**Summary**

In the aftermath of Thanos' snap, those left behind must figure out if there is a way to move on. These are stories of what comes between as the Avengers try to make sense of their lives and their relationships to each other in the five years up to and through their final confrontation with the Mad Titan.

**Notes**

I've been working on this since Endgame came out. It started as a little vignette and just kept going. While I continue to work on them, the theory is of course to move to the end of Endgame to finish this series.

For those who have read my long X-files "Seasons" series, you know my favorite place to
write is in the small moments between character, those character studies of self-reflection and those moments when people are grappling with other people and their emotions. This is no different, except now I'm now playing outside of just one character's perspective. So this is kind of new and fun and I'm digging it.

I hope you enjoy.
What Is Left Behind

Tony Stark did as he pleased, just as he always did, and damn the consequences.

Pepper had seethed the entire ride back from Central Park, too angry to bother calling him after Bruce and the strange wizard had taken off with him. Happy hadn’t asked where he was, sensing all too readily by her mood that his boss had popped off on another hair brained mission again. Tony had engaged in far less of that in the years since the Sokovia Accords. She had hoped that by signing them he’d actually stop testing her patience and her sanity and think before leaping into some other world-threatening catastrophe, perhaps wait for other people with cooler heads and better battle plans to come in and help. For the most part, he had, though admittedly, the Avengers break-up and the restrictions placed by the UN meant that he had not one a lot of anywhere on missions.

She had enjoyed the downtime with him, the moments they could build a relationship and just be the two of them, Tony and Pepper, and not Iron Man and...well, she supposed his annoying fiancee. That didn’t mean she didn’t see him in his lab tinkering on suits when he was bored or restless...or that he didn’t watch the news obsessively if there was a hint of a group of enhanced people out there in the world saving lives and helping others in defiance of the UN edict...or that he tried to hide the new, glowing blue badge he had taken to sticking onto his chest every morning under his clothes, right where the old Arc Reactor used to be.

He missed the Avengers, the old team, she knew it even if he didn’t say it. Sure he had Rhodey and Vision still, and if he wanted a mascot he had the Parker kid, but it wasn’t the same. Pepper knew Tony well, better than he knew himself at times, and understood how much he missed the way it was before the Accords. She had never asked him what happened in Berlin and Sokovia and he had never told her, only that he and Steve Rogers had “broken up”. Any further attempts to drill down on the subject had been shut down. She knew something horrible happened, because Tony looked as if he had been trampled by a herd of elephants, broken in body and spirit, with nothing but Steve’s iconic shield to show for it.

Yes, she got Tony, and was well aware when to leave things alone. She didn’t touch the ache she knew he still felt and decided to move on, hoping he would too, that he would just settle down with her and their relationship and this life. So he had, for two years, seeking therapy, actually giving input into the company she capably ran, and taking real vacations with her. It was a happy idyl, the quiet in the eye of the hurricane.

Now the storm was back in full force, and in the form of a spinning ship, as round and threatening as any tropical storm, churning dust and debris through Greenwich Village and all up and down the east coast of Manhattan, down the corridors of buildings and streets towards the East River, out to Brooklyn beyond. News cameras on sight showed debris everywhere, cars crunched into each other, light poles toppled on top of them, trash piled everywhere, busted windows, and fleeing people. In the center of it all stood Tony and the wizard, defiant against creatures she had only ever seen in the likes of in video games.

“FRIDAY, keep tracking Tony, will you?” She stared at the footage on her phone as Happy yelled at the mess of traffic, people either fleeing or gawking at whatever was floating in midtown.

“Of course, ma’am.” The AI’s ever polite, Irish lilt was unflustered despite the chaos. “Would you like me to put in a call to Colonel Rhodes.”

“She replied as Happy lurched, spinning them out of the main traffic and down back alleys to the penthouse she and Tony had purchased together after selling the old Avengers tower. She
yelped but didn’t yell at him as he capably handled the large car.

“You think Tony is going to do something stupid,” Happy wondered as soon as he got the car stable once more.

“It’s Tony, Happy, what do you think?”

He only grimaced and nodded. “I knew that wizard was no good, even if he had Banner with him.”

Pepper didn’t need to echo his sentiment.

She was upstairs before she saw the footage of Tony streaking off into the sky after the departing space ship, the spinning ring rising through the atmosphere as Tony’s suit morphed to boost itself into space. Shrieking at the projected image, FRIDAY was already dialing Tony before she could articulate the words. He of course apologized, and despite her begging him to come home, she knew it was no good. He was already on the ship and committed to whatever hairbrained scheme he was up to, all by himself, with whatever threat it was. His voice broke up and crackled away into static as FRIDAY lost connection.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I’ve lost him.”

Pepper could only stare at the sky, tears burning to the surface, frustrated and fearful. “Yeah, so have I.”

“Colonel Rhodes is on the line, ma’am, if you’d like me to patch him through.”

Pepper wasn’t sure what good it would do, but she took it anyway. “Rhodey?”

“Pepper, did I just see what I thought I did?”

“Yes,” she uttered, scrubbing her hands across her face and over her hair, pulling on her ponytail in numb irritation. “Tony’s in that ship.”

“By himself?”

“Of course,” she snapped, throwing herself on the couch as the news continued to play silently before her. “Why bother with taking five minutes to let people know and maybe have a plan, when he can go and get himself killed all by himself!”

Rhodey was a veteran of most of Tony’s poor choices, but still she could hear the same annoyance in his soft sigh on the other end of the line. “I’m at the compound now, trying to get Ross on the line and getting the runaround. I’m guessing they just now are finding out and are running around like headless chickens.”

This was what they had bargained for when they had signed the Sokovia Accords, this level of oversight. It was the very same agreement Tony had signed and now promptly ignored. “Seriously, the Lower East Side is going to be a mess now and they haven’t even called you once?”

“The level of bureaucratic hell to get anything done makes the US Military look organized.”

She would never say this to Rhodey, Tony, or anyone else openly, but there were days and moments when she wondered if Steve Rogers didn’t have a point. “Meanwhile, Tony is up in that ship right now. Is there anything you can do to, I don’t know, go up and help him?”

“In space? This suit isn’t cut out for that, Pepper. I’m shocked Tony’s is.
“The man who made an entire legion of suits and you think that he doesn’t have one that goes into space?”

“Good point,” Rhodey chuffed, though not with humor. “Look, I got a call from Banner. Did you know he’s back?”

“Yeah, he showed up in the park with this...wizard, I don’t know, saying something about the end of the world.” She hadn’t been clear and Tony hadn’t explained, except to say he had to go, despite her protests that others could handle this.

“Yeah, I’m going to fly and grab him and see if he can help sort this out for all of us. He seems to have most of the answers.” He paused, clearing his throat, carefully. “Also, he called Steve Rogers in on this.”

She didn’t want to admit relief at that, not when she felt he’d been just as stubbornly pig-headed as Tony. “How did he find him?”

“Tony’s phone, I guess. Tony’s always had a way to contact him. I’m not going to lie, Pepper, if he hadn’t, I’d have called Cap in. I’d have flown him in from wherever he is. Vision’s off line, we can’t find him, the spider kid is too young and shouldn’t be involved in this, and that leaves just me.”

“No, you did the right thing, Rhodey. If there’s any way I can clear things up to get them here, let me know.”

“Not unless you got pull with the US government. They are closing airspaces left and right, they’ll have to sneak in here. I’m already reaching to Cap and giving him coordinates that will let him get in through a back door.”

When the Avengers were needed most, they had to come in like criminals. Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose. “Right, well let me know what you all come up with. I’ve got FRIDAY trying to track Tony, wherever he is.”

“Let me know what you find out. I’ll handle things on this end. We’ll get him home.”

Pepper wasn’t so sure about that. “Thanks, Rhodey.”

He clicked off as Happy wandered in, his expression grim on his florid face. “So, what do we do, boss?”

She pulled her feet up on the couch, staring at the coverage from the news. “We wait and hope he pulls off another miracle.”
And What Came After

Chapter Summary

In which the Avengers come to grips with the reality of their loss.

The world - the universe - had fallen apart around them and for the first time in Steve’s Rogers’ very long life he realized that there was not a damn thing any of them, least of all him, could do about it.

All around them, the cries of shock, pain, anguish rose through the Wakandan plain as the wind picked up the grit of those who had existed just the moment before, now carried away into the air like a dream, as if they’d not just been there. Bucky, who had been as solid and real to him as he had been the day they met nearly a century ago, had melted before his confused eyes, his ash still coating the fingertips dangling between his knees. He’d heard Sam's voice briefly before he too vanished, Rhodes calling for him desperately in the tall grass. Vision lay gray and lifeless on the ground beside Steve, his forehead scooped out like a melon, exposing the intricate circuitry inside, delicate and lifeless, somehow far more horrific in its way than any number of severed limbs he had seen over his long years of war. His blank eyes stared heavenward as if watching the last remains of Wanda flying upward to join him.

They all stood around him in silent shock, begging questions he had no answers for. For the first time in decades, maybe since his own mother’s death, Steve wanted to break down and weep in broken and abject misery. Instead, he sat, crumpled on the ground, unable to finding his footing physically or mentally to stand back up again. They had lost, irrevocably.

It was Natasha, of course, who pulled him back into himself with a gentle hand to the shoulder, a soft murmur of his name that turned him to look back up at her. She clutched her middle, clearly wounded, heartbreak in her large eyes, but she tugged him up, determined, as he rose, regarding the others who all stood in horror around them; Thor, Rhodes, Bruce, Okoye, and the strange talking raccoon that he’d seen arrive with Thor. They all looked to him as if he had some sort of answers to what they should do. Perhaps, compared to them, he did.

“We need to get back to the lab, find Shuri, see what damage has been done.” His voice was rough and cracking, choked on smoke and tears. The others, lacking any other suggestions, agreed, making their way across the grasslands to the princess’ lab on the promontory just outside of the city. All around them, the grief of the Wakandan people sounded in an aching cacophony of loss and bewilderment, the torn and ruined ground pockmarked here and there by the smallest mounds of dark dust clinging to the dirt and grass, as if refusing to go. Along the way, a warrior, as tall as Thor and more massive, rushed to Okoye, shouting in disbelieving Wakandan as Okoye, still reeling, replied in a state of grieved shock, horrible anguish writ in her expression as tears began to fall. It occurred to Steve, as the larger man unexpectedly wrapped arms around the tall warrior woman that he had never seen the general of T’Challa’s forces and head of his personal guard ever break down, not once. From the first time he met her years ago he had admitted he had been somewhat intimidated by her, a feeling that both T’Challa and Bucky had freely admitted they had as well. There was something horrible in the way she sobbed into the other man’s cloak as he held her that shook him as much as the sight of Bucky dissolving before him, of Vision lying motionless on the ground.

The man turned to Steve, stern and shaken in his grief. “What has happened here?”
Steve could barely string words together to respond. It was Bruce who managed any sort of eloquence in Tony’s battered Veronica suit. “Thanos got all of the stones. He did what he set out to do, to kill half of all life in the universe.”

The man’s stern grief turned to pained confusion in an instant. “Why?”

“Because he thought it would save us all in the long run. Because he believed halving everything would make things thrive, not tax resources. I don’t know, he thought he was some cosmic gardner, a god who had the right to make that sort of arbitrary decision.”

Had he not seen what he had that day, the man might have laughed right in Bruce’s robotic face. “All of this because he wanted to prune us like a bush?”

Bruce clearly didn’t have answers for that. He stood silent as Okoye pulled away, wiping at streaming eyes. “M’Baku, the royal family…”

“I have to see to my people.” He clapped the woman on the shoulder, not unkind, but firm. “I am their lord, I need to see what has happened. Go see what remains and inform me.”

“Yes.” She turned to Steve and Natasha, jerking her head to the gleaming tower beyond. “Come, then. Let us go.”

M’Baku watch them go in grief and sadness, saying nothing as they stumbled forward, before calling to what remained of those on the field. Steve barely paid heed as they claimed one of the transports that they had sailed out in, Okoye holding her bracelet against it, activating it to float up once more with a soft humming sound. He held a hand first to Nat, then to the racoon, helping them on board before clambering on with Thor close behind.

“Banner, Rhodes, meet us at the research hangar. We need to figure out who is still alive here.”

“Right!” Rhodes had always been quick to jump at Steve’s orders, the military training too ingrained in him not to. Bruce, though, hung back for the briefest of moments, uncertain.

“Steve, we don’t know what has happened to Tony…”

Steve could only hold up a hand, still covered in the remains of Bucky. “We can only handle one thing at a time. Just...let’s get there and see what we got.”

He glanced towards Natasha, once, before bounding off after Rhodes, still clumsy and ungainly in his Stark Tech suit. Okoye took the helm of the speeder as they set off, standing as a silent sentinel leading the way back from defeat. They skimmed across the grass as Steve eyed the remains of Wakanda’s armies, wandering in the fields around the fallen bodies of comrades and alien creatures alike, dazed, confused, and lost.

“I will need to order them,” Okoye murmured, absently. Steve could only nod, numb in the moment.

The research labs and royal hangar were all eerily quiet, the mountain which housed both Shuri’s lab and the entrance to Wakanda’s vibranium mines empty save for a few hysterical and confused lab techs and guards and the ominous piles of ashey dust scattered across the white tiled floors. Natasha whispered something in Russian, he wasn’t sure what. They wandered, grimly, to Shuri’s lab, Okoye’s long strides moving faster the closer they got.

Just outside lay two bodies armored in red vibranium woven fabric, crumpled like forgotten dolls, spears in hand. Okoye stopped, eyeing them both for long moments, before bending to turn them from where they fell, shutting their eyes with trembling fingers, murmuring something in the musical,
clicking language all Wakandans spoke. Without looking back at them, she entered the lab, searching for the princess.

It was empty. Somehow, he had expected that.

A window had been broken, he was guessing by Vision in his attempt to escape. A breeze blew in from the grassland below, stirring the ash at the bottom of the stairs by where Shuri had been working. Okoye stood in the middle of it, watching it all with the aching sadness she’d displayed on the field with M’Baku. Behind him, he could hear the clanking steps of Rhodes followed by what he presumed was Bruce. They stopped short at the door.

“Shuri,” Bruce called, brokenly, knowing the answer already.

“Gone,” Steve said simply, turning to regard the group. Thor hung back, his face inscrutable as he stared off into the fields beyond, the raccoon by his side, eyeing the lab with sad curiosity. Rhodes and Bruce stood by the door, wringing their hands at a loss.

Natasha moved to stand by Okoye, placing a hand on her elbow. “Is there anyone else in the family left?”

“The Queen Mother, I hope.” She touched a finger to the beaded bracelet at her wrist, calling up an image that projected itself in front of her. The woebegone face of another Dora Milaje greeted her, seemingly relieved to see Okoye alive. Whatever her news, it was far more positive than Okoye’s, judging from the tenor of the conversation. Okoye’s response broke the young woman, however, who nodded in tears before signing out.

“Queen Ramonda is alive and safe.” Okoye stared down at the ashes of her princess, the brilliant young girl who had shamed even Bruce’s intellect. “I will need to see to my people, to Wakanda. That is my duty.”

“Of course.” What else could he say to the grieving warrior, to the grieving nation. He’d brought this here to them. They’d failed and he had brought all this misery on all of them. He looked to the others, who all looked as helpless as he felt. “We should head back to headquarters, find out what’s going on.”

He glanced to Okoye who still stared at the ashes of Shuri at her feet. “Chances are high that what happened here is happening everywhere. Our channel is open. Call us when you need.”

The barest inclination of the woman’s bald, tattooed head was all the indication he had that she had heard him at all.

Slowly, he marched through the lab, past the table where Vision had been just an hour before, beyond the dead bodies of the fallen women. The others fell in line behind him. It was only after they reboarded their quinjet, Rhodes setting coordinates to return to New York, that he really took stock of what had just happened. They had failed. The universe was falling apart. Tony was nowhere to be found. Thanos had won. Now what?

“Steve?” Thor’s rumble, like distant thunder, caught his attention. “Where were Stark and Barton?”

Rhodes glanced at him, sideways, grimacing before turning back to the controls.

“Clint was home with his family,” Natasha jumped in, worry etched on her worn face. “He’d been under house arrest.”

“Arrest?” Thor had been off planet for the last three years, since they moved into the Avengers
facility. He hadn’t known about the events of the Accords or the fallout from it.

“A lot has happened since you left,” Natasha hedged. That was an understatement if ever Steve uttered one. “There was a...falling out.”

“Literally,” Rhodes chimed grimly from the cockpit. Steve caught Natasha’s pained grimace.

“Over what?” Thor’s confusion deepened into a scowl as the raccoon beside him eyed the tableau in silence.

“The world’s leaders weren’t so keen on the fact we tended to leave death and destruction wherever we went, so they tried to create some laws, guidelines for us to operate in.” Natasha, ever the diplomat, tried to couch it carefully.

“Some people didn’t agree with there being accountability for our actions.” Rhodes was testy, and Steve could almost feel the mild glare from the front. He couldn’t blame him. He’d lost his ability to walk in the mess.

Surprisingly, it was Natasha who clapped back at him. “Other people didn’t feel we should curtail our personal freedoms or those of other enhanced humans out of paranoia and give over the Avenger’s ability to do our job to a group of officials who little understood the situations we were in or the kind of work we do.”

If Rhodes was shocked it was Natasha who called him out, he didn’t show it. “Yeah, great piece of work we did today. This time we managed to get half the universe killed.”

“As I recall from the little conversation you were having with Thunderbolt Ross when we arrived that bunch would have have been too busy dithering and consulting their legal experts to decide what to do about the impending alien crisis.”

“I wasn’t the one who signed the Sokovia Agreements and then turned my back on them when it was convenient.”

“They were wrong, Rhodey.”

“We needed accountability for our actions. We had just blown up half-a-country!”

“We tried to save half-a-country, you mean. Stark was the one who thought it was brilliant to create a killer robot to try and protect the entire earth!”

“Yes, from Thanos, and now we see why he did it!”

“And we all had to pay the price for his hubris and overwhelming sense of guilt? His plan didn’t work. It broke the Avengers apart.”

“Guys!” Bruce, now out of the Hulk-busting armor, cut in, inserting himself between Natasha and Rhodes’ bickering, a hand up to each of them. “Look, none of this helps us in the moment. Why hash this out now?”

Natasha turned hard eyes on him, a storm brewing there, waiting to break. “Easy for you to say when you’d been gone for three years. This is what we’ve been dealing with while you were...where again?”

“Sakaar,” Thor supplied, clearly trying to be helpful, but only earning mild panic and a shake of the head from Bruce. “Sorry, just...yeah, that’s how I found him. I ended up there from Norway after my
father...uh...died.”

He trailed off, looking to his feet as everyone stared at him, including Steve, as Thor underscored both how alien he actually was and how very long it had been since they had seen him. Clearly, they weren’t the only ones with long stories to tell.

Out of nowhere, the talking raccoon decided to pipe up, long silent through the various exchanges. “So, you mean to tell me that this bunch is the Avengers you kept going on about? Earth’s mightiest heroes?”

Thor blinked, as if just remembering there was an animal standing right beside him sounding supremely unimpressed. “Uh, this is my friend Rabbit!”

“Rocket,” the raccoon corrected, glaring at the much larger Asgardian before waving collectively at them all. “Pleased to get to know you.”

Steve didn’t want to know why it was a talking rodent sounded like he had a south Philly accent, but there it was. In a day full of so much grief and numbness, where he’d watched monsters out of nightmares come to Earth to attack them, one talking raccoon almost felt like a relief in the day. “We are some of the Avengers, yeah. Stark wasn’t with us. He went up on one of those spinning spaceships. One of them landed in New York.”

“Probably Thanos, then, if not one of his so-called kids,” Rocket shook his furry head in a very human way that would have been far more unnerving if Steve wasn’t already broken. “My guess he’s gathered the ships somewhere. Gamora would know where, if she’s still alive.”

“If Tony’s still alive.” Rhodes’ expression was bleak, turning to Bruce. “You didn’t hear where they were going?”

“Man, it was all happening so fast, I couldn’t keep up. The wizard, Strange, he was flinging spells and trying to keep his stone away from Thanos’ goons, and then this kid in some masked suit showed up, flinging strings and swinging around. Tony sent him to keep an eye on Strange and I think he went up on the ship first. Tony followed.”

“Peter Parker,” Rhodes supplied for the confused Bruce. “Tony’s protege, goes by Spider-Man.”

“He’s the one he brought to Berlin?” Steve remembered him. Smart, had a lot of heart, had been from neighboring Queens. Had the circumstances been different, Steve thought they would have gotten along.

“Yeah, the high school teenager from Queens, sure.” Rhodes’ rolled eyes said exactly how he felt about that. “Believe me, I gave Tony hell for that, bringing a kid to that sort of fight.”

Far too late now, Steve supposed, to lodge any sort of complaint. “So, Tony and potentially Peter Parker are lost in space and we don’t know where. We’ve yet to hear from Clint Barton or Scott Lang, either of them could be among the dead.” He didn’t dare look in Natasha’s direction, fearing what he might see.

“I don’t even know how to get to my team,” Rocket murmured dolefully into the stillness. “If they are even alive. Terra isn’t exactly known as a technological center of the universe.”

Considering the fact that till he met Thor, Steve hadn’t known there were such things as aliens in real life, he couldn’t fault the raccoon in his statement, but Rhodes still looked affronted all the same. “Where in the hell did you pick up a talking rodent, Thor?”
Rocket bristled immediately as Thor placed a firm, heavy, staying hand on his head. “Rhodey has never seen anything like you, before, Rabbit, and it’s been a horrific day, for all of us.”

That it had. Warily, Steve scrubbed at his face, ignoring whatever traces of his childhood best friend remained on his palm. “Rest up! When we land in New York, we’ll try to raise who we can and figure out what’s left.”

Even as he said it, he knew his words were hollow. He wasn’t going to sleep again for a long time and he doubted any of the rest of them would either.
The Great Beyond

Chapter Summary

In which Tony gets to know his new companion.

“I wonder if it would help if I got out and pushed.”

The woman - at least he thought she was a woman - Nebula only blinked at him blandly, her dark eyes and low monotone devoid of any humor. “We’re in space. You have nothing to push against.”

Tony could only sigh at that. “It’s a joke, you know. It’s...a bad Star Wars joke. Guess you’ve not seen that to get it anyway.”

Her bald head, blue and purple and shining in the faint light of the ship’s cockpit, shook as she considered. “Stars do not have wars, though I’ve seen plenty enough in space.”

“Yeah, not...it’s a movie, a form of entertainment back on Earth. It tells the story of some make believe humans in space somewhere.” He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to tell her this. She had no hope in hell of getting it, but Parker - Peter - wasn’t there to riff off pop culture references and make him feel ancient by calling a cherished childhood film “old”.

Some sort of recognition lighted on Nebula’s stoic face. “I believe this is something Quill spoke of, some story he liked as a boy. It involves a ship called the Enterprise?”

“Close enough.” Tony grimaced, rubbing at the red, swollen, infected scar in his middle and tried not to shiver despite the fever he knew would be raging sooner rather than later. He stared at the foreign conglomeration of bits, recognizing in a vague way the makings of a sort of flight engine both more advanced than any he’d ever seen and painfully similar. He could figure this out with a little research and a bit of elbow grease, that always had served him well before. “Does this Quill keep tools around? Maybe a manual on this thing?”

“Tools are in the back. The systems logs will have schematics.” She rose in a fluid motion, the same sort of grace Romanoff had, both mesmerizing and decidedly lethal, all of which set Tony’s teeth on edge. She tapped her fingers across a screen, pulling up diagrams and pictures in a language he couldn’t read.

“Got anything...err...Terran?”

She silently tapped on the systems preferences, or he assumed that’s what they were in this configuration. “Your planet has many languages. Which one’s yours?”

“English,” he replied, frowning quizzically at the back of her head. “Same one Quill speaks. Say, how is it I hear all of you in English?”

“You don’t, you just think you do.” She tapped a code and up popped the familiar Latin letters he’d learned when he was 2-years-old. “Universal translators, most civilized planets have them.”

“That would count us out.” He came behind her, glancing over her shoulder to swipe through the screen and text, quickly figuring out the situation at hand. “Fuel cells cracked, likely from whatever
planet your father decided to send at us, and we’ll need to fix that before we can get going again.”

She hardly twitched at the mention of her father but she did seem impressed he had gathered it all so quickly. “You’re surprisingly not stupid.”

He should have been insulted by that and perhaps ten years ago he might have been, but now he only barked a laugh and wandered to the back where she said the tools were kept. “I was building robots as playmates when I was a child. I have a knack for this mechanical thing.”

Something about his words gave her pause as she cocked her head, almost like a puppy, a sound like gears clicking accompanying it. It hit him then why it was she’d hinged on that turn of phrase. He studied her for a brief moment, noting the mechanical panels, the streaks of silver in her skin, perhaps some sort of advanced neuron circuitry, and the way she kept one of her hands gloved. “You’re a robot yourself, aren’t you?”

The first real emotions he’d seen since they’d gotten themselves stranded in space flashed angrily in her eyes. “I’m a living creature, the same as everyone else.”

“Right and that ticky, clicking sound in your neck sounds just like me when I wake up, except I think I could fix yours with a screwdriver and a good lubricant - which also was the solution to one of my more infamous dates…”

“I’m a Luphomoid.” She cut off his lewd rejoinder with a scowl that honestly gave him pause. It really bothered her, the idea of not being quite organic. “My people are normal, just like everyone else.”

Well, save for the blue skin and baldness, but then again, they probably would find humans horrifying after one afternoon on a New York city subway.

“But you’re not,” he provided simply, shooting her a small, tight smile as he unearthed what he took for a tool box in one of the storage areas.

Nebula said nothing, but busied herself studying the gloved hand with sorrowful dispassion. Strange as she was, something about her reminded him very much of himself, once. Perhaps it was the whole having difficult fathers who engaged in wholesale slaughter business, or maybe it was the forlorn manner she had about her, the way she seemed to want to engage with others, but just couldn’t figure out how to do it right. Sighing, he took the kit and came out into the galley, setting it down on the table to rifle through it for tools he might be able to use.

“Life with Daddy Dearest wasn’t a picnic, hmmm?” It didn’t take a genius to guess that. He’d met Thanos and one of his so-called “children”.

Nebula didn’t look at him, but she shrugged, causing the whirring sound again. “I don’t remember anything else, really. I suppose I had a family and home. Something about me was enticing to him. He came to my planet, just like thousands of others over his long life, and slaughtered precisely half. The rest he let live to pick up the pieces of the lives they once had and somehow put it all back together. I don’t remember the day well. I just know he took me with him to his home, to raise with another girl, Gamora, a Zehoberei. He loved her, but she didn’t have a playmate. His other children were older and she was lonely. He would give Gamora anything. So I was supposed to be her sister, to love her and train with her and challenge her. If I did well, I’d be rewarded. If I did not, I would be improved.”

She uttered “improved” as blandly as she uttered the rest of her sad story, but Tony felt chills go up his spine all the same. “Thanos did this to you?”
Self-consciously, she rubbed the spot of her neck he knew was making the noise. “He wanted to use me as an assassin. What use is an assassin who can’t stand up to the greatest warrior in the universe? Every time I’d lose, he’d send me to the shop for upgrades, to make me more deadly, to match me to Gamora.

It was fucking sadistic was what it was and it left Tony feeling even more vaguely ill than he already was. Thoughts of Steve Roger’s friend, Barnes, floated to mind with more than a hint of regret and guilt. All he could manage in response was a slightly horrified “Why?”

“Because of his mission.” She regarded him simply, her naturally low voice barely a whisper. “He wished to bring balance to the universe and I and my siblings were his tools.”

“He’s a madman.”

“Yes,” she sighed, clutching her neck. “He is.”

Tony hated awkward silence, always had. It was why he had the unfortunate habit of acting outrageously and saying asshole things, but in this moment, all he could think to do was to wave to the seat by the table as he fumbled in the toolbox. “Sit.”

She stared at him as if he’d asked her to strip. “Why?”

“Because you got something out of whack in there and I’m an engineer and can fix it. So, sit.”

She still eyed him dubiously, clutching herself.

“I swear I won’t hurt you. I know what I’m doing. Remember, been at this since I was a kid.”

She may have doubted him, but she finally relented, coming to plop down in front of him without any of the previous grace she had shown. She slowly removed her fingers from her skin, allowing him access to the back of her neck. It was a brave thing to do for a warrior and assassin, he had to admit, and he recognized the courage it took to even let him, a perfect stranger, try this.

“Let’s see what we got here.” Just under where her skull met the spine, a panel, faint as a crease in her skin, was visible. He pressed gently as it gave way, opening the entire right side of her neck, exposing metal vertebrae and wires rather than bone and flesh. It would have been horrifying if he hadn’t had a hand in the making of Vision, and even then it still was rather ooky.

“I think I found the problem.” Several vertebrae were misaligned causing the whirring and clicking with every turn of her head. “Just need a bit of a chiropractic adjustment.”

“A what?” She turned her head sharply, causing the noise again and giving him a better example of what was going on.

“It’s what the rest of us have to do when our vertebrae get out of alignment, get pushed and pulled like a ball of dough.” He felt up the metal pieces, trying to figure out which one to push first. “Does it hurt?”

“Not particularly, no more than usual.”

That wasn’t reassuring.

“Okay, I’m going to move this one. If it hurts, I’m sorry.”

He grabbed the one in the middle, the fourth from the skull, and popped it forward, forcing the other
two on either side that had bowed out with it to pop back into place as well. The movement was subtle, but it caused Nebula to gasp as he immediately let go, concern and a certain fear of her capabilities causing him to take a step back. “Did that work.”

“Uh….yes…” She panted, turning her head experimentally. He could see the vertebrae turn weirdly inside. “That was killing me! It’s been days since those went out.”

“Sports injury?” He had a feeling that would never be the answer with her.

“My father was torturing me for the location of the Soul Stone - or at least hoping he could lure my sister in to tell him where it was.”

For not the first time in this conversation, he paused, unnerved by her matter-of-fact accounting of the cruelties of her batshit crazy adopted father. “He did this?”

“Yes.” Her shrug was diffident. “It wasn’t the first time.”

Swallowing hard, he closed the flap as it sealed, smooth and almost flawless. “You survived.”

“To kill him,” she replied, quietly. “I failed at that.”

Hadn’t they all? “Yeah, I know that feeling.”

He returned to the tool kit as Nebula rose, turning her head this way and that, rolling it around. The sound didn’t return. Poor kid, she hadn’t asked for any of this and here she was stuck in the the horror factory that was Thanos and his other minions in their sacred quest. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, she was kind of growing on him.

“So I know a thing or two about being upgraded.” He meant it as a conversation piece more than anything, only realizing as the words spilled out of his mouth how connected they were.

She stopped her physical exercises, eyes flickering to the patch of light attached to his chest. “Your metal suit? Is that where it comes from?”

“Nanotechnology. This houses the nanotechnology that make it up, not terribly unlike your friend Starlord - Quill - whatever, his mask he wears. This is the latest iteration of my suit.”

“Latest?” True curiosity lit her face with an expression other than dull, angry blankness. “How many have there been?”

“Oh…a lot.” He shrugged, waving a hand as he studied the assortment of high tech tools, gauging what they did and what he could do with them. “I’ve tried every permutation out there, at this point, I think.”

“Why?”

“Because, your father was out to raid my planet for Infinity Stones and kill half the people, and I wasn’t okay with that.” He studied something he thought was some sort of wrench. “Because I thought if I could build a bigger, better suit of armor that could stop him.”

She was quiet for long moments as he poked in Quill’s heap of junk. “It would never have worked.”

“Really?” It hurt to hear, but he didn’t want to let her know that.

“He destroyed Xandar, one of the more technologically advanced planets in the universe. They had systems designed to keep the Power Stone safe. You and a suit of armor wouldn’t have stopped
Somewhere, Steve Rogers was laughing at him, he was sure of it. “Well, I think that got proven out today in spectacular fashion.” He chucked a tool that he couldn’t even identify hard into the metal box, closing it shut, scrubbing at his feverish face.

“You survived, didn’t you?” She echoed his own words back at him. She was smart, this Nebula, for all that she was weird and somewhat creepy.

“I did.” He gathered the tools he recognized and piled them together, flopping into one of the chairs opposite her. “So, about ten years ago, my time at least, I wasn’t running around in metal suits fighting wannabe gods on alien planets. I was just a guy, albeit, a super rich, highly influential, dashingly attractive one. My father, Howard, had built this company from the ground up, making a lot of things, but mostly weapons. My planet was in a constant state of war for the last 100 years or so and he was filling a niche, and consequently got rich off it.”

Why he was telling her all this, he didn’t know, except that she was there, and it was space, and he was lonely. She had been honest and vulnerable with him, and God knew he was feeling broken and lost right now, and it just felt….good to connect with another living soul, metal or otherwise. He’d never been good at making friends, never saw the need for it in his brilliance and self-centeredness, but then again, he always had that tendency of connecting with the other lost and broken soul in the cave with him when he was at his lowest point.

“So, anyway, I get this company and I’m a genius making weapons that can kill smarter and better, and I’m showing off a bigger, better weapon in this country called Afghanistan, where there are insurgents taking over and killing people. While I’m heading back, this bomb goes off, kills everyone in the caravan but me. I survive, but not without damage.”

He tapped his chest, right where the nanotech plate sat attached to his skin.

“So, they bombed us with my own weapons. One of them had been rigged to send off shrapnel that would not necessarily kill you right away, but eventually would work its way through tissue to vital organs, killing you slowly. Anyway, so the the bad guys kidnap me and take me to their camp, where they have this other engineer, Yinsen, from a nearby village. He manages to save my life, puts a magnet in my chest to keep the shrapnel from digging in further. To keep it going, I created a power source, something my dad had been working on, miniaturized it, and stuck it in my chest, and from there I figured out I could power an entire suit of armor from it. So, while they thought I was making a weapon for them, in reality I was making my escape and maybe taking a few of them with me. Surprisingly, it worked.”

He hadn’t thought of that long ago day in awhile, of the clunky, giant metal suit he’d fashioned out of scrap pieces and weapons parts, or the fear that somehow they would be discovered and killed before it was complete. He hadn’t even thought of Yinsen, dead for years now, in a long time either. The man had saved his life and given him purpose when he really had none. He’d believed in Tony’s ability to survive and get out and to live a better life. He’d tried, thought he could fix what he’d created, that he could somehow make it all better all on his own.

“Anyway, I got out, and I got home and once I was there, I made the next suit, which was even better, and the funny thing with each suit I made was, each one made me feel safer, more powerful, like I didn’t have to worry about the bad guys coming in and taking over because I could stop them. I personally could end all war, all injustice, all cruelty, through my intellect, skills, and better suits of armor. So, I kept building them, kept trying to make better and better ones. Every time a new problem arose, a new weakness I had to address, I would upgrade the suit. I started thinking of new problems and new eventualities, so new suits, until I had an entire army of suits, there to stop all
problems, all threats, all things, but especially your father.

Admitting it out loud for the first time felt odd, especially to this perfect stranger, this cyborg woman, but it was also freeing. He was admitting his most secret fear, the biggest crack in his warped psyche, the driving force behind who he, Tony Stark, was. “Iron Man was never just about my overwhelming hubris, which is prodigious indeed, or my narcissism, which is perhaps my most defining trait, and I’m not saying they aren’t all wrapped up in it. Iron Man was always about being scared, of knowing that there were monsters out there, real ones, and feeling like I had to do something, anything to stop it, to make everyone safe, to make me safe. I can’t just sit by and watch...watch someone else do something else cruel to someone just because they get kicks out of it. That’s what they did to Yinsen and me, and...I thought if I built bigger and better suits, kept upgrading, I’d stop it, all by myself, that I could make me and everyone I love safe. So, there it is! The secret of the great Tony Stark.”

He hadn’t even ever told his therapist that much. They’d focused on his issues with Howard, probably because that was more sensational. This...this had been freeing, speaking the truth that lay so deep inside, the true reason for the suits, for being Iron Man, for all of it. Certainly, Thanos had to have destroyed his world and everything in it for that to come burbling out past his carefully constructed wall of asshole-ness. Now, he felt simply feverish and empty, like one of his suits, all the life taken out of it once the key element is exposed.

Nebula only stared at him with dark, fathomless eyes, but her inscrutable face seemed to soften, somewhat. “I suppose we both learned from our weaknesses and came out stronger.”

What else could he do? He laughed at that, a hysterical, fever-tinged laugh that ached where Thanos had stabbed him with his own nanotech. “Not strong enough to defeat him.”

“No...not yet.” She reached for some of the tools on the table. “For now, let’s just handle what we can here. You said you were a genius engineer. You should be able to do this.”

He wasn’t so sure about that, but he had to admit it was better than sitting there twiddling their thumbs and hoping for a lift back to Earth. “Right, alien spacecraft, don’t foresee a problem there.”

No, he had never made friends with others easily, but he sensed that this pragmatic, no-nonsense cyber-lady might end up being one of those after all. For now, in the spot he was in, he would take it. He didn’t have many friends left in the universe.
A Secret Fury

Chapter Summary

In which Natasha realizes Fury kept more secrets than she even knew about.

Fury had always kept his secrets, even from her - especially from her.

Natasha could never be quite sure why he had let Clint keep her alive rather than having someone just off her on the spot. Had the roles been reversed, she would have. She knew just how dangerous she was. Just like Clint, however, Fury had made another call. He saw something else in her beyond just a weapon, a tool to murder and remove others. He saw something worthy of being redeemed.

That said, it wasn’t exactly like Fury had trusted her, despite all that. It helped that he didn’t. They both walked in the gray area of espionage, a land of half-truths and outright lies, where your ability to dissemble and do it well was the difference between life and death. It made sense he didn’t tell her or anyone everything, as it kept people alive. Still, there were times she wished he had been a bit more honest about what he was up to, such as the moment he first suspected SHIELD had been compromised. Perhaps that would have been less of a shit show than it was. Certainly, this was one of those moments Natasha wished he had confided in someone, anyone, what the hell sort of layers of backup he had set up.

Pepper Potts had flown in to the compound in one of Stark’s suits, pale and shaken, with word of the chaos in New York City in the wake of millions disappearing in the blink of an eye. She’d not noticed at first, waking up in Manhattan, hours behind Wakanda. It was only when a helicopter crashed into a building a block down from her penthouse that she realized something was going on. On the news, the on-site reporter in Greenwich Village had dusted before everyone’s televised eyes. She’d brought with her a pager left at the last coordinates Maria Hill had given them on the location of herself and Fury. It was a classic model from the 1990s, souped up like nothing Natasha had ever seen before. Pepper handed it over to them as Stark’s suit crawled off her skin, like a living thing, some new technology that slightly disturbed Natasha and Steve, but which Pepper hardly noticed.

“What is it?” Steve frowned at the little gray device with it’s tiny screen as if it was some sort of alien technology. Funny, considering it was woefully out-of-date that it looked ancient compared to him.

“Pager, what we all used before cell phones.” Bruce took it gingerly from Pepper, studying it briefly. “A tricked out one, that’s for sure. Some sort of tech I’ve never seen before, maybe something SHIELD cooked up?”

Natasha could only shrug, realizing painfully that in the moment she was the only SHIELD expert on the team right now. “Maybe, though before my time. We haven’t used those things since dinosaurs walked the earth.”

“Still new to me,” Steve muttered, scratching at his beard as he studied it. “Is it working?”

“Looks as if he sent some signal out before he dusted.” Bruce grimaced but looked to the labs, mentally calculating what they had on hand. “I can see if I can set up an algorithm to triangulate where the signal is going to and who he was trying to call. Maybe he knew what was coming and was trying to get reinforcements.”
“Like who?” This one Steve directed at Natasha, his gaze laser ing in on her with all the military precision he used to direct their team. A peevish part of her tired and heart-worn soul wanted to shrug and throw her hands up in the air. Contrary to popular belief, Fury hadn’t trusted her any more than he trusted anyone else.

“I don’t know. He didn’t tell me or Clint and SHIELD was full of secrets. There could be hints in the files, if we want to find them online and pour through them, but even then, I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Which means we will just have to wait for whoever it is he’s calling to show up.” Rhodey didn’t like it, but he was right, it was the only option they had.

“Whoever it is, I hope that they know what’s going on, because sure as hell, it isn’t us.” She glowered at the device in Bruce’s fingers. “Let us know when something pops?”

“Yeah,” he replied, looking as exhausted as they all felt. He shuffled off as Rhodey returned to setting up monitors on the screens of the reports coming in of the dead and missing. She glanced at the number, climbing steadily. Some names they knew, others...she hadn’t heard from Clint yet. She had called the minute she could once they hit the air, but it had gone to his voicemail. That had been after 8 am in the Midwest, the family would have been awake, but he had taken to keeping his phone in a drawer more often lately, not bothering to check it. He was enjoying retirement, being with Laura and the kids. She hadn’t even bothered calling him before this, not even to tell him where she was going, to give him some measure of peace. Now, she didn’t know if he wasn’t answering because he was out and about or if it was because he was one of the dusted too. Her heart ached and she found herself whirring around, marching out of the meeting area, phone in hand as she dialed Clint’s number once again. She wandered to the gardens just outside, the leafy trees rustling in the twilight of evening, pacing around them, unseeing as the phone rang and rang.

“Come on, Clint!” Her whispered plea went unanswered, however, as the phone went to voicemail, again. She resisted the urge to throw it, instead choosing to stare at the screen with it’s background picture of the Bartons from a now long ago Christmas. Nate was still just a toddler, Lila had been in pigtails, a Santa cap on that made her look like one of his elves. It had been a long time since she had seen any of them.

“No word from Barton?” Steve’s distinctive rumble sounded from the door. She glanced back at him over her shoulder, where he leaned, arms crossed over the undershirt he wore, watching her quietly.

“He’s been keeping his phone off line more and more. I’m not surprised.” She tried to be cool about it, even if underneath it all fear curled in her gut like a knife. “For all I know, they’re off camping or something and haven’t noticed.”

“He’s on house arrest. How far can he go?”

“On their property? Pretty far.” She knew he’d tested the limits no sooner than they had put the ankle bracelet on him. Of course Clint would, he was a spy and assassin, he never got caught, unlike Scott Lang who had set off alarms just by being clumsy. Still, Steve was right, Clint couldn’t go far, and chances were high that one of the kids would have turned on the television and seen what happened. He’d have called directly, if he could.

“Do you need to go out there and see him?”

“No.” She slipped her phone into a pocket.

“Natasha…”
“I’m needed here, Steve. If things have gone....sideways, I can’t do anything about it now.”

If nothing else her training had made her ruthlessly pragmatic about things like death. Still, she had to swallow hard against the tears threatening, pushing them down with sheer force of will. She didn’t dare look at the wealth of compassion on Steve’s face.

“How long as it been since you saw them? If you need to go, you know we’ll make it happen.”

“Let’s just figure out what we are doing right now and then I’ll take you up on that offer.”

He finally let it slide then, nodding as he pushed off from the door, allowing her to slide past. He had a good heart, Steve, one that would have moved mountains, literally, to ensure she got what she needed. Still, he respected her boundaries and didn’t press as he nodded to the conference table where already Bruce and Rocket were working on the pager and Rhodey was pulling up data. Pepper sat to one side, looking somewhat out of sorts at the hustle around her. Thor, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Unsure on what to zero in on first, she chose Pepper. The poor woman was taut with anxiety for all that she tried to put a professional face on it. She’d always liked Pepper, finding her smart, tough and practical, the antithesis to the mercurial and scatterbrained Tony Stark, a perfect match for him, really. Patient to a fault, Natasha was never sure how she had put up with his worst behavior, especially considering you would have to be blind to not see she had been in love with him for years. He had been a bit slower to the conclusion. Natasha had realized his feelings for his assistant long before he openly admitted it and had noted in her report to Fury that Pepper’s influence on him helped keep his worst tendencies in line. That said, now Pepper ran his company and was very, very good at it. She had no longer had time to babysit an impulsive genius. Natasha knew it hurt all the same to see him take off once again without any explanation or answers as to where he was going or if he was coming back.

“How are you doing, boss?” Natasha tried to lighten the mood somewhat, recalling her brief stint working as Pepper’s assistant while she was spying on Tony. Unlike her fiance, Pepper had never held her true loyalties against her and gave her a smile as Natasha settled beside her.

“It’s good seeing you.” The lines of the other woman’s shoulders relaxed, somewhat, as she studied her. “Blonde doesn’t suit you.”

“No, but certainly less noticeable than red.” She ran her fingers through her platinum hair, still feeling the grit of dust and dirt, not to mention whatever that ichor was that had come out of those creatures, all mingled with the sweat of the day. “I need a shower.”

“I wasn’t going to be the one to mention it,” Pepper teased, quietly, before a frown settled as she turned to the screen. On it, Rhodey had pulled up numbers. The one under “population” was growing alarmingly fast.

“How you holding up?” Natasha tried to pull Pepper’s attention from that, focusing it on her instead.

Pepper only shrugged, hugging her middle, silent in her anxiety and fear. Natasha got it. She reached to wrap an arm around the other woman’s shoulders, giving what comfort she could to her. “If he’s out there, and I think he is, we will find him.”

“In what state, though?”

To that, Natasha couldn’t say. She merely hugged Pepper tighter.

For a long moment, there was silence.
“Nat? Is that a raccoon over there helping Bruce?”

Natasha merely nodded beside her. “Yeah, it sure is.”

If only that were the weirdest thing about the day.

Eventually, someone, Natasha suspected the raccoon, said something about food. Unsure what was even open or functioning at the moment, Pepper offered to take the suit and run into Poughkeepsie to see if there was anything that was open offering sustenance. It was something to do and it made her feel useful, and everyone agreed as she took off. Steve took the chance to crawl into a shower, while she went to the screen, watching the reports coming in of governments frozen in indecision and confusion, of panic in the streets as officials attempted to get a handle on the situation while the masses grappled with what was going on.

“It’s getting ugly out there,” Rhodey murmured beside her, his expression clouded with anger and worry. “I tried raising Ross, but no answer. How much you want to bet that the only good thing to come out of this is he’s gone and not a pain in our asses anymore?”

“If we should only be so lucky,” she muttered, eyeing the chaos in the streets in cities all over the world. Even at half the population, many of those places still had a sizeable enough one. On another screen, a ragged looking reporter gave details of the numerous other deaths outside of Thanos’ snap, of planes that had gone down, cars that had crashed, trains derailed because the people controlling them had disappeared. Already, there were real fears of serious industrial and ecological problems at power plants and dams with the engineers who ran them now gone, and reports of boats left out at sea, crews missing or left without anyone to man them.

Half the populations? Did this Thanos even consider or care that in the end that it would be more? How many people, civilizations, other worlds would die off because he made an arbitrary decision all on his own, because he felt he was the ultimate authority on the universe and how it would best thrive? For all the blood she had spilled, the red in her ledger, she still could not understand how anyone sane could justify this. But then again, from what little she had seen of the massive, purple giant who had manhandled them all like rag dolls, she doubted “sane” was a descriptive anyone would apply to him.

Pepper returned with supplies saying that Poughkeepsie felt like a ghost town, with frightened people and an air of apocalyptic doom. Rhodey said the news already had street preachers out attesting to the “end times” and calling for people to repent. Pepper cooked some sort of food for all of them, Natasha thought it was a pasta, but for the life of her she couldn’t remember afterwards what she had put into her mouth. They all ate mechanically, even Thor, who had wandered from somewhere, brooding with mismatched eyes she didn’t remember him having. None of them spoke, not even Rocket, who clearly had no qualms with whatever they were eating and ate it with the same mechanic hunger the rest of them had.

The population kept climbing. With every number that ticked up, her jaw tightened and the crease between Steve’s brows deepened. Bruce picked through the noted dead, looking for those that they knew and recognized. There were those they lost in Wakanda, but he added other names to the already heartbreaking list: Scott Lang, Erik Selvig, and Stark’s protégé, Peter Parker, the kid they were just now learning was Spider-Man. That hit both Pepper and Steve hard, though for different reasons. Thor had silently studied the face of Selvig before stalking out again.

When Rhodey announced the pager had gone off, the fine thread of her dwindling equilibrium snapped. It wasn’t fair, perhaps, but there it was, the culmination of everything over the last two days. She didn’t care if Steve was nominally their leader or if they were dealing with tech twenty years out of date, Fury had left something for them, a clue, a thread of hope, and it was all she had
clung onto for hours now. She needed to know what his last secret was and who it was he was trying to contact. When she whipped around she hadn’t expected the answer to have crept up on her to stare her right in the face.

Without thinking she dropped into a combat stance, the habit of a lifetime of training, as the glaring blonde in front of her demanded to know where Fury was. Around her she could see everyone follow her lead, with Steve immediately falling in at her left. It was he who took the initiative with the stranger.

“Who are you and how did you get in here?”

The woman glowered. “I asked first.”

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Steve’s jaw work in that trademark stubbornness. “You also broke in. You want answers, you give answers.”

This stranger may have just gotten the drop on her, which was nearly unthinkable, but if she believed she would somehow budge the immovable object that was the will of Steve Rogers she clearly had another thing coming. Still, her eyes narrowed dangerously as her hands started to sparkle and glow with an eerie, golden light. Natasha lowered her stance even more, prepared to duck and tackle if need be. She could hear a whine of Stark tech and didn’t know if it was Rhodey or Pepper who had managed a suit.

Just when blows were about to be exchanged, the raccoon had to throw himself into it all.

“Hold up, I know you!” Rocket stood nonchalantly on a table, a gun as big as himself in his hand, lowered as he cocked his fury head in recognition. “We ran across you a year ago in Kree imperial space. Quill thought you were hot.”

Even the woman looked taken aback by the sight of a talking raccoon standing on a table with a hand cannon. She paused, glancing between Rocket and the rest of them, before unclenching her tightened fist, the glow dispersing up the arms of her blue, red and gold suit. She frowned, puzzled.

“How did you end up on Earth?”

“Long story involving an Asgardian god of thunder and an axe.”

Rhodey, unsurprisingly, was the first to recover. “You know her?”

Rocket shrugged, a gesture still weirdly uncanny to see off a giant, talking rodent. “Yeah, she’s this crazy Kree girl we met on a mission. Nearly took off with our reward.”

“Your loot you stole, you mean?” Her glare was back, but it didn’t seem to phase Rocket.

“See! Crazy Kree girl.”

“I’m not Kree,” she shot back, turning back to the rest of them in the room. “I’m human, like you. I’m from here on Earth.”

“I’ve never seen a human do that thing with their hands,” Natasha shot back, eyeing them as if they were dangerous weapons.

The woman held them up to study them, shrugging. “I had an accident a long time ago.”

That was some accident, Natasha thought.
“What’s your name?” That was Cap speaking, not Steve, and Natasha could see the woman instinctively respond to it.

“Carol Danvers, former captain, United States Air Force.”

“Danvers?” That perked Rhodey’s attention. “One of the first women to clear fighter pilot training?”

She arched an eyebrow at him, clearly pleased he knew her. “So I have a reputation?”

“Hell yeah, you do. They said you were tough as nails and could ride the stick like no one’s business.”

Danvers looked smug at that.

“They also said you were dead.” Rhodey crossed his arms in front of him. “Which is why I’m a bit surprised to see you alive and well with glowing hands.”

Here she shrugged in acquiescence. “There was an accident with an experimental plane and a secret energy source. I was a part of Project: Pegasus.”

That was a bit of information Natasha felt she could finally latch onto. “That was the joint SHIELD/NASA/US military research facility out in Nevada.”

“Yep,” she replied, moving her hands to her hips, her stance relaxing from the aggression she had arrived him. She looked Natasha up and down. “You seemed well versed in SHIELD classified intel.”

“I should be. I used to be SHIELD.” So this woman had known Fury then. One more of his secrets brought to the surface.

“Used to be?”

“SHIELD fell several years ago, corrupted by HYDRA.” Steve’s dark expression indicated he wasn’t exactly welcoming this stranger with open arms. “Which makes me wonder where you fall in all this.”

This put her on her guard again. “If SHIELD is gone, where is Fury and how did you get his pager?”

“Gone,” Natasha interjected, without remorse or gentleness, her tone nearly cold as she said it, despite the crushing soul ache within her. “He’s...gone. So is half the population of the Earth, all gone in a snap. The pager was the only piece of him we found and his last act was to use it to call you. Why?”

She could feel Steve’s glare turn on her and didn’t care. The posturing was getting nowhere and she wanted answers, so she cut straight to the chase. It worked, as the other woman’s face fell into shock, disbelief and sadness all at once.

“Gone? What do you mean, gone?”

“Dusted,” Natasha said, forcing an even calmness she did not feel. “Thanos, some alien, decided to destroy half of all life in the universe and he did it by collecting some Infinity Stones in order to use them to accomplish just that.”

It sounded crazy coming out of her own mouth, she could only imagine what it sounded like to
Danvers. But rather than laugh skeptically or deny it outright, she only nodded, quiet and thoughtful. “I’d heard of Thanos. I’ve seen what he’s left behind.”

“You know what we are dealing with, then?” Steve jumped on that possibility with the hope of a desperate man.

“Some of it, sure. I’ve never seen him, only heard of him on planet after planet he devastated.”

Steve kept pressing. “Do you know where he is?”

“No, I don’t, but I know what he does.” For the first time, something horrible and sad flickered on her face. “I was with friends, off world, just...they crumbled in front of my eyes and scattered, before I could even catch them. They were gone in an instant.”

Natasha finally relaxed herself, standing straight again at seeing the other woman no longer posed a threat. “The same with us. We’d been fighting Thanos, then…”

She couldn’t say it, couldn’t speak of the moment when Wanda had disappeared, like cigarette ash blown away. She didn’t want to think of Clint. Still, this Carol Danvers seemed to finally understand they were not her enemy.

“You were fighting him?” She eyed them all, looking somewhat impressed. “Who they hell are you, then?”

It was Steve, naturally, who replied. “We’re the Avengers.”

She blinked, startled, but then laughed ruefully. “Seriously? He went through with it?”

That statement to anyone else would be confusing, but Natasha understood. She’d been there as Fury had gotten his hairbrained scheme off the ground, had helped him implement it for all that she thought it was a fool’s errand. She was curious how this woman, this stranger, knew about it.

Danvers explained that. “My call sign back in the day was Avenger. He started his initiative after I maybe showed up one day and introduced him to aliens by accident.”

Fury and his fucking secrets! Natasha clenched her jaw so tight, she thought she cracked a tooth trying to keep it from hitting the floor. Still, Danvers seemed to have finally warmed up to them and held out her hand to Steve, who took it willingly, shaking it with his firm formality.

“Captain Steve Rogers, former US Army.”

“Otherwise known as Captain America,” Rhodey supplied, perhaps just as shocked by the Avengers reveal as Natasha was and wanting to show off a little of their own street cred.

“Captain...America?” Danvers blinked, now wide-eyed herself as she clutched Steve’s hand, looking him in the face until pink rose above Steve’s beard. “You mean like...the Captain America? Like Howling Commandos Captain America?”

“Err…” Steve stuttered, all cool confidence lost in the astonishment of Fury’s secret alien nuclear bomb.

“Oh, she’s a fan.” Bruce could only snort as they finally all relaxed, even Pepper who had indeed been the one in the suit.

“Wait, did she say Captain America?” Rocket even now blinked at Steve with new eyes.
Natasha only glared at Rhodey. “Look what you started!”

He didn’t even have the decency to look sorry.
A Needle In A Haystack

Chapter Summary

In which Carol gets to know people better.

None of them seriously got it, they were sending her on a mission to recover their long lost friend, somewhere in the vastness of space, with little more than a vague hand wave and directions that might as well include “as the crow flies in them”. And they somehow expected her to be successful?

“Yeah, space travel to them is still sort of magic.” Rocket had sniffed at their technology, which to be fair was indeed primitive, but then again, she had the advantage of being able to fly through space without any ship.

“I didn’t go into space until the Kree kidnapped me and brainwashed my entire existence away.”

The raccoon merely stared at her for a long, stunned moment before blinking. “Gees, why the hell does every hero gotta have such a frickin’ sad story?”

That was a question Carol had asked herself many times over the years. “I don’t know, I guess you have to have something to work against to make you heroic.”

Rocket only snorted, continuing to plug away at coordinates with the AI, named FRIDAY, in the hopes of finding her creator. “Well, if this friend of theirs, Stark, was on Thanos’ ship, chances are high he’s dead by now. Besides, even if we did find him, we’d need to get to him.”

“What part of ‘travel through space without a ship’ did you miss out on?”

“Seems unnatural to me,” Rocket grumped, reading through data as projected above. He was one of the few of those at the compound still awake. Most of the rest had crashed in waves hours before, with Steve Rogers being the last one to go down, having fallen asleep in the chair he was sitting in. Rocket had finally told him his snoring was annoying and to go to bed, but if Rogers even heard him, he didn’t say anything. He more fell out of the chair and stumbled down the hallway towards a room.

Seriously, he was Captain America! The fact he was stumbling anywhere was both humanizing and a bit relatable, and the child inside of her who still only vaguely recalled her former life did remember long summer days where she sat up in the niche of a tree with a thermos of lemonade, a bag of cookies, and her father’s old comic books. The “Captain America” ones had been the most treasured, and thus the most enticing, and had been her favorite. Her father had let her have it when he found them in her backpack after one of her afternoons away, and she’d never gotten her hands on them again.

“How did you know of Captain America?” Her gaze slide sideways to the raccoon who made calculations on a notepad he purloined and muttered quietly to himself.

“What? Oh...yeah, Quill is a fan.”

“Who is Quill again?”
“Sort of idiot guy with a dumb face. Calls himself Star Lord.”

“Oh, him!” She remembered him now. “Has a case of permanent foot-in-mouth disease?”

“That’s the one. He’s Terran, grew up in someplace called ‘Missouri’. Don’t know where it is.”

“Same country as here, just in the middle, a thousand miles that way.” She pointed in the vague direction of west.

“Yeah, whatever, he liked the guy. Said his grandpa knew him or something, they were friends, at least the way he told it, I don’t know if any of it was true, but Quill said he was a super hero, cool guy. Anyway, he told us stories because he wanted Terra to sound cool.”

“It is cool!”

Rocket’s ambivalent glare told her what he thought of that opinion.

“It’s my home too, you know.” She couldn’t help but be a bit defensive.

“I should warn you, Quill is also the same one who thinks the greatest actor of all time is Kevin Bacon.”

“Seriously? I haven’t seen a Kevin Bacon movie in a while, admittedly, but even I can tell you that the greatest actor of all time is not Kevin Bacon.”

“I don’t know who he even is and I don’t care. FRIDAY, can you get me those readings for Quadrant 73?”

“Sure thing!” The AI had connected unexpectedly with the rodent, which had surprised everyone. Thus far it had been cool and polite to the others, but unattached, save to Banner and Potts who Carol had figured out were friends with Stark. Clearly, there was something about the AI that liked the alien creature, and the feeling was mutual as far as Carol could tell.

“This is a sexy piece of computer engineering, I have to admit. Banner said Stark made it himself, after the first having evolved into an android or something. I didn’t get the story on it.” If one could attribute lust to a sentient woodland creature, there was something akin to that in Rocket’s dark, beady eyes.

“So Earth can make things that don’t suck, then?”

“Ehh, even an idiot banging together two rocks can figure out a rhythm every now and again.” Rocket muttered, begrudgingly.

Carol could only chuckle as she crunched thoughtfully on potato chips, the first she had in years, at least since her last visit home. That had been...too long. Long enough that Maria would likely kick her ass when next they saw each other. Monica had to be out of the house with a life all her own now. That thought gave her pause, as did the next one after it. She didn’t know if they were even still alive after all of this. Fury had dusteded, why couldn’t they? She hadn’t thought to check till this very moment, and frankly, if she were honest with herself, she was too afraid to look. What if they were?

Half the universe, gone from existence, as if they hadn’t been there.

Her appetite for junk food now lost, she set the bag aside, curling it in on itself and clipping it, turning her attention to Rocket’s work. On one side of the screen she could see FRIDAY working
out the signal for Stark, scanning the skies above. The other was a different signal, one for something called…

“The Benatar? What in the hell is that?”

“My ship,” Rocket replied without looking up. “Well…Quill’s ship, he’s the ‘captain’, but it’s mine. I keep her together.”

“And he named her, I’m guessing?”

“What was your first clue?”

“I don’t know, the fact he named it after a 80’s pop star I am supposing he had a poster of hanging on a wall of his bedroom as a kid?”

“I will have you know I do appreciate her music.” He sniffed, cutting eyes to Carol. “On pain of death, don’t you ever tell him I admitted that.”

Carol bit back a grin. “You do realize I’m pretty indestructible. I took out an entire Kree war fleet right over the skies not far away.”

That gave him pause.

“Fine, don’t tell him or else I will be forced to extort you, which is almost as good as death, but there’s more in it for me.”

“Much more reasonable.” She stretched, standing to wander to the kitchen area for something to drink. “You need anything? Water, juice, fresh venom to keep your stores well supplied?”

“Funny, very funny. No!” He muttered under his breath as she wandered off, opening the refrigerator to find what was inside. She’d thought about coffee, but found the maker on the counter too different and frightening to manage, so settled instead for a Coke, leaning against the counter to watch the first rays of sunrise crawl across the gray, eastern skies. Half the universe gone. Half of Earth gone. Fury gone. Maybe she should look up Maria and Monica, maybe Coulson, see if he was around…

“You’re up early.”

Rogers wandered in, looking bright-eyed for a man who had only gone to bed four hours before. He appeared considerably better for having slept, though the dark circles under his eyes remained. He was a far cry from the pictures she saw of him in his red, white and blue uniform, clean cut and wholesome, screaming World War II patriotism. Now, he looked more like the grizzled old soldier, home from a war that had chewed him up and spit him out.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she supplied to his comment, watching him rummage the cabinets before coming up with a tin of coffee grounds and managing the coffee machine that had frightened her with a capability that made her jealous.

“Do you need much?” He was more curious than anything as he went through the motions of starting a pot brewing. He was old enough to be her grandpa and could manage that thing better than she could. That was awkward.

“Er, no, I guess not. Some, I mean, I do sleep, just like normal people.” She sipped her soda as he set the machine and perused the cabinets, pulling out a box of extremely healthy looking cereal. “How about you?”
He shrugged, snagging a rather large bowl from a different cabinet. “I was sort of genetically engineered to never need much, but yeah, after a lot of physical exhaustion, I crash, same as you, I expect.”

“True,” she admitted as the scent of fresh brewed coffee made her current drink feel pallid in comparison. “I will go and go and then I just stop, wherever I am at, and sleep like the dead.”

“For hours, even! Isn’t it glorious?”

She thought of her comfy bed and sighed, nodding. “Yeah!”

“Till the nightmares start, at least.”

He had her cornered there. She stared at him in surprise as he smirked, ever so slightly, pouring milk onto his cereal.

“You guessed that, huh?”

He lifted his broad shoulders before putting the milk away, digging in a drawer for a spoon. He waited till he had settled at the table, digging through the bowl before he answered. “I wake up some nights still thinking I’m in ice and I’ve woken up in some other new time. Other times, it’s seeing my best friend falling out of my grasp and into any icy Alpine ravine, or the look of terror in another friend’s eyes when he thinks I’m going to kill him.”

He pauses before giving her a wan, rueful look. “Let’s just say I have demons of my own I have to work through.”

He was a soldier, just as she was, and she supposed he had seen a lot, perhaps more than she had. She’d never been allowed to fly combat when she was younger, but she’d seen plenty enough atrocities in her years flying around the universe, trying to stop what insanity she could. Those sorts of things left a mark, even if you didn’t want to admit it.

“How did you survive the crash and the war?” She’d been itching to ask it since she figured out who he was.

He stalled, eating a spoonful of cereal before answering. “Best we can tell, it was the serum. It protected my cells and repaired them after the crash, but I was frozen on top of it. The serum put me in stasis, shutting down my system until I could be revived.”

“And no one thought to come get you out?”

“Well, in fairness, I didn’t precisely tell them where I was and the North Atlantic is really big.”

His wry humor caught her off guard. She hadn’t expected him to be funny. “Cute.”

“I do try, from time-to-time.” He went back to his cereal. “I’ve got to admit, I’m not funny like Stark, always quick witted and cracking jokes, but it’s not like I don’t have a sense of humor.”

She didn’t know this Tony Stark enough to be able to judge one way or the other. “So, is this friend of yours any relation to Howard Stark, the inventor?”

Rogers paused briefly, staring into his bowl, before continuing. “Father and son. Tony inherited Stark Industries after Howard died.”

“Oh.” It hadn’t occurred to her that Howard would be dead. Her memories around him were vague
at best, a silver haired man, more than a bit of an arrogant smart ass, but he had gotten on well with Dr. Lawson - Mar Vell. They had been good friends. But that was all thirty years ago, she supposed, and even if Howard had been alive, he’d be quite old.

“You knew Howard?” There was a note of something in his voice, but he smoothed it over with stoic expression. Yeah, Carol knew that habit, too.

“Uh, yeah, back when I was still a pilot.” When she was still normal, she silently supplied. “He started Project: Pegasus, worked with the head researcher, Wendy Lawson. I guess he was a pilot in the day, so we’d sit and talk shop.”

“He was a hell of a hand in the pilot seat. Only man crazy enough and good enough to fly me and my men into enemy territory. Flew me into my first mission in Austria, right into enemy fire, guns full on him. He handled it as if it were a Sunday afternoon stroll.”

Carol smiled, memories rising in her mind of the adventures of Captain America and his Howling Commandos splashed across pulpy pages in lurid ink, German guns blazing as he narrowly escaped death with his trusty shield. “Seriously, did you really carry a shield into battle with you?”

She hit a nerve. A crease formed between his brows as he pushed cereal in his bowl for a long moment. “Yeah, Howard made it for me out of vibranium, a rare metal found only in Wakanda in Africa.”

Carol had never heard of the place, but the image of his trusty shield flying through the air had seared into her childhood imagination. “I used to have a frisbee painted like your shield as a kid. I’d run around with it like I was you, throwing it at Nazis and saving the day.”

He flushed, something of a boyish smile creeping along his beard. “I guess I’m honored. You know, most of those comics and the movies were all make believe.”

“And the radio show?”

“Especially the radio show.”

From down the hall, she could hear the shuffling of feet and a drowsy, sleepy-eyed Romanoff wandered into the space, not even bothering to acknowledge any of them as she made a beeline to the coffee, grabbing a mug the size of a soup bowl and pouring a generous helping in. It was only after she drank a large gulp of it straight that she turned to address either of them.

“You talking about the radio show again?”

Rogers rolled his eyes and continued eating. Romanoff wandered to the table, scrubbing at her face. “If you want to get him out of a room, just bring that up. Stark used to have it cued up at just the most embarrassing parts just to see how red he would get.”

Funny how in a moment of desperation small bits of humor crept in, like a balm when it hurt too much to think. Carol could see the silent teasing from one to the other, a friendship between the two. She had that with Maria back in the day and she supposed with Fury as well but not as much away from Earth. She was a loner out there in space. Who else would keep up with the likes of her? No one else even had her powers, let alone was as strong as she was by herself. Still, she could see in Romanoff and Rogers, and even in Banner and Rhodes, a camaraderie that made itself immediately known. Even in the darkest of times like this, these were people who had fought together and lost together and they weren’t about to give up on one of their own.

“So your powers,” Romanoff began conversationally, now that she had appeared to awaken to her
fullest. “You are human. How did you get to be like this?”

“Like I said, an accident.” She wasn’t sure how much Romanoff had been made privy to by Fury, if anything. “I was one of the test pilots on the technology Howard Stark and Dr. Lawson were creating. We crashed, and in the fall out the energy source was destroyed. I got hit with the blast and...well, here you are.”

She didn’t know what else to say to that. For their part, neither of them seemed bothered by it, but took it all in stride. She guessed if they were Fury’s Avengers they’d seen weird stuff and more. Something inside of her relaxed a bit, knowing she wasn’t seen as odd for it, though, frankly, they did have Rocket there, so perhaps nothing did phase them anymore.

“Strange we’ve never heard of you once over all the years,” Romanoff mused, less out of suspicion, more with a hint of annoyance.

“I was needed elsewhere. The universe is a big place and lots of people need help. Fury knew what he had here. Clearly, he found you.”

