Summary

“Everybody wants to rescue the princesses.” Bruce shakes his head. “Nobody wants to help with the homework.”

Trashed labs and radiation-laced murders in Europe, mechanical squid in the harbor, shacking up with the monsters in your closet, the etiquette of stalking, holidays with found family, the unregulated mentor industry, movie night as a liberal arts credit--In the aftermath of taking down the Red Room Redux in Texas, living with a dozen teenage assassin prodigies in the tower was the least of their problems.
St Potts School for Recovering Killers

Thor begins baking.

It starts with spritz cookies, or the Asgardian mother-cookie that devolved into spritz. Although Thor deflects, you can tell that no one is pronouncing the real name properly, but he graciously calls them spritz and pesters everyone to try them.

Which is difficult for a few reasons. The first is incredulity.

“You bake?” Clint shakes his head to dislodge his right eyebrow from his hairline, “No, I don’t believe this. Baking is the chemistry of cooking, it’s finicky.”

“It was a task set by my father for just that reason, to teach me patience and precision.” Thor explains. “But it turns out I have a natural affinity for it since I understand how flour responds to the endless fluctuations of humidity and air pressure.”

The second reason was because Thor had broken three different cookie presses, and had finally just used a freezer bag with the tip cut off to drop the cookies. His squiggles and loops aimed for the Avengers’ iconic symbols, but came out, depending on how hard he’d squeezed, looking like snakes and dog turds.

Tony eyes the cookie pile in his hand dubiously. “Isn’t it a bit early for Yule logs?”

“Try ‘em before you say another word.” In fact Clint has a wrapped plate of them stashed against his chest, under his coat. “Did you flavor these with almond?”

“Well-spotted!”

Tony gapes, “You’ve got a palate? I’ve seen you pair little chocolate donuts and grapefruit soda.”

“I like to mix things up.”

“Is that one of my plates? Are you hoarding my china in your hidey hole? How can you eat that many cookies and maintain your birdlike figure?”

Clint’s eyes flick to the cookie in Tony’s hand, “Eat it or I will.”

“This is good. I want our wards to feel welcome in their new home.” Thor grins, dropping another couple dozen onto a cookie sheet. He’s wearing a denim apron with gold puffy paint letters saying Tortes or GTFO.

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Early on, a meeting of the Lozen Trust Board begins with a slide simply stating: Trust Kids.

“This is what we’re calling them. It can be shortened down to kids,” Pepper concedes, “but I think it sets the proper tone, and that’s what Khadijah says they’ve chosen.” Khadijah was the kids’ ambassador, a seventeen year old who looked more like an up-and-comer from SI Legal than a student, especially after hanging out with Pepper working on the Trust implementation.
“This means the nicknames have to stop.” Pepper continues, eyeing her way around the conference table of Avengers, tutors and reps from the Maria Stark Foundation. “Spiderlings, baby assassins, GNats, Wednesdays--these kids deserve a clean break. This needs to be a safe place for them.”

The Trust provided therapeutic services and oversight for the children rescued from the Lozen Academy in Denton, TX. The Red Room remix. In the months since then some had chosen to transfer to reputable boarding schools, a few had distant family that had taken them in, and a handful did a stint in the tower to shore up their educational gaps and score letters of recommendation, ditching the Trust like a spent rocket stage.

That left an even dozen in the tower, most of them in the messy throes of puberty made even more awkward by the various levels of enhancement, and light to moderate brainwashing they were still shaking off.

Each one of the team finds his or her own way to make the tower a welcoming place.

What they don’t know is that when it’s just Pepper and Tony, Pepper herself refers to the whole enterprise, Trust and Avengers, as St. Potts’ School for Recovering Killers.

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Khadijah had come to the tower on the church bus, and had been their designated spokesperson from the moment she walked up to Reception. She was slim and serious, short natural hair pieced out into twists streaming back from her face, grace personified despite twenty-six straight hours on the road from Denton, TX.

She’d asked to pass a message along to Captain Steve Rogers, which normally would go through a few different filters before getting to him, but Tony had set a flag on those requests the day before, and Pepper had come down right away.

She noted the young woman’s ragged poise, the steel underneath, and how anxiety had given an ashy cast to her complexion. Khadijah’s grip was firm, her hand cold despite the summer heat, “A mutual acquaintance asked me to tell Captain Rogers, ‘beloved junkyard dogs’.”

“We were hoping you’d come.” Pepper had added her second hand to the handshake and given her warmest smile. God, this was their chaperone, their best approximation of an adult--these were babies. “Is it just you?”

“For now.” Khadijah had gone up to Pepper’s corner office where they spoke for hours about the Maria Stark Foundation, the Lozen Trust that had been put together for the students, the philosophy that had been hammered out from a dozen different points of view about what these kids would need, might want. Khadijah warmed slowly, and took a lot in without giving much back.

They broke for an hour, and when Khadijah came back for a dinner meeting she brought another young woman with her. They looked improbable standing next to each other, a tall stack of chocolate cookies beside a short shot of milk.

It was Peyton’s turn to be the quiet one, a silent Eastern European cherub with a bow mouth and huge hazel eyes that saw everything. This time around Khadijah brought it, negotiating hard for as much autonomy as possible, occasionally consulting with Peyton who looked things up on a tablet so new some of the clingfilm was still attached to the back. Pepper did not ask where they’d gotten it. This is when Pepper really met Khadijah, eager and incisive, unafraid to ask for clarification or a pause to familiarize herself with anything from a business term to case law precedent.
Pepper in turn pressed for concrete responsibilities and consequences—she had a whole tower of leases to consider, after all, as well as the thorny security implications.

By the time Tony and the rest returned from Texas the next morning, Pepper and Khadijah had forged a tentative alliance, and a bus full of kids and their surprising amount of gear had been emptied up into the Trust floor. Khadijah had become the de facto liaison between the medical and educational staff, the oversight board and the girls. Her ability to code switch among those different people, to move between eager compliance and firm resolution with any party, to be the chameleon and the buffer...it was Natalie Rushman all over again in Pepper’s view.

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Natasha understands the impulse to give fair warning, and she doesn’t disagree, but she thinks Bruce is going overboard with making it a whole presentation for the Trust girls. Ultimately it’s his story, and he gets to choose how to tell it, but that doesn’t mean she won’t razz him about it. The fact that it comes up when Clint’s there is just a bonus.

She pours Clint a mug from the bottom bulb of her vacuum coffeemaker, and sits beside him at the counter facing the cooking area.

“It’s not a slideshow.” Bruce corrects, half ignoring them as he puts away clean dishes. “It’s informed consent.”

Clint’s response is darkly amused, “Giving them a primer on doing your worst? We could each make one. Amazing Tales of Tricks and Terror! Ride the bad judgment train along with us. Y’pays y’money, y’takes y’chances.”

Bruce levels him a look, “None of you look like a sixth grade science teacher and can cause an international incident by defying the known laws of physics.”

“One of them garroted their science teacher,” Clint reminds them, “nearly took the woman’s head off.”

Sadness flashes over Bruce’s face, but leaves an expression of even harder resolution. He corrals the clean measuring beakers into sets of descending size, tucked into each other like matryoshka dolls. He puts their little efficient kitchenette to rights with a measured precision that she finds calming.

“You want to scare them,” she says. It’s not condemnation, but the resigned twist of her tone suggests that she doesn't approve, like she knows something he doesn’t.

“I want them prepared.”

“You want them wary.”

“Yes.”

She sighs and picks up the large bore syringe barrel and sights along it. “And this is gonna help? Looking at you like an experiment?”

“We’re all experiments. And sometimes they go wrong.”

There’s a long moment of silence that stretches out until she puts it down, and he slips it into the proper drawer along with its plunger. “They know that already, Bruce. First hand.”

“I’m gonna run it like a lab,” he explains, slotting dirty dishes into the machine in a precise and
arcane pattern she’s stopped trying to decipher. “Give them cell lines, let them see radiation damage occurring under the atomic force microscope.”

It’s eighth grade science with post-doc equipment, and a theoretical framework that’s his alone.

He wants the girls to have full knowledge of what he is, not just what they’ve found on the internet—glorified one way or another, skewing towards heroic or plastered with horror. He’s acknowledged that both have elements of truth. The older ones can make their own judgments, and the younger ones deserve to be guided in the right direction.

“Okay, I have to ask.” Clint sets his mug down on the black marble counter top. “I know you’ve explained why your kitchen looks like a chem lab—”

“Tony said he found an interior designer who ‘shares his sense of fun’.”

“--but that does not explain all the fucking labware.”

Bruce points to Natasha, who sips at her coffee. “Ask Ms. Molecular Mixology.”

She shrugs. “Making weird caviar is fun.” Clint gives her a wary look. “It’s not like you don’t have strange hobbies.”

“True,” Clint shakes his head and raises his mug, “but it’s you having hobbies at all that weirds me out a little.”

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Clint’s contribution to welcoming the Trust kids is proposing a Movie Night, because it amuses Clint to do things un-ironically that most of his colleagues did in college. Pepper, surprisingly, is his main supporter in this.

“Film Appreciation, we can add it to the list of educational seminars.” Surrounded by science and military types, Pepper is looking for any assistance in pushing a more liberal arts curriculum. “I love this idea. We can all take turns choosing, it will also help the kids get to know us, make a connection.”

“Sure,” Clint hedges, “But I’m only sitting through *Citizen Kane* if it’s honestly someone’s favorite movie.”

Clint takes the first turn because it’s his idea—and, Natasha knows, because he doesn’t have much time left before the baby arrives. He’s already referencing a long undercover mission stateside, no real danger, but the possibility of useful intel. There are tense negotiations with Pepper about what constitutes worthwhile cinema to share in the name of film appreciation. She has to liaise with the education board after all, and she’s really set on accreditation.

“No ape sidekicks, no Burt Reynolds.” Clint stares through her, but she not only remains cool, she adds, “No spaghetti westerns.”

“I draw the line,” Maria pipes up from the other end of the conference table where she’d been absorbed in a report on her tablet, “Sergio Leone was a genius—*Two Mules for Sister Sara* is a classic for a reason. Clint Eastwood, Shirley MacLaine, the ocarina on the soundtrack...”

Pepper’s brow scrunches in the middle, but Clint explains, “We both grew up watching a lot of cheap local TV.”
“That’s why I’m not participating.” Maria sips from her mug.

“You’re going to let it be mostly men picking the movies?”

“You want to help me justify the cinematic merits of *The Satanic Rites of Dracula*?”

“Question withdrawn.”

Clint ends up choosing *The Jerk*. Which he tries to pass off as a documentary from his childhood.

The conversation pit in the Avengers common area is packed, more couches brought in to accommodate the crowd, all of the Trust kids showing up if only for recon of that floor of the tower and to gather intel on this bizarre group of adults who’ve inexplicably decided to invest an obvious amount of resources and, weirdly, some attention to their welfare.

About twenty minutes in a voice, still cracking into contralto, interjects, “This is not a documentary!”

“JARVIS, lights to dim, pause movie.” Tony stands up. “Who’s calling bullshit on Barton?”

A sea of unblinking eyes stare back at him for a long moment, then one hand shoots up.

“I see at least one person is treating this like an actual class. Your name, kid?”

“Peyton.”

“Extra credit for Peyton.” Tony sits down, “JARVIS, resume flick.”

Afterward Clint ambles up to stand in front of the screen and gives the Trust kids the longest speech anyone’s ever heard from him, except maybe Natasha. But she’d been shocky and unresponsive at the time, years ago in Albania, so it’s not like she expects soliloquy to ever be a normal response from him.

“Yeah, so this is not technically a documentary of my childhood,” he begins, acknowledging with a nod the person who gives a raspberry, “But you know what? You watch that movie, and you’re looking at what it looked like. Movies are made in a place in time. I slept under those worn quilts and scratchy satin-edged blankets. I did my homework lit by those pot-bellied ceramic lamps. I rode in those cars, without seat belts. I know most of those scenes smell like old second hand smoke. I’ve worked in a traveling carnival, and run for my life from gunfire, and really fucked things up and had to start over. I’ve been saved by the strangest people, by the weird connections I made with them without thinking, sometimes in spite of being a fucked-up broken person just faking it. So yeah, if I say this is my bildungsroman, then it damned well is. Your story is your own to tell as you like.”

Clint gestures to Pepper and sits back down, and to her credit she smoothly brings the group around to discussion of the cinematic and cultural.

Bruce, thumb and forefinger thoughtfully stroking his lower lip, muses quietly, “I...had not expected that.”

Natasha leans her shoulder against his, “Clint is full of surprises.”

Movie night becomes more tensely negotiated than just about any other aspect of the Trust curriculum, as they hew to personal taste and meaning, which vary incredibly. There’s more suggestions for John Waters and musicals than one would expect, and Tony is still lobbying for the Kill Bill duology, so it can get dicey trying to vet a film through both Pepper and Clint.
One night as they unwind Bruce asks Natasha if she had to choose something to represent her youth, what it would be. She smiles sharply and says with a wink, “Battle Royale.”

“The Bond flick?”

“You’re thinking Casino Royale,” She’s already cuing it up, “This is Battle Royale.”

It turns out to be a Japanese film about high schoolers forced by the government into a battle of last one standing as a means of cowing the populace. There’s a countdown as the kids die off by murder, accident, suicide and misunderstanding, the emotions just as gritty as the realistic blood staining the clothes.

Natasha’s still convinced it’s a love story. Bruce...finds himself reluctantly agreeing.

Natasha takes on the Trust kids’ physical training, which had been a huge component at the academy in Denton. She knows movement is a major outlet for a lot of them to work out energy and conflict and aggression, and that there won’t be a shortage of any of those things as they work through a ton of transitions all at once.

She runs it more like a gym and a studio, moving the focus away from sparring and broadening it to include foreign concepts like fun, stress relief, self care and artistic expression. There’s a lap pool in the tower that Khadijah uses before dawn. Steve is teaching three of the kids to jitter. She takes a group of eight out into the city on parkour runs, quickly handing it over to Peyton as the chaperone when she sees the young woman’s ability to track them all and bring them back safe.

Natasha takes Georgia, Dominique, Aisha and Mellie to the ballet studio with her and sets up classes for them with the owner. When Natasha’s in residence she brings Ameena to her own adult ballet class on Thursday mornings.

It means going to the Trust floor and rousting her out of bed at 6:30 a.m. in a battle of wills, and listening to her gripe all the way there. Once she hits the studio, Ameena dances with more intensity than a lot of people fight for their life, and seems calmer and clearer on the way back.

They don’t talk much as they make their way back to the tower, but Natasha knows that if Ameena really didn’t want to go with her, she wouldn’t. The girl may resent her presence, her influence, but she’s not rejecting it. Natasha can live with being the one Ameena pushes against in order to figure out what she needs.

When it’s still light in the mornings, Bruce occasionally meets them both on their walk, tea in hand for her and coffee for Ameena. His presence makes the whole thing stranger and easier. Ameena will chat idly with him, enough to mention combinations they’d worked through in class, or a part of the curriculum she finds pointless, or just comment on the people they pass in the street.

Five of the kids still want to spar, but she takes heart that aside from Ameena, it’s the four worst fighters of the dozen. She thinks they stick with it exactly because they’re bad at it, because now they can be bad at it, it’s safe to fail when the consequence is ending up slammed onto the mat out of breath and not buried in the wet clay of the back forty.

Three in her sparring class have started a band. Ameena is not the only one who clearly still needs the physical outlet of art and war.
Bruce Banner’s Punch & Broody Show

The dozen Trust kids file out of the elevator on Sublevel Seven, past a large unmarked cargo bay door, through the outer door of the Radiation Lab, and into the leaded glass shielded inner sanctum of the lab proper.

Bruce lays out his past for the girls in clean terms. Experimentation, mutation, aberration. He tells them what he is. Or rather, what he believes himself to be.

They all look at cells under a microscope, don lead aprons and crowd around the lead-shielded workstation to bombard them with x-rays, then circle back to microscopy to watch most of them die, watch a few transform. They run a quick sequencing and Bruce puts the results up on a holoscreen side by side with the control, genes blacked out and false-colored like a highly redacted document. Trinh asks a series of follow-up questions, starting innocuously but leading toward the pathway he took to decide on gamma radiation protection as a field of interest, and how that led to work on the super soldier serum. Bruce gives her some office hours and moves on to the AV portion of his presentation.

The rest of them look vaguely bored, even as he calls up selected footage and they watch him destroy parts of New York.

Natasha sits in on the lecture, grim, but doesn’t interrupt. It’s his fairy tale, even if he wants to turn gold back into flax.

“You’ve all dealt with a lot,” he concludes when it’s done. “I wanted you to know what was possible. Before you decide to stay.”

Ameena raises her hand. “Does it hurt?” She’s still limping a little from the gunshot, even enhanced, a shattered tibia takes time, but there’s no empathy in her tone. “When that happens?”

“Yeah,” Bruce says, folding his arms. Natasha knows he’s choosing to count emotional pain, that he feels the damage he's done to people’s lives like a gut wound, something terribly wrong piercing through the center. “It does hurt.”

They remain unfazed. They’ve already seen people transformed into monsters.

The coup d’etat they pulled off, the sweep of law enforcement officials storming their nightmare of a school, the tornado from hell, and a harried processing through several child welfare agencies had been far more of an upheaval to them than the prospect of living with a potential Hulk.

They don’t have any questions.

Afterward Bruce lays on the couch in their suite, feet up on the arm because it’s a terrible couch to stretch out on. One hand rests on his chest with glasses caught delicately in his fingertips, the other forearm flung up over his eyes. "That could have gone better."

"I think Trinh took the wrong kind of notes."

He flings his glasses back on the table and presses his palms into his eye sockets, releasing a low groan that escalates into a bared-teeth shout of frustration.

She gives him a moment. He’s being melodramatic, but it's a rare self-indulgence, and on top of that he's letting her see. She curls up on the fluffy accent rug next to the couch, propping her chin on her fist. Doesn't hurt to enjoy the view.
“I think I failed to convey the magnitude of the situation.”

Her snort of laughter is enough to get him to stop the swooning drama and look at her.

She digs her elbow into his side. “Maybe they’re just not scared.”

“They should be,” he says, glaring a little.

“In their world, monsters are silent, secret things from quiet places,” she says. “And you make a lot of noise.”

He reaches down to stroke along her cheek, glide along her arm.

“Maybe,” she offers, “they think he’s not so bad.”

“You know that’s a lie.”

She sets her jaw, but he avoids her expression by rubbing his brow bone.

“For today, can we agree to disagree?”

She wants to say no, wants to push this, elects to tug at him to join her, “Let’s just fight about it down here,” she says. “That couch is hell on your back.”

He swings his leg over and sits up, meeting her halfway. She drapes her elbows across his knees.

The look on his face is hard to take, the stubborn retention of self-loathing like it’s something precious she’s trying to take away from him.

She smooths her hands on his thighs, “Come on.”

The rug is ridiculous, thick woolly pile in a charcoal color that Natasha suspects was meant as a visual pun on Bruce’s chest hair. She will never understand Tony’s odd preoccupation there, but the rug is thick and soft like someone took a mammoth to a fine salon before skinning and preserving its hide. It’s where she’d like him sprawled out with his head in her lap so she can work her fingers against his scalp, smooth his brow, and if nothing else, physically ease that look from his face.

But he won’t be coaxed. “I don’t want to fight about it on the rug, either.”

She draws herself up like coming out of a pool, folding her knees underneath her, and slides her hands toward center. It’s an offering, an appeasement, a kind of truce.

His eyes soften like he’s seeing her again instead of the misunderstanding that’s killing him. He leans down and the kiss is gentle like a sob, and she lets it happen for a long moment, lets him indulge in the bittersweet feeling before she wraps her hand around his nape and kneels up, pulling his head back with a handful of his hair.

She presses him back against the cushions and he lets her, shifting down and spreading his knees. She keeps her hand in his hair, pulling hard enough to sting and he closes his eyes. Okay, so they won’t talk about it. Instead she slowly unbuttons his shirt, scrapes her nails down his chest and belly at the edge of cruel.

It’s not like they don’t know how to bicker and resolve, they share a suite and diverging pieces of the same mission, none of that would work if they didn’t know how to talk things out, compromise, apologize, see from each other’s point of view.

But sometimes she sees things about him, extends trust that Bruce can’t even comprehend, much less
She can’t join him in condemning himself, but she can choose not to push acceptance when he’s not ready. Instead she pushes him physically, pinning him and giving him more teeth than he tends to like, even when she takes him in her mouth, but he just groans, head thrown back where she’d put it. His fingers skim her cheek, so gentle and shaky they almost don’t connect with her skin. She slides her hand into his pants and clutches his balls, scrape of her fingernails on his inner thigh.

She pulls off abruptly and he freezes, mouth parted and brow crumpled like at the edge of comprehension.

She turns and bites the meat of his thumb, teeth and soft tongue and then hard enough to bruise, and he’s loud now, something broken free by the whipsaw of soft and vicious, unrelenting. She goes back to his cock, suckling emphatically as her hand continues to roll his balls.

He digs into the cushions and twitches run through his belly and legs.

She rises, bringing a knee up onto the couch between his thighs and letting her hot wet hand wring him closer. She hovers her mouth over his, pressing his bottom lip into the serrated edge of her top teeth with her tongue.

His lips are cool from panting, the rest of him so hot the scent of his skin rises up like she’s set incense to smolder. He whines and lurches beneath her as he brings him over, pumping in her grip as he spatters them both. She kisses him, warms his tongue with hers, and eases her fingers when he twitches, but offers the occasional thumb swipe, watching from above as he takes it.

He is lovely like this, wrecked by her hand. Heartbreakingly so.

She gives him some pain along with the pleasure, as if the pain is what sweetens the medicine of someone really seeing him, and caring for him, cherishing him anyway.

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The church bus is the first sore spot. An ancient twenty-seater the exact shade of light blue to clash most with both the generous spattering of rust and the swaths of primer orange bondo, it was stenciled St. Miriam of the Reeds Youth Choir.

Tony asks JARVIS to get rid of it, and the request is routed to the upper floor concierge office. Devon, in his crisp suit and tie, goes down to the secure parking lot on Sublevel Six to see if any of the paperwork is in the glove box, looking up full-service scrap yards on his phone.

The ensuing incident works it’s way back up the chain to JARVIS.

Which is how Tony ends up facing off in SubSix parking with Luzviminda, who’s armed with a socket wrench and adamant that NO ONE is taking her bus.

Tony holds his hands out, palms open. He wonders if she’s been sleeping in it, if that’s where she feels safe, six levels underground in the shitty bus she drove in, tucked under the plaid stadium blanket he sees folded on one of the bench seats. “Tell me about the bus.”

Luz tosses and catches the socket wrench in a well-worn pattern as she thinks; half-spin, half-spin, quick full spin. She opens the driver’s side door and reaches in, pulling out a thick manual and a well-thumbed quad-ruled notebook. She thumps them on the hood of the bus, loosening grains of rust, and indicates that Tony should take them. “Look ‘em over. Maybe I’ll pop the hood next time.”
“You need help fixing something? I’ve got way nicer toys up in the garage…” Tony has started flipping through the manual, a standard Chilton’s for the make and model, but heavily edited and annotated. He shoves the Chilton’s under one arm to look at the notebook, which is amateurish in drawing style and violates several conventions of technical drafting, but in the same way as the Principia Mathematica. “Holy fucking shit.”

The slow blink only makes Luz appear more stone-faced. “No one takes my bus.”

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He is alone for six months before he connects the name Bucky with who he was and who he has become. It feels strange, and removed, like a name he pulled out of a hat. But he hears Steve saying it, and it had felt like he was waking from a nightmare, and so he keeps the moniker in his head. He’s so many things and so many names, and he’s not sure he is Bucky, but it feels better than anything has in so, so long. And right now, he’s just trying to get by. Maybe make contact. Maybe not. It’s hard to know. Everything is still foggy. When he’s close to Steve, things are clear, but they don’t stay that way.

At first he worked in the wholesale flower district, but it was too close to what had become Avenger’s Tower. While he wanted to keep an eye on Steve, needed to, he also needed to retain some of the anonymity of New York.

He knows that if anything, Steve can probably spot him easier in a crowd. There’s still a disconnect in his mind between the Steve he grew up with and the muscle man he’s become, some of the movements and habits he used to think of as Steve turned out to be Asthma or Weak Heart instead. Steve’s a sentence translated, and it still throws him off.

Though he’s changed just as much, Steve grew up looking at him, just a shade older, taller, stronger, more at ease. Steve’s drawn him, cartooned him, sketched his movements, mixed improbable contrasting colors to replicate the brown of his hair even before the government dialed up his photographic memory. Steve could spot him a mile away by the curl of his lip or the way he reaches for his wallet to buy a soda.

So he put a little more distance between them for breathing room, taking a job at a produce wholesaler instead, graveyard shift so he can sometimes spot Steve running in the morning as he comes home from work.

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Steve insists that the Trust recruit top-field political science professors for tutoring, heading off to universities around the city to make the pitch himself.

He’s acutely aware of the vulnerabilities of having to rely solely on what you’re told, by people who don’t disclose they have dogs in the fight. If anything he errs on flooding the kids with resources and information, since he’d been asking everyone he met the last few years for their take on the last seventy years of human endeavor. He works his way methodically through his notebook of lists, like a penguin coming ashore and regurgitating half-digested cultural milestones down tiny chick gullets.

For the most part, the kids who stay work the program with the same bared-teeth motivation that helped them survive before. Natasha had been right that these are clever kids who can see opportunities and exploit them.

They’re also flexing a lot of personal freedoms that had been quashed and distorted, and the band is
just the start. The Trust floor of the tower is not for the uninitiated.

“It looks like an IKEA’s been turned into the Milk Bar from Clockwork Orange.” Tony’s not even sure himself if he’s bitching or perversely proud of how they’d transformed the clean modern sweep of the central common area that their suites and other rooms open onto into a labyrinth of personalized nooks, workspaces and juxtaposed oddities.

Pepper assures him that it’s all within the lease, and didn’t he go to MIT, hasn’t he seen a college dorm before?

“I was fourteen, a lot of things looked normal to me then.”
Chapter 2

Home is Where the Shrapnel Is

“By both weight and volume, most of what you own is shoes.” Bruce himself is barefoot, toes fidgeting into the pile of the carpet as he drinks tea. He surveys the bins and boxes she’s methodically emptying out into a wall of tilt-out drawers in the massive and nearly empty closet. “Which is impressive, given how heavy your gun collection is.”

Natasha opens another bin with a smirk and shakes out her winter weight bathrobe, plush and inky black, showing him the initials embroidered in silver in monogram form: NRA.

“Hauntingly appropriate.” Bruce shakes his head, setting his mug on the small table on her side of their bed. “Wouldn’t have expected you to have anything so personalized, though.”

“Christmas present from Clint.” Actually, it was from Laura, the first year they’d known each other. Still on probation with SHIELD, Natasha had only been at the house once, when Clint first brought her in from the cold. This second time, she’d been badly injured in Albania, and after they’d been extracted Clint had taken her home again with him, like the farm was her safe house. The next morning she’d gotten out of the shower to see the robe, warm from the dryer, flung on the bed in the spare room without comment. Woozy from unaccustomed painkillers, Natasha had burned Laura a mix that was embarrassingly heavy on Eurovision songs. “This is the personal box.”

Bruce pauses a moment, as if to give her a chance to deny his curiosity, even though she’d hauled each of these bins into their bedroom herself. He sits down on the floor with his back against the bed.

She’d been living in his suite for months now, and her current wardrobe had long since migrated with her. But with autumn coming she’d decided not just to pull the next season out of storage, but to move everything from storage into the tower. Into her place in the tower, where she also keeps her guns and her bed and her Bruce.

Aside from the bathrobe, nothing else in the small personal bin has identifying markings. He takes out a worn leather concealed carry holster, knife slash making it useless.

"I keep it as a template for when I commission more." She explains, "Most holsters fit the gun, but that one also fits perfectly at the small of my back."

Next is a 35mm film canister that rattles. At her nod, he carefully peels off the lid and slides the contents into his palm: a misshapen slug of steel and a bicuspid tooth, root and all.

"I guess those are 'things that hurt worse than I'd expected'. That lump of metal is a failed mission and a gut wound."

“Your only permanent marks. I thought it went clean through?” The exit is a knot of scar tissue to the left of her navel, but he’d also seen the entry wound on her back, a tiny burn scar smaller than the caliber of the round.

“It did. When we couldn’t get ballistics...I’m not sure why I kept it, it just went with the tooth.”

He sets the spent round carefully back into the canister, and rolls the tooth in his other palm. "Whose was this?"
"Technically, it’s still mine."

His hand clenches around it and he looks at her sharply.

“It grew back. Hurt as bad as losing it, just spaced out over six months.”

“That answers my second question.” He doesn’t ask the third question, just says, “I can feel grooves…”

“Pliers.” She leaves unsaid that she’d let it happen so she could get four levels deeper into a human trafficking organization and slip the metaphorical knife right into the tender heart of it. As well as the literal. Satisfaction warms her face, “It was worth it.”

His hands are almost reverent as he puts it away. “I’ll take your word.”

She opens a large garment box, layers of muslin and acid-free tissue parting to reveal a cocktail length dress, late forties Dior by way of Edith Head. She drapes it across the bed, it’s been years since she’s repacked it, and the fabric needs to breathe.

Bruce has a soft considering look on his face, “Personal?”

Natasha fluffs it out, hands delicate. “I’ve never worn this on a job.” Ice blue chiffon wrapped tight around the boned bodice, wispy chiffon straps with a length of scarf draped from one shoulder, and a flowing double-layered skirt, all lined with silk crepe de chine. “I didn’t buy it for a job.”

“So, not a costume, not an identity.” Bruce has come to understand a bit that clothes are stage dressing and props, a way to set the scene, to control expectations, to inhabit a different personality, or selectively show pieces of oneself.

“No more than what I’m wearing right now.” Which is a pair of jeans she bought last century, and a sweater she stole from him. She sweeps an arm toward the closet, “Less so than most of this stuff.”

“It’s pretty.” Bruce shifts the layers of skirt, feeling the fabric. “It looks like cotton candy made from antifreeze.”

She explains, “It’s vintage, knockoff couture. Between the shows in Paris, and when the orders were filled and shipped there was a window...if you could smuggle the intel out, you could be selling your own interpretations before the real thing even docked.”

“Personal.” Bruce echoes.

“And of course, there are shoes.” Natasha smiles, pulling out a smaller archival box, “Those are real couture, a few years older than the dress.”

There’s a wealth of commentary in Bruce’s look between her and the box, which is covered in old-style radiation symbols and warning stickers. In the center of the lid, a Garbage Pail Kid named Adam Bomb detonates his own head in a mushroom cloud. Inside are silver shoes with tall strange heels and a Paris label. They look like an antique vision of the future, gleaming and kind of inhuman.

“You have a lot of occasions that call for your feet to look like Metropolis?”

“This can be one.” She returns his grin, rising to her feet and stowing empty boxes. Between the two of them, they’ve still only made a small dent in occupying the cavernous closet. “You know, at first I thought you were into feet.”
“You mistook my scientific curiosity for sexual fetish?”

“One of mine.”

He bemusedly adjusts his glasses, and maybe he really doesn’t know that’s the kind of thing that makes her want to lay him across a lab bench and mess up his composure, make him all sweaty and shouty, erudite up until he loses all language entirely.

She continues, “And don’t deny there was more than curiosity.”

“It was solely curiosity.” He’s earnest and only a shade smug. “I was keenly interested in what you might taste like.”

~*~

Every Tuesday night, the start of his weekend, Barnes locks the cat in the bathroom, gets out his kit, puts on the *Star Talk* podcast that he saves for this occasion, and he re-wraps his left arm.

He peels off the worn layers of thick rubberized tape, cleans the adhesive off with WD-40 and a rag, and pops open the joint panels to do a full maintenance routine. Running the full routine weekly is erring on the far side of caution, but he needs to catch anything hinky while he still has a chance for an easy repair. He doesn’t have any good options if the arm malfunctions, and it’s bad enough doing this one-handed.

He used to have a team, and then a tech, and then a different team. Now it’s just him and the cat yowling on the other side of the bathroom door, as an astronomer’s mellow bass voice soothes him with jokes he sometimes doesn’t understand and profundities of the universe that he always does. It’s a pain in the ass to do this alone, but equally reassuring because he is alone.

The cat is not soothed. She can smell the Reuben waiting and the scrawny thing’s always hungry, always packing food away into a black hole.

The cat looks like someone pieced it together from the tag ends of other cats, impossibly long whiskers and a squinty eye that gums up. She has no name, but she likes to lap at the lubricant and that can’t be good for even a ragged little monster like her.

He’s thought about taking steel wool to the star, but honestly, even thinking about it feels like an empty gesture and he’d rather just get the thing taped back up and have some dinner with the cat. He methodically lays the tape along the plates in a pattern he’d worked out when he first started at the warehouse, which lets each part slide and shift as needed.

He still wears layers, long-sleeved shirts and hoodies, thermal gear that softens the lines of the arm, and Mechanix gloves on his hands. But even working full tilt shifting produce in temps just south of forty degrees, the arm cools down enough that when he gets out the metal pings and chimes as it heats back up, starting from the meat of his shoulder on down to the fingers. The rubber tape is a layer of insulation, of muffling, of damping down the shine and covering the dead star on his shoulder.

The cat yodels.

~*~

Bruce, Natasha, Clint and Thor take the younger girls to buy school clothes at the end of the summer, an activity that ends up more fraught than some of the missions they’d been on. The stores are packed with families cranky with the heat, wearing everyone down into a sniping irritability that
dents even Thor’s good cheer, “Yes, yes, fine, but I’m told that socks are a required item--”

In the end, Clint scribbles a mandatory list of a minimum wardrobe and lets the kids knock themselves out, stationing himself before the registers and vetoing only a few things. “Not warm enough for winter, try again.”

Clint’s weirdly familiar with the sales and specials, but when Bruce points this out he just offers that blank expression and says, “It’s called reconnaissance, Banner.”

Bruce has rarely seen Natasha look as harried as in that Target in Brooklyn at four in the afternoon, so when Catherine and Georgia wander toward the empty Polaroid photo bar, he just herds the rest of them along. They need a break from the clothes, the crowds and the weird blind date tension of being in loco parentis to these kids they brought home like a box full of stray kittens that turned out to be lion cubs.

Glossy photos and weirdly nostalgic accessories turn out to be a good call. They go home with a pile of stuff to display them, twine, ropes, magnetic boards and shadowboxes for the Trust floor.

Memories made tangible.

Bruce doesn’t realize that Natasha’s also caught the fervor until she goes on recon shortly after, and he gets a package hand-delivered by the upper floor concierge. Three fake polaroids of badly translated signs from what he guesses is Hungary, taken with her phone, printed in New York and delivered to him. He borrows some of the brightly colored twine and tiny clothes pins from Marisol, and strings them up across one of the lab walls.

~*~

Peyton paints herself like a roller derby skater when she’s out with the monkeys parkouring. It forestalls a lot of confrontations that would otherwise occur as a small sixteen year old chaperoning a pack of wild middle-school kids needing to throw themselves around in the concrete and weather to bleed off some of their destructive energy.

Peyton doesn’t like confrontation. Her policy is to avoid it unless absolutely necessary. Her kills at the Lozen Academy in Denton had been quick and clean, and she wanted that part of her life to be over, please.

So when she spots the same creep in the hoodie for the third time that month, she cuts a corner to duck them out of sight for a moment and issues a challenge for the girls to pair off and take the four most public routes to the tower at speed. Peyton hangs back to buy a coffee and text Trinh that she’ll be late. Trinh has enough to worry about.

Creepo is remarkably hard to follow for a guy hunched like he has the flu, and she loses him a few blocks later.

~*~

“They’re never getting those cabinets up in time,” Steve is so gleefully excited about the potential for failure that Bruce feels a little guilty. Guy fought Nazis and the Red Skull and Bruce is the one to infect him with schadenfreude. But probably, they’re just watching too much DIY.

Still, when you’re actively rooting for disaster, you should probably re-evaluate your life choices.

The same could be said for the fact that they’ve been living like college kids for the past few days, knocking around like pinballs in the tower after hours because it’s just the two of them, antsy and
unsettled, eating whatever they can get delivered because Bruce refuses to participate in the cooking rota while he has a project going. And also to be a little pissy. Steve, capable of equal pissiness, insists they eat on real plates but won’t pick them up on the nights he’s not assigned clean up.

“I think I hate open concept floor plans,” Steve says, slurping lo mein off second-best china.

Bruce shakes his head. “Hard to tell when it’s always the dregs of humanity who want open concept. It’s a false positive.”

“I like those little bungalows, the ones with nooks and niches and shelves.” Steve sounds daydreamy, “Craftsman style. Be nice to have some built-ins, a bench seat in the kitchen.”

Christ, they really have been watching too much DIY.

“Stairs,” Bruce says in spite of himself. “A bedroom upstairs, that looks over a green yard. Wood floorboards that creak when you walk on ‘em.” He muses about a big bed with a wooden headboard that squeaks when you fuck in it, and a claw foot tub to share after. He pictures steam and sunlight curling along the windows and the mirror, how bright her hair would be against the white tile.

“Warm colors, asshole,” Steve shouts like someone watching a fumbled play.

He catches Bruce’s startle but doesn’t bring attention to it, just explains partially to the screen, “They’re more appetizing, comforting, makes the food look better. Prussian blue, dumbass, it’ll harmonize better with that atrocious yellow you’re dead set on.”

Steve continues in a chagrined tone, realizing he’s dropped into lingo again, “Prussian blue--”

“I actually know that shade--ferric ferrocyanide, they use it to treat cesium-137 poisoning.”

“Huh.” Steve gives him a lopsided smile, “So you can see what I’m saying. Kitchens and bathrooms should have warm colors.”

“Yeah, I...I can picture it.” Bruce knuckles his glasses back up. Unbidden, the picture shifts, condensation dripping down dark rich blue tile behind her head, soaked red tendrils snaking up as she sinks down into the hot water, skin blushing pink. The man knows his color wheel that’s for sure. “Appetizing.”

They kind of glance at each other side-eyed, like they’ve been watching porn, like it’s dirty and they’re a little embarrassed. They go back to the noodles and the Renovation Realities, and Bruce adds his own wish for an electrical short or black mold in the walls to distract them from the bare sincerity he heard in both of their voices. What a cliche, he thinks.

Left behind in this chrome and glass tower, nesting with a moony superhero, and he’s not even sure what country Natasha is in.

~*~

They’re having a council of war, or at least Trinh, Peyton and Luz are. Ameena is in the room but high as a fucking kite, again, and Trinh is sick of it.

The worst part is, Ameena keeps pretending nothing’s wrong, like no one notices her slowing down, or spacing out, or how Luz had kicked her ass the other day. While assuredly deadly with an impact wrench, Luz has never been more than barely functional at hand to hand, even now with Romanoff teaching her.
Besides the suite the four of them share smelling like sweet rot, it’s just plain annoying, and it sets a bad example. But that’s a problem for another day.

“There’s something wrong with that guy,” Peyton’s started a file, hard copy like they’d kept the plans they’d made back in Denton. “But he’s hella sneaky in spite of it.”

“Sounds like he’s gonna keep showing up,” Trinh nods, paging through the file. Distance sightings, but a pattern of following since shortly after they arrived in New York. “We divvy up surveillance, keep an eye out, but make sure he doesn’t notice.”

Luz makes the hard call. “The monkeys are going to need to help. They’re less noticeable, can be in more places that they’re not supposed to. Kids wander off, do stupid stuff, perfect cover. Let’s follow him around a little.”

Peyton looks at her. “Do we tell Romanoff?” Luz and Trinh share a look, and she glances at Ameena, who has fallen asleep.

Trinh shakes her head. “Not yet. Let’s see if it’s more than just a creeper first.”

**Snipe Hunt**

“It’s a snipe hunt,” Barton kicks through a pile of broken lab glass and plastic debris.

Their boots crackle through the whole room, but shattered glass is heaped in that one corner like a snow drift, like most of it had been thrown against that wall.

“Every time we find something that looks like a lead, it just takes us to another fucking movie set.”

Reports from former SHIELD informants still scattered in Europe had indicated a re-emerging HYDRA presence, people disappearing and suspicions of experimentation, but so far there’s not much to back up those rumors. And this feels...smaller somehow, at least compared to a half century plan of infiltration. The rumors couldn’t be ignored, but evidence has been frustratingly difficult to nail down.

Natasha inspects a busted pipette tool that's been stabbed into the wall fairly deep.

Clint’s right. The destruction is staged, unconvincing, half tantrum. A marked contrast to the factory they’d searched a few days ago in Algiers – a sterile high tech laboratory, too well-funded for its neighborhood and official clientele. Chemical smells, trashed monitors, computer towers purged of their hard-drives and server connections, the remainder half-melted. A professional tossing, but that didn’t necessarily mean HYDRA or a conspiracy or a master plan. It could just as easily have been designer drugs or knock-off pharmaceuticals.

A few labels on scraps of manifests stuck in the corner of an empty desk had lead them here to Croatia and this absurdity. Whoever had destroyed this small, underground lab had done it like art.

Clint pulls the pipette from the wall with more effort than he expected. “This is exactly the kind of bullshit detail that junior mints were invented for.”

Junior SHIELD agents who'd survived had scattered to known agencies to try to salvage their careers. Hill was working those connections as a long term investment in inter-agency cooperation, but that meant a hands-off approach for the next few years. Right now, Hill's building up from a bare bones outfit associated with the Avengers, and in the field they either tend to liaise with careerists looking to earn a cookie for playing well with others, or function as free hazing for clueless newbies,
i.e., junior mints.

“No one’s trusting us with any vulnerable talent these days.” she says.

She squats down to take a sample of a pile of ashes that burned hot but incomplete, leaving an oily and sharp smelling ring around the char. She sifts through the singed and unburnt material at the edges. There’s a scrap of glass that has a filmy russet residue, the curved acute bottom of an Erlenmeyer flask. She puts it in a specimen bag.

"No shit. That last batch that we liaised with in Bucharest couldn’t be actual humans. No one’s that dumb."

She gives Clint a flat look. “You’re just bitchy because you think that baby is gonna be early.”

“I know he’s gonna be early. She’s been saying all along they got the dates wrong and now she’s getting a murderous look in her eye I’ve only seen twice before.”

She’d seen the photo, Laura looking hot and sweaty and miserable like she was on the last leg of a triathlon.

“Three is a lot of kids,” she says. “But it’s gonna be fine.”

“Three is more than the number of arms I’ve got. I don’t know how we decided three was a good idea. It’s not like regular tactics, we were actually outnumbered at two.”

“C’mon,” she says, pocketing the sample and standing up, “Let’s go drink shitty Croatian beer and gossip.”

~*~

When Natasha is gone, Bruce runs at night instead of in the mornings. He can think better sometimes after the high of exercise, and if he decides to go back to the lab and work until early morning, or stay up with Steve catching up on half a century of television, there isn’t anyone to harangue him about sleep or routines.

That’s not quite fair, Natasha doesn’t harangue. But she knows his needs and his triggers so well all she has to do is give him a look and he knows she’s calculating exactly how far he’s pushed himself, letting him know that she sees he’s shorting one account or another. She will sometimes offer an eyebrow as comment or simply shove him toward the bed.

He also finds the anonymity of the city at night comforting. At night, running a path his body knows by memory, he can soften the odd sharp ache of missing her that threatens to overwhelm him. He can push himself until he can look out into the night and still imagine disappearing into it again.

Morning never offers that solace. They came together over early morning endorphins, toast and carefully spilled secrets. It’s important to him, somehow, that he keeps those moments separate from the track his mind circles at night when she’s gone, when he tends to his wanderlust as if checking in on an old friend.

He worries that the urge to flee will wear down completely, smoothed like a stone in a stream of small tranquilities and ineffable satisfaction, and he’ll forget what he is, let himself be convinced otherwise. Domestic longings side-by-side with the drumbeat reminders that this can only be temporary, and he can’t let himself think that those longings are anything more than fantasy. He’s spent a decade seeking shelter and small solace in forged, found places. This is only one of them despite how different it may feel.
Pushing himself into a hard physical ache helps mitigate the anxiety that his bed without her - the large, comfortable, luxurious bed in this literal tower - feels more lonely than sleeping alone in a field ever did.

He walks the last few blocks back to the tower to cool down, and is surprised to see a small dark figure come out a service door on the side like it’s perfectly normal for an eleven year old to be venturing out into Manhattan after ten at night. Even an eleven year old who nearly took off her sadistic computer teacher’s head with an ethernet cord. Although they’ve kept that secret between them.

Normally Bruce remains hands-off in setting boundaries for the girls, but even he has to draw the line somewhere.

Marisol spots him before he can call out, pausing and flexing up onto small toes like she’s contemplating a disappearing act of her own. He holds up his hand to show her that she’s already caught out. She’s little, and he’s tired, but she’s half his size. He’ll catch her if she runs. Probably.

She waits for him to get within shouting distance.

“What are you doing?” He’s genuinely curious, even though the situation probably calls for more disapproval.

“It’s stuffy upstairs,” she says. They all can lie effortlessly. “I wanted some air.”

He doesn’t touch her, or call out the lie, but twirls his hand to indicate that she should walk in front of him back into the building. “Open some windows,” he says, and escorts her back to the Trust floor. She’s wearing a charcoal grey hoodie and dark rubber-soled shoes like a tiny cat burglar.

“Goodnight Marisol,” he says. He should really press the issue, but he’s not sure where to start, if he even really wants to know.

“Goodnight Dr. Banner,” she says, and waves as the elevator doors close.

~*~

Mohammad doesn’t tell him he’s promoted, just hands him the scanner and starts telling him how to key info into the warehouse inventory system. He spends less time handling pallets, more time telling the crew where they need to be, but he’s still working midnights in the big refrigerated room, and it’s not until a week in that he realizes he’s fallen into a leadership position again.

It’s when he does maintenance on the arm, and finds there’s less wear and tear. That’s a good change. It puts off the inevitable for a little longer.

He asks Mohammad about it, saying he misses driving the hi-lo. “What, you want to get hemorrhoids sitting all day? You’re a good worker, and you own it, you make sure it gets done. Like Gigi. I didn’t waste her time shuffling boxes, either. She knew what she was doing when she hired you. Now get those trucks out of here.”

He doesn’t correct Mohammad that he started three days before Gigi, that it was ancient sketchy Doris who hired them both. It’s more money for a rainy day. He uses part of it for a laptop and starts making his way through the SHIELD datadump.

The documents are thick bureaucracy, and it’s the first time he’s ever tried to read red tape, but he’s his own key. The things he remembers, that roll through his head all night at work and that slosh him out of sleep despite the heavy duty foil he put on the windows to block out all the sun, those are the
things that open the files up for him to read between the lines.

He doesn’t find much of anything about what was done to him, though. He suspects it’s because HYDRA had a bare bones maintenance approach to the Asset, and only a general idea of how the Asset had been created. He goes over the research, spending long hours on PubMed and bringing home a stack of used biology textbooks to make sense of the lingo.

It could go better. But then again, his search for some of the more obscure articles led straight to videos of the Hulk, so it’s good to remember that things could also go worse.

It’s about this time, high summer, that he first sees the kids.

He’s using a coffee shop wifi to look through a huge online catalog of tiny electronic parts, things he should have spares of for the arm, at least the bits that aren’t solid state or custom designed or firmware. It’s something to do while he gets some sun. Sunlight’s important, at least it was when the Soviets held the leash. There was a whole regimen of nutrition and training, even if the mission was over in a heartbeat they still cleaned and oiled him like a well-loved gun. The Americans weren’t as diligent—they hadn’t made him, and they didn’t have the same sense of upkeep.

He gets up early to get the evening sun, to watch regular people, and it helps. On this summer day he sees a pack of mismatched girls tear through the park and he grins to himself, reminded what exuberance feels like.

The next time he’s sitting on the bench with his face tilted up so the sunlight pours blood red through his lids when he hears them. He’s got a few hours before he needs to head to work, so he takes a stroll and watches them play. They ricochet through the park, over walls and boulders like rocks skipping on water, up tree trunks like there were stairs cut into them, melting invisible into low branches only to drop down on each other and wrestle with an intensity that...he can’t place. But he thinks he should.

They play in four evenly matched pairs. A ninth, older and vigilant, shepherds them.

He scouts for them too, now, and he watches them whenever he gets the chance. He wants to recapture that feeling of exuberance when he first saw them, kids tearing through the city like he used to do, not like most of the kids he sees now, weighed down by backpacks now that it’s fall. Their teen chaperone starts to remind him of Gigi at work, bold makeup like a poisonous frog. But that disquiet never goes away, that feeling like he’s missing a piece of it.

One of those bright fall days where the sun seems even hotter because it’s sitting lower in the sky, he squints across the park and sees them with Nataliya.

The penny drop is so unexpected, so profound, so wrong that he nearly lurches off the bench and stalks right up to her. The stupid thing he can’t help thinking is that, yeah, anything can happen in New York, but how the hell was this happening right under Steve’s nose?

~*~

“It’s no place exotic, so don’t get all worked up,” Tony shoots Bruce the abstract he’s submitted to the ICES conference--or someone submitted, since getting Tony to write down his findings instead of just acting on them is an effort in and of itself.

They’d had an intern, Bruce thinks. Hadn’t they? Or maybe they had borrowed Lewis’ intern, the one who heeled her like a bird dog in penny loafers. He doesn’t remember writing the abstract. It’s possible he’d dictated it.
“Bellevue?” Not exotic, but specific. He’s got colleagues in Bellevue. Or he had. He’s not sure he wants to re-enter the academic conference fray even if he has given a few lectures around the city in the past few months. Academics live to argue nonsense, and while he still loves theory, he doesn’t want to argue with anyone, particularly outside of his field. He takes the tack, “We aren’t environmental engineers.”

“No, but we figured out how to harness clean energy to deal with the rubble and destruction of the city.”

The nano-agent was inert until charged via solar, batteries, or arc technology; then when applied it catalyzed an otherwise highly improbable and naturally very slow reaction, and reduced concrete rubble to a scoopable large grain powder within hours. The powder, with very little additions, could then be the major component of new concrete right onsite. Tony named it Reset. Pepper, another survivor of a concrete house that crumbled into the ocean, called it Pixie Dust. Timely delivery of Pixie Dust by first responders could drastically reduce earthquake casualties and slash rebuilding costs.

“We should be presenting to a real conference.” Tony shrugs. “But you’re a pussy, so I thought I’d start you small.”

“God, you can be an asshole.”

“I know. It’s why you love me. Plus, it’s good prep. I’m gonna host the Stark Expo again.”

“Naturally,” Bruce shakes his head. “It went so well the last time.”

“This is part of my brilliant plan, Mr. SuperGenius,” Tony strides away, declaiming, “to one day get you to embrace the idea of a fucking learning curve.”

~*~

They’re late enough touching down that Natasha doesn't bother to call for a car from the tower, just shoves them into a cab and keeps watch on the ride while Clint rests his eyes. He’s relieved to make it stateside before any serious signs of labor, but he’s got hours to kill before the short flight to ROC and home upstate.

Bruce isn’t in the suite when she gets there. She thinks about just crawling into bed, but it’s been a long week and a half of running down false leads and trying to glean some sense out of a tangled trail of sketchy evidence. All they’ve come back with is the sense that it’s not HYDRA, and the knowledge that Clint will soon be grounded for the next few months, which means Natasha’s next missions will either be solo or working with inexperienced agents.

She much prefers solo.

There’s sand behind her eyes, after a long flight spent compiling reports, arranging for lab tests, and debriefing Maria on the nothing they found. She’s put the mission to bed and she’s irritated that her reward for all of that virtue isn’t in hers.

She’s a spy, she could track him down, but instead just asks JARVIS.

He’s asleep on the couch in the lab. Every lab has a place for non-scientists to sit and get shit done, thanks to Pepper, and Natasha also knows the couches seeded all over function as subliminal reminders that rest and sleep are also things. This couch is only fractionally larger than the couch in their suite, but has already proven to be good enough for government work.
He sits with glasses on, tablet in hand, his head thrown back and throat vulnerable; all the markings of being run down and ambushed by sleep. Different than the quiet catnaps, the post-Hulk pass out, the deep somnolence after sex, or the rare REM-heavy sleep of normal routine and good maintenance. So many ways to catalogue him, and this is one. It’s surprisingly dear to her.

She thinks about leaving him there, but most of the couches in the tower are a bitch to sleep on for more than a few minutes. She has JARVIS further dim the lights, tugs the tablet out of his hand and gently slides off his glasses, setting them on the chair where he’d tossed his jacket.

He blinks at her as she turns back, something startled and lovely in his gaze like he’s not sure what he’s seeing. It tightens her belly, the way his mouth softens around the shape of her name, the way he pulls her down to him, the warmth of his body and his regard.

“Long day at the office?” he murmurs, and strokes up her back.

“Why aren’t you in bed?”

“Long day at the office,” he smiles around the joke.

She lays down on the sofa with him, fitting together in the narrow space, pressing him into the cushions as he bands her waist and sets his mouth against her neck. She just means to close her eyes for a moment.

She wakes a few hours later, stiff necked, to a text from Clint on his way back to help shepherd baby number three into the world.

~*~

Peyton lets Trinh and Khadijah hash it out while Luz listens like a judge hearing counsel, and they come to the same conclusion she already has.

If Banner was going to rat them out about Marisol breaking curfew, he’d have already done so.

The older girls head out at night a couple times a week, to explore the city. It had begun as sussing out their situation, a reassurance that they could leave whenever they wanted, but had become them laying claim to New York itself. They know sometimes Marisol follows them, a tiny brunette shadow as they move through the streets and clubs and venues.

“Are you saying we trust him?” Khadijah asks Trinh, who volunteered to be the point person for Banner after his bizarre presentation. She seemed to get him, or at least wanted to squeeze his brain for the juice.

Trinh shrugs, “I’m saying it’s too late not to.”

“I’m more surprised that he spotted Marisol in the first place.” Luz adds, “Even Mrs. Gerrish didn’t see Marisol until it was too late.”

“Asked her about that...she says he just does, from back in Denton.” Peyton makes an effort to shout, knowing her voice is still just above a whisper. “I think it takes one to know one.”

“I do think we need to tighten it up.” Khadijah had already gone off on how she had hated Texas over and above the bleak horror of the Academy; the oppressive weather, the cramped university town they still hadn’t seen much of, the provincial outlook. She curls defensively around her thermal mug of coffee, “I don’t want to deal with a security escalation. I don’t want to lose this.”
“Agreed. I’ll talk to Aisha, see if she can tap into some real time location info so we can avoid them at the Tower exit points. She got us the Tower specs, after all, she’s pretty much the point person for JARVIS.” Luz swivels in her seat to face Peyton as she finishes the thought. “I know that no one wants to talk about Ameena yet, so I won’t bring it up.”

Trinh winces and Khadijah takes a deep breath.

“But we need a new point person for Romanoff.”

“Stop looking at me.” Peyton sinks down on the cushions and tries to calm her heart rate, each pulse slamming her brain against the inside of her skull. “She’s half the time in Europe anyway.”

Luz smiles, “That’s a plus, you don’t like people.”

“You know,” Trinh is diffident, and Peyton braces herself for dealing with another dose of Trinh Guilt, which is actually far worse than the theta-inducer treatments she’d assisted Madame in, because it doesn’t look like Trinh Guilt will ever fucking end. “If you told her about the brain strain, it would give you an opening to connect with her.”

At the Academy, they had developed a list of euphemisms to downplay medical concerns, not wanting to attract the wrong kind of attention. Broken toys are thrown away, after all. Brain strain ranged from a pesky sinus pressure to, in Peyton’s case, vicious puking migraines that had only been worsened by the sessions in the basement.

“Then why wouldn’t I just go to Fiona for help?” The PA had seemed benign so far, even a bit of a relief. It was good to have someone to treat Mellie’s three-ring circus of ailments without worrying the small girl just wouldn’t turn up for dinner one night.

“Why don’t you go to Fiona now?” Khadijah asks, partly so Trinh doesn’t have to.

“And there’s your opening angle.” Luz swivels back and forth. “You’re welcome.”

The idea of laying this down on someone else’s plate feels just like when she started demolitions training: frightening and compelling in equal measure. Peyton lets herself be drafted.
Chapter 3

Play Dress Up; Play House

Natasha likes to make him wait a little for her at the start of these evenings out, anticipation part of the ritual, but tonight Bruce passed her coming into the suite as he was coming out already dressed.

Normally, he’d linger while she got ready, distract her, but some of the places they go are finicky about reservation times, so he takes himself out of the line of temptation and wraps things up in the lab.

“Ditch the tie,” Tony says, “You look like you’re going to the Polo Club. But the sweater’s good, so are those jeans. I knew you’d wear ’em.”

Bruce unknots the tie in relief and leaves it next to his workstation, setting up the next round of model simulations as he unbuttons the collar for good measure. His impulse is to try to contain the rumpledness he tends toward, to pass himself off as belonging next to the primped and polished Natasha. He has no feel for the human ikebana of artfully mussed.

Stark plucks the shirt out so the tails show under the sweater, then leans in closer. “Is that new?” He keeps sniffing.

“Jesus, Tony.” Bruce bats him away like discouraging a dog trying to sit on his lap.

"It's good, neither sporty nor sweet. God knows you're not, either. Yeah, you can go.”

"I don’t need your sign off to go to dinner.”

“But don’t you feel better knowing you have it?”

“You look fine,” Pepper assures, not looking up from where she’s going through paperwork on the lab couch. She’s waiting for Tony, and Bruce suspects Tony was waiting for him just so he could razz him some more about his evening plans. “And Giselle is at your disposal tonight. Have fun.”

He starts to scrub his hand over the back of his head, messing up his hair out of ingrained habit. Tony makes a face that he kind of hides from Pepper, but she somehow divines enough to suggest, “Ignore him, he’s always overly fussy about hair. And he needs to get it together; Happy's waiting, and we have a plane to catch.”

Tony waves this off. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t remember if it’s the place with the ants or the place with the foams,” Bruce says, and logs into his email to check. Natasha curates a list of the places she wants to go to, and when reservations are secured she sends him a briefing, often sub-sectioned out like her mission reports. “I think it’s foams.”

“Tell her WD-50 is closing in November. I’m going to make reservations for the four of us.”

He smiles at her, for normalizing the situation instead of offering up inspection, and closes his workstation back down. “Have a good trip.”

He heads downstairs to linger near the car port and finds her already there, lovely in dark blue, with high heels sporting a cream and white polka dot pattern, feminine and yet still a little aggressive, as if
the cheeriness of the dots is warning coloration. He likes them, likes seeing her glossy and put together and waiting for him. He helps her with her coat, lips light against her neck, and resists the urge to muss her up a little.

“Nice sweater, doc,” she says, turning, and leans in, nose along his throat and jaw, breathing him in, tweaking his collar, making a pleased sound. Unlike with Tony, he doesn’t push her away, instead slides his arm around her waist and enjoys the subtle dusky spice of her own rich perfume mingling with the scent of the bright lipstick, the wool of her fitted overcoat with buttons like an old European military uniform.

It’s not just that they clean up for this. He wants to present her with his best self, and that concept alone is like putting on new shoes after a summer barefoot, having a best self at all.

It’s just as strangely vulnerable and fraught for Natasha, accustomed to inhabiting a persona with the ease of changing costume.

So they take a moment to ground each other, to connect. To smell the skin beneath the fragrance.

Giselle pulls the vehicle around, and they separate. It still feels odd, sliding into the back of a town car to be escorted around the city like it’s prom, but the subway would be a buzzkill if only for those impractical shoes, not to mention the whole unpredictable, underground aspect. This way the commute is also enjoyable, she picks the destination, and all he cares about is going off alone with her as the city passes by.

She pushes her ankle against his in the car, nods to Giselle and gives her the address.

“How’s Peyton?” he asks, brushing fingers against the her thigh, subtle, but he wants to feel the texture of the dress, how it slips along her skin. Wants to see her light up a little with the glancing touch.

“They’ll call tomorrow with the results, and if she and Fiona agree, she’ll let me know.” Dr. Cho had recommended the physician's assistant for her discretion as well as her work with other kids who’d experienced physical and psychological trauma. “So I guess we’ll see.”

Peyton’s headaches had been getting worse, or maybe she was feeling secure enough to share. He knows Natasha’s relieved the girl finally agreed to the medical scan.

"It's a sign of trust," he says, "letting us in, letting us try to help."

"Never mind her brain, she let me chaperone the parkour run again." Peyton insisted it was separate from the Trust curriculum.

“And how was the gravity defying?” She nudges the toe of her shoe up the cuff of his pant leg, and he rests his hand on her thigh, enjoying her warmth.

“They’re fearless,” she says, admiration rich in her tone. “Which means one of them is bound to end up in the ER again, but we did okay today. Skinned knees and a busted shoe, and some scraped palms. I’m always surprised by what throws them off course, what’s easier than it should be.”

From the records they'd found, when Natasha was crafted from the raw material of an orphaned pre-schooler, they’d built in enhancements for strength, dexterity, focus, endurance. She didn’t get minor ailments and illnesses, could get hurt, but healed quickly. Everything about her was amp'd up, and they’d attempted to erase anything that could be a distraction - altered her metabolism, her immunity, her memories and chance at reproduction, they’d done their best to strip her of her humanity. On that front they’d failed. But Natasha was the product of an intensive, focused effort by a group trying to
create the perfect assassin.

She was an entree while the girls were more...snack-sized. Enhanced to be stronger and faster, years of the same deadly training, but with the messy humanness left inside as if Kudrin were more interested in quantity than thoroughness.

Several of them wore glasses, Peyton had copped to migraines, and Mellie, the youngest with the fewest changes to her system, was constantly acquiring head colds and rashes and gooey, goopy childhood illnesses that then got passed around the Trust floor; except for the head lice, which had seen her quarantined in the infirmary office while everything on four floors was hot washed and Tony fled to Malibu.

It still makes Bruce grin, the panic of a billionaire over tiny blood suckers that were gone in a matter of days. Natasha raises an eyebrow and he takes her hand.

“I hear rumors of travel in your future,” she says, and he rolls his eyes.

“Tony’s decided he wants the praise and acknowledgement--and possibly the influx of young, impressionable talent--that accompanies the academic community.”

“And?”

“I think he’s just taking advantage of the fact I write and submit, whereas he just jots results down and sends it off to the patent lawyers.”

“So you’re going to finally rejoin the world of academia?”

He looks out the window instead of at her, and then lifts her hand to press his mouth to the palm. She cups the side of his face. “We’re going to University of Washington in November,” he says. “So we’ll see, I guess.”

“It changes the scope of your…” she pauses to think of what she wants to say. “Options.”

He covers her hand. “No,” he says, “it really doesn’t.”

He recognizes the set of her mouth, holding back more to be said on this topic, but she just nods, and leans closer to kiss him gently. “I look forward to the practice presentations.”

It turns out to be ants, which start in the first course as a sprinkling of crunch on the salad. He’s not bothered by the fact of them so much, he’s eaten more questionable things in his time on the road, but the novelty of eating Oaxacan bugs in the East Village is not lost on him.

She quirks her mouth with a grin as he drinks something bright and bitter made with mezcal and pink fruits, refreshingly ant free. Her drink is rimmed with something called ant salt. He declines a sip, knowing he’ll probably give her most of his own drink at some point anyway.

“I know that you’d just as soon go to Joe’s Shanghai if we’re going to go out,” she says, “so thank you. For the indulgence.”

He puts down the drink, intent, “It’s never an indulgence.” He gets a genuine smile, toothy and ridiculous, that she tries to hide. It makes him feel lit up inside, like a breakthrough, like a win. “I like that you want to eat at the strangest places in the city,” he says. “And humans can digest chitin, so what the hell, right?”

She picks an ant out of his salad, biting its head off in a display rich with metaphor that cracks him
up. “I’ve spent half my life eating food with groups of soldiers in a mess hall, squatting in a safe house eating out of a polyethylene pouch, or a styrofoam container. Hell, I’ve spent a disproportionate amount of time watching Clint eat dan dan noodles out of carryout cartons, shoveling them into his mouth like they’re going to escape.”

“Wherever he’s at, I’m sure he knows every purveyor of dan dan by now,” he laughs, and gamely pops an ant into his mouth.

She continues, lifting one shoulder. “We live in a culinary mecca, and I get to enjoy it with someone whose company I’ve chosen.” Her smile goes sultry. “It always feels indulgent, in the best way possible.”

He strokes her knee under the table, leaning in to posit in his bedroom voice, “Would it be inappropriate to line them up to march to victory?”

“The second course comes with grasshoppers.” She grins, “So what I’m saying is, pick your battles.”

He peters out on the second drink, this time with the ant salt, and when they call for the car he’s floaty and loose in the way tequila often provokes. Her cheeks are flushed in the brisk air and he’s got his arms around her waist under her coat as she curls a warm palm around his neck, and slips her fingers underneath his sweater and shirt, stroking along his skin.

Getting away from the tower, taking this thing between them out of that context, heightens it.

It’s less about being seen, for him, than watching her navigate the public as herself with him in tow, the way she laughs, and steals things off his plate no matter what he orders, and looks at him like she’s glad he’s there; two people out in the city who like each other, who can just have a conversation over a drink rimmed with salt and ground up insects. It’s an exhibition with an audience of two, a demonstration that their identities can’t be summed up in press-friendly monikers.

Giselle pulls up and opens the door for them, crisp professionalism in her tasteful black suit and leather driving gloves.

Natasha gets into the car first, flirtatious, the turn of her ankle, the line of her calf a lovely tease. He thanks Giselle and follows.

Natasha has shed her coat in the warmth of the car, and when it pulls out into traffic, she scoots closer to him, arm across his shoulders and fingers in his hair, mouth against his neck. The tinted glass partition is up this time, blocking the sound. It's still a two way panel, an exhibition of desire under smoked glass, but he just can’t make himself care as Natasha's teeth graze the tendon connecting to his shoulder. He draws circles on the back of her knee under her hem, then tugs so her leg curls over his and he can draw fingertips up the back of her thigh.

It’s subtle but a little too close, not quite appropriate, teasing, seeing how far he can push, how much she can pull while still keeping covered, mouths so close but not touching. Winding each other up, savoring the moment between intent and contact at each step.

She slides her calf up his thigh and adjusts the strap of her shoe, brush of her knee against his balls and a nudge along his erection as she neatly dusts off her instep.

Under cover of her coat in the space between them, he's bunched her skirt in his hand until his knuckles touch bare skin. He eases his fingers into the tight juncture where her thighs primly cross, just enough to feel humidity and heat under silk. His elbow is jammed against the seat back, but that’s part of the slow burn of it. He’s not sure how she’s got her hip up like that to fondle him with
the soft inside of her knee, how she’s getting that much friction through the confines of the denim as she makes a show of plucking invisible pieces of fuzz from his sweater.

He grins when he sees it, then schools his face to casual concentration. He draws a lock of hair back away from her cheek, rubs his fingertips together and delicately licks the pad of his middle finger, then catches the stray eyelash. He holds it for her to see in the uneven flare of street light through darkened windows, then wets his lips so her eyes track to his mouth and blows it off.

Her eyes look dark, and she turns her ankle to pin his leg against hers, possessive. “Did you make a wish?”

He shakes his head slow, squirming his fingers to edge them deeper between her thighs. “Nope.”

~*~

Halloween feels more gauche the closer it approaches, a celebration of the horrors she works hard to contain, and she’s full up on horror right now. In Natasha’s now uninhabited suite there’s a banker box stuffed with files and yellowed quad ruled lab books, recovered from the Academy in Denton but far older, lives catalogued like experiments: doses, training, missions, outcomes, complications.

The records they’d found on the girls were digitized. This box of hardcopy files is hand-written in fountain ink, much of it thankfully in Dr. Kudrin’s precise hand, dispassionately recording grim deeds and outcomes. The writing is cramped, but the words leave plenty of space for someone knowledgeable to read between the lines.

Sometimes the smell of the papers is too evocative, but the upwell of memory is also useful. She’s digitized copies for when handling them is too much.

These were Kudrin’s personal notes, not her vague lab reports. They’re not only in Russian, but partially in code and much of them obscured by context and inferences. There are only a few people in the world able to pull information back out of them. Natasha is a Rosetta stone, translating out to Maria and Bruce, taking their questions back to the files and trying to index the information like a bot spider.

She needs a break, frankly, which she hadn’t realized until Bruce had reached over from his side of the bed, where he’d been reading while she worked, and gently gripped the back of her neck. He meets resistance, an incipient tension headache she hadn’t noticed, and he gives it a slow chiding shake.

She sets her tablet on the bedside table and angles herself so he won’t strain his elbow and stop doing that. He’s still engrossed in whatever he’s reading, so she calls Clint to check in.

“Trick or treat.” Clint answers on the first ring, which means he’s patched his commlink into the phone, which means Laura’s working.

They have never observed the small talk niceties of conversation, so she starts right in, "Steve wants costumes to be mandatory, but he won’t come out and say so."

Clint snickers, and in the background the new baby Nate makes a noise that almost seems like he’s trying to do the same. It sounds like a Shih Tzu with a head cold. "He knows how far that'll get him."

"So instead he's guilt tripping us about how we should be modeling normal civilian behaviour, how the little ones deserve a fun holiday, how it sets a tone--"
In one ear Clint says, "He got that shit from Pepper."

On her other side, Bruce murmurs to himself, "The tone argument."

"So there's a party?" Clint speaks around something held between his lips, muttering. "Hold still, neither one of us wants you poked." Diaper pin, then.

"SI tradition, apparently." Stark Industries always throws a carnival on the first three floors with candy and monsters and fortune telling for kids who can’t trick or treat in their own neighborhoods, providing transportation and chaperoning from far-flung schools. Both Pepper and Tony relish it for different reasons – good works vs scaring the crap out of enthusiastic 7-12 year olds -- and it’s not always clear who falls down on which side. It depends on the day. "It’s also Maria's turn at movie night."

"She texted me the IMDB link. I'm actually sorry to miss the look on Pepper's face." Clint muses. "So what’s your costume?"

"I don’t dress up to playact," she says flatly. Bruce snorts quietly, the massage pausing slightly as he executes a tricky page turn with only his other hand.

"Nat," Clint groans, "How can you not see you have a golden opportunity to troll, here? You love trolling."

She considers. "Point."

Clint murmurs to the baby, who’s probably now tucked against his other shoulder, away from the earpiece. She feels similarly split, a thin boundary between Clint’s odd quotidian home life hundreds of miles away, and the strange and comfortable domesticity she’s made here with Bruce. She’s circumspect, and even talking to Clint right here and now is part of maintaining cover, acting like he’s on a mission stateside, touching base during downtime.

“I’d ask how things are going, but..."

“Haven’t slept properly in weeks, but I think Nate’s starting to get the hang of Earth. Cooper’s been trying to sing him to sleep, so maybe both my sons will start yawning whenever they hear The Ramones sing about life on the road.”

“You really weren’t joking.”

Bruce rolls onto his side, his free hand now trailing down her backbone slow, like he’s got too much sleepiness and is trying to pawn some of it off on her. Bastard.

“I told you, it was the only song Laura could remember the words to. You sing anything slow and sincere, it’ll work.” Clint sighs, and Natasha can picture him settling into the faded golden easy chair, beat but content. “When did you get so middle-class uptight? It can’t be that guy you’re shacking up with.”

“That’s not how I’d describe it.”

“I’m sorry. I meant to say, that highly educated gamma monster you’re shacking up with.”

“Ass,” she chides fondly. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, well you’re wrong. You’re not dating. Neither of you are the dating type no matter how many restaurants you go to.”
Trick or treating wasn’t part of her youth, and Natasha finds adults dressed up as pirates and zombies a little absurd, but she keeps her own kind of All Souls Day even though she’s not terribly concerned about the exact day. She rises early on Halloween but skips going to the studio, not feeling up to being Katya nostalgically dancing with fellow ex-ballerinas.

Instead she kicks the pile of laundry out into the hall with her feet as she leaves the bedroom, stealing Bruce’s burnt orange sweater in the process. He snuffles into his pillow and drops deeper into sleep.

She makes a strong pot of tea and sits down on the floor by the east window, setting her laptop on the zazen stool neither of them use. Night is fading from the sky outside, and she considers lighting a candle, but there are none in the suite. The last time she did this had been in Maria’s condo in Bethesda, body gone stiff from having finally gotten a night’s sleep after days on the run with Steve. She’d blown all her SHIELD covers with the data dump, but she’d always had a few back pocket identities with their own reserves, cash flows, outlays.

Habits either kill you or they stick around to become old habits. This habit was one she never shared with SHIELD.

The sky doesn’t lighten much more, settling into a cold drizzle instead, but she doesn’t turn on any lights, just works in the dark with the screen colors inverted. She revisits her back pocket identities, and redistributes her tithing portfolio for the coming year. Anonymous donations to charities and a few individuals, funneled through a couple lawyers tucked away, working for people who don’t technically exist. She’s always been inclined toward material penance.

She spends the aborted dawn on due diligence, then takes advantage of the fact that Bruce will sleep as long as it’s dark. She begins working on a few more back pocket identities, a bare bones kit if she ever needs to take him underground.

She’s not above eating a candy apple when she’s done.

Thor is giddily enthusiastic about the holiday, unfortunately the god of thunder can’t grasp the idea of being someone else for a day, no matter how many times the idea is explained to him. “I have had to do this before, it was...a tumultuous time for me.”

“But this is for fun.” Pepper says, earnest in her bright yellow track suit. “It’s play.”

“And hot hot teasing.” Tony adds, sliding a finger down her katana with big dark eyes. “Wish fulfillment.”

“You’re right, maybe this is not the tack to take with a guy who incorporates a cape into daily wear.”

Pumpkin muffins make far more sense to Thor, “What delights can the muffin method not do?”

Tony's reply is to hand him a caramel apple.

Steve holds the hard line on the costumes, even when Tony needles him about the near century gap. “We celebrated Halloween,” he says impatiently. “A pillowcase and some greasepaint, it was good fun. Now there’s horror stories about razor blade apples, and it’s all over before dark. Whatever, it should still be about fun.”

Natasha puts on one of her prim SI paralegal outfits, hair and makeup in the same vein, letting Ms. Rushman settle into the way she moves and tilts her head. It’s a costume that’s not a costume.
Bruce is letting her slick down his hair, letting her dress him because he’s indifferent to the whole thing. She thinks detachment is often his play when he doesn’t want to want something, when he’s afraid of disappointment or leery of the price to be paid. She’s not the only one taking advantage of that seeming disinterest. Tony’s persuaded him to go to that conference, coaxing him back into the scientific community by forcing him at each step to have to say no. So far, Bruce hasn’t.

He gives her a slow once-over, and it’s not the first time she’s noted that he always begins and ends with eye contact. “What are you going for, sexy librarian without glasses?”

“I thought glasses were integral to the fetish?” she asks, diffident with plausibly deniable sensuality.

His eyes narrow. “You’re wearing a cover, aren’t you?”

“Am I?” She breathes, tamping down the pleasure at being recognized.

He pulls his head back, sudden discomfort and wariness. Since Denton he’s been skittish about this part of her skillset, but she thinks he needs a better understanding. Of what she does, and of what the actual trigger was in that Texas bar when his control slipped.

After all, he’d been fine watching her be someone else for hours that night, until her mark lightly fondled her with intent. The next morning they’d done interviews all over the city and he’d seen her subtler variations on cover, how she fit herself to each target like crafting a hypothesis to glean information. But those interviews were just patient shit-stirring, observation, and the careful piecing together of clues--no jealousy, no need to respond to a stranger’s hand on her ass by ripping the offending arm off.

She breaks and gives him one of her own smiles, reaching up to smooth his hair. He relaxes again, and she’s gratified that he can read her so closely. Fast learner. She thinks he just needs to go out into the field again with her.

She slaps a name tag on his jacket that says *Hello, my name is: DICK*, and pushes him out the door.

“I look nothing like Feynman,” he says, watching her lock their suite with a press of her palm.

“Fair point, but he’s your man crush.” She adds, “and while you could use a haircut, Einstein would never have bombarded himself with radiation.”

“Ouch.” He walks with her to the elevator bank. “But accurate. On both counts.”

The doors open on Tony, who nods at Bruce and then startles when he sees Natasha. “Ms. Rushman. Didn’t we fire you?”

“Mr. Stark. Technically, no. I wasn’t actually a notary, so some legal documentation had to be sorted out first.”

Tony blanches so suddenly that Bruce reaches to brace his elbow.

“I’m kidding. Pepper did that ages ago.” She presses the button to close the doors. “Boo.”

Clint texts her trick-or-treating photos. Connor’s been Iron Man three years in a row and it’s starting to grate--his head’s cropped out of the pic. Lila is Princess Leia circa Hoth, and Natasha smiles at the excellent trigger discipline she’s showing with her blaster. Nate is striated and indefinable.

She texts Clint a question mark, and he shoots back a body shot with the baby strapped to his chest, facing outward: *He’s the Alien eating it’s way free.*
She texts back: *I don’t even have words.*

*We were gonna be Master Blaster, but he’s too little to stay up on my shoulders.*

Thor carves fantastic designs into his pumpkin, curves and branching swirls, all the while trying to work out with Bruce some kind of synthesis between World Tree cosmology and his recent marathon of deGrasse Tyson’s *Cosmos.*

“Darcy had suggested it as a way for me to become familiar with Midgardian magic, but I was surprised to find it so compelling.”

Bruce plans out his jack-o-lantern, scoring the skin with an x-acto before cutting, making it an exercise in skilled precision.

“I hadn’t thought Midgard had anything like Asgardian bardic tradition, the telling of truth as a story so it can be remembered properly.”

“It’s a remake, actually. Better animations, updated science, Druyan outdid herself.”

“Jane showed me some of the earlier version, yes,” Thor palms his pumpkin like a basketball player, turning and carving with his wicked pocket knife. “I confess I much prefer the bard Neil.”

Natasha simply enjoys the jagged sawing, and her pumpkins are all eyes and teeth.

Steve surprises them all, showing up in dark jeans, a thermal and an Iron Maiden shirt that glows in the middle, and an eyebrow penciled goatee. He looks like Captain America’s evil twin.

It’s only fitting that Tony eventually shows up in blue spandex and a red belt, a knit Captain America toque with earflaps completing the ensemble.

Hill is the only one who arrives in an appropriate costume, bearing store-bought cupcakes with fondant fangs and red gel blood. She kicks off the first of the movies before the sugar rushes really get out of hand.

