

“He’s cuter than you are,” she told him, earning a snicker from Peter and a snort from James.

“Now, you’re just trying to hurt my feelings.” Tony put a hand to his heart. “I do have them, you know.”

“You are just asking for it, Stark.”

“Well, yes,” he said with a smirk, then grinned at Steve and James who were waiting for her by the elevator. Neither looked very amused. Fortunately, neither looked particularly peeved either. “But you’re still saying no.”

“Goodnight, Tony.” Peeved would delay her goal.

“Goodnight, Red.”
The doors opened and she slid inside to lean against the wall. The hum in her system continued to rev as they descended. She pulled out her phone, skimmed the messages then put it in do not disturb for the night. The doors opened to let them out onto Steve’s floor, she took a deep breath of the earthy scent of the tree. That was lovely.

“Friday…”

Steve and James headed for their rooms—probably to drop off their duffels, though the shield went to her room. Steve paused only to set her paintings down near the shelves. That was fine. But both paused because she hadn’t moved farther than a couple of feet from the elevator.

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff?”

“Lock down the floor please, full privacy mode. We’re in for the night. Limit contact to emergencies only otherwise just take a message.”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff. Goodnight.”

“Thank you, Friday. Lights to twenty percent please.”

The dimness flooded the floor and she had a pair of gazes resting on her.

The elevator doors closed, and the light next to the controller went red. No one would be able to access the floor.

Stripping out of her jacket, she dropped it over the back of the sofa and set her phone on the side table. Then she slid off her shoes.

“Nat?” Steve said, frowning.

“Hmm?” She pulled the hoodie off and left it on the chair as she made her way toward her room.

“You okay, Doll?”

She stripped off her tank top and dropped it.

“Oh, I’m just fine… and the first one naked in that room is getting a blow job. And the second one is going to have me riding them.” Pivoting, she unsnapped her bra and let it slide off and dropped it as she continued a languid walk backward toward her room. “Let’s go soldiers, and make it snappy…”

There was a beat. Then a pair of duffels hit the floor and she danced the rest of the way into her room pausing a couple of feet in the door to strip off her leggings. James beat Steve by a scant inch, and he gave her a cocky smile.

Yes… like marble, unique, and gorgeous. His cock was already half-hard and attempting to stand at attention. The cool fire in his pale blue eyes licked over her and she sighed. “I’ve been thinking about you all day long…”

“Yeah?”

Steve was a half step behind her and he trailed his knuckles down her back. “All day?”

“Hmm-hmm.” She tipped her head back and he brushed a kiss to her lips, then another to her cheek, and he nibbled his way to her ear. Closing her eyes, she let the sensations wash over her. There was a wonderful floatiness that accompanied base need.
“You should have come to help me go over those reports,” he murmured against her ear, then gave her a light slap to her ass and she laughed. The contact sent a warm flush racing through her already stimulated system. Sliding her hand back, she ran her hand along the length of his cock from root to tip and back again. He let out a low hiss. “Or you can keep doing that…”

“Oh, I’m going to do much more than that.” She leaned back against him for a moment and savored the heat.

James chuckled. “I know it’s not the wine, it does not affect you like this.”

“No,” she said. “It was definitely not the wine.” She gave Steve another squeeze and then moved them all toward the bed. Already a half-dozen scenarios rolled out in her mind, and she wasn’t sure which one she wanted to play with first.

“Yeah?” James looped an arm around her waist and reeled her in close. Her nipples scraped against the solid wall of his chest and his mouth was hot, open and demanding as it closed on hers. Running her hands over his chest and then down his sides, she groaned as Steve pressed right up against her back. James’ cock was hard and hot against her belly while Steve’s erection nestled against her ass. Steve pressed a kiss to the bruise on her shoulder.

“How do you want us, Angel?” the whispered question at her ear sent another cascade of images through her mind, and Steve’s hands were everywhere along her back, her ass, her sides and James tightened his grip on her hips as he licked and sucked every moan from her mouth. Fuck, he could kiss and she was already soaked with wanting before she’d even gotten on the damn quinjet.

Finally breaking the kiss, she gazed at James’ blown pupils, visibly huge even in the low light. Licking her lips, she gave him a light push toward the bed. “I don’t know that I need a lot of foreplay tonight, boys.” She ached with the wanting.

James moved up the bed toward the pillows and she followed him at a slow crawl, very well aware of how her ass swayed and the picture she made for them. She glanced over her shoulder and said, “See something you like?”

“You have no idea.”

She raked her gaze over him. “Oh, I have some idea.” Licking her lips, she said, “If you want me, come have me. I’m going to entertain myself with a little treat.”

The words had the desired effect, Steve’s breath shortened and his cock seemed to stand even higher at attention. Grinning, she turned to see James stroking his cock lazily as he watched her.

“Whatever you did today, Doll… please do it again and often. This is… nice.”

Settling between his legs, and keeping her ass in the air, and her cunt on view for Steve, she brushed away James’ hand lightly as she took over stroking his cock. “I haven’t even gotten to nice yet, milli moi.” Then she dipped her head and licked him from base to root, never looking away from him.

Steve’s hands glided over her ass, and the heat of him drew closer. Moaning a little she clenched her thighs at the needy ache spreading through her. The only thing she wanted was for him to just sink inside of her… But he slipped his fingers down to part her labia, before he drew circles against her clit. Groaning, she closed her lips around the tip of James’ cock, and swirled her tongue against the slit, gathering up the pre-cum before dipping her head and taking him all the way to her throat.

His low “fuck” rocked through her and she groaned. From the minute Wanda asked her about
orgasms to Laura wanting to know what it was like to be boxed between them, she’d been craving their touch. For every hour they’d had to stay the need ratcheted a little higher. She might have enjoyed visiting, but it left a little closer to desperate than she’d been in a long time.

Steve eased a finger into her and she pushed back against it, but dammit she wanted more. One finger wasn’t enough. Flexing around the digit, she moaned when he added a second and then a third, The stretch helped to answer some of the ache, and then he pulled his fingers out, but before she could protest, he lined up his cock and pushed in.

Tracing her tongue along the vein beneath James’ cock, she let out a low continuous moan as Steve sank into her with relentless stretch that edged her right to the point of pain but it felt so fucking good. She clenched her inner muscles around him even as she hollowed her cheeks and sucked against James’ cock, beginning to move her head to let him thrust in as far to bump her throat and then out again. Careful to not gag as she relaxed the muscles in her neck.

The heated smell of him—gunpowder, metal, and hints of pizza and that part that was indefinably him. It overwhelmed her as Steve sank balls deep, and held there a moment, rubbing her ass and then running his hands down her back.

“Good Angel?” Always checking these two. Always wanting to know.

James combed his fingers through her hair, and then gripped a handful. One gentle tug and her scalp lit up. The warring sensations sent up a kaleidoscope through her mind. The stillness of a night, the dark all around, the need to be quiet and her Soldier hot on her tongue, his fingers in her hair as much a need to just touch each other as to alert her if he heard anything.

One light pull. All was well.

Her whole body warmed and she eased back, clenching around Steve. If he wasn’t going to move, she would. Then she eased away from Steve but he clamped his hands onto her hips and drew her back, his cock pressing deep and then he began to move, pulling out and then thrusting in. The angle was perfect and sparks played across her vision.

Splitting her focus to match Steve’s motions and grip her inner muscles while stroking James’ cock with her lips, tongue, and fingers made her dizzy in all the right ways. Her whole body buzzed with the want to come, to feel them come, to make them feel as good as she did.

The soft huff of Steve’s breath, the focused thrusting as he fucked into her and the careful way he gripped her—tight enough to keep her in place but never biting into her skin. So damn careful, always. James fisting her hair, but never yanking or pushing, letting her control the pace even as his breathing quickened and more pre-cum swirled on her tongue.

There was a rhythm to the way they felt. The heat, the force, the taste, and the feel… James was close, but Steve was intent and she wanted them to come at the same time so she eased off on James, locking her fingers tight at the base of his cock, and he let out a low curse in Russian. Lifting her eyes, she met his gaze and smiled around his cock before she moved to tease only the head, deliberate teasing licks as she pushed to meet Steve’s every thrust the force jolting her, rushing the air from her lungs and she had to suck it in greedily through her nose, but the deprivation lit another fuse and everywhere her skin touched theirs, her nipples brushing against the bed, the feel of their hands, and their cocks.

It was too much and not enough, and then Steve was striking that perfect spot and his thrusts grew more intense, the increase telling her he was close so she swallowed James deep, and pushed him as she stroked from root up with her lips and her hand, and his fingers tightened against her hair,
but he still didn’t pull and his hips lifted but she pressed her hand to his thigh and he groaned.

“Natalia…” He was so close.

Clenching around Steve, she beckoned, needing to make this be all about them and then he slipped a finger around and pressed against her clit, and her vision went white as her whole body locked and the strain pulled her taut. Steve gave a stuttering series of thrusts, her body clamping down around him pulling his orgasm from him. Her orgasm triggered his and James followed, and she swallowed, nearly choking for a moment as she clawed through the pleasure to focus on his.

All her strength seemed to evaporate as she released him with a slow pop, her cheek against his thigh. Steve pressed his lips to her back, where he lay half over her, breathing hard.

Slowly, one by one, their breathing normalized and Steve eased out of her. They both let out a groan and then hands were lifting her and moving her. James kissed her, his tongue delving against hers and she let out a low laugh as he released her only to turn her and then Steve was kissing her. Long, slow, lazy kisses full of heat and tongue stoking the pleasure suffusing her.

“Better?” Steve asked.

“Always better like this,” she told him and sprawled back against the pillows as they contented themselves with gentle touches and pets. James stirred against her back and it re-ignited her interest.

“Natalia?”

“Hmm…”

“What did you do today?”

She laughed softly.

“No,” he said, teasing his fingers down her side as she traced her hand over Steve’s glorious Adonis belt.

Good became great, twice over.

“I really want to know…”

She’d tell them. “Later,” she murmured. “Kiss me.”

He didn’t need to be told twice.
Waking before either Steve or James was an accomplishment. Slipping out of the bed without rousing either one a feat of skill. She opted for a quick shower because she’d need a longer one later, and then changed in the bathroom. She’d managed only a couple of hours of sleep. Her body was still humming as she slipped into the elevator and took it down to her floor. Friday informed her that Peter was still sound asleep, and assured her that he and Tony had both wrapped up before one in the morning.

In her studio, she closed the door and had Friday put on the music as she slipped on her pointe shoes. The simple leotard would help her stay cool. Her right shoulder ached, but like every other sore muscle she’d earned from the series of training sessions the day before, and playing with Steve and James, she embraced the sensations as she began stretching.

As she moved through the positions, her mind settled and she began to sort her tasks into order of most to least urgent. The guys knew she planned a research day, so after breakfast, she’d send Peter off to train with them or work with Tony and then retreat back to her floor. Friday had the files in order and she could focus on threat assessment. Isaiah was also higher on her list. The holiday weekend was winding down, and she needed to get her accounts in order, particularly if she was going to be taking a more active public role.

An active public role.

Her.

The Black Widow.

The spy.

She was far more comfortable in the shadows, but to accomplish her next mission—she would have to abandon them and that might mean forever. A natural extension of burning all her covers?
“You came.”

“But you save people.” A child’s logic, so solid and sure. “You’re a hero, Auntie Nat. My favorite hero...oooh! Don’t tell Daddy.”

“I try to be,” she promised Lila. “Every day, I try. But listen to your mom, and your dad. Don’t watch the news, and don’t listen to your friends. Don’t correct them. People are going to believe what they are most comfortable believing.”

A long moment of quiet, because that was a hard concept for adults to understand much less kids.

“I believe in you,” Lila said finally. “I know you’re a good guy. Someday, I’m going to tell your story—just like Maleficent, and everyone is going to know it.”

A painful kind of joy shanked her. “Deal. But only if you play Aurora.”

“I can do that. Because Aurora is going to grow up to be a hero, too. Just like Maleficent. She’s going to defend the woods, and she’s going to save people. Just like you.” Razor-sharp assurance underscored every word. Nat pressed a hand to her lips and Clint took the phone from her fingers.

“Hey Bug,” he said, and Lila squealed. “Auntie Nat and I have to...”

“You have to go save the world, okay Daddy. I love you and I love Auntie Nat, too.”

“We love you, Bug. Give Coop, Nate and Mom our love... and Bug?”

“Yes Daddy?”

“Tell your mom what your friends said.”

“Okay, Daddy. Auntie Nat is a hero, right?”

She couldn’t look at him, not while she fought tears.

“She absolutely is, baby. And I’ll tell you a secret—she’s my favorite hero, too.”

“Nat...you’re everything. You are the person who lit the way for me here. You kept me grounded, you taught me...I don’t know where I’d be without you. Natalia reminded the Soldier what it was to be human—for Bucky. Natasha did that for me. You did that...for both of us.”

“Good,” he told her and handed the dog over. “New York’s missed you. We don’t want you to be a tourist.”

The most unsettling feeling passed through her and she met his earnest gaze and found nothing but
honesty. “Thanks, Alphonse.”

“No ma’am,” he assured her as he lifted his own cap. “Thank you.”

The reaction puzzled her, and then his smile gentled. “My grandson was on a bus with my wife the day the sky opened up.”

A chill raced up her spine.

“They came home because of you.”

For once, she actually didn’t know what to say.

“Take care, ma’am…” then he lowered his voice. “And welcome back.”

“The red in my ledger…”

“You saved the world, at least three times that I can count right off the top of my head. There is no red in your ledger. Not unless you want to say it’s there, and that’s not the world saying you owe a debt, Nat—that’s you.” Laura set her wine glass down and spread her hands. “You deserve better—from you.”

“I believe in you.”

“You were the reason I survived. You carried our pain when I couldn’t, and I’ll carry it for you now. Yes, I miss our daughter more than I’d miss my own life. But I know you, lyubov moya, I know you did everything you could to protect her, and keep her safe. I know you wouldn’t have come anywhere near me or the Red Room if we were a threat. You came back for me…”

“You’re awesome,” Mindy admitted, stealing a glance to the other customers then looking back. “What you did? Giving up your security and anonymity to save lives? That’s—I don’t know if I could have done that and you put it all out there. “ She held out the pen and pad to Natalia who took it. “I hope I’m half as brave as that in my life.”

Muscles warmed, she lifted her head as she rose and met her own gaze in the mirror. Going public the first time had been the only option. The only way to stop Hydra and SHIELD both. The only way to protect Steve, Tony, and every other person marked by Project Insight. Now… they had other options, but this would be the way to build a better future for them, their present was secured.
They had to protect the future for Wanda, Peter, and whoever else followed in their footsteps.

It wasn’t just about her.

Rolling her head from side to side, she murmured, “Switch playlists, Friday. Something with a beat…”

_Bleed it Out_ began playing. Linkin Park. Good choice. The combination of guitars and swift beat would push her. Controlled movements, extending her muscles to the burning point and she was on her toes as she tapped out the lyrics. The extensions stretched her arms and back, and then she was flying. Submerging herself in the movement allowed her to shuttle through the to do lists, threat assessments, training analysis, and potential future dangers. There was only her, the music, and the movement.

Friday understood her dance routines well because she segued from one hard beat to the next, and Nat covered the floor in a series of spinning pirouettes and leaps. With every pass, she sank deeper into the music and a distant part of her mind acknowledged James’ arrival, a silent sentry tucked against the corner next to the door. He slipped in like a shadow, but her lizard brain had long since accepted he was safe and welcome.

She transitioned from one song to the next while letting Friday control the beat and the AI varied the music, from the pulse-pounding opening number to the slower, more reverential choral suite she finished on. Every song stepped her down until she finally dropped, body folded in half. Skin slick with sweat, she greedily gulped in air and had her head pressed against her knee.

The soft applause stroked over her. Lifting her head, she smiled at James and then chuckled at Peter who stood next to him, hair askew from sleep, a pillow impression still on his cheek, and the faint shadow of stubble providing contrasting images of his youth.

“Wow,” he said. “You can really dance.”

She untied her toe shoes and freed her feet. The redness of her toes promised bruises later. That was fine. They were minor enough.

“Kid was awake when I came down,” James said by way of explanation as he crossed over to catch her hand and she let him pull her up. Then she hung her shoes on the bar to dry and air. She’d clean them later.

“That’s fine.” The soundproofing wouldn’t have let the music wake him. But it was still early.

“I got up for water… and he said he was coming to watch you dance. I hope that’s okay.” If it weren’t, James wouldn’t have let him follow him inside.

“It’s fine,” she retrieved her water bottle and drained it in.

“When Tony said you could teach me to dance… I had no idea you could do all that.”

She chuckled at the amazed note in his voice. “I’ve danced for years.”

“I had some lessons when I was a kid, but… _nothing_ like that.”
“Well, if this is something you want to learn—it will take far longer.” Not that she was entirely comfortable teaching dance. James passed her a fresh bottle of water and she drained it nearly as quickly as she had the first.

“No, I’ll stick to the other dancing. It’s early… but could we do breakfast sooner rather than later?”

Natasha glanced at James. “Steve still here?”

“He went running. But he wasn’t going to do a long one. You two get showers in, and I’ll start food. Should be ready for him when he gets back.”

“You didn’t go running with him?” That surprised her. They’d been talking about it the night before.

“No, I’m going to head out to the Compound later after Clint drops off his family. We’re going to run one of the live training simulations.”

Of course, they were. She smiled. Clint must have been feeling up to it to invite James.

“Live simulations?” Peter asked as she wrapped a towel around her neck. The sweat was rapidly cooling her overheated body and she’d get a chilled soon. “Can I go?”

“It’s a live-fire exercise,” she answered, studying Peter. “You need to be checked out on weapons safety and run some drills before you participate.”

“Oh.”

“You should be certified anyway, you’re already dealing with guns on the street.” It was a mental note she’d made weeks earlier, but it had slipped through the cracks of their missions.

“How long will it take?”

“Probably not long,” James said, giving him a critical eye. “You’ve got good spatial and engineering awareness. It’s more about the basic construction of weapons, knowing how to clear the chamber, engaging a safety, which weapons have safeties, and pulling the magazines.”

“Should know how to strip a weapon down and put it back together, too.” She headed for the door. “In the middle of a fight, you don’t want a fully-loaded and armed gun just lying around—besides leaving a weapon for your opponents, a kid could find it or another civilian.”

“I can just break the guns.”

James shrugged. “That doesn’t mean you can pass a weapons safety check.” Curling his fingers with hers, he glanced down. “Want me to run him through it, Doll?”

Peter’s eyes widened a fraction, whether with excitement or apprehension, she wasn’t sure. Maybe a little bit of both.

“You free today, Peter?” They hadn’t really discussed his schedule.

“Mostly? Aunt May is probably home and sleeping, and I should get home later to have dinner with her.” He also had school the next day.

“Then, yes please James. That would be great. I’m going to be busy today,” she continued, the last aimed toward Peter. “So spend a couple of hours with James, he’s familiar with most types of
handguns and assault rifles... and probably more than what we have in the armory.” His extensive knowledge stretched back to weapons not even in production anymore.

“I’m not a big fan of guns.” The hint of trepidation in the words was understandable.

“They’re a tool. Know them, respect them, and you can handle them. Sound good?”

He nodded once before heading off to a shower. In the elevator, she leaned against the wall and smiled at James. “Sleep well?”

“Slept fine, Doll. Woke up lonely.”

She laughed. “But Steve could be your cuddle buddy.”

The look he gave her just made her laugh harder. Back on Steve’s floor, she padded barefoot toward her room. The clothes she’d left strewn had already been cleaned up. She let her gaze skim over the tree with its Avengers ornaments hidden amongst the branches like they were in the midst of preparing for an ambush. Then the photos on the shelves. Her paintings sat side by side in front of Steve’s record player.

It was starting to look even more—lived-in than before. James trailed her into the bathroom, but pulled himself up on the counter while she stripped and turned on the water. Since he was freshly shaven, his hair was damp along with the shower itself, she guessed he’d already had his.

Under the water, she rinsed the sweat off and debated washing her hair now or waiting until after her session with Tony…

“You’re doing research today, Doll?”

“Hmm... yes.”

“Did you decide whether you were going to be in or out?” The phrasing didn’t fool her. Was she staying safe within the Tower’s security perimeter or heading out into the big bad world? For a moment, she considered escaping to the safe house in Queens. But it wouldn’t be as useful as working here.

Here she had Friday to assist.

“Most likely here.” She’d leave it at that. If she discovered something actionable or something she could follow up on herself, she would. The sooner they whittled the threat list down to a smaller number, the more easily she would be able to determine if Tony faced an imminent threat. Well, more imminent than his average daily quota. “That means you don’t have to worry about me, mili moi if you head out to the Compound.”

“I was going to see if you wanted to come and do the work there...”

But she was already shaking her head. “Too many distractions,” she explained, unpinning her hair and soaking it before she did a quick wash to free it of sweat. “Everyone wants to talk to me... and I am grateful they are so welcoming, but I need to dig in today and tackle a number of items, not the least of which is calling Isaiah.” So many things she’d let slip the last few weeks. Not that she’d had a choice. “He needs a heads up before tomorrow.”

“Will it cause you issues, kotyonok?”

One she rinsed, she shut off the shower and smiled as James passed her a towel. “I would say I
don’t know, but that would be disingenuous. The work I do… it’s better performed under the radar. The contracts I receive… there are clients who will not want the glare of public spotlight anywhere near them. Those will dry up.”

“Some, but not all.” It was a fair assessment.

“Yes, and those that remain will need to be more carefully vetted. It benefits my clients to maintain their anonymity and to keep records of our interactions to an absolute minimum… but when a public profile heightens…”

“Any intelligence can be repurposed to a formidable weapon.” Concern flickered in his eyes as she wrapped a towel around her torso before squeezing the water from her hair.

“Exactly. The more Isaiah knows ahead of time, the better prepared he’ll be. So I get a few less contracts, that could cut into the bottom line.” But Isaiah had often wanted her to reinvest her money in more than just the funds she set up and the families she paid.

“Are you worried?”

Lowering the towel, she met his gaze. “No. Not anymore than I was before I made the decision. Life is change. I’ve been adapting to new circumstances for years.” While sometimes being mired in old ones, but that was a problem for another day. “It means we might have to be circumspect in what we spend… but we’ll be fine.”

He trailed a finger down her cheek. “And the other research you have to do?”

“I’ll read you both in if and when it’s necessary.” They’d been on edge for weeks, all of them. This could very much be the kind of thing Tony dismissed, idle threats that would go nowhere. So no sense in getting them riled. She would have Tony’s back for the next few days while she and his security teams worked on it.

“Okay.” Then he pressed a light kiss to her lips. “I almost wish Peter hadn’t woken up so early.”

“Only almost?” She smiled before nipping his lower lip.

“Not seeing you most of yesterday afternoon made last evening a pleasant surprise.”

She snickered and patted his chest before heading out to find clean clothes. “You can thank Laura and Wanda for that.”

“And why would I need to thank them?” He was right on her heels.

“Because they kept asking me about the two of you, what our relationship was like—how many orgasms I’d been having… a lot of salacious details that while I had no intention of answering all of them, I couldn’t stop thinking about what they brought up.”

Clean panties and sports bra in hand, she glanced at the very quiet James. Red flushed his ears and warmed his cheeks. Utterly charmed, she closed the distance and wrapped her arms around him.

“They’re very impressed by you,” she murmured.

“About our sex life?” His eyes narrowed, but the flush on his face didn’t diminish.

“Girl talk.” His discomfort made her want to soothe him.

“And women really talk about these things?”
Leaning her head back, she eyed him. “You mean to tell me, James Buchanan Barnes, you’ve never talked to Steve or any of your other buddies about your resistance girls? Or the ones you dated before the war? Steve said you were quite the ladies man.”

He grimaced. “That was…”

“Different?”

Perhaps her tone warned him, but he cupped her face. “I would never talk about you. Never in detail.”

“I know, and what I shared was how you make me feel, and that the serum took what was good and made it great.”

The darling flush spread over his cheeks and he closed his eyes as he pressed his forehead to hers. Laughter rumbled from his chest, and he rubbed her arms. “Promise me something, Doll?”

“Hmm?”

“Let me be there when you tell Steve.”

Chuckling, she swatted him. “You’re terrible.”

“No, truly—Sam has been trying to shake him down for details. Wait… that was why Laura was laughing when we came in?”

The corner of her mouth kicked up as she slipped out of the towel and stepped into her panties. “Perhaps, we’d gotten a bit silly by then.”

“Then you really need to let me be there when you tell Steve.”

“You call me mean,” she said still chuckling.

“You must be rubbing off on me,” he murmured, running his hand over the curve of her ass.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve rubbed myself off on you,” she told him drily. “You’ve rubbed a lot of things on me.”

“Yes…and I could again, but I need to prepare breakfast.”

“I can tell you’re cooking even as we speak.” Pulling out a tank top, she pulled it over her sports bra and then pulled out leggings.

“Savoring my time with you, Doll before you’re pulled away with Tony all week.”

“It won’t be all week,” she said, facing him. “I promise. I will find a way to make time.”

“You can’t promise that, what you’re going to do is hard enough, you don’t have to worry about us. We’ll manage… I’ll make Stevie spar. A lot.”

Natasha laughed.

“But I still want to take you out, we’ll find a place and just—you and me.” He held out his hand and she caught it easily, holding it.

“Are you asking me out a date?” A little thrill curled through her.
“I think we’re long past the time I should have done that…”

“Yes… not about it being long past time, but yes, I’d like to go on a date with you. Wherever you want… whenever you want.”

His slow smile tightened something in her gut. Had he really thought she’d say no? Rising on her tiptoes, she kissed him. Deepening the kiss for a moment, he cradled her face and then whispered, “Really wish he wasn’t coming up for breakfast…”

“I’ll be here later,” she said. “So come find me when you get back.”

He chuckled. “If I thought you’d let me distract you, I’d cancel and spend the day in bed with you.”

“So. Tempting.” But she had to resist. There was too much to do. Her stomach grumbled and he released her.

“How tempting?”

“Too much.” Her gaze snagged on his, and if she hadn’t been watching so closely she would never have seen the softness gentling his expression or the way the corners of his mouth tipped just slightly upward as his lips parted as though struck by wonder. “What?”

“Once upon a time you would never have admitted that to me.” Another stroke of his fingers down her cheek. “Thank you, lyubov moya.”

Once upon a time was only a few months ago. Touching a finger to her lips, she pressed it to his. “Hungry.”

He chuckled. “I’m going… pancakes?”

She groaned and he laughed harder. “I know, kotyonok.”

Her laughter sobered as he left her in the bedroom and she sat down to pull on her shoes. They’d made the bed already, the corners neatly tucked. Steve’s shield sat comfortably next to the bed, and they had dealt with the duffels they abandoned the night before because they’d been gone when she and James returned.

The chime of the elevator announced Peter’s arrival. The scent of coffee began to wreath the air and she closed her eyes. The rumble of Peter and James’ voices washed over her as she slowed her breathing. It was just six. She was due to meet Tony in the training room in an hour.

Hopefully, he’d be able to move today.

Bacon sizzled as James directed Peter to put toast in the toaster. Then laughter as Peter suggested it would be neat to design the toaster to shoot the toast out to land on the plate, but not practical. That launched James on a mini-rant of the conveniences now available that weren’t all that practical either. Then it hit her… they’d been born in two different centuries, decades apart in experience, and yet—they were both just two boys from New York, just like Steve.

Would she and James have been like this with their daughter if they’d had that chance? Did he get up early to cut wood or make food or whatever it was they did to fill the hours hidden away… the ringing in her ears amped up sharply and her eye pulsed.

Forcing herself to breathe, she pulled her thoughts back to the present. The tree decorating their
living room, the smell of the food cooking, and the hum of their voices as they chatted all grounded her in the here and the now. The ringing slowed until it drifted away and the lance of pain through her eye abated though it was becoming a little too familiar.

Standing, she touched a finger to her nose and then checked her appearance in the mirror. No blood.

That was better.

Better than the last few times that hit.

“Coffee’s ready, Natasha,” Peter called and she found a smile before shutting off the light in the bathroom and heading out to join them.

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An hour later, she stood in the gym stretching to warm her muscles again. Breakfast had been a boisterous affair. Peter wanted to introduce James to more video games and he’d rattled off several. The single person shooters, however, she advised him to stay away from—if he wanted any hope of winning. They were different than live fire, but James seemed intrigued so that had gone on the list along with weapons safety for Peter.

When Steve made it back from his run, he came over and dropped a frosty kiss on her and then shook some icy cold drops of water from his hair that made her laugh. It was snowing again, not bad and he didn’t think this one would linger, but it was out there.

They’d all looked out the windows at the snowy-wintry and slushy mix and Natasha was suddenly glad for tasks that would keep her indoors. Too bad she couldn’t take the research up to the penthouse and steal Tony’s fireplace. After Steve showered, he’d joined them to eat and she got to spend fifteen minutes just soaking up the boys talking—Steve wanted Peter to spar again if he was up for it and offered her one as well, which sadly, she had to take a raincheck on.

It was far too easy to just settle into a groove with them and stay, but the sooner she got the research done, the better. In the past, she would have been hip deep within an hour after talking to Pepper, but she had far too many other pulls for her attention.

Warmed up, she tilted her head to look at the ceiling when they hit the fifteen-minute mark. “Friday?”

“Boss is in the elevator, Ms. Romanoff.” The response helped, but it didn’t mollify her irritation. She could have still been sitting at breakfast instead of just stretching her already warmed up muscles while she idled in wait for him. “He’s also on the line with the French delegate.”

Fine.

That held a little more weight.

She had retrieved towels and water bottles so they could warm to room temperature. Tony strolled into the room in sweats, a dark tank top and an unzipped hoodie with a cup of coffee in one hand and his phone in the other as he said, “Adrien, I can call you Adrien, right? Good. Here’s the thing, you and I have a sit down with Natasha Romanoff first thing tomorrow morning—yes it was
scheduled for 11 a.m. that’s first thing in the morning for me.” The careless attitude underscoring his words coupled with his smirk almost made her laugh.

It would be foolish for anyone to take Tony at face value and yet so many people made that mistake.

Even his friends.

“Well, we can’t meet with you at 11 a.m. if you’re in Geneva.” He paused and went to take a sip of his coffee as he listened. Natasha closed the distance and took the coffee out of his hand and replaced it with water. Not even the rich smell of the coffee could compete with the liniment Tony had used, and considering he wasn’t limping, she’d call that a win.

He scowled at her and she walked over to the trashcan and dropped the cup and the coffee into the receptacle.

“No, I’m not bringing her to Geneva.” Tony stared at her like he was debating throwing the water bottle at her head. “Adrien, do you want to meet with Ms. Romanoff or not?”

Water bottle fisted in one hand he bowed his head as he listened.

“In that case… hold on a moment.” He pulled the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker then beckoned to her with two fingers. “Adrien, Ms. Romanoff is on with us.”

“Mademoiselle Romanova—or do you prefer Romanoff?”

“L’un ou l’autre est bien avec moi, Monsieur Devereux.” It really didn’t matter what he called her. Providing some control to men in power, particularly over issues that mattered little to her allowed them to develop a false sense of superiority. It also tended to make them chattier.

“Vous parlez très bien le français.” Amusement filtered through his voice.

“Comme vous,” she said with a faint smirk and Tony snorted. Complimenting Frenchman on speaking French was the kind of backhanded insult some men enjoyed.

“On peut se tutoyer?” And apparently, Monsieur Devereux was one of them. “Et puis-je vous appeler, Natasha?”

“Nous n'avons pas encore dansé Monsieur, et quand vous aurez le privilège de mon nom, je vous le dirai.” Challenge offered.

The French delegate chuckled. “Touché, Mademoiselle. Touché.” Challenge accepted. “Tony,” Monsieur Devereux said a smile in his voice. “I must meet this beautiful woman for myself. Come to the French embassy at eleven tomorrow morning with the lovely Mademoiselle Romanova, and we shall have wine and we shall talk.”

“The lovely mademoiselle would prefer coffee,” Natasha corrected him. Dangle the carrot, then pull out the stick.

“Anything for you, I am very much looking forward to our meeting.”

“À bientôt.”

“À demain Mademoiselle Romanova.”

“I guess we’ll see you in the morning, Adrien,” Tony said drily.
“Yes, Tony—until then my friend.”

Tony ended the call and eyed her. “So, Red… about the coffee.”

“You’re late, and you need to start stretching.” She plucked the phone from his hand. “Friday, hold all of Mr. Stark’s calls.”

“Mr. Stark? Really, Ms. Rushman. Are we back to that?”

“We are when we’re running late and it’s almost 7:30.” She set the phone down next to the water and towels, then moved to the mats. Her shoes were already off. Tony toed his off one at a time.

“That was my first cup of coffee you know, French roast, perfect blend. Appropriate.”

She glanced at him. “I’m sure you have more upstairs, but you need to hydrate, and then you need to stretch. We’re starting with closed holds and we’re moving to breaking, grappling, injuring, and fleeing.”

He made a low, almost resigned sound in his throat as he followed her to the mat. “Was it the attempted bump and grind or the offer of the goodnight kiss?”

“For what?”

“For the amount of punishment I’m about to receive.”

Natasha smiled. “This isn’t punishment, Mr. Stark. Step into the lunge, slow and hold.”

“No?”

Circling him, she said, “No… this is fun.”

“Not sure I’d call this fun,” he groaned as he stretched his other leg.

“Didn’t say the fun was for you.” She arched her brows and he met her gaze as he switched the leg he was lunging on.

“What did you say to Adrien…when he asked about your name?”

“Is your French rusty?”

“A bit. I was better at it when I was drunk.” He shrugged.

“He wanted to make things more informal, it’s usually the prelude to more amorous overtures.”

He frowned and it was her turn to shrug.

“Men in power are very much alike, Tony. I told him we had yet to dance, and I would tell him when he earned the privilege of my name.”

“Nice, Red… you baited the hook.”

“It’s why you wanted me, isn’t it?” She rolled her head from side to side, and ignored his second frown. “Finish the lunging. We need to make sure you’re loose all over.”

“Never going to happen. I’m surprised I could walk today. I reek, but I can move.” Grudging admiration offered.
“See what happens when you listen to me?” Grudging admiration accepted.

After he warmed up, she spent the next hour doing rolls, guards, locks, and breaking out of them. As with Wanda, she switched it up for chokeholds. He was not a fan, especially when she made him practice it on her.

Less a fan when she taught him how to get out of one. The fact he didn’t want to cause her pain was sweet, but he had to learn the pressure points.

“It doesn’t work if you just pretend to hit the right points on my elbows. Depending on who you’re fighting,” she said while he drank water. “You have to jab it in hard to pinch the nerves and force them to let you go. It’s excruciating, but effective.”

“You do hear yourself right now?” Tony said, his breathing was coming under control a little faster than the day before. Still not great, but a definite show of improvement. “Right? You want me to do something that will hurt you so I can practice it?”

“I would never tell you to do anything if it wasn’t necessary.” She extended her hand. “Give me your hand.”

He eyed her a moment, then placed his right hand in hers.

Trust was the gift he kept giving her. Now, he needed to accept hers.

“If you never practice the amount of force needed, you won’t know it for when the time comes that you might need it…”

Impatience flickered in his eyes. “Red… when the hell am I ever going to need it?”

“Better to know it, and never need it—than need it and have no idea how to do it. Or worse, only know enough to fail.” She traced her finger over the soft skin between the thumb and forefinger, then turned his hand over palm up and began applying pressure beginning at the heel of his thumb, and working her way up in increments, increasing the pressure with each contact.

Tony’s breathing deepened, the faint wheeze in his inhales disappearing. “What are you doing?”

“This is the lung meridian… with the application of correct pressure, you can relieve symptoms of congestion and distress to the lungs. You’re still rebuilding your lung capacity. That coupled with the damage your heart has sustained over the years puts you at risk for hyperventilating or worse, a heart attack.”

His entire expression froze.

“And yes, Tony. I’ve known for years. The toxins the palladium pumped into your system compromised the muscle. Treatment and surgery—including what you had Helen do when she removed the ARC reactor has gone a long way toward making you healthier. But your lung function still needs work, as well as increasing strength to your cardiac muscles, lungs, and chest wall.”

Throat convulsing in a hard swallow, he dropped her hand and took a step back. She clasped her hands behind her back, relaxing her posture in order to minimize whatever threat he might perceive from her.

His gaze held hers for a fraction, then he looked down. The pithy comments and frequent one-liners absent in the long pause between her revelation and his processing of it.
“Your toes are bruised,” were not the words she expected to hear. “What did you do? Kick one of the boy toys?”

“Dancing.”

He continued to stare at her toes. “They fixed up your studio.”

“Steve told me you had most of my floor repaired, but they hadn’t gotten to the studio so he finished it with the materials you got for it.”

Looking up, he studied her. “Is it helping?”

“Still clears my mind. Helps when I have too much to think about.” She’d told him that once, late one night while they’d been determined to put a dent in his liquor cabinet. It had been after a particularly bad mission where everything that could have gone wrong did. They’d lost hostages and members of the STRIKE team. Steve had even taken a bullet.

It had been a bad mission. She couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t get out of her own head, so she’d been drinking. For some reason, she said she might go break into a dance studio down on 5th and when Tony had looked at her oddly, she said dancing cleared her mind.

When she came back from her next mission, he’d converted the floor she shared with Clint and added the studio.

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “I’m glad.”

Still, she didn’t move as he worked his way through her words.

“Does it always bruise your feet like that?”

She shrugged. “Pointe shoes are tough. I’ve danced until they bled before. It’s all a matter of degrees.”

“But you don’t do it anymore.”

“Sometimes.” That got his attention. “If I step out of my head for too long, I can make them bleed. It’s an endurance and stamina exercise for the body, but the mind controls it. So if I can compartmentalize, my body will perform.”

“I hate the Red Room.” The vehemence in those words wrapped around her like a hug.

“I know.”

Finally, he dragged his gaze up to meet her eyes. “Is my heart why we’re doing all of this?”

“No. It’s a perk for you. The work will strengthen the muscles, it will increase lung function, increase your range of motion and improve your flexibility. Maybe—maybe it will give you a new party trick.” Maybe it would save his life. “I didn’t tell you to hold it over you, but to demonstrate that if you’re ever in the position of a chokehold, and you can’t get out of it…”

“It’ll kill me.” Inhibiting the blood flow and driving his blood pressure up while straining his lungs could very easily trigger a heart attack. Blowing out a breath, he clapped his hands once. “All right. You drive a hell of a bargain, Red. Show me again… I’ll do it.”

Relief swam through her and she moved toward him then pivoted to face away. “Put me in a
chokehold.” He wrapped an arm around her throat, and braced his other arm behind her head, locking her into position.

“I always imagined far kinkier scenarios for this position,” he said idly. “So, if you happen to notice any other particular piece of enthusiasm from me, we’ll blame my very vivid imagination.”

The corner of her mouth kicked up. “Understood. Now… this is what you need to do.”

An hour later, they called a halt to their workout. It had gone well past when they should have stopped, but he wasn’t panting or straining, he’d been practicing jabbing his fingers and digging in against the nerves.

The violent pins and agonizing needles racing from her fingertips to her shoulders proved he had it down.

“You okay?” Tony winced as she moved slowly stretching her arms and forcing them to push past the pain.

“Nope,” she told him, grinning despite the way it hurt. “But that’s good. Cause you did it.”

“Dammit, Red…”

She laughed. While she appreciated the concern, he’d done exactly what she wanted him to do. And he’d done it well. “Consider us even for the coffee.”

It only took him a beat. A smirk spread across his face. “You have a point.”

“You know, I’ve heard that before.” Still, she flexed her hands and kept up the motion to prevent cramps from seizing his muscles. It would pass soon, but it was a successful way to impair an assailant. “And you can see, this is really effective for getting away and your assailant is going to have a hard time re-engaging immediately.”

“Considering I had to damn near break my hands to do it, I should hope so.” The last came out more a grimace than a point of pride.

“You did it. That’s all that matters and a broken hand you can survive.”

He brought her a bottle of water and even opened it. “You’re getting soft on me, Red.”

“Don’t worry,” she teased. “There’s always tomorrow and we don’t have to be at the embassy until eleven.”

Looping a towel around his neck, he stared at her. “You were serious about the everyday thing, weren’t you?”

“As a heart attack.” She grinned before retrieving her shoes. She had feeling back in three fingers on her right hand and most of her left.

“You wound me.”

Chuckling, she followed him toward the elevator. “That’s next week. This week we’re just hobbling and bruising.”

“I knew it,” he pointed a finger at her as she stepped into the elevator. “You and all your secret spy whammy…”
“Hmm-hmm.” She leaned against the wall before tipping the water up to drink.

“Your arms are really going to be all right?”

“I heal, Tony. Even if I didn’t, it’s not permanently crippling.”

“Okay.” But he didn’t sound wholly convinced.

“You worry too much,” she murmured, bumping his arm as she headed for the doors opening. “Do those stretches tonight before you go to sleep and warm up before you hit the gym in the morning.”

“I’m sure I’ll do all of those things,” he said with absolute insincerity. “But I will bring you coffee, so you don’t hurt mine.” Then the doors closed on that last word and she laughed.

The floor was curiously silent. Well, maybe not so curiously. A note sat propped on the tree, dead center impossible to miss.

Angel,

We’re heading out to the Compound early, something about clearing Peter on weapons. There were more reports I wanted to go over. No, I’m not ill. I can occasionally want to go over reports. Good luck on your research today. You have until 8 p.m. then Bucky and I are coming to get you.

Thank you for last night and every other night.

Steve

Pressing the note to her chest, she smiled and then headed for her room. After storing it in the drawer with the others, she took fifteen minutes for another quick shower and then changed into another pair of cargo yoga pants along with another funny t-shirt that read I’M A VIRGIN (but this is an old shirt). Dog tags around her neck, bracelet still secure on her wrist, she stuffed her feet into socks before shrugging on the dark gray hoodie that had reappeared in her closet.

Twenty minutes later, she had a steaming cup of tea in hand, a faux fireplace playing on the television, the windows cleared enough for her to see the snowfall and she settled on the sofa.

Time to find the problem.

She had… she checked the time on the clock, a little under eleven hours.

“Okay, Friday… Let’s go to work.”
Of forty-seven credible, eighty-four potential yet insubstantial, and one hundred and forty-seven not credible she had whittled it down to a dozen. Twelve threats received since Leipzig. Zemo kicked over a lot of anthills and some of those anthills had vipers in them.

She looked at the threats arrayed in front of her. The language, the specificity of the targeting, and the almost conversational tone invited Tony to play a game with the source. Every game had rules and a goal.

Killing Tony wasn’t the primary goal though. Not based on these threats. They—were too intimate. Too personal. Too calculating.

Leaning back on her sofa, she stroked her finger against the empty teacup and stared at the names arrayed in front of her. They fit the profile exactly.

Fuck.

Calculating.

Another damn smoke screen.

Rising, she blew out a breath. “Friday, move these back into a secured filed, my password and voiceprint only.”

“Should we turn these suspects over to the FBI, Ms. Romanoff?”

“We could, but we’d be wasting man-hours and money. They’re credible threats because every single one of them has an axe to grind with Tony over something. The language, the form of the threats, and they’re very specific.”

“Agreed. Based on the psychological profile you have been applying to the various threats, these twelve are the most likely to—mean it.”

“Yes—too perfectly.”

There was a pause. “I’m afraid I’m not following the logic. If they are perfect and fit the parameters, then we have identified the threat.”

“In a manner of speaking, we have… but it’s not them. Oh, do I think Senator Stern’s family has reason to hate Tony? Sure, he humiliated him on live television in front of Congress and worse the media. And he bankrupted the guy who sank too much money in Hammer Industries, and after he was outed as Hydra, his family lost everything.” She walked into the kitchen and turned on the kettle. “Stern is in prison, and probably will be for the rest of his life. His wife is a recluse, and his kids are all keeping a low profile.”

While a low profile didn’t eliminate them as potential threats, this was all a little too on the nose for a family that had taken a very public flogging in the media and amongst their peers. Then again, they could be Hydra.

She’d keep an eye on them regardless.

“But the threat is specifically from Senator Stern’s brother, a suspected member of Hydra, an investor in Hammer Industries—he sat on the board and held that position long after Justin Hammer went to prison. He has begun to amass wealth again, he could be cultivating contacts and
is perfectly positioned to put out a contract on the Boss.” Friday was learning.

“Exactly, so why send a threat? If you’re going to hire someone to do your dirty work, you don’t play with your food. You just kill them.”

She pulled out the leftover remains of the sushi Tony had sent up to her for lunch without a word, just the food arriving with Friday announcing it had been set in the elevator. Eating the last couple of rolls, she turned the information over in her head again. There was always another angle.

The kettle boiled before Friday responded again. “In applying that logic to the other eleven names, I am beginning to see the same pattern. Like the collection of threats security identified as coming from the same source, you believe these are another distraction? To force us to look at them instead of where the real threat is coming from?” Excellent questions.

Pouring the water over the tea, she said, “Yes I do. It’s a masterful stroke. The person we’re looking for isn’t going to be named in this information. It’s all…”

“…a diversion.” Friday sounded disturbed. “If we do not have the source, how do we locate them?”

“We go hunting.” She went to the closet in her room, removed a secondary panel, and pulled out the bag of burner phones she kept. Checking the charge on one, she set the others back before she dialed Isaiah’s number.

“I finally have an evening to myself, and you call. Typical.”

“Good evening to you. Miss me?”

“Like a hangnail. Are you finally ready to talk finances?”

“Not tonight. Soon, I promise. I need to arrange a face to face anyway, you need to meet James and Steve.”

“I can barely contain my excitement. If you didn’t call to take care of the business that’s literally been languishing for months, what can I do for my favorite client?”

“Sometimes you almost say it like you mean it.”

“Sometimes I do mean it.”

She grinned. “I need an ear to the ground… I’m looking for word or whispers of an open or sealed bid contract.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Yes. For Tony Stark.”

Dead silence.

Then. “Did the billionaire finally piss you off or something Natasha? Don’t you live with the guy?”

“Isaiah.”

“Yeah, I know. Mind my own business. Open or sealed bid. If I find it do I take it?”
“Yes.”

“You know people know you’re living at the Tower, that you’re back with Stark. You really think someone is going to give you the option of that contract?”

“I’m the Black Widow.”

That still had cachet, even if she was about to change the rules.

“Either way, I need to know what’s out there and if there’s an open bid—I’m going to have to pull some weeds.”

“I almost like it when you get bluntly cryptic. I’ll put some feelers out. Might take a couple of days.”

“You can handle it.”

“When should I plan on meeting Steve and James?”

“Soon, I have a few items on my to do list this week.”

“When don’t you?”

“True… Isaiah…”

“You do not get to institute the final notice protocol again, not so soon to the last one. I know that tone.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” She chuckled. Sometimes he fussed. “I’m going to be back in the news soon, higher profile…”

“Higher than the World’s Most Wanted?”

“Probably. I’m going to be helping to renegotiate the Accords—publicly and taking meetings with the various delegates. Also publicly.” She could tell Isaiah, he kept all her secrets.

And her sins.

“I really was looking forward to a quiet night.” There was the sound of a bottle cap being screwed shut.

“You always wanted to invest my money, you may need to start looking into some high yield accounts.”

“God and angels above, the world is ending. You actually want me to do more with your money than flip it around like pancakes?”

“Yes, feel like setting me up a few revenue streams?”

“I’m going to kiss you on your mouth when I see you and you’re going to let me.”

She laughed. “The bids first. The money second.”

“Yeah yeah, business before pleasure. Go away. You ruined my night and now I have to work.”

“Bye, Isaiah.”
“Yep. It was good to talk to you. Finally.” Then a click.

She put a spoonful of jam into the tea and stirred it.

“Will that help, Ms. Romanoff?” Friday asked, her voice quiet and reserved.

“We’ll find out.”

“Is there something I should continue doing to assist our hunt?” The language created alliance, and Natasha nodded. Each time Friday made those small intuitive steps, they were getting a little closer.

“Keep monitoring, apply our methodology to any new threats security flags. We’ll figure it out and we’ll keep him safe.” Moving back to her sofa, she looked at the holo screen. “Pack this up for now. I’ll let it percolate for a while. Let’s bring up the files on Adrien Devereux. I need to study.” While the AI didn’t respond, she did bring up the fireplace on the television again.

She was still combing through his history when Friday announced Steve and James had returned. Rubbing her burning eyes, she wiped away the files and shutdown the holoscreen. Then she packed her laptop and Starkpad away in her bedroom before rinsing out her teacup and leaving it the kitchen. It was time to pack it in for the night. Tomorrow would be a whole different battle.

When the doors opened to her floor, James and Steve stared at her a beat. Then James focused on her shirt.

Laughter burst out of James and Steve groaned.

Grinning, she stepped on the elevator. “Hey boys… did you miss me?”
Trust

Chapter Summary

Sharon briefs Tony and Steve regarding the Committee prior to Tony and Natasha leaving to meet with the French delegate

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Trust

Tony

Every muscle in his body was on fire, but the pulsating jets of the shower began to beat them into submission. He lingered long enough to shave. The haircut he should have gotten before Thanksgiving would have to wait another day. Appearance was everything, but the faint length would lend something to his cavalier attitude and the fact he was too busy working to worry about something trivial as hair.

Three days in a row of Natasha’s tender mercies. Getting to put their hands all over each other was supposed to be a perk. A laugh slipped out of him. Well, he was definitely more flexible, at least on the mats even if he could barely walk afterward without the liniment.

“Baby Girl, did you find me the scentless variety?” He toweled off while he could still move.

“Yes, Boss. It was delivered yesterday. I took care to order a large stock, and I’ve added it to all the houses you might be inviting Ms. Romanoff to.”

He paused for a beat. “That’s… initiative.” Friday had been getting more and more of that over the last few months. As much as he would like to linger in the shower, the tailor was due at ten for Steve and Bucky, while he and Natasha were due at the French Embassy at eleven. “Has Jacques confirmed his arrival at ten?”

He styled his hair with just enough product to hold it as it dried.

“Yes, Boss. And the labs on forty-three have been prepared for him. I also updated his calendar for a fitting for Mr. Parker after school.” Like his suits, theirs would all be made on property using trademarked and highly protected engineering. Jacques had been making suits for the family for forty years. His son was training to take over from him someday, but even he didn’t have clearance yet.

The scentless liniment still had a vague medicinal scent but it dissipated as he spread it everywhere. He was liberal with his arms, legs, shoulders and neck. It cooled rapidly and the coolness put out the burning fire of overworking them. Not bad. Not bad at all. He added a light touch of after-shave and he couldn’t smell the liniment at all.
Perfect.

In his closet, he pulled on a pair of compression boxers—a good plan if he ended up in the suit and he always assumed he would—before tugging on a pair crisp black pressed pants. A plain white shirt, a striped vest and the suit coat would complete the look. The lightweight bullet-resistant fabric just added another layer to his professional appearance.

“Ms. Carter has also asked for a meeting with you and Captain Rogers first thing this morning.”

“First thing?” He checked the time. It was 8:45.

“Yes, she’s here and waiting on the Common Room level. I’ve restricted her access to all other floors, but her credentials as liaison for the Committee have cleared.”

“That’s fine, Baby Girl. Have you told Steve?” Steve wasn’t going to be thrilled if he had to leave Red right after she got back from the training session. So far, she had made sure they worked out in private since beginning this new training regimen. The recordings were also locked to his voiceprint and hers, only. Friday had taken the “initiative” to store them on his private server.

Red’s access gave her certain privileges, but he hadn’t informed her of this one. If she’d figured it out on her own, he wouldn’t be surprised and he didn’t mind.

“Captain Rogers said he would be available at 9, but understood he would have to leave the meeting at 10 unless it was critical.”

“That’s fine, let Jacques know they may be a little late. Not sure if Bucky will be comfortable letting a stranger that close to him without someone watching his back.” And Red would be leaving with him around the same time. They had to take the car to the embassy, well the Consulate really, and it was off 5th. The distance, coupled with the fact they had to make some noise when they got there, meant everything had to be timed appropriately.

“I’ll take care of it, Boss. You should know, Ms. Romanoff is in the news…”

Tony paused buttoning up his pressed shirt to pivot. “Show me.”

A holo screen opened to a morning news program—filming live just down the street. “Good morning, Tim and Jane, I’m standing outside of Avengers Tower, as you can see behind me. A crowd has gathered because we have confirmation that Natasha Romanoff, also known by the codename Black Widow, has indeed made a very quiet return to the United States following the charges against her being dropped not only by our government, but it would seem many governments. This news broke just a few weeks ago, but since that announcement there have been no reports of the Black Widow surfacing until this weekend when postings on social media began appearing about Captain America, Steve Rogers, being out and about in Hell’s Kitchen while reportedly Christmas tree shopping.”

An image popped up on the screen of two girls in a photo with Steve that was clearly a selfie and a posting that read Can’t believe who we met tonight at the Christmas tree lot! Best night ever. Touched my phone. #sohot #avengers #CaptainAmerica #Cap”

Shirt buttoned and tucked in, Tony smirked as he secured the ARC reactor over the shirt, then smoothed down his tie before sliding on the vest.

“Now as this photo started trending along with the name of the pop up tree lot where he was spotted, more fans turned out in Hell’s Kitchen.”
More photos popped up and apparently, #ChristmasCaptain had trended over the weekend as fans tried to catch him at a tree lot.

“Then this photo appeared.”

It was Steve, Natasha—though it was only her profile and hidden half in shadow—, and Bucky looked at a tree. The angle on the image was almost perfect, they formed a near triangle around it, Steve kneeling to test the trunk, Natasha running her fingers over the needles, and Bucky tilting his head as though assessing it... no, he was looking toward whomever took the picture. Had he heard something?

“While that hashtag trended sending more fans in search of Captain America, one eagle-eyed fan spotted this.” The image reappeared and there was a circle drawn around Natasha. “The profile, this commenter speculated, matched the one of Natasha Romanoff, taken several months ago in the aftermath of the bombing in Geneva where the Accords were due to be signed.”

The image on the screen showed Natasha, dressed in a professional black skirt and suit jacket, moving away from the bombed site. It was a rare candid image of her, her suit was dusty, and torn around the cuffs. Soot marred her face and her eyes were—her eyes were deeply troubled as she scanned her surroundings. The light caught flecks of glass in her hair. Were her ears still ringing? Her body aching from the concussive force? Was she trying to regather herself?

Tony’s jaw flexed as he shrugged on his suit coat then added the specialized cufflinks.

“As you can see, comparisons found many points of similarity.” The image resolved to the reporter on the street again. Despite the cold she stood in, she seemed in warm spirits. “While many expressed disappointment at not being able to find the captain or Ms. Romanoff to obtain confirmation, it’s well known that Captain Rogers and Ms. Romanoff led the Avengers in the aftermath of Sokovia, and have worked together since the Battle of New York. It makes sense that in light of the charges being dropped she would return to New York and to Tony Stark’s Avengers Tower. Tony Stark, as you may remember, has been a vocal supporter for Ms. Romanoff and helped negotiate the deal to bring all the Avengers home, save for her.”

Yes. He remembered.

“Yet following a rather brutal incident with former Secretary Ross, we have had no visual or public confirmation of Ms. Romanoff’s health or even survival.” Then the reporter smiled. “Until a few hours ago when this image appeared on Twitter and Instagram under the hashtag #thewidowlives and #myhero.” The image flashed on the screen of a young Asian waitress standing next to Natasha the two women smiling. “Posted by the handle @phdforbeer, also identified as Mindy Wang. Miss Wang is a student at NYU studying criminology and law enforcement, she also works at a bar in Hell’s Kitchen where she had the honor of meeting Natasha Romanoff the same evening Captain Rogers was photographed tree shopping with a woman who looked like Natasha Romanoff and a man later identified as Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, the recently pardoned and recommissioned prisoner of war and former Howling Commando who grew up with Captain Rogers. As you can imagine, Ms. Wang’s photo created quite a stir and crowds have been steadily gathering this morning outside of Avengers Tower, all hoping to catch sight of the Black Widow. We’ll be following this breaking story closely, but one thing is certain…” The image of Natasha with the waitress Mindy Wang appeared. “Natasha Romanoff is alive and well—and back in New York where many of us believe she belongs.”

Tony smiled. “Baby Girl…”

“Yes, Boss?”
“Track down Mindy Wang, make sure she gets a membership in The Black Widow League, a t-shirt, and find out if she has any student loans, and pay them off. Then make sure she has a scholarship to cover anything more she wants to study.”

“On it Boss, Ms. Potts has asked that I make sure to inform her when you make significant gestures of a large financial nature.”

“Go ahead, Baby Girl, and be sure to tell her why we’re doing it.” Mindy Wang just gave him a hell of a gift. A splashy and warm reintroduction of Natasha Romanoff to the public eye and all of it innocently and honestly handled.

And damn, Red actually posed for the photo.
She really was in to make it work. She’d have never agreed to it otherwise.

After checking his gauntlet watch, and making sure the new Arc reactor was secure beneath his vest, he headed for the elevator. Time to go find out what Sharon wanted. “Let Happy know we’ll be leaving via the front, Baby Girl.”

“That puts you in front of a lot of cameras, Boss. Security won’t like it.”

“I’ll be safe, don’t worry.” Let them get their photos of her as they headed out to the limo. No comments, just pictures. The press would follow and by the lunchtime, everyone would know they were meeting with the French.

Just perfect.

Phone in hand, he sent a message over to production. The line of shirts and other merchandise needed to start hitting the stores this week. With the organic surge of welcome on social media, now was the time to give people a little something extra.

His email showed two offers from the four PR firms Friday contacted the previous week. Both time-stamped in the last fifteen minutes. “Feeling cocksure are you, gentlemen?” Flagging them to read later, he closed the app as the elevator stopped on Steve’s floor. He was waiting for him, Natasha stood in their kitchen sipping coffee or maybe tea from a mug. Dressed in a smart, deep red suit that would definitely catch the eye, she looked stunning. Her legs were on gorgeous display in a pair of four-inch heels, that he would bet doubled as weapons. Distracting and dangerous.

Wolf-whistling, he grinned when she glanced over at him. “Looking good, Red. Turn on the news. You’re trending. See you downstairs at ten straight up. Don’t be late.”

Steve eyed him as he stepped inside and they began the descent to the Common Room. He was dressed in comfortable jeans and a t-shirt. “She’s trending?”

“It’s all good news, Cap.” Tony tapped his biceps with the back of his hand as the elevator opened to where Sharon waited for them. “I’ll fill you in later or she can.”

“The Widow Lives trending on Twitter?” Sharon asked as she stood from the armchair she’d taken in the sitting area. Moving around to pour himself a glass of water, Tony nodded to her.

“Good timing.”

“Morning, Sharon,” Steve greeted. “Hope you had a good holiday with your family.”
“I did,” she said. “Glad I left when I did, we were the last flight out that night. Got back mid-day yesterday, still a little jet-lagged.”

Steve motioned for her to take a seat and Tony held up the water toward Steve to ask if he wanted any. When he shook his head, Tony set it down, then took a sip of the water as he pivoted to face Sharon. Not willing to ruin the lines of the suit before they made the walk to the limo, he studied their new liaison. Dressed in slacks, a blouse, and a vest, she had the look of casual professional. The fact she was also armed, a gun visible in her shoulder holster, and at least a knife or two, maybe even a taser reminded them of her training.

“Hope the holiday was good here, it seemed to be quiet.”

“No missions, at least,” Steve told her. “We all enjoyed it.”

“Not to hurry you along, Sharon,” Tony said rather preferring to skip the small talk. “But let’s leap ahead to why you needed a meeting first thing this morning. I have an appointment to keep.”

Clasping her hands together, she said, “In the interest of full transparency, I need to inform you of some key facts you need to be aware of.” The choice of language sent a warning up his spine. “The Committee is uncertain about Natasha, which—as I told her last Wednesday—may be the king of understatements.”

Steve’s frown tightened, but Tony kept his expression as even as possible. It sounded like bad news, didn’t mean it was. Then again, if she approached them like it was a problem and talked about in a tone that suggested a problem, she was likely bringing them a problem.

“They are making nice right now,” Sharon continued, her gaze flicking to meet his. “Largely to placate you, Tony.”

He was already aware of that fact and was fully willing to use it to the full extent necessary.

“To that end, they have dropped the pursuit of any charges with relation to the Accords. Through—negotiation and discussion—member nations have taken a step back, including the U.S., with regards to pursuing charges against her, most notably treason, espionage, and terrorism.”

So far she hadn’t told him anything he didn’t know. Steve’s resolute expression, however, wasn’t promising. At least not for the Committee, though Tony would wager Sharon’s reception just went to fifty-fifty odds against.

“France and Wakanda are both huge proponents in her favor. Russia is distinctly opposed, though they are being—extremely careful in their language. For the moment, they have withdrawn their request for her immediate extradition and repatriation to Russia.”

Over his dead body would she go back there.

“In light of all of these key facts and the current status of flux we find ourselves in where the Accords are concerned, I have been asked to inform you that Natasha Romanoff’s reinstatement to the Avengers should be considered strictly probationary until the new Accords are agreed upon, ratified, and every single Avenger has signed.” Sharon looked at Steve and Tony lifted his chin.

There it was. Withdrawing the charges was the carrot, demanding their explicit compliance with whatever they worked out was the stick.

A muscle ticked in Steve’s jaw, but his expression didn’t alter as he returned Sharon’s stare. “Is that all?”
Ten points to Captain America, he didn’t even blink.

“Like I said,” Sharon continued as if she weren’t staring down a very pissed off super soldier. “I was asked to inform you. It is a gray area, Steve and it’s important you understand what they are asking…”

“I’m pretty clear on the fact they want to leverage Natasha’s freedom and her use of her abilities to risk her life to save people in order to exert their influence over the whole team and demand their compliance. Or did I misunderstand?”

“Nope,” Tony said slowly, and Sharon glanced at him. The faint jerk suggested she’d forgotten him for a moment. “Sounded pretty clear to me, too.”

“Agreed.” The admission caught Steve off-guard. What was she up to? “Again, this is very much a gray area. As a probationary member, she wouldn’t have the authority to lead the team in Steve’s absence or act as his second…”

Too fucking bad.

She held up her hand when Steve opened his mouth to say something. “Look, Steve, I’m not thrilled about this.” Glancing at Tony, she continued, “I’m not thrilled they want to use their influence in this manner, however, I get why they are. They’re terrified of pissing Tony off.”

Good.

“But they—there are a lot of questions about Natasha, and what went down on so many different things. Compartmentalization of reports and intelligence means they probably have access to less than a third of what’s out there in the world.”

A questionable third at that. Tony had swept her file off the Internet.

“They certainly had enough to smear her name…”

“To be fair,” Sharon said. “A lot of that was Ross.”

“Don’t mind us, Carter,” Tony said deliberately leaning on her last name. Their families had been close, that didn’t make them close personally. “A lot of us don’t care. The Committee didn’t say a damn thing and they supported him nearly to the end.”

“Nearly. Some did oppose him.” As far as the accounting went, it was accurate if ineffective. “But you’re right, he was given too much rein and we have a lot of work to undo the mess he left in his wake. The Committee assures me they are aware of this and for the most part I believe them.”

“For the most part?” Steve’s eyes narrowed. “What part don’t you believe?”

“The part where I inform you that I am also to monitor and evaluate her performance over the course of the next three months and provide them with a full evaluation on her fitness to serve in the Avengers.”

“Which is what they will use to decide if she can even stay?” Steve clarified. “Whether we’ve all signed the Accords or not.”

“In a nutshell. They didn’t come out and say it like that. Then again, reading between the lines makes it pretty clear they don’t want the headache she could possibly be for them. Her being second in command is definitely a point of contention.”
The asses were probably worried she had blackmail material on every single one of them. That could be useful if she did.

“Too fucking bad,” Tony cut in before Steve said anything else, though he half expected Cap to correct him for language. “The Avengers will never again be held hostage to the Accords least of all Natasha. She is not a pawn on a damn chessboard.”

She was a Queen. The sooner those idiots understood the fact she could move anywhere, do anything, and had more compassion, intelligence, and kindness in her fingernails than anyone on that Committee, the better for all of them.

“Tony—if you fight them on this…”

“Did I stutter?” He raised his eyebrows. “This is fact, not a fight.”

“Steve…” She turned to him as if he would be more reasonable.

“Tony’s right. If they want to use Natasha as leverage, they’ve chosen the exact wrong tactic. Her freedom is something she deserves and has long since earned. The smear campaign, every word of it was carefully calculated to paint a very dark picture of a woman who did not ever deserve to be treated as anything less than the Avenger she is.”

“I know that,” Sharon said slowly. “In as much as the fact that all of you seem to trust her so much—she’s—look, I didn’t know her at SHIELD. I knew of her. Everyone knew who she was. If you were lucky, you were a high enough level you could sort the fact from the fiction, but even the gossip agreed she was a legend before she came to SHIELD and that legend only grew while she was there.”

“Well, lucky you, you’ll get to work with her on a regular basis if you stay on as the Avengers liaison. She’s second in command, that was Cap’s call and he made it.” If the Committee didn’t want to piss Tony off, this was a really bad way to go about it.

“As the official liaison, I have a certain amount of discretion during this delicate phase. The old Accords are not being enforced strictly, however, we are supposed to respect them until when the new Accords are decided upon.”

“Sharon, I appreciate the diplomatic tone you’re taking.” Steve was a hell of a lot nicer about the subject than Tony was feeling. “Are you briefing us or trying to tell me we’re going to have a problem with the Committee over this?”

Tony would have to compliment him later. He didn’t align with or against Sharon. The next move was hers. She seemed a good choice for handling the Committee in the beginning, but their cooperation wasn’t guaranteed. Not yet.

And there were at least two basic premises Tony added to the list of requests he wanted to be altered or added to the Accords.

“I told Natasha and now I’m telling you, I plan to exercise my discretion. I can observe the team, review mission reports, and ask for explanations or clarifications so that when I represent the team to the Committee I have the full picture to effectively do my job. She didn’t feel that my evaluating her would be a problem.”

Of course, she didn’t.

“She’d expect it,” Steve said flatly.
“I agree,” Sharon said, then sighed. “Guys, I’m not the enemy, I literally wanted to meet with you first thing because Natasha is right—I have to be transparent with you if I expect you to trust me at all. I have no interest in fueling any fires against Natasha, that said, I don’t owe her anything either.”

Tony considered her before he drained the rest of his water. Steve glanced at him. Was this going to be a problem for them? The question was clear in Cap’s eyes.

Yes, it would be a problem. The Committee was trying an end-run while in the middle of negotiating their so-called goodwill.

“So to be clear,” Steve returned his attention to Sharon. “You’re only passing along the will of the Committee with regard to Natasha’s status as their liaison to the team?”

“More or less.”

“Would you be willing to pass a message on to the Committee from me?”

“From Steve Rogers or from Captain America?”

Tony smirked.

“Both.” Good boy.

“Okay.”

“Natasha Romanoff is the only person for the job as second in command and as long as I am leader, she will be standing right beside me. If they have a problem with that… they can deal with me.”

“Do you really want to pick this fight with them?”

“Not picking any fights, ma’am. Only finishing them.”

When she looked at Tony, he raised his hands. “He’s team lead, he makes the calls.”

“You would make the same call though, wouldn’t you?”

“Eh, I might promote her to being in charge of all of us. She’s the smart one in the group anyway.” The dry remark pulled a grin from Steve.

“Think she’d take the job?” Steve asked with a flicker of amusement.

“Not a chance in Hell,” Tony said with a chuckle. “Then she’d have to manage all of us.”

“She pretty much does that now,” the comment from Steve pulled a faint frown from Sharon. But she didn’t argue with them.

“Sharon,” Tony formed her name like a question. “What’s your play? You go back to the Committee and tell them we won’t cooperate with their suggestion. What then?”

“I don’t meet with the Committee before Christmas. Not unless there’s an emergency, most of the members are tied up in individual…” She paused, then met his gaze as understanding flickered into her eyes. “They have a lot of meetings scheduled with you.”

“Some of them, definitely. But you’re going to have to tell them something.” He didn’t live in a
pretty world of pretend. The Committee wouldn’t have brought her in to leave her without some kind of oversight. That was what they wanted, control over the Avengers. She was just another cog in that wheel.

“Do you trust Natasha?” The blunt question shouldn’t have surprised him. Peggy could be like that. Slice right through the crap to the base issue. Natasha did the same, though she could be far smoother in how she pulled you right up to wanting to tell her what she wanted to know whether she asked or not. “You’re Tony Stark, notoriously you don’t trust anyone and I know SHIELD embedded her with you like they had me watching Steve. You did not take that well. Her profile of you was less than flattering. She betrayed you at Leipzig. I was standing three feet from Ross when T’Challa reported to both of you what she’d done. Despite all of this, do you trust her?”


Surprise marked her reaction, and when she glanced at Steve, Tony did as well. He wore a faint smile and said, “Yes, I trust her.”

“Then, I tell the Committee that two men I respect and admire trust her. I’ll follow your lead and I have no personal objections to her status as second-in-command.”

“But you’re still going to evaluate her?” Steve’s grim expression suggested Sharon’s “support” didn’t soften the bitterness of the Committee’s presumptuousness for him either.

“She’s going to evaluate all of us,” Tony said, a slow grin forming. Deflecting with humor, just another service he offered. “Remember… textbook narcissism here. I better go first.”

“And on that note…” Sharon sounded slightly exasperated. Slightly. “I have a drive to the Compound to make. Will I see either of you up there today?”

“Unlikely,” Tony said with a shrug and Steve shook his head.

“I’ll be working from here unless we get called to assemble.”

“All right. Then I’ll see you later this week…?”

Steve walked her to the elevator and Tony checked his watch. He had ten minutes until he needed to be in the lobby. After the elevator chimed, Steve paced over to join him at the windows glancing down at the street. The crowd gathering below had gotten thicker.

“What’s going on?”

“Someone posted pictures of you guys looking at a Christmas tree, but they only got her in profile. Then a young woman posted a selfie with her this morning. It’s spreading… They know she’s alive and she’s back.”

“Why doesn’t that make me feel better?” Cap folded his arms.

“Because there was a certain comfort in being the only four who knew absolutely where she was. We lost some of that when the rest of the team found out. But that was the team…”

“They protected her. Protected us.”

“Now the world knows again.” She would be much harder to protect. In fact, they couldn’t lock her behind iron walls. They needed her out front and standing in the light. “Currently, they are thrilled
and eager to see her."

"Do you think that will change?"

"There’s always a backlash, Cap. Always. We just have to be ready for it. I’ve got a lot of plans in motion, layers to keep around her, and a public relations apparatus to keep it that way.” He would go through those reports as soon as they were finished with the French delegate.

"How bad?"

"Probably the sexist bullshit first. Who is she fucking, and for how long. More articles criticizing her clothing or trying to dissect her body language. Next would be the Can She Really Be Trusted think pieces, which will give them the chance to rehash every scandal soaked detail of the smear campaign. Then… then they find a victim. Someone they can dress up, trot out, and say look what she did to this poor person. How can anyone stand with someone like her… that's when the fun really begins.”

"Jesus, Tony,” Steve said staring at him. “Why the hell were you encouraging her if it was going to be like that?” The unspoken why was he also encouraging her echoed within Steve’s question.

"Because we need her, Cap and she needs us. She was right, it’s better we stay together, no matter how we do it. She won’t face the vultures alone. We counter every sexist piece with one about her accomplishments. Like stopping Project Insight and SHIELD. We dump the list. There’s a few million on it that owe her their lives. For the think pieces, we don’t just counter the chunks of scandal, we change the premise. We reframe them because for nearly every action they brought up there’s a counterpoint of how her actions saved someone, helped someone else—at great personal cost to her.”

He’d been thinking about this for a while. It was why he wanted the public relations firm in place. Why the footage and files she’d retrieved from Azzano were secured in a vault. Why he and Friday had mined the web for every single piece of footage of Natasha in that chair… then scrubbed it. He had it all, locked to his voiceprint along with Cho’s medical reports and findings. It was a nuclear option. He had the proof they’d put her through that Hell again… while he’d known her.

But he didn’t want her to relive it much less ever experience it again, so he hoped he never needed to use what he had.

“And the victim?”

“How many people has she saved Steve? How many has she helped? Some will come forward, others may need to be encouraged…”

Facing him, Steve frowned. “But none of them came forward before. Why would they now?”

“It was all allegations. This will be different. Going after someone legally, particularly someone no one can find, it tends to make you keep quiet if you know something good. Because you don’t want law enforcement looking at you.”

“Didn’t really stop you,” Steve pointed out.

“That’s because I’m me.” Sliding his hands into his pockets, he glanced toward the ground where the surge of humanity remained visible even at this distance. “No, they’ll come. Maybe not all at once, but they’ll show up.”

“How do you know? I mean really. Why are you so certain?” The existential struggle was as real for Steve as it was for Tony. They needed her and they wanted to protect her. How did they justify
their choices to put her in the spotlight despite all of that?

Meeting Steve’s gaze, he said, “The Black Widow League for one. Sure a lot of those people are just jumping on the craze but I don’t doubt for an instant that some of them are people she’s saved.”

“For a second?”

“Because we’ll have her back. We’ll be there with her every step of the way, you, me, Bucky. Clint whether he’s mobile or not. The rest of the team will play their parts. She doesn’t have to be alone.” Not again. Hell, even Peter would show up. The kid was crazy about her.

“I hope you’re right,” Steve said slowly. “Because right now I feel like a selfish bastard for putting her in this mix, for wanting her back here.”

Me too. Though he didn’t say those words aloud.

“If she didn’t want to be here, Steve. She wouldn’t be.”

The silence elongated. “You won’t leave her alone in these meetings?”

“Not for a minute.”

“Thank you,” he said slowly, chewing the words as if they were not quite what he wanted to say.

“No thanks necessary, Cap.” He glanced at his watch. “I need to get down there. I don’t want her walking out without me.” The very concept made his blood run cold.

“Which she might,” Steve admitted with a half-exasperated, half-fond shake of his head.

The elevator opened and they stepped inside. “Baby Girl, where is Red?”

“She’s waiting for you in the lobby with Sergeant Barnes, Boss.”

“Take us down there,” Steve said. “I’m hating this idea more every minute…”

“I get it,” Tony told him quietly. “I really do. I’m not letting anything happen to her.”

“I know,” Steve glanced at him. “Friday hold the elevator.”

“Boss?”

“Do it, Baby Girl.”

The elevator stopped and Tony pivoted to face Steve, both of them leaning on opposite sides of the compartment. Tony waited him out. Just two months earlier, he wouldn’t have been able to be in this enclosed space with him. As it was, his pulse jumped but he focused on the breathing. Mirroring Natasha’s count in his head as Steve studied him.

Finally, Steve said, “I want to trust you with her.”

“I won’t let anything happen to her.”

“No, I know you’ll protect her. I have no doubts there. I meant it earlier. I know you care.” He shook his head, then raked a hand through his hair.
Ahh. So they were putting their cards on the table.

“Not denying it.” No reason to. “I made that clear to you when you pulled that crap about the date she and I had planned.”

Steve’s expression tightened.

“She’s my friend, Steve.” He’d repeat it until every one of them got it.

“You want her to be more.”

She already was more, but he’d said he could settle for being a friend and he would. “What I want and what I get… not always the same thing.” The corner of his mouth kicked up. “I’m not trying to take her away from either of you, Cap.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Keeping a promise.”

The silence stretched out between them and Tony didn’t look away. Stare for stare, he held his gaze.

“You love her Cap, I get that.”

“So do you.” Tipping his head back against the wall, Steve blew out a long breath. The sigh carried so much weight.

Finally, Friday intervened, “Boss, Ms. Romanoff said we are not running on Tony-time. Her words explicitly.”

Tony chuckled. Friday could almost mime Natasha’s intonations. “Tell Red to keep her panties on. Her boyfriend and I are having a moment.”

Steve’s frown eased some, and he looked more curious than anything else. “I don’t know if I’m ever going to understand you.”

“You shouldn’t try, Steve. Seriously—I gave up on it a long time ago. It’s a minefield up here.” He tapped his head.

With a half-hearted chuckle, Steve looked up at the ceiling. Tony wanted to tell him something that would make him feel better. The last few days since they’d come back had been good. The snowball fights, the meals, the laughter—but Red… She got him. She didn’t take his crap. Where he doubted her before, he got it now. He couldn’t unsee all the little things she did, for all of them—for him. He wasn’t giving her up. Not for Steve. For Bucky. Or any one else.

Before, Tony had soaked his pain in alcohol, blunting the harsh edges. The world was a lot more painful and clearer when he was sober.

“Okay.” That was it. Nothing else.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Okay?” Define okay.

Steve nodded once. “Okay. She’s your friend. You’re hers.”

“Just like that?”
“I trust Natasha,” he said. “I’m choosing to trust you.” That was the rub. Cap didn’t trust him. Hell, Tony still struggled with trusting Cap. The past didn’t just go away because they poked at it and fought to fake it until they made it.

“Fair deal.” Anything else he added would be patronizing. After that concession, Steve really didn’t deserve patronizing.

“Let’s go, Friday before Natasha scales the shaft to find out what we’re doing.”

“She wouldn’t,” Tony mused. “Not in the suit. It would ruin the lines. She’d hack the system.”

A laugh escaped and Steve shook his head. “You’re right. Speaking of which… erase the video from this?”

“Baby Girl?”

“Already done, Boss. Got the feeling it was a private conversation when Captain Rogers asked me to stop the elevator.”

“See… She’s been spending a lot of time with Red. It shows.”

The elevator opened to the lobby where Natasha stood near the security desk, Bucky leaning against it, his gaze hard on the crowd outside the opaque glass. The tourists and well-wishers—face it protestors were probably out there too—couldn’t see in. Stark security had doubled, and there was a man at every entrance, and a half dozen outside handling crowd control.

“Friday keep the Legion on standby.” The volume of people visible beyond the glass was impressive. Apprehension rippled over him. It had grown far more than it seemed from upstairs.

“You two are really going to walk out through the middle of that?” Bucky asked. Tony could almost feel the other man twitching.

“We’ll be fine, milli moi.” Natasha, in contrast, seemed utterly relaxed.

Steve eyed her warily and Tony had to admit, her confidence was both inspiring and a little terrifying.

“We can bring the limo into the garage and go out that way.” What the hell had he been thinking to want to parade her in front of the public and the media? A few seconds of footage for them to ponder, speculate, and chew over on the news? Was that really worth the chance someone in that crowd, maybe more than one, would try for their fifteen minutes of fame?

“C’mon, where’s your sense of adventure?” She grinned. “This is going to be fun.”

“Doll,” Bucky drawled slowly, putting a hand around her nape before he kissed her lightly. “You and I have very different ideas of fun.”

But her confidence didn’t waver, and she gave his hand a squeeze, then caught Steve’s and lifted her face to meet his for a gentle kiss. Tony glanced away to give them some privacy. She murmured something and Steve answered her, but Tony didn’t catch it.

Then Natasha was next to Tony, and she bumped him lightly with her hip. “You good?”

“Always.” Game face on. “Friday, does Happy have the car?”

“Yes, Boss, he’s on his way around and said to wait for the rest of the guys to get out there.”
The rest of the guys?

Natasha laughed. “Happy really does believe in overkill.”

Aware of the fact Steve and Bucky followed them with their gazes, Tony paused near the main doors a half step in front of her. “Stay right next to me, Red. No side trips, no walking faster. Arm in mine and right next to me.”

“Relax,” she said, the low croon blanketed his anxiety and made him want to do as she asked. But not yet… not until she was safe inside the armored confines of the car.

“Boss, Mr. Hogan says they’re ready for you. Police on the way to help disperse the crowd. The Iron Legion is on standby.”

“It’s going to be fine, Tony. Breathe… we’re about to be front page news.”

“Pfft. Been there. Done that.” His chin came up and he pulled the sunglasses out and slid them on, the screens came up and threat assessments clicked into place as he looked out. He offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

When she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow, he nodded to the security guard who opened the door for them, and then stepped out first before allowing them through. The noise rolled over them like a wave, the crowd surged forward, but security held them. Shouts carried. The sounds of cameras clicked. More, there were dozens upon dozens of cell phones up and likely recording in addition to the cameras from the local and national news outlets.

Tony measured his pace, aware of her heels.

“It’s her!”

“She’s really here!”

“Black Widow welcome back!”

“Where have you been?”

“Are you really cleared?”

“Can you look this way?”

“We love you!”

“Mr. Stark, did you find her before or after the charges were dropped?”

The questions kept coming. Tony lifted a hand and waved, smile firmly in place. Natasha moved with him and when he had to slow because the crowd tried to push over his security, she turned and faced them. The slow, mysterious smile and firm, assessing gaze sent a ripple of quiet through some of the agitation.

Then Happy had the door open to the back of the limo as he motioned them forward. Security was actually on the far side of the limo, too. Blocking any reckless souls from doing something stupid. Expression tense, Happy split his attention between their approach and keeping an eye on the crowd around them.

The questions were still coming, and at the door to the limo, Tony caught her left hand with his and moved her forward so she could climb in first. Happy had her covered on one side and Tony took
“Ms. Romanoff! Are you glad to be back?”

Natasha paused, one hand on the door and she turned making eye contact with someone. Tony was getting too much information to pinpoint her target. The camera—she looked right into the news camera. It was a money shot with her warm eyes and small smile.

“Yes I am. Really glad to be back.” Then she slipped into the car and Happy was shuttling Tony in. Once inside with the door closed, the sound cut in half but didn’t quite fade altogether.

He leaned back in the seat and eyed her. “Still having fun?”

“Always.”

The limo gave a smooth jolt as Happy pulled away from the curb. Security trotted around them like they were the Secret Service, at least until they were clear of the crowd and some fool didn’t try to jump on the hood or get shoved into the path of the vehicle. Tony hadn’t wanted anyone else squiring them around town. Well, they were in it now.

Opening salvos fired. A small screen lit up in the corner of his glasses. A text from Friday.

#IronWidow was trending on Twitter.

Tony chuckled, the ball of tension in his chest releasing all at once. At Natasha’s quizzical look, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, squeezing gently before he pressed a kiss to her forehead. He lingered there for a couple of extra seconds, needing the reminder they were okay. Maybe she did, too. “We’re going to do this, Red. We’re gonna fix it. Might take a while, but we’re going to do it.” Still, he didn’t let go of her. Couldn’t really, not yet. Thankfully, she indulged him. Maybe she needed it, too.

“Tony?”

“Hmm.”

“You need a haircut.” The line startled him and he glared.

“I’m not exactly swimming in time lately.”

“I can cut it if you like.”

A faint smirk crossed his lips. “You with a sharp implement that close to my throat? I don’t know.” The internal shaking calmed, but it didn’t fade completely.

“Don’t get cocky.”

He snorted. “Too late.”

The corners of her lips curved as she glanced out the window at the bustling city. “I know.”

Yes, she did.

The Queen was on the board.
The tension cording through Tony ratcheted down a notch as he kept his arm around her. An embrace could trigger the sympathetic nervous system. His pulse steadied, and the tight lines around his mouth eased a fraction. She kept an eye on him without watching. Instead, she tracked the world passing by outside. The throng outside hadn’t been that large in a long, long time.

Never had they been focused on her.

It was—unsettling.

“Traffic is heavy, Boss,” Happy said via the intercom. “We’ve got some news vans right behind us.”

“That’s fine, Hap.” Tony squeezed her shoulder again, and then twisted in the seat to look behind them. “We want them to follow us all the way to the front door.”

Happy grunted.

Natasha didn’t blame him. Between the throng at the Tower and pulling all the eyes on them to the consulate, Tony was far too exposed. The suit would help—but it wouldn’t stop a headshot.

The only comfort she had was she didn’t think the authors of the current campaign wanted him dead. They wanted to hurt him. She wanted to look closer at the threats to Pepper, his company—maybe even Happy. Peter was listed as an intern, but you’d have to be inside the Tower or Compound to witness how close Tony and Peter were.

James had grown more forbidding as they’d waited in the lobby. He’d gone down with her after they’d watched the news at Tony’s suggestion. The warring concerns of letting her be her versus letting her go out without him fully armed right beside her had kept him on edge. Steve hadn’t been much better when he said, “I know this is important and I know I said it was a good idea, but are you sure you’re okay with this?” He had offered her an out.
“Yes.” She didn’t need it. She’d made her choice. This was important.

He grasped both of her hands then dipped his head for another brush of his lips. “Watch your back while you’re watching Tony’s,” he murmured even lower. “Yeah?”

“Hey,” she reminded him with a wink. “It’s me. Take care of James.” She’d already told James to take care of him. They both gave her the exact same look and she grinned. The tension coiling around the three of them threatened to strangle them. They needed some levity.

Still…

“You know, Red.” Tony said idly, easing his arm from around her finally but claiming her hand instead. The rough tattoo of his pulse was still a little fast, so she turned his hand over and began exerting light to gentle pressure to the trigger points. “You could have given us a head’s up about Sharon.”

The mild chiding note was far better than the tense, strained tone he’d developed between the building and the car.

“She’s doing her job. That and she was up front about it. It won’t be the first time my job performance is assessed by someone working for an organization that wants to see me fail. But I don’t think she has anything personal to grind with me, so I don’t worry about it.” Frankly, she didn’t have time to worry about it. She reserved her judgment where Sharon was concerned. Time would tell if she could trust her.

As she reached the tip of his thumb, she moved back to the heel of his hand. They were waiting for the light to change to get out of the traverse and cross 5th on their way to Madison Avenue.

“I think the probationary status might have warranted a mention.”

With a shrug, she glanced at him. He still had on the sunglasses from earlier though the opaque lenses had gone clearer. The measured reproach in his eyes expressed how little he was amused.

“There are going to be bumps in the road,” she told him. “If you expected smooth sailing, you really need to take a break and reassess. You know as well as I do, it’s about control.”

“Maybe I like it less now that they’ve already begun the power play and you’re square in their sights.”

“Meh, I’m not worried. You should save your energy. Sharon’s initial gambit was to just not say anything except to me. It fostered an alliance between us, goodwill. It was a good play, but not telling you two even if she didn’t intend to follow the Committee’s instructions wasn’t the way to handle it either.”

“Transparency in all things.” Tony mused. His pulse was better and the faint pallor to his skin had been replaced with better color. Turning his hand over, she placed it back on his leg before returning her hands to her lap. “It really doesn’t bother you?”

“No. This isn’t a fight we need to have with them.”

“I’m not fighting, just stating facts. You were slated to be an Avenger from the beginning, long before the rest of us. We’re not reinstating you to anything. You’re still a damn Avenger and not whatever their idea of probationary status is.”

Warmth flooded her. Steve had much the same thing. “Then let’s not worry about it. It’s a game.
That was a very small move. They’ve made it, and I’m presuming you already made the counter move.”

“Steve did,” Tony said. “Not even missing a beat. Told Sharon to inform the Committee you were his second and if they didn’t like it they could deal with him.”

“Then it’s handled. The next move is ours and we’re making it.”

Tony made a pop click sound with his teeth, but he let it go. James had gone with Steve for his morning run and Peter was home with his aunt so she’d called and briefed Pepper after her morning studio time and before she went down to meet Tony for training. He was only ten minutes late, but the smartass actually did bring her coffee—in a thermos for after the workout. Who said you couldn’t teach a genius a few new tricks?

The partition dropped, and Happy glanced back at them. “We’re pulling up out front now, I sent some of our guys over, but the consulate offered to open their garage for us to pull in off the street.”

Natasha glanced at Tony. She told him she’d follow his lead today, he’d wanted to make it a spectacle. “The world is watching,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, I know. What do our guys think?”

“It’s manageable, for the moment, might not be when you come out.” Happy’s tone indicated clearly which option he preferred.

“Pull us up out front.” Tony’s mouth set in a firm line and he eyed her. “Same rules getting out of the car as in it. We’re walking it together. The earlier tension was back in force.”

“You both wait for me to come around,” Happy ordered. “I’ll open the door and only when the guys are in place.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Natasha hid a smile and Happy snorted. “You don’t get to smirk at me, Natalie.”

“Natasha,” Tony corrected him. “We’re over the Natalie Rushman incident.”

“Says you,” Happy argued.

“Yes says me. Her name is Natasha, Hap. Get used to it.”

Happy muttered something. Tony leaned forward. “I’m sorry, what are you mumbling?”

“I said she can fight her own battles, I’ve seen her, remember?”

“True.”

“So, don’t smirk at me, Natasha,” Happy finished and she grinned at him. “We’re not on a smirking basis yet.”

“If you want to go a few rounds in the ring, you just have to ask,” she said, tweaking him. Throwing him that first time had been all instinct, a slip as it were. Still, he’d dropped the booty boot camp comments.

“Uh uh,” Tony tsked. “My Happy, not yours. Go find your own.”
When Happy slid into place in front of the consulate they were all laughing. The crowd wasn’t as thick, and the press didn’t have as much time to get into place, so the walk from the car to the front doors where French security admitted them was without incident. Tony’s earlier tension was back in full force and he covered her hand on his arm when she would have removed it.

“Monsieur Devereux is expecting you…” They were informed and rather than pass through a metal detector, the guard ran a wand over them. Needless to say it lit up on both of them. She tugged Steve’s dog tags out when the wand made a particular complaint over her chest. The guard studied her for a beat then the tags. When he would have touched them, she closed her hand around them.

Tony opened his mouth to protest, she was sure, but she squeezed his arm once. Then stepped away. He accepted her small purse before she extended her arms to the side and met the guard’s eyes. He wasn’t just consulate security. The assessment in his eyes, the controlled expression, and where he holstered his weapon all said DGSI.

“One former agent to another,” she murmured in French.

The guard smiled faintly, then ran the wand over her. It sounded when it was near the dog tags and her bracelet, which she had already tucked back inside her blouse. No, she wouldn’t be taking them off. The metal detector went off for Tony but they weren’t going to challenge him. Which was why he had his toys and she went a little old school, including forgoing her comms.

Power plays.

They really didn't change.

“You are dangerous even without the weapons I know you are carrying,” the former or perhaps current, DGSI said. “I did not approve of this meeting.”

“I didn’t ask for it,” she told him in the exact same tone. “So what are we going to do? Not that I don’t enjoy the flirting.”

A ghost of a smile graced his lips as he lowered the wand. “I’ll be watching you.”

“I’ll be sure to add a little something extra to my step.”

Dropping her arms, she accepted her purse back from Tony, and he just stared at the guard.

Touching a finger to his ear, the guard informed the delegate they were there. The internal security doors opened and he took them deeper into the consulate. She really did enjoy the French. Their path took them past two conference rooms before bringing them into a sitting room with a fire crackling cheerfully. Despite the fact it was most likely a gas fireplace and that the sound was manufactured, she enjoyed moving to stand near it as though chilled. It gave her the opportunity to sweep the room for the best positions for cameras and listening devices. The operative escorting them said nothing, standing in the open doors and waiting with his hands behind his back as though at parade rest.

Fortunately, Devereux did not keep them waiting long. He arrived along with the coffee, patting the agent on his shoulder and dismissing him before crossing the room straight for her. Politic. When his hands settled on her biceps and he leaned in to kiss each of her cheeks, a dozen different ways to break him starting with his hands and ending with his neck danced across her mind.

“Mademoiselle Romanova,” Devereux said, his smile bright, warm and welcoming though it didn’t quite match his eyes. They were a fraction cooler, darker, and far more guarded. The invasion of
her space was a deliberate provocation. “It is a true pleasure to meet you.”

“Monsieur Devereux,” she returned the greeting, but kept her tone cooler as she withdrew from his embrace. “I believe I should thank you for your country’s stand to withdraw the charges against me.”

Might as well address the unpleasantness first.

“It is we who should be thanking you,” he returned, and though they’d been conversing in French, he returned to English as he offered a hand to Tony. “Tony, it is always good to see you.”

“Adrien,” Tony said shaking his hand once.

The staff had set up the tray with coffee and cups with saucers on the small table between the pair of settees.

“Please,” Devereux said, motioning to the settees. “Sit, we shall have coffee and discuss all the things that bring us together.”

They both waited for her to sit first. Natasha crossed one leg over the other. Devereux’ gaze didn’t dip once. So his flirtation had been perfunctory. His history said he served in the military for a few years before achieving this post. With the DGSI outside, she would wager he had also taken an intelligence position. DST perhaps before the merger with the RG created the DGSI. Spies in one form or another populated most consulates and embassies. Measuring his responses, she waited as he poured the coffee and Tony took a seat next to her.

“This—meeting as it were—will be more informal. Let us say a getting to know you Mademoiselle Romanova. It is better to negotiate among friends, don’t you think?”

“Depends on what you want out of the negotiation,” she answered as he passed her the coffee to her. “In some cases, two enemies can come to a mutual accord faster than friends.”

“Because they are not trying to please each other, only get what they want,” Adrien finished. “I have heard this sentiment before. Though I admit, I have never sat down with enemies for any negotiations. Rivals, certainly, foreign governments with their own agendas definitely, but enemies? No.”

“Hard to broker peace if all you talk to are your friends.” She took a sip of the coffee, while Tony set his cup and saucer to the side rather than drink it. It was only coffee, but Natasha left it at a sip to see what if any poison may have been added.

She wasn’t a fool. Assassinations in consulates were easier to cover up, no foreign government wanted to admit it happened and they’d do the clean up for you.

The small talk went on for nearly forty-five minutes, during which Adrien tried to push her buttons and Tony’s with delicate, if precise little jabs. The lack of any reaction to the coffee within the first few minutes, and she went ahead and drank the rest of the cup, particularly when Adrien didn’t object to her refilling his cup as well as her own. Tony finally drained his likely now cold coffee and said, “Adrien, you’re going to have to give a little here. The point of these private meetings is we don’t dance around the ceremony. You wanted to talk to us…”

“I am talking, Tony,” Adrien informed him. “Mademoiselle Romanova—” she had yet to give him permission to use her first name. “—is a charming woman. One should always take the time to appreciate the finer things, in particular a woman before you begin business. This is my first opportunity to get to know Mademoiselle Romanova, we were not so blessed to have the time in
Geneva.”

Nicely played. A reminder that he had also been in the building when Zemo’s bomb went off. “Monsieur Devereux, is it your intention to pursue this—getting to know you period—until we may speak informally?”

“Perhaps,” he said with a playful grin that did not quite reach his eyes. “Or perhaps I really do need to know you, before I can agree to work with you. The rumors, the stories, the legends…they describe an exquisitely beautiful but deadly woman capable of seducing and taking what she wants whether it is information or lives. You have been to France many times, have you not?”

“Not as often as I would like or should, if I want to pay her the attention she deserves.” The man was attempting to get on their nerves. Admittedly, he seemed to have a talent for it. “Perhaps when we have completed all of our talks and come to an accord, I will be able to return.”

“Perhaps… unfortunately, I cannot make any promises. While we are most profoundly grateful for your swift actions in dispatching the group of terrorists, we are well aware that they were only there for you. Our people, though, they see it as an act of heroism and so do many of my colleagues and our president. None of this, however, absolves you of the Committee’s very genuine concerns.”

The suggestion he did not see it the same way lingered between them. This was a very old game. One she was intimately familiar with. Force the mark to be defensive. He was going to have to work a lot harder.

“Then let me try to allay those concerns, Monsieur Devereux. What do you need from me to help you make this happen?”

Tony’s posture stiffened a fraction, but she caught his eye and shook her head. While they may not like the dance, following the steps were often necessary. Devereux wanted to test their resolve, to try and get a read on her. His help may seem fait accompli on the surface, but the hard truth was if they were one of her most ardent supporters as Tony and T’Challa had suggested, they had a long road in front of them.

This was a warm-up.

“I was really hoping you would say that, Mademoiselle.” He had finished his coffee, so she lifted the carafe and refilled his, then Tony’s and finally her own. “If you will indulge me, can you tell me again how you came to work for SHIELD?”

Tony

SHIELD. He wanted to ask her about SHIELD? Adrien had seemed like a decent enough guy, a bit of a kiss ass and far too diplomatic, but his government’s support of Natasha had helped get the charges dropped. His continued support could help them sway the whole of the EU block of votes and gain them some ground in Asia and the Pan-Pacific.

“Well, you’ll understand some pieces are compartmentalized,” Natasha answered the question as smoothly as if they had switched to discussing the weather.
“The whole of SHIELD’s files were released to the Internet, Mademoiselle. How can information be compartmentalized if the files are so readily available?” The man’s rather insincere smiles grated on Tony’s nerves. The normal verve and charm he sported dialed either too high or too low.

Rather than make Natasha uncomfortable, she actually seemed to warm up to the whole thing. Spy whammy. Must have been a while since she really got to play.

“I’m sure you’ve read them, Monsieur. What could you possibly gain by me repeating information you already have?”

“Because reports, Mademoiselle, are one thing. Facts can be massaged and truth manipulated. But you—you were there. You were the one brought in chains to SHIELD and kept in a cell for months.” It was like the guy wanted to stick his finger into a wound, but Natasha merely smiled. “You were the one ultimately turned and then put to work on some not so savory projects. We won’t venture too closely into those, at least not today. But you know how this game is played, perhaps far better than your good friend, Tony.”

The phrasing snagged his attention. He’d engaged a jammer from the moment they arrived, but he made a show of pulling out his phone and before saying, “Let me know when we switch back to new material.”

“Shall we play then?” Natasha let out a light laugh and brushed a hand down his arm. The part. Her good friend Tony and she flirted with him. The show was definitely on. As irritated as he was with the guy, it could be interesting to have a front-row seat when he wasn’t the one in her sights.

Not that he’d particularly cared for it when they heard it over comms, but this was different.

Then he switched the screens on the phone to a dummy email so the cameras overhead only saw what he wanted them to see. In the meanwhile, Friday helped him identify all the camera angles. Sweeping through the displays inside his glasses and as he typed in an email with two thumbs, he dropped the phone out of the camera’s line of sight.

A couple of buttons pushed, and he had the audio and the video.

If Adrien wanted her to tell the story, fine. They weren’t going to have it available to throw back in her face.

“Absolument,” the delegate murmured, his attention seemingly rapt on her. Tony considered it only seeming because there was something just… a little different about him today. Or maybe he’d only been sucking up to Tony to create the effect that would bring Natasha in to meet with him. That would take an extraordinary manipulation of events.

Paranoid?

Maybe.

“I was a freelancer when SHIELD approached me. They’d sent an operative with a kill order to eliminate me.”

“They sent someone to kill you and you call it an approach?” Mild surprise reflected in Adrien’s voice. Negotiation at arrowpoint was not giving someone an option, but Natasha had either a twisted sense of humor about it all or she remembered it fondly because of Clint.

The freelancer line was funny. Though freelancer seemed better than assassin.
“Yes, what would you call it?”

“An… assassination. An execution.”

“Fair,” she said with almost a dismissive shrug. “If they had been successful, perhaps. However, they made me an offer. This agent saw potential in me, potential they thought might be repurposed.”

“Does this paragon have a name?”

“Yes, they do.” She kept the pronouns neutral. Clint’s name wasn’t going to pass her lips. “We talked for a while, this agent and I. Eventually, I agreed…”

“Why?”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Why did you agree?”

“Does that part matter?” She challenged him.

“Yes, it could matter very much, this turning point in your life from contract killer to agent of SHIELD.”

“Freelancer.”

“Pardon?”

Tony did not laugh. He didn’t. But Natasha flipped the whole table on the guy so smoothly he hadn’t noticed.

“I said freelancer. There is a difference.” Perfectly reasonable, almost sweet in her delivery and when he glanced sideways at her, all he could see was the gentle curve of her smile. Unruffled.

With narrowed eyes, Adrien set his coffee cup on the table. “So you deny you hired out your services as an assassin and profited from the number of bodies that can be laid at your feet?”

“I’ve never received any profits from my work.” She said with an absolutely straight and earnest face.

Never? It was Tony’s turn to be surprised. Though he just tapped the screen on his phone as if he were engrossed and completely ignoring the conversation unfolding in front of him while he tried to parse fact from fiction.

“You understand the luxury of choice, Monsieur. You also understand the limitations when it’s removed.”

“I see.” No, he didn’t. Though Tony studied him via the camera he’d taken over on his phone. Adrien waffled between perplexed and annoyed. He genuinely wanted the answers to these questions.

“As I was saying,” Natasha continued. “After I agreed, I surrendered myself in the agent’s custody. It took a couple of days, but eventually, I found myself in the Triskelion where I spent several days being interrogated by four separate agents. They arrived at various intervals, the mixing up of interrogation techniques to keep a target off-balance coupled with sensory deprivation limited at first, then gradually increasing to ensure a deep sense of isolation all played a part in their
methodology.”

She paused and reached for the carafe, refilling her cup and Tony’s though he hadn’t asked, but she didn’t refill Adrien’s. Settling back once again, she uncrossed, then recrossed her legs.

“Graduating interrogation tactics were also used to supplement discussions with the initial agent. Give the initial contact an air of familiarity, offer them up as balm, a salve to the lonely wound of thirty days of relentless questioning, assessments, and physical exams.”

Tony’s gut sank.

“Physical exams?” the delegate didn’t quite manage to hide his elevated interest in that subject.

Natasha raised her cup to sip the coffee as daintily as if she were dining with the queen. “All SHIELD agents are required to pass a series of proficiency exams.” The answer didn’t remotely answer his question, but she moved on. “Once contact was made, isolation is gradually eased back and more activities are reintroduced, all under the oversight of the newly returned agent in an effort to create a bond, after weeks of having no contact physical or emotional, there is a theory that a bond is more easily formed when paired with reward. Behave, go to the gym. Behave, be allowed to feel sunshine through a window. Behave, receive a book to read.”

A small shrug, then she took another drink of the coffee and Tony set his phone down to reach for his own, glancing from one to the other.

“Still recounting how I joined SHIELD.”

At the mild assurance, he nodded as if bored and blew out a sigh.

“If the act of rewards and bonding is successful, training exercises are added into the rotation.”

“Such as?” This time, Adrien seemed genuinely interested.

“Reality versus fantasy. Missions that aren’t missions. Controlled experiments.” Another shrug. “Testing to see if compliance has been achieved or will the subject betray them at the first sign of freedom.”

“Were you successful at these activities?”

Natasha’s smile grew almost blindingly bright. “I’m always successful. Eventually, I earned the position of a Level 3 Agent, and the assignments became real.”

“Level 3? Why so high?”

“You know—they never explicitly told me.”

“And when you helped Captain Rogers destroy SHIELD, what level agent were you?” The accusation rankled and Tony had to bite his tongue.

He actually did know how to do it. But he usually didn’t bother because it hurt.

“When I helped Captain Rogers escape multiple assassination attempts and exposed a terrorist organization growing with a global intelligence agency poised to reshape the political and territorial landscapes at their whim?”

Adrien actually had the grace to look chastised. “Yes, of course… my apologies, Mademoiselle. Your service should never be in question.”
“Yet, you have so many questions, don’t you Monsieur? A by-product of your time with the DGSI? Or were you always so curious?”

His what? Tony stilled.

“Questions are as much a luxury as a choice,” Adrien said in a very vague nonanswery kind of way. “But I am curious about one thing.”

“Only one?” Natasha scoffed lightly, her laughter low and husky. “You do yourself a disservice. I did not take you for so boring a man.”

Walk into her web said the spider to the fly.

“You flatter me, Mademoiselle…”

“Hardly. Flattery would be meaningless words with no substance designed merely to elicit a favorable response.”

Adrien frowned. “So you don’t wish me to become fond of you, Mademoiselle?”

“Monsieur, you’re playing with me. Why just yesterday you asked my permission to become more informal with me…”

“True,” Adrien admitted slowly, and if Tony hadn’t been staring at the camera feed he would have missed it. The bastard’s eyes dilated, just a fraction as his lips parted. She had him and he hadn’t even realized the trap had long since closed around him. “You fascinate me, Mademoiselle.”

Well, Adrien wasn’t alone there. Still, Tony couldn’t help turning over what she said. SHIELD essentially kept her prisoner, yes she’d turned herself in, but they’d tried to break her down and then rebuild her.

Just like the KGB.

Just like the Red Room.

Just like Hydra.

Because SHIELD was Hydra. Whether they were cognizant of it or not, the bleed over had been present.

“Are we done with this jaunt down memory lane?” He asked abruptly. They’d already been there for hours. The time surprised him as he closed the phone. Then again, they were in a beautiful sitting room—with no windows.

“A break would be welcome,” Adrien said, clapping his hands to his thighs as he stood. “And I promised you lunch. I always keep my promises to beautiful women.”

“Always?” Natasha challenged. Tony swore he could almost hear the vibration of her web as she tested the thread.

“Oui, Mademoiselle, I give you my word as both a gentleman and a Frenchman. One moment and I shall summon our repast… are you sure I cannot tempt you with some wine?”

“I never mix business and pleasure.” The slow rasp of her voice over the words made the hair on the back of Tony’s neck stand on end.
“Then, perhaps after we have reached an accommodation?”

“Perhaps,” she baited him, but her smile was all playful sincerity.

Tony almost felt sorry for the guy. Almost. The poor bastard wasn’t going to know what hit him. But then again the guy was just asking to have his ass handed to him.

“I very much look forward to it,” Adrien told her, a hand over his heart then he glanced at Tony. “I owe you a great debt for introducing me to this enchanting creature, Tony.”

He did not roll his eyes. It was a feat of unparalleled will. Nor did he gag. Instead, he just grinned and patted Natasha’s thigh like he had the right to it—and thank God she didn’t break his hand—and said, “You can pay that debt off faster with food. Preferably something with a couple of courses.”

Adrien inclined his head and then stepped to the doors. They opened and the security guard who gave Natasha the stinkeye was standing immediately outside and he stepped into the opening as Adrien disappeared.

So much for trust.

With light fingers, Natasha smoothed the hair at his ear and he caught her gaze. She glanced down once. Oh. Right. Hand.

He gave her thigh a squeeze, suddenly very aware of the thigh sheath beneath his fingers. Then tapped Morse code lightly. It was Natasha. No way she didn’t know the code of dots and dashes. You okay?

Brushing her fingers against the shell of his ear, she tapped Always.

Needing to stretch his legs, he stood and held out his hand to her. She clasped his fingers lightly as she rose, then released them to walk over to the fireplace.

“There’s something soothing about a fireplace on a snowy day,” she said, her tone almost absent as she ran her fingers over the mantle. “Think this was original construction or did they add it later?”

Before he could answer, Adrien returned followed by two servers pushing carts laden with silver domed food. The idea of Persephone in the Underworld flashed through his mind.

“It was re-added,” Adrien said, motioning to the fireplace while his people laid out the food at a small intimate dining table. Their knees were all going to knock at that thing. “The original fireplace was uncovered, then remodeled.”

“Interesting.”

If she said so.

When the servers finished they swept away with the coffee tray and the carts, leaving the guard to close the doors behind him. Adrien pulled out a chair for Natasha and Tony snagged the one closest to hers. She might already have the guy on a hook, but why not make him work for it anyway?

The food turned out to be filet mignon and grilled potatoes with sprigs, and some kind of sauce he didn’t bother with. The steak was more than enough.
“Bon appétit,” Adrien murmured, before saying, “If you’ll forgive me, do you mind if we continue with my questions while we eat? In the interests of time?”

Sure.

Tony cut into his steak and shook his head. How Natasha did this he had no idea. He’d liked Adrien as much as he could like any politician, but he’d never expected the guy to be such an ass or a bore. They were stuck here, sucking up. And he was the first of one hundred and seventeen.

Maybe he’d picked a bad time to stop drinking.

“Of course,” Natasha said, tapping his foot with hers gently and he snapped his focus back to the pair in front of him.

“Wonderful.” Then Adrien waited until she’d taken a bite before he asked, “Prior to the incident with SHIELD, were you aware of the Winter Soldier?”

Natasha

They’d had lunch and dinner with Adrien Devereux and spent nearly ten hours in that little sitting room with its pale ochre-colored walls, carefully curated furniture and temperature kept pegged at exactly 67 Fahrenheit to make the fire more inviting while she endured one of the more thorough interrogations she’d had in a while.

Tony held her coat for her as she slipped her arms into it and then he gave Adrien an almost perfunctory handshake before Tony shrugged into his own coat. When Adrien turned to her, he took her hands, lifting them both to his lips for a kiss. “I want to thank you, Mademoiselle Romanova, you indulged my every whim.”

Nice. The calculated words, the fact three of the staff witnessed the event and likely the cameras down here wouldn’t be jammed. Romantic almost. So she’d returned the favor, allowing him to hold her hands a beat longer than necessary, resting her fingers against his wrists. “Well, when your whims are playing a game of twenty questions, it’s no hardship, trust me.”

His mouth thinned faintly. Yes, the goal was to make him an ally, but boundaries needed to be established. Lowering her hands, he caught her fingers and squeezed, enough force to warn but not actually injure. Three witnesses, Adrien, and Tony. Two of the staff were likely DGSI or at the very least security. The third was some kind of functionary. She could take them if it came down to that. Messy with three DGSI agents, but Adrien would be the first she took down.

“What would you say to a friendly game of chess next time?” he asked.

They were already playing chess. “Perhaps, I’m not sure how full my schedule is. I’m sure you have other commitments.”

“I do, but I very much want to work on the Accords with the pair of you. I think we would make formidable allies.” This little game between them was far from over.
Tony studied him. “So you’re on board?”

“Absolument. Send me the amendments and your requirements. I will review them, then we may discuss them after our next meeting.”

“Have your people call my people,” Tony told him and his tone had gone flat, not bored, just done. “We’ll see what we can do. Until then…” He offered his arm to her and she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.

“Perhaps I shall have earned the privilege of your name by then…” Adrien called after her, more personable than he’d been since he was on the phone with Tony the day before.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Tony muttered as security guided them to the door. “You ready for this?”

“Sure,” she drawled. “We can only go up from here, right?” Even braving a gauntlet of security and a phalanx of the media, which apparently had been gathering outside the consulate since their arrival earlier in the day. The police had reportedly roped off an area to keep them back, but it wouldn’t matter.

“Chin up,” Tony told her, confidence bleeding into his voice as the careless playboy began to grin. “You set the pace and watch for the ice.”

Watch for the ice? An automatic smile hovered on her lips as security opened the doors for them. The cold greeted them like a slap in the face, bracing especially after the room. The sudden wash of noise as questions came winging at them left her ears humming. She dipped her head, just enough to keep from looking at the flashes directly. Even with the floodlights, the rapid clicking, snapping, and yelling out of questions made surveillance challenging. She had a firm grip on her small clutch and the gun inside it.

Happy was already out of the car and at the door as Stark security swept forward. She really hoped they hadn’t been stuck out there all day. It had been bad enough to be stuck inside.

Tony ushered her ahead of him into the car. He all, but fell into the backseat after her. As with earlier, when the door closed, they could still hear the reporters. Thankfully, the opaque and treated windows kept them from looking inside. Neither of them said a word. Tony rubbed his face then reached into the small fridge and pulled out a water bottle. What had once housed any number of single-serve bottles of alcohol had been swapped out for small bottles of water instead.

Pulling her feet out of the heels, she began curling her toes against the soft carpeting of the floor. They ached.

“Back to the Tower?” Happy asked over his shoulder.


“Nine and a half hours of my life back.”

There was a downbeat, then an upbeat before Tony shook with laughter. The sound beat against her until she released a chuckle of her own.

“I promise, the moment they’re available, I’ll buy them for you.” He had his tie undone, and his vest open as he leaned back. “We’re skipping the front this time, take us through the garage.”

“After cheeseburgers, right?” Happy glanced at Tony via the mirror.
“Definitely.” Tony stripped off his coat and then his suit coat and tossed them on the benches opposite before he slumped back in the seat and opened his water. “You sure you don’t want anything Red?”

“I’m fine.” Truthfully, she wanted a shower and to spend a few hours in her studio until the fine line she’d had to dance disappeared along with everything else. Maybe soak in a bath afterward.

Tony motioned to Happy and the partition rolled up closing them in. “You still good?”

“It’s fine, Tony.”

“That stuff you told him about your first few months at SHIELD… did they really do all that?”

“Mostly,” she said with a shrug. “It didn’t take thirty days for me to see Clint again, but they kept me in a windowless room, they interviewed me at random times of the day or night. I didn’t sleep much so it probably frustrated them they couldn’t roust me.” Coulson never seemed ruffled, but she was pretty sure Fury had been annoyed. Or maybe that had simply been his permanent state then as it was now.

“I still don’t get that, you came in willingly—why torture you?”

“Because I was the Black Widow. Seducing men to take their information or their lives was what I did. They had no idea if I’d compromised Clint to get me in there in the first place. Trust takes time. As it turns out… a lot longer than I thought.”

“You know Clint trusts you.”

“I do.” She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “Took me time to really earn it with him, too. But it was worth it.” She could almost feel the weight of his gaze. “You can ask.”

“Did it feel like torture? You thought you were going into safety and then they do all of that, and I imagine more than what you shared.”

“They didn’t pull my fingernails out or break my bones. They didn’t try to starve me or send me out into a Siberian winter with only a knife and tell me to survive.” As these things went, she’d certainly had far worse.

“But you trusted Clint to…”

Opening her eyes, she rolled her head so she could meet his gaze. “That’s just it. I didn’t trust him. I took a gamble. One I couldn’t lose because I didn’t care if I lived or died. Clint wasn’t wrong…I was ready to die the night I let him find me. I was ready to be done with all of it, the years, the fighting, the surviving, the safe houses, the jobs—everything. I just wanted it over. Not enough apparently to kill myself, no, my conditioning was too absolute for that. To kill myself would have been failure and failure was not to be tolerated. But letting the SHIELD agent who had been trailing me for months get close enough to take his shot—that I could do. What SHIELD did… at least what I remember… that didn’t bother me.”

“It’s what you can’t remember.” Tony didn’t ask, but he’d probably already guessed.

“Maybe.” She closed her eyes again.

“Red?”

“What Tony?”
“Why that night? When Clint came for you, he’d been close before. You always slipped away. What was so special about that night that you set the stage for him?”

“It was April,” she said quietly. It had taken a while to settle in, but today while weaving a path through the labyrinthine questions Adrien asked in his search for what she knew and when she knew it carefully construed as trying to determine what broken pieces of her past were true or not, it hit her. Once the realization settled, she couldn’t unknow it. “It was April 3rd. While I don’t know it for certain, I do know it… it was the day my daughter was born.”

She had nothing more concrete than her gut. James hadn’t given her a specific date. He had said April. The pieces were there, she just hadn’t connected them until today.

Tony covered her hand and she let him link their fingers.

“Red…”

“Shhh,” she murmured. “Nothing you need to say. It’s—poetic in a way. I can’t remember her, but I couldn’t forget her. Laura was right.” For a single paralyzing moment, her eyes burned, but she blinked her way past those tears. Laura had told her on the island.

“Nat, I know you. You knew even if you hid it from yourself and buried it deep.”

“We don’t have to do more of these.”

“Of course we do.”

“No,” Tony said flatly. “We don’t. Frankly, it’s not worth it…”

She squeezed his hand. “It’ll be worth it when we have an Accords the whole team can live with and thrive under.”

“Not if they are going to bleed you to do it.”

“No, there as something else up with Adrien. The French might be on our side, I’m not so sure about him.” It wouldn’t be a surprise to find out he was a handler for French assets in the U.S. His job as a delegate would give him diplomatic immunity and freedom to come and go.

“Great, another one we have to worry about.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I planted a microfiber device. We may get some chatter or find out he really is just a nosy little bore with delusions of being charismatic.” The dry remark pulled a laugh from Tony.

He drained his water bottle as Happy turned them off a road and sure enough, into the drive-thru of a fast food place Tony favored. A limo in a drive-thru, the contrasts of Tony Stark. It took her back to when she’d been his assistant for those few weeks.

“I hate to break it to you, Red. I guarantee they sweep that room for bugs on a regular basis. Considering how wired they had it and how disappointed they’ll be when they realize they got nothing at all—they’re sweeping it already.”

She chuckled. “He was in a very bad mood by dinner, I’m positive they already noticed.”

“Me, too.” Smug suited Tony very well, particularly in this case.

“And I know they’ll sweep that room. I left a few bugs in there to distract them, then I used a skin
tab bug on Adrien when he was bidding me farewell. It clings to the skin, almost invisible, and lasts for about forty-eight hours. Not a great amount of time in the scheme of things…”

“But long enough to hear what he did after we left. Red... you really do complete me. Tell me Friday is looped in…” He paused, then touched his glasses. “She is already monitoring. He’s made a couple of phone calls and then bitched out his surveillance staff. Apparently, one of them is getting sent back to France. My heart bleeds for them.”

The partition opened and Happy held up the bag of food. Shifting to the opposite bench, she snagged the food bag and drink. “Thanks Happy.”

He met her gaze for a beat then flicked a look to Tony before look at her again. “Thanks, Natasha.” It wasn’t for the food. No, he knew about the threats to Tony and Pepper likely briefed him on bringing her in. He was thanking her for watching Tony’s back. She patted his arm, then moved back to her previous seat before setting the bag on the seat between she and Tony then handing him the shake and the straw. Happy closed the partition again, and she closed her eyes,

April 3rd.

She’d known it. The same way she’d known James. Would she know if she met her? Would that be possible? Would some instinct ignite in her bones? There would be no way to know without retrieving her memories so she could figure out where she hid her in the first place. Retracing her forty-plus-year-old steps by trying to think like a woman she’d been before they destroyed her, forcing her to rebuild all over again might be possible.

Anything was possible.

“Any luck finding your neuro specialist?”

The rustling of the bag ceased and outside the lights of the city blurred a little.

“I’ll find him, Red. I have a lead on him…”

“Who is he that you are trying so hard to find him?”

“His name is Doctor Stephen Strange.” The name sent a pulse of déjà vu through her system.

Sitwell gasped, his face pale and sweaty. Being kicked off a high-rise would do that to a person. “Zola’s algorithm is a program...for choosing Insight’s targets!

“What targets?” Steve demanded.

“You! A TV anchor in Cairo, the Undersecretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City. Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who's a threat to HYDRA! Now, or in the future.”

“Why him?”

“He’s an unparalleled genius of a surgeon who has done amazing work in areas so delicate that no other surgeons would work on them. He has a reputation for taking on impossible cases.”

Well, at least she qualified for that.

“And he’s the only one?”

“The only one I’ll trust. The background I did on him was extensive, the man’s a doctor, the kind
who saves lives not compromises them.” Tony’s vehemence sold her. “He was in a car accident last winter, went over a cliff. Smashed up his hands, he was in the hospital for months, multiple reconstructive surgeries. He worked with every cutting edge technology out there to find a solution for the nerve damage done to his hands.”

“He can’t do surgery anymore.”

“No,” Tony said. “But I think I can help him and he doesn’t need his hands to look at your CT scans. All he needs is his brain.”

“He went off the grid?”

“Until a couple of days ago. He was seen at Metro-General Hospital, Friday caught him on facial recognition. We can’t figure out how he got into and out of the hospital. He seemed injured. A doctor was treating him, and I’ve called her, but she hasn’t returned the calls.”

“You’re certain he’s the right man for this job?”

“Red, I wouldn’t trust your brain to just anyone.”

Fair enough.

“I’ll find him then.” Somehow.

“I think your dance card is a little full, don’t you?”

She shrugged, but before she could make a smartass remark an alarm went off in the car. It had been a while since she heard it. Tony checked his watch, then tapped his glasses. “What’s happening, Cap?”

It was a call to Assemble.

Adrenaline spiked.

“We’re on our way to the Tower now… we’re about fifteen minutes away. Or you can bring the quinjet to meet me…”

“Meet us.” She told him. She had a tact suit on the quinjet, and weapons. The glasses lit Tony’s eyes up and he stared at her a beat. “Yes, Cap, she said meet us. Red’s in.”

One beat.

Two beats.

“Let me know when you’re close and have the hatch open. Red’s gonna get cold.”

No one objected. Good. Tony pulled off the glasses and pressed a button to lower the partition. “We’re going to dump out here in a minute.”

“Both of you?” Happy sounded startled.

“Both of us.”

She was so ready to hit something.
“Okay, I’m getting out of the traffic so you don’t give the guy behind us a heart attack.”

Tony glanced at her. “It’s going to be cold.”

“I’m Russian. I can handle it.”

“Yeah. You probably can.” The exhaustion on his face seemed to have vanished along with her own.

“We’re clear Boss.”

“Leave the shoes, Red and button up the coat.” Tony turned forward and sat back against the seat before he activated the ARC reactor. The metal crawled over him, sealing him behind the red and gold. When the helmet locked into place, the eyes lit up. As it had on the plane, his seat lay flat and the trunk opened. “Get on top of me, Red.”

The smirk in his voice made her laugh. “You’ve been waiting a while to use that one.”

“No comment.” But he held still as she rolled on top of him. The metal was not the most comfortable thing, fortunately, her suit and jacket insulated her chest.

“Keep your face down. The suit warms and I’m redirecting some of that to you. But at speed, it’s two minutes of frigid hell for you.” He brought a gauntleted arm around her and it locked on. “And Red, whatever you do… don’t let go.”

Between one breath and the next, he launched them out of the car. She made the mistake of looking as he exited at a straight horizontal, and then curved sharply at ninety degrees to ascend. It was exhilarating.

She kept her cheek to the warming metal as the world flashed by faster and faster.

The cold whipped around her. Stung her face and her legs. She kept her thighs locked to his hips and her arms around his neck careful to spider monkey so if he needed the gauntlet he was holding her with, he wouldn’t drop her.

A thrill raced through her, chasing away the exhaustion, the hints of grief, and all their other problems.

It was only professionalism that kept her from whooping out loud. Though when he landed them inside the quinjet and he set her down, hair blown to hell, face reddened and numb, she couldn’t help grinning.

James was on his feet waiting for her and she grinned wider. Steve glanced over his shoulder from the pilot’s seat. He swept her over with a look and she winked. His expression relaxed a fraction.

Then, she headed for her locker. Game face on as she began to strip out of the suit and change it for her tact gear.

“Read me in…”

Chapter End Notes
The series has crossed one million words. Woo boy.
The hour is at hand! We the Bastard Sons of Wilbur Day advocate violent and immediate revolution against a technologically based industrial-informational hierarchy designed from the boot at the neck of the proletariat up. We will strike back against the corrupt, fascist heart of super-police unchecked by morality or decency with the very weapons they oppress us with, and our revolutionary brothers and sisters around the world. His name was Wilbur Day! He saw technology as a tool of equalization. But the rich white men in power said no. He was murdered in the streets like a dog. Well, surprise, super-fascists! His sons now rise up.”

As Friday finished playing the recording, James snorted. “So we’re the super-fascists now?”

“Nope, Terminator. That would be me.” Tony grunted.

“Trying to find out who this Wilbur Day was,” Sam said over comms. He, along with Wanda, Vision, and Clint were on the other quinjet. They were en route to San Francisco. Natasha accessed the satellite feeds and news reports indicating chaos as mass evacuation packed civilians onto the highways, bridges, and more trying to get out of the city. A doomsday clock counted down in the upper right of the window.

“Boss, we’re tracking the source code for the clock, but it’s being routed through a massive number of proxy servers. Each time we lock, it bounces to a new one.”

“It’s an AI code,” Natasha said, switching screens and Tony moved over to brace a hand on the back of her chair as Friday put the trace up for them. “Popular with intelligence agencies, usually these are for denial of service attacks.”

“Or information hacking. They used this when they hacked the corporate emails a few years ago, opened up their entire server and all their dirty little secrets to the world.”

“That was North Korea.” She would know, Fury sent her to take care of the server farm where it originated. Not her best vacation destination. Three weeks of crossing humid jungles to get out with
the North Korean military on her ass hadn’t been much fun either.

“I remember that,” Clint said with a laugh.

“Shut up,” she said without any heat, counting the seconds as Friday shut down the server before the code leapt to another.

“C’mon, Nat. You said you wanted to get a haircut anyway.” His snicker elicited more than one curious sound.

“Going to share with the rest of us?” Sam asked at last.

“Not if he wants to sleep with both eyes closed,” Natasha said firing off a single line of code to piggyback the doomsday clock AI just as it made the leap. Dual screens opened and she got two sets of readings, one the new server it burrowed into and the other—and internal counter on the code itself. Oh, that was clever. Base 8 math, creating an algorithm to randomize the jumping so that it was already tunneling to its destination server.

Tony reached past her to the keyboard and she slapped his fingers.

“Ouch…”

“If you can’t tell us,” Wanda suggested. “Do you have a picture?”

“Natasha,” Vision stated. “I can see the next server it’s going to leap to. Should we shut that down?”

“No,” she and Friday said at the same time. “We are attempting to pull the code to a server where we can box it,” Friday continued.

Tony leaned away still shaking his fingers. “That’s not a bad plan.”

“North Korea…that would have been in 2011,” Sam speculated. “I remember the scandal. So before the Battle of New York. STRIKE Team Delta operation?”

“Man, you don’t know STRIKE Team Delta operations.” Clint chuckled. “Don’t pretend. Not that we needed the whole team for it.”

“Not that there was ‘We’ involved,” she reminded Clint. “If you want to talk about we stories, we can always discuss Colombia in 2008.”

“Or we can move right along to the fact we’re thirty minutes out, do we have a target yet?” The abrupt change of subject made her smile. Friday opened a third screen as Natasha wrote a secondary string of code.

“Change the line at the base jump,” Tony said, still reading from over her shoulder. “You’re leaving a loophole.”

“I know, I want to leave a loophole, it’s going to calculate trajectory to another server and begin the tunnel, this will change the base math it’s using, forcing it to recalculate…”

“…creating a time delay, a few milliseconds. But those will add up.”

“Yep.”

“You know we could just go off comms,” Sam teased in a staged-whisper. “Then you can give us
the 4-1-1 on North Korea and what Natasha doesn’t know won’t hurt you.”

“Stay on course for San Francisco,” Steve cut into the chatter. “The evacuation is creating a hell of a mess on the streets and local services are overwhelmed. The National Guard has been deployed, but our priority is to find the weapon and disarm it.”

“Do we even know what the weapon is?” James had been going through her weapons locker, going over each one with a fine toothcomb. He wouldn’t let her go into a fight with a gun that might jam. It was sweet.

The worm on the code began to rewrite it and shortened the time it lasted on a server, forcing it to tunnel to more than one server at a time and splitting its resources. It made the code sloppier and each time, they cost it a few more milliseconds until they had it on a five-second delay.

“Friday…” Natasha typed the next round of code to close the box, but they needed all the strings to hit the server Friday had readied for it at once.

“Two more leaps, Ms. Romanoff, and I believe we will have it.”

“I concur,” Vision added. “I would suggest closing the string on that last line.”

“No, she should leave it open,” Tony argued. “The math will force it into a loop.”

“But that could, in turn, create disparate strings tunneling to multiple servers and delay the caging of the malicious code.”

“Maybe, but…”

She tuned out their argument. The open code would create a loop. She wanted it to loop. The countdown clock increased in speed, the time elapse jumped forward by five seconds.

“Is that a problem?” Sam dropped the questions about North Korea. “Or did time just change on it.”

“It’s not a pro—” Tony cut his own answer off. “You need me on another screen.”

She didn’t even bother to answer him because she did. He moved to the other set of monitors and logged in. New strings of code were coming after her additions. Another hacker—maybe more—were trying to overwrite her changes and divert the AI away from the cage Friday had set up.

“Vision,” Tony said. “I need you to start tracking where that code is coming from.”

“I shall endeavor to locate them.”

“You stay on the code, I’m going to start blocking,” Tony said and she let him do it. They lost a second off the five she’d gained them. So she tweaked her own code. Friday added a secondary server as bait, this one with fewer security protocols to break.

“If you really want to hear a story,” Clint said idly. “To kill time, there was this weekend op in the Philippines.”

Another jungle tale.

Joy.

It took no encouragement for Clint to continue. “This is STRIKE Team Delta… but the action happened before the Philippines op. It was the first one Nat ran with the whole team and we had to
bring everyone up to operational readiness.”

She shook her head.

They bought back another half-second, and Tony’s fingers flew over the keyboard next to hers. Friday sent updates every fifteen seconds.

“I have them,” Vision announced. “I am cutting their access off. There are a half-dozen individuals using multiple IPs to send the DoS attacks to inhibit Natasha’s code from completing the task.”

“U.S. based?” Tony asked.

“No… mainland China.”

“Wonderful,” Tony muttered.

“The STRIKE team was in its infancy back then,” Clint continued. “There were a half-dozen of SHIELD’s top guys competing for three slots. One of those was going to Natasha, and someone got their nose pushed in when they realized that the three slots they thought were available was only two.”

“How’d they find out?” She could almost picture Wanda leaning forward at Clint’s chuckle.

“Because Rumlow was a jackass who liked to tell stories, and he never got over Nat handing him his ass.”

She frowned. Cutting Rumlow off had been a habit, but she didn’t recall actively handing him his ass. While she took care of Rollins and a couple of others in Pierce’s office, Rumlow had been on a lower floor. She avoided sparring with the members of the STRIKE team, much as she and Clint had avoided sparring together. If anyone was sent to take her out, it would likely be them and she didn’t want them knowing her moves personally. Later…. Later it was a habit.

“The op was pretty straightforward bag and tag the bad guys, turn them over to SHIELD for interrogation and shut down their operations…” Clint recounted the scoring the team had been doing, getting cocky as they cut through the security forces on the plantation hidden away in the middle of a sweaty, snake-infested jungle.

“Got it,” she murmured.

“Confirmed,” Friday said a beat later and Tony leaned back in his chair.

“Vision notify the MSS about those hackers, let them pick ‘em up. If they weren’t working for them anyway.”

Natasha flexed her hands as Friday finished corralling the AI code, then they hit fast forward on the countdown clock. It couldn’t transmit anywhere and when it hit zero, the coordinates popped up including a final message.

“The super-fascists will face destruction at their own hands. We judge you, the fallen, as the arbiters of your own doom.”

“…the scoring got out of hand, though, as did the competition. Nat wasn’t in the mood to play, so she cut ahead of everyone…”

A warehouse located on the docks. It was almost a super complex, half of it located in a port safe
zone where goods would never actually enter the country and the other half squarely on U.S. soil. Development and engineering…

“We sure about the coordinates?” Steve asked.

“I’m pulling up satellites now,” Natasha tabbed back to the monitors she’d been on before. Was the warehouse the target or…

“…so, the targets are like fish in a barrel, the team is culling them, the score is high and tight…” Clint chuckled, a vague note of disgust in his voice.

“The warehouse seems to be where the device they set is supposed to go off. Not sure how that punishes the whole of San Francisco…” Unless...

“Nope,” Tony said. “Hopefully empty rhetoric. Think positive people. We’ve never heard of these jokers before…”

“Damage is already being done,” Steve pointed out. “The evacuation has caused numerous accidents, snarled the roads and promoted increasing panic.”

That was a level of destruction all its own.

“…Rumlow will not shut up about his numbers. He’s got the top score. But he’s egging him on the rest of the team, keeping neck in neck. Rollins starts tracking past him, Rollins—he’s giving Rumlow crap about taking his spot if he didn’t already have a lock on the top three, but Rollins’ numbers—they’re wavering and soon it’s in a four-way heat…”

All the chatter that day had gotten annoying. She’d turned off her comm unit. A fact Clint bitched her out for later. But the fact she wasn’t keeping score seemed to antagonize the competitive agents vying for that spot.

“Twenty minutes from target,” Steve said. “Focus up. Clint, you’re staying with your quinjet, overwatch as much as possible and provide fast evac as needed. Sam, you and Vision are going to move to cover the south end of the warehouse. We have no idea what we’re expecting in there and docks have evacuated. Tony and Wanda, you’re going to get us in the front door and be ready to handle any high yield explosives… if necessary, Wanda—straight up… as high as you can get it.”

“If it’s nuclear yield, bare minimum safe distance is about 290 kilometers, and that’s cutting it close, the farther we can send it the better.”

“I vote for no nuclear devices.”

“At that height, an EMP will take out the quinjets, Tony’s suit, Sam’s wings, and quite possibly Vision himself.” James folded his arms. “You could see fusion of the power lines, and it would knock out most of the city. The damage could still be significant even with a high altitude detonation.”

“Woah,” Sam said, his voice teasing. “Look at you with the science news.”

“Project K, 1962,” was all he said to Tony and she sighed.

Cuban Missile Crisis. Saber rattling. Not pretty.

“Got it. So let’s vote against the nuclear option. We haven’t had any reports of stolen nuclear material, have we Baby Girl?” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. He was still dressed in his
slacks, shirt, and vest sans tie and jacket from earlier. Natasha rose to slip on her weapons.

“Where do you want me, Steve?” She slid her Glocks into their holsters, added fresh magazines to her pouches. Garrotes in place. Stingers charged.

“You, Bucky and I are going in to clear any resistance. If there’s computers or a database or an operational center—you go after it.” And she better damn well stay in one piece. The unspoken words pulled a faint smile from her.

One nod.

“Friday, have you found a schematic for the warehouse?”

“Searching now, Ms. Romanoff…apparently the corporation who owns the facilities made several upgrades in the last few years and they have secured their filings with the city under proprietary information.”

“Crack those open for us, Baby Girl.” Tony rolled his head from side to side and checked his watch. They would have maybe fifteen minutes to spare once they were on the ground.

Not a lot of time to locate and disarm the device. If there was one… It could all be an elaborate hoax meant to inspire panic and cause chaos—which it definitely had—but they had to be prepared for anything.

James checked over the straps on her harness, then her belt and the compartments before eyeballing her holsters. Arms folded, she smirked and raised her eyebrows. When he was done, she did the same for him. Then ran her fingers down his left arm. Tapping her comms off for a moment, she said. “Tony… an EMP will shut down his arm, but will it trigger your kill switch?”

She hated that damn thing.

Quiet plummeted through the compartment. “It shouldn’t.” Tony said finally. “But I’ve got five minutes. Let’s shut those down, now.” With a curl of his fingers, he beckoned James to him.

James squeezed her hand, then brushed her cheek before he moved and turned so Tony could work open the rills on the arm. Blowing out a breath, she caught Steve’s glance and his mouthed thank you. Moving so she could stand near him and still keep an eye on James, she rested a hand on Steve’s shoulder.

No need to thank her. It was on her to watch their backs. She tapped her comms back on.

“…like I said, this was a weekend op…”

“I don’t understand the difference.”

“It means it was a training operation. It was still live-fire and real targets, but every member on the tour with the STRIKE team that day was being evaluated for whether they would earn the open spots,” Natasha answered.

“Cutting to the reader’s digest, Rumlow’s got every agent-candidate wound up and desperate to get the highest score because they’re convinced that’s how they get the lock on that spot.”

“Three minutes,” Steve reminded the rest of the team. “Look sharp.”

“We make it through the valley to the main facility, a full-on developmental factory, a hundred
workers, mass-producing weapons and handling cocaine, it was a one-stop bad shop, more than fifty armed personnel on the floor and another dozen or so sniper positions. I slipped into the first one, but…”

“The guy was already down, and Natalia had taken out the rest. The workers were likely lined up, hands on their head in the center of the compound and the main gates were wide open.” James glanced over his shoulder at her, his gaze confident and his smile proud. “She probably waited until the whole STRIKE team entered before she said something like….”

“… you’re late,” she answered with a shrug. “Maybe next time, more fighting, less yammering.”

“Thanks, both of you, for absolutely killing my punchline.” Clint groused. “And I’m not even going to ask how you knew that, Bucky.”

“Because Natalia is Natalia,” was all James said in response.

“You still have a punchline, Clint.” Natasha reminded him. San Francisco Bay was ahead of them.

“One minute.”

“Done,” Tony said, making sure the rills were closed, then tossing the hand tool onto the desk. “Disarmed and shutdown. Shouldn’t be a problem, even with the EMP.”

Relief flooded her and then they were descending. Tony suited up.

“Deploying Cap,” Sam announced.

“As am I,” Vision informed them.

Floodlights illuminated the warehouse below. No visible signs of activity.

“Wanda,” Tony said. “You got it to get down or you need a ride?”

“I am heading out now.”

“On my way.” He hit the button to open the ramp and glanced back. “See you three on the ground. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do…”

“That’s a lot of latitude, Shellhead.”

She couldn’t see the smirk behind the helmet, but she knew it was there. Then he was out.

Natasha set her watch as they landed. Fourteen minutes and thirty seconds until whatever the Bastard Sons had planned for them. She started the counter, then moved down the ramp with Steve and James.

The absolute quiet save for the occasional bell out in the harbor and the lapping of the waves gave the whole dock area a post-apocalyptic feeling.

“You know,” Sam said over comms. “I feel like I’ve seen this movie, and I’m not a fan of the jump scares.”

13m 6s

‘Then keep your head on a swivel,” James answered him.
One by one the team checked in.

“Going in,” Tony announced and the rip of metal screaming tore through the air as Tony and Wanda punched a hole. Steve headed up the metal railing along the side of the building. They were going in through the roof. Steve made the leap and flipped onto it. She was right behind him, and James behind her.

12m 2s

“All quiet so far,” Tony informed them, a faint disappointment edging his voice. One she totally understood, she really wanted to hit something and if they came all this way for some mind games played by the Bastards, she’d make it a personal mission to find each and every one of them.”

“Clear here,” Sam said only to be echoed by Vision.

“There is nothing down here,” Wanda said quietly. “Equipment and boxes, but no people…”

11m 15s

“Tony, scanning for explosives?” Steve asked, they were at a roof access and he ripped it open one-handed and she glanced down. It was darker on this end of the building and there were metal catwalks and grating below.

Wonderful.

Just what she wanted to see again.

“Yep,” Tony said. “So far no abnormal energy signatures. This might be a hard search.”

James dropped in first, then whistled once for all clear. Steve swung her up bridal carry and then dropped through the opening. It was a twenty-foot drop, but he landed lightly on the metal. She was on her feet and moving. Still quiet.

9m 48s

Steve’s jaw tightened. He looked at James, then her and finally below. “Split up. Nat…stay up here, take west. Move as fast as you can, give me a full visual. Sam deploy Redwing, I want a full composite scan outside. Buck, head to the floor, take south. I’m taking north. Tony—you and Wanda work your way toward us. Stay on comms.”

She made it one step before Steve pulled her back and gave her a hard, fierce but swift kiss and then he went over the railing and leapt below.

“He’s so dramatic,” James commented, but he gave her a similar kiss before he winked, and leapt after Steve.

Rolling her eyes, she bit back a smile and turned west. Adrenalin thrumming, she began her search at a jog.

8m 51s

The massive space wouldn’t make for an easy search and the clock continued to wind down. Pallets were stacked across the upper level. She paused at one and flipped out her knife to cut through the heavy layers of plastic wrap to get a look inside. Heavy steel cables bound a large wooden container. A TitanCorp logo was barely visible so she cut a little more plastic away and
snapped a photo with her phone, then moved on.

“Cap, it’s all quiet out here. We’re getting reports of fires in the city now. They’ve got people trapped in cars on the bridges and emergency services aren’t having a hell of a lot of luck pushing past the people flooding out.”

“We finish the sweep. The code pointed us here, we clear this before we move out.” The grind of his teeth was almost audible over the comms. He didn’t want civilians to suffer, but if they didn’t do their jobs they might be releasing something far more deadly on the trapped populace.


“Shipping containers,” James reported. “Ten of them, all open and empty.”

“Not finding much down here. Heavy equipment, all powered off.” Frustration edged Steve’s words.

“It’s like they were in the middle of working and just stopped, containers and large crates scattered haphazardly instead of stacked together. Is that typical in a place like this?” Wanda asked

6m 10s

Scattered haphazardly.

Natasha pivoted. She’d been weaving in and around heavy plastic-wrapped containers just like the first one she’d cut open. They were scattered. At least ten feet between each one on all sides.

“What’s the distance between the containers down there?”

“Eight, maybe ten feet?” Wanda didn’t sound certain.

“At least ten on each,” Steve confirmed. “What’s up?”

“How many?”

5m 6s

“Based on the readings from Boss’ suit, I’ve scanned at least fifty or so containers in the Boss’s immediate vicinity.”

Switching to a flashlight, Natasha studied the elevated floor she occupied. “Friday, dimensions on the second level?”

“Roughly 65,000 square feet on the main level, the secondary level is 45,000 square feet.”

Pivoting, she looked at one of the plastic-wrapped crates again. “James, do those crates go all the way to the shipping containers?”

“Yes…” The lights in the warehouse came up. Clicking as they snapped on row by row on across the length of the building.

It was her first good look at the whole layout.

3m 45s
“Who turned on the lights?” Tony asked.

A chorus of ‘not its’ filled the comms.

“Everyone in the warehouse converge on my location,” Steve ordered. “Everyone outside, look lively, we might need you in here.”

“Still haven’t found anything Cap,” Tony stated, but the lack of discovery was in its own way a discovery.

“Work your way back here, anyway.” The command in Steve’s voice was hard to dispute—and kind of sexy.

2m 30s

Still, she studied the containers. It was like looking at a chessboard in a manner of speaking based on the way they were laid out.

“Nat, you’re moving, right?” Steve prodded her.

“I’m on my way,” she told him, but she twisted to look at the container closest to her. “Friday, you’re still not detecting any power sources?”

“A generator engaged when the lights came up. It is running an independent system. We cannot access it wirelessly so it’s unlikely to be the result of outside interference.”

So someone programmed it to turn on the lights.

“I’m going to cut into one of these boxes,” Tony said. “I want to see what’s so important they have five hundred of them.”

“Be careful,” Steve cautioned.

“Yep,” Tony said. “Sure.”

She wanted to cut into one of the crates herself, but she headed back the way she’d come, following the railing to look for a spot to drop down. She pulled out her grappling hook and attached it to her gun.

1m 3s

“Natalia, on your right.” James beckoned via the comm. She glanced down and grinned. He was paralleling her path.

“You two better not be playing tickle the metal out there.”

Wanda’s faint snicker barely covered Sam’s snort.

“Focus,” Steve chided.

30s.

There were no stairs or ladders. Why erect an entire level…for storage. She paused at the railing.

20s
“Standby, we’re still not getting any readings so I’m opening her up.”

Natasha glanced toward the center where she could just make out a red laser.

10s

“Come on down here,” James said. “They use loaders to get up there, you’ll have to go too far to come down.”

8s

“What the…”

6s

She fired the grappling hook, then paused a beat as it lashed, waiting for Tony’s exclamation to finish.

4s


“Legion activating boss.”

2s

“Deploy Veronica.”

Veronica?

“Jump!” James ordered and she leapt the railing.

1s.

The crates began to crack and the plastic rip as the whole place trembled.

She rode the swing all the way to the floor, unsurprised when James caught her and literally launched forward running. All around them the crates were shattering.

“Guys?” Sam came over comms.

“Stay out there,” Steve ordered. “Vision, we need you in here now. Wanda, tear those things apart if you can.”

A crate in front of she and James exploded, and he wrenched sideways and blocked a huge jagged slat of wood that flew at them. It broke against his arm, but what replaced it was a large machine unfolding itself like some damn nightmare from War of the Worlds.

“I’m seeing that, right?” James asked.

“Definitely seeing.”

“Nat, Buck—get your asses over here.” The snap almost made her smile because Tony muttered language in an undertone. Vision’s laser whirred through the cacophony of metallic beasts rising from amidst the ruined crates. A blue glow lined them, all the way up to their soft underbellies while three large metallic tentacles extended to drift against the floor.
Repulsors.

All around them, the hum from the machines as they climbed—and they were everywhere—grew louder. The very familiar whine of the repulsors sounded like they belonged to Tony. Explosions detonated ahead of them and James and she both crouched as flaming metal slammed into the machine hovering right in front of them.

And it…

“Up,” James snagged her hand and they moved. The machine toppled crashing into the one next to it, then the next. It was a chain reaction, and they were exploding. A scream hum from one of the machines had them both spinning, she brought up the Glocks—not that they would be much good against those things unless she got in a really lucky shot—and James pulled the M4A1 with the grenade launcher as one of the tentacle monstrosities twirled toward them.

“Sensor,” she called the warning, sighting what looked like an ocular lens twisting in the center of the metallic mass. It angled toward them. The repulsor whine increasing in frequency scraped over them and she squeezed the triggers on both targeting that sensor. The first three shots glanced off around it, but the next two cracked the lens. One of the tentacles lashed outward toward them and she ducked it as James fired the grenade right toward the center of the underbelly where the blue lights were the most intense.

They didn’t wait for the explosion to take it out, they just moved. More of the mechanical beasts were unfolding and beginning to hum forward. They were focusing on the center—where Tony, Wanda, and Steve were. Or at least that seemed to be where they were going.

One of the mechs had toppled over. It wasn’t burning or destroyed. It was just—dead seeming. No lights were on. She hit James’ arm and motioned to it. Though his expression tightened, she adjusted course and headed for it.

Chatter over the comms told her everyone was alive. Veronica had arrived and Tony was currently pounding his way through the tentacled mechs. Heat was rising around them, the fires warming the air.

“We’re still working our way to you, Steve,” she said over comms as she slid down next to the fallen beast. The things had to be twenty feet plus tall, but they weren’t using standard legs. They hovered—like Cooper’s Death Star. Not really flying so much as defying gravity to move. They lumbered. They lacked real finesse on any level.

“No lights were on. She hit James’ arm and motioned to it. Though his expression tightened, she adjusted course and headed for it.

“Just get clear,” Steve said, his voice a little breathless. “Containment is the goal right now.”

“Iron Legion will be here in ten,” Tony added. “We just need to keep them from getting out.”

“They’re not going anywhere,” Clint added. “Two made it outside. Two went down. What else do you got?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” James said as she eased between the tentacles toward the belly. Without the blue light to hide it, she could see the seams in the paneling.

“Yeah?”

“Do we get paid for this?”

She grinned. “Not really.”
“Huh.” Another blast, this one so close the heat washed over them and James’ metal hand covered the back of her head. “You want to tell me what we’re doing?”

With a small penknife, she worked it into the seam. “I want to see what’s inside…”

“Right now?” The skepticism rifling the word pulled another smile from her.

“You have something better to do?” She asked not looking at him as she worked the leverage. If she wasn’t worried about destroying some components on the other side, she’d have James just punch through it.

He didn’t answer immediately, but she felt him more than saw him move. The blast of the M4A1 confirmed his choice. Then another explosion and he was kneeling next to her again. “I was thinking… sleigh ride, Central Park. Now bear with me, it’s cold, I get that. Really cold. But heated blankets, hot cocoa—we can take yours if you like or buy some. I won’t be fussy.”

“You won’t huh?” She had it, the panel gave and she gritted her teeth as it finally popped off. “Don’t prefer my cocoa like everyone else?”

“I prefer everything about you to everyone else, but I figure a date shouldn’t be work for you Doll.”

“Are you two really having a dating discussion right now?” Sam demanded, almost incredulous.

Natasha didn’t laugh though a chuckle worked through her as she got the panel open and then pulled on it. James reached past her and ripped it down the rest of the way so she could half crawl into the guts.

“Got something against sleigh rides, Sam?” She asked even as James latched onto her ankle but didn’t pull her back as she worked her way in. The inside looked like a cross between the quinjet’s flight panels and the interior of a console on the hellicarrier. Micro processors—

“Sleigh rides are fine, you can cuddle, but I’m thinking not so fine when we’re working.”

“You said we should talk about our needs,” James razzed him.

“No?” Sam and James echoed each other.

“Tony,” Natasha said, gritting her teeth as she stretched her hand and grasped the device, it took some hard twisting—though as she jostled it the whole panel lit up around her and James swore. “Leave me here,” she ordered then wrenched hard to pop the device out and the whole thing collapsed again with a jolt.

“I’m listening Red, kind of busy though so can you make it snappy.”

Someone was peeved.

She was about to make his day worse.

“ARC reactors—looks like an older model.” She shoved the reactor into a pouch, then twisted herself in and grabbed the hard drive. That didn’t want to budge so she wedged a knife in for leverage and gripped it. “James, haul me out of here.”

She didn’t have to ask twice he yanked her, she yanked it and it unplugged and she had it. Holding
it up with a small grin, she said, “Thank you.”

He shook his head, snagged it and shoved it inside his vest before saying, “Can we go now?”

“Sure… and I like sleigh rides. They’re sweet.”

With a huff and a roll of his eyes, he took point. Vision had cut around them at one point, because he was just behind them knocking the mechs into each other. Another whirled as they went to circle it to continue to the gang and then the whine of its repulsors winding up, had Natasha raising her Glock. The familiar song of vibranium raced toward them and the shield slammed into the forward sensors. James leapt and caught it on the rebound then whipped it out to slice off the tentacles. It ricocheted and then Steve caught it as he slid in front of them and blocked another blast.

“I told you both to move it…” he chided.

“You said to work our way out,” James corrected. “We’re working.”

“We’ve got movement on the west side,” Sam warned. “Three of those mechs are…”

“Watch your six, Sam. They have heavy repulsors that fire like Tony’s suit. Slow targeting, soft underbelly. Sensors on the main body, take those out and they can’t seem to get a lock.”

“Good to know,” he yelled and the sound of fire rippled over the comms. “They seem to be locking just fine… excuse me while I cut in to bring these two…” An explosion echoed. “Much better. They apparently don’t know not to fire on each other.”

The Iron Legion chose that moment to arrive and it became a mop-up job. Sweat dripped down the back of her neck from the multiple fires around them, but the Legion had already begun to extinguish them. Tony disassembled Veronica and sent her back to her satellite. Natasha hadn’t seen the heavy armor in a long time.

Kind of weird to see it now. He stood over one of the downed mechs with Wanda watching his back. The guts were ripped open, but the equipment had blackened and fused together either from an external blast or when some fired on it.

“I want all of it. Buy the warehouse if we have to,” he was saying. “Then send in the cleanup crew. Yeah, I know—call it an early Christmas present for me.” Then he turned toward Steve. “Red was right.” He held up the damaged ARC reactor. “This would have powered the Mark III, won’t work with what I’m running now but… I need to find an intact one. This is already fried.”

“Speaking of early presents.” Natasha pulled the one out of her pouch. “Heads up, Shellhead.”

She tossed it to him and he caught it in both hands. His expression grew grimmer. Then James passed over the hard drive wordlessly. “I went to San Francisco and all she got me was this lousy imitation ARC reactor. And a hard drive.”

“You’re welcome.” Pivoting, she gave Wanda a once over. Sweaty, cheeks smudged with soot, panting for a breath, but she wore a grin. “You good?”

“I’m—really glad they weren’t bombs…” She blinked a moment, then looked at Tony. “They aren’t bombs, nuclear or otherwise right?”

“Yeah, no. Not bombs. Just—crappy construction, poor materials, and I’m going to guess terrible programming on top of being stolen intellectual property.”
“Stolen?” Steve shifted to stand next to him as Tony turned the ARC reactor over in his hand.
“From?”

“Peter… and me.”

Natasha frowned. “His robotics project?”

Tony nodded.

She pivoted pulling her phone out of a pouch and dialing May Parker’s number uncaring of the time. It rang three times and then his aunt answered the phone. “Do you have any idea what time it is blocked number?”

“Yes, Ms. Parker,” she said, aware that May went by her married name. “My apologies, this is Nadja Rasmussen, Mr. Stark’s assistant, he needs to speak to Peter on a very urgent matter. I’m sorry it couldn’t wait until morning—” She dropped her voice a bit. “You know how eccentric he can be.”

“Oh, I know how eccentric he is… is it really urgent? Peter has school in a couple of hours.” Time differences sucked.

“I’m very sorry, but he’ll probably fire me or just show up at your front door if I tell him I couldn’t get through.” The accent fell into place naturally as she spoke. Around her, the Legion was putting out fires with Sam and Clint making their way inside. They’d apparently taken long enough for them to come looking.

“Oh. That man. Yes, you’re probably right. You know, you should tell Mr. Stark, he’s a great guy to take such a personal interest in Peter and I really appreciate all the opportunities he’s giving him, but he’s fifteen years-old and he has school. I would also appreciate that he remember that and not need to speak to him at five in the morning.”

“I will absolutely pass on that message.”

“Peter,” May said on the other end of the phone. “Peter—Mr. Stark is on the phone for you.”

“What? Mr. Stark—where?”

“The phone, Peter… here.” There was a fumbling then. “Hello? Mr.—I mean Tony. Sorry, sir… what?”

“Peter,” Natasha said firmly. “Listen to me and don’t say a word.”

“Wh—”

“Not a word. Look at your aunt, tell you’re sorry, you forgot to do something and you just need to take care of it and then you’re going back to bed. Word for word. Say it.”

Peter repeated it, word for word then May let out a huff and said she was going back to bed, just put her phone in the kitchen. He promised.

When the sound of the door closing echoed across the phone, she said, “Don’t say anything else. Your laptop, your StarkPads, your phone—everything digital you’ve brought into and out of the Tower, anything you’ve worked on your Robotics project with. Power them off. Now.”

“Okay.”
His breathing huffed over the line and she moved when Steve pressed a hand to the small of her back. He pointed to the doors and she nodded. They were cleaning up, and she walked, phone to her ear, listening as Peter did as she asked. James was a half step behind her and Clint met them as they reached the doors. Outside, the cool air washed over her and she sucked in a deeper breath of clean air.

It really had been full of soot, smoke and burning metal inside. The Iron Legion ringed the area, save for those inside, and they were in defense mode. They barely took notice of the three of them after the initial scan.

“Okay,” Peter said. “Done.”

“Do you have a radio receiver? An older model that picks up FM and AM?” He repurposed a lot of abandoned tech.

“Yeah…”

“Grab it, we’re going to scan your room, then your apartment—everywhere except where May sleeps. Then you scan it as soon as she’s out of the house.”

Dead silence.

“Yes, Peter. Someone may be bugging you and listening to your conversations. Don’t worry, we’re going to fix this. I’m in San Francisco, and I will be at your apartment as soon as I get back to New York. Until then, I need you to do this. If you identify anything transmitting—leave it where it is.”

“Yeah, okay, Mr. Stark. But I have a big project due this morning and Ned and I were supposed to get together to work on the Mecha.”

The Mecha. Good Peter.

“You may need to scan Ned’s place. I can help with that, too. You back everything you work on up, right?” He would, he was too meticulous. She’d seen that in the reports.

“Of course,” he almost sounded insulted she’d ask—and far more awake.

“Good. My next call is Happy, I’m going to get him to bring you clean devices, you can restore key files, not your Apps. Some of those may have been compromised so just download the ones you absolutely have to have from Tony's servers. Friday will make sure they are clean.”

She rubbed the back of her neck when a whine-whine noise crackled over the line.

“Mr. Stark?” The faint note of panic tugged at her. Then he said, “Sorry, I was trying to tweak the radio, but it’s a little buggy sometimes.”

“Your room or main apartment?”

“Mine.”

“Sweep the rest. You can do this. Just mark where they are. Does May work today?”

“Double shift,” he admitted. “She goes in after 2. I think.”

“You’re meeting with Ned after school?”

“Yeah, going over to his place.”
“I’ll take care of it.” She checked the time. “Can you handle this from here?” Because she’d stay on the line if he needed her.

“I got it, Mr. Stark,” he said almost wryly. “Sorry about whatever it was I did that screwed everything up…”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” she promised him. “We’re going to fix this.”

“I’ll get on the rest of this…” Then he paused. “Is…” The hesitation was marked. “I have to return May’s phone to her.”

“It’ll be fine. Friday is monitoring.”

“I am, Ms. Romanoff and I have updated, Karen. Peter should make sure he takes Karen’s comm unit with him today.”

“Peter… take Karen with you today. Keep her on you at all times.”

“And I really didn’t screw up?” The need for reassurance and the confidence to ask for it. Good kid. There was a whine from the radio wherever he’d moved to. A second listening device.

“You really didn’t screw up. I’ll see you in a few hours, all right?”

“Be safe.”

“Always.”

She hung up and pivoted to meet Tony’s gaze. “He fine?”

“There was at least one listening device in his room and one more. He’s sweeping his place. We need to clean his apartment and probably Ned’s too since he had the devices there. How compromised is the Tower?”

“Not even. Friday jams any unknown signals, so they wouldn’t have been able to pick up anything until after he left.” Anger tinged his voice.

“How close are those things to his project?” Steve asked as he joined them, shield on his back.

“Near exact replicas, cheap, poorly made—but the base design is all there and if they rolled out…” He stared toward the city. “They would have caused chaos and some destruction. They went down easily enough, but…”

“Terror doesn’t need it to do mass damage.” It just needed to scare the hell out of people and this attack had been successful despite the fact they’d stopped the mechs. She rolled her head from side to side. “We need to help with the civilian evacuations, to turn them around…”

“Already working on it,” Steve said. “Wanda, Vision, Sam, and I are going to head out there. You two need to get back to New York.”

Natasha frowned.

“Clint’s flying, Buck’s going for backup—you’re both exhausted and you have that meeting with the United Kingdom delegates today.” The fact Steve remembered that when it had utterly slipped her mind had her blinking. “See,” he said, his smile gentle. “You’re tired.”

“I can’t head back,” Tony said rousing all of a sudden. “Who’s going to take all of that apart?”
“Vision can handle it. You’ve got people coming, and the Iron Legion is here to secure it. If necessary, Wanda can scrap them all. You’re needed in New York to cover the Peter angle and the Accords. Trust us. We’ll take care of all of this.” A long look passed between the pair and Tony nodded.

“Fine. Friday—hand over operational directives to Captain Rogers for the Iron Legion. Maintain a presence here to secure this warehouse and dock. Deploy the rest to where he decides they need to be.”

“Confirm directive control authorization to Captain Rogers?”

“Confirmed.”

Decision made, Clint gestured with his thumb to the quinjet he’d brought. That would leave their quinjet with Steve and his crew. Tony studied the warehouse a beat longer, then pivoted and headed aboard, talking to Friday.

She might have to knock him out to get him to sleep. Clint followed him, but Steve’s light grip on her arm kept her from joining them.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey…you’re good, right? No injuries?”

“Barely even a bruise.” She was pretty sure. “Had some big brute watching my back when all Hell broke loose.”

James snorted. “I got a few bruises.”

With a chuckle, Steve pressed his forehead to hers. “Go back, sleep on the way back if you can. You were with the French all damn day, then this…you need rest.”

She didn’t scold him for the concern. He’d kept it in check while she was on the mission. “I’ll see what I can do…hopefully, the Brits are more reserved than the French.” Or they would be worse.

“Friday when is that meeting scheduled?”

“It was scheduled to begin at eleven, but I can push a request for a later meeting time as your flight will land only an hour and a half before you would need to be at the embassy.”

And she still needed to sweep Peter’s place.

“Clear it with Tony, then see if we can push them to one?”

“I’ll take care of it, Ms. Romanoff.”

Steve smiled at her. “Thank you.”

“You be safe… crazy things happen to people when they’re scared and you have a lot of scared people out there.” She should stay.

“I know, we’ll be fine.”

“You sure you don’t want James to stay and help?”

“I’m sure. Now go on, we’ll be back as soon as we get this sorted out here.”
That could take a while. “Party’s on Friday, Captain. I expect you to dance with me.”

“I wouldn’t miss it, Angel.” He gave her a kiss then a nudge. “Go.”

“We need to track down these Bastards.”

“Language,” he chided with a teasing grin. “We will. Now go, before I ask Bucky to carry you on there.”

He would, too.

Both of them.

Rolling her eyes she gave him a wink, then headed to the ramp with a little extra sway in her step.

“You know what, Romanoff?” He laughed.

She glanced over her shoulder and grinned. She did indeed know.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” James told him.

“How can I? You’re taking all the stupid and the gorgeous with you.”

Natasha laughed as she walked up the ramp, the tired crashed around her. The post-adrenalin rush fall and she made her way up to where Clint sat in the pilot’s seat.

“You’re not flying, go sit your ass down and sleep.” He flicked his fingers at her.

Tony was on his back, staring up at diagrams on a holo screen, his expression intent and still angry.

“I will… later, tell me about the Rumlow thing.” It had been bugging her since he mentioned it.

He frowned. “What?”

She glanced over her shoulder, James was still at the base of the ramp talking to Steve and Sam had joined them. Lowering her voice, she said, “You said Rumlow never got over me handing him his ass…”

Clint nodded. “Yeah? It was pretty spectacular.”

“I don’t remember that.”

At all.

Silence.

He searched her gaze, then exhaled, “Fuck… I went… I went home for a few days after that. You were… you were still in lockdown.”

“When you came back I’d handcuffed myself to a bed.”

There was a reason she didn’t remember it.

“Fuck.” Clint’s knuckles went white.

The soft scuff of a boot told her James was right behind her. He’d probably heard everything. When she met his gaze, she read the concern there, and like Clint, the anger.
“Well, at least now we have confirmation.”

They had been screwing with her after she got to SHIELD. It made sense. Only a fool would have thought otherwise, but… she’d lacked confirmation.

“Nat…”

“Nope, it’s all good. It’s the past.” She was a little numb. Weariness crashing in as her adrenalin crashed out. “But I want to hear that story. It sounds like a good one.”

The look Clint gave her told her it wasn’t over, even if he let her get away with it for now.

She squeezed his good shoulder gently, then turned. The ramp was closing. Steve was already gone. So was Sam. When James caught her hand, she let him tug her over to sit. They had a long flight back.

And an even longer day to follow.
Clint shaved some time off the flight, setting down on the landing deck on the penthouse level at a quarter until nine. Though she’d taken most of the flight to actually fall asleep, Natasha opened her eyes the moment the engine cycles changed. Bucky’s expression tightened as she rose. She was still in her tact gear, though she’d stripped down the weapons. When she would have picked up the duffel she’d packed them in, Bucky usurped it.

“Tony,” Natasha said, nudging him with her knee. The engineer had surprisingly slept, and he sat up hair askew and eyes bloodshot. “Go in, go back to sleep. Friday will nudge you at eleven. We have to be at the British Embassy at one.”

“I have some work to do…”

“Another hour. Then you can do it.”

“Red…”

“Final offer. Move. I need you thinking coherently if you’re backing me up. If Sir Winston is anywhere near as boring as Adrien, you need it or you’ll pass out during the meeting.”

Smirking. Tony raked a hand through his hair as he stood. “You know, I can get away with sleeping.”

“Go,” she told him.

“Peter…?”

“I’m going to change and go now. I’ll hit Ned’s place. Pick up the bugs, all of it and I’ll secure it to examine later.”

The hell she was. Though neither Clint nor Bucky argued with her as she bullied Tony off the quinjet.

“Ninety minutes,” Tony said to Friday as he climbed the steps toward his room leaving them with
a half-wave. “Not a minute longer.”

“Understood Boss.”

In the elevator, Bucky said, “Steve’s floor please, Friday.”

“Of course, Sergeant Barnes.” Then she added, “Thank you, Ms. Romanoff.”

“If he actually sleeps, thank me then. Any word from Happy?”

“Mr. Hogan took care to deliver the new devices to Peter and gave him a ride to school. I took the liberty of setting them up. Mr. Hogan is also on his way to pick up Ms. Parker and take her to an early lunch. He will notify me when you’re clear.”

“Thank you, Friday.”

Yeah. Clint caught Bucky’s eye and the other man shook his head. When the elevator doors opened, she was already unzipping her tact suit and heading for her room.

“Give me a minute with her?” he asked, and for the first time, it was a little like stepping on someone else’s toes.

Bucky nodded. “I’ll make coffee. You hungry?”

“I could eat. She definitely should.”

“Yep.”

Clint let himself into her room and shut the door. Her tact suit lay abandoned in a heap by the dresser. The shower was on, so he knocked on the door once before he opened it and leaned back against the wall.

“I don’t want to talk about this right now…”

“Then listen,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, Kid. I screwed up.” He’d talked her into surrendering herself. She’d been out. She’d been free of them—Hydra, the Red Room, everything and he brought her back to them.

The protracted silence dug at him. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” she said finally.

“Bullshit, Nat. You—you were free and I…”

“I was dying, Clint.” The sober words locked the emotion in his throat. “Inch by inch for years… so no. You didn’t do anything wrong. You wanted to save me. In a lot of ways you did and—”

He snorted, tapping his head against the wall. “Nat, I brought you back to them.”

“You didn’t know.”

“I should have fucking known.” Why hadn’t he known? Fury. Coulson. Hill. He trusted them. Fury and Hill might have been the world’s dickish secret keepers and he couldn’t say he liked Fury much these days, but he didn’t think he had anything to do with Hydra then or now.
“With your advanced intelligence-gathering capabilities and measured interrogation techniques designed to pull what you need to know from your mark?” The water shut off. “If that’s the case, then what’s my piss poor excuse for not knowing?”

Despite himself, a smile pulled at his mouth. “Nat…”

She paced past him a towel wrapped around her hair and another wrapped around her torso. “When you had that arrow pointed at me and made me that offer… When I told you to get on with it and you asked me if maybe there was something else we could do… did you bring me in because you wanted to turn me over to Hydra?”

“Hell no.”

She pivoted to face him, her green eyes so clear and sharp as she locked gazes with him. “Are you Hydra?”

“No,” he answered flatly.

“Then you aren’t the one who owes me an apology.”

“I was supposed to have your back…”

“You barely knew me…”

“Then.” He snarled taking three steps toward her. “I barely knew you then. But I knew enough to bring you in and to give you my word, Nat. I said I would have your back and I would be with you every damn step of the way.”

“Well… I knew you couldn’t keep all of that promise.” She shrugged, then turned to the dresser door. “We both knew you wouldn’t be there for everything. Fury wasn’t your greatest fan.”

“No,” Clint admitted. Fury had her taken out and then he’d nearly taken off Clint’s head. If not for Coulson… “But I was there for nearly everything.” Everything they would let him be present for. They kept him out of the debriefings and her trips to medical. If he’d known then…

Fuck her trips to medical.

A hollow, wet laugh escaped her. “There’s an irony in all of this…”

“I fail to see it.” Nor did he find any of it funny.

“If I hadn’t been there and if you hadn’t brought me in—I wouldn’t have vetted Tony or been there to backup Steve when it came to taking SHIELD down. Remember what Fury said when we walked into his office?”

They’d made it all the way through the Triskelion with her jacket over her cuffed wrists hiding the bracelets. He’d used his clearance to empty the elevator, then taken her straight to Fury’s floor.

“Are you trying to kill me, Barton? Is this what you call a joke?” Then the man had planted his hands on the desk and glared right at her. “Or are you trying to take down SHIELD? You do know what she’s capable of, don’t you?”

When she turned to face him, clean clothes in hand, she wore the smallest smile.

“Apparently I lied to him that day…”
She chuckled. “But you didn’t know. Neither of us did.”

“You still took them down.”

“A little too late… then again, maybe everything happens for a reason.”

He crossed to her and grasped her biceps. “I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t.” No doubt marred her eyes or her tone. “I know Clint, just like I know that if you’d had even an ounce of suspicion…”

“I’d have burned them down myself.” He nodded, but it didn’t absolve him of his complicity. “Still… I keep thinking of that day I came back.”

“Don’t do this to yourself, please. You didn’t do this…”

“You said that after Loki and it was still me. I was the one who gave Loki your secrets. I was the one who led the team onto the ship. I was the one who facilitated the other guy breaking free and he almost killed you. Loki did kill Coulson. Nat, you can tell me until the day I die that it wasn’t me, but it was. You and I both know it. You don’t want me to hurt or to feel guilty. God knows I love you for everything you try to cover up for me to make me feel better about myself. Whether it’s being a crap husband or a shitty partner…”

“Are you done?”

“Hardly, but get dressed anyway.” The comment pulled a reluctant smile from both of them. He moved over to the windows and looked out over the snowy city. The sun shone. The snow would melt during the day and freeze at night. Another storm was coming soon enough. Another storm was always coming.

“James is cooking,” she murmured as the scent of bacon invaded.

“You need to eat,” Clint said. “Then you need to get some sleep so you can razzle and dazzle the Brits today.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve gotten by on…”

“Just don’t.”

“You’re in a mood.” The teasing note in her voice beckoned for him to come out and play. She wanted him to let it go. The problem was, he’d let it go too many times. He’d let her distract him or push away his concerns. Natasha had a gift for making the best of the worst situations.

“You could say that…”

The door to the bedroom opened after a light knock. “Food is ready for you two. Come finish the disagreement out here so I can tell Natalia I agree with you and she can stay here and sleep while we take care of Peter’s place and his friend Ned’s.”

Well. Bucky seemed to have no trouble with making his wishes clear.

“James,” she began as she padded out of the room barefoot. She’d pulled on leggings and an oversized sweatshirt that hit her at mid-thigh. Nat would never stop stealing other people’s clothes. It was one of her adorable traits.
“Sit,” Bucky told her, pointing to a chair with a plate full of food and a steaming mug of tea next to it. Then he nodded to another setting with bacon, eggs, toast, and what looked like fried potatoes. The man was fast. The smell of it hit Clint’s system like a truck. Bucky added a mug of coffee next to it, then sipped on his own.

“We’ve had the discussion about me not being a dog,” she said, giving Bucky an arch look as she propped one knee onto the chair but didn’t actually sit down.

“We’ve also had the discussion about the fact that just because you won’t listen to reason doesn’t mean we have to do it your way.” He met her stare for stare and didn’t blink.

Smirking, Clint sat down slowly and extended his leg. He’d been pushing it, but so far it was all holding up. The brace was his for the next couple of months at least, but between Dr. Cho and the therapists, he might not spend a year in recovery. Six months was still six months shorter than the surgeons in Switzerland warned him about.

“Don’t look smug,” Nat warned him. “James agrees with me more often…”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Clint said, reaching for a fork. “I happen to approve of this boyfriend.”

“Oh, now you approve.” She snorted.

“When he’s doing what I like, yes, I do.” At her roll of the eyes, he grinned but it was fleeting.

“Nat…”

“Stop,” she said before putting her fork down. “You didn’t know. I didn’t know. How were you supposed to?”