“I don’t know if we quite lived up to expectations,” Rogers replied, pushing aside the rest of his uneaten breakfast. Something passed again between him and Romanoff. She reached a hand to squeeze his arm in comfort before he rose to get coffee for himself.

“It’s been...a hard few years.” Romanoff’s answer was cryptic, a trait she was learning the woman had in spades. Hanging around Fury, she could see why. Spies loved their secrets.

“It’s going to get harder,” Carol offered, meeting the other woman’s quiet gaze.

“Yeah,” she said, simply.

Way to bring a room down, Carol.

“Hey, guys!” Heedless of their conversation or the others sleeping, Rocket yelled loudly from the lab area, frowning at something up on the screens. “I think we got a hit.”

Rogers was at the desk in an instant, already scrutinizing the information at hand. “What do you got?”

Rocket pointed with one, tiny finger up at the incomprehensible string of numbers and digits. “That code there is the Benatar. It looks like she’s stuck in space, drifting. Hasn’t moved at all, and if it was Quill and them, they’d have been trying to make contact by now.”

He tapped keys on the projected keyboard on the table in front of him, flipping screens above. “Here, that faint-ass signal is your boy, Stark. He’s too far to pick up all by himself, wherever he is at, but it overlaps with the Benetar, which means the ship has picked it up and is transmitting it enough for us to find it.”

“Which means your friends found Tony somewhere.” The first relief Carol had seen on Rogers’ face broke. “Can you contact them?”

“Not with the primitive equipment you all have. If I had time I could maybe make something, but it will take me weeks to just figure it out and I’m not so sure they got that long.”

“What do you mean?”

“If they are sitting there, dead-in-the-water as it were, means something’s wrong with the engines.
Sort of like your planes here on Earth, no power means you don’t get air or heat or nothing.”

“How long do they have?”

Rocket shrugged, rubbing his snout as he calculated. “With the back ups, maybe a couple of weeks. More if they stretch it. If they’re all on there, they may not get that long.”

“And if they aren’t?” Rogers was blunt about it, making the raccoon wince a bit.

“They may hold out longer.”

He nodded, hands on his hips, considering as she and Romanoff watched. Sharp blue eyes turned up to Carol, and something long forgotten snapped within her, pulling her to attention as if she were standing on the parade grounds.

“Danvers, you can travel in space, right?”

“Yes, sir,” she found herself replying automatically, without thought. It felt both good and a bit alarming, her old military habits floating to the surface, like muscle memory.

“If we got you coordinates, could you find them?”

“Sure,” she glanced at Rocket. “I could even get them home if the engines are out.”

“By yourself?” Rocket didn’t look confident in that.

“Remember, Kree warships? I took those out by myself.”

“Yeah, yeah, super hero girl.” He grabbed a pen and began writing down the string of numbers. “I don’t know how you’ll find them without a navigation system. Closest planet near them is what remains of Titan.”

“Titan?” She knew of it. “That’s deserted, has been for longer than anyone can remember.”

“Sure, but still is Thanos’ home, according to Gamora and Nebula.” He ripped the lined paper off and handed it to her. “If you can get there, chances are high you can find them around the area. May take a bit of searching, though.”

“Got it.” She glanced instinctively to Rogers. “If they are there, I’ll bring the ship here and get Stark home.”

“I don’t know if we can be of assistance, but let us know if we can.” Steve turned to Rocket. “You keep scanning out there for them, just to make sure they at least stay where they are for us to find them.”

“Sure. Not like they can go anywhere.”

“And keep an eye out for Thanos as well.” Rogers’ eyes hardened as he watched the screens. “I wanted to find the bastard sooner rather than later.”

That, Carol suspected, would be a lot harder to do. “Right! Well, let me grab a cup of coffee and a shower, then I’ll be off.”

Romanoff was already standing there with a mug, passing it along. “You sure you got this?”

“Finding a needle in a haystack? Sure!” She glanced back at Rocket and Rogers. “And maybe
Thanos too, if you find him. Showers are where again?”

Romanoff pointed down the hall. “Last room on the left, you can use that.”

“Excellent!” Actions, this felt good, doing something, movement, moving forward. This felt far better than the inertia of waiting and wondering what they could even do next. It was only after she had chugged the coffee and crawled into the scalding shower that it occurred to her that she still didn’t know the truth about Maria or Monica, and she didn’t want to know...not for a while, yet.
In which Nebula asks Tony a simple question.

The fever left him weak as a kitten, drained and exhausted, too tired to even roll out of bed to take a leak, but he survived, thanks in no small part to whatever crazy-ass, alien medication Nebula had shot into his arm. She assured him it would be all right, Quill used it all the time and he was human. Tony was far from sure of that, but was in no place to argue the point.

The repairs they had managed got them 2 more days further and away from Titan, but after that, no more. They needed parts they didn’t have and in the deep of space there was no Triple A to come and tow them to the nearest station. He thought longingly of the many, many times he had flown in one car or the other down the PCH from his house in Malibu to El Segundo, careless of himself and others, finding himself longing for one last spin up the California coast, or maybe a more leisurely saunter from New York to Maine with Pepper, go hit up some B&Bs along the way and eat lobster till they exploded. Anything, but being stuck doing nothing in deepest space. At least, he admitted, as he stood staring out the window of the prow - was it called that - the views were amazing. Far more so than he had ever imagined it could be. That part of him who wanted to be an astronaut as a little boy was awed and amazed staring into infinity around him, realizing that at least if he had to be stuck somewhere, he was stuck here. That thought was a comfort, till he realized that on these stars half the life surrounding them was now gone because he couldn’t defeated a man who wanted to be God.

For all that she was as grim as his lawyer on any day Tony’s face appeared on the news, Nebula wasn’t a horrible...person? Android? Cyborg? In fact, she seemed not to mind his need for chatter when the silence was too oppressive, patiently answer his myriad of questions and curiously asking some of her own. He had gleaned a few more things about her in these chats; that she had no memory of her life before Thanos, that she had once had a horrible resentment of her sister fostered by her maniacal, blood-thirsty father, that despite it she had desired to please him, whatever it took, just to make it all go away. It certainly put his own issues with Howard into perspective. He had a cake walk next to this woman. Sure, his father had been difficult in his own way, but, he had loved his son. Well, Tony believed he loved him. That hadn’t been a word that passed between them a great deal, “love”, but in the end the worst his father had done was to frown and criticize Tony on his wasted potential not tear him apart bit by bit to improve him.

He’d also gained a bit of insight into these “Guardians of the Galaxy” that he had met, this strange family of aliens who sort of wandered about like guns for hire. Gamora had found them when she was sent to retrieve the Power Stone for Thanos. Perhaps it was Nebula’s telling, or maybe Tony’s bias after their brief meeting, but intelligence didn’t seem to be their forte outside of Gamora. They were scrappy, he supposed, like some sort of space equivalent of old-West cowboys. He had long known there were alien races outside of Earth, Thor talked about them all the time, but he hadn’t realized just how civilized the rest of the universe was. It was all just so...big. Here he was, just trying to keep his corner of it safe, clearly without much success. The way Nebula spoke of the Guardians, though, he couldn’t help but feel a small twinge of longing and miss the Avengers - the old team, even with Steve Rogers.

They were on day 12 of their own personal episode of Lost in Space, having just spent a leisurely
few hours in a rousing game of paper football which Nebula, with her enhanced abilities, won handily. She had looked beyond moved by this and he could guess she likely didn’t win at life a lot. He had wandered to move, stretch, use the lavatory, and do something other than sitting in this ship. He’d listened through Quill’s playlist of oldies, but goodies, not horrible, though would it have killed him to have a bit of good classic metal on there? He was jonesing for something, anything to do, a book to read, hell, he’d take Wikipedia at this point, just something…

He fell into his habit of 20 questions with Nebula instead.

“If you could go anywhere in the universe, if given the chance, where would you go?”

Nebula shrugged, her dark, uncanny eyes unblinking, as always. “My home planet. If anyone is still alive I would try to find it at least, to see if anyone remembered me or my family. Perhaps, I’d find something of myself.”

Fair, he reasoned. He supposed all of them would go back to their past, if they could, to understand where they had come from. Nebula would want to have that piece back more than most.

“Would you stay with them?”

“No,” she shook her head firmly. “I’ve become something else since I was taken, something…not like them, something broken. I don’t know how well I’d fit in that life anymore.”

That gnawing guilt Tony loved to ignore reminded him again of Bucky Barnes and for not the first time since Siberia he wished he’d not let his righteous anger and dark temper get a hold of him. Not that Cap was justified in what he did, but, if he’d kept it together for just a bit longer…

“Do you have family left, then, back on...Earth?” She had taken to calling it that rather than Terra, he suspected to be polite.

“I hope so,” he replied, shooting her a sad smile, heart aching at the prospect. “I mean, it’s not much. My parents died long ago and I was an only child, so just little old me. But, I have Pepper. Virginia is her real name, but she hates it. She’s been the woman in my life for...a long time now, and I hope she’s waiting there if I ever get back.”

“If” being the operative word, there, he quietly noted.

He continued, drawling as he wandered around their confined space. “Other than that, I have my best friend, James Rhodes. I call him Rhody. I’ve known him since we were at MIT - that’s an advanced school for science in my country - before he was commissioned into the military. And then there is Happy Hogan, my driver. Used to be my bodyguard. More than anything I think he just tried to keep me out of trouble. Sort of failed at that.”

God, he would kill to have any of them back. Hell, he’d take Steve Rogers’ stupid face at this point, if it just meant he had someone, anyone waiting on the other side of the universe. If he didn’t have to be alone with the weight of all of this; the sadness, the anger, the guilt…

“The boy who was there on Titan with you, the one in the strange suit. Was he your son?”

If Nebula had been trying to hurt him, he didn’t think she could have succeeded more if she tried. That she was deadly was without question, but in this she was merely innocent, a well-meaning question that gutted him, stopping him in his bored pacing as he swallowed, hard, against the wealth of anguish that rose up within him.

“No,” he barked out, aching as he turned to her even expression, just a hint of confusion surfacing at
his reaction. “No, he wasn’t, he was just a kid. Just...he was my protege.”

The word clearly had no meaning in her translator, as she frowned at it. He clarified, words tumbling out as fast as the grief inside of his still weakened insides.

“He was a kid, just a student in school still, but smart, so, so, so smart. Orphaned kid, his parents died when he was young, some accident, raised by his father’s brother and sister-in-law. They were all right, average folks, hipster types from Queens, but they have this nephew who is precocious as hell and too smart for his own good, so they send him to this school for the sciences. On some school trip to a very questionable laboratory doing clearly unauthorized live animal experimentation, he got a bite from a spider, a sort of bug-like creature we have a lot of on our world. Don’t know what the lab did to the spider, but clearly it was genetically altered, and that altered the kid too, and it enhanced his abilities. Overnight, he became super strong, super agile, super fast, and could climb tall buildings without breaking a sweat.”

He recalled the videos Happy had shown him, of this impossible teenager doing feets that made even Cap look old and slow. He’d been interested then, but had decided to leave well enough alone till the kid got older at least. That was before the Accords and Cap’s peacing out. Then he’d called him in out of necessity, else he’d never have been able to face Cap at all. He still lost all the same, in every way imaginable. He hadn’t regretted the idea of bringing a child, a high school freshman, into this entire adventure - well, maybe just a little bit. Rhodey had given him hell when he’d found out and made him promise to wait till the kid was eighteen before bringing him into the Avengers, which Tony had hand-waved his way out of. Tony had seen too much of himself in Peter, that brightness, the whip smart intellect, the keen wit, and remembered what it was like to be 15 at MIT with Rhodey and young adults who were miles older and wiser than he was. He wanted to give Peter a chance.

He’d have been better served if Tony had never found him at all, had never given him a Spider-Man suit, had never seen one of his videos. If he hadn’t, then he’d have been home when this all hit. Maybe he wouldn’t have dusted, maybe he would have, but he wouldn’t have been on a planet far away from Queens and his aunt, with only the man who had used him at best, ignored him at worst. He could have died somewhere safe and not afraid.

He only realized he’d gone silent after noticing Nebula’s unblinking attention on him, unnerving in and of itself. “Right, so yeah, this kid, he develops super powers, essentially, but right then, his uncle dies in a robbery. So, being fourteen and thinking he can do anything, he decides he’s going to be a superhero, like the Avengers, except in his neighborhood, helping the little guy. He started posting videos of himself in a mask, doing crazy things to help people, and that’s how I found him. I figured he needed someone to help keep an eye on him, help him learn to use his abilities and not get killed, and I saw potential in him.”

“As an Avenger?” Her voice was dusky in the quiet.

“Sure, if he wanted, or maybe he could go to MIT, get a degree, become an engineer, whatever he wanted. The thing was the world was his oyster and he had a chance to be a hero, to make a difference, to be...to be all the things I wasn’t.”

That bit of truth fell out unexpectedly, tumbling past his lips, surprising him as he blinked at the other woman, the ache flaring painfully as he stopped, his weak knees forcing him into the chair he had vacated, collapsing, a pile of legs and elbows. He blinked, his vision filling with tears he hadn’t expected to cry, spilling down his wasted cheeks as he wiped absently at them.

“I...I’m an asshole, Nebula.” He laughed, wetly, as he continued to scrub at his face. “I’m a self-centered narcissist who has always, always believed I was smarter than everyone and that made me more right than everyone. If I had an idea that was what we were doing, no matter what. I wanted to
be important, to be seen and recognized, to have people love me and view me as a hero because I needed that attention, fucked up as it was. I liked being Iron Man because I was Iron Man. Iron Man wasn’t a suit and a mask and an alter ego skulking at the top of high rises in the dead of night. Iron Man was me, out there saving the world. I liked feeling important, like I was doing something good for once.”

Wow, if that wasn’t the product of years of therapy spilling out all over a perfect stranger, he didn’t know what was. It welled up out of his ravaged body and in between them as he tried to collect the tattered fragments of his dignity. “Anyway, this kid, this improbable boy from Queens, he had all the pieces to be something great. And yeah, I saw myself in him, this scrappy kid who life had sort of kicked around, lonely, smart, and capable. And I thought, I’d help him grow into those powers he has. I’d help him become a superhero, one better than even me, because he had a big heart, a heart bigger than mine, a selfless one. Hell, Steve Rogers would have loved this kid. He was everything that I wasn’t, and I wanted him to be all the things I could never be. And then your father’s other murder children show up and he gets taken away and then everything else happens...and he’s gone. This boy, this child, with all the world in front of him, and he’s dead because I screwed up. I failed.”

The truth burned its way out of him as he shoved the table, hard, though it didn’t budge. It only managed to bruise his already weakened palms, He cursed, wrapping his now rubbery arms around himself, closing his eyes as he breathed, the image of the kid’s face in front of him, his last terrified moments, the feel of him disintegrating in his hands. He had begged and pleaded not to go and there wasn’t a damn thing Tony could do to stop it.

“He should never have been here,” Tony finally sighed, looking up at Nebula, blurred through his tears.

Her expressionless face at least held compassion as she reached across the table to touch his shoulder, a small gesture, but one that spoke volumes from her.

“What was his name,” she asked, simply.

“Peter.” His voice broke on the simple name, one that was filled with so much fortitude and strength. “Peter Parker.”

Nebula nodded. “Like Quill. That was his first name.”

Not like Quill, he wanted to snap, but refrained. He understood her making the connection. “Yeah, it’s an old name, from another language. Means ‘rock’, like someone who is strong, or maybe the centerpoint for something, the foundation.”

Nebula took that information in, quietly. “I suppose you could say Quill was the foundation for all of us coming together as the Guardians. Your Peter was your foundation for your future. We all lost what held us up.”

She was clearly not dumb at all.

“You’re father never valued you nearly enough, Nebula.”

The effect of his words stunned her to quiet. She blinked at him with her liquid dark eyes. “You’re a good man, Tony Stark. Whatever else happens, I hope you know that.”

High praise from this terse, broken, sad woman indeed.

He scrubbed at his face with the back of his hand, trying to clear his eyes. “Well, if we never get saved, I’m glad...honored..to have met you. If I have to die with you here as the only one who
remembers me, thanks.”

They lapsed into silence again. After a while, he rose, looking for the shattered remains of his helmet, wherever he last left it.

“I’m going to make another nightly recording for Pepper, if we should happen to be found. I’ll let her know what you said.”

With that, he wandered off with his thoughts and misery to stare at the stars for a while and desperately wish he was back home with Pepper, with Peter safe in Queens with his Aunt May.
Fumbling at the Line

Chapter Summary

In which Natasha and Steve discuss life choices.

Sometimes the best thing you can do is start over…

Steve had to wonder how many times one could start over in a lifetime before it was finally good enough.

They were in a holding pattern at the moment. Danvers had yet to send word on her search for Tony or of Rocket’s team. The rest watched the numbers climb and the news reports of unrest and fear across the globe, even as familiar names and faces came across their reports, ones that broke what was left of their hearts and morale piece-by-piece. He stood, stoically, watching his entire world, everything that he’d slowly and achingly built since waking up in the future, crumble and fall apart and pondered on Peggy’s words to him.

The digital clock read 3 AM, but Steve was far from sleep. FRIDAY had three screens up for filled with news on the chaos; CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera, all begging the question of how did this happen and what comes next. Already, the knowledge that there was an alien invasion in Wakanda, so newly open to the world, had finally broken and that coupled with the images from New York meant the world’s press was figuring out rather quickly what was going on. Reports from Wakanda had leaked Thanos and the world’s media grappled with what all of this meant, pulling in politicians and religious leaders to discuss as hysteria seemed to build to a fever pitch in the streets. All he could do was sit by and watch it unfold in utter helplessness. Not since that fateful day so long ago, sitting in that movie theater in Brooklyn, had he ever felt so powerless to do anything and so angry about it.

“I didn’t think it could get more scary out there.”

He glanced up at the door where Natasha stood, arms crossed as she watched the same reports, nodding grimly. “You know, you think you have seen the worst and then the universe has a way of surprising you.”

The hard smile that rose on her face agreed with his sentiment. “A lesser man would crack under that, yet here you are, always persevering, always clinging to hope. How in the hell do you do that?”

“Luck?”

She snorted at his wry look, coming to stand before one of the screens. “Seriously, I thought that ‘greatest generation’ rhetoric was bullshit till I got to hang with you.”

“I wouldn’t say greatest, just one that had to put up with a lot and keep on moving forward. Tends to put things in perspective.”

“Even this?” She turned to him archly.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, watching a riot in some city, wondering how in the hell they could even begin fixing any of this. “Maybe there is an end to that well of optimism.”
She nodded, reaching a long finger up to the CNN screen to press onto a file in the corner. Up popped the list of missing that they knew, the associates to the Avengers who had all disappeared in the blink of an eye. One-by-one she flicked through the names, staring at each as is memorizing every line and crease on the far-too-many faces. She paused on Sam, her shoulders sinking just as Steve’s battered heart did.

“Does his family know?”

“I reached out to who was left. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Natasha nodded, arms crossed as she regarded Sam’s stoic expression, one that was completely at odds with the other side of his personality; jovial, quick-witted, eager to laugh and have a good time. He’d always teased Steve for being so somber all the time, had tried to drag him kicking and screaming into the modern era, throwing new movies, music and food at him. He’d been his first non-Avengers friend in this new world, a perfect stranger who had jumped in to help him that day in DC. He could have been killed for it and it’s a wonder he wasn’t. Steve didn’t know if he and Natasha could have ever managed surviving the revelation of HYDRA within SHIELD, let alone single-minded focus of the Winter Soldier, without Sam at their side. Sam had never questioned it, though, covering Steve’s left the same way Bucky always covered Steve’s right.

“Sam was a good man,” Natasha sighed, swiping his face away. “Far too good to die like this.”

Steve wasn’t sure any of them deserved to die like this, snapped out of existence as if they hadn’t ever been there. He rubbed his fingers as she spun through photographs, of Erik Selvig, the physicist who had worked for SHIELD and was friends with Thor, of Shuri, T’Challa’s brilliant young sister, of Peter Parker, the young kid from Queens who Tony had roped into battle.

And then she stopped on the next face.

“When did we hear?” Her expression didn't change, but he could hear the quiet quaver in her voice.

“Three days ago.” He wished she would flip past it, move on to Fury, Hill, anyone who wasn’t that face.

“Did you…”

“I had Pepper and Rhodes follow up through back channels with the CIA. I’m still not sure what our legal status is in this country and I’m not about to start drawing attention to it.”

Natasha could only nod, sadness breaking at the sight of “deceased” under Sharon Carter’s name. “She was one of the few friends I had at SHIELD. She never cared I had been KGB or that I had been a Widow.”

“She had her own mind, else she never would have helped us out.”

Natasha’s eyes cut sideways towards him. “Seemed to be a Carter women trait.”

She wasn’t wrong. Still, the comparison didn’t sit particularly well with him. “Sharon was herself and no one else, especially not Peggy.”

Natasha acknowledged that with a cool tilt of her head. “I always wondered why you two didn’t work out.”

“You mean besides the fact that I was an internationally wanted fugitive and she worked for one of the organizations on the look out for me?”
“I, for one, would think that would add excitement to the relationship. Then again, I think we’ve established I have rather strange ideas for what makes for good relationships.”

Steve hadn’t missed the pointed way in which Natasha had avoided most direct interaction with Bruce since his return. “Yeah, well when you already had a rocky start because one of you was spying on the other, then add in that she worked for the CIA, and then the fact we couldn’t ever really connect because I was on the run, it just failed to launch.”

“Seems to be the story of most of our love lives. We get there, it’s in our hands, and then it all falls apart. What was that term Sam always had?”

“Fumble at the line.” Steve could hear Sam’s voice, the disapproving shake of his head as he glared at Steve every time the subject of Sharon ever came up in conversation. “Because he said I was always fumbling the ball at the line of scrimmage, never could move forward.”

“Accurate,” she sighed with dry empathy, running fingers through her blonde hair. “In fairness, circumstance hasn’t been any of our friend.”

“No, it has not.” He stared up at Sharon’s face, regret and guilt gnawing at him as he thought of Sam’s lectures. “I get what he was getting at, none of us can dwell in the past. We can’t go back and fix it, but it’s a bit hard to move forward when the world is so determined to kick you in the teeth.”

“Not that it has ever stopped Steve Rogers.”

Natasha knew him well. “No, not that it has.”

“So why did you stick around with the likes of us and not make more effort to go after Sharon?”

“The truth?”

“You might as well, we all know you’re a terrible liar.”

That brought up a ghost of a smile. “I’m not that bad.”

“There’s a reason I’m the spy in this partnership.”

“Fair,” he conceded, mostly because she was right.

“So, why not?”

He scrubbed fretfully at his face, still unused to the loss of the beard he’d grown in his two years on the run. “Because as amazing as Sharon was, as smart, and funny, and attractive, there was a ghost of someone else there between us and we both knew it.”

Natasha was never one to judge and she certainly didn’t here. Instead she nodded as pieces she clearly suspected finally were confirmed. “I suppose it is hard to build a relationship with someone who is the great-niece of the long-lost love of your life.”

That was something of an understatement. “Every conversation we had somehow would loop back to that, and I started realizing that we both had the habit. She was close to Peggy, she had just passed, we both were grieving her...I don’t know, when you get down to it, it just didn’t feel right, starting to build a relationship off of that shared connection.”

“That’s fair, I suppose, though you seemed to like her okay when she was still Kate.”

He had, admittedly. “Which was all a cover, as you recall.”
“True, but that was still Sharon underneath there.”

“And how much of that is because she reminded me of Peggy?”

Natasha bobbed her head in the classic “maybe” gesture. “You do have a type, Rogers.”

“And that was the problem, that’s not moving forward, that’s clinging to something familiar, and worse, it was setting up expectations for both of us that neither of us could live up to. She isn’t Peggy Carter. I wasn’t about to start turning her into her aunt.”

“And you didn’t want to have a relationship straight out of a Hitchcock thriller?”

He only snorted at her levity, at least having finally seen Vertigo to understand what she was talking about. “That would have made a great by-line after the fact I was a fugitive from the law. ‘Captain America Becomes Psychotic’.”

“After everything that’s happened to you, how are you not?”

“Same reason you aren’t and you’ve been through far worse than I have. We just learn to pick up, learn to keep on going, even when we fumble the ball at the line of scrimmage on the goal line.”

“I see your American football references, Rogers, and I have spent enough Sunday afternoons with Clint yelling at a television to understand them.”

“Did the metaphor work?”

She grinned. “Yeah, it did.”

He regarded Sharon’s face still floating in the air, the old familiar question of “what might have been” spinning in his brain. It felt as if his entire life was made up of missed opportunities and chances not taken out illness, or duty, or fear. He had no one to blame but himself. He chose to fly Schmidt’s plane into the ice, to refuse to sign the Sokovia Accords, to go risk everything for his best friend, to walk away from the SHIELD and the idea of Captain America, and he had also chosen not to pursue a relationship with her.

“Sharon deserved much better than me.”

“You both deserved to be happy.” Natasha’s answer was firm, glaring at him mildly. “Why do you keep thinking you don’t?”

“I would like to be happy, sure.”

“But you don’t think you deserve to be?”

What could he even say to that? “When I was a kid, I had to learn to accept I’d never get to do the things I wanted because I was too sickly to get them. Expectations re-adjust, you learn that sometimes who you are means you can’t always have the things that you want, no matter how badly you want them.”

“You sound like Bruce.” Frustration mingled with exasperation briefly.

“And I don’t sound like you?” He knew she had been known to think and say the exact same things. She frowned guiltily but wouldn’t back down. “Maybe we all have it wrong. You’re a good man, Steve, one of the best I’ve known and you deserve to have a life, to be happy. I just hope one day you catch on to that and stop wasting the chances that keep get thrown at you. Go out and grab that
“And what about you?” He wouldn’t let her off the hook that easily. “You wanted a life once with someone. You got a second chance to maybe reconsider that.”

As expected, she demurred, that bit of her she only let her nearest friends see closing off somewhat. They were close, he and Natasha, but there were sacred cows even he couldn’t step on, and Bruce was one of them. “I have a hard enough time getting you figured out, let alone my life. Sam’s not here to get your head on straight, so that leaves little old me.”

He decided to take her graceful out of the conversation she didn’t want to have. “Sam would be glad someone is keeping on me.”

“Face it, you’re a mess, Rogers.” She looked to Sharon once more before clicking the rotating pictures off. The screen returned to the CNN coverage. “So I’m not sleeping for the rest of the night. Think Tony has some popcorn hidden in this joint?”

“Maybe, though likely it’s organic, dried goji berries or something.” Tony was always, always snacking on something. Even in the couple of weeks they had been home Steve had found baggies of dried fruit stuck in the most random, odd places all over the facility, most opened and tucked away by the absentminded engineer.

“Really, if Stark’s alive, we need to have a serious conversation about the kind of junk food he keeps around a place. I’ll go see what I can find, maybe we can sit up and find an appropriately awful movie to watch.”

He knew what she was doing and was grateful for it. “Sure, just don’t make it a romantic comedy.”

“I’m thinking action. We can sit and criticize Hollywood fighting techniques.”

He watched her wander off to putter in the kitchen, grateful that even when he fumbled the ball, he had a friend who would fall on it for him.
Walking in Memphis

Chapter Summary

In which Natasha goes to see an old friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

From high above in the quinjet the world looked peaceful and normal. It was only when you hit the ground that you realized it wasn’t. The snap may have taken half the population of the universe, but clearly it wasn’t even. Reports were coming in of whole small towns, rural farming communities that had existed for a century or more turned to dust, the homes, businesses and farms empty. Some cities had been hit harder than others. New York had lost half its giant population overnight, turning whole quarters into ghost towns, while Detroit, a city already rocked with population decline and city corruption, was devastated to the point that there was talking of closing down whole neighborhoods all together to bring residents to one central, safe area. The tallies were still coming in on who was left and who wasn’t.

There was one tally Natasha had yet to learn the truth on. She owed it to herself to go and find out. She landed in the field outside of the quaint and tidy farmhouse near dusk. The route was familiar, she’d come alone many times, always to be met with one child or another’s shout from the house. But as she disembarked, she could hear only silence in the distance. The house, which would at least have had the light on over the back mudroom, was dark, and nothing stirred. She hadn’t expected it too, but still, she had foolishly hoped.

It had rained in Missouri the week since everything happened. The grass had grown and needed mowing, a job Clint had loved doing on his riding lawn mower. Nat had teased him that it was his baby tractor and he would ride through the fields with a beer, playing at being a farmer. It had grown up with the recent showers and needed trimming. It brushed high against her practical shoes as she hiked to the house.

“Clint,” she called, well before she reached the back porch with it’s stack of boots and the deliberately distressed, country kitsch flag on the back siding. She traced a finger across it, gathering grit on her fingertips as she went to the back door. It opened easily, not even locked, a habit that Laura had that drove Clint crazy. Laura swore people in the country never needed locks.

“Clint!” Her voice echoed into the Barton’s house. The mudroom led into the large, tidy kitchen. He’d finished that for Laura right after Natasha was hit outside of Odessa by Bucky Barnes, then the Winter Soldier. She’d convalesced on the couch in the living room listening to him saw and mutter, wandering through the house with a tool belt on, as Laura swore that if she didn’t have a working stove and sink in two days she would divorce him and take Nat with her. She’d been too injured to protest, but she laughed at Clint’s affront at his wife’s claim on her and protested he had found her first.

The kitchen was silent and dark now. Dishes sat in the sink, but no food remained save for a half-drunk juicebox one of the kids left behind. The fruit in the bowl on the counter was over-ripe, several of the oranges had turned green with mold, and a banana was on the verge of becoming brown
sludge. The scent was sickeningly sweet as she wandered past into the living room. There was a book on the couch, one of Lila’s, some teen apocalyptic series she had fallen in love with that Clint had mocked for being unrealistic, to his daughter’s haughty protests. A pair of Nate’s socks lay on the hand-made rag rug, forgotten, again, by their owner. Cooper’s baseball sat on the coffee table, alone on the edge, having never rolled an inch. She willed the tears not to come as she spun around the perfect house, the place she had found refuge in when the rest of the world had gone to shit. This had been her family’s home. She had no one else, never had, and this was the closet she had to a brother and sister, to a niece and nephews. She hadn’t wanted it to be true.

He’d called nearly a day after they landed back in New York, but Danvers had arrived and they had focused on their energy on figuring out what happened and where Tony was. She got his message later, the broken truth of it. Laura and the kids had all dusted away before his eyes. He wanted to know what happened, was half afraid she was gone too, as she wasn’t answering her phone, if any of them had survived. She had called him back as soon as she could, but the phone had gone to voicemail. He hadn’t called back.

The stairs creaked with age as she climbed up to the rooms, daring to peek inside the private sanctums of the Bartons, hoping against hope to find some sort of life. Of course she was disappointed. Unless Clint was hiding under the mess of Cooper’s room or in the spilling closet of Lila’s, neither looked as if they had been touched.

“Clint,” she called again, knowing if he hadn’t answered yet, he wasn’t going to. She cursed loudly in Russian. She had hoped he was there, still. She shouldn’t have been surprised when he wasn’t.

Her phone in her pocket buzzed, startling in the stillness. She reached for it, expecting it to be Steve or Rhodey checking in on her. Instead, it was a single text message from a number she didn’t recognize.

You talk to Captain America with that mouth?

Her heart soared as she tapped back quickly, her thumbs flying across the StarkTech glass. Where are you?

There was a long pause as she stood in the hallway between the rooms, looking for the cameras she could guess Clint had set up to watch the place between missions. Clearly, he was watching her. It took a minute for her phone to buzz again, his reply popping up on the screen.

Houston.

What the hell was in Houston? Why?

She glared at the camera she saw tucked in a space above the linen closet.

Don’t look at me like that?

She smirked, flipping off the camera.

You’ve learned bad habits on the run with Cap and Sam.

She typed quickly. Steve has a surprisingly blue vocabulary when he wants. Answer my question.

Another pause before a reply. I always knew he had it in him.

“Clint,” She shouted at the camera, her patience snapped.
Her phone now rang, the strange number appearing on her screen.

“Why Houston,” she snapped, without ceremony.

“I know a guy,” he drawled, tired and dark.

“A guy? What sort of guy?”

“Old contact back in the day.”

“SHIELD?”

“Not precisely.”

His evasiveness annoyed her. “How far back in the day are we talking, Barton?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to.

“Reliving your old army days?”

“World has gone to hell, Romanoff, or haven’t you noticed?”

“I have, as a matter of fact, that’s why I’m here.”

He’s quiet for long moments.

“Clint, we need you.”

“To do what?” It wasn’t snide or mocking, just broken. Natasha’s heart ached at the sound.

“Look, everything is chaos, the world governments are in shambles, any semblance of order is in a tailspin, and we are here, trying to patch things up as best we can.”

“By ‘we’, who are you talking about?”


“Banner’s back?” That caught him by surprise. “Where the hell has he been?”

‘Off world with Thor.” She hadn’t gotten all the specifics on that.

“Where is Stark?”

“Still missing, we’ve got someone out there looking for him.”

Again, he went quiet. Twitching, Natasha grasped at anything.

“We could use you right now, Clint. I could use you.”

“Fat lot of good I did sitting at home while you all got your asses handed to you.”

“You did what you had to do.”

“And what good did that do me?” His voice broke in anger and grief, causing Natasha to curl in on herself, her shoulders hunching up as she willed the sobs in her chest away. “I was...we were just in the back, having lunch. Laura grilled hot dogs. The boys were having a catch, Lila...she got a bullseye. They are there one minute and the next, they are gone. I blink and they didn’t exist
anymore, and all I could do was stand there with some stupid look on my face.”

“You wouldn’t be far off from the rest of us,” she whispered, tears leaking out of the corner of her closed eyes. “We watched them. Bucky Barnes went right in front of Steve. Okoye watched T’Challa. Wanda…”

Here the sob did escape, the memory of the young woman, holding her dead lover, almost grateful as she disintegrated like ash on the wind. On the other end of the line she could hear Clint curse.

“They’re gone, Clint. We can still do...something.”

“Like what?” Skepticism rang across the line, underscored by anger. “We made a stand and lost.”

“We can find Thanos, make him put it all back.”

“An alien from outer space and you want to find him? Jesus, Romanoff!” He half sobbed, half laughed, all of it despairing. “You’ve been around Rogers too long. When did you of all people become the wide-eyed optimist?”

She pursed her lips hard together, regarding the camera up above. “When someone reached a hand out to me and made a different call.”

His ragged breaths on the other end were the only indication he was still there.

“Clint, I know where you are heading. I know what this all sounds like a great idea. You’ve lost everything, you have nothing, and for a man of action now you can do something, anything to fill that aching hole there. I know that road better than you. You know what I did, what I was willing to do, how many lives I cost, and you also knew where I was headed. You pulled me out. Laura wouldn’t want this for you, the kids…”

“They’re gone now, so what does it matter?”

What could she possibly say to that?

“Tasha,” he breathed, the name only he really ever called her. “I hear you. I’m not saying I don’t hope you find something, I’m just saying I can’t hope...I can’t...they were why I did all the things I’ve done. Why I worked for SHIELD instead of as a merc, why I took up the good fight instead of going solo. Everything I’ve done all these years, especially the Avengers, was for the four of them. Without them, what do I got?”

“Me,” she whispered, tears flowing freely. “You’re best friend, the person you helped get out.”

“You were always stronger than you looked, Natasha. That’s why the KGB could never hold you. You’ve been doing fine without me around.”

“Yeah, but no one covers my six like you do.”

“No,” he admitted, roughly. “Let me know if you find anything on this Thanos asshole, will you?”

“Clint,” she begged, but the line went dead. She stared at the camera above but knew it was no use. Sobbing, she angrily turned from it, stomping down the stairs and back out the back, slamming the door hard behind her. The quinjet lifted, rising into the twilight air. In the distance, she could see the lights of a small town. Clint had told her it was called Memphis, had joked no one had an original name for a town out here. She’d never been there. She wondered who was possibly even left there, if anyone. Did they even know about the little farmhouse outside of town, of the family who lived
there who were now gone.

She glanced down one last time at the quaint refuge she had once had before turning back towards New York. She burned it into her memory. She would never come back again.

Chapter End Notes

Why Memphis?

Funny story, so I'm looking up where the Barton farm is supposed to be, knowing Clint historically was from around Iowa. They said...Missouri? Which, yeah, I suppose, but it made me laugh a lot especially as Quill is from Missouri and I wondered why. The only answer I got from a friend who does pick-up writing over at Marvel was that Missouri is seen as being wholesome.

Being from the fine Show Me State, I laughed really hard at that.

Anyway, so while it isn't central Iowa, you can practically see Iowa from his very large back yard. Also, it is the town where my favorite younger brother lives so I had to tell him that in my fanfiction he was unfortunately snapped out of existence.
If Bruce stared at the images of the dusted and missing one minute longer he might just put a hand through one of Tony’s expensive, clear monitors without Hulk to egg him on to do it. He paused on Shuri’s face, the young princess with a mind that put both Tony and him to shame, inquisitive eyes sparkling with humor. He could see she was likely too smart for her own good, both a joy and a trial to her regal mother and the apple of her royal brother’s eye. He was sad he wouldn’t get to know her now, this girl whose brain kicked his ass seven ways from Sunday.

Bruce turned the monitor off, scrubbing at his face under his glasses. He was back in his own clothes, finally, having found what he’d left behind in the Avenger’s complex years ago. Picking up the pieces of a life he once knew was difficult under the best of circumstances. Doing so after failing to save half the universe was way worse. He didn’t even know where to start with any of it. If he’d only been a bit faster in getting here, more insistent on getting Steve Rogers from the start, if he had not let Tony wander off alone into space to deal with it by himself...

He pushed away from the desk, out of the lab and into the common area. It was quiet at the moment. Pepper and Happy Hogan were trying to piece together Stark Industries and were working with Steve to coordinate relief efforts as they could. Rhodey was tied up with the military, trying to see what was left and what they could even do to help. He hadn’t seen Thor much at all in the days since Wakanda. He’d hidden himself away, avoiding all of them for the most part. Only Rocket was around, monitoring space on one hand, watching the news with the other, munching a bag of dried nuts and fruit as he gave Bruce a baleful eye.

“Shit is getting bad out there.” He nodded to a report of riots in some city. Bruce thought it was Cleveland. “People are scared.”

“They got a right to be.” He watched for several long minutes as the bottom third of the screen begged the question of “How did this happen?”

“If it’s this bad here, imagine elsewhere in the universe? Xandar was hit hard before the snap. Thanos hit it first to get the Power Stone. Guess they were hit again and ain’t nobody controlling their territory. The Kree, probably the same there, only worse ’cause they don't even know what happened.”

For all his time on Sakaar, none of these names made any sense to Bruce. “Any word on the Asgardians?”

“Trying to find them.” He waved at the monitor looking both for his ship and what was left of Thor’s people. “If they are out there, they’ll hail us.”

He hoped so. He knew Valkyrie was charged with getting the rest, mostly non-combatants, off the ship and to Earth. The last he saw of them was their desperate flight away from Thanos before he turned into Hulk. That was over two weeks ago and there was still no sign of them.
“You seen Thor?”

Rocket nodded, looking grim. “Been hiding in one of the training rooms.”

That sounded a bit promising. “Working out his stuff there, that’s good.”

Rocket arched a furry eyebrow up at him. “Don’t think that’s what exactly he’s been doing.”

What hope he had that his friend was managing melted into a puddle of anxiety. Distantly, he felt Hulk stir and shrug and roll over, unable to be bothered.

Really?

“Maybe I should go find him.”

“You could. I’d bring one of those fancy Stark suits with you.”

“Why is that?”

Rocket mimicked throwing something. “His aim is good, but he doesn’t always pay attention what’s between it and him.”

Yeah...really not good.

“Thanks for the advice.”

Nothing for it, Bruce supposed, but to find him and face the depressed wrath of a despondent Norse god. He vaguely wished Tony and Steve were here to help deal with this. Not that he couldn’t, he supposed, but Thor had always fit in neatly between the two polar opposites of Iron Man and Captain America. He had instinctively understood Tony, with all of his father issues and excessive hubris, and Steve, the soldier with his honor and his discipline. Thor had made things work well with those two. Bruce had tried to just avoid it all together. Now, he wished neither he nor Thor had ever left planet. Maybe none of this would have ever happened.

The facility had more training rooms than it knew what to do with; a gym, a pool, free weights, a padded room for tossing people around in. Bruce had never really been in this place. Tony had been building it while he was here, but they’d not moved in until after the Ultron fiasco, which was after he had disappeared. This wasn’t the home that the Tower had been and he found himself wandering from room-to-room, listening for the sounds of Thor’s new axe thunking into things. He eventually found it, in a padded room filled with random targets, or at least it had been until Thor’s axe had been unleashed in there.

He peeked inside the reinforced glass in the door, making sure that Thor wasn’t in the act of throwing the giant killing blade before he dared open the door. It seemed safe enough, as he stepped inside, looking for Thor standing motionless on the other side. The Asgardian was in the midst of calling it back to him, much as he had his hammer, the passage of it’s passing stirring against Bruce’s skin as it skidded in front of him to Thor’s outstretched hand.

“Hey, Thor, buddy!” He smiled at the thunderous scowl on the other man’s face. Bruce glanced at the room. All around, targets and pieces of wood lay shattered, while deep grooves and cuts bit deep into the padded walls and the steel behind them. It looked as if an entire gang of Vikings had run through here ransacking and pillaging, not just one depressed god.

“How are you holding up?” Not well, judging from the state of the room and of Thor himself. He’d changed into some of Steve’s clothes, the one person close enough to him in build to have anything he
could fit. They were now several days old, rumpled, and needing a wash. Frankly, so did Thor, but he was polite enough to at least not say it.

“Fine,” he rumbled, a desperate smile pulling at his mouth and up his cheeks. It didn’t quite reach his mismatched eyes. “I’m...fine. Waiting to see what Rabbit and the flying woman turn up, that’s all.”

“Yeah, Rocket is scanning for Valkyrie and the escape ship. I’m sure they will turn up.”

“Of course,” he tittered, a chuff that was a poor shadow for the full, ringing laugh he used to possess. “Of course, she has been doing this for longer than I’ve been alive, she’ll be fine.”

Bruce had been too long managing his own complex emotional state over the years not to hear the frantic edge in Thor’s voice. “You sure you’re doing all right?”

“Yeah, I’m...fine.” He at least let the slightly manic smile fall, finally, his face sliding into somberness. “It’s been a hard few weeks is all...for all of us.”

“Yeah, it has. “ For Thor in particular, he knew. “You want to talk about it? I mean, I’m not psychologist, but Tony always assumed I was, so I’m used to just listening, if you need.”

“Ahh, well, I don’t know if there is anything that could fix the likes of an Asgardian.”

“Try me,” Bruce replied, jerking his head towards the door. “Least let’s get you outside for a walk.”

Thor didn’t look as if he was going to comply, but finally gave in, setting his axe by the door gingerly as he stuffed hand’s in the pocket of the borrowed hoody, shuffling behind Bruce as they wandered out of the facility and onto the grounds. He’d been thrilled when Tony had chosen an old storage site his father had used ages ago, one that sat on the Hudson with acres of beautiful countryside and not a single building for Hulk to destroy. It was a lovely site, Bruce admitted, and he regretted not having been here to enjoy it. Pity it was under these circumstances he was back.

“Stark did choose a fine place to rebuild.” Thor commented mildly, more as something to say in the stillness than a true observation, Bruce guessed.

“Have you decided where the Asgardians will go when they get here?”

“Norway,” he responded automatically. “Tønsberg, it’s a city near where my father fought a great battle at a thousand years ago. He rather liked it there, I guess. Anyway, there was a village not far from there, just outside of the present city. It’s an old one, marking the spot of the battle. It never was the same after Steve’s war and that fellow he fought. What was his name?”

“Johann Schmidt.” Bruce shivered. He knew Schmidt well from his own research, another example of how the serum brought out the worst traits if not done right.

“Yes, that’s him. He destroyed much of the village and they never really recovered. But, they keep the old ways there, they still remember us. Maybe we can, you know, help them along.”

“I think Norway would be perfect for all of you. Appropriate.” He tried to put a positive spin on it, at least. It wasn’t Asgard, for certain, the beautiful golden city floating in space, but they could make a good life there. “I don’t know, Tony’s got some weird sway with the royal family, maybe he could chat with the King of Norway, make it all happen for you.”

“If he gets back.” Thor’s quiet rejoinder cut out the legs of Bruce’s optimism. “Things have not exactly fallen out for me the way I’d have hoped of late.”
Bruce privately thought that could be said for most of them of late, but in truth, for Thor it seemed the hardest. They’d all lost something in all of this; family, friends, loved ones. Thor had lost before he knew who Thanos was. His parents were both gone, a family secret that his father conveniently forgot to tell him revealed he had a long lost sister who was crazier than his adopted brother, and the only way to stop her from killing all their people was to destroy his whole world by bringing the prophesied Ragnarok, destroying her and the home of the Asgardians for centuries, leaving them alone on a single ship, prey to Thanos.

No, he supposed it hadn’t been easy for Thor of late.

“[I know it’s been a difficult few weeks.”

The snort beside him was the only commentary Thor had on that statement.

“But you know, hiding away isn’t going to make any of it better.”

Thor’s mismatched eyes cut towards him in a deep scowl. “Says the man who ran away from his friends after he had a bad day and somehow ended up on another planet. Have you and Natasha talked much about the last few years?”

He hadn’t talked to Natasha at all, in truth. He’d avoided that particular time bomb like the plague and he owned that. “She’s been busy with all this. She’s out at Barton’s place, trying to find him.”

“So, you are avoiding people because you don’t want to deal with uncomfortable emotions and are lecturing me on the same?”

“Yes,” Bruce sighed, knowing the other man had a point and owning the irony of this situation. “But, that’s the reason I am! I tried hiding away from everyone, I thought I had messed up too badly and I ran. That’s why I’m here.”

“You didn’t fail your family, your people, and now the entire universe.”

“Well, I did destroy Johannesburg.”

“Half the universe is gone, Banner!” His bellow rolled with thunder. In the distance, Bruce could hear it floating across the river valley, even though it was a clear day. “I...I was so busy showing off and wanting to make him suffer, as my people suffered, as my brother suffered. I should have killed him. Instead I toyed with him, gloated. I enjoyed feeling as if I had won. I gave him the advantage. I let him snap his fingers and destroy half of everything because I wanted to show off.”

In fairness, he wasn’t wrong. Had he done what Thanos said and taken his head, none of this would be a problem. “Sure, you could have done that and we’d have won. But then again, Wanda could have destroyed Vision earlier or Steve could have not demanded we save him. I could have maybe not messed up the Mind Stone’s connection to his neural pathways so we could have gotten it off. Maybe Tony could have not gone tearing after Strange all by himself, hell, maybe he could have called Steve a hell of a lot sooner than he did, or how about the two of them could have worked out their differences before Thanos came calling. A lot of woulda, coulda, shoulda for all of us.”

The temper didn’t abait, but it did rumble less as Thor glowered, kicking at a tuft of grass with the toe of one shoe. “All my life, I’ve been raised to be a king, a ruler, a leader to my people. I have been anything but. I’ve been a braggart, a show-off, a bully, a hot-headed fool. My father would lecture me against that, and I wouldn’t listen. He banished me here to Earth because I nearly started a war with Jotunheim over a petty quibble. I thought I had learned, I thought I was better, that I had finally earned the wisdom and even nature needed to be a king, but in the end, they all died, and I decided
to take on Thanos single-handedly out of revenge. I thought I had learned my lessons, and clearly, I hadn’t.”

It was the most honest Bruce had ever heard Thor in the years he had known him. Thor had always struck him as impossibly confident and sure of himself, never afraid to allow his true personality out, unlike Bruce who feared his. That he felt the same anxieties the rest of them did made him feel - well, a bit more human.

“We all have ups and downs, you know.” Bruce knew that lesson better than most anyone. “I thought I had the big guy under control, only to have him let loose in South Africa and then I didn’t have control for two years. Now, I can’t get him to come out. We all think we have it put together and then life happens and you realize that in this moment, you just don’t, and that’s okay.”

“Tell that to Clint, if you ever get to speak to him.” Thor was eyeing high above, as a quinjet came up on the horizon. “Perhaps that will give him some comfort when he has to look me in the eye as I apologize for allowing his wife and children to die because I couldn’t be bothered to remove Thanos’ head from his shoulders with the giant axe I had made for the purpose. I’m sure he’ll be understanding.”

With that, the god of thunder turned heel and stalked back to the compound, leaving Bruce clumsily staring in his wake, eyeing the approaching quinjet he knew had Natasha in it. He had a feeling Clint wasn’t on it and Thor wouldn’t be having that conversation. He had thought the Avengers were broken before Thanos’ arrival. Right now, he didn’t think anything could make them better ever again.
Honesty Between Friends

Chapter Summary

In which Steve has an honest conversation with Pepper.

Seeing Tony sprawled on the floor, broken like a doll, had jarred him more than he could say. Steve remembered all too well the days when he had been small and skinny, weak and sickly, and never wished that on anyone, but least of all on Tony Stark. From the moment he’d met him he’d been cocky, brash, powerful, a presence. To see him withered and hollowed out, broken both physically and emotionally, left Steve shocked beyond words. Just what had Thanos done to him?

He watched the blue, bouncing lights of Tony’s vitals on the screen above as Pepper pulled a blanket over Tony’s emaciated frame, pressing a kiss to his forehead as she did. She smoothed out hair that had grayed considerably since Steve had seen him last. It hit him that it had been a long time since that horrible day in Siberia, and Tony was a very different person.

Beside Steve, Nebula stood hesitant as she watched the tender tableau. She had been hovering outside of the med bay since they had made their plans, watching Tony with her black, inscrutable eyes. He hadn’t even had time to wrap his head around her and who she was outside of being a friend of Rocket’s and an exiled daughter of Thanos. She had kept Tony alive these last three weeks, which showed she had some compassion, and she clearly had no qualms in taking on the man who had kidnapped her, abused her and tortured her for much of her life. That thought alone disgusted Steve beyond words, seeing in the quiet, broken woman a memory of the best friend he had lost again. As if he needed more reason to want to see Thanos destroyed.

Pepper made her way outside to the lounge, the dark circles under her eyes and utter exhaustion in her demeanor at odds with her patent relief and joy at having Tony back. Tears in her eyes, she moved straight for Nebula and without hesitation threw her arms around the woman who reacted with startled uncertainty, eyes darting to Steve. He only smiled encouragingly as Nebula haltingly returned the embrace, unsure hands reaching up to pat Pepper on the back in ginger reassurance.

“Thank you,” the other woman breathed through her sobs. “Thank you for bringing him home to me.”

Nebula said nothing as she closed her eyes for a brief moment. Steve guessed such affection was unknown to her, and he could see her struggling as she gently pulled away, looking anywhere but at Pepper’s grateful face. “He’s strong, a survivor. It was an honor to fight beside him and to get him home.”

“Honestly, I’ve spent years expecting him to end up dead in some forgotten corner of the world. What’s another planet?” Pepper’s flippancy disguised the very real frustration she had long had with Tony, the fact she couldn’t ever get him to just stop at anything. This time had been so close...too close.

Nebula didn’t know this, however, as she glanced over Pepper’s shoulder to the sedated man on the other side of the glass. “He spoke of you. He told me your name was Virginia, that he trusted you with everything, including his company, and he loved you very much. He recorded messages to you every night on his helmet, just in case he didn’t return.”
Ah, Tony!

Pepper burst into further tears, wiping futilely at them. He could have called earlier, he could have brought them in. Steve would have moved heaven and earth to back Tony’s play up. Perhaps, if he had, things wouldn’t have gotten so bad, but Tony hadn’t called. It had been Bruce who did. He hadn’t trusted Steve enough to call. He hadn’t forgiven him at all, that was for certain, and Steve had no one to blame but himself.

“Whatever you need here, let me know, I’ll make it happen.” Pepper was babbling now as Nebula tried to find ways of removing herself from the feelings pouring out all over her.

He broke in, firmly but kindly. “Nebula, I think Rocket’s working on the ship, trying to patch up those fuel cells. If we want to take off soon, he may need some help.”

It was the out the other woman needed. She nodded gratefully, pausing only to lay a hand on Pepper’s shoulder, before wandering out to the grounds where Rocket’s ship still stood out front. He and Pepper watched her go for a long moment, Steve politely giving Pepper time to pull herself together.

“So, you all are going to do it?” She sounded more resigned than accusatory.

“If there is the smallest chance, Pepper, we have to take it.”

Wrapping arms around herself, she settled in one of the armchairs, looking far from pleased at the prospect. “You know what Tony said, Steve, of what he tried to do. Look at him, for God’s sake!”

Steve was looking. He knew what Thanos was capable of. He’d just had his ass handed to him too. “All of us know the threat and we are willing to risk that.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

Steve had considered that possibility as well. “Then it can’t be worse than what it is now.”

Pepper’s snort was somewhere between a laugh and a sob, breaking as she scrubbed at her face. “You could all be dead, far away on some other planet.”

“Those are the risks. We know them. Besides, it’s what we signed up for doing this.”

“You talk as if you are still a soldier.”

He met her statement with a sad sort smile. “I never stopped. The others know what might happen. I wouldn’t ask any of them to come on board if they didn’t.”

“But not Tony.”

He couldn’t help but eye the vitals over Tony’s bed again, shaking his head dolefully. “He’s done enough, Pepper, more than enough. I think it’s time for him to rest.”

The truth was that even if he had been able to, Steve doubted Tony would have come along. He saw the look in his eyes when he slapped the nanotech repository into Steve’s hand, the fear, the anger, the hurt. Thanos had scared him, truly scared him, like few things had ever scared the great Tony Stark. The only other time he had ever seen that expression on his face was when they had been fighting. Tony had truly believed, for half a moment, that Steve would kill him. Whether he liked to own it or not, that had haunted Steve ever since.
Reading his pensiveness, Pepper attempted reassurance. “You know, those things Tony said in there, he didn’t mean any of that. He’s exhausted and sick and been through a lot, and you know how he is on his best days.”

How much time in Pepper’s relationship with Tony had she spent covering his outrageous behavior? It was second nature to her now. In this case, she needn’t have bothered. “No apologizing, Pepper. Tony was right.”

She blinked at him with a hint of dubiousness. “Steve, what happened between you two?”

He startled from his revery to frown at her patient expression, surprised she didn’t already know. “Tony never told you?”

“I’m sure this will come to you as no surprise to you, but there are things that he doesn’t discuss with me, often to avoid the argument afterwards.”

Good to know that Tony had that habit with Pepper as well and not just him.

“Did he ever tell you what happened in Siberia after the bombing and the Sokovia Accords?”

“He said you decided to become a fugitive rather than sign the deal.”

“That’s a way of putting it.” He paced fretfully before settling on the couch across from her, pulling together the most neutral account of the events he could. “It’s no secret I didn’t agree with the Accords. I felt that handing over our freedom to articulate how we do our job to a government with their own agendas and secret motivations was a bad idea. Tony felt we needed more oversight and accountability to prevent things like...well, Sokovia. Perhaps, in the end, we would have worked through those differences. That wasn’t why I went on the run.”

With Thanos standing between the events of Sokovia and now, in hindsight that argument felt very small, but in truth it had been devastating for the Avengers in particular, for Steve personally. He and Tony had never had an easy relationship, but to have it degenerate the way it did had cut far more than he had expected. Only in hindsight had he realized how much of a friend Tony was to him, albeit in his prickly, self-absorbed way.

“So, you know the bombing in Vienna was initially pinned on someone else.” He might as well start from the beginning.

“Yeah, a Barnes, if I remember. Turned out to be a Sokovian named Zemo.”

Steve nodded. “James Barnes...Bucky, my childhood best friend.”

The soft exhale of breath was all the more reaction Pepper gave on the subject. It was unclear if she knew that connection or not.

“Even when I had nothing, I had him.” Steve scrubbed wearily at his face, recalling the echo of a time that was only slightly less stressful and much more carefree in the golden haze of memory. “I’ve known him since I was nine, since he took out the bullies who were trying to beat my face into the pavement for my pocket money. He peeled me off the cement, dusted me off, and he always had my back after that.”

If he closed his eyes, he could still remember sitting in Mrs. Barnes’ tidy and well- scrubbed kitchen, snitching shortbreads just out of the oven to stuff in their pockets without her looking, before running out of the back door of their apartment, off to some endless game of stickball on the street below. It carried with it the bittersweet ache of all that he had lost, coupled with the raw wound of losing
Bucky all over again right in front of his eyes, even while Sam dusted completely out of sight, his other best friend gone before he even knew what was going on. He swallowed thickly at the hurt.

“HYDRA had captured him in the war and experimented on him, gave him a different form of the super soldier serum. None of us knew it. I thought he had died in ’45 on a mission, falling from a moving train in the Alps. I tried to catch him and he slipped right through my fingers.”

He could still hear Bucky’s terrified scream as he fell, forever, through the snow and ice to the river below.

“When SHIELD went down, I discovered Bucky wasn’t dead. HYDRA had found him in that ravine, had captured him, tortured him and brainwashed him. They stripped him of his identity, of who he was, all of his memories, including me. All that remained was a tool, a weapon, an asset. He became a HYDRA assassin, kept in cryogenic stasis, removed to be deployed by them in order to get at high level targets so that HYDRA could further their agenda while hidden safely within SHIELD. When they were done, they would wipe his memory and stick him back in till they had someone else to kill. They kept him that way for seventy years, pull him out, wipe him down, send him to kill someone, put him under again - over and over and over again.”

He had read the files, the ones Natasha had pulled for him, of the conditioning, the psychological trauma, of the dehumanization of a man who had been as dear to him as a brother, the closest thing he’d ever had to one. Sam said it was a wonder he even survived with as much of himself as he did. A lesser man might have simply broken at it, never to be rescued.

“How did you even find him?” Pepper’s question was quiet in the stillness outside of Tony’s room, horrified and empathetic.

“He found me, or rather, HYDRA tried to have Natasha and I killed. He tried to take me out and I found out who he was. He didn’t remember me at all...not at first.”

“That was the fall of SHIELD.” Pepper knew that well. She’d been instrumental in helping to salvage the remains of the Avengers Initiative from the fallen debris of SHIELD. She and Maria Hill had worked to bring it under the aegis of Stark Industries. “How did you get him out?”

“I nearly didn’t. He almost killed me, if you remember.”

She did. She blanched, nodding.

“But in the end, he didn’t. I don’t remember being pulled out of the Potomac. I don’t remember if he did it, but he was the only one who could have. I want to think he remembered, that he finally broke through. After that, he ran away, free. Sam and I tried to find him, chased him through one destroyed HYDRA facility after another. He was used to being a ghost. He did it well, at least till Berlin. Then Zemo dug up the files on him, decided to pin a crime on him that he didn’t commit and waited to see what destruction it wrought.”

“That’s the part I didn’t get. Why did Zemo do any of it? All those people, dead, for what purpose?”

“To break up the Avengers.” It had been a long play, well planned out, an elaborate trap to lure them in and prey on their weaknesses. “He waited till the Accords were ratified, executed it so he could draw the world’s attention on us. He knew where our points of division would be in Tony and me and he exploited those using Bucky as the wedge to fracture us.”

“But I don’t understand? Tony didn’t know about your friend.”

“No, but he did think Bucky was a terrorist and was willing to follow the Accords and take him in
for arrest on a crime he didn’t commit without any evidence.”

“All right, he was willing to do that, but he was ordered to.”

“Exactly, which was the problem. Those who ordered it had their own agenda and didn’t care about reasons or other stories to the contrary. They were happy to have an open and shut case and let Bucky rot in hell for something that for once he didn’t do.”

Pepper sighed, slumping in her seat. “All right, so Tony would have played into it, I get it. But he’s not totally unreasonable. Had he known, he would have worked around it.”

“There was a lot going on with Tony then.” Steve stepped around that as diplomatically as he could, knowing that had been one of he and Pepper’s "breaks". Frankly, there was a lot going on with Steve too, though he didn’t recognize it till well after the fact. Zemo had played them like fiddles and they sang to his tune.

“There was something else, though, that Tony didn’t know.” He might as well rip the bandage off the cause of the rift, the true crime that had broken the Avengers apart. “His parents, everyone assumes they died in a car accident.”

That hadn’t been the segue Pepper had expected and she stilled. “You are telling me they didn’t?”

“No,” he sighed, heavy with regret. “Natasha and I found out when SHIELD fell. In the files, it was clear that HYDRA had Howard and Maria killed.”

In a month full of horrors, you would think nothing else could have shocked her. “Why?”

“Howard had been working on a new super soldier serum. He thought he had found it. From what we could piece together, Obadiah Stane had an agreement. He informed HYDRA of Howard’s breakthrough and where he would be with it and in exchange they’d kill him so he could take control of the company.”

For long moments, Pepper stared, her mouth working wordlessly, groping for the words. When she finally found them, they were in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious.” He spared a glance towards the quiescent form of Tony in the other room. “We found out about it and we didn’t tell him.”

It only hit Steve now just how devastating the knowledge that Howard had been killed really was. He’d been so focused on Bucky’s piece in the equation, it hadn’t really occurred to him till he saw Pepper’s utter dismay how truly horrifying this knowledge had to have been to his son, who had laboured for years under the supposition that it was all an unfortunate accident. Small wonder that in the grief of the moment Tony snapped.

A long silence followed. Steve didn’t dare look at her, half afraid to see the look on her face he had seen on Tony’s in Siberia. Not that he didn’t deserve that, but as much as it hurt coming from Tony, it would hurt all the same coming from Pepper who had shown him nothing but grace and compassion.

“Why not,” she finally asked, quietly. He cringed, his long fingers wringing together as he leaned against his knees.

“I told myself I wanted to spare him. I didn’t know the details of who ordered it or if they were even alive after the fall of SHIELD. I figured it was best to let sleeping dogs lie. But really, honestly, it was because underneath it all I was afraid.”
“Because you thought Bucky did it.” Pepper supplied, the pieces finally clicking into place for her. “You weren’t sure, but you at least suspected.”

“Yeah.” Guilt gnawed inside of him, squirming as his knuckles whitened around each other. “I had hoped I could find him, that I could get him home and into help and maybe then I could find out the truth for certain, tell Tony.”

“Would you have?” The question was blunt rather than accusatory and Steve could only shrug helplessly.

“I guess we will never know. Zemo got to us before then. He lured us into a trap, the three of us, and that’s when Tony found the truth. Not from me, not from Bucky, but from someone who used it to maximum effect to utterly demolish everything. I gave him the weapon to do it. To say it didn’t end well is an understatement of such epic proportions as to be laughable. In the end, I left the shield and took Bucky, but only after we beat the hell out of one another. We went to Wakanda with T’Challa. I didn’t speak to Tony again until the moment he got off that ship last night.”

And there the entire sordid tale laid out in the open. As shocked as he’d been that Pepper hadn’t already heard Tony’s side, he was even more stunned she hadn’t already started berating him for his part in all of this. He dared to glance up at her as she sat, pensive, eyes closed as she worked her fingers against her forehead.

“Steve,” she finally breathed, eyes finally opening to regard him with equal parts exasperation and pity. “If you only knew the hornets nest you stepped into with this. Tony, the loss of his mother, his relationship with Howard, what fell out with Stane, all the things left unsaid…”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t really. Your memory of Howard is locked somewhere in 1945, your wartime buddy, the man who still thought a blonde for breakfast and a brunette for lunch was acceptable. Tony didn’t know that man. He knew the great Howard Stark, a man who he barely connected with. He’s been to therapy for years about his issues with him, and whatever he says, he never, ever got over their deaths. His mother was one thing, that devastated him, but Howard was a wound he never figured out how to mend.”

Steve knew a thing or two about wounds that never mended and the lost opportunities of death and time. “I do get that, Pepper, and I know, I should have handled it and him differently.”

“Yeah, you should have.” Her pointed look gentled somewhat as she continued. “But then again, I can’t imagine being in your position, knowing it was my horrifically traumatized best friend who did it and not knowing what to do about it.”

Relief flooded through him as it hit him she had understood. “I couldn’t not try to help him.”

“I know.” Her smile was tight and sad. “It’s what makes you Captain America, which is a whole other can of worms with Tony you two will have to work out on your own sometime, but I get it. You would never abandon a friend. Had it been handled differently, maybe he would have understood.”

“Instead, I lied to him, caused him to lose faith in me, and undercut the Avengers just when we needed unity the most.” He knew very well what had been in the world “liar” as Tony uttered it, delirious and hysterical.

To his surprise, that only made Pepper laugh dryly. “Wow, that’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”
Peggy had said the same thing to him years ago, when everything with SHIELD had first broken. “It’s true.”

“To a certain extent, I suppose, but as my mother once said, it takes two to tango, and I’ve been dancing with Tony Stark a long, long time. I love Tony, madly, deeply, crazily, but I know he has flaws. Narcissism is only the one he likes to admit to, but he also is a man who has never been good at forming normal, human attachments, who has been wounded by those he loved and let down by those he respected. You hit more than a few of his triggers, and while it’s not an excuse, it is a reason. He overreacted too, and had things been different then, perhaps it all would have been mitigated. I was out of the picture at that point, and I’m sure that didn't help anything.”

“Pepper, even if you had been there…”

“No, if I had been there, I could have called him out on the bullshit. Instead, he sulked and hid till I finally drug him out of it months later, sent him off to therapy and on a vacation to India and we began to work it out. Even then, he didn’t tell me any of this. If he had...well, maybe you two would have been talking when Thanos showed up.”

She had a point, and a good one, but not one that overrode his deeply ingrained sense of guilt. “That doesn’t take away what I did.”

“No, it doesn’t, but you alone didn’t destroy the Avengers and neither did he. If it was anyone, I’d say it was HYDRA, or Zemo, or Thaddeus Ross, or all of it together. I know you have that old-school sense of patriotism and martyrdom going on there, Cap, but you don’t have to hold the whole burden of this failure by yourself and neither does Tony, The sooner the two of you get it through your heads, the happier you both will be.”

As she finished, Steve finally broke a rueful smile. He shook his head in wonder at the woman who somehow managed to keep even an impetuous Stark in line. “God, Tony doesn’t know how lucky he is having you.”

“I think he does, but he just chooses to forget at convenient moments.” She rolled her eyes fondly at the sleeping man in the other room. “We are lucky we still have each other, not everyone else was.”

No, they weren’t.

“We’ll find Thanos. If we can, we will make it right again.”

The gravity of their purpose hit the other woman once again. “And if you can’t?”

“Then we’ll move forward, won’t we?”

“I suppose we won’t have much of a choice.”

Moving forward was something he unfortunately knew far too well.

From out of the corner of his eye he saw the quiet shadow of Natasha emerge from the kitchen, leaning against the corner till he turned his attention to her. “Cap, Rocket thinks he will have things in shape by morning. You okay with that?”

“Yeah,” he replied, all business once again. “Let the others know. We’ll plan for 0600.”

“Right,” she responded crisply, pausing to shoot Pepper a brief, reassuring smile before wandering off to find the others. Pepper quietly watched her go before turning worried eyes on Steve.
“You’ll be careful, right?”

He couldn’t give her that promise, but he wasn’t going to lie to her. “We’ll do what we have to do.”
Chapter Summary

In which Rhodey contemplates being on a different planet.

“I had always wanted to travel to foreign planets, just...not like this.”

Rhodey stood on the edge of the field of some sort of alien plant life, ripe and rustling in the twilight of evening. The golden sunlight - could you still call it that here - was fading into the purple of dusk as in the distance the green trimmed mountains melted into the smudged blue of the sky, the stars of an entire different solar system peeking out above them. To think, these were different stars than the ones he knew, a different sky, a different world!

Beside him, Cap stood solemnly, eyes turned up to the very same sky, grim awe lighting his solemn features. “I never even dreamed that far as a kid. That wasn’t even a possibility.”

Rhodey often forgot just how old Steve Rogers actually was. “1920s wasn’t exactly the height of space travel, as I recall.”

“Nope,” he chuffed a broken chuckle. “We just were getting transatlantic flight when I was a kid, Lindbergh and all that. We used to pretend we were pilots flying across the Atlantic like him. He was kind of a big deal.”