“I’ve got a slew of brothers and cousins,” Maria paces before the screen like lecturing recruits, her thin linen nightgown swirling at her feet. She has her old running gear on underneath, flash of the SHIELD gym logo through the translucent fabric, but the eye is more drawn to the copious amounts of fake blood dripping from the corners of her lips, down her neck and into her decolletage.

“Summer afternoons, if I was quiet, no one would know I was hanging out in the basement gorging on these flicks; filler for local TV stations, but I loved them.”

There are three movies queued up, but the Film Appreciation students only have to stay through one to get credit. They giggle through *Dracula, Prince of Darkness* but aren’t displeased, and it leads to a discussion of Gothic horror, vampirism as a metaphor for disease and a coded way to discuss sex, pleasure, risk and societal unease with female desire.

Steve left for pizza in the middle of the first movie, returning during the second to full-on naked sacrifice Black Mass on the screen, chanting and hard nipples and sigils painted on the creamy skin of a moaning blonde. “This seems...gratuitous.”

Maria stares him down. It seems to take less effort than usual.

“I mean, do you think it’s appropriate, even for Halloween?”

“Name one person in this room who doesn’t have nipples, Steve.”
“That’s not...I mean, my point is...” His eyes track the thrust of a ritual knife, the jump cut edit, the blood dripping off a dead cockerel dangling midair. He glares at her, “It’s clearly standing in for sex.”

“Steve, you’ve seen the internet. Isn’t the fact that it’s *subtext* refreshing?”

Steve leans in, still coming off as peeved. “Refreshing is not the word I’d choose.”

Maria sometimes thinks that handling the intensity of Steve Rogers is like surfing, when he gets rolling you can’t even think of steering the wave, just steering yourself across it and enjoying the ride. Maria has never been surfing, and has never wanted to, except maybe now. She tosses a blood capsule in her mouth and pops it between her molars, swiping it across her teeth before smiling, “Then have some punch and don’t watch.”

That’s when his color changes, or maybe the flush gets above his collar, and she realizes that things have gotten a bit more interesting. He sounds downright pissed, but she’s half convinced it’s just wound up. “I’d like to speak with you about this in private.”

In the empty conference room she grabs a handful of t-shirt and pulls him into a corner behind the door, “You gonna lecture me some more, Rogers?”

Kissing her seems like the best idea he’d had all day.

The fake blood is sweet, with a trace of chocolate, but under that is the smooth smoky taste of Maria Hill’s wide, lovely mouth. Steve doesn’t know what to think about this turn of events, just that it’s not the corn syrup he’d like to taste more of, but the trail of it is leading him down to some interesting places.

The vibration of both of their phones breaks up that party, even if ROBOT SQUID flashing on the screen reads more like a shitty band than a real threat. They head back into the living room and don’t say anything about the kissing.

Three of the younger girls have shown up while they were tucked into a corner, swapping out with the film students who’d bailed. The girls had come up from the party in the lobby, glutted on candy and dry-ice laced punch, only traces of stage makeup and tatters of fabric left of their costumes. They sit around one of Thor’s dough proofing bowls, big as a satellite dish and filled with popcorn.

Romanoff waves her phone at Steve, shaking Banner awake and pushing his head off her lap. “Squid,” Romanoff says, earning a hard look from Banner as he sits up. He plucks his glasses from where they perch atop her head like a tiara.

“Where’s Barton?” Steve asks, suspicious.


“Squid are very intelligent,” The dark-haired girl, Marisol, looks up at Steve through her own glasses, smeared from being pushed back up with buttery fingers. “But not like octopi.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Steve assures her. “Hey, would you ladies like to watch something else...?”

Marisol rolls her eyes but Aisha tags in with a thousand watt smile and a southern peach sweet, “No, thank you, Captain.” The *bless your heart* is heavily implied.

Banner reaches down sleepily to grab a handful of popcorn, idly munching while Romanoff scrolls
through the brief communique from the Port Authority.

He offers Marisol a handkerchief from an inside pocket, and the girl licks her lenses and wipes them kind of clean. He waves that she can keep it, and grabs more popcorn. A communicative look passes between him and Romanoff and he sighs, shoves the last into his mouth and bends to put on his shoes.

Steve offers him an encouraging smile, because he’d rather have him on site and unneeded, than needed and cooling his heels back at the tower.

Banner snags a bottle of water from a nearby bowl of ice and hands it to Steve. “You might want to rinse your teeth before you go save the day looking like a cannibal.”

~*~

As they head out into the harbor aboard one of the Coast Guard cutters, the Sector Commander is remarkably frank, “We’ve got a lot of drunks on and in the water, between the ferries, the booze cruises and the pleasure craft. Luckily, New Yorkers have grown accustomed to monster movies happening in their backyard.”

Behind Captain Grodzicki, a fireboat is valiantly containing a blazing yacht. She sees Steve staring and reassures him, “We don’t believe it breathes fire. Pretty sure that one’s just opportunistic insurance fraud.”

“See?” Bruce smiles, “Could be worse.”

He’s the least reassuring person Steve has met in this century, but he’s always so wryly cheerful about it that Steve takes heart anyway.

“It’s kind of beautiful, actually. Bioluminescence.” Bruce muses, feet planted on the deck and hands in his pockets as he faces into the gusty autumn chill at the prow. The blue tentacles look like they’re lit from within, setting the choppy waves of the Atlantic glittering. “That is, if it weren’t humping that passenger ferry into capsizing.”

Thor and Stark are feeding Steve info from above, and Romanoff is on a second cutter closer to shore, scanning the rest of the harbor traffic that isn’t on fire. Hill is back at the tower coordinating with several authorities, agencies, and her on-call team, “Possible ID of a controlling signal, awaiting confirmation.”

Thor plummets and then twists at the very bottom of his descent, throwing all that speed behind the hammer and into the torpedo-shaped head of the squid, sending a plume of water up to rival the fireboat.

“Thor!” Steve barks, “Hold off until they’ve cleared the passengers and crew!”

“That was a nice spike of data, though--signal confirmed as related to the mechanism.”

The Coast Guard craft have completed the evacuation and begun pulling away from the ferry. Captain Grodzicki waits until they gain some distance before giving the Avengers the all-clear with, “Lady and gentlemen, feel free to get that damned thing out of my harbor. I’d appreciate if you could spare the ferry, though, if at all possible.”

Steve acknowledges, “Ma’am.”

“Carry on.”
Hill clicks to single channel to say, “Flirt,” then clicks back to the full team, “Stark is working on wide spectrum signal jamming, but if you can push the thing a little bit we might be able to triangulate and find the person behind the sea monster.”

Hill’s still in her costume, which is one of the things that fascinates Marisol. Madame was very strict about appearance and comportment, and Marisol had struggled with that at the Academy. She lost track of details such as when she’d brushed her hair last, and she was the disappearing kind of quiet when she didn’t have anything she wanted to say.

Seeing Maria Hill work the Avenger’s tactical HQ in her soft flowing nighty stained with fake blood, juggling two earpieces tuned to different channels, five holoscreens, two regular screens on swivel arms, the Coast Guard, the Port Authority, JARVIS, Avengers and her own team--it’s a revelation for Marisol.

It’s not like she didn’t know Madame was full of shit about the source of power for a woman, it’s just that Marisol couldn’t picture the alternative until it was right there in front of her.

She texts Aisha and Mellie, and tells them to bring the bowl of popcorn. She lets them onto the floor.

~*~

One of Hill’s agents comes by with a coffee and a night vision set-up, and Bruce appreciates that they took the effort to not come off as the babysitter they are. He gets the motivation, wanting an early warning if he loses it, but it’s the opposite of helpful to have someone hovering in crushing range.

Besides, he sinks like a stone in his regular form, much less swole to tonnage. He’s pretty sure no amount of pre-transformation visualization would help keep him in the right frame of mind to fight a mechanical sea monster, in the dark, at depth.

He slips on the goggles and the harbor lights up like daytime. No, he’s pretty content to sip Coast Guard coffee and watch the scenery turn green instead.

~*~

“Rogers, refrain from taking it apart right there. If you could move it another thirty feet along a different vector we can get the source of the signal and take out whoever’s behind this.”

Aisha is squinting hard at the readouts while Mellie is watching Maria, rapt.

Aisha whispers, “Warehouses.”

Mellie is fidgeting slowly as her body mimics Maria’s gestures and expressions, the way her fingers swoop through the holoscreen, the frequency of her pacing step.

Marisol agrees with Aisha. If she’d sent a robot squid out into the harbor to eat ferries, she’d be watching from one of those quiet darkened warehouses.

~*~

Natasha doesn’t make the crew dock, she hops off the gunwale the moment they’re close to the wharf. Tony is rambling about the proper way to dismantle the mechanical squid so as to preserve as much function as possible for later study, ignoring Bruce’s question of, “And store it where, exactly?” Thor is simply whacking away like it’s lobster fest.
Steve is stern in her ear about waiting for backup, but she doesn’t have time to explain why that’s a ridiculous idea. The show is over, the squid is being hustled offstage, the ferry is dented but afloat and none the worse for wear, all the passengers shoreside by now and the Coast Guard back to fishing the regular holiday haul of drunks from the drink.

Whether the puppeteer considers the night’s events a success or failure, they’re surely bugging out post haste. She’d been heading for these warehouses the moment she spotted them from the cutter, and Maria’s coordinates only pinpointed and confirmed.

For Natasha, a warehouse is a bit like a studio, full of equipment and possibilities, from the track and pulley systems at the ceiling down to the drainage pits beneath the floor.

Which makes it even more humbling when she wakes up in a puddle of water staring up at a couple of EMTs.

~*~

Steve snaps, “What do you mean off-grid?”

“Just that, her comms shorted out. I put Banner on mute the moment it winked out, so let’s all take a beat and--damn.”

“Hill--”

“Last ping was from the coordinates I sent out not two minutes ago.”

~*~

Before Tony touches down next to him, Bruce notices the faceplate is open and his eyebrows are high up his forehead. He raises spread hands and his voice is loud and tight, “She’s fine. Probably more pissed than hurt. Don’t freak out.”

This is when Bruce realizes that while his commlink is still buzzing with Port Authority and Coast Guard, he hasn’t heard any of his team for a few minutes.

“Update: she just took a swing at an EMT. So yeah, right as rain. Bruce?”

He turns to the agent off to his left, “Tell Hill to fix my comms and not pull that shit ever again.”

To her credit, it’s nearly instantaneous that Hill replies in his ear, “Sorry.”

“Take me there.” He waves Tony quiet with a fed-up shake of his head, “Just...not too goddamn high.” Tony pops out the Hawk handles and Bruce climbs on.

He briefs Bruce as they hover about a yard off the ground at a decent clip, and it’s just like a flying dream except for being exactly like a nightmare. She’d been unresponsive when they found her, sprawled out in a puddle of water from the leaky warehouse roof. Her opponent was also out cold, a gritty older guy built like a fireplug, the control device stashed in a backpack a few feet away.

Bruce had heard Cap tell her to wait. Heard in the click of her tongue that she was ignoring it like a suggestion, not an order. He could even see her thought process - the immediate danger was taken care of and she was right about the location of the source, but still.

“He’s already bundled off to the hospital in custody, standard Widow tasering.”

“What happened to Natasha?”
“Guy’s clothes were soaking wet--probably already took a header in one of the puddles--so when she landed and engaged the bites--”

“She took herself down, too.” The floor of the warehouse is more water than concrete when they hover in, puddles rainbow slicked with oil, lit by the bright open ambulance they’d driven right inside.

“Like a ton of bricks. Whacked her head on the floor. Lucky they both landed face up, actually.”

Bruce locks eyes on her in the middle of a knot of medics, and he lets go of the suit and homes in. She’s coming around when he gets to her, bleary and refusing to have her neck immobilized.

~*~

“At least they didn’t cut through the uniform.” Natasha fiddles with the zipper, which rides lower than usual to make way for the cardiac monitor. They did cut her bra off, even the heavy gauge underwire of her fighting gear no match for EMT shears.

Bruce doesn’t answer, just stares down at where his hands are laced together dangling between his knees. Her boots, belt, holsters, gloves and bites are neatly stacked next to him on the bench, everything a sickly shade from the weird bright lighting in the back of the ambulance.

Her head is pounding, the pain nauseating with each jostle of the road. There’s a CAT scan waiting for her at the end of this joyride, to be performed under her own name, and that’s...not great, but she’s really not dealing with that right now because she’s more concerned about the fact that Bruce still hasn’t said a word. His hands squeeze each other in a slow erratic pulse.

“Why’d you bust in here to ride along, if all you were going to do is pout?”

His knuckles go white and he bends his elbows to rest his chin on his thumbs, press his doubled fist against his mouth. His eyes are glassy, and she was not expecting him to look hurt.

She leans over the other side of the gurney to empty her stomach, situational awareness dispassionately noting the EMT’s shoes deftly sliding out of range of sour candy apple, Bruce’s thready sigh, and his hand rubbing slow circles on her back, warmth seeping through her armor.
Chapter 4

Her brain strain gives him pain in the temporal vein

“This can’t be the first time you’ve ridden out aftercare for a concussion.”

Natasha shouldn’t be working. The head trauma left a fuzzy gap in her memory of the fight, and the full force of one of her bites isn’t exactly nothing either.

Instead she’s got note cards in English and Russian laid out on the coffee table, and a map spread out next to her on the woolly rug. She’s been carefully translating and tagging Kudrin’s notes since the summer, collaborating with Bruce and Maria to reconstruct how the Academy in Denton came about. She’s the only one who can make sense of the raw material, and she often has to go back and re-work through layers of implication when any of them make a new connection.

Bruce knows he sounds pissy, but he’s not prepared to hide his annoyance. “Do you even know what the aftercare is for a concussion?”

The look he gets confirms that she’s dismissed such recommendations in the past, and has no intention of changing that. No real surprise there.

She turns back to her notes, rubbing at the back of her head. She’s maybe playing on his sympathy, or maybe the pain is too annoying to ignore even if he’s watching. Both options only amp up his irritation, but he isn’t interested in unpacking what he’s angry about, sick of the spike of pure dread that’s been running through him since it happened.

Reckless. He hates it when she’s reckless.

He lays his hand flat on a section of cards and sweeps them aside in formation to clear a patch of table to sit on. She continues scribbling what looks like an EEG line, but he knows is cursive Cyrillic.

He knows sometimes that she can’t help herself, that she survived on skill and canny instinct, hard-won experience even more than enhancement. That throwing herself at a problem is often the first response she can think of, but it leaves him hollow. Call her on it and it sounds possessive, like he’s questioning her abilities, her craft. Not respecting the extraordinary things she can do.

Ignore it and he’s left with this tinny anger that feels nothing like transformational ire and everything like being left behind.

For all her enhanced physiology, though, she’s so very human - no armor, no shield, no hammer, no rage. Just fragile, mortal flesh.

Bruce’s patience is finally met with a toneless recitation, “I can’t run, spar, or hit. I’ve been ordered not to even demonstrate anything, which means that I had to turn training over to Steve today. I have a headache, and because of all the above, I cannot be within twenty feet of Stark.”

That was fair. Tony had been merciless in his teasing, probably because she was so rarely the one to have her own choices blow up in her face. Bruce is pretty sure it’s Tony’s way of saying he cares, much like the quickly reinstated paperwork that showed Natalie Rushman was an employee of Stark industries with the accompanying excellent benefits package...and name on the medical records.
That had earned Tony a heart-stopping grin and a few free passes for harassment. Passes he was incapable of not using up immediately.

“Also, I’m not up for the disapproving look from Steve if I try to watch him teach. He gets that blush when they stare at him, I promised Clint a picture but it’s not worth the Power Frown.”

“That’s the physical rest part.”

Natasha ignores his cue the way he sometimes ignores hers, so he heads off into the kitchen.

~*~

Boredom and avoidance have steered her through the rest of Kudrin’s files, pushing through the sore sluggishness of her brain to find patterns she hadn’t noticed or dwelt long enough on before.

The pre-Denton papers describe sets of tests and outcomes, unevenly punctuating the years between the Red Room and the Lozen Academy project. Prototyping new tech, developing the enhancement and theta-inducer protocol used on the girls in Texas, but even for secrets some pieces had been terribly opaque, like the seven sets of alphanumeric codes cribbed in the margins.

Each one appears once, on different kinds of papers though mostly paired with physiological data, but they’re too short to be financial accounts, ID or telephone numbers, and she’d set it aside months ago as a loose end to come back to. She stares at the card and thinks it can’t be that simple.

“JARVIS, engage interactive mode.”

“How may I assist, Ms. Romanoff?”

“Pinpoint the following on a map, push to my tablet. Use the Pulkovo-42 coordinate system.” She reads off the seven codes and then looks at the result on the screen.

She and Clint had recently investigated trashed labs in three of those locations, dismissing them as unlikely HYDRA bases. These were the smashed and burned labs, not the professional jobs, though just as clean of data and evidence. Not HYDRA. This was related to Kudrin’s work.

Kudrin had hewed close to her benefactors during the dissolution of the USSR, at least those best suited to the profiteering and oligarchy that followed. She’d known her work was valuable but after that she’d let herself sink off the radar, perhaps being a good team player and biding her time on related research projects in labs scattered across Eastern Europe, until she raised enough funds to strike out on her own in the land of the free and home of the unaccounted for children.

“JARVIS,” he says on his way out of the kitchen, “dim lights, disengage interactive.”

The room darkens and Bruce stands in front of her with pain relievers and a glass of ice water. In return she offers him a sheaf of papers she’s sorted out, chemical formulae diagrammed like constellations on a star chart, spiky linear graphs and scatterplots.

“NMR data.” Bruce shakes his head. “Getting at the structure dynamics of proteins and nucleic acid molecules, but....”

“I indexed everything before I started, so you can see what was filed alongside each one in the box.”

“...yeah, so not the problem I’m having right now.” He picks up the tablets again and holds them out on his palm. “Come on, woman, meet me halfway here.”
She puts the notes away and can’t help the smirk. Mild-mannered like a worn mountain range, smooth but implacable.

~*~

Natasha replies to Peyton’s meeting request with a time and the address of a Japanese tea room. The Trust’s physician assistant Fiona has shared the neurologist’s report per Peyton’s request, which is reassuringly normal, and with a good prognosis of getting the headaches under control.

Dr. Cho’s appended report echoed the findings, though with far more caution due to her knowledge of the enhancement piece. The biotech Kudrin used in Denton seemed to take a different tack than that used in the original Red Room; Dr. Cho speculates that it forks one of two ways, the girl becoming either more physically or mentally robust.

Peyton is bedrock. She saw one of the Trust psychologists for a while but is down to bimonthly check-ins, and reports no medical or psychological difficulties aside from the migraines. She’s dealing, she’s doing well in her studies, and she’s been actively helping the younger girls process and adjust.

Between the grand jury findings, the evidence gathered at Denton, and the Lozen Academy records that Kudrin kept both publicly and privately, Natasha knows that Peyton is diligent, unflappable, introverted, loyal and efficient. Her part in the coup was to neutralize the teaching staff, and she killed six of the ten in under fifteen minutes before gathering up kids and evacuating the school. Pepper describes her film appreciation essays as “brilliant for sixteen, subtly unnerving actually.”

There’s no reason Peyton would want to talk to Natasha, except the obvious.

Many of the kids have favorites, adults they seem to trust or connect with and gravitate toward. Luz might as well be Tony’s apprentice, and Mellie has a countdown for when she can go to Asgard for bardic training. Marisol imprinted on Bruce like a tiny fey duckling—which surprises everyone but Bruce--while Trinh spends hours in the lab he shares with Tony. Aisha had Catherine build a special earpiece and sub-vocal mic so she could talk to JARVIS undisturbed.

Even the band serves a dual function, not just as an outlet for Sumi, Dom and Georgia, but with every name change their branding is everywhere: t-shirts, stickers, guerrilla ringtone and screensaver changes.

Reclaiming identity, marking territory, owning their own story whether the songs are pretty fictions or ugly truth, or just a way to express the screaming and walk away from it—but everyone’s been marked with Marco Polio, Vile Lozenge or whatever they’ll be next month.

Real connections, yes, but Natasha is aware that the Trust kids are managing their situation as best they can, and not just in the obvious way that Khadijah liaises with Pepper.

Natasha thinks Ameena was only in the sparring class to associate with her, to work the connection. She suspects Peyton may be tagging in as the Romanoff Handler, which means the girls are concerned enough to favor Ameena like an injured limb.

Whatever the motivation, the young woman is clearly uneasy when she enters the little alcove tucked away from the main room, and takes a seat. Natasha had chosen afternoon tea to echo the formality of Kudrin, but went Japanese to subvert it, to play on the steady containment of Peyton herself. “I ordered for us, so we shouldn’t be disturbed too much.”

They make small talk over little warm sandwiches in bamboo baskets, and Peyton is terrible at it,
letting topics and conversational gambits flow past her like someone waiting at a train crossing. She’s tensing up, her otherwise flawless manners wearing at the seams from it. When the scones arrive, scenting the table with bergamot steam, Natasha tries a different tack, “I know Khadijah is the official liaison you’ve all chosen for the Trust, but have you thought about an information backchannel with the Avengers?”

Peyton takes a sip of tea. “You think a dozen teenagers need an official liaison with the saviors of New York?”

“Let’s not be disingenuous: bad footing to start off on. We’re neighbors in the tower at the very least. Arguably much more.”

“St. Potts’ School for Reformed Killers.”

Natasha offers a smirk, pleased that some of the real Peyton has finally made it to the meeting. “That could apply to everyone except Ms. Potts herself.”

“I believe that’s how she meant it. So how would this work?”

Natasha shrugs. “Ask me anything. I’ll tell you the truth, and I’ll let you know when I can’t answer at all. I’d hold you to the same.”

Peyton picks at her scone for a moment. “You know we divvied y’all up. Of course you do. Star pupil, came to take Madame down, beard the lion in her own den and all that.”

“It’s survival, I know that. I don’t fault you, and I won’t thwart you.”

“Thing is, though...it took us a long time to learn to trust each other, to risk talking to each other enough to bitch and cry and plan.” Her words are quiet in the little alcove, voice already strained from the adolescent shift down into contralto, now thickened with an emotion she’s letting rise and fall unheeded. Peyton is a rock, lapped by waves. “We started by working each other as assets, useful connections, but...some of us remember where we came from, good and bad, and...the habit of making friends ran deeper, kinda infected us--the ones who’ve stayed, that’s why we did. This is the family we have.”

Natasha quashes the almost queasy tightening in her chest.

“I can see it happening here, too. Connection is compromise.”

Natasha pours for them both. “You’re not wrong. But if it helps, you should know you’re changing us, too. Even if it’s just seeing the future staring you in the face all unimpressed. It has an effect.”

“Future, huh? I figured we were more in the category of past mistakes.”

“What happened to you was fallout from someone else’s evil.” Natasha shakes her head slowly and emphatically, “Each of you have to figure out what to do with it, what it means.”

Peyton lifts her cup to clink with Natasha’s. “To Cold War legacies.”

They drink. “Even if you don’t reciprocate, you can still ask me anything.”

“Were you disappointed you didn’t get to kill Kudrin?”

Natasha had thought for a long time about what it would be like to put a bullet through Kudrin’s eye. It had turned out more satisfying to beat her at her own game, to see how far she had grown away
from being Madame’s pupil, and to see Kudrin’s own unfinished works take her out in the end. “No.”

“I wasn’t either. I had a list, I stuck to it. I’m done.” Peyton swirls tea leaves. “Wish I’d gotten to Gerrish first, though. She was the sole one I was looking forward to. I’d’ve taken her head clean off.”

“Who did?” Natasha has only been able to eliminate the unlikely contenders for who slew that particular dragon, and the official findings are just as blank on that question as any of the kids when asked.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Okay.”

Peyton waits a long beat, but if there’s another shoe it’s not going to drop this quickly anyway. She shrugs. “So I guess we have a deal.”

Natasha clinks cups again, “To mutually assured destruction.”

**Europe on 2 corpses a day**

Natasha had spent years working alone in the field but her missions had always been clear cut. Locate, eliminate, retrieve; sow discord, sow doubt, sow false intelligence; start a fire, stop a feud, stall a war.

Once she joined SHIELD she and Clint had become Strike Team Delta, and she got used to having someone at her back: laying down cover fire, being the distraction, or straight man, or last argument of kings, as needed. In recent years Fury had leaned harder on her infiltration and analytical skills, sending her out solo to assess, persuade, keep in check, forge alliances.

Her work with Maria now is more investigation than anything else, chasing down unscreened leads from excitable junior agents and international contacts, and reconstructing decades of horror from a banker box jammed with files and notebooks.

Now she’s going back to Europe on the strength of four scribbled coordinates and a junior mint in the Hungarian office who wants to show her something.

This mission is like stabbing in the dark, trying to build a hypothesis on the fly. It’s maddening and compelling, and that’s why she’s heading to Finland and Latvia, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Meanwhile Bruce is off to Washington state with Tony, after three days of bickering like crotchety old men about the AV portion of their presentation, Tony accusing Bruce of mistaking koans for slides, Bruce countering that physical demonstrations do not belong in serious venues.

*Tony poured pixie dust on a concrete block. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" He gave it a light playful tap and it crumbled to tiny pebbles.*

*In your case, this is the sound of one hand clapping." Bruce jostled a loose fist at hip level and rolled his eyes in a toss up between fake orgasm and real boredom.*

Natasha goes out to the Barton farm for a night before heading to Finland. Waiting until she's sent Bruce off with Tony, and folding it into her own trip, makes it feel less like lying.

Bruce sends her a series of reaction shots of Tony encountering Seattle, including him facing off with
an inexplicable statue of Lenin, captioned, “socratic dialog on the inherent evil of goatees.”

When she shows the Bartons, still chuckling, Laura smiles politely and Clint just blinks. She sends it to be printed for the lab wall.

The baby is warm and grumpy, and coos and kicks at her for not being his parents, but settles in once she informs him that she can always just give him back. She bounces him, resolutely humming guitar riffs while Cooper gently pokes his back and sings The Ramones.

Nate smells milky and sweaty and kind of delicious, and she ignores the eyebrow Laura gives her as she tucks him against her neck while hashing out her strategy for Europe with Clint.

She’s stood here in this kitchen with each of these kids, holding them and swaying, talking out nightmares and daydreams and how to cheat at dividing fractions. There’s comfort here that she welcomes, but also a growing sense that it’s selfish to keep this comfort to herself. She doesn’t know what to do with that feeling. This isn’t her secret to share, so neither is the place she’s created within this family.

“We’ll be at my folks’ for Thanksgiving, out in Manhasset.” Laura says after, wiping her hands on the dishtowel over her shoulder and double checking that homework and lunches are ready to be shoved into backpacks in the morning.

Natasha sways a little with Nate. “Come into the city,” she says, grinning. “We’ll have lunch.”

“Sure,” says Laura, mirth in her voice. “We’ll buy shoes, drink Cosmos, gossip about the fellas.”

Natasha covers her fingers over delicate baby ears as she breaks into raucous laughter, unable to contain herself. She knows Laura’s been working with her business partner and building a clientele closer to the city, that if anything they’ll talk restaurants and business lunches and the contacts that Natasha’s been trawling through SI for.

Clint shoots them both a dirty look, finishes wrapping up the leftovers, and fishes out beers for the three of them.

There’s a curve and grace to Nate’s head, and Natasha rests her palm there, feeling the delicacy of fuzz and a skull more cartilage than bone. “He’s so breakable,” she says. “I keep forgetting how little they start.”

“Tiny and defenseless.” Clint lifts his bottle. “Extra motivation to keep ‘em safe. Until they get big and ornery like everyone else.”

She rolls her eyes.

“Oh Christ,” Laura says, “The Clint Barton school of pithy philosophy.”

“Pissy philosophy.” he corrects. He cocks his head at Natasha, reaching out to tweak his son’s toes. “You really think it’s worthwhile to schlep all the way back to Europe?”

She shrugs, earning an annoyed ooga from the kid. “There’s something going on there, and it’s got a couple of the junior mints scared. I don’t know. I have a feeling about it, I wanna follow up.”

He nods, a little distant, like he’s listening to something else or planning which room to deconstruct next, though they all look turned over and disorganized. Clint’s always trusted her judgement about missions, but that doesn’t mean she hasn’t led them into some minefields.
“Hill wants me to go back, but I think she also wants me to terrorize the newbies a little more.”

“Lotta time on the road,” he says, sits back, raises his insinuating eyebrow.

She matches it. “So?”

“So nothin’. Just wondering what you’re trying to prove.”

She hates it when she gets doublespeak from Clint, but they try not to actually argue here. It’s so much more effective to save it for the middle of a firefight.

“So,” Laura says, pushing through the awkwardness. “Robot squid? Really?”

Natasha lets her tone go light, but doesn’t break the stare off. “They glowed in the dark.”

"Plus," Clint adds, slow smile of victory before he blinks and glances at Laura, "Someone got a nifty new concussion to add to her collection."

“Seriously?” Natasha says, “Everyone’s a tattletale.” She hands off Nate, and hears a murmured commentary as Clint makes his way down the hallway with him.

Laura clicks on the baby monitor and leans against the counter, giving Natasha the same look of clear eyed guileless innocence that always devastates her kids into spilling secrets. Natasha sips her beer, and tries not to let on that she thinks it’s cute.

“You know,” Laura begins, “the first time Clint came home hurt, I wanted to punch him in the throat. He was all quivering chin, all I’m sorry, baby, and showing me his bruises like I’d want to kiss them better...I just wanted to kill him.”

Natasha quirks her head in acknowledgment. She’s familiar with the feeling.

“Because I was scared.” Laura takes a long pull of her beer, watching Natasha’s amused smile falter. “Told him until Cooper’s birth to really get where I was coming from, that love may be patient and kind and all that, but sometimes it’s also fucking frightening, because part of your heart is now out of your control.”

Laura finishes her beer. The kitchen is eerily quiet since Natasha’s been here last, because all the crickets have died for the season. Laura pushes away from the counter and punches her in the arm.

“Ow.”

“My kids love you,” she says, rubbing the place she’d punched. “You know he loves you. I love you.”

“I...” Natasha swallows so she can do more than nod, but still can’t quite make the response come out.

“I know.” Laura nods sweetly, understandingly, then gives Natasha a light smacking palm to the forehead. “So don’t get hurt.”

~*~

Peyton takes Dom, Aisha, Mellie, and Georgia to ballet on Wednesday, and decides to just wait while they finish class. She’s got some calculus to do, but she’s surprised when the instructor comes out, spotting her while the girls warm up.
She’s prepared to apologize for Mellie, who just cannot seem to grasp the idea of quiet, but instead the instructor hands her a stack of forms.

“I know it’s kind of late. We’ve been rehearsing since the middle of October, but the girls don’t take class with their normal age group, and I didn’t know…”

Peyton finds the ballet instructor, a young blonde woman who favors neon leotards, a little hard to take. She just stares at her, willing her to either finish or go away. The woman swallows around her discomfort, and forges on.

“We had a bunch of snowflakes drop out and the girls are all quick studies. Plus, we always need more people for the party scene.” She eyes Peyton with a calculating glance. “Maybe you and your…” Peyton can tell she’s about to say parents, but given the disparate backgrounds, appearances and races of the girls, it’s disingenuous. “Guardians…?” she finishes with a wavering lilt. “Anyway, we can always use more people in the party scene.”

Peyton narrows her eyes, takes the sheaf of papers, and decides to make it someone else’s problem. The only someone else she can locate by the time they get home, however, is Rogers, who pages through them, befuddled.

“You have to give them permission.” Peyton just wants to be done with the whole thing.

“To dance?”

“To perform.” This is not that complicated, but maybe things were different back in the dark ages. “And they need money to order the costumes. Plus, I’m supposed to ask if there are any adults at home who might want to be in the party scene. I said I’d ask, so I’m asking.”

“So wait,” Natasha says to Bruce a few nights later on the phone, their schedules overlapping long enough to relish his voice in her ear, to be grateful for the sheer silliness of the whole thing. “Captain America is going to be in our local neighborhood Nutcracker?”

“Don’t worry,” he says, “Steve shelled out for the costumes and I bought tickets for all three shows.”

~*~

Natasha has to take a big dual sport vehicle out to the edge of the road and hike into the park to get to the coordinates the Junior Agent in Helsinki had provided.

This thirty-two kilometer stretch of the Oulanka River Valley bordering Russia had been shared, uneasy space since World War II, map-strategic when people still worried about Soviet armies, but nothing much of interest on the ground except for an abandoned archaeological survey that had been hotly negotiated forty years ago, but hadn’t been funded or followed up on since.

If she’d had to guess, the lab had been set up to take advantage of the lack of development of the land, and the entire lack of fucks now given about it.

Negative two Celsius in Finland, and she’s tromping around in the forest. She gets to the site in the middle of nowhere and of course the damned wooden facility had been mostly burnt down, like a Sami/Slavic meth lab.

She’s got a sample case in her backpack that she fills up, taking pictures, taking notes. She’s not an arson expert, but the fire looks deliberate, hot scorched marks of ash stemming from a pile in the corner, smoke marks climbing the remaining wall.
She does a perimeter check, ringing out in increasingly wide circles. When she finds a brown hiking boot, caked in muck and leaves, her gut tightens. It’s another hour before she finds the rest of the remains, the skin attached only in patches. It’s cold up here and he’s stashed in a darkly shaded hollow that still has a crusted remnant of snowbank, so decomposition hasn’t progressed much, and there’s gnaw marks on the exposed areas. Something looks off, but it could just be the sun tipping down, shading the park with wintery tones. She uses the satellite phone to wrangle the junior agent and get him out to the scene with bio-hazard gear and a body bag.

It takes the medical examiner two days to give her findings. The victim had been a scientist, recently working for a pharmaceutical company in Kallunki, but he’d gone missing four months ago. His grown daughter said he was having financial issues, had been depressed about work. She assumed he was out there somewhere, waiting to be found.

“Radiation poisoning,” the medical examiner says. Which makes no sense. “I’ll have to send this all to Helsinki.”

Natasha persuades her to send it to the shell facility Hill has set up, ostensibly for radiation research, the Junior Agent explaining that this lab will coordinate with the Finnish authorities. The woman blinks wearily at Natasha and her lanky puppy dog Finn in his ill-fitting suit like she wants nothing more than to turf this strange and horrifying case into someone else’s hands, and agrees to forward the samples.

Latvia offers another burnt lab just outside of Riga, a raft of locals grumbling about unpaid debts connected to the building and its erstwhile renters--but no body. Natasha is absurdly grateful.

Riga is hard to take, intrusive memories of arms trading and close gunfire, bullet wounds that have either long healed to invisibility or never ripped through her unmarked arm in the first place. Everywhere she turns in the medieval town she sees glimpses of a life she can’t fully identify. Then she turns up a rumor of a woman matching Kudrin’s description setting up residence there for a couple years in the late eighties, about the time she would have been scrambling for resources and desperate to make the right contacts.

Natasha tracks down the landlord, a retired man with a long sharp widow’s peak bisecting the top of his head. She nods pleasantly to him through mass and shares his walk home after, alluding to a flimsy cover of visiting distant relatives in the same neighborhood.

“There was this one woman, when I was a child, she was so very…” Natasha takes on Madame’s bearing, serene and precise, neck and shoulders long graceful lines.

“Patrician,” he describes his long ago tenant, and they dish for a bit. “She had very specific interests, and not a lot of patience outside of those topics. Oddly good with kids, despite being so chilly.”

She slips cold fingers up her sleeve, soothing the phantom sting.

“She left suddenly. I replaced her with a tenant who paid.”

Natasha leaves Riga that afternoon.

She wishes her past would stay where she so fervently tries to put it, instead of chronically rearing up to hiss and bite.

~*~
They call him Dave. It’s as good a name as any, and he likes the sound of it. It’s uncomplicated. He doesn’t eat lunch with the crew anymore, it makes them uncomfortable now that he’s management, or maybe it always did and now there’s an excuse, so he shares a little formica table and a few sentences with Gigi in the small hours of the morning when their shifts cross. Her makeup is bright, and there are bluebirds circling her forearms. On weekends she bartends, so she’s used to letting people talk or drink as they please without making it weird.

Sometimes they talk about science stuff. She has an impressive wardrobe of t-shirts with science jokes and he either laughs or cajoles her into explaining them. She’s the one who gets him listening to podcasts.

A few times he’s wanted to ask her about some concept or other giving him fits in his off-hours study, because she knows a lot of biochem with regard to newer recreational drugs, but he quells that urge.

They get chummy enough that she tells him, with a gentle tilt to her head, that he doesn’t look like a Dave. He chews his sandwich and gives her the courtesy of blinking while he looks at her eyes, and she returns a mild stare of her own, as if she doesn’t really care if he responds. She’s never said anything about the glove, always tucked carefully into the sleeve, never asked for the explanation he has in his back pocket about a bad burn from military service.

He tells her, “Never really felt like one, either.”

She raises her coffee in salute and takes a sip. “I know you save ‘em for your weekend, but it’s a good one this week. Neil has Jane Foster back, but she brought her lab assistant who’s a fucking hoot. They dish about Asgardians and some of the research going on in Avenger’s Tower.”

He makes himself take the bite of sandwich he had lined up, chew and swallow. He knows how these things work, especially now that he’s spent months comparing blurred memories with HYDRA bureaucracy double-speak. Nothing of any real importance going on in the tower would be logged, much less leaked on a podcast. He thinks if Neil DeGrasse Tyson broke the news of an assassin training school in Avengers Tower, he’d deliver the news at a press conference right in front of the sci-fi looking Hayden Planetarium.

Gigi seems to be waiting for a response, so he grunts offhandedly, then changes the topic with a knowing smirk, “So you do anything technically still legal this weekend?”

~*~

“Buenos Aires, summer in January, come on.”

The conference had gone well. So well in fact that they’d been asked to present a case for farther reaching applications in Argentina. Tony’s now thrumming with enthusiasm to take their show on the road, and Bruce is pumping the brakes to no avail. “I said I’d think about it. This means giving me some time to think about it.”

“You’re a genius, how much damned time do you need?”

Bruce checks his watch, but shelves the sarcasm in favor of a soft sweet smile that’s even more satisfying. “Office hours, sorry.”

Tony squints and hits below the belt, “I hear Trinh’s planning on sacrificing Pumpkin and Stacey next.”

Bruce closes his eyes for a beat. He didn’t do mouse care, so he’d had the luxury of not looking at
the name tags Tony had taped to the cages weeks ago. Bruce found out when Tony had updated the
data file so that each mouse was dual labeled with its serial designation and suitably adorable
moniker. “Please, stop naming the mice.”

“They come with names, I just make the introductions.”

When Trinh comes, Ameena and Georgia are with her.

Georgia greets them with, “I’m protesting the animal research.”


That seems a pretty horrific thing to say to any of these kids, but Tony has a much better handle on
when Georgia is trolling or being earnest, so Bruce lets the whole exchange pass. “You aren’t
required to dissect in biology. Beyond that, everyone has to set their own ethical guidelines in
compliance with the standards of their chosen field. Trinh developed this methodology, and it passed
objective review before she began experimentation.”

By the end of Bruce’s explanation, Tony’s chuckle has turned into a hard laugh.

Bruce slides his SI mug away, removing the temptation to throw it. There’s a gross of them tucked
away in the lab, which Tony had ordered once he’d determined the ‘most ballistically satisfying
shape’, which was apparently heavy and round in the hand--but that’s a safety fuse he tries not to
trip, certainly not for mere annoyance.

“I have a new study I want to do, and they’re here as volunteers,” Trinh says. “I want to examine
their blood.”

Bruce stares at the trio in front of him; the oldest, the brightest, and the youngest aside from the three
who are still unequivocally children. Ameena is looking off to the side like she’s bored, and Georgia
has a kind of vicious eagerness shining off her to go with the angry red pimple on her chin. Trinh
meets his gaze.

“Eventually everyone will probably volunteer,” she says, “but for now I want to do a pilot study and
create a baseline we can expand on later, as questions come up.”

They’ve got an original baseline from the admissions data on each girl at her entrance to Lozen, as
well as Kudrin’s documentation of the subsequent enhancements and training they received. After
Dr. Cho reviewed it for relevant medical history, it was encrypted into offline storage until the girls
can decide what to do with their own information when they reach majority.

“I’m sure Dr. Cho would be happy to go over any of it with you, answer your questions.”

“Yeah,” Ameena agrees, “but she’s not us.”

Tony has stopped laughing. He knows something about owning your own press. He was also mostly
awake for the mandatory review board training Pepper insisted on. “You need to draft a proposal that
outlines your methodology, data security protocol, informed consent, if you’ve got a hypothesis or
are just pathologically curious.”

Now Bruce wants to laugh because Tony’s pathological curiosity is what landed them in the
mandatory review board training last year.

Trinh slaps a notebook onto the table, from the cartons of school supplies they’d gotten back in the
fall. It even has labeled divider tabs. “Done,” she says.
Tony winces like the notebook is a steaming pile, “Jesus, paper?”

Georgia replies, “Romanoff gave us a heads-up about data security.”

Bruce hears that his own laugh is mean, but that only makes him laugh harder.
Chapter 5

Spies like USB

Natasha is having a late dinner in the restaurant across the street from the hotel when a man in his sixties approaches her table. His hat has already caught her eye, too old-fashioned even for here, but if it were an affectation the man would have stylishly doffed it coming inside. It’s to hide his face.

She’s been asking questions, not conspicuously, but not hiding anything, making herself known as a reporter doing a story on designer drugs coming out of Eastern Europe, chemists gone rogue. Nothing to concern the people running the major drug distribution pipelines, just party drugs and low level hookups; she thinks she’s displayed the right amount of mixed ambition and cluelessness.

“You ask about GenyCo...” the man begins.

She nods, gesturing with her knife for him to sit, deliberately uncouth. He shakes his head, and finally remembers to take off his hat.

“My son, Alexei Bordas,” he says, and his face is pale. “He worked there. He’s been missing.”

She schools her features into sympathy, with the hard edge of a journalist sniffing a story.

“He must be dead, I think,” the man says. “He wouldn’t worry his wife so, his mother.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and means it.

The man shakes his head and it has the vibration of a nerve tremor. She dials down her estimate of his age, chalking it up to exhaustion and illness. She wishes there were something real she could offer him.

“Oh,” he kneels unexpectedly as he snags her napkin off her lap, “Let me.”

He straightens and passes her something inside the worn linen cloth. It’s so old school espionage that it nearly chokes her.

“I’m very sorry,” she says again, and he replaces his hat, tips its brim to her and leaves.

The tiny tab drive he’s given her holds a set of formulas that look familiar despite her untrained eye. She’s pretty sure she’d destroyed something similar she’d pocketed in Denton, dousing it in lysing agents and caustic detergents, patiently waiting for the autoclave to cycle on the shards of ampoule glass left over. Someone at GenyCo may have been the source for those ampoules.

She works into the early hours digging into the personnel records for everyone employed in the vicinity of the lab, as well as the lab itself.

It’s past three in the morning and her head is throbbing, and her room has the dank chlorinated smell of improperly-cleaned damp even if it also has wifi, and she just wants...Bruce.

It’s not like the want she’d struggled against in Denton, her new baseline for wanting things. She’d gone to take down the Academy resigned to the possibility of never getting out, and this thing between them had been so new that it was easy to chalk the longing up to desperation. It was an indulgence like the hungry thinking about steak when she contemplated returning to the bed that was no longer his but theirs, the man she was starting to occupy like home territory.

He’d been difficult to put out of mind even then, but she’d done so. Now she’s struggling with even
wanting to do so.

Natasha has never allowed herself to long for safety or ease when on a mission. It only distracts, makes you a danger to yourself and others. But now she doesn’t want to fight the longing-- for his hand on her back, his touch and his clever mouth and his care. She misses him, the bite of his intelligence and dryness, the way he breaks a puzzle into pieces to solve. Even his anger, banked beneath his calm. The longing itself is connection.

Natasha misses all of them actually: Clint’s insight and smart comments and solid partnership, Steve’s ability to see through the heart of a mystery, find the way true. Thor’s ease and charming curiosity. Stark’s dogged pursuit, quick, flexible mind. She misses being part of a team, bringing all of their strengths to bear on a problem.

She’s only been gone a week, she knows better...and she calls Bruce anyway.

“I can’t sleep,” she says, instead of hello.

“I know the feeling,” his tone feels like it’s sliding over her skin, and she closes her eyes even in the dark of the hotel room. “Hold on a sec.”

She hears him murmur to someone and then he’s walking, and she hears the ding of the elevator. “I’m getting somewhere quiet.”

It’s quiet enough on her end she can hear him breathing, and it settles something in her. She thinks of the curve of his throat, the scent of his skin, the way his eyes roll back when she runs teeth over the fleshy part of his ear. “I can wait.”

“You sound tired, but I’m guessing that’s why you’re calling. I’m here.”

“Do you mean in New York, or somewhere quiet?”

“Both,” he says, chuckling to himself, “and in your ear, for as long as you want.”

“Just...” it feels like pointing out a weakness, but she has nothing to lose by stating what she realizes now is obvious, “I miss you. I wanted you to know.”

There’s a long pause, and when he speaks again his voice is husky and so gentle, “I miss you too.”

Her grip on the phone tightens like she can get closer to him by clinging to the device.

He continues, voice hypnotic and from the chest, “I feel like this is probably not about the mission, and things are pretty slow here, so my menu of neutral conversation is mostly about watching DIY shows with Steve. Unless you had any specific requests.”

She can hear his sly grin, feel her own blooming as she burrows down into the bed. “Are you asking if this is phone sex?”

“I would, but I don’t think I could give good phone. You and I both know I tend toward loud and nonverbal.”

“How is that a problem?”

“Are you asking me to talk you off and not ride along with you?”

“I’m saying I like hearing you even when you can’t speak. You communicate the essentials.” She tries to stifle the yawn but it cracks through anyway and turns into a stretch that puts stars in her eyes
for a moment, leaves her body heavy after.

“Sleepy Natasha,” he murmurs, “not even making it through the small talk foreplay.”

“Keep talking,” she sighs, feeling the edges of unconsciousness swell up around her, “I don’t care about what.”

“Maybe next time we’ll try this out: I describe the perfect en suite bathroom while you read from the local phone book and we race to see who comes first?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“I know you didn’t call to wind me up at bedtime, but good job anyway.” He’s slowing his pace of speech, letting the pauses linger between sentences. “This sounds like your sleep breathing...I kind of want to beat off to it...but that doesn’t seem like the done thing...wow, you really are out...I’m gonna hang up soon...don’t wake up when you hear the click...be safe...come home...”

She registers the sweet words dragging her deeper, and then she wakes up when her alarm goes off the next morning.

~*~

Following the girls on the subway is a calculated risk that Bucky usually doesn’t take, since they travel in groups and it’s harder to escape notice, especially when the punk girl with the warpaint and the huge eyes is with them.

He’s pretty sure she’s pegged him as a likely pedophile, but instead of raising the alarm like modern kids are trained to do, she’s taking the old school approach he grew up with: the neighborhood kids told each other which adults to stay away from, which ones to keep their eye on.

This morning he happens on a passel of them heading in the same direction as he is, so he follows to see where they go. He’s still unsure of what to do with the data he’s gathering, but the nagging unease keeps growing.

He follows them down the stairs, far enough away to not be noticed but close enough to hear them bickering. The smallest one, an exuberant and painfully blonde girl with a head cold, stops suddenly at the bottom of the stairs and pulls a raft of tissues out of her pocket. They all stop and cluster around her protectively, letting her honk and blow like a busker without being swept away by the crowd.

He has to keep going or it’ll seem odd, a scraggly guy staring at kids, so he pulls out his cheap phone and pretends to text as he passes them, lingering just on the platform and watching with the edge of his eyes. He sees something drop when the little one finishes, shoving carelessly at her pocket. They pass him in turn and he circles back to the stairs like he was mixed up about the train direction.

He spots the keycard amongst a wad of damp tissue fluff kicked against the bottom stairs, and snags it without missing a step.

~*~

Steve knows he’s being followed. He also knows he should say something. But he’s not sure he wants to deal with the reactions and endless discussions...or even ask himself any hard questions about why he isn’t asking for help.

The ambiguity itself has become comforting. It’s enough to know that Bucky is out there.
Sam’s been back in DC since the trail went cold, and Steve talks to him a lot, but he prefers their friendship without the third wheel attached. He doesn’t talk to Maria about his suspicions, either. Aside from exchanges in his halting Spanish, they’ve been doing a lot of everything except talking these days.

He could talk to Natasha--she’s already pieced together the picture from the negative space, but he’s not sure what to say.

‘Yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s Buck. Yeah, I know he tried to kill me, and you, but he’s had a million chances since then that he hasn’t taken, and I know there’s stuff you’re not telling me either, but actually, it’s cool.’

The word cool is one of the things Steve unequivocally likes about this century. Well, that and being able to kiss beautiful, brilliant women, or rather, be kissed by them and figure out where to put his hands. Turns out, women these days are full of great ideas about that.

“Oh, muñequito,” Maria chides when he shares this observation late one evening in her apartment, watching fifty year old Batman episodes and fooling around, “women always had these ideas, it’s just easier to find men willing to play.”

“Is that what we’re doing? Playing?” It should be more complicated, Steve thinks, but aside from the glimpses of Bucky and the job itself and the fact his own apartment in the tower is now surrounded by the St. Potts School for Wayward Assassins, when he’s here rolling around with Maria it’s surprisingly uncomplicated.

“You’re having fun, right?” The Director of What Is Not SHIELD rocks her hips over his, grinning down at him.

“Yeah,” Steve lets himself be pinned. “I am.”

~*~

In another lifetime, Natasha drank mint tea in desert tents out of cups made of worked glass, thick coffee in small cafes in the midst of ruined cities, acrid Lipton in bunkers and battered safe houses. These moments happened with quiet men and women toppling governments, with brash agents twitchy from nerves and adrenaline, with contacts and confidantes all using false names and false backgrounds with the truth of destruction in their eyes.

Now Natasha takes tea with the grieving, using her own name and schooling her features to earnest sympathy.

She adds sugar and milk to heirloom cups and listens as Marina Bordas tells her of packing their small house up, because while her husband Alexei is missing, there is no body, so his employer won’t pay out his salary, the government won’t pay out benefits, and she can’t live here solely on her wages. She can’t even make herself go to work half the time, because the police won’t investigate if she doesn’t keep pestering.

“Alexei was unhappy in the last few months,” Marina says, stirring another lump of sugar into tea she isn’t drinking. “I thought it was about us. We’ve been trying to have a baby.”

Natasha sees the tension in the woman’s jaw, understands that this is a grief that predates Alexei’s disappearance.

“But it could have been about work.” She frowns. “He wouldn’t have told me. He was working on something classified, was up for a promotion for another location in Slovakia. I didn’t want to go,
but…” she shrugged. “He was ambitious. We’d fought about it. He didn’t end up getting it.”

Natasha sips her tea to give an empathetic pause before prompting, “There’d been a break in at his lab...?”

“The security guard had a heart attack when he discovered them destroying equipment, fell down dead right there, though I don’t understand how it could have been that much of a shock.” She shrugs. “It happens. People think they’re making drugs, or other things. Exciting research, heh. Alexei wanted to cure diseases, extend human life, that’s why he studied so hard in school. Mostly he worked on ways to make old men have sex for longer. That’s where the money is. Or so he told me.” She pauses. “Back when he told me things. They were starting clinical trials.”

Later that day Natasha learns the guard was in his late forties, but the death was ruled natural causes due to family history. Convenient timing, though.

The junior mint in Hungary is even younger than her Finnish puppy, but despite her baby face she’s bold enough to work a tenuous connection, a spouse of a former teacher who is on the Minister of Health ethics committee for clinical trials. Alexei Bordas’ department at GenyCo hadn’t submitted any paperwork to run human trials on the Viagra variation they were supposedly working on.

“Since there is only this one committee for all of Hungary, if we do not see it, it cannot have been approved.” The older doctor folds her glasses into her hands and looks around carefully with watery blue eyes. They sit near the window of a small Syrian-Hungarian cafe, the Danube just across the road, roulade and baklava and surprisingly great coffee.

The woman leans forward and Natasha mirrors it, as if they’re telling tales out of school.

“There were rumors,” she says, like it’s gossip, but also like it’s the kind of truth that no one wants to look straight at, “that they weren’t always...submitting the proper documentation.”

“They were running trials without going through the review board?”

“So I heard.” The doctor fiddles with a piece of baklava, flakes coming off and sticking to her fingers.

"What about their implementation--how they ran the studies--any rumors there?"

“The climate around genetic modification is reactionary, so any project, even just looking at markers for drug efficacy, will provoke nasty insinuations.” She shakes her head with eyes closed, pushing past culpability, “We never received any real accusations to justify an investigation of a respected multinational entity, nothing to follow up on...”

She leaves unspoken the crime Natasha finds the most pervasive, the most devastating; no one really wanted make the effort to confirm whether the rumors were true.

**Mentors in Diet Coke**

“No.” Bruce saw this coming but it still takes him by surprise. “Absolutely not.”

Trinh’s eyes widen, “Why not?” She’s sitting cross-legged on a cleared section of lab bench, occupying high ground the way that Natasha does when she’s in the kitchen with Thor or Steve. He’s wondered if it’s the same training, or convergent solutions to being the shortest person in the room.

“Let’s set aside for the moment that you’re barely fifteen and have no real training in radiation safety.
There’s no way I’m signing off on any research protocol where you get to play with gamma.”

“Your welcoming presentation had a radiation component,” Trinh implies hypocrisy.

“I thought it was just a filmstrip. Ping!" Tony grimaces. "Ping!" He bares his teeth. "Ping!" He raises his fist and silently roars.

“Just enough X-rays to mutate a cell line." Bruce ignores him. "Not gamma bombardment.”

“So not the party trick,” Tony clarifies to himself, “just the puppet show.”

Bruce takes off his glasses and steps close to Trinh, going for as earnest as possible. “I know you want to soak up the whole field of serum research, but it’s not like Dom learning the guitar, you can’t just superglue your callouses back on and practice some more. Be thorough. Take the time to ask the deeper questions.”

“Welcome to Science!” Tony calls out from his side of the lab in a game show host voice, “Here’s your very own mountain of pitchblende and a brand! new! shovel!”

Trinh gives the middle finger to Tony as an aside, pitching her voice quieter to speak only to Bruce. “I know you said there’s little evidence we were exposed to additional radiation--but I really think She might have used it to catalyze some of the biologic components of the serum, before we received it. It would account for the range of effects.”

Bruce sighs. Trinh has latched onto Dr. Cho’s conjecture that the Trust kids’ enhancements shake out into two distinct groups: increased intellectual ability/emotional stability vs. increased strength, endurance and hardiness.

“Quarantine and analyze the radiation effect before introducing it into the human system, then you can match the batch to the desired effect,” Trinh postulates.

Bruce thinks a dozen individuals receiving anywhere between two to twenty-one treatments, various degrees of training and abuse, not to mention the theta-inducer sessions down in that godforsaken basement--this is qualitative data at best. Even if true, Kudrin wasn’t operating on scientific principles, she was layering effects in a painterly fashion.

“I just wish She hadn’t destroyed her notes. She was constantly writing when we were in the basement.” Trinh picks at a snag in her jeans. “Georgia was adding Russian to her list, and I transcribed what little I saw, but it wasn’t much and none of it made sense.”

Bruce presses his loose fists against the lab bench, cracking his knuckles.

Georgia picked up languages like some kids picked up pretty rocks, but still. Kudrin’s notes have been slow-going for a native speaking former subject, the Director of Not-SHIELD with access to deep and obscure eyes-only files and...well, Bruce.

“It’s not a bad concept, but it’s still far from a falsifiable hypothesis, Trinh. And at this point you don’t even know what you don’t know.” Which is more true than she’ll ever find out, even if she grows up to earn clearance on the Academy notes.

Two ampoules were retrieved from the Academy, sealed, unlabeled and of unknown age or provenance. The samples weren’t radioactive, but they could have been irradiated; selectively denatured to target certain effects. Natasha had pocketed the ampoules when she’d broken into the medical cabinet, when they were treating Ameena’s gunshot wound in the basement lab. She’d shown them to Bruce back in New York, and let him run just enough tests to identify the substance
as an updated version of known serum formulae. He’d added the relevant non-formula info to the sealed offline files, and then watched as Natasha destroyed both bottles using the protocol Bruce had developed for his own mutagenic blood and tissue.

Watching that potential information disappear had been both difficult and reassuring. Even if it hadn’t been Natasha’s call to make, it’s not like he has a history of being correct and on point with such ethical dilemmas.

So of course the universe has doubled down on him by dumping this in his lap like hot coffee. Hot gamma coffee in the form of an ambitious brilliant kid starving for information on what was done to her and eyeballs deep in the Dunning-Kruger effect, underestimating her own ignorance by a large factor.

“While Bruce tries to manually stuff his frontal lobe back into his skull,” Tony leans over the bench next to Trinh, “let’s go bring back some lunch.”

“Office hours are--”

“Fucking irrelevant when Banner is hangry. Come on. You’re a meat-eater, right?”

“Yes, I tell you that every week.”

Tony swipes at his phone then starts walking away already ordering, “Yeah, pick-up for Steve…”

“I’m not even sure who he’s confusing me with.” Trinh gives Bruce a look.

“No--food’s a good idea, actually.” He makes himself stop shoving his thumb and fingers into his eye sockets. “Give me a moment to think about a compromise.”

“But isn’t a compromise something both people talk about together?”

“Shows what you know.” Tony interrupts, pausing at the open elevator door. “Maybe Pepper can do a seminar on boundaries and negotiation.”

“Pepper could be a doctoral advisor on boundaries and negotiation.” Bruce leaves unsaid that it would be the kind of doctor who teaches sign language to apes.

“Trinh--Jesus, light a fire under it, come on.”

~*~

Bruce is in the team’s common area kitchen, watching Thor manhandle a large chunk of rye dough on the wooden bread board he’d brought with him from Asgard last month. For the past week he’s been fiddling with jars of exotic sourdough starters he’d ordered from around the world, treating them almost like pets, and today is the first batch of pumpernickel to go into the oven. It looks like quicksand, and there’s already a yeasty funk to the kitchen that’s not bad, per se, but something Bruce took into account when choosing a strong smoked black tea for the pot in front of him.

Devon from concierge had caught him on the way out of the lab, and so he’s got a pile of mail to look through as he tries not to think of Trinh’s enthusiasm being reigned in by Tony Stark. He drinks tea just on the safe edge of scalding, and decides not to go back to the lab that day.

“Why are your magazines addressed to ‘Resident’? How does Devon know that means you?”

Bruce wonders how the Allspeak extends to reading English upside down.
“It started just after, when ‘Researcher in Residence’ was a euphemism for me laying low here in case the Army came calling.” Bruce picks at the label of the National Geographic, “My suite was the first finished, right down to milk and magazines.” NatGeo and SciAm were on the coffee table, and Architectural Digest in a rack in the bathroom, yes, haha Tony. Devon now routes the latter to Barton's suite, presumably for rooftop research. “I’m on the payroll now officially, publicly, but I haven’t bothered to change the subscriptions.”

He hadn't intended to open the cardboard mailer of the latest polaroids from Natasha until he got back to the suite, but he loses track of what his fingers are fidgeting with. Thor tucks the heavy lump of dough back into its bowl and pours himself a mug of tea as he joins Bruce.

One of the pictures shows a rolled pastry filled with chocolate, the layers so thin they’re almost transparent, the crosswise slice looking like tree rings. Thor whistles appreciatively. “Roulade with ganache.”

“Well, spycraft is different from war.”

“I would think better food, but the task lonelier.”

“You wouldn’t be wrong.” The second is a ground level shot of the Shoes on the Danube Bank. The Trust history curriculum was heavy on the 20th century, to counteract the singular geopolitical slant Kudrin had been working with the kids, and so even Thor is familiar with the numerous iron shoes lining a stretch of river bank in Budapest, memorializing the people who’d been ordered to line up to be shot into the water, fascists not even bothering to bury Jews.

“Natasha said to me once that human life is cheap. Worthless.” Thor’s shoulders are uncomfortable, shifting. “That it’s our actions that give it any value.”

Bruce exhales something like a laugh. Russian. Pragmatist. Spy. Ruthless and yet driven to make things right. Running a constant calculation of her net impact on the world from the time her fist first hit flesh. Of course she would believe there is no inherent value to human life. Of course she would rail against that with everything inside her. He squares the pictures along the edge of the table, cake and death. “I think sometimes she’ll end up killing herself to prove that point.”

“Tis honorable.” Thor shrugs, “Willingly laying down my life to protect others is what made me worthy of Mjolnir once more.”

Bruce’s hand pauses.

“It is always a choice, and I know what happens when I choose unwisely, without love. The repercussions are still with me.” Thor plunks the mug down decisively and takes the roulade pic to the pantry, pulling out baking chocolate, flour, a couple work bowls. “I have the power to give life value, by protecting it. We all do.”

“I see.” Bruce has been curious how a godlike alien sees himself fitting into a group of human misfits, from wondrous to monstrous. “So your take is that the ultimate super power is to be a mensch?”

“Person of integrity, yes.” Thor surveys the refrigerator and gathers butter and cream. “It is harder than being a ruler. More satisfying.”

Bruce has just rolled into bed, but when the phone goes off he pulls it out from under the pillow and squints one eye open in the weak morning light.
Natasha greets him with a sigh, “I have to go to Slovakia.”

He tries to dig past the disappointment to find a cogent and neutral reply, but ends up murmuring blearily, “More cake and death, then.”

“I’m used to either fighting or biding my time--a good cover identity is like a plane on autopilot.” She sounds tired, though it’s just past lunch for her. “But detective work is a constant churn.”

“Sounds like it’s for the birds.”

“I just flew all over Budapest,” she brings the set-up home, “and boy are my arms tired.”

He snorts into the pillow, and then pulls it closer because it smells like her hair. “Junior mints can do the detective work, right?”

“Not like a spy can.”

“Be careful,” he slurs a little, “come home.”

“I woke you up. I’m sorry.” She doesn’t sound sorry, with a sly smile he can hear. “What are you wearing?”

Her voice slides warm and rich into his head, smoothing over the brisk tap of her feet on pavement and the ambient noise of a street. Rolling onto his back, he lets out a comfortable groan. “Not a goddamned thing.”

She makes a wanting noise. “I’ve only got a minute. I have to pick up a different car,” she says, and sighs. “I shouldn’t have called, woken you up. I just wanted to hear you…”

“I’m glad you did.” He casts about through the fog of sleep for something to keep the connection going, remind her that her home is in this absurd tower, with him here in this bed waiting for her. Reassure her that she’s not out there alone, not truly. “I’d always rather talk to you than sleep.”

“That’s usually true,” she laughs, “the rest of the time you talk in your sleep.”

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” he says, “I have never heard that from anyone else, and I’ve slept in a many a crowded room.”

“Maybe you just talk to me, then.”

“You theory has merit. Oh,” he lights on something to give her, another minute he can keep this tenuous filament humming her voice into his ear, making his bed feel right again. “You should know that the ballet school is taking ruthless advantage now that they know Steve has stage experience.”

He pauses dramatically.

“Oh c’mon,” she says, “Don’t tease.”

“I was waiting for you to ask how they found out, but--”

“--even if the kids didn’t spill, either you or Tony would feel obligated to fill them in.”

“Yes, well, “ he breaks, starts to laugh. “There was an accident, with the stilts. Mother Ginger went down, broke her ankle. Cap stepped up.”

There’s a choking sound on the other end of the line, the kind of snorting delighted laughter that she rarely lets anyone hear, that feels like a wonderful counter-pressure against the ache of missing her.
“Oh god,” she says, “I can’t think of anything better.”

He texts her the photo Peyton had snapped at rehearsal of Steve in the crinoline, navigating the stilts like a champ, then rolls back onto his face and into sleep.

~*~

Secretaries and security guards are usually better sources than higher ups, but she also wants to shake up the lab administrator. She buys some chit-chat with a few rounds of beer for the security guards, local guys appreciative of the attention and the lager, but also makes a formal appointment to meet with the supervisor.

She learns from both sources that a biochemist, Nika Rybarikova, had disappeared around the same time that Bordas had gone missing. She’d gotten the promotion Bordas had been up for, come up from Budapest out the same department.

The lab administrator is new to his job. His predecessor, a former state scientist who was adding to her pension by facilitating a series of classified government contracts at the lab, had suffered a fatal stroke four months ago.

The administrator flips through Rybarikova’s file after glancing briefly at Natasha’s faked ID. “She came highly recommended, did excellent work, seemed to be settling in. Then she just didn’t come in one day.”

“No one looked for her?”

“We filed a report with the local police.” He blinks. “What else could we have done?”

Natasha’s flare of dislike is masked by years of training. “Did she have family? People who asked about her?”

The administrator shifts uncomfortably. “We have an excellent facility here, above average salary, specialized work, but... one of the things that made her a good fit was her lack of family. We can’t exactly advertise that, but... this is a place for those dedicated to their work, not those tied down to other obligations.”

“Can you tell me what she was working on?”

He shakes his head. “That’s classified.”

Classified is a temporary problem, but annoying nonetheless.

The admin has pomaded hair and keeps pulling at his tie like she’s going to reach over and strangle him with it, though she’d bet money that he doesn’t know who she really is. “Look,” he says, “The contracts we’ve been working on were just spillover, supplemental to a bigger project out of the Czech Republic. Perhaps they’d be able to help you out.”

In other words, perhaps she could get the fuck out of his facility and go bother the Czechs?

She goes to Rybarikova’s apartment and charms the landlady, who lets her in to look around, pleased that apparently someone gives a damn about the missing tenant. The apartment is neat, and more devoid of personality than Natasha’s hotel room. She finds Rybarikova’s laptop and downloads everything, including a file of formulas in a spreadsheet - cells sloppily pasted like it’s a plagiarized school assignment. She transmits it to Hill just in case.
She opens up the calendar and finds Alexei’s name next to an address, right where the likely time window for each of their disappearances overlaps.

She programs the address into her GPS, and it pings out a set of coordinates before offering up directions in Polish, because the sensors keep malfunctioning. The numbers look familiar, and she digs into her bag, pulls out the small notebook with the old Soviet map coordinates from Kudrin’s files converted into latitude and longitude. They match.

The warehouse has been abandoned for years, maybe a decade. The body in the basement has been there for far less time. It looks worse than the body in Oulanka, but she’s sure the death is more recent.

She calls the police, warning them to bring protective gear for possible radioactivity, and heads to the top of the building. When she finds the second body, she crouches down beside it. The corpse is missing its eyes, face frozen in a grimace, but she recognizes him from his picture and his resemblance to the old man in the hat. Alexei’s skin is a waxy slate blue, and relatively fresh in a way that negates her earlier assumption that he died the same time as Rybarikova in the basement. His torso is bare, and there are needle marks along his chest and his inner arms, bruising up the veins as if something caustic had been injected over and over. Goddamn it.

The back of her throat prickles. She hadn’t doubted that he was dead, but this is unnecessary. Cruel.

After the locals arrive she calls Alexei’s father, only getting out her name before hearing a wracking sob and the click of disconnect. She passes the contact info to the authorities, hoping they can be kind, and takes her leave of the scene.

She calls Hill on her way to breaking into Rybarikova’s department at GenyCo. “Can you look into the financial records for all the admins and accountants connected to the set of labs I marked as professional clean-up jobs? None of the scientists were spending money, at least nothing to write home about. So somebody else must be profiting off this, it’s lucrative for government work, I think the contracts are cover for the real revenue streams.”

“Isn’t that the kind of thing you usually get all gooey over?” Hill sounds bored, which Natasha knows is the tone Maria uses when her brain is digging deeper. “You love wallowing around in data.”

Natasha sighs. “I’m too busy playing Batman.”


“I thought as much,” she says, voice tight. The body had been curled as if blasted with fire. “She died relatively quickly, but it would have hurt.”

“Do you need reinforcements?”

“Meaning?”

“Fuck, I don’t know, Romanoff. Do you want me to round up a delegation of other agents? Do you want me to send in Rogers, or give Stark a heads-up?”

None of those feel necessary. Right now it’s just an ugly, frustrating mystery with an undercurrent of connection to Kudrin’s suppliers. This could change, but she needs more data.

She needs to revisit the financial situation connected to the lab in Oulanka, trace any hidden investors
behind the destroyed labs that she and Clint had uncovered. Follow the money, figure out who
would gain by building and then erasing these facilities. She needs to know what Rybarikova was
working on, why someone would torture Bordas--information? Payback? Warning?

Maria prods, “Should I at least pass on the pathology reports to Banner?”

“Not yet. I’m going to Prague in the morning, I’ll let you know what I find there.”

Maria sighs. “Happy Thanksgiving, Romanoff.”

For just a moment Natasha wants to say fuck it and head back to New York. But changing the flight
would be an expensive hassle, and as much as she misses her bed right now, she also needs to find
out what the hell this is all about. “Right back at you, Hill.”

She doesn’t find anything in Rybarikova’s lab. It’s been cleaned out completely.

The only satisfaction is making a small adjustment to the security system so that in the morning the
police would be alerted every time the admin used his key card. Small, petty victories.

~*~

Prague is filled with ghosts.

Natasha cannot pretend she wasn’t a dozen other people here, didn’t steal, kill, betray. She cannot
pretend that she wasn’t heartless in this capital. She names the ghosts when she can, and ignores
them otherwise

She stands on the Charles Bridge and calls Clint, even though it’s the middle of his night. He’s up
with the baby and answers the phone, worried, and she flashes on car wrecks and the awful midnight
phone calls that normal people get. In her world, death is announced in the morning--there’s no point
in pulling someone out of bed for bad news that can wait.

“I’m fine,” she says.

He grunts back, as if his voice hadn’t been audibly strained when he said her name.

“It just seems weird to be able to call on a mission. I’ve been taking advantage lately.” She doesn’t
apologize. Years of partnership have made that kind of thing ridiculous. Besides, she’s not sorry.

She hears the rustling of him sneaking through a quiet house with the phone against his chest. His in-
laws’ place, probably. Clint moves through his own house without regard to creaking boards or
regular conversation, feeling it’s important for kids to learn to sleep through it, differentiate safe from
unsafe sounds. She hears a door close and he speaks, “First time I called Laura from the field, I
thought I was going to get hauled off to the brig.”

“There’s no one to catch me being myself.” The statues stare vigilant over the water. “I’m in
Prague.”

“Ouch,” he says. Waits for her.

“I’m finding bodies,” she explains. “And it’s sloppy.”

She’s not looking for feedback on the mission, she just needs to burn through this unsettled feeling
from working things like a detective, investigation without a cover. She’s alone, but she’s not
infiltrating. She’s giving out her true name much of the time, asking questions, getting answers more
straight than crooked. The contacts on her phone are still under aliases, but if she calls them, there’s no real risk.

“Nat,” Clint sounds patient but tired. “Stop trying to prove that nothing’s changed. Go home.”

Home is an illusion, she thinks. Home isn’t a real place. It’s dividing fractions in the Barton kitchen, ephemeral like the smell of Clint’s roast and the rough affection of Laura’s teasing. It’s dark eyes and a dusky voice making stoichiometry jokes as she mixes a drink, a gravelly laugh, and the warm palm stroking along her back that never fails to make things better. Home can be taken away in an instant.

“Go home, Nat.” Clint croons, using his dad voice, but she doesn’t call him on it.

“Not yet,” she says, looking at the statue of St. Jude, his gentle look and thick book, and his big fucking stick held in reserve: the patron saint of lost causes.

"Why not?"

“There’s still the matter of the bodies. Killed by gamma radiation. How’s that for irony?”
Chapter 6

Sewing Prawns in the (former) Iron Curtain

The GenyCo outpost in Prague has a small flank of protesters outside of it. She crosses the picket line, showing a fake badge at the gate, catching slogans about environmental damage and chemicals dumped in the watershed. The company’s been so careful of their reputation everywhere else.

The director of the lab gives her a few unsatisfying details on the EU contracts, more subtle public relations and misplaced pride than anything useful. “We’re developing an alternative to current erectile dysfunction remedies,” she says. “Something with more widespread applications.”

Natasha asks about unusual circumstances, disappearances.

“A small break-in a few weeks ago,” the director dismisses. “We suspect the youths you may have seen at the front gate. They damaged two of the research stations—nothing we couldn’t replace—but one of our junior techs was hospitalized. He’d been working late, unfortunately some of the security protocols failed due to a small fire in the back lab earlier that day.”

Natasha asks to see an inventory of the losses, and the director calls in a clerk. The young woman is early twenties, the kind of big eyes and rounded cheeks that look feline when framed with Slavic cheekbones and dirty blonde hair pulled back in waves.

“Are you going to look for the people who broke in?” She hands Natasha the list. “My boyfriend Radek is worried about me working here now; he thinks security should be tighter. He’s a weekend guard, part-time, so he knows.”

Her boss makes a disapproving noise, but the young woman holds Natasha’s gaze with a surprising steadiness.

“I’m looking into a number of things.” She reassures, “if you’re not here after hours, I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

Afterward she walks, to give herself space to think before tackling the last of Kudrin’s coordinates, a warehouse in a light industrial area. She stops in the Mucha Museum, sure that she’s never been to it before, as Art Nouveau is too fanciful for her tastes.

She’s full up on draped gowns and scrollwork and upswept hair when her phone vibrates. She’s been handing out fake cards in Prague, but this is the first time it’s rung. It’s the clerk from the office, Dragana. “Radek thinks he might have some information for you,” she says. “Can you meet him tonight?”

It sounds like a trap, but she agrees to show up in Old Town for coffee. This will give her several hours to check out the warehouse beforehand.

~*~

Bruce is not only still in the lab when Tony strolls in just before lunch, he’s still wearing the pair of transformation-ready track pants he’d worn running the night before, heading out in the small hours of the night when Tony had turned in.

Tony makes a u-turn without stopping and comes back a short time later with a bowl of chili. He
knows better than to suggest Bruce eat it, so he takes a page from Pepper’s book and gestures with the spoon as if he’s about to dig in himself. “Whatcha got there?”

Bruce’s arms are crossed, shoulders folded like tucked wings, and he’s got a series of spectrum graphs and messy models of knotted protein molecules cycling on the holo screen on shuffle. Shuffle is a technique he uses when he’s out of real analytical methods, but he can’t set the problem down just yet. Tony has seen this go one of two ways—breakthrough or breakdown.

It’s why Tony brought in the gross of mugs, the way you buy fuses in bulk for an old house with dodgy wiring. He confirms that there’s one on the bench, half full of tea, a weird ring on the surface as the milk had probably gone bad in the hours it’s been sitting untouched.

Bruce’s voice is rusty when he finally answers, “The evolution of a bad idea.”

“Another puppet show for the kiddies?”

“Trinh was right.” Bruce ignores the dig but does uncrimp his spine a bit. “Irradiation was used to selectively denature some of the serum proteins. I think it started as analysis of the more traditional formulae, open up the molecules to see the structure, but someone then took the altered serums and wanted to see what they would do in human beings.”

Tony digs into the chili, raises the spoon, but doesn’t bite. “So a puppet show about the kiddies.”

Bruce shakes his head, “Denton was the culmination, the practical application.”

He flings his arm in a tight arc, faster than he usually moves in his human form. A holographic timeline unfurls back to the wall of fake polaroids. It’s the chronological index of the box of records Natasha has been translating and interpreting.

“Before that came research, pilot projects even, exploring and delineating the fine line between enhancement and system failure. Human failure.”

~*~

The coordinates take Natasha to a small, abandoned garment factory. There are rows of industrial sewing machines, old-fashioned and almost picturesque, blanketed in a thick paste of machine oil and fibrous dust. There’s a roller table assembly line along one wall that begins and ends at empty spaces. The second floor has a big open room that could have been an office pool, could have been a gym. Could have been a place to keep bodies - alive or dead. It’s not hard to imagine children sleeping in rows like those machines.

It feels familiar to Natasha, but she’s spent a lot of time in abandoned places. This building has a lot of dank corners and undefined spaces, empty of everything but choking dust, as easily mundane as sinister. There’s a kitchen, likely the company commissary, which doesn’t look like it’s been used in some time but still smells of boiled potatoes. Her boots lightly scrape on the concrete, the first footprints since most of this dust settled years previous.

She has a gun that she acquired from the junior in Hungary, a knife she bought from an old acquaintance, and a few surprises tucked away if things get dicey. There’s been more down time on this mission than a more traditional infiltration op, when she’d be either inhabiting or working on her cover, so she’s been improvising concealable weapons from common household objects, just for something to do with her hands in the hotel room. Television and masturbation only kill so many hours, after all. Last night she’d tied and wound a length of fluorocarbon ice fishing line into a metal-barrel ballpoint pen. It’s not the most ergonomic of garrotes, but it still writes.
The objects offer little security, but she’s not feeling particularly threatened either. Just tired, chilled, and very alone. There is nothing here that looks like it was ever a lab, or a medical facility.

No evidence, no destruction, and she wonders what she’s missing, why this dead end was codified in Kudrin’s own hand--what is the feint here?

~*~

Tony gives the chili a look of disappointment. “I put too much cheese on.”

Bruce sighs and holds his hand out for the bowl. Tony thinks he’s being subtle whenever he does this routine. But Bruce has been gnawing on this problem since he had the realization halfway through his run, so he is in fact too hungry to either play the game or call him on it. He tucks into the chili while Tony strolls up and down the timeline.

“So why the all-nighter? Squishy biology isn’t my strong suit. Point of fact, when confronted with squishy biology, I built a strong suit to avoid dealing with it. But what about this has your shorts in a twist?”

“It’s not the biology. It’s that Trinh was right.”

“You think she knows more than she’s telling.”

“Oh, without a doubt. Probably not about this stuff, though. She spent over a year assisting in the lab, but Kudrin was careful.” Bruce pauses for another mouthful. It’s Steve’s chili, which is a simple bowl of spicy delicious meat and more onions than you’d expect. He can’t imagine what those sessions in the basement were like, Kudrin zealously guarding her methods and observations, Trinh doing her damnedest to subtly sabotage and glean intel. No wonder the kid wasn’t squeamish about sacrificing a few mice in the name of science. Those were just mice.

“So it weirds you out that she’s right?” Tony shakes his head, crouching to root through a cabinet. “Kid’s been brilliant from the get-go.”

“That’s what gives me the willies,” Bruce sets down the empty bowl. “I think I need to bring her into some of this investigation.”