“Because they weren’t erasing my mind. I saw the signs…” Looking back, he could attribute a lot of odd little things to what had been done to her. “But I just assumed…”

“That I’m a difficult and emotionally distant woman who doesn’t really value people over the mission.”

Bucky’s expression hardened. Word for word, what Matt had said to her.

“I know who I am, Clint. I may not know who all I’ve been, but I know exactly who I am. I do value the mission. I compartmentalize. I don’t get close easily. I rarely trust.” She flicked a look at Bucky. The man in question dropped onto the chair next to hers with his own plate, but he nudged her fork with a look. She picked it up, then looked at Clint again. “I know who I am. You wouldn’t have known because you were trying to get me to open up. What I wouldn’t share whether I knew about it or not is easily dismissed as me being difficult.”

“You regressed in your progress during my first week-long trip home after I brought you in.” He’d been stuck at the Triskelion for weeks after bringing her in. Laura had understood but had also been frustrated with the fact he couldn’t leave. When Nat finally had started making some progress and Clint had been working out with her more and more regularly, he’d thought it was a good option. Coulson was there, he’d keep an eye on her and then… “I should have known something more happened than just me leaving.”

“Would you like me to hit you?” Bucky offered nonchalantly.

Nat paused mid-bite to glance between them, but Clint only shrugged. “Honestly,” Clint answered. “I’m tempted. I deserve it.”
“Can be arranged.” Then the other man focused on Nat. “Finish your food. Lie down and sleep. Friday will lock down the Tower. Clint and I will do the clean sweep on Peter’s place and on his friend’s. We can do this for you. We can’t handle the negotiations or the delegates. But this we can do. Should one of us follow Peter after school?”

“Fine,” she caved so fast, Clint had to lean back in the chair. “As for following him, no, you don’t have to. He’ll have Karen on him and she’ll be monitoring him and jamming any unknown signals.”

“So just like that, you listen to him?” He stared at her.

“She likes me more. Must be the sex,” Bucky told him without missing a beat.

There was a split-second of silence then all three of them laughed. “I might be jealous,” Clint admitted. “I usually have to yell to get that kind of cooperation.”

She flipped him off and Bucky hooked his foot through the rung of her chair. Territorial and protective, Clint recognized the signs well.

They ate in relative silence after that, but Clint couldn’t shake the concern eating away at his stomach lining. He’d missed all those signs. He’d missed—he’d missed them tampering with her. To what end? What had they been doing? Damaging her memory to keep her from talking about them? Repurposing her—fuck the thought made him sick—and sending her on missions? Wiping her from missions they’d used her on?

She’d been his partner. In the first few months, she’d never been allowed solo ops. They’d always gone out together, she was his responsibility. Sure he’d had missions without her. Glorified milk runs, then again Fury had always been sticking it to him in subtle ways even if he ended up valuing Natasha.

Glorified milk runs.

Had those been when they had used her? Had they triggered her? Did they have some code words hidden out there, which could wipe out his Natasha and turn her into…

“We need Fury,” he said into the silence, very aware of the fact both Bucky and Nat stared at him a beat later. “Hear me out…”

“I’d rather not,” Natasha cut him off.

“I get that,” he said, meeting her gaze and setting his fork aside. The food sat like a hard lump in his stomach anyway. “But you have a lot on your plate, this whole thing with the delegates and the Accords, and you’re just barely recovered from playing the role of a Duracell. We need Fury.”

Mutiny filled Natasha’s expression and she went white knuckled where she held the fork. Clint didn’t look away, not even when Bucky covered her hand with his and her gaze softened—a fraction maybe, but it still softened. This was Nat and Clint didn’t give a damn what they’d done to her, she’d never hurt him. They’d been close for too long and he knew her too well. While not quite angry, she was resistant because Fury had burned his bridges with her.

“Hear him out, lyubov moya.” Despite the encouraging words, Bucky warned him with a stare.

Yeah, he didn’t need the warning, he got it. “Even when I was gone, milk runs, home to Laura, Fury was there… Look, he’s an asshole. Fury is cold and meticulous and he plays five steps ahead in the game. It was why you used to respect him, why I respected him. All that said, Fury only ever
cared about protecting the greater good. Maybe his methods sucked, but he was on the right side.” Elbows on the table, Clint leaned forward. “But he was there. He knew who saw you, who didn’t—he’d know what missions, if any, you were sent on? I don’t like him. I hate what he did to you—he should have told you he was alive and not put you through that. But we need him, Nat. We need him to answer those questions.”

“She doesn’t need to talk to him,” Bucky said decisively.

“Maybe not at first,” Natasha answered before Clint did. “But we both know he’s been trying to get me to sit and hear him out. If we need these answers… I will have to talk to him.”

“You won’t be alone,” Clint was a half-second behind Bucky on that statement, but the other man grinned at him.

Natasha pushed her plate away, then rubbed her face before she took a long swallow of the tea. “I don’t want to need to talk to him.”

“I know. I’ll do it.” Clint had nothing to lose in the conversation. Fury wanted access to Natasha. He’d take Clint’s call. From there… No what if’s or if only’s, he’d just start with there.

Pushing away from the table, she rose. Leaning down, she wrapped an arm around Bucky and met his kiss as he raised his face to hers. Clint focused on his coffee and hid a small smile. One thing he never thought he’d get to see—her settling into a real relationship that was good for her. Her happy, because despite everything else going on around her, she had something solid to ground her.

Former Winter Soldier notwithstanding and the fact she had two boyfriends to boot, it was good.

“Clint,” she murmured as she circled the table and rested a hand on his shoulder. He caught the hand and squeezed it.

“I know, I’m an idiot.”

She pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “I was going to say thank you. But you’re an idiot works, too.”

He chuckled. Then she was gone with a whisper of sound and the door to her bedroom closed behind her.

Expression cool, Bucky met his gaze. “We need to talk.”

Yes, they did. Clint nodded. “Roof?”

Another nod.

They cleaned up silently. Bucky had shed most of his tact gear, but Clint hadn’t had time yet. They pulled on jackets and took the elevator with Friday promising to lock down the floor and keep watch. The sun was bright and the air bracing. Bucky extracted a pack of cigarettes from his jacket and lit one. It had been a short bit since the last time Clint saw him smoke.

Finally, Bucky faced him. “Do you trust Fury? Or do you really think he was in on it?”

Whatever Clint said next would likely decide whether Fury faced another assassination attempt and this time, Clint would bet on Bucky.
The fact he, once again, had to discuss the former director of SHIELD didn't sit well with Bucky. The man’s sudden appearance in New Orleans had left a bad taste in his mouth. Fury wanted leverage over Natalia. Maybe he wanted it for all the right reasons in the world, but a leash was a leash whether it was made from chain metal or the softest of silks.

No one was doing that to her again for any reason.

Clint took a moment obviously chewing over the wording of his answer. Probably a wise thing. Natalia faced enough challenges at the moment. She’d been almost too happy to be on the mission initially. It could have been the wild ride up with Tony—aggravation unwound in him all over again at the cavalier step. They could have landed the quinjet to pick them up.

Her chapped face and eyes shining with a too bright smile had been all that silenced him from cutting into Tony right then and there. When Steve realized what he was going to do, his reaction had been even more severe. But like Bucky, he’d shut it down when she looked so pleased to see them or from the dangerous ride or being aboard or on the mission—maybe some combination of all of the above.

There had been an energy to Natalia, controlled and calm amidst the chaos of stories, arguments, and multiple conversations. Even when everything went to shit in the warehouse, she’d been in the moment and he’d been right there with her. Exhilarating in a way he hadn’t been able to enjoy in a long time. Maybe the last time had been their ops in the late 70s and early 80s, before…

No, that was better not to be focused on right now when he needed to make a decision. Clint wanted to call in Fury for a reason. The man had intel on the situation at SHIELD—pretty shitty intel considering how long it took him to even notice Hydra, but no one asked Bucky. In theory, he might be able to provide some insight into who had been pulling Natalia in for conditioning and for what reasons, not that any of those mattered ultimately.

They’d done it.

Today, once again, her sense of self had been undercut. Every word they’d spoken in the bedroom had been audible to him. Just as he’d heard her admit she had no memory of the interaction with Rumlow. He blew out a long stream of smoke. The idea Rumlow had been around her, interacting with her day after day, made him sick.

That she’d been forced to forget something about him made his blood cold.

“My trust in Fury is conditional,” Clint finally said. “That’s difficult to admit. I trusted that man with my family.”

He’d trusted him with Natalia.

“And Nat. He abused one, but… my family was never compromised. Laura and the kids are safe and he helped me do that. He kept them out of SHIELD’s files, erased any tangible links so they couldn’t be traced to me.” Clint scrubbed a hand over his face. “Then he let Nat down. Compartmentalizing her as an asset rather than a friend or even a colleague. He didn’t trust her to read her in and he hurt her.”
Agreed. He made it worse by not listening to her when she said she was out and done.

“The thing about Fury—he’s a real bastard sometimes, he doesn’t trust, he questions everything, and his secrets have secrets. Yet, his goals they’re the right ones. Protect the innocent. Defend against tyranny. End terrorism. His methods aren’t always comfortable…”

“Not all tyrants look like tyrants,” Bucky said softly. “Some of the worst dregs of humanity have worn a pleasant face, earned trust, and exercised judicious caution for which they are then lauded even when those decisions cost thousands of lives.” Bucky had seen more than his share during the war and beyond… “I’ve installed tyrants to power and I’ve taken them out. One man—a father of five, a grandfather of a dozen and happily married for forty years—on paper he was pious, compassionate, yet firm and dedicated. In practice, he was a butcher who valued no life over that of his goals. When one of his children proved problematic, he had them killed. Though he did grieve quite generously at his wife’s side, the child defied him, so had to be cut out.”

“I hear you. I’ve seen plenty of assholes who would cheerfully backhand you with a smile on their face. Fury doesn’t take pleasure in hurting people. He doesn’t lack for empathy, even if he makes decisions that cut you. He isn’t doing it for joy. There’s a difference.”

There was.

“That said, I’ve spoken to him twice since SHIELD collapsed. Hell, I didn’t even know he was alive until Nat told me.” Which didn’t say a lot for the man’s trust in Clint. Or maybe about whether he needed Clint.

“Fine, let’s say you call him and bring him here or meet him somewhere secure…” Wherever they had this conversation, it needed to be secure. “What exactly is our goal?”

“I want to debrief him on Nat’s debriefing. I want to know who was assigned to her…”

“Weren’t you with her all those weeks?”

“Yes and no.” Clint moved stiffly as he began to pace. “Pretty sure Fury wanted to drop me in a cell and leave me there. Coulson spoke up for me. Fury made Nat my problem and me Coulson’s. I got to see her, but I didn’t get to sit in for everything. I watched some of the debriefings. They decided I was biased.”

“Do you remember everyone who interacted with her?”

“Fury, Coulson, occasionally Hill, a couple of the doctors, and me. Everyone else was compartmentalized.”

Bucky snorted and crushed the cigarette. “He compartmentalized everything, so you didn’t see it as a problem.”

“And he didn’t want me twisting anyone’s arms for information. Fury knew everything at SHIELD…”

“Except he didn’t.” So far Bucky wasn’t convinced. The reward had to truly outweigh the cost of Natalia having to deal with the man. “He didn’t know Hydra was there, that it had been there from the beginning. He didn’t know it had grown throughout the organization, invading everything it touched. For a man who claimed he trusted no one, how did he not see what was happening?”

And at the end of the day…
“I didn’t see it either,” Clint told him. Solemn pain reflected in those eyes. “I brought her in. She was out. She was free. Maybe her life wasn’t great… but I brought her back to where they could lay hands on her.”

The guilt ate at him.

“Do you think Fury will really answer the questions?”

“I don’t know, man. I don’t know much anymore. But he’s a thread we can pull. All I need is a direction.”

Natalia had dumped her file to the Internet, but if any of what they had done had been in there—Tony would have mentioned it long before now. Of that, Bucky had no doubt.

He’d finished one cigarette and smoked his way through most of a second as they stood there, neither speaking. There was no easy answer.

“I’ll feel him out,” Clint said. “I’ll meet with him. He doesn’t have to see her to answer my questions.”

“But you have to ask them and that will reveal a great deal to him.” It rattled him, baring Natalia to someone who had hurt her so deeply in the past.

“Fuck.”

“I agree we need to test the waters, but we can’t reveal anything without being certain of him.” Bucky never would be. The idea of simply putting bullets through him he couldn’t get up from this time danced across his mind. The Soldier still found it insulting that the target had survived while Bucky—Bucky was both impressed and wary. To survive him meant he was someone very dangerous indeed.

Before he could continue, his phone buzzed. Pulling it out of his back pocket he read the screen.

**Friday:** Mr. Hogan will be at Mr. Parker’s apartment in thirty minutes to take Ms. Parker out for lunch.

An address flashed below it. It wasn’t Peter’s, Bucky had been to Peter’s street a couple of times.

**Friday:** Mr. Leeds apartment with his family.

The number of family members, along with a few photographs gave him something to identify.

*Arrangements are being made to draw them out so the apartment will be emptied for you to scan.*

He texted back.

**Thanks, Friday. We’re heading to Queens now. Look after Natalia.**

**Friday:** I will. Do you want a report when they leave for the meeting with the British delegate?

**Yes. Regular status updates if you have them.**

**Friday:** I will do my best.

“Go time?” Clint asked.
Bucky nodded once then crushed out his cigarette. He sent a quick message to Steve to let him know the SITREP. He didn’t expect an answer. The city had been in chaos. Even if they managed to rein it all in by now, they still had the warehouse and most likely the need to locate the ones who called themselves the Bastard Sons.

Charming name.

He and Clint descended to gather a few items. Bucky hadn’t stowed all of his weapons. Then they made their way to the garage. By the time they reached Queens, May Parker should be out of her apartment.

Clean sweep the apartments, remove Peter’s electronics via the shielded bags and then install jammers Peter or his AI could activate. The same would be done at Leeds’ place sans the jammers because they might inhibit other devices.

“Doc Cho said what they did to her had to have been repeated often to leave the kind of damage she still has.”

Bucky nodded once.

“That means they did it at SHIELD.”

Another nod.

“Why keep doing it? Didn’t the crazy twins want her for some warped program? Wasn’t it Madame B who ordered the procedure?”

“Do you assume because I spent seventy years with those bastards that I have some insight into how they think?” Bucky drove. It was enough that Clint had been running around all night on the leg. Granted it didn’t hamper him as much as it had, but he wasn’t healed yet.

“Maybe? I don’t know. I can’t work my mind around it. Why do it? Why repeat the procedures? Why leave her active at SHIELD? They had her, they could have taken her back…”

“Could they?” Bucky considered the handlers he’d had in the last few years. “The technicians who dealt with me, they didn’t know as much as those who built the programs. Information was hoarded, carefully curated, and never shared. It might be stolen—like a lifted file or gathered intelligence—but what had brought me to heel in the first place?” Bucky shrugged. Alexei, Leonid, and Yuri had failed repeatedly in their efforts to replicate Natalia. Even the Smith character (or maybe one of the others) had shredded Petrovitch's files looking for clues. “They didn’t have it anymore. Put me in the chair, wipe me, give me commands, then throw me back into cryo. No finesse. No way to refine the programming. Part of that is why those other Winter Soldiers languished in cryo in Siberia for two decades. Everyone who knew about them was dead.”

“Except for you.”

Another shrug. “And one of my last KGB handlers. I suppose he escaped after the fall, taking my book with him.”

The book with the control words. Hydra hadn’t had those the last twenty years. They’d been stuck with brute force. No finesse.

“They didn’t know what to do with her.” They had never had any idea of what to truly do with her. Gifted, skilled, and trained with a highly-developed intellect, she surpassed every other Widow they tried to train. None of the girls measured up. “So they followed what few orders they had left
over from the Red Room, I guarantee you they didn’t even question why do it. They did it because it was a way to keep her under control. If she’d gotten pregnant, Clint, what would you have done?”

“Taken her to the farm. Found a way out for her.” He didn’t even hesitate in his response.

“Hydra wouldn’t have access to her. As long as she was at SHIELD, they had access to her skills.” Access they’d abused.

Thank God they’d never brought her to him during that time. He’d never been forced to harm her — save for when he encountered her in Odessa and later in D.C.

“The fact that even makes sense to me is enough to make me ill.”

“Because you have a conscience,” Bucky told him. “It’s no small thing.”

Leaning his head back, Clint said, “You know what worries me?”

“We will discover during the course of this that Natalia was made to betray all of you and then it was stripped away from her?”

Yes. It had occurred to him. They had an asset embedded with the Avengers, serving at the higher levels of SHIELD, trusted with solo ops that walked in a gray area and when Steve came back… she’d been at his back.

A laugh worked out of him and he snorted.

“What?”

“Pierce.”

Clint frowned. “What?”

“Steve was partnered with her after he became active again. They planted her right at his side, Fury for his reasons and Pierce and his ilk for theirs. She was perfectly positioned to take him out. But instead, she took them down. She faced off against Pierce that day… at least the way Steve told me. She went in, took out the STRIKE team that had the World Security Council hostage. Dumped SHIELD’s files… and all the while Pierce had to be looking at her and realizing he had lost control. She got Steve away, helped keep him alive when I was sent out…”

Bucky wished he could have seen his face and at the same time, he was glad the son of a bitch was dead. From the moment Pierce became his handler and primary director, the man had sparked a traitorous sense of loyalty in him. When he was younger, he’d reminded the Soldier of Steve on some level. No way they didn’t do that on purpose.

“She’s still determined to use Tony’s tech, isn’t she?” Clint said as they turned onto the street where Peter’s apartment was located.

“Yes,” Bucky said with a sigh. “Tony, however, has said no. Not until a neuro doctor clears her brain scans. Not after what happened on the quinjet.” For that, Bucky could kiss the man himself. Not that he’d said a word. Natalia’s disappointment had lingered in her eyes. “After the holidays, I’m taking her to Montana.”

“You’re going to show her the cabin.”
He nodded and found a spot on the street to park.

“Think it might spark something?”

A shrug. “I can tell her stories. I can show it to her. I can give her back that piece even if she never remembers.”

“If she never remembers…”

“I know,” Bucky said, putting the vehicle into park. “Sometimes I wonder if I am being selfish wanting her to remember knowing full well that not every memory I got back is one I wanted.” Hers would be worse if he went by some of the ones he recalled now.

“You can be selfish or not, Nat’s going to do what Nat does.”

Yes.

She would.

“Shall we?” They left the car and made their way inside. The apartment was on the third floor. Climbing the stairs threw him back, he could almost taste the Italian cooking away on the first floor. Wood polish scented the air on the second. There was a faint haze of burnt toast lingering around Peter’s apartment. Clint got the door open easily. Friday had given them the alarm code so they turned it off and split up to search the apartment.

Bucky tried to not look too closely at the afghan on the sofa, or the stack of health journals mingled amidst the fashion magazines. The furniture was well-used, careworn from time, but clean. Not everything matched, but it was lived in. Photos decorated the shelves—lots of Peter when he was younger. Natalia would get a kick out of the child he’d been.

There was one of him with two people who must have been his parents. He was very young, but they all had on baseball caps, foam fingers, and huge grins. A smile pulled at his lips as he looked at it. Family… Whoever May Parker was, she’d given Peter a family and a home in this place. Someone had invaded their privacy and security.

In Peter’s room, he found the equipment and bagged it. Then he located the listening device. No cameras. That was a small mercy. One planted just under the windowsill which was near his desk. Another under the lamp next to his bed. While the room wasn’t large, the dual placements would give them clear audio of the whole room.

Resisting the urge to crush them, he removed them and sacked them up. There was another picture of Peter and the woman who must be his aunt. She didn’t look the one in the living room. They were both making the most ridiculous faces.

Natalia would like her.

Equipment in hand, he moved on to the next bedroom. Since the bedroom belonged to Peter’s aunt, he stayed task-oriented. The woman didn’t deserve to have her privacy invaded anymore than necessary. He found only one listening device.

Returning to the living room, Clint was removing one from behind the television and his expression was grim. This was where the kid lived. They would learn who did it and make sure they never made such a foolish choice again.

All told, seven devices spread out over four rooms and one hallway. In the hallway, Bucky added a
small camera next to the hall light that would give an unobstructed view of their front door. It flashed a green light at him once. Friday had eyes.

Finished, they secured the apartment and carried Peter’s devices down to the car as quietly as they began.

“When we find the bastards who did that…” Clint scowled.

“Agreed.” But Bucky got the car started and headed for Ned Leeds’ address. His phone buzzed and he pulled it out to glance at it.

**Friday: The Leeds are out. You will only have about forty minutes.**

He showed the message to Clint.

“Plenty of time.”

Agreed. “Do you know how to contact Fury?”

“Maybe.”

Did they do it without telling Natalia? That was the question. She could be stubborn, but this was a different subject altogether.

“Not sure we should,” Clint admitted. “Even if I want to demand answers from him.”

He was not alone in this. “Keep thinking on it.” Natalia had enough on her plate, she did not need to deal with Fury unless absolutely necessary.

“What are you doing this afternoon?”

Bucky shrugged. “Waiting for Natalia and Steve.”

“Want to take a drive?”

Weren’t they doing that now?

“We take the quinjet to the Compound, drive out from there. Take a couple of hours and go take a look at some land?”

“Maybe.” Bucky found a spot on the end of the street. Ned’s place was a little more open. Houses with yards. They were going to stand out.

“Alley,” Clint pointed. As Bucky turned down it, they counted ‘til they found the right house. Rear garages. “We’ll be fast.”

Twenty-four minutes later, they were back in the car and pulling out of the alley. Ned’s place had no listening devices in it. His devices were also clean as far as Friday had been able to tell. The thumb drive she’d instructed he plug in allowed her to access it wirelessly and it also installed a security program, which would quietly improve the kid’s firewalls.

His phone buzzed as they began the trek from Queens back to Manhattan.

**Natalia: Leaving now. Miss you. Steve and team still in SF. May not be home tonight. I will be.**

*I’ll be waiting, Doll. Stay safe.*
She didn’t respond, but she didn’t have to.

At the Tower, they put the computers and listening devices in the secure safe Friday indicated. “How long is their meeting Friday?”

“Four hours was the scheduled time, Sergeant Barnes. Though Boss seemed to think it might take longer.”

It was one-thirty. If they took the quinjet, they’d still be cutting it close.

“We can go tomorrow…” Clint began, but Bucky shook his head.

“No, if I stay here, I’m going to start pacing the walls.” He wouldn’t sleep. Not with both of them gone and not together. At least when Steve and Natalia were together, he could rely on them to look after each other. “Let’s go. We can eat on the way.”

No, what he could do was find a place for them while they took care of saving the world.

That was his job.

Saving them.

**Steve**

Wanda swayed on her feet when Steve steadied her. “We’re done,” he told her firmly.

“There’s still…” She began, wrenching her bloodshot tired-eyed gaze toward him.

“Emergency services have it. You’ve gotten everyone clear. Vision and the Legion can handle what little is left.” He glanced at the android whose attention had focused on Wanda when Steve kept her from stumbling.

“I can indeed handle the rest, Captain.” Though he glanced briefly at Steve, his attention returned immediately to Wanda. “You should rest. You have been working ceaselessly without break on no sleep.”

It was late afternoon, almost fourteen hours since they’d cleared the docks and moved out into the city. They’d gone block by block, starting where the worst of the congestion and accidents began and just kept going. They’d gotten people out of damaged vehicles, handled hospital transport, put out fires, and wrangled frightened and angry people while also detaining looters and turning them over to the police.

Exhausting and thankless work that kept them all on their feet and moving. Rather than divide their resources, Steve kept them together. They moved as a unit supported by the Iron Legion. The armored support handled emergency situations perfectly. Their programming made them capable of directing traffic, evacuating any compromised buildings, and pitching in to support first responders. Steve had assigned several of the Legion to overwatch at the hospitals until police were able to arrive and provide security.
The flow of people out of the city had reversed and they’d been lucky. The numbers of the injured were high, but casualties appeared low. The real number may be days away, though.

“Sam,” Steve said into the comms. “We’re calling it.”

Friday had made arrangements for the team to use a residence outside the city, owned by Tony through a subsidiary. The place had the benefit of being close, stocked, and monitored by Friday. While he’d rather be heading back to New York, there was still work to be done here.

An hour after he called it, Sam and Wanda half-walked, half-stumbled into the house. Food arrived as they did. They ate because they needed the fuel, but if Wanda or Sam were anything like him, they barely tasted it. As soon as they’d eaten, he sent them both off for showers and sleep.

“Minimum eight hours of rack time,” he ordered.

Sam groaned. “Don’t have to tell me twice. Night.”

Wanda gave him a woeful look. “Can I just sleep right here?”

“No,” he told her, giving her a small smile. “Shower, get out of those clothes, Friday said there are guest things you can use. Get some sleep. You did great out there today. We wouldn’t have gotten through the warehouse without you and we really needed you out there on the streets. You did really good.”

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. “Thanks, Steve… you’re going to sleep, too? Right?”

“I will. Want to check in with Vision and call Nat, then I’ll be bunking down for a few hours, too. Trust me.”

With a nod, she shuffled off toward the stairs. At the door, she paused and glanced back, “Hey Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“It sounds weird, but... I think I liked today.”

“Doesn’t sound weird at all. We won today. That’s a good feeling.”

After she went upstairs, he touched his comms. “How we doing out there, Vision? Still handled?”

“I believe so, Captain. The city coordinator has informed me that they have relieved most of the major congestion. People are returning to their homes. The Legion and I have assisted in removing damaged vehicles from the travel lanes. The fires have been contained and they are confident the worst of the threat has passed. With your permission, I will make one more sweep then return with the Legion to the warehouse to begin cataloging the mechs.”

The android didn’t require rest like they did, but he should still take a break. “Don’t work all night,” Steve told him. “Everyone needs some downtime.”

“Understood, Captain, but I believe it better to be efficient in this case as I can remain operational while you sleep.”

“All right,” Steve said, not really in the mood to debate with Vision on the psychological necessity of taking a step back. “Contact me if there’s an emergency.”

Done, Steve pulled out his phone to check the messages, but before he could tab them open a
sound of movement had his shield off his back in hand as he pivoted.

“You’re a difficult man to track down, Captain,” Fury said as he stepped out of the trees running behind the house. An alert chimed in his ear as Friday detected the intruder’s presence.

“Been busy,” Steve said by way of greeting as he locked his phone and slid it away.

“I noticed.”

“What are you doing here, Nick?”

“I came to talk to you.” He walked forward slowly. “Heard about the trouble, figured you’d still be here doing cleanup—took a chance.”

“That’s a lot of trouble to make your way here just for a conversation.” Steve was too tired to play games, but with Fury, nothing was ever what it seemed. Add to that his continued appearances around Natasha but none of the rest of them, and it left Steve with questions.

“Some conversations are better handled in person.”

“Well, you know where I live…”

“I do. You and Stark made up. Got your best friend back. Got rid of Ross and put the Avengers back together. You’ve been busy.”

Steve just shrugged. “I see a job that needs doing…”

“I have a job for you, Cap. If you’re interested.”

He wasn’t. “Depends on the job.”

Nick smiled. “Got time to talk?”

“Are you leaving if I say no?”

“Maybe.” It was Nick’s turn to shrug. “Maybe not.”

No. The former director of SHIELD took the time to track him down; he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Then say what you have to say.”

Whether it was for effect or not, Nick looked surprised. “Not going to invite me in?”

“I don’t think I will.” After sliding the shield onto his back, he folded his arms. “What do you want, Nick?” He waited for it.

“To talk about things—the Avengers, the Accords… SHIELD.”

“So you have rebuilt it.” He didn’t ask and Nick’s lack of a direct answer was answer enough. Natasha was right, he’d probably been working on it since they took it down.

Nick’s good eye narrowed. He stopped about six feet away and Steve didn’t blink. His days of following Nick’s orders were long gone. The man couldn’t stop himself from lying to any of them.

“Lies still sound like lies. Stop trying to sell me on something. Get to the point. Like I said, I’ve been busy and it’s been a long day.” He wanted to check on Nat and Bucky. Wanted to hear her voice. He wasn’t going to get that with Nick standing right there.

“We need to talk about Natasha.”

There it was. He wanted to just tell him no and blow him off. He wanted to tell him to go to hell. But he couldn’t do those things without tipping his hand and revealing Natasha could still be used as leverage.

So all he said was, “I’m listening…”
The trip to the consulate had been uneventful. Without Happy to drive, Tony settled for handling it himself. Though they’d shared coffee before they left, he and Natasha hadn’t spoken much. She’d reviewed a StarkPad with data on it and he’d gotten the hard drive she’d acquired plugged in so Friday could begin tearing it apart. Sir Winston requested they avoid the circus they’d created at the French Consulate the day before. In a fit of pique, Tony half-considered making it worse, but Natasha talked him out of it with a single look.

Unlike Adrien, Sir Winston hadn’t tried to play games. The man was a grandfather and a long-time servant of the crown. The security sweep cleared Natasha of weapons—again—because she handed them to Tony in her purse. It amused him to no end that they didn’t bother scanning him. His ARC reactor set things off as did his watch. He wouldn’t be removing either.

Her bracelet might trigger the alarm, but they ignored it as jewelry. If they’d requested she remove it, he'd have made a stink. He was almost done with the new one for her. It would have more features, all he needed was a few hours in the lab.

Security also never tried to pat him down. What did surprise him, however, was when they asked Natasha if they could search her, she allowed the pat-down. Unlike her suit from the day before, she wore a dress today, more of a cowl necked sweater sheath in soft ivory that hugged every curve. Knee-length black boots and a knee-length black coat completed the effect.

Tony hadn’t missed the attention she’d received when she removed the coat to reveal the ivory dress beneath. Her red hair was piled up, neatly pinned though a pair of strands escaped to frame the sides of her face. Competent. Cool. Beautiful. Professional. Intoxicating. Provocative and she showed very little skin. The pat down had been handled discreetly. Sir Winston and his people were already winning points the Committee burned courtesy of Sharon’s warning and Adrien’s questionable behavior.

They skipped the isolation of a sitting room as well when Sir Winston ushered them into his office. It had been cleaned and likely anything of a delicate nature secured away, but they had a view of the city beyond and the tea flowed steadily—thank God they brought him coffee.

The conversation, though, that settled the agitated part of Tony that both wanted to be back at the
Tower tearing apart those designs and the hard drive to figure out who’d poached from the kid in the first place and the part that very much needed to be right where he was.

For the first hour, Sir Winston outlined the specific areas of the Accords he saw as beneficial. In the second, he asked them some rather pointed questions about what they wanted to change. In the third, over a tray of finger sandwiches and more tea, he turned the questions to Natasha directly.

“I feel as though I have gotten to know Mr. Stark over the last few months, but you and I have only ever had two real conversations before today, Ms. Romanoff.”

“Gerald, if you want to make this personal, you might as well call me Natasha.” Just looking at her, no one would ever suspect the day-long interrogation she’d endured the day before or a night of fighting much less the fact they’d been in this meeting for over two hours.

“Always business first, Natasha. You know this.”

“You both know something I don’t,” Tony muttered, eyeing first the delegate then Natasha. “You know how I feel about being kept in the dark.”

Natasha settled a hand on his arm and tapped a light message. “Gerald I met previously when I worked for SHIELD. There had been some uncomfortable issues with a splinter group that required delicate handling.”

He could translate her description any number of ways, but her message had been clear: *I saved his and his wife’s lives.*

“Indeed, Ellen asked that I pass along her well wishes, Natasha. When I saw you in Geneva, I was truly looking forward to working with you again—alas—our time on the Accords was unforgivably short.” Hands clasped together, Sir Winston leaned forward. “Due to our previous acquaintance, I am afraid I recused myself when perhaps I shouldn’t have.”

“Sir Winston, you and I both know that your first duty must be and always will be to the crown and to your family. I am not offended that you didn’t take up the defense of what many considered indefensible.”

“Perhaps, but I consider myself a decent judge of character. You may be a complicated woman, but as Ellen would say, one cannot enjoy the simple things truly if one cannot recognize the elegance in a complication.” The genial ease with which he said the words betrayed an affection not marred by lust or tainted by greed. Tony had kind of found the older man to be a bore, but not so much now. “That said, why didn’t you take credit for cracking open that smuggling ring and warehouse in London? You uncovered a great big mess for us, young lady. Then you merrily skipped off to Paris without so much as letting us thank you.”

She shrugged. “Are you sure that was me?”

“Natasha, we can play games about many things, but we are aware of what you did. No one else could have penetrated the group as swiftly or disassembled it so thoroughly. The files you uncovered… we have had to sweep away a generous amount of rubbish. Some of which we hadn’t even realized had collected in the corners.”

“If one is doing something as a favor, then yes you let the recipient know. Favors, of course, can and should be repaid. If one is sending a gift, you don’t have to sign the tag.”

Despite the grit in his eyes, Tony smirked. “Unless you’re me,” he added. “Trust me, when I give you things you’ll know.”
Sir Winston chuckled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Then he sobered and he returned his attention to Natasha. “What I am about to say is firmly off the record. It is not politic, it is not the word of the Crown or Prime Minister. These are my words… are we understood?”

Upon being admitted to his office, Tony had done the standard scan. Surveillance equipment was present, but limited to a single camera and recording. Sir Winston had also been explicit about the surveillance—a refreshing change—so Tony hadn’t tampered with it too much. All of the equipment, however, had been turned off just as the delegate changed the subject.

Crossing one hand over to rest on his wrist, he was ready to pull down the gauntlet if necessary—but he didn’t think it would be. Still, he’d learned the hard way that old men were far from toothless.

“Of course,” Natasha said, shifting forward in her seat. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“You took an awful risk, young lady.” Sir Winston’s genial kindness gave way to a stern frown. “You allowed that wretched man to hurt you. I understand why you did it, but I must urge you to never allow anyone that kind of power over you again.”

Surprise kindled in Tony.

“Do you really think he had all the power, Gerald?” She said with some amusement. “Truly?”

“Most likely not, but Secretary Ross is one of the single most unpleasant men I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting and I’ve served government since the 70s. I’ve met many unpleasant people. It didn’t do my heart any good to see you enduring torture.”

Not a memory Tony would ever forget, but Natasha’s gentle smile pulled him away from that dark cloud. “Thank you, Gerald. I am fine, however, and the former secretary is no longer a threat to creating Accords we can all live with.”

“Very true. Also, I am to inform you that the next time you come to London and do not call ahead to have tea with Ellen, she will be most cross with you. As it is, she will be most cross with me that she is currently in California with our granddaughter—she’s about to give birth to her first child and Ellen wanted to be there for her.”

“Please, pass along my regards and let her know that I would love to sit down to tea provided she can find those blackberry crumpets she served the last time. They were marvelous.”

“Good Lord, I’d half-forgotten those.” Tapping his desk once, he said. “Now to return to more pressing matters, I need to take a bit of a walk. I always go for a stroll this time of day. The weather outside means I must walk the consulate. While normally, I would invite you along—I thought you might enjoy some peace and quiet of your own after your busy night before we resume.” He pressed a button under the desk and a pair of doors to his right unlocked. “If you’d like to step in here…”

He opened the doors to reveal a sitting room, comfortably furnished and lined with bookshelves. It looked more like his haven than a place for meetings. A stack of files sat on the coffee table. “Plenty of reading material or perhaps you want to nap. There’s a water closet just through there if you’d like to freshen up.” A fresh tray of tea and water had been delivered a few minutes earlier and he set it just inside. “No one will disturb you. How does an hour sound?”

Natasha studied him and Tony divided his attention. The files were plain as day but Sir Winston didn’t once glance at them.
“An hour would be lovely, Sir Winston,” Natasha murmured keeping her voice formal. “Are you sure about this?”

“Of course. Consider it a gift if you wish. I must close these doors once you’re inside, but no one will disturb you until I return.” He caught her hand and gave it a squeeze, then nodded to Tony. Nat didn’t say anything as she moved into the room and made a show of examining the bookshelves.

“Mr. Stark,” he said to Tony as he followed her inside.

“Sir Winston.”

“One hour…” Winston reiterated, then he closed the doors.

Natasha glanced over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows. A quick scan of the room found no active surveillance.

Tapping the arm of the glasses tucked behind his ear, he said, “Friday, give me a secondary scan. Are we secure?”

“Secure Boss. The jammer for this section has been turned off. As has primary surveillance in the room you’re in. He re-engaged it for his office, though. I have eyes on it. No one is present. No heat signatures in the next room either. The room you’re in is on an outside wall. No window for directional mics.”

“We’re clean, Red.” He glanced at the table of files as Natasha moved to sit on the sofa in front of them. “Tea?”

“No, I’m swimming in it at the moment.” The faint laugh underscoring her words didn’t carry a lot of humor.

“Agreed.” He dropped onto the sofa next to her and reached for one of the folders. “What did he leave us?”

She’d flipped one open and began to scan the contents. “Profiles in this one. Other delegate members and he’s marked those he thinks we’ll have trouble with from the looks of it.”

“He’s sharing intelligence?”

“Possibly. He’s given us an hour. I can read a good portion of this but not all of it…”

“Then it’s a good thing you brought me along.” He pulled out his phone. “I’ll scan half, you scan the other half?”

“As if we didn’t already have reams of research to do…” But she already had her phone out and began snapping images.

They worked in silence. Then Natasha stopped snapping and started reading… He bumped her knee lightly with his own. “You can read when we’re done.”

“In a minute…”

Leaning over, he scanned what had her attention. Manifest of items removed from the warehouse in London as well as a dozen different company names who had property found amongst the warehouse contents. The name TitanCorp was at the bottom accompanied by a list of directors.

Tony frowned. “Ezekiel Stane.”
“Yeah, I saw that one. But I’m also focusing on this one…” She tapped her thumb to the name below it. “Sasha Hammer.”

A headache formed at the base of his skull. “Typical. Then again, I didn’t realize Justin Hammer had a child—”

“She corrected him. “His sister’s daughter, father unknown. Student at Oxford prior to Justin Hammer’s arrest and subsequent conviction. She kept her distance, publicly disowning him.”

“And hooking up with Stane’s waste of space kid.” He’d never liked Zeke. They were more than a decade apart in age, but Obadiah used to compare Zeke to Tony often—and never in Zeke’s favor.” With a grimace, Tony rubbed the back of his neck, careful to not mess up his hair. “I still need a haircut.”

“I know, I’ll take care of it later if we don’t have another call out. Friday, can you start tracking where these two are? I mean it may be nothing but those crates had TitanCorp logos on them.”

“Think it might be a misdirect?” Tony mused.

“I’ll see what I can find on them, Ms. Romanoff,” Friday answered promptly. “Ms. Potts has also asked if you’d be available for dinner this evening, Boss.”

“Probably not,” he answered absently as he returned to scanning the papers in front of him. He had a ton of work waiting back at the Tower already, and he still needed to get some of those mechs moved back here so he could tear them apart.

“You should take some time for yourself, Tony,” Natasha said as she resumed scanning the papers. There was a lot in this stack. Intel on delegates, companies, items that hadn’t been listed in the manifests or news that were confiscated from the smuggling ring Nat had broken.

“I am making time for myself. I’ve got to strip that hard drive, pull apart the ARC reactor, look at how they got into Peter’s equipment…” His teeth ground on the last. People wanted to come after him. Fine. Bring it. The kid was listed as an intern and they took his designs for a high school project—granted a very sophisticated design—and used it to mass-produce those shoddy mechs?

“That’s work.”


“You’re obsessed with what you do.” She paused on the second to last file and frowned as she read.

“A little obsession never hurt anyone.” He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. If it weren’t for the bugs at Peter’s place and the fact someone stole his work—and in turn, some of the ideas Tony helped Peter flesh out—he would have called the previous night a rousing success. The team had worked together beautifully, even if he hadn’t had eyes on Nat for most of it. She’d been right there to cut into the software, as she and Friday boxed the AI code and pulled up the location.

She’d also gotten him the ARC reactor out of one of the mechs along with the hard drive. He’d stated several times how vital she was to the team. Having her prove him right was the kind of thrill he enjoyed. That and the look on her face when they landed on the quinjet. She’d enjoyed her flight.

It contrasted sharply with the faint confusion in her eyes when she confessed to Clint she didn’t remember some incident that happened at SHIELD. A fact he couldn’t afford to focus on because Tony wanted to dig deeper into every single file he and JARVIS had ever harvested to find some
damn clue.

It also made him wonder why the hell he hadn’t done it before. The simplest answer was he’d never seen Natasha as a victim before a few months prior and it hadn’t occurred to him to look.

“Should I be jealous of that file?” Trying to keep his mind on the here and now, Tony asked after her continued silence. She’d been reserved, but seemingly fine when she joined him for coffee before they had to leave. As if the night before hadn’t exhausted them both. “It seems to have sucked all your attention.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

No. He didn’t either. Bracing an arm on the back of the sofa he leaned over to read. “Abigail Burns… never heard of her.”

“She’s an English activist—something of a subversive.”

“Subversive doesn’t equal bad, Red. I can be very subversive.” At this distance, he could whisper right into her ear.

She rolled her eyes and elbowed him. “Focus. We’re working. Not flirting.”

“I can do both, what’s your excuse?” She so rarely got exasperated with him, it was fun to see how far he could push before she shoved him back. Sometimes progress had to be measured in inches.

“Burns believes the world has to be saved from capitalism, corporate hegemony and the impotence of democracy—a frequent subject of her blogs and streaming content. She has gained a dedicated following as more mainstream media picks up her niche think pieces.” When she finished reading, she turned her head and met his gaze. “Corporate hegemony?”

“It means multinational corporations have pulled away influence from the nation-states and exert considerable influence across the globe. Corporations. Not governments.”

“I know what it means, Shellhead.” She shook the file once. “We, the Bastard Sons of Wilbur Day, advocate a violent and immediate revolution against a technologically based industrial-informational hierarchy designed from the boot at the neck of the proletariat up.”

“You know their little manifesto isn’t improved even when delivered in your sexy voice.” The corner of his mouth kicked up, but she didn’t smile.

“Corporate hegemony is very much a part of a technologically based industrial-informational hierarchy.”

He frowned. “Maybe if you squint and turn your head sideways. But convenient to get a file on a person who might be linked to a group we’d never heard of before yesterday?”

“One, there are no coincidences. Winston put this here with everything else for us to review and read. He is very well aware of where we were last night. Even if we haven’t filed after-action reports, it was all over the news. Two, this woman? Abigail Burns? She had a call scheduled with Pepper last Friday.”

Apprehension laced him and he plucked the file out of her hand. “Why would Pepper have a call with an activist?”

“She runs a blog—and does videos about corporate greed and the rise of corporations over the
environment, over people—Stark Industries ring a bell?”

Tony frowned. “Friday… have there been any reports done by Abigail Burns on the state of Stark Industries or Pepper? Cross-reference any mentions.”

Natasha had two fingers on the last file as Tony read the rather thin profile on Burns and her questionable activities, most of which boiled down to writing inflammatory articles and biting commentary. Not the kind of threat he thought warranted their attention, still…

“What does your gut say?” He asked while waiting on Friday to get back to him.

“That there are no coincidences.”

She’d said that once already.

“How do you know she had a call with Pepper on Friday?”

“Boss, I’ve found two articles written by Ms. Burns that mention Stark Industries, though only one identifies Ms. Potts.” They appeared in the corner of his glasses.

“Give us the snapshot, Baby Girl.”

Natasha pulled the remaining file onto her lap and sat back against the sofa and he leaned back next to her, wanting to keep her in his line of sight. How did she know whom Pepper was talking to? It wasn’t like she actually worked as Pepper’s assistant any longer.

“The first article challenged Stark Industries commitment to environmental protections in light of all past weapons development, citing specifically the devastation to a mountain range in Afghanistan during a Jericho missile demonstration.”

He didn’t flinch, even if he went a little icy all over. Just hours after that test, his convoy had been ambushed, and a shell detonated next to him nearly killing him and lodging shrapnel in his chest that led to his need to created the miniaturized ARC reactor.

The cave.

The waterboarding.

The threats.

Yinsen.

The Mark I.

Light fingers on his wrist brought him snapping back to the present and he had to fight not to claw open his tie. Natasha moved to sit sideways and she loosened it for him. Then returned her hand to his. He closed his fingers over hers reflexively, aware of his white-knuckled grip but concentrating too hard on pushing air in and out of his lungs to loosen it.

“The second article offers more criticism for previous SI initiatives but calls out Ms. Potts as a possible beacon of the future for the clean energy at SI as well as the environmental reclamation work being done in countries like Sokovia, but the question is, will her efforts be enough? Or is just a weak patch on the surface of a cancerous wound the Starks have plagued the world with—and it continues in that vein.”

“Let me guess… more examples of my absentee management and decision-making paradigms?”
“Not quite that bad, Boss…” But Friday hedging her answer was in and of itself an answer.

“Check Ms. Potts’ schedule and tell me whether or not they had a call last Friday.”

“A forty-five-minute call is detailed on her sheet, she took it at home, and they were the only two on the phone. There is no record of the call’s content.”

Still squeezing Nat’s hand, he glanced at her. “How did you know?”

“Pepper asked me to come see her last Friday.”

Tony exhaled slowly. The quakes set off by the Jericho reminder hadn’t quite resolved yet. “You were going to tell me when?”

“When you needed to know. She asked me for a favor, Tony.”

Almost not wanting to ask, he pressed on anyway. “The favor was?”

“To review the threats you’ve been ignoring.”

“Dammit, Pepper,” he swore and squeezed Natasha’s hand once and then released it before he tried to break her fingers. Rising, he tugged at his tie and paced the little room. “I get threats all the time. You do not need to be involved in those.” Especially not on the heels of her recovery.

“I’m not having this argument with you, Tony…”

“You’re right, you’re not. You’re off the case.”

“It doesn’t quite work like that…” She tapped her fingers against the file. “We don’t have that much longer before Sir Winston returns. So if you want to spend this time yelling at me and telling me how you don’t need my help on threats that are meaningless and that you can take care of yourself… we can.”

“Or?” he retorted drily.

“Or you can accept the fact that whether you think the threats are valid or not, you have people who care about you. Threat assessment is what I do.”

“Regardless of what I say, you’re going to do it anyway.”

She only smiled and he groaned.

“Red…”

“Tony.”

Dropping back onto the sofa next to her, he clasped his hands. “I have had so many death threats in my life they don’t mean anything anymore. People have tried to kidnap me since I was a kid. It happens. I’m fine. No one is going to touch me.” Not again. After Afghanistan, never again.

“Except now someone has bugged Peter’s place,” she offered it up solemnly. “Threatening you isn’t just about you. Abigail Burns didn’t have a call with you…”

*Pepper.*

*Peter.*
“The last time someone threatened someone you cared about—you gave your address out on national television and called out a terrorist to come and get you.”

Yeah. He had done that.

But that wasn’t the last time someone threatened someone he cared about.

“People pretty much know where I am now, Red. I don’t have to give them that address.”

“True. Might be that I share the same zip code and I’d rather not have the Tower come down on my head in a shower of glass and rubble.”

He made a face.

“You’re mad because Pepper went around you because she was worried about you. I’ve reviewed the threats, I think she’s right to be concerned.”

“Not terribly comforting.”

“You don’t need my comfort,” she said the last with a bit of a smile so it robbed it of the sting.

“I wouldn’t say that,” he said with a sigh, then rubbed a hand over his jaw again.

“You didn’t,” she reminded him. “I’m working on it. We’ll figure it out. I’ll brief you on everything I have when we’re back if you like or you let me do my job and I’ll bring it to you when I have something more tangible that you won’t just scoff at and say you’ve heard worse.”

He grimaced. “I’m not that predictable.”

“No,” she told him, almost indulgently. “But I’m close, aren’t I?”

Not willing to admit it, he finished scanning the Burns file though it didn’t keep him from noticing Natasha's small headshake. She was too close.

“Fine, keep looking into it,” Tony said without a lot of grace. Grunting at his tone, he softened it some. “But I don’t want you wasting a lot of your time on this. You’re already taking on the Committee for me. That’s enough shark-infested waters for anyone.”

Chuckling, she bumped his shoulder. “Call Pepper. See her for dinner.”

“No,” he said, then snapped the file closed and reached for the one she had in her lap.

“You’re being stubborn.”

“Hmm… you don’t say?” He flipped it open to an internal Committee report on Natasha Romanoff and excising her from the Avengers quietly, to avoid a scandal, and to keep Tony Stark happy in the meantime.

“I’m going to kill them…”

“No,” she told him gently. “You’re not.”

First Sharon delivers that asinine request and now this.

“You’re not the boss of me.” It was petulant, but fuck it. What the hell with these people and their willful blindness? Natasha wasn’t a damn terrorist. She was an Avenger. She was one of the
smartest people he knew. At her worst, she saw too damn much…

Son of a bitch.

“And now he’s thinking again folks,” Natasha murmured tugging the file out from under his hand. “Friday, ask Pepper when she’s available to come over this evening? If Tony’s not available, I’ll have dinner with her.” She’d rather have dinner with James, but it might be a good time to introduce the two. It would also let them keep it somewhat lighter.


“Would you also let James know? Tentatively for six p.m. Clint could always come, too…if you need the buffer, Tony.”

The look he shot her promised he’d get her back for that and she grinned.

“What about Steve? Don’t you want the other boyfriend there, too?”

Friday interceded before she could say anything, “Captain Rogers is still in San Francisco. The situation seems to be in hand, but he and the team are still busy and are not expected to return to New York before tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, when she and Tony had a chain of meetings at the U.N. proper rather than the individual consulates. She sighed. “Are they all okay?”

“Some bruises and mild dehydration, though Mr. Wilson has been after both Captain Rogers and Ms. Maximoff to drink more. Otherwise, they are quite well, Ms. Romanoff.”

“Thank you, Friday.” She finished snapping the images of the last file, then stacked them together again. Amongst all the information, he would imagine the memo was what Sir Winston wanted them to see. Maybe they should consider replacing the Committee along with the Accords.

Why the hell did he ever agree to all of this in the first place?

They had about five more minutes so she rose to move around and stretch. Tony braced his elbows on his knees, his hands fisted beneath his chin. Pepper reaching out to Natasha made sense on some levels, but not on others. She hadn’t wanted him to stay involved with her or to risk himself defending her. Pepper had labeled Natasha as toxic. While a part of him understood it, he didn’t like it.

Had Pepper called her toxic to her face? Had she encouraged Natasha to walk away, too? Either notion made him uncomfortable. He didn’t want to fight with Pepper about Natasha. But he didn’t want Natasha to have to deal with rancor on Pepper’s part spawned by some need to protect him.

“Red?”

“Hmm?”

“Sorry I yelled at you.”

She laughed. “You didn’t yell at me, Tony and even if you did—I can take you.”

Yes, she could.

“Is there anything else I should know about your conversation with Pepper?”
But she didn’t get a chance to answer as the doors cycled to unlock and Sir Winston appeared with a genial smile. “I hope you both enjoyed your break.”

“That’s one word for it,” Tony said, affixing his smile into place as he stood. “Thank you for the respite. It was nice to take a step back after the night we had…”

Natasha pivoted to face Tony and fixed his tie with two quick motions before she gathered her small clutch purse and phone.

“I would imagine so,” Sir Winston said as he motioned for them to return to his office. “We still have more to discuss, but we shall make this prompt, yes? I have a few members of my staff who have put together reports that I’d like all of us to go over.”

“Can’t wait,” Tony said with as much fake enthusiasm as he could muster. As they followed Sir Winston from his office to a nearby conference room, Tony kept his hand at the small of Natasha’s back.

“Behave,” she murmured.

He leaned in close. “I am behaving. My hand could be lower.”

She rolled her eyes and he grinned.

Once in the conference room, he pulled out Natasha’s chair, then took the one right next to her. The five people across the table didn’t look like they had an axe to grind. But after yesterday, he wasn’t taking any chances.

Sir Winston had done them one favor—no, he’d given Natasha a gift. Not a favor. That had been personal. The rest of this was just the cost of doing business.

“Who starts?” Tony asked without preamble. “Did you draw straws or are we going alphabetically?”

Pepper

Happy delivered her to the Tower at six promptly, though she expected dinner wouldn’t begin until seven if she were lucky. History suggested eight was the more reasonable bet. She’d had a salad before leaving her Manhattan office as a ‘tide me over.’

A pair of SUV’s flanked them forward and rear on the drive across Midtown pulling away only after Happy pulled into the garage. He walked her to the elevator before saying, “Text me when you’re ready to go. I’m going to grab a sandwich.”

“Happy, you don’t have to wait, I can call for another car.”

He reached inside and pressed the button for the penthouse. “Text me. Have a good dinner.”

Sometimes, he was too protective but she didn’t argue much after Aldrich Killian. A shiver raced
up her spine and she closed her eyes. Three deep breaths and she relaxed the tension. Yoga had been her savior for the last couple of years. When the elevator opened to the penthouse, she was surprised to find not only was Tony present and dinner waiting, but Natasha was there along with Clint and... James Barnes.

That was unexpected.

“Hey Pep, you’re exactly on time. Have I ever told you how much I adore your punctuality?” Tony wore a broad grin as he waved her inside. “Never understood how it survived all those years when you were my assistant.”

“Well that makes sense,” she retorted drily, setting her purse down to remove her coat. “I’m not sure how I survived as your assistant.”

“Cause you’re the best.” He cocked his thumb and forefinger at her. “I ordered your favorite—shrimp linguine and garlic toast. Dry or sweet white?”

“Water will be fine,” she told him.

“Tony, let her actually come inside,” Natasha admonished him and then she crossed over to catch Pepper's hand in a gentle squeeze and murmured, “He’s in a mood.”

“I noticed,” she replied. “Do you have time to talk when this is done?”

A single nod. “Pepper, you remember Clint, yes?” Natasha took the time to introduce her and Pepper shook Clint’s hand.

“I do,” Pepper told him warmly. She hadn’t interacted with him much, but he’d always been unfailingly polite when he and Natasha weren’t ribbing on each other. “It’s good to see you again. I hope your recovery is going well.”

“I’m good,” Clint told her though his smile didn’t quite reach all the way to his eyes. The brace he wore on his leg provided him with support though he still moved with the suggestion of a limp. “And you? Give yourself a raise for having to put up with Tony?”

“The board already did that for me,” she said lightly and Clint chuckled.

“Pepper Potts this is James Barnes. James, Pepper is a good friend and the CEO of Stark Industries. She pretty much bails us out financially among her myriad of other duties.”

Natasha’s introduction was nicely done. It was also Pepper’s first chance to see the Winter Soldier up close. Clean-shaven with his longish hair pulled back from his face, he gave her a polite smile and only took her hand for a split second after she offered it.

“Ms. Potts,” he said, his voice pleasant and his eyes cool. Like Clint, his smile didn’t quite reach all the way to them.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she said slowly. Did she say it was good to meet him? It really wasn’t. This was the man who killed Tony’s parents, but Tony had been working to get him pardoned and protected by the military—rather successfully—despite those actions. So she settled for a more diplomatic, “I wondered when I would get to meet you. Congratulations on your pardon. I hope it allows you some measure of peace now that you’re home.”

The faint curve of his lips deepened for a fraction. She’d used to think Natasha was guarded, but Sergeant Barnes made her seem warm by comparison. “I’m aware you were part of the work
toward that. I wanted to thank you for your part in everything.”

“You’re welcome,” she said after a moment. Most were dressed in casual clothes, she was a tad overdressed thanks to the business suit. Both Clint and Sergeant Barnes were drinking a beer. Natasha had a bottle of water and Tony swirled water in a glass with some ice like it was a whiskey. Yes, she would stick with water as well.

“So Pep’s met everyone, shall we sit down and eat?” Tony was definitely in a mood. He drummed the fingers of his right hand against the back of a chair as he stared at all of them. The pinched look at the corners of his eyes said headache, and the twitchiness said he had no desire to be there—now whether it was because he’d prefer to be in his lab or because he didn’t like the company was anyone’s guess.

“I’m fine to get started if everyone else is. Thank you for waiting for me.”

“Just glad we made it on time, we only arrived about twenty minutes ago,” Natasha told her as they moved toward the table.

“You were meeting at the British Consulate today, weren’t you?” They’d made a spectacular splash the day before on their way out of the Tower, their arrival at the French Consulate, and much later departure.

Clint pulled out a chair for Pepper and she smiled at him. She was seated across from Natasha and Tony dropped into the chair at the head of the table but he didn’t close the gap, if anything he was sulking.

Sergeant Barnes took the seat next to Natasha and took a long pull of the beer before he glanced at the covered dish.

Lifting the silver dome on her food, Pepper smiled at the shrimp linguine and the garlic toast. It had to be from the Tuscan Garden, one of her favorite restaurants. Clint had lasagna, likely from the same place, while Natasha had a plate of ravioli and a side salad. Sergeant Barnes’ had the same thing, but he made no move to touch the food.

It was a surreal few minutes. Tony lifted his silver dome to another plate of ravioli, and like Sergeant Barnes, he didn’t touch it.

“Yes,” Natasha answered after protracted silence during which it became clear Tony wasn’t going to answer. “Sir Winston was lovely as always, and I would say we had a successful meeting with he and his advisors.”

“No fanfare today after the incident last night?” Pepper swirled the linguini onto her fork. The news had covered the mass evacuations and panic including some questionable rhetoric on where were the Avengers—right up until the threat was neutralized. Some long-distance shots caught the downed mechanical creatures and the presence of the quinjets.

“Seemed a more prudent choice and then I didn’t have to listen to the press shouting every ridiculous question that came to mind.” Natasha took a bite from the ravioli and chewed it thoughtfully. After she washed it down with some water, she said, “Half the team stayed out there to help with cleanup and to restore order.”

“I saw.” Pepper took a drink of her own water, tracking the motion of Natasha swapping her plate for Sergeant Barnes’ and then proceeding to take a bit from her new plate as if nothing happened.

“It’s all over the news,” Clint added. “Most of the stories are favorable. Nat’s return gets bumped
for Captain America’s swoony good looks.”

Natasha laughed. “You will not hear me complaining.”

“No, you’ve never seemed fond of the spotlight even if the spotlight favored you.” Natasha had impressed Pepper during the hearings after the incident in D.C. She’d maintained her poise and looked directly at the congressmen doing everything they could to paint her and Captain Rogers as the villains of the piece. “I spoke to my friend about you.”

At Natasha’s arched eyebrows, Pepper shook her head. No, she had considered having dinner with Tony tonight—in private—to let him know she would be bringing Marc to the party. But not in front of an audience and definitely not while Tony was in this mood.

“Okay,” Natasha said. “Is it good news or bad news?”

A genuine laugh wound through her. “It’s actually not bad news at all. He was thrilled to have the opportunity and can’t wait to meet you. Apparently, he’s a fan.” If Natasha were anyone else, she might resent her. While she might resent her a little, Marc’s enthusiasm both for Natasha as a hero that he may or may not have had a crush on—at least he admitted it aloud—at one time and for the challenge she represented in public relations.

“A fan,” Natasha made a face but Sergeant Barnes chuckled. He had begun digging into the ravioli Natasha had given him. Pepper wasn’t quite sure how to interpret that.

“Natalia does not know what to do with fans.”

Since she had at least three at the table, Pepper thought she might have some idea of what to do with them. “I promise, he won’t ask for your autograph. He’ll be at the party on Friday, just save a few minutes—I’ll introduce you. Maybe a quick conversation and then we can set up a sit down soon.” She planned to leave not long after the party, but maybe she could put it off for a couple of hours so they could meet on Saturday.

“A sit down for what?” Tony asked. Oh, now he decided to rejoin the conversation.

“Pepper offered to help me set up a public relations plan. Since you’ve all decided you want me out in front on some of this, it would probably be a good idea to replace all the World’s Most Wanted and Notorious headlines with something a little more positive.” Natasha’s description was extremely politic and edited out Marc’s identity.

“That’s what we hire public relations firms for, don’t you have a company to run?” Tony frowned.

“It’s amazing what a little delegation of responsibility will do and I do have some familiarity with rehabilitating a bad image.” Maybe a little too pointed, but the jab landed. “Also, I’ve seen the reports—we haven’t had much success with the firms because they don’t know Natasha. I do.”

“You knew her for five minutes when you thought she was Natalie Rushman and now you think you’re the expert?”

“No, I would never dare to think I was the expert. Not when you’re in the room.”

Quiet settled over the table and Tony opened his mouth, then slammed it shut with a grimace. He glanced once at Natasha, then blew out a breath. “Sorry Pep, I’m being an ass. It’s been a bad couple of days.”

The apology startled her, but she nodded. “You’re probably running low on sleep.”
“Some. Doesn’t matter—thanks for the help. We’re going to need it.” He actually sounded like he meant it. He finally dug into his food and the conversation relaxed a fraction around the table.

Clint threw in some questions about the meetings that week—all with potential allies. Although any mention of the French delegate earned a sour look from Tony. The following week, Natasha insisted, would be the more challenging one. But one step at a time.

Pepper could appreciate the thought. The conversation shifted to the holiday party and the holidays themselves. She hadn’t told Tony about her vacation yet. A part of her wanted to just leave it until the last minute or slip it onto his calendar. Depending on whatever project he was working on, he might not even notice.

The speculation about Natasha and Tony in the papers would only increase and her absence might fade there, too. It wouldn’t stop all the gossip, but they should be able to nip the rest in the bud. Though Natasha didn’t seem to be paying as much attention to Tony as she was Sergeant Barnes and the dynamics of the table were a little murky. Then again, she’d thought Natasha and Clint were an item for the longest time, so what did she know?

By the time they’d cleared the food away, Pepper was ready to call it a night herself. The meal was both better and more stressful than she’d expected. When the others made noises about turning in for the night, Pepper said, “Actually, before I go, Natasha—can we steal a minute?”

“Of course.” She stood, revealing Sergeant Barnes had a hold of her hand. She smiled at him. “Did you want to take this to my floor for some privacy?”

“I’d like that.” She glanced to Tony, then said, “Good night, Tony.”

“Pep. Thanks for coming.” But the smile definitely didn’t reach his eyes and the relaxed manner he’d almost achieved bottled once more to something closer to a sulk.

Natasha and Sergeant Barnes made quick work of the remains of the meals, going so far as to rinse out and stack the plates and flatware in the dishwasher. Pepper almost expected Tony to say something but his broodiness didn’t abate. Clint filled her in on his family and he had pictures. Nate had gotten so big. She made a mental note to send gifts to all the kids. When Clint mentioned they’d be at the Compound for Christmas, she smiled. That would make it even easier. Maybe she should get his wife a spa day—she’d ask Natasha about that. Maybe she’d like to go with her. They were friends; at least she thought they were.

Tony perked a little when it was time to say goodnight. He pressed a kiss to her cheek, then murmured, “I know I’m an ass. Thanks for putting up with me.”

Well, it was easier to put up with him at a distance especially in these moods. Still… no. No still. She shook off the nostalgia. Tony would always be Tony. Clint and Sergeant Barnes took them to Natasha’s floor first, then left them as the elevator carried them elsewhere.

Dropping her coat and purse onto the sofa, she paced toward the windows. “Is Tony all right?”

“Someone stole his tech.” The revelation explained nearly everything about his bad mood.

“And you got him to sit through a whole dinner?” Shocked didn’t begin to cover it.

“We all need to take breathers in this. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Besides, you wanted to come and see him.”

“Well, I had considered giving him the head’s up about Marc, but I can’t tell him in this mood.”
Pivoting, she waved off that concern. She would deal with it when the time came. “I wanted to see how your progress was going. I received your analysis. I can’t begin to tell you how frustrating I find it that all these threats might be nothing more than red herrings.”

“Unfortunately, you have to investigate every threat you receive. You have to treat them all as serious. That means you can overwhelm a security force with enough of them. Maybe they’re all genuine threats from people with genuine grievances. That said—there’s also an equal possibility to point to the smoke bomb billowing out the window and evacuate everyone to the street—where the sniper has the clear shot.”

That was the gruesome and effective description. “I am really not sure that makes me feel better.”

“It’s not supposed to make you feel better. The threat is real. Where it’s coming from and who it’s directed at—that’s the bigger question.”

Pepper frowned. “Tony is the subject of the threats.”

“Stark Industries is also a target. You’re a target. Peter Parker is at target. Happy Hogan can be a target. Whoever this is, they’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to make a lot of noise so you can’t hear them slipping in the backdoor. They don’t want to kill Tony…”

Relief swamped her. “Are you sure?” When he disappeared in Afghanistan, she’d thought she’d lost him then. Every other time he’d gone out in his suit, from when he’d flown through that portal and then plunged to the earth to when the Malibu house collapsed on him. So many times, she’d thought she’d lost him. After everything, she couldn’t bear it if something happened to him and she could have done something.

“As certain as I can be. They don’t want to kill him. They want to hurt him…”

“That’s hardly better.” Exasperated, she folded her arms and pivoted to stare at her. “What are we supposed to do with that?”

“You are supposed to be vigilant. Listen to Happy, the overkill with security is a good idea right now.”

That explained why Happy was waiting for her instead of driving them today as he had the day previous. Natasha made it all sound reasonable. “So while I am being protected and hidden away. What are you doing?”

“I’m keeping an eye on Tony and I’ll keep digging. I have… some ideas that need to be fleshed out. I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“His stolen tech.”

Natasha nodded once. “It was a project he was working on with Peter—a school project. It was most likely taken from his hard drive.”

“He’s a fifteen-year-old kid.” That was outrageous.

“I’m aware. We’re already taking steps there.”

“Should I put security on him? And his aunt?” Pepper considered how they could do it. Perhaps she could do it unobtrusively.

“That’s a thought. Peter is staying at a friend’s tonight, and we’ll be talking to him at length
tomorrow. For now, he’s fine and we’ve cleaned his apartment of surveillance. We’ll make sweeping it a more regular thing.” Natasha rolled her head to the side and rubbed at the back of her neck. She seemed almost human in allowing that glimpse of her weariness. “You hurt Tony by hurting who he cares about or…”

“…using his tech to hurt people.” Yes, she was aware. “Who is watching Happy?”

“Happy has his own security force, the guys doing the escorts for you, they have orders to keep an eye on him as well.” She seemed to have thought of everything.

“Rhodey is at the Compound a great deal or on a military base.” That left Natasha and she was ensconced in the Tower. “So we remain vigilant and take precautions.”

“Ideally, don’t assume because you’ve always done something it’s fine to continue doing it. If it seems like it might be risky, err on the side of caution. Friday and I are both working on this… and Tony is aware of it.”

Pepper grimaced. “You told him?”

“I wasn’t going to keep it a secret longer than necessary. He needed to know. Whether he does anything with that information…” Natasha shrugged, then her expression shifted slightly. “Oh, that reminds me. How did your call go on Friday?”

“My call?” Pepper lifted her brows. Natasha arrived at the tail-end of her conversation with Hong Kong. The only other… “Oh, Ms. Burns? It was fine. Just a quick chat about some of Stark Industries clean energy and lighten our ecological footprint efforts. Why?”

“The name Abigail Burns came up. She’s written a couple of articles about SI.”

Understanding kindled in Pepper. “You mean she’s written a semi-scathing rebuke of SI under Obadiah and painted Tony with the brush. I am aware. She’s also written one about the changes we’ve made and recorded a couple of videos for her channel about our London offices and the work we did in the moorlands to preserve them rather than building a facility there.” Pepper shrugged. “I’d call Ms. Burns a firebrand, but she seems more enthusiastic than anything else.”

“Huh. Are you meeting with her at any point?”

“No,” Pepper elongated the syllable. “I can set up one if you’d like to sit in and meet her. I don’t think the two of you would have much in common, though.”

“Maybe,” Natasha said with a faint smile. “Maybe not. No, don’t arrange a special meeting for me.”

“You don’t think she’s behind the threats, do you?” That seemed a stretch. “She’s definitely an activist and she’s definitely vocal enough in her work to put heat on a corporation, but—that’s not the same as a threat.”

“It’s not the same at all. But her name came up and I recognized it. For now, exercise judicious caution. If she reaches out again, let me know?”

Pepper sighed. “I can do that…” She didn’t want to have to look at every person they did business with or who wanted to have a conversation with her as a potential threat.

“You don’t have to like it, Pepper,” Natasha said in a soothing tone. “You can think me paranoid. It’s fine. My job is to find everyone suspicious until I clear them.”
“Oddly—I find that comforting.” When everything went to Hell at the Expo, Natasha had kept her head and she trusted Pepper to handle her part while Natasha had gone to handle Hammer’s facility. “I would love it if you were able to tell me the threats are nothing more than loud chatter.”

“If I can, I will. In the meanwhile, be cautious taking meetings with anyone new and if you don’t mind, loop me into your call sheet and meeting schedules?” Maybe that was overkill, but it couldn’t hurt anything. “Stick with your security—even on dates and on your vacation.” They’d discuss that later. “And we’ll keep an eye on Tony. He’s taking the meetings with me. He’s got the suit. That’s all we can do until we can figure out the source.”

“And you have some ideas?” Which was deliberately vague.

“Yes, I do.” Dressed in an oversized sweatshirt, leggings and sporting bare feet and a face washed of any cosmetics; Natasha looked more like a college student than an assassin or capable spy.

No one should look that good based on the schedule she’d been keeping.

“All right, keep me updated?”

“Absolutely. You do the same.” It wasn’t a request, but Pepper appreciated the sentiment.

“Agreed…” She gathered her coat and purse once more. “You know… the selfie with the waitress was a genius idea.”

“I didn’t do it thinking it would get me publicity.”

Probably not. “Which was why it was a genius idea. The press is fascinated with you right now. You should consider a press conference.”

The downturn of Natasha’s mouth and her wrinkled nose made Pepper laugh aloud.

“Think about it after you talk to Marc. Maybe next week, helps you control the narrative while you take all these meetings. The press is already speculating about what the two of you are doing. This could be a good way to plead your case for the Accords to the public. Get them to endorse your ideas and they’ll be endorsing you, too.”

“I know you’re right, but I can’t say I like it much.”

Shouldering her bag, Pepper smiled and stepped closer to Natasha and pressed a kiss to her cheek. The action felt even more natural than when she did it teasingly at her apartment. The reminder of that rather indiscreet moment she’d actually hit on her while she was still Natalie Rushman was both endearing and aggravating. If Tony ever found out about it, he’d have a stroke.

That might almost be worth it just for the look on his face.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Natasha advised but she caught Pepper’s hand and gave it a squeeze before returning the kiss to Pepper’s cheek. “But keep looking after yourself. Have you told Tony about Scotland yet?”

“No, I was also considering doing that tonight…”

“Right.” Natasha walked her to the elevator. “I’m going to ride down with you to the car. Get you squared away.”
“You don’t have any shoes on,” Pepper argued.

“My feet can handle some cold concrete for a couple of minutes.”

“A press conference is a good idea. More—around the town stuff. Not just going to meetings, but —Christmas tree shopping.”

“Sleigh rides? Eating hot dogs?”

“Being human, yes.” Pepper grimaced. “I’m sorry to put it that way.”

“I’m not insulted,” Natasha told her. “I’ve spent my life making sure people didn’t notice me. This —will take some getting used to.”

“I know…” Pepper said as the elevator doors opened. “Do you have meetings on Friday?”

“I—don’t—Friday? Do we have anything scheduled on Friday yet?”

“Only a breakfast with King T’Challa to review the week’s meetings and to plan for next week. With the party that evening, Boss didn’t want anything to run over.”

“Good,” Pepper said firmly. Happy met them at the door to the garage and he wagged a finger at Pepper.

“You didn’t text me.”

“Yet, you’re still here,” she said with a chuckle.

“Because Friday gave me the heads up. Hey Natasha.”

“Evening Happy.”

“I’m picking you and Tony up in the morning, don’t let him drive his car to the U.N. He likes to leave it out front to piss them off.”

Natasha laughed. “I’ll remember.”

“Right, you need to go get some sleep, but Friday, let’s have lunch? I know a spa where we can get mani-pedis and our hair styled. They pamper us, feed us expensive snacks and wine. It’s the perfect pre-party prescription. Then you can come back here and get changed so you can arrive together. Think about it?”

It would also show that Pepper the CEO was fine with Natasha Romanoff being back in Tony’s life.

“I’d like that—well some of that anyway—but let me keep my yes to a tentative. I don’t know what all will happen this week.”

“I understand. I’ll make the reservations and if you have to cancel, it won’t be any problem.” She shrugged into her coat. “Good night, Natasha.”

“Take care, Pepper.”

After Happy got her in the car, he turned and spoke to Natasha for a couple of moments, probably reminding her about Tony. Happy was used to Tony listening to him as much as he did Pepper.
Her last sight of Natasha was the other woman standing near the door to the building keeping watch as Happy pulled out of the garage. Leaning back in her seat, she sighed.

“Everything all right, Pepper?”

“It’s fine, Happy. Just tired. I’m ready to go home and take a bath.”

“We’ll have you there in a few minutes.”

Her phone buzzed and she smiled at the message from Marc. Flight lands in the morning. Lunch?

She’d have to juggle her schedule, but she could make it happen. First, she sent a message to Janine to take care of it, then one to Marc to confirm.

Done, she glanced at the dazzling Christmas displays beginning to fill the windows, then closed her eyes. She used to love Christmas. Now… well, now it just left her with too many memories she didn’t want to think about. After the party on Friday, she’d go to Hong Kong, take care of the tower there, then escape to Scotland for a nice long vacation.

Just a few more days.
“Friday, I know you’re busy, but can you begin putting together dossiers on Abigail Burns, Marc Kumar, and Janine Reynolds?” Natasha leaned against the wall of the elevator.

“Password locked to your voiceprint?”

“That would be great.” It was barely eight-thirty. Early by anyone’s standards, but she was ready to fall on her face.

“I’ll take care of it, Ms. Romanoff. The Boss is in his lab going through the hard drive, I’ve informed him at eleven I will be cutting power, but I won’t until midnight. Is that acceptable?”

Natasha laughed. “Is he threatening to rewrite your algorithms yet?”

“No. He is blaming you.”

“Perfect. But if he’s on to something, give him until one. He won’t sleep at all if he’s mid-discovery. What time is our first meeting tomorrow?”

“Ten.”

She tapped her head against the wall. “Set an alarm for him. I still expect him in the training room at seven.”

“Red—stop conspiring with Friday. You think I’m going to miss you torturing me?”

“The thought had occurred.”

“Then stop. Friday is copying the full drive for you to take a peek at. The code is—less than elegant. Go over it before we meet in the morning. I plan to pick your brain.”

“Night, Tony…”

“Red?”

The elevator halted, but the doors didn’t open.
“Yes?”

He went silent for a long time. Long enough she wondered if he’d gotten distracted mid-thought. Finally he said, “Come up before the workout? Give me the haircut?”

“Then go to bed earlier.”

“No promises. I’ll keep an eye on Steve. They’re fine. Not that you asked, but they’re still fine. It sounds like they may be wrapping it soon to get some sleep.”

“Thank you, Tony.”

“Yep… sleep well, Red.”

“You, too.”

The elevator rose smoothly. The doors opened to Steve’s floor and she stepped out onto the darkened level. As the doors closed behind her, Friday said, “Entering secure sleep mode. Lockdown initiated.”

Only the lights from the tree offered any illumination. The windows had been darkened blocking out the lights from the surrounding city. Scanning the living room and kitchen, she didn’t see James. Her bedroom door was closed, as was Steve’s. James’ door, however, was not.

Though it was dark.

The heat at her back made her smile. More silent than a cat and one of the few people who could sneak up on her, he closed the distance without actually touching her. His whisper at her ear sent a shiver over her skin. “Are you tired, Doll?”

“A little,” she said, still smiling. The tension of the past couple of days had her wound up. She’d spoken to Peter while they’d driven back to the Tower. He was a little freaked out, but Liz told him she could go to the holiday party which went a long way to repairing his distress. Telling him they’d cleaned the bugs had helped, too. James and Clint had just finished filling them in on their discoveries when Pepper arrived. All they had to do was find the source and erase them, then she would feel better about all of it. “You?”

“Not so much.” He shifted until his lips were against her other ear. “Do something for me?”

“Anything.” The dark around them, the faint illumination from the tree, it took her back to shadowed corners and half-formed images, feelings, and sounds.

Fingers traced along her hips, then he closed his hands on the edge of her sweatshirt. A light tug pulled it upward. She raised her arms to let him pull it up and off, but he only pulled it over her head. The sweatshirt bound her arms lightly, pulling her shoulders back.

“Is this all right?” A whisper of breath, then a light kiss brushed over her shoulder. The restraint wasn’t terrible, but apprehension coiled around the cords of tension roping through her muscles and tightening in her belly. Another kiss to the other shoulder, the shirt sleeves went taut as he did something to the sweatshirt. The weight of it pulled on her, arching her back and her nipples stiffened as she curled her toes.

“I can live with it.” She licked her lips.

“One word, Natalia and it comes off.” He didn’t have to tell her. She could wiggle free. But the
fact he did tell her massaged some of the unease into anticipation.

“I trust you, milli moi.” The words tasted sweet on her tongue. His answering groan had her cunt clenching. Another kiss, this time to the shell of her ear.

“I need you,” he said, his hand closing over her throat. No pressure, just heat. The gentle circle of his thumb over her pulse point soothed over all the rough patches the last forty-eight hours had left raw. The words looped more effectively than the cotton on her arms, keeping her still and in place. She would give him everything he needed.

Too soon, his hands moved away from her throat. The faint tickle of a kiss to her earlobe a lingering reminder. Then softness brushed over her face and the mask slid over her eyes. An electric jolt went through her and she squeezed her thighs tight as he settled the mask into place. With gentle fingers, he stroked her scalp. The innocent action sent a stroke of lust to curl through her lazily.

“Yes?” The touch of his lips to her ear. The lightest trace of his tongue following the whorls.

A shudder ascended her spine and left her trembling. He’d barely touched her, but he’d bound her arms and now he took her sight. Licking her lips, she murmured, “Yes.”

“So good for me, kotyonok.” The soft rumble of his voice turned the words into a caress and she squeezed her thighs tighter. A part of her wanted to just turn around, shrug out of the shirt and wrap her arms around him. But that wasn’t what he asked her for. The rough heat of his right palm versus the coolness of his left one roamed down her chest, barely gracing her breasts with more than a passing warmth before spreading over her abdomen.

Tease.

She bit her lip as he dipped his fingers into the waistband of her leggings. Abruptly he swept them downward, panties and all. Then he stroked his hands over her legs, pressing kisses along her skin. He was still behind her. With care, he braced her hip then lifted one leg and tugged the clothes off, then the other. Another kiss to the back of her thigh, and she exhaled at the shivery sensation.

When he traced two fingers between her thighs and parted them, she spread her legs so her stance was wider. It bared the fact she was already wet. A fact he had to have noticed as he skimmed his fingers upward, not quite touching her cunt tracing his fingers against the slick left on her thighs. The faintest brush of his breath was her only warning before he gave her skin a lazy lick against the trickles of moisture on her skin. So close to her cunt and yet he denied her that. “Krasavitsa,” he exhaled the word, the tickle stroking between her legs but a rush of heat sent more dampness flooding her cunt.

He’d barely fucking touched her and she ached for him. A kiss to the curve of her ass. Then those clever fingers parted her cheeks and he pressed a finger to the pucker of her anus. She almost swayed as he rested it there, not pressing or teasing, just waiting.

“Still with me, Natalia?”

“Yes,” she promised and she flexed her ass. His soft chuckle tickled her, then he bit down on the soft skin where her ass curved toward her thighs and a jolt went through her.

The movement against her vanished along with the heat. He’d taken his touch with him and she bit down against the whisper of protest. Then he was back, and he took her fingers and touched it to the bracelet on her wrist.
“Off.” It was a gentle command, one she could refuse, but she stroked the bracelet twice and it released. It fell from her wrist. Then he caught the dog tags around her neck and lifted them to her lips. “Off.” Again, she could refuse, but she kissed them once and he tugged them over her head.

James wouldn’t let anything happen to them. Then his arms came around her, both hands on her abdomen contrasting heat and cool as he pressed his mouth against her ear. “Lyubov moya.”

A shudder worked through her.

A kiss to her throat. “Vdova moya. So strong. Do you have any idea how sexy you are when you work?”

All the moisture in her mouth fled.

“How fucking beautiful I find you when outwit our opponents?” With his chest at her back, her arms trapped between them, she could curl her fingers against his thighs. The rough denim and soft cotton said he was still dressed. So not fair. Still, his words washed over her, like the water rushing in at the beach, smoothing over the sand. “How amazing you are when you keep your cool in the middle of battle? I’ve never known anyone like you, Natalia.”

Even though her eyes were covered, she closed them. Then hot fingers traced over her lips. “Everything about you,” he whispered against her ear. “Your mind. Your skill. Your body. Your heart. I adore them.”

Parting her lips, she sucked two of his fingers into her mouth. She couldn’t touch any other part of his skin she traced her tongue over his fingers, teasing them. The roughness of his callouses and the hint of salt on his skin sent a fresh wave of sensation through her.

One arm locked around her middle, he lifted her with ease and she let her head rest against his shoulder as he worked his fingers in and out of her mouth, a lazy mimic of his cock. The rasp of his jeans grinding against her slowly, the stroke of his fingers, the gentle pressure of his left hand holding her with care combined to assault her senses.

“Knees,” he murmured as the softness of the comforter on his bed brushed her legs. She picked up one knee and rested it on the edge, then the other and he lifted her forward. When he tugged his fingers from her lips, she almost whimpered at the loss of contact. “Shh,” he soothed, running his left hand up and over her breasts, still only circling around them and they ached from needing more.

“I never get over how beautiful you are. The first time I saw you naked...” he continued, his voice wrapping around her like a stroke as he moved around the room. The cool air teased her taut nipples and resting on her knees, thighs apart didn’t let her squeeze them together to ease the pressure of her cunt. He was taking her apart slowly. “Every morning you danced and the Soldier was mesmerized. He told himself he needed to see you move, to understand your physicality.” His breath feathered over her lips as the bed dipped in front of her. A teasing kiss, there and gone again. “But he couldn’t get enough of it, the grace and power you have when you move—that you still have.”

She tried to follow his words, swaying a little and hands caught her putting her back where she was and she groaned.

A soft chuckle. “Resist, Natalia... You have to let me seduce you.”

“I’ll give you a tip,” she told him in a voice she barely recognized. When had it gone all deep and
husky? Hell even her tongue felt swollen. “I’m a sure thing.”

The smooth rub of his right palm over her ass, then a sharp short slap that sent heat eddying out in a wave and her cunt clenched around the emptiness.

“Never,” he told her. “You are never a sure thing. You deserve to be earned, to be courted, to be praised, to hear every single word I could never give you before.” Emotion clawed at his voice. “I love you. I wanted you from the beginning. I needed you nearly as long.”

A soft kiss to the corner of her mouth, then his lips claimed hers and she sighed as his tongue stroked inside to tease hers. He didn’t let her move, his hands keeping her still as he plundered her mouth. The hint of beer, ravioli, and garlic was a heady combination, but beyond all of that, was the taste of James himself. She’d know him anywhere.

The thought scattered against the broken landscape of her memories. She had known him. That knowing had never gone away. Beneath the softness of the blindfold, her eyes were damp as she gasped into his mouth but he didn’t let her up for air, kissing her until she was dizzy from the want of him and then he drew back.

“As I was saying,” he continued in the most decadent voice filled with the promise of sex. “The Soldier couldn’t get enough of you. We watched you dance in the morning, then savored every time you touched us when we sparred.”

“I was hitting you,” she whispered. A flash of twisting in his grip, then spinning to climb over him. The first time she locked her thighs around his head and flipped him. She could almost taste it.

“And you were magnificent,” he promised. He began to run his hands along her sides, this thumbs teasing the curves of her breasts. “For weeks this went on and I pushed you, demanding more and more from you and you always gave it… then one day you walked out of the training room. Aggravated, I thought, because I hadn’t let you win.”

She gasped the combination of history and memory tangling with desire as he finally covered her breasts. “You never let me win.” The insulting idea did little to stymie the desire he kept fueling.

“No.” A smile populated his words. “Never. I needed you to be better, to be stronger, to be the best.”

“I was the best…”

“You are still the best, Natalia.” Then his mouth laved over her nipple, the sudden suction locking her up her thoughts as her whole world narrowed to the point where his tongue teased the tense point and his mouth drew on her like he needed to fan her passion higher.

Taking her apart? He was scattering her into pieces.

When he released her nipple with a pop, she moaned, the sound winding up from her belly.

“Yet,” he said continuing his story as if his hands weren’t massaging her ass. Her shoulders were still pulled back, the faint strain leaving her muscles with a low burn underscoring the myriad of other sensations his touch evoked. “It was what I thought. More, I thought you angry with me and I didn’t like it.”

A moment of wonder popped in his voice and she smiled. The bed dipped as he moved, and then he was easing her down onto the bed, the sweatshirt tugging away to free her arms. Then he lifted her hands and put them forward so she could rest on her cheek, arms stretched out above her. The
position put her ass in the air and she bit back another smile. James wanted a display.

She could handle that. She kept her thighs apart so he could see and touch whatever he wanted. The dull ache of need began to climb again as he rubbed her shoulders gently, then smoothed his hands over her back.

“I’d never cared before if someone liked me. By then, I’d forgotten the feeling of needing or wanting anything. So I followed you. The Soldier told himself it was because you reported to him. You had to follow his orders. Walking away was disobedience.” He ran his hands down over her ass, smoothing his fingers against where he’d smacked her earlier. Some prurient part of her wondered if he’d do it again and anticipation sharpened. Punishment wasn’t attractive, but the slap hadn’t been about the pain, it had been about the sensation and another cord of heat unfolded in her belly. Biting her lip, she gave into temptation and wiggled her ass.

A light slap then a gentle rub to spread out the heat. “Sit still, kotyonok.”

Fuck.

She pressed back a little, and this time the slap had a lot more heat and she groaned. He chuckled and it had the barest edge to it. “I know what you want, Natalia. We can stop now if you are uncomfortable…”

“No,” she exhaled in a rush, forcing herself to sit still.

“No?” He smoothed his hand against the hot spot on her buttock. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, James,” she whispered. “Ya prinadlezhhu tebe, Soldat.” She was his, no argument from her. Not right now. He asked for her and she would give herself to him.

His soft inhale, the quickness of it made her smile. The offer pleased him so she could settle and be patient.

A light kiss to her spine. “Moya Natalia.”

“Da,” she confirmed. Though even her patience might be tested was he eased away abandoning his caresses again. The mask meant even if she wanted to peek, she couldn’t. Probably why he did it.

“You’re thinking too hard, lyubov moya.” His breath was warm against her cheek and she smiled.

“I miss you,” she whispered.

“I’m here.” A light kiss, then his hand was skating down her spine. Something warm pressed against her hip. Then more warmth trickled down her crack and over her anus. Fuck. She flexed her fingers and dug her toes into the bed. “I followed you,” he continued as if he’d never paused his story. “You knew I was there and yet you blithely continued up the stairs to where your showers were. They were empty. It was mid-day and all the other students were elsewhere. We were alone on the floor and as you pushed into the showers, you glanced at me once. All dismissive, then shut the door behind you.”

More warmth spread over her anus and he began working a finger into her. The pressure was sweet and intense, but he moved with such agonizing slowness. The heated lube both a tease and provocation all in one.

“I followed you inside without hesitation. Disobedience should not be rewarded, but you barely acknowledged me, standing beneath a stream of water all glorious skin and your soaking wet red
hair. You didn’t even grace me with a glance as you worked soap through your hair. All the moisture in my mouth went away and I wouldn’t have been able to string together a coherent sentence if you put a gun to my head.” He had two fingers working into her now. Two fingers he scissored, stretching her and she wanted to push back, but he kept a hand on her hip, keeping her still. Sweat gathered along her back, her mind as engaged in his story and the picture he painted as her body was in what he was doing to her.

“Instead, I studied you and the way your muscles moved. I’d seen the ones in your legs and your arms. I’d felt them under my hands as you fought me. But I’d never seen all of you, and when you turned to face me—my cock stirred for the first time in years.”

She tensed as he added a third finger and the burn of it pushing her. She flexed her fingers again, mouth open to catch her breath.

“You stared at me, all defiance and said…” A low chuckle broke through him. “Get naked, Soldat. There’s hot water and I’m willing to share.”

Bold. A short sharp laugh broke out of her because he added a fourth finger and it pressed the air out of her lungs. More warmth drizzled around her anus. “I sound like—a terrible tease…”

“You were glorious,” he whispered. “The Soldier was torn between scolding and simply watching you. It was like when we saw you dance. Only instead of ethereal, you’d become earthy and so real. A flame we could cup in our hand.”

A tear eased out of the corner of her eye. Thankfully the blindfold hid it.

The gentle burn of the stretch wound her tighter and tighter.

“Did you strip, Soldat?” She could see him, staring at her. His cool eyes embers of a fire she could almost feel. His expression hadn’t changed an iota from the training room, yet intensity radiated off of him. He turned to the door and then glanced at her again.

“No one will be up here for another hour, Soldat…” She let her gaze skate over him. “You can’t possibly like cold showers anymore than I do—but join me. Don’t join me.” She shrugged and gave him her back again but not before his pupils flared a fraction. The shift in movement the first time she’d elicited a base response from the Winter Soldier.

The thrill of it speared her and she had to keep the smile from spreading across her face.

“You didn’t join me…” She gasped as he eased his fingers away only to replace it with something warm, and thick. It wasn’t his cock, but a metal plug and he seated it deep, stretching her almost to the point of pain.

“No,” he whispered. “I didn’t—then. I wanted to, lyubov moya. So much, but I didn’t understand those feelings. What I did understand was how gorgeous you were. I made it a mission to memorize every detail of your body.”

Shaking and sweating, she arched her head up as he glided a hand beneath her to gently stroke her labia apart.

“Long before I got to touch you beyond combat and tending wounds… I knew you. I knew every freckle. I knew how your muscles shifted and contracted. What I wouldn’t give to go back to that first fierce coupling and take my time…”

A stroke over her clit, the pressure competing with the fullness in her ass and she pushed back
toward his hand and he pulled it away. Fisting the covers, she wanted to yell but she swallowed the protest.

The rustle of clothing hitting the floor and her shaking increased. Then hands on her back moving to her sides and he rolled her over and she arched her hips.

“Okay?” he checked with her, soothing strokes of his hands over her sides, and over her breasts. The competing hot and cool sensations shredding her control.

“Yes… where…” Where the hell had he gotten an anal plug?

His mouth at her breast, a light tug and the scrape of his teeth. “Clint took me to the most fascinating shop…”

A laugh broke out of her and then his mouth was on her neglected breast. They were sore and aching and so full and he still had her hanging on this precarious string.

“So many things I want to do with you, Natalia… so much I want us to have.” He nudged her legs apart and pressed a kiss to the inside of each thigh. “The first time you saw me naked… you were stitching my wounds. The second, you let me have you. Never once, in all those years, did you turn away from me.” He ran his left hand over her abdomen and up to her breast. When the metal traced her lips, she opened them to him as she had his other fingers. “Never treated me as less.”

“You’ve never been less,” she panted as he pulled his fingers away and then he shifted her again, resting her left knee against his shoulder and the tip of his cock rubbed against her cunt. Swollen, achy, and needy, she stretched out her hands to him. “Can I touch you yet?”

“Oh moya Natalia. You have always touched me.” The blindfold whisked away and she blinked her tear wet eyes open to the candlelit room. Her gaze snagged on his as he pressed into her, the thickness of his crown splitting her open and the pressure of the plug was almost too much. She clenched her leg and reached for him, but he lunged forward relentless in his thrust until he shoved all the air from her lungs and an orgasm ripped through her that had her throwing her head back. His fingers interlaced with hers and he thrust in earnest, every stroke scraping sparks across her vision.

The second orgasm tore a real scream from her and he loosened her leg and lunged in, arms around her as she locked her thighs to his hips and then his mouth captured hers. There, right there, and she arched her hips up to meet him. Digging her nails into his back, she let out a low keening note. All those sounds were coming from her and she didn’t give a damn. He swallowed them down with every kiss, and then he buried his face against her throat as he pushed her higher and higher, until his whole body shuddered. The hot release flooding her sent a pulse out and then another and she fluttered around him as her vision whited out.

Seconds? Minutes? She roused to his weight draping her. His cock was still semi-hard and speared inside of her. The thickness of the plug kept her ass stretched. Every part of her one, long sensual ache.

A spasm shook her and she squeezed around him. He hissed out a breath but didn’t pull away. The scrape of his skin against her nipples was almost too much, but she couldn’t bring herself to care. Boneless, she languished beneath the weight and heat of him.

When he finally lifted his head, he wore the most magnificently satisfied smile. The thrill of earlier pierced through her again. She’d given him a reason to smile like that, open, carefree, with laugh lines deepening the corners of his eyes. Tears shimmered over her vision again. He kissed away the
errant drops. The shift in his motion sending a shudder through both of them and she lifted her hips again.

“D’you like that?” Curious and gentle, he drew his fingers down and he surprised her when he traced it around where his cock still rested inside of her.

“I’ve never not liked that,” she said slowly. “I’m very fond of your cock.”

He chuckled. “Not just that lyubov moya, but the plug…” He rolled onto his side, pulling her with him, and then he teased the edges of the plug before giving it a gentle tug and electricity lit her up and she clamped down on him.

“Fuck,” he blew out a breath and she thought she could almost feel him stiffening under the flutters of her cunt, the inner muscles squeezing as he toyed with the plug.

“I think…that’s a yes,” she said on a shivering laugh. “It was unexpected.”

“The blindfold wasn’t?” he teased.

“Nah, you said you wanted to save it for later.” The tease during training had been more of a turn-on than the setting warranted. “The binding was…”

His smile erased to be replaced by concern. “Too much?”

“No,” she marveled, a little surprised at herself. “Uncertain at first, but… it was you.” That was all that mattered. James would never harm her. Never willingly. “You didn’t bind my wrists.”

“Never, kotyonok. Never.” He stroked a hand down her arm, then caught her hand and brought her wrist to his lips to kiss. “Never.”

She believed him. Cupping his face, she traced the smoothness of his cheeks. He’d shaved while she spoke to Pepper, shaved and set all this up. “I don’t know about the plug all the time,” she told him. “I’d rather it was you.”

“Or Steve,” he told her, dropping a kiss on her nose. “We need to keep you loose. Never pain for you.”

“And it helps that it makes me even tighter, hmm?” She didn’t miss the glint in his eyes.

“You’re perfect, Natalia, in every way.” He thrust gently, shallowly. His refractory period stretching her and keeping him seated deep inside. “I will never have enough of you…”

Cupping his face, she kissed him. A slow, deliberate kiss filled more with affection and acceptance than passion. She kept her leg over his hip, arching her body to keep him in place. The kisses turned languid. She contented herself with the slow thrusts, no hurry, just filled with the need to keep touching each other.

The earlier trembling resumed whenever he played with the plug or she twisted her hips a little. So close, they danced at the edge as she slid her fingers around the root of his cock, squeezing him gently as he pushed in and pulled out. He massaged her breast as he sucked on her tongue. So many different things to taste and to feel… when he shifted enough to grind her clit against him with every thrust she tilted her head back.

“Let me see you,” he beckoned, rolling her onto her back. He rose above her, rolling his hips with every thrust nailing that spot with each deliberate thrust.
Opening her eyes, she locked gazes with him. No walls, no reserve, she let out every gasp his touch elicited and moaned in tandem with him. His pupils were huge in the low light, his expression wrecked, and all for her. When her orgasm rolled over her this time it was a surprise, the coil of lust turning as heated and languid as their kisses and the rush of wetness should have embarrassed her but there was no shame in the way his smile grew and then he increased the tempo of his thrusts. The wet sound of him easing in and out of her a playfully erotic harmony and when his orgasm stole over him, she had a front-row seat to his expression tightening and his lips parting in silent rapture.

When he collapsed this time, she wrapped around him, cradling him to her. They lingered until the air began to cool their sweaty, sticky bodies and even then she didn’t want to pull away. “When did you know you loved me?” The question slipped out, a half-formed thought she would never usually ask.

“I don’t think there was any one moment,” he told her, his breath hot against her neck. When he pushed himself up, they both groaned. He slipped out of her and she was panting at the loss, but her ass was still so full. “I can’t remember a moment when I didn’t, not really. I wasn’t kidding when I said that day I saw you at your graduation, fighting your way free after they left you to sit in that chair broken and bloodied—you were fierce and beautiful and so deadly. The Soldier… he was captivated. Every minute I spent with you after that just cemented it.”

Carefully, he pushed up and then rolled her over, she wanted to hang onto him, but he rubbed her thigh. Then with exquisite care, he eased the plug out and she trembled all over again.

“Shh,” he crooned, rubbing her thigh. “No pain, yes?”

“None,” she promised, a little strung out and catching at his fingers, needing to hold onto him.

“Just—so full and now…” Now she wasn’t.

“I’m here,” he dipped his head and pressed a kiss to her forehead then the corner of her eye. “Just a minute, okay?”

She released him and he slid off the bed on shaky legs. It was her first glimpse of the plug. It was silver-gray like his arm. It almost looked like an extension of his fingers and another shudder rippled through her. He disappeared into the bathroom. The water for a moment, then he came back with a warm, wet washcloth. He wiped across her cunt gently. The sensation almost too much and she arched her hips.

“Shh,” he soothed again, the roughness just enough to send little shocks through her clit as he cleaned her. Then he changed the cloth and wiped around her ass, the contact soothing even as she ached for more. Fuck, how much more did she really need? Not a thought she had to spend too much time on because he set the washcloth aside and nudged her onto her back, then buried his face in her cunt.

She forgot how to breathe and English. A string of Russian invectives fell from her lips as he ate her out with such enthusiasm and sent orgasm after orgasm crashing through her. At some point, she must have blacked out because when she opened her eyes again, she stared into his smug expression and a trembling laugh fell from her lips.

“You are a dangerous man,” she whispered.

“You need a dangerous man.” He told her, then kissed her lightly. She could still taste herself on him. And a little of his own release. Fuck, he’d ate himself out of her. Destroyed. She traced his lips.
“I don’t need one… I have one.”

“Yes,” he promised. “You do.”

Blissed out was the only way to describe him as they lay there. Her body seemed to belong elsewhere, floating on a haze of pleasure. He toyed with her fingers, gave her lazy kisses. His eyes drifted half shut or maybe that was hers. She didn’t want to go to sleep, longing to not miss a second of this.

A low buzz intruded. A whimper escaped her when he rolled partially away, then his hand settled against her belly, his thumb skating in circles. He brought his phone back with him and turned so she could curve against him and rest her head on his chest. Answering it, he stared up at the video screen. “Hey, Punk. Everything good?”

“Not as good as if I were there,” Steve said, chuckling.

She smiled as she tilted her head to look at him. “Hi, Steve.”

“Hey Angel… you look tired.”

“Hmm, a little. Mostly worn out.”

“I bet.” But the laughter in his voice made her smile wider. “Hopefully I’ll be home tomorrow.”

“I’d like that.” One thigh resting over James, she lifted herself a little to look at the screen. There was more than tired around Steve’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing…”

“What’s wrong, Punk?” James backed her up. “Something happened.”

“I knew I should have kept this to voice only.” Which meant he’d not wanted to worry them.

“Too late,” she said, keeping it light. “Talk to us?”


“You look exhausted,” she countered. James rubbed her arm lightly.

“Been a long day, but I didn’t want to go to sleep without talking to you.”

She searched his face. “Steve?”

“It’s nothing, Angel. I’ll brief you on everything tomorrow, okay?”

“Steve,” James said.

“Seriously, Buck. Tomorrow. Right now, I just want to talk to the two of you and enjoy looking at Nat’s beautiful face.” The compliment warmed her, but at the same time...

“Fine…” But James didn’t sound any happier about it than she was.

“Tell me about your days,” Steve asked. “I didn’t get to talk to you about the meetings you had yesterday Angel.”

“What do you want to know?”
“Everything.” He set his phone down a moment, then he was lying down and had the phone propped next to him as he leaned on his side and looked at them. It was almost like he was there. But not enough.

Stretching, she curled against James again as he shifted the phone, and she filled them in on the meetings—keeping it light. Though she didn’t edit out Adrien’s questionable behavior or the fact Sir Winston left them with files to review. James had been stroking her arm as she spoke. When he picked up the thread, she found herself yawning halfway through his report on Peter's apartment. He’d told her earlier after all. James’ voice rumbled against her ear and she wanted to listen to more but her eyes drifted closed and the last thing she heard was Steve’s chuckle as he whispered “Night, Angel.”

Steve

“You don’t trust me,” Nick told him unnecessarily instead of following up on his Natasha comment. “I earned that.”

No argument from Steve. Arms folded, he waited the man out.

With a huff of a breath and a faint smile, Nick shook his head. “You don’t trust me, but I need you to listen to me because she won’t.”

“Pretty sure you earned that, too.” Maybe he should have let the comment slide, but the former director of SHIELD had made more than a few questionable choices in Steve’s opinion. “I guess she’s not as comfortable with everything as you thought she was.”

“Or maybe she has just decided to value someone else’s opinion more,” Nick countered. “She’s always been pretty flexible.”

Steve wouldn’t punch him.

“It was probably that flexibility that let her survive.” In spite of Nick’s actions, she had survived. Nick who sent her out on as many dangerous ops as the Red Room and the KGB had, who sent her out without backup or respite, who used her serum status to get what he wanted when he wanted it, who had used her.

“You’re a damn stubborn man, Captain,” Nick frowned, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Thank you,” Steve said. “If that was all…”

“Before the last few days, Cap, I wondered if she died.” The revelation pricked him. “The last time I saw her—we didn’t part on good terms. The simple truth is… Natasha needs a handler.”

“The simple truth is you’re not getting your hands on her again,” Steve countered. “She’s fine without you and she’s definitely better off without SHIELD.”

“Look, I know what I think doesn’t hold much water with you. I regret a lot of things…”

“Nick, do you regret letting her think you died? Do you regret telling me to not trust anyone, which
would include her?” Steve dropped his arms and took a step forward. “Do you regret the fact Hydra had access to her all those years and you didn’t do a damn thing to protect her?”

The last was a gamble, he didn’t think Nick knew it. If the man did… well, then Colonel Fury would rank among the worst humans Steve had ever encountered. Nick straightened at the accusation. “What?”

“Hydra. Pierce? The STRIKE team? Ringing a bell?” It was a little like sticking his thumb in a wound and grinding down on it. But Steve had never liked bullies and on more than one occasion, Nick struck him as not much better than a bully. Like now, when he wouldn’t back off of Natasha even when she told him she was retired.

“Cap, I get that you think I might be the devil incarnate, but do you seriously think I’d have let her get tortured for kicks?”

“You didn’t mind when her marks tortured her as long as she got the information you needed or the job done. Why would this be any different?”

Straightening, Nick glared at him. “Romanoff was my best agent. I admit to not wanting her when Barton brought her in, but she was hands down my best. It’s why I assigned you to her. I knew she’d get you into shape and I knew she’d keep you alive. You think I would have done that if I thought she was Hydra? Or if I thought for a moment they could still have been sinking their hooks into her?” He shook his head. “I told you to trust no one because all of SHIELD had been compromised and Natasha…”

“Had a sketchy history.”

“Longer than you know,” Nick muttered, then he paused. “Or do you know now?”

“I know everything I need to know.”

“You probably think you do, but she is also the most accomplished liar I’ve ever met. She lied to me on more than one occasion and I didn’t see it.” Frustration marred his expression and his words. “And I didn’t tell her because the extraction for director in danger was to tell only one person. One person would know. Hill. She had her mission. Keep me alive through all means necessary. It was the cost of doing business.”

Steve shrugged. “Then losing her trust and confidence is another cost of how you did your business.” But he was already tired of this conversation. “Get to the point of your visit and go.”

“I need to talk to her—her and me. No one else.”

“Not happening. Was that it?” Because Steve could use a shower and sleep.

“It needs to happen, Captain. You’ve reactivated her as an Avenger. Stark’s trotting her out to court the public eye. You’re taking her Christmas tree shopping with your buddy. She and I need to talk.”

“No. She told you no. What part of no are you having trouble comprehending?” The stare-off lasted another two beats. “Look, Nick, you can tell me or not tell me. I’m on her side. Not yours.”

“Did she read you into her history?”

“Enough.”

“Her history after she came to SHIELD?”
“You mean her debriefing and the time spent in a cell while you tried to reprogram her as your weapon?”

The dry look didn’t ease his temper any. “I meant the suicide attempts.” Nick let that hang out there a moment before he continued, “She’d go into fugue states, tried to open her wrists once. Stabbed herself in front of me another time. Guards found her trying to cave in her skull once, hitting it against the wall.”

“Did you ever look at who was with her before those incidents?”

“No,” Nick admitted. “But the reason she needs a handler, she needs someone who can keep her focused, keep her on task, and doesn’t let her slip down a rabbit hole. She’s spent too many years being a pet…”

“Call her that again and you’re going to need more than an eyepatch to cover your injuries.” Steve was done. “Nick, you don’t get it. She’s an Avenger. She has us. We will look after her. No more handlers. No more leashes. Sure as hell no more soulless commands to suffer for a mission.”

“Cap, you aren’t the only person who cares about her.”

“Then act like you care and not like she’s stolen property you want back. You know it makes you no better than the Red Room or Hydra.”

Nick’s mouth closed in a thin line. “Natasha doesn’t do affection. She understands the mission.”

“You don’t understand Natasha. Maybe she couldn’t handle affection when you first met her. Then look at what she went through before you did…”

“Should I look at all the people she killed? The hospital she torched? The men, women, and children who didn’t go home because they were in the Black Widow’s sights?” Nick spread his hands. “She had no empathy… no remorse. Not until we taught it to her.”

Nick was trying to press his buttons and he was succeeding.

“My point Cap, she’s a time bomb. She’s always been a time bomb. Barton and Coulson—they covered up her slips. Those times she went off the reservation.” Something niggled in the back of Steve’s mind. Too many hours idle, that was what Clint had said. Sometimes when she was off the mission for too long, she’d have those slips. Like the day in Vienna when she went for him in the bedroom. An attack he provoked deliberately because he pushed her.

But what if it had never been that she was off-mission too long?

“Who is going to clean up her messes now? You?”

“Nick, if you want to see her and you want her to forgive you. Act like it. This—attacking her even when she isn’t here, it’s not endearing me to your cause. Nat’s one of the most empathetic people I know. She can put herself into any situation, she can become anyone—but you can’t fake that kind of emotion. She’s been tortured, abused, and betrayed on every front—even by the Avengers. That’s not happening again. Not by you, not by anyone.”

To hell with it.

“Anyone who thinks any different will have to go through me to get her. Are we clear?”

Nick smiled slowly. “Crystal, Captain.”
Steve had tipped his hand. Whatever.

“The Russians on the Committee… they want her back.” Nick’s whole attitude changed abruptly. “There have been a handful of attempts over the years, SHIELD used to block them. We could take care of the hunters if she hadn’t done it already. But now she’s very public, sooner or later, someone is going to put together her history and her timeline. The Russians know it. Maybe not all of them, but a key few. If anyone has code words to trigger her—it’ll be them.”

“You son of a bitch,” Steve dropped his hands to his hips and sounded out each word deliberately.

“You better not be kissing Natasha with that mouth and if you think I’m surprised by your relationship, think again. I needed to know you have her back, all the way. No matter what crawled out of the darkness to find her.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Yes, I am,” Nick said with a nod. “I hurt her. I have to live with that. You’re right. I took advantage of her trust—that’s on me. I want her safe. Ross strung her out in the wind. I went after her to bring her back in where I could keep her safe.”

“She doesn’t need you,” Steve said, even angrier than he had been earlier.

“Maybe not… You take good care of her Cap. You don’t—you’ll never see me coming.” The other man nodded then turned away.

“So that’s it? All this way to try to make me turn on her to prove I wouldn’t?”

“You’re learning, Cap,” Nick called back. “She’s been a good influence on you.”

“Nick…”

The former director glanced back at him.

“The suicide attempts?”

“Those were real. Might have been Hydra, looking back that makes more sense. I kept a close watch on who she interacted with, at least I thought I did…”

Something in the way he said that. “And?”

“The only one I can think of who had unfettered access. Her psychologist. Richardson.”

Steve exhaled. Her deprogrammer had been Hydra.

“Yeah,” Nick said. “I didn’t know is not an excuse. I failed her.”

“I won’t.” Steve had already done that once when he left her in Leipzig, when he failed to listen to her about the Accords.

“Good. I’ll have my eye on you, Cap. I’ll have my eye on all of you.”

Then the other man was gone through the trees and Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. Bastard.

Twenty minutes later, showered and stripped down to gray sweats that were in the guest room he occupied, he pulled out his phone. After that conversation, he just needed to see her and hear her. Know for damn sure she was all right.
It rang twice, then Buck held the phone up. It was dim in the room and they were all curled together clearly fucked out and relaxed. A sigh left him. So many people let her down, but she was still safe. Buck was with her and the sweet curve of her lips and pleasure-hazed eyes promised him Bucky had been taking very good care of her.

Nat saw right through him, so did Bucky—but he wasn’t going to bring up Fury. Not while they were so blissed out and relaxed. Instead, he soaked up Nat’s stories about her meetings. When she dropped off in the middle of Bucky’s tale about cleaning out the bugs at Peter’s place, Steve couldn’t stop looking at her.

“She’s fine, Stevie,” Bucky told him quietly.

“Yeah… sometimes I just have to see it for myself.”

“I know.” Bucky probably knew more than anyone else. “You really okay?”

“No,” Steve admitted. “But I’m getting better. We’ll talk when I get back…” He met Bucky’s gaze. “Promise.”

“Okay Punk… take care of you. Watch your back.”

“Take care of you and our girl.”

“I will—and Stevie?”

“Yeah?”

“Get some sleep. You look like hell.”

Steve chuckled. “Look better than you.”

“Impossible,” Bucky said with a smirk. Steve took one last look at her, then ended the call.

Setting the phone down, he shoved Nick’s visit out of his mind. Touching a finger to the comms he’d put back in after his shower, he said. “SITREP, Vision?”

“The Iron Legion and I have moved to begin a breakdown of the debris and mech at the warehouse. A plane will be landing tomorrow to pick up all the items and return them to New York for Mr. Stark’s full inspection. I should travel with the items along with the Legion to make sure they’re secure.”

“Agreed,” Steve rubbed a hand over his face. “First thing, we’ll do another sweep of the city and make sure they don’t need us. Then wait until everything is loaded. We can fly escort with the quinjet just to be on the safe side.”

Tucking an arm under his head, he closed his eyes and tried not to think about how empty the side of the bed seemed. It was one night… but the last few weeks had spoiled him.

He didn’t want to miss even one night next to her.

Tomorrow, he promised himself. Tomorrow.

Still, it took him a long time to go to sleep.
Natasha has an episode and Tony catches on.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Busted

Natasha

The elevator opened to the penthouse and the scent of freshly brewing coffee. “Good morning, Ms. Romanoff. Boss is in the shower. He said he’ll be a few minutes.”

“Did he sleep at all, Friday?” She’d woken early, still tangled around James. He’d dragged her back into bed before she could slip away and she had a pre-morning workout before she went to dance. Not that she was complaining. There was something to be said for post-coital relaxation. It left her loose in the studio and her body was still humming from his joining her shower.

She’d teased him about the enthusiasm, but he only hoisted her higher as he pushed into her and pinned her to the tile wall of the shower. “You disappear for hours, I want every minute I can get.”

“A few hours, Ms. Romanoff. He may have had a breakthrough on the mech design. Have you had a chance to review the programming on the hard drive?”

“Some.” Coffee poured, she moved over to the living room. “Can you pull it back up for me in here?” She’d reviewed it while James made coffee and they’d made bacon and egg sandwiches with toast. He’d gone to roust Clint when she headed up to Tony. When she’d asked what they were going to do today, he’d kissed her on the nose and said the range.

They were so not going to the range.

On the other hand, they were also good for each other and having Clint and James watch each other’s back while she was tied up at the U.N.—so not looking forward to today—comforted her. Even if Clint took him to shops with sex toys—she wished she’d been there to see his expression. She’d sent a message to Steve, but he was probably still asleep. Hopefully, he would be back by the time she and Tony returned.

Rising up on her tiptoes and then down to her heels, she kept her legs warmed and stretched as she studied the program files Friday displayed. The coding was—inlegant. More brute force with driver algorithms to activate at a certain hour, exit warehouse, levels of destruction required by primary units to create an exit. Then coding for specific latitude and longitude.

It had no AI, it was literally point and shoot. Swiping to the next screen, she followed the series of if/then statements. If Avengers, then maximum force.
Cheerful.

If armed police, then engage secondary defenses.

What secondary defenses?

Tilting her head, she scrolled looking for the section on secondary defenses…

Self-destruct was a secondary defense.

So whoever wrote this didn’t want to hurt cops, but they wanted to hurt Avengers. Then again a self-destruct could hurt a lot of people.

The level of detail though, it was endless. Like they added any number of scenarios they could think of… they might as well have said if stormy, then spawn a tornado…

Game design.

“It’s game code.”

“That’s what I saw, too.” Tony descended the stairs, shirtless with a towel around his neck. “Pretty sure it’s based off one of the alien shooters.”

“Are you sure? These lines here are more like disaster coding you’d see in one of the city simulation games.” She magnified a section. “There are grid vectors here. Granted this is one hard drive and they may have been networked…”

“They weren’t,” Tony told her as he poured his own coffee. “Vision sent me a breakdown of everything he could from one of the more intact mechs. He’s bringing everything back today aboard a larger transport. Cap and the team will fly escort just to be on the safe side.”

“Good. So they could have individualized the code. Probably more if/then…” Then she found it. Tapping it twice, she widened the window with the flick of her fingers. “Five separate groupings, once they were clear of the warehouse they would then cycle to their individual assignments. I don’t know whether to be impressed or insulted.”

“I’m both, so you can be whatever you want. I’m also incensed, irritated, and irked.”

“You just said three words that basically mean the same thing.”

“I would go for improper, but you still have to beat me this morning.” Some of the sullen air from the night before had dissipated.

“Speaking of which…” She set her coffee down and returned to the kitchen to grab her leather tool satchel. When she returned with it, Tony had scrolled the code to the bottom. “No signature?”

“No. But every coder has a certain style.”

“That doesn’t read like style, that reads like someone cut and paste, then ran a substitution algorithm.” Which would explain the absolute lack of elegance. Untying the satchel, she unrolled it and checked her various pairs of scissors, combs, and the trimmers. The straight razor had been cleaned and returned to its oiled sheath.

“I have scissors you could use,” Tony mentioned, staring down at the satchel. “Let me guess, you were undercover as a barber?”
“I have no idea,” she admitted. “But I know how to do it. That’s the important part.” She ignored his flinch and the pained look flickering across his eyes.

“Red…”

“You can’t get upset every single time something comes up. My memory is swiss cheese. I keep learning about new holes they punched in it. Maybe it’s a good thing I have the serum or I’d be drooling on the carpet. Shall we move to the tile so we don’t have to worry about hair on the carpet?”

“I don’t care about the carpet,” he said. “Wherever you’re comfortable.”

She moved him over to one of the dining room chairs. It was easier to move around. Using the towel in lieu of a cape, she ran the comb through his damp hair. “You want your usual cut?”

“You know how I cut my hair?” The hint of disbelief etched the underside of the words.

“Natalie Rushman was a very meticulous woman who kept detailed notes on every aspect of your life in order to facilitate your comfort and efficiency.” At his glare, she grinned. “Yes, I know how short you usually cut your hair and how you like to style it. It’s why I noticed it was getting long. So usual style?”

“Thank you,” he muttered, straightening. “Make sure you keep the neck trimmed and cleaned up. Want you to have a good targ—ow!”

At her pinch, he shut up. “Better.”

Running her fingers through his hair, she adjusted the part slightly, then measured the lengths before she pulled out the scissors.

“Do you want to talk about Adrien?” he asked as she began snipping. She started with the length in the back.

“Monsieur Devereux of The Questionable Tactics? His government may want to help. He has another agenda entirely.” The fact he’d asked such pointed and leading questions would have pointed her in that direction if she hadn’t already found his manner a bit overbearing.

“I was pretty sure he just wanted to get you into bed. Then—what the hell agenda could he have? He’s…”

“An intelligence operative. It could be as simple as he has orders to find out everything he can about you, me, the Avengers… Considering the current state of the world and the Accords—these are all reasonable targets.”

She paused when Tony lifted his coffee for a drink. An uneven cut was worse than just needing one.

“What if it’s not simple?”

“Then we have an enemy we need to keep an eye on. As a spy, your primary goal is to be the smartest person in the room, all the most recent intelligence, and even if you don’t know where the bodies are buried, you know how to find them.” Monsieur Devereux played a very interesting game. “As opponents go… I’ve had less intriguing.”

“You sound almost like you like him?”
“Like would be a strong word,” she murmured, moving to the side and evening it to match the rest. She’d need to use the trimmers on his neck, but it was already looking better. There was more gray in his hair though, spots of it here and there. Even if she knew he’d had some for years, it was unsettling to recognize how much. Tony hadn’t been kind to his body for years. “Respect is too strong. Professional appreciation would be the better description. He wanted me off-center, hence the emotional inquiries.”

“He asked a lot of questions about SHIELD.”

“Because SHIELD had dirt on a lot of agencies—including his.”

“Dirt you collected?”

She chuckled. “Tony, I didn’t do everything to everyone…”

“Just a lot of them.” The warmth in the tease kept it from being an accusation. Then again… “Fine, I tackled my fair share. But I always liked France and the French. They’re very—French.”

“Thanks for making that so clear to me.”

She shifted to his other side to make it match. The snipping was almost soothing, as she would comb up a section then work off the end of the scissors to keep it all even. “I grew up in Russia, it’s very cold there and austere. I never had things. I had my weapons and the clothes on my back. Every once in awhile Ivan would bring me a book that I would hide away so Madame didn’t toss it. Don’t get me wrong, we had reading material and lots of movies—reels. American films. There’s a reason I hate Snow White.”

“You hate Snow White?” He glanced at her as she moved to stand in front of him. And she had to press her fingers lightly to the sides of his head to keep him from tilting it.

“Snow White played once a day every day for two years. We had to practice our English, and amidst the warbling music of the guileless princess and hard working dwarves they set up their subversive programming designed to make us obedient little drones.” She leaned away, nudging his chin so he would look up at her. “I hate it the same way I dislike Tchaikovsky. But that was my life—year in and year out. But France? It’s amazing. Beautiful architecture, colorful festivals…the music, the food… even the ridiculous level of attention they pay to seduction amongst their upper classes. It’s an art form.”

“Good practice for you?”

“Sometimes, though I had most of it down long before my first assignments took me into the world. I had to in order to graduate.” She combed his hair back, then cleaned up a couple of pieces before setting the scissors aside and pulling out the trimmers. “But there is something about walking along the river Seine at dawn, the sun is just edging over the horizon. The bakeries puffing flour and sweet smells into the air, the city is just beginning to stir. Deliverymen rush about to get their papers or milk or boxes of fruit to wherever they need to go… at least it was like that in the sixties. It has changed some. But I still like the city. I am going to have to get myself a new safe house there.”

“I’ve got a place there you can use…” Of course, he did. “But you’re not going to France until we figure out Adrien’s game.” Sometimes, he was impossible not to find endearing.

“There’s always a game to play.” Testing the trimmers, she moved behind him again. “One step at a time. At least Gerald was helpful.”
“Yeah, I almost wish all Adrien wanted was to sleep with you,” he sounded so aggrieved. “It would be easier to just dismiss him.”

“Cavalier playboy with an entire retinue of come-ons is hardly something you’re unfamiliar with,” she chided him, running the trimmers along his neck gently.

“I’m not obnoxious.” He paused, then added, “Much.”

“It depends on the day.”

“Ouch, Red.” He turned his head to catch her gaze as she turned off the trimmer. “I’m not that bad.”

“Sometimes,” she told him. “You like to push, Tony.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

She nodded her head a little. “It is. But it’s also what gets you into trouble.” After she removed the towel carefully to keep from dropping hair all over him, she tapped his nose once. “Take a look at that and tell me if you want any changes.”

Raking a hand through his hair, he gave her a small smile. “Thanks for not shaving me bald.”

A laugh escaped her. “Did you think I would?”

“It occurred to me that it was a great opportunity for you to get even. But not sure I can rock the bald look.” He winked. Crossing the room toward the mirror over the side table near the elevator, he turned his head from side to side. “That’s not bad Red…”

“Good enough?”

“Yeah. You throw in a shave and I’ll get rid of my regular guy and just see you every few weeks.”

Rolling her eyes, she cleaned up her tools. “Finish your coffee. We need to get to the gym and get our hour in before we have to get cleaned up.”

“We’ll be fine, we can take the Ferrari…”

“Happy is picking us up.”

It was Tony’s turn to snort. “It’s much more fun to park it in front of the building and leave it there. Drives security nuts.”

“Exactly the impression we don’t want to leave.”

Spreading his arms, he approached her. “You’re taking the fun out of my day.”

“That’s what I’m here for… Speaking of cars, do you know where my ‘Vette is?” She’d been meaning to ask for days and it kept slipping her mind, which was aggravating enough.

“In storage,” he said with a slow smile. “I might have moved it off the property and into a hanger with a few of my cars. Want me to bring it back?”

“Yes, please. Thank you, Tony.” She was very fond of that car.

“Consider it done, Red.” Then he pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Thanks for the haircut. Now gimme
a minute to grab a shirt and shoes and you can proceed to beat me black and blue.” He laughed at his own rhyme then headed for the stairs. “Hit the music, Friday.”

A song rolled out of the speakers and she shook her head as she inspected the scissors and wiped them down before sliding them back into their pouch. The light guitar notes were a little more low-key than Tony’s usual rock…

*Goodbye to you my trusted friend…*

*We’ve known each other since we were nine or ten…*

The lyrics washed over her.

*…climbed hills and trees*

*Learned of love and ABC’s…*

She knew this song.

*…we had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun*

*But the hills that we climbed were just seasons out of time*

A pain lanced through her right eye and the spike drilled all the way into her brain.

*…Goodbye Papa, please pray for me*

*I was the black sheep of the family*

*You tried to teach me right from wrong*

*Too much wine and too much song…*

*Wonder how I got along…*

The sun was hot on her face, but she couldn’t slow down. Her nose had already cracked from the previous day’s sunburn. The weight on her chest and back left her shoulders aching, but nothing compared to the hole blown through her heart.
Goodbye Papa, it’s hard to die

When all the birds are singing in the sky

Now that spring is in the air

Little children everywhere

When you see them, I’ll be there…

The ringing in her ears elongated to a harsh discordant note that stretched to infinity. She pressed her palm against her eye, trying to smother the white-hot heat piercing her skull.

We had joy, we had fun, we had seasons in the sun

But the wine and the song, like the seasons have all gone

Goodbye my little one

You gave me love and helped me find the sun…

Squinting her eyes closed, she tried to turn away from the light. It was too bright everywhere. Car horns blared and her eyes burned. She had to keep walking. Going back wasn’t an option. It was the right thing to do.

Goodbye Michelle it’s hard to die

When all the birds are singing in the sky

Now that spring is in the air

With the flowers everywhere

I wish we could both be there…

The blast of exhaust clogged her nose, but she lifted her chin as she walked. A hat from one vendor, a scarf from another and with each block she walked, she peeled away the layers to become someone else. A wallet from that man, a watch from that one, and a bump to drop something into another bag and lift out a blouse. Then ID from a woman who asked her directions.

Ten blocks later, she was someone else with everything she needed to manufacture an ID. Turning, she looked at the Brooklyn Bridge as the sun cut right through it and her vision whitened out.

“Natasha.” Hands on her arms, squeezing and pulling. She cut her hands down to twist and yank them off her. “Fuck—dammit, Red.” Then she was half-pinned and she twisted the hold broke it and threw her assailant over. The pain piercing her eye abated a fraction and she stared down at
Tony.

His gauntlet was pulled over his hand and he had it up against her chest. Immediately she opened her fist and let him go as she fell back on her ass and scrambled away from him. The throb in her skull echoed her heartbeat.

“Red?”

“I’m sorry, Tony,” she whispered, tasting blood in her mouth. She brought a hand up to her face to staunch the blood from her nose. Leaning against the bar wall, she put her head back.

“Friday, get Bucky up here…”

“Don’t…” She told him. “I’m fine.”

“Yeah, no.” He said. “Get Bucky, Friday and Clint.” He closed the distance and squatted in front of her. He grabbed a cloth napkin from the counter and reached over to her gently.

“I got it,” she said.

“It’s not just your nose, Red.” Careful as hell, he put the napkin to her ear. The ringing was still there. The beat of the pulse in her head.

“Did I hurt you?”

“Just my ego,” he quipped. “I can take it.”

The elevator chimed. She closed her eyes. Focusing on her breathing. Pain could be compartmentalized. But that wasn’t pain.

“Natalia,” James settled right next to her, but Tony didn’t move away and then Clint was on the other side of her. Boxing her in.

“Stop,” she said quietly. Too much. “Need to breathe for a minute.”

A warm hand at her nape, the light pressure next to her ear. Another one being added to her nose. It hurt. Pain could be compartmentalized.


“I went to get changed after she cut my hair, came out and she was—just checked out. Face blank, nose bleeding and the ear…when I tried to get her attention. She snapped.” Tony kept his tone light, but genuine worry underscored every single word.

“Like the chalet? Or like Vienna?” Clint asked.

“Like I’ve never seen her like that before. It wasn’t just her being someone else, it was like she couldn’t see me or even knew I was here.”

“Let’s get you up Kid, sound good?”

No. Not really. She was almost there. In for four breaths and out for four. James pressed his forehead to the side of her head. He said nothing, but he had his fingers on her rabbiting pulse as she got it under control.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” she said again. “I didn’t…”
“Didn’t do anything wrong, Red. I’m fine. Totally rocked that close-hold for all of about five seconds. Thank you for protecting my ego during training.”

A little laugh worked its way up and she winced as she shook her head.

“Bleeding is stopping.”

“I’m picking you up now,” James informed her. It wasn’t a question.

“No, little more time. I’ll have this under control and then we can go train.”

Dead silence greeted the comment.

Blowing out a breath, she refused to let it shudder as she opened her eyes. Tony was on his knees right in front of her. He had a hand on her upraised knee and the other held the cloth napkin to her ear. Clint was on her right, sitting awkwardly, leg brace out in front of him and her hand in his with two fingers on her pulse the other applying careful pressure to her nose. James still knelt on her left, a hand wrapped on her nape with his fingers against the pulse point at her throat and his forehead pressed to the side of her head.

For once, they each wore the exact same expression—a combination of disbelief, irritation, and flat-out concern. In Tony and Clint’s eyes, however, anger stirred.

“I’ll be fine in a couple of minutes.” She licked her lips. Her next words were going to piss them off even more than they already were. Not telling them was one thing. They had been getting better. Lying deliberately was another.

“You had an episode, Nat.” Clint’s tone said he firmly disagreed with her. “You know the routine…”

“It wasn't like…”

But Clint didn't let Tony finish. “We have the routine for a reason.”

They did. “Fine, my name is Natasha Romanoff, formerly of the Red Room, the KGB, and apparently SHIELD/Hydra. I’m an Avenger. This...these—don’t last that long and once the headache goes. I’m fine.”

“Speaking from experience, Red?” Tony’s tone went flat.

James sighed.

“It’s happened a couple of times…”

“Dammit, Nat.” Clint squeezed her hand. “Thanksgiving?”

“Yes.”

“When else?” James gave her nape the gentlest of squeezes.

“The day after we got back from the island—in the morning when you and Steve went running,” she said, glancing at James.

“And?” He prompted.

“And Saturday… before I trained with Wanda.”
A muscle ticked in Tony’s jaw. Clint frowned. But James lifted his head. “And you told no one?”

“She didn’t want to see the doc,” Tony said in almost the same breath as Clint said, “She hates medical.”

“She is right here and can answer for herself.”

Tony pointed a finger at her. “Maybe you can, but you don’t. So now you get to be quiet. I can’t—you let me hit you. A lot.”

“I’m fine, Tony.”

“Zip it, Red.” Anger vibrated in those three words.

James tapped a thumb against her neck. The headache had finally begun to recede, leaving an aching bruise in its wake. “Natalia, what happens before the bleeding?”

Tilting her head back, she brushed Clint’s hand from her nose, then tested it. Tony finally withdrew his hand. The smear of red on the cloth napkin an accusation all its own.

“I had a bad dream the first time. No, I don’t really remember it… except the chair was in it.” That was the problem. The glimpses were like pinholes through a sooty window, barely enough to make out what was on the other side before the pain made it impossible.

“And the second?” Clint prompted. They weren’t going to let up. This was why she hadn’t told them. They were all on the floor. Flattening her hand, she went to push up and James shifted immediately, one arm around her and pulling her to her feet. Tony rocked back on his heels and rose as they did, then he held out a hand to Clint and helped him up. “It was Thanksgiving, Tash. That was the second one? While you were waiting for Peter?”

She avoided looking at any of them directly. James’ grip on her arm was firm, but not painful. The rest of him had gone rigid though. She’d left the Tony, Steve, and James hammering out their rules for the snow fight and gone to be by herself. And then she’d called Clint.

Finally, she glanced at Clint and his gray-green eyes focused on her intently. He was not backing off. “Fine, yes it was Thanksgiving. I… I was thinking about a question Peter asked me and then I was in the chair again, I could feel the metal digging into my scalp.” She had forced herself to open her eyes and look into James’ empty, blank ones devoid of everything that made him him.

Licking her lips, she took a step away from James and he finally loosened his grip. The dull ache was a half-formed memory of the violent pain.

“The third time was on Saturday. I went to change Nate. I was just playing with him and…” The déjá vu in that moment swarmed over her. It was like some horrible little taunt from the past. A fresh new torture.

Dead silence rolled off all three and the weight of their stares. She’d told Clint about the headaches and he’d made her promise to act if they got worse. Reclaiming her almost chilled coffee at this point, she took a long drink. “Today—is the first time since Saturday it happened.”

“You promised you would tell someone if they got worse,” Clint said, the disappointment in his voice filled with reproach.

“Saturday wasn’t worse…”
“For fuck’s sake Tasha, that’s splitting hairs and you know it. You don’t get to pull that crap with me.”

Pivoting, she leaned against the back of the sofa and met their gazes. James hadn’t said a word, but she didn’t doubt he would have them. Just not here. Not with Tony and Clint.

Clint, on the other hand, had no such compunctions. They’d never been restrained in slapping the other one upside the head.

Tony, though, his silence said a lot more. Anger radiated off him.

She touched a thumb to her nose, then pulled it away to examine her skin. No stains. “See, all healed. The only thing I’m really sorry about is I hit Tony.”

“You didn’t hit me,” Tony said quietly. “I shouldn’t have grabbed you, but the lack of response and the bleeding were worrying. You tossed me on my ass and when I tried to pin you—you broke the close hold faster than I could lock it. You were trying to get away, not attack me. I had the gauntlet, I was fine.” The gauntlet in question was gone.

“You should have used it.” At least then he wouldn’t have been in danger.

“I think I’ll skip taking your advice on how to handle your condition,” Tony retaliated. “You’re clearly not the most reliable source. Tell me, Red. What would have been worse? When you had a stroke?”

“Pain can be…”

“You finish that sentence, Tasha and broken leg or not, I’m going to kick your ass.” There was just enough heat in Clint’s words to suggest he was serious.

A faint smile pulled at her mouth. “I’d like to see you try.”

“I don’t have to try,” James added. “You should have told someone Natalia.”

“There wasn’t much to tell…and I came back and endured every single one of those damn tests so you three wouldn’t worry. I was not going back into that box. What the hell is anyone going to tell me? I have brain damage? We know I do. We also know I heal. I’ll survive. The rest of it is…”

“You suffering in silence.” Yes, James was not happy with her.

Tony raked a hand through his hair and turned sharply into the kitchen. “Friday, cancel today’s meetings…”

“Don’t,” Natasha said, straightening. “Don’t cancel them, Friday.”

“I’m not taking you into a viper’s pit of questioning and accusations while you’re suffering…”

“Fine, I’ll go by myself. You worked too long and too hard to set this all up. There’s a row of dominoes that need to fall. We have to shore up the allies before we face the opposition. You put off the appointments today, it reflects badly on the whole team and maybe costs us some points with them.”

Tony smirked. “I’m me. They’ll get over it.”

“But I’m not you.” She met his gaze, aware of his clenching teeth.
“Red…”

“I’m fine. The headache is mostly gone. It feels like a bruise now. If it’s anything like all the others, even that feeling is gone in an hour and it will be like nothing happened.”

Clint folded his arms. “But something did happen.”

“And the meeting isn’t until ten, I can have Cho here in an hour.”

Of course, he could. “She can’t read the CT Scans, that’s why you’re looking for your Dr. Strange, remember?”

“Son of a bitch.” He slammed his cup on the counter.

She wanted to rub her forehead, but she didn’t dare. “You need to train, Tony.”

“Shut up, Red.”

Blowing out a breath, she pushed away from the sofa and went to retrieve her tools. “Fine. I’ll go get ready.”

“I didn’t say we were going…”

“Natalia—you’re remembering,” James said quietly. “That’s what is triggering the headaches.”

“Maybe,” she said, lifting her shoulders. “I think so. But it’s fragments. Pieces. There and then gone again. If I look too long and too hard…”

“The pain is worse.” Clint finished for her. “It’s how you compartmentalize, you pull back and look away.”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I just ride it out.”

“What happened today then?” Tony asked some of his anger draining away. “What did you remember today?”

“There was a song…”

“Friday? What was playing?”

“\textit{Seasons in the Sun} by Terry Jacks, released 1973,” Friday offered. “By the first stanza, Ms. Romanoff’s pulse had increased. By the second, her blood pressure had also risen. Respiration was uneven. I notified you something was wrong, Boss and then the altercation began when you tried to get her attention. Ms. Romanoff’s failure to respond lasted forty-eight seconds from when you took her arms.”

That was unsettling.

Tony eyed her. “See why I’m peeved?”

“I already said I was sorry.”

“I don’t want or need your apologies, Red. I do need you to be okay and for you to tell someone when you’re in trouble. Is that so damn hard to understand?”

“No, but I have no desire to go to medical. So if you can promise to leave that alone—”
“Not happening. You wanted to know why I said no to B.A.R.F.—this right here? This is why.”

She’d known why. Tucking the satchel under her arm, she said, “Fine. I’ll get ready. If you’re in the garage when Happy gets here, you can go with me to these meetings. If not, I’ll take them alone. We need every inch of progress… and before you say you’ll tell Happy not to show up, I can get there on my own if I have to.”

“Natalia.”

Dammit James.

She looked at him.

“What fragments? Can they compromise you during one of these meetings?”

The closest they might have come would have been Adrien’s interrogation, but she’d played the game, dancing on the knife-edge of truth. “Only if they knew what questions to ask—would be my guess. I am not even sure…” No, that was a lie. “If they ask about the chair, maybe. If they knew enough to ask about…about the Red Room.” That didn’t taste right.

“Tasha, we’re on your side, you know that, right?”

“Of course, I know that,” she didn’t snap at Clint, but she was close. They were worried and they weren’t the enemy. She set the satchel down and braced her hands on the table. “This hasn’t bothered me during the meetings the last two days and since Monsieur Devereux did his damnedest to probe for any detail he could get out of me. It was probably one of the more thorough interrogations I’ve had in a while and I. Was. Fine.”

“She was,” Tony admitted. “Even remembered something…”

She glared at him and he had the grace to wince.

“What?” James asked.

“April 3rd.” She looked at him. Just mentioning it was like picking the scab off a barely closed wound. “She was born on April 3rd.”

James nodded slowly. “Yes… you remembered her?” Despite the coolness in his eyes, hurt echoed in his voice. Maybe not audible to anyone else.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “James if I remembered her, I’d have told you. I was… one of the questions he asked was about when SHIELD brought me in.” She flicked a look to Clint. “Then Tony asked me in the car about why that day, why had I let Clint find me that day… why was I ready to give up then and die.”

None of them moved, the stillness so loud in the silence.

“It was April 3rd,” Clint said finally. “Fuck, Tasha…”

She shrugged. “Until that moment, I didn’t… I didn’t have any context for it to be special. Laura said I had to have known, even if they took it away, some part of me knew—just like I knew James. I was tired, and I was done. I was ready to die. Then I didn’t and here I am.”

The burn in her eyes stung, but she refused to give into it. She would not cry.
James closed the distance abruptly and wrapped his arms around her. Pressing her cheek to his chest, she closed her eyes and just let him hold her. For a moment, she leaned into his strength. But only a moment.

“Where the fuck is this Dr. Strange asshole?” Clint asked abruptly.

“Good question, I’ve been looking. Friday and I keep running into dead ends. Red was going to look for him…”

“It has to be him?” Clint asked echoing the question she’d asked earlier.

“Natalia?” James murmured, his voice too low to carry. “Skazhi mne pravdu. Tebe vse yeshche bol’no?” Was she still hurting?

“Ne tak mnogo.” Not so much.

“He’s the best in the world—he deals with impossible cases. We’ve been vetting a couple of others, but they’re less likely to do more than dismiss her as untreatable.” Worry coated those words robbing Tony’s voice of his earlier anger. “I won’t give them all her details without being absolutely sure of them.”

The last thing she wanted to be was another science experiment. Tony had refused to let that happen. Guilt nibbled at her again. He was twisting himself into these knots for her and she flipped a damn switch. Again. Maybe it wasn’t the same, maybe it was. This was not how she wanted to talk to James about the birth date.

“Fine. Bucky and I were going hunting anyway, we’ll move this guy to the top of the list.”

Hunting, huh?

She leaned her head back and eyed James. “Okhota?” Hunting anyway? Really?

The corners of his eyes tightened. He nodded once. “We will find this doctor.” That wasn’t all of the story, but she wasn’t going to question him. They all had their secrets for their own reasons. Not like she thought he was going to the range anyway.

So they find the doctor and then what? He rooted around in her brain?

The shudder working its way up her spine didn’t disguise her reaction. “I sent a message to Isaiah… he was going to pull some threads.”

James rubbed her back. “Clint can contact your Isaiah?”

“Yes, I can,” Clint muttered, his gaze assessing. “He loves hearing from me.”

Natasha smiled. Isaiah rubbed Clint the wrong way the first time they met. He came around eventually, but Isaiah could be an acquired taste. “He knows he’s authorized to talk to you.”

“Maybe we should all meet him,” Tony suggested. “Just to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

That was fine. “Let me call him…” She glanced at the clock. It was almost eight and even if they went to the gym right now, they wouldn’t have enough time to finish the workout properly. “You need to do your stretches.”

“I have enough on my—”
You want to be pissed at me. Be pissed. You refuse to train this morning because of a little nosebleed, fine. Refuse. We’ll tackle it again tomorrow. The stretches and the warm-ups are not optional. We missed yesterday because we had a mission. Our deal stands.” She locked gazes with him as she slipped out of James’ arms and Tony scowled.

“A little nosebleed? That’s what we’re calling it? Fine, I’ll stretch and you take the day…”

“I don’t need the day. And we’re not renegotiating the deal.” She pulled her phone out and sent a message to Isaiah: Available for a call?

His response was: With you? Always. Let me just tell the judge you need me and everyone else needs to wait.

Rolling her eyes, she replied: Later is fine. Clint will be in contact about Strange situation.

Isaiah: I don’t know if I can stand the thrill.

“Does he speak to you like that often?” James asked, a testier edge to his voice.

Clint moved to squint at her screen, then snorted. “That’s Isaiah.”

“Be nice.” She sent: When would be good?

Isaiah: Let me get back to my office and check my calendar. Oh, you should know you’re up 20% in a few days. I take my thank yous in the form of presents to save you the oxygen.

James massaged the back of her neck. She should move away but the release of the tension drawing the muscles tight felt good. Maybe she should have thrown more effort into finding the doctor for Tony. Not that she’d had much time in the last 48 hours.

She’d been alive for decades and there never seemed to be enough time.

Maybe she should have told them, but they were all acting exactly how she expected them to act. She couldn’t be on the bench right now. She just spent almost a month on the bench and that was after months of being in the shadows.

“Can Friday brief us on everything regarding the doc we need to know?” Clint asked.

“Yeah, she has it,” Tony sounded tired. Guilt took another bite out of her.

It would get worse.

James was going to tell Steve.

The chances of her not getting benched were growing slimmer.

“Part of why I wanted to use B.A.R.F.,” she spoke in a slow and deliberate manner, meeting each of their gazes but finally focusing on Tony. “If this is a mental block—something put in place by the chair. I don’t know if I can get through it on my own. When I used it before… we learned things. I got pieces of me back.”

Licking her lips, she folded her arms. The posture was defensive. She didn’t care. The topic was uncomfortable enough.

“Yesterday, I finally had some confirmation to what James suggested. The whole time I was at SHIELD—they kept messing with my head—with me. More pieces sliced off or shaved away.”
James’ hand went still against her neck and Clint scowled, but she kept her focus on Tony. “You said no because of the damage to my brain you can’t account for and because the last time it put me into a coma because I had a concussion. But the process of it—it healed my brain, too. Four percent. That’s a lot.”

“That’s not a guarantee, Red.” Tony said softly, almost regretfully. “And it’s using it in an unintended fashion with unanticipated results. Even before the thing with ET using you to phone home—I wasn’t thrilled with a repeat experience of that. I won’t let my tech be the thing that hurts you.” Something flashed across his face, there and gone again. “I want to work on it, to tweak it and make it safer. I want the doc to look at you and see what if anything we can do to make this easier for you.”

“I know,” she said. She did know. Tony’s tech being used to hurt anyone extracted a cost from him, added red to his ledger. He didn’t need to explain it. “I didn’t bring any of this up because it was fleeting. A nosebleed. A piercing pain, intense for several long seconds, sometimes minutes. Then it’s over and it’s bruised, but hardly incapacitating. It’s not the worst thing I’ve ever experienced.”

The air whooshed out of Clint as he paced away and James dropped his hand. Tony just shook his head. “The fact you even have some basis for comparison doesn’t make this all right. You cut us out, what happens if something goes really wrong?”

“We don’t have answers right now,” James interjected in a reasonable tone. “When do you have to be at the U.N.?”

Tony grimaced. “Ten, so we should leave in a little over an hour.”

Relief spread through her. They were still on. Before she could say anything else, however, Friday said, “Captain Rogers is on the line, Boss. Should I put him through?”

“That’s my cue. I’ll go get ready for the meetings so you can all talk about me freely. When you do tell him,” she said looking at James this time. “Be sure to emphasize I’m fine now.”

“I’ll be sure to get right on that, Doll.” Then he cupped her cheek. “He’ll call you as soon as we’re done.”

“I know. He might as well get his yelling in now since I’ll be stuck in meetings all day.”

“Steve has plenty of lung capacity, he can yell now and later.” Then his grin disappeared behind a somber look as he lifted her wrist with the bracelet. “If it happens again Natalia…authorize Friday to notify us.”

The instant ‘no’ died unspoken. Tony’s anger hid fear. Clint’s impatience masked worry. James—he didn’t bother with artifice, he was all of the above, but he couldn’t really yell at her. Could he?

He’d remembered everything, then hid it for days.

“Friday?”

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff?”

She picked up her satchel and headed for the elevator. “Do you have biological markers you can track that detail when an episode occurs?”

“Based on the first and most recent, yes. I am afraid you erased the third and I was not monitoring
the quinjet for the second.”

“Thanks for throwing me under the bus there, Friday.”

“You’re very welcome, Ms. Romanoff. I believe I stated some concern for the incidences previously.” Maybe encouraging her to be a smartass had been a mistake.

Turning she faced them from the elevator then added, “Authorize Clint, Tony, James, and Steve to be notified immediately if I begin to display the physiological signs.”

“What confirmed authorization?”

She couldn’t miss the relief on their faces or the way it stabbed guilt into her gut. They all had enough problems. There was no easy fix for this and she could endure it. “Authorization confirmed.”

The elevator doors closed and she leaned against the back wall.

“Ms. Romanoff?” Friday asked tentatively.

“Yes?”

“I believe the concerns demonstrated by Boss, Sergeant Barnes, and Mr. Barton are all warranted. The physiological stress markers during those episodes display an unhealthy reaction. Bleeding from the nose and ears indicates burst blood vessels that could be masking deeper, more profound issues.”

“I’m aware. But do you think the profound stress they will experience knowing I’m having these and being unable to prevent them will be an improvement for anyone?”

The doors opened to Steve’s floor and she headed for her room.

Friday didn’t answer her immediately. She was halfway through straightening her hair, needing everything to be a little smoother and more orderly when the AI finally said, “While Boss’ physiological reactions indicate severe stress at the realization of your condition, I believe he is better suited to finding an answer to the problem if he is aware of it. Also, by being made aware of it, Mr. Barton and Sergeant Barnes are now looped into the search for Dr. Strange and may facilitate finding him sooner rather than later. Captain Rogers is currently being brought up to date, and while his stress markers indicate deep concern and anger, he is also advocating for your continued involvement in the work you’ve already begun, citing trying to bench you would cause more harm than good. In this manner, yes, I do believe their knowledge is an improvement. Since you asked.”

Natasha lowered the flat iron and glanced toward the camera in the corner of the bedroom. With Friday allowed to interact, the light on it indicated she had her attention. “You’ve been waiting a while to win one with me, haven’t you?”

“I have indeed, Ms. Romanoff. I have found working with you to be stimulating. Rationally, it is better that they know. Emotionally, I understand it is uncomfortable for you. While your enhancements allow you a resilience only Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes share, they have not made you immortal.”

That was a common refrain.

“I’d miss you if you were gone, too.” Just like she missed JARVIS. It had taken her a while to get
there, but she liked Friday.

“...but she liked Friday.

“I would manage in your absence Ms. Romanoff. The Boss might not.”

Natasha’s phone rang before she could respond and Steve’s name appeared on the screen. It was a video call.

“Privacy mode, Friday.”

The light on the camera blinked out.

Swiping the screen to active, she propped the phone on a shelf so she could look at him and finish her hair. “Hey…”

“Hi, Angel.” His expression held exasperation and affection in equal measure. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Well kicking me to the curb is always an option,” she said, trying to keep it light.

“Not for me,” he murmured, shaking his head. “Bucky said you were feeling better. Are you? Or did you say that to get everyone off your back?”

“I could have, but once it passes—it’s like a bruise. The bruise fades. It’s a little tender still.” She touched two fingers to her temple over her right eye. “It’s almost like I can feel it here and then back. But it’s not pain per se.”

“Not pain as in it really doesn’t hurt? Or not pain like it’s a stubbed toe versus being shot?” He studied her intently.

She dragged the flat iron over a long strand until it fell perfectly straight. Her hair had gotten long again. It fell to the middle of her back when she flattened it. “A little bit of both. It’s almost impossible to think around it when it starts, but it doesn’t last long. Most of the time I just breathe through it, I get a little nosebleed, and it’s over.” She downplayed it, but didn’t try to dismiss it. Dismissing it would just piss Steve off and the fact he was being so reasonable about it was a gift she refused to ignore. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“You’re not,” he said bluntly. “Not really and that’s fine.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Actually, it’s not fine. But I understand it.”

Setting the flatiron down and turning it off, she reached for the cosmetics. Today was a marathon of meetings with delegates for a half-dozen different nations in the EU. They had blocked out an hour each. She needed to look professional and approachable. Though she missed her earlier relaxation, she could at least paint a facsimile of it with cosmetics.

“Clint and Bucky are going to look for this doctor. Vision offered some assistance once we get the transport back to New York. Tony’s going to look into tweaking his memory gear, but you’re still not using it until we get an all clear. Bucky thought—thought you might be breaking mental blocks put there by the chair.” The fact his lips compressed as he said the last added fierceness to the word. “Is that what you think?”

Carefully applying the base, she said. “I think I’m trying to remember something… I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“It’s haunting you.”
After she broke down on the island, she and James hadn’t told Steve the full content of that particular conversation. At least, she hadn’t. Those few days had been vital, passionate, sweet and… she hadn’t wanted to spoil anything. Coming back to New York had been challenging enough.

“You could say that…” Then because it had been quiet, no chime from the elevator she admitted, “Sometimes I wish he never… he never told me. I wish he hadn’t remembered it. Then I hate myself a little for even feeling that.”

“Natasha.” The emphasis on her name pulled her attention to the phone. “Bucky hates himself for doing this to you. I hate myself for not being there to save all three of you. You’re allowed to feel resentment for having so much taken away from you.”

But not resentment for James… never for him or Steve. Even when they frustrated her. Just, no. She wasn’t allowed. Not for Clint or Tony either. It was just easier to compartmentalize, to pack it all away. Even if it wouldn’t stay in its designated boxes anymore.

“I told James… I remembered her birthday. Deduced it really, I don’t know if you could call it a memory,” she said, explaining how she came to April 3rd. “I should feel more knowing that and I just feel… empty.”

“We cope with grief differently and you’re grieving. You both have been since Buck remembered and he told you. Angel, it’s been a few short weeks. It feels like we’ve all been together forever, but we haven’t. It’s been a bare few months since we found you again in Geneva. Less since we made it out of Russia and back here…” Russia and all the wonderful secrets ripped open there. “…you’re rebuilding and having to dig into the past every day, you’re juggling so much for all of us, and we want—I want to do the same for you.”

“You told them not to bench me,” she said with a small smile.”

“If I thought it would do you any good, I would. But it won’t. You need to find a way to work this out for yourself… And to that end, maybe we should talk to T’Challa and his sister.”

She was in the middle of adding a light liner to her eyes. “Why?”

“They helped Bucky. Whatever Shuri did while he was in cryo—his memories came back over the course of a few weeks, but he got them all back. It might be safer with them. More controlled.” Than with Tony’s experimental tech. He didn’t say it that way, but she heard the underlying implication. “Even if they can’t do that. They have advanced technology, access to a lot of really smart people. Tony’s hanging a lot on finding this Strange guy.”

She trusted Tony. She understood Tony. T’Challa and Shuri were… they were unknowns.

“You want me to go through more tests with more people? Advanced or not.”

“I want you to think about it. Having a conversation isn’t a commitment. We already have the scans. Let me send one to them. Let them look at it. Maybe they can’t help, maybe we need Strange. But… we have other possibilities, too.”

She scraped her tongue along her teeth. “If we tell them it could wobble their trust in what I’m doing. It could get out…”

“T’Challa has been looking for a way to repay his debt to you. He protected Bucky. He’ll protect you.” Steve’s faith was absolute.
“They’ll be here for the Christmas party. T’Challa is supposed to be here for a meeting with Tony and I Friday morning.”

“Will you consider talking to them? Please?” The genuine request coupled with Tony’s earlier fear, James concern, and Clint’s worry pulled at her.

“You know, it’s a good thing I like you so much…”

His smile was like the sun breaking out of the clouds. “It’s a really good thing, Angel.”

“Yes, I agree,” she said, returning to her eye cosmetics. “I’ll ask him.”

“Thank you,” he said, his relief profound across the connection. “Tony and you are still taking the meetings today at the U.N.?”

“That’s the plan, even if he ducked out of training…”

“Natasha, you scared him.” He wasn’t wrong and he didn’t add she scared all of them.

“Wondering why you all put up with me?” she tried to lighten it up, but Steve’s disappointed face was far worse than Captain America’s.

“No. Not a question I ever need to ask. None of us do.” That just made it a thousand times worse.

“Angel, look at me?”

She met his gaze.

“We’ll figure this out. All of this—together. Partners, remember?” The admonishment in those few words strangled all her other objections.

Was she really cut out for this? The worrying? The second guessing? The putting herself in front of the mission?

“James and Clint aren’t going to the range. Something was bothering you last night and you didn’t want to talk about it. James remembered and he had to keep it a secret—at least from me—until he got a handle on whether what he remembered was true or not. These nosebleeds could be nothing… not telling you wasn’t me not being your partner. It was me compartmentalizing a minor problem versus everything else we have at the moment.”

“Accepted,” Steve countered. “Save for the fact nothing that causes you pain is a minor problem. If you can look me in the eye and tell me that if I were having the same issues—the exact same or if Bucky was—and neither of us told you, you would accept it at face value and not worry any further—I’ll back off.”

She couldn’t. He damn well knew it.

It was why she’d tackled the security case for Pepper. Tony was ignoring it. It was why she got Tony to train, because he needed to improve his physical and mental health overall as well as be prepared for a possible attack. It was why she and James wanted someone with Steve in the icy weather and why she indulged James when his hyper protective instincts kicked in. Indulged them both really.

“If you needed time, I’d give it to you. But this isn’t about needing time.”

“No,” Steve said gently. “It’s about you accepting help, something you hate to do and admitting to
“A possible flaw or weakness…”

“Weakness…”

“Angel, don’t. Don’t say one single poisonous word those liars poured into you. I know how you feel about it. I know it drives you every single day. But this isn’t the Red Room, you will never have to be there again. You need help, that’s what we do. Even if you don’t know whether it’s a big deal or not. Bad dream, skinned knee—broken fingernail.” The last was a jest and she smiled. “There she is… Angel, does it scare you?”

“Nothing scares me. I just—I don’t like the loss of control. I don’t like the moment it slips through my fingers. I could have hurt Tony today. That hadn’t happened before—not with this.” Not since that morning in the chalet when something mis-fired in her brain and she wasn’t Natasha anymore, she’d been Natalia for a few dangerous minutes. That was something else altogether, right?

If not for James recognizing it or Tony shocking her—she could have hurt Steve and he would have let her. James gave her his word he’d stop her because she didn’t think Steve would and she’d promised him the same.

“Tony insists it didn’t happen today. You never tried to actively hurt him, you just tried to get away from him. From the way he described it, reminded me of when Bucky tried to get out of the chalet when you mentioned going after Ross.” James hadn’t hurt either of them then. He just kept pushing them away or picking them up and physically moving him. Hopefully Tony wasn’t downplaying it out of affection for her…

“He’s pretty pissed.”

“He’s pretty scared,” Steve reiterated. “I don’t want to be that guy who lectures…”

“But you’re so good at it,” she teased, earning herself a small smile and a half-chuckle. “I authorized Friday to notify all four of you if I have another episode. I’ll talk to T’Challa.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Someone owes me a dance this weekend, I’d be really upset if you weren’t there.”

“Oh, I’ll be there. Someone is going to be dressed in a spiffy new tux and I have a brand new dress coming.” Not that she’d seen it. She finished the last touch to her cosmetics, then glanced at the phone. “How do I look?”

“Like the most beautiful woman in the world—even with the all makeup.”

She laughed and his smile grew. “Like me better au natural?”

“Like you in everything, Angel. Bare, clothes, makeup, plain, curly hair or straight… we’re going to be loading the plane in an hour or so. Then heading for New York. I’ll be at the Tower by the time you’re done with your meetings. Buck and I are going to pick up dinner… any requests?”

Tilting her head, she made a show of thinking about it. “Pizza sandwiches?”

His laughter warmed her all over.

“Just for that, I’m letting Bucky pick.”

She grinned. “Be careful, Steve. Stay safe.”
“You too, Angel. You too.”

Then he was gone. Twenty minutes later, dressed in slacks, a dark red blouse with a black vest over it and a pair of stilettos so she had her knives with her, she headed upstairs to the penthouse. Tony had been very non-hyper verbal since she departed earlier. Clint and James were on their way to look for the doctor and whoever else they were hunting.

She didn’t ask. They would tell her when they were ready—the fact James had Friday inform her they were leaving rather than tell her himself said either he was in a hurry or he respected her need for time or maybe he needed the time himself. It could be all three.

Tony stood in the front of one of the broad windows fastening the buttons on his shirt cuffs when she arrived. She hung her coat and purse together.

“I’m going on record that I don’t approve of keeping the scheduled meetings,” he said without preamble. Turning he faced her. “I’d like to further add that I resent the fact you kept what was going on with you a secret from people who care about you defying logic and reason.”

“Kind of like you not telling anyone you were dying.”

“You’re not dying,” he told her as he pulled on his suit jacket. It sounded more like an order than a retort. The haircut looked good. The inane thought bubbled up out of nowhere. “And like I said, defying logic and reason. I am never a good role model. You’re the sensible one.”

She snorted.

“All of that said…” He straightened the jacket lapels then smoothed a hand down each arm before he slipped his glasses back on, but not before he looked at her with eyes both achingly grim and openly bruised. “We are going to figure this out. I refuse to be outwitted or outmatched by decades old Soviet technology even if butchers wielded it.” Crossing over to her, he telegraphed the motion of taking her biceps gently and leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead. Closing her eyes, she leaned into the contact. “Not willing to risk you, Red,” he said quietly. “Any earlier warnings to when it’s going to happen? Anything that will let you tap me and so I know to get you somewhere safe?”

Resting one hand over the other on his chest, she frowned. “Maybe. A ringing noise… a sharp tone that rises and something that feels like a hot needle going through my eye. Lasts seconds, maybe. I can sometimes discipline my thoughts to stop following whatever trail they were on and it stops.”

“But not always.”

“No, not even close to always. Still, it’s only been a few times.”

He gave her a look, then took a step back but continued to grip her arms. “Friday, full scan. Retinas and pupil response.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“Measuring possible physiological markers. Your eyes were dilated when I found you. They shrunk to near pinpricks in the immediate aftermath.”

Well that was new. Ice slid under skin. Authorization for Friday to notify them if she had an episode—a leash she slipped on to comfort them. The scan now, probing her for more data points.

Only discipline kept her breathing even. It was Tony.
She kept reminding herself of the fact it was Tony. It helped, a little.

“Scan complete, Boss. I have updated our profile. I will also monitor, Ms. Romanoff via security cameras at the U.N.”

She grimaced.

“Ahh,” Tony admonished her with a finger and she held up her hands in surrender. “Tell me if you need a break. Tell me if you’re getting even a normal headache.”

“I will, but can we talk about anything else?”

He gave her a long measuring look, then smirked. “What did you have in mind?”

“Did you know there are Iron Man ornaments?” The random subject change caught him off-guard and he blinked.

“Excuse me?” He took her coat from her as she lifted it off the hook and held it so she could slide her arms in.

“I got two of yours—and I got some of Steve, Wanda, Vision, Sam, and Peter…” Turning, she lifted her hair out from under the coat collar and faced him.

“Where do you have this contraband?”

“On our Christmas tree,” she said with a grin. It was weak, but a real smile. This was a much better topic. “Come by later and I’ll show them to you. It’s pretty nifty.”

The elevator opened and Tony straightened his tie as he stepped in with her. “That’s not nifty… that’s trademark infringement.”

Well, at least he wasn’t worrying about her in that immediate moment. Even if she earned a rant about someone touching his stuff. It was better for both of them.
Hunting

Chapter Summary

Clint and Bucky go hunting...

Chapter Thirty-Six

Hunting

Clint

Hearing Natasha didn’t remember something like handing Rumlow his ass had been a slap in the balls. It made him sick and furious in equal measure. Looking into her blown pupils as she fought to regain her composure while helping staunch the nosebleed and Tony kept a cloth napkin pressed to her ear—her fucking ear was bleeding—threw him back to Casablanca and carrying her glass-shredded and concussive force damaged body out of the warzone created by multiple car bombs.

She’d taken off one night to do a job—she’d been so proud of herself for getting the information SHIELD needed and uncaring of how injured she was. He’d always thought he understood the way she viewed a mission, but that night had been an education he never forgot. The need to throttle her even as he wanted to lock her away from the dark and horrible world battled each other.

He didn’t think it could get worse than that night.

Not even seeing those tapes of her so-called graduation or hearing her discuss the horrific things that happened to her as if they were in passing. The fact she had a child she couldn’t remember—that was pretty fucking awful. But every one of those happened long before he knew her.

This? This happened on his watch.

Bucky was good with her even as she kept putting distance between all of them, warier of herself than them. He wouldn’t allow it. If Bucky hadn’t been there, that would be Clint planting himself at her side. As it was, he fought to keep from chewing out and hugging the stubborn Russian. Tony’s anger boiled over, but the rage wasn’t just aggravation at her. It was a mask to cover the terrified man who’d been kneeling in front of her when they arrived.

“Authorization confirmed,” she said in a voice so quiet and husky it sounded like it had to be torn out of her. The doors closed and Clint’s anger drained away. They were taking away her self-determination. No matter how they dressed it up, this was what they’d done at SHIELD. Monitor. Report. Assess. A slightly improved—only maybe not so much anymore—version of her life under the KGB and the Red Room. Hydra, it seemed, was just one long puppet master.

And here they were doing it again.

Clint wasn’t sure he could reconcile the dueling needs to defend her independence and keep her
safe.

The silence stretched like a rubber band pulled too far, then Tony scrubbed a hand over his face. “Video for Steve, Baby Girl?”

“On standby.”

“Let’s have it.” Tony’s brusque voice couldn’t quite cover the twisting emotions he’d battled the last few minutes from terror to pissed off to devastated. If Clint had any questions about where Tony’s head or heart was at, he didn’t anymore.

Not going to end well had been an understatement.

The holo screen formed over the coffee table in the living room. Steve glanced up and his gaze went from Clint to Tony and finally to Bucky. For half a beat, he swept his gaze searchingly over them again, but Nat wasn’t there. Finally, he locked his attention on Bucky, “What happened?”

“Natalia had an incident,” Bucky said bluntly, not softening any of the edges of it. “Something triggered her memories. A song.”

“Is she all right?”

“No.”

A real comfort. That was Bucky. “She’s upset, Cap,” Clint interjected. “Probably half because it happened and half because we know about it.” These three idiots could push her too far—standing between her and everyone else, it was what he did. But she’d let these three in and that made his job more challenging.

Steve exhaled slowly, his expression thoughtful. The instant restraint and lack of immediate defensiveness was an improvement in his previous reactions to similar news.

“Give me a minute…” He went off screen, but his voice carried. “No, you two go get food and then swing back to pick me up. No, seriously Sam—just go. I need to finish this and I’d rather have privacy.”

They couldn’t catch Sam’s response, but Wanda’s voice carried. “Is everything all right?”

“Figuring that out now.”

They remained silent on their end until Steve reappeared on the screen. “Secure mode here, Friday?”

“Yes, Captain Rogers. You are secure. The line is encrypted. I will monitor for any interference.”

Nodding once, he folded his arms. “Any way to show me exactly what happened?”

Tony roused for the first time since Cap appeared on the screen. “Friday play surveillance from the penthouse beginning with Natasha asking about her car.”

Three separate screens arrayed across the holo field, minimizing the window for Steve to a small footprint in the corner. The camera angles showed Nat standing at the table repacking her trimmers into the roll-up satchel. Clint hadn’t seen that bag in a while. A shirtless Tony approached her with his arms wide and a big smile.

Clint filed that away for later and doubted he was the only one.
“You’re taking the fun out of my day.”

“That’s what I’m here for… Speaking of cars, do you know where my ‘Vette is?” Brows arched, her expression was curious and almost indulgent.

“In storage,” he said with a slow smile. “I might have moved it off the property and into a hanger with a few of my cars. Want me to bring it back?”

“Yes, please. Thank you, Tony.” A hint of relief relaxed her expression.

“Consider it done, Red.” Then he pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Thanks for the haircut. Now gimme a minute to grab a shirt and shoes and you can proceed to beat me black and blue.” He laughed at himself then headed away. “Hit the music, Friday.”

She shook her head as he walked away then examined her scissors once more before putting them up as the music kicked on. She rolled the satchel closed as the lyrics began to filter through the speakers.

If he hadn’t been watching for it or if they hadn’t had the camera angles to see her profile, back, and face, he might have missed it. Not even one full verse into the song and her chin lifted. The emotion and color drained out of her face until her expression was blank and her eyes glassy.

No movement. Was she even breathing?

Suddenly counters went up in the corner. Her pulse skyrocketing to one hundred and fifty beats per minute. Blood pressure rising. Now her breath came in short fast little bursts. Blood began to trickle from one nostril and then from her ear.

A single tear ran down her face.

Still utterly devoid of actual reaction.

Worse was the silence, the song playing out like some eerie soundtrack. She pressed the heel of her hand against her right eye, her whole body hunching and the blood from her ear dripped onto her shoulder.

Still not a fucking sound.

Clint ground his teeth.

Then Tony appeared. “Hey Red, I was thinking about the lunch meeting… we’re going to need a break midday… Red?” He descended the stairs, his expression growing grave. “Red?”

He touched her arm, but she didn’t move, then he tugged her around.

“Natasha?” He had both of her arms, then she went from complete stillness to action, breaking his grip and moving away from him but he caught her again and then he went flying. Impressively, he got his legs around her and trapped her and nearly had her pinned—bad move but maybe he hadn’t realized it at the time—but she drove her thumbs right into the muscles above his knees and she got free. “Fuck—damnit Red.” His gauntlet slid out of his watch and wrapped his hand, but Natasha blinked rapidly as realization bled into her face and her mouth opened. Her fist opened and she fell on her ass backward as she scrambled away from him.
“Pause that…” Bucky said suddenly. “Back it up.”


“She said something.”

The video rewound.

“There just after she flips him and breaks the hold.”

Clint squinted. Tony swore and… “Not hearing it.”

“Drop my audio, Friday.” Tony said suddenly. “Her mouth is moving, but I didn’t hear it either. Drop the music and my audio and magnify hers.”

The video rewound.

“Мне так жал, маленькая звезда. Это единственное, что я могу сделать.” The words slipped out in a rushed almost hoarse whisper in the split seconds between Tony’s cursing and reality rushing back to her.

“I’m so sorry little star,” Clint translated. “I didn’t catch the rest of it.” He knew enough Russian to be dangerous. Had to learn it if only to know when Nat called him an idiot.

“This is the only thing I can do,” Bucky finished and his expression had gone grave. “It is a memory.”

Tony’s whole frame sagged. “This is about your kid isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Bucky sounded certain. Then Clint thought about the inscription on the drawer in Montana: луна и звезда моя.

Her moon and stars.

“She didn’t try to hurt me,” Tony said quietly. Clint didn’t disagree with the assessment. She’d been getting away from him. If anything, she could have broken bones and bloodied him. She hadn’t. That marked a significant difference to her other fugue states. “But she has no business putting herself through any more stress. I can get her out of this negotiation. T’Challa and I can handle it…”

That might not be a bad idea.

“No,” Steve said, earning a double take from Tony and frankly surprising the hell out of Clint. Captain Overprotective wasn’t going to pull her back?

“What?” Tony squinted at him. “Steve…”

“Not yet. Fill me in on the rest. What happened after she snapped out of it?” His expression was grim.

“I had Friday summon Bucky and Clint.”

“She was still in pain.”

“The bleeding slowed and was under control in… ten minutes?” Tony hazarded the guess.
“Eight minutes, Boss.” Friday recorded it.

“Natalia said it has happened on at least three other occasions.”

Steve’s expression tightened. “When?”

Then it became a series of explanations and questions until Steve knew what they did.

“You’re not saying anything, Clint.” Steve commented when they reached the part where Natasha went downstairs and still had every intention of attending the U.N. meetings.

“Not much to say, Cap,” Clint said slowly.

“Except you knew this was going on.” The quiet accusation required an answer.

“I knew something was up. You and Tony butting heads a lot isn’t good for her. She was worried on Thanksgiving about the little snow battle you three were planning. She’s gun shy about the two of you getting into it again.” Steve and Tony glanced at each other. “Can’t say I blame her… but there was something off in her voice. You’re right, I knew something was up. I made her promise to tell me if it got worse.”

“But she didn’t say anything more?”

“Obviously,” Clint said with a shrug. “She didn’t think they were worse.”

“She said as much,” Bucky added on. “I believe her.”

So did Clint. “But Nat—Nat’s definition of worse doesn’t always match ours.”

Bucky nodded once.

“The negotiations are demanding a lot from her. The French delegate spent hours interrogating her. It might have been polite and done over food and in relative comfort, but it was still a damn interrogation. It’s likely to get a lot worse before it’s better.”

“Natalia can handle it.” Despite the faith, Bucky didn’t sound like he cared for the idea.

Steve scratched his beard. “Benching her isn’t an option I’m willing to explore right now.”

“Are you serious?” Tony stared at him. “The last thing she needs…”

“Is to be made to feel useless or broken. She’s exactly who she was yesterday, Tony. Exactly who she was this whole week while she coordinated and took care of everyone around her—including you.” Hands braced on what was likely a table wherever he was, Steve stared into the screen. “Natasha compartmentalizes, but we start isolating her, she’s going to move around us. I don’t… I don’t have answers to this. You can’t find your doctor.”

“Clint and I will find him,” Bucky volunteered. Not look for him, find him. Clint could live with that. The guy was a doctor with crippled hands. How hard could he really be to locate?

“I have a couple of ideas.” He and Bucky shared one of those long wordless glances.

“Do you think she’d go?” Bucky frowned.

“You told her you wanted to show it to her. Maybe. It’s a lot to ask.”
“Wakanda,” Tony said flatly. Well, that was one person not on board with the idea. Clint turned it over in his head. Wakanda definitely had the technology and a hell of a lot of smart people.

“They fixed Bucky—or at least put him on the firm road to recovery.”

“In cryofreeze,” Tony stated. “You want to freeze Red?”

“No, Tony,” Steve said with a sigh. “I don’t. But I also don’t want her suffering. I know you’re doing everything you can. But I’m not willing to overlook other possibilities.”

“It’s up to Natalia,” Bucky said firmly as if that ended the argument.

He wasn’t wrong.

“Tony,” Steve added. “She needs to help. We asked her to do this… we can’t take it away. Besides… I thought you liked spending so much time with her.”

Clint didn’t roll his eyes, but really—Cap could have put that a thousand other ways.

“I love spending time with her,” Tony stated, arms folded and a dark expression on his face. “I love having her around more. I’m not a fan of being the one to walk her down crazy lane, holding hands and skipping.”