“I know.” Rhodey tried to imagine the man standing beside him and the one-armed guy he saw briefly in Berlin ever being small boys pretending at airplanes in some alley in Brooklyn somewhere. He found he couldn’t.

“Bucky would have gone crazy over this,” Cap whispered achingly, staring all around him, eyes coming to rest at the small hut they had stormed like it was a gang B&E. “I had just gotten him back, just gotten his head together. He was doing good, working through what he’d been through...what he’d done.”

Rhodey didn’t dwell on the fact what James Barnes had done was kill his best friend’s parents. Frankly, unlike Tony, he understood how messed up this entire situation was, especially for Barnes. He’d seen more than his fair share of soldiers coming out of Afghanistan and Iraq irrevocably changed. Then again, it also wasn’t his parents that had died horribly, either.

“I’m sorry, Cap,” he murmured, clapping a hand to his impossibly broad shoulders. “For Barnes and for Wilson. I didn’t know Barnes, but Sam was a hell of a friend and a good man. I miss him.”

“He was, the best. The only friend I had for a long time and he didn’t deserve to die so far away from home, away from his family. He never even got to see them before everything. Just followed me to Wakanda blindly.” The crease between his brows deepened impossibly as he regarded the others in the field just beyond. “I know you thought we had a slim chance of pulling this off.”

‘Yeah, but I thought it was because Thanos would kick our ass, not because he had destroyed the one thing we needed to set it all right.” Even now, his stomach still churned with the twisting anguish of Thanos’ words. He wanted to believe he was lying, that he’d simply hidden them somewhere. It
had never occurred to him or any of them he could just simply will them out of existence. “Makes you wonder what in the world would cause a guy like him to up and decide that destroying half the universe was okay.”

Cap shrugged. “Grief and loss do strange things to you.”

“Says the man who just lost his two best friends after waking up 70 years later to find everything he knew was gone. You didn’t turn into a genocidal maniac.”

“Not everyone is me.” Cap’s jaw tightened perceptibly. “And we all lost.”

Wasn’t that the truth? Rhodey turned to glance towards the gorgeous, foreign sunset one last time, nodding firmly. “Let’s finish this up and get home, Cap. I want to see how Tony’s doing.”

The others had gathered outside of Thanos’ cabin, a rough hewn affair, simple and rustic. It would have been charming, he supposed, if it wasn’t for the maniac who built it. Nebula came down the steps, slowly, carrying nothing with her as she met them. Her face was still splattered with the gore of Stormbreaker’s passing through Thanos’ neck.

“Burn it,” she muttered coming up to them, looking to Thor himself, who stood scowling, his axe still covered with the congealed mess of Thanos’ death. He didn’t so much as nod as he lifted the mighty weapon high, calling lightning from the clear, dark blue sky, striking the top of the dwelling with a resounding crack. The flash had barely begun to fade from Rhodey’s vision when the smell of burning wood and grass began, slowly eating up the thatched roof and moving towards the inside. They stood watching in silent witness as the alien sun set, the body of Thanos burning to ash within the crumbling remains of his paradise. Nebula said little as they stood there, her dark eyes unblinking as she watched, silent tears streaming down her blue and purple face. Perhaps he was a fucked up father, but he was clearly the only one she’d know.

They waited till the hut had burned to little more than embers, Bruce standing by in his suit to extinguish any stray fires that might blaze up from it. Full dark was on them, the fields of crops now filled with the sounds of whatever alien life constituted the flora and fauna of this world. It was only after Thor had raked through the coals briefly to find the charred remains of bone that Cap finally called for them to load up on the Benatar. They trailed to where they had parked it, winding through the stalks, flashlights out and saying little. Even as he followed the others, Rhodey hung back to stare at the sky one last time. When else would he ever get this chance again, to say he visited another world? That boy who had once dreamed of being an astronaut, who had gone to the theater to see *Star Wars* ten times as a child, stood in awe at this moment, even as the cynical adult in him reminded him that near all of these stars there were likely planets and they likely were wondering why half of their people vanish, all because of the man they had just killed.

“Tony will be pissed he didn’t see this.” Natasha’s quiet voice at his elbow startled him.

“I think he’s over space for a bit after what he’s been through.” Rhody looked down at her tear-stained face. She had been so sure that all of this would work and they would bring everyone home. She and Cap had been the most crushed at Thanos’ revelation.

“Did you get any pictures?” Her normal levity sounded strained and hollow.

“Video even. Stuff to show the grandkids, if I have any.”

Her smile was small in her wan and tight face as they marched to the ship. “Perhaps you should, considering there are half as many of us as before.”
That thought was terrifying and heartbreaking all at once.

“I know I was the voice of doubt in all this, Romanoff, but for what it is worth, I hoped we would win and get them all back.”

“Yeah,” she sighed, tears he never thought he’d ever see her shed streaking down her stoic face. “Me too.”

He’d known Natasha since she’d worked for Tony. He’d never once saw her break. Awkwardly, he reached a robotic arm around her, careful not to crush her. She wrapped an arm around his, sobbing as she nodded, accepting his comfort, before neatly squirming out.

“Thanks, Rhodey,” she sighed, patting his hand before moving up the gangplank. Behind him, Danvers watched, solemn as he turned to her.

“You coming back with us, Superhero Girl?”

The other woman nodded quietly. “At least till we decide what to do next. Earth’s still my home, and I know...I know I have friends there. I need to make sure they are okay.”

He crawled in, strapping in the back as before, beside the silent Thor and the quietly crying Natasha. The entire cabin smelled of ashes and defeat. He took one last look out the front of the ship, to the foreign fields he could see under the Benetar’s floodlights, his last glimpse of another planet. That boy who once dreamed he could walk among the stars wished, for just a moment, he could have been there for something other than this, anything than this.

“Rocket,” Cap called as the raccoon strapped in. “Let’s go home.”

“Sure thing, Cap,” he called, sadly, as they lifted off, back into the stars and the nearest jump point. Back to what was left of home.
“When did they leave?” Tony’s mood upon waking was not much better than it had been when he collapsed on the floor at their feet.

Pepper quietly allowed it, far too exhausted to bother with calling him out on it. “Early this morning. I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

He glared at her with one gaunt, jaundiced eye, his attention still on the myriad of news reports all over the screen. “If they aren’t already dead on some other planet. Whose hairbrained idea was it? Rogers?”

Pepper gripped her patience tightly as she stood watch by the window, hoping against hope to see the lights of Rocket’s ship settle in front of the Avenger’s building once again. “I think it was a mutual decision. They felt if there was a slim chance, whatever it was, they needed to take it.”

“Well, I don’t see half the population back, so I’m guessing the slim chance wasn’t one at all.” Pent up for weeks, his snark was in full force, spewing everywhere, and no less because he wasn’t feeling well. She had been prepared for that. Tony with a head cold was enough to try the patience of a saint. This, however, was on another level.

“They weren’t going to let all of this go without a fight.”

“Of course not, because why accept the perfectly logical conclusion that we lost when it’s so much more noble to stand on principle and get your head bashed in.”

She knew who was at the heart of that criticism but chose to stay silent.

“Seriously, Rhodey had to go with them, too? I thought he was smarter than that.”

“He was right by their side in Wakanda when Thanos arrived here. He had as much right to be there with them.”

“Ahh, the great stand! They got their asses handed to them when Thanos didn’t know how to use all the stones. How do they think they will fair with him knowing all of them?”

“Do you full intend to complain the entire time?” Pepper had hit her limit with it. Since he had woken up late that afternoon he had done nothing but voice his dissatisfaction, loudly. She tried to be understanding and patient in this, but after everything over the last three weeks what remained of her nerves were gone and she felt herself breaking, anxiety eating away at what precious reserves she had left.

Her snap caught him short. He stopped enough to stare at her, as if really seeing her for the first time.
since he stumbled, broken and incoherent, off the spaceship. A million thoughts flickered, she could see them as he finally nodded, simply raising his arm in invitation. She didn’t think twice, throwing herself onto the narrow cot, curling up in the comfort of his embrace, gently pressing her cheek to his fragile chest. Tears she hadn’t noticed soaked the thin fabric of the sheet that covered him.

“I’m so sorry I left you,” he whispered into her hair, nimble fingers running through the frazzled mess of it. “I know I keep doing it, and I’m sorry. I thought I’d never see you again.”

A sob shook her shoulders as his thin arm wrapped around her as tightly as he could manage in his state. God, she didn’t care that he felt so light that the wind would blow him away, like half of everyone around her, or that he needed a shower like he needed food and fluids. He was alive, he was here, and he was hers and she never wanted to let him go ever again.

“Do you know how lucky it was we even found you,” she finally managed, voice cracking with grief. “Rocket was scanning every signal he could find and he just happened to chance on it in his ship.”

“That’s the raccoon?”

“Yeah,” she sniffed, too tired to find the humor in the surrealness of all of it. “You just took off without anyone, without telling me, without calling anybody.”

“Who was there to call? I had to get to Strange before he took off, and Peter was up on that ship, and…”

She detangled herself from him enough to turn a hard look up at him, unfazed by the pleading she had seen a million times in his rapid-fire, schoolboy explanations of why it was he fell into the latest mess he found himself in. He paused, words dying as he realized it would do him no good. He at least had the grace to look shamefaced.

“You had that phone.” It was all she said.

Annoyance and guilt warred for a brief moment, and predictably, he went for annoyance. “What, Bruce tattle on me?”

“You had that phone for years.”

“Even if I had called, Pep, it would have taken them hours to get from the Middle East to Greenwich Village and we didn’t have that kind of time.”

“How did you know that they were in the Middle East?”

He was caught and he knew it. His mouth closed with an audible pop, the slack muscles of his hollow cheeks furrowing with mutinous stubbornness and vague sheepishness.

Pepper wasn’t going to let it go. “Don’t have an answer for that?”

“I didn’t know where precisely they were in the Middle East.”

She raised only one eyebrow up at him.

“Okay, I knew it was Syria, but that was guesswork more than anything. Honestly, you’d think having Romanoff there she’d have taught them a thing or two on the ‘cloak-and-dagger’ thing, but Rogers doesn’t know how to spell ‘covert’.”
“You were following them?”

“I kept an eye on them! I didn’t know where Vision was at, though, he turned off his transponder. I couldn’t track him. It didn’t take a genius to figure out he was with Maximoff. Why else would he be trying to hide?”

“You know, as an Avenger, and under the Accords you signed, you were supposed to arrest them.” She couldn’t help needling him just a bit, not after the last few weeks of her life. He’d never been happy with the Accords, but he’d signed readily enough out of his crippling guilt and hubris, certain that he had the moral high ground for once. The mixed legacy that remained rankled, and she wasn’t about to make it easy for him to deal with.

His frown made it clear he knew exactly what she was up to. “I could have, but that would have required a form and some sub-committee hearing, and then I’d have to talk to Ross, which I avoid at all cost…”

“You aren’t getting out of this, Tony. You went by yourself. I don’t know how you aren’t dead.”

Her fingers reached beneath the sheet to the pink mark just under his rib cage, only just missing his already battered and war torn heart. It was the only remnant of a wound that should have killed him had it not been for his quick thinking and the nanotechnology he had on him. Nebula had given her the full rundown of what had been perforated and the raging infection she helped him fight. It was one of many scars she knew he carried, literally and figuratively.

Quietly, he reached for her hand against his skin, pulling it up to press against his dry lips. “I don’t know how I’m not either, babe. I just...I didn’t stop to think. I didn’t have time to. I sent the kid after Strange, and then...I just did it. I knew if he got to him and got that stone, that was it, no more. And I tried, Pep, I tried so hard.”

His grief broke like she never had witnessed before. What was left of any composure he had crumbled in an onslaught of wracking sobs, a torrent of anguish that trembled through him as Pepper held on tight, or as tight as she dared, at least, to his withered body. All she could do was hum nonsense, murmur words of comfort as he fell apart, hoping that in the end she could put him back together again. The storm subsided, finally. He was too weak to let it go on forever, but he quieted to occasional sniffles and choked sobs as she reached on the bedside table for tissues. Quietly, she passed him one as he reached for it with trembling fingers, trying to put some semblance of his dignity back together again as she opened a Pedialyte for him.

“I lost the kid, Pep.” His bloodshot, dark eyes were so hurt, the classic Tony Stark swagger lost in his grief. “I...his aunt trusted him to me and I lost him.”

“Tony, you tried. You all did.”

“Trying doesn’t cut it when people die, does it?”

“No.” She didn’t know what else to say. There wasn’t a lot that could make any of this better. She smoothed his lank hair off his flushed face, pressing the drink on him till he finally took it, swallowing slowly.

“Happy is on his way from the city. It’s slow going, the drive, there are still quite a few abandoned cars they are trying to clear up.” She’d seen footage on the news, most places looked like something out of an apocalyptic movie. Pepper supposed that’s exactly what they were living in, now.

“How did you get here?”
“Took one of the suits.” She shrugged, ignoring the ghost of his cocky grin. “Turns out I’m not so bad using it.”

“Always thought you’d look sexy in one.”

He at least made her laugh. “I think that would take your narcissism and self-absorption to a whole new and very uncomfortable level.”

“You think that would be worst thing a therapist would have to say about me after the month I’ve had?”

If she couldn’t find some humor in all of this, she would cry, and they’d already done that. She only shook her head, kissing him lightly, pressing her forehead to his briefly. “You need a shower.”

“Don’t know if I’m up to one of those, yet. Sponge bath, though... attractive nurse…”

“I thought you wanted me in the suit.”

“Best of all worlds?”

“You are so weird,” she breathed, soaking in a moment of calm in the hurricane their lives had become.

Outside, the sound of roaring filled the air as the building reverberated with something re-entering the atmosphere. Pepper bolted up, eyes to the window, as outside she could catch the incoming light of an aircraft coming in to land.

“They’re back!” Her knees buckled, briefly, with the knowledge they had made it home. She didn’t know how safe of sound, but at least someone had come back. The Benatar circled before landing outside, nearly in the same place it had the night Tony had returned.

Tony was already trying to get up out of his sick bed. “Get the wheelchair over there, will you?”

“Tony, you need to stay in bed.”

“I want to see who made it back and what happened.” Something dark and manic glittered for just a moment in his expression before melting into pleading. “Please? They’re still my team!”

She relented, but only with the promise that he stay in his chair with the IV drip attached and to not repeat his performance from the previous day. He settled, achingly slowly, pulling his robe about himself with as much dignity as he could, and held on to the rolling IV frame as she pushed him carefully into the common area, waiting for the others to make it inside.

They were still alive at least, all of them, even Steve Rogers, which Pepper had half worried wouldn’t be the case. But one look at them all showed that whatever happened. It hadn’t been the win they wanted.

“Cap?” Tony’s dark eyes flickering between everyone, coming to rest on Steve.

“Thanos is dead. Thor took care of him.”

Pepper looked immediately to the tall, glowering god of thunder, hulking in the back of the group beside Bruce in his borrowed armor, and then to Nebula, her face still spattered with what looked like blood - likely her own father’s. Thor, for his part, looked neither pleased nor sorry for what he did. If anything, he still looked murderous. She suddenly felt vaguely ill.
“The stones?”

“Gone,” Rocket said simply, little hands at his waist as he sank into one of the armchairs at the table. “We had him pinned down. It was like a mob jump. Golden Girl over there went in and grabbed him first, then your pals in the suits came up and grabbed his hands. Thor chopped off his gauntlet, but when I flipped it over, the stones were...gone.”

“Gone? How could they just be gone?” Agitated, Tony nearly jumped from his seat, till Pepper’s staying hand and her murmured reminder had him settling back again. “He had to be hiding them or gave them to someone…”

“He snapped his fingers again.” This was Natasha, standing to the right of Steve, her face pale, eyes red-rimmed and unguarded. It caught Pepper by surprise. She’d had always respected that this was a woman who carried herself with calm, poise and absolute steel in the face of outrageous odds, whether it was in a fight or as a spy. It’s what made her an Avenger. Pepper had never, ever seen her break like this, not without a purpose at least.

“We were able to find him because Rocket traced the energy signal from the second snap,” Natasha continued, her voice trembling. “He’d already used the gauntlet again, this time to undo the stones, to destroy them so that if we ever found him, we couldn’t undo what he had done.”

Clearly, Thanos had learned his lesson in regards to the Avengers. In a strange way, Pepper couldn’t fault him for thinking ahead, as he had been right, they had come, but it was too late. There were no other options, no do-overs, no go backs.

“So, we really lost?” The question in Tony’s voice was merely rhetorical. He had known. Still, he had perhaps carried some sliver of hope.

They all fell silent, heartbroken, at a loss. The only one to speak was Steve. “I’m sorry, Tony. We tried.”

Without a trace of bitterness or irony, he simply sighed, tugging at Pepper’s fingers on his shoulder, murmuring his earlier statement. “Trying doesn’t cut it when people die, does it?”

And there lay the open wound for all of them.

“Tony,” Rhodey began, that familiar, gentle rebuke in his voice, but Tony held up one thin, emaciated hand.

“I didn’t mean it as an asshole. We tried, we all tried, just...we lost. For the first time, we couldn’t out think, out smart, out maneuver, or out will the other guy. We tried, gang, and hey, that’s the best any of us can do. Now we have to figure out what to do from here.”

It was clearly not a conversation any of them were ready for, least of all Steve, the man who had lost and moved on so many times Pepper’s head spun to think of it. Still, he took in the rest of the team with him. “Go ahead, bunk down for the night. Nebula, Danvers, you are welcome here as long as you need.”

He glanced over to Tony warily, as if he just now remembering that technically he was still a fugitive and not the leader of the Avengers. “That’s if it’s okay by you.”

Tony at least still had enough wits about him to shrug lazily after a hard look at Steve, as if he couldn’t be bothered with such things. “Sure, knock yourself out, though the beer in the fridge is my favorite. I ship that in special from Georgia, so don’t drink it all.”
Thor may have looked somewhat disappointed by that.

“And you won’t turn us into the government?” Trust Natasha to take on the elephant in the room by both tusks, ignoring the reproachful murmur from Steve.

If Tony was offended by her challenge, he at least hid it. “Ross is dusted, isn’t he? Otherwise, I think they have more enough issues than worrying about the Avengers being back together again. Besides, they’ll probably need all of you sooner rather than later, judging from CNN.”

Natasha accepted this with a curt nod, but nothing more. Steve clearly was too tired to deal with any of it.

“We’ll let you get some rest, Tony. The rest of you, let’s regroup in the morning.”

They all finally wandered off in different directions. Rhodey wrapped an arm around Tony’s thin shoulders murmuring something Pepper couldn’t hear before heading to his quarters for a shower. Rocket agreed to take Nebula to one of the spare rooms so she could clean up. Thor wandered to the kitchen, propping his monster of an axe by the door, still dark with the blood of Thanos smeared all along its blade. Danvers eyed first it, then the Asgardian, before following him quietly into the kitchen with a quiet look passing between her and Steve. In the end, only Steve and Nat remained.

It was Steve who spoke first in their face off. “It’s good to see you, Tony. Damn good to see you.”

Tony was a man who didn’t let go of his grievances easily. Still, he was at least gracious enough to accept Steve’s goodwill. “Glad you held down the fort while I went on a little space adventure. Of course, had you been here the whole time…”

Pepper let her hand wander from his shoulder to his cheek, her voice soft but firm. “Tony…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” He did too, but that hurt was still healing and likely would be a long time in doing so, if ever. He sighed, letting his inner asshole drop for half a moment. “I’m sorry about Wilson…and Barnes.”

That last one had cost him. Pepper felt proud he said it.

“Thank you,” Steve murmured, quietly, his expression solemn with loss. “I’m sorry for Parker. He was an amazing kid.”

“Yeah.” Tony’s voice rasped with grief for just a moment before he cleared it. “Anyone find out about his aunt?”

“I can look.” Natasha volunteered. “If she’s alive, do you want us to…”

“No, I’ll do it. It should be me, anyway. I promised…” He trailed off, sighing. “She found out about the whole Spider-Man gig and what he was up to. When she did, she found me and threatened to either slap me with a lawsuit or have me killed. I wasn’t clear on the details. I promised her I would keep him safe to the best of my abilities. If anyone is the one to tell her, it should be me.”


“Yeah, another kid, Harley Keener. He’s in Tennessee at a STEM high school for engineering. He’s supposed to be starting MIT next year. Just..he’s a good kid.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”
“Thanks. Any word on Barton.”

“No.” She only flinched a little.

“His whole family?”

“Yes.” Her answer was simple, but it pulled from deep within her. Pepper felt for her and the loss of everything she had built for herself.

“Jesus,” Tony swore softly. “Fury kept them off the grid to keep them safe.”

“No one was safe in this. You know that.”

Tony’s shoulders slumped perceptibly. Even if he wasn’t tired, and she couldn’t see how he wasn’t, Pepper felt enough was enough. “I think we need to get you back in to rest.”

“Sure.” He nodded, regarding the other two. “Not going to lie, I’m glad Thor killed that son-of-a-bitch.”

Steve gave him a dark sort of smile. “Not going to lie, I am to.”

For what it was worth, a black part of Pepper’s soul was glad as well.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't found anything definitive that says T. Ross was dusted (or E. Ross for that matter), but I liked the idea he was and then had to be rescued by the Avengers, Bruce specifically, so this is how I'm running with it.
In the days and weeks after the snap and Tony’s miraculous return, Happy Hogan’s phone was suspiciously quiet.

Honestly, it wasn’t like he was any less busy with half of the world gone and everything turned upside down, if anything, he was more so. There were fewer people in this world which meant a security nightmare. He had fewer resources, fewer bodies, and more territory to cover with less. Unfortunately for everyone, the snap didn’t take away thieves, hackers, con artists, or those interested in trying to use the chaos of the snap to break into the vast information networks and massive archives that Stark Industries possessed. Between shadowing Pepper wherever she went and worrying over Tony’s still frail and shaky health, his days were filled with video conferences, meetings, and protracted conversations on how to manage what felt like the impossible in a world where clearly anything was possible. So, no, he didn’t exactly have a lot of time in his day.

But everyday, around four o’clock, he’d look at his phone, expecting a flurry of voice messages to inundate his inbox, transcription flashing up on the screen faster than he could ever possibly read. For the last two years, like clockwork, his phone would ring with a Queens’ number and he’d send it to voicemail to listen to later in the evening. Most of it was just breathless ramblings, a tumbling torrent of words that was Peter Parker running down all his good deeds for the day as Happy tried to pick through it and see if there was anything he needed to involve the lawyers in for. Without fail, those check-ins came. Most of the time he ignored them in irritation. Now his phone was silent and he didn’t like it.

“Something up?” Pepper had been reviewing his report on security details for Stark Industries main headquarters in El Segundo and New York.

“What? Yeah, everything’s fine, just checking my phone.”

“It’s the fourth time you checked it in the last five minutes. Not even you are that attached to your phone.” She eyed it suspiciously. “Did you get a girlfriend?”

“No!”

“I’m just saying, you wouldn’t check it so much unless you had a reason.”

“I am head of global security for your company, that’s not reason enough?”

“Because you wouldn’t check it if it were your mother.”

“Yeah, if only she could have gotten snapped.”

Pepper’s expression was reproachful. “Happy!”

“I don’t mean that, but I kinda do. No, it’s not my mother, it’s not a girlfriend.”
“Happy’s got a girlfriend?”

Trust Tony to come in on the backside of that conversation. He had wobbled in from the back area of their posh penthouse, still using his cane to shuffle along in a way that made Happy wince seeing it. Tony had his fair share of scrapes and knocks, hell, he’d had his ass handed to him more than a few times before he was ever Iron Man, but he had never been anything like this. Whatever this Thanos did to him, it had fucked him up but good, and nearly dying of starvation and infection clearly didn’t help. Tony was a shadow of who he was the day he left on that stupid ship and it hurt to see him like that.

“I don’t have a girlfriend and if I did, you don’t think I’d have told you by now?”

“True. Whatever happened to that nurse you were dating?” Tony hobbled over to the comfortable living room where Pepper had spread out her office, settling in an armchair and waving off his ever hovering fiancee.

“Janice? We broke up because you moved to New York and didn’t go back to LA where she lives.”

“Long distance relationships work,” Tony protested.

“They don’t work,” Pepper muttered.

“We worked!”

“I have a private jet I can fly back and forth in, and barring that you have these nifty suits.”

He blinked mildly out of his haggard face, regarding her. “Right, I suppose that does help.”

“Happy was checking his phone,” Pepper now had a cohort in her mayhem and Happy wished he hadn’t even pulled the damn thing out of his pocket.

“And you say you don’t have a girlfriend?” Tony was like a dog on the hunt now, glee lighting his emaciated face. “Spill it, Hogan. Who is she?”

“No one and mind your own business.” He desperately didn’t want to have this conversation right now, especially not with Tony of all people.

“She got a name?”

“No.”

“She live in New York?”

“No.”

“She lives in Canada?”

“No.”

“She’s a he?”

“No!” He glared at his best friend and sometimes employer who hardly looked sorry as he impishly smirked. “I mean, maybe it could be he, I prefer she types, but I am just saying, be open minded is all. It doesn’t matter because there is no one and leave it alone.”

“Not a girlfriend...you owe someone money?”
Happy glared at him. “What, you think this is the set of Goodfellas?”

“Just saying.”

“Would I work global security for your company and be in with the mob?”

“I’ve had people working for my company doing worse things, including some nutjobs, so you never can tell.”

“Well I’m not that Quentin Beck asshole, so no.”

Tony paused only long enough to consider a new angle. “Selling drugs?”

Happy only glared at him.

“Corporate espionage?”

“Tony!” Pepper’s tone had an edge of warning in it.

“I’m cooped up here, Pep, I need some excitement in my life.”

“Picking on Happy isn’t it.”

He ignored her, dark eyes regarding Happy with gleeful possibility. “Working as a Vegas bookie?”

“No,” Happy snapped, wishing he would just stop at this point.

“Secret life as a male escort?”

“I was checking on the kid!”

Happy hadn’t meant to snap like that and was vaguely shocked that he did. He was a veteran of Tony’s needling to the point he could ignore most of it, but something about it had crawled under even his thick skin. He found himself staring at the stunned faces of both of them at his proclamation, feeling shame and guilt rise up as he glared at the said phone in front of him.

“Everyday at about this time, Parker would be calling me to give me one of his updates about whatever he was doing after school and people he would help. He never failed at it, even if it was just to tell me that he was late getting out because of practice or some test coming up. Everyday, I’d let it go to voicemail and then when I got home I’d listen to him ramble about catching bike thieves, and purse snatchers, and getting cookies from little old ladies. I’d make sure nothing crazy came up, you know, just make sure he was okay, because the last time I ignored his phone calls he nearly got killed by someone stealing your stuff and I promised I wouldn’t do that to him ever again. Last message he sent me, he had just gotten off his bus from his field trip and was heading to Greenwich Village and he wanted me to let you know he was coming. That was it, that was all he said, and my phone has been silent ever since.”

If he had thrown a flash grenade into the room, he didn’t think he could have had more of an impact on them. Pepper’s jaw hung on the floor as she glanced towards Tony, who looked as if Happy had shot him. He’d not heard the full story of what happened up there, only that Tony had lost the kid, and he’d not asked, but he could see the devastation as clear as day on his best friend’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Happy murmured, suddenly wishing he were anywhere but his bosses’ apartment ruining their lives.

“Happy,” Pepper finally gasped, sadness and sympathy in that single word.
“No, look, I’m sorry. I was here, giving my report, I didn’t mean to bring it up and…”

“I miss him too.” That was all Tony said as Happy fumbled for his phone and keys, staring blankly at Tony’s fixed face. He’d said so little about Peter since he got back from space, of what happened to him. All Happy knew was that he dusted like everyone else.

“He was a good kid.” Happy had meant it much more as a statement than the challenge it sounded like.

“He was,” Tony conceded, suddenly looking as exhausted as he had been when they’d gotten him back from outer space. “He was the best.”

They fell into silence, the ghost of a teenage boy hanging between them.

“FRIDAY,” Pepper finally murmured into the silence. “Could you move all my data into the bedroom. I’m going to take a call in there.”

She began gathering papers and files as Tony watched her apologetically. “I didn’t mean to run you out!”

“I know, but I think this is a conversation you both need to have.” She stood, her arms loaded as she leaned in to kiss him before glancing at Happy pointedly and wandering from the room. Her absence left just the two of them there with their grief and sadness.

Happy took the initiative at least. “I didn’t want to bring it up.”

“It’s all right.” Tony waved a frail hand, sounding as if it was anything but all right.

“I didn’t want to bring him up while your still recovering.”

“Why not?”

Happy drew up short here. He wasn’t particularly sure why. “Because...look, Tony, I know what the kid meant to you.”

“Like he meant any less to you?”

“I know, I’m just saying…”

“We all lost, didn’t we?”

Happy never thought he ever heard Tony sound so defeated. “Yeah...I guess we did.”

They sat staring at each other for long moments, the only sound was Pepper’s voice far off in the distance, talking on the phone. Happy didn’t know what to say. He had never been into the super hero life, especially not for Tony. Hell, when he came on board twenty-five years before, Tony had still been deep in his balls-to-the-wall lifestyle of women, booze, drugs and occasionally inventing things. He’d nearly given Happy a heart attack many times over before he started to calm down. He’d always vaguely hoped Tony would chill out, like Howard did before him, get a life, find a woman, marry her and settle down. But then Afghanistan happened, then Iron Man, then Nick Fury shows up and dragged Tony merrily into saving the world. All Happy could do now was make sure Pepper was safe and stand with her helplessly as he tore off after one crisis after another. And it was one thing when it was Tony doing the crazy. Then he got the kid involved, and then...then it became something else.
“Can I just say something,” Happy asked, finally finding his words.

“Sure,” Tony shrugged, scrubbing at his already too-thin face.

“You should never have gotten the kid involved in all of this.”

Tony’s sigh pulled from somewhere deep inside of him as he let his head hang. “I know.”

“I mean it, Tony, you never should have, and it’s my fault that you even found out. I should have known better. You’re like a kid in a candy store when something new like that pops up, you gotta have it, and I showed you those videos and then you wanted to go recruit a high school freshman to go with you to try and take on Cap and the rest. And I should have said something, but I didn’t. Hell, that whole trip, he was acting like I was taking him to Disneyland, not like there were life and death stakes involved.”

“I get it, Happy, he was too young.”

“Yeah, he was too young, and too stupid to know his own limits. I mean, Christ, his uncle died what, not even a year before. Of course he’d think he could take on the world, stop people doing bad things like they did to him, because what kid wouldn’t dream of having that chance?”

Tony looked grim at that. “Peter wasn’t the vengeful kind.”

“No, he wasn’t, but he did want to be a superhero just like you. He wanted to be like Iron Man, stopping the bad guys and saving the world. You know what I wanted him to do? To get to class on time. To not skip school to go chase after people. I wanted him to get home and eat dinner and do his homework. I wanted him to be sleeping in his bed at his aunt’s apartment, safe, every night. That’s what I wanted, because then I did my job. Every time I turned around that kid was in the middle of something, and he thought he could get away with it because you told him he was your Avengers intern.”

“I didn’t mean for him to throw himself in that Toomes business and I sure as hell didn’t want him getting too deep into anything without signing up for the Accords.”

“Yeah, those Accords, the ones that were supposed to keep everyone in line. How well did that work out?”

“What, you want to come after my ass on that too, Hogan?”

“Yes...no.” He sighed, frustrated, flopping back into the deep cushions of their couch as he glared at Tony. “I’m just saying you have an unfortunate habit of acting first, feeling bad about it later, and then making everyone else ride on your guilt trip. If you hadn’t tried to push the Accords on the team, you and Cap wouldn’t have come to blows, and Peter could have just been a normal kid in Queens.”

“He was never going to be a normal kid, you know that, right? He could climb up walls and swing through buildings. He wasn’t ever going to be normal.”

Unfortunately, Happy knew he was right. “He didn’t have to be drug into this.”

“Yeah, I know that too.” Tony fiddled with his cane, rolling it between his bone thin fingers. “There’s a lot I regret in all of this, go figure. I regret not going to therapy sooner. I regret Ultron, and Sokovia. I regret not at least trying to hear out Rogers’ side of the argument and maybe trying to find a compromise. I regret...I regret all the fall out on that side of it, at least the stuff I’m guilty for. Yeah, sure, I regret it. I get it as much as it is hard to believe, I do get I had a part to play in the tragedy that
helped bring this about. But bigger than all of those is the regret that there was this kid, this brilliant kid who I not only let down, I brought him in and I can never, ever get him back. I had him in my arms, Happy, when it hit. He was in my fingers when he crumbled to dust and I couldn’t do anything. So, yeah, I know what it means to miss him.”

Happy could list on one hand the number of times he’d seen Tony Stark moved to tears in their long association, and he didn’t need more than one digit to count that off. To see him now, frail and tearful, hurt more than words could say. “This was why I didn’t want to bring it up.”

Tony could only chuckle wetly. “I don’t hire you to keep me safe, you know.”

“Yeah, I kind of noticed. Besides, you don’t hire me at all, your fiance does.”

“Point, but I keep you around because you’re my friend and your honest with me and I need that. I guess I’ve been wallowing and should have remembered how much the kid meant to you, too.”

“Closest thing I’ll have to a nephew, I guess,” Happy sighed, considering. “Unless my sister actually gets married, and let’s be honest, I can’t see that happening unless they are blind or desperate.”

“I don’t know, half the world is gone, fewer options, someone might be one or both.”

Levity restored, Happy chuckled much more loudly than he probably needed to at that. “Jesus...right I just...yeah. Anyway, I would like to think this is a moment of personal growth for the two of us.”

“Agreed, we shared our feeling, discussed like adults, came to an amicable conclusion.”

“Either therapy is working or we are getting old.”

Tony could only bark a laugh and sigh. “Christ, I think it’s the latter.”

“Yeah.”

Feelings were not something that Happy had a lot of experience dealing with, especially not with Tony Stark.

“So, wanna watch a movie?”

Which was how an hour-and-a-half later Pepper found them both snoring lightly in front of the projection of Die Hard, a fact that had her teasing them mercilessly for weeks to come.
Bruce wasn’t a religious man, but if there were a God in this universe, and given recent events he wasn’t sure where he landed on that argument, whatever deity was out there had a sick sense of humor, putting him and Natasha Romanoff in any sort of failed romance. The two people perhaps the least capable and most confused in how to manage normal human relations get stuck together and when it predictably didn’t go well - admittedly, mostly his fault - they were left to somehow figure out what in the world they could possibly do about it. It wasn’t fair, but then again, what in his life ever was?

Natasha was a consummate professional, if anything, and given that the sky was falling, the world was ending, and they had so many more important things to worry about since returning from killing Thanos, nothing had come up. Of course, perhaps that was a bit self-centered, after all, considering the years, the way it all fell out, and the current state of everything, the last thing that would be top of anyone’s mind would be something like this, but Bruce was aware. He was always aware, he had to be, that itching anxiety in the back of his brain, the quiet fear and the silent worry of what this would mean about everything when they finally did have a chance to address it. He may not know how to keep relationships, but he had a hell of a knack for destroying them.

As fate would have it, it all came to a head, not in a stormy argument with flying dishes or some sadly emotional conversation in the rain by the side of the river, but because of Thor being Thor and being obtuse. Rocket had been trying to boost signal all day to find and hail the Asgardians and see who and what of them remained. Bruce had been there initially to help, but frankly, the talking rodent had it well in hand and between him and Friday had managed to scan the relative coordinates Thor remembered to try and find them.

“FRIDAY, love, think you can scan the quadrant and see if you find any particular signal, distress or otherwise.” Rocket had an affection for Tony’s AI that was bordering on creepy and Bruce wondered if he’d want to have one of his own.

“Sure thing. You are looking for something with an Asgardian signature?”

“Yep!” Rocket turned to Thor, slouched in a nearby chair, hoodie over his head. “Anything I should tell them?”

“Ask them how many are alive.” His words were dull and hollow, laced with a quiet desperation. Bruce’s heart went out to him. Poor guy had lost everything in the space of weeks, really, his home, his culture, his family, most of his people, and that wasn’t including Thanos and all of that. Even the Avengers were a mess. Small wonder he was falling apart at the seams.

“We’ll find them, buddy,” Bruce assured him, sharing a pointed glance with Rocket. “I mean, Valkyrie, she’s a good warrior, she’ll keep them safe till they get here.”
Rocket chimed in. “What’s the worst that could happen, right? I mean, half the universe is gone, so no one will come and kill what’s left!”

Not exactly the words of comfort Bruce would have used. “Or they could just be in space, perfectly fine and trying to figure out how to get here, all safe and normal.”

Rocket blinked at him. “That’s what I was getting at.”

“What’s up, guys?”

They all jumped and turned on Natasha, who stood leaning nonchalantly against the door, amused at the reaction she still got. Tony used to swear he’d put a bell on her, except she might just kill him with it.

“Gees, could you just make noise and be obnoxious like normal people?” Rocket clutched his chest and glared at her completely unapologetic expression. “How do you do that?”

“I was raised by a secret organization who trained young women to be assassins and spies in order to be used as tools in their wars on other nations.”

Rocket only stared at her for long minutes.

“Also, I studied ballet, a form of dance that develops grace and requires extreme muscle control, and believe me you can’t get through Swan Lake without learning how to walk quietly.”

If that had any meaning to the alien life form, he didn’t show it. “Why can’t any of you just have a normal backstory, like you had a family, you grew up, and then got into this hero gig because it was a great job?”

“You think this is a job choice?” Natasha eyed him as she threw herself down on the nearest couch.

“I had that story,” Thor spoke up quietly, staring hard at something in the middle distance only he could see. “Mother, father, brother, great childhood, raised to believe I had a place in this universe, that I was special.”

Rocket’s expression didn’t look impressed. “Yeah, as the future king of a magic land with golden halls, floating in the middle of space, not exactly normal people over there, Thor.”

“Well, that and it turned out to be a pack of lies perpetuated by my father who was hiding the truth from my brother and me, so there is that.”

Well, that brought the mood down a smidge.

“So, what you are saying is that you have a tragic backstory like everyone else.” Rocket threw his hands up in disgust before turning on Bruce. “What about you?”

“Me? It was normal, I suppose. Normal parents, normal school, normal everything.”

“Except for how many doctorates,” Natasha pointed out teasingly from her nest of pillows.

“A lot...but you know, I liked that. I mean, I had issues with my dad, but so did Tony, so did Clint, so does Thor, I mean, who doesn’t have those?”

Thor nodded slowly in companionable understanding at him, holding up his fist for a brief bump. Bruce stared at it but obliged as the other man gave him a grimace he supposed meant they were in solidarity.
He continued. “Yeah, nothing was weird in my life until I got brought on to research the super soldier serum and well...became the other guy. That’s when everything fell apart.”

“You injected yourself with something that made you giant, green and angry on purpose?”

When Rocket put it that way…

“In my defense, I didn’t know it would do that to me. But, yeah, not precisely the best scientific approach, I suppose.”

Natasha shook her still weirdly blonde hair. “Isn’t that the plot of most classic horror movies? Scientist wants to science, decides to inject himself, mayhem ensues.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think Thaddeus Ross was big on institutional review boards.” In hindsight, it all sounded dumb and foolish now. In the heat of the moment, with Betty and her father there…

“Anyway, lost the job, the girl, my life as I knew it, and here we are.” He waved expansively to them all in the middle of the Avengers facility. They all looked at one another.

“At least we aren’t standing around in a circle like a bunch of assholes.” Rocket sniffed, turning back to the screen and the signal he was working on.

Thor, who had been strangely silent during much of that, finally emerged from his hoodie to regard Bruce. “You haven’t lost everything, you know.”

Bruce wasn’t sure if the other man meant that accusingly or not. “I...didn’t say…I…”

“You still have Natasha, after all.” He nodded knowingly at her in the corner of the couch, her face blank as a white sheet of paper, stoic and unreadable. It was her version of the deer in headlights face. He was sure his own expression was much more similar to the traditional one, jaw hanging on the ground, eyes wide in panic.

“Thor, I…” He began to babble, but the larger man held up a hand in the face of his utter confusion.

“As someone who had everything and then lost it all, just let me tell you both to take the opportunities you have and seize them. Don’t waste them. One day, you’ll wake up to find your world destroyed in the long-prophesied calamity that you had a part in starting, just to destroy your evil sister you didn’t know existed, and then in your escape, a mad, world-destroying Titan attacks your ship, slaughters half of the passengers, kills your best friend and your brother in front of your eyes and destroys your ship with you in it, leaving you to die in the void of space, only to mock you when you attempt to destroy him and fail because you are an idiot.”

Even Rocket turned around to stare at him over that one.

“Right, sorry, that got strangely self-involved.” He scrubbed at his face before rising to stand between Bruce and Natasha, his mismatched eye giving them both what he assumed was perhaps a sadly paternal expression. “I say this as your friend and someone who has known you both for a while, take your chances while you can. Gather your rosebuds while you may, I think the saying goes, by your Shakespeare! I read that after Stark made reference to it, but it applies just the same. Don’t lose your chance!”

With that, he inclined his head meaningfully to them all, shoved his hands into his hoodie, and wandered off in the direction of the kitchen to grab a six-pack of whatever was in there and wander off onto the grounds. They all stared at him as he went, quietly dumbfounded. It was Natasha who found her voice first.
“Wasn’t that To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time by Robert Herrick?”

Bruce shrugged. “Beats me! I’m just shocked he was reading human literature and poetry.”

“He’s in bad shape, whatever it is.” Rocket hissed through his teeth, perhaps his approximation of a whistle, shaking his furry head, before glancing between the two of them appreciatively. “So, you two...you’re...uh...a thing?”

Natasha only arched an eyebrow. “Maybe you should go after Thor and have him recite some Shakespeare to you. It will be educational.”

Rocket was smart enough to know when a dangerous woman was telling him to get the hell out. “Right, so I’ll go find Thor and ask him about this Shakes Pier guy and whatever.”

Bruce watched the wander in the direction of Thor as quickly as he could, muttering about not getting the middle of emotional entanglements. Bruce couldn’t blame him. Right now, he wished he wasn’t in the middle of one either.

“So,” Natasha began with a drawl. “There is that elephant in the room.”

“I don’t like elephants,” Bruce muttered, scrubbing at his face and wishing he could avoid this conversation for a bit longer.

“I don’t know, they are smart, kind of sweet, never forget.”

“Yeah.” He looked at her, at the hint of humor and depth of sadness lurking in her expression. “Natasha...”

“So, another planet?” She cut across him, shifting on the couch to sit, cross-legged, a pillow in her lap, hugged to her chest. “A trash planet?”

Her shift in conversation startled him as he pulled back from the apology that had been on his lips. “I...uh...yeah, something like that, I guess. Sort of more an intergalactic junkyard, where things that are lost or forgotten get dumped.”

“Even people?”

He squirmed a bit. “Yeah, even people.”

Her expression, cool and distant, didn’t shift as she nodded, running her fingers through her hair. “So, the next question is how did you end up there? Last we saw, you were on the quinjet, lost somewhere over the Indian Ocean.”

That part was as much a mystery to him as anyone else. “Don’t know, I wasn’t the one in control. My guess is he hit something that caused us to end up in space. There’s a jump point not far away, probably just found it and that’s where he ended up, simple as that.”

“So simple.” She said it as if he were trying to explain how he backed the car up onto a light pole.

This was not going at all well.

“Natasha...”

“When did you first figure out you weren’t on Earth?”

“Err...not until Thor showed up a few weeks ago.” That was perhaps the second most surreal
moment of his life, next to the first moment he had changed all those years ago. “I mean one moment I was in the dungeon in Strucker’s castle in Sokovia, kissing you, the next I’m waking up naked on the remains of the quinjet in a junk pile, Thor standing over me, and you on the vid screen telling me to come home. I didn’t know where I was or how I got there, and apparently everyone on the planet knew me, or at least they knew Hulk. He was some sort of celebrity there…”

“Well, good for him, then,” she muttered, dryly.

“No, not good for him! I don’t know, it was some sort of fighting pit, like ancient Rome, but I didn’t know how I got there or how long it had been. Honestly, Nat, I didn’t have any control over any of it. Three years...I mean, the Hulk hadn’t ever been in control of me for that long, ever. If that video hadn’t come up…”

He trailed off, slightly helpless at the very thought of it.

But Natasha wasn’t that shy about it. “You’d still be Hulk now, some gladiator in an alien stadium, oblivious to the rest of this?”

“Well...yeah.” He shrugged, his smile without humor. “It wasn’t my call, Nat.”

“I know. It was mine.” Her sigh was long and sad, pulling from the depths inside of her. “I suppose it’s my turn now to apologize for pushing you, but we needed Hulk, not Bruce.”

“I know.” Bruce Banner was a mild mannered scientist who got to hang out with superheroes all day. He was just a normal human being, nothing unique or special about him. The Hulk was who they needed, who they always needed, and yet he was unpredictable and uncontrollable. Case in point, the fact he still hadn’t coaxed him out of whatever part of Bruce’s psyche he called home, not since Thanos had beaten the crap out of him.

“So, how did things end up in Sokovia, since I don’t really remember it at all?” He might as well ask since they were on the subject.”

“Horrible! The city was destroyed. Wanda’s brother was killed saving Clint. Sokovia’s already shaky economy was in tatters, and you know, the world blamed us for it, so that was fun.”

“I’d have been here if I could have.”

“I know.” She plucked at a thread on the corner of the pillow, pulling it between thumb and forefinger as she studied it, quietly. “I get it, you weren’t you.”

That seemed to be the story of his life, never having any control of it at the very precise moments he needed it. “I’m me now, and this me...I’m still the same guy I was three years ago.”

“Yeah, but I’m not the same girl I was three years ago.”

Bruce tried to ignore the aching crack that broke in his chest then. ‘Nat…”

“You woke up and didn’t know what had happened. Me, I was here, with the Avengers...with our family! I was left behind, trying to hold them together and watching Tony and Steve pull them apart. I was stuck in the middle of a battle I could never win, while Thaddeus Ross tried to create watchlists of enhanced humans and put a leash on the Avengers. I was then forced to run when I wouldn’t submit. You may have blinked and three years had passed, but it didn’t for me. I wish I could say it did.”

For a brief moment Bruce had to wonder if this was how Steve felt when he woke up from the ice,
awake in a world that had passed him by. “So where does that leave us?”

She stared at him for long moments, inscrutable. “I honestly don’t know.”

“I still feel the same for you I did then.”

Something softened, just a little at his words. “If only it were that simple.”

“It’s not?”

“You know it’s not.” She picked at the pillow yet again. “Perhaps it was a foolish idea, someone like me having a normal relationship with just a regular guy.”

The idea she would even use the word ‘regular’ to describe him made him laugh. “We both know I’m the furthest thing from one of those.”

“Well, in our line of work, you are the closest I get.” Her smile was small and sad.

“I don’t think it was a foolish idea for either of us.”

“No?” She didn’t sound so sure. “You know, it took a lot for me to even bring the idea up to you.”

For the confident, cool Natasha Romanoff he had a hard time believing that. “Why?”

“Because of who I am and what you become. Let’s be honest, you are a nice guy who turns into a monster. I am a monster who happens to look like a nice girl.”

“You aren’t a monster, Nat!”

“You don’t know everything I did before this.”

“I know some of what you did.”

“Not all of it.” She hugged the pillow in her arms so tight she might as well be strangling it. “I wasn’t a person for a very long time, Bruce, I was...a thing. I was a tool that could be used and projected on at will. Do you need a spy? Do you need an assassin? How about the sweet, innocent ingenue who can beguile the jaded man of wealth and power? How about the stripper to incriminate your enemy all over the world’s press? How about the woman in his bed who conveniently dispatches him so he’s no longer a problem? I could be a school girl, a mother, a whore, a saint, whatever you needed me to be, and I didn’t care about who it affected or who got hurt in the process.”

Bruce knew all this, had always known all this. Some of it he picked up from Natasha, but most of it he’d gotten off of Clint in a moment of big-brother protectiveness while they were hiding out at the Barton’s farm. “You know, none of that matters to me.”

“But it does matter to me.” He had never heard Natasha sound so brittle and vulnerable and he didn’t like that she did. “I’ve clawed my way to the place I’m at now. I’ve built this up, slowly, piece-by-piece, to be human, to care about people outside of my own narrow world, to care about my family I have now, my team, you. This is what I got and I’ve watched all of it fall to pieces the last few years and I got to wonder if maybe it was too much to hope for.”

“I don’t think it was.” The fervency in his voice shook even him. “Natasha, you were always human. That they made you something else, that is on them, but it was never on you, and you deserve all those things, same as everyone else.”

It took him a long moment to realize those were tears streaming down her otherwise calm features.
“Standing in that hut, Thanos on the floor, all I could think was that I tried so hard to make it all better, to make it right, to balance the ledger and put it all back, and the harder I try, the worse it gets. All those people...Cooper, Lila and Nate...Laura...you know Clint risked everything for me. He was told to kill me, to remove me because I was a problem. He should have done it, but he didn’t. He put it all on the line to go into Fury and tell him that I deserved more than being put down. He brought me here. He gave me a family to love and something to do right, and I wanted to bring that all back for him.”

“I know.” He thought of Thor’s people, even now floating out there in space, lost and likely terrified.

She wiped at her cheeks absently. “This, the Avengers or what’s left of us, this is all that remains of everything. What we do here, what we try to do, this is what I got left. I came out of the cold because Clint convinced me I didn’t have to be the monster they made me to be. Laura and the kids may be gone, most of our team may be gone, Wanda, Sam, Bucky, Vision, but I’m here. The work still needs to be done, now more than ever with everything happening. The world still needs heroes, even if we are broken.”

Bruce couldn’t help but chuckle at her sentiment. “You sound like Steve right now.”

That statement seemed to brighten her, somewhat. “I’ll take that as a complement. Besides, I’ve spent a lot of time on the run with him of late, his idealism and goodness was bound to rub off.”

He could see how, after all she had been through, she would gravitate to Steve Rogers and his view of the world. “So, where does that leave us?”

That wasn’t as simple to answer and he knew it. He could see it in her eyes.

“We were going to go away together, you and I, remember? Leave all this behind. Walk away from the Avengers, from every crisis that hit the Earth, just be the two of us, normal people living their lives.”

It had been a lovely dream back then, hadn’t it?

“I’m guessing that window is closed now, huh?”

She nodded mutely, staring at her twisting fingers. He had known, of course, but still, he had kind of hoped for something, anything, even if they couldn’t have that.

“I guess we can’t always get what we want, right?” He had said something like that, or close enough, in the hut in India the first time he met her so long ago. She’d been so coolly relaxed, hiding the truth that she was absolutely terrified of him. He’d fucked with her then, a fact he nearly regretted when she had pulled a weapon on him so fast he couldn’t even blink. He thought he’d fallen for her just a little bit, seeing how despite the terror in her wide, green eyes, she hadn’t backed down. He should have known then that no matter what, the other guy was always going to stand there between them both.

“Right now, with all of this...this is where my focus is, on the Avengers and keeping the world together. I just don’t feel right taking off to find myself with you when so much of the world is falling apart.”

She was right, he knew she was right, but it didn’t make it hurt any less. “See, I told you Steve was rubbing off on you.”

“Maybe that part was always me, the real me, underneath all of what they made me.”
“Also told you that you weren’t a monster.”

“But I was,” he said softly around his beverage. He was never sure if he was being honest or if he was just voicing the hopes he had. “I was trying to argue with the man who has more degrees that any decent person should. What was I thinking?”

They could at least laugh, even if it hurt like hell to do so. “Maybe…someday?”

She didn’t look hopeful. “I suppose that depends on a lot of other things outside of us, doesn’t it?”

He supposed it did.

“Well, that was a very awkward and heartbreaking conversation to have.” He pushed himself up, shoving his hands into his pockets and wondering where in the hell he could hide to nurse this wound back. “Maybe I’ll go get lunch now.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t move, either to hug him or join him, which was perhaps for the best. Right now, he felt that if she did, he’d fall apart and not even the Hulk could put him back together again.

“Right! I’ll just go see what Thor’s up to.” Blindly, he turned, in the vague direction that Thor and Rocket went in. Before he could get five steps, though, Natasha’s voice called back to him.

“I’m sorry, Bruce. I really am.”

He turned, only slightly, her pale, platinum hair just out of the corner of his eye. “Not more sorry than I am right now.”

She didn’t reply as he wandered off, shoulders hunched around the gutted feeling in his middle.

Chapter End Notes

Time works funny sometimes in the MCU. I had Bruce gone three years rather than two to accommodate the time before Avengers: Age of Ultron and Avengers: Infinity War.
“How in the hell did you ever put up with this?”

Rhodey eyed him blandly and completely unsympathetically. “Because I had an asshole who liked to tinker with my gear pushing me along the whole time.”

Tony hardly thought that was the correct assessment of how the situation had been. “You know, I don’t remember being that much of an asshole. I encouraged, sure, cajoled. I was a goddamn cheerleader!”

“I wanted to punch your face in and my only incentive for walking down those bars was to get my hands on you.”

“Good thing I am quick, now, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, we’ll see how quick on your feet you are in a few weeks. Till then, keep moving and I’ll give you one of those disgusting shakes you love drinking.”

“Those are properly balanced proteins and carbohydrates to acclimate my body back into a normal eating cycle, providing nutrients at a set pace to ensure I am absorbing them properly and helping me build up both body mass and muscle tone and strength to my pre-Thanos levels. Plus, they’re banana flavored.”

“Yeah, whatever, your science talk doesn’t make them any less disgusting.” Rhodey stood at the end of specially built treadmill, one Tony had made for him when he’d been paralyzed. “Could just eat a cheeseburger, like the rest of us.”

“I would literally give you all the money I have in the world for one of those right now if it wouldn’t make me sick.”

“All the money? I mean, you got a lot of it.”

“Seriously, I’d almost be willing to puke one back up just to have one right now.”

“That is sad, desperate, and disgusting all at once.”

Tony could only laugh as he got to the end of his training cycle, leaning heavily on the handles to the sides as Rhodey held an arm out for him to hold, helping him off the platform and over to one of the comfy chairs nearby, collapsing as his chest heaved from just the exertion of what would have been a brisk 20 minute walk ten weeks before. “You know, this kinda sucks.”

“I know. But, you’ve been here before. Remember Afghanistan?”

“Nah, I wasn’t this bad after Afghanistan.”
“True, but you did still have a mini-power generator in your chest.”

“Oh, those were the days.” He rubbed the heel of his palm against the cotton of his shirt, right in the spot where the arc reactor used to reside. It had long since been grafted over and healed, synthetic bone, cartilage and skin replacing what had been there before they decided to blow up his Humvee. If he were honest with himself, he still felt naked without having something over his heart, some sort of gadget glowing in the middle of his chest, there at a moments notice if he needed.

Rhodey flopped on a chair opposite, the braces on his legs whirring slightly as he did so. “We are getting too old for this.”

“Tell me about it.” He wouldn’t admit that to anyone outside of Rhodey, really...well, maybe Pepper, and that was a strong “maybe”. He was well aware that he had lived a very hard forty-eight years on this planet and the toll was wearing on him. “You’re older than me, even.”

“Yeah, I remember. No need to rub that one in.”

“Good thing I have a good-looking and beautiful future trophy wife to keep me young and remind everyone I still got it.”

“Speaking of, where is the future trophy wife this morning?”

Tony shrugged, waving out the window of the penthouse apartment he purchased after selling the Avengers Tower, mostly to give Pepper a place to crash when she was in the city. “Off running my company with much more capability, patience and strength than I got.”

“You are so lucky you got her, you know that.”

“So you keep reminding me and so I know all too well.” Lucky wasn’t even the half of it. How he still had her after half the shit he’d put her through, he didn’t know, but if there was a divine power he didn’t believe in out there, and some days he had to wonder given the fact he was still there, he would have thank them for putting Virginia Potts in his life. Frankly, he wasn’t so sure he deserved having her there at all, especially not of late.

“How bad did you guys get hit?” Rhodey’s question broke him from his revere, a fair one, considering the state of the world and the global economy at the moment, which was in a near panic, but not outright collapse just yet.

He grimaced, having gone over the numbers with Pepper earlier that week. “Not as bad as most companies, still not great. We are lucky, we still have a company that can function, unlike others. Not sure if we have as big a demand for products now but there are people assessing. Pepper’s trying to work with what’s left of the executive leadership team to reach out to families of those gone, if they are even alive, and see what we can do to help, while in the meantime reaching out to global governments to see how we can start taking the lead in things helping with their infrastructures and power grids. Most of them don’t even have crew to man what they got now.”

“How would have thought that the push to clean energy we needed would come out of this?” Rhodey was both rueful and sad.

“Thanos, actually.” He hated to admit it, but yeah, the cold-blooded bastard wasn’t completely wrong in his twisted, philosophical way. Rhodey eyed him in surprise, but Tony shrugged. “Man - can you call him that - whatever, he did have some points, I guess, things that he used to justify his crazy scheme. I didn’t say I agreed with it, but the man had vision, I won’t deny that.”

“Tony, you have vision, that’s what you do. You didn’t kill off half of all living things and call it
“Well, there are days when I’ve considered it.” He groaned as he leaned forward, pulling himself up slowly off the couch. Even his joints ached, weakened muscles shaking as he forced himself to stumble into the kitchen for the smoothie he had in the fridge.

“So you actually talked with him? Did he explain why he did any of this?”

“I didn’t talk with him, no. Strange did.” He shuffled into the open concept kitchen, leaning heavily against the granite as he began rummaging through the fridge for the shakes he personally thought were tasty, screw whatever Rhodey thought.

“The wizard?”

“Mage, sorcerer, I think he may have been a surgeon. Honestly, that was not the weirdest part about that day for me.”

Rhodey had followed, leaning on the other side of the counter as Tony managed to get his shake and sit at one of the tall stools. “So, what did he tell Strange about why he did it?”

The last thing he had wanted to talk about was Thanos and his crazed schemes. Rogers had been all about finding the son-of-a-bitch and fixing it, but Tony, all he wanted to do was lick his wounds and wrap his head around what had happened. He hadn’t wanted to ruminate or pontificate or charge in where angels feared to tread. They had lost, and badly, and right now, that was all he could really handle understanding in his life. Hell, he wasn’t sure he could handle that. But this was Rhodey, his best friend since he had been a snot-nosed fourteen-year-old who thought himself more brilliant than anyone there, mostly because he was, and couldn’t figure out how to fit into a campus of students all at least four years older than him. The only one who talked sense into him and stuck by his adolescent, angsty ass was James Rhodes, who was nearly as much of an outsider as himself. No matter how bad Tony got over the years, or the tabloid headlines he generated, or the embarrassing situations with the military Rhodey had to cover for, he was always by Tony’s side, even if it was simply to kick him in the pants.

“So, the ship we were on took us to his home planet called Titan. I guess back in the day it was like any other planet, beautiful, prosperous, and then it died off. Not sure how, climate change, overpopulation, disease, whatever the case, it was gone, his people, civilization, all disappeared.”

“And he took it out on the rest of us, then?”

“Grief does strange things to us, or so my therapist has told me, and for him it was going on some holy quest to prune the universe, to ‘bring balance’ as he kept yammering on about. I don’t know.”

“And why did he get to decide he was God and could do that?”

“No one else around to stop him, I suppose.” Tony had tried. He had failed. “Guess that means I’m not a god after all, either, if I couldn’t stop him.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that for years and you are only just now getting that in your head?”

“Yeah, really, what was I thinking?” He snorted, selfishly glad in the moment he still had Rhodey along with Pepper and Happy. “How’s the military establishment given...everything.”

“A hot mess.” Rhodey’s weary response was perhaps the biggest understatement of the year. “Word on the street is that World War III has been on the brink at least four times in the last six weeks, but never got off because there’s not enough people to pull together that sort of weapons to make it good.”
happen...yet.”

“If I die after this because of some 12-year-old messing around in a missile silo…”

“The UN is pulling together what resources it can to try and contain most of that.” Rhodey grimaced, eyeing him ruefully. “They’re voting to ‘amend’ the Sokovia Accords.”

Tony had seen that in the news, lost in the mountain of other existential anguish being covered in the moment. “Yeah, I know.”

“They are basically talking of throwing them out.”

“Saw that too.” He busied himself with swirling the thick and chalky shake in its container. “Guess that means I don’t have to arrest you guys for breaking the law, now.”

In truth, he hadn’t been terribly surprised when it was announced. The UN had no choice. The world was in chaos and they needed help and they had that in the Avengers. They’d never been as effective with the Accords, and as much as Tony hated it, he knew it. Of course, they’d have been much more effective had most of them not decided to jump ship and side with Rogers in the argument, but even then, he knew the effect of the controls on their capability to do what needed doing free of any one government being an asshat about it was limited. Rogers hadn’t been totally wrong, but neither had Tony. Of course, realizing that in hindsight was helpful to just about nobody.

He glanced speculatively at Rhodey. “So, you going to go hang out upstate with the cool kids, leave your old buddy behind?”

“You talk as if you won’t be back to normal in a couple of months and ready to put on the latest iteration of your suit. I’m still waiting for the one that comes out of your orifices.”

“That’s just gross and it was going to be out of my skin, through my pores.” He’d never gotten to that prototype, mostly because it was just about as difficult as it sounded. “Besides, there isn’t going to be another iteration of my suit.”

“I heard you say that after the whole Mandarin business. What we are like 40 versions past that one?”

“No, I mean it, Rhodey.” Tony cut him off with a tight, painful grimace. “No more suiting up. I’m...I’m tapped out.”

His friend stared at him, incongruously looking both surprised and unsurprised, which Tony didn’t think was humanly possible. “Look, I know you got your ass handed to you, we all did. But if the world needed Iron Man at any time, now is it.”

“They had me for ten years. They’ve still got everyone else.”

“Sure! But can you stay out of the game?”

“I have done it before.”

“Please, you swore off Iron Man twice and each time I blinked you were back in that suit. Face it, Tony, you like being Iron Man. You are Iron Man, or did you forget that little production you put on before the Senate sub-committee?”

“I’m a guy in armor and so are you, and they got you! So, what’s the problem?”
“Just...I don’t know, Tony. Just didn’t see you giving up.”

“I’m not giving up!” He threw his hands in the air, more irrationally annoyed than he needed to be at Rhodey’s statement. “I was beat, Rhodey, within an inch of my life. I had a honest-to-goodness moon dragged down from on high to beat me in the face. I’m not even kidding about that. I fought a demigod and I lost. I think I’ve earned the right to finally hang up the spurs, don’t you?”

Rhodey didn’t have an argument for that, so instead stared at him with that look that said if he sat disapproving of him enough, he’d get his way. Like that had ever worked once in their long friendship together.

“Look, buddy, I’ve thought this over. Really, I have. I mean, what else was I going to do for three weeks on a dead spaceship in the middle of nowhere? It’s time, and there’s no shame in that. I fell into this superhero business by accident, by circumstance. And sure, I chose it, and I’ve done my best, but you know, I can’t save everyone. I operated like I could, I thought I could. I tried everything I knew to somehow do that, signed up for the Avengers, created Ultron, fought against my own friends because I was convinced it was my job to save them all, and I can’t, no one can. It’s an impossible task. I set myself up for failure, and I did, and I have to accept that and move on.”

“It was never just about you, Tony.”

“For me, it was.” He spun the bottle with its milky mixture in it between his fingers on the granite. “When I got into this, there was just me, no one else.”

“And I told you years ago you didn’t need to do this lone cowboy schtick.”

“Look how far teamwork got me? I mean, face it, I was never a team player before Fury showed up at my house. Remember the dodgeball team in college?”

“When you argued that the rules didn’t bar robots counting as ‘team members’ and you beat the hell out of all of us? I remember.”

“They needed better defined rules. Dum-E isn’t smart, but has perfect aim.” He still wasn’t sorry about it thirty years later. “My point is that the Avengers work better without me. I was only ever supposed to be a consultant anyway. The world needs you guys, now, I get it. I’m happy to still provide tech and assistance as needed.”

“But not suiting up?”

“I think it’s for the best.”

Rhodey looked as if he still wanted to argue, but finally he nodded, giving in. “I bet Pepper is thrilled.”

“She’s the main reason I’m doing this.” Even thinking of her pulled a lopsided smile, bubbling up from inside of him. “You know, I thought I was dead. I was dying, and the last thought I had as I lay there on the floor was of her. All of this, everything I’ve done these last ten years, has been with her in my mind. She’s been so patient with me, ridiculously so, and I’ve pushed the limit with her as far as I possibly could. She deserves better. She always has, far better than me, and I got to give it to her, Rhodey. I got to do it for her, and for me, because right now, I need her. I need a life with her. The rest of the world has superheroes. All I’ve got is her.”

He had clearly shaken his friend with that raw confession. He didn’t think he had ever been as honest him about his feelings, especially in regards to Pepper. “Damn, Tony...that’s...that’s poetic.”
“It’s true.” He shrugged, blinking hard against the mist that filmed his eyes. “Probably not the sort of thing you expected to hear out of me back in the day.”

“No, back in the day I mostly expected to hear about a paternity suit.”

“I’m not saying that won’t still happen, but I think Pepper is well aware of my dark past at this point and knows I don’t have secrets. Not that I was very good at keeping any of them to begin with.”

“Not when a good Google search could find most of them, no.”

As if sensing the tenor of their conversation, FRIDAY broke in with a quiet “Ms. Potts is home, boss, and will be up up the elevator in one minute.”

Tony glanced at his watch, loose and dangling on his now skinny wrist. “Long day for her.”

Rhodey shrugged, pensive. “Can imagine it’s going to be a long day for a lot of people, trying to cover more with less.”

Right on time, the elevator pinged and Pepper wandered through the door, lookin seven different kinds of exhausted. Tony’s greeting was cheerful, even if he quietly worried about her. “Hey, babe! How was work?”

“Why did you make me CEO?” This had been a common complaint of hers since he’d named her years ago.

“Because you are brilliant, tough as nails, hard-working, compassionate, and the smartest woman I know. Also, you are not out to kill me, so that’s a plus.”

“Some days I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” She wandered over, placing a soft kiss on his forehead, brushing the hair back fondly before greeting Rhodey. “You staying this evening?”

“Can’t, got a strategy meeting on the Asgardian refugees in about an hour, so I’ll have to get going.”

“Bet Thor will be relieved to have them here.”

“If he notices,” Rhodey grumbled. Tony glanced up at Pepper who met his worried look.

“Bruce said it was bad,” she said, pulling away. “Maybe, with his people here…”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I know he’s been through some rough stuff. Cap’s coordinating most of the set up with Nat running interference with the local government. Thanks, by the way, for the call into the King of Norway.”

“Haakon’s an old friend college at Berkeley. He was happy to take the call.”

He couldn’t seem to help the derisive snort that rose. “By ‘old friend’, he flirted with her outrageously at one of my parties in Malibu, as I remember.”

“Because you were schmoozing with some friends of his.”

“They were models asking me to review their portfolios.”

“Is that what they call it in Norway?”

Her acerbic glare only earned a wicked grin out of him.
“In any case, he is perfectly lovely and was happy to help. Frankly, I think any place would be willing to open its borders now.”

“All it takes is a little random genocide to make people’s hearts grow big enough to let others in.” Rhodey’s bitter was on full tilt today, clearly.

“When will they get here?”

“Rocket’s been in communication with them, they had some ship problems. They took a heavy hit when Thanos attacked them and they’ve been limping here.”

“Frankly, I bet they’ll be glad just to get onto solid land for a change.” She patted Tony’s shoulder briefly before wandering towards the bedrooms in the back. “I’m going to take a hot shower.”

“Okay,” he called back as Rhodey smiled, softly. “What?”

“You’re so domestic now, it’s cute.”

“You should try it, buddy. It’s not so bad.”

“Believe it or not, it’s a lot harder getting women to notice you when you have leg braces helping you walk.”

“Seriously, if there is a woman alive out there who doesn’t see the benefit in that, they don’t deserve you.”