“...and?”

“And?” Bruce tries to give Tony a look, but the man’s occupied bussing his tea mug of all things. “I can’t believe I need to spell this out--that only makes me even more leery of what’s at stake here. She is brilliant. I agree. She is driven to find out what happened to her and her peers. She is curious and reckless and it’s a bad idea to bring her into this, and a bad idea to try to keep her out. I’m trying to figure out if there’s even a path to navigate this where she doesn’t end up in the ethical weeds.”

“She’s the brightest witch of her age--” Tony sets a clean mug down on the bench, a few more dangling from his fingers by the handle.

“If I bring her in, it’s tacit permission that this is all fair game. If I lock her out, she’ll make her own way without any guidance or check at all--”

“Gifted kids, man. Sometimes they only learn by fucking up--”

Bruce grimaces, breath catching, and then lets himself smash a mug into the corner of the lab. Tony nods, racks another within reach.
In the end he’s sitting on the floor against a lab bench, elbows propped on his knees and hands clutching at his face. Tony leaves for a while, then comes back and plucks at his sleeve, coaxing, “C’mon, man. You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here.”

“Kicking me out?” Bruce can’t stop grinding the heels of his hands against his eyes, even though he’s past stars and they burn.

“I’m taking pity on Dum-E over in the corner,” Tony refers obliquely to the blind corner that was cleared of equipment and decoration about the time he ordered the gross of mugs. “He’s had the cleaning program paused for twenty minutes, but it won’t engage until the room is empty.”

Bruce has been the breakable thing laying low until the raging asshole leaves, “Good safety protocol.”

“Yeah, I’m worried he’ll overheat if we don’t let him do the dustpan dance pretty soon.”

Bruce lets himself be pulled to his feet and shoved toward his suite into a dead sleep.

~*~

Dragana Kadlecova looks even younger without her office clothes, baby-faced and earnest in a dark jacket and jeans. Radek Jezek has black hair, ridiculously thick eyelashes framing pale eyes, and smokes like an old communist even though he was born after the Velvet Revolution.

He postures like the old men in this cafe that he clearly finds charming but Natasha just finds dank. Prague is full of real charm that isn’t the dregs from a time when things were worse, and she would have preferred to drink good coffee in one of those places instead of playing spies in a shitty hovel. It’s clear that they come here often. Students, Natasha thinks, and keeps from rolling her eyes. Can there really be nostalgia for the Cold War?

“The break-in had to have been an inside job,” Radek says. “It was too easy, but the bosses don’t want to tell the insurance people that or they won’t pay out for the destroyed equipment.”

He’s so enthusiastic about his theory, cheerful and exuberant as he orders coffee and then beer, and never gives her much more than wild theories.

“They’re dumping chemicals in the forest run-off,” he says, “It makes sense that the break-in and fire was staged to cover it up.”

Natasha salutes his corporate suspicion, doubts that he’s right, but promises to look into it. “What do either of you know about the projects this team is working on?”

Radek takes a long sensual pull on his cigarette, bedroom eyes and nonchalance, “Rumor is long-term Viagra,” he blows the lungful of smoke away from the table, as if it matters in the smog of it everywhere, “but I think their security would be better if it was that kind of money involved.” He clearly enjoys the mystery of it, but Natasha catches the wary considering look Dragana gives him, and that makes her wonder.

“Things have been funny around there,” she says. “Security is actually pretty strict in the labs themselves, for making sex pills and headache medication. Key cards and biometric scans.”

Radek snorts, “But you could get into the front door with a paperclip, and they’ve got people like me doing part-time security.”

Natasha encourages this line of discussion. “It seems like there’s been a lot of personnel turnover.
More than seems normal.”

“I’ve worked there for a few years. People come and go,” Dragana says. “They pay well, but the hours are shit.”

Dragana speaks English with a Slavic tilt to her consonants that doesn’t read as Czech, but when she orders from the waitress, her diction is precise. Natasha files that away.

**Giving a Shit About Thanksgiving**

Steve is taking the afternoon train to DC for the holiday weekend, but he’s substituting for Romanoff’s sparring class in the morning first. The problem is that when he subs, it’s not just the five girls enrolled for credit, but ten girls who show up in their old Lozen tactical gear and intent expressions.

He can tell it changes the dynamic in a way that unsettles the regulars, especially Catherine, Georgia, Sumi and Luz, who’ve gotten out of practice in getting their asses handed to them by the better fighters.

He tells them all to partner up for a series of knee and elbow drills and they automatically find the opponent who most clearly matches their strengths and weaknesses. He can practically time the blows that miss and connect with near robotic precision. When they’re done, Dom raises her hand.

“Can we practice throws?”

He stifles a groan. Practicing throws inevitably results in the tiniest of the girls proving they can put Captain America on the mat, knowing he won’t fight back. Romanoff keeps telling him that they’re fucking with him. That they find it hilarious. He sighs, thinks of all he has to be thankful for, and says, “Sure.”

Then they surprise him. Peyton signals them into two teams and calls out, “Capture the Captain!”

Mellie slides across the floor and hooks around his calf--while he shakes her off, Marisol takes a flying leap and wraps around his neck like a scarf.

Half an hour later he staggers up from the mat, having been the flag in a rough game of capture the flag, and assesses the damage as he passes out ice packs and towels. Luz is canted forward to quell a bloody nose, Catherine and Aisha have traded black eyes, Georgia is icing scraped knuckles and can’t stop grinning, and Ameena broke a sweat and actually seems engaged with the rest.

Sumi offers Steve a bottle of water and punches his shoulder, “Good game, man.”

“Yeah,” They’d fought in Denton to win, but since then they seem to have recaptured a sense of fun. Weird Nat-style fun, but still. Steve can’t help himself, he ruffles Sumi’s hair. “Good game.”

~*~

Natasha leaves the couple at the cafe around seven to go back to the hotel and review the financial information Hill had sent. So far, she’s got a lot of small crimes that should have been handled by local authorities but mostly weren’t; some big crimes that should have set off more alarm bells but apparently didn’t; two distinct styles of destruction and three bodies. And a lingering headache that seems like it’s been a constant companion since she got to Finland.

She’s been asleep for almost an hour when the phone rings at four in the morning. The woman is inconsolable and nearly incomprehensible, but Natasha identifies her as Dragana--swerving into
native Czech before reigning back into English.

Dragana and Radek had argued about him wanting to go to the lab and investigate on his own. She had left him at the cafe with friends, but he hadn’t come home and his phone is going straight to voicemail. She fears the worst; he has never been like this, so angry at her, beyond her reach.

She’s called around to his friends, but no one has seen him since he left the cafe.

Natasha sits up in bed and squints into the dark, calling up every tactic she’s ever employed with a mark, a child, a downed agent she’s trying to salvage for evac. She is familiar with shock and grief, but the young woman’s voice itself sounds like it’s raw and bleeding, the anger of a wounded animal, cornered.

Natasha doesn’t ask why she’s calling someone she just met, instead of the police. She calms Dragana down, and then calls the police herself.

Ten hours later--Thanksgiving morning in New York--the police fish Radek Jezek’s body out of the Vuznice, a freezing little creek on the outskirts of town. Natasha meets the authorities in the woods, and rides into town with the body. She doesn’t need a professional this time to tell her it’s gamma.

The morgue looks like any of the older facilities she's been in, chipped white tile and hard fluorescent light, but the coroner is unsettled, trying to describe to Radek’s loved ones something he’s struggling with the reality of. Aliens had poured out of the sky, gods had appeared from other universes, men had risen from generations of cold dead sleep--those things humanity seemed to accept with a shrug and get on with their day. Those things happened elsewhere.

Find a young man dead just a few hours, his skin sloughing off like a boiled tomato, with radioactive sand in his veins? That’s real, that’s on your table needing to be explained, that’s a family in your office refusing to understand why they can’t take the body home to bury, that leaves a mark. Denial suddenly sounds as good as a heavy sweater and a roaring fire against the cold uncaring dark. The things she has seen in the past few weeks have looked like the early Red Room records come back to life, hard science spun out into bad science fiction, it’s only purpose destructive.

The coroner hustles them into an anteroom, worn office furniture and despair. Radek’s parents clutch at each other, grief aging them, his father openly weeping and his mother pulling at Dragana’s sleeve, her arm, trying to get her to sit. Dragana just stands there, dark circles around her big empty eyes making her look blackened at the edges like a spent fireworks.

The coroner turns to Natasha as the only one capable of normal interaction, and gives her the two items found with Radek’s body: a pack of Petras and a Zippo. There is nothing in the pack but two waterlogged cigarettes.

He was just a child, Natasha thinks, an enthusiastic kid who didn’t really know anything and hadn’t had enough time to figure that out. Later that day, all sources corroborate that he’d argued low and furious with Dragana, spent a few hours nursing a single drink and not saying much, then headed home on foot.

Natasha finds nothing when she goes back to the scene alone, nothing by the roadway, nothing in the damp darkening forest along the river.

She decides that what bothers her is that any bodies had been found at all. Traces of workshops and hints of research in four different countries, yes, it was hard to scrub all of it away and she was good at finding it. But bodies. Bodies didn’t get found unless the people behind this were being careless on purpose, and that’s the kind of thing that makes Natasha go very, very still inside--bracing for the
inevitable conclusion of armor like a second skin and countless rounds of bullets. People that reckless are not persuadable.

This is what she signed up for, literally...but she feels queasy and furious, and so tired.

Back in the hotel room she brews some coffee to warm up, to fortify herself for planning the next few days of follow up and stuborn loose ends ahead of her, sorting through the baggage of her past, digging for Kudrin’s likely work here, going over anything she might have missed in her conversation with Radek. She keeps seeing his bright eyes flash, cigarette burning down in his cupped hand as he lit a new smoke from the ash of the previous one.

She’s flicking the Zippo open and shut and thinking about Radek’s romanticism about the Cold War. She looks at the small guttering flame, unsurprised that it’s low on fuel, but curious that it still feels heavy.

Natasha disassembles the lighter in the hotel sink as the tiny coffeemaker sputters, the stink of naphtha clashing with the coffee. She slides the cover off, and jammed underneath the guts, lodged against fuel-soaked cotton, is a glass shell vial. Inside the vial, wrapped in a twist of stiff plastic, is a micro SD card. Just enough grams to make the lighter feel full when it’s nearly empty.

Radek had done his chemistry homework, the card is undamaged and accessible, if also inexplicable.

It holds a series of black and white photos of the woods on the outskirts of town, and the same staff roster that Dragana had given her when she first interviewed the lab director. Natasha finds no hidden files, and the photos aren’t surveillance composition.

It certainly doesn’t look like anything worth killing the kid over.

~*~

“It was my suggestion.” Darcy meets Bruce at the elevator with a frosty rocks glass on offer, “You’re welcome.”

It’s not even ten in the morning and the whole gathering space on the main floor is filled with the scent of cooking, already multilayered and hard to parse out because the aroma mashes a big Asgardian fist on every button.

“All I needed to do was mention ‘feast’ and he took over. Apparently warriors not only hunt and kill massive beasts, as a thing, you know, weekends, they also prepare and consume them in situ. Take it dude, it’s a White Russian.”

Bruce sniffs it dubiously. “This smells like coffee ice cream and jet fuel.”

“I may have taken liberties with the recipe.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Jane waves him over into the conversation pit, where a knot of six Trust kids are simultaneously watching Cosmos and some holiday parade that’s really heavy on marching bands. There are four more kids in the kitchen with Thor, cooking and cheerfully arguing.

The homeliness of it feels like signal jamming laid over the severe modern decor of chrome and glass, like a guerrilla slumber party has taken over the tower with Stark and Potts off in Japan.

Ameena catches him doing a headcount and offers, “Trinh’s with Peyton downstairs. Brainstrain.
S’okay, Fifi’s stopping by.”

“I’d suggest we save her a plate, but I doubt leftovers will be scarce.”

“It’s a madhouse in there.” Ameena’s affect is monotone but not flat, and her eyes are clear. Small victories. She seems fascinated more by the marching bands than the cosmology, though the sound is muted on that channel, and finally she just shakes her head, “It’s got to be hundreds of hours of practice. To get that kind of precision, so many people, everyone carrying equipment and playing music at the same time. You’d have to practice on the field, with someone high enough to see where the patterns are right and wrong, just...hundreds of hours. To what end?”

Bruce feels this is rhetorical and doesn’t formulate an answer until Ameena cranes her head to stare at him and gesture with her shoulders and wide eyes, “Well?”

He sighs, sips at his lethal milkshake, and says, “I think...if you’re asking about the point of any human endeavor...it always helps to also ask--why am I watching?”

Ameena seems to laugh despite herself, pointing at him and nodding.

~*~

Polished boots, cashmere coat, leather gloves, clean shaven but for a patch to hide the dent in his chin, Barnes constructs the camouflage of looking well-heeled but anonymous. It’s a skill the Americans...Hydra had rarely let him practice. Their leash was shorter than the Russians, a muzzle on a set of jaws instead of the strap on a weapon.

Trying on a pair of fine wool trousers in an upscale resale shop, he’d caught sight of himself in the mirror and been overwhelmed by the fear of coming back to base too altered, knowing the recalibration would come quick and cruel because of it. He’d pressed his back against the one corner of the dressing room that was brick instead of drywall, wrapped a hand around his ankle where a knife was strapped, and made himself ride it out with deep gulping breaths. There is no more recalibration, not for you. But those kids, what might be happening to them? Breathe slow like you’re aiming. Get up. Find a fussy shirt that’ll look okay without a tie.

You aren’t wearing a goddamned tie. With your luck Nataliya offers a garrote merit badge.

Barnes bundles up carefully, extra layers to shield the arm if there are scanners, and a couple ceramic knives stashed if things get hairy.

He wants to see how far the keycard will get him, points of ingress, layout. He knows staffing on the holiday will be light, less experienced.

He’s shocked at how far he gets. He works his way up the main stairwell, which is spacious and sunlit with a resting area at each floor, more like a series of atria or mezzanines, clearly meant for major foot traffic between floors. There’s a locked access point for the top ten. He swipes the keycard. The upper stairwell is smaller but still open and welcoming.

He starts at the top and works down. The keycard lets him onto the lower three floors.

The gymnasium is nicer than most of the churches he’s been in, but it doesn’t surprise him to see a huge investment in training facilities at Avengers tower. The weapons cabinets are behind keypad and palm lock. He wonders if Steve comes here, what he does in these rooms.

The next floor is broken out into conference and classrooms. He inspects the security measures locking the medical office, for next time. He pulls out his phone to take pictures of the whiteboards,
the science labs, and what look like individual study areas.

The last floor is clearly where the kids are kept, but it’s empty. There’s a shoulder-high decorative wall between the elevator bank and a large common room that’s a riot of color sectioned into smaller areas by bookshelves, like a rat maze. A kitchen and dining hall are tucked off the far end, and each corner of the room funnels toward a short hallway and a door. Christmas lights are strung in several places, but are turned off. There’s a central hearth, with fake logs hosting a small fire.

It’s fucking cozy. And not as empty as he’d thought, because there’s a soft high voice murmuring from the one door that’s open.

The bookshelves offer decent cover, and he works his way across the common area to listen. The room is dark enough that he suspects blackout curtains, and while he doesn’t recognize the voice that does most of the talking, he pegs the second one as the big-eyed punk girl.

Shaky, thready, but a voice he’s heard shouting across streets and parks, cracking the way a girl’s voice does when it goes Lauren Bacall. The barfing certainly isn’t helping.

He can just make out movement in the room, a dim light coming on and bathroom noises. There’s half a sob from the bed, like it snuck out when the high-voiced girl was gone.

The elevator dings.

He slips along the wall back toward the stairwell, crouching behind an overstuffed chair until the doors open and close. A woman quietly sings out, “Ladies,” as she strides into the common area. She’s built for comfort, not speed, but he’s met enough babushkas that he’s not going to underestimate a woman like that if he can simply avoid her. But he is curious.

She stops in the doorway, gentle and soothing, “Brainstrain, huh? Can I come in and help?”

She waits until she gets a soft, “Yeah.”

She waits. Until the girl says yes. Then she goes in.

Keeping inside the shadow of a bookshelf, he plants a foot on the back of the chair and hops over the decorative wall. He eases the breaker bar of the door with unsteady hands and his body gets him down the unnervingly bright stairwell, down into the bigger public one, out into the street and somehow home to his apartment.

He can’t stop pacing, agitated and shaken, until he picks up the cat to get her to stop howling at him.

He drops into his chair and the cat not only lets him curl around her, she purrs like she’s got something to prove. The woman had waited, until the girl said yes.
Chapter 7

Pwned for the Holidays

Natasha’s phone dings a few times that day, people reaching out to her across oceans to wish her a happy holiday, to show that they’re thinking of her.

Clint texts her a picture of a wild turkey pinned to a tree trunk by an arrow through its neck captioned, *Tom took one for the team today.*

Natasha has never met Clint’s infamous in-laws, but from what she gathers it’s more about mutual discomfort than anything else. As an architect, Laura is the bohemian working girl of the family, and while her sister and her sister’s wife do like and care for Clint, they see him as a bit of a fixer-upper. She sends back, *They mean well.*

Sam texts her a photo from Washington D.C. to wish her Happy Thanksgiving. The text accompanies a photo of Steve in terrible hipster glasses and a hat that looks like a turkey. They’re standing in line, bundled against the chill, passing out meals to a line of people. She’s less surprised by the early morning decency than the turkey hat and relishes it. Steve will always do good, but his growing willingness to embrace the ridiculous is a gift.

She passes the photo on to Maria Hill - her own contribution to debauchery. It’s also payback for Steve’s refusal to text. He could have wished her Happy Thanksgiving his own self and avoided the photo.

Peyton sends a line of three emojis pulling various fed up faces. Natasha has no idea what this means, but she sends back the one that looks like a sad pile of poop, and gets back a winking devil.

Okay, maybe Steve is on to something by avoiding this entirely.

~*~

“If we sit through this, do we get extra credit?”

Jane promises, “One by two by three.”

Dom turns to Bruce, “I’m taking that as a yes.”

Bruce is a little buzzed, definitely full, and he waves a hand at the screen to imply he’ll deal with it later, even though *2001: A Space Odyssey* had already been vetoed off the curriculum by Pepper. No one’s first choice made it, so he’s not bothered, he figures he’ll find something canon before it’s his turn.

He kind of wants to choose *Badlands*, if they’re really talking about communicating the feeling of his childhood instead of a cultural representation. Inexplicable death, the endless Midwest landscape, the flat affect...but he doesn’t want to watch it. *Jaws*, maybe? Irrational monsters and dread spiked with fear.

He chooses to go positive instead, deciding on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He likes the pushing, punishing, obsessive drive to find answers, and then the payoff at the end, the beauty of understanding, the tenuous amazing connection. He never really wanted to explore the stars, but he remembers that feeling--before he destroyed himself--the drive to scratch the itch of the unknown, the
wonder of discovery. How relentless it had felt, how unable he’d been to resist that pull.

It feels like another universe, being that man, living that life. Holidays only noticed because the lab got quieter. Thanksgivings spent in grad student housing, being a new professor and eating dry turkey with colleagues, dinner with the Rosses, before the General decided Bruce was a threat. Before he was.

This is another Thanksgiving with colleagues, with a scientific theme, but so incredibly different.

“The book was better.” Catherine gripes, looking up from one of the endless stream of used paperbacks she goes through like tissues, “and I feel like I could have reread it while I’ve been sitting here.”

“It’s soothing.” Peyton’s head is resting between Sumi’s thigh and an ice pack as she stares at the screen with dark-circled eyes and Sumi flicks through something on her tablet.

Jane slumps in the large chair next to the couch, hand under her sweater cradling her gorged belly, eyes glassy and a smile on her face. “I love this movie,” she says. “So beautiful and so fucked up. I remember seeing it in a revival house, because my parents thought I might understand it. Made me want to go out into space and find extraterrestrials.”

“Instead, space came to her.” Thor is having some kind of knit-off with Darcy, who adds, “...and the ET came--ow, I was gonna keep it clean--came to dinner.”

Jane tucks her elbow back, “Loved Star Trek, too. The way the stars seem so infinite, so big and bright, like all the answers you wanted are out there.”

Jane keeps bringing her beer bottle to her mouth like she’s going to drink it and doesn’t. She closes one eye, and points it at Bruce. She’s more than a little buzzed, he thinks. “I went to one of your lectures,” she says, “before…” and a swirl of the bottle indicates all the after.

He’s amused in spite of himself, “And?”

“It was so pretty,” she says. “Not just elegant--pretty. This beautiful theoretical model of what gamma radiation is capable of, the transformative powers it could open up, the spinout of understanding that those experiments could give us. I still wanted to study the stars, but it made me understand why you’d stay more grounded.”

He shakes his head. “I wasn’t much of a professor.”

“I bet that’s not true.”

“I was cranky and impatient.”

She lifts her brows, scrunched up in the middle. “Who wasn’t?”

“And I couldn’t collaborate to save my life.” He thinks about it. “But I liked teaching. When they got it, that spark. Still, when given the chance to do pure research, I took it.”

“You wrote that one paper though, with the biologist, what was her name?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I did do that.”

He is, in many ways, a better man now...even with nuclear destruction living dormant inside him. Before though, he had been a better scientist, more rigorous, intensely focused. He’d had a
constricted capacity for love—from his parents and their damaged, broken lives, and from his own choice. Betty, his aunt and uncle and cousin, even those connections were attenuated. He’d dismissed everyone else’s attention outright, friends and colleagues who reached out had met an indifference that had been carefully cultivated into cold reflex.

He’d played that tactic out to the bitter end and called it quits. Tried to. Instead he’d woken back up, spitting metal like he’d only gotten a tooth filled. Even after that, for a long time, he’d approached compassion as an intellectual exercise, not understanding how corrosive it was to the kind of barriers he lived inside.

Letting himself physically care for strangers had allowed him to care about them, feel for them. Once he’d opened up that tiny crack, he then let himself be pulled out of exile, working his way up to collaboration, colleagues, friendships. More.

He’s lost in memories when Natasha calls, but the low sough of her voice reorients him in space and time. She sounds so tired he can feel her weary ache in his own chest.

That man he’s mourning couldn’t have fallen in love this way, with this woman, clear-eyed and aware of what they both are. His illusions used to be so important to him, the only safety net he had, but his rationality was a mirage, his emotionless objectivity worse than blinders. He couldn’t have done the things he has--taken the risks, destroyed cities, saved them, helped people—as that person. He doesn’t want to go back to being that man.

He would do it in a heartbeat, though, if it meant stripping himself of this loaded gun he shares an existence with, if it meant eliminating the risk he carries with him wherever he goes, but he doesn’t… want to.

The realization shorts him out for a minute. She hears it and her weary lulling voice turns sharp in a heartbeat, his name a brisk, concerned question.

He hushes, soothing. “I’m fine, honest. Too much wine, too much pie, and I think Lewis is trying to poison me. Too many kids and…” He doesn’t know how to say that the day was wonderful and exhausting, yet also felt kind of pointless when he couldn’t lean into her. How he wanted to pawn his boozy milkshake off on her super soldier liver, bicker over the pretentious genius of the movie, watch her pull conversation from the others like a magician pulling coins and scarves, share the day with her. It feels selfish to say it. He doesn’t want to chastise, isn’t trying to. Longing sometimes stymies eloquence, and want comes off as whining. “…it’s just been a lot.”

“I’m sorry I’m not there,” she says, so soft, so contrite, and he would give anything, literally anything to be next to her, pulling her against him. There’s so little he can protect her from, but he can swap out grief for comfort, disappointment for desire, if that’s what she needs.

“Ah, sweetheart,” he says, “we missed you. I missed you. I wish you’d been here, too, but it’s okay.”

“Could you,” she has to clear her throat to continue, “...maybe talk about terrible home design at me for awhile?”

He gets up out of the conversation pit and heads down to his lab because it’s closer, filling in by unwinding for her some of the tangled ball of cosmology and boozy milkshakes and nine kinds of pie, and trying so very hard not to ask what’s making her voice sound like that. If she wanted him to know, she’d have told him. She’s reaching into the dark, asking him for something, and he won’t disappoint her.
“Steve has deeper thoughts about the color wheel than you’d expect,” he says, “man definitely needs an outlet for the repressed artist.”

“And you,” she asks, “what are your thoughts?”

She’s starting to sound normal again, more grounded, and in the quiet of the lab he can hear her voice pitching low, and it runs through his body, vibration like a piano wire with the keys tapping.

“People are sheep when it comes to design,” he says. "I like white walls, I think. Maybe it’s so much time in labs, the simplicity, but Steve is winning me over on warm colors too. I’m not a fan of the granite counter top. But those luxurious bathrooms, with the fancy shower, and the tub and the lighting and the sound system--I can get behind that. I like those big French windows.”

“I rented an apartment once,” she says, hesitating just for a breath, “in Marseille. Part of a cover. It had these big windows and they opened up towards the sea, and you could smell it. The salt, the fish, the snow.”

He can see her hand, curled into a tight fist the way it always does when she allows memory to intrude on her present.

“It was so cold, and I was only there a few days, and it snowed, but I didn’t want to close the windows. I bundled up in everything I had so I could keep them open.”

She so rarely shares pieces of her past that don’t end in destruction, and he has to close his eyes against the image of her, those keen eyes looking out from an empty apartment at snow falling on a medieval fishing town.

It’s beautiful and lonely, and he has no capacity to keep her at bay. He’s not sure he ever will.

“Natasha,” he says, letting her hear the yearning as he imagines his fingers dragging along her skin. “Do something for me?”

Her voice hitches and she just says, “Yes,” breathing into it like she does when she's agreeing to follow his lead.

“I want you to take your pulse. At your throat, fingers against the carotid.” There’s a rustling, and then he says, “Count your heartbeats for me.”

Her voice is steady, and he lets her get to ten. “Now at your wrist, and count for me again.” She does. “Now your heart.” His own pulse is speeding up, matching hers. “Now slide down to your femoral.”

She murmurs the heartbeats to him and he wants to touch himself, doesn’t. He isn’t sure why it’s so heady to hear this, if it’s imagining her body responding to his direction, or imagining the force of life pulsing through her, so incredibly strong and vivid, so much more than mere form and symmetry. His lust for her has always been bigger than a simple reaction to her beauty.

“Imagine I’m there with you, following that path,” he says, shifting on the couch so he can lay back. “My mouth on your throat, sliding along your arm to the inside of your wrist, your breast, moving down, pressing against the inside of your thigh, feeling your blood beat under your skin, smelling how rich, and wet and lovely you’ll be, how you’ll taste when I kiss you, how it feels when I slide inside you.”

She moans then, and he can practically taste her, the sweet saltiness, the peachy luxury of her skin against his tongue. He’s hardening, his own breathing quickening, but he works to keep his voice
low, and firm.

“Are you touching yourself?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Good, sweetheart,” he croons, “Good.”

Her voice hitches again. There’s a sweet, slick sound like her hips writhing against sheets and he has to adjust himself, feels strangled.

“But Natasha,” he says, and there’s a whimper, like she knows what he’s going to ask. “Can you hold off, bring yourself to the edge and just stay there, keep from coming? Until you get home?”

There’s a long, drawn shuddering breath while she finds equilibrium. “And if I do?”

He flexes his hand. “I promise, I’ll make it worth your while.”

There’s a long series of breaths, and he knows she’s turning onto her belly, her voice muffled. “You’re a terrible person.”

He laughs.

"Yes," she says, "Okay."

“Good,” he says, "That’s...I don't know how I'll sleep. I haven't...I won't." In asking for her restraint, he knows he’s promising his own, lost to her, as always. He wants to vibrate along with her for a day or two, give her a reason to come home.

Her voice is terribly gentle, like she knows that she holds him in her hands, the heart of him.

"Goodnight," she says, "I miss you. I'll be there soon."

~*~

The box of tiny clothes pins Bruce ordered months ago is half empty. He unwraps two more photos waiting for him on his desk. On one, a sign with a frowny face declares: *Do NOT move the banches. This is NAT an adventur playground!* and the other sports something in Cyrillic that he assumes must be hilarious when there’s a bullet hole in the center.

Bruce clips them to the twine now zigzagging back and forth across the long back wall of the lab, and stands back to assess. It looks like a drunken rebus. He likes it.

Tony drinks coffee pointedly. “You two are so fucking weird.”

As if he hasn’t been singing ‘Flash! Ah-ahhhh!’ at random times for the better part of the week. His Freddie Mercury is worse than Clint’s Geddy Lee.

“You’re just mad because she only brings you back crappy candy,” Bruce says, checking the time. He’s got a one on one with Trinh at three and she’s late.

His phone dings. Natasha’s supposed to come home tonight, and he’s hoping for an update. But it’s from Trinh: *sick, sorry.*

He frowns. It’s a piss poor excuse, and while the girls do get snotty colds and muscle sprains, menstrual cramps and headaches, normal teenage girl stuff that he sometimes feels like he’s
drowning in from every direction, it’s not like Trinh to miss a chance to push the boundaries.

He texts her back, *Fine. Feel better. I’ll see you Thursday.* He considers adding ‘see Fiona’, but he errs on the side of either respecting her autonomy or letting her have the white lie.

He can project how every option in front of him is a mistake. They aren’t parents, only barely teachers. Guardians in the strictest sense of the word, and this whole thing is much fucking harder than they thought it would be.

~*~

Trinh is sitting cross-legged on a counter in the kitchen area, ostensibly working on the chore rota but really she’s there to make sure this thing between Khadijah and Ameena doesn’t come to blows. Khadijah is still wrapped in the ridiculously large towel she takes with her to the lap pool, and Ameena is in pajama pants that were filthy three days ago. The rest of the kids are either at lessons or they fled the moment Khadijah lost her cool.

Even in Denton, Khadijah never lost her cool.

Ameena had wandered into the kitchen and poured the last cup of coffee from the pot without asking if anyone wanted it. She left the maker dirty, empty and full of grounds, sat down across from Khadijah and said, “Hey, get me a new keycard, okay?”

At this point Trinh was already on alert, because it almost seemed like the whole thing was calculated to push the buttons of the person who did a whole lot of smoothing for them and really only wanted a steady stream of caffeine in return. Khadijah had gotten up, rinsed the coffeemaker, set a fresh pot brewing, and retrieved the leather folio she used to take notes on legal pads. She sat back down, clicked her pen and asked, “What happened to the old one?”

Ameena tried to shrug it off, “Just lost it, I guess.”

“That’s not an acceptable answer. This is a tower security matter; I have to answer to Ms. Potts for this request.”

This is about when everyone but Trinh remembered they had very pressing business on another floor. Trinh kind of hates that this is her pressing business.

“I don’t know,” Ameena rolls her neck to crack it, “make something up.”

Khadijah clicks her pen again and shuts the folio. “You don’t remember, do you. What happened to it, where you had it last, I’m not even going to ask, because fuck it--you don’t even know what day it is. Do you.”

None of these are questions, and Khadijah’s tone has gone from cool to cold as hail.

“Look, I don’t need to listen to your shit, I just need a keycard.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? It’s what you do, isn’t it? Liaise?” And she says it like Khadijah is some kind of collaborator.

“That’s not French for cover for your stupid ass mistakes.” Khadijah rises as her voice gets hot, her knuckles tight around the pen. “You’re free to leave, you know. Then you won’t need a damn keycard. You want one? You go ask Potts yourself. Get your story straight before you go. I wash my
damn hands, Ameena, I’m done. I think you don’t even want my help so fuck you too.” Khadijah’s seething now, as the coffeemaker hisses and spits and Ameena just takes it stone-faced, and that seems to piss her off even more.

“I argued against biometrics, I didn’t want ID’d cards. Everyone’s all got the same damned chip in theirs because I didn’t want individual tracking of when we came and went, so I can’t get you a new damned card without issuing new ones to everyone—and that’s if I can still make a good case why we shouldn’t be individually tracked.”

“So don’t bother, I’ll use someone else’s.”

“You can’t be serious. We’ve got little kids here—”

“You and I both know ain’t none of us are kids.”

Khadijah shoves at her folio, tears of rage spilling unheeded down her cheeks.

“Then stop fucking acting like one,“ Trinh tags in. “Suck it up and ask Potts yourself.”

“Whatever.” Ameena shrugs as casual as can be, heading back into her room and leaving the coffee she didn’t want in the first place. “I’m not scared of Pepper goddamn Potts.”

There’s a low falling note of a whistle from behind one of the bookshelf walls that break up the expanse of the common area, punctuated by the sound of a book snapped shut. Sumi comes into the kitchen at a slow stroll, shaking her head and pulling a mug from the cabinet. Khadijah has her face in her hands but is not crying, just breathing methodically.

Sumi pats Trinh’s knee, just enough reassurance to be heartening without making her want to shed the tears Khadijah is ruthlessly packing away.

Sumi fills her mug straight from the maker and slides the pot back underneath without spilling a drop. She doctors it liberally and rinses the spoon, puts it back in the drawer.

“Thing is…” she pauses to sip, cogitating. Sumi doesn’t offer her opinions in general, almost everything goes into her notebook and is distilled down into lyrics of such high proof they’re often incomprehensible to Trinh. “The thing is, that...she helped get us out of Texas by being a raging cunt.”

Khadijah stops breathing.

Sumi comes around and starts rubbing her back, and that’s when Trinh realizes Khadijah’s just started crying on the exhale, and Sumi’s trying to shake a breath back into her. It’s a wracking sound when she finally pulls in air, and she wraps her arms around Sumi’s waist and just clings.

Sumi meets Trinh’s eyes and just nods, drinking her coffee and smoothing her hand down Khadijah’s back.

**Home and Other EM Spectrum Phenomena**

Europe had been wearying in a way Natasha hadn’t expected. As far as missions go it was nothing unusual. It was no Denton. But there had been a similar flavor to it that had kept her reaching out to another continent, sending bits of herself into the distance between them, photos for the wall, and texts, and in the last week a couple of ridiculous, inexplicable late night calls where he murmured home renovation nonsense at her until sleep stopped eluding her and rolled her into the depths like an alligator.
Natasha had texted Bruce when she touched down, but aside from a quick acknowledgement neither one of them was much for alternate modes of communication when the ETA was so close at hand.

JARVIS had sent a car to pick her up, and she knows the driver well enough to doze a little on the ride in. It was a habit she’d picked up from Clint, who called it the catnap method of keeping up with the enhanced. Giselle has a very smooth style, and the car pulls into SubSix parking without rousing Natasha.

“Shall I take care of sending your bag up, ma’am?”

“Thank you, Giselle.”

In the express elevator she asks JARVIS to notify Dr. Banner of her arrival, and like delivery he comes into the suite just as she’s unzipping her jacket.

He smiles at her, eyes soft, and it hits her like a punch in the chest, stuttering her heart rate. It’s too much to deal with right now, so she stalks over to him. He kisses her, still warm and gentle, welcoming as she unbuttons his shirt. She breathes him in, feels the scent of him working on her, and it’s everything she can do not to sweep his legs and ride him down to the carpet.

“Missed you,” he breathes, then sucks it back in as she pulls his half-buttoned shirt down to the elbows and captures his arms behind him. He rears his head back and eyes her, “Like that, then?”

“Yeah,” she steers him as she works open his belt. He darts kisses onto her jaw, her neck, letting her bare him just enough, push him down onto the couch where he bounces with a jingle of his belt buckle. He watches her strip, idly working his arms free from the shirt and kicking off his shoes, bare toes digging into the plush of the woolly rug.

If she were calmer she’d sink to her knees and give him a thorough working over, but she’s unsettled and he’s already ditching his glasses and hunkering down in invitation so she kneels on the cushions instead. His arms wrap up around her thighs and he dives in like those three weeks apart had been someone interrupting him and he was determined not to lose his train of thought.

She reaches back, scratching through the hair on his belly and grasping him so he’s no longer humping air. She gets to the edge embarrassingly fast, but hangs there, and it takes her too long to figure out that he’s doing this on purpose. She’s shaking and sweating by now, laughing and cursing at him in languages he doesn’t speak, and he looks up with crinkled eyes as if asking what she plans to do about it.

“I’ve killed people for less,” she’s wound so tight she’s almost seized up with it, “with these very thighs.”

He hums in agreement, languid and deliberate strokes like a taunt.

She cards her fingers through his curls, his hairline is sweaty and his eyes, oh his eyes, “Fuck, I missed you.”

He closes those eyes and shifts gear, steady and relentless until he topples her over the edge, and then a moment later over onto the cushions as she’s still twitching with it. It’s not graceful--he’s no athlete--but he’s compact stamina with a solid grasp of leverage to match her mastery of momentum; he offers a rough sketch, lets her work out the details, and then it’s drive meeting thrust.

She’s lit up, riding aftershocks and drinking him up through her skin, and he slows, looking at her with eyes gone dark, covered in sweat but if anything there’s more energy coming off of him, each thrust hard and willful like an argument presented. “Yes,” she says, and she can’t even begin to find
words for what she’s agreeing with, just that fundamental, “Yes.” He shudders and shoves his head into the crook of her shoulder and she holds on tight as he comes.

She soothes her hands possessively along his back as he comes down, licking the sweat from his temple. She can feel some of the tightness, the unease settling down into a place where she can process it—talk it out, fight it out, put it into a spreadsheet and assign it a solution. It’s never less than a gift, that they can do this for each other.

Sometimes no less terrifying for all that. Craving not only the touch, the taste and texture of him, but the sharing of weight between them. It makes her grateful, and unnerved, and desperate to come home where all of the pieces of her slide into place.

He kisses her neck, slow and languorous tongue and teeth, pulling her out of her thoughts before she comes down very far. He stretches out beside her and settles a hand between her thighs to wind her up again, clearly intent on following through with his promise to make the wait worth her while. She cradles his head against her chest, want and welcome shuddering through her.

~*~

The cat prefers when Bucky has the arm off, so he tends to leave it on the workbench when he’s settling down with the laptop. She hunkers down across his leg as he opens up the pictures from Stark tower.

Hours later he’s compiled a rough sketch of what the kids are studying, reading, doing. The Red Room had offered a broad education as well, music and art appreciation along with military tactics, to slip in with movers and shakers you had to talk a good game. But there are pieces that don’t fit, and while they give him a kind of hope that this isn’t the Red Room all over again, it’s not enough to reassure him.

And Steve...for all his pissy cynicism, Steve has always been an idealist—just an outraged idealist. Bucky had been too sore about what had happened to him as a prisoner to ever ask what Steve really thought about the serum, and how his government had deployed its one super soldier, in the middle of a world war, as a dancing monkey.

To be honest, Steve is also a piece that doesn’t quite fit. Bucky’s not sure he’s ready to know what the man thinks of anything. It’s easier to watch from afar, see that he’s safe, and leave it at that. But the kids. The kids pull him in, and this? This he has to know.

It’s the common room that gives him the most pause. The bookshelves seem privately owned, one filled with pulp science fiction in vertical stacks, another skews to politics and international health and is arranged by Dewey decimal, another is poetry and lit grouped by culture and era. There’s a soldering gun, a pad of bristol board, a socket set, four colors of yarn stuffed into a net bag, a huge glass candy dish full of rubbers, discarded warm-ups, a heavy leather work glove, swim goggles, drumsticks, an electric guitar on a stand, a book of Italian verbs, and a posted rota for cleaning the kitchen and common room, which is how he learns the names of the girls.

It’s a mess, frankly, not just eclectic. There are Christmas lights and huge fluffy bags on the floor that maybe they sit on, and a lot of afghans both folded and flung about.

Amid hundreds of photos clipped to the walls there is art—unframed, some pieces still ragged along the edge where they were torn from the book—art these kids have made. Like the way that woman had waited until the girl had said yes, it’s glaring in its difference. The Red Room had understood the value of art appreciation, but to put the tools to make it into the girls’ hands? Doesn’t make sense.
He closes the computer and shakes the cat off his lap, reaching to put the arm back on so he can get some sleep. He wished a little art could be enough reassurance.

~*~

They don’t waste time on sharing; Bruce takes the shower first while Natasha unpacks. The edge of need is curbed for the moment but her mood still feels unpredictable, in the way he’s learned she often isn’t quite aware of herself...he’s got a knack for knowing how the winds are blowing.

He kisses her when they swap places, wet hands sweeping her hair back from her face, grounding her as much as he can as she steps inside. He’d rather have her tucked up next to him talking it out, or fucking again, or just sleeping. She’s pale and off-kilter.

He brushes his teeth and waits her out, leaning against the sink, towel in hand, and takes her to bed damp.

“Things are getting worse,” she says.

She sits up against the pillows, and he’s shifted down with his head in her lap, cradling her thigh against his chest, his lower shoulder snugged into the hot hollow of her crotch. Objectively they adopt the strangest postures, but his head rides the undulation of her breathing, he can feel the thump of her aorta slow as she relaxes, and the way he’s braced gives her something to push against if she gets restless.

Her voice, her fingers in his hair, the feel of her skin along down from cheek to chest to belly, he wants to grasp those things tight. He’s not sure how all these small moments, these tiny actions have added up to this deep pleasant ache in his chest when she comes back, like it’s all building to something they’re both staring at but can’t name.

He expects her to keep talking out the mission, debriefing, but instead she says, “Tell me you and Steve didn't try to build anything.”

He huffs against her skin, idly stroking a line from hipbone to ankle.

“Oh god.”

“Tony watched us put up some shelves.” He can feel the laughter burble in her belly, and she draws her nails lightly along his back, his brain deciphering the slow scrawl of 6PYC as a Cyrillic transliteration of his name.

“...And?”

“They lean. A little.”

“Captain Tactics and a certified genius, but neither of you thought to use the level, did you?”

“We’re both pretty good at gauging things accurately. We thought it looked straight.”

“I’m surprised Tony hasn’t taken a sledge to it.”

“He fabricated a Good Effort trophy, put it on the top shelf, and made us watch as it slid all the way to the left. Then he went to Japan.”

There’s some stuff with the Trust kids that’s got him a little edgy, but he figures it can wait. She wriggles down until she’s facing him, diagonal on the bed, hand pillowed under her head. He mimics...
her posture. She nudges him with her knee, and he catches her leg, pulls her tight to him with her thigh draped over his hip so he can span her back with his palm.

“There’s evidence of human experimentation,” she says, low and angry. “Like we don’t have enough fallout to deal with already.”

He doesn’t take it personally. They’re both experiments technically gone wrong. And he shares her ire, both aware that most human subjects in these cases aren’t volunteers.

“It’s ugly,” she sighs. “And sometimes, I get so tired of ugly.”

It’s a small, quiet confession, one he knows is hard for her to admit, the weariness of terrible things that just keep happening.

He strokes up her back, pulling her closer. She lays her hand on his face and kisses him, slow and deep, and he can feel his need matching her own.

“I really missed you,” she whispers to him, like even that hurts her a little.

He wraps her up, crushing her to him. “I missed you too, sweetheart. You don’t even know.”

~*~

“I give up,” Tony levels a look of disgust at the Czech Kitten Tongue chocolates in his hand as he walks over to where she sits at Bruce’s workstation. He’s got something wrapped in black jeweler’s velvet tucked under his arm. “If I just give you what you want, will you stop bringing back the most horrifying candy you can find?”

“Stark, Stark, Stark,” she shakes her head, “you know that’s not how this works.”

“Fine. I’ve got a present for you,” he puts the jeweler’s roll in front of her. “Really, a present for Mr. Grumpypants, who in addition to building that abomination of a shelving unit over there, was an actual bear to live with the last three weeks.”

“You were in Japan at least half of that time.”

“I didn’t have to be here to know how it went.” There’s a certain logic to that. “So I promised him a present. For you.”

He unfurls the cloth for her and then takes a few steps back, staring horrified at the Kitten Tongues, pretending he isn’t waiting for his praise.

The weapons look like small flares, smooth and lovely, beautifully dangerous. Reminiscent of the glow sticks the girls had covered themselves with on the Fourth of July in the park, at Steve’s insistence that they give fair warning instead of moving through the dark like ninjas. Georgia had kneecapped a pickpocket, even lit up like a rave.

Tony reads the package, "Milk chocolate in the shape of a traditional cat tongue. Pleasure and for your sweet tooth! Christ."

Natasha examines one of the sticks, letting a small, genuine smile of pleasure roll across her face.

Tony takes a step back, unnerved. “Now that’s just not fair.”

“Give me the pitch,” she says.
He offers a kitten tongue, which she eats just to disturb him as he explains. She’s disappointed at the lack of crisped rice, which seems like a no-brainer.

The sticks are a new delivery system for the bite gloves she'd designed--a quick debilitating burst of electricity like a taser but with more sharp jolt and less aftershock. A quick kiss goodnight. She doesn’t like to fuck around, waiting with her finger on a trigger for the twitching to stop. But, despite the rumors, she also doesn’t always want to kill on contact. She’d tried throwables, had even triggered one on herself, but they didn’t have the same punch as the gloves.

Tony’s lightsticks are just big enough to hold the full power of the bites, with the heft and balance of a throwing knife. They offer the stopping power of the gloves with room to maneuver, space between her and her dance partner.

She plays with the balance as he explains the reasoning.

"It just seemed like not every fight should require you be wrapped around someone's neck like a python in order to level punishment."

“Not every fight,” she demurs.

“You climb men like a lumberjack of death. You’re a human mosh pit tragedy. I admire your craftsmanship, but trust a weapon maker that it doesn’t scale.”

“Barton’s still using arrows.”

“Barton still uses a *bow*, because he's the kind of asshole who enjoys the personal touch--”

Natasha offers a pout of sympathy, “Find another hidden Hawkeye doll?”

“Action figure--”

“Not the way he dresses them.”

“--and no, this was an Iron Man body with a Hawkeye head jammed on. And no, I don't want to talk about where I found this one. My point is that most of what he shoots these days aren’t arrows.”

Tony plucks a stick from the velvet and gives it a quick jerk. “You shake ‘em like a glow stick to activate. There’s a code imprinted to a chip in your gloves, or your thumb print. Only you can turn ‘em on.”

God he loved to make things complicated, but there was an elegance in the thought process. “Good balance.”

He’s bouncing on his toes.

She tests the sticky ends, “What’s the adhesive?”

“Nanotextured. Like gecko feet. Stick to damn near anything, but it can be yanked off and it stays sticky.”

Natasha gives him the grin that lives on the opposite plane of warm and delighted but feels just as good. She’s tired of ugly situations, but there’s something beautiful in doling out damage efficiently. And after three edgy, anxious weeks of gathering intel, a fight seems like a lovely way to warm up her morning before the official afternoon debrief. “Show me.”

“Alright, sunshine,” Tony says, “Let’s dance.”
She raises an eyebrow. “I can’t test them like they’re toys. I’m gonna have to make contact and see what they do.”

“I’ve been practicing,” he bounces again.

She shrugs, feeling like she’d given ample warning.
Chapter 8

Pepper’s due diligence

Pepper meets with Khadijah every week, to go over Trust concerns and issues, and as an informal internship and support. Pepper feels for her, poised between her compatriots and the board, managing the weight of abuse and potential each one of them carries, as if adolescence wasn’t difficult enough—not to mention the loneliness that comes with leadership, even at seventeen. Pepper struggles to be a good mentor, a positive role model, a fair but firm landlady of a multibillion dollar property... in short, St. Potts.

Khadijah consults the next item on her legal pad. “I’ve been working with Sumi on the noise complaint issue.”

Sumi, Dom and Georgia’s peripatetic band practice was an ongoing issue, generating cranky tenants wherever Vile Lozenge holed up to thrash and scream. They were getting pretty good, channeling Sleater-Kinney style harmonies between Dom’s piano wire vibrato and Sumi’s almost tenor growl, and little Georgia was a beast on the drums. Pepper doesn’t sigh, but she really wants to.

“Catherine’s been looking over the building plans and she thinks the best place would be the ARC room on SubSeven.” Khadijah rolls right over the fact that no publicly available spec of the tower includes any mention of the ARC on SubSeven, across from the RadLab. “No noise complaints.”

“Indeed.” Pepper interlaces her hands on the desk. “Unfortunately, SubSeven is restricted and the ARC is off limits.”

“We already asked,” Khadijah says, “and he said ‘sure’.”

Pepper closes her eyes. This is why Researchers in Residence, brilliant though they may be, should not answer facilities questions. “I’m sure Dr. Banner is more than happy to offer the use of the ARC on SubSeven, however, it exists in the tower for insurance purposes and must remain available at all times.”

“Even when he’s not in the tower?”

Pepper spreads her hands flat and states carefully, in the way she’s learned that Khadijah can pick up and won’t run too far with. “The SubSeven ARC must remain available whenever Dr. Banner chooses to be in the tower.”

~*~

“Right off the bat,” Pepper states right off the bat, even before Bruce registers the tapping of her heels into the lab, “I have this on my calendar as a meeting with you in your capacity as a consultant on the structural engineering study for the ARC.”

“Good afternoon to you too, Pepper.” Bruce and Tony had sketched out the Adamantium Rage Chamber after the Battle of New York, when it became clear that while property damage from the Other Guy throwing around Chitauri spaceships would be classed as damage from an act of war, any further incidents would be hotly contested. The ARC was an appeasement gesture, another expensive boondoggle tossed at the Other Guy like confetti.

“Hi.” Pepper has her business face on, and she stands on the other side of the bench. “Now. About
“Yeah, have you heard them?” Bruce really likes the idea of these kids going down into the basement and making art from their anger inside a Chamber built to sequester it. “They’re getting better.”

“Everyone has heard Vile Lozenge—"

"Marco Polio."

"--that’s part of the problem."

“Solved, actually.”

“Not, actually.” Pepper takes a deep breath, centers herself. She’s still not sure how ranty she can get around him, how to argue with someone who doesn’t rant right back. “They can’t practice there, not with you in the building.”

“Dom texted me, she’s working out a practice schedule with the parameters I gave her.”

“Bruce--it’s not just an empty room, they’ve put up acoustic tile and the drum kit’s set up all the time.”

“And?”

“And? And what if it needs to be put to use, it’s designed use?”

“Right, that,” Bruce chuckles, “Even if I lost it in sixth level parking, you really think the Other Guy could be stuffed into the ARC if he didn’t want to go?”

Pepper’s shaking her head as if to dislodge his words, but he keeps calmly explaining.

“I know the analysis talked about sending him down the elevator shaft, but he bounces like a two-ton flea—"

“Not!” Pepper shouts.

Bruce blinks at her.

“Not. Another. Word.” Pepper holds up her hands, closing her eyes. “Not another word, Bruce, that is not already in your consultant report, which has already been acted upon with due diligence to the satisfaction of our underwriters. There is a reason it’s just the two of us in this room in the first place.”

“Informal meeting?”

“Plausible deniability.”

“Ah. Okay.”

“I hate to snap. I forget sometimes that Tony’s a hybrid creature who grew up also speaking business. Here’s how this is going to go.” Pepper smooths her hands along the surface of the bench. “You’re working out a schedule with Dominique.”

“Yes.”
“You will be off Tower property whenever there are children in the ARC.”

“Assuredly.”

“The children’s passcode to access SubSeven level will not function while you are in the building. I’ll let you sort out the details.”

“Got it.”

“One last thing. The acoustic tile, the equipment…”

“If for some reason he ends up in there, it’s forfeit.”

“No, sweetie, that’s not it…” A pained little frown appears between her eyebrows. “If you find yourself there, will any of it…”

Bruce shakes his head, not following.

“Could any of it hurt you?”

Bruce assures her that it won’t, and Pepper officially concludes her on-the-books meeting. He goes to make a cup of tea, a slight shake in his hands. God, the Other Guy could eat a Monsters of Rock reunion tour and not even burp and she was worried about a couple guitars and drums. Okay, and a couple amps and mics and a bunch of egg crate tile. He might burp a bit.

Marco Polio votes and sends the announcement through JARVIS that they are now called CandySmash.

~*~

Steve ambles right up to where Stark lies splayed on the mat, face slack and lids at half-mast. He doesn’t look down, even though Stark’s still twitching a little at his feet. He asks Natasha, “Did you actually say at any point, ‘This is a bad idea?’”

There’s a tone there suggesting he wouldn’t blame her one way or another, he’s just interested in the answer.

She shrugs. "I said, ‘Don't let me hit you’."  

It had seemed adequate warning at the time, after all the man had made the sticks, he should know the punch they packed. But Stark had turned that into a dare, had gone on the offensive when he should have been more scrupulous about defense. She knew he’d been itching to go another round since she’d clocked him three times for luck, to establish her cover to get into Denton.

She’d discounted that he’d be equally punchy to try his new toy, exhibit his brilliance.

He’d tried a halfway decent wrist lock to turn the one in her hand against her, or maybe break her grip. But she yanked their arms toward her in the direction he was pushing, giving the stick the activation shake in the process. Then she swept to the side, pushing down as she let go of the stick so it ended up clinging to his pant leg when it went off.

He was surprisingly dense in a physical sense; even with the servos it must take a lot of muscle to maneuver the suit. He went down like a wet paper sack of rocks.

Steve nudges Tony with his toe. His color’s okay and he’s breathing in a fast involuntary pant, likely from the exertion of the fight leading up to being hoist on his own petard.
Natasha sighs. “JARVIS, perhaps you could find Dr. Banner.”

Aside from a sour look at both of them when he sees the scene JARVIS had briefed him on, Bruce doesn’t have a lot to add. He checks Tony’s airway and pulse, and rolls him onto his side into the recovery position.

"You didn't kill him," Bruce adds from where he kneels, hand resting on Stark’s shoulder blade. "So there's that."

Natasha’s tucking the sticks back into the velvet jeweler’s roll, "Oh, he'll be fine."

Bruce sighs, “There’s a process of peer review for a reason. You don’t test deadly--”

“He's not dead,” Steve interrupts.

“--deadly force with a prototype on human subjects.”

Stark’s eyes fly open and he gasps, rolling half onto his back and reaching for his chest, freezing with one foot in the air as he scopes out the room. They all look on in interest.

“Fuck me,” he testifies, wide-eyed at Natasha. “Merry fucking Christmas.”

Steve breaks into a grin first. “Welcome home Romanoff.”

~*~

Bruce keeps Tony on the mat for a few more minutes, lets Steve and Natasha go on ahead. Maria Hill is waiting for them in the conference room.

“That’s quite a gift,” he says. It was good to know what the surprise had been, and get clarification on Tony’s persistent humming of the Flash Gordon theme over the last few days. Hopefully he won’t have to use one on himself to dislodge that earworm. “Although really, what the hell were you thinking?”

“Someday,” Tony says, wistful, “I’ll get a punch in, something. Get the upper hand. Just for a second.”

Bruce snorts. “You just keep thinking that, Tony. But for the record, I think she likes them.”

Stark doesn’t sit up, but taps along his chest where the arc reactor used to live. In anyone else it would a nervous tic. In Tony, it’s practically mental masturbation.

“We’re gonna have a Christmas party,” he decides.

Bruce stands up, rolls his eyes, and offers his friend a hand. “That is not where I thought you were going with that.”

~*~

There’s more than a gross of baked goods arrayed on the table, a baker’s dozen of plates piled high with cookies and little pastries and brownies, the conference room yet another venue for Thor’s largesse. It’s small consolation.

Natasha deeply hates meetings; the sole, single benefit of life as an independent contractor had been the total lack of them. This team is full of the virtuously organized, who love ordered lists and tactical sketches; essential skills that she appreciates but doesn’t want to have to listen to.
She doesn’t even have Clint around for the foreseeable future to roll her eyes with, and Steve gives her the Power Frown now when she sits next to Bruce, having declared her a bad influence. In truth, Bruce was the bad influence, but he had always looked like he wasn’t paying attention in meetings, distracted or preoccupied by Science.

He used that assumption ruthlessly to his advantage to do whatever the hell he wanted, reading science journals on his tablet, playing Doctor Who Legacy--and sometimes slipping his hand into her lap to surreptitiously wind her up. He’d look innocent and bewildered as her skin got pinker and her eyes got glassier. The last time he’d been briefing the team on the Pixie Dust research, waxing technical about nanocatalysts and earthquakes as his fingers drifted in random patterns edging up her thigh, and she had totally lost the thread of everything else by the time Steve asked for her tactical assessment.

The two of them take seats anchoring a corner, not technically next to each other, but only technically. Steve lets it pass, perhaps taking pity since it’s a double meeting.

They’ll debrief about Europe later, but first, Pepper’s called a state of the union. Unlike when Stark creates them, Natasha pays attention to Pepper’s agendas.

A. Facilities Request Procedure
B. Lozen Trust Quiet Hours
C. Recreational Drug Use
D. Bicycles in the Lobby
E. Human Subject Testing - Safety, Informed Consent, IRB Review

Natasha mouths, eyes narrowed at Bruce, “That was fast.”

He murmurs back, “JARVIS is protective. And a snitch.”

She thinks of Clint riding her about a concussion he learned about while ostensibly in deep cover. “Everyone around here’s a snitch.”

“And protective.”

F. Recent security breaches and upgrades
G. Following up on internship and independent study paperwork in a timely manner

She watches another item roll onto the list.

\[ H \text{ is for Holiday party} \]

Replaced by a quick exchange:

H. SI has an annual holiday party on Dec 10, and all residents of Avengers Tower are invited.

H is for Holiday Party:) It’s potluck.
H is for Holiday Party:) Better leave it as a potluck. I could make it a cookie exchange.

This goes on through the first two agenda items: the proper procedure for making facilities requests, whether usage or structural--Pepper shooting a dark look first at Bruce, and then at Steve; and then assigning those who live in the tower full time to a rotating on-call schedule to enforce the Lozen Trust quiet hours starting at 9pm.

She can’t help looking over at Bruce, who gives her a shrug and a smile which lingers and scrunches above his nose, and earns her a warning kick in the ankle from Steve. But she’s apparently been forgiven for shock sticking Tony, so she just kicks him back.

It’s *C. Recreational Drug Use* that starts the argument.

Pepper lays out a brief sketch of the issue, notes from tutors and offhand remarks from some of the other kids, hastily denied because they tended to close ranks out of reflex, but telling. So far it’s only Ameena, drifting on a haze of weed more days now than not, and it’s gotten bad enough that Dr. Cho took her aside for a talk during her last health care follow-up. This went predictably, with heartfelt reassurances that went nowhere.

“Unacceptable.” Tony checks off the item. “Bikes in the lobby--we should see about putting in a bike check, should’ve thought of it sooner. Human Subje--”

Bruce interrupts before Pepper can, "Do we know where she’s getting it?"

"I thought your anger management was all straight edge." Tony’s voice has an edge itself. “It’s New York, you can get it delivered. But this is not a debate--"

"From a safety standpoint,” Bruce leans forward to try to engage Tony, “it’s important to know, are we dealing with a medical grade source or should we worry about adulterants?"

Maria asks, "Any evidence of psychedelics or escalation to more addictive drugs?"

"Just evidence of weed so far,” Pepper assures, “and remarkably old school in that she’s pretty exclusively smoking it, not going for any fancy delivery systems."

“Sounds like blowing off steam,” Maria shrugs, “possibly self-medication.”

Steve adds, "Likely both."

Maria nods.

Tony shakes his head like trying to shift water from his ear, "How does any of that matter--it's against the Trust agreement, full stop."

"You can't be serious,” Natasha turns to Tony. “You're leasing top-end Manhattan real estate--how many kilos of cocaine are in this building right now, all told?"

“I think we all recognize this is a thorny issue,” Pepper smoothly interrupts Tony’s response, "Glass houses--substance abuse is one of the top five issues the SI anonymous employee helpline offers resources for." She then speaks to the room in general, "And we're leaving aside any personal history which isn't germane to this discussion."

"No, Pep, it's incredibly fucking germane. I know what I'm talking about because I've been there. I looked around one day and realized I'd lost a few decades checked out. It's a goddamned waste, and
"That is not going to happen here."

"Checking out for a while doesn't mean she's spiraling." Bruce's tone is quietly deliberate, the mode when he lays down ugly truth. "Maybe she just needs to process things, work them out her own way."

Tony scoffs, but lets him finish.

"People have different paths. You can't save someone from walking theirs, but you can limit unnecessary damage along the way. Sometimes they need to check out for a while to come to terms, gain perspective."

"We retrieved most of these kids in the training phase, but Ameena is one of the handful who were effectively deep cover operatives in their own school, with confirmed kills." Natasha has worked diligently to recall everything from Denton, and she can play it back behind her eyes in full fidelity. She has mined it, analyzed it, distilled what she learned and passed it along to her teammates, the Trust staff, the girls themselves. She lays her arms on the table, holding her elbows. "Have any of you considered that this may be her attempt to limit damage?"

Tony's jaw muscle flexes, but he actually seems to be thinking about it, coming to conclusions that he hates.

"Maybe she feels safer this way, less dangerous to others." Natasha will never have the whole story, but between what she witnessed and the forensic evidence in the grand jury report, she has enough to know that Ameena assassinating Kudrin was only the punchline to a sick dark joke she'd been living for years. There were old burials on the property, just like ones still undiscovered outside of Moscow. "Keeps her from hurting people, or constantly evaluating how she could."

Bruce tucks his arms away, chin planted on his chest to think.

"She's also one of the kids who's declined counseling so far," Steve quietly adds, "she's not going to be real interested in what we think about any of this."

"I refuse to condone it."

"You're not condoning it Stark," Maria concludes, her voice more gentle than it's ever been with him, "you're just not making an ass of yourself forbidding what you can't stop."

They discuss the harm reduction approach for a bit; safe handling, keeping it away from the other girls, encouraging Ameena to be open with the medical team, offering counseling again.

"This is the stupid thing we're letting you do, and this is how we'll protect you from all the consequences of it so you can keep doing it." Tony concludes bitterly, as if they've all decided to sideline Ameena the way Stane sidelined him after his parents died. "That's gonna end well."

"Tony brings up a good point about doing stupid things, which is our next item," Pepper updates the agenda, "I'm drawing a hard line that any training or sparring involving new technology must be vetted through our medical consultant Dr. Cho before use on human subjects. This excludes Tony."

"Listen, there is a long-standing scientific tradition of self-exp--" Tony catches it way too late.

Bruce lets the moment hang awkwardly for a long beat, all eyes most definitely not looking at him in favor of shooting disapproval at Tony for really stepping in it. Then he slides the platter of Hammer of Chocolate cookies over to Tony, "Yeah. Sneaks up on you, doesn't it?"
Pepper tables the final two items with a resigned, “Please read the attached memos about security changes if you don’t want to take Mr. Hogan’s seminar again just to get back in the building; and please file your educational session paperwork on time, so the board of education will continue to look kindly on our endeavors and leave us the fuck alone.”

Human subject testing was kind of a natural transition, after all.

Natasha’s notes are attached to Maria’s agenda, broken out into categories for the technically minded and the military trained. Tony summarizes the list of equipment, remnants and remains. Off the record she adds her own suggestions for appropriate retribution when she finds the bloody hands behind the bodies she’d encountered. The team hashes out the particulars of the labs and the connections to research on enhancement.

Maria looks at all of them. “We need to decide if this is an appropriate mission for the Avengers, or do we just keep running it like a case, but using each of you as consultants?”

Steve starts, “Right now, it’s horrifying, but it doesn’t require...extraordinary measures. We don’t have a sense of who we’re dealing with. The officials at GenyCo clearly aren’t saints, but that doesn’t mean they’re the ones murdering people or involved in a cover up.”

“Somebody is.” Tony taps into his banked irritation from earlier, angry in a hot second. “But I guess if we wait until everyone’s scratched off the list we can put the picture together at our leisure.”

“Tony, I’m not saying we do nothing. But we can’t go in there like a mission force either—”

“And where would we go?” Thor asks with curious equanimity, but the look he gives Natasha expresses his disquiet, and it’s saying something if Thor thinks you’re going off half-cocked. “We do not have a clear target or enemy.”

Bruce listens to the debate wind up, his folded hands resting against his mouth failing to cover his hard determined expression.

Thor eventually hustles Stark right out of the conference room, because it’s impossible to outline strategic options with him repeatedly asking questions no one has answers to yet, and postulating theories that lead nowhere. “Come, let us discuss alternate tactics in a breakout session.”

Natasha looks to Bruce, a comment ready about Jane taking Thor to too many conferences, but Bruce is absorbed in the reports Maria’s forwarded him from the Finns and the Czechs.

“This has been fun,” Tony snipes as he leaves with a plate of blondies. “Tag me back in when you decide to actually do something.”

In the pause that follows, Bruce looks up from his tablet and poses the quiet pointed question, “And the radiation findings?”

“Gamma exposure of some sort, from the protein breakdown throughout.” Natasha offers the coroner’s analogy, “Radek Jezek...broke...like an untempered egg yolk. His blood stopped being blood.”

Maria adds, “Your input on likely sources would be appreciated.”

Bruce nods, doesn’t ask anything else, and the discussion turns to international agency cooperation. While Hill briefs Steve on the pros and cons of different flavors of Junior Mints, Bruce tucks his tablet under an arm and slips out. Natasha watches him go without comment.
Hill needs to coordinate with her counterparts, and it likely means a return trip to Prague. Possibly sooner rather than later.

“Barton’s out for awhile,” Natasha reminds them, “but it’s not like I can’t go back myself. Whatever this is? They’re not hiding it. I don’t think it will make a difference if I’m recognized.”

“Push until they show themselves?” Hill nods, “See what that looks like. I’m not sure there are a lot of other options.”

Steve still doesn’t understand how a mission can seem so much like a hunt, with his own people as prey. He wants to reign in Romanoff’s habit of throwing herself at danger, “You don’t always have to be bait.”

“I’m not bait, Cap.” She grins at him, wolfish. “I’m that angler fish in the deep, dangling the light before unleashing the teeth.”

**Let’s All Call Bullshit on Each Other**

The clamor of this team in vigorous disagreement always surprises Bruce, not the emotional upheaval per se, but the fact that these people don’t walk on eggshells in front of him.

Most of the time that’s just fine, in fact it’s preferable. People don’t tend to be good at knowing how to protect him, so he’d rather they didn’t try, that they left it to Bruce himself. He’s always had a bead on the emotional volatility of others, even before, when he was locked down tight and didn’t really feel it, inert like a thermometer. He’s good at hearing storms coming and letting them wash right past him, even with the intensity of the personalities involved. Without the scepter jabbing it all under his skin, it doesn’t rile him.

What does rile him, what pushes him to his feet and makes him exit the meeting, is not the disagreement about whether this case qualifies as an Avengers op. It’s not even the three people, maybe more, dead from gamma radiation.

It’s that Natasha has been chasing this down for weeks and he’s hearing about it in a meeting. That hits something sharp inside him.

She’s trying to protect him from information. Like that’s the threat, instead of the risks she takes when she’s alone. It stings because he knows he’s bad at this part: accepting the risks she’s exposing herself to, trusting her and living with his fear. Wrapping his brain around the idea that she could go out on a mission and simply not come back. It’s ugly and sore, a spot he’s been worrying too long and too hard and it’s starting to bleed.

~*~

Aside from her faltering studies Ameena had been consistent with sparring class, though Natasha has had to shift her away from pairing off with Luz, Georgia, Sumi or Catherine. The hard physicality of throwing herself at Natasha seems to bleed off the destructive energy that otherwise builds, and when she’s clean she’s good practice with her advantage of height and long arms.

Then for three weeks in a row it’s just the younger four, still endearingly eager. They talk about lyrics as they grapple and wrestle, the way words sound and if that’s more or less important than what they mean. They talk about songs that aren’t working, Georgia drumming on the gym floor between bouts. Luz finally throws Sumi, but while she’s jumping and hooting at the victory Sumi
lies staring up at the ceiling gasping, “I’ve...got the...refrain!”

Natasha leaves that session off-balance, boundaries crossed that she didn’t realize she had, the sanctity of combat trespassed by art. And after that she’s in Europe.

Maybe the others have been cajoling Ameena, or maybe she was bored, but she shows up today.

She’s not sure if Ameena is half-baked or just habitually dissociated from what’s happening, but Natasha slams her down onto the mat harder than she means to, frustrated at the change in her. She smacks her hand to the mat next to Ameena’s head and the girl barely twitches.

“Out,” she snaps, and the word ricochets. She pushes her knee against Ameena’s diaphragm and continues very close to her ear, “You’re a danger to yourself, which means you’re a danger to others.”

Something flares in the girl’s eyes at that, something Natasha recognizes. Beat me, it says, but you can’t tell me what to do.

Okay, she thinks, I can work with that.

“I’ll stay if I want to,” Ameena says, grim and angry, finally acting like she gives a shit about something. She rears up, using her greater mass to shove at Natasha, who decides maybe the gentler of her lessons just aren’t taking hold. The shove rocks her back, but she uses that momentum to roll Ameena onto her stomach, arm jerked up hard behind her, Natasha’s knee now in her back.

The other four have sensed the shift in mood, and are circling a little, not sure who’s side they’re on here. Natasha frankly doesn’t care. This is something that needs to be handled. It’s an ugly mirror of their face-off in Denton, but this time Natasha is sharpening the humiliation instead of softening it.

She pulls up harder on the arm, feeling it on the cusp of dislocation, and addresses the watching girls. “There’s always someone who can make you do what you don’t want to do,” she says. “We all know that.”

She releases Ameena and stands.

“But that’s not why I’m here.” The young woman sucks her breath in through her teeth, and uses her other arm to get to her feet. “Come back when you’re willing to participate.”

Ameena holds her shoulder and walks out without looking back. Natasha calls after her, “And go see Fiona about that arm.”

Sumi, Catherine and Georgia are more wide-eyed than usual. Luz’s face is almost Barton-blank.

“We’re done for the day. Extra credit to whoever can persuade Ameena to get medical attention.”

~*~

When Ameena gets back to their suite, Trinh sees the way she’s cupping her elbow to brace it and gives her this look like she deserves it. She’s sick of that tight disapproval like she’s fucking something up when this whole situation is ridiculous. “Don’t even start with me.”

“Well, guess you can still get mad. That’s something.”

“Fuck you.”

Trinh looks down at her laptop. She’s hitting the backspace more than usual, and her jaw tightens as
Ameena stares at her. Propped against the laptop is the surveillance data on Creepo, but that’s just another stupid game they play, even down to keeping it from Romanoff.

“What are we even doing here? Fucking around, taking classes, playing at self-defense? What’s the fucking point?”

“I like it here.” Trinh keeps working, some basic experiment she’s running like it’s a real lab, Banner had even made her submit a protocol for the mice to SI’s Animal Care and Use Committee. Ameena still can’t get over the bitterness of that one—there’s more documentation on each of Trinh’s mice than half the kids here came with, and Trinh’s just running some kind of glucose study. “Six months ago my options were Madame or the back forty. You’re an asshole not to take advantage of this.”

“She’s impossible! What does she want from me?” Ameena continues to stomp, and knocks the books off her nightstand. She uses her good arm but it still jostles the injured one and she clutches it tight.

“If you won’t see Fiona,” Trinh says, not even looking up, “then go see Dr. Banner.”

“Maybe,” she says, grimly amused at the idea, and gratified when Trinh stops typing and finally shows some trepidation.

~*~

Natasha curates a list of restaurants she wants to take him to, places with names that sound like chemical equations or book titles, updated constantly due to the volatility of Manhattan haute cuisine. She revels in details, each plan a small logistical operation that gratifies something in her. Bruce hasn’t checked the list in months, with their inability to keep even half their formal dates due to urgent missions and crises.

This evening’s reservations are for a place that does molecular gastronomy and cocktails, which is fascinating on a technical level but leaves him hungry, and he’s just not feeling it tonight.

It’s not about the dinners for him. It’s always been an elaborate feint to get them both out of the tower and be less available, dress up for each other and take their show on the road. Maybe it is about the dinners: the ritual of it, not the food. He craves the feeling of coming home at night to her. Going along with the list is a concession in the middle, heading out into the city to be just the two of them somewhere else. But he’s just as happy debating pizza versus Chinese, or whether they’ve been to their favorite Italian place too many times that week. His needs and desires have a distinctly domestic tinge these days, like he’s digging in his heels just to see if he can.

Bruce craves some place to have those arguments, someplace theirs, and that feeling’s been getting stronger while the reality still seems faint. How can he build that, give her that? Have it for himself? Is it even what she wants, to be taken home to some place with a yard out back?

He has reservations himself, which may be why he’s still in the lab when he should be getting cleaned up, or maybe getting a snack and then cleaned up.

He logs off and heads out of the lab only to find Trinh and Ameena on their way in.

Trinh’s mouth is set firm and Ameena looks clearer than usual, but Bruce himself is not thrilled to see them. They’re not supposed to be in the lab after hours. He doesn’t question that the girls can get to a number of places in the tower that they’re not supposed to be, real and virtual. They’re skilled, and frustrating, and he’s genuinely attached to them while still kind of wishing they lived further away.
“Can you look at her arm?” Trinh sounds like she doesn’t want to be there, either.

Bruce takes off his glasses and crosses his arms. “What about Fiona?”

Ameena shakes her head, but doesn’t elaborate.

He cocks an eyebrow at both of them. He lives with a spy, he’s pretty good at not getting played, and this feels a whole lot like a con he doesn’t want any part of. “What happened?”

“I hurt it today. Sparring.”

He’s starting to see where this is going. “Is your partner okay?”

Ameena gives him a steady look, “She’s fine.”

Bruce wipes a hand down his face, rubbing the edges of his jaw. Natasha’s calm only seems to fuel Ameena’s rage, and he wants to tell Natasha to try talking to the kid; ask Ameena to just believe for half a second that someone else could understand. But he knows it’s pointless.

He sighs, and makes her sit in the chair. He does a hands-off exam, coaching her through some basic tests of movement and flexibility, which confirm his suspicion that Natasha had delivered a carefully dosed amount of hurt. Trinh watches the whole time, and Bruce wonders if she came along as a support for Ameena, or as a witness to back up Bruce if need be.

“Take some Advil, ice it, go see Fiona in the morning.” Ameena opens her mouth but he shuts her down firmly by adding, “Preferably before you wake and bake.”

He can tell she’s going for mean as she lurches to her feet with a scowl, but she misses it by so much it only looks hurt.

“For the record,” He pitches his voice quiet and she takes the bait, turning around in the doorway to look back, “Don’t try to play the people who care about you against each other. That’s only going to make things worse.”

Trinh hangs back to take the elevator alone, telling Bruce as she waits, “She’s getting worse. And I don’t know what to do.”

Bruce wants to explain that she’s trying to break the things around her so everything will stop hurting, but it seems so obvious to him that saying it aloud would be pointless. It doesn’t solve a damned thing.

Alone, he goes back to the physical evidence gathered from destroyed labs and morgue slabs all over Europe. How could these people have been bombarded with enough gamma to have such an immediate catastrophic effect, down to the blood in the marrow of their bones? What does it have to do with the cover stories about proprietary projects and the next wonder drug for dicks?

There’s analysis of a highly degraded sample retrieved from a busted up Croatian lab that matches some properties detailed in Kudrin’s notes...and the only way that stuff was related to Viagra was in the Kissinger sense of power being the ultimate aphrodisiac.

He forgets to stop.

Natasha eventually retrieves him, but he’s saturated, and can’t process navigating a meal of sea green foams and peculiar textures. They end up eating a delivery Vesuvio with capers and anchovies, on the floor of the living room where they can sprawl on the thick rug and drink beer from the bottle.
with their shoes off.

He does feel a little bad that they got the evening he wanted instead of the one she planned. He offers to break out the calcium sorbate and soy lecithin, to try making some of the tiny mint syrup beads she’d put in rum the week before, but the mixology is her thing, and it’s the process as much as the product, so he’s not surprised when she shakes her head.

She rests her head back on his thigh and closes her eyes, and his earlier tension loosens at the sight of her. His thumbs stroke her face, petting the line of her eyebrows, her nasal bridge, the exorbitant sweep of her zygomatic arches.

“I pushed too hard today,” she admits, “We’re fucking this up with Ameena.”

“She’s got nowhere to put those feelings,” he says, tapping his fingertip gently on the spot between her brows until she stops blinking, watching her jaw relax when she does. “Internal or external, it still feels like an open wound.”

Her voice has shifted slower and lower, and he’s pleased at the change he’s wrought. “You break or you bend. But we’re not helping her bend. She’s trying to play us like parents, but we can’t even ground her.” Eyes open, seeking clarification, “That’s what they do, right?”

"Grounding?" How the hell should he know?

"Like faltered flight. Maybe we are doing that part.”

It’s as good description as any, and he leans down to kiss her, trying to help her through.

~*~

Tony counts it as a win when he finally gets the church bus into his private garage. Luz insists on driving it herself, and they take it for a little jaunt before circling back and bringing it to its new home. The scans are a thing of beauty as they populate the holoscreen, and seeing Luz play with the 3-d exploded diagram gives him an almost uncomfortable feeling in his chest, like his sternal repair has grown three sizes.

She’s been tearing through all the Engineering modules he can throw at her, even when taking time to tutor her own little protege Catherine. Last week she casually mentioned early admission to MIT, which for Luz is akin to most other kids tearing your damned sleeve off with nagging.

She tests well, they all do. He wonders if he could pass it off as a legacy as well, a former fourteen year old freshman sending another fourteen year old into the fray.

He’s thinking he can steer her toward the massive online open courses, maybe buy another year or two for her to really settle instead of just being stoic and calm.

The more he looks at the bus, the more certain he is. Kudrin had bought the thing and assigned it as a project so there’d be a getaway vehicle in case of relocation. Luz had taken the idea and run halfway around the world with it, made it her contribution to the coup d'etat. She’d turned it into a fast efficient machine they could live in if need be, with a ton of amenities tucked away like a Tokyo apartment.

He can recognize a machine that’s had every hope stuffed into it like a carefully folded parachute. He knows it takes longer than you’d think to unpack all that shit.
Chapter 9

Truth and Dare

Bruce is down in the SubSeven radiation lab across from the ARC. He’s been preoccupied reviewing his notes on the bodies found in Europe, extrapolating out what could have caused such damage. The method was really immaterial—the amount of gamma radiation that kid caught the brunt of could only have been brutal and excruciating.

He’s already on edge when the thick alloy outer door of the RadLab opens to reveal Natasha. The lab itself is a leaded glass room situated inside the metal shell, so he takes a moment to close down his workspace as she slides open the glass door to enter the lab proper. He’s looking forward to the break.

Instead, she begins offhandedly, “I may be going back to Prague...”

He clenches into dead silence for a long time before he can speak calmly. “Thought Barton was still indisposed.” He doesn’t sound calm after all, just meticulous and quiet, but at least the churning feeling in his chest is pulled tight for now.