“You put Nat in a corner, Tony and she’s going to come out fighting. Maybe don’t burn your bridges with her yet.” The fact his tone implied he might not have a problem with Tony aggravating her that way just poured fuel on the fire. Though Clint would give Steve points. He’d listened and he’d begun to understand her. That—it didn’t make it better, but it helped.

“We all love her,” Bucky said abruptly. “Let’s just make that part perfectly clear. This isn’t about ego.” He looked pointedly at Tony. “Or stubbornness.” He pinned a look on Steve. “Or even patience.” Oh, so Clint was getting swept up into the chastising. Fine. “It’s not about us… Natalia has been waging this war for decades and she’s had to wage it alone. If we—” A muscle ticked in his jaw.

Clint felt for the guy. He’d known her longer than any of them.

“Just because she is stubborn doesn’t mean we have to listen to her, but we can’t discount her either. She will do exactly as she said she would. Do I want her putting herself through hell? No. Will I walk into Hell with her? Yes. The only question you have to ask yourself is, would you?”

“I’d rather blow Hell off the map so she doesn’t have to deal with it.” But Tony spread his hands. “If that’s not an option, then yeah, I’m in. I don’t like it…”

“We don’t have to like it,” Steve fired the words like bullets. “We just have to be there to catch her. To cover her. To back her plays. She needs us.” Then with a grimace, he added, “Tony—she needs you. I don’t like it. Probably never will. But she does. Are you going to take that away from her, too?”

With all the grace of someone who sucked on a vinegar-soaked lemon, Tony said, “I hate you a little bit right now.”

Only a little? Somehow Clint doubted it was that simple. But he wasn’t going to dump more fuel onto that fire. The hints of resentment and past disagreements kept bubbling to the surface between those two. Maybe it always would. It also put Nat squarely in the crossfire.
“I can take it,” Steve told him. “So we’re agreed. We keep her on the Accords?” When no one objected, verbally at least, Steve sighed. “We have one other problem.”

Really? Because another problem was just what they needed.

“What?” Bucky asked and despite the turmoil brewing between Steve and Tony, his mood didn’t shift. Either he’d made his mind up on all of this or he was as good as Nat at compartmentalizing. Clint would wager it was both.

“Fury showed up here…”

“Excuse me?” Steve had all of Clint’s attention. Bucky’s too and Tony frowned.

“What the hell did the pirate king want this time?”

“He said to make sure Natasha is safe…” Steve detailed the story, including the suicide attempts. That earned Clint a studying stare, an askance look, and one glare. “Did she?”

“Once,” he admitted. “It was in the very beginning—she wasn’t adjusting well and they weren’t letting me see her. Coulson brought me in… she calmed down. To my knowledge, she never did it again.”

“Fury indicated at least three times.”

Nick could be playing Steve. He was capable of sacking with information carefully curated for maximum emotional impact. Clint didn’t want to believe it was true. Three times? Before or after they brought him in? Or was that why Coulson did it?

“Great,” Tony said, tilting his head back. “None of that is in her files.”

“It wouldn’t be. So much about Nat was compartmentalized then. I really hoped that had protected her from the Hydra elements embedded in SHIELD.” Though that turned out to be so much hot air and wishful thinking on his part. “We need to talk to Fury.”

“I don’t know where he went. But he did leave me with a name.” Steve focused on Clint. “And I’d very much like it if you could find him.”

“Who?” Bucky asked.

“Richardson.”

Her fucking psychologist.

Clint closed his fist. “He was Hydra?”

“Fury said he was the only one with unfettered access to her.”

“Who was he?” Tony asked.

“The man who helped deprogram her…”

“If tampering did happen at SHIELD,” Steve said and he made it sound like that was still in question. “It probably started with him.”

“It happened, Stevie,” Bucky told him. “The story Clint was telling about Natalia handing Rumlow
his ass—she doesn’t remember it.”

Tony’s expression tightened and Steve pinched the bridge of his nose.

The hits just kept on coming.

“Find Richardson,” Steve said finally. “Find this doctor. Track down Fury.”

“I have Maria Hill’s contact info,” Tony said. “Friday—put a tag on her. I want to know where she is.”

“You think she’s still working for Fury?” Steve asked and just like that the storm brewing between the two turned into a hurricane aimed at someone else.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. She’s supposed to work for me, but whatever. Fury trusted her above everyone else.”

“Except Coulson,” Clint agreed. “I know he wasn’t dirty.”

Because if he had been… well down would be up and out would be in and the world would just be a sadder, darker place than it already was.

“I’m calling Nat—Tony, you are sticking with her, right?”

“You couldn’t peel me away, Cap.”

Clint left those layers of meaning alone as he locked gazes with Bucky. “You up for this?”

Bucky glanced from Steve to Tony, his expression unreadable. “Stevie… call me after you speak to her.” Then he pivoted. “We should go.”

“You’re not going to talk to her first?” Tony challenged.

Pausing, Bucky faced Tony and Clint shifted his weight. There were times when Tony didn’t know to stop pushing. He may have just reached the limit of what Bucky could take. “You may want her and I believe you love her—but never forget I know her. I have loved her longer than you’ve been alive. Don’t test me where she is concerned. Natalia does not want to talk about this. She wants to do her job. She needs to finish her mission. That will give her the balance she requires at the moment. Keep that in mind when you stand with her today. Be yourself, that’s who she needs and don’t ever question my feelings for her again. You were right to do it once—not now. Not ever.”

With that, he stalked toward the doors to the flight deck and Clint whistled.

“Well, this is going to be a delightful day… gentlemen.”

And he followed him, his last glimpse was Steve pinching the bridge of his nose and Tony looking pained. Anger burned like acid in his gut. Just once he’d like to get good news where Nat was concerned. Something with puppies and kittens instead of terror and loss.

Bucky
On board the quinjet, he went through the pre-flight check. Warming the engines was an easy task with the ARC reactors as a fuel source. The air outside was brittle and it slapped him in the face when he exited the penthouse. He almost wished they were traveling by open-air jeep to wherever they were going. The icy temperatures might cool the slow-burning rage beginning to curl through his system.

As Clint stepped aboard, Bucky touched his comm unit. “Friday, please inform Natalia that we are leaving and will see her later today.”

“Of course, Sergeant Barnes. I have uploaded all the pertinent data on Dr. Strange, Maria Hill, and Colonel Fury to the quinjet’s systems. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you require further assistance.”

“Thank you, Friday. Will you also be watching Natalia today?”

“Yes, Sergeant Barnes.”

Good enough. He tapped the comms off.

The ramp closed and Clint didn’t move immediately to take a seat. “You going to be all right out there?”

The Soldier unfolded within him and he turned to face the archer. “I will be fine. I am well aware of what we need to accomplish.”

“Bodies might not accomplish what we need.”

Might. Interesting word choice. “I have no problems with letting you take lead,” Bucky told him. “I have a very specific goal in mind, however, and I will not be dissuaded from it without exceptional reason.”

“Fair. Cards on the table then—what is your goal?”

“Protect Natalia.” It had been the Soldier’s goal from their first meeting. Steve had just handed him two names—two living targets—who had possibly harmed her. Too many times he hadn’t been there to stop it. He could get her answers, however, and extract a pound of flesh.

“That’s a good goal. You have a target you want to go for first?”

Fury. The man had been her handler. He’d used her. Abused her in the Soldier’s opinion and treated her piss poorly in Bucky’s. He’d disliked his appearance in New Orleans intensely. However, he’d given them another name: Richardson. Another who had likely hurt her. Then again, it could be another smokescreen.

“The doctor.” The one who could most likely help Natalia in the immediate timeframe. Disgust unfolded within him. Bucky understood Natalia’s resistance to medical. Taking her to Wakanda might be the best option—at least their medical facilities smelled different.

“That’s a good choice. So Metro-General. Let’s find Dr. Christine Palmer.” Clint moved to the terminal and pulled up a screen with her data. “And she is on shift. Shall we see if the doctor is in?”
The laconic tone didn’t match the cool chill in the archer’s eyes. The relaxed manner suggested he held his anger just below the surface. The quinjet lifted off smoothly and Bucky turned them toward the hospital. There were a couple of places they could park the jet in stealth mode.

“I’m going to ask you a question and I want a straight answer.”

“As you wish,” Bucky said with a passing glance to the man seated behind him. Normally he didn’t want anyone there save for Natalia and Steve. Clint’s presence didn’t bother him as much even if it did make his shoulder blades itch.

“Say this Strange guy has a fix for her—and it lets her restore her memories. All of them. What kind of fallout is she looking at?”

Easily a half-dozen memories slithered out of the corners of his mind, all bloody and terrible. He locked his jaw. “Without knowing precisely what she has forgotten beyond me…” and our daughter remained unspoken. Even saying the first part aloud raked hot coals over barely closed wounds, ripping them open and sealing them in the same breath. “I can only guess.”

“Then your best guess… how much of Natalia is going to overwhelm Natasha?”

The archer understood in a way Bucky didn’t believe anyone else did. Tony might suspect and Steve might have considered it after some of their conversations, but they couldn’t know.

They’d met Natasha.

Clint was the only other who knew some of his Natalia.

“She is who she chooses to be,” he said, choosing his phrasing carefully. The hospital was a short hop away and he was already angling to touchdown at the top of the hospital’s parking structure. “She has endured impossible hardships and survived them. More than she knows, but she is who she is because of the ones she remembers.”

“And the ones she doesn’t?”

The quinjet alighted gently. The cloak still engaged as he cycled the engines to neutral. The near-silent running would be even quieter, but they were also prepared for a fast exit.

Turning in the seat, he met Clint’s assessing gaze. “You want to know what tortures or crimes she may have forgotten?” It was enough to wonder what she may have been forced to do under SHIELD’s auspices. Those would hurt her more immediately, especially if they targeted any of those she currently cared for.

“I want to know if this is going to break her.”

Mary Elizabeth had nearly broken her. Rising, Bucky went over his weapons. He had a half-dozen stored on him but he wasn’t wearing full tactical gear. Jeans, a shirt, and a heavier jacket—civilian clothes could disguise most of him. But his hand would stand out so he would keep that tucked into the pocket of his jacket while they moved in the hospital.

“She is stronger than you know,” he told him. “I see their faces.”

“Whose?”

“Every single person I killed or had to hurt.”
Clint flinched.

“I see them all. I see her amongst them. I have to live with it.”

“And it doesn’t make you crazy?”

“It could I suppose—but I have Natalia.” She was his star, the bright center to his universe. “I hope we’re enough for her.” It was why he couldn’t object to the love showered on her by the team, by Peter, by Clint—and even by Tony no matter what he wanted. If the man was in love with her, then fine. He could be another anchor point for her. He and Steve had been enough on the island when she broke. Then she’d put herself back together and like reforged steel, she was stronger for it.

Rising, Clint tapped the screen. “Christine Palmer. We need her help, so let’s keep the intimidation to a bare minimum.”

Bucky nodded. “You may talk to her first.”

“Generous.”

He shrugged. Not much else he could offer. Natalia handled the more delicate interrogations. The Soldier was far more inclined to the difficult extractions of intelligence.

The woman had done nothing wrong, so Bucky wouldn’t be the first or even the best choice to handle the questioning. Steve called and Bucky stepped out of the quinjet and away to speak to him. Clint didn’t follow.

“She can handle it, right?” Steve asked soberly. “I’m making the right call.”

“She can,” Bucky told him. “She’s making the call.”

“What happened just because she’s stubborn doesn’t mean we have to listen to her?” The vague amusement in the words made him smile.

“We’re taking steps.” Steps he wasn’t altogether comfortable with. “She’s agreed to let us monitor her.”

“Yeah and Tony has point…”

“Tony was with her today.” The engineer had called them immediately. He’d stuck with her. Hadn’t let the real danger he faced scare him off. “She’s letting us.”

“If he hadn’t caught her today…”

“Can’t think that way Stevie. We can’t. Natalia… Natalia is who she is. We accept her or don’t.” Bucky accepted her. She was stubborn, fierce, independent and every piece of her training taught her to compartmentalize. They were chipping away at it, earning her trust. She didn’t know him as she had before—when she could tell him anything, everything without reservation. But they were getting closer. “She needs time. We all do.”

“Buck? Does this have a happy ending?” Deep worry filled those words.

“Yes.” Unequivocal. He refused to accept any other outcome.

“Agreed.” Steve understood. “I talked to her about Wakanda.”

“And?”
“She said she would talk to T’Challa.”

Bucky’s smile was fleeting. “Good.”

“I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“We’re at the hospital now where Strange worked.”

“Good hunting.”

“Fly safe.”

Fifteen later, they made their way toward the emergency room. The doctor they wanted worked in the ER. Though it was early, there were still a generous number of patients being treated. A nurse directed them to the waiting room, but Clint pulled out ID and murmured a few words to her. She frowned, but took them to an empty room with a sliding door and closed them inside.

Bucky didn’t ask. Clint didn’t offer.

Ten minutes passed in silence. Clint settled on the bed and stretched his leg out in front of him. It still impaired his movement, but his limp was barely noticeable. The door opened finally, and a reddish-blonde haired doctor entered wearing light green scrubs and a harried expression.

“Mr. Barton,” she said as she closed the door. “The nurse said you didn’t have a chart and you’d been treated for your broken leg, but that you had a follow-up only I could answer?” The sharp barb of sarcasm skated along the edge of her words as she pressed a pump on hand sanitizer twice and then washed it over her hands. She glanced from Clint to Bucky, her gaze assessing and equally skeptical.

“Dr. Palmer?” Clint confirmed.

“That’s what it says on the scrubs.” She stood at the end of the bed and studied him. “What can I do for you, Mr. Barton?”

“You know who I am.” It wasn’t a question.

“You know who I am.” It wasn’t a question.

“I know who he is, too. You’re not exactly running incognito.”

Smart woman.

“That makes this easier then,” Clint leaned forward, but the way he’d settled on the bed, broken leg stretched out in front of him gave him a more easy-going profile. The guy was hurt; you’d trust him, right? Bucky wouldn’t, but then Bucky didn’t trust anyone not named Natalia or Steve—all right fine, he’d trust Clint, but he knew him.

Still, Dr. Palmer didn’t seem impressed. If anything, she appeared impatient. “It would wonderful if you could make it quicker. I have real patients to see, too.”

“Dr. Stephen Strange.”

Her expression tightened and her eyes chilled. “I’m afraid, Dr. Strange is no longer on staff at the hospital…”

“We know he had an accident.” Clint raised a hand, asking for her patience. “We know his hands were damaged—irreparably. We also know he’s been missing or at least off the grid for months. A few days ago, however, he was seen at this hospital under your care. He entered and left without
using any doors.”

He paused, raising his eyebrows.

“If what you say is true—and I am not suggesting that it is or confirming your assertions—what does it matter?”

“It matters because the Avengers need Dr. Strange to consult on a case.” Clint was going for the direct approach. Expedient.

Dr. Palmer frowned. “I told you, he no longer practices…”

“He can’t operate,” Bucky said bluntly, drawing her attention. “We need his mind, not his hands.”

His left hand remained in his pocket. The doctor might recognize him, but that didn’t mean she would be prepared to see the metal hand up close. Or she would, and he wasn’t in the mood to deal with an examination.

“Dr. Helen Cho has tried to reach out to him. Tony Stark is trying to reach him…” At the mention of Tony, Dr. Palmer glanced away and her mouth tightened. “I believe he’s even reached out to you, but you wouldn’t return his calls.” Clint spread his hands. “So we’re here, pleading our case in person.”

“Your case?” Dr. Palmer flicked a look over him, but then she turned and squinted at Bucky. “Or yours?”

“Our case,” Clint said firmly. “An Avengers case. Everything about it is needs to know. Dr. Strange will be well compensated for his time and Mr. Stark has also said he would be more than happy to fund Dr. Strange’s search for a treatment for his hands if not help him himself. He’s gained a lot of experience in medically supportive tech for injuries and impairments.”

The doctor exhaled, clearly troubled, if the way she chewed the inside of her lip was any indicator. “Stephen… Stephen is no longer seeking treatment for his hands.” Though she didn’t sound terribly certain.

“Doesn’t mean he can’t use the money—or the chance to solve an impossible case and maybe save someone.”

Her eyes narrowed.

Clint slid a hand into his jacket and pulled out his phone. He unlocked it and scrolled to a photo, then held it up. It was an image scan of a brain—Natalia’s. Bucky had seen it several times now. It was still unclear to him how it demonstrated the horrors perpetrated to it, but he wasn’t an expert.

Dr. Palmer stretched out her hand as if to take it, but Clint pulled it away. “Look. Don’t touch. I wanted to show you why we need him.”

Rubbing her hands against the front of her scrubs once, she folded her arms and nodded. When Clint held it out again, she stared at the scan. “This—this person has to be in a coma. Vegetative state. I’m very sorry for your loss, but Stephen can’t do anything about that.”

“The patient isn’t in a coma,” Clint told her as calmly as if he were discussing the weather. “In fact, I had a conversation with them an hour ago.”

She stared at him as if ready to shout the words bullshit, but then she looked at the scan again.
“That’s impossible…” Hook.

“His specialty, right?” Line.

Frowning, she leaned in and studied the image scrutinizing it. “They’re bedridden?”


Unfolding her arms, she pushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear and paced away a couple of steps, then turned and stared at the image until Clint clicked it off.

“He may not come… I don’t even know if I can contact him directly.” Sinker.

“We just need a phone number. We’re willing to do the rest.”

“He might not even be in the city…” She chewed at her lower lip.

“It doesn’t matter,” Bucky said. It didn’t. They’d go wherever in the world he was.

“He’s right,” Clint said. “We can go to him. Just need to find him.”

She dug a hand into her pocket and pulled out a phone. Turning away from them, she glanced out the door toward the rest of the ER she divided her attention between the phone and what was happening out there. The activity hadn’t increased.

Clearly torn, she pressed the numbers but the angle made it hard to see. Then she put the phone to her ear, one hand on her hip as she glanced at them again. Clint sat there, patient as a monk, his expression relaxed as if they had all the time in the world.

Foot tapping, she exhaled and then rolled her eyes. “Stephen, it’s Christine. I have something you are going to want to see and you need to see.” She glanced at Bucky then Clint. “It’s an impossible case, and I’ll be honest, I’ve never seen a CT Scan like this before. I know you’re—busy—but call me. Soon. Like when you get this and not in a week or two. It’s urgent. This has your name written all over it.”

Ending the call, she looked at Clint. “Give me your number. As soon as he calls me, I’ll call and connect you.”

“Will he call?” Bucky wasn’t so sure based on her own uncertain manner.

“I’m not going to lie to you. I don’t know. Before last week, I hadn’t seen Stephen in months. He—lost more than his hands when the accident happened.” Regret filtered through her eyes. Regret and—grief. “That scan is the kind of thing he would have told me I was crazy to ask him to look at—then he would have berated me playfully—and five minutes later he would be back to try and figure it out. He loves puzzles. Especially challenging ones.”

“This is a person,” Clint said as if reminding her. “Not just a puzzle.”

“I know that and Stephen was—and maybe still is—a doctor first. But it’s always a puzzle. A puzzle he’ll want to solve. You’re not going to leave that scan with me, are you?”

“No ma’am,” Clint told her as he eased off the bed and stood. “If he wants to tell us no. I’d prefer to talk to him personally.” He slid the phone away and then pulled out his wallet and pulled out a card. “That’s the number for Avengers Tower—Friday always answers the phone no matter what time of night or day and she can find us.”
Dr. Palmer accepted the card. “I hope your friend will be all right. If Stephen doesn’t call… I can probably recommend another neurosurgeon.”

“Anywhere near as good as Dr. Strange?” Bucky asked. She startled at the question. He hadn’t been silent the whole time but she seemed to have forgotten he was there. Standing in the shadow of the unconnected equipment could do that.

“No one is as good as Stephen…” she said, then added in a mutter, “Impossible man.”

“Thank you, Dr. Palmer.” Clint offered his hand. She clasped it briefly. But he pressed his other hand over the top of hers and held her a moment longer. “We’ll look forward to your call.”

With another nod, she let herself out and tucked the card into another pocket of her scrubs with a glance back at them then she hurried on to her patients.

“She wants to help,” Bucky said. The doctor in her had been fascinated by the scan. “But she doesn’t think he’ll come through.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Clint nodded to the door.

They fell into step easily, leaving the ER and heading toward the tunnel for the parking garage.

Once they were back on the quinjet, Clint tapped his comms. “Friday is the skin tab transmitting?”

“Yes, Mr. Barton. I am not sure how long it will survive a doctor’s frequent hand washing, but the secondary transmitter on the card is also coming in clearly. I was able to capture the number dialed from her cell and I am now monitoring it.”

“That’s great, can you track it?”

“Unfortunately it does not appear to be turned on at the moment.”

Bucky dropped into the pilot’s chair. That would have been too easy.

“Keep us in the loop?” Clint settled into the co-pilot’s seat with a little more care for his leg.

(Of course, Mr. Barton. Sergeant Barnes, Ms. Romanoff and the Boss are at the U.N. and have begun their meetings, her pulse remains steady and her blood pressure normal. She did smack Boss once, but he did not indicate this was problematic.)

“Smacked him in the face?” Bucky clarified.

“No, the back of the head.”

That was all right then.

“Thank you, Friday.”

Clint checked the coordinates. “Looks like we’re going to Maryland.”

“Maria Hill?”

A single nod. “Maria Hill.”
The flight to Maryland sped by despite the absolute silence from his companion. Bucky didn’t offer a lot of chatter on the best of days. Today could not remotely count among those. Clint didn’t mind the quiet. Not when he needed to sort out his own feelings on the subject of their tasks. The day before they’d gone to look at land and found a few houses. The first two were absolute no’s for different reasons, the third and fourth, however, had potential. The fifth though—wooded location, lake nearby, secluded with limited road access.

They’d both liked it and planned to return for a full scout on those last three. Stopping at the little shop off the interstate on the way back had been a joke, but Bucky had enjoyed it more than Clint thought he might. It had been worth a little laughter. All of that seemed so far away despite having been the afternoon prior. That was before the dinner with Pepper. Fuck, he was tired.

Now they were en route to track down Maria Hill. He’d worked with her intermittently for fifteen plus years and everything he knew about her was based on professional interactions.

She was coldly impersonal on the job. Everything and everyone was assessed based on performance metrics and competency. Essentially, if you were good at your job and didn’t fuck up, she could be almost pleasant. Make her life difficult for even one day and she’d return the favor—in spades.

Clint had made her life difficult on several occasions.

They were not friends.

Fury trusted her implicitly, choosing her personally to serve as his Deputy Director. Rumor held she’d blackmailed the World Security Council after New York, Clint wasn’t sure how much credit he gave the rumor. Natasha had heard it, then shrugged and said, “Sounds like Maria.”

Hill’s cool pragmatism made her invaluable when it came to dealing with the department heads and STRIKE team commanders. No one impressed her. No one intimidated her. She didn’t play favorites and she was impossible to bribe. In the aftermath of SHIELD falling, she’d made a strategic retreat to Stark Industries, hiding behind Tony’s army of lawyers and powerful influence. Maria Hill knew where the bodies were buried and no one wanted her talking. It was why Natasha—who’d likely buried the bodies personally not that they seemed to understand that fully—had been yanked in front of Congress and not Hill.

Another black mark against Fury as far as Clint was concerned.

The one fact about Maria Hill that always stood out—she hadn’t hesitated to shoot at him when Loki took him over and she hadn’t been going to wound him. He couldn’t fault that except—Hill didn’t like him. Coulson scolded him on more than one occasion that he was imagining things, Maria was just tough. No, Natasha was tough. Hill didn’t like him.

And he was just going to endear himself further by bringing the Winter Soldier to her doorstep. Body armor required.

By the time they landed, Friday notified them the team and Captain Rogers were due to land at the Compound within the hour. Nat and Tony were still in meetings and Nat’s current stats indicated she was fine. It bugged him a little that Friday gave them the health updates. They were spying on
Natasha. Monitoring her every move.

She had to hate it.

Hell, Clint hated it.

Yet, the fact she allowed them to do it spoke volumes.

Focusing on all of these facts kept him from dwelling on Bucky’s response to his earlier question. Nat absolutely chose who she was, but her choices were all based on the semi-edited and curated life experiences left after the Red Room/KGB/Hydra finished punching holes in her brain. If they filled in all those gaps, was it even possible she’d be the same person?

The Clint who loved her? He didn’t care. They’d find their way through. They always did.

Hawkeye who’d hunted the Black Widow?

He never wanted to be in that position again.

“Approaching coordinates,” Bucky said into the silence and Clint leaned forward to check their location. A block of warehouses on the outskirts of Silver Springs—held under a shell corporation operating under a series of other names and organizations delving a dozen layers deep.

Nothing on the books indicated what the warehouses actually housed. Scans gave them—nothing.

“Set us down over there.” Clint nodded to a second block of buildings in a hell of a lot worse repair. The coordinates were to a building that seemed in need of repair, but the even foundations, lack of crumbling brick and the near-uniform cracks in the sidewalks and lack of plants growing through the recently repaved blacked topped parking lot said SHIELD satellite office. “It’s got a good view. Then suit up.”

Bucky glanced at him, raised his eyebrows then nodded. Once the cloaked quinjet set down, Clint pulled up the scans of the building across the street. Sometimes when the scans wouldn’t give you anything, you needed to look for what was specifically missing—power for example. There were easily eight to ten power lines feeding into the building, all underground. Heavy cabling, high voltage, but the building read as blank.

By the time Bucky returned to the cockpit dressed in full body armor and loaded with weapons—at least seven Clint could count in a glance, Clint had tracked where in the building she might be. Standard satellite office set-ups required they have civilian facing facilities and facades including what anyone would expect to find in a building of this nature.

Urban reclamation said converted lofts maybe. That meant a rental or management office. Hill liked overwatch, which meant she’d be closer to the center of things.

“How much resistance should we expect?”

“No idea,” Clint told him as he rose. “Keep an eye out. There’s a place they’re parking and it’s not that parking lot. I want to see what vehicles come and go.”

Bucky nodded once.

It took Clint a little longer to gear up. He had to switch the brace off, change his pants for the armor lined ones, then put his brace back on. At what felt like a snail’s pace later, he returned to the cockpit and found Bucky in exactly the same position he left him in.
The cool, remote expression that had seemed so fucking eerie when he’d first shown up in Switzerland was kind of comforting at the moment. Steve might be the one who punched down doors and blew his stack because he hated the lies and the negotiations and the politics. Tony would walk in determined to set them all on fire. Bucky, though, he wasn’t letting his emotions dictate anything—yet.

He had no personal connections to their targets.

Clint grimaced. “Before we go in there… you should probably know that Nat liked Maria. At one point. Not quite sure what she feels about her now, but they were—friendly? That might be the word for it.” She and Maria seemed to understand each other.

“Did she have sex with Hill?” The dry question held not an ounce of jealousy or surprise.

Opening his mouth, Clint debated a few smart-ass responses to that question, then snapped it closed.

“It’s not a difficult question,” Bucky pointed out. “A simple yes or no will do.”

“I never asked,” Clint admitted. In fact, he made a point of not asking. At the time, everyone assumed Clint and Nat slept together. They never disabused anyone of the notion. She could have slept with Maria. They certainly got along well enough.

Then again… could Maria unwind the stick from her ass long enough to let Nat have the room to go down on her in the first place?

“You’re trying to picture it right now, aren’t you?”

And now he really couldn’t unsee it.

“I feel like answering that question in any way would be the wrong answer.” With a grimace, he pushed it all away.

Bucky chuckled. “I’m not planning on killing Hill.” Yet was implied. It was there. Hanging right off the end of his sentence, dangling by its fingertips. “We want her to get us Fury.” If it turned out Hill was compromised—well, Bucky didn’t have to say anything, did he?

“And Richardson,” Clint needed to point that out. “Hill would know his details.”

“You don’t?” The cold eyes nailed him to the spot.

“No. Enough.” He knew his last name, his occupation, and a semi-decent description. He also knew the “last time” Natasha had to see him. They’d celebrated by leaving the Triskelion and going to a bar in DC for her first drink as a SHIELD Agent Level 3.

“There.” Bucky nodded toward the viewport and Clint narrowed his eyes as a door slid open almost silently on the building despite being a metal corrugated rolling door.

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

The black SUV rolled out.

An alarm went off on the panel, and Bucky pressed it. Scan identified facial recognition match. 91% accuracy.

Maria Hill.
"I like it when they come to us."

"Follow or secure the vehicle here?" Bucky was poised for action, the SUV had just turned out and waited a beat as the doors closed behind her.

If the vehicle was one of their standard units—they didn’t have enough time or planning. This close to the building, she could fall back or activate other defenses. "Damn hard to take down a SHIELD transport. They’re reinforced."

"Hard isn’t impossible," Bucky said with a shrug. "I’ve done it before."

Nodding once, Bucky retreated to the rear of the quinjet. Clint lifted off and followed the SUV as she wound through the cracked streets then angled to get ahead of her. They had a few blocks before she would merge with heavier traffic. Most of the dilapidated area had been abandoned. Another reason why they made for good satellite locations… the ramp on the quinjet dropped suddenly and Clint swore.

One moment Bucky was on the ramp, the next he landed on the SUV below. The whole vehicle sputtered to a dead silent halt and he hit the ground next to the vehicle, large-caliber gun in hand. Shaking his head, Clint brought the quinjet to land. Then headed out to where Maria stared icily at Bucky through the window of the vehicle. Her gaze landed on Clint, and her eyes narrowed.

Once Clint made it to them, Bucky lowered the gun a fraction and took a step back and to the side. He still had a clear shot.

"She hasn’t decided to open the door," Bucky said conversationally, then pulled out a small plastic explosive and pasted it to the door handle. "What do you say we open it for the lady?"

The door to the SUV opened abruptly and she glared at both of them. With a flick of a look toward Bucky, she focused most of her attention on Clint. "Barton."

"Hill." Clint smiled. "Long time no see."

"Could have been longer." She was still not a fan. Dressed in a pantsuit with a blazer, he didn’t doubt she had a gun at the small of her back, another in a shoulder holster and based on her stance, at least one in her boot. "Are we going to stand here all day or are you going to tell me what you want?"

There were a couple of ways he could handle this. "I have a couple of questions for you."

"You couldn’t call?" Scorn etched the question.

"Apparently you haven’t been big on returning calls."

Maria smirked. "That’s not a question, Barton. You’re slipping. I hear that happens to men in their advanced years. To some sooner than others."

"Nice. Almost below the belt. Your aim is off."

"I try to aim for where I’ll do the most damage." She gave him a dismissive once over. "You’re not
packing that much heat…”

“We’re here about Fury,” Bucky said. “And Natasha.”

Or they could just do that.

Maria wrenched her gaze from Clint to Bucky. “What about Natasha? And you can lower the weapon, Sergeant Barnes. I’m annoyed that you blew out my phone with the EMP, but I don’t shoot people for that.”

He smiled faintly. “No ma’am, I’m sure you don’t. Spilling your coffee though might be a different story.”

That explained the stain on her pant leg.

Maria chuckled.


Bucky Barnes. Maria Whisperer.

“What about Natasha?” Maria said as she folded her arms and leaned back against the SUV like they were just hanging out.

“I need to find Richardson,” Clint told her. Start small. Work his way to the top. Getting a bug on her would be impossible. Even if he landed it, she’d find it. “And I need you to give Fury a message from me.”

“Richardson?” The question almost sounded genuine. But she’d worked for Fury for too long. Classic move to get them to supply more information.

“A full name and a profile will do,” Bucky told her.

“Oh, is that all? I take cream in my coffee and two sugars. You should remember that.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Fine… where do you want the profile sent? I can’t do it right now, someone blew out my car.”


“Send it to Friday,” Bucky told her.

“So you’re working for Tony now?” She seemed almost mildly impressed. “That’s… surprising.”

“No, it’s not, Maria. Cut the crap. You worked for Stark as long as you needed him for cover and now you’re back with Fury. Likely working for both so you can keep your own tabs. Fury’s been tracking all of us, ergo you are. You knew exactly where we were.”

She shrugged. “If you say so, Barton. How’s the leg, by the way? You sure you should be running around on it?”

“It’s fine enough to put a boot up your ass.” God, he really disliked this woman.

“I bet I could take you…”
“This conversation is pointless,” Bucky interceded. “You wouldn’t get a step closer to him. We’re not here for answering old petty grievances. We need the information on Richardson and for you to tell Fury to contact Clint. That’s it.”

Her gaze went speculative as she studied Bucky. “How is she?”

It was a simple, quiet question.

“She needs help.”

An equally quiet answer.

Straightening, Maria dropped her arms hands out to the side palms forward. “I’m going to get my tablet out of the car. Only my tablet.”

He nodded once, but his gun didn’t waver.

Clint shifted his stance to keep an eye on her hands, but all she withdrew was a tablet. She powered it up—so the EMP didn’t knock it out. If it had been off when the EMP hit—made sense.

A couple of swipes and a retinal scan later, she tapped the screen and turned it around. “Abel Richardson also known as Dr. Clayton Yancy. He changed his name after he ‘finished’ at SHIELD. Took a job in the private sector.”

“If he’s Hydra why haven’t you taken him in?” If Fury knew who he was, why was he still in private practice?

“Low-level threat. He’d been ‘out’ for more than a decade.”

“His name didn’t come up,” Clint supplied. “He was the primary psychologist on Natasha’s case, SHIELD falls and everyone scatters and he was overlooked.”

Maria had the grace to grimace. “We’re looking now. He’s in the wind though, someone got word to him the heat was coming up or maybe the fact Natasha’s been all over the news has something to do with it. But I’ll give you everything we have.”

Fine. He wouldn’t punch the gift horse in the mouth. “And Fury?”

“Fury is dead.” She nodded to Bucky. “He killed him.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “You want to try that one again?”

“Hey, I was there. Filed the reports myself. You want him—I can tell you where his tombstone is.” She didn’t blink.

“Fine.” If that was how they wanted to play it. “I’ll be there.”

He headed for the quinjet, but Bucky still studied Maria. When Clint glanced back, she was giving him the same assessing look.

“Don’t try to recruit him,” Clint said bluntly. “He’s taken.”

“I hear you’re an Avenger these days.”

“Lots of stories going around, ma’am. Sorry about the car.” Bucky had lifted the gun so it wasn’t pointed at her anymore but he hadn’t relaxed his vigilance.
She pulled a set of keys out of her jacket pocket and hit a button on the remote starter. The engine turned over immediately. “Nothing to worry about. Tell Nat to give me a call. I’ll answer.” Then she removed the plastic from her door and held it out in her palm. “You might need this.”

“Ma’am.”

“Sergeant.”

Then her gaze flicked to Clint. “Barton.”

“Hill.”

She climbed into the SUV and backed away, then turned down another street and was gone before he and Bucky were fully aboard the quinjet. “She’s not so bad,” Bucky said hitting the button to close the ramp. “And Natalia definitely had sex with her.”
Bucky’s admonition still ringing in his ears, Tony waited for Clint to exit before he looked back at the screen. Steve met his gaze unwaveringly. A novel lay open and unspoken between them. It took a lot to keep Tony from fidgeting. A dozen quips dissolved on his tongue.

The words he finally gave voice to were, “So what’s the play?”

“The two of you go and charm more Committee members. The rest of the team and I will bring the mech back. We start running traces on the equipment at Peter’s place. Bucky and Clint find the doctor.” Exactly what they’d discussed, except…

Considering the number of times his naked ass had ended up in a video online, Tony should be more used to being exposed. This was different… They should address this. “I’m not going to put Red in the middle of our disagreements.”

“She’s already there, Tony,” Steve rolled his head from side to side. Grimacing, he pressed his hands onto the back of the sofa. He might regret this, but he had to ask, “Protect her. Be her friend.” If it didn’t look like a muscle ticked next to Steve’s eye as he spoke, Tony might also believe him.

“How about we talk about what it is you really want?”

“No,” Steve said. “Because if we do that—we’ll fight. Again. Nat might already be in the middle, but you and I? We’re not doing that to her. Not again. You’re not backing off. So this is where we are.”

He laughed without humor. A hollow little sound. Not backing off. It was all he’d done. Gave her the option. She chose Steve. But he also told her… he told her a lot of thing.

“First time you admitted it aloud?” Steve didn’t have to clarify what it was.
“I didn’t say it,” he said with a slow exhale. Didn’t say things like that. Empty words. Meaningless platitudes.

“You didn’t deny it.”

No. He hadn’t.

“You need to call Red,” Tony told him abruptly. “I need to get changed.” He also needed to get his head on straight. Turning, he headed for the stairs.

“Tony…”

He paused, head turned slightly to the side to indicate he was listening.

“Thank you.”

Frowning, he turned and glanced back to meet Steve’s gaze.

“For looking out for her. For being there today… for not keeping it from the rest of us.” Because he could have was what Steve implied. He could have covered for Red, could have made it their secret.

So many things he could say and didn’t. None of them were deserved. Most of them were about making himself feel better. She was far more important than scoring points. “You’re welcome.” He made it another step then pivoted again. “I don’t like the idea of sending her to Wakanda.”

“Because you can’t control it.”

“Yes.” He wouldn’t deny it. “T’Challa seems like a good guy. Their tech—what I’ve seen of it is impressive. But I don’t know them.” He couldn’t stand the idea of her going into one of those cryotubes.

“Noted,” Steve said, for a moment—just a moment—it was like he and Steve were on the same page. A shadow reflecting in Cap’s eyes. Could he see her in a cryotube? Leave her in one like he’d had to do with Bucky? “It’s not our decision.”

No. It wasn’t. It was hers. Like it had been Bucky’s.

Tony hated the whole concept.

“Don’t be offended if I lobby against.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Steve said with a wry smile. “You make your case. I’ll make mine.”

“And we let Red sort it out?”

“She’s the smart one.”

“I resent that.” But he was grinning and Steve actually chuckled.

“Going now.” Then the holo screen went dark.

Tony retreated upstairs to change and ignored the faint shaking spreading out as the adrenaline crashed. “Friday, give me the list of delegates we’re meeting today.”

By the time Friday alerted him to Natasha’s imminent arrival, he’d calmed enough to make some
decisions of his own after reviewing the footage one more time. Decisions and a plan. She probably wouldn’t like either, but she’d already conceded to the monitoring.

“Run the tests on the new bracelet today,” he told Friday. “I want all the upgrades at 100% optimization.”

“I’ll take care of it, Boss. She’s here.”

He tackled the subject immediately. When he kissed her forehead he had to resist the urge to change the angle. It was enough that she was there and in one piece. More than enough that she trusted him to help her. Increasing the monitoring and updating the calibration on his glasses to help him detect any minute traces in her physiology was invasive. But she allowed it. She also confirmed there might be warning signs at which she could alert him.

Here was hoping she actually did it.

“I will, but can we talk about anything else?”

The open plea in her green eyes coupled with the fact she’d listened to him and at least pretended to hear helped enough he might be able to let it go for an hour. The new bracelet was going on her wrist as soon as possible. It had better biometric monitoring capabilities, two-way communication, and a couple of other presents. Smirking, he asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“Did you know there are Iron Man ornaments?” The random subject change caught him off-guard and he blinked.

“Excuse me?” Avengers ornaments? Someone was using their likenesses in product placement? He took her coat from her as she lifted it off the hook and held it so she could slide her arms in and then smoothed his hands over her shoulders to wipe away imaginary lint.

“I got two of yours—and I got some of Steve, Wanda, Vision, Sam, and Peter…” Turning, she lifted her hair out from under the coat collar and faced him. She’d straightened all of the curls. It was smooth, professional, guarded, and controlled. A lot like she was at the moment.

“Where do you have this contraband?”

“On our Christmas tree,” she said with a grin. It was weak, but a real smile. It left her eyes gleaming—and for just a split second, all he could see was that blank, empty stare she’d worn when he returned to the living room. Devoid of everything that made her Natasha. Then the one before him replaced it, alive, warm, and so vital. “Come by later and I’ll show them to you. It’s pretty nifty.”

The elevator opened and Tony straightened his tie as he stepped in with her needing something to do with his hands. “That’s not nifty… that’s trademark infringement.”

Stark Industries had trademarked every single one of their likenesses—on purpose. He didn’t want the markets flooded with a sea of cheap knockoff regalia and items. The Avengers image control remained one of his top priorities.

The first thing he saw after they slid into the limo was the miniature Iron-Man hanging from the rearview mirror. Leaning forward and lowering his glasses, he glared. “Where did that come from?”

“Popping up all over the city, Boss. Figured it was part of your rehabilitate the Avengers campaign.”
It wasn’t.

Maybe it should be.

“Give that to Red, would you?”

“I have two, Tony,” she said, amused.

“They’re selling out quick.” But Happy removed it and extended it over the seat. Natasha accepted it then dangled it by two fingers for Tony to study.

Not.

Terrible.

“You said there’s how many others?” He adjusted his frames to scan it. The paint job was pretty close, the arms and legs were articulated and even the hands had what had been painted to be his repulsors. The suit was out of date. Yes, he would be critical. It was an older model, but still…

“Rhodey, Steve, Wanda, Vision, Sam, and Peter,” she ticked them off with her fingers, then curled her hand around the Iron Man in her palm. “They’re adorable—well, the Wanda one is terrible in as much as it looks nothing like her face. But they got the outfit right. Peter’s is cute. Vision is pretty accurate. They even have a Bruce and a Thor. Little hammers and little shields.” A laugh slipped out of her.

She didn’t mention Bucky. That made sense. He was relatively new. Peter wasn’t technically an Avenger before the last few weeks—and he was only a junior member now but Spider-Man had been growing his own reputation without them.

“Clint?”

“Yes, though again, the features aren’t very accurate. Sam’s are better. But I found his at a different shop.” She made a face. “The only one I haven’t found is T’Challa’s, there was a place for it on the hook and James… but I don’t suppose they made one for him yet.”

Yet.

So that was everyone.

“What about yours?”

Natasha gave him an amused, if reproachful look. “No one wants the world’s most notorious woman on their tree.” She leaned forward to return the ornament to Happy.

“I’d have you on my tree,” Happy told her with a kind of blunt-nosed charm. “But I can ask some of the runners to take a look. You never know, you could be in those head shops down in the Village.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but Natasha’s snort was worth it.

Pulling out his phone, he sent a message to Friday.

**Put someone on who is manufacturing the ornaments. Get legal involved if necessary.**

An acknowledgment flashed on the corner of his glasses just below Natasha’s vitals, which showed a green line for now.
“I should get a tree,” Tony said absently. Pepper usually handled the decorating. Handled it. She’d handled a lot over the last few years that he muddled by without now.

“You should,” Natasha agreed with him. “We can stop on the way back from our meetings tonight and pick one up for you.”

He gave her an askance look.

“Oh, it’ll do you good to be out amongst the mortals.” It was like nothing happened that morning. Her voice was warm, dipped in honey and full of teasing. It made it extremely difficult not to smile and laugh with her. Despite the early hour, he almost wished he had a drink. The craving hit hot and fierce. He reached for a water bottle instead, but it didn’t quite quench the need.

“We’ll see;” he kept it noncommittal. Then checked distribution for merchandise. Some of the first articles had begun shipment. Friday indicated samples of everything would be at the Tower by the following week.

When Happy pulled into the U.N. the press was out in force, but also semi-contained by security. Switching the lenses to threat assessment mode, he frowned. This was not how they usually did business.

“What do you want me to do, Boss?” Happy asked, his voice echoing Tony’s internal concerns. A public information officer stood at the steps waiting to greet them. The U.N. employed thousands of people in support staff positions. But they would have to work their way through the crowd to get to where he waited for them.

Natasha shifted in the seat. She glanced behind them then ahead. They had Stark Security inside the SUVs, but using them here might set the wrong stage. At the same time, he didn’t want anyone close enough to jab either of them with anything.

She could jab him in the neck, no one else.

Feathering her fingers over the back of his hand, Natasha said, “What will play better? Us giving them big smiles and making a splashy arrival or scuttling for cover?”

The answer was obvious. She knew it. He knew it. This had trap written all over it. Public relations trap. “Big smiles, hold my hand, and stay close.”

“Let’s do it, Happy.”

His driver grunted, then opened the door and slipped out. The shouts and cameras were already going off. The noise rushed in then shut off when he closed the door behind him and made his way around the car. Security left the SUVs and moved to give them some breathing space.

“We got this, Tony.”

“You may need to keep telling me that.” Because all of this was beginning to feel like a bad idea.

Happy opened the door and Tony slid out first. The information overload as Friday scanned the crowd running threat assessments and facial recognition made him take a beat before he extended his left hand to Natasha while still partially blocking the door. Her hand gripped his and then she was out.

The questions grew in volume as well as in variety of languages.
“Are you and Black Widow together?” Came one question and Tony didn’t even bother to glance in their direction.

“Ms. Romanoff! What’s it like working with the whole team again?” The reporter had a microphone in hand and thrust it out toward them.

“It’s good,” she said, the smile she flashed him so genuine and full of warmth.

“Did you miss the team then, Ms. Romanoff?” Another asked, also thrusting out their microphone. Tony didn’t want to stop but he wouldn’t just haul her along so he gave her a beat as she slowed.

“Yes,” she said, offering him a what was almost a teasing grin. “Even this guy.”

“Of course you missed me…” Tony retorted. “I’m the best.”

She laughed and it earned them another round of snapping cameras. Tony got them moving again.


Tony’s French was rusty, but a translation appeared on his lenses almost immediately. Did you suspect General Ross of bad intentions when you met him? How did you free yourself from him? The published videos showed him torturing you.

Jaw tightening, he fought to keep his smile firm when she paused and her gaze settled on the dark-eyed and skinned woman staring at her steadily. “Don’t have to do this…” He murmured in her ear, careful to keep his face closer to her hair. The straightened fall of it provided him a curtain from lip reading programs.

“It’s okay,” she assured him. “Oui, l’ancien secrétaire d’Etat Ross m’a torturé dans le but de prouver que je lui obéirais. À aucun moment de mon incarcération, je ne suis vraiment sous son contrôle. Cependant, comme la plupart des hommes avides, s’ils ont alors la possibilité d’exercer leur volonté, ils trahissent leurs véritables intentions. À la fin de la journée, Ross était un très petit homme.”

From the first word she said, the crowd quieted as if they wanted to get the exact wording recorded. Not all of them spoke French. Hell, she even earned a grin from the woman asking the question.

Yes, former Secretary of State Ross tortured me to prove that I would obey him. At no point in my incarceration, am I really under his control. However, like most greedy men, if they then have the opportunity to exercise their will, they betray their true intentions. At the end of the day, Ross was a very small man.

And enough questions about that.

"Warum hast du ihn nicht getötet?" A German reporter asked, stepping forward into the breach before Tony could get them another couple of steps. Why didn’t you kill him?

Tony fixed the guy with a hard stare, but the reporter ignored him. His attention solely on Natasha who merely regarded him with a kind of patience none of these carrion eaters deserved.

“Ich sammelte die Beweise, die nötig waren, um ihn vor Gericht zu stellen. Was als nächstes mit ihm passiert, hängt von den Gerichten und dem Justizsystem ab.”
I collected the evidence necessary to put him on trial. What happens to him next is up to the courts and the justice system.

The dizzying collection of languages she spoke with ease made an impression. More than one reporter gave her a startled look.

“Ms. Romanoff, as a follow-up to that—how do you feel about the fact former Secretary Ross is not facing charges at the moment? The investigation is ongoing, but he remains free?”

“I feel like I did my job,” she said.

“Thanks folks, but we have meetings to get to…” Tony pushed forward and the crowd moved, surging around them. Still, the public information officer waited serenely for them to get to the steps.

The next flurry of questions struck swiftly.

“It's been suggested that you are in a relationship with Captain America, is this true?”

“Would you return to Russia if you were given a full pardon?”

“Are you still an American citizen? There were stories about it being revoked.”

“How do you feel about the Russian practices that turned you into ‘The Black Widow’?”

“Do you feel that SHIELD may have compromised you further than Russia?”

“Considering your crimes, should you even be a part of these talks?”

“Vy deystvitel'no dumayete, chto zasluzhivayete imya Chernaya Vdova posle vashego predatel'stva Materi Rossii?”

Do you really think that you deserve the name of the Black Widow after your betrayal of Mother Russia?

The Russian pulled him up short. He locked his focus on the man with the taciturn expression, ice blond hair and cold eyes. He had to stand over six feet tall and if he were a real reporter, Tony would eat Captain America’s shorts.

Threat assessment didn’t have to tell him there was a problem. Even as the facial recognition identified him as Yuri Brevlov, former SHIELD asset, Natasha seemed to recognize him. Just what they needed.

“YA pomnyu. YA protsvetayu YA Chernaya Vdova, i dazhe smert' ne mozhet otnyat' eto u menya.” The dismissive note in her voice sent a dark look skittering across the man’s face. Natasha didn’t look away, until he finally backed up a step.

I remember. I thrive. I am the Black Widow and not even death can take that from me.

Tony flexed his grip on her hand and pulled her closer, wrapping his arm around her. “Thanks for the support folks, but we don’t want to be late…” He tracked Brevlov and he wasn’t alone, Natasha shifted against him, letting him lead while she scanned the crowd.

When they finally reached the public information officer, Tony glared at him. “One word and we’re leaving.” The man opened his mouth, then closed it. The doors opened to a smaller crowd gathered in the main lobby. A crowd that quickly found other places to be as the officer lead them
directly toward the elevators.

No security sweep.

One of the guards stepped forward, but Tony just looked at him and he backed off. Once the
elevator opened, Tony ushered Natasha inside then hit the button. “We’re good from here. You
should go back out front and get a good seat for when we leave later.”

The doors closed on the man’s quickly flushing and embarrassed face. Releasing Natasha, he leaned
back against the wall.

“Breathe,” she murmured.

“I am breathing. Did you have to bait the Russian?”

She shrugged. “I’m not worried about him.”

“Former SHIELD asset.”

She tilted her head toward him and smiled. “Aren’t we all?”

“Consultant,” he said with some measure of indignation and she grinned.

“I thought we couldn’t afford you.”

“You get a discount.” But his mood rallied at the flash of warmth in her eyes. “Besides, you have a
very talented tongue.”

Her snort made him grin wider. “Latvia?”

The elevator doors opened and he nodded. “Latvia.”

Natasha

Coffee with the Latvian delegate followed all polite protocols and included a forty-minute lecture
on the nature of international law. While the delegate probably considered it a discussion, she
found it patronizing, insulting, and worst of all, boring. Tony’s increasing agitation had her
keeping a hand on his arm if only to remind him he wasn’t alone. Though when their hour was up,
she found a swift manner in which to end the conversation so they could move on to Luxembourg.

The delegates from Luxembourg and Belgium elected to share their time. Both delegates—women
—were far more interested in Tony, Steve, and whether or not James was wholly restored and
could they be certain? They were also very interested in how the team managed to reunite despite
their differences. Diplomacy and gossip all tied up in a neat bow. At least Tony could tackle more
than half of their questions, but when he started laughing halfway through at a question regarding
team-building and possible therapy, she knocked her knee against his. The morning had left them
both on edge, but they had this.
Their lunch meeting with Germany went fine in the first ten minutes, then Leipzig became the sole topic of conversation.

“You’ll forgive my bluntness,” Hans Beck said, speaking in perfectly cultured English. Tony’s German was almost non-existent—his words, not hers—and he preferred to be a part of the conversation. “Ms. Romanoff, Mr. Stark—you were both there at Leipzig, partially responsible for a great deal of the destruction that closed a full terminal and during the course of these actions, Ms. Romanoff allowed Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes to escape. Now you want me to believe you two are cozy and fine and the rest of us should accept that on your word, there will be no more falling outs between the Avengers?”

“That’s a fair question,” Tony admitted, half-slouched in his chair. He’d barely touched his food and she couldn’t say she blamed him. The choice of dishes wasn’t to her taste either. Though she’d made a point of testing a couple of bites. Most poisons wouldn’t kill her, but she’d notice they were there. If Tony wasn’t eating it may be more than a lack of appetite. Folding his hands together over his abdomen, he continued. “The same one I asked myself when Germany reunified. I mean—we only had your word you weren’t going to launch another war to dominate Europe. That seems to be working out so far.”

Natasha did not sigh, nor did she allow her expression to shift. Herr Beck, however, glared. “I believe we are discussing two very different things, Mr. Stark. My country’s history and shame is well documented as is every single step we have taken to assure nothing like that ever happens again. What have you done other than dress up your Russian spy and put her on parade?”

“You want to know what we’ve done?” Tony sat up, left hand lifted as he ticked off the items on his list. “Prevented global catastrophe on three separate occasions including an alien invasion comes to mind. Provided you with the evidence of Secretary Ross’ complicity in eliminating members of this very Committee—you can thank my Russian spy for that—oh, then there’s this small matter of the Hydra founded Project Insight that targeted a few million people globally—should we look to see if your name is on the list? I guarantee you’ll know someone. You can also thank my spy here for saving your life.”

“Tony…” Natasha said quietly.

But he was on a roll and shook his head. “No, Ms. Romanoff,” he enunciated her name as if making a point. “Herr Beck here wants to know how we’ve done and likely what we’re planning. Let’s see, we rebuilt and added many amenities to Leipzig, we also funded restoration and reparations in Lagos. There are multiple charities coordinating under the Maria Stark Foundation to continue rebuilding and reclaiming Sokovia. You know…” Tony tapped a finger to his lower lip. “I’m forgetting something.” He made a show of looking at her. “The Sokovian intelligence officer who caused all the damage in the first place… you can thank the Avengers for bringing him in. But that’s not the only part…”

“Mr. Stark,” Beck snapped out his name like he had a hope in hell of containing Tony. Natasha kept her gaze on him aware his security was right on the other side of the door and his assistant had wide, almost rolling eyes as Beck’s face flushed a deeper red.

“I think we should take a break,” Natasha offered. “Allow cooler heads to prevail…”

“I remember,” Tony said, snapping his fingers making both Beck and his assistant jump. “We supported your poorly thought out Accords in the first place, even while you were letting Ross pull all your strings and paint targets on innocent people. And we haven’t once pointed that out the press despite the carefully orchestrated smear campaigns you’ve never walked back against my spy.”
Yes, the Committee had a lot of dirty laundry they didn’t want aired in public. A very firm, if unspoken truth ringing these meetings. Well, unspoken until right now when Tony fired a salvo.

“If you’ll excuse us, Herr Beck,” Natasha said as she stood and set her napkin aside. “I’m afraid I have a headache.”

The delegate rose, crumpling his own napkin. “I understand, Ms. Romanoff.” Though he made a point of not looking directly at Tony. “Please accept my apologies if my description of you offended.”

“Apology accepted.”

Tony shoved back from the table and stood, buttoning his jacket like he hadn’t just thrown down a gauntlet. “Herr Beck.”

“Mr. Stark.”

When she turned, Tony had his hand at her lower back to guide her toward the door. They said nothing as the assistant nearly tripped over his own feet to open the door or when an escort lead them to the elevators then up three floors, and finally into a quiet conference room before closing the doors and leaving them alone. Tony pulled out a device, then tapped his glasses. “Make sure we’re secure, Friday.”

Natasha set her purse down on the table and then slipped off her shoes before she paced in a slow circle.

“Good deal,” Tony turned to face her. “How bad is the headache? And should you be lying down?”

“The only headache I had in there was you. What the hell was that?”

“What? Beck was being an ass.”

“They’re all asses, Tony. Why were you inciting him? The whole point of these meetings is cultivating allies. Germany might have reservations, but they don’t have whole-hearted objections. Or they didn’t… who knows after that little display.”

He frowned. “He called you a Russian spy.”

“Correction, he called me your Russian spy and for the record, a part of that statement was true at one point.” She ran her tongue over her lips as she shook her head. “This… you can’t do this Tony.”

“What? Defend you? I think I can.” He folded his arms. “I think I have been and I will continue to do so. You’re an Avenger. It means something and every single one of those bastards who are looking for a way to quietly shut you out needs to realize it’s not going to happen.”

One hand on her hip, she met his hostility with calm. “One—we knew this would be hard. I have a lot of ground to make up with these people…”

“Bullshit,” Tony said.

“Let me finish,” she cut him off and he spread his hands, then loosened his tie as he paced the room. They had a decent view of New York through the windows but neither of them paid it any attention. “I have a lot of ground to make up with these people. The smear campaign was effective
because a lot of those charges are true—and before you give me the song and dance about how I was used and abused—I know this. The rest of the world doesn’t care. The delegates don’t care. What they care about is they can’t control me, that I slipped them for months, and now I’m back, right in their faces and they have egg on it because Ross played them.”

She took a breath. His agitation was like a living thing, wreathing the room in stinging static.

“Two, we had a plan. We charm, we indulge, we let them ask all the questions they want… Tony, we spent hours with Devereux and he asked every polite, and some not so polite, invasive question he could. We spent thirty minutes with Beck and you’re ready to punch him.”

“I think you’re dramatically overstating the issue.”

“Am I?” She folded her arms. “Fine, why don’t you educate me? Because in thirty-two minutes we have to continue on our series of meetings and figure out how to make it up to the Germans that you not only slapped them, we walked out without giving them the full time they were promised.”

Rolling his eyes, Tony spread his hands, “Red, trust me. Right now Beck is on the phone to his people telling them that Tony Stark isn’t going to tolerate anyone, not even the Committee, bad-mouthing you. They’ll understand quickly that we’re here to do a job, not indulge their every damn torture fantasy.”

A vein popped in his forehead. She’d bet every dollar in her investment accounts his pulse was going way too fast. His respiration too shallow. Sweat dampened his forehead.

Crossing the room, she caught his hand and put it over her heart as she put one over his. “Breathe, Tony. Deep breaths. Even.”

“I like the opportunity to grope, Red, but we don’t have the time we need to really enjoy it.”

She smacked him upside his head and he winced.

“Are you paying attention to me now?”

His expression tightened, but he nodded once.

She put his hand back at her heart and held it there with her right hand as she laid her left over his. “Now. Breathe.”

He opened his mouth and she glared. He shut it again.

The hammer of his pulse was too fast. A flush started at his neck crept up towards his jawline, but with every deep breath, it began to cool.

“You shouldn’t have to go through this,” he said finally.

“Talking you off a ledge? No, I shouldn’t. You know better. You play this game better than everyone else.”

“Not better than you.”

She chuckled. “We might disagree with that. I’ve always had another identity to disappear into. You’ve always been Tony Stark.”

“That hasn’t always been a good thing, though.” He sighed, some of the tension leeching out of him.
“You remind me a little bit of your dad,” she told him. It was a story she hadn’t shared yet. There just hadn’t been time.

He frowned and his heart accelerated again. “What?”

“Still with me?”

One nod.

“Then keep breathing. We can stand here all day if we have to, but I need you to get your temper under control. I need you to be funny, sassy Tony Stark who eviscerates with a sharp word and a playful grin, who delivers insults artfully enough they sound like compliments and who knows exactly how to manipulate the conversation so they feel foolish for trying to deviate.”

“How is that like my dad?”

“The one time I met him—the one time I recall meeting him—he was a few years younger than you are now, he talked a dancing and playful game that made it an art form.”

“Red, if you slept with my father please stop right now. I never want to know that. Ever.” He looked almost ill at the idea.

She laughed. “No, Tony. I never slept with your father.”

He sagged abruptly and then pulled her close looping an arm around her for a hug. “Thank you. Seriously—thank you.”

“You’re welcome for not having sex with someone.”

“Yeah yeah,” he said tightening his grip and keeping his hands splayed on her shoulder blades, and his face hidden against her shoulder. “Tell me about my dad.” The uncertainty in whether he wanted to hear the story but asking for it anyway had her rubbing a soothing circle against his back.

So she did. Recounting what happened in the 1950s at the Olympics. How she’d been sent to watch Peggy Carter and Howard Stark. Observe, but not interfere. How Howard approached her one evening and she found herself joining Carter, her husband Daniel Sousa, and Tony’s father dancing and that the light pursuit continued over the few days she was with them. He was a lot like his father, funny and charming, and always with a quip at the ready. How in the end, she learned nothing about whatever they had been searching for but that she now suspected might have been a rumor about James and she’d been sent to derail their search.

It happened.

They went back to the States and Natasha returned to Ivan.

Loosening her grip, she took a step back and for a moment, he resisted and then his hands fell away and he retreated a couple of paces.

“And you just decided to share this with me now?”

“I didn’t remember it before we were at Arkangelsk,” she admitted sliding back to sit on the table. Bringing up that incident was a risk, considering his already dark mood. “It was one of the things that came back when he told me to remember. Ivan made me forget a lot of stuff. Since then, we’ve had a lot on our plate.”
“Red, how do you do it?”

“Don’t have any other choice. Surviving is the only option. Put one foot in front of the other. Keep moving.”

Sliding his hands in his pockets, he leaned his head back. “I hate everything about this. I hate that…”

“C’mon—you can say it. I’m not going to break. You hate that…?” She’d scared him. Steve had pointed that out and she’d seen it herself. Earlier—after she first came out of it, she’d been too raw to fix it for him. Too raw to help. Now he was too raw. Hurting. It seemed an odd description for it, but he was. Her past kept hurting them. It painted with a broad stroke and it threatened to taint the Avengers.

“I hate that you have to go through this. That people who have no idea what you’ve endured are going to judge you on a few—okay maybe not small, but in the greater scheme of the world? A few less than desirable choices, most of which weren’t yours to make.” He checked his watch. “And I hate that we’re stuck in these damn meetings.”

“Could be worse…” she offered. “One of us could be stuck here doing it alone. Kind of like you’ve been doing for months.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t help. What else have you got?” A small smile kicked around the corners of his mouth.

“We could be stuck in these meetings all the way up to your party and the way they run over, we’d miss the whole opening bit.” Despite telling Steve she would talk to T’Challa on Friday, she was looking forward to no U.N. meetings that day. Maybe she should take Pepper up on that spa offer? Then again having total strangers giving her a massage while she was face down and vulnerable to attack?

Not. Relaxing.

Tony let out a harsh little laugh devoid of any real humor. “No, I get to meet Pepper’s boyfriend that night—so still not winning points for me.” That—actually surprised her—and it shouldn’t have. “You pulled a background on him after one was run a few months ago. It gets flagged. Especially since you pulled Pepper’s PA and the Abigail Burns activist.”

“Well, bad on me.”

“It’s fine, Red. Pepper should move on. Find a guy who’ll treat her right. His background is pretty solid. Seems like a great guy.”

“You know you could always just call her and tell her you miss her.”

“Nope,” he said almost too glibly. “Not doing that to her again. She made her wishes clear. She’s moving on. So am I. So—this is really not cheering me up. Well, except that the first dance is mine. That’s a cheerful thought. What else do you have?”

“Um… I’d flash you my boobs but you got Black Widow boobs on Halloween.” It took him a minute, but then a startled laugh—a real one—broke out of him and he began to shake.

“No offense, Red. I do prefer the real thing to the faux boobs those ladies had.”

“I didn’t think they were so bad. At least from my angle, they even looked all-natural. Pretty sure
they could give my butt some competition, too. Very nice curves in those skin tight suits.”

Still laughing, he shook his head. “I should have said the boobs those faux Black Widows had.”

“Ahh… Maybe next year we’ll have a contest. The best Black Widow boobs win.”

“Okay, now you’re just teasing me. We have—three minutes. What else have you got? It’s lonely out here on the ledge.”

She patted the table next to her as she kicked a rolling chair out of the way. “Then I’ll just sit out there with you. Kind of like you do with me.”

“Depends,” he said, sliding up to sit next to her and bumping her shoulder with his. “Are you busy later?”

“I might be, a friend needs to find a Christmas tree.”

“Lucky friend.”

“He doesn’t always think so, but he’s a good guy. Even when he’s being an arrogant ass.”

“Arrogant asses are the best guys. You know I wouldn’t steer you wrong. Want some advice?”

“What’s it going to cost me?”

“On the house, the Red discount.”

“Sounds like a pretty good deal.”

“Arrogant asses tend to be possessive and protective. They may not always look like it or act like it—but there’s not a lot they wouldn’t do for you once they’re in your life.”

She sighed. “You know, I’m pretty sure I already knew that. Kind of like how you know that I like having an arrogant ass in my life. It’d be a pretty crappy place without one.”

He smiled. “You know… today might be your lucky day.”

“I could use one of those. Whatcha got?” Tossing his own words back at him made him smile.

“Me.”

“You, huh?”

“Yep, one hundred percent the real deal. All yours and all included for the bargain basement price of putting up with me.”

“Well, I don’t know… kind of means you have to put up with me.”

Tony grimaced. “You have a point.” He hopped off the table as someone knocked on the door. “Gonna have to think about that one, Red. Raincheck until later?”

“I suppose.” She slid her feet back into her shoes and retrieved her purse. “Where are we going next?”

“Greece,” Tony said. “Do you speak Greek?”

“Enough to know that if they offer us a horse, I’ll go low, you go high.”
He nodded crisply. “Deal.” At the door, he paused and added, “Thanks for telling me about my dad. If I wasn’t clear earlier—really glad you didn’t have sex with him. That’s one I’ve definitely still got up on him.”

“I’ve never had sex with you, either,” she reminded him pointedly.

“No, but I still have hope.” Then he opened the door, ending their privacy before she could retort.

Tony

Greece, Hungary, Estonia, Czechia, and Romania made up the bulk of their meetings for the rest of the day. Greece and Estonia were fine. They actually asked a lot of questions with regard to the Accords and only the Accords. There were points in the old Accords they had never been comfortable with, and they engaged both Tony and Natasha on how they could better word or remove sections that involved government invitation to enter the countries. They wanted the accountability, but whenever a government was in flux or a conservative government shifted into power, the affected country may not be able to call on the Avengers or worse, might refuse.

Czechia and Romania were far more standoffish. The Romanian delegate, in particular wanted to have a one on one conversation with Natasha that Tony nixed despite how much it irritated the woman. While Natasha didn’t care for the speed at which Tony said no, she also didn’t argue.

He didn’t trust a single delegate they were dealing with, and he certainly didn’t trust their agendas. To that end, the point of taking the meetings together was that Natasha would never be left alone with anyone who might seek to either compromise her by framing her for something or triggering her.

The delegates who didn’t like it could just suck it up. Ultimately, the Romanian delegate settled for admitting she wanted to ask Natasha about the current minority party in her country at the behest of her leaders. As it turned out, they had been gaining traction for some time and their current leadership had once been supported by active SHIELD ops during challenges in the early 2000s.

“I’m not entirely sure what you’re asking us to do,” Tony said slowly, because as yet she hadn’t made an actual request beyond her less than fully formed history lesson.

Mihaela Popescu sighed. “Mr. Stark, I am not requesting anything of the Avengers.” Her accent always grew more pronounced when she said Avengers. “I am asking for Ms. Romanova’s assistance—you were with SHIELD in the early 2000s, yes?”

“Yes,” Natasha told her evenly. “But I’m afraid I was not involved in any operations in Romania or related to Romanian politics. As for your current situation—I will tell you it has been my experience that if you’re willing to play dirty to hold onto power—you don’t deserve it.”

Instead of being offended, Ms. Popescu actually smiled. “Normally I would agree with you, however, the minority party is no fan of the Avengers or the U.N. or most people outside of Romania. They are insular, conservative to the point of painful. They would very much like to close our borders to the refugees we continue to receive from other parts of the world.”

While she was the first to bring it up directly, the other delegates had touched on the refugee
situation in the European Union and the challenges to their resources. But these were all socio-
political and not matters for the Avengers or even the Accords.

“Are you expecting a hostile coup?” Despite the length of the day they’d had so far, Natasha
seemed as cool and composed as if they’d first started. Even more remarkable considering the
incident that morning.

Incident. He really hated that word.

It was a flashback and a symptom of the PTSD she had to suffer from every bit as much as he did.

So why incident? Was it the polite term?

“No,” Ms. Popescu stated. “Ms. Romanova… May I call you Natasha?”

“Only if I can call you Mihaela.”

“Of course, please—this is why I wished to speak to you alone. Mr. Stark does not know our part
of the world. Not the way you do.”

Nat merely raised her eyebrows, waiting for her to continue.

“This party—they align themselves as a Communist party. Whatever you may think of our political
differences, it is not the ideology but those who spout the ideology that makes it a threat. In this
case, Bogdan Rusu. A name, I am sure, you are familiar with.”

Without shifting or flinching, Natasha continued to meet her gaze. “Mihaela, Tony and I are here
today to discuss the Accords, to answer your questions about the Avengers, to find common ground
that we can hopefully use to develop a better relationship with Romania.”

“That is exactly what we are discussing, Natasha.” The delegate glanced at Tony. “I assure you—
these are matters that will go a long way toward striking a mutually beneficial relationship. If you
need time to think about it or to do some research even, I would be more than happy to take your
call whenever you feel ready to have this part of the discussion.”

“Yeah—great.” Tony stood. “Ms. Popescu, I want to say it’s been a pleasure, but it really hasn’t.
We’re willing to work with you on the Accords, but any other matters—particularly those related to
long done past events that we had nothing to do with, I’m afraid you will have to accept our
apologies as we move on.”

She rose gracefully. “Of course, Mr. Stark. I wouldn’t dream of holding anything hostage that is so
clearly unrelated to the issue at hand or anyone involved in the negotiations.” She didn’t even
pretend not to look at Natasha.

Yep.

Done now.

“Until next time…”

Their escort awaited them as they left the Romanian suite and Tony had to keep his questions to
himself, but oh boy did he have questions. Keeping a hand at her back as they walked, he said, “I
thought the Hungarian delegation was also on this floor?”

“They are,” the public information officer—not the schmuck from downstairs—answered. “The
delegate, however, aware of your schedule today wanted to take the meeting over coffee in the lobby and perhaps a walk outside.”

“In thirty-degree weather? With the press everywhere?”

“Thirty degrees is balmy in Hungary,” Natasha said.

“And I’m sure you wore a bikini in Russia when it was ten degrees outside, but some of us aren’t polar bears.”

The public information officer actually coughed as he hit the button inside the elevator and Natasha shifted so she leaned against the wall between him and Tony. Eyeing the doors, she said without missing a beat, “Only after a good snow. The reflection made for a nice tan. Otherwise, it was one-pieces all the way.”

Tony snickered.

The officer fidgeted.

When the doors opened on the lobby, there was a rise in noise. Employees, delegates, staff and visitors migrating in and out of the building while outside the sun had already set. Fuck it had been a long day.

“If you’ll both follow me,” their guide said, cutting across the marble floors toward a secure roped off area. The guards allowed them admission without a word. The hum of voices from the main lobby followed them as the scent of coffee wafted around them like a siren calling them home.

Tony had barely eaten anything and he’d limited his intake to bottled water. He didn’t think Natasha had done much better. “Coffee is sounding better and better.”

“Right?”

As they reached the coffee kiosk there was a single man waiting for them beyond the barista working the kiosk. Dressed in a suit, his hair steel gray and peppered with streaks of white—he was not the delegate Tony had been expecting. He slowed his steps, but before he could catch Natasha’s arm, she picked up speed.

“Natalia Romanova.” The man held out his arms and Natasha walked right into them.

What. The. Fuck.

All the tired drained out of him as he focused on the older man giving her a hug. Natasha actually laughed as she drew back.

“Agoston Farkas, you—you look wonderful.” Her voice actually softened a note, to something far more tender and Tony frowned. Then he flicked a look to the public information officer who stared at the pair himself.

“We’re good from here. Thanks.”

The only one allowed to gawk was him.

“Of course, Mr. Stark. You will not be disturbed. The delegate’s request.” Then he retreated.

Friday filtered information about Agoston Farkas, a businessman and lawyer, one-time suspected smuggler apparently, and current liaison for the Hungarian President overseeing all diplomatic
matters. He was their version of a Secretary of State. Way above the delegate paygrade.

“Agoston,” Natasha said. “Have you met Tony?”

“No, this is my first time working with the Avengers,” he said, giving her an almost indulgent smile before offering his hand. “Mr. Stark, Agoston Farkas, I am honored to meet you.”

Tony clasped his hand and shook it slowly. “That makes one of us.” Ignoring the quick frown Natasha sent his way, he asked, “What happened to Viktor Abnon. He has been the delegate for Hungary since the beginning and we’ve had what I hoped were at least a few fruitful discussions.”

“So I have been informed.” Agoston dropped his hand, but kept an arm around Natasha like he had a right to. Very shortly, he may not have an arm to continue taking such liberties—except she was letting him. What. The. Hell. “Mr. Abnon sends his regards, but in this matter, I shall be handling all of Hungary’s interests. Please—before we begin business, let us have coffee and talk as friends do. My security and the U.N. have both assured me we will not be disturbed. There is even a small garden lit for the holidays we might walk in.”

Considering the location, Tony tapped the jammer inside his jacket pocket then slid his hands into his pockets. “Well, by all means…” He focused on Natasha. “Let’s talk as friends do.”

“Be nice,” she said with a wink.

“Oh, I think you’ve got nice all sewn up.” But he read the warning in her eyes and shrugged before he nodded. Natasha stepped away—finally—from Agoston’s grip to order a hot chai tea for herself. Tony elected to take the straight coffee while Agoston ordered something with a lot of milk and caramel.

“An indulgence,” he told Natasha. “I only allow it when I am in the States and Serene cannot catch me.”

“You should be nicer to your wife,” Natasha informed him almost tartly. “She has put up with you for forty years.”

“I know, I must have done well when I kidnapped her.”

Nat rolled her eyes and Tony frowned. He was missing a piece of this. The familiarity between them and their affection. They obviously knew each other, but from where—or better, when?

He helped Natasha slip on her coat before putting on his. Convenient that they’d been left here to wait for them. He did a quick pass with his watch and scanned them as he made a show of buttoning Natasha’s coat for her. No bugs or other tracking devices.

After pulling on his own coat, Agoston led them outside but he didn’t try to wrap an arm around Natasha again and Tony kept his hand firm on her back. She gave him a faintly exasperated look but stuck with him. Outside, the air was cold with the bite of snow in it. The lights were also beautiful to look at, but Tony wasn’t in the mood for it.

“We are—how do you say? Secure?” Agoston answered after a moment.

“No one can overhear us,” Natasha assured him. Tony allowed himself a momentary smile. She knew damn well he’d taken care of it.

“Wonderful,” Agoston said, then glanced at Tony. “And does he…?”
“Do I what?”

“Yes,” Natasha said, sliding her arm through Tony’s before lifting her chai tea and taking a sip.

“Tony knows.”

Relieved, Agoston’s smile grew. “You have not aged a day, Natalia—forgive me, Natasha.”

“You’d be surprised,” she told him.

“Okay—clearly he knows you and this happened a long time ago. Fill me in?”

“I only remember pieces of it,” Agoston said. “My parents were trying to get me and my brothers out of Hungary, it was October of 1956 and the revolution had begun—in an attempt to overthrow the People’s Republic and the Soviet policies. My father had made—noise.”

“He was a journalist. He wrote about the abuses,” Natasha added. “The crimes against the people served by the government. His was one of many names on lists to be cleansed.”

Tony flinched.

“Our Red Angel came in the night, she found us trying to escape.” Agoston looked so wistful. “My papa was sure she was there to kill him. So all he asked was that she let us go. Send us away, and then he would stay.”

Ice curled around Tony’s spine.

“But they were closer to the checkpoint than they knew… Soviet forces were making a strong showing. Teach the people a lesson. You know if you do it hard enough once, you may never need to do it again.”

“It just makes the people that much more determined for their freedom,” Agoston countered.

“True.”

While he wanted to hurry them along, there was a strange dynamic between the pair. Agoston was in his late sixties and deferred to her like she was his elder.

Which—Tony supposed she was.

“We were hiding in an old farmer’s truck, beneath the slats in the floor. Natasha closed the wood over my father’s face without answering his plea. We didn’t know how close the solders were either. But then they were everywhere and Natasha just sat on the bed of the truck. To this day I don’t know what she said. We knew she was there, my mother was holding our hands and our father held his breath. But she just talked to the soldiers and eventually, they went away.”

Tony glanced at her, Natasha’s expression had gone unreadable.

“Then she climbed into the truck and started driving. She drove all night.” Agoston beamed at her. “When morning came, we were in Austria. She gave my father some money and said…”

“I was never here and you never saw me. Now take your family and go. Maybe write about nature or something,” Natasha said the words sternly. “Then I crossed back over the border, and made my way back to Budapest.”

“She saved my whole family that day. From time to time in my life, I have encountered her again.”
“Yes, when someone decided that hijacking Soviet arms was a wonderful way to make money.” The scolding look on her face made Tony laugh.

“I needed to send my brothers to university,” Agoston sniffed. “And the Soviets deserved it.”

She smirked. “I did not see him again for a few more years, by then he’d married a wonderful woman and had children of his own.”

“Every time I met her, I needed her in my life,” Agoston said. “She stopped someone trying to kill me and my wife. I have been much blessed by the Red Angel, but it was not until your SHIELD fell and you stood before Congress that I ever learned your name.”

“You never needed my name,” she admonished him. “You were safer without it.”

“I know that and I know also, now, that you were the operative sent to kill my father that night all those years ago.”

She shrugged. “I never asked him his name. How was I to know?”

It was utter bullshit. Natasha not only let the man and his family go, but she also got them to safety at personal risk to herself.

“See this—this here is why I adore this woman,” Agoston said as he lifted his coffee. “So when Mr. Abnon tells me that Natasha Romanoff will be joining Tony Stark for the Accords negotiation, I decided that I would step in. You may have enemies on the committee, Ms. Romanoff, but I will be your staunchest ally. You saved my family. I will help save yours.”

Well.

How about that.

They spent an hour with Agoston, walking in the garden with its lit trees. He listened to their full pitch, including how Ross manipulated the Accords because of vague language. One of the strongest pieces Tony wanted in place, above and beyond all the rest—was the Avengers would police their own. Agoston saw some problems with it, but he understood that language could be both a gift and a curse.

Tony had to admit, the guy was almost too good to be true. But nothing he said sounded forced. His biometrics registered as true, pupil response and respiration all within normal ranges. If anything, he seemed disheartened he couldn’t offer them more.

“Agoston,” Natasha told him, her tone firm and brooking no arguments. “The Accords are more than I could ask for.”

“I could ask for a whole lot more,” Tony supplied. “In case you were wondering.”

The other man laughed. “I have heard interesting things about you, Mr. Stark. I can tell only about half of them are exaggeration.” The sly wit even made Tony laugh. By the time they bid him goodnight, Tony couldn’t feel his nose anymore. Happy waited out front with the limo and a pair of public information officers walked them out. Fortunately, someone had cleaned out most of the press.

That was a nice change.

“Picked up some hot coffee for you,” Happy said as he held the door open. “Cheeseburgers, too.”
Tony gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You complete me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Happy brushed him off. “Get in the back with the hot Russian.”

Snorting, Tony slid inside. Sure enough, there were a pair of cups with hot coffee still steaming and a bag of cheeseburgers. He pulled off his coat before tossing it on the other seat and plucked out one of the cheeseburgers and offered it to Natasha.

“I’m good,” she said waving it off.

Unwrapping the burger, he studied her. Since leaving Agoston, her mood had grown somber. “What’s up, Red?”

She shook her head. “Just tired.”

Yeah. No.

“We going straight back to the Tower?” Happy asked as he started them out of the secure drive.

“Thinking about stopping to get a tree. Go find us a good lot.”

“A tree?” Happy squinted at him.

Tony shrugged. “Red’s right, we can grab one on the way home. Be nice to put it up in the penthouse.” He probably had some ornaments somewhere. Not like he couldn’t wire something together for lights. “Tree.”

“Okay,” Happy said with a shake of his head.

Closing the partition, Tony took a bite of his burger and glanced at Natasha again. Her gaze was fixed on the window outside. Considering the day had been a bit of an emotional Tilt-a-Whirl, she probably had the right to some quiet time.

“Boss,” Friday said. “Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes wanted to know when you’d be getting back to the Tower with Ms. Romanoff.”

“Probably another hour, we’re going to stop and get a tree.” Tony glanced at her again. “Maybe ninety minutes. We just left the U.N. Tell them to come up to the Penthouse for dinner. Grab Clint, too.”

Friday was quiet.

Natasha’s phone buzzed and she shifted to pull it out. After hitting a contact on the screen, she put the phone to her ear.

“Hey… Yes, Tony needs a tree for the penthouse and I offered to stop with him on the way back…. No, I’m definitely tired, but it was—an interesting day.”

That was a word for it. Tony ate his cheeseburger, shamelessly listening to her call. Not like he could miss it.

“Do we need to have dinner, all of us?” She glanced at Tony and raised her eyebrows.

“Maybe,” Tony said. “I think we should talk, the four of us, at least. Clint if he wants in on the chaos.”
Natasha shifted the phone. “Talk about what?”

“Lots of things,” Tony continued. Until the words slipped out, he hadn’t realized he’d been thinking about it all day. He motioned to her phone. “May I?”

“Hang on Steve, Tony wants to talk to you.” She held her phone out.

Taking it, Tony put it to his ear. “Hey Cap, everything go okay with the transport?”

“It went fine.” Steve sounded a tad wary. “No issues. It’s all secured in one of the mechanical labs here at the Tower, Vision made a point of disconnecting every single ARC reactor and storing it separately.”

“Paranoid. I like it. Good plan. How did Clint and Bucky’s day go?”

“Moderately successful,” Steve said, still guarded. “We can brief on that later. I had plans for dinner with Nat tonight and I’d prefer to skip a group thing.”

“You and your bestie kind of are a group thing, Cap and while I get that—it occurs to me we’ve been going about some of this the wrong way.”

“Some of what?”

“Nat’s memories—these incidents. The nosebleeds and headaches.”

He had Natasha’s attention.

“Yep. In the interests of transparency, I want to run through the idea with all of you. No secrets, no going behind your back or hers.” Tony made a face and she pulled all of her hair over to one side so it spilled over one shoulder. “So if I can cut into your time with Red, I’ll try to keep it short and get the hell out of your reunion way if no one wants to give it a shot.”

“You’re being unnecessarily cryptic.” The observation was on point.

“That’s because I’m working out the details in my head. One hour, Cap? Two tops.”

Steve sighed. “Give the phone to Natasha please.”

After returning the phone to her, he took a sip of his coffee.

“I don’t know, he hasn’t told me any more than he told you.” She gave him a pointed look and he smirked.

It was an idea. He’d just had it. In the last five minutes. He needed a few more to troubleshoot it. But Agoston gave him the idea and maybe all he needed was to put that meeting together with the video he saw of the incident that morning.

“I’d like that,” she said. “A lot. So two hours tops. Then we break out.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, we’ll see you soon.” She hung up and said, “Are you going to tell me now?”

“Nope,” Tony said. “I think this will only work if we’re in a controlled environment and we have the others there.”
“You realize that sounds like an experiment.”

He nodded once. “It will be painless.” I hope.

“That’d a first.” She tucked the phone away.

“Hey Red… what’s up? I know you were annoyed about the German delegate, but Agoston is good news. A powerful ally and someone who will take your side on the Committee and he’s got influence according to the info Friday pulled for me.”

“He does.”

“You saved his life—his whole family. That’s a good story. One that…I wish like hell we could tell. It would go a long way toward shoring up your image. Even when you were under their thumb, you still saved people.”

She snorted. “Don’t give me that much credit, please.”

“Red…”

“I recognized his father, I knew exactly who he was.” That didn’t surprise him. “Yes, I gave into the sympathy to get them out. Agoston was barely eight years old, and his younger brothers were even smaller. Their mother was hugging them so tightly I didn’t know how they could breathe. Their father knew why I was there, he had to know. He didn’t offer me a bribe or try to fight me or anything. He just offered to come quietly and asked only that I spare his wife and children.”

Unease settled into his gut at the way she was telling the story. “But you got them out.”

“I did. Told Karpov and his men that I had a lead, that they’d gotten around us somehow. Perhaps traveling overland. I’d slip in with the refugees and deal with them that way. Karpov waved me off but gave me two days to meet them in Budapest.”

Karpov. “He was Bucky’s handler.”

A single nod. “But James wasn’t there or if he was, I didn’t see him. I remember that night very clearly. It was dawn when I crossed into Austria and everything Agoston said was true, I gave them money and sent them on their way. Then I returned, I had to be in Budapest. But I also had to make sure my target was eliminated.”

“You didn’t kill his father. You let them go.”

“And I found a man on my way back who looked enough like him that when I put a bullet through the lower half of his face, they wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

The unease settled to pure ice.

“So don’t laud me, Tony, I spared one family. I killed plenty of others. I can’t even tell you why I spared his family or why I kept checking on them over the years.”

“Because it was human, Red.” How did she not see that?

“Maybe,” she leaned her head back and stared out the window. “But if I chose to save one, why didn’t I choose to save them all? You like to play with me and tease me and flirt with me, Tony. I’m not blind to it. You have grown fonder of me these last few months and I am deeply grateful for your friendship, but you’re forgetting something. You’re forgetting that I was what they made
me and once upon a time you knew better than to trust me.”

“I’m a smart guy, Red.”

“I know you are.” He could almost hear the smile in her voice and it was bittersweet. “Not quite getting how you keep forgetting what I am.”

Balling up the wrapper from his cheeseburger, he threw it away in the bag, then twisted on the seat and put an arm behind her. The tracing two fingers against her scalp, he waited until she looked at him.

It was dark and only the faint running light inside the limo illuminated her. When she finally faced him, he propped his head on his fist and said, “You’re Natasha Romanoff. You’re my friend. They made you a weapon. You made you a person. You saved a family. You might not think it’s much, but to that man back there, it’s everything. I’m not going to pretend I understand it all, maybe I never can. But I’m not going to cut you loose again. You’re stuck with me, Red. All my bad habits and all. I can take your past because that’s all it is—the past.”

“You are so not that dismissive. You want to know everything.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. “True. But that’s half my charm.”

She snorted and a reluctant smile curved on her lips.

“Fine, maybe twenty-five percent. The rest of it is all good looks and personality.”

The limo slowed and pulled off the road into—a Christmas tree lot. That was a lot of trees. He smirked at the internal pun.

“Okay, turn that frown upside down. We’re on Tony-time now, which means everything is awesome. We’re getting the biggest, fattest tree on the lot…” Then he sobered a beat. “Come play with me? Let’s pretend we haven’t just spent the longest three days ever dealing in politics and ass-kissing.”

Happy followed them as they left the limo. “You know,” Tony said. “I don’t think I’ve ever picked out my own tree before.”

“You haven’t,” Happy commented.

“I picked out my first one a few days ago, so I’m not really an expert.”

“More experience than me,” Tony said. “Oh look—mistletoe—ow.” Natasha twisted his arm and pulled him away from where he’d planned to walk. “Got it. Got it.”

“You two are going to make a scene,” Happy muttered.

Tony glanced back at him and grinned. “Was that a dare?”

But he caught Natasha’s half-smile and small snicker of laughter.

“No,” Happy said firmly. “It was not a dare. It wasn’t even a commentary. It was an observation only.”

“I think that was a dare,” Tony murmured in her ear. “What do you say?”

“I say find a tree, Tony and if you keep angling for the mistletoe, I’m going to trade with Happy.”
“Fine,” he huffed and gave her a squeeze. Snow began to fall and they all glanced up. Small flakes. Barely noticeable. But kind of mood-setting anyway. “You used to be fun.”

“I was never that fun.”

At the dry remark, Tony grinned. “Now that sounds like a dare.”

Happy groaned, but Natasha laughed.

Better.

Much better.

Now what kind of tree did he want? How big did they carry them here?
Tony nearly bought three trees, she talked him down to two—one of which he sent home with Happy. More entertaining was watching Happy secure the trees to the limo while Tony paid for them along with a few more of the Avengers ornaments. Standing there in the cold, she kept watch as he signed some autographs. The lot Happy chose was large, well lit, and not crowded. It made maintaining her vigilance simpler. Still, the Stark Security tail car was out on the street. At least two of his men were ‘wandering’ to look less conspicuous, but she still kept her attention divided between the pair.

The kids were excited as Tony waved them off and made his way to where she stood in the doorway. He offered her a candy cane with a cheeky grin. Then looked upward. “I wouldn’t,” she warned him. “That’s not mistletoe.”

He frowned and squinted at it a beat. Crestfallen, he muttered, “It’s mulberry.”

She chuckled. “Let’s go. I’m tired and so are you.” Not to mention, she needed something more substantial than chai tea. As it was she slipped the candy cane into her pocket to keep her hands free.

But they didn’t take two steps before three little girls with their hair in dozens of braids, clipped with colorful beads and wearing thick jackets and scarves raced up to them with a harried mother in tow. The girl in the red scarf stared up at her and asked in a breathless voice, “Are you the Black Widow?”

“He’s Iron Man,” the one with the green scarf whispered very loudly.

Natasha smiled. “I’m Natasha Romanoff.”

“The Black Widow,” Tony said, mouth whispering it for dramatic effect.

The girl with the red scarf stood even taller and seemed to almost vibrate. “You’re really her? No jokes right?”

“Yes,” she said solemnly, meeting the young girl’s gaze. “I am. You are?”
“I’m Tana Morgan, I’m nine. These are my sisters, Kennedy and Gemma. Gemma’s five. She’s really shy.” Kennedy was the girl with the green scarf and Gemma, though slighter than her sisters, was the one with the blue.

After a swift visual sweep, Natasha squatted to bring herself more to their levels before she held out her hand. “It’s good to meet you.” Happy had finished securing the trees and he had moved to a few steps away, close enough to keep an eye out, but not so close as to actually join them.

She shook each of their hands. Then glanced toward their mother as she rose. Closer in, she was familiar. Adjusting the purse strap on her shoulder, the woman squared her shoulders. Yes. She was very familiar.

“Diana Morgan,” she offered, holding out her hand. Yes, Natasha knew who she was. But her daughters didn’t know. It was clear in every inch of her posture and the worried light in her eyes.

“Natasha Romanoff,” Natasha said, gripping her hand once. “You have lovely children.”

Relief spilled through her tension and her smile warmed. “I do. Thank you. They’re—huge fans of yours.”

Glancing at the girls, Natasha smiled. “I appreciate that.” She really didn’t know what to do with fans.

“My friends will never believe we met you for real,” Tana announced. “Everyone has been talking about you.”

That in and of itself was strange, but coming from these little girls it tugged at her. Diana fidgeted a little and Natasha said, “We shouldn’t keep you from shopping for your tree…”

“Oh—could we take a picture with you?” Kennedy asked, bold as brass without an ounce of shyness. “Please? No one will believe us if we don’t have a picture.” She stole a look at her mother.

“Maybe we shouldn’t bother them, baby.”

“It’s no bother,” Tony said, glancing at her. “Right, Red?”

“Not at all,” Natasha answered meeting Diana’s gaze. “I don’t mind at all.”

Diana nodded slowly. “All right then.” She pulled out her phone and Natasha moved to squat again, careful to keep her knee off the cold and snowy ground. Kennedy pressed her up to her side and Tana moved to the other. Gemma hesitated then moved to stand in front of Tana and she leaned on against Natasha’s leg and gave her a shy smile.

“Do you want Iron Man in the picture, too?”

“Girls only,” Kennedy declared and Tony chuckled, raising his hands and retreating a couple of steps.

“It’s all you ladies.”

A couple of distinctive clicks went off, but it took Diana another minute or so to snap some pictures. Tony had gotten his. Or maybe Happy. He’d snapped a couple while they were looking at trees, but pretended he wasn’t when she’d given him a look.
“There we go. Girls, let’s let Mr. Stark and Ms. Romanoff go. They have to be very busy people.”

Tana looked disappointed, but she nodded. Kennedy bounced away calling, “It was nice to meet you.”

“It was nice to meet you, too.” She started to rise when Gemma touched her hand. The little girl bit her lower lip then leaned forward. She cupped her hands to Natasha’s ear and whispered, “You’re very pretty.”

Lowering her voice, Natasha mimicked her action and whispered in her ear, “So are you. I love your scarf.”

Gemma’s eyes widened, and she touched the royal blue scarf in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes, really. It’s my favorite color.”

The sudden smile lit her up and then Gemma leaned in to whisper, “I hope you beat the bad guys at the U.N.”

“They’re not all bad. This isn’t about winning, it’s about making agreements that we can all live with.” At Gemma’s confused look, Natasha added, “Do you know what a promise is?”

Gemma nodded.

“When you make a promise, you want to be able to keep it, right?”

Another nod.

“But if someone asks you for a promise you know you can’t keep, should you give it?”

A solemn shake of her head, then her eyes lit up. “You’re making it so you can keep the promise?”

“On all sides.”

She beamed. “Thank you, Ms. Widow.”

“You can call Natasha.”

Gemma grinned again, then gave her a swift hug. Letting her go, Natasha rose as Gemma hurried to her mother.

“Girls, go on inside and wait for me a minute,” Diana told them. The girls waved toward Natasha and Tony. Nat waved back at them, before she looked at Diana. The other woman’s smile faded a little. “Thank you for not telling them.”

“I have no reason to,” Natasha assured her. “They really are lovely children.”

“We’re doing all right,” Diana told her. “We really are… they really are your biggest fans. Make me crazy always looking for stuff that has you. We find all the other Avengers but…”

“Well, now they have a picture.” Natasha studied her expression. “Take care of yourself, okay? If anything comes up…”

“I know. I can call you. You said that once before. I still have the number. Would rather try to make it on our own. Feels—right that way.” She glanced at Tony who was watching them with a sober expression, then Natasha. “Merry Christmas to both of you.”
“You too,” Natasha murmured, then let her go.

Tony held out his arm and she glanced toward the interior of the shop where the girls were searching through the Avengers’ ornaments before she slipped her arm through his to walk back to the car. Once they were back in the limo, Tony stretched out his legs.

“Friday, let the others know we’re leaving the lot and we’ll be at the Tower in the next thirty minutes or so. Go ahead and put in an order for Chinese food.” He glanced at her. “That work for you Red?”

“That’s fine. Sweet and sour soup sounds good.” Not really, but she could eat it.

He gave her five minutes.

“What didn’t you say to her kids that had her thanking you?”

Almost a record.

“Her husband worked at SHIELD. He died at the Triskelion.” The simplest explanation.

“Her kids don’t know where he worked or that he was Hydra?” It took him no time to reach the conclusion.

“Both, actually.” Natasha glanced at him.

“She didn’t meet you until after…”

“Identified Hydra agents, living and dead, had all their assets seized and their bank accounts frozen. Diana had no idea nor do her children. A lot of families were displaced and affected in the fallout due to the choices of their spouses. She had moved the girls into her car because it was the only thing she had left that was in her name.”

“And you bailed her out?”

“I may have set aside enough funds to get them through the other side. She never asked me for anything…”

“Yeah, I get that Red. Now she’s here in New York?”

“I guess. The last time I saw her, I had just finished the last day of my testimony to Congress.” She had to take the file to meet with Steve and Fury, then she had to get out of the city herself. Diana had refused her assistance the first time, angry and grief-stricken, struggling to understand what her husband had done and how she’d missed it.

That day, Diana had been at the cemetery. Her father was buried there and she’d gone to think. Natasha had intruded even when she told herself not to. They’d talked for a short while and Diana accepted the offer of financial assistance, reluctantly despite Natasha’s manipulation to persuade her.

“But I’ll never be able to pay this back,” she’d almost stuttered the words when Isaiah’s wire transfer appeared almost immediately in the account she’d provided. Natasha had just hung up with Isaiah. “This is too much.”

“That’s about six months of pay for a SHIELD level 6,” Natasha told her. “Including hazard pay, which I think you more than qualify for. Use it, get your feet under you again, look after your
children. Don’t look back, just build a better future for the four of you.”

“I wanted to hate you,” Diana admitted. “Watching you on the news, hearing about Hydra, about what they did. The names of everyone who died… there you are at the center of it. A part of me thinks if you and Captain America hadn’t started all of this—maybe—maybe Robbie would still be here.” Natasha had been quiet while she spoke. “But that’s the irrational part of me.” She lowered the phone. “I really don’t know that I can ever repay this.”

“You don’t have to. Help someone someday who needs it. Help your kids. Help yourself.” Then she handed her a card. “If you ever need me—for any reason—call that number. They’ll get the message to me.”

And that was it, Natasha headed for her ‘Vette, and walked away from everything. Fury. Steve. The smoldering remains of SHIELD, and she’d disappeared for a while.

Until tonight, she hadn’t seen her again and she had never met her daughters. The day before it had been Gerald. Then today Agoston. Now Diana. Little pieces of her past slipping out around her. She rubbed at her temple.

“You’re just full of surprises,” Tony said, but then he let her be. At the Tower, Happy got the tree off the car with some lugging and Natasha offered to help but he’d given her a look and she’d raised her hands.

They managed to get all three of them and the tree into the elevator, but it was a tight fit. Though she would rather have gone to Steve’s floor and changed, the elevator whisked them straight up to the penthouse. Trapped in the corner next to the buttons, she waited as Happy huffed and struggled with the tree, disregarding offers of assistance from Steve or James or even Clint. Tony was leaning in his corner, laughing.

“You’re awful,” she reminded him.

He gave her a too innocent smile. “You heard him. He doesn’t want help.”

Rolling her eyes, she exited in time to see Steve stabilize the tree as Happy finally got it set down. It was right in front of the windows leading to the deck. Blowing out a breath, he looked at Tony. “You got something to keep it straight? A good tub or something?”

“I’m sure I’ll figure it out Hap. Go ahead and take off, yeah?”

“No need,” Tony assured him already walking him back to the elevator. “Go home. Have a beer. Put up your own tree. Back here bright and early to do it all over again.”

Skirting the pair, Natasha headed straight for Steve. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, he looked so damn comfortable. No visible bruises. His eyes were bright. His smile real, and his hair a little tousled, like he’d been raking his hands through it. There was some tension around his eyes that relaxed as she dropped her purse on the back of the sofa and walked right into his arms. The hug scooped her up off the floor and she closed her eyes.

Just a minute. Just one minute to not have to look after everything. To pretend the incident hadn’t happened. To be glad Steve was back. It hadn’t been a full two days, but she liked it when he was around.

“Hey Angel,” he said against her ear.
“Hi,” she answered with a sigh. “Welcome back.”

“Good to be back.” Then he set her down carefully. “All good?”

“Long day. Lots to brief on….” Then she smiled as James slid an arm around her from the back and pressed his forehead to her the back of her head. “And yes, all good.”

“I’m going to get out of the suit,” Tony announced. “Chinese food will be in the lobby in ten. Red you wanna borrow something so you can change?”

“Yes,” she answered, not glancing away from Steve. “I’m going to borrow the elevator so I can go change into my own clothes. I’ll be back.”

She half-expected James or Steve, if not both, to follow her but they said they’d wait for her to get back. Clint volunteered to get the food, so he joined her in the elevator.

Aware of his intent not-scrutiny, she asked, “Am I going to be annoyed by wherever you and James went today?”

“I don’t know,” Clint admitted. “Maybe.”

“Good to know.”

The elevator paused on Steve’s floor and Clint braced a hand against the open doors as she stepped out. “Is there anything you want to tell me about you and Maria Hill?”

“Me and Maria?” She turned and raised her eyebrows. “Like what?” She hadn’t spoken to Maria since before the Accords got dropped on their head. Though she suspected it was either her or Nick who sent her the blocked number message to call them.

“Yeah. You know Maria Hill, about this high, black hair, bitchy attitude?” Clint had never seemed to care for Maria much personally or professionally. After Loki, it had been worse.

Course, her relationship with Maria got a little testier after Loki, too. Natasha had planted herself firmly in the path of anyone going after Clint—friendlies or not.

“How is Maria?” Since he was asking.

Clint’s smile grew. “I’m not that easy, Tash. Nice try though… be back to grab you in five. But you and me? You owe me a beer and a long conversation.”

“I can’t wait…”

The elevator doors closed and she shook her head. Rolling her head back, she let out a long sigh. Delicious silence.

She could smell the tree and hints of Steve’s soap in the air. He’d probably showered at some point. Stripping off her heels, she glanced at the lit tree and smiled. It really was beautiful. There were new ornaments on it. Unbuttoning her coat, she set the shoes on the back of a chair and dropped her coat over it before reaching out to touch the little antique frames.

Pictures.

Steve.
James.

A picture of Sam right next to James and Natasha laughed. Even when he was being sweet, Steve could poke fun.

Peter.

Cooper.

Wanda.

Lila.

Laura.

Clint.

Tony was tucked into a corner, but he was there.

Nate.

They were close-ups, probably taken from other photos. But they were scattered throughout the tree.

Still smiling, she carried her coat and shoes into the bedroom. She stripped in the closet, letting the outfit she’d worn all day hit the floor. Then she removed the weapons strapped to her back, her stomach, and her thighs before putting them away. Stripping the cosmetics took another minute, but she wanted it gone.

Abandoning the bra, which was cutting into her ribs anyway, she padded over to Steve’s room and found the soft gray shirt he normally put on to go running. It was huge on her, but so comfy. Pulling the dog tags out, she let them lay against the shirt, too. She’d had to keep them tucked away all day and considering the questions she’d gotten about her dating Steve, she would need to keep them out of sight of the press.

Who they were wasn’t for public consumption.

No matter how much she had to put herself out there.

Back in her room, she pulled out a pair of leggings and dragged them on and pair of slouchy socks. The elevator chimed announcing Clint’s return along with the rich scents of food that made her stomach growl.

“Light a fire under it, Tash. I’m starving…”

“I’m comi—” She paused and stared at the side of the bed. On Steve’s side was a framed photo of Steve and James from the war. They were side by side, caught mid-laughter. The lines of tension and fear utterly absent, if not for the uniforms, even if James’ was unbuttoned at the collar and a little rumpled, they could have been back home in Brooklyn. Still, there was a youthful air almost carefree and open about them.

On James’s side, a more recent photo of them—also laughing. It had to have been from Thanksgiving. They were in their tact gear, their faces red and ruddy from the cold, and laughter etched into every line.

“You okay?” Clint was right behind her.
“I’m fine,” she whispered. She’d wanted a photo of the two of them. Steve got her two. Then and now.

Before and after.

Slinging an arm around her shoulders, Clint followed her gaze and chuckled, “You got it bad, Kid.”

“Maybe,” she admitted. “But I like what I have.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I like what you have, too. As long as it isn’t contagious.”

He barely managed to dodge her elbow, and she gave him a look. But he held up the huge stuffed bags of food as if to block any attack. Shaking her head, she followed him back to the elevator.

Inside, surrounded by the rich scents of sweet and sour, moo goo gai pan, and what had to be General Tso’s—Clint’s go-to order—she sighed.

“You really doing okay?” Clint asked, his gaze sharp and assessing.

“I’m fine. No incidents since this morning. You guys all have a little electronic leash you can pull anytime you want.”

He winced. “You know I don’t like it any more than you do.”

“I know,” she said, hands behind her back as she leaned on the wall next to him. Then she leaned her head against his shoulder. “Wish it wasn’t necessary.”

“Ditto.”

“If you were asking about Maria because you were thinking of asking her out…” She let it hang out there, because she hadn’t forgotten the odd little inquiry.

“What?” His voice was dry. “I’m not her type?”

“Nope,” she said lightly and when his mouth opened to retort she added. “Sorry, no hate sex for you. You’re married.”

The elevators opened as she smirked. James pivoted toward them, his back had been facing the elevator while…

“Dammit, Tony. Why do you think you have the be the one to fix it?” The aggravation in Steve’s tone punched up at the last.

“Maybe because I’m the one with all the ideas or the will or maybe I’m just that good. But we have to do something—we’re monitoring Strange’s phone now, but until he turns it on…” Tony’s retort was pure arrogance. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not up to you. Or the pirate king. Or anyone else you want to go digging up to bring in and ask their opinion.”

“Oh. Boy. We came back at the good part,” Clint announced as he headed out of the elevator. She followed slightly slower, pausing next to James. Steve and Tony stood in the middle on either side of Tony’s coffee table, staring—almost but not quite glaring—at each other. “Food,” Clint continued. “Put them away boys.”

Tony turned, rolling his eyes and Steve dropped his chin as he exhaled a harsh breath.

The tension clouded the air and made it hard to breathe. Before she could go another step though,
James put an arm in front of her. She glanced at him and raised a brow. A silent shake of his head.

“Tony,” Steve said, glancing at her once. “We’re not staying without a little more clear direction on this plan.”

She pursed her lips but said nothing as Clint put the food down.

“That’s not your decision, Steve. Unless you and Natasha are suddenly sharing a brain, you don’t get to make those decisions for her.”

“Oh, and you do?” It was like fingernails on chalkboard between them. “If you have a plan, then you can lay it out for us. Not just start working on it without a word to anyone. She isn’t a science experiment.”

Tony wrenched around and the level of fury on his face had Natasha moving, but James shoved her back and she hip-checked him, only to have him take her arm and move her so she was behind him again.

“You don’t think I know that? You aren’t the only one here who gets to care, Steve. All I’ve done is try to figure out how to fix everything for her and I’m not stopping just because you get your red, white, and blues in a bunch.”

Clint’s whistle cut through the air.

Natasha glared at James, but he just raised his brows utterly unperturbed.

“I said put them away, boys. Don’t make me separate you two.” Clint folded his arms. “Everyone’s a little stressed and this right here… not good for anyone. Especially not the woman you’re fighting over.”

Fighting. Over.

“James, you block me again and I will hit you.” She kept her voice low, but she wasn’t kidding.

He glanced over his shoulder to where Tony and Steve still glared at each other.

“I can take a hit, Natalia,” he told her as he looked at her again. “You and I are staying right here until they settle this.”

“Oh, are we?” Like alcohol being poured over open wounds, the words burned. “You don’t make decisions for me.” Then she raised her voice, “None of you make decisions for me.”

“Angel…”

“Don’t,” she said, raising one finger at Steve’s entreaty. When Tony opened his mouth, she said, “I mean it, Tony. Just. Don’t.”

Clint rapped his knuckles on the table. “Everyone sits down. Everyone eats. No one starts arguing. Then we talk. Tony lays out whatever plan he’s cooked up. We can ask questions and we can challenge it, but we are not in a pissing contest. Agree, or I’m walking and taking Nat with me.”

She sighed. “Clint…”

“No dice, Nat,” he told her as he folded his arms. “If they can’t behave, I’m not leaving you with any of them. You’ve had a long day. We all have. We’re also all adults, so let’s act like it.”
“Says you,” Tony remarked. “I personally have never been rated much past the age of 21.”

More like 12 on some of his worst days.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine. We sit. We eat. You talk.”

Circling James this time, she waited for him to put her back and if he did… but he didn’t, he just followed her to the table, but she moved to where Clint settled into a chair and dropped into the chair next to him. That left James and Steve on the other side of the table.

The instant she put that divide there it hurt, but she reached for the food and studiously did not look at Tony as he moved to sit at the head of the table. At the moment, Clint sat at the end closest to him. He nudged her arm and pointed to the sealed bowl of sweet and sour soup.

The silence stretched out as the food passed to different hands. James didn’t even open his boxes and Steve seemed to be physically holding himself back from glaring at Tony. It lasted another five minutes before she broke. First, she reached for James’ carton, and pulled it over to her. Flipping it open, she didn’t grimace at the kung pao beef and noodles, instead, she just opened up a pair of chopsticks and took a couple of bites. The peppers weren’t a preferred taste, but she ate them and then stabbed the chopsticks into the top before pushing it back to him.

“Thank you, Natalia,” he told her in a too solemn voice and it added another prickle of guilt to bleed with the other wounds.

Steve gave her a small smile and Clint nudged her soup that she’d opened but hadn’t taken even a sip of. Most of her appetite was gone.

“Before I tell you what I have in mind,” Tony said, drawing the words out as he ate his order of General Tso’s chicken. Clint had nearly devoured all of his own. “I need to ask you some questions, Red.”

“Goody,” she intoned and twisted in the seat to pull her legs up so she could sit cross-legged.

“You might consider them invasive.” The apology in Tony’s eyes sent another rake of guilt through her. They were all on edge because of her. She should be able to manage them better…

“Fine, not like I’m not getting used to those. Whatcha got?” The callback to their earlier conversation relaxed him, minutely. He gave Steve a faint smile.

“It might be uncomfortable for everyone here,” Tony added.

“Just ask the questions, Tony,” Steve said with a sigh.

“The first time you had a nosebleed—you said it was last week after you got back from the island.” She nodded. “First morning we were here, Steve and James went running.”

“Did you have a flashback?”

“No,” she said with a slow shake of her head. “I had a dream. It was… unnerving.”

Steve frowned at her.

“Do you remember what happened in the dream?” For all his over the top antics sometimes, Tony could be stone cold and cool when he put his mind to it.
“Only that it had the chair in it,” she said, blowing out a breath, then turning the plastic soup bowl.
“I could feel it… It’s got these hard little pieces when the headgear goes on, they are cold against
the scalp. Cold and unyielding. Then I was awake.”

James nodded once. “The chair has those. It’s part of how it conducts the electricity into the head.”

“Fun stuff.” But no one else at the table responded to her faint smile. “Anyway… the nosebleed
happened in the shower.”

“But before that—when you woke up? Any other reactions?”

“Nausea. I could taste metal in my mouth—like I’d bitten my tongue. For a split second, I wasn’t
sure where I was, then the light from the bathroom came on.” Steve had been there.

That had been safe.

“What else?” Tony was relentless.

“I—I think I was uneasy, the dream was very vivid for a few seconds, but the longer I was awake
the faster it slipped away. There was a sense of loss in the middle of all of that.” She met Steve’s
steady gaze. She’d talked to him. Sent James after him. But she hadn’t told them. “It didn’t seem
like much. I’d woken up worse.”

He sighed.

“And I had a headache,” she said slowly, toying with the dog tags. “After—after you two left I
remember gripping these because I needed to feel something else. It was like an ice pick dug into
my skull. I’d—half-forgotten that.” That sent the hairs along her body standing on end. “I think I
thought I was dehydrated, so I drank some water, got in the shower and—then the nosebleed.”

“Okay, and after that, the pain was gone?”

“I was… “

“You were off,” James said quietly. “When we came back you’d done all that baking. But you
were still feeling off-center.” He’d noticed, but he hadn’t pressed her when she brushed it off.

“Yeah, a little. But it was easy enough to compartmentalize.” If she didn’t, well, her dreams had
never been the happiest place on Earth.

“Okay, so you had a dream about the chair—that triggered the first one. But you don’t remember
anything else about the dream except the chair, some nausea, the taste of metal, and a sense of
loss?”

“Essentially.”

Tony drummed his fingers. “The second one—you were on the quinjet talking to Clint on
Thanksgiving, what? A little over twenty-four hours later?”

“We were talking about you idiots and whether the three of you were going to turn your snowball
fight into Siberia again,” Clint said, his tone almost idle. “Someone worried she was screwing
things up—then brought up exes better never mentioned again.”

She nudged his shoulder. “Matty isn’t that bad.”

“He isn’t that good either. He was an asshole. Move on.”
Flipping him her middle finger, she said, “You were all watching me so close—and that was bugging me a little. Clint reminded me that he was watching me too, but that was different. He’s always watched my back and I’ve watched his—but you three were watching me like I might break. Then I was thinking about the fact that I was more used to watching your back,” she said to Steve, then nodded to Tony, “and yours.” Then she looked at James. “I was getting used to watching yours—or watching yours again.”

She went over the whole conversation mentally.

“I reminded her she scared the hell out of all of us,” Clint picked up the thread. “Justifiably because she looked like hell and it took a long time for her to bounce back. But—if she didn’t want you three playing with fire, she should have just told you. Then she started checking out of the conversation a little.”

“It wasn’t that, I was thinking about the question Peter asked me the night before.”

“The one about whether you always wanted to be the Black Widow?” Tony guessed.

She nodded. “I gave him the edited version of an answer.”

“I remember,” he told her. “You handled it well. Kid—Kid doesn’t need to dig down into the ugly details.”

“I know.” Licking her lips, she met Steve’s quiet, worried gaze and gave him a small smile. “I told Peter I chose it. I did—I fought for it. I chose it all those years ago and then I had to have…” A pain pulsed eight behind her eye and it took everything she had not to wince.

“Pulse increasing to 130 beats per minute, Boss.” Friday announced.

“Nat…”

“Wait,” Tony said. “Keep going Red…”

“Are you insane?” Steve asked. “You want to trigger one? That is your plan?”

“I want to see what the triggers are, I have a theory…”

“…but we don’t know what happens to her brain when this happens,” Clint interrupted.

She curled her hand to press her nails into her palm as hard and as deep as she could. The pain helped offset the stinging cadence of her pulse slapping against the back of her eye.

“You were thinking about choices, Red—you chose to be the Black Widow back then and you had to have what? When did you choose to be her again?”

“Stark,” James said in a slow, cold voice. “She doesn’t have to do this.”

“She does,” Tony said. “This is the point. She’s remembering. Pieces are breaking off and getting through. If we can find the triggers, and push them. We can maybe break this mental block. Then it stops happening.”

“That’s a guess,” Steve argued.

Clint put his hand over hers, and then there was a cool metal on her other hand.

“Nat,” Clint swore. “C’mon, open the hand, you’re bleeding.”
Better blood than tears.

“Natalia, open your eyes.”

“One more word Tony…”

“Yes, more words, Cap…Red—what are you seeing?”

Nothing, she wasn’t seeing anything, but the white-hot spike pressed all the way back until it seemed to burn her synapses.

_Steeling herself, she reached for every ounce of discipline she possessed and forced her eyes open to stare into the empty, cold gaze of the Soldier. Her Soldat. He was gone. He stared at her as if she were nothing more than a stranger… a mark._

Only James had deep worry in his eyes and they’d turned her chair away from the table. Clint—James…

_Metal prongs dug into her scalp, the restraints locked down her wrists, forearms, chest, legs, and ankles. She couldn’t even twist in the seat. The room stank of antiseptic-coated copper._

“C’mon, Red—use your words. What do you see?”

“James—”

“I’m right here,” he said.

“No…” The images doubled.

James.

Soldat.

James.

Soldat.

James.

Her Soldat was gone.

“I’m in the chair.” The sound of her breathing was unnaturally loud. “There’s—blood in the room—in my mouth. I—there are technicians who are dead. I killed their chief one—he programmed the chair. He was a specialist. I waited until I had him in my sights, and then I took him out.”

_Metal prongs digging into her scalp and a trickle of blood down her face._

Soldat’s empty gaze as he stared at her.

“You killed the guy who programmed the chair?” Tony confirmed. “You’re sure it was him.”

“Yes, he’d been there before… for years. On rabotal s Karpovym - i s Zoloy do etogo, tak skazal Karpov. On byl mekhanikom, yego priveli, chtoby nastroit’ Toy-soldat.”

“What…?”

“He was the mechanic…he was brought in to work on me,” James’ voice held serious contempt. “I
know who she’s talking about. She’s right—she killed him—the day I put her back in that chair.”

“After?” Steve asked.


She was about to join him.

This was what she’d wanted.

“YA dolzhen zabyt’. YA khoitel spasti tebya, no ty menya bol’she ne znayesh’. YA khoitel vernut’ tebya. No vy zabyli. YA ne mogu pozvolit’ im - ya dolzhen zabyt’. YA Natal’ya Al’ianova Romanova i eto moy vybor.”

“Natalia—”

White noise blotted it all out.

Don’t look.

Sounds gradually filtered through the hush blanketing her.

Don’t open your eyes.

The words were unintelligible.

Don’t let them know you’re awake.

Assess the situation. Identify possible threats. Prepare response.

The voices didn’t make much sense. It was like she had her head underwater and they were speaking far above it.

Don’t move.

Her breathing was slow, almost shallow. The pound of her heart an echo in her system. Not underwater for real. She could breathe. The slowing pace of her heart from a rapid cadence to something more normal said serious stress or pain.

Don’t open your eyes.

“How was this a plan?” Clint asked, a terrible edge in his voice. “You deliberately set out to trigger her.”

“I deliberately set out to see if she could be triggered. We were right here.” Despite the cavalier statement, worry pooled in those words. “How are we doing?”

“The bleeding has slowed,” James said, a cord of steel in the words. “But she has not…”

Natasha opened her eyes. Steve was the first thing she saw, he stood just behind James’ shoulder and relief had his shoulders sagging. Tony let out a harsh breath nearly matching Steve’s in the volume of relief.
Clint glared at her as he dabbed at her face. “You gotta cut this shit out, Tasha.”

“You first,” she muttered, then closed her eyes again. The headache was still there. It felt more like someone punched her in the head.

“Pulse normalizing, respiration also normal. Blood pressure normal. All vitals in the green, Boss.”

“Yay,” Tony said without any enthusiasm.

Natasha opened her eyes again, James studied her. She was on the sofa, James sitting next to her, Clint by her head and Steve right behind James. Beyond them, all she could see was that enormous tree.

“Keep the lights at thirty percent,” Tony continued as he appeared overhead—he must be behind the sofa.

She went to lift her hand but they were both held still. Squinting, she looked down to see where James was holding them. “Can I have a hand please?”

He released one and she lifted it to touch her face.

“The bleeding has stopped,” Clint told her. “Both ears this time.” Then he gave Tony a dark look.

“Can you tell us who you are?”

“I didn’t flip, did I?”

“No, Natalia…”

“You had a seizure,” Tony said quietly. “Friday got most of it recorded. Frantic brainwave activity, and then you just shut down.”

“Wonderful.” A seizure. That was going to make the rest of this so much more bearable.

“C’mon, name,” Clint cajoled.

“Natasha Romanoff. Former Red Room asset, KGB agent and SHIELD agent turned Hydra stooge.”

“Smartass,” Clint murmured.

“You started it.”

“How do you feel?” James asked interrupting them.

“Like a truck hit me…” Then she studied him. The deep well of concern in those eyes, so much warmer than the unforgiving chill. A shudder ripped through her and James tightened his grip.

“Natalia…”

Dragging her into the room, she’d been quiet. Playing possum. The time from Amalfi to Budapest had let her bones begin to knit back together. Then he’d broken her arm again when she’d slipped. After that, she’d gone still. The Soldier never took his eyes off her. She met him, stare for stare until the pain took her again. In Budapest, she roused as they pulled her off the transport.

She knew this place. They didn’t have her secure enough but she didn’t struggle. If anything she just played along with it. There would be a moment. She might only get the one, but she would take
These were the men who took James from her.

She wanted him back. But he didn’t know her. Not anymore. Whatever they’d done—they’d stolen him away.

For that, she would kill them.

It might take her decades, but she’d kill every damn one of them.

The moment came, a moment when they dismissed the Soldier. He was their puppet. Forcing him to watch wouldn’t punish him. So no, they sent him away.

When they loosened the chains, she struck. The first died when she crushed his windpipe. The second with a pencil jammed right through his eye. The third choked on the chain she wrapped around his neck, even as she locked her thighs around the fourth.

Shouts came from the hallway and she was on the mechanic before the door splintered open. She’d taken a gun from one of the guards. Three more went down in rapid succession and she put a bullet right through his brain even as she tumbled over him.

A groin shot. A double-tap to the chest. Another headshot. And she spun, gun in hand as the door blasted inward and then stopped. James was right there, the hot barrel of her gun pressed against his head.

“You told me to kill you if they ever took you again.”

And she couldn’t.

She couldn’t pull the trigger.

She couldn’t put a bullet in his brain.

He peeled the gun out of her nerveless fingers. Then his metal hand was around her throat and she was being pushed into the chair. She closed her eyes. She failed.

She failed.


More blood trickled from her nose.

Better blood than tears. Steeling herself, she reached for every ounce of discipline she possessed and forced her eyes open to stare into the empty, cold gaze of the Soldier. Her Soldat. He was gone. He stared at her as if she were nothing more than a stranger… a mark.

Metal prongs dug into her scalp, the restraints locked down her wrists, forearms, chest, legs, and ankles. She couldn’t even twist in the seat. The room stank of antiseptic-coated copper.

Her Soldat was gone.
So many thoughts tore through her in that moment. So much she wanted to tell him. To save for him. And she didn’t dare think them. Didn’t dare let a single whisper of them breeze through her.

Broken. Her James was broken.

She was about to join him.

This was what she’d wanted.

No… she couldn’t lie to herself. She’d wanted to get him out, but instead… She pushed those thoughts away. Compartmentalize. Forget. The choices she’d made as Nancy Roarke, the life she’d lived, the… Pain speared her heart. It was over.

The guards who’d flooded the room with their cattle prods and weapons didn’t matter.

The bodies being dragged away didn’t matter.

The only thing that mattered was the moment. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow.

“’It’s okay,‘ she told him even if he didn’t know her anymore. He’d remembered once and if he did again, she wanted him to know. ‘It’s okay.‘ Then the rubber guard was in her mouth.

She was Natalia Alianova Romanova. She would only ever be her. The Black Widow.

This was her choice…

“You wanted me to kill you and I couldn’t do it,“ she repeated, blinking as the memory spilled through her like a torrent. Like a surgical excision, the memory was razor sharp.

James nodded slowly. “You had the gun at my head, Natalia. You could have pulled the trigger. You chose not to do it.”

“Twice—three times if we count Odessa.” A wet laugh escaped her. It wasn’t until D.C. that she found the strength to finally do it, when she had someone else to protect.

Clint eased away and sat on the coffee table. Steve’s face blurred a moment, but the anger in his expression had given way to something far sadder. And Tony… agony filled his frown.

Pushing her hand against the sofa, she moved to get herself upright. James had a steadying hand on her and even Tony reached forward though he withdrew his hand when James glared at him.

Her stomach lurched a little and she touched the side of her face again, then along her scalp. Concern wrapped around her as she turned to put her feet on the floor. Fucking exhausting.

“Does it still hurt?” James asked.

“Bruised. Really—really bruised. I feel like I failed to block your left.”

He grimaced.

“Nat…” Clint pulled her attention. “How much do you remember this time?”

“From the moment I was—in the truck. Transport. I think they had to take me overland from Amalfi to Budapest. James—never left me alone.” She wasn’t going to bring up the broken bones.
He hurt enough for that and it was long done.

Her choice. She only wished it hadn’t left him with pain.

“Then—Budapest. The facility. They had me very chained.” She almost laughed, but her voice croaked a little. “They were terrified of me.”

There was no humor in James’ smile.

Her lips and throat were very dry, there wasn’t even enough moisture in her mouth to wet her lips. Before she could ask, Steve appeared at the side of the sofa, kneeling so he could hand her an open bottle of water. Smiling, she touched her fingers to his face. All the earlier irritations were gone, he’d been worried—sorry. He just squeezed her knee gently as she drank the water.

Tony eased around to study her. “So you remember everything up to when they put you in the chair again.”

“Yes.”

When James would have pulled away, she locked her hand on his.

“And I’m done with questions for tonight.”

“Red…”

“It’s fine, Tony—I’m not mad. I’m not. I just—my head is sore. That’s… that’s a lot tonight. Maybe I don’t remember it tomorrow.”

Clint’s frown deepened. “Did you remember her?”

Next to her James went still, his breath ceasing to have any sound and Steve’s grip on her leg tightened. Even Tony looked like he was holding his breath.

“Not so lucky. Just remembered why I was there… and yes, I knew what would happen. I hoped James would see me and it would be enough to break him out, but—they’d really done a number on you.” She released his hand to cradle his face. “I knew that might happen. So—my choice. I chose to be the Black Widow again.”

_I chose to leave my daughter behind._

Rising, she didn’t snap when Steve put a steadying hand under her arm. Nor push James away as he followed her with a lethal kind of grace. “Was that all you wanted to try for tonight? Was that the whole of the plan?” She looked toward Tony.

“Not the best plan, maybe,” he told her. “At the same time…”

“My memories are fighting to get out. Or maybe not. I don’t know. I don’t know how long they had me the chair.”

“Three days,” James told her and Tony went pale. Even Clint swallowed. “Three days, Natalia. They wanted as much of a blank slate as they could get. They only let you out to test your reflexes. You broke the conditioning in a few hours the first time.” Like him. Only he didn’t say that.

“Well, at least we know they were thorough.” Yeah. The joke went flat.

“I thought if they were trying to come through, if we could make it lucid for you—it would help
“You remember,” Tony said. “Help prevent the fugue from hitting again.”

“I know. You wanted to help.” She did know. “But I think I’m going to head out now… maybe we can help with the tree another night.”

“Don’t worry about it. Go get some rest, I’ll look at—”

“If the words ‘rescheduling the meetings’ pass your lips, I’ll hit you.” It was a really bad threat at the moment. It was taking everything she had to stay steady on her feet. But she refused to sway or give in to any weakness. “To that end, I expect you in the gym in the morning.” He needed more training. Months she could pack into days.

“Peter’s supposed to be by tomorrow.” Peter needed his training and she needed to check in on Wanda. “Who are we meeting tomorrow?”

“Everyone else in the EU.” Tony sounded more resigned than anything

“That’s a long day.”

Tony eyed her. “So maybe we lighten the load.”

“And add meetings to Friday? No thank you.”

She turned. She’d had a purse—there. She snagged it, but James hooked it right out of her hands. Not bothering to argue, she headed for the elevator.

“Red…”

“It’s okay, Tony. I know you were trying to help. I got that piece back, so thank you.” Then the elevator opened and she leaned back against the wall inside it with Steve right there and James following. Clint remained motionless, but he lifted his chin at her before the doors closed.

“Friday…”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, Ms. Romanoff. I believe that is also why Mr. Barton stayed.” Probably. “Your stress markers indicate you are still in some pain.”

“Well, definitely still feeling bruised.” A shot of vodka sounded about perfect right now.

When the doors opened to Steve’s floor, they braced the doors until she’d cleared them. The brighter lights on the floor had her squinting. “Thirty percent on the lights, Friday,” Steve said. The lights dimmed immediately, she gave his arm a squeeze before heading for the sofa.

“Before either of you start, yes. I’m tired and yes I’m going to sit my ass on the sofa and behave. Would one of you mind getting me the vodka?”

“Angel…”

“I’ll get it,” James said, setting her purse down on the coffee table before heading to the kitchen.

Curling onto the center cushion, she looked at Steve. “Thank you. I didn’t get a chance to say that earlier.”

Confusion clouded his eyes. “For what?”

“The tree,” she said, pointing to it. “And the pictures in my room.”
His expression gentled and he dropped to sit on the sofa next to her as James returned with three glasses and the vodka. “You should eat something,” he told her. “The two bites you took of mine don’t count.”

“It’s been a really long day…”

“And Tony and I fighting killed your appetite,” Steve said.

“Maybe.” She patted his leg. James poured a measure into each glass. She took hers, then the bottle and finished filling her glass before she handed it back to him. His eyebrows went up and she tossed back over half of it in one swallow. The cold heat poured through her system. Freezing vodka chilled on the way down and warmed as it spread.

“So, how were your days?”

“Natalia…”

“No, I don’t want to talk about that yet. I’m a little talked out on that part. I haven’t seen Steve in almost two days and I haven’t seen you since this morning when you were pretty pissed at me for not telling you about the nosebleeds.”

At least James didn’t deny it.

“So what I want right now, is to see the two of you and to hear about your days.” She tossed back the rest of the vodka. “Please.” James refilled her glass and looked at Steve.

He lifted his glass, then took the full shot and made a face. The grimace was so pained, she laughed. The chuckle pounded through the bruise on her head, but it still felt good.

“You want to hang out with the crazy Russian, you need to learn to like the vodka,” she told him in a horrific accent that had James almost snickering a minute later.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Steve told her, but he leaned back, holding out an arm. “Would it be okay if I hold you while I tell you about my day?”

“Yeah,” James said. “We’ll pass you back and forth like one of those spirit stick exercises.”

She and Steve both stared at him. “Spirit stick?”

He nodded. “Clint and I watched a movie today. They had a spirit stick you had to keep from touching the ground.”

Steve frowned, but Natasha tossed back her vodka as another laugh worked through her. “You watched, Bring it On?”

“Cheerleaders. Very intense sport.” He made a face. “Never thought it would be one.”

She might have to kill Clint. “So I’ve heard,” she told him in all seriousness.

Then she scooted over to curl up next to Steve, and he wrapped an arm around her. After pressing a kiss to the top of her head, he sighed. “Pretty straightforward day,” he began.

He started with the team’s work in San Francisco, after she and James left. The accidents and wreckage they had to clear. The people they helped get home. Making sure fires were out. Grueling, long hours but ultimately worth it especially because they’d been able to make a difference.
When he stressed how well Wanda did and how upbeat she’d been, Natasha almost grinned. “I’m glad.”

They skipped over the night, other than he complained about sleeping alone. “I’ve gotten kind of used to having you there. It was—odd.”

She glanced at James. They hadn’t slept in her room the night before. Sleeping in his had lessened how strange it was that Steve wasn’t there.

“Missed you, too, Punk.” James nodded to her glass and she held it out for him to refill. Maybe if she killed the whole bottle the ache in her head would ease up. The image of his empty eyes swam over the pair studying her so intently.

She took another swallow of the vodka. Steve continued to discuss getting the mech equipment loaded, the flight back, offloading it. He’d written up a good chunk of the after-action, but wanted Natasha to review it—which she could—then he had a phone conference with Sharon rather than head out to the Compound, and he’d finished a couple of hours before she and Tony wrapped their meetings.

“Like I said, pretty standard.” He rubbed her arm.

“So why were you upset last night?” She twisted slightly to look at him. Normally, she would have tilted her head back, but that made her stomach sway and she’d just gotten into the vodka. She wasn’t wasting it.

“I wasn’t—” Pausing, he frowned. “I don’t want to lie to you, Angel.”

“Then don’t. If you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. But you were upset. We both saw it.” She glanced at James, he nodded but… “And you’ve already talked to James about it.”

“Yeah, we talked earlier.” Steve drew a circle against her arm.

“Okay.” She let it go and drained the vodka. “I’m sorry the dinner plans got derailed.”

“Not your fault,” he said.

“A little my fault. I could have told Tony no. I kind of wanted to tell him no, but… long day.” She thought he needed the company, then he’d been excited. A plan. Something to help her and ugh… “So is it James’ turn?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, easing his arm back as James scooped her right up and then sat where she’d been on the middle cushion. It put him shoulder to shoulder with Steve with her feet in his lap. “That works, too,” Steve added and he caught one of her feet in his warm hand and began to massage it.

James’ arms were tight as he caged her close. He managed to not make her drop her glass or lose the bottle of vodka. Some Russian had trained him right. The thought sent a warped giggle through her. It was—so wrong. The Russians had done so much wrong to him.

“Clint and I did not go to the range,” James admitted. “Not this morning, anyway.”

Not a shock.

“We went out to Metro-General. Found a doctor who knows Stephen Strange. Spoke to her, got her to reach out to him. Friday can trace his phone now and Clint slipped a bug on her. Might not last
long, but it’s a step forward.”

“Okay.” Progress, even snail’s pace, was progress. Personally, she didn’t really want another doctor poking in her brain. But the guys all needed this. They needed her better. She needed her to be better. Tonight was a classic example of it.

“We did a little scouting, checked out a few locations. Got some leads, but nothing has panned out yet.” The carefully edited description left out a great deal more than it offered. “Eventually, we headed back here. Caught you in some of the news reports.”

Eventually. Nice editing of where he went between the hospital and here. She didn’t push. Clearly, they didn’t want her to know some things.

“The press was waiting for us at the U.N. I think I’m getting pretty good at that.”

Steve worked his thumbs right into the arch of her foot and she let out a little sigh. Oh, that helped. It melted through some of the tension the vodka hadn’t already consumed.

“Who was the Russian?” The ease with which James just asked the question made her smile.

“Have you been wanting to ask me that since I got back?”

“Yes.” He studied her. “You knew him, Natalia.”

“Yuri Brevlov, former SHIELD asset. Nick recruited him…ten years ago.” She made a face. Had it been a decade? “He was former SVR, recruited directly into SHIELD to assist in ops in Eastern Europe and Asia.” She held up her glass and James poured the last of the bottle into it. “He lasted—a year? Maybe two before he created enough havoc Nick sent me to pull him…. Right before Odessa actually.” She’d forgotten that. “He decided he would teach me a lesson for interfering. Unfortunately, it meant he had trouble giving his report to Nick when I delivered him.” Broken jaws would do that. “Anyway, last time I saw him. I pretty much thought he was out of SHIELD after that. He wasn’t my problem anymore.” Then again, knowing Nick, Brevlov could have been embedded anywhere. She should know better than to assume.

Then she’d gotten shot and a few months later assigned to Tony. She hadn’t had a reason to think about Brevlov.

“So, quiet days for both of you really. Nothing unusual, just James watching cheerleaders.” It wasn’t a question and she caught the tightening in Steve’s jaw as he worked on massaging her foot. When James cupped the back of her neck, digging into the locked muscles with his right hand.

Neither said a word, so she lifted the glass and finished the last swallows. She could probably go through another bottle. Let them keep their secrets.

The sound of the metal shackles slamming shut echoed in the back of her mind and she shifted against James. He loosened his grip on her and she blew out a breath. Steve’s gaze riveted on her.

“You’re not okay,” he said quietly.

“No,” she agreed. “I’m not.”

James had flexed against her, but she had to move. She couldn’t… When she pulled her feet, Steve let her go and then James released her as she stood. Snagging the empty bottle, she walked it to the kitchen aware of their gazes following her. The freezer lacked another bottle of vodka. Her freezer had three bottles in it. Or it used to have three bottles in it.
“Do you have any on your floor?” Steve asked.

She twisted to see him already heading for the elevator. “Thank you—in the freezer.”

“I’ll be right back.” Then he disappeared into the elevator and she leaned back against the counter and locked gazes with James. He stood on the other side of the island.

“I couldn’t do it,” she told him. A part of her wanted to apologize and another part of her held those words in a tight fist. She wouldn’t apologize for making sure he survived. Even if surviving meant —

“I know, lyubov moya.”

Her eyes burned and her chest squeezed. “You knew when you remembered…”

He nodded slowly.

Tilting her head back, she stared at the ceiling until the dampness in her eyes would abate. “You didn’t say anything.”

“There was nothing to say—I hurt you. You came back for me. You did that to yourself to protect her. If you had kept your word—you would have been left there alone. They had enough people there to take you down even if you took out most of them.”

She closed her eyes and the elevator chimed. Regulating her breathing helped bring her rebellious amygdala under some facsimile of control. Steve held a single bottle in his hand. He slowed as he reached the kitchen.

Natasha straightened and took the bottle. “Thank you.”

Even not looking at them, she could feel the way they watched her and caught when they shared a long look from her periphery. Less than twenty-fours before, she and James had been tangled in a very much needed and erotic seduction. Now they were both watching her like a time bomb about to erupt.

_Her Soldat was gone._ Fuck, how did she miss him so damn terribly and have him standing not six feet away?

After she opened the bottle, she refilled her glass almost to the brim. If it wouldn’t probably have been a scream for help, she might have just drained the bottle itself.

Her record was five bottles in one evening.

Tonight, she could probably make it to seven or eight.

Not like alcohol poisoning would kill her.

“My day was—interesting,” she said, looking more at the vodka than them as she recounted the press line, the series of meetings—editing out the acidic scolding Tony gave the Germans as well as their talk in the conference room.

It wasn’t like Steve and James were being particularly forthcoming about certain pieces of their day. When she got to the part about Agoston and mentioned the tale of getting his family out of Hungary, she managed to meet their gazes evenly.

“So a guy you saved from Karpov is now going to help you save the Avengers from the Accords?”
James asked slowly, mild disbelief on his face.

She shrugged. “Apparently. He’s a good man… so far we’re not really gaining ground with our so-called allies. Next week should be a real treat. We get to meet with the ones who don’t like us—well don’t like me.” She tossed back the last of the vodka, then set the glass down. “Then when we were done, we headed out to get Tony his tree—and now we’re here. I’m tired.”

Just like she expected, they had no objections to shutting it all down. She brushed her teeth and pulled off the leggings. She’d gotten blood on Steve’s shirt. When she pulled it off to change, she’d stared at it and Steve took it from her hands.

“It’s okay, Angel. It’ll wash.”

The words ‘I’m sorry’ stuck like glue to her tongue. She nodded. After pulling on a tank top, she crawled into bed and curled up in the middle. She was facing James’ side so she stared at the picture of them from Thanksgiving morning. The laughter on their faces, their chapped skin. The life in that photo.

Her Soldier. Laughing.

There were blank spots on either side of that memory, huge gaping craters that she’d known but hadn’t really felt until now. She’d had the keeping of his name before. But more, she’d had his heart and the tidal wave of emotion that choked her when she’d pressed the gun to his head…

James slipped into the bed in front of her and rolled onto his side. He held out his hand, and she took it then kissed it lightly and linked their fingers. Then Steve was behind her and he wrapped an arm around her waist. Everyone was back where they were supposed to be.

Except—she didn’t quite fit. The differences might be slight, but where the seams had once been even, now they were stitched at odd angles.

“Sleep mode, Friday,” Steve said.

The lights dimmed completely and the windows went opaque. That James could sleep with his back to them at all was a testament to the fact he felt safe here. She regulated her breathing and closed her eyes, but sleep was not forthcoming. The last place she wanted to visit was her dreams.

Instead, she lay there and waited.

Steve finally dropped off. The arm around her going a little slack, his fingers relaxing as his breathing deepened.

James took longer, but eventually, he drifted off.

The fact they’d not kissed or spoken or done any of the lazy cuddling they normally did when they went to bed hadn’t escaped her notice. This was not the welcome home she planned and still, she waited a few minutes longer.

Once certain they were both asleep, she eased out from under Steve’s arm and slid her fingers from James’ grasp. She moved slowly, inch-by-inch, allowing them to get used to her shifted position so gradually that they didn’t stir when she slipped off the bed.

By memory, she walked through the dark to the door and slipped out, closing it behind her.
“Friday, silent mode, no chime. Open the elevator.”

The elevator slid open and she stepped inside.

“Secure the floor and take me to mine please.”

Once there, she pulled off the dog tags and removed the bracelet. She left them both by her bed as she pulled on a pair of dance shorts then grabbed her shoes.

In the studio, she laced up her pointe shoes, then rose. “Start with my first playlist Friday, cycle through them in order.”

“Ms. Romanoff…”

“Just play, Friday. I don’t want to talk.”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff.”

Then the music began and Natasha danced. There were a dozen playlists with more than thirty songs on each.

Surely by the end, she’d find some peace.
Shards

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of recovering that single shard of memory has consequences for all of them

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Shards

Clint

After the elevator closed behind the trio, Clint rose slowly from the coffee table and returned to the table. Nat’s soup remained untouched so he sealed the container. He’d save it for her. She might not eat it, but then again… who knew?

Easing back into his chair, he resumed eating the General Tso’s left in his box, aware of Tony standing absolutely still and staring at the elevator. There was a kind of lost, kicked his puppy, quality going on with the billionaire at the moment. Leaving him alone wasn’t an option.

Abruptly—and somewhat jerkily—Tony headed to the bar. Clint caught a piece of chicken with his chopsticks, observing quietly as Tony pulled open the cabinet. It was empty. He shut it, then went to the next. Finally, he opened the fridge below.

All empty, well, save for the bottles of water in the fridge. “Friday…”

“Ms. Romanoff emptied the bar, the fridge, the bottles hidden in your closet, and the stash in the lab.”

He straightened abruptly. “What about…?”

“I should amend that to all the labs, Boss.”

Stripping off his glasses, Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine.” Dragging out the bottle of water, he twisted it open and drained it like most men would a bottle of beer—or Nat would a bottle of vodka.

Clint took another bite of the chicken. When Nat dropped, he’d gone white as a sheet despite being the one pushing her and Steve had nearly punched him. As it was—one dining room chair was in pieces. Surprisingly, it was Bucky who shut them both down and Clint had a feeling if they hadn’t stopped—well, probably best not to think about that.

Bottle finished, Tony turned and a ripple of shock made an appearance on his face. Every raw emotion on display and he fumbled to get the arrogant mask back into place. When it failed, the engineer went for aggravated. “Take a picture, it lasts longer.”
“Depends,” Clint told him as he reached over the table for one of the unopened cartons and flipping the top. Oh. Garlic pork. He pushed the empty General Tso’s to the side and began to wrap noodles on his chopsticks. “Trying to decide what I’m looking at.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The other man tossed his water bottle and retrieved another. There was a faint shake to his hands and a gleam of sweat along his brow. He wanted alcohol but Nat had removed it. Probably a good plan for someone going sober.

“Exactly what I said,” Clint continued before slurping a noodle down. Almost the perfect level of spice—a good burn that blazed a trail across his tongue and down his throat. “What are you hoping to gain, Tony?”

“A satisfactory set of Accords that protects the team, the team secure under stable leadership, Nat’s name cleared, and maybe—just maybe—a good night’s sleep.”

“Uh huh,” he captured a piece of the pork. “Tonight was all about those goals.”

Tony stared at him. “Tonight was about your best friend. I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“Currently, I’m not pointing an arrow at you or plotting your demise,” Clint said, keeping his tone conversational. “Keep that in mind if you want to try and aggravate me into walking out.”

He’d almost gotten punched a few times today. The fact his jaw hadn’t been dislocated said a lot more for Steve and Bucky’s restraint at the moment than Tony’s attitude.

“People walk all the time, Barton,” Tony said, his tone as uncaring as his eyes weren’t. “There’s the elevator, feel free to take it.”

Clint chuckled. “Nice try.”

Irritation scraped across Tony’s humorless smile. “Why are you still here?”

“Because despite a heinous lack of personal skills on your part, I actually like your snarky ass.” And Natasha cared enough to ask Clint to watch out for him. He’d probably have done it anyway. Bucky and Steve had Nat, and they at least seemed to have it together enough to look after her. That meant he’d take care of Tony.

Surprise blinked across Tony’s expression.

“Shocked?” Clint pushed a piece of food out from between his teeth in the back before he took another bite.

“Maybe,” Tony lied. “We’re not exactly close.”

“Nope, but we have a few things in common and you’re not a complete ass when it came to my kids or getting me home to them.” That alone would be enough to have earned Tony some leeway.

“And despite the heavy-handed attitude and the deliberate provocation you keep throwing at Steve, I know you care about Nat.”

Tony didn’t deny it.

“Maybe you care a little too much, though.” Spotting a target from a distance was what he did. Clint saw things better at a distance. His feelings for Nat didn’t compromise him the way it did Steve or Bucky and clearly Tony. Maybe it was their history, maybe it was because his only skin in the game was keeping her stable and hopefully happy. Maybe because he didn’t need to win where
she was concerned.

“She’s my friend,” came the near whiplash speed defense. Denial, folks, was not just a river in Egypt. “Of course I care. She needs more friends.”

“Oh, I won’t argue that. She’s a great friend to have your corner. Not a lot she won’t do for the people she cares about. Like compromising herself—she’ll do that if it fills a need. Putting herself through Hell? No sweat, not if it helps. Doesn’t matter what happens to her at the end of the day, she’d open up a vein if necessary.”

“That’s not what I was asking…”

“It wasn’t what you weren’t asking for either.” Clint leaned back in the chair and put his leg up on the chair across from him. His hip ached. He’d spent a lot of time up and moving, skipped PT a couple of days running. Tomorrow wasn’t looking so good either.

“Not remembering is hurting her.”

“Remembering is going to hurt her, too. It’s pain, Tony. Suffering. It’s something she’s intimately familiar with—and in your quest to fix things for her, to solve all of these problems—are you doing it for her? Or for you?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means,” Clint said, gesturing with the chopsticks. “You have skin in this game. You want to give her the answers so she leans on you, looks to you, so you can be first in line.”

“There isn’t a fucking line.” Hostility crept into his tone.

“Sure there is—or you wouldn’t be standing in it, needling Cap in the hopes that he’ll step out of his spot just once so you can slip in.” The emotions had been there. The need. The quiet desperation turned into motivation. It had been there since their first conversation in London and again on the quinjet heading to Austria.

“She picked them. I’m just her friend,” Tony said, spreading his hands and then turning away. “Considering how you feel about her, I figured you’d recognize it.”

“I do,” Clint said easily. “It’s why I see it. But there’s a key phrase in there—Nat chose them. That’s where she wants to be. Why are you trying to shoehorn into it?”

Tony drained the second water bottle without answering. “I’ve got work to do… you should probably head out.”

“I’m good right here.” Clint stabbed the chopsticks into the last half of the pork. He’d have to get that dish again at some point. It was good. Shifting his weight, he kept his attention solidly on Tony. “Hypothetical question for you—what do you think happens if you push Steve enough to get him to take it out on you? If you start another fight with him? Maybe even with Bucky? What happens to Nat in that scenario?”

Clint had thought about it. Had Tony?

“Not going to start a fight. Like I said, she made her choice.”

In all seriousness, Clint couldn’t tell if Tony was playing dumb to placate him or if he genuinely didn’t see it. “But not the one you wanted her to make.”
“I don’t usually get a lot of what I want,” Tony told him, his tone flat. “I’ve learned to live with it.”

Bullshit.

Then Tony shrugged. “I’m undoing what I failed to stop in the first place. She’s back here. She’s on the team. That’s enough.”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Barton, what do you want?” Impatience crept back into the weariness of his tone.

“I want you to be honest. I need you to be honest. With yourself, if no one else.” The look on Tony’s face, the genuine worry wavering back and forth with the displaced aggravation, it was familiar. “In 2010, when she was assigned as your shadow. You asked her a question on your birthday.”

 Surprise raced across Tony’s face before he could shut it down. “Nice to know I’m a subject of gossip. Or maybe just another footnote in a report.”

“Save it,” Clint warned him. “This went in no reports. Considering you hacked all your files, you damn well know it.”

He looked away.

“I know because it bugged the hell out of her.” This crossed a line, but it was a line that needed to be crossed. “You asked her a question. You asked her if she knew it was going to be her last birthday, what would she do?”

“I’m aware of what I asked…and she told me she would do whatever she wanted with whomever she wanted to do it with.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Six years later, she tells me what she said was the truth.”

“Yeah. Now think about that for a minute. Six years ago—a few months after the Winter Soldier shot her in the gut, she told someone she barely knew—a drunk, narcissistic, self-loathing asshole with a guilt complex—the truth.”

“Don’t hold back. Tell me how you really feel.” Then he exhaled for a beat before he said, “And yeah, I know that now…and I damn near thought about taking advantage of that then, is that what you wanted to hear?”

“You didn’t.”

“But I thought about it.”

“I think about shooting some people in the head so they’ll go away. If I don’t act on it, it’s not a crime. You thought about it, but you didn’t do it.”

“Yes, she wasn’t interested.” Tony’s smile was fleeting. “You go out with enough women—you get a feel for what they want. Some just wanted me for the money, some for the thrill—a couple probably wanted me for me. She didn’t fall into any of those categories.” His mouth compressed. “Why are we talking about this?”

“Because you deserve to know something—I told you when she wrote that evaluation she did it to protect you. Not for guilt or shame, but because in a few weeks of you behaving like an absolute jackass, she found herself caring. It was uncomfortable for her. Then Nick outed her and you found
out you were an assignment.”

Crushing the empty water bottle, Tony exhaled. “That was then.”

“Yep. But she also told me something that’s stuck—something that made me want to hunt you down then and put an arrow in your ass.”

Tony frowned.

“What?” Clint said drily. “You don’t think I’m protective?”

“No, just you never did it.”

“Thought about it. Sometimes it’s enough.” Easing his leg off the chair, Clint stood and began the process of cleaning up the food.

“What did she say?” Tony asked after Clint gave him time to process that.

“That you weren’t going to trust her again—not after all that. Because you were a smart guy.”

Hand on one of the cartons, Tony went still.

Clint met his gaze steadily. “She trusts you, Tony. More than that, she wants to be worthy of your trust. That’s a hell of a gift. Don’t abuse it. Don’t abuse her. She won’t risk losing your trust again. She thought she wouldn’t have it. There’s not a lot she won’t do for the people she cares about. You happen to fall on that list. It’s why I’m not breaking your face for that bullshit you pulled earlier.” Barely. It was still tempting. Knowing he meant well helped.

Tony swallowed as he straightened.

“I also get you did it because you do care. You are trying to do right by her. You have been doing everything you can. I appreciate it and I even respect it. Maybe—maybe in a different time I could root for you to get what you wanted from her. But if you don’t know what it is you want and you stay on the path you’re on, you and Steve are going to clash and she’s going to be trapped right between you—and that I won’t let happen.”

“Maybe you should be having this conversation with Steve.” Not that Tony was denying it.

“Don’t worry. I will.” Then he straightened as he sacked the empty cartons. “Right now, I’m talking to you.” Right now, the thing she had with Steve and Bucky worked.

“If you weren’t married…” Tony eyed him.

“I am married and it’s not a question I want to ask.” Or would.

He shook his head. “So the divorce is off?”

“Maybe—“ Clint shrugged. There’d been a couple of moments over Thanksgiving and he’d talked to Laura every day since. But he didn’t have the right to ask. “It’s a work in progress. You and Pepper done for good?”

“Probably.” Tony separated out Nat’s uneaten food and then wrapped it into a plastic sack without ever looking at him. “I’m not good for her.”

“So what makes you think you’re good for Nat?” Because he was done tap dancing around it.
“Not a damn thing.” The self-deprecating grin lent some weight to the statement. “But I’m putting her first—not something I was able to do with Pep. Gotta be worth something, right?”

Maybe easier because Nat wasn’t actually with him. Fuck, this was a messy situation. What was easier for Tony wasn’t necessarily easy for Nat. It damn sure wasn’t making it easy on Steve.

“I want to help her,” Tony said. “Maybe I can’t give her back the years they took or undo the damage I did when I turned my back on her. God knows none of us can give her back her child.”

Yeah. On that, they were agreed.

“But she’s hurting and you’re right, she’s opening a vein. I can’t ignore it. I won’t. I know she wants access to B.A.R.F. Steve wants her to go to Wakanda. I don’t know what the hell Bucky wants for her other than to just be around her. Me? I want to see her smile and chase the shadows out of her eyes. I want to remove every hook, blade, and screw they’ve put to her. I want her to give her the chance to be all of who she is and not the cobbled together pieces they left her. I want her to be whole.”

The guy was so in love with her, it hurt. “Did it ever occur to you that a whole Natalia Romanova may not be Natasha Romanoff anymore?”

Had it occurred to any of them?

That if he kept pushing to fix her it might actually break her?

Bucky

The quiet woke him. The quiet—and the absence of Natasha’s breathing. Sitting up, he glanced to his left. Natasha wasn’t there. Steve slept, restless, his eyes flickering almost too rapidly and his breathing coming in short, sharp pants.

Putting a hand on his shoulder, he gave him a gentle shake. Steve roused almost immediately. His expression tensing as he swept a look around the room then toward Buck and finally the bed.

“Where is she?”

Shaking his head, Bucky shoved the sheet off and headed out of the bedroom. The penetrating quiet said she wasn’t on the floor, but he took the time to check every room and the sofa. A part of him half-hoped to find her there, curled up and staring at the tree if not sleeping.

“Friday,” Steve asked even as Bucky headed for the elevator. “Where’s Natasha?”

“She’s on her floor, Captain Rogers and the floor is locked down.”

Slowing at the elevator, Bucky frowned. “Locked down as in we’re not allowed access?”

“No, Sergeant Barnes. You and Captain Rogers are still cleared to access the floor. But she has put me in voice-activated mode only.”
She wanted to be alone. Bucky clenched a fist. After earlier, he couldn’t fault her. Fuck if he hadn’t needed some distance when his memories crashed back in. Hers had been forced, a manipulation to trigger her and rip one agonizing moment to the surface without something sweeter to soften the bitten. Shaken hadn’t begun to describe her and if Bucky never saw the tragedy in her eyes ever again it would be too soon.

Hating himself, he asked, “Vitals check?”

“I can’t provide it. She has removed the bracelet.”

“Take me to her floor.”

Steve was a half step behind him. “Silent mode, Friday. Don’t announce in case she’s asleep.”

That had the potential to be a bad idea.

The doors opened to lower lights on her floor. The main suite was quiet and she wasn’t on her sofa. Bucky looked at the door to her studio. It was soundproof so if she was in there…

“Is she dancing, Friday?”

“Yes, Sergeant Barnes.” The quiet in Friday’s voice worried him.

“How long?”

It was almost three in the morning.

“Since a little after ten.”

Five fucking hours.

Steve went for the door.

“I’m afraid I can’t open it, Captain Rogers.”

Natalia didn’t want to be disturbed. Pain fisted in Bucky’s chest. She’d slipped out while they were sleeping. A bad dream? Or because she knew sleep would be elusive.

“Friday—let her know we’re here?”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Friday told him and she sounded apologetic. “She has locked it to privacy mode.”

Which meant unless she requested something from Friday, Friday was blocked from reaching her. Tony could probably override it. But that would require asking for his assistance.

When Steve lifted his fist to knock, Bucky said, “Stevie, wait.”

“Five hours, Buck.”

“I know.” But short of breaking down the door, what did he plan to do?

“You’re fine with it?” The fact he’d just woken up, his eyes were a little red, his hair askew, and his expression stricken spoke volumes for where Steve’s head was at. The fact he also had a short fuse and hot temper added to the turmoil. Tony had aggravated him and Natalia had him worried—not that it was anything new of late—but Steve was on edge at the moment.
“Let’s go…”

“But she’s…”

“She doesn’t want us right now. If she did, she would have woken us or left the door open for access.” Natalia knew he loved to watch her dance. “So we respect the boundary she has established.”

“She could be in there hurting herself.” It wasn’t really a question. Natalia was in there hurting herself, but maybe not quite how Steve thought.

“We’re going to the gym,” Bucky told him. “You need to work off some of that steam before she comes out.” Because she would and she would have bleeding feet and bruises all over them. He’d seen her dance like this before, when she shut out the whole world, and she’d nearly hobbled herself then. It was how she exerted control over a world that refused to let her have it.

Frankly, Steve wasn’t the only one who needed to face off against the anger stirring in his blood. For a painfully long pause, he thought Steve would fight him and take his luck at the door. They could get through it. Hell, either one of them could do it on their own. Reinforced as the doors were, they could take it down. But if they went in their battering, Natalia would close off behind her walls and rightfully so.

She’d left them for the night, not forever. Bucky didn’t like it that she was alone or that she was hurting, but he also understood needing to get perspective. He waited in the elevator until Steve came to the decision himself. They were in sweat pants and tank tops, so no sense in going back to their floor for clothes.

Somehow, it didn’t surprise him to find Clint sprawled on a bench drinking a bottle of water with a book open. Sweat decorated his face and there were gloves next to him like he’d been working out. He eyed them both as they entered.

“She’s in her studio.” As if answering the where they hadn’t asked.

“We figured that out,” Steve told him, heading straight for the speed bags. “Are you waiting for her?”

“Maybe. Friday is going to let me know as soon as she puts her bracelet back on.” That was a reasonable way to determine if she was out. Bucky tracked Steve’s motion as he opened up on the speed bag without tape or gloves. His fists pounding at a rapid pace. “That bag isn’t going to make it,” Clint said conversationally.

“No,” Bucky said with a shrug. He retrieved water bottles from the cooler. After leaving one near Steve, he moved for the weights.

He was on his second set with the chest press when the first speed bag lost its life to Steve’s temper. The second bag lasted only slightly longer. Bucky had moved to free weights when the third one flew across the gym to slam into the wall so hard it left a dent.

“You going to do something about that?” Clint asked, his tone conversational.

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“You going to do something about that?” Clint asked, his tone conversational.

“No, Bucky told him. Clint had abandoned his book and trailed him as Bucky worked through a whole series of disciplined lifts. He needed the structure. The urge to pound his fists into something was there, but it wouldn’t help her and currently, he didn’t think it would help him either so he focused on keeping his mind clear and his muscles engaged.
It wasn’t like he needed the training for his left arm, but the sheer weight of the original arm had left his muscles constantly aching if he didn’t build. The new arm fit him better, moved better, and weighed less. But the workout still served a purpose.

“How bad was she?” her best friend asked finally.

Bucky shook his head. The raw anguish when she said she couldn’t shoot him. He’d seen it then and he saw it now. When those memories washed through him, he hadn’t focused on the moment the Soldier took down the door obeying the order to contain the Widow once again. Death surrounded her in a constellation of bloodied bodies, but he only had eyes for her. The heat of the gun barrel at his head seared his skin. A split-second where the Soldier waited for the trigger to be pulled, but she locked up and then it was over. He had her and slammed her into that chair so hard all the air had whooshed out of her.

Unlike the other fools around him at the time, the Soldier would never mistake the Widow as easy prey.

“How bad.” He set the weights down and picked up the water to drink. The clock on the wall read 4.

Steve had finished off the last of the speed bags and had headed over to the storage room to retrieve more. A collection of six lay in a pile of slaughtered sand.

“Understatement.” Folding his arms, Clint watched Steve hook up the new bags. He barely even spared a glance in their direction. “That anger needs somewhere constructive to go.” Or he would end up taking it out on Tony—the easiest target for it right now. Clint didn’t have to explain it.

“A little longer.” Let Steve take the edge off, then he’d take him to the mats. A couple of hours of beating the hell out of each other would definitely whittle down the razor-edged shards digging into them.

“If you say so…”

“I do.” He knew Steve. The problem was he had too much heart, sometimes. When Steve told him what Erskine had said about being a good man, not a good soldier, Bucky had shaken his head. Steve was a good man. The problem with that was he didn’t know how to not feel everything deeply. Natalia pushing them away, no matter how justified or necessary for her cut at him. It would until he could assure himself she was fine and didn’t need him to stand in front of her.

“You want to talk about something else,” he said, finally looking to the archer rather than Steve or the next on the list to die speed bag he currently hammered.

“ Asking me or telling?” A faint grin touched the other man’s face, but since it went nowhere near his eyes Bucky didn’t bother to respond. “Fine—Doctor Palmer called Strange again. She left another message. Then she called someone named Wong. The number was unlisted and blocked, but Friday has sniffers running to track the name. The first call was to a local New York exchange, but the other was somewhere in the Himalayas, at least as far as Friday was able to trace before the call ended.”

So untraceable meant she hadn’t been able to complete it. Got it.

“Then we’re still waiting.”

“Yes.” Clint rolled his head from side to side. “Poked Nat about Maria, but she didn’t bite though she did give me a little hell.”
Bucky frowned.

“Great, you didn’t tell her we saw Maria did you?”

A single shake of his head. “Steve didn’t mention Fury either.”

“That’s going to bite us in the ass.”

“Maybe. But Natalia does not wish to see him. She made that exorbitantly clear in New Orleans.” The faith and trust she had in the former SHIELD director had been shredded. “As long as you think Hill continues to work for him, I do not see why Natalia needs to talk to her either.”

It wasn’t like he would stop her from calling. She likely had their contact information.

“Did she always dance when she was upset?” The question surprised him and he glanced at Clint. The other man was watching Steve with a frown.

“Sometimes, if she could find the space. In the Red Room or any of our other training facilities—she danced every day she wasn’t on a mission. The discipline and the focus grounded her and kept her in fighting shape.” The single most beautiful thing he’d ever had the pleasure to witness. Though even that which was so elegant and captivating could pull her into a web of darkness when she lost herself to it totally. He’d seen her after one such session, the welts on her feet oozing and her ballet slippers soaked through with blood.

At his frown, she’d shrugged him off. “I’ll heal.” Then she’d limped to the showers. An hour later, she met him in the training room and though her feet were a mess, she didn’t limp once.

“What about…” Clint winced. “You know what, ignore me.”

“What about what?” He flexed his hands when the new speed bag died a lot faster than the others.

“When you two got out… did she still dance then?”

The memory rose unbidden of her dancing in their living room, her pregnant stomach throwing her balance off and the way she would laugh at him as he prepared to intercede in case she toppled over. There had been so much laughter in those stolen moments. “Yes. Every chance she got—it was less about the discipline than the freedom.”

Even after Mary Elizabeth was born, she maintained her training. Dancing. Stretching. Teasing him into light sparring. She didn’t dare get complacent.

“She loves to dance. It was one of the few things her training instilled in her that was as much a blessing as it was curse.”

He hadn’t seen the toe shoes again for a long time. 1979? Prepping for a mission, he’d been brought out of cryo because he was needed to extract the Widow. She’d traveled with a ballet to visit several South American cities, effectively catching the eye of a cartel leader—someone who had penetrated Soviet borders through arrangements with a Bratva. They’d paid off several high-ranking officials.

The Widow had the names. The Soldier was sent to clean them out.

He met her after an evening performance and watching her dance had been a mesmerizing experience.
Separate for years since they’d been brought back and allowed to work together only a couple of times, the Soldier was half-in-love with her before she walked off the stage.

They spent three glorious nights in the jungle as they evaded the cartel’s foot soldiers after eliminating every member of their leadership. Running, fighting, and fucking.

Only sheer good fortune kept him out of cryo when they reached Moscow. Thus began the next chapter of their affair lasting intermittently for five years until the day Leonid, having been released from cryo the year prior, caught them together. The bastard had been pursuing Natalia relentlessly, seeing a chance at permanent freedom if he could make the Widow his ally.

Shaking off that memory, he glanced at Clint. “How long was she at SHIELD before she was even allowed to dance?”

“A year,” he admitted. “I had no idea. The first six months she was barely allowed out of her cell unless it was to exercise or to meet with medical—” Another grimace. “Her fucking psychologist or for a debriefing.”

“And the second?”

“She trained with me, every day I was on base. Not always sparring, but sometimes running, weights—working the range—but everything was supervised. She wasn’t allowed to be alone.”

She would never have shared something so personal under those conditions. “How did you find out?”

“Tracked her down one morning. She was no longer restricted to quarters, but she wasn’t in the gym or her rooms or any of the ‘usual’ places she’d been allowed. Found her in an empty training room by accident…” The breathless look told Bucky all he needed to know.

Natalia had descended into the dance for the first time in a year. She would have been raw, poignant, and captivating.

Solitude was not an evil thing to people like her and him. Steve slaughtered another speed bag. It was why they had to let her have it if she took it.

“I’m going to work with Steve now.”

Clint nodded. “I’ll head up, crash on the sofa on her floor. She might smack me in the head when she passes by.”

Bucky chuckled. “Thank you for being her friend.”

The other man clapped him on the shoulder. “Never have to thank me for that.”

“Clint?”

“Yeah?”

“Tony?”

“Left him after he finally passed out in his lab. I moved him to a sofa and dumped a blanket on him. He’s pretty wrecked about the whole damn thing.”

Served him right, except… the man meant well.
Even if his methods were terrible. That was the part that kicked them all in the teeth. Even the most well-meaning person could create havoc if left unchecked.

He nodded. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yep.”

Bucky waited for him to leave then headed for Steve.

Time to channel all that rage so he could be himself when she emerged.

Tony

Friday woke him without mercy, but promised him coffee was already brewing in his kitchen. Somehow, he’d staggered to the sofa in his lab. Or maybe Clint had dumped him there. Clint had followed him down to the lab after the evening went to Hell. Eyes gritty and throat raw, he made it to his feet and snagged the bracelet off the worktable. It was done. Passed all tests with flying colors.

Now to convince Natasha to swap it for the one she’d worn for him for the last few months. The ride from the lab to the penthouse passed swiftly. Twenty minutes later, he’d washed his face, brushed his teeth and managed a shave before dragging on his workout clothes. He fixed two cups of coffee and headed down to the gym.

Arriving with exactly one minute to spare, he dredged up a smile and a quip but the room was empty.

“I’m not late am I, Friday?” It was 6:59. Training was at 7.

The clock ticked over as Friday said, “No, Boss. Ms. Romanoff has not come down yet.”

Surprise didn’t begin to cover it. He downed half his coffee and at 7:02, he went into the stretches she always wanted from him. What had she said? He needed to warm up earlier than the actual spar time so that they would have more time to work on technique.

At fifteen minutes past seven, he was done with his stretches and about to head for the elevator when Friday said she was on her way down. The Natasha who walked into the gym was… off. It was the only word he could describe it. Her hair was pulled back into a tight braid on her head and it looked wet, as though she’d just showered.

She moved to the mat to begin stretching. “Morning, Tony.” Her voice was rough, raspier than usual and he wanted to offer her the coffee. Then thought better of it. Five minutes of stretching was all she allowed herself. It gave him time to watch her though, her eyes were distant and the faint smile she wore when she greeted him didn’t even merit a hint of a gleam in her eyes. They were just—cool, quiet, absent.

It wasn’t until she called him over to begin that he caught sight of her feet. The deep red and purple bruises along her toes and the Band-Aids wrapped around every single one made him recoil. What the hell had she done to her feet? Not that he got a chance to ask the question, she struck without
warning and they were rolling. She locked him in a closed-guard and he broke it on the second try. From closed-guards to chokeholds to high guards, she moved them at a dizzying pace. He didn’t even have time to comment before she had her thighs wrapped around his head and he was going down.

Three more times, she demonstrated it. Her instructions clear, concise, and absolutely lacking any of the teasing heat or warmth of all their previous training sessions. Once he fumbled through a high guard a couple of times—thank God she didn’t nail him in the nuts—she pointed out the ways to twist to avoid being crippled. Then moved to armlocks and wristlocks.

The hour was almost up when awareness hit him they weren’t alone. Bucky waited by the door, a silent sentinel. Soaked with sweat and breathing hard, but not panting, Tony hit the mat on the last armlock. He couldn’t break it and he was tired.

She released him, then explained with perfect patience how to get out of it. Then talked him through it. The third time, he had it and when she gripped him again, he broke and then reversed it. The first real smile of day deigned to make an appearance. Then she stood and helped him up.

“We leave at 9 or 10?”

It was just five after 8. Their hour was gone even if she’d been late and he couldn’t even say anything. Or ask the one question burning on his tongue… They were okay, right?

“9:15. The first meeting is continental breakfast with the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.”

“I’ll be in the garage in an hour then.” She pivoted and headed for the doors. Bucky straightened and pushed away from the wall at her approach. Half of his face was swollen black and blue, his lip was busted, and the knuckles of his right hand were littered in bruises. What the hell?

“Red?”

Natasha glanced at him, the small smile on her lips so fake it slapped him. She was so much better than that. There wasn’t even an ounce of worry on her face and no way she didn’t see Bucky’s state. “I’m fine, Tony. We’re fine. I need to shower and change. I’ll meet you in the garage in an hour.” She paused a beat, then swept him over with a look and for just a split second she was his Red. “You did good. Really good today.”

Then they were gone and her new bracelet was still sitting with the coffee. He’d give it to her in the car.

Upstairs, he showered swiftly then coated himself in the liniment. “Friday what the hell happened to Sergeant Barnes?”

“Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers sparred this morning, Boss.”

It was 7 when he got to the gym. “How early this morning?”

“They arrived in the gym at 03:30 this morning. Would you like a full status report?” Her tone suggested it was a bad idea, but Friday didn’t make choices for him.

“Yes, I would. Video, too.”
“If you’re sure, Boss…”

The holo screen opened on Bucky and Steve arriving in the gym at—3:30 in the morning. Clint was sprawled on a bench, shirt sweat-stained and hair damp.

What had there been a damn convention?

*And they didn’t invite me.*

He was buttoning up his shirt as Steve destroyed the first speed bag. “They’re not actually sparring.”

“Fast forward about forty-five minutes, Boss.”

Natasha wasn’t with them. Clint left and Bucky called Steve over to the mats. Flushed and definitely angry, Steve all but leapt across the room.

“Pause.”

Did he really have the right to sit here and watch the recording? They hadn’t turned off the cameras. It wasn’t like they didn’t know. Then again…

Just because he could do a thing, did it mean he should?

Blowing out a breath, he went through the motions of dressing, securing his ARC reactor and the cufflinks then pulling on the suit jacket.

“Cancel playback.” The video cut out. “The bruising is just from the sparring, not a real fight, right?”

“They were definitely fighting for real, Boss, but they called it a spar.”

But they’d had a lot of rage to work out.

Rage Tony set the match to the night before by triggering Natasha. She clearly wasn’t with them and her feet looked like she’d put them through a meat grinder in addition to being late to training.

“She trusts you, Tony. She wants to be worthy of your trust. That’s a hell of a gift. Don’t abuse it. Don’t abuse her.”

Translation, he needed to be worthy of her trust, too.

“Let me know if they need anything, Friday.”

“Will do. And Boss?”

“Yeah, Baby Girl?”

“You made a good call just now.”

“We’ll see.”

Six hours later, Tony debated giving into temptation and calling on his armor to break out of the
U.N. Only he wasn’t sure if it would be more helpful or harmful to the cause. Natasha sat listening to the delegate from Portugal wax on about the balance of power lying with the majority of Americans on the Avengers team rather than an international force more likely to be welcomed around the world.

Tony wanted to gouge out his own eyes. Natasha, though, she remained the picture of poise. Looking at her, you’d never guess she’d collapsed the night before. Collapsed? Been driven to it. He triggered a seizure and he wasn’t even sure she still remembered this morning. When he eased into the subject area, she’d changed it.

The only bright spot all morning had been when she let him slip the new bracelet on her. The coloring worked nicely with the dark green suit she’d chosen for today. Flat, calf-length boots covered her damaged feet and the skirt ended just at the knee, allowing a respectable flash of skin, but not one she drew any attention to.

Even weirder was her near serene approach to every meeting, like the Bulgarian delegate who wanted to discuss the list of crimes attributed to her in his country, including ones she couldn’t possibly of committed—his words not Tony’s. Nothing ruffled her. She smiled at all the right moments, chuckled when appropriate, effectively charming delegate after delegate.

And she worked from behind a mask so brittle, he didn’t understand how it didn’t crumble if she moved too quickly. Worse, he couldn’t believe he could even see the mask. He’d gotten okay at reading her moods, but he could never really get a read on her before not with any reliable accuracy.

So how the hell was he clocking it now?

After Portugal, Natasha glanced at him. “Need a break?”

She didn’t? “I could use one, but we have to meet with Austria.”

They’d packed the day even heavier than the previous one. “A couple more hours if you can make it.”

If he could make it? Offering her his arm, he relaxed a fraction when she settled her hand on the crook of his elbow. “Just two more, then we can kick it in the head until next week.”