Rhodey only snorted, but took Tony’s hand in a tight shake before wandering to the balcony patio overlooking lower Manhattan, where his suit waited. Tony watched him take off for long moments before slowly making his way to the bedroom. The apartment wasn’t as luxurious as their old place downtown had been, and it certainly wasn’t as big as the Malibu house, but it was all right, he supposed. Now at days he preferred the home they had been making at his father’s old fishing cabin upstate. It was a cabin only in the sense that it was marginally removed from the nearby town, sat on a lake, and had a rustic feel to its craftsman design, and that was about it. His father had never been fond of truly “roughing it” in the sense of sleeping in a hand-hewn hut with no power or plumbing, but he had liked getting away to fish. It was about the only pursuit he remembered his father having that was quiet and slow, and one of the few he had actually brought Tony along for. Few non-engineering things in life could hold Howard's attention for terribly long, his brain just worked on too many levels for that, but fishing was something he could do while pondering the deep wonders of the universe. Some of the only good times he could remember with Howard were at that cabin, sitting on the dock, a pole a piece, chatting about projects or dreaming of the future and what it would look like.

The shower had turned off by the time he managed to flop on the bed, curling into the pillows and yawning loudly. Soon, he’d not tire himself out walking to the bathroom. He had just drifted, drowsily, as the door opened to a cloud of floral scented steam, Pepper wandering out in a silk robe and a towel on her head, only looking mildly more refreshed than when she went in.

“Feel better?”

“Mmmm?” She shrugged, grabbing her briefcase from a chair and wandering to the bed with it.

“How’d your meetings go?”

“Well, good news, we still have a company. Bad news, we have to divert large portions of the workforce, and lots of projects are going to get cut for it.”
“Yeah.” He had some pet projects he had been putting through himself. “How are things going with the energy initiatives?”

“Many seem on board with it, though others...it will be a bit of a struggle. I’m working with who I can. We’re offering to have our teams come in free to several countries who can’t afford it, and Wakanda has already been making overtures to work with our engineers. They have technology that blows us out of the water. It’s astonishing the level of advancement they have.”

“Yeah, T’Challa was holding out on us.” He’d been as shocked as the rest of the world when Wakanda’s king had come back to the UN a year after his father’s death to announce that the small, secluded, intensely private and secretive African nation was opening its borders to the West. He’d not thought much of it, having only ever heard of the country in relation to vibranium and nothing else, until the BBC was invited by the palace to do a documentary and revealed a nation so insanely prosperous and technologically superior they might as well have been another planet. Pepper had wisely not pounced on the opportunity to connect with them, knowing Tony wanted to very badly, and she’d been right to wait. They had come to her when they were ready at this time of crises to step up like they never had before as a leading nation in the region. He couldn’t have been more proud of her.

“I ever tell you I’m damn lucky I have you?” He cuddled closer to where she lay against the pillows. “A lot of late, but I’ll take it anyway.” She smiled, face still a bit wan after her shower. He didn’t like it, the dark circles under her eyes that hadn’t faded since his return or the exhaustion that etched itself into every line.

“You should get something to eat.”

“Not hungry,” she murmured, her mouth a moue of disgust. “FRIDAY, pull up my email and my reports.”

Her emails and a variety of brightly colored charts and graphics were projected in front of them, none of which made sense to him without context, but he glared at them all the same. “You feeling alright? You got me worried.”

“Fine, just a long day...month, two months...”

“Oh, he murmured, though he could smell bullshit a mile away. She was being evasive and he had to wonder if it was something awful. Was it something he did? He didn’t think so. After all, the worst thing he did of late was not stop Thanos and nearly getting killed in the effort. The mess that the world was left in of course was draining on everyone and no one was unaffected by it. It was overwhelming in and of itself to think about. Perhaps that was it.

“I’m just saying, if you aren’t okay, you can talk to me.” Maybe that would tease out something? Unlike him, who had perfected the art of pouting alone in his lab, Pepper usually was more up front with what was bothering her if he pestered her enough.

“I know,” she smiled softly, leaning over to kiss his hair. “I’m all right.”

“Because I know you’ve been under the weather, and you’ve been down, and you aren’t even eating your organic yogurt with acai berry, which is just as well, as I’ve been using that in smoothies...”

“You are not going to leave me alone on this, are you?” Far from being irritated, she seemed resigned to this being the tenor of their conversation, which secretly delighted him. Pepper knew him better than anyone.
“I am just worried about you, honey. I know it’s been a lot. I’ve been a lot.”

“Everything has been a lot.” She ran a finger down his temple and across his cheek. “If I tell you, you have to promise to A, not be pompous about it and B, not put it out there for the world yet.”

“I’m sure I can manage B, but A, that’s historically been tough for me…”

She smirked, rolling her eyes. “FRIDAY, pull up the Mach 3 file?”

“Mach 3? Making me something for my birthday?”

“Something like that,” she grinned so broadly, she was fairly glowing. “Though, it might be a few months too late for it, or too early, depending on how you look at it.”

Presents he could get behind. “Am I going to like it is the question, and is it…”

He stared up at the file that FRIDAY projected, his jaw hitting the bed. For once he found himself at a loss for words.

“I hope you like it.” Pepper’s words were both smug and hesitant at his ear.

He didn’t even have a response, couldn’t formulate one. He stared at the information on the screen as the brilliant mind that always, always, always ran on overdrive skidded to a grinding, screeching halt. When he could speak again, the words that tumbled out didn’t really make sense.

“Is that…”

“Yes.”

“When did…”

“Last week.”

“Huh…and does that mean…”

“Yes.”

“How?”

If she smiled any harder she may set fire to their apartment and frankly Tony couldn’t bring himself to care. “When a man and a woman love each other very much…”

“I got the mechanics down, baby, I meant…we haven’t…”

“I seem to recall you did just fine two nights before you decided to go out into outer space.”

Through the haze of angst, grief, and loss, he seemed to recall an impromptu night together spurred by nothing more than the fact she was wearing a delectable pair of jean shorts and carrying on about wedding details and he had wanted to stop the one and slowly remove the other. A chance moment, one of so many in his relationship with this amazing, wonderful, brilliant woman, and this was what came out of it? He didn’t care that tears were now dribbling down his face.

“Tony?” Pepper’s alarm brought him back to himself as he sat up fully, grabbing her face in both of his hands, kissing her desperately, like he hadn’t since he got back, out of joy, and shock, and sheer wonder that he, the stupid bastard he was, got all of this.
Unfortunately, his stamina wasn’t up to the depth of his emotions. He pulled back, breathless and awed as Pepper reached a hand up to wipe at his face. “Honey, I just...I don’t know what to say.”

“That’s a first,” she chuckled, misty-eyed herself. “I thought for sure you’d brag for the rest of the night about your oracular abilities.”

“I’m not saying that isn’t happening, because clearly I’m a prophet in my own time, but right now…” He stared back at the screen, his brain coming back online in full force, whirling with possibilities, with things they would need to do, of things that he’d have to take care of.

“You got about another eight months or so, Tony. Don’t go out tomorrow buying up all the baby stuff we will ever need.”

“I wasn’t...yet.” He was only somewhat sheepish. “Besides, I can order online or send Happy to do it for me.”

“Right!” She sighed, wiping at the tears still lingering on his cheeks. “I’d wanted to tell you in a big dinner or something. Make a production out of it, surprise you. I thought the Mach 3 thing was cute! I was going to go with a theme.”

“Do I not look surprised?” It was the most surprised he’d been in weeks and the first good surprise in so long, he couldn’t remember.

“I just...want to wait till I’m a bit further along before sharing it too widely. And no, I don’t want this out on your Twitter feed.”

“I’m not,” he promised. Frankly, at the moment, after all that they had been through and suffered together, this precious thing he wanted to keep to themselves for just a little bit. Reverently, he curled next to her, laying a hand on her still flat lower belly. She twined a hand with his there, holding on tightly.

“I suppose, Ms. Potts, this means you have to finally make an honest man out of me.”

“I suppose it does. Where you going to be in three months time?”

“Wherever you’re going to be, hopefully with an ordained clergy member and/or legal officiant, giving you half of all the money I got.”

“I already have that. I am really just after your heart.”

“You got that, honey, have since you put that Arc Reactor in my chest.”

“Oh, God,” she shivered at the memory, laughing quietly. “You are horrible.”

“But you love me.”

“That, I do.” She sighed, contented, as she blinked at the files, reports, and work floating in front of her. “How about we just curl in bed and watch stupid movies for the rest of the night?”

“Sounds like the best ‘I just found out I’m going to be a dad’ celebration ever.”

“Good.” She flicked a finger, sending the whole lot of it skidding into nothingness.

“You know,” he sighed as he wrapped her more firmly close to him. “Boy or girl, we are going to have to name them Morgan.”
“I hadn’t planned on anything else.”

Seriously, he loved this woman.
Beyond Avengement

Chapter Summary

In which Natasha and Tony have a heart-to-heart.

No one was surprised when Tony said he was quitting the Avengers, what surprised Natasha was that he had gone through with it. He’d threatened and promised so many times over the years it was beginning to be something of a joke. They had taken wagers on how long it would be before he wandered back through the doors in the latest iteration of the suits he absolutely didn’t need anymore, ready to cause havoc and annoy Steve until he finally gave in and let Cap do his job. Frankly, it was a small wonder that Pepper hadn’t left him for good, for all the times he had “promised” he was leaving and had come back. Nat had been convinced their last “break” was final, that Pepper would finally catch on to the truth Natasha had known since she had detailed Tony years ago, that he was Iron Man. It wasn’t some mask he put on or weekend warrior persona he adopted, it was his identity, who he saw himself as and who he wanted to become. He couldn’t lay it aside any more than he could survive without his shell-shocked heart. Perhaps he thought he could just walk away, but he would always come back to it, convinced he alone had the mind, vision and will to save the world. He could never give it up - at least not till Titan and Thanos.

Natasha knew better than any of the others, perhaps even Pepper, just how fractured Tony’s psyche already was. It wasn’t like he got off to a good start with his contentious relationship with his father, the not-so-accidental death of his parents, his spiral into self-indulgence that led down the road to Stane, Afghanistan, and Iron Man. His years wearing the suit had only added to it. He was already a bundle of bad personality traits, anti-social issues, and anxiety, and that was before the PTSD hit him. He was, in short, a hot mess with a small fuse and it was small wonder that it got set off frequently, most usually by Steve. They still didn’t know what all had happened out there in space. Tony didn’t speak of it and most were afraid of ask. Natasha, who had seen the worst of humanity, saw the aching horror and despair in his face, the soul-crushing brokenness and knew that whatever happened up there, it had scared him. The Tony Stark who had left Greenwich Village that day in pursuit of Stephen Strange had been Iron Man, determined to do whatever it took to save the world. The man who came back was a pale shadow, someone who had expended himself too far and had seen too much and had nothing left to give.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to try and argue the point.

“You know, I can still come and do things here. Hell, Cap needs new armor if he’s going to keep doing this. Have you been letting him run around in rags this whole time?”

Natasha could only shrug, rolling her eyes as Tony eyed Steve’s old armor with mild horror. “Sorry, I think Walmart was all out of their red, white and blue combat gear for hunting season.”

“This is why I missed you, Romanoff, no one else has both your dry wit and lingering Marxist disdain for Western capitalism.”

“I’m here five shows a week. Try the salmon.” She smirked as she leaned against his lab table. He looked somewhat better, though still unhealthy and gaunt. The weeks since his return had been a slow road of progress for him. He still had months to go to be a fighting weight and that was only the physical side of it all. The mental wasn’t such an easy fix.
“Seriously, though, gadgets, update of computer systems, FRIDAY giving you hell, I’ll be here for it.”

“I would like to believe I’m far better behaved than that, boss.” FRIDAY managed to sound both indignant and prissy and it made Natasha laugh as she imagined an irritated, Irish school marm.

“We’ll be fine, Tony. Whatever help you can give us, that’s great, but we got Rocket now on the team. He could teach you a thing or two.”

The idea that a rodent with the mouth of a dock worker could teach the MIT trained child prodigy and genius Tony Stark anything galled him. “You do know I caught him spelunking in the bins out back, right?”

“You’re just jealous FRIDAY likes him.”

His face twitched, but he agreed to nothing. “Anyway, so the president fell all over himself to welcome you back. That’s good, I guess. You know, Sokovia Accords, law of the land, that gets thrown out the window in a crisis.”

Natasha bit back the more cynical response she had about politicians and only shrugged. “No one is precisely in a position to enforce it, and it’s not like there are that many enhanced people left for them to oversee. Besides, turns out they figured out they needed us now more than ever, and without a vast bureaucracy to keep us in line, we are left to our own devices after all.”

“All that grief and in the end, it was for nothing. Story of my life, I suppose.”

“True.” She admitted that if things weren’t so desperate, she would have found this all depressingly laughable. “It puts things in perspective, though.”

Well, some things. As far as she could tell, he and Steve weren’t exactly best friends, but they’d come to a detente, an agreement to ignore the sleeping dogs for now, perhaps forever. Tony was still angry and Steve was still guilty and it didn’t look as if either was ready to hash out the resentment between them. Still, it was one less burden on the thin emotional resources of the team, not having to be caught in the ongoing drama between the two men.

“It does put things in perspective.” His long sigh was more thoughtful than cynical. “I suppose, then, that you all will be the long arm of the law, policing the world for them.”

“Universe, now. Steve had us in a day long planning session the other day, strategizing. We pulled in who we could, anyone who was able and willing. We have Okoye in Wakanda. She’s got permission from the Queen Mother to use what is left of the Wakandan and Jabari forces to help oversee Africa and the Middle East until they can put a new king and structure in place. In the meantime, Danvers, Nebula and Rocket are patrolling space, trying to help where they can and keep an eye on the most immediate threats, filling us in to keep Earth in the loop and out of danger. That leaves Steve, Rhodey and me here to mop up the rest of it. We’ll see if Thor and the Asgardians want to help, but frankly, they will be too busy trying to put their life together again.”

Tony at least had the grace to not even offer a token of his help. “Not Barton, though?”

She happily didn’t flinch at the drop of his name. “No. He’s gone off the grid, doesn’t want to be found.”

“Can’t say I blame him,” he sighed, regretfully, shoving his hands into his pockets. “That’s a tall order for all of you.”
“It is.”

He eyed her speculatively, his mind spinning. She didn’t think she had ever seen anyone have as many thoughts going through their head at any one time as Tony Stark and it was even odds as to what would come out of his mouth. To her surprise, it was actually nothing rude or snarky, but rather quietly personal.

“Why are you still in this, Romanoff? All this time, on the run, then Thanos, and now...you could retire, live your life. Maybe kidnap Bruce and…”

The mention of Bruce earned an instant icy glare, catching him short as he realized he’d unintentionally stepped on one of the vulnerable places Natasha let show. He backpedaled, apologetically. “Right, sorry, just...I’m saying you’ve never had a chance to just live life. Why don’t you take it, before some other world crisis comes along and you lose that.”

She knew he wasn’t just thinking about her welfare in that. “And do what?”

“What do you want to do?” He said that as if it were as simple as waking up and deciding breakfast. Spoken like a white man born to great wealth and the privilege of being whoever and whatever he wanted in the world. He had always had that luxury. She hadn’t.

“What do I want to do?” She echoed his words, folding herself into a chair by his table, mulling them over in her mouth as if they were a new language. “I didn’t grow up wanting to be a princess or a ballerina, Stark. I carry the name of a royal family because that was the name given to me. I don’t even know who my parents were. As for being a ballerina, I’m Russian, it’s in our blood. I trained for that because it made me dexterous, agile, and quick, and it was good cover if I ever needed it.”

“And here I had harbored a secret belief you were a long lost grand duchess,” he teased.

There were times, many of them as a matter of fact, where she had rather wished that she was. “Not a lost grand duchess, no, just an orphaned kid who the state thought they could mold and fashion how they wished. From the moment I was given to the Red Room I was trained to be a spy and killer and I didn’t get any other options. You know the first time I ever had a choice in my life? It was when I stood there in the wreckage of a children’s hospital in Brazil, knowing I had caused all the destruction around me and realized that I had a choice - security or my soul. So I left the KGB and went on the run and I never looked back.”

She wasn’t sure she had ever told him any of this. Clint had known, as did Fury, and Steve and Sam, but Tony had never been overly interested. He held onto grudges like a champion, and he had never quite gotten over the fact she had duped him on Fury’s orders so many years ago. Now he saw her in a new light and pieces began falling into place.

“You know,” he began gravely, pulling himself up to sit on the top of his lab table, still-thin legs dangling over its edges. “I know a thing or two about that, about one day waking up to find that everything you’ve done has left nothing but a swath of destruction and pain that you can never, ever make up for.”

“You name was on the bombs, Tony, but you weren’t the one pulling the trigger.”

“No,” he admitted, slowly. “But tell that to Wanda Maximoff or Helmut Zemo or any of the Ten Rings bastards who had me in a cave in Afghanistan. I stood at the helm of my father’s company, I profited off of the death and destruction for years, and I didn’t care as long as I could still research my pet projects, hang out with the world’s most beautiful models, and buy the fastest moving things on this planet to play with. To the people who lost their homes and families and way of life, I was the
bad guy, the monster in the darkness, out to ruin their entire lives.”

“That is true, but misplaced on their part. On mine, I actually did kill those people and I didn’t blink an eye when doing it.”

“You were brainwashed and forced into it.”

“Same as Barnes, I know.” It was a low blow and it connected, making him glare at her for a long moment before nodding, scrubbing his face roughly.

“I concede the point that James Barnes was a tool who was mind fucked into doing awful things, including killing my parents, and I really hate you right now for turning that on me so craftily.”

“Red Room psychological training, not all of it was murderous or useless.”

“Jesus! My point, if I can get back to it, is that I understand. You carry a shit ton of guilt, the weight of all you did because that was the card you were dealt in life. And sure, you can spend a lifetime making up for it, trying to clear your ledger as it were, do enough good and selfless things to make it right. But when do you get a chance to live the life you didn’t get? When do you get to choose for yourself and not have someone else dictate what you do and where you go, how you live? You aren’t in the KGB anymore, and you aren’t in SHIELD. You can walk away from this. Maybe go find a beach somewhere, live a quiet life, take up gardening or...baking?”

“Baking?” Where that had come from, she didn’t know.

“Yeah, baking! I could see it.”

“What sort of fantasy have you been having about me, Stark?”

“I think the broader context of this conversation is that whatever you want to be in life, Romanoff, you can be, and I’m asking why you don’t want to be that instead of policing the world and its problems.”

The answer was simple, really, when it came down to it. “Because for a long time, I was a tool used in the making of those problems. Now, I’m in a place where I get to help fix those problems. That feels good. At a time when I feel like I’ve failed on so many levels, let alone saving the world, it’s nice to feel good about something. And the world needs us, needs me. That’s something I can do.”

“You know, it won’t bring Barton’s family back, right? It won’t make up for what’s lost.”

No one could ever accuse Tony Stark of being stupid. Self-centered and emotionally obtuse, yes, but never stupid.

“Yeah, I know. But if I don’t have them, I got this. It makes it a little less for nothing.”

Perhaps he understood that after all.

“You know, Romanoff, I didn’t like you for a long time.” He eyed her from his perch with the classic, narrow-eyed musing gaze he employed, whether he was studying people, scientific equations, or car engines. “I mean, sure, you’re one of the most attractive women I’ve met outside of Pepper, but I couldn’t trust a woman who hid in shadows and dealt in lies or so I told myself. Couldn’t ever decide where your allegiances lay. You were loyal to no one and nothing, and therefore why invest in you?”

She’d known that opinion for years. “And now?”
“I have a sad, sinking feeling that maybe you were the best of us all along, underneath it all.”

“From you that’s high praise indeed.”

“Well, for all of your other lies, you’ve always been honest in who you are and you’ve always kept us reeled in on the straight and narrow when we’d go flying at each other. You never forgot what this was all about, that it wasn’t about laws, or oversight, or personal freedom, or standing on principle. You just wanted to do what was good and right. I think maybe we all forgot that for a bit.”

She feigned indignation “Don’t you dare even hint that I’m a good guy underneath all of this.”

“Heaven forbid!” He held up his hands, a grin pulling up his still thin cheeks. “I know you all will do good. You don’t need me around except to maybe pay for things.”

“That’s what lawyers are for.”

“True,” he nodded, scooting to slide slowly off the table. He glanced around the space he had built for them, the place where he could be something more than just a genius, billionaire, playboy. She thought she could see a faint ghost of wistfulness coupled with the regret they all had now at days.

“So, uh...you’re the first to know, before Rhodey or Bruce even, because I couldn’t find them, but...Pepper’s pregnant.”

That shouldn’t hurt as much as it did. Faint images of being wheeled through an ancient hospital mingled with memories of Laura Barton placing a newborn Nate in her arms, the cherubic face of his sister beaming as she asked “What do you think, Auntie Nat?” What came out of her, however, was a broad smile and a truly pleased “congratulations”.

Tony still looked vaguely stunned by it all. “Yeah, so I had been teasing her about this dream I had that day with Thanos. Turns out I must be fucking prophetic, because last week she lays that on me. I mean...had things gone different, had I not gotten back...I mean...or what if she had been the one snapped...”

Words failed him as he shoved fists into his pockets, focused on the tips of his shoes as Natasha politely allowed him the moment to regroup himself. It took several long breaths before he cleared his throat and continued. “You know, my dad was about my age when I was born, and fatherhood sort of hit him out of left field. He was set in his ways, already had a company, was busy with the Arc Reactor, and unbeknownst to me, helping to run SHIELD. I mean, I don’t know if he knew what to do with me, frankly, and I know that I wasn’t the easiest child to put up with, especially for a man who thought he was saving the world.”

Knowing the brilliance and annoyance of the adult Tony, Natasha could see this.

“Anyway, we learn from our parents’ mistakes. I spent my childhood trying to convince my father I was as important as any of his five zillion projects. I don’t want my child to ever feel like that, thinking that the Avengers, my work, saving the world meant more to me than he or she does. Nothing on this planet means more to me than that baby and Pepper. The day I went after Thanos, I couldn’t say that. Today, two months later, I can.”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Tony. This...this is big news, good news. I’m happy for you.” She was, honestly, pleased beyond words for him. As long as she had known him he had been unsettled and unmoored, trying to define himself by big deeds in a metal suit, looking for happiness and validation as a hero, tending to forget that the best source of it was standing right in front of him. Perhaps, finally, Tony Stark had grown up and found that he could be happy with the quiet, simple
life. His lecture to her started to make some sense.

He shrugged his shoulders by his ears, still studying the tops of his athletic shoes. “Don’t tell everyone till I’ve had a chance to tell Rhodey and Bruce at least. They’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

“No worries.” She had never seen Tony look so bashful or so fretful. “Hey, it will be okay and no one will judge you for walking away from all of this, not for that.”

“No one?” He peeked up at her with pointed speculation, not completely convinced. She knew who he meant.

“No one, especially not Steve. If there is anyone on the planet who would understand leaving for the chance of happiness, it’s him.”

Petty irritation flickered as he threw his head back, rolling his eyes. “He really is insufferable, isn’t he?”

“I don’t think he means to be. Not everyone is as lucky as you are.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” He shook his head, dolefully, pulling his ubiquitous glasses out of his pocket. “Anyway, I can of course tender a formal resignation and all that, but the place is all yours, bought and paid for. Just, don’t throw wild parties in here, no boozers with the press.”

“That was your fault, remember.”

“Right,” he drawled, a grin creasing his sunken face. He stuck a hand out to Natasha. “Romanoff, come visit when you can. Keep me honest.”

She took his proffered hand to pull herself up in front of him. “I think that’s what Pepper’s around for.”

He laughed as she briefly wrapped her arms around him, pulling away quickly with a slight nod. “Take care of yourself, Tony. We’re here if you need.”

“Yeah,” he replied, shuffling out of his old lab, spinning slowly to look around the place. “You know, if you need a new interface with FRIDAY, I can come on a weekend, set things up.”

“Go!” She called. He waved and wandered out to the latest Audi he had parked in front, a sweet number in silver. She waited till the sound of his engine roared to life and peeled out of the drive at a speed that she was certain wasn’t legal. It was only when it faded away that she realized she was going to miss having him around, being annoying. Tony Stark had, unfortunately, rather grown on her.
In which Natasha wishes Steve a happy birthday.

Steve made himself scarce these days. It amused Natasha. It was like he didn’t know her or anything. Honestly, to think he could avoid the likes of the Black Widow when he was a guy who regularly went around with the American flag emblazoned on his chest? Steve couldn’t dissemble if his life depended on it, which on occasion, it did. It was a wonder he made it this long.

She didn’t have to look very hard to find him. After two years abroad in shoddy lodging and worse surroundings, she knew he would high tail it to the one place he felt the safest. Steve Rogers was nothing if not loyal, and Brooklyn was his home. It might have changed in the century since he was born, but it was the closest thing to familiar he had in this crazy world turned upside down.

Natasha had lived in America long enough to know that the 4th of July was usually a day of celebration, flags everywhere, barbecue smoke wafting across the city, someone who had too much to drink attempting to fire off explosives against the advice of more sober voices. Her indoctrination whispered to her about the vile decadence of it all, but she had always found it charmingly brash, like most of America was, in love with the idea of its own history. The cynical part of herself would point out it was a history born in blood and violence and the vile use of others. The rest of her just liked to have a hot dog and a beer and sit out in the twilight watching the sky explode in stars.

None of that was visible as she drove through Brooklyn’s quiet streets. Here and there she thought she could smell charcoal or hear the pop of fireworks, but for the most part many stayed to themselves. Since well before Steve’s birth the teeming city had been home to more than 2.6 million people, a mix from all nations and languages, pressed cheek-to-jowl between the East River and the Atlantic Ocean, scraping by to make their dreams in this country they now called their own. Today, Brooklyn was a ghost of itself. Apartments that had gone for ridiculously stupid prices just months ago now sat empty of owners. Looting was a problem here as in many places, and even in the nicest neighborhoods graffiti began to pop up, claiming to be this gang, or that gang, or just someone bemoaning the fate of the universe. She’d seen more than a few artistic representations of Thanos and the destruction he wrought painted on the sides of brick buildings where months ago hipsters were having Sunday brunches of organic kale salads and locally-sourced, artisanal cheeses.

Steve’s building wasn’t far from Prospect Park, a nicer place that overlooked the swath of green in the middle of the city. It was one of the luckier buildings, it still had most of its tenants and she found a couple of them out walking their dog. They let her in after her sob story of having left her keys at her boyfriend’s place. She took the stairs up to the top floor where Steve had taken out a large apartment completely under his own name. If he had really wanted to hide he’d have at least made more effort to come up with a better alias. She rapped on the door, the sound loud in stillness, broken only by the faint strains of music from inside. Sam had at least finally broken Steve of the habit of only listening to ‘old fogey’ music, as Sam termed it, and gotten him to even embrace R&B and hip hop, a feet that had astonished Natasha. Right now, it sounded more jazz. Coltrane if she wasn’t mistaken, something melancholy and almost wistful.

It took another round of rapping before the door opened to a rather wary and somewhat surprised
Steve, peeking out of the corner as if she were 6’8 and there to rob him. “Natasha? Where did you come from?”

“Russia, my files say Volgograd, but I don’t remember much of it. May I come in?”

He sighed, shaking his head, but opened the door enough for her and her large shopping bags to wander inside, casing the place as she did. It was certainly a good size, she’d grant him that. The hardwood floors were original, as was the open brick work, and the view on the park was particularly nice from the roof just outside of the large, floor to ceiling windows. She dug the open concept floor plan, if nothing else because of the free range of vision it gave. Good sight lines. The kitchen was perhaps a bit small for her tastes, but for a bachelor like Steve she doubted he noticed.

“Dare I ask how you found me?”

“Girl can’t give away her secrets.” She spun to face him, eyeing him up and down. “You’d make a shit spy.”

“Good thing I never tried being one of those.” He plucked quietly at his comfortable athletic pants and the undershirt that looked like a three-year-old had attacked him with oil paints. “I wasn’t...uh...precisely expecting anyone.”

“I got that memo, considering I haven’t seen you in two weeks.”

“Told you I was taking some time.” He shrugged as he wandered through the comfortable living room, with it’s large television and squashy couches, to the dining area-cum-artist’s studio. It was a sight that struck her with a hint of incongruousness. She’d always known Steve was an artist, but the sight of him standing there covered in paint as he wiped down the brushes he’d been using when she knocked on the door hit her as an oddity. Normally, her perception of Steve was of the fighter, the soldier, the leader who stood like a stubborn brick wall against his enemies. She never really saw the more sensitive side of him, the Steve who had at one point in time studied art, who had a love for creating things and capturing human existence in pencil and paint. For whatever reason, she had just assumed that this part of him must have disappeared under the ice like so much of Steve’s life did.

“I know you said you were taking time,” she finally responded, setting her canvas bag on the marble counter top of the kitchen island. “But you weren’t responding to communications.”

“Taking time means I’m not on the clock.”

“Doesn’t mean your friends don’t worry about you.” She crossed her arms as he ducked his head, sheepishly, continuing to rinse out brushes.

“I figure after two years on the road with me, you got to be sick of this mug.”

“Ehh, you’re a hell of a lot prettier than Rhodey and the raccoon. Don’t tell Rhodes I said that.”

He finally chuckled. “Your secret is safe with me.”

She watched as he went meticulously about his work, knowing he was avoiding asking the obvious question and deciding to have some mercy with him. “What are you working on?”

“A painting.” He didn’t look up, but she could see the hint of a smirk all the same. He was being a teasing shithead.

“Of what?”
His shoulders tightened, but he at least didn’t shut down. “You can come take a look.”

She wandered behind him to the canvas on the eisel, covered in a swath of yellow-green field and bright, open sky. Wakanda, she realized, outside of Birnin Zanda, the great, glittering city and capital of the tiny and powerful nation. For now, it was still just the field and sky, but she could see in the distance the beginnings of the forest, perhaps a waterfall, and the giant, powerful panther that oversaw all of it.

“Figured if I was going to be relieving my own failures, I might as well paint it,” he murmured, coming to stand beside her. “Though, I think I’ll leave out the battle. Maybe paint something else, perhaps the king and princess, as a gift to the queen mother.”

She hated that her eyes burned with tears just then. “I think she would love it, to remember her children as they were.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, solemn as he studied it with a critical eye. “I figure if I brought war to her country and people and cost them their leader and future, I should do...something. I don’t know.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say it wasn’t his fault, but that would do her no good. She knew that from experience. “They chose to die as warriors.”

“I don’t know if they chose at all,” he replied, quietly reaching over her to pull down a cloth to cover the painting for now until he decided to work on it again. “Not that I don’t appreciate a visit from a friend, but what are you doing here, Nat?”

“Bringing you dinner.”

He looked as if the thought hadn’t struck him. “A fellow never says no to a lady bringing him food, but you didn’t have to.”

“That’s the point, Rogers, I didn’t have to. I did it for a friend.” She moved past him to the bag she brought, pulling out foil wrapped items and placing them on the counter. “Please tell me you have beer, though.”

“One of the few things I do have in my fridge.”

“See, it’s a good thing that I brought you dinner, else you’d have starved.” She began opening the veritable tray of hot dogs, the pints of potato salad and baked beans, and the small mountain of corn on the cob. He eyed it, somewhat bemused. “If you weren’t going to go to a cookout, Rogers, it’s going to come to you.”

“You didn’t make this?” He looked both awed and horrified by the idea.

“God, no! I found a deli open and put in the order. Grab a plate and a beer and let’s go sit out on your roof.”

He didn’t need to be ordered twice. Clearly, he was starved, and probably had been too lost in his artistic endeavor to be bothered with things like food, a dangerous proposition for a man whose metabolism ran four times faster than a normal, athletic person. He piled a plate with hot dogs and another with sides, as Natasha primly made up one smaller one for herself and grabbed a six pack and the dessert as she climbed out of the window frame to the roof beyond. Outside, he had set up several folding, wooden lounge chairs. She set up shop on one, setting the beers on the table between, and waited as he maneuvered himself outside to settle beside her.

“Happy 4th of July,” she cheered as she popped open a bottle, pulling from it in a long sip, thinking
that it was a far cry from where they had been this time last year. Steve opened his own bottle, echoing her sentiment. He dug into his food with gusto, and she was pleased to see it. She waited till he had downed at least two hot dogs before beginning her own, slathered in onions and mustard and dill pickles and tasting like barbeque in Clint’s back yard. She’d tried to track down where he was earlier that day, but had hit a dead end...again. Unlike Steve, Clint at least knew how to hide.

After he’d inhaled three of his hot dogs and began working more slowly on the side dishes, Steve finally spoke. “I was going to kind of let today pass by, you know.”

“I know.” She had come to understand him well since he first wandered onto the helicarrier years ago, wide-eyed, aching loss evident in every line of him, whether he knew it or not. At the time she’d never expected to like the old-fashioned man, stuck out of time, who kept referring to her as “ma’am” at every turn, a habit that had Clint in fits every time he did it. But Steve Rogers had a habit of growing on people - well, people who weren’t named Tony Stark. He was now as close to her as anyone, save Clint. He had her back so many times over the years it seemed a crime to not have his.

She eyed the sky above, having just turned from the golden hour as the sun sank low in the horizon, behind Manhattan's skyline and into New Jersey. The sky was now turning purple and gray, a breeze stirring off the East River. “So I looked it up, there will be fireworks soon in Prospect Park.”

“So that’s why you came here bringing food?”

“I own it. Nothing beats your view for them.”

“Well, I suppose there are a few perks of being Captain America.” He chewed on another hot dog, taking a sip of beer to wash it down.

“You know, there is a certain irony about you, Captain America, being born on the 4th of July, right? Like, it was destiny that someday you’d have to run around in a spangly costume with an American flag shield.”

He at least laughed at that. “It wasn’t planned, I promise you, but yeah. The press had a field day with that one when they figured out I was born on Independence Day. A ‘real life nephew of my Uncle Sam’.”

“You know I have seen Yankee Doodle Dandy, and I do get that reference.”

“You are full of surprises, Romanoff.”

She grinned, sipping at her beer and poking at her beans. “Did you grow up believing all the fireworks were for you, then?”

“My mom told me that at first, but I figured that out pretty quick. Bucky had his youngest kid sister, Agnes, convinced of the fact for years. She’d brag about it to the other kids, till she found out it was for American Independence. She then proceeded to cry and punch Bucky in the face.”

She tried to envision the man she knew as Bucky Barnes being a young man in Brooklyn in the 1930s, teasing his kid sister and found she couldn’t. “I can’t imagine what the two of you must have been like back then.”

“No different than any other kids, I guess.”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t like any normal kid.”

Steve’s eye roll at her only earned an impish grin. He finally reached for the phone he’d set aside
when he sat down and took a moment to scroll through it. “Here, photographic evidence.”

Delighted, she took it, staring down into an image of a sepia-colored photo that looked like it should be in some Ken Burn’s documentary. Two boys stood there, dressed in clothes from decades before, children from a time long past. One was small and light-haired, who looked so skinny a stiff wind might carry him away. Even then, though, she could recognize the granite jaw and stubborn lift to the chin that characterized the tall, broad shouldered man sitting next to her. The other, taller and sturdier, had his arm thrown around the neck of the tiny boy. Darker haired, he had an easy, confident grin, a happy child who clearly hadn’t known a day of hardship in his life. Still, here and there, she could see faint glimmers of James Barnes, the man she had known as the Winter Soldier, or more accurately, she had seen in the man she knew the ghost of this child posing on a long ago day in a park somewhere.

“My birthday, 1928. I turned 10 that year, so my mom decided to make a day of it. We did a picnic, I invited the entire Barneses. Bucky’s eleven there. I remember he ate so many sandwiches he nearly got sick.”

“It’s so hard to believe either of you were these cute little kids once upon a time.”

“Yeah.” He had that familiar, Steve Rogers smile, the one that said he was lost somewhere in his own head, back in a place and time he couldn’t get to anymore. Sometimes, she envied him the fact that he could remember his past.

“How did you two meet?”

That earned a brief guffaw. “The way you would expect me to meet anyone. The summer I turned nine, I had spent a month earning pocket money carrying groceries for the neighbor lady, which for a kid like me, that was a lot of work. So I decided to take my dollar to go spend it, but this neighborhood bully, he corners me. He sort of ran his own personal extortion racket at the corner by the drug store so he could pin down kids like me. Anyway, he was maybe, I don’t know, three years older and built like a linebacker. He and his crony penned me in and demand my money. I said no. He said he was going to pound my face.”

“So you spit in his eye?”

“You know me well, Romanoff.”

“Lucky guess, but continue.”

“So, there I am, getting my face pounded into the pavement, and this blur comes flying out of nowhere and takes this kid out. I didn’t see much save flying fists and Cuddy screaming bloody murder, but he and Barney make a run for it. And this kid comes over, peels me off the pavement, dust me off and introduces himself as James Buchanan Barnes and asks me why I would do something as stupid as piss off Cuddy Neil when he could have eaten me for breakfast.”

“It’s a fair question. So you were fast friends after that?”

“While his mother patched me up, we bonded over baseball cards.”

“That sounds so ridiculously quaint.”

“It kind of was.”

She chuckled, fascinated by the idea that either of the men she had come to know could have ever been so disgustingly innocent. “So, why the name Bucky? Why not Jimmy or Jaime?”
“Do you know the single most popular boys’ name in that era was James?”

She nodded in the growing dark.

“The Howling Commandos had three men named James, not including Dernier, whose first name was Jacque, which is the French version. Back home I think every other kid on the street was named James. We ran out of nicknames for them, starting making stuff up at one point.”

“And going by ‘Bucky’ as an adult is totally dignified.”

“Well, it was a different time, I guess. Besides, he had the misfortune of being named for President James Buchanan. His parents thought it was a tribute, because he was an Irish-American president. This was in the age before Kennedy. Trouble was, they didn’t remember that James Buchanan was the president who helped lead the country into the Civil War.”

Natasha blinked.

She hadn’t meant the hysterical giggle that burbled to the surface, but it popped out all the same. She sprayed beer as she slapped her palm to her lips, trying to stem the worst as her shoulders shook, tears of mirth and sadness creeping down her face. She couldn’t really put a pin in why it struck her so funny, other than the fucking tragedy of the splitting of the Avengers and why it happened, coupled with the losses all around them. Still, she snorted and coughed, laughing till her sides ached and her face was wet with tears. When she recovered herself, she found Steve watching her in bemusement, a faint smile on his face and worried confusion in his eyes.

“It’s just,” she snorted, trying to pull herself together. “It’s a fucking funny coincidence is what that is.”

Even Steve could see the humor. “Yeah, well, ill-luck name and all, he preferred Bucky to James and didn’t particularly care if it was dignified or not. He never had a problem with the ladies with that name, that’s for sure.”

Natasha had regrouped enough to finally have a calm conversation, wiping at her eyes with a napkin. “Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

“Perhaps a bit.” He shrugged, embarrassed. “It was never easy keeping up with him. He graduated from Erasmus top of his class the year before me, lettered in all four sports, could have gone to college if his folks could have afforded it. Instead, he stuck around here to keep an eye on me after my mom died. We pooled our money together to get a place, this ratty hole where the radiators didn’t work half the time and the roof leaked, but it was ours. It was a total bachelor pad. I think it only ever got cleaned when his mother came over and then she’d clean it more for us because we were so bad at it. I worked days doing paintings for businesses, you know, signs, ads, whatever they would pay me for. He worked at the gym and wherever else he could get a job. On the weekends, we’d go out, usually he’d have some new girl on his arm and scrounge up a date for me, just so I wouldn’t have to be alone. When I got sick, which was all the time, he’d make sure I got a doctor and medicine, and never complained once about it. We even did art college together. He wasn’t bad, had an eye on industrial design, maybe engineering. He and Howard used to like to discuss those type of things. When Pearl Harbor happened, we tried signing up together. They took him. They didn’t take me.”

Even now, after all these years and everything that happened, Natasha could hear the regret and disappointment of rejection out of Steve. Some things you never get over. She passed the phone back, setting it on the table, quietly. “Is that why you volunteered for Project: Rebirth?”

“More or less.” He set aside his plate, all of the mountain of food now gone. “I stumbled on that at
the Stark Expo. Erskine happened to be there and saw me with Bucky, and I guess he took pity on me. I don’t know, I just...couldn’t stomach the idea of all those men, of Bucky, going off to war and fighting and dying why I stuck around Brooklyn not doing anything to help, to take a stand.”

“There’s nothing wrong walking away from a fight, you know.” Natasha knew a thing or two about the strategic retreat.

“Remember, I was the kid who got beat up for a dollar in coins.”

“Fair point.”

Steve sighed as he looked out over the lights of the city. There weren’t as many of them as there once were. “I came into this world too weak and sickly to make it, so they said. I think I’ve spent my entire life since then just defying the odds and throwing myself at things I should have never been able to handle just to prove I could, to prove everyone who said I’d never make it wrong. I always figured if I fought hard enough, if I was stubborn enough, if I worked better than anyone else, I would be able to defeat anything. Then Thanos happened and we lost. Didn’t matter how much heart we had or how stubborn we were, none one of that mattered.”

Yes, they had lost.

“And the worst part, for me, was as I stood there, trying to make sense of what happened, the first thing I hear is Bucky’s voice, just to my right, calling my name. I turn, and there he is, taking a step towards me and then he’s gone. Dust, as if he’d never been there. I’d watched him die once before, falling off a train in the Alps. I had just got him back again, after what HYDRA did to him. I had defied the Accords, I fought with all of you, I nearly beat the living hell out of Tony and permanently destroyed our friendship forever, for Bucky, the last thing I had from my old life. I watched him dust right before my eyes. After everything, to have him gone. What the hell were we fighting for, Nat?”

She didn’t need to look at Steve to know there were tears streaming quietly down his face.

“Do you regret that we did it?”

Her words were simple, but they got through. “No.”

“Then we were fighting for them. And yes, we lost, but the world is still here. We are still here. And people still need us, still need the Avengers to take a stand and fight for them.” That was what she had signed up for, this chance to do something good and right in the world. She had thought the others had done the same.

“Will they ever stop needing us?”

That hadn’t been the question she expected out of Steve. He had always been willing to throw himself into the righteous cause. He had never known him to question it. “People are still broken creatures out to do stupid, awful things to others. Thanos didn’t change that.”

“I know.” He sighed, rubbing away tears with the back of his wrist before reaching for another beer. “I’m 100-years-old today.”

“And yet you don’t look a day over 30, tops.”

He laughed at that. “I feel like I’m twice as old.”

“Well, you know what they say, age is just a number.”
He hummed, swallowing from his new bottle, contemplating the world beyond his roof.

“You know, Bucky, Peggy, all of them at one point or the other said you have to keep going, keep moving on. I don’t know, right now, I’m just...tired.”

Of fighting or moving forward? He didn’t say and she didn’t ask. Anyone who knew Steve Rogers for longer than 5 minutes saw in him the endless optimism, the almost Pollyanna-like need to see the bright side in the darkest of times, the way he picked himself up and dusted himself off and kept going. Perhaps it was a product of growing up a sick kid to a widowed mother during the Depression and war, but underneath all of that, the “rah, rah, yay America” was hidden a man deeply hurt, wounded by the loss of nearly everyone and everything he’d ever cared for and his inability to stop any of it. Honestly, Natasha worried if he lost one more thing in his life, one more friend, he might just fall to pieces and crumble himself. Considering the pillar that Steve was in their lives, that prospect was terrifying.

“You know,” he sighed after long moments. “I always thought that after the war, I’d get to come home. Maybe settle down, have the life everyone else got to have for once. Put down the shield, just be an average guy.”

“I hate to tell you this, Steve, but you couldn’t be average if you tried.”

“That’s true.” He shrugged, shifting in his seat. “I am apparently bad at hiding in plain sight.”

“How you survived for two years on the run, I will never know.”

“I had a pretty good teacher.” He grinned at her. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have made it without you, Sam, and Wanda.”

They’d become something of a family, the four of them on the run, five if you counted Bucky in their times they got to Wakanda. For all she had missed Missouri and Clint, Laura and the kids, she had built friendships with the others, shared stories and fought by their side. She found herself missing Sam’s hysterical, teasing humor, the quiet, steady calm of Barnes, and Wanda, who had also had her own missteps coming into her own and who had looked to Natasha as an older, wiser sister.

“I miss them,” she whispered, quietly.

“Me too,” he murmured into the stillness.

They waited in companionable silence till the full darkness had turned the sky an inky blue. Somewhere in the neighborhood, someone had a grill out. In the space next to Steve’s on the roof, a family came out, a father and two children, a boy and a girl, carrying pillows and a blanket, spreading them out to get comfortable. Across the way, she could see other families on other rooftops doing the same. One had set up at a table with candles, chatting companionably. For all that they lost, for all who had disappeared, life continued to move on despite it all.

Why was it so goddamn hard?

In the distance, a sound, like thunder, could be heard. Across the skyline, pockets of color, red, blue, green, white, exploded like flowers bursting throughout the city landscape. The children beside them gasped in excitement. Steve had struck up a companionable conversation with the father from next door, both mutually missing baseball and bemoaning its loss in the face of everything. Natasha took the opportunity of his distraction and reached for the box beside her chair, quietly trying not to rustle it as she opened it.

The first fireworks over Prospect Park shot off, a shower of gold over the city as the children yelled
in excitement. Nat lit the candle she had stuck in the middle of the thick apple pie, butting into the two men’s sad sports conversation, a childish smirk on her face as she held it up. She was pleased to see Steve’s heartfelt surprise and wry amusement at the large “100” glowing in the darkness.

“Happy birthday, Captain America,” she grinned, unrepentant as he blew out his birthday candle.

High above, the sky exploded in stars of red, white and blue.
Walking With The Gods

Chapter Summary

In which Valkyrie must confront a world of changes.

There had been a time, just a blink-of-an-eye ago, when she would have met this entire scenario with a good drink of something powerful enough to knock out a Nidavellir dwarf, drank herself blind, gotten into a bar fight, then passed out not remembering any of it and do it all over again. It had been a shit existence, she had known it, somewhere deep down in a distant part of her she ignored for millennia, but had studiously pretended otherwise till Odin’s younger sons had wandered into her life and reminded her who she was and what she had been once upon a time. Now, as she looked back at a hold half-filled with people, scared, exhausted, and tired of wandering, she realized with a horrible jolt she was the one they were all looking towards to somehow make all of this work.

All Fathers, she could use a drink and a bar fight right about now!

“We’ve been cleared to enter into Terran space, Valkyrie, near someplace called Norway.”

She glanced to Lief, the old, Einherjar warrior, ancient by even her reckoning, but the only one left who could pilot the Sakaarian escape ship with its paltry remnant of survivors on it. “I remember it. Make course for it, tell the Terrans we should be there in fifteen of their minutes.”

“As you wish,” he nodded with all the dignity and duty her title once had given her in Asgard, not that she had much use for it now. Long gone were the days when she and her shield-sisters would pick and choose young men to train as the elite warriors of the Asgardians armies. Hell, she wasn’t sure any of the young blood who managed to survive Hela and her rampage even remembered the likes of them, not that it mattered. The old ways were dead and it was time to start something new.

“Right, you lot!” She turned to the scattered, frightened people. “You’ve survived Hela, you’ve survived Ragnarok, and you’ve survived Thanos and the disappearance of half of us. I won’t say we shouldn’t be terrified, the All Fathers know I am, but this is a chance for us, a new home. Midgard is not a planet without its challenges, but Thor loves this place and Odin before him. It is somewhere we can make a home and begin again.”

A child snuffled, his hollow-eyed mother cuddling him tight and shushing him softly. She’d lost her husband to Hela and her older children to the dusting. Still, she kept going in the face of all that loss. If she could, then they all could, right? That was the theory, anyway.

“When we arrive, the Midgardsians have arranged shelter for us as best they can. They’ve lost half of their people too, but they are welcoming us with open arms. Thor has arranged with their leaders a place to settle and temporary shelter and supplies so we can begin to rebuild. Midgard has long looked to us as gods, as fairy stories, and knows little of life outside their planet, but they have opened their doors to our king and his people. Perhaps we aren’t their gods, but we can build a new home here...right?”

A sea of blank faces all stared at her in the blue light off of Earth’s surface. It was Korg, the pile of rocks, who answered her finally.
“I’m sure it will be alright, given some time! I mean, look at it, it’s a nice, lovely blue with bits of brown and green, which isn’t quite like Asgard’s golden palace, I’ll grant, but it’s far bigger. Lots of room to stretch out! And all sorts of topography, from forests to deserts, and oh, look, there are mountains…”

Fine, let him chatter, keep them occupied. She turned to Lief instead. “Did they give you a landing spot?”

“Yes, my lady, outside of a city called Tønsberg.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s as much a garden as the name implies.” She eyed the incoming strip of gray-blue sea and long, rocky shores outlined with trees. It was beautiful here, she had to admit, dramatic and stark, nothing like the gilded halls of Odin’s world. Somehow, she felt better about that. It would be a new start, a fresh start, free from the trappings of what they had once been, a chance to begin again as something different. She could see why Thor liked it so much.

They soared over a city, not terribly large, but still big enough, full of brightly colored wooden buildings and a weather beaten stone fortress, before landing outside of it, on a windswept coast, overlooking a hilly cliff. More of the quaint little houses clung to the coast, huddled around an old dock and ancient fishing cove. Spreading behind it were the remains of what had once been some sort of village, she gathered, once upon a time, destroyed at some point, but whose marks could still be seen outlined on the ground below. Scattered in pockets around it were makeshift dwellings, quickly put up, but sturdy, braced against the weather from the sea, all teaming with Midgardians who bustled around, heads turned up to watch them come in with curiosity.

“They seem a friendly lot, I guess,” she murmured, as she pointed to a relatively flat field in the distance some way beyond. “Land there.”

Lief nodded as he took the controls. She turned to the people who all strained to look out of what few windows the ship had to see what their new home would be like.

“All right. I’ll go out and meet with the Midgardian’s waiting for us. Korg, you organize everyone into groups. Remember, space will be tight, women and children will get the first claims to food and shelter. The Midgardians come in peace, so leave any weapons you have here. We don’t want to cause an incident when they are trying to help.”

Not that they had any weapons to speak of, most of those had stayed with Thor and the other half of the survivors who stayed to fight Thanos and died.

“Valkyrie?” One child of young years raised her hand, dusky skinned and wide eyed, a hint of worry on her face. “My brother said Midgard is a savage place. They won’t...eat us, will they?”

Said brother stood behind their father, looking somewhat guilt as the man, a gardner she wanted to say, glared at his older son before cuffing him on the back of the head.

She wasn’t good with children, but she tried, stooping down to the girl’s level. “No, they are...much more civilized now. They’re a good people. Thor wouldn’t lie to us about that.”

This seemed to calm her, if not assuage her fears. She nodded, clinging to her father’s hand all the same. Scared, terrified people were what were left. She didn’t know what to do for them, how to do anything for them. She hoped Thor would. These were his people. He would have thought of something...right?

They landed gently, the ship finally coming to a standstill after long months in space with a quiet
lurch. The engine’s powered down and people waited, breathless, half terrified, half anticipatory, and all looking towards her.

“Well,” she muttered, straightening her formal battle armor as she looked to Korg, who gave her an encouraging double thumbs up. “Let’s go out and make friends, shall we?”

Not her forte, but she supposed there was a first time for everything.

The hatch opened, lowering a ramp to a swarth of green and yellow grass, swaying in a tangy breeze. Their sun made everything golden bright, like Asgard, and across the field she could see two men crossing to greet her. The shorter one she knew. The rumpled Bruce Banner was at least welcoming in his broad, cheerful smile, a far cry from the angry, childish, green Hulk. The other man was a stranger, tall, blonde, serious, in an outfit that looked like some form of Midgardian armor and a demeanor that marked him clearly as a leader. Still, she was a bit pleased - and just vain enough - to see the man’s jaw hang open, just a bit, as she marched down to meet them in the armor that marked her rank as one of the foremost warriors of Asgard, her sword at her side. Banner was polite enough to whisper something to him that made him flush and close his mouth with a snap.

“What’s up, Angry Girl?” Banner’s familiar greeting to her from his days as a giant, green rage monster said he was pleased to see her, and she had to admit, she was pleased to see him as well.

“You’ve changed,” she teased, taking his hand in greeting. “Again.”

“Yeah, long story behind that.” He shot an uncomfortable look with the other man, who had at least gathered his wits about him enough to return to his commanding demeanor.

“So, uh, Valkyrie, this is Captain Steven Rogers, the man in charge here.”

The man nodded in that way warriors had, meeting her handshake as Thor would. “Ma’am, Steve is fine.”

“Steve Rogers?” She’d heard that name before, a lot, out of both Thor and Loki, though the latter had very few kind things to say. “Thor’s mentioned you before. He said you were a warrior brave enough to walk the halls of Valhalla. You can call me Brunehilde if you want, if we aren’t standing on ceremony.”

Rogers nodded, but Banner look as thunderstruck as the captain had just a moment before.

“Brunehilde? I thought your name was Valkyrie?” Banner’s utter confusion was amusing considering how smart the man apparently was.

“My title is ‘Valkyrie’, like his is ‘Captain’. It’s what I did.”

“Right, I know, but Thor always called you that.”

“Because Thor didn’t bother to learn my name. All he heard was ‘valkyrie’ and he was swooning about my sword and how cool I was. It would be like calling him ‘king’ all day, though I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.” She glanced around the remains of the ruined village, over to the shelters with their bustle of people and to the bright fishing cottages in the distance. “Speaking of, where is our noble king? I thought he’d be here to greet his people when they arrived at their new home.”

Both men exchanged nervous glances, but it was Banner who answered. “About that…”

He paused, looking to Rogers, who grimaced tightly before deciding to be the one who was the bearer of bad news. “Thor’s a bit...indisposed?”
“Indisposed how?”

The powerful Midgardian shuffled his feet. “Like…”

“Like plowed off his face right now.” Bruce finally cut to the chase, despite Rogers' discomfort.

That was a term that hadn’t translated well. “Plowed of his face?”

“Drunken,” Rogers supplied, glancing helplessly at Banner. “He’s…really drunk.”

“I’ve never seen him like this ever,” Banner supplied.

“I didn’t think he could get drunk on our ‘mere mortal’ stuff,” Rogers grumbled.

“Clearly, he can if he drinks enough of it.”

As someone who had spent the last - well, few thousand years, really - “off her face” as it were, she knew that was possible, and she also knew the absolute pit it was once you got into it. None of this boded well at all.

“What happened?” The question belted out of her directed mostly at Banner, who sort of cringed, before sighing darkly, looking far older than he already looked, if that was possible.

“That’s a kind of long story, actually.”

“Besides,” Rogers broke in, authoritative and firm. “You’re people are waiting. We have everything we could get for them; shelter, food, what medical aid we got, if it helps at all. We can get them off the ship and settled, and then deal with Thor.”

He was right. She could see why it was Thor admired him, he had a head on his shoulders and knew how to strategize and take the reins, something she was still learning. “Right, you’re right. Korg’s got them split up. Probably best to take them in groups, get them set up and settled.”

Banner lit up at that. “Korg’s alive!”

“Yeah,” she smirked, opening the comms. “Alright, let’s get the first group out here.”

As it went, the settling part went fairly smoothly. The Midgardians - humans, as they called themselves in the language Rogers and Banner spoke - were kind enough, if nervous at meeting these alien people who looked nearly identical to themselves. It didn’t take long for the two groups to warm up to each other, as the children broke the ice quickly, wanting to know about everything and anything all at once, surprised when they discovered that the humans weren’t savages who ate their young. She would need to smack whoever started that rumor - hard.

It was nearly evening, the sun setting behind a ridge of cliffs into the ocean, turning the sky a golden orange and purple, exhaustion and good food finally taking its toll on everyone. Lodging had been distributed and functional and soft cots provided for everyone, with the promise from Rogers that the king of this land had promised resources to help them rebuild and start again. It seemed that the loss of half of Norway’s population meant that refugees from elsewhere were welcome with open arms. It was at least something for a people who had nothing.

Speaking of kings, their own king had yet to make an appearance.

“He’s alive…I think.” Banner trudged along, through the ruins of older buildings, to the fishing cottages along the human built bay below.
“Will you tell me what happened now?” She’d heard rumors through the afternoon from the relief workers, sad stories of lost loved ones, of missing co-workers, of people who vanished before their eyes, dusting just as half of the Asgardians did. Unlike them, they seemed to know something of it, attributing it to the same Thanos who had attacked their ship.

Banner grimaced, nodding as he paused at a structure, in the heart of the village in a broad, old plaza, a broken down, stone building, it’s front caved in, rubble piled neatly against what remained of the walls. He studied it, briefly, waving at the interior, now open to the elements. “So, this building, it used to be the village church, sort of a temple, place of worship. This one stood for, I don’t know, a few hundred years. Was a Lutheran church, but it was a Catholic one before that, and before any of those things, it was a worship site for those who revered your people as gods.”

“We were hardly ever gods,” she retorted, softly. She’d never understood why anyone thought they were, but Odin had let it go on, always saying it was better that way.

Banner only shrugged. “You know the way it goes, story turns into myth, and that turns into legend. Whatever the case, Thor’s father left something here, something he wanted to hide. I guess he thought Earth was enough of a backwater no one would come looking. I don’t know how he got hold of any of the Infinity Stones, though Thor said he had more than one. He hid one of them, the Reality Stone, in some dimensional space in London, not far away from where we at. Here, he hid the Tesseract, a cube of immense energy that held the Space Stone. He gave it to his human followers here and they hid it for nearly a thousand years.”

The Infinity Stones? That captured some hint of a memory from somewhere in the depths of the things she wished to forget. “Odin was always collecting powerful objects in all of his wars of conquest, items that other people used as weapons. He kept them in his treasure room, well guarded.”

“But not guarded well enough if Loki could get in and out of there all the time.”

“Loki was a sneaky shit who hardly needed an excuse to stir up the pot, but, yeah, I guess there is a point. All I know about the Infinity Stones was that they were the most powerful items in the universe, enough to shape it however you wanted, if you were strong enough to wield them correctly. But that was the thing, few could. One stone could incinerate even an Asgardian if used for too long.”

“Thanos could. He had already grabbed one of the stones, on some place called Xandar, when he attacked the Statesman.”

“So why did he attack us, then? It wasn’t as if we had the stones. You said Odin hid the ones he had.”

“On that,” Banner murmured, running a hand through his hair, already turning gray at the temples. “So, the Space Stone, it used to be here, till a big war seventy-five years ago. This guy, Johann Schmidt, knew what the Tesseract was, if not what the Space Stone was, and he was trying to take over the world with it. Ironically, the guy who stopped him from doing it was Steve.”

He nodded down the hill to where Rogers stood talking to Lief and other remainders of the Einherjar who were strategizing and coordinating resources. She knew humans didn’t have the lifespan that Asgardians did, but he hardly looked old enough to have done that. Her expression must have given something away, as Banner rushed to give her an explanation.

“Steve’s got a whole long story himself. You’ll have to ask him about it sometime. In any case, Schmidt tried to use the stone and it went off. My guess is that by him using it, he alerted Thanos that
it existed and that the stones could be found. After that, it was just a matter of finding them all.”

“That still doesn’t explain why Thanos targeted us.”

“Loki,” Banner said simply. He almost didn’t need to explain further, she should have known that
snake would have something to do with it, but he continued anyway. “Long and the short, after Loki
decided to nearly take over Earth and piss a bunch of people off, Thor took it back to Asgard and
Odin’s vault. It would have been destroyed there, too, during Ragnarok, if Loki hadn’t thought
himself so clever and taken it while he was in there the last time.”

“Of course,” she muttered, unsurprised it would be his machinations that would have started all this.
Still, he hadn’t deserved to die the way he did. “So, Thanos found us while following the stone,
killed those who remained, and only Thor survived.”

“That’s the long and the short of it.” He eyed the church a moment longer, before wandering again,
this time towards the cottages. “After that, well...he might be better at telling you than I am.”

“If he’s sober,” she muttered, following Bruce through the maze of clapboard buildings, a riotous
color in the growing twilight. Inside one, barely more than an insulated shack, the lights were on and
and there was noise inside, though none of it was Thor.

“Sounds like he’s up,” Banner muttered, knocking on the door, but only perfunctorily, stepping
inside past a room jammed with boots and gear of some sort, and into a hallways that led to a larger
room filled with mismatched furniture and warm light. Draped on the far sofa, eyes glued to the
screen blaring loudly into the room, sprawled her sovereign king, in a shirt and some sort of loose
fitting pants, looking like he’d just been drug through every banqueting hall in Asgard and smelling
like the bottom of an ale barrel. His eye-patch was gone, replaced with a mismatched prosthetic, and
neither of his eyes looked up at either her or Banner, instead focusing on the screen blaring in the
corner about some sort of resolution regarding the recent tragedies.”

“Thor, buddy!” Banner was tentative in a way Hulk never was as he approached, shooting her a
nervous look. “Hey, brought someone to see you! Thought you could use the cheering up!”

He only managed to let his eyes glide first to Bruce, then to her. The blue one was bleary and
unfocused, the brown...well, honestly, the brown wasn’t much better.

“You’re majesty,” she smirked, hands on hips as she regarded the mess that was the King of the
Asgardians. “It was so good to see you with your people today, providing leadership and lifting their
spirits.”

Her sarcasm was clearly lost on him. “I just woke up.”

“Yeah, we know,” Banner snorted, eyeing him up and down. “And I’d guess you’d have a hell of a
hangover after what you packed away, buddy.”

“I never get hangovers.”

“How’s your head?” Banner ignored his protests.

“Feels like a thundering herd of bilgesnipes has been set loose in it.”

“That’s what we call a hangover. I’ll get you water, not sure the pain meds would do you any good.”
He patted her arm and nodding to the truculent Thor on the couch, mouthing “talk to him” quietly
before he wandered to the back of the house.
Right, talk to Odin’s son, currently in the sort of mental breakdown she herself had just gone through. Of course, she was a valkyrie, not the king, and had no responsibility to any group of people when she decided to go on her bender. He did and they were currently being overseen by her, a washed up shield maiden, and his friends, all of whom were well meaning and none of whom were him.

“So, glad to see you survived,” she offered, cheerfully, flopping on the couch beside him in her full armor. It bounced but didn’t really turn his attention from the informational program he was currently staring at.

“I heard about Loki,” she offered, hesitantly, at least trying to offer some comfort. “I’m sorry.”

He grunted, at least. That was a start.

“I met your friend Captain Rogers - Steve. He’s rather nice.” She didn’t do small talk, never had, and she was already straining at what she was okay with. “He’s with them now. He’s as impressive as you said he was. Certainly, I can see why you like him so much. I’d be curious to spar with him sometime, test his mettle.”

Not even talk of battle roused him.

“Are you even listening,” she snapped, now at the end of her admittedly limited patience, kicking his leg with her boot. That at least annoyed him enough to turn his head on the cushion and glare at her.

“What do you want out of me?”

That hadn’t been the answer she wanted or expected. “I want you to get off your ass and be a king, that’s what I want.”

What the hell was the matter with him?

“You said Steve has it. He always has it. He’s Captain America, the ‘Star Spangled Man With A Plan’!”

She didn’t even know what the hell that even meant. “And your friend, as I recall, one of your closest.”

“He is, he is...yes.” He sighed, lolling his head back to the screen. “Steve is the greatest, the nicest...the worthiest. You know, he was the only one of the Avengers who could even budge Mjolnir? It was only a smidge, not like he picked it up or anything, but for a human to even manage it at all, that’s...that’s a thing. I mean, not many can even do that, but Steve and Vision...except Vision is dead now. Thanos ripped the Mind Stone right out of his head, like it was a melon, and bam! There went half the universe.”

It took her a full minute to catch on to what he was saying. “You were there, then, when he got all the stones?”

“Well, he had most of the stones, then, but yes.” He nodded sloppily. “I came down from Nidavellir. You remember it? I went there with the tree and friend Rabbit...where is he? He was here?”

“You mean the talking raccoon, Rocket? The one who got us here in the first place?”

“That’s the one! Anyway, we went to Nidavellir and Eitri, he was there, and we made and axe! You know, because Mjolnir...my sister destroyed it, so, I wanted something big enough to defeat Thanos and make him pay for our people.”
With a sinking heart, she had a feeling where this was going. “Did you get your axe?”

“Oh, yes! Nice one too, I can call the bifrost with it, which is good, because, Heimdall is dead.” He drifted a bit at that, the death of his best friend. “Anyway, so I used it to come to Wakanda, this lovely country here, full of these amazing warriors. You’d love them! I thought we were winning the battle! And then Thanos arrives, and I knew that was my chance to revenge them all; Loki, Heimdall, the rest. I wanted to make him pay for it. I wanted to make him suffer. I swung my mighty Stormbreaker high, cleaving into his chest, biting deep for his heart.”

Considering what happened, she guessed it hadn’t gone as expected. “I don’t know if he had a heart, Thor.”

“No, I don’t think he did.” He frowned, glancing to the corner by the monitor where a giant, shining axe of Nidavellir make was propped by the mantelpiece of the fireplace. “He said I should have gone for the head and snapped his fingers, just like that.”

He snapped his fingers in front of his own face, looking cross-eyed at them.

“Then he disappeared. That’s when everyone else did too. Steve’s childhood friend, dear to him as a brother, Bucky, he was the first to go. Then the Wakandan king, he disappeared in the hands of his shield-maiden. Sam, Steve’s noble friend, always at his side, we never found him. And Wanda… dear, sweet Wanda, she’d come from so far, you know, being used by HYDRA and the Mind Stone, lost her brother, and still became a better person for it. Vision loved her, though he didn’t know it, I don’t think. She died holding his body, dusted up into the sky.”

She remembered well the horror and terror of being on the escape ship, free from the Statesmen, not knowing what had happened and desperately trying to find their way to Earth. They had no idea when, one by one, people disintegrated before their eyes - wives, husbands, children, lovers, old friends. Half of those who had made it out didn’t make it to Earth.

“Anyway, they all disappeared. Half of Wakanda disappeared, the Earth, the universe, and there I stood with my god-killing axe and a stupid look on my face, and I couldn’t do anything about it. Thor, the great warrior, the King of the Asgardians, the wielder of Mjolnir and Stormbreaker, and all I could do was kick my own ass for not going for his fucking head.”

Oh, bloody hell, she breathed. She had been here before. She had been right here, watching as Hela with her bloody blades cut down her shield-sister, her lover, right before her horrified eyes as all around the Valkyrie lay the dead and dying. She alone had survived to tell the tale, as Hela had tried to rest control of Asgard from Odin.


“Yep and I failed!”

“You did.” There was no denying that fact.

“I got the bastard in the end, though. We found him, but he had destroyed the stones by then. So, I chopped off his head. Couldn’t hurt anyone anymore without one of those.”

“But it doesn’t fix the situation or bring anyone back,” she replied, knowing full well the spot he was in.

“Nope.”

This was a lot worse than she had expected, a lot worse than either Banner or Rogers had hinted at.
“Thor, I know that this is hard for you. I know you tried, and you know, failing happens sometimes, even for warriors like us. You taught me that. You taught me to pick myself up and get back up when I had given up and decided to drink myself to death. You taught me it was better to die fighting on my feet than buried in my own misery. Your people need you. You may have failed with Thanos, but you still have Asgard.”

Rather than earning a snort, or a nod, or nearly any other reaction she expected out of him, Thor decided to burst into tears.

“I can’t be their leader! I am the leader of no one and nothing! I couldn’t save half the universe and I am one of the greatest warriors Asgard has known! How can I keep them alive, hmmm? Clearly, I lack any of my father’s wisdom or cunning if I couldn’t even figure out how to chop off his head before he could snap his fingers. I don’t have Loki’s brilliance, or my mother’s insight, or Heimdall’s all-seeing eye. You know why, because they are dead. They’re all dead, because I failed them all, every last one of them. I failed the Avengers, I failed my people, I failed the universe because I was stupid, and you expect me to somehow figure out how to keep the rest of them alive?”

“I do, Thor, because it’s your place.”

“It’s my place only because my father and mother were king and queen. Who in the universe thought that was a good idea, making you king because your father was? Because children are often idiots, case in point, my sister, who you are familiar with.”

“You were trained and raised to it.”

“So was Loki and he tried to conquer the Earth.”

“All right, not great examples, but we have no one else, Thor. All we have is you.”

He sighed, long and hard, rolling his head back to look at her. “Then you are all really screwed, aren’t you.”

She could have punched him in the moment.

“So, water!” Banner must have been listening, not that he could miss anything in the kitchen. He had several giant glasses of water on a tray. “Just what the doctor ordered, and I mean that because one of my degrees is a medical one.”