She snorts, “I do just fine without Clint,” and it’s still light; the tone, the way she’s shuffling stuff on his desk, the gentle slide of his phone toward him to remind him to put it in his pocket.

“You shouldn’t,” he says, and his own voice catches. “Shouldn’t go by yourself.”

She stops and gives him a sultry look, “You could come.” He feels the invitation in her tone run through him, and they’re both playing an angle now.

“No.” He thinks of watching her become someone different, ply her craft by not being the Natasha he knows but X number of women who don’t exist and are unconnected to him. He doesn’t trust his tolerance for it, doesn’t trust that his intellectual understanding can ever soak deep enough to safely watch. “No, I couldn’t.”

That’s all it takes to shift the mood. “Yes,” she insists, hard and even. “You could.”

He narrows his eyes, standing but also refusing to give in to the urge to pace. “What are we talking about here? Do you want me there as a cover? As back up? Someone to do research?”

She just continues to look at him, mouth set hard.

“That’s all it takes to shift the mood. “Yes,” she insists, hard and even. “You could.”

He narrows his eyes, standing but also refusing to give in to the urge to pace. “What are we talking about here? Do you want me there as a cover? As back up? Someone to do research?”

She just continues to look at him, mouth set hard.

“Even if I wanted to do any of those things—which mostly I don’t—I’m a liability more than I’m an asset.” He softens, needing her to see. “Or don’t you remember Denton, round one?”

She loses a little of the hard line. Bruce had watched close-up as she inhabited an identity to work a mark. He’d kept it together most of the night before they hit a hard boundary the Other Guy didn’t want crossed, hustling himself out like a one man bar fight and taking extreme measures to shove the monster back down. It had snuck up on him, and it had been close.

“You kept him contained,” she says. “And that’s not what we’re talking about.”

He knows that for her, ripping off the scab until the wound becomes a scar is the way to wrangle fear into a submission hold. It’s what she did with him after all. Decided to refuse fear. But it’s a dangerous tactic to take with the Other Guy, and he’s weary of her dismissal of danger.
“Natasha,” he says gently, “It’s always what we’re talking about.”

He thinks if he’d stopped there, it would have been fine. But he doesn’t, he can’t, not just because he’s thorough and pedantic, but because if she’s going to beat on her drum he’s damned well going to beat on his. Those bodies had been hard to look at. They had families, friends. Loved ones. He doesn’t want to let this go, doesn’t want to be looking at her corpse on a table.

“It doesn’t--”

“Except when we’re talking about you walking into danger alone like there’s never any other alternative. Like the risk means nothing, just because you’re good at your job.”

He watches the choices flicker over her face, this process she lets him see now, or has stopped bothering to mask when it’s the two of them. She moves through personal space right up into breathing space to whisper, warm in his ear, “I am very, very good at what I do.”

He wants to push her away and maybe press into the fight they’re on the edge of, but she pulls him closer by his belt, and he settles his hands on her hips instead. They are going to have this fight at some point, but she’s offering him an out. He takes it, knowing he shouldn’t.

“Your skills were never in question, Agent Romanoff,” he says, and even he can hear that the wry note falls a little flat.

"No," her smile is genuine and sharp, her fingernails lightly grazing the fabric of his pants right over the head of his cock, unerring aim even though he wasn't anywhere near hard when she started, "only my judgement."

"Only about this." He can’t help the thrill he gets when she plays him hard like this, when she takes him, whatever he can give. He slides his hands down her ass.

"Which happens to be my vocation."

"Taking me to Prague like a bomb in your carry on?"

"Assessing risk." She stretches a hand behind him to put the lab on light lockdown with his own passcode, giving him a slow squeeze as the door bolts engage.

He slips his hands under her jeans, hot skin contrasting with the cold of the lab. He leans forward, breathing in the scent of her neck, caught in the soft wool of her scarf, touched with the leather of her jacket. It’s heady and vibrant, it stirs him up. "I'm not your job, Natasha."

"No," she agrees, "I never date on the job."

The absurdity seizes him, the word dating, when she reaches for him in restless sleep and settles without waking up, when they can share a joke across a table with a silent look, when just the scent of his skin can either slow or spike his pulse. His fingers clench against her skin, and he forces himself to relax as she stills under his palms. He shakes his head, looks at her up close. "That's not what this is."

Her teeth run across her bottom lip, and her expression turns rueful, "Wasn't ever, was it?" Her fingers dip into his waistband, nails sharp against his skin.

"No.” He slips his hands upward, under her shirt. They’d stumbled into whatever the hell this was, and he feels answerable somehow, like it should have been deliberate, that he should have offered her an out somewhere along the way.
He spreads his fingers, feeling the sweep of rib, the furrow of her spine, the curve of her waist. She’s smaller than she seems, the vibrancy of her presence so much bigger than her physical self. "I'm sorry."

Her head turns a little, brow crinkled, as if she doesn’t follow. Her eyes narrow, and her voice is ragged like that apology was a slap. “Are you...trying to piss me off?”

The bottom keeps dropping out of this situation. "I could ask the same of you."

She pauses, and he watches her process this, the idea flicking through her eyes as she comes to a conclusion that surprises her, and something flares.

“Maybe,” she says, “What if I am?” She licks her bottom lip and leans into him harder. His hands are full of her, and she’s almost shimmering with something that unsettles him as she pushes, still in her bomber jacket like she’s ready to take it outside.

The answering flare of his anger is not surprising--it’s the familiar one he’s been carrying since October, a barely banked torch of outrage at her willingness to put herself at risk, to take on harm. The surprise is that it also feels...like betrayal, the sharp, breathless punch to his gut in the same way that her saying dating had hurt, the lie of that word, even when he knows it’s self protection on her part.

Bruce knows she doesn’t lie to him, unless she’s lying to herself first. Still the irrational suspicion rises up; what if it’s true?

That feeling...stirs the same flicker of awareness he gets when the rage and stress build, not quite enough to force him to turn, but he could grab it without reaching. That feeling is deep and terrible, it’s being left behind, being ignored. Abandonment, ugly and brutal, clawing at the desperate Id-driven part of him. He recoils from it, from the connection of what he feels for her with this need to control, possess.

He wants nothing to do that feeling, it makes him physically ill to even look at it, but he forces himself to because Natasha’s not backing down, up on her toes right in his face like she’s ready to headbutt him, contained energy, and there doesn’t seem a way out of this but through.

With that thought the feeling banks a little, gives him some breathing room.

What if he were to give in to it, let it bloom here just a little? What would that look like? Feel like? What if he could let it free, show her what she’s actually asking for? Make her see.

He grabs her arm, moving so quickly that her nails scrape against his skin as he catches her by surprise, and he marches her toward the couch. He hears her breath catch, but the sound alone tells him it’s not fear. When he lets go with a shove she rounds on him, expectant.

“You're going to stay here...” he says, stay awhile.

She shakes her head, but her pupils are dilated and her look is keen. “No.”

He lets the anger burn a little in his tone, “Then leave.” It feels good, and he hates it.

She’s up in his face again. “You first.”

He doesn’t back down, and his voice bounces off the thick leaded glass walls of the lab, “I’m not going anywhere.”
“You sure about that? What if I do piss you off?” She actually shoves him, palms knocking his shoulders hard enough he has to take a step back to maintain balance. “You going to stick around with me then?”

She says it like a dig, but it sounds true, sounds like her own fear. Good. Now they’re on even footing: scared shitless and pissed off.

He takes a step toward her as it surges, and he sees the legitimacy of the threat register in her eyes, maybe it’s in his own eyes now, but she holds her ground. That makes it worse. She’s standing there, her own not insubstantial rage primed, but there’s also something hot and desperate and needy in her gaze, like she’s been dying to have this fight. Like she’s asking him to show himself, offering her need to him, daring him to take it from her.

He wants to knock her down, he wants to scream. It takes everything he has to speak, and his voice is quieter now, so tight that it hurts, “You don’t want that. This. You don’t want this.”

And he means the escalation, but between his mouth and his ears the words turn and expose his fear, and she hears what he doesn’t mean to say. How can she want this risk? How could it possibly be worth it?

“You don’t get to tell me what I want, Bruce Banner.”

He can’t help but answer that dare. He’s struck, as he often is, by the way she can read him, read a room, a moment, a situation, when she still so often needs a primer to decode love. How escalation is part of her skillset. Still, he needs to prove her wrong.

“You want this?” His voice is still quiet and grave, a remnant of control remaining there, maybe all he’s got left.

He grabs her lapels and scarf, shucking her coat down her arms and tugging it off to the floor.

She clutches the hem of her shirt and whips it off for good measure, throwing it at him like a challenge.

He catches it without looking away from her.

Her smile looks as brutal as he feels, “I want you.”

He balls her shirt in his fist and throws it to the side, feels like he’s watching this from a distance, a dashcam in an accident video. What the hell are they doing? But he doesn’t stop. Can’t. He curls his fingers around the middle of her bra, wire and lace and hot skin. He slowly tugs down and the dissociated part of him is horrified to see her ease onto her knees, still looking at him with a fierce crooked smile, like she knows something he doesn’t.

“I already know who you are. I’m not going anywhere.”

Oh that’s a cold feeling, hearing that and knowing it’s a lie even if she doesn’t, even as she looks up at him with a naked expression on her face. The anger is still howling, but it’s rooted back inside of him now, the pit of his stomach an acid ache. The hurt driving this feels so human, anguish and pain and fear. He crouches down so his face is hovering just above hers.

“You think that, and okay...I’ll give you that you know me. But you underestimate him. All of this. And maybe he,” he chokes around it, forces honesty on himself, “Maybe I don’t kill you. Maybe we avoid that, somehow. Protocols, or dumb luck, or maybe you’re right and I’m full of shit. But...maybe it’s because you get yourself killed by someone else instead.”

He sees her head rock back, but even so he’s not sure how he ends up flat on his back, wind knocked out of his lungs. He suspects the answer is that he wounded her professional pride, hurt her
feelings. When he gasps his lungs open he can’t help laughing, and it’s an ugly amusement.

“Get up.” Her voice is a little shaken, like maybe she’d lost her own cool for half a second when she floored him.

His laugh sputters to a stop, “No.”

“I’ll wait.” Soft now, like she’s come to a decision.

And she does wait, for the long moment it takes him to roll up to a sitting position. The floor is fucking cold. She's sunk down onto the couch, still in her bra and jeans and boots. Despite the chill, her skin is flushed, and her eyes are sharp. He feels strung out with the suspense of it, and he surges up toward her, riding the tail end of the rage, planting his fists on either side of her and leaning into her face. “What are you trying to prove? That you’re not scared?”

She’s not calculating anything, and that unnerves him, she just licks her lips to speak and says, “I’m not one of the girls; you can't expect a display of cave canem to dictate my fear. I know you.”

He drops his head then, and her voice is gentle.

"Would you prefer if I were terrified?"

He lurches back to sit on his heels. He folds his arms tight, wrists flexed sharply into his elbows to mechanically force the tendons of the hands open. She nods as if he’s spoken, leans forward and grabs a deliberate handful of his shirt.

“No, I didn’t think you would.” She exerts methodical force, pulling him back toward her so he rises on his knees, face at her level as she sits on the couch. “So what are you going to do, now that you know you aren’t going to scare me off?”

He swallows and wraps a hand around hers. He owes her honesty, but the truth is made up of dread, and regret, and an awful humbling overload of mercy he has no idea what to do with. He opens up the dread. “Be scared for you.”

She gives him a slow shake, “Then come with me. Let me show you...” She ducks her head, tilting her eyes up to him. "I won't let him hurt me. I'll keep us safe."

"You can't promise that." He knows she can't and he won't ask her to promise failure.

"I'll try," she says. "I can try."

He has no answer to that, but she leans into him, mouth so close to his skin, breathing him in, brushing along his jaw, his cheek. He can't stand it anymore, needs to touch her, and turns his face to kiss her, the coolness of her mouth, the small noise she makes so welcome, her fistful of shirt becoming hot palms cradling the sides of his neck.

She steers him onto the couch and straddles his lap, and he sets his forehead against her heart beating in her chest, arms around her waist, just shaking his head because he’s committed to this bad idea. There’s no real alternative...and part of him wants to push through it. He's not sure he can tell her yet, needs to just press her close and take her in.

Agreeing to this is bigger than going on a mission with her. It's giving her something, a promise he’s not sure either of them are ready to hear.

He spreads his hands across her upper back and tucks his face against her neck, and she wraps
around him and cards her fingers through his hair. After a while she unbuttons his shirt and slips her arms inside, burrowing in. He catches her leather jacket with his foot, and they drape it across her shoulders to warm up her back, neither of them willing to interrupt the strange solace that’s crept up in the wake of this by talking or letting go.

They stay that way until he strokes up her back and she presses her mouth to his throat, fingers ghosting along his chest, a shivery, gentle caress. She kisses him, slow and languid, and he cradles her skull, drawing her closer, and she rocks against him, mouth soft, and wet and hot, until the kiss shifts from longing into need.

They keep contact even as she stands to wriggle out of her jeans and underwear, her knee pressed against his, fingers graced against bared skin as he frees himself from his own clothes, fixed gazes...tender as if the bruises were physical.

She sinks down on him, rolling her hips, hot and sweet and lovely, and he groans into her neck as she takes him in. It’s about holding onto that languid solace, pulling pleasure into it, and he lets her rock slow and uneven as he thumbs at her clit and watches her face, trying to keep his mind blank so he can take all of her into memory, the sheen of sweat on her red cheeks, the scrape of teeth over her lip, the look of angry awed disbelief as she clenches around him.

She tips them sideways, spreading out on her back and pulling him down, pulling him in and hooking her ankles together at the base of his spine, offering a deep angle for his stroke. She digs her blunt nails into his neck like she’s trying to take him down with a bite.

There’s so much to fear, still so much to talk about. Things aren’t exactly settled, but he doesn't feel as broken as he'd feared; or maybe it just doesn't matter because he's already lost. They don't speak as they dress, but she kisses him before she unlocks the lab and leaves him to his work. Afterward, she goes off to meet with Hill and he works until he can't anymore.

He heads out into the night to run, because he needs to look at what disappearing means in the face of this.

He needs to figure out if he's ready to say goodbye to that option, and if he does, what will break inside him if he's naming this thing between them wrong...she still isn’t acknowledging why she pushed this, why she reaches out for him in the dark.

**Advice for the Lovelorn and Monstrous**

After her meeting with Hill, Natasha finds Bruce isn’t in their suite. This isn’t unusual, they’re both liable to get caught up in projects or just have those nights where it doesn’t make sense to force sleep, to make a big deal out of it, they’ve each just gone to bed and assumed the other one would stagger in eventually. Natasha heads right back out of the suite, needing to lay eyes on him, unsettled and not wanting to examine just why, not just yet.

Bruce’s phone pings in the RadLab, but the moment the elevator opens below ground she knows he’s no longer in the building. It’s nearly three in the morning and the door to the Adamantium Rage Chamber is propped open with a battered furniture dolly, the roar coming out that of CandySmash in full swing.

She suspects the band has an alert set to be notified whenever Bruce leaves the building, cramming practice in whenever they can. It’s not a school night, so she just retrieves his phone and heads back skyward.

She knows he runs at night sometimes, but it’s when he’s given up on sleep. Lately only when she’s
gone.

Tony is still up when she heads through the common area, finishing a sandwich and gesturing through television channels with a grim determination until he spots her.

She can smell the horseradish from yards away when he speaks through a mouthful, “Did you lose your dog, Romanoff?”

The sudden tightness in her jaw and throat take her by surprise.

“Well, shit.” Tony flicks off the screen with a slash of his hand and faces her.

What the hell is wrong with her that she can’t nail down a simple blank expression--she changes tack with herself and divulges, “We had a discussion...earlier.”

“You had a fight.” He’s intrigued, and she’s not sure if it’s concern or just the primate fascination one would have seeing a train derail into an oil pipeline.

Likely both, but she’s not interested in managing Tony right now. “You can’t fight with someone who won’t get angry.”

“Really?” Stark snorts, strolling toward the bar. “He and I do it all the time.”

That’s oversimplifying it. Since this thing between them began, they’ve occasionally argued and gotten pissy and snapped at each other, they’ve touched on raw nerves and stumbled into places where things got a little mean for a moment, but they both know how to ease up, how to work back from that. There’s never been a risk of him giving in to the thing that most terrifies him.

Lately he’s been so staunchly determined he’s right that the process has been thwarted, downshifted into sex, an outlet for the frustration and the need. Catharsis without resolution, she sees now. Reaching for a reassurance he doesn’t, at base, really believe in.

Rage is not the issue, rage is fear on the offensive, rage is survival. The issue is defensive fear, bracing for the blow, the twisty dread that lives underneath the anger.

“It wasn’t a fight. Exactly.”

Tony had pulled out a rocks glass, but adds a shot glass when he hears that, and reaches down into the freezer. “Oh, you’re in for a treat, then.”

Against her better judgement, she decides to hear him out. “In what way?”

“I’m guessing you’re still in the warm-up phase.” His one hand gestures in a swirl as he pours. “Where you don’t even realize you’re having a fight with Banner, because he’s already had the argument with you in his head and lost.”

She sighs. “But he’s still a sore loser.”

Tony points at her, “Exactly.”

She knocks back the liquor. “This is more social awareness than I expect from you.”

“I’m hurt, Natasha. Truly hurt that you would mistake my not giving a damn with social awkwardness.”

“That’s what I mean, you usually keep intel like this to yourself until you need it for targeting.”
He really does have a great sharky grin, she thinks. “Like I said, you’re in for a treat when he finally decides to tell you off.”

“Maybe I don’t kill you. “Maybe he already did.”

“Not if he’s out walking it off.” Tony shakes his head, pours her a second shot. “He’s still working up to it.”

~*~

She’s a lure, she’s a feint. It’s not just her method or her habit, it’s who she is. She draws and pushes, and makes you chase, and then she’s never where you saw her last, she’s dropping down on your head like death from above.

She sleeps in your bed, she’s made it hers, but the first time she sat on it she’d broken into your room. You never asked her why she did that, did you--you knew. To prove she could. To show you she would only do it in front of you. And your reaction...was to decide you’d actually kiss her instead of just thinking about it.

Bruce runs because conditioning helps his control, but it also helps to take his thoughts out into the real atmosphere, the actual uncontrolled weather.

The thing about the tower is that the weather is visible in the air, in the light, but there’s no feel for it. It’s a pilot’s view of weather. It’s only when you get into the street that you can feel what the world is doing. He’s almost alone out here because it’s late for this part of town and terribly cold. The air is desiccated, all the moisture squeezed out into tiny hard pellets of snow drifting in lazy curls on the pavement, looking fake, crunching under his feet like milk powder.

You let her punch you in the face, Banner, back in the late spring. An experiment for the sake of the stand-down protocol. For science.

From the beginning, you’ve really done nothing to encourage her to play nice. That means something.

She got away with punching you in the face. She can be forgiven for reasoning that maybe she’s got a margin of safety she can work with. Even if she’s wrong, you were wrong first. And as far as you went with it tonight, trying out some fucking tantric approach to your anger, it never occurred to you to take the simple precaution of going across the hall and locking yourself in the ARC.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” he says, just another breath of water vapor dissipating into the cold sere air.

“We both are.”

It’s at that moment he realizes they could both use a safety net, a reality check, some actual backup if they’re going to do this thing.

~*~

Bruce shows up at her desk the next afternoon. He’s still wearing his running clothes, hair all over the place like he never even took his winter hat off. His mouth is serious and he looks hollowed out, eyes puffy underneath, stern at a glance, but to her it reads like no food and no sleep.

“Did you…?” She leaves it hanging. Did you sleep somewhere else? Did you stay up all night? Did you know I stayed up waiting, drinking with Stark like some misguided confessional? She doesn’t say any of that.
He sets a piece of tech down on her desk, smaller than a phone but with a similar screen. Despite access to Stark’s fabrication and machining set-up, it still looks cobbled together like it should have a rubber band around it to keep the parts in one piece. All of his prototypes look like mice the cat dragged in, and she can tell this one is partly an explanation of where he was last night.

There’s no point in holding on to the annoyance that he never came to bed, that he could have just vanished for all she knew. He’s here now, in the pissy difficult mood that signals an actual willingness to talk. She picks it up, turns it over.

“It’s a gamma detector. It’s portable, but still capable of giving accurate measurements and warning of exposure. I calibrated it to pick up even residue levels of gamma so you can test in the field. Get an accurate, immediate read. Some of those bodies...you shouldn’t have even been near them for any length of time...”

“Okay.” She can be patient, even if it’s killing her. “Thank you.”

“I’ll go,” he says, “but I have some conditions.”

She doesn’t love being dictated to, but she can bend. “And they are?”

He’s swaying a little on his feet but he doesn’t sit down. “You bring backup. Real backup, not just me. We both know you don’t want me there as protection, you’ve got an agenda.”

It’s not like she hasn’t been clear about that, wanting to push him toward a more realistic assessment of his own situation. “That’s one.”

He rubs his hands over his face as if he can scrub away the tired. “That’s as far as I got, but I’m still thinking.”

She sets the detector down, and doesn’t point out that keeping the negotiation open is a condition itself. She’s getting what she wanted, and she’s willing to let the rest ride for now.

She puts her fist on his thigh and leans her chin on her hand. “Okay.”

He unfolds an arm to stroke her hair. “Thank you.”

She nods slowly, letting herself be soothed, letting herself shake off the dread that had seen her through a night of drinking and dishing about boys with Tony Stark. He took a long walk and came back, and there’s something to be said for the fact that he’s choosing fight over flight.

“He lost his phone again.”

With a sigh she reaches into her back pocket and pulls it out.

“Oh,” he says, unfolding his other arm to take it from her. “Thank you.”

She opens her fist and lays her cheek against his leg, curling her hand around that knee. He massages her scalp and traces along the muscles of her neck, light delicate touches making them twitch and then relax. She murmurs, “I’ve got your back, Banner.”
“Well it works out,” Maria takes a seat on Steve’s huge blue sofa, propping her feet next to his on the ottoman he’d bought to keep her feet off his coffee table. “I need to bust some heads and press some flesh out that way, and it wouldn’t hurt for you to get some more field experience in.”

Steve shakes his head ruefully. “Doesn’t it seem odd to you that Romanoff’s suddenly interested in having an entourage?”

“A brutally practical one, if so.” Maria shrugs. “Don’t worry muñequito, we can handle this.”

“This is going to be a clusterfuck.”

“I’ve always preferred the term ’goatscrew.’”

He snickers and starts up the next episode. Steve has a notebook of cultural milestones and achievements he’s methodically caught up on over the years, but Maria was the first one to insist that television was more important than he’d realized.

“People discount the boob tube,” she’d explained, “but nothing provides the same context as ephemeral media. Judicious study of comedies in particular, because if you know what makes people laugh, you know what they’re tense about, what they bond over, what the moving boundaries of the social mores are.”

He’d been unconvinced; home renovation shows were one thing, but classic broadcast television was both after and before his times. But he was game because Maria was brilliant like sun on the water, you watch the waves all placid rolling in and you don’t realize until your eyes are swollen and sore that you might as well have been looking at the sun. It also gave him an excuse to spend time with her that didn’t involve conjugating verbs and fighting French cognates in his head to get to donde instead of ou.

Maria had been the one to suggest *Barney Miller* to him, back in the spring when they first started the Spanish lessons, and now they’re watching stuff together. She’d lead off with *Batman* once it became a real curriculum, alternating it with *The Twilight Zone*. They’d inhale a season in a week if it was a good one, even as busy as they were between two very demanding careers and, to be frank, a lot of fucking.

Some things didn’t translate well, or stand up to time, or simply fell flat. Steve felt *Hogan’s Heroes* was problematic in ways he couldn’t articulate and that Maria had chalked up to “Too soon?”. Some things you got the gist of after an episode or two, like *Gilligan’s Island* or *Three’s Company*.

She offered a few contextual comments, explained references that hadn’t been in any historical overviews, but mainly they just both laughed together at stupid comedies she’d grown up on, and that did, yes, give him far more of a middle ground between the here and now and the past he left only a few years ago.

These were the stories his contemporaries told after the war, and the stories their children told of the troubled changing world they grew up in. These were stories of upheaval and optimism and fear and denial and inexorable change and stupid escapism and laughing at anxiety.

*The Addams Family, Star Trek, Get Smart, The Muppet Show...*the best part was that any of it could spark a deep discussion on culture or politics, or just a couple laughs while Steve had a roast in the oven or Maria had a Bolognese on an almost imperceptible simmer.

Barring that, they could always make their own fun.
Pepper is not enamoured with *Renovation Realities*, sounding genuinely sad for the people who are ruining their homes with blithe incompetence. She started out killing time waiting for Tony, but has gotten sucked in as he failed to come up from his session in the garage with Luz.

“Oh, no,” she sounds like she’s watching a nature documentary about cute prey animals. “That’s not going to work out for them at all.”

Bruce has his hand on Natasha’s knee, gesturing and idly touching as she reads and mostly ignores everyone. He’s trying to explain to Pepper that disaster is the point of the show: people reaching way beyond their abilities, failing gloriously.

“In the place they then have to live in, every day afterward,” Pepper finishes, a little too on-point. “I can still think it’s sad.”

Even Steve can’t argue with that, though it doesn’t dent the delight in his voice as he and Bruce continue to discuss project failure.

Natasha pulls her feet up, tucking them under Bruce’s thigh next to her. There’s a thread in these reports that she should be able to follow, and it’s so close…

Pepper finally persuades Steve to change the channel to HGTV for comparison. “See,” she says, “Isn’t it so much better to look at something beautiful, professionally done?” Pepper doesn’t have much truck with incompetence; she saves it for those venues where she can fire it, or sue it, or compete it out of existence.

Steve leans over and kind of knocks his arm into Bruce, in such a boyhood gesture of camaraderie that Natasha looks up.

Steve’s pointing to an establishing shot of a small farmhouse, not that different from the Bartons’ digs in Parma, just not as isolated. The interior shots show that it’s smaller, more urban than the houseful of mismatched family heirlooms from Laura’s family.

“Something like that, doc?” he asks.

Bruce shakes his head, still not looking at her. She tries to be as gentle as possible, as close to diffident as she can pull off with people who actually know her, “You want a house?”

Bruce shakes his head, still not looking at her. She sees him realize that he’s still looking at the house instead, the two women who share it so proud of the hard work they’d put into it. His head tilts toward her and he tries to sell her that sheepish, disarming smile, but she’s not buying it.

She’s aware her face has gone calculating, a dreamy cold look she’s most often unmasked to disarm, but she hasn’t been hiding that expression from him for months now.

“We’ve just gotten saturated on *House Hunters,*” he tries to rationalize, “You start to have favorites.”

But she can see the truth reflected back at her— and that he’s aware that it’s true but doesn’t want to cop to it to her.
“It’s a good investment,” Pepper continues, “good for rental property out of Manhattan.” She seems to catch a little of the tension, and adds slowly, “…or not.”

~*~

Natasha texts Clint to check in on everyone and gets a red, squinchy-faced Nate photo back that rattles something in her. He’s lost the disbelieving look of the desperately new, and has moved on to a judgmental expression. Even since her visit, he’s started noticeably developing Clint’s nose.

She doesn’t want to push, but looking at this new person in the world when she’s been neck deep in the dead, she wants to share it. That little squishy nose is like a punchline.

When are you gonna cop to domestic life? Also, that kid is terrifying. Is he plotting world domination or just pooping?

He texts her back a middle finger emoji.

He’s beautiful, she replies. And I feel like I’m lying, but not in the fun way.

I get it. Just need to figure out a strategy. NYC stuff for L, new plan.

Plan?

Maybe singing the next verse of Green Acres.

She has to look up the reference, which hints that they may be moving closer to the city. She finds she doesn’t like that idea, that it feels like loss. You’re getting a talking pig? Or are you the talking pig?

Arnold was the smartest person on that show.

She pauses. Doesn’t know who else to tell, and Clint’s far enough away to maybe give her a little bit of a break about it.

He wants a house.

That doesn’t even warrant a thought, apparently, the text back is so swift.

Okay. So what do you want?
Chapter 10

Taking Matters in Hand

Bruce gets to a stopping point earlier than he’d expected; he’d been hoping to work straight through until the movie started and show up then, join the whole group in the big gathering place while Natasha was already occupied with talking about the film she’d chosen. It’s not avoidance, it’s practicality.

It occurs to him that here is also merit in getting there early and choosing his ground.

This is how he shows up way before movie night starts, and finds out that the “S&B” session that occasionally shows up on the Tower schedule matrix--dutifully replicated on every infoscreen and synced tablet--consists of Thor, Dr. Foster and Darcy Lewis making various items out of yarn.

He goes to turn around a shade too late, and Thor catches him with a hail fellow well met, a wooden hook, and a ball of something coral red and silky.

Thor is making a scarf, which is to say that since his Costco card was revoked by Stark he has dialed down the baking in favor of making a scarf for everyone he knows. Steve has already been outfitting the team in knit stocking caps. Lewis is either less ambitious or more, the pile she’s working on in her lap is a sweater she’s designing for herself.

She’s trying to explain short rows to Thor, and teasing him about being on quiet time duty for the Trust kids. “You’re an RA, it’s adorable! Though I have to say, between you and me, they’re creepier when they’re quiet. It’s all Charlie X times a dozen.” This becomes an explanation of resident assistants, Star Trek and telekinetic children.

“Oh, seithr--yes that is quite disconcerting in a child…”

Foster watches Bruce fiddle with the yarn, running the free end through his fingers as they talk shop and she tries to persuade him to go to another conference. She guests on deGrasse Tyson’s podcast now, has a couple truly bawdy stories about Bill Nye, and when he stops laughing she offers to show him how to crochet a hyperbolic plane, which is apparently all she ever does during these get-togethers. Lewis describes her desk as looking like a barrier reef.

Maria shows up next with a big bowl of popcorn and Steve, since she’s insisted he audit the class. Bruce suspects she’s also gathering soft intel on the team, keeping an eye on the kids.

Steve reaches into Thor’s basket and pulls out a half-done mulberry tweed cap on circular needles. Maria unwinds the yarn as Steve works, saying, “Please tell me it’s not The Bicycle Thief. I don’t want to have to go on an SSRI because of movie night.”

Natasha had been talked down from the French New Wave that frankly no one who isn’t getting credit wants to sit through. So it’s Marriage, Italian Style, because while Pepper’s apparently decided no one gets their first choice, Natasha wouldn’t even entertain the notion that Sophia Loren could be objectionable.

Seven kids are taking Film Appreciation, and they file in like ducklings behind her.

She doesn’t offer an explanation of childhood or history, or the story she’s telling. There’s no point, not from her, not to these girls. Her story isn’t reflected in film, she has no childhood memories
wrapped around couch cushions and nostalgic set decor. She simply likes the complexity of talking and yelling and agendas coded into multiplicities of meaning.

Now she sinks down cross-legged on a cushion and leans back against Bruce’s shins, one hand wrapped firmly around the back of his calf as they watch almost two hours of passionate Italian argument.

“The more the world changes, the more it stays the same. Houses, palaces, skyscrapers. And in the middle, an old story like ours.”

“It’s old because you want it to be old. There are skyscrapers in America, too, and inside those skyscrapers there are old stories. That’s not the problem.”

The lights go up after and Maria tackles post-WWII Italy while untangling three balls of yarn. Steve’s knit the hat into a couple stripes of mulberry and creamy white, and is working a dusky slate blue into the crown. Lewis stops murmuring to him about decreases to field a question about patriarchy from Khadijah.

Natasha analyzes Filumena’s allies and strategies, casting the story as a chess game, but that for all the focus on marriage, names and place, her motivation truly is love--love for her children and even love for her opponent Domenico. All the while she strokes under Bruce’s pant cuff, soothing and maddening so his nerves buzz right up his leg.

Bruce still has a passel of things he wants to avoid talking about--houses, risk, stray children, the dueling sets of anger and fear that they’ve so recently touched off, this huge thing between them neither of them are willing to name--but he can barely stand letting the discussion finish before hauling Natasha back to their suite.

They almost don’t make it inside, but it’s just a palm lock and he spares a hand for a moment while she pulls his shirt from his pants and starts unbuttoning.

He catches her shoulder and spins her through the doorway, heading for the bedroom in long strides. She follows, leaving clothing every couple of paces. He stands by the bed, shoes off but only opening the last two buttons of his shirt.

When she gets to him, she undoes his belt while he watches her delicate fingers. He says, “Strip down.”

She goes the extra mile in yanking the belt from the loops, and runs her nails up his belly. “Like that, huh?”

His voice feels raw, “Yeah.”

She offers him that lopsided smirk that kills him, so far from femme and heart-stoppingly hot, and tells him the same thing she murmurs to people who try to cut her off on the freeway, “You’ll have to really want it.”

He runs his teeth over his bottom lip and pulls the belt from her hand. “I don’t want to fight you for it this time. I want you to let me.”

She gets a look sometimes, as if she’s distracted or listening to something only she can hear, and it’s the hair raising on your arms before lightning hits too damned close. She slides the last scraps of silk from her body, and stands there dressed only in the pink of her warming skin.
He drapes the belt around the back of her neck like a scarf, catching the ends in his fist so it’s loose like a handle.

She lets him.

He draws her in and keeps her at a certain distance, just close enough for her nipples to brush against his chest. He doesn’t kiss her, he runs his lips lightly over the skin of her neck, down her chest, circling the tightening areolae, smelling the scent of her, watching her breathing grow more impatient as he forces her to be languid beyond all reason.

When he gets back to her mouth he offers a small lick to her upper lip. The flush on her chest is so high it’s mottled and creeping up her neck.

He must telegraph the move because she doesn’t stumble, she swings around with him as he steers her back against the wall by the leather still in his hand. He’s so careful with it, has locked his fingers so two of them are in the nice open space between her throat and his fist, which he rests just below the notch where her collarbones meet.

She takes it, still except for her racing physiology as he works his way down, just barely touching her with his fingertips, the rasp of his cheek, the edge of his teeth, his breath.

Her voice is a grated whisper, “You are a wicked man.”

“Possibly.” He sinks down on his knees and brushes his hair lightly up her thighs, easing her feet apart with his other hand. He still holds her by the belt with that arm stretched upward, the only solid line of contact between them. “Probably.” He noses through damp curls and lets her feel him breathe her in. “Smart money says yes.”

Her dominant hand is clenching and opening without rhythm, a crack in the control. He wants to break that control wide open with his tongue, settling on his heels and into a meditative mindset. Before enlightenment: chop wood, eat pussy. After enlightenment: chop wood, eat pussy.

He does actually start to get the soft sense of expansion that mediation sometimes brings, which is a strange mix with the strung tension of high arousal running through him.

He’s not even sure which happens first, her gripping his forearm tight enough to bruise or him laying the flat of his tongue hard and insistent on a spot that makes her buck away from the wall. She’s panting with the inevitability of it, gathering a fistful of his hair, and then she’s shuddering and riding it out against his face so he’s not sure about breathing for a long moment.

He straightens back on his heels, coaxing her down the wall by the belt. She slides half onto his lap and catches his fist in her shaking hands, prying open his locked fingers.

He kisses her, extra slide from his wet face, the heady scent of her, soaking through hot where she’s pressed against his cock. He eases her off, and they stumble toward the bed.

He shoves her down with a hard bounce, wrecked and graceful even so, and she still has his belt draped over her shoulders, unheeded. He strips, and hooks his arms around her thighs to pull her to the edge of the bed, which is at a perfect fucking height for this, but he doesn’t line them up, just slides against her as slow as he can stand.

She gives him that look again like lightning is going to strike and then sits up, draping the leather strap around him like an untied necktie. She rides him down, pressed chest to belly, and somehow takes him inside with just a roll of her hips. “Mine.”
“Fuck.”

She’s using the belt as leverage to keep him fixed against her as she moves beneath like rough sea, teeth against his neck, tongue under his jaw, fierce whisper in his ear, “Mine.”

“God, yes,” he shoves his forearms up under her shoulders, cradling her neck as she fucks him from below and he rocks into her fervent grasp, “yours.”

~*~

Tony gives him a look halfway between amused and petulant. “Are you being punished?”

Bruce looks over his desk and benches to make sure he’s got everything from his workstation that he might need - tablet, notebook, phone, chargers. Check. He concedes, “Maybe.”

“Well,” Tony claps his hands together and rubs them, warming them up as he walks away a few steps, “Eastern Europe is lovely in the middle of fucking winter, so there’s that.”

“Thanks, Tony.”

“Bruce.” His hands drop down to his sides, but the thumbs still flick restlessly. “You don’t actually have to go.”

“Yeah, I know that,” he says, and there’s more truth on both sides than he wants to hash out with Tony. “And yeah, I do.”

Tony sets a case down in front of Bruce, the size of a trade paperback and made of brushed metal. Inside on a bed of smoke grey velvet there are five identical pieces of compact tech, each one with a small clip and a readout screen. He pulls one out and the screen flashes.

“Gamma detectors. I took some liberties with the interface, and also, you know, made them not suck.”

Bruce runs his thumb along the smooth flattened shape, which is almost organic. “Thanks.”

“You can thank me by not building things that are painful to even look at.”

~*~

Marisol hears footsteps in the living room, but keeps her eyes closed. One of the older girls is often up in the middle of the night, getting soda or water, reading, playing video games, not sleeping. When they first got here, no one much slept and there was a lot of cranky arguing. Now the watch rota has evolved into the kitchen rota, and it’s better now.

It’s close to Christmas, and they’ve even talked about getting a tree, pretending like this is a home and not just another dorm room. It’s as close as most of them are ever gonna get.

Marisol had cousins, still has them she guesses, although she’ll never go back. She’d slept in a room with all four of them, her in a sleeping bag and them in rickety bunk-beds. At Lozen, it was four to a suite. Here she just has to share with Aisha who is neat aside from the books, and lets her keep the door cracked open at night. Marisol is very good at waking up to sounds that don’t belong, and sleeping through the ones that do.

Those footsteps don’t sound familiar, don’t sound like any of the adults who occasionally come down to make sure they’re safe, or at least present. She makes herself open her eyes, then sits up
quietly in bed and reaches for her glasses.

Aisha sleeps on her back with her mouth open, and once she’s asleep she’s just not there anymore.

Even so, Marisol is always quiet when she gets out of bed at night. She finds her soft tennis shoes, her coat and her keycard, because sometimes the big girls sneak out to go to a club or eat pizza at 2 a.m. just because they’re not supposed to. Sometimes, Marisol follows them when they go.

“We test everything,” Luz had said at the beginning, as Catherine double checked entrances, exits, locking mechanisms. The big girls still treat the tower like a prison, even though they’re happy here. Happier. Breaking out is part of that. Marisol had followed because she’d wanted to see what was so great about breaking the rules, enough to break them too, but now she just likes to know they’re safe.

She sees the outline of a man at the other end of the common room, turned away, and darts through shadows to get a closer look because he isn’t one of the tutors, Captain Rogers or Dr. Banner. Those are the ones most likely to come all the way into the living room to confirm things are okay when they’re on Trust duty, though never this late at night. The man is still familiar, the line of his back as he angles sideways in front of Catherine’s bookshelf, the ambient light from the cityscape apparently enough for him read book titles.

He glides a finger along a couple of the spines, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth. Marisol recognizes him when his smile falters back into blankness, this is Creepo.

Marisol understands that there are situations where she should be scared--has in fact been scared when she was younger--but the throb of her heart at her temples doesn’t feel the same anymore, it feels like a racing engine, it brings focus and clarity and a surge of strength.

Creepo is just standing there in the midst of their messy common room, looking around like he lost something, like he isn’t getting something. He turns and heads to the elevator bank and he makes no sound at all, melting into the shadow and even getting the fire door open without sound.

Marisol is quiet, so quiet, and she knows how to not be seen even when she isn’t still, and she knows that if she can get through the same doors as he does before they close that her absence won’t be recorded and none of the robots will snitch.

The janitorial staff comes in at 4:30, if she’s back in time, she can sneak in with them.

She’s followed Creepo before, but he’s never walked with this kind of purpose. Even on the street, the guy moves more like Marisol herself than a standard New Yorker, situational awareness and plotting his trajectory. She checks that her phone is silenced, and gives him as much distance as she can. It’s a long walk, which avoids the problem of following him through the subway.

He stops at a bodega, and then goes into an apartment building on that block. Marisol gives him an hour, but he doesn’t come back out again.

**Prague is for Lovers**

Steve sits in the quinjet cargo bay with him, comfortable in his civvies, wearing the knit cap he’d been working on that clearly replicates his shield design in a muted winter palette, dusky blue star at the crown. “Nice to have you along, doc.”

Bruce isn’t really sure what to say. Hill is at the controls, Natasha in the co-pilot seat. It feels weirdly
like an awkward double date, as if they’re doing couple stuff with the neighbors. God, maybe they are.

“For the record,” Steve confides cheerfully, “I think it’s gonna be a clusterfuck, but what do I know?”

Bruce agrees, but he also sees that Steve is learning, becoming a student of complexity willing to figure it out by doing. Hill seems to be expanding a lot of his horizons, though Steve is still reassuringly terrible at reassurance. “Was that supposed to be encouraging?”

“Not really. Wanna play Twenty Questions?”

Bruce sighs.

Steve digs in his bag, pulling out a mustard yellow tupperware container. He’s taken to picking up random housewares at Salvation Army and salting them around the hyper-modern tower just to annoy Stark. He pulls open the lid, offering, “Spritz cookie?”

It’s a long flight to the Czech Republic.

They set up a base camp outside of the city in a small country house that is cold as hell, but wired for bear. With Natasha’s skills and Tony’s tech, they’re able to create a digital infrastructure to access the not-SHIELD info as well as get help from Tony via satellite if need be, plus access to the databases of local authorities—or at least that’s the plan.

Hill’s piece is to coordinate with the local and international agencies in a mostly official capacity, set up meetings and work the above board cooperative investigation piece. She’ll also be Natasha’s handler in the field, stepping into a position last occupied by Fury, and Coulson before him. Steve is here for tactics and physical support, backup if needed.

Bruce, for all her insistence that getting his analysis in real time will make a difference, is really just here to watch and learn. She wants to prove something to him.

“How is it,” Steve asks, adjusting his cap down over his ears, “that we can probably break security systems all over the Eastern Bloc—and yes, I realize it’s a dated term, but the Cold War is still pretty relevant even if I missed it—how come that’s a cakewalk but we can’t ever manage to bunk anywhere with fully functional HVAC?”

There’s a wood stove in the living room that Bruce looks at longingly. He’s got a sweater on over thermals and he runs hot at the best of times, but it really is cold as fuck in the house despite supposed radiant floor heating.

At the dining room table Natasha hacks into the local police station. Bruce isn’t sure it’s necessary, but he’s not going to point that out. He thinks it’s probably like taking a bath or reading a book or doing sudoku for other people, a bit of mindless comedown, or a way to ground herself without expending undue energy.

Maria has water coming to a boil on the stove for pasta while Steve’s putting together a salad. Bruce is cleaning and chopping the odd assortment of mushrooms they’d picked up from a roadside market. The easy domesticity at the tower is still odd when he thinks about it, but it’s become routine. Here it just reads as weird, like they’re all wearing secret faces, masquerading as two couples on a winter holiday. It makes him tense and frustrated.

He hands the mushrooms off to Hill, and Natasha turns to catch his eye, her face pale in the darkening room off the kitchen. The irritation slips away, and he thinks about turning on the light so
she can see the keyboard if she’s still working.

“We good to go?” he asks as he comes up behind her. She nods, like she appreciates that he’s trying.

Hill and Steve are murmuring off by the stove, too low to determine what language they’re using.

Bruce leans in, brushing his mouth against the side of her neck, and she reaches up to thread her fingers through his hair. She’s chilled, cold in fact, and he pulls her back against him for a moment just to warm her. “We should have a fire. Or we’re gonna freeze to death before you prove your point.”

"Go be cranky somewhere else." She shoos him back to the kitchen, where he locates plates and helps dish.

“I’ve got a condo in Bethesda,” Hill says over dinner, coding it like small talk. “It’s a pain because I’m never there anymore.”

Bruce gives Steve a look of mild betrayal but the man’s methodically intent on sopping up mushroom cream sauce with a piece of bread.

“I have to keep renting it out under the table, usually military types so I know the yard’s taken care of, keep the board off my ass. But I can’t make myself sell.”

Bruce forgets that Hill is in many ways a career military officer with a normal background, still living a relatively normal life. Her capacity to take in stride the extraordinary, to deal ruthlessly with the fallout of fundamental betrayal, was also taxed by the mundane demands of subletters and a homeowner’s association.

“I really should, but I bought it because my dad kept bugging me to invest. He’s the kind of guy who thinks if you don’t own a home, you’re throwing away money.”

“I’ve never lived in a house,” Steve adds momentum to the topic. Bruce thinks maybe Steve’s getting it back for the interference in his sex life, and curses the fact that Barton’s effectively dropped off the map, leaving him to take the brunt. “We had an apartment in Brooklyn, shared bathroom at the end of the hall, pretty standard. Then barracks and camping through Europe. Then the tower.”

“Base housing in New Mexico,” Bruce gives in, trying really hard to keep it light and not load any of this with his past, or add to the itchy need people have to speculate on his future.

Natasha carries on eating, but he can feel her focus shift to him in a way he can’t qualify.

“My aunt had a place, one of those row houses. No yard. Still, it was better than the base. Grad student housing was the same, more dorm than home. Then after...” He takes a bite of pasta.

He’d lived where he could, and he didn’t hate that: rooms and shacks and shared quarters and wide open empty space to keep him from hurting anyone. But he knows it sounds a whole lot worse out loud than he can explain away. If he feels physically safe he can, and has, slept damn near anywhere.

“I’ve never lived anywhere with it’s own entrance. I’ve never really thought of it that way.” Natasha twirls pasta around on a fork, doesn’t eat it. “Dormitories, barracks, bunkers. I’ve had tiny apartments in a dozen cities that I spent days in, maybe. Hotels. A lot of hotels.” She shrugs, “I’ve spent plenty of nights squatting in tenements, or on a cot, or sleeping on the ground. Strangely good for the back once you get used to it.”

Bruce looks at her like she might understand what he’d left unspoken, like maybe she’s already
noticed this about him because she shares it.

She grins. “For the record, a bed is always better.”

Steve nods, slow uneven smile, and Bruce lets himself give in a little to the camaraderie, the pleasure of a shared moment. The truth of it. A bed is better.

The sum total of Natasha’s quarters had fit into a corner of their bedroom closet. Her shoes alone take up more room than anything else and he knows that’s equipment, that’s costuming. Half of his own clothes are new, appearing in his closet unbidden since he took up residency in New York.

If they move, he thinks, they’ll have to figure out how to own things.

~*~

Hill and Natasha go into the city in the morning, taking the small Ford Asbo they’d rented that’s like being crammed in a clown car, leaving Bruce and Steve behind. Hill will take the official meetings while Natasha will start pushing a little harder on some of the folks that had been connected with the victims.

He and Steve are supposed to offer ground support if necessary. He’d asked Natasha what, in her professional opinion, ‘ground support’ meant. She’d said, “If someone tries to kill us, stop them.”

That was not comforting either.

There’s a beat up Land Rover that came with the house, and the plan had been to use it as the second vehicle to coordinate in the field, but the Rover was a little worse for wear. They spend the morning trying to get the engine to turn over.

“Sonofabitch--” Steve stalks away, flicking his hand and speckling a snowbank with blood.

Bruce lets him walk it off, working the socket wrench in the tight space, two clicks at a time.

“I hate to carp,” Steve’s knuckles are shredded yet again, hot pink freshly healed skin even less resistant to the sharp scallops of half rusted metal, “I just thought you’d be better at this.”

“Should’ve brought Tony instead.”

“You both build things.”

“I build theoretical models, Steve. I speculate about things that are subatomic, about the possibility involved in quantum theory, things that change at a chromosomal level. I’m not a mechanic. And do you not remember the shelves?”

"Right." Steve sucks the blood from his knuckles and digs out his phone.

"You’re calling for roadside assistance from Czechoslovakia?" On speaker Tony is both incredulous and pleased. "Send me photos. What have you tried so far?"

Steve runs down the list while Bruce pulls off grimy gloves, lowers the zip of his coat and shoves his icy fingers inside toward his armpits.

"Okay, now send me photos of Bruce. I need ’em for the wall."

Steve obliges, and Bruce braves the wind chill to flip them both off.
"JARVIS, zoom in on the battery. Well, shit, I've personally been wired to better. Hello there...you've got a supermodel pout going today, Banner. It suits you. JARVIS, current temp in Prague?"

Steve shoots Bruce a look and mouths, “He’s asking the AI in New York about the weather we’re standing in.”

Bruce shrugs and rolls his eyes.

Tony whistles. "Yeah, you're fucked gentlemen. You're suffering from a dearth of cold cranking amps. Maybe if you warmed up the engine block you might get it to turn over--just don't shut it off."

"What about Natasha's cuffs?"

Bruce is already shaking his head.

"Since you're stranded you can spend the cold dark evening explaining electricity to Stevie. Although...if you disabled the non-lethal current-interrupt, had the parts to switch out and adjust the amperage, it might be enough of a boost. As an intellectual exercise, you understand. You're better off just having the Captain steal another car."

"Borrow."

"Whatever. Thank you for calling Avengers Automobile Association. Let me know if I need to dispatch a towjet."

~*~

Radek’s parents allow her into their small home, accepting her cover, not really caring who she is. Natasha isn’t even sure they recognize her from before. They’re grieving and sluggish, nearly silent, and without much to add to either the coroner’s report that Natasha already has, or the impression she’d gotten of him in person.

He’d worked at a law firm in the city as a clerk, did part-time security. He liked to take pictures and cook, spend time with his friends and his girlfriend Dragana.

His mother shows Natasha a triptych he’d taken of Dragana in the forest, distant and staged like a folk tale, a traditional costume and modern hair and a fathomless gaze. She’s posed like she’s part of the forest, like he stumbled upon her. It’s intimate in a way that makes her uncomfortable, their youth writ so large in this portrait, his regard for her so plain in the focus of the camera.

“No family,” his mother says, tapping on the photo. “Radek always said she sprang fully formed, like a story, into the world. I think he liked the idea that he made her less alone. I don’t know if they would have lasted once he got tired of that idea. He was...” she shrugs, the grief so knotted in her shoulders that the gesture hurts Natasha to watch, “easily distracted. Fanciful about such things.”

Hardly the first young man to fall in love with someone thinking he’s rescuing her. Whole identities have been wrought to take advantage of that very impulse, and she always had to fight against her deep contempt when she betrayed them. “Who are you,” she’d think, “to believe that I needed saving? That you’re even the person to do it?”

She studies the triptych and recognizes something of that contempt in the last panel, and wonders if Radek saw it as love. There’s something else familiar in the scene and she tilts the frames, trying to get a bead on it. Maybe it’s just the same piece of forest that she’d seen on the flash drive.

“May I borrow these?” She asks, and his mother turns her face away.
“Keep them,” she says, “It doesn’t matter now.”

“I’m sorry,” Natasha says, “For your loss.”

There’s not much left to say.

~*~

For the lack of anything better to do until it gets warmer and they can try the goddamned Rover one more time, Bruce teaches Steve how to calculate amperage and shows him how to make a circuit diagram.

The precision and fine lines appeal to Steve, as does the representation of electricity and current. “When Stark first built his suit, he was hooked up to a car battery.”

Bruce nods, that’s his understanding. It’s become part of the Iron Man mythos, but he suspects, like so many things related to Tony, that the very outrageousness of the claim probably means it’s true.

Steve sketches out the circuit break, and winces. “It must have hurt.”

Bruce rubs at his hands. “I suspect it still does, even without the arc reactor.”

Steve tries to work through how the electricity powers Natasha’s bites and the new light sticks, but stalls out at the circular current. While he’s heard Tony muttering for hours to JARVIS about their structure, could probably fix them if they broke, it’s not his field. Natasha invented them and it’s probably a better idea for her to walk Steve through the tech if he still cares later.

They eat lunch, and Steve finally gives in to carp that he’s missing rehearsal to sit around in a fucking igloo waiting for something to do.

“Rehearse here or stop bitching,” Bruce gestures. The living room is big enough, and he’s also bored, and not above pushing Steve. They’ve spent a lot of time learning how to ride out each other’s pissiness.

He doesn’t expect Steve to take him up on it, but finds himself counting out a 3/4 beat so Captain America can get his groove on.

~*~

Dragana definitely remembers her. She answers the door like she’s been hiding in the apartment since Natasha left. Her hair is dirty, eyes sunken into her face, anger at the surface like a shield over her grief. The flat smells of cigarettes and old food. It’s not how Natasha imagined the young, assertive woman living.

“What do you want?” she says. “I was already at the polizei this morning. Some American woman was there asking questions. I’ve answered all the questions.”

Her voice is rising. Natasha aims to soothe.

“She’s my colleague. We have different approaches to the problem. She’s gathering a baseline of information. I doubt we’ll ask the same questions.”

Dragana is not soothed. She insists on seeing Natasha’s battered badge again, takes in her boots, the tight dark jeans, sleek parka and good bag and all the other trappings of a well-bribed official that Natasha is laden with, and launches into a diatribe against the local police and their disinterest in
finding Radek’s killer.

Natasha holds up a hand to stop her. “Can I come in? I don't want you to lose all your heat with the door open.”

The house is neat in spite of the lingering stale smell. Dragana lights a cigarette and opens a small window, and the whole front room gets a hazy choking filter of light and air and smoke. It’s started to snow again.

“He must have seen something that night,” she says, holding the smoke like she wants the acrid taste to linger, exhales. “But no one will check with the industrial oversight committee, or take readings in the groundwater. They just act like it’s a fluke, like there’s no chance that Radek knew something about illegal waste or pollution. Like the fucking company couldn’t be doing anything wrong.”

She looks at Natasha, and her gaze is icy. “He was somewhere he shouldn’t have been, otherwise he’d still be here. With me.” She stabs the cigarette into the ashtray in her lap. “So the questions is, are you going to believe me, or you just here to pretend as well?”

Natasha knows this can’t be the result of some industrial dumping, poisoned waters. But that doesn’t mean that there isn’t anything to be learned.


Natasha takes down the names of local environmentalists, politicians and bureaucrats who Dragana loads with blame, and mostly tries to get a bead on Dragana herself. She’s moving between English and Czech during the conversation, but there’s still something a little off about her pronunciation. Natasha’s fake ID gives her a Moscow home base, representing an international agency. She doesn’t want to pretend too much in case she’s recognized.

Natasha mostly speaks in English, but layers a Moscow accent onto passable schoolgirl Czech just to see if the girl gets careless, lets something slip with the assumption that Natasha understands less than she does. Her own Czech is, in fact, flawless, but it’s an easy way to get a mark to relax. She’s found that it works just as well in soft interrogations, and gives her something to focus on aside from the raw ugliness of grief, the way it shades even innocence with menace, makes sincerity hard to parse.

Natasha has brought the triptych of photos with her, curious to see if the girl can give her any insight that will help her recognize whatever is niggling her about the photos.

The laugh that breaks from Dragana’s throat is as raw as the grief that knotted up Radek’s mother. “Oh god,” she says. “Those photos. I can’t believe he gave them to his mother.”

She takes a risk. “I have a drive full of photos that I think he took,” she says. “I think they might have been taken in the same location.”

Dragana pauses to think, then shrugs. “Possibly. There’s a hunting cabin out there that we’d go to sometime. I used to have flatmates, and he lived with his parents. We wanted privacy, you know?”

Natasha nods, “Of course.”

“He wanted me to be Gretel, Vasilisa, he wanted to photograph a girl lost in the forest. He borrowed a costume from his cousin who was in a bunch of Miss Czech Republic pageants when she was younger. I felt ridiculous, but it made him happy.”

“That sounds kind of...fanciful for a potential lawyer.”
Dragana sighs, and takes the photos into her lap, lights another cigarette. “His parents wanted him to be a lawyer. He liked things like this,” she gestures to the photo. “Fairy stories. Radek wanted to be an old Bohemian, a child of the revolution. I used to tell him that we escaped from the witch in the forest. I think it turned him on.”

“We?”

“My sister and I.”

“His parents thought you didn’t have any family.”

“We were orphans. People took us in, but it’s not the same as family. And they weren’t always...kind.” She waves, dismissive and the smoke trails and drifts like it was holding the thought. “He wanted his mother to think of me like that, an orphan. A lost princess.” She takes another drag and her voice is quavery but it’s hard to tell if the emotion is rage or loss or a combination of both. “He wanted to be my family. What do you say to that?”

Natasha wants to push, ask about her sister, the photos, the woods they were shot in but she can tell from the way that Dragana stubs out her cigarette that they’re done. She may get another chance to circle back if she needs to, if she leaves gracefully now.

Dragana rises and walks her to the door. “He was a good man, if a little ridiculous,” she says. “I loved him. We were going to marry.” Her voice gets higher, a little faster. “He deserves to have some justice.”

It’s a strange phrase, and Natasha stalls in the doorway, wanting Dragana a little unsettled, shaken. There has to be more, something that will give her insight into this dead man and his flights of fancy, camera chip hidden in his lighter and meeting a gory end in the woods he’d been taking pictures of. But the girl is growing ever more anxious for her to leave.

The coat hanging on the rack next to the door catches Natasha’s eye. It’s black, a lush wool, this season’s designer work. Far, far too expensive for a clerk living in an efficiency she’s had to share with roommates. Extra income from somewhere then, likely on a cash basis. Natasha lingers just a few more moments, until Dragana turns pointed, “I’m tired. I have a headache. Can you go?”

Natasha leaves her card, again. Hopes not to hear from her.
Chapter 11

Everyone Hates Prague Rock

Natasha gets the first flurry of bickering over comms as she walks towards the car park in the city center. Steve has his in, but Bruce’s voice is only in the background.

Holding her phone up as cover, she says with a false smile on her face, “So I take it you two are still trapped?”

“It's just so cozy here, it's hard to leave.” Cap is working on subtle sarcasm during missions.

“Battery's useless.” Bruce sounds more frankly peeved when he comes onto his own comm, tersely outlining the dead Rover situation. It’s possible she has underestimated just how much he doesn’t want to do this.

"Maria will have the full lab and intel reports released to you soon, in case you get bored.”

"Well, at least there's that."

"The girlfriend gave me some names, I’m gonna run those down this afternoon."

Her mind supplies the visual of thumbs digging against his brow to go with his sigh, his worried tone, the fact that Steve has gone quiet. "Call us if you need to, we'll bite the bullet and send Cap in a cab or something. I know you want to be low key, but fuck it."

“Just Cap?”

“I’m going to be busy here at the cottage doing all that Science I couldn’t possibly have done in a fully-equipped lab in New York via satellite link.”

“Well-played.”

“Be safe.”

She thinks she may have also underestimated his sense of vulnerability. She’s conflicted herself, both frustrated by his dug-in heels and comforted by his very pissiness. Most people are so easy to persuade it’s no fun; Bruce has always called her on it, made her work at it.

She stabs a button on the keyfob, hearing the faint chirp down the block. She does a quick sweep and sees no one looks interested in her car unlocking.

She’d wanted him to see how much of field work was tedious investigation, poking and prodding and shit-stirring. Or rather that it was the larger component. Plenty of her missions had been wet work, interrogations, or plain thievery. But mostly, they were subtle explorations of human vulnerabilities and secrets. She knows he hates to see her undercover, working an identity; that it makes him feel in some deep way that he’s losing pieces of her to that identity, that she slips away and doesn’t come back.

It cuts at her, seeing that fear on his face. It’s fear of the transformation of someone he knows into someone else, a mirror of the inexplicable, painful change which leaves him with only scraps of memories and a deep sense of dread.
But she owns in full every memory she creates these days, knows the heart of where her false identities lie. She thinks he can too, if he'll only learn to trust it. Trust her with those things.

He thinks that his monster can’t handle his fear. But she knows that he can, that they both can. She sees it every time he transforms, the subtle cues and clues, the Hulk’s willingness to follow the protocols, the evidence of control that he offers to her as green shudders back into tan.

The other types of shivery control that she and Bruce pass back and forth.

He trusts her with so much, but he’s still reluctant to trust her with this. And the absurd thing with the house has lack of trust written all over it.

~*~

Bruce gets up to stretch his legs, generate some heat. He’s wearing his transformation-ready track pants layered under his jeans, because while the house was almost livable when there was weak sun coming in the windows, it’s now three in the afternoon and getting on towards dusk. He thinks about putting on another sweater.

He's been going through the reports Maria secured on two more bodies found in small border towns, not reported to INTERPOL. The autopsies had been covered up, but Maria’s subtle wheedling and calling in favors had managed to unearth them. That kid -- he has a name, Bruce reminds himself, Radek Jezek -- whatever had happened to him had been done to these others, five in all.

And it made no sense. There was nothing to be gained from what had been done, no knowledge or benefit, just an elaborately arrived at corpse that was then poorly disposed of.

Steve is conferring with Natasha on his commlink and plowing through a mixing bowl of cereal. He’s been eating constantly, which he says he only does if he’s cold. Or healing. Or bored.

Bruce took out his commlink again a few hours ago, because he doesn’t speak Czech, but he finds her voice deep in his ear distracting in a way they should definitely explore back in New York when they aren’t on duty. She can get a hold of him through Steve if need be.

He’s proceeded to watch Captain America demolish several boxes of Mysli na zdraví (Health Muesli, the flavor translated as 'think buckwheat honey') a second tupperware container of spritz cookies (this one avocado green with yellow daisies) the rest of the pasta, and a loaf of bread methodically dismantled and slathered with raspberry preserves. Since they came in for lunch.

Steve shrugged off the suggestion of adding more layers, and Bruce wonders if he’s trying to replace the busted radiant heating by burning through a pantry full of carbohydrate. For something to do.

“We’re going to break into a photo lab?” He sounds wary, but he puts the bowl down like something interesting is finally happening.

“Do they even have photo labs anymore?” Bruce asks.

Steve shrugs as he relays the question, then the answer, “Apparently for digital printing? Commercial applications, fabrication.”

“3-d printing?”

Steve relays and nods.

Bruce roots through the refrigerator, which might be warmer inside than the kitchen itself. He pulls
out a small wheel of cheese and a big chunk of something that smells like smoked liverwurst.

It is possible that something fabricated on a 3-d machine could be housing the gamma wave generator. It’s an interesting theoretical puzzle - using computer modeling instead of machining would mean a smaller space would be required and it could be replicated without a lot of monitoring of the pattern. It’s potentially a lead.

Natasha apparently went away because now Steve’s kicked back in the armchair with his Power Frown, and his feet on the coffee table. Bruce hands him the plate and adds another log to the fire, two versions of the same action. “Breaking and entering?”

“Her exact words were, ‘Clint and I do it all the time.’”

“She’s fucking with you.”

“You don’t think they break into things on missions?”

“Oh, no, I’m sure they break into…” he shakes his head with a sigh, “all kinds of things. I’m equally sure that’s on our agenda for tonight. But she’s also teasing you.”

Steve is silent for a long time, packing away the liverwurst, and then he finally speaks in his team leader voice. “Does it ever worry you,” he says, “that she and Barton act like they can’t get caught?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce says, aware that’s not exactly how it is with those two, but trying to be honest with the man who’s charged with leading them all into life and death situations. “I think they understand the risks. I’m just not sure it matters that much to them.”

He can practically hear Steve process all this through the complicated relationship he has with Natasha and her decisions, with how much he likes her, and how frustrating he finds the lines she draws because they delineate gray spaces Steve can’t always allow himself to see.

Steve moves on to the chunk of cheese, shifting gears. “The first thing you’ll need to buy for that house is a couch. A good couch really makes a difference in a room.”

No, Bruce thinks, the first thing they’ll buy is a bed, something indulgent and comfortable because that’s the point of the endeavor. Knowing where you close your eyes at night, where you’ll wake up and with whom. But that’s getting ahead of yourself, isn’t it Banner? You don’t even know if she’s looking for anything more than to share your suite, park her shoes in your nearly-empty closet, and hang out on your fluffy living room rug because the sofa is stylish but only good for fucking.

“The only good couch in the tower is mine,” Steve muses. “Big enough to nap on, comfortable, perfect shade of blue for the room, really ties it all together. Stark wouldn’t know a good couch if it bit him in the ass.”

“They have their uses.” Bruce is thinking in terms of height adjustment, leverage, easy cleaning. He kind of wants to ask Steve if he’s taken these things into consideration with his perfect couch. Instead he asks, “How’s Spanish class...coming?”

It always makes him feel better to see Steve blush like a sunburn.

~*~

“I can stay here and monitor your activities through the commlink.” Bruce distractedly scratches along his jawline, rasp of fingernails through several days of stubble, longer than he usually lets it go.
“Look, if we find anything related to the experimentation--”

"That's why all of us have gamma detectors, to monitor and limit exposure."

"I'm talking equipment, lab set-up; you'll recognize it, know how to handle it." She wants his brain there, wants him seeing what is and isn't there, not just gathering intel but experience in what that gathering looks like, the ponderous reality of it.

"If you find a container built with lead bricks, don't open it. Don't press any buttons. Anything else, send me a photo. Describe it."

Steve is watching them, bright eyed and focused, but Maria is looking anywhere but at them.

“Coverage is shitty, plus, I fully expect this to be underground. There’s more to the building than you can see from outside.”

“So you think it’s a good idea to put me underground with potentially dangerous equipment, potential danger to all of you?” He’s got a mutinous look on his face, and it isn’t doing anything to dissuade her from arguing.

“Look, I don’t think it’s potentially dangerous, or there’s no way I would have brought any of you.”

“Really, Romanoff?” Steve says, “that’s news to me.”

Before she can reply, Steve backs down with a wry gesture of appeasement, because Bruce is giving him a glare as threatening as her own.

“I’ll be in the car, as backup.” Bruce turns back to her, softening just enough that it almost sounds like negotiation again, “If you find anything I need to see, I’ll be right there.”

In the end, she takes Steve to break into the printing house while he and Hill wait in the Asbo around the block.

~*~


“I hate you all,” he says.

“No, I get it. Sure it’s Manhattan, but you’re living in Stark’s giant metal tower with a flight deck off the glans.”

Bruce’s chuckle makes a cloud of frozen vapor in front of him. “You kiss Captain America with that mouth?”

“He still brushes his teeth with salt and baking soda.” Maria gives him a sly look and calls his bluff. “He tastes like pretzels. What’s Romanoff say about the house thing?”

“Not much.” He answers truthfully enough.

“She can be reserved.” Maria slowly nods as they both stare at the alley entrance leading to the photo lab. “What did she do when you told her?”

Bruce thinks about her quiet, “You want a house?” and how in that moment he thought he could actually take it back, swallow the words whole. Pretend he didn’t have a wall of photos in his mind of what that would be like with her, a safe place, somewhere to return to, just for them, a sacred
space set aside for this thing they have when the two of them touch.

He shrugs his collar close up by his ears and Maria turns to look at him, curious. She mutters, “You’re a tangled little ball of string, aren’t you, Banner? No wonder.”

Then she runs the car for a few minutes to cycle some warmth. It’s not ten minutes later that Steve and Natasha come barreling out of the building and dive into the backseat.

“Go,” Natasha yells, “Just go!”

An explosion shatters the air around them as Maria floors the little Ford and they take off out of town.

“It’s possible,” Natasha adds, as Steve pinches the bridge of his nose and Bruce stares at them over the back of the seat, “that the situation was more dangerous than I had postulated.”

“Well,” Maria says, “they know we’re in Prague now.”

Frottage at the cottage

The thing about spies, which Bruce finds sociopathic in the best possible way, is that the world is a deck of cards they’re constantly playing solitaire with.

So Maria not only has a twisty getaway route waiting in her head–likely one of several–after fifteen minutes of driving with no indication of a tail, she stops the car near a full-service butcher shop and takeaway counter, and comes out laden with roast pork belly, sausages, a couple meatloaves and whatever the guy at the counter thought would go with.

Because she also had a plan in her back pocket for dinner–likely one of several.

Steve has the pile of food on his lap and it smells so good it’s hard not to reach around and wrench it away.

“There wasn’t a damned thing in that basement,” he says.

“Well,” Natasha interjects, still sounding giddy and a little adrenaline high, “except for charges and a smiley face made of plastique.”

Steve’s answering, “Sure, except that,” is an object lesson in pissiness.

The house is still a meat locker, so cold that they just build up the fire and tear through the food while it’s still warm. Everyone’s quiet, their strategy all talked out in the car including assigning watch.

Bruce shares first watch with Natasha, in no hurry to head up to the arctic bedroom. Last night it had taken a good ten minutes of shivering to warm up the duvet, so Bruce has brought it down to get a head start, sitting on the lukewarm floor close to the fire to thoroughly toast himself.

Maria and Steve have disappeared upstairs to their own room until they take over after midnight, splitting the long dark night in half. He waits for Natasha to finish her beer, thinking that the alcohol won’t make a difference in unwinding her, but that she’s after the placebo effect, the ritual of it.

It’s not that different from the way they sprawl on the accent rug in Bruce’s suite, except huddled closer due to the cold.

She’s leaned up against the couch, sitting on one of its cushions. Bruce leans back against her, the
duvet drifted around them like a snowbank. “If it were you and Clint here, and you’d just blown up a building…”

“We didn’t blow it up. It was set to go off.”

“Well that makes all the difference, then.” She jabs a thumb into his ribs in protest, but he just takes her hand and slips it under his sweater, twitching at the chill shock but willing to warm her up. “But if it were?”

“I don’t know. Regroup, assess, drink a little, play cards. Make a new plan.”

He knows he won’t like the answer, but he asks anyway, “And if you were here alone?”

“I’d make sure whoever set those charges knew it had been me in the building. I’d make myself obvious enough to be found.” She lays a little emphasis on the last, “I’d force them to make that mistake.”

Bruce doesn’t point out yet again that she’d be taking a risk alone that she wouldn’t take with backup. Lately, topics like those have gone right up to the edge of argument and veered off sharply into sex, and by unspoken agreement they’ve been treating this whole jaunt as on-duty. So when the quiet crackle of the fire is punctuated by occasional creaks from the ceiling, he assumes it’s the house shifting in the cold.

He’s begun to drift, watching the fire and going over the forensic evidence in his head. There really isn’t any purpose he can find, no knowledge to be gained from pulsing that much gamma through five people so far. Not even retribution. While it may be as brutal as a slow motion stroke of lightning through each of your cells, it kills pretty quickly and only leaves a hot coagulated mess to deal with.

Unless your target lucked out in their de novo germline mutations because their sire was a brilliant careless mess inside the lab and out. Then they had a chance of walking away, on the opposite of little cat feet. None of these people had any chance of walking away, and it’s the uselessness that’s starting to get to Bruce.

Natasha shifts behind him and offers out of the blue, voice a little thready, “We could turn on some music.” She’s already reaching for the remote to the sound system, which unlike the heat actually works.

“Hmm? No, I was just thinking.”

“Maybe think a little louder?”

He half turns with a questioning look but the answer comes the moment he makes eye contact--a desperate male groan from upstairs, echoing in the winter silence.

“It’s been going on for a while, but we’ve reached the point where music is called for.”

He licks his lips and breaks eye contact, “Clint owes me a twenty.”

~*~

Steve’s color is remarkably high when they swap for second watch, but Maria seems unfazed. Spies.

The duvet is warm, and it helps a little, although their room is still freezing. Natasha keeps her socks on, which Bruce knows she hates. They’re both a little worked up, keyed up, attempted larceny and
explosions and Steve finally getting some for the record.

But there’s nothing wrong with the anticipation, letting it buzz under his skin, or the feeling of her body against his, warm and soft and solid, reassuring for all his running fears and tension and internal doubt. She pulls his arm tight around her, threading her fingers through his and it soothes something in him.

It’d be more soothing, however, if she’d stop squirming.

He slips their joined hands under her shirt, spanning her belly and pulls her a little tighter, trying to get her to stop. Or maybe to squirm more. He’s honestly undecided, until she pulls her knees up a little and squirms back with a little more intent.

“Alright,” he says, mouth against her ear. He nudges the back of her knee, and she turns a bit, catching his calf with her foot and tangling their legs together.

“So what would you do if you were trapped in a safe house, knowing the others were fucking their brains out? Could hear you, if you were inclined to do the same? Do you stay professional? Go to sleep? Read a book? Pretend it isn’t happening?”

“In a professional capacity?” That thready tone is back, and she rocks against him a little. Curves her arm up to wrap her hand around the back of his neck, fingers tangling in his hair.

“Maybe?”

“Or from past experience?”

He moves his hand up, brushing against the undersides of her breasts and says, “I don’t think I want to know the answer to that. So we’ll pretend the answer is moot.”

She laughs, low and lush. “So the question is, do I just give in and get off? Or ignore it, try to get some sleep?”

“Mmm.”

“Hmmmm, it depends. How desperate am I?”

He’s drawing patterns on her skin now, looping figure eights that keep expanding, grazing up between her breasts, down over her belly to slide along the band of her loose pants.

“Well, someone did try to blow you up. That tends to make people kind of desperate.” He brushes his lips along her jaw, breathes in against her neck. So achingly sweet, chilled but warming quickly.

He still hasn’t shaved, so he’s careful with the extra friction as he glides his lips along her skin, noses into the hair behind her ear, rides out her shiver of pleasure. “Does get the adrenaline going.”

He slips his fingers under the waistband, now tracing loops of infinity through her curls. She tucks her head into the crook of his neck, scooting more onto her back and pulling up her knee. He’s hardening against her thigh.

“I think, as a professional, I’d have an obligation. To work off the adrenaline. To make sure my hands were steady. For the good of the mission.”

“You’d have to be quiet,” he says, soothingly petting the lips of her cunt, lightly dragging his fingertips along the wetness where she’s parting for him. “Keep it secret. Not get caught. You’re no
amateur.”

“I can be quiet,” she breathes.

“Prove it,” he murmurs and slides his fingers down, slipping against her clit in a slow, agonizingly deliberate circle. She arches her back, and stays silent as he works her, slow and careful, whispering into her ear. She shifts so she’s laying more on him than off, freeing up his other arm to wrap around her, thumb stroking over her mouth. She grips his forearm as her hips roll, taking his thumb between her teeth and her lips, sucking on the flesh and he can feel it through his whole body, straight into his cock as he bucks against her.

He’s stopped whispering, distracted by the soft wet sound of what he’s doing to her.

He feels how close she is, how her control is slipping just a little. He knows how much she wants to cry out, how much she’d rather turn around, straddle his hips, slide him inside of her. But he keeps her still.

“You don’t want anyone to hear;” he says, and there’s a shake in his own whisper. He can feel her whimper, almost audible, but she stays as quiet as she can, soft, panting noises through her nose, her mouth wrapped around his thumb, teeth sharp, tongue along the curve where it meets his palm, and she’s so sweet, so wet as she breaks, pushing her foot flat against the bed, hips thrusting, and she shudders against him, clenching around his fingers inside her.

He rides the come down with her, occasional slide pulling another squeeze from her, echoed by his own twitch where he’s lined up, hard, along her ass.

She rolls off of him on to her knees, breath ragged, and does straddle him then, rocking against his cock, layers masking the dampness, but not the heat, her mouth against his, pulling his hair as he tugs her down to him, kissing her, drowning in her taste and her desire.

She pulls back, flushed and glassy, running her thumb over his bottom lip. There’s a look on her face, wicked and lovely and he wants to give in to all the sentimentality running through him, amped up by the worry and the danger, but she doesn’t give him a chance.

She frames his face with her hands and kisses him with this slow heat that kills him, and then slides down his body, stripping him down enough to free his cock, and then he’s in her mouth, her tongue and lips, so deep his whole body contracts as she works him, takes him into her throat, sliding back, circling. She puts a hand on his belly as she strokes his balls with careful, clever fingers and he knows that the same rules apply. Quiet. Stay silent, stay contained.

The imposed boundaries roll through him, intense and desperate. He sucks the taste of her from his fingers, bucking up into her hands and mouth. Breathe through the nose, take in the perfume of her, don’t make a sound.

She knows him, knows his silence is impossible past a certain point and she pushes him hard past it and then rises up to kiss him as he groans, tongue delicate behind his teeth as she fists his cock.

He can taste himself in her mouth, mingling with her in his own and she’s stroking her tongue relentless like that’s how she’s fucking him, and he lays his hand over hers to make it slow and thorough, thrusting into both their hands as she takes all of his sounds into her mouth and he spills over their fingers.

She lets him go, still kneeling over him, and then her mouth starts to twitch, and that grin he loves breaks out. She looks at her hand and then the cold floor and she starts to laugh.
He can see the thought process as she looks back at him, calculating whether she can convince him to get up for a towel, and he can’t contain himself anymore either. He pulls her down onto him and starts to laugh against her neck as she wriggles his pants back up his hips and wipes her hand on them. He returns the favor and she shrugs, rolling to tuck herself back up against him.

“So much for quiet,” he says.
Prague is for Haters

Dragana calls Natasha in the morning, wanting to meet for coffee as early as possible. Maria got the Rover to crank but not catch, so they either all go or end up with the same situation as yesterday, and she’s not interested in having two of her team holed up in a house practicing Christmas ballets and demolishing the pantry.

Everyone’s a little quieter than normal this morning, whether from the illicit getting off - she’s not tempted to tease Steve, but Maria is another matter entirely - or simply from the residual reminder of nearly getting blown up. It seems a lot more real this morning. The first news cycle had attributed it to a gas main leak. But they had also reported a body found in a closet in the basement, one that they hadn’t run across in the quick search before discovering the timers and not a damn thing else.

Natasha recognizes the name from the staff roster. A biochemist, head of research and development, recently retired. He’d apparently been an investor in the printing lab back when it did large scale press and digital work, and had bankrolled the transition to 3-d modeling that the business was undertaking.

She decides to send Maria and Bruce to the morgue to learn more about the body, and Steve to the local television station. They’ll regroup later, after Maria and Bruce visit the district surveyor’s office to get topographical maps. She’s planning to meet them there.

“What am I supposed to tell them,” Steve asked, “If they ask why I’m there?”

“Why you’re there or why Captain America is there?”

He blinks peevishly.

“Wear a hat, borrow Bruce’s glasses and just charm a PA to get any footage they might have that we can review and find out if there’s anything they know they haven’t reported. See if anyone’s making connections. Sometimes reporters get stuff that police don’t because they aren’t invested in the outcome.”

“And if they recognize me?”

“Tell them it’s classified.”

“Reporters love secrets. They’ll just push harder.”