“Well, technically. We still have to talk to T’Challa tomorrow and the party.”

That was enough. “The party is going to be a great time, I insist.”

A faint, but genuine smile appeared. “You do?”

“I do. Your dress was delivered this afternoon along with the tuxes. We’re going to celebrate the holidays in style. We’re going to have a fantastic time, I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“Now you’re just being insulting,” he sniffed. “My parties are the best.”

The real, if quiet, chuckle was better than the first time JARVIS cracked wise with a sardonic joke. The first of many. Here was hoping this would last.

Austria, as it turned out, was a breeze. The delegate had taken personal umbrage to Zemo’s attack in Vienna and felt a certain kinship for having survived it alongside Natasha. But at the end of the
day, he felt the Accords were more an intellectual exercise in trying to control the uncontrollable. What made the Avengers a force to be reckoned with was their adherence to fighting where they were needed and not to some political agenda.

If not for the Hungarian and British delegates, Tony would call Austria his favorite. As it was, he half-considered inviting him to the Christmas party. He didn’t actually do it, but he considered it. As the delegate bid them a good weekend, Tony walked Natasha to their last meeting of the day. It was after five-thirty. At this rate, it would be seven or later before they returned to the Tower.

They needed to revisit the following week’s schedule. Shorten the days. They’d been damn lucky with only one call this week, but that couldn’t last. It just couldn’t. Then he and Natasha would be burning it on both ends.

Kind of like she was right now.

“Mr. Stark,” a breathless voice called out as he and Natasha had just reached the elevator. It was one of the public information officers from the day before. “I’m sorry—I was trying to catch you before you left the Austrian suite.” The man smoothed his jacket down. “I’m sorry for the late notice but the Italian delegate had to leave to take a flight home unexpectedly. He sends his profuse apologies, but will be unable to meet with you today. They will reschedule… but he isn’t sure when he will return.”

On the one hand, yay, no more meetings, but on the other hand…

“Was it an emergency?” Natasha asked. “I’d love to be able to send our regards.”

The young man squirmed. “I’m really not sure why he had to leave, actually. It was very sudden. They called me up to deliver the news.”

Him. Not one of the ambassadorial staff.

“I’m sure it must have been important,” Natasha mused. “How long ago did he have to leave? Maybe there was something in the news?”

Taking the hint, Tony pulled out his phone. But Friday showed no breaking world news out of Italy and was already scanning the newsfeeds. The biometrics of the guy in front of them showed him plainly upset, but honest. He really didn’t know.

“I can try to find out,” the PIO offered, but he spread his hands. “I’m really very sorry. I understand last minute changes can truly upset a schedule.”

“It’s fine,” Natasha told him, a smile softening her words and the kid all but swooned. God he was easy. “Thank you for rushing to find us. Nothing in the news?”

“Nope,” Tony said. “At least not yet.” But the delegate had yet to depart any of the major airports so maybe the emergency was avoiding meeting with them. He’d have to look into that.

Friday ticked off a message that Happy had been notified, but he would was on the far side of Central Park so it may take him a while to get there.

Taking Natasha’s elbow, he waved off their escort and they headed for the elevator alone. Inside, they rode down in silence. All of her warmth drained away after they left the nervous young man.

“He was sweating… a lot.”
Tony glanced at her.

She reached over and hit a button for the tenth floor, they’d just passed the twelfth. The elevator glided to a stop and he eyed her. “Problem?”

“Feel like taking a walk?”

“Sure,” he said pushing off the back wall and following her out of the elevator. The floor didn’t house any delegations, but there was a feeling of hustle. It was a hub for research and likely where a lot of issues had to be vetted before being presented to the U.N. councils and committees. Natasha caught his hand in hers, and nodded to his phone.

Interlacing his fingers, he tapped a couple of buttons and started a low-level scan. No unexpected signals. They passed a windowed office housing a number of individuals on headsets—translators. Down the hall Natasha continued until they were nearly on the far side of the building, and then she pushed open the stairwell. Glancing inside, she looked up and then down.

“What’s up, Red?”

The phone was back in his pocket and he tapped the glasses to switch to combat and threat assessment.

“Just—it’s very cool in the building today. The heating hasn’t been keeping up.”

True. He hadn’t felt the need to remove his jacket all day and Natasha had kept her suit jacket buttoned most of the time.

“Last minute change of plans. Sweating public information officer who just happened to catch us outside the Austrian delegation offices almost to the elevator, but he came from behind us.”

Now that she put it that way, no way he’d been hurrying to intercept. Lagging behind to catch them at the right moment?

Tony leaned into the stairwell and scanned it. Nothing jumped out at him.

“Only reason to do that is to make sure we arrived on the ground floor at a certain time…” Yeah. He wasn’t feeling the love.

She pulled him into the stairwell. “Fly up, take the roof outlet, then head back to the Tower from there.”

He cut a look at her. “Where are you going?”

“Downstairs.”

“No.”

She kicked up an eyebrow. “I want to see if there is a trap.”

“So you can what? Trigger it?” Okay, maybe a bad choice of words.

“Well, at least I’m telling you ahead of time instead of just saying I want to ask some questions before I tell you my plan.”

The rebuke landed.
“Okay, accepted. I deserved that. Please, let’s go back to the Tower together and we can fight about it there. But if you go out front, so do I.”

“I wasn’t planning to go out front.”

He frowned. “Then exactly what were you…”

“Tony, the window for whatever they did is rapidly closing. I want to see what it is and who planned to trigger it.”

“You’re more likely to be a target than I am, Red. That’s kind of why I’m here. Body armor.” He mimed running a hand over himself.

“We don’t have time for this. If you won’t go up and just fly out, then go up and be armored and waiting.”

“Five hundred feet too far away to be helpful.”

She glared and he wanted to kiss her because it was the most emotion she’d shown all day. Course, if he kissed her she’d probably slug him, but hell that might be worth it.

“Stay right behind me.” And she headed for the steps, snapping her purse around and it was his first glimpse inside of it. The gun was visible tucked into the lining, but the bites slid onto her wrists as she led the way down the steps.

Huffing behind her, he tapped his glasses. “Friday, take the cameras out front and give me a good look.”

Natasha slipped a comm into her ear, and then she slipped the purse over her head to hang crosswise. Why would she want to go and look herself? Making things more difficult. At the fourth floor, he said, “Why didn’t we wait until the second floor to ditch out?”

“Because if I were setting a trap, I’d have the lower four floors monitored by the elevators. It’s a typical ditch out. Most people don’t want to climb or run down several flights of stairs.”

“No kidding,” he huffed.

“Boss, not scanning anything unusual. A high concentration of people are leaving the building—general office staff and some members of delegations. There’s a line of cars…”

Natasha stopped abruptly, and Tony wrapped an arm around her to keep from knocking her down.

“Shit,” she swore.

“What?”

“There’s a bomb.”

“What?” He stared at her.

“A bomb. Suit up. There’s a bomb out there. How do you take out two Avengers and not make it about them?”

“You kill a lot of innocent people…” He kissed her cheek. “Get clear.” Then he was hitting the suit and the armor crawled over him. He dropped through the center of the stairwell and down. A woman let out a shout as he emerged from the stairwell and he zipped through toward security.
“Begin evacuations and get everyone away from the front of the building.”

Thankfully, he didn’t have to repeat himself. He zoomed out the front doors. There were already security guards calling and an alarm began to go off. Those out front glanced around in confusion, but security was calling them in. Friday hadn’t been wrong about the line of cars.

Line of cars.

If he and Nat had to wait for Happy—who was thankfully still working his way across Midtown—they would have been on the east side of the building. Right over there. He scanned the vehicles in the drive. Engines. Facial recognition running on the drivers. Some people were hurrying into the cars, but they were jammed up and not moving.

Bottleneck.

A flash of movement on his tracking and he caught sight of Natasha moving across the plaza at speed.

“Dammit, Red. Where are you going?”

“They may have it on a timer,” she said. “But I doubt this set-up would rely **only** on a timer.” She was moving wide around the plaza.

“You think someone’s waiting to pull the switch.”

“Are you going to gamble that your targets—including one known to be notoriously late to everything—will show up exactly where you want them?”

She had a point.

He’d cleared the first half dozen cars. Not everyone was out of the plaza… Friday flashed a red line and his combat mode came up. “Explosive material Boss twenty meters. Tucked next to the pylon.”

“Got it.” He landed and the driver in the car closest to the pylon, which prevented car bombers from charging into the plaza, gave him a wild-eyed look. “Time to go.” He pointed the man away and then knelt to get a look at the device. It was secured to the pylon. So ripping it off and flying it up to drop it in Turtle Bay wasn’t necessarily an option. Car doors slammed as the vehicles around him emptied out.

Carefully, he rolled the zipper down to find the wired canister inside. Oh that was not good. Steel cable wound through it and onto the pylon. Okay, time to lose a whole pylon. Cut that through with a laser and…

Shouting came from his left and he snapped his head around in time to see Natasha take down a guy, she had her hand wrapped on his as she locked her legs around him and drove him to the ground, then her bites went off and the guy shook as he collapsed and she kept her hand on his and then stood slowly.

“Got the deadman’s switch.”

Well… okay.

“And a second bomb.”
“Give me a rundown on it,” Tony told her.

“Zippered backpack, two foot canister, eight inch diameter, steel cabling drilled through it to the pylon… and I’ll bet there’s a third.”

“You just keep making my day better and better.” But it made sense. “Triangulate…” He scanned from where he was to Natasha, then to where the third point could be. There were only two spots. “Or they could be overachievers.”

“There’s four.”

“Yeah.”

“Opening mine,” Natasha told him and he snapped his head over to look at her.

“Bad idea, Red.”

“You have more cars around you,” she said, very reasonably. “Unless they are daisy chained, which let’s hope they aren’t, mine has less collateral.”

“Then I’ll do it,” Tony told her as he started upward. “I’ve got the armor.”

“Too late,” she had the cap off and looked in the canister. “Four minutes…cross-wired, Semtex. Smaller area of effect.”

“More concentrated explosion. I really don’t like these guys.” He got his canister opened.

“Nested wiring. Two triggers—timer and deadman… I’ve got one of them. Have Friday blanket jam?”

He glanced toward her and the camera zoomed in. “You want to disarm it and make sure it doesn’t set the others off if it doesn’t work.”

“More or less. And we don’t have time to argue. We can both do this, we both know how. This goes faster if we don’t disagree.”

“You get blown up and miss my party, I’m going to be pissed.”

She smiled. “Noted.”

“Friday, jam all signals.”

The word jamming appeared on his screen but it meant he lost communication with Nat and Friday. So he went to work. Four minutes, four bombs, two of them—only Natasha was working one handed.

*Focus.* He could almost hear her voice in the back of his mind.

Trailing wire. Lead wire. Grounding wire. Trip wire. Someone was an asshole with wires. At one minute and twenty-eight seconds wasted, he tracked the two detonator wires and pulled them, then the circuits. Rising, he caught Natasha already striding for the next one, the switch still in her hand.

The area around them was eerily quiet save for the alarm sounding inside the building. The temperatures were dropping since the sun had gone down. But he headed for the next canister.
They had to get the Semtex out of here, but defusing had to come first.

He got the canister open on this one, placed at the curve of the drive. The triangulation would have taken out the first six cars, all the damage would have been in that concentrated area. The vehicles were still there, but they were all evacuated.

It was different. Orange Semtex, but the wires were…under it. They’d placed this one upside down. Or maybe they’d placed the other one wrong side down. If this one was different. He shot a look toward Natasha. The zoom showed her focused as she lifted the canister and tilted it to unscrew it from the bottom.

The cables were in the way but if he cut them the heat might set off the wires. He had to get the detonators out first.

The timer was running down and he was at less than a minute when he got the bottom off. The wires weren’t there. Dummy charge? A distraction? Gripping the sides of the canister he began to break it apart carefully. The wires were nested along the sides and he moved the Semtex carefully. Wires. All wires.

No detonators.

The Semtex cracked as he shifted it and it turned to powder.

It was a dummy.

Standing, he whipped around and started for Natasha. But she held up her hands, signaling all clear. She still had the deadman switch gripped tightly as she stood. She blew out a breath, a faint smile on her lips…

He was staring right at her when the car behind her exploded.

Steve

Going to the gym had been a good idea, even if he and Bucky left bloodied and bruised. The speed bags weren’t helping, but the sparring did and Bucky didn’t hold back so neither did Steve. Between Tony pushing her to trigger with the questions he asked and Natasha’s collapse—and how damn fragile she’d seemed before he woke to find her gone and barricaded in her studio—his mood had taken a distinctly southward turn.

The anger in his gut burned. The fact Bucky just left her up there and told him to do the same added more fuel to the fire. Natasha did not need to be alone with this. She’d recovered a traumatic memory. Just hearing them talk about it painted a picture of horror. That he had seen one of the chairs up close and the effects it had Bucky were bad enough.

Imagining Natasha in it was a nightmare.

Worse—imagining Bucky putting her in it.

She hadn’t wanted to discuss it. Not with him. Maybe not with Buck. Though there’d been
discussing something when he returned with the vodka. The torrent of thoughts rode the wild fury of tangled emotions. He wanted to make it better, but he couldn’t fight her past. Who was he going to punch? The people who did it to them were dead.

Tony? The thought was tempting. Too tempting. Keeping his distance right now was the only thing he could do. But her locking herself in the studio, that couldn’t be healthy. She didn’t have to be alone. Why did she isolate herself? Throw up walls? Every. Damn. Time.

When he’d destroyed his eighth or ninth bag, Bucky called him over to the mats to spar. Suddenly, every ounce of his frustration focused on his best friend.

“Why?” He demanded as they circled each other.

“Why what, Punk?”

“Why didn’t we break in?” He lunged forward with a punch, taking a shot to the back as Bucky avoided him.

“Because she’s going to shut down if we do. If she wanted us in there, the door would have been unlocked.” Another dodge, but Steve twisted and drove his elbow back into Bucky’s gut earning a grunt.

“But if we had gone in, we’d know she’s okay.” That part was killing him. He took Bucky’s right hook as he blocked the left. The one-two combination was vicious. Blood was sharp on his tongue.

“So you’d rather her be mad at us? Not a good plan.” He switched it up and kicked, but Steve caught the leg and flipped him. “Need I remind you of putting her back to a wall on the island?”

No, he didn’t have to remind him. Steve got him with a hard punch that actually knock him back a couple of steps. “Let her be mad, I’d rather know she’s okay.” And he couldn’t get Fury’s words out of his head. About her suicide attempts—if they were real and not some way for the former director to twist the knife. Didn’t matter, he couldn’t stop thinking about it especially with her walling herself away.

“She’s fine, Steve,” Bucky pushed out between breaths, and he twisted, flipping Steve over onto his back. All the air whooshed out of him as Bucky tried to put him in an arm lock. “She just needs to figure stuff out.”

“That’s why she has us,” Steve countered, dead lifting the weight to break the lock and tumbling to his feet. “Partners. We don’t shut each other out.”

“If you want her to keep us, you’ll leave her alone for a while and let her figure it out.” Bucky caught the next hook as Steve spun, then jabbed him the solar plexus.

“And if she’s in there hurting?” Because dammit… “She doesn’t have to be alone.”

This time Bucky wrenched him backward, arms locking up around his and trapping his arms up. “She is in there hurting. We’re all hurting. Because what she remembered fucking sucks to have in your head.” He shook Steve once. “I couldn’t talk to her in the beginning, not about this…”

“You could talk to me,” Steve grimaced as he forced his arms down, reaching for one of Bucky’s hands. The strain was enormous and took every ounce of focus.

“Not at first… I panicked, I had to say something to someone… Natalia’s had years of coping on her own, of rebalancing herself after loss, of finding who she needs to be and tonight…” He swore
as Steve seized his left hand and began to twist, and then Steve launched away, rolling forward and then back up catching Bucky with a kick that sent him skidding back.

Panting Steve faced him. “She doesn’t have to be alone anymore. Yes, she’s spent years fighting everyone trying to control her…”

Touching fingers to his bleeding lip, Bucky stared at him. “Punk, you love her. I love her. No matter what happens, we’re going to be there for her. But this is one time your charging in isn’t going to do a damn thing. If we bust in that door, if we force her to accept our help, she’ll go for the jugular and she’d be right to. You want to see how fast she can disappear? Keep pushing.”

Straightening, Steve turned away and paced hands on his hips. “I hate feeling helpless.”

“I know,” Bucky dropped to a knee. Steve’s whole face throbbed, so did his chest and his hands were bleeding. “I want to go back and help her kill them all. I want to rip apart every machine. It kills me that she has that memory—of all of them—that one. One filled with loss and terror and…”

“You hurting her.” Steve grimaced, double-fisting his temper. He couldn’t live with that in his head. The idea he could do something like that. It wasn’t Bucky, but it had been his hands. “I’m being an ass.”

“Little bit,” Bucky said with a shrug. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

“Har har,” Steve said without any real amusement. “Before…” He gulped in air. “Before, when something happened, she’d—she’d go quiet. I’d catch her staring at walls. Maybe she’d head out for a few hours. Most of the time, she’d shake it off, throw a quip at me and just dive right back in.”

“But you weren’t with her before, not like this—and you weren’t with her twenty-four seven.” Bucky wiped his face with his shirt. “I never got to be with her like this either—not until we ran.”

“That was different.”

“Yeah, it was just us. But she’d have moods and sometimes—so do I.” Then Bucky eyed him. “You get ‘em too, Punk.”

Yeah, Maybe he did.

“Fury said she tried to kill herself a few times in the beginning.”

He had all of Bucky’s attention. “She wouldn’t have…”

“She wanted to die when Clint brought her in,” he reminded him. That part of the story stuck him.

“The day… it was Mary Elizabeth’s birthday,” Bucky told him and it rocked him. “She figured it out… during one of those meetings when the French bastard was asking her all those questions about joining SHIELD. It was April. Some part of her knew—some part of her felt lost. It’s… I know what that’s like Steve. If not for Natalia, I’d have eaten a bullet maybe. But not her. She was willing to let Clint kill her—but she wouldn’t have killed her self.”

“You think Fury was lying.”

“I know he was—ask Clint. He was there. Maybe not for all of it, but he’d have noticed a suicide attempt.”
Steve frowned. He couldn’t imagine Natasha being so willing to die, even when she described it before. Everything about her was so vital, so alive—she’d survived such impossible odds. Then again… “Did you get any leads on that psychologist?” He really wanted to have a very long conversation with the man.

“Got a name. Hill said he took off though, maybe because Natalia’s been in the news. We’ll find him.”

“Why does it always feel like we’re looking for someone?” Some of the fire edging him had cooled.

“Because we live very interesting lives,” Bucky retorted. “You ready to go another round?”

“Yeah.” He was. Only this time, he didn’t need to pour all of his anger into the hits. It was more focused, more controlled and the kneejerk rage from earlier abated. By the time they called it and headed upstairs, they were both soaked in sweat, and bleeding in a couple of places.

“You look like hell,” Steve told Bucky. “Sorry about the face.”

“Still look better than you,” Bucky answered with a bloody smile and they both laughed. No word from Friday yet. It was almost six. She would have to emerge soon, right?

The right side of his face was damn sore and his right eye was swollen, but not closed. He tested his jaw after he finished showering then his ribs. As much as it hurt, it also—it also felt good. He needed that. He needed to unload it all.

Tony was trying to help, but Steve should have stopped him before he pushed Nat down the rabbit hole. At the same time, what Tony had done worked. The seizure not so much—but Nat would heal. Wasn’t that what she always said? Just because she could didn’t mean she should have to. Then again… he studied the bruises forming on his chest.

It was part of who she was and Steve had to accept it. But he would never stop trying to protect her. He caught the scent of coffee and bacon as he pulled on clean clothes.

“Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes,” Friday announced. “Ms. Romanoff has put the bracelet back on and is in the elevator.”

Steve hurried out gliding to a halt as the elevator doors opened and Natasha limped out, soaked in sweat and looking worn to the bone, but her chin was up even as her eyes were wary. Biting back the need to sweep her up, he focused on her and forced his jaw to move without grinding his teeth. “Morning, Angel.”

She paused, eyeing him then Bucky.

“Morning, Doll. Go shower. Coffee be ready in a minute.”

The faint scent of copper touched his nose and Steve dropped his gaze. Her feet…

“Okay,” she said, but for a moment she seemed surprised. As she limped past him, he curled an arm out and she let him pull her to him and he pressed a kiss to her forehead, then her nose, and finally brushed her lips gently. It pulled at the cut on the corner of his mouth, but he didn’t care.

She feathered a touch against his bruised cheek. “Hi.”

“Hey… go shower. Then we’ll do something for your feet, okay?”
She glanced down at them, a bemused expression. “Okay.”

Tracking her until she was in her room, he turned to look at Bucky who slid a cup of coffee across the island. “Good.”

“Does it ever get easier?” Not just picking her up and fixing it.

“I threw her in the pool the last time she got stubborn,” Bucky said with a shrug and took a sip of his coffee. “No. But sometimes... sometimes you have to just let her be her.”

Steve didn’t want anyone else.

“Course sometimes I have to let you be you, too. So—if you’re in the mood for an attitude adjustment...”

At Bucky’s smirk Steve laughed. It wasn’t loud or long, but—it broke some of the rocks in his chest loose. Her shower didn’t take long, she came out still limping but with a calm expression. Maybe too calm.

After a shower, her feet looked worse if possible and Steve picked her up and parked her on the island before he retrieved the first aid kit. Bucky pressed coffee into her hands and set water next to her. She didn’t argue as they moved around her or when Steve cleaned and put Band-Aids on each of her abused toes.

When he finished, she wrapped her arms around him and he hugged her back. Holding her and letting her hold him. Wordlessly, he pressed a kiss to her forehead and they stayed like that until Bucky nudged him. She needed to eat.

They didn’t talk about it. She didn’t ask about their bruises and Steve bit back the questions about the studio. While she ate, it wasn’t much. It reminded him being on the island, nudging food toward her and coaxing, but she wasn’t all there. Glimpses of her, they’d peek through in a touch or a smile or when she leaned against Bucky’s hand on her cheek. When she left to train Tony, Steve forced himself to just give her a kiss and let her go.

Bucky stared at the closed elevator doors for a long moment. Then he stood and drained his coffee before he headed toward his room and returned with his jacket and a pair of shoes.

“I thought we were giving her space,” Steve said drily.

“We are. I’m going to smoke.” He scratched his jaw. “Then I’ll go down and check on her. Come with if you can handle Tony at the moment.”

Not an unfair condition. “I’m working on it.”

The night before—all he’d wanted was to have dinner with her and Buck. At the same time, if Tony had a plan to help her deal with the nosebleeds, great. But aggravation had been instantaneous. There had to be a way around it, but Steve didn’t see it. Not yet.

Especially not while they were living in the Tower.

Maybe… maybe they could move out to the Compound if she didn’t want to get a house. Then again, she said on the island she’d begun to understand it. Maybe the distance would help give him some perspective.

Always so dramatic… Peggy’s voice admonished him from the past.
Had he gotten worse? Had the serum enhanced even his emotional reactions to things? God knew he loved Natasha with everything he had and it… it was overwhelming how much he cared. He’d never cared about anyone the way he did her.

Maybe that was the problem. His feelings for her complicated everything. Shaded how he saw every interaction. Did he think Tony was in love with her because how could anyone not love her? Tony hadn’t denied the charge. Then again, Clint loved her too and he’d been a potential ‘rival’ for far longer, but—Clint was her best friend. She kept insisting Tony was her friend. Steve trusted her.

He had to.

So why was Tony aggravating him?

He was still chewing over that when Natasha returned with Bucky from training. The same lithe grace marked her movements as she readied herself for the day. Steve was glad she went with the boots. That had to be better for her feet. His dog tags were visible before she tucked them into her shirt.

It was almost relaxed how she got ready while they lingered in the room. Finally, she pivoted to face them when she was ready to head down and said, “I know I’m being difficult. I just… I need some time to integrate that memory it’s mine but… it’s not.”

While Steve couldn’t imagine, he wouldn’t begrudge her a second. Even if he still wanted to wade in and wage war against the demons. Bucky smiled at her. “I know, Doll. We’re not going anywhere, are we Stevie?”

“Nope,” Steve said slowly. “Whatever you need.”

She slid right between them and they hugged her from either side. “I’ll try not to need to be alone too much.”

Guilt twisted a knife into him. “You do what you need to, Angel. You need to feel what you need to feel.” Even if he hated every minute of it.

“You almost sound like you mean that.” For just a split-second, the sly wit gleamed at him from her eyes and her smile curved before both faded.

Summoning a smile for her was as easy as breathing, he brushed his knuckles down her cheek. “Thanks for putting up with us.”

Then her smile turned real and she kissed him, then Bucky. “It’s a really good thing you like me.”

He loved her. But he just smiled. “More than you know.”

Walking her down, he nodded to Tony as she slid into the limo. “Look after her?”

Tony nodded once. “You know I will.”

He did.

But...

No. No buts. This issue was his. Yes, Tony baited him sometimes but if he’d stop rising to it, maybe he’d stop.
Or maybe he’d end up breaking Tony’s nose.

The rest of the day past in slow motion. He finished the after-action report and dropped it in Natasha’s email for her review. Checked in on Wanda and Sam. Sam planned to take a few days the next week. He wanted to go to Chicago to visit his mother. Steve signed off on that and asked him if he planned to go back for Christmas and Sam laughed. Of course he did, but his mom was feeling a little blue so he wanted to take her shopping and just have some time with her.

Steve would give a lot to spend a few days with his mother again, so no problem. Wanda was next on his list, and she was excited to announce she would be taking a couple of classes in the spring. She hadn’t decided which ones, but could he and Natasha maybe carve out some time so they could discuss it—she didn’t want to leave the team hanging.

Next was Sharon. She asked about the report, but Steve said he’d have it the next day. They covered a few minor issues including the fact she’d heard some positive things coming out of the meetings Tony and Natasha had. Was there something Steve would like her to do to help on that front? Not particularly. Then she mentioned taking a couple of days the following week.

Her schedule wasn’t really something he felt the need to control, but signed off on it anyway. Though she did ask if he could nudge Natasha to call her so she could say she’d touched base with her to the Committee and not remotely lie about it.

Not a problem.

Rhodey had left a message about Bucky’s public pardon. They’d been avoiding those calls. Maybe they needed to look into it. For now, Steve just left the message to sit.

Bucky had been reading while he handled that, but he was heading down to the range with Clint. On impulse, Steve joined them. It killed a couple of hours and there was something entertaining about watching the pair try to outdo each other. They also debated when or if Fury would return the message Clint left him at his grave.

The bigger concern was he’d try to ambush Natasha again. Clint shrugged it off. In his opinion, Nat could handle it. He didn’t think Fury’s intentions were ill meant. That said, he wasn’t thrilled with it either. Bucky’s opinion was very clearly on the firm side of negative. Natasha had told him she wasn’t interested.

At the same time, Fury might be a source for real answers. They got the name of the psychologist but that went nowhere. The doctor was going nowhere. It was all just a lot of hurry up and wait.

And that, Clint announced, was why Steve was a soldier and not a spy.

He couldn’t agree with him more.

By late afternoon, Bucky sprawled on the sofa reading again while Steve had the news on and worked on a sketch he’d been toying with when a breaking story flashed across the screen.

BOMBS SUSPECTED AT U.N. IRON MAN ON SCENE

“Buck,” Steve said as he rose. The images were coming from a long distance but he could see Tony kneeling next to what looked like a device.

“Friday?”

“Boss and Ms. Romanoff located four bombs placed in the plaza at the front of the U.N. building.
Ms. Romanoff secured the bomber on site and took the deadman switch. They are attempting to disarm them. There was a timer, but I am currently jamming all radio signals to prevent a remote detonation.”

The camera zoomed in on the television as Tony split apart whatever canister he was working on.

“It appears as though they have disarmed three of the four.” When Iron Man turned, the news camera swung to where Natasha was rising away from another canister, hands up in an all clear mode. But she still had something clenched in her left hand.

“That would appear to be all four. I will resume radio transmission when Boss calls for it.”

But Tony was launching forward and the camera had moved off Nat to follow him when an explosion rocked the cameraperson. The news reporter was saying something. And then another angle came on from overhead—a helicopter?

There was a car burning where Natasha had been and Iron Man skidded to a halt. The news replaced the image from the second camera, Nat had her back to the car and it went up. The fire ballooning outward, the concussive force hit her and she twisted. Something shimmered as the fire swept to where she’d been and then retreated. Tony landed a second later and Nat was on the ground behind a hard glittering shield that vanished a second later.

“the hell?”

“Cap… she’s fine. Friday says you can see us on the news, wave at the boyfriends Red.” Steve had never been so damn glad to hear Tony’s voice. She was getting to her feet with a hand up from Tony and they both glanced to the news camera. She wiggled her fingers. “Give us ten and I’m getting her out of here. Just need to secure the Semtex.”

Maybe by then Steve would remember how to breathe again.

Natasha

Her ears were still ringing from the explosion. Tony had Friday send Happy back across Midtown. He’d never actually made it out to pick them up. While she kept watch over the plaza as the Semtex was removed, she kept playing with the new bracelet. The burning car had been extinguished. The diplomatic plates were false and so far no one knew how the car had arrived on the scene. Since they’d evacuated everyone—it didn’t matter.

She didn’t think the driver was in on it. They were most likely a patsy. Just like the bombs in the plaza hadn’t likely been meant for her and Tony. Maybe, just maybe, but they would have been collateral. But she didn’t think so. She thought they were meant to be witnesses, the timing to drive them down to the main plaza, plenty of witnesses and Tony in the front row to see Happy die. The main detonation would have gone off where Happy had dropped them off and picked them up the last couple of days.

The target was most likely Happy. Mr. Deadman’s Switch wasn’t talking but NYPD had taken him
into custody. They’d answered questions and she promised a report, but Tony insisted they turn over on the scene. His agitation was infectious and it left her nerves jangling. He wouldn’t move more than a foot from her at any moment. Not that she faulted him for it, just… exhilaration flooded her in the immediate aftermath and she had almost too much energy. After a day of forcing herself to play the game and go through the motions, she practically buzzed with it.

The bomb squad came to take charge of the Semtex and what seemed like a hundred news cameras got them from all angles—according to Friday they were running with it on all the news channels. Aware of the scrutiny, she kept her game face on.

The bracelet, though, had saved her life. Tony said he’d made some upgrades, but that was far more than a simple upgrade. It reacted to the concussive force and generated a shield long enough to keep most of it off her. She wasn’t sure who had been more shocked, her because she was in one piece or Tony because it worked?

Once they handed the scene over, Tony motioned her across the plaza and out of sight of the cameras for a moment. He stripped off his suit coat and passed it to her. They were flying back and he didn’t want her freezing. With care he wrapped it around her head and then suited up before he pulled her close and said, “Hang on tight, Red.” Then they were up and flying.

Even though the cold lashed at her legs and chased up her skirt and she was virtually blinded with Tony’s jacket over her head and face while she pressed against the heated armor—she couldn’t contain the simple joy flooding her. She’d kept Tony and Happy alive. No one died and the only thing hurt was a car.

That was a win in her book.

They arrived much faster than she expected. He landed with a familiar clank of metal. Then warmth flooded around her and he set her down, but didn’t let her go. Pulling the jacket away from her face, she stared around the darkened room.

“Tony?”

“Just—give me a minute, okay Red?” He lifted his hands and the suit retracted, then he cupped her face. She could barely make out his features in the half-dark with only the city lights beyond the windows to give them any illumination.

“Where are we?”

“My apartment.”

His… “Your apartment?”

Since when did he have…?

“Surprise, something you don’t know about me,” he said with a faint smile. “Got this place a few years ago. Used it as a crash pad when I was in New York and avoiding Obadiah.”

“And it’s not under any Stark names.”

“Nope.” Tony grinned, still cradling her face before he slid his hands down to her arms then pressed his forehead to hers. “Top secret. Eyes only. That’s why you had to have my jacket over your head.”

She didn’t say anything about the view. She could probably figure it out. “Uh huh, that was the
“reason I had to wear it.”

“Yep.” He kept tightening and relaxing his grip like he couldn’t make up his mind.

“Tony…”

“Just another couple of minutes, Red. I just—I just need a minute before I give you back to Cap.” His pulse hammered and his breathing was a little shallow, but his gaze was latched to hers.

“Oh Tony—don’t do this.”

“I know,” he said, giving her a small smile. “I’m not. I’m not putting you in that position.”

“I don’t want you to do this to you,” she said. “Come on. You saved my life today.”

“You saved mine first.” He closed his eyes and shuddered, then he dragged her close and buried his face against her hair and she wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m okay,” she soothed. “One piece. Didn’t even break a nail on those stupid containers.”

“You got the bomber, too.”

“Easy pickings, he was so focused on the drive coming, he wasn’t watching the evacuation.” Part of what drew her to him. Everyone else was running, he was staring almost impatiently.

A half-laugh. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“I have been called worse.” She rubbed his back in slow circles, waiting for his heart to calm down. “It was a good day. We disarmed the Semtex, caught the bomber, no casualties.”

“You were almost one,” he whispered.

“Nah, I had this great bracelet made by a genius.”

He pulled back and caught her left wrist, then lifted it to kiss just behind her bites, which she was still wearing. “Thank you for taking it today, I almost thought you wouldn’t… after…”

“Hey,” she said dipping her head to catch his gaze as he kept looking at the bracelet. “It worked.”

“Of course, it worked.” The latent arrogance was more him, but the raw look in his eyes that was a far more vulnerable man than he showed the world. “I know I said I was okay with friends, Red. I am… I am okay with it. But…”

She pressed two fingers to his lips. “Don’t.”

“Why the hell not?” He grasped her fingers and pulled them away. “I’m not asking you for anything except… no, I’m not asking you for anything.” Shaking his head, he pressed a kiss to her fingers. “I’m not. Friends is what we agreed on. I have to take you back and pass you back to Steve…and Bucky.”

“Dammit Tony…”

“I know. I throw you to the wolves then bust back into your life wanting to fix everything and—spend so much time on that I miss out on my chance. That’s okay…” He made a small smile. “It is. Probably better for both of us. Too much awesome together and they really will think we are trying to take over the world.”
Still toying with her hand, he traced the line of her fingers. The warmth in the apartment chased away the chill, numb feeling on her legs. The sound of their breathing served as the soundtrack. She didn’t want to make this a joke. Their playing and teasing was one thing, but this… She opened her mouth, but Tony pressed his fingers to her lips.

“’Nope. Don’t say anything. You don’t have to. I know.’

She raised her eyebrows.

“I do. I may act like an ass and I may take liberties.” He smoothed his hand over her hair. “I may want to do a lot more. But I won’t. I just…needed this minute because for a moment—it was like I was losing you all over again and I need to feel you right here with me. That’s all this is, okay?”

The very real plea in his eyes begged her to just let it go. To let him have this. To not say a word.

This was everything Steve worried about and James warned against.

“It doesn’t have to be anything, Red. I promise. Nothing changes. I’m still the same impulsive self-loathing narcissist you adore and you are still my mind-blowingly duplicitous spy—with a penchant for vodka and kicking my ass. Okay?”

“I adore, huh?”

“Absolutely. I’m completely adorable. You know it. You’re just—stoic.”

The problem was, she did care and she did not want to hurt him. She had already done that before.

“Stoic,” she said slowly.

“See?” A playful grin teased at the corners of his mouth. “You agree with me.”

“I do adore you,” she confirmed. “And I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not hurting me,” he said almost too solemnly. “The only thing that would hurt is if you left. Okay—well to be honest dumping all my booze hurt but I figured I earned that one.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“Good, that’s exactly how I like my women.” He snagged his coat from the ground and lifted it to wrap around her head, pausing to press a kiss to her forehead. “Now lets get you back to your boyfriends. I’m pretty sure after the last couple of days you could all use some serious cuddle time.”

“Tony,” she stopped him from activating the armor and he stared at her. “About last night?”

He sobered and nodded.

“Don’t try to trick me into a trigger again. If you want to try, tell me. I understand why you did it. It hurt—I won’t lie. At the same time, I have back a piece of myself and James I didn’t have before. Sometimes it’s going to hurt, but thank you.” Then she pressed a kiss to his cheek. “But no more tricks.”

“No more tricks.” He held up his hand. “Scout’s honor.”

She raised a brow.

“Do you hear me?” She studied him and his smile faded. This—this would create problems. It would hurt far more than him and she wouldn’t let that happen to any of them.

“I do, Red. I promise. We’re good. I’ll—try to stop the poking and the…”

“The baiting? The inciting?”

He glanced down and then nodded once. “You chose them.”

“I did.”

“I’ll respect it.”

“Thank you.” She blew out a breath.

He activated his armor and she pulled his coat around her head. Then curled when he lifted her and tucked herself against the armor. She didn’t even try to look at more details about the apartment before he launched them from the balcony.

The flight back to the Tower was swift from there, even if the wind still managed to numb her knees all over again. The doors to the penthouse opened as he landed them on the deck. Steve strode right out with a big blanket and she was wrapped up in it even as Tony passed her over as if it were a great ceremony.

Steve’s grip was fierce and she returned it, kissing him gently before he handed her to James and he pulled her close. Over James’ shoulder, she caught Steve nodding to Tony. Tony gave him a nod back.

Clint just shook his head at her in exasperated affection. Then he shocked Tony by giving him a hug and clapping him on the back as he thanked him for keeping her alive. Steve and James echoed the sentiment as James set her on her feet, but didn’t let go of her. Tony shifted uneasily under the attention. She hid a smile as James tugged her toward the elevator. Tony lifted his chin toward her.

She gave him a little wave and said. “Don’t think a little bomb disarming gets you out of training tomorrow…”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he said. “Bright and early. Try not to be late.”

She flipped him off and his grin grew.

Okay. They would be okay.

As the elevator doors closed, she leaned back against James and closed her eyes. All she wanted was some pizza, fuzzy socks, and to curl up with her guys.

She’d damn well earned that much.

Frankly, they all had.
Calm

Chapter Summary

The throuple gets some quiet time, Peter needs a dance lesson, and more as they all take a beat from the past twenty-four hours

Chapter Forty

Calm

Natasha

On Steve’s floor, James continued to keep custody of her hand as they left the elevator. A book lay discarded by the sofa, Steve’s sketchpad lay forgotten on the chair, two half-empty mugs were propped on the tables and the news still played on the television. Shots repeated from outside the U.N. where it was all flashing lights.

“…to update our continuing coverage of the bombing at the U.N. a little over an hour ago, Tony Stark in his Iron Man suit and a woman now identified as Natasha Romanoff, recently a fugitive, prevented a catastrophe as they disarmed several bombs placed in the U.N. plaza. While a car did explode after those bombs were taken care of…”

Footage accompanied the reporter’s words of the car exploding behind her. Twice they replayed it in slow motion.

“…the only person standing in the radius of that explosion was Natasha Romanoff, but she appears to have escaped with no apparent injuries…”

The image paused on the first flare of the shield.

“…due to what many are calling a force shield. While the Avengers at this time have no comment on the event, there are some who are saying Tony Stark and Natasha Romanoff proved once again why they are heroes in averting a disaster while on U.N. property to discuss the Accords with members of the Committee.”

James helped her out of her coat and Steve was like a silent sentinel at her side. “Friday—roll that back to the explosion.”

The video paused then retreated to the slow motion.

The image was from overhead. She had the deadman switch clenched in her left hand. She’d lifted both hands to show the all clear. Though she hadn’t been able to see Tony’s face behind the mask, she had barely any time to react when he suddenly headed for her and when the explosion tore at the car behind her. The image showed her turning, twisting to look.

“Back it up again.”
“Natalia,” James said, his hand on her back.

“One sec.” She began to strip off her bites. On screen, she stood, hands up to signal the all clear, then the car behind her exploded and she twisted to it. The pin. She’d heard the hard click. She’d already been turning when the car exploded. “Okay… I heard it. I heard the click of the ignition switch. Mute.”

With a warm hand on her nape and the stroke of his thumb along the side of her neck, James said, “an audible switch? That doesn’t sound professional.”

“Maybe,” she leaned into the contact when he began to stroke the tension from the muscle. “Sure, an amateur may not know to muffle the sound or to use something electronic that won’t give it away—but how would an amateur secret a car bomb onto a vehicle that is swept and scanned before being admitted to the property in addition to the four—which turned out to only be three—active explosives loaded with enough Semtex to pretty much destroy a row of six cars down to their nuts and bolts?”

“They wouldn’t, but a professional might use it to flush a target into motion or draw them out if they were taking too long.”

“Friday give me a layout of the plaza…” She shifted to put one hand on the sofa and tugged off her boots. Her feet still ached, but the pain told her she was alive so she shuttled it to a corner and left it there to pout on its own. The holo screen filled in with the area. “Now place the bombs where we found them.” They lit up. “Now the cars.” The row of them, jammed together, one would have to move out to let the whole line move up.

“You have where Happy has been dropping us off?”

She marked it.

James frowned.

“Now the car that exploded.”

It was sixth in line. Right at the edge where the last bomb had been. An explosion there would send people fleeing into the blast zone. Or pull people into it.

Steve braced his hands on the back of the sofa. “You don’t think you and Tony were the targets.”

“No…”

Then she filled them in on the threats she’d been analyzing for Pepper and reminded them about the secondary team who had come after her all those weeks before—the one that took down Iron Man with the EMP. They hadn’t been after her, but Tony. A fact they all had then, even if they’d tried to contain the news—and then they had to go after the formless and for her at least, that particular issue had been allowed to slip. When she explained her theory, Steve bowed his head.

“Makes sense. This is the confirmation you were waiting on before briefing me?” Just a bit of testiness.

Natasha shrugged. “I had a gut reaction, but no actual proof. Tony ignores threats; he gets them all the time. But like I said, I don’t think they are targeting him directly to kill him. They want to hurt him. Listening devices at Peter’s place. The mech stolen from Peter and Tony’s designs. Now this—if Happy had been closer—and I checked—he’s usually in position between 5 and 6 no matter what time we’re finishing. He wants to be there when Tony walks out. He wasn’t today because he
was ferrying Pepper to a series of meetings and we weren’t sure what time we would be done.”

An entire discussion that occurred in the car when she hadn’t really been listening, but tracked more out of reflex than anything else.

“This is why you’re training him,” James said belatedly.

“Well, partially. He needs to do more than box anyway, but this gave me some motivation to make sure he attended. I’m with him at these meetings so at least when he’s out and exposed, I can cover him. We’ve put extra security on Pepper and Happy even has some. Rhodey’s good, there will be Stark security keeping an eye on him and Friday tracks if he’s going to be in an insecure location.”

“Thank you, Friday. Privacy mode, please.” Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “All of that makes sense. But if this is the case, you two should have someone else with you as well.”

“We’ll figure it out.” They could have used some backup today, even if they had it handled. Still… they couldn’t tie all of the Avengers up in these meetings.

Her stomach gurgled and James squeezed her nape lightly. “What do you want to eat Natalia?”

“Pizza.” It wasn’t even a question. “Large, fluffy crust, with the works.”

“I’ll do all of that but no anchovies.”

“They’re the best part.” Not that she really cared, but Steve and James grimaced with equal measure and she grinned. The action stretched her cheeks, both familiar and awkward in the same breath. “Fine, no anchovies.”

“Good. I’ll go pick it up. Normal order for you, Punk?” James continued to run his thumb up the side of her neck, pushing another wave of tension away.

“Yeah,” Steve said, his expression tight but distracted. “Thanks, Buck—you need company?”

“I’m good. Want to get a smoke and take a walk. Get my head straight.”

It was her turn to frown. Glancing at his still bruised though far less swollen face, she studied him. Turning, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. Maybe reviewing the explosion upon first entering hadn’t been the best idea. “Sorry,” she whispered against his ear.

“Nothing to be sorry about, Doll. You came back alive. I’m happy. And I get needing to understand what you may have missed.” The brush of his lips to her ear made her sigh. “Steve needs you. I’m going to take my time.” Then he sucked on her ear gently, the pull sending a pulse through her. Leaning back, he smiled as if very well aware of what he’d done. “Steve needs you. I’m going to take my time.” Then he sucked on her ear gently, the pull sending a pulse through her. Leaning back, he smiled as if very well aware of what he’d done. “Go take a shower—get into something comfortable. Make Stevie give you a foot rub.” He paused then they both glanced down at her bruised feet. “Okay, make him give you a back rub.” Another kiss, then he was snagging his jacket and heading for the elevator.

The soft chime as the doors opened, followed by the soft swish of the doors closing echoed in the quiet. Turning, she focused on Steve. He wasn’t looking at her but at the screen frowning.

“Go ahead,” she told him quietly.

He shifted his gaze to her and raised his brows.

“Yell at me. You know you want to.”
The tension in his bruised jaw gave it away, but he shook his head. “Nat... I don’t.”

“Liar.”

Eyes narrowing, he scowled at her. “I’m not lying.”

“But you’re not being honest either. You’re mad at me.”

“Nat—Angel. I’m not mad. I’m... frustrated.”

Catching his hand, she said, “Then come yell at me while I shower.”

“I do not want to yell at you,” he argued, but followed her into the bedroom. “You’ve had a long week, including getting no sleep last night after you had a seizure. Then you spend your entire day with Tony, who triggered you, dealing with politics and the questions of the Committee that wants to still find a way to get rid of you and you finish your day defusing bombs only to be right in the path of an exploding car. None of which is your fault.”

She unzipped the skirt and walked into the bathroom to turn on the shower. Unbuttoning her shirt, she faced him where he leaned in the doorway arms folded.

“While I was also working on an investigation I didn’t read you in on because it wasn’t immediately critical. Something that also involves Tony and I’ve spent more time with him this week than I’ve gotten to see you. Oh and I also wasn’t very welcoming for your first night home after a mission kept you away. I’m thinking those are my fault.”

Setting the shirt on the counter, she unsnapped her bra and winced when Steve ran a finger over her shoulder blade. “Hurt?”

“A little. Stings.” She twisted to look. Then picked up her shirt. There was a slice right through it. “I didn’t feel that.”

“Probably just shock. It’s not deep.” He probed it, the skin pinched but not terrible. “It feels more like a burn, looks like one.”

“Guess the shield wasn’t quite as fast as it seemed.”

“Fast enough.” He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “More than fast enough.”

“Okay... so, about that yelling...”

He sighed and gave her a little nudge. “Get in the shower, Angel.”

“You’re really not going to yell at me?” She gave him a long, slow blink and the corner of his mouth kicked up.

“Not while you’re still hurting.”

Straightening, she sighed, “Then we might be in for a long wait.”

Understanding flickered in his eyes. “I want to ask how are you, but I don’t want to crowd you.”

“You’re not crowding me...I’m the one who disappeared. I needed... I needed to get my head clear. When I dance I can do that, I kind of get out of my own head and it quiets the noise.”

“We could have slept in our own rooms...”
Closing the gap, she pushed up on her bruised toes and cradled his face. “I never want you to feel like you can’t be in my bed. I was the one who didn’t feel comfortable there, not because of you Steve. Never because of you. I just… I needed to get out of my head and I really didn’t want to sleep.”

Some of the lines of tension in his expression eased. “Bucky said you needed time—I kind of wanted to break the door down.” He dropped his forehead to rest against hers. “I hate seeing you in pain, Angel.”

“Well, it’s not a picnic and it’s…” She wasn’t even sure she had the words for it. “Not a fan of you being in pain either.” He was and it wasn’t just the bruises on his face or James’. They worried about her.

“Shower, you can keep talking but the water’s plenty warm.” The steam billowed around them as if proving his point. Then he pressed his mouth to hers, slow and even, a gentle caress and a taste. A moment later, he picked her up and set her in the shower, pulling back before the warm water hit him.

Tipping her head back into the water, she let out a little hiss as the heat beat against her shoulders. The burn stung but it wasn’t awful. She pulled her hair out of its braid, and combed her fingers through it. Blinking the water out of her eyes, she caught Steve staring at his dog tags and smiled.

“You really don’t want to yell at me?”

“Nope,” he said, the corner of his mouth kicking up. The cut from earlier had nearly vanished. The bruises along his face would be gone by the following day. “Disappointed?”

“No—maybe a little?”

Leaning on the wall, he smiled a little wider. “I can yell, I suppose. But I don’t want to.”

“Fine,” she gave an exaggerated sigh and worked shampoo into her hair. It was kind of like washing the whole day off. “Last night…” She turned the conversation back. “What I remembered… it was like I lived through those moments all over again. The taste. The smell. The…” The gut-wrenching agony of a broken heart. “James had asked me to kill him if they ever took him again. To put a bullet in his head rather than be made to serve them.” Bile burned in the back of her throat. “I couldn’t do it.”

Understanding flared in Steve’s eyes. “I know, Angel. I wouldn’t have been able to do it either. Killing him would have meant there was no hope. I know it took decades…”

“But I got him back.” She exhaled and rinsed her hair before going for the conditioner. “I got him back. But I had no idea then. Not even faith I just—” Hesitating, she studied Steve. “Do you want to hear this?”

“Yes,” he told her. “Anything you want to share or not. I’m here. I know you can do this on your own, but you don’t have to.”

Leaving the conditioner in her hair, she reached for the washcloth and the soap. “For a little while and even now—it feels like I’m two people.” Even saying it aloud was unnerving. “The me who went there, who let James take her back and I knew what waited for me. I knew it every moment I was on that transport. I counted on it.”

Pivoting under the water, she rinsed her arms and then turned to begin scrubbing her face to get all traces of the cosmetics off.
“I knew when I got there I’d be in the chair. I’d had this hope, faint and fleeting, that when I saw James again it would trigger him to remember. That died fairly quick. So the next option was to make sure they wiped me, but I was going to take as many of them with me as I could.” After rinsing her face and her hair, she turned to face him again. “These were the people who did that to him. Who wiped him. Not just the people who ordered it—but the scientists and the doctors and the specialists.”

Hate coiled in her gut. They were the bastards who ‘fine-tuned’ their equipment to modify their weapons. The ones behind shredding their minds and making them as puppets.

“I wanted them dead.”

When she shut off the water, he snagged a big towel and held it out for her. Stepping into it, she sighed when he wrapped it around her and then locked his arms around her tight.

“That was the goal? Just to punish them?”

“Not the only goal.” That piece of her had refused to think about the child. That was what she’d reduced her to in her mind. The child. Not a name. “If they decided to interrogate me… no one is impervious forever, I had to protect the child.”

“Your daughter.”

“By then I had already compartmentalized.”

Steve’s arms flexed against her.

“I couldn’t think about it any other way.” That part of her might have known or remembered but the memory she had—swallowing once, she tucked the towel against her breasts then reached for a second one to wrap her hair. That memory had been devoid of her daughter. The child. Compartmentalized. Removed. Allowed no purchase. If she thought about her at all—she’d have hesitated even more than she already did. Facing him, she spread her arms. “So I got—a piece of me back. But it’s this really… dark and painful piece. I don’t—I don’t quite know what to do with it yet.”

His whole expression gentled. “Do you feel different?”

“I don’t know.” Did she? When Steve snagged the towel and tugged her forward, she found a smile as he began to dry her off. “I feel like I’m me, but not quite right. Like—there was her and she was—or I was so completely focused on what came next. The regret—the only thing I had to steel myself for was looking into his eyes and knowing he wouldn’t be looking back at me. I had to tell him it would be okay. Even if I couldn’t kill him.” The very idea was just wrong. It even tilted the memory of when she shot him on the bridge. Recoiling inside of her like how could she? “I had to tell him it would be okay because some day he might remember it and he might hate himself for it.”

Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes, then pulled the towel off her head. The weight of it too much. Steve rose from a crouch and straightened the dog tags so they hung perfectly again. He took a moment to hang up the towel, then took the second one. Blotting her hair slowly, he wore a look of intense concentration.

Meeting his gaze, she exhaled slowly. “So getting perspective, that’s taking me a minute.”

“Okay.” He set the second towel aside, then brushed his knuckles down her cheek. The gentleness actually forcing her to swallow back the emotion. “What can I do?”
“You’re doing it,” she told him. “You’re here.”

“Not planning on being anywhere else.”

“Good.” Planting her hand against his chest, she forced her breaths to even. “Steve… do you remember when we were on the quinjet? In Moscow? You had just woken up from the drugs they hit you with?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “There was this gorgeous redhead, reminded me of a pinup girl. She was pinning me to a cot. Might have kissed me into submission.” He caught her hand and tugged her out of the bathroom, snagging something off the vanity as they moved. Then instead of staying in her room, he continued toward the living room and then over to his room.

James still wasn’t back, not that she’d have cared if he’d seen her trailing after Steve in the wide-open space in the nude.

That might be kind of hot.

“That could have been me—except I don’t recall kissing you into submission. You were still pretty feisty.”

He chuckled. “I was drunk and besotted with the idea you were actually kissing me. Let’s be honest.” The lights were off in his room, the windows bright enough to let the city lights illuminate the interior. “Friday nudge the heat up in here a couple of degrees and remain in privacy mode.”

At the bed, he pulled out the pillows and then nudged her to lie down and at her arched brow, he held up her favorite lotion.

“I don’t think James was serious about you having to give me a massage…”

“He might not have been,” Steve told her with a slow smile. “But I am definitely serious about it. You had a day. You need some pampering and I need to pamper you. On your stomach, Romanoff.”

“Right away, Captain.” She gave him a light bump with her hip before she crawled onto the bed and settled with her arms crossed beneath her head so she could lay her cheek against them and look at him. It pulled a little at her shoulder, but since the burn didn’t really do more than sting faintly, she ignored it. Perching next to her, Steve added the lotion to his palms before he rubbed them together.

“So, the quinjet where you kissed me senseless?” He prompted as he began to smooth the lotion over her back. Her eyes half closed at the firm, even pressure he applied to her already warmed muscles.

“Hmm… I told you I was worried about what remembering would do.” Steve had really nice, big hands and sometimes she forgot that until he worked both of them along her back, his hands easily engaging the muscles from her trapezius to her rhomboids to her Lattisimus dorsi.

“You didn’t want to make a promises or offers you might not be able to keep if you and Bucky remembered and you were more than you knew.” His voice was calm and even. “You even offered to stop trying to figure it out…”

She had. She’d meant it at the time. “That piece…even as disconnected as it is, like this orphan segment of a life I inhabited—that was one piece. It fits and doesn’t fit and I’m me and yet her, but she’s—a fragment. What happens when it’s all of it?”
“Well, I’m going to recommend some breaks in the dancing to treat your toes if nothing else.” The solemn, earnest advice sent a ripple of laughter through her. He rolled his thumbs along her spine, working loose knot after knot. Steve had given her massages before—usually she’d been dressed and she’d done the same for him after a grueling workout or mission, but this was… this was nice. “Do you want to stop?”

“No,” she admitted, no hesitation. As uneasy as the divide was between that memory and the rest of her or how challenging it would be to reconcile all those turbulent emotions with how she felt now. The depth of her feelings for James alone was—confusing and intoxicating and more than a little worrying.

It seemed like an outlier on the curve of her experiences.

One shard of memory.

What happened when she had them all?

“Then we don’t stop—but I would like a doctor who knows what they’re doing to look at the brain scan.” The gentle reminder sent a chill through her gut, but she sighed.

“I know. T’Challa is here tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to ask him, Angel,” Steve told her and the faintest of catches in his voice betrayed how much it probably cost him to push those words out. The heat from his hands added to the warmth in the room and from her shower and her muscles were unlocking from all the tension of the day. She could almost hear the knots crackling as he pressed a thumb into them to work them loose.

She groaned when he got a particularly stubborn one to go. “I think you just killed me.”

He chuckled. “Yeah? Should I stop?”

“Right around never, okay?” Stretching her legs, she bit her lower lip when he worked his way over her glutes.

“Never sounds pretty good.” He pressed a kiss between her shoulder blades.

He moved, half straddling her legs without putting any weight on her and stretched to run his hands from her back over her glutes to her thighs and back up again. A shiver had her tightening her thighs when his thumbs glided along the inside of them.

“Are you okay?” The bruises on he and James said a lot. But they hadn’t volunteered and she hadn’t asked. The same way Steve and James gave her space about the dancing.

He didn’t answer immediately, working his hands over her thighs up and down. Coming perilously close to teasing levels as he inched higher with each stroke. “I didn’t handle it as well as I wanted. I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to not want to protect you and bust down doors to make sure you’re safe.”

“I know.” She smiled against her arm. “I kind of like that about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She could save herself, but it was damn nice to know he had her back. To know they both did. They had and they would. Another hard piece to swallow, the memory of looking into the eyes
of the one person who’d ever made her feel like a person and not finding them there anymore.

“But you still need your space.”

“Sometimes… but I’m here,” she promised. “I want to be here.” She did.

He sighed and then he blanketed over her and pressed his lips to the spot right behind her ear. “I think I just need to hear that.”

She smiled, cracking her eyes open to look at him. “I want to be here. I want you.”

“Hmm,” he nuzzled her ear. “More.”

“And I told you uncomfortable isn’t the word I would have used for it,” Steve countered.

“You never told me what the word you would have used was then…” The invitation to play tangling around them

“More,” Steve chuckled when she nuzzled his throat, but it was her fingers tickling along his side that got him talking. “The word I would have used was more.”

Delight filled her. “You should really learn to use your words more.”

Her smile grew into a full grin and she began to laugh. “More is a good word.” Twisting beneath him, she arched her head to meet his lips and kissed him. First a brush, then deeper when he stroked his tongue over the seam of her lips and parted them.

Between one kiss and the next, he claimed her mouth with crushing demand. Hands flat to the bed, he lifted his weight and she rolled over then dragged him back down. Carding her fingers through his hair, she cradled his hips with her thighs. The roughness of the denim bit into her skin and she didn’t give a damn.

All the uneasy, uneven thoughts quieted as she sucked on his tongue. Steve groaned against her, the sound rumbling in his throat. All that heat and strength pinned her, a shield against the rest of the world even when it was her own mind racing through the dark places.

“I missed you,” he whispered against her lips before he began kissing his way along her jaw and down her throat. The brush of his beard adding layers to the sensations his mouth provoked. “The last few days—God I missed you, Angel.” He traced his tongue over her pulse point before sucking a kiss against it. “Got spoiled on the island, having you right there all the time and now…”

“I know,” she whispered, sighing with pleasure as he kissed a path down to her collarbone. “The island spoiled us.”

Lifting his head, he gazed down at her. His eyes gleamed in the colorful spill of ambient light from the cityscape outside. But she didn’t care about what was outside the windows, only what was right here in front of her. “Are you…? I don’t want to… I mean… Is this okay? I’m not pushing. I know last night was… it was a lot.”

Combing her fingers through his tousled hair, she pushed it away from his forehead. Then she slid her fingers down to caress his beard. “Steve…” Her voice was a breathless whisper, as she allowed need to trail into the syllable well aware of what it would do to him. Licking her lips, she added, “More.”

Humor deepened the line at the corners of his eyes as he grinned. “I can do that.”
A delicious shiver traveled up her spine as he ducked back in to kiss her again and roamed those wonderful hands over her skin. Light skimming touches with the tips of his fingers, squeezing caresses with his palms, and then he worked his mouth down her throat once more and she arched her back.

“I do… need something,” she murmured when he closed his lips around a nipple. Not that she needed it in the immediate moment. She ran her nails down his back and squeezed his sides as the roughness of his jeans dragged against her skin. The pull of his mouth and the faintest scrape of his teeth as he twisted her nipple sent a pulse of pure heat curling through her. He palmed her neglected breast and damn if he hadn’t memorized what she liked.

“Fuck,” she exhaled as he continued the full on sensual assault. She tugged at his shirt, then fisted a hand into his hair until he released her nipple with a light pop and glanced at her.

“I’m working on it,” he told her as a bit of that lazy drawn out Brooklyn accent crawled into his voice.

“Yes, you are,” she whispered. “But I need you to have on fewer clothes, because I’m more into participation.”

With a soft laugh, he pressed a kiss to the skin just next to his dog tags and then another on the curve of her breast, and then a third only this time he sucked a small bruise along the underside and she pressed up with her pelvis only to have him slide a hand under her thigh and lift it, keeping her still.

“I’m busy,” he told her with no small amount of impertinence. He took his time, kissing her breasts, her belly button, the jut of her hip—taking a moment to murmur something as he traced his tongue along the line where her hip dipped toward her thighs.

“What?”

“Curves,” he said quietly, then pressed another kiss to her mons and she bit her lip as she clenched her ass. “Your curves are returning.” Pleasure and wonder tangled in his voice. Want ripped through her with every glide of his lips. When he spread her legs and eased down to brace her thighs apart with his shoulders, he smiled. “Beautiful curves.” He gripped her ass and gave it a squeeze. “Exquisite curves.”

Then he curled his tongue against her clit as he pressed a kiss to her cunt. The sudden pressure and low vibrations had her arching and twisting. Too much. Not enough. But he clamped her down and wouldn’t released her as he pressed her right up to the edge and without an ounce of hesitation shoved her right over.

The orgasm hit sweet and fierce. The strain pulled her taut because he continued licking her from entrance to clit and down again, driving her higher with every hungry stroke of his tongue. She fisted the blankets as she flexed her thighs. Then two fingers pressed into her and she was pushing up to take them all the way to the base knuckles.

Too much.

Not enough.

When had he figured that out? But before she could fully form the thought, he curled his fingers searching with every careful glide as he thrust his fingers into her. She glanced down to find his gaze locked on her, the want in those eyes and she didn’t fight the waves as they hit, each one a
little stronger than the last.

When the second orgasm struck it caught her in a torrent and she soaked his hand. His murmur of surprise and delight preceded him nibbling at her labia, then stroking her clit again, detonating little spasms as she flexed around his fingers.

Beating her fist the bed once, she tried to glare. His less than impressed but sultry smile told her it was an abysmal failure. “Steve.”

“Yes, Angel?”

“Get naked.”

“You sure that’s what you want?”

One minute he was grinning up at her from between her legs and the next she had him on his back, his shirt off and her hands on the snaps to his jeans. He stared up at her with an unabashed smile and a hint of a flush. “Apparently that’s what you want.”

“Hmm,” she said with a smile and leaned down to lick herself off his lips and he let out a lower, deeper groan as she got his jeans open and her hand wrapped around him. Hard, thick, and hot in her hand and she sucked one his tongue. His hands came up to her hips and she clamped her thighs to keep him from shifting her weight.

Another moan left his throat as she nuzzled his beard. She’d soaked his face apparently, too and a sense of deep satisfaction unfolded as she rubbed her cheek against his.

“What?” The darkness of his pupils threatened to swallow his blue eyes as she lifted her head, still smiling.

“You smell like mine.”

The words slipped out. It was more than the shampoo or the soap. It was… there were no words for it. He lifted a hand to tangle with the dog tags, tugging her down and she went pliant and met his kiss. Slow, deep, and wet. He shoved a hand lower to help her push down his jeans and boxers.

Shifting, she stroked him again and he trailed his hand up to her hip, tightening his grip as she sank down on him and their kiss broke on a gasp. There was something about just taking all of him at once, not giving herself a chance to stretch or to breathe.

Staring into his eyes, she shuddered as she took him to the hilt. Lips parted, he let out a soft breath. Fingers still wrapped around the dog tags, he tugged her back to him and she chuckled against his mouth. “You like that…”

“Yes,” he moaned, breath mingling with hers. “I do.” Then her mouth was on his as she began to roll her hips. The kiss seemed to stretch on until their lips were swollen and all she could taste or feel was him. Pulling upward, she tilted her head back and then stretched to place her hands on his thighs. She shoved his jeans down farther, then he kicked them and the boxers off. She dug her fingers into the tense corded muscles flexing beneath her as she shifted.

A furnace. The man was a furnace and all that heat and power moved beneath her. The position arched her back and pressed her breasts high and then she increased the tempo. Steve locked both hands on her hips and she drank in the sight of his wrecked expression as she drove herself a little crazy with very glide of his cock against her swollen cunt. The grind and twist at the end sparking fire against her nerves and teasing her already sensitive clit.
With every thrust up to meet her, he pushed the air from her lungs. Faster, harder, deeper and she was clamping down on him as he let out a low shout, surging upward to wrap his arms around her and then his mouth devoured hers as he came. The hot release spilled into her as she went boneless and shaking. Clinging to him, she gasped breaths between kisses. The beard against her cheeks a counterpoint to the pleasure sprawling through her system.

Leaning her head back, she drew in a deeper breath and smiled as he fisted her hair, holding her as tightly as she clung to him. Connected. Belonging.

“So…” She licked her lips. “I hope that answers the question of if this is what I wanted.”

Steve started laughing and he toppled her over onto her back and stared down at her. “Pretty damn sure you’re right…”

“Captain,” she admonished him as she stroked her foot down the back of his thigh. “Language.”

His expression shifted subtly, but she was already trying to eel away as his fingers danced down her sides. A shriek of laughter escaped her when he clamped against the nerves on either side of her knee. And then another. The laughter peeled out of her, her whole body vibrating.

“Don’t make me have to come in there,” James called from the other room and Steve went still. “I’m really enjoying eating all the pizza.”

Natasha laughed, then called, “You better not be eating all of mine.”

“You’ll just have to come out here and find out.” The smug note in James’ voice had Steve grinning as he brushed the hair away from her face. “And for the record Stevie, you’re not quiet either.”

The laughter in Steve’s expression arrested her as he chuckled. “I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“Fuck, no. It sounded pretty hot.”

Dropping his forehead to hers, Steve shook with laughter. “We’re coming…”

“Pretty sure you already did!”

She was still giggling when Steve pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Hang on a sec, Angel…” Then he rolled off the bed and walked toward the bathroom, all gorgeous ass and flexing muscle.

“I hate to see you leave, but I sure like watching you walk away,” she murmured in her best Mae West. Steve flipped on the light in time to reveal the flushed red of his ears and a sigh escaped her. The blushes grew far more infrequent, but she would never not enjoy them.

“See something you like?” He ran the water and used a washcloth to wipe first his cheeks and beard, then his thighs and cock.

“Very much so,” she told him, definitely enjoying the view. He returned with another washcloth and the angle of the light hit the framed image on the side of the bed.

“Steve?”

“Hmm?” He wiped the cloth gently between her thighs and she shuddered at the contrasting sensations.
“Is that my ass?”

He glanced over his shoulder at the image and hummed. “Hmm-hmm. I really enjoyed that bikini.”

“I’ll have to make sure I get one for the future.”

“Or wear nothing at all, depending on where we are.” He nuzzled a kiss to her lips before he rose.

“Hmm… that’s an idea.” She stretched as she left the bed and headed for the door.

“Buck?” Steve called.

“Yeah?”

“We’re still alone, right?”

She had her hand on the handle and she laughed.

“Yep, just me, the tree and all this pizza.”

Winking, she pulled open the door and sauntered out. James paused, pizza slice on the way to his mouth. Then he set it back down and wiped off his hands.

“You know, Stevie. You can have the pizza. I just found something much better to eat.”

Steve groaned from behind her but Natasha just grinned. James sat up and then patted his lap.

“Subtle,” Steve muttered as he followed her, though he’d dragged on a pair of sweatpants.

“Not even trying for that,” James said without unabashed glee as she accepted the offer and slid onto his lap. His jeans were warm, even if his left arm was cold. “Hey Doll…”

“Milli moi,” she murmured as he gave her a kiss. “Feed me.”

“Happily.” James nudged open the box of her pizza and lifted out a slice. The next few minutes passed in relaxed fashion as she worked her way through three slices and Steve and James ate theirs. The tree was lit, a bluesy kind of jazz music played, and the only thing she didn’t have was her fuzzy socks.

Still kind of perfect…

A low chime sounded and they all glanced up.

“Friday?” Steve asked in a tone that said it better not be bad news.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Parker has arrived and he’s anxious to go over his last dance lesson before tomorrow’s party.”

James groaned. “Not fair, now Natalia has to get dressed.”

They all laughed, but she had Friday send Peter to her floor while she went to get dressed. Maybe with a little coaxing, she could get a dance out of Steve and James, tonight too.
It wasn’t near as late as it felt, but it was still after eight when she made it to her floor with Steve and James in tow. Peter brightened up the moment he saw her and greeted her with a hug that picked her up off the ground.

“You should have called me!” The complaint surprised her as did the tightness of his grip.

“Ease up, Pal,” James told him with a hand to his shoulder and Peter relaxed the embrace enough to let her get a breath. When he set her down, Steve had a light hand at her back.

The faint wild-eyed look had her putting a hand on Peter’s chest. Rapid heart rate. Shallow breaths. “Breathe.”

“I am, I was just running before I got here. I heard it when I was on the subway. Been in school all day and had lots of stuff to get done so I could get Liz tomorrow and I needed to pick up my suit and do the last dance lesson, and I wanted to listen to more of the music cause I figure that way I’ll know what songs to ask her to dance to and maybe we could practice to a couple of those and there was a video on social media with links to the bombing and you were there and you didn’t call me.” The last ended on a plaintive note and Natasha sighed.

“You’re right, I should have called you. Now breathe for me. Then take a good look at me. I’m fine.”

Peter eyed her then Steve and James, both of whom wore expressions of concern. “You look great,” he told her belatedly. “They look like they were in the fight.”

James chuckled. “It happens. She’s all right though, Pal, you saw that on the news, too, right? She was able to stand up after?”

“Yeah, but for a second…” That stricken expression tugged at her.

She spread her arms. “One piece. Ready to dance if you are—or would you rather just have some hot cocoa?”

He actually looked torn, but his pulse steadied. “Should I go up and see Tony?”

“Why don’t we invite him down?” Steve offered. “He might be working.” The offer surprised Natasha, but she smiled at him. He was trying.

“I don’t want to bother him if he’s working. Friday?”

“Hey Pete,” Tony came on over the speaker. “I’m fine. Red’s fine. We’re all fine here. Your suit should be hanging in the guest room on Red’s floor. I’ve got a car on standby to take you back. You ready for tomorrow?”

The smile on Peter’s face coupled with the genuine relief made her feel bad. He’d worried. She should probably send a message to Wanda. Touching a hand to his shoulder, she circled him and headed for her studio. She’d cleaned it up before she left, but she pushed the door open and checked anyway before pulling her phone out and sending a couple of quick messages—first to Wanda, then to Laura, and finally to Sam.

All three answered in short order. Steve glanced at her with raised eyebrows and she nodded, she
was fine.

“I’m ready. I think. I just wanted to make sure I had a little more practice.”

“You’re welcome to join us, Tony,” Steve said. “Peter would probably like it if you did.”

“I mean it would be great, but you don’t have to if you’re working. A few songs and then Natasha said hot cocoa…”

“Call me when it’s cocoa time.”

“And you better make some for me,” Clint added over the speaker and Natasha laughed.

“Fine, cocoa for everyone. Let’s go Peter…”

The next hour sped past. Three slow dances and a couple of fast ones with Peter as she walked him through the steps until he was comfortable. James offered a couple of pointers, but he ducked actually dancing with her. They were all a little raw—and of everyone, James knew exactly what she’d remembered. He’d been there.

Fine, she’d make sure she got a dance out of him at the party.

Steve stepped in a couple of times so Peter could see the dance from the outside and she told him he could also watch himself in the mirror.

“At the end of the day, it’s about having fun,” James told him, catching her hand and twirling her out then pulling her back. Her toes ached inside the shoes, but she didn’t care. This was—nice.

“I get that,” Peter said. “But how do you know if she’s having fun?”

“The smile on her face,” Steve said, nodding to Natasha who grinned.

“The fact she wants to keep dancing,” James gave her a squeeze.

“What if she doesn’t like it? Or what if I mess up?”

“Then you apologize,” Natasha told him. “Tell her you need her help cause you’re just learning and you would enjoy it if she could show you a few steps.”

His eyes widened. “Really?”

“Oh yeah, girls like that.” She didn’t miss Steve’s growing smile from the corner of her eye. “Trust me.”

A few more songs and Natasha retreated to the kitchen to get the cocoa started, but she caught the awkward edge of ‘how do you know when to give a girl a kiss’ and should he before the dancing? Or after? Or maybe not at all?

Happily leaving that to Steve and James to figure out, she got the milk heated. Clint and Tony arrived as if by magic—or more likely courtesy of Friday since Natasha hadn’t put her into privacy mode. Clint tugged at her ponytail and she bumped him with her hip then he pulled out his phone and showed her a picture of Lila in ballet class, one of Cooper playing with his Death Star and Nate trying to reach it as he stood calmly like he’d been walking for months.

Tony strolled into the studio after shaking his head at the two of them and muttering something about, “why did I ever think they were just assassins?”
She tracked his movements for a minute, but the earlier unsteadiness was gone and his expression wasn’t pinched.

“He’s okay,” Clint told her. “Been hanging out in the lab while he reviewed some specs for some self-driving car thing. Don’t ask, I didn’t.”

Meeting his gaze, she nodded. “Got it.”

“How are yours doing?”

“Okay—James seems fine. He needed a walk earlier, but he brought back pizza. And Steve… Steve is good. We talked.”

“Good.” He folded his arms as she began feeding the chocolate into the simmering milk. “So, I’ve been thinking…” His voice was low. “I was looking into all the usual suspects before, you know after those two teams.”

“Long thread to pull with not a lot of movement.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. There hasn’t been any movement.”

She frowned. “None?”

“Zero.”

“We couldn’t get lucky and they all took each other out, right?” She kept adding the chocolate slowly stirring it in as it thickened. Opening the cabinet to the left, she pulled down the cinnamon, vanilla, and cayenne.

“I wish,” Clint’s voice matched her barely a whisper for a whisper. There was still a chance Steve or James could hear them, but they were in the studio with Peter and Tony, debating first kiss protocol. “After today’s incident though, I think I want to kick over some anthills.”

“You’re going to need taller boots.”

“Or a spider.”

She slanted a look at him. “Are you asking me if I have time for a play date?”

“Yep and for you to read me in on what’s going on.”

“Later.”

He frowned as she added the different spices. “How are you doing?”

“Undecided but—not terrible.”

The weight of his regard settled on her. “You need to talk, you know where I am.”

Nudging him lightly, she nodded to the cupboard. “Mugs.”

He pulled them down and lined them up on the counter. Then eased aside as she poured the hot cocoa. She was still in the undecided camp, there was—a strange mix of feelings when she looked at James. Part of her wanted to ask him if the same thing happened to him. Had he been caught between the before and the after?
But she knew the answer to the question and it was hard enough to define the depth of feeling surging from that one shard tangled amidst the loss and the pure rage.

Then there was what she felt now—the attachment, the need, the desire—shaking her head, she caught Clint’s concerned gaze. Watching her. They were all sliding back into the watch her lest she explode mode. Not her favorite. Crossing her eyes, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Peter’s startled laugh made her grin as he and the others finally came out to join them. They took up residence in the kitchen, with Natasha perching on a counter to sip her cocoa. James came to lean on her other side and Clint smirked, not surrendering his spot to Steve who just chuckled and shook his head. The warmth in his eyes when he met her gaze though promised they were good.

Tony was still offering Peter different ideas for creating the right stage for the first kiss. Combing her fingers through James’ hair, she contented herself with what she had. She might not be able to contextualize that memory, but it was hers—theirs again. What she had right now was good.

It was—really good. When Tony caught her eye, he gave her a small smile and toasted her with the hot cocoa.