His joke fell flat, both because she didn’t know what a doctor quite was and Thor couldn’t care.

“Right, so drink all of these and that will help with the headache.”

Thor eyed them briefly, then shrugged. “I’d prefer beer.”

Banner twitched. “We..we are fresh out of beer, pal. You drank it all.”

“I’ll take vodka then, if that’s left.”

“You got all that, too.”

“Wine?”

“All out.”

“Scotch?”
“Thor, you need some water at least.”

Storm clouds brewed on his face, though they didn’t quite crackle into lightening. “I don’t want your bloody water, I want a real drink, and if needs be I’ll go get it. I’m sure Tønsberg has something.”

“Be my guest,” Banner snapped, fed up. She held her breath, expecting his pale skin to turn the strange shade of green it did when he turned into the Hulk, but it didn’t.

Instead, Thor merely managed to scramble up off the seat, pulling himself up unsteadily as he thrust his hand out, calling the giant axe to him, allowing it to pass dangerously close to Banner’s face. It landed with a solid ‘thunk’ into his palm. Without another word, he stormed out of the front door, as out of a clear twilight he called down lightening, disappearing in a flash of light into the sky.

“He’ll be back,” Banner sighed, tightly, his face grim as he watched the storm clouds move to the lights of the larger town. “He’s...not in a very good place.”

She blinked at him as if he’d just dribbled all over himself. “You think?”

Banner shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets in the self-effacing manner he had. “It’s why I’m glad you’re here, Val...Brunhilde...whatever. If there’s anyone who gets what he’s going through, it’s you. None of the rest of us do. He needs you.”

She didn’t know how to break it to Banner that she didn’t think she was what Thor needed. Frankly, having been in that spot, she couldn’t say what Thor needed, as she wasn’t sure, really, what had even broken her out of it outside of her need for revenge.

“I can see what I can do, but no promises.” She had a feeling she’d be far too busy trying to keep their people alive, since Thor wasn’t about to.
I Am Hers And She Is Mine

Chapter Summary

In which Steve attends a wedding.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The world’s press called it the “Decimation”. It was both a dramatic and thoroughly inaccurate term when properly understood, a decimation would have been much easier to bear. As the true scope of what was lost came to be known, life changed for everyone. The summer crawled along and the world attempted to figure out what this new life would be like with only a part of its citizens on it. For the religious out there, this was a sign of the end times, of the rapture, of beginning of the apocalypse. A call for revival was put out, and among those left behind there were many who flocked to places of worship trying to understand. Others, more cynical and opportunistic, took the chance to profit off of those who struggled to cope with their loss. Still others rose to the occasion, reached out, tried to make real human connections with people, to link together souls now thinned out, leaning on each other in order to survive.

Whether they wanted it to or not, life moved on, as did time. Summer melted into the balm of early September and the last golden days before the glory of autumn, neither too hot nor too cold. The setting was intimate, a rooftop park in Manhattan, lined with trees, small and private. The event was far from being the social event of the fall. It had now become a smaller, more private ceremony, with only family, close friends and colleagues, and absolutely no press. It couldn’t have been a more perfect wedding if they tried, which after all they’d been through was heartily deserved.

Virginia Potts married Anthony Edward Stark quietly and without the fanfare that they had been planning for six months before. She still wore the dress she had chosen for the larger affair, though, simple and couture, altered only a bit for slight bump that was only just starting to become apparent, if you were rude enough to look for it. The groom, as ever, dressed to the nines, had finally recovered from his long weeks in space, helped in no small part by an alien elixir brought back by Carol Danvers, saving him from weeks more of the milky shakes he had grown tired of. James Rhodes, in his elegant military evening dress stood for the groom. Happy Hogan stood, awkwardly, for the bride, and a Potts female cousin nicknamed Rusty, who also was an Episcopalian priest, presided over it all. It was short and sweet and elegant and when it was done the groom dipped his bride into a kiss that nearly sent them both toppling. Instead, red faced, the bride simply swatted him with her bouquet till he righted them, thoroughly unrepentant and disgustingly pleased with himself.

All-in-all, it was a beautiful and perfect, and frankly, Steve was still a bit shocked he was even there at all. The invitation had gone out broadly, of course, to all the Avengers who remained and to the new blood, such as Danvers, Nebula, and Rocket, who had been so crucial in rescuing Tony. Even still, Steve wasn’t sure that the invitation really did mean him. He and Tony had only infrequent conversations since the team had returned from their hunt for Thanos, polite if strained exchanges full of Stark’s sarcastic repartee and Steve’s quiet, pointed responses, never breaking the narrow boundaries of their careful truce.

He had, at least, provided Steve with new armor, the old armor having been thrown out soon after
the battle of Wakanda, broken and battered. He’d lamented that Steve had tried to take on Thanos with it and muttered that it was a wonder he didn’t get killed before giving him the new suit, explaining all the new modifications he had made, including new carbon scale armor Stark Industries had been developing. Steve had accepted it for what it was, a peace offering and a show of good faith, even if privately he wasn’t sure he’d ever put armor back on ever again. He had not asked about his shield, and frankly he wasn’t sure he even wanted it. Captain America felt like a title that belonged to someone else long ago, not to the battered soldier he was now. Tony hadn’t offered it back, either, and they both coolly avoided the sorest of topics. Things weren’t okay, and he didn’t know if they ever would be again with Tony. Far too much resentment lingered, but at least they were no longer enemies.

He had of course been happy to hear that Tony was finally marrying Pepper. Personally, Steve felt Tony should have done it years before, but had planned on avoiding the nuptials and the potential drama it could cause all together until Natasha had stepped in. Going over both his head and Tony’s, she spoke to the bride and was told that if Captain America wasn’t there, she would take it as a serious insult and he could sit on her side of the aisle if he wanted. For not the first time Steve had to wonder how Tony had ended up with a woman as perfect for him as Pepper was, a sentiment that Natasha echoed as they sat at the reception afterwards, watching Tony dance with his wife.

“Honestly, I was there when they got together and I had to wonder what she saw in him.”

Rhodey saluted Natasha with his beer, meeting her champagne glass in a mutual toast. “Same! I mean, I knew those two were simmering for years before they got together, but Tony was determined to have his cake and eat it too.”

“The way they flirted with each other was really obvious, and he didn’t even come out with it till she nearly was killed by Vanko, which is less than ideal timing.”

“Yeah, Tony stepping up and owning his feelings, not his strong suit.”

“Fair point.” Natasha smirked, downing the rest of the very expensive sparkling wine. “And now they’ll have a kid. Tony as a dad is just...weird.”

“He did alright with his proteges.” For a moment, that hint of sadness that clung to everything hit the table. Neither Peter nor Harley had made it out of Thanos’ snap alive. “Besides, when you think about it, who gets kids better than Tony does?”

“If by that you mean he’s a man with impulse control issues and a serious lack of perspective outside himself, yeah, he gets kids.” Natasha was impish in her teasing, but softened as she watched Tony and Pepper kiss. “I’m happy for him, though. Really, she’s good for him, and he deserves to be happy.”

“Don’t we all,” Rhodey sighed.

“What, you’re not happy?” Natasha rose, smoothing down her rose pink silk dress, reaching a hand out to Rhodey. “Dance with me, soldier.”

Her words, playfully meant, hit Steve square in the gut, an ache he hadn’t felt in such a long time rising within him. He watched, painfully, as Rhodey considered her outstretched hand, then nervously took it, rising in his leg braces to escort her to the floor.

“You know, I don’t got the moves I used to in these things.”

“That’s okay, we’ll go slow. I’m sure you can still show me a thing or two out there.”
We’ll have the band play something slow. I don’t want to step on your toes.

“They make a cute couple out there, don’t they?”

Steve’s eyes flew open to Bruce, who had been wandering the floor and now returned to settle at their table, beer in hand as his eyes followed the dancers who had joined Tony and Pepper in their celebration. He didn’t need to ask which ones he was referring to, he could see Bruce watching Natasha’s lithe, small form in her impossibly tall and thin stiletto heels leading Rhodey in a tiny circle, chatting companionably.

“She likes Rhodey well enough. She’s known him since she tailed Stark years ago.”

“He’s a good guy! Military, super smart, keeps Tony in line, loyal to a fault and never abandons his friend or his post.”

Steve had a feeling he knew where Bruce was going with this. “She’s missed you.”

Bruce glanced at him, then shrugged as he pulled from his beer. “I wish I could say the same, but I spent most of it as the other guy and he was having fun being the Tony Stark of Sakaar.”

Steve had heard stories, mostly from Thor, when he was sober, and Brunnhilde the Valkyrie, who admittedly wasn’t very sober herself in those days. Thor was there at the wedding, mostly upright from what he could tell, leading a very awestruck Potts cousin in some sort of formal dance that didn’t exactly fit the music, but neither seemed to care.

“You know, the only way I came out of being the Hulk was Natasha.” Bruce sighed, picking at the label on his bottle with a thumbnail. “Thor was trying to get the old quinjet working, and Hulk was tearing the hell out of it, and I guess something hit something, and the video she sent trying to get me to come back after Sokovia popped up. Next thing I know, I’m waking up naked on another planet, for Christ’s sake! The last thought I had was watching Sokovia raise up in the sky and Nat pushing me off to force me to change.”

That had all been so long ago, it was laughable. “You must have been terrified.”

“Of waking up like that, yeah. Worse was knowing the other guy had just been ruling the roost for so long. If Thor hadn’t come back, he’d never had let go, not unless something drastic happened. Frankly, I think that’s part of why he refuses to come out now, that and Thanos handing his ass to him.”

The strange relationship between the two halves of Bruce’s soul was something Steve had never quite understood, but he didn’t think Bruce did either. “It wasn’t his fault any more than it was yours.”

“No, but we both feel like assholes for it.”

That, Steve could absolutely get.

“You know, I was engaged once.”

Caught in his own thoughts, Steve nearly missed Bruce’s quiet confession, blinking in surprise at the scientist. “No, I didn’t know. It wasn’t in your file.”

“That wouldn’t be.” He smiled bitterly, shaking his head. “She was Betty Ross, Thaddeus Ross’ daughter.”
That was unexpected. “The same one who busted our chops over Sokovia?”

“That would be him.” He spun the bottle briefly, half consumed, before pushing it away. “I met Betty in college. We were both bio-chemistry nerds. I was the guy who always hung out at the lab in high school, she was the general’s daughter, and I think we both found someone who could...let loose with, I guess. Hard to believe, but the chemistry students are partiers. If it wasn’t some sort of chemical study, it was a booze up with interesting concoctions of some legal and mostly illegal forms of alcohol.”

“I don’t know if I find that as hard to believe as you think.” He fondly remember Dr. Erskine the night before his procedure. “So you two connected over science and dubious chemical choices.”

“Well and research. We had differing interests, she was straight biology, I was more interested in bio-chemistry and physics, but we still worked together extensively. We got recruited into this pet project of her father’s, were told it was supposed to create a serum for radiation poisoning. What we didn’t know was that he was trying to recreate Abraham Erskine’s formula, the one he used to make you.”

When Steve thought about it, it was was rather strange the number of ways that each of them were tied to one another, connected by happenstance and world events. Bruce Banner, the mild-mannered scientist, had just been sucked into this crazy world because Thaddeus Ross wanted to have another Captain America on his hands. Had Steve never existed, neither would the Hulk. It was amazing what people who wanted bigger weapons would do in order to get them.

“And this is the man who wanted to control the Avengers?”

“The irony of that situation is not lost on me. Maybe it was good I was on Sakaar and not here, I’d have punched him in his smug face, just as myself, not as the Hulk.”

“I’d have held him for you.” Steve smirked, remember Ross and his self-satisfied, pious censure, so very concerned about the Avengers and their actions. He’d turned Bruce into the Hulk and nearly destroyed Harlem in the process. “What happened to Betty?”

“That!” Bruce chuffed, leaning back in the late afternoon sunshine, watching Natasha twirl in Rhodey’s arms, as graceful as she was when she was taking a target out. “As you can imagine, the Hulk rather changed the dynamic of our relationship. I tried to hide, pretended I was dead...hoped I was dead, frankly. Her father was looking for me, wanted to use me, and I knew it. She moved on with her life. When I came back, let’s just say I shouldn’t have looked her up.”

“She rejected you?”

“Oh, no, she...I still loved her, she still loved me, but I couldn’t do that to her. I couldn’t have her life turned upside down by this monster inside of me, never knowing if the slightest thing could set me off. I mean, I hate to say it, in those early days, sex was not going to be happening, because the minute my heart rate went up, I was changing.”

Steve had never known Bruce well, certainly not his love life well, but pieces began to fall into place for him as he regarded him and Natasha and what might have been, once, long ago. “You can’t trust yourself to be close to anyone for fear of what you might become, what you might do to them?”

“In a nutshell.” He didn’t look at Steve, but he knew he’d hit Bruce’s fears on the head. “I let Betty go because I couldn’t ask her to live a life like that. It wouldn’t have been fair.”

“And Natasha?”

He jerked up, looking for the pale blonde hair, it’s roots just starting to turn back into her dark,
auburn red. “It wouldn’t have been fair to her most of all. You know her, Steve, you know her story, what they did to her. She may not have had your pal Barnes’ treatment, but it wasn’t far off. She thinks she’s so cool and collected, that she’s a horrible creature, but I saw the fear in her eyes when we first met. She’s had enough monsters in her life. She didn’t need one more.”

Steve considered that against what little he did know of his friend. Natasha had opened up to him slowly over the years, perhaps not as much as to Clint, with whom she had a unique bond, but certainly more than to the others. He’d never had siblings, the closest he had ever gotten were the Barnes kids, Bucky and his three sisters. Nat was the nearest he had in these modern times, loyal to a fault, willing to stick with whatever insane plan he had, quick to scold him when he had done something stupid, but just as quick to welcome him back with open arms. And yet, she always walked around with the heavy weight of guilt, of who she was made to be, of what she had done. Few people in this world could ever truly understand that. Natasha’s entire life had been one of rebirth, from the Red Room to the Avengers, reinventing herself, building around herself a purpose, a life, a family. She had invited Bruce to be a part of that family, to enter into that life, and he had rejected it. That was a hurt that didn’t just go away, especially not for Natasha.

“You know, Bruce, not for nothing, but you had the perfect chance right in front of you. A damn good woman, perhaps one of the most beautiful in the world, wanted you. Not Stark, not Thor, hell, not me, she wanted you, the bio-chemistry nerd with anger issues, the guy who isn’t naturally a fighter or who even likes the fight. Natasha is someone who knows her own mind, in fact, she knows it better than anyone, and knows all our minds too.”

“I know.” He rubbed the heels of his hands hard against his eyes. “I’m an idiot, but...after Johannesburg, what I did...I don’t know, Cap, I wasn’t in a good place, and you know what, maybe I waited too long. Like you said, I shouldn’t have, but I did, and you were right.”

The poor bastard really did have it bad, Steve mused, feeling for him. “I only spoke from experience, is all, hoping you’d miss out on my fate.”

Bruce studied him for long moments before nodding in understanding. “I never asked who she was. I mean, you’ve mentioned her, at least in the abstract, this long lost love, but never discussed her or brought her up.”

It was true, he hadn’t, not to others, anyway. But today was a wedding, and Natasha’s words had jared painful memories of her voice on the radio, of impossible promises made, and the dance he had long waited for but never got to have. He reached inside his pocket for his father’s old, battered compass, the one he carried now with Peggy’s picture carefully pasted on the inside of the lid, the newsprint yellowing with time and wear. He opened it up to stare at her coy, determined smile, watching him through decades and all manner of conflict, always as ever pointing him to his true north, to the man he wanted to be.

He gently turned it and passed it across the table to Bruce, who studied the insides, his expression softening as he smiled. “She’s beautiful.”

“She was.” Even in her 90s, Peggy had been lovely, aging gracefully in a way so few do, and he had loved her just as much then as when she was twenty-two. The same fire that had burned inside of her in the 1940s had still burned within her 70 years later, but it had been hampered by age and the depredations of time on her beautiful mind.

“What was her name?”

“Peggy...Margaret Carter.”
Her name rang a bell for Bruce. “The Peggy Carter? Like 'Project: Rebirth' Peggy Carter? SHIELD Peggy Carter?”

Of course Bruce would know, having done all of his research. “The very same. That’s how we met.”

Bruce whistled, shaking his graying head in admiration. “I met her once, when she was older. That was one hell of a tough, classy dame.”

“That she was,” Steve’s smile was achingly bittersweet. “Though she might shoot you for calling her a dame.”

Bruce laughed till Steve arched a pointed gaze at him, melting his amusement. “You’re serious.”

“She shot at me once. It’s how we figured out vibranium was bullet-proof.”

“Jesus! I thought Nat had a temper.”

“She hasn’t tried to kill you...yet.” He reached back across the table for the compass. “Anyway, it was a long time ago. She and I...we never quite made it all work. The war, different duties, hell, I was a glorified show pony for a chunk of it while she was spying in Europe. Then I was hunting down HYDRA with Bucky and the Commandos, tramping through Europe. There was always...something, the next mission, the next contact. We kept telling ourselves that one day, soon, the war would be done and we’d get our chance. But, we all know how that ended up for me.”

One brief kiss in the back of a car flying down a runway, chasing after a madman. That was all he got. All those chances and missed opportunities, the small moments when he could have confessed how he felt, tried to move forward, but had demurred in the face of duty and military code and whatever the hell else he thought was standing in the way. It had all really been excuses for the truth, that he still thought of himself as the pipsqueak from Brooklyn, the kid who wasn’t even as tall as she was, who couldn’t possibly deserve the beautiful, brilliant, bright Agent Peggy Carter. He’d wanted perfection for her, never realizing there was no such thing as a perfect world, only one that could be turned upside down with the snap of an alien’s fingers.

“I wanted to give her the world, to be free for her, not Captain America, bound to serve his country by duty and some serum. I wanted to be Steve Rogers, just the guy from Brooklyn who never knew how to talk to women, who couldn’t dance, who dreamed of being an artist, and who loved her thoroughly and completely. But, I waited too long to get that and lost my chance.”

Perhaps he could understand Bruce’s dilemma after all, the two sides of who he was and wanting to give the right side.

With a long sigh, Bruce reached for his forgotten beer, holding it up for a toast. “To the damn fine women that we love and to opportunities lost.”

Steve reached for his bottle, gently tapping the neck to Bruce’s. “Yours may not be as lost as you think.”

“I don’t know about that,” he muttered, regretfully, watching Natasha as she stood in a group of dancers, a faster paced song now being played as people laughed and cheered. “If I had done things different...”

He turned curiously to Steve, a question bubbling slowly out of him. “Have you ever thought about, if you could, just going back there. Doing it all different? Maybe not flying that plane into the ice, living to tell the tale, spending your life with her?”
“Thought about it? Only every night since I woke up in 2012.” And most days, he added to himself, especially the last two years on the run. “Thought about if I had just tried to land it, or if I waited till they got someone, maybe Howard, on the line to help me land her straight. Don’t know if we would have had time or if I would have even managed that. Even decades later those bombs were still live when they found me.”

He watched the crowd dancing, smiling sadly. “It’s not such a bad life, you know. It’s very different then what I would have expected the future to be, and full of its own regrets, but...you know here I am. What else can you do, cry about it?”

“Spoken like a true child of the Depression.”

Steve laughed at that. “You know, between growing up with a widowed mother who always had to work to support me, being sick all the time, being picked on in school, and never having anything because the economy was in shambles, I suppose it does give you a true perspective on hardship and adversity.”

“Even in this, with half the universe gone?”

“Even in this.” He nodded to Tony, who had stepped off the sidelines to chat with Rhodey briefly before returning to his bride, spinning with her around the floor. For all his differences with Tony, he couldn’t help but smile at the sight, really smile at the sheer happiness between the couple. “If you can’t find happiness in something like this, then what in the hell can you find happiness in? Life goes on and we have to make the best of it.”

“How is that working out for you?”

“Not as good as Stark, but I keep trying.” He grinned, Bruce chuckling by way of response.

Natasha wandered back then, flushed and sparkling, the champagne and activity making her look less pale, tired, and anxious. When was the last time any of them had not looked like they wanted the world to end and swallow them whole? She smirked at the pair of them, reaching for another glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “Is this the grumpy old men’s table, then?”

Steve laughed, polishing off the rest of his beer as he gave Bruce a pointed look. “Nah, this old man is going to go wander for a bit, wish the bride and groom the best. I’ll leave the table to you two, let you catch up.”

Bruce began to protest, weakly. “Catch up? I don’t need to catch up!”

Steve patted him on the shoulder and deliberately sauntered over to the bar where, predictably, Thor was holding court telling a tale of some far off planet he had helped to conquer to a small huddle of children and teenagers, eyes as wide as saucers as they stared. Steve smiled, grabbing a beer as he turned to watch the dancing. Happy had managed to somehow convince Nebula out on the floor, a feet that Steve wasn’t sure could ever be done. She looked confused and sullen, but was playing along with it, much to Rocket’s abject astonishment, his furry jaw hanging on the floor. Somewhere, in the middle, Carol Danvers in a lovely dress the same shade as her suit was swaying with Rhodey, the two of them chatting amiably between themselves, perhaps swapping service stories. For all the people who were lost, all the death and heartache, life...living...still continued with new alliances, new friendships...and yet here he remained, still alone, waiting for his dance.

“I still have yet to see you out on this dance floor, Cap!”

Of course, the moment he slipped into morosity, there would be the man of the hour. Still, it was his
wedding, and Steve held out a hand for Tony to take, genially, clasping it firmly. “Congratulations, Tony. I mean it. You and Pepper deserve all the best.”

“She does, that’s for certain.” He nodded towards where she was now trying to talk Rocket onto the floor as well. “I’m not sure she’s getting as lucky in this deal.”

“She’s getting who she wants, the right partner for her.” He thought wistfully of a long forgotten London pub and a smashing brunette in a red dress that turned all eyes to her. “You deserve it.”

Tony nodded, reaching for a beer himself. “Well, now that your back and doing all the heavy lifting, I get to return to my previously scheduled life as a gentleman farmer.”

“Farmer?”

“Really, it’s just Pepper with a vegetable garden and a flower bed. Did you know my able-bodied former personal assistant and the CEO of my company can actually grow green things out of the earth? It’s like magic!”

It sounded idyllic. “And what will you be up to?”

“Puttering and trying not to blow up the house or harass my wife. Raising my kid and becoming a nervous wreck. Maybe I’ll read a book.”

“And no more wars!” He raised his beer in silent salute. “I’m glad you get to have this.”

“Thanks.” That was all the more he said. Frankly, it was a lot for the two of them. Their conversations since Thanos had been stiff and polite, but never as friends. Already, Steve felt the clamouring anxiety of what to even say next without stepping on a land mine that might erupt into the classic Stark sarcasm and temper.

“I know you said you aren’t the same man who went in the ice in ‘45, I get it.” Tony pulled from his beer, watching everyone on the floor. “But, you know, Rogers, you never get to know how to dance unless you get out there and do it. Take the chance when it’s right in front of you and run with it, because if you don’t...I don’t know, I almost didn’t, and I’m just damn lucky is all I have to say.”

“I had the chance and I blew it. I wasn’t as lucky as you.” Suddenly no longer thirsty for anything, he set his beer aside. “My chance died two years ago, an old woman who got to live her life without me in it. There’s no coming back from that, just...moving forward, starting over.”

He hadn’t meant to be morose on the man’s wedding day. He also didn’t expect the compassion flickering briefly there. “Peggy wouldn’t want you to not live your life.”

“No, she wouldn’t. I guess that means you are doing it right.” He clapped Tony’s shoulder. “Go, be with your wife.”

“Just sayin’, Cap, a man 100 years old, like you, go out and live a little.” Tony passed him his beer with a wink and strolled in between the dancers to where his wife was still laughing uproariously at whatever Rocket was saying. He wrapped his arms around Pepper’s waist, right over where their new child was growing, and whispered in her ear, making her blush and smile before she turned to kiss him, lightly.”

He was hers and she was his, and after years of existential angst, personal trauma, and even the loss they all had suffered, Tony finally got to come home and get his reward. Steve was happy for him,
he really, really was, but there was that part of him that was envious as well. It was the same part of
him that had been jealous of Bucky with his athleticism and ease with women. The serum might
have fixed Steve physically, but nothing in the universe would help him catch a break on that score,
of losing those he loved again and again.

Quietly, while the guests still danced and laughed, he wandered off to the elevators alone.

Chapter End Notes

The name "Rusty Potts" comes from a person I knew in high school whose parents
actually named him Rusty Pipes. I had the idea that clearly the Potts clan had an
eccentric grandpa who could never remember the grandkids actual names but gave them
all names that went with "Potts" because he thought it was funny, so all the cousins
have some version of "something Potts". I already feel for the cousin named "Crack".
In which Tony doubts Bruce's decision.

“I just got to say are you sure about this, buddy?” Tony had suspected something was up when he got a call from Bruce to come to the facility to discuss a “highly dangerous and possibly insane” theory of his. Considering the fact Tony was usually the one who had these sorts of brilliant notions, he had indulged Bruce. Now, he rather wished he hadn’t.

“Positive.” Bruce stared at his laptop, crunching numbers and avoiding Tony’s pointed worry. “I’ve done all the numbers, the science is sound.”

“The science is sound. I’m more worried about your, you know, psyche.”

“That will all be fixed too, if this works out.

Tony wasn’t so sure it was as simple as that. Sure, the events of the last few months had taken their toll on everyone in different ways. Hell, Pepper still woke up at night half believing him dead and between that and their daughter’s newfound love of dancing the can-can off her mother’s bladder at 2 am meant that he’d not had a solid night’s sleep in two weeks. Romanoff said that Rogers had taken to spending chunks of time alone, moping, and Tony suspected she was trying to spin all the plates and somehow make the world work by sheer force of will. They all were cracking at the edges, which was to be expected. Bruce, on the other hand, seemed to be falling to pieces.

“Let me get this straight? You are willingly going to spend the next year-and-a-half just hanging out in a room full of gamma rays because that sounds like fun?”

Bruce rolled his eyes over the top of his screen. “It doesn’t sound like fun, and it won’t be totally full. It’s just going to be doses of ever increasing exposure to the gamma radiation in the hopes that I can somehow come to a happy meeting of the minds, mine and the Hulk’s.”

“See, that’s where you lost me, because for as long as I’ve known you, those two are not happy and don’t get along.”

“That’s the point!” Bruce scrubbed through his hair, tossing off his glasses onto his keyboard in mild frustration. “This has been over fifteen years, Tony, of me living this Jekyll and Hyde existence. I’ve tried everything to control it; yoga, therapy, drugs, just beating the shit out of things, and none of it has ever worked.”

“And what makes you think that bombarding yourself with dangerous radiation is the answer to your problems, because that didn’t exactly work out for you before.”

“You’re father’s research, for starters.” Bruce tapped his laptop and sent files up to the screen overhead, type-written and marked with the SSR stamp. “I started digging through his old Project: Rebirth files, the stuff he had from working with Erskine. I wanted to see what the key difference was between what they did and what I did, besides, you know, being successful.”

“Remember, they only got one success out of that before Erskine got popped and Howard spent the
rest of his life trying to find the genie’s magic lamp again.”

“But it was one more success than I got.” Bruce shrugged, leaning back in his desk chair to study the contents briefly. “Honestly, what made Steve change from a 90 pound weakling to an Adonis wasn’t the serum so much, we see that in what Armin Zola did with his serum when he used it on Barnes. He didn’t grow taller or bigger, but Steve did. You could have given that serum to anyone and it would have improved their physical function, made them faster, stronger, their senses keener, sped up their higher brain functions. The serum didn’t bring on the physical change and growth to the full human potential, that’s what the Vita Rays were for. Your father hit on that as being the stimulant needed in conjunction with the serum in order to promote growth. Basically, they just stimulated Steve’s cellular activity to grow to the full potential that he would have if all conditions had been ideal during gestation and development.”

“So he was always destined to be a 6'2 wall of self-righteousness and sanctimony. Good to know!”

Bruce only eyed him reproachfully but didn’t contradict him on that point. “Anyway, the idea was that the Vita Rays and the serum would balance each other out. The radiation would be just enough to promote cellular growth on a rapid scale, but the serum, because it inherently protects cellular growth, would allow for that change to happen without it spiraling out of control, unchecked. You didn’t really need the Vita Rays to make a super soldier, but if you wanted to make them as big and strong as they could be, you needed them to help them grow. Vice versa, the subject would never survive the bombardment of the Vita Rays at those levels without the serum to help protect them.”

Bruce tapped on his keyboard, pulling up different research. “This is my own research, the stuff I was working on for Ross when he was still a general in the army. He didn’t bother telling us he was creating super soldiers, else this would have gone much better, but you can see some of the key differences. First, we were working with an imperfect version of the serum. I’m guessing from the HYDRA files Natasha dumped on the internet and from what Barnes told Rogers, the formula Ross got his hands on was the version that Howard had perfected right before his death. This version enhanced hormones levels, which created the ‘anger’ issues in the subjects HYDRA tried it out on in Siberia, which perfectly align with the same problem I have. My guess is that Ross got a hold of it and thought that he could somehow figure a work around that HYDRA couldn’t.”

The idea that the very thing that led to the death of both of Tony’s parents was the same version of the serum that had turned Bruce into a brutal monster left Tony feeling more than queasy. He remained silent, however, as Bruce continued, watching the flickering projects as Bruce pulled them up, all of his research.

He clicked to another screen, this a CIA projection study on potential terrorist attacks. “The main difference in my experiments and the Project: Rebirth ones is that I used Gamma Radiation rather than Vita Rays. Ross told us that we were working on a some kind of drug to help protect the populace from a potential terrorist attack in the wake of 9/11. We used Gamma because it was singled out by our intelligence networks as being the one most likely to be used by terrorists. We figured out that we would need a primer to help absorb the Gamma radiation so it didn’t overwhelm the system and then counteract that with your father's version of the serum. Me, being a hot shot, decided to test it on myself, and...well, you know the rest of that story.”

“You turned into a violent, green rage machine and Ross hunted you down for sport for the next nine years.” Tony had never been a fan of Thaddeus Ross, less so after the Sokovia Accords, but his fanatical need to build and control human weapons of mass destruction had never ceased to amaze and befuddle him. How the man could justify an experiment that turned one of the leading minds of their generation into a monster, then treat him like an animal, only to turn around and preach to Tony about how the Avengers were out of control and needed to be held accountable for their actions, he
would never know. It was more than a pot calling the kettle situation, had the dipshit not dusted when Thanos snapped his fingers, Tony could have cheerfully beaten his head in with a pot or kettle, he’d take both at this point.

Bruce, for his part, only shrugged mildly, perhaps far more resigned to all of this than Tony would have ever been. “What’s done is done, I can’t change that. I can change going forward. You weren’t wrong, years ago, when you suggested that the other guy was there to protect me. I’ve been treating him like the monster for all these years, the thing I should be ashamed of, a disease that I can cure if only I was smart enough. But the truth is, he’s not. He is me.”

On the projections above he flipped back to Howard's work, the copious notes, and an outline of Erskine's theories, typewritten save for a notation here and there in his father's cramped hand. He didn't need to scan them as Bruce summarized in quiet thoughtfulness. "Erskine always surmised that the serum and how it worked brought out certain parts of an individual's personality. Like as not, it's the effect on the brain chemistry, enhancing certain personality aspects. In Johann Schmidt it sharpened his ambition and ruthlessness, fed into his god complex. In Steve, it was his sense of justice and unwillingness to back down from a fight, especially while protecting others."

Tony couldn't help the eye roll that just naturally rose to the fore when discussing Steve Rogers and his virtues. "And let's not forget his Irish Catholic martyrdom complex and alarmingly Pollyanna-ish world view."

Bruce had often been caught in the middle of Tony's arguments with Steve, and like then he chose to not comment. "The thing is, the serum I got, sure it brought out the good things, like loyalty and determination, a desire to protect those I love. But I got the version your dad made, the one that made all those super soldiers in Siberia go nuts. So on top of the good things, I got the bad ones too; anger, rage, a desire to destroy. The only thing that saved me was the primer we had been working on, the one that absorbed the Gamma Rays. It took all the bad things from the serum and fit them into this weird - I don’t know - pocket in my brain chemistry. It’s as if the primer was working to protect me from it, just as it was supposed to. It basically arrested the process so that I couldn’t give into that part of myself without my anger, hence the split. The truth is, I am the Hulk. It's just that he's the super soldier half, the hero, but without my normal reason or rational.”

“And you think this will fix all of that?"

“That’s the idea. If I bombard myself with Gamma rays that weakens the ‘protection’. The idea of doing it slowly over a period of months means my body can finally accept the changes without issues. It’s not the ideal fix, I mean, I’ll still be huge and green, but it is better than what I got now.”

“I’m sure a little makeup to cover that up, no one would notice.” Tony didn’t think this was a good idea, not at all. “You do realize, so much of this is theoretical, right?”

“Find me another human being who is a giant, green rage monster and I’ll try it on them.”

“I’m serious, Bruce. You’ve played with this in the past and this is how you got into this fix. Sure, at best you’ll end up finally one cohesive person, at worst the other side takes over and we never get you back, and if that happens…”

Tony trailed off, unwilling to consider what would happen if the other possibility was the result. But Bruce clearly wasn’t.

“You’d have to put me down, I know. Don’t think I haven’t thought of that. Honestly, at this point, Thor’s the best bet you got with his giant axe.”
Tony literally stuttered, unable to consider the possibility of what Bruce was even suggesting. “You are talking about having a close friend of yours behead you, you know that?”

“All in the case of extreme emergency.”

“Jesus!” Tony dug fingers into his eyes. “You are seriously suggesting murdering yourself as a solution.”

“Not that I haven’t tried that solution in the past.”

“May I ask why, all the sudden, you’ve decided it’s time to try a crazy ass experiment that may or may not work, and if it fails, may result in your death at the hands of people who care about you?”

“It’s not precisely all of the sudden.”

“Fifteen years, Bruce!” Tony burst up off his chair, pacing the lab, frenetically. “You’ve lived with this that long and now after all of this you want to try something this insane, just when we’ve got you back?”

“Tony…”

“Three years you were gone.” He spun on him, suddenly unreasonably angry about all of this.

“Three years, we didn’t know if you were alive or dead. Romanoff, she was heartbroken. Didn’t show it, because you know, Russians like to pretend they have no soul, but that hurt her. Hell, Fury thought you were dead, down in the bottom of the Indian Ocean, but never could find you. How in the hell were we supposed to know you found some portal to outer space?”

“In fairness, I didn’t know either.”

Tony ignored his quip, pausing his pacing to glower over him. “We could have used you after Sokovia.”

Bruce winced openly at that. “Tony, I was part of the reason there was a Sokovia.”

“You always had the most sense of the pair of us.”

“And yet I helped to destroy at least one city and one country. I don’t know how I could have upgraded.”

“I’m serious, Bruce!”

“So am I,” he snapped, desperate as he threw himself back in his chair. “Hulk…that part of me, I kept trying to push him back and shut him down, and frankly, he didn’t like it only being pulled out to fix other people’s problems and then shunted out of the scene because now he was unwanted. And the truth is, I did that as much as anyone, and that…that’s a part of me, Tony, and I need to finally accept that and figure out a way to live with it, or me, myself, Bruce Banner can never, ever hope to have a life.”

And there was the crux of that. “So, you want a life, then?”

“Who doesn’t? You’ve gone and found one.”

Tony shrugged, picking up a random screwdriver off a table to twiddle with in agitation as he wandered. “I wouldn’t consider myself a shining example of relationship goals. It’s a wonder Pepper didn’t leave me.”
“Yeah, you lucked out. Me? I’m a hot mess.”

“Aren’t we all that, though?”

“Yeah, not like I am. And that’s just the thing, Tony, right now, there’s a lot to process. We all got hit hard with this, all of us, you, Steve, Natasha, god, Clint is out there somewhere and I don’t know if he’s ever coming back. We all lost. But I lost to Thanos twice. I was on board the Statesman watching half of what was left of Asgard get killed, only to have Thanos toss Hulk - me - around as if I was a ragdoll. Then I have to do it all over again in Wakanda, this time as myself and with nearly all the team, and we are talking everyone we could scrounge up plus the king and his whole army. We should have won that battle, we should have but…”

He drifted off, sadly, staring forlornly at his laptop screen. “Look, Tony, I know we are all playing the game of ‘woulda, coulda, shoulda’. I mean, maybe if we’d destroyed the Mind Stone sooner, sure. Maybe, if we’d been more careful with the whole Ultron business, we wouldn’t have been in the spot we were in. We’ll be doing that forever, I guess. You keep telling me, all of us, that we got to move forward, and I don’t disagree with you. But if I’m moving forward, I got to resolve this. Right now, I’m living a half-life, either as Bruce or Hulk. I need to finally get these two sides together and work this out or I’m never going to be able to do anything.”

He wasn’t wrong, he knew he wasn’t wrong, and the math was sound. I mean, as smart as Tony was, Bruce was admittedly a smidge smarter at least in his particular fields. He would be fine, it would be all right, what did he have to worry about, right? Just, you know, the potential death of one of his best friends, that’s all.

“All right, I’ll help you build this and get it set up, but if at the first sign of anything going wrong, you get the hell out of there, you hear me?”

“It will be fine, Tony.”

“That’s not the answer I want. Yes or no?”

“Fine, yes, I’ll get out of there!” He rolled his eyes but agreed.

“Right, and it’s going to be here. We aren’t keeping it secret. Romanoff, Rogers, they can keep an eye on you. You set up a schedule, they’ll watch it like a hawk.”

“What, you going to babysit me now?”

“Someone’s got to and it can’t be me, I can’t be around the stuff, not with Pepper. Bad enough I’ve had Palladium running through me, among other things, so it will be wonder enough if my kid doesn’t turn out to have three eyes.” He wouldn’t admit that he’d had the OB/GYN do extra tests just to make sure and thus far everything seemed okay.

“Fine, fine. Seriously, Tony, I’ll take every precaution.”

“Right.” He could feel shades of his father then, lecturing Bruce, freaking out about irresponsibility. Peter came to mind and he cut that off ruthlessly. “We can convert one of the labs downstairs, set it up for Gamma radiation treatment. I can set it up with Netflix and everything.”

Relief flooded Bruce’s smile, one of the first genuine ones he’d had in a while. “Thanks. This...this means a lot.”

“Yeah, sure, just don’t make me have to regret my decision, okay. This is for you and only you, because your my friend. I’m done with all the rest of it, the Avengers stuff.”
“No, I got it, I do.” He was still grinning, however. “I...it will be be okay, Tony, I promise I will.”

“I don’t know how many of those I believe anymore, buddy, because our luck always seems to go wrong on those, but sure, if it turns out, great.”

He really, really, really hoped Bruce was right in all of this.
Chapter Summary

In which Rhodey and Danvers have a chat.

James Rhodes had to give it to Tony, he certainly knew what he was doing when he put the new Avengers complex upstate, sitting along the Hudson River, wending its way to the sea. As he flew in, the valley was a riot of colors, crimson and rust, umber and gold, here and there a flaming orange, all blazing beneath him as he came in, rustling and whispering beneath the break of his passage. He took a moment just to survey it all, to breathe in the view from high above the world, a sight he didn’t think he would ever get tired of seeing.

“Are you seriously stopping to smell the roses right now?” Rocket broke into the comm, clearly unimpressed with the vista before him.

“Seriously, man, what other planet you got out there that has a view like this in the autumn?”

Rocket hemmed a bit at that. “Okay, fair, it’s pretty gorgeous.”

“You know, one day, you might just get off this hunk of rock and figure out other planets in this universe are pretty stunning as well, not just yours.”

“Ain’t got time for that, too busy trying to keep this one safe.” He landed, meeting the talking rodent and shaking his tiny paw. “Speaking of, how’s the universe holding up.”

“Probably about as good as the Earth is, only worse.”

“That good, eh?”

Rocket snorted as they wandered inside from the cool damp outside to the warmth of the facility. The hanger was quiet. Few of the technicians had survived the snap, and those that did only came in twice a week to check the equipment. The facility had once been the home of 300 employees full time, some in research, others in just maintaining the gear the Avengers used on a regular basis. Now, less than a 100 remained, and of those, they had kept just the skeleton crew to keep things from falling apart. Even looking at the once pristine grounds Rhodey could tell the difference.

“I have to say these team meetings, not my style, but Romanoff always finds the good eats. Think it’s burrito night?”

The raccoon really could only think in food and sarcasm. “Is that all your here for?”

“Sometimes I’m here for the pizza. I’ve grown to like Italian.”

“Look at you, expanding your horizons.”
“Hey, at least I’ve tried a food item that wasn’t grown on this planet. Don’t lecture me on culinary adventure-ism!”

“Whatever, you’d still eat out of the garbage if you could get away with it.”

“That McDonald’s was not going to go to waste. Seriously, the amount of food you people throw away…”

Natasha met them at them with an even expression. “What is this, comedy hour at the Laugh Factory?”

“Not even sure what that is, but sure.” Rocket waved it off as he wandered into the meeting and straight to the bags of food in the kitchen.

“You know there are days I wonder what my life has become,” she sighed, waiting politely for Rhodey to get out of his armor before wrapping arms around him tightly in a brief hug. “How is life out on the front?”

“Crazy,” he murmured, suddenly hit with exhaustion he hadn’t realized he had. He’d been on the road for a month now, mostly in Central Asia and the Middle East. “If people had to dust, I would have hoped it was the Ten Rings, honestly. Why couldn’t that happen?”

“Luck of the draw?”

“Yeah, some hand.” He could see Steve and Nebula chatting in the corner. “This it, tonight?”

“Okoye will comm in from Wakanda, as usual.”

“What about Bruce?”

Something undefinable passed briefly across her expression. “He’s in a different part of the facility. Locked himself up with Gamma rays.”

“On purpose?”

“Yeah!” Her features were schooled to stillness, which usually never meant anything good. “He’s trying some alternate therapy for his condition.”

“You’d think that would do the opposite.”

“He’s the science wiz, I’ll let him figure it out.” There was something in that statement that Rhodey didn’t dare touch. He knew better than to cross the dangerous Natasha Romanoff, especially when it came to what was or wasn’t going on in her love life.

“So, how about Danvers?” He thought that at least was a safe subject. She’d been off world for a couple of months, at least since Tony’s wedding.

“She’s supposed to be here tonight. Not sure she will make it to every one, but she’s close enough to us in the universe she was going to try and make it in.”

The very idea of the words coming out of Natasha’s mouth was mind boggling, to say the least. “Well, you know, glad she’s in the ‘hood at least.”

“Are you?”

He ignored the speculative look on her face. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Just making observations.”

He don’t know why he bothered with trying to get a straight answer out of her. She barely blinked at
his narrow-eyed suspicion. “I don’t trust it when you start making connections, Romanoff.”

“Why, because I’m a spy or because I’m right?”

“Usually, it’s both.”

“Come on.” She tugged on his arm, dragging him into the room with the others.

“Hey, Nat, you get the tomatillo sauce for the shrimp burrito?” Rocket already had his nose in the oven where the food was staying warm.

“Wait till everyone else gets a chance and I might tell you if I got it or not.”

“Fine! But if I die of starvation, I’ll have you to blame.”

“Not the first time I’ve let that happen.”

That gave Rocket pause.

“Seriously?”

“I wouldn’t cross her,” Rhodey added, throwing himself onto the couch. The implied threat at least shut Rocket up for the moment. He grumbled, throwing Rhodey a dirty look before crawling up in one of the armchairs, muttering about cruel and unusual punishment.

Natasha was hardly phased. “I’ll get Okoye on the comm. Cap, you ready to do this?”

Years of being in the military meant he was used to these type of strategic planning sessions, breaking down manpower and resources, picking through threat assessments and hints of intelligence and trying to make the best calls as to which areas to protect, what leads to follow, and which of the myriad of bad guys needed to be the next key target. Back then, he’d been a normal officer, doing his job with the might of a large military force behind him. Now, he was one of a handful of people who were tasked with trying to pick up the pieces that all the militaries and police in the world - hell, in the universe - couldn’t manage anymore. It felt overwhelming. He wouldn’t admit that, though, not to the others. Frankly, they probably felt the same themselves. Still, it was what they had, all that they had. It didn’t mean it didn’t feel any less terrifying. Such was the superhero life, he supposed.

He’d drifted somewhere in the middle of an in-depth discussion between Steve, Nat and Okoye on some situation going on in South Africa when the windows began to rattle. Confused, he looked outside in time to see a ball of light, like a falling star, land on the pavement outside, a woman standing in its middle. As it dissipated, Carol Danvers smiled, slowly.

“Show off,” Rocket muttered.

“I’m guessing that’s Carol arriving.” Okoye had yet to meet her but she’d heard the stories enough.

“Making her entrance, as always.” Steve was the first to greet the woman as she sauntered inside, blowing her fly away hair out of her eyes. “Danvers, glad you could make it.”

“Sorry, I’m late, got caught helping some friends out of a bit of a jam.” She had changed her suit up since they last saw it, losing the gold shoulder pads. “Oh, we doing burritos tonight?”

“I’ve already claimed a shrimp one, blondey, so get in line.” Rocket was still miffed Natasha was
making them wait.

“You didn’t lick it, did you?”

“And if I did?”

All four women, even Nebula, wrinkled their noses in mild horror.

“Dude,” Rhodey sighed, convulsing in a full body shudder. “Just...have you heard of germs.”

“I’m a different species, maybe my germs don’t have the same effect.”

Danvers looked revolted. “I can categorically say that’s not true.” She eyed the couch next to Rhodey. “This seat taken?”

“Nope.” He inched away enough to allow her to flop in it.

Steve, as always, grabbed the reins of the conversation out of the hands of chaos. “Anything else, Okoye?”

“I believe that’s it. I’ll have the War Dogs in Johannesburg by the end of the week and I’ll have more information then.”

“Good.” Steve turned his attention to Danvers beside Rhodey, all business. “Danvers, what do you got?”

“A lot.” Grimly, she held up her left wrist, tapping the device there and projecting a series of what looked like some sort of star maps. “Both the Nova and Kree empires have destabilized to the point control is beginning to fall apart quickly. Civil wars are threatening on most of the outlying worlds in their respective realms. It’s hitting Nova worse, because Xandar was already hit by Thanos and the Nova Corp was annihilated.”

It all almost meant nothing to Rhodey, but Rocket swore loudly. “I got buddies on Xandar! Do you know if…”

Danvers expression softened somewhat. “No, I don’t. Some people survived...some. Maybe they are all right.”

Rocket didn’t look convinced.

Danver's continued. “Anyway, it’s looking bad and worse by the second. Earth is lucky, it’s a singular entity. Nobody wanted it, thought you were too backward.”

Seriously, all the off-worlders had to hate on them. “And that’s supposed to be a good thing?”

Nebula spoke up then, in her grave monotone. “It means no one else wanted to control you or subsume you, either, which gives you have a chance of surviving this. Many of those planets, all they know is being part of imperial protectorates. It means their economy, their security, their way of life are tied to that and if it fails, they have nothing to fall back on. Chances are high most of them will fall into anarchy in a matter of years, if not months.”

Well, that was horrific.

“And your father was okay with that?”

Nebula lifted a shoulder. “He didn’t care as long as it brought his vision of balance. He’d argue that
their demise was their destiny, the fact they lived so precariously was a sign that the universe was overtaxed. Now, it can right itself into a more manageable state.”

“Except in the meantime, trillions are going to die because it’s hell out there.” Danver’s eyes flashed gold as she said it but Nebula only met her irritation solemnly.

“I didn’t say it was good, only that was how he saw it. Clearly, my father had twisted notions of perfection.”

As if to emphasize the point, she rotated her mechanical wrist, the whirring sound setting teeth on edge.

“Point made,” Danvers acknowledged, heavily. “Anyway, this is going to take years of clean up. If it’s all right by you, Cap, I’d like to recruit Nebula and Rocket here to help out, at least with the Nova Empire. They’re the most critical at the moment and you know them better.”

“Also, unlike the Kree, they don’t have a bounty on our heads,” Rocket blithely pointed out.

“That, too.” Danvers grinned. “The Kree aren’t fond of me, either, but the feeling is mutual. I can handle them more on my own.”

Cap looked to Natasha, who agreed with whatever silent communication they had. “Sure! Think you two can help her out.”

“If I can talk to Kraglin, sure.” Rocket sounded hopefully, at least. “Not much of the Ravagers left, but they might help out for the right price. Besides, he owes Nebula. He’d do it for that.”

“Owes you for what?” Now Natasha was curious.

“He cheats badly. I let him have his life.” A hint of a smile lurked in her black eyes, the closest she ever got to humor or any positive emotion, really.

Natasha was impressed. “Nice. Smart thinking, I appreciate this.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Rocket muttered.

“And on that note,” Steve clearly had given up on any further efforts to keep sanity in the room. “Okoye, you need anything?”

“No, I’ll report what I can to Queen Ramonda.” She turned to glance at Nebula and Rocket. “Good hunting with Captain Danvers. To the rest of you, I’ll wish you a good night.”

Inclining her head, she bowed out of the comm. It went dark.

“Wonderful! Now can we have burritos?” Rocket was already up and eyeing Natasha like he’d gnaw on her if given half the chance.

“They’re in the oven, Jesus!”

Rhodey watched the farce that was Natasha bickering with a raccoon. What in the hell had his life even become?

“Hanging around with a Stark, your world had to have been insane to begin with.”

He cocked an eye at Danvers, who gave him a Cheshire smile.
“Your powers come with telepathy?”

“No, but I’m good at reading people. Habit I got because I used to chase shape-changing aliens, and because I couldn’t remember huge chunks of my life.”

“Useful tool to have, not going to lie. As for weird shit-o-meters, hanging with Tony, yeah, you see a lot. I mean, people who turned into molten lava, that was a bit extreme.”

“Do I even want to know how?”

“Crazy chemical, angry ex-girlfriend, some dude he snubbed while drunk. You kind of had to be there.”

She laughed, a carefree sound. He sort of liked hearing it. It reminded him that this woman who felt so alien, flying through space, more powerful than anything he had ever seen, was still very human, just like he was. Sometimes, she even acted like it.

“So, how long are you on Earth this go around?” Last time she’d only been in town briefly. She wore a dress that time, midnight blue, elegant and pretty. They’d danced and chatted, mostly about the Air Force. She hadn’t looked at his leg braces once.

She smiled, regretful. “Not as long as I would like. Checking in on friends that survived the snap. I don’t know when I’ll see them again.”

“Right.” She had a whole life here, once. He’d looked her up in the old SHIELD files that Steve and Nat dumped. The first woman to certify for fighters, stuck in New Mexico at Project: Pegasus flying test engines for Wendy Lawson and Howard Stark. Everyone thought she died in an accident gone horribly wrong, or at least that was the official story. The true one he still didn’t have the whole picture on. She’d been rather vague about it all.

“So, beyond the melt-down of galactic empires out there, how are you doing?”

She looked as if the answer to that question had never even occurred to her. “Fine, I think. I mean...well, like all the rest of you, I guess, just feeling...a bit stretched thin.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” He hadn’t slept in his own bed in weeks.

“Where they got you at?”

“At the moment? Hanging out in Central Asia. You know, the ‘stan’ countries.”

“All the ones that were still the USSR when I last lived here.”

“Yeah, don’t let Natasha hear you talking like that. It’s Russia, thank you very much.”

That made her laugh again, that ringing sound that suited her. “I hear she can be bribed with good chocolate and fine caviar.”

“Not untrue, but she prefers whiskey to vodka.”

“Good to know if I ever get on her bad side.” She glanced to the kitchen where the other four had gathered, chattering between themselves. “You know, you are very fortunate to have such good friends.”

He glanced back at them, thinking of Tony and missing him. “I fell into it with the rest of them. Tony was how I got into all this. He happened first.”
“So how did you get to know the son of the great Howard Stark anyway? You didn’t tell me.”

“Hell, that's a story, like most things with Tony are.”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t want a story.”

He eyed her curiously, her teasing smile. He couldn’t tell if it was friendly or flirty. He didn’t know the cues anymore, partly because it had been years, partly because Tony had ruined him on the rules of how actual people who weren’t genius, billionaire, playboys lived. He wasn’t about to call him to ask him either, because he’d never hear the end of it.

She arched an eyebrow at him expectantly.

“Right, story!” He shook his head, clearing it. “Anyway, so I went to MIT for my undergraduate work, not the Academy. I was more interested in aerospace design and weapons development, so I went the ROTC route. You know the routine when you are ROTC, you still have all your drills and training. We’d be up at 5:45, doing our run, mostly minding our own business. No other college student at MIT would be up that early, right?”

“I do remember those days well, sadly, an unfortunate side effect of getting my memories back.”

“Yeah, try doing that in the dead of winter in Boston. If you don’t make it there, you don’t make it anywhere.”

“Colorado Springs, baby.”

Damn, she had him there. “Let’s call it a draw.”

“Come on, it’s in the mountains! The air is thinner!”

“Do you want your damn story?”

“Fine,” she pouted. “Continue.”

“Anyway, so my first class of the day is at 8:15, basic ‘Intro to Mechanical Engineering’ class, one of those courses you sort of have to take. The engineering field is huge at MIT, so this class has easily over 100 kids in it, because everyone had to have it, but I’m coming in from my drills, so I was always just cutting it close sliding in at the back of the class at 8:15 everyday. But I’m there, pressed and dressed, got my notes out, ready for duty as it were.”

“You had to be the only one in that class that alert at 8:15 am.”

“So that’s part of my point, because everyday, fifteen minutes after class started, in stumbles this kid into class, and not like sneaking in and hope the professor doesn’t notice. No, he stumbles in falling all over himself, a real hot mess. Didn’t look like he was older than 13 or 14, backpack half hanging open, didn’t look as if he’d slept in a week, hair all over the place, basically falling apart. He’d more or less pour himself into class, fall into a chair, dump everything on the floor and lay his head in his arms for the rest of the period, dead asleep, like snoring dead asleep, and he always picked the seat right next to me.”

“Oh, gees,” she chuckled, already guessing who it was. “I bet that went over well with the teacher.”

“So that’s the thing, everyday he did this, and everyday, I could see the professor’s eyes just zero in on him. This wasn’t a small class, it was in one of those big lecture halls, right? And this was in the 80’s, when you didn’t have everyone’s name and picture on the class roster handy, so it took him
about three weeks to figure out who the student was. So, one day, in he comes, like clockwork. He
dumps his backpack on the floor, falls into the chair, buries his head, drifts off. I see the professor
staring at him, then staring at me. So, being the straight laced ROTC cadet, I try to do the right thing
and I reach over and poke him, try to wake him up. He just snorts, turns his head, goes back to sleep,
and I’m looking at the professor like ‘I tried!’ So then the professor, in this loud voice that could
carry across Cambridge calls out and says, ‘Mr. Stark, would you care to join us this morning or
would you like another 15 minutes?’”

“Don’t tell me he slept through that?”

“Oh, no, worse! He wakes up, raises his head just enough to look this respected, award-winning
professor straight in the eye and say he’d love another 15 minutes but could he keep it down, he’s
trying to take a nap.”

Danvers eyebrows looked as if they’d fly off her face.

“Hand to God, that’s what he said. I thought I’d fall out of my chair. So now this professor is royally
pissed. Kids in class are laughing, trying to figure out what’s going on, and so the prof calls him out
again and says if he couldn’t be bothered with paying attention in his class he could drop it, to which
Tony says he wouldn’t take it if he could get away with it, but there’s some stupid rule about his
program and them making him take the course for a grade even though he doesn’t need it. This is a
young, teenage kid in MIT saying this to a guy who has been doing this since before Tony was even
born. So now, the professor is properly pissed and decides to throw out three of the theories he’d
been lecturing on for the past week and demands he explains their reasoning and purpose. I thought
for sure this kid was sunk, like would be humiliated in front of all these nineteen-year-old smart kids
who had to bust their ass to get into MIT. But wouldn’t you know, cool as you please, he sits up
straight, not only rattles off the theories and their purpose, but also what was problematic about them
and provided addendums to several that modified the original work done for given situations. Now
mind you, smart kids are everywhere at this place and most think they know more than they do, but
this boy just schooled this prof in front of his class. The prof can’t decide if he wants to be apoplectic
or impressed.”

Danvers clearly was the latter. “So what happened after that?”

“That’s the kicker. So Tony’s just looks at this prof when he’s all done and says ‘So can I get out of
coming to your class or can I go back to sleep? Because I’d like to not have to get up at 8 am to be
bored to death about things I learned when I was 10.’”

Danvers squeaked in delighted horror. “Wow! How did he not get kicked out of MIT?”

“Honestly, if he wasn’t such a big genius and if MIT wasn’t so eager to keep on his father’s good
side, I think they’d have done it that first semester. As it was, the professor I guess cleared him to test
out of it and he started an ‘independent course of study’, which we all knew was code for ‘keep the
genius kid with the attitude problems occupied while he’s here’.”

Danvers shook her head in open astonishment. “It’s a wonder he didn’t get his ass beat.”

“Nah, he was too smart for that. You ever see the movie Real Genius before you got hit with the
Tesseract and forgot everything?”

He could see her mentally going through the scant memories in her head. “No, can’t say it’s coming
up for me.”

“Well, next time you down on Earth, we should watch it. That was Tony to a tee in college,
wandering around doing whatever he wanted. Who was going to stop him? Howard Stark was his father, he was a mile smarter than most people, and the kid had hacked the Pentagon mainframe as a 12-year-old high schooler. He was a legend on campus and wasn’t even old enough to legally drive, vote or drink.”

“That’s a lot of pressure to put on a 14-year-old.”

“Tell me about it.”

“That how you two got to be friends, then?”

Had to give Danvers credit, she was sharp. “By the time I got into my serious course work we were in class together a lot. Remember, I was interested in the type of things his father was doing at Stark Industries, so we connected. I mean, you could say it was mercenary, but it was personal. You couldn’t help but look at the kid and feel sorry for him. Seriously, he had a nanny till he left for college. Did you know that?”

“A nanny?”

“Yeah! He didn’t have friends, really, he’d not stayed in normal school long enough to build social relationships or learn how to do it. What would he say to any of them, anyway? ‘Wow, that’s cool your parents just bought you an Atari, I built my fully graphical computer in the basement last night with some of my dad’s spare parts.’ He had his parents, I guess, but his father had the same exact problem Tony does, he never knew when to just stop, he got so wrapped up in things, he missed out on a lot. All that together tends to mess a kid up, even if you don’t mean to. So here he is at MIT with young adults five and six years older than him, trying to be as cool as that senior girl with the amazing body who is chatting you up because she wants to work at your dad’s company when she graduates.’

“I can’t imagine that was easy for him, no.”

“I knew a thing or two about being different there. Not exactly a lot of African-American kids at MIT at the time or even in the Air Force. I got it, being the odd one out, being different because of who you are and not knowing what to do with that. And the kid had no coping mechanisms whatsoever, not that he does now, but I thought the least I could do was try to be a friend to him, be the older, wiser voice of sanity.”

“How did that work out for you?”

“Not as well as I had hoped, better than I expected.” He laughed, considering the man Tony had become. “Honestly, what he really needed was a friend, just someone who cared about him without strings attached, who had his back, and I guess I decided to be that for him.”

“And all these years later, here you are.”

“Yeah, lucky me!” He chuckled, considering all the insane shenanigans that being friends with Tony Stark over the years had gotten him into. “It’s had its ups and downs. Sure, it was pretty sweet being friends with one of the richest, most powerful men in the world; fast cars, fancy parties, always the finest hotels and got to meet all the celebrities.”

“I’m sure the gorgeous women flocking around didn’t hurt,” she smirked, knowingly.

“Hey, they were all there more for him than me.”

Her cocked eyebrow told him she wasn’t buying that line.
“Seriously! I had a job and a mission and it was to mind Tony Stark, which meant one of us had to be sober, level headed and in control, and it wasn’t him.”

“Fair point, I suppose.”

“Yeah, and believe me, there was a lot of crazy in those years, especially after his parents died. There wasn’t anyone around to call him out on his shit, save Obadiah Stane and me, and considering that the former decided to have him killed, I have to wonder even about that. Till Pepper and Happy came along, I was what you got.”

Hell, he privately ruminated, it was a wonder Tony had even lived long enough to get captured in Afghanistan, let alone live this long.

“He’s lucky having you for a friend, then.” Her eyes flickered to the braces on his legs, glowing against the leather of the couch. “I mean, he invented new technology just to help you walk. I think he feels that way.”

He tapped the metal framework lightly. “Well, he also likes making things and having his friends serve as lab rats, but yeah.”

She smiled, thoughtful for a long moment. “I have a friend like you. She always had my back, no matter what, even when I didn’t know who I was, she had my back. I’ll always be grateful for her for everything and can never thank her enough for it. I mean, my life, this existence, it’s all crazy enough as it is and somehow she’s put up with all of it.”

“Seriously, unless she’s had to pull you out of Hollywood producers house where you were shacked up with three future starlets, only one of whom did you actually know by name, because the Head of the Joint Chiefs is demanding your presence regarding national security concerns over a country who may be using blackmarket knockoffs of your work, I don’t think she’s had to put up with a lot out of you.”

“That’s true, I haven’t done that yet. I’ll add it to my bucket list.” She grinned and Rhodey found himself staring, again.

“Hey, you two going to eat over there, because if you don’t, the second shrimp burrito is mine!”

Danver’s closed her eyes, irritation causing gold to flicker across her skin and hair. “Seriously, fur ball, not everything is about food.”

“Hey, you two going to eat over there, because if you don’t, the second shrimp burrito is mine!”

Danver’s closed her eyes, irritation causing gold to flicker across her skin and hair. “Seriously, fur ball, not everything is about food.”

“So does that mean I can eat it?”

“Fine, I’m coming.” She smiled apologetically, throwing herself off the couch to snag the foil wrapped burrito from Rocket, glaring daggers at him as he smirked. He sighed, wondering if he should get up to grab something before the raccoon ate it all. To his surprise a burrito on a paper plate appeared right in front of his nose.

“If I didn’t give it to you the walking garbage disposal was going to steal it.”

He took it, grateful, smiling up at Natasha. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

There was that knowing smile again. “Interrupt what?”

“You know, you are as bad at this as Rogers is, neither of you can lie to save your life.”
“It’s not lying if I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I didn’t say it was me you were lying to.”

“I was having a conversation, that’s all.”

“I know and it was nice.” She plopped in the chair that Rocket had vacated, throwing a leg over the arm. “I don’t know her, but you know when a woman with that much power comes to help, you have to assume she’s good people. It’s nice to see you talking to her is all I’m saying.”

“She chatted me up at Tony’s wedding. She’s former Air Force. We get each other.”

“Yes!” Her knowing smirk was insufferable.

“Look, that’s a woman who can fly in space all on her own and doesn’t need a suit to do it.”

“And she’s by herself, you’re by yourself. I’m just saying it’s ideal.”

“Who has time for stuff like that?”

“We make our time where we can get it.” Her smirk wilted sadly into something wistful. “If nothing else, Thanos’ showed us we got to make good on the the time we get. Don’t miss out on a chance, Rhodey, even if it’s just a fleeting one. It’s better than no chance at all.”

Her words struck as he chanced a glance to the blonde at the counter with the other four. “You sound like Tony.”

“Yeah and he’s got a lifetime of stories and a wife and kid.”

Natasha had a point.

“I’ll think on it.” It was all he was willing to concede, but it was a thought. Perhaps it was only mutual attraction, but a little bit of something was better than a lifetime of what-if.
All Is Calm, All Is Bright

Chapter Summary

In which Pepper wakes up on Christmas morning.

If there was one thing that Pepper Potts-Stark wanted for Christmas more than anything else it was to have a full night’s rest without having one Stark or the other interrupt her slumbers. Honestly, would it be such a small thing to ask to have eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, free of nightmares and small living creatures playing kickball with her bladder? She roused awake to her daughter doing flips inside of her, wiggling in a decidedly uncomfortable way, like as not bored with her surroundings and like her father looking for something to do.

“Could you just rest, baby?” She sighed, eyes prying open in the darkness, gritty and exhausted. She blinked onto the other side of the bed, to where Tony’s dark head should be laying against the white pillow. It was empty, however, and the mattress beneath was cold. He had been up for some time, at least, not that she wasn’t used to Tony and his nocturnal wanderings. For as long as she had known him he had the tendency to wake up in the middle of the night, his brain, which never fully shut itself off, waking him up with some new idea or invention. How many times had she found him in his lab puttering on some new toy or iteration of his suit, a crazy idea having hit him in his sleep. The perils of being married to a genius.

She stumbled out of bed, wrapping her flannel robe around her to go to the bathroom before she peed herself. “FRIDAY, what time is it?”

“It’s 3:15 am. Happy Christmas!”

Their AI was far too cheerful for this time of the morning. “Thank you. Where’s Tony?”

“He’s down at the garage.”

“Did you turn the heater on?”

“The temperature is on optimal heat and everything is well lit. I left the outdoor Christmas lights on, including on the giant inflatable snow globe in the yard.”

She thought she could faintly see the glow of that monstrosity through the artificially darkened windows. “Right, perhaps, start some hot cocoa for me while I get bundled up?”

“Of course!” FRIDAY still lacked much of the personality of JARVIS, but she was efficient and friendly which considering Pepper’s mental state when she woke was just what she needed. Thoughtfully, the AI turned on the lights to a dim glow as she puttered around, pulling thick, wooly socks on under her flannel pajama pants and a thick cardigan over her top, wrapping it around her very round belly as she tried to soothe her daughter.

“It’s not Christmas morning, yet,” she whispered to the her as she padded downstairs slowly, the lights of the Christmas tree illuminating the dark of the house. There were enough strands of bulbs on it to see from space, frankly, but Tony liked his Christmas trees like he liked everything else, bright, flashy and noticeable. She’s given in and she had to admit it wasn’t so bad sparkling in the darkness.
“I’ve prepared enough to fill two travel mugs for you both, ma’am.”

“Thank you, FRIDAY.” She wandered in, the light just flickering on as she entered, rummaging in the cabinet for two insulated mugs. The smell of chocolate and cinnamon soothed her as she smiled, thinking of many other sleepless Christmas Eves as a child when she had been up out of excitement more than anything else. Back then she still believed in magic and miracles and a fat man in a red suit who came down a chimney. Now the only man in a red suit that was around was currently out of miracles, unless he was doing something truly dangerous in the garage, which wasn’t totally out of the realm of possibility, she supposed. With that in mind she found a bottle of the good bourbon and poured a generous dollop into the blue travel mug before sealing it. In her silver one she added more cinnamon and vanilla before closing it and bundling both up before she wandered to the front door where her sturdy boots sat.

“Should I tell the boss you are coming?” FRIDAY was a hint worried. She’d become more attentive and protective since Pepper’s pregnancy started, she suspected because Tony was a worry wart.

“Nah, let me surprise Santa Claus for a change.” She stamped first one foot in, then another, ever so glad she had the forethought to get ones that didn’t have laces. She couldn’t have bent over now if she wanted to. Pulling on her parka, she wrapped that and a muffler around her before pulling on a wooly cap and gloves. She felt like a giant, shaggy mammoth by the time it was all said and done, snagging the two mugs and stepping out onto the wrap-around porch and the crisp, clear winter’s night outside.

It had snowed that week and most of their yard was blanketed in pristine white down to the icy edges of the river that wended its way through the tree lined valley. Here and there in the darkness she could make out neighbors’ cabins with twinkling lights on, glowing faintly in the darkness, a beacon in a world still reeling in loss and anguish. Christmas was a subdued affair for most this year. It was normally a celebration of hope and family, of children and wonder, and in a post-Thanos world that seemed to be in relatively short supply. For those whose families were ripped apart, who had lost children or parents, this wasn’t a season of joy of glad tidings, but a sad and painful reminder. She was quietly mindful of how very lucky she was.