Natasha raises her eyebrow. “In my experience, they love the idea of a scoop more. And you hunting around after anything is a bigger scoop than a gas main leak. They’ll trade. Then make something up. Announce an illicit affair with Tony Stark, or your desire to raise bull mastiffs and retire to Spain.”

“God you’re mean.”

“You have no idea,” she says.

~*~

Their trip to the morgue was proving pointless. The coroner was behind on finding a cause of death.
and could only give them speculation. The body had been badly charred by the fire, even hidden in a
closet. However, a nasty flu was working it’s way through the building and had made everyone short
on staff. The body wasn’t going anywhere, and they were going to have to wait.

They’d been walking out of the morgue basement, debating Bruce offering up his services to help
the coroner catch up when Maria had shoved him into a supply closet. They only needed to get close
enough to measure the gamma radiation coming off the body, so her plan was to wait until the
coronor and his sole assistant broke for lunch.

Spies, he thinks with not a little residual bitterness. It is not a large, nor a comfortable closet. His
favorite. Maria had then proceeded to poke holes in his composure like her way of dealing with
bored and aggrivated and tired was to tease the dragon.

"You should push her about the house,” she says. “You’re going to have to hash out location as well
as style, and I’m guessing your insurance will be a fortune with whatever safety mods you’ll have to
make, which is going to influence budget and financing…”

“This is not a topic I’m discussing with you again,” he says. “I’m done. Done. Besides, it’s none of
your business.”

“Pshh. Plus, you’re both my business. Romanoff more than you, I guess, historically, but now?
Yeah. Both of you.”

He rolls his eyes. "I regret ever letting you people know I can get annoyed."

"How is this my fault?" María shifts to face him, all knees because she can fold up into a small space
but she's still a tall woman. "Besides, living in urban India told us that--the car horns alone made me
homicidal."

He bristles at the casual mention of years of surveillance, but upon reflection appreciates her
frankness. "Don't think you know me, though."

"Fair enough. I still bet we know the Other Guy better than you do." She forestalls his reply, "All
three of us bet that."

"You shouldn't have."

"Here's the thing," she begins, but pauses to unzip her jacket, "Jesus Banner, you put out a ton of
heat. Thing is, we have you at a disadvantage, because we're not blacked out when he's at bat."

He pulls himself tighter to keep from overheating the tiny space, though the temp isn't bothering him.
"I get flashes. Dreamlike."

"Do you ever look at the footage? Read the debriefs?" Maria becomes incredulous at his non-answer
of an answer. "Come on, man, I made Stark write a whole stand-down report for nothing?"

"Why would Stark write a report?" His arms unfold and he straightens away from the wall. "Why
would he need to?"

Maria soberes and gets quiet, "Bruce, I want you to really listen to me. It's my professional opinion, as
someone who's worked with both of you in the field, that your willful ignorance is the greater
liability here. Do with that what you will."

He pauses a moment, to give the impression that her words sunk in, and to his annoyed chagrin it's
harder to dismiss them than he expects.
She watches him fidget for a long moment. “Seriously, the Hulk can take direction, be part of the team.”

He knows this. They’ve practiced, field-tested and he remembers the feeling of acting with purpose. Not always the actions, but the intent. “So Stark found me in Denton, I presume. Carried me back once I’d spent the rage taking down the shield generators.”

“Cool story. Too bad it’s wrong.” Maria is the kind of spy who would not only serve you poisoned macaroons, but would freshen up your tea and dish about the neighbors as you ate your fill. “Our boy Tony shucked himself out of the Hulkbuster and talked him down personally. Because we needed you. The Hulk gave you back when we asked.”

Bruce can feel it sometimes, like he’s wearing someone else’s skin, when there’s a stirring of interest or activity, when his two halves overlap. But that’s different from thinking the Hulk can be controlled. The Other Guy is a human monster, with a mind of his own. And humans are unpredictable. “Have you been taking lessons from Barton? Or maybe Tony? How to be obnoxiously pushy in a contained space in four easy steps?”

“Steve, actually. He works out his questionable team dynamic issues in his sleep. It’s kind of sweet.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “I feel like I should ask what your intentions are on that front,” he says, deflecting, because the frailty of humans just makes him worried, leads him to darker places than he wants to go on this bright, cold morning. And he needs to distract himself from the fact he’s hiding in a closet. “But I don’t really want to know the details.”

“He’s got a spectacular ass, he’s a hero and a leader, and a genuinely good man,” she says, thoughtful.

There’s something about contained spaces and life-threatening situations that are great for confessions. But mostly he thinks Maria just doesn’t really deal in avoidance. Her straightforwardness is as much a mask as Natasha’s small, deadly smile that looks like reticence and always portends damage.

“I like him a great deal. I respect and admire him.”

She’s still trying to disarm him. You live with a spy, you learn a few things or you never get a vote on dinner. “That all sounds terribly formal.”

“He’s also a crank.”

Bruce laughs at that. It’s one of his favorite things about Steve, actually. “But?” He’s genuinely curious, and not above the gossip.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. He’s not someone I can see being messy with, bickering or buying furniture.”

“He’s got a specific design aesthetic,” Bruce agrees, knowing that’s not the point. “And he could probably haul the couch home on his back.”

She ignores the deflection. “I can’t imagine kissing him in public. Making a scene, even if I wanted to, good or bad.”

It hadn’t occurred to him that she would be looking for that for herself. Bruce thinks with a little chagrin that he’s always thought of Maria as someone who handles other people’s tantrums and scenes.
She shrugs. “I look at you and Romanoff, Thor--what Pepper deals with--and I don’t think I want to be in love with a goddamned superhero. You’re all exhausting. But I like him. I enjoy liking him.”

Bruce sits with that. Says slowly, “Does Steve know?”

She looks at him hard, contained, a leader in her own right. “He’s waiting for something that’s never gonna come around,” she says. “He doesn’t need to know the specifics.”

“He’s tougher than he looks,” he says.

“That’s part of the problem,” she says. “Now go check the corridor before I boil to death.”

~*~

Dragana is waiting for her at one of the tables outside the small cafe. There’s a heating lamp, but inside would still be preferable.

“I found some more photos,” she says. “From that shoot. I thought they might help you figure out what you were seeing.”

She’s washed her hair at least, made an effort, although she’s still chain-smoking, and is on her second coffee. Natasha orders from the shivering waitress, and looks at the photos Dragana hands her.

They don’t offer up much aside from confirming that Radek had been pursuing his photography habit more vigorously than before. He’d learned to develop his own film, going lomo and analog, but had shot a bunch of digital photos in the forest a few days before he died, trees stripped of bark, and odd markings.

“I got them from his friends at university,” she says. “The lot of them, all convinced that GenyCo was dumping chemicals. Blbec. Who cares what they do? No one. And a bunch of stupid children playing at caring aren’t going to make a difference. They don’t know how to make a difference.”

It turns out his friends were all hoping Radek had shot evidence of potential environmental degradation, but according to the biologist they’d consulted, it was just evidence of pine beetles.

“Thank you,” she says to Dragana. “We’re still looking into the other leads you gave me.”

She shakes her head. “You should talk to Radek’s professor, the one who got him started in all this. He taught environmental law, used to work for a big pharmaceutical company in the U.S. Came back home to teach at university. They all worshiped him there. He’ll know more about why Radek was so upset. I’d stopped listening months ago.”

She stabs out her cigarette, and there’s a feverishness to her movements. She’s very young and very alone, in a way that reminds Natasha of Steve, like she’s displaced in time somehow. There’s none of the young, brash frankness she remembers from that first meeting. If that girl had been Gretel, she’d been Gretel fat and happy and safe from the witch. This girl looks trapped in the house, the fire at her feet. She’s barely older than Ameena, and there’s a similar flatness, a vivid hopelessness.

Natasha puts her hand on the girl’s wrist, trying to radiate cool compassion and feeling something a little deeper, surprising herself. “Are you alright, truly? I don’t know if there’s anything I can do, but I could try. Is there anyone you want me to call? Your sister? A friend?”

Dragana jerks her hand away like she’s been burned, looking at her wrist, but there’s more confusion than anything else in her gaze. “You were there. Before he died, and I just thought...I don’t know
why I care. But I loved him and I thought seeing you might help.” She shakes her head. “It doesn’t, but I can’t seem to stop myself. Go talk to Anton. He...I’m sure he’ll know something that I don’t.”

She stands up, shoulders her bag, leaves Natasha staring at the photos, sipping her coffee. She returns a few minutes later to put a card on the table, for a gallery.

“He had an exhibition here, some of his stuff is still up.” The register of her voice is halfway between choked and furious. “He was so proud.”

She leaves without saying anything else and Natasha just flips the card back and forth in her hands. Photos, rumors, activists and bodies. Labs and gamma and forests. They don’t go together in any logical way, nor in any non-linear, deconstructed manner. Natasha is very good at seeing patterns, but the only pattern spinning here is one that feels like they’re being lead a chase for no particular reason.

Coordinates, and old files, and destroyed labs and dead bodies, and not a goddamned pattern of behavior amongst them beyond destruction.

The deep sense of wrong that had brought her back here is starting to get worse and she regrets bringing the others. Prague had seemed like a starting place, and now it’s starting to feel like a trap. She decides to head back out to the warehouse from Kudrin’s files, see if a little more ambiguity could ramp up her irritation full scale, shift the context a little.

It doesn’t look like anyone’s been there since she was last, and it’s still a warehouse full of easily imagined horrors and empty of real clues.

She walks the upper floor carefully, shining a high-powered beam along the walls, up into the ceiling, down through cracks and into corners, finds little more than a repeating set of marks that could be repetitive wear from a machine or instrument, or could be someone making a count. She kneels, takes photos from several different angles, starts to see patterns along the wall at a height that, by her measurement, could have accommodated army cots.

So far, she has no real proof that the Red Room legacy is tied to this, but she knows it. Like she knows that this warehouse had been used for something vile. She doesn’t need proof, but she does need it to make sense.

It could be a case of projecting context onto the situation, but she can see Kudrin in this place. She knows it like she knew bad things were happening in Denton the moment she saw the building specs for the school, although she got to this place a decade too late to prevent the damage that Kudrin had wrought. The girls who made these marks are likely long dead.

She parks the Asbo in the community square lot, and meets Steve outside the TV station. “I’m starving,” he says, so she buys him pastry and coffee and asks again why he didn’t bother to change any Euros.

“Didn’t think I’d want to buy anything,” he says. She feeds him a ham sandwich an hour later as they walk to the law school. She calls Professor Schechter on the way, and is surprised to get him on the phone right off.

She introduces herself as an investigator, mentions Radek and Dragana.

“Radek was one of my favorite students,” he says, “And she...” there’s a pause that Natasha doesn’t think much of, “Dragana worked for me for a bit.”

“She thought you might be able to give me more details about his concerns about GenyCo,” she said,
“What he and the other protesters wanted to get from their petition.”

Schechter pauses. “I think I know what she means. I’ve got some time now, if you can come by. I have to teach a class at one.”

It’s a relatively short walk to Old Town where the Law School is housed, but when they get there, Schechter’s door is open, but he’s nowhere to be found.

They talk to the secretary who swears he was right there, calls his cell but gets no response.

“Goddammit,” Natasha says. She really, really doesn’t want to find another body. She’s full up right now.

Steve accompanies her to the gallery after a second ham sandwich. The place is small and narrow, but welcoming, filled with the sort of stark, natural photography that she likes, many in black & white, all with a sense of depth and space. The kind that makes you feel lost in the wilderness. The gallery owner knew Radek, and has some documentation for his work in the back. They look at the photos while they wait.

She tilts her head towards a small piece, a rolling Baltic seascape that looks as brutally cold as the city feels. She’s surprised to see that it’s one of Radek’s still on display.

Steve joins her. “He hand-tinted these. Not just fiddling with knobs or filters to make things pretty.” He doesn’t ever talk about his art, but she knows he’s got an eye.

She simply enjoys looking at it, like it’s a struck bell resonating, felt if no longer heard.

“You can tell he had an idea in mind, laid down just a few washes of color to bring it out.” Steve sketches his finger through the air, but doesn’t explain what he’s pointing at, just concludes, “It’s so lonely.”

She gets that, but there’s a purity to it. Stripped down and isolated. She thinks it might look lovely surrounded by warm wood, contrast in a place that embraces the opposite feeling.

Plus, it’s almost Christmas.

The owner’s paperwork is nothing more than the bills of commission, some correspondence about the opening last month, and she thanks him. There’s nothing to be gleaned. Then she buys the photograph and安排 to have it shipped straight to New York. She ignores Steve’s long look of pensive consideration. The gallery didn't really give them anything to think about, after all.

Radek spoke to her a little here, but he said nothing about the case.

All of them, people whose death might have made life easier for someone, much harder for others--but hell, that’s everyone walking the planet. The fabrication lab with dismantled equipment, the flashes of gamma in the woods, it all refused to gel.

They’re nearly to the open air car park, walking in silence. She spots the little orange Asbo, pulls the keys out of her pocket, presses the unlock. The door locks disengage but there’s no beep, just a pause as the air around the car shimmers.

Steve throws his arm up to cover her, like his shield is attached, as the ear-shattering boom of explosion hits them. Instinct and action and concussive force.

They go down hard on the pavement.
There’s another couple of pops, secondary explosions as nearby cars catch and light on fire. Natasha scrambles to her feet, shoving Steve ahead of her in a tangential direction. They jog away, trying not to draw attention and still gain minimum safe distance.

“That’s two,” Steve says, he’s grim and not even a little out of breath. “I’d like to avoid three.”

They duck into an alley, slowing down. There’s the shrill noise of a dozen car alarms, people shouting, emergency vehicles in the distance.

“How did you know?” he asks.

“I didn’t.” She shakes her head. “Old habits.”

“Too bad it wasn’t that goddamned Rover.”

“I wanted to get noticed,” she says, “but this is overkill.”

A bomb triggered by the locking mechanism was sloppy, but setting it in a public place? Unbearably careless. Witnesses would have seen someone at the car. It won’t be hard to figure out who wired it, and that’s worse.

The thing tightening her gut, worse than this spinning disaster she’s put them in, are the scenarios narrowly avoided. What if it one of the others had opened the car? Made a different choice with space or distance, been standing right there with the fob. Steve and Maria are human…and Bruce…If there had been people in the car park… There are so many variables at play here, and none of them feel…professional. Planned. It’s messy and ugly. And worst of all, it’s stupid.

She knows the lack of purpose behind the deaths had been worrying at Bruce. It had bothered her less. She’d seen a great deal of senseless killing, but now she thinks he was right to worry. She had dismissed it thinking a larger force was at play with the typical bureaucracy of destruction. But this has a nasty, personal feel.

“I’m calling it,” she says to Steve. “Whatever this is, it’s not an op.”

“Something’s off.” Steve nods. “Plus, anyone really interested in killing you...should really be better at it.”

She raises an eyebrow, but grins, feeling ferocious. “We get back to the house, regroup, figure out what the fuck is going on, get out of here.”

She calls Bruce, who doesn’t answer.

Calls Maria who does. “Yes, dear?”

Code words, but there’s nothing to code.

“Waste of time,” Natasha says. “Someone just blew up the damned car.”

The sirens behind her on the main street punctuate her statement.

“Damn,” Steve says under his breath, like a revelation. “My sandwich was in the car.”

“I’ve fed you four times this morning,” she mouths. “Get over it.”

“It was the last of the meatloaf!”
“I’m at the surveyor’s, on the other side of the city. I took a taxi,” Maria says. “I left Banner at the coroner’s office. He said he’d figure something out.”

Natasha wants her team together, where she can see them all. “Fuck,” she says, regroups. Looks at Steve and his eyes are sparkling a little. She focuses back on Maria. “Can you get back to the house? I think we need an exit strategy.” She kicks back against the wall. “And a vehicle.”

**That Personal Touch...on the Detonator**

The moment he gets out of the coroner’s building and gets service back, Bruce’s phone beeps with a text, “We’re fine” punctuated by an emoji car next to a little pulsing frowning fire.

He opens his call to Natasha with, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“We’re fine. We were blocks away. But we don’t have a car. Get in the taxi at the corner, I called it for you.”

He hangs up on her, but gets into the taxi which drops him off a mile away from the house. By the time he bangs open the door and stalks inside, he’s walked some of the anger into worry, cheeks flushed, and he just asks if they’re okay.

Now he’s in the dining area off the kitchen with the other two, pouring over topo maps and the photos she’s been collecting, looking for correlations while she paces the living room to expend energy. Many hands make light work, which is a problem when the body’s habit is to dump adrenaline and tear things up. She wants a fight, and she could probably channel it into sex instead, but she’d need willing partners for either and the exploding Asbo had momentarily ruled that out, so she puts her brain into overdrive instead. While she wears a hole in the floorboards.

Natasha finally gets the incentive to have a great big whiteboard, room to sketch a theory outside of her own head. Right now it would be so fucking satisfying to scrawl this across the wall: It’s personal.

Bruce stands in the threshold between the rooms to add, “Mr. 3-d died of a surfeit of gamma radiation, hastened by some unhealthy asphyxiation, with the roasting being insult to injury.”

He still won’t look at her, so she keeps pacing.

She’s so used to institutionalized violence, planned power struggles, secrets and spies and controlled chaos, that she’d forgotten to account for the opposite.

Humans are loose ends, lunatics. They follow their own internal logic, and sometimes that logic is flawed and sometimes that logic is simply fucked.

They’d followed the wrong leads because they were vicious and ugly, and that had been such a common theme since HYDRA resurfaced. She and Clint had been right to rule out HYDRA, but she hadn’t changed her lens, had still been looking for the organizational angle; which conspiracy, which group would profit or benefit or be at risk.

Instead, she should have seen that there were overlapping threads in play.

Thread one: the remains of the labs and factories. The professional clean-up, the subtle heart attacks and missing persons.

Thread two: the bodies, the cruelty, the labs trashed like performance art and the mutilated corpses seeded where those in the know could find and recognize them. The bait. The tantrums.
They seemed tied together because there were obvious connectors – brutal, senseless deaths, secret operations, a type of radiation that always tied back to the things that HYDRA or their ilk were experimenting with.

But they shouldn’t have found the bodies, that wasn’t organizationally sound. Natasha should have realized, no *internalized*, that the findings indicated a lack of infrastructure.

Whatever, or whoever, had killed those people hadn’t done it out of a need to experiment, but to lure and flush out more victims, their colleagues. Regardless of whether the weapon, likely developed in one of those abandoned labs, was scavenged or re-purposed, she really wanted it out of the hands of whomever was wielding it. Old scores and old intrigues were one thing, but this threat was immediate.

Gamma, assassination-style pattern, the frustrating lack of connection causing her to dig deeper, the whole thing had been catnip. And it had continued to lure her the whole time, and she’d let it, trying to prove herself. The bait: Come here, stop this group. Instead, the truth was: come here, let me show you how I want to play.

The game was elimination, perhaps retribution.

Her suspect list is narrow, and not a surprise. The only shift in perspective required is to consider that instead of a well choreographed, well-dispatched plan of attack, it’s one woman, off-balance but improvising adroitly, working alone.

It’s not simply a feint. It’s Natasha’s own tactic used against her.

If she hadn’t brought the others...well, one of the reasons that tactic works so well is that it’s unexpected, and catches the mark when they’re vulnerable. She’d cared--about what had happened to Radek, to his parents and Dragana. Her compassion had been a vulnerability, one exploited, and she hates it and still aches a little for the young woman.

She suspects Clint would have spotted it earlier. He had far more appreciation for what he called the crazy motherfucker factor. While she expected everyone to have a secret agenda, Clint lived by the dictum, “Everyone’s fundamentally squirrelly, just some of us know to wear pants out of the house anyway.”

Bruce comes into the living room and sits on the couch, crossing his arms, tucking his fingers under his armpits and glares at her.

“I think we found your spot,” he says.

She’d expected something more confrontational.

“Thank you,” she says. “For helping. For…”

He waves his hand. Not dismissive. Impatiently reassuring. “I take your life pretty seriously,” he says, looking up at her. “All of our lives, but yours in particular.”

She bites her lip. “It’s Dragana,” she says. “It has to be.”

“Call in the cavalry, the juniors even.”

"Pretty sure she's been tipping some of them off, and we don't have time to sift that out without showing our hand." She shakes her head. “It has to be me. I’m not sure why, but this is personal.”
He sounds displeased, leans back into the cushions and tilts back his head. “Then I’ll go with you.”

“Romanoff,” Steve yells from the kitchen, “come confirm this location so we can move the maps and have dinner.”

They spend the rest of the night going over the B-roll footage of the 3-d lab Steve had sweet talked out of the reporter, and figuring out strategy for handing over just enough intel to the local authorities to point them in Dragana’s direction, and suggest they start looking for Professor Schechter.

None of it helps to explain why, and she can feel her sense of urgency growing. They don’t have time to really go to bed, each of them taking two hours out to sleep.

She knows Bruce is still worried and frustrated, but when they swap for their time to sleep, he palms her face, looking at her like he’s memorizing her, and kisses her with an aching sort of sweetness that has her running her thumb over her bottom lip as she lines up the photos downstairs, and tries to reason out a why to match her hypothesis.

~*~

“There’s no lab, no breaking or entering, just a walk in the woods.” Natasha dares Bruce to squirm out of it this time. “It’s not even mosquito season.”

“I’m not Steve, I’m not scared of mosquitoes.”

“Then it’s a date.”

His narrowed eyes are part peevishness, but there’s an amusement there as well, “We agreed we’re not dating.”

“Good point.” Her smile is sly, “But you’ve always enjoyed our walks in the woods.”

“Hmmm.”

She packs a light orienteering kit, sat phone and the spare gamma detector aside from their personal ones, some food and water in a backpack. The sky has cleared, piercing bright white without a cloud, and it feels almost balmy compared to the previous chill, but they layer for warmth. The jeep’s been sitting in the sun, and fires up when Maria tries it for a lark, so they all pack up and pile in.

They drop a fresh battery into the Rover and Natasha drops off Maria and Steve in town to wrap up their piece before heading out to the hinterlands. They’ll take an Uber from there, though Natasha doesn’t envy Maria having to listen to Steve’s union rant on the way to the airport.

The walk is pleasant, actually, the sun coming down through bare branches to heat them up through their coats, the scent of snow and wet autumn leaves.

They come up over a crest and there’s an easy path into the shallow bowl of land nearly surrounded by high ridge. “Hey, you were right.”

Bruce chides her, “I can read a topographical map, you know.”

“I don’t mean to sound so surprised, but it’s a kind of visualization.”

“You think I’m bad at visualization?”

“Tony showed me pictures of the bookshelf.”
“Making things is different from picturing things.” He adjusts the blue knit cap Steve made him, and knuckles his glasses back up his nose. “Carpentry is harder than it looks.”

“You could have had custom shelving fabricated with a click of a mouse.”

“I like wood.” Bruce lays a hand on a trunk as he passes, “It’s warm and alive.”

Natasha pulls the optics out of the backpack and chivvies up into a tree, long slow survey of the ridge line familiar from Radek’s photographs, even stripped bare of leaves. The sun is a lucky break, because it glints off of a corner of shiny blue glass on the northern slope of the bowl.

“I think I see a solar panel.”

She drops down from the branches. He’s holding the backpack open for her to stash the optics, and he zips it closed before speaking. “You said no labs.”

“I also said no breaking and entering, but that was predicated on there being no labs.”

He nods his head, lips pressed together. “Naturally.” He begins walking northerly.

“Actually, it looks like a house.”

“Makes me feel loads better, thank you. I assume the B&E is still a go?”

“You know,” she says, “your bitching is starting to sound like anticipation.”

“Maybe I’m hoping the house is made of gingerbread.”

It’s made of forty year old concrete. It’s a cluster of seven domes sunk into the forest floor, a main dome made into a hexagon by six smaller ones circling it, the whole thing just peeking out from years of leaves and branches. Most of the concrete is green with moss and brown with lichen, the blue solar panels the only sign of upkeep or habitation.

The dome that sticks out of the ground foremost has two large metal doors, and the lock is a trifle. Natasha pulls a gun and gestures Bruce behind her. The space inside is the size of a single car garage, stuffed with skis and snowshoes, hazmat gear, tools, and two small Japanese motorcycles, one of which seems to have been cannibalized for parts. She opens the door to the main dome.

The garage smell takes on a damp basement character, and there are six steps down into the main floor of the building. All the other domes open directly onto the central one, little alcoves in what had once been an ecohouse.

It had been roughly re-purposed a while back, remnants of medical and laboratory equipment shoved back against earth toned walls, heaped in broken piles onto the smooth stuccoed benches built into the damp northern side niches. Light filters in through dirty half-buried skylights, but it still feels like being neck deep in the ground with nowhere to go.

“Steve was right about open concept. Nothing good comes of open concept.”

“He’s got an eye,” Natasha murmurs, making her way around the perimeter, gun in hand and pointed down at the ready.

“And fucking basements.” Bruce is shaking his head, grim and pale. “What is it with basements?”

“You can’t properly terrorize someone in a kitchen.”
“No. *You* could, though.”

“Stop, I’m blushing.”

“This feels like the basement in Denton is rising out of the earth like a cyst.”

“That was almost Barton-level poetry.”

Bruce is turning slowly in the center of the house, taking it in with wide sweeps of his eyes before poking around. “There’s remnants of a bio lab, separate from the kitchen space, but anything of value is long gone, just tubing, an old jug of deionized water…” he toes through a pile of shattered glass in the corner, “busted tube racks...everything else was destroyed. All of that’s dusty, long before the squatters I think.”

“Smashed like art.” Natasha says, completing the circuit and stepping to one of the niches.

The doorway used to have hinges and locks on the outside, but the door is replaced by a heavy canvas curtain racked to the side. There’s a low wide platform in back of the room, heaped with unzipped sleeping bags and anchored on one end with a metal barrel and a firebox.

“Rocket mass heater.” Bruce explains as she pokes through the contents of the small room. “Small amount of wood, captures all the heat of combustion, really cheap way to get through a winter.”

The bedding reeks of cigarette smoke, and there’s a glass bottle stuffed with butts within easy reach next to a camp light and a padded lens case.

Bruce consults the spare gamma detector, “There’s some evidence of radiation in the mud room we came in through, still low level, but the rest of the house is clean.”

She crouches down to look at the wall that’s the head of the bed, running her fingers through old scrapes in the stucco of two stick figures, off kilter as if made by someone lying on the platform. They’re deeply grooved, successive carvings overlaid by steadier hands. The figures have the rough and disturbing proportions of true child drawings. They look like what Lila was producing last summer.

“I misspoke.” Bruce says softly behind her, looking as she pulls her fingers away from the grooves, “*Now* I’m truly creeped out.”

“The key to terrorizing someone in a kitchen,” she rises and lays a quick hand on his chest before starting a deeper search of the house, “is to be a witch.”

“Kudrin.”

Natasha nods, “I think this was one of the workshops that led to Denton.”

“Workshop…” Bruce echoes with distaste. “I think this is more like the mouse room, where the subjects were housed. Treatments given, maybe some testing done. Training?”

“Physical training; you could put together a rigorous program out in the woods, all season.” She shakes her head, but it makes sense. Draga is clever but rough-edged, and was probably never supposed to be anything more than a low-budget proof of concept. Perhaps the work that opened up investor pockets for Lozen. “Some tactics and comportment, Kudrin would have done that simply by habit. An operation this small, though, wouldn’t have had the breadth of education. If they stayed here in isolation, there wouldn’t have been the polishing. We were taken out into the City regularly, and even in Denton the girls mixed with the locals.”
The sound of a motor cuts off Bruce’s reply. Natasha pulls her gun again. They had closed the outer door, but left the inner door open. Bruce presses himself into a shadow behind the doorway, watching Natasha on the other side.

The outer door opens and the footsteps are cautious, a soft shifting sound on the dirty floor, just a few into the main dome and then stopping.

She can tell he’s controlling his breathing, slow in and even slower out. The footsteps retreat to the mud room, and there’s a slam and a rough gasp, then another slam. She looks at Bruce, and they both know this is someone punching the metal door in order not to cry. Natasha checks around the doorway, lightning quick, and signals the room is clear as they hear the motor start up again.

Natasha mouths, “Pursuit.”

Bruce gestures a go ahead.

She shakes her head once, sharp, “Not leaving you.”

The motorcycle outside revs, just beyond the closed metal door on the other side of the mud room. She holsters her weapon inside her coat, cross-draw, and gently turns the spare motorcycle toward the door. The idea seems to be to let the mark get some distance, calm down a bit, see where else they go knowing their cottage in the woods has been compromised.

The motor sound revs again and then drops into gear, heading off. Bruce opens the door and they both mark the direction as Natasha takes out the bike and straddles it. “Hop on.”

Bruce takes a darting step back, ”No, this is a bad idea."

"Two people, one motor, get on."

"You have to let me drive--I'm sorry, I have to have some control over this--""

"I'm sorry," she sounds the opposite, "Your control over this is letting the better driver handle it."

"You know, I'm not even denying that you're the better driver, I just can't risk--"

"I can't risk letting you stay here, or deferring to the person with less training--""

"This is a terrible idea--"

"If it goes south, all you need to remember is: let go." She kicks the engine started as if the argument is over.

"Letting go is the problem--"

"No, just let go of me. If it comes to that, I'll take care of the rest." She shifts the bike between her hands and legs to get a feel for the weight and size. Calibrating her cerebellum, he knows.

And damn it, he does trust her cerebellum far more than his own, going at speed through forest, but that's not the trust at issue here. "Natasha, he's way faster than the bike--"

"Which is why I'll ditch the bike and ride him."

"Fuck," he breathes, piloerection cresting in a wave up from his shoulders to the top of his skull, so hard he scratches at the back of his neck involuntarily.
"Yeah." She answers his shudder, "That’s about where I’m thinking."

"God, this is the worst idea ever." He climbs onto the jump seat and wraps his arms around her middle. She adjusts his grip.

"Hold on tight as you can." She repeats the little shifts of the bike, re-calibrating for him clinging to her for dear life—in his case, her life. "Yell as much as you need to."

Bruce doesn’t yell.

He doesn’t even breathe at first but his heart starts pounding up into his temples and he knows that’s a short road to nowhere good.

She bobs and curves, velocity and acceleration in baroque vectors too fast for him to comprehend. He’s flotsam on a sucking swirling current, and his breath stutters in his chest like he’s slipping under the surface while gulping for air.

He has to close his eyes to bring his lungs under control, as if he only has enough bandwidth to cling for all his worth with arms and thighs, riding a rocket, and the scraps left can either go toward seeing or voluntary breath.

He tucks his chin down against the shearling collar of her coat, the scent of leather and her hair snapping against his face, and he concentrates on breathing out as slowly as he can.

He doesn’t realize he’s getting the hang of it until the bike slows and comes to a stop at an angle, and he feels Natasha go soft and centered, ready for a different physical challenge. Dread pools in him as he straightens and opens his eyes, peering through the cloud of her hair caught in the stubble on his face.

“Dragana.” Natasha greets the woman as if she’s a colleague she seldom works with, respectfully distant.

“Romanova.” Dragana replies coolly, as if she isn’t standing in the middle of a walking path through the woods, stance wide to brace the large barrel of the weapon propped against her hip. It looks like a t-shirt gun that’s been parasitized by a cold laser generator.

Bruce tightens his grip, then forces himself to ease it, pulling his arms back to himself, giving Natasha room to work.

“That’s not the woman you came with.”

“Neh, I’ve been switching it up lately. Breaking old habits.”

“Too little, too late.” Dragana offers a conceding shrug that doesn’t waver the barrel a hair, “Dekujeme for New York. Maybe it will lighten your load in hell.”

“Tell you what,” she says, as Bruce slips a finger under her jacket and shirt. “I’ll even spot you for the ones you killed.”

“Generous.”

He methodically inscribes an upside down L on the skin of her back. Gamma in Greek and Geh in Cyrillic. Natasha shuts off the engine. The bike won’t be fast enough anyway. “Except for Radek.”

“Do not say his name.” There is a pause, and Dragana’s voice is empty when she speaks again, “I
was cleaning it all up. They were paying me one last time, to cover their tracks, but I was burying it all, it would stop with me. Then you come and shit in my shoes. That was bad enough, but I was still going to let you be. But your questions got him going again, conspiracies and mad scientists in the forest--"

“And where did he get those ideas from, originally?”

“He never believed my fairy stories.” Dragana scoffs, heat back in her voice. “That was play, it wasn’t real for him, not until you came around.”

“If he found your trail of bodies it’s because you got sloppy when you brought him here in the first place--”

“Shut up.”

“--when I started asking questions he was already suspicious--”

“Shut your mouth, you cow.”

Natasha continues, almost sorrowfully quiet, “Did he turn on you, or was it an accident?”

Dragana continues in Czech, addressing Bruce directly.

Natasha’s mouth is parted and she translates around exhaled breath without moving her lips, “She says start the engine and go.”

He buries his face in her hair, hoping to come off as terrified, muffling the deepening resonance of his voice into her woolly collar, “Get ready to ditch the bike.”

"He suspects you're going to kill him anyway. Maybe he doesn't want to waste the petrol." Natasha props the bike, stands as tall as she can with hands on her hips, elbows out. Bruce shucks his coat along with the backpack. He sweeps the knit cap from his head and sets it between them. "Environmentalists. What are you gonna do?"

“Fuck you, Romanova--do haje.”

Bruce clenches his teeth; he can smell the gamma wound up behind Dragana’s barrel, a leaky water gun compared to the ocean surging in every cell of him.

He plants his feet, thinks about what he has to do, and shoves the Other Guy outward.
Chapter 13

Fuck Prague

Natasha has watched the transformation many times by now, swift and unreal, seen Bruce struggle against it, slow it down, aim it.

She has never been close enough to feel the air displace, be pelted with the rags of what he'd been wearing, never seen him accelerate into the curve. Turns out he can pop like a kernel of corn, flow into it as fast as he can move while transformed.

She can't even track his motion through the air, because her visual field is filled by green at the same moment she's swept off the bike sideways and everything rolls.

She's tucked into the curve of his body, surrounded by dry hot skin like packed sand, and she knows that Dragana is firing the gamma projector at the Other Guy's back, that he's shielding her with his mass, that his skin has thickened against it. Daylight appears as one arm swings behind him, obviously hitting the target with a swat and a crunch.

Natasha scrambles to get a look but he nudges her away and pivots, still blocking her view. When he rumbles a noise of frustration, she realizes he's been remarkably quiet so far.

She hangs back. Dragana is sprawled off to the side of the road, her arm bent at the wrong angle and the rest of her very still. The bike and the backpack are untouched, and when she looks inside the pack, the gamma detector has registered a lethal dose. The weapon is in pieces, scattered toward where the Hulk crouches, his shoulders bunching minutely.

She walks over to Dragana and Hulk turns, keeping his back to her. There is no sign of pulse, and her skull is dented ominously. Natasha searches the body and gathers personal effects, papers, keychain, even the pot of lip balm, tucking them into the pack for later investigation.

Hulk straightens and shoots her a look as she works, and begins pacing on the roadway. Natasha drags the body deep into the woods. The head wound is severe despite the lack of blood, and the exposed skin is stiff and blanched from the blast of the gun. She notes the location to give to the Junior Mint for later retrieval, and she opens the carotid with Dragana’s own knife. To be sure, to be merciful, to be safe.

At the roadway she scatters a few handfuls of dirt on the blood stain, scraping with her boot to leave something that looks like a roadkill mark. She picks up the pieces of the gun, the tatters of Bruce’s shoes and socks and shirt, and shoves them into the now bursting backpack.

She wonders how long they have, on this little service road through the forest on a Tuesday morning, before another vehicle comes along.

Hulk continues to pace, one fist clenched, the other onehandedly cracking its knuckles. The stubble carried over, but then why wouldn't it? He slows as he comes back around toward her, seeing she's finished.

He looks at her, and for the first time in a long time, he's angry at her. She tucks her chin slightly, as she lets her eyes dip down and then come back to meet Hulk’s. Primate gestures. "Hey."

He huffs, and replies, "Hate being wrong." He stalks away, then turns back, periodically looking at
that one tight fist. "Him. Me, too. Needed me."

You needed me, and if I'd had my way I wouldn't have been here, she translates, suddenly aware of the cold. The thick blue cap he’d been wearing is on the seat of the bike, and she realizes Bruce took it off for her. She moves slowly, gets it, puts it on. It’s still warm. She tucks his busted wristwatch into her jacket pocket, and layers his coat on over her own. "I'm glad you are here. Sometimes I know what I'm talking about."

He grunts, wheels around to do another lap.

"Him. Me." He's strangely chatty, and she wonders if it's initial conditions or the blast of gamma. Maybe, her brain supplies, they're both pissed about the same topic so the connection is stronger. He gives her a sullen look as he paces away, "Sometimes….hate being right."

She reigns in the reflexive protest, not wanting to antagonize. But as she lets the point stand under the scrutiny of an eerily calm Hulk, she has to acknowledge it has some validity. She is learning to utilize a team, but her habits are solitary, her first instinct is still to shove everyone behind her and walk between the teeth of the beast intent on causing indigestion.

He stops pacing. There is a shiny track of compacted asphalt marking his path.

Bruce had been right. She would have been killed if she’d come alone this time.

"Get it." His sneer becomes a smirk at one edge. "Finally."

"I'm sorry." Natasha swallows again, this time through a throat gone tight. "We were both wrong. Both right. And I'm sorry for my part of it."

Hulk hums like rolling thunder, and it's almost a pleased sound, but his reply is still kind of snide, "Tell to him."

"Right." She wipes her face, tears and sweat evaporating into tight cold saltiness. "Is he coming back soon?"

"No." Hulk strides away, pacing faster than before, looking down at his one hand cradling his other fist. "Tony. Need lead bricks."

Natasha’s seen Tony and Bruce build a squat little castle of lead bricks in the RadLab, gamma containment being a matter of throwing as much mass as possible between you and the source. She looks harder at the broken pieces of the gamma gun: the focusing barrel, the scrap metal housing...but the guts are missing. She digs a spare commlink from the backpack, signals Maria.

"On your way home, dear?"

"Soon. We need to pick up some groceries."

"Tony is on his way over," Maria indicates the channel is more or less safe, "he could stop at the store..."

"Tell him to bring enough lead bricks to build a castle."

Maria swears and patches Tony in, “Romanoff, that’s a ridiculous amount of tonnage, I need info on the material. Get Bruce on the horn.”

“He can’t come to the phone right now. It’s been an eventful morning.”
Tony sounds chipper, “I’ll bet.”

She calls out, “Hey, Big Guy. Any details you can share?”

She pulls the commlink from her ear and sets it for broadcast. Hulk snaps off a small tree limb and whips it through the air, dead leaves and twigs scattering on the asphalt. He tosses it into the underbrush, chooses a bit of debris like picking out a shell at the beach, and points.

“Smaller.” He rumbles.

"He says the source is smaller than a maple seed pod."

He grunts affirmation and his jaw flexes as his eyes go unfocused for a moment, “Medical.”

“Copy that, Romanoff. Bruce suspected a nuclear medicine source, so the containment vessel he packed on the quinjet should work.”

Natasha identifies the expression on Hulk’s face as the same hesitant doubt that Bruce gets when confronted with his own missing time. He gets the broad outlines, lead containment, but not the details, that the Other Guy had already run the numbers and taken care of it.

She runs her hand down his forearm, soothing, familiar despite the scale.

He sets the knuckles of his fist on the ground at her feet, arm straight, head bowed and angled to expose that side of his neck. It’s his version of a whisper, subsonic resonance, "Faster."

He’s offering the ride, letting her be the one to climb on.

Natasha does.

He waits for her to work out the details, a familiar pause. She straddles his nape, heels hooked down into the hollows toward his armpits. She has to take off her gloves to get a firm grip, wrapping each of her hands in a massive lock of hair like silk rope.

"Will you let me navigate? I know where the airfield is from here."

With a finger he strokes down one of her shins. She takes that as a yes, and directs him with tugs of his hair and pressure from her heels like riding bareback.

~*~

“Jesus, she’s riding him like a mahout.”

“I’m more disturbed by the fact you can tell Banner hasn’t shaved.” Tony tilts his head, considering, “It gives him an Evil Spock look.”

Natasha unhooks her knees and slides down his back to the ground, trailing her hand along his side as she comes around. Stark is suited up and has the containment vessel ready, but Hulk just slams that one fist into the ground over and over until Stark shoos them away with, “Come on, are you kidding me? No audience participation.”

It only takes a minute, and when they come back around the quinjet Stark’s already stashing the vessel aboard.

Hulk is standing there rubbing at the palm of his now opened fist, and there’s a smoky meaty smell in the crisp air. Natasha moves toward him but he offers a warning rumble and she backs off. He’s
staring into his hand, lower lip slung open, and there’s blood smearing on his thumb as he digs it in.

“Yeah, I think the gun went off in his hand at some point.” Tony shakes his head, “Quick--don’t think of pork rinds.”

Maria folds her arms, leaning against the side of the loading bay, “Classy.”

“We should do something.” Steve is rock solid on this, but he’s less sure on what they should do, and it comes out as a question about strategy. “Stand down protocol?”

Tony turns to Natasha but she’s shaking her head. “He shouldn’t come back yet, not until it’s healed.”

“I’d ask how long that might take, but,” Tony gestures to Hulk, “our radiation physicist and biochemist are occupado.”

Maria slaps the bulkhead and heads toward the cockpit. “Let’s give it a shot.”

“You heard Hill,” Tony shoves his helmet back on and broadcasts as he launches straight up, “Now boarding first class passengers.”

Natasha considers the situation for a long moment. It feels like he’s riding the edge of calm, and in the handful of times they’ve gone through a stand down protocol, this would be past the time that feeling would have welled up and brought him down into his smaller form. He’s intent on the bleeding burn, methodically scraping with his thumbnail the way someone would bite inside their cheek to maintain focus.

“You’re trying to stay, aren’t you? You’re fighting him for control right now.”

He snarls and slams a fist into the wounded palm, bellowing, “Fighting me.”

“Yeah,” Natasha shakes her head more to herself than to him, either of him, “I can’t take sides on that one.”

In a half-second he’s crouched down and leaning his face not a foot from hers. She lets herself breathe again as he hangs there, scent of metal and blood, warm vapor of his exhale steaming her like a bun. His eyes are desert khaki, and she knows she’s looking at them both right now. A fierce smile bristles. “Liar.”

She shrugs with one shoulder, joint oddly stiff.

“My liar.” He huffs, and pulls back to stare at his palm again. “Soon.”

“You’re making him wait for it to heal.”

He flexes it experimentally.

“Stupid not to.”

He hums, and he sways a little on his feet.

“Come inside,” she takes slow steps back, coaxes him toward the ramp. “It’ll be too cold for him out here.”

Each step feels like a decision, shudders through them both. He’s fighting against the change, safeguarding his other self, and it’s rare that she feels protective of the Hulk as opposed to Bruce, but
the lines have blurred so viciously today, and how can she not ache for him?

“Please,” she says, keeping her voice as calm and true as she can. She keeps backing up, slow and steady as he follows.

He looks dubiously at the bulkheads of the quinjet hemming him in.

“We’re gonna close the door,” she says, “and we’re gonna go home. Is that okay?”

He huffs and she sinks down cross-legged on the floor. “Sit down with me,” she says, holds her breath until he reluctantly settles next to her, back snugged to the same bulkhead she rests against. His injured hand is tucked between them, curled palm down on the floor.

She strokes her fingers across his knuckles, a gesture he allows.

“Let me know when you’re ready.”

He shakes his head and rumbles, “Go.”

Steve gives Maria the all clear for take off.

“One of those things where you’re never gonna be ready, you just do it anyway?” She keeps stroking along the back of the massive hand near her leg. “If it helps any, that’s been a running theme for me lately.”

He sucks a breath through his teeth when the engines kick on, but doesn’t move. Steve’s eyes are wide, keeping watch from the co-pilot seat, and she kind of wants to throw something at him. Instead she keeps up a quiet murmuring commentary as they reach altitude, pitched for the huge being beside her.

“I could make small talk, but who really gives a shit, am I right? We get so little quality time together you and I. That I know of.” His ears only scale up a little when he’s like this, oddly petite at the hinge points of a mammoth jaw. “I don’t really get how the two of you work in that one brain, I’ll be honest, but I take heart in knowing neither do either of you.”

His eyes narrow.

“I’d say ‘don’t be mad’, but I’m aiming for a little peeved Trying to be helpful, you see.”

He blinks and shakes his head, but it reads as a mellow exasperation.

Finally, he lifts and opens his hand, hovering it between them. She pulls it down to rest on her thigh so she can inspect the palm. There’s going to be a scar, she thinks, but it no longer looks raw and burnt and horrifying.

“It’s okay now.” she says. “Close your eyes. You’ll feel better.”

As startling as the change into the Hulk had been, this is almost as sudden, even though she watches the reflexive twitch flow outward from his softening expression. A whispering shift in the atmosphere, and the warm strange feel of the hand spanning between hers smooths and dwindles and feels more familiar. The burgeoned mass of the Hulk focuses down to the pinpoint of Bruce.

As he falls against her she pulls at his arm and slides between him and the wall, settling his head and shoulders across her thighs. His own legs sprawl to the side, boneless. His look up at her is bleary and brief, and he exhales and seems to deflate even more as his eyes slip closed.

Steve drapes a blanket across Bruce, avoiding Natasha’s eyes like he’s caught them in an intimate
moment he hadn’t expected.

**A Series of Uncomfortable Truths**

Bruce wakes up with his wet cheek pillowed on his own folded sweaters, tears, sweat, drool, likely all three. His neck is sore from sleeping half curled round his left arm, and he’s got the sick ache in his chest of not enough rest. Next to him, Natasha has been replaced by Steve. Near the front, Maria is passed out in one of the jump seats. The plane jolts downward and his stomach follows. The plane evens out, but not Bruce.

Steve’s got his coat pulled tight around him, the knit shield hat jammed firmly on his head, and he’s sitting so close to Bruce that it would look like a drug buy if they weren’t halfway over the Atlantic.

“Turbulence, and Hill’s exhausted.” Steve says, cheerful. “Romanoff told me to watch you, keep you company.”

That sounds familiar, warm hand on his chest, being told to keep sleeping. He resents it a little, but it’s an easy, comfortable type of resentment. It’s not going to go anywhere special. He works his way back, as he always does, like grasping at a dream in the morning. He was on the back of the bike, and then they stopped, and he knows he changed because of how he feels, but…

Oh. There’s more than he expects, significantly more, and it has a drunken instead of dreamlike weight. He folds his left hand closed like he can physically pack it away for later. “Okay.”

Steve hands him a water. “She said you need to drink that.”

Bruce puts on one of the sweaters, blanket still wrapped around his legs, and cracks it open.

Steve has another bottle waiting, and he hands Bruce a sandwich, half unwrapped and ready to go. “She also said that I can’t start on the debrief until we get home. But I am allowed to gloat about it being a clusterfuck.”

That would explain her place at the controls. She’s not good at sitting with anger, even self-directed. She’d need something to do.

Bruce opens the second water and starts on the sandwich. “It’s not like I can give you much info, Steve. Not yet.” His hand burns, and he works very hard to leave it alone.

Steve is still looking at him like he’s a case study, a failed recruit. Or maybe that’s compassion. Sometimes with Cap, disappointment and worry wear the same face.

“You should know, if you don’t already, that it was her idea in the first place,” he says.

Bruce honestly has no idea what he’s talking about.

“The protocol. She wanted to give you a reason to stay, not compulsion or duty, or a lack of other options. A real reason.”

He knew it had been her idea, and in the beginning, Bruce had run two scenarios side by side in his head: that she both was and wasn’t for real.

Steve says, like he’s working through this as he speaks, “Not to weaponize you, or make you safe for us. To give something back to you.”
At some point he disproved the null hypothesis, decided she was looking to make a real connection with him, but he’d never reinterpreted the early data; how she’d worked herself as much as him, opened up her ruthless beautiful heart as well as her horrors, let him see her when she might have only just started looking at herself.

Hearing it makes him feel humbled and beholden, angry and desperate for her. The first and only promise she ever made him: her life, getting him out. She’d failed on the helicarrier, just as he hadn’t kept it together, but it’s spun out like a fugue since then.

“Yes, I--” he turns the catch in his throat into a cough, nods and drinks more water.

“She’s fearless,” Steve sounds angry. “I wish she weren’t. I hate...it’s like she doesn’t put any value on her own life.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Natasha has fear, she values her survival. But Bruce knows every choice is a calculation of need, duty, debt and survival, of cost and risk, the endless factoring of risk.

Even Steve’s brow furrows neatly, as if pressed crisp with an iron. “You follow directives, you act with intent when you’re the Other Guy. The both of you can take a goal and get it done, but you work outside of parameters and sometimes it fucking terrifies me. I don’t know what either of you will do.”

Bruce gestures with the last of the sandwich, “Both of whom? Me and me? Her and the Other Guy?”

Steve shakes his head with a dry chuckle, “Yeah, exactly.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, “to worry you.” And he is. Steve is a good man, and a good leader, and so much weighs on him that Bruce truly does hate to add to it.

“The Commandos were not exactly regular troops.” he shrugs, “But sometimes, with all of you, and the civilian component? I feel like I don’t know anything.” He glances to Maria, her face composed and vaguely sullen in sleep, and his cheeks are washed with a lovely carnelian, a renaissance color.

“I..we…” He takes a deep breath, Captain America manning up. “It’s obvious that it’s more than Spanish lessons, isn’t it.”

Bruce nearly chokes on the crust.

“That we’re more than friends. Or maybe we’re not, but it’s...personal.”

“Yeah, kind of got that.” He’s really trying for gentle, but the charm of Steve’s 20th century evasions are killing him. It’s been a long trying day, and suddenly he’s back in freshman year of college with this.

“I don’t like to embarrass a lady. I didn’t mean to be indiscreet. It’s still kind of...new.”

This is not a conversation he has ever wanted to have with Steve. With anyone, truthfully.

“Is it possible that, you know...no one else finds out?”

It’s not like Steve to keep secrets, to want secrets and he wonders if that’s it. If it really is modern sensibility that’s eroding Steve’s composure, or if it’s a need for privacy, or something altogether different.

Bruce shakes his head. “Steve, people are gonna find out. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You like
each other. You like being together. People are gonna notice.”

“It’s...” Steve looks at his hands, doesn’t finish the sentence.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “It’s your choice, your...whatever it is.”

Steve has this funny twist to his mouth, not displeasure, more like his problem solving grind, and keeps going.

“Fun,” he says. “We’re having fun.”

“Are you?” He doesn’t mean to sound arch, but this is so a conversation for Natasha. For Clint, who’d just blow past the meandering and find the heart of whatever’s bugging Cap. Bruce needs to extract all the data before he can offer a hypothesis.

Steve nods like he is, but he’s not sure he should be, and again, there’s that disconnect between 21st century sensibilities and a kid who was probably raised to look at sex as a promise and a threat. That kid in particular.

“Do what you need to do, Steve,” he says, “we’re not gonna talk about you.”

He knows Barton will get it out of one of them, but bridges, crossed later.

Steve pulls his knees up closer to his body. “Can I ask you something else?”

He’s still tired, he wants to throw a pair of jeans on over these tactical pants, and he’s still hungry. “Go ahead.”

“I keep seeing Bucky. Or at least I think I do.”

That floors him for a long moment, as Steve takes a deep breath and blows it out. Bruce is gentle and deliberate, “And...what’s the question?”

“Can you keep that a secret too?”

Goddammit, he thinks.

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Marisol has been back a few times since she first learned where Creepo lived, and the more she finds out about him, the less comfortable she is calling him that.

Okay, he shouldn’t have been in the Tower, granted. But she’s pretty sure he’s using the keycard Mellie lost a while back, before she stole Ameena’s to replace it. He only took a look around, and he hasn’t come back since. Marisol doubts it’s idle curiosity, but it seems harmless so far, more like the kind of checking in that a lot of the adults do, when they come down to the Trust floor or inquire how their studies are coming along.

He’s no Mrs. Gerrish. If anyone, he reminds her of Peyton, inclined to quiet solitude, careful with himself the way she can be when she’s feeling poorly.

Marisol locates his apartment the next time she comes back, and one night when he’s at work, she lets herself in.

The cat likes her, rubbing against her legs as she moves through the tiny efficiency. It’s cluttered but clean, jammed with so many books that stacks of them have been improvised into tables. They are mostly science, science fiction and history, including some of the texts that are part of their new
curriculum in the tower, and several of the fiction titles Catherine’s liked enough to bother shelving. There are bookmarks in half of them, like he’s downloading all these files at once, take-out menus and receipts, mostly.

Marisol kind of wants to meow back at the cat, it sounds like it’s expecting her to have a conversation and is getting vexed when she doesn’t make any sounds back. She takes pictures on her phone: the books, the food in the fridge, the contents of the kitchen and medicine cabinets, under the bed, the spring bar across one blacked out window that serves as a closet, the work shirts embroidered Dave, the small but comprehensive collection of small arms and combat knives.

He seems more and more like Peyton to her.

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Once they land, Maria nods to Steve and they bookend Bruce and manhandle him off the plane while Natasha remains aboard wrapping up whatever pilots do—he casts his eyes toward the cockpit, but she’s intent on the controls and so he lets them sweep him away off the roof and into an elevator.

Steve murmurs to JARVIS, “Medical,” and lets Maria do the talking.

Bruce is struggling with the awkward intimacy of being the meat in a paramilitary sandwich. “I can walk on my own.”

“Nothing doing, Banner. Not until Dr. Cho takes a look.”

Maria is also taller than he is, and he feels like a whiny kid being bum-rushed out of a store, but he can’t help carping, “This is technically kidnapping.”

“We’re evacuating you while rendering first aid. You feel like a kitten, Bruce, but if you think you can bust out, go for it.”

They each have a firm arm around his waist, and he can tell they’re looking at each other over his head. “Pretty sure consent to treat doesn’t have a deathmatch component.”

“Says the guy practicing medicine a few years back on a long-expired EMT cert.”

“Don’t fight her on technicalities, son.” Steve smirks, “She will gut you.”

They let him get onto the exam bed on his own, either as a sop to his dignity or to emphasize how shaky he still is. Fiona greets him with a handshake, already gloved, and that’s when he notices his fingernails are rusty with dried blood, which is caked between the fingers of his left hand.

“Don’t worry about the gore.” Maria calls over her shoulder from where she’s been talking with Dr. Cho via satellite, “It’s yours.”

He lets Fiona examine and clean off his hands, revealing a shiny patch of reddened scar about the size of a misshapen quarter.

It felt like catching an ember, holding onto a cinder that just kept stinging where it was lodged in the crease of his palm. It was everything he needed to keep away from her. It was harm and death and everything that had called his other self into being in the first place. It was the thing that Bruce couldn’t do or wouldn’t do. It was protection as offense instead of defense. If he had gotten his way, he wouldn’t have been there in any capacity.
“Breathe,” Fiona strips off one of her gloves and lays a hand on his shoulder blade, “It’s been a long day, but it’s almost over. Would you lay back?”

“No, sure, I’m…” He stretches out and lets Fiona begin the scan, and she keeps a light hand on his forearm until it gets underway. “I’m good.”

“Liar.” Tony interjects from a few yards away.

*My liar,* comes surging up on a wave of fondness and vicious pride, his skin rising in goose pimples. He knows what she feels like riding small on his shoulders, pulling his hair like reins to show him where to leap, where to run. A warmed blanket descends on him and Tony leans down on his elbow to say, “Fiona’s giving you a choice of juice and a cookie, or an IV.”

“Don’t say I never did anything for you!” Fiona calls from where she’s going over the scan results with Dr. Cho.

“Well it’s no cake or death,” Bruce rolls and pushes himself to a sitting position, bunching the blanket next to him, “but the answer’s still obvious.”

“It is, in fact, one of Thor’s Hammer of Chocolate cookies.”

“Why are you still talking to me about this?”

Tony hands him a chocolate chunk cookie the size of a plate and opens the orange juice, giving him a wide chipmunk grin. Bruce side eyes him. “No change in your baseline radiation, not even in the blood. You’re a heat sink for gamma. By any chance, are you connected to a singularity?”

“I gave it all to the mouse in my pocket.” Bruce works on shoving the whole cookie in his mouth.

“No, my friend, that’s an elephant in your pocket.” Tony adds, thoughtfully, “And Hill was right, you’ve also got a mahout. Who’s apparently disappeared off with Hill and Steve to do the debrief.”

Bruce takes another cookie and offers half to Tony.
Yes, But Who Is The Hulk When He’s at Home?

There’s a FedEx shipper tipped against the door of their suite, a bit bigger than a shirt box. When Bruce brings it inside Natasha is already there.

She’s sitting on the coffee table like she just dropped onto the nearest seat-level surface, one boot off and dangling in her hand. A few clumps of Czech forest mud have fallen to the woolly carpet. The room feels like impending storm, and he takes his shoes off at the door and locks it behind him.

Her mouth twitches churlish to the side when he walks up, but she keeps staring into the middle space like she can’t look away.

When he reaches to relieve her of the boot, she blocks him with a sweep of her hand that jars his forearm. He raises his hands, but chooses not to step back.

Her mouth tightens and she sends the boot against the far wall.

“Yeah,” he nods once, “long day at the office."

“I thought…” she’s breathing rough, as if the struggle to keep it together is also physical exertion, “...I wasn’t expecting you back yet."

“I could leave,” he shakes his head slowly, “but I don’t really see the point of you being alone if you don’t want to be. I was a dumbass about not coming along. I regret that.”

My liar, he thinks, as she meets his eyes without moving her head, too much white at the bottom like they’re half rolled back.

He scratches the back of his head, still unused to the patch of numbness on his palm.

“What happened in Denton...that wasn’t a misunderstanding, him not getting what you do. That was jealousy.” He gets a no shit, Banner expression in response, but he still feels like he’s in some kind of alternate reality where things turned out okay somehow. He lets himself admit, “His. Mine.”

There’s a shiver to her movement as she pulls off her other boot and lets it fall. “Territoriality,” she clarifies.

“Sure. Doesn’t make it better.”

“It’s not good or bad, Bruce. It just is.” She looks around the room. “If I’d gone to my suite...I would have broken a lot of it by now.”

He drops his eyes, but it’s not like he wasn’t braced. He’s always been careful to remind himself that she’s a pragmatist and a spy, a wanderer, and while he gets to share his bed and his closet with her, be ridden hard and spooned and taken out on the town, a person like that is not kept for keeps, would not be looking to settle down.

“I don’t care if you do it here instead. Go nuts.”

“This...this is ours, and I...can’t. I don’t want to.”

He feels his pulse in his throat, his hands. “Territoriality, then.”
Her voice goes from throaty to ragged to road rash as she speaks, as words start to tumble out of her like the keystone’s been pulled. “If you gave me an hour, I could maybe pack this feeling away, save it for later when I need to destroy something, but you keep standing there like it makes no goddamned difference that I was so. fucking. WRONG about this damned thing that I nearly lost at MY OWN GAME.”

He sits down on the rug so he’s looking up at her now. She’s seething righteous fury, glassy-eyed and red webs of capillaries burning through her translucent complexion, but it’s anger at herself. He gets it, but it hurts to look at. “Natasha.”

She closes her eyes, angling her head down, her breathing ruthlessly even and painfully ragged.

“You failed.” He wants to touch her, but she’s on a hair trigger for something and he knows how easily all of that energy can shift into violence instead. Violence is easier. “But, here’s the key point you’re glossing over in your rush to take total responsibility for a clusterfuck we were all part of: you had a safety net.”

Here’s the thing Bruce knows about crying that most men never get to learn--you can cry from anger, and it’s a better option than homicide. So when all of that seething frustration breaks like a storm he doesn’t try to reassure or comfort, because he knows what tears of rage taste like.

She cries soundlessly, in seizing waves where he’s not even sure she’s breathing. For a long moment it will clear, and she’ll wipe her face and breathe like one expecting a hiccup, and then her lips peel back in a grimace and she locks up with it again, face turned downward and rocking in lieu of sobbing.

This much...yes, she would have destroyed her suite if she couldn’t pack it away, but where the hell would it go? Instead she came here.

There’s a gradient to it; the episodes shorter, the space between lengthening. She’s begun wiping the tears into her hair and drying her hands on her jeans. He’s got a handkerchief in his jacket pocket, that he uses to clean his glasses, and he offers it.

She lets out the first sounds since this started, a short croak of a sob, then a growl of self-disgust. She looks at the square of worn linen, then plucks it from his hand. “You wouldn’t know it,” she begins, voice strained, “but I can cry a lot prettier than this.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he takes in the streaks of hot red outlining her eyes, the whole middle of her face swollen, “so can I.”

Another sound breaks free, the intersection of a sob, a laugh and a hiccup. He waits on the rug to see if there will be a reprise, but she seems to settle instead. Her face is a mess, but he can feel the storm has gone past when she says, voice thick, “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You wanna get a Vesuvius delivered, and then maybe fuck later when my head’s no longer pounding?”

“Sure.” He barks out a harsh laugh, but he also means it. That she can joke, and still ask for normalcy, to find comfort in a routine that’s theirs alone? That’s more than something. He rises to dig his phone out of his pocket, holding his hand out to pull her up from the coffee table. “Let’s get you re-hydrated.”

The couch is just long enough for her to stretch out, soft clothes and bare feet, holding ice cubes
rolled in a washcloth against her swollen eyes. He doesn’t tell her she should actually breathe when she cries, he can well imagine the reasons why she might have learned to be utterly silent.

Bruce takes her empty pint glass and heads to the suite’s intense little kitchen. He refills her ice water and slips a few beers into the freezer. On his way back he spots the shipping box and idly tears open one end, pulling off bubble wrap.

She says, “Oh...huh,” with a cagey look on her face that doesn’t square with the unassuming wood-framed photograph in his hand.

It’s a seascape, desolate and haunting and subtly tinted so it feels on the verge of real. It reminds him of the vague dreamy edginess that accompanies reached-for memories.

“I don’t know how it got here already.” Her voice is quiet. “Radek took it. I saw it at the gallery…”

He looks at her questioningly, and she shifts the ice to rest on her cheekbone. “It was supposed to be a present,” she explains, “Sort of.”

“For…”

“For…” she gestures, at him, the room, at the door. He looks around, frowns a little.

The art on the suite walls is as sleekly modern as the rest of the furniture, pops of color in brushed metal, and a vaguely Soviet propaganda feel in the living room that picks up the color of the rug that he knows is Tony’s other visual pun. He doesn’t want to question the aesthetics, but the picture is kind of a strange choice for the walls, tangible instead of abstract, moving and a little haunting. Even the frame looks out of place here.

She takes a deep breath when it’s clear he’s not getting it.

“It seemed like it might go well on a white wall, someplace with wood floors and sunlight, and actual locks and doorknobs and…” she shrugs, her voice gone a little thready in the trail off, and there’s a flush on her cheek that he could attribute to the ice but he isn’t going to.

She puts the washcloth back on her eyes and he can tell it’s for the distance, which is okay because it’s a gesture, not actually shutting him out. It’s been a big fucking day and he can give her some space to retreat, while his pulse races and he tries to remember how to swallow.

“It’s a reminder,” she says, finally, and he doesn’t question of what. “An idea.”

He sets it gently on the coffee table and nudges her so that she picks up her feet. He sits down on the end of the couch, wrapping hands around her foot and ankle, stroking her instep. He needs to ground himself but isn’t sure he can look at her right now, and he thinks maybe that’s why she’s shifted the ice over her eyes; not so much stressed as abashed.

Caution and hope roil in his head. You’re reading too much into this. She says it’s a reminder, an idea. It’s a photograph, Banner. It looks like a postcard from loneliness, looking at the cold sea from safe on the shore. You’re desperate for some kind of answering ping of sentiment. Go ahead and fuck yourself, Banner.

He slips his thumb between her big and smaller toes, tender skin like satin, like the crease of her thigh, the crescent beneath each breast. She lies still, waiting as his mind races, as if her comment about doorknobs was akin to exposing a soft underbelly.

He might be giddy from so much missed disaster, but what’s a fantasy if you can’t bring it out to
He’s been building a house in his head like a meditation focus, a secret security blanket, a souvenir for when he has to hit the road once more...only to find she’s broken into his room and nailed art on his wall. Installed fittings. Lifted the shades.

“What do you think...about those big wooden sleigh beds?” he says. “Or a... a creaky mahogany monstrosity, something with slats?”

“Frankly,” she says, “I’m more interested in shelling out for really good sheets. But keep going, your dirty talk is getting better.”

He slides his hand inside her pant leg, cupping the muscle of her calf, stroking. “Steve thinks a couch is the first big purchase.”

She rubs her free foot along his hip, and there’s something very sweet in her tone when she says, “Yes, but Steve thinks a couch is just for sitting on.”

“There’s a better than average chance that he’ll learn other uses for it. I suspect that Hill is interested in mentorship. Although I did promise Steve I wouldn’t gossip about his love life.”

“Spoilsport.”

She pulls her feet away, puts the washcloth on the floor and shifts so that she’s kneeling beside him.

He’s watching her and she takes his face in her hands, thumbs over his cheekbones. He still hasn’t shaved but she doesn’t seem to mind, and her eyes are dark, red rimmed, face still a little swollen. Even so, she’s remarkably beautiful, focused and solemn like she’s looking straight into him.

“I made a bad call,” she says, and there’s no anger in it, just a kind of shaky sorrow, an acceptance of the situation. “And if you hadn’t been there, if he hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

He covers her hands, stills them. “Natasha… we both…”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to hash this out right now, I just want…” She leans in, lips brushing against his forehead, then gently against his mouth.

“Thank you,” she says, so softly that he feels it more than hears it, and he pulls her to him, and she sinks into his arms, burying her face against his neck, curling into him as he tightens his grasp. She wraps her own arms around him, one knee astride his lap, and the force increases as if they could pop their rib cages together like two bubbles merging.

Bruce can feel her heart pounding against his chest, and his own breathing goes ragged and harsh. He’s not even sure if it’s a slow wave of panic, or near-miss grief, or just the body dumping stress, it’s hard to breathe with her arms creaking his ribs but he thinks it’s also what’s keeping him together. He shoves his face into her hair and they kind of rock until he settles enough to clear his throat.

Natasha pulls back and sweeps her thumbs under his eyes, and okay, maybe he was just taking his turn. He says, “Hey.”

“Hey.” She gives him a fond wry look, “Had to rub it in, didn’t you, that you cry prettier than I do?”

He shrugs.
Bruce sits across from Maria Hill with a glass of water in front of him, and a pen in his hand which makes him feel like he has some control.

"Typically," she clarifies, "the deal has been you only debrief when it’s you and not...him...who was involved in the op."

Hill is back in the professional dress and makeup that sets her apart from the casual messiness of field work, but it only takes thinking of Steve and pretzels to re-establish the more familiar context. Bruce has no interest in talking to official handlers, but he’s willing to extend Hill a favor while investigating honesty with himself.

"I’m not sure it’ll count as a debrief," he says, sips the water. "But you all saw the tail end, the aftermath, and I can fill in more gaps than normal. It seems fitting that I do this with you."

Hill waits until he nods, then begins recording.

He takes a deep breath, recapping a bit from where the more formal report he’d written ends. "Natasha--Agent Romanoff and I went into the woods to follow up on a lead. After some time at the location, we discovered we were being watched. Agent Romanoff borrowed a motorcycle from the compound, and engaged in pursuit. Shortly after we got to the road we encountered Dragana Kadlecova. She was armed, and I identified the weapon as the gamma projector that had killed several people over the past few months."

Maria’s eyes narrow, keen.

He takes another breath. "Ms. Kadlecova threatened Agent Romanoff, and indicated that if I left I’d be spared. I chose...not to. I determined that there was no way to prevent injury to Romanoff on my own. Presumably, she understood what kind of backup she’d brought."

"How did you identify the weapon in the field? In your previous reports you’d declined to speculate on what the gamma source would look like." Hill’s hands are interlaced in front of her, thumbs working slow circles of thought. "The reconstructed model doesn’t look sturdy enough to fire wiffle balls. It could have been a bluff."

This conversation feels like a bluff, and he finds he wants to share his edginess with Hill, make her just as uncomfortable. "You’re asking how I knew the threat was real."

"Yes. I’d like to know events from your perspective, but I’m more interested in understanding your thought process in the field."

"I could say it was an educated guess by a trained eye. That would also be true." Bruce leans forward a little, leading with the chin, "But I didn’t have to look. It was leaky. I could smell it."

"The gun?"

"The gamma. At a certain point...I can sense a greater spectrum of EM, and it translates as scent."

Hill reaches for her pen, clicking the point a few times, taking the information in or maybe giving him time to deal.

"So I...let the Other Guy out." He’s admitting to a level of control he’s only ever shown in public during the Battle of New York, and only to his team a few times in practice runs at a decommissioned proving ground upstate.
“At a certain point, you said.” He gives her points for cool. “So you were already at that point when you were smelling the radiation.”

“His interest was piqued.”

“Chum in the water?”

He makes himself sit back, take a drink of water. “That’s not why the Other Guy showed up.”

“Then why?”

Bruce can let the transformation wash over him, yes, but in this case Bruce called him...asked him to do something he himself couldn’t. He...gave over choice because it was better than the alternative. “I shoved him out.”

The knowledge that he would do it again? Every time, in the same circumstance? He will have to live with that, because it is truth. They both will. Not so compassionate when it comes to threats to his own.

“He was able to get in front of Agent Romanoff and prevent her death by absorbing the radiation flash. He...eliminated the immediate threat, and secured the weapon. Afterward, there was a brief window where he could communicate...more clearly than normal. I think that accounts for my increased recall as well.”

Maria writes a scrawl of word fragments ending in a fish hook of a question mark.

“He...I,” Bruce swallows hard. “I killed that young woman.”

Maria puts her pen down and looks at him. “You don’t know then?”

“Know what?” He arches an eyebrow. “I know what he did. The choice I made.”

Hill’s mouth is flat, and there’s a level of compassion in her eyes that he’s guessing doesn’t often see the light of day. "Officially, Agent Romanoff terminated the operative in the field.”

At Bruce’s warily confused look Hill leans forward to elaborate.

“Due to the nature of the mission, Agent Romanoff was authorized for deadly force against known hostiles. Ms. Kadlecova’s injuries were extensive, but with likely enhancements…” Hill shrugs. “Agent Romanoff employed a blade. In her assessment, it was to be sure—to be quick and merciful, and as you say, eliminate the threat.”

“I see.” Of course she did, he thinks, and the tender upswell of love and sorrow wraps him like a blanket. You became the monster to protect the princess, but she’s always been a knight, he thinks, and she protected you by becoming monstrous. That for Natasha, mercy means death, is not lost on him. Bruce clears his throat, pushes past the horrifying pride. “With the gamma source secured, we made our way to the jet.”

“Well, that’s the bulk of it, in summary.” Hill says. “Any other details stick out?”

Bruce lets out a long exhale. He tucks his arms across his chest and shakes his head, signalling the debrief’s denouement.

“So you don’t remember him calling for radiation containment?”

“Tony?”
“The Other Guy.” Hill offers the correction with a dismissive wave, leaning forward on her elbows, “What about your hand, anything about the injury? He had concerns about standing down before it healed—were you aware of that?”

His arms pull apart, adrift. “...what?”

“Your scar, Banner.” Hill looks pointedly at his hand, until he opens it and makes the smooth patch visible. “He kept that hand clenched tight around the gamma source and requested Stark come with containment. It pulled a chunk of skin off when Stark shoved it in the lead bottle. Dr. Cho reports it was a full thickness burn, with evidence of tendon contracture.”

Bruce remembers his hand aching on the jet.

“He stuck around until it healed. As your captain, I can tell you he was perfect gentleman on his leg of the flight, though understandably bitchy about the voice in his head.”

**Defeating the Incredible Sulk**

Bruce has the option of looking up Tony’s post-Denton report, but at this point it feels like the wrong tack to take. He heads down to the RadLab.

Past the massive doors of the ARC, he can hear the sound system booming until he’s a foot from the door, when it dials down to a sane volume due to his proximity. Inside, he slides open the leaded glass door to the heart of the lab.

Tony’s already there setting up equipment to work on the guts of the gamma gun. “Morning, sunshine. Didn’t expect you until after noon, you know, jet lag, Hulk lag.”

“Yeah, the lack of daylight made the time difference less of an issue than you’d think.” Bruce puts his hands away in his pockets and watches until Tony’s tightened all the bolts on the access plate. “About the other thing…”

"The other..."

“Guy.”

Tony straightens and twirls the socket wrench thoughtfully, a habit he’s picked up recently from Luz. “You want to talk about him?”

“Not really, no.” Bruce shrugs. “But I’m...beginning to suspect...I’m ignoring data.”

Tony stops spinning the wrench and widens his eyes for a second, not surprise but another version of yeah, no shit, Banner.

“So.” Bruce takes a slow deep breath in the pause Tony’s letting spin out. “Tell me what happened in Denton.”

“JARVIS, call up suit cam files--”

“No footage. Not yet.”

Tony shakes his head, tossing the wrench onto a workbench in such a careful ballistic curve that it lands better than most airplanes and slides barely an inch. “You haven’t watched any of it, then.”

“The problem is, I may not have enough objectivity to...see what others see.”
“First up—you don’t. There’s no maybe about that. You’re stuck in that damned presentation you did for the kids, which was an impressive piece of slander—I know from slander—and years out of date.”

Tony strolls over to a niche in the corner and pulls a smoothie cup from the small fridge. He turns and gives Bruce a long look while he sips, gauging how his words have landed. “I’d add libel, but your slides are so minimalist.”

Bruce eases the fists in his pockets, pushing his shoulders back.

“You okay, there?” Tony slams down half the smoothie, licking his lips. “You want to pick a safe word?”

“No.”

“No.” Tony echoes, then grabs a tablet and shoves it at Bruce, gesturing to the seating space off to the side. “Well you can work on this, then.”

Bruce sits down on the couch, hyper aware of the fact that the last time he sat on this one, he was naked and so was Natasha, standing in front of him as she gathered her clothes, having come to an uneasy truce about this very subject. That if she hadn’t pushed him, forced him to bend a little, had the Other Guy almost literally in her back pocket in Prague, she’d have been killed by the very gun he’s down here to analyze.

He’s extremely unused to feeling like he’s inhabiting the best case scenario, that he’s come through an incident unscathed, much less been given a boon.

He turns to the tablet, which displays scans of the gamma gun pieces, some of the parts twisted from being held in his own massive fist. He skates his fingertips on the glass, graphically untwisting them so the pieces can fit back together. A thermal cup is set on the side table, and he didn’t even know there were tea things in this lab.

Tony’s turned away like he doesn’t want to be caught. He claps his hands and announces, “Story time!”

Bruce whispers to himself, “Yay.”

“Things got hot in Texas—not technically true, things got chilly and damp and tornado-y in Texas. But you were cool, you were okay. Then the defensive shield went up and you asked for a piece of the action.”

Bruce doesn’t remember that. He remembers the dust kicking up and the ozone smell on the breeze, remembers watching the school he’d only seen once before while sitting next to Natasha in a rental car. He’d hung back with ground command because he’d only planned on watching.

A notification pops up on the tablet. It’s Tony’s stand-down report, using the standard headers that Natasha wrote up back when they first went to Franklin Proving Ground to develop the protocol.

**MOBILIZATION**

-----Antecedents: Subject at low boil b/c mission was taking forever. Also, cranky from weather like everyone else. Precipitating factors include: humidity, proximity to Clint Barton, and being in Texas. Subject at baseline is kind of an asshole, in the best way possible. Triggers include witnessing a setback in the mission, and a conscious decision to enter the fight.

“You got antsy, asked Cap to give you something to do. Barton painted you a picture to keep in
“Okay.” Bruce takes a drink, just a shade too hot, and he holds it against his teeth until it won’t burn his tongue. “On purpose, then.”

Tony looks at him sharply. “You know...just a suggestion from past experience...it might behoove you to try a little harder to fill in the gaps when you black out. Just saying.”

“It’s not...I remember some of it.” He remembers scraping fistfuls of clay and pounding through rock, the sharp acid feel of electricity below the ground and in the sky. He recalls a whole lot more of the basement, afterward, reeling her back like a kite gone too high and threatening to snap its string. “I always remember some of it.”

“Right, like you always remember what the IMAX movie was about.”

“I don’t always fall asleep.”

Tony doesn’t even dignify that, just goes on where he left off, “Once you took out the shield you eventually surfaced and wandered toward staff parking. Made a mess, but deliberately where no one could get hurt.”

-----**Behaviour:** Subject achieved mission objective with zero injuries, casualties or damage to allied materiel. And can we take the extra U out of behavior, Romanoff? I feel like I’m writing with my pinky finger sticking out.

-----**Consequences:** Subject exited the situation, removing himself to a non-populated area and restricting himself to collateral property damage. Subject may have been attempting a cool down, or perhaps misses Hot Wheels.

**STAND-DOWN**

-----**Antecedents:** Mission parameters changed and subject’s other skill sets were required, namely, ability to safely enter occupied buildings, squishy biological knowledge of super soldier enhancement, and familiarity with Agent Romanoff.

“We got to Romanoff, but she was in a bad way, out of it, armed--”

“I remember going into the basement. I know what happened from then on out.”

“That’s the magic trick, frankly; she came back from Texas calmer than she went in.”

“Back to the parking lot.” Bruce elides with a wave.

“Hill put out a call for you. I was the nearest, so I gave it a shot.” Tony drops down into the chair next to the couch, head back and lolled to the side to look at Bruce. “I just talked with him.”

“You,” he repeats, “you just talked to him.”

“With.” Tony corrects. “He’s not chatty--it pretty much boiled down to being annoyed I wasn’t Romanoff--but he took in the info, and made a rational decision to let you take back the wheel. Thor and I hustled you off into the basement.”

-----**Behaviour:** Subject briefed on situation, and after a demonstration of good faith, subject chose to stand-down in favor of...ah shit, I’m in a corner with this...other subject, I guess?
Bruce makes himself ask, “Good faith?”

“I got out of the Hulkbuster.” Tony’s eyes roll ceiling-ward, as if picturing himself back down on the scrub as the Hulk crouches over him close enough to bite his head off. “Let him sniff me.”

Bruce blows out a slow breath. “That’s...uncomfortable to hear.”

“I was going to put that in the report, but Hill said she wouldn’t accept a scratch n’ sniff addendum.”

“Give her a stale bag of Fritos, it’s the same experience.”