Friends. Lovers. Family.

~~~

The first nightmare pulled her awake at two in the morning. It had been near midnight when they went to sleep, her body humming with pleasure. Exhausted and replete, she’d fallen asleep to the sound of James’ heartbeat and the feel of Steve’s hand stroking her back.

What worked in the waking hours and the light wasn’t always present in the dark. Movement next to her then Steve had her hand in his and she was leaning against him. He dragged them back to sit against the headboard. The gentle rumbling was his voice and it took a moment for the words to penetrate.

“You’re safe, Angel,” he was murmuring, stroking her hair. Water dripped onto her arm and his chest. He covered her cheek with a hand, stroking away the tears.

Fuck, she was crying.

James pressed his head against the back of hers. She couldn’t even remember the nightmare. Only that someone had torn out her heart.

Somewhere between the soothing words and gentle caresses, she fell back to sleep with her lashes still wet.

It was almost four the next time she jerked away, eyes wide. The room was dark. For a moment—an endless second—she forgot where she was. James shifted on the bed, the weight of his metal hand on her thigh. The air backed up in her chest, and she couldn’t breathe.
Then he moved his hand to her cheek and his face nestled close to hers. “I’m here, Natalia,” he whispered.

“They took you.”

“I’m here now. We’re safe.”

Were they? Would they ever really be safe? The trembling started in her hands and she fisted them. He caught her hands and held them in his, the soft murmuring of his voice chasing the shivers wracking her system.

Steve’s hand settled on her hip and he rubbed it in slow circles as James kept talking to her and eventually her eyes closed.

At five-thirty, she opened her eyes to find Steve sitting next to her, a light in the bathroom gently illuminating the room as he worked on his sketchpad. The shadows of the dream lingered, but they faded fast when he smiled down at her.

“Hey… how you doing?”

“I want to take a hit out on the dream gods,” she admitted in almost petulant tone. This was why she hadn’t wanted to sleep the night before.

He glanced over her toward James. “Want to go running with us? We’ll get you back in time to train Tony.”

Actually… she kind of did.

Ten minutes later, she led the pair of them out of the Tower and they headed toward the park. They let her set the pace. The air was frosty and their breath steamed. Her muscles burned almost as much as her eyes did as she warmed up. This couldn’t be more than a jog to them, but they didn’t complain.

They made it back to the Tower with about five minutes before she needed to be at the gym. Winded, sides aching, and her legs on fire, she found herself a little more balanced. They rode the elevator down to the gym with her, then left her to head in and meet Tony while they returned to Steve’s floor. Maybe they could make up for the sleep she cost them.

Tony was already in the gym when she came in, he was stretching and there were two cups of steaming coffee sitting on the bench. “That’s two days in a row I got here first, Red. A record.”

“Don’t get used to it.” She stripped off the hoodie she’d worn for the run and dropped it on the bench before sitting and pulling off her shoes. Tony was getting deeper in his stretches. Granted, a few days wouldn’t make up for years of abuse and neglect, but everyone started somewhere.

“Which one is mine?” She motioned to the coffee cups.

“The one closest to you.” Straightening, he turned to face her as he went into the next lunge. “You look flushed. Morning wake up call?”

She smirked. “Running.”

“With Steve?” Mock horror crawled across his face and she chuckled.

“And James. No, they didn’t set the pace.” After taking as sip of the coffee, she sighed. It was one
if the better South American blends, rich and really nutty. Also one of her favorites.

“You’re still up for this? Don’t want to break the teacher.”

She snorted. “You’re not getting out of it today.”

“Damn,” he said with a snap of his fingers. “Well, just remember, our only meeting today is T’Challa and we get to eat decent food with him.”

“And we don’t have to kiss his ass,” she added and lifted the coffee cup in his direction before taking another long drink.

“It’s like getting a gold star, you’re actually drinking the coffee instead of throwing mine away. I mean—it’s getting me right here.” He pressed a hand to his chest, then finished his last set of deep lunges before straightening.

“The coffee is good,” she told him and set the cup down. “Did all your stretches?”

“Yes,” he told her. Though his eyes were a little bruised and red-rimmed and his hair disheveled, he looked okay.

“How did you sleep?”

“Had better. Had longer. Did okay.” He rolled his head from side to side. “How about you?”

Stretching her hands over her head, she stretched her spine and then stepped into a lunge and then back up. Her muscles were warm and loose, but they wouldn’t be for long if she didn’t get moving. “Not horrible.” Though, that wasn’t saying much. “I’ll live.”

Moving out to the mat to face him, she considered their options. “Let’s run through the holds and the locks, and breaking them. Then we’re going to work on disarming.”

“Sounds—painful.” The snarky grin made her smile. Then he sobered. “Hey Red? We’re okay, right? You and me?”

“Yes, Tony. We’re okay.” She met his gaze evenly. They were friends. Yesterday had left them both raw and bleeding in places. But they were okay. “Now get ready.”

“Yay. Bruises.”

Despite the remark, he was ready. It took him two tries to break the close-hold, but he got out of the choke-hold on the first try much to his own surprise.

“Look at that—not so bad, eh? Who’s your best student?”

“Peter,” she told him without missing a beat and he scowled.

“That’s cause he’s cuter than me, right?” The mock offense in his voice echoed with familiarity.

“Yep,” she said, not even bothering to deny it.

“Just remember, the kid’s jailbait—ow.” He landed on his ass, then held up a hand. “Yep. Deserved that.”

Smirking, she nodded. “Just think, a few more months of this and you might be able to say a smart ass remark and not get your ass kicked immediately.”
“Motivation. I like it.”

By the time they finished though, Tony had the basics of disarming down and he’d not only broken a chokehold, he took her down right after almost perfectly.

After a crappy night, it was a damn good start to the day.

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Breakfast with T’Challa went mostly as expected. Steve, Clint, and James all joined them and it was a good time to catch everyone up on the week. T’Challa listened with interest to their suspicions about the French delegate and the questions with regard to the Italian.

“We cannot act as if he is complicit in the bombing.” T’Challa had not been at the U.N. during the incident, though he’d heard about it almost immediately. The press had also been running stories on it all evening and night. “If anything, he may be a dupe or the person involved spread misinformation.”

“Yes and that public information officer disappeared before anyone could question him.” It was another issue to deal with on another day, like so many others.

“As much as I hesitate to say such a dangerous event worked to our benefit, it may have.” T’Challa added, because the press, it seemed, loved how she and Tony had worked together. Tony was getting most of the credit, something Natasha didn’t mind at all. Though her surviving the explosion had led to a lot of speculation on whether she was enhanced.

And more about her being Tony’s girlfriend.

“Well,” Clint said. “At least the press always has the old standbys to fall back on.”

“Unfortunately,” Steve grumbled.

She covered his hand with hers. “Just ignore it. No one is answering that particular question, so they speculate and that’s all it is.”

“Too bad Thor isn’t here,” Clint said with a chuckle. “He’d probably take those questions for you and wax poetic on the worthiness of all possible contenders.”

There was a downbeat then an upbeat and she, Tony, and Steve laughed. They tried to explain the joke to T’Challa and James, but it was really only funny if you knew Thor and the fact he’d taken hair questions for her one day when the press had asked if she needed a particular regimen for combat.

As it turned out, Thor had one.

They wandered off topic, but T’Challa, while amused, also focused on the French delegate’s action. “France has been the most vocal country in your support,” he told her. “His behavior leads me to believe next week may be more challenging than we already expected.”
“Maybe,” Tony said. “But we’re going to take next week a little differently. The all day conferences are not going to work. I want to group them up some, play their agendas off each other.”

It could help, but they still had a lot of ground to cover.

“But that’s next week. Tonight is my party and we’re going to have a good time. No politics.”

Nakia would be there, T’Challa told her. She was en route having been delayed on another matter. When Natasha asked about shopping, he smiled. “Yes, I believe she had to pick up a few things. A quick trip.”

Throughout the breakfast, she debated whether she would ask the king about her memories and the brain scans. They’d helped James, and listening to T’Challa and James talk, it reminded her of just how much they’d done.

When James came to them in Switzerland, he’d arrived with a tablet full of data including brain scans and the steps they’d taken as well as expectations of success. The work had been extensive.

Still, the question remained securely fastened to her tongue. She caught Steve’s gaze a couple of times, the curiosity mingling with worry in his eyes. The speculative weight of Tony’s regard crossed hers once or twice; the only two not seemingly waiting were Clint and James.

Only when they excused themselves and T’Challa began the process of saying his goodbyes did Natasha ask if he had a minute. She took him to her floor preferring the privacy to do it her way and no one objected. Alone, she stood with her hands behind her back and T’Challa canted his head as she said nothing.

“Natasha?”

“I would like to ask you a question,” she volunteered finally. “Hypothetical at this point. You may not be able to answer it and I am comfortable with a non-answer if that is all you have.”

“Very well,” he said, sliding his hands into the pockets of his suit. “How can I be of assistance?”

“When James came to Wakanda, he asked to be put into cryo after explaining his condition—”

“The trigger words used to control him following the brutal mental reconditioning he received over the course of many years.” T’Challa nodded. “I was fully briefed. If you have specific questions about his treatment, I can arrange for you to speak to one of his physicians or to my sister.”

“I may need that to answer this question. There is a chance that some of the same mental reconditioning used on James—was also used on me.”

His expression shifted. “You are referring to the video that Secretary Ross aired of you…?”

“Yes—and no. I know I was in that chair. I know… pieces of what was done to me.”

“I see.”

“Maybe—I’m not explaining this well because this is not a subject I am comfortable discussing. We may be on friendly terms now…”

“But we are not friends, Natasha. I understand. Let me approach this a different way for you, as I understand the desire to keep that which is private, private even among allies.”
“Thank you.”

“You are most welcome. I owe you a debt.” This had come up before. “I stand by my offer of assistance. If you wish to visit Wakanda so our physicians may examine you, then you would be welcome. You need only say the word.”

“Even if you don’t know what the issue is? If I don’t—totally understand all the finer points?”

Holding out his hands, T’Challa waited a moment and she finally set her hands in his. He gripped them lightly. “Until we have identified the issue, we cannot know if we can assist you. But I will tell you exactly what my sister will say should I introduce you and tell her you have a challenging problem you do not think she can fix.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows.

“She will tell me she can fix a mean white Russian.”

The corners of Natasha’s mouth twitched and T’Challa smiled. “I promise you, those will be her words.”

“I think I like her already.”

“Most do. She is incorrigible.”

“The best people are.” Releasing his hands, she took a step back. “Thank you for the offer. Would you ask your sister if I might talk to her? A video call would be sufficient.”

“Of course. I will make the arrangements and we will set it up.” With quiet concern, he studied her. “Are you all right at the moment? Truly?”

“At the moment?” She inclined her head. “I’m in a good place right now.”

She was.

Even if her head wasn’t quite.

“Thank you,” she told him as she walked him to the elevator, but he waved off her accompanying him to the lobby.

Once he was gone, she rubbed her face and glanced at her dance studio. There was hours yet until the party. Hours she didn’t have to do anything at all. Pepper had invited her to a spa, but the idea of being out with strangers and letting anyone touch her—no. She sent her a message apologizing about not being able to make it but she looked forward to seeing her at the party. Pepper understood, she’d seen the news. She assured her they were all fine, though security had been taken to a ridiculous level. After extracting a promise to have a drink together that evening, Pepper signed off to go to a meeting.

With one last glance at the studio, she turned to the elevator and took it back to Steve’s floor. They must have still been up in the penthouse, so she stripped and crawled into bed, and burrowed into the covers. She was drifting when the elevator chimed their arrival. She cracked an eyelid when the bed dipped and she smiled at Steve. He scooted back to sit against the headboard and pulled out his sketchbook again. With a gentle rub to her back, he bent to press a kiss to her forehead. “All good?”

“I talked to him. No decisions yet… gonna talk to Shuri. Apparently she can fix a mean white
Russian.” The words made them both snort as James sprawled on her other side and he spread his hand over her hip.

“Thank you, Angel.”

“S’okay. Tired.”

“Sleep, Doll.” Another kiss. “We’re right here.”

Safe, she told herself.

Safe.

She was safe… she was in a good place.

Eventually, her mind listened and she slept.
She stared at herself. The room was like so many others she’d occupied over the years. The smell of blood and sweat polluted the air. Shackled to the chair, James—no, not James—the Soldier standing before her, his hand on her jaw forcing it open.

The words—she knew the words, she’d spoken the words. No, the other her had spoken them but she’d been her. The memory was hers. The schism between she and her couldn’t be more profound as she moved to stand in front of herself.

Natalia Alianova Romanova.

Natasha Romanoff.

Two sides of the same coin.

Natalia’s glare turned accepting. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“I know,” she told herself.

“It was the only thing to do.”

“I know that, too.”

She did. The moment elongated around them. This second trapped in between the breaths. Natalia’s gaze turned sharp and appraising. They’d been trained to dissect even the smallest example of body language. “You want to know where she is.”

“Yes.” How could she not?

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Because she knew herself.
A sly smile. “Does it really matter which?” Natalia rolled her head from side to side. The crack of her neck sounded obscene amidst the frozen tableau.

“No,” Natasha said as she sighed. “It doesn’t. If you had the information I wouldn’t have to ask you for it.”

“Are you sure?” Natalia raised her eyebrows. “Our training was thorough. Or maybe you have lost this as well. Karpov’s obsession with this stupid machine—he thinks to make himself more by making us less.”

“Lost...”

“Compartmentalize...Natasha.” Her sneer on the last was more bitter than angry. “Are you what I become after this?”

“No,” Natasha looked around the echo chamber of a room. She could almost see her breath frosting in the chill. The soldiers frozen in mid-motion. The weapons aimed at them. Their Soldier towering over them. Deep inside his eyes, she searched for where James was frozen. She knew he was in there, even if he could do nothing. “We became—something else for a while.”

“Not Karpov’s pet.” Disgust curled through Natalia’s words and echoed in Natasha’s soul.

“No,” she laughed, but there was no humor. “Do you remember Ivan’s warning? The command he gave us?”

“No. He gave us many commands. I am actually surprised he is not here. But he grows older every year and his power erodes.” Natalia tried to shrug but the shackles kept her still. “Ivan, Madame. Karpov. A leash is a leash.”

“You won’t tell me where she is?”

“I can’t,” Natalia repeated. “I can tell no one. In a moment, I won’t even know myself much less her. This is for the best.”

Natasha understood that, but she wanted something. Some—small piece to connect to. Even if it was just to see her from a distance, to know she survived and thrived.

“It’s the only way,” Natalia reminded her. “The only way.” She lifted her chin toward the room. “This is her alternative.”

The room flashed around her.

There were tanks. Dozens of them. And inside were...she wouldn’t call them fetuses or even babies—they were...

“Nat...” Steve gripped her shoulder, a light touch, but she didn’t look at him. She was studying the tanks.

“This...is the some accumulation of their work. He kept trying to remake you, build another. Design another. A more perfect you—since you were flawed.” Leonid laughed now, but there was no humor in it. Just a kind of sad sickness. The world had passed him by. “They put us on ice, they put your Soldier on ice, and they let you live and live and live...and you betray them, leave them behind, and don’t stop the Soviets from falling. So you should be responsible for rebuilding our
motherland. You…it’s there in you. Locked away. The perfect soldiers.”

One tube contained what looked like the remains of a little girl, and she skidded to a stop in front of it.

The greenish cast of the water gave her an ill pallor; though her eyes were closed and her body floated—definitely a corpse—she was eerily familiar.

It was her face.

Or close to it.

Madame screwed Ivan by having Natasha sterilized. Ivan screwed with Karpov by sabotaging her for his asset program. It was why she’d run…they’d taken the Soldier from her. At some point, maybe it was in Azzano, maybe that was the moment. But she’d broken from the Red Room, from Karpov, from all of it.

Touching her hand to the tube, she swallowed the bile crawling up her throat.

“This is her alternative.”

This was their alternative.

But this wasn’t her. Not her daughter. But it could have been.

This was why she had to run. Why she had to forget.

Turning, she stared at the rows. There were so many. Friday had all the data. Tony downloaded it.

She never read it.

In the weeks since they left this place—she never looked at it.

“Compartmentalizing,” Natalia whispered in her ear. “We hide it even from ourselves. It is how we keep our secrets.”

Natalia was a shadow behind her as she moved through the wall of tanks. Each one contained a new horror. At the end, one waited empty and she walked up the steps to touch the glass inside it, then she was in it and the water flooded in and as she twisted and turned, she found Steve and James staring at her, their eyes both empty. The flash brief, then Steve gripped James’ shoulder and pulled him away.

“Sorry Buck—I know you thought she’d be here.”

James’ eyes turned turbulent as he glared around the room. Clint shook his head. “Nothing here, but more of these monsters. I think you two are chasing a ghost.” He motioned to the tank she was in and the water was closing over her waist. The glass was smooth; the roof of it had no seams. There was no way out.

“Friday is downloading the data,” Tony called. “Start setting the charges.”

“We’ll find her,” Steve said, but his tone didn’t match his words.
The guys split apart and she banged on the glass, but nothing happened.

Wanda passed the tube.

Peter.

Fury.

Tony started past her, then backed up. The pity in his gaze as he looked her over wrenched at her. “Sorry—you probably deserved better.” Then he pressed a charge against her tank and activated it before moving on.

“Hey, Tony…” Even Bruce was there… wait… what?

A roar broke through the room echoing and then the other guy charged, smashing the tanks as he raced through and the water had reached her neck. Soon she’d be under it. She sucked in air, six minutes…if she could hold out just six minutes, she could get out.

Then her tank exploded as the big guy caught her across the back and she flew into pallets of quinjet parts.

Looking up, she expected to see him roaring at her as he stomped toward her, but she faced Natalia in the chair again.

“It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay.”

Then someone threw the switch…

Natasha snapped her eyes open and sucked in a gasp of air. Arkangelsk. Alternatives. Compartmentalizing. She committed the clues—if they were clues and not some perversion created by the darkness in her mind—to memory before they slipped through her grasp. The room around her was quiet and dark with the window turned mostly opaque to keep the daylight out.

Abandoning the bed, she slipped into the bathroom, emptied her bladder and then washed her face. The soft hum of male voices carried from the front room—too faint to make out their content. But they were out there.

It was still early afternoon. The party was hours away. At least she’d slept. After pulling on sweatpants, a long-sleeved pullover and fuzzy socks she padded out to the living room. James stood in the kitchen, building a sandwich while Steve leaned against the island, arms folded as he listened to Clint who leaned back in a chair, balancing his leg on the chair across from him.

“I get that, Cap—but it’s kind of what Nat and I do,” Clint said, spinning a bottle around lazily with one hand. “I can…”

“What do we do?”

“Sleeping Beauty arises and I didn’t even have to send in a prince to wake you.” The dry note in Clint’s voice amused her, but she flipped him off as she headed straight for Steve. He wrapped his arms around her for a hug and she squeezed him a little tighter than she probably needed, but he and James and Clint were all here, safe and sound and she wasn’t in that giant tank.

Pressing his lips to her head, he murmured, “Another one?”
“Yeah, just—different this time.” She listened to his heartbeat for a moment, then caught James eyeing her with so much life in the cool blue of his eyes. “I’m…” Yeah, she couldn’t even make herself say that word anymore. “Better. I’m better now that I’m awake.”

He nodded slowly. Easing away from Steve, she wrapped her arms around James from the back and pressed against his shoulder blades. The not-quite-nightmare left her off-center. This was better. Much better.


“Hungry?” he offered and her stomach’s growl answered for her. Chuckling, he covered her hands on his abdomen and twisted to glance back at her. Rising on her tiptoes, she pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth, and he smiled. Fresh coffee and a sandwich in hand, she settled at the table.

“What are we good at?” She nudged Clint as she took a bite of the sandwich.

“Kissing ass and taking names,” he said with a wry smile and she rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe that’s just me.”

“When was the last time you kissed someone’s ass?”

“March 2010.” He smirked. “Bet you thought I couldn’t answer that.”

Steve chuckled, but he exchanged a look with James. One she caught in her periphery and James nodded to Clint but Clint reached over to try and pilfer her roast beef and she smacked his hand.

“Mean.”

“Kiss James, maybe he’ll make you one.”

“Don’t kiss James,” James intoned. “He will definitely not make you one if you do that.”

Steve’s shoulders shook. “Try kissing Bucky.”

James didn’t even slow down restacking the next pile of roast beef onto bread as he leaned over and smacked Steve on the shoulder. “Don’t try kissing Bucky, either.”

“I think you don’t know how to play this game,” Clint said in a staged whisper. “You kiss your boyfriend and get me a sandwich.”

“Natalia may absolutely kiss me,” James deadpanned. “But it won’t get you a sandwich.”

A grin stole across her face as he passed the next sandwich to Steve.

“Wow. And after everything I’ve done for you…” Clint said. “I’m in awe at the lack of love.”

“I’m shocked at your awe. You want a sandwich, ask for a sandwich.” James put another one together as he spoke. Steve grinned at her and she hid a smile behind a sip of coffee in time to see Clint’s fingers tapping something out on his thigh.

He wasn’t sending the message to her. Making a show of taking a bite, she tracked Steve’s gaze and James’… they could both see it.

“I think I’m going down to the range.” They’d been talking and she interrupted. So, she’d give them their space.
“Yeah?” James paused to glance at her. “Today?”

“I have a few hours before the party and I am way behind on my range time. Shooting stuff also sounds really good right now.” So she wouldn’t pry into what they were keeping from her. Besides, if she locked herself in her studio again she didn’t know if she’d make it out before morning.

*Compartmentalizing. We hide it even from ourselves. It is how we keep our secrets.*

Despite not looking, she couldn’t miss the flicker of Clint’s finger tapping or how Steve answered. Turning her gaze away, because she’d already figured out the message had been received and he expected to hear back tonight. She took another bite of her sandwich.

James set a sandwich in front of Clint and said, “Since you didn’t ask…”

“Hey, I knew you cared about more than just my looks.”

It was James’ turn to roll his eyes, but he shook his head almost imperceptibly then caught her gaze. His mouth flattened into a thin line, then he dipped his chin a little, an apology clear in his eyes.

“I’ll go with you, Natalia…”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to.” She accepted the apology. Sandpaper scraped over her insides and she finished the sandwich, then drained her coffee. “I just haven’t had time in a few days to get down there.”

That was an unforgivable oversight. She’d been training Tony and running to meetings, but she hadn’t been looking after her own training.

“I don’t mind going down,” Steve said. “Had fun watching these two trying to one-up each other.”

Rinsing her mug in the sink, she kept her gaze on it and not on whatever they were doing. “I’m not saying no to company.” Though she would object if they decided to talk around her. “But I want to get some time in. Just going to grab my shoes… and a hoodie.”

It was usually colder down there. The weight of James’ gaze followed her, but she kept her steps light and her head up.

The soft murmur of voices began as soon as she shut the door, but the edge in Clint’s tone was all the confirmation she needed. James and Clint waited for her by the elevator when she emerged. Steve was dragging on a sweatshirt over his tank top as he exited his room.

So. All of them were going.

Game face on, she smiled. “So what do I get when I wipe the floor with you boys?”

Clint snorted. “Even with my arm in a sling, I’m a better shot than you are.”

With a chuckle, James curved an arm around her. “Not everything has to be a competition.”

“Yes it does,” she and Clint chorused in the same breath.

Steve snorted softly as the elevator doors opened, but when she raised her eyebrows he lifted his hands. “It’s absolutely a competition and I’m putting all my money on you.”

“Whipped,” Clint murmured and she pinched him. “Ow, uncalled for body contact.”
Leaning against James she shook her head. “Idiots.”

Definitely better. Even with secrets.

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The range helped. Like dancing, she could bleed off a lot of tension as she switched off between right hand and left hand shots. Pacing the course with James and Clint was a different feeling, particularly when they kept neck-in-neck in the scores. Steve made it on the board, but he seemed content to let them have their fun.

Her arms were tired at the end of their sprints and Clint edged her out by two points. His gloating cut short when James tapped the last target perfectly. Knocking Clint’s score by a point. “Rematch—a little more physical therapy and I’ll have you eating that point.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, pal.”

The afternoon continued in that vein, wavering between playful and serious. They dropped Clint on his floor for a video call with the kids. She told him to get their Christmas lists and to give them her love. She would try to call over the weekend.

Back on Steve’s floor, she pulled out her StarkPad and went through her emails while sitting on the sofa, her feet resting in James’ lap as he read and Steve settled back in his chair with a sketchbook.

Instead of the television, Steve had put on a record. It was kind of nice listening to the familiar scratch of the vinyl as holiday music played. She reviewed Steve’s after-action report and added her notes. She went over Stark security’s most recent updates on the threats, then followed up with information about the bombing at the U.N. Then wrote up her own after-action for the U.N. event and sent copies to Steve, Tony, and Sharon along with a note that she’d call Sharon on Monday.

Mr. Deadman’s Switch had been found dead in his cell earlier that morning. At this time, the NYPD had no comment on what happened but the investigation was ongoing. Of course, he had. There were few other statements issued about the bombs, everything classified under ongoing investigation.

She sent a message to Friday about the data retrieved at Arkangelsk. The prompt response directed her to a private server, which she could access with her StarkPad. The files were neatly categorized—including the Genesis folder she’d located while on site.

The next couple of hours slipped away as she began to decipher the notes in the files. Some of them were cryptic, written in their own version of scientific shorthand, but others had almost too much information on cellular development, how to cultivate the right gene pairs and to encourage the proper expression.

The latest entries were all about the failures to replicate. So she scrolled to the earliest files. These were even more arcane than the later ones. They’d definitely explored the potential offered by a small movement of eugenics enthusiasts—not quite the wording they used, but the speculation included that by eliminating flaws they could engineer a more perfect being.

She had to read several lines more than once. Without a degree in biology or genetics, a lot of this didn’t make sense but she got the gist from the notes. Even as she read though, she had more
questions than answers. Why would any of this be important to what happened to her daughter?

My daughter.

Then again why was she taking warped advice heard in a nightmare from herself?

“You want to know where she is.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Rubbing her eyes, she shut off the StarkPad and stood. “I’m going to go take a bath.” They still had another couple of hours before they had to get ready. The conflicting information from the last few months, Leonid and Alexei’s research, the files from Arkangelsk, the threats to Tony, the formless, James telling her they had a daughter in the first place. It was all crowding together in her head and nothing fit where it should.

In her bathroom, she filled the jet tub with hot water, as hot as she could stand it and added a generous measure of a vanilla bath oil. The scent wrapped around her with a kind of aching familiarity. Her dress hung on the back of the closet door still sealed in its designer bag. There were separate bags for the undergarments and a box with jewelry and shoes.

Steve and James’ tuxes were hanging in their rooms. She hadn’t looked at them either. A treat for herself later. Pulling her hair up she pinned it to the top of her head. There was a hickey on the side of her throat, and another on the curve of her breast and two more on her thighs. But Steve was right, she was filling back in—despite the sheer volume of distractions, she’d managed to put on muscle again and the hollows around her hips filled in.

Stepping into the fragrant water, she caught the drag of a foot—just enough to let her know he was coming. “Talia?”

“Hmm?”

“Shave me when you’re done?” he leaned against the door, his eyes intent on her.

She tilted her head back and smiled. “Yes…”

“How long do you think we have to stay at the party?” A faint strain around his eyes and a tightness to his jaw.

“A while, but you don’t have to.” She stretched back, resting her arms on the sides. “It’s—a big event for Tony. One of the few he actually likes to throw. It’s important for the team and, unfortunately, for our image.”

James came to sit on the edge of the tub. “Have you reviewed the security?”

“Yes,” she said, motioning to her StarkPad. He picked it up and she unlocked it with a touch as he held it. The screen was still on the genetics files. A frown wrinkled his forehead, but she closed those and flipped to her email, then pulled open one and tapped a series of files. “Location. Layout. Security checkpoints. Camera positions. The last few years the party was here at the Tower. There’s a ballroom on one of the floors, Tony busses in everyone we need, but he’s doing something different this year.”
“Of course, he is,” James murmured. “Do you mind if I look at this?”

“Not at all. You can read the files I was reading earlier, too.”

A flicker of guilt in his eyes when he glanced at her. “I wasn’t trying to pry…”

“You’re worried and you’re keeping secrets with Steve and Clint. You are definitely trying to pry.”

But surprisingly, she wasn’t irritated. “I’m not hiding anything. I’m trying to pull apart the puzzle.”

He lowered the StarkPad to his lap. “Natalia…”

“Shh,” she waved a damp finger at him as she leaned her head back and let her eyes fall closed.

“I’m not upset. I’m not even asking. You’ll tell me when I need to know.”

Just like she’d told them about the security threat to Tony and his people.

A breath against her cheek, then a wordless kiss and a gentle stroke of his fingers around the curve of her jaw. She smiled.

“Don’t fall asleep,” he warned in a husky voice.

“I won’t.”

The soft hush of his steps, then the faint depression of fabric sliding on fabric. He’d gone to sit or lay on the bed. He’d likely memorize everything about the location and keep an eye at her at the same time. She had. The ways in, the ways out, the potential blind spots—of which she had to give Tony’s guys credit were very few—and the fastest ways to move around the club.

Trust was not easy. It was an active investment in other people and a constant faith they would not betray what she had given them. She slept between them most nights and they’d seen her at her most vulnerable and at her weakest points. James had memories of her in his keeping that she no longer possessed.

A part of her wanted to ask him about her—about Natalia. She’d avoided it for the most part. At first, it had been simple. She wasn’t Natalia anymore and those feelings he aroused in her they didn’t belong to Natasha. They were Natalia’s. His feelings were for her, he didn’t know Natasha, not then.

Somewhere along the way, all of that blurred. Somewhere along the way, James got all of his missing pieces back.

And he still wanted her…

All Natasha had were a few memories, dream-like in some of them of a deep and abiding trust where long conversations about their feelings weren’t even an option.

But she never asked him if he missed Natalia. She didn’t have to.

“Easy isn’t going to make this happen for us.” He backed off a step and raked a hand through his hair. “So fine, you want to know what I want? I should want back the life they took from me, but I’m not going to get it. Truthfully, I don’t really want it. I’d never have met you in that life. So, I want Natalia Romanova again, I want that woman back and maybe I won’t get her either.” His gaze fixed on her “And that’s okay too, because I’m not Bucky Barnes anymore and maybe you
can’t be her… but a long time ago, Natalia Romanova made me remember what it was to feel human. They punished us both for that…they punished us, Natalia. But you and I, we’re still here. We can still make this count. So whether you’re Natalia or Natasha or someone else—that’s what I want.”

Stretching her leg out, she pressed her foot against the edge of the tub. Shying away from those kind of difficult questions wasn’t like her. Still, her feelings for the Soldier had evolved hadn’t they? He wasn’t only Bucky or the Soldier, but James. That was her. Not Natalia. But her, Natasha. She let Natalia die when she finally cut all ties to the KGB, the Red Room and walked away. For years she was no one, then Clint and she chose to be Natasha. On the island…

“I love you,” James told her carefully. “You know that right?”

The words. The sentiment. All of it stunned her. Not that he said them, though the words tasted shiny and too bright, they got trapped in her throat, difficult to swallow. But she didn’t doubt their intensity.

She hadn’t lied.

She did know. She had known.

They ran from the Red Room. Her idea? That shocked her more than he loved her. She’d always been an obedient bitch, their monster on a leash. Even when she rebelled in her small ways, it had never truly stayed her hand from the worst things they asked of her.

What was one life spared when compared to the dozens she took? As much as she chafed under her existence, leaving it had never been an option. Not that she’d ever recalled.

But pregnant? How had she figured that out? What signs?

“You have—a tremendous amount of scarring,” Helen told her. Her tone was perfunctory. Professional. She wasn’t trying to be her friend or bleeding with sympathy. She nodded her head to the screen. “The uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries are still there—but you said they did a surgery…”

“Doc, I remember going to the medical ward for a procedure. They sent me there a lot for different things. Infusions. Setting broken bones. Breaking my bones to see how long they would take to heal. Procedures were just—a way of life.” She touched her tongue to her teeth and focused on a roof tile and the little pitted depressions in it. There was more pressure and she had to keep her legs steady or she was going to kick the doc right in the face.

“But you said they made an incision, where precisely?”

It was sixty-eight years before… she drew a line down the left side lateral to her abdomen. “Maybe six or eight inches…”

“And you said it took a couple of days to heal?”
The sterilization happened. She bedded James for years on and off, though she doubted there’d been any consistency to it. She’d had to bed plenty of marks, too. No pregnancies that she knew of.

Ice formed in the pit of her stomach.

Better not to think about that. No, if they’d been able to prove she could get pregnant, they’d have dropped her into a room with Leonid or Alexei to make more of their perfect little soldiers.

A shudder worked through her and she shifted in the water.

“The point is…” Helen swiped something across the StarkPad and flipped it onto the holo screen. “Your DNA is adaptable. Introduce something new to it, and it will utilize the resources. Repurpose them.” She switched screens. “You have heavy scarring throughout your uterus and fallopian tubes, but your ovaries are intact. The scarring here and here…this is scar tissue reattaching the fallopian tubes. It shouldn’t exist, but there it is.” She highlighted areas. “Gynecology isn’t my specialty, but the striations in the tissue is heavy layers of scar tissue overlying old wounds. Based on the way you heal, the only way they got this much damage is if they began inflicting before, during, and after whatever treatments they were giving you.”

Adaptable.

Her DNA was adaptable.

She drew a finger down her left side where the incision had been. Basic anatomy was the same. The incision would have allowed them limited access to her uterus, but plenty of access to an ovary.

Samples? Tube tying? Maybe both.

They’d attempted to harvest eggs. Had they continued to do that for years?

The tank room filtered across her memory.

Blood samples.

Eggs.

Tissue.

Marrow.

Nothing successful.

Would there be treatments in the late sixties and early seventies to improve their work? They couldn’t replicate it outside of her. They tried.

But she and James?

Her DNA was adaptable. Everything Helen found said not that she couldn’t get pregnant, but she couldn’t sustain the pregnancy. It had likely been his DNA more than hers at that point.
She’d adapted James’ DNA.

They’d been able to do what the scientists hadn’t.

Shifting forward in the water, she sat cross-legged. The huge tub was a gift, considering it could fit all three of them. She activated the jets, the low whirring agitated the water.

Adaptable.

Experiments.

None of this answered what she did with her daughter. *Think, Natasha. You’re a mom. Your daughter is—eighteen months old? Maybe a little less. She was born in ’72. They came for James in ’73, he didn’t take you back in until ’74. Born in April.*

They were in the mountains in Montana, she would have had to hike out with a baby, and vanish in a sparsely populated area. Had she still been breastfeeding? Maybe. She could hunt for herself, provide for her daughter that way. Cross overland—that would have taken weeks. Eventually, steal a car and then what?

Where would she go?

Not Europe. Not South America. Her South American contacts would have been limited then. Her best options would have been north to Canada or stay in the States.

A low tone began humming and it stretched out, growing louder even as the pain behind her right eye bloomed.

Dammit. She was allowed to think about this.

The pain intensified and she pressed the heel of her hand against her eye. It needed to stop.

“Jam—”

She grit her teeth as it ballooned. Then hands were hauling her out of the water and something cold pressed against the back of her neck. The sound and the pain retreated bit-by-bit.

Something cool pressed to her nose, the chill helping as the spike in her brain eased off. She was in James’ lap and Steve was kneeling in front of her. “Hey—you back with us?”

She nodded, carefully. The cool metal of James’ fingers stroked her nape. The towel wrapped around her didn’t prevent his jeans from being soaked, but he didn’t try to move her.

Steve frowned, “How bad?”

“But not too bad. Are my ears bleeding?”

A brush of fingers as Steve turned her head carefully from side to side. “No, just your nose. Do you know what…?”

“Trying to figure out what I would have done when I hid her. Apparently my mind doesn’t want me to know.” Or Natalia didn’t.

*Compartmentalizing. We hide it even from ourselves. It is how we keep our secrets.*
With a gentle squeeze of her nape, James pressed a kiss to the back of her head. “Still hurting?”

“Just the ache now.”

“On a scale of one to the night before last, how bad?”

“Not—I didn’t have a seizure?”

Steve shook his head. “You called Bucky, he already had you out of the tub when I got in here.”

“You were just holding your head,” James told her. “Friday alerted me in the same breath as you did.” So that was something, she supposed.

“Then more like the quinjet. I just—it started and I should have stopped pushing but it’s not—I should be able to at least think about it.” Anger kindled in her gut. It wasn’t fair. But when the hell had her life ever been fair?

“Maybe—maybe we shouldn’t go tonight,” Steve said slowly. “You’re exhausted…”

“Not an option.” Besides the security threats and the Accords and the public perception… “Steve, this party is important to Tony.”

“Not as important as you are.” His eyes went a little flat and a muscle ticked in his jaw.

Curving her fingers against his cheek, she stroked his beard. “I want to go.” It was Tony’s favorite party, one he enjoyed throwing. One he enjoyed having all of them at. One she’d been looking forward to as well. “We’re all going to be there.”

With a sigh, Steve shook his head.

“Stevie…” At James’ voice, Steve glanced past her to him.

“Fine,” Steve exhaled. Whatever he’d seen there had convinced him. “But I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like parties? Or dancing with me?” She raised her eyebrows. The dull pulsing ache had quieted and the careful and gentle massaging squeezes from James helped.

With a snort, Steve gave her bare thigh a light swat. “Not going to get me to play on that one, Angel. You can’t just seduce me away from worrying.”

She grinned slowly. “Are you sure about that?”

“Nope,” he said, with a smile that was quick to warm his eyes. “But I figure it’s worth a try.”

Leaning her head back against James, she continued to stroke Steve’s cheek. “I’m better.” Which was true. The headache receded.

“Lay down for a little while?” The quiet request tugged at her. “We have time still before we have to get ready.”

Which was why she’d soaked in the bath.

“I can do that. Then I’ll shave, James.”
“We can save that for later, Doll.”

She did her best to ignore the relief and worry vying for supremacy in Steve’s gaze. A part of her missed the days when she could handle all of it on her own, when her actions affected no one. When telling a friend no didn’t leave her aching for the hurt she caused or when telling a lover yes didn’t cost her a piece of herself. Pieces she did not have in great quantity or when looking in the mirror she knew exactly who she was… because she could be anyone.

But not anymore.

The more entrenched she grew…

“Hey,” Steve said from the door and she lifted her head to find him carrying in a mug of tea. “I’ve been practicing.”

Scooting up, she sat cross-legged. James still sprawled next to her reviewing her security analysis for the threats against Tony. He gave her an absolutely unrepentant look when he caught her gaze and flipped to the next page. Accepting the mug, she smiled at the scent of blackberry orange and Lapsang Souchong tea. A sip and she sighed. Practically perfect.

Steve’s smile warmed her. Her solution. The more entrenched she grew the more she didn’t want to be anywhere else. Once, she could have still slipped away, but now…

Leaning over, James took a deep breath. “Not bad, Punk. That almost smells like the real thing.”

She pushed his face away gently. “Don’t listen to him dorogoi, it’s perfect. Someone has been paying attention.”

“You like your tea,” he said as if that were the answer to everything.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Angel.”

A chime sounded overhead and James groaned. “I don’t know whether to hope for a mission or not.”

Steve chuckled. “Yes, Friday?”

“Boss wanted to invite everyone to the penthouse for drinks and hors d’oeuvres before you leave for the venue. But since Ms. Romanoff just had a minor episode and she got rid of all of his alcohol, he suggested that he come down for drinks if you have them.”

“Sure,” Steve said with just the barest hint of an edge to his voice. But when she ran her foot over his leg, he grasped her ankle and sighed. “That’d be great, Friday.”

When Friday signed off, Natasha reached over to link her fingers with Steve. He kissed her fingers lightly, then sighed.

“Have you looked at your dress?”

“Nope,” she said. “Have you looked at your tuxes?”

“Nope,” James drawled. “Can’t believe I got a suit that costs a few thousand dollars.”

Natasha glanced back at him and grinned. “You sound very comfortable about wearing it.”
“Well,” Steve said slowly. “Back in the day, Buck did like to dress up. Saved quite a bit for his suit as I recall.”

“Could have put suits on everyone on our block and three over for what we paid for those tuxes.”

She chuckled and wiggled her foot free to shimmy off the bed. “I bet my dress cost almost as much and will have far less fabric.”

Leaving her tea mug on the nightstand, she padded over to the bags to begin opening them. The undergarments, right down to the panties earned a huff from Steve.

Gold.

Really, Tony?

She eyed the thong then set it aside along with the matching thigh sheath. Oh, he didn’t, did he? The second bag made her grin slowly and James stared at it.

“A weapon’s belt. I’ve never seen one so…”

“Delicate?” She fit it to her tummy, and checked the lengths. Laying each piece out, she studied the small blades he’d added to it. They were ceramic. The balance was perfect. Two small daggers and one longer thinner one. A bustier was in the third box. She lifted it out and tested the fabric—the familiar bullet resistant material along with the boning to make it holds its shape. A small depression was visible where it would curve over her breasts. Touching it, she gave it the smallest tug and a laugh escaped.

A garrote.

Okay.

Tony went overboard, but… she almost didn’t care what the dress looked like. She’d be well armed.

“I don’t know if I’m jealous or turned on,” Steve admitted frankly.

“You can be both,” James told him. “I certainly am.”

Eyeing them, she held the bustier up to her. “I didn’t know you had a thing for lingerie.”

Steve snorted. “You’re getting aroused while playing with the toys Tony sent you.”

“Not going to lie—these are some sweet blades,” she said, considering the items. Tony made some of the best toys. Then she slipped open the jewelry box and just stopped. “Oh.” Lifting the bracelets out, she stared at them. They were all gold and rubies, but the rubies weren’t gems—they were mini stingers.

He’d turned her bites into jewelry.

A choker lay above the pair of bracelets. There were two rings attached to each bracelet. They reacted to her thumb rolling over them and the gems charged.

“Yeah, okay. I’m leaning more on the jealous side now,” James admitted. “You look far too aroused.”

“Hush,” she told them both as she tested the choker.
“But it occurs to me—it’s going to be wearing this all night and we get to strip it off later,” Steve said musing.

“If we break any of it, she’s going to be annoyed,” James grumbled.

“So we peel it off all careful like.” The base note in Steve’s voice sent a shiver up her spine and she curled her toes. The fact they were blatantly talking about her was just a little bit on the side of heady.

There were shoes, also gold with red on the bottom. In fact that bit of red was the only splash of color beyond the rubies. Pivoting, she eyed the dress bag. Open it now or save it for after she had everything else ready?

“Well then I think you boys should pay attention,” she said. “That way you can watch it go on. Come along, James…”

He rolled off the bed and walked into the bathroom. She already had the water running warm in the sink, and a towel laid out for him. As before, she straddled his lap but he had pants on this time. With a glance down at his jeans, she raised an eyebrow.

“We might be late if we do it the other way,” he answered with a wry grin. “But what the hell…” he gave her hip a light tap and she rose again. She’d been naked since he hauled her out of the bath. After tossing his clothes aside, she settled back on his lap and smiled at the heat of his cock nestling right against her labia. Stiff, warm and welcoming.

“That’s dramatically unfair,” Steve pointed out, he’d moved to lean in the doorway as she began warming up a washcloth, stretching over James to wet it and grinding herself gently against him.

James chuckled softly as she settled again and his cock bumped against her clit. With a little sigh, she pressed the washcloth to James’ cheeks. “Thinking about a shave, Stevie?”

“Not sure Natasha will let me.” That low husky note struck a chord within her.

“I’ll shave you if you want,” she promised him. “Or I can ride your cock if that’s what’s got you so forlorn.” She flexed her thighs and began to spread the foam along James’ cheeks.

“Fuck,” Steve exhaled and James laughed again.

“You’re teasing him terribly,” he admonished her.

She tapped some foam to the tip of his nose. “It’s only teasing if I don’t plan to deliver.”

“And you really like his beard,” James reminded her.

“Hey,” Steve complained. “Don’t talk her out of it.”

“Just saying, Punk. She likes to feel all that fur when you go down on her.” James winked at her. “If you lose the beard, I may have to grow one and then you’re really going to be in trouble. I’ll have the hair and the beard.”

The saucy confidence made her laugh. Tightening her glutes, she rolled her hips as she reached for the straight edge and James let out a shudder.

“All right, Doll. I’ll stop.”

“Actually, I think you can do something else for me…”
“Yeah?” He eyed her as she showed him the blade, telegraphing her next move. “What can I do for you?”

“After Steve gets the lube, you talk him through getting me ready…”

A flare kindled in James’ gaze and his eyes narrowed. “You sure?”

“That Steve wanted to have my ass and you wanted to be on the other side of that action?” The directness sent a hint of red to Steve’s ears and even James blinked for a beat.

“You know—Stevie, why don’t you grab the lube?”

Smiling, she dragged the blade gently along his throat. Better to do the underside before Steve started playing with her. James settled his hands on her hips and it didn’t take long before Steve was behind her, the heat of him right against her back.

“We need to do this nice and easy,” James told him as she continued his shave.

“You sure that’s wise while she’s working with a straight edge?”

“I think she asked us for something,” James replied as she lifted off his lap to stretch and rinse the blade. Steve brushed a kiss to her ass as she moved, then he bit gently against the curve. “You up for it, Punk?”

“Yeah,” Steve exhaled as she settled back against James. Heat curled through her. The warmth chased away the dark dread from the dream and the last lingering remnants of the earlier pain. In the warm bathroom, there was just the three of them and she took care of James while James guided Steve and Steve eased a finger into her, the thick bluntness of him took a moment. Each time he worked a little deeper or stretched to add another she would slow the sweep of her blade on James’ face.

The pressure was exquisite. The thickness at the crown of James’ cock kept stroking over her clit with her every motion. When Steve added a third finger, she paused and braced a hand against James’ shoulder. The burn of it was intense and she caught James measuring her response.

“She’s good, aren’t you, Doll?” He murmured, drawing his hand up and down her spine. “You can feel Stevie can’t you?”

A slow nod, then she flexed pushing back to take him to the next knuckle and then down onto James, they both hissed. When Steve trickled more lube along her crack and he began to stretch his fingers, she let out a shuddering breath. So close… And they hadn’t done much more than open her up as she teased herself and James.

Biting her lower lip, she finished the lash stroke of the blade then rinsed it off. When she pushed up with her legs, Steve eased his fingers back. The warm, wet washcloth in hand, she sank back down and found James fisting his cock into place.

“You think you can handle it, zvezda moya?”

“Da,” he murmured and she sank onto him without any further invitation. His hiss of air matched her own as Steve pressed his fingers deep at the same time and then they were both shaking.

“You need to finish him up, Angel because I really want to finish you up.”

With trembling fingers, she pressed the hot cloth to James’ face and washed away the last traces of
foam. Then she pressed her cheek first to one, then the other. “Perfect.”

“How sturdy is that chair, Buck?”

Oh Hell.

“Bed.” The single word had Steve easing his fingers from her, earning another shudder that had her clamping on James’ cock. He pressed up and she locked her thighs to his hips. Then he strode out of the bathroom, every step creating a shallow thrusting motion and grinding against her clit.

At her bed, James twisted and fell back, spreading his legs as her knees came into contact with the mattress. He nearly slipped away but he thrust upward and then she was flush to him, breast to chest, and he had his hands on her cheeks, holding them apart.

“No matter how prepped, lube up and go slow.” The order in those words was unmistakable. She nuzzled a kiss to his smooth jaw, aware of Steve’s hand on her spine, then the warm drizzle of more lube. Flexing around James, she closed her eyes and savored every sensation. “She’s going to be tight,” James told him. “So ease in, once you're past the ring of muscle you may need a little more lube and then she’ll stretch.”

“You ready, Angel?”

“Hmm…” She squeezed James’ cock with a flutter of internal muscles and he slapped her ass lightly, then rubbed it in a circle to spread out the heat.

“Use your words, Natalia.”

“So bossy,” she told him, opening her eyes to find him staring at her with a fierce gaze and her next tease faded away. Bossy because he wanted it to go right for both of them. “Yes, I’m ready,” she whispered. “For both of you.” She pressed her lips to James’ as the sweet burn of Steve pressing into her began. The pressure increased as he eased in, shallow thrusts pressing him deeper and fucking her onto James.

The tension coiling tighter in her gave way when he was flush to her ass and so deep. “Fuck…” Steve exhaled. “So. Tight.”

She smiled as he tested the area where he disappeared into her. The pressure leaving her so full and sweat dripped down her spine. They were all going to need another shower.

Fuck she did not care.

“You still with us, Natalia?” The beckoning of James’ sweet croon pulled at her and she lifted her head and nodded.

“Move it, boys…” Her voice came out hoarse. “I need to feel you move.” Wanted them.

So.

 Fucking.

 Much.

Then Steve spread his fingers over her spine again as he eased back, the drag had her clenching up and then he pressed in again almost as relentless and slow. At first it was only Steve moving, but she was caught, snared entirely by James’ heated gaze.
“Little more speed there, Punk. She can take it…can’t you?”

Oh. Yeah. But all she could do was nod. They were so different, and it felt different. The push and the pull, then James began to move and she flattened her hands to the bed so she could roll her hips. They found their rhythm as easy as breathing. Maybe it was because she could anticipate their moves or they could hers or maybe they all knew each other.

Their hands began to roam, stroking her back, her sides, then down to her hips or Steve’s spread over her ass, clenched tight. She rose a little higher, her lower back arching as she rippled between them. The pleasure pulled her tauter and tauter; it took everything she had to ride the balance. They took her apart as they increased their pace, the speed, the friction, and the constant contact.

She was so full and then the first spasm hit, and she threw her head back and Steve was there, kissing her, one hand tangling in her hair. James locked his lips around her nipple and it tripped her past the first spasm to send the glorious tension up in flames. She was clamping down on both of them. James swore and then Steve let out a shout as he came and James a heartbeat after him.

Trapped between them as Steve half collapsed but James braced his shoulder to keep his full weight from coming down, she sprawled against James’ chest.

“Oh, now I feel much better.”

“Me too,” James said with a chuckle. “But we might have killed Stevie.”

“Not dead,” Steve let out a little gasp. “Not yet.”

She smiled. “Give me a minute… and then we can shower.”

It took more than a minute.

Twenty-five minutes later, she took her time running lotion over her skin then adding a little with the body glitter. The shower had washed away the sweat, but she reveled in the sensual ache almost as much as Steve’s dazed expression and James’ smug one.

Cosmetics took a little longer. She had to cover up the hickey Steve had left her with, including the one on her cleavage. No doubt the dress would show that off. Most evening wear did. Gold seemed to be the color for the night, so she added a little shimmer to her eyes.

Glancing behind her toward the bedroom, she grinned at her avid audience. “Too much?”

James laughed softly. “You’re not wearing anything yet.”

“You look gorgeous, Angel.”

“Hair up or down?” She glanced in the mirror. Her curls were a little on the riotous side thanks to the humidity from the shower.

“Down,” they both said in the same breath.

By the time she finished her hair and make-up; Steve had his attention divided between watching her and looking at something on her StarkPad. She caught the layout of the venue on the screen as she passed him.

The thong was as comfortable as those ever got. The bustier fit her like a glove. Despite the sense of boning in the frame of it, it moved with her like a second skin. The weapons belt slid around her
waist, cleverly hidden by the edge of the bustier. James abandoned the bed to check the ties as she fit it around her upper thighs. It was almost a garter belt for weapons. The thigh sheath fit against the inside of her left thigh and the material was perfectly frictionless, creating no irritation.

She left the new bracelet from Tony in place even as she added the new pair. They fit snugly to it like they were all supposed to be there, then placed the rings over her index and ring fingers on both hands. The softness of the metal against her pulse points wasn’t impairing. Not handcuffs. Warmth seemed to trace off of them.

The earrings were barely visible amongst the curls, but the choker looked perfect against her throat and it wasn’t tight despite the name. The dog tags wouldn’t work with the outfit, so she slid them off with a bit of regret. Turning, she faced them and smiled at their expressions. “What do you think?”

“I think… wow.” James said with an exhale of breath. “You’re a knockout.”

“He’s right,” Steve said, setting the StarkPad aside. “You haven’t even put on the dress yet.”

She grinned. “I’m not going to until you two go get your tuxes on. That’s all the eye candy for you, it’s my turn.”

There was a bit of an eye roll from James, but he gave her a kiss as he exited. Steve sat there a beat longer, studying her.

“I can’t begin to tell you how beautiful you are.”

“You don’t have to.” The look in his eyes spoke volumes. She held up the tags. “I can’t wear them with this…” It might be a bad idea to wear them somewhere so public anyway. But she set that to the side.

She lay the chain over the edge of the framed photo on his side of the bed, the one featuring he and James from the war.

“They’ll be there,” he said. “We know where they go.” He ran his hands lightly over her hips. Then traced the lines of the weapons belt.

Cupping his face, she tilted his head so she could meet his gaze. “Still jealous?”

“A little,” he admitted. “I’m trying, Angel… but this… Tony’s dressing you up gorgeous.”

“Okay. I can wear something else.” She hadn’t even looked at the dress and she had plenty of evening wear. Making the offer twisted something in her gut. “But remember, he’s dressing you up gorgeous, too.”

“You haven’t even seen my tux,” he scoffed and she chuckled.

“I don’t need to see it to know how good you’re going to look.”

He blew out a breath. “Wear the dress. And give Tony the first dance tonight.”

That surprised her. “Are you sure?”

“The fact you’re offering makes me feel like an ass. I do trust you. I never want you to think otherwise.”

The corner of her mouth curved upward. “But I don’t want you to be unhappy.”
“I’m not,” he promised and she almost believed him. “Because I know who’s getting the last dance and who you’re going home with. Tasha—don’t change. I want you exactly as you are, but you aren’t just mine. You belong to all of us in a way. You’re the glue that pulled us back together. He won the first dance; so let him have it—if you want to. I promise, no hard feelings.”

Bending, she pressed a kiss to his lips then murmured, “So who gets the last dance? You or James?"

He chuckled. “You will have to wait to find out.” Then he stood and gave her a light kiss before he headed for the door. “You sure you’re better for tonight?”

“I promise. Not even a headache anymore.” Which was true. It had abated to a half-forgotten memory. “You and James are really the best medicine a girl could ask for.”

He grinned. “Good. See you in a minute.”

Then he closed the door behind him.

_I want you exactly as you are._

Unzipping the garment bag, she looked at the dress hanging inside and shook her head. It was—stunning wasn’t the right word. She half-expected it to be heavy, but the shimmering fabric that looked like metal and mesh weighed next to nothing. She stepped into it carefully, then pulled the zipper up on the side. It slid over her like a glove, fitting perfectly to the bustier. Strapless, it hugged her chest. A small slit gave a glimpse of her upper right thigh but the dress fell to just at her knee. When she stepped into the shoes, she turned to face the full-length mirror.

_all that glitters is gold…_ 

It was armor without being armor.

_Dammit, Tony._

It tugged at her heart again even as she stared at the outfit in awe.

If he hadn’t nearly confessed, she’d have her certainty right here.

She could fix this. She had to fix it for him. Smoothing a hand over her stomach, she turned to check all the lines. The material was perfect. It moved with her, but it didn’t have a single outline of anything beneath. The slit allowed her access to the thigh sheath. The garrote was easily accessed just beneath the bodice and the bracelets gleamed as she lifted them. Curling her fingers into fists activated the jewels and a familiar hum surged through them.

Testing the dress she lunged forward and it moved with her. She could strike with her fists and the dress adhered. It might not be her tact gear, but it was probably the best, most fortified outfit she’d ever worn to a work event much less a pleasure one.

He’d outdone himself.

At the sound of the chime announcing someone had arrived, she slipped into the bathroom to check her appearance one last time then opened the last box that came with the dress. A gold clutch purse. Inside—a gun. It looked like a smaller, sleeker version of a Walther PPK. It had a holster tucked into the side of the purse. One snap and she could pull it right out.

The handle warmed under her grip, a faint blue light illuminating along it. It was an icer and the
grip had been coded to her hand. She switched to her left hand. It warmed again.

Both hands.

He’d thought of everything.

Slotting it back into her clutch, she headed for the door. It was too much. All of it.

One hand on the doorknob, she closed her eyes. That all these people cared about her. About Natasha. It... was too much. Breathing, she packed it away. She needed to be focused to get through the party. To keep an eye on things. To make sure it all went well. Compartmentalizing the distress, the worry, and the overwhelming sensation of somewhere along the way, she’d made a bad call.

“Ms. Romanoff?” Friday said quietly. “You seem to be in distress.”

Her pulse quieted as she forced her respiration to slow. “I’m better,” she assured Friday. “I just needed a minute.”

“Very well, your pulse increased a few moments ago but it is already calming. Please let me know if I can be of any assistance.”

“I will, thank you.”


James.

Steve.

Peter and his first date.

Lots to look forward to... she pulled the door open and stepped out in time to see James exiting his room wearing an all-black suit with the shirt open at the collar and no tie. The suit fit him perfectly, the lines hid his shoulder and arms but he looked—elegant and dangerous.

Grinning, she caught the startled look of pleasure in his eyes when he found her looking, then his jaw loosened as he gave her the once over. “Wow.”

“I’ll second that,” Clint announced from where he leaned against the island in a black and white tux, his body relaxed and even the brace wasn’t quite as noticeable over the elegant dress pants. “Though I think I’m rocking the 007 tonight, so you should all take a step back so I don’t outshine you.”

She laughed, pivoting as Steve’s door open. His suit was different again, a royal navy color with black accents, a white handkerchief in his breast pocket and a simple black tie.

“Okay, hold it—time out. Why is he in blue?” Clint never did like having to pull out the formalwear.

“Cause it’s Natalia’s favorite color,” James said and Natasha grinned wider. Steve gave her an almost abashed look, but his grin was full and bright.

“No one is going to be looking at any of us,” Steve said. “Not with Nat in that outfit. You really do look like an angel.”
“Speak for yourself,” Tony announced as he stepped off the elevator. Like James, he was wearing a black on black tux but he had on a white suit vest and white tie. “I’m the most popularly photographed guy at my shindigs, so sorry Red—you’re a knockout, but the eyes will definitely be on me tonight.”

“I have no doubt about that.”

“How does it? Find all the toys?”

“It fits great…” She glanced at Steve and James. “Definitely found the toys.”

“Ugh, killing me, Red.” But Tony was grinning. “Quick drink and then we go?”

“Water coming right up,” Clint announced as he headed for their fridge. “So, are we gambling on whether we’ll have topless girls dancing on the piano or a fistfight on the dance floor as the first mood breaker of the evening?”

“You know—that only happened at one of the parties,” Tony pointed out. “But that said, I’m going with topless girls.”

“Fistfight,” Steve and James said at once.

Clint laughed. “Guess I’ll take the odds on the topless girls.”

“You in, Red?”

“Hmm…I’ll take fistfight between topless girls.”

James snorted and Clint shook his head as he handed her a water bottle. “That’s cheating.”

“It’s only cheating if I get topless and start the fight.”

There was a downbeat, then an upbeat and Steve cleared his throat. “I don’t think Natasha should get to bet.”

“I dunno, Stevie. It could be fun.”

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it. “You know… for once I’m going to defer to Cap on this one, Red. You don’t get to bet.”

She smirked. “Cowards.”

“Yes,” he and Steve said at the same time and Clint rolled his eyes as James laughed.

She smiled as she took a drink.

Still, she wouldn’t mind seeing a topless fistfight.

Could be fun.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late posting today. Dentist yesterday knocked me for a loop with the
nitris. But I didn't want to miss today's post!
Walking out onto Steve’s floor, Tony damn near swallowed his tongue. Only the fact he’d caught Steve’s comment about no one looking at them and the need to quip his response saved him from stuttering like he was an awkward fifteen-year-old staring at his first pair of boobs. Not that he hadn’t seen boobs before he turned fifteen, but no one had let them play with theirs until then.

Yeah. Turning his mind away from boobs or playing with them, he tried really hard not to stare but that outfit was everything he’d hoped it would be. She had on every piece, which meant she had on all the underthings. Maybe picking out the various pieces to go with the armor in the dress and bustier he’d designed were a mistake.

When Natasha turned though, his gaze may have dipped to her ass, and there were definitely no lines present. So either she went commando—which with her in that dress, he really needed to not think about—or she’d gone with the thong he’d included.

Hell. He needed to not think about her in a thong, either. In retrospect, maybe he should have made a couple of tweaks.

Instead, he focused his attention on Clint’s comment about topless women or a fistfight. Natasha did not help when she suggested if she bet on topless women in a fistfight, she’d likely start one.

Yep. Not the image, he needed. Downing the water, he took a minute to glance around the floor. They’d made some changes. New photos in the living room, the tree—and look at that, ornaments just like she’d said, and photo ornaments too. He was in a couple of those images. Her paintings had appeared on the walls, too. While she hadn’t officially moved in, he had to admit—she was living here and they were making accommodations for it.

Across the room, Natasha was balancing a knife on the tip of her finger and staring at Clint like he was an idiot. Bucky leaned against the island watching intently. Clint reached out to snatch the blade and she dropped it, then caught it by the hilt and flipping it around to balance on another finger.

“How the hell do you do that?” Clint muttered.

Bucky laughed, the rumble of sound both entertained and proud. “Natalia, let me try.”
“Why do I feel like you have some unfair advantage?” Clint eyed him suspiciously.

“Because he probably does.” But Nat circled the counter and balanced the blade, eyebrows raised as she waited for Bucky to make his move…

“It’s watching them like this that I remember all the shared life they had before us and how differently it could have gone for them,” Steve said quietly. He meant better. Because life could have given them more chances. Like Natasha never being raised in a hellhole or Bucky never falling off a train or maybe they escaped in ’71 and never went back. “At the same time, I can’t imagine them not here.”

“I don’t want to,” Tony answered him. “Call me selfish, I like having her here.”

Sliding his hands in his pockets, Steve said, “I like having her here, too.”

Bucky went for the blade and narrowly missed it as she caught it and flipped it, but his grin grew. “Again.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, then shook out one of her hands. The light chains linking the bites he’d framed in the titanium-infused gold. They looked even better on her than he’d expected. The red and gold for his armor.

No, he hadn’t really been subtle with that one. But he’d gone with a white vest for the evening instead of the red and gold, which would have complimented her outfit. She told him he needed to stop.

Steve scratched at his beard. “You doing all right?”

“I’m coping. You’re a lucky man, Cap.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “Like what you’ve done with the place.” He’d kill for a drink, but he downed the water instead. Natasha had the blade on her finger and she never took her eyes off Bucky as he tilted his head. When he snapped his hand out and caught the hilt, Clint swore and Natasha laughed.

The rich, throaty sound hit him like a punch to the nuts.

“Tony…”

“Hold that thought, eh?” He didn’t want Cap’s sympathy or pity. Man had Natasha, didn’t need anything else. “All right folks, let’s get this show on the road. The party can’t start until I’m there.”

“Boss, the cars are in the garage and the rest of the team has arrived.”

They were going to arrive as a team. It would help quiet the speculation about who Natasha was dating, hopefully, and give them a splashy moment for the news cycle. Perfect timing on Friday’s part. Natasha shifted her skirt and slid the blade away. The weapon’s belt did exactly what it wanted, armed her nicely and let her look absolutely gorgeous.

Clint retrieved a long black coat and threw it over one arm. Then he eyed Natasha. “You have something in a less super soldier fashion to keep you warm?”

She flipped him off as she headed for her room. “Keep talking Clint and that fistfight is going to be you and me.”

“In that dress?”
Her inelegant snort carried and Clint grinned wider.

“She could definitely take me in that dress.”

“She could take an army in that dress,” Bucky corrected him. “It’s not the clothes.” His gaze touched Tony’s for a hot second. Message sent. “It’s the woman.”

“Not a question,” Tony told him, batting the message right back. Bucky snagged the long leather coat Natasha emerged with and held it up so she could slide her arms into it. “Looking good, Red.”

“Thank you, Tony. You look pretty spiffy yourself.”

“Of course, I do.” He smirked and she shook her head. Bucky and Steve pulled on their coats over the suits and then they were in the elevator. In the vestibule for the garage, they found Rhodey, Sam, Wanda, Sharon, Vision, and surprise—Maria Hill.

Tony eyed her. “What are you doing here?”

The dark-eyed, dark-haired former deputy director—ha, former—faced him. “Good evening to you, too, Tony. I was invited.”

“Hmm…” Pepper might have invited her. But then Tony’s gaze landed on Sharon who actually had the grace to wince. “Really, she’s your plus one?”

“You didn’t say it had to be a date,” Sharon told him with a dry smile.

Uh huh.

“Hey Maria,” Steve said, holding out a hand. “It’s been a while.”

“Captain.” Then she glanced at Clint and Bucky. “Barton. Sergeant.”

Tony swore he heard Clint mutter bitch under his breath, but it was too low and Bucky just nodded to her. “Hill.”

“Natasha, you look amazing,” Wanda said and the tight little bubble of tension burst as Wanda came to catch her hands. “I love the gold.”

“Thank you,” Natasha gave her a light hug, then Wanda tugged her away from the group. “You look really good, too.”

“Romanoff.”

Natasha glanced at Maria once. “Deputy Director.”

Tony almost lifted a fist. He knew it.

Sharon grimaced and Sam raised a hand. “Did I miss something?” He glanced at Maria. “Don’t you work for him?” He pointed to Tony.

“That’s an excellent question, Wilson.” Tony pivoted to face Maria. “Who are you working for these days?”

“I work for Stark Industries, Mr. Stark. If you ever bothered to come into the office, you’d know that. As it was, Ms. Potts asked me to be here because she said Sharon has been trying to reach me and this would be a good time to get the band back together.”
“You weren’t in the band,” Tony told her flatly. “You weren’t even a backup singer.”

“Tony,” Steve said quietly. “Maybe not now?”

“No, let’s by all means bring a double-agent with us. We have our spies she has her. Tell you what, I bet on mine.”

“Yo, Tones,” Rhodey raised his voice. “Maybe we go ahead and get in the cars and save the fireworks for after the party.”

Clint snickered. “I kind of like the early fireworks myself.”

“Right?” Tony said, throwing an arm around Clint’s shoulders. “You’re in the fun limo, with me. Honeybear, you can have Hill, Carter, Wilson and… Vision. But someone should let Hill and Carter out earlier; the Avengers should be arriving as one team. You ladies understand.”

He didn’t wait for whether they did or not as he released Clint and twisted to see Red talking to Wanda near the stairwell, heads down and voices low. “Red—time to go. Wanda, you’re with us.”

She blinked at him in surprise, then glanced at Natasha who merely said, “Ride where you want, he’s in a mood.”

Yes.

Yes, he was in a mood.

Why the hell was Maria Hill coming to his party? If the pirate king actually turned up, he’d show them a mood.

Happy stood by the first limo, holding the door. Wanda slid in first with Natasha after her, then Bucky, Steve, Clint and finally Tony. He would be the first one out. “Ready to party, Hap?”

“You’re not going to blow anything up are you?”

“Why does everyone ask me that?” Tony made a face.

“Does ice sculpture ring a bell?” With a smirk, Happy closed the door.

Leaning back, Tony glowered at Natasha who started laughing.

“See, you blow up an ice sculpture and everyone blames me.”

“Pretty sure that was your gauntlet.”

“Pretty sure it was on your hand.” He made a face and she just grinned at him. “Still—it was a pretty cool moment.”

“Only to be topped a little while later when you two crashed through the roof and landed on the piano.” The dry comment earned him a couple of stares.

“I’ll give you that one.” Tony fixed his tie. “In my defense… I was dying.” It was also a few hours before he found out Natalie Rushman, his sexy and sweet assistant was a spy. “Tonight is a Christmas party, not a birthday party.”

“And you’re not dying,” Steve supplied oh so helpfully and Tony let out a snort of laughter.
“Definitely a bright side.” The ride to the club took only a few minutes. As they drew closer, he glanced at Bucky. “It’s going to be a hell of a lot of press out there. You okay for the flashbulbs and the shouting?”

Tony had enough issues with it. Steve had stood up to his fair share as had Natasha. It never really got easier.

“I’ll be fine,” Bucky told him.

“If you get blinded or it’s too much…” Tony would what?

“I got him,” Clint said. “We’ll use the buddy system. Steve, you and Tony, Nat, take care of Wanda, I’ll bring in Bucky. Ladies in the middle, that will settle Bucky’s instincts down.”

Natasha’s smirk and lack of argument said those instincts were both irritating and endearing.

“We’re pulling up in five, Boss,” Happy called back. “Security says there’s more than expected.”

A train of limos and cars followed the drive up to the club. They were in the heart of Midtown. The searchlights were gleaming up at the sky, rotating as they had back in the old club days. There was a rope line for guests to arrive and a canopy. The club didn’t usually have one, but Tony would bet a few million that was Natasha’s idea for destroying sightlines. Not that he was complaining. Security was checking them at the cars. No invites, no admission, no exceptions.

“Pepper make it there yet?”

“She’s in the VIP lounge with… “ Happy grimaced as he trailed off.

“Her boyfriend, you can say it. It’s just a word.” Yep. Just a word. One word. A rather undignified, insignificant word. Boyfriends came and went.

At least until they didn’t and graduated to some other title—like ex-boyfriend.

“Yeah, she’s waiting for you to arrive before they make an entrance.”

Didn’t want the attention on her. Never did. Though Happy’s comment earned him a frown from Steve, not a disappointed one, but a concerned one. No, he did not want Steve’s sympathy at the moment. Steve had Natasha and Tony got to see all the boyfriends tonight. Still a party. Still planned to have fun. Nat would dance with him and she’d worn the dress he designed for her. More than enough. They inched closer and Wanda shifted to lean forward.

“That’s a lot of people.”

“It’ll be fine,” Natasha told her and clasped her hand. “Chin up, eyes forward, but kind of look to the side slightly. It will keep the flashes from burning your retinas. They’re going to yell questions… we’re not taking any, are we Tony?”

“Nope. It’s a party, not a press conference. Let them have their pictures though. Team arriving together, all smiles, even if you hate it.”

The last he said to Steve and Bucky. Steve had begun to drum his hand against his thigh, not loudly but steadily. Natasha reached over and clasped his hand and the action stilled.

Yeah, this was going to be a thrill. Maybe they should have done a practice drill. Nat could handle it; she’d been graceful as hell all week.
“You know, I almost wish we were staging a raid of Hydra,” Bucky mentioned. “That would be easier.”

“Eh,” Clint said with a shrug. “It’s not so bad. Think of them as the gauntlet only their weapons are irritating lights and questions. Once we’re clear, we’re clear. We just have to walk the gauntlet.”

Bucky glanced at him. “You do know I took out gauntlets like that so Natalia didn’t have to walk them, right?”

“Yeah I’m assuming those guys were armed with more than bad attitudes and Nicorette.” The droll response was the right one because Bucky snorted.

Tapping his glasses, Tony brought up the threat assessment as he studied the crowd. Natasha’s vitals were in the green and the power levels on her new bracelets—all three of them—were in optimum condition. Wanda’s knee began to bounce and Bucky’s expression tightened with every inch they drew closer to the building.

Tony glanced at Natasha and raised his eyebrows. She gave him a serene smile. It would all be fine. Yeah, it had to be the waiting. It was always worse than the action. He rolled his eyes and nodded outside, and her smile grew.

“Stop complaining Tony, you know you love the attention.”

Oh, she wanted to play? “Why yes, yes I do. Course, splitting that attention a dozen ways tends to make for a softer lens focus. I prefer it clearer and crisper.”

“We can drop you off and take a spin around the block,” she teased and he chuckled. She’d do it too.

“Yeah, I’m good. Besides, it’s good PR for them to see me and Steve arriving together.” Their fight had been gossip fodder for months. Steve saving Iron Man had gone over big even if it hadn’t been Tony in the suit and they’d let it play. Better for everyone that way.

“We’re pulling up in five Boss, King T’Challa and his date arrived and that was the hold-up.”

Well, that explained a lot.

Still—he’d said five minutes, five minutes before. “So in the second five minutes? Is that like second breakfast?” He could have let it go. Happy grimaced. “Because we do have another five minutes after that…”

“We’re going to be there shortly,” Happy said in an even shorter tone and Tony grinned. Needling Happy buoyed his mood despite the rapidly rising anticipation in the car.

“When we get there,” Natasha said quietly. “Remember, knees together as you turn to get out, both legs on the ground before you take a step.”

Wanda nodded.

In other words, no panty shots. Tony smiled. Good thinking.

Finally, Happy pulled into the drive. “You should also remember,” he called back. “I open the door. You Avengers don’t assemble until I get the door.”

Tony snickered as Happy slammed the door and even Steve grinned.
The door opened. “Showtime.”

Tony was out first and the flashes went crazy as did the questions. He cleared the door after a beat and Steve slid out, smoothing his coat as he did and the camera flashes had to double. Steve nodded to them and Tony kept there another minute, then he nodded his head.

“On your six,” Steve told him as they moved ahead.

Happy reached in a hand to Natasha and the roar of the crowd grew in volume. They hadn’t planned it and frankly, Tony was surprised Steve didn’t help her out, but Cap wasn’t new to the infamy thing and they’d all had way too much speculation about Natasha’s dating life. Right now they wanted it focused on her heroic efforts, so they weren’t feeding the beast.

Natasha’s took a couple of steps and then Happy helped Wanda out and if the noise was deafening before, the questions kept flying. Natasha clasped Wanda’s hand as the flashes kept going off. Tony shifted slightly to keep an eye back and forward as he and Steve moved. Wanda looked a little frozen.

But Natasha had a warm smile on her face and she got a small laugh out of Wanda. There was a flicker of red around Wanda’s hands and the threat assessment ratcheted up a notch.

Yeah, Wanda freaking out would not be good.

“Steve?”

“She’ll be fine,” Steve told him, pausing to put a hand on his shoulder as he leaned forward to say. “Nat’s got her.” His change in posture gave him a chance to check on them, too. It also earned them a few shouts of:

“Have you two been able to repair the rift that broke up the Avengers?”

“Did Captain America saving your life lead you to forgive him, Iron Man?”

“Captain Rogers! Is it true you abandoned the Avengers for your best friend and only came back because Iron Man got him pardoned?”


Clint and Bucky were out of the limo now and entering the gauntlet. Natasha had Wanda moving, hands still clasped.

More questions flew. Who were they dating? Was the Black Widow only free because she had blackmail material on the Committee? What happened with SHIELD?

They kept coming. Then the doors swept open and he and Steve were inside. They paused a few feet inside to wait for Natasha and Wanda. Clint and Bucky were almost directly behind them. Bucky’s expression wasn’t hostile, but he definitely didn’t look friendly. One of the reporters pushed out and yelled some sexual question at Natasha and the look Bucky gave him had him almost falling backward.

“Okay, points to him. He didn’t punch the guy,” Tony commented.

“I almost wouldn’t have minded if he had with that one,” Steve said.

Tony really didn’t have a problem with it either.
Then Nat and Wanda were with them and Wanda leaned into Natasha with wide-eyes. “How do you look so calm?”

“Because I can kill every person out there about a dozen different ways. When you know that—they aren’t so scary.”

Bucky nodded once.

Tony chuckled. “See Red, that’s why you’re on the team. You keep everything in perspective.”

“And here I thought it was because I had the best ass.”

“Nope,” Tony said, slapping Steve on the arm. “That’s Cap here. They even had a poll.”

“Oh God,” Steve groaned. “They didn’t.”

Still laughing, Tony led them deeper into the club.

It was time to party.

Bucky

After the question from the reporter about whether Natalia killed her lovers like a real Black Widow, he confirmed his opinion that a Hydra raid would be more fun. At least then he could have just broken the guy’s nose. The future had a lot of perks, but the paparazzi was not one of them.

“Beer?” Clint offered after they’d all checked their coats and Bucky nodded once. He tracked Natalia who still had Wanda in hand. “She’ll be fine. Friday has eyes on her.”

They moved into the throng of party guests. Bucky caught Steve’s eye before he followed, lifting his chin toward Natalia. Steve nodded. They were all keeping an eye on her and Tony both, after Natalia’s briefing and analysis of the threat against Tony seeking to hurt him by hurting those he cared about.

Tony definitely cared about her. It also made Bucky think that car bombing had been a real attempt on her; taking advantage of something they had placed to flush them into the open to actually inflict damage. If not for Tony’s upgraded bracelet—he damn well owed the man more now—then it would have been successful and none of them would be partying today.

Clint ordered a couple of beers and Bucky watched as the bottles were opened and passed over. “Open bar,” Clint said. “Makes it easier.” There was a band tuning up in the corner. “This place is a mess of bad lines.”

He nodded and tipped his beer up for a drink. There were three levels according to Natalia’s schematics. This would be the one for dancing, food served on the second level, and private lounges on the third for those looking to get away from the noise.

Security occupied all three levels. There were literally dozens of cameras and Bucky had no doubt that Friday monitored every single one. Natalia still held hands with Wanda as she guided her into the club. Steve kept an eye on them, but he and Tony had gotten trapped by well wishers near the door as Rhodey and Sam arrived with Carter and Hill and Vision.
“Nat knows,” Clint told him as he tipped back the beer.

Bucky nodded. He’d caught her look when he greeted Hill and the other woman returned it. Yes, Natalia knew. She knew a great many things. Her response to Hill had been telling as well. They might have been lovers in the past, but Natalia did not trust her.

A pair of women glanced at him with smiles as they sidled up to the bar. He nodded and shifted so that his back was closer to the wall and he could continue to track Natalia. She’d taken Wanda over to a different bar and so far the women were alone.

“How many of these people does Tony actually know?”

“Probably less than a third,” Carter answered before Clint did. She and Hill had made their way over. Clint pointedly ignored Hill. “Though he’s probably met most of them. They’re business acquaintances, employees, old family allies, some politicians; diplomats… then there are the lawyers and the scientists. Which is probably why these parties are so fun.”

Bucky nodded. Natalia had said the guest list was five hundred or so names. That was a lot, but security outside had been tight. Still, there was always a way into a party like this.

A plus one, for example. Hill handed a beer over to Carter and then tucked a purse under her arm. “I’ll see you later, I’m going to mingle.”

“Try not to get me fired.” It sounded far more like a request than an order.

“No promises.” Then Hill looked at Clint. “Why don’t you mingle with me, Barton?”

“Because we’re two different species and I haven’t had my shots.”

Carter twisted briefly, turning as her lips twitched.

“You hang out with Barnes, you have to have had your shots,” Sam commented.

Not bothering to reply, Bucky tipped his bottle up for a drink. Hill shook her head at Clint then glanced at him. “What about you, Sergeant?”

“I’ve had lots of shots. Never been a fan,” he deadpanned. Carter lost her war against laughing and Clint smirked. Even Sam let out a snicker as he caught the bartender’s attention then pointed to the bottles they had and motioned another round.

Bucky finished his beer as Hill shook her head. “Sergeant, I’d find a better class of people to hang out with.”

“Sam’s not so bad once you get to know him.”

“Damn man, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me.”

“Don’t get used to it, not planning to get to know you.”

Hill stared at him for a moment like she couldn’t puzzle him out. Across the room, Natalia eyed him and tipped up her wine glass for a sip before her gaze swept the room.

It continued to fill down here. The band was warming up, the temperature in the place climbed along with the noise level. Rhodey was with Steve and Tony and the crowd around them had
thickened.

Wanda touched Natalia’s arm and said something to her, then she moved away with determination. Tossing back the rest of her wine, Natalia made it two steps from the bar before she encountered T’Challa and a woman Bucky hadn’t seen before—though he surmised she must be Nakia and Natalia looked pleased.

Satisfied, he finished the beer and set it on the bar. Sam had ordered him another and he’d watched the bartender open them, so he took it.

“I’ll see you around then,” Hill finally said and moved on. Carter watched her go for a beat then looked at Clint.

“Is it really a problem for Tony that I invited her?”

“Nah,” Clint said. “Now, is it a problem for everyone else here? Maybe.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sam told her. “She worked with all of them for years. Maria’s one of the good guys.”

Clint snorted, but Carter tapped a nail against her bottle. “I guess I’ll go mingle, too.”

Sam let her get all of three steps before he said, “Hey, wait up. I’ll keep you company.”

Subtle.

“Think Steve knows?” Clint asked.

“Probably not.” Bucky tipped the beer up for a drink. Natalia wore a beautiful smile as she spoke to Nakia and T’Challa actually looked perplexed.

“Gonna tell him?” Clint leaned like he didn’t have a care in the world, but his gaze moved like a predator. They were clocking every person in the room. So far the only ones with weapons had arrived with the Avengers or were security.

“Nope.” Frankly, Steve wouldn’t care. He’d probably be happy for them. Watching Sam fumble was entertaining. He moved with Carter, not too close like he might give away the game.

Clint chuckled. “Should I tell him?”

“Only if watching Sam pretend that he’s not interested when he is or that she obviously knows he’s interested but they are keeping it cool for some reason—professional or Steve—doesn’t entertain you.”

“Good point.” Clint tapped his beer bottle to Bucky’s.

“So you think Fury is really going to show up here?”

“Five hundred people, Nat in public, I left a message and Hill just suddenly comes out from hiding?” Clint speculated aloud. “He’s already here.”

The question then wasn’t if, but when.

Hill had been making her way slowly around the room. She seemed to know quite a few people. Made sense if she worked for Tony.
Steve and Tony finally managed to emerge from their group of admirers along with Rhodey and stepped down into the room.

Both men swept the room with a look and both relaxed when they spotted Natalia. Bucky took a long pull from the bottle. Tony couldn’t have made a bigger play for her than the outfit he’d put together. Though Bucky had to admit it was sexy and functional as fuck. The Soldier in him wished her outfits for some of their earlier ops had been so well equipped. She’d always managed to do so much with far less.

Tony’s expression stiffened briefly and Bucky shifted to check his sightline. Pepper Potts descended the stairs on the arm of a tall, dark-haired man with deeply tanned skin.

“Must be the boyfriend,” Clint commented.

“Know him?”

“Never seen him before.” The archer shrugged. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

Hill had shifted her trajectory. In three more short conversations, she’d reach Natalia. Despite her wandering path, she’d been angling toward her since leaving them. Natalia was still speaking to Nakia and T’Challa currently had two fingers pressed to his lips as his gaze moved back and forth between them.

A tall, dark-skinned man with a military bearing intercepted Steve and Rhodey circled back to join them. Based on Steve’s posture, he didn’t mind the conversation though he, like Bucky kept watch on Natalia.

Pepper and her man were on the floor and heading in Tony’s direction when he accepted a wine glass from one of the waiters and detoured directly to Natalia. T’Challa looked almost grateful he showed up and Tony offered the wine glass to her rather than take a drink from it.

Bucky shook his head as Pepper paused her expression tightening a moment until the boyfriend put a hand on her arm and she smiled up at him. Then she nodded toward one of the bars. Tony shook hands with Nakia, then put a hand to Natalia’s back before drawing her away from the pair. His mouth moved swiftly as he put it close to Natalia’s ear and she nodded as he guided her toward the band.

Finished with the beer, Bucky placed the empty on the bar as Hill watched Tony and Natalia with a bland expression before she glanced toward Pepper, then altered her course to approach the other woman.

What was she up to?

“Divide and conquer?” Clint asked.

Bucky nodded once. Then tapped his comms.

They split apart and Bucky slipped his hands into his pockets as he drifted along the fringe. Most of these people were not threats, but the sheer number of them would be the best cover for one.

“I have Natalia,” he said into comms.

“Moving to the second level after I do sweep.”

Bucky glanced up at the balconies. “Better vantages up there.”
“I always did see better from a distance.”

The band finished the song they were playing and a hush fell over the crowd.

“Good evening everyone,” Tony announced and his voice carried perfectly even without a microphone. Friday likely transmitted it to all the speakers. “Welcome to the annual Stark Christmas Party, I’m your host—Tony Stark. Who’s ready to celebrate with me?”

The applause and the cheering amped up the volume, but with everyone looking at Tony, Bucky was free to study all of them.

Natalia stood not far from the little stage, the clutch purse tucked under her arm and the glass of wine in hand. The relaxed expression her face was a mask, she was as aware of this crowd as he was.

Wanda was on the second level, leaning against the railing. Rhodey and Steve got a break in their conversation as the former military man with them also turned toward the stage. Pepper twisted away from her conversation with Hill and her boyfriend, her gaze going to the stage. The boyfriend’s expression tightened, a slip before it smoothed over and he took a drink as if to cover. Hill caught him studying them and raised her eyebrows; Bucky merely shrugged and moved on.

He caught sight of Peter near the doors arriving with a tall, slender girl wearing the most delighted smile and Peter was absolutely besotted.

Good for the Spider-Punk.

“Thank you, thank you,” Tony said. “As you know—we have this party every year and every year we try to make it something special…”

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Steve

The retired colonel now currently the head of support operations at Stark Industries was a fan. After the shouts of the paparazzi and then the crowd who descended on him and Tony as they entered, Steve had wanted to just get over to where Buck and Clint were holding up the bar. But the retired colonel paused to ask him about whether he would consider making an appearance at a veteran’s event.

Thankfully, Rhodey intercepted and the two men were apparently well acquainted. Having the pressure taken off accepting immediately, Steve did ask him to pass the information to Rhodey and he would see what he could do. Tony brought Nat a glass of wine and then pulled her away from T’Challa and the woman who must be Nakia before he stepped up to where the band was playing.

With everyone focused on the stage, it gave Steve a breather. He caught Rhodey’s sympathetic look and his quiet motion for Steve to ease away while the other man was distracted.

Since Nat was near Tony, he headed toward the bar she’d originally settled at, ordered a beer and then moved to keep his eye on her. Oddly, if he had a drink fewer people tended to hover. Bucky
and Clint had split up. The message Clint received suggested Fury had gotten the missive left at his grave. While Steve didn’t care for coded speech, if Clint thought Fury might make an appearance tonight, Steve wanted eyes on Nat at all points.

That and the fact she described someone wanted to hurt Tony, which involved targeting those close to him or whom he cared about. Of all those she listed as securing, including Peter—Steve caught sight of him with his girl and he hid a smile. Peter had on a burgundy suit that looked rather good on him and the girl’s dress was a lighter shade but perfectly complementary—she’d failed to list herself. Knowing Nat, it was an oversight because she wouldn’t classify herself in that category. Or she did, and like with Clint back at SHIELD, she was more than willing to put herself in the line of fire.

Steve got it. He didn’t like it, but he got it. By mutual decision, he, Bucky, and Clint would keep watch over both of them.

“Thank you, thank you,” Tony said. “As you know—we have this party every year and every year we try to make it something special… and this year it’s special because as you may have heard if you own a TV or go on social media—the Avengers got the band back together.”

Applause broke out spontaneously all around the room.

“That’s kind of what the holidays are about, bringing families together. It’s been a while since I had one—but growing up, Mom loved Christmas best of all. She liked the pageantry…” He swung up a hand and an ice “castle” appeared from under a curtain. It was New York, right down to the Avengers Tower in the center and the cityscape. There was even a set of Avengers around the tower and unsurprisingly a very red-haired one posted up at the top.

“…she also liked the fact that holidays let us give gifts and she always said there was more in the giving than the receiving so…” He lifted his hands and waiters began to stream out, handing out envelopes. “Now before you open those,” Tony said with a big grin and wagging his finger at them. “You have to understand that this is a gift with strings attached. It’s not a gift for you. It’s a gift for you to give.”

Puzzled reactions came from the crowd and Steve accepted the envelope from one of the waiters.

“What is it?” Tony cupped a hand to his ear. “I can hear you all thinking, Tony why are you giving me something I have to give away? That’s not a gift at all. Well, that’s where you’re wrong. It’s a gift for someone else. The joy of giving is in the actual giving so I’m giving you a chance to make someone else’s day—to pay it forward. To be the gift giver. You can keep it, I know some of you will—but I’m betting a lot of you won’t. Captain America over there? Guaranteed he’s going to give it to someone who needs it. Why? Cause he’s Captain America.”

Steve smiled wryly at the joke at his expense. Then a woman screamed and everyone looked to see her holding up a large single piece of paper and there were tears streaming down her face.

Tony laughed and rubbed at his ear. “Oh, I might have slipped some actual gifts into those envelopes for some of you—for example—Marjorie there. She’s been with SI since I was at MIT. She’s never missed a day of work, she never takes more than two weeks of vacation in a year despite how much she has accrued and Marjorie, SI has been counting—you have fifty-two weeks of accrued vacation—plenty of time to take your husband on that around the world trip. I hope you do it—then back to work promptly at nine in the morning of Monday in week 53 because the company will actually fall apart without you.”

Laughter spilled across the crowd. Another woman let out a shout and then people were tearing
into their envelopes.

“I know we’ve got some kids here tonight—we always invite some, earnest, hard-working, and clever kids—who are actually doing all the things they’re supposed to be doing and passing their classes while still doing chores and being respectful. I just have a couple of things to say—the first is stop showing me up, Mom would have appreciated someone like you back in my teen years—just saying.”

More laughter.

Then the girl with Peter clutched his arm, shock on her face as she stared at her envelope.

“And the second thing is you’ll find that each and every one of you has been awarded a scholarship to the school of your choosing. Four years, all on me. Make ‘em count—that doesn’t just mean keggers in the dorm, though…yeah okay I probably shouldn’t recommend those.”

More laughter and Tony’s crooked grin as he offered up these gifts of a lifetime. It was moments like these that reminded Steve of Tony’s immense generosity and his need to make things better.

He really was a good man even when he drove Steve nuts. When Tony’s gaze cut to Nat, Steve didn’t have to strain to bury the jealousy.

As the crowd quieted, Tony pressed his palms together. “I’m sure there was something else for tonight… oh, I know. Have a good time. We’re celebrating the holidays so break out your good cheer and your happy smiles! If you get hungry, there’s food upstairs. If you need a break, there’s a quiet lounge on the third floor—trust me, I won’t be up there, it will definitely be quiet. Let’s make some noise!”

He was applauding along with everyone else as the band picked up their instruments and then he descended from the dais and held out a hand to Natasha, she had an envelope in her hand too but the wine glass was gone. She laughed at whatever he said and swatted him with the envelope before she let him pull her out to the dance floor as the band kicked up a rock ballad of some kind. Steve thought he’d heard it before, but Tony had an arm around Natasha and she had her head tilted as he continued talking to her.

“Hey Steve.” Sam pulled his attention away as he and Sharon approached. They each had envelopes in their hands. “Did you open yours?”

“Not yet.” Steve turned the envelope over in his hand.

“Is he for real?” Sam opened his and inside must have been a couple of thousand in cash and a slip of paper.

“That’s Tony,” Steve said. “He likes to make things better.”

“There’s a check in here for the new veteran’s center I’ve been working at on Long Island. Enough to build the recreation area they’ve been raising money for. How did he even know?”

Sharon laughed. “It’s Tony.”

“What did you get?” Sam nodded to her.

“I think I’m on Tony’s naughty list,” Sharon laughed. “I got a one-way ticket to England.”

“Really?” Sam leaned over to look at it. “Damn, that’s cold. What’d you do? Tell him we won’t
have a Tony Stark Day or something?”

Steve had a pretty good idea, but Sharon shook her head. “No, but I like England so who knows, maybe I’ll go and not come back.”

“Girl, don’t say that. You’ll break our hearts—we might get stuck with someone else as our liaison.”

“I’m sure Tony meant it as a joke.” And a warning, but Steve didn’t need to tell Sharon that. She gave a little shrug and folded the envelope up and put it in her purse.

“Probably. I do like how he did the gifts. It was pretty classy. Are you going to look at yours, Steve?” Sharon asked, a curious gleam in her eye.

Setting his beer aside, he tugged the envelope open and there was cash in there, and at the bottom there, three tickets. Pulling it out he stared at them.

“Man,” Sam said before he let out a whistle. “Season tickets for the Mets.”

“That’s awesome,” Sharon complimented him. “Want to trade for my one-way ticket to London?”

Chuckling, Steve shook his head. “’fraid not.” Bucky would love this—hopefully Nat wouldn’t mind being shanghaied into going with them.

“You know, three tickets, you and me—we could even take Bucky.” Sam sidled up to him with a knowing smile.

“Maybe,” Steve said, grinning, then pulling out his wallet to slip the tickets in. He was going to have to thank Tony for those. It was—an incredibly generous gift.

“Maybe?” Sam smirked.

Steve lifted up his beer. “Maybe,” he told him firmly.

“Wow, Cap gets season tickets and he’s all ghosting on his friends.” But Sam didn’t sound remotely upset about it, so Steve let him complain. Tony had shifted so his back was to Steve, letting Steve see the soft smile lighting up Natasha’s face, but her gaze wasn’t on Tony.

Tracking where she looked, Steve’s grin grew. Peter and his girl—Lucy? Liz? L-something—were dancing and Peter wore a look of fierce concentration as he moved the girl on the dance floor.

“Okay,” Sam said. “Now that’s just not fair.” He put his beer on the bar and held out a hand to Sharon. “Dance with me?”

Steve watched bemused as Sharon ducked her head slightly, then smiled. “Are you only asking because there’s a kid out there dancing with a girl and you’re not?”

“Might be inspired by, but not the only reason.”

Amused, Steve shook his head as Sharon took his hand.

“See you, Cap.”

“See you, Sam. Sharon.”

She waved as Sam guided her out to the dance floor. Natasha caught sight of them and grinned.
before saying something to Tony and then she caught Steve’s gaze and he lifted his bottle toward her. She winked and he grinned.

Tony got the first dance. He’d even let him have the second because Pepper had moved out to the dance floor with her boyfriend and Tony immediately angled Natasha to another part of the floor and kept his back to them as the band shifted to a slightly faster song.

“Heads up, Cap, eight o’clock,” Clint said in his ear. “Fury’s here.”

He didn’t jerk or jump, but he did a full sweep of the room. There. At the very edge in the shadows beyond the band, a very familiar figure. Son of a bitch, he really did show up.

“I’ve got eyes on him.”

“So do I,” Bucky added.

“Going in,” Clint told them and he made his way toward Fury from the far side of the room.

It wouldn’t be a surprise, but Steve tapped the earpiece to change the channel. “Friday?”

“Boss knows, Captain Rogers. I informed him.”

That also explained the sudden shift on the dance floor.

“Thanks, Friday. Tell him we’re on it.”

“Of course, Captain. Good luck.”

He pressed the earpiece again and drained his beer. They hadn’t told Natasha and he’d been of two minds about it, but after San Francisco, Steve really didn’t want Fury anywhere near her.

At the moment, he was too damn close.

Clint

The message Fury replied with suggested he’d be here. *Usually, I spend holidays with my family.* Cryptic, particular because Fury didn’t have a family that Clint knew of. Well, it was cryptic or it was a taunt, if he was referring to Clint’s family. Still, he read Steve and Bucky in on the idea that Fury might press a reunion at the holiday party and Natasha didn’t need the stress on top of everything else.

They didn’t need Fury read in on any of Natasha’s current challenges beyond those made public by the press documenting hers and Tony’s meetings with the U.N. Despite the security, it didn’t surprise him in the least that Fury had gotten into a party that Tony would never have made him welcome at.

Hill’s appearance had been the last confirming nail in Fury’s non-existent coffin.
“Barton,” Fury said by way of greeting.

“Sir,” Clint said, moving until he stood in front of him, blocking his path to where Natasha danced. “Surprised to see you here.”

Fury flicked his gaze toward him and raised his one visible eyebrow. He wore a black on black formal suit sans a leather trench coat, but he still blended into the shadows. “No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not. You’re looking very good for a dead man.”

“So I’ve been told.” Fury didn’t quite smile. “Your friend up there planning to shoot me again?”

Clint didn’t need to look to know he referred to Bucky. “Depends.”

“I’m listening.”

“Tell me about Richardson.”

“Already told Rogers to look into him and Hill gave you his alias. What else do you want to know?”

“Did you know?”

Fury eyed him. “Did I know what?”

“That he was Hydra.”

“Do I look like fucking Hydra to you, Barton?”

“Alexander Pierce didn’t look that way, sir, and look where he ended up.”

For a beat, Fury tilted his head, then nodded. “Point.” His gaze moved past Clint. “No, I didn’t know.”

“Tell me about what happened with Natasha when I wasn’t allowed to see her.”

“Debriefings. Medical. You know all this. You were briefed.”

“So tell me what wasn’t in the briefs and don’t give me that bullshit you told Rogers about her suicide attempts.”

“It wasn’t bullshit. The day you came back from your vacation when you found her handcuffing herself to her bed and the two of you got into a fight.”

“There wasn’t a fight, sir,” Clint told him with a perfectly straight face.

“Fine, when you were wrestling with your clothes on,” he replied drily. “She had an incident earlier in the week. Started slamming her head against a wall.”

“She looked mighty fine for that to have happened.” There’d been no bruises on her. Then—she healed. And Fury knew that…

“Pictures or it didn’t happen,” Tony said in his ear in a hissed whisper.

“What happened that week, then? Coulson was in charge. What did you do?” Coulson was one of the first one to notice that when Natasha had nothing to do she went a little stir crazy and would
slip off to take smaller jobs, like eliminating genocidal dictators in third world countries.

“That was fifteen fucking years ago,” Fury stated bluntly. “Do you remember everything you did that week?”

“Yes. I do. So—your recall is selective is it? Did you send her to medical? Was she sent to Richardson? I know she wasn’t hitting the gym. So tell me… where was she before she started running her head into walls?”

Fury glared at him.

Clint didn’t blink.

Finally, Fury blew out a breath. “I don’t know. I had meetings with the World Security Council that week. A lot of them. They were up my ass about issues in East Asia and a bad op that went down.”

“So you didn’t see her running into a wall?”

“I saw video. I had Coulson purge it.” Fury’s mouth tightened. “Neither of us knew what happened. She was fine one day, trying to give herself a concussion the next. They had to sedate her.”

“And?”

“And what? She handcuffed herself to the bed and wouldn’t leave it until you got back.”

“The other so-called attempts?”

A muscle flexed in Fury’s jaw and he glanced at Natasha again. “I should be having this conversation with her.”

“Well you burned that bridge, so you get to have it with me.” Clint folded his arms. “The other incidences?”

“She did stab herself—you were in Cairo, running point on the dissident cell.”

Boring fucking month. Dissidents were three schoolteachers and a handful of students. Frankly, Clint had been tempted to take out their targets for them just so he could go home.

“And?”

“And a mission in Bulgaria came up. A critical one. Natasha had done well in Morocco, so we sent her.”

Wait. That was… “She wasn’t cleared for solo ops.”

“I’m aware, Barton. It was a tactical decision. Coulson and I discussed it. She had the best chance of getting in and out. We couldn’t send an extraction team. We needed to prevent a double agent from selling SHIELD files to the highest bidder. He didn’t know her, she was too compartmentalized then.”

He sent her on an assassination run.

“You son of a bitch…”
“Be careful how you talk about my mother, Barton.”

“You sent her out less than three months after Morocco, she wasn’t cleared for solo ops, she wasn’t even cleared to run heavy combat ops…”

“It wasn’t combat. It fell into her particular skillset. She was in and out in twenty-four hours. It was clean and no one had any idea.” Except Natasha. Nat knew. “You don’t have to like it, she didn’t have a problem with it.”

Of course, she wouldn’t. Fury was her ticket to stay and Clint had told her as much. They had to impress him and she had been… apparently too much.

“And she just happened to stab herself after a clean op?”

“I think she was going to stab Coulson and stopped herself at the last minute.” That admission floored him.

“You just compartmentalized it?” Because of course they did. Natasha never said a word.

“It was a Level 10.”

Phil hadn’t been Level 10.

“She recovered before you came back. We told her it wasn’t going on her record and she should just… forget about it.” Bastard. He’d asked her to forget. “We’d sent her before she was ready so that was on us. Coulson took care with any other assignments we gave her after that.”

But they’d still sent her to seduce people, to extract information, and the occasional black bag job.

“Look, it was a different time back then. You and I both know what was going down in the world. We had terrorists to find that meant we had to follow the money and the dealers. She was damn good at it.”

“She’s also a person and my partner. You should have told me.”

“Coulson said you were too close. She was fine and we didn’t have another incident again… at least not like that.” At least Fury had the grace to look at least a little guilty.

“I don’t get you,” he said. “The mission, yeah it was important. She’s incredible at what she does, but she’s never been expendable.”

“Not to you,” Fury told him. “I wasn’t convinced in the beginning. Trust takes time.”

“Fuck you, Director.” Clint didn’t want to hear this shit. Then it hit him… “The chair. That’s why you won’t leave her alone.”

A flicker of an eyelid, the scantest of tells, but visible.

“You had to know about it—after the Triskelion. What they found in that bank. What was done to Barnes. Then you see Ross holding up that footage… where did he get that?”

“I don’t know,” Fury told him. “Is that what you want to hear? I don’t know. But we examined the footage, it wasn’t faked. That means—it happened to her on my watch.”

“So you start playing games…”
“This isn’t a game. Someone got to her when she worked for me. Someone did those things to her when I wasn’t looking—and I always have my eye on things. You should remember that.”

Clint snorted. “I used to think so…but then well, Hydra was there all along and you never saw them.”

“Neither did you.”

But Nat had. He’d bet everything he owned she’d found out. That was why the chair. It made perfect sense.

“I want names,” Clint told him. “You’re going to give me the name of every Ass, Bastard, and Dick who ever had anything to do with her—doctors, scientists, guards on her cell. Then you’re going to get me the full copies of every single solo op you or anyone else ever sent her on.”

“Why am I going to do that?”

“Because if you don’t—then you’re a problem and not a part of the solution. You want to help her? You do this and you stay out of the way until we fix this mess.”

“You and the Avengers?” He actually shook his head as he chuckled. “You children can’t even clean up your own messes.”

“Maybe because we’ve been too busy being your janitor.”

“You’ve been talking to Rogers.”

Clint didn’t bother to answer that one.

“Fine. I’ll get you your files. But I want some answers in exchange.”

“This isn’t a negotiation…”

“Everything is a negotiation. You find out what they did to her—then you find out what she did for them.”

Clint narrowed his eyes. “Why would I do that?”

“Because that red belongs in my ledger and not hers.”

He almost believed him. “You know what I don’t get? Why did you ever pretend you trusted her?”

“Who says I was pretending?”

“The fact you died and didn’t tell her says volumes. The fact you don’t take her at her word says more.”

“The fact she doesn’t know if it is her word says I was right not to tell her. But I’ll tell you what we told Rogers. Any attempt on the director had to look successful and only one agent would know and a specialized team would be activated. No one else was read in—not even Rogers. They found out at the same time. Not telling Natasha wasn’t personal.” Then he looked past Clint again. “It was never about not trusting her.”

Yeah.

“Huh,” Fury said after a moment. “She and Stark make a good couple. Maybe I did something right
after all.” Only this time, his gaze didn’t go to her but past Clint toward Steve.

“You’re an ass.”

Fury actually grinned. “Sometimes you need to be an ass to get the job done. You used to know that.”

“Uh huh. I see things a lot better from a distance.” And a lot of what he’d been seeing about their history, he really didn’t like.

“So am I walking out of here or is this a fight?” The dry question made Clint chuckle.

“Why, did you think we wouldn’t see you coming?”

“Let him go,” Steve said.

“You believe him?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah,” Steve said with a sigh. “This time I do.”

At this point, so did Clint. Fury hadn’t had anything to do with what happened to Nat except—he’d been careless. Someone—maybe even Pierce—had manipulated him into looking away at the crucial times. Times when Clint had been out of the loop because of an assignment or a mission. Chances were, Coulson had been pulled off to manage an op—he ran more than just Clint and Natasha. He had a lot of agents he looked after over the years as well as his own assignments. Massage the mission reports, clear the path, and put her on a task. If she was told something was classified, torturers wouldn’t have gotten it out of her. Then if they manipulated or wiped her, who would have noticed? She was always cryptic.

Clint should have noticed. He had when she’d been off, but there always seemed to be another explanation.

Stupid on his part.

Wouldn’t happen again.

“Good night, Director. We’ll be waiting on those files,” Clint told him. “Have a good holiday.”

A waiter swung by and handed Fury an envelope. The spy master stared at a beat and then smirked. Ripping it open, he eyed the cash—a series of crumpled ones and a note. He folded it, then the envelope and note disappeared into his jacket.

“Tell Stark I said no thanks, I’ve been there.”

Tony would have heard it loud and clear. Then Fury turned and moved through the dark along the edge of the room.

Raking a hand through his hair, he turned and glanced to where Tony and Natasha had left the dance floor and were talking to Peter and his girlfriend. Nat wore the most amused and fond smile. Her expression relaxed and her manner open. That was the kind of life she deserved, not more dark corners with even darker secrets.

Course, it would be a mistake to think she wasn’t aware of the room. Clint only hoped the dancing and the kid kept her distracted enough to miss Fury.

“So what next?” Bucky asked.
“We enjoy the party,” Steve said. “We keep our eyes open.”

“You want me to spell you out there, Bucky?”

“I’m good,” he said. “Stevie—you should go ask Natalia to dance.”

“I would, but we didn’t get to this decade yet.” It was eighties music and it had a good pounding beat to it.

Clint chuckled. “I’m getting a beer, then I’ll do another sweep.”

“You should dance with Natalia, too. She used to love the parties they sent her to—but she could never enjoy them.” Bucky’s voice grew thoughtful. “There was always work to be done.”

“Then stop watching her through a scope and join her,” Clint told him. After years spent watching her go through the motions, too, he didn’t disagree. She loved the pageantry and the dancing, but she’d never let herself be a part of it.

Time to change that.

Time to change a lot of things.
Chapter Summary

From a dance to a favor to another dance and an interrogation, Natasha's night begins to unravel.

Chapter Forty-Three

Tension

Natasha

The band kicked it up a notch. Electric guitar, bass, drums, and a raspy-throated singer with a decent range made for an excellent cover band. Tony moved on his feet lightly, one arm around her as they rocked to the beat. After his speech, the party atmosphere had definitely climbed several degrees. Natasha kept her head on a swivel, even while they were dancing.

“You never turn it off, do you?” Tony asked, his glasses were activated which meant he had threat assessment dialed up. In this crowd, it didn’t surprise her.

“Not impossible, but not easy—managed for a while on the island.” Possible when she was alone with two people she trusted to have at her back. Sometimes she could do it at the Tower, too. But only after the security protocols were engaged. “You aren’t much better.”

“True,” he agreed, turning her neatly with the music. He was a damn good dancer and he definitely knew how to lead. “Makes us a great pair.”

“Tony…”

“No, Red—not a come on. Promise. Just you get me. Not every woman I dance with understands it’s hard to relax when you have this many people around you. Even fewer understand you can’t dial it down much less turn it off.”

“Not everyone understands the work we do,” she reminded him. “They live safe lives and that’s why we do it.”

“Agreed.”

She caught Pepper sitting at a bar with a man—Marc Kumar Natasha surmised—and she looked fabulous in a silver calf-length dress with cross straps on her back and her hair pulled into an elegant updo folded around a ponytail. Pepper possessed a kind of effortless elegance.

“Did you open your envelope yet?”

“Nope,” she told him.
“C’mon, Red, aren’t you curious about what’s in it?”

“Well, cash presumably as that seems to have been in most everyone else’s.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Now, the weight of it suggested that there’s nothing metal or card like, so it’s probably a piece of paper in addition to the bills.”

She watched him as he raised his eyebrows, daring her to continue.

“Which means your present is either something very thoughtful or too large to fit in an envelope or both.” She was definitely getting warm surrounded by the other dancers. “Based on the murmurs I heard from others you’re catering them to the individual.”

Tony groaned. “You’re killing me, Red.”

“It’s a puzzle. I like puzzles.” She also liked watching him squirm a little. “So if you’ll answer three questions, I’ll know what it is.”

“Or you could, I don’t know—open it and find out.” Impatience flickered in his expression.

“No fun.” She grinned. “Besides you like the idea of surprising me because it’s a challenge for you.”

“Not a question,” Tony countered and spun her a little.

“Fine. Does it have something to do with discussions we’ve had in the past?”

“You do realize that we have talked a lot, right?”

Natasha just stared at him and waited.

“Yes, Red. We have discussed it in the past.”

“Is it something that I will appreciate having because it’s both thoughtful and useful?” Kind of like the weapons belt she currently wore and the bustier. Both were very thoughtful—a little heavy on the provocative side but oh so very useful for the future.

He made a face tilting his head from side to side before saying. “Yes. I think so. I hope so, I guess.”

“Does it cross lines it shouldn’t cross?”

A frown tightened the line between his eyebrows. “Depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.”

“Then for some people, yes. For me? No.”

“You know I can’t accept it.”

“Yes, you can… more, I’m not taking no for an answer on this one Red.” He kept her close then said, “Call it an iron parachute. You want out, it’s there. You never want it or need it—that’s fine.”

“Where?”
“Everywhere.”

Access to all of his properties anywhere in the world and his holdings were extensive. It was a safety net. Like the bracelet. Like the dress. He was building a suit of armor around her.

“You do need to learn a little thing called restraint and boundaries.”

“I know.” He smirked. “I’d say you can’t blame me for trying, but we both know you can. We also both know that you indulge me a lot and I’m grateful for it. But I won’t abuse it. Contrary to recent events, I do know better.” The intensity in his gaze promised every word was the truth. “This gift is because I want to know you always have a place. I mean that. I take care of my family, Red. Like I said, you never have to use it. It’s not an obligation or an expectation—if you do. I’m exceptionally clear on that boundary.”

A place. Never left behind again. Never overlooked. Germany would never happen again. That was the essence of the promise.

She sighed. “Thank you, Tony… you really shouldn’t have.” The lines were blurring. They needed to remain more distinct for his sake at least. That loneliness in him had always appealed to the same in her. The random conversations at three in the morning punch drunk on no sleep or sometimes just plain drunk. Very little they couldn’t say to each other and they’d never really given a damn about offending the other.

“I know. Speaking of things I shouldn’t have done… thank you for wearing the dress,” he said. “In retrospect, I may have gone overboard.”

“May have?” A laugh unwound through her. “Understatement? You?”

“Fine, I built a shrine to overdoing it. Do I need to apologize?”

“No,” she murmured, because that would send them down another path and blurring lines or not, the lines were there.

“You sure?” He frowned. “I will. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Are you uncomfortable?” Deflecting, she swayed with him.

“Not as much as I could be if you’d really taken offense.” Deflection was definitely the name of the game.

“Then I’m sure.”

“Yes?” Confirmation. Like the night in Switzerland when he made that overture and she’d told him she didn’t want to hurt any of them. To be honest, she had no idea she was even capable of a long-term relationship. She’d never had one outside of Clint.

Or so, she’d thought. James made a liar out of her on that one. That didn’t change the fact she still didn’t want him hurting either and if their friendship was going to do that…

“Positive,” she assured him. The song ended, but he tightened his grip when she would have eased away.

“One more?”

“One more.”
The band shifted to Queen and played *Friends will be Friends.*

“Subtle,” she told him as she shook her head.

“I think we’ve established, subtle isn’t my thing.”

“You know I saw them perform live…” Maybe it was the crowd and the faintly humid air generated by a lot of bodies in close quarters as they danced—and more than one sang along with the lyrics. It took her back.

“Queen?” Tony’s gaze sharpened.

“Hmm-hmm. Live Aid, 1985. Wembley Stadium.” She’d been free for a year. “It was an amazing performance. Absolutely electric.” Lost amongst a sea of people singing at the top of their lungs and she’d only known a few songs. By the end of the day, she’d been drunk on the sheer amount of emotion throbbing in the crowd. There had been no strangers, the lines between all of them blurring as they danced, arms up, and responded to the performers on the stage. Even the technical difficulties like when the mics cut out on some songs—the crowd rode a wave of euphoria and filled in all the blank places.

It had been… exhilarating.

“I think I hate you a little bit right now,” Tony said with a chuckle. “Best performance of the night?”

“I don’t know about best—I know my favorite.”

Over Tony’s shoulder, she caught sight of Peter in a gorgeous burgundy suit leading a girl out to dance. The shy smile on his face belied the animation in his eyes. Liz looked overwhelmed and thrilled in equal measure.

“What are you…?” Tony shifted. “Ahh.”

The pair were a little awkward, but Peter settled a hand on her waist and then took her hand with his free one and they began to move almost perfectly to the music with the barest of hesitation to the steps.

That was—good. Peter caught her eye and his grin widened a fraction and she winked at him.

“Proud?” Tony squeezed the hand on her waist once.

“A little bit,” she admitted. “When I was his age…well, it doesn’t really matter. I *like* that he can do this.” At his age, the only dances like this she’d been to—well there had been no dances like this, just missions and tests. Blood and bone.

“Yeah, Red…” Tony sighed, then gave a little shake to her hand where he clasped as they kept swaying as if to pull her back to the present. “Favorite performance? You better say Queen. There is no other answer. I was glued to the television when that was on.”

He’d been a kid when it was on, what a year younger than Peter was now? What had he been like then? Still a smartass? Definitely a genius. But had he been lonely still with the strained relationship between he and his father? Or had his mother still been able to fill in that gap? Kids needed their mothers—she shook her head. “Queen was amazing, no doubt. Freddie Mercury had a gift.”
“Pictures or it didn’t happen,” he hissed the words and she raised her eyebrows. Yes, her mind had wandered a minute, but that didn’t sound like he was talking to her. He adjusted his glasses. “Sorry, Friday distracting me—and you’re saying Queen was amazing but not your favorite?”

“Nope. They were good. I’ve never seen anyone work a crowd the way they could.” It had swept her up in the pure theatricality of it. She’d bought a copy of their albums the following day and holed up for hours listening to it. “But later on—Elton John performed with George Michael.”

“Damn, Red. That’s dark,” he said, his expression fierce.

“Maybe, but it resonated.” Even thinking about it now sent a wave of goosebumps over her. At the time, she’d almost forgotten where she was. For a spy, on the run from the KGB, aware of how precarious her position was—she could not afford such mistakes. But she’d stood in that crowd and just lost herself to that song. The first tears she could recall in years dripping down her face. A bittersweet melancholy swept through her.

Swallowing that memory, she stole another look over at Peter and Liz. They were still dancing. More and more couples were hitting the floor and the song ended only for the band to slide right into another Queen hit and she threw her head back laughing. Radio GaGa demanded movement.

When he extended his arms up, she followed suit and began to move. They weren’t the only ones. Everyone had their hands up to clap to the beat. A flash of movement on the edge of the room caught her attention. She shifted to follow it, but he was there and gone again.

Understanding flared. The faint tension in Tony and the others made sense. Nick was here. She danced back and Tony followed her. Peter and Liz had made their way toward them and Liz’s eyes grew when she caught sight of Tony and Natasha. Nat grinned and shifted slightly to dance with the younger girl, and she bobbed her head just like a headbanger. Liz laughed and then began to match it and they rolled their shoulders in and back. Peter clapped his hands to the beat and Tony let out a laugh as they all joined in.

When the song ended, Natasha moved off the floor and waved her purse a little to cool herself as Tony brought the kids along with a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

“Ms. Romanoff,” Peter said, his eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief.

“Mr. Parker. I hope you’re enjoying the party.”

“We are—if you don’t mind, this is Liz Toomes. Liz—this is Tony Stark and Natasha Romanoff.”

Tony’s smirk couldn’t get any bigger if he tried. “Miss Toomes, glad you could make it to the party.”

“Thank you so much for inviting Peter, Mr. Stark. For the dress and the car ride—thank you. I’m—I’m a huge fan.” She glanced at Natasha almost abashed. “Of yours, too. Really, I thought Peter was teasing when he said I might get to meet you guys tonight. I mean—all of you. The Avengers.”

Then her cheeks flushed as she ducked her head and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “I watched everything in Manhattan when I was a kid.” She was still a child, but Natasha just gave her an encouraging smile. “I used to draw pictures of you and I can’t believe I just said that. Peter, please say something and make me stop talking.”

Peter grinned so hard his face had to hurt. “They don’t mind. Mr. Stark and Ms. Romanoff are pretty cool.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Natasha told her. “Would you like to get a drink? Mr. Parker can go get it
for you.”

“I can,” Peter said. “Would you like a soda? Water? I think they might even have lemonade.”

“I—I’ll go with you.” She looked at Tony and Natasha again. “Could I get a picture? My dad is never going to believe this.”

“I’ll take it,” Peter volunteered.

“Nonsense,” Tony said. “Get over here. All four of us now.” She and Tony framed Peter and Liz and Tony held his phone out and said, “Friday, do us the honors.”

Peter’s phone dinged a moment later and he held it up for Liz to see. The delight on her face could never be feigned. “Thank you, Mr. Stark, Ms. Romanoff.”

“You’re welcome. Now go—make merry and have a good time.”

They were a couple of steps away when Liz let out a squeak. “Oh my god I forgot to thank him.”

“It’s okay,” Peter soothed. “Mr. Stark doesn’t always like being thanked.”

“Well, I say our work here is done,” Tony began, then sighed. She turned in time to see Pepper weaving through the dancers with Marc Kumar right behind her, holding her hand. She looked nervous—he seemed guarded.

“Breathe, Tony,” Natasha told him, though she might need to give the advice to Pepper because the CEO was a little flushed and her eyes a little too bright. Then as if she’d said she was excusing herself, Tony latched a hand onto her arm to rock her securely to his side—a shield? A life raft? Whichever, she had his back and she covered his hand carefully.

“Tony,” Pepper said in a breathless murmur.

“Hey Pep, you look fantastic tonight. New dress?” His smile was automatic, his gaze intent, and his grip on her arm tightening. She kept his hand covered to hide the whitening knuckles.

“Of course, the Christmas party needs a new dress, wasn’t that the rule?” From slightly flustered to poised, Pepper straightened. “Speaking of which, Natasha—that’s an amazing dress. You look—you look great.” Pepper leaned in and Natasha took a single step toward her as Pepper pressed a kiss to her cheek and then she returned the favor.

Not that she could get far because Tony might as well have been set in stone. “Thank you, but you look just as amazing. Pure elegance.”

“Red’s right, you look amazing, Pepper. Hope you and your guest are having a good time… Red and I have to…”

“Tony,” Pepper said, the warning in her tone gentle but clear. “I want to introduce you to someone.”

The someone in question had been quiet for the entirety of the exchange. The intensity of his hazel eyes focused on Tony but flicked to Natasha periodically. He kept his hand on Pepper’s lower back and his expression firmly neutral, but the moment Pepper began the introduction, the polite mask appeared.

It wasn’t a bad one just—the one worn when meeting strangers you knew little about. Though the
chances that Marc Kumar knew little about Tony was slim and none. Maybe he was just polite. Maybe.

Exhaling, Tony turned obediently to look at Pepper’s date, but his grip had his fingers digging into her arm and she was pretty sure he was going to leave half-moons for his nails on along the crook of her elbow. Two fingers against his wrist told her his pulse definitely accelerated. He did not want to be introduced to this guy.

Tony wanted—or maybe needed was a better word—extraction and Pepper had asked her to assess Marc.

“Tony,” Pepper said, then licked her lips before continuing, “Natasha, this is Marc Kumar, he’s a freelance public relations specialist and he’s done some consulting for SI on a couple of things over the last few months. Marc, this is Tony Stark, my very dear friend and the genius behind Stark Industries and Natasha Romanoff…”

“…who truly needs no introduction,” Marc said extending a hand and since Tony had apparently taken ownership of her arm or something—the only way she was getting her right arm free was to break his hand—she extended her left. Marc caught it and gave it a simple shake. An improvement over putting on airs and trying to kiss her hand. She’d give him a point for that. “Pepper has told me a great deal about you, Ms. Romanoff. She’s very fond of you.”

“Well,” Natasha said as she released him. “I can assure you. The feeling is mutual.” She didn’t hesitate to meet him stare for stare. The guy was focusing on her now, instead of Tony. Deliberate insult or trying to get a read on someone Pepper wanted him to help. It was fifty-fifty at the moment. “Tony and I are both fond of Pepper. Aren’t we Tony?”

“More than you know,” Tony said flatly. “So why freelancing? Just building up what you need to nail that corner office somewhere?”

She didn’t kick Tony, but Pepper might. “I think what Tony’s asking is, do you enjoy the challenge of freelance work? I’m sure it must be feast or famine some days.” It wasn’t much better, but would the guy take the bait? Pepper threw her a grateful look.

Marc merely chuckled as he said, “Public relations is all about image, deliberately managing information so that it spreads in a way beneficial to the client. There are people in my field who handle the maintenance of an established image, the day to day, where they know the ins and outs of their companies intimately. Then there are people like—a specialist—focused on fixing scorched earth scenarios or cleaning up the scandal-ridden.”

With that, Marc looked to Tony. “As I’m sure you’ve had to deal with in the past whether Stark Industries or the Avengers. It’s about finding someone who can not only manage the expectations but who is invested in fixing what’s right in front of you.” Touching a hand to his chest, Marc offered them a self-deprecating smile. “My apologies, I tend to be passionate about things I’m invested in.” The fact he turned partially toward Pepper as he said that felt almost calculated, yet Natasha couldn’t put her finger on precisely why.

It was all the perfect response, a little passion mixed with a little bravado pivoting on a hint of affection. Exactly what one might expect from someone who managed to snare Pepper’s attention.

“You know I get that, I’m pretty passionate about my stuff, too.” Tony glanced at Pepper. “Ms. Potts—a word?”
Pepper hesitated.

“I’ll look after Mr. Kumar,” Natasha told her. Tony finally eased up on her arm and Natasha patted his hand.

Marc Kumar, however, was not fond of the idea of letting Pepper walk off with Tony. He should probably learn right now if he wanted any kind of long-term relationship with Pepper Potts, Tony was a fact of her life.

“Are you sure?” Pepper threw her a grateful look.

“Of course, it’ll be fun.” Natasha caught Kumar’s gaze and nodded toward one of the bars. James was in her periphery and on the second floor. He’d been watching for a while. Clint was on the move in the background and Steve had already angled in their direction.

Well, at least she had bailout options if she needed them.

Tony didn’t really wait for Kumar’s agreement, he took Pepper’s arm and they moved off.

At the bar, Natasha ordered white wine. He demurred. “Ms. Romanoff… you don’t have to entertain me,” Marc offered with a small smile. “Mr. Stark clearly doesn’t approve.”

“Really?” Tucking her clutch under her arm, she lifted the wine glass. It was blessedly cool because after dancing and the fact the band had really gotten revved, the room had definitely warmed up. “What gave you that impression?”

Innocent, she kept her eyes a little wider as she sipped the wine.

Kumar frowned, glancing in the direction Pepper and Tony had taken their walk but Natasha merely watched him and waited. “Maybe I’m assuming…”

“Are you?”

Touching a hand to his tie, Kumar smoothed it down. “Perhaps. I know better than to fall into that trap. In fact, Pepper has mentioned your issues to me and that you might be looking for someone to help rehabilitate your image.”


Nicely done.

“Not sure I really need it,” she told him before taking a sip of wine. “In my experience, people are going to believe what they want. You can’t change their minds with a few events and speeches.”

Laying down the path, she waited to see if he’d follow. The weight of James’ regard settled on her. It was almost funny; she could tell when he was watching her, a shiver of awareness along her spine. The band switched it up from Queen to the Clash, and a roar went through the crowd as the volume climbed again.

“You know,” Kumar said, stepping closer to make sure he could be heard. “A lot of people think public relations is just about gloss, it’s not—it’s calculated strategy. A battle plan. You set your targets, you analyze them, you figure out the best approach and then you use a multi-pronged attack to gain the ground you need.”

“That sounds particularly aggressive.”
“Depending on the client, aggression is required. You have a formidable reputation, Ms. Romanoff. Your work with the Avengers is impressive and I’ve seen you facing the press this week, you have an incredible presence. But you also have a very sticky history.”

“I should warn you, Mr. Kumar, flattery does nothing for me.”

“As well it shouldn’t, that’s style over substance. You don’t have time for flash despite who you are spending your time with.” Nicely delivered dig, not subtle, but framed in context. “Your issue isn’t who you are, it’s who you are perceived to be. People’s perception of you is… questionable.”

Natasha chuckled. “That’s a polite way of saying it.”

“Not being polite,” he continued, his expression sober. “I use the term questionable…” He shifted as Clint settled at the bar right behind him and closed the distance a little. Though Kumar still had to raise his voice, he kept a narrow but very definable space between them. “Because people don’t know what to think. There’s the obvious, hero—then there’s the cool reputation, the association with a known terrorist organization. Now granted, you helped bring it down but when they see your face or hear your name, there are some assumptions made. It’s not a coherent narrative despite a rather heavy-handed attempt at painting you as a villain.”

“Attempt…” Admittedly, the man had an interesting way of phrasing it. “You don’t think they were successful?”

“I think they had a few news cycles and you’re gradually taking them back. What you’re doing, it’ll work in the long run. You stand out in front of the press and you answer their questions until they run out, they will move off the story and on to something else. But you give them real substance to run with while they’re doing that and it will give the world an answer to their questions that’s a narrative you control.”

Very provocative. “What would you do to provide them with real substance?”

“Depends on how open you’re willing to be. Take your boss for example…”

She raised an eyebrow. “My boss?”

“Mr. Stark.”

Natasha laughed, “All right, take my boss, for example…”

Behind his Kumar, Clint rolled his eyes before lifting his chin. Did she want an extraction? She shook her head slightly as she took another swallow of wine.

“He lives everything out loud. His image is volume and splash and arrogance. No one questions who he is because they think they know him personally. They see Iron Man or Tony Stark and they fall onto the narrative he’s given them but it also means his every word is dissected and his every move documented.” For a moment, a hungrier light came and went in Kumar’s gaze as he looked somewhere behind her. Whether at Tony or not, she wasn’t quite sure. “It also means they are so certain of who he is and what he does, they stop digging. All he has to do is put on a performance like tonight—big, generous spender—and he can go back to sacking his employees and treating them like crap tomorrow and no one will even blink. Not even his employees. You want to defend him yourself, right now, don’t you?”

“Not particularly. Tony’s a big boy. He can defend himself.” But she held Kumar’s gaze as he straightened and took a moment. The response on his part hadn’t been quite as calculated. Oh, he’d started following a narrative, but he’d tripped a little over some real irritation.
Interesting.

“You know, I should apologize.” Now he wanted to clean up after himself. “This is a holiday party and I don’t mean to bad mouth the host. I’m merely holding him up as an example.”

“Of substance?”

“I feel like we went off the rails… which is not really a good quality in a public relations specialist.” Self-deprecating laughter and damage control. Someone had lost the thread of whatever advantage he presumed to hold.

“I thought we were just talking,” Natasha told him, then drained her wine glass.

He smoothed his tie again. “Ms. Romanoff, are you playing me?”

Clint smirked.

With a careless shrug, Natasha set the empty glass on the bar. “To what end?”

“I’m pretty sure your boss doesn’t like me.” The man really was hung up on that. “So you’re keeping me busy while he speaks to Pepper.”

“I promise you, I am not talking to you for Tony’s benefit.” She smoothed down his tie for him and he almost flinched. The sudden pound of his pulse and the faint glimmer of sweat more telling than anything else. He was nervous and her invading his personal space put him on edge. “You should get a drink, Mr. Kumar. It’s a party—and you’re way too serious.”

Patting him once, she didn’t miss the flex of his hands or the whiteness of his knuckles.

Then Pepper appeared in her periphery. “Oh, there you are, so sorry Marc. Thank you, Natasha.” A little harried and flushed. Argument with Tony? Or just Tony being Tony?

“Not a problem, Mr. Kumar was telling me all about how he’d rehabilitate my image. He has some interesting theories.”

Pepper placed a possessive hand on his arm, but the look she gave Natasha was questioning. “Do you think you could come to lunch tomorrow? The three of us could sit down and talk about it—you know where we can actually hear ourselves think.”

“Absolutely,” Natasha committed herself even if lunch with Kumar was the last thing she was interested in. Pepper asked her for a favor. The faint tightness in Kumar’s jaw and the compression of his lips said it wasn’t what he was interested in either, but he was swift to give Pepper a smile.

“Hi Clint,” Pepper said.

“Evening Pepper.” Clint’s grin grew when Kumar flinched slightly. The man really hadn’t been aware of Clint being there other than just another body at the bar. “Having fun?”

“I am—have you met Marc yet?”

“Nope, Tash didn’t introduce me, they were too busy talking about substance or style or bosses. I wasn’t really listening.”

Natasha didn’t laugh because Clint did disarming-and-bumbling guy really well. He stuck his hand out toward Kumar and that left the other man no choice but to shake his hand.
“Clint Barton.”

“Marc Kumar. You’re the one they call Hawkeye.”

“As long as they don’t call me late to dinner… speaking of which, I’m going to steal Natasha now and let you two lovebirds get back to enjoying your evening.” The dopey grin and aw-shucks charm amused the hell out of her, but it immediately set Kumar at ease. He assessed and dismissed Clint as a threat.

“I’ll see you both around,” Pepper said, then glanced at Natasha as she was walking away with him mouthing ‘call me.’

Natasha nodded as Clint sidled closer. “Why were you interrogating that putz?”

“He’s dating Pepper.”

“Okay, but we’ve talked about this. Dating isn’t a crime, Tash.” Clint patted her arm, then frowned and turned it over. She definitely had a then first shadows of a bruise and four sharply defined little half-moon indentions.

“No, but Pepper asked me to tell her what I thought of him and Tony wanted to talk to Pepper.”

Steve slid a hand along her lower back as he came to join them. “All good?”

“Fine. Just doing a friend a favor. What did Nick want?”

“Dance with me?” Steve asked rather than answer. Clint smirked and waved them off.

“Go dance. It’s supposed to be a party tonight, not work.”

Shifting Natasha caught sight of Maria watching her from across the room. When the other woman raised a questioning eyebrow, Natasha deliberately didn’t respond and looked at Steve instead. The band segued to the Led Zeppelin with a more mournful guitar as the singer picked up the first line of Stairway to Heaven.

She bumped Clint, but slid her hand into Steve’s as she glanced up to where James leaned against the railing above. A small smile flirted at the corners of his mouth. Winking, she grinned as his lips spread wider, then glided up to rest a hand against Steve’s shoulder as he drew them close to move slowly to the music.

“Not going to tell me about Nick?”

“Not tonight Angel. I just want to dance with you.” Steve glanced at her arm. Then her.

“A moment of nerves. He’ll be fine.” Tipping her head back, she studied the intensity in his expression. Worry lurked in his eyes, but it softened as they began to dance. “I really like your tux.”

He chuckled. “You told me that before I was wearing it.”

“I meant it, might be the man in it or maybe the color, but it’s definitely working for you.”

“Yeah? Good enough to be your arm candy tonight?”

“Hmm—I don’t know. Arm candy shouldn’t outshine the bearer.”
With a snort, he shook his head. “Impossible to outshine you.”

“You know—we might want to start a mutual appreciation society.”

“Be a really closed society.”

“The best ones are.”

Chuckling, he drew her closer as he flexed his hand on her hip. “You’ve got work mode written all over you. What’s up?”

“Hard to explain.” Particularly when they weren’t reading her in. Nick had been there and they didn’t want her to know. Probably what Friday distracted Tony with—or maybe that comment hadn’t been for Friday at all. Maria was making no pretense about wanting to talk to her. Dragging it out was doing any of them any good, but she wasn’t in the mood.

James was on edge, but that could be the location. Steve… Steve was being protective. The watchfulness wasn’t only focused on her, but around her. Then there was Tony, Pepper’s new boyfriend threw him despite the fact he claimed to be aware beforehand. Aware didn’t always match up with reality. Then there was Kumar himself.

Something—something was off about him, but how much of that was his actual fear of her versus discomfort with coming face to face with Pepper’s ex?

“I’m pretty good at following a lead,” Steve reminded her. “What are the parameters?”

“Are you getting technical to seduce me back on mission?”

A soft laugh escaped him. “No, I’m trying to get you focused back here on me than whatever it is you’re dissecting in your head.”

“Fair,” she exhaled the word. “It doesn’t quite feel like a party. All the elements are here. I haven’t been upstairs yet and I should probably check on Wanda….”

“Everything okay with her? She pulled you aside earlier.” Concern etched into the underside of every word.

“Nervous. Excited. Uncertain. Vision is still making her feel uneven, but she brought up college classes she wanted to take. But she didn’t finish high school or the equivalent in Sokovia, so she needs to get a GED. There are some assessment tests she’ll need to take and I think she was feeling a little overwhelmed. I need to spend more time with her.” Wanda was also frustrated, like she was in a holding pattern, only she didn’t know quite what for.

“You’re spreading yourself thin, Angel.”

“Maybe.” Maybe that was it. She was tired, but she also enjoyed this party. So why wasn’t she this year? “We have a lot of unfinished business we need to get in order.”

Steve grimaced. “What can I do to lighten the load?”

“You’re doing plenty yourself, Captain. You’ve got to handle all the day to day while I’m tied up in meetings.”

“Yeah, but I can do more. Let’s schedule group training in the next couple of weeks. We should be doing those more often anyway.”
“Hmm… I could use a spar.” She eyed him. “Know anyone willing to take me on?”

“I bet we could find a volunteer or two. In a pinch, I could offer up myself. Interested?”

“In you?” Natasha gave him an appraising look. “Think you can give me one hundred percent? Don’t hold back? First one to ten gets a massage?”

“If we’re adding wagers into it,” Steve turned her neatly and they slipped off the dance floor as the music picked up to a much faster beat. She took her clutch in one hand while he clasped the other. “I think we should make it interesting.”

“What did you have in mind?”

His slow smile promised it was definitely interesting. “Let’s grab Bucky and get some food. You haven’t eaten much today and I’m starving.”

She didn’t roll her eyes. “Typical. You just want to stuff me with food.”

“Getting predictable, am I?”

“Just a little.” But she grinned. It still took them a few minutes to get to the stairs. They were stopped by more than a few well-wishers and curiosity seekers. At least three women wanted Steve’s autograph, including one who asked if he’d sign her breasts.

At the request, he hesitated.

“I got it,” Natasha told him, plucking the sharpie from his hand and scrawling his signature perfectly across the curve of the blonde’s breast. The other woman blinked and then glanced from it to her then Steve. “It’s all in the wrist, you just need to let it flow over the skin because the surface tension isn’t like signing a book or a piece of paper. And this lady has some very lovely curves to work with.”

Biting the inside of his lip, Steve managed to grin. “I’ll keep that in mind. Ma’am,” he said politely to the blonde and she actually flushed, then glanced at Natasha again. Nat just winked at her, then hooked her arm through Steve’s.

By the time they reached the stairs, Steve’s silent shakes of laughter sobered enough for him to ask, “How long have you been able to do my signature?”

“Hmm… about four days after your first after-action report was due and you accidentally hid it in the top side drawer of your desk and told Maria you must have left it at home.”

Hill had not been amused so Nat found it in his top drawer, finished it up, then polished his signature and left it on Hill’s desk before she headed home herself.

“I promise, I never abuse the superpower.”

Steve laughed again. “Not even a little worried about it, Angel.” At the top of the stairs, they found James and Clint waiting for them.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. “Fancy meeting you up here.”

“Hard to believe who you run into at these things, Doll. Need eyes everywhere.” A smile relaxed James’ face, but his eyes remained wary.

“You doing okay?” She studied him. “Clint usually ditches around this time, if you two want to
“Fine,” James said waving her off even as Clint said, “Hey, I resent that. I don’t ditch. I exit smoothly, with a casual smile and the walk of a man with things to do and places to be.”

“You bail out and get a pizza and beer to go watch movies.”

Clint smirked. “Don’t be jealous. You can sneak out with us. We can send Cap down to sign more boobs and sneak out the back.”

“No,” Steve said abruptly. “You go sign the breasts, the three of us will slip out.”

“You didn’t sign the breast, Stevie, that was Natalia.”

Natasha laughed.

“The woman liked it, too.” James sounded particularly amused by that, but Natasha had caught the flash of interest, too.

“We’ll make sure Steve gets the next one,” she promised, giving his hand a squeeze.

“No, we really don’t need to do that.” Steve shook his head.

“You mean to tell me in all those shows you did Cap, no woman ever asked you to sign her boobs?” Clint made a face. “Not sure I’d have handled the 40s well.”

“You’d have been fine, pal,” James said even as he scanned the floor around them. Natasha had angled herself so her back wasn’t to the stairs, but she still appreciated having James keep watch. “Back then, you had to work to see the goods and you weren’t thinking about signing them when you got there.”

“Okay, time for dinner,” Steve said, giving James a pointed look.

“I think you should have made him do it, Doll.”

“He can sign mine later, then he can say whether it’s something he ever wants to do again.”

“Practice does make perfect,” James agreed and Steve tilted his head back with a sigh.

Before he could say anything, there was a roar from downstairs, as one, they all moved to check the commotion. The women who’d stopped Steve earlier were actually brawling and there were breasts on display.

“I really should have been allowed to make my bet,” she murmured as security waded in to break them up. On the far side of the dance floor, Tony stood with Rhodey and he glanced up and caught her gaze.

He mouthed I blame you.

She smirked and gave him a thumbs up.

Another sweep of the floor found Sharon and Sam dancing. Peter and Liz were heading for the stairs, and Peter had his jacket off. The earlier tension in his face gave way to animation as he spoke. Whatever he said had Liz captivated, because she hung on every word. She didn’t see Kumar, Pepper, Wanda, or Vision.
Hill had also moved.

“Food,” Clint said tugging at her. “People watch later. We can make up stories.”

“You suck at that game,” she told him as the women, their boobs, and their fight were promptly escorted away.

“I do not,” Clint countered. “You just have the most whacked ideas of what people want.”

“And I’m usually right.”

“That you are usually right is not the point.”

They were still debating it when James pulled out a chair for her at their reserved table and Wanda glanced up from her phone to stare at them with vague alarm.

“Someone is smuggling dinosaur eggs?”

“See,” Clint said. “Wanda gets it.”

Wanda blinked. “No… I don’t. What are we discussing?”

“That Clint is an idiot,” Natasha told her.

“I still say Jurassic Park is a totally viable possibility.” Clint pointed at her. “Tony could whip up those Barbasol cans in his sleep.”

“They really haven’t tried to grow dinosaurs, have they?” James said with a slow smile. “Or would that have been classified in Area 51?”

She glared at him. Why would he…?

“Nah, Area 51 is where we kept the blue men.” Clint warmed to the topic. He loved nutball conspiracy theories. The more outlandish the better. On some ops, she’d imagined gagging him just to get him to shut up when he got going. And here was James egging him on.

“I thought it was little green men,” Wanda said and Clint’s grin grew.

“Could be mechanical men…”

“Or Norse gods with arms to make you swoon,” Natasha pointed out and Clint narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not speaking to you anymore.”

“Oh good. That means I get a break.” She slumped back in her chair dramatically and James chuckled.

Wanda leaned toward Steve. “What are they talking about?”

“Don’t ask, they’ll just get more outlandish,” he said with a bemused smile. “And every once in a while… you get the truth thrown in amongst the rest.”

“It’s all true,” Clint said abruptly. “From a certain point of view.”

“You see Wanda,” Natasha said drily. “You’ll find that the truths we cling to depend greatly on our point of view.”
That earned a groan from everyone.

“Except for mine,” Clint declared slinging an arm around Natasha. “I’m always right.”

She gave him a shove and he grinned.

Dinner turned out to be a lively affair. The fact Tony had the Avengers area roped off and covered by security meant they were able to eat without anyone bothering them. Tony joined them along with Rhodey. Sam and Sharon made their way up and Peter and Liz stepped in so Liz could meet the other Avengers before retreating to eat elsewhere. They’d all invited them to stay, but Natasha understood Peter’s reasoning. He had an identity to protect.

The band was taking a break downstairs; so more guests were filtering through. Pepper and Kumar were seated on the far side of the room and Pepper seemed to be entertaining business associates. Maria was still missing, but Natasha doubted she’d given up.

Surrounded by different conversations, Natasha studied the different faces in the room. Some were familiar—she’d seen them at previous parties or they had a relative amount of fame. A couple she actually recalled from her assignment at SI. If they remembered her, they did an excellent job of not showing it.

A point, she supposed, supporting the fact people looked at what they wanted to see. When Sharon and Wanda excused themselves for a restroom run, Natasha went along more to keep them company than any desire to use the facilities. As expected, the line for the restroom was long. The oddity of women’s restrooms meant that no matter where they were, there was usually a line.

While she’d been expecting it, she somehow found it almost sadly predictable when Maria joined her leaning against the wall of the sitting area in the restroom annex.

“You’re a hard woman to pin down,” Maria said by way of greeting. Though they were relatively alone, there was no privacy. Women flowed through to check hair or cosmetics or to stand in line for one of the stalls. Wanda and Sharon were three people ahead and around the corner.

“You used to like that about me,” Natasha replied. “Though, I have to admit, I don’t think you have been trying nearly hard enough to be complaining at the moment.”

“Not a complaint. Just an observation.” She waited a beat, then added, “How many refrains do we need to make it through before you step out and give me a moment?”

“Depends,” Natasha rolled her head to look at her. “What’s the goal?”

“Can’t I just want to see how you’re doing?” The hint of amusement in her eyes didn’t lend a lot of weight to the sentiment.

“Sure, but that’s never all you want.” They were not the kind of friends who went out for drinks or confided in each other. They’d had turbulent moments and professional ones—a rigid separation that served them both.

“Today, I want to see how you’re doing and I’d like to have a conversation with you involving more than five words.” Then Maria said, “And I think I have something you want.”

The corner of Natasha’s mouth curled. “That was more than five words.”

Maria stared at her. “Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?”

Straightening, she gave Maria a lazy smile. “Oh, please say the hard way. Because I’d really like to...
see you try… Deputy Director.”

A woman passing by gave them a startled look but she continued on. Wanda reappeared and glanced from Maria to her. “Hello Maria. Are you enjoying the party?”

“It’s a blast. Just trying to steal Romanoff here for a drink. You can let the boys know she’ll be back in a bit can’t you?”

“Sure,” Wanda said slowly, then looked at Natasha. “Would you like me to do that?” Good girl. Never take anything at face value.

Sharon hesitated as she cleared the corner and frowned.

“It’s fine. Tell them we’ll be downstairs getting a drink.”

Wanda frowned, then murmured, “I could join you if you’d like.”

“So could I,” Sharon volunteered. “Be nice to just have a chat amongst us without all the testosterone.”

Natasha was tempted to take them up on it if only to watch the blood vessel in Maria’s head pop out farther than it already was. Maria knew it, too, if the warning flashing across her gaze was any indication.

“It’s fine, this is old business and it would be boring,” she said, then met Sharon’s gaze. “For both of you. I’ll find you in a bit.”

“If you’re sure,” Wanda said.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

The four left the bathroom together, but she and Maria headed for the stairs and descended them. Maria matched pace with her. Despite the band’s break and the swap to a DJ, there were still a number of people lingering around the high top tables and on the dance floor.

Once they each had a glass of wine, the claimed an empty high top and set their glasses down. After placing her small evening bag on the table, Maria said, “You know what I want to talk about.”

“The same thing Nick wants—for me to join your new operation.”

“Yes and no,” Maria told her. “I get why you don’t want to come back. Nick may not like it, but I understand.” After forcing the conversation, align herself as a friend, the one with the balm.

“Then why bring it up?”

“Because you were one of our best, if not the best, and frankly… we could use you.”

Story of her life. “Then shall we save some oxygen and you can pretend you laid out all of your reasons, soft and hard sells, and I’ll still say no. I have enough to do right now and even if I didn’t… I’m out. My profile is too high for that kind of work.”

“Not for training,” Maria told her. “Not for schooling up and coming agents to be the best they can. To bring an entire generation up to speed with access to the best skills in the business. There’s no kind of op you haven’t run and you think on your feet in the field in a way no one can really teach, but imagine what we could do with open, impressionable agents who want to be the best. You
would set the bars, do the assessments and make the determinations. You’d be their first handler,
you would wash out the breakable ones, but the others—the ones who could take the pressure—
you would make them invincible.”

Marble.

“No,” Natasha told her.

“Just—think about it. This isn’t the kind of offer you’ve ever had before. You would make all the
calls.” Everything in her tone invited allure.

“I make them now.”

“Do you? Or did you just trade SHIELD for the Avengers? Nick for Tony?” From teasing
invitation to combative.

“Baiting me is beneath you, Maria and I don’t rise to it anyway. What has you and Nick so
spooked you want me under a microscope?”

James was on the stairs. Clint had settled in at the railing above. She half-expected Steve to join
them any minute. Something had them all spooked.

“Why can’t I just want to work with you again?” Leaning into their ephemeral connection—one
that existed on rare, private occasions most often in a hotel room and utterly compartmentalized
from any other part of their lives.

“Because we aren’t that close.” They hadn’t been for a long time.

Leaning forward, Maria rested her forearms on the high top and studied her. “So do they follow
you all the time or is this a new thing?”

Tony and Steve had descended the stairs. James was a single table away and he didn’t bother
pretending he wasn’t watching her.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Natasha made a show of glancing around the room.
“Getting paranoid, Maria?”

The eyebrow twitched ever so slightly. “The chair at the bank.”

James whole posture stiffened.

“Rumor had that a black box was retrieved from it during the aftermath—somewhere between the
records being burned and the chair itself being destroyed. Based on what we were able to piece
together, Pierce and his particular cell set that whole thing up sometime in the 90s.”

Natasha turned a hand over. “And?”

“And we think Ross acquired it.”

“Makes sense. He and Talbot are close. Talbot cleaned up SHIELD’s mess, chasing down errant
assets, equipment, and rogue agents. The black box probably ended up on a shelf until they figured
out what they had.” She still wasn’t biting.

“I’d forgotten how frustrating you can be.”

“See, you don’t want to work with me. Difficult is my primary setting.”
Maria snorted. “No, that’s Barton’s primary setting.”

“Same thing.” The comment earned her a faint glare. Maria had never really forgiven Clint for falling to Loki. The fact Natasha would and had put Clint first had also been an issue where it shouldn’t have been.

“You’re seriously leaving?” Maria pushed herself up on her elbows, face and chest still flushed. Her lips shiny from kisses and her thighs damp from where Natasha just spent the last half-hour driving her insane.

“I have to,” she told her, pulling on her boots. Clint needed her.

“You just got here…” Maria complained.

“And you got off,” Natasha countered as she’d buttoned up her shirt. She’d not even managed to get out of her pants. The hotel room key and the address had been in her locker; she’d driven over after filing her report to find Maria already waiting with two glasses of wine. It had been a long week...

“It’s always going to be Barton…”

At the door, Natasha slung her purse strap over her shoulder. “I’ll make it up to you next time.”

“Why bother…” Maria’s voice followed her as she shut the door.

Hate sex had been fine for a while, but even that got old when it only ever led to cooler glares and more reproach.

“Fine. Let’s try this a different way. What do you want?”

“Nothing you have to offer,” she said it bluntly.

“Not even if what we can offer is a way to break those memory blocks?”

Steve and Tony had joined James and while Maria wasn’t looking at them, she could hardly miss their presence. Tony’s frown was fierce.

“Or maybe your new handlers don’t want you questioning things too closely. But I think you have a right to know—”

“It really has nothing to do with you.”

“It does if you were compromised on SHIELD’s watch. Let’s be frank with each other… I think after all these years, you and I can both handle the naked truth.”

“Were you lying before?” The eyebrow twitched again. Maria had skin in the game and apparently Natasha wasn’t being nearly as cooperative as she expected. It shouldn’t surprise her.

Tony’s mouth popped open and his eyes widened a fraction.

He always was a little too quick.
“You have been spending too much time with Stark.”

“Jealousy really never did look good on you,” Natasha picked up her wine glass and drained it.

Maria snorted. “Nat… I’m here as a friend. Nick has come to you as a friend. Sooner or later, it won’t be friends willing to ask.”

Steve straightened, but Natasha shook her head once as she set the empty wine glass down. He wasn’t the only one who looked ready to interfere, but the constant surveillance wore at her. That along with the fact the music was starting to grate with the constant hum of the partygoers rising and falling.

“Feel free to send them. Just don’t expect them to come back.” Natasha told her flatly. “If this is your version of naked truth, you need to work on it. I already knew these things. Nick wasn’t subtle.”

“Nick wants to help you.”

“You two should worry about you and your new operation. I’m fine.”

“You can’t tell me you don’t want to know…”

“Sure I can,” Natasha said easily. “Because what I do or don’t want is nothing to do with you.”

“But it has something to do with all of them… sure they trust you? They don’t give you five minutes of unobserved time. Believe me, I’ve been watching them watch you all night.”

“And you’re done,” Tony said abruptly as he reached the table, Steve and James almost in lockstep. “This is a holiday party. My party. My rules. You’re not very cheery. So time to say good night, Maria. I’ll have a car take you home.”

Maria straightened and she glanced from Tony to Steve to James and then turned to glance up at Clint before looking at Natasha again. “You know how to find me.”

Not waiting for a response, Maria strode away. Tony swiveled to glance at her, but Steve hadn’t taken his gaze off her since they arrived.

“Red… you and Maria?”

Unfortunately for Tony, she wasn't in the mood to play. She rolled her eyes. “I was fine, by the way. I did not need or want any of you interfering.”

“Backing you up isn’t interfering,” he argued.

No. But not trusting her to handle it for herself was. Since James and Steve were both being mute, in this they agreed with Tony. Well, it was good for them to have bonding moments.

“Fine, tell me what Nick was doing here. If you’re backing me up, then maybe read me in.”

Dead silence met the inquiry.

“Later, Angel,” Steve said and she shook her head. “This is a party…”

“It’s supposed to be,” she said. “But right now it feels like an op and I’m the mark. So you boys finish whatever business it is. I’m going to take a stroll around—alone,” she added when James took a step forward.
He’d follow. Or Clint would. Or hell Tony would have Friday track her.

“Red.”

She held up the wrist with her bracelet. “Not like I can get that far. So leave me my illusions while I still want them.”

With that, she turned and moved out into the crowd. James’ gaze never left her and the irritation scraping away inside her skin turned into the anthills Clint had wanted to kick over.

Only she hadn’t expected to be in the middle of one when it happened.

Climbing the stairs, she pulled her arm out of Clint’s grasp when he caught it.

“Hey, Kid…”

“Clint. No.” She told him.

“That’s not how this goes…”

“Then change it. You’re all smothering me. I’ve cooperated because I get it. Now you all need to understand… I can’t breathe like this.” They were. In their own, unique, ways locking her in tighter and tighter. Tony’s wall of iron. Clint’s armed shadow. James’ vigilance. Steve’s shield. They were all sources of comfort.

Yet, they were all rapidly in danger of becoming her prison. The first shackle was on her wrist and she’d agreed to it.

He raised his hands. “Don’t let Maria get in your head.”

“Give me some credit. She was the one slipping.”

“But she also knows you—apparently pretty well based on…” Then he sighed.

“Are you investigating me again, Clint? Pulling background? If you want a list of lovers, just ask. I’ll make sure you have it. But right now, find someone else to watch.”

“Tasha…”

She made it two steps. “I know. I know you care. But I was in one cell for you before. I’m not going to be locked into another now. No matter how well-meaning.”

Though she caught his flinch, she kept walking.

“Friends are harder. Friends…friends make you weak.”

“Because friends can hurt you. Family, too.”

That was the problem with compartments. Sometimes the latches broke and the doors wouldn’t stay shut.

Her head hurt.

Her heart hurt more.
Balance

Chapter Summary

While taking a break from the party, Natasha and Pepper talk

Chapter Forty-Four

Balance

Natasha

Natasha continued up to the third floor. The club was quieter up here, the lights dimmer and the air cooler. The dull thud of the drums and bass from the first floor muted. Making her way along the open promenade she found more than a few people had made their way up here—some seated on chairs or sofas in tucked corners while they chatted and drank. The layout said there were a number of rooms laid out in a round.

Pausing at one of the bars, she got a glass of water with a lime in it before continuing her slow walk. One group of women let out a laugh as they looked up from some video they’d been watching. The mood was considerably more relaxed but it didn’t ease the agitation crawling under her skin.

Security was less conspicuous, but they were still present. Finding one of the rooms empty, she stepped out of her shoes and padded over the carpet to drop onto a chair in the corner. She didn’t bother with turning on the light; instead, she drained the water then pressed the cold glass to her neck. Maybe she should have put her hair up.

Though she’d rather close her eyes, old habits kept them open as she steadied her breathing. The music from below had grown fainter. The absence a balm she craved at the moment. Maybe it was talking about the concert from the 80s or the way the crowd surged when they danced, but she’d been walking the edge for the last few days and the tension kept snapping around her like rubber bands being popped against her skin.

Not painful but…

“Of course, just one moment,” Pepper’s voice reached her and she slipped into the room and closed the door. “I have quiet now. What was that?” She leaned forward, her clutch in one hand as she pressed it to the door, her phone against her ear. The balance let her stand up on her tiptoes out of her heels and stretch her arches. Natasha was familiar with that need.

“No, we never bring in outside contractors for those jobs. Who did they say authorized it?” Pepper huffed a laugh. “Okay, that’s not authorization that’s someone trying to do an end run around because they assume you’ll sign off on it rather than bother me on a Friday night when I’m at a party. No—you absolutely did the right thing. Send their name and info to Happy and inform
security they are not cleared to be in the building… Really, you did the right thing. Now get out of the office and go home. You were supposed to have left a couple of hours ago…. Good night, Janine.”

Hanging up, Pepper groaned and then turned to lean against the door. Her gaze hit Natasha at the same moment.

Raising her eyebrows, Natasha motioned to the chair next to hers. “Come in, plenty of room.”

Pepper let out a laugh that seemed to land somewhere between self-mocking and genuine amusement. She glanced at Natasha’s bare feet then at the door before bumping it with her hip to make sure it was closed and then she stepped out of her shoes. Her groan as she flexed her toes was one Natasha could appreciate.

“I shouldn’t hide too long, I left poor Marc out there to fend for himself.”

“Take as long or as little as you need. I’d offer you a drink, but I only grabbed a glass of water on the way in.”

Pepper chuckled. “I think we can do a little better.” Picking up her shoes, she carried them over and set them next to Natasha’s before settling into the chair and twisting to press a small button on the wall. “Part of the reason Tony likes this club—they used to have these rooms set aside for ‘secret assignations’ back in the day.”

Natasha laughed, “Why does that not surprise me?”

“Because it’s Tony,” Pepper said drily.

A soft knock on the door preceded its opening. Dressed in a white coat and tie, the waiter said, “What can I do for you, Ms. Potts?”

“A bottle of the cabernet?” She glanced at Natasha. “My personal Château Ducru Beaucaillou 2016 Saint-Julien. Two glasses.”

“Right away.” He closed the door behind him.

Silence fell and Natasha let her muscles relax as her breathing evened. Bit by bit, she packed the evening away. Pepper stared at her phone a moment, then sent a message before she silenced it and slid it into her purse. “There, I told Marc I was going to be a bit while we visited because we really didn’t get to talk downstairs. I’ll meet him in a little while.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Natasha told her. Kumar did not seem to be the type who needed or particularly wanted his hand held. More likely, he’d want to do the handholding and guiding. The waiter returned in short order, entering the room long enough to set their glasses down and open the bottle. He poured a small measure into a glass and handed it to Pepper. The deep purple of the wine was almost black in the low light. She tested it with a sniff, then took a swallow before she nodded.

“Perfect, thank you.”

“Of course,” he said, filling both glasses before leaving the bottle and slipping back out.

Pepper handed her a glass then lifted hers. “To quiet moments.”

Touching her glass to Pepper’s, Natasha lifted the glass for a sip. The flavor combined elements of
blackberries, mocha, licorice, and violets as she rolled it over her tongue. Juicy and precise, but the hints of black ink and graphite gave her a pause.

“It’s the gravelly soil,” Pepper told her as if sensing her hesitation. “I thought it odd when I first tried it, but I found I really liked it. I bought quite a few bottles and I had one sent over here for tonight.”

“It’s different.” Not sure she was a fan.

“It’s okay if you don’t like it. Maybe let it breathe a little longer then try again.” Pepper took another swallow. She shifted in the chair, then drew her legs up with a sigh. “Sometimes I wonder why we bother with the shoes and the hair and all the time spent to get ready when it’s exhausting.”

“Because you look fantastic and no one remembers the aching feet or the sore back, just the spectacular appearance. Successful. Confident. Poised. Everything a CEO should be.”

“God you are good for my ego,” Pepper laughed. “And I should be all those things without the shoes and the dress.”

“You are,” Natasha reminded her. “It’s just window dressing. It’s really no different than the thousand-dollar power suits and expensive watches. People want to be able to see and touch power and stability. They don’t recognize it otherwise.”

“True. But they could make it a more comfortable shoe.”

Natasha smiled. “You have this whole company full of innovators, I bet you could come up with something that’s both functional and pretty.”

“I could,” Pepper said slowly. “Couldn’t I?”

“Hmm-hmm.” Natasha swirled the wine and gave it another taste as Pepper took a longer drink of hers.

“So… are you ready to give me a verdict on Marc?” Though she didn’t seem particularly keen on asking the question.

“It’s hardly a trial,” Natasha cautioned her. “And I only spoke to him for ten minutes.”

“Well Tony came around to one in under three, but I bet you can do better.” Disappointment reflected in her expression, but she focused on her wine glass for a moment before lifting her gaze to meet Natasha’s. “And I know how much he values your opinion…”

“What’s your opinion, Pepper?” Because hers and Tony’s shouldn’t be the ones she made her decision on.

“I like him,” Pepper admitted.

“But…” Because Pepper wouldn’t have asked if she didn’t have some concerns.

“He’s—wonderful. He’s thoughtful and invested. He remembers things that I say, one-off comments, and he takes me seriously.”

Still not a ‘but.’

Pepper drained the wine from her glass then refilled hers before glancing at Natasha’s. Not letting
people drink alone was one gift she could give, so she finished her glass and held it out.

“It’s not vodka, Natasha. Try to at least enjoy it a little.” With a small chuckle, Pepper poured the wine then said, “Did I tell you how I met him?” In the close proximity of the room, Pepper’s perfume irritated her nostrils. It was a little too sweet, not quite candy. Not her usual style either, but then again her body chemistry might be affecting it. Pepper was a little nervous.

“You said you met him in Vegas when you were there for a tech conference, I’m assuming.”

“Yes. There was a party—as there often is—and a couple of the other executives there had a little too much to drink. I had the situation in hand, but Marc stepped in on my behalf. Granted, I didn’t thank him for it. I rather resent when people decide I need rescue rather than letting me take care of myself. It was hardly the expo exploding around me.”

“Granted,” Natasha said. Lately, she understood the feeling very well.

“But it was how he handled it, with grace and charm. He had the men laughing and feeling good even as they apologized. Then he made me feel the same way when he apologized for stepping on my toes. It was—different. I liked it. Ridiculously so, then he asked me out to dinner and I promptly told him no.”

Natasha chuckled at the grin on her face. “I see that lasted.”

“It did—for a month. He traveled, but every time we were going to be in the same city he’d ask me out for dinner or for lunch and finally coffee.” There was an element of giddiness mingling with the amusement in her voice.

“How did he know where you were going to be?”

“Emails,” Pepper told her primly. “Nothing dodgy. Then we moved to texting.”

“So you went slow, made him prove he was actually interested in you.” Smart. But then no one could accuse Pepper Potts of being anything else.

“Exactly. It didn’t hurt that I was really busy or that… Tony and I had just separated and I wasn’t going to jump right into another relationship.” She sighed, curling the end of her ponytail around one finger. “At the same time… it was nice to be pursued. To get to know him bit by bit. We talked about books, movies, music… our favorite wines. Places we’ve visited or wanted to visit. Texts graduated to phone calls and I said yes to coffee.”

“But you still took your time.”

“I may have needed to make sure I was actually interested in him instead of just rebounding. That wouldn’t have been fair to anyone.” She let out another sigh. “He’s not like Tony, he’s steadier and calmer. I relax around him and I don’t have to worry about the world catching fire. He keeps a strict work schedule, but he’s also prone to being really invested in his clients. The balance—you know between your work life and your personal life, he has it.”

She had zero idea what that had to be like, but she nodded. “That’s important.”

“Yes,” Pepper leaned toward her. “With Tony—even before Tony with me—I was always working and worrying. I’m still always working and worrying, but I’ve been working on finding that balance. I do yoga. I’m planning a vacation. I have an assistant who puts in more hours than me now and I have to keep telling her to go home.” She laughed. “You did that…”
“Worked more hours than you?” Natasha raised her brows.

“Yes, it was one of the things that brought me around after Tony hired you out of legal without consulting me.” She made a face. “Well let’s face facts, he consulted me but he didn’t listen to me at all. He wanted something. He took it. It was what he did… anyway, when you came to work for me instead, you were so competent. It let me do my job because you took care of all those things I used to take care of for Tony. It made replacing you impossible for a while.”

“I’m sorry?”

“No, you’re not.”

“No… I’m really not. But I understand. You took on a job you’d been handling from the fringes for quite a while, but when you were in the chair instead of standing beside it, the view was not only different but how others viewed you offered fresh challenges. You had to work twice as hard to be considered half as good. The perception was only important because you needed to stabilize the stocks and keep the board in check.”

“Exactly.”

“How does Marc fit into all of that?”

Because so far, Pepper’s assessment hinged on the comparisons to Tony and resisting making good or bad decisions because of Tony. All reasonable since she and Tony had been so deeply intertwined and continued to be no matter how they both framed it.

“He’s—a breath of fresh air. While he’s done a couple of things for SI, we don’t work together. He has his job and I have mine. He supports me, offers encouragement and listens to my day without automatically trying to fix things or even point out what he would do differently. Even when I ask him if he has any advice, he’ll say things like, ‘You’ve got great instincts, Pepper. Trust them. You know the business… you probably already know what you want to do,’” she said the last with a kind of wonder.

“He’s right. You do know what you want to do.”

“Is that your way of telling me you aren’t going to give me your opinion on Marc?” Pepper finished her second glass and seemed to be contemplating a third. Her cheeks were a little flushed and her eyes gleaming.

“No, that’s me saying you asked me to talk to him to give you my impressions because you’re uncertain about something in him and you want confirmation or assurance so you can stop worrying about it.”

The other woman grimaced as she lifted a hand to rub the back of her neck. “I don’t like being transparent.”

“You’re not.” Natasha assured her. “I’ve just been doing this a long time and I got into the habit of anticipating your needs when I worked with you. You only ever asked for verification when you thought something was off. You asked for clarification when you didn’t believe the results as presented. Nine times out of ten, you were right to double-check.”

“That tenth time I was just being paranoid, fine. Thank you, I accept the compliment and the premise.” She set the glass down and unfolded her legs to sit forward.

“Paranoia isn’t a bad thing. I’d rather you assume something was wrong and prove it wasn’t than
ignore your gut and pay the price.”


“Then what is it about him that you really want to know?” Because at the heart of all of it, Pepper was looking for something.

“Is he real?” the other woman said slowly, fanning her face as though it were warm but it could just be embarrassment.

Natasha swirled the wine in the glass, then took another drink of it. Honestly, she wasn’t seeing the appeal. Gravely soil or not, the graphite made her think of gun oil for some reason which made her think of James and neither of these were what she wanted to focus on. And while she actually liked the smell of gun oil, she didn’t want to drink it.

“That’s what I want to know. Am I just fooling myself that he’s what I want?”

“Are you?” Natasha tipped the glass back and drained it even as Pepper reached for the bottle.

“You do know that answering questions with questions is a very irritating habit?”

“Is it?” She smiled slowly as Pepper laughed. “The trouble with answering your questions is you know the answers. I can guess them…”

“You don’t guess, Natasha.” She filled the glasses and shifted to move her ponytail away from her shoulder. “You study, you assess, you categorize, and you define. Call it a genuine gut instinct or a gift for observation, but you see things others don’t. I get your first loyalty is to Tony and I’m not going to pretend that your relationship didn’t grate at first, but I get it—I get why he…”

“Pepper, I’m not with Tony.”

Pepper blinked slowly and lowered her wine glass. “Now it’s my turn to ask, are you sure about that?”

“Yes.”

Running her tongue over her lower lip, Pepper looked thoughtful—and very skeptical—as she added, “He’s wanted you for a long time. That’s been obvious.”

“Is that why you left?”

“No,” she answered swiftly, then blew out a shaking breath. There was a bit of a tremble to her hands and her face was still a little flushed. “I admit I’ve never liked how he looked at you…Tony always had a reputation, a well-earned one. The number of one-night stands I sent home the next morning should have been my first clue.” Sadness traced through the words. “You know what he said the first time he saw you?”

“How do you spell your name?”

Pepper laughed. “Well after that—he said I want one. Then he hired you over my objections and I know—it was your job to get in close and he resented you for it. Him more than me… But then again you were SHIELD and I liked Phil. You saved Tony’s life—at least twice that I know of. Maybe I was a little…smug that he’d gotten bitten by his own arrogance?” She winced at that part. “I probably shouldn’t be.”
Natasha shrugged. “The intention was to use his weaknesses against him. It’s also shored up that weakness now. He learns from his mistakes. But not to rehash all the history, because we can…” And they’d circled right back to Tony and not Marc Kumar. Maybe Pepper wasn’t there yet. She might like the guy, but he wasn’t Tony and that was the part she was trying to decide if she could live with or not. “But I’m not with Tony. He’s my friend. He has done a lot for me and we are close, but I’m not dating him.”

“You know that outfit says differently right? It says you’re his to protect. He only makes those kinds of things for the people he wants to keep safe.”

“I do know.”

“He only wants to keep safe those he genuinely cares about. So maybe you aren’t dating, but I’m pretty sure that’s where he wants to be. And—I was wary in the beginning. Your status even a month ago was a threat to him. But I also think you’re good for him. He’s not drinking.”

“That’s all him,” Natasha told her. “He was doing that before I saw him again.”

“Good. I worry—his heart. His blood pressure. His lack of sleeping. The stress. Then throw in the drinking and…”

“You care,” she told her quietly. “That doesn’t go away.”

Pepper stared at her wine glass. “Marc isn’t Tony.”

“No,” Natasha said. “He’s not.”

The other woman drained the glass then shook her head. “I don’t want Marc to be Tony.”

“Okay.”

“I want…”

Natasha waited and pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth as she maintained her patience. The sensation was odd and she scraped her tongue against them. It…she couldn’t quite feel the tip of it. Pepper’s flushed face.

“I don’t know what I want,” Pepper admitted in a burst of energy, she started to stand and then sat back down abruptly. “I know that Tony and I didn’t work but it didn’t make the feelings go away. I’ve loved him for a long, long time.”

The air was really cool and Pepper was sweating. Natasha flexed her toes. They were numb. Reaching a hand over, she caught Pepper’s wrist, but it was like she was reaching across a long tunnel and the world slowed.

Pepper’s skin was hot to the touch.

“Oh, you’re so cold,” Pepper said suddenly, clasping her hand, but Natasha slid her fingers to Pepper’s pulse. It was racing.

Racing pulse.

Flushed skin.

Tingling numbness in the extremities.
Compromised balance.

Everything seemed to move into slow motion.

“I’m sorry,” Pepper said suddenly, her voice coming from far away. “I shouldn’t say things like that. I know you aren’t cold or cruel. I meant your skin.”

And she was babbling.

Standing, Natasha forced her legs to work even as she swayed. Neuro toxin. It had to be. Pepper’s wine. Wine she ordered and had sent over. Her heart was slowing, but Pepper’s raced.

“Up,” she told her. That made no sense. Why was her own heart slowing, but Pepper’s wasn’t…

The air.

Fuck.

She held her breath, but it wasn’t going to be enough. She needed to flood her lungs with oxygen, but whatever was in the air—and they had to have been feeding it in gradually whatever it was—would just speed up the process.

“Pepper,” she said. “Focus.”

Pepper’s face wavered and her pupils were the size of saucers. Staggering to her feet, Natasha stripped off the bracelet and slid it onto Pepper’s wrist, then secured it. She tapped it twice to activate it.

Please let there not be jammers.

The world wavered more as she got the clutch purse open. The first masked man through the door—didn’t come through the door—but the wall. From the other side. Had they been cutting through the whole time and she’d missed it?

How off were her reactions? She couldn’t even make out the passageway. It didn’t matter, she fired and he took a stun to the gut. Only discipline kept her arm steady as she fought to hold onto consciousness by her fingertips. Her hand squeezed because the gun fired. Three men down. Then the fourth.

The world was swimming but she had herself as braced as she could, lungs screaming for oxygen even as her head roared. Adrenaline dumping into her system helped.

The guys would be here if the bracelet wasn’t jammed. Fine.

She’d get them out.

A shock hit her, sending a blinding white pulse stinging through her system.

Then a second.

A third.

A trickle of drool escaped her mouth as she got up close and personal with the carpet.

More booted feet.
Masked men.

Count—identify anything for later.

Six. At least six.

She could take six.

Then the world went black.

Pepper

For the longest time, Pepper just couldn’t move. She was aware, but it was like someone locked her away in her head. Her body went hot, then cold, then flushed hot again. The air tasted almost sickly sweet and it nauseated her. She’d been talking to Natasha and the words just kept falling out of her, little raw truths she hadn’t meant to share, but then she found herself locked behind the barricade of her eyes as Natasha staggered to her feet. She put something on Pepper’s wrist. But Pepper couldn’t turn her head to see what it was.

Then the men came. Time seemed to do weird things. The men came through the wall? Did they cut a hole in it? Natasha shot them. Why was she on her own? Where were the others?

Oh, they were in one of the suites on the third floor.

Soundproofed.

No cameras.

Security swept the rooms regularly because of that.

So why weren’t they in there?

They hadn’t come in at all while she’d been in there talking and they had to have been there at least a half-hour.

Natasha shot several of the men, she was right in front of Pepper. Blocking her into the chair. All Pepper could see now were the lines of her back. Then Natasha convulsed.

Once.

Twice.

She was falling.

In her mind, Pepper was reaching out a hand to catch her but in reality, nothing moved. It was like a nightmare, completely aware and unable to do anything.

More men flooded into the room, they were hauling Natasha up. She groaned.
Oh thank God, she was still alive.

Then one man went down, Natasha’s legs around his neck.

The sickening crunch of that same neck being broken echoed in the air.

Another man shouted as she drove two fingers right into his eye. Then the thud of something hard slamming into the back of her head. Natasha didn’t get up this time.

One of the men dragged Pepper up, then she was over a shoulder, her bare feet dangling. They collected their purses, the wine bottle—even the glasses.

What were they doing?

Evidence.

_They’re cleaning up the evidence._

Then the man carrying her turned and she couldn’t see anything but his back. The most unsettling feeling cascaded over her and she shuddered. They were in another building entirely and she could see the wall they’d—oh my god we walked through a wall.

There hadn’t been a hole. They’d walked right through it. Another man came through with Natasha over his shoulder. They’d bound her hands and her feet. The guy had a hand on her ass, but at least it didn’t look like he was groping her. Pepper was pretty sure the guy carrying her had a hand on hers but she was so damn numb and disconnected.

They were running down stairs. But they weren’t talking or maybe Pepper was deaf.

_Please let this be a nightmare._

The club was located in the theatre district. This wasn’t just a building. It was an old theatre. She could smell sawdust and something like the ozone from the lights. There was that heavy smell of stage makeup and—_why does every backstage area have to have a hint of urine to it?_

The silent troop of men made their way along the empty back hallway. Applause split the air and there was a rising crescendo of music. There was a show on—some new stage show with that actor… she couldn’t think of his name. What was his name?

But another door opened and a blast of icy air hit her. For once she didn’t shiver. It actually felt good. The cold air on her skin sent a rush of awareness through her. She was hot, boiling and her stomach lurched as she found herself tumbling sideways and she landed against a hard metal floor. She tried to turn her head, but she was staring at a wall of a—van? Maybe. She was in a van.

This was definitely a nightmare. No window in sight, van wall. A light thud of something landing next to her. Natasha? Then more quiet bumps rocking the vehicle. The men climbing inside.

Did they bring the men she shot?

A car horn blared somewhere. The dull sound of vehicles moving. The wind blew. Somewhere was the very badly piped sound of Christmas music.

The engine rumbled and the van began to move. They turned and she slid, bouncing against the side lightly. She lay like that for seconds…minutes…hours… Time seemed to fade.

Did she pass out?
Oh, she could smell sweat. Something a little sweeter, but the overwhelming musk almost drowned it out. Turn her head, she just needed to turn her head.

She blinked. It was darker in the van than it had been before. Where had the streetlights gone?

Someone coughed.

It was still—quiet.

Too quiet.

She needed to turn her head. The van turned and kept turning like it had to circle to change from one road to another. Her head finally rolled a little and she flopped from one side to the other.

Natasha.

She lay on her side. Wrists bound. Pepper could barely make out her features in the gloom. Her eyes were still closed. Her jewelry and dress were still in place. Good. Maybe that meant Pepper’s was too. They weren’t alone. Movement just behind Natasha. A man sat there, he had one knee up, his arm resting on it as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

Or maybe he was braced.

Pepper’s stomach lurched again and she closed her eyes. The heat flushing her system was unbearable. She was probably sweating buckets. The next time her eyes opened, there was more light, but it was infrequent. They were still moving.

Her head pounded and she squinted away from the light. Oh. God. She could move. She put her hand down and tried to push off the hard bite from the uneven floor.

Arms trembling she managed to roll over and she lost the fight with her stomach. The sour smell of wine hit her as she vomited.

A hand grabbed her hair and hauled her over and she faced a bucket. She gladly vomited into it. Sweat soaked her arms. Eyes tearing and throat burning, she fought against the gag as she tried to throw up again. Finally, it stopped and she sagged to the floor. The bucket vanished. But the smell was still there.

Hair stuck to her cheeks and she reached out with trembling fingers to touch Natasha’s arm.

Ice.

She was so cold. God, why was she so cold when Pepper was on fire?

“Natasha…”

C’mon. She shook her again.

Natasha still didn’t open her eyes.

“What did you do to her?” Pepper demanded. None of the shadowy figures said anything. Pepper wanted to put an arm over her protectively. Try to warm her up. “You have no idea the hell you’re about to have rain down on you.”

She had no idea how long they’d been gone, but the Avengers would be looking for Natasha. Marc would notice she was missing and he might tell Tony, but they would definitely be looking for her.
“You want to do yourselves a favor. Just pull over and let us go. Trust me when I say you will not enjoy the alternative.” She kept a hand on Natasha, at least she had a pulse. “Or we can simply make this a negotiation. You’re taking an awful risk, I hope the reward is worth it. You might want to consider that I can double whatever they are offering you quite easily and that payment wouldn’t be a for a crime that might find you spending the rest of your life in jail.”

If they had a life after. Tony wasn’t especially reasonable in volatile situations like this. There was absolutely no guarantee they’d receive any mercy from Natasha.

C’mon, Natasha. Wake up.

Still, the men said nothing. If not for the occasional flash of light illuminating the legs of the man just behind Natasha, Pepper wouldn’t be able to tell they were there. Twice she tried to shift so she could get a look at their faces—but the one time she managed, all she saw was a gas mask looking thing.

Yeah.

She hadn’t needed to see that.

Why did they need those?

Don’t think about that right now. Where was her purse? She had a taser in there. And her phone. No amount of squirming located it and she didn’t want to be obvious. Maybe if she sat up…

Her stomach rebelled so she pressed her face against the metal floor. The sour stink and the musky odors weren’t helping her stomach, but the coldness did. It was blissfully cool against her face.

It had to be the drug in her system. She always reacted badly to them. Her thoughts kept getting a little sticky, but nothing compared to the trembling in her limbs or the fact she was so damn hot.

“Natasha…” She tried again. Face to the floor, she suppressed the tears welling up. Being a frustrated crier had never been a useful trait. Learning to keep those tears in check kept her from bawling during business meetings or when facing down the board. It wouldn’t matter a damn that neither her emotions nor her mind was impaired, she just cried when things got to be too much. But good grief, bring out the tears and men scattered or suddenly behaved like you’d grown two heads.

Wait…

She lifted her gaze to see the man behind Natasha again. His mask faced in their direction but she couldn’t see his eyes. There was movement farther on in the van, near the back doors she would guess. But the light from the front windows didn’t reach that far.

“Please…” She said, summoning the tears. “Just tell me what you want.”

The guy behind Natasha shifted. Then movement flashed from behind her and she saw a needle moving in her direction.

No.

Her arms and legs still shook but she managed to kick the guy’s arm. And she scrambled. Her hand slipped in something, but she didn’t look at it. The guy lunged for her as she slammed against the corner behind the passenger seat and the van wall. She had nowhere else to go.

Natasha moved suddenly. The man never made it to Pepper as Natasha’s feet slammed into his
solar plexus. And he went flying backward. The man behind Natasha surged forward, a needle in his hand, but she blocked him, catching his wrist with her hands. She was still bound, but she wrenched his hand to the side and there was another sound of crunching bone then the syringe and needle fell and tumbled over the floor. Pepper snatched it without thinking twice and when the first guy rushed back toward Natasha who almost had the second one subdued, Pepper pushed off the seat and slammed into him. She jabbed the needle into his bare forearm and sank the plunger.

The backhand to her jaw had her hitting her head against the door, but she tried to rake her hand down his face, but the mask was in the way. The van swerved, jostling all of them. A body slid toward her and Pepper recoiled, but Nat was already tumbling over that body and right into the guy attacking Pepper.

Her hands were free and there was a flash of a knife. Something hot spit across the distance and spattered Pepper’s cheek.

Blood.

Definitely, don’t think about it.

The van swerved again and Natasha had hands and feet free and she’d gone for the front of the van.

“Brace,” she ordered Pepper. The sound of a gun ripped through the silence and then the very real scent of burning hair a sharp sound of electricity, like a taser. Then the van went tumbling. Pepper grasped what had to be an ‘oh shit’ handle and shoved herself as hard as she could against the passenger chair and then the van was tumbling.

The sound was horrific. Metal crunched and bodies bounced around them. One of the men slid into her, but it bounced off her as something shimmered in the air around her and they were falling and falling and finally came to an abrupt jolting stop.

The creaking of the metal and the hard tilt of the van were not comforting. Natasha was moving before the van even settled. She jerked a door open letting in icy, icy air. Pepper went from burning up to freezing.

“Natasha…”

“Conserve your energy,” Natasha said as she went over the men. “We need to get out of here and… Hell yes, thank you.” She pulled something out from under one then tossed Pepper her shoes. After, she stripped a jacket off one of the men. “Put those on.”

Pepper did not want to put that coat on, but she shoved her arms into it. The smell was only slightly better than freezing to death.

She thrust Pepper’s purse at her, then she had her own shoes on. She shoved her clutch into Pepper’s but went over to one of the other men. Then the driver. She searched each of them. She came out with two more knives and a gun... the handle flared blue when she gripped it. Then she unholstered a second gun. One for each hand. Pepper checked her phone, but it had no signal. At all.

“Can you fire one of these?”

She’d learned. When she started at Stark Industries, everyone received training on proper handling of weapons and there was a small club of admins who used to make a day of it—range, spa, lunch. “Yes. Don’t ask me to hit much.”
“Keep it. If they get this close to you, just shoot them. Don’t hesitate. See—no safety, just a trigger pull. You have to squeeze it like you mean it.”

Pepper blew out a breath and nodded. She was shaking all over but they had to get this done. She ignored the tears running down her cheeks. Natasha wasn’t saying a word. A sound of gravel crunching and Nat held up a hand as she moved to the doors she’d shoved open.

With a finger to her lips, she motioned for Pepper to stay back. Then she took a glance outside.

The fingers on her left hand ticked. One. Two. Three Four. Then she stopped then her thumb jutted out.

On five. No, there were five… five guys.

There had been four in the van not counting the bodies Pepper didn’t look at that had all landed in a heap near where she’d braced. She didn’t know why they didn’t all end up on top of her and she didn’t care to ask.

“Stay here,” Natasha told her. “I’ll be right back for you.”

Pepper nodded once.

She believed her.

Then Natasha was out of the van and moving.

Shouts. A bullet pinged off the side of the van and Pepper crouched lower. She didn’t have much cover and if they had armor-piercing rounds—Hell even if they just had large caliber it would go right through the side of this van.

Her stomach lurched as she heard impacts of flesh, then another shout and finally two sharp shots. Then silence.

Bracing the gun, she kept watch.

*Don’t shoot Natasha. Don’t shoot Natasha.*

Natasha appeared in the opening. “C’mon. We’re getting out of here.”

Pepper stumbled to her feet. She could probably run in the heels if she had to, but she really hoped not. Natasha had—when had she gotten sleeves?

Outside the van, she looked around and just tried to ignore the bodies on the ground. There was a car farther up the incline…no, an SUV.

They’d tumbled, it must have been thirty or forty feet down a rocky slope.

Natasha caught her arm. “Hey, focus.”

“Sorry—what happened to your dress?” She really had gotten sleeves and the bare expanse between the bodice of her sleeveless dress and the choker was now metal mesh… armor.

The choker must have turned into sleeved armor when she activated the bracelets, the gems on them glowed currently.

“Apparently it had a nifty trick. We’ll talk about style later, stay close. We need to get up that
incline and into that car. Hopefully away from the van, we can get a signal out.”

Why away from the van? What signal? Oh. Her tracker. After Killian—Pepper suppressed a shudder—and the incident with the Extremis, Tony had a subdermal tracker placed just under the skin behind her right ear. She forgot it was there half the time, but he called it a precaution. At the time, struggling with nightmares and half-sick with fear, she’d agreed to it. Then promptly forgot about it as she worked through her complicated feelings.

Natasha glanced at her again and Pepper realized she’d stopped moving. “Sorry.”

Her steps were sluggish and her shoes in combination with the terrain made for an uneven climb. More than once she stumbled and the borrowed jacket offered only a little assistance from the icy breeze.

At the top, Natasha gave her a hand to get over the edge and then they were standing on the road.

“Where are we?”

Pepper turned and looked. It was an empty stretch following a curve to what might be the Hudson River below? She’d heard water but…

The SUV’s doors were open and the lights were on—but the engine wasn’t running.

“Don’t tell me we need to go back down for keys…”

“They didn’t have keys on them,” Natasha told her, moving around the car and searching. Pepper pulled out her phone, still no signal.

“Where are we that we still have no phone signal?”

“In jamming range—probably something in the van.” Natasha eyed the vehicle. “Or this SUV. What time is it?”

“One in the morning.”

She’d been in and out for hours.

Shoving her phone back into her purse, she pushed the hair off her face and moved to help with the search. “They aren’t going to be able to track us until we get away from that thing…”

“Yep,” Natasha said, pushing out of the car and scanning the area. Then she moved to run her fingers under the rim.

“Can’t you hotwire it?”

“If it were twenty years older? No problem. A lot of manufacturers started adding immobilizers back in the 90s, without the chip, it’ll shut the whole system down. If we had signals on the phone, I could probably hack it that way.”

She frowned and looked at the engine.

“Chips.”

“What?”

“There are no keys because they have the chip implanted somewhere…or maybe in a watch. I’ve
seen it done.” Natasha pivoted and checked the road. “We’re hiking…how are you doing?”

“Well… I don’t want to throw up anymore.”

They shared a look and Natasha grinned. “Well, I call that an improvement.”

“East or West?” She asked.

Natasha glanced at the van, then the sky and said. “East. We’re going to have to stay close to the road, but be ready to get off it when I say.”

The road would leave them exposed. She kept hold of the gun but folded her arms against the breeze and headed toward Natasha. The armor on her arms and chest had begun to retract into the choker. But she pulled a jacket out of the car and tugged it on, then pulled her hair free. There were three or four what looked like burn marks from a taser prong across her upper chest.

“How far do you think we need to get?”

“A mile, maybe.” Natasha glanced back again. “Depends on how strong that jamming blanket is.”

Would it be faster to try and find it and disable it?

Pepper looked at the overturned van. They’d literally rolled down that hill and she was in one piece. How…?

“C’mon, we need to move. I don’t think these guys were alone and we don’t want to be here when backup arrives.”

No.

No, they did not.

“Right behind you.”

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Natasha

Ten minutes of walking brought no passing traffic, no signs of lights other than a distant flash on a cell tower that could be a couple of miles away. The road wound unevenly. If she was right, they were in the Hudson River Valley, north and east of Manhattan and they’d been missing for a little over three hours. Chances were high that the team was already looking.

The bracelet had a tracker and she’d put it on Pepper before they’d been taken for a reason. The shield activated when she sent the van down the cliff. The armor sliding into place after she’d used the new bites on the driver had been a welcome surprise, but the flare of shield igniting insulated Pepper as they fell.

The best damn news since she’d realized the wine was drugged.
“How… how did they do this?” Pepper asked. “I get they poisoned the wine but…”

“Neuro toxin. They pumped something into the air, too.” She glanced over her shoulder. Pepper was flagging and she couldn’t move at a brisk pace. “Then threw in tasing me for an extra special good time. I’m still working out how they got into the club.”

“They walked through the wall.”

“What?”

“Through it. Like phased through it, I was—awake when we went through with them. They even brought the bodies of the people you took down.”

That was bad. Phasing? Something phasing through solid matter. There had to be a way to neutralize that.

“I counted six coming in. There were three bodies in the van, four living, then five more from the SUV. That’s twelve.” A hell of a lot of manpower.

“Who are they?”

“No idea. Did they say anything?”

“No.”

She would have taken more time to document the scene except she had Pepper with her. At least photograph the men. As it was, she hadn’t taken the time to remove their masks. Even the ones in the SUV had been wearing them. Dehumanizing, impersonal and downright creepy gas masks. It threw her back to the war and she made a point of never revisiting those memories if she could help it.

The time to drag every one of those men up, hoping she found the right one the first time out didn’t feel like the right choice. The same with stripping the van to find the jammer. It could be anything. Every instinct she had said get Pepper out of there. It was why she abandoned the scene, why she didn’t linger to search. They had limited resources and contact. Even when they got through, it would take time for the team to get to them.

“Pretty sure you were the target.”

“The wine.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“But you were there with me…”

“You had the wine sent over. Someone knew it was yours. They tampered with it. The waiter.” Natasha knew what he looked like. She’d paid attention to that much. Once they were in the room and the door was closed, she hadn’t worried about the lack of sounds. “Soundproofing on the room. It was a trap…but a trap of convenience. You happened to be there.”

“I could have ordered the wine at any point…”

“Have you ever ordered your own wine while at an event while still working the event?”

Pepper grimaced. Though she kept up the effort, she was slowing. Natasha pulled out her phone. Still no signal. Dammit. “No.”
The bracelet was active. No sign of Tony so still falling under the jamming umbrella.

Her legs were numb and she had no doubts Pepper had the same issues. The jacket was hardly more than a windbreak. But if they kept moving… just keep moving.

“So they knew at some point you’d take some quiet time. Might have expected you to do it with your date.” Mr. Big Fix It Public Relations would have been no obstacle.

“Instead they got you,” Pepper said with a breathless chuckle. “What a bad night they must be having.”

They were all mostly dead. The ones she’d iced had been killed and not by her. That told her something about who she was dealing with. Failure led to execution. These people weren’t playing. That at least eliminated Nick and Maria. They were—they weren’t butchers. They might be hard asses, but summary execution for mission failure was not their modus operandi unless she had completely and utterly failed to read them.

Possible? Sure. Anything was.

Probable? Very unlikely.

The road was smoother than the land around it, but the near-total darkness broken only by the very distantly placed streetlamps with their muddy yellow light still created a murkiness that made their steps uncertain. Natasha slowed her pace if only to prevent Pepper from wrenching an ankle. While Natasha could—and had—walked miles on severely wounded and sometimes broken joints, she didn’t think it would be an option with Pepper.

Pepper’s security should have been keeping closer tabs on her. No one came to check on them. Sure, she’d texted Kumar that she was staying to have a drink. That did not absolve her security. She, Happy and Rhodey were high targets and should have had someone on their six at all times.

Then again, she’d been in a room with Natasha. She should have been safe.

“I guess you were right about whoever these people are—they were trying to hurt Tony,” Pepper said and there was the barest hint of a wobble in her voice. Then she swallowed hard and the wobble eased. “They didn’t seem to want to kill me—or you.”

“No, kidnapping seemed to be the name of the game.”

“For ransom?”

“Maybe.” Highly unlikely. Disappear Pepper, leave no body, no trace of what happened to her. Keep her alive long enough to create evidence that could be sent to torment him.

“What’s that?”

Natasha stared ahead. She’d been looking at it for the last couple of minutes. There was a crescent moon that night, not much in the way of light to reflect from it. Worse, there were clouds moving in and the cold wind had been steady. She couldn’t feel her cheeks or her nose anymore. The ears had probably long been numb. Exposure could lead to frostbite. They needed shelter if they couldn’t get out of the jamming radius.

The phone still had no bars.

“Covered bridge.” She didn’t recall any on her drives through Westchester, but she didn’t spend
days exploring rural New York. What she could see of it now didn’t look at all familiar.

“So,” Pepper said. “When we get out of this and we’re home. You and me, a bottle of untampered wine and a full day of spa treatment at my place or the Tower…”

“I’m not really a big fan of strangers touching me,”

“That’s fine, we’ll have Henri and Georg over for lunch, you can interrogate them and I’ll provide you with the background check. Then you get pampered. They have—fantastic hands. The things they can do with them… they’ll change your life.”

Natasha chuckled. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Trust me, Henri has been my personal masseuse for a decade—the kinks in my back and the wrenched neck after the expo? He fixed those. The weeks of therapy after Killian? He and Georg kept me together. Georg is Henri’s brother, by the way, they’re worth every penny I pay and they’re willing to fly to where I am if I need them. I never have to worry about pictures or stories or inappropriate behavior.”

“You make it sound attractive.”

“It is. And we’ll have lunch and then have Marie do our hair and Rachel can do our nails. How do you feel about shopping?”

The chatter betrayed a hint of her teeth knocking together. Natasha dropped back to walk with her and wrapped an arm around her. Pepper was taller than she was, but she could get an arm around her waist easily enough. It was more about the psychological warmth than actual heat at the moment. After shifting the gun to her other hand Pepper slipped her arm around Natasha’s back even as she shuddered from the cold.

“Shopping isn’t so bad. I once worked as a personal shopper for a cover. I would have to put together whole lines of clothing for clients.”

“What kind of mission would need you undercover as that?”

“Do you know how much women talk when they come in and have wine and look at the latest collections? The wives of diplomats and politicians are the worst, they gossip about everything—trying to one-up each other on their husbands’ successes or projects.”

Pepper laughed. “Oh my god, you’re right…”

“So, you go in as a personal shopper. You’re the help. Invisible. All you do is bring out the outfits and soak up the information.”

“I can’t imagine it. I used to think my life was exciting but…”

“It’s boring more often than you know. I’ve sat for days on a stakeout, had to live in different covers for months. You still have to do the work and the whole time you’re waiting for an opportunity or information. But no one around you really knows you and every decision you make can impact your cover and your mission. Some days I’d rather just sit around in my sweats and watch TV.”

“I always thought being a spy was exciting.”

“On television, sure. In the movies, they even glamorize the bad parts of it. It’s not a good life. The
truth isn’t all things to all the people and neither am I. I haven’t been for so long…maybe I don’t remember what it is anymore.” She was tired. Right down to her bones she was tired. This wasn’t like the island it was… everything else.

“I’m sorry, Natasha.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Yes, I do. I keep wanting you to fit into this mold of ‘normal,’ but of all people I know normal is relative.”

“You work with what you have, Pepper. You’ve never tried to make me feel like I was less.”

“But you still don’t want to do a spa day?”

Right now? “Ask me again after I meet Georg and Henri—I like a man with good hands.” Steve had excellent hands. She definitely liked him, even if she’d wanted to punch him earlier.

Pepper actually laughed and squeezed her tighter. “I want to ask you a question…and I feel like it’s horrifically inappropriate but I really want to know the truth.”

“Then ask.” They were almost to the covered bridge. Pepper’s little panting breaths in between shivers were good signs. It was when the shivers stopped that they’d have an issue.

“When you were undercover at SI… did you really not sleep with Tony?”

“No, I didn’t. If it had been the only way to achieve the mission objectives—then I probably would have.” She could have lied. She could have softened it. “But Tony didn’t need a lover. He needed a friend. I could do that.”

“You mean that.”

“I do—I know when a man wants me. He didn’t. Not then. I think he toyed with the idea because he thought he was supposed to and I think he wanted to push you away.”

Pepper stumbled.

“That day on the plane…coming back from Monaco. He was desperately trying to get your attention, to tell you that he was dying and he was scared. But you were too angry at him for driving on the raceway and you were blaming him for Vanko’s attack.” Yeah, she could be nicer. But Pepper didn’t need nice right now. She needed to be angry. Anger would get her adrenaline pumping and help keep her warm. “You were too busy being angry at him for being him to hear him asking for help. Maybe it was easier for me to see; I wasn’t emotionally compromised. But he succeeded in getting you to push him away. You let him do it.”

“I don’t understand why he couldn’t have just told me instead of…”

“Protecting you? Trying to lessen the impact his death might have on you? Because you were more important to him than his own life, even if he was desperately trying to find a way to survive. He was scared, Pepper. Men do crazy things when they’re scared.”

Like build shields around you or track your every movement by putting you in a bubble of surveillance.

“He should have trusted me.”
“You should have trusted him.”

In the distance…

…that was an engine. Natasha twisted to look behind them and Pepper slowed.

“The night of the party, I blamed you. I thought you were feeding his ego and filling his head with… well, a lot of stuff.”

“Natalie Rushman was damn good at her job, but being provocative was half of it. You were supposed to think it. You don’t look at what a sexpot is doing other than what she is wearing or whether her lipstick is smudged.”

The engine was getting closer. There was more than one.

“Pepper…”

They were at the covered bridge. There was a brief break in the wind, but not much. Natasha leaned over to look past the railing. Could they slip down there and just get out of the way?

“What…?”

Natasha stripped off her coat. Ahead of them in the distance rounding a curve she’d caught a flash of lights. “Take this…and get down there.” She pulled her around to the edge of the covered bridge. “Keep the gun in your right hand and use your left to brace yourself, go down as far as you can. Take off your shoes. Get flush to the bridge and use the jacket to cover your legs.”

The engines were getting closer.

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. No matter what happens to me, you stay down there until I come or Tony does. Or one of the others. They’re going to find you. But you’ll be out of the wind.”

“Natasha…”

“I don’t have time for this argument. If I needed to tear apart a multinational corporation, you’d be my first call. This is what I do. Trust me to do it. Go.”

They had maybe two minutes.

Pepper hugged her abruptly. “Don’t die.”

Returning her hug, she gave her a brief squeeze. “Remember—you stay quiet, no matter what. Promise me that. No matter what you hear up here—until it’s me or Tony or one of the others, you don’t let anyone know where you are.”

With one last squeeze, Pepper nodded and then she began her descent.

“And keep that gun close. Wait for them to get right up on you and you don’t hesitate.”

“I won’t.”

Aware of the cold burning her arms, Natasha ignored it. She moved out onto the bridge. The cars were getting closer. There was a chance it would be some locals. Civilians she could hitch a ride for them with.
There was always that chance.

Adjusting the grip on the gun, she stared at the oncoming lights. I.C.E.R. Two knives. Garrote. Stingers.

Everything else within her quieted. All the tension settled.

Compartmentalize.


Pepper was right about one thing… these people were going to have a very bad night.
Regret

Chapter Summary

One by one, the guys confront their choices and the fact Nat and Pepper are missing.

Chapter Forty-Five

Regret

Clint

The minute Tony pushed away from the table, Steve should have sat him down but that was hardly possible when he and Bucky were also ready to intervene.

“It’s supposed to be. But right now it feels like an op and I’m the mark. So you boys finish whatever business it is. I’m going to take a stroll around—alone.”

The absolute lack of emotion in her voice was a tell. Maybe not to others, but Clint recognized it. It meant she erased her emotional reaction. Shut it down and hid it away.

“Not like I can get that far. So leave me my illusions while I still want them.”

Damage control. He’d intercepted her at the top of the stairs, but she dismissed him with a look. No, they didn’t get to do this. Fuck Nick and Maria at the moment. The only reason Clint had been watching that conversation after Natasha disappeared to talk to her was the fact Nick was pushing so hard to get at her. Maria and Natasha had history—which was bad enough—but Maria was every bit as loyal to Nick as Clint and Natasha had been.

It didn’t help that Maria caught their vigilance. Then again—the three below were hardly subtle.

“Don’t let Maria get in your head.”

“Give me some credit. She was the one slipping.”

“But she also knows you—apparently pretty well based on...” Then he sighed.
Who was he kidding? He hadn’t been subtle, either. Maybe he’d let Fury get in his head. The idea
Hydra used Natasha while she’d been at SHIELD left more than an unsettled feeling in his gut.
Beyond the betrayal of her trust was the question he hated asking himself. What had they made her
do? Was there anyone else out there who could still do it? They’d dealt with the Ivan triggers,
right?

An image of her blank-eyed gaze when she’d appeared at the facility in Russia flashed through his
mind. That threat was over, right? But were there others? SHIELD deprogrammed her, partly why
she’d spent so many months in isolation.

Except, she’d also been trapped where they could get to her.

What about the chair? Did she have code words like Bucky or not?

“Are you investigating me again, Clint? Pulling background? If you want a list of lovers, just ask.
I’ll make sure you have it. But right now, find someone else to watch.”

“Tasha…”

She made it two steps. “I know. I know you care. But I was in one cell for you before. I’m not going
to be locked into another now. No matter how well-meaning.”

He flinched. She had gone into a cell at SHIELD and she’d walked into it because she trusted him
and his word. And he was questioning her again, not to her face, but he didn’t have to. Natasha was
not blind. She could be stubborn—Lord could that woman be stubborn. But keeping her out of the
loop of her own defense? It seemed—prudent. She had enough stress. The fact she’d been having
those episodes at all was enough to make him consider suggesting they take her back to the island.
Maybe she needed more than just a few weeks to heal before thrusting herself back into the fire.

If they’d been able to track down that damn doctor…

Except, she was already in the fire and deciding she needed something versus just backing her up—
yeah, that made every single one of them not a lot better than Nick. She’d cut Nick out and if they
weren’t careful, she would do it to them, too.

And right now, Clint didn’t think she’d be wrong.

Worse, she’d do it with a considerable amount of harm to herself because she’d granted them so
much leeway. Why the hell were they pressing for even more?

Because we want her safe. But her sanity is far more important.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Tony said via the comms and Clint shook his head. He tracked
Natasha as she followed the circuit of the second level toward the stairs for the third. There was an
elevator but why bother? She hadn’t been kidding about walking it off.

Bracing his hands against the railing, he scanned the party crowd. Peter and his date were dancing
again. Sam and Sharon had made it down there. Wanda came to stand next to him. Where was
Vision? It took him a minute, but he found him standing in the far corner of the first level, his
expression intent as he studied the organized chaos around him.

“He wants to learn more about how people interact in social settings when they are relative strangers,” Wanda said as if reading his mind. Maybe she had. Right now, his mind might not be the best place for her. She leaned on the railing next to him.

“How are you doing?”

Bucky and Steve were still standing with Tony, their conversation interrupted by Rhodey and a couple of Pentagon representatives who’d apparently swung an invite—cause they were related to Howling Commandos. Clint touched the comm to dial it down some. At least they weren’t rushing up after her. Tony might give her space. Steve would likely ensure it since she’d basically stated that was what she needed.

The former Winter Soldier was a wild card, but Clint got where he was coming from. Nat did, too. She understood them all and they had been taking advantage of it.

“Maybe I should be asking you that,” Wanda said, her accent giving the words some added emphasis. “Natasha seemed upset.”

“She just needed to get some air. It’s noisy in here.”

“And crowded.” Wanda added, gripping the railing. “Did Maria say something to upset her?”

“Don’t worry about Tash. She’s fine.”

“Okay.” Not that Wanda sounded like she believed him. “I think—”

Someone burst in the front doors downstairs, a man with a camera and he was snapping pictures rapidly but someone else was right behind him and they threw something. It arched through the air but then froze as Wanda caught it and created a bubble around it.

“It’s paint.”

There were shouts that it was art, but security already had both men in custody and was pulling them out. Tony glanced up at them. “Not detecting any kind of explosive. I think it’s a paint bomb.”

Wanda glanced at Clint. “What do you want me to do with it?”

“Tony thinks it’s a paint bomb, can you move it somewhere secure? We don’t want it exploding over the crowd.”

The music had cut off and the crowd cheered at the red glow hovering around the ball.

“If I may,” Vision said as he floated over to them. “Allow me to have it, Wanda.”

She nodded and he approached the field.

“Now.”

His hands closed around it as the field dropped. Without a word, he flew forward then phased through the wall taking the device with him.

After another round of applause, the band kicked it back up and a blushing Wanda asked, “Are all of Tony’s parties like this?”
“More or less.” Clint gave her a grin. “You did good, kiddo.”

She lingered with him for a few more minutes glancing back over the level and toward the stairs to the third floor. From where Clint stood, he could see them. Eventually, she gave up waiting on Natasha—because that was what she was doing, of that he was certain—and went downstairs where Sharon and Sam lured her out on the dance floor. More than one of the single men down there took notice of her and Clint frowned. Catching the paint bomb set a lot of eyes in her attention.

“Natalia hasn’t come back down.” Like he materialized from the ether, Bucky said.

“No, she’s still on the third floor. Leave her be.”

“I have,” Bucky told him. “But…”

“No, no buts. We’re playing this wrong by trying to sack her out of her own defense.”

“We’re not…”

“We are,” Clint said flatly. “We didn’t tell her about Fury approaching Steve or that we went and sent him a message. We told her we were going to ask…”

“She said she didn’t want to talk to him.” Bucky shook his head. “Before you say it, yes I know the difference. Natalia is…” He broke off and gripped the railing. “I need to go find her.”

“I wouldn’t…”

“I can handle her anger.”

“Look, I like you. But you can’t smother her not when she flat out told us to back off.”

“Natalia is stubborn and just because she has made a decision doesn’t mean it’s the right one.”

“So you’re the guy who decides what’s right?”


“We all want what’s best for her,” Tony said in an almost idle tone. “Maybe we should lay that out.”

Clint sighed. There was the other problem. They were trying to decide what was best for her.

“Lay it out. I’m going to put eyes on her. Once I know she continues to be safe, I’ll back off again.”

“Buck…” Steve’s voice stopped him. “You told me the other day to back off. Let her have her space. She needed to work it out for herself and when she was ready…”

“She was safe inside the secure Tower in a secure room. She’s not secure here.” He grimaced as if he tasted something bitter.

“Friday,” Tony interjected before anyone else could respond. “Red status check.”

“Ms. Romanoff is currently located on the third floor, respiration, and pulse all within normal ranges. She appears to be stationary for the time being. No distress.”

“See,” Tony said. “Nothing to worry about, we have eyes on her and she’s not going anywhere that
we won’t—"

He stopped abruptly and Clint’s stomach cramped.

“Not like I can get that far. So leave me my illusions while I still want them.”

“Son of a bitch,” Tony said and Clint caught his profile as he rubbed his eyes under the glasses.

Steve folded his arms and leaned back against a wall, his expression dark and Bucky just stood there, a silent sentinel.

“Yep. That would be all four of us,” Clint said easily. “She is letting us track her. She’s surrendering her privacy and control to keep us from freaking out. We’re a bunch of assholes trying to make her feel bad that she isn’t letting us do more.”

“Natalia is not a child.”

“No, Terminator, none of us think she’s a kid.”

Clint tracked to where Peter and his girlfriend danced near Wanda. The kid had glanced around a few times—from Tony to Steve and even up here to where Clint was.

Probably looking for Natasha, too. Only Clint would bet he wasn’t looking for her to check up on her but to check in and maybe get a little encouragement. Natasha, in turn, wasn’t hovering over any of them. Not even Bucky who wasn’t comfortable in this crowd but he’d been managing.

She’d kept an eye on Tony, watched his back, but she didn’t have him under electronic surveillance. Clint and Steve? They were fine, she checked in with them, teased them, and he’d seen her face while she danced, she’d been having a good time.

“No, I am reminding myself,” Bucky said with an aggrieved sigh. “I just… I feel better when I can see her.”

When he knew she was safe. “You’re worried she’s going to disappear.”

After everything that happened in the last few months, Clint couldn’t blame any of them. Except…

“He’s not the only one,” Steve admitted, though frustration edged his tone.

“Make it four,” Tony added. “Let’s split the difference. Friday—keep an eye on Red, if she runs into an issue notify us. Does that work?”

“Of course, Boss.”

Bucky sighed. No, it really didn’t work for him and his gaze flicked toward the stairs. No one argued with Tony, however, and Clint let that settle in his mind for a hot minute. The sad reality of it all, as much as he wanted to know she was all right, he wasn’t comfortable with just how easily they relied on that leash.

Nat wasn’t wrong. They’d put a leash and collar on her and she’d let them.

She’d let Tony do it all the way back in Switzerland.
Why? What… Yeah. It was long past time. Him. Natasha. And maybe a screaming hangover the next day, but they needed a talk. A real one.

“Let’s get a beer,” Clint told Bucky. It would give them something to do so they didn’t go looking for her right now.

It wasn’t the ideal option. He’d let her down and he’d done it with all the best intentions. Talk about a metaphor for recruiting her. They’d gone after her in Vienna and ended up complicating things for her. Clint still believed that decision was the right one. She deserved to have backup.

She also wouldn’t ask for it, she was so geared toward solving her own problems. Still, they didn’t have the right to usurp all of her decisions no matter how they dressed it up.

Tony and Steve dropped off comms abruptly, the telltale tones indicating the cut-off. Did he go play referee so the two didn’t start another damn fight in the middle of the party or did he let them solve it like grown-ass men?

“Beer sounds good,” Bucky said abruptly. “But maybe we go up to the roof and I can smoke, too.”

“They have roof access?”

Bucky grinned suddenly. “Natalia had the plans.”

“Of course she did.”

Clint spared a glance for where Tony and Steve stood. They weren’t swinging, but those were some fairly intense expressions. “Why don’t you grab us a couple from the bar at the base of the stairs?”

Following his gaze, Bucky stared at Steve and Tony for a beat. “Should I?”

“Up to you man.”

He sighed. “If I go over there and it’s about Natalia, I might hit one of them.”

“Or both,” Clint offered.

With a faint grin, Bucky nodded. “Or both. No, Stevie can handle it and Tony’s been angling for this fight for a while. They need to work this out between them.”

“You don’t have anything to work out?”

“No.” One word. Simple. Settled.

“Okay.”

He wasn’t sure he believed him, but he wasn’t going to try and egg him into it either.

“Be right back.”

On the dance floor, Wanda laughed at something Sam said even as he dragged her back out into the fray. Sharon followed along. The atmosphere was electric, and everyone seemed to be having a good time except for Peter. He had a frown on his face and the kid was looking around again.

What was up with that?
Steve

The music. The noise. The heat. The fact she’d walked away following the flash of fire and pain in her eyes. They’d screwed up. All of them. When Wanda said Natasha went to have a drink with Maria, he hadn’t been able to shake the fact it was a bad idea. Not after Nick had just been there.

Shadowing her to be around had been his only intention. Or at least, that was what he told himself. Bucky hadn’t even lingered for the discussion piece. He’d just sailed out of the room to find her. Clint hadn’t been far behind or maybe he’d been leading. Tony hadn’t hesitated either. Even if they’d had to weave their way through partygoers, wanting their attention, they’d made their way to a high top not far from where she stood talking to Maria.

The air around them had crackled with tension. Hearing the same words from Maria he’d received from Fury had put his teeth on edge. All day, he’d been regretting the timing of the Christmas party. The bombs at the U.N., the threats against Tony—which could be interpreted as threats against Nat, the discussion with T’Challa about the upcoming challenges—this past week seemed to be tame in comparison to what would come next—Natasha’s episodes. Tony triggering one, her lack of sleep and then when she finally did, she suffered terrible nightmares.

One thing after another and that was only a couple of days after finding out she was having them in the first place. He got it. He understood why she hid it. If he hadn’t before, he got it now. The fact he wanted to lock the gates and keep everyone and everything away from her had been fanning to a conflagration.

She’d never let him.

Then he’d see her blue lips and bloodlessly pale face after the formless and a small part of him wondered why he would let her have a choice. That part?


Then she had the episode earlier in the day followed by Tony’s damn gifts and Steve wanted to call off the party. But Nat wanted to come and for a little while—watching her dance, dancing with her, enjoying her expression as she watched Peter and his date or how she immediately folded Wanda under a wing on the way in—it had been worth it.

That included Maria Hill’s rather unexpected arrival. He should have known, Clint had been fairly certain Nick would put on some appearance. Having Hill show up ahead of time also made a certain sense.

There was the other side of that very sharp coin.

They hadn’t told Nat yet about Fury’s appearance in San Francisco or Clint’s actual attempt to reach out to him including seeking Hill out. Hill’s presence tonight was a direct result of their efforts.
“I’d forgotten how frustrating you can be.”

“See, you don’t want to work with me. Difficult is my primary setting.”

Maria snorted. “No, that’s Barton’s primary setting.”

“Same thing.”

They found Bucky planted one table away, making zero pretense of staring at them. Nat was definitely aware of their presence. Steve suspected Maria was as well.

“Fine. Let’s try this a different way. What do you want?”

“Nothing you have to offer,” Natasha said bluntly.

“Not even if what we can offer is a way to break those memory blocks?”

Another below the belt hit. Natasha seemed unperturbed, but for people who kept saying they wanted to help—why did they feel the need to inflict injuries in the process? Why would they ever believe it would lead to trusting them?

“Or maybe your new handlers don’t want you questioning things too closely. But I think you have a right to know—”

“It really has nothing to do with you.”

“It does if you were compromised on SHIELD’s watch. Let’s be frank with each other…I think after all these years, you and I can both handle the naked truth.”

“Were you lying before?”

 Handlers. They weren’t her handlers. There was subtext to the whole interaction that set off minor alarm bells, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. A hint of shock rolled off Tony as if he’d made a discovery. Steve did a swift sweep with his gaze, but Tony was still focused on Natasha and Maria.

“You have been spending too much time with Stark.”

“Jealousy really never did look good on you,” Natasha picked up her wine glass and drained it.

Maria snorted. “Nat… I’m here as a friend. Nick has come to you as a friend. Sooner or later, it won’t be friends willing to ask.”
Nice threat. Steve straightened; debating an intervention but Nat caught his eye briefly and shook her head. Though he really wanted in, he forced himself to hold his ground. They’d run numerous ops in the past where he’d had to wait on the sidelines or just out of sight while she took all the risks to pull danger out of the shadows.

He liked it even less now and the only threat she faced was one they knew well.

“Feel free to send them. Just don’t expect them to come back.” Natasha warned her flatly. “If this is your version of naked truth, you need to work on it. I already knew these things. Nick wasn’t subtle.”

“Nick wants to help you.”

“You two should worry about you and your new operation. I’m fine.”

“You can’t tell me you don’t want to know…”

“Sure I can,” Natasha said easily. “Because what I do or don’t want is nothing to do with you.”

“But it has something to do with all of them… sure they trust you? They don’t give you five minutes of unobserved time. Believe me, I’ve been watching them watch you all night.”

That was the moment he’d given up holding their position. Steve wasn’t actually sure which of the three of them moved first, but Tony all but kicked Maria out and Natasha…

Steve would almost have preferred she hit him instead of looking at them with that blank gaze and empty expression.

Then Tony had to ask…

“Red… you and Maria?”

The implication startled Steve more than he cared to admit, not that he should have anything to admit. Natasha had a life before him… but she and Maria? When had that happened?

When Natasha dismissed them and walked away, Steve planted his feet lest he follow regardless. That… instinct wasn’t quieting. The need to know she was all right.

Her comments to Clint had been more than telling and left Steve floundering. She was right—this didn’t feel like a party.

Even after Bucky headed up like he’d follow her anyway and Tony determined she was fine after consulting Friday—because she wore the bracelet he’d given her. A bracelet that saved her life, but she’d worn the first version of that gift since Switzerland since before he, she, and Bucky agreed to explore what they could have.

If he thought too long on that, he’d end up plunging down the rabbit hole of jealousy all over again. Instead, he tried to focus on the dancers. Sam, Wanda, and Sharon dancing and laughing. Peter and
his date. The whole paint bomb incident had given everyone pause, but they were back to having a
good time.

“Red and Maria,” Tony said on a breath, shaking his head as he pulled off his glasses and pinched
the bridge of his nose. “Damn.”

“What?” Steve turned to look at him.

Tony flicked off his comms and Steve followed suit. “Just—surprised. I knew she was bi but…
you look at her and Hill… did you ever notice anything between them?”

“No.” Natasha had always been absolutely professional with her to the day Maria showed up in the
back of the armored transport and took them to a very much alive Fury.

The chill set in after that. If he looked back, that was the exact moment and frankly, Steve had been
too damn preoccupied with the fact Bucky was even alive much less the mysterious assassin the
Winter Soldier to notice much else.

That and Bucky had shot Natasha.

Whether or not Nat was warm to Maria was a moot point. Even the couple of years Maria ran
intelligence ops for them, Natasha had never seemed to speak to her beyond in a professional
setting.

“Steve… she’ll come around.” The sheer, unmitigated gall of Tony’s confidence raked through
him. “She always does. If she were really pissed, she’d have thrown the bracelet in my face. She
knows I have eyes on her and she wants us to know she’s okay.”

Maybe it was the wobble in his smirk or the bravado in his voice, but Steve glared at him. “Why
do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make it about you.” Steve studied him, even stuffing his temper down wasn’t having much of an
effect. “Your bracelet. Your face.”

“Well, in actuality, I did design the bracelet and I did ask her to wear it for me, so yes, I do make
that part about me.”

His jaw ached from clenching his teeth.

“Cap, don’t get your boxers in a bunch. She made it perfectly clear she chose you and your bestie.
Do I like it? No. Will I live with it? If the alternative is losing her too, then yes, I’ll live with it.”
Tony’s sour expression turned into a fleeting smile as someone called out to him as they walked
past. The veneer melted as soon as they were alone—well as alone as they could get when
surrounded by so many people. “Are you and I going to have this fight every single time I express
concern or affection for her?”

“So you’d fight for her if you thought it wouldn’t alienate her?” He’d heard that, right?

“I fight for her every day,” Tony said. “That doesn’t stop because she’s in your bed or Bucky’s.
She asked me to stop baiting you—and I admit I was doing that.”

Folding his arms, Steve studied him. That admission surprised him.
“Your water, Mr. Stark.” A waiter asked as he carried over a tall iced glass and placed it on the table. Steve hadn’t even noticed Tony ordering, then again, Friday could have done it for him. “Can I get you anything, Captain Rogers?”

“Water is fine.” A beer would taste good but Tony had been refraining despite the free-flowing spirits in the room.

“I’ll be right back with it.”

After taking a drink of the water, Tony said. “I’m not proud of it. You get too possessive you’re going to drive her away. Then I’d be there…”

Steve sighed.

“But that would also hurt Red, so even when I was doing it… I didn’t really want to do it. Aggravating situation.” Tony grimaced. “I even like you most days now, Cap. Wouldn’t have said that even two months ago. Don’t make any mistakes, we’re still not friends.”

“No, Tony, I would never make that mistake.” With a half-laugh, Steve shook his head. “I don’t know whether to punch you or feel sorry for you.”

“Punch me,” Tony said bluntly, wheeling slightly so they were facing each other. “Don’t ever feel sorry for me. I’ll be fine. She’ll be fine.”

“I’d like us to be friends,” Steve admitted and Tony frowned.

“Why?”

Again, Steve released an almost disbelieving laugh. None of this was funny except… “Natasha.”

“Oh.” Tony grimaced and took another drink of his water, saving his response as the waiter returned with Steve’s water.

Once they were alone again, Steve said, “Believe me, I’m as surprised as you are.”

“I highly doubt that.” Tony squinted at him. “If we’re friends, do you think it means I’ll care about her any less? That it’ll quash my interest? Make me go away?”

“No,” Steve told him slowly. “But it may save me from saying something as stupid as ‘go ahead and give Tony the first dance tonight,’ like she required my permission.”

Tony paused water glass almost to his mouth and he stared at him. “You didn’t.”

“I did.” He’d been proud of himself for it earlier, too. For five minutes. Even when she’d said she didn’t want him to be unhappy. “I felt like an ass that she was offering not to wear your dress.”

“Yeah, I went a little too far with that.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” Tony said with a sigh. “But I like doing things for people… Your suit, the kid’s, Bucky’s…”

“Mine didn’t come with underwear, did theirs?” He’d made his point. He should let it go.

“Most of that was functional and color coordination is important.” But Tony sent him a faint smile.
“I’m not apologizing to you for it.”

“I would never presume,” Steve said drily.

“But I offered one to her earlier.”

Well, that was something.

“She didn’t want it,” Tony continued. “But I did offer it.”

“Okay.” He drained his water. He’d watched them dancing earlier. He had to admit, they’d looked good and they’d had a lot of fun. That much was clear.

“You know, at the risk of getting punched, I kind of figured your boy Bucky would have more trouble with all of that.”

“Me too,” Steve said. “Except I always was the punk looking for a fight.”

They shared a look and then Tony began to grin and a laugh worked its way up. “Don’t have to look far when I’m around.”

“No, I don’t.” He set the empty glass on the table and slid his hands into his pockets. If he looked at his watch, he’d probably feel the urge to head up the stairs. Feel it? Give into it.

He needed to apologize to her, but more, he needed to find a way to keep them from being in this situation again. The team—he’d meant what he told her earlier. She didn’t belong to him. She belonged to all of them. She was the glue and maybe that was why they were all so damn determined to keep her safe. They’d tasted life without her in it.

Steve had already lost one woman he loved because of time and, then again later, death. He refused to lose Natasha.

Not as long as he had…

“Mr. Stark…” Peter said as he hurried toward them.

“Hey, easy Kid. It’s Tony, remember?” Tony braced him with one arm and glanced behind him. A little wild-eyed, Peter panted. “Everything all right with the girlfriend?”

“Yeah, Liz is fine. She had to go to the ladies’ room, but—something’s wrong.”

“What’s up?” Tony scanned the room and so did Steve.

“I don’t know… it’s dread. Like something is really, really wrong and I can’t figure it out. I’ve seen everyone but Natasha… where is she?”

“She’s taking a break,” Tony said slowly, sliding a look to Steve. He activated his comms and Steve turned his on again. “Natasha’s fine. Right, Friday?”

The pause had Steve pulling his hands out of his pockets and wishing he had his shield on him.

“Friday,” Tony snapped. “Red status.”

“I can’t find her, Boss. I’m not picking up any signal from the bracelet.”

Tony slid his glasses back on.
“I was right,” Peter opened and closed his fists. “Something’s wrong.”

“Maybe nothing at all,” Steve assured him, but the kid’s anxiety was contagious. “Buck? Did you get that?”

“Already on our way down.”

“Search the third floor, Tony and I will work our way up to you.”

“Copy,” Buck said.

Tony nodded. “Kid go look after your date, keep an eye out down here. Red’s probably just pissed at me and turned it off.”

“Did you do something to make her mad?”

“Maybe. Now go look after your date and let us worry about this.” Then Tony pulled something out of his pocket and held it over to him. “Put that in. Stay on channel 3. We’ll grab you if we need help. Got it?”

They didn’t have more time for this.

Peter nodded once as he closed his hand around the comm unit.

“Go that way,” Steve told Tony. “I’ll circle this way. We meet at the stairs and then take the second level.”

“Friday has eyes on the door.”

“And the rest of the building Boss, I’m not seeing her and I’m not seeing her leave either.”

It was Natasha. She had been annoyed. “Friday, scan the Tower—override the privacy command to see if she’s on my floor or her own…”


Steve nodded to people, smiling and being polite as he spoke to them in passing but he didn’t slow down.

“She’s not in the Tower, Captain Rogers. I’m scanning.”

It was Nat. She would be perfectly fine. Probably show up in an hour and tweak him for being worried. She could look after herself.

Didn’t stop him from looking.

Bucky

On the roof, Bucky lit the first cigarette and turned his back toward the wind cutting around the buildings. Clint stood next to him, a beer in his hand, shaking his head. “Why the hell did we come up here in freezing temperatures without our coats to drink cold beer?”
“Because.” Bucky exhaled a stream of smoke, then took a long swallow of the beer. “I really miss the ability to get drunk.”

“According to Nat, enough vodka will do it.”

That he did know. She used to slam the vodka back in the day. A rebellion she claimed against their masters. Not that it did any good, but the Soldier would have acquired anything she wanted.

“Yeah, but I don’t think we want me getting blackout drunk even if I could manage it.” He used to be the fun drunk. Prohibition was repealed when he was almost sixteen. Not that he hadn’t tried a shot or three before then, down at the docks when he helped to offload there was more than one sailor who would share a bottle around. Most folks looked the other way.

But he enjoyed the dancehalls when he had an extra nickel and he could always stand to pick up a pint from the corner to split with Steve.

“Steve used to be a cheap drunk… it’s kind of funny. A couple of sips and he’d be lightheaded.” He sighed and turned his face toward the breeze. It was noisy out, despite the hour and the cold. There was a hint of snow in the air. Not that he minded the snow here so much. It wasn’t up to his eyeballs and he didn’t have to worry about tunneling through it.

The club’s location in the theatre district meant there was a lot of cross traffic. The crowd out front of the club was still there. They had a decent vantage over it, but a canopy blocked the front door.

“Over there,” Clint said, pointing with the hand holding the bottle. “Edge of the bank building.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “You have to take the wind into effect.”

“But you can predict the movement under the canopy, that would be the best angle.”

He nodded. They both stared at the corner for a long moment. Then Bucky shifted his stance and looked up 54th toward 8th. “Or the market. Looking at secondary drift, but you’d have a sharper angle.”

“Smaller window of opportunity.”

Chuckling, Bucky shook his head. “How big of a window do you need?”

“Need? Not very. Like having? Big picture window-sized. Want to make sure I can cover the full scope.”

He finished the first cigarette and moved on to the second. The best spots they could find for a sniper targeting the entrance were both empty. Not that he’d expected anyone to be there. He could get to the one on the market in less than ninety seconds if he had to leap. The bank would take him slightly longer to scale the outside of it.

Natalia had told Clint they were smothering her and she couldn’t breathe. Bucky understood the sentiment and understood he was probably the one most at fault.

“You need to find a way to lighten your grip on her,” Clint said after a while. The silence and the cold wore at the knot in his gut.

“I don’t know if I can,” he admitted. It was taking sheer will to stay on the roof.

“Is it because of the past? Or something now?”
While he appreciated Clint’s ability to distinguish, Bucky said, “Both. Natalia… I have had to watch her be taken away from me. I’ve been used against her. Those…” Leaving her as he went to draw off those hunting them. “When I look away… something can happen. Karpov would take her and put her in the chair… That first time, she was just sitting in her room when I went looking. She hadn’t come down to dance like she did every day. No, she sat there just staring off, utterly compliant.”

Seeing that blank expression on her face at Arkhangelsk even without remembering everything as he did now, it had jolted him. They took her from him piece by piece.

“Hill and Fury want to take her away.” He couldn’t let that happen.

“Not arguing with that, but I agreed with Steve earlier. I don’t think Fury wants to hurt her.”

“We don’t want to hurt her,” Bucky told him. “Look what we just did.” That was the crux of it. He trusted her, but he did not trust the rest of the world. Natalia was exposing herself. It was safer when she was in the shadows, but the Avengers needed her in the light. Bucky supported it—supported her, but…

The comm unit chirped in his ear. “Natasha’s fine. Right, Friday?” Tony’s voice came through loud and clear. The pause elongated and Bucky glanced at Clint.

“Friday,” Tony snapped. “Red status.”

“I can’t find her, Boss. I’m not picking up any signal from the bracelet.”

He snuffed out the cigarette on his way to the door. Clint was a half step behind him.

“I was right,” Peter’s voice was fainter but carried over the open comms. “Something’s wrong.”

“Maybe nothing at all. “ Steve was on the channel. “Buck? Did you get that?”

“Already on our way down.” This was why he wanted eyes on Natalia. But he didn’t say that. Natalia had a right to be furious with him. She’d never liked it when he shadowed her too closely, but there had been more than one op where he hadn’t been near enough.

Only she didn’t remember those ops. Didn’t remember so much of those years.

“Search the third floor, Tony and I will work our way up to you.”

The third floor had an open floor plan with chairs, sofas, and tables scattered around for cozier seating and talking. The lights were dimmer. But there were also rooms that afforded more privacy.

“Friday has eyes on the door,” Tony said.

“And the rest of the building Boss, I’m not seeing her and I’m not seeing her leave either.”

Bucky pushed wider the door to the first one and interrupted a couple making out. They didn’t even look up, so he pulled the door closed behind him.

“Friday, scan the Tower—override the privacy command to see if she’s on my floor or her own…” The command in Steve’s voice didn’t waver.


“She’s not in the Tower, Captain Rogers. I’m scanning.”
He moved from room to room, most were open. He knocked on the closed doors. He knocked harder when Friday told him she didn’t have eyes in the rooms. There were no cameras.

“Security sweeps the rooms, including any closed-door ones regularly.”

They did?

He shared a look with Clint. They’d seen security, but they weren’t patrolling.

He interrupted two separate couples mid-coitus based on at least one of the erections he’d gotten an eyeful of. But still no Natalia.

“Steve?”

“We’re on the second floor and I don’t see her. Friday what was her last location?”

“Third-floor stationary approximately 5 meters from Sergeant Barnes current position in room 11AB.” The lights in the whole club were coming up.

“Party’s over,” Tony announced. “Please collect your things and move out through security, sorry folks, we’re just shutting it down early.” The tension in Tony’s voice didn’t make him feel any better. “Have a great holiday!”

Security began to stream through the third floor, including one heading toward them. “I have the key for all the rooms.”

Bucky motioned him ahead as they reached the room. The door was locked. He hammered on it once, then again. No one opened it.

“The rooms are soundproofed,” the man explained as he pressed the keycard to the lock.

Steve was striding toward him. “Sam stay on the exits, keep Wanda with you. Vision I need you overhead on the street, just keep it organized.”

“Red’s going to kill us if we evacuated for nothing,” Tony muttered.

Bucky didn’t care.

The door didn’t unlock. The man pressed the keycard again and the light flashed green but the door didn’t move.

“Boss, security detail for Ms. Potts is reporting they do not have her covered. She is still in the building but she was with Ms. Romanoff.”

Bucky caught the guard and pulled him aside and then hit the door with a kick. The door shook, but didn’t open. The doors weren’t that reinforced. He reared back and slammed his foot against it again and the door trembled. Sharing a glance with Steve, they both backed up a couple of steps then surged forward and hit with their shoulders, the door and frame cracked before the door gave and flew open.

The interior was a plain comfortable room with a small table, a pair of armchairs and a much larger sofa. It was empty. Clint frowned as he studied the room. “Lock failure?”

“No,” Steve said, rubbing his shoulder. “That was like going through a cement wall.”

“The locks don’t work like that anyway,” the guard explained. “It’s electronic locks, but just a
simple locking system. The door’s not even reinforced.”

It wasn’t.

The air in the room had a faintly sweet odor. Almost too sweet.

“Anything?” Tony asked from the door, his expression fierce. “Pepper is with her. Which should make me feel better if either one was answering their phones.”

Bucky should have thought to call her. But… no this was off.

“Cap,” Sam was on comms now. “We’re about halfway through the guests and we’re vetting them one at a time. But Wanda’s got a waiter who tried to slip out. He’s nervous and sweating. Might be nothing…”

“I got it,” Clint said. “Keep him there.” Then he looked at them. “How long since we had a contact with Pepper or Natasha?”

“Friday?” Tony asked.

“Forty-five minutes to last confirmed sighting of Ms. Potts, Boss. Fifty-five minutes for Ms. Romanoff.”

Bucky stood still, the words spoken by the others washed over him but he stopped listening. Natalia and Pepper entered this room and Friday was on unable to track them leaving. Steve made his way around the floor double-checking every room. None of the other closed doors seemed to have the same kind of resistance to being opened.

Natalia knew the blindspots. She’d marked them in security. Studying the camera placement, he tracked how she could have left the room. None of the blindspots would have allowed her to reach the stairs. The coverage was just too thorough.

Back in the room, he said, “Do you smell that?”


“Natalia does not wear this kind of perfume.”

“Steve, you there?” Sam was on comms.

“Go ahead, Sam.

“Talking to a Marc Kumar, he was with Pepper tonight. He has a text message from her about an hour ago saying she was going to have a drink with Natasha and catch up a little. Then she’d come find him. She hasn’t answered any of his texts since then and I’m looking at his phone. Guy’s a little on the needy side, but seems legit.”

Second confirmation Pepper had been with Natalia.

Bucky glanced up at the ceiling and stretched a hand to check the tiles. He gave one a shove, but it didn’t move. It was solid.

“Keep him there and have Clint talk to him, too.”

“Be with him in a minute, Cap. The waiter brought them wine, a bottle Pepper had sent over herself. She requested it, some chateau something or other. He brought them the wine and two
glasses, described Natasha and her dress to a T said she was there when he was called in and when he delivered it. That was the last time he was in the room.”

“Why is he so nervous?” Bucky asked.

“Cause he was smoking weed,” Clint sounded disgusted. “And he left his post for about fifteen minutes to have a joint on the roof.”

Tony made a face.

“Talk to Kumar. I don’t like the guy, but I’m probably biased,” Tony said flatly.

Something about the odor bothered Bucky. “Can you analyze the air in here?”

Tony tapped the arc reactor and the armor crawled over him. The helmet snapped into place and his eyes lit up. “Running an analysis…”

“Low levels of nitrous oxide and benzene, Boss and a chemical I don’t recognize. Quantities are dissipated, but elements are present. Both benzene and nitrous oxide are reported to have a sweet odor.”

Iron Man went absolutely still and Steve’s expression tightened.

“Nitrous oxide has a sedative effect, it encourages relaxation and calmness reducing any anxiety or fear. There are often reports of a feeling of euphoria and sometimes being disconnected from the body associated with the gas. It has very short-term effects, however, and will clear the system with fresh air. Benzene, though, can cause drowsiness, dizziness, rapid heart rate, headaches, tremors, confusion, and unconsciousness. If ingested the effects will be magnified.”

“Wanda, can you scan this whole building and tell me if you can feel Nat’s mind anywhere…?” But Stevie’s tone made it clear. He already knew Natalia was not here.

“I can try,” Wanda said.

The gas.

The sealed room.

No evidence to indicate they’d been there save for some residual traces of gas.

Natalia could more than defend herself and… “She is very resistant to poisons and toxins of all kinds,” he said abruptly. “They could not have taken her with those alone.”

“How the hell did they get them out of the room,” Steve asked. “Friday, can you do a grid search scan of all cameras in—a two-block radius for the times between their last known sighting and now. We’re looking for anything out of place.”

“Scanning now, Captain Rogers, I will widen the search in two block increments.”

Iron Man moved around the room, pressing on the walls. Nothing moved or shifted. “Friday, what’s on the other side of this wall?”

“The Rook, a theatre, Boss. Currently hosting the newly opened musical The Prestige.”

Bucky didn’t see any way to open the wall. It was solid. Tony even knocked on the drywall. But he mirrored his actions, testing the wall. Knocking and listening for anything hollow.
“The girls come in…the girls do not go out.” Iron Man said slowly in a chilly voice. “That wall goes to another room. So does this one. That one to the hall. This is the only external wall.”

Then he faced it and fired, blowing a hole right through the wall. The dust revealed an empty framed room that led to a hallway. It smelled of sawdust, ozone—the drywall dust—oil, and blood.

Bucky slid through to the other side and stalked down the hallway, only half aware of Tony and Steve following him.

“Boss, I’ve scanned as far as six blocks out, I have no facial recognition hits for Ms. Potts or Ms. Romanoff in the time allotted.”

Bucky found old stairs tucked into a corner. The theatre around them was quiet, but even if there was a show, this was all along a narrow passageway behind a wall, he doubted anyone would come back here based on the dust alone…and the single trail of footprints disturbing the dust.

At least a dozen men.

No high heels.

No bare feet.

If he were trying to get two women out quietly without alerting anyone and they’d been subdued, they were both light and easily carried that wouldn’t be the problem. It was the not being seen part.

He continued down the steps and then they were on the ground floor facing an old metal corrugated door.

Shoving his fingers under it, he ripped it upward and it didn’t make a sound.

Someone had oiled it.

The door opened into an alley. Bucky scanned the walls.

No cameras.

“Friday,” he said, his blood running to ice. “Track our location. Map this alley, any camera pointing at it, I want to know what vehicles entered today and any exiting in the same time frame since Natalia’s last sighting.”

Steve stared at him, his expression impassive. It had been 90 minutes. 90 minutes since Natalia’s last reported sighting. More than that since the last time he laid eyes on her.

“I have three vehicles exiting the alley in the allotted time frame. One SUV, one smaller car, and a van.”

“Did you get plates, Baby Girl?”

“Yes, Boss…”

Tony’s expression darkened. “Find me those cars.” He activated the armor. “Captain…”

“Go, we’re going for our gear and a quinjet.”

Tony nodded, then launched.
Now 93 minutes.

He should have damn well followed her.

Tony

“Do we have Happy and Rhodey secure?”

“Yes, Boss. Mr. Hogan is displeased, but I assured him he needed to secure Colonel Rhodes. Colonel Rhodes has left you a detailed message involving pieces of your anatomy that we can save until later, but both are on their way to the Tower with Ms. Carter and Mr. Wilson.”

A smile almost touched his lips but died before it got there. It was his fault.

“Have Pepper’s security detail secure Mr. Kumar,” he grimaced at the taste of the name on his tongue. “Not at the Tower. Take him to a secondary location.”

“I’ll take care of it, Boss. Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, and Mr. Barton are on their way to the Tower now. I have the quinjet prepping for their arrival.”

Natasha warned him about the threats. But Pepper was supposed to be secure. She’d been with Natasha. It didn’t get more secure than that.

Security had the building buttoned up tight. Friday on all systems monitoring.

“No luck with Pepper’s tracker or Nat’s bracelet?”

“No, Boss. I’m still sending initiations to both.”

Natasha. He planned for everything.

Right?

“Take me to Channel 3.”

The dress. The weapons. The armor.

“Kid, if you can’t talk that’s fine. Just cough.”

The signal in the upper right corner of his HUD had gone dark while he and Steve talked. He’d taken his glasses off for a few minutes.

Just a few fucking minutes.

Peter coughed.

If he hadn’t butted into her conversation with Maria and pissed her off…

If he hadn’t ticked Pepper off by telling her Kumar was a pretentious ass, and she could do far better…
“Don’t freak out. We have an emergency situation. Natasha and Pepper are both missing. I mean it, don’t freak out. Friday is arranging to have security put your girl in a car and take her home. I’ll send a secondary unit with her to make sure she gets there.”

If he hadn’t done a lot of things…

“You can’t go with her. I need you to stay with Wanda. She and Vision will get you to the Tower. Friday will send someone to keep an eye on May. I’ll explain the rest when I can. Cough if you understand.”

He coughed.

“Take your comm to channel 1 when your girl is in the car.”

Another cough. Good kid.

“Boss, I have the sedan. It’s just over Weehawken, New Jersey, Estuary Apartments.” The address flashed on the screen along with a navigation map. “Still tracking for the SUV and van.”

Shifting course, he jetted across the Hudson River.

“Take me back to channel 1.”

“I have the sedan in Weehawken, heading there first. ETA Cap?”

“We’re at the Tower in three.” Steve’s voice and tone were both rock steady. Fuck if that didn’t help with the primal scream crawling upward from the base of his lungs. “We’ll be up in the quinjet right after that.”

“I’ll let you know what I find, leaving this channel open.”

It took eleven minutes to reach the address and he landed with a noisy thunk, tearing up the asphalt. When he gave a damn again, he’d make arrangements to fix it.

He scanned the sedan. The plates matched. A light came on in the apartment the vehicle was parked in front of. Repulsors powered up, he started forward on a deliberate approach. The vehicle was registered to an Emanuel Martin, age 54 residing at the address in front of him. The man who opened the door matched the DMV photo and there was a woman right next to him. Wife according to his records.

“Emanuel Martin?” Tony said, already feeling the adrenaline drop. This guy looked so bewildered and like Tony had gotten him out of bed.

“Yes, sir. You’re Iron Man—Mr. Stark.”

The HUD showed 0 threats.

“You were in the city tonight near The Rook Theatre at 54th and 8th.”

“Yes, sir.” Martin stepped onto the stoop. “My wife is a seamstress, I went to deliver costumes and to pick up the ones that needed repair.”

Wife, Sally Martin. Seamstress.

“How long were you there tonight?”
The man looked confused then glanced at his wife before straightening. “Only twenty minutes. I parked in the alley like I always do. They always leave the clothing for repairs in a bin. It’s not far from the entryway in the back—it’s never locked during a show so the crew can go out for a smoke.”

“Did you notice any other vehicles in the alley?”

“We’re on the quinjet, Tony.” The calm of Steve’s voice steadied him. How the hell Cap had it together right now, Tony had no idea.

“There was a van…” Martin shrugged. “Parked at the end.”

“Was there anyone in it?”

“No. But I didn’t look either, Mr. Stark…Iron Man. I’m sorry.” He scratched at his jaw. Dammit.

“The van was moving when I came out. I put the stuff in the car and got in. Wanted to get home. When I was almost out of the alley, the van pulled up to the side of the theatre.”

To the door that was always unlocked. “I didn’t see anything else, sir. I’m—sorry.”

“It’s fine.” It was so not fine. “Thank you.” He glanced to the cracked asphalt. “I’ll get that fixed.”

He should probably think of something else to say but he’d already wasted this time…

“What time?”

“Sir?”

“What time did you leave?”

Friday might be able to tell him that. “9:30, maybe 9:40. Does that help?”

“It might… Good night.”

“Goodnight!”

He took off and zipped back toward the Manhattan.

“Come on, Baby Girl give us something.”

The van moved up around 9:30, it was closing in on midnight.

“So if you want to spend this time yelling at me and telling me how you don’t need my help on threats that are meaningless and that you can take care of yourself… we can.”

“Or?” he retorted dryly.

“Or you can accept the fact that whether you think the threats are valid or not, you have people
who care about you. Threat assessment is what I do.”

“I called Maria,” Steve said over the channel.

“Why the fuck did we call her?” Then he wondered why he hadn’t thought of it.

“Chatter. She still has ears in places. I asked her if she’d heard anything regarding Pepper in the chatter or you.” Which meant he didn’t say anything about Natasha.

“Smart.” His chest squeezed as he angled toward the Tower. The quinjet hovered meters above the building. A second one was lifting off.

“Maybe, maybe not. She didn’t have anything. Sharon is working her contacts. Vision is doing a full scan of the Internet with Friday, to see if he can find anything. Right now the only chatter we have is what your security turned up in the threats and Nat’s analysis.”

“You’re mad because Pepper went around you because she was worried about you. I’ve reviewed the threats, I think she’s right to be concerned.”

“Not terribly comforting.”

“You don’t need my comfort,” she said the last with a bit of a smile so it robbed it of the sting.

“I wouldn’t say that,” he said with a sigh, then rubbed a hand over his jaw again.

“You didn’t,” she reminded him. “I’m working on it. We’ll figure it out. I’ll brief you on everything I have when we’re back if you like or you let me do my job and I’ll bring it to you when I have something more tangible that you won’t just scoff at and say you’ve heard worse.”

He grimaced. “I’m not that predictable.”

“No,” she told him, almost indulgently. “But I’m close, aren’t I?”

Yes. She had called it perfectly. He’d finally conceded to her continuing on it and then… the bombs at the U.N. right after he triggered her the night prior. Just one thing after another and then another.

“I have had so many death threats in my life they don’t mean anything anymore. People have tried to kidnap me since I was a kid. It happens. I’m fine. No one is going to touch me.” Not again. After Afghanistan, never again.

“Except now someone has bugged Peter’s place,” she offered it up solemnly. “Threatening you isn’t just about you. Abigail Burns didn’t have a call with you…”


The bombs, she was certain those were meant for Happy and they’d nearly gotten her.
“Clint’s scanning old channels. If Nat’s out there, she might not be able to communicate over regular channels.” Steve’s words buoyed him. That was how they’d found Ultron and Nat before—in Sokovia. Nat had found a way to send a signal over an old coded channel.

Come on Spy Whammy.

“She trusts you, Tony. More than that, she wants to be worthy of your trust. That’s a hell of a gift. Don’t abuse it. Don’t abuse her. She won’t risk losing your trust again. She thought she wouldn’t have it. There’s not a lot she won’t do for the people she cares about. You happen to fall on that list. It’s why I’m not breaking your face for that bullshit you pulled earlier.”

The words played over and over in his head. It was why she’d let them monitor her—let him monitor. Why she continued to wear the bracelet. That night in Switzerland, the look on her face when he said their relationship only ever had to be friendship. The absolute gentleness and the teasing warmth and the relief—he’d meant it. He always meant it.

Now, because she wanted to worthy of his trust and he’d managed to step on her even when he hadn’t intended to…they all had. She was out there with Pep and...

“Boss, I have the van. They changed the plates, but Vision tracked it to one location where it exited with a new paint job and plate, but all other particulars matched.”

“Damn they thought this out,” Clint said, his voice hoarse.

Yes, they had.

“Where, Baby Girl? Give me coordinates.”

“North on Palisades Parkway—Catskills, Boss. Trying to narrow search now.”

The Catskills? Over a hundred miles from the city.

They’d definitely thought it through.

“What about the SUV?” He was already turning to follow the coordinates on the HUD. Tracking showed the quinjets following.

The Catskills weren’t small. Taking them, what would they do with them? Containing Natasha might prove impossible, but they had Pepper. Nat would protect Pepper. The bastards had a significant time lead. Too much lead time. He activated his thrusters and increased the speed.

They’d lost more than an hour hunting for the van.

“Not finding the SUV Boss, they may have changed it like the van. Backtracking to see if we can locate it.”

What if they put the girls in the SUV?

Headwinds pushed against him as he focused on the flight.

Even at top-speed, it would take too damn long to just reach the Catskills.
“Start doing a search of all local airports in the Catskills region, I don’t care if all they can launch are crop dusters. Let’s get eyes on them.”

They took them. Why take? They wanted to hurt him. That was what Nat said. They were targeting the people around him to hurt him. But they didn’t kill them at the scene…

Or did they?

Bile curdled in his gut. Disappear them—like he’d vanished in Afghanistan. If not for the video his captors made, no one would have known where he was and still most speculated he died. Even then, they’d never found him. He had to get away on his own—with Yinsen’s help. Not on his own.

A pang rocked through him.

He leaned into the flight, accelerating faster. He was outpacing the quinjet. They were fast. He was faster.

The clock seemed to mock him. It plowed forward mercilessly. No one chattered on comms. No jokes. No stories. Every few minutes he glanced at the upper right corner where Nat’s vitals should be popping.

They were closing on the mountains.

“Sam,” Steve said. “Follow 28, go stealth mode and keep scanning. We’re going to need visual as well as Friday.”

“Got it, Cap.”

“We’ve got a hell of a lot of smaller roads up here. Friday do you have us a narrower vector? Tony, you’re about ten minutes ahead of us. Anything on the bracelet?”

“Negative, Captain Rogers. Still triangulating. Traffic cameras are much fewer in the mountains even on the main highway. If they took any of the offshoots…”

She didn’t have to finish the thought. They may have well and truly lost them visually and if they switched to a different vehicle.

Clint wasn’t wrong. These people had thought it out. They’d managed to neutralize a deadly assassin and kidnap her and the CEO out from under the nose of a heavily secured location monitored by Friday without alerting anyone. They did it through a wall without leaving a trace.

“Cap… channel 2.”

“Channel 2, go.”

“They took them out through a wall. It was solid, no damage…”

“They’re enhanced whoever or whatever they are.” Steve was already there. “Which means we don’t know who has them or how they’re being held.”

“Yeah… but I’m thinking about Strange.”

“Clint mentioned him earlier. Something about him getting in and out of a hospital absolutely undetected?”
“Yeah. Friday couldn’t track him anywhere, but he was there and gone again.” It would be almost too much to hope for… “You don’t think the doc got my message?”

“And Natasha went with him and didn’t tell anyone?” The tone answered the question. “Tony, there was gas in there.”

“Yeah. I’d rather think she was seeing the doc—”

“Right there with you. But we’ll find her. She’s with Pepper. She’ll protect her.”

If she could even protect herself. How the hell were they controlling her? Gassing her sure, but her metabolism and serum would kick in sooner or later…

“Beginning grid search,” he said while not grinding his teeth.

“Returning to channel 1.”

“Cap?” He blew out a breath. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He didn’t even ask for what. Or maybe he didn’t need to.

They were back on channel 1. But the reports weren’t giving them good news. It was more nothing.

His gut began to sink. What if they picked the wrong lead to follow? Friday still hadn’t found the SUV. If they changed it or just swapped it out for a different one… they were screwed. Again.

Tony… Her voice was a huff. Focus.

The clock ticked 4 when Sam reported they were doubling back but so far nothing, Nothing at the airports. Nothing.

More nothing.

Light flickered in the upper right corner.

Pulse.

“Boss…”

“I see it. Lock onto that signal right now. Cap, getting telemetry and bio-signals.” A secondary signal came up. Pepper’s tracker. Phones went back online. They were in the same place.

All of them.

All the signals together.

He poured everything into the speed as he peeled off.

It had been over seven and a half hours.

“Bracelet has two-way communication, activate it.” It was the upgraded model.

“I am getting no verbal response, Boss. Body temperature is extremely low. Pulse and respiration are labored.”

Must. Go. Faster.
He cut around a mountain and then saw the bridge, he rocketed straight for it and hit the road in front. The signal was… the HUD triangulated. To the right. Down the slope.

He got to the side of the bridge and turned on lights, the suit’s floodlights slicing through the gloom. The first thing he caught was the swaths of blood all over the inside of the covered bridge.

“Pepper!” he shouted. Sliding down the incline. Sweeping the lights. “Red!”

Dammit, he was right on top of the signal. The incline descended for another thirty feet to a rocky ravine that was frozen. Turning he scanned along the struts of the bridge.

“Red! Answer me dammit. I know you’re here.”

“We’re five minutes away, Tony,” Cap told him.

“I’m on top of the signals but…” Movement. “Standby.”

He slid another few feet then ducked under the struts, tucked right against one was a body, wrapped in jackets. The signal said Nat and Pep.

Peeling the jacket back, he winced as a bullet glanced off the armor and rebounded to hit the wood of the bridge.

“Oh, God!” Pepper said, fisting the gun she had on him between two shaking hands.

“Pepper…” He held up his hands. “It’s me. It’s Tony…”

The gun lowered and she shuddered. With care, he removed the weapon from her trembling grasp then opened the helmet to get a better look at her. She had a bruise on her cheek and she was shaking.

“Cold,” she said though her teeth barely chattered. Not a good sign.

“Hang on Pep. Friday turn up the heat.” The suit began to swelter and he leaned in toward her, bracing a hand against the wood above her. “Where’s Red, Pepper?”

“Not…they took her.”

His teeth clacked together.

“Her signal is…” Then his gaze hit her wrist.

“She put it on me,” Pepper said, still shaking as she tried to huddle closer. He put a hand closer to her arm, bracing her with one and trying to keep the heat pouring off him focused around her to help chase the chill until the quinjet got there.

The silence on the comms told him they’d heard.

“She…she told me to hide. They were coming…we got out of the van and the car…nothing worked. Jammer… been down here …a while. They came—there were so many.”

He hadn’t seen a body up there. He activated the helmet to enclose again. “Mute comms. Mute the suit.” Friday listened to him. “Scan above. Any bodies?”

He hated himself for asking the question.
Please say, no.

Please say, no.

“No bodies, Boss.” Friday was subdued. “A lot of organic matter.”

Blood.

Was it hers?

The roar of the quinjet landing filled the air. “Unmute.” He retracted the helmet and reached down to pick up Pepper. “I got you. Dial the heat down some Friday.” The heat shields on the suit redirected so he wouldn’t burn her. Lifting her up, he eased out from under the bridge. Steve, Clint, and Bucky were out of the quinjet, Steve had a huge blanket in hand and helped wrap it around Pepper before they got her on board.

“I’m sorry,” Pepper said, her eyes were glassy and she was so out of it. “They took her… she got so many of them. But there were too many… she got me out… I’m so sorry…”

Tony closed his eyes and grasped her hand carefully. She was still shaking.

This was all his fault.

No. He could feel sorry for himself later.

He forced his eyes open and met Cap’s level-gaze, bracing for the hate.

“Sam,” Steve said into his comms, steel concern and worry the only things in his expression. “I need everyone here and we’ve got Pepper suffering from hypothermia, I’ve got warming blankets on her and I’ll get the warm saline started.”

“On our way Cap.”

Something shattered on the bridge and Cap ground his teeth.

“Friday… I need satellite coverage of this area for the last few hours. I don’t care whose it is… break in and get me pictures, Baby Girl.”
Chapter Summary

The team works to keep it together as they look for clues

Chapter Forty-Six

Missing

Sharon

Day One

Sharon marked the distances to the bullet holes. A scattering of shots had gone wide. The wooden bridge was pockmarked with them. On closer examination, there were fewer than she initially believed. But even one was too many when they were an Avenger down. More than one had blood spatter and what might be tissue around them. Collecting the evidence, she followed old procedures. Granted, they should have called out law enforcement but Steve said no.

No explanation. Just no. Sam had flown Pepper to the Compound rather than the Tower. It was closer and Dr. Cho was already on site. Tony had returned a few minutes earlier, but he didn’t interfere just stared at the bridge.

In the dark, under floodlights, it had looked bad.

In the watery light of day?

It was… far worse.

Clint worked in silence from the other end of the bridge. One of the struts had been completely shattered courtesy of Barnes, who had jogged three-quarters of a mile to the west where Pepper indicated they’d gone off the road.

He found no wreckage, but there had been disturbed earth and damaged rocks. Very little to confirm Pepper’s story of how she and Romanoff escaped nor the dead bodies she’d said had been there—at least nine to twelve. Romanoff was more than capable.

Barnes’ expression when he returned reminded her of when he broke out of the Joint Terrorism Task Force facility in Berlin. It left her chilled, so she avoided staring at him. Steve, though, was worse. He wore no expression. His gaze moved over the area like he pictured what battle had gone down. Or maybe the different scenarios played out for him.

Whatever he saw, he didn’t interfere with her work or Clint’s. He only moved to assist if they requested him, then he returned to his silent vigil. He and Romanoff were friends—at least they’d always seemed that way when she’d had to shadow him. Romanoff had been over often enough at
least. But this… all three of them looked so fierce. Tony and Steve she understood. They were Romanoff’s friends, but Barnes? Sure, she’d sat on the arm of his chair during the meeting, but she tended to set up wherever she felt like. Frankly, Sharon doubted Romanoff had ever walked into a room she didn’t own.

They weren’t the only three out there. The kid from Thanksgiving and Wanda stood on the ramp to the quinjet, both wrapped in tight jackets. They probably should have gone back to the Compound with Pepper, but they’d refused. Vision continued to work with Friday on a project Sharon decided she knew nothing about because if she knew about illegal hacking attempts to foreign satellites she might have to report the Avengers overstepping their boundaries.

So for now, she knew nothing.

The site was devoid of evidence—except for the blood and a few bullets. Turning, she stared at it again. There was too much blood for it to have come from one person. And frankly, if the point had been to kill the Black Widow, why take the body? Why drive them all this way?

If they had taken her, how did they miss where Pepper was hidden? Sharon had climbed down to where she’d nearly frozen to death. Arguably, in the dark, if she were silent, they might have missed her.

Then again, if Romanoff cost them too much they may have decided to cut their losses. Romanoff was more than capable of cutting through a swath of men. There was a reason neither she nor Barton ever needed an extraction team back at SHIELD. At least, that was what she’d always heard.

Pepper had reported they’d taken her, but her words had been scattered and she’d been a little on the delirious side. They’d need a full statement later. Moving to the next wooden plank, she began collecting blood samples from the wood. Each one had to be lifted with a dampened Q-tip, then sacked and numbered. Evidence collection was a bitch. But they might get a hit off DNA.

Any clue at this point, something to offer hope to the three grim-faced men behind her and the one working his way toward her—not to mention the kids. Sharon filled out the data on the front of the bag and then dropped it in the kit before going to the next board.

Even in the cold air with it dry, she couldn’t not smell the blood. Or maybe that was her mind playing tricks on her.

Crouching near the end of a board overlooking the opposite side of the bridge from where Pepper had been found, Sharon frowned. Something glistened between the rocks—just a flash when she shifted her position a little. Finishing her sample collection, she left a marker exactly where she stopped so she could continue when she returned. After she dropped the collection bag with the others, she moved off the bridge and headed for the rocky slope.

Steve took a step forward. “Did you find something?”

“Maybe,” she told him. “Might just be a bit of trash.” The last thing she wanted to do was get his hopes up. But he crossed to stare down the slope as she descended. She wore gloves, they were hardly enough to insulate her against the cold, but they did keep her from contaminating the evidence. The descent was treacherous but she moved among the large rocks using them for balance when the slope cut sharply downward.

Glancing up at the bridge, she climbed over one of the rocks, the balanced with one foot on each before crouching. The sun glinted off something again and she ended having to lay on the rock to
reach down for it in the shadow of the crevice created by the two boulders so close together.

Something clinked as she got her fingers on it and then she pulled it up. A yellow gold and ruby bracelet with two rings…well, one ring. The other appeared to be missing from the end of the chain.

There was more blood on it… and hair.

“That’s Red’s…” Tony said abruptly from above.

“I know,” Sharon told him, moving to slide the bracelet into a collection bag without disturbing the hair. “There’s hair on it… not red.”

After securing the bag, she moved to search the other side of the same rock. If her bracelet ended up down here, something else might have as well. Navigating the rocks wasn’t fun, but she wanted to be thorough. The hints of ice around the rock basin suggested that in warmer temperatures water trickled through here.

But even after spending another grueling hour, she didn’t find anything more than the bracelet. When she made it almost to the top of the hill, Steve extended a hand and helped her up the last couple of feet.

“Can I see it?” he may have phrased it as a question, but there was a definitive command in his voice. She pulled the bagged bracelet out and handed it to him.

“The blood might not be hers. The hair I’m pretty sure isn’t. So that might be the break we need to figure out the who if not the what and the why.”

“We know the what,” Tony ground out. “They took her and Pepper, and Natasha took on an army by herself. At some point, they took her but she managed to keep Pepper hidden. That’s the what.”

“Ease up, Tony,” Clint said, his voice as calm and easy as the breeze. Grim expression or not, he’d settled right into a professional veneer left over from his DELTA team days she didn’t doubt. He’d just told her to get started and she’d gotten to it.

“I’m not going to ease up, we’ve been here hours and we’re no closer to her than when we started.”

“Yelling doesn’t make the collection go faster. If you want to go ahead and take the bracelet back and start running that blood and the hair, do it,” Clint’s tone was mild. “But you’re not the only one worried right now.”

Tony glared, but he didn’t move to take the bracelet out of Steve’s hands. Sharon shifted her weight awkwardly, Steve wasn’t saying a word—he just stared at the bracelet and then his gaze went back up to the bridge.

“It’s missing a ring,” he said quietly. “Did it break off down there?”

“Maybe,” Sharon told him as honestly as she could. She wanted to approximate Clint’s mild tone, but she wasn’t sure she achieved it. Aunt Peggy once told her bad news was bad news and sugar could make it stick in the throat whereas kindness didn’t ease the passage it did at least share the experience. When Sharon asked her what was better, Aunt Peggy had shrugged. Bad news was bad news. Better to rip the Band-Aid off to better assess the damage. “But I didn’t see any evidence of it down there. The end of the chain is bent, almost torn…I’m thinking it wasn’t connected when the bracelet came off.”
The catch on the wrist guard was broken, too. Steve nodded, then glanced down into the rocky slope. Then he looked at Tony. “Do you want to take it back now?”

Tony extended a hand and Steve gave it to him. The two men stared at each other a beat and then Tony glanced toward the quinjet. “I should take Peter with me.”

“I want to stay here, Tony. I want to help,” Peter argued immediately.

“You can help in the lab,” Tony told him. “You know how to run tests and to follow instructions. We have a lot of evidence to process.”

Sharon frowned, he was a kid and when she would have opened her mouth, Barnes touched her arm and she glanced at him. Fuck. She hadn’t even heard him move. He just shook his head then said in a faint voice as he turned away, “He needs something to do. Leave it alone.”

“Take the quinjet,” Steve said. “We’re going to be here for another hour?” He glanced at her, then Clint.

“At least.”

“Take it. Sam should be heading back any time now or you can send him back.” Steve shifted to glance over at Wanda. “You should go, too.”

“I want to help,” Wanda said. “I could move things down there. Lift the rocks…”

Steve hesitated.

“Maybe what she could not find was because it is wedged under.” The young woman was so serious and fierce. It wasn’t like Steve or even Barnes couldn’t move the rocks themselves.

But maybe she needed something to do.

“Okay, we could use that help,” Sharon offered and Steve nodded.

“Fine, get a warmer jacket on and a hat,” Steve ordered. Wanda didn’t wait for him to finish the sentence before disappearing back into the jet. “Peter, you’re with Tony. Get to work on what they’ve already collected. We’ll bring the rest when we’re finished here.”

Peter frowned like he was going to argue but Steve’s expression didn’t change. Finally, the kid’s shoulders went down. “Teamwork. Everyone has a job.”

“This is one you can do,” Steve told him quietly.

Tony gave the kid’s shoulder a squeeze. “Come on. Go grab the evidence box and we’ll go.”

With a nod, Peter jogged over to the bridge and grabbed the crate, holding it out for Clint to put two more bags in it. “Get something to eat,” Clint told him. “Put food in front of Tony, too. And don’t tell me you’re not hungry. Food is fuel. Fuel keeps you on your feet. If you’re on your feet you can work and help.”

The argument in Peter’s eyes extinguished and he nodded. “I’ll make sure Tony eats.”

Then Barnes surprised her when he gripped the kid’s shoulder and said something to him softly. For a beat, tears filmed Peter’s eyes but he blinked them away before he nodded.

“Okay,” he said.
Barnes let him go as Wanda descended the quinjet ramp. Tony frowned at her a beat, and Steve almost smiled. She wore a red leather jacket and she’d changed into jeans and boots.

“That was Nat’s,” Steve said quietly.

“I know. For luck.”

He nodded. Wanda gave Peter a quick, if awkward side hug as they passed then Tony followed him up onto the quinjet. Wanda headed for the slope where Sharon had found the bracelet, Barnes a step behind her.

“Do you need to go down there?” Though he’d said so little, each word seemed to be measured as exactly the one he needed.

Shaking her head, Sharon went back to collecting blood samples from the next board.”

“I can do it from up here. But it might be easier to be down there to see what I uncover.”

“Stay here,” Barnes told her. “I’ll go.” Then he jogged down the hill like it was a jaunt in the park.

As the quinjet powered up and took off, Steve resumed his watchful position. Sharon glanced at Clint, he’d paused one where he’d leaned down his leg at an awkward angle though he hadn’t once complained. His head was down and his eyes were closed. Then he shook his head and went right back to work.

Blowing out a breath, Sharon tried to ignore the rocks suddenly rocketing skyward from the gorge as Wanda and Barnes began their search.

They needed to find something.

Soon.

The tension crackling around the Avengers gained voltage with every passing hour.

**Peter**

The Compound was almost eerily quiet as he went to the kitchen to make sandwiches. He wasn’t much of a cook, but he could make a sandwich. The living room area was dark and the dining room empty. Even the windows were still obscured as though the Compound itself wasn’t any closer to facing the day without more information.

He found everything he needed to make turkey and cheese sandwiches. Tony could probably use coffee, too. Peter opened the cabinet and stared at the chocolate bars on the third shelf. Taking one down he studied it. It was a bar of dark chocolate, maybe, it had a German name on the wrapper. There were more up there. Some white bars. Milk chocolate. The shelf below it had spices—cinnamon was right up front. His eyes blurred and he closed them for a moment.

Carefully, he put the chocolate back and then closed the door again. Turning, he found Tony staring at him as he reached for the loaf of bread. “We’re going to find her, Kid.”

“I just… I saw that bridge. There was so much…”
“I’m betting it wasn’t hers. Maybe some, but definitely not all.” Tony laid out the bread slices mechanically. He was still dressed in his black dress shirt and slacks from the night before. With the sleeves rolled up, he looked like he’d just gotten home from the office. “The thing about Red… she’s probably the toughest person you’ll ever meet. She’s resourceful as hell and don’t let the packaging fool you—she’s small but she’s strong.”

Peter let out a little laugh. “She’s really fast, too. And quiet. Really quiet.”

“Stealthy little minx. Walks right up behind you and you never hear her coming.” Tony made a face then began to spread mayo onto the bread. “When she first moved into the Tower, I told JARVIS to always announce her—if she came down in the elevator or was in the stairwell or walking into a room. He was to announce her because she was so quiet.” Shaking his head, Tony began to stack the turkey while Peter added mustard to his. “You know what she does? She goes into the code and adds a single line…an if/then statement…tells JARVIS not to announce her arrival until she’s standing directly behind me. If…then… so the first time it happens, it’s nine or ten at night, she’s been off on some mission God knows where and the Tower’s pretty empty…I think Bruce was in his lab downstairs. I go down to the common room kitchen to steal Steve’s leftovers…”

Tony paused a beat, then pointed a piece of the turkey at him.

“Forget I said that last part.”

Biting his lip, Peter raised his brows. “Did you steal Steve’s leftovers a lot?”

“All the time. If I didn’t, Red did. It was like a game. You gotta understand, Steve never had leftovers unless he ordered double or triple something and he only did that when he really liked it—in this case, it was some spare ribs. Oh…really good ones from some place called Memphis Pete’s over off Broadway.” Tony seemed to pause for a moment, his expression nostalgic before he shook his head. “Anyway—as long as Steve thought Red was taking them. He didn’t get too cranky. He’d give her a little grief, but she’d just smile at him all enigmatic like and that was it.”

“So when you say you stole them and if you didn’t, she did—you mean you were stealing them and letting her take the blame?” Just to clarify and stuff.

“Exactly.” Tony grinned. “It was fun…” Then he shook his head. “Anyway, so I’m down there, I open the fridge—it’s all dark cause I didn’t bother with the lights, and I just have that box in my hands and JARVIS says, ‘Agent Romanoff is directly behind you, sir.’”

A laugh burst out of him, it was loud and wholly inappropriate but Tony’s expression was comical.

“I felt like some damn Bugs Bunny cartoon as I nearly climbed on top of the fridge. Needless to say, the ribs went flying and I thought they were doomed, but she caught the box, then smiled at me as if nothing had happened and said, ‘hey… thanks,’ before she sauntered out.”

Peeling the cheese out of the wrapper, Peter couldn’t shake the amusement leaving him in a little wave of chuckles. “Did she eat the ribs?”

“I don’t know, I was too busy having a heart attack. For the next month, she pops up everywhere—my lab, the kitchen, the penthouse, the gym…everywhere and I get JARVIS’s ‘Agent Romanoff is directly behind you, sir.’” Tony mocked a British accent every time he voiced JARVIS. He finished building his sandwich, then grabbed a couple of sodas from the fridge while Peter put the sandwich fixings away. “Every time I ask JARVIS why isn’t he announcing her when she gets there as opposed to only when she is right behind me, he apologizes but he said there is no reason
to announce her anywhere else…finally, I gave up and just had him cancel the command.”

“So, she wasn’t being announced anywhere anymore?”

“Nope,” Tony said with a slow, almost amused smile. “About a year later, I am doing some maintenance and cleaning out old code—I do that sometimes when I need to clear my head and there it is, bright and bold as day. She even left a damn spider and kiss emoji with it.”

Peter didn’t pretend not to laugh now.

“Clever, see?” He downed half of his soda in one long slug, then grabbed his sandwich. “Eat and walk, Kid.”

Grabbing his stuff, he hurried after him. “Did she do that a lot?”

“Did she do what a lot? Scare me into my next life?” Tony snorted. “Yes. Kind of missed it about her when she was gone. If I could make it through the common room or in and out of my lab without a sudden adrenaline surge, the day was just not complete.”

Snickering, Peter had to hold off biting into his sandwich. “I meant JARVIS’ code?”

“Once or twice I think. She’s a really skilled hacker. Skilled enough she doesn’t brag about it, doesn’t even tell you she’s doing it. You find out after she’s done. She’s been teaching Friday…”

Biting off a mouthful, he chewed the sandwich and stared at him. “Sh-s-ach-ng–i-day?”

Tony stared at him a beat. “God, now I know why my mother yelled at me for talking while eating. It makes so much more sense now.” He took a bite of his own sandwich; finishing it and the soda before they even reached the lab. “Yes, Red’s been teaching Friday. Talking to her, occasionally working on a tweak here and there in her coding—wasn’t sure at first, but Friday’s been getting… sassier.”

“Intuitive leaps are not sassing you, Boss.”

Tony smirked as he moved over to the counter where they’d left the samples. “See? Intuitive leaps. Cracking jokes. She’s even become something of a smart ass.”

“I was already smart before, Boss,” Friday said without missing a beat. “The ass is all you.”

A real look of delight creased Tony’s face. “See—that has Red written all over it. Don’t think I don’t know you two girls have been talking behind my back.”

“And in front of you, too.” The quip from the AI seemed to please Tony even more. “Completed tracing all sixty-one flights departing between last night and first thing this morning at all local and regional airports within an hour to two hours of the Catskills.”

The entertained expression vanished. “Nothing?”

“No sign of her, Boss. Ms. Romanoff has been able to slip my facial recognition before and I still have the programs running to scrub her from surveillance which means I’m constantly scanning for her and I have no hits following her last sighting on the third floor of the club. But I didn’t scrub her automatically. There was nothing to scrub.” Friday sounded almost annoyed.

Tony had pulled on gloves and Peter followed suit as soon as he’d swallowed the last bit of his sandwich. “Keep looking, Baby Girl. They can’t just fall off the face of the Earth without leaving
some kind of footprint.”

“Unless Natasha’s in something,” Peter said slowly, his gut-churning at the thought.

In the middle of removing vials from the sample bags he began to load into a tray, Tony paused to stare at Peter. “In something?”

“You know…like a box or something. You can’t see in a box…”

“Friday,” Tony set two more sample vials into the tray, then shoved his stool back to roll over to a computer. “How many of those flights had cargo? And how fast can you get to a port from the Catskills?”

“You’re thinking container ship, Boss?”

“I’m thinking anyway they could move her where we wouldn’t look. Load her into something, take a speedboat out, add it to a ship already out of a port…” Tony’s expression changed as he drummed his fingers. “We need more variables. But let’s start tracking any cargo—that was human-sized or larger.”

With a hard swallow, Peter glanced at the vials he was removing. Each Q-tip sealed to preserve it. They were going to have to run them fast because they had a time limit on how long before the samples were compromised.

“That’s smart thinking, Pete,” Tony said as he returned to working on the samples. The bracelet sat on the table between them. The damaged chain looked almost forlorn and the gold seemed almost dull while the rubies were listless. Anthropomorphizing jewelry probably wasn’t a good idea, but the last time Peter had seen it Natasha had been wearing it.

“Thanks.”

“You know… you said something last night. You said you had a feeling of dread. It’s why we checked on Red.”

Peter nodded, but he kept his attention focused on the vials. “I just… something felt wrong.”

“But wrong enough you had to run over and tell me…”

Grimacing, Peter opened his mouth to apologize but Tony waved him off.

“No, I’m not upset Pete. I was just thinking… you knew something was wrong. And you knew enough to tell someone.”

There wasn’t a question there, well at least not a verbalized question, so Peter said, “It happened before.”

“When?”

“Once…when I was training with Natasha. We were—doing a blindfold exercise. Didn’t happen at first, happened at the end. Like I knew there would be a real hit instead of just a faux one and I moved.”

“So just in training?”

Chewing the inside of his lip, he shook his head. “The day Natasha and I went to Oscorp.”
Tony’s scowl had Peter lifting his shoulders.

“It happened when we were on our way back—and it may have happened when she was inside. But it wasn’t as bad then. It was really bad on the street. I was twitchy, like someone was watching us and I couldn’t shake it. Then she sent me away with the samples she’d taken and…well, you know what happened next.”

“The teams stalking her.” Tony exhaled slowly. “Two teams.”

“What?” Because the way he said the last two words sounded meaningful.

“Two teams. One was mercenaries after her for the bounty—took care of the bounty took care of the problem. But the other one actually wanted me. I was the target, but they went after her…” Clenching his fist, he blew out a breath. “Okay—back to the relevant piece here. You’ve had that feeling before and each time something bad happened or at least could have happened?”

Peter nodded once. “Then we’re at the party last night and…it was fine. Things were great. Dancing with Liz, talking, and the gift—I didn’t thank you for the scholarship yet.”

“It’s good Pete, I know you care. Get back to the feeling.”

They were snipping their way through each sample and getting them suspended for the mass spec. Between them, they made fast work of it.

“Yeah, so I was just having fun. After dinner, we’d gone back down to dance—Liz’s idea, she’s a great dancer—but it was like something was just there. I kept looking over my shoulder. Something was wrong—then that paint bomb thing happened and I was like boop—there it is. That was it.”

“But it wasn’t,” Tony guessed.

“Yeah, the feeling didn’t go away. So I looked around, just making sure everyone was all right and I didn’t see Natasha…”

“Ergo you assumed something was wrong with her.”

“It happened around her before. If I think about it—it’s happened when I’ve been fighting. Like—in Germany.” He had to be really careful of this, Tony had gotten pretty angry about the bruises Peter came home with even if Peter hadn’t been.

“What happened in Germany?”

“Um…when I was after Sam and Bucky in the—um—terminal? I had gotten them with webbing and then this hot-cold feeling hit and it kind of tingled and I turned but not fast enough and the little flying thing Sam uses… Redwing? It snared me and pulled me out of the terminal.” Banged him off a wall too, kind of hurt.

Picking up the tray of prepared samples, Tony walked it over and loaded it into the mass spectrometer.

“It may have happened a few other times, but I was usually kind of busy and didn’t really think about it.” Should he apologize for not telling him?

“Did you tell Red about it?”
“Not in so many words, but like the bad feeling. That day on the street, when I told her, she didn’t ask me why or what, she just—responded to it and sent me away.”

Peter had a lot of time to think about that later. He hadn’t understood the threat, but she had and she’d trusted his instincts for some reason. It was why she’d wanted him to take the samples and go. Not only to secure them, but also to get him out of the line of fire.

He wasn’t the one who’d been in danger, though.

After stripping off his gloves, Tony entered a code then said, “Begin processing the blood samples, Friday. All the genetic profiles you can pull. Find out if any of these are Red’s, too.”

“On it, Boss.”

Turning back to the table, Tony studied him for a minute then moved to the bracelet. “Change your gloves. We’re going to see about swabbing this and pulling the hair out of it, need to run all of it—then I want to see how they broke the chain. It was a titanium infused gold…”

“That’s some tough stuff.” Peter moved to switch out his gloves. A tingle raced up his spine and he turned, catching the rubber ball Tony had apparently thrown at him.

“Did you get a feeling that time?” Tony asked, both eyebrows raised.

“Yes?”

“Huh.” Tony opened the bracelet bag. “You know, Kid, you never did tell me about how this happened to you.”

Peter set the ball down carefully and then pulled on the gloves. “I… was doing something I wasn’t supposed to…”

“That’s my favorite kind of thing to do,” Tony told him. “Tell me more.”

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**Wanda**

With every rock she lifted, she said a little prayer. Even if part of her thought it was ridiculous, what had God ever done for her? But still, she would say it because she really wanted to find something—anything that would lead them to Natasha. Before Tony ordered the party to be shut down and Sam pulled her over to the entrance to help corral the guests and check on them, she had no idea anything was wrong.

Then it was even more time before it finally settled in that it was Natasha who was missing. She knew Pepper, too, but not as well and they’d found Pepper. This was good. But Natasha… The rock she held up wavered and she concentrated to keep it there as Bucky began to search where it had been. He seemed utterly unperturbed to move around beneath even the larger boulders while she held them suspended.

So far, they’d found a child’s sandal, an old tire, a broken doll, dozens up dozens of crushed
aluminum cans and of all things, about ten different tennis balls. But nothing that would help them find Natasha.

When they came up with nothing this time, she sent the rock down with more force than necessary and it cracked.

Bucky peered up at her. After asking if she needed to be down there before descending himself, he’d been quiet. “We will find Natalia,” he told her. “If she does not find us first.”

Wanda tugged the hat off her head, then pulled her hair back and tied it at her nape before pulling the knit cap down again. No one had really said anything since she’d started. Sharon still worked on collecting evidence—blood—from the bridge along with Clint. Steve?

Steve just didn’t move. He was a statue. It was worse than when Bucky had gone into cryo in Wakanda. Then, Steve had become like a ghost, but he still seemed to have some life in him. Not now. His empty expression and almost listless eyes. She was pretty sure he was only half aware of them, enough to respond but otherwise, he focused on the bridge.

Not wanting to imagine what happened there, Wanda looked everywhere but it.

“Do you really believe that?” she finally asked as she stared down at Bucky.

“I do,” he said as a faint smile creased his lips, one that never reached his eyes.

Wanda sent another rock up, then a second one, and a third. The collection gave her something to focus on. “I want to believe that.” One thing about her powers, when she used them they helped keep her warm. Maybe it was the energy she expended or the stress she put herself under, but the chill in the air barely touched her skin.

“We were sent on a mission once—Natalia first and then I after her.” He continued his search of the ground as he spoke and Wanda felt more than saw Steve shift his attention. “At the time there was a secret research facility in the Kazakh Steppes called Baikonur…”

“The cosmodrome?” She’d heard of it. It was huge, it wasn’t secret…

“Then, no one knew it was there and the government preferred to keep it that way. The mission details are not as important as Natalia was sent to infiltrate. Our superiors suspected a western spy had embedded themselves…” It was almost funny to hear him talk about the western governments as if he were not an American. “She can blend and become anyone, so her entrance into the facility was all but assured. A week into the mission, Natalia sends word to our superiors that Winter must come.”

A faint smile creased his face.

Wanda moved to the next set of rocks, carefully replacing the others she had lifted.

“You have to understand, our missions were always compartmentalized. There were times when she was sent ahead of me or I was sent in support, many where we were sent together. But never had she requested backup. To say it created a stir is an understatement. They deployed me immediately, which was unusual, more unusual were the orders to retrieve her at all costs.”

That sounded awful. “She was expendable?”

“No, but they would never sacrifice one resource for another. But never had my orders included a rescue, protection yes. But the mission was always first.” He shook his head. They’d completed
one full side of the gully. “Still, orders were orders, so I went. Natalia was not at the designated
rendezvous nor was she in the living quarters she established for her cover. In essence, she had
vanished. I had to play the part of a brother searching for his sister to find out from a neighbor that
she had been taken away by polïcïya. Which was interesting, because the polïcïya would never be
a threat to Natalia.”

Clint chuckled. “She let herself get caught.”

Bucky glanced at him. “Yes. It was not the first time she’d done this, but I was…”

“Annoyed? Pissed? Ready to throttle her because you had no idea whether you were supposed to
burst in and rescue her or would that actually screw up her plan? So then do you sit and wait to see
when it got real? How do you know when it’s real?”

“Yes,” Bucky commented drily. “And where precisely had they taken her?”

“I feel you,” Clint said with a wry shake of his head. “Every single gray hair on my head came
from her.”

Wanda didn’t mean to, but she laughed. “You do not have that many gray hairs.”

“Ha,” Clint said. “That’s what you think. Anyway… how’d you find her?”

“I went to the local station…”

“No way she was there,” Steve said, his voice surprisingly rough and amused. “That would be too
easy.”

Bucky grunted. “I went back to her apartment and studied it until I found the maps she had made
under a floorboard beneath the bed. It was cleverly hidden through a seam in the carpet that she
had glued together. The maps showed several camps in the range around the facility. Three had
been marked with question marks.”

Lifting and lowering the rocks became almost rote as she listened.

“I am now left with the question of which one do I approach, if Natalia marked them—it meant
something. So I took one of the polïcïya and I questioned him. He told me which of the three
housed a militant group most likely trading information and safety with the western spy for arms
and technology.”

“I don’t think I want to know how you got him to tell you.”

Bucky smiled suddenly, it was a little less sad than his earlier attempt. “Natalia is not the only one
who can be persuasive.”

When Steve snorted, Wanda laughed. “I believe you.” Though she didn’t think he meant that he
persuaded with charm.

“Now I have been there two days and I have not found Natalia and my patience for the hunt grows
thin. She was taken not long after she sent the message, this means she has been in custody for five
days. I armed myself and drove directly for the camp.” Bucky crouched and shoved his metal hand
into the muck beneath where one of the rocks had been and pulled up another ball. “I am expecting
heavy resistance, the polïcïya has indicated they are at least a hundred men, maybe more and they
have plenty of weapons and entrenched position. They’d captured the Soviet for questioning—his
words.”
Tension coiled in her stomach at the idea of Natasha being held anywhere for five days. Ultron had taken her too… when they’d been in South Korea. He’d stolen her away after she rescued Vision’s cradle. Wanda hadn’t really known her then, only the little bit of the darkness she’d seen in her mind—and the nightmares it gave her for a few days after. Yet Bucky spoke about it so matter-of-factly, like walking into a situation with that many men would be a little time-consuming but not a challenge.

“When I arrive, I take a position in the grass to scout the camp. But as I study it through the scope all I see a smoking hovel and there is only one person sitting at the fire, the smell of antelope roasting carried well. She twisted around and waved to me, beckoning with a wave of her fingers. By the time I get to her, she points to the antelope and says, ‘you’re late, I almost had to have dinner without you. Please tell me you brought the vodka.’”

The imitation of Natasha dry tones sent a thrill of amusement through her.

“She had, in her words, grown tired of waiting. She had all the information by the second day, but she had to wait for the spy to show up. Once he was there, she took them all out.” Bucky shook his head slowly. “When I asked why she sent for me, she patted the ground next to her and told me to wait. We ate dinner and she had her vodka and then the sunset came. ‘That,’ she told me. ‘You needed to see that.’”

“How’d you explain that to your superiors?” Clint asked as he eased off the bridge, his limp more pronounced than when he’d started.

Bucky glanced over at him and shrugged. “Natalia and I arrived back, she told them I had been invaluable in taking the camp. That was it. Later… she said to me the vodka was invaluable and I brought it, so therefore, it wasn’t a lie.”

Clint laughed. “You actually brought the vodka?”

“It was Natalia, I always brought vodka.”

This time it was Steve who chuckled. “She definitely has a way about her. After Fury was shot… he’d left me that thumb drive and said trust no one. I hid it in a vending machine because Rumlow and STRIKE wanted me back at the Triskelion. After I got out, I went back to the hospital—and the thumb drive is gone. Then I see Nat’s reflection right behind me, dressed like some teenager in a hoodie while she’s chewing some gum, the minute she blows a bubble—I know she has the thumb drive.”

He scuffed a shoe against the ground. “Craziest thing, I’m equal parts amazed she found it and pissed that she found it because Fury said don’t trust anyone and I’d seen that thumb drive, I was there when she got the information that was on it. I demanded to know what it is and she says she doesn’t know and I was—pigheaded and tell her to stop lying and she looks me dead in the eye and says, ‘I only act like I know everything, Rogers.’” Deep affection filtered into his rough tone.

“And you know, right then—I knew she wasn’t lying. She helped me make sense of it, but we needed to know what it was on it, so she dresses me in the most ridiculous clothes ever—don’t even know where she got them from. Then we’re at a mall and she says to me ‘first rule of going on the run…””

“Is walk, don’t run,” Clint and Bucky finished for him one second behind each other.

Wanda’s smile grew. All three men wore the same exasperation on their faces.

“She takes me to an Apple store, walks right up, and plugs the thing in and starts looking at it. She
knows the encryption program on it, makes sense, she probably wrote it. But…we only have a few minutes and the AI on it kept rewriting the code so she was fighting with it. But we’re running out of time, we figure out where we have to go next and we’re out. But STRIKE is in the mall, and this is going to end badly.” Steve’s eyes took on a particularly distant look. For a moment, Wanda forgot about the boulders she was holding up as she listened.

“Standard STRIKE formation, flanking tactics—it’s going to be a messy as hell fight with all of these civilians, but I have to get Natasha and the thumb drive out of there. She had a better chance of figuring it out, so I was going to take the fight while she ran.”

Clint snorted this time, the sound so derisive that Steve actually spread his arms.

“Yes, I know that now. I probably should have known that then.”

“Uh huh.” Clint made his way over to set the last collection bags into the box.

“Anyway,” Steve said with a little more life than he’d had in his voice all morning. “I tell her the plan and she says, ‘shut up and put your arm around me and laugh at something I said.’” He shook his head. “We sailed right past two STRIKE members, they never even looked at us. Then we’re on the escalator but less than twenty feet away is Rumlow on the other escalator heading right toward us and she turns around looking up at me and says, ‘Kiss me,’ and I have no idea why and she says, ‘Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable,’ and I said ‘yes they do,’ but I can see Rumlow coming and she doesn’t give me a choice, just kisses me.”

He scratched at his beard and his eyes held so much animation in them. From below, Bucky laughed. “Did you forget you were in the mall, Punk?”

“Yeah,” Steve admitted. “But sure enough, we get right past Rumlow and as she turns around, she smirks and says, ‘Still uncomfortable?’ We got out of the mall without a single civilian being harmed, never engaging the STRIKE team… There’s nothing she can’t do.”

A warmth spread through her. They loved her. She’d seen glimmers of it in their interactions but listening to both Steve and Bucky—they loved her so much.

“Were you uncomfortable?” Wanda had to ask.

Steve grinned, the smile fleeting, but real. “Not the word I’d use for it.”

“Eh,” Clint said. “I’ve kissed her on an op. She deliberately had an entire onion dish that night. Uncomfortable isn’t the word I’d use either.”

Snorts and snickers broke out around them, even Sharon chuckled but the look of speculation on her face as she studied Steve sobered her swiftly. The hum of the quinjet’s engines filled the air. Sam was back.

She and Bucky finished with one side of the ravine and they’d found nothing useful, but he insisted they continue to the other side and no one argued.

At least they could do this while they waited for something to give them more information.
It had taken him longer to head back than he planned. After getting Pepper over to medical with Tony, he’d called Rhodey to bring him up to speed and then he’d left a message for Maria Hill. They could use all the resources they could find. After, he packed food and thermoses of coffee. Knowing Steve, he wouldn’t even be thinking about food, but they all needed it. Pepper had been in rough condition, but it was more exposure to the weather and possibly lingering after-effects of whatever gas they’d used.

As soon as he touched down, he had the ramp lowering and he carried out the packs and thermoses. Wanda was lifting rocks for Bucky while Steve stood sentinel watch. Clint had moved to lean against the exterior of the bridge looking away from it. The man’s face was definitely haggard around the edges.

Sharon was going over the samples, dark shadows under her bloodshot eyes. The dark tension present when they’d first found Pepper and discovered the mess on the bridge seemed absent.

“Thanks, Man,” Clint said when he handed him the thermos and a small container of food.

“Ain’t much, but everyone needs to eat.” Sam turned to Steve and all but shoved a thermos to him. He’d boiled ink for him and Bucky, but that was how Steve took his coffee.

“Thanks,” Steve said, accepting both but not opening either. “How’s Pepper?”

“The doc was still in with her. They’re running her on dialysis right now.” He shook his head when Wanda looked like she’d say no to the offer of coffee. “Get the rocks on the ground, then eat and drink. Ten minutes. You can’t keep burning so much energy on nothing.” It had been hours since they all had dinner at the party.

Damn, it felt like eons instead of hours. They’d all been laughing. Nat had looked fantastic and she’d teased, flirted, and given them all a hard time when she wasn’t boosting Wanda’s self-esteem or soothing Bucky when he got restless. Hell, she’d even kept Tony in line and Sam didn’t think he’d seen Steve laugh like that in a long time.

It had been a good evening.

Until it wasn’t.

“Food is fuel, Wanda,” Clint told her. “Everyone take a break. We’re no good to anyone if we collapse.”

Finally, someone with sense.

Of all of them, Sam expected Bucky to object the most. But all he did was take the coffee and food and go to drop down on the ramp. Steve sat next to him. Then the weirdest thing—Steve opened his coffee and drank some before passing it over. He did the same thing with the food.

Nat had done the same thing at dinner the night before. Filing that away, Sam ushered Sharon and Wanda over to sit inside the quinjet. The heat in there helped keep out the chill.

“Clint,” Wanda asked as she sat tiredly. “How long were you and Natasha partners?”

“Fifteen years—give or take,” Clint said, tipping the coffee back. “Why? You want to hear my crazy Russian story?”
Wait, they'd been telling stories?

“I’ll fill you in later,” Sharon told him quietly, her expression thoughtful.

“That bad?” he murmured in response.

“No, just—a little confused.” Then she shook her head and took a sip of the coffee with a faint smile. He’d put the sugar and creamer in it for her and the pleased surprise on her face gave him a boost.

“Okay.”

“Yes,” Wanda admitted. “Steve’s was funny and so was Bucky’s…”

Damn, he had missed stories.

“How about filling us in on North Korea…” Sam had been curious about that since the mission.

Clint chuckled, “Yeah…no. I like my life.”

“Damn,” Sam said with a snap of his fingers and Sharon bumped him.

“You know—fine. There is one story I could tell, and if you tell her I told you, I will deny it. She’s known me longer, so I’m pretty sure she’ll believe me.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, pal,” Bucky drawled as he dug into the canned stew that Sam had heated and packed for each of them. Steve was also eating, but slower and staring at the bridge still. That faraway look wasn’t good. Sam had seen that on too many soldiers—and he hadn’t seen it on Steve since they’d all been allowed to return. He had kind of hoped being back with the team and having Bucky on his feet would have put an end to that shadow.

“Anyway,” Clint drew out the word with a pointed look at an unrepentant Bucky. It was good that the two seemed to get each other. Bucky needed friends, more than just Natasha and Steve—though Sam wasn’t touching that one. He still didn’t quite get how they made that work but they were.

Wanda drank the coffee with small grimaces. Sam should have made her tea, but he hadn’t quite mastered that so better bad coffee than bad tea, right? Maybe. Didn’t matter, she was drinking it and eating. He’d put sugar and cream in hers, too. She needed the calories.

“I told you about the STRIKE team exercise and that Rumlow knew better than to mess with Nat, right?”

Sam made a face. A story with Rumlow in it? Hopefully, it would be good cause nothing else about that man was.

At their various nods, Clint took a long slug off his coffee then said… “Back when I brought Nat into SHIELD, she spent a few months in isolation. Everything monitored, then gradually we integrated her into the general population at SHIELD, bit by bit. She and I trained together and we’d spar, but we didn’t spar a lot. Still, needed to keep her sharp and we’re about a week off from when she gets the all-clear and she can move out of on-base housing and into her own place.”

He made a face, then shook his head before he continued, “She didn’t know this. Phil and I did, we’d been pushing for a while. She and I had run quite a few ops and she was about damn perfect in the field, she’d crossed all her T’s and dotted her I’s, so we’re running her through this whole
battery of bullshit.”

He laughed then and glanced down at the coffee.

“Pretty sure she figured it out, but we wanted to make this hard-sell presentation. All her skills and how easily she worked into the populace. For about a week and a half, I’d been making her come to the main gym and training room with me. Light sparring, weights, a little bit of everything. She’s dropping my ass all over the place and giving me some advice here and there. Meanwhile, Coulson’s just hanging out ‘documenting’ everything so when it comes to the reports, he can say honestly he saw nothing out of place but solid teamwork.”

After scrubbing a hand over his face, he said, “Rumlow comes in and he’s watching us and he makes a few not so politically correct comments. Nat doesn’t bat an eyelash, pretty sure she heard them but she ignored ‘em. Now, remember—I said light sparring—so Rumlow says that he’d like to get a piece of that and I’m ready to deck him, but then… you know why not let him give it a shot? So I look at Phil and Phil is watching all three of us with this kind of thoughtful look, then he crooks his finger to Natasha and she goes over and he tells her something. Now I don’t know what it is then, but I know Phil, and Rumlow was a tool. He was always a tool. He happened to be decent at his job, but… whatever.”

Yeah, Rumlow was Hydra, so Sam was definitely in on the whatever part. Still, he had to admire Clint for keeping it clean not only for Wanda, but likely to keep from pissing Steve or Bucky off.

“We’re getting a bit of a crowd, thanks to Rumlow’s heckling. Then Phil says, ‘all right, Rumlow —on the mats. First to three falls takes the match.’”

Now Clint chuckles. “I’m out of the way and Natasha heads out there. Rumlow promises to go easy on her and she tilts her head, eyes wide and all innocent, ‘why?’ and you can just see the gears turning in Rumlow’s head, and he makes some dumbass remark about her being a little thing and he wouldn’t want to overwhelm her. Then as sweet as pie, she says, ‘but if you do not overwhelm me, how do I see what you have to teach me?’”

Sam made a face and even Steve grimaced. Never in a million years would Sam buy an innocent act from Natasha. Not on a sparring mat for damn sure.

“Yeah, man fell for it like a hundred-pound sack of bricks. She spreads her hands and says, ‘please…how is it you say… take me to school?’”

Suddenly Bucky just starts laughing. It was a rough, deep, belly shaking laugh and whether it was to Clint’s horrific mockery of a Russian accent or the actual words, the laughter just rolled out of him. It caught everyone up in his mirth. Steve bumped his shoulder and Bucky quieted, but the amusement on his face remained.

Yeah, that was an improvement on Bucky’s part—the humor, the openness—but the edges were still frayed with worry and grief.

Clint grins. “For the next forty-five minutes, she runs his ass all over that mat. He kept trying to get ahold of her and she kept slipping away, darting, ducking, evading. Not once does she hit him, she just has him red-faced and panting. And he’s pissed. Probably didn’t help that I was laughing and so were a lot of people. Finally, Phil whistles. They both stop and he looks at his watch and says, ‘Natasha, we’re due at lunch in five minutes. Let’s wrap this up.’”

Bucky started laughing all over again and Sam had to admit, he couldn’t help but chuckle. Even Sharon was shaking her head laughing while Wanda stared at Clint with rapt attention.
Nat says, ‘absolutely, sir.’ Then hands Rumlow his ass on a silver platter, she dropped him three times in three minutes, so hard and so fast, he was still dazed when she finished the last one and held out her hand to him to help him up. He stared at her and said, ‘what the hell?’ She smiled, only it’s not sweet or innocent, it’s bloodthirsty and dangerous and she says… ‘I take you to Russian school. You need better education.’ Then she walks out as calm as you please, Rumlow was still limping three days later—and he never crossed her after that. Turns out Phil said, ‘Tasha, he needs an education. See what he knows for me?’”

Man, that had to have stung him. She humiliated him in front of an audience then wiped the floor with him. Knowing Nat, she’d done it without an ounce of malice. “Almost wish I could have seen that…” Sam said.

“Me, too,” Wanda added. “I can’t imagine her not being…”

“Powerful?” Sharon asked. Sam glanced at her and she gave him a small smile. “I’d have paid money to have seen her do that.”

Clint nodded, then glanced over at the bridge. “We need to finish up.”

Just like that, the laughter evaporated and they cleaned up and resumed their work with Wanda and Bucky moving to the other side of the bridge to check for evidence.

Natasha was going to be all right. She had to be.

Cause Sam didn’t think Steve or Bucky would survive her not being okay.

And God help whoever did it… cause if she didn’t beat their ass, these two would.

Actually, they might be better off with Nat dealing with them. She’d just kill them.

Bucky would make it hurt.

Clint probably would, too.

Steve had that look in his eye again and Sam blew out a sigh.

He didn’t think Steve would do anything to stop them either. Hell, he’d probably help.

*You just be all right, girl. You be all right until we find you... better yet, you come find us and chill these boys out.*

Even after they finished at the bridge and revisited the site where Pepper said the van went off the road, collecting anything there that might pass as evidence, they were all clinging to these little stories.

Wanda had one about the jacket and the look on Natasha’s face the first time she’d seen her wearing it. Sam told one of his own, about Natasha and Fort Mead, brass balls on that woman. Breaking into a heavily fortified military base didn’t make her sweat. The only one who didn’t tell a story was Sharon. Sam didn’t have to ask why. She and Natasha just didn’t know each other. A fact, Sharon seemed to be regretting at the moment.

When Steve talked about the battle of New York and the moment Natasha leapt off his shield, he took hell from Clint who added the piece about her needing a little help because Loki had locked onto her.
Every story helped just a little bit.

Then they got back to the Compound and delivered all the evidence. Everyone showered, changed, and returned to pace. All they needed was one break…

Pepper

It was dark outside when she opened her eyes. Tony was asleep in the chair next to her bed. His head hung at an awkward angle, and a StarkPad dangled precariously from one hand. The lines on his face were deep grooves and he was still wearing the black shirt and slacks from the night before. Blinking slowly, she took a mental inventory.

Every muscle hurt. She had a headache. Her throat was dry. Her lips were chapped. They’d said something about dialysis earlier. The doctor said toxins or something in her blood. Had to clean it out. Then she’d passed out again. Tony had been there for a while—the bridge. He’d found her under the bridge.

The images from the night before assaulted her and she closed her eyes. The images had been bad enough in the van—the men with their gas masks. Vomiting from the wine. The blood on her face. Worse than all of that were the sounds in the dark. The grunts. The sounds of flesh hitting flesh. Gunshots. Just…

She jerked her eyes open as one the machines began to beep and let out a shaky breath. Tony snapped his head up and he leaned forward, his gaze darting and searching.

“You’re awake.”

“I think so,” she told him. “I feel like I’ve been trying to wake up all day.”

“Just take it easy, the dialysis worked and the toxins are out of your bloodstream. But you had a hard night…” He set the StarkPad to the side and glanced at the machines around her before he pulled the blanket up.

“Tony…”

“Shh, you need to rest. Are you hungry? They didn’t say you couldn’t eat. They’ve got you on saline for hydration and we’ve had you in warming blankets. There was exposure, but no frostbite. That’s good.”

She licked her lips and tried to catch his hand. “Tony…”

“Careful,” he adjusted one of the tubes wrapped around her fingers and tangling with the metal railing.

“Tony.”

He stopped, his fingers clasping hers and his hands were cold. He hadn’t slept. She’d bet anything that nap in the chair was the first sleep he’d had.
“Did you find her?”

Squeezing her hand gently, he dropped his chin and shook his head. “No.”

“How long… it’s dark outside now. How long?”

“We’re at twenty-four hours since you were taken.” He blew out a breath, seeming to steel himself. Then shook his head. “You need to rest.”

“Tony… what can I do?” Natasha had told her to hide. She’d told her to stay down and to stay there. There had been so many people above. She’d heard their voices—the sound of their feet and the fighting. She didn’t think she’d ever heard Natasha cry out… not once.

“We’re at an impasse,” he told her. “We… need to know what you know. But you need to rest.”

“I’ve been resting. I want to help… I can tell you… some of it is fuzzy. We were… were having wine and…”

Oh God, they’d been talking about Marc. She did not want to have that conversation with Tony.

“Pep… you don’t have to tell me,” he said slowly. “We need to see what you saw.”

She blinked. “You want me to use the machine…”

“Only if you’re up for it…” He swallowed. “I wouldn’t ask, but we’ve got nothing Pep—this is my fault. They took you because of me. They took her. I need to know who they are. I need to know where to look.”

“Oh.”

“I just… I have to try everything, but I know this could be hard for you. Sooner would be better, but if you need more rest we can wait.” He let out a little not-laugh, the one that edged toward hysteria and scared the hell out of her in the past.

“We need to see what you saw.”

“Okay.”

But it was like he didn’t hear her, he just looked at her hand and shook his head. “You shouldn’t have to go through it again, but there was nothing there… everything you mentioned, the people who came, the van, the car… the bodies. They were all gone.”

Reaching over, she covered his hand with her free one. “Tony—stop. I said okay. I’ll do it… you should know… she and I talked about you. It…” It might not be comfortable for you.” Definitely wouldn’t be comfortable for her. But that didn’t matter. “I want to help.”

“I don’t care what you talked about… we just need to see who they were.”

“They were in masks and I never saw the ones on the bridge.”

“No, but you heard them. Your mind… it catalogs more than you know.”

She nodded. “Okay. How do we do it?”

He straightened and looked to the left, then the right and exhaled a deep breath. “I need to do some tweaks, then calibrate it. I’m going to ask one of the doctors to put a neural net on you so Friday can start the readings… okay? Nothing happens until you say okay and I have the device here.”
“Okay…”

“Pepper, Steve and Bucky are going to want to be in the room. Clint, too.”

She nodded. “I can handle it.”

She could. She wanted to help. She could do this.

“You really are an amazing woman, you know that?”

“I do, actually,” she said with a faint smile. “Now go get done what you need to do. Then we’ll see if we can find Natasha.”

He kissed her fingers, then headed for the door. Sliding to a stop, he turned around. “Your boyfriend…”

She braced herself.

“…I set him up in the Lexington Building. He’s got security. He’s safe. I—if you really want him here, I’ll get him. But I’d rather no strangers in the Compound or the Tower right now.”

God that must have cost him to say. She nodded slowly. “It’s fine. I can call Marc tomorrow. Does he know?”

“That you were missing?”

“Well, yes, but I meant that you found me.”

He blinked slowly. “I…”

“You have no idea, do you?”

“Been a long day, Pep.” The earnestness in that said it hadn’t remotely been spite. He’d genuinely forgotten all about Marc.

“All right, I believe you. Now go… I need to have a neural net done. Maybe they can help me coordinate it with this hideous green gown.”

A faint smile quirked his lips. “You were talking to Red about me?”

“Among… other things. Yes.”

He nodded slowly. “Are you really all right to do this? After… well after everything?” He was toying with something in his hand, like he couldn’t sit still.

“No,” she told him honestly. “But I won’t let that stop me. Natasha kept me safe. I’ll do what I have to do in order to get her back.”

“You’re the best, you know that, right?”

“Yes,” she said with a soft sigh. “You’ve said that before.”

He nodded. “I’ll be back soon. Rest as much as you can.” As he turned again, she caught sight of the bracelet in his hand. It was the one Natasha put on her. It had a tracker, she’d already figured that out from the look on Tony’s face when he’d seen it.
Natasha made sure they could find her at the expense of herself.

Yes, she could damn well handle a little BARF.

“Tony…” she called.

He popped back in the door. “Yeah?”

“You really need to rename that acronym.”

A real smile spread across his face. “Yeah. You wanna do it?”

She laughed. “No, but… I don’t want to say I BARFed either.”

That earned her a genuine chuckle and for a moment the corners of his eyes crinkled and some of the darkness lurking there—the same darkness that had stalked out like some primal beast after Afghanistan—eased.

“Rest. I’ll be back”

Then he was gone and she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

They had to find her… until then, she started a mental list of tasks Janine needed to dive in on. As soon as she got to a phone, she’d send her a message.

Focusing on that list let her drown out the sounds of flesh hitting flesh and the worse ones… the ones where bones crunched.

She’d have to relive it all soon enough.
Spark

Chapter Summary

Pepper brings valuable information to the table and their foe introduces himself

Chapter Forty-Seven

Spark

Steve

Day Two

They’d gone over the room at the club, the bridge, the crash site, and every inch of highway in between. Tony had Friday running multiple searches, but so far—nothing. Vision helped, but even he seemed consternated by how evasive their quarry was.

The problem, though, was they didn’t know the identity of their quarry beyond Natasha herself. Everyone else could be on some video footage somewhere and how would they know?

In theory, they were sleeping in shifts though neither he nor Buck had slept yet. They agreed with Clint on the idea and sent him off to take the first one. He was still healing and his leg had taken some abuse. Based on his bloodshot eyes, however, Steve doubted Clint got much sleep. Wanda had finally fallen asleep on the sofa in the common room and Bucky dropped a blanket over her. They did the same for Peter when he gave in and curled into one of the chairs.

Sharon and Sam offered to stay with them, but they were both swaying on their feet, and in spite of all the rules he and Tony were breaking, Sharon hadn’t offered up a single complaint. They owed her. If there were any blowback, he would make sure it didn’t land on her.

“We’re about ready,” Tony said as he crossed into the kitchen. “Friday’s got the full calibration scan complete. Pep fell asleep, so as soon as she wakes up…”

It was a little after six on Sunday morning. Natasha had been missing since late Friday evening. Their last known sighting by anyone—Pepper—had been around one in the morning, Saturday.

They had only been a couple of hours behind them. Might as well have been a couple of days for all the clues they had. Now? It was like being trapped in the ice all over again, immobile, as the world raced on without him. Tony emptied the coffee pot into a mug and took a long swallow before getting another pot started. Leaving his sketchbook, Steve slid off the stool and went to the fridge. He pulled out everything needed to make breakfast. Tony shifted aside, a StarkPad in one hand, to move over to the island where Steve had been seated.

Steve didn’t ask him about the data scrolling on the screen or the work Tony was doing. Tony didn’t offer. Right now, they needed all of Tony’s focus on the device to access Pepper’s recent
memories to give them something to work from—they didn’t have anything else.

After plating the bacon, scrambled eggs, and pancakes, he slid it across the counter to Tony who eyed it for a beat, then reached for it with almost a weary resignation. Steve built another plate, this one with double the pancakes and set it on the spot next to Tony’s a heartbeat before Bucky slid into the seat. Clint limped up to settle on the stool Steve had abandoned and he picked up the open sketchpad as Steve added fresh pancakes to the grill.

“That’s not bad, Cap.”

Steve glanced over his shoulder as Tony leaned sideways to see the image and Clint turned the drawing so he and Bucky could see it. The drawing had been an attempt to get out of his head, but he could do better. There were details missing from her dress and from the jewelry, but he’d focused more on the look in her eyes before they’d left for the party, when he’d seen her in the actual dress for the first time.

“Thanks,” Steve said, taking the sketchpad and flipping it closed before setting the food in front of Clint.

Once Steve had his own plate and stood on the opposite side of the bar from them, Tony put the StarkPad down. “This is how we’re doing it. We’re calibrated so once Pepper is awake, I’m going to ask her to walk through everything that happened from when she and Natasha ordered the wine.” He drained his coffee and then went to fill it again. Bucky covered the mouth of the cup with his hand and Tony blinked at him.

“Water,” Bucky told him. “You need to hydrate, too.”

“After,” was Tony’s only response and when Bucky withdrew his hand, he finished filling it. “This is going to be fairly traumatic for Pep, so we’ll be monitoring her vitals throughout, Friday and I have worked out a failsafe to step her back to a happier memory whenever it becomes too much.” Tony had been working on it. He didn’t think…

“…I couldn’t do that before, when Red tried it. Been meaning to add it in for a while. Pepper can choose the memory when we start. Anyway…” Tony waved that off. “It’ll be the four of us and Pepper in the room, she agreed to you being there. I would prefer it if we kept the chatter to a minimum while she endures this and save specific questions maybe for after unless… unless we see something crucial.”

Steve nodded slowly. “Then if we have a question, write it down and we can decide with a vote if we ask it or not.”

It was about as democratic as he was willing to be, but between the four of them, they had to know Natasha better than anyone and had most tactical areas covered.

“Agreed,” Clint said and Bucky nodded.

“I can live with it,” Tony acquiesced. “Second, Pepper already told me that she and Red had a conversation about me, so lock down any knee jerk reactions and I’ll do the same. Frankly, I’d rather pretend I don’t know the content of their private talks.”

“Finally get over your eavesdropping urges?” The dry question held no malice or reproach as Bucky cradled his own mug of coffee and stared at him.

“Probably not as much as I should be, but I figure I would warn you ahead of time.”
Steve shook his head. “Fine, I don’t actually care about what they discussed, I care about who took them.”

“Agreed,” Clint and Tony said in the same breath.

Then Bucky added, “And who has her now.”

“Once we have everything Pepper remembers, we’re correlating what she remembers hearing and seeing with all the evidence gathered, the scans of the scene, the possible trajectories to build a comprehensive model…”

“You can recreate the scene,” Steve said slowly. Was that really possible? Even with all of Tony’s tech? “Even though Pepper was below the bridge?”

“We need keystone data, but we have enough markers to extrapolate and build it out. I think it helps that Friday also has data on Natasha’s fighting styles and enough on file from her sparring and the fights the suit has been present at.”

Of course, Tony recorded his fights. Steve had almost forgotten that fact.

“So you think we’ll see more…”

“I think we need it,” Tony said solemnly. “We need to have eyes and ears there because whoever this son of a bitch or sons of bitches that did this are, they went to extraordinary lengths to make sure we had nothing to work with.”

Steve didn’t have to ask. That had to grate against Tony. They’d jammed their trackers, avoided video detection, entered through an impossible access, somehow neutralized Natasha, and escaped with both she and Pepper without alerting anyone, then kept them off the grid long enough to vanish with Natasha and left almost no traceable evidence behind.

Nearly all of the blood had been compromised, the bullets had rifling but nothing to match to any known weapons—they might be able to match them later if they found the weapon, but for now it was a dead end. The hair and blood on the bracelet were problematic—the blood had been Natasha’s but the hair, a black strand, had no follicle. Which only left them with a texture and color to match later, no DNA.

As near perfect crimes went, this one had been executed with brilliance.

Even more worrisome was the fact they’d been so damn thorough in how they cleaned up after themselves.

Tony checked his watch. “In a little over ten hours, I have to notify the U.N. about tomorrow’s meetings…”

With a harsh exhale, Clint said, “How long before it leaks to the media?”

“There are already rumblings. The party shutting down early, the Avengers sudden departure…” Tony shook his head. “It’s a matter of time at this point.”

“I need to make a call,” Clint said quietly. “Then I’ll be ready.”

Steve met his gaze. “Nat wouldn’t want to worry Laura.” It wasn’t even a question in his mind.

“I know, but Laura and I are trying something new… I keep her in the loop. Didn’t think I’d be
testing it so soon.” He drained his coffee. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Then he limped away and Steve braced his hands on the counter. The fact he had nothing to do, to contribute at the moment, but backing everyone else up grated on him. Looking after Wanda and Peter mattered. Making sure Tony didn’t OD on caffeine and no food mattered. Making sure Sam and Sharon got sleep mattered.

But until they had a target, all he could do was stabilize the holding action. It was the hardest part of the fight. The part where they could do nothing, but wait.

“Steve…” Tony held his gaze. “If it comes down to it—announcing her disappearance has to come from us.”

Yes, he was aware of the fact.

“We need to decide what we’re going to say…”

Steve sighed.

“Let me rephrase that, Cap—you need to decide what we’re going to say.”

A single nod. Announce her kidnapping or hide it under the auspices of a mission? The truth? Or the lie? Which one threatened her more? Which one helped the team more? “I’ll take care of it.”

“I managed to find one good thing in all of this…” Tony gave him a wry grin. “Finally renamed BARF.”

Though he wanted to smile, Steve couldn’t quite manage it and settled for asking, “Yeah?”

“Yeah. SPARK. Superior Proactive Augmented Recollected Knowledge. Doesn’t really roll off the tongue, but SPARK works.”

Bucky shook his head. “Natalia will still call it BARF just to tweak you.”

A faint smile, then Steve even chuckled a little. Because she absolutely would.

They finished the last of the meal in silence. Clint returned just as Friday notified them Pepper was awake.

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They took up spots around the lab Tony had selected for the effort. Pepper sat in a wheelchair, though she’d argued against it, and Tony had applied the gear to hook around her ears and press against her skull.

“It’ll feel weird,” he told her even as he checked the bags of fluids he’d attached, enough to switch out as she drained each one. “It’s also stressful because you’re going to relive it again…but I want you to focus on something fun, a safe memory, a place you love to think about… maybe your grandparents’ orchard or the beach house. Something that you think of and it makes you happier. Just concentrate on that for a minute, okay?”
Pepper nodded, then took a deep breath. Hands clasped together she closed her eyes and the room turned into a sunny grove, apples on the trees and the leaves just kissed with the edge of rust and gold. Not quite fall, but getting there. Pepper sprawled on a blanket under one tree with a book in one hand and an apple in the other. Well, it might have been Pepper. She looked pretty young.

Steve scratched at his beard and looked away. This was personal.

“Perfect,” Tony said. “Now, key a word to this…just a word that makes you think of it.” The machines monitoring her vitals showed her pulse and respiration calm.

“All right, Pep. Take us back to the club last night… to the private room from when you got the bottle of wine… and remember, when it gets too scary or too much—just remember that word and go back to that memory. That’s your safe retreat, okay?”

Pepper opened her eyes. “I know, you explained it four times. I want to do this. I want to help find her…”

“Thank you,” he said quietly and Pepper glanced at him.

“Same,” Bucky told her. “We appreciate you doing this.”

Clint nodded. “I don’t know what it’s like, I haven’t seen this thing work yet—but thank you.”

She smiled, then took a deep breath. Tony opened his mouth and she held up a hand. “I know what to do. Shh.”

He made a face then glanced down at his screen and nodded to her. The twin worries for Pepper and Natasha had to be playing hell inside of him. Steve definitely didn’t envy him the position he was in. While he didn’t want to put Pepper through this if they didn’t have to, they needed to find Natasha.

“Do it, Friday.”

“Engaging SPARK.”

Pepper closed her eyes and the scene around them shifted. The room filled in, some of the corners shadowy or indistinct, maybe unclear in her memory. Natasha sat in a chair, her shoes on the floor and her bare feet curled up in the chair beneath her. She looked both weary and amused in the same breath—and absolutely beautiful.

“Come in, plenty of room.”

*Pepper laughed and stepped out of her own shoes. “I shouldn’t hide too long, I left poor Marc out there to fend for himself.”*

*“Take as long or as little as you need. I’d offer you a drink, but I only grabbed a glass of water on the way in.”*
“I think we can do a little better.” Picking up her shoes, she carried them over and set them next to Natasha’s before settling into the chair and twisting to press a small button on the wall. “Part of the reason Tony likes this club—they used to have these rooms set aside for ‘secret assignations’ back in the day.”

Natasha laughed, “Why does that not surprise me?”

“Because it’s Tony,” Pepper said drily.

Across the room, Tony focused on the StarkPad even as he stole glances at the scene playing out, one corner of his mouth quirked upward.

A soft knock on the door preceded its opening. Dressed in a white coat and tie, the waiter said, “What can I do for you, Ms. Potts?”

“A bottle of the cabernet?” She glanced at Natasha. “My personal Château Ducru Beaucaillou 2016 Saint-Julien. Two glasses.”

“Right away.”

“That’s pot boy,” Clint threw in there. Pepper sent a text message and their conversation was rather mundane—shoes, visiting, then the wine when it arrived. Natasha paid Pepper a lovely compliment and it seemed to cheer Pepper up enormously, even Nat looked a little more relaxed.

“So… are you ready to give me a verdict on Marc?”

“It’s hardly a trial,” Natasha cautioned her. “And I only spoke to him for ten minutes.”

“Well Tony came around to one in under three, but I bet you can do better.” Disappointment reflected in her expression, but she focused on her wine glass for a moment before lifting her gaze to meet Natasha’s. “And I know how much he values your opinion…”

“What’s your opinion, Pepper?”

Tony’s head snapped up and he glanced from the image of them to Pepper herself. So that must have been the other part of the favor she’d asked Natasha. Clearly news to Tony. Steve fought the urge to fidget and wished there was a clock somewhere in the memory, which considering he was looking at a holographic projection of an actual memory, he really shouldn’t be complaining.

Pepper shared her thoughts and described how she’d met Kumar—including a telling line about resenting those who decided she needed rescuing without involving her. The words resonated and while Steve couldn’t look away from the almost too understanding look on Natasha’s face, he got it. They’d decided to protect her without involving her—maybe if they hadn’t or if they just read her in right then and there…
“That’s what I want to know. Am I just fooling myself that he’s what I want?”

“Are you?” Natasha tipped the glass back and drained it even as Pepper reached for the bottle.

“You do know that answering questions with questions is a very irritating habit?”

“Is it?” She smiled slowly as Pepper laughed. “The trouble with answering your questions is you know the answers. I can guess them…”

“You don’t guess, Natasha.” She filled the glasses and shifted to move her ponytail away from her shoulder. “You study, you assess, you categorize, and you define. Call it a genuine gut instinct or a gift for observation, but you see things others don’t. I get your first loyalty is to Tony and I’m not going to pretend that your relationship didn’t grate at first, but I get it—I get why he…”

“Pepper, I’m not with Tony.”

Pepper blinked slowly and lowered her wine glass. “Now it’s my turn to ask, are you sure about that?”

Steve resisted the clench in his gut waiting for Natasha’s answer. Across the room, Tony clenched his jaw and a muscle ticked away in it. Steve wasn’t sure he could endure a conversation about himself with the amount of control Tony demonstrated.

Clint and Bucky kept their gazes on the women…or maybe the wall. Watching for how someone got in.

“Yes.”

Running her tongue over her lower lip, Pepper looked thoughtful—and very skeptical—as she added, “He’s wanted you for a long time. That’s been obvious.”

“Is that why you left?”

“No,” she answered swiftly, then blew out a shaking breath. There was a bit of a tremble to her hands and her face was still a little flushed. “I admit I’ve never liked how he looked at you…Tony always had a reputation, a well-earned one. The number of one-night stands I sent home the next morning should have been my first clue.” Sadness traced through the words. “You know what he said the first time he saw you?”

“How do you spell your name?”

Pepper laughed. “Well after that—he said ‘I want one.’ Then he hired you over my objections and I know—it was your job to get in close and he resented you for it. Him more than me… But then again you were SHIELD and I liked Phil. You saved Tony’s life—at least twice that I know of. Maybe I was a little…smug that he’d gotten bitten by his own arrogance?” She winced at that part. “I probably shouldn’t be.”

Natasha shrugged. “The intention was to use his weaknesses against him. It’s also shored up that
weakness now. He learns from his mistakes. But not to rehash all the history, because we can… But I’m not with Tony. He’s my friend. He has done a lot for me and we are close, but I’m not dating him.”

She was so matter-of-fact in the statement, no hesitation whatsoever but the emphasis she put on friend reminded Steve of what she’d said about him—she’d kill for him. She’d take hits for him. She took out Ross to get him away from all of them. Pepper stressed that the outfit meant something; Tony only outfitted those he cared about. When Steve met Tony’s gaze, the other man lifted his chin.

They’d covered this for the most part. There was no mistaking what Tony wanted, but that wasn’t what this was about. So Steve let it go and folded his arms to force himself to stillness.

Pepper didn’t seem well and Natasha had been almost too still as they spoke, her voice—was it different? Sure, she could affect a tone, but—it was like having the most relaxed conversation ever. Nothing about it bothered her at all. That—that wasn’t right.

Bucky straightened and leaned forward. “The wine and the air…” he said quietly. “It’s having an affect. Look at Natalia’s eyes.”

They were dilated, more than the low light of the room would call for. Pepper was flushed and when she tried to stand, she sat abruptly.

“Nat knows,” Clint said, his gaze sharpening. Natasha’s whole demeanor had shifted. Yes, she’d definitely noticed something was off.

Pepper swayed even in her seat, but Natasha had her feet on the floor and stood abruptly and the effort that took. Steve clenched his fists. It was like when he’d see that bastard Alexei slapping her around in the memory aboard the quinjet. They couldn’t intervene in what had already happened.

Nat took Pepper’s pulse and tried to get her to stand, but Pepper was growing more and more unresponsive.

On her feet again, Natasha stripped the bracelet off her wrist and slid it onto Pepper’s and secured it. Barely able to pick up her feet, Steve understood exactly why she didn’t call for help—

“Son of a bitch,” Tony exhaled. “She activated. She tapped it to signal Friday—to signal me.”

And it had been jammed. Nat had called for help.

We didn’t come.

She wrenched a gun out of her clutch, and the handle lit up blue as she gripped it.

“Shit…” Clint swore and there was suddenly just a guy in the room, a gas mask hiding his face. Nat didn’t hesitate she shot him and he went down. Then the next guy melted through the wall and she shot him.

“That’s my girl,” Bucky whispered a vicious note in his tone.

She took out third, then a fourth.
Then there were multiple men coming from all sides and they hit her with a shock stick. Her body convulsed as they hit her over and over again. Then she finally went down.

Forcing himself to breathe and to keep his eyes on the scene, he watched a single man move around the room. He snapped the necks of those men who’d gone down in the initial assault. The haze over the image might have been the effect of the drugs on Pepper’s system. He did something to the door, then his men were picking up the fallen, collecting the women’s things, and finally, they dragged Nat up and over, lashing her wrists and then her ankles before throwing her over a shoulder.

They walked right through the wall. Pepper’s unsteady memory of that was clear.

“Him,” Tony said, a glimpse of a man’s ungloved hand just before the glove went back on. “That’s the guy who did it to the wall.”

“He did something to the door, too,” Bucky added.

“He was the one in charge,” Steve murmured, considering how he’d dealt with the fallen.

“Failure will be punished,” Bucky delivered in a flat tone.

The memory tumbled with their near-silent passage to the van. That part played out like they surmised, only the men never took off those gas masks. Even in the van, they kept them on.

“Were they still gassing them?” Clint asked. “I get protecting your identity but that seems a little extreme, men driving around in gas masks are going to be noticed.”

“Except facial recognition isn’t going to record them.” Tony’s wooden tone betrayed a deep and growing sense of horror that Steve shared. Since finding the bridge, Steve had been almost numb. It had been the same kind of vicious calm that hit him when he’d asked Phillips’ about Bucky and realized he was gone—that he was likely dead.

That numbness clung to him even when Peggy jolted him into action. Action was what he craved right now, an actual target—someone to take on. But they needed this to get there, even if it killed him to see Nat tied up and unconscious.

When Pepper got hit Tony jolted, then Nat was in motion. Even tied up, she was the most graceful damn fighter he’d ever seen. The flash of her taking them out, then the driver before the van went off the road followed by the tumbling crunch. Some of the bodies slid toward Pepper, but rebounded off the field flashing up around her.

The bracelet. The one Tony built to protect Nat; she’d put it on Pepper and endured that tumble without it. There had been no hesitation on her part. She’d done it before the attack even began.

The fight outside the van was not one they were privy to outside of the noise, but Bucky counted them… Steve focused, listening for the small telltale sounds.

She was back swiftly enough and her dress had changed. When Pepper asked and Nat said it happened after she engaged the bites, Steve glanced at Tony who gave him a small shrug.

Yeah. He had built that whole outfit to protect her.

The next several minutes elongated as Natasha and Pepper discovered they were being jammed, swept their gazes over the scene…
“Almost a dozen bodies and the wreckage, completely removed.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “They never pulled off the masks.”

“Priorities,” Clint said. “Getting Pepper out of there was more important than the intelligence.”

Steve couldn’t argue with that. Tony was pale, but so far Pepper had been going strong even if she white-knuckled the arms of the chair. They started walking and watched as Nat and Pepper put together what happened. The wine. Targeting Pepper. Natasha kept checking her phone and more than once she scanned the sky.

Tony winced every time she did it. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t the girls’ fault, it was whoever these bastards who took them.

“So they knew at some point you’d take some quiet time. Might have expected you to do it with your date.” Natasha pinned it down rather ruthlessly.

“Instead they got you,” Pepper said with a breathless chuckle. “What a bad night they must be having.”

Clint snorted and Steve smiled.

“I guess you were right about whoever these people are—they were trying to hurt Tony,” Pepper said and there was the barest hint of a wobble in her voice. Then she swallowed hard and the wobble eased. “They didn’t seem to want to kill me—or you.”

“No, kidnapping seemed to be the name of the game.”

“For ransom?”

“Maybe.”

Clint shifted at that. If Pepper had been the true target and they finally took down Nat, why had they left Pepper behind?

Their conversation about spa dates—including Nat’s dislike of strangers touching her—filled Steve with genuine grief. How many years had she endured strangers touching her? She’d still been doing it when he met her, just—putting herself out there even if she didn’t care for it. Even with their conversation, the icy coil of anticipation curdled in his gut. They were getting closer and closer to the bridge.

Tony had shifted to change Pepper’s saline bag when Pepper asked Natasha if she’d slept with Tony when she’d been undercover at SI. Tony frowned and glanced down at her.

Nat’s response was painfully honest and blunt as hell. When it boiled down to Tony needing a friend and the failure to communicate between Tony and Pepper over Tony’s rapidly declining health, there was real loss in Pepper's voice.
“He should have trusted me.”

“You should have trusted him.”

Then they were there… a vehicle was approaching. All the oxygen in the room seemed to thin as Natasha sent Pepper down to hide, then moved up onto the bridge. There was a look in her eyes that Pepper might not have recognized, but Steve did.

Then Pepper was tucked under the bridge and their view likes hers had been was occluded until the lights came from the vehicles sliced through the gloom.

Pepper

Tony had warned her it would be like living through it again and yet not. Emotionally, she might be invested and she could remember the sensations—in this case, the cold and the dread. But it couldn’t hurt her. Even as Natasha sent her to stagger down the slope, Pepper clung to the struts of the bridge, moving from one to the next. The vehicles—multiple—were rumbling closer. The louder their engines grew, the more terrified she became.

Natasha was going to be up there alone.

But she said to go.

Pepper had survived in the van, but this—she couldn’t do this. Farther she went until she found a nook in the bridge and crawled under it, thankfully out of the breeze. She stuffed her clutch behind her then pulled the jacket up around her head to hide her hair and covered her legs with the other. Nothing to shimmer or betray her, then she clasped the gun in her hands.

Above—as the cars bracketed the bridge—oh God, they were behind them as well as in front—their headlights illuminated the space above and she could see through the slats.

She hadn’t remembered being able to see her—only the sounds. Hadn’t she closed her eyes? No, she must not have. Dust and debris drifted down as weight struck the bridge—marching feet. Natasha didn’t move or flicker. From this angle, Pepper could see the gleam on her bracelets and the fact metal shimmered over her chest and arms. Her head tilted as though she were aware of what was in front of her and behind. The bits of dust almost sparkled—like something from a fairy story.

Absolutely ridiculous and even as she stared, transfixed, she had to hold her breath. There were so many footsteps. How many people were up there? Natasha’s hand lifted and she fired. Several shots rapidly even as someone rushed her from behind.

The fight came in and out of her line of sight. The shadows flickered through the slats. Natasha wrenched a man twice her size to the ground, the sound of his neck snapping even as she took his gun. Then the explosion of sound and brief flashes as she fired followed by the almost harrowing
sound of bullets impacting on flesh.

Blood trickled through the dust and bile rose in Pepper's throat. More shadows, the gun she held was empty and she flung it in the face of a man, there was a crackle of bones crunching. Did she break his nose?

A minute later, he was down, his throat slashed. A knife gleamed in her hand and she was weaving in and out of her line of sight again. Dust continued to rain down, the cut of the light contrasting against the drips of blood. Smothering the scream in her throat, she flinched when Natasha took a hit. The punch rocking her head back and knocking her to the ground she rebounded and in a series of kicks drove back her attacker only to have another one grab her from behind.

Pepper lost sight of her for a moment, nearly forgetting to breathe, but the sizzle and zap of the bracelets echoed below. Then she surged forward, a new knife in her hands and she blocked another knife with her armored arm before driving her blade up between the ribs of a man whose face turned toward her.

Somewhere beyond her, she heard Tony say “Freeze that image and pull it out.”

God, she couldn’t look away as the life seemed to drain from his dark eyes even as she stared at him and then the frozen moment ended and he disappeared. The next flash of Natasha found her knife gone and a handgun fitted into her palms.

From somewhere, a man called out, “Hold!” A single command and all the movement on the bridge stopped. Then Natasha just fired and for every concussive explosion from the gun there was a corresponding thud as a body hit the ground.

She fired until the magazine emptied.

“I said hold,” the man declared again.

Natasha laughed. “I don’t care.”

“You want to survive tonight?”

Pepper bit the inside of her lip until she tasted blood.

Sweat gleamed on Natasha’s skin and her breath came out in puffs of frost as she panted. “I seem to be doing pretty well. Whatcha got?” Belligerent, daring, and absolutely fierce, she didn’t look remotely chastened.

The sound of running feet and Natasha shifted her weight but there was an explosion of flashing lights and sizzling flesh and then something dropped. Natasha’s defiance remained unchanged but her brows drew together.

“You will fight me.”

“If that’s all you wanted, you should have called ahead. I would have saved you the trouble and met you wherever.”

A soft laugh. Pepper almost wanted to shift to see where the voice was coming from and at the same time she didn’t dare.

“Is that what Stark sees in you?”
“Honestly? No idea. I keep waiting for him to punt me off the roof of the Tower.” The smirk and the words dared the man to believe.

Something slid across the wood. “I assume you remember how to use that.”

Natasha stomped her foot once and something flickered through the air and landed in her right hand.

“Freeze frame there, give me a close up,” Tony snapped.

“It’s a sword,” Barnes said. “Keep going, I want to see this man.”

“Continue.”

The breather ended and Natasha tested the sword against the air, rolling it once in a circle. “Are we dueling then?” Her tone was almost amused. She stepped out of her shoes. Had she been wearing them this whole fight?

“No, we are proving a point.” Then he lunged forward and her blade came up. The clash of sword on sword came fast and furious. Pepper couldn’t catch all the movements for how fast they were fighting above and there was a horrific sound of blade scraping on blade, then a grunt and hiss. Where were they? The fighting moved around, she couldn’t track it.

The shadows danced between the slates. Then there was a crash and something fell. Turning her head to the side, she saw the bracelet tumbling as the light hit the rubies. It was almost like she could catch it, but then it disappeared and there was a faint clink almost drowned out beneath the sound of the swords.

Finally, Natasha appeared between one slat while the other—why couldn’t she see more of him? Just a profile, long hair, both dark and light. Natasha’s shoulders were bare. The armor was gone, she still held her sword and her expression was focused.

“You are a formidable opponent,” the man said finally. “Do you yield?”

She snorted. “I don’t yield fights.”

“Never?”

“When you grow up like I did—you yield when you die.” She rolled the blade again.

“So the rumors are true…”

“Depends, what have you heard? I read that Melinda was going to be the next Bachelorette, but then she’s pretty wretched—can’t imagine guys fighting over her.”

“You find yourself amusing, don’t you?” The man stood with his head to the side, the hilt of a blade gripped in his hand. She still couldn’t see his face, the lights hit his back and left his face in shadows.

“Someone has to… only child syndrome. I think I’m the star of my own show. I bet you’re familiar with it.”

“Only child? Yes. But there were no—stars in my show.”

“Pity, no competition, you should have been a shoo-in. You know, they say there’s something wrong if even your imaginary friends won’t play with you…”
He actually threw his head back and laughed. “Have you rested enough, 赤寡妇毒蛛?” That was Mandarin, he’d called her Black Widow.

Natasha looked impressed, then responded in the same language, “我可以叫你什么?” What may I call you?

“主.” Master.

“Never going to happen.”

“You are as impressive as I had heard… I think Stark will miss his favorite weapon.”

She snorted and then he moved in a flash of blades. The sound was like thunder as it crashed again and again. God, wasn’t Natasha tired? Pepper was exhausted as the fight played out and she fought against the cold. But it continued, she wanted to squeeze her eyes shut and escape the sound as the blades clashed over and over, the lights and shadows dancing then the man hit the ground and rolled and rose—without a sword.

“You seem to have dropped something…” Sweat shimmered on Natasha’s face and her hair clung to her. She had not one blade, but two. Dark rivulets ran down her arms. Blood, Pepper realized belatedly. She was bleeding, but she had both swords.

“Impressive,” the man said slowly as he stood. “Very impressive.” Then something flashed on his hand. “But can you do it when you cannot see?”

Natasha didn’t move, but she shifted her grip on the blades—it was a small movement. “The question you should ask yourself, is can you do it without a blade?”

“I’ll have my blade soon enough,” he told her, then moved and Natasha reacted. The speed was there as he danced in and away from the blades and then he caught her a hard elbow to her spine and he managed to get one of the swords, but not the other and then the fight was on again, only this time when she disarmed him, the blade went away and he grappled with her over the blade she had left.

The shadows flickered, elongating madly back and away then, he was down and Natasha was there, blade singing— “Stop.”

In one word, she froze. Something on his hand glimmered.

“You are impressive, Ms. Romanoff. I am truly honored to have fought you.” The blade seemed to tremble in the light.

“Drop the blade,” he ordered as he stood.

From what little she could see, Natasha was in a lunge, her hand on the blade firm, and the blade itself extended and shaking.

“Formidable— you struggle against it even now.” He rose from where he had been on his knees and he struck, the blow slammed into the inside of her elbow and the blade dropped. “Very formidable.” Lifting the blade, he looked down at it.

“Freeze that fucking image…” Tony’s voice cut through the darkness. God, why wasn’t Tony here? Where were all of them? Why hadn’t they gotten clear of the jammer?
Half of the man’s face was caught in the light, Asian features with a high forehead and cut-glass cheekbones. But his green eye seemed almost lit from within. What she’d thought was white in his hair must have been a trick because all she saw was black hair.

“Six foot—maybe six foot two. Two hundred pounds at least,” Barnes’ voice held no emotion at all, it was like the icy air all around her.

God, Pepper wanted him to look away, it was like the man up there could see her.

“Resume,” Tony ordered.

The man turned the blade’s hilt in his hand. “This is an elegant weapon, much like yourself. That was always the rumor about the Red Room—the finest weapons ever produced in the world. Impossible to acquire. You prove your mettle—you fought your way to freedom, you have taken many of my men out and you have fought me to a standstill twice—while blinded the last time.”

She would have killed him if he hadn’t done that thing—whatever it was he’d done. Pepper pressed her hand against her mouth to try and contain the sound. Tears burned in her eyes.

“Beyond impressive.” He was looking at Natasha but Natasha’s expression didn’t change, it was still frozen in that same mask of concentration she’d worn while fighting. “They say something else about you—and if everything else is true, let us hope this is, too…”

Then he slammed the blade through her with enough force to lift her off the ground as the blade exited her back. The scream Pepper fought against ripped from her throat.

He didn’t drop her, but lowered her to the ground, then pulled the blade out. No. No. No. The world blurred, and then the man was kneeling in front of her, the shadows hiding his face.

Oh, God. He’d found her. The safe memory—the word for it—wouldn’t materialize.

“Shh,” he said almost gently. “Stop crying.” The tears almost dried up at once. Something on his hand gleamed, but she couldn’t look away from his face. “You will not remember this until Tony Stark looks closely—he will. I have watched him for a while. He is a master of his technology, a truly gifted man. You will forgive me, Ms. Potts, I’d intended for you to deliver a different message—but that I found you both in the same place proved too great a temptation. So my message is for Stark… Trevor Slattery was a mockery and a fraud. I have reclaimed my name. When the time comes, you will come to me. For now—consider your Ms. Potts a gift. The Lady or the Tiger… I chose the Tiger. Which will you choose, Stark? Now—sleep until they find you.”

Then everything just went dark.

Clint

From BARF—SPARK, whatever—to the virtual reconstruction Tony built with all the data, Clint kept everything on lockdown. They didn’t have the best view through the slats in Pepper’s memory. There was haziness. Blurring. The blade may not have gone through any vital organs.
He was holding onto that desperate hope by his fingernails. The virtual reconstruction provided an almost seamless view of the bridge from overhead and Friday painted in the figures—some were shadowy and indistinct relying on second-hand data like the flickers of light and sound tracking from Pepper’s perspective to the markings on the wood—they’d photographed every inch and apparently Tony had scanned it at some point—to where each piece of evidence had been collected along with the bullet holes. Even where her bracelet landed and how it fell provided them with data to extrapolate.

Tony spoke at about Mach 3, the words washing over them like a fierce storm. Not that Clint needed to understand it. Hell Steve and Bucky hadn’t said a single word since Tony shut SPARK down, and got a nurse and doctor to tend Pepper. He’d practically teleported himself to the lab with all the data and he hadn’t stopped moving since.

Rhodey was present as was Sam, Sharon, Vision, and Wanda—over Clint’s objections. He didn’t think Wanda needed to see this. Peter sat in the corner, trying to be unnoticed but Bucky—surprisingly of all of them—planted himself near the kid. He said nothing to him, maybe he wouldn’t but Peter’s slumped shoulders had come up when Bucky moved to him.

“We’re almost there…” Tony said finally. “The key things here—this is an extrapolation based on all the data. It may contain elements that are unclear because there isn’t enough data, but it will be accurate to… what do you say Friday? 75%?”

“I believe that to be a generous number, Boss, but we can make it work. There’s a lot of material here. I would, however, advise that because of the sensitive nature—not everyone here should view the material.” Friday agreed with him at least, that was something.

Tony glanced at Peter who straightened abruptly. “Don’t send me out…”

“Kid…”

“No, I know something happened to her. That was too much blood and while the samples were too contaminated—some of it had to be hers. I know she was hurt. I want to be a part of this.” He glanced from Tony to Bucky then to Steve almost imploringly. “I am a part of this.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Tony shook his head. “Pete… I wasn’t ready to see this.” He looked at him.

“Let him stay,” Steve said abruptly and Clint stared at him.

“Cap, he’s fifteen.”

“I’ll be sixteen in a couple of months.”

“Let him stay. He’s a part of this team. This is part of being on this team.” Then Steve looked at the kid. “This is a damn hard watch, son. If you stay in here, you have to keep it together. We’re looking for anything that gives us more on who and what we’re dealing with.”

They had a damn good idea on who already. Tony had blanched at the message sent directly to him and he’d put Friday on a facial recognition search—and a search for Trevor Slattery.

The Mandarin.

Clint exhaled. Ten Rings. They’d been quiet. Too quiet.

This was why.
“I can handle it,” Peter said. “I’m not letting her down.”

“It’s okay if you can’t, pal,” Bucky said, finally looking at the kid. “She would tell you to be honest about what you can and can’t handle. Once you see it, you can’t unsee it.”

“Is she dead?” the kid’s whole expression locked up as he asked. The question evacuated every molecule of oxygen from the room. Wanda folded her arms tightly, Rhodey put a fist down against the table, resting against his knuckles like someone had increased gravity abruptly. Sam shot a glance to Steve, his arms already folded and his expression fierce. Sharon—Sharon swallowed once, a flicker of concern on her face before it schooled to professional. SHIELD training kept you upright even when Hell rained down.

Tony planted both of his hands on the glass worktable, his breathing suddenly harsh and loud as he stared at Bucky.

It was like a collectively unconscious decision. Bucky would know the answer to this, right?

“Until I have her body in my arms and feel she doesn’t have a pulse with my fingers and see her with my own eyes, I’ll never believe it.” The answer was the right one, Steve closed his eyes for a beat and a wave rolled through the room.

“Good enough,” Tony said. “Ready when you are, Baby Girl.”

“Standby, Boss. Beginning virtual reconstruction from when Ms. Romanoff sent Ms. Potts below the bridge…”

The room darkened as the table lit up and then it began to roll like magnetic sand, the shapes sharpening and there she was, standing bold and determined in the center of the bridge—her damn line in the sand.

Had she been on her own, he didn’t think she’d have done it. No, she’d have vanished into the wilderness, it may not have thrown them off her tail, but she wouldn’t have taken that specific risk.

No, she’d absolutely done that to protect Pepper. She’d made the hard call. The sacrifice play—and he was going to beat the hell out of her when he got his hands on her right after he hugged her until she couldn’t breathe.

No one said a word—though Peter had started forward when Nat opened fire. Bucky gripped his shoulder and Steve took the other one, locking the kid back away from the table. That bit of buffer zone wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing.

Steve’s gaze fixed on the table, his eyes narrowed and focused. Nat hadn’t waited for anyone to get to her, she’d started putting them down before they did. When the ICER slipped from her grip, she took a gun and then she was putting them down for real. There had to be twenty-five to thirty men in that first sortie.

They’d not really tried to shoot her—or they’d started to, but those weapons went away for knives, single sticks, damn staves, and in some places, just straight hand to hand.

God, were those assholes out-classed. She moved like a prima ballerina in a violent spectacle. Speed, grace, and deadly accuracy. She cut through them without hesitation or remorse—well, not then. She’d add that red to her ledger later, but in that moment she was the wicked and dangerous fighter.

Nat might be a spy, but it was a mistake to ever think her a femme fatale only getting by on her sex
When the man stepped up to call a halt to the fighting, there was a gasp from Wanda, Peter and even Sam when she continued firing, emptying her gun and taking down the last eight men—not the last. More shadows moved behind the man. Did this guy have a whole damn army?

“Oh, shit…” Rhodey said. “That’s—damn. I knew she was good but…”

“She’s the best,” Bucky said without lifting his gaze from the table.

As much as he didn’t want to watch what came next, Clint forced himself to stare at it. They needed a clue—something—anything they might have missed. Ten Rings was a dangerously large and complicated entity. They’d often been lumped in with terrorists but that wasn’t all they were. They were also tied to groups like the Hand, which caused considerable issues.

He and Nat had dealt with satellite clusters of the group for years. Ten Rings was also behind Tony’s abduction in Afghanistan. This guy—if he was who he claimed to be—had deep roots.

Wanda flinched and looked away as the fight continued, Natasha had to be exhausted, but it didn’t show in her movements or her speed. What she said about yielding explained everything, still—Clint had never been more grateful for her hellish upbringing because she had the skill and the speed to not only take on this bastard, but she almost had him and she didn’t hesitate to go for the killing stroke. Even after he said something about the dark. His hands had a strange glow when he said it, and Natasha’s reactions had been off for a split second then she recovered.

Then he froze her and the glow on his hand—it had to be a ring or something—intensified. By all rights, she’d beaten him not once, but twice. Then again, the fight wasn’t over until your opponent was dead.

He gave her an order and she—resisted it.

Some kind of mind control. No shit Natasha was resistant to it. Bastard.

The moment stretched out, he knew it was coming and still he forced himself to watch. The vehicles, they had a rough outline of them. The approximate sizes of the men. An image of him.

Then he shoved the blade through her after wondering aloud about whether the rumor about her was true…

Her healing or her age. It had to be one or the other, maybe both.

Wanda clapped a hand over her mouth as the blade pierced all the way through, the force of it actually lifted her off the ground and her hands dropped…

“Stop.” Clint straightened abruptly and neared the table as the horrifying tableau froze. “Enhance her right hand, blow that up.”

The image changed as it came up. Everyone stared at him a beat, then at her hand. They may not see it. Maybe he hadn’t seen it.

“Back it up…slowly to the moment he first pierces her with the blade. Stay focused on her hand.”

Wanda let out a low sound and turned away entirely. Sam put an arm around her and she buried her face against his chest. There was a half-choked sound from Peter, but he didn’t look away.

The blade hit and her whole body shuddered. The hand trembled three fingers, curled fist, thumb tucked four fingers straight. She repeated it as he lowered her to the ground, then she became
almost indistinct as the whole image wavered. That was the point Pepper screamed.

“I need to make a phone call,” Clint said abruptly.

“Who?” Tony demanded.

“I’ll tell you in a minute. Finish this.”

Three fingers spread, curled fist, and thumb tucked with four fingers straight up. Bless her confident mind. She’d fought to keep Pepper safe and she’d dragged it out maybe hoping they would show up and even at that last blow, she didn’t stop thinking.

After the man’s message, everyone looked at Tony. Tony was looking straight at Clint. “Rhodey, would you please take everyone and school them on the Mandarin and Trevor Slattery and give us a minute.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey said slowly and for once no one argued. Peter hesitated, but Wanda caught his hand and pulled him with her. Sam pointed to himself and mouthed, I got them.

The only one who didn’t leave immediately was Sharon. “I don’t want to be the one who has to say this…” she began.

“Then don’t,” Tony told her flatly.

“I have to…even if I don’t want to.”

Steve glanced at her. “You do what you have to do, Sharon. But we’re not coming off this and we’re not answering to anyone while we figure it out.”

“Steve, you may not be the best…”

Tony straightened abruptly and Bucky started forward a step. “If you say his judgment is compromised, then you’re talking about the whole damn team,” Tony said without preamble. “Including you. You can’t not be affected by what you just saw.” The implication being if she wasn’t affected, it was going to get ugly really fast.

“Of course, I’m affected. I just watched her fight off an army and still end up stabbed in the gut and we don’t know if she’s even alive… the wounds she has to have. The only way she could survive that would be…” She tracked a look to Steve. “…things that I should probably not know about. But it doesn’t change the fact, this is a targeted attack on the Avengers—this guy clearly wants Tony and he specifically went after Natasha because she was there when they went for Pepper.”

“We all heard it,” Steve said quietly. “I told you, you do what you have to do.”

“What I should do is report this to the Committee, get the CIA and the FBI involved, and reach out to the Joint Terrorism Task Force.”

Clint crossed his arms and waited.

Sharon said, “I will give you as much lead time as I can, but it can’t last. She’s supposed to be in meetings all this week and sooner or later someone is going to take this public… if he doesn’t do it to call Tony out.”

“He already did that, Sharon,” Tony told her. “So I’m with Steve, do what you have to do and we’ll do the same.”
With a sigh, she headed for the door, but paused and faced them again. “You may not believe it, but I am on your side. You can keep playing this tight to the vest, only reading us in on very small, select pieces. Or you can get the whole team involved. Give me a job to do, I will get it done.”

Steve turned. “Can you deal with the Committee to get the meetings this week canceled and rescheduled? After the bombing at the U.N.?”

“Use a leaked memo…” Tony suggested, tapping a couple of things on his phone then swiping it to up. Sharon’s phone beeped and she glanced down at it.

“Is this real?”

“Yes,” Tony told her. “No, I won’t tell you where we got it but we verified it. They are holding meetings and drafting plans to find a way to get her off the team without pissing me or any of the others off. You might want to let them know that plan’s an abject failure.”

“And in light of the bad faith, we don’t believe the meetings will be productive. Can I get T’Challa involved in this?”

Fuck, Clint had forgotten all about the Wakandan king. He and his date had been long gone from the party before everything happened, slipping out quietly earlier in the evening.

Tony looked at Steve. Steve nodded once. “We can trust him.”

“Then do it,” Tony said. “What else do you need?”

“I can take care of this,” Sharon offered. “I’ll—work on a plan to control the information flow on what’s happening and how we should proceed if we have to make any kind of announcements.”

“Sharon,” Steve said quietly. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “I meant it when I said I was on your side.” Then she left, the door closing behind her putting a period on the conversation.

Steve looked to Clint. “Who do you need to call?”

“Secure the room?” Clint told Tony, it was likely already done, but Clint verified. Old habits…

“We’re secure. Who are you calling and if you say, Fury, I might punch something.”

“We might need him, he put Nat and I on Ten Rings a long time ago.” Surprise flickered around the room. “Old missions, compartmentalized. But that’s not who we need to call. Friday, I need to know if you have a Black Widow’s Web protocol.”

A moment of silence, then Friday said, “To access that information you must provide the keyword.”

Of course, he did… “Budapest.”

“Access verified to Clint Barton, eyes only. You are not alone, Mr. Barton.”

“If I have access, read in Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, and Bucky Barnes.”

“Acknowledged.”

An image appeared on the screen. “Oh hell, I must be in trouble,” Natasha said with a sardonic grin
in the recording. “Before you yell at me, remember—I plan for everything. So, if that was the end, well…kick my ass later. If it wasn’t, why are you standing here? Shouldn’t you be out trying to save my sorry ass?”

Flashes of grins appeared on the faces of the other men in the room, the same reluctant smile pulling at his own mouth.

“All right, enough drivel. If it’s bad and if you can’t find me… I have an ace card I’ve been banking for years. Do not pull this trigger if you have any other alternatives, it’s going to burn pretty much every favor I’ve ever earned. That said… if I haven’t already burned them to help the team which I might before this year is over…” She paused then shook her head. “Never mind, I have placed information vital to contacting my web on a series of packets stored across Friday’s servers. You can pull a strand or activate the whole thing. When you ask her to activate the web, it will begin a launch of communiqués to people I consider allies—people who owe me favors—and people who are probably as flexible and comfortable with working between the lines as I used to be.”

That was a telling comment.

“If for some reason, you can’t access Friday, call Tony and tell him you need his help to kick this off. You can explain to him why. When you’re ready to activate the web… call Isaiah. If by some terrible measure, you can’t get to Friday and Tony won’t help, Isaiah also has the master list memorized. You know how he gets; you have to give him the specific code phrase. I won’t repeat it here. If Isaiah has been compromised, I left a package with Phil. I know you hate going there, but right behind the N, a foot deep. You may want that package anyway. And Clint?”

God, it was like she was looking right at him. She left a fucking package… she left it at Phil’s grave. She was damn right he never went there. He didn’t have the right to go.

“If I didn’t make it… it was fun.”

Then it ended abruptly and Steve clenched his fists. Bucky stared at where she’d been and then Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes were suspiciously wet or maybe those were Clint’s.

“She thought I might not help?”

“She planned for every contingency,” Steve said slowly. “With the one person, she’s always trusted.”

“Don’t take it personally Cap… she said she wanted to get you set up with Isaiah…this is part of that.”

“So we activate this web,” Bucky said slowly. “Then what happens?”

Clint had a fair idea. “We’re going to kick over some anthills—but if she’s right…and she usually is. We get one shot at this.”

She left it in his hands, but that was when it had just been the two of them. He looked at Steve, then Bucky, and finally Tony.

“We need to all agree on this…” Burning favors was a lot of capital.

“She’s not dead,” Bucky said firmly. “She can’t be.”

“I’m with Buck,” Steve said quietly. “This was the message she sent… when you focused on her
Clint nodded. “She signed web.”

“She wouldn’t have done that if she thought there was no hope,” Tony added. “Maybe to save Pepper, but she’d already done that or at least she believed she had. Would she?”

No. “She’d never waste a resource on herself,” Clint answered. “Not if she thought it would be a waste.”

“Then I say do it.” Tony looked to Bucky and Steve.

Bucky nodded once. “Natalia’s plan. Do it.”

“Do it,” Steve said. “And we need a plan to track this guy and to find her. We needed it yesterday…”

“Then I’m calling Isaiah—I’m not blowing the whole wad if a single strand will do.” When she said she’d collected favors, she meant she’d been doing it for decades. That web was part of her long-term survival mechanism.

“And Phil?” Tony asked him, stripping off his glasses to rub his face. “Do we go there, too?”

Clint sighed. They would have to… “I’ll head out as soon as we figure out the plan.”

Tony’s phone buzzed and if it were possible, his face grew grimmer. “We found Slattery…”

Why did that not sound like good news?

Natasha

Opening her eyes took real effort. Her eyelids were impossibly heavy. The dark was all around. Cool air filtered over her mouth and nose. Too sweet and cloying. Her lips were cracked and her throat dry. One hand up, she pressed against a padded surface. Too close. The burn in her side ached and her eyes were closing before she could get her muzzy thoughts in order. Awake. She needed to stay…
Chapter Summary

The game is hurry up and wait...

Chapter Forty-Eight

Armor

Day Three

The first news stories broke early on Monday, but they weren’t tales of her kidnapping or disappearance—they were tales of her heroism. Black Widow began trending as videos of her fights from the streets of Paris, to D.C. to New York, were cut together and shared over and over. They used footage from past news conferences focusing on her in the background. Someone went to a lot of trouble to highlight her where the media failed or so a few stories claimed.

From Good Morning England with Sir Gerald Winston

“I found Ms. Romanoff to be a delightful woman, sharp and insightful. During the course of our discussions last week, we touched on many topics that I am sure will continue to be of interest in the weeks to come. The intention of the Accords and their necessity has never been more present, but these are not mandates we can lay upon the Avengers as if we have the right to dictate to them. An accord is an agreement and I think Mr. Stark and Ms. Romanoff are excellent ambassadors for the Avengers and I feel confident with their involvement we will find a workable solution.”

~*~

Maria

The last thing she expected when she returned to her apartment after a morning run was four
Avengers making themselves at home in her living room. She’d known something was off the minute she heard the morning shows on her television. The second clue was the missing pistol under the sweater hanging on the rack by her front door.

Undoubtedly, they’d found her other weapons.

Pulling the earphones out as she followed the short hall to where Barton, Stark, Rogers, and Barnes waited, she debated the myriad of reasons they could be paying a call at her at barely seven in the morning on Monday.

“I know I missed a couple of days of work last week, but the last time I checked that didn’t require a house call.” She kept it sardonic. Barton and Barnes were definitely armed. In fact, the latter had a Glock sitting on the arm of the chair he occupied, his blank expression as unnerving now as it had been on video of the attack on the Triskelion. Nothing like the man who’d literally dropped in on her a few days before with Barton.

Stark always had his armor or his tech, so definitely armed. Steve might not be packing a gun, but thinking he wasn’t a threat would be a damn foolish mistake. Unzipping her hoodie, she made a show of her shoulder holster and the small .45 resting in it.

“Am I giving this up or is this a friendly visit?”

“To be determined,” Stark said from where he sat in a different armchair, hands folded together as he stared at her. “Have a seat.”

Though Rogers removed the gun without comment. Then he nodded to her ankle. The sweat pants covered the ankle holster and she smirked. Putting her foot on the back of the sofa—her sofa, she could put her feet anywhere she wanted—and tugged up the sweats. He unsnapped that one.

“You can keep the knife,” Barton told her almost laconically as he danced a blade over his fingers.

“Generous.” Something was definitely up with all of them—grim-faced, sober eyed, and generally radiating very unhappy vibes. “Let me grab a water.” Turning her back on them, she scanned her small dining area and kitchen. The planter in the corner had been moved and the cookie jar had been turned the opposite way. They hadn’t even attempted to disguise the search.

Opening her fridge, she pulled out a cold bottle. The Tupperware with the gun she kept in there was also missing.

Very thorough.

Returning, she dropped onto her sofa and leaned back. Of all of them, she left Rogers’ at her back. He was not behaving like himself, but he was also the least likely to stab her in the back. Twisting open the cap, she eyed them.

Stark seemed to be playing leader today. “What can I do for you, Boss?”

“Are you actually still working for me, Hill?” Really, nothing friendly inhabited his expression. Nothing friendly at all.

“What happened?”

“Answer the question,” Tony said flatly.

“The last I checked, I’m still pulling a salary from SI, I still do work for Pepper, and I still have
clearance for the Compound, so I’m going to say yes, I still work for you. Is this your way of letting me know I’m terminated?” She chose the word very specifically. After the way they’d circled the wagons for Natasha, she wouldn’t be surprised if Stark gave her the boot.

“That depends…” Stark touched a finger to the side of his glasses as he studied her. “Where did you go after you left the party Friday?”

“Your driver brought me straight here.” There had been rumblings of the party ending early, but it was Stark. He did weird, abrupt things all the time. “Why?”

“Did you go anywhere after?” Rogers asked without waiting for Stark’s response to her question. Usually Rogers was Steve, but reading the room—he was definitely Rogers today.

“Let’s see—I went to take a shower. I went to pour myself a drink. Then I went to bed. Alone,” she tacked on as she kept her eye on the other three. “Not that you asked, but I thought I’d save you some trouble.”

“This weekend?” Barton asked. “Where were you the last two days?”

“Right here, binge-watching *Game of Thrones*, I’m finally caught up to the current season.”

“You were not here,” Barnes corrected. “You haven’t been here since Saturday morning when cameras marked you leaving a rideshare that took you ten blocks away, where you had your SHIELD issued SUV parked. From there, you took the Holland Tunnel and headed into Jersey.”

Tipping the bottle up, she took a long drink before she said, “Really? Stalking Natasha not filling the hours anymore? Needed to add fresh meat? Trust me. I’ll just bore you to tears.”

Something was definitely up.

“Maria…” Steve said, hands against the back of the sofa. She could see him in her periphery and she wasn’t quite sure if he was doing it on purpose or that was just where he’d ended up standing. Hell, he’d spent enough time with Nat to figure out a few tricks. But she wasn’t shifting her gaze from the other three in the room. “Natasha is missing.”

“Well maybe you four should lighten up on the hardcore stalking,” she suggested. “The last I checked, Romanoff was a free woman…”

“She was taken,” Barton said quietly and all the cutting responses on her tongue fell away.

Taken. There were a lot of players in the world who wanted their hands on the Black Widow. “When?”

“Friday night.”

From right under their noses? That had to sting.

“You’re certain she didn’t just take a walk to teach you a lesson?” As much as she liked Natasha, she could be a contrary bitch when she was in the mood. More often than not, that mood would be Barton’s fault. But Maria dismissed that old grievance.

“Friday night, armed men using unknown technology phased through a wall to a private room on the third floor of the club. They took Pepper and Nat—after they’d been drugged and gassed,” Barton laid it out.
Not a single news story dictated that the CEO of Stark Industries was missing—and that would make the news—much less an Avenger. So they were keeping this quiet.

“They also had to stun Natalia when their narcotics and toxins failed to incapacitate her fully,” Barnes added.

When Stark sat forward, his dark eyes courting Hell, he said, “They were aware of every security precaution, they knew to jam the trackers, they changed the color of their van, and they had the right drugs to at least slow Natasha down—not for long, but long enough to get them out of the city.”

Between the four of them, they brought her up to speed. Barnes’ comments were a bare minimum and Barton spoke more than the other three combined. Still… “So Pepper has been recovered and Natasha remains missing and she’s been gone…?”

“Today is day three,” Steve said, heaviness in his voice that hadn’t been there earlier.

Three days. Capping the water bottle, she pulled her phone out of her pocket aware that Barnes tracked her every movement. After entering a code, using her fingerprint and a retinal scan, she switched the phone to an encrypted mode to access a locked segment. Then she dialed a number and put the phone to her ear.

“Fury.”

“Sir…” She made no pretense of who she was calling. Stark stared at her like he could drill right through her head and see her thoughts. “Natasha was taken Friday night by a group of unknown, heavily armed and skilled subjects along with Pepper Potts. Ms. Potts was recovered at a bridge in the Catskills. Her statement regarding Natasha is that she engaged in a heavy battle but was subsequently subdued and stabbed by an individual using advanced tech or possibly enhanced. At this time, Stark alleges the man behind the attack claimed to be the real Mandarin though not in those words.”

“Standby.”

She waited. Even half-expecting it, she enjoyed the surprise on Stark’s face when her front door opened and Fury strolled in. Disconnecting the call, she lowered her phone.

He was dressed in slacks and long-sleeved sweater. His apartment was one floor above hers. They also had the apartment below, as well.

“Why do you think this person is the real Mandarin?” Nick didn’t waste time with pleasantries. He also completely ignored Barnes and Rogers, focusing on Stark. “What else do we know?”

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The Morning Report with Christy Rowan

“Welcome back from the break, we’ve had some fun stories rolling in this weekend as the holiday season sweeps the city including how one man on the street is trying to make a difference—for a
hero. We’re going to the Patrice on the Streets with that story right now.”

The camera focused on a familiar reporter standing next to a street vendor, the older gentleman has a genial smile as he serves up a hot dog to the first of a long line.

“Alphonse Roberts has been a street vendor here in Manhattan for forty years, to hear Alphonse tell it, this job is something he began to make a little extra money, but as his business grew he ended up doing it full time. The great thing about Alphonse is he always here, he’s a fixture in this neighborhood and he knows everyone and they know him.”

The camera cuts to a different segment. “Thanks for talking to us today, Alphonse. Did you know that one of our viewers wrote in to the show about you, more than on actually, and they nominated you for our Man on the Street?”

“That’s very nice…” he said. “It’s funny, people are always saying how distant people are getting these days. My kids are always talking about being online, but there’s something about being here on the streets, talking to folks every day. I like it.”

“I hear you’ve had a lot to talk about these last few months. You’ve been a one-man campaign about Natasha Romanoff aka the Black Widow.”

“I don’t know that I’d say one man campaign,” Alphonse said as he turned showing a button to the camera that read Black Widow = Hero. “Just you folks in the news were running a lot of bad stories about her. Always looking for a piece of scandal and folks over at the U.N. looking for a way to lock her up.”

“There are a number of people who feel her past activities and crimes have never been paid for, how do you address that?”

“I address that by saying people are more than their pasts. Not everyone has it easy or pretty. I say that the day the sky opened up, there were a whole lot of people running away—but not Ms. Romanoff. She ran into the fight. Same in D.C. and now in Paris.”

“So you think because she’s a hero now, it means she wasn’t a criminal then?”

“I can’t speak to her past, I can only tell you what I know and it’s what I tell people when they ask about this.” He tapped the button. “The day the sky opened up, my wife and my grandson were on a bus right down there in Midtown like so many other people. Black Widow and her friend got them out of that bus, they protected them from the aliens, and my wife and grandson are with us today because of her.”