The ‘garage’ as Tony had taken to calling his new play space was less a garage and more a workshop and storage space. She guessed it was created by Howard in the days when he first bought the place. When they had moved in shortly after the Avengers had moved upstate to the new facility Tony had tricked it out even further, a place he could tinker and putter to his heart’s content, much as he had in the lab of the old Malibu house. On any given day she could find him in there fiddling with something, from the garbage disposal (which led to a flooded kitchen in the middle of one night), to the neighbors old ‘67 Mustang that had sat in their garage for years. He said he said it kept his mind busy. He never spoke of working on his suits. She never said anything about it either. She had long ago accepted that he was and always would be Iron Man and that was just a part of the man she loved. So she quietly let him be when a new idea of a different iteration sprang to mind, allowing him to futz with it because if she didn’t he’d have no peace from it. She wondered quietly what inspiration had caught him tonight.

Even from halfway across the massive yard, his music was clear. Despite his soundproofing, the loud, metal Christmas music he liked and found childishly amusing thumped in the stillness. She opened the door inside, her red cheeks instantly tingling at the warmth as she peeked in to find him at his workbench, bent over a box, she guessed perusing files. She wandered into his sanctum, trying not to startle him. Whatever it was, it had his attention all right. He barely even looked up when she waddled up, setting her carry-all with the mugs in them on the metal table.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Stark.” She set the mug in front of him, causing him to jump and blink up at
her, dark eyes wide in his face, now full and healthy once more.

“Pep! Hi, babe!” He frowned, shaking himself as he looked at the blue thermos in front of him. “FRIDAY, lower the music.”

The thrumming notes of some very guitar-heavy “Jingle Bell Rock” lowered to a dull roar overhead. She brushed a kiss against his temple in gratitude as he snagged the beverage in front of him. “Coffee?”

“As if you need any more stimulation. No, hot cocoa, the good stuff, not the Swiss Miss that tastes like chalk.”

That caught his attention, one dark eyebrow waggling. “The Belgian dark chocolate one?”

“With cinnamon and a dash of sea salt, and I may have added in bit of an extra kick.”

He took a large swig, pausing as it hit his tongue, before pulling up, swishing the cocoa around briefly before swallowing it, nodding. “Tastes like a small batch, from this place outside of Paris, Kentucky, aged in charred oak barrels from Scotland, hints of vanilla and honey, maybe 20 years?”

“You do have good taste in bourbon, I’m not going to lie, not that I can have any for another two months.”

“Little miss been keeping you up?” He reached a hand to caress the side of her swollen middle. As if knowing what he was up to, Morgan’s fist connected with the side of her uterus right where Tony’s hand lay. Pepper winced, wrinkling her nose.

“Seriously, if your up, she’s up, and that means I’m up, and if this is the way our child is going to be I’m going to hate the next 18-20 years of my life.”

“Don’t worry, that’s what cough syrup is for, right?”

“Tony,” she chuffed in mild rebuke, settling onto a stool by his table. “What’s got you up?”

“Nothing, just…” Alarm broke across his face, eyes wide, as he stared at her. “Wait, no…don’t look!”

“Don’t look at what?”

“At your…yeah, you aren’t supposed to see it till tomorrow morning?”

“See my what? My present?”

“Yes, your…just keep looking at me. No, don’t look at me, look straight ahead, don’t turn left or right or…”

“Tony, honestly, it’s Christmas morning, I know about three of the gifts that are under the tree already.”

“That’s because someone is a snoop and that forced me to go back out to the store in the freezing cold to buy ten other things you couldn’t find out about.”

“But I can’t see the one you have sitting behind me?”

“Nope!” He popped the ‘p’ as he stood, nervous and chagrined, hands in his pockets as he rocked on his heels, clearly hoping she wouldn’t see. Still, she’d known this man for fifteen years, and she
knew her way around him, too.

“Please?”

Immediately, his resolved quivered. “Pepper…”

“Pretty please?”

“Babe, I had it all planned out!”

“You’re so cute with your plans. We can still put it by the Christmas tree. Pretend it’s a surprise.”

“Yeah, but it takes away from the awe of it.”

“It’s not a suit for the baby, is it?”

“No!” He denied that quickly, which meant it wasn’t it but that the thought had crossed his mind at some point.

“A suit for me.”

“As sexy as that sounds, no.”

“Can’t I just see?”

“I don’t want to lose the effect!”

“Tony, how many presents over the years have you purchased me thinking they would be the next most amazing thing ever?”

To his credit, he did own that. “Several, as a matter of fact and I am aware that most were duds. The giant, stuffed rabbit, which was unfortunately destroyed when I taunted terrorists to come to our house, that was a misstep. The wax-figure likeness of my head was indeed very creepy and may have been buried in a dark place with rituals cast over it so it didn’t steal my soul. And, okay, the sexy spy outfit I ordered may have hit a little too close to Romanoff’s actual tech suit and was indeed completely and utterly distasteful and I apologized profusely for that…”

His diversionary tactics weren’t going to work. “Tony, stop talking.”

“Right.” He snapped his mouth shut, realizing his usual method wasn’t going to work. “Okay, but just note, I had a big set-up by the tree planned for this.”

“Duly noted,” she smiled, beaming at having won out as he sighed, shuffling to the work space behind her. Something covered in a drop cloth sat there, unnoticed when she first came in. It was too big for lingerie and too small for a giant stuffed rabbit.

“Is it a back massaging chair?” A woman who was nearly 8 months pregnant could dream, right?

“Not exactly.” He swallowed. Was he really nervous?

“I tease you on your gifts but it can’t be that bad.”

“No, at least I hope not. Just remember, this isn’t my primary medium.”

“All right, Picasso, I’ll be gentle.”
With a tug, he pulled off the sheet and let it fall to the concrete floor.

She stared at it, speechless.

For long moments, neither of them said anything, not until Tony’s nerves began to get the better of him.

“So, do you…”

“Oh, Tony,” she breathed, her eyes filling as she pressed a trembling hand to her mouth. Damn hormones meant she cried at everything now at days, but these were truly overwhelmed, heartfelt tears. “I just...you made this?”

He blushed and demurred in a way she didn’t think she had seen Tony Stark, of all people, ever do before. “Sure did, spent a month researching different ones, drafted a design, found a guy in town who let me use his larger hardware, then did the smaller stuff by hand. FRIDAY helped, kept an eye on me so I didn’t screw it up.”

“Happy to do so, boss,” she chirped, politely.

“Anyway, do you like it?”

All Pepper could do was sob, much to Tony’s clear consternation.

“Is this a good cry or a bad one?”

“It’s good, you idiot!” She threw herself up, as best as she could with all her weight in the front now, to run a finger across the lovingly turned out rocking chair sitting before her. The design was simple, but sturdy, made out of a wide-grained maple, a pale yellow with dark marbling running through it, and finished in golden tones to match the lighter colors she’d picked for the baby’s room. The spindles in the back were curved and carved to fit into the small of her back, while the arms were wide enough to rest an arm holding an infant.

“Are these cup holders?” She ran a fingers through the carved cups in each arm.

“Bottle holders, actually, they are heated to keep things at an even temperature, depending on what you have in the bottle. And on the side there, a handy space to store things you’ll need. I hear spit-up towels are a thing.”

He tapped along the edge of the left arm and out of it came a beam of light that projected on the ceiling, full of colorful shapes and shifting light patterns, all soothing and calm. “When you are trying to get her to go to sleep, turn this on and bam, should knock her out. That’s the theory, at least, but she is my kid, so…”

“Tony, oh my God! This is beautiful!”

“Wait till you see the crib, though, I’m still trying to figure out how to make that so Friday can rock it.”

She grabbed his sweater, pulling him in for a kiss, which he all too happily obliged.

“Well,” he whispered, voice husky as he pulled away. “If I got that for every gift I got you…”

“Law of averages, you were bound to hit on a good one sometime.”

“Fair.” He kissed her again, lightly, before pulling away. “Note the elegantly turned and lathed back
supports for you?"

“I did notice that. You come up with that?”

“Design element to help while nursing.”

“You thought of everything.”

“Well, I did try.”

She grinned, moving to test it out. Sitting on the seat was a cushion in the same color as Morgan’s room and on it a soft, knitted blanket in cream. She picked it up, noting the delicate stitching, carefully hand done.

“I don’t think you did this,” she said as she examined it, glancing up at him. A soft smile crept along his face as he watched her unfold it.

“No I didn’t make it. That was mine.”

She paused, looking down at it in quiet awe. “You still have this?”

“Was in a box of things from my parents’ house. They had...a lot of stuff I never looked at, things I’d had in storage for a while. I found that when we moved in here and put it away, but when I started this project I remember it and pulled it out. It’s a bit musty. I can have it cleaned.”

“It’s lovely.” She studied it, the little eyelets lacing through it, the small duckies on the edges, lovingly created by quick, competent fingers. “Whoever made this was so talented, way more than I’ll ever be.”

“Ana Jarvis made that for me.” He smiled with real fondness, the sort he only ever had for a few people in his life. She’d of course heard stories of the Jarvis’ over the years from both he and Rhodey, though she’d only met Edwin, the dear, sweet old gentleman that he was. The couple had worked for his father through Howard’s death and had stayed on to see after Tony till Ana’s ill health and Tony’s worries for Edwin made Tony force them into retirement, finally. Ana had passed just before Pepper had come into Tony’s employment, Edwin had passed not long before Tony went to Afghanistan. With them went the last bit of any true family Tony had for a long time.

“I didn’t know she could knit,” Pepper finally offered, running the baby-soft yarn through her fingers.

“She worked in a clothing shop in Budapest before the war. It’s how she and Jarvis met. She was forever patching up something I ripped or tore. She made all my costumes for me when I was a kid, no matter how stupid. I particularly remember a fetching number as the element Argon.”

“A creative costume indeed.”

“I found a photo.” He beckoned her back to the table, where he spread out the stack of things he had been looking at. Papers and diaries, photo albums and loose pictures spilled out of the box, along with a couple of trophies, some framed certificates, and a tiny, handmade robot, a miniature version of Dum-E and U, both of which were currently in the back of the garage, quiescent in sleep mode for the moment.

“Here it is! My crowning glory of pre-school.” He shoved a photo at her of him, impossibly tiny, beaming at the camera dressed in what she assumed was an accurate representation of an Argon atom.”
“Why Argon?”

“I liked the sound of the name, weirdly enough. That was it.” He looked through the stack of dated photos, all from the 70s and 80s. “Here is one of me as Sherlock Holmes, much to Peggy Carter’s delight. I got extra candy from her that year. Another me of me as Isaac Asimov, I think.”

He paused on one photo, a funny look flickering across his expression as he held the stack to his chest. “Jesus, I thought this one burned!”

Pepper’s eyebrow arched with curiosity. “What’s worse than Isaac Asimov for a Halloween costume?”

He blanched, face pulling in consternation. “If I show you, you promise - no, you swear - you will never, ever discuss this with anyone, most especially Steve Rogers, ever, unless I am dead or it is an emergency.”

“What does Steve have to do with it?”

“Swear it!”

“Okay,” she giggled, now hopelessly intrigued.

He sighed, dramatically, whipping out the photograph to shove at her. She saw in an instant why he demanded her silence.

“Oh my God,” she gasped, squealing as she looked at him. “You were so cute!”

“I look like a reject from a USO show.”

“You were what, six?”

“That was before my Star Wars obsession, so yeah.” He grimaced. “Yeah, I really did choose to dress as Captain America for Halloween.”

“You even had the shield!”

“Yeah, Dad had the shield, one of his scale models he used for mock ups, just painted it for me. Ana did the costume because all the ones in the stores were stupid. She got this off of Dad’s sketches of Steve’s armor.”

“Seriously, you won’t let me tell him?”

“Do our vows of marriage mean nothing to you?”

“Okay!” She held up her hands at his quiet indignance. “You were super cute.”

“If he ever finds out, I’ll know who to blame.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” She still snickered, wishing desperately he’d keep it out so she could frame it.

He took the photo back, shuffling it in with other pictures of his youth; him in Boy Scouts, him in his father’s lab, one from a Christmas sometime in the late 70s, another in a uniform for a school whose name was in French, all the pieces of his childhood she knew so little about. Tony was a careful curator of his story and always had been. Of course, the Stark brand meant he had to portray both himself and Howard in a certain light, but behind closed doors he had very little good to speak of in
regards to his early life. So few people were around anymore who remembered it, Pepper had no
way of judging what was true and what was a matter of perspective. Even Nick Fury, the last person
who knew Howard well, had dusted. She supposed Carol Danvers might have known Howard, but
even her memories were only of a research colleague to Dr. Lawson, not of the man who was
Tony’s father. She rubbed a hand along her belly, thinking how very much she wished she had those
stories, those memories of Tony and his life before, for Morgan’s sake, if nothing else, so she could
know who she was and where she came from.

“Why don’t you talk about your childhood more?” She had meant the question as curious, rather
than accusatory. Instantly, she could see Tony stiffen.

“I talk about it,” he replied defensively, gathering up the scattered photos quickly, perhaps
protectively.

“Yeah, all the bad stuff, none of the good. I’ve known you fifteen years and I didn’t know about
Ana making you costumes or that you dressed as Captain America for Halloween. Those are sweet
things, nice things. Every time you talk about your childhood, you make it sound like it was hell.”

“It wasn’t hell.” He shrugged, putting the photos in an envelope he tossed back in the box. “I mean,
we had too much money for it to be hell.”

“Tony!”

“What do you want, Pepper, a New York Times best-selling tell-all?”

She shrugged, reaching for her hot coco. “That might be a start.”

He eyed her, shaking his head, before barking a harsh laugh. “You know all the important bits. Dad
married late in life and it was another three years before I came along. All his friends were looking at
becoming grandparents. Here he was in his 50’s having a kid and trying to be a father for the first
time. I think he was just...confused by the whole thing. What do you even do with one of those?
How do you feed it? What do you do with it till it’s old enough to have intelligent conversation with?
I think children, on the whole, just confounded him.”

“Children on the whole confuse everyone, not just your father.”

“Clint Barton gets it...got it, I suppose.” He winced, restlessly setting his photos aside. “You know, I
saw him with his wife and kids. When he was with us, the Avengers, he played off all cool and
badass, a spy and assassin, but the minute he was home it was like a switch flipped and he was a
husband and father, just...a regular guy. He drove his wife crazy with remodeling the house and
played catch with his kids, like normal fathers do.”

“I don’t know if there is such as thing as a ‘normal’ father.”

“Well, there is such a thing as a father who is present, and Barton was that. Howard wasn’t so
much.” He grimaced, pulling out a trophy from the box and studying it. “Growing up, you’d see
other kids with their dads, going to games, taking them camping, checking in on them just to make
sure that the other kids weren’t being mean and they got their homework done. You know who took
me to Boy Scouts? Jarvis! That went over real well with the others.”

“I can’t believe you were in Boy Scouts at all.”

“Oh, trust me, for all my father’s patrician aspirations, he thought the Scouts would make an honest
man out of me. I didn’t last long.” He sighed, regretfully, setting aside his trophy. “Nothing I did
lasted long, honestly. Problem with being me, I guess, I just zoomed through everything at that age,
too smart to stay occupied, too bored to behave myself. You’d have thought that Howard Stark of all people would have understood that better than anyone. Yet there he was at every turn, frustrated when I got kicked out of one school after another, saying I didn’t ‘apply myself’ and that I couldn’t just coast through life on his hard-earned dollar.”

“True,” Pepper murmured, reaching for the trophy, some engineering one with his name on it, likely for a competition he did as a child. “Your father didn’t exactly have the easiest childhood himself, if I remember right?”

“No,” Tony muttered, leaning against the table, staring blankly into the box of memories. “I guess that’s a Stark family trait. He didn’t get along with his father. He was a washed up failure in business and an alcoholic to boot, never managed to get out of the Lower East Side. He was an engineer too, you know, but a terrible businessman. Thought he’d make a million on his inventions and never sold one. There’s his kid, more brilliant than he is, builds an empire out of nothing. They never got along either.”

“So, your saying your grandfather wasn’t the greatest example as a parent.”

He chuckled, sipping at his cocoa. “No, not really, I guess.”

Pepper hummed, fingers running along the rim of her own travel mug, lazily. “That had to be hard, though, for your dad, growing up like that. Takes a lot of drive to pull yourself up from poverty. Probably explains why he took so long to settle down, though, when you’ve grown up with nothing. He likely just wanted to enjoy life for a while, like he couldn’t as a child. Maybe also explains why he was the way he was with you, too. He remembered having a father who couldn’t give him what he wanted or needed, especially by way of education, and he had to do it all himself. He didn’t want you to have to go through that.”

He shrugged, fiddling with the latch on his mug. “You are starting to sound alarmingly like my therapist right now.”

“Am I?” She tried not to grin at that.

“Yeah, though I pay her a lot more than I do you.”

“You gave me your multi-billion dollar company to run. Also, you made me a rocking chair, which, you know, is kind of cool.”

“I did, didn’t I?” He beamed on his creation proudly, the gears in his brain ever turning and working. “I just...I’ve been thinking a lot of him lately, you know, with the baby. I’m almost the same age he was when I came along. I spent so much of my life just angry at him for being so busy, for never having time, for not being there for the things I needed and wanted, being upset about things that in the end didn’t matter. And, I get it, no one is perfect, least of all Howard. I think the only altruism he had in his entire life came from my mother, which may be why he loved her so much. She made him a better person, made me a better person too. I was too much like him and I don’t know if he was ever quite okay with that.”

“I don’t know, seeing how you turned out in the end, I would think he would be rather proud.”

He stared at her as if the thought had never occurred to him.

“Proud is not the word I was looking for, frankly. Frustrated, yes, maybe…”

“Why?”
He threw a hand up in one of his classic, expansive gestures, as if it encompassed everything. “I’m a mess, Pepper, always have been. All he ever wanted out of me was to step up, to work hard and run his company and I do none of those things. If anything, I turned a blind eye to everything while I profited off death and destruction. Then, when I finally do get my act together, finally make something out of myself, step up to the plate, I end up mucking that up too. Half the universe gone. Doesn’t feel like something Dad would be proud of.”

“You’re also the man who fought against forces far greater than himself to try and stop all those things. You’d only have been a failure if you hadn’t bothered trying, if you had thrown your hands up and said ‘not my problem’, if you didn’t step up. But, you did. You have a good heart, Tony Stark. It’s why I fell in love with you.”

His expression softened to tenderness as he looked at her. “I thought you fell in love with me for my wit and sold gift-giving capabilities.”

“Strawberries,” she shot back.

“Rocking chair?”

“That’s going to make up for a lot of things, I will admit. Maybe not the wax head sculpture.”

“I don’t know what I was thinking, outside of Madame Tussaud’s and it sounded cool at the time.”

“Tony!”

“Yeah?”

“Come to bed.” She tugged on his arm, beckoning him to the warmth and peace of their room. He nodded, gathering items to put back into the box, safely tucked away for now.

“Hey, Pep?” He fit the trophy and the other things back neatly, placing the lid on the top. “You...you think I’ll be okay at this fatherhood thing? I mean, all things considered with the exceptionally disastrous father/son relationships that run rampant in my family?”

The raw emotion of his worry and fear made her heart melt, aching for this man who always seemed so confident to the rest of the world. She rose, snagging his hands to place on the sides of her belly where Morgan blessedly had finally decided to rest for a bit. “Good thing you are having a daughter, isn’t it?”

His smile was as brilliant as the hideous snowglobe on the front lawn.

“You’ll be an excellent father and this little girl is going to grow up knowing how much her father loves her and wants her just the way she is.”

“More than anything in this universe.” He bent to kiss her, lips soft as against hers. “Thanks for having confidence in me, even if I don’t in myself.”

“Always,” she smiled, patting his hands on her middle. “Come on, Santa Claus, if you don’t come up to bed, there may not be anything under the tree for you.”

“Anything good?”

“You never know, if you let me sleep in tomorrow morning I may make it worth your while.”

“It is totally true what they say about that last trimester.”
“Shut up, grab your coco, help me back to the house.”

“Yes ma’am.” He jumped to do as she demanded.
The Lost Ones

Chapter Summary

In which Natasha teaches a lesson.

“Let’s try it again! Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit…”

Around Natasha, twenty girls and a handful of boys ranging from five to thirteen all moved through their basic positions, all varying in levels of grace and capability, dutifully following her lead despite the missed step here or the elbow not high enough there. Unlike her own instructors when she was their age, she didn’t whip out a cane to rap their bodies into position. She merely moved through, kindly pushing a shoulder here, gently tilted a chin there, and laughingly held up one of the younger girls as she nearly toppled over attempting to copy what the older children were doing. They all did admirably well as she watched them come through their paces, ending with triumphant smiles on their faces.

“Very good! You all are getting along. Soon, we’ll have you pirouetting right across the floor!”

The snorts and laughter told her that her charges all highly doubted that would be happening anytime soon.

“All right, last one to put their things away has to carry all the stinky towels.”

A scramble of children taking off slippers and gathering up mats, towels and other accoutrements rushed around the room in a scramble with only minor pushing and shoving as they went. She chuckled at the ruckus, holding on to the hand of Miranda, the youngest, who was a bit too little to be caught in the scrum of the other, bigger kids cleaning up. When everything was gathered and put away and the disorder assembled into a single line, she quietly nodded as they filed out into the activity room beyond, the kids scattering as they made a dash for the snack tables.

“Ms. Tasha, can I get some?”

She glanced down at Miranda, who hung on her fingers dutifully, smiling sweetly, all while eyeing a table of granola bars. “Yes, but one, okay. And get some juice!”

“Okay!” She raced off on chubby legs to follow her fellows, brown braids flying as she horned in between two older girls, both of whom made room and immediately started to mother the younger girl. She supposed that was the way of it with this kids anymore, they all had to look out for each other. She remembered that responsibility well - what little she did remember of her childhood.

“How were dance lessons?” Their lead instructor, Ms. Priscilla, slid up beside her, smiling warmly at the flood of children in Natasha’s wake.

“Well, they aren’t the Bolshoi, but they are a lot more fun.”

“Thank you, again, for coming to work with us. I know, after everything, your time…”

“I’m happy too.” She cut off the well meaning woman with a smile. “Honestly, I wish I could do more. I’ve been talking with the local governments, trying to work out plans. Places all over the
world are stuck in spots just like yours, kids suddenly orphaned, no one to take care of them. Groups are forming to take them in. We are trying to network everyone together, have an oversight committee that is tied right into the Avengers so we can help facilitate connection and the sharing of resources.”

“As if you didn’t have enough of your plate.”

“Well, it’s our job.” Or at least it was the job she was making for herself. “We’re around to help those who can’t help themselves.”

“That’s why we are so lucky to have you.”

She didn’t say what she was privately thinking, that they wouldn’t need the Avengers had they stopped Thanos.

A tug on her sleeve drew her attention to two little girls, perhaps around 10, beaming up at her shyly. “Hey, guys! What’s up?”

She knew their names, Keyasha and Tzipa, children from vastly different backgrounds, united in that they were made orphans in the blink of an eye. Both girls were in her class, side-by-side. Tzipa had studied ballet before it all happened, growing up in more affluent circumstances with a mother who thought it would help her be graceful. Keyasha’s single mother had worked double shifts in security and couldn’t afford things like dance lessons, but the girl gave it a go all the same, eager to do whatever her new friend was doing.

“We had a question for you.” Keyasha crossed her skinny arms with a serious look, copied by the more quiet and reserved Tzipa.

Natasha smothered a laugh as she nodded just as gravely. “Go on.”

“You’re an Avenger, right?”

Not that she advertised, but word had gotten around from on high, she supposed. “Yes, I am.”

“And you are a girl?”

“Obviously.”

“So you can be both an Avenger and a girl?”

“Why not?”

“See, that’s what I said, and Miguel said I was stupid because girls can’t be superheroes.”

Across the room, she could see a clique of boys, all preteen, chatting together and casting furtive looks their way.

“Did Miguel say why he believed that?” Natasha figured she would at least ask. Better to not jump to conclusions with a kid whose parents were likely gone and had no one to guide him in a period already difficult enough.

Keyasha was too young to have thought of that angle. “No, he just said that girls weren’t as strong or smart and I was stupid for saying I wanted to grow up to be an Avengers like you.”

Priscilla beside her quietly hummed. “Miguel Esposito, had a rough life to start, lived with his grandmother. She disappeared.”
Of all the polite ways everyone had to say that they died, the “disappearing” one was the one Natasha found the nicest. It implied they may reappear somewhere else, like in the living room or maybe in Maui. She glanced at the knot of boys in the back. “Which one?”

“Tall boy in the back, the one racing to puberty.”

Yeah, that would do it. Poor kid, didn’t look more than 12 but was already at the awkward stage between childhood and young adult where his body wasn’t really sure what it was doing with itself quite yet. He still had the rounded chubbiness of youth but promised to be tall and gangly in another 6-12 months. Hormones were racing, and if he already had a lot going for him coming into all of this, he definitely he probably was worse now.

“Let me go and talk with him. That okay?”

The teacher nodded, if perhaps a smidge hesitantly, as Natasha followed her two admirers to the back, both girls stomping in high indignation as they went. She tried not to smile at it. Her childhood had been such a different environment, closed and sequestered. They were girls who of course had their petty arguments, all of which quickly quashed by their instructors and training. They’d expected them to obey, to be disciplined, to not engage. The small dramas and childish squabbles of adolescence were in fact somewhat new to her, something she had only really had previous experience with in Cooper and Lila.

The two girls marched right up to the huddle of seven boys, all eyeing them with various levels of amusement, boredom, and dismissal. Keyasha was the one to speak, though graceful, willowy Tzipa was nearly as full of sass, her ash blonde hair in its tight bun quivering with every nod beside her friend.

“We just spoke to Ms. Tasha and she said she’s both a girl and an Avenger and I can be both, so look who’s stupid now!”

The other boys look to Miguel, eager to see what he had to say about it. Older than the two girls he was aggravating, he already had his answer ready to spit out to cover his bases. “Ms. Tasha is a woman, stupid, not a girl. That’s different.”

Oh, dear, they were playing this game. “Different how,” Natasha asked, quietly curious.

Miguel looked as if she’d just asked him what color the sky was. “Well, your grown up, that’s how.”

“Oh, you difference between me and them is that I’m fully grown with a fully developed body. Otherwise, I’m still just as female as they are. So what’s the real issue, that they are too young to be Avengers or too female to be Avengers, because only one of those is a right answer.”

She had him pinned and he knew it, as did the other boys. They all ooed, quietly, as the two girls nodded in delighted satisfaction their Ms. Natasha had won out.”

Miguel, however, resorted to the tried-and-true teenage response of abject sullenness. “I meant they were too young.”

“Keyasha, did you say that when you grew up, you wanted to be an Avenger?” She turned slightly to the girl who nodded her head, the two puffy pigtails on top bouncing.

“Yeah and he said I couldn’t grow up to be one because I was a girl.”

“Did not,” he shot back, just a bit guilty.
“Did too,” Tzipa fired hotly for her friend.

“He did, Ms. Tasha,” replied one of the boys, Daniel. “He said he didn’t think women could grow up to be as strong or as powerful as Captain America or Iron Man.”

Miguel’s warm brown cheeks turned as red as Steve Rogers’ when embarrassed as he cuffed Daniel hard. “Dude, shut up!”

“You aren’t wrong,” Natasha granted, philosophically, as the two boys demurred. “I mean, physically, I am not nearly as strong as either of them. But, Captain America is an enhanced human, altered to the peak of physical perfection and highly trained to boot. Iron Man has a suit that gives him greater stamina, greater strength, and the ability to fly. Thor is an alien with an enhanced physiology all around. So, yeah, against all that, a normal human woman like me without technology doesn’t have a chance.”

“But you are an Avenger,” Keyasha insisted stubbornly, looking as if Natasha had somehow failed her.

“I am. That’s because I’m smart and I use the tools I have to do the best I can. I don’t have to be stronger than Steve Rogers or Thor, I just have to use what I have.”

Miguel now was intrigued. “How?”

Well, then! She may as well show them.

“Come along.” She beckoned the boy, turning to return back into the large, multipurpose room, snagging several mats from a stack along the wall. She laid them out, side-by-side. Miguel followed, as did Daniel and several other boys, but also Keyasha, Tzipa and a whole other little audience as well. At the back, Priscilla, the lone adult, watched with curiosity.

“Miguel, here.” She stepped on the mat, pointing to a spot in front of her. The boy flushed from root to neck, but he did as he was asked, shyly stepping in front of her. He was nearly as tall as her already. She found herself judging his height, his weight, the way he carried his coltish, ever-changing body.

“Now, I’m going to show you some things, but to do so, I’ll have to touch you. Is that okay?”

He nearly turned purple at that, but nodded.

“Good. Now, I’m not going to do anything that will hurt you, but I want you to pay attention. One slip up and you or I can be seriously hurt.”

He agreed again, unsteady and unsure.

“All right. So, let’s say we were in a fight, you against me. What would be the first thing you would do?”

He shrugged, clearly too embarrassed to know what to do.

“You’d run at me, right? Try to punch me?”

“Yeah,” he drawled, shrugging, staring at the mat in front of him as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

“Hey, Miguel! Eyes up!”
As if he had a string attached to the top of his head, his chin lifted, dark gaze looking at her with childish shame. Poor thing was all over the place emotionally!

“I want you to attack me.” Her words were calm and deliberate and they caused him to slacken with shock.

“Wait, you mean, for real?”

“Absolutely.”

There was a collective hushed gasp from the children who all looked at each other in awe.

“But, I was told not to hit girls.”

“Who taught you that?” Her question wasn’t accusatory, more informative. Still, the boy lifted his chin a bit defiantly and proudly.

“My abuela. She taught me that real men don’t hit girls...I mean, females.” He apparently learned his earlier lesson.

The grandmother who died, she guessed. “Your abuela was wise. You should never hit women, or children, or people in general who have done nothing and are defenseless. And don’t ever hit animals either, because that’s just mean.”

Someone in the gathered cluster piped up. "What about little sisters?"

“Them most especially no.” She pretended to glare at them all, causing the chitter of quiet giggles. “But, Miguel, no, you don’t hit women, but, I am teaching you something you can use one day if you ever get in trouble. So, say I’m a bad guy and you want to take me down. Come at me as if you want to hit me.”

He did or at least tried to. He was still skittish and shy, too worried about actually hitting her. As he rushed to her, fist raised, she easily sidestepped his attack, gracefully dancing out of his clumsy way. He rocketed past her and she grabbed a shoulder to help stop his momentum before he fell over. The kids giggled and even Miguel managed a shy smile.

“Admittedly, you telegraphed your attack, mostly because I told you to do it. I didn’t have to do much there, did I? I just moved out of the way. The key to ensuring you manage an attack isn’t that you are stronger than the other person, but that you are smart enough to avoid their attack while getting in your own. Make them work for it.”

For the next half hour, she used Miguel, mostly, and others who were eager to “spar” with an Avenger as examples as the kids watched in fascination. When everyone was fairly tired, she had them gather the mats to put away, wandering to where Priscilla stood, her expression knowing as Natasha made an exhausted face only she could see.

“Well, now you are a hero to the boys and the girls.”

“If they try any of that on each other, let me know, I’ll whip them into shape.” She had a feeling there would be lots of parrying of “attacks” over the next few days. “Seriously, that was fun.”

“You’re good with kids,” the lead teacher observed as she smiled benevolently on her charges. “Especially these guys who all have lost so much.”

“I don’t know about good with kids.” She tried not to think of a hospital, not unlike this one, ruined
and charred, the bodies of little ones hidden beneath the blackened rubble. She pushed it aside, choosing to think instead of her own cold, gray childhood. “I was an orphan too. Don’t know anything about my family though. I was raised by the state, not unlike these guys, but with a decidedly more Soviet flair.”

Priscilla chuckled at that. “I suppose that shows, at least with how you treat all of them.”

Natasha thought it was wiser not to mention she had been trained to seduce and assassinate people. Perhaps not the best thing to mention, given the lesson she’d just given the kids.

The teacher continued, a benevolent eye on the charges around her. “So many of these kids are at a loss. They’re from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, all have different stories, but in the end, they are kids who lost everything that day. Unlike the grown ups, they don’t have a way to just keep going forward, so we are trying.”

“I know.” Natasha eyed the two girls who started the entire exchange. Before Thanos’ snap she doubted they would have ever come into contact with one another, Keyasha from a working class background and Tzipa whose parents were lobbyists. Now they were all each other had in a world where everyone had lost someone.

“I’ll be back in two weeks, just to check on things.” She nodded at the teacher as she scooped up her bag with her ballet slippers and other odds and ends. “I know we are still working on pieces and I can coordinate with the board on how to move forward. We may expand all the operation, if we can manage it.”

The woman was doing a saint’s work, in Natasha’s opinion. She knew little of Priscilla outside of the fact that she had been a teacher before the snap, working for the DC school district. Kind-hearted, determined and resourceful, when everything hit the fan she and other teachers, social workers, and surviving parents began to pull together all the resources they could to form an orphanage for the kids in their care in one of the now mostly empty schools. It was only her grit and determination, plus the openness of what remained of the local government to do whatever it could to help, that provided a safe space for hundreds of kids who lacked one now. God knows, there were millions more across the planet who didn’t even have that.

After being mobbed with hugs as she made it out of the door, she stepped into the cold, gray flurries of the DC winter, eyeing the brown and blasted treeline to the Capitol dome in the distance. She was rarely in this city anymore, not since the fall of the Triskelion. For obvious reasons, she had made her presence there scarce. Between the CIA and Thunderbolt Ross, she didn’t feel like putting up with their bully tactics. Now, she didn’t think she could get arrested walking down the street there. Metro police were having a hard enough time managing the crises that were popping up with only half the police and resources, one former spy was hardly on their radar.

She’d co-opted one of the quinjets to fly down for the day. As convenient as they were, they weren’t exactly easy to park, even in the more empty parking lots. She found the top of a parking garage being unused and had settled it there, far away from prying eyes. The walk back to it from the makeshift orphanage wasn’t far, fifteen minutes at most, through a neighborhood mostly quiet and empty. Still, abandoned buildings and empty homes stared at her in the icy gray as a pack of dogs, all abandoned at their owners disappearance, scattered at her steps, wandering into neighboring properties, their frightened eyes watchful as she quietly made her way to her destination.

The weather was cold, not as frigid as she had grown up with, but still bitter enough that she dug in deeper into her warm, leather coat, pushing her gloved hands into the depths of its pockets. Her steps echoed in the emptiness, hard against the pavement, the only sound beyond the random passing car. In the cold she could see the mist of her breath, steady and even, as she spied the parking garage in
question in the distance, promising the quinjet and warmth as she made her way back home.

Of course, that was if she made it there at all, depending on what her tail was prepared to do. She’d noticed the tall man as she walked out of the door of the orphanage. He was bundled against the cold, earphones in and phone in hand as he sat at a bus bench, the picture of a 20-something heading home from work. He’d not looked up when she walked past, but a block and a half after she’d glanced back to see him having left the bench, following at a distance, his eyes ever on the screen in front of him.

Seriously, it was cute he thought he was being so secretive. She supposed with fewer people around for cover it did make it a big difficult. She continued on her way, half-an-eye on her tail, as ahead of her an SUV pulled to the side, a woman in there looking at her own phone, as if lost. Walking towards her were a couple, man and woman, arm-in-arm, heads together talking, sharing a secret smile as they whispered.

This was so basic as to be laughable. Still, Natasha went along with it, more to see how far this would go than anything else. She continued walking, gripping the length of shoestring she had in one pocket, noting the gun she had strapped at her ankle, underneath the cuff of her loose fitting pants. She quickly took stock of what she had working for her in this scenario: a fire hydrant, a street sign, an abandoned newspaper box, and the storefront, empty and abandoned, but with large pane glass windows. She could make this work.

The fellow behind had sped up considerably, now close enough to reach her in a few steps. The couple in front were closing in. She was coming up on the SUV, the woman inside looking up absently as she stepped up alongside the nose. Natasha eyed the driver, meeting her gaze pointedly, before turning to the other three people coming at her.

“Guys, please,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “You have to work much harder than this if you don’t want to be so obvious.”

Well, that stunned them all enough to give her the drop. As they all started and stared, she launched herself at the closest, the tall man with the headphones. Pushing herself off the hydrant, then the SUV, she had the shoe string out, wrapping it around his throat as the force of her leap brought her swinging around, dragging him down, suffocating as she landed on the other side, a swift crack to his left leg sending him down. Her knee to his temple sent him sprawling, unconscious, to the freezing pavement.

The other man swore loudly, now recovered, as he and the woman pulled out guns, as if she hadn’t seen those before. She ducked as they aimed, tucking and rolling to slip around them to the storefront, catching one of the plate glass windows with an elbow. It cracked, sending shards of glass spraying as the ducked from the spray, still trying to catch her as she snagged the biggest, sharpest piece she could find and bounced up again, enough to get leverage to sweep a foot under the woman, who side stepped it neatly, but not fast enough to avoid the nasty slash to her Achilles tendon Natasha managed with surgical precision.

The woman screamed, hitting the pavement, firing at Natasha as she ducked, throwing herself to the back of the SUV for cover as the man joined his partner in firing. Bullets whizzed past Natasha, the driver inside screaming in protest at her compatriots. She tried to place the language, Serbian, maybe Croatian. She wasn’t well versed on either to tell the difference, though she knew enough of both to know they were trying to kidnap her alive and that her being dead would do no good. Did they even know who she was as a target?

The driver’s side door opened, she was guessing with the driver prepared at last to give aid to the other two, as the man in heavily accented English called out. “Come out and we won’t hurt you.”
Amateur hour, clearly. She eyed the faint shadow of the driver in the waning light of day, as Natasha pulled her gun from under her pant cuff. She could see the driver’s feet under the carriage, just in front of the back tire. She popped off a round to each ankle, sending the woman sprawling and screaming, as she threw herself up and spun up on the startled man, hitting his right shoulder with a well aimed round and sending him spinning into the glass on the concrete. The first woman couldn’t aim quick enough before she managed the same injury to her, her weapon hand going limp as Natasha neatly picked it up out of the other woman’s now lax fingers.

She rounded them quietly, studying them as they lay on the ground in pain, stunned and shocked as she regarded them coolly. “So, who are you guys and why are you bugging me?”

The woman whimpered, tears in her eyes, as she glared up at her. Natasha shrugged, pulling the man’s weapon as she neatly tucked it up under his chin.

“All right,” she purred, switching to Russian. “Now, who are you and why are you trying to kidnap me?”

He hadn’t expected the Russian, she didn’t think, because he looked surprised. “Hired,” he managed in kind with a horrible accent. “We were looking for you, given a description, told to find you here.”

“Really?” That was both interesting and laughable. “Did someone really it out for you?”

The man gurgled.

“Do you know who I am?”

Judging from the way his eyes rolled in fear in his head as she pressed the muzzle deep against his throat, he didn’t. “Some woman. They wanted you kidnapped.”

“Oh, someone had to be pulling your leg on this one.” She switched back to English, looking at the carnage around her. “Who was it?”

“Don’t have names,” he relied in equally accented English.

“Right.” She sighed, considering what to do. She couldn’t let these three for just stay there. She highly doubted they would try a second time to take her. Even as she thought that, she looked down at the man, his eyes flickering to just over her shoulder, wide and desperate and realized that, maybe, she could be wrong.

A shot rang out. Behind her, there was the sound of a body falling to the pavement. Natasha looked back to see the first woman down. Dead, incapacitated, she didn’t know. Down the street a single figure stood, silently lowering this gun. She watched, cautiously, as the man wandered up, taking in the scene and her in it, with bemusement.

“Hello, Strickland.” She greeted the newcomer, weapon still at the ready, though now no longer under the man’s chin. “Fancy meeting you around these parts. I didn’t think I’d see the CIA slumming it.”

“Funny, that’s what we used to say about SHIELD.” He offered a hand to help pull her up. She eyed it and him for long moments, assessing the threat. Deciding it was low, she took it with her left hand, standing up, weapon still trained on the man at her feet. “Could have jumped in earlier, but was rather fun watching you at work.”

“Ehh, they made it easy.” She looked down at the man, quiet and wide-eyed at her feet. “Croatian?”
“Yep, mercenaries, highly paid ones at that, though I don’t think they knew they were being sent to kidnap Black Widow.”

That name had an effect on the fellow on the ground.

“We...we just hired to kidnap woman, blonde, supposed to be alone.”

“And you didn’t check to see who she was or that she was the most dangerous woman in the world?” Strickland tisked, shaking his graying, dark head. “Wow, you really clueless.”

“Whoever wanted me either didn’t have the intelligence to find a really talented crew or were grossly underestimating my abilities. I don’t know if I should be insulted or not.”

“I’ve called it in all the same. It will take our people a minute. Not as many of them as there used to be, you know.”

Natasha only nodded, stepping away to replace her weapon and catch her breath. “David Strickland. How long has it been?”

“I don’t know, since before you and Steve Rogers decided to blow our intelligence community all to hell, so a few years.”

“The CIA still butt hurt over that?”

He smirked. “And MI6, and Interpol, and the KGB...”

“Yeah, well, none of them knew they were dealing with HYDRA either, which would they rather have?”

“Honestly, depends on the day.” He had a cock-eyed smile in a ruggedly handsome face, the sort that wouldn’t necessarily stand out in crowd. It was a good look for spying. She’d known him for next to forever, longer than she had known Clint and Fury, but only by a hair. He was a CIA operative she had limited contact with before she left the KGB. Truth be told, had she been in a different headspace before turning her back on her life and winding up in Budapest she might have defected with him, but that was a long time ago and she had made different choices.

“How are things, then, given...everything.” She felt uncharacteristically nervous as she shoved her hands into her coat pockets again, trying not to shiver in the come down from adrenaline and the dipping temperatures.

“Oh, you know, the world is on fire. I guess you have a pretty good view of it with the Avengers.”

“Better than some. I’m surprised you are here checking on me. I thought the CIA didn’t trust me anymore, burned too many bridges.”

“I didn’t say that they trusted you.”

“But you do?”

“I didn’t say I trusted you, either.” His smile was cheerful as he shrugged. “I still remember Venice.”

“What was wrong with Venice?”

“Besides the fact that you still managed to steal the entire hot list of key political targets?”

“Shouldn’t have hidden them where you did.
“I hid them in my glasses.”

“Which you left on the nightstand.”

“Because I was sleeping in a bed with you in it, I might add.”

“Well, see you just exacerbated your problem there. Bad judgement calls. Don’t blame me for your poor choices.’

“My glasses?”

“I seem to remember you could manage just fine without them.”

“You thought so.”

Her smile was slow and completely unapologetic. “If your fishing for compliments, Strickland, you’re parked on the wrong pier.”

“I know better than that, Romanoff.”

Still, she allowed an appreciative gaze to linger, for the briefest of seconds. “So what brings you out to these parts, then. Surely, you aren’t looking out for me.”

“Yes and no.” He tapped a toe to the injured man on the ground, who only groaned by way of response. “We got word on them, followed up on it, traced it here. I figured you were fine taking care of yourself, but…”

He reached into the inner warmth of his bulky, winter coat. She tensed, but relaxed somewhat when he pulled out a large, standard issue smartphone. He tapped it, pulling up something before he handed it over. She took it from him, studying the image he had left up for her to see.

“That was in Trapani, just before Christmas.”

The scenes of gore looked as if someone had used an Italian villa for target practice. Her gut churned at that. “Who are the targets.”

“Matteo Riina, head of one of the leading mafioso families in Sicily, held the port pretty tight. Part of a younger generation among the families who all like to play it fast and loose, was using the port to import drugs, weapons, young women to sell into the sex trade, not that he dirtied his hands with it. He’d let others get away with importing it there for a price.”

“So, good old fashioned, Mafia extortionism. Glad to hear he keeps some of the old ways.” She studied the photos, the precision of the attack, the impossible shots.

“Riina’s younger brother, Bernardo, hired these idiots. He’s used them before for other kidnappings and they’ve been successful. How, I don’t know.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, but what does that have to do with me?”

Strickland’s keen expression softened somewhat. “I think you know why, Romanoff. I didn’t have to look twice to see who made the hit.”

Her fingertips went white on the edges of the phone as she gripped it, her mouth dry. “You sure?”

“Short of getting fingerprints and DNA samples, yeah.”
Natasha glared up at him, unreasonably angry all of the sudden. “He’s good at his job, one of the best. He’d not get caught by some two-bit, Sicilian crime lord.”

“No, but even a two-bit, Sicilian crime lord has connections, and there are plenty out there willing to squeal on a former SHIELD agent and Avenger if they are paid well enough.”

“Then clearly someone sold him bad information if they thought they could somehow catch me.”

“Well, I won’t deny that. With everything going on, though, maybe he’d thought he’d get the upper hand”

Natasha passed Strickland his phone again. “Well, thanks for the warning. I’ll be sure to keep an eye out.”

“Not the only reason I did it.” His expression softened just a smidge. “This isn’t the only hit he’s done. This is just the first that anyone has tied to him openly.”

She said nothing as she blinked at him, watching him put his phone away.

“Look, Romanoff, I like you. I like Barton. He and I go back. He was always, always a good guy, one of the best of us in this shitty business. Last I heard of him he’d gone to pasture after the Accords, retired, was living the good life in Cabo or Waikiki or something. Next thing I know he’s leaving a trail of bodies across the world, seriously pissing people off.”

“He’s an assassin, Strickland, it’s what he does, takes people out. There is nothing good, or great, or glorious about it.”

“Yeah, but he always did it the right way and for the right purpose.”

“Is there a right purpose?” She wasn’t even sure about that anymore. Clint understood, he always had, about the terrible things that people like the two of them were asked to do in the name of securing the world and the awful price it exacted. It was why he had looked in her scared, defeated eyes all those years ago and made a different call.

“Come on, Natasha, you of all people know better than that. Right now, no one has the capacity to do anything. We are just trying to hold shit together and not let the world explode and that’s asking a lot. But, soon, it’s going to be too big, too obvious, and it’s going to be our people asking, or MI6, or Interpol, and what then? Once he gets on their radar, do you think they are going to be forgiving just because of who he is and who his friends are?”

“I don’t know, Stark has some pretty powerful lawyers still alive.”

“Not big enough for this. I don’t know what started this ronin style shit, but he’s going to have to stop, before someone stops him.”

He wasn’t wrong, she knew that, but he didn’t understand how deep this went or that Natasha had no capability of stopping it, not yet, at least. “He lost everything, David. All of it, he...he had one thing in life that kept him moored, kept him sane in all this insanity, and it’s gone, in a snap of some alien’s fingers. And I tried...we tried so hard to stop him, but they’re gone, and he has nothing keeping him from falling over that terrible edge, anymore.”

Strickland sighed, nodding as he looked down at his feet. In the distance, she thought she could hear sirens coming, finally, to handle the injured, if they were even alive anymore, that was. When he spoke, it was from a well of sadness and grief all of his own. “Everyone lost someone, Romanoff. No one went unpunished. Some people lost lots of someones. You don’t see anyone of them
“Everyone processes their grief and loss differently. Being an assassin, your grip on your humanity is more tenuous than just about everyone else’s. If you lost the thing that kept you going, kept you sane, what would you do?”

Strickland at least looked as if he understood that.

“Who did you lose?”

If he was surprised she asked, he had the grace to at least hide it. “My kid sister, her entire family. She’d just had a baby, six-weeks old. She’d been trying for years to try and have another. Smartest woman I knew.”

“You’re only family?”

“Yeah.” His loss flickered, briefly. On impulse, Natasha reached for his hand, squeezing his gloved fingers tightly.

“I’m sorry, for you, for them, for letting you down.”

Grief, the searing kind so many of them displayed now at days, welled up in him, only to be pushed aside. “Yeah. Just...try and find him if you can. He’s not alone in this and I don’t want to see a good man torn down with loss and regret.”

She didn’t know if that was possible, finding him. “I’ll try,” she murmured, knowing as she said it that it was probably a lie.

In the distance, faint lights began to flash.

“That’s my cue,” she whispered, letting go of his hand. “Can you get this all cleared up, then? Wouldn’t do to have an Avenger on site with awkward questions to answer.”

“Sure, just remember, you owe the CIA one on this.”

“CIA knows where they can find me, too.” She shot him a half-smile, teasing. “Thanks for the assist. It was good to see you, Strickland.”

“Likewise, Romanoff.”

She turned on him, making her way in the growing dark and cold to the parking garage, nearly to the door before units made it on scene. She turned to glance back at it before charging the stairs up to the jet above, pretending for a moment that Clint was up there, waiting impatiently and giving her grief about ex-romances and her choice in men. She tried not to be disappointed when she arrived to a dark cockpit, by herself, more alone now than she had been even years ago when she had nothing at all.

She stood on the edge of the garage for a long time, watching the police clean up the mess she left behind, tears freezing to her lashes, unnoticed.
Stolen Hearts

Chapter Summary

In which Tony finds his heart has been stolen completely away from him.

Unlike her father, who preferred something of a more showy entrance, Morgan Stark came into the world with much less fanfare and far fewer fireworks. Well...mostly, fewer fireworks. Happy did faint the minute that Tony stepped out of Pepper’s private room with the tiny bundle of blankets, causing something of a stir in the waiting room, much to Rhodey’s disgust.

“I’ve seen him take on thugs as big as him and he’s passed out at that?”

Tony could only eye the crumpled figure with mild alarm. “He should have his blood pressure checked, you know. He’s not getting any younger.”

The nurses rushed to get his erstwhile head of security, sometimes driver, and one of his best friends up off the tiles so they could check the bump on his forehead, embarrassment putting color back in Happy’s cheeks as he tried to wave them off.

“Yeah, whatever, let me see her!” Rhodey couldn’t wipe the grin off his face if he tried, pulling back the soft blankets to the scrunched-up, little red face nestled inside. “God, she looks like neither of you.”

“I was rooting for Pepper in the gene pool, but we’ll see.” Tony stared down in awe at the most precious, delicate thing he had ever held in his entire life. “Seven pounds, three ounces, twenty inches long, and outside a bit of an unhappy squawk when she came into all of this, she’s been a quiet little miss.”

“You sure she’s your kid?” Rhodey’s smirk was only offset by the stars in his eyes as he stared down at her.

“Believe me, if that means I get a few more hours of sleep, I’m all in.”

Hours later, comfortably ensconced back home, he didn’t think he could sleep for the world. If he did, he might miss out on something. Morgan lay snuggled on his chest, snoring lightly with her little baby breaths, her frail little body wrapped up in snug newborn onesie and swaddled up like a burrito against the chill of the late winter sleet outside of their cabin. Pepper had passed out, finally, exhausted from producing a whole human being from out of her body. As an engineer, the magic of it stunned him. This little being, this product of his and Pepper’s DNA, so finely tuned and perfectly calibrated, had grown for nearly 10 months inside of her. Then through his beautiful, gorgeous, amazing wife’s strength of will, she got this precious creature into this world safe and whole. Tony couldn’t make a single suit without some sort of design flaw, some sort of piece to it that needed to be recalibrated and tweaked. He’d gone through more iterations than he felt comfortable admitting, and yet, there was Morgan, perfect in every way and she was breathtaking to behold. His wife did all this in one go!

“Just not fair, I tell you,” he sighed out loud, stroking a long fingers across one perfectly round, chubby cheek. Morgan’s little mouth moved, but she didn’t stir. She’d had a long day too, coming
into this world. Both his girls stunned him with their strength.

“\textquote Single Best Add to My Gene Pool...
when we think we are right. We try to dictate to everyone around us and we can sometimes rub people the wrong way."

He studied the sweet little face before him. “I’ve made categorical decisions that hurt people, even your mom...especially her. I can’t seem to help myself at times. I’m an asshole, not going to deny that, but I do try to do what is right, what is good. I think that is what lays at the heart of all of it, I keep trying, even when I fail at it. I guess that’s the mechanic in me, because nothing is perfect on the first attempt, you got to just...keep at it. It’s easy to be self-serving, to do things because you want to and to hell with the rest of the world, but it’s harder, so, so, so much harder to do what is right for all of them. But that’s what it means to be a hero, you know, to put all that aside and to do what’s best for everyone. Not that you ever need to be a hero. Frankly, if I could keep you bundled up here for the rest of my life, I would, but you’d likely take to that kicking and screaming.”

Morgan sighed then, a tiny, delicate baby sigh, and his soul shattered with the sound.

Dear God, why had no one ever warned him of this eventuality, the fact that out of nowhere these little beings could just show up and take your heart completely like this? He had spent decades avoiding any emotional entanglements until Pepper came along and he found she had crept into his life so subtly that he couldn’t survive without her presence in it. Now there was this little person who had come along and in the course of hours had taken what remained of his broken and patched up heart and clutched it in her tiny, little baby fingers. What in the hell was he supposed to do with that?

“Know, your grandfather, my old man, he was a pretty smart and famous guy. Made all these inventions to save the world, but he once told me that the greatest creation he ever had was me. As much as I wanted - needed - to hear that sentiment, I couldn’t imagine that ever coming out of Howard Stark. But now, I get it. I’ve made so many things of mass destruction, so many suits that could do any number of things, but in the end, all of it pales in comparison to you. Someday, my hope is that you'll change the world, that you’ll do it different and better than I did. But, if you just choose to do something quiet and boring with your life, I think I’ll be just as happy with that.”

Out of the growing darkness, Pepper’s voice sounded, quiet and amused. “I don’t think your daughter could ever just do something ‘quiet’.”

He craned his neck to look backwards at her as she puttered, slowly, over to the couch. “Hey, baby! You didn’t sleep long.”

“I have a feeling she’ll want feeding soon. Besides, as tired as I am I just want to sit and stare at her.” She crept to the end of the couch, groaning slightly with the physical strain of the day, curling into the cushions. She smiled as she watched the pair of them.

“How much of my one-on-one, frank discussion with my daughter did you overhear, might I ask?”

“Enough to know that this little girl is going to be the luckiest damn woman in the entire world to have you as her dad.”

“Well, I am pretty handy with a bicycle and I do know my way around a grilled cheese sandwich.”

Pepper only chuckled, eyes shining in the growing twilight. “I’m not going to lie, I am pretty afraid of what we’ve gotten ourselves into. I mean, it was one thing when it was just you and me and now we have a whole human being we are responsible for. I mean, we weren’t so great at being responsible with just us.”

“I don’t know, you run a whole company, I think that by default makes you the responsible parent.”
“Sure, dump that all on me.”

“Well, let’s look at personal history and see where this plays out. I couldn’t be left alone with a goldfish.”

“I know.” She sighed, laughing, the long years between them inuring her against the worst of his tendencies. “What in the hell did you ever do before I came along?”

“I don’t know, honest to God and I wouldn’t know what to do if you weren’t here. Probably either go nuts or give up in defeat.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true, though.” He rubbed a hand along Morgan’s small back. “I’m not going to lie, Danvers hauling our asses through space, I kept wondering what I would do if I got down on the other side and you weren’t here.”

“But I was, and I’m here, and we got lucky.”

“Yes, we did.” He tried not to think of Peter and his dust coating his face and hands, the way his heart broke as the boy dissolved in his grasp. Luckier than some, but still not unscathed, Peter would have loved Morgan.

“How scared are you about all this?” Pepper blinked slowly at the tiny figure curled against his chest, anxiety writ along with extreme exhaustion on her face. “I mean, I thought it was hard putting you back together again, but raising a child, changing diapers, soothing nightmares, bandaging skinned knees, poop and vomit, I don’t know.”

“And that’s the easy stuff. Wait till she’s coming home from school after some fight with some other kid.”

“Or when she comes home with a boyfriend?”

Tony’s brain literally seized at that. “I wonder if I can make a functioning chastity belt.”

“Do you even know how sexist that sounds?”

“And I remember being a young man of a certain age around young, pretty, rich girls.”

“By ‘certain age’ you mean thirty-eight?”

That caused mild panic as he thought about it. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“I’m just saying you might not want to cast too many stones. Also, don’t be that dad.”

He knew she was right. Pepper usually was. “Fine, but I do reserve the right to greet any future boyfriends or girlfriends with an Iron Man suit, that’s all.”

“Ahh, the toxic masculinity!”

“Let me have a little bit of fun.”

“Let’s talk more when she gets a little older, okay? Right now, she’s not even a day old.”

“Fine,” he sighed, trying to imagine this tiny being ever being old enough to turn his already graying
hair even more so. Would she be the antithesis of himself, a quiet, reserved girl who followed
the rules and despised of her father and his terrible dad jokes, of which he was certain to excel at?
Would she be more like him, too smart for her own good, causing them both heartache? He rather
hoped she would end up somewhere in the middle, with his brains and Pepper’s common sense, less
self-serving and selfish than himself, willing to stand up for those who can’t.

“You think we’ll be okay parents?”

Tony shrugged. “I think that’s the universal question, right. They don’t make these things with
manuals. All we can do is hope for the best? Just, take whatever comes our way and pray she doesn’t
end up in years of therapy for it. Even then, I’m not so sure that still won’t happen.”

“I’ll just vote for her not ever making it on the cover a tabloid newspaper before she’s twenty-one,”
Pepper offered blandly.

“I would like you to know, most of those headlines were grossly overblown and I looked damn good
in a few of those pictures. That was back when I was young, pretty, and somewhat emo.”

“You were very pretty, honey.” Pepper reached across to tousle his hair. “Still are.”

“Bet you say that to all the boys,” he smiled, leaning into her hand. The action shifted him ever so
slightly, causing the small lump of Morgan to move and not in a way she found pleasant. Her little,
wrinkled face twisted into the sweetest of frowns as Tony recognized a full on squall brewing.

“I think that it’s time for Momma to get involved here.” He glanced to Pepper, perhaps with a hint of
desperation. Not that she was much better, but at least she did take pity on him and scooped up their
daughter with a coo. She gathered herself to attempt a feeding, Morgan’s first since being released
from the birth center, a soppy smile on his face as he watched.

“So, what do we want for a middle name?” They had yet to decide on one and it had been up for
debate for some time.

“I still like Maria,” she murmured, sighing as the hungry Morgan finally latched onto a nipple.

“Not with a first name Morgan, too many M’s. What about Virginia?”

The thoroughly disgusted look told him what Pepper thought about that.

“I always liked your name,” he teased, knowing it would only irritate her, which is why he did it.

“It’s old-fashioned, like something for a maiden aunt!”

“I hate to break it to you, but given that’s your child you are feeding at the moment, I think those
maiden days are sadly over for you.”

He delighted in her glare, but had already moved on to other names. “Not a lot of Stark women in
the family to draw from. How about the Potts side? What about your mom’s name?”

“No,” Pepper was quick to shoot that down. “Maybe Ana? A nod to the Jarvises?”

“Then you get ‘Morgana’ and that’s a bit Arthurian.” He considered, thinking through all the names
in the family, through his extended family, then through the family he had built for himself, and the
idea struck him as so obvious he almost kicked himself for not thinking of it earlier.

“Harriett.” He said the name, rolling it around on his tongue. It had promise.
“Harriett?” Pepper clearly didn’t think so.

“Yeah, Harriett. Think about it.”

She did. When it occurred to her, a slow smile spread, as she resolved herself to the idea.

“Harriett, then. I don’t love it, but I do think it’s sweet.”

“I knew you’d approve.” He threw himself up to cross to his girls, leaning in to brush her head with his lips before stroking a finger on the back of his nursing daughter’s head. “Morgan Harriett Stark. It has a ring to it.”

“It certainly does,” Pepper replied, warming to the notion.

So it was that the next day, when Happy came by, a bandage on his head, embarrassed and fumbling as he apologized for the day before, Tony merely sat him down on the couch and quietly placed the bundle in his arms. Happy stared at the small person he held, terrified, as if she were a fragile timebomb made of glass.

“Thought you might like to finally meet her, seeing as she’s your goddaughter, Harold Hogan.”

Happy couldn’t stop crying for an hour, and for that alone his choice was worth it.
He had hoped to avoid the day all together, perhaps go camping in the mountains, spend a few weeks getting his head together. The fragmented bits of his emotional restraint had scattered and broken to the winds, like the ashes of Bucky and Sam. He’d been too tired, busy, heartbroken to manage. The world was falling apart at the seams, as it seemed it always was. There was another crisis of the week out there; a drug cartel running rampant in Mexico, a gang in Hong Kong, a paramilitary group in Montana, everyone testing the new world order now there seemed to be less of it. It was everything he and Natasha and Sam had been doing on the run for years, except there was more of it and less of them.

He was so very tired.

When Natasha had approached him with the visit, he had nearly said no, eager to avoid it, to flee from the horrific truth of their failure, but he didn’t. He couldn’t. He had never backed down from a fight once in his life, and he wasn’t about to start doing it now, he supposed. He thought of Peggy, then, of the long ago conversation in that car on their way to Brooklyn. Running away and hiding had never really been his style.

So he’d agreed to go to San Francisco.

“I wouldn’t have asked you if it wasn’t important.” Natasha rarely asked for anything at all and that alone was almost reason enough for Steve to say yes. Of all the thousands of such memorials occurring all over the world, even in New York, this was the only one she’d insisted on.

“Why this one?”

She pulled up a picture on her phone, a sweet faced preteen girl, with dark hair and eyes. “She asked us.”

“She’s a cute kid,” Steve acknowledged, uncomprehending.

“She’s Scott’s daughter, Cassie Lang.”

“She asked for us?” That hit his gut far more than he liked. In the aftermath of Thanos’ snap, he had of course asked Natasha to check in on her and make sure she and her mother, who had also survived, were all right, but he’d given little thought to either in the year since. In all the chaos, Scott’s daughter had slipped off his radar, a piece of a man he had barely gotten to know, but who had risked everything, including his family, to help him out in his effort to clear Bucky’s name. He should have done more for her.

Natasha clicked off the image, slipping the phone into her pocket. “It’s been a hard year for her, obviously. Lost her dad, his girlfriend, her step-father. Her mother called and said it would mean a lot to her to see the Avengers come and remember her father.”

The gentle rebuke in Natasha’s frank expression did nothing for his growing sense of self-
recrimination. “We didn’t know he had a record when Sam recruited him. I would never have put him in that much danger if I had known.”

“Lang made his own choices, Rogers, and he chose to follow Captain America, same as I did.” She smiled softly. “Besides, it gave him two years with his daughter that he didn’t have before. She got that at least before everything went to shit.”

For once it was Natasha putting the bright spin on things. “I think I’m rubbing off on you, Romanoff.”

“What do you mean? I’m always bright and sunny!”

The crowds gathered for the commemoration and groundbreaking were somber. Despite the fact it was late spring, the fog that wreathed the bay in early morning lingered, a gray mist that brought a chill to the air as people huddled close to one another in the damp. Glad for his jacket, Steve shrugged deeper into it, pulling his hat down as he listened to first one speaker, then another discussing how despite their losses, despite their heartbreak, they would persevere and they would not let the human spirit be extinguished. Each of these platitudes earned a round of applause from the crowd, muted, but determined in their own way. He understood the sentiment well, that need to keep going forward even when everything in you doesn’t want to. How many times in his life had he had to do it?

Natasha had been staring at her phone, he guessed texting Cassie’s mother. “They are on the other side of the crowd, said to look for a pink umbrella and a girl in a Giants hat.”

They wandered around the expansive crowd, spread across the swath of green grass under the shadow of the mist-shrouded Golden Gate Bridge, it’s red paint just visible in the gloom. They had gathered there, young and old, rich and poor, of all races and faiths, it seemed, judging from the various symbols he saw there. Many came bearing mementos of lost loved ones, pictures in frames or on t-shirts, signs with names, trinkets and candles. Some stood alone, others stood in groups of supporters, huddled tightly together in grief. Here and there, murmured prayers in a variety of different tongues could be heard, some he recognized from his own youth, others were foreign to him, and yet in their own way familiar in their aching sadness. Tears flowed down so many faces, to many to count. He could drown in a sea of those tears. They’d failed all of them and he had no way of making it right.

They found Cassie and her mother on the outskirts of the crowd on the far west side, holding hands under a large, pink polka-dot umbrella. The woman had on a warm jacket against the chill, the girl a black baseball cap with a stylized orange “SF” on the crown. Caught up in the speeches on stage, the pair didn’t notice them until Natasha called out to get their attention. “Mrs. Paxton?”

The blonde woman turned, blinking, till she recognized them, or at least Natasha, a broad, nervous smile lighting up the somber expression. “Ms. Romanoff, I presume.”

“Yes,” she took the woman’s hand. “We spoke on the phone.”

“Yes! It’s Maggie, by the way.”

“Natasha.” She turned to gesture to Steve, but Maggie was already diving in to take his hand.

“No introductions needed with you, I believe, Captain.”

Steve could only smile at the other woman’s enthusiasm. It reminded him of Lang. “Steve is just fine.”
Maggie turned to the quiet girl behind her, blinking at them both. “This is Cassie!”

The girl waved, limply, eyeing them both with a sullen expression that was at odds with her mother’s more hopeful enthusiasm. Natasha cut a sideways glance to him and he nodded. They knew that look, had seen it on countless kids who had been caught in tragedy, unable to process the losses around them. Poor kid was one of what he was sure were many children trying to wrap their heads around the last year of their lives.

“Cassie, say hello.” Maggie coaxed in that gentle way that begged her daughter to engage in something.

The girl looked up at her, her chin jutting sullenly, before turning back to them. “Hi.”

Maggie’s shoulders slumped, defeat rising briefly in her now brittle smile. “It’s been a hard year for everyone.”

“We know.” Natasha was all empathy and warmth, a trait she rarely ever turned on in public, and it never ceased to amaze Steve she had that in her. When he had first met her on the deck of the helicarrier years before she’d been sarcastic, acerbic even, but never warm. He hadn’t seen that, really, until after the events of the fall of SHIELD. That loss had opened her up in ways he hadn’t expected. Now, she was the one serving as the face of caring and concern for the team as the rest of them huddled in their own existential angst.

Maggie knew none of this as she seemed to melt underneath the concern. Tears welled as she nodded, stroking a hand across her daughter’s hunched shoulders. “I know we aren’t the only ones. God, you all, I don’t know how you keep it together!”

“It’s our job,” Steve heard himself say with a small smile. That caused the sullen girl to perk up just a bit. Natasha had caught that too. She cast a glance at him again, that silent communication they had developed over long years working side-by-side. He nodded as she maneuvered herself in Maggie’s space, taking the other woman’s hand again.

“Scott wasn’t a member of our team for long, but he was a big part of our investigation into the Berlin bombing and we wanted to help with you all a little bit. The Stark Foundation has agreed to help cover the cost of Cassie’s education through college and beyond if she’s interested.”

The name “Stark” dropped by Natasha had the effect of picking the little girl right out of her stupor and not in a good way. Her eyes cut to slivers as she glared up at Natasha, her expression screwed up mutinously. “Mr. Pym says you can never trust a Stark and I am not about to! You can keep your money!”

Maggie looked as if she either wished lightning to strike her right at that moment or the ground to open up beneath her out of sheer, horrified embarrassment. “Cassandra Lang!”

“Starks are thieves and liars and they are why my dad had to wear an ankle bracelet for two years and maybe not even that if that jackass had his own way!”

“Cassie!”

“Starks are thieves and liars and they are why my dad had to wear an ankle bracelet for two years and maybe not even that if that jackass had his own way!”

Fairly shouting, tears in her eyes, she glared up at her mother before taking off on a full on sprint across the grass. Maggie made to run after her, but Natasha grabbed her arm before she could,
instead looking to Steve who had already tracked where the girl was off to. He took off after her, catching up to her easily before she could make it to the sea of cars where he guessed her mother had parked earlier in the day.

“Cassie, hold up!” He reached a hand for her shoulder and she spun around, swinging at him. He’d had far too much practice to not be able to defend himself, and her tiny fist connected with his hand, lightening fast in it’s block. He grasped it gently, her streaming eyes going wide as he did it. It was enough to shock her into stillness as she stared first at her hand, then up at him, before looking down at her fist enveloped in his long fingers.

“Dad always said you were the best Avenger,” she whispered, somewhat awed as Steve finally let her go. He couldn’t help the small smile that crept up his face at the amazed expression.

“I don’t know about best Avenger and certainly not the strongest. The Hulk beats us all out there.”

“I guess if you are a giant, green, punching machine you have to be good at something.”

“When he isn’t a green giant, he’s one of the smartest men in the world.”

She nodded, taking this in as her expression suddenly melted into apology and shame. “I’m sorry I yelled at you back there. That wasn’t fair.”

“I’m not offended.” He scanned the area they stood near, spying a bench along a concrete walkway, not far away. “Care to sit and maybe chat while your mom and Natasha talk?”