-----Consequences: Successful deployment and retrieval of rage monster. Successful deployment of soulful brainiac and retrieval of BAMF.

~*~

After class with the girls, having spent an hour holding back the fear and anger and not a little shame, Natasha spars with Steve. She wants to sweat and work it out through her muscles, craves the impact, hard and vicious.

It feels good to take a punch, though her self-loathing has dispersed enough she no longer wants to taste her own blood. Steve still treats the session like therapy - carefully calculated hits, and the Power Frown when he connects too hard and knocks some breath out of her. She grins at his discomfort and he shakes his head, “For the record, that smile makes me feel like Red Riding Hood.”

She rushes past his guard, hooking a hand under his armpit to throw herself across his upper back and catch his head between her knees, a riskier move than she usually breaks out for practice, reaching for something to strip herself of the lingering guilt, the flickers of doubt.

Steve drops dead weight while shoving at her hip to pull his head free, rolling back to his feet with, “Careful, Romanoff.”

She feints as he follows through to elbow her, then steps up onto his thigh and backflips off him with a kick to the sternum. He catches her foot as she comes down, smacking her into the mat.

It’s the most satisfying thing that’s happened to her all day.

“This is practice. You don’t need to prove anything.”

She breathes hard, wipes the blood off her mouth from where her lip mashed against her teeth. She rolls to her back and flips up onto her feet. “Bring it, Rogers.”

She parries and goads until he finally stops sparring and starts fighting, although still with restraint, still holding the boundaries, and she appreciates that, it almost feels like a safety line breaking a fall. When they’re done, the split lip and a pleasant ache from physical work in her muscles are the only mementos. It’s almost enough.

But she can admit that she misses Clint more than normal right now, and not just because he’d have just given her that bland expression, said, “It was your turn to fuck up,” let her beat the shit out of her hands, fought back, and then laid on the mat and harassed her into good humor. She hasn’t called Clint since they got back. He hasn’t called her either. She feels stuck in this space, unable to reach out, unable to take up another load because she’s been allowing herself to want things, to feel, and everything is too present, too intense.

She feels scraped raw, and it’s killing her ability to segment herself effectively.
Or rather, she’s having to learn how to do that and still keep Natasha at the surface, instead of pulling back and packing away and blunting it all. Staying present may be necessary, but she’s not enjoying the process so much.

She thinks of the girls, relearning, retraining, retrenching to survive, and knows she can’t do anything less. She knows too, that Steve is just as unwilling to help her punish herself as he is often uncomfortable with her choice to diverge from his orders. She can’t explain the set of calculations that goes into that choice when she makes it, how she has to trust herself first, even as part of a team. But she can re-evaluate what that means. Even in this. She can make an effort all around. Maybe it’s time to apologize here as well.

He’s toweling off his head at the edge of the mat, drinking Gatorade like a commercial, and rubbing at the bruise on his sternum.

She punches him lightly in the arm. “This whole damn city is filled with snot and Christmas. Let’s go do something touristy and ridiculous for the holidays,” she says. “We can shop, maybe.”

He gives her an eyebrow, but then his face evens out. “Do they still skate in the park?”

“Wow, you don’t do things halfway. That is the ultimate tourist holiday destination.”

His face is impassive. **Vulnerabilities**, she thinks, **restitution. You can survive tourists.**

“Okay, we’ll skate. Or watch. We can at least watch.”

They end up watching, uninterested in moving through the long line and the crowd, but there is a quiet wistfulness on Steve’s face as he tracks the people gliding, bumping into each other, trying for graceful, but instead achieving an infectious joy. They wander over to their usual bench near the zoo, sipping hot chocolate that tastes mainly like scalding hot water.

He’s got a fleck of chocolate on his face, and it’s endearing in the same way his cheerful lack of reassurance often is, like you could take the kid out of a shitty neighborhood in Brooklyn, but he’ll still cling to small comforts and big moral questions.

“It’s not the same,” he says with finality, “but it’s kind of nice. I used to really like Christmas, even when we didn’t have much. I liked the neighborhood during the holidays. Lots of different ways people celebrated.”

“Christmas wasn’t a Soviet institution. And later...” She has spent many holiday seasons in safe houses and bunkers, in tents and tiny studios. Once she spent it in a luxury hotel in Istanbul, waiting around in a bathrobe for a mark who didn’t show, whom she finally had to go find. To dispatch. “Well...I don’t have many expectations of the holiday season. But I like the trappings.”

A fair share of those holidays were with Clint. She should call him. Steve finishes his drink, takes her empty cup. Continues to sit there.

“Are you,” he pauses, and she waits because she knows that kind of pause from him. “Are things alright?”

Steve had joined her debrief with Maria at the end, when she had talked about Dragana’s death. Natasha has told many such stories, and schooled her voice from habit alone, but never in the case where such a death wasn’t the purpose of her mission. When she’d talked about the uneven flutter of pulse she’d felt, the amount of fluid and matter already on the forest floor, her decision to make that final merciful slash of the knife, Maria had nodded and Steve had winced.
“I will be fine. Things will be fine,” she says, because what other option is there?

He gets that same pained wince on his face now, but covers it up, shifting his hat back and forth as if he were just itchy. He pops to his feet and steps in front of her decisively.

“All right Romanoff. Shopping it is.” He hauls her up, and they head to the Vosges shop to sample their winter truffles and get real hot chocolate.

It isn’t until they get back to the Tower and he brushes snow out of his hair in the lobby that she realizes, somewhere along the way, Steve lost his hat.

~*~

Marisol keeps the results of her recon to a small circle, and only shows the pictures to Aisha, Georgia and Catherine.

They run down Creepo’s electronics parts catalogs and his book titles. They determine his cat, as a large-patch tortoiseshell, must be female. They crack jokes about his pantry. They reconstruct his monthly budget from receipts, pay stubs and a ballpark estimate of rent in his neighborhood.

Catherine hangs from the top bunk, swinging from her knees. “So he’s definitely checking us out, because 68% of his English book titles are either on our curriculum or in my bookshelf. The remainder skew heavily to biology. The rest?”

Georgia had been working on her Russian since Denton, the only difference being she didn’t have to do it in secret. “Mainly biology books. You didn’t find anything handwritten?”

“Nothing.” Marisol shakes her head. “And the laptop has a password.”

“Then I’m going with you next time.” Aisha crosses her arms and gives Marisol a slow blink. They’ve had this conversation before, and Aisha is using the peer pressure of Catherine and Georgia in the room to get her way this time. “I really want to know what the hell he’s working on.”

“Probably full of porn.” Georgia scoffs, smacking a rhythm on her thighs that Catherine begins to swing to, hair sweeping through the air, “fucking Creepo.”

The two of them rattle off a list of depravities, each more outrageous than the last.

“I’ve seen worse,” Aisha shrugs. “We’ll just add it to the dossier supplement we’re putting together.”

It’s one of the things Marisol likes about Aisha, that steady equanimity. It’s what roused Marisol to her defense back in Denton, seeing Mrs. Gerrish rail against that placidity with escalating horrors that just seemed to slide off the girl like water off a duck. When Gerrish started to eye Mellie as the next plaything, knowing what had happened to the previous discarded toy, that’s when Marisol clipped a few lengths of old phone cord pulled from the wall of her room, and threaded them through the waistbands of her uniform pants. Just in case.

“When are we going back?” Aisha pins down Marisol, pressing her advantage.

“Fine.” Marisol relents, picking a date after this term’s deadlines and exams.

~*~

Bruce is waiting across the street when Natasha gets out of ballet. She misses more classes these days, between the travel and the jet lag, so they’d fallen out of their summer habit of meeting up after
exercise. The sun is just high enough over the horizon to wash the blue from the eastern sky, but he’s clearly done a few miles of running before getting the cups of hot tea in his gloved hands.

They’ve been leaving the weightier subjects fallow for the last few days since the post-Prague freakout, still raw, still very tentative about where they now stand. The seascape she’d given him is now on his dresser, propped against the wall, presiding over where he sets his wallet at night.

He hands her a cup.

“You shouldn’t jog when it’s icy like this,” she says before taking it.

“Sidewalks are mostly clear.”

“You say that.” She sips, hot and strong and sweet. “I made a hit in Milwaukee without lifting a finger, brained himself in his own driveway while hurrying to get the mail in his slippers.”

“One less black mark, though, right?” He offers his arm and she hooks hers through.

“I hadn’t obtained everything I needed from him yet. Took me another six weeks of infiltration to get the bare bones of what he’d bashed against a curb.”

“Frustrating.” He shakes his head. “So I take it you’re not done with me yet?”

“Just be more careful.”

“Right back atcha, Romanoff.”
Chapter 15

Nailing Stockings with Care

“Though Hitchcock’s films often had romantic elements, they were never traditional.” Pepper only sounds slightly defensive about her film choice. “So even while Frances and John seem pretty courtly on the surface, there is some interesting weirdness playing out as *To Catch a Thief* unfolds.”

She’d debated even hosting a class this close to Christmas, but no one had objected and summer in the French Riviera seemed like a good way to celebrate the season of red noses and dirty slush in New York. “Hitchcock was a master filmmaker,” she says, “despite an unhealthy obsession with icy blondes.”

“How can that possibly be unhealthy?” Tony asides to no one in particular.

“Despite the polish of new money, Frances is very much her mother’s daughter, seeking risk, seeing past the surface. While John represents all that society says she shouldn’t have a part of, or even want: danger and sexuality, risk and adventure. John’s cover, the fact he has a dual identity, it gives her a chance to create her own dual identity, to retain the physical illusion of icy perfection, remain the polished heiress, but to also be more than a trophy, to get what she wants out of life for herself. Frances doesn’t want to be the jewel, she wants to be the thief--but she’ll settle for wearing the costume, as long as she can be seen for who she really is when she takes it off.”

The discussion after is more animated than she’d expected, touching on John’s poor burglary skills, the age difference between John and Frances, whether John had more chemistry with her mother Jessie, whether John should or shouldn’t have trusted his friends from the war.

Khadijah doesn’t understand Frances’ sense of betrayal when Jessie’s jewels go missing, if she knew she was playing with fire. “She seems like a little kid, while John and Jessie are the adults.”

“Sometimes, what you want is more difficult than you expected. It asks more of you. It feels like a terrible mistake because it’s changing your whole life, and that’s scary because you can’t control it.” Pepper shuts Tony up preemptively with a flick of her eyes in his general direction. “People get weird when that happens, they lash out. Especially if they’ve done it to themselves, which Frances did, which is why I think this film still speaks to me.”

“Perhaps you could address Frances’ agency?” Natasha speaks up from where she’s pressed against Bruce, hands interlaced and heads leaned against each other like teenagers. *Germaine has very sensitive hands, Pepper thinks, and an exceedingly light touch.* “How she played with the perceptions people had of her, how she was the one who pursued Robie?”

“Well yes, good question.” Natasha had watched Pepper break apart when she took control of SI, when Tony sailed off the rails and nearly into oblivion, saw her strap herself together as she loosed and brushed and pulled and smoothed her ponytail back into place in a stolen moment between screaming C-suite meetings, saw her press her forehead to cool marble in the guest bathroom at the Malibu house, the counter gritty with coke and the sound system rumbling through the concrete. Saw her smile, and stand her ground, and come out the other side of it not just with the company she’d aimed to save, but some weird kind of love where Tony Stark went from being her clueless slutty boss to a devoted equal partner.

Pepper is aware that Natasha trolls to show she cares, and to deflect from whatever she and Banner are currently working through--she’d heard Prague was a shitshow, but there they are, the two most
dangerous people living in her tower, nuzzling each other like kittens.

“Well, you have to realize that having Frances be the pursuer, having her play with her own identity to corner John, this was outside the box of what people expected from women characters—unless they were villainous and hence punished, but Frances expressly gets the guy in the end, she gets the hero’s traditional reward.”

Tony raises his glass with a winking grin.

Pepper rolls her eyes. “This is still a revolutionary idea. Some people still can’t handle that a woman can create herself, can choose and go after what she wants, and not be punished for stepping out of bounds, or wanting the wrong thing, for making her own choice. But you know…”

Pepper looks at these girls, these young women who’ve been through hell exactly because they have so much potential, that she’s brought into her tower and sometimes lets herself think might be one of her legacies, “Fuck those people.”

~*~

The Christmas tree and string quartet anchor the far corners of the grand ballroom, colleagues and investors circulating with pleasant ease as if born in formal wear. Bruce leans against the glass railing of the balcony to look down at the party.

He is somewhat cheered that the high-powered guests gravitate to the buffet and bar just as quickly as academics ever did.

Bruce has let himself be wrangled into a retailored hand-me-down tuxedo from Tony, mostly as a favor to Pepper since he should put in an appearance as a Researcher in Residence at SI. He feels silly in it, silk socks and bracers, a bow at his throat Natasha had tied with a smirk. Dressed like a doll. The waistcoat sports a borrowed pocket watch, since he busted the band of his wristwatch hulking out in Prague.

Natasha’s down on the dance floor wearing the candy floss dress and strange silver heels she keeps in her one box of personal belongings. Ice blue chiffon drifts just past her knees, sparkling snowflakes hold back her hair, and blue topaz glitters from her wrist and neck.

He smiles, remembering her pleasure as she put it all together; even the small touches are all her.

“Did you know most of these topaz were irradiated to turn them blue?”

“Are you suggesting that’s what happened to me?”

“Dunno, doc; are you blue?”

He shakes his head again now, this time in admiring disbelief. She wears the outfit like she's playing the crowd, but it's a feint of a feint. It looks like a cover and isn’t. It’s a small, rare piece of her, hidden in plain view.

She is chilly and glacial and sharp; soft and hot to the touch if she lets you close.

His heart squeezes at the sight, knowing he’s likely the only one who knows what he’s seeing. It’s so heady -- all her dualities, costuming creating multiple layers of identity, taking advantage of expectation.

Steve is wearing a uniform that looks more like a costume than his actual Captain America get-up,
and he’s leading Natasha through a waltz that Bruce recognizes from helping Steve rehearse.

They look like the kid’s version of Cinderella, something he remembers watching with his cousin when she was little, in a rare instance of babysitting. If Cinderella were a redhead and giving the prince a ration of shit as he whirled her around the ball. Bruce can tell by the way Steve holds his mouth and gets a little ahead of the music, that he’s irritated in a way that also betrays a certain amount of affection.

Bruce doesn’t love Christmas, but he doesn’t hate it either, and he knows that neutral is ahead of the game compared to some. He’s pretty sure none of them have fond holiday memories, which explains the oversize tree, the company party, the potluck Tony keeps threatening them with. Overcompensating like mad to get the fuck over shitty memories, to purposefully pave over the expectation of family cheer with something new, something found, something theirs.

“We should mold them from marzipan, put them in a little box like the jubilee figurines,” Pepper says, but there’s no rancor in her voice. “All that human perfection.”

He laughs, and she hands him a glass of champagne with bright cranberries in the bottom. She wears a dark green dress fitted over her slender form, velvet he thinks, because details sink in even if he doesn’t really care about fabrics. He vaguely remembers Tony talking at length about commissioning a piece with a set of matched aquamarines and the shrapnel from his thoracic surgery, which had sounded like a kid’s found object art project to him.

The effect of gems the color of Pepper’s eyes shining from twisted shards polished smooth, now laying centimeters away from her heart catches Bruce by surprise, the hard poetry of it.

It occurs to him he’s also been handed metal wrenched out of flesh, Natasha so casual you could almost overlook her watchful eyes as he rolled the bullet that went through her in his palm. At the time he hadn’t fully realized the trust and love laid bare in that gesture, letting him touch it, exposing what it was—that she had no explanation for why she’d kept it, and she offered no ready deflecting lie, just...vulnerability. That it now hides at the back of a closet they share is almost brutally appropriate. He swallows some champagne and Pepper turns to lean over the rail, giving him a moment.

She’s lovely and graceful, and shrewd. He likes Pepper best when she’s shrewd.

“Those shoes,” she says, nodding down at Natasha and sighing with playful envy. “They’re vintage. Schiaparelli. I can never wear vintage. They’re always too small.”

This is what he knows about vintage: when Natasha moved her whole wardrobe into his closet they’d ended up fucking with her wearing only those shoes, and they’d done it on the floor since the dress was laid out on the bed because the fabric needed to breathe.

“The box they live in is covered in warning stickers,” he says and laughs because when he’d asked about them, she’d said Clint gave her the stickers when she pulled a gun on him for touching the box. The shoes she’d bought in London on a mission, but expressly not for the mission. “Biohazard and radiation trefoils plastered on a shoe box in our closet.”

“You two,” Pepper says, raising a perfect brow, “so domestic...”

He’s occupied trying not to snort champagne.

“It surprises me sometimes, I suppose.” Pepper shakes her head, turning to look at Bruce. She’s agitated, and working her way toward the topic. “I don’t always know how to think about it. But
then, I rarely know how to think about Tony, and I live with him.”

Bruce doesn’t tend to offer touch to others unless he’s sure of the outcome. That hasn’t really changed, but he reaches out to Pepper’s wrist, fairly certain she won’t pull away. They’re friends, mutual interests drawing them together, and he’s still touched by her being concerned about him if he ever had to go into the ARC. She settles a bit, and her smile is genuine.

“The holidays are complicated for everyone. We’re going to California.” She pauses. “You...I don’t like the idea of you being alone here at Christmas. You could come with us. Both of you, of course.”

The awkwardness warms Bruce more than anything. The holiday is clearly personal for Pepper, though so distant for the rest of them. She’s too kind not to make the offer, and too true to herself to pretend it’s anything she wants.

“I’ll ask Natasha,” he says, “but I think you’re safe.”

She sighs. “Tony is at his...Toniest at the holidays, around my family. I truly wouldn’t mind a buffer, but I suspect it would actually make things worse.”

He has met her parents, briefly. They are bright, blond, ambitious people, proud of and baffled by their daughter; they do not have her edge. He thinks she has sisters, nieces maybe, there are photos in her office. He can’t picture Tony in the midst of all that pale buttoned-up earnestness, much less imagine how Natasha would play it. “I suspect you’re right.”

He’d lost track of Natasha while talking to Pepper, so the hand on his ass is more of a surprise than it normally would be. She slides it around to primly rest in the crook of his arm, and as he bends his elbow and covers her hand with his own he feels both dashing and like an asshole. She squeezes his arm, reassurance. He would slip away to let her talk with Pepper, but they refrain from business or intrigue, and Natasha holds him fast until the small talk dance concludes and Pepper excuses herself.

“She invited us to the holidays.” Bruce turns to face her, stepping in close. “I gave a tentative decline.”

“Good call.” In her tall heels she’s nearly eye to eye, and hers are glittering more than the snowflakes in her hair.

“She finds us surprisingly domestic.” Natasha’s waist is hot through the layers of chiffon, and the complicated underwear required by the dress that has been alluded to but is yet unseen, commissioned from a corset-maker whose website was a fount of trashy rockabilly soft porn. He’s not sure what it says about him, that he finds it just as arousing that she’d commissioned it special just like she does her holsters.

“Does she?” Her legs are covered in silk, and the slide of one knee along the wool of his trouser leg is a raspy, delicate sound that goes straight to his dick. Wanting her near, wanting his hands on her, had been a nearly unbearable pull since Prague, matched by these stretches of quiet, comfortable need.

“Mmm.” He slides a fingertip over her collarbone, barely touching, tracing down her arm, delicately back up. “We could go somewhere though. If you wanted. I don’t know if it matters to you.”

Her eyes slide to the side with that calculating head tilt, “Well there is this one place...I’ve been thinking about it for a while now…”

He’s intrigued, knowing she doesn’t have any nostalgia or romance about the holidays. “Do tell.”
She doesn’t. Instead she straightens his bow tie and says, “That thing you do, where you fade into the background and slip away?”

Even though it’s true and the lack of judgement in her voice is clear, he still wants to deny it.

She presses her lips against a smile. “Meet me in the kitchen, give me ten minutes.” She lifts his nearly empty champagne flute and rolls the cranberries into her mouth, and as she bites into them his mouth waters with empathetic tartness.

It occurs to Bruce that she hadn’t specified which kitchen, but he figures she didn’t mean the industrial kitchen full of caterers, or the lab bench kitchenette in their suite. He works his way to the floor above, which is laid out on a more human scale and has the kitchen where the team’s cooking rota is enacted several times a week.

The hood light above the stove is the only illumination, and he doesn’t see her there waiting for him, leaning back against the butcher block, until she asks, “Do you remember when we played poker with Pepper and the team?”

This was just after Denton, when they were still circling each other with intent and strange reluctance. She’d break into his room in the middle of the night and cling hot along his back, but leave early in the morning before he woke up. They’d groove and neck in every surveillance blind spot she’d identified, but it went no farther while any of the rest of the team were in residence, and they hadn’t taken it off site, either. It had been like waiting for auspicious conditions to start a new venture, biding their time until they’d had the place to themselves. Poker night had happened near the end, when he’d been useless with wanting her. “I remember that Thor plays by Culver University strip poker rules.”

She hops up backward to sit on the butcher block and smirks. “That all?”

Bruce laughs, recalling his remark about wishing for an alien invasion so they could fuck right there in the kitchen. “We worked around the lack of aliens.”

She leans forward, arms braced at her sides and feet swinging, futuristic silver shoes flashing in the light from the side. “And yet, this butcher block remains pristine.”

He scratches his forehead, “I ah...forgot I’d shared that one with you.”

“I was impressed by your recon skills.” The icy perfection she’s wearing tonight, a subtle nod and a tease, has him breathless. Especially now, contrasting with the warmth she opens up for him. “And I’ve been thinking about it since then.”

He’s close enough now that he can confirm the block is indeed at the perfect height for them both. “Really?” Now that she’s stopped swinging her feet he slides a hand up her calf and jokes, “So this is the place you wanted to go for the holidays?”

She runs her teeth over her lip, eyes soft, “Yes.”

Bruce feels like he’s missing something here, like the key of the scene might be transgressive, but it’s not about getting caught or she wouldn’t have waited for the party when it was deserted. It’s not about reminiscing, because while Natasha is surprisingly poetic in a viciously pragmatic way, she is not a romantic. It’s not even about the antique oak block, which is slightly concave under her ass from generations of knives--though, God, the resonance of that one is charged for him in a way he’s not really comfortable analyzing.

“Why here?” He brushes his fingers along the hem of her dress, slowly pushing it up so the chiffon
bunches above the line of her stocking and a strip of pale tender flesh.

She shakes her head, and he can hear the unsaid lie of I don’t know. He slips a few fingers into the hem of her stocking, wanting to tease and draw her out. She wraps silk clad legs around his hips and pulls him flush against where she perches on the edge of the block.

“Natasha?”

Her fingers catch a free end of his bow tie and she unknots it, opening his collar and smoothing her hand around his neck before meeting his eyes. “Don’t people fuck in their kitchens?”

Her thumb is nervously circling just under his jaw, but she waits for him to respond. He discards reflexive pedantry: technically their kitchen is the little efficiency in their suite, but the two of them really do more cooking in this one; people don’t specifically fuck in their kitchens, but he knows couples have been consecrating their houses with sex since before Roman times. He ignores the pulse in his throat, tries to tease, “Domestic kink?”

She’s popping the studs on his shirt with a concentration like she’s breaking into a safe. Since they returned from Prague they hadn’t talked any more about the house, about the future, silently agreeing to shelve it for a few days while the rest of the world enacted a holiday frenzy.

It’s just above a breath, “I want…” and Bruce has to lean in closer to hear her, and while it’s a technique older than dirt he thinks maybe she’s not using it on that level, that the thoughtful twitch of her lips is her pushing through a genuine discomfort and an additional heat flushes through him at her effort. “I want you to show me what you had in mind that night. And after that…”

“…yes?” He prompts, letting her pull him closer by the waistcoat she’s unbuttoning.

“Look under.” There’s a black tactical bag under the butcher block. “Do you trust me?”

The question is clearly meant to fuck with him, since the bag is ominously stuffed, so his answer is to sidestep the topic by kissing her, hand high on the curve of her thigh, toying with a satin ribbon he can feel against his thumb as she keeps hold of the vest.

What he had in mind that night was like any of his fantasies, a flash of impulse both visual and tactile, with no real context, just noting a sturdy hip height surface and picturing what her face might look like as he pushed into her. Frankly it’s still a rough sketch, but it works better because now he does know what she looks like, how her eyes go narrow and her breath hitches. When he withdraws slightly so he can look at her, he knows exactly how her cheeks will have colored, her lower lip almost a pout, how he’ll be unable to resist going back for more of a taste of her mouth.

Natasha fills in backstory like a compulsive doodler, and it’s clear she’s been elaborating on his offhand comment, though. Even before she reaches for the side zipper of her confection of a dress, her breathing is rough and quick, her lips cool with it as the rest of her radiates heat and the spice of her perfume riding along the humidity of her skin.

The zipper parts to reveal black satin with a sheen like a raven wing, and he sees the ribbons and snaps holding up her stockings are emerald green. He bites his lip, thinks of medieval knights and livery. Marks of ownership and fidelity, all drawn with that wry, devious humor. He doesn’t mind his favors being claimed in this case. She slips his jacket from his shoulders and with a deft flick it lands across the back of one of the dining chairs. His waistcoat follows, and she’s pulling on his braces like reins.

“I have to admit, it was not a complicated fantasy,” he says against her neck, working the delicate
straps from her shoulders to clear a path for his mouth, “just opportunistic.” She works the dress out from under her and he gathers it, takes a moment to lay it out over his jacket.

She says, “Take the rest off.”

He turns to object—a furtive fuck is one thing, but he’s given up public nudity these days—and sees Natasha perched there like the perfect counter argument, flushed warm, red hair and sparkles and black satin trimmed with green. The corset sits at her waist, framing her pale belly and offering up her bared breasts as if in lacy egg cups. Completing it are tiny green panties with a black rad symbol centered over her mons.

“Hilarious.”

“I thought so. Now give me a show.”

When he pulls off the tie, she runs a hand up her own thigh. Dress shoes and silk socks are met with her bracing one heel up on the block, betraying her easy flexibility, and shifting the other knee, showing him where the satin is darkened where she’s wet. He takes his time, drawing it out for her, folding each piece and setting it on the kitchen chair. She’s biting her lower lip, fingers slipping along the ribbons of the stockings with edgy anticipation.

When he looks back at her from setting the shirt down, she’s pulled the bread knife from the magnetic strip mounted on the wall behind her. She leans back and slips it between her hip and the side string of the panties, then with a whisper the serrated blade cuts through and she tosses the knife back onto the magnet.

His voice is rough, “Was that necessary?”

“Take your pants off and find out,” she says, low and jagged, though she’s already touching herself.

Now he’s naked in Stark’s kitchen, the floor below filled with guests and team mates dancing formally to a string quartet, and he’s so hard and so keyed up he doesn’t care if all of them filed in to watch them. He pads over to this woman, drawn like falling into a gravity well, searing through miles of atmosphere until it’s just the impact of them coming together.

She pulls him in, hot hands and happy smirk and her fancy shoes digging into the cheeks of his ass.

He pauses, flush to her body, slick tight heat and the scent of her mind-blowing. One hand supports her lower back to keep the angle and he flexes a little, gets an answering whimper, a flutter of internal muscles urging him to keep going, but he needs a moment. He brushes his mouth against her throat, her cheek, her ear.

"This," he says, thrusts a little, "it's better. Every time, it's better than any of those fantasies."

She wraps an arm around his neck and pulls him tight, nodding as she stares at his mouth. They're breaking rules and boundaries and a few tiny taboos that neither of them are much bothered by, but what delights him is that it's her wanting something, giving him something, and he wants to revel in that. He wants to drown in the heat and lust and desire he has for her, the answering beats of love and curiosity drumming as well, driving the sensations higher.

She digs nails against his side, kissing him fiercely, and then rubs her cheek up his and bites his ear. "More," and it's a gasp and an order and a plea. He gives in with a short huff of laughter, grips her tightly in return and offers up more.

The butcher block is indeed sturdy, but toward the end the wooden legs bark along the stone floor,
her voice in his ear hitching as she says, “Domestic kink--fuck--you’re my domestic kink.”

She’s watching him fuck her as she works her clit, and he lets her nipple go with a wet sipping sound and looks down as well. His fingers catch in the discarded panties circling her thigh like a ragged garter, and he wraps the satin tighter against the hard tensed muscle, just a little more leverage. Her fingers speed up and she comes silently, clutching at his hip hard enough to bruise, and his intentions of lasting are shattered as he follows her.

There’s no place to rest on the block, a downside he hadn’t considered. Her legs shake when she stands, waving off his offered hand. She digs out the tactical bag and sets it on the block while he leans against the counter, sweaty and still half hard, and idly wonders what the hell he’s in for.

“Put the kettle on,” she orders.

He fills it and clicks it on, and gets a chest full of plush white something when he turns back around. It shakes out into a bathrobe, monogrammed BB, which is no less puzzling when he sees she’s now entirely naked and stowing their formal wear into the tactical bag.

“I’m...definitely missing something here.”

She straightens, pulling on her own inky black bathrobe, the sparkling snowflakes still in her hair. “I want a cup of tea.”

He stands there, robe in hand.

“...with you.” She draws a breath, hand fisted around one of the robe ties. It hangs open, framing her from throat to fiery bush, and it’s the most naked she's ever looked. “Not in a diner, or in the place where we cook and anyone can come in, or where we have to wear pants, or our play-sized kitchenette.”

“But in a place where we could fuck and grab a snack and do as we pleased.”

“Yeah,” she says, “a place like that.”

**Yule Figure It Out**

Bucky switches the station again, and his headphones turn blue to match Gigi’s.

The group they’ve been touring with has ended in a small bar, color-coded groups of people listening to the same station dancing together, some people doffing their headphones for conversation.

He’s dialed the sound down as far as it will go, passing off his reticence and lingering sobriety as a consequence of his alluded to military background and a desire to be the designated safety net for the evening. He’s a good dancer, a better listener, and Gigi’s been down lately and maybe not so picky about company. It’s offered him an in.

The Blue DJ is spinning Top 40, which is too high-pitched for his taste, but he’ll ride it out. Gigi is getting handsy but hasn’t copped a feel, just hanging off him like an affectionate pet. Touch starved. Bucky can’t recall where he heard that phrase, but it rings true, unsettling, and he’s dead sober and can’t escape noticing that he’s shoving his right side toward her not just to make sure she doesn’t feel the metal arm through his layered shirts, but also because she’s warm and welcoming.

The drugs have pushed her into an open smiling mood, which is what she was aiming for, an easing and then an erasing of the stress and tension that had made her so brittle and taciturn even Dave felt he had to express concern.
She leads him to a sofa tucked away at the side of the bar, dropping down into the space between his chest and arm and settling in. She pulls his headphones off, and while she has explained the chemical action of what she’s riding, he’s still struck by the genuine softness in her expression as she leans into him. She rambles, and he listens with the earnestness of a dog being talked to, but the takeaways are that she’s grateful for him as a friend, they aren’t going to fuck, and yeah, she could hook him up if he wanted.

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“Panettone,” Bruce says. “My grandmother used to make it. I think. My mom used to talk about it. Even if it’s apocryphal, I like the idea of it.”

Thor settles onto the bar stool, dwarfing it but eager to learn. Natasha is sitting cross-legged on the butcher block grating citrus into a bowl.

It’s not her rodeo, but she’s enjoying the process. Equally enjoying interfering in it. She’d elected to order rugelach and hamentashen from the bakery down the street in an effort to diversify the pastry offerings.

He’s got on an apron, but the flour is everywhere. His feet are bare, vulnerable and dusted pale, and it’s kind of killing her in this ridiculous way that makes her feel melting and a little sweaty. Natasha herself is clean, having chosen her spot off to the side. Even Thor has a sprinkling on his golden forearms.

She’s pretty sure that it’s going to be a disaster. It’s a complicated recipe with two doughs, which is why Thor is here to learn/supervise. It doesn’t much matter. Process, she thinks, working through something that’s a challenge, that amounts to something in the end. It’s something she likes, and while she spends a fair amount of time watching Bruce do things he’s good at, participating in others, it turns out that watching him plow through a task that he’s less practiced at, but pursues with equal determination, is no less sexy. Sometimes, this thing between them makes her feel brain-damaged. Right now, she’s blaming it on Christmas cheer.

Tony sweeps into the kitchen, perhaps lured by the scent of the different rums they’ve been sampling. “Fruit cake? I mean...fruit cake?”

“We’re in the middle of the Stark-Potts Christmas Extravaganza and this is the holiday tradition that stymies you?”

Tony turns to her and then starts shooing, “Go sit on the regular counters like the alley cat you are, that’s an heirloom.”

“I took my shoes off.” Natasha plants a foot and makes a sweeping turn to settle on the brushed steel counter next to the block, setting the bowl back down and continuing to grate.

“I’m relieved. I’ll tell my great grandmother that when she rises from the grave to kosher slaughter you.”

“Wait, you mean a...personal heirloom,” Bruce states in that hesitant way he has of avoiding laughing darkly. Natasha keeps her eyes pinned on the piece of Buddha hand she’s zesting, but she can see in her peripheral vision Bruce is now kneading with gusto in a familiar rhythm.

“Yes, a fucking personal heirloom.” Tony dumps a small pile of salt on the block and scrubs it clean with a damp hand towel.

“Oops,” Natasha says, and Bruce kneads more vigorously.
“Go back a few generations and the Starks are grocers all the way down. That whole ‘merchant of death’ thing when SI was still deep in weaponry? Both Shakespearean allusion and dog whistle to a certain crowd.” Tony’s eyes go flat the way they do when he’s parsing emotion he doesn’t want to share, “Sometimes I think a big reason Dad married an Italian American is that any kids wouldn’t technically be Jewish, but Catholicism was almost as much of a fuck-you to the East Coast gentry.”

“Interesting gambit.” Thor has been dipping into the PoliSci portion of the Trust curriculum. He nods in thought as he dusts more flour on the pastry marble without even looking. “I think our fathers would have gotten along very well.”

“I’ll take that in the spirit it’s meant,” Tony assures, smacking the dish towel against the wood one last time with a satisfied nod.

“So you keep such a precious object here, where we all share meals?” Thor clarifies. “You do us an honor, Tony.”

“Yes, well.”

“We’re making gingerbread people afterwards,” Natasha offers, by way of apology.

“I’ll be back later to help you eat them,” he accepts.

While the panettone dough rises, they make the gingerbread and recruit Steve for decorating until it’s time for him to head off to dress rehearsal. They send him to the theater with a plate of cookies for each of the kids in his crinoline tent.

It’s the gingerbread people that give her the idea. Those drawings in the ecohouse, the origin place, the very bed Dragana would think of when she talked about being a little girl in the witch’s house. She was spinning a story for Radek, talking to him in his own metaphors, sidling into his worldview...but all good stories are rooted in the real, and Natasha had brushed her fingers through the grooves a little girl had carved into a true place.

A place the young woman had taken Radek, not just to fuck, but to sleep next to in that niche. He’d wanted to become my family.

How much had been true? Did it mean there was another girl out there, buried in the forest loam, or perhaps walking around somewhere in the world, missing her sister? How many others were out there, lives made into prototypes and then discarded, now making their own way?

~*~

Natasha’s in the lab with both Trinh and Peyton the next morning when Bruce rolls in. The chronology of Kudrin’s workshops is unfurled across the room, but in addition to formulae and psychotropic protocols, training and clinical outcomes, additional layers of information have been added. Each point where an individual could be identified now has a spike off the timeline with dossiers and SHIELD datadump documents.

Natasha snorts when she sees him paused by the door.

“It’s not office hours,” Bruce says, eyeing the sole cookie clutched in his hand, “or I’d’ve brought enough for the rest of the class.”

“It’s Romanoff’s office hours.” Peyton says, dragging a file and docking it on the timeline. “Are you going to eat that poor gingerbread man as another demonstration?”
Trinh snickers.

“Play nice,” Natasha chides, taking his hand and biting the head off the cookie as she passes him on her way to the end of the timeline. “It’s not a gingerbread tank after all.”

Bruce mumbles into a bite of cookie, playing it up a little, “I don’t eat them.”

Peyton brings him up to speed, glancing more at Natasha than him. “Financials indicate that Dragana Kadlecova had been employed by GenyCo for years as a middling entry level clerk, stable but no promotions, no nothing. After Lozen was taken down, things shift. She ditches the roommates, dismantles the first labs, and the suspiciously convenient deaths begin. She’d been taken out of storage.”

Trinh’s melodic voice sounds like a vengeful angel, “They were cutting their losses. Shelving the project for later.”

“Problem was,” Peyton pulls up a series of crime scene photos, escalating destruction and violence, “they had to open up the books for her to do the job. Whatever peace she’d made with what was done to her, was trashed when she saw the depth and scope. She went off the chain.”

“It looks indiscriminate but she was trying to flush them all out, suppliers, researchers...”

“Took out a good percentage of the brains and checkbooks, snagged the gamma gun for good measure, maybe self-protection, then leaked info to local agencies to bat cleanup. But that escalated out of hand,” Peyton tags Natasha in.

“Radek got spooked after my interviews. His death was an accident, I think maybe a quarrel between them. She took it badly.” Bruce hands her the balance of the cookie, a gesture of comfort. She eyes the offering dubiously, but takes it. “But I think the original task isn’t completed. The remainder of her employers could be desperate enough to go recruiting,” she scans the spikes coming off the timeline, “or expand their list of targets.”

“We’re fairly safe here.” It’s obvious Trinh is going for reassuring, as far as she’s capable. “But we want to help.”

Peyton reads the room a little better, adding, “Romanoff made us promise to keep strictly to analysis. She does all the fieldwork with her team.”

Bruce wishes he’d made time for a more substantial breakfast than a bite of gingerbread, but plunges gamely on, meeting Natasha’s guarded look with a small careful smile. “Then I’ll keep working on the tech piece.”

~*~

Natasha had sent out a memo that for opening night they would dress and behave like appropriate adults, Tony Stark I am looking at you.

They have tickets for all three nights, but for the opening, she is determined that they will stifle boredom and hilarity to cheer on their charges. Steve included.

She’d sent a different memo to the Trust girls not onstage that there’d be extra credit available for a combo of their attendance and an assignment on the origins, history and mythology of the ballet. So far, she’s received a breakdown of the original story of Tchaikovsky’s involvement from Khadijah, who needed the liberal arts credit despite a vigorous discussion with Pepper via email, including footnotes and case law references on both sides. She’s gotten a computer model of the stagecraft
involved in creating the growing tree and the world of sweets and spices from Luz. Two songs of a rock opera adaptation from Sumi. And from Peyton, a slightly ominous exploration of the threats and salvations that Drosselmeyer and the mouse king each represent for Clara as she emerges from childhood into adolescence.

Natasha had confirmed the floral etiquette with the lead instructor, and arranged for tiny delicate roses and greenery for the four girls, and white roses for them all to give to Steve, which will utterly horrify him after the show.

She’s got a nervous flutter in her stomach only partially ameliorated by seeing Steve in full stage makeup, shepherding the girls to the theater after shrewdly confirming their buns and eyelashes and lipstick are perfect. Chorus girl, she thinks, maybe the flowers will just make him smile.

Between Pepper and Maria, specific rules for press and social media coverage had been established. The girls names will be listed in the program only, while Steve is uncredited. Press will sign non-disclosure agreements and all social media is restricted to the studio and the kids whose parents and guardians signed releases. Wifi will not be available. Natasha also knows that a mysterious signal outage will plague the surrounding blocks, limiting internet access. The exchange has been a small, but healthy donation from Stark Industries to support local cultural endeavors for youth programs. And an extravagant growing tree that Tony, Luz and Bruce had spent a truly embarrassing amount of time field-testing.

Tony takes Pepper and the Norse coalition of Thor, Jane, Darcy, and Darcy’s latest intern along in the car, while Natasha elects to walk over with Bruce once he finishes his analysis on the gamma source. Maria will meet them there.

She’s swinging her heels against the lab bench while he’s trying to ignore her. “If you give me ten uninterrupted minutes, we can leave from here,” he says.

She shrugs and kicks her heels against the bench again, and he stops pretending that he can ignore her and shuts down his workspace. Between them they finagle his coat, his phone, and his glasses into his pocket. He stands patiently while Natasha tugs at his coat lapels, grabs his scarf from the couch, and then loops it around his neck just so, fiddly.

It’s a warm grey outside, the fuzz of atmosphere and a dusting of old snow catching in the street lamps. He holds her gloved hand in his bare one as they walk, tries to wait her out until finally he can’t stand it anymore.

“Oh, spit it out. You’re wound up so tight I’m afraid to take you into a public place without searching you for small arms.”

“I’m…” She takes a deep breath and cops to it, feeling foolish. “What if they mess up? First nights are nerve-wracking--and dress rehearsal was apparently a disaster, which is supposed to be a good sign, but I can’t really see how. That has to be some ridiculous American thing, and they don’t...”

It hit her the day before when Steve had gleefully reported on the dress rehearsal, including Mellie kicking another snowflake in the head attempting a fouette in imitation of the Snow Queen, inciting a nosebleed that almost took out a couple costumes. This was unrelated to a classmate’s fit of panicked crying, or the Snow Queen falling half into the orchestra pit and scraping her hand up on a footlight housing.

Natasha had looked on the whole Nutcracker exercise as just that - an amateur performance with the added benefit of Steve on stage, giving the show his all. But there are so many half memories surfacing in her - first nights, and rigorous painful rehearsal, and the looming threats of the
consequences of failure and it doesn’t matter that so many of them aren’t real.

She knows the pressure of a stage, of performance. The terror of mistakes. She knows equally well
that even in that rewritten life, there are truths to that pressure. The girls are supported, indulged at
their neighborhood studio. They aren’t even required to wear matching tights and leotards in class,
but still, Natasha’s struck a raw set of nerves for the whole endeavor that she didn’t think existed.

She glances up at the yellow haze of sodium light that New York calls a night sky, then meets
Bruce’s waiting steady gaze. “There are so many moving parts, so much potential disaster...I feel
responsible for them up there.”

Bruce tightens his grip on her hand, gently amused but retaining enough self-preservation to hide
most of it. “It’s the safest thing they could possibly fail at,” he points out. “Yes there’s a slew of them
moving all over--Steve drew me diagrams. But that means even if they fuck up, no one will notice,
and they’ll have a great time. There’s no consequence beyond a little embarrassment.”

She presses her lips together, feeling the wax of her lipstick in the cold, trying to convince the tight
dread behind her navel that this is true.

“It’s normal,” he says gently, “Kids doing this. Even doing it badly.”

She blows out a breath.

“And I’ll give you a dollar if Mellie makes it through the whole performance without some sort of
interruption.”

“You know my stakes are higher than that.”

“Sexual favors.”

“Then everyone’s a winner,” Natasha smiles, and swings their linked hands. “I think,” she says, and
it’s soft, and reflective in a way that she’s still learning to be, “that giving them the gift of failure is
the strangest thing I’ve ever been proud of.”

He laughs and stops, tugging her to him, and kissing her with an exaggerated exuberance. She
shoves at him, but she doesn’t let go of his hand.

Tony sits between Pepper and Bruce, and as the party scene starts, the adults waltz their way through
the early music, Steve holding the waist of a woman Natasha recognizes from her own class. She can
hear Bruce muttering in time with the music, his sigh of relief as the pairs successfully chasse under
the bridge of arms, and Steve’s first act responsibilities come to an end with no steps missed.

Clara falls asleep, dreaming of her broken prince, and the tree rises and rises and nearly takes over
the theater in a way that’s both terrifying and kind of exhilarating. The audience gasps, and Tony
high fives Luz in the row of Trust girls in front of him, then Bruce.

The snowflakes are controlled chaos from the complicated, patterned intro, but no one falls over and
no one gets kicked during a series of hopping arabesques and line crossing jetes, although it’s close
enough that the crowd’s breath hitches as a collective.

Mellie’s voice rings out near the end of the pattern, “How am I in the wrong spot?” so perfectly
timed to a break in the music that there’s also room for the reflexive annoyed shushing from Dom to
punctuate it, earning an indulgent laugh from the audience. Far from a ballerina, but certainly a born
performer.
Bruce holds out a hand for his dollar. Natasha offers a tongue in cheek promissory note.

Steve comes out on stilts in a giant bonnet and crinoline and Pepper leans back and gives up trying to keep Tony in check when he mutters, “Holy shit.”

Natasha leans over to ask, “Have you never seen this show?”

Tony shakes his head in awe as the polichinelles emerge from under the skirts and Steve camps it up in a way even Natasha didn’t know he had in him. He sways and fans himself, massive skirts swinging back and forth like a tolling bell. He keeps upright, even achieving some absurd grace, blowing vigorous kisses to the audience and his charges.

Tony stands up as the dancers return to the skirts and the whole contraption exits, at first just overcome, but then he’s catcalling and whooping as Bruce shrinks down in his seat and Pepper yanks at his jacket.

The parents in the row ahead of the girls turn back to look, but Tony’s enthusiasm is genuine and unstoppable.
Chapter 16

Fun for the Whole Family

Tony puts his bag down at the entrance to the lab. “Thought you might be making more fruit cake, or at the very least recovering from the closing night party.”

Bruce has a faint headache from the combo of spritz cookies and punch and the flask Thor had passed around to combat the flurry of enthusiastic tiny ballerinas as they waited for Steve on closing night, but it doesn’t count as a hangover so much as a bummer. “I thought I’d try to do some work this morning, it’s been a busy week.”

He’d pulled gift shopping duty, in part so that CandySmash could practice more during winter break, going out for hours at a time like a glorified wallet, chaperoning the kids that wanted to buy presents. He’d been very proud of himself, tagging along through shopping crowds, equanimity in action despite a few tense moments. On the upside, they often plied him with ice cream on the way home, and he was not above a little Pavlovian conditioning.

“Jesus, Bruce, it’s fucking yuletide. Have some nog and take the time off.”

“That’s something coming from you. And I’m not doing anything serious, just hammering out a methods section. Plus, the only reason you agreed to go to California was to test out another suit variation.”

“Untrue. I agreed to go to California because I value my relationship. I also want to test out the electrical mods on the new suit, but I could honestly do that anywhere--and if you tell any of Pepper’s relatives that, I will un-mothball the Veronica project.”

Bruce shakes his head, “The Pottses unnerve me.”

“Well there are bound to be weird prototypes before you strike gold.”

“Which brings us back to you trying to paste Bite technology onto a suit. Dare I ask?”

“I tried to route the tech I used with Romanoff’s glow sticks into the firing mechanism, but it’s shorting something else out.”

Bruce snorts. “Merry Christmas Tony. Try to be good.”

Tony sets something done on the desk next to him. “Merry Christmas yourself.”

He raises an eyebrow, and Tony indicates that he should open the envelope. Resting inside are a ticket to Buenos Aires, hotel reservations, and a ticket to the VIP dinner that kicks off the conference. “Tony…”

He holds up his hand. “No, don’t say you need to think about it. Just…”

Bruce crosses his arms.

“We did this, Bruce. You and I. We developed and built this thing and it is making a goddamned difference in people’s lives. We should be talking about it, sharing it, getting feedback and inspiration and recognition.”
Bruce starts to shake his head, but Tony puts his hand on his arm. “Christ on a crutch, Banner, I know you spent years being all selfless and self-sacrificing and hiding from the goddamned aftereffects of that big, beautiful brain and a slew of bad decisions. But it’s time to stop hiding.”

“I’m not hiding…”

“Are you avoiding the critique of your peers? Afraid to let some random egos take a swing at it?” Bruce bristles at this, but closes his mouth when he sees Tony’s feral half-grin. “Hah! Got you on that one. I’ll tattle to Steve that you’re refusing to model proper peer review for Trinh.”

Bruce blows a breath through his nose and shakes his head. Tony steps closer, going soft and serious.

“I’m not talking the Hulk, or the Avengers. I’m taking Doctor Banner. Do you know what it’s like to finally talk to someone who understands everything I say? Who I have to struggle to keep up with. It’s… it’s a goddamned gift, Bruce, and you and I made this thing together. So let’s own it. And share it, and present it at this conference which is a big fucking deal and put our names out there as people who can do this.”

There’s a tight prickling at the back of Bruce’s throat at the vigor of Tony’s response. At the surprising...thoughtfulness of the persuasion.

It’s a naive concept, that Bruce can just waltz back into an academic life, but at the same time, Tony’s right. They’d built something that was making a difference. And in the face of the type of destruction he’s wrought, it feels like a small, tangible, and so very welcome evidence of penance. Tony’s penance is of such a different flavor, such a grander scale but this feels like it’s answering something for him as well.

“All right,” he says. “Buenos Aires. We’ll go. We’ll strut. We’ll...eat beef and drink pisco or whatever it is. I’ll go.”

Tony gives him a wet, smacking kiss on the forehead. “Have a good holiday. Do something decadent.”

~*~

Natasha plunges the coffee press and turns the page on the newspaper scattered all over the couch. She’s in the huge gathering space with the windows, panoramic view of the light snowfall dusting the city. It’s indulgent to read newsprint in Tony Stark’s empty tower while he’s gone, and she’s tempted to send him a photo but it’s Christmas Eve morning and he’s time zones away dealing with a pack of Pottses.

She’s drifted away from the news in favor of watching the snow when her phone dings.

Fine. I’m tired of this silent bullshit. Come for Christmas. Bring the doc.

She texts Clint back: I wasn’t being an asshole. Prague was...difficult. Things have been complicated since then. Didn’t know what to say. Also, what if we already have plans?

He sends back a photo of the Christmas tree covered in a flurry of ornaments and tinsel, and her heart clenches a little. She spots familiar ornaments, and sees that the popcorn strings have not yet been added.

We’ll talk when you get here. Bring presents. If you had plans, you’d have called already.
She looks at the time, estimates prep and driving and the effort of convincing Bruce to follow her lead and pack a bag without asking where.

She cancels the dinner reservation at the Scandinavian place in Brooklyn, and texts him back.

*We’ll see you around 7.*

~*~

Bruce finds her on the main floor, stacking three different papers and leaving them on the arm of chair to give Tony conniptions when he gets back. He’s about to suggest breakfast when she faces him square and says, brief and blatantly obtuse, “Our presence has been requested for the holidays. You and me both. Please come?”

It’s the please that makes Bruce tuck his book back under his arm and go pack a bag. He meets her in SubSix parking, where she’s signed out Stark’s chili pepper red Porsche Cayenne and is going over it with a jaded eye.

She hands him an anti-static envelope, “Pull the toll pass and stash it in the glove box.”

“No, that’s not ominous at all.” He takes the RFID card from the driver side visor and stows it away. She hands him a wallet with a variety of cash and fake ID, and he’s curious when she started making covers for him, too. He’s apparently going to be Ben Romano for Christmas. Another soft mark of ownership, but it only gives him a bemused warmth. “And you will be?”

“Noelle Flagstaff.”

“Ah,” he licks the incipient smile from his lips to chide, “I’m disappointed, you usually don’t allow in-jokes in your covers.”

“Not quite a cover, more like a bid for time in the worst case scenario.”

“Are we killing someone?” He clears his throat, scratches his temple, “Else, I mean? I didn’t pack for that.”

She studies him a moment, comes to the conclusion that he’s still kind of fucking with her, then throws his bag into the back seat along with hers. Steve’s tupperware cake taker rides in the backseat next to a box of wrapped presents, making the whole car smell like rum soaked panettone.

“Casual holiday,” she’d said, “three or four days, no church, be sure to pack pyjamas.”

“I do remember how to be a civilized guest. I only got into the habit of sleeping naked when you took over half the bed.”

She’d tilted her head as if awarding him a point, “Yeah, that does make sense.”

He hadn’t asked her where they were going, because that’s part of this thing they do now, trust exercises for people who refuse to speak the forbidden words aloud: love; home; I don’t know what I’m doing, but it’s become impossible to picture doing it without you.

So he climbs into the car with her and for five hours he counts out toll money and buys rest plaza coffees and pumps gas, shivering in the cold as the tank fills because New York has no kickstands on its pumps and cold death is rolling out of Canada for the holiday. Eventually, they’re going to hit Lake Ontario, but she veers westerly as the sun dips and takes a numbered state route through a patchwork of farms and woods, ponds and wetlands, all sere and layered with snow. The last stretch
of road looks more like a glorified path through the dark woods, already more like a luge run than a road.

He can feel tension building in her. “I half expected I’d have to wear a head-bag once we got close.”

“We could pull over and I could yank your sweater over your head hockey-player style. If it would make you more comfortable.”

He declines, shaking his head. “The offer is heartwarming, though.”

The road winds out into a clearing, rolling land and a sprawling farmhouse side lit by the last colors of sunset. His stomach turns leaden, the caught out feeling he had when Steve had ratted him out about wanting a house, pointing to one on the TV much like this one. She honks the horn and throws the car into park.

He tries for light but can hear how badly he fails, “Not the Bat Cave after all.”

There’s a woman on the porch, dark wavy hair and a big open armed smile when Natasha walks up through a path worn through the snow. Bruce shoulders both their bags and eases up the steps but the hug continues, the woman whispering fiercely into Natasha’s ear. When they break apart she offers her hand to Bruce, “Laura Pierce. Call me Laura.”

He introduces himself, catching two small faces peeking through curtains.

“You made great time, come on in,” Laura leads them into the home, adding over her shoulder, “He’s in the kitchen, I suggest you both stop acting like offended cats and get it over with.”

In the kitchen is Barton, in socked feet, drying his hands on a dish towel and looking like he lives there...which Bruce realizes he does. With Laura. And the two peeking faces. Natasha exchanges a diffident nod with Barton and pulls a bottle from the fridge, catching the opener Barton tosses blindly behind him.

Clint starts giggling when he sees Bruce, high-pitched and evil. A giggle which is echoed by the spitty burbles of an infant in a small hammock on the kitchen counter.

It’s like getting new lenses; the details flood in and make perfect sense, but the adjustment can make you queasy.

This is where Clint hares off to for days at a time, why he takes dozens of Asgardian cookies with him.

This is Clint’s long stateside mission--paternity leave.

When Clint was suborned in New Mexico...Natasha had this family, this home in the forefront of her mind when she came to bring Bruce in, when she said to him cool and cocksure, I’ll persuade you.

Laura’s hand is on his shoulder pressing down, and there’s a dining room chair there to receive him.

Clint is laughing so hard now he’s propped his hands on his knees and he’s gone dark red, “Oh God, his face!”

Laura shouts over his head at them both, “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

Natasha hands Bruce a brown glass bottle, which is nearly freezing cold cider when he takes a pull. “No…” he says to Laura, “no, she did not.”
Clint is gasping and pressing the dish towel to his face, choking out between spasms of laughter, “Nat, you’re forgiven.”

“Strike Force Delta.” Laura pats Bruce’s shoulder, “I love ‘em both, but together...sometimes they can really be shitty.”

“Oh, fuck!” Clint rescues a boil over on the stove.

Here’s the thing Bruce learns about this Twilight Zone episode he’s spending Christmas in: this is Natasha’s family. A sweet-faced architect who doesn’t cook, but watches cooking competition shows with the same antisocial glee Bruce gets from home renovation shows. A boy approaching middle school age—it’s not even a calculation to know that Clint became a father around the time he decided not to put an arrow through the Black Widow’s eye. A girl almost the age of the youngest they pulled out of Denton this past summer. And a baby named after Natasha.

Bruce has somehow lodged himself deep in the soft heart of his two hardest team mates.

He drains the bottle of cider as he perches on the kitchen chair. What the hell has he gotten himself into? Clint has made a goddamn goose.

Laura slides another bottle across the table to him. “House rules. There are three.”

Bruce clings to her measured pleasant calm. “Okay, yes.”

“First, no talking shop in the house, and no talking about the house in the shop. Second, our septic field is kinda old, long story, so we run the bathroom on hippy rules: if it’s yellow let it mellow, if it’s brown flush it down, and there’s a shower rota, so you and Nat choose morning or evening between you. Third, we have a swear jar but it’s designed to be a moneymaker, it’s the crock over there called College Fund, so let ‘em fly. Natasha’s covering you on her tab.”

God, this really is Barton’s spouse. It probably really is the college fund. “No fucking problem.”

“There you go.” Laura grins, clinks her bottle against his. They drink in companionable silence for a while, watching Natasha sous chef for Clint as they murmur and bitch in their half code. By the time Laura enlists him in setting the table, he’s lightheaded and has stopped expecting Rod Serling to carve the bird. He sits next to the boy, Cooper, across from Natasha and the girl, Lila.

Laura has put on a holiday mix heavy on 50’s crooners and Doris Day. Natasha’s sock-covered toes are compulsively brushing his ankle, and her eye contact is fleeting and chronic.

Bruce wonders for a paranoid second if all those strange meals in the city were training for this, but once the food hits the plate things loosen. Lila and Cooper vie for Natasha’s attention, catching her up and dishing about the baby Nate, who in their view is less of a namesake and more of a mascot.

They all gather in the living room, Natasha and the kids stringing popcorn for the tree and Clint giving Bruce a strange look. It’s not his usual light disdain or complete blankness, but contemplative and unnerving. When Laura goes to dole out the panettone, Bruce takes Nate just for something to distract him. He’s glad for rule one, because he has a feeling Clint’s got opinions on what happened in Prague.

Bruce shifts back in the chair, an elderly recliner the color of goldenrod, and tucks the sleepy baby facing outward as instructed, since Nate is pretty placid as long as he can watch people.

After the kids go to bed, the older ones aided by small doses of boozy fruitcake, Clint asks about the Trust.
“I thought rule one…?”

“No gore, no violence,” Laura clarifies, “but I want to know how they’re doing, too.”

**Nesting for Spies**

The next morning is a frenzy of presents and pancakes, but even after looting through large handknit stockings filled with goodies the kids have a weird energy around Bruce, like they hadn’t expected him to still be there come morning. Consequently they’re up Natasha’s nose about everything, diverting her attention whenever it strays to him. Aunt Nat is the cat’s pyjamas, wedging Bruce into the corner of the couch wearing her gifted pyjamas with green-eyed Siamese cats. She clearly has been claimed by most of the Barton brood, even if Nate seems okay hanging out with the new guy.

Nate has Clint’s nose, and is already developing a rep for poor taste.

Clint kicks the kids out in the afternoon to build up an appetite on the sledding hill hidden in the patch of woods. Laura bundles the baby and straps him on, off to supervise. Bruce offers to help with lunch, and Clint nods, then shoos Natasha toward the door to join the sledding gang.

“I’d go, but the shoulder’s acting up.”

Natasha looks dubiously between the two of them. “Have you been doing the PT?”

“Bruce can spot me.”

Lila tugs at her arm. “We have a fox,” she says, urgency vibrating through her small body. She’s got all of Barton’s intensity and her mother’s wide charismatic smile. “We made him a hutch.”

She smiles at Lila, and then narrows her eyes at the men. Laura is waiting on the porch, jiggling Nate around in his carrier.

“She’s acting up.”

Alone in the house, Clint takes him into the root cellar down a set of stairs more like an old wooden ladder. “Lunch is sandwiches, and I dismantled the goose last night, so it’s just assembly.” The farmhouse is warm and inviting in all the rooms that aren’t in the process of being renovated, but the cellar is out of a horror movie.

There’s a bare bulb dangling from the low rafters, shaped like a compact fluorescent but throwing dim yellow light onto a hardpack floor and frankly depressing equipment. The weight bench sports random knife cuts on the cushions, the stacked piles of iron plates scream tetanus. A multicolored bouquet of therabands dangle from a metal storage rack crammed with canning and lodged perilously close to a squat rack that looks vintage, circa auto de fe.

“Well if you ever need to intimidate someone into recanting on their IT band…”

Clint’s been by turns giddy and dour since their arrival, and while Natasha had ignored it, the aggravation is working Bruce’s nerves. He and Barton have worked together effortlessly in the past, and the man has seemed at worst neutral, and at best actively supportive of Natasha spending time with Bruce. They’ve been friendly. So it isn’t jealousy...territoriality maybe? He gets that, thinks it’s probably more about whatever Barton and Natasha need to work out between themselves spilling over onto this new facet of interpersonal dynamics. Plus, Barton has a loopy sense of humor. He’s waiting for the interrogation to begin.

He’s surprised instead when Clint grabs the sides of the squat rack and gently leans outward, stretching the front of his shoulders. There’s a genuine wince of pain on his face.
It’s starting to make sense. Bruce inquires, “Torn rotator?”

“Tendonitis, bursitis,” Clint’s head move is halfway between nod and shake, “probably just a matter of time before something gives. It’s not healing as fast as before.” He gestures at the therabands.

Bruce hands him the purple one. He notes that the labels on the Ball jars are in Clint’s handwriting, peaches and salsas and sauces from a few months ago.

“Sucks sometimes,” Clint says, his ridiculous musculature working through tiny focused rotations that are making him kinda pale in the sickly light, “to not be one of the enhanced. I get older and more broken. No suit, no serum. Paternity leave came at a good time. I’d be a liability in the field right now.”

Bruce chooses a lighter gauge band and hands it to him. He isn’t exactly enhanced, but there’s a reset factor to the transformation, so he rats out another teammate instead, responding to the banked worry in Clint’s voice. “Ask Tony about his ACL.”

Clint’s smirk is wry. “I still recover better than most - training and flexibility, and SHIELD had great medical. We do pretty well with that, too. I get shot, stabbed, burned, I figure that recovery will be slow but feasible…”

“But age, micro-tears, overuse. Not a whole lot medicine can do for you.”

“I’ve been overworking those muscles since I was a kid. It’s a matter of when not if; I’m not afraid to take myself out of the field when it happens, but it leaves a lot of questions about what I’d do next. And I know Natasha doesn’t necessarily need me in the field, but I hate to make that a permanent thing.”

Bruce can see the bigger picture here. Clint has a life, normal human ties, a family and an abnormal, inhuman job. An abnormal, more than human partner he’s known since the beginning was going to leave him behind.

“I never expected her to bring anyone home,” Clint lets go of the band, rolls his arm a little. “I feel like an asshole because I’m weirded out. I mean, I’m happy for you both, and glad it’s you because someone needs to watch her back. But you’ve also got a terrifying fucking thing living inside you.”

Bruce rubs his chin, nods.

“So, I guess what it boils down to is...everyone’s in-laws are kind of fucked up.”

"My last meet the parents situation resulted in military torture, courtesy of my potential father-in-law."

"Those are some exceedingly low expectations to beat." Clint offers his hand, "Welcome to the family.”

Bruce shakes it, letting an uncomplicated grin spread on his face.

~*~

Bruce is slicing bread when the sled mob returns. He doesn’t hear Natasha come into the kitchen ahead of the tromping children, and her hands are freezing when she slips them under his sweater while they’re still stomping snow off their boots.

He yelps. She hooks fingers into his belt loops and stands up on tiptoe to whisper, “Wanna help me
“get out of these wet things?” She follows it with a lick, hot along the curve of his ear.

“God, no,” Clint barks out. “I’m going blind. Stop it. Go be inappropriate in another room.”

“We’ll be back,” she says, and tugs Bruce along. Her cheeks are bright pink, hair damp and curling and he realizes she’s co-opted the blue wool hat Thor had made him. She’s also legitimately soaked, and shivering just a little, but her eyes are very bright.

She closes the guest bedroom door behind her, taking off the hat and ditching her coat. “I wasn’t just rescuing you,” she says, “I really would prefer a little help.” She’s unbuttoning her jeans and wriggling as she tries to get them off her hips, but they’re sodden and heavy and her skin is clammy.

She could try harder, but he’s game for making it a team effort.

“Here, let me.” He nudges her down on the bed. “I’m good at getting you out of your pants.”

“The reigning expert,” she agrees as he tugs at the sodden ankles, pulls as she pushes, and then drops her jeans onto the floor as she strips off her sweater and undershirt and he peels off her socks. Her grin is sly, and her legs are mottled reddish blue with the cold. There’s a purpling bruise on her thigh and one high up on her hip. He runs his hands briskly up her legs, moving between her thighs, leaning in to brush his mouth between her breasts, along the angle of muscle that connects her skull to her sternum, framing her pulse.

“How did you not notice you were getting this damp and cold?” She wraps her legs around his hips but this only reveals the tremor of the shivering she’s tensed against. “Did you turn into a kraken?”

She makes a monster sound, but the shiver has progressed to her jaw and the “Raaarr” vibrates with cold.

He grabs the afghan at the foot of the bed and rolls her up in it, kicking off his shoes and sitting behind her, up against the pillows. He brackets her with his legs, wraps his arms around her. “And the war wounds?”

“Miscalculation of angle and trajectory, I had to turn and take the brunt of a tree for Cooper, and then what kind of aunt would I be if I’d left the sled in the snow drift?”

She smells like snow and wet wool, and there’s a fierce possessive streak running through him that wants to keep her here, tucked against him. She burrows back, lodging her head into the crook of his neck and shoulder. She’s warming fast, metabolism firing up like when she falls asleep.

“Thought you might need a little time out,” she says, kissing his neck. “I know it’s been… a lot to take in.”

“I like them,” he says. “I like that Barton has this. I like that you do. And I’m…kind of weirdly touched to be allowed to see it.”

Humbled too, if he’s honest, by Natasha. By Clint and Laura opening their home, this secret to him. By this whole thing. How tangible a world it is, how easily lost. By how welcome he is, even if it is awkward and strange.

She’s quiet at that, rubs her cheek against his jaw and he tilts into it, meeting her mouth. It’s gentle and cool, and he pushes her hair behind her ear to stroke her cheekbone. “But?” she prompts, murmuring against his lips.

He shakes his head, there aren’t caveats. “I like seeing you here. I like seeing how much they love
you. It...I just don’t want to put any of that at risk. Any of them...” He cannot help seeing disaster play out in front of him, and even as he stills under her touch, he’s shaking his head. “It’s so much... faith,” he says, shaky, “It’s terrifying, that pressure.”

She doesn’t say anything, and he feels the least he can do in the face of all the faith is to retain the illusion of safety, make it a truth.

Her voice is so quiet when she finally speaks. “I felt the same way, the first time. Like the responsibility of being...here, in this normal house with this normal family—even if it included Clint—was so much...it would tear me apart from the weight of it.”

He nods against her.

“And then it just...kind of became part of me. And it started to feel like strength. Not fear. That keeping these people safe was the first good thing I could claim. I won’t ever stop doing that, and I never would have brought you here if you truly posed a risk.”

It’s said with a cold ferocity, but also so full of love, for all of these things she’s found that she never thought she’d deserve, or need, or even want.

“Okay,” he says, skimming light fingers over the bruises from where she threw herself between a child and a tree, “okay.”

He does take some comfort that, in this, her belief in his control is its own safeguard, that she truly understands the risks. That she would sacrifice him to protect this family? He is so immeasurably warmed by that.

It is also a relief to find she’s not truly alone in the world. That if something were to happen, his death or disappearance, she would have this place, this family to support and shelter her, even if she never gave in to the temptation to seek their solace. Pragmatic acts of love on both sides, prep for worst case scenarios, just like her nudging him back into academia, securing him a place in the world and encouraging him to make connections. He’s comforted by that too, frankly.

And he’s finally ready to consider, out loud and in the open, the tentative idea of a best case scenario: a life built together.

To name what they’ve been building and not talking about, a found family. They won’t create a child between them, and he won’t linger on that here in this odd house of loved children and a bright burbling infant that feels like hope given and stolen in his arms, but that doesn’t exclude or negate the creation of family, the definition of it, and it feels breathtaking to contemplate.

The house he’d pictured morphs again, not just her art on the walls this time, but Natasha moving through it the way she moves through this home: like it’s hers as well, socked feet and calling up the stairs and weapons cached in palm-locked safes behind picture frames. Like she would live there whether he came along or not.

He would never have believed her, so she didn’t even try, she just showed him. Trigger locks and pancakes, crafting covers for him complete with wallets. Nesting for spies. Infiltration at it’s most subtle and devastating, worming her way into his head under the guise of herself.

She turns in his arms, shucking the afghan so it pools around her hips, and touches his face with careful fingertips. He curls his hands around her ribs, stroking the skin there. He is full, aching with what she’s brought him, a counter-pressure to the darkness and rage, an antidote of sorts to the violence he carries within...or at least the strength to match it, a reason to reach for whatever peace he
can. He’s never had such a gift, and it’s profound that he’s found it in an assassin on her own path to restitution. As if something in him pushes against her own pressure of darkness, staunches her own upwelling violence.

Sometimes family is blood. Sometimes it's two bleeding palms clasping each other tight.

Whatever she sees in his gaze stills her, and she leans towards him, framing his jaw with cool hands, hungry and answering—and the sharp knock on the door and high voice calling her name only give her pause, her breath on his lips.

Unfortunately, it’s followed by Clint’s bellow up the stairs, “Lunch is on the table. Everyone better have on pants.”

“Surprisingly,” she says, pushing off him with a sigh to dig through her bag for fleece-lined leggings and his black sweater that he hadn’t been able to find when he’d packed, “that is not directed at us.”

~*~

On the third day, Lila makes her move. Natasha is downstairs ensuring Steve’s empty cake taker makes it back into the car, and Bruce is making the guest bed and straightening out the afghan. Lila pokes her head around the corner with a travel mug on offer and says, “Cocoa?”

“Um, thank you.”

When he takes a sip, her smile is wide and bright, adult teeth front and center flanked by gaps and baby teeth. “Good?”

“Yes.” It’s warm but not hot, half cocoa and half coffee. ”Did you make it?”

Her response is a non-sequitur, “Aunt Nat taught me about drink safety.”

“She knows a lot of things.”

“She says never take a drink from a stranger. Always keep your eye on your drink, or better yet, your hand over the top.”

Bruce mutters into the mug, “You’re ready for college.”

“She didn’t teach you. Maybe she doesn’t like you that much.” Lila says archly. “If you hurt her, and something happened, she might not miss you.”

He meets her eyes over the rim, and he lets the mouthful backwash into the mug. “Well-played, Barton.”

She narrows her huge eyes until they’re horizontal bristles of eyelash. The effect is mole-like, but the set of her mouth is dead-on mean. “We protect our own.”

He sets the mug on the side table and gives her his full attention. “I’m glad to hear it.”

She nods once, sharply, pivots and exits with a brusque swing of her hair that’s pure Aunt Nat.
Chapter 17

The Kink of Normaling

“Normal,” she suggests, slyly playful as they unpack from the jaunt to the farm. “Do you want to pretend, just for a few days, to be normal?”

“What’s your definition of normal include?” he asks, taking his sweater from her bag.

Her arched brow and completely fake pout of outrage amuse him.

“Get your own.” He likes seeing her in his clothes, and she’s better than he is at cycling things into the laundry. But damn it, he really likes this sweater too.

“I don’t know,” she says, “but we could try it. Temporarily. Apparently people take time off from work even when they aren’t recovering, go to movies and museums, linger over lunch...”

“Dates?”

“We’re not dating.” She grins. “Crossword puzzles. Coffee and television and lounging in socks. Learning the guitar.”

“Well,” he says, “I don’t think the guitar will earn us any friends, but sure. Dates and hanging out until New Year’s...or as long as we can stand it. Also, did you look that up on the internet?”

“Maybe,” she says.

He gives them a day, knowing they’re both restless people. But the challenge appeals to that, putting aside work and doing fuck-all except what they want to do entails about as much analysis as one would expect from two people who’ve buried themselves in their work for years.

It becomes like brainstorming their own scavenger hunt: What Do Regular People Do? Bruce suggests calling it What Would the Bartons Do, but Natasha corrects him, “Laura told me before Cooper came along they saw a lot of bands and fucked in club bathrooms.”

Bruce shakes his head, “Too many people.”

So they lounge in bed and linger over lunch. They go to museums like tourists, and discover they’ve developed the seething impatience of native New Yorkers. They browse a sex shop and get into an intense discussion about lube properties that results in her dragging him home to analyze his opinions in detail.

“Tell me about the kinematic viscosity again, Bruce,” her breathing is erratic but her grip is measured, “use the Système Internationale d'Unités.”

He bites out, “What other units would I use?” trying to stay on the plateau since she has three other bottles lined up. “We’re using you for the control, right?”

They build up to tickets to a show, the midnight session of *Sleep No More*, walking through tiers of immersive theatre in a warehouse, masks in place for a lark. It had been haunting and intriguing despite being the safest kind of roleplay they’d engaged in to date. They weave home through a dusting of snow, the absinthe hitting her more than him for a change. He thinks she’s probably dehydrated, and they down a few glasses of water in their little lab kitchen without turning on any
lights.

He hasn't done dishes in a week, though the kitchen is usually his daily task. They share the last clean glass, passing it back and forth.

The Trust is having a party for New Year’s Eve the next night, and Steve has announced plans to spend that day in the communal kitchen making food to ring in the year—a light day, domesticity and friendship and responsibility to celebrate. They tumble into bed in the dead of night, unworried about waking early, about anything but waking to each other.

It’s bitterly cold outside, so chilled there’s frost crawling along the outside of the windows. The view is one long pure stretch of grey fading toward dawn, like being up in the helicarrier in a snowstorm, or out at sea. On a train in the middle of Siberia.

It’s barely seven in the morning, but she’s breathing hard, hips rolling against his, naked except for the top of her cat pyjamas hanging off her shoulders. He palms her breast, nipple caught between two knuckles, and she’s so close, so very close, riding this early morning wave of lust and want, watching how focused and close to blissed out he is beneath her. He’d barely woken up when she’d taken him in hand and mouth, working him up to this, and he’s still sleepy, glancing dreamy touches mixed with intent, teasing, nails against her thighs, dancing near the join of their bodies, then back again when she whimpers. She tightens around him, reaching for release, not quite there when both of their phones start buzzing.

If it were one, it would be easy to ignore. And she tries to, she really does, can see in the tight set of his mouth, the grip on her thigh that he’s trying too, keeping his attention focused on her and the tatters of this dreamy, surreal feeling, but the phones keep ringing and vibrating, and she reaches over to the nearest nightstand to grab one.

He snatches it out of her hand because it’s his, and he knows that look on her face. It always means having to get a new phone.

She eases into a rocking motion as he reads the screen, still hoping for a reprieve.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me?” he says, and flops back on the bed. She takes the phone.

“Motherfucker,” she says, outraged.

*Krampus army, Scranton, PA. Heavy hitters, poss. superpowered. Think rabid Santa Claus with horns and chains. Drones, mech/bio, swarm intelligent.*

He pulls her down to him by gripping the edges of the pyjama top. “Are we living in a Doctor Who Christmas special? I’m fine with that in theory,” he says, “but seriously, sometimes it’s just so fucking weird and I don’t see a TARDIS.”

“You’re the only thing here that’s bigger on the inside, pal.” She nips his nose and climbs off.

“They’re a little fucking late to the party by the way. That’s pre-Christmas shit. And what are they gonna do with Scranton?”

Maria’s follow-up text is to the point: *If I have to deal with this fucking absurdity, so do you. Suit up!*

She has to cajole Bruce out of bed, and eventually he relents. She throws a pair of the Hulk-ready track pants at his head and then zips up her armored suit. He grabs a t-shirt and layers a couple hoodies, then wraps his scarf around his face. He’s still scrubbing sleep out of his eyes, dazed and cranky when they meet Steve, Maria and Thor on the flight deck ten minutes later.
Hill holds up her phone. The text from Stark is five lines of emojis that look like his face, all laughing in sync. “He said to call if we really needed him. Which means I’m going to have to go with you.”

“So who’s handling ground ops?” Natasha asks, and she’s not surprised when Nick Fury steps out of the quinjet.

He’s back in the leather overcoat but it covers a sweatshirt and black jeans, and his eye patch is bedazzled with an 8-bit rendering of a snowman. “I had Hill add me to the roster as a consultant.”

Bruce goes very still, mouth tight.

Fury nods, “Dr. Banner.”

“Merry Christmas.” Bruce turns his head a fraction to mutter at Natasha, “Seriously, no more fucking surprises this week.”

“I can’t promise that.”

Thor seems nonplussed, but unbothered. Steve just looks at his shoes.

“Nick,” Hill offers him the floor.

“I’ll get Stark to Pennsylvania. Meanwhile there’s a group of ugly-faced Santa rejects who can’t seem to read a calendar destroying municipal buildings and threatening civilians. They’ve managed to stand firm against everything the local PD can throw at them, including a cannon--I don’t know why they had a cannon, Dr. Banner--”

Bruce puts his hand down.

“--it didn’t seem that relevant to ask.”

Hill chimes in, “There’s a Civil War reenactor on the SWAT team.”

Steve briefs them more thoroughly on the way. Krampuses--Krampi? Rampaging. Breaking shit. Seemingly indestructible. A threat to the population. Stop them, don’t make it worse. Even with the jet time to Scranton being under half an hour, it leaves time for awkwardness to settle.

“I’d planned a pretty good day,” Natasha glosses over the fact that Fury is alive. Bruce tilts his head. “Sex, a nap, then that really good coffee and breakfast at the Cuban place. Send you off to the barber with the bourbon, get my nails done, meet for drinks, Make an early appearance at the Trust party, avoid the hordes of revelers on a time schedule, and be naked again with champagne by ten.”

Steve clears his throat as Thor listens appreciatively. Thor is a big fan of the mating habits of Midgard.

“I haven’t forgotten about your not-dead former mentor, but we’ll circle back to that later.” Bruce pushes his knee against hers. “My thoughts were brunch at the place in midtown with the big tables and the cranberry muffins. Do the crossword from Sunday, go see Doctor Zhivago at the place around the corner--”

“Ugh. Not even for Omar Sharif.”

“...I was thinking we’d sneak in spiked hot chocolate and you could tell me everything wrong with the film until we got kicked out. The rest was pretty much the same. Granted, I’d failed to factor in your internal alarm clock and the morning sex. Definitely an oversight for which I apologize. I blame
the lack of sleep.”

She grins at him. “Checking the rest of normal off the list?”

“It seems fitting, since I’ve only got a list and I know you’ve got a cross-referenced spreadsheet. I needed an ironic twist.”

Steve is actively glaring at them now.

Thor ignores Natasha’s snicker to ask, “You don’t wish to see the ball drop to ring in the New Year?”

Bruce shakes his head at both of them.

Thor makes a motion that seems to indicate to each his own. “Jane has a similar disinterest, but Darcy has promised to accompany me to Times Square if I wish to see it.”

“It’s all tourists anyway,” Steve says, annoyed. “Crowded and loud. I went last year.”

“New beginnings are always important to acknowledge,” Thor says, and crosses his arms over his chest like that settles the matter.