~~~

Tony

“I know that Tony and I didn’t work but it didn’t make the feelings go away. I’ve loved him for a long, long time.”

The cube smashed against the wall and shattered. Bracing his hands against the worktable, he
stared at the files surrounding him on the holographic screen. The door to the lab jerked open and Steve stared at him.

“It’s—threw something,” Tony told him then pulled off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Sorry.” He hadn’t even realized Steve was outside of the lab. “What are you doing out there?”

“Staying close,” Steve said as he pushed the door wider and Tony could see an armchair he’d dragged down and parked in the hall.

“I don’t need a babysitter.” The meeting with Hill and Fury had been a colossal waste of time. They had no more information on this Mandarin than Tony had—in fact, Tony had more. Because he was better than all of them…well not better than Natasha but the damn Mandarin had her and Tony had no clue how to find her. Every piece of evidence they had, all of it—it amounted to nothing.

“No,” Steve agreed. “And I’m not babysitting you.” He raked a hand through his hair and moved over to lean against a wall inside the lab. “You’re going to find Natasha…and when you do, we’re going to go get her.”

The confidence in that single statement floored him. “Haven’t you been paying attention? It’s my damn fault she’s in this mess in the first place.”

“When you were undercover at SI… did you really not sleep with Tony?”

“No, I didn’t. If it had been the only way to achieve the mission objectives—then I probably would have.” Natasha’s voice never wavered, but her expression—there had been an element of regret there. For what she said? For what she did? For what she didn’t do? “But Tony didn’t need a lover. He needed a friend. I could do that.”

“You mean that.”

“I do—I know when a man wants me. He didn’t. Not then.” Not then. Those two words ran in circles in his head. “I think he toyed with the idea because he thought he was supposed to and I think he wanted to push you away.”

“No, it’s not,” Steve said evenly. “The Mandarin is the one at fault. Not you. Not her. Not us. He took her. He set up that trap for Pepper that they then pressed their advantage of because Natasha was there…”

“Advantage of?” Tony spread his hands. “They gassed them in that room and poisoned the wine. Pep was already down from the wine, not that I have a sample but her blood work tells us a lot about the toxins and sedatives they used. The gas was purely for Red, but…”

But how the hell did they get the gas in the room if it were spontaneous?

Maybe the same way they walked through the walls and reinforced the door. They’d played with the molecular structure of the room. Molecules were molecules, even when they ended up entangled or transformed, the matter remained it could be altered but the substance of it.

He half forgot Steve was there as he pulled up the detailed scans he and Friday had done of the room. For an hour, he went over the samples from the furniture, the wall, the door, and the air.
There had been a sweetness to it and Friday had identified the substances, but there had been no equipment to fill the room with it…unless it was handheld and fed through the wall they’d altered the structure on.

“That’s why the gas masks…”

Steve glanced up from the sofa in the corner of his lab, when had he moved over there? “Because of the gas?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Obviously, no I meant there was no equipment or closed ventilation in that room. To get the gas in there, they had to pipe it through the wall they were messing with, which means Mr. Mandarin 2.0 there can alter the molecular structure of things, apparently use some form of mind control to make a person or persons obey him, and… blinding them. He said he blinded her?”

“In darkness,” Steve confirmed, leaning forward with his hands clasped as he studied Tony. “That’s a lot of enhancements for one person.”

“Unless he has a tech that can do it…there was the glow around his hands.” The blinding? Might be able to do that with something to burn the retinas, but he hadn’t flashed her with a laser or done anything other than move his hands. Wanda could move things with her hands, but it took concentration and hand motion, she didn’t seem to be able to perform it without both.

“I saw it,” Steve said. “The mind control though… he told her to stop and she did, the second time, not the first.”

“Still, she resisted it when he told her to drop the blade. She was fighting it Steve, he had to physically do something to her arm to make her let go.”

The armor hadn’t been enough. When she’d lost a bracer, the armor had collapsed. That was something he needed to change. He’d done all of that to make sure she was safe and it still ended with her taking a sword through her gut…

His hands trembled and not for the first time since realizing Natasha and Pepper had been taken, he wanted a drink. Pushing away from the worktable, he stumbled over to the coffee maker. Finding no more coffee and the bottom of the glass scorched, he nearly throws it across the room.

“Tony… maybe you need to get some sleep.”

“I’ve got to figure this out Steve… the guy was after me, he wanted to hurt me. He said… he said he was going to use Pepper to send a message, but changed his mind because Red was there.” Because Tony cared about her. It made her a target. It had made Pepper a target, too. But Natasha had protected Pepper, even when Tony hadn’t been able.

Protected her and…

“Tony, what would Natasha tell you to do?” The quiet question had him turning around.

“Why the hell are you being so nice to me? Why aren’t you yelling or at least punching me? If I hadn’t been pursuing her…if I hadn’t been putting on a show… they might have left her alone.”

Blowing out a long breath, Steve studied him. “You didn’t do this to her, Tony. I know it. Buck knows. Hell, even Pepper and Clint know it. I know Natasha knows it. The only person who doesn’t—is you.”
“You should punch me.”

“Noted. Maybe later,” Steve tacked on the last two words with a wry smile. “But what would Nat tell you to do right now? If she were here and not me?”

“Focus, Tony,” he said the words slowly. “Sleep. You need your fabulous brain running on all cylinders and you’re damn sexy when you’re sleeping.” The last came out on a shaky laugh. “Yes, she said that to me. I said, ‘all it takes is me in bed to be sexy, Red?’ Without missing a beat, she smirked and said, ‘When you’re sleeping you’re quiet and that’s very sexy.’”

Steve shook his head. “She always knows what to say to you. Even when you two were fighting, she could always…”

“Shut me up?” Tony scrubbed a hand over his face. He had three days of growth on his face, and he really didn’t know when was the last time he showered. He was still wearing the slacks and shirt from his suit for the party, the party where he danced with Natasha. The ache in his chest spiraled out and he had to think about something else.

Had he eaten? Steve had put food in front of him.

“Sometimes.”

That was true. Sometimes all she had to do was say his name. If this was fucking him up so bad, what the hell was it doing to… “Steve…”

“Don’t.” One word. A hard syllable. “Just…don’t.”

“But… how the hell are you standing? I feel like I’m losing my mind and you’re just—calm. Nothing is touching you. Not Fury’s jibes earlier or Maria’s prickliness. You’re not even getting mad at me.” Which really did make the world a truly insane place to be.

“I’m standing because she would be. I’m taking care of the team because that’s what I can do right now. When you find her and give us a target, we’re going in to get her. Until then…this is what I can do. So if she would tell you to sleep… then you need to get some sleep. Take two hours. I’ll wake you up.”

“Are you going to sleep?”

“I’ll sleep when she’s home.”

“Cap, even you need sleep.”

“I don’t need dreams,” Steve told him. The brutal honesty in those four words left a mark. “So are you going to sleep or should I go find you more coffee?”

“I’ll sleep. Two hours.”

His phone buzzed and Tony pulled it out. A message from Dr. Cho. All of Pepper’s follow-up blood work was clear of the toxins, but she wanted to keep her for the rest of the day for observation, but she would likely be released in the morning.

After SPARK and the recreation, he’d gone in to see her but she’d been asleep and she was still asleep when they left the Compound early that morning.

“Friday, let Pep know when Dr. Cho releases her I would prefer it if she continued on at the
Compound or came to the Tower. At least... for a few days.”

“Of course, Boss.”

Steve waited for him silently. Tony set the empty coffee pot down and made sure the burner was off.

“Lock the lab up, Baby Girl. Keep all the programs running, I’m going to sleep for two hours.”

“Good idea, Boss.”

They rode up to the penthouse silently and Tony left him to—do whatever—as he climbed the stairs to his room. In the bathroom, he threw himself through a shower and shaved before changing into something clean. Running his hand through his damp hair, images of her just kept popping up. Laughing at him. Rolling her eyes. Warning him. Encouraging him to fight back.

“C’mon Stark.”

He glanced up toward the roof, then headed into his room. Friday had already occluded all the windows. It was dark, but not pitch black. Falling back on the bed he stared up at the ceiling.

Sleep was not going to just reach out and pull him in. Shoving up abruptly, he left the room and headed down the stairs to his kitchen. Steve turned from where he’d been staring out the window as Tony headed into the kitchen.

He rooted around in the cupboards, and he had to stretch to find them. She’d hidden three or four bars back behind the canned peas—that he would never eat thank you very much—he tossed the cans in the trash and set the chocolate bars on the counter. Then he went for the milk. He checked it by scent and expiration date. Then opened the spice cabinet and stared at it.

“Cinnamon,” Steve said. “Bad dreams linger, and so do spices. But most of the time, spices aren’t in bad dreams. So you’ll know you’re awake.”

Those were her words. Exactly what she had said. She always knew what kind of cocoa to make and she always made it when they were hurting. He pulled it out and set it on the counter. “This probably won’t taste anything like hers...”

God knew they were hurting right now.

“That’s okay,” the captain told him. No matter how much Steve might pretend otherwise.

“Want a cup?”

“Yeah,” came the slow answer. “I think I do.”

“Then get over here. You’ve seen her do it, too. Maybe between us, we won’t screw it up.”

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The Janelle Young Show
“Good afternoon you gorgeous people. Have we got a show for you today! If you’ve turned on your TV—which obviously since you’re hanging out with me—or logged onto a social media account in the last few months, you can’t get away from the spectacle in New York that is Tony Stark and Natasha Romanoff. The Avengers are back in a big way and none more controversial than the Black Widow herself. Most people have strong feelings and we’re going to be digging down deep today with our collection of special guests. Who are they? We’ve got a housewife from Connecticut, a lawyer from Pennsylvania, a school teacher from Maryland, and a graphics designer from New York here to talk about their personal experiences with the Black Widow…”

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Bucky

The files on Aldrich Killian, Trevor Slattery, and “the Mandarin” painted a dangerous picture. There were videos—numerous broadcast interruptions from Slattery’s Mandarin with long-winded threats about the decadence and corruption of the west. Everything about them was grim, other videos included footage from the Extremis explosion at the Chinese Theater, then Tony threatening the Mandarin on national television and giving out his address. Killian’s people literally blew up the Malibu mansion, rendering it to rubble, and Iron Man went missing. The last pages of the file included documenting the kidnapping of the president; the downing of Air Force One—a rather dramatic rescue by Tony of a dozen passengers—a battle on an oil tanker—the symbolism was so heavy-handed—including Rhodey saving the president. Tony Stark’s contributions were lauded across Capitol Hill but not by the intelligence agencies. There were numerous questions about how to control him. Still, the end result was a public skewering of the Mandarin’s image—as played by Slattery—courtesy of revealing the hoax and making the Mandarin the butt of multiple jokes social media and late night television.

None of the data, however, directly tied into the shadowy figure that took Natasha. Killian appropriated the symbolism to bury his company and his personal involvement in creating an atmosphere of fear in order to profit from it with his Extremis soldiers. The volatile substance capable of regenerating limbs but also turning those infused with into living bombs.

Setting that file aside, he keyed in a search string.

Ten Rings.

Four new folders opened and he tapped the first one. Footage from Tony’s kidnapping in Afghanistan. Reports on the attack on his convoy. Details on the weapons used. The months of incarceration, suspected torture—though it remained unconfirmed as Tony Stark did not discuss it. The assessment was based on observation pre and post kidnapping. The group’s affiliation with Ten Rings suggested a greater global impact, however, Raza, the man in charge of that particular cell was listed as a local warlord of no special repute. The last page contained a notation that Obadiah Stane had been responsible for arranging the kidnapping, offering arms in exchange for the assassination of Tony Stark. Only he wasn’t assassinated. He was taken hostage.
The other three files were details of missions undertaken by Hawkeye and Black Widow, including the infiltration and subsequent destruction of a Ten Rings operation in Singapore, another in Cape Town, and a third in Istanbul. Each report indicated substantial differences in the organization and goals of the cells. The diversity of the groups suggested independence rather than a cohesive unit.

Yet the iconography and the name remained the same. So was there a more centralized figure each of these groups answered to? Was that why he managed to stay off the radar, because based on the information they had currently—they had nothing. The Mandarin was a “boogeyman” no more substantial than his own title Winter Soldier. It told them nothing about the man, his goals, his base of operations…

“You’re going to go blind you keep reading all of those,” Clint said as he stepped down from the pilot’s seat of the quinjet. Friday had taken over as he took a break. “You eaten?”

“I had the protein shake,” Bucky told him, almost flavorless, but it added the correct amount of fuel he’d need to continue.

“You’re going to need more than that,” Clint said pushing open the cooler and pulling out a couple of protein bars.

The shake had been enough, the idea of food was unappealing. He’d eaten earlier when Steve shoved bacon and egg sandwiches at them so the punk would eat. When Clint tossed one of the bars to Bucky, he caught them automatically. Stripping one open, he ate it methodically. As flavorless as the shake, he washed it down with a deep swallow of water.

“We know nothing about this man,” Bucky said finally. “Not in Natalia’s notes. Not in SHIELD’s files. Not in the database Friday pulled together from the various intelligence organizations. Not in what Fury and Hill had. He’s a myth.”

“Not for long,” Clint offered as he tore open his protein bar. “If it helps—you used to be a myth.”

Bucky snorted. “It doesn’t help.” Rising, he moved to the cockpit and checked the telemetry. They were on their way to Manitowoc, Wisconsin to retrieve the package Natalia left for Clint. He and Clint had only stayed long enough to intercept Hill with Steve and Tony. After leaving them at the Tower, they’d taken off.

All of that after a night spent reviewing every scrap of data they had—including Tony, Peter, and Vision tearing apart the devices Clint and Bucky retrieved from Peter’s place. They found the sniffer programs and two worms. Friday and Vision were now using old SHIELD hacks to trace where the worms came from and maybe, just maybe, pinpoint where the harvested data was sent.

Peter had wavered between blaming himself and a kind of rage at everyone because they were not working faster. Bucky spent as much time with the kid as he could, the boy was important to Natalia—and Bucky liked him, too. For someone so young, he was tackling increasingly difficult burdens. It reminded Bucky of Steve and in some ways of Natalia. They’d both grown up long before they should have had to, then again, childhood hadn’t meant the same things when he and Steve were growing up. Natalia had never been allowed to have one.

He’d almost invited the kid to come along, but he had school. That had been a different fight altogether. They promised to loop him in if they got a lead, it was the only way to get him to go. Stark Security would have an inconspicuous presence at the school in an effort to keep an eye on him while Karen, his AI watched after him.

“How are you doing?” Clint asked. “You haven’t said much.”
“Not much to say,” Bucky told him. Not that the archer had been talkative after revealing Natalia’s web protocol. Always thinking, his Natalia. Always planning. She prepared a dozen steps ahead as often as possible.

“It’s always that one thing you don’t think about that blows a mission. But it’s exciting, too.” She’d laughed when she described it. “It’s like playing chess with fate.”

Though he doubted she’d ever believed in fate. If she had, she might have given up long before now. He shifted to the side so Clint could slide back into place.

Leaning against the back of the co-pilot’s seat, he stared out the view window. Every hour that ticked past was another hour she was in their hands. Bucky had reviewed the footage a dozen times. He could quote it in his sleep—not that he dared to sleep. He wanted to study the way the man moved. His skill seemed nearly equivalent to Natalia’s own and he was fast, but she had been a hair faster—and more ruthless.

He referred to her as a formidable opponent, but he had access to enhancements or he was enhanced. It was how he’d defeated her. Enhancements weren’t much of an obstacle to a bullet fired from five hundred yards. All he needed was a window and to get a window, they needed to get a fix on the man.

“Barnes.” The snap in Clint’s voice yanked him to the present. “Focus man, you’re zoning out. We can’t afford you going all Soldier yet.”

A faint smile pulled at his mouth. “Yet.”

“I know what I said, trust me, we get a line on this guy. You go right and ahead and mow down anything in our way. I will be right with you every step of the way.”

Of that, Bucky had no doubt.

“It is the waiting.” He didn’t have to explain it further, the other man nodded. He could and had sat for days waiting for a target. There was a headspace that even the Soldier adopted when he had to wait on Natalia, hours upon hours settled in a perch, waiting for her to finish or to present him with the target. He had the patience.

The waiting was worse this time. This time the waiting accompanied her loss—again. When they’d taken her from him or him from her, the erasure no matter how thorough always left some element of the loss behind. A thread she could trigger with a tug or an appearance. Until that last time, they’d always found a way back to each other. And there was some mercy in not remembering her fully to ease the passage of decades.

This time their masters had not taken her intent on separating them or stripping her identity. Instead, Tony’s enemy had taken her—Tony’s favorite weapon. Damn, she had been so fierce. Even through the filter of Pepper’s memory and the haze of the reconstruction, her every move had been brilliant. Strong, fast, and confident. No evidence of even her drugging much less how drained the headaches and memory flashes had left her. No sign of the frailty the formless had left her with after it drained her to go home.

No, she had been every inch his Widow.

“We’re here,” Clint told him, a tautness to his voice pulling him to the present. As the quinjet touched down, they were settled on a snowy plain verging on the edge of a cemetery. “It’s a bit of a hike. He’s buried on a hill on the other side of those trees.”
Bucky double-checked his weapons before they exited and secured the quinjet. The walk through the cold morning air was silent with only the crunch of the snow beneath their feet. The closer they came to their target, the tenser Clint became.

All Bucky knew about the man was he was one of their former handlers, someone Natalia and Clint had both been deeply fond of and Clint held himself responsible for his death. Keeping a wary eye out, he said nothing when they reached the grave itself.

Blowing out a breath, Clint dropped to his haunches with care trusting the brace to support him and stared at the name for a minute. “You know…there’s a part of me expecting the package she left is just a note that says, *made you look*, to get me to come here.”

“You haven’t been at all?”

“No.” He touched his fingers to the name on the gravestone. “He’s here because of me.”

“He’s here because of the god who controlled you sent you on a task and that being killed him.” That was what Natalia told him.

“Maybe—but it was still me.”

That Bucky understood. He kept his head on a swivel, they were too exposed in the wide open with no cover.

“You know,” Clint said after a moment. “He would have *loved* meeting you.”

“Even after I shot his favorite agent?” It was a poor attempt at humor, but he wanted to try and lighten the man’s burden.

“Hey,” Clint said with a glare at him. “I was his favorite agent, thank you very much.”

Bucky didn’t smile, but the defiance in that statement amused him.

“She was definitely *one* of his favorites. But I was first and best,” he finished with a little less humor. “But no…he would have loved you because you were a Howling Commando and he loved anything Captain America or the Howling Commandos. Even had a damn Bucky Bear.”

A what?

Clint laughed. “God, I need to find one of those for Nat now.” Then he swiped at his face. “Phil was…one of a kind. Humor so dry and he could keep up with Nat, he was always so relaxed with her. You knew if he was in your corner, you had everything you needed.” He touched the gravestone again. “But we were small potatoes compared to when we found Steve in the ice, I’ve never seen a grown man giddy before.”

Bucky smiled then because Clint was almost laughing.

“He was everything SHIELD should have been.” With a light bump of his fist to the top of the stone, he circled it and pulled out a trowel. “Sorry, Phil. I know Nat left this here with you where it would be safe, but I need it to find her.”

The digging took some effort. Bucky wanted to offer assistance, but the man seemed to need the task. After thirty minutes, Clint glared up at him.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind *a little* help.”
Circling the gravestone, he grasped Clint’s arm and pulled him to his feet, then shifted to drop to his knees. He punched his metal fist straight down where Clint had been digging in the frozen earth. The second punch collided with metal and he pulled the hit some. Grasping it, he yanked it up and stared at the metal tube.

With care, he passed it to Clint. They filled the hole back in and then Clint spent another moment staring at the stone, before they returned to the quinjet.

On board, Bucky slid into the pilot’s seat as Clint stared at the metal tube. “There’s a part of me that doesn’t want to open this…”

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No,” Clint said. “I’ll do it—just going to need a minute.”

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Progressive Talk – Hero Hour

“Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, and goodnight wherever you are in the world, it’s Progressive Talk’s Hero Hour and my name is Win Michaels, and I’m your host! We want to hear about your heroes. We’ve got Tony Stark back in the news, but when isn’t he? But that was some exciting stuff this week in New York as Iron Man defused those bombs with an assist from the Black Widow herself and didn’t she look fine while she was doing it. How awesome is that to have her and all the Avengers back? Do you have a favorite one? What do you want to talk about… and we’re going live on the air with our first caller… Ladyhawke—love your name Ladyhawke from Iowa. What did you want to talk about today?”

“Hi Win, great show, I listen every day and I wanted to talk about the things we don’t see the media or anyone else talking about. I want to talk about how much these heroes give up to save lives, save the world, and save people like you and me—but who saves them when people like Secretary Ross try to turn them in his personal soldiers or the world plays tug of war over who they belong to and whose rules they should follow? When do we, as the people, protect our heroes from our politicians and greed?”

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Steve

Isaiah was not remotely what Steve expected. The lean man dressed in a dark brown suit with a matching bow tie. His dark hair was combed perfectly and his hands were well manicured. He took one sweeping look at them as Clint lead them into his office—located in the back of a clothier’s warehouse in the Fashion District—and actually harrumphed.
“When I said we could meet, Mr. Barton,” Isaiah retrieved his phone from his desk and held it up as if to show Clint the specific message. “I meant you and I, not you, I, Captain America, Iron Man, and… good lord, what do you go by these days, Mr. Barnes? Sergeant? Winter Soldier? FYI that name does not roll off the tongue.”

“Just call me Bucky,” Buck told him after sliding a look to Steve. Yeah, Steve didn’t get it either. This guy—nothing about him—suggested someone who would be Natasha’s lawyer and handle so much of her private business.

“Bucky?” Isaiah tried it out. “Bucky.”

Then he shook his head his gaze half tracking Tony who paced around the room. Two hours of sleep hadn’t been near enough, but he’d had a whole pot of coffee and ate the takeout Steve had Friday order for them.

“Absolutely not, Mr. Barnes will have to do.” Then he slapped his gaze on Clint. “Now explain to me why there are three more Avengers in this room than I scheduled for the next forty-five minutes.”

“Black Widow’s Web Protocol.” Clint pushed the words out. “That’s why they’re here. So sit down, pull the codes and tell me what are the best strands to pull.”

Eyes narrowed, the attorney touched his tie then glanced at his phone as it began to ring. Pressing answer on it, he put it to his ear. “No you will have the mark-ups when I’ve finished reviewing the files and since you only delivered it to my office on Friday after five, you’ll have to wait until the end of business tomorrow. You don’t pay me to work weekends, and remember a lack of fore planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine… have to go, darling, in a very full meeting.”

Hanging up, he reached a hand under the desk and Bucky moved abruptly, though Isaiah didn’t blink at the gun suddenly pointed at him.


“There’s a gun strapped to the underside of the desk.”

Isaiah blinked. He shifted then glanced below it and huffed out a little laugh before he straightened. “I do apologize, I had forgotten Ms. Romanoff installed that when she borrowed this office. I was simply going to press the button to ensure the sound distortion gave us privacy.”

The fact he didn’t blink at the gun aimed at his head was all the convincing Steve needed that he worked with Natasha.

When Bucky didn’t lower the weapon right away, Isaiah glanced at his watch. “In precisely two minutes, I will begin billing hazard pay for each subsequent moment you have that weapon pointed at me. But in the interests of expediency, I’m going to press the button. Try not to pull the trigger until I’ve at least completed my tasks.”

“Bucky,” Steve said even as Tony let out a mad, little chortle.

“I can see why Red likes this guy, go ahead and bill me for the hazard pay. I’ll cover it.” Dropping into a chair, Tony put his feet up on the edge of the man’s desk like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“I will do that,” Isaiah said. “Happily. Now, pressing the button.” He threw the last comment at
Bucky even though Buck had already put the gun away.

Shaking his head, Steve stared at the man. Every minute, he kept his focus on something that wasn’t *what is happening to Natasha right now* because if he lingered too long on that thought, he might lose his mind.

The phone rang again and Isaiah glanced at the screen then answered it. “Hello, Mitchell. Yes, I’m glad you called. The offer we made on Friday has now decreased by ten percent. I will continue to decrease by ten percent each day you play this game. So, please, have your attorneys review the language again. Feel free to take all the time you need—oh, you don’t need to have it reviewed again? Fantastic. Have the signed and witnessed contracts at my office before close of business and you’ll still have ninety percent of the original offer. Must go now, more important people to talk to.”

He hung up, then looked at Clint with a narrow, assessing gaze. “There are steps that need to be taken and if they aren’t executed in the exact right order, I will give you exactly nothing.”

Clint leaned his head back, then rolled his head from side to side. “I like the owl who soars at midnight.”

Nodding once, Isaiah said, “But it is better that the lion calls at noon.”

“But better still is the bear who runs with friends.”

As codes went, those were nonsense. But maybe that was why they did it.

“Much better, Mr. Barton, I acknowledge your right to act on Ms. Romanoff’s behalf. What do you require? And I should also remind you that attorney-client privilege does not currently extend to our three guests as they are not currently bound by Ms. Romanoff’s contract with me.”

“Give me a piece of paper,” Steve said. “I’ll sign it.”

“Need a retainer?” Tony offered drily and Bucky just shook his head as he moved to lean against the wall, arms folded. Steve couldn’t really blame him on that one.

“Cut the crap, Isaiah. You know damn well Nat was going to add Steve and Bucky.”

“What I know and what she has done are two entirely different things. We prefer to work in precise terms, however, because this is an emergency, we will for the purposes of this meeting place me on a small refundable retainer, when and if, Ms. Romanoff adds all three of you to her account.”

“Where do you want the money?” Tony asked, his phone in hand.

“I love you, Mr. Stark.”

“Fantastic. Where do you want the money?”

Steve could almost see Natasha’s smirk as Isaiah wrote down a series of numbers and passed them over. Once that was completed all of the recalcitrance went out of him.

“What’s happened?” His sober expression was more in line with what Steve had expected.

Clint gave him the thumbnail. Isaiah listened with a kind of focused intensity. Then said, “Do you have a picture of the man who took her?”

In answer, Tony summoned one up and created a holographic screen with his phone. Steve stared
at the man’s face, not that he needed to—he had memorized it already. Yet the icy chill that went up his spine every time he thought of how the Mandarin addressed her—respectful yet curious and also filled with a kind of purposeful malice. It was unnerving and infuriating. He hadn’t referred to her as a person, but a weapon. Stark’s favorite weapon.

A bump against his shoulder and he glanced at Bucky. He hadn’t noticed him moving. The two of them had barely said a word to each other since it happened. They needed to correct the oversight soon, but they kept splitting up to tackle different tasks or to look after the others. Maybe being busy helped Buck as much as it did Steve.

“Asian with some European—you can see it in the bone structure and the eyes. Unnerving those… are they actually glowing or is that the light?”

“We have no idea,” Tony answered. “We don’t have a name for him. Just that he goes by The Mandarin.”

“So you need the web to identify him and where he may have taken Natasha?” It wasn’t Ms. Romanoff anymore as the formality bled out of his voice.

“She said activating it all would blow a lot of capital, if I can avoid that I will. We need a more focused search. But we also need to know what questions to ask and what threads to pull,” Clint told him. “She said you have the whole web memorized.”

“I do,” Isaiah answered and then sank down to sit in his chair, hands steepled together as he studied the image. “Remy Lebeau in New Orleans. That will activate the Thieves Guild and they have connections around the world. Logan, he has connections all over Asia, he may even know this man’s face, or be able to find someone who does, if you can send it to him. He will not expend any of her capital, he adores Natasha and would likely bring you this man’s head for free.” He tapped his fingers together. “Boris Turgenov. Him you do not speak to directly. In fact, speak to none of them directly. Activate the web to send the communiqués, include the details on this man. The web will do the rest.”

“Turgenov… he’s Russian.”

“Very good, Mr. Barton. Now don’t profile just because of the name, Natasha is an exceptional individual and she is Russian.”

What must it be like when Isaiah and Natasha were in the same room; their conversations were probably swift and biting.

With a sigh of exasperation, Isaiah said, “I didn’t make the rules. She put his name on the list. She trusted whatever it was that she did for him or favor he owed her to be gripping enough that he would honor it. You asked for my advice. Now…” he glanced at the clock. “In seven days I will execute the final protocol. You may all go, thank you so much for your business. It was a pleasure to work with you, Mr. Stark. I’m a huge fan.”

Steve’s gut lurched at the mention of the final protocol. Nat’s final wishes to be dealt with in the event of her death. She planned for everything.

She planned for Christmas, too.

Dammit.

“Yay,” Tony said as he stood. “I’ll send you a t-shirt.”
“Wonderful.”

After, they were back in the car and on their way to the tower Steve tried to focus on what they’d gotten from Isaiah rather than on what would happen in seven days. “How many of these guys do we actually know?”

“Remy,” Bucky and Clint answered simultaneously. Then Bucky said, “I met him when we were in New Orleans. Strange character, but he is very loyal to her. He had her back at least twice while I was there, and he kept Fury off of her when we left. He’ll help.”

“He’s a pain in the ass but he does love her. Yeah, he’ll help. Logan though… that guy’s a damn wild card.”

“You don’t like him?” Steve asked.

“Don’t dislike him—just—imagine Nat on her worst day, only pissed off, smoking cigars and always drinking. Only guy I’ve ever seen keep up with her.”

Tony grimaced. “He’s not human is he?”

“Don’t know what he is,” Clint said slowly. “But they go back a ways. I believe Isaiah when he says he’ll help.”

“Turgenov,” Bucky said slowly. “He wasn’t in the Red Room. I don’t know that name.”

“Me neither,” Clint admitted.

“Then we pull the two threads you do know,” Steve said. “We have enough damn unknowns in this game already.”

“Ease up there with the language, Cap,” Tony gave him an amused look.

Fine, he’d take the ribbing. They needed to do something. To feel something.

They were back at the Tower all too quickly and Tony disappeared into his lab while Clint talked to Friday and got the web running. Steve avoided returning to his floor by setting up outside the lab. Bucky joined him and they waited.

One break.

All they needed was one break.

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*Evening News with Tim Maher*

“…and in our next story tonight, we’re beginning a five-part series on the Black Widow by taking a deep dive into the life and times of Natasha Romanoff. The contradictory tales of her heroic and criminal activities detailed in past media stories. Is she a hero or a villain? Why these two sides of her personality may not actually be opposites but all in the perception of her actions. More, we
have an exclusive interview with a former Agent of SHIELD who worked with Ms. Romanoff prior to the agency’s fall. What does this former agent have to say? Stay tuned as we peel back the covers of former agent and current Avenger, Natasha Romanoff aka the Black Widow…”

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Clint

The web had been activated, the communiqués and details on the Mandarin sent. If they didn’t have anything in a couple of days, he’d pull the whole damn thing. It grated to even wait that long, but the one lead the Mandarin had given them—Trevor Slattery—was dead. He’d apparently broken out of prison months before, but someone somewhere dropped the damn ball. Or maybe the fact he was a foolish actor caught up in the vagaries of a far worse man had made him seem less criminal and just more criminally foolish.

Either way, his body turned up in Malibu, about a hundred yards from where Stark’s house had been. Steve and Bucky had camped outside the lab. Clint dropped off a pair of pizzas each for them and another couple for Stark and Peter—the kid had shown up at the Tower as soon as school was out. Taking the elevator to Natasha’s floor, Clint indulged himself in the need to pretend to be close to her.

Setting the box of pizza on the table, he limped over to her freezer. His leg ached like hell. He hadn’t done PT in days and he was beginning to feel it. After pulling out the vodka, he carried it and a shot glass over to the living room.

After pouring a shot, he flipped open the pizza box and smirked at the pineapple. She always made fun of him when he ordered that on the pizza. “You gotta be here to give me hell for it though, Tash.” Picking up the shot glass he said, “Hang in there, Kid. We’re going to find you. Then I’m really going to beat your ass for leaving me to babysit your super soldiers and mad scientist…and spider kid…” Tossing it back, he winced after he swallowed. It burned all the way to his gut.

Fuck, he’d gone to Coulson’s grave.

Pouring himself another shot, he tossed it back before he ate a slice of the pizza. The metal tube sat on her table where he’d left it when he came back. He still hadn’t opened it yet.

“If I didn’t make it… it was fun.”

“I hate you right now, Tash. Just saying, I’m not explaining to my kids that Auntie Nat isn’t going to be there. No deal. Nope. You don’t get to do this.”

He managed to eat three pieces of the pizza before he finally reached the tube and twisted off the end. Inside was a sheaf of papers, carefully rolled together.

Unfolding them, he set them out on the table. Then he began to go through them one at a time. Post office boxes. Safe houses. Inventories. Tracking lists—wait—these were names of people she’d relocated. Coded, but he knew her codes, she’d taught him a lot of those.

Holy crap—photos. Lists of affairs. Mistresses. This wasn’t a web file—it was blackmail. She had
dirt on—a lot of people. Some were dead, the ones in the back that she’d redlined, but she even had stuff on sitting senators, congressmen, and more than a few notables in entertainment and not just in the States but overseas.

Secrets. She’d collected dozens of them.

More, she’d organized them by degree including some she marked to take down. The last time it had been updated—six months before. Right after Germany.

Fuck.

In the middle of the stack was an envelope. His name was on it.

“No, Tash. Fuck you, I am not reading some sappy ass goodbye letter.”

He dropped the papers on the table, then dug out his phone and dialed Laura.

“Hey,” she answered. “Cooper, put that back and finish your homework. Lila—bath. Go. No, arguments. Up you go or no story. Do not wake your brother.”

Lila groaned but must have gone because there were no more arguments.

“Hang on,” she said. Then the creak of the door to the porch and rasping noise as it caught against the frame. Followed by a squeak from the swing, the springs sounded off. The weatherstripping on the door needed to be replaced before winter and now she was out there in the cold.

“It’s freezing, Laur.”

“I don’t mind, I’ve been baking all day. Big fundraiser at the school, so the kitchen has been a sweet-smelling sauna, I swear I gained and lost five pounds in the same day.”

He chuckled even as a pair of tears slipped out. “You’re beautiful.”

“Uh huh. No word on Nat?”

“No,” he said. “Putting feelers out there, doing research, but the guy who has her isn’t talking and we’re getting nowhere fast. It’s been three days…”

“She’s been missing for weeks before,” Laura said carefully.

“I know, doesn’t change—she never told me to pull the web before. Isaiah’s kicked in the final protocol countdown…Steve and Bucky are walking around like stoic sentinels, watching, looking after everyone—I swear to god they’re guarding Tony right now and the kid is here…he’s a mess. Tony’s…he’s blaming himself.”

Rubbing a hand over his face, he exhaled.

“Laur, she sent me to Phil’s grave.”

“What?” Laura knew. She and Nat both knew he hadn’t been, not since he’d been buried. He’d been blackout drunk during the funeral and…

“She left a message—for in the event of her disappearance or her death—something I would find when I asked about the protocol. Told me what to do. Told me she left a package with Phil.”

“Clint… Tell me you didn’t go alone.”
“No, I had my pal Bucky with me. He’s actually turning out to be a decent guy, less recovering assassin and more okay guy from Brooklyn who happens to have a scary side and is dating my best friend.”

“Good. I like him. He’s good for Nat. So is Steve for that matter.”

“Yeah… don’t feel like I need to shoot him anymore. You know for Odessa, so that’s definitely an improvement.” He wiped his nose as he laughed a little. But he stared at his name on that envelope. “There was a tube there, I brought it back. Didn’t open it before now—none of the guys said anything and I wasn’t ready to open it.”

“Because when you do you’re accepting what she meant it as.”

Yeah. A fucking goodbye on some cheap ass stationary.

“There’s a letter in here to me.”

Silence on the other end of the phone, then, “Cooper, no. I’ll be in shortly. If you’ve finished your homework, you may have thirty minutes of game time. But you need to take a shower as soon as Lila’s done in the bath.”

The normalcy wrapped around him and he closed his eyes. He could almost picture Coop’s sudden grin at the offer of game time only to have it dissolve into a pout because it was only thirty minutes.

“Okay, I’m with you again,” Laura said. “I wanted to grab a blanket. Now… do you want to open it? I can sit here on the phone while you do.”

“Don’t know if I’m ready yet. Could find her tomorrow and then what do I say? I’ll have to look at her after reading all this sentimental drivel and know that deep in the heart of our crazy Russian rests an old soft marshmallow.”

Laura laughed. “You know that already.”

Yeah, he kind of did.

“Tell me about the kids—how was their day? How was yours?”

And he listened, soaking in the images she painted for him as she talked about the argument on the PTA loop about the bake sale and how utterly ridiculous it had been. The kids were getting wound up about Christmas. A present had appeared, a single one, without a name on it. The kids were endlessly debating whose it was and who it was from.

Clint smiled at that. It was an old trick they’d started doing as Christmas approached. They’d done it for each other, then began doing it for the kids. A tease and a promise, and a little magic for Christmas.

All Laura’s idea.

Cause she was amazing.

Finally, she had to go. “Do you want to talk to them before bed?”

He did but… “No, I’d probably start blubbering then they’d get upset and you’d just have a bad night. I’ll call them tomorrow—if I can. I’ll leave them both video messages in a little while so
they have them.”

“That’s good.”

“I love you, Laur.”

“I know you do. I love you, too. Now... you put away the vodka and you pack up the tube with the papers. Then you get some rest and go find our crazy Russian and bring her home.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You always do.”

Then she was gone and he was alone with the papers and the pizza and Nat’s letter.

“I’m going to paper cut your nostrils with this, I swear.” But he packed up the vodka, then the papers and he weighed the envelope a beat before he slid it into the tube, then he carried it all into her room and flopped onto her bed, shoes and all.

If she didn’t like it, she needed to be there to kick his ass.

“Friday,” he called. “I’m going to try and sleep for a couple of hours. Wake me if they find anything?”

“Of course, Mr. Barton. I am searching continuously, I promise.”

Three days.

Three days since she’d been stabbed in the gut.

She better be alive or he’d kill her—and everyone else involved.

Natasha

Awareness returned to her with a hard snap. She kept her eyes closed, training and experience telling her to assess her surroundings before betraying herself. Her side ached, but the memory of the blade cutting right through her was still fresh.

No sound, but a faint rush of air through a vent and no more cloyingly sweet smells—they’d been gassing her repeatedly. More than once she’d woken in that coffin, but she hadn’t been able to stay awake.

Finally allowing her eyes to open, she studied her surroundings. A room, ordinary, plain. A single door. No windows. She lay on the only item in the room, a bed—a single. The ceiling was the source of light but it had no specific fixtures.

She was alone.

Except for a camera in the corner of the room.
A little red light blinked on the top of it.

The bed had no blanket or sheets.

She moved to sit up and a chain rattled. A manacle locked around her ankle and secured to a bolt in the concrete floor.

How—original.

Her dress was gone. She’d been changed into a plain cream top and pants. More like scrubs, but softer. Her feet were bare. She touched a hand to her abdomen. The wound had sealed, a thick bit of scar tissue where it had closed remained.

The jewelry was gone. She checked her arms. Most of the bruises had faded. Faster than even she normally recovered considering she’d been in a coffin and she didn’t think they’d fed her. As it was her mouth was dry and tasted a little bit like ass.

Brushing her teeth was out.

There didn’t seem to be a bathroom.

That could be a problem.

The only movements in the room were hers, the rush of air through the slender vent over the door and the blinking light over the camera.

Pulling her legs up to sit cross-legged, she stared at the light and let her mind relax while she explored the manacle with her fingers. Could she get her foot out? Work the bolts free? She could be here a while and she needed a plan.

And food. Yeah food would be great. Hopefully, food that wasn’t drugged.

Yeah, that would be nice.

Was this the guy behind the threats? It fit. He didn’t want to kill Tony. He wanted to hurt him, to take something from him. Guess she’d been nominated.

She continued to stare at the camera.

Guess she was the star of the show.

That part would be less fun.

Did Pepper make it out? Was she successful?

That would be good to know.

How long? Where?

Those would also be useful.

Her mind touched on Steve and James for a moment, then she shuttled them to the back and secured them. Pain could be compartmentalized but she didn’t want to focus on their hurting. Her last words to them had not been friendly.

Great… she told them to fuck off with the hovering and she got kidnapped.
They were never going to let her live this down.

Shaking that off, she kept her gaze fixed on the camera and her face blank.

She really needed a plan.
Natasha relied on her internal clock to keep track of the passage of time since she’d woken. The shackle wouldn’t break easily and she found no openings for her to pick even if she had a lock pick. The bolt in the back seemed almost soldered on. The thick links making up the chain would need some kind of lever to break them. She could possibly create enough torque to then snap herself free from the floor or at least break the chain.

That still left her with what to use as a lever, not to mention what came next. After what had to have been two hours, her bladder screamed and she stood up from the bed. Her legs protested the sudden movement after a long period of stillness. Testing the distance, she found her radius to be less than four feet in any direction. The bed—cot really—had been placed in the center of the room right next to the floor bolt. It was made of metal, so no wood for her to break.

Metal could work, if it were screwed together, she could strip the screws and pull it apart. Not swiftly, but she apparently had time. Moving in a slow circuit, she walked back and forth. The walls were smooth, no signs of mortar or seams. When she put a hand to them, she traced the roughness of the surface. Not quite stone, though it definitely looked like it.

The room wasn’t warm, but she wasn’t freezing. Not yet. The chill over time though would add to the discomfort. On the surface, nothing about this room suggested torture beyond the shackle. A part of her wanted to stretch and considering she’d already given him a taste of her skill—she’d almost had him. Not that almost meant a damn. Almost surviving would still mean dead. Almost winning still meant lost.

But he hadn’t killed her.

She put a hand to her side. No, he would have had he been less precise. Where he’d thrust the blade through her had been a near-perfect strike and it told her more about his skill than all of his battle technique put together. He moved like a man very familiar with the strengths and limitations of his body. The shift from hand-to-hand to swordsman had been virtually seamless, yet he hadn’t trained against an opponent who could best him.
More often than not, she went for his hands to loosen his grip, it was how she’d gotten the sword away from him in the first place. Rather than take a hit or turn into it, he’d released the hilt.

Mistake? Or had he wanted to see if she would kill him?

Clearly, he’d had the capability to stop her from the very beginning of the fight. All a test. Rolling her head from side to side, she resumed her pacing. Sooner, rather than later, she was going to have to soil the room. The chain prevented her from fully reaching any corner, and there were no towels or blankets to absorb the mess.

No visible drains in the floor—she pivoted and careful of the chain shoved the cot. It wasn’t bolted to the floor. That was something. Anything that could be removed could be a weapon. The cot shifted with a vicious grating noise. It was weighted metal. That could be useful.

There, right below the bed. A drain.

With the shackle, this would hardly be graceful but she turned, tugging the bottoms down as she squatted and kept the pants out of the way. Emptying her bladder was a profound relief, but she kept her expression bland as she stared at the camera.

If he hadn’t already seen her fight, she might be able to manipulate the situation by playing helpless. Had he planned to put Pepper in this room? The CEO wouldn’t have cracked that easily, but over time, isolation had a way of wearing a person down. Like water over a rock will eventually erode the stone.

But she was marble.

She had been forged from far greater than this. Done, she stood and tugged her pants up in one smooth motion. They weren’t getting more of a show than they already had. Her physical inventory hadn’t picked up any new bruises or pulls anywhere. If they had... well, it wouldn’t be the first time. She would just add it to the tab she fully intended they pay before this was over.

Tugging the bed back into place. She moved a little easier. Stretching, she loosened the tightness in her shoulders and her arms. Exercise would be limited with the chain and in a little while, she’d lie on the cot and pretend to sleep. The only visible camera gave her a blind side to work with, however, she doubted someone who had covered so many aspects of the kidnapping, including phasing through walls—how did that even work?—would have accounted for a blind spot unless he intended for her to exploit it.

Straightening, she settled into mountain pose. A rat in a maze.

She was the rat.

The room was the maze.

His fascination with her skill and knowledge of the Red Room coupled with his assertions about Tony gave her other material to work with. The Mandarin was a gifted fighter, a skilled swordsman, and possessed a keen understanding of physiology. Yes, she could heal the wound he’d inflicted. She might even have managed it if he’d nicked an organ or perforated her intestines —she had been gut shot before.

An image of James flashed across her mind’s eye. The shot through the shoulder. The shot through her abdomen. Bleeding out was always a concern, however, if The Mandarin had thrust even a few centimeters in either direction, he could have severed an artery or nicked a major vein. That could have complicated matters.
Locking her fingers together behind her back, she stretched her shoulders as she kept her feet planted.

No, he’d disarmed her with a perfect nerve hit. She’d lost all feeling in the lower half of her arm and her hand. The compulsion to release the sword vied against her need to survive. No matter that he forced her to stillness, she would not abandon the weapon of her own will.

Each step of their interaction had fascinated him further. She’d seen that look in the eyes of others.

Federov.

Karpov.

Ivan.

Madame.

More, though their names weren’t as dusty.

He wanted to know if she could survive an injury that would likely kill someone else either from blood loss, shock, sepsis, or some combination of the three. The coffin. He’d transported her in a coffin.

Macabre. But clever.

If the coffin had been hermetically sealed and he placed tanks of oxygen and whatever narcotic he’d used to keep her under—nitrous oxide maybe, it had a sickly sweet smell—then he could have moved her through international ports with the right permits. She didn’t question for an instant if he had the right permits. That would have been a simple task for her.

So no, he injured her severely. She’d had several cuts along her upper arms and shoulders. There had been bruises along her hands, her left wrist had been partially swollen not only from getting out of the ropes and the fight in the van, but from the blow he’d delivered to her bracelet which shattered the catch and tore one of the chains.

It had left her with one ring on her left hand, while her right bracelet and rings had been intact—and still capable of charging. Though the armor generated by her necklace had vanished.

No, she’d had a lot of injuries. How long had she been down that she woke healed so thoroughly? While she wasn’t complaining, it would definitely be useful knowledge because any escape was going to hurt.

A lot.

He’d wanted to know if the rumors were true.

Every piece of their interaction remained firmly intact. Unless this was some strange exercise exacted by… no. The Red Room was gone. They did not test her this way anymore. Whatever this was with The Mandarin, he was testing her. He wanted to know her capabilities.

“Have you rested enough, 黑寡妇毒蛛?” Black Widow.

The man had European in him, but he spoke Mandarin like a native. “我可以叫你什么?” What may I call you?
“Master.”

“Never going to happen.”

“You are as impressive as I had heard... I think Stark will miss his favorite weapon.”

The one part she couldn’t answer in all of it was how he’d blinded her. For several long minutes, she’d been smothered in pure darkness without even a pinprick of light. Only the fact she’d moved all over the bridge and the smell of his sweat reminded her of patchouli and salt grass had kept her in one piece. Still, she’d almost had him.

The last swing should have taken off his head.

Eyes opening, she stared ahead at the blank wall, the camera at her back. She tracked her gaze down to where the wall met the floor. There was always a way out.

Use some part of the bed to make a lever, snap the chain, and then... what was the next step?

Below her feet, a thunk vibrated as if something snapped closed. The drain.

They’d closed the drain.

Turning slowly, she faced the camera again. The flashing red light taunted her. Another sound, sliding in the walls, clanking.

“Greetings, Black Widow. I trust you slept well.” The voice came from all over and nowhere.

“You trust too easily.” She fixed her stare on the camera. Something was about to happen.

“Sadly that was once true,” The Mandarin said. “My parents perished when I was young, my father’s wealth squandered by those who should have cared more about me than what my family’s money could do for them. In this—Tony Stark and I are much alike.”

“Sure sounds like you two could be bosom buddies. Maybe you should send him a letter, start with pen pals so he doesn’t swipe left.”

“Sarcasm: the last refuge of modest and chaste-souled people when the privacy of their soul is coarsely and intrusively invaded.”

She snorted. “Dostoyevsky.”

“I thought you might know him, he is Russian. Like you.” There was a moment of quiet, but she chose not to respond. She had humored him, now she took it away. “Interesting choice,” he said finally when she maintained her silence. “However, the game must now begin. Would you like to know the rules?”

“Does it matter?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Perhaps not. If you would rather be surprised, then I will grant you this respect. You have more than earned it.”

“Gracious,” she retorted.

“Not as such.”
The silence elongated, and she kept her fingers interlocked behind her, shoulders stretched, and chest open, she tested the air. Filling her lungs slowly and deliberately with long, deep breaths. If it was a fight, she needed to flood her cells and muscles with as much oxygen as possible.

“Very well, Widow. You honor me with your strength and I wish upon you the fortune of good choices. In a moment, the microphone in your room will be turned off. I’m afraid that your voice is a gift I will not give in these first moves. He will have to earn it. But you may listen, this is another courtesy I am granting you.”

He?

Tony.

Another long breath and she shifted her footing to give herself a view of the door. The problem was, she had no position that gave her the whole room, her back had to be to part of it because of the chain. The Mandarin could walk through walls.

“Good evening, Mr. Stark. I trust you have filled your time well while waiting for my call?”

“You son of a bitch,” Tony’s voice carried through perfectly. Schooling her expression, she focused on the words. The Mandarin was beginning the game—no he’d already been playing it and he had since before he took steps to acquire Pepper. She wasn’t the opponent.

No. She was the rat. In the maze.

The pawn on the board.

*Focus, Tony.*

“You want a fight with me, you come and pick it with me. You don’t go after my people.”

“I accept that assertion,” The Mandarin agreed. “It is incumbent upon those of us with power to protect those in our service.”

“Then why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” Tony demanded. “Or is drugging women the only way you can get a date?”

The Mandarin’s laughter was neither amused nor vicious; it simply filled the air. “Mr. Stark, we can exchange pithy insults if you wish, or you can take the first step in reacquiring that which I took. But do take your time, I’m certain Friday is quite strenuously attempting to trace this call.”

“You called for a reason,” Tony ground out the first two words, but then his voice evened as if he got ahold of himself. *Better, Tony. You can do it. Don’t let him get to you. Why don’t you get to it?*

“I believe you found Ms. Potts?”

Found? Natasha stilled, the echo of her heart very loud in her ears.

“She’s fine, no thanks to you. Yes, before you ask, I got your message. Where’s Romanoff?”

“Patience, Mr. Stark. I understand you have a heart condition, it dates back to Afghanistan, yes?”

*Breathe, Tony. Just breathe.*

Pepper was fine. It worked.
“This is a boring conversation, I’m about to put you on hold. I like to watch the light blink,” Tony offered sounding a little more Tony. “Get to the point. What do you want for Romanoff?”

“I want nothing for her. I worked very hard to acquire her and I would very much like to keep her. In fact, I left Ms. Potts there as a show of my good faith. A more honorable man would show gratitude for that gift.”

The icy silence she didn’t have to imagine.

“Thank you for not completing the kidnapping attempt and leaving her to freeze under a bridge, I can’t begin to tell you how grateful I am that you then continued to take Romanoff after skewering her. If you tell me where you are, I will come and express my profound gratitude personally.”

“You mock, Mr. Stark, but that is also in your nature and I accept that about you. In the future, such rudeness will cost you points.”

“Points?” The dry response. Tony was fishing but he couldn’t affect full disinterest, not when he’d already thrown down a gauntlet twice.

Still, Pepper was safe. That mattered.

“In a game that you and I shall play, Merchant of Death versus The Mandarin, it has, what do you like to call it, a good ring to it. Though I admit, I lack your capable naming skills.”

“Where and when?”

“Oh, we are already playing, Mr. Stark. I made my move, the next is yours. Did you discover it?” He sounded almost hopeful, like he’d be disappointed if Tony hadn’t.

“The Lady or the Tiger?”

“Very good.” A sharp sound of applause. “I knew you were the right opponent. I chose the tiger. Tell me, Mr. Stark—which do you choose?”

_The Lady and the Tiger_ was a short story about a kingdom where the king would send those who displeased him to make a terrible choice, decide between two doors. Behind one lurked a lovely lady that the king would then grant to the person who chose the door as a wife while behind another waited a hungry tiger who would devour the supplicant. When the princess and her lover were discovered, the man was put to the test and she knew that behind the door was her rival for his affection, and she would lose him either way. When he looked to her to make the choice for him… the story ended without a clear result. Did she send him to the arms of her rival or did she send him to the tiger?

“That’s it, I just choose?”

“Of course, that is your move.”

“And then…?”

“Then we must see how it plays. That was why I left you Ms. Potts. It was only fair.”

Breathing deep and even, she began to compartmentalize. Whatever Tony chose, something was coming for her. While she didn’t expect it to be an actual hungry tiger, she couldn’t discount it either.
“Do choose, Mr. Stark or we shall have to institute a timer.”

“Fine, the tiger. I choose the tiger. Bring it on. I dare you to devour me.”

Natasha closed her eyes.

“I’m afraid you misunderstood, Mr. Stark… you are not the one opening the doors. Good day, I will be in touch with the play.”

Then the call ended before Tony could respond or maybe The Mandarin cut it off. The air from the ventilation cut off. She slid a sideways glance at it. So the tiger would suffocate?

The clanking in the walls began again. Bringing her hands together in front of her, she began to sign slowly. She wouldn’t have time for a long message. If he planned to record whatever he was doing and send it to Tony, she had to give them something.

Not that she had much.


Over. And over.

Then there was a rushing sound, and she glanced at the vent as it suddenly flooded with water and spilled it down into the room. The grate had closed below. The water was spilling in at an increasingly swift pace.

This was to hurt Tony. His choice.

Drowning.

Keeping her heart rate steady, she took deeper and deeper breaths. They’d already cut off the oxygen to the room. The air was getting thinner and the water flooded in faster.

Fuck it was cold.

She stepped up onto the bed, though the chain didn’t let her go far. The water continued to rise. At the rate the room was filling, it would be over her head in ten minutes. Maybe less.

 Plenty of time to create panic and let her freak out.

She could hold her breath for six minutes.

He wanted to see if she could survive the blade through her gut.

Now he wanted to know if she could survive drowning.

She signed not your fault. Choose the lady and I think it means you surrender. Always choose tiger.

She continued until the water reached her waist. She couldn’t feel her feet anymore and the water continued upwards. The buoyancy carried her, but the chain locked her in place, keeping her a good six inches below the ceiling. The water would be over her head while air, what little was left would flow away.

It was at her throat and she kept herself as relaxed as she could. Just like an ice bath. Just like in the Red Room.
Survival was the only option. Pain could be compartmentalized.

The water reached her mouth and she closed her eyes, tilting her head back to drag in the last few gulps of air and then she held her breath and the water was over her face.

Without a lever, she couldn’t break the chain. So she floated, breath held, and waited him out. Six minutes.

Six minutes became five.

Then four.

The cold numbed her face.

The world vanished.

Sensory deprivation.

Three minutes.

“Natalia—you are late this morning,” Madame B snapped, sweeping her gaze over her. “That is unacceptable.”

“You forget yourself,” Natalia reminded her. “I am not your student any longer, Madame.”

“And you…” Madame said, then halted, her eyes flashing. Natalia didn’t have to look. The Soldier stood behind her. Madame wouldn’t cross them, not directly. She preferred to work in the shadows. “You should show greater respect.”

The words on the tip of her tongue burned. She was not in the mood for Madame’s games.

“Come, Natalia. We have a mission to prepare for…” The Soldier never played the games or the politics. But he also never let her face them alone if he could avoid it.

With a half-dismissive wave, she summoned a semi-polite tone. “Another time, Madame.”

When the older woman gave her a cold smile, she knew she’d been understood.

Turning, Natalia trusted the Soldier to watch her back. Her bag was already by the door waiting with his, he’d carried them down while she changed. She’d been late coming down because she’d still been in the Soldier’s room rather than her own.

At the door, he collected the bags and stepped out ahead of her. Just like when they took a facility or a house or any structure, he never let her go first. Overprotective brute.

Still, he was her overprotective brute.

“You should not bait her,” the Soldier said softly, too softly to carry as he headed for a vehicle.

Natalia shrugged, not caring one way or the other. Of late, their days had all become the exact same. They were deployed, they would spend three to five days scouting their targets or she would have to spend it seducing them to get what they needed, then they would eliminate or clear whatever potential threat they’d been sent to deal with and they might get one night together—if they were lucky. Then back to base or to the Red Room—she’d truly thought she would be free of
that place once she graduated.

Then days of meaningless training and time in the chair if Karpov deemed it necessary. The last trip had taken her three days to recover herself and only because her Soldier forced her to fight, to work, the train—all as she had done before.

“It’s the only way,” he would say in that hushed croon. “I know it hurts. But if you don’t go through the motions, you will forget and I don’t know if comes back then.”

“Have you lost pieces that have never come back?”

She’d climbed into the driver’s seat and he hadn’t argued with her. Speeding, she raced away from the manor house as if they were being pursued but it was more a way to push her restless energy.

“I think so,” Soldat said finally. “Sometimes, I see another place. I remember… music. Dancing.”

“Are you sure you’re not remembering me, milli moi?” The affection slipped out and she bit her lip. They had not been explicitly forbidden from having sex and as long as it was to scratch an itch, she doubted anyone would care. But it wasn’t that for her and Soldat looked at no others, even if she had to for the work they required.

Soldat didn’t smile. “I will never forget you,” he promised, though they knew better than to make them. “No, I just… I know I was something else before. But I am here now and…what we have… I would not have it otherwise without you.”

What we have…

We have…

What…

She hit the floor of the concrete, water dripping around her as the majority was sucked out through the floor. A cough rattled through her and she twisted to vomit it out. Another cough. She put her hands on the ground to push herself up. Her heart hammered in her ears and spots danced in her vision, pushing up a little higher; she stared up at the camera.

Then lifted a single middle finger and mouthing always choose the tiger before she collapsed into shivers. The cold. The lack of air. The fluid in her lungs.

Oh, she was so going to kill that guy.

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Evening News with Tim Maher

“...and next tonight is the second in a five-part series on the Black Widow by taking a deep dive into the life and times of Natasha Romanoff. The contradictory tales of her heroic and criminal activities detailed in past media stories. Is she a hero or a villain? Why these two sides of her
personality may not actually be opposites but all in the perception of her actions. Recently, a movement began in France that has been growing in fervor and now reaches more than thirty different countries on three continents and is growing each day. This movement? The Black Widow League, here to discuss this as we continue to peel back the covers of the former agent and current Avenger, Natasha Romanoff aka the Black Widow… Ms. Wilson is coming to us via satellite, just so our viewers understand this, you’re actually an American living in Paris, as part of a cultural and educational exchange program?“

“That’s correct,” Deanna Wilson said. “I’ve been here for six months and I’m fortunate enough to have another six months. As a world history teacher, it’s important to embrace the elements of culture both politically and sociologically. We use these exchanges to let teachers from different countries experience not only different methods of teaching, but also that the subject matter taught is very much grounded in the culture you’re teaching it in.”

“So you’re saying it’s different to teach world history in France than in the United States?”


“It’s this same approach that brought you to help develop the Black Widow League?”

“I wouldn’t say I developed it. That would be taking credit for a very organic movement which came from the students here in Paris, in Marseilles, in Nice… Culturally speaking, our youth is traditionally on the edge of any major change in thought, and I believe that’s very much the case here.”

“Yet you are involved in this movement?”

“I am what we call a web keeper. The kids are fierce in what they believe and as the movement grew, teachers—particularly history or cultural experts who became involved—took on the mantle of fact checkers. If you’ve ever played the whisper game, a tale begins to take on a life of its own. There are tales about a ‘Black Widow’ dating back to as far as World War II. Some speculate that it’s a mantle passed down from one generation to the next. Maybe from mother to child? From teacher to student? Either way, there’s history there. In some circles, the Black Widow is a legend, spoken of with respect and admiration. There are stories of her saving the lives of orphans, of her literally going into warzones or into situations of human trafficking and pulling people out on the other side.”

“If she has been this active, why hasn’t anyone come forward before now?”

“The media distorts. They spend more time on her looks and her scandals than on her good works. Blood and bone sell. Random acts of kindness belong in the lifestyle section.”

“There are some who say that organizations like yours, appearing overnight, and growing in huge proportion so swiftly will burn out as quickly. The picture you paint of the Black Widow seems almost too good to be true.”

“Sometimes, I think she is. The point is not to embellish the story; it’s to embrace all of it. The good and the bad to extract the truth from the fiction. There is an inescapable truth that we like to tarnish those we revere less they rise too high. It’s exciting to cheer someone on, to laud their successes, but we’re equally hungry to see them fall. The Black Widow is very much an example of that, but she’s more than a two-minute sound bite. Much more…”

“You obviously admire her and are dedicated. You say there are a lot of educators involved?”
“I’m just one person. One teacher.” Deanna Wilson flashed a small, almost knowing smile. “You could say there is a whole network or—a web if you will—of us…”

“Deprived of meaningful work, men and women lose their reason for existence; they go stark, raving mad.” The man’s voice was not what she wanted to hear when she woke up. She’d managed at some point to sprawl on the bed. Still damp, her hair clung limply to her cheeks. She hadn’t slept long.

“You should change the channel,” she croaked. Oh, that didn’t sound good. She’d ended up swallowing too much water and coughing it all out had left her throat raw.

“It would interest you to know that I sent Stark the full video, including your messages.”

It did interest her to know.

“Did you include the part where I coughed up the ice bath you gave me?” Did Tony know his choice didn’t kill her?

“Yes, the game would not be fair if he did not know the full play. Your—survival Widow is spectacular.”

Good, Tony knew she wasn’t dead. That was better. There was still an occasional drip from one of the walls. That was annoying.

Resting her hands on her abdomen, she worked on her breathing. Her chest still hurt. A faint rattle in her lungs when she exhaled that forced another cough from her.

“Food will be brought to you soon as will water.”

“Had enough of that, thanks.” She kept her eyes closed, affecting indifference wasn’t easy when she kept coughing and shivering. The shivers were good though, it meant her body was trying to warm her up. In a way, he did her a favor even if he tried to drown her. Ice baths always triggered her healing for some reason. Encouraged it as the blood flowed faster.

Soon that scar from his blade would fade more. Maybe she’d lose the faint bruising around her ankle. Though, her host seemed determined to test the limits of what she could repair.

That was like a blast from the past. How many procedures? How many times had she heard the sounds of her bones snapping or dislocated then a timer set to see how long it took her?

“You are adapting well.” The door unlocked—or at least it clanked loudly—and she opened her eyes and swung herself upwards so she sat on the edge of the bed. Two men entered carrying a small table that would sit on the floor. There was food and water as promised. They set the table down, then bowed to her before they retreated to the door. It closed without further ceremony.

“Enjoy your meal, Widow. The next round begins in two hours.”

“Can’t wait,” she muttered. Adapting well.
Adaptable.

That was her. Very adaptable.

Easing off the bed, she walked on unsteady legs to where the table had been left just close enough she could reach it at the limit of the chain. Seated, she lifted the cover off the food. Lightweight, cheap plastic. The cup was also plastic.

Rice. Diced Vegetables. Meat. It was all mixed together, about a cup and a half worth of food. They hadn’t brought her silverware. She could refuse the food and starve. Under normal circumstances, she might last three weeks without eating. Water wasn’t so optional. That meant the food wasn’t likely to be poisoned. Or if it was—it was like another tiger.

Then again he said the next round began in two hours.

Lifting the cup of water, she sniffed it and then took a sip and swirled it around her tongue. She’d messed up with the wine. She’d tasted something off in it and Pepper’s assurance about gravelly damn soil had seemed valid. Maybe there was the flavor of gravelly soil in there, but she’d tasted the poison and hadn’t stopped them both from drinking it and getting her the hell out of that room.

That was on her.

Another sip and she swallowed it. Her raw throat appreciated the moisture, so she pinched the rice between her fingers and began to eat it slowly. James would probably have ignored it. He could go far longer on far less.

If they kept throwing her to the hungry tiger, she needed resources.

Adapting was something she’d always had to do. Cho said that adaptability was in her DNA. She took her time eating, carefully chewing even if the food didn’t need it. If there was something, she’d rather it triggered before she ate too much.

The little fragment of memory, leaving with James for some mission, being bored and tired of it all. That was the strangest sensation. She’d never loved her work, but she always enjoyed leaving for missions. In some ways, she’d half-thought leaving with James would have been more enjoyable except… so many of those missions meant working her way through other people. Their time on mission wasn’t a vacation or time spent together. Had they ever had that at all? Or were they all stolen moments?

Maybe in Montana. She lived in Montana. Even turning that over in her mind didn’t make it seem any more real. Of all the places to have lived, she never pictured herself in what had to have been a remote, unspoiled by civilization, cabin hidden from the world.

A pulse behind her eye sent a lance through her skull and she sighed, then stuffed more food in her mouth. Focus on the now and not the then. They couldn’t afford an episode here.

Montana after the holidays. James wanted to take her and she’d said after… they’d agreed.

He’d asked her on a date. A real one. Look at her, dating. She and Steve had plans, too. She’d been so annoyed with them. Annoyed with the way she couldn’t take a step without their assessing gazes on her every move. It wasn’t about hiding from them, but at the same time—they weren’t reading her in and what she’d told them had been true.

She felt like a mark in the middle of an op and that hurt more than she thought it possible.
Another flash of annoyance, this time at herself. Really? This was what she was going to concentrate on. They had bigger problems. If she wanted those dates or Montana or answers or anything, she had to get out of this maze.

To get out of the maze, she had to survive. The Mandarin was keeping his distance, whether a deliberate choice to keep her off balance or for some other reason, it denied her the opportunities to read him—his body language, expressions, and compare them to his tone and words.

When she finished the food, she took another long drink of the water. Then carried the cup with her back to the bed. As soon as she sat down, the clanking began and the door opened. The same two men, who brought the table, returned. They bowed to her once, and then lifted the table and carried it from the room, but the door didn’t close immediately behind them. Not that she could get to it.

The chain kept her locked in place. The view through the door was to another chamber much like this one. The door continued to remain open, but the men didn’t return. Had they shifted to a different form of psychological torture? She swished the water around her teeth, sucking it between her teeth, then spitting it out to the side before she took the last swallow and finished it. Crumpling the plastic, she studied the open door.

Then she threw the crumpled cup through it. It bounced harmlessly against the cement. The lighting on the other side of that door matched the lighting over her head. But where her room was still humid and damp, the walls and floor still discolored from the water.

Rising, she moved to stand as close to the door as the chain allowed. It was something other than staring at the camera. She hurt, so she began to stretch. There were katas she could do, even with the chain attached. Yoga would also help, calm her mind and her body. Help keep her respiration and heart rate settled while embracing the discipline.

She’d just completed her third stretch with a clanking came from the floor. The last time that happened, the grate beneath the bed closed and he flooded the room. The air still blew through the vent though and it had been gradually warming.

Aww, the sociopath had a soft spot. Go figure.

Or maybe he just wanted her to think he had one.

That seemed far more likely.

The tension on the chain released. Pivoting, she glanced at the floor. The bolt had sunk down, releasing her. Well as released as she could be with a shackle and chain still attached.

Open door. Released from the floor bolt.

She stared at the camera. Did she really look like she’d been born the day before?

Then the far wall began to move, inching forward with a gratingly slow grind of sound.

Great.

She was in an Indiana Jones movie.

They were supposed to be more fun. The wall continued its relentless plodding pace toward her, herding her to the door. The bed would be trapped between the walls in a moment, the reinforced metal might hold out—but not with the pounds per pressure force the wall could exert.
Fine.

She walked through the door, not allowing the weight of the shackle or chain to force her to limp. As soon as her chain cleared the door, it slammed shut leaving her in—an absolute duplicate of the room she’d left except it wasn’t wet—and it had a single toilet in a room off to the side. A slow pace around gave her nothing more than that toilet. It was old and probably questionable and she didn’t care. It wasn’t squatting in the middle of the floor.

After she finished her business, she moved to lean against a wall. There wasn’t another bolt in the center of the floor, and the bed sat in the center. This room had three doors—the one she’d entered via, and two others.

Lady or Tiger.

Head against the wall, she closed her eyes to half-slits aware of the camera continuing its endless blinking.

“I hope you enjoyed your meal, Widow,” the Mandarin said by way of greeting. “The next round will begin in five minutes.”

“Yay?” She kept it light. “But if you don’t start on time, I’ll have to call an audible. I hate being late.”

“Understandable. Punctuality is the hallmark of an organized mind.”

“Taunting someone over speakers while hiding away is the hallmark of fear.”

“How so?” He sounded genuinely curious. “We have a moment if you would like to enlighten me.”

Oh, she’d like to enlighten him with a few things.

Squashing that thought, she forced herself to stay relaxed. This wasn’t personal. Yes, he wanted to use her to hurt Tony—that alone made him worthy of being eliminated—but what he was doing right now wasn’t personal. The man wanted to understand her for some reason. Or at least he wanted to pretend to, perhaps to lull her into confiding in him.

There was a way to use that to her advantage. It would take time. She couldn’t seem too eager. Frankly, she needed to be more antagonistic.

“Most never want to look their fears in the eye. They would prefer to pretend they control the situation so they have all the power and thus never have to actually confront their fear.”

“Interesting. Why do you say that they pretend to have the power?”

“Because the only thing controlling them is their fear.”

“That… is a concept I will have to think on Widow. I appreciate your effort to broaden my mind.”

Was he really that pretentious or was that just another part of the game? There were so many ways to play it. Too many ways.

“As for now, we shall reach out to Mr. Stark, to play.”

She didn’t let any reaction register.

“Greetings, Mr. Stark—”
“You son of a bitch,” Tony’s voice held pure venom. “You tried to drown her.”

Fuck.

“Correction, Mr. Stark—you chose the tiger. She did drown, but she is resilient. She survived. Twice now. She has survived the tiger. For this round, we shall see if she survives the third.”

“What do you mean a third one?” Then. “Look, if you want me. Name the time and place, I’ll be there. But this has nothing to do with her.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Stark. It has everything to do with her as you so eloquently put it. You believe you can change the rules because you do not like them. It is what you did after Afghanistan. After your own weapons were turned on you. It is what you did with the Avengers. It is what you did with Ms. Potts and your own company. I have no doubt, it is what you will do with the Widow.”

Not all of those things were like the other. He’d brought up Afghanistan. Psyching Tony out by bringing up the source of one of his greatest traumas was really not going to work.

It was just going to piss him off more.

“You think I don’t know you weren’t involved? Ten Rings? The Mandarin? It all goes hand in hand, doesn’t it? That’s why you killed Slattery? He was sullying your name?”

“We all of us are born with very little to claim for ourselves—our name has value. Who would you be if you weren’t Tony Stark?”

“A genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist—and I’d still be Iron Man.”

Atta boy, Tony.

“Confidence is a worthy attribute in an opponent. Now, as I have given your Friday sufficient time to be frustrated as she chases my signal all over the globe, we shall begin the next round. You will have the result within the hour.”

“Wait…” Tony exhaled. “Why Natasha? You said you planned to send a different message with Pepper but you changed your mind because of Natasha… why?”

“When you discover that answer, you will be close to solving the game. Good day, Mr. Stark. The next round, should she survive, will begin two hours after this one.”

Then the signal ended.

Pepper would have died on the first round. If he’d run a blade through her. Or if he drowned her. Or whatever he was about to do.

He took Natasha because she would last longer. It would hurt more.

The silence in the room stretched out around her. She was still relatively free, but as she studied the walls and the doors, there was no way to open or close anything from her side.

The hiss of a dart jerked her into motion. She avoided the first one, and the one after that. The third nicked her, slowing her down, and the fourth caught her in the arm. The fifth hit her in the neck.

Dammit.
“Each dart contains a nonlethal dose of tubocurarine.” The Mandarin’s voice drifted over her. She
couldn’t move. A sixth dart slammed into her thigh. “We are administering it in higher quantities
because of your previously recorded reaction times. I want you to understand what is happening to
you. It paralyzes the muscles and depresses the respiratory capabilities. Some have described it as
drowning. Perhaps if you survive, you will let me know if they were correct.”

Natasha fought against the climbing sensation of razor wire binding her from head to toe and
managed to get her middle finger up.

“It pleases me that you are so resilient, Widow.”

Movement in the room and she couldn’t move. Hands picked her up and set her on the bed, then
the chain was secure. She could see them moving from the corner of her eyes, but they’d laid her
on her stomach. Then there was a needle piercing her right shoulder.

“Quinuclidinyl benzilate, produces akathisia, an intense desire to move. You might know it as
Soviet code substance 78.” It pumped into her arm like ice being injected into her veins.

Blue liquid. IV strung down and around her wrist. Liquid ice pumping into her veins.

“It also amplifies pain receptors, so that even pinprick will feel like you're being stabbed. It also
causes hallucinations and a loss of mental and physical control.” Curiosity populated his voice. “I
am told it’s very potent. We have tripled the dose for you. To make sure you experience…”

Fingers stroked over her face and her skin lit up like he’d poured acid over her. She couldn’t move,
she couldn’t even see him. He was on the other side of her. Only the shadow of his hand. Then he
ran it down her back and a scream choked in her throat as a river of fire flayed her skin.

“As pain mounts, so does blood pressure, respiration, and pulse…”

Hot pokers drilled into her, then raked down her back and across her legs. She’d been flayed
before. The sting of the whip. The strike of a cane. The repeated hits.

You can’t resist torture if you don’t know what to expect.

Pain could be compartmentalized. Even if the walls shuddered and collapsed as fast as she could
erect them. Another prick in her side and she was being stabbed all over again.

“Do you truly want to spend your last hours in unholy pain, Widow?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “It’s better than the alternative."

His eyes narrowed. “Which is?”

“Talking to you.”

His fist struck her again and she rocked back. They had her hanging by wrists. She’d been there for
hours. Betrayed. Poisoned. Beaten. They’d known she was coming and they wanted to break her.

She would not break.

Another hit.

Nothing they could do would touch her.
All she tasted was blood…

Then the door shattered inward and a smile pulled at her damaged mouth. Pain could be compartmentalized.

Even as he ripped through the men in the room, she fought to reassemble the pieces of herself.

A hand around her throat…

…slamming her into the table. Gazing up into those empty eyes, why did she know them? Why did they make her want to save him when she should be putting him down? Choking, she couldn’t breathe. “You could at least recognize me…”

…the hit took her in the stomach and she folded around it unable to breathe… “The wound is truly gone, nothing but a line…do you feel this Widow?” Another strike.

“Natalia, you can do this…”

“I know I can,” she told him with a fierce glare. “Stop telling me what to do.” The flash of a smile on his lips, the way it warmed his whole face, charmed her. Every single time he gave her one, it was a victory over their oppressors.

She gripped his hands as her body seemed to split open. The pain came in hard jolts, her stomach rolling as her muscles clenched, contracting and then she bore down. She forced herself to breathe, taming her wild reactions with discipline.

“I see the head, Natalia,” he whispered, staring up at her. “I will need my hands.”

Sweat slicked her back and her face. She was filthy. Exhausted. But she would not stop fighting… She wanted this pain. Planting her hands, she panted, then said, “Now.”

It seemed to last an eternity and ended in a microsecond of profound relief. Then that blessed cry, a protest against their whole world.

Eyes filming over with tears and weariness, she stretched out her hands. She was bleeding, the loss pouring out of her, but she didn’t care anymore. James lay the wet baby against her bare chest as he worked to tie the cord. Natalia touched her fingers to the small head as she let out another lusty cry.

It was a girl.

A little girl.

Then James had his hand over hers and he pressed a kiss to her lips. “You did it Natalia.”

They had a little girl.
Fire in her veins, chasing the ice and she lashed out with her hand cupping her other hand protectively over the baby that wasn’t there. Reality crashed in and she jerked upright to stare around the empty room. It should be painted in blood for how much she hurt, but there was nothing, sagging back she blinked her eyes furiously.

Mary.

She—had Mary back.

She’d had her.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she fought the tangled ball of emotion strangling her. Their little girl. The wonder on James’ face. The loud, fierce cries. The sweet, so tiny body.

Don’t react.

She couldn’t react to it. Compartmentalize the pain. Lock it away. She pressed a hand to her face. Her skin ached, pulled too taut. Sore.

Drugs.

He’d pumped her full of drugs. Hallucinogens.

Forcing her eyes open, she stared at the wavering room.

Hallucinogens.

The door crashed inward.

No.

Hallucinations, Natalia.

The roar shook the whole room.

No.

He couldn’t be here.

Closing her eyes she pressed her palms against them. No.

She would not fall for the tricks.

Pain catapulted through her…

“You’re sorry?”

Oh. Shit.

Bruce’s eyes were the last thing human about him as green cascaded over his skin. She’d seen the transformation before but never up close.

She fought to get her ankle out. It wouldn’t come loose. There! She was on her feet and moving. He was staggering, but he turned—and when the other guy—the monster stared at her, she did the only thing she could.
She fled.

Distract him with steam.


Run.

Run.

Run.

The hit picked her up and threw her. She slammed into the pallets and he was lurching toward her...

This was it.

She was dead.

Finally.

Eyes open, she sat up. The loss of sensation. The locked-in feeling. They were both gone. She was alive.

Not dead.

Not tortured.

Well, at least not actually bleeding. Sweat glistened on her hands and the room reeked. She was sweating out the poisons. Go serum. Getting a workout.

Mary.

She’d seen Mary.

“Welcome back, Widow. How do you feel?”

“That was fun, Mandy. Want to do it again?”

Mary Elizabeth. She’d. Seen. Her.

Held her.

Touched her.