“Sure.” She glanced in the direction of her mother, who was just barely visible in the distance with her pink umbrella. He sauntered to the bench, damp with mist, wiping it down with a handkerchief before offering it to Cassie to settle on.

“A hard day for you, huh?” He nodded to the gathering and all the people there.

“Yeah.” It was all she said as she swung her sneakers in the wet grass, leaning forward with her hands on the edge of the bench.

“It’s a hard day for me too.” All the people there, all with someone they had loved and lost. “Reminds me of how I failed, how all of us failed.”

The girl hadn’t expected to hear that. “How did you fail?”

“Trying to stop the guy who did this.”

“Thanos?” That name had gotten around the world in the last year.

“Yeah,” he sighed, the memory of the flash of light and the rumble of thunder still just as potent as it had been the year before. “Yeah, we tried to stop him and couldn’t. He beat us. We lost, and because we lost, so did everyone else.”

Bucky...Sam...Wanda...Vision...T’Challa...the Bartons…

Cassie reached a hand over and wrapped it around his. “Like my Mom says, you can’t win at everything. And you tried, right? That’s what superheroes do!”

Such simple words. They plucked at something aching inside of him as he felt his eyes sting and burn, his throat swell around the emotions bubbling up. He nodded, screwing up against the tears he hadn’t expected, pulled out by a little girl who he had come to comfort. How did this get reversed?
Cassie was clearly wise beyond her years as she sat quietly for a long moment, giving him time to pull himself together as she sighed, a world weary sound out of a girl not yet even in junior high. Perhaps this year had forced her to grow up, like it had so many other kids in the world.

“You know,” she finally said, murmuring into the stillness. “My Dad always bragged about getting to work with you, not anyone else, just you. He looked up to you.”

He’d kind of gathered that by the way the man had carried on in their first meeting. “He was a good man to work with.”

“He was probably a dork, wasn’t he?” There was the long suffering expression of a preteen girl, already aware her father was less than "cool". Steve couldn’t help the wet chuckle that broke out, nodding ruefully at her.

“He was, I have to admit, but not so different than a lot of us at one time or the other. Believe it or not, there was a time when I wasn’t able to talk to girls like you.”

“Really?” She frowned, looking him up and down. “Why?”

“Too shy,” he admitted, flushing somewhat despite himself. “I was a sickly kid, puny and scrawny. I was the type of kid that would get picked on in your school.”

That resonated with her. “There is a boy, Justin Cho, he’s like that. He has to use an inhaler and he can’t see without glasses so thick they slide down his face.”

“Yeah, well, that was me, minus the glasses. I had all of it and I didn’t talk to other people because they didn’t even look at me. No one paid any attention.”

“That seems sad. Didn’t you have any friends?”

“Sure! Bucky, he was my best friend, my brother.” He tried not to think of him bursting into a cloud of ash so fine it didn’t even make a sound when he disappeared. “And I had my Mom and Bucky’s family. I wasn’t totally by myself. Outside of that, I was really kind of a dork too.”

This seemed to relieve the girl somewhat. “So, you don’t have to be cool and beautiful to be a superhero?”

“No,” he laughed, shaking his head. “Some of the bravest people I knew weren’t precisely ‘cool’ or even beautiful, but they had big hearts, ones that wanted to do good, to do what’s right?”

“Even Iron Man?” She sounded dubious at that. He was curious just what this Mr. Pym had told her about Starks and why she disliked them so.

“Even Tony Stark. He’s perhaps one of the best men I know.”

“Even though he arrested Dad?”

“Well, there was a reason for that.” He didn’t know how much of the complexities of the Sokovia Accords she understood. “He was doing what he thought was right, just like your dad was.”

“How come every time my dad wanted to do something right he got arrested for it?”

That was a good question indeed. “I don’t know. I just know that we all disagreed on what right was. That doesn’t make Tony a bad man.”

“He turned on you and you still say that?”
“Well, he didn’t turn on me, we just disagreed. That happens sometimes with relationships.”

“Like my parents.”

“Something like that.”

She nodded, sighing as she slumped back, pensive once more. “I miss him. I miss Jim. I miss Hope. I just want them to come back.”

“Me too.” He sighed, wanting them all back very much. Grasping for something, anything other than sadness to talk about, he spied her black and orange Giants baseball cap, reaching over to tip it forward and study it with a critical eye. “I see your a fan of that team.”

That brought a giggle out of her as she pushed the bill back up out of her eyes. “You mean the best team?”

“If by best at losing team, sure.” He smirked as her eyes lit up in challenge. “Seriously, no accounting for taste here.”

“I suppose you like those guys down south?”

“When I was your age, your team was in New York and that ‘team down south’ was my hometown Brooklyn Dodgers. We hated each other then and we hate each other now.”

“You remember them in New York?” The very idea seemed to boggle her mind and well it should as it was before her father was even born.

“I remember watching them play at Ebbets Field. Bucky and I would go sometimes if we could scrounge up ticket money, go sit in the cheap seats.” If he closed his eyes and thought hard enough, he could still remember the smell of cheap, stale beer and cigar smoke, the green of the grass and brown of the dirt, and the crack of the ball against the bat ringing in the thick, summer air. “We didn’t have a lot of money then. It was the Great Depression and no one had money, but we would go when we could. They went through a dry spell there, didn’t win the pennant again till right before the war. I remember Bucky and I listened to that game on the radio and when they pulled it off Brooklyn lit up like it was the Fourth of July, except it was the middle of the day.”

She stared at him with impossibly wide eyes, as if he’d been describing the creation of the world. “Wow! You remember that?”

“Yeah! I’m kind of old.”

“Well, yeah, but still, I don’t know anyone who remembers all the way back then.” She shook her head, pulling of her hat as she did, regarding it fondly. “My step-dad, Jim, he got it for me. He’d take me to games all the time, ever since I was little. When Dad got out of jail the first time, he’d go with us sometimes too, after he and Jim got to be friends. Mom would sometimes come along, sometimes Hope would. It was nice. We’d all go as a family. I don’t know if I like baseball so much as I liked the idea of us doing something together, being a family, even if we were a weird family. It was nice having all of them together, like having two moms and two dads. Now they’re all gone and it’s just me and Mom. All I got for it is this stupid hat. There’s not even baseball anymore.”

That he understood all too well. He reached into his pocket for the ever present compass he kept there. “So, my dad died before I was born. He fought in World War I, died fighting. I never got to meet him, but when I was old enough, my mom gave me this.”

He passed it over to her to study, the beat up metal, scratched and scuffed. “It’s 100 years old now,
“so be gentle with it.”

“Really?” She took it, gingerly opening it to stare inside at the artifact of his youth. “What is it?”

“It’s a compass. Helps you tell where you are going?”

“Like a GPS?”

He tried not to smile at her very modern equivalency to the more ancient technology. “Very much like it, only it doesn’t need a battery and doesn’t have a voice telling you where to go.”

Cassie looked as if he might as well have handed her an alien object. “Wow! I think my grandpa might have had one of these!”

“Used to be a lot of people did. My father had it when he went to war and they sent it back to my mother in his footlocker. I had it when I went off to war, too.”

She nodded, carefully touching a finger to the inside of the case, to the faded and yellowing picture pasted inside. “Is this your mother?”

“No,” he laughed, unable to help the tender smile. “That was a woman I fell in love with. Her name was Margaret Carter.”

“Just like my mom!” She beamed at that.

“Yeah, except mine went by Peggy.”

“Oh, like in Hamilton! Angelica, Eliza and Peggy!”

He at least was culturally aware enough to know the reference to the play. “Something like that. We met during the war. She was an agent for the SSR, fought beside me.”

“So, she was a superhero too?”

He tried to imagine what Peggy would have said to that. “She was one of the first ones.”

“I think there should be more girl ones. I mean, guys are fine and all, but women can be heroes too. That’s what my friend Anneliese says, anyway.”

“I think Annelise is right.”

“I want to grow up to be a superhero, like my Dad. Maybe be an Avenger.”

With that determined look on her face, so reminiscent of the woman he loved and lost, he had a feeling Cassie Lang might just be successful in her quest. “Well, if I’m still around then, I’ll make sure to save you a spot.”

“Really?” This seemed to please her greatly. “I want to study computers, like my Dad. The Avengers always need people smart like that.”

Here, Steve saw the segue to compromise in regards to the conversation Maggie was likely having with Natasha at the moment. “You know, to do that, you have to go to college and that’s expensive.”

He could sense Cassie knew where this was going to. “Yeah. I mean, Mom has some money from Jim and Dad, but somewhere good means I’ll need scholarships.”
“Or it could mean taking the money that Mr. Stark is offering you for your education.”

She frowned, the hint of a petulant pout forming. “Do I have to?”

Steve chuckled, shaking his head. He had a feeling Scott had been a sucker for this child and her wiles when he had been alive and he almost felt sorry for him. “Well, like you said, the Avengers can use someone good at that, and sometimes being a hero means being the bigger person and learning to accept things graciously.”

Her eye roll and sigh spoke volumes. “I guess! I don’t have to like it, though, do I?”

“Nope.” He tried hard not to laugh outright.

“Fine, but I sure hope wherever Mr. Pym is he’s not going to strike me down with something.”

Steve wasn’t sure who this Mr. Pym was or why he had a beef with the Starks, but he chose to nod sagely. “I think your dad would be proud you are doing the right thing.”

“I hope so.” She didn’t sound so sure. “All I ever wanted to do was be like him, try to do good things for people. You know that’s why he got sent to jail, right?”

“I’d heard that.”

She sighed, staring out at the bridge beyond. “Will I ever stop missing him?”

Wasn’t that the million dollar question everyone here today was asking?

“No,” he answered honestly. “You won’t and you shouldn’t. I still miss my mom and she’s been gone for a long, long time. I miss my friends. I miss Peggy. I think that’s normal to miss them. If we stopped missing them, I don’t know, I guess it would mean we stopped caring and I don’t want to stop doing that.”

“Me either.”

“But in missing them the pain does get a little less as we go along, I guess. We get up, we go to work or school, we keep going even when we don’t want to, and things slowly start to get better, and maybe we don’t think about them every minute of every day. Maybe we think about them just once a day, or once a week. Maybe when we think about them, we remember the funny things or the happy things and not how sad we are they are gone. We never stop missing them, but it does get easier as time goes on.”

“Yeah,” she murmured, with that air of all soon-to-be teenagers who didn’t like the answer they got from adults but realized they weren’t going to get a better one. “I wish it was easier now.”

“Me too.”

In the distance he could see Maggie and Natasha begin to cross the expanse towards them.

“Thank you, Cap.” He turned in surprise at Cassie calling him by his team name, something she must have gotten off Scott. “I see why you were my dad’s hero.”

That statement both ached to hear and warmed him at the same time. “I appreciate that. Your dad was a good man. I hope he is your hero.”

“He is.”
“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” Natasha’s cheerful statement was couched in the coded language of checking in with him. He glanced up and nodded as she smiled down at Cassie. “Been chatting with your mom about things. You doing okay?”

“Sure,” Cassie replied, in a considerably better mood than when she had run off. “Mom, Cap says I can be an Avenger someday when I grow up, like Dad.”

“Oh, really? Did he say you had to go to college first?”

“Yes!” She drawled, throwing her hands in the air. “I said I’d do college and I said I’d take the stupid Stark money to go. Besides, you have to be smart to be an Avenger!”

“Ehh, mostly,” Natasha muttered through a smile.

“Smarter than the average person, at least,” Steve shot her a pointed look. Natasha was completely unrepentant. “It also means sticking with your Mom. Things are hard right now in the world. She’ll need you to help her get through.”

“What in the world would I do without you around?” Maggie’s smile was bright, but her words were brittle. “I mean, who else am I going to make peanut butter and banana fried sandwiches for?”

“True, I don’t know how you’d survive without me.” Cassie hopped up, shoving her hands in her hoodie as she adjusted her cap on her head.

“Me either.” Maggie hugged her daughter tightly. “Let’s head home. Make you a sandwich? We can watch stupid movies in our jammies for the rest of the day?”

“Sounds like a plan!” Cassie turned to Steve where he sat, flinging her arms impulsively around him, hugging his neck tightly. “Thanks, Cap!”

He wrapped his own arms around her, briefly. “Of course!”

She pulled back, holding out his compass gently as he took it back, an impish grin on her face. “The Dodgers still suck.”

“Oh, big talk there!”

“Well, you know, Giants.” She smirked as she tipped her cap, then shook Natasha’s hand. “It was cool meeting you.”

“Thanks.” Natasha was clearly bemused, considering the fact she hadn’t really talked to the girl.

“Ready to go, Peanut?”

“Sure.” She wrapped an arm around her mother’s and the pair wandered off to the cars. Steve could hear her voice carrying, telling Maggie that Captain America’s girlfriend had the same name she did.

“Well, you made an impression.”

He knew Natasha was going to tease him. “I’m good with kids, always have been.”

“I know. It’s why I let you handle her.” She settled in the spot Cassie vacated. “Figured you needed to pull out the good, old USO charm.”
“Ehh, trash talked baseball.”

“Or, you know, that.” She shook her head, still baffled by the sport that Steve and Clint could discuss for hours. “Sometimes, it’s the little things.”

“She’s a kid who misses her family. I think all of us get that.”

“Especially you,” she pointed out, gently.

“Yeah, especially me.”

Natasha nudged him with her shoulder, her silent thank you for reaching out to Cassie. They sat in companionable silence for long moments, the sounds of continued speeches in the distance. Here and there attendees drifted off from the crowd, some to sit alone, others to wander, still others to leave. No one noticed the two Avengers sitting on the bench.

“So what was her beef with Stark’s money,” Natasha finally asked.

“I asked. She said it had something to do with a ‘Mr. Pym’. Guess he didn’t like Starks. Know anything about him?”

“Hank Pym?”

“Maybe, she didn’t give a first name.”

“That’s a blast from the past. Hank Pym used to work at SHIELD. He was a research scientist working with ants, I think. I can’t be sure. Anyway, he had some huge fight with Howard Stark, left SHIELD, went off to start his own company. His daughter was dating Scott Lang.”

“What was the fight about?”

“Who knows? Comparing ego size? Maybe Howard’s was bigger?”

Steve snorted at Natasha’s obvious ploy to get a laugh out of him. “Whatever the case, I talked her down. She wants to be an Avenger one day, told her she needed to get her education and that seemed to work.”

“Conflict resolution by means of bribery. I think I’m rubbing off on you, Rogers.”

“What, learning how to cut a deal and not beat my head against a wall ad nauseam?”

“Sometimes it’s the stick and carrot. For her, it’s the carrot of being an Avenger. Besides, I think it is the least we can do for Scott, making sure his daughter is taken care of in this crazy world. I have a feeling it’s going to need her, sooner or later.”

“Me too.”

“Glad you came?”

He had suspected Natasha had been trying to drag him out of hiding when she asked him to come with her. “Yeah, I am. It felt good, just...talking with her, hearing her out, connecting in shared grief.”

“See, you don’t have to be alone, the old man hermiting himself away in Brooklyn with his paints.”

“I can’t be a tortured artist?”
Her dubious expression made him laugh. “You are far too cheerful to ever be a tortured artist.”

“Fair,” he chuckled, lightly. “Sam used to run support groups for the VA, you know, for people coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. He was good at it.”

“Sam had a big heart, kind of like you.”

“Yeah. I was thinking of maybe trying to do the same thing. Take some online classes to get certified, maybe run a group for people like this, who lost everything to Thanos.”

Judging from the sly smile she shot at him, he guessed that she’d been thinking the same thing. “I think that’s a brilliant idea. I think there’s a lot of people who could use your help. And you get what they are going through better than anyone else I know.”

“What, the waking up to find everyone I knew and loved gone?”

“Pretty much. You get it, that loss, that pain of trying to figure out how to move forward when you’ve lost it all. People need that. Sure, it’s not running around in tights with show girls to drum up morale, but smaller doesn’t mean it’s any less important.”

“True. Also, I really hated those tights, like a lot.”

“What? I think they were kind of cute.”

“They were itchy and I looked stupid in them.”

“Could always show some support group your old films. I’m sure that would cheer them right up.”

“You are a horrible person, Romanoff.”

“I know, but you put up with me.” She stood, tugging on the bottom of her jacket and holding a hand out to pull him up. “Hey, I think we can even pull up your old show tune, listen to it on the ride home.”

“How far is the walk back home across the country?”

“Far even for you.” She snickered, strolling slowly beside him back to where they had set the jet down. “We’re here for a bit, though. Could go into the city, find some good Chinese, just...spend a day not at home brooding on our failures. Figuring out how it is we keep moving forward.”

“What if that’s all you know how to do?”

“Then, we commiserate in that and you buy a girl a drink since it doesn’t affect you. They have a good sized Russian community here. They get the good vodka here.”

He didn’t need to be certified like Sam to read what she was getting at. He’d spent enough time with Natasha to know when she didn’t want to be alone, especially not on a day like today. The truth be told, he didn’t want to be alone, either.

“Chinese?”

She grinned. “I know a place or five. What are you feeling in the mood for?”

“How adventurous are we talking? Remember, I’m a very old man.”

“For that you’re getting Sichuan and no complaints.”
“What a shit hole!” Nebula could smell the sleaze from Contraxia before they even hit the atmosphere.

“Hey, it’s a nice shit hole!” Rocket barely looked up from the ship’s monitors as he muttered that.

“It’s a cold shit hole,” she retorted, glaring down below. “And a shit hole is a shit hole, no matter how many brothels or gambling dens you put in there.”

“Brothels do nothing for me, but a good card game…”

“Kraglin better be here.” She glowered down at the surface. Personally, she wasn’t a fan of Rocket’s plan. She never liked the Ravagers, had thought they were little better than over-glorified pirates, but they had few choices. Danvers hadn’t been wrong, things were getting bad in the universe, worse even than she had expected. Their last connection with Romanoff had been months ago as they got caught up on the far edges of the Nova Empire in a series of riots that broke out after regular shipments were delayed in getting there with needed food stores. She’d held the worst offenders at bay while Rocket had made runs back and forth on the Benatar, recruiting those he could to get food to the beleaguered planets. It wasn’t enough to last, not without a fleet dedicated to the purpose and that was where Kraglin had come in.

“He’ll be there, I told him if he wasn’t that debt of yours comes due.”

Nebula nodded in approval. “Should teach him not to cheat at cards.”

“Remind me never to play any competitive games with you.”

“Stark survived three weeks of his paper football with me without incident.”

“Yeah, how did he not end up dead?”

Nebula wanted to be insulted but merely found herself irritated. “Just land this thing and let’s get this over with. We haven’t even stepped out of the ship and I already need a shower.”

Contraxia was an outpost, a cold, ice cube of a planet that no one wanted to be a part of save the whores and gamblers who had come there to set up shop far away from Novan, Kree or Sovereign influences. It had only one main settlement, and that didn’t have a name she knew of. It wasn’t even really a settlement in the strictest sense as much as it was a collection of bordellos, bars, gaming dens, and so-called ‘spas’ where various Ravager clans all came to spend their ill-gotten gains and get drunk before hiring out a love bot for whatever pleasure they liked best. It existed mostly because the Ravagers and their ilk wanted a place like it to exist. That it would survive her father and his cullings while so many other planets were dying seemed utterly unfair in the grand scheme of things in the universe.

“Where did he say he would be?”
“Zentradi’s Hand, the gambling hole on the edge of town.” He pointed through the main shield down below to a ramshackle hut on the edges of what passed for civilization in this dump, with a single, brightly lit sign, garishly proclaiming it had the best games for the most money in the sector. A nice sentiment, she supposed, but considering most Ravagers couldn’t read, it defeated the purpose as none of them knew the difference.

The Benatar landed in a clearing not far from the building, ice melting in its wake. The few who ventured out this far in the cold turned to stare at it as it landed, but few of them paid that much attention. Ravagers kept to themselves when they weren’t busy punching each other in the face. Her father had considered them worse than useless, too ignorant to make into pawns, too unreasonable to sway with anything other than money, too greedy to be relied on. Whatever Thanos and his other sentiments were, she at least agreed with him on that. Still, they had a strange sense of honor, for all their stupidity, and Kraglin had more of it than most. He could be useful.

“I need some Xandarian ale, an entire pitcher of it.” Rocket wandered to the armory, slinging on his favorites with practiced ease. Even when he was at his most comfortable he tended to go in armed enough to take on a Kree battalion.

“Last time I let you get a pitcher of anything you shot up the bar and nearly had the authorities on us.”

“That was that one time!”

“That was the third time you did it. You started crying over the tree and you threatened to put a laser through someone’s eye.”

“Which is a perfectly natural reaction to grief or so I heard on that Terran talk show.”

“They were talking about reactions of violence.”

“See, perfectly normal reaction!”

Speaking of idiots…

Rocket continued. “Anyway, Kraglin’s too stupid to get on my bad side. It’s the rest of the assholes I worry about. Some of them are all right, I guess, the rest, we send them in there to do a good deed and they’ll come out lining their pockets for it.”

“And why should they listen to us?”

“They likely won’t, which is what the guns are for.”

Days like these were when Nebula found herself missing Gamora more than words could say. The snow beneath the gangplank crunched and squelched as they marched down it into the biting cold. From inside the circular, round pile of building material and metal sheets steam rose from exhaust vents. They marched inside, into the dimly lit entrance, just as the smell of spilled alcohol, unwashed bodies, and fluids she couldn’t and didn’t want to identify rose up to slam her senses, nearly choking her as she stared around the dark, dingy interior.

“Ahh, smells better than the last time I was in here. Must have cleaned.”

She only stared down at the rodent, but he ignored her, sauntering through the tables filled with gamblers and booths of drinkers, up to the bar where a Sneeper tended, looking bored as they watched some program on a screen on the far wall.
“Hey, looking for Kraglin Obfonteri. You seen him?”

The Sneeper shrugged and pointed to a back room.

“Right.” Rocket fished in his pocket for a credit. “Bottle of the best Xandarian stuff this will buy before I go back there.”

Nebula knew what the raccoon plus alcohol usually added up to. “What did I say about not shooting up the place?”

“I didn’t say it was for me.” He glared at her as he grabbed the large bottle of dubious looking amber liquid. “Negotiations need lubrication.”

“You hate negotiations.”

“Yeah, well I hate breathing too deep in this place, but you see me still standing here.” He jerked his furry head towards the back. “Come on.”

The back area as blocked off by a curtain, but it was in theory, she surmised, supposed to be the high stakes room for the ‘big rollers’, whatever that constituted in this bunch. Four tables of different games were set up, and in the far one she could see the silver contour of the Yaka Arrow controller across Kraglin’s now shaved, pale head. He wasn’t even paying attention to them, instead eyeing the hand he had and looking decidedly unhappy with what he got.

“You putting in?” The Acturan growled from his side of the table, impatiently tapping a mug of some alcohol.

“Yeah, I’m putting in.” Three 100-unit credit chips flew reluctantly into the pot in the middle of the table. Personally, if Kraglin didn’t like his hand he shouldn’t put that much in, but he always did like to try and play the odds and hope someone else did worse. Seriously, there was a reason Quill looked brilliant next to him.

“A full suit!” The Acturan placed the hand of cards on the table in front of him, a grin spreading from ear-to-ear. “Think you can beat that?”

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Kraling tossed his cards on the table as the other man laughed, reaching a massive hand to scoop up the small pile of unit credits into the larger pile he had already amassed for himself.

“Should get better at playing before you waste all your money on cards.”

It wasn’t an untrue statement, but Kraglin glowered at the other man. “Mighty nice coming from someone who conveniently put together four perfect hands in a row on my money.”

The other man stilled, as did much of the rest of the room, caught by Kraglin’s words and now suddenly very interested in what was going on at his table. “What did you say?”

Kraglin leaned back in his chair, lazily triumphant he got the Acturan’s attention. “I was calling you out on some of your strategies is what I was doing.”

The room tensed at that, a palatable frisson of excited nerves as everyone’s eyes flickered first to one another, then back to the tableau at the table. While no one overtly moved, she could sense the ever so slight shifts towards weapons strapped on hips or at waists, to knives and guns or whatever they felt would be useful in a bar fight.

Beside her, Rocket leaned against a chair, lazily, nodding in approval. “Someone actually taught
Kraglin big words like strategy. I guess he can learn after all.”

“You calling me a cheat, Obfonteri?”

“I’m calling you a convenient organizer of your cards.”

Rocket whistled low. “Convenient and organizer, even. Who knew he was this smart?”

“Shut it,” Nebula hissed, rolling her eyes.

Even as she did the Acturan shoved the table hard towards Kraglin, standing to loom up over it, scarred face scowling darkly as he reached for the pistol at his hip. “I don’t like the insinuation you’re making.”

“And I don’t like losing because someone thinks they are clever!”

“I can make that better for you real quick.”

“Can you?” Kraglin quirked an eyebrow before opening his jacket to reveal the Yaka Arrow strapped to his hip and giving a short, sharp whistle. It quivered as it rose.

“How skilled is he with that thing,” Nebula worried, eyeing it as it rose to hover at the level of Kraglin’s eye.

Even Rocket looked concerned. “Not skilled enough to keep someone from getting killed in these close quarters.”

“That’s what I thought.” Sighing, she pulled her own gun out and marching behind the Acturan, placing it neatly at the base of his skull. The room went silent, all pretext of pretending not to watch now gone.

“Let’s not get hasty, boys,” she murmured, low and quietly threatening. Over the Acturan’s shoulder, she could see Kraglin’s eyes widening. “That means you too, idiot. Put the arrow away.”

“He started it.”

“You called me cheat!”

She pressed the muzzle close into the curve, just where the head met the top of the spine. “I am not in the mood. Take your credits and your weapons and leave with your life before I take that from you.”

He quivered but didn’t budge. “And what if I don’t?”

The Acturan was brave, she’d give him that. Stupid, but brave. “Then I apologize to you in advance, Kraglin, for getting the gray matter he calls his brains all over you.”

Kraglin only gurgled. “I...err...”

She lightly pulled the trigger, powering up the weapon with a high-pitched whine.

“Fine!” With shaking fingers, the Acturan ducked, gathering his credits and shoveling them into his pockets, turning to glare at her before all color left his face. “Nebula!”

“Not as idiotic as I thought.” She didn’t bother wondering how he knew her name.

“I mean...sorry...sorry.” He did a strange sort of bow, genuflection as he scooted out, credits slipping
out of his pocket as he hustled away, dropping to the floor, unheeded, as he made a signal to a group of others at another of the tables, who all got up and followed him out. The rest of the patrons all watched, looked at her, and then promptly returned to whatever games they had been ignoring at the moment.

Rocket snorted as he reached down for three of the 100-unit credits, promptly pocketing them in his suit. “Got to hand it to you, that was an impressive bit of fear mongering. Natasha would approve.”

While it pleased her, somewhat, that Romanoff would be impressed with what she’d done, it confused Nebula more than anything. “Why did he run like that?” She picked up a credit off the chair and flicked it over to Kraglin, who took it, grabbing another four left on the table.

“Why else you think? Your Thanos’ daughter.” He shrugged, throwing himself back down as Nebula took the seat that the man had vacated. “I mean, sure, yeah, you’re on our side, but still, people are superstitious.”

“My father is dead. He’s not killing anyone else.”

“Tell that to half the universe. That one, he lost half is crew in the blink of an eye. Lot of people did. People are starting to use his name as a curse word, you know, the boogey man who frightens kids.”

“They ain’t wrong.” Rocket had clambered up into another chair, patting his now bulging pocket and putting the bottle of alcohol up on top of the table. “Just was in the outer settlements, even they’ve heard who did it.”

Her father had wanted the universe to worship and thank him for what he did, to be grateful for bringing some sort of cosmic balance. Instead, his name was a curse and he was reviled as mad, as a monster. Had he lived, he perhaps would have shrugged it off as justice, who knows. He was maddeningly philosophical about these things and she had never really quite understood it, only followed it. It was later that she came to realize the utter arbitrary nature of his notion of “balance” and that it only made sense to him. He was the executioner of a vision that in the end was only his perspective of an ideal universe and no one else’s. Stark had called it the height of utter hubris and had laughed, saying of all the people in the universe that should know, it would be him. Nebula had supposed he had a point.

“Thanks for the assist.” Kraglin reached for the bottle, pulling the top off with his teeth before spitting it in a distant, dank, dusty corner. “Not that I couldn’t have handled him myself, of course.”

“Yeah, who was the last person you stuck with that thing?” Rocket gestured to the arrow at his side. Kraglin avoided both his look and his question as he pulled from the booze. “You all called me and mine here. What do you want?”

Rocket took the lead. “Same outer worlds I was just talking about. With everything going to hell in a handbasket, normal trade routes are being disrupted. People aren’t getting the supplies they need; food, medicine, the basics.”

“Yeah, been that way a lot of places. What of it?”

Nebula knew he wasn’t that stupid. He was angling, hoping to see what deal could be made. “We’re willing to hire your Ravager crew out to do the service for them, maybe even serve as some protection.”

“Hire us? Who? You?” He eyed the pair of them. “So-called ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’? Thought that was Quill’s gig.”
“Well, Quill’s gone and I’m captain of the ship now,” Rocket snapped, tiny fist thumping the table loudly. “And we’re still doing what he’d have wanted.”

“Just the two of you?” Kraglin’s large, protruding, blue eyes turned to Nebula with more than a bit of skepticism, which she met with only the faintest of eye-rolls.

“You know, I could still just kill you.”

“Hey, you used that to get me here and listening. You didn’t say that I would have to go soft.”

Rocket smacked his own face in frustration. “It’s not going soft, it’s about not being a douchebag. There’s a difference!”

Rocket’s argument perhaps was perhaps splitting hairs, frankly, because Kraglin didn’t see a difference. “Ravagers aren’t out there trying to keep the galaxy together. We ride out there, free! We don’t need no laws and civilization!”

“Yeah, how well is that working out for you now at days with half the pirates to raid and loot with?”

“It’s a noble life, a Ravager!”

“You’re criminals,” Nebula finally broke in, done with the pettiness. “Whatever it is you want to call yourselves, you are that.”

“What, I’m supposed to not be insulted now? Yandu wouldn’t stand for this.”

“No, but he was in the habit of transporting kids to be killed by their dad, the living planets, so if we want to put names to things...” Rocket held his hands up wide and meaningfully.

Kraglin finally threw up his hands. “Look, you think that I can convince my crew to go straight? That’s how Yandu got a mutiny.”

Nebula lifted her shoulders in an eloquent shrug. “You said your crew is superstitious. Play on that, tell them that they need to do this to balance out the wrong of Yandu’s crew. Tell them you if you don’t that their spirits will give you all bad luck till you make amends.”

That thought hadn’t occurred to him, clearly. She could see it working its way through Kraglin’s dull mind. “Maybe could work. Yandu always did like doing an odd good deed or two, just to make things right.”

“Now we’re talking,” Rocket enthused, happy they seemed to be getting through.

“Course, they’ll like it better if they have a little monetary incentive, if you know what I mean.”

Kraglin’s baleful eyes took on a wicked, knowing gleam as he held up two of the credits he had snagged. Nebula was unsurprised, frankly few people in this universe came without a price, save the Avengers.

“You could save good people and do a nice thing and you want money?” Rocket’s outraged indignation was a bit rich, in Nebula’s opinion, considering he was the most avaricious shit she knew, but she played along with it as he pulled the card of moral disappointment.

Kraglin wasn’t biting, though. “Costs money to do good deeds and we ain’t a charity. Got to pay for fuel and provisions for us and then get supplies for these outer planets. You want us to be the good guys, we need capital to get us through.”
Rocket was chewing nails at this point, but Nebula stepped in before the raccoon could start shooting things. “There is a Terran, a rich one, who might be willing to give us money to help out.”

“A Terran? Isn’t that Quill’s home? I thought that was a shitty backwater.” Kraglin’s disgust would maybe have more weight if they weren’t sitting in the worst dump that Nebula had ever seen in her entire life.

Rocket clearly agreed with Nebula or perhaps it was his latent love of Earth and by that, primarily, it’s cuisine. “You ever actually been to Terra, douchebag? It’s a nice place, which is more than what I can say about this one.”

Kraglin scowled. He hadn’t been there or anywhere near there since Quill was just a kid. “Right, fine, but they don’t have money anyone recognizes out here.”

“I got a few places I can do a quick exchange or two, depending on the currency. May take a couple of weeks, but you’ll get it. We’ll put a call into the Avengers.”

“The who?”

That was a response they got a lot, to the point Nebula didn’t even blink. “Protectors of Earth. We work with them.”

Kraglin’s dubious expression spoke volumes on his opinion on that. “How come I never heard of them?”

“Mainly, you can’t read, but also, your an idiot.” Rocket had reached the end of his diplomacy, apparently.

“Don’t go insulting me, raccoon! I’ve already had to deal with a cheat today.”

“Or what, you’ll shish kabob me on your fancy arrow you don’t know how to use, hoping you’ll figure out how to hit me?”

“Enough,” Nebula roared, causing more than a few chairs to screech. “Look, are you willing to do the job or not?”

Kraglin considered, looking at the unit credits in his hand. “Maybe doing something like this, other jobs might come out there, other folks caught in a tough spot with what Thanos did. Maybe they might pay for folks like us and our services.”

“Probably, which is a nice, tidy profit for you.” Rocket clearly spoke Ravager. Nebula still found it all somewhat disgusting. Her father was many things, mercenary wasn’t one of them.

But money spoke to Kraglin. “Sure, we’re in. Tell us what needs doing, we’ll handle it.”

“And maybe, if you find other systems who could use some help?”

“Yeah, we’ll see what we can do...for a fair price!” He quelled at Nebula’s glare. “Not out to gouge poor folk because your daddy wanted to kill everyone.”

“Good.” She rose in a fluid movement, her nose wrinkling as she glared around the so-called ‘establishment’. “I’m going to remove myself from here and scrape my skin off before I’m infected by everything I touch. We’ll be in touch.”

As she stalked out, the tables filled with players all leaned away somewhat in her wake. She didn’t
breath again till she was outside, the cold air rinsing out her nose as she marched through the
 crunching snow to the Benetar, Rocket following behind. She’d never been so grateful for her
cybernetic implants, else she would have actually had to inhale the toxic fumes in the place the whole
time.

“That went better than expected,” Rocket seemed pleased as he hopped into the navigation seat. “I
thought he’d want more out of us.”

“You think he’ll do it?”

“Kraglin? Yeah, he’s not smart enough to doublecross us and he’s got a soft spot for sad cases. Put a
puppy in front of him, he’s a total marshmallow.”

“Will he do it and not screw it up?”

“Well…” Rocket was more circumspect on that. “It’s getting done, that’s what counts, right? And
there’s only two of us, so beggars and choosers or some such like that. Want to put in a call to
Natasha, see if we can negotiate some fundage? Stark likes you, maybe he’ll put in.”

The idea of having contacts and allies who one could call on for favors to do something without
strings attached seemed so...odd. “We’re overdue for a check in with them, I’ll run it by her. It means
we’ll have to go to Earth and pick it up for a conversion.”

“Think I can scare a little old lady again?”

Nebula glared mutely at him.

“What! It was the one time! But, you know, it was rather funny, because I talk and stuff.”

“You are such an asshole.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the little things in life.”

How did she end up getting stuck with the talking rodent?
Normal was a word that she had never truly understood or even cherished till Pepper got to know Tony Stark. Normal was just a state of being, it was the everyday, humdrum, boring life she had always known, the existence she thought she would always have. Normal was the baseline for what it always should be, or at least she thought it was. Now, normal was that thing that other people seemed to have, but not her. She wouldn’t know normal now if it smacked her in the face. Case in point, she was currently sitting at her husband’s work table in their comfortable cabin home in upstate New York, drinking her coffee and keeping half an eye on her husband outside the window, wandering the yard with safety glasses and power tools. At the table with her were King Haakon of Norway and Queen Ramonda of Wakanda, there by virtue of a digital technology created by the madman in her yard attacking a maple tree with abandon. In the next room her daughter napped, oblivious either to the royalty in her presence or the annoying sound of the chainsaw in the front and the falling branches twisting to the ground.

“Is Anthony enjoying himself?” Ramonda could clearly hear what was going on outside of her window all the way in Wakanda.

“Well, if I have to duck-and-cover in the middle of this, you’ll know why.” She shook her head, returning to the conversation at hand. “So, the Asgardians have been in discussion of sharing some of what remains of their technological knowledge with us as a sort of shared braintrust. Their fear is that what remains among them after everything may be lost forever if they don’t move to preserve it.”

“We’ve already had historians and archaeologists working with them in order to better understand our own cultural heritage.” Haakon had already sent a full report of the findings of several scholars regarding the influence of the Asgardians on the ancient Scandinavian cultures and what they left behind. “Their technologies are intuitive to them, but advanced to us. Our teams are trying to backwards engineer what they are doing using different languages, almost. We are having to learn how they understand the universe and how we understand it and work from there.”

“Like the Bifrost.” Pepper remembered Jane Foster once telling them how she and Thor understood the same feature as two different ideas until they were able to work their way through the theoretical concepts together.

“The Wakandan engineers have been most helpful in this process. They already have a unique perspective not completely outside of the Asgardian framework that has helped lead to creative and outside the box thinking. Our hope is that we can begin adapting those things that are most useful and beneficial. I want to thank her Majesty for providing this brain trust to work with.”

Ramonda’s smile was warm and regal, one monarch to the other. “You are welcome. It is a tribute to my son and his legacy that we do this. T’Challa wanted us to open Wakanda to the world and that means not just giving but learning as well. The Asgardians are a people who came to us for succor.
and we want to do our part.”

“As do we.” Pepper smiled as outside there sounded the rustle of branches and a mild yelp. A quick glance told her that Tony was fine, though she wasn’t certain her vegetable patch was. “Stark Industries is willing to front the money to aid as many as want training in certain areas the ability to do so. Brunnhilde has stated most of those who made it to Earth were in the trades, and while some translate to Earth skills, others don’t. A few have expressed interest in university education, while others are interested in things more hands on.”

“We have a core group, including Brunnhilde, who have begun training to build a fishing fleet to New Asgard to give them something more of an economy. We are working closely with Tønsberg on that, as there has been some talk of developing a cultural center out of it. Queen Ramonda has also been kind enough to offer technologies to help bring a large scale, digital model of Asgard as a joint project with the local university.”

“We are a small people but a proud one and we know what our history means to us. I can imagine what it means to them to keep it and to know that they have a tie to your land and a history all their own as they build a new home.”

“Well, then, I’m glad that is getting settled. I can report back to the charitable trust our findings. They are interested in using this same model with some of the other refugees we have, and I want to make this the next big push with the project.

“If only Thanos’ actions had brought world peace,” Ramonda sighed with some acerbity. Didn’t they all wish that out of all of this awfulness?

“I suppose a mad alien’s whims aren’t enough even to stop the petty arguments of humanity,” Haakon replied.

“Well, all I can do on that score is to make sure we aren’t giving them any more weapons,” Pepper smiled at them both.

As if on cue, there was a loud crack and pop and the rush of branches snapping as the maple Tony had been hacking to pieces fell, tumbling to the ground with a crunch. Both the images jumped and blinked at her as she waved a hand, assuring them all was well.

“Anything else,” she asked, having a feeling that Morgan would be waking soon and would want her attention.

The queen spoke up, still looking as if she expected Pepper’s roof to cave in. “I am glad to say we have 5 candidates lined up to send to your El Segundo campus for our cross-cultural exchange program, all from the Oakland educational facility. We are working to provide others from the Atlanta one next year.”

“That’s exciting! I know that Tony was very eager to hear that. He wants to head out this summer while they are there to meet with them before their trip to Wakanda.”

“I think they will appreciate it. For many of them it’s been a hard year.” The lines that creased the beautiful queen’s face were a testament to her own loss and struggles. “I think seeing a superhero in the flesh, especially one who is an engineer, will be something to inspire them.”

“I don’t know, wait till they meet him in the flesh.” Just as she said it, the superhero himself wandered onto the porch and into the house, shirtless, a bandana around his forehead, sunglasses on, covered head-to-toe in leaves and wood chips. Yes, that was her husband, the great Anthony Stark,
wandering into the house in front of two ruling monarchs looking like he was a demented, backwoods lumberjack.

Her life was anything but normal.

“Hey, Pepper, you didn’t really need that bed of pumpkin vines, did you?”

“Not now,” she sighed, used to Tony’s side projects having unintended consequences for her sanity and all of those around her. “I’m on a call with the Queen of Wakanda and the King of Norway by the way.”

“Haakon?” He wandered over, clearly not caring he had just come from the yard or that they were royalty. “Hey, buddy! How has it been?”

“Tony,” he smiled, a genuine one. Haakon was well used to Tony’s antics, both through their interactions and hearing Pepper’s stories over the years. “How did the tree felling go?”

“Well, you know, not going to lie, very, very well. We still have our roof intact and I managed not to kill us all.”

“Good job.” Pepper took comfort in the small things. “Queen Ramonda says there are 5 students going to the main facility in Los Angeles.”

“Really!” He perked up then. “Exciting, your majesty! I look forward to meeting them. We’re going to give them a treat while they are there.”

“They’ll look forward to it.” She blessedly didn’t seem to be terribly shocked by Tony’s appearance, but then again, the fact that he had most of his clothes on and it didn’t involve something horribly embarrassing was a big step for him. “Perhaps, when you have time, Pepper, we can discuss future opportunities for internships and job placement.”

“Of course.” She glanced towards the corner of the display FRIDAY had projected to see how Morgan was doing. She was stirring, as expected, and Pepper had a feeling her meeting would have to wrap up. “Apologies to you both, Morgan’s about to wake and I don’t want to keep you.”

“She has to be getting so big!” Haakon had children himself and had delighted in the few occasions he had seen her via their sporadic meetings.

“Six months today!” It was the truth, she was getting big, a happy, cheerful baby with Tony’s dark hair and eyes and Pepper’s smile. “Next time, I’ll bring her on to say hello.”

“Cherish these moments,” Ramonda said with a knowing smile. “They are grown before you know it.”

Pepper couldn’t help but think of the queen’s own lost children with sadness. “I have photos enough to document every second of her growth. My mother is inundated.”

“She is a lucky woman,” the queen chuckled, just as the first warning signs of Morgan’s impending wakefulness sounded.

“I’ll go fetch her.” Tony waved to the pair virtually sitting at the table. “Your Majesties, always a pleasure. Stop by any time!”

They voiced their farewells as Pepper wrapped up, planning their future meeting and assured them she’d have more information from the trust’s board once she had had a chance to connect with them.
With that, she closed the connection, the queen and king winking out of existence. For a brief moment, she considered the fact that she had just had a business meeting with ruling monarchs in jeans and a blouse as if this was all just the usual thing people did everyday. How did this get to be her life?

She rose to rinse her coffee cup, listening for Tony with the baby. “Everything okay in there?”

“Yep, just needed to have a pit stop.” Tony had taken to diaper changing with the clear-eyed precision of his mechanical genius mind. He had it down to a science, getting Morgan changed and cleaned in the time it took for a NASCAR pit crew to get a tire off. He blew Pepper out of the water, who usually ended up getting peed on and covered in poop as Morgan stared at her as if she were an idiot.

“I’ll grab a bottle!” She wandered past the bottle warmer, blessedly run by FRIDAY who had it timed just right whenever Morgan was starting to stir from a nap. She grabbed it in hand and wandered to the living room, where Tony now had their daughter cleaned and dressed and on her playpad, making funny faces at her as she stared at her reflection in the glasses still on his face.

“I’m waiting for the day you put Teletubbies on those things so she can just watch it off your lenses.”

“Bite your tongue, woman, our daughter will not watch such drivel!”

“Still convinced she will be a born genius?”

“Hey, it’s in the genes and she recognizes letters already. Today we learned M is for Morgan!” He tickled her tummy as she laughed before he handed her off to Pepper for her feeding time. “She knew exactly what that letter meant when I pointed to it. Course, it could also have been her filling up a poopy diaper, hard to say.”

Pepper could only shake her head as she settled Morgan comfortably for feeding. “Your daddy is silly, Miss Morgan.”

She seemed to agree as she gurgled while drinking, dark eyes bright after a nap, earning a smile from Pepper as she kissed her downy head. She hoped her daughter grew up with her patience and Tony’s sense of humor. She’d get a long way in this life if she did.

“So what am I supposed to do with a giant tree down in my yard,” she called to wherever Tony had wandered to in the house. From the sound of it, he was now in the kitchen.

“I’m going to cut it up. We can have it for wood in the winter. Maybe I can make something new for you, like a pen set or a foot stool.”

“Every man needs his hobbies.” She smiled at him as he walked back in, one of his never-ending supply of dried fruit snacks in hand. He’d gained back the weight he lost in space and filled out again nicely, back to the fit and handsome man he was before Thanos nearly killed him. While Tony had never been Steve Rogers or Thor, the latter of whom seemed to like to parade around without a shirt whenever possible, Tony had done all right. She admitted she still liked to see him wander around in the occasional tank-top undershirts, strutting through the house as he puttered from one thing to another. Last week he’d muttered something about building her a greenhouse for the winter. She suspected that’s why the tree had to go, to make room for it.

“So how did the meeting of the minds go.” He still hadn’t showered, but flopped on the couch anyway, to Pepper’s slight chagrin.

“Very well, I will go back to the Foundation’s board of directors with out plans of action next week
so we can move forward with funding plans and future similar programs. It helps to having the weight of Haakon and Ramonda in this, as it gives it a bit of panache and credibility.”

“Yeah, put a crown on someone’s head and it makes them regal and glamorous.”

“Well, yeah, it kind of does, that’s part of the point of it.” She shifted Morgan in her arms, musing on her earlier thoughts. “I have to say it’s beyond surreal to me that here I am, a girl who grew up in a normal, middle class family in boring old, suburban California, sitting in a house in upstate New York while one of the richest men in the world does a ‘honey do’ list around the house and I’m drinking coffee at my dining room table chatting with two heads of state via video conference. I mean, when I graduated high school, the most I had hoped for was a good job working at some no-name company and the idea of marriage seemed so far away it was practically unthinkable.”

“And all you did was answer some want ad in a newspaper for a personal assistant, Cinderella.”

“I was recruited and you know it.” She reached a toe over to shove his khaki covered knee. She’d been working at a San Jose bio-medical tech firm, the same one she had met Aldrich Killian at, as the executive assistant to one of the senior VPs. It was her first job out of Berkley and one she’d gotten through networking and sheer persistence. Her boss, a woman who saw in her the capability to grow into something more, had given her the chance and she’d thought it was a step into future growth managing more and more responsibilities. As it turned out she’d been so capable, the VP had bragged to Obidiah Stane and next thing Pepper knew she was on a plane to El Segundo and on the path that led her right to this moment.

Tony only grunted at her attack against his leg, lost in thought for a moment. “I remember you showed up in your oh-so-very 2003 off-the-rack black suit and heels, straight out of some TV show, trying to look so professional and grown up.”

“I was terrified! My interview with you, as I remember, you were having five conversations at once and then asking me for my entire CV. Why in the hell did you care which sorority I had pledged at Cal?”

“To make sure I hadn’t slept with any of your sorority sisters.” He shrugged, clearly remembering that. She rolled her eyes.

“Believe me, I’d have known if you had.”

“I was flirting with you very hard that day.”

“And I was ignoring it very hard. Bambi had warned me you would try before I went into the interview.”

“Good old Bambi. Where did she go after she retired?”

“Arizona, she sent Morgan a hand-sewn dress.”

“Oh, yeah.” He smiled at the memory of his old secretary, the same woman who had worked for his father. “So she ratted me out.”

“She cared about you. I think that more than anything was the reason I went through with the interview at all.”

“I must have impressed you somehow. You took the job.”

“Well, maybe I saw the truth underneath all of the bull you were slinging around that day.”
“Which was?”

She smiled at him. “That despite being a billionaire genius playboy who chased after anything fast and shiny, you were a guy with a big heart who just needed people to believe in him.”

He sniffed with that nonchalant coolness that had been his trademark once upon a time. “You’re getting soft on me, Potts.”

“I know. I’m letting you loose in the yard with power tools. I should know better.”

He grinned, but shrugged. “You know I went through five PAs before you.”

“Six if you count the one who left after two days swearing she would sue you.”

“Right.” He clearly didn’t even remember that one. “I just remember thinking you were smart, pretty and spunky.”

“Spunky?” She hadn’t been called that once in her entire life.

“Yeah, like Rosalind Russell, only you speak slower.”

She got the classic movie reference. “So you kept me around because I was spunky?”

“Well and you made a pretty good cup of coffee, which said a lot in my book back then.”

“Ahh, that’s true romance.”

He laughed at her. “We do put a spin on the classic trope of the CEO and his secretary though.”

“I suppose we do.” She took the bottle from Morgan who had long since finished it and was now much more fascinated with her toes. She settled her on her played with several of her toys. “I didn’t think that day that I’d end up CEO of the company your father founded, let alone married to you.”

“Life is funny like that, I suppose.” He watched as she settled their daughter on her playpad in the middle of the floor. “One twist of fate, you turn left instead of right, and you end up in a whole different place. If I had gotten in Rhodey’s humvee that day, I’d have never been blown to kingdom come and never built the suit.”

“True.” She knew that his journey through his own trauma and loss over the years had been a long one. Even still, for all that the suits he built were his protection, they also helped him grow as a person into someone who she didn’t think she’d ever see when she first started working for him - a good man. He had always had the potential, but he never knew how to channel it. Being Iron Man had given him something to hold on to, a purpose in this life outside of being an extension of his father’s legacy. He could be his own man on his own terms.

“I think of that sometimes, how life spins on those funny moments, and you wake up and realize that if you hadn’t done that how different your life would be. For all the horror of that cave, if I hadn’t done that, would I be sitting here in this house with you and our daughter, embarrassing you in front of foreign royalty, one of which is your college ex-boyfriend?”

“He is not my ex-boyfriend and stop it. We hung out together and quit trying to make beef where there isn’t any.”

“I’m just saying you two are chummy.”

“Because we had classes together and became friends. Men and women can do that without it being
complicated by libidos.”

“I’m sure the science is out on that one.”

“Do you want to sleep with Natasha?”

He paused. “There is no right way to answer that question.”

Her glare was only met with a smirk.

“Okay, fair, and I’m not really jealous just...intimidated he has a crown and I don’t.”

“You’re richer by a lot.”

“Fair.”

“And he’s happily married with a family all his own and so are you and why is this an issue?”

“Mostly because it’s a silly argument I know is dumb and I like having it with you because you rise to the bait every time.”

There were moments he was endearingly obnoxious and sweet. “Why do I put up with you?”

“I’ve been asking that for years.”

She leaned over to kiss him, which gave him the opportunity to snake an arm around her waist and pull her onto his lap, cuddling her close. He smelled of sweat and wood and engine oil, and while it was likely going to linger in the couch for a bit she did admit it was something of a turn on and far better than the old Axe Body Spray he used to wear when she first met him.

“You need a shower,” she murmured against his mouth when they’d parted enough to catch a breath.

“You plan on joining me? I think I got wood chips in some uncomfortable places, may need some help with that.”

She giggled but then glanced at Morgan, who was currently fascinated with drooling on a stuffed bunny Happy had brought her. “Someone’s got to keep an eye on Morgan.”

“Hmmm, about that.” Tony tipped his head back towards the ceiling. “FRIDAY, engage the Big House Protocol.”

“Big House Protocol engaged.” Around the area Morgan played at, a faint square of blue energy boxed her in, shining faintly in the sunlight. Tony looked pleased it had worked.

“Please tell me you didn’t literally make a baby jail for our daughter.” Pepper glared at him, slightly horrified by the thought.

“It isn’t harmful, no different than the energy shield I created for my suit and with the added benefit of monitoring her while she’s playing and you are out and about in the garden doing your Earth magic or whatever.”

“Weeding isn’t magic.”

“And, besides, it gives us a little time to Mommy and Daddy to take long, hot, soapy showers together.”
That at least was a compelling argument. “FRIDAY, you’ll let us know if she so much as gets grumpy while we are upstairs.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Without even being asked, she began playing a series of different pictures and colors on the energy boundary, children’s music sounding as Morgan’s attention was turned towards the entertainment.

“I think we have twenty minutes,” Pepper estimated as Tony hooked an arm under her knees, pulling her up as he lifted her off the couch with him - admittedly slower and with more grunting than he would have done ten years ago.

“That’s okay. I don’t think I need ten minutes.”

Pepper laughed, kissing his cheek. “I still find you sexy, Mr. Stark.”

“I’m glad, because I don’t think I could survive long without you, Ms. Potts.”

The shower ended up taking thirty minutes instead.

That night, laying in bed beside him, Morgan tucked away in her room, Pepper thought of her strange, weird life in this world where half of everyone had disappeared in the blink of an eye. Despite it all, she had this, this island of normalcy in the middle of the storm, her husband, her daughter, her career and her home. Perhaps her life wasn’t as far removed from what she understood as normal after all...except for maybe the baby jail.

Chapter End Notes

So I am not a fan of RPF, just...yeah, not my thing for a lot of reasons. Historical figures in a fic, sure, but sparingly. That said, Crown Prince Haakon is a real person and I’m sure very lovely and he really did go to Berkley for grad work and I used him very sparingly. Considering the Iron Man trend of real life people appearing in his films left and right, it was a fun call back.
In which Carol pays Rhodey a visit.

It had been a very long time since Rhodey had awoken to a beautiful blonde in his bed. He had roused as much to sensation of a warm, pliant body wrapped around his own as he had the natural rhythm of nearly 3 decades of military training. The sun was still just below the horizon as he blinked at the clock on the nightstand. He could stay in bed a bit longer, snooze with the woman who snored softly next to him, or get up, start his day, make coffee, check emails…

“You think too loud.”

He chuckled fondly, reaching long fingers to run them through the long, golden spill splayed across his chest. “You sure you’re not psychic?”

“Positive, else last night would have been a hell of a lot more awkward.” Danvers finally peeked up at him, eyes rheumy with sleep, blinking. “What time is it?”

“Not yet sun up on the West Coast”

“Jesus,” she muttered, pulling the comforter over her head and rolling over. He laughed but couldn’t fault her. She bounced between planets and galaxies, anything vaguely resembling a circadian rhythm she may have had as a normal human on Earth was long gone.

“How long since you last crashed and got yourself some rest?”

Her head popped up out of her nest guiltily. “Would it be a bad thing if I said I don’t remember?”

“Then maybe it’s a good thing to sleep in. I’ll let you know when I got some breakfast.”

“With bacon and waffles?”

“Sure!” He pulled the blanket down around her, tousling her hair as her eyes flickered back closed. She looked young and peaceful that way, snuggled in his bed. Funny, considering she was older than him by a couple of years, not that he’d mention that fact to her anytime soon. Unlike Tony, he was a man who cultivated wisdom and decorum and had a certain sense of impulse control.

With long developed practice he pulled himself up and out of bed and into his leg braces, Almost as soon as the main frame of them settled against his body the rest wrapped around his legs. The electrical impulses that he normally didn’t feel tingled to life, giving partial feeling as the repulsors did the rest to give him balance as he stretched. Three years into his new reality he still felt it was weird and yet it could be worse. Most people he knew with the sort of vertebrae damage he had never walked again, forced to use wheelchairs and other means of transport. He had lucked out in that he was an Avenger and the best friend of Tony Stark, who looked at his injuries more as a creative problem to solve than an life-altering injury. The exo-skeletal braces weren’t perfect or always comfortable, but they were an alternative, and Rhodey was happy to be Tony’s guinea pig in his designs. So far it had worked so well that Stark Industries was looking to market it for wider distribution, with versions for those who needed prosthetics to walk. In the meantime, Rhodey
patiently put up with Tony’s never ending fiddling with them. He hoped one day to convince him to make a nano-tech version of them, not unlike his latest suit. Would be damn useful just to have a belt he could strap on and have the braces form whenever he needed them. Also would be damn helpful, he thought ruefully, when he had a lady over for the night, not that it was a frequent occurrence.

Most mornings he hit the gym, but this morning he indulged, deciding to lazily pick through emails, pulling up a screen over his kitchen island as he used one hand to flicker through the virtual desktop, the other to nurse his giant mug of coffee. He braced himself for the latest disaster or calamity in what felt like a never-ending string of them. For most civilians, the Decimation had been horrific, ripping apart families, leaving children orphaned, families childless, loved ones left to watch as friends and co-workers, neighbors and strangers all faded to dust around them. For those in the military, it had been worse. Their entire chain of command had been disrupted, no one knew or understood what was going on. The government had been in chaos for days, and all the while the same thing had been going on in nations big and small all over the world. For weeks it had been a tense game of seeing who was alive and left in the world and hoping it was someone rational on the other end of the line, begging them to not do anything stupid. Most of the rest of the world would never know how close they had come on more than one occasion to even worse disasters occurring.

Since then, the fall out over the lack of control and order in some areas was still raging. Places where fragile peace had just been forming had returned to nascent warfare, while in others the actions of Thanos had caused them to turn inward, to isolate themselves further from the world, sometimes violently. In places like central Asia, which had already been plagued by the activities of groups like the Ten Rings, warlords were popping up, declaring themselves masters over huge swaths of territory without anyone there to tell them otherwise. The rise of crime lords, drug cartels, mafia families, and terrorists groups was climbing as they all sought to take advantage of the situation and offer a little order to the disorder of the world, all at the expense of those they now sought to control.

This morning was a quiet one, frankly, in the grand scheme of things. Well, if you could call a pending military coup in Venezuela a small thing. He took note of it and sent a message to Romanoff, asking if she wanted him to intervene. He continued to meander through notes and emails till his messenger pinged in the corner of his screen. Lightly, he tapped a finger the area where the message flickered in the middle of the air. Romanoff’s response was a single “yes” followed by a link to an article about an unusual light over the skies of Southern California and the reappearance of the mysterious “Captain Marvel” in the night skies. In the footage, snagged on someone’s cell phone he gathered, he could see Danvers streaking across the twilight desert skies just outside of Lancaster, his own darker shape trailing behind. Romanoff’s only response in the message window was a smirking emoji followed by an eggplant, a taco and a thumbs up.

He had a feeling he wasn’t going to live that one down.

He decided to call and face the music rather than ignore it and let Romanoff find more inventive emojis to send. She picked up on the first ring.

“How bad is the damage on this one?”

“Ehh, I think few people caught on to you in the shot,” she drawled as he rose to rummage for breakfast making items. “When did she get in?”

“Yesterday morning. She wanted to check in while she was in the neighborhood.”

“Did she?” The note in Natasha’s voice was suggestive and he rolled his eyes as he pulled out bacon and turned the oven on. “She find everything in working order.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he shot back, ignoring her throaty chuckle. “Is this where I tell you
that you were right and promise to buy you drinks?"

“I will never turn down those with a friend.”

“How much more to keep you from telling Tony before I do?”

“Dinner would suffice.”

He pulled out a rack and baking sheet from a cabinet. “How much to not tell Steve?”

“Oh, he knows. He was in today. He said to tell you good job, she’s a nice girl, and have a nice
time.”

“He makes it sound as if we’re courting, not shamelessly hooking up.”

“If you behave yourself and get good grades in school he may let you borrow the station wagon to
go make out. Where do they make out Lancaster?”

“My house is just fine.” He knew she would take the crap out of him. “We can be at headquarters
this evening if you want, discuss the Venezuela situation.”

“Sure you don’t want some alone time?”

“That’s what the rest of the day is for.”

Romanoff laughed. “Sure, we’ll see you then. Have fun.”

He clicked off, ignoring his burning ears as he put bacon in the oven and looked for his waffle iron.

Sure enough, he had just pulled the bacon from the oven and put on the last waffle to cook when Danvers wandered in, sleepy-eyed and tousled, dressed in one of his old Air Force t-shirts. She

“OhmyGodthankyou,” she mumbled, grabbing it and nearly planting her face in it.

“You’re welcome.” He returned to the waffle iron, eyeing her with bemusement as she drank
greedily. “Not a good Starbucks out there in the universe?”

She took a second before she answered, happily humming as the coffee hit her system. “No, though
some friends of mine love it so much they come back here every so often to load up on beans.”

“Earth’s gift to the universe, caffeine addiction.”

“Well, if you have to be known for something.” She returned to her coffee, watching him as he worked. “How is the world today?”

“Stable for the most part. There is a situation in Venezuela Romanoff wants me on.”

“So you have to leave?” There was disappointment there and he smiled.

“Nah, I said we’d come by this evening to discuss. Besides, I owe her dinner and a drink.”

Danvers arched one of her delectable eyebrows in a smile that would have made a lesser man weak
in the knees. “For what?”

“She’s being smug because she called you and I hooking up last fall.”

“Did she?” She chuckled as he brought over the plate of bacon he set in the middle of the table. “How did she find out?”

“Seems your little Top Gun maneuver last night was caught on cell phone cameras. Didn’t tell me you have a history around these parts.”

She winced, her face scrunching. “Ayeeeee, I forget that everyone here has those things in their pockets nowadays. It was much easier when it was all just regular Nikons and fuzzy pictures.”

“Yeah, Captain Marvel, you’re quite the celebrity.”

“I still have that nickname?”

“Well, not as cool as War Machine, but you know, has a bit of pizzazz. Still, feels like a knock off of Captain America.”

“I didn’t come up with it. First time I heard of it was in a tabloid newspaper. Fury laughed so hard he nearly puked.”

Rhodey tried to think of anything making the grim and vaguely terrifying Nick Fury laugh that hard and he couldn’t imagine it being Carol Danvers. “How in the hell did you meet Fury?”

“That!” She grinned, reaching for bacon to munch on as he brought over waffles, butter and syrup, returning to fetch plates. “When I first landed in LA he was the SHIELD agent in charge of investigating me. I guess they thought I might be a foreign agent of some sort.”

“Well, you were from Kree.”

“I’m a US citizen, thank you.” She sniffed, crunching through the bacon with a little moan that she shouldn’t be making while eating breakfast. “God, I miss bacon too.”

Rhodey, who had stopped to stare at her with her plate in his hand, would have happily given her all the bacon she wanted for her to keep making that noise. “Errr...no bacon in space?”

“Pigs are a Terran species, so no.”

“Well, that sucks for the rest of the universe. So, Fury?”

“Right, so anyway, he and his rookie, Coulson, were the ones to find me there. I got away, but he tracked me down and we figured out the truth about Project: Pegasus and the experiments that Wendy and Howard Stark were up to out there. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t remember my past at all...well, him and Talos, but Fury got me into Pegasus to find the files.”

“Still seems crazy to me. I went looking for them, you know. They’re public now, part of the big SHIELD data dump Romanoff did when she and Cap took SHIELD down.”

“You think my story is crazy, the fall of SHIELD still seems insane to me. An entire espionage network destroyed by those two and Fury.”

“Yeah, insane, my bosses were less than thrilled. But, you know, HYDRA was in the works and that meant we couldn’t trust it or any of the intel we’d gotten over decades. It was a blow to the intelligence world. Your boy, Fury, went on the run for a while after that. We all thought he was
dead till he was popping up on Barton’s farm. I only heard about it when he called me in to help with Sokovia and I was as shocked as anyone that he was alive.”

“He was a spy, you know, knew how to hide.”

He eyed her quietly as he buttered his waffle, pouring syrup over it. He wasn’t a jealous man, never really had been. You couldn’t be Tony’s friend and be that way, it would make you crazy. He couldn’t help a twinge of envy at her clear admiration for the man, even though he was dusted and she hadn’t exactly been on Earth a lot over the last twenty years.

“So, you and him...Fury, did you two ever…”

He let the words draw out for a long moment, eyes flickering up to her as she frowned at him, mid-slather of her own waffle.

“Did we...what?”

“You know, were you two ever an...item?”

There went that eyebrow again. She seriously had the most expressive one he had ever seen and this one wasn’t precisely amused. “Do I detect jealousy, Colonel Rhodes?”

“Not precisely.”

She didn’t buy that bullshit.

“Maybe a little,” he confessed, returning to pour syrup over a waffle. He wasn’t as hungry as he had been. “I just...I know you two were close.”

“You do realize that a woman can be close to a man without wanting to jump his bones, right?”

“Yeah, I do, but…”

“Because right now you don’t sound like you do is what I’m saying.” She cut a neat, precise square of waffle off of her plate before popping it in her mouth to chew on, challenge in her eyes.

He should have seen the minefield a mile away. He didn’t and he had no one to blame but himself. “Look I just wanted to...I don’t know, understand what I was stepping into with you...with this.”

What was this? He wasn’t sure. Honestly, it had all happened by circumstance. What had started out as mutual admiration, one pilot to another, had turned into mild flirting, until one random Saturday three months ago when she had shown up on his doorstep and asked him out for dinner. He hadn’t questioned it that night, nor when she showed up again six weeks later. Now they were on their third date, if that was what they were calling it, and he had to ask himself what this was all about.

Perhaps she was in the same boat, because she shrugged, reaching for her coffee to hide whatever was going on in that expressive face. “Why does it need to be complicated?”

“It doesn’t.” He sighed, twirling his fork in his fingers. “I just need to know what it is, that’s all. If I’m some inter-galactic booty call, that’s fine, as long as that’s the parameters we set.”

“A what?”

He forgot how much slang she missed not being on Earth all the time. “Booty call? You know, calling a brother up just to...you know...get laid.”
“Is that the term the kids are using these days?”

“Hell, the kids were using that in my day, I don’t know about you.” He set the fork down to regard her seriously. “I guess I just need to know where we stand with one another.”

Feelings and emotions clearly were not things Carol Danvers liked dealing with. “Can’t we just eat breakfast?”

He knew when to push and when not, so he carefully retreated. “Sure.” He flashed a smile, digging into his waffle carefully, though without any true gusto. He chewed a mouthful that tasted like cardboard in his mouth, swilling it down with coffee and regretting he even said anything.

They are in silence for long moments before Danvers finally broke it with a soft muttered imprecation. “Shit, Rhodes, I’m sorry for...I don’t know, being me?”

“Nothing wrong with being you, I like you. Just, sometimes stuff everyone has can be a pain in the ass.”

“And I have more stuff than most.” She ran a fingernail through a small drop of syrup on the countertop, lazily making a mess. “I’ve spent so much time being told no, that I wasn’t good enough, that I shouldn’t do things because of my gender, or my species, or because people wanted to control what I was, and I just like things not complicated. The minute we put labels on things is the minute you start limiting what they can and can’t be.”

“Fair and I for one am not interested in trying to tie you down to anything. As if I could, you can just blink and fly on your own. Not a lot I can do about that.”

Her chuckle was warm despite her sorrowful apology. “I don’t have to blink, you know. It’s not like *Bewitched.*”

“Wiggle your nose, then?”

“Nope, not that either.”

“I thought it would be cute.”

“You were saying,” she pressed, though she smiled, which was the point.

“I was saying that I’m not here to start putting limits on you or force you to do anything.” The image of her from the night before, playful and laughing as she darted off across the skies, heedless of either the Air Force base nearby or the ruckus it would cause made him smile. The joy she took in just being herself was somewhat infectious. “I don’t want to tie you down. I get it, believe me I do, the lure of what’s out there, what’s beyond this. I know eventually, you’ll always go back to that. I just want to know what you want out of me, waiting here on Earth, trying to keep Tony from doing something else stupid with his life.”

“Keeping a Stark from doing something stupid with their life is sort of like asking the sun not to shine.”

“I get that, but maybe I’m a man who likes the challenge of the impossible.”

She softened at that. “Honestly, Rhodes...I don’t know. I mean, I’m a hot mess. I’ve not really bothered with anything more than friendship in a long, long time.”

“And yet you show up here every so often. Why me?”
“Why not you?” She gave him a suggestive look he knew was supposed to throw him off. He had spent decades with Tony Stark, the master of keeping people off balance and he didn’t bite. She rolled her eyes, reaching for more bacon.

“Because on the day I showed up, panicked at Fury’s signal, having watched people just disintegrate in front of me, you were the one person who called me out on my shit. I was ready to do what I do, just go out there and kick ass and take names and damn the consequences. You had no fear in just telling me to slow my roll and calm the hell down, and that's...nice, I guess. Having someone who isn’t afraid to stand up to me.”

“You do realize the massive egos I deal with on a regular basis, right?”

“I am well aware, but it’s still nice to hear. I think sometimes people are so busy being in awe of me they forget that I’m still human. It’s nice when someone remembers.”