~*~

They land the jet on the outskirts of town, and Bruce stays in the back while Hill monitors transmissions, giving orders and coordinating with local authorities on the ground. Fury works the government level officials who are debating sending in reserve units from neighboring municipalities. Hill is antsy to get in the field now that she’s here. Her uniform looks more military grade than Natasha’s, but then Maria suited for bear always looks ready to lead an army across the Rubicon. It could be the stance.

“I can’t just leave you here alone,” she grouses.

“You could,” Bruce says. “Just take the keys. Don’t want teenagers taking the jet for a joy ride if I need to go green.”

Maria shoots him a glare. “Got any theories about why anyone would deploy an army of Alpine holiday demons to rampage a quiet rust belt city?”

“Nope.”

“That’s not a hell of a lot of help.”

“To be fair,” Bruce says, digging his hands into his pockets. “I’m not trying that hard.”

Fury joins the comm channel and Bruce is grateful to not have him in his ear, although having him boom out through the quinjet’s speakers is still unsettling. “The governor is debating sending in National Guard. I’m not sure we want that kind of paperwork, Hill. Or rather, I’m not sure you want it. I officially never have to fill out paperwork again.”

“We don’t really know what we’re dealing with yet, sir. Give me enough time to get a sitrep before I advise.”

“If they send in the troops, I’m definitely staying in the jet,” Bruce says to whomever is listening. “The Other Guy does not feel kindly about tanks, and I don’t feel kindly about their interest in making me a lab experiment.”
“National Guard isn’t the Army.” Hill barks back, then tries for calm explanation. “Not quite. Even if they need to bring in Army units to supplement, it’s all under the Guard Commander, and I’ve had a channel open with him since before we left NYC.”

“I’m not taking any bets,” he says.

“God, you can be a pain in the ass.”

“I was busy,” Bruce says. “It’s New Year’s Eve, and we’re here, and this is some power hungry bullshit probably run by someone field testing more mass terror in the guise of German folklore, and frankly I’m kind of full up on Black Forest fairytales for the year.”

“Field test, huh.” Hill looks at him shrewdly. “Though technically you’re sitting here being a whiny tittybaby in the backseat, not out there kicking Krampus ass. Plus, you’re not the only one who was in the middle of something.”

Bruce raises an eyebrow. “In the tower and everything? I thought you only corrupted the Captain in your own apartment.”

Maria crosses her arms and mutters darkly, “I was out of town for the holiday going to every mass offered by Our Lady of Guadalupe because Dad’s a cantor and thinking about becoming a deacon. I needed a palliative for all the Catholicism.”

Bruce lets that alone. Clint still owes him a twenty. Withholding gossip from Barton was a consequence for being sized up and found wanting by his precocious offspring.

“Well, maybe we’ll get lucky. They’ll call in the Guard to blow shit up, and we can leave them to coordinate with FEMA. Get to resume the day’s activities.”

“It’s all in the family now, right?” Maria stops to issue a few clipped sentences to two different channels, “I’ve heard the DOD and DHS finally shelled out for the pixie dust.”

It’s what they’ll be presenting in Buenos Aires, the nano-agent he and Tony have developed that turns cement based rubble into a scoopable and compressible powder. Applicable for the aftermath of many disasters, both natural and super-villainous. They’d donated the tech to a relief-based nonprofit, which now sends teams wherever it’s needed and offers the service for free—but they’ve made private companies and the larger governments pay for the same privilege, covering the cost of manufacture.

Hill paces, taking in field reports. Bruce has shed the scarf and the top layer of hoodie and he turns his comm back on in time to hear Natasha and Steve bickering pleasantly about foods that bring good luck for the new year. Tony has still failed to appear, and Bruce checks his phone and texts, WTF?

The SWAT commander patches in. “They’re moving in groups of eight or nine right now, kind of silent and darting for such big...machines, for lack of a better word, although damned if they don’t look alive. They just don’t sound that way.”

Natasha and Cap are coordinating with a larger group of SWAT on one side of the downtown, Thor on the other, trying to get a bead on what’s happening, what strategy the Krampi are employing, figure out their end game.

The SWAT team has created barricades to keep the Krampi in the radius of the city center, but there are reports of small groups of twos and threes moving towards the larger residential neighborhoods.

“Thor,” Maria says, “can you lead that big group away from the Electric Building? It’s a local
landmark, they’ve requested that we not level it.”

“I will endeavor to do so,” he says, all earnestness and battle lust. Bruce gives the Electric Building slightly better than even odds.

There’s a popping sound, and then Thor says, with a type of offended dignity Bruce has never heard. “They explode!...And they have a LIQUID center, like those rabbit eggs from the time of Easter.”

Bruce grimaces, answers Maria’s quizzical look, “Cadbury eggs.”

“Oh, that is truly revolting.”

Bruce’s phone dings. It’s Stark: Small issue with the Mark 42.

He texts back, How small?

I may have failed to ground the electrical properly in my excitement, and then my hot fix, pardon the pun, wasn’t adequate.

Are you dead, Tony?

Not exactly, but I am hooked up to a cardiac monitor. Don’t tell Romanoff.

I make no promises.

The holidays are stressful. I blame the Pottses.

Bruce calls out to Hill, “Stark’s not coming. Might want to pass that along.”

“Motherfucker,” Hill mutters, gets on the horn to Fury and the team.

He hears a lot more squashing and crashing and popping, but nothing from Steve or Natasha until there’s a sucking in of breath that he knows, that tells him what she’s about to say.

“Doc,” her voice is very serious, “we might need you. I just want you prepared.”

### Scrimmage in Scranton

An ice storm the week before, followed by flooding from unseasonable rains, had wiped out power to one of the low-lying neighborhoods near the river, as well as a couple multi-family dwellings. It was a shitty holiday for the families spending it at a community center that had been turned into a makeshift shelter, as they figured out next steps and the city waited for federal FEMA money to rebuild.

If anything, it probably made the governor’s finger itchy to redial the National Guard.

That community center is now surrounded on all sides by the Krampi, horns curled, mechanical teeth bared, chains flailing at a building full of terrified families.

“Heat signatures, maybe?” Natasha poses. “It’s the biggest collection of people in the area. Most of downtown was shut down for the holiday.”

The Krampi are horrifying up close, a gleaming amalgam of mechanoid and organic. The faces are steel but the teeth look like tusk and bone. They’re silent beyond small clicks and hums. They don’t move like something created by humans. They’d trampled a fleet of cars stuck on the bridge, just walked over and through them, and people had run screaming. Natasha is pretty sure that whatever
threat the drones hold the main point is inciting fear, they aren’t directionless but they have a collective focus that’s eerie and unpredictable. It’s more than aggression, it’s destruction.

According to SWAT, the drones can be taken down with a combination of bullets and sheer force if hit in the right place, force being more effective than projectiles, but there was truly an army of them, and they moved with unexpected grace and relentless determination. The local PD was outmatched with their current roster, even pulling from surrounding departments. There were just too many of the robots.

Natasha and Steve quickly figured out how to ricochet a few of them against each other using the shield and sheer momentum, but it’s not efficient. It knocks them down and conks them out, but they regroup, eyes flickering back into that eerie, familiar blue. They’re electric, but animated with something that reads as organic.

“Fuck me,” Maria says in her ear. “One of the small groups just picked up a couple kids.”

“What are they doing with them?” Steve asks.

“Just holding them so far.”

“That can’t be good.” Natasha had been starting to have fun. It had been too long since she could just whirl through opponents as pure destruction. It was deeply satisfying.

“Thor, can you head in that direction? Fend them off?” Steve says, “We can get volunteers to corral any more stray kids, keep them off the street.”

Bruce whistles the first bars of the Doctor Who theme song.

Maria cuts him off, “Cram it, Banner.”

“Play nice, kids,” Natasha says, and winks at Steve, before taking out another duo of horned bots. She gets close enough to another one advancing towards the community center door to get out the light sticks. She flicks her wrist to activate it, and as the Krampus advances, she shoves the stick into it’s side where she can see a gap in its metal. The electricity sears through it and she smiles through gritted teeth.

There’s a popping sound, and then it explodes, covering her in a sticky yellow substance.

“Oh motherfucker,” she says. “That is not okay.” The goo is spattered all over, a thick glob covering her boots. She shakes it off and steps back, but when she pulls at her left foot, she meets resistance and nearly torques her knee. She pulls again.

“Romanoff, get out of there.” Cap is behind her, the sound of his shield connecting, ricocheting off the robots giving an echoed perspective.

“Can’t.”

“Seriously,” he orders again. “Move it.”

“No, I really can’t,” she says. “I’m stuck.” She’d thought about hedging, but really, it’s just absurd. She tugs at her foot and realizes at the same time that the light stick is now glued to her right glove. She can’t put it down. She can probably get out of her boot, but that means holstering the weapon in her left hand, and there’s a drone moving towards her.

She can fend the Krampi off but it’s going to require letting them get really close.
“A little help if you can spare it, Cap.”

“We need to get those drones out of the residential areas,” Hill says. “I’m going to send the Hazelton SWAT after them, but I need two of you to secure that community center.”

Thor sounds disgruntled, “I will go retrieve the children picked up by these demons. However, you should know that the substance that results when they explode is...not suitable for fabric.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s very, very sticky. And it has eaten my cape.”


“Glued to the ground in front of the main doors,” Natasha growls in confirmation. “Unless they take the roof off, they’re going to have to go through me.”

It looks...not great from where she’s standing. She can ditch her boots and run, but there’s a lot of the robots. She catches Steve’s eye, shakes her head. They need backup. It’s not an ideal situation for the Hulk - uncertain outcomes and a lot of potential property damage, scattered civilians like those kids who should have been long evacuated. But the Krampi are moving forward like they’re possessed, and she’s gonna stand her ground as long as she can.

“Call it,” she says.

“I agree.” He nods. “Doc, we need heavy artillery.”

“Stark’s not coming,” Hill’s left the comm channel open as she’s speaking to Bruce, “We’ve got Colonel Rhodes on the phone, but he’s in London. It’s gonna take awhile.”

She hears Bruce’s deep breath. “Where and how, Cap? I think as much direction as possible is probably ideal.”

“Most of downtown has been evacuated, aside from the folks in the community center, so how do you feel about navigating here and busting bad Santas?”

“If you can get those folks clear, I’d feel a lot better about it. Not going to worry about navigating, Hill’s dropping me right in the target zone.”

~*~

Hill is circling above the community center while Bruce sheds the other hoodies and his shoes and glasses, stashing them in a bulkhead compartment. The back hatch cracks open and a cold vortex tears into the cabin.

Steve bellows, “Duck!” and there’s a ping over comms, distinct to something ricocheting off the shield.

Natasha’s voice is tight, “Well that was nice while it lasted.”

Bruce plucks the comm out of his ear and walks out of the back of the hatch right into the buffeting wind. The drop doesn’t even feel like falling, because he knows where to go.

~*~

“Whoa,” Steve throws up his shield as Hulk smashes two Krampi together. They positively gush,
like eggs cracking at high velocity. The goo splatters him and covers the Hulk.

He growls, but it sounds more like a playful dog tug-of-war sound, and that big mean mouth has the smirk at the corners Bruce once described as schadenfreude.

“Romanoff, are you unglued?”

“No, I left my boots where they stood. Thor is right, this stuff is eating holes in the suit.”

“Can you get inside, start evacuating?”

“Already on it, SWAT’s at the loading dock with some commandeered transit buses.”

Steve fights off blasts and goo with Natasha’s updates on the evacuation in one ear and the gleeful smashing of the Hulk in the other. He’d started snagging single robots by the limbs and whipping them like batteries at the oncoming squads. One crack shot sends a plume of goo high in the air, and that was definitely a nearly subsonic chuckle rumbling up through Steve’s boots.

“Hazelton SWAT’s herding the residential Krampi squad your way, Cap,” Hill says. “Governor is sending in National Guard and has authorized an EMP, hopes it will help. They figure troops will cause less property damage than the Hulk, though that’s a moot point now.”

“Sounds like something we have in the back of the jet,” Romanoff says. “But it’s gonna short out everything, radius five miles. People tend to hate that. Also, how comfortable are we that armored vehicles look different enough from tanks?”

“I have retrieved the children, they are unharmed.” Thor reports, adding, “What is EMP?”

“Well,” Steve glances at the Hulk, remembering drawing circuit diagrams in a freezing cottage in Prague and feeling like an idiot for not fully utilizing his team. “Lightning counts.”

~*~

There’s an inanimate Krampus in the middle of the jet. It smells weird, like milk and machine oil, but it’s eyes are blank. Hill is the only one completely dressed. Everyone else is wearing blanket togas, since the goo reacted poorly with the kevlar-based uniform cloth. “Maybe it’s for the best that Stark didn’t make it.”

Bruce chuckles sleepily.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Natasha says, pulling the blanket around her shoulders. Her weapons and belt are fine, but her suit and her boots were left melting in the middle of Scranton, as was Steve’s uniform and the non-Asgardian alloy parts of Thor’s armor. They’d all finished the fight half-dressed, corralling Krampi into a killing corridor of tri-county SWAT.

It turned out the god of thunder believed in protective cups, but not underwear, which resulted in a risque peek-a-boo effect that glinted in the weak January sun as he called down strategically forked lightning to fry the stragglers.

Bruce has a couple small flecks of glue hardened in his hair, unlike the large chunks dangling from hers and Thor’s locks. Steve escaped clean mainly because he’d wanted to keep his ears warm. He might actually learn to keep his cowl on in battle after this.

“I’m just saying that, occasionally,” Bruce murmurs in her ear, “it’s a salve to my dignity when I’m not the only one naked in public.”
She kicks him a little harder than she means to, then soothes the spot with the outside of her raggedly socked foot.

“Shoulda brought my calamine,” Steve grouses.

The goo also reacted badly with bare skin, though Bruce dodged most of this as well.

The Hulk had just finished destroying an armored personnel carrier, as an after-event palate cleanser, with the same caustic glee Natasha has seen Bruce level at poorly-conceived theories and painted concrete floors. Maria was trying to sweet talk the Fire Chief into bringing a pumper truck around to rinse the corrosive stuff off before he stood down into Bruce, but the woman was having none of it.

Vehicle demolished, Hulk then stalked off to a huge plowed bank of snow and started scooping handfuls of it, scrubbing himself clean in the same rote pattern of Bruce half asleep in the shower.

As Natasha approached, Maria had said in her ear, “Oh right, I’d forgotten about the stint in Canada. Problem solved.”

Problem remaining, he’d been loathe to stand down, antsy and aggressively pacing along Main Street and calling out, “Where is more?”

“No more left, Big Guy.”

“More.” He swung around for another lap. “There is more. Hulk smash more, not Red.”

“There’s no more for either of us to smash,” Natasha shivered and cajoled, more or less in her underwear.

“Where is MORE!” He slammed his palm into a plow bank, snow and gravel and road salt flying.

“HEY!” Natasha shouted from the chest, “Can we just knock it off, already?”

He’d whipped around and stopped, then closed the distance to where she stood, shuddering and pissed. He crouched to eye level and stroked down the back of her arm with massive fingertips, searing hot. “Cold, or scared?”

“Cold.”

He’d grunted, like it was funny but he wasn’t going to be an asshole about it. He swept his thumb down her arm for good measure before letting Bruce take over, stumbling and twitching onto the icy pavement.

There doesn’t seem to be any permanent damage to the team aside from collective pride, but the after effects are aggravating and uncomfortable. Natasha’s head throbs, and she itches, and she’s going to have to cut this stuff out of her hair. She scratches around the welts on her neck.

Bruce curls against her and murmurs, “Wish we could have found...whoever was controlling them...like with the squid,” before dropping off into the post-Hulk pass out.

By the time they land, Tony has sent everyone on the team a video link. Shot by someone peeking over the edge of the community center roof and set to dubstep, the thrumming percussion swells and folds as the Hulk hurtles down from the sky and starts smashing Krampi together by twos in great spurts of yellow goo and shrapnel.
Kramping your Style

Natasha snips the goo out of their hair as Bruce sends Tony photos of the leftover robot demon laid out like a corpse in his lab. She lets him take point on the shower while she sections and re-layers what’s left of her length with the speed of long practice. They swap, and he’s ready with the first aid kit when she comes out, towel wrapped around her waist.

He sprays antiseptic and smooths anti-itch cream over her back and arms. They’re still going to stop by the Trust party, although she’s so tired she feels woozy with it. “This was not the way I anticipated primping for the evening,” she says.

He twists a blunt curl between his fingers, “It looks good shorter.” He brushes his mouth against the newly exposed skin before medicating the welts on her neck.

The antiseptic stings and she’s weary with the day, with demons and interruptions and feeling like a weapon and not an answer. She hates that they don’t have a cause for all that fuss or a perpetrator.

She pulls on jeans and a soft t-shirt over the welts. He wordlessly hands over his black sweater to save her the trouble of stealing it, then lets her read the texts from Tony.

*You just gonna leave that thing lying there?*

*Do you want me to wait for you?*

*Yes, followed by No!* Followed by, *Maybe...*

*That’s all of the answers.*

*Luz. Get Luz to help.*

Natasha yawns. “You recruiting from the party?”

“It’s a good idea. She’s an exceptional engineer, and Tony’s actually turning into a good mentor.”

“It’s New Year’s eve, she might want to ring in the new year like a kid.” Natasha offers it like a counter, but she doesn’t really believe it. Luz gets that Stark-like gleam in her eye whenever mechanics are mentioned. The phone dings in her hand: *Tell her if she does a good job I’ll let her take a poke at Harbor Squid.*

She drops next to him on the bed to put her own shoes on, watching him type out, *We’ll film it like alien autopsy.*

He’s shifted so easily back into that curiosity that she finds so appealing, and she knows he’ll chase that second wind until he collapses. Their normal had slipped away so easily, in a wash of fractured fairytales and goo.

Steve and Maria are already at the party, talking to Khadijah and Sumi, or at least trying to. Sumi is still flushed and sweaty from the band's earlier set, while Khadijah clutches a cup of punch and looks like she’s being deposed by Captain America and the Director of NotSHIELD.

Trinh has borrowed Stark’s karaoke machine for the evening and some of the tutors and Fiona are
belting out their own high school hits as the girls watch in admiring horror. In the back Nick Fury is sitting, arms spread out along the back of the couch, watching *The Seven Samurai* with the subtitles on. Most of the monkeys are sitting on bean bags on the floor with Peyton, but Aisha and Marisol are sharing the couch with Nick.

Marisol’s eyes are wide like she’s witnessing a secret of the universe unveiled on screen. Aisha finishes murmuring into an earpiece and shows Fury something on her tablet. Fury smiles, and offers her a dap.

“Nice eye-patch,” Natasha says, sitting down next to Fury.

“Hannukah present.”

Bruce hovers for a minute, clearly torn. Luz is already rolling to her feet with Catherine in tow, clearly given the heads up from Stark.

“Go,” Natasha says.

“I’ll be back by midnight,” he says.

“It’s fine, really.” It’s already past nine. “Happy New Year.”

Fury’s raised eyebrow is even more annoying than usual, so she ignores it. They watch as Kikuchiyo rescues an orphaned baby, breaking down because he’s come full circle: a farmer’s orphaned child pretending to be a samurai, rising to the occasion to rescue the villagers, but still very much a lost babe who belongs to neither world. Aisha is back to murmuring and tapping, while Marisol has snuck down to share Peyton’s beanbag.

“ Heard your last mission abroad went a little pear-shaped,” Fury says, still watching the screen.

“It wasn’t ideal,” she answers. She doesn’t want to go into details in front of the girls. Besides, she’s sure Hill has sent him intel. He’s really just making conversation, chastising maybe. Or not. Fury is, as always, an enigma about his agenda.

“Thoughts on the origins?”

She doesn’t like to speculate, but Nick is the only person she knows who’s brain is as twisty as her own. “I feel like I’m missing something, like I’m looking at a pattern where someone’s covered up an essential clue. I can see around it, but I’m guessing wrong until I guess right.”

“What’s the pattern.”

She lowers her voice. “Enhancement. Irradiated serums. Fucking gingerbread houses.”

Fury nods as if her summary makes perfect sense.

“What we found, and the threat we encountered, have to be tied together. But I don’t know how. I have suspicions, but no proof, only speculation. I need to see the real pattern.”

“I might have something for you,” he says. “Some intel came in a few months ago, didn’t think much of it. Something out of China.”

She doesn’t believe the hedge, but she can be patient. “Okay.”

“Hill sent me Banner’s debrief as well. Thought I’d be curious.”
“You’re always curious, Nick.”

“Making sure my proteges aren’t in over their heads.”

Natasha thinks Steve is over his head trying to follow along as Maria belts out Welcome to the Jungle. Dom edges him out and her guitar takes over for the karaoke machine, and then it’s two tall brunettes, waves and afro puffs thrashing as they scream until the rest of the band joins in. They segue into a set of their own songs and hand Maria a t-shirt with their new name: CuntraPuntal.

Eventually Thor and Jane arrive, dropping by for the countdown. She drinks some champagne, and Fury breaks out Enter the Dragon. She doesn’t remember falling asleep.

JARVIS wakes her up at 1 a.m. Fury doesn’t seem to have moved, just sitting there while she dozes, keeping watch. The monkeys have gone to bed, and the older girls are talking around the kitchen table, or maybe they’re playing cards with Maria. It’s hard to tell. Steve is passed out in a beanbag chair, in an oddly vulnerable curl.

“Agent Romanoff, I thought you’d like to know that Dr. Banner fell asleep in the lab. The young ladies are still exploring the new…acquisition. He asked that you be alerted in such a situation, expressing concern for their safety.”

“Thank you JARVIS. I’ll come send them all to bed.”

Fury stands up with her as she rises, switches off the television. “Goodnight ladies,” he says. The table waves at him.

He walks with Natasha to the elevator. “You’ve done well with this.”

“We’re doing better,” she acknowledges, “it’s been a process.”

“You’re…” Fury seems to be thinking about what he wants to say. He’s never been at a loss of words, but the hour and the odd circumstances seem to have created an unusual restraint in him. “You’re building something, Tasha. It’s gratifying to see it. Take that as a compliment from an old man. An old friend.”

She lifts a shoulder, not sure what to say.

“I don’t mean the Trust, or the Avengers, although those things too.” Fury looks down at his interlaced fingers, then back up at her. “We built a safety net for Barton and his family. If you want that, need it, even now I could still…”

“With all due respect, sir,” she interrupts him, holds up her hand, and is gentle as she knows how to be. She might still harbor some resentment at being kept in the dark. “The best protection Clint could receive was being kept off the grid, which you helped him do, and I know he’s grateful. You know I don’t really have that option. And to be frank, I take care of my own. I always have.”

Fury acknowledges that with an eyebrow.

“But if the need arises,” she says, kinder now. “I will find a way to take advantage of it.”

Fury gives her a serious look, like he’s weighing his words, deciding what to give her. Finally hits the elevator button, and gives her what he’s been holding on to.

“Ross is regaining some of the ground he’d lost after Harlem. SHIELD’s destruction has helped restore his reputation with the more paranoid factions. Understandably, I suppose. I’m not sure that’s
a enemy you can fight on your own. I thought you should know. It may not matter, he’s got another agenda he’s pretty set on currently. Maybe he’s let the thing with Banner go, but I’d be careful anyway. Keep close to whatever sources you still have in that arena.”

“Thank you, sir. For the intel.”

“And so you know, I’m leading January’s film appreciation. I’ve already sent my choice to Ms. Potts.”

“Just so you know, Nick, no one gets their first choice.”

“We’ll see,” he says as the doors close on his smile.

In the lab she shoos Luz and Catherine back to the Trust floor, and wakes Bruce up just enough to chivvy him into the elevator, putting the lab on lockdown and giving JARVIS special instructions to monitor the Krampus.

Bruce is sleepy with comedown, spent adrenaline and scientific fervor. He wraps his arm around her waist, and leans heavily against her.

She doesn’t bother to turn on the lights in the suite. He strips down, crawls into the bed, and tugs her towards him as she pulls off the sweater.

“Mm sorry,” he mumbles into her hair, hands stroking her body, lazy and comforting, no intent beyond touch, “normal got away from us. Happy New Year, sweetheart.”

She fits herself against him, nose in his neck, relishing his scent, his warmth, his place next to her. “This is our normal, doc,” she murmurs back, thoughtful, exhaustion riding her down like a wave until she feels slurred with it, letting his touch lull her to sleep.

~*~

Other than scanning and naming the Krampus--Johannes, because there’s a fussy beard and moustache with a black oxide finish and Luz thinks it looks like woodcuts of Kepler--they wait until Tony gets back to open it up. They’ve analyzed samples of the goo, built holographic models from the scans, but Bruce wants an expert there when they start disassembly.

When they crack open Johannes there’s a beautiful symmetry to its moving parts, as much mechanical art as machinery. There’s a deft hand at work, a familiar one.

“I think our friend the Squidmaster made this,” Tony says.

Steve crosses his arms, “Pretty sure that guy only knew how to run the tech.” He’d watched hours of interviews, and while the guy talked in florid paragraphs about dire and beautiful sea monsters, he was silent when asked about his supply chain.

“Not the guy living the Lovecraftian dream. The one who sold him the monster.” Once he says it both Luz and Catherine work it like a puzzle, spotting the artisan signature that ties the two constructs together; repeated solutions like verbal tics, the affectation toward a clockwork aesthetic in work so far past gears it includes manufactured biology. There is a symmetry of structure, beautiful as they are horrifying, baroque toys meant to convey terror.

Natasha crosses her arms. “We really don’t need a global conspiracy to start a party these days, do we?”
Tony is in love, trying to figure out how to take Johann apart so that he can then put him back together.

Natasha spends the first days of the new year going back through Kudrin’s notes, looking for the missing link. Bruce finds her in their suite on the third day sitting cross-legged on the bed, head tilted back against the wall.

“I’m going to Russia,” she says, “for a few days. I think I need to go back to the beginning.”

**Meanwhile in Satan’s Workshop**

Bruce’s flight is early in the morning because Tony has business in Rio that afternoon ahead of the conference, and it’s not like he’s a stranger to three AM. Natasha gets up, groggy and mussed, to say goodbye. Giselle is taking them to JFK, and Tony is already waiting down in SubSix parking.

“He’s going to Russia,” she murmurs at him, punctuating each order with a brush of her lips across his cheekbone, his jaw, his chin. “I’ll miss you.”

“Be safe,” he says, holding her face, “be careful. Tell Clint thank you for coming along. I kind of miss you already.”

It’s so early it’s more waking in the middle of the night than anything approaching morning, and their goodbye feels like reassurances in the post-nightmare dark. She pushes against him, curling her hands around his chest, inside his jacket, teeth light against his neck. He pulls her tight.

“When you get back...” she’s ambushed by a yawn, and he waits with contentment as her jaw cracks at the apex and she shakes it off to continue, “...you wanna talk about a house?”

He feels ambushed himself, caught out by being handed what he was still trying to figure out how to ask for. He’s afraid to say yes, in case she changes her mind, so all he can do is kiss her, fill his nose with the sleepy bed scent of her.

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“The wind off the river is bitter.” Natasha wraps her hands around the hot cup, feeling scalded instead of warmed. “I think American citizenship thinned my blood.”

Clint doesn’t call her on it, just shrugs and says, “Born and bred, and I’m toasty.”

The tea house they’re sitting in is ornate, lovely. She hasn’t been back in Saint Petersburg for a decade. It’s a beautiful city, even in the middle of winter. But she’s been chilled since they arrived, drinking steaming gallons of tea and coffee, shivering outdoors, indoors and in bed. She knows it’s not really the temperature, but it still feels physical.

“I have to know.” Natasha finally asks Clint, “Bribery or guilt?”

“Worse. He just asked.” Clint has a mug of hot spiced cider in front of him, but he’s not drinking it. “Actually he called Laura, and asked her if he could ask me to come with you.”

She’s impressed by the manipulation. “That is a level of deviousness that I hadn’t expected.”

“You could have called me,” Clint says, and arches his brow. “You’re allowed to need back up even when it’s not life threatening.”

“I don’t really need my hand held to go look at old buildings,” she counters, but she’s pretty sure the
dark circles under her eyes, mementos of a fitful night, are evidence to the contrary.

It isn’t intel she expects to find, but memories - layered, and untrustworthy, and aching. The notes in Kudrin’s files had given them a rough idea of the location of the old compound, a few discreet inquiries had shored up the certainty, and they’ll go later, as it gets closer to dark.

Like when she handles the old notebooks, smelling the paper and ink and time, she’s anticipating an upwelling of memory from being in the building once more, the views through doorways, the way sound echoes in those exact spaces.

She wants to say, *Fuck it. I’m not doing this.* Can feel the words pile up in her throat, *Let’s get drunk and talk about real estate that isn’t a shitty safe house in an obscure city,* or maybe, *How did you stop being scared of making a home,* or even, *How do I keep myself from ruining everything?* But they don’t have those sorts of conversations. They talk around them, joke and bicker, and give each other context clues to know that the subject is safe. They’ve never really needed to spell things out. They’re spies, all of the truth between them lies in between the words.

Russia always makes her feel bruised and melancholy, fissured, even without expressly coming to visit her past. She sees the regime that built her in every street, every flag, and food stand, each cobblestone and glimpse of striped onion dome.

Clint warms her just by sitting there in front of her, stubborn and unsubtle, so much skill under that placid facade, the antithesis of moody Slavic pessimism, so bright in his cynicism. He’s an antidote, and she drinks his cider and gives him the truth.

“That I’m glad you’re here,” she says. “I’m glad to not be here alone.”

It takes them an hour by train to get to the old compound. It remains the way a discarded piece of equipment moulders and rusts in a cellar, and she knows in her bones it’s the place, as they walk up the familiar curve of the access road, frozen soil smooth and evenly coated with crunchy snow under her boots. No one comes here, because everything of value has been stolen away, even the razor wire.

“And I brought bolt cutters for nothing.” Clint pouts as they pass through the perimeter of empty wooden posts.

The facility where she was raised had started life as a nobleman’s manor house, appropriated and re-purposed by the state. It’s an imposing stack of stone much like the Academy in Lozen, and even decades of abandonment have only given it a bristle of incipient woods growing around the foundations. It looks feral, like it had never wanted people inside and prefers to be empty and left alone.

Inside it has been hollowed out like a pumpkin, all the decor, the carved wood, even the glass in the windows gone. The ruined floors are covered in a mud made from fallen leaves and ceiling plaster. A piano rots by the tall bay windows.

She was a child here, this place had nurtured her, a creche for killers. She feels a laugh that burbles at the edges of hysterical. She should take a photo, send it to the lab. *Here, honey, is where I took my first step on the path, crafted my first poison, killed my first rival.* She does start to laugh, because she has no pet name for him besides Doc, and the joke loses impact without the *honey.*

Clint gives her a sharp look.

“They sent us to Moscow when we started to develop and menstruate,” she says, and her voice
sounds rougher, rawer than she’d hoped. “We...those of us who proved our worth here, we were sent to the City...to continue ballet training.”

The staircase is still sound, and Clint paces her as she ascends, bouncing the flashlight off the peeling ceiling to throw the whole place into navigable dimness.

There’s so much grey. She stands in a shell of a barracks and feels the dreamy blur of competition, discipline, the sharp push of a needle finding her vein, the taste of oranges and erasure.

“We would have morning class there,” she gestures. “Little girls dressed alike, tights and black leotards…” she trails off. Ballet clothes and buns, smocked school dresses and Mary Janes, bodysuits and braids and crepe-soled trainers. Tiny killers, full of the glory of their purpose. She doesn’t remember fear, only will. Even young, that purpose had warmed her like the sun. She had known she was a star pupil, even before the injections and the tests. She’d looked forward to proving it, to tackling whatever they gave her. She’d been so proud.

She hears Clint call her name as she walks through the wide empty room she’d slept in for years.

In Moscow they had dorms, six to a room. Here in Leningrad they all slept together in two rows of iron beds and scratchy blankets, children without lullabies or stories, left only with each other and a deep mistrust for comfort. The thing is, even without the false memories, she can’t remember being unhappy. Children adapt, she thinks. If they don’t know the difference, they adapt to what they know. The Trust girls? They knew the difference.

She hadn’t lied to Peyton. She is glad that Madame fell at the hands of one she was in the midst of corrupting. If Natasha had killed her, she’d have been no better than her training. Kudrin’s presence is only a faint echo here--she’d worked her true magic on adolescent Nataliya--but it is here that she first hand-picked her prodigies. Natasha has recovered enough of her past to know that, and what she didn’t recover she has decoded and translated from the box of records, under the designation ПЕТ019, the nineteenth subject, obtained from Petrograd.

Back downstairs she heads past the dining hall to the rear of the building. The kitchen is broken white tile, black iron stoves jammed into the original massive hearth. “We called them the Grey Ladies.”

“Grey Ladies?” Clint pulls open a door on a stove, rust breaking free. “Like ghosts? No, wait, Steve was telling me about the old Red Cross volunteers, like candystripers but with grey dresses, part of his Smithsonian consultant thing, I think. They must have gotten around.”

Clint’s throwing bullshit and faint grins at her tight expression. She doesn’t laugh, but she is glad he’s here.

There are things that she and Bruce know together because they are facts about her childhood that she has read in precise, angled handwriting before handing them over to him. He holds her secrets so dearly and so tight. She trusts him to keep them safe. She wants Bruce here, the weight of his compassion thick around her, his love and his insight. But she’s equally glad he’s far away, somewhere sun drenched, feted and thriving.

She doesn’t think she could stand to have him see this place, see how he’d look at her after.

“The women who did the work, the cooking and cleaning.” Natasha leads him through a door she’d never been through before, wide open room with another massive stove, square soapstone sinks. “The laundry. I don’t remember hearing any of them speak.”
Clint eyes the pulleys on the ceiling, a couple lengths of wood still waiting for a new load to come hang high and dry. “Washouts.”

“Mostly first generation.” She’s read bloodless analysis of the consequences of shackling; physically the girls healed but for every one that resisted there was another who came to depend on the security of it, and it compromised them in the field.

She’s cracking along those fissures, duality of longing and loathing. She was a girl. She’d held a gun, pulled the trigger. Over and over until she learned to see it as a choice. She’d been so very good at what she’d done, and she’s a fool to think it was ever anything but choice.

Clint lingers in what had been a hallway, boots crunching on the snow as he shifts, giving her space, until he finally calls her name again.

“Nat,” he says, voice a kindness that bruises her. “It’s enough. Let’s go.”

She nods, follows him in a fog of memories that all seem real. She can’t feel the cold now, the chill has gone too deep. They eat dinner in the hotel. Clint talks at her, anecdotes about the kids, memories of past missions in Russia, and she tries to ground herself in his voice and his presence, but still feels transparent.

“I want to redo the sun room before we put the house up on the market,” he starts, and it’s the idea of home, of building it, shaping and dressing it and having it, and it starts to suffocate her, feels like a palace of ice because what is she? Who is she to have something that malleable, something that can be torn down and rebuilt and shaped into a fit for her?

“What am I doing?” she asks, interrupting Clint, vodka cold in her hand, so icy that her fingers are numbing because embracing the cold seems to make more sense than fighting it and she’s shaking with it. “Playing house, and pretending to be normal. How could anything normal survive that?”

Clint puts his hand on her shoulder and shakes her, hard. “You aren’t normal,” he says, voice edged. “Neither am I. But we still get to be happy. Or at least, we deserve the chance to figure out how to be.”

She clenches her molars hard on a fold of soft cheek, using the sting to fight the burn settling in her eyes as she looks at her hands.

“I’ve seen you, and now I’ve seen that place, so I know what I’m talking about.” His hand cups the top of her shoulder, steadying. “You’re more than that place. We’re all more than we’d expected to be. Because we’re awesome and we work hard. And we’d learned to have shit for expectations. Who needs expectations, anyway? Stop being scared and just fucking grab what’s already in front of you.”

It’s his grip, the solid, no fucking around tone that she’s relied on for a decade, that she’s turned back on him in his own moments of doubt and it starts to chip away at the cold, at the shock and fear and ice. That little hit of heat, of warmth and faith kicks starts her, and she takes a deep breath.

She can believe this, believe in what she’s created, that it’s real, has legs. She has to believe it - for herself, for Clint, for Bruce and sometimes even for Steve. For the life she has built in spite of herself. How hard they all work, she thinks, to go out every day and be more than their pasts and their horror and their mistakes.

“You made yourself into someone who can look at your past with horror,” Clint says, and he’s using the tone he uses with the kids sometimes, compassionate sergeant. “Use that, trust it. It means
something that this makes you feel like you’re drowning. You built a life. You’re still building that, so have a little fucking faith.”

She has survived by building and creating identities, rooms full of them, universes full of them, wallets and passports, and potential safe houses and places to run, as if new names could really keep them safe. She knows there’s no such thing as safe. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a home. It’s time to shore up her own foundations.

She shakes her head, breathes out hard again. “Sorry,” she says, “for the maudlin.”

“Yeah, well,” Clint shrugs, knocks back her vodka, “it’s better than hitting yourself in the face with a hammer. “

“I might be unclear on that metaphor,” she says, twists her smile to soften it. He’s her partner, loves her, but that love isn’t tied into how she sees herself. It won’t be shadowed or shattered by her own doubts or internal mistrust, her failures at redemption. When Clint handed her back a chance to make a change, he did it with his eyes open.

She doesn’t have to protect him from her failings, although she will always try. He’s the one who taught her that part of redemption means being better everyday, trying again when she fails.

There’s a pattern here, she thinks. Generations. Repetition. A signature, like the robot squid and Johann. The Trust girls, herself, the evidence in the records. Kudrin was an artisan. She’s left telltales behind.

Natasha survived because she learned how to build an architecture of the self from the skills she’d been given, the rewrites and resets, long after they stopped happening. The Trust girls made it out because they pooled resources, connected with each other, remembered what had made them human. Kudrin continued to reshape her methods without changing her purpose.

It’s the humanity she could never get past, the crazy motherfucker factor. Humans will always default to the piece that lets them survive - whether it’s an erasure of self or emphasizing one’s true nature.

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Sam meets Steve at the train station in the afternoon, and the weather is almost balmy compared to what it had been three hours earlier and northerly.

Steve likes D.C. He feels more at home here than he does in New York. It had been easier to start building a life in a new place, one without old memories and expectations. The city itself is full of earnest young lawyers and politicians, people going to jobs wearing suits, and it reminds him of the world he was born into. There’s a formality that’s comforting. Of the many things he lost when SHIELD fell, this might be the thing that pisses him off most on a personal level, losing home a second time. At least it would if he let himself have those kinds of feelings about the places he lived. He knows he could have stayed, found a new apartment, started again but the lure of purpose had drawn him to the tower, and he doesn’t truly have any regrets.

“You know,” Sam says, “You could probably get some sort of special military flight. Hell, don’t you live with a billionaire? I bet he’d fly you down so you don’t have to spend half a day on Amtrak.”

Steve shrugs. “I like the train. If the weather were better, I’d take my bike. I’d buy a car, but I don’t want to pay to park it and besides, where else am I gonna drive?”

Sam grabs his bag, slinging it over his shoulder even as Steve protests and they head to his car.
“Man, just let me. It’s what buddies do. You carry that.”

He gestures to the special bag that Tony had commissioned for the shield that makes it look more like an artist’s portfolio than a carrying case. Steve really hates going anywhere without it.

“We’re going for Ethiopian tonight, hope you’re hungry.”

“Actually, I was hoping we could just hang out. You bragged you were an all-season griller.”

“Just for that I’ll make you the all-season griller.” Sam raises an eyebrow. “Girl trouble or end of the world shit?”

Steve shrugs, gives that million dollar smile. “Both. Neither. I don’t know.”

It’s not that simple, but he has to talk to someone. Saying it out loud to Bruce had just made things harder in some ways. It felt like he was spilling secrets that weren’t his, and the new year is making him restless, pushing him to stop waiting around and reach for what he wants. They’re all so tied together in the tower that any secrets they do have become tangled, insidious tripwires.

He needed to get out of the city to get some perspective. Every day feels like another chance for Bucky to step out of the shadows and say hello, or fuck you, or blow me, or how do you feel about Burmese food, because there’s a great place down the street, and dinner can be one long Burma Shave sign joke.

Steve has no idea which of those outcomes he wants. He’s equally afraid of finding out. Every day is another chance he doesn’t take, either.
Chapter 19

The Boy from Ipanema Goes Hulking

Bruce has relented on the flashy AV presentation. In for a penny, in for the full Tony Stark, whaling away on a concrete block with a five pound sledge while Bruce stands next to him shining an LED flashlight on the small vial of pixie dust, turning and shaking it a bit to activate all the nanoparticles.

Tony mimes swearing and wipes his brow, borrowing heavily from his failed attempts to shift Mjolnir, then offers Bruce the sledge as if stepping aside for the master.

Bruce shakes his head and sprinkles the concrete block, finger tapping the vial so the dust scatters and catches the light.

Tony offers him the sledge a few more times and Bruce politely declines, and then one last time where Bruce snatches it from his hand all peeved, only to set it gently on the floor, and blame it on some of the audience having a light buzz on already, but there’s a collective chuckle that feels almost warm.

Tony brings the set-up home by snatching the vial from Bruce’s hand and setting it on the concrete block with exaggerated care—which is the last nudge it needs to crumble down into tiny pebbles.

Tony knows how to work an audience.

Afterward he sells a variable patent to two international conglomerates, then disappears for several hours with two Asian women. Bruce is hip deep in a friendly argument about semantics and physics in the hotel bar when Tony reappears at his elbow, offering a glass of iced alcohol and half a lime, insisting on celebrating successful partnerships he’s just made with NGOs in Thailand and Nepal respectively.

Maybe it’s all the practice he’s been getting with Tony’s flawed brilliance, but he’s gotten the hang of allowing people leeway to be wrong without alienating them, without it feeling like a physical pain. It leaves room for compromise, a space to meet in the middle. Tony’s bright, wicked laugh helps that sentiment along. By the time Bruce taps out of the heated discussion, he’s pleasantly buzzed and it ends with handshakes. He’s pleasant in general.

His room is nearly as big as the house he grew up in, and has a wide open balcony that overlooks the pool. It’s summer here, warm even in the twinkling evening. Bruce has kicked off his shoes, sitting back on a lounge chair next to Tony, ignoring the drink but enjoying the cool condensation of the glass in his hand, grounding.

He thinks of Natasha bundled in down and fur in a miserable Russian winter, pale face and bright hair and fierce smile, and misses her so deeply his hand shakes a little, ice clinking.

Tony has shed his conference clothes, stretched out in only his sternal scar and a pair of short swim trunks patterned in red tropical flowers. “Do you want to see Patagonia?”

Bruce shrugs. “Tomorrow, or ever?”

“This could be it, Bruce,” Tony says. “Our last road trip.”

“Did we have a first one?” Bruce sips, brow furrowing. “Tell me you’re not counting the helicarrier
as a road trip. I take that back, of course you are.”

“I find,” Tony says, and Bruce can hear now that his speech is a little too deliberate for sobriety. “I find that I long for my own bed when I’m away from home. For my bed, and the woman in it, who has graced me with her presence. I like my life Bruce. How the fuck did that happen?”

“You’re a lucky man,” he says, feels his mouth turn up. “Every squirrel finds a nut, Tony.”

“Exactly. You’re happy.” There’s something awed and almost accusatory in Tony’s voice as he turns to his side, gesturing with his drink. “Or as close as you let yourself get, I suspect. Which is pretty fucking weird if you think about it. How did that happen? I mean I’m fucking delirious for you, man, but it...how did it happen?”

“Maybe she’s the squirrel and I’m nuts.”

“Not what I mean.” Tony flops back to look up into the night sky. “You stayed. I never thought you’d stay...but you stayed.”

Bruce shakes his head. “Every day,” he says, and it’s cautious, deliberate. “I make a choice, Tony. I wake up, and I go through all the reasons why to stay, and why to go. Every day it’s a choice, some days it’s a hard one. But these days, I get to make my own choices. That’s a luxury, and it comes with the obligation to make the right ones.”

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Natasha says goodbye to Clint in the sole terminal of Pulkovo Airport, sending him skipping like a rock to Heathrow, JFK, Rochester and then the farm. She settles in to wait for her own flight to Urumqi, connecting to Shanghai.

The local times for NYC, St. Petersburg and Buenos Aires have been a widget on her phone all week, and she swaps out Petersburg for Shanghai, but she and Bruce haven’t spoken since she got to Russia. They keep missing each other across the distances, time and space, season and schedule, and it feels like they’re living in two different worlds. If she’s honest, she knows that she’s avoiding any in-depth conversation until she’s gathered all the pieces. She wants to hear his voice, and she’s trying very hard not to hide behind secrets, but she also wants to keep some of this private while she works through it, at least for a little while longer.

She wants to burn with the certainty of purpose, and instead she feels tired and cold, like whatever she finds in Shanghai is just going to grind away at her further.

He won’t thank her for protecting him, and she’s a little ashamed at that. She wants to know how the presentation went, beyond the photo of Tony with victory fingers and a sledgehammer propped on his shoulder. She knows, without being told, that she owes Bruce the chance to worry.

The latest is the two of them looking blurry around the edges by the hotel pool, Tony in his terrible swim trunks and Bruce barefoot, his shirt so rolled up and unbuttoned it’s barely on.

It’s 6 a.m. in Buenos Aires, but she doesn’t want to move on to China without making one more effort.

“Romanoff, a pleasure. Are you calling to describe your underwear in detail?”

“Who says I’m wearing any?” she’s mildly amused. Very mildly.

That stops Tony for a hair’s breadth. “Is that true?”
“Why are you answering Bruce’s phone? Particularly at this hour?”

“Just being neighborly. He got kidnapped by a delegation of New Zealand academics last night, left me holding down the fort since I already met my life quota for hookers and blow. I took his phone to keep it out of compromising situations.”

She waits, her patience fraying slightly.

He sighs. “You’re really no fun this morning.”

“Never claimed to be.”

“He left his phone in the lobby and I picked it up, forgot I had it in my pocket. Do you want me to go wake him up? His room is just next door. Or, and I say this as a former consultant for several military and intelligence agencies, you could tell me more about these missing undergarments…”

“Don’t be a lech, Stark, I know you don’t mean it. No, just...give him back his phone when you see him. Tell him I called.”

Stark dials down the shrill, more bullet train than runaway train. “We went out to Cordoba yesterday, drove across the Pampa, two lane roads straight as a pin, no shoulders, think Kansas--

“I’ve been to Cordoba.”

“--it took us forever, but we kept moving in and out of thunderstorms so the sky made it almost interesting. We had lunch and walked around until dinner, and he convinced me to take the bus back--”

“Tony,”

“Apparently Cordoba’s nickname is La Docta, from the University here, but all I could find was a keychain, but he pointed out that he doesn’t have any keys, which yeah, so last century, but I was gonna get it for him anyway, maybe if we put a small phone on one--”

“Tony.” Her voice is sharp. She feels sharp, this whole conversation is making her jaw ache. This is her least favorite flavor of Tony, brittle and manic, like he hasn’t been sleeping.

“It’s been a good trip,” he says. “Nuestro Doctor is out in full charm, winning friends, influencing people.”

“I’m glad,” she says softly, and something about that does get through to Tony.

“Seriously,” he says, train finally pulling into the station, “It’s been good. Several meetings on our tech, a few working groups that have asked him to consult on side projects, at least two University lecture slots requesting his presence, and there’s a fellowship for a private think tank in New Zealand that keeps sending him flowery notes. The others...it’s a little tentative, on both sides, but the folks in New Zealand don’t seem to give a fuck about mean green. They’ve got the money to build him whatever he wants. Maybe not whatever, but close.”

She wants to be happy for him, is happy, even knowing he’s unlikely to consider a permanent position anywhere. But there’s a sharpness in her throat, something tight and achy. It would be a solution for him, of sorts. Take himself out of the heroics, return to pure science and research as far away from people as you could be and still do the work with good tools and support. There’s a certain appeal, and she wonders briefly if she’s not the only one who’s been hesitant to get on the phone.
“That’s... wonderful, for him,” she says. “Although it doesn’t really sound like that was your news to share.”

“He turned them down,” Tony says flatly, “Even after we both agreed that you’d bring a lot of charm to a rain slicker and wellies. He seemed unconvinced of your interest in living in BFE with sheep.”

She ruthlessly shelves the implications of all of that. “That so?”

“Apparently that’s part of the decision process. I told him you’re the kind of wolf who’d be most comfy in a flock, but he wasn’t buying it.”

“That doesn’t make you happy? You get to keep your lab partner? As for the rest, that really isn’t any of your business, Stark.”

She can hear the change in Tony’s voice as he gets up, pacing or fixing himself a drink, fiddling with something. He’s so rarely still.

“It should be simple,” Stark’s voice hardens. “We should be able to figure out a way to give him better choices. He should believe that he has better choices, or more choices. I don’t know. We talked a lot about choice.”

She hasn’t mentioned her conversation with Fury to anyone else, and it’s not like Bruce needs anything to amp up his paranoia, even if justifiably so.

“It’s always a choice,” she says softly.

“That’s what he said,” Stark is almost kind, and then hangs up.

**Laying Bare the Truth**

Natasha lands in Shanghai seventeen hours into the future, and spends the next five eating, drinking and catching up with an old contact. Halfway through, in a friendly argument over who will pick up the most recent tab, Xifeng agrees to let Natasha pay but in return insists on making the introduction she’d been subtly angling for earlier. This is the businessman Fury had sent a dossier on, but he’s not her target.

She has what she needs, so the next few hours are an exercise in gardening, tending her contact and investing in the future of their relationship. Settling into the pace and movement of indirect business. Xifeng makes good on her word, but it takes Natasha three days of negotiation to get the in-person meeting she requires.

Her reputation proceeds her, but the black dress still helps things along. It’s a slip of a thing, slinky, slit high, nearly backless. Difficult though not impossible to conceal weapons within. She brings a bag with a gun that she doesn’t care about, and when the younger of the two guards runs practiced hands over her body, Natasha is impressed that she finds both the obvious blades, and the wire in the clasp that keeps the dress along her neck. Three out of five is excellent work.

She stands in the entrance to the private room, K-pop throbbing on the dance floor behind them, and feels very film star femme fatale, so much more show than threat, a little disdainful of the whole thing. If she were going to kill these businessmen, she’d hardly have arrived in an impractical dress and ridiculous shoes.

The younger bodyguard gives her a glance that suggests she agrees, but it’s her job to make the
whole thing a production.

“It’d be easier if I just stripped,” Natasha says in Korean, and the woman raises an eyebrow, just a fraction.

The meeting is post-climactic, follow-through for show. She shows up the next night in another foolish dress and lets the second guard find the same number of weapons.

She’s made certain that the items they find are callbacks, from the gun to the garrote, signature tools these girls would have been given during training. Everything is a message, and as they divest her of these signals with deferent calloused hands and schooled faces, she hopes they can interpret her intent. The businessman is duly uninterested in her pitch.

The next morning she gets a note by messenger with a location and a time.

The apartment is in a high rise, no apparent security, but she has to be buzzed in to the flat itself, and the door opens up into an enclosed waiting area. There’s a single security guard, a big Samoan man, arms crossed, weapons breaking up the line of his expensive black suit in a way that looks deliberate and she thinks is largely for show. She wonders if it’s for her benefit.

A very tiny woman, shorter than Natasha herself, comes out from a sliding wooden door and beckons.

“You strip,” she says. “At least pants and shoes.” She hands Natasha something papery and thin, and gestures her through the door.

Inside is a flat massage table and the two bodyguards: Hye and Nahla. Fury’s intel had located the two women in Shanghai, fingerprint records from the files confirming a match with two of Kudrin’s subjects: КИЇ002 and ПОЛ007.

Nahla is Palestinian by birth, Israeli mother and Syrian father, but her family had ended up in Poland. They’d been killed in a car accident when Nahla was five. Hye is Korean and Ukrainian, Kudrin’s first entry listing her as four years old when she was obtained from Kiev. After training she’d placed the girls like a devious headhunter, capitalizing on the trend for beautiful, deadly women to protect the lives of China’s new, dangerous elite. Part trophy, part looming, dichotomous threat.

There are others from that class, scattered through Asia, girls in Chechnya, Belarus, possibly one in Kinshasa. Natasha doesn’t need to track them all but she feels better taking a sample. Whatever Dragana and her sister Libuse had been to Kudrin, these women, barely more than girls themselves, connected the line to Lozen. Natasha needs to know what this batch had taught Madame.

The two young women are in tank tops and tiny paper panties, in a small salon room that smells of beeswax and sandalwood.

“We know who you are.” Hye has clipped British syllables that could be a natural accent from her English lessons, could equally be an affectation. Natasha’s own gifts at artifice were natural, but they all learned how to hide in an identity. That wouldn’t have changed.

The little old lady repeats, “Strip,” and pokes at Natasha, who raises an eyebrow at Hye.

“You’d best do what Meimei tells you,” says Hye. “She’s the meanest person I’ve ever met.”

Nahla chuckles as she undoes the ties on the paper underwear and hops up on the table. Meimei stirs something in a miniature crock pot, and then hikes up one of Nahla’s legs.
Natasha takes off her boots and jeans and underwear, slips on the paper panties, sits in the chair next to Hye.

“It’s not sophisticated work,” Hye says. There’s a small ripping sound, but Nahla doesn’t flinch as the wax pulls off soft hair. “And the upkeep is a hassle. Still, I haven’t killed anyone in two years. The trade off is waxing my fanny bare every six weeks to wear short skirts, and pretend to be the mistress of some arse who’s paranoid of poison in his tea while making sure no one actually shoots him in the head. I can live with that.”

This is not at all how Natasha imagined this conversation going.

“We read your files,” Nahla says, and her voice is rich and warm, accented with the Levant. She wonders if that’s an advantage, different from Hye’s flat British syllables. Nahla could pass for Israeli, another sort of film star threat, dark hair and lush curves, as opposed to Hye’s slim kawaii looks. “We never thought anyone would come, once Madame made the trade for us.”

“First Nahla, then me,” Hye clarifies. “Sheun Jeung paid very well to buy two of us.”

“Buy is an ugly word...” Nahla begins.

“...but accurate.” Hye finishes, and this has the feel of a topic they’ve agreed to disagree on.

Meimei swabs Nahla with olive oil, then motions Hye over. The two women swap places.

“Where did you...go to school?” Natasha glances at Meimei and Nahla shakes her head. “How big was your class?”

“Later,” she says.

Hye is less stoic about the waxing, wriggling a little and yelling at the rip. Natasha understands. There is a comfort in hollering at the things that don’t really matter. She thinks of Bruce, venting with a thrown cup, a smashed fist. Best not to let the tension build. He will like this part of the story better than the misery of Saint Petersburg.

“Eight of us,” Hye says as Meimei places another swath of wax and fabric, “a small orphanage in Finland, finishing school in Prague.”


“No,” Natasha shakes her head, “I really don’t think so.”

Hye laughs, a little cruelly. “Sorry, you’re here. Meimei will insist. We insist. A trade for information.”

“I don’t go hairless unless it’s for a mission. And I don’t really take those types of assignments anymore.”

Nahla’s voice is quiet, but hard. “And we’re not a mission?”

“I hadn’t planned on it, no.” Natasha wonders at the earlier disagreement, thinks maybe there’s something she can help make right if they trust her. She concedes, “Plans change all the time.”

Natasha’s insight is right. They are bright and lethal, but unseasoned, so young. They were veal sent to market for quick turnaround on capital. Natasha spends another two days in Shanghai, helping them...renegotiate their contract.
“That’s a good look on you.” Sam tilts his beer at Steve. It’s a little weird sometimes, seeing Captain America in his small backyard, wielding barbecue tongs and wearing an ex-girlfriend’s Kiss me, I’m Irish apron. “Tall and commanding like Julia Child.”

Steve gives him a pointed look. “I’ve seen some episodes of The French Chef, you know.”

“It’s getting harder to stump you.” Sam offers one of his easier smiles. They’ve spent the past few afternoons at the V.A. Steve is usually more settled after talking with the vets and their families, sitting in on some groups, taking a few turns himself, but today he’s still on edge. “Did you know she worked for the OSS during your war?”

“Julia Child?” He’s meeting with the folks at the Smithsonian in the morning to consult on creating a traveling version of the exhibit, along with a series of streaming videos and interviews, both archival and new. He’s insisted that they devote several episodes to women in the war efforts, Rear Admiral Hopper, the Night Witches, probably a whole list tucked in his notebook. “She was early CIA?”

Sam nods. “Helped develop shark repellent.”

“Okay now you’re messing with me.” Steve accuses with the tongs, smile a little goofy and shoulders finally moving with ease as he shifts the burgers onto a waiting plate. “That’s from the old Batman TV show.”

Sam has been waiting for hours for him to break a little, “Real life can be even more messed up than TV, you know that.”

Steve hangs the tongs and follows Sam into the house. He catches the beer Sam tosses and pops the bottle cap off with his thumb like it’s the head of a dandelion. They doctor the burgers and settle at the kitchen table and into a paused silence that Sam breaks, “Man, you gonna unpack it, or just take it back with you? Either way’s okay, just choose.”

Steve chuckles, takes a steadying bite, washes it down. “I’m still looking for Bucky, but...I’ve stopped searching. He’s in New York.”

Sam doesn’t point out that Steve is here. He’s always treading a line with Steve, meeting him where he’s at as a peer he can talk to, trying not to fall back on clinical detachment. Being as good a friend as he can, while not expecting much in return from a guy Sam could tell from the beginning was deep in the bad place, and hanging on by sheer cussedness.

“I see him. Mornings, usually. I keep a set schedule, much as I can, so he knows where to find me. We both pretend we don’t see each other.”

“It’s a mess of trouble the moment he surfaces officially.”

“I know. I’m sure he knows that, too.” Rueful doesn’t touch the pain in his voice. “I’ve put Maria in a bad spot--”

“Hill is a grown-ass woman, and a spymaster. I’m sure she knows the score better than you. She might have some ideas about bringing him in from the cold. Might help if you talked to her.”

“And say what?” Steve shoves the burger in his mouth as if to shut his own self up.

“Say the hardest part first. The rest is details.”
“The details are that he’s another super soldier, and we don’t need that spotlight right now when there’s a child soldier rehabilitation program in the tower. That he’s been used as a weapon for decades and committed God knows what assassinations under duress. Is he a repatriated MIA? A war criminal? I come out of the ice and get back pay with interest; he comes out of cryo and brainwashing and gets more shackles?”

“Details.” Sam presses; they went over a lot of this when they were on the road fleshing out the file from Romanoff. Before Sam ran out of banked sick time and Steve pulled the plug to focus on the team in New York, which, yeah, makes more sense now that he knows why. “What’s the hardest part?”

“I don’t…know how much of him is left.” Steve squares up and his face goes solemn. “I love him. I see him on the street, and the only thing that keeps me from…going to him…is that I don’t want to find out he’s gone after all. Not the risk, not the complications. The heartbreak.”

“I’m glad you’re here, man.” Sam leans forward on the table. “I’m glad you’re talking to me.”

Steve laughs bitterly and swipes the heel of his palm under one cheek, then the other. “You say that to everyone who comes out to you?”

Sam takes a pull of beer so he doesn’t say, hold up, as he shifts gears.

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The flight from Shanghai to New York is fifteen hours, even if the clock only reads three hours later. Natasha is tired, and cranky, worn down. All she can smell is stale airplane and airport floor wax, and she doesn’t even know what century her head belongs in. Even with her diplomatic paperwork it takes another hour to get through customs, but it’s still another two before dawn.

This is the real witching hour, the time when going to bed and facing the world meet uneasily between the wicked and the virtuous.

Natasha shifts her bag up higher onto her shoulder and checks her phone. She’s planning to take a cab back to the tower, but still has to walk through baggage claim, and she’s paying attention in the way she’s been trained - peripheral awareness, taking in details and ambient noise, but still kind of processing her own thoughts.

She notices the sign that says “Flagstaff” before she takes in the person holding it--hair curly and mussed, wearing a jacket instead of his overcoat, sporting ridiculous sunglasses, face and throat tan, mouth trying to contain his expression. With the glasses hiding his eyes, he looks like any scruffy, roughly handsome guy who’s heading out to breakfast before bed.

She pauses, mouth twitching, and crosses her arms. “Nice shades.”

Bruce folds up the sign, closing the distance. She takes in the scent of soap and wool and him, and gets a little woozy with it as her shoulders and jaw unclench reflexively. She takes off his sunglasses and uses them to pull back her hair. She has missed him so fucking much, and none of the things she’s been holding fast to over the past week seem to mean much in the face of him here, and this feeling, this sense that no matter what happens in her life, it’s better when she’s standing close enough to him to touch.

“Tony,” he gives half a shrug, “he bought five pairs between Buenos Aires and Cordoba.” She can see his eyes now and they’re so warm for her, tired and bright, crinkled lines of sleepiness, and laughter, and squinting against the sun. She wants to run fingertips over those lines, revel in them,
feel the scrape of stubble as she strokes down his cheeks and neck.

“You should be in bed,” she says, softly, moves just a little closer. It’s so absurd that he’s here, at the airport. It’s a glorious, foolish gesture and she cannot help being swept up in it, just a little.

“Jet lag,” he says, “Person-lag. Is that a thing? Not being able to sleep alone?”

“Sure,” she lets her bag slide to the ground at their feet and puts her arms around his waist. “But it’s localized. Certain people. Certain beds.”

“Missed you,” he says, mouth along her cheek, hands under her jacket, and she’s pressed against him, and they’re in public, in the goddamned international airport, anyone could see, and she can’t find a reason to give a single fuck. His mouth is cool and sweet and perfect and she wants to hold on to this kiss until she can’t think of anything else.

They break apart in a flurry of wolf whistles from the group of bored teenage basketball players waiting for their luggage.

“Can I take you to breakfast?” He picks up her bag, slings it over his shoulder. “God, what do you have in here?”

“Sure,” she says, “or you could just take me to bed. I have a story for you. There are visual aids you might find interesting.”
Chapter 20

Stop Freezing Me Out

Natasha calls the meeting with Maria and invites Steve in part as recompense for leaving him out of the first round of negotiations for Denton. They gather at one end of a conference table just off Tactical HQ in the tower, Natasha coming in early but still the last one to arrive.

“I’m going back to D.C. at the end of the week,” Steve is saying, “but just overnight.”

“Okay.” Hill sits across from him, her face still and hands clasped.

“The museum wants to run the final mock-ups past me, and well, it’s been good for me. Spending time with Sam, figuring out some things.”

Maria smiles fondly, but doesn’t reply. It’s the look you give a happy memory.

Natasha isn’t sure what to take away from the exchange, so she begins the meeting. “We determined in the Czech Republic that this was a personal vendetta, rooted in Lyudmila Kudrin’s activities between the dismantling of the Red Room and the Academy in Denton. We decided then it wasn’t a full team mission, but I think that’s changed. This already requires more than infiltration and investigation.”

“I got the report from Bruce,” Hill says, answering Steve’s look with an explanation, “He and Trinh connected the formulas we found in Europe with what was used on the girls at Lozen.”

“We’ve traced the assassinations and destruction of labs across Europe to Dragana Kadlecova. Raised in a small test facility near Prague with her twin sister Libuse, respectively subjects ЧЕХ001-6 and ЧЕХ001-а. There is no trace of Libuse, likely not a survivor of testing. These kids were the hinge point, the proof of concept for the new formulas and tech. Dragana’s remains show extensive injuries remodeled and healed...including some likely self-harm in the past.” In the gingerbread house in the woods where the witch turned children into potion ingredients.

“Once it proved viable for her purpose,” Maria’s been putting together the financial piece, “Kudrin raised a quick crop in Finland to work out the bugs and finance the Academy.”

“Evidence had suggested two different teams at work on the labs, unrelated agendas, but now I believe Dragana was working alone.”

Maria looks at the breakdown of the sites in two side columns, with a middle column that weaves links between left and right, strokes and heart attacks in key personnel. “It’s all circumstantial, the ties between, but there is a lot of it. And the timeline is doable for one person.”

“To what end?” Steve asks, “and why bother with subtlety at all?”

“She was working two sides.” Natasha pulls up the map, marking out the chronology of destruction. “Mollifying her employers by cleaning up any links back from Kudrin, while taking the opportunity to raze her own personal targets. Maybe even selling it like she was trying to catch the rogue element herself. Dispatching some hits hot and messy, to draw out bigger players.”

“Like you.”

“Maybe, yes.” Natasha acknowledges Steve with a nod. “She didn’t try to take me out, though. Not
at first. Not until Radek Jezek was killed...I think that changed her end game.”

Maria takes over the screen, pulling up her own web of evidence. “We’ve been working out the financials--the records you got from the women in Shanghai gave us two major links from the accounts we found in Denton, to GenyCo and the silent partners there. Dragana was being paid in installments for the clean-up work. Before that she was receiving a stipend, funneled through a clerk position, for years.”

“Consultant on retainer?” Steve suggests. “Or hush money?”

“I think it was easier to keep her out in the pasture than either kill her or cut her loose.” Natasha shakes her head, still gnawing at that part a little--why didn’t they just kill her years ago? Why did they compromise? “And she came in handy when they had to burn their bridges to Kudrin.”

“Except she started taking down the whole industry.” Steve flips through the dossiers on the suspicious deaths, “Facilities, top researchers…”

“Most of them euthanized, some tortured for intel, possibly retaliation, and a few blasted with gamma to send a message.”

“Kudrin’s gone,” Maria says, and her voice is hard. “But there’s still a market out there for children trained as killers, and we’re close to running down the second tier suppliers, the people connected through GenyCo who made the formulas and financed Dragana to cut their ties to Kudrin. I’m sure they’re even more motivated to erase the evidence. I suspect they also have replacement first tier suppliers lined up.”

“More people like Kudrin?” Steve has gone pale, “This takes precedence over anything I have going on.”

Hill shakes her head, “We need to identify the targets first. But we need to bring the team in to do so.”

Natasha taps on the photos of Dragana, of Hye and Nahla, and wonders if she’s put the survivors in danger.

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He’s put it off long enough, waiting until the new year, hoping for some clarification, but then Banner and Stark had left, and the Tower security had been raised to unprecedented heights. Nataliya had also been absent; and there was Steve, coming and going, missing for whole nights at a time.

Steve knows Barnes has been following him, he keeps leaving things behind, and Steve was never forgetful--hot-headed, but always so deliberate, so why hasn’t he said anything? The man Barnes remembers was never subtle or hesitant, and the subterfuge amps up his mounting tension. Maybe Steve can’t say anything. Maybe whatever is keeping those kids there has Steve silenced.

Nothing on earth could tamp down an outraged Steve Rogers, but Barnes has learned well how far you can push someone if you keep them in the dark and aren’t squeamish about the tools you use to steer them. Steve moves like he’s learned new lessons, weighty and damaging, and maybe this is one of them.

The next time Steve leaves, Barnes will take his chance. He’s isolated Banner as the one with the most predictable schedule. The man is generally out of the building on Thursdays, often with the girls. That’s in two days. He’ll be ready.
Pepper catches her between floors, stepping into the elevator and riding down to the lobby.

“I sent you an email,” she says, “but I know you just got back.”

Natasha puts on her smile of infinite patience and waits.

“Ameena turned eighteen while you were gone. By the terms of the Trust agreement, she’s no longer a ward of the Trust, although she’s entitled to the benefits of it until she turns twenty-three, if she wishes to retain them, educational fund access a little longer. But she’s no longer a minor. I had her sign the acknowledgement.”

Natasha nods. “So what does that mean for her?”

Pepper purses her mouth. “Not much day to day. But in practical terms, if she gets into legal trouble, she’ll be tried as an adult. And, well, her influence on the younger girls should be taken into account. She needs to exhibit some sort of direction.”

Natasha sighs. “It’s not that easy.”

Pepper nods in sympathy. “I know.”

The next morning Natasha chivvies Ameena out of bed for ballet, and on the silent walk home, steers her into the diner close to the tower instead of just continuing home.

Ameena is sullen but compliant. Natasha orders them both coffee and the waitress raises an eyebrow at her, and just says, “Your usual?”

Her usual is fruit and yogurt and Bruce’s toast, but she says yes to see what will arrive. The waitresses like Bruce. They always bring him extra toast.

Ameena orders corned beef hash, but doesn’t say anything until it comes.

“So, what,” she says, “We’re having heart to hearts now?”

Natasha shakes her head. “Nope, celebrating. You turned eighteen. The state considers you an adult, although you can’t rent a car or buy alcohol. But you can vote, enlist, get a job without sign off.”

Ameena shrugs. “Yeah, I know. I had to sign some papers.”

“In practical terms, I’ve decided that your continued presence at the studio or in my sparring class are now up to you. In the class of course, I have the right to fail you if you don’t show up or show up chemically altered. But ballet is your choice. I won’t get you out of bed again.”

“Goody.”

The waitress delivers the exact amount of toast that Natasha generally steals and she grins at her. Ameena forks hash into her mouth like she hasn’t eaten in a month.

“Your stipend will also be limited,” Natasha says. “If you want to increase it, you’ll have to find a job. There are internships in the tower, or with connected agencies and partners. Perhaps there’s something you’d like to do.”

“Oh, like you worked when you turned eighteen.” She says it and then looks up at Natasha, and it’s
clear that she knows that it was a mistake, but just holds her mouth still.

It’s a window, Natasha thinks. “You know I did. I’d been in the field for several years by that point.”

Ameena puts down her fork, pushes away the plate, and then says, so softly Natasha can barely hear her. “I’ve read the files, or some of them. The ones that Trinh’s put together from the research she’s doing with Dr. Banner. I know there was a memory loss component to your treatments.”

“Yes.”

She shoves the plate and it bangs into the ketchup bottle and Natasha stills the whole thing.

“I wish she’d kept that part in.”

They don’t actually know whether or not Kudrin had eliminated the memory wipe or just changed the program subtly enough that it was less necessary, and perhaps less noticeable. If she’d deployed Ameena and her peers in the field as assassins, it may have come into play.

“I remember every classmate I murdered,” she says softly to the girl. “I remember how it felt, how it smelled, how they looked. It wasn’t until later that they took my memories.”

Ameena blinks, and the tears there are of anger as well as pain.

“Believe me. As awful as it is, knowing is better. Remembering is better.”

“How can you say that?” There’s such burning, bitter anger there, but desperation as well.

Natasha fought so hard to retain the memories, to know what she’s done. She thinks of Bruce, the devastation he feels when he can’t remember, connect himself to his actions, how dehumanizing it is to be treated like a weapon, nothing human tying you to the earth.

When she broke conditioning, she centered it around her crimes because it seemed like knowing where the blood on her hands came from would be the only way she’d know who she was. There are other memories there, that flash in and out occasionally, that feel like something less than red death. But Natasha decided a long time ago that she could live without them.

Natasha looks at Ameena, reaches for the compassion that she has built for all of these girls, the love. “Because you can’t fix what you don’t know. You can’t work to be better if you don’t own your actions. It strips you of choice. And sometimes, choice is all we have.”

Ameena shakes her head like she hates all of this, and they finish the coffee in silence.

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“Office hours are posted on the door!” Stark isn’t working, just gazing intently at Johannes’ power plant. It’s housing is shaped like a human heart, holding a tiny watch battery version of arc-reactor technology. He’s removed it from the rest of the organs and jump started it.

Natasha comes in anyway, envelope in her hand.

Where Tony’s glowing core was clean, minimalist modern, the light in the clockwork heart is softer, corroded, gently pulsing. Tony says it’s the cycles per second, they’re too slow, and the pulse is wave interference; it means while Vanko monetized the tech a few years back, he sold a purposely defective version.

She sets the letter down in front of Bruce.
He has a set of schematics up on the holoscreen, the branch diagram of enhancement formulas from Europe and Kudrin’s notes. He shifts his focus to her, smiling, and then picks up the letter. He glances at the return address and the stamp, then hands it to Dum-E, saying, “Circular.”

He watches the arm robot deposit the letter in paper recycling.

“You’re not going to open it?”

“No point,” he says.

“You’re not even curious what they want with you in New Zealand?”

He quirks his eyebrow. “I know Tony ratted me out. He confessed.”

“If it’s something you want, we should talk about this.”

“I don’t.” He shakes his head, and puts his hand on her hip. “Want it, I mean. I...do you want to go to the other side of the world?”

She doesn’t. Or maybe she does. What she wants is for him to stop making decisions for her and include her in the process, ask her instead of assuming she’ll say no. That thought stops her short, burning the hesitancy away like fog. “I want to be part of the choices you make.”

Bruce pauses, then peers around her shoulder to look at Tony. “Do you mind?”

“Nope,” Stark says, and waves Johannes’ heart around, “I’m just fine.”

“If you want to go do research in New Zealand, then I want to know that. I want the chance to say, sure, do that. Or even, let’s do that. Let us. I like sheep, okay. They’re no giant Flemish rabbits, but they’re alright. I look good in boots and waxed canvas. I could get hobbies, learn to knit. Terrorize the Kiwis. Possibly with my knitting.”

“Natasha…”

“You’re going to have to learn how to ask,” She leans forward and cups his face, feeling, for once, a step ahead of him in the ‘how to be human with another person’ game. “Instead of assuming the answer will always be no.”

She kisses him, gently, not caring that Stark is watching them, clutching a clockwork heart. Bruce is holding himself so still, but when she breaks the kiss he follows her, and that little betrayal of need makes her push her advantage.

“Practice the idea that your world isn’t going to be razed to the ground if you say what you want out loud.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a pot and kettle thing going on here,” he says, and rubs his thumb over his lip as she steps away.

“Yeah, well,” she takes a deep breath. “I’ve got to go see a god about a cake.”

“I did at least warn you,” Stark at least waits until she leaves. “You’ve got options. So you can’t keep defaulting to the path of least resistance. So tell me Banner: what the fuck do you want? Do you even know?”

Bruce continues to watch the door she exited. “Yeah, I do,” he says, softly. “But right now I have a date with a comfy chair and a movie about the stars.”
It was bound to happen, reading Peggy Carter’s dossier supplied by the museum, surrounded by her. Steve has seen official bits and pieces: her service record, her military decorations, hours spent at the bedside of the women herself. But it’s different to sit in front of a computer, press a 21st century button on a screen and hear her voice coming out of the past, talking about the founding of SHIELD, knowing how her legacy was betrayed. There are already lines around her eyes as she speaks to the interviewer, so composed, so precise. Oh, Peggy.

He feels like he’s choking, stops the file, calls up another, and it turns out that it’s worse, in so many ways, to hear her talking about the legacy of Steve Rogers. She never once calls him Captain America. He hopes to never again hear someone he loves talk about him in the past tense.

He can see, in the papers laid out in front of him, in the artifacts - a pair of gloves with a microfiche pocket sewn inside against the wrist, a scarf, typed reports with Peggy’s British vowels - the path his life could have taken. He runs his fingers over the folder, and feels impossibly ancient.

Steve knows that to a lot of people, he’s just a legacy, an artifact, a dot on a timeline. Sometimes he feels like that’s all he is, when he’s not at war. That he’s also just a guy, struggling to find a place and a home, can disappear for him as much as for anyone. Even the most mundane missions make him feel more human than looking around his home and seeing all of the drama, the bickering, and love, and sex, and robots that he lives amidst.

He’d moved into the tower because he’d lost the home he was trying to build in D.C., and he was tired of being lonely, thought it might be easier to live where he worked if work was going to be the thing he defined himself by. Steve fingers a sketch book amongst the artifacts. There didn’t used to be just the one thing.

Sometimes it’s good, living in Stark’s tower, sometimes it’s weird, and sometimes he spends whole nights watching home improvement shows with a guy who pretty much ruined his life trying to duplicate the thing that had given Steve purpose, but it’s okay because he likes that guy quite a bit.

He likes them all, but just feels so distant. Even Maria, who is a companion, and friend, and lover (he knows the word is old-fashioned, but he cannot think of a modern equivalent that doesn’t make the whole thing feel dirty), often feels so distant. Maria is a spy, but clear about it, delineates her life into work and not-work in ways that it would never occur to Natasha to do, or even Bruce, and certainly not Tony Stark. It’s one of the things he likes most about Sam, actually, the ability to delineate, to be a person and a soldier, a counselor and a friend, to be all those things at once, but also one at a time.

More than anything, Steve longs to talk to someone who understood what life was like before, not because he can’t adjust, but because he didn’t live through 70 some years of changes. He went into the ice and came out of it the same man, and the world kept going, and that’s not what bothers Steve. It’s that his small world went on without him and he can’t talk about it. Peggy lived a life, aged, faded after a glorious existence. It hurts, but in a quiet way. He doesn’t resent it, he just wishes he’d been there for it. Wishes there were folks beyond the vets, and occasionally Natasha, who he could walk through nearly a century of living with. Talk about how crazy television was, how pictures had changed, how music had, how people had, without sounding crotchety and cranky. It was such a small thing, like sitting under a rain cloud, and looking around at everyone in the sun and asking, “How’s the weather?”

But Bucky? He’d been kept on ice too, and beyond just the lure of his physical self, it means that somewhere, there’s someone who understands what it’s like to have the world keep spinning when your own universe stops. The prospect of touching that, of looking into the eyes of someone who understands? It makes Steve feel like a kid again: protected, full of possibility, wheezing for breath,
and reaching for life with all the fight he has in him.

**Brucenapped**

Bruce comes around to the sound of a finger snapping, percussive but soft, and part of his mind supplies a picture of the waveform, pinpoint double spike on an oscilloscope. He's really comfortable, but he opens his eyes anyway.

He's slumped into an easy chair, and there's a guy sitting on an ottoman in front of him, scruffy, straight hair and brows, clear blue eyes. Bruce doesn't tend to notice eye color, he doesn't make that much eye contact frankly, he watches brows and mouths, that's where the tension builds long before it sparks. This guy is menthol cool.

"I hope you like red flavor." The guy cracks open a Gatorade one-handed, bottle gripped between his knees. When he offers it Bruce realizes he only has the one arm.

Bruce looks at the cold plastic bottle in his hand and smiles a little, remembering Barton’s middle child counseling him on drink safety. He is not in a crater, or a van, or a plane. He does not feel hollow or loathsome or relieved. He feels safe, and he knows that should worry him. But it really doesn't. He's in somebody's home and nothing is broken. He can abide.

"You should drink it. Electrolytes."

"Did I pass out?" Bruce means to sip but downs half the bottle. He doesn’t feel shaky, just soft and really clear except for the missing time. He'd had to leave the tower for band practice...

"I'll tell you what happened, but I need you to not freak out."