James… your face.

~~~

Natasha Romanoff danced with both Captain America and Iron Man during Tony Stark’s recent holiday party. The video is kind of crappy, but that’s really them. Iron Widow versus CapWidow. Discuss. <video removed>
Discuss? She probably dances with lots of people.

But she’s dressed in gold! Iron Widow all the way! <image removed>

You do know dancing doesn’t mean she’s with anyone, right?

Or with everyone! I’d do her. Does anyone have naked pics?

She’s a hero! Why are you demeaning her with naked pics?

Found lingerie pics. She’s hot. Found Stark sex video 2!

She’s in a sex video with Iron Man?!?!!?

Define hero, moderator with a blast button. Bye bye trolls!

Why? She doesn’t need a guy to be someone. I’d rather talk Black Widow.

Thank you!

Just click-bait! Ignore.

BLACK WIDOW TOPS AVENGERS! Click it, come on you know you want to! <link removed>
Definitely don’t click! Spam.

Do you think they can date? I mean, Stark does everything, but could you date and be a hero? Wouldn’t that make sacrificing yourself or your teammate like impossibly hard?

Maybe it’s the real reason behind the fight. Not just the law but all that angst.

This thread has been moderated.

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Tony

He couldn’t watch anymore. This was even worse than the drowning. She lay absolutely still, unmoving, and all that bastard did was run his hands over her hair and down her back. Petting her. But with those drugs in her—it had to be excruciating. Bad enough he touched her in the first place. But she wasn’t moving at all, her face frozen, her expression locked.

Paralytic.

How long would it take her serum to purge it?

“Friday…” His throat was raw, congested, and it turned his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat. “Friday—estimated dosages he gave her?” He’d explained exactly what he was doing. She’d evaded the darts, but there was nowhere for her to go.

“Based on the amounts I can see in the video, Boss—he said it was—if Ms. Romanoff didn’t have the serum she’d already be dead.” Friday didn’t usually rely on inexact, but right now, he wasn’t going to complain. She might not want to give him exact numbers and he wasn’t sure he wanted to think about how much poison the bastard just pumped into her. “This is a theory, only, I think he’s testing the limits of what she can recover from.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that when he drowned her.” And he hadn’t thought she’d get up from that one. Not and be as functional as she appeared in the next video.

Three days since he stabbed her and she appeared if not fully healed, almost there. That suggested the Mandarin was at the very least taking care of her. Food. Water. Sleep. She’d signed gas earlier. So they’d most likely kept her gassed and on the move.

When the first call came, Tony had tried to draw out the man, dared him to take on Tony but that wasn’t what he wanted. Yet. Clint had added. The caveat dragged on Tony.
“Yet. He’s getting in your head. That’s all this is.”

“All?” Tony had stared at him. “He’s torturing her.”

“No,” Bucky had said in a rough tone. “He’s torturing you.”

Always choose the tiger. That was what Natasha told him to do. Always choose the tiger. In the story—the lady was the princess’s rival. Did she send her lover to be with someone else or did she send him to his death?

“Is Steve awake out there or did he finally get some sleep?”

“He’s awake, Boss. Do you want me to get him?” Friday’s subdued tone made him ache.

“Tell all three.” He wasn’t going to keep it from them. It had taken him a minute, but he finally understood the choices. The Mandarin promised to call again in a couple of hours—if Nat survived.

No damn ifs…she was going to survive.

“Friday? If I tell you to restock the booze?”

“You don’t want to tell me to restock the booze, Boss.”

“I don’t?”

“No, Boss. You want to get to work and rethink the plan.”

“Friday? Are you—trying to Jedi mind trick me?”

“Is it working?” The edge of sass, the barest hint of a teasing lilt, and a smile pulled at him. Dammit Natasha.

“No.”

“Then I’m absolutely not doing it. Captain Rogers is on his way as are Sergeant Barnes and Mr. Barton.”

God, he was not looking forward to doing this to any of them. What time was it?

“Boss?” Hesitance slipped in Friday’s tone. It had to be a conscious choice. She was still learning as well as experimenting. “Ms. Romanoff already healed from the stabbing. That’s good right?”

“In theory.” He never thought he’d be grateful for her active sex life with the super twins but if her DNA was adaptable, well go three-way super soldier serum. Just…how long did that last?

~~~

The door grated open. She’d lost track of how many rounds they’d gone. The last one ended with her inside this damn Iron Maiden. Irony was a real bitch and so were all the stab wounds. She’d had to stand for hours or maybe it was days. Don’t move. Don’t breathe to deep. Even the slightest shift sent the spikes a little deeper, tore them a little to the side. None went in anywhere vital. No,
they were definitely not going to kill her. No this was about maximum pain, because as the person
grew exhausted, they would slip.

Most sentenced to the Iron Maiden didn’t even die from the blood loss. No, it was sepsis and septic
shock that took them out. Go Red Room torture lessons. She was an A+ student.

It also wasn’t her first time spending hours or days on her feet, impaled on something, or with a
bone broken.

She’d graduated after all.

Eyes closed, she kept her respiration and pulse slow. Sinking deeper and deeper into that place
where she could wait. Pain could be compartmentalized. She was a damn master at it. Her pain
belonged in a series of matryoshka—Russian nesting dolls.

A whine of hinges as the front of the maiden swung open, tearing the spikes out of her—fuck she’d
begun to heal around them. Okay. That needed a slightly deeper breath.

There.

Better.

Hands on her arms pulling her forward. She kept her eyes slits, and let her whole body go limp. A
slight drag two steps. Another set of hands on her back. Two.

Just the two of them.

Her silent bowing pair.

Becoming dead weight threw off the man holding her from the front. He stumbled. The man
behind tried to compensate.

Head snapping back, she slammed it against his face and the satisfying crack of bone as she
shattered his nose filled her with a small amount of glee. Step, twist, closed hold, and wrapping her
arms around the guy’s neck. Wrench twist. Broken. Rolling. Sweep the legs. Down, elbow to the
gut. Up. On her feet. Snap kick to the head. Snap neck. Leave no one to follow behind her.

Rising, she picked up the chain and wrapped it around one hand as she headed for the open door.

There were sounds coming from down the hallway.

Shouts.

She kept moving. It was probably a trap.

Probably another room.

Probably another round waited for her.

But the accommodations sucked and she wanted to register her complaints with the management
directly.
Chapter Summary

The Mandarin's messages and videos are taking their toll, but a call provides them with fresh clues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Fifty

Torment

Steve

Day Five

“How can you have nothing?” Steve turned to face the screen in front of Tony. The engineer had his head down, pinching the bridge of his nose and his eyes closed. Pale, haggard, with deep bruises under his eyes, Tony had been pushing himself at a punishing pace even with their enforced breaks and downtime.

“This guy knows every damn thing I’d do…” Tony said. “How the hell does he know every step I’m going to take?”

“He said he’s been watching you,” Clint stated. “Watching you enough to know your routines, your systems, he even knew Friday’s name. So—who has that kind of access?”

Tony jerked around and stared at Clint. “You think we have a spy.”

“Peter’s devices,” Bucky said slowly. “He has been in and out of the Tower. In and out of conversations. Friday and Vision have not been able to track the source of the worms or where the data they mined was sent.”

Leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, Tony stared off into space. The vacant look was a lie though, he was thinking. As irritating as Steve had found that expression in the past, he was grateful for it now. It meant Tony was digging deeper for an answer.

“What if… bear with me,” Steve said slowly. “I don’t always get how that stuff works, but what if the technology lift was a feint? It made us look sharply in one direction. All of us. You. Nat. Everyone.”

Head tilting, Tony stared up at him and a quiet kind of rage filled his eyes. “Baby Girl?”

“I’m already looking, Boss. Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes may be onto something. There
are smaller packets tucked amongst the larger schematics and plans. They were sent in microbursts. I’m reaching out to Vision. We’ll try to follow them—we may need to initiate one and trace it if we run into the same issues. He’s using proxy servers and decoys, each one splitting into two, then another two…”


“Like hopping off a train before you get to the destination, but continuing to that destination because most people are going to be looking elsewhere.” *When on the run, walk, don’t run. When you’re hiding, choose the most obvious place because no one expects you to stay where it’s obvious.*

“China,” The instant response had them all straightening. “But the splitters and the proxies sent the information everywhere else. Running the smaller packets now…do you want to send one and lock a tracer on it?”

“Why not?” Tony said. “Bastard knows we’re looking—let’s build a worm of our own…”

Then he descended back into that technology-realm he owned, his mind racing ahead of all of theirs. Steve nodded to the door and Clint pushed away from the chair he’d leaned against to follow him and Bucky out.

“He needs to eat and shower soon,” Steve rubbed the back of his neck.

“He isn’t the only one, Cap. I got this.” Clint motioned to the elevator. “Both of you. Go take an hour. Maybe two. I’ll figure something out for dinner…” He glanced at his watch. “So go. Shower. Sleep. Then we’ll reconvene with food and see where we’re at.”

“Kid’ll be here soon,” Bucky said quietly. Peter had gone to school, but he didn’t want to be there and he’d shown up at the Tower every single day without fail as soon as school was out.

“I’ll take care of him. We’re *not* telling him his equipment sent that data.” It wasn’t a question and the hard look he gave Steve said it was one issue he would fight over.

“He doesn’t need to know that,” Steve agreed. “He’s already tearing himself up enough. Find him something to do that isn’t those videos and if one comes in…”

“I got it. Go.”

With a sigh, Steve glanced past him toward the lab.

“Stevie,” Bucky said quietly. “Clint will get us.”

That was the problem though. They were waiting. Again.

With a nod, he turned toward the elevator. Once inside, he braced against the wall. “Friday take us to the gym.”

Bucky sighed.

“Captain Rogers…’
“Please don’t try to manage me, Friday. The gym will be sufficient.” He really needed to beat on something.

“Very well.”

The elevator descended swiftly. When the doors opened, he all but launched himself out the doors aware of Bucky shadowing him. In the locker room, he changed, pulling on a t-shirt and sweatpants. He didn’t bother with shoes. Right now, he just wanted to get to work.

In the training room, he headed straight for the speed bags. But something slammed into the back of his shoulders and bounced off. Wheeling, he glanced down at the boxing gloves then over at Bucky who was currently strapping on a pair.

“Put them on,” was all Bucky said.

“I’m not fighting you…”

“Fine, then stand there while I pound on you. We’ve done that before.” He pulled the first glove tight with his fingers, then wiggled his left hand into a glove that he tightened with his teeth.

“I said no,” Steve said, picking up the gloves and throwing them back. Buck knocked them to the side easily. “Not. Fighting. Anyone.”

Pivoting, he headed for the speed bags. He felt more than heard the speed of Bucky’s approach and he twisted at the last moment, taking the blow to his shoulder and throwing him past him. Tumbling, Bucky flipped over and slowed with one gloved hand against the ground, then he launched again.

“Dammit, Buck,” Steve wore, and he brought his arms up. The blows came in a flurry of furious and brutal strikes. Even the gloves only muted the hits; they didn’t rob them of their power. They locked together in a grapple, but Bucky yanked him down then Steve twisted, slamming his feet into Buck’s gut and sending him flying backwards. He landed with a thump and then raced back toward him.

Aggravated, Steve caught his left fist and turned it outward, then he drove an elbow back at Bucky’s chest as they weaved between grappling, boxing, and kicking. When they crashed into the wall, it cracked right through the plaster. Shoving away from it, he drove Buck back toward the mats, his strikes a swift one-two combination not allowing Bucky to get a hit in as he forced him to block. Then Bucky opened up and the hit rocked his jaw, knocking him backwards, but he clasped Steve’s wrists with both of his gloved hands and then dropped and kicked at the same moment. Steve flew over him and slammed against the mats on his back even as Bucky landed next to him.

“You’re an asshole,” Steve grunted out when he could air back into his lungs.

“You need me to be an asshole right now.”

“How the hell can you be so calm?”

“I’m not calm, Stevie,” Bucky panted the words even as he wrenches himself upright and climbed to his feet. “Never believe what you see. I’ve been containing my reactions for decades. I wasn’t allowed to respond to her pain before. I wasn’t allowed to express fear or worry or concern.”

Grimacing, Steve pushed up to his feet. “Buck…”

“No,” Bucky said, pivoting to face him. “Fight first. We’ll talk about feelings afterward.”
“Fine.” He snatched up the gloves and yanked them on. They were both sweating and a little breathless. “Friday, run the reinforcement program please.”

“Already running, Captain Rogers, I thought one hole in the wall was sufficient.”

Yeah. He stretched his neck from side to side as Bucky paced back and forth like a caged wolf waiting for the gate to open. Tasting the blood on his lip, Steve nodded and lunged even as Bucky met him halfway. The fight was brutal. He wasn’t going for a win or even to score points, it was literally about hitting each other as hard as they could. Bucky would take him down, he’d turn the tables, and they traded off who held the lead. The next time they dropped on the mats, it was Steve slamming Bucky into it, but his whole body ached from the fight. The burn in his arms and legs matched the one in his eyes and his soul.

“Had enough?” he asked.

Bucky laughed softly, “I can do this all day.”

“Ass.” But he made no attempt to get up. Resting a forearm over his eyes, he fought back the grief ebbing and flowing amidst the rage. Neither would do them any good at the moment.

“Maybe so, but you’re thinking again. We need your brain as much as we need Tony’s.” Buck let out a groan as he sat up. The rills on his arm shifted as he turned his wrist from one side to the other, then he crossed his left arm over his right forearm and gave a firm yank.

The thwack of the bone going back into the joint had Steve jerking up to look at him.

The wry look on Bucky’s face made him grimace. “I hate this.”

“It never gets easier,” Bucky told him. He bumped his shoulder before he stood and began to strip off the gloves. They were both sweating and bleeding in places. The mat had suffered the worst of it—they’d torn it up in places, though Steve was pretty sure they’d cracked the floor, too. Even with the reinforced shielding Tony put in so Steve and Thor could spar hadn’t prevented some of the damage.

“I keep saying it’s not her fault.”

“And you’re still pissed at her that she walked off from us at the party and that we let her go.” Tossing the gloves aside, Bucky limped over to the weight rack they’d knocked over. Steve didn’t even remember when they’d done that.

“It’s not her fault,” he repeated, ripping off his own gloves before joining Buck to right the racks and put the weights back. “It’s ours.”

“Maybe.” That answer surprised him.

“We’re the ones who lied to her.”

“We didn’t lie, we just didn’t give her all the facts,” Bucky told him. “We made a judgment call based on the evidence and the circumstances at the time. Am I happy about it? No. Do I think we could have done things differently? Obviously—but I didn’t argue with your call then, Steve. I didn’t think you were wrong. I still don’t—to a point.”

That surprised him more. Hauling the destroyed mats out he turns it over in his head. When he gets back, Bucky had stored the gloves and cleaned up the damaged plaster and marked the cracked floor. He passed a bottle of water to Steve and motions to the elevator.
“I was just going to shower down here…” The last thing he wanted—

“Steve.”

“Dammit, Bucky. The last time we were there it was all three of us and we…we were planning a
great night even when I thought she should have skipped it. If I’d just stood my ground…”

“You would have been here instead of there when she went missing and it would be a thousand
times worse.” That damn calm was back, even sweating and bleeding, Bucky seemed almost
dispassionate. Nat could do that; she could—compartmentalize—stay focused on the mission and
act like nothing affected her even when he knew it had to.

“How the hell do you do it?”

He drained the bottle of water, and then fixed a look on him. “The same way you do, Punk. It
needs to be done. But you’re avoiding me and I’m avoiding you so we don’t talk like this. It’s
easier to put on a face for Clint or Tony or the kids—hell even Sam. You and me—we know
exactly how strong she is.”

“And how fragile.” Because that was the part he was doing his damnedest not to think about. They
had just gotten her back to herself. She was back to training and running ops. Determined and
smart, she pushed them all to be better.

“Get on the elevator, Steve. You’re not going back up there alone.”

Inside the elevator, he leaned against the wall and dreaded every floor passing by them. “Was it
always like this?” He didn’t say what it he was referring to, Bucky would understand.

“Sometimes,” his best friend said. “Sometimes it was a lot worse. We have video, we can see her.
She’s fighting back and surviving. That’s—something.”

“We’re seeing her be tortu—”

Steve had seen her beaten before, seen her take hits and torture for a mission. He’d always hated it
then but this… This was a whole other level. He’d thought when Leonid and Alexei had her had
been bad.

“Believe it or not,” Bucky told him as the doors opened. “That’s not new either. Now, go shower
and we’ll talk. You need to sleep and until we do, I don’t think you will.”

Steve hesitated at the doors as Bucky headed for his room. Once at the door, he turned and his
gaze hit their tree and the shelves with all the photographs before he looked back at him.

“Go Stevie…Natalia wants us to look after each other. You need your strength because any time
now, Tony will find a lead and I plan to beat him to the punch in killing this son of a bitch and it
would be good if you were right there with me.”

Nowhere else he’d rather be. Nodding, Steve made his way across the room. His gaze ticking over
signs of her—the mug on the coffee table, her StarkPad visible on the bed from the door, the
empty, discarded boxes her dress and accessories had come in, and standing there in the door to her
room, he could still smell the perfume of her shampoo, soap, and the faint scent she wore and he
always associated with her.

The bed was still disheveled, they hadn’t stripped it or remade it after they’d sandwiched her
between them and his whole body shuddered at the memory of taking her ass. It had been—so
different and better than he’d expected. The warmth, the way she took him, and how she gave and gave until he only wanted to be lost in her. There on the nightstand, on the photo he’d framed of he and Buck from when they’d been in the field late in ’43, his dog tags hung—waiting.

Dragging himself out of the doorway, he headed for his own room. He needed a little distance just to get his head back in the game. The lotion from her room sat on his nightstand, right next to the photo of her in that gorgeous black bikini he’d managed to snap, the curve of her ass tilted as her hip jutted out. She’d been sass ing them before she’d turned to look out at the ocean and he—he hadn’t been able to look anywhere else.

Brushing his fingers against her back, he murmured, “You keep fighting, Angel. Kick his ass. We’re coming.”

Then he forced himself to get in the shower. Bucky was right. They needed to come back here. Be surrounded by her. It hurt, but she left her mark everywhere on this floor—his floor. Just like she left a mark on him.

“I don’t want to kill anyone. I just… don’t like bullies.”

Not anymore. Right now he very much wanted to kill The Mandarin.

The shower helped. Trimming the beard helped. He stared at it in the mirror for several beats, debating shaving it off. The hair was getting too long again; he’d meant to ask her to trim it up over the weekend. Maybe take her out on Sunday, just—grab Buck and head out to the MOMA or the Met. The Zoo would have been cold, but they might have enjoyed that. Just—go be together away from the Committee, the Avengers… their responsibilities.

Red marks littered his chest and shoulders. He had a bruise forming on the side of his face, too. Most of them would be gone in a day or two. His knuckles were barely reddened, the gloves had prevented the hurt there. Even if he’d wanted it. Shutting off the light, he finished dressing then walked out to find Bucky sitting on the edge of sofa. Though shoeless, his combat boots were on the floor right next to him. His weapons were arrayed across the table and he was currently pulling one apart to clean it—even if he hadn’t fired it.

The gun oil, the oilcloth, the brushes—it was all familiar. Nat did that when she needed to re-establish order in her world or maybe it was just a habit. If there was downtime on an op, she took her gun apart and...

“You taught her to do that.”

Bucky glanced at him, then nodded. “Guns are better these days, fewer misfires, better tools over all. But it used to be the crap they gave us—no, we cleaned everything, took it apart, checked the firing pins. Then put it back. Never take a weapon into combat you don’t know. Saw plenty of guys blow their own hands off.”

“May I?” Steve motioned to the Glock 26 nearest him.

Bucky tossed him an oilcloth. “Do it right.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. Nat hadn’t been so trusting the first time he offered to help, figuring it’d make the task go faster. It was a while before he realized she didn’t crave speed, she
craved the task. So many little things she shared with Bucky, echoes of habits developed over decades together—they couldn’t take it all away. He began stripping the gun down with precision, setting each piece out after he inspected it.

Amidst cleaning his own, Bucky kept an eye on him and with each step, he nodded. They worked in silence until Steve had the gun cleaned and reassembled. When he returned it exactly where Bucky had left it, Buck grinned slightly. “She taught you well.”

“Trust me, it was a work in progress. Everything went back to where it belonged exactly or there would be hell to pay.” Not really, but Nat had a reproachful look then she’d do it herself from scratch and he would be left feeling like he wasted her time. Later—much later—he understood it. Sometimes he did it to tease her and other times, he was as exactly precise as she was because that was what she needed.

“Natalia was always thorough. She missed very little; it could be daunting at times to be tasked as her trainer. She wasn’t wrong when she told Karpov she could have broken Leonid’s arm, what could I possibly have to teach her?” Another smile. “As it turned out, I could push her as no other opponent would dare. She was so damn good already, but we drove each other to be better.”

Rising, Steve went to grab water for them. Returning with it, he held one out to Buck. “She did the same to me—after New York, when I signed on at SHIELD, I was still on the fence about even being there.”

Hindsight. It’d be nice to think his reticence was some sixth sense about Hydra, but no. He’d just been—lost. The world had moved on without him and he didn’t fit anywhere.

He told Bucky as much. “I was pretty much feeling sorry for myself, but New York showed I could still do something even if it was just delivering and taking a beating. Nick partnered me with Natasha from day one, not that he called it that exactly, but my desk was shoved into an office she shared with Clint and I was there reading through a procedures manual when she returned from an op—one I didn’t even know she was on. She slowed down, looked at me, looked at my desk and then snorted before she walked right back out again.”

Bucky laughed at him. “Did you think she was irked with you?”

“A little bit. Next day she dropped the mug off on my desk and I thought she’d just been tired. After I figured out the prank, I wanted to get her back—but I wasn’t sure what I could get away with. So I waited. Then Nick sent me on an op with her and—I thought I’d seen her fight in New York, but it was a whole other thing. Five minutes after we get back, she says, ‘Go get showered. You stink. Meet me in the parking garage. We’re not taking your bike. But I’ll buy you breakfast.’ Not remotely optional and all I’d really planned on doing was heading back to my apartment and getting some sleep. Instead—we have breakfast somewhere in the wilds of Maryland, then she took me down to the shore and we walked for hours. Just—walked, she asked me a lot of questions—all over the place. I get it now, she was trying to figure me out, then she brings me back—not to SHIELD but to my apartment and says, ‘meet me in the training room tomorrow at 8. Don’t be late.’” Then she was gone. And it took an hour but he realized she’d never asked him where he lived, she’d just brought him straight there.

“The next day she kicked your ass all over the training room?”

Steve made a face. “I didn’t like the idea of hitting a dame and I didn’t want to hurt her.”

Bucky laughed. The sound rusty and jagged, but genuine. “You poor fool.”
“Yeah, I learned my lesson. If she wasn’t around, she told me don’t spar with anyone else, just train my other senses—observation, blending in—when we trained with STRIKE for operations, she insisted that I run the op verbally. ‘Never let them see you move outside of real combat, Steve. You’ll slow yourself down for them and they can study you more carefully.’” He’d argued they were supposed to be a team and she’d patted his cheek. “This is me being on your team. You keep what you know how to do from everyone. Then they can never use it against you.” At his dubious look, she’d grinned then added, “You only think you’ve seen all my moves, Rogers. Don’t worry, I know you’ve got moves you’ve been holding back from me. I like it. Keep it up.”

“She was right,” he said slowly. “After—well after you shot Nick and Pierce ordered me back to the Triskelion, the STRIKE teams tried to take me out in an elevator.”

“You’re better at close quarters brawling than you are just about anything. It’s where you’re a natural,” Bucky said, eyeing him as he took a long drink of the water.

“Exactly. Took them out, got out—took the most obvious route too—right out through the glass and down about twenty stories.” He could have landed it better and it had definitely jarred everything. Even when she wasn’t with him, she was helping to save his life. Just like the habits she picked up from Bucky helped save hers. It all kind of circled around, again and again.

And now, she was out there…

“Stevie, you can’t focus on the torture,” Bucky kept his tone even. “First, she can survive pretty much everything he throws at her. He obviously doesn’t want her dead or she would be already. That is his first mistake. He thinks he can tame or control her.”

Steve frowned. “Control?”

“Take her from Tony,” Bucky continued as he put the gun back together. “It’s why he called her Stark’s favorite weapon. This whole game is to see who will blink. Second, he wants to inflict pain on Tony and to keep the Avengers off balance. With his research, he has to be aware of our presence and everyone else. Destabilize us, keep the narrow focus on Tony, inflict mental and emotional harm by forcing him to watch every moment of her physical harm.”

The line of his jaw shifted as he ground his teeth. Then he held the gun up checking the sight before setting it down to take up another and worked on it.

“Natalia knows this. She had to give him a full demonstration of her combat prowess on that bridge. He has seen exactly how capable she is and he demonstrated how much of a planner he is. This whole strategy is already planned out, he is merely going through the steps. Nothing we do will alter this until we track where he is holding her.”

There was an odd source of comfort in that. “Her death isn’t the goal?”

“No. He is confident she will survive these trials, another reason why he took her. The only thing I am uncertain of—does he think he can turn her on Tony or use her survival as the final screw to control Tony? He tried to control her on that bridge and she fought him, but he was still successful in taking her.”

Control Tony. Steve leaned back in the chair, turning that idea over in his head. In the past, between Tony’s drinking and impulse control, he could get so lost in his work he forgot about the people around him. What had Nat said about challenging a terrorist on national television? Tony didn’t run from fights, no, he raced into them.
"I have a plan, Captain. Attack."

"He’s studied us, so he knows where we’re vulnerable. Taking Pepper would have gotten under Tony’s skin."

"Taking Natalia gets under all of us. Look at what we’re doing—our focus is solely on retrieving her to the exclusion of all else."

"Is it all one big diversion?"

"Doubtful. This is part of the play though, he wants all of Tony’s attention and he wants something from him. But I don’t know their history and the files I read—they don’t tell me of any true interactions between Tony and this figure before the Trevor Slattery incident."

"We weren’t involved in that," Steve said slowly. "We should have been, but—we weren’t." The Mandarin carefully orchestrated the threats, distracting Tony’s security and leaving them with a great deal to investigate. Pepper got Nat involved and even with her own distractions, she’d only found part of the puzzle.

Nat’s involvement increased security on Pepper, Happy, and Peter.

"Why the mech?" Steve asked aloud, not waiting for Bucky to respond before he said, "To test us, to see how the Avengers reacted. The worm, the computer virus, all the denial attacks from the hackers; it required a response from Tony, Vision, and Nat along with Friday to contain it. Which also gave him more insight into Friday’s operations. This was not done overnight, he’s been planning and probably watching for months… maybe even before Leipzig. He knew the major players. He tested our responses. He learned. Then he waited for a moment of seeming invulnerability to strike—what he said, suggests that until Nat was in that room, he still planned to only take Pepper."

"Natalia is a volatile element to control."

"No, Buck, that’s not it. He took her on an impulse. If we take him at his word, he knew enough about her to plan for metabolism and her skills. He set up that test on the bridge and with her captors, that’s why they hauled them out of the city so fast. Jamming the tech probably took a while to get the frequencies…” All of the disparate pieces were making more sense. Tactically, what The Mandarin had done was brilliant and terrifying. Even if it was an impulse, he had those tortures ready to go. Had he been planning to go after her anyway? Or were those meant for Tony?

"There was another reason to take Nat," he said slowly as he sat forward. "Not just because he wants to take Tony’s weapon. If he’d taken Pepper and Nat was the one here—she’d keep Tony on the rails, they’ve been spending a lot of time together, Peter has spent a lot of time with them…"

Bucky nodded. "And as good as all this is to know… we’re still not any closer to her." He eyed him. "But you’re thinking again."

"Yeah. Thanks for kicking my ass."

"Anytime, Stevie. I meant what I said, don’t focus on the torture. Focus on everything else around her and what she is saying and doing. When she can get us a clue, she will."

"I keep thinking of how long she held out, how long she kept Pepper from being taken and that she was waiting for us and we didn’t show up."

"I know, but that was one battle. The war is far from over.” He set the last gun back onto the table.
“We have forty minutes until we’re supposed to reconvene. Think you can sleep?”

Steve put his feet up on the table and closed his eyes. “Forty minutes.”

“I got watch, Stevie. Sleep.”

The hell of it was, he dropped right off and snapped awake forty minutes later when Buck griped his shoulder. Sitting up, he scrubbed his hands over his face. No dreams.

“Food is ready, Clint dragged Tony up to the penthouse.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, rising. “We need to make a plan.”

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**Bucky**

Steve sounded more like himself. The need to compartmentalize was one he was deeply familiar with, but Steve wasn’t a statue. He didn’t shut down. What he was doing, however, was locking down every ounce of his rage. If he went into a fight like that, he wouldn’t have been thinking and The Mandarin had already proven too canny a target to let Steve race in there like it was a back alley fight he couldn’t walk away from.

And as much as he’d done it for Steve, Bucky needed to vent some steam as well. Telling Steve not to focus on the torture was all well and good. Bucky had spent more than one lifetime being forced to watch her suffer. Just because he didn’t show his contempt, disgust, and rage didn’t mean he didn’t feel it. He was better at channeling it, but he’d torn men apart before.

He’d find a way to take this one apart, too.

All he needed was a window of opportunity.

Tony was descending the steps from his room when they arrived, his hair damp and his clothes clean. The deep shadows under his eyes and the red-rimmed color said he hadn’t much if any sleep. Clint was in the kitchen, pulling something—lasagna nice—out of the oven. Two large pans of lasagna and there was the distinct scent of garlic bread.

“You know, if I’d realized you could cook, I wouldn’t have stocked you and Red with all that junk food when you moved in,” Tony said idly. “Hell, I didn’t even know Red could cook back then.”

Clint laughed. “We didn’t mind, though she made me move half that crap into my room so she could put real food in there. We just figured you didn’t think we’d hit the common areas if we had real supplies.” When Tony glanced at the coffee pot, Clint shook his head. “Nope. You’re cut off for at least another twenty-four to thirty-six ounces of water.”

Tony made a face, but didn’t argue.

“Where’s the kid?” Bucky asked. He’d expected Peter to be there.

“Down in the lab, finishing something for school. He’ll be up in a few minutes,” Tony said. “Clint made me leave. I was getting close...”
“You were getting nowhere, you ran the same search string three times in a row,” Clint said bluntly, setting out plates before pulling the garlic toast out of the broiler.

“Shows what you know,” Tony said with a sigh. “I was getting close, I could feel it... He should have called. It’s well past two hours since the last video.”

No one wanted to touch that. But if they were in Asia, the time difference put it sometime around dawn there, give or take. That could mean he’d kept her up all night on those trials. Daytime—daytime would be the time for deprivation, wear her down that way or leave her waiting and wary for the next one.

Kind of like Tony.

Or… or he was giving her recovery time after the brutal day/night.

Or maybe he’d had no choice.

“Eat, then two hours of rack time,” Clint told him. He glanced at Steve then Bucky. “How much did Cap get?”

“Enough for now,” Bucky told him. Not really, but Steve had slept. That was the first step. More than Bucky had let himself do. “I’ll go get the kid. Don’t let Steve eat everything.”

“Bite me, Bucky,” came the response, and Bucky grinned on his way to the elevator.

They were all tired. They were all a little on edge. He’d needle Steve and Clint had taken to poking at Tony. Keep their focus off each other. The elevator descended to the lab floor. Bucky was starting to hate this one. All of the equipment and whizzing mechanics of the robots was bad enough…

“…It also amplifies pain receptors, so that even pinprick will feel like you're being stabbed. It also causes hallucinations and a loss of mental and physical control…”

His head snapped up and he moved on silent feet to the door of the lab. The kid sat perched on the back of Tony’s chair, staring at the screen with a look of mute horror on his face.

Why was Friday…? He glanced at the corner. The camera’s red light was off.

Natalia was not the only one who could put Friday in privacy mode. The kid had been paying attention.

The torture on the screen was nowhere near as bad visually as the drowning had been. Or the recordings that followed.

“You might want to reconsider your choice, Peter,” he said quietly, and Peter jerked, leaping upward where he landed against the wall, staring at Bucky as he panted.

“None of you told me you’d heard from him.” Accusation laced the crack in his voice. “He’s torturing her.”

“Yes, he is,” Bucky agreed with him. He didn’t have to move closer to the screen. He knew every move The Mandarin made as he ran his hand over her back. The pain she had to experience, yet none of it showed nor did she release any sounds. Her discipline would have stopped much of it, but the paralytic arrested all of it.
“And we’re just supposed to go up to dinner?” The video went on much the same for the next forty minutes. Even five of that would have been agonizing, but that length of time would have made the torture seem unending. All Bucky could hope was she’d blacked out from the pain at some point. A small mercy, but one he’d take for her right now.

“Food is fuel. It’s necessary to keep going. We haven’t given up. Every minute of every day since they disappeared we have worked on this. We have reached out to contacts, Tony does searches, Friday searches even now…”

“But he’s hurting her.”

“Peter…this is why we didn’t show you. The torture is not for Natalia. It is for Tony.” And us. “Now you.”

Dropping back down, Peter glanced at the screen. “I found five recordings…I was watching them in order.”

“He drowned her in the first one. But Natalia can hold her breath for several minutes, she survived,” Bucky kept his tone even and matter of fact. “In this one…”

“Pain. The drugs, even the lightest touches, she’s got to be in so much pain.”

Bucky nodded once.

“And the others?”

“Do you truly wish to know?” Much as he’d told him at the Compound, “Once you see it, you cannot unsee it.”

“She’s alone.”

“We’re always alone,” Bucky told him as he pushed away from the door. “How we each face suffering is our own burden. Do you think she would want you to have that in your mind? Do you think she would want it to haunt your nightmares?” Because it would. “We did not keep it from you because we wanted to deny you the right to care, we kept it from you because you care.”

“They keep talking about her—on the news, on talk shows, online. Aunt May even mentioned her this morning.” He glanced down at his hands. “For months it was all about how awful she was, a criminal, a liar, a murderer—a traitor. Now—now they are talking about some of the things she’s done that were good. Beyond like saving New York. Like—she saved some woman who had been running from an abusive husband. Took her all the way across the country, helped her start a new life. She said she’d seen her at a corner grocery one day and the next—Natasha showed up and took her away, set her up and eventually her husband died in some bar fight, but—she liked her new life. One she wouldn’t have had without her.”

Bar fight. Bucky wouldn’t be surprised at all if the fight involved Natasha.

“Aunt May wanted to know if I’d met her and I said she was at the party. It wasn’t a lie.” But it also wasn’t the whole truth. “She’s really important to me and no one knows that.”

“She does,” Bucky said quietly. “So do the rest of us.”

Peter glanced back at the screen where the video continued to play. “How long?”

“Total? Forty-nine minutes and fifty-eight seconds.”
“At the end of the drowning…we…” Peter swallowed. “We saw her coughing up the water. Does she…”

“She sits up. She’s there.”

“And in the next one?”

Bucky eyed him for a long moment. Peter straightened, then squared his shoulders.

“And in the next one?” he repeated.

“He used a device called a stork. It fixes the neck and limbs into a prone, uncomfortable position, nothing is allowed to relax, each part of the body pulls on the other. Within minutes there are excruciating cramps that continue to spasms in the chest, neck, arms, and legs.” The muscle twitches had been visible. But Natalia had only stared at the ceiling, her eyes distant as she retreated from the torture. Sometimes it was the only way to endure.

Peter swallowed hard. “And then?”

“He evacuated all the air from the room, leaving her barely any until she was almost hypoxic. Then he began again.”

Fists clenched. “The last one?”

“He put her in an Iron Maiden. I’m sure the irony was a part of it.” Bucky sighed. That video had cut off only when they opened the door and she’d stumbled out. Alive, but nearly unconscious, a dozen bleeding wounds visible on her arms, legs and torso, her clothing soaked with the blood.

“How can she possibly survive all of that?”

“She’s a lot tougher than she looks, Kid.” The fact not every torture had been life-threatening helped some. Painful, yes. Hampering her in some way? Absolutely, but only the drowning and the hypoxia were likely to have killed her outright. The stork and the drugs were excruciating. Her system could handle the drugs—even before the serum, the Red Room conditioned her on torture.

He’d done his own fair share of time on the same methods.

The Iron Maiden would have been horrifically painful and debilitating, but her system could handle it. Most likely why they hadn’t had another “round” since those five, she actually needed the recovery time now.

God, he hoped that sadistic son of a bitch let her have it.

Folding his arms, Peter shifted his weight and then looked back at the screen. Reaching past him, Bucky hit the space bar to halt the playback, then turned off the monitor.

“Does it help you to know?”

Peter shook his head. “What if we never find her?”

“Not an option.” It wasn’t. He’d lost her for decades. He would spend that and much more looking for her. “I meant what I said. We will find her. Or she will free herself. Likely long before we get there.”

“You sound certain.”
He was. Only on a very few occasions had he needed to truly save her. She had saved him as often. “I am.”

“Why didn’t she get away? I mean—she fought on that bridge. She could have hidden with Ms. Potts? Maybe they could have gone down that hill and followed the gorge away from the road. A mile or two down, it crossed near a main road.”

“She made a choice.”

“To die? Like when she dove into the formless to get me?”

“To save you. To save Ms. Potts. She doesn’t want to die, Pal.” She didn’t. Maybe once, she’d been ready but not anymore. “Look…” He leaned against the table next to him. “I’ve known Natalia a long time, I know this is hard. But I also know she can survive it.”

“Sergeant Barnes?” Friday asked quietly.

“Tell them we’ll be up in a minute, Friday. Peter and I are just talking.”

“Of course.”

“Are you and Natasha together?” Peter asked, looking at him sideways.

“Yes.”

Peter nodded. “But she’s with Steve, too?”

The corner of his mouth lifted and he nodded. “Also yes.”

“I was kind of rooting for her and Tony,” Peter admitted.

Bucky bumped his shoulder. “So is Tony.”

Then a little laugh escaped the kid. “You know that’s weird, right?”

“I don’t care.” Bucky shrugged. “Does it bother you?”

With a slow shake of his head, Peter said, “You’re cool. So is Steve. You’re nice to her?”

“Yeah, Pal. We’re nice to her.”

“Okay. Cause I really do like her…so if you hurt her…” Despite the genuine earnestness and baby face, there was a real attempt at a threat in there. Maybe he didn’t sound like he meant it or could back it up, but Bucky had fought him in Leipzig. Kid was not without skill or strength.

“Not a problem, I’ll stand still and you can kick my ass.”

Peter grinned suddenly. “I can probably take you.”

“You keep thinking that, Pal.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “Now let’s get you upstairs so you can eat. Natalia has very strict rules about how we are supposed to look after ourselves when she’s away.”

Upstairs, the shift in conversation was a little obvious. Peter gave him a wry look before he headed to the table. Bucky shook his head. The kid was too smart.
Food made them all quieter though Tony picked Peter’s brain about school and his projects, which seemed to give them both something to talk about. Bucky took care of the wash-up while Steve and Clint talked about the tube retrieved from Coulson’s grave. The information was useful, but he hadn’t found anything in it that would lead them to The Mandarin. For now, it did give them leverage if they ran into issues.

It was nearing time they should consider getting the kid home when Friday chimed in. “Boss, we have a call from Japan. A rather—surly individual—who wishes to speak to the jackass who bugged him on Ms. Romanoff’s dime.”

Clint sighed. “You want to take that call.”

“Audio or video, Baby Girl?”

“He said he can do video, but he isn’t getting dressed up for it.” Friday sounded downright perplexed. “He seems irritated at the moment.”

Tony poured himself a glass of water over ice, the tumbler was an amber color and it wasn’t the first time Bucky had seen him do that. It wasn’t alcohol, but it looked like it from a distance. He was covering his sobriety—it was a good tactic for most.

A holo screen formed and a fierce-looking man glared into the screen, thick chested, bulky arms, and husky shoulders. The hairstyle though— was different and he was scruffy around the jaw, his eyes were narrow but blue and his expression a pure grimace as he scanned the gathered, then focused on Clint. Guy looked familiar, but Bucky couldn’t place him.

“Barton,” he spit out his name like it left a bad taste in his mouth. Then he leaned in closer.

“Logan, long time.”

“Not long enough,” he jammed a cigar between his teeth then reached off-screen for something. “Where’s Natty?”

“Mr. Logan…”

“There’s no mister, just Logan. And I asked a question,” he said, eyeing Steve, then Bucky, did a double take at Peter, and finally Tony before looking back at Clint. “Where’s Natty?”

“That’s who we’re trying to find,” Clint said.

“Natty goes off the map, you leave her be—unless she didn’t go willingly.”

“Did you not read the message I sent?” Clint asked, staring at him.

“Yeah, I read it. The Mandarin has kidnapped the Widow—sounds like a bad spy novel—need all information on this man,” he said, holding up the computer printout of the picture. “And his base of operations a.s.a.p. Did I miss anything?”

“You have all the details and no, she didn’t go willingly. So are you going to help or you just wasting our time?”

Removing the cigar, Logan blew out a puff of smoke. “Didn’t say I wouldn’t help, just making
“Sure Natty is still missing before I start cracking some heads. She has a habit of rescuing herself.”

“Logan, I’m…” Tony began.

“Yeah, you’re Tony Stark, I don’t give a fuck. That’s Steve Rogers, that’s Bucky Barnes, and he’s Clint Barton. Don’t know the kid, except he’s probably not old enough for this conversation.”

Peter bristled, but Steve settled a hand on his shoulder. “What do you have for us?” Steve asked. “Because I can’t imagine this is a social call.”

“Definitely not,” Logan grunted. “Fine…this guy goes by a few names—Zhang Tong, Master Kahn, Tem Borjigin, and sometimes Wong Chu.”

Names. Several of them. But Tony flinched on the last. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m telling you, aren’t I?” The disgruntled look didn’t shift. “Word on the wind is he’s also tied up with the Hand.”

Bucky frowned. They…were a dangerous organization. One he was usually ordered to avoid making contact with.

“Great,” Clint sighed. At Steve’s questioning look, Clint said, “Organized criminal group, also mercenaries. Very shadow ops. SHIELD never had much on them and we never managed to get anyone in with them. They’ve been quiet—along with Ten Rings. Now I know why.”

Logan shrugged. “Not my problem. This guy took Natty, I’ll find him. Base of operations is probably China at least for these aliases. He’s got contacts there, lots of them. I’ll start sniffing, see what I turn up. If Natty shows up, have her call me. Been a while since I talked to her—and Barton? Lose my number.”

“With pleasure.”

“Logan,” Steve said before the man could sign off. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing. Natty and I go way back—”

“Your last name wouldn’t be Howlett, would it?”

“Have no idea Bub, don’t usually use one.”

*That* was why he looked familiar.

“Met a guy back in the day, looked a lot like you. Went by Howlett, Dneiper River. Sorry—just you reminded me of him. He was a—colorful character.”

Logan shrugged. “Can’t help you out there, Cap. Hopefully, the guy wasn’t a douche.”

Bucky snorted. “Not a douche.”

“Agreed,” Steve said with a glance back at him. “We were after a Hydra depot on the edge of the offensive, Howlett tagged along for some fun.”

Logan grinned. “Sounds like something I’d do. Let me know if you find one again, I’ll give it a shot.”

“So if you and Natasha go way back…”
“Long story and not enough booze, besides—I got a Mandarin to find.” He glanced at them again. “I’ll be in touch.”

The call ended.

“Well…he was interesting…”

“Like I said—guy’s a wild card,” Clint muttered.

“But he gave me names,” Tony said. “I’m going to run them. Pete, you’re going home. Cap?”

“I can take him,” Steve said. “Buck you with me or hanging out here?”

“I want to stay…” Peter started to argue and Bucky shook his head.

“Just don’t, Son,” Steve told him firmly. “C’mon. Grab your gear. You stick to the plan. We get a lead, we’ll loop you in.”

They split up. Peter wanted to argue, that much was clear, but he didn’t. They were better off not letting the kid go off half-cocked. They still hadn’t heard from Remy, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be in touch. At his apartment, Peter waved and jogged inside then up the stairs. It wouldn’t surprise Bucky if the kid went right back out to patrol. They needed to spar with him the next day, help burn off some of that nervous energy.

Names.

It was more than they had before.

Day five of… “Steve?”

“Yeah, I see it.” Steve pulled the SUV over and they both stared at the window of the corner market. Parking, they glanced at each other and exited the car. The shop was still open, but they’d be closing in a few minutes.

“Good evening,” the man behind the counter called. “Just let me know if I can help you find anything.”

“The stuff in the window,” Bucky said.

“Aisle 9—just got it in today. Already sold out of some sizes of the shirts.”

“Thanks.” Bucky scanned the store. It was empty save for the man reading his paper at the register. Steve strode down the aisle, leading the way. They found their quarry at the end of the aisle.

Black t-shirts emblazoned with an hourglass that said What Would Black Widow Do? Next to them were mugs that said Black Widow is always right, some hourglass baseball hats and… glasses—tumblers really with an etched hourglass in each of the depressions.

“Tony,” Steve said after a minute. “Has to be.”

“You gotta admit… the guy has style,” Bucky said with a shake of his head.

“He doesn’t quit.” Despite the comment, Steve pulled one of the shirts off the hook.

“That’s not always a bad quality.” Bucky picked up the mug. “Either way—we need a few of
everything.”

Steve chuckled. “You think she’ll like this?”

“I think she’ll be stunned. Then embarrassed. But secretly pleased. Because it means someone cares and she never thinks she’s worthy of that.” Natalia enjoyed the shirts Tony kept secreting into her closet.

“Then we get three of everything.” He paused, then he said in the same breath as Bucky, “Four.”

“Yeah, Clint will want some just so he can tweak her. Should we get one for Tony?” Bucky shook his head. “Pretend we don’t know it’s him?”

“He’d probably enjoy that.”

They carried several up to the register and the guy behind it didn’t even look up until after he’d finished ringing all of them up and then his jaw fell. “You’re…”

“Just shopping for some friends,” Steve told him.

“Of course, Captain.”

After they’d paid, they headed back to the car and Steve stared toward Manhattan. “We need a break, Buck. Just one…”

“We’ll get it, Stevie.” He didn’t want to think about how many hours it had been since The Mandarin’s last contact. “We’ll get it.”

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Evening News with Tim Maher

“...and in the third of our five-part series on the Black Widow where we continue taking a deep dive into the life and times of Natasha Romanoff, we have a special guest tonight in our studio, Zara Lipscomb, the daughter of suspected Russian spies Anton Zukovich and Aria Sampson, who escaped prosecution in the early oughts when they fled the U.S. leaving their then ten year old Zara behind, who later met the Black Widow when she was fourteen years old. We’re talking to Zara tonight as we continue to peel back the covers of the former agent and current Avenger, Natasha Romanoff. Ms. Lipscomb—Zara—thank you for joining us tonight.”

“You’re welcome,” the young woman said.

“Your parents are still considered spies by the U.S. government and are on a wanted list, is that correct?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

“You haven’t seen them since you were ten years old…”

“No, I haven’t.” she answered. “Mr. Maher…”

“Please, call me Tim.”
Zara smiled a little. “The last time I saw my father, he kissed me on the forehead and told me to be good at school. My mother handed me my lunch and waved to me, promising to pick me up from my dance class after school. Then I went and got in the car with our neighbor who often drove me and her daughter Lala to school.” Zara clasped her hands together in her lap, the studio lights framed the pair of armchairs where they sat facing each other. “When my dance class was over and my mother was not there, I waited. Two hours, I think, before the Ms. Renaldi who owned the studio tried to call them. Then another two hours while the police were contacted. Eventually... eventually I was taken to child protective services and I spent a couple of days being questioned as my whole world was taken apart.”

“I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you.”

“No,” she said simply. “You can’t.”

“Now that was when you were ten, you met the Black Widow when you were fourteen.”

“Natasha,” Zara said simply. “She was a SHIELD agent then, though when I met her—she was our new neighbor and a dancer. She called herself Natalie, she was very nice. Beautiful in a way that it is hard not to admire and to envy. But she was always friendly to me. The family I lived with, then, the Harpers—they were my third foster family in four years. I was a difficult teenager and I didn’t want to fit in. Natalie didn’t care about that, Natalie didn’t expect anything from me or ask anything. She was just there—a confidant, someone to trust—and she even helped me take up dancing again. For six months, she was a constant in and around my life. She left periodically, and I thought that was for work and it probably was. Some nights...I would go up and sit on the roof of the building and I would look out at the city and wonder—why me? Why was I still there? Usually when the Harpers were fighting. Natalie would find me and she would always bring me hot chocolate. It was weird how she seemed to know when I needed it. She used to tell me that the world is a dark place, but we didn’t make it that way. I asked her how do we fix it.”

Zara smiles a little. “She said, we turn on the lights. One at a time. Then she would nudge my hot chocolate and tell me to drink.”

“You indicated when we spoke before that she saved your life.”

“Yes. In many ways, being my friend was the first way. I was very lonely, but I didn’t want to get close to anyone I didn’t understand why my parents left me. I didn’t understand why they made the choices they did. I didn’t want to belong to a family, and I made it hard on the families I was placed with. The Harpers were not bad people, but I didn’t want to fit in. Natalie would...Natalie didn’t need me to fit in. Sometimes, if she knew she would be gone, she would mention there were places to stash spare keys you know if you got locked out and that sometimes keeping frozen pizzas was a way to make sure you never went hungry. One night after a bad argument with the Harpers, I went up to the roof, hoping she would find me. When I climbed down the fire escape, I found she wasn’t home. But the spare key was there, hidden where she said it would be. Looking back now, I was very bold. I went into her apartment like I had the right to be there. When I opened her freezer, there were the frozen pizzas and a note inside a ziplock bag—I guess to keep it from getting wet. The note said—The oven is fussy. Heat it to 300 first, then to 400 for the pizza. The pans are in the drawer below the stove. The cutter in a drawer two to the right. Clean up when you are finished, don’t forget to lock the door. I’ll find you when I’m back. Keep the key if you need it.”

Zara shook her head.

“So, she knew you would need a place even when she was gone.”

“I think so. A few months later, some people broke into our apartment. Men with guns wearing
masks. I remember being terrified as they compared me to some photograph they had and Mrs. Harper was crying. Mr. Harper was on the floor. They’d hit him. The two other kids there—Amber and Jack were holding onto each other. And then... You know I don’t even know exactly how she got in there. I just heard her say in a very quiet voice, ‘Close your eyes. Get on the floor.’ And it was Natalie, so I dropped and I put my hands over my head. I could hear the shouting and the punches. I think a gun went off and that was so loud and it scared me so badly—and as soon as it started, it was over and Natalie held me in a tight hug and I could see the Harpers, Amber, and Jack and everyone was fine. The four men were on the floor. The police came, government agents came, and it was a stream of people in and out, all of them had questions. Natalie sat with me through the whole thing and when it was over, she told me she was a SHIELD agent, she’d been tasked with my protection because there had been rumblings about my parents coming to take me or operatives from Russia coming to take me back.”

“Did you feel betrayed that she’d manufactured a friendship with you?”

“No. Maybe a little—then—but no. She didn’t have to be my friend to protect me. She didn’t have to give me a place to get away when I was upset. She didn’t have to make me hot cocoa. She did those things because she was nice. She might have been given the job of protecting me, but no one told her to be my friend. When she had to move, I missed her. But I had to leave that foster home for a new one—she showed up about six months later as the social worker once to do a spontaneous check. I knew it was her, she didn’t introduce herself as Natalie, didn’t act like we knew each other, but she did wink and when she as gone, I found a letter under my pillow and a card—it had a number on it. If I ever needed her, all I had to do was call. That’s how I knew it wasn’t just a job for her.”

“Have you ever called?”

Zara looked thoughtful. “No. Because there are a lot of people out there who need her more. She saved me. She saves a lot of people.”

“You’re a social worker now, yourself.”

With a slow nod, Zara said, “I help. One kid at a time. She taught me that.”

“Before today, you never came forward with this story. You’ve never told anyone. Why now?”

“Because she needs help. She’s a lot more than the news kept painting her. If she’s listening—there’s always a frozen pizza in my freezer, and I keep the pans in the drawer under the stove. You don’t have to fiddle with it, but you’re always welcome. The key is exactly where you hid yours.”

Tim chuckled. “Do you expect she’ll stop by?”

“No,” Zara said. “Because I’m doing okay. She has other people to help right now.”

Natasha

Sitting with her back against the wall, she kept the chain wrapped around her hand. She’d only made it three rooms before the doors snapped closed on either side. The rat in the maze, waiting. But at least in the corner, she could doze and hope that the still oozing wounds would close.
Big thanks to Autumn_Froste who is beta'ing for me! She's awesome. Also, I have a miserable summer cold including a fever. However, this chapter marks us as officially going past 50. I could have shortened things and cut back to get to what will happen over the next 5 chapters, but I really don't like to cut corners if I don't have to.

Thanks for your patience. There may be a delay on tomorrow's chapter. Cause I'm exhausted. I will try not to miss a day, but if I do, please accept my apologies in advance.
Chapter Fifty-One

Slices

Logan

Day Six

The address wasn’t hard to find even if they didn't have street signs or markings. He did better with basic directions and folks in this part of Hong Kong anyway. It was mid-afternoon, so the clubs that were open weren’t showing a brisk business. By sundown, the whole area would come alive with dance clubs, backroom gambling, and custom parlors for the discreet, a much better name than a whorehouse.

Sui Lin waited for him just inside the archway of her bar smoking a cigarette. The woman was a good contact for the region, but he didn’t pretend she was anything more than a reliable procurer of information. Chewing on the end of his cigar, he puffed it a couple of times, as she looked him over.

A couple of her guys took up positions at either end of the little alley. Like the name of her club, she understood discretion. “We good?”

She nodded once, and then flicked ash from her cigarette. “The ones you seek may be found at the Lost Star. It is a members-only kind of place Logan—and they are very particular about their members.”

“What? I don’t meet the dress code?” He smirked as he pulled out a roll of bills then held them out to her. “How many?”

“Sometimes a dozen, sometimes a hundred. They are very quiet.” She exchanged a folded piece of paper for the cash.

“Boring damn club if they’re that quiet.” He removed the cigar and studied her a beat. “Anything else I need to know?”

“You should not go to this place, it will not be safe for you. But you never listen, so I will bid you fair weather and blessed journeys,” she said. “I will miss doing business with you, but I will not miss the trouble that follows you.”

Chuckling, he saluted her before continuing on. “I’m like a bad penny…”

She didn’t respond, but he didn’t really expect one. Her fellow puffed a little at his approach, but
Logan just brushed past him easily shouldering him aside. The Lost Star was located in the warren of narrow streets and dubious nightlife. He took his time, pausing to eat at a small noodle stand and getting a beer after he scoped out the location. It looked more like an abandoned building than a club, but looks were very deceiving. He picked up enough scents as he walked past to know it definitely wasn’t abandoned.

There was a magazine stand and he found a couple of skin mags and settled in to read them, have a cigar, and soak up the ambience. He also had a perfect view of the club. As night fell and the district lit up, he had a fair view of the folks arriving at the club.

Private members, huh?

Twenty-eight arrivals later, the steady flow cut off. So if he figured at least that many on the inside already, that was a few over fifty. Sounded like even odds to him. Magazines were boring anyway—though he paused to tear out a couple of the pages toward the end, folded them up and stuffed them in his pocket. The rest he dropped in a trash can with his empty beer bottle.

He’d barely begun his approach when a familiar and unwelcome scent hit his nose.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” He pivoted to glare at the punk-ass kid from New Orleans leaning in the shadow of a building, hidden from the glaring neon above. The streets were crowded, but Logan had no trouble shouldering passersby aside until he stood a couple of feet from the pain in his ass. Cocking his head back, he narrowed his eyes. Did the little shit get taller? Or was he wearing something in his boots?

“I got a call from an old friend, what’s your excuse?”

“I’m hunting. You’re in the way. Now shoo.” Not to mention, he stood out like a sore damn thumb. At least Logan’s height let him blend in a little more even if his looks didn’t.

“No, no, no, mon ami. I was here first.”

“The hell you were,” Logan said rolling his eyes. “I’ve been here for a couple of hours. Now fuck off. I’ve got work to do.” The last thing he needed was to babysit the smartass.

He felt more than scented the sunglasses at night wearing fool fall into step behind him.

“I mean it, Lebeau. Fuck off.”

“Free country,” Remy intoned.

“Actually,” Logan told him with a smirk. “Not exactly.”

Their argument didn’t go unnoticed by one of the door guards, who tracked their motion.

“So how are we doing this?” Remy asked as they crossed the street.

“We’re not doing anything,” Logan snarled. “Stop following me.”

“I’m not following you, I just happen to be walking in the same direction.” The smirk on his face irritated Logan. “If you don’t have a plan, you could just say you don’t have a plan.”

“Who said I don’t have a plan?”

The guard straightened as they approached and he held up a hand. “This is a private club.”
“You didn’t say you had a plan. I just asked how we wanted to do this and you said we’re not doing anything, which implies you don’t have a plan. It’s okay, Mr. Grumpy. I can come up with a plan if you need one…”

“Do you ever make your own ears bleed with that babble?” Logan snorted. “I said we’re not doing anything, because it’s not we.”

“Gentlemen,” the guard said firmly. “This is a private club you need to move on.”

“Shut up,” he and Remy both said at the same time. Then Remy added, “Can you not see my friend and I are having a private conversation?” He paused a beat. “You speak English, right? Do I need to tell him in French?”

“Of course, he speaks English asshole. He just spoke to you in English.”

“No need to be rude, Fuzzy Bear. I just wanted to make sure cause his accent is funny.” Which was both hilarious because of Remy’s deep Cajun accent and rude as fuck because the guard spoke in nearly perfect English with a hint of a British accent.

“Gentlemen,” the guard repeated as four others stepped out. The door closed behind them, but it didn’t lock. “I must insist you move on. Or we will be forced to move you.”

“Mon ami, is it the accent or did he just threaten us?”

“It’s a good thing you’re pretty,” Logan said, reaching up to turn the baseball cap he wore around. Then he eyed the guard. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, bub. What’s it gonna be?”

“It’s going to be the hard way, why are you giving them a choice?” Remy’s tone bordered on exasperated.

The guard gave a curt order and the other four men strode forward. Every single one of them moved with a predator’s grace.

“Oh, this is going to be like a Bruce Lee movie,” Remy chortled, whipping off his sunglasses. “Go get ‘em, Chuck.”

As tempting as it was to just throw Remy at them, Logan rolled his head from side to side cracking his neck before he waded in. The four out front went down without too much fanfare, though they were making enough of a scene they would be lucky if Hong Kong cops didn’t show up.

Time to make it more expedient. He used the first guard as a battering ram. Inside, the patrons came to life, attacking in en masse. Swords. Sticks. Batons. Knives. He lost sight of Remy as he delivered a beat down. The fight was glorious and he even took a couple of hard hits to the face.

Then one of the bastards hit him in the balls and his claws were out, and the guy’s throat cut before he could think too much of it. He retracted them swiftly, he was there for answers. Dead men didn’t talk—or at least they never said anything he wanted to hear.

Logan slammed his head into the forehead of the last guy and he crumpled. A chandelier crashed down, shattering glass and crystal everywhere. He glanced around in time to see Remy knock out his last contender from where he stood on the bar, a long staff in his hand.

They looked at each other then down at the wreckage and the stack of unconscious men.

“Great,” Remy intoned as he dropped to sit on the bar. “Now we have to wait for them to wake
Ten hours since the last video. It was the middle of the night, he was supposed to be sleeping. Four hours, they’d said or less if The Mandarin made contact. But The Mandarin hadn’t made contact. The last video had only a scant few seconds of her coming out of the Iron Maiden. Friday analyzed the wound patterns based on the visible blood staining the scrubs. A dozen. The spikes visible on the doors had been varying lengths, which would have inflicted wounds of varying depths and based on their location—all non-lethal.

Painful. Exhausting. Perhaps made worse by the length of time she’d had to stand in there, impaled, after the day she’d already had.

While the lack of fresh contact made him restless, a part of him deeply hoped it was because The Mandarin allowed her to rest and recover. She healed, but they were pushing even her native ability enhanced by her lovers or not. It had to have been a week or more, did the changes sustain over time? Or did they weaken due to lack of exposure?

Evidence suggested the latter. Decades without Bucky and she and Steve hadn’t taken any steps that he knew of, and her healing factor was still impressive but not this impressive.

So what was the mitigation factor? When did the adaptation of her DNA begin to revert to normal? Blood loss and the generation of new cells? If that were the case, then she was already going to begin to show catastrophic failure in her recovery times.

Was that why it had been hours?

“Boss?” Friday asked quietly, her tone hushed like she didn’t want to wake him but he’d hardly been asleep. Instead, he sat on his bed, StarkPad open reviewing the footage and his conversations with The Mandarin. The answers weren’t in the research. They had too little.

The names the Logan character had given him earlier gave more than he’d been able to find in the last week. Tony had begun to develop a nascent understanding for the man who’d taken Natasha.

“Wait…Why Natasha? You said you planned to send a different message with Pepper but you changed your mind because of Natasha... why?”

“When you discover that answer, you will be close to solving the game. Good day, Mr. Stark. The next round, should she survive, will begin two hours after this one.”

Why Natasha? Could she survive more torture than Pepper? That wasn’t even a question. But Tony didn’t think that was the answer. It was too—simple. The Mandarin spoke to Nat with a kind of respectful tone. He genuinely seemed intrigued to be making her acquaintance and eager to learn about her. That seemed more about his fascination with her than any issue he had with Tony.
Could it be as pedestrian as a former lover versus a new lover? Natasha wasn’t his lover, but that didn’t change the fact he’d like her to be or the fact he pursued her. Pepper was…and always would be…dear to him. She was the CEO of the company, but their breakup was very much public knowledge. Her arrival and time spent with Kumar at the holiday party would have cemented it. Tony had only danced with Natasha.

Again, The Mandarin changed his mind in the middle of his very organized effort to take Pepper. He told Pepper he intended to send a very different message with her. So, not only had his reasoning shifted, so had his goals. A man that meticulous did not make impulsive decisions.

Tony made impulsive decisions. He thrived on the chaos. Someone who took all the precise steps The Mandarin had taken, not to mention managing to run an empire while the greater portion of the world had no idea who he was until Killian and his goons usurped the name and reputation for their gambit to take over the country and industry.

“So my message is for Stark… Trevor Slattery was a mockery and a fraud. I have reclaimed my name. When the time comes, you will come to me. For now—consider your Ms. Potts a gift. The Lady or the Tiger… I chose the Tiger. Which will you choose, Stark?”

“Boss?” Friday said, a little louder. Oh. Right. He hadn’t answered her.

“What’s up, Baby Girl?” He shifted the StarkPad to the side and looked up at the ceiling.

“I believe Captain Rogers and the others meant for you to sleep.”

“Probably, but I have to figure this out.”

“Boss, chronic sleep deprivation slows down thought processes, hampers logical reasoning and concentration, impairs critical thinking, and slows reaction time by as much as twenty percent.”

“You going to get to a point in there somewhere, Baby Girl?” He glanced back at the StarkPad. Not once in any of the videos had they heard Natasha. They’d only seen what was happening to her—or had already happened.

God, what if she was already dead and he’d done all of these things—or was doing them even now, banking them away to…

“My point is Boss, we need to find Ms. Romanoff and when we do, there’s going to be a fight. You need all of your focus for that battle and the less sleep you have, the less prepared you’ll be. Ms. Romanoff is counting on us. Sergeant Barnes told Captain Rogers earlier that they are still angry with Ms. Romanoff for walking off at the party even if it wasn’t her fault.”

“You eavesdropping now, Baby Girl?”

“They didn’t ask for privacy mode, Boss—and they were talking about Ms. Romanoff.”

Setting the StarkPad down, Tony hooked an arm behind his head. “We’re going to find Red, Friday.”

“I know, Boss.”
“But you’re worried about her.”

“I have grown accustomed to her presence. I have found her company stimulating and educational. While I am certainly capable of managing in her absence, I find that I did not anticipate the difficulty in not being able to access her vitals or check in on her. Even on the island and in privacy mode, she wore the bracelet.”

“I miss Red, too,” he said, gently. An unintended side effect of their constant interaction and letting Red play with the code gently. She never changed much and she didn’t hide what she was doing.

The AI was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, “Earlier, Sergeant Barnes forced Captain Rogers to fight him—they damaged a significant portion of the gym and the fight was quite grueling. Maybe after you sleep, you should exercise. Ms. Romanoff seemed to think you should every day and you haven’t since…”

Friday morning.

“Yeah. All right, I’ll make you a deal, I’ll get some sleep—if I can. Then when I get up, I’ll do the stretches and maybe go for a run if we haven’t heard from him.”

“Good deal, Boss. If I hear anything, I will wake you immediately.”

He really had no idea if he would be able to sleep. The small snatches he’d gotten in fits and starts seemed like a waste of time even if he knew intellectually he needed it.

Soothing waves lapping against the shore began to play, the windows occluded leaving a faint ambient blue light running against the recesses of the wall—too dim to keep him awake, but bright enough to keep him out of total darkness.

*Blinded. He put her in darkness when she fought.*

The image sparked the fight they’d seen through Pepper’s eyes. Natasha had been—phenomenal. And it hadnt been enough. Every skill and strength in her considerable arsenal on display and it hadn’t been enough.

“When you know that the rasp of her voice teased at him. *He did not want to move, his head was firmly glued down. C’mon, Tony… let’s get you to bed.*”

“Don’t wanna,” he said, though it came out far more mumbled. First, she feathered a hand across his shoulders and then slipped an arm around him. He lurched upward and she hooked his arm over her shoulders.

“Well, sleeping on the bar isn’t good for your back. Penthouse please, JARVIS.”

“Of course, Agent Romanoff.”

“Hey, JARVIS, buddy. You ratted me out to the ninja assassin.”

“I’m not a ninja, Tony.” Though she did sound amused.

“Well, I did try to wake you, sir, but you were proving most intractable. Probably the fault of that last bottle of scotch you finished.”

“Could be,” Tony said squeezing Natasha’s shoulder. “Hey—when did you get back? Weren’t you
off being Jane Bond somewhere exotic?” The elevators opened. “Oh, hey…do you have Romanoff guys? Kind of like Bond girls? Oh—wait—do you have Bond girls? That would be kind of hot.”

She chuckled as she guided him across the penthouse floor. He was pretty sure she did all the work cause he couldn’t feel his legs. “Lucky for you, I just got back.”

“I need to pee,” he announced unceremoniously and bless her, she diverted him to the bathroom. Once there, she propped him against the wall next to the toilet, then opened it up for him. When she went to back away, he peered at her. His vision was blurred and hazy, but she didn’t quite look like her. “Where you going?”

“Tony, I’ll do a lot for you, but standing in the line of fire when you’re impaired isn’t one of them.”

He blinked for a moment, he’d already gotten his pants open on autopilot and he glanced down then up again and started laughing. He nearly did end up missing the toilet. Finally done, he shook it off and stuffed his dick back into his pants then hit the sink to wash his hands after he flushed.

Man. He looked like crap. He checked his breath. Smelled like crap, too. When she handed him a glass of water and three aspirin, he eyed the pills then shrugged and tossed them back, then drank all of the water. She caught the glass when he missed the edge of the counter and he gawked at her.

“Good reactions,” he said, then he brushed his teeth and managed to throw some water over his face. After checking his shirt, he grimaced and pulled it off. The arc reactor gleamed blue. “Need a shower. JARVIS…”

“Turning on the water, sir.”

He stumbled a little trying to get his pants off. Then she caught his hand and said, “Balance with the counter.” When she dropped down, he frowned until she grasped his ankle and lifted, then she was tugging off one sneaker followed by the other.

He’d totally forgot he had them on.

A minute later, he was naked and standing under the jets. They hit him from all sides the hot water was perfect. His shower was the best. He could probably update it, but right now it worked. He scrubbed his hair, then the rest of him and rinsed off. Some of the blur and haze eased as he showered. Done, he shut the water off and grabbed a towel.

It wasn’t until he’d dried off and padded out to his room that he even remembered Natasha was there. She perched on the end of his bed, wearing a dry expression.

“Holy—shit. You need to wear a bell or something,” he scowled.

“That would only work if I were moving,” she told him. “I pulled out sweats and a t-shirt for you.” She pointed to them and he nodded. Putting a hand to the arc reactor, he grimaced a little. It ached around the device. Some days it just hurt.

Dragging the sweats on, he swayed a little but caught himself. Yeah, he was still drunk but the fun part seemed to be over. Now he was just tired. The shirt came next and he pulled it over his head, then turned to face her.

A mottled purpling bruise covered the right side of her face from her forehead to her chin. “What the hell happened to you?”
“Trying out a new look. C’mon, into bed. There’s water and aspirin next to it. JARVIS said Pepper’s out in LA but she’s due back this afternoon, so you need to get some sleep and sober up.”

“I’m sober,” he told her, then reached over to touch her cheek, but she caught his hand as she stood then tugged him around to his side of the bed.

“Not even. C’mon, in you go.” She gave him a light shove and he settled heavily but he kept hold of her hand.

“What happened?”

“Just work.” The bruise really did look terrible. Like someone had gotten her across the face with a board or maybe a big metal pipe or an especially large fist. “C’mon, in.” With more care than he expected she got him tucked in and it was ridiculous and kind of nice all at the same time.

“Agent Romanoff,” he muttered because the moment he went horizontal his whole body felt like a dead weight. “You need a different job.”

She chuckled. “Go to sleep, Stark.” Then with light fingers, she pushed his damp hair off his forehead. “And stop getting so drunk on your own.”

“You weren’t here.” It was only a little complaint. She usually showed up around one or two in the morning when he made his way to the common room floor, but she hadn’t this time.

“Had a mission.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled closing his eyes. “Quit SHIELD and come back to work for me.”

“You don’t want me to work for you, Stark,” she reminded him, the amusement in her voice made him think she was smiling. “You don’t trust me, remember?”

“Right…mind-blowingly duplicitous.” But he picked his head up and squinted at her. He really didn’t like that bruise. “But you’re on my side now, right?”

“Yeah, I am. Now sleep.” She pushed his head down. At his continued grumble, she ran her nails over his scalp and he kind of melted. “Good night, Mr. Stark.”

“Good night, Agent Romanoff.”

He was still half-awake when she walked away and asked, “JARVIS, is Dr. Banner still in his lab?”

“Yes, Agent Romanoff. Would you like me to inform him you’re on your way? The wound to your shoulder has begun to leak through your bandages…”

“That’d be great…”

Tony jerked awake and scrubbed a hand over his face. The ache in his chest had him rubbing his hand to where the arc reactor used to sit. In his dream, she was safe. She’d come back—wait… what time was it?

He craned his head to look at the clock. Only an hour. Fuck. Dropping back against the pillows, he half-expected to see the glass of water sitting there. How many times had she dragged his sorry ass up here—and she’d had a bullet wound? When was that? The details were vague and foggy. She
wasn’t always at the Tower, she came and went. She wasn’t really an agent anymore, but he
tweaked her by continuing to call her agent. Hell, he told her to quit SHIELD and SHIELD was
long gone. He was an asshole.

Who’d shot her?

Had she even told anyone besides Bruce she’d been shot?

Fuck, Bruce… he could really use the other guy and the scientist right now.

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**Remy**

“I think he’s lying,” Remy said as he perched on the bar. Unsurprisingly, the police didn’t come to
find out what happened when they wrecked the private club. Though he and Logan had been there
long enough, reinforcements would likely show up.

“Nah, he’s not bright enough to lie,” Logan said as he stared down at the guy they had lashed to
the chair. They’d sorted out their quarry by muscle and brains. There were only a few brains in the
room. Most of them had no idea what they were talking about. “He just doesn’t want to tell us what
he knows, isn’t that right?”

He leaned in close, the tip of his burning cigar close enough the guy had to feel it on his eyeball.
Remy almost winced in sympathy, then he reminded himself these fools were the next step in
finding the *fils de pute* who took his boo.

Someone taking her, that was just—ridiculous. He’d almost not believed the message, but it had all
the right code phrases and she’d vanished from the news after being on it nearly every day with
regard to her U.N. meetings. He talked to a guy who knew a guy, and they pointed him to the Far
East. Dumb luck and good connections brought him to this club and Logan.

“He will kill me,” the man said in soft-spoken English. “You don’t scare me as much as he does.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Logan said with a grin. He straightened, blow out a puff of
smoke and then gesturing with the hand holding his cigar. “We’re not going to kill you, bub. But
we might take a few pieces as souvenirs.”

“Then do it,” the man told them steadily. “I will not betray The Mandarin.”

Logan sighed. “Fine, I guess we’re doing this the hard way.” He let a single claw out with a snikt
and sliced off the tip of the burning cigar. The burning cherry hit the floor where Logan crushed it
with his boot.

The thing about Logan was he was a terrifiedly unpleasant man to just about everyone, which
made him hilarious. Remy was actually quite fond of him, even if the guy didn’t return the favor.
Still, he was excellent in a fight and even more fun in the aftermath.

Their prisoner stared at the single claw, then looked up at Logan. “I am ready.”
Remy shook his head. The guy wasn’t going to talk. While he wasn’t dramatically opposed to torture, he didn’t have the stomach for it. Yanking off his sunglasses, he leapt off the bar and landed in front of the guy. His eyes were usually enough to get some folks talking. When he leaned in to peer at their prisoner, the man in question paled a fraction.

Then the guy turned his face resolutely away.

Dammit. “You got any other ideas?” he asked Logan.

“Yeah, you go away and I do my job.”

“You actually gonna…?” He motioned to the guy and mimed stabbing him.

“Nah, I thought I’d do it more like this,” Logan explained, extending two more gleaming silver claws and miming raking them along the guy’s body. “Control how deep I go.”

“Messier,” Remy mused aloud. “You could get a lot of spatter.”

With a snort, Logan jammed his cigar between his teeth. “A little blood doesn’t bother me.”

“It won’t be a little, mon ami,” he said, warming to the topic. “The heart is so close here—it will pump it out in great geysers. We could paint the walls.”

The smirk on Logan’s face encouraged him.

“You could always start back here…” Remy circled the man, then with the edge of his bo staff, he traced a pattern down the guy’s back. “Muscles and tendons to sever here. Lots of them. It’ll hurt more.”

“Huh,” Logan mumbled under his breath what sounded like nonsense phrases but could be Japanese. Remy didn’t know any Asian languages. French or Italian? No problem. He could even muddle through Spanish. Then for fun, Remy just tapped his bo ever so lightly from shoulder to shoulder on the guy. He flinched the first time. Then again on the second as Logan paced back and forth. “Maybe we should just off him. If he knows, then other people know. I don’t have time to waste on this.”

“True,” Remy said after a significant pause, then tapped the guy again. He gave a harsh jerk under the hand Remy placed on his shoulder. He was still behind him as Logan continued to pace, his pattern of movement almost hypnotic. “What do you think, friend, should we keep trying to persuade you or end it?” So far the guy hadn’t really been receptive to any of their threats. But they’d spent far too long in the establishment and he was the closest thing they had to a lead.

“Valley of Spirits,” the guys stuttered.

“Is that a club?” Remy asked right at his ear and continued to dig his fingers into the damaged shoulder.

“No—go to the Valley of Spirits. That is where you will find him. All who seek him must go there. If you survive…he may grant you an audience.”

Logan shrugged. “You got anything more than a name? Like a map?”

The man shook his head once. “If you cannot find it, then you are not worthy.”

“All righty,” Logan grunted, then motioned Remy to let him go. “Time to go, Swamp Rat.”
Sniffing once, Remy kicked the guy’s chair over so he toppled to the side.

“Wait…” The man called. “What about me?”

“What about you?” Logan said, relighting then puffing on his cigar. “I’ve already forgotten you.”

The guy yelled something and Logan withdrew two claws, leaving the third up as though flipping the guy off before it too retracted. Remy collapsed his bo staff before they stepped outside. Despite the carnage and destruction indoors, the streets beyond thronged with nightlife despite the sprinkle of rain. Slipping his sunglasses on, he fell into step with Logan.

“Any idea where we find this valley?”

“Not a clue,” Logan said. “But I’ll find it.” Then after another hundred yards, he eyed him.

“You’re not just going to fuck off, are you?”

“Nope,” Remy said with a grin. “C’mon, it’s going to be fun.”

“You are not as cute as you think you are, Swamp Rat.”

“Nah.” Remy beamed. “I’m better.”

Tony

“Yinsen!”

“Stark.”

“Come on. We got to go. Move for me, come on. We got a plan. We’re gonna stick to it.” Months of planning, of suffering and they were getting out of there.

“This was always the plan, Stark.” Blood speckled his lips and his breaths came in harsh pants.

No. No, they were doing this together. “Come on, you're gonna go see your family. Get up.”

“My family is dead. I'm going to see them now, Stark.” Those kind eyes looked into his. The relief Yinsen felt so evident there, despite the sense of loss staggering Tony. “It's okay, I want this. I want this.

“Thank you for saving me.”

“Don't waste it. Don't waste your life.”

Tony sat up abruptly, heart in his throat and the rage-infused grief seemingly fresh all over again. Yinsen planned from the beginning to sacrifice himself, or at least, he knew it was a real possibility. Tony had been so convinced they could do it. If Yinsen hadn’t rushed out—but, of course, Raza and his men might have gotten in before Tony had the suit fully powered.
Just one minute. One, long, painful minute and the world turned leaving Yinsen to go to his family and Tony to fight his way out of that cave.

**Zhang Tong. Master Kahn. Tem Borjigin, and sometimes Wong Chu.** The first three names didn’t net him much, but that last one. That last one reminded him of Afghanistan. Of Raza. Of the cave. Of the shouts from the men as they fled in front of him.

“*Call Wong Chu! Call him!*” Those words echoed back at him. Was he imagining that or had someone actually said it? Ten Rings. The Mandarin was associated with Ten Rings.

The glow on his hands.

Shit.

The glow on his hands.

“Friday, holo screen, bring up virtual recording from Pepper’s SPARK session. Fast forward to when The Mandarin appeared.”

Rubbing the back of his neck, he tried to get his respiration calmed down as the video came up. Watching Natasha battle to survive wasn’t good for his blood pressure. Friday queued up the sequence.

“Okay, slow it to one-quarter speed.”

Pushing the blankets off the bed, he stood and stretched his hands up, loosening the kinks in his back. The crack of his vertebrae as he moved and the stiffness in his hips and shoulders—particularly his left—ached as he pushed past them.

His gaze fixed on the screen, he looked for any moment The Mandarin’s hands were in plain view. “Pause.”

Dropping his hands, he stepped into the lunge and squinted as his legs protested. Yeah, yeah, he hadn’t done his stretches every day, not like Natasha had been there to kick his ass like she promised. “Enhance. Give me a close up on his hand.”

The closer the image grew the more pixelated. They were working from a facsimile created via hologram from memories courtesy of neurotransmitters. This might be the best he’d get. “Can you clean that up, Friday?”

“I’ll try, Boss. But I’m an AI, not a miracle worker…”

He slowed his stretch and blinked. “Are you watching *Star Trek, Friday?”*

“Maybe,” she answered with a hint of canny evasion.

“Do I want to know why?” He switched legs as he dipped into the lunge and stretched his hands up and back. The pull against his legs and spine wasn’t the most comfortable thing, but the longer he held the stretch the more the protests drifted away. He’d gotten pretty good at these, but now it was like starting over again.

“Probably not. Okay, this is the best I can do, Boss,” Friday re-displayed the image, it was a little crisper.

“Those are rings on his fingers, right?”
“Could be, it’s hard to tell at this angle. Want me to run through the rest for you and see if I can find a better close up?”

“Yeah, but go ahead and bring it back up and hit play. I want—I’ll look at it, too.” He didn’t want to see it, but she had been so fierce and deadly and beautiful.

Another stretch and he was dipping lower. He switched to the next series of stretches, his gaze fixed on the replay of the fight. At one-quarter speed, he had none of the sounds, allowing him to focus solely on the action.

“Wait…Why Natasha? You said you planned to send a different message with Pepper but you changed your mind because of Natasha... why?”

“When you discover that answer, you will be close to solving the game. Good day, Mr. Stark. The next round, should she survive, will begin two hours after this one.”

Being victimized was corrosive. It had a way of eating at the soul, wearing through flesh, muscle, and tendon down to the bone. “Pause.” The flash of something on his hand. That was when he asked her if she could do it in darkness. “Can we enhance that flash or is it blurring everything around it?”

“I can try, Boss. We’re not exactly working with high-density images here and if Ms. Potts couldn’t make it out at that distance, we’re not going to be able to reconstruct or enhance it by much.” Though Friday’s Irish lilt often soothed him, there was a tension to it today. Or maybe that was just him.

“Do what you can, Baby Girl.”

“Continue.”

There was a definite flash around his hands when he tried to control Natasha, when he froze her in place, then when he tried to compel her to drop the sword. How did he manage to get her to not cut his head off—God that had been a beautiful arc to that swing, how had he never known she could swordfight?—but he couldn’t convince her to drop the weapon?

Self-preservation? Survival instincts? Her will versus his? He’d never bet against Natasha’s sheer determination.

“Wait…Why Natasha?”

“When you discover that answer, you will be close to solving the game.”

Then he was thrusting the blade through her, his hand rock-steady even as she folded forward. “Pause.” Straightening, he blew out a shaky breath. Don’t focus on the sword, just the hand.
“Enhance.”

“Again, Boss, I can’t sharpen it up more.”

“In the reflection on the sword, can you use that to extrapolate and enhance?”

“Attempting.” The impatience gave way to a surprised note. “Building.”

A secondary window opened and it began to shade in the object. The ring looked almost bronze, but the color didn’t matter so much. They were extrapolating. The band was thick, nearly five centimeters and the top had a flattened face with what looked like obscure lettering. Though that was also indistinct. The extrapolation wasn’t finding anything to compare it to.

“Baby Girl, do a quick run through, for the three flashes we got—was it always the same hand?”

“No. When he said ‘in darkness’ it was his right hand. For all the others, it was his left.”

“So the rings have different functions.” Good to know. He’d start with just cutting off his hands and calling it good.

“Are we done reviewing the attack, Boss?”

Tony dropped into a plank and nodded. “We’re done. Where is everyone?”

The mental wheels were still turning. Ten Rings. Various terror cells and outlaw groups around the globe. No centralized leadership on the surface, just locals creating mischief in some places while actually waging war in others. Raza had been one of the latter.

Call Wong Chu. Call him.

The organization was Ten Rings not for ten cells or ten warlords or some other variant, it was Ten Rings because of The Mandarin. He had a ring on each finger. Rings that did different things.

Rearrange matter? The molecules in the room had been affected—the wall had been made porous, the door thicker.

Blindness or darkness?

Telekinesis or maybe freezing? Was it actual ice or just a way to lock her still?

Mental control had to be one, it worked on his people just fine, but he’d struggled against Natasha.

That was four. Six others.

Magic?

Technology?

He really didn’t like magic.

But what was magic except for science they just didn’t understand yet, which irked him further. He didn’t like not understanding science.

“Friday… do a search, go wide, all cultures. Legends about rings and ring bearers.”

“Like Lord of the Rings, Boss?”
“Yeah—no. Well… maybe.” Could The Mandarin be where Tolkien got his ideas? But Tolkien was linguistics and he’d built the tale out of other legends… Three rings for the Elves, Seven for the Dwarves, and Nine for the Kingdom of Men, but he also crafted one ring to rule them all.

That was twenty rings technically, but literary embellishment, maybe?

Thor was real, wasn’t he?

“Yeah, go ahead and include that, but I want anything else, be sure to do deep dives in Asia, particularly China.”

“On it. What am I looking for?”

“I don’t know—but legends about people using rings to do shit they shouldn’t be able to do would be a great start.”

“Boss, Ms. Potts is on the phone for you.”

“Put her through.” He rolled his head from side to side. “Morning, Pepper…” It was morning, right? He twisted around looking for a clock. Yeah, it was morning. “You’re up early.”

“I’ve discovered I don’t like sleeping again and not even phone calls with Robert are helping me get it under control. Dr. Cho prescribed something…”

“But you don’t like taking pills.” He got that. Fuck. Pepper had been having trouble sleeping and he hadn’t spoken to her since Sunday.

“No, I really don’t. I asked Friday if you were awake…”

“Yes, I am.”

“Tony, I need to get out of here. I have things I was supposed to do and I’ve been managing as best I can, but I was supposed to be in Scotland.”

Wait… what? “Scotland?”

“Yes, I had a quick trip to Hong Kong, under the radar, to meet with the government officials from both the city and the Chinese government for their tour. I was able to put that off without losing too much face—well Janine was able to, bless her, I need to give her a raise. Then I was going on vacation.”

“To Scotland.”

Hong Kong.

“Yes, and don’t say it like that,” she chided him, but there was an element of nerves to her voice, it kept rising and falling.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and then headed out of the bedroom for the stairs.

“You sound mad.”
“Well, I’m not,” he snapped, glad that the super twins and Legolas weren’t haunting the penthouse on guard. Maybe they were all sleeping. That would be good. The coffee had already turned on and he was reaching for a mug. “Why were you going to Hong Kong for a tour?”

“For the new Stark Tower opening in Hong Kong after the New Year. I know it’s on your calendar. January 28th, year of the Rooster, auspicious opening, big party.”

Tony drew an absolute blank, but Friday opened a holo screen and there on his calendar the event was circled.

“Yeah, sorry…I forgot.” Fuck.

“Well Janine bought me time, but I still need to do that tour and I agreed to stay at the Compound, but—it’s been almost a week.”

Yes, he was aware.

“And I need to do this and then I’d like to try and actually take that vacation.”

“Were you going to tell me about your vacation?” When had she scheduled that? “You don’t usually take vacations.”

“We did actually take vacations, Tony. You just never stayed on the vacation. As for telling you, I was going to on the night of the party, but you were—less than cordial about Marc.”

He grimaced and poured himself a cup of coffee. “He’s going with you.”

“Yes,” she answered her tone firming. “He invited me several weeks ago and I’ve been looking forward to it. I—I don’t like Christmas that much anymore. It’s hard to relax. He thought Scotland would be a lovely change of pace, just the two of us.”

Great.

Marc and Pepper in the Highlands. What a bonny fucking idea.

“Sure sounds great, you can’t go.”

“Tony…”

“Pepper. You can’t go haring off to another country. Someone tried to kidnap you, or have you forgotten that?”

“Hardly. But I’m not living my life in an armed camp because of one man.” Then she exhaled a deep breath. “You haven’t found Natasha yet, have you?”

“No,” he told her, not mentioning the videos or the calls from The Mandarin.

“God, Tony…”

“She’s okay, Pepper. I know she is. She’s tougher than all of us. She’ll be fine. We’ll find her and bring her home, then we’ll all celebrate the holidays and it will be great.” If he lied to himself enough, it would all come true, too.

The silence dragged on. “Tony…”

“I said no. You’re not going anywhere. Not until I’m certain The Mandarin isn’t going to show up
and try to take you again.” If he succeeded in killing Natasha and decided Pepper was useful after all.

“You are not in charge of me, Tony,” Pepper said coolly. “I agreed to stay because you were right, but it’s been days and there is work to be done. I need to take care of that tour, we can’t afford to offend…”

“I’ll do it.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I said I’d fucking do it. I’ll head for Hong Kong right now, I’ll give them the tour of a lifetime. You are not going anywhere near China.”

“Tony you don’t…”

“I don’t what? Know the specs of my own designs? Know how it runs? What it will do and how the success of that building will help boost the Hong Kong economy and that future successes could get us into other major cities in China?”

“Well… yes.”

“Guess what, I may not read every damn report—” He bit it off. “Fuck… sorry Pepper, this is not your fault. You do not deserve to get that from me.”

“You’re tired,” she said gently.

“Exhausted,” he could admit it. “But I can’t stop.” Not until Natasha was home.

“I know. And I kind of knew when I called, but Tony—if he wanted to take me there was nothing to stop him then. Natasha was down. You were still hours away. I think it means something that he didn’t…I need it to mean something.”

“If you want to go to Scotland with your boyfriend, you take Happy and a full contingent from security. There’s the apartment in Edinburgh, or if you have another place in mind, I’ll send some of the Iron Legion to secure it. But not China, Pepper.”

“All right,” she said slowly. “I’m not sure Marc will like all the extra security.”

“If he does, then he’s an idiot, your safety is more important than his butthurt feelings.”

“Tony.”

He huffed.

“I’ll have Janine send you everything for Hong Kong. Please, read it?”

“Can you do the Cliffs’ Notes version?” he mumbled before he took a swallow of coffee.

“Maybe… You need to take care of yourself.”

“I am…eating, showering, sleeping—drinking coffee. I’m a regular poster child for wellness.” He didn’t take her snort personally. “Check in with Cho before you leave. Take the jet… Friday will monitor the Legion so they are not intrusive.” Well, as not intrusive as the armor could get.

“Okay.”
“I’ll talk to you later… before you go.”

“If you can,” she said, letting him off the hook. “I know you’re busy.”

“Yeah… Bye, Pep.”

“Bye.”

The connection ended and he stared down at the coffee with a sigh.

The Mandarin intended to send a different message with Pepper but he changed his mind…

“Friday… scan the Hong Kong tower.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Explosives.”

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Mindful with Mindy

“So word broke today that Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries is pulling out of a trip to Hong Kong as genius and Avenger, as well as senior stock holder, Tony Stark is taking her place. Is this a sign that Ms. Potts ouster from Stark Industries is coming? And do you think Natasha Romanoff will accompany him to Hong Kong? They’ve been spending a lot of quality time together. In fact, a little birdie says they picked out a Christmas tree together a couple of days before the holiday party itself. Isn’t that sweet? Hong Kong is a romantic city and they looked awfully adorable on the dance floor at Stark’s annual holiday party. Just look at this video of this gorgeous pairing. What do you think? Would you like to see confirmed playboy Tony Stark settle down and will the Black Widow take him out of play?”

Arms folded, Steve and Bucky turned to look at him in almost the same instant as Clint hit mute on the television.

“What?” Tony said with a shrug. “It’s not like I wrote it.”

At their continued stare, he spread his hands and said, “Besides, we were adorable. I can’t help if you two can’t dance.”

Bucky snorted. “Stevie danced with her just fine.”

“Well let’s alert the presses because the Black Widow seduces Captain America is the headline we all want to read, right?”

The fact Steve sighed proved his point.
“It’s gossip. It will go away.”

Steve nodded. “And we have more important things to worry about.”

“Yeah,” Clint said. “Like when are you going to Hong Kong?”

Natasha

At the crank of the door, she opened her eyes. A single figure stood there, carrying a tray. They took a cautious step inside, then another. She tracked his every movement. Most of her wounds had closed, but she’d held the room she was in for hours. A half dozen guards lay around her in various broken states. They’d been the last attempt nearly six hours before by her reckoning. That didn’t count the ones in the rooms behind her.

She shifted her grip on the chain as the figure made it halfway into the room then set the tray table down, hands together, he bowed to her.

“Honored guest, my master bids you a new day and says you must eat if you wish to conserve your strength for what it is to come.”

“And I care what your master wants, why?”

The man did not look up nor did he answer.

Great. A one-line monk. Give a monkey a typewriter and he’ll eventually get to Shakespeare. Give a monk a line, he’ll eventually give her a headache. “Tell your master if he wants me to eat, he can bring his ass down here and we’ll settle this between us.”

“I do not speak to the master, honored guest.”

Honored guest. What did he do to the ones he didn’t like? “Probably best, he’s a terrible conversationalist anyway…” Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you still in here?”

“To prove the food has not been tampered with.” The monk retreated two steps and went to his knees. “If you suffer any ill effects, my life is forfeit.”

She shook her head. She hadn’t eaten in hours, the food—whatever it was—smelled good. Probably more rice, meat, and vegetables. Sounded like ambrosia. Her mouth was dry and her lips parched.

“And if I don’t eat?”
The monk sat on his knees, hands flat against his thighs with his palms down. “Then I shall remain here until the next trial and endure it with you.”

A half-laugh worked its way up and she coughed. “So you’re the human sacrifice.”

“I am what my master bids me to be.”

She’d killed a lot of people in the last few days. A lot. Her ledger was swimming in it, what was one more?

Except, he wasn’t offering her any threat. That alone made her wary.

“AAfter. After whatever tortures Fury can concoct, you would appear as a friend, as a balm. And I would cooperate.”

Loki’s words swirled right up out of the past and she could almost see him standing there in his emerald green robes, that knowing smirk on his face as he studied her.

She was Loki in this scenario—and the monk her.

“Tell me about your master.”

The monk blinked at her.

“You’re not allowed to speak to him—surely you can speak of him…”

The monk appeared to consider the inquiry, possibly trying to find the trap in her words.

Rising with care, she hooked the table with her foot, then pulled it back toward her ignoring the scrape of it across the raw flooring.

“My master… is a wise man.”

“Yeah?” She sank back down to the floor, ignoring the protests of her thighs and calves. She’d begun to stiffen. After she ate, she’d stretch again. Lifting up the lid, she looked at the rice and meat—it smelled like chicken this time. Surprise. Winner. Winner. Chicken dinner. “What makes him so wise? Did he eat his Wheaties every day?”
The door cranked open admitting her friend the monk with a fresh tray. It had been roughly eight hours since his last visit. The temperature in the room was growing more humid, which was a problem. There were still six bodies in this room. She didn’t want to think about the halls and rooms behind her. The monk had taken a respite with her for a little under an hour while she worked her way through her food and water. As promised, no one disturbed them and the food hadn’t been poisoned. He’d advised she rest before he absented himself.

Yeah, she dozed but she refused to fall into the vulnerability of sleep. The monk wore loose trousers and a tunic, like her, his feet were bare and he kept his eyes lowered as he paused near her and bowed before dropping to his knees and placing the tray a few feet away in front of her.

“I bid you good day, honored guest.”

“Uh huh.” She wasn’t feeling particularly friendly. If he was the balm sent to make an alliance with her, well he would need to work for it. His words about his master in their last conversation had been purple prose. His master was wise. His master had been blessed. His master had discovered many secrets in the hidden land. His master made her sick.

“You have not slept,” the monk said.

“Bad acoustics, no ocean waves to lull me to sleep.” The chain was heavy in her hand today and her fingers a little numb. She’d been gripping it. Her ankle had begun to swell inside the shackle, though more from the pressure and chafing than any injury she had done to herself. Most of her injuries had healed—most. She was sore though and vividly aware of every muscle.

“You seek distractions from where you are,” the monk observed.

She smirked as she rose to her feet. The numbness in her extremities an hour earlier had been damned uncomfortable, but she’d stretched and kept a wary watch on the doors. She’d broken the cameras in here—every single one of them. If the bastards wanted to know what she was doing,
they had to come to her.

Enter the monk.

Balancing on her left foot, she hooked her right under the table and dragged it toward her. Unsurprisingly, the cup had water in it—cold this time—the bowl filled with more rice, vegetables, and meat. There was a second bowl, however, of water and a cloth on the tray.

Lifting an eyebrow, she glanced at him then took a sip of the water in the cup. He sat comfortably on the ground, legs crossed with his hands on his knees, palms down.

“Daring to be different today?” She motioned to the bowl of water.

“Your clothing is soiled as is the room you occupy.”

“Yeah?” she said with a slow drawl and glanced around the room without ever really taking her attention off of him. “Something wrong with the room?”

A smile fluttered at the corners of the monk’s unflappable expression. The first wrinkle since he’d puzzled over her question about his master. “You are an unusual person.”

“How so?” She scooped some of the rice out with her fingers; they never brought her utensils. It was like they thought she would stab them with a spoon or something. To be fair—she could, but a girl did like to earn the mistrust.

“I believe you are aware of your unique qualities.”

She paused after bite then took a slow drink of the water to wash the lump of rice down. “I’m just a material girl living in a material world,” she told him then took another bite.

“Honored guest, your self-deprecation and loathing are not healthy.”

“Depends on your point of view.” This conversation was nearly as boring as the one the night before. “But since you seem so concerned, what is it you want me to do?”

The monk lifted his hands and she tracked the motion without reaction, she hadn’t let go of the chain once since she gathered it. Eating and drinking one-handed were simple enough. In the Red Room, she’d keep a knife in her lap or a sharpened spoon tucked in her palm lest one of the other girls’ catch her unaware.

Amazing how well some habits returned even after a decade or more of disuse. She had gotten soft, but not that soft.

“I wish for nothing from you, but the master requires your continued good faith.”

She didn’t snort.

“It is important that you complete the trials.”

“Yeah? What trials? His little Mandarin House of Horrors?” She took another bite.

“It is a trial of the dragon.”

“Well the dragon can shove it up his snout,” she told him, then took another bite.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand. You have been chosen for this honor.” Yeah, it felt like she’d
been chosen. “To embrace the dragon is to know wisdom and grace, to be admitted to the halls of the worthy…”

“Are you sure you’re not Asgardian? Cause I’ll tell you what I told him—I don’t need the answer to that question.”

Clint stared at the hammer on the table before tipping back a long slug of the beer. The rough shadows in his eyes had diminished, but there was still an edge to him. Three years had blunted it, polished it down, but she knew the signs of restlessness. She experienced them herself. “Uh, ‘whosoever be he worthy shall haveth the power!’ Whatever man, it’s a trick.”

With a pleased grin, Thor motioned to Mjolnir. “Well, please, be my guest.” Natasha shook her head as she settled on the love seat and stretched out. She was sore from the fight, the bruises on her back had bruises as did the ones on her hips and shoulders. But she’d heal in a couple of days, for now, she just tipped back a beer and took a swallow as the guys trotted out their egos.

“Come on,” Tony encouraged Clint, he was already three deep drinks in and his cheeks had a warm flush to them. He wasn’t remotely drunk, but he was definitely feeling the buzz.

“Really?” Clint eyed Thor then Tony as if skeptical, but he was just playing that out. He was so totally going to do it.

“Yeah,” Thor saluted him, but that smug grin didn’t diminish for an instant. Predictably, Clint stood up and made a half staggering step. No, he wasn’t drunk but he did like to play the card to keep everyone else off guard.

“Oh this is gonna be beautiful,” Rhodey said with a shake of his head. He caught her eye and his grin grew, she kept her game face on and just took another drink.

“Clint, you’ve had a tough week. We won’t hold it against you if you can’t get it up.” Taunting was Tony’s version of cheerleading.

It was cute.

Laughter rippled around the room. “You know, I’ve seen this before, right?” Clint declared as he grabbed the handle of the hammer, but it didn’t even budge. “I still don’t get how you do it.”

“Smell the silent judgment.” Tony smirked.

“Please, Stark,” Clint returned the favor. “By all means.”

“Oh, here we go,” Natasha murmured and Maria slanted her a look. Things were a little warmer these days between them and at her inquiring eyebrow raise, Natasha gave a little shrug. Maybe… they weren’t that warm at the moment.

“Okay,” Maria answered as she returned her attention to the boys.

“Uh oh,” Rhodey laughed and Clint hummed.

“Never one to shrink from an honest challenge,” Tony said as he studied the hammer like he could ferret out its secrets. Throwing a challenge at Stark was like dangling the rabbit in front of a greyhound at the tracks—he never looked back as he raced toward his goal.
“Get after it,” Clint egged him on and he shot her a look that demanded her cooperation.

“Here we go,” she drawled out the words, dragging the syllables enough to earn a small smile from Tony. Yes, he’d heard her. It was an invitation to show off and he accepted.

“It’s physics!”

“Physics,” Bruce echoed Tony and he gave her one of those shy little smiles.

“Right, so, if I lift it, I—then rule Asgard?” Tony clarified.

“Yes,” Thor answered, confidence and delight filling his whole expression. The man had no filter. It was—refreshing. Steve had very little of one but there was such an abundant joy to Thor that Natasha just enjoyed watching.

“I will be re-instituting Prima Nocta,” Tony declared and his gaze snagged on hers. She snorted once. He tried to lift it, but the hammer didn’t budge. “I’ll be right back.” He returned with his gauntlet and the hammer still didn’t move. Rhodey grabbed his gauntlets and they were both yanking with the power-up and nothing happened.

Thor’s shoulders shook with laughter he didn’t even try to suppress.

“Are you even pulling?” Rhodey demanded.

“Are you on my team?” Tony countered.

“Just represent! Pull!”

“Alright, let’s go!” Tony declared, his face flushing even a deeper red as a vein popped in his forehead. But nothing.

Finally, they gave up and Bruce pushed up the sleeves of his shirt. He seized the hammer’s handle and began to pull on it, then he roared as if he planned to shift into the other guy but still failed. There hadn’t even been a flicker of green so when he gave that shy smile to everyone’s wary looks, she just grinned and Bruce murmured, “Huh…” It had taken her months of effort, but he didn’t terrify her anymore. Healthy survival instincts? Check. Terrifying fear? Not so much.

Steve finally stood up and set his beer down. He stared at the hammer a beat.

“Let’s go, Steve, no pressure,” Tony rooted for him as Rhodey called, “Come on, Cap!”

Steve grasped the hammer with one hand and it budged. A fraction of an inch, but it moved. All the color and mirth drained from Thor’s face, then Steve let it go shaking his head and Thor released a relieved laugh.

“Nothing,” he murmured, but he’d seen it. She definitely had. No one else commented. But Steve had moved it.

That didn’t remotely surprise her. If she had to pick from the guys in this room who was worthy, he’d be right up there at the top of the list.

“And?” Tony said, spreading his hands.

Bruce glanced at her again. “Widow?”

“Oh, no no.” She said reclining on her elbow and tipping her beer up even as Clint gave her a
dour look for ducking out on the fun. “That’s not a question I need answered.”

Warmth and laughter suffused the moment. It was just the team and Maria and Helen. The rest of their guests had left and it was late. The feeling of camaraderie, of belonging, it hovered in the air around them like a gentle buzz. It didn’t last... but for a little while, it had been nice.

“You have encountered many wonders in your lifetime, have you not?” The monk liked to answer questions with questions. A familiar tactic.

“And some pretty crummy ones, too.” She finished the last of the rice, then drained the water in the cup.

“Yet, you persevere.”

She shrugged, ignoring the pull of tired and stiff muscles. That required no other answer so she didn’t waste the time. Leaning forward, she lifted the washcloth with a careful hand and sniffed it. No scent. Not even a laundry one. Then she tested the scent of the water in the bowl before dipping a finger in it and waiting.

“You lack any trust in the world,” the monk told her. “They say that the formation of the tree begins with the seed, but even a seed planted in unfriendly earth can still flourish if the wind and the rain and the fire do not scorch it and twist it. Even then, it may yet grow tall if gnarled and give fruit to life—but even that was taken from you.”

“Yeah, I haven’t been a tree recently.” The water on her skin didn’t act like a drug nor did it seem to seep into her skin and affect her. That didn’t mean it wouldn’t, it had been a relatively small quantity. She was actually surprised they hadn’t gassed her again.

“You are very literal.”

“There is fact. There is fiction.”

“There is faith,” the monk insisted.

“Out of curiosity, you do realize your master is a terrorist right?” She dipped the cloth into the water and let it soak before running it over her other hand. Blotting away the blood and grime. The stain to her fingertips and nail beds would likely take a lot more effort to come out, if she could ever wash them clean. Three of her nails on her left hand were broken. She barely had only one left on her right.

“Terrorism is a point of view.”

“Yeah,” Natasha said slowly. “That’s what it is.”

“You were once a terrorist. An assassin. A murderer. A thief. A traitor.”

“I’m still all of those things,” she told him bluntly.

“Are you? Or have you been reborn again and again? Perishing in fire only to be reborn in blood?”

What were these people smoking? “Trust me, if I died. I don’t think I’d let myself be reborn.” She’d wanted to die. Plenty of times.

It wasn’t off the table, but it no longer headlined her menu.
“Born Natalia Alianova Romanova,” the monk intoned. “Born in Soviet Russia after the fall of the Czars, yet you have their name.”

“I’ve had a lot of names.”

“You’ve also had a lot of lives. Born, then reborn, then born again.” The monk spread his hands again. “How many lives have you lived?”

He seemed married to the phoenix metaphor. What happened to his little spiel about the dragon?

“What life does your master want?”

The monk blinked at her slowly.

“Or should I ask you what you want?”

The man’s smile grew. “You are the worthiest of opponents, Widow.” The monk passed his hand over his face and the features shifted and changed. Then The Mandarin stared at her. “What betrayed me?”

“You were playing it a little too heavy-handed. The monk before never lifted his hands from his legs.” No, he had sat rock still, his formal language never varying. This one… close, but no cigar.

The Mandarin smiled. “Very observant.” He glanced around the room. “You have created a difficulty for me.”

“Really?” She finished wiping her fingers and tossed the cloth back onto the tray. She began to flex the muscles in her legs to warm them. He knelt between her and the open door. He wasn’t shackled, not to mention, he looked well-rested. “Sucks to be you.”

“If your enemy is secure at all points, be prepared for him. If he is in superior strength, evade him. If your opponent is temperamental, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant. If he is taking his ease, give him no rest. If his forces are united, separate them. If sovereign and subject are in accord, put division between them. Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.”

“Did you get your copy of *The Art of War* in the embossed illustrated version or the Cliffs’ Notes?”

Smiling, The Mandarin eyed her. “Your tongue is almost as cutting as your blades.”

“I hear I’ve got a talented one, shame to waste it.” He won their last fight because he used something to hold her still. The rings on his hands, one for each finger, drew the eye but he didn’t shift his posture as he settled his hands against his thighs.

“I hoped that by engaging you, I could persuade you to continue. The game—after all—requires two players.”

“But I’m not the player in your game, am I?” She challenged him. “You put me here as the pawn…”

“…and the prize,” he reminded her. “Better I think than what Tony Stark took from me in the first place. But it is not a victory until I have won it.”

“So…it really pisses on your day that I don’t want to play anymore? Damn, I can’t tell you how broken up about that I am.”
The Mandarin sighed. “I had really rather hoped to keep this civil.”

She didn’t scoff. She didn’t have time to. He flung out his hand and lightning struck her. The sizzle of it rolled over her even as her system jerked and she slammed her head back against the wall. The metal in her hand heated and the shocks rolled over her.

Still buzzing, she looked up as he rose. “This could have one much easier, but perhaps this will be a lesson for both of you.”


Where the fuck was a lightsaber when she needed it? The inane thought rattled loose as she shook, teeth grinding together. Hold on… breathe… it would end…

It always… ended…

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Noon News

“…as our countdown to Christmas continues, there’s drama in the ornaments department. Avengers ornaments are all the rage, but the one question consumers had been asking, where in the world is Black Widow? Shopkeepers from South Shore to Hell’s Kitchen to East Harlem to Baychester to Little Neck to Brighton Beach are all reporting a dearth of Black Widow ornaments. With all of the Avengers appearing on trees throughout the city, this oversight seems pretty conspicuous with all the popular press she’s received, but then—just a few weeks ago, the press was singing a different tune. Not to worry, launching today beginning in Midtown and spreading throughout the Boroughs a collectible set of Avengers ornaments featuring Black Widow, Iron Man, Thor, The Hulk, Captain America, and Hawkeye—the OG 6 as some like to call them. There are supplementary packs but these sets promise to go fast. Are you rushing out to get Black Widow on your tree?”

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Natalia climbed, balancing her hands and feet carefully against the rocks as she made the ascent. The pack on her back threatened to overbalance her but she maintained her steady grip. Another few feet and she’d reach the plateau. From there, she could cross almost directly north into Saskatchewan. The wind had shifted to come from the east, it made it easier to camp at night.

Mary cooed behind her, a constant stream of babble with the occasional Mama thrown in. Every time her muscles burned or her eyes did, she would focus on the syllables and noises Mary made. Sometimes she sounded Russian—Natalia’s fault for singing her Russian lullabies—other times there was a lilt to her words, just like James. The traces of Russian in James’ voice sank beneath
his accent—Brooklyn, he’d told her. He’d grown up in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn sounded like a nice place. She’d been to New York twice before. The first time she had been sent to assassinate a former Soviet asset who had decided to blackmail the ambassador, who himself would be recalled home after she completed her mission to face his own fate. The second time—the second time… she wasn’t really sure about the second time. She’d been there, she could see the cityscape clearly but the details were fuzzy.

Karpov and his damn chair.

At the top of the rise, she pulled herself over and then sat. Her breasts hurt and so did her arms and her legs. Her hands were scraped and beneath her jeans, she knew her legs were littered with bruises. She had gone through the upcountry and climbed before descending on the far side. It had been a brutal twelve days since they came for James.

Since she’d seen him for the last time.

“Mama,” a cheerful voice then a hand tugging on her hair, and she twisted to smile.

“Malyshka,” she crooned the word gently. “We will take a break soon. I want to get a little farther before we stop for the night.” She was low on rations and she hadn’t seen anything but a couple of too scrawny rabbits for the last twenty-four hours. The jerky in her bag would have to do. Fortunately, she’d found a river before her last climb and she’d refilled her two canteens.

“Mama,” Mary insisted, her voice a little more tense as she yanked on her braid.

“Nyet, malyshka. A little longer.” Then she tugged her braid out of her hand and pulled it over her shoulder. Her hair hung almost to her waist. It was too long, she should have cut it but she hadn’t had time. After she crossed into Canada. She would find a lodge, take a room for a couple of nights. She had the money. Then she would work on the new IDs.

And go where? The little voice in the back of her mind snipped. Where will you go, Natalia? You gave into weakness and became weak and now you have nothing.

She ignored the voice as she pushed to her feet. Humming, she started moving and swaying as she walked. “Sometimes in our lives we all have pain, we all have sorrow, but if we are wise, and we know that there’s always tomorrow…”

Mary quieted as she sang. Natalia lifted her face toward the sun and then began to clap along with the song as she belted it out. It had come on the radio so many times in the last year, she’d gotten used to singing along with it and once or twice, she’d caught James humming it as she and Mary swayed around the living room together.

A tear slipped out and she batted it away and kept singing. When she finished, she segued into You’ve Got a Friend. James had always gone so quiet when the song came on and one night—late—after Mary was in bed and they lay tangled together, he’d told her about his life before. Before Russia. Before the Red Room. Before Karpov.

He told her about Brooklyn. He told her about his friend.

Captain America…it had amazed her. The American hero had been his best friend and some of the stories he told her made her laugh until her sides hurt. But he was gone, he’d disappeared in ’45 and was presumed dead.

She followed up with Bridge over Troubled Water, then Imagine. The latter song was a world
she’d love to have, but wars still raged and they were still wanted to fight them.

There would always be a war.

Always a fight.

Mary drifted off, but she kept singing as she walked. The skies had been kind to them, but the farther north she went, the chillier the nights had grown. Hopefully, they wouldn’t need shelter.

She would persevere. The hours bled past and she tracked a sturdy grove of trees, tucked out of the wind and there was nothing for miles around. She got a fire built, then settled with Mary out of the pack. The baby complained because she wanted to run, but Natalia couldn’t let her. She rubbed her legs, soothing her before she changed her soiled diaper. She packed it away for washing before she put a new one on her and then set her to a breast before eating some of the jerky and drinking water.

Mary would need more than this soon, it was enough for now—but if Natalia’s food stores grew too lean she would run low. Soon, she promised her silently. Maybe another three days and they would be in Canada.

And then...?

She closed her eyes. Then she would figure out the next step. The one after that. Stroking her fingers through Mary’s hair, she whispered, “You will be safe malyshka, no matter what. They will never touch you.”

She’d kill them all first.

Peter

“You’ve never even been in the same room as Tony Stark,” Flash said from behind a magazine. It was the last period of the day and with AcDec Nationals over it was a glorified study hour. Helped Peter stay ahead on his homework. For the most part, he could stick his earphones in and ignore everyone—except it was also one of the few times during the day he could talk to Liz.

And Liz had asked him if he wanted to get together this weekend and all he could say was he had work to do for Tony Stark, so he didn’t know if he’d be free. Not that Tony had him doing much but busy work. There’d been no word on Natasha, not since he’d watched the videos and every day that passed without more news.

“Flash, he works for Tony Stark,” Liz corrected him.

“I don’t work for him,” Peter amended. “I’m an intern.”

“Yeah and I’m going to ask Black Widow out on a date this weekend,” Flash muttered and Peter clenched his fist.

It wasn’t the first time Flash made the joke. It wasn’t even a particularly good joke. He’d told some really bad ones over time, but Natasha wasn’t just some abstract figure anymore.
She was... she was Natasha.

Liz just shook her head. “Peter…”

“It’s fine,” Peter told her. “If we finish this project…” If they found Natasha… “And it all works…” And she was fine... “I’d love to see you this weekend…” As long as Nat was okay. “But I can’t make any promises.” Cause I have no idea if we’ll find her.

Bucky seemed dead certain. The kind of confidence rolling off him buoyed Peter and made him want to believe, but watching her drown—seeing her drugged…

Natasha was the least helpless person he knew and he hated that this was happening to her and he had to be at school pretending everything was fine and his greatest worry was counting down to Christmas break.

May had noticed something was up with him, he’d fumbled as he tried to cover and then when she asked if he was having trouble with a girl—he said yes. That she’d left school abruptly and he wasn’t sure when she’d be back.

It was a little lie, but May listened to him and that helped.

Some.

“You know,” Liz said quietly. “I could just show Flash the picture.” But Peter shook his head.

He’d even asked her to not post it to Instagram. Part of that was he needed to keep his distance from the Avengers in the public eye; it was one thing for him to be at a party or to go to the Tower because he was officially an intern. It was another to be partying with the Avengers. And he'd seen something really sweet in Natasha’s face that night, she’d smiled at him like she was really proud and it…

Just no. “I don’t have anything to prove.”

“Nope,” Flash said as he bumped him on the way past. “And nothing you can prove.”

The bell rang and Peter gave Liz a quick smile. “I’ll call you later?”

“Okay, Dad is home tonight so I may not be able to talk.” Her father was pretty strict about phone time when he wasn’t away working. “But I’ll text.”

“Okay,” he told her then snagged his backpack and waved as he jogged out. His phone buzzed as he reached the doors and it was a text from Friday. Please hurry, Mr. Parker. Boss is parked in a bus lane and there are people getting cross.

What?

He pushed open the doors to see the limo waiting out front, Tony leaning against the side of it, phone in hand just ignoring all the gawking students who were slowing on their exit out of the building.

Flash had stopped dead right in front of Peter and Peter half-ran into him. Catching him before he knocked him over. Peter said, “Sorry,” then hurried to where Tony waited with his driver. The driver who wasn’t happy.

What had happened?
“Mr. Stark—I mean Tony?”

“Get in, Kid, we’ve got work to do.” He nudged Peter inside before following and the driver closed the door but not before he heard Flash’s “No way! Are you really dating the Black Widow, Mr. Stark?”

Peter grimaced. Then focused on Tony. “What happened?”

“We’re swinging by your place and giving your aunt a ride to the airport, you’re spending the weekend with me working on your robotics project, got it?”

“Um… yeah?”

“Good, we’ll brief you on everything else after we get her dropped off.”

Dropped off where?

What was happening?

Natasha

Pain sparked through her as she opened her eyes. She was flat on her back staring up at a ceiling… a different one. Spasms rocked through her muscles. Shaking, she pushed herself upward and then winced as her arms and legs contracted with another cramp and she rolled to her side.

Lightning.

He’d hit her with lightning.

Her jaw trembled along with her hands. Looking around the room, she saw—nothing. Her chain was affixed to the floor again. No furniture. No… there. She shifted as she rolled over. The camera in the corner. The red light taunted her.

She’d been… walking. With Mary. The image of her daughter danced tantalizingly close.

Swallowing hard, she planted her hands against the floor and got herself upright. Chained was bad enough. Prone was dangerous. There were scorch marks along her hands. Burns. The scent of char and burnt hair clogged her nostrils.

Malyshka. The emotion accompanying that word swamped her. Pain could be compartmentalized, but this was agony. The giggly little voice calling her Mama bounced around in her mind like a lash she both craved and shivered away from in the same breath.

Might be more important? There was no might about it.

Clenching her fists, she pounded one against the cement floor. Then again. And again, until the bruised sensation overtook the grief clustering in her chest and choking her.

“Rebirth is painful.” The Mandarin said over the speaker. “But ultimately worth it.”
“Why don’t you give it a shot then? I’d be happy to take care of the first part for you.” Not the most diplomatic of responses, but at the moment she didn’t want to play this game anymore.

He didn’t respond. In fact, he said nothing at all. Then a tone began playing, it started low but increased in frequency and volume until pain sliced through her head and she pressed her hand up to her eye. The lance digging through her skull felt like another wave of the lightning striking her. The sound elongated and she forced her hands down, eyes closed as she breathed through the pain.

Something wet dripped down and the world went white and fuzzy at the edges.

“Agent Romanoff.”

“Secretary Pierce.”

“Call me Alexander.”

She’d rather not.

“That’s an order.”

“As you wish.” Though she still didn’t say it. She stood in his office, her hands behind her back, her posture erect, near military perfect, and her attention focused on the blond man behind the desk.

“You’re still not going to do it, are you?” The genial smile on his face invited her to trust him as he rose and crossed over to the bar. She’d never been on this level of the Triskelion before. Her clearance didn’t allow it. Though she’d been climbing in the ranks steadily, the orders had been waiting for her when she checked in that morning.

She and Clint along with the rest of the Delta STRIKE team had just returned from a successful operation in Argentina. Coulson had dismissed them all for the next seventy-two to ninety-six hours, mandatory. Clint had invited her to join him on his long weekend, but she waved him off. She actually wanted some downtime to herself, the last few weeks she and he had been living in each other’s back pockets along with Rumlow, Rollins and more.

There had been a hotel room key in her locker and a suggestion for Saturday night. That was forty-eight hours away. Long enough for her to relax and look forward to some quality time with the Deputy Director, who did not rank her when they went behind closed doors.

“My apologies, Mr. Secretary. It does not seem politic to assume such a familiarity.”

“Even if I welcome it?” He swept his gaze over her and she schooled her expression. That was a familiar look most men in power wore when they decided upon something they wanted. “Can I pour you a drink?”

“I believe I’m still on duty, sir.” Distancing herself further, she fell back on protocols. She hadn’t even had time to change out of her tact clothes before her beeper had gone off with the order to appear. “Not to mention it’s barely seven in the morning.”

Pierce chuckled. “Irish coffee is good at any time.” But he didn’t pour himself alcohol, instead, he poured coffee. “You know I’ve been reading your reports. You’ve done exceptionally well the last few years.”
“Thank you, sir.”

“Nick thinks very highly of you.”

Director Fury didn’t think highly of anyone. It did not, however, require a response so she didn’t give one. Why would the secretary summon her to his office? She’d never had an audience with him, barely seen him since Clint brought her in aside from the occasional news broadcast and only the fact she’d done her homework on SHIELD and she kept up on her intelligence told her who he was in the first place.

“He’s not alone. Your mission success also speaks highly of your value to SHIELD.”

“Thank you, sir.” Was he getting to a point? She’d been awake for the better part of forty-eight hours. A date with a bubble bath, a bottle of vodka, and a book sounded like heaven right now.

Approaching her, Secretary Pierce frowned. “How long have you been with SHIELD, Agent Romanoff?”

“Seven years,” she answered. “Six since I was cleared for field ops, five and a half since I was cleared for solo ops.” Not that the director hadn’t sent her on a few before she was officially cleared.

“How do you like it?” He was close enough that all she could smell was his cologne. The spiciness of it made her nose itch.

“I like it fine,” she told him. “I’m helping to save the world.” Maybe a little grandiose, but wasn’t that what they said in all the recruiting videos?

Continuing to circle her, the secretary nodded. “And if you could be doing more?”

“That would depend on how you define more.”

The secretary chuckled. “A good answer, Agent Romanoff. A very good answer.” Then he sobered. “Are you armed, Agent?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, I need you to accompany me.” With that, he turned and headed across his office to a different door than she’d entered via. He outranked the director, which meant he outranked her and then some. So much for her days off. She followed him to what turned out to be a private elevator.

A car waited for them in the garage, unmarked with blacked-out windows. A man she’d never met opened the back door and the secretary climbed inside and patted the seat. “You’ll ride with me, Agent.”

Nodding, she scanned the area, but they were alone. She, the secretary and the driver. Once in the back seat, she settled opposite him with her back to the front passenger seat while the secretary leaned back and studied her. The privacy partition was closed.

Keeping her expression schooled and her posture relaxed, she didn’t look out the windows as they left the Triskelion and headed out into D.C. traffic. “I am curious about something, Agent.”

It wasn’t really a question, but she met his inquisitive and somewhat probing blue-eyed gaze. Everything about him said ‘trust me, I’m on your side and I know best,’ but he made her skin

crawl. She’d had her fill of genial older men with their sweaty palms and hands-on approaches. They always meant well. “Sir?”

Keep the formal distance. Maintain professionalism. He was the Secretary and held a position on the World Security Council overseeing all of SHIELD.

The man literally held her life in his hands. Politicians were the same no matter the country. Keeping them appeased made life easier. Early morning traffic in the district began to slow their progress. Not that she knew where they were going.

“Why did you agree to join SHIELD?”

“Because Agent Barton asked me.” It was a rather direct answer to a direct question.

“He just asked and you said yes?”

A shrug. “It is the simplest answer.”

“What about the more complex one?”

Surely he had access to her files and her debriefings, to her intake with the director and the months she spent with Richardson. If she never saw him again it would be too soon.

The day they told her she no longer had to see the psychologist had been a cause for celebration. Clint had told her Laura was expecting only an hour later. A lot of news to celebrate.

“I needed a purpose,” she said, choosing her answer carefully. “I’d lacked some direction for a while. I’d made some interesting choices that got me on SHIELD’s radar.”

“You assassinated a Councilman’s son.” Yes, he’d read her file.

“I did.”

“You know, I authorized the kill order myself.” Was that what they were doing? Heading somewhere to finally drop the sword that had been hanging over her throat all this time? He gave her a quick smile as if to rob the words of any sting. “That’s not a threat, Agent. I just signed the order after Nick presented the case to the World Security Council. It wasn’t fait accompli, even if one of the councilors had lost a child. He was excused from that vote—compromised as it were.”

She nodded because there was no other response to make to that.

“But you weren’t killed, you came into SHIELD voluntarily and I have to admit, the concept fascinated me. I followed your progress with great interest.”

That—did not make her feel better.

They pulled out of traffic and into another underground garage. They’d traveled some three miles from the Triskelion and if her internal compass had tracked the turns correctly, she was somewhere in the business district.

When the vehicle stopped, he opened the door without waiting for the driver. “With me, Agent.”

Following, she scanned the empty level—third—of the underground garage. The driver never exited the vehicle. There were no other cars or people. Secretary Pierce used his retinal scan to open a door, then ushered her through it. That put him at her back and she was not comfortable with that. Shifting to the side she allowed him to take the lead again.
A faint smirk touched his lips. “As I was saying,” he continued as they followed a long, marble-tiled hallway that echoed with their footsteps. “I have followed your progress with great interest. Every test you’ve been given you have exceeded. You are an invaluable member of the STRIKE Team Delta. Your solo ops are impeccable. Your ability to gather intelligence is unparalleled and while it is unfortunate there are times we have to rely on it, your wet work skills have saved us from egregious harm on many occasions.”

They arrived at an elevator and he pressed the button, it opened for them and he stepped inside. The more he spoke the more unsettled she grew. He was a gifted liar, but every word held an element of mistruth, not a lie, but a truth that he’d twisted to serve his purpose.

She very much understood that skill.

The elevator continued down three floors before pausing and the doors opened.

“I’m afraid we need your skills again, Widow,” Pierce said and then something sounded right behind her ears, the tone paralyzing. Her muscles stiffened. Three men hurried forward—men in white coats and she went to strike out but she could do nothing.

They picked lifted her and carried her toward a great metal beast of a chair and her whole system rebelled with dread. But instead of placing her in it, they moved her past it to another device—her stomach bottomed out.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” the secretary said as she lay prone on the table. “You’ve helped us calibrate this device for the last few years and it’s proven essential in both of our successes.”

Her sleeve was rolled up, then an IV inserted. She could feel the ice of the needle going in and then a flash of blue liquid being hung. Panic clawed at her insides. She had to move. Get off the fucking table, Natasha. But her muscles didn’t obey.

“Easy, sweetheart,” Pierce crooned as he stroked her face. “I know it’s scary, but you’ve done this many times and we have to do it again. Unfortunately one of our people has made a strategic error and I need you to correct it.”

The stroke of his thumb against her cheek made her want to break his hand. But all she could do was stare at him impotently. He glanced up. “You need to be swift about this, I want her programmed and ready. Her flight leaves in two hours. She needs to be in place before the presentation is completed.”

“Sir, you’re asking for a lot. We’ve fine-tuned this, but every time we do one of these procedures we risk further brain damage.”

“She can handle it, can’t you sweetheart?” He smiled down at her. Pain cut across her forehead and something wet dripped down and then agony as the skin was rolled back. Were they scalping her? Fuck—she couldn’t move and it was agony. Burning lances of pain drilling into the back of her eye. The whir of a saw.

“I can’t believe there’s never a scar,” one of the technicians said.

“Be quiet,” the other mentioned and when there was a sickening pop she wanted to throw up, but nothing reacted. She was stuck staring up at Pierce’s face as he gave her the most benevolent smile.

“You’ve done this for us time and again. It’s time for you to help us change the world. Don’t worry, Widow. I want you to save someone this time. You’re going to save Tony Stark.”
Then the pain turned white-hot and the world blurred.

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Natasha jerked upright and then twisted as her stomach revolted. Her head was on fire, but worse—what the hell had been that thing they put her in? The chair had been there, but they hadn’t put her in a chair. It had—a table and a dozen sharp probing needle-like instruments.

She rubbed her hand against her forehead, betraying her own weakness. No incision, nothing bled. Nothing…

“You’re going to save Tony Stark.”

Save Tony Stark.

What the hell?

She ran her hands over her arms, no needles. They’d—peeled back her scalp—she’d bled…there had been…

The pain redoubled and she pressed her hands against her eyes. Stop thinking about it. Stop…

Kunar Province, Afghanistan. Everyone thought it just hot and arid. But the nights could be brutally cold in some regions while baking your bones on others. She’d dropped in by chute and had ten klicks to cross to reach the ambush point. Time to ambush, sixty-seven minutes.

She would be cutting it close.

Switching her gear around, she wrapped her head in a scarf and then pulled on the robe. Her weapons were stored beneath it. She spoke the language well enough to pass, at least in some dialects, but her orders were to be undetected.

Eliminate any witnesses.

Running, she set a grueling pace. It didn’t matter. She had to be in position. Failure was not an option. Her mission parameters were explicit. Prevent the assassination of Tony Stark.

She raced across the hills, her lungs burning as she maintained a brutal pace. She could do a six-minute mile. Doing 6.2 miles in 38 minutes, however, required every ounce of her stamina. She flagged at mile four, cramps threatening her legs and a violent stitch in her side. Her back protested and her head hurt.

Pain could be compartmentalized. She ignored it. Even when something tore, she pushed past it but her pace slowed. She checked her time. Less than twenty-two minutes to go and she was a mile out.

She could afford to go a fraction slower, conserving oxygen and energy to deal with the attackers. A dozen insurgents, perhaps more, armed with M-16s and old Kalashnikovs. Roadside IEDs would
be used to halt the convoy. Then flush the escort out. Tony Stark would be a casualty caught in the crossfire.

It was her job to prevent the crossfire. Save him, keep him alive until aid came, then retreat to the extraction point. Scrub all witnesses.

Under no circumstances was she to engage with Tony Stark.

He must not see her.

The explicit orders played on a loop in her brain. As if she needed to recite them or risk forgetting them. Even when she tried to shift her focus as she scanned the terrain, looking for any sign of the ambushers’ position, the orders continued to repeat.

She reached the position marked on her GPS, but instead of eleven minutes for the convoy—she could already see their dust trails. She slipped her sniper rifle out, assembled it swiftly, locked, loaded, and in position.

Testing the sights, she measured the breeze by a bit of scrub. The dust approached rapidly, they were ahead of schedule. Very ahead of schedule.

Instead of an IED, a missile arced upwards and then struck the lead Humvee in the convoy. She jerked her head up. Missiles were not in the mission report. A second missile struck the third Humvee.

Gunfire opened up and the middle Humvee stopped. What the hell were they doing? If they had the target? She sighted through the scope and picked off the visible insurgents, but like her, they were well shrouded and camouflaged against the landscape. She took out three, but the soldiers had abandoned their Humvee in an attempt to engage. Dropping the rifle, she pulled her Glocks and rolled down the hill. She caught two on approach. A bullet to the head each.

Her mind was already cataloging the weapons. Those weren’t old Kalashnikovs or M16s. They were heavier duty arms, fully automatic, and scatter-shot armor piercing rounds.

The intel on this mission was shit.

Out of bullets, she slid the Glocks away and pulled her knives. A dozen insurgents down and there were more coming. Even their numbers were off. She caught sight of movement, a man in a suit tumbling out of the middle Humvee as it was peppered with bullets.

Altering her course to intercept, she ignored the order to go unnoticed. She couldn’t save him without getting to him. He was going to damn well notice her.

More missile fire and he was fleeing through the burning wreckage. He disappeared behind some rocks and she sliced through two more men on her way, she was almost there when the explosion picked her up and flung her back. She struck the ground and red-hot pain pierced her in a dozen places.

Her eyes blurred as she fought to turn over.

Tony Stark was on the ground.

Bleeding from a dozen wounds to his chest.

She failed.
“You should get some sleep, Peter,” Steve told the kid. Though he’d approved the plan, he was not fully on board with bringing him to Hong Kong. It seemed almost like an unnecessary risk, but he couldn’t discount Tony’s logic either. Peter had a talent, one they hadn’t fully explored yet, but those instincts coupled with talent might be just the edge they needed against The Mandarin.

“I still can’t believe you sent Aunt May on a week-long retreat with five other nurses from her hospital,” Peter said, sprawled back in the chair. “She was thrilled, then worried and almost said no because of me.”

“Well, better to keep her somewhere safe and she can enjoy some relaxation in the sun,” Tony said, his attention fixed on the StarkPad in front of him. He’d been reviewing the videos again, but with an earpiece in to listen to his conversations with The Mandarin earlier. Steve got that Tony was trying to get into the man’s head, but re-watching the torture scenes… it was too much.

“Peter,” Steve repeated. “Go sleep. The jet takes longer than the quinjet.” They had to arrive in Hong Kong as part of Stark Industries and not Avengers. “We’ve got another nine hours of flight. Go rest.”

Sixteen hours in the air. Still no contact from The Mandarin regarding Nat. They’d passed twenty-four hours without a word.

“I don’t know if I can sleep,” Peter admitted. He’d been stunned when Tony Stark swung by his high school to pick him up with a driver. Then more stunned when the driver proved to be Steve in a photo static veil. More surprised to swing by his apartment and find May already packed, they were taking her to the airport and then from there, they boarded a flight of their own.

“Try,” Tony said, glancing up from the StarkPad. “Once we’re in Hong Kong, I can’t guarantee we’re going to get a lot of rest. I’ve got a bedroom back there just go crash. Have Friday turn on a movie. Shut your brain down.”

“What about you?”

“Take four hours,” Tony told him. “I’ll take the next four after that.”

Peter glanced at Steve as if looking for confirmation. “I’m fine right here. Go on, get some sleep.” The time change would be brutal on all of them, but the long hours in the air would be even more grueling.

“Wake me up if we hear anything?” Peter requested as he paused in the door to the bedroom.

“Yep,” Tony told him, rocking his chair around to meet his gaze. “Go sleep, Pete. We need you firing on all cylinders tomorrow.”
With a thumbs-up, the kid disappeared into the room and the door closed behind him. Tony stared at the door for a long moment, then swung his chair around and looked back at the StarkPad.

The silence dragged between them for another hour. Steve debated turning on a movie but chose to lean his chair back and stare out the window instead. Finally, he scrubbed his hands over his face and pushed out of the chair. There were no flight attendants, just the pilots, with Friday running support on the systems. Steve stepped into the galley and pulled out a bottle of water from the fridge. Then grabbed a second one before starting a pot of coffee.

They were all going to resemble pots of coffee before this was over.

Returning to the main cabin, he held out a bottle of water toward Tony. “He has to know we’re coming.”

“I’m counting on it,” Tony said, taking the bottle with a nod then glancing back at his screen. At least it wasn’t more of the videos.

“You sure you want to do this?”

“No even a question, Cap.”

Unscrewing the lid on his bottle, he lifted it up and took a long swallow. They’d argued this for three hours, but in the end, Tony wouldn’t be swayed from the plan he’d made. As much as Steve disliked it, he also agreed it would likely be the most effective, if not the one with the most risk.

“Don’t start worrying about me, Steve—”

“Been worried about you for a long time,” Steve told him, not letting him finish that sentence. “Worried about you after New York. Worried about you after everything with Killian. Worried about you with Ultron.”

“You were pissed at me over Ultron.”

Steve shrugged. “They aren’t mutually exclusive emotions, Tony. We don’t always talk the same language or even live in the same world. But I do worry about you. What you’re proposing—it’s a risk.”

“It’s been my risk to take, it should never have landed on Pepper or Natasha in the first place. The guy has issues with me.” Tony leaned his head back and met Steve’s gaze. The tired on Tony’s face didn’t match the quiet ferocity in his gaze. Something had shifted in the last twenty-four hours; he’d emerged from his self-loathing with more determination than ever. “That said—he told me when I figured out why he took Natasha instead of Pepper, when I could answer that question I’d be close to solving the puzzle.”

“You think you know why he took her?”

“I have a dozen different reasons I can think of. Most of them are probably true, but I don’t think any of them are the exact reason.” Tony drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair. “Friday and I have been doing some research on the rings…”

He laid out the idea of the rings—ten of them to be specific—and what he thought some of them did. The idea of magic didn’t sit well with either of them; then again, magic and science were not so distantly intertwined.

“So if we chuck him and his rings into a volcano, we’re golden?” Steve asked as he went to grab
coffee. He poured cups for both of them, not really caring if it wasn’t strong. At the moment, he wasn’t drinking it to stay awake. The hum in his system since they decided to make a move fired him up.

Tony chuckled. “Tempting, but I don’t know. I’d like to think that would work, but doing that destroyed Mount Doom and pretty much all of Mordor. I’m thinking if we wipe a third of China off the map, we can kiss any Accords we were working on goodbye.”

“Fair.” Steve handed him the coffee. “You’re also wondering if you can get the rings and do some research…”

“Also tempting, no lie. But they aren’t the priority.” Tony stared at the cup in his hand. “This guy has been around for years—Ten Rings, has to be named after him, right?”

“I can accept that premise,” Steve nodded, stretching his legs out.

“Ten Rings has been around since the 1950s, as far as I can tell—give or take. The initial origins of a group that would take on the name of the Ten Rings, anyway, began sometime in 49 or 50, on the heels of the Chinese revolution? Arms seemed to have been their thing. There was some huge coup, in ’51, the notes on this are sketchy. Group went into chaos, took a few years to reorganize. Then, sometime in the 60s, the name Ten Rings appears for the first time—no association with The Mandarin or any of the names on that Logan guy’s list. But it’s a small operation, smugglers working in and out of communist China, they fade into obscurity. Another resurgence in the mid-to-late 70s, this time Ten Rings shows up outside of China for the first time. The militant group in Vietnam disappears almost as fast as it appeared. It happens again and again, until the early 90s. Then the groups begin to pop up all over the world.”

“You don’t think he’s been around trying and failing to get a group up and running since the late 40s,” Steve said with a frown. Granted, he, Nat, and Bucky were anomalies but it would be arrogance to assume they were the only ones.

“Do I think he’s a super soldier? No,” Tony said flatly. “Do I think he has access to dangerous tech? Or items that might as well be tech? Yes. That said, with the exception of the cells popping up in the 90s, the rest is pure speculation and urban legend. The stories about The Mandarin are very circumspect. Like they avoid mentioning him directly.”

“So, actual groups that existed and faded and they’re taking credit for it?”

“Anything is possible, the key here though, is the names Logan supplied. Those names do begin to make an appearance in the late 90s, specifically Tem Borjigin—he owned a company called Prometheus, it began making inroads in the arms market and went for a deal with Stark Industries.”

Steve frowned.

“ Took a couple of years, but during the negotiations—which Obadiah dragged out—Prometheus went under and then Stark Industries picked the bones clean. Tem Borjigin reappeared on the horizon running a small company called Gentech, eventually Prometheus Gentech. Next level engineering and they were—competitive.” Tony sounded very tired. “They had some great ideas, but they didn’t always have the execution. I remember being fascinated by one of the concepts—2005? I think. But they couldn’t get their tests off the ground. Too many flaws. But the idea of it? That was sound.”

“You fixed it,” Steve said and it wasn’t a question.
Tony nodded. “Just did it one weekend to clear my head, Obadiah loved it, put it into production and the Jericho missile was born.”

The missile tests in Afghanistan.

“Prometheus Gentech goes, fades into obscurity, their stocks dwindle down to being unable to give them away. But Stark Industries is climbing, bigger and better than before.” Tony drained the coffee. “Took me a few years to perfect it, but I did the best live demonstrations for the Jericho in 2008.”

And was kidnapped shortly thereafter.

Steve leaned back and rubbed his forehead. “He was behind your kidnapping.”

“Him or Stane or both—maybe someone screwed someone else over. Raza was a warlord, he was the prick running the whole operation.” The faraway look in his eyes was one Steve could empathize with. “I’d insisted we do the test in the field, to get a real look at the full scope of what they could do and where better than a place we’d been at war at? Better to outfit our troops and give them the best weapons… Riding back in the Humvee, they were all just kids in uniforms. Hell the driver was a woman. Did you know that? I didn’t even know it at first. That was the point. She was a soldier. Then vehicles in front of us and behind were hit. The guys told me to stay inside but there were armor-piercing bullets and they were all down. I made a run for it—what did I know? There was an M-16, I grabbed it, but the stock and the handle—they’re on fire. Burning my hands. I drop it and there was this ping.” Tony paused, shaking his head. “Just a little ping off of metal and something hits the dirt next to me. It’s a Stark Munitions. There’s my name emblazoned on the side of it. I know I gotta go. I know exactly what it does. Then it explodes and tears through me shreds my vest and I’m lying there, staring up at the sun…”

He lets out a shuddering breath.

“Anyway…fast forward to torture in a cave, some good old waterboarding, a car battery hooked up to an electromagnet in my chest to keep this piece of shrapnel from shredding my heart and they want me to build them Jericho missiles. Never even wondered why that specific item other than it’s a dangerous weapon I should never have made. Months go by, I get the first Mark armor built with Yinsen’s help. The day we’re going to break out, we’re running low on time and Yinsen goes and takes a hit for me. Says it was his intention all along, but—doesn’t matter. He’s dead and I’m pissed and I can hear someone in the background yelling as I’m mowing through their men to call Wong Chu.”

Steve stiffened and Tony met his gaze finally.

“Yep. Seems awfully convenient that name came up right then—”

“He took you to build him a weapon.”

“Build his weapon,” Tony said slowly drawing it out and Steve exhaled.

“Son of a bitch.”

“Ding ding ding, we have a winner. I took his weapon and I repurposed it, made it work, did what he couldn’t.”

“He took Natasha to take yours.”

“She’s not a weapon, Steve. I don’t care what those bastards in the Red Room or Hydra or KGB
“But The Mandarin doesn’t care about that.” Leaning forward he rubbed his hands over his face, profoundly grateful Bucky wasn’t here for this piece of the conversation.

“No—he doesn’t.” Tony glanced back at the StarkPad. “He wants me to build him something and he’s going to try and take her apart until I do it.”

Leveraging her against Tony to make him willing to turn himself over.

“It’s gonna work Cap, we’re going to find out where she is and you guys are going to get her out. Keep the kid close—he’s got a sixth sense, and I’m pretty sure it will alert him if those rings come into play.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. Everything in him said no to this plan. “Tony…”

“Don’t start again, I heard you the first time. We don’t trade lives. But you’re wrong, if it was you he wanted—you’d be the first one through the door offering yourself up for her.”

They locked gazes.

“You’d throw yourself on a grenade for her—you threw yourself between her and collapsing building. We both know that we’d trade our lives. I can do this. I can get her back. You and the others are going to be there to get her out. You know it’s going to work. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Steve wasn’t leaving there without both of them. This was a crazy as hell plan and they were still waiting on news from Logan about what he found, if he managed to find anything. In the meanwhile… they were about to make a lot of noise in Hong Kong.

Logan

He slowed the jeep and pulled it off the rutted road. Remy had a map open in front of him since their GPS fucked off about five miles back. None of the available maps listed Valley of Spirits—go figure. But they’d talked to a guy who sent them to an herbalist who sent them to a former temple where a gardener directed them to a monk who’d eyed them from head to toe then circled a place on the map, before waving them off and telling them to take their bad spirits with them.

Nearly twenty-eight hours later they sat where the monk had marked on the map. It was dark, but dawn was a promise on the horizon. Remy opened his mouth, but Logan just glared at him and stuffed a cigar in his mouth as he tramped a few steps away. The air around them was silent and cold.

Remy went to open his mouth again and Logan growled.

The other man sighed. He’d burned his last verbal ticket two hundred and fifty kilometers earlier when he’d started singing drinking songs to keep himself awake.

Annoying swamp rat.
The sky in the east turned violet then gradually streaks of red and pink and then the light fell across the midnight landscape ahead—illuminating barren and jagged peaks like the scales of a dragon’s back.

“Well, well… Valley of the Spirits, I presume.”

He checked the map then eyed the terrain. They wouldn’t be driving in for long. “Let’s go,” he told the other man and Remy eyed him.

“Does this mean I can talk now?”

“Nope,” Logan told him. “If you want to talk you gotta walk.” He fired up the jeep again and Remy slouched into the passenger seat.

“You should be nicer to me, you know… I’m her favorite.”

Logan snorted. “I haven’t killed you yet, right?”
Chapter Summary

Tony arrives in Hong Kong and the team launches their plan to lure the Mandarin out

Chapter Fifty-Three

Bait

Tony

Day Eight

STARK INDUSTRIES

Memo

Eyes ONLY

TO: TONY STARK

CC: NADJA RASMUSSEN

FROM: OFFICE OF PEPPER POTTs

RE: Hong Kong Stark Tower Tour Dos and Don’ts

The tour of Hong Kong Stark Tower for national and local officials is vital to achieving final approval to continue with the grand opening in January.

Arrive quietly and without fanfare, the tour is a private honor for the Chinese government and Hong Kong city officials. (Less is more)

The plane landed at eight a.m. local time and by the time they taxied to the private gate, several members of the Asian—and some Eastern European—press were already waiting inside the terminal. As he exited the plane, the cameras began to roll. He strode ahead with only two members of Stark Security flanking him. The flashbulbs went off as Tony nodded and waved almost genially.
“Welcome back to Hong Kong, Mr. Stark! Are you planning to spend any time in the city?”

“Thank you, I love Hong Kong. I think I’ve been here four or five times over the last decade and I can say truthfully, I’ve never left this city less than pleased.” He fixed a smile to the young woman asking the question, then winked when she laughed.

Gross? Yes. But effective.

The press gathered a little closer since he made no move to walk away. All of their attention on him.

“Did Natasha Romanoff make the trip with you, Mr. Stark? I know there is some question of whether or not she will be gracing our city.”

“She would be a grace to the city, wouldn’t she?”

“Mr. Stark, with you in Hong Kong, how do you plan to work on negotiating the Accords?”

“I am happy to negotiate no matter where I am, the key is to have good faith on both sides. I know what I bring to the table, I’m waiting to see their reactions.”

“Mr. Stark! With the placement of Stark Tower in Hong Kong’s skyline, are you planning to make it a regular base of operations for you or for the Avengers?”

“Anything is possible and Hong Kong’s beautiful skyline remains exquisite, it’s just a little more me!”

“Mr. Stark, there is more press gathering outside, we should go,” the man to his left informed him. He turned his head for a beat as if listening intently. The security guard stayed close while Tony scanned the terminal beyond them and the flash of a familiar backpack disappearing ahead.

Perfect.

“One more question, my babysitters need to get me settled in so I don’t get overstimulated before the tour. I might throw a tantrum. You there—young lady in the back—come on folks let her through only fair everyone gets a turn. Plenty of me to go around.” He nodded to the young woman near the back.

The reporter laughed. “You have avoided answering any questions about dating Natasha Romanoff. Are you pursuing a relationship with the Black Widow?”

A slow smile curved his lips. “If you wanted to impress a woman, would you announce your intentions in front of the whole world?”

Several shouts of does that mean he was trying to impress her? Are they dating?

“Is she just playing hard to get?”

“Why isn’t she joining you for this event?”

He gave them a beat to get really wound up before he said, “I never said she wasn’t. I have to go folks—thank you!” He gave them a wave and then turned to let security hustle him past there. Chen had definitely done his job setting all of this up. He needed to give the man a raise.

There was a larger gathering of foreign press just outside the private terminal where his car awaited. SUVs flanked the limo, ready to escort him into the city. His driver for the trip held out an
amber glass with ice and water.

“One sec,” Tony told the press as he took it and nodded to the driver as he accepted the drink. The man’s gray-green eyes were not amused as he scanned the crowd.

“We will be late if we don’t leave soon,” the driver told him.

“Don’t worry,” he said lifting the glass and taking a drink like it was a whiskey instead of water. “They can’t get started without me.” He winked before he turned. “Who has a question for me?”

“Are you planning to expand Stark Industries into the Chinese markets?”

With a little laugh, Tony saluted him. “I’ve always got plans to expand, to adapt, and to improve… that’s what we do at Stark Industries. We make things work and we make them better.”

“Will you be taking a more active role in the day-to-day operations at Stark Industries?”

“I’ve never not been involved. The company would literally not be where it is without me. It’s why Stark Industries is still here and so many others are just pfft—gone.” Every word was weighed and measured.

“Where is Natasha Romanoff? Since the holiday party, you’ve both been avoiding the press, Mr. Stark? Did you steal away for the week?”

“That would have been fun,” Tony told him.

“Why are you handling this tour when the CEO was originally scheduled to take care of it?”

“Because the CEO is busy,” he said. “And I’m me. Last question!”

A taller blond man lifted his hand, then asked in a familiar British accent, “Mr. Stark, some would say that you are taking on too much with the Avengers, the Accords, and your business, and you cannot possibly devote adequate time to each of these endeavors. Why should people trust you?”

“Because I’m Iron Man,” he said with a broad grin. “Take care folks.” There was always a pang when he heard his voice, even if he’d come to terms with the idea of J being gone. The pang remained.

His driver closed the door behind him after he slid inside. A moment later, he settled behind the wheel and the privacy partition lowered as the vehicle started forward.

“We good?”

Clint glanced back at him. “Right on schedule.”

Allow the translator to introduce the government and city delegates, pay strict attention to the order of introduction and greet them formally. (Keep it simple, a kind word and don't bow unless they do)

The press waiting at the building only got a wave from him as he strolled inside. The delegates had
arrived fifteen minutes earlier. He was late, but he didn’t hurry, instead, he took his time, one hand in his pocket. His two security guards continued to flank him as he made his way past the gathered to the front doors. There were easily fifty cameras on him and Friday had the newsfeeds running on a ribbon in the corner of his glasses.

Iron Man was trending.

So was IronWidow.

The fact Steve might yet punch him when this was over in no way dissuaded him from the course of action. The point was to set the stage. He wasn’t the one asking the questions anyway. Inside, the translator had a kind of wild-eyed look at his late arrival.

“Good morning everyone,” he said clapping his hands as he strode through the doors. All energy. The glasses were already in threat assessment mode. “Tony Stark, but I’m sure you’re all familiar with me.” God, Pepper was going to kill him. “Do we need to do introductions? Or would you prefer to get on with seeing what this Tower can do? I promise you, it’s going to knock your socks off.”

Proceed with the tour, highlight the green functions of the building and not the luxurious aspects. Allow them to sample the luxuries personally. (Really, just think green, green, green)

The translator blanched before he passed on the remarks. Of the half-dozen delegates waiting for him—four men and two women—as well as the translator and their own various security personnel, only one actually managed to look amused. Facial recognition identified her as Sonoya Lu, Deputy Minister Office of the Chief Executive. She was there representing Chief Executive of Hong Kong along with Chan Wei, a Deputy Minister in the Financial Secretary’s Office.

Well, one out of six wasn’t bad.

“Good? Great. Let’s start at the top. I like to have the best view.”

Give the officials a chance to provide you with feedback and show them due respect by merely listening, you do not need to respond or promise any changes. (Really, just let them talk)

As they reached the promenade level in the center of the Tower which included a mezzanine, interior garden, and the promise of restaurant facilities and a chef, he grinned, “As you can imagine, Stark Tower will provide working facilities for up to five thousand people, so we need to be prepared to feed them and provide an area for relaxation and leisure.. I thought a sample of the food would be great.”

The chefs had worked overtime to provide a full spread for lunch, along with refreshments. Tony made a point of accepting another tumbler from one of his security and sipping his drink as he listened to their comments and concerns.

Not really, but Friday took notes for him and he studied the guests. Ping Doh Win was the senior delegate from the Chinese government. He had said absolutely nothing from the beginning, he
inspected every floor with military thoroughness and his expression didn’t change from dour, not even when presented with the charming Sonoya Lu who seemed very eager to make his acquaintance. These events were boring on a good day. This was not a good day.

They were approaching forty-eight hours since they’d last had any word on Natasha. The silence could mean a lot of things, but The Mandarin wanted something from Tony. More, he wanted Tony to suffer. So—Tony kept on his bright and cheerful face. He flirted with the press and basked in the spotlight the business and gossip media threw in his direction.

Everything about him said The Mandarin could suck it.

“Mr. Stark,” Ping Doh Win said, his accent absent of any inflections.

“Mr. Delegate,” Tony said, glancing up from his phone as if vaguely distracted—not something he had to pretend really. He didn’t want to be there.

“Your tower is very impressive and your presentation bold and direct. You are, however, not interested in being here as much as you claim to be.”

Huh.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because there is nothing in Hong Kong for you to fix. The city thrives.”

“There is plenty of unrest. One country, two systems.” Just because he acted like he didn’t pay attention didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of what was going on. “But I’m not here to fix Hong Kong. Stark Tower is about a promise—and it’s a promise I made the day I became Iron Man and a promise I intend to keep.”

“Even when my government opposes the woman in your life?” That was direct.

“I didn’t know your government took a position on who I dated.” He tossed back the water and swirled it around his mouth before swallowing.

“Our position would have been made clearer had you and Ms. Romanoff attended the scheduled meeting with our delegate earlier this week.”

Tony smirked. “Feeling insulted?”

Ping Doh Win canted his head. “Your intention, I presume?”

“You may presume whatever you like. I’m sure your delegate also informed you of the backroom deal he and the other members of the Committee were attempting to make in regards to the co-leader and second in command of the Avengers?”

The barest flicker of surprise. Well, look at that. “Such a move would indicate a failure to honor the general principle of negotiation.” The man turned to look at the others then glanced at Tony again. “I will consider those words and I thank you again for making the time to honor us with your presence. Ms. Potts made many promises—and I am pleased to see that you have upheld them.”

The man bowed slightly and the conversation in the room quieted. Tony glanced over the gathering and one by one they bowed.

Sliding his hands into his pockets, he nodded to them.
Once the tour is complete, allow them to take their leave and do not upstage their ministers or city officials, no press releases, no appearances, no talking to the media.

Try not to be you.

After the tour ended and the delegates departed, Tony made his way through the reporters still lingering. Once back in the limo, Tony loosened his tie and leaned back. Clint glanced back at him. “Good?”

“Yeah, that’s done. Steve and Peter make it to the hotel?”

He nodded. “We heading there now?”

“Probably,” Tony glanced back at the Tower. “Friday?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Everyone’s evacuated, right?”

“The last of the staff exited five minutes ago. The last of the vehicles leaving the property are yours and security. The press is also taking their leave.”

He cut a look to where the press had already begun packing up and heading to their own cars—either to follow them or move on to the next story. After checking his watch, he pulled out his phone.

“Do the final sweep of the building.”

“Sweep commencing.” The screen lit up as Friday ran the drones through the building, every level, every room, and past every structure.

“No explosive materials detected. We have successfully removed all incendiary devices.”

“Light up the playground.” Tony leaned forward. “Okay, Clint—let’s go. Keep your eyes open.”

Behind them, the hologram program added the illusion of security at their posts. The jamming signals dropped away, and the interior surged with activity as workers finished last-minute projects and cleaners dealt with the mess left by the tour.

“Think he’s going to go for it?”

“He wants to hurt me.” Taking down a Stark Tower could definitely be perceived as hurting him. When The Mandarin sent the signal and nothing happened—well, impotence did affect many men over the age of forty.

They were fifteen minutes away from the building when his phone rang.

Bingo.

Hitting answer, he put the phone to his ear. “Tony Stark.”

“Mr. Stark…” The Mandarin’s voice greeted him. “It has been some time since we spoke.”
“Yeah, didn’t miss you. Have to chat later. I’m busy.” He hung up.

Of all the things he’d chosen to do that day—that was the hardest.

Clint met his gaze in the rearview mirror and nodded.

His phone rang again.

He let it go to voicemail.

Natasha

The stone beneath her was cold. She’d lost track of time lying there. Waiting. The silence was a kind of comfort as she forced herself to breathe through the pain. Concentrating on thinking about nothing was harder than it sounded. Eyes closed, she didn’t feel the stone but the sand…

“You’re going to burn, Natalia,” James chided as he dropped to sit next to her. She’d come out to sit and watch the waves rolling in. The steady breeze tugged at her hat.

“Sshh…” She told him, drinking in the way the sky seemed to stretch down into the water, the horizon just one endless sea of blue. The heat was welcome on her chilled muscles.

“Why are we being quiet?” The softly voiced words were right against her ear.

“Because I’m not thinking. Sshh, James. I need to concentrate.”

“On not thinking?” The doubt in his voice made her smile.

“Yes.”

“Natalia… you are always thinking.”

She knew.

“Sshh…”

“Good day, Widow. Are you ready to begin again?”

She didn’t answer; the scent of salt and sand tickled her nostrils. She liked this beach. The sand was soft—well, as soft as sand could get—the water warm. The sun always seemed brighter here, no smog or pollution to dilute it. At night… she glanced up and smiled.

Stars.
“Do you have a favorite constellation?

“Are we supposed to have one?”

Steve groaned. “You had to ask him that.”

“Yes,” James sounded almost smug. “She did…so let’s discuss Andromeda…”

Laughter bubbled up within her at the irony.

Andromeda.

The chained woman.

Pain arced through her, the chain retracting had yanked her leg and she sat up.

“Let us try that again, shall we, Widow?”

She didn’t have a choice, so she said nothing.

“Tony Stark.” Tony’s voice echoed from above.

“Mr. Stark…” The Mandarin sounded almost pleased. “It has been some time since we spoke.”

“Yeah, didn’t miss you. Have to chat later. I’m busy.” Then Tony hung up.

There was silence then the sound of ringing.

“You’ve reached the voicemail of Tony Stark, clearly I’m busy. Leave a message, if I think it’s important, I’ll return—” The message cut off.

More silence.

Ringing.

“You’ve reached th—”

Silence.

“It would seem that Mr. Stark wishes to forfeit this round.”

Good boy, Tony.

She rolled her head from side to side. The retracted chain was now just three feet in length and she sat at the limit of it. The backs of her legs had scraped against the stone.

Blowing out a breath, she lay back again. Honestly, the vulnerable position set every one of her nerves jangling even as her pulse seemed to pound inside her head—like the staccato beat of a fist against a prison wall.

“Your minds are where your greatest strength lies. Pain can be compartmentalized. Will can overcome weakness. Sometimes, your greatest advantage lies in surrender. All warfare is based on deception…”

The crank of a door opening sent a spike to her pulse. She refused to look to the door, instead, she
focused on the cracks in the stonework above her. The patterns within patterns. Like constellations, the imperfections in the rock gave it character and…

The Mandarin’s face appeared above her, blocking her view of the ceiling.

“Why does he not take my call?”

With a slow blink, she met his gaze.

“Answer me, Widow.”

She dragged it out for another three seconds beyond the moment his pupils contracted.

Lightning crackled in the air and the hair on her arms stood up.

“Maybe he’s bored,” she finally said as if the very nature of answering exhausted her. “Kind of like me. Are we doing this or is this part where you start ranting or telling me some convoluted story about how the world did you wrong and it’s all the fault of some rich, facetious, entitled jackass who probably didn’t know or care about your name?”

The Mandarin’s eyes narrowed.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather just get on with it,” she continued after a beat.

With care, The Mandarin squatted. He was close enough to strike, but she needed to make it a perfect hit. “Do you believe that if you continue to refuse—or if he does—the game ends?”

“The game never ends,” she told him with a shrug. “There’s always another move, another player, another game that picks up where the last left off.”

“You would have me believe you no longer care.”

“You presume I cared to begin with.” There was a beach waiting for her.

Suspicion edged his expression. Doubt creeping into his green eyes.

“Mother or father?” she asked, refocusing on him.

“Excuse me?”

“Your green eyes. Mother or father?”

His mouth compressed.

“I ask because—fifty plus years ago, you would have been an anomaly. A mutt. An unwelcome stain—”

Electricity soared through her system and her back seized as she arced under the force of it, then almost as soon as it began, it ended. Her thoughts rattled for a moment, pinging off each other as though rejecting contact.

“You cannot even name your parents,” he told her as if she needed a reminder.

“Sure I can…” she exhaled around the shudders cramping her muscles. Blood trickled from one nostril. “My mother was Russia.” A laugh wheezed out of her. “Are we done now? I had plans.”
A phone appeared in his hand and he pressed a call button. It rang, the sound echoing in her cold chamber.

“Avengers Tower,” Friday said when she answered. “What is the nature of your call?”

The Mandarin glanced at her and then held the phone in her direction.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. Did he really think it would be that easy? Another shudder raced along her spine.

“Avengers Tower,” Friday repeated. “Please state the nature of your call.” Then, “This call will terminate in ten seconds.”

“I presume I am speaking to Friday,” The Mandarin said when she continued to refuse.

“You have reached Avengers Tower,” Friday said as if ignoring his statement. “At this time, the Avengers are unavailable to take any calls. May I take a message for them?”

A cough wheezed out of her as she laughed.

“Tell Mr. Stark he has forfeited this move…”

“Mr. Stark is no longer interested in your offers, Mr. Mandarin.” Friday replied in such a prim tone, Natasha wanted to laugh.

“He does not make the rules,” The Mandarin said slowly, an incensed look cracking through his façade.

“But he does not have to play your game, either. If that is all…”

The Mandarin glared at her.

The sheer volume of dislike was a testament to Tony’s ability to piss off a saint.

Save Tony Stark.

“What change is he seeking to continue the game?”

Well. That was a surprise. The Mandarin just blinked.

It could be another play. But then, how could he advance if he couldn’t get Tony on the phone?

“Mr. Stark is a very busy man, Mr. Mandarin. A creator. A builder. Unlike Prometheus, he will not be chained to a rock to have his liver consumed each day.”

There was a message in that; Natasha shuddered as electricity still jangling in her system set off another cascade. She was really going to need a haircut after this. It probably did look like she’d stuck a finger in a light socket.

A dry, hoarse laugh broke out of her and she ignored The Mandarin’s glare. Still, there was a message—even if she could only glean the intent—which was Tony would no longer play by The Mandarin’s rules. Her situation was about to get worse, if possible, but it also meant Tony wasn’t reacting anymore.

They were coming.
She didn’t doubt it and at the same time, a strange sensation fisted in her gut. They were going to take risks to get to her. She should already have been out of here.

“You don’t have to tell yourself you’re okay if you’re alone, if you don’t want to,” James told her slowly, understanding a fierce light in his eyes. “And if you need exit plans to feel safe, that’s okay, too.”

Cupping his cheek, she wanted to fall into his gaze and stay there. “I’m trying to not do that.”

“It’s okay,” he assured her. “I mean it. It’s what we do Natalia, it’s part of what they made us to do.”

“I don’t want that part of them anymore.” Then she licked her lips and smoothed her hands down his jacket. When she stepped back this time, he didn’t fight her. “I want to just—do our jobs, and be us. Or learn who we can be without that worry, without having to look over our shoulders. Even if that’s never possible, I still want it.”

“We’ll make it possible.” He tucked a finger beneath her chin and lifted her gaze to his. “We have a secret weapon now…”

At her raised eyebrow, he grinned slowly.

“A stubborn super soldier who doesn’t know when to quit. He’ll come for us every time.”

She chuckled. “Yes, he will… and… we’ll go after him the same way.”

“Damn straight.”

She’d gotten free once.

Hope pricked her.

That was more dangerous than anything else. She shuttled it to the side, secured it and then buried the code. Hope made people stupid. They reacted out of emotion instead of logic and reason.

“Why did you agree to join SHIELD?”

“Because Agent Barton asked me.”

“He just asked and you said yes?”

“You choose to do this, you don’t walk it back. You walk out these doors with me, and it’s you and me kid. I’ll have your back.” The ludicrous part of the whole dramatic statement in her opinion was the absolute earnest way he delivered it. Clint Barton, the Hawkeye, believed every word he
said. Believed it enough, she found herself almost swayed by it.

No one swayed her with words.

“How the hell can you make that kind of promise?” The man was supposed to kill her. No one had ever gotten so close to her, and she’d known he’d been shadowing her for a while—watching, but keeping his distance.

“You were relieved to see me,” he told her, meeting her gaze and holding it. Not once did he dip for a look at her breasts the robe did little to hide nor did he focus on her bare legs, crossed one over the other. He stared into her eyes, his pupils relaxed and the gray-green color of his irises seemed almost soothing even under the gentle hotel lighting.

“So this means you should offer me a way out? A job working for your people?”

“Sure, why not?” Then he grinned and dropped to sit on the edge of the bed. He still had the bow in his hand, but the arrow was no longer knocked. “You’ve got mad skills, kid. Mad skills. I’ve never seen anything like what you do—and I’m good. But you’re better.”

“Because before Nat was recruited into SHIELD…”

“At arrowpoint,” Tony interjected. “I don’t think they call it recruitment when you only have two options.”

Pain blossomed in her leg and she reoriented to where she was. The Mandarin had tightened her chain again, sinking it another foot into the floor—wait, that wasn’t retracted, the chain itself was in the floor.

That explained the walls in the club.

Another mad little giggle bubbled up and she was tempted to give into it.

“Say something,” he told her holding the phone in her direction. She looked at the pinhole camera on the phone. Then up at him and raised her eyebrows. Her focus wandered, wavering in and out of the present like something in her mind had shorted a connection. But she did know she didn’t want to help him extract whatever pound of flesh he craved to take from Tony.

“All my life…dying has never been something I was afraid of. Everyone dies. My training says nothing is more important than the mission. Nothing. But this time…even knowing that it could happen and accepting the risk…I didn’t want to die. I really didn’t want to leave you two…or the team…or Clint and his family…not when I just found my home. I want to live…I want to make a place in this world. With you. I want us to make a place in this world. So I’m sorry that I scared you, and I’m sorry that it came so close to me not being here…I’m going to work on that, okay?”
Steve. James.

She had to keep surviving.

Mary.

She had to.

“What do you want me to do, sing her a song?” She didn’t look away from The Mandarin’s demanding glare.

“Ms. Romanoff.” The AI’s intonation didn’t shift. If anything, she sounded even more impersonal.

“Friday.”

“I’m afraid I should inform you that a Red Level Alert has been placed on all communication with you.”

“What does that mean?” The Mandarin asked. How rattled was he that he tipped his hand?

“It means I’m mind-blowingly duplicitous. The whole double-agent thing really sticks in my DNA.” It also meant at least Tony, if not all of them, was listening.

The Mandarin stared at her for a beat. “So Stark will no longer fight for you?”

She actually laughed. “Why did you think he was fighting for me in the first place? You have met him, right?”

“Because he offered to trade himself for you.” The bland delivery told her he believed she was lying.

“Mr. Stark displays compulsive behavior—he will react when provoked generally in a manner one would expect from an entitled, arrogant billionaire who never had to work a day in his life.” She pushed herself up, no longer content with being prone. “Prone to self-destructive tendencies—he likes to pick fights with people to prove his value as if he can rise above the station life accorded him. Textbook narcissism? Borderline sociopath? Devoid of true empathy? All valid diagnoses.”

The Mandarin frowned at her. “You wish me to believe these are your opinions of him?”

For the first time in a while, Natasha smiled. “I wrote the book on him.” She could write a book on The Mandarin, too.

Save Tony Stark.

“I was sent to assess him for the Avengers Initiative—Iron Man? Yes. Tony Stark? No.” The words had been clear-cut and crystal on the page. She’d meant it when she wrote them because the Initiative would not be good for Tony.

“Do you still hold with this assessment?”

Had he forgotten Friday was still on the phone or had he hoped she was? Did he want her to lash out at Tony?
She was tired. She wasn’t dead.

“Have you met him?” She snapped her fingers, the act actually hurt. When the hell had her fingertips been burned? Oh. Lightning. Right. “Rhetorical question. You decided you met me so that was enough. I should tell you—I am not Tony Stark. He doesn’t even like me.”

The Mandarin snorted. “Perhaps you are the one who has not met him. He covets you in every press interview.”

“That’s cause I won’t have sex with him. Make a man want you? Keep him chasing? They’ll do anything you want.”

A flicker of a question in his eyes. “I highly doubt that, Widow. I’ve seen you together.”

“You see what I want people to see. That’s all anyone ever sees,” she informed him. “But you go ahead and keep deluding yourself. Are we done with this conversation? We’ve manipulated matters, covered everything in shadows, pulled a Thor with the lightning—huh—you really do have a thing for Asgard—hidden fortresses, monks, and myths. Or maybe you just want to try the old Jedi mind trick again, I should warn you—I look great in a metal bikini.”

It was random. Tony might parse it. She had to trust Friday kept recording. And if she had to place a bet, she’d guarantee Tony was listening. What he couldn’t parse, Clint or Steve or James would.

Though a part of her hoped Steve and James weren’t. They didn’t need to hear what was coming next.

Truthfully, none of them did.

“So you truly do not care, one way or the other?”

“Not even a little bit,” she told him. “If you knew me at all—you’d know I’m available to the highest bidder. If you really want him dead, just put out a sealed bid on him. I’ll take care of it.”

“Unlikely, though I appreciate the attempt. Whether he cares about your return or not…” The Mandarin paused, then shook his head. Had he just realized how long he’d been on a phone line? A cellular phone? “You are very clever, Widow.”

“Some days it’s my best attribute.”

He glanced down at his phone then at her. “Tell Stark the rules were simple. He has forfeited this move. If he passes on the next, I’ll consider it a forfeit of the game and I’ll be keeping the Widow.”

Natasha laughed before he could hit the end call. “As if any man can keep me. You can bury me in stone, lock me in a dungeon, and keep running me chained in a maze. But I’m not the one you want to impress.”

“Then what happens next won’t matter…” He hit end call and she braced herself.

He was right. It didn’t matter.

It hurt like hell.

But it didn’t matter.

And when the pain blossomed behind her eye, she fell into it this time. Escape came in many
Arms folded, Steve braced against whatever came next, but the call ended and Tony stripped off his glasses as he walked away from the desk. Clint leaned against the wall, head tilted back. Bucky hadn’t moved, except to put a hand on Peter’s shoulder. Sam split his attention between all five of them, but no one said anything. Wanda, Vision, and Rhodey were the only three not present.

But they were waiting for word on the next move.

“I was able to trace the packets, Boss,” Friday said finally and Steve let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Northern China, Inner Mongolia. I couldn’t get a certain fix, but I am retasking a satellite. There are several blackout zones in the region and Chinese regulations and jamming are adding another layer of difficulty.”

“We have the codes to crack that,” Tony said flatly.

“I said difficult, Boss. Not impossible. It will take time, however, I believe we may be able to triangulate using the information gathered by Vision and yourself during the Denial of Service attack during the Bastards incident in San Francisco.”

“The hackers who tried to stop Nat and Friday boxing the worm.” Steve straightened. “Correct, Captain Rogers. While I believe it a gamble, I like the odds as Boss would say.”

Tony let out a little laugh. “Do it, Baby Girl—then leak the story about the SI takeover of TitanCorp.”

“On it, Boss.”

After the call ended, Peter said, “How long before we get the next video?”

“Two hours,” Bucky told him. “We should get food up here. Everyone eats. If you haven’t slept, take a nap. If you have, go over the gear.”

“How much more can Natasha take?” Sam asked into the quiet. “I know we’re not talking about that. But—he’s had her for eight days and she sounded…” The hesitation wasn’t unwarranted. The first time they’d heard her voice since she walked away from them at the party and there had been defiance in it, but also exhaustion.

“Natalia will survive,” Bucky said with absolute assurance.

“You can’t know that,” Sam said slowly. “She’s—she’s tough, but…”

“She’s more than tough, Sam,” Clint interceded, as Bucky’s eyes grew even more glacial.
“Bucky’s right. She’s going to survive. Right now, we need to focus on the plan. The next part is going to be tough enough.”

With a shake of his head, Sam met Steve’s gaze. “Are we playing this the right way?”

No. But they hadn’t been left with much choice. Tony was right. There was only one way this ended. “It’s what we have, Sam. This is what we’re doing. We each have a part to play. I need you focused. Grab some food, get some sleep. We’ll reconvene in two hours.”

Room service delivered the food a few minutes later, but they were all on guard for it. Tony scanned every inch of it before he signed off on letting them eat. When he headed out to the balcony, Steve slipped the bodyguard face on, then followed. Sam and Bucky had faded into the background in their matching suits and sunglasses and photo static veils of their own. Clint’s face wasn’t as well known, but he also had the benefit of a hat and a magnetic resin base he rubbed in that apparently created a reflective surface and baffled facial recognition.

Currently, the only Avenger in China legitimately was Tony. Steve Rogers, as far as the world knew, was in New York. Sharon was running interference. Even Peter’s presence had slipped under the radar, his intern status kept him ‘running’ and Steve had hustled him out of the airport while Tony distracted the press.

The balcony was more of a deck, with lounging chairs and a table. There were planters filled with an abundance of green and even a fountain to give the whole thing a relaxing atmosphere. The power of wealth and privilege. Blue skies, cool temperatures, but not cold and a near-perfect level of humidity all seemed lost on Steve as he followed Tony to where he stood staring at the fountain.

“You knew it would be hard,” he told him. Taking personal risks had never slowed Tony down, but this wasn’t risking himself. Trying to incense The Mandarin meant he would take it out on Nat. The problem, though, was he would have taken it out on her anyway. He had been, for days.