She was all too human, all right, and well he knew it. For all her insane abilities, she had the frail heart and broken psyche of every human he ever knew. “How about this? We don’t label this anything at all. We are two friends who just like spending time with one another, who care about each other a great deal, and on occasion like to let loose and be intimate together. I think that is a very adult definition that is both open and clearly sets out what we mean to one another.

“I don’t know, ‘booty call’ was warming on me.”

His glare only earned a delighted peel of laughter out of her as she returned to her waffle. “You’re a menace, Danvers.”

“Well, I do try to be. You are entirely too caught up in regulations and dress code, Colonel. You’ve been playing straight man to Tony Stark for far too long. Time to live a little!”

“By living a little, you do know I have my own private pool in the backyard thanks to Tony and no way for neighbors to see in, right?”

That piqued her interest. “Really? That’s rather daring, Colonel!”

“I have my moments.”

“Tony is a horrible influence on you.”

“Unless you want to hear stories that will make your hair curl, I suggest taking that back.”

Her only response was to grin around a forkful of waffle. “Make me!”

Later that evening when they showed up in upstate New York relaxed and grinning goofily at one another, Romanoff at least had the grace not to say anything. And, if she noticed the slight pink on Danver’s pale nose and cheeks from the California High Desert sun or that Rhodey was a bit stiff walking in his braces, she ignored it politely, save for a quiet “good job” to Carol as they made their way out for dinner.
Chapter 29

The virtual chess board hovered between them in the stillness of the quiet lab, glowing faintly in the dim light. Bruce studied the board quietly as on the other side of the thick lab walls behind which he sat, Natasha watched lazily, attention torn between him and the Charlie Brown Christmas special she had put on, bored with waiting on him to move. He ignored her as she shot him pointed glares through the reinforced glass, knowing he was trying her patience and doing it on purpose.

“I could just declare you the in check and move on with my life.” Her tone was dry as she picked at a fingernail painted badly in festive red and green.

“And where would the fun in that be?”

“For me, I’d get out of playing this game.”

“You would think a Russian assassin would be better at chess.”

“I think it’s cute you make these stereotyped assumptions on my capabilities, though I suppose it’s to be expected that the nerd with a handful of doctorates would be amazing at chess.”

“And who is working off stereotypes?”

“Is it one, really, when it’s true?” She tapped a foot to a rhythm only she could hear at the moment. A small part of his brain rerouted from how to best annoy her with chess strategy and tried to piece out the ballet from whatever it was she was tapping out.

“The Firebird?”

She snorted. “The Nutcracker and you need to work on your Russian composers.”

“I know orchestral works and opera better.”

“From just hearing me tapping my toe?”

He conceded that point. “Are you working on The Nutcracker with the kids?”

“They have a recital the week of Christmas for the board.”

“Are they excited?”

“Nervous I think is more the word.” She smiled fondly as she held up her nails. “Though, they did pin me down to do these.”

“I saw! I think the sparkles suit you.”

“I do too.” She nodded to the chess game. “You might want to make a move before the new year, though.”

Natasha was rarely ruffled and it amused him that he managed it. “This is bugging you.”

“Not bugging as much as I dislike being strung along.”

Her statement was loaded. Still, he chose to ignore it as he finally made a move, almost to her palatable sigh of relief. He smirked as he leaned back, allowing her to survey the board. He watched
her, keen eyed as she studied it critically.

“So will there be a big party then, for the kids?”

“Yeah,” she murmured, cocking her head in the way she had when she was thinking. “A swank event, actually. Pepper pulled quite a few strings to get some high profile people involved and draw attention to the global challenge of kids left orphaned by Thanos. My bunch are going to get to dance for the President.”

“Well, then, they’ll be superstars.”

“If they don’t fall over.” A hint of pride lurked in her chuckle. She had taken up this charge of herding all the orphaned kids she could, working to try and find resources for them and provide shelters. It had been her baby, her pet project in the year-and-a-half since everything went to hell, and it was finally starting to get off the ground. Bruce couldn’t help but feel happy that her hard work was paying off.

“Wish I could be there to see them,” he offered, watching as she reached a finger to the wave at a virtual piece and move it to a different spot.

“Wish you could too. You’re already a festive green color. You could be Santa Claus.”

“Or a giant walking Christmas Tree.” He eyed himself in the reflection of the glass and steel that cut off the lab wall from everywhere else. Over a year in and the effects of his efforts seemed to be paying off. The ever-increased doses of Gamma radiation had worked - in a way. He had morphed into his Hulk form, tall, green and muscular, but with the higher brain function of his non-Hulk self. He had succeeded in merging the two halves of the whole into a mostly-functioning, whole human being. Sure, Hulk still got the better of his temper sometimes, perhaps making him a bit more snappish, but never to the point that he was raging. Given another couple of months he could perhaps even leave the Gamma lab for good and go out into the world once more. What he would do in that new world, that remained a mystery. He’d been so long removed from it, the idea of actually being a part once more was vaguely terrifying.

Still, his Christmas tree crack made Natasha smile. “Ahh, the kids would have fun with that. Maybe we could find an extra, extra, extra large, ugly Christmas sweater.”

“I am not looking forward to clothes shopping when I get out of here.” He studied the board again. Whether by design or frustration she had paved the way for him to take the game. He could just toy with her a bit more before going in for the kill, but he had a feeling her patience wouldn’t last much longer. “How upset would you be with me if I moved into check?”

“How about I concede the game like I wanted to a move ago?”

“Very well,” he sighed as she marked the virtual board as a win for him. The board spun out of existence at that, leaving only the lab wall between them.

“I should get Tony in here to play with you one of these days.”

“Tony may be brilliant, but he’s awful at it. He lacks patience or any sense of strategy, always on the attack. I cream him worse than you and then he gets bored with it and wonders if we can mechanize it.”

Ignoring the fact computers have been playing for years?”

“Yeah, well, details.” Bruce could only smile fondly at Tony’s impatience with the game, his brain
running on too many levels to ever stay focused on it. “Steve’s amazing at it, though. Goes without saying, I guess, the tactical genius is good at the game of strategy.”

“When next he comes by, I’ll have him play a round with you.”

Those keywords, ‘when he comes by’. Bruce wasn’t an idiot. For all that he was in the basement, he kept an eye on things in the facility. FRIDAY monitored who came and went on a regular basis. Natasha was here all the time, having just made her home here. In fairness, he wasn’t so sure she had anywhere to go other than here. Rhodey swung by on occasion as his missions allowed, and every so often the more space-based members of the team would stop in to catch up and say hello. Steve, however, was noticeably absent.

“How’s Steve doing, by the way?” He leaned back into the massive arm chair, a handmade gift from Tony for Bruce’s birthday.

“Fine, I guess. He checks in from time to time, makes sure things are okay. He’s been taking psychology and counseling classes.”

“So he’s really taking up Wilson’s old gig?”

“Yeah.” Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “He’s doing some course at CUNY-Brooklyn, powering through them from what I hear.”

“Typical Steve. Overachiever.”

“Says the man with seven doctorates.”

“Only six of those are Ph.D.s. The last one is an MD.”

“I stand corrected.” Her smirk was playful and it struck him that this was the easiest conversation they’d had in a long time, certainly the easiest since he had returned from Sakaar and the whole fall out from Thanos. He’d been squirreled away here in the basement, hidden here just in case the worst should happen, close enough to Tony that if he needed he could come over, while still being monitored by the rest of the Avengers. That said, Natasha wasn’t always there to entertain him. She had a life and responsibilities after all, and on the occasions she did come to visit there was always an air of polite tension about it. That she hadn’t been thrilled with his idea had been evident from the beginning, but as the months wore on and he didn’t seem to either fall into madness or tear up the joint, she relaxed somewhat, falling into the patterns of friendship she had with most everyone else. He did note she hadn’t relaxed on their relationship just being platonic. That hurt, yes, but with all of this right now, perhaps it was for the best. After all, with the way things were...well, yes, it was best that perhaps things had fallen out as they had. Perhaps that sort of relationship with anyone was out of the cards for him.

“So it’s just you holding down the fort here?” He shifted the conversation away from the painful, back to the mundane.

“Just me,” she replied, glancing around the room expansively. “I always wanted the house all to myself without the kids, but I don’t know if this is what I had in mind.”

“And what about the Avengers?”

“What about them?” He could see those defenses of hers slam up, despite how calm she met his question.

“I mean, where are they?”
“The Avengers, such as they are, are about trying to hold things together.”

“Natasha…”

“Look, it’s not like it’s been all kumbaya since the Sokovia Accords and the registration acts, okay.” There was that flicker of the old hurt. “And people have been through a lot, Steve especially. If he wants to go off and help the world in a different way, than fine. I mean, not everything he does needs to involve a shield. Not that he has that anymore, anyway.”

Bruce had noticed that but hadn’t said anything. “Where did that end up?”

“Tony has it, last I knew about. I don’t know if he kept it or not.”

Bruce knew some of what happened between them, not why Steve walked away from the shield or from being Captain America. “You know, the last person I would have thought would just flake out of all this was him.”

“He’s not flaking out. He’s still around leading aid missions as needed.” Natasha’s defense was immediate and reminded Bruce just how much he had missed by being off world. Steve and Nat had always been close, since their SHIELD days, but their friendship had strengthened in their time on the run and he envied that she trusted Steve more than Bruce. Not that he had anyone to blame on that but himself.

He at least had the grace to concede her point, though. “All right, he’s still around, I will admit that. Just, he was our captain! I mean, sure, Tony loves to take the spotlight and boss people around, but Cap was the leader of the Avengers.”

“Maybe he was tired of being a figurehead, all that ‘symbol for the nation’ crap. Seventy-years and I’d be over it too.”

“And to hell with the responsibility to everyone else with it?”

“Is it his responsibility to fix all this by himself?”

“No, but…” He drifted off, losing the thread of his argument.

“Why does it fall on just him?”

Bruce found himself caught in his own checkmate, a web easily spun by the Black Widow who watched him with cool, green eyes. Perhaps she was crap at chess, but she sure was good at psychology, and he had stepped into that one. He stuttered, trying to find a good reason and realizing in fact he had a very small one. “Because he’s Captain America and we need a superhero.”

“We or you?”

She was too damn good at this.

“I’m just a guy, Nat, a scientist, a nerd who knows your moves seven steps ahead, but when faced with the big things, I…fail.”

It was the story of his life, really. Seven doctorates and he still failed at everything, at relationships, at saving the world, at fixing himself. Hell, he was as responsible as Tony for the hot mess that was Ultron and the events that led to the creation of Vision. Had they taken more care with him, if they had just left the Mind Stone alone, would any of this ever happened? Would Vision even have existed, let alone had to die?
“We all failed, Bruce.”

“Some of us failed more than others.”

She sighed, leaning forward in the chair she had camped in, elbows on her knees. “We all did, in big and small ways. None of us are perfect. You can blame Tony for his ego, thinking that he can manage this all on his own and making unilateral decisions that affected all of us because he thought he knew best. You could blame Thor who knew what the stones were and took off for three years without checking in with us or even providing us a lick of information on Thanos of the gauntlet. You could blame Steve, for choosing to stand on principle against Tony and for not coming to us all with what was happening so we could work through it together. Everyone had a role to play in what happened, and in the end, we still can’t even be sure that if we had been a united front we’d have been able to stop Thanos from doing what he did.”

She wasn’t wrong, he supposed.

“How did you fail?” They had spoken so little on their shared grief and loss, he didn’t even know for sure her feelings on it.

She was circumspect for long moments, flickering to whatever Christmas special was on screen without really seeing it. When she spoke again, it was low and sad, full of a grief she so rarely displayed to everyone else. “I failed to keep my team...my family...together. When I left the KGB, I left alone, swearing I was going to do it all different this time, I wasn’t going to be the pawn anymore. I went to SHIELD and thought I had that there, only to find out I was only someone else’s puppet. But you know, the one place I was just me, just Nat, was here, with all of you. I had a place here. Steve, he trusted me as his right hand. You know, that’s a lot for him to trust anyone and he gave that to me. Tony, hates all spies and hated me for getting one over on him like I did, but he respected me and he knew what my value was and never questioned my place on the team. Thor always saw me as a valuable warrior, the same as all the others. And Clint...well, you know that story. Even you, you listened to me when you had no reason to do so, not after everything that Ross did to you.”

India was an awful far, far way away from here, not just in geography, but in time as well. “You stood your ground even when I was being an asshole. How could I not admire you?”

She only gave him the most polite of grateful smiles. “The point is that I had something here, a place, a home, my own purpose outside of some existential entity, and I was doing good in this world, something positive, something right. I just wanted to keep on going and never stop. So, when Tony came in with Ross’ ultimatum, I didn’t really question what this would ethically mean for us or other enhanced humans in the world, or how it would inhibit people’s civil rights, or how we performed as a team, because I’d never thought of those things before. All I could think of was signing the dotted line so I can help keep my family together, whatever it took. I was willing to do anything, anything to keep them whole. In the end, not only did it not work, but I helped to split the team and compromised what in my heart I knew was right.”

Not for the first time Bruce fervently wished he had been there.

“What did Clint have to say about all of it?” If Natasha ever had a moral compass in this world it was usually Barton. He was always the one who could get her to listen to her better angels. He wondered, not for the first time, where he was in the world now and how far down the dark rabbit hole he had wandered down.

“Clint sided with Steve.” She chuckled, likely at the dry irony of it all. “You know, they were trying to hold Wanda prisoner. Ross said she was a ‘weapon of mass destruction’.”
Bruce only vaguely knew the girl and not in a good way. The rest of the team had time to build positive feelings about her, he had not. “Frankly, having been on the receiving end of one of her whammies and then destroying Johannesburg, I feel they had a point.”

“She was still human, Bruce, and a girl who had lost everything again and again and been lied to. She was trying to turn her life around, to have a new start, to be an Avenger and do good in the world. If there is anyone who could relate to that, it is me.”

And again, she had a point. “You know, I should stop arguing with you because you’re kicking my ass.”

“Not so much fun on the other side of the chess board, ehh?” Her teasing made him smile, despite himself. “Wanda was a good kid. She was lied to by HYDRA. She was frighteningly powerful, but in her heart she only wanted to do good, to be a hero, and Ross wanted to lock her away to use her as a tool, just like someone else I know.”

And there was her checkmate...again.

“So, Clint stuck with the side not trying to use young woman as weapons.” Bruce eyed Natasha pointedly. “As did you, in the end.”

“Hey, we all have to have our moral compasses.” She shrugged with a wry look. “I didn’t have one for a long time, so you know, having one is sort of still hard. For what it’s worth, Tony wasn’t wrong. I think, in his way, he was trying to do the same thing I was. He was right, these fights we kept getting drug in were destroying cities, people were being affected in horrible ways. Then again, the fights we had weren’t exactly cakewalks either. Still, Tony saw the longer game. He knew Thanos was a threat, and he knew that the world powers did have a point and was willing to compromise in order to keep the Avengers together for the ultimate threat that Thanos posed. Unfortunately, he did that without thinking through all the effects and full ramifications or even explaining any of it to us in a full fashion.”

“Not unusual for Tony.”

“No, but he’s not totally at fault for the fall out from the Avengers. There was a lot going on...a lot that happened. There are things that broke out, wounds that opened that had never fully healed, Tony’s crazy, Steve’s crazy, just...a lot. All that to say that you weren’t the only one who failed.”

If only his own crazy could figure out that simple fact.

“I guess we are all flawed human beings. Who would have thought that for a bunch of superheroes?”

“Being perfect is overrated. How boring is that?”

Bruce thought that he for one wouldn’t mind being a little less of a hot mess for once in his life. “So where does all of this leave us?”

“As in?”

“The Avengers? I mean, here you are, holding down the fort, while everyone else is out there. Where does this leave everything?”

Her shoulders raised eloquently. “That...I don’t know. We try to do what we can with what we can. That’s all we can do, for right now.”

What they could with what they can. Survival in its most basic sense.
“You got me,” he stretched now one impossibly long leg out in front of him. “I mean, what else am I going to do? The only home I have is here and all the other superheroes are off finding themselves. You all need someone who has some oomph to call on.”

Something calculated passed over Natasha’s face before quirking into a question. “You sure about that?”

“Yeah.” His smile was wryly accepting. “I mean, seriously, where else am I going to go? You guys were my family, too! I think, maybe, I forgot about that for a while.”

“We could use you. I mean, Thor was our only person with superpowers and he’s incommunicado at the moment.”

He suspected that was her polite way of saying Thor was ignoring their efforts to reach out to him. “I can, you know, be the muscle, I guess. First time I can use it effectively, not just smashing things.”

“Though, if we need smashing, you’re willing to do that too, right?”

It was moments like these he realized how much he really did miss her. “Why do I feel like I was railroaded through this entire conversation to come back to the Avengers?”


“Seriously, that’s three times in this conversation alone I played into your hands.”

“It’s what I do.”

“You set your web and bam, there I am, in the middle of it before I know it. I’m beginning to wonder if you are really being bad at chess.”

“Guess we’ll never know now, will we?” She was totally unrepentant. He found he didn’t mind.

“You ever think you could have had a career as a true evil genius?”

“Who says I didn’t?” She laughed, sighing as she ran hands through her hair, longer again and now with a strange omber effect of her red hair growing out of the blonde she had dyed it as. “You’re birthday is coming up and Christmas. Should do something for it.”

“I haven’t celebrated my birthday in years.”

“It’s a big one.”

“Yeah, 50 isn’t something I’m rushing out to tell everyone.”

“Still, it’s a big deal. Like you said, we are your family. You don’t have to be by yourself, Bruce. You never did.”

He only blinked at her as she turned heel to head back upstairs and to the world beyond, the world he hadn’t dared believe he could be a part of till now. “Enjoy your Christmas specials! I got to check my emails. I’m expecting something from Rhodey tonight.”

“Sure!” He watched her go, feeling that familiar sense of loneliness for company, but for the first time in a long time it was accompanied by something he hadn’t felt in so long he didn’t think he could recognize it...hope.
Chapter Summary

In which it is Morgan's first birthday.

The mornings always started out just the same in the Stark household.

“FRIDAY, give me Ms. Morgoona’s vital stats, please?”

“As of today, after exactly 12 months of life, Morgan is 19 pounds and 29 inches tall. She has already reached mobility and has begun to toddle unaided on her own. Please be aware, boss, not to leave your tools within easy reach any longer.”

“Duly noted,” Tony grunted as he poured an obscene amount of black coffee into a Stark Industries mug.

“She is advanced in her verbal skills, having managed to learn words for ‘dada’ and ‘mama’ and is trying clumsily to say ‘Friday’.” He could swear there was a hint of maternal sentiment in his AI’s voice at that. “She still struggles with the rhotic sound, which is typical for children her age. I’m afraid she will still be saying Colonel Rhodes’ nickname as ‘woady’ for a while yet.”

He couldn’t help but snicker as he wandered to the fridge to decide between good life choices or bad for breakfast. “He thinks it’s cute, so I’ll allow it, but let’s work on some games for her for her language, hit up her speaking skills. Also, maybe start in on some rudimentary reading, just for good measure.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“You know, throw some math in there. Can’t have my daughter not knowing how to add.”

“She’s a year old, Tony, she doesn’t need to be doing advanced trigonometry.” Pepper wandered into their spacious kitchen with the birthday girl herself sitting on her hip, babbling as she immediately reached to grab for Tony’s outstretched arms.

“Dada,” she crowed as he snuggled her close, kissing the top of her dark head.

“Hey there, Morgoona, my light, my love...oh, and hey, babe!” He grinned as he snagged Pepper around the waist to kiss her as well before she wandered to the coffee maker to make a mug as big as his own with more cream and sugar in it.

“I’m glad you remembered me. Most mornings princess there has you all tied up in less than five seconds.”

“Not less than five seconds...more like ten.” He set his daughter into her high chair, a hand crafted job he had made after his doubts regarding the market brands Pepper was eyeing. This one had enough nanotechnology in it to make it a tank if need be - not that he’d admit that to his wife, who would have balked at the very notion of wrapping her daughter in a protective shell and things like the words “obsessive” and “neurotic” would start coming out. Sometimes in a marriage, as he was finding out, it was just better to leave things be, for everyone’s sake.
It did have repulsers on it though, for ease of movement. Little ones. She’d grumbled, but said nothing.

“So, big day, Morgan! Got to have a power breakfast! Banana? Cheerios? Both?”

The grabby hands went for both along with the word “milk”, which her father dutifully endeavored to provide for her as Pepper rumbled in the cabinets for cereal. Something disgustingly healthy, no doubt.

“So the cake is ordered?” Pepper liked her checklists. She stood with her yogurt and granola and he made a face eyeing it.

“Yep, Happy is grabbing that in town on his way in.”

“And there is a photographer?”

“Every shot of our lovely daughter will be recorded for posterity.”

“What about party games? Did we think of those?”

Tony tried not to side-eye his wife as he poured some organic, whole wheat Cheerios wannabe on Morgan’s tray. “Honey, she’s one, she’s not old enough to be talked into those stupid things.”

“Party games aren’t stupid!”

“I tolerated the ‘taste the baby food’ game for your baby shower and that only under extreme duress. I put my foot down on the ‘sniff the diaper’ game.”

Even Pepper cringed at that one, though she did snort around a mouthful of coffee. “Yeah, that was my assistant’s idea.”

“It was disgusting, and beyond that it was cheesy and no one likes cheesy party games.”

“Might I remind you of some of your party games from the past?”

Her arched eyebrow indicated she remembered all too well some of his more inventive ones, mostly because of the trouble they caused. “I made good party games.”

“Your party games wouldn’t be out of place in a Roman orgy.”

“And this is horrible because?”

That certainly didn’t amuse her.

“All right, I will grant they weren’t the sort we would want at a child’s first birthday, but I stand by what I said.”

“Yeah, well, how are we going to entertain our guests?”

“It’s family and close friends, Pep, I think they are well used to hanging out with us and being bored.” As elaborate as his wife’s daily life in the office was, with assistants and meetings, protocols and timelines, you would think she’d relish the idea of not having to do something fancy for once in her life. But, it was Morgan’s first birthday, and in fairness Pepper loved planning and doing things. It was why he kept her as his personal assistant for years longer than he should have and why he gave her his company to run.
“You know what, I’ll go look up some things online, see what I can find. I bet I can whip up something quick. Maybe some party favors ...”

“Yeah, babe, you go do that.” He’d leave her to it. It was best that way, honestly. He shook his head as he watched her wander off with coffee and a bowl of granola and yogurt to her office, looking down at Morgan who sipped happily at her milk.

“Just saying, sometimes with your Mom, better just to let it go.”

Morgan’s dark eyes crinkled as she giggled up at him. How could you not smile at that?

“It’s the same rule of thumb with me, too. Sorry, kid, you have very meticulous, OCD parents.” He ruffled her hair, returning to his internal debate on whether to eat healthy or not that morning when the unmistakable wooshing of a repulsor sounded from the front lawn. Considering he was standing right there, that left only one likely candidate.

“Uncle Woady is here, pumpkin! Your favorite!” As much as he could encourage this most annoying and adorable of nicknames, he would. Besides, it was worth it to see her eyes light up as she tried to turn in her high chair to see him come through the door. He gently tapped it to direct it to the front of the house as Rhodey hit the door with a grin that lit up his face, swooping in to snag her out of her chair, gooey with banana, milk and organic Cheerios.

“How is my best girl today?” He spun her around as she squealed and clapped sticky hands to his cheeks.

“She’s going to puke on you in a minute if you aren’t careful.” Tony only spoke from experience, finally voting on something in between for breakfast, a frozen veggie omelette he could eat with toast. “Breakfast?”

“Nah, I ate at the facility before I came over.”

He nodded, unpackaging Pepper’s pre-made food and throwing it into the microwave. He kept half-an-eye on his food, half-an-eye on his daughter as Rhodey blew a raspberry on her tummy before setting her on the counter to grab a paper towel and attempt a clean up. There were only three people Morgan may love more than Rhodey; Happy, Pepper, and himself, and frankly most days he assumed Happy won. He blamed it on the fact the man spoiled his goddaughter rotten with every chance he got.

“Looks like I’m forever cleaning Starks out of messes, huh?” Rhodey dampened a paper towel enough to scrub down hands and face while Tony managed his food, grateful for the breather to at least get some modicum of sustenance in him. With Morgan it was a challenge, if nothing else because she had Pepper’s less obtrusive nature and all of Tony’s innate curiosity. She was sneaky as hell and without him looking she would be in the trash, up the stairs, or fishing in the toilet. She was like a toddler sized Romanoff with all the brilliant potential of her Stark forebears. He hoped she got some of the Potts common sense, else they would all be doomed.

“What’s this ‘cleaning up after Starks forever’ business?” He finally caught back up to the thread of Rhodey’s conversation as he waited for the hot, jiggling mass of organic egg and homegrown veggies cooled enough for him to take a bite without burning the roof of his mouth off.

Rhodey was unapologetic in his estimation of the situation. “Seriously, you need me to answer that question?”

“It’s not forever, just...you know, mostly since I’ve known you.”
“Oh, so who is being pedantic?”

“I’m just pointing out I’ve grown up a lot since you first met me and give me some credit.”

“That part I won’t disagree with.” He gave the squirming Morgan one last swipe across her mouth before booping her nose playfully, earning a giggle for his efforts. “One day, when you are a lot older, I’ll tell you about the hot mess your daddy was when I first met him.”

“Ah, well, she’ll have lots of stories.” He shook his head, finishing his food enough to clean up the plate and finish his coffee while Morgan was preoccupied. He glanced at the framed photo of his father, sitting on the shelves just above the sink. “You know, when I was growing up, it was all about my old man and how awesome he was, what a great man he was, a titan of the industry, blah, blah, blah. I didn’t find out the actual shit he was up to until I was older.”

“What, the fact that he was downlow working for spies or that he once slept with half of Hollywood?”

“And most of New York, give the man his credit.” Tony couldn’t talk much on that score - literally, it tended to make Pepper cranky. “When I knew him he wasn’t the crazy inventor in his basement making wonders and changing the world. He was overworked, stressed out, angry at everything, and just bitter at the world. He couldn’t crack a joke unless it was to demean someone else. Honestly, Mom was the only saving grace he had. She was his Pepper, the one thing that made him good and decent.”

“Hey and he had you, didn’t he?”

“Not precisely a shining example of my Mom there. I take far too much after Howard for my own good, down to the sarcastic asshole.”

“Well, yeah, can’t get away from that.” Rhodey scooped up Morgan again, wandering to her play area. “FRIDAY, enact Baby Jail Protocol.”

“Protocol enacted.” A series of nanobytes grew out of the walls, forming a barrier that would adjust as Morgan got older and tried to test her boundaries. That was one of his better inventions, he felt, and certainly safer than the force field he had originally used in the first Baby Jail protocol. Morgan was rather good natured about it all as she sat on her play pad, oblivious to the strangeness of it before crawling over to her favorite pile of toy blocks to bang them together loudly.

“Still one of the best names I ever concocted for an invention.” Tony had loved the idea. Pepper...less so...but had tolerated it with the hope Morgan would never remember being in “baby jail”.

“Better than BARF, that’s for sure.” Free of baby, Rhodey made for the coffee himself. “So, Nat said she may swing by for a bit. She’s got a gift for Morgan.”

“That’s nice of her.” Truth be told, it would be nice to see Romanoff or any adult that wasn’t Rhodey, Happy or Pepper. “How are things over there?”

“Holding on, at least.” Rhodey shrugged, sipping out of his large mug. “You’re always welcome to go say hi, you know.”

“Already got a job of Morgan wrangling!”

“Could take her with you to say hello.”
“I’m not an Avenger anymore. I go over there as requested to fix tech and make sure the place doesn’t blow up.”

“Then go tinker on some things. See Natasha and Bruce. He says he’ll be done...cooking, whatever, soon. He’d love to see you and Morgan.”

“I talk to him all the time via video.”

“Not the same.”

“Yeah, well not good to take Morgan near the Gamma Radiation lab, because, obviously.”

“Okay.” Rhodey shot back with a hint of frustration, shaking his head as he sipped his coffee.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Rhodes, seriously, if you have something to say…”

“I never thought I’d say this, but you need to stop avoiding people.”

And there it was. “I’ve not been avoiding anyone.”

“Really? When was the last time you left the house?”

“I went into town just yesterday.”

“I mean to some place not Poughkeepsie.”

“I took Pepper out to dinner at that swank new place in Downtown Manhattan just last week. Date night.”

“Tony...people ask about you.”

Tony couldn’t help his eye roll. “And by ‘people’ you mean the reconstituted Avengers.”

“They are people. Maybe not the raccoon, we haven’t decided.”

“He’s technically not a raccoon, but whatever, the point is, I’m not avoiding anyone. I’m, what, less than an hour away by car? Doors always open, Pepper likes cooking for people, apparently.”

“You know what I mean.”

He did. “I gave that up, buddy, you know that. I can’t...look, we all know me and my personality, right, my many defects, and you know what will happen the minute I get sucked into whatever problem you all are trying to solve. First, I’m just telling myself it’s consulting, then I’m partnering, and next thing I know I’m in a suit trying to take on giant, purple aliens because I think it’s my job to save the universe.”

“No one is asking you to put on anything.”

“That’s just the thing, you don’t have to.” He leaned a hip sullenly against the countertop, staring out the back window to the shaded woods beyond. “Romanoff wasn’t wrong when she did that evaluation of me, you know, way back. God, that’s been...a minute or two ago.”
“Nearly ten years.”

Tony shook his head, considering all they had been through in those ten years. “Thing is, save for Thanos and the snap, the rest of it...I don’t know if I’d change those ten years. Remember me before Afghanistan?”

“Hell, I remember you in Afghanistan. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how drunk you got me.”

“Yeah.” He only remembered that flight in bits and pieces, honestly, and he never could tell if it was the booze or the trauma that muddled it all up in his mind. “I don’t know, I grew to be a better person out of that, right?”

Rhodey’s features softened somewhat at the hesitancy in Tony’s voice. “Hey, being Avengers made us all better people, I think.”

“We were a good team.”

“Still are.”

Tony shrugged. “You know I can’t do it anymore and why I can’t. Life moves on and I came out the other side and I grew up and now I’m living a good life, one I’m ridiculously happy with. For once in my whole existence, I’m...good. Beyond all my psychological issues, I’m just in a good place. I got Pepper, I got Morgan, I am creating new things, humanitarian stuff, working on ARC reactor tech we can use overseas, trying to figure out how to do things now with less manpower…”

“I get it, Tony. I’m not asking for you to do anything else other than reach out to people, you know. The Avengers, they were more than just people who beat up aliens for the fun of it. They were friends...a family. More family than most of us got.”

A family? Strange, he supposed, in the moment as he lived it, he wasn’t sure he thought of them as such. Frankly, if he were being brutally honest with himself as his therapist suggested, if anything he thought of the Avengers as a tactical unit, a group of people with some extraordinary talents who got together every so often when the Earth couldn’t handle the shit being thrown at them and they’d somehow make it all work. They were co-workers, not that he had ever had those ever, but that was the closest analogy he could think of. You didn’t have to like them, you didn’t have to put up with them, you may take them out for drinks, but that’s where it ended. But family…

As if to mock him, the image of Peter, just behind his father on the shelf by the sink, caught his eye. He frowned, the gut punch of guilt that usually hit seeing Parker’s youthful face, the stupid certificate held upside down, the humor he found in the moment. He’d walked away from the Avengers. He had been both aggravated with and proud of him that day. He had left to go and have as much of a normal life of a kid as he could.

“I miss them,” he admitted softly as he found himself twiddling with a dishtowel, randomly twisting it and snapping it before wiping a counter needlessly. “I do, I miss all of you, even Rogers and his annoying optimism. You’re right, the closest any of us had to a family. But I did it already, I’ve been there, I have the scars to prove it. Everyone is welcome, come on out any time. I mean, seriously, when the weather gets good, let’s barbecue. I can get in some steaks, beer, I mean the good stuff too. But that life...I can’t flirt with it anymore, Rhodey. It’s not what I do.”

Rhodey sighed. “Fine, though for the record I wasn’t asking you to put on a suit. Just come and let people see you. You’re missed. And sure, we can maybe get people up for a weekend. Sounds nice.”
“Good!” Tony had a feeling the likelihood of that was slim to none, but it was the thought that counted, right? “So, anyway, Pepper is trying to figure out party games that are appropriate for a first birthday party.”

“It’s a kid’s birthday party. Don’t you just feed them full of sugar and let them loose screaming?”

“I don’t know, the woman I’m married to, she likes planning things.”

Even as he said it, he could hear her from her office announcing she had found a bingo game of all of a child’s first achievements they could play. Rhodey looked at Tony who only shrugged helplessly.

“Could always hide out in my garage and wait till its all over,” Tony offered as an alternative to bingo.

“What and let Hogan one up me in Morgan’s love and affection? No chance.”

“Hate to tell you this, buddy, he already has us all beat.”

“Because you named him her godfather.”

Yeah, Tony knew he’d not hear the end of that one. “Tell you what, if we have another one, he’s James, after you. Jamie if it’s another girl. Maybe we could go with Woady?”

“You know, that business has to stop.”

“What, Morgan can’t say the ‘r’ sound yet?”

“You encourage it and you know it.”

“Wonder if Danvers will find it cute...”

“Good thing she’s off planet and will never find out.”

He pouted. “You really do take the fun out of everything, don’t you?”

“Since we were kids at MIT, sure. That’s my job.”

Pepper wandered in, ignoring Rhodey standing there, pencil in her hair as she regarded her tablet in hand. “What about we do a trivia game where they guess Morgan’s favorite things?”

Rhodey turned a pleading gaze to Tony.

“Pepper, love of my life, mother of my child, keeper of all things sane in my world...about these party games...”

Rhodey damn well appreciate the fight he was about to pick.
On Uncertain Waters

Chapter Summary

In which Valkyrie has to settle an incident.

Well, as the saying used to go, it was good luck in a marriage if there were at least three fights and one embarrassing moment at the ceremony. If that was the measure by which Asgardians lived by for a healthy relationship, well this couple would have the luckiest of marriages or at least the sort of wedding they could tell tales of to their grandchildren.

“G’off, both of you!” Korg easily plucked the two drunken wrestlers off each other as they glared mutinously at each other from his stony grasp. “It’s a wedding, you guys! We should be celebrating, dancing!”

“He called my sister a whore!”

“That’s because she sleeps with anything that moves!”

“Just not you!”

Korg had to strain to hold the drunken pair from each other, looking as if he’d rather just bash their heads and be done with it. Valkyrie was half a mind to let him, but she decided to be the bigger person and stepped into it all, glaring at the pair.

“Right, what’s your name?” She eyed the dark-haired one in Korg’s left hand, a young one she had seen working the boats.

“Nori, Valkyrie.” He didn’t back down from her glare, a trait she liked in him. The temper, though, not so much, as he glared at the other fellow. “He’s been slandering my sister!”

“Just saying the truth!” The one on Korg’s right hand spat on the ground between them. “She’s a tease and flirt and nothing ever comes of it.”

“Jarl, shut it,” she snapped, glaring at the boy who was more familiar to her and not for good reasons. “What did I tell you about using that word?”

He knew what she was talking about and flushed under nut-brown skin, making the nasty bruise blossoming along his left cheek even brighter. “Valkyrie!”

“What did I tell you?”

He paled, seeming to go limp in Korg’s hands. “That next time I used it you’d remind me personally that women aren’t property and can choose to do whatever they want, including not being with me.”

Well, close enough she supposed. “And here we are, at a lovely occasion, and what are you doing?”

If the young man could shrink into himself, hanging ridiculously as he was by his shirt collar, she imagined he would. As it was, his dark eyes avoided hers as she stepped up, nearly nose-to-nose with him as he dangled. “I’m...using that word again.”
“And fighting over a woman as if she were the last piece of cake. What gives you that right?”

Jarl had clearly been into the copious alcohol, his eyes glazed a bit as he nearly melted under her gaze. “Nothing, Valkyrie, I just...I really like her and I wanted her to like me back.”

“And you think she’s going to want to be with you calling her awful names and picking fights at people’s weddings?”

“No,” he whispered, looking as if he wished thin air to open up and swallow him out of Korg’s grasp.

“Right, you are.” Her eyes flickered to Nori, who was grinning far too much for her liking. “And aren’t you related to the groom over there?”

The grin faded a bit as guilt flickered to life instead. “That’s my older brother, Valkyrie.”

“Right and it’s his big day, the first real celebration any of us have had since Asgard, and you are ruining it by picking fights?”

“But he called me sister...”

“Yeah, he did, and he should get his ass handed to him.” Her expression hardened at Jarl again. “But not at your brother’s wedding. After the party, I’ll set up the fight myself and let you two have at it. Till then, lay off the booze both of you and if I catch you two at it again, I’ll beat you both and then lock you inside the herring warehouse for a week. Am I clear?”

Both lads looked less than thrilled at complying, but when she lazily fondled the dagger on her hip they were all too eager to fall all over themselves to say yes.

“Korg, you can let them go, now.”

The Kronan did so with only the barest opening of his fingers as the two youths tumbled to the ground in a heap of limbs and grunts. They rose slowly, dusting off their relatively new, Earth-style clothes and still glaring at one another but at least sullenly keeping their silence. She eyed them both before standing out of the way, shooing them to the circle of dancing and food in the middle of the green swath in the center of town they’d set up the festivities at. She waited till they quickly separated paths to sulk before she turned, shaking her head.

“Fifth scuffle of this party and it’s not even halfway through.” She sighed, pushing her made up hair out of her eyes. She’d at least chosen to wear trousers and a nicer tunic, because after the second fight she’d separated she already looked as if she’d been in one herself.

“Ehh, everyone’s just having fun, messing about. It happens.” Not much phased Korg, to be sure, and he glanced around the crowd of merry-makers all dancing, eating, and chatting happily. “It’s good to let loose, to celebrate life and new beginnings, for all of us.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have to be drunk assholes about it.” She knew that was high talk coming from her, who had spent the better part of her existence off her face, but at least she hadn’t been an asshole about it...much.

“Ahh, well, you know how these things go. My uncle nearly started a riot at my mum’s second wedding, mostly because he was bored. Admittedly, he was at the table in the corner because no one liked him.”

“Maybe because he started riots for fun?”
“I always thought it was because he was that weird uncle no one liked, but now that you mention it, they sort of go together.” Korg fell into step beside her as they prowled the event. Most of what remained of the Einherjar were enjoying themselves and not trying to keep the peace, so Valkyrie took it upon herself to wander the event and keep people in line. She had never been one much for weddings anyway, and as for getting hammered, she’d spent most of a lifetime doing that. This gave her something to do other than be drunk and making a fool of herself - or picking fights like everyone else seemed to be doing.

Korg, on the other hand, just seemed to be enjoying the event itself. “Never been to an Asgardian wedding, you know. It’s very nice.”

“Well, it is a simple wedding for an Asgardian.” Not that they had much with which to throw the sort of parties they’d all grown used to on their home world. “But yeah, I guess it’s nice and small, which isn’t bad.”

“Human weddings are big deals! I’ve seen them on TV, they usually involve someone getting angry at someone else, and brides crying if their white dress isn’t perfect.”

She paused only so long as to shoot him a vaguely perplexed look. “You really need to stop watching so much television.” She hadn’t fallen in love with the very human form of entertainment the way that many of the refugees had, especially the young ones. She didn’t see the point, sitting around and watching other people do things when she could just as well do them herself.

Unsurprisingly, Korg disagreed. “It’s fun! You know, in America they have this sport where the entire point is to smash at each other for an hour while passing around this funny shaped ball just to score points. They call it ‘football’ which is weird because they don’t use their feet, except for running I suppose, unlike football here where they actually use their feet to kick the ball around and no hands. Anyway, it’s brilliant, no one gets killed or uses weapons and they get to go home at the end. They even wear pads to keep them safe. Imagine that! Humans are so much more civilized about things.”

She wasn’t sure they were more civilized by any Asgardian standards, but she could see Korg’s point she supposed. Compared to Sakaar, anything was more civilized. “So what do any of the humans make of you? I mean, you are a walking, talking pile of rocks.”

“Technically, I am not a pile of rocks so much as a living creature whose skin is made up of high levels of minerals that appear to look like rocks.”

“Whatever, humans don’t have walking, talking rocks on their planet.”

“Well, no. I own that I am somewhat disconcerting to the average human when first they see me and I can’t blame them. I’d be upset too if there was say a walking, talking tree around. Some of the kids get scared you know, but when they see I’m friendly, they usually warm up pretty quick. Dogs, though, they seem to think I’m some sort of toilet.”

She shouldn’t have laughed at that, maybe, but she did. “This planet is strange, you know.”

“I don’t know, it’s not so bad. It’s got it’s charm. The food is really good, and they have so many different kinds of places here. I’ve been reading it up on Wikipedia, spend hours on there.”

“I’m not saying it’s bad, just different. Like, for example, do you know that there are some places on this planet where I could be ostracized for the color of my skin and others where I’d be killed for the fact I prefer women to men in my bed?”
“I don’t know why any of that would make people want to kill you. I mean, maybe if you were threatening their lives or stealing their things.”

“I know!” She was no less baffled than he was. “Thankfully, not all humans are that way, else I’d wonder why it was Thor brought us here.”

Speaking of their erstwhile monarch…

“Oh oh,” Korg murmured, catching her as he pointed towards the high table beyond, just as a tall figure staggered up to where the bride and groom sat, staring wide-eyed at the God of Thunder, who grinned like an idiot as he wobbled and weaved in front of them.

“Cheers to the happy couple! Cheers!” He grabbed the groom’s hand, pumping it up and down exuberantly. “You’re Valdar, right?”

The man, a trained soldier in the Einherjar, was still jerked about by Thor despite his own strength. “Err, yes your Majesty, I’m the son of Davi, head of the palace guard on Asgard.”

“I remember your father well from when I was younger. He was a good man.” Thor’s manic smile only lessened a smidge. “And your lovely bride! What’s her name?”

The girl, resplendent in one of the fancy, puffy white dresses the humans preferred for weddings, blushed becomingly, clear to the roots of her chestnut hair. She gave her new husband a side-eye glance before answering nervously. “Jeni, your Majesty. I’m just the daughter of a baker, sir. No one special.”

“No one special?” Thor frowned now, weaving as he jerked upright to stare down at the little thing. “You’re alive and he loves you, that’s special!”

Cheers rose in the crowd at Thor’s blustering words, approval all around.

“And you make a lovely bride, Jeni!” Thor continued, reaching for a giant mug of something on the linen and floral spread table. “My friend, Anthony Stark, very rich and powerful man here on Earth, he thought that if he lifted Mjolnir that this would make him king, which is silly as that’s not what it does. Anyway, he said that if he was made King of Asgard he would reinstitute the practice of prima nocta. Now, I’m not well versed on all of my Midgardian languages, so I had my friend Natasha translate, because she speaks many, including that one, and she said it is Latin for ‘first night’. I had to ask what that meant, the first night of what? Apparently back in the day in Earth’s history, ancient kings would reserve the right to be the first person to have sexual intercourse with the bride after the wedding because she was their property or some such...I’m not really clear how this all works.”

The crowd suddenly went silent. At the table, Valdar tightened an arm around Jeni as he stared up at the king in shock, looking too stunned for words. All-in-all, a pin could drop in that place and would be as loud as a laser blast as Thor, oblivious, drank deeply from his cup.

“That’s done it,” Korg breathed, clapping a hand to his craggy face.

“Right, someone needs to get him out of here.” Already, she was on the move towards the front, but Thor had lowered his mug and stared, beaming good-naturedly to the crowd before cottoning on that something wasn’t precisely quite right. It took a full five seconds for the coin to drop.

“Wait, no, I wasn’t suggesting I should do that!” He quickly covered himself in nervous and embarrassed horror as rumbles began to ripple through the gathering. “No, no, I meant to say that I was thought it was a disgusting practice! I was shocked it was even a thing and that Tony suggested it, I mean it’s truly just the worst! But, you got to understand, back in the day before he was Iron
Man, he had quite the colorful life, did lots of things even I didn’t do as the Prince of Asgard. Just...yeah, not great things, didn’t really respect women the way that I do, that my mother, Queen Frigga, she taught me. But he does now! He’s a very good man now, he’s got a wife of his own! I went to their wedding, in New York, very lovely, like this, and he was so happy. And he respects Pepper, that’s his wife, and now he has a little girl who is just adorable and you know he wouldn’t want her to ever be treated like property, so I guess that goes to show you someone can change and grow for the better, learn to be a good person.”

Finally pushing through the press of people, Valkyrie reached to grab his free wrist, yanking him hard, uncaring of the liquid he sloshed as she muttered in a voice slightly louder than a stage whisper. “Thor, come on, you’re embarrassing yourself and these fine people. Let’s go sit somewhere else.”

“Valkyrie! Hi!” He turned his grin to her, not even aware of the hiss of muttering around them. “I was just toasting the new bride and groom!”

“And you’ve done it, so let’s go!” She shot the couple an apologetic smile. They both looked as if they had been hit by a space cruiser.

“No, no, let me give them a real toast and not talk about stupid Tony and his prima nocta.” He lifted his drink high, as everyone stared at him in vague shock. He blinked before waving his other hand to get them all to raise whatever glasses they held to recognize the couple. All those that had them complied, albeit in a slightly confused and somewhat worried fashion.

“To Valdar and Jeni! A long life together, full of happiness. You are the hope born out of the ashes of Asgard and all those we lost, and as we rebuild, it will be you that bring our future. Congratulations!”

Cheers swelled over the crowd, slow at first, but swelling as Thor finished his glass. The music started again and the sound of more than a few broken glasses punctuated the scene. The couple smiled again and all seemed to be right with the world.

She took her opportunity to snag the troublemaker and drag him away from it all before he could cause more trouble.

“Ow! What are you doing?”

She didn’t answer beyond a murderous glare as she drug him away from the party, Korg following close behind.

“I demand to know what you are up to, Valkyrie!”

She merely tugged him harder, her fingers tightening.

“Brunnehilde!”

“Call me that again and I’ll use you to beat the rest of the idiots out there making fools of themselves.”

“I was just giving the couple a toast!”

“You were making an ass of yourself was what you were doing.” She jerked him around in front of her, out of the celebration and out by the old church that had been destroyed during a war. Thor stumbled but held his ground, which was a feet in and of itself. The last two years had not been kind to him, or rather he had not been kind to himself. The mighty Thor, the strong and fit warrior she had met on Sakaar was now turning soft. He’d put on weight, there was no denying that, and he had lost
his quickness and agility. Hell, he couldn’t be relied on to stand up straight anymore without falling on his ass. Between his now scraggly hair and overgrown beard and his stained, rumpled clothes, he looked less the King of Asgard and more a homeless hermit who had somehow wandered into the wedding.

“Thor, you’re a mess is what you are.” She sighed, hands on her hips as he attempted to pull together his “god of thunder” face and failed. “You do realize you likely insulted everyone there.”

“What? It was a funny story!”

“Most of them know of Tony and Pepper Stark and now they know that he once joked around about raping women on their wedding night.”

Clearly, he hadn’t thought of that. “I don’t think he was serious, first of all, and second of all, Natasha said no one really did it, that it’s a myth.”

“Even if it wasn’t, it’s horrible, but beyond that, he’s the man who is helping us, his wife is helping us, and now they are going to think he believes in a vile practice because you thought the story was funny.”

“If they believed that about Tony, well they just don’t know him.”

“No, they don’t!” Her voice rang louder than she had meant it to, causing several to turn and glance at them. She scowled back, causing them to quickly look to doing something else.

“Tony has his moments, I won’t lie. Like, you know, the whole Ultron business, he didn’t think that one through, but in his defense his head wasn’t quite there. Had his head messed with by a witch, and he and Pepper were having some fight I believe, so really not his best behavior, but on the whole he’s not a bad guy at all. He’s my friend, he wouldn’t be if he was horrible.”

“And when was the last time you spoke to your friend, hmmm?” She knew that answer and she didn’t even need to ask, but she wanted him to think about it. He frowned, paused, considering.

“I don’t know. I think I spoke to Pepper recently, didn’t I?”

“She came to say hello and you hugged her, belched in her face, then proceeded to go into your room and fall on your bed.”

“Oh!” He blinked, as if trying to pull that memory up from somewhere and failing. “Well, far from the first time someone’s done that to her.”

“Yeah, well, she passed on Stark’s well wishes, but I’m sure you don’t remember that.”

“Now that you mention it…”

“You know Steve Rogers has been calling every other week or so just to see why you aren’t answering your phone.”

That made him look somewhat guilty. “Steve...yeah, I see him calling, and I keep meaning to call back, but you know, time difference between New York and here.”

“It’s six hours, you can call him during the day. He’s your friend and he is concerned. They all are. They all call me because they don’t know why you are shutting them out.”

“I’m not shutting them out! I don’t see them showing up to say hello.”
“And if they did, would you see them?”

He flushed in guilt and anger. “They are off doing their Avenger thing and I don’t do that anymore. I’m here with my people, the people I abandoned to go run around the universe.”

“Right, I see how much you are there for your people.” She sniffed, throwing an arm out to them. “When was the last time you bothered showing up for a council meeting?”

She had him and he knew it. “I was never great with those.”

“Well then, how about working down at the docks or helping with rebuilding efforts. I hear you’re pretty mean with a hammer and axe.”

She was goading him and she meant to. Valkyrie wanted to see the spark of something rise in him, literally. For half a moment, she thought she could feel the electric crackle of energy around them, the hint of a spark of blue pulsing in his mismatched eyes. But then it was gone as he shrugged rounded shoulders that drooped under his wrinkled shirt.

“They’ve been getting on just fine without me around to muck it up.”

She could only blink at him. “They’re your people! Do you think that I risked my life going through the Devil’s Anus for my health? How about your friend, Banner? You kept insisting you needed to get back, stop Hela, and save Asgard.”

“And I did! And where did it get us?”

She sighed, knowing she couldn’t argue that. “Fine, it ended disastrously, but there are still those of us alive, many of us, and that was because of you. And they still need a leader, Thor, someone to look to in the middle of all of this.”

If anything, her words only seemed to make him wilt more. “I’m not that person.”

“What do you mean? You were born to it.”

“Yeah, well I never was great with it. I always wanted to go out and fight, to find adventure, to be a hero. I wanted to have people love me and respect me because of my great and heroic deeds. None of that makes for a very good king. Great kings don’t want to show off or have groupies.”

She wasn’t even sure what a groupie was. “No, but good kings care about their people. You do care, I know you do, else you wouldn’t have risked so much for them. They still need you, Thor, the real you, not...like this.”

For the first time in their entire conversation he appeared to look somewhat lucid as he regarded her evenly. “All that is left is this.”

Her heart sank at the firmness of his words. “Thor…”

“Our people don’t need me, they’ve got a Valkyrie, a noble warrior. You’ve got this. Anyway, I’ve put in my appearance and wished the couple well. I’m going to go take a nap. Have fun!”

With as much dignity as one drunken sot could muster he turned on his heels and stumbled back down the hill towards the shack he claimed with Korg and Miek, weaving his way down the swath of grass. Had she not been that way herself not so long ago, she might have been more disgusted, but right now she was just sad.
“He’ll be all right when he’s crashed for a bit.” Korg had come up from behind, watching Thor stumble off. “Wish there was a way to get him to snap out of it.”

“There isn’t one, really, till he wants to snap out of it.” She tugged on her braid fretfully, watching him. She knew he would go back into his hole of misery and alcohol and they may or may not see him again for a while. It wasn’t a way to live a life, especially not a life as long as theirs.

In the distance, she could hear shouts and insults and the start of another scuffle threatening.

Korg sighed deeply. “Seriously, everyone, this is a wedding! Can’t we just, you know, get along or something?”

“What would the fun in that be,” she muttered, rolling her eyes as she tried to pinpoint the scene of the latest disturbance to break it up before someone went home with a black eye and broken jaw.
Needing A Hero

Chapter Summary

In which Bruce proves himself to be just the hero they needed.

“You sure you’re up for this?”

Bruce didn’t think he had been less up for anything his entire life.

“Yeah, I’m cool!” He was shooting for easy, casual smile. Steve and Natasha looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

“What? I mean, come on! It’s not like people haven’t seen the Hulk, right?”

“Yeah, last time they saw him he was tearing up Sokovia as it was flying overhead.” Natasha adjusted her sunglasses as they strolled through Central Park and the bright summer sunshine. Bruce had been out of the Gamma lab for weeks now, readjusting to life outside in this new body of his, but no one else had been given the chance to readjust to him. This was his first big step out into the world.

“Hey, I can’t be the weirdest thing New Yorkers have ever seen in their lives.”

“Fair point,” Steve offered wandering beside him. “I mean, they did have to deal with Loki and the Chitaurri destroying most of the city.”

“Not to mention Nebula’s adopted brothers showing up,” Natasha offered placidly. “And half the population of the entire world disappearing in front of their eyes.”

“Hey and then there’s the subway. You can’t really get weirder than that!”

Steve really was an unbridled optimist.

“Right now, I’ll just go for people not running screaming is all.” He shoved his now giant hands into the pockets of the impossibly large jeans that Natasha had ordered from somewhere. Sadly, shoes were still hard to come by, but he had on clothes - real clothes - and while he had to make do with what they could find Hulk sized it felt nice to feel...well, like a normal human being, for once not at odds with himself.

“It’s a summer’s day in Central Park. I think you’ll be fine.” Steve had slipped his own aviator glasses on, looking as calm, cool and collected as he did on those World War II propaganda posters. Bruce wondered if there was ever a day in his life when he ever felt depressed beyond words. God knows Bruce had more than a few of those days.

“So how is coursework coming?” Natasha directed the question to Steve. Clearly, she was up for changing the subject to something other than the obvious sore, green thumb sticking out between them.

“Really well, all things considered, I should be done by the end of this year and have already been accepted into a counseling program.”
Bruce blinked. “You know I heard sleep was a thing. Do you ever not study?”

“Look who’s talking. Besides, keeps me out of trouble! That’s what those PSA ads I had to record told me to say.”

“Oh, those gems! I can’t believe you got talked into those.” Natasha snickered. “I heard they show those in school now. Just think, you’ll be immortalized forever standing in front of a green screen talking about puberty.”

“Wonderful,” he winced at the chuckles at his expense. “Pepper said it was a favor.”

Natasha’s arched eyebrow said she didn’t buy that. “Couldn’t they have gotten a different outfit for you if it were a favor?”

“Yeah, no offense, Steve, the whole thing smelled like Tony Stark prank to me.” Bruce had always known Tony loved taking the crap out of Steve, partly out of a childish need to poke at Steve’s more serious nature, partly because of his own misplaced anger at his father, and all because Tony felt like it.

“Anyway, can we find and destroy all the copies?”

“Not in the age of the internet. It will live forever now.”

Natasha grinned, spinning backwards to regard them both, her sundress flaring becomingly on her slight frame. “You see the memes they have on Instagram?”

“It’s a go to on Twitter for me,” Bruce shot back as Steve regarded them both askance.

“You have a Twitter account?” Steve looked disbelieving at that.

“I’m 50, not dead,” Bruce shot back to Natasha’s delight as some private joke passed between her and Steve. Steve finally conceded, rolling his eyes as they wandered.

Around them people passed, some walking, others jogging, kids skateboarded by. Most stared at him for a moment, some seemingly trying to place what they were seeing, others gaped open mouthed. He thought he could hear teenagers openly whispering as they passed by. Natasha seemed unbothered by it all, coolly smoothing back her ponytail, still platinum blonde, unlike the hair at the top of her head which had grown out to its natural red.

“You holding up okay?”

“Yep,” he murmured, pushing his now oversized glasses up his nose. “I mean, not the first time in my life I’ve been taunted. Remember, nerdy science boy.”

“We got your back if anyone says anything.” Steve spoke with the steely resolve of a guy who had once been picked on mercilessly himself. Bruce found he appreciated Steve more in this moment than he knew possible.

“Where were you in my freshman year locker room,” Bruce quipped, remembering all too well the indignities of that particular right of passage.

“Buried under the ice, as I recall,” he replied instantly.

Well, yeah, there was that.

“I suppose that’s an excuse.”
The park itself was still a haven for all of those in the city who wanted to have something natural around them, even if half of them no longer were there. The city still had around 4 million people in it now and they all still came wandering through at some point. Bruce felt like all of them were there now, coming to stare at the freak of nature that was the Hulk dressed in real clothes and acting like a human being. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he could see a group of young people with their phones out, taking video.

“It’s good, you know.” Natasha nudged him gently. “They’ll get the word out that your back and have changed.”

“Seriously, do you see social media? I have a feeling someone will start calling me an inhuman freak and call for my deportation.”

“Thaddeus Ross is dusted, so how bad can it be?”

He shouldn’t smile at that, but he did, just a little. “You sound like Steve, Romanoff.”

She considering the other man beside him, smiling. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Steve only snorted in response. “You all act as if looking on the bright side makes me naive.”

“Well…” Natasha wrinkled her nose, earning a glare from Steve.

“I wouldn’t say naive is the word,” Bruce offered diplomatically.

“Pollyanna,” she countered.

“Still means naive,” Steve retorted.

“I’m Russian, Steve, we pride ourselves on being pessimists.”

“And yet here you stand with two hopeless cases like us, so there must be some small kernel of optimism in there.”

She took Steve’s teasing gracefully. “I expect the worst but hope for the best.”

“And you don’t think that’s what I do?”

“No, I think you look for the best in the worst of situations. Admit it, Rogers, you were that soldier who was annoyingly chipper even when you were up to your thighs in mud and cold.”

Even from above and behind, Bruce could see Steve’s ears and neck turn as pink as Bruce was green. “I admit nothing.”

Natasha grinned impishly up at Bruce. “Pollyanna.”

Bruce watched the entire exchange, ignoring the niggling hint of jealousy that wormed its way in his gut. That Natasha and Steve had become close was no secret. She had been SHIELD long before Bruce ever met her and when Steve joined it made sense to have him work with her and Barton. Despite Steve’s well known dislike for subterfuge and Natasha’s rough-edged cynicism the two developed a bond of trust with each other. Bruce had always suspected that Natasha saw in Steve’s big heart and earnest acceptance something of what Clint had shown her years ago and had gravitated to his inherent goodness. Steve, he guessed, had appreciated that underneath her shades of gray was a person who at her heart was inherently loyal and longed to do what was right. In the end, they weren’t so different, those two. Still, it made it hard, sometimes, to see how easily they got
along. Had things been different...had he been different…

In the distance there was the sound of a horrific creak of metal and a boom of something collapsing as people began to scream. Steve heard it first, his hearing attuning to it a split second before Bruce. Most people in the park hadn’t noticed, but over the treeline he could see a dust cloud rising as cars screeched to a stop.

“I got sight of it,” Bruce murmured, pointing in the direction the chaos seemed to be coming from.

Like a light switch, Steve flipped into Cap without blinking an eye. “Nat, you calling in?”

Natasha already had her phone out. “On it.”

“Bruce, you bring her, I’ll run ahead, see what the damage is.” In a blink, Steve was gone, running agily past everyone who blinked in startlement. On cue, Bruce turned to her, already on her phone with authorities. She barely flinched as he wrapped an arm around her slim waist, hauling her up beside him as he turned to follow, lumbering steps shaking the ground as people moved out of the way with shouts and yelps.

“Sorry, pardon me,” he called, trying to avoid the largest clumps of people on the path. “Sorry, Avengers stuff, got an emergency!”

“FDNY and NYPD are en route.” Natasha signed off on the call, clutching her phone as she wrapped an arm around his neck. “Initial calls in seem to indicate a crane fell over onto an office building. People are trapped inside.”

“Right,” he grunted. He paused at the sidewalk running the edge of the park, seeing in the distance the chaos and damage. He at least had the presence of mind to wait for the crosswalk.

Natasha only stared at him. “Seriously?”

“Hey, in the old days, I’d not have cared how many cars got smashed while I was running across traffic. We can hold a minute so we can cross safely.”

“You have changed,” she muttered as the lights flipped and goggling people hung out of car windows to stare at the giant green man in a button down and jeans carrying the beautiful Black Widow in a sundress pinned to his side.

The scene two blocks away was chaos. The crane had tipped drunkenly across the street and into a seven story office block, crashing through the top two floors and well into the third. Workers from the bottom had already flooded out as onlookers either gawked, cell phones in hand, or tried to help organize what help they could. Without their communicators, Bruce had no way of knowing if Cap was inside or not, but he assumed he was, judging from his absence outside.

“Put me down. I’ll try to coordinate with the police. You go see what you can do to help Steve.” Natasha was all business as he nodded, setting her down gently as she made to meet the initial first responders on the scene.

Bruce instead rushed inside, searching for Cap inside the ruined building. Unsurprisingly, he was in the thick of it already, on the fifth floor where the signs proclaimed a marketing research company. He was helping a woman crawl from under the ruins of her desk, holding up bits of ceiling to allow her to crawl out as she scrambled, repeating “thank you” over and over again amid hysterical tears.

Bruce stepped in before she could throw herself at Cap as he lowered the heavy bits of aluminum and steel. “Don’t take the elevator, take the stairs. Get out and across the street. First responders are
waiting there.”

She nodded, breathless, as she ran out the way he came. He looked to Steve. “How many we got?”

“I haven’t gotten to the upper floors, but getting a peek above.” He pointed to the destruction right over the woman’s desk. Bruce could see a giant hole and a bit of the crane above. “Not sure what the casualties are.”

“This floor clear?”

Steve nodded, eyeing it one more time. “Believe so. Meet you up there?”

“Right.” Bruce let Steve fly past him before following him up the stairs to the next level. As suspected, the crane lay in the middle of the floor, bisecting it, as one group of workers seemed to desperately be trying to reach another group on the other side.

“Everyone all right,” Steve called as heads turned and voices called. Bruce could see off to one side a man about his age pulled to the side, his leg twisted underneath torn trousers, gray and grimacing in pain.

“They’re trapped,” called a younger woman, determinedly clinging to the crane and pointing to a group he could just see over the other side. “Same thing up above, can’t get across.”

Cap eyed the hole in the floor above, where people were hanging over, clearly stuck on their side, but trying to do what they could to help the floors below. Bruce could see his mind calculating and spinning, not unlike Tony’s at times, but far more strategic as he took in everything.

“Bruce, how much does one of these things weigh?” His nodded his head towards the monolith of metal, wire and gears.

“Just the arm, a hundred to two hundred tons, at least, and it’s wedged in here good.” He nodded to where it broke through concrete and steel. “You’d need another crane to get it out of here.”

“How much can you lift?”

He didn’t think “I don’t know” was the answer Cap was looking for. “I haven’t tried it since we decided to join forces and the other guy never cared.”

“Do you think you could lift it enough to let these people here out under it and the those on top use it to bridge the gap?”

He shrugged, doing quick calculations in his head. “In theory, I could, but for how long, I don’t know.”

“Let’s give it a try.” Automatically, he began shooing people aside. “Stand back. We’re going to try and lift it enough so those on this floor can crawl under. Those of you on the top, try to use it to hop across.

Bruce looked along the length of it, trying to find the most optimal spot. The crane had lodge nearly through the floor, but closer to the far end there was just enough wiggle room he could slide his hands under it to lift. It was heavy, no denying it, and he found his muscles straining with the effort.

“That’s right! Easy does it!” Steve stood back, watching his progress as people trapped on the other side of the building began to cheer.
He pulled till he could lever himself underneath to push, wedging his shoulders under the heavy steel, grunting with the weight of it. The crane groaned as little-by-little he got it above his head and nearly to the ceiling several feet above, where the wide-eyed faces of the people up there gaped.

Cap was already giving orders. “All right, everyone, let’s move it. Those of you up above, use this as a bridge to get to the other side and to the stairs. Let us know when you are all clear. The rest of you, come through here as orderly as you can. Anyone who needs help, speak up.”

Bruce closed his eyes and breathed. He had always known Hulk was ridiculously strong, but this...he was lifting a freakin’ crane! He ignored that part of his brain that was rapidly calculating the weight and leverage ratios and exploding with the unlikeliness of it and focused instead on holding the damn thing steady as the people above tramped over it and those below under.

Perhaps it took five minutes or fifteen, he wasn’t sure, but finally a male voice up above called down. “We’re all clear up here! The last of us are heading down.”

“Bruce!” Cap’s voice followed close behind the man upstairs and he blinked his eyes open to see him with a very pregnant woman in his arms, well away from the crane. “That’s the last of them. Let it down, gently.”

“Right,” he grunted, slowly, ever so slowly bending to lower it. Carefully, he moved it off his shoulders and into his arms, ducking out from underneath it to ease it down back into the original position it had. It settled somewhat, lowering just a hair, but it stopped, as he let out a gust of breath he had been holding and found himself grinning in relief.

Steve clearly had been holding his breath too. “Right, there’s one injured over here in the corner. If you can get him, we can get out of here.”

“On it,” Bruce nodded, noting the man he saw earlier, crumpled in the corner with his torn leg. He looked at Bruce in awe as he bent down to him.

“You’re the Hulk, aren’t you? The one that tore up Harlem?”

He only winced a little as he gently held a hand out to him. “Not one of my greatest moments, no. Things have changed a lot since then.”

“I’ll say,” he gasped, pulling himself up enough for Bruce to get a hand underneath him. As easily as Steve had scooped up the woman, he gently managed the man, who yelped only a little but mostly clung for dear life as Bruce made his way towards the stairs.

“Apologies for this being a bit bumpy going down, stairs aren’t exactly made for guys my size.”

“What am I going to complain about? You’re saving my life!”

Had he not been trying to get out of a heavily damaged, seven story building, perhaps Bruce would have been extremely touched by that. As gently and quickly as he could manage, he got out of the building and into the sunlight where the fire department and police had already cordoned off the area. A crowd of people stood gathered around, some were the workers in the building, but most just onlookers with phones out. Bruce ignored them as he carried the injured man to one of the waiting paramedics, who rushed to help him with his burden.

“Here you go, see he gets looked after.” Bruce gently laid the man on the gurney that was wheeled over, even as the man grabbed his hand before he could pull away.

“Thanks for that!” His pained face had genuine gratitude on it. Bruce couldn’t remember if anyone
had ever looked at the Hulk that way.

“What’s your name?” The Hulk would never have cared, but Bruce did.

“Carl,” he replied, wincing as the paramedics got to work. “Live up in the Bronx. Got a wife and daughter. Nearly didn’t get home to them today. Least now I can get out of here with just a busted leg.”

“And thankfully that’s all you got.” He looked down at the injury. It was likely broken, the muscles torn, but Bruce didn’t think it was crushed. “Not going to lie, Carl, that’s going to hurt like a son-of-a-bitch and be a while in PT, but you’ll be back on it sooner rather than later.”

“Maybe gets me out of my ‘honey-do’ list for a while.” He smiled tightly, pain evident despite the humor and gratefulness. “Thanks! You were a real hero today.”

“Excuse me, sir.” One of the paramedics politely interrupted, trying very hard not to stare as they wheeled Carl into one of the waiting ambulances. Bruce watched him go briefly as it hit him he had just saved some guy’s life and it wasn’t Tony.

“Good job up there.” Steve was at his elbow, watching the ambulance take off. “If you hadn’t have been there they’d have been hours trying to figure out how to get them down.”

“Just lucky they had the Avengers nearby.” He shrugged as he could hear someone in the crowd of office workers milling around talking about how the Hulk lifted the crane so they could get out. He turned just in time to see that it was a woman talking to a reporter with a camera and that they were looking right at him.

“Oh no,” he muttered, just as Steve took stock of the same thing. “Cameras...the press!”

Steve for his part was nonplussed. “And everyone here has a cell phone, so it’s likely all over your Twitter feed.”

Bruce felt panic rise in him, a cold wave of stress and anxiety that curdled his insides and left him gasping. “I can’t talk to them!”

“You’ll be fine,” Steve was already turning on his patent, ever-patient USO, polite-as-can-be smile. “They’ll just want a comment and they’ll leave you alone.”

“What will I say?”

He got no response before the cameras were in his face, the microphones shoved high above heads and nearly up his nose as reporters from at least three networks asked for comment. Steve was less than no help, visibly standing back as he let Bruce dangle in the wind of the flash of publicity.

“Oh...hi?”

Somewhere, Tony was likely laughing himself sick at all of this right now.

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