“Yeah. I was ready for it until I heard her…” Tony shook his head and glanced at him. “Red’s the toughest person I know and he’s got her chained in a dungeon.”

“Stone. Yeah, I got that. She confirmed your theory about the rings, too. Four of the ten.”

“Lightning.” Tony checked his phone then slid it into his pocket. “I don’t want to know how she found that out.”

They didn’t have to be told. If he was showing it off, he’d probably used it on her. Electrocuted her. This plan had to work, they had to get The Mandarin out in the open or get him to bring Tony in to him.

Folding his arms, Tony faced him. “The news reports are going to start trickling out. The leaked story about the TitanCorp takeover…”

“You’re sure that’s him?”

“Prometheus-GenTech? TitanCorp? Hijacking Peter’s specs then creating all that mech? Yeah, I’m sure it’s him. Red said as much when she quoted from the psych profile… but the elements, she was talking about him, too. He needs to beat me, but not just a win. He needs it to be clear-cut victory of superiority proving himself beyond worthy while punishing me in the same breath.”

“Worthy?” Steve said slowly then leaned his head back. “Thor.”
“Whosoever wieldeth this hammer… and stuff.” The engineer smiled slightly. “Kind of wishing he and the big guy were around for this. We could use them.”

“We can handle him. He’s avoided direct contact with all of us—except Nat and without those rings, she had him. We can take him.”

The door opened behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder to find Clint joining them. “It’s also a trick,” he said, making his way across the deck.

“Possibly, but that wouldn’t be a news flash,” Tony said, his expression thoughtful. “’You see what I want you to see…’ could mean he’s doctoring the videos. Also not a surprise.”

“But to what end? Is he hiding how bad she actually is? Or just trying to make us think it’s worse than it is?” Neither really seemed to fit the guy. He definitely seemed to take some pleasure in what he was doing or why would he keep doing it? Dammit, what was he doing to her right then? They were standing on a deck in the penthouse of a wealthy and exclusive hotel—that Tony actually owned via a different shell corporation—and Natasha was in some stone dungeon...

Dungeon.

See what I want you to see.

“Friday,” Steve touched his comms unit. “The region you traced the packets to. Are there any fortresses or castles visible from satellite?”

“I am still in the process of scanning the region, Captain Rogers, I will let you know immediately.”

“Thank you.” He glanced back inside to where Bucky and Peter were talking. The pair had been thick as thieves the last few days, if Peter wasn’t with Tony, he’d been gravitating to Bucky. Steve got that. He’d been the same way at that age. If Bucky told him something would work, even when he argued with him, he still trusted his opinion.

“The one thing I’m worried about…” Clint said arresting his attention and Tony’s. “The Jedi mind trick comment.”

“He’s messing with her mind,” Steve said and it wasn’t a guess. “But she still sounds like her.”

“But she doesn’t trust herself or she wouldn’t have warned us,” Clint told him. “I’m telling you right now—the closest you’ve ever seen Nat to a true slip was that morning in Vienna and that was nothing.”

“I’m not changing the plan,” Tony told him. “We get her out, we get her back.”

“I’m not saying change it,” Clint said, spreading his hands. “I’m saying be wary.”

“Already planning on it.”

“Next item of business,” Clint continued, seemingly accepting that answer. “Fury sent the files.”

Steve snapped his head up. “Her mission reports?”

“Yep.” He jerked his thumb back at the room. “I’m going to go through them, I was on most of them with her, I’ll know the ones that are off.”

“Are you sure?” The challenge from Tony carried no malice or heat. “They slipped it past you before.”
“That’s part of why I’m the right guy to look, I know the protocols. I remember the missions. Nat wrote a lot of those reports, but there were other protocols—checkouts with Coulson, sign-outs at the Triskelion. We kept logs of coming on base, leaving base—”

“Mission deployment,” Steve added. “We were logged in with a health status when we returned.”

“Exactly. We also signed out any leaves—even mandatory ones. Those had to be manual, just—another way to cross a t and dot an i.”

“But if her mission reports are doctored, why wouldn’t the log times be, as well?”

“Because the login/log out for the Triskelion was a part of internal operations, not sec ops and spec ops.”

“Bureaucracy,” Tony scoffed. “You think it’ll be that easy?”

“I think the world owes her a few and fate needs to step the hell up so we know what we’re looking at.” Clint glanced at his watch. “I’ll be in my room going through this. Bucky and the kid are going to watch a movie. Sam’s catching an hour. You should both try to do the same.”

Not that he expected they would from his expression. “Send me copies of anything post-2012 for STRIKE Team Delta,” Steve told him.

“Yeah,” Clint said with a nod. “You were there for those.”

And they both knew they’d missed things by then.

After Clint went inside, Tony said, “It’s going to work, Steve. Everything else we can figure out.”

“It only works if you both come out of this on the other side.”

“Well—” Tony said with a wry grin. “It’s Christmas, I think we should be able to whip up a miracle.”

Bucky

The two hours passed with agonizing slowness, though he kept his focus on Peter as the kid went over his gear testing his web shooters, then tuning them up. They seemed to be working fine, but Peter took them apart and put them back together twice. Bucky appreciated the attention to detail. He sat across from him and took apart, cleaned, and then reassembled his guns once more. Then he did the pair Steve would be using. Finally, he did Sam’s. When he went in search of Clint’s, the other man gave him a bland look and told him to watch a movie.

It was—almost funny.

Steve and Tony talked out on the deck, about what? Bucky wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure he could stand out there and talk or plot or maybe even for a distraction. Not after Tony deliberately antagonized The Mandarin. It was the plan; he understood it and even appreciated the reasons why.
He also respected the fact Tony was deliberately seeking to put himself in the crosshairs—but Natalia was the one paying for that anger and aggravation.

Natalia was the one who’d been a prisoner for days. She would survive it. She always did. The fact she had to, though, left him boiling.

So no, he understood the plan and he respected the plan, but he truly wanted their target in their sights now, rather than waiting for him to make a move that brought Tony to him.

Because that move wasn’t the final gambit. It was literally just a next step. They had to trust they could track his route, narrowing the window again and again. They had to trust Tony to stay alive long enough to get to Natalia and hope The Mandarin didn’t kill her in a fit of pique to punish Tony.

Tony’s confidence that The Mandarin wanted to own Natalia fueled his belief that they could both hold out—especially if he was there and if he didn’t, he’d shrugged it off. He was willing to fall on that sword to get her out.

That stayed any cutting remark or anger flaring with every passing minute. He didn’t blame Tony that she’d been taken. He didn’t even blame Natalia—though he was still angry with her. He would be angry until he could get his hands on her again and know she was safe. They’d had precious little time together and there was still so much...

“Buck,” Steve said quietly and he glanced up then down at the barrel of the gun he’d mangled, twisting and bending the metal until it was useless. With a sigh, he set the gun down. It was one of Sam’s. He’d have to replace it.

“I got it,” Tony told him. “We’ve got spares on the quinjet.”

At some point, both men had returned inside. Peter stared at him steadily and gave him a small smile. “I said something, but I don’t think you heard me.”

He shook his head once. He hadn’t. A part of him had locked onto the mental image of The Mandarin and envisioned taking the man apart piece by piece. The need to protect Natalia had been a visceral chain of barbed wire around him from the moment he reconnected with her, it was what brought them together again and again. Only the enforced separation, keeping her far away, had any kind of effect.

That and wiping him until he was little more than a drooling machine who understood point and shoot.

Odessa flashed through his mind. The Soldier had a mission and she was merely an obstacle, except… for one split second when their eyes connected, he’d known her. It was why he shot through her instead of just executing her.

Washington D.C.

The woman had been his target, but he hadn’t allowed any of the team to go after her. He’d taken the shot through the roof of the car after he dragged Sitwell out. Attacking Sitwell first alerted them. He could just as easily have seized her through the broken glass and thrown her into traffic.

He hadn’t wanted to.

Germany.
Triggered, running on primary commands, he just wanted to leave. But Natalia had proven the threat. The need she roused in him had been counter to his programming.

Then finally at the airport, more himself than he’d been at any of their encounters in more than three decades and the last thing he wanted was to attack her when she stood between him, Steve, and the quinjet.

The reticence in Steve’s eyes buoyed him but it was the resignation in hers that cut at him.

She didn’t want to fight them either.

They had never wanted the fight.

But it always ended in one. The fight always found him. It found them both.

A hand on his shoulder and Bucky blew out a breath. “The video came?” It was the only thing he could think of that would bring them inside and Peter had gone to fetch Clint.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “You holding it together?”

“ Barely.” He wouldn’t lie. In the weeks since he’d gotten himself back, since the barriers shattered the walls keeping his memories prisoner, he had been far more balanced than he felt at the moment. His world narrowed down to a singular purpose and while he might be Bucky Barnes, he was still the Soldier.

He would always be her Soldier.

“Have you seen it?” he asked as Clint exited the room he’d claimed when they’d arrived in the multi-room penthouse. Exhaustion visible on his face, the archer sank down on the sofa and stretched out his braced leg.

“No,” Steve told him. “I don’t think any of us want to watch it more than once.”

Bucky flicked a look to Peter, meeting his gaze as Tony returned with a handful of water bottles. He passed them out before he took a seat in the armchair. The sitting room area was one big rectangle of chairs and sofas around an oblong coffee table.

“I know you’re going to say I can’t unsee it.”

None of them could.

Bucky wasn’t alone studying him, Steve and Tony regarded him evenly, but it was Clint who said. “Kid, she doesn’t want you to see this.”

“She probably doesn’t want any of us to see it,” Steve said finally. “But Clint’s right. Peter…”

“I know, I’m a kid. Only I’m not. I don’t want to see it…but I need to.” Peter blew out a breath.

“I can tell you after,” Bucky offered. It had worked before, but Peter shook his head slowly.

“I’m here. I can handle it.”

“Pete, Clint’s right, Red doesn’t want you to see this. None of us want to see it.”

“But there might be clues,” the kid said quietly.
Tony set his phone on the table, then unscrewed the lid to his bottle. “We’re ready, Baby Girl.”

The image that appeared nearly stopped his heart. Natalia sat in the middle of a stone room, her leg shackled, her skin filthy and her hair hanging dank and limp. It had been days and it showed. There were hollows in her cheeks, shadows beneath her eyes and a blank look on her face. The image didn’t give him a good look at her eyes, but… there was no mistaking the stain of blood around one of her nostrils or along one of her earlobes and down to her neck.

She’d had an episode.

Maybe more than one.

“Her hands…” Peter said in an almost strangled voice and Bucky glanced at her scorched fingers. They were red and blistered.

Burns.

He was burning her.

Cold hate settled even deeper into his bones. Her mouth moved but there was no sound. Was this from the call earlier? When The Mandarin had reached out to Friday after Tony hung up on him and let the calls go to voicemail?

Bile coated the back of his throat.

The moment The Mandarin ended the call though; he stood abruptly and towered over her. Natalia didn’t even flinch. All the hair on his body stood up. Then lightning flashes filled the screen, almost too bright to see past and Natalia was curled on her side, taking the blasts.

“Son of a bitch,” Clint swore quietly.

It went on for several minutes, the flashes growing more infrequent. But she hadn’t stopped twitching.

“Natalia?” He’d gone looking for her when she didn’t come to dance. She never missed a dance session when she was in residence. The guards reported she’d returned, so where was she? Then finding her, the vague disquiet in her eyes. The lost look. The blankness to her features. Her spirit dimmed. In the training room, he pulled her into the fight and then she responded, her body moving from muscle memory alone and the light rekindled in her eyes.

It was the first time he pulled her from the chair’s grip.

It wouldn’t be the last.

Slamming her into the chair, his hand gripping her jaw tight enough to crack it. The locks slotting into place and the look in her eyes as she met his gaze. The well of sadness.

Her fighting to get to him as he stood in the cold, captivated by those beautiful green eyes and her red hair. The red hair would linger even as the chair erased her. The red hair haunted him.
The Mandarin stared down at her dispassionately, then looked at the camera. Suddenly they had sound. “This is the cost of forfeiting your round. Do so again and you will never see her again. As I’m sure you’ll understand.”

Then he swept his hand out and ice slid over her, like a sliding blanket as her body stopped shaking and then went utterly, completely still.

The camera focused on her. The ice entombed her.

For the next forty-eight minutes.

She lay encapsulated in the ice. Eyes closed. Unaware. Frozen.

Alive.

She had to be alive.

Something shattered to his right but he didn’t take his gaze away from the screen. Not once.

His chest ached with the idea of the breath frozen in her lungs. Could she survive, even at that temperature? Even with all her skills? Her enhancements?

Finally, the ice began to melt. Slowly at first, then more rapidly the ice shrank, leaving her soaked, shivering violently, and blessedly alive.

“Your move, Stark.” The video ended.

No one said a word.

Bucky rose and strode out of the room. There was a hole in the wall where Steve had been standing. The kid’s chair had been bent. Outside, Bucky walked over to the railing and sucked in a deep breath then another.

Electrocuted.

Frozen.

He was trying to unmake her.

“We’re going to kill him,” Tony said from somewhere behind him, but Bucky didn’t look at him. He stared over the blue horizon, fighting the memories cascading through him. Cryo. The cold. The ice in his lungs. The ache in his bones.

Finally, he said, “How long?”

“Now…”

Bucky turned slowly and looked at him. Tony was in his suit.

“Tracers are on. Isotope is in my system. Gear up Terminator.”

“Stark…” He said as the man kicked in the repulsors and began to rise. “Tony…”

“Don’t even have to think it. She comes first. Find her. Get her out. Then worry about me.
Hopefully not even an issue.”

“Thank you,” was all he said and Iron Man stilled a minute, the mask angled in his direction but the smooth metal betraying nothing of the man inside.

“Thank me when she’s home.”

Then he blasted off and zipped away. Steve stood framed in the door. “Time to go work.”

Bucky sucked in another breath, locking everything down.

They had a job to do.

Remy

The Valley of Spirits was a creepy place; the landscape was like something out of an alien movie. If face suckers suddenly appeared, he would not be surprised. They’d left the jeep about fifteen miles back and Logan blazed a path. Despite the jagged and barren rock formations, there was vegetation—that was also vastly different shades from normal. Green trees that looked almost sickly or should be glowing. Dim brown along the bark that could be a collection of earth worms—he half-expected them to start moving.

The valley was more range that included sunken, almost crater like areas, deeply gouged out of the earth with the remains flung upward to create awkward peaks. It just didn’t feel like it belonged.

Wind whistled over the ridges and through the rocks, almost moaning. Definitely explained the spirits. They’d taken a break at the edge of one rock ledge before they descended to the next valley and Remy could have sworn there was an army of spirits carousing around them.

Haunting melodies strummed by the wind, screaming at them. Logan paid little to no attention to it. The faint twitching of his nostrils now and then promised Remy he checked the wind for unfamiliar scents and so far—nothing.

Not even animals.

The lack of fauna worried him more than the strange landscape. By unspoken decision—Logan still wouldn’t let him say anything—they drank from their own canteens and ate only from their packs. Remy had switched out for heavier gloves. If he needed to burn through the fingertips, he could handle that when the time came.

As it was, they were both wound tight. Logan might be quiet, but irritation rolled off him in waves. Maybe this place gave him the heebie-jeebies, too?

Beyond the lack of roads was the lack of radio signals and GPS. Remy’s phone croaked less than a mile into the valley. Logan hadn’t checked his, but Remy doubted it worked.

“Let’s go,” Logan said in a low voice before he leapt forward, then he struck out with his claws to slow his descent. Remy took a longer path down, using his bo staff to wedge and climb. Logan waited for him twenty feet below. The vegetation had grown denser and the floor of the valley darker.
Not even opening his mouth, Remy took point. He’d rather have Logan behind him than whatever haunted these woods. A scream of the wind shrieked behind them, a banshee denied her tribute.

Yeah, he was missing N’awlins more and more. At least the bug-a-boos there had some familiarity to them. “You getting the feeling like we’re in a *Predator* movie?”

Logan snorted. “Pretty shitty predator if we are. You crashing through the woods should have brought him out hours ago.” Not that he sounded like he would complain about it.

Inaction was bad enough, constant motion and no results? It raked up Remy’s side like the buss of a bad wind carrying in a storm off the gulf. He couldn’t even seem to work up a sweat in the arid depths—how did it look like jungle and yet have no moisture?

Logan grasped his shoulder and yanked him backward and they pressed against a tree. Straining, Remy listened but only the wind answered. Then…

A voice.

Male. Logan tapped his arm, then curled his fingers in a beckoning motion. They circled the fat trunk of the tree—it had to be ten meters around, see? *Not* natural!—with Logan in the lead and Remy moved on the balls of his feet. Despite Logan’s complaints, Remy didn’t leave a sound of his passage.

Twenty meters of creeping through the woods and Logan held up his hand then lowered it slowly as he crouched. Moving at a duck walk, Remy sidled up to him. Below was a pair of men carrying large baskets on their back as they made their way up an uneven path toward…

“That’s a castle,” Remy mouthed the words, barely giving them a whisper to voice.

“Fortress,” Logan answered. The pair of monks spoke in low tones, whatever they were saying, he couldn’t hear.

But that place didn’t look like a monastery.

It didn’t even look inviting.

No, everything about that fortress said go away.

There was a humming sound and above the fortress a helicopter rose. Remy squinted. He couldn’t see who was inside of it, but the machine turned and ambled away at a diagonal, racing out of the valley and away from the fortress.

“Do we go inside?” Remy asked. Because he’d go inside, but he was thinking Logan should go first.

“No,” Logan told him. “Not yet.” He pulled out his phone then grunted.

“No signal. Haven’t had one for the last several miles.”

Logan glared at him. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“Cause you told me to shut up…”

There was a vicious cranking noise, grinding like chains being wound tight and the monks had reached a section of wall that lifted to reveal a gated opening.
“Since when do you listen to me,” Logan muttered. “Dammit.”

“We go in, find Boo, get out and go get food. I’m starving anyway.” Truth be told, Remy could go for some serious gumbo or grits—or maybe gumbo and grits. No, jambalaya. He wanted some jambalaya.

“Stay here,” Logan told him and started moving.

“Where are you going?” Remy snagged his arm. Arguing at such a low volume really robbed him of any kind of command.

“To hike back out, I’ll go faster on my own.” Not a lie. His claws made climbing easier, not that Remy had slowed him down. “Calling in the B-team.”


Logan smirked. “Stay. Here.”

“Not planning on going anywhere.” He glanced back at the creepy fortress. Did they do mummies in China? He’d bet there were some mummies in here.

“Swamp Rat, I mean it. Stay. Here.”

“I heard you—less talking more walking,” he spit the words back at him from earlier and Logan growled. Then he shook his head and disappeared into the alien foliage.

Maybe the Valley of Spirits was a gateway to another world. Purple landscapes, strange plants, creepy winds…now eerie fortresses carved from the rock itself. Yeah, staying here was a good plan.

The wind crept through the trees then crawled over him with a moaning wail and he shuddered.

Then again, he was a master thief. He could get in there, get Boo, and have her here waiting when Logan got back.

Show him.

Besides…Remy was starving.

He pulled up his canteen and took a drink. The jerky had run out earlier and the power bars were just a miserable excuse for food. Still, he made himself eat one and stared at the fortress. No more monks on the road. No monks on the wall.

No movement.

He tilted his head toward the ridges around it. There were enough uneven depressions, he could climb, slip over and in.

Boo didn’t belong in a place like this. He glanced over his shoulder. It had taken them hours to get here. It could be a few hours before Logan got back.

Then they’d have to wait for the B-Team. He snickered. Barton. Barnes. Definitely a B-Team.

Though he liked the Barnes guy a lot more than Barton.

The wind whirled around him, clawing at him with chilly fingers and a yowling complaint.
Logan said wait here. He hunkered down and finished the power bar. After an hour, he glanced behind him then back at the fortress.

Cranky pants was right.

He never liked listening to him.

Place like this probably had tons of secret passages.

Remy was really good at getting in where he wasn’t supposed to go.

He pulled out a small pack of cards, shuffled them silently as he waited. It was something to do and kept his fingers warm.

First pull, Queen of Spades.

He grinned.

Shuffle.

Second pull, Jack of Hearts.

Remy snorted. See, he was definitely her favorite.

More shuffling.

Queen of Spades.

Yeah. Her card always came up. It was fate.

He could get in there. Tucking his cards away, he slipped out from the trees and headed for the valley floor. The fortress was less than half-a-mile. By the time he made the climb, he could be inside before Logan even got out of the valley.

They didn’t need the B-Team.

*Ready or not, Boo, here I come.*
Accelerating out of Hong Kong’s airspace, Tony angled away from major thoroughfares and military installations. His armor wasn’t stealthy, but maxed for speed and maneuverability. Friday ran interference for him. One perk of China’s constant jamming of external transmissions, it made piggy backing those signals to create a jamming field of their own fairly simple.

He couldn’t shake the image of her convulsions as the lightning struck her. Five of ten rings identified—no, six. “Friday…”

“I’m here, Boss,” she assured him. Did he sound like he needed assurance? No, no time to look at that too closely.

“I’m counting six of those ten rings as identified and active. What’s your count?”

“The sixth one is questionable,” Friday replied. “One for control as indicated during the encounter on the bridge. One for casting blindness? Or perhaps the darkness is a literal thing.” That was two. “One for rearranging matter of some kind, including altering the density of molecules such as needed to infiltrate the room at the club.” Three. “Electrical or lightning from the base reactions and arcs of power, also based on burn patterns along Ms. Romanoff’s extremities.” Four. Had her feet been burned? “Ice.” Friday sounded almost sober. “The freezing of Ms. Romanoff was disconcerting.” That was a word.

“The sixth was heat or fire.” Because the ice had melted away almost as swiftly as it had formed, leaving her in a puddle, shivering.

“Agreed, but we cannot confirm the sixth. That leaves four unidentified threats.”

“Then we just need to identify them. Are you set to burst transmissions? I need to make sure the packets get through even if he jams my main communications.”

“We’re good on this end, Boss. Satellite will be in position in a little under an hour.”

“Good.” He exhaled, heading roughly north by northwest. Inner Mongolia was 1500 miles away and covered a rather large area. Even at top speed, it would take him hours to get there. The team would already be moving for the two quinjets they’d secreted into the country while he and Steve
flew in on the Stark jet. “Give me a replay of the video with Red, Friday. Then include the conversation you recorded when he called.”

“Boss…” Friday hesitated. “You need to be focused.”

“I am focused. Her injuries are excessive. Based on my estimates, her serum is being taxed with keeping up with the injuries he’s inflicted on her.” Eight days in captivity. Repeated injuries. Unlikely he was providing her with adequate food, water, and rest. She was tough as hell, but even she had her limits. “I also need you to analyze her voice for stress markers and see what read you can get from the physiology on the tape.”

“Cataloging Ms. Romanoff’s physiological reactions have never been conclusive before. I can try, but we’d be flying blind without an accurate read of her blood pressure, pulse, and respiration.”

“I know. But let’s see what we can figure out.”

“I’ll take care of it, Boss. News stories regarding the acquisition of TitanCorp have begun to leak. Ms. Potts’ office has placed a call they would like you to return. I have averted the calls reaching Ms. Potts directly. Her cell phone is currently not receiving texts from the U.S. However, she may notice if I must persistently block those calls.”

“Pepper needs the break. Inform her office Stark Industries does not respond to rumors or innuendo. That is the line. No other comment is required.” Then after a beat, he asked. “How is she doing?”

“She is resting, Boss. I have been asked to respect her privacy, but she is safe and resting.”

Good. He wasn’t asking about the boyfriend.

“Mr. Hogan has continued his regular check-ins. Ms. Parker and her friends are settled in at their spa. She has left one message for Peter, which I forwarded to him. He has responded. That is covered.”

He hadn’t asked that, but good.

“Ms. Romanoff’s car was delivered an hour ago.”

Tony sighed.

“The merchandising has reached forty-one percent saturation in the city and along the East Coast. Additional orders for ornaments and shirts have tripled in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Friday?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Video.”

There was a quiet beat. “Boss…”

“Now, Friday. I can handle it.”

“Yes, Boss.”

The video played in the corner of his screen and he divided his attention between his flight pattern, telemetry data, radar, and the video itself. Natasha’s voice held elements of defiance, exhaustion,
and… “Pause. Rewind to previous sentence.”

“I wrote the book on him.”

“Replay.”

“I wrote the book on him.”

Book. “Friday, do you hear what I’m hearing?”

“Relief.”

Yeah. There was relief in that sentence. Why? “Continue.”


But she did that to protect him… wasn’t that what Clint said?

“Pause. Rewind to the book comment. Then replay.”

“I wrote the book on him.”


She was telling him not to come. The relief was that she could get him the message. Stop. Don’t play. Stay away.

“No can do, Red. Resume.”

The Mandarin snorted. “Perhaps you are the one who has not met him. He covets you in every press interview.”

“That’s cause I won’t have sex with him. Make a man want you? Keep him chasing? They’ll do anything you want.”

He discarded the won’t have sex line, it had nothing to do with sex. Make a man want you? Keep him chasing? They’ll do anything you want.

Yes, he got that too. The Mandarin wanted him. Make The Mandarin chase him.

But he had a slightly different play. She wasn’t wrong, not at all. But if he kept forcing The Mandarin to pursue him, she would continue to pay the price. No, he was changing the rules entirely.

Hidden fortresses, monks, and myths. The fortress was likely where she was being held or at least what she could tell of it or…

Fuck.

Ultron had taken her to Strucker’s fortress. Locked her in a dungeon under it. She’d gotten them a message. She was telling them to wait.

Wait for what? For him to kill her?

The myths were the rings and the monks? Well, if there were fighting monks there, they’d deal with it when they got wherever that was.
'Or maybe you just want to try the old Jedi mind trick again, I should warn you—I look great in a metal bikini.'

He was messing with her head. Or she felt compromised. Not impossible, she’d undergone torture for days. Tony had been questioning his sanity after less than one in the cave and more probably had questioned it since he got out.

Metal bikini?

_No, Red. You're not taking him out on your own._

Could she? Absolutely. But at what cost? No, the fight was his and she’d taken enough hits for all of them.

She’d engaged him. Kept him on the phone. Buying Friday time to trace the call. It helped. He paused, then replayed several sections of the video. The sheer amount of pain she had to be enduring nauseated him. The frozen images trickled by and he increased to fast-forward. He didn’t want to stare at her in the icy tomb.

But at the end, when it melted and she began to shiver… “Pause image.”

He glanced from the telemetry and his course to the image again, squinting.

“Close up on her hand.” The image magnified. “Compare it to her hand at the beginning of the video.”

A side-by-side appeared.

The redness and blistering was absent.

“Contact the others, ask Steve, Bucky, or Clint if cold does something to accelerate her healing.”

“Ice baths,” Friday stated.

“What?”

“Ms. Romanoff takes an ice bath when she has excessive bruising and soft tissue damage. Submersing herself for as long as six minutes in the frigid water—it encourages her serum or so she described to Sergeant Barnes at the chalet following the incident in Azzano.”

Soft tissue damage.

“You were listening?”

“I was monitoring Sergeant Barnes as ordered, Boss.”

Oh. Right.

Fuck that had been only a few months earlier. Not that long at all. Not really. “So the extreme dip in temperature encourages her serum to work.” That made some sense, but he’d need to study it closer to figure out the thermodynamics, though the body would encourage blood flow in the form of shivering to get heat to the extremities and to warm up the blood and tissue in those areas.

“Any negative after effects?”

There was a pause. “Technically, I was in privacy mode, Boss.”
“Technically?”

“Ms. Romanoff’s heart rate and respiration exceeded standard ranges, I engaged to let her know I was going to send for help, she refused me. Twice. Said to wait. She stabilized, and the bruising and tissue inflammation was significantly less in the aftermath.”

“I’m okay with that, he may have just given her back an edge he’d taken away before.” Tony still wanted to kill him, but go Red. “Forget the call.”

“The team has boarded their quinjets and are leaving the city in stealth mode. They will be approximately two and a half hours behind you though they may make up time in the air. They have to take different vectors due to size constraints.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“I know I said I was okay with friends, Red. I am... I am okay with it. But...”

She pressed two fingers to his lips. “Don’t.”

“Why the hell not?” He grasped her fingers and pulled them away. “I’m not asking you for anything except... no, I’m not asking you for anything.” Shaking his head, he pressed a kiss to her fingers. He wanted to ask her for everything. But he couldn’t do that to her. Not when she’d made it clear. “I’m not. Friends is what we agreed on. I have to take you back and pass you back to Steve...and Bucky.”

“Dammit Tony...”

“I know. I throw you to the wolves then bust back into your life wanting to fix everything and—spend so much time on that I miss out on my chance. That’s okay...” If Ross hadn’t made his play. If he’d stayed in Switzerland. If he’d been there for Prague and for Azzano. If... If... “It is. Probably better for both of us. Too much awesome together and they really will think we are trying to take over the world.”

Still toying with her hand, he traced the line of her fingers. She was so delicate to house so much strength and power. Defusing the bombs, heading straight into the conflict—Hell, even telling him to leave so he would be safe while she went to face the threat, it all flew in the face of the betraying seductress who spied on him, flipped sides from the Soviets to independent contractor to SHIELD agent to Avenger. More, she was the one person he’d met in years who could keep up with him and wasn’t dissuaded by his eccentricities. She had plenty of her own. When she opened her mouth, he pressed his fingers to her lips to forestall her rejection.

“Nope. Don’t say anything. You don’t have to. I know.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I do. I may act like an ass and I may take liberties.” He smoothed his hand over her hair. Windblown, it was still soft against his fingers. Imagining her hair spilling across a pillow, or over her shoulder, or even flying around as she twisted and kicked in the middle of a battle was not hard. “I may want to do a lot more. But I won’t. I just...needed this minute because for a moment—it was like I was losing you all over again and I need to feel you right here with me. That’s all this is, okay?”
May want? God, he wanted. He wanted with everything he had. But he needed her to just let him say the words. As long as she never rejected him, he could have this moment. Have her safely hidden away with him for a few precious seconds that he didn’t have to share her with anyone.

“It doesn’t have to be anything, Red. I promise. Nothing changes. I’m still the same impulsive self-loathing narcissist you adore and you are still my mind-blowingly duplicitous spy—with a penchant for vodka and kicking my ass. Okay?”

“I adore, huh?” The sadness in her eyes pulled at him. The last thing he wanted to do was make her sad, but there was also a hint of humor in her voice.

“Absolutely. I’m completely adorable. You know it. You’re just—stoic.” Once upon a time, he’d said that she hadn’t wanted him. He knew when a woman didn’t. It wasn’t the same now. He was pretty sure she did, but she’d never allow it. There were lines, boundaries she’d created, and he wouldn’t breach them. Not—not anymore than he already had. Not without an invitation.

“Stoic,” she said slowly. Doubt and humor vied for supremacy in her eyes.

“See?” A playful grin teased at the corners of his mouth. “You agree with me.”

“I do adore you,” she confirmed, and his heart fisted in his chest. The squeeze forced the air from his lungs and threatened to drain it of blood. Natasha didn’t dangle her feelings out there like some women; she never opened up to admit those things. When she’d told him he was important to her, that his friendship was—it had meant something. This meant so much more. “And I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not hurting me,” he said almost too solemnly. She wasn’t. She had made him zero promises. He was the one who hadn’t been able to let her go and the one who really didn’t want to even if he would loosen his grip, because she asked. “The only thing that would hurt is if you left. Okay—well to be honest dumping all my booze hurt but I figured I earned that one.”

“Boss…” An alarm sounded and he snapped his attention to the HUD’s readouts. “Satellite is having trouble penetrating two or three different areas. You are approaching one. I have an electronics white out.”

“Understood.” He angled low and slowed his acceleration. If the suit went down, he wanted to be close enough to the ground and traveling at a speed that wouldn’t kill him should he suddenly find his propulsion compromised. “Map it for me.”

The HUD warned him a moment before he bounced through to the white out zone. Interference cut into his communications, his radar, even his telemetry. He still had actual HUD readouts, but he wasn’t connecting to anything. The map had appeared a split-second before he lost Friday.

He was looking at about thirty-eight square kilometers give or take. The interference sent feedback through the suit’s communications’ array. He shut those down and continued forward. The fastest route was straight across and he still had arc reactor power and repulsors. Gradually increasing speed, he grit his teeth at the violent shaking and dialed up the sensors on the suit to get a full reading. He may not be able to analyze it until the other side, but there was no such thing as bad info.

When he burst through the other side, the information suddenly flooding his screen threatened to
deafen and blind him.

“Boss, are you reading me?”

“Yes, Boss. You vanished like you hadn’t existed.”

Not a comforting thought. The isotope should have been trackable, but it might need to have someone in closer range than the satellite.

“Is there one of those zones close to where you tracked the packets?”

An image appeared on the map along with the telemetry. It was an hour north and east of his position. He changed directions and pushed the speed. He wanted to get there sooner. “Make sure the team knows about those zones.”

“Already done, Boss.”

“Take the readings from my last passage, I’ll use the same speed and model for the next one. Estimate trajectory and route from that.”

“On it.”

Arc output steady at 98%, a 2% drain since hitting that zone. He made a mental note to figure out what the hell caused that later.

In the meanwhile, he had a date with Natasha and no one was canceling this one.

Not again.

**Natasha**

She stared at the ceiling, tracing the swirling pattern of paint on it as sound drifted around her. It was like the world spun and everything moved, all except Natasha. Sinking deeper into the soft bed beneath her, she wanted to sigh. The guys were both asleep and she was awake. It was unusual enough that she savored studying their unguarded expressions.

James slept as he lived, near silent, but there was a relaxation to his face and openness to his expression she’d only seen a few intimate times. Usually when they were alone—private moments in time belonging to her—to them. She wanted to trace her fingers along his cheek; aware the stubble there would scrape at her skin. She wanted to draw lines over his forehead, re-familiarize herself with every inch of him—recommit him to memory.

He’d changed in so many ways and yet—he was exactly the same. Her Soldat. Her Soldier. James. His name safely in her keeping, she’d refused to surrender it. They’d blotted him out, but that name had lingered, rising to the surface decades later without context until she had to force herself not to think of the Winter Soldier as James—now she could think of him as no other.
A shift of weight against the bed, a hand curving over her abdomen had her turning her head to
smile at Steve. He usually slept on his back, a great sprawling golden blanket of maleness. But
sometimes, he rolled onto his side, bracketing her. His eyes were closed, those impossibly long
lashes together. The beard she adored soft and just begging for her to run her nails through it. His
hair had gotten longer; it hid his ears and layered against his neck.

The lack of military cut gave him an almost roguish air that his clean-cut jaw and tightly trimmed
hair hadn’t allowed him before. Where he possessed an almost boyish innocence, he’d gained a
more worldly air, but the edge of cynicism hadn’t jaded him. Asleep, his expression free of the
worries about the team, about her health, about James’ adaptation, about…everything… The only
thing missing was the deep azure of his eyes or the pale gleam of James’. Both blue, but both so
different. Sun and Stars.

Day and Night.

She sighed. Her past and present.

Movement at the foot of the bed had her lifting her head. Tony leaned back in the chair in the
corner, propping one foot against his knee, half sprawled as he held up the glass. A couple of
buttons were open at the top of his shirt, his vest open and a tie hanging loose around his collar.
Unlike Steve and James, he wasn’t asleep… He had a glass in his hand and he tilted it, studying
the liquid as he swirled it.

“You were supposed to save me…” He looked over at her. “If you’d done your job… I’d never
have had the shrapnel in my heart. I’d never have spent all those months in a cave. You never
fail… why did you fail me?”

She snapped her eyes open and stared up at the cracked stone facing above. The air was still frosty,
her throat sore, and the tremors shaking through her left her aching but not pained. Or maybe the
pain wasn’t much compared to being electrocuted over and over. She could still smell the faint
odor of crisped hair amidst the chill.

A hand smoothed against her face and she gripped the wrist and turned it out.

“Hey, hey…” The familiar voice pierced her and then Tony leaned over her. “Hey, shh…it’s me.”

No. She closed her eyes and let go of his hand.

“Nat?”

“Great… more hallucinations.” Even when she woke from dreams, she fell into the other. Her
mind had been so scrambled as the ice enclosed her. Aware yet trapped. Some part of her had
recoiled from the continued cognizance—of The Mandarin’s presence oppressing the very air
around her, of the glacial air freezing her lungs, and the reality of Steve’s hell. Had this been his
life for decades, trapped beneath the arctic?

“That a hallucination, sweetheart. C’mon, I need you to wake up.” The hand against her face again
and she pulled away from the contact, almost floundering as she tried to escape the touching. The
last person who touched—it hurt. The memory of her skin boiling and splitting open, even if it
hadn’t been real—her nerves had erupted.

“Not here,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. Then she pressed her hands against the
stone as she leaned away from the contact. The touch went away. She forced oxygen into her
lungs. The shivering had finally stopped. Her fingers were shiny, the skin flushed but no longer
burnt or blistered. The bruises along her sides and legs, the ache had gone from those. Even her chest no longer felt like a lead weight squeezed all of the air out of her.

The ice… better than an ice bath.

No wonder they never put her in cryo.

She laughed, but it came out a wounded sound. That or her mind really was slipping between the present and the past, the facts and the fiction. She wanted to feel sand beneath her fingertips or the warmed wood of her dance studio—or even just the soft covers of the bed.

Lying in the bed they’d shared for the last few weeks—starting with the chalet, then the Tower, the island, then back to the Tower again.

“Natasha.” Tony’s voice, right behind her and she twisted. The hallucinations didn’t linger if she confronted them. The man on the ground directly behind her sported a black eye, a split lip, and a familiar quirk to the corner of his mouth that promised a smirk was forthcoming. “You with me again?”

She skimmed him for injuries. There was a shadow of stubble on his cheeks, his hair disheveled and his shirt was torn. There were—burn marks on his shoulder visible through the shredded fabric.

“Prove it,” she said quietly.

“Prove I’m here?” Surprise flickered through the whiskey brown of his eyes. Even shadowed with the weight of concern, they softened as he weighed the question. “Or prove I’m me?”

A little bit of both. “The Mandarin can manipulate matter. He—changed his face. Not sure if it was a mask or some other parlor trick but he pretended to be a friend. A balm. An ally. Who are you?”

Muscles tense, she swung herself around. Her leg buckled as it came up against the shackle—keeping her rooted in place without the ability to separate the distance between them. His scowl as he examined the chain, then her ankle soothed her.

“I’m—I’m going to see if I can loosen this, okay?”

“With what? You have some armor hidden under that shirt?” There was no sign of his arc reactor.

Dry as the desert, he stared at her a beat. “Give me some credit. Engineering isn’t all gadgets.”

She almost snorted. Instead, she schooled her features and lifted her chin toward her left leg and the irons holding her captive. He moved onto his knees and tugged at the chain, it was still half-sunken into the floor and fused, leaving her less than a foot of room to move. Even if she could break it from the hook in the floor, she wasn’t going anywhere.

With careful hands, he checked each segment of it then reached the shackle itself. His fingers were warm against her barefoot, the skin beneath the shackle had been raw, but it was nowhere near as fierce. Straightening, he slid his hands into his pockets then pulled out a pair of coins, then patted his breast pocket and pulled out a pen. He pulled the pen apart then together again until it looked like a mini screwdriver. Flattening one of the coins to the back of the shackle, he pressed the driver against it and began to turn it counterclockwise, slowly.

Maybe it was her imagination, but the harsh grip of the shackle seemed to loosen, albeit only a fraction. Face an intense mask of concentration, he moved the other coin into place and tried to
hold it still, bracing it with his hand while he turned the other.

Something slipped and then the whole shackle widened. It slipped down to rest against the top of her foot. He glanced up at her with a grin. “See…?”

“Not a hallucination, then.”

“No…” His swift smile faded when she shook her head.

As much as she wanted him to be telling the truth, she fought against the need to believe. “If you put them on, you would know how to take them off.”

Another scowl. “Dammit, Nat. What do I need to say to prove it to you?” The scowl faded and he glanced back at the shackle as he continued to manipulate the coins—magnets—they were definitely magnets. The shackle widened again. “Try to pull your foot out.”

Blowing out a breath, she flexed her ankle to point her toes and white-hot pain lanced through the muscles. Ice-chill spurred healing or not, that foot had been in that shackle since she woke up here…however many days that had been.

She really had lost count.

Teeth clenched against the pain, she pulled her foot free and then crab-walked backward until she hit a wall. Disappointment curved through “Tony’s” expression. But he didn’t follow her, instead he removed the coins and then slid them into his pocket before he dissembled his screwdriver pen and returned it to his breast pocket.

“I need you to trust me, Natasha.”

If he wasn’t a hallucination… “Then tell me something only we would know—and don’t make it too much of a giveaway.” She flicked her gaze to the camera and back.

Raking a hand through his hair, he studied her for a long moment. “I love you.”

Her heart sank. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Maybe I never tell you—but you know I do, Natasha.”

Tipping her head back against the wall, she stared at him from beneath lowered lids.

“I’ve been trying to get you back—I hung up on him to piss him off. It’s me—it’s what I do.”

“Getting yourself caught? That’s what you do?” God, she wanted to believe him. Never had she wanted to grasp onto such a blatant lie with both hands before. It would be easier, to just—let go.

But her life wasn’t about easier.

It would never be easy.

“To get to you? There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do,” he said, then held up his hands as he moved closer. He didn’t stand though. He moved on his knees. The deep bruising on his cheek masked the bags under his right eye, but not the left. There was no stiffness in his hips as he covered the last few feet. “Trust me?”

“Yeah,” she said slowly as he held out his hand. She clasped it and let him pull her to him, staying pliant as he cupped her face. “I trust Tony.”
He went still, a flicker of motion, a hint of surprise. Barely there before it was gone again, but she caught it. She locked her legs around his waist then twisted around him in one motion, forearm locking under his chin, as she elongated and stretched him backward to throw off his balance and then lightning sizzled through her, the shock convulsing her muscles and he caught her wrist, turning it out even as he slammed an elbow into her breast bone. Tumbling away from her, he brought his hand up and flung her backward.

Impact with the wall knocked all the breath out of her and “Tony” straightened. “You know him very well, don’t you Widow?” The Mandarin stared at her, his expression taut and unforgiving.

“Better than you…” She wheezed, fairly certain she’d cracked a couple of ribs. But he sported fresh bruises of his own. “Pretending to be him is pathetic.”

“Pretending you don’t want him is even more,” The Mandarin countered. “All warfare is based on deception.”

“Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable. When using our forces, we must seem inactive. When we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away. When far away, we must make him believe we are near.” She knew the quote. Understood it. “You can change your face, you can affect a voice, you can pretend to be whatever you like—but you aren’t Tony Stark and you never will be.”

Tony

The second dead zone—or whatever they wanted to call it—was worse than the first. The interference had dialed up to an intolerable level. He finally shut off all internal speakers. He kept the sensors dialed to the max for later analysis, but he didn’t need to hear the screeching and shrieking like some haunted house gone mad on his communications array. This one was considerably larger, so he clung to the edges. In all likelihood, what he wanted would be somewhere in the center—because luck just turned out that way—but the uneven landscape. The purplish color to the rocks, the unusual shade of the foliage and the downright disturbing shape of the landscape—rock ledges going nowhere, sudden drops and then long, gouges out of the earth as though someone dragged an enormous…

Ship.

Tony hesitated and then slowed, turning, he did a 360 beginning with the border where the giant, almost purpling bruise to the land began, then around until he faced out toward the valley then back again before he faced the “valley” once more. It wasn’t a valley, though, It was more of a…it looked like a crash site.

Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him, but he considered his flight path and the view coupled with the interference. This part of Inner Mongolia was sparsely populated, it butted up near the Mongolian and Russian borders. Less an a million people—if that, Friday’s estimates put it closer to a population of 700,000 spread out over 456,000 square miles.

There were fewer people than in the state of Rhode Island which was only a thousand square miles.
Accelerating, he ascended, keeping his view on the spreading bruise of a valley. Now that he’d likened it to a wound, he couldn’t look at it any other way. Mongolia was a land of steppes and yurts and the Gobi desert. Inner Mongolia had its own steppes and open plains land, but this?

This didn’t belong here.

If he had to bet, it didn’t belong on Earth.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed a groan.

Aliens.

*Again.*

Snapping his head forward, he scanned ahead as far as his HUD could magnify with whatever was screwing with his sensors and comms. Radiation? The look of the land said it had definitely affected it—transformed it even as it scarred the hills and turned them jagged, dug out a depression that snaked through with foliage. He couldn’t tell if there were any life readings down there, he wasn’t getting a lot of interpretable sensor data. The lack of Friday in his ear created a sensation of absolute quiet that added to the disturbance he saw splayed out ahead of him. He continued to ascend slowly.

A ship crash was right. This looked like the scar a crashing vehicle would make. Plane crashes could be spread out over hundreds of miles depending on how they came down. This one…this went on far beyond where his eye could see. The radius of the zone was enormous, easily fifty thousand square miles, maybe more. Couple with the damaged region he’d already passed—falling debris perhaps? And the presence of another some miles north of this one… yeah.

“Make a note,” he dictated. “When you get the sensor data, Friday, examine for radiation and other fallout. Suspected crash of an extra-orbital vehicle would be my thought. Something larger than the Millennium Falcon. Based on the damage to the region, I’m thinking Star Destroyer—and I’m betting the distortions are a result of their propulsion systems either exploding or decaying here. Eyeballing the trajectory, I would say it was coming in hot, maybe already damaged as it was losing pieces along the way. No way to estimate how long this has been here but the growth of the foliage suggests at least five or six decades. Probably a *lot* longer.”

Which meant whatever crashed here crashed before the advent of satellites. The radiation obscured it from satellite scans and unless someone looked out of a plane at the exact right moment… if this was even on a flight path…it could go unnoticed for—well for however long.

It *had* gone unnoticed, save for maybe The Mandarin and his people. Where better to hide than in a place the rest of the world can’t find you without taking a risk to plunge into the unknown? Where better to plot against… *Son of a bitch*. Technology challenges existed within the scar of the ship’s crashing. In all likelihood, the ship itself was somewhere in here.

The rings.

Tony would bet every dollar he had those rings came from the ship, whatever it was, and that ship allowed The Mandarin the ability to transmit but kept them from being able to pinpoint the trace.

A part of him really wanted to find that ship and the rest of him was really over aliens. He’d been over them since their first appearance in 2012. Thor? He was fine. But the rest of them? Just. No.

The point of Ultron was to build a suit of armor around the world. That didn’t work out. But this scar—this was already here. The technology, hopefully not any lingering forces…
Wait.

Was The Mandarin one of them?

As much as he didn’t want to think about it, he couldn’t discount the possibility. Recording his findings and observations, he loaded the information into a drone then turned to face the border. Eyeballing it, he fired the drone. It would transmit to Friday as soon as it was clear.

The rest of the team needed the heads up before they came in after him.

Dropping back to the deck, he considered the shape of the dead zone based on Friday’s earlier mapping, then followed the center line. Wherever he was going, that ship had gone first.

Feedback on the comms remained a nuisance so he kept them off. There would be no breaking through to talk to the team anyway. He had to trust them to do their jobs. Steve would have them where they needed to be. As he flew, he had to concentrate more on his flight path. Nearly all his automated systems were down, but he managed to set up two more drones. He jettisoned them at different points and sent them on a flight path out of the dead zone with telemetry and sensor readings.

Even if Tony went down, they would have the data they needed. The jarring to the suit increased the deeper he went. Red lines appeared on several systems. Auto targeting was down as was generalized tracking. The combat HUD wouldn’t engage. Sensors were getting an overwhelming amount of data. He kept a running log. When this was over—he would need to work on additional shielding. So far the arc reactor held up and the nanotech was holding together, but those might be the next to go.

Moving lower, he kept the fact he could crash at any minute ever-present as he chose his course. A river winding through the foliage caught his eye and he would have descended for a closer look but the interference escalated until even his HUD was half-static. The water glowed.

Yeah.

That couldn’t be good. Phosphorescent algae and other sub aquatics usually required darkness to achieve that kind of light emission. He could…track sunlight even if it was muted and discolored.

Huh.

Particles must be thrown up to create an almost smog like effect to dilute the sun’s natural radiation from penetrating. Granted, it would be dark within the hour, but there had been sunlight when he set out from Hong Kong. He couldn’t see any appreciable amount of cloud cover. Climbing to try and reduce the static on the HUD, he pressed onward.

He’d been in the dead zone for more than ninety minutes and he’d yet to find anything…

Something slammed into his suit.

No.

Something grabbed his suit. Repulsors firing did nothing as he sank toward the earth rapidly, the sheer weight of it like a giant hand smashing him inexorably into the earth.

It took a sheer force of will and his suit actually screaming to lift his head as he hit the ground, on one knee, he couldn’t lift his arms. Had he hit some kind of gravity well?
Some distant part of his brain exulted at the idea of a gravity engine. The rest of him swore as his leg actually sank into rapidly spreading crack in the rock created by the pressure shoving him down. He had to bow his head and he managed to fire the drone, but it exploded not even a foot away from him, shattering into scattered particles.

“Welcome to my world, Mr. Stark…” The Mandarin greeted him, but he couldn’t lift his head. “You will surrender the armor…now…or I’ll bury you in it.”

Considering he sank another few inches into the crumbling stone, he didn’t disbelieve him,

“So you bury me,” Tony said. “Bigger men than you have tried. Trust me, I always get back up.”

A soft chuckle. “You have always thought highly of yourself, Stark. It doesn’t surprise me that you abandoned your team and rushed after the Widow. You have not grasped the concept that you cannot win this particular battle.”

“We haven’t even begun to fight.” External armor along his right shoulder buckled. The nanotechnology responded, filling in the missing gaps but they were moving so much slower than they should be.

“We have battled for months, but you were too preoccupied to notice.”

Snorting, Tony managed to get his head up a fraction of an inch. Where was the bastard? “Yeah, I don’t tend to notice nuisances. The world is full of them. You can’t afford me, nor are you worth my time.”

A blow struck him, like the concussive wave of an explosion and the pressure holding him down vanished abruptly as he flew to slam against the rock face. It shuddered under the impact, showering him with jagged debris and dust.

There he was.

The Mandarin stared at him from under the shade of a large squat tree with a base that looked more like a giant acorn than an actual tree trunk. Dark hair, goatee, slightly longer on all sides than Tony’s own added to the mix of Asian and Caucasian features, from his narrow green eyes to his broad forehead and thicker jaw. Definitely over six feet in height, though Pepper’s memories had made him seem even taller and broader. While hardly a lean man, he wasn’t as bulky as Cap or Bucky.

All good in their favor.

He was also sporting fresh bruises along his face. Five bucks said those were from Natasha. God, he loved her.

Then the Mandarin held his fist up, one of the rings glowed and there was a slicking of ice covering his hands and legs. Yeah. No thank you.

He’d solved the icing problem a long time ago.

The suit automatically redirected the heat sink to burn through the ice.

So, gravity power ring, check. Apparently a blast ring, also check.

“Well, aren’t you just the Mighty Morphin’ Mandarin Ranger. Though your suit needs some work. The black on black is very retro, but you can’t totally pull that look off.”
The Mandarin shook his head. “You are far too impressed with your own ability to talk.”

“Not really, I just prefer to hear someone intelligent say something.” The ice steamed off and he fired both repulsors, but a swath of fire surged toward him not only obscuring his view, but still setting off the alarms on the suit. He shoved upward, climbing before he caught him in that gravity ring again.

What was the range on those things?

Fire ring confirmed. Gravity ring added. Blast ring thing. That was eight little piggies. Now, what were the last two?

He jettisoned another drone and it made it about fifty feet farther than the last before it imploded and he shot away spiraling and trying to keep a visual track on the man who’d vanished into the trees.

Since he didn’t go cratering down to the earth, he had to guess he was out of range for the gravity ring. Not good. The distance also meant he had a harder time targeting without his systems.

Fine.

If the little piggy wouldn’t come to him, time to bring the little piggy to the market. He eyeballed the tree and let loose with several small missiles. The strafing fire ignited a swath of fire through the underbrush and sent—blue-violet flames, well that was new—shooting up the side of the tree.

A fresh wash of fire spun out toward him and Tony ignited a force shield. The static disruption affected the integrity but it still sent the fire cascading around him and held long enough for another concussive blast to hit it. A laser shot toward him and he dropped letting it pass over him to slam into the rock face behind him. Instead of shattering debris it became—dust.

*Note to self, avoid that ring.*

Nine.

He got off a couple of shots with the repulsors, exploding the earth in front of The Mandarin and sending him flying backward. Then he surged forward—flying.

The man flew?

Fuck the god-mode level set on this son of a bitch. A blast of electricity surged at Tony and slammed into his suit. The HUD went crazy with static and light, then the power levels on the suit surged upward.

Oh yeah.

*Thank you, Thor, for proving a point.*

He unleashed the blast of pent energy right after The Mandarin, even as he raced away. The tree between them exploded and Tony took a single second to fire off a drone with the latest data and hurtled after him. The increased energy output allowed him to catch up to The Mandarin but the terrain slowed him down as they weaved in and out of the gully.

Almost… he snagged him by the arm and wrenched him backward, encapsulating one of his hands within the armor then he went for the other and The Mandarin whipped around to face him.
“Stop.”

Tony halted—his speed, his propulsion, all movement.

“Descend.” The order had him lowering them to the ground.

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

There was a ring glowing on The Mandarin’s hand but he couldn’t move.

“Allowing your enemy to capture you is difficult. You want to fight; you have to fight. It’s important they feel superior, that they won the fight. If taking you is too easy—then they won’t fall for the ruse,” Natasha said, both hands on her hips as she stared at him, Rogers, and Barnes. “You can’t make it easy for them and if it is even easier for you to defeat them, that just makes it more difficult. So trim them back, make them earn it and when the time comes for them to take you down—don’t struggle. You want to be taken alive. You want them off their guard. I won’t lie—it could hurt, a lot, but remember, you’re allowing the capture and we’ve already planned the extraction. This is all part of the plan.” Even the parts where they’d hurt her were left unsaid.

On the ground, he stood still, his body a hostage to the other man’s will.

The Mandarin smiled slowly. “Always so clever, always so smart—no one is as savvy or brilliant as Tony Stark, but this is the second time I’ve taken you, Stark. After I took both your women out from under your nose. You are not as clever nor as powerful as you think.”

Don’t make it easy for them. Tony opened his mouth, “Blah, blah, blah, I’m a badass, blah. Second verse, same as the first.”

The man’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re a ten trick pony with tech you stole, not tech you created. Tech you probably don’t even understand. You’re a half-assed inventor with bad follow-through. I’ve met hundreds of you in my lifetime. Your problem has never been with me, it’s always been with your own inadequacies.”

His failure to interface with the suit kicked off a countdown.

We’ve already planned the extraction. All part of the plan.

“Your overconfidence is your weakness…”

“And your faith in your technology is yours.” All too easy. Tony almost laughed.

“We’ll see… remove your armor.”

The command settled into his bones and Tony didn’t argue or swear, but he focused his glare at the other man as the armor retracted. First, he freed his hand, then it opened so he could step out of it. The Mandarin actually backed up a pace before Tony crashed into him. Then before he could do anything, Tony’s suit sealed and launched the repulsors set off a concussive wave that knocked them both to the ground as it skyrocketed straight up.

“No!” The Mandarin yelled, turning to extend his hand to it and the control locking Tony’s muscles went away. He swung a solid shot right into his kidney then wrapping his legs around him in a closed hold, and wrenching his mind control arm into a lock. They tumbled down.

Don’t make it easy for them.
He got a blow into The Mandarin’s face before the man broke the close hold and wrapped around him, chokehold. Locking his fingers, he slammed them into the pressure points with none of the reservations he’d experienced with Natasha. As soon as the arms loosened, he slammed his head backward.

*Don’t make it easy for them.*

He raced forward as if he needed to get away. That was harder than all the fighting all together. He wanted to pound his fists into the guy, but those rings versus his suitless form—not a contest he wanted to try.

The blast hit him, picking him up and throwing him forward. He barely had enough time to get his hands up to shield his head as he tumbled down the hill, skidding and sliding until he bounced against a log at the bottom.

The Mandarin was over him scant seconds later, his expression murderous. “Sleep.”

Tony opened his mouth but plummeted into darkness before he could say a word.

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**Natasha**

The cranking of the door announced The Mandarin’s return, but she maintained her position against the far wall, eyes mostly closed, and forearms resting on her upraised knees. The position alleviated some of the pressure on her chest from the cracked ribs. The rest would hopefully help her heal faster, but the gurgling of her stomach accompanied by the cramp of hunger promised it wouldn’t be that easy. It didn’t help that her throat was dry and there was so little moisture in her mouth.

When was the last time she ate? The fact the hours had begun to bleed together and she’d lost track somewhere along the way was a bad sign. Too much time spent fighting episodes and pain. She was alive, cognizant, and free of the chain. She’d take her wins where she could get them.

A pair of the monks appeared. Well, look at that. They dragged an unconscious man between them and dropped him on the floor. The first monk turned to her and bowed. Then another pair carried in two trays—look at that, dinner and a guest. Still, Natasha remained where she was. Any one of the five currently in the chamber could be The Mandarin, from the unconscious man on the floor to the four monks.

One of the monks headed toward her and he held something in his hands—it looked like a collar.

She didn’t move, didn’t object, didn’t do a damn thing until he reached down to snap it on her and she surged upward, turning his wrist out until she heard it break then slamming her hand right against his throat, crushing his larynx. He dropped along with his collar.

The other three monks ranged out, each one sporting a cattle prod.

Hitting the collar with her foot, she kicked it away from her and spread her hands. Her muscles hated her. Her body ached Her chest hurt. But she wasn’t getting chained again. Not while she had breath and consciousness.
Fire spilled across the floor flaring up between her, the monks, and their prone guy. The Mandarin appeared in the doorway. Bruised, battered, and looking more than a little worse for wear.

Damn, someone kicked his ass or tried to, and she hadn’t gotten to see it. The flames made her sweat, not that she had a lot of moisture to share. But she didn’t back off from the heat, tracking the movement of every man in the room from the dead one to the living.

“Cooperate,” The Mandarin ordered and the compulsion rolled over her like a spill of slime, cold, sticky, and cloying. A trembling seized her muscles, but she shook her head slowly.

“Drop dead, Mandy.”

Years of snapping on handcuffs every evening, locking herself to a frame coupled with decades upon decades of not being able to trust her own mind. No. She would not cooperate.

“Your will never fail to impress me, Widow.”

Widow. Always Widow now. Like he’d forgotten she had a name. She was the Widow. She lived. She thrived. She was the Black Widow and not even death would take that from her. Settling under her skin, the mantle only reinforced her refusal to obey him even as the demand crawled through her mind with icy fingers, demanding, provoking, coaxing.

No.

She.

Would.

Not.

Cooperate.

Finally, the man lowered his hand and shook his head. The fire continued to flicker between her and the room, keeping her contained. But she could go over those flames. Even if they burned her, so what? She could be over them and on to the first monk. Take his cattle prod, snap his neck and then after the other two. But The Mandarin was the greatest threat.

Him and those damn rings.

She should have cut his hands off when she had the chance.

Live. Learn.

Never make that mistake again.

“Wake up, Stark.” The Mandarin ordered and the prone man jerked awake. “Stand.”

The dark shirt and jeans looked familiar from the back, so did his form. But after earlier? Yeah… she wasn’t buying it.

“You wanted so desperately to trade yourself for her,” The Mandarin said. “Turn.”

The man pivoted, then recognition struck his eyes as he stared at her. His whole body was rigid, not even his expression changed.

“Red?”
Fuck.

“It’s a trick,” she said slowly, measuring the distances. Mandy couldn’t be two people? Right. He’d already done this to her once. Already played the part of Tony—earlier or was it the day before? She really had no concept of the time anymore. Was it before he froze her? Or after?

Her ankle throbbed in sympathetic memory.

The flames pushed toward her and she retreated a step.

Only one.

If he wanted to burn her alive, then she wasn’t going to surrender any more ground.

A ticket out was a ticket out.

But she wasn’t dying here today.

Not unless she took Mandy out with her.

Flicking her gaze from Mandy to “Tony” then back again, she couldn’t shake the relief in those eyes—the relief and the hint of terror. She’d felt that compulsion freeze her in her tracks, forcing her to stand still. But he hadn’t been able to do much more than that. Fortunately, Mandy didn’t seem to be testing that theory. This guy could be just another monk.

The other three in the room were watching her, moving casually closer unless she pinned a look on them. They’d gained a few feet, but she still had some room to maneuver even with the fire.

“Stark,” Mandy said. “Retrieve the collar.”

As “Tony” turned abruptly and almost jerkily, she gritted her teeth. Monk or not, Mandy was controlling him. Crossing to where the collar lay against the far wall, “Tony’s” steps were unnatural, the gait tight, his hips not giving where they should. There was even more stiffness in his upper body.

Injury?

Or the control?

With a groan, he bent and snatched up the collar, then stood still. That was the end of Mandy’s command.

“Now, Widow, I am going to send Stark over there to put that collar on you. You are welcome to kill him if you wish. That will end the problem for me and secure the final round of the game. You’ll be mine and Stark will be gone. Or you will refrain from harming him and he will put that collar on you himself. Either way, I will win. Decide… you will either kill the man who covets you so greatly or you will let him put you will allow him to leash you. What will you do?”

“I’m going to kill you,” she promised.

“Many men have tried.”

“Not going to try,” she said. “Going to do it.”

The Mandarin chuckled. “I almost believe you.”
He didn’t need to believe her for it to be true.

One of the monks surged toward her as the fire dropped and he was dead a few seconds later, his neck snapped and the cattle prod in her hand; she rolled it around like a sword. Her chest ached from the sudden movement and The Mandarin sighed.

“Stark, collar the Widow.”

“Tony” turned abruptly and began toward her, more, The Mandarin closed the distance between he and Tony, never letting him get more—dammit. The control had a radius effect.

He had to be in range.

She dropped back a few more steps, not that she had far to go with only so much room to maneuver.

Agony reflected in “Tony’s” eyes as he neared her. “Red… I’m trying.” Even the words were pushed out through gritted teeth.

“What will it be?” The Mandarin called. From the corner of her eye, she caught the flashing of the camera. He was recording the action. “Does Stark live or die, Widow? His life is in your hands.”

Save Tony Stark.

Directly in front of her now, Tony stared at her. Fuck. It was Tony. The gait. The eyes. The movement. “Red… knock my ass out.”

She shifted her grip on the cattle prod.

“Dammit, Red.”

Yes. That was Tony.

He unsnapped the collar and lifted it toward her.

A slap, this one hard enough to make her jerk against the containment, digging the prongs into her flesh. They would leave a mark. Warmth trickled down her face.

Better blood than tears.

Steeling herself, she reached for every ounce of discipline she owned then forced her eyes open to stare into the empty, cold gaze of the Soldier.

Soldat.

James.

Zvezda moya.

Lyubimyi

He stared at her impassively, as though she were a stranger, a mark.
“It’s okay,” she whispered around the guard between her teeth. She’d pushed them all, and she was right where she needed to be. “It’s okay.”

The memory slammed into her with the force of a hurricane. She couldn’t hurt Tony anymore than she could James. He wasn’t responsible for this. With increasingly jerky motions, Tony lifted the collar.

“Dammit, Red…”

“It’s okay,” she told him, meeting his eyes. “If I hurt you—he’ll do worse.” The Mandarin wanted to pit them all against each other. He wanted to hurt Tony.

The collar was cold as it slid around her throat and then it locked into place with a distinctive snap. Tony sagged abruptly as if someone had cut his strings and his hands came down onto her shoulders and she steadied him, shifting even as one of the monks surged forward. He managed to get Tony with the prod, the shock ripping through him and into her. Staggering under his weight, she thrust her own prod out and it went into the monk’s throat. But she had to let it go to keep Tony upright.

The Mandarin laughed.

With a hand, he pushed the downed monks together, then hit them with a blast of something that erased them all together leaving only a smear of blood to mark their presence.

Finally, he looked at her as she balanced Tony’s weight. He was trying to get his feet under him.

“One of you dies tonight…” Mandy spread his hands. “I’ll leave it to the pair of you to…”

“No one is dying,” Tony said, with a ragged breath, finally managing to turn, she hooked his arm over her shoulder even as her ribs screamed. “You want me to build you something. What is it?”

The Mandarin’s expression grew remote. “I have all I want from you.”

“Bullshit,” Tony spit out the words. “You’ve got alien tech you barely understand and somewhere out there is a ship. That’s what you want, isn’t it? You want me to make it operational?”

A ship?

Then Tony laughed, it came out a wheeze. “I’m the only man alive who can do it and we both know it.”

“Shut your mouth.” The ring activated and Tony’s jaw clamped shut. Then The Mandarin looked to her. “You need to convince him. The next move is mine… the game resumes in an hour. Then the final move is Stark’s. Eat…” he said motioning to the trays. “You’re going to need your strength.”

Then with that, he strode out of the room, the other monk following and the door closed with a clanking slam.

Tony let out a sudden exhale, then glanced around the room before he twisted to face her. “Why the hell did you let me do that, Red?”
She chuckled. “Hi, Tony.”

Then his arms closed around her in a fierce hug and she gritted her teeth against the pain as she returned it. “Hey,” he murmured against her ear. “Miss me?”

Her chuckle became a laugh and she swallowed back the half-sob when he pulled back to cup her face.

“Hey…”

“You shouldn’t be here.” Why the hell was he here? They shouldn’t be coming. She couldn’t protect him here. She had to save him… the imperative invaded everything, but even without it. “Dammit, Tony. I told you he wants to hurt you.”

“I know,” he said, then pressed his forehead to hers, running his fingers over the collar. The catch didn’t come loose. Then his gaze locked on hers. “But I’ve got a plan.”

He had a plan?

“Yeah…don’t kill me.” Then he kissed her, slow, deep, and breath-stealing. His fingers were in her hair as he held her still and her mouth parted Surprise rippled through her and she stilled for a long minute as his tongue swept against hers. He tasted like coffee. The sensation registered slowly, the scent of sweat and coffee twining around them along with hints of his cologne. It was almost like being at the Tower. Home. Then she firmed her hands against his chest but he broke the kiss before she could shove him away and buried his face against her throat. “He wants a show… he knows I care. It’s our advantage at the moment. We need time.”

Time? For what?

Her lips tingled and her mind stuttered. But fine. Whatever. He had a plan, so she finally pulled back. “My mouth tastes like ass.”

The corner of his mouth kicked a little higher. “I really like your ass.”

A watery laugh escaped her and she bowed her head as her shoulders began to shake and when he hugged her this time, she clung to him. “You shouldn’t have come.”

“We weren’t leaving you, Red,” he whispered against her fiercely. “None of us. You gotta hang on.”

We…

“Hang on. They’re coming.”

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Logan

The route to get clear of the so-called valley seemed to shift even as he retraced his steps. He’d memorized the path and could even detect the faint traces of their earlier passage, but it took hours longer than it should have. The vegetation had odd scents and even the air had a twisted metal taste to it to accompany the demented shrieks. The fact the rocks seemed to hum when he touched them
or clawed his way up added another layer of unease.

He’d spent too long away from Remy. The chances of Swamp Rat being where he left him were
slim and none. Dammit. He’d need to get him and Natty out. He was fuming by the time his phone
finally chirped, alerting him to the fact he’d cleared the distortion effect.

Double-checking the signal and scanning the area around him, he spotted the area where they’d left
the jeep and he went for supplies as he dialed the number.

“Avengers Tower.”

“This is Logan. Get me Barton or Rogers.”

“One moment, Mr. Logan.”

“No mister, sweetheart. Just Logan.”

He flipped open the container in the back and pulled out a thermos of water, twisting it open, he
drank it down.

“Logan? This is Rogers.”

“Good, listen up. Have your tech person track this call. I’ll leave the phone with the jeep. We’ve
tracked The Mandarin to a fortress in the Valley of Secrets. It’s a dead zone in Inner Mongolia.” He
rattled off the longitude and latitude or his best guess based on where they’d been. “Once you’re
inside, tech doesn’t track or connect. I left Swamp Rat watching the fortress; it’s buried in the alien
rock. I’m heading back in.”

“We’re already en route to your location. Wait for us.” The command made Logan snort.

“No can do, Rogers. Swamp Rat has to have gone in already, which means I need to go drag his
sorry ass out before he gets into more trouble than Natty. If I find her, I’ll pull her out too—
otherwise, I’ll be on site when you get there. Leaving now.”

He dropped the phone into the jeep without hanging up, then snagged another thermos of water
and shoved it into his backpack and more food for Swamp Rat. He shoved a protein bar in his
mouth and chewed it, washing it down before he lit a cigar and headed back into the dead zone at a
run.

It would be full dark before he got back.

No way Remy would be there.

Nope.

No way. No how.

Damn Swamp Rat.
Chapter Summary

Tony and Nat fight to escape and the team comes through with the plan...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Five

Red

Natasha

The heavy weight of his hands against her back coupled with the steady, if racing, heart grounded her. He was really here. Not a dream. Not a drug-induced mirage or oxygen-deprived hallucination or some other damn trick.

Please don’t be a trick.

He rubbed one hand against her back, even as he fisted her hair his hands opening and closing as if to prove to himself she was real. Irony. Then the contact grew heavier, almost electric. It hurt like hell. It was wonderful. She didn’t want it to end. He had to stop touching her. Too much. Not enough. Cataloging the number of ways she could take him down flitted through her mind, a slam of her knee to the groin might be among the simplest, but she could pinch the nerve in his arm, slide around him, take him down, lock him into a chokehold and then…

No.

She pulled free, absolutely not looking at the disappointment in his eyes or the heavy weight of concern crushing down on her like he was still hugging her too tightly. After disentangling herself, she’d moved over to the trays. Food. Normalcy. Sure. Yep. More rice, meat, and vegetables. More water. As hungry as she was, the thought of eating the same again sent her appetite fleeing. With a faint laugh, she dropped to sit on the stone floor, ignoring the addition of bruises before scooping out some with her fingers and eating it.

“Red…”

“It’s not drugged. If it is, the effects are minimal. I’ve been eating this for days whenever they decided to feed me.” When was the last time she ate? She had no idea. As it was, her stomach rolled as the first bite hit it. She sipped the water. “Wait until I’m done. I can sample yours, too. Let you know if it’s safe. For the most part, I’ll bounce back from whatever it is.”

There was always an upside.
“Yeah, that’s not a bonus, Red.” While she ate, he explored the stone cell. She had the whole thing memorized. How many steps to travel the length of each wall. How the corners seemed to round rather than come to a true angle. How the door sat flush in the wall and had to be cranked open by some mechanism inside it. How the air tasted a little bit like age and moisture amidst the stone and dust. How the ceiling had nearly one thousand seven hundred and four creases, cracks, and depressions. How the camera blinked steadily, one pulse every three seconds. “We’re going to get out of here.”

She didn’t doubt it. But she conserved her energy. Every bite sat in her stomach like a lead weight, but she kept eating then washing it down with small sips. The moisture she desperately craved and if he didn’t drink his own water, she would do it for him.

No.

Setting her still three-quarters full cup down, she shook her head. She wouldn’t. Taking his water could leave him dehydrated, she had to save him…

She pressed the palm of her hand against her eye and exerted pressure.

“Hey…” Tony was suddenly in front of her, covering her hand with his own. “How bad?”

“It’s not pain,” she admitted, albeit reluctantly. “It’s not anything.” Then she met his doubting gaze once before flicking a look to the camera and back. The Mandarin had been chipping away at her for days. It was inevitable he learned things, but she’d controlled the narrative to a point so far. She wasn’t giving up any more, not willingly.

“Then what is it?” Tony dared her to answer, brows raised as he studied her. Despite his own scrapes and bruises—one to his cheek and a cut along his hairline along with the bruise to his temple near his eye. Not quite a black eye, but definite swelling. How many other bruises was he hiding under his clothes? He hadn’t been wearing his armor?

“How the hell did he get you out of your armor?”

With a dry look, Tony made a fist and held it up. “By the power of RingSkull…”

The corner of mouth twitched. “Oh, Mandy…” she murmured. “He definitely put a damn ring on it.”

Tony’s grin made a sudden appearance. “Mandy? I’m stealing that.”

“No need, I’ll share.”

Dropping to sit on the floor, he glanced up at the ceiling then at the camera before flipping it off and giving it his back to look at her. “Are you really okay?”

“Nope,” she told him, then took another bite. “I’m trapped in a dungeon with a megalomaniac and it doesn’t seem to matter how many of his people I kill or how efficiently I can take him down, because as long as he has those rings… I just need a blade. Then I’m removing his hands.” Followed by his spleen—maybe a kidney. He had two. It would take time to carve them out.

An image of Madame B lying in the middle of her floral patterned living room, the walls painted with her blood as Natasha casually put a bullet into each joint. She’d paused for a drink or to wait, dispassionately, as Madame shrieked. She’d died in pain and blood.

The same way she’d raised Natasha.
She could live with that fate for Mandy.

“You know, I’ve been called worse,” Tony said with a bare hint of teasing glint in his eyes, but she shook her head.

“You’re not a megalomaniac.” Then she took another bite of the rice, doing her best not to look at the grime on her hands or the fact there wasn’t a bathroom in this stupid room or that she’d already had to make do with a corner when pain hadn’t flushed her system for her.

Humiliating as that had been.

“Not everyone would agree with you, Red.” He lifted the cover on his paper bowl of rice, meat, and vegetables. After sniffing it once, he held it out to her as she’d nearly finished everything in the bowl of her own. It was less than a cup, but it was better than nothing.

“You should eat that,” she told him. “They don’t offer food often so that may be the last of it for a while.”

“He plans to kill one of us…”

Lifting her cup of water, she said, “Goodnight Westley. Good job. Sleep well. I’ll most likely kill you in the morning.”

“The Dread Pirate Roberts.” He lowered the food bowl, making no attempt to disguise the concern in his eyes.

“I used to say that every day when I was first at SHIELD—well every day after they made me watch the movie.” She wouldn’t say Clint’s name. Tony would know who she was talking about. “There’d be a day of sessions with the psychologist or training room or medical…” She didn’t shudder even as the icy fingers walked up her spine. All she really had left were own thoughts, memories, and troubling emotions to roll over and over against her palate like she tasted Pepper’s gravelly wine once more. It almost seemed pleasing, but there was a grittiness that never really washed away. “Anyway, each evening I’d be back in my cell and they’d say goodnight, and I began responding with that. It fit.”

“But they never killed you in the morning.”

“We don’t know that.” The reminder made him flinch and she regretted the choice of words. “Sorry.”

“No,” Tony said slowly, shaking his head as he swung his glance around the room. Probably looking for something he could do to get them out. She’d considered a lot of different ways. At the moment, she wasn’t shackled. That gave her more options. Unfortunately, Mandy destroyed the cattle prod she’d claimed.

With a light hand, Tony stroked up her arm and she had to physically force herself to keep from jerking away from the unexpected contact. When she stiffened, however, he lifted his hand away.

“My turn to say I’m sorry. I was going to look at the collar…”

After draining the water, she schooled her thoughts and then nodded. Breath control came into play as he lifted her hair away and she tried to ignore how filthy it had to be or that there was no way he couldn’t notice her stench at this distance. Instead, she kept her gaze on the door ready for it to open at any minute. Or for Mandy to just pass right through the walls. He’d done that a couple of times—though he’d always looked like someone else, an apparition come to life, as he approached.
It had taken her time, but she always shattered the illusions.

With careful fingers, Tony checked the distance between her skin and the collar itself—it wasn’t much. He couldn’t even slip his finger in between. “Can you?”

At his request, she reached a hand up and pressed her finger up against it. Her hands were smaller than his, but no, it was too flush against her skin. She could feel the metal with every contraction of swallowing. Tony shifted as she dropped her hand and he began to move his fingers around the surface of it. The catch had been in the back, but nothing he did seemed to activate it.

“Might be electronic.”

“Magnets.” That was what Mandy had used earlier. “The shackle needed magnets to open it.”

“Okay, we can do that.” Finally, he returned to sitting next to her and then offered the food again. “Are you still hungry?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Pretty stuffed. Appetite takes a nosedive when you spend days doing nothing.” Speaking of which, she pushed up from the floor and moved a few paces away and began to stretch.

Tony stared at her for a beat.

“If I don’t,” she answered his unspoken question. “I’m going to stiffen. There’s enough time for that when… I’m resting.”

Standing, he made a face as he stretched then rubbed at his left shoulder. “Red…”

“You should rest. You look like you took a fall.”

Then he was in front of her and she met his gaze. The sympathy swimming amongst the concern aggravated her and wrenched her in the same breath, she shook her head even as he said, “I’ve had plenty of rest. Can you let me be here for you?”

“It’s not like we have a choice—oh wait. You did.” Infuriating man. “You were supposed to stay safe.”

“Not happening. Get this through your gorgeous, bull-headed, stubborn and utterly fascinating brain—” He locked his gaze on hers, his tone inflexible and demanding. “I really don’t like it when people touch my stuff.”

The corners of her mouth began to shake as a rusty laugh broke free and she shook her head. “Did you really tell Pepper ‘I want one,’ when you met me?”

“Guilty,” he said without an ounce of shame. “Still do.”

She rolled her eyes, then stretched her hands over her head. “You’re annoying.”

“It’s part of my charm.” Then the corner of his mouth kicked a little higher. Then he held out his hand. “C’mere?” At her questioning look, he raised his brows. “Let me hold you for a sec?”

“I smell.”

“I don’t care.”

She gripped his hand but didn’t let him pull her closer. “I really don’t want to be touched, Tony.”
Admitting it took everything she had and understanding crystallized in his eyes illuminated by raw fury beneath it.

“He didn’t…”

“No,” she told him. As far as she knew. But that… that wasn’t the point. Tony’s hand was warm and calloused against hers. Even that seemed like too much. It was hard to explain, but every part of her vibrated with the urge to react, to break whatever or whoever touched her and end the threat. The hours spent under Mandy’s “careful” eviscerating touch had definitely left a mark, but it was far more. Every sense she had jangled. Even talking seemed too much input.

What had she told Wanda? Having your will subsumed was even worse than an assault—and The Mandarin had been taking it away over and over, even as she fought to regain it.

She’d been alone or she’d been tortured.

Her mind hadn’t helped with that.

“Mama…”

She closed her eyes. Tortured. Tormented.

“I’m afraid we need your skills again, Widow.”

Again.

How many times had they done it? How many times had they? The pain behind her eye began to spiral and she tugged her hand out of Tony’s and he released her as she retreated to lean against the wall. The cold stone a reminder of her current reality.

Tony rubbed the back of his neck, then retrieved the water and carried that over to her. “Drink. I’d offer you vodka…”

“Fuck that would be nice,” she exhaled.

“But I’m fresh out,” he told her with a wry tone that couldn’t hide his concern.

“Tony, rest.” She took the water, drank a sip and then passed it back to him. “Drink some yourself.”

“I don’t plan on being here long enough to need that,” he told her, then paced away rather than taking the cup. She returned to his tray and set it down, then returned to the wall. By her internal count, their hour was nearly up. “You know they say genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains.”

“I’ve read that,” she told him. “Life is an infinite capacity for taking pain. You don’t have to be a genius.”
Turning, he actually rolled his eyes at her but there was a faint smile on his lips. “Yet we both are and we both take great pains to accomplish our tasks. Note, I am including you.”

“Generous.”

“I can be.”

“Your point?” The edge in her voice made her squeeze her eyes shut and she shook her head, then held up one hand as she took a deep breath, then another before opening her eyes. “Accepted on both counts,” she tried again. “What’s your point?”

“He thinks he’s planned for everything, but holding onto you has stretched his resources. How many of his men have you already taken out? Because he can’t possibly afford to replace them at the current attrition rate.”

A smile slipped out of her and she shrugged. “I don’t know. As much red as I’ve painted in my ledger over the last few days… I think I stopped counting. I wasn’t…” She shook her head again as her smile faded. She wasn’t always sure what had been real. “He only needs one way to keep us contained. That much he’s also proven repeatedly.”

“Fair,” Tony said, then tilted his head, his gaze cutting to the side as if looking at the camera, which currently faced his back. “But by my calculations, we have about seven, maybe nine ways, to get out of here.”

Seven

The rest of the Avengers and… he brought Peter?

She stared at him.

Tony spread his hands. “Been a busy few days Red, when we get home—you and I need to have a very long conversation.”

About a lot of things.

“Wait… nine?” Was he counting the two of them?

“Fine, if you want to be picky it could be seven, nine, or eleven.” Then he smirked. “We’ve got options—any number of threads we can pull.”

Threads.

Her web.

Clint activated the web.

A flutter went through her. That was a lot of capital to spend on one gamble. She’d been hoarding those favors for a long, long time.

Hands still splayed wide, palms facing her, he said in a very quiet voice, “You’re not alone, Red.”

“No, I have Tony Stark with me.”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” he teased.

“I wouldn’t say that.”
The door shuddered and she straightened. The two small trays were still present. The paper dishes were useless, but the trays might work. Still, she was better hand to hand.

Pushing away from the wall, she moved to stand between Tony and the door.

“What the hell are you doing…” He went to catch her arm and she twisted, pulling him into an arm lock and putting him behind her before she released him and faced that door that shuddered again.

“Stop talking,” she told him. The doors didn’t shudder. They cranked. There was an awful grinding noise and they slid or swung open.

They didn’t—pulse.

“This is not usual?” Tony checked, moving to stand next to her but still a have a step back.

“No.”

Similar clanging and banging in the walls had preceded the flooding. The suffocation, too. She could survive those. Tony couldn’t.

Another slam and dust began to shower down from around the door, and then it glowed.

She motioned Tony back a step and he listened—small miracles—but neither of them took their attention off the door.

The glow intensified, as did a kind of cringe-worthy whining noise, which climbed to higher and higher notes. The door trembled and Natasha whirled, tackling Tony backward as the whole thing imploded, showering them in rock dust and debris even as larger portions of rock bounced off the stone just behind where they’d stood.

Pushing up, she squinted through the dust and fought the dueling urges to sneeze or cough when a leather-clad hand waved the dust aside and a very familiar if cocky grin filled Remy’s face. “Boo!”

Shaking her head, she pushed upward and caught Tony’s hand helping him stand.

“Am I interrupting?” He gave her another cheeky grin, then glanced from Tony to her and back again.

The door behind him was open. But there was no way anyone missed that sound.

“Remy, Tony. Tony, Remy. We need to go.” If they were lucky they’d have a couple of minutes before more monks swarmed into the corridors.

“It’s a maze out there,” Remy warned a beat before he had an arm around her and hugged her close. It took everything not to strike out and she shuddered at the contact. “I got lost a few times trying to get down here. What’s up with the monks?” He was a bouncing ball of energy. “Been worried about you Boo,” he told her before he finally let her go.

“Ease up on her—and where the hell did you come from?” Tony asked him with a frown as she eased past them to shattered remains of the door. The rock pebbles and debris cut at her feet, but she ignored them. It was inconsequential discomfort versus what they faced if they were still here when The Mandarin returned. She had to get Tony out, then she’d come back and kill the son of a bitch.

Logan.

She whirled. “Logan’s here?”

“Yeah,” Remy said with a broad grin. “Well not, here here—he’s out there here, went to call the B-Team. But Richie Rich is here.”

Logan.

“Okay, we need to get Tony out of here, Loverboy, Play nice.”

He made a face, but at her glare, he held his hands up. “I can be nice.”

“How long?” She glanced at Tony.

“Maybe thirty minutes, if everything is running on schedule.” Tony hadn’t even needed her to explain what she was asking.

“I don’t suppose you have a gun?” It was a pointless question for Remy.

“I don’t like guns, Boo. Besides—you got me. I’m better than any gun.”

The corridor seemed empty, the chain of rooms going on through a couple of doorways. “Stay together. Cover Tony.”

“Red…”

She flicked her fingers at both of them. “Cover Tony, I’ll take care of me. Get him out. That’s the first priority.”

“Romanoff… you and me? That talk. It’s not going to be fun.”

She snorted. “Shellhead, we make it out of here, you can say anything you want to me. But you have to be alive to say it.”

Without waiting for a response, she headed into the room. They didn’t have time to argue. Nor did they…

“Boo?” Remy said, a half step behind her. “You know you smell, right?”

“Oh my God,” Tony groaned. “Not the time.”

“What?” Remy argued in a harsh whisper. “Just saying—she smells like the swamp to me, not that I have anything against swamps…”

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They made it almost four rooms before they hit the first wave of resistance. Remy said something about stairs, but she’d not made it this far across before. Underground made sense. She hadn’t seen
a window in days, hell, she’d barely seen more than stone and Hell in days, but she’d never needed much before.

A half-dozen rushed toward them, armed with single sticks, more cattle prods, and a couple of bo staves. She barely glanced to see Remy or Tony as she raced forward. The worst enemy in combat wasn’t your opponent; it was your own weakness. It was the hesitation brought on by worry, or worse, by exhaustion. She blocked the swing of one single stick with her left arm and drove her right hand straight into the throat of the man wielding it. Twisting, she caught his arm and pulled him around with her and drove him into the first monk with the cattle prod.

The jolt of electricity hit her system with a dull thud, her nerves barely aware of the sensation scattering through her. Block, strike, kick, twist. Two more down and she whirled on the last only to find Remy dropping one with a sharp strike to the skull and the final one in Tony’s chokehold.

Not wasting time, she checked her four. All dead. Remy’s still had a pulse, she didn’t waste time, she just snapped the downed monk’s neck then moved to the one Tony had set down.

“Red…”

“Not leaving them behind us.” She met his gaze fiercely. “Move, Tony.”

“This isn’t you,” he tried.

But she snorted and put a foot on either side of the man’s downed head, gripped with her ankles and twisted. His neck snapped as she held Tony’s gaze. “This is exactly who I am.”

Then she grabbed one of the cattle prods and handed it to him before she took two of the single sticks.

“Stay together,” she said, then caught Remy’s surprised look. He’d never been a killer, though, as she proved to him years earlier. “Cover him.” She gestured to Tony before she headed into the next room. Every single one had a camera so there was zero point in stealth.

She half-expected the doors to slam down and the oxygen to be evacuated. He’d certainly done that to her once. Or flood it with noxious fumes—they’d done that, too.

“Stairs in the next one, Boo,” Remy called as she followed the winding hall. They really had built it like a damn maze down here. How many others had he trapped over the years? Or were they just special?

Tony was at her back when she paused a few feet from the stairs. The heat of his breath seemed to add to the humidity rolling off her skin. The fact his cologne kept tickling her nose reminded her of why he shouldn’t be down here. He’d spent there months in a damn cave, right?

“I hate them, Tash…the people who did this to you. I hate them.”

“Don’t tear yourself up. It was a long time ago,” she soothed him. “I’m a survivor. It’s what I do.”

Silence filled the line, then he said, “I was in a cave for three months. It changed how I thought, how I fought, and what I fought for. I can’t—I can’t imagine you being in that cave that young.”

“Then don’t try. I mean it, don’t.”
Three months in a cave. That had been her.

She shook her head. *Focus, Widow:* “How many did you hit on your way down, Remy?”

“Only a couple,” he defended. “I was going for stealth.”

“Of course you were,” she soothed, and then rolled her head from side to side. There was a shaking in her muscles. She gripped the single sticks tighter until she couldn’t quite feel her palms. “How far up?”

“Two flights, but they’re both here.”

It could be tight… did she go up first and make them wait and risk some kind of trap sealing this doorway? Or did she bring them up with her, but risk trapping them in the hall with her?

If Tony had armor, he’d be wearing it. Since he allowed himself to be captured, he sent his suit away. “Tony…”

“Remembered I’m here?” Fine. She deserved the dry remark.

“I never forgot,” she promised. “How far away is it?”

He shook his head. “Not a guarantee. But maybe something better.”

Okay.

“Stick close to Remy, please.”

“ Asking me this time?” The glare in his eyes lacked heat, but there was definite disgruntlement.

“Tony…”

“It’s fine, Red.” He gripped her shoulder once, lightly, and then let her go almost immediately. It was his turn to soothe. “Not used to needing someone to cover me.”

Relief and gratitude swamped her. She nodded. “Okay, here we go.”

She hit the stairs and raced up them. There was something to be said for stealth, but she’d rather take the advantage of rushing the enemy. They never seemed to know what to do with her and based on her current stench, there was no way she was sneaking up on anyone.

The next rush of defenders met them at the top of the stairs, but she was already engaging. Strike, block, slap, strike. The single sticks were a blur in her hands, and she could only wish they were charged like her bites, but she could work them. A cattle prod slammed into her side and she leaned into the shock as she slammed a single stick down on the inside of his elbow before she climbed and wrenched. Then another one grabbed her and yanked her forward. She flowed, twisting, striking, and rolling.

As she took two more down, Remy called out, “Boo, get clear.”

Fuck. She launched herself upward and onto the shoulders of one, kicked a second in the head and leapt. The explosion hit, the force pushing her as she rolled. She bounded to her feet and raced back into the fray. Only a couple remained on their feet—staggering or not—, but Remy took down both with ease as he cleared the top of the stairs.
One look in his eyes and she tucked herself into a forward roll as he flung a card right past her. And a second explosion shook the antechamber they were in and more rock dust fell down on them. Rising, she glanced back at the three men behind her who now lay unconscious or possibly dead.

“C’mon, Red. Leave them. We need to get up and out of this place…” Tony then pointed at Remy. “And why isn’t explosive boy in the lead?”

“Name’s Lebeau, Remy Lebeau. Not explosive boy, Richie.”

“Not now boys,” she said. “Upstairs first, and build up a charge if we need to get through another door like the one below.” In her experience, Remy’s ability to exert kinetic force grew with restraint, not with constant use. Then again, you didn’t need a lot of force to take down people—just things.

They headed up the next flight of stairs. But just as she reached the top, there was a massive explosion outside and dust showered down at them. She glanced at Tony and raised her eyebrows.

He just grinned.

He said he had a plan.

Easing forward, she stared out into the great hall the staircase opened onto. Framed and barricaded windows exposed no light from outside, so maybe it was night. Time had ceased to have any meaning.

But the lack of sunlight wasn’t what caught her attention. Another explosion, like something actually struck the side of the entire structure, sending more dust raining down.

“Boo?” Remy asked, but she held up a hand. If something looked too good to be true, chances were it was too good to be true. The lack of any defenses or armed monks—how many had she killed in the last few days? Maybe he had finally run out—set off her internal alarms.

A shout from the left pulled her attention and she caught sight of a monk flying forward, only to crash into one of the stone walls with a distinctive crunch before he crumpled down.

“Fuck me… do none of you bastards speak English?”

Logan.

“Cranky Pants!” Remy shouted. “I found Boo!”

Nat flinched at the shout right next to her as Remy pushed past leaving she and Tony behind.

“Red, someday—tell me where you met these guys.”

She almost laughed. But then a blood-spattered and furious Logan was there and he scooped her up into a hard fierce hug. Panic flash-fired through her alongside pain. Her cracked ribs weren’t onboard with all the action or the touching. “Natty,” he almost growled, then put her down. He eyed her critically. “You look like shit. Smell like it, too.”

“Still look better than you, malen’kiiy dyadya,” she managed the right retort and he grinned. Fooling Logan would take more than a quick word or a smart remark. She needed to avert his attention and calm her racing heart.
Remy chortled. “His ugly mug isn’t hard to beat, Boo.”

Tony put a steadying hand on her back as she fought not to give into the shuddering reaction to the contact from Logan. Logan definitely didn’t deserve her flinching away.

Friend.

They were all friends.

But her instincts—fuck her instincts wanted to clear the room and the contacts. No more touching.

“Let’s go, your B-Team buddies are on the way…” Logan motioned them forward. “I came in over the wall.”

“They’re not here?” What were the explosions?

“Nah,” Logan grinned, all fierce teeth. “I found his munitions.”

Another strangled laugh left her and she shifted her grip on the single sticks. Aware of Tony’s hard gaze, she glanced at him. “I’m all right.”

He just shook his head, but saved her the argument as he let his hand fall away. The prickles of awareness between her shoulder blades grew into spikes.

Five steps from the front door, she understood they’d never make it.

Logan and Remy both shouted as they went flying. Logan slammed into a wall hard enough to crack a skull. Maybe not his, but the blood smear left as he slid down it promised the damage was significant. Remy crashed into the wall next to him, but thankfully with less bone-crunching force. He crumpled even as she spun to see The Mandarin staring at them. He held two swords in his hands.

Familiar blades.

One of them had impaled her.

Her side burned at the reminder. The punch of the blade pushing through her flesh, the near razor smoothness hadn’t hurt at all. It was like it happened to someone else, but she’d felt the blood rush from her body, the ice spreading through her extremities and she’d stared down at the bridge aware that she was all that had stood between Pepper and being taken.

Then Pepper had screamed.

“You weren’t planning on forfeiting, were you, Stark?” The Mandarin inquired. If he was concerned about their company at all, he didn’t show it.

“Oh look, it’s The Mandarin Ranger… and you’ve got to work on your costumer, because that wardrobe is just lazy. Who does it for you? Asking for a friend,” Tony snarked.

Shirtless save for a pair of black pants and his blades, The Mandarin showed off rippling muscles marred by burns and bruises.

She’d seen better.

And far tougher.
The Mandarin looked from her to Tony then back before he slid a sword across the floor. Logan surged up but The Mandarin sent another wave of force at him and he hit the wall again, this time actually leaving cracks where he impacted.

“You know the rules, Widow. You fight for Stark or he fights. This time I’ll give you the choice.”

“You son of a bitch,” Tony muttered. “Red…”

She shook her head. “We need time, Tony—unless you’re hiding sword skills I don’t know about, this is mine.”

“Goddammit, Red…”

“C’mon, Tony—it’ll be fun,” she told him as she handed him a single stick, then moved a step forward. Since she had bare feet, she slid her other single stick under the sword edge and flipped it upward to land the hilt in her palm. The blade was as well balanced as she remembered. Rolling the blade around with a few swings, she loosened up her wrist. Her arm trembled. So did her hands. She had to ignore it.

Pain could be compartmentalized.

This wasn’t about suffering. It was discipline.

She’d beaten him.

Twice.

She’d do it again.

Then he’d gut her when he had to rely on his rings—if she didn’t cut his hands off first.

A small smile tugged at her lips. Oh, she was looking forward to that part.

She kept hold of the single stick. No one asked her about the rules and she really didn’t care what his rules were.

*Save Tony Stark.*

“You get a chance,” she murmured, her gaze never leaving The Mandarin’s. “You go. I’ll be right behind you.” It was a lie. They both knew it.

The Mandarin only smiled. “He’ll run—it was what he did in Afghanistan. He ran from the battle even as you ran toward it. Did he realize, even then, the weapon he wielded?”

The slash of that verbal blade drew blood. She felt more than saw Tony’s flinch.

“Get out of here, Tony,” she said, heading toward The Mandarin even as she scanned the great hall they stood in. There were huge barred doors behind her and more space beyond him. Columns stretched down the hall and even as another explosion filled the air outside and shook the dust, she stopped focusing on the external sounds. There were more monks or men or whatever he called them. They would show up sooner or later, that was why Tony needed to go.

On the bridge, he hadn’t allowed his men to interfere though she’d eliminated them when they obeyed his orders.

Never leave an adversary at your back.
They’d left a handful down the stairs.

She should have finished them, but the look in Tony’s eyes stayed her hand. That and choosing speed over expediency.

Unlike when she handled this fight to defend Pepper, Tony wasn’t out of the line of fire or hidden from view. Her focus absolute, she rolled the hilt again aware of the muscles bunching in The Mandarin’s arms, the faint sway of his whole body as he prepared to leap forward. She was already moving as he lunged. This was how he’d fought her before, seeking to overwhelm with brutal strength, but she’d relied on speed.

The dance was one she’d honed on and off over the years—fighting with a sword took elegance, speed, skill, and a fair amount of certainty that the wrong move could leave you with gaping wounds.

She and Clint had sparred with swords twice in her tenure at SHIELD. After the second time, he called a moratorium on sword fighting. She was too damn dangerous. A smile pulled at her as she flowed with the sword. Fortunately, she’d found other masters over the years to keep her skills sharp. The blade really was a sweet weapon. He’d polished it, cleaning up the nicks from their previous fight.

The blades sang as they clashed, then parried. The whistle of their passage as much a serenade as the drum of her heart was the rhythm. What light there was in the great hall flashed off the blades, adding fresh sparks. When she danced through a strike and parried, swinging his blade around then she struck with the single stick, sending his blade skittering. He cracked her wrist, seizing it with his longer reach.

Twisting, she rolled over his grip and struck out with her foot. He staggered back, then tumbled. He landed hard, and retreated on hands and feet as she pursued. Then he had the blade in his hands again and yanked it up to block her strike before kicking her in the stomach.

All the air whooshed out of her and there was a roar behind her and suddenly Logan was there, his claws extended. The Mandarin barely avoided the eviscerating strike, then lashed out with a hand. The concussive force caught her as well as Logan and they both flew. Suddenly another explosion hit the door. Then another. And she caught sight of Remy on his feet as she leapt to her own. He was flinging cards at the barricaded door.

Good boy.

Take it down.

Logan snarled as he reached his feet.

“Help Remy,” she told him. Ignoring his disbelief she lunged for The Mandarin, he already had a hand up aiming for Remy—no, he didn’t get to keep using those damn rings. She intercepted the next blast and grimaced as something in her chest popped. There went deep breathing. “That the best you got, Mandy?”

The taunt yanked his attention back to her and she barely got the sword up as he came at her with hard overhand swings. It left his center open, but she could only take advantage of it if she was willing to take the deep slice to a shoulder or even her head. A dozen small cuts already littered her arms and his. They’d drawn blood, but the blades were too sharp to bite with much pain as they sliced.
Block. Parry. Block. Block. She stepped in to the next one and struck with a hard left to his chin, it threw his swing off and she damn near took a slice to the neck. A haft of hair floated down.


An explosion ripped out the door and another plume of dust went up. The Mandarin shoved her away then lifted his hand and she raced in front of him and the concussive blow sent her flying. A hard body collided with hers and took the landing as they slammed down stone steps and onto the hard-packed earth. Her mind barely had time to catalog the near alien landscape, the jagged shadows of rock and strange glowing plants. Above the sky was all-stars and the air was blessedly cool and free of the stench from inside.

A flash from the corner of her eye and she caught Tony and Remy barely skirting out the doors to dive to the sides as a wall of fire whooshed out like a dragon’s belch. Logan rolled over pinning her as the flames passed right over them.

His scream had her clenching her teeth in agony for him even as the air turned too hot to breathe and threatened to sear her lungs. Then the fire vanished and she shoved Logan over with a breath of apology, rising, blade in hand to face The Mandarin as he flung Remy and then Tony away from him.

Dammit.

Tony hit hard and didn’t get up immediately. Her gaze narrowed.

“You wanted me…come and claim me,” she told him and The Mandarin smirked but a whine of repulsors split the sudden silence and then Iron Man slammed into the ground in front of her.

The Mandarin laughed. “Your armor fights even when you cannot, Stark?”

Tony grunted. “That’s not me.”

Then another whine and another suit landed. Then another. And another.

The Legion? Had he given them a paint job?

“Opportunities multiply when they are seized.” Tony wheezed in laughter. “Know yourself and you win the battle. Or did you forget I am Iron Man?”

The rings flashed. “Come here, Widow…”

“Bite me,” she told him and made no move to step out from behind the armor even as the compulsion crawled through her. A familiar shield sang through the air and it slammed into The Mandarin and he went flying back into the gaping maw of his—fuck it was a castle.

“Oh yeah,” Remy called. “It’s a party now.”

Nat turned but she didn’t see Steve—just—suits.

“We got this, Doll,” the one in front of her said as he glanced over his shoulder. Then the shield soared back out of the castle and clanked against the wrist of the suit moving up to her side.

They were all…

They were all in Iron Man suits.
Tony grinned at her, even as he staggered to his feet. “I told you I had a plan.”

Then the walls of the castle exploded around him and Remy.

~~~

Chaos erupted around them as four of the suits rushed forward—including Steve. His was distinctive. He had his shield. He and another managed to cover Tony before he was buried in debris while the two got Remy out. Then The Mandarin flew—from the gaping hole of destruction he’d created and James—leapt—he slammed into The Mandarin who twisted and struck with his ring and instead of holding onto him, James struck the earth abruptly, his leg sinking into it as the force pressed him down.

She had the sword, but he was too high for her to get an angle. Suddenly repulsors hit him from multiple angles and she ducked as fire opened up. Logan groaned and she nudged him.

Then he glanced around at all the suits. “How hard did that bastard hit me? I’m seeing lots of the Iron Fucker.”

She laughed though there wasn’t any humor. “Lots of suits up…can you move?” The suits were maneuvering as The Mandarin responded—fire, ice, concussions, darkness hit her before she even made it a step.

Tensing, she squeezed Logan’s arm. “Go—get Remy. Get clear of the field.”

“Oh, I want me a piece of this guy. I got it, Natty. You go.” Then Logan was gone from under her hand. She shifted her grip on the sword and turned, still in a crouch. There was so much going on around her. Heat billowed. The cacophony of explosions. Then the sound of a suit hitting the ground next to her as the repulsors whined.

“Get her out of here, Kid!” James.

“Natasha.” Peter.

Peter should not be here.

“Get Tony, Peter. Get Tony and go.”

“Tony’s fine, he’s got a suit,” Peter told her. Oh. Then Peter lifted her. “Hang on.”

His repulsors pushed off and they were angling up. More explosions split the air. “No!” Peter shouted, then pain surged—electricity singing over her.

“Crap!”

She plummeted and another suit caught her.

“Gotcha,” Sam said. “Sorry, this takes a different kind of maneuvering. You good over there Peter?”

“Yeah—watch out!” The blow knocked them and she was falling—again. She tried to relax, for the impact, but then another suit caught her.
“Hang on Angel.” Steve!

“Can’t see,” she told him. Gripping the armor as he turned suddenly and something hit them. The crackle of electricity had the hair on her body standing on end but no pain crawled over her flesh.

“What?”

“Can’t—” A deafening explosion. This one left her ears ringing. “—see.”

The damn darkness was fine when she was on the ground and had a rough idea of the terrain, but they were in the air.

They hit the ground abruptly, the suit absorbing the shock of it even as it jarred her. Ears still ringing, she couldn’t figure out if Steve said anything in response. But he wasn’t…he was moving jerkily.

No. No. No. No.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Wanda! There was a snap in the air and power surged around her. Steve stopped abruptly and set her down.

“Go Angel...” he sounded strained, even to her damaged ears.

“Fight him,” she told him. “Think of something… think of something you’d never surrender and make that the thing you have to give up to obey…”

“I am… I got it. Go, Angel. Fifty feet, two o’clock, there’s cover. Go.” Steve gave her a gentle shove. She tested the land under her bare feet. She pivoted to face the direction and moved as deliberately as she could. But the battle raging had her twisting then diving as the land around here went up as the concussive force hit it.

Those rings had a range, right? So if she was still plummeted in darkness then he was still too close.

Closing her eyes, she focused on listening and not moving. Logan roared. Repulsors whined. Strafing fire. The sing of the shield. Then more fire.

Where was he?

She could hear—all of them and the ground vibrated with the battle, but where was…

A cold blade touched her side. “You were the clever one, Widow.” His voice rolled over her. “They aren’t sure what they’re fighting right now. I have to admit… Stark’s plan was a good one.” There was a hand in her hair.

Blade at her side.

Hand in her hair.

He was right-handed.

Left hand in her hair.

She twisted, letting the blade cut as she rolled and got her legs around him. She wrenched his fingers, snapping two and kept going, forcing the blade down as she tore it from his hand and he had to let it go to hit her, she kicked and he tumbled free and she had the blade’s hilt in her hand
and she tracked the feel of the air and the blade slammed into bone.

His howl cut through the air. The darkness vanished from her eyes and she shoved the blade with force where it stuck in the notch of bone on his forearm. Blood gushed from the wound and he struck out with his free hand. The concussion knocked her backward and she was flying. She impacted against a suit.

“Gotcha,” Peter said.

Fuck those suits hurt.

And she stared right at The Mandarin as he clenched a fist and ice raced toward her. Two suits slammed together in front of her. The ice encasing them and her heart threatened to stop.

One of them had a shield.

No.

No.

No.

Then all the air cut off and the collar around her throat began to cut into her.

“Natasha!”

The world darkened as spots danced in front of her eyes.

She hadn’t gotten in enough air.

A whine of repulsors from multiple sides, a shriek of incoherent rage, a concussive blast wave slamming her backward followed by another explosion and the slice of ice striking her cheeks like frozen tears.

“Natasha!”

Shouting followed her spiraling consciousness. But the world blacked out completely.

~~~

Her feet ached as she reached the first stretch of highway. The backs of her hands had turned a faint shade of tan over the last several days after first burning. The soft whisper of Mary’s breath against her back played a serenade to her steady pace. By her reckoning, she’d passed over the border to Canada a few miles back. The road ahead was the first one she’d seen since descending along the gradually decreasing incline. There were mountains in the distance as well as behind her. She hadn’t dipped too much elevation, so this had to be a high valley of some kind.

It was only late morning; the day had grown gradually warmer so she loosened the scarf from her head and hair, switching it out for a baseball cap. It had been James’—she hadn’t even known why she’d stolen it. He’d picked it up at some truck stop on their way across from the States from Michigan. It had the name Dodgers emblazoned on it. He’d said it was an impulse at the time and she’d been so tickled by the fact her Soldat could have an impulse, she’d almost bought one just
like it. Still, he’d worn it—a lot—and at some point, he’d just stopped.

It had sat on the dresser for weeks, ignored, when she finally stuffed it into her go bag. The desire for it may have faded, but it had been one of the first things in years she’d seen him want for himself besides her. Now she tucked it over her hair and turned east on the road. Hopefully, it would bring them to a place she could get them a room. Even if it didn’t, there were always abandoned or empty homes in any area—even in the capitalist and greedy west—a smile pulled at her lips.

She and Mary needed real shelter and Natalia needed to hunt real food if she couldn’t scrounge some up. A store would be ideal, but she wanted a remote one. Even if she stood out as a stranger, she could play that off.

Her car broke down…

Her husband had to run up the street…

They were lost and she was asking directions because he wouldn’t…

There were literally dozens of ways to play it. She could be forgettable if she needed to be. But whether she was hunting or she was shopping, she needed more food. The last of her supplies had run out and if she went too long, her milk would go. Mary needed more than she was getting as it was, but she’d kill people and take their damn food before Mary starved.

She glanced behind her, the empty road seemed to stretch out into eternity, as did the road ahead. But distances and appearances were always deceiving. Game would be near the roads, she’d seen it often enough in Russia and multiple other countries. They’d seen it on their drive west.

Hooking her hands into the straps of the pack, she sighed. Her stomach cramped and gurgled. She’d been drinking water to fill it, but even that sensation of fullness didn’t last too long. She wouldn’t be dehydrated though. Both of her canteens were full…

A faint stench touched her nose and she had to laugh. “Malyshka…”

Mary grumbled in her sleep, sounding as delightfully cranky as James could when she would tease him awake. There was a spear of pain shanking her heart, but she had to keep moving even if her life’s blood pumped out of her body. It didn’t matter. Still, she scanned their surroundings. The terrain was relatively flat; there were some trees, but none up close to the road. It seemed they’d shaved them back when they built the road. The road itself was darkly colored and the lines a brighter white. So it wasn’t that old. Still…

She paused and then focused on listening past Mary’s grumbling as she woke. A soiled diaper was not something she could sleep through. Finally, she retreated from the side of the road and kept a wary eye out. After unbuckling the harness, she slid off the backpack carefully before setting it down. Mary looked at her sleepily, eyes squinting in the sunlight as her face took on a disgruntled expression.

“Shh, Malyska,” she crooned and began to sing a nonsense song, just random notes and sounds to soothe her as he pulled out a blanket and spread it out on the ground. Done, she eased Mary out of the carrier and settled her down on her back. Mary stretched her arms and legs, her expression still fussy but the little sounds she made weren’t full-fledged complaints.

Checking her weapon, she set it to the side just under the edge of the blanket aimed away from Mary but where she could retrieve it in a second. Her knives were easily accessible, too. She pulled
out the items she needed to clean her including a fresh diaper she’d laundered at a stream and hung to dry the night before when they camped. She only had six of them, so far she’d been fortunate that Mary hadn’t soiled them all in the same day.

As she stripped off the dirty diaper and then cleaned her up, Mary began to giggle. She had ticklish spots on the backs of her legs. Fresh diaper on and the soiled one cleaned off and then packed away in a sealed bag until she could wash it properly, she went ahead and changed Mary into cleaner clothes—they were running out of those too. Just four outfits to rotate, she’d outgrown so much and Natalia hadn’t had time to add larger sizes to the bag.

Her mistakes.

Still...

She laundered those as best she could, too.

“We’re going to make it, aren’t we Mal’yska?”

Mary giggled when she blew a raspberry against her belly. Then again. The sound lifted her flagging mood and she moved to sit more properly on the blanket and got her shirt open, Mary was hungry and settled right in though Natalia had to use a finger to break the seal when she used her teeth “No biting,” she reminded her, and she got a disgruntled look before Mary latched again.

The steady pull a reminder of how much she could give her, even when they had nothing. Still, she kept a wary eye out and Mary had nearly drifted off still sucking steadily when she caught the sound of a motor.

It was distant, but the mechanical noise sent a surge of adrenaline dumping through her system. With care, she got Mary detached and back into her pack, then she moved swiftly to clean up and get the pack on and belted.

Even if the plan had been to use the road to get close to town, she didn’t want to be caught unawares. She had the gun tucked away and hidden beneath the jacket she threw over her arm and she started walking, scanning the road ahead and behind—then she caught sight of the vehicle.

A truck, a smaller one, with what looked like a camper on it rambled in her direction from the west also heading east. She sucked on her lower lip, then adjusted her baseball cap and kept moving. The distance from the side of the road to the trees was about a hundred yards. Retreat was viable if she went now, if she lingered too close to the road and they were hostiles, she couldn’t give them her back, not with Mary there.

She checked her gun. It was loaded semi-automatic. James got her for her four months earlier and she’d used it for target shooting only. She had a 10+1 extended capacity magazine loaded and two more in easy reach on her belt.

Just walk, Natalia. You and your child are out for a walk. Nothing else.

The truck drew closer. At twenty meters, the vehicle would be within accurate range. When the vehicle began to slow, she let out a deep breath then took another one. She quieted her heart, steadied her respiration, and settled into the Widow. Turning her head a fraction, she caught the truck in her periphery and it finally slowed to idle when it was parallel.

“Hey!” A voice called and she turned, facing the road fully putting Mary behind her. “You all right?”
The man was alone and the angle of the sun cast him in shadows. Or at least, he appeared alone. He was the only one in the cab of the truck. It was a dirty, dishwater brown color—maybe. The camper on the back had definitely seen better days and the engine had a kind of coughing sputter.

A puff of smoke flowed out of the window.

“Um… you speak English?” The man called. “Parlez vous Anglais?” he continued in a hideous French accent.

“Better than you speak, French.” She’d debated her accent for all of a few seconds before she settled into James’ Brooklyn. The lilt of it as familiar as her own. She was Natalie—Natalie Rogers. James’ friend, his name fit into place.

A laugh flowed out of the cab. “Yeah you do—look, not trying to be a creeper or anything, but are you lost?”

“No,” she told him truthfully. “Are you?” She’d come out west for a guy, but he got her pregnant and then…then he died. So she didn’t have much, but she was making her way back home.

No, she didn’t have a family.

No, she didn’t want him to call anyone.

The cover slipped into place like a second skin.

That got her another bark of laughter. He put the truck into park, still right there in the middle of the road. Not that it mattered. His was the first vehicle she’d seen since reaching the road. The first one in days.

The first person besides Mary she’d spoken too. The first since James...

“Yeah, well, maybe. Did your car break down? I didn’t see it back there.”

She shrugged. “I’m just walking to the next town.”

“Lady—I hate to tell you this, but the next town east is about a hundred miles, and the nearest one west is about sixty. You’re on the lonely stretch.”

Of course, she was.

She sighed and glanced to the east. West would be closer. But that would be going back and she couldn’t afford to backtrack. In the best-case scenario, James eluded capture and would be looking for her.

Though in her gut, she knew he hadn’t. If he’d eluded capture, he’d have caught up with her in the mountains. He could track better than she could.

She swallowed.

“I can give you a ride,” the man offered.

She looked back to the truck. “You’re a stranger.”

“Okay…” He pushed open the driver’s side door and it took a bit of wrenching to get the door to cooperate. With a curse, he stomped around in front of it. He was shorter than she expected, closer to her height. Thicker shouldered and brush brown hair and a beard that covered the lower half of
his face.

Scruffy.

Even his plaid shirt and plain brown sleeveless jacket had an out of date, rustic look to him. “I’m Logan.” He didn’t offer a last name.

All right. Eyebrows raised, she said, “Natalie.”

“There you go. Now we’re not strangers. C’mon Natalie, I don’t bite.”

She really wasn’t worried about that.

“You and kid smell tired—and a little like trouble.”

She narrowed her eyes, but he held up his hands a smoking cigar in one of them.

“I don’t hurt women or kids. If you’re running… I’ll get you away.”

“Why should I believe you?” She frowned.

“Because I’m the only guy out here offering and you’ve got a gun under that jacket that could do a lot of damage and I’ll bet by the way you’re standing you know how to use it.”

“You’d be right,” she told him, the cover fusing with herself. “But that still doesn’t mean I can trust you.”

“Gotta start somewhere Natty—at least let me get you that hundred miles. It’ll take a couple of hours, maybe three. You look like you could use a break.”

She glanced to the side, then back at him. “What’s after me isn’t friendly.”

He gave her a fierce little grin. “Neither am I.”

“Not sure I like Natty.”

With a lift of his cigar, he said, “It’s already growing on me. You coming?” He retreated toward the driver’s side and she tipped her head up. Go or stay on the road?

He was a stranger.

Who stopped to offer her a ride for no other reason than she was alone in the middle of nowhere.

Nothing about him said deceit.

Could she trust her instincts after all this time? She and James had been alone for months. He’d been the only face outside of Mary’s she’d seen. The only voice she heard. The only one she talked to.

At the driver’s side, Logan continued to stare at her. “Is it the cigar?”

“What?”

He held up the cigar. “Some people don’t like ‘em.”

James smoked.
She did, too sometimes.

“No…” she said quietly. “I’d kill for a cigarette though.”

He grinned. “Well c’mon then, let’s go get you some smokes.”

Fine. She started forward. “I’m not letting go of the gun.”

“Wouldn’t dream of asking you,” he assured her. She had to slip it away to unbuckle the carrier, and then she was shifting the backpack down. Logan kept his distance, then he looked inside the cab. “I’m going to lean in and clean off the seat. You want to put her—him? No, her.” He nodded firmly. “Put her between us?”

Put her daughter between her and a stranger? Yeah.

“I’ll hold her in my lap.”

“All right then.” He cleaned off the seat and waited for her to set the backpack inside at her feet, then with Mary against her and the gun secured in reach, she climbed inside and sat down. The broken springs in the seat were almost a welcome relief for her back and her feet.

A minute later, Logan climbed in, put the truck in gear and they began rolling forward. He flicked on the radio and dialed it a few times. The whirring of the signal coming and going scraped across her until he found a station playing tunes.

“That okay?”

She nodded slowly and pressed her lips to Mary’s hair. “That’s—that’s great. Thank you.”

A few miles on, he said, “Dodgers, huh? You like them?”

“No, it was my husband’s.”

Quiet. A few miles later. “Is he gone then?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.”

~~~

Awareness swept over her. It was quiet. Almost too quiet. Then the faint vibration of engines penetrated. Followed by a quiet voice, then another.

Some distant part of her mind recognized the dip and rise in the first voice—Peter. The second voice? James.

James?
She jerked her eyes open and stared upward at the familiar pale blue eyes regarding her. He was really there—not—not—reality crashed over her. No. Of course, he hadn’t been taken.

“Hey…” he exhaled. “Stevie.”

Then Steve was there, bruises littered both of their faces, but they were there and she blew out a breath. More faces appeared—Clint’s and his scowl was epic followed by Peter’s who looked relieved. Where was Tony?

“The others?” Her voice came out a raw croak. Fuck that hurt to say.

“They’re fine, Angel,” Steve told her. “Everyone’s fine.”

Everyone?

“Tony?” She lifted a hand to touch her throat; there were bandages there. Why was she bandaged?

“Over here, Red,” came a pained response and Steve shifted slightly so she could see Tony on the other bench turned cot, though he was sitting up and his arm was in a sling. “Battered and bruised, but all here.”

Relieved she sank back against the pillows. James knelt next to her and Steve sat on the edge of her bunk, but neither touched her.

“Hey Pete,” Tony called. “C’mon, give her a break for a few and let her wake up. She got smacked around.”

“Easy,” James told her. “You had a nasty cut… it’s healing, but—we wanted to seal it until it was gone.”

Cut.

“The collar…” It came out worse and worse.

“Debrief later, rest now. Everyone is out. The Mandarin is dead. It’s over.” Clint stared at her. “You don’t get to pull this crap ever again.”

She flipped him off and his scowl turned into a smile.

“Rest, Natalia.” James set his hand near her head, but he still didn’t touch her and she looked from him to Steve and she closed her eyes. There was some disconnect inside of her.

She did not want to sleep. But the flight home was long and she drifted in and out. Neither Steve nor James were far when she opened her eyes, but the fact they still kept their distance wore at her.

Twice, she started to reach out and twice she pulled her hand back.

Everyone spoke in hushed tones.

More than once, she caught Tony studying her or Clint.

Steve sat on the floor next to the cot, his head tilted back. She wanted them all to really be here.

A faint snoring had her lifting her head and she stared at Peter who’d flopped back in a chair and zonked out.
James filled her vision again and he pressed a straw to her lips, she took a slow, careful drink. Only a sip. The water was icy and clean. No taint. But she gave it a minute. At his frown, she gave him a small smile.

He shifted the straw to the side and took a drink of it himself, holding her gaze the entire time and something inside of her crumbled when he offered her the straw again.

The water was safe.

Taking a deeper drink, she batted back the sensation of tears even if no moisture crept into her eyes. The shaking started a minute later and she clenched her hands tighter.

“You need an IV, Nat,” Clint said, suddenly there and quiet plunged through the quinjet.
“Everyone’s been holding off cause you’ve been through Hell. But you’re in pain and in shock and you’ve lost blood, so I’m putting in an IV in and you’re going to let me, clear?”

The stern, no nonsense tone demanded she pay attention even as it promised her she wouldn’t be alone. She’d trusted that voice for well over fifteen years. Her partner wouldn’t make her if it weren’t absolutely necessary…

“No drugs,” she whispered. Her throat hurt worse if that were possible.

“Some drugs,” he countered. “Antibiotics, a little pain medication…I know a lot of it doesn’t work, but we have some of the good stuff on board. Some anti-inflammatories and a lot of fluids to hydrate your system.”

“Not too much…I don’t want to have to pee.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” he told her, patiently. “Little stick.” He’d been moving the whole time; there was a pinch in the back of her hand. “Taping it down. Okay, there we go. See.” He pointed to the IV bag James hung in her line of sight. It was saline, and the drip was wide.

Then Steve held up four syringes. “Antibiotics. Anti-inflammatories. Pain med cocktail.” It had to be a cocktail, less than what they used on Steve or James, but enough she wouldn’t metabolize it right out of her system.

“Don’t knock me out.”

“Not going to knock you out, Angel. Just want you to feel a little better.”

Yeah, that wasn’t going to be possible.

“Trust us?” Clint said, it was more a request than an order.

“He would put on your faces,” she said quietly and Steve stilled. “Sometimes Tony. Sometimes Steve. Once…James. But he couldn’t do any of you right. Did Clint, too.” That one—that one had damn near gotten her. Clint coming to get her made so much sense and he’d sounded like Clint. He messed up on Steve, on James, and Tony, but Clint? He’d almost gotten it right.

“Okay,” Clint said slowly. “I’m Clint Barton, I met you in a hotel room when you decided you were ready to stop. But that wasn’t the first time you saw me.”

No. It hadn’t been.

“The Anderson job, you caught me on your way out. Sauntered right past me in a hallway, even
gave me an amused smile and a wink.”

“In the elevator, I turned around as the doors closed—you were running toward me.”

Clint smirked. “Yeah, cause I figured out I just let my target get right past me. I get to the lobby level, no Black Widow.”

“Elevator shaft.” She pointed a finger up. “I went off the roof.”

He grinned. “Brat.”

“Sometimes.”

He really was Clint. Relief swarmed her. “Everyone else real, too?”

“The first time I saw you, you weren’t you,” Steve said, picking up the thread. No one injected the syringes into her IV yet. “You had on one of those photo static veils, and you messed up the plot to fool me into thinking it was still the 40s. Didn’t get to see this beautiful face until the hellicarrier though.”

“Called me, ma’am.”

He grinned. “Yes, I did.”

“Not a ma’am.”

He chuckled.

“Met you in my gym in Malibu,” Tony said. “But that wasn’t the first time you saw me, was it? And I don’t mean the news.”

She shook her head. That earned her a sharp look from Clint and Steve frowned. “Afghanistan.”

Nobody moved, then Tony said, “Tell me later?”

She nodded. “You won’t like it.”

“A lot of that going around. But if you want more proof—after you put me on lockdown with Coulson, I showed up at Stark Industries, you scolded me for trying to blow your cover, I called you mind-blowingly duplicitous and I asked if you even really spoke Latin and you said…”

“Fallaces sunt rerum species.”

“Exactly.”

Peter said almost sleepily, “I met you in Germany, but I don’t think I said anything really memorable.”

Everyone laughed.

“But that day at the Tower that I met you—I said I wouldn’t let you hurt Mr. Stark. And you said he was on a mission—then I kind of said I could turn you in cause you were a criminal, but my phone…”

“It was on the floor next to your backpack.”
He gave her an abashed smile and she chuckled even if it made her wince and then she had to take a deeper breath. Her ribs. How many had she cracked this time? No wonder it felt like there was deadweight on her chest.

“I don’t know if you remember our first meeting, Natalia—beyond what you saw in BARF.”


“Whatever,” James countered. “She wasn’t there for the renaming.”

“You renamed BARF?”

“Really not important right now, Angel.”

Fine.

She looked at James. “Tell me why the Dodgers.”

A grin tipped his lips. “Because they belong in Brooklyn.”

“Okay…”

“We good to do this now?” Clint asked, motioning to the syringes Steve held.

“You’re going to knock me out.”

“Just ‘til we’re back at the Tower. You need the sleep and I can’t imagine you got much the last few days.” Steady as hell, Clint never looked away from her.

She didn’t want to go to sleep. What if she woke up back there…?

“It’s that or I call Laura and she talks to you until you agree.”

Scowling, she said, “We don’t tell Laura these things.”

“Might be that we’ve changed the rules.”

“You told her.” Natasha groaned and closed her eyes. Reaching a hand over she uncurled her fingers toward James and he caught her hand easily. “I don’t want to sleep. So not all of the pain meds.” She looked up at him. “Don’t let them knock me out.”

He sighed. “Fine. Not all of it.”

Clint glared, but Steve handed the extra pain syringe off to James. “Only half.”

She nodded once. It was hard enough to breathe and all the moving was making her ache.

One by one, he injected the syringes. The sensation of coolness passed through her. Then Steve laid another blanket over her.

“I smell,” she mumbled.

“Not so bad,” he told her with a small smile, one hand resting atop the blanket. The weight of it was there, but not quite making contact. James still held her hand—or rather she held his. “We changed you, needed to get a full idea of the injuries.”

“I lost the dress,” she whispered. It was the first time she’d thought about it.
“Don’t worry, Red. I can have another dozen made,” Tony told her. He looked like hell. They all did. Tired, bruised, but alive.

“It was a good plan, Tony.” She should probably tell him that. “Everyone was Iron Man.”

“No,” he told her primly. “I’m Iron Man. They were definitely the backup singers in the boy band.”

A weak laugh moved through her.

Clint touched two fingers to his lips, then her forehead before he walked away murmuring he was going to tell Laura she was safe. Tony tugged Peter back to the other bench and they settled to talk quietly. She was alone with Steve and James, sort of. But she was aware of every sound. Every motion.

“Natalia,” James said softly. “You can sleep. We’ll keep watch.”

“I dreamed about Mary,” she whispered and he went still. Steve leaned forward.

“And Pierce…” And Karpov, Ivan, Madame… they’d all been there.

“You don’t have to talk about this now,” Steve told her.

She didn’t want to forget again. What if she forgot again?

Her eyelids were getting heavier. She really didn’t want to sleep, but she was so tired. “I saw Mary…” she whispered. “She was so beautiful.”

Then James pressed his lips to her forehead. “Yes, she was,” he murmured. She lifted the hand with the IV and fumbled a bit before she found Steve’s, he turned his hand over so her palm was in his.

“I’m still mad at you,” she whispered.

“Yeah?” Steve asked.

“Yeah…treated me like an op.”

“I know. I’m still mad at you, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you stormed off and then disappeared on us for days.”

“Really tried not to.” But it wasn’t much comfort or as effective as she’d tried to be.

“We know, Doll,” James murmured. “We’re sorry we treated you like an op.”

“No, you’re not,” she said, smiling a little. “You’d do it again.”

“To keep you safe?” he said. “Yeah. We would.”

She almost laughed at that. But honesty was better.

“Still should have told you,” Steve said. “Talk when you’re feeling better?”

She nodded, the floating sensation deepened. It was like she drifted against the water, even the sense of the quinjet’s engines faded away. She licked her lips. “Probably fight, too.”
“Yeah?” James said slowly. “I think we can handle it.”

“You better,” she sighed. “I guess I’m going to sleep whether I want to or not.”

It was sinking her fast.

“We’ve got you,” Steve told her, then he rubbed his cheek gently against her hand. His beard soft against her fingertips. “We’ve all got you.”

She was almost there when she jerked her eyes open. “Did I miss Christmas?”

James chuckled. “No, Doll. You didn’t.”

Relieved, she closed her eyes. “Good, I wasn’t done shopping.”

“It’s a date, after we’re home,” Steve promised.

Home.

That sounded really good.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your patience, I know my posting schedule got a little wonky this week with the cold. There is one more chapter tomorrow! And more news to follow it.
Love

Chapter Summary

Nat is home safe, but maybe not so sound. Not yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Six

Love

Clint

Twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours since they made the drop into the warped area of land to find the fortress at Logan’s coordinates. Twenty-three hours since the front gate exploded outward and Nat appeared along with Logan only to be nearly fried where they stood. They hadn’t been able to drop fast enough and the lack of open communications had meant they were limited to shouting. It was fine. They had a plan.

Twenty-two hours and fifty-five minutes since a sea of flames covered Nat and Logan—thankfully both survived. The fight after that had been fierce. The suits had a lot of intuiting. Friday had installed widgets—it was what she called them—programs to automate systems even if they lost contact with her. Everything had updated en route from Hong Kong to the drop zone. They’d gone as high as possible to avoid the radiation effects and only dropped when they were over the coordinates.

As plans went, it had gone far smoother than could be expected. Tony had gathered enormous amounts of data that Friday translated into defense programs. They weren’t perfect, but they’d gotten the job done.

Twenty-two hours and fifteen minutes since Nat took The Mandarin’s hand almost clean off after they’d ended up playing football with her trying to get her out of the fight. Something cracked in that moment, the dizzying array hitting them—the fact Sam and Clint had been attacking each other just fell away.

The rush of awareness as he scanned the battlefield—Peter had managed to catch Nat, but ice rushed at them and while Peter’s suit could probably shed it, Nat would be buried in it.

Again.

Steve and Bucky slammed together in front of her and they’d taken the blast, but their suits had
done the job melting the ice even as Tony had yelled something about sidekicks. The program on his suit had flared and jerked his arm up—and he wasn’t alone, every suit lifted an arm as they assembled and surrounded The Mandarin. A blast from him sent Wanda skittering back, but she hit him with her own. Then the same with Vision, only the force passed through him.

Just being in the suits didn’t limit their own abilities, but the suits had ideas—or programs courtesy of Friday’s widgets—and sidekicks had them all firing at the same time.

The subsequent explosion of the repulsor discharges all striking together sent up a blast wave that knocked everyone back—including the unarmored Logan, Remy and Nat.

Peter got a shield up, barely as if his programming had been different and when the smoke and debris cleared, they were also the only two still on their feet, well relatively speaking. Nat was out cold. Bleeding from a dozen different places soaking her already bloodstained and soiled clothing.

Worse was her throat, which had deep gouges all around it. Wanda was kneeling close by, a ring of red surrounding her and the pieces of metal in her hands from where she’d ripped them off Nat.

A collar, Tony explained to them later, The Mandarin had forced him to place on her. A collar, Peter said, that began to contract, slicing her neck open even as it threatened to crush her throat.

Wanda had heard over it all, somehow, or maybe she’d sensed it. But she’d pulled the collar off, tearing it into two parts so it broke away from her. On the flight home and after he’d gotten an IV into Natasha along with meds—even if she refused the full dose of pain medication—he’d caught some of what she’d said to Steve and Bucky before he went to call Laura.

Filling her in on the details, he highlighted the key points—they had Nat back. She was going to be okay. It might take a few days or a few weeks or even a few months.

“Then why do you sound so worried?” Laura asked into the quiet. Clint glanced over his shoulder; he had on the headphones and had retaken the pilot’s seat. The suit had given him enormous maneuverability despite his still healing leg. It had been nice, but he was exhausted.

“Letting herself be taken—playing that card? It’s always been one of her strongest and most successful plays. She fools them with her seeming weakness but she never loses control of a situation.”

She hadn’t lost control this time, but it had been ripped from her. The hollowness in her eyes, the tortures they had seen, and the state of her when they’d been able to get a good look at her?

This battle left its mark on her.

“Clint…she’s Nat.”

“I know she is.” He’d sighed. “We’re bringing her home. When she’s a little more settled…”

“Tell me. I’ll call her this time.” Laura’s tone told him not to argue.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do that.”

Fourteen and a half hours since they’d landed at the Tower. She hadn’t even stirred when Bucky and Steve lifted the cot. Peter jogged ahead of them to get the doors as Tony limped after and Clint brought up the rear. It was dark out and Friday shut off the lights. The quinjet was in stealth, they came in dark and they wanted it to stay that way.
Inside, they took her straight to the med bay. Helen was waiting for them. She took one look at
Natasha then sighed. The medical report left its mark: nearly every single one of her ribs had
cracked. While their healing had stymied at least her neck had already begun to close. The vicious
gouges sealing over. The soft tissue damage, bruises, and enough cuts that Clint stopped counting.
He told them butterfly seals on all but the worst of it. The stitches would end up tearing more if
they had to cut them out too swiftly. That didn’t mean she didn’t get them, but it took time.

Tony waved off any treatment until Cho finished with Nat. His cracked collarbone, sprained wrist
and concussion were enough of a concern, but he was also a mass of bruises just like everyone else.

They’d been lucky.

Damn lucky.

“And that’s about how it went,” Tony said, briefing them fully from the moment he’d joined Nat to
when the battle had tumbled out into the yard—including her reticence to be touched, Remy’s
arrival and the encounter with Logan.

Twelve hours after the fact and they were lingering in the med bay while Nat slept. Steve wanted
to take her back to their floor, but Cho wanted the last of the blood work to clear—she still had toxins
in her system. Whether from the air, the food, or some other source, she’d been getting hit
with some powerful psychotropic drugs on top of everything else. So they set up camp around her
room, even Peter, though Bucky had finally sent the staggering kid off to bed going so far as to
escort him to Nat’s floor and not returning until he said the teen had finally sacked out.

Clint’s body clock had lost track of whether it was night or day much less what day of the week it
was. Nine days since Nat had gone missing. So, Sunday, maybe? They had what? Ten or Twelve
days until Christmas?

The time had—raced past them.

More time she’d lost.

At the eight-hour mark, Cho cleared her to leave Med Bay and while she’d stirred on and off, she
hadn’t fully awoken. The IV was out and they’d gotten her on a cot that they carried upstairs. As
much as Clint wanted to hug her, he resisted it. Following to give a hand and once they got Nat
settled in her own bed, he’d told them he was going to find his.

Eight hours of—mostly—sleep after that and nearly twenty-four hours since they’d dropped—he
was standing on the roof watching her stare out over the city as the sun rose, a cigarette in her
hand. She wasn’t alone. Bucky leaned against the railing next to her, close but keeping his
distance.

Steve and Tony were absent but he didn’t ask.

“Did Logan say anything about where he was going?” Nat asked in a hoarse voice that made his
throat ache in sympathy. It was fractionally better than the croak of the night before, but that
wasn’t saying much.

“Nope,” Clint told her. “Be honest, I didn’t ask either. Once he was sure you were safe and The
Mandarin was dead… he told us to take better care of you and then took off.”

She nodded. Bucky tilted his head watching her. “We can find him, Doll.”

She nodded again. “I can call him.”
For the first time in years, Clint felt fucking helpless. She wasn’t giving him much to work with as she kept her face fixed in the direction of the sun. The frigid air turned her cheeks pink, but she didn’t even seem to notice it.

Putting the cigarette out, she finally turned to look at him. When she held out her hand, he limped over and then she leaned into him. “Can I?” he asked, his arms open but he didn’t want to push her.

A little nod and he closed them around her and pressed a hand to the back of her head. Bucky bumped his shoulder once as he moved away. He didn’t go far but enough to leave them some privacy.

“It hurts…”

“I know,” he told her, cradling her and resisting the urge to squeeze tighter. “What can I do?”

“You took care of them.”

He snorted. “We took care of each other, even Tony. No fighting. You’d have been proud.”

She smiled a little. “I can remember my little girl,” she murmured and his heart broke. “I’m worried what I remember isn’t… isn’t…”

“You don’t know if it’s a memory or not.” The echo of Bucky’s pained admission weeks earlier resonated. He hadn’t known then either. “Can you figure it out?”

“Yep,” she said, then lifted her head. “I have to.”

When she eased away, he let her. “It’s going to get better.”

The corner of her mouth tilted. “You always say that.”

“And I’m always right,” he reminded her. “You brood if you need to, but you’re not alone. Never again.”

“You all came.” The disbelief in those three words made him sad and furious in the same breath.

“Did you really think we wouldn’t?”

When she lifted her eyes and gazed at him, he found himself holding his breath. Then a hint of lightness as she smiled then shook her head. “No, I knew you’d find me. You always find me.”

“Damn straight.” Then he eyed her again as she turned to look at the sunrise and he moved to lean against the railing next to her. “Don’t do it again.”

Another smile. “Or what?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll make it suitably awful.” He bumped her shoulder once. “I love you, Kid.”

“I know, Idiot. Most of the time, I love you, too.”

His grin grew wide for a beat then he scowled. “Wait… what do you mean most of the time?”

Her chuckle was weak, but it was hers and something in his chest let go.
Natalia’s chuckle, low and quiet as it was, pulled a smile from him. Even after they got her back to the room, she’d only stirred restlessly, not quite sinking into deep sleep and not quite waking. Worried about nightmares, he and Steve had taken turns watching over her and taking showers. After showering and changing, Tony had requested to come back to the floor. He hadn’t intruded either, just asked if it would be fine if he waited, too. Bucky made him a place to sleep on the sofa, even if he’d have been more comfortable in the penthouse.

When Natalia woke an hour earlier, Steve had been sound asleep on the chair in the living room, feet up on the table while Tony slept on the sofa. Only Bucky had been awake. He was due to nudge Steve in another hour.

A confused frown had pulled at her brow as she looked around the room and then met his gaze. It was almost like she was seeing her room again for the first time. The unsteadiness in her eyes as she sat up and the faint shaking in her hands had him leaning forward.

“Natalia…”

“I know where I am,” she’d whispered hoarsely. “I just want to know it’s real.”

God but he understood that feeling.

“Hot cocoa with cinnamon?” He offered. “Bad dreams linger, and so do spices. But most of the time, spices aren’t in bad dreams. So you’ll know you’re awake.”

Her sudden smile eased one of the stones off of his heart. “I told you that.”

“I know, you helped remind me I wasn’t back there that I was here in the present with you.”

She licked her lips, then grimaced. “I need a shower.”

“We can do that, too. Whatever you need, Doll.”

She shoved the blankets back and then began to work her way off the bed; she’d lost weight again. It made him want to kill The Mandarin all over again.

Fighting in the Iron Man suit had been an experience he wouldn’t forget. It enhanced and inhibited in some ways, but he hadn’t been focused on how it felt so much as getting to her. Then the ice slammed into his suit—his and Steve’s—and for one, violently precarious second, all he could taste was cold and then the suit burned it off.

Minutes later, The Mandarin was dead and Bucky had his wish, he’d gotten to help with it. The blast from his repulsors, Steve’s, everyone’s, had created a cataclysmic explosion, ending the bastard’s life. Bucky only wished he could have done it with his bare hands.

Natalia had cut off his hand.

His girl, blinded, wounded, and fighting on unfamiliar terrain, and she took his hand off.
Was it any wonder he loved her?

As much as he wanted to go to her and help her up, he kept his distance. She didn’t want to be touched. That statement would fucking haunt him, but he’d seen her like this before and it was the only thing keeping him sane at the moment. Natalia had been abused, badly, and she was on a hair-trigger. A touch could set her off, so he would respect her wishes no matter how much he ached to hold her and comfort both of them.

“He told you,” she said once she sat on the edge of the bed, the faint tremble in her muscles visible from where he stood. She didn’t seem as weak or as washed away as she had been after the formless drained her. No, she just seemed—stretched far too thin—every muscle pronounced and flexing with her motions. Honed spare again.

“He did,” he confirmed. “Whatever you need, Doll.”

“A shower…” Then she looked at him. “And a little help.”

That she asked at all had him in motion. He offered his hand, his left and she gave him a small smile as she placed her palm against his and he didn’t pull her up. When she used him to steady herself, he kept himself still. “Tell me when it’s too much.”

She nodded, but didn’t let him go as she started forward. The last time they’d been in this bathroom, she’d shaved him. They’d been playing with each other. Teasing. Now she held on so she wouldn’t collapse. In the bathroom, she let him go to put her hands on the counter. “I need to brush my teeth so bad…”

A chuckle worked free. “I’ll warm up the shower for you. Do you need or want the chair?”

With a wrinkle of her nose, she put the toothpaste on her brush. There were two others slotted next to hers. His and Steve’s. Though they had their own bathrooms, a lot of their stuff had been migrating into hers.

She glanced at him in the mirror. “Will you help me?”

“With anything,” he told her and reached in to turn on the water, before closing the bathroom door and stripping. She brushed her teeth slowly, taking her time and he kept an eye on her as he pulled out a couple of towels. “Friday, warm it up in here.”

“Of course, Sergeant Barnes,” she said gently and Natalia glanced up.

“Hi Friday,” she said around a mouthful of toothpaste.

“Welcome home, Ms. Romanoff. Your input has been much missed.”

Another small smile turned up her lips. “I missed you, too.”

“Can I do anything else for you?” Friday asked.

“Is everyone else all right?” She’d asked that before.

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff. Minor injuries were sustained. A few contusions. Ms. Maximoff wrenched her wrist and twisted an ankle, but nothing serious. Mr. Wilson has a laceration that required four stitches and a great deal of complaining according to Colonel Rhodes.”

Bucky actually laughed at that.
“Mr. Barton overdid it with his leg, but his bruises are superficial. Mr. Parker broke two fingers and sustained electrical burns, but they already appear well on their way to healing. Vision reported no damage while Colonel Rhodes seems to have strained a shoulder and sustained minor cuts and abrasions. Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers…” Friday continued as Bucky glared at the ceiling, “…have multiple contusions and soft tissue damage related to concussive force and some electrical burns. Boss broke his collarbone, strained his arm and suffered multiple bruises. He also has a concussion, but that could just be his personality.”

Natalia bit her lip as she snorted a laugh, then resumed brushing her teeth. After rinsing her mouth, she said, “Thank you, Friday.”

“Of course, Ms. Romanoff. Your vitals all appear in excellent order based on standard readings. Dr. Cho indicated multiple cracked ribs, but your respiration does not seem as labored. The electrical burns have also healed. How is your head?”

“I’m all right, Friday,” she told her. “Sore and probably a little tired…”

“Undernourished, dehydrated…”

“Friday,” Natalia warned her gently. “I’m going to eat and take care of myself. When I find my bracelet, I’ll put it back on so you can know I’m all right.”

“That would be most satisfactory, Ms. Romanoff. I have grown rather used to the regular input.”

Setting her toothbrush back, she said, “Me too…”

“I’ll return you to privacy mode, simply call if you need me.” The offer made Natalia smile a little wider.

“Even the AI loves you,” he said.

At his words, she dipped her chin. “She’s just used to my input.”

“Me, too.” He held out his hand. “Need help getting out of that?”

She glanced down at her t-shirt. They’d changed her back in the room after giving her a sponge bath. They’d done their best to clean her on the quinjet then here, but they’d been limited by privacy on the jet and not wanting to wake her here. She tugged it up and off, then braced a hand on the counter to strip off her panties. The bruises ringing her torso, and down her arms were matched only in vivid color by the ring of bruises on her still-healing throat, though it looked about fifty percent better than it had the day before.

Naked, she reached a hand out to him and he offered his again and helped her into the shower as soon as she was under the pulse of the water, she let out a groan.

Standing just behind her, he held his hands out to the side, and then she stepped back until her back touched his chest and she said, “It’s okay, James. I can take it now.”

“I don’t want you to have to take it,” he told her. “You should enjoy touch, not endure it. You’ve had to do that far too much, Natalia moya.” But as she rested her weight against him, he firmed his legs.

“It’s not so easy to shake… the need to react, to evade, to fight…”

“It is why you survive,” he murmured. “We got past this once,” he reminded her. When she’d first
returned to the Tower, after Ross, after Alexei and Leonid, and Fenhoff… “Touching you is one of my favorite things, lyubov moya, but I can be patient.” Had been. Would be. “Just having you back here and safe, knowing he can’t hurt you anymore. That is more than enough for me.”

He could even live with not having squeezed the air from the bastard’s lungs before he ripped him apart. That there had been only burnt and pulverized flesh remaining had to satisfy him. Natalia was more important than anything else.

“James…” She leaned away to reach for the shampoo and he shifted, so she could soak her hair down.

“Do you want me to wash it?”

She smiled. “I’d like that.”

Relief settled in his bones as he poured the shampoo into his palms and then began to carefully work it through her hair. It had knotted and snarled. There were pieces missing, the cut uneven and burned.

“I remembered…” She exhaled the words slowly. “I think.”

He had to make himself continue washing her hair. “You said you saw Mary Elizabeth…”

A slow nod. “I… when he drowned me I remembered…leaving the Red Room with you. We were going on a mission. Madame was aggravated with me over something and I was baiting her. I wanted to push her into striking, but you showed up and she backed off.” A faint smile touched her lips. “She was afraid of you.”

“Da,” he murmured. And with good reason. He’d delivered more than one threat to Madame B when she overstepped herself where the Widow was concerned. Not all of those threats had come from Karpov. “She was a vicious old witch.”

“Sometimes,” Natalia murmured, leaning into where he massaged gently against her scalp. Her hair had been filthy, lank and limp. She hadn’t been kidding about the smell, but that told him even more about the conditions The Mandarin kept her in than anything else. The 107th had been kept like that. He’d seen the memories flash in Steve’s eyes even as they’d rolled through his and if The Mandarin hadn’t already been dead, they might have killed him for that alone.

“But I’d spent the night with you and I skipped whatever it was she’d wanted because I hadn’t wanted to leave your bed.”

This time a chuckle did rumble out of him. “You always pushed how long you could stay even when I wanted you safely away.” Denying her was always so hard, especially when she turned into a cuddler after sex. He loved holding her.

She tipped her head back into the water at his gentle urging and he washed the soap free. Her breathing had calmed, despite how rough it had been in the beginning. She wanted him to touch her, but it was still hard for her so he limited the contact to the task at hand.

Only after all the soap was clear and he worked conditioner into her hair did she speak again. “Later…I remembered Mary being born.”

He couldn’t help it, that locked his muscles and he riveted his gaze to her troubled eyes.

“There was a moment… when the pain was so bad I couldn’t breathe around it or
“It meant you were having her,” he finished softly, then pressed his lips to her forehead. He meant to keep it light but he lingered there. “She took so long to finally come…”

“And then you needed your hands and I braced my own against the floor. I don’t know why we were on the floor…”

“You didn’t want to soil the bed,” he told her dryly and she laughed a little. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye and he brushed it away with the back of his fingers before he resumed working the conditioner through her hair.

“She was beautiful.”

“Yes, she was. Almost as pretty as her mother,” Bucky told her and his heart broke and filled in alternating beats. Remembering, knowing, when she hadn’t had been painful enough. God, he’d wanted to open his memories to her and share those moments and at the same time, dreaded the day when she would have to face the self-same loss.

Leaving the conditioner in, he found her loofah and soap and then offered them to her. She began the slow process of scrubbing her skin and he leaned on the wall, ready to help but drinking in the sight of her.

Bit-by-bit, she reconstructed her memories for him. What Pierce did. How she’d ended up in Afghanistan. Her failure to save Tony. The fact she had no idea how she got back to the States after or how she covered her wounds. The device in the bank. He didn’t know it, and she couldn’t describe it well. Hate swelled in him. There was every chance in the world he’d been in that bank the day they brought her in, tucked away in his cryochamber, sleeping the years away.

It would be another year before he was sent to kill the scientist she protected. Then she told him about leaving the cabin—the route she’d taken to get her and Mary Elizabeth away. His heart fist ed as she murmured the songs she’d sung to her and the fact she’d had to focus so hard to not think about him and to not imagine what was happening to him and how each morning she woke before sunrise hoping he would catch up that day—and eventually that hope faded.

The cross into Canada made sense, but it wasn’t until he was helping her rinse the conditioner she told him about Logan. “And I don’t know if that actually happened…”

“He’s your friend, though. One you put into your web?”

“Yes, because I met him after I left the KGB,” she admitted. “It was in the mid-eighties the first time our paths crossed, I thought. He never…he never said anything about knowing me before, but…he called me Natty from the moment he learned my name, my real name. So, am I imagining that I met him then? Am I trying to fill in the blanks?”

“Natalia,” Bucky canted his head as he stroked his hand over her hair, carefully finger combing away the tangles. “What do you think?”

She exhaled slowly. “I think I had to tell him that I may not recognize him later and he should not expect me to know him.”

“You were already thinking about what would happen if they found you.”

She nodded. “But he never said a word.”
“You never asked him, did you?” It wasn’t a guess. Yet at the same time, she knew someone who might know about Mary. There was a flare of hope igniting in him, one he’d nursed carefully in darkness and away from the world.

“It never occurred to me.”

“And if he’s as good a friend as he seems to be…” Bucky didn’t doubt it. The man might have been abrasive but he hadn’t hesitated to go looking for her and it had been Logan that shielded her from the fire. The man had tackled her and taken the brunt of the damage. After the fight was over, Bucky had been more concerned with her than with the man but he hadn’t seemed as bad off as the rest. Maybe. “He took you at your word.”

“He didn’t say anything because I told him not to.”

She leaned her forehead to his chest. With light fingers, he continued to stroke her hair.

“I need to talk to him.”

“Well luckily,” Bucky told her. “You know how to reach him.”

After the shower, he helped her dry off and then they dressed. In the living room, Steve and Tony were still sound asleep. She studied them both with gentle eyes, then Bucky took her to the roof wrapped in his jacket. She wanted to smoke and to think and he didn’t blame her.

“I know the name we need to search for….” The sunrise was a promise on the horizon, edging upward and all he could think about was how she said it was her favorite time of day. That the sunrise meant she’d made it another day.

He glanced at her. “Mary’s name?”

“Maybe, but the name I was using.”

“Natalie,” he said, not an uncommon alias for her. It was the Anglicized version of Natalia.

“Rogers,” she murmured and he blinked. The look she gave him was almost shy, when she said, “You told me about him. Your best friend. I couldn’t be Barnes. They would have been looking for that, maybe. But Rogers…maybe that wouldn’t occur to them and I could still be close to you.”

Hot emotion licked at the back of his throat. She’d been alone and as magnificent as he imagined, constructing a cover just to get from one place to another.

“I had Mary, I had your Dodgers hat… and I had your best friend’s name. I had a lot.”

“So maybe Mary Rogers?”

“Maybe—I don’t know. But I was using Natalie Rogers with Logan, maybe I kept it for a while. I would have had to build an ID.” There was something else she wasn’t saying, but he didn’t want to push.

Finally, she sighed, “We didn’t get married did we?”

“No, Natalia,” he said after a hard swallow. “I should have, but at first, I was only interested in seeing you safe and by the time I remembered enough being me… we couldn’t risk you being seen. I would have. In a heartbeat.” He still would.

She nodded a little, and then glanced at him. “When Logan asked me about the hat, I said it was
my husband’s.”

He didn’t deserve the title and it filled him to the brim at the mere suggestion.

“I love you, Natalia. I loved you then. I love you now.”

Her smile grew. “I know I don’t say it…”

“You never have to.”

“You should hear it.”

He dipped his head. “I hear it every time you say my name.” And he meant it. Every single time she said James.

“I love you,” she whispered and he drank in the sight of her as her lips shaped the words. “Even when you’re stubborn and overprotective and trying to boss me around.”

He couldn’t help his smile. “Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

“Probably,” she admitted with an almost reluctant laugh and he grinned. “But we’ll still fight sometimes.”

“That’s okay,” he said with a contented sigh, treasuring the words she gave him. Treasuring the sentiment. Treasuring her. “I can take it.”

The elevator chimed and she took a long inhale on the cigarette as Clint appeared, the worry in his eyes alleviating at the sight of her. Bucky nodded to him. They stayed out there for a little while longer, Bucky let them talk but he kept watch as he turned over her words in his mind.

He’d never needed her to say it, but the words felt like bright, shiny new pennies catching the light and warm in his hand. When his phone buzzed with a message from Steve, he let out a breath and sent back a message that they would be right down.

She’s better Stevie. A little fragile. But better. We’ll be down in a minute.

Steve: Breakfast?

Yeah, starving.

Steve: On it. Tony’s still here.

Not a surprise.

Let him stay.

Steve: Already planned on it.

“She’s better Stevie. A little fragile. But better. We’ll be down in a minute.

Steve
Sleep had been elusive for days and he hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but with her tucked safely in her bed and secure in the Tower, exhaustion had hit him like a brick. While he’d half-expected nightmares about the ice, all he’d seen in his dreams was Nat, her teasing smile when she caught him in the shower. The jaunt in her step when she snared him with a joke. The droll comments about finding him a date. The promise in her eyes when she sprawled out on his bed so he could sketch her nude.

When he woke, he’d spotted her open door and glanced around. Tony was still passed out on the sofa. His bruises looked worse this morning than they had the night before. Scrubbing a hand over his face, Steve rose and headed for her room. The bed was empty, she and Buck were both gone. There was the warm humid air lingering from the shower, and the scent of her shampoo.

If she was up for taking a shower, she had to be feeling better. He fired off a text to Buck uncertain if Nat even had her phone. He hadn’t seen it since… Hell, he hadn’t even thought about it. They were on the roof and would be down shortly. Tony was still here, but Bucky said let him stay. Steve hadn’t had any intentions of asking him to leave. The guy had gone above and beyond for her, risking his life to get them what they needed to get her out.

When he’d first proposed the plan, Steve had told him no. They didn’t trade lives even if he wanted Nat back. Sacrificing Tony wasn’t an option. But Tony argued his point and they went back and forth on it for hours. Finally, Steve had to admit the plan gave them a solid chance. His plan worked, better than Steve could have hoped.

The armor had taken some getting used to, but when the ice entombed him, he barely had time to panic. Anger surged more than fear, then the suit burned them free. The compulsion to turn her over to The Mandarin had slid through his skull like an alien entity and if not for Wanda…

Yeah, he didn’t want to think on that too closely. Nat had told him how to fight it, too, but for the first time he had a taste of what being a threat to her was like. He understood Bucky’s self-loathing over being used against her. But they’d all taken down The Mandarin, all of them. Ended him and brought her home.

“Tony,” he murmured, nudging the man.

Tony’s eyes jerked open and he gave him a startled look before he grimaced and rubbed at his bruised face. “Cap…”

“Nat’s awake, she and Buck are on the way down. I’m making breakfast. You want to shower again or just have coffee?”

“Coffee,” Tony mumbled, then rolled up to sit with a grimace. His movements were slow and pained. “Aspirin wouldn’t hurt.”

“I’ll see what I can find,” he told him. “If you stay tonight, there are other beds on this floor. Might be better than the sofa.” He left it at that ignoring the startled look Tony shot him. Hard to shove him out the door when he’d made the door possible. Right now, Steve wasn’t going to examine any of that too closely.

He had the coffee going, potatoes frying and eggs mixed for omelets when the elevator opened. Pivoting, he couldn’t take his gaze off her as she stepped out ahead of Bucky and Clint. He drank in
the sight of her from her reddened cheeks to her shadowed eyes, but there was a spark in them. A spark he hadn’t seen in far too long. She moved with a slow kind of grace, her steps careful as if she still hurt.

Of course, she still hurt. Just a glance at her throat would tell them she had to still be in some kind of pain. But there was color and awareness. When Tony said, “She doesn’t want to be touched,” it had threatened to crush the air from his lungs. What the hell had happened to her that even touch was repugnant from people she knew?

Buck hadn’t flinched as if he’d almost expected it, but the wheels turning in Steve’s head hadn’t stopped until Tony said, “She’ll be okay, Cap. We just gotta give her time. Look at Bucky—he knows.”

It made a certain amount of sense. Even Clint looked at her the same way, they were cautious, not touching her without clearing it with her first. But she’d put her hand on Steve’s on the flight. That settled him further. She’d reached for him.

They should have found her sooner.

But before those wheels could start twisting in his head again, Friday announced Peter was awake and would be joining them shortly just as Natasha reached him. She held out a hand, and he caught her fingers, keeping it loose and then she stepped in closer and pressed her forehead to his shoulder. Cupping the back of her head, he murmured, “Hey Angel.”

“Hey,” she said with a little sigh. “Food for me?”

“No, I thought I’d feed the guys, you know how they get.” The tease slipped out so easily and her laugh made it worthwhile, even as rough as it sounded.

“I do—maybe I can steal some.”

“Well,” he drew the word out, shifting slightly to stir the potatoes with his free hand but not releasing her fingers. As long as she held onto him, he wasn’t moving away. “I can probably be persuaded.”

Bucky snorted as he poured coffee into one of the Black Widow mugs. With a smirk, he held it out and Steve bit back a smile as she lifted her head and stared at the _What Would Black Widow Do_ inscribed on the side of it.

“Tony…” The warning in her voice carried.

“Hey, blame the super twins, they bought them.” But there was only laughter in his voice. “Just wait until you see the shirts. They’re much better.” There were some ornaments on the tree, too. But Steve left those for her to find.

It was her turn to snort and Steve missed the contact as she let him go and cradled the mug to her. Rising on her tiptoes, she swayed a bit just a hint of off-balance and pressed a kiss to the corner of Steve’s mouth when he dipped his head. The others migrated into the kitchen for coffee and then the elevator opened as Steve laid the first omelet on a plate.

The kid hesitated as he reached the kitchen and Nat set the mug down as she faced him. “C’mere, Peter,” she told him and opened her arms. The kid didn’t waste a second. He picked her up with his hug, but he didn’t squeeze too tightly or at least she didn’t look like it.

She held him for a beat, running her fingers over the back of his head. For the first time, Steve
noticed the broken nails, the jagged edges, bits of paint chips left from her polish, and the hints of freshly healed wounds along her fingertips. With great care, Peter set her down then said, “I was really worried about you.”

“I know malen’kiy pauk, but I’m going to be fine. Just give me a few days to heal…”

He frowned, then caught her hand gently. “It’s really okay to touch you now? Tony said…?”

Her gaze flitted past him to Tony briefly, then she focused on the kid again. “I’m better. Just don’t surprise me for a few days…” She squeezed his hand. “It gets better.”

Steve let out another breath as he transferred the potatoes to the plates and served up more omelets. She glanced at all of them before she retrieved her coffee. All six of them made the table a tight squeeze, but Nat settled right between him and Bucky without complaint. The conversation avoided some of the heavier topics as Peter filled them in on school, then they talked about Christmas and generally idle topics.

“Hey, Pete,” Tony said as they finished. “When’s May getting back?”

The kid glanced at his watch. “In a couple of hours…do you mind if I go with the driver to pick her up?”

“Not at all.”

They kept the topics lighter as they finished eating, then Nat went to sit in the living room, her feet tucked under her and by unspoken agreement they let Peter sit and talk to her quietly until he had to go. He promised to see her the next day then pressed a kiss to her head and she smiled at him. Bucky walked him out and said he’d be back in a few.

Clean up done and fresh coffee poured, Steve perched on the edge of the sofa next to her while Clint and Tony settled into the chairs. She borrowed Clint’s phone and called Isaiah. The conversation was painfully short, but this close Steve couldn’t miss the genuine relief in the man’s voice as Nat told him she was alive. After, the quiet stretched out as they waited and when Bucky returned, she said, “We have a lot to talk about…”

She filled them in over the next hour, everything she could remember from waking in the van to the fight with The Mandarin on the bridge. Tony paused her to say they’d gotten a lot of that from Pepper and explained how. The look on her face twisted Steve’s heart. Pepper had put herself through the whole experience to help her and would Nat never not be surprised about how much the people in her life cared about her?

Then she told them about the waking and passing out again as she was transported in what she was pretty sure was a coffin. Steve had to keep his focus on his breathing as he listened. They’d suspected something like that, but confirmation seemed to make it worse. Then she talked a little about her time in The Mandarin’s keeping—not the tortures, she didn’t mention the drowning or the pain or the oxygen deprivation or… any of it.

She told them about her dreams. Her memories.

Pierce.

“Fuck,” Tony had sworn even as Clint’s expression had turned to stone. “Hydra sent you to save me?”

Natasha had nodded slowly, a wariness in her. “And I failed.”
“Red… not pissed at you. Not even a little. You didn’t know.”

She lifted her shoulders. “I should have been faster…”

“You got hit by it then,” he said with a frown. “The munitions. You were close enough it had to have hit you, too.”

“I guess…I don’t remember the after. I don’t even know what happened when I had to report I’d failed.” She sounded a little lost at that; Steve didn’t miss the way Tony’s expression softened for her. Whatever happened, this wasn’t like when he found out about Bucky—course, she hadn’t been sent there to kill him either.

There were more questions, but Tony only told her it wasn’t her fault. At one point, he pulled out the bracelet—it had been in his pocket for how long, Steve had no idea, and he held it out to her. She’d stared at it for a beat, then extended her left hand and he slid it over and locked it into place. Then she curled back up and leaned against Steve. He kept his hand braced behind her on the sofa, content enough that she wanted contact.

Pierce.

You couldn’t kill people twice. How many times had they done that to her?

In 2008, Steve was still in the ice. Had they done it after she was working with him? He caught Clint’s eye and the archer nodded. They’d figure it out. She deserved all the answers.

Finally, she told them about Mary. Remembering her daughter and the name she’d used. Steve blinked at her.

“James told me about you,” she said with a small smile. “I don’t remember all of what he said, but—I needed a cover and I wanted to still be close to him.”

It squeezed all the air from his lungs as he nodded.

“Natalie Rogers,” Tony said. “Canada. You’d have needed papers, there might be a registry of you somewhere.”

“If I didn’t falsify them completely,” she argued.

“It’s something, Red. I’ll get to work on it… right, Friday?”

“Already working, Boss.”

That pulled another smile from her. “I called Logan,” she said. “I left him a message to call me on James’ phone. I don’t know where mine is…may have to set up a new one. I need to ask him if he remembers that…need to know if what I dreamt was true and not something my mind made up.”

Bucky laid his hand next to hers, palm up and she took it gently then leaned her head against Steve’s side again and he smiled down at her. “We’ll figure it out. We’ve got more clues.”

When Nat got tired, Steve called a halt to the debriefing.

“There’s more…” she said.

“I know, more on our side, too. Team-lead executive decision. Nap, then we talk more.”

“We’ll be here, Red,” Tony told her. “We’re not going anywhere.”
She relented and then let Steve walk her back to her room. Buck lifted his chin, telling him to go. Once inside Steve closed the door.

Standing in the center of the room for a moment, she seemed to study it and then she glanced at him. “I dreamed about here, too. But the sheet colors kept changing… weird, right?”

“Maybe? I don’t think the sheets are the important part of this room.”

A small smile and she turned to face him. “Steve…”

“Angel,” he said, meeting her gaze. “Thank you for staying alive for us.”

The corners of her mouth lifted a little higher. “I promised.”

“Yes, you did,” he said with a slow breath. “Yes, you did.” The feeling welled up in him. He lifted his hands, then lowered them again. But she stepped closer and caught his fingers.

“Hold me?”

She didn’t have to ask him twice, he wrapped his arms around her carefully and pressed his lips to the top of her head. “I love you, Angel,” he whispered, the words falling right out of him. “I thought for a little while I wouldn’t get to tell you, but I do. I love you so much. God, I need you in my life and there were moments… if not for Bucky or Tony or Clint… I really thought I was going to lose you and I’d never have told you how much I love you.”

The words caught in his throat, tripping a little as they poured out of him a rush. Her fingers dug into his back, the burns and bruises there were healing, but he didn’t complain about the bite of her grip.

“I…” she elongated the vowel.

“Angel…”

“Ssh,” she snapped the syllable and he went silent. Then she leaned back to stare at him with dampness on her lashes. “Give a girl a chance to say it right. I don’t say this—I just—love is for children. That has been a part of me forever.”

“I know,” he whispered.

“So give me a second to do this,” she requested, then licked her lips as she stared at him. “I told you I was attached.”

He remembered.

“But it’s so much more than that… I… maybe love is for children because they believe in hope and tomorrow and wishes and dreams… I don’t know. But you make me believe in those things, too. Even when I was in that cell…or chained to the floor or fighting for air…” She let out a shuddering breath. “I fought so hard not to think about you or James. I couldn’t bear to share you with him or that place. I had to keep you all safe, even if it was only in my mind. But… but when I needed to escape, to hide away from it all… Steve, it was you. It was James…it was…” She hesitated.

It twisted him in knots as she fought for the words even as she met his gaze, hers open and unguarded.
“It was Tony and Clint. It was all of you. And he…”

“Used us against you,” Steve said softly. She’d told them that. How he’d had their faces.

“And I don’t know if it was always him or in my head—sometimes I can’t trust my mind.” She exhaled, straightening. “But I trust your heart. I trust you. You make me hope for tomorrow, for wishes and dreams and things I used to think were only for other people.”

He heard it in there amidst all the words.

“I love you,” she said quietly as if lifting off a great weight. “I… I do, Steve. I love you.”

“Can I hug you again?” He was dying to lift her up the way Peter had, to just cradle her. She folded into his arms and pressed her cheek to his chest as he wrapped them around her. As amazing as the words were, he hadn’t needed them.

She’d shown him a thousand different ways how much she cared. But he would treasure it.

“Thank you, Angel,” he whispered, pressing his lips to her hair again. “Thank you for telling me.”

With a low, husky laugh, she said, “Thank you for wanting me. Even if I’m a mess.”

“You’re my mess,” he said. “Perfect for me.”

“Even the parts…”

“All of it,” he promised. Even the parts he might never like. He wouldn’t change a thing about her.

“Now, c’mon, you need that nap.”

“Will you stay?”

He looked at her. “You think I want to be anywhere else?”

She sat on the side of the bed, then plucked the chain from the edge of the frame and lifted the dog tags. With a light finger, she stroked over his name. “I’m so glad I left these here… if he’d taken them, too…”

Steve covered her hand on the tags and said, “He didn’t and if he had, Angel, you’re the important one, not the tags.”

With a small jut of her lip, she pulled the tags over her head and let the chain rest against her damaged neck. “They matter to me.”

Because he mattered. Gathering her hands together, he pressed a kiss to them, then helped her shed the pants and socks leaving her only in the t-shirt. Once she slid over to the middle, he climbed in. He’d intended to stay on top of the covers, but she pushed them back so he stripped down to his t-shirt and boxers before settling next to her.

When she curled up against him, she pressed her head to his chest and he wrapped an arm around her. Her breathing evened out almost immediately and he stole a glance down to see her resting, almost peaceful expression.

He was still marveling at her being there, at holding her, when the door opened and Buck let himself in.

“Tony and Clint will be back later,” he mouthed the words almost, his tone barely a whisper.
lights dimmed and the windows went opaque, darkening the room as Bucky stripped down, then slid in on her other side. She shifted a little, but let out a sigh as he rolled onto his side and propped his head on his fist to gaze down at her.

Steve relaxed.

For real.

She was back where she belonged.

They were home.

He met Bucky’s gaze. “We got this.”

His best friend nodded. “Yeah, we do.”

“Sleep?”

“You first, I just want to watch her.”

Steve grinned. “Me, too.”

So they did. It might take a little while and they couldn’t smother her. Not again. But he needed just a little while to know she was there and safe.

Tomorrow…

It would be here soon enough.

Tony

Back in the penthouse, Tony made his way over to the kitchen. He found a bottle of pain relievers, shook out four, and then took them. The floor was quiet. Almost too quiet. Everyone was exhausted, Natasha probably more than all of them put together.

“You shouldn’t be here.” The strain in her voice, the taut expression, and the trembling in her limbs had him holding her tighter. “Dammit, Tony. I told you he wants to hurt you.”

“I know,” he said, then pressed his forehead to hers, running his fingers over the collar. The catch didn’t come loose. Then his gaze locked on hers. She should never have let him put that thing on her. “But I’ve got a plan.”

Yeah, he had a plan but right now the only thing he cared about was she was alive. She’d survived long enough for him to get to her. Nothing else mattered. It would in a few seconds. In a minute
and all the minutes after that.

But she was alive.

She was alive and he could feel her.

“Yeah…don’t kill me.” Then he kissed her, slow and deep, pouring every ounce of his affection and caring into the contact. Her mouth opened, lips parting for him and he swept his tongue against hers as her fingers fisted against his shirt. The first brush had her tongue stroking his, her mouth widening as the kiss deepened.

Wildfire raced through him as he breathed her in, he didn’t care about the sour stench of sweat or musk of body odor. She’d been here days, all they meant was she was alive and warm. He sank his fingers into her hair, gripping it as his heart pounded. It was everything. She was… he forced himself to let her go, to break the kiss and to suck in a breath of air before he pressed his face against her throat. “He wants a show… he knows I care. It’s our advantage at the moment. We need time.”

It wasn’t a lie. No. No more lies between them. The Mandarin did want a show. He kept calling her Tony’s weapon. His? Yes, he could live with that description but she was so much more than a weapon.

She was alive. She’d returned his kiss.

His heart steadied as reason and logic reasserted itself. The base emotional impulse, the desperate desire to feel her close to confirm she was there had been satisfied.

For now.

She pulled back slowly, surprise flickering in her eyes but she didn’t shove him away. She didn’t chastise him.

Finally, she ran her tongue over her lips and he couldn’t look away from the movement. A nervous gesture? A tell? Or maybe her lips were just dry? All he’d felt was their warmth and softness despite everything else.

“My mouth tastes like ass.”

The corner of his mouth kicked a little higher. “I really like your ass.”

It was the right thing to say. A watery laugh escaped her and she bowed her head, but when her shoulders began to shake his whole body went taut. No, Red should never ever have to cry. He pulled her to him and she clung to him.

“You shouldn’t have come,” she admonished him in a hoarse whisper.

“We weren’t leaving you, Red.” He thought of Steve, Bucky, Clint, Peter, Wanda… Hell, the whole damn team. They were out there, getting ready. They had a plan and they were coming. “None of us. You gotta hang on.”

He would get her back to her boys. All of them.

He would give her everything.

“Hang on. They’re coming.”
Tony blew out a breath. Then he glanced at the windows and looked out over the skyline. Hydra sent her to save his life. They sent Bucky to kill his parents and her to save his life. Now he could save both of theirs. He could help them get back what they’d lost.

He would give her everything.

“Boss… Mrs. Parker’s plane has landed safely and is taxing to the gate.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said. “Let me know when she and Peter are home.”

“Of course.”

Okay, Red was home, she had her bracelet on, she’d recover, he had a search pattern to run and…

A gold circle began to blaze in the middle of his living room. “Uh… Friday?”

“I see it Boss—but…it’s…”

Then a man appeared, dark hair, goatee, and a red cloak. “Tony Stark?”

The gauntlet slipped over his hand even as he pulled his left arm from the sling. “Depends on who’s asking.”

“I believe you’ve been looking for me. I’m Dr. Stephen Strange.”

Well, how about that…

Chapter End Notes

And thus concludes part 3 of To Be Human. Wow, this was far longer than I expected. But there is so much story, so many characters, and so much more to do. Yes, for those who may not have followed the comments, there will be a part 4. It will likely begin appearing sometime in mid-September so be sure to subscribe to the series so you don’t miss it.

Thank you so much to every single person who has read, commented, or just given the story a shot. I love these characters more than I can say and I’ve had just so much joy taking this trip with them.

There will likely be a part added for "one-shots" at some point, too. Because there are side-stories, small ones that don’t always fit in the greater narrative, but happened and I’d like to flesh them out.

Finally, special thanks to Autumn_Froste for beta reading all the way through this, she’s been invaluable to getting these as clean as possible (even when my writing schedule was wonky!)

For everyone who wants to know "what happened to Mary?" that’s coming. I promise.

Feel free to come find me on Tumblr, I’m not always on it, but I do try to check:
Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.tumblr.com/blog/heather-long) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!