“You and everyone else.” Bruce tries to pace himself with the remainder of the drink. "Listen, there's no way to say something like that without making the person freak out anyway, wonder what the hell is going on, though as far as things go, a barcalounger and a beverage are not so bad. To start. The night is young...I guess...the tinfoil on the windows makes it hard to judge." Bruce offers a sly smile, "but there is something going on here because I'm still kinda okay with that. Also chatty."

"Molly."

"Who, now?"

"MDMA, Banner. Softened you up. Didn’t feel the short-acting tranq."

Bruce scratches behind his ear, a cascade of biochemistry rolling up like a wave and then receding, "Yeah, clever you."

No response, which is interesting in that Bruce can feel the sincerity of it. This guy really doesn’t care what Bruce thinks of his plan, and he feels a little admiration for the sheer balls of it. Of course, the wave of biochemistry surges again and leaves him with the realization that this rock solid feeling of everything being right with the world is because his brain’s been squeezed like a sponge, and once all those soothing neurotransmitters run off into metabolites it will leave the opposite in its wake, and a high likelihood of hell to pay.

"Not gonna be a pretty comedown, though. You're aware of this?"

The guy shrugs, and it's obviously a deliberate gesture from someone who normally inhabits stillness. "I know I've got a window to work in."
"That window include getting me the hell out of New York?"

"You offering?"

Ah there it is, the sad spiteful little rage, just a trickle.

The guy reaches down and idly scratches at the patchwork cat rubbing against his leg. He watches Bruce analyze the situation, taking in the tiny studio apartment crammed with used books, stacks of college texts and paperbacks serving as furniture. One improvised bench holds electronic parts catalogs, a soldering iron, and a large lit magnifying lens, clustered around a cybernetic arm. Bruce’s body follows his eyes and then he’s touching it, smooth gleaming plates, some popped open like vents, some covered in insulating rubber tape.

Oh, hell.

It’s gorgeous and terrible.

One of those hands, either the one inert on this bench or the one delving into soft cat fur, has sent two bullets through Natasha. Bruce turns back, and can’t help but feel a disconnect between the idea of the Winter Soldier and this scruffy guy in a padded plaid hoodie and a thermal shirt. But then who is he to take appearance at face value?

Barnes clears his throat, doesn’t seem like he talks enough for words to be easy. “Take a look.”

Bruce wants to, would normally already be reaching for one of the computer screwdrivers arrayed in a chipped mug on the bench, but maybe it’s Natasha’s influence that the guy is the more interesting puzzle right now. “It isn’t working right, but that’s not the only reason you took it off.”

“Didn’t want to spook you.”

Bruce shakes his head, saying to himself, “That’s not it.”

The cat picks up the tension and issues a short heartfelt yodel. It looks like a quilt made of mismatched mice.

“You wanted to come off as more human. Put me at ease. Make a connection. You want something from me, but it’s not repairing the arm. There are countless techs in New York who would love to pop the hood on that piece, maybe even if they knew it’d be the last thing they did.”

Barnes stands, watching Bruce as he closes the distance between them. He’s taller, but there’s a cant to his stance from the weight imbalance and he looks at Bruce from a predatory angle. “I need to know about the girls.”

“Oh, now,” Bruce breathes, almost a whisper, “and here I was starting to root for you.”

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Bruce’s phone is at his workstation although he is not, which Natasha discovers standing in the lab and texting him a question about dinner that she’d come down to ask in person. Only the phone answers, with a chime. She picks it up, resists throwing it across the room, and goes to find Tony, who is elbow-deep in Johann’s goo, manipulating forceps with a surprising amount of dexterity through the chemical containment box.

“I thought you didn’t do squishy biology.” She waves the phone at him, but he shrugs.
“At least he knows where his phone is this week.” Tony removes his hands from the gloves, rolling the lab stool off to another bench to look at the readings. “He’s out because Marco Polio is jamming in the ARC. Band practice.”

“It’s CuntraPuntal now. And I know it’s Thursday. But the middle schoolers are back, and he’s not.”

“Check the whiteboards.” Tony drums on the bench with a couple pens, taking the opportunity to snipe.

The whiteboards are a sore spot, a concession to the fact that not everyone is as digitized as Tony. They’re a repository for suggestions (some impertinent), lists (pro, con and grocery), and quick notes (commentary, explanatory and graffiti). The big one in the lab, started to list all the things Tony was forbidden to do or touch, has been titled VETO and become a low-key battleground in the past few months.

Initially highlighting the common ground of No Unauthorized Human Testing, it has since devolved to the latest: No Naming Trinh’s Mice.

In the middle in block letters is the message no one will cop to: NO TELLING ME WHAT TO DO. There’s a big line through the sentence, punctuated by VETO surrounded by a red heart.

“Nothing there.” The grocery list is from last week. She taps the phone against her palm, looking at Tony.

He cocks his head, and there’s a flicker of curiosity stirring. “You think he left his phone behind to avoid contact? He’s not that passive-aggressive.”

Natasha feels the side of her mouth curl just a little, and she finds answering hilarity on Stark’s face, although she can tell he’s starting to catch a little of her unease.

“He’s exactly that passive-aggressive when he wants to be, but…”

“He’s not irresponsible,” Stark finishes.

She tries to look at it from Bruce’s perspective. He’d assume the phone’s either in the lab, or their suite. He doesn’t want to deal with Tony, or with her, so he doesn’t hunt it down. The girls all have phones. If he’s needed, or they need something, he’s not out of communication.

He can walk away for a day trip. She doesn’t begrudge him that. But something feels off and she knows that a little overreaction is better than ignoring her gut.

She nods at Tony. “I need to go haul some kids out of PoliSci.”

~*~

Marisol stays quiet as the other three close ranks, like they can steer around Natasha, knock her off course like taking down Steve in Capture the Captain. She lets them explore this tactic for a bit, loosening them up. Mellie does most of the talking, which itself is an indication they’re spinning a tale. Thor keeps advocating for the realm exchange program in part so Mellie can get Asgardian bardic training, which apparently emphasizes some kind of Hippocratic Oath regarding the truth.

They went to the Natural History Museum IMAX. Nope, Dr. Banner did not fall asleep, because it was the Space Station movie and that’s his favorite. They’d completed the theoretical physics worksheets and gone on to the space wing. Afterward he went down to the cafe while they went to look at the bugs. When they couldn’t find him and he didn’t answer their texts, they came home.
The lies are so easy to spot she doesn’t bother pushing that angle. What she does push is the guilt, laying it thick on Aisha and Catherine, knowing that Marisol will break when she sees her friends buckle down and try to withstand the pressure. She doesn’t bother with Mellie who is always able to convince herself that her tale is true. She’ll make an excellent spy someday.

For such a dreamy mathematician Aisha stands up to the onslaught like it’s happening to someone else, but Catherine’s lower lip starts to tremble and that’s when Marisol breaks.

The truth is a lot less complex, and far more complicated.

“He fell asleep in the theater.” The lenses of Marisol's glasses are dirty, in cloudy pool shapes at the bottom like the edges of salt flats. “He was gone when the lights came back on.”

Natasha rocks back slightly, the dread solidifying into fact.

Bruce had been terrible at situational awareness even as a kid, tying his sense of physical safety to the emotional temperature of the room. As long as people were copacetic he didn’t pay much more attention. He could sleep anywhere, but would wake if the noise level changed or if the conversation around him turned more serious. Reclining in a dark museum theater with sonorous narration? Banner always fell asleep in the IMAX.

The only trace, and it’s likely unrelated but it’s all they have, is in security camera footage of part of the parking structure, one corridor away from the theater. In a sliver at the edge of the frame a blue recycle bin is trundled off to a delivery van, no plate visible in the shot, and just the elbow of the medium-size person moving the bin.

This assumes he didn’t walk out of the building and off the grid himself. She hates the thought, but it’s almost preferable to the alternative.

~*~

"Seriously?" Clint is not helping, but Natasha knows that ranting part of his process when he isn't in taciturn mode, so she lets him shout, picturing him pacing in his kitchen, hearing the ambient noise of things banging. “How the hell is he the one who gets kidnapped?”

It’s been hours since they discovered he was missing, longer still since the girls had seen him.

She has cross-referenced his movements as best she can with the girls and Tony, with the security guards and personnel at the museum who know Bruce and the girls by sight. Hill has requisitioned any CCTV footage from the area, but they don’t want to raise alarms with local law enforcement unless absolutely necessary. So far, there’s been nothing.

"Lost, maybe," Clint continues. “Has to be rescued from starting a riot at a post-seminar Q&A--sure, I can see that, it’s the quiet ones you gotta watch, and he’s got a mouth on him that could start a fight. But who the fuck kidnaps the Hulk?”

There’s a clunk and it gets quieter, a pause long enough that Natasha says, "If he didn't take a walk." She says it like she believes it. She won’t forgive him the worry he’s causing, but taking a walk means that he’s out there somewhere.

"I'm ignoring that, Nat, because you're compromised. You are too. Don't even try to deny it."

She closes her mouth, and pretends to herself that she wasn't going to deny it.

“It could be nothing,” she says, hears how much she’s trying to gauge her own reactions. “But Nick
gave me a warning when he was here for New Years. I think there’d have been more rumors, more
fuss if Ross had grabbed him. That guy’s the antithesis of subtle, but...we don’t think about Bruce
being vulnerable, not like that. He knows his boundaries and limits. But if this isn’t Ross, and
Bruce’s not just walking something off, where the hell is he?”

Natasha lets the question linger. She can vocalize this with Clint like it’s a puzzle or a mission. She
can lay out the possibilities. Postulate. Theorize. Strategize, even as her throat chokes on the words.

"Nat.” It stops her short, and she realizes that the speculative silence had lasted too long. “I'll be there
in an hour."

This seems improbable, considering the flight alone from upstate is an hour, but she doesn't correct
him. There’s a low-grade panic compressing the back of her skull like an incipient migraine. She tries
to focus, think strategy and tactics and be four steps ahead, but the fear is pounding in her temples.
There are so few ways that this ends well.

"Do me a favor, before I get there, start working the informal leaders. Even if they didn't see
anything, there's a reason the little ones kept quiet. Thor there?"

"Not yet, he's off-realm but we've got Foster sending up the signal to Heimdall."

"And they don't take Steve seriously enough. Okay, that's me as good cop, then."

"That's not a real interrogation tactic, Clint."

"No, Nat. But I'm hoping a few of those kids are still vulnerable to parent tactics."

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Tony finds Natasha in the kitchen, sitting on the floor with her back against the heavy antique
butcher block. There’s about a finger of what he suspects is his really, really good bourbon in a glass
in front of her, but mostly, he thinks she’s hiding.

She looks...shattered. It’s her most terrifying look to date.

He likes to tease her, joke about her ability to be three different people in as many seconds while also
being no one in particular. That she’s more android than his robots. He knows she’s as human as he
is, it’s just that his moments of seeing it are usually...fleeting and luminous, translated through her
love for her friends, for Bruce. Hell even a fondness for himself.

He sits down next to her, not close enough to touch because he’s not foolhardy, but close enough
that she seems smaller than normal.

“We’re gonna find him,” he says. “He’ll be fine.”

Tony’s investing a lot in those words, for himself every bit as much as for her.

“I just...need a minute,” she says.

He doesn’t think the bourbon is for nerves or for lubrication. He suspects it’s a gesture towards
normalcy: what would a regular person do in the face of this kind of fear? Her fingers rest on the rim
of the glass like an abandoned prop, and it scents the air between them with esters of vanilla and
cherry and the mellow taste of good tobacco. He can see expressions twitch on her face, in his
peripheral vision, but when she speaks again her voice sounds so contained the disconnect is
unsettling.
“I always assumed that it would be me.”

Tony feels gut-punched. It turns out other people voicing your worst nightmare is not any better than doing it yourself.

“Enhanced, yes...but I’m human. He has built in protection. I used to worry, sometimes, about what would happen...if he were there, if he saw it. But I told myself I could take care of that. I’m careful. I’m good at what I do. I’d make arrangements if I could, keep him from losing control.”

She looks at him, breaking the little boundary of privacy he’s been giving her. Her eyes are flat, her question offered rhetorically, “So what the fuck am I supposed to do if he dies first?”

She doesn’t expect an answer, but he actually knows how this one goes. This isn’t atrocities or monsters or powers beyond our ken. This is regular human bullshit.

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” He takes her liquor, sips it. “Love is a game of chicken until one of you flinches first. Or neither of you do, or both, and you figure out how to have a long ride together. But most people are not my parents, going out in a blaze together, too. One of you is going to die first, and none of us know which, or when.”

She takes the glass again. “Explaining the problem back to me is not an answer.”

“Okay, try this. You set up some rules, what you need from each other. You follow them, and change them together when they don’t fit.”

“You sound like Clint.” Though Clint phrased it more along the lines of, ‘stop fucking around like you’re dating, neither of you are the dating type, just fucking admit it already’.

“I prefer to think he sounds like me.” Tony gets up off the floor slower than he normally would in front of her, though he still swallows back the twinge in his knee as he talks. “You try like fuck every day to make sure if either of you go out, there aren’t any regrets. That’s all you can do.”

There’s a small, stilted lilt to her mouth as she drinks the $100 pour of bourbon. “That’s not terrible advice, Stark.”

“Look at me, I’m a role model.” he says, offering a hand up she doesn’t need but she oddly takes anyway. “Gather round, ye children, and learn from my mistakes in glorious Technicolor!”
Chapter 21

Spy in the House of Love

Because Natasha’s not expecting Clint for hours, he’s already been working the room for a while when she and Tony head back to the Trust floor.

He’s sitting on the long kitchen counter that faces out into the common room, legs dangling and kicking at the cabinets in a slow arrhythmic thud calculated to disconcert. His expression is very close to blank, but he knows the crowd, knows many of them are unfazed, but enough of them are picking up on the subtle edge of disappointment-tinged concern.

Tony has stopped short with her at the entrance to the room, and says low, “If you tell me he’s been in New York the entire time, I will not be surprised. Pissed about the squid thing, but not surprised.”

Natasha assures him, “I would never tell you anything like that.”

“Naturally.”

“So here’s my concern.” Clint looks like he’s half in uniform and half out, boots and tactical pants, with his gear strapped to his back over a soft blue flannel shirt. Most of the kids are in the common area, a few in the kitchen, all listening with various shades of chagrin and wariness. “We need information. I’m not looking to rat anyone out, but it’s clear that there’s a tendency to withhold intel, keep it close within the Trust. I get that. Keeping a secret can save your life--it already has, right? It’s a good skill, it’s handling your business.”

Khadijah and Georgia are in the kitchen behind Clint, and he’s letting them fiddle with the gear strapped to his back, which Natasha realizes is not his quiver. There’s a black tactical bag on the floor by his feet, bigger than he needs for just his weapons.

“The flip side of that skill is knowing when to share intel; when to collaborate, make an alliance, share a mission. We have a mission--you know we have to find him, why that’s important, I’m not gonna waste breath on that one. I have the feeling you all know a bit more about a lot of shit than you’re letting on. So I’m asking you to take the next step in handling your business. Please share the relevant intel.”

Tony murmurs again, “I keep forgetting he’s also a spy.”

“ Weirdly, that often works in his favor.”

Ameena uncurls from the kitchen chair in the corner where she’d been surveying the whole room. Khadijah is not the only one watching her, but she is the most keen, like something terrible is on the brink of happening and she’s not sure which way she’s rooting. Ameena heads to one of the random cluttered bookshelves and pulls out a large padded scrapbook.

Trinh straightens in her seat, chin jutting defiantly. Peyton scratches the back of her neck, resigned. Luz crosses her arms and looks furious. The smaller girls are stock still, and even Georgia’s hand drifts back down to her side as she just stares at Clint taking the padded yellow gingham binder from Ameena.

“No one looks in scrapbooks.” Ameena explains. “It’s how we tracked our plans at Lozen. We started this one in July.”
Clint cracks the book open, flips past the first few pages which are sparkly and off-putting, and then snaps it shut when he gets to the real photos and text. He addresses the room with eye contact all around, sincerity making him look younger, “Thank you. It helps to know what we’re up against.”

Ameena nods, and Khadijah comes around the counter to lay a tentative hand on her shoulder.

Luz bolts to her feet, moving with a speed and precision that Natasha has never seen her bring to the sparring mat. She goes over to the huge blown glass candy dish that Fiona keeps topped up with condoms and little lubes. Trinh looks away, and Peyton says rhetorically with a wave of a hand, “Sure, why the hell not?” Luz tips it and swipes a flash drive from underneath.

On her way to Natasha, Luz passes close to Ameena and shoves a hard quick fist up under her ribs. Ameena takes it. Khadijah doesn’t even react, her hand riding on Ameena’s shoulder as she gasps and coughs.

Clint hops down off the counter and starts working the kids in small groups on his way to them. Georgia follows, carrying the heavy tactical bag like it’s nothing.

Luz’s eyes flick from Natasha to Tony, and she hands the drive over to him, but speaks to Natasha. “Peyton spotted him first, but it’s New York, there’s creepy everywhere. We were handling it.”

“How are we handling it?” Natasha asks as Tony turns the drive through his fingers.

“How are we handling it?” Luz rubs at her knuckles. “Surveillance only, on either side. But Barton showed us the clip from the museum, could be that guy.”

“Round up the crew who worked on this, we’re going up to Tactical.” Tony calls the elevator, and is surprised to turn back and find all the kids flocked around him. “What, you let the little flying monkeys tail this guy, too? I can’t believe I’m shocked, I’m the one who opened my home to the Red Romper Room, after all…”

Clint hands Natasha the scrapbook, “Speaking of old home week.”

“But fuck, Marisol looks like she’s still too young to sell Samoas.” Tony continues as they pile into the elevator, but he deftly cuts off Ameena with a curt, “You can join us when you no longer smell like a composted hippy.”

Ameena slinks to the side and the doors close.

Natasha opens the scrapbook to find careful logs of sightings, movement patterns, and more than a handful of pictures. Shots taken from cellphones, printed off-site as fake polaroids and delivered straight to the tower, like Bruce has pinned all along a wall of his lab. Only these are candid surveillance photos of James Barnes.

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Maria is in Tactical when they arrive en masse, the interface shut down and her palm lodged in the hi-res 3-d scan port. “JARVIS locked it down when I used my code, because someone was already in the system under my login.”

Peyton has gone blank and serious. “You really should have changed it since Halloween.”

Clint wrangles the kids to camp out in the conference room attached to Tactical, and as a self-organizing unit some of them duck out for a moment and come back dressed in dark jeans and charcoal grey tops, or even sporting some of their Lozen gear. Others pop out and raid the kitchen
for snacks.

Tony is already pulling surveillance video off of the drive, five months worth of clips of the subject known as Creepo walking down streets, eating hot dogs, watching from benches, standing on subway platforms. Early morning, mainly, but in areas that Natasha recognizes as close to Steve’s accustomed running routes. Some of the clips were shot at night.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and just assume the guy who looks astonishingly like Bucky Barnes, is, in fact—” Maria and Natasha are already nodding, but Tony feels compelled to follow through, “Sgt. James Barnes.”

“AKA, the Asset.” Natasha brings it home all at once because she doesn’t have time to waste on Tony processing data, “AKA, The Winter Soldier. Likely in the city for the last year, if not shortly after the Triskelion.”

Natasha sees this is not information Maria had, but she takes it with a wry lift of an eyebrow and a murmur of, “AKA, the other shoe.”

“Steve being in DC, it looks he’s keeping track of Rogers as well.” Tony consults his phone, “ETA in forty minutes.”

“Good.” Natasha enlarges one of the paused videos with a flick of her hand, “We can ask him how Barnes got the hat.”

Peeking out of the fleece hood is the knit hat Steve had worn in Prague, thick mulberry and cream stripes up the forehead, and just visible, two points of the dusky blue star at the crown.

“I’m still lost,” Clint shakes his head, “What the hell does he want with Banner?”

~*~

Barnes continues to loom. “I want to know how far it’s gone, what Nataliya thinks she’s doing.”

Her name in Barnes’ mouth makes Bruce rile, and he tries not to get distracted by that, tries to keep focused. He has no illusions that Barnes could do him serious damage, which would then be repaid a thousandfold on a building full of people, the neighborhood around them. "What do you think she's doing?"

"I've watched those kids tearing through the streets." His voice is gruff as he lays it out point by point. "I've seen your list of publications, the updated one in your SHIELD file, with the Army research. You know what the serum does. Don't tell me you don't see what's been done to those girls."

"They've been enhanced, yes."

"Enhanced." His lips twist in a sour line and he paces in the small spot of floor in the tiny apartment. "I was enhanced, that's painful but you walk away from that. It's the training. I can spot it like a family resemblance and I know Nataliya's the last one from back then. She's trying to recreate…it was an abomination, that place."

"Wait," It takes Bruce a moment to process the accusation, maybe less from the drugs than from the sheer absurdity of it. "You think...?" He starts to laugh.

Barnes moves in to grab the arm, but Bruce side-steps to block him.
“No,” he says, can hear an edge of panic in the giggling but he can’t stop, “I don’t think so.”

Barnes stares at him, single fist clenching. "You don't understand. I'd *given* her that training. I won't let this go on."

~*~

“He wants to know about us.”

They all turn to see Aisha plugging a phone into a port on one of the display screens. Peyton and Ameena are in the doorway. Ameena is in her fighting gear, her hair pulled back and ponytail still dripping. Peyton has Nate strapped to her chest in the black cloth carrier.

Natasha stands next to Peyton and asks, glancing at Ameena over by the screens, “Sober?”

Peyton’s brushing Nate’s downy head with her thumb, and the baby has that blase expression Barton gets when he’s about to crash into sleep. “By now? Pretty much.”

“Is that a baby?” Tony is the only one surprised by the infant, but he makes up for everyone else. “Holy shit, they’re tribbles. We’re doomed. I’ve brought tribbles to New York. The world will be overrun with assassin children and it’s because I thought they were harmless and adorable. No, wait, I’ve never thought that--”

“Shut up, Stark.” Clint reaches out and palms Nate’s back. “He’s mine.”

Tony wheels on Clint, “Who the fuck gave you a baby? Are they insane?”

“No one gave me a baby.” He helps Peyton untie the straps of the carrier and lays the squirming burping child up on his shoulder. Upon closer inspection, he’s wearing a tactical shirt under the plaid, which is clearly meant as a kind of burp cloth to keep his armor from smelling like cheese.

“You stole a fucking baby? Wouldn’t that blow your cover? Or is it a souvenir--is this a thing we do now?”

Natasha smacks Tony on the back of the head.

“Thanks Nat. No, I didn’t steal him. We made him. From stuff we had around the house.”

“We?”

“Don’t look at me.” Natasha taps Nate on his squishy little Barton nose. “I officially know nothing.” With a sweep of her arm she pulls up the video files from the phone.

All of the video was shot at night, and in a different neighborhood. Some of it is interior, casing a building and an apartment. Aisha stands a little taller with everyone’s eyes on her, making the decision to focus on the interaction. “This is Marisol’s phone.”

“Hey.” Clint’s voice cuts sharply through the chatter and Tony’s unheeded monologue, “Where is Marisol?”

Peyton drawls out, “Oh, shit.”

~*~

Natasha is gratified when Ameena falls into step behind her, and Clint brings up the rear in sheepdog fashion because he’s also seen it coming. Tony has a conniption, and tries to recruit Hill, “No.
Absolutely not.”

Ameena keeps her mouth shut, and more impressively, not sullen.

Maria tilts her head. “Technically, she is an adult.”

“Technically, so’s Tony.” Clint adds.

“This is a terrible idea, are we just letting randos off the street join in?”

“Ameena,” Natasha faces her, close enough that she has to look up into the young woman’s face. “How many people have you killed?”

Ameena licks at dry lips. “Five. Three teachers, and before that, two others.”

Everyone in the room knows she’s referring to fellow students, to the kill or be killed situations that were integral to Kudrin’s training model even after her philosophical shift to a subtler and more insidious Red Room. Natasha sees that this is not a reminder to Tony, but in fact his main objection, a kind of horrified sorrow that leaks out from his peevish expression. She speaks gently, aware that she’s talking about Ameena in front of her, but it’s not like all of the conferences about her behind her back have helped any.

“I think we’ve all been avoiding dealing with the problem, pretending she can go back and be a teenager. That she’s normal, or just damaged. We were wrong.”

Ameena is not going to get a degree in business and work in an office; she thrives under pressure, needs the risk to give her a reason to show up. Her eyes are more clear and bright than they’ve been in months.

Tony is looking at Ameena as Natasha continues, “She’s not a kid, but we’re not helping her figure out how to be an adult, either. She’s not damaged--she’s very specifically trained, and she’s survived a great deal, but she needs guidance--”

“People have to get their own shit together.” Tony addresses Ameena directly. “It takes more than a shower.”

“You will take orders from Director Hill,” Natasha adds.

Ameena turns to Hill, “Yes, ma’am.”

Hill gives her a once over, eye to eye. Natasha remembers their first real encounter, not when she’d given Maria the charm and flirtation, but later, after Maria had a moment to realize she’d been played even though she knew better, to re-read the Black Widow dossier and get pissed off. That second meeting when Maria started to really see her, and vice versa. “If you come with us, you are not authorized for deadly force.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You will be treated as the very green and untrained agent you might one day grow up to be.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’m granting you a boon.” Hill’s voice is quiet but not gentle. “One toe out of line, I will take you down without hesitation and you will never get another chance from me.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”
“I have a team mustering in the fiftieth floor mezzanine. Report to Agent Yoshida.”

Ameena gives Hill a salute that makes everyone in the room with military experience cringe. After she’s in the elevator, Hill comms down to brief Yoshida, “Use academy ride-along protocol, but be advised she’s weapons trained and has seen action.”

**Homecoming Weekend at Krasnaya Komnata High**

“Krasnaya Komnata.” Barnes intones with pompous solemnity punctuated with a scoff, Red Room. “From what I can piece together, it’s the longest stretch I was out of cryo. Long enough to forget about the cold, to start thinking of myself as James. I was a kind of tutor.”

“That’s also when the memory wipes came into the Black Widow program.” Bruce sticks where he is, between Barnes and the makeshift bench. A part of his brain has calculated the man’s reach, and is careful to keep enough distance even if he lunges...but that part of his brain is normally a lot more antsy, especially in a situation like this, and Bruce feels both calm and untethered.

“God knows how much Nataliya remembers.” Barnes shrugs with the barest twitch of his head, his voice low and insinuating. “About any of it. About me.”

Bruce lets the implications of that lie, thinking that maybe Barnes is poking at him to test the strength of his chemical chain. “You’ll have to ask her yourself.”

It’s a curious sensation, the lack of the pressure he’d built himself up to withstand. He thinks maybe, if he absolutely had to, he could reach down and coax the Other Guy up. Might take a bullet.

“I’m more interested in what’s happening right now to those girls. I think you can fill in those blanks for me.”

“Fair enough.” Bruce knuckles his glasses up. “You're wrong, by the way: Romanoff was the last you trained. After the Red Room, Lyudmila Kudrin kept on working until the end, projects, schools, the branding changed, the techniques evolved.”

Barnes’ mouth shapes the word, Madame.

“We cleared out Kudrin’s last stand in Texas this summer. The rest is recovery. Beyond that, I’m not telling you anything specific about the kids, that’s their story to tell or not, when they’re adults. But the Lozen Trust is a nonprofit entity, anyone in the public can inspect the records. Not sure what the business hours for the Maria Stark Foundation are, but--”

“You think I don’t know how that works? There are hundreds of pages in the SHIELD datadump about me, by name and by reputation, and most if it’s bullshit.” Barnes actually shows some animation. “The really dark shit? People don’t put on paper.”

“So what, I’m your man on the inside? You’ll get the real scoop from me? And then what?”

“Depends on what you find. Maybe I become your man on the outside. Take it down.”

“Everybody wants to rescue the princesses.” Bruce shakes his head. “Nobody wants to help with the goddamned homework.”

Barnes’ reply is forestalled by a knock at the door and a muffled inquiry, “Dave? Are you alright, man?”

Bruce lifts his eyebrows.
“Mohammad’s wound up about the no call no show thing, but I said it wasn’t like you so I’d check and see if you were okay...”

“Jesus, Doris--” Barnes mutters, then calls out to carry through the door, “Gigi, I’m fine, just bad clams or something. I talked to Doris hours ago.”

“What? I can’t hear you through the door. Dave?”

“You need to get that?” Bruce leans back against the workbench. “Poke your head out. I’ll wait.”

“Dave, come on, I’m worried.”

"Either you trust me or you don't." Bruce shrugs, rattles through the cup of computer tools, selects a tiny screwdriver.

The woman's voice turns conversational for a beat, aimed away from the door, "Hello sir, I'm sorry to disturb you, I'm just trying to get my friend," thump, "to stop being a little shit," thump, "about a little case of the shits," thump, "and answer his door." Thump.

Bruce bends his head down to inspect the gleaming arm. The lack of biological components had obscured the artisan’s signature style, and it was likely an early example of it. Perhaps this is the piece that first married mechanics with flesh. Perhaps Tony is right this minute disassembling a similar piece, a drone instead of a prosthetic, fired up with the terrible beauty of it. He murmurs sympathetically, "Colleagues are the worst."

Barnes gives a long blink, and Bruce gets the feeling his indecisiveness stems from having to discard several violent alternatives before settling on a course of action. He knows that re-calibration inside and out, that pause of having to machete a new path on the fly. He gestures to the door and sits on the little camp chair by the workbench.

Barnes unlatches and unlocks, and opens the door just enough to peer out. He is careful to imply that he is both touched and tired. He sighs, "Gigi, I'll be okay,"

He does not see Bruce surge up and close the short distance of the apartment in two swift steps. He does not register the arm whistling through the air before the shoulder piece slams into the back of his head.

He’s sprawled on the worn carpet, unconscious, when the fourth blow doesn’t land because Bruce has also been caught unawares.

~*~

“This...this is what you do when you’re not here?”

“Not really, no.” Clint lays the infant out and proceeds to change him right on the desk, to Tony’s absolute horror. “This is who I am when I’m not on the job. But my job apparently now offers daycare, so…”

“But this kills my whole image of you. I’d imagined you sneaking in and out of bedrooms all over the city like an alley cat, a kind of cat burgling James Bond, up all night, high stakes poker with diamonds, lounging around listening to Queen and plotting which corner you’re going to pop out of next to creep me out.”

“You know, all of these things you list, I could probably find YouTube videos of you doing.”
“Cuing up now, sir.”

Clint smirks. “Thanks, JARVIS, but the point is made.”

“But you’d be all punk rock about it. Pulling yourself up by stolen bootstraps into a life of danger and debauchery, slipping in unnoticed and thumbing your nose at it all.”

“I’m your pet iconoclast.”

“Were.”

“No. Am.” Clint perches the baby on one Popeye forearm like a seat, the other hand spanning his chest and holding him back against Clint’s own. They both stare at Tony until Clint bobbles the baby toward him and sings in a creepy falsetto, “Touch me, I’m sick!”

~*~

Gigi has a gun, held with confidence in a small, gloved hand. Gigi looks awfully familiar, but his processing skills are subpar right now, gripping Barnes’ miracle of an arm, MDMA still coursing so happily through his veins.

“Put it down Dr. Banner,” she says. “Or I will shoot you. I’m guessing Dave gave you something or I imagine the whole place would be down around your ears already. So, put it down or I shoot you, and you bleed out, or maybe you don’t and He comes out to play and levels this block.”

It’s the familiarity with him, her voice saying his name, that triggers it.

“Hello, Giselle,” he says. “It’s a bad idea, one way or another.”

She shrugs. “I’m out of any good ones.”

He thinks the odds are fifty-fifty, so he doesn’t move, doesn’t put down the arm. She sighs, lowers the gun, and shoots Barnes through the opposite shoulder. Her aim is very precise.

“You seem to be wavering. Shall I shoot him again?”

Bruce sighs. “Kind of a cat in the box situation, isn’t it.”

She aims. He puts down the arm, letting it fall to the carpet propped against Barnes’ chest. She gestures for him to walk in front of her.

“Can I grab my coat?”

“No.” She ushers him into the hall and pulls the door almost closed. “It’s not like you weren’t colder in Prague.”

But Giselle doesn’t say Prague in English, to kind of rhyme with frog, as she yanks the fire alarm on their way into the stairwell.

She says Praha, an otherwise American sentence spiked at the end with Czech.

~*~

Marisol wouldn’t be this cold if she could shiver freely, but she’s clearly visible on the fire escape to half the windows in the opposite building, so she’s huddled down into the arctic gear coat she borrowed from Aisha—who’s thin southern blood had thought Texas got chilly—and trying not to
think about her toes and ears. At least it had been easier to get up there this time, using the big blue
recycle bin that was parked in the alley near the access ladder.

There’s a pinhole in the window foil she’d made on one of her trips inside the apartment, and she
needs to keep still not just to avoid being seen, but to keep her pupil aligned with the pinhole that
turns Creepo’s one-room apartment into a camera obscura.

She’d felt bad about calling him Creepo, thinking that he was probably just lost and confused, the
way Peyton says that all of them are trying to find a way through. But the moment she saw that
familiar walk on the surveillance tape, she’d had no choice but to shove her phone at Aisha, get her
gear and check this out. It made no sense; she’d decided he was harmless and he goes and does this?

Dr. Banner is coming around, not as bleary as when she first met him in the basement of the
Academy. He’d been a wreck then, having dug through clay and bedrock to take down the perimeter
shield, and was filthy and squinty-eyed as he treated Ameena’s gunshot wound. Even later at the
hotel, when he’d sprung Marisol from triage, his wry weariness had felt safe.

In contrast now his smile at Creepo is sharp, and Marisol decides she is not going to go in after all.
There is not enough room in the apartment for the two—potentially three—of them already.

She plugs one stethoscope earpiece in and lays the chest piece against the window, leaving the other
ear open to ambient sound. Creepo’s talking about the Trust kids, which kind of pisses her off. Why
not ask the kids themselves, hey, I think you’re being used, can I spring you from the tower?
Between Trinh and Khadijah they’d tear him three new ones—the older girls had already busted out
of the school before the Avengers came, and the tower…

Marisol was asked if she wanted to live there. That had never happened before.

There’s a loud knocking, and the business at the door is obscure until Dr. Banner tags in swinging,
then is disarmed at gunpoint.

Marisol hears the fire alarm start and it kicks her heart faster. When she was small this was fear, this
sharp ache of her body shifting into a higher gear, but she hasn’t felt scared since she went into the
basement the first time. This is energy and power, this is her mind focused and her body ready for
anything. She already knows the building exits, and the produce van at the loading dock in the back
wasn’t there when she arrived an hour ago. It’s the company name on the pay stubs she’s seen in
Creepo’s apartment, the engine still warm. It’s the most likely option, and the van’s back door is
unlocked.

She locks it behind her to give herself time to hide, making a space between cartons of tomatoes
where she can duck, then watches through the perforated design covering the back window.

Marisol takes the time to strap up like she’d done the day they took over the Academy, stashing
weapons in her pants and boots. A garotte is already threaded in the strap of the bra she’d had to start
wearing a few months back, not because she’s actually got tits yet, but her nipples have gone weird
and huge and sore and it feels better to have the padding—and it’s more comfortable there than her
waistband, which is where she used to wear the wire she goes nowhere without.

She misses Texas for the first time, wishing she also had a gun.

~*~

The vinyl seat is freezing, like the steering wheel, like the cold regard of the woman holding a gun
on Bruce low against her hip.
“Buckle up for safety,” she says.

He does, shivering, feeling a strange distance with himself as he starts up the van. “Where to?”

She lets out a sharp breath, acknowledging the jest with a puff of water vapor, and starts with clipped directions.

He checks his mirrors and pulls out jerkily into traffic, because he’s out of practice behind the wheel and he can’t find the sweet spot between Sunday in Albuquerque and any other day fighting through the Moulali Crossing.

He can see the resemblance now, soft round cheeks hung on dramatic cheekbones, the dyed toffee brown hair in a tighter wave due to being shorter. This is the twin, born first on the other side of midnight and taken down a different path with different formulae, a different focus with the theta-inducer.

~*~

The van stops, and Marisol shoves her burner phone into the backpack under her large coat. It’s the warehouses Romanoff had ended up at on Halloween, though not the exact one. She sends a quick text to Peyton as she watches the woman direct Dr. Banner into the building.

The small door they went into is locked, so Marisol does a perimeter check until she finds an alternate entrance, a loading dock door that isn’t properly latched, and she eases it open enough to crawl underneath.

~*~

Peyton reads off the location first. “They’re alive, but not safe, and Marisol is keeping watch. Banner’s very calm. The accomplice left Creepo bleeding out at his apartment.”

Natasha exchanges a look with Clint. “Someone needs to secure Barnes, tempting as it may be to leave him there. I don’t want to explain that to Steve.”

“Gotta be a reason Banner’s not hulking out yet.”

“His control is better. He’s in the city. He’s compromised. He’s going to contain it as long as he can, but...yeah. Drugs, maybe. Something Barnes gave him in the theater?”

“Timing’s gonna be a bitch.” Stark adds. “If he’s able to be transported, if he’s coherent, his metabolism is going to be burning through any kind of muscle relaxant or neurological agent. I can’t imagine Barnes has access to anything military or hospital grade--”

Clint scoffs, “Aftermarket resale, he could have anything.”

“So Oxy? E? Most anything that would mellow Bruce out is gonna swing hard the other way.”

Natasha’s expression is flat. The only thing she’s got right now is reliance on her training, her skills, focusing on tactics, gathering intel, processing it. She’s cold with it, composed, feels like she’s moving outside of herself. It had never occurred to her that Natasha Romanoff would be an identity she’d need to inhabit.

“And it seems,” Tony looks at all of them “that we’re gonna ignore the fact that we’ve got an eleven year old taking point.”
“She’s twelve,” Peyton interrupts. “Marisol is twelve, and has grown over two inches since she came here this summer.”

“She’s an asset right now,” Natasha says. “We can no longer think of her as a child. She’s smart, she’s capable, and she has good tactical judgement.” She looks at Peyton for confirmation.

“Proven in the field.” Peyton says, confirming her long held but unvoiced suspicion about Marisol’s role in the Denton coup.

“Fire rescue was dispatched to the location, someone pulled a false alarm for distraction. No report of injuries.” Hill adds, “Cap is at the train station, I’ve got Yoshida’s team picking him up. But do we want him at the warehouse, or collecting Barnes?”

Do they use one of their most valuable assets doing what could be nothing more than a body grab? Subject Steve to the choice of basically arresting his childhood best friend or seeing him dead? *Fuck it*, Natasha thinks. If Barnes is in fact functioning, he’s as much of a threat as the Hulk, if slightly less of a property damage risk. Slightly. “Have him lead the tactical team to pick up Barnes. He wants to keep secrets, he can fucking clean up after them.”

“Agreed.” Hill taps her commlink, patches in to Steve. “Cap, a tac unit is waiting for you outside. I presume you’ve got your shield. You will secure the asset and debrief him if possible in case he’s got further information. Any instructions for the rest of the team in approaching Banner and the kidnapper?”

Steve’s answer is profane.

“I’m not sure ’Keep him from breaking the city’ is really a strategy, Rogers,” Tony says.
Chapter 22

The Big Comedown

Giselle ties him to an old desk chair, solid wood and cracked leather, broken wheels scraping the warehouse floor. It’s kind of hilarious, except for how Bruce is starting to feel like his brain is a skipping record. The serotonin supply is futzing out in waves, leaving him cold and feeling the itch that leads to pissed off. The ropes are actively making him twitch against them, like playing tug of war with a dog.

He can see, like double vision, how easy it would be to snap them off, snap the chair in half, snap the girl in half, crush her against the cement of the floor. He breathes through it but that technique’s rapidly losing efficacy. Deep breaths and mellow thoughts and fucking concentration just aren’t going to cut it, not when someone’s aiming a fucking weapon at him, making him hurt, trying to make him cower, everyone thinks they can make him cower...he snaps his head, resets. Tells himself again that it’s temporary.

“You really, really need to be less of a threat right now, Giselle. Please put down the gun.”

She’s pacing, an energy burn, action to spin off adrenaline as she works through a problem. He’s watched Natasha do the same thing.

“I’m very sorry about your sister,” he says, as kindly as he can. It rings a little false even though he means it. “We didn’t intend to kill her.” What is there to say in the face of grief, if that's what this is? They did kill her. He broke her spine, and Natasha slit her throat for good measure, both of their monstrous skills perfectly in play. He feels sick. This is a new type of torture, ricocheted loathing. Usually it’s so straightforward.

Giselle stops, turns towards him. Her voice is ragged but she's still so very focused. “I told her over and over again to stop, but she wouldn’t. I’m not sure she could. She was always emotional, and after Dr. Kudrin...she’d get ahold of an idea, couldn’t let it go.”

Bruce is really trying to listen, keep the firm, empathetic expression on his face, but he can literally feel synapses firing and snapping in his brain, like the hypnagogic flotsam at the edge of sleep, distracting with sudden images and snips of sensation, kodachrome memories as real as the ropes binding him. The pull of stitches through flesh as he holds himself still, ignoring the tears and snot on his face. A man sobbing quietly through the wall, ringing, meaningless contrition. His mother stroking his hair, restrained, the gesture more sorrow than comfort. She hurts too. He needs to keep her from hurting.

No. Stay in the moment. He needs to keep the woman in front of him from hurting.

Giselle stops, squats down, gun dangling between her knees and quirks up her gaze at him like she’s trying to figure him out. He’s sweating, breathing hard, disoriented, but he meets her eyes.

“She got out of hand.”

Dragana’s name focuses him again, and he clings to it, the puzzle Giselle is untangling in front of him.

He follows it, he’s good at that. He knows he is. “She got out of hand.”

“She wanted to hurt everything, everyone who had turned us from children to weapons. Useless
weapons, destructive and explosive.”

He hates the compassion unspooling for this girl. He should be grateful for the emotion, but really, the clarity that comes with the Other Guy is so much more satisfying - destroy the threat, smash the risk. Don’t think, just do. But he can also smell the wet dead leaves in the corners of that creepy house sunk into the forest floor, smell the dust and stale perfume of the closet that, if he were fast and lucky, he could get into unnoticed when he heard that certain tone of voice reverb through the house. Bruce has been controlling his respiration for a very long time.

“I’m sorry,” he says. If he can keep saying it, the words will mean something. “So, what is it that you want?”

Giselle presses her lips, blinks, looks like she’s handing over her last dollar. “She had the prototype of the gamma weapon. I don’t know how she got it. I’d like to get it back. I can trade it, keep myself safe.”

“Not possible. We destroyed it.”

“Fuck.”

She stands up, pacing faster as the reality sinks in, the dwindling likelihood of a trade. Even distracted, Bruce can see the anguish on her face. “Fuck. Fucking Dave. Who gets involved in all of this mess? Why? I just wanted to clean up the rest, put it behind me..."

“He thought we’d set up Kudrin’s program in the tower, but he’s maybe not in the healthiest place to draw conclusions. I think he meant well. Which in itself is kind of charming, considering his history, and I’m getting the impression you don’t have my best interests at heart...”

“Please shut the fuck up…” she’s starting to sound rattled, but Bruce really can’t help himself. Talking is helping to keep him calm, grounded. It’s not helping very much, but it’s something, and it’s all he’s got, because not only are the synapses exploding, he can feel the burning, sniffing query in his muscles, his bones. The Hulk is scenting threat and blood, the vitriol stewing in Bruce’s brain, and he’s wondering why he’s been napping through it.

“Seriously, Giselle, you should have left me there. Do you know what the Hulk is capable of? What I am? This isn’t some evil mastermind with a diabolical plan. This isn’t Kudrin experimenting on children. There’s nothing subtle or insidious here. This is death and destruction and chaos, and I cannot control it.” He’s straining against the ropes, the scrape of hemp rubbing him raw.

She’s starting to look a little desperate, at his agitation maybe, certainly at her own, but it’s just amping up her determination. He can sense it on her, fear and adrenaline, and there’s a primal tic, a twitch of ragged, terrifying need to draw blood, respond in kind. The two halves of himself are crossing over in a new way that feels like death and power, but it always comes down to blood on concrete, blood on stone.

He wants it now, to feel it hot on his hands, and the shame runs through him like a river of ice, plunging him down. Usually, there’s heat to it, a burn he needs to turn away from, but this is drowning, frigid and relentless. "Goddammit," he mutters to himself, "Keep it together. We are fucking better than this."

He doesn't actually know if that's true, but he's seen video that suggests it, if he can just hold to that belief, trust Hill. Trust Tony. Trust in Natasha and her clear, terrifying faith, unwavering and unprecedented. Remember that his present is so much better than his distant past. He wants to believe it, he wants to call up her touch, hands drawing down his spine, cupping the back of his neck, curled
around his wrist, his cock, the sole of his foot. But what wells up instead are his dead and lost, all of whom whisper at him of failures and betrayals.

The need and the ice are winning, clawing through him, telling him that faith is a lie, that everybody dies, that often it’s bloody. He jerks up on the ropes, unable to stop himself, and the chair thunks against concrete.

"This is a tactic." Giselle says, sharp, a little scared. Good. Scared is good. “Stop talking. I'm not some child you can rattle with teeth and threats.”

“It’s not a tactic,” he sounds crazy, desperate. Maybe it will help. “I’m not a spy, not a soldier. I’m just a guy who’s got a fucking nuclear bomb inside him.”

“Stop it.”

“I’m a guy that turns into an unstable weapon when provoked, and this is a huge fucking provocation.”

“Shut up.”

He’s pleading now. “Call Stark, call Romanoff. You know us. You work for Potts, which Christ, we are the worst detectives, but still, I guess someone will sort out how your background check went through. They can help you. They will help this situation.”

“No.”

“You STUPID FUCKING CHILD!” The rage is curling through him. It makes him terrifying, terrible. He doesn’t want to be, hears it ringing in his ears, tries to push it back. He focuses on the friction burns on his wrist and chest and elbows. Stop pulling at the ropes, Banner, color within the lines. Except all he feels is blurred.

It’s the secret, bursting through his pores as the Hulk growls and huffs but stays contained–this ugliness, this rage, this impotent pain isn’t the Other Guy. It’s him. He’s the monster. He can’t conjure the beast because he is the beast. He can’t tell where he stops and the Hulk starts, he doesn’t know if there is a difference, and yet...

He bangs the chair against the ground, Goddammit, he can do this, stay present, not go under. He’s done harder things. He caught Tony from mid-air, but that wasn’t him, now was it? He talked Natasha back to herself, but that was a different kind of desperation.

Giselle puts her hand up, like she’s warning him off. She’d always worn driving gloves, and he’d never noticed the tattoos circling her wrists and dipping onto the backs of her hands. Bluebirds and scrollwork. Fairytales inked into her skin. His pity is as vicious as his rage, and as unforgiving. What good has pity done him? But it’s a place to start.

“Sorry, I’m sorry about that. I know you’re not stupid, but this...it’s so fucking dumb, Giselle. It’s just...you’re going to die. Everyone in a twenty block radius is in grave danger, a lot of them could die, and you don’t want that. You can’t want that.”

They’re near the harbor. Maybe he could direct himself into the water. Possibly. Probably not. There’s been too much sensory input and now it’s even welling up from memory, a wash of stimulus with no one to offer direction as he’s pulled under, no one to help steer the comedown after. Just an angry, confused, threatening kidnapper, the second one in a row, a whole body full of fucked up chemicals, and a long shitty day that won’t end.
No Steve, no Tony, no Natasha and he doesn’t know if he has it in himself to keep it together. It’s feeling less and less possible. But if he can’t redirect himself, the Other Guy will kill this girl, destroy everything around him. Untold property damage, and no way to predict how much death, how much injury.

“You’ve got maybe fifteen minutes at best. Probably more like ten.” He pleads with her again, “So call Natasha now, don’t fucking wait around. Get someone here to help us.” He takes a deep breath, blows it out slow. “Or shoot me.”

Yes. Timing-wise, it could be an option, and all he has left to offer is a zero sum anyway. Stop himself. Put the power back into her hands. Okay. Bruce feels lighter.

Giselle’s eyes narrow, looking for the tactic, the angle. He wishes there were one, but that’s not his role. He’s not the man with a plan. He’s the guy who shows up to wreck the place. But he can still choose.

“Maybe, just maybe a bullet through my brain right now will stop it. Stop him. I can’t make any promises. I do know that pretty soon, the decision will be out of both our hands.”

This is a terrible gamble, but the fear that’s starting to seep out of Giselle is making it impossible to keep still, heart punching inside his chest, soles and palms tingling as he grinds raw skin against the ropes he can feel starting to give. He doesn’t want to die, but he doesn’t want to unleash the Hulk, and his alternatives are slipping away.

Of course it comes down to this again, after he’s made a life on the other side of suicide; not just surviving, but having built something to lose.

Giselle pulls out her phone, eyes and gun leveled at him. Her jaw ticks, but her hand is steady. She, like all of them, has been well trained. “Fuck, I really didn’t plan to kill you,” she says, like the intention matters. “I’m not looking for revenge. Revenge is what got Draga killed.”

“I’m what killed your sister.” He pours all the calm he’s got left into his words. “If you’re going to do it, you need to do it now. This is the only chance you’re going to get.”

Giselle nods, her finger tightens, and the only thing he wishes is that he’d had a chance to say goodbye.

God, Natasha is going to be so fucking furious.

It’s the longest moment of Bruce’s life. Her steady aim, the rise and fall of her breath, the way her face is distorting, twisting, like she sees that this is her only option, but it will destroy something in her. She’s hesitating, and he can feel the adrenaline spiking, the dreadful fear that comes with losing his grip.

“Please.” He slowly levers himself up, still bound to the chair, crouched with legs cramped from tension fought and restrained. He presses his forehead to the barrel, tilting it down to put his brain stem directly in the path of the bullet. “This way, it’s just me.”

Giselle squeezes the trigger. Bruce watches in blurred double vision. Everything slows, becomes crystal clear and gorgeous, there is no time left for anything but one last pull of cold air into his chest. Bluebirds of happiness.

The crack is sharp and devastating. He flinches back, involuntary, and wood shatters behind him.

Giselle falls in front of him under the impact of a small body, limbs whirling and dark hair flying.
Sound of fists pounding into flesh, that smacking thump he can feel echoing in his shoulders. He loses his balance completely, arms still tied, no way to catch himself as he trips in the web of rope and broken bits of chair.

Concrete and blood; he smacks his head on the floor with a sick thud and his vision shorts out, and he begs himself to keep it together, to stay human.

~*~

Steve doesn’t flinch when he sees Ameena in the tac van. It actually seems natural, and he treats her like he would any new agent. Minimal contact, surveillance, waiting for her to prove herself.

A few neighbors are still chatting with the Fire Rescue, which looks just about to pull away from the building. Agent Yoshida dispatches one of her juniors to get them to stick around. Ameena goes with two others up the fire escape, another two come up the stairs, and Steve and Yoshida take the elevator.

“Hill described this as rescue/retrieval, priority on survival over stealth.” Yoshida pulls out an I.C.E.R. “I need to know right now if you have a problem with that.”

“No, ma’am.”

The doors open and Yoshida gestures, “I’ll let you take point nonetheless.”

Steve holds the shield in front of him as he clears the unlocked door with agents flanking him, stepping over the prone man just behind the door to fan out into the tiny apartment.

It’s anticlimactic, despite the sticky puddles of blood, the severed mechanical arm and the fact Bucky’s lying there like a miracle. The apartment is just a place to live, and Bucky is woozy but already healing. A patchwork cat yowls from the top of the kitchen cabinets.

“Threat level is minimal.” Steve has the team stand down, “This is for medical. Stabilize him and arrange transport.”

“Steve...”

“It’s me, Buck.” He kneels down with no regard to the blood soaking through his pant legs, he’s done the standard precautions training, he just doesn’t care. When they were small, Bucky had nixed the whole blood brother thing on the grounds of having looked up anemia in the family Merck manual, "It’s my job to keep that blood in you, Steve, cutting you to prove it is stupid," but there’d been enough broken noses and schoolyard scrapes and slips of the paring knife between them even before Europe, and yes he realizes there’s a lot of dodgy history between then and now, but he’s already wedged Buck’s wounded shoulder between his palms and is applying measured pressure.

“You brought one of them with you.” Bucky’s staring up at Ameena. “One of the girls from Texas.”

“Not in Texas anymore.” She says with a quiet composure Steve hasn’t seen on her face before. “Also, technically an adult.”

“She’s here to help. Ameena, secure the arm. And the cat.”

~*~

Ameena ends up folding the arm at the elbow and zipping it into the travel bag Captain Rogers uses for his shield. The cat is harder to corral, and she suspects Agent Yoshida is glad to have a newbie to
pawn that one off on, but Ameena is a good little tag-along and sweet talks a neighbor into loaning her a pet carrier.

She also gets an earful of what Mrs. Jakubiak thinks about Barnes (whom she calls Dave), Captain America, and the insurance administrator she’s on hold with for the entire conversation--which boils down to marry, fuck, kill, in that order.

Despite the seal of approval from his neighbor, who at least doesn’t describe him as quiet, odd or a loner, Barnes is an enigma. The life laid out in his apartment is mundane down to the box of malt-o-meal left on the stove from breakfast, the life of a guy who punches a clock, and reads a lot, and yeah, maybe has a stalking habit that escalated way out of hand, but if his woozy mutterings are any gauge his motivations were pure if nothing else; concern, outrage, anxiety, dread, the visceral drive to get involved to stop something horrible. Twisty shit to deal with even when you aren’t a sword trying to beat yourself into a plowshare.

“You should have said something to me, Buck.” There’s a lot of blood on the worn carpet, it mats Barnes’ hair and the metal shoulder joint had been smeared with it, but he has a fistful of Captain Roger’s jacket like a lifeline. Captain Rogers has shifted to give the EMTs room, but he covers Barnes’ fist with his own bloody hand. “I should have talked to you.”

Ameena thinks about the deal she’d made with Trinh back in Texas, the pact that she’d do everything she could to get them out, as long as Trinh didn’t try to harm herself. She thinks maybe she got Trinh and the rest out, but she hasn’t let herself out yet, hasn’t figured out how someone like her lives anything like a normal life. Every option in front of her seems like a stupid game and she won’t play any of them because what’s the point in the end?

Maybe there is no point at the end, maybe the point is the work itself, making fucking malt-o-meal and paying the light bill and protecting those you care about, keeping those connections, and the frightening thing has always been that Ameena has no idea how to do any of that.

Khadijah does, hell even Trinh with her research projects and her mice. Romanoff with her fucking kaffeeklatsch morning ballet like she couldn’t take down the whole room in a heartbeat.

Ameena can kill. She can plan. She was ruthless and worked betrayal like a tool and got them out of Texas. She made a list with Peyton of staff that needed to be taken out. She worked with Trinh to smuggle a few girls back into the basement and sabotage their brainwashing so they could be trusted not to go to Madame. She can see where Barnes was coming from trying to suborn Banner to get at the truth--she can see the cracks where he got it wrong, the way Luz looks at something broken and can see how it’s supposed to work.

The Come to Hulk Talk

No trust. Never any trust. Makes sense, yeah, but if a guy can’t trust what’s in his own head, it makes life hard. Harder than it could be. Stupid. Always been book smart and stupid. That’s what Hulk’s for, to be hard for them both. Safer that way.

Hulk is better at being hard, keeping them safe. When Banner fights him, makes it harder to keep them safe. Pisses him off. Red knows. Knows some of it.

Banner is crumbling. This is new.

Banner’s snapped, and he’s let go with a sharp shock, and he’s even shoved Hulk outward. Many ways to lose your grip, slip, fumble, smash. Anger, fear, threat...sometimes choice now. Hulk takes over when needed, always has, but there’s nothing to run from here, nothing to smash except
Banner’s stupid poison brain.

Hulk wants Banner to give it over.

Banner is churning with shame, sorrow, dread, resentment, rage, poison feelings from all different times. Hulk’s brain feels like it’s going to throw up. Throw up Banner, like bad shrimp.


~*~

He’s not dead.

He’s also still this side of the Hulk, just barely.

His head hurts like a motherfucker and the sweet serotonin has all dissipated, the very idea of soothing calm now incomprehensible as the pendulum swings into payback. Not like he did so well flying solo when the Other Guy was chemically chained—luckily the man he’d tried to beat to death was hard to kill, even with his own cybernetic arm.

Bruce can’t aim this. That chance was squandered by a deus ex ninja dropping from the ceiling. His control is fractured and unhinged, and he’s helpless in the face of it, even with Marisol’s face peering at him too close. She’s pushed her glasses up into her hair, one lens out and the other cracked.

“I didn’t kill her,” she reassures him, “I tied her up and locked her in one of the old freezers. I think she called someone, though, which is why I dragged you in here.”

She’s trying to help him up, and he’s trying to wave her away, stubbornly curled into a recovery position on his side on the dirty linoleum of the warehouse office. “You need to go, Marisol. Right now.”

“I let Peyton know where we’re at. She said to hold tight, they’re coming.” She sits cross-legged on the floor, and leans close again to shove a lumpy backpack under his head.

Willful, fearless little shit. He’s going to kill her. He’s going to kill her because he can’t override her empathy and make her leave. He levers up on one arm, movement jerky as he fights the clenching muscles, tries to get them to obey, to get him away. “Go, Marisol. I won’t be able to stop it much longer.”

“Then don’t.” She digs into her pocket and holds out a quart size bag of the peppermint bark she’d made with Thor. He’d held Mjolnir’s handle with her, those tiny hands interlaced with his huge hams, crushing leftover candy canes to smithereens using a piece of neutron star. “Hungry?”

He makes the decision to put the threat open on the table, lunging up and raising his fist, using a full lungful to bellow, “Get out!”

Marisol pulls his fist down, jamming one of her other knuckles on a pressure point in his forearm that sings pain, lets her lever open his fingers. The burn scar shines glassy in his palm, and she smooths her thumb across it, a numb patch on his hypersensitive skin. She sets the baggy of peppermint bark on top. “Nope.”

Bruce feels his eyes burn and asks himself, “What the hell is my life?”

~*~
Hulk likes peppermint.

Hulk wanted Banner to talk to Red, get his mind right. Red’s not there. Banner keeps whining. Hulk is not patient, but he is stubborn.

Fuck Banner. He’s so scared of Hulk, then let him keep stewing in his own poison brain.

Hulk can abide, in or out.

~*~

Tony and Thor scout ahead at location Marisol had provided, to see if they’re needed as the front line of defense or to be backup, protection for the local population. The helicopter is ready a few minutes later.

Nick Fury looks surprisingly normal sporting a baby in a pack strapped to his chest, and Nate doesn’t seem to mind as Clint shoulders his tac bag and ducks out onto the helipad. Natasha has already buckled in with Khadijah and Peyton, the de facto leadership from the beginning negotiating with Pepper.

They’re coming in case Marisol needs a stabilizing force, handlers, reassurance, family.

The girls have revealed that their established inner structures and lines of authority take precedence over their relationships to the adults in the tower, and Natasha is willing to exploit that. The abstract pieces of understanding she’s been weaving together concerning the girls’ situation have gelled into a clear picture under the stress of the day. She wasn’t bluffing with Tony. No matter how much they’d wanted to give these girls back their childhoods, maybe the best they could hope for was to treat them like the complicated, murderous humans they are.

As a complicated, murderous human, Natasha knows it doesn’t have to be the only thing that defines you, but it never really goes away. The reality for the girls is that there was no childhood to regain.

They’d tracked Barnes, recognized his actions as threatening, but didn’t fear him. They worked him like a case, kept him a secret, and never considered informing an adult. They were a closed circle, dependent on each other to assess, observe, wait patiently, investigate in turn, flipping the script so they were predator and not prey.

And in the meantime, they’d snuck out like the teenagers they were, searching for more innocent secrets to keep. They’d had fights and headaches and Thanksgiving. They’d thrown a party, sold songs on the internet, and dove deep into science and mechanics and spy-craft and been in the Nutcracker.

Compartmentalization, deconstruction, coding and the formation of fragmented identity--these are characteristics that have defined Natasha. They define the girls as well.

So maybe offering them the opportunity to inhabit both identities was also a possibility. She is not Tony, mourning the stolen childhood. She has only ever survived by looking ahead. And she can guide them to that view.

She sits across from Clint, adjusting her gloves. He’s suited up in a mishmash of the armor pieces he had in his trunk while visiting the in-laws with the kids--which explains how he’d got there so quickly--plus a few things he’d left behind in his little used suite in the tower.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he says, voice flat, less about reassurance than testing the waters.
She shrugs, mission identity firmly in place. “I can talk him down.”

“Which one?” Clint asks, insinuating brow quirked because a mission is a mission, personal or not, and the only way to make it through is to ride a train of wry disinterest.

“Either,” she says, “Both.” And she forces herself to believe it because the alternative is unbearable: that she’s too late, that he’s nothing but rage, that there’s no control left, destruction in his wake. If that’s the case, he will never forgive himself, and she will lose him to that loathing and pain.

She trusts him. She trusts the Other Guy. But Bruce trusts neither of them, and she can’t bear to see him proved right.

~*~

The facilities at the tower are extensive and cutting edge, but they really need an actual staff aside from Fiona. She drafts the medically trained agents and makes do with on-screen consults, but it’s clear she feels this spy shit compromises care.

“Here’s something you need to know.” Fiona stands at the head of the exam table where Bucky can see her if he deigns to regain the consciousness he lost on the way there, and her voice is deceptively smooth and soothing. “I’m damned good at what I was hired to do, which is provide primary care and case management for the dozen kids in the Lozen Trust program. I have extensive experience working with troubled youth. I am not, repeat not, an ER doc, trauma surgeon, neurologist or walking hospital.”

Steve doesn’t care that he’s looming, but to be honest, Fiona doesn’t look like she does either. “We can’t take him to a hospital, there are complications--”

“Eliminate them.” She shakes her head as he tries to interrupt again. “He’s stable, but I don’t like that he’s unconscious again, and frankly, I don’t trust Stark’s AI to interpret scan results.”

“You don’t understand--”

“Yes, I do.” Fiona lays her hand on Bucky’s chest, delicate and final. “Get him some SI employee paperwork, a quick haircut, and get him the hell into a CT scanner. Chaperone him right into surgery if need be.”

~*~

“They’re really close, I think,” Marisol says, and that’s just great. The peppermint bark is delightful. Everything is lovely, even the huge thunk that’s just shaken the warehouse. It sounded like a boulder had landed right next to Bruce’s head. His senses are always overwhelming when he’s about to change.

“Please,” he tries one more time, “Marisol, get out of here.”

She shrugs in a way that’s half Maria Hill’s that’s really not my problem and half Natasha’s fuck you, but it’s sweet of you to ask, and says, “No, I don’t think so. It’s gonna be okay.”

He shoves another square of peppermint bark into his mouth, grasping for distraction while the Hulk rolls through his chest. Bruce can feel his taste buds twang, his teeth crack, molars expanding; his mouth shifting just like his body heat is melting the chocolate. He groans with the inevitability and kicks his shoes off, shoving his socks inside. He huffs through it, in and out like meditation. He hasn’t changed tonight under stress, under
physical assault, under the depths of despair, under surrendering to death. The Other Guy looms just under the surface, but has not stepped in. The rippling feeling in his skin and bones is not the uncontrollable Id unfolding in his cells, it's his body reacting to the stress by feeling the muscle memory of transformation, preparation as the chemicals burn in his brain.

The Other Guy is in there, but he’s been weirdly patient. Bruce is afraid of ripping himself apart, but in Prague he’d pushed the Hulk out to save Natasha. Could that be an option here, to save himself? It’s terrifying. It’s so fucking freeing.

Maybe if he doesn’t fight it, invites the Hulk even in the midst of this cyanotic feeling in his lungs and mouth, it will be okay. Just maybe. Faith. Trust. He has learned that--to give over the best part of himself to someone else in order to be better together. That lesson could be extended.

He pulls the sweater over his head. Gets most of the shirt buttons back through the holes.

On hands and knees, the cold floor gives him a few moments of breathing space.

The pants are one of the newer pairs from the SI TacWear team, an attempt at business casual that he’s iffy about, but he often wears to the IMAX because they were clever with the pockets and the loose stretchiness makes them comfy for napping. Or kidnapping. Or just fucking snapping. He opens his eyes again, grounding himself in the moment so the choking feeling doesn’t become a laugh or a sob, just rides through him. Don’t fight it. It’s the one chance you’ve got left. Maybe also don’t break your watch again.

“There’s another message,” Marisol says. “From Romanoff.”

“Tell her I tried,” he says, handing Marisol his watch. “Get into the corner. Stay as still as you can.” He can hear his voice has dropped a register, thrumming in his rib cage, but she doesn’t skitter, just quickly and carefully obeys.

Usually, the change feels like chaos and disorder, body ripping at the seams, sense of self cracking open until he shatters, loses coherence. This time it floods over him like water, a broken dam, the flow eroding a crumbling foundation until the structure washes away…

~*~

Banner is full of shit. Let him sit in it. Hulk won’t take over, take blame. Hulk controls Banner--chooses not to.

Fuck Banner. Make Banner ask. Hulk is stubborn.


Banner works himself around…and lets go.

Gets it. Finally.

The growl fills the room up, reverberating, and a tiny girl jams her hands over her ears.

“Wow...that was loud.” Teeth clicking. Scared, or cold. He sits back on his heels.

Tiny. Fragile. Smashable like eggs, like the robots, like...no, girl. He knows this girl.

He doesn’t want to hurt this one. She scoots forward, wary, offering something from a bag.

“Candy?”
It smells like his mouth tastes, buttery chocolate and minty grit.

She freezes, moving her head slightly to locate a noise. She drops the bag into his hand and pulls a gun from under her coat, rising silently to her feet. She shushes, whispers, “Quiet.”

He doesn’t have enough words to explain, and they are all loud, so he just breathes, “Mouse.”

She listens for a moment, more sounds, and she’s eyeing him like she wants to hide him in a closet under old coats. She leans in, just tall enough to whisper up into his ear where he kneels. “Are you calling me mouse, or being as quiet as?”

“Mouse,” he mutters and points his thumb at himself. He grabs the words for her that Banner’s buried like a secret, and nudges her shoulder back a little with his finger, “Brown Recluse.”
Chapter 23

Czech Yourself Before you Wreck Yourself

Pepper has been on the phone with her head of HR for half an hour, and during a pause she shoots Steve a look and says, “The next fucking head wound gets to pay out of pocket and offer up an actual driver’s license.”

She’s wearing leggings, hair in a messy knot. He’s never seen her look less than professionally perfect, and if he had any room left for guilt, he’d feel really bad about dragging her away from her actual life into this mess. The thing is, he doesn’t.

Bucky is dazed and compliant, sitting up on the gurney and keeping blank eyes on all three of them, but mostly Pepper.

“Use the #8,” Pepper watches from the foot end of the gurney while Fiona gauges his pupil reflexes again and Steve works quickly with a pair of clippers, clenching his teeth as they clog with lanky hair clotted with blood. “Longer on the forehead. He just needs to pass as a mid-level accounting clerk who got mugged. Don’t worry about the shave, we’re coming into tax season end of January.” She pulls the earpiece out with frustration, “It just keeps ringing. It’s not like Giselle to flake out when she’s on call, even this late.”

Fiona rides down with them but tags out at SubSix parking, heading up to prep for the next wave of incoming and taking the arm with her.

Steve helps Bucky into the backseat of the car. He’s lucid but pliant, like he’s not really connecting with what’s going on. Steve feels the same way. After months of pretending, of ignoring his shadow, of willfully discarding things in his wake in an obscure attempt at communication, Bucky is here, so solid and so real. At least someone is here, and this man reads as far less Winter Soldier than James Barnes, even if his body is a line Steve doesn’t recognize, his logic a foreign thing. But Steve is so tired of being driven by logic and tactics and stoicism. Not right now.

He wraps his arm around Bucky, blunted end of his upper arm tucked against Steve’s chest, and helps him stay steady. The burn of purpose fills Steve in a way he hasn’t felt in so long.

Pepper drives more aggressively than he expected and they slide around a little in the back of the car, but he doesn’t care as long as she keeps heading to where they can get help. Fiona had briefed them on how to approach the intake nurses, the doctors in duty, navigating the institution to get the answers and care they need without sending up too many red flags.

“Steve,” Bucky’s eyes flutter open, and they’re clear, pained, then shift into confusion. “Don’t let them take blood. Don’t let them take me.”

Steve presses his lips together. Enhancement isn’t bloodborne, and the signature traces won’t show up in common medical testing, so that’s an easy concession and risk. The healing factor is frankly more of a bitch to explain. They’re going with a mugging that happened a day or so ago, with Dave wandering back to his apartment concussed and unclear on the timeline. “I’ll be with you the whole time. Let me take care of the talking, okay?”

Bucky’s looking at Pepper in the rear view mirror. Steve jostles him lightly to get his attention, keep him from fading again. After a long moment he licks at his dry lips and says, “When you gave me the hat, you made sure Nataliya didn’t see. I thought...I thought you were finally giving me a
message.”

Steve swears at himself, rearranges his grip on Bucky’s shoulder. When they’d gone to watch the skaters and he’d seen Bucky sail past on one blade the very moment Natasha glanced down with disdain into her tepid hot chocolate. He’d hustled her away with the promise of candy and dropped his favorite hat, almost giddy with the game of it but still unable to think of how to break that silent stalemate. Well that was one problem solved, now wasn’t it? “Things are good here. I trust her.”

“I know that now.” Bucky has a slow sorrowful stricken expression that tears at Steve, his voice a hollow attempt at wry, “I used to be so good with people.”

~*~

“Leibchen?”

Marisol pulls her coat sleeve down over her hand and most of the gun, tucking her arms and hunching her shoulders so she looks cold. She slips out of the office and leaves the door unlatched. True to his word, he’s even quieted the bellows of his lungs so you can’t hear him just inside the office.

There’s an old guy in the person-sized doorway near the loading dock. His accent is thick, like he’d learned English late or just didn’t care to bend any of this vowels or consonants to it. “You are not Libuse.”

Marisol uses a technique Mellie had taught her, sketching a role on the fly with what she’s being given, supplemented with stuff already in her head. This lih-Boosh-eh is obviously the woman she’d stuck in the fridge, and she casts herself as a Trinh-like helper to this woman’s Kudrin. “I will take you to Madame.”

The old man hums and plants the tip of his cane against the floor. “I do not think so. If she would like to negotiate, I will wait here for five minutes.”

There’s a pause, and Marisol suspects he’s thinking faster than she is. Libuse is desperate, looking to sell this man...what? What she had on-hand: gamma mutation? For what? She had enough money not to be desperate. Maybe safety, for her or someone she cares about. Marisol doesn’t have enough information or time to work this out, and her elbow twitches to pull the gun but she doesn’t. It occurs to her she’s missed her window to leave the room like a good little messenger.

“Madame is indisposed, I take it.” The old guy is bent a bit, but like a spring, and he uses the cane more like an accessory than an aid. “Am I to haggle with you?”

Marisol wishes she were Mellie, their own Pippi Longstocking of Plausible Bullshit. She doesn’t practice talking enough to pull this off. “Yes.”

The old man hums again, and idly taps his cane on the ground in a little rhythm. “And do you have the item? Or perhaps samples?”

Padding through the loading dock door come a pack of wolves. Mechanical, but nearly silent on paws lined with traction rubber pads.

“As yet, you have produced nothing of interest, and I do not abide people in my neighborhood who have no business here.”

Their ruffs bristle with fur made from wire brush that extends down their backs, and their jaws are serrated with teeth. Their necks are reinforced and built for tearing. Six of them flank the old man in
a semi-circle and wait on their haunches ready for launch.

Marisol’s body rings with the bright clarity of danger, and she says the first thing that comes to mind. “Madame left me here alone.”

The old man rests both hands on the butt of his cane, looking down his long narrow nose at her, considering. “The only Madame I know of is dead. And if you are meant to be some kind of offering or opening bid, I have little interest in Kudrin’s sloppy idea of biotech. Libuse had grown into something, but as you see, I prefer more useful pets than monstrous children.”

He takes a step forward.

“You know Kudrin. Are you one of her little Texans, then? Libuse had said you were all strictly off limits.”

“And what was she offering instead?” Marisol tries to phrase it like she’s testing him, which she is kinda, because she thinks the samples the old man wants are the same ones Trinh has dangerous daydreams of analyzing: Dr. Banner’s. “A boost to the squishy parts of your robots?”

“Ungeheuer…” He whispers, and several things happen at once.

The man raps his cane on the floor and Marisol tracks his eye line several feet above her. The wolves spring in formation, flying over her head as she ducks and rolls. The warehouse reverberates with a roar.

Metal ricochets. The man hustles back out the door, the limp of a bad hip now evident, his wolf pack regrouping and covering his retreat.

Marisol shoves the gun into the coat’s pocket and is swept up by an enormous arm, half-crushed against a side hard and rough like a stone wall, and then they’re driving through the metal of the loading dock door with a screeching rip.

There is no sign of the old man, though given his speed and the open space around them it makes no sense.

Marisol scrambles free and checks under and inside the produce truck, while the Hulk stomps around it and brushes his hand along the top like dusting a shelf.

There is only a stretch of scrubby broken parking lot, distant warehouses, and the sound of a helicopter flying low.

~*~

Hulk is standing in the bay, towering over the produce truck. Marisol’s perched on his left shoulder like a parrot, though the puffy black down coat makes her look more like a penguin. The loading dock door is peeled open. That appears to be the extent of the damage, at least so far. Safe. They are both safe.

This is relief, Natasha thinks. It has to be relief, but it feels a lot more like she’s been gut punched, knees watery, chest tight, like a gentle breeze could knock her over.

Clint grips her arm, and she must have swayed, identity slipping into reality, and she doesn’t do that, she doesn’t… but she must have, and she’d be embarrassed to show it in front of the girls, except for how she doesn’t really give a fuck. Isn’t that part of what they’re teaching them? Connections. Partnerships. Love. Commitment to something bigger than themselves. Vulnerability. It’s why those
two are there in the first place, to be there to catch Marisol.

Or maybe they’re teaching her, not that it’s just possible, but necessary. Clint’s steady presence here is proof positive that she understands it on a fundamental level, but this is something else - risk, choice, giving over part of herself. Trust. Not because she has to, but because she wants to.

She looks back up. Hulk is watching all of them, remarkably calm. Almost eerily so. She’d started this thing to give Bruce something back, and found something for herself. The order is now reversed. That was worth learning.

Marisol acknowledges them with a wave, and says something in his ear. He bends down and helps her off his shoulder to the ground, where the two older girls are waiting. Natasha hadn’t realized how much Marisol had grown over the year, now as tall as Peyton.

Hulk is still kneeling. Natasha moves towards him, and he gives her that terrifying half smile. She puts her fingers on his wrist, and he turns his hand over for her, like he had in the quinjet.

“Thank you.” She’s so quiet, she’s not sure he can hear her but she takes his hand in both of hers, brushing her cheek in his palm, gently kissing the fleshy ridge that connects the thumb to his wrist. On Bruce, that place is sensitive; she wants him to feel her touch. He rumbles a little at that. He also smells like chocolate.

Hulk takes his hand back delicately, pressing the knuckles to the ground by her side, a little in front, protective like a mastiff at heel.

“Marisol,” Natasha says, feeling grounded now, steady and ready. “What do we need to know?”

The girl twists her mouth, organizing her thoughts. “It’s the driver, Giselle. She’s in a freezer inside. He was meeting someone here, but he’s gone. An old man, he had more of the drones. He knew Giselle by the name Libuse.”

Clint has his bow ready, and he’s got his head tilted, conveying information to Stark and Thor via comms as he heads into the warehouse.

Hulk rumbles, “Sister.”

Natasha leans her hip against his elbow.

“He didn’t hurt anyone.” There’s a very grownup look in Marisol’s eyes. She produces a gun from her coat sleeve and hands it to Khadijah, who checks it with practiced efficiency. This is Marisol’s personal chain of command.

Khadijah hands it to Natasha, “One shot fired.”

“He wanted to make sure he wouldn’t hurt anyone. They both did.”

“Banner,” Hulk sniffs derisively, “In time out.”

Natasha will unravel that later, and it promises to sting. She sends the girls back to the helicopter to be evaced back to the tower, leaving just her and Hulk, who has started to pace with an aggressive eye on the produce truck. He’s exerting an exceptional amount of control but it’s unlikely to be perfectly in check. None of them are perfectly in check.

Stark and Thor are doing a sweep of the warehouses in this area, many of them underutilized or empty, but certainly not all. Artist collectives have been moving in, sometimes squatting, making it
difficult to get accurate data on occupation. From their investigation of the squid back in the fall, they know this whole block is owned by a private development group that’s been around since the 1960s, but hasn’t been particularly active since then, hence the squatters.

It’s not long before Clint emerges from the warehouse, Giselle looking worse for wear but alive, hands bound behind her back. Natasha’s ready to call it, wrap it all up and take it back to the tower for sorting, but despite Hulk’s relative calm, he’s not making way for Bruce.

Time out, he’d said, like he’d sent Banner to some deep recess of mind to think about what he’d done. “Do you need to stay like this?” she asks.

He shrugs enormous shoulders, putting his hands on the produce truck and rocking it.

“Don’t,” Giselle starts, and he turns on her faster than physics should allow, eyes narrowing, and bellowing so loud it knocks her back stumbling. Clint steadies her by the cuffs.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be giving him suggestions,” Clint says, shaking his head, popping his jaw to clear his ears. “I don’t think he likes you. That doesn’t end well, generally.”

“Romanoff, we don’t see any damage, no signs of anyone else in the vicinity. Nothing on scan so far, either.” Stark says into her ear. “We’re heading your way.”

“Affirmative,” she says. “Maybe think of a Hulk delivery method unless you want to hang with him in the cold for however long he’s gonna be this way.”

He’s back to rocking the produce truck, and Natasha figures it’s not worth trying to stop him. There’s no telling what, if any, effect Barnes’ kidnapping cocktail is having. Steve sent an off-the-cuff report per Barnes: a light dose of MDMA at the museum, a dose of heavy duty tranq that would have killed a regular human or three, and a second massive dose of MDMA in the apartment, combined with stress. Might not mean anything for the Hulk, might be fucking with his equilibrium, it’s hard to tell. If he wants to break a truck, she’s all for it. Property damage that can be contained is acceptable right now, and she’s about to give him the go ahead when she hears a shuffle and a tap.

Giselle shouts, “Anhalten!” and then swears a blue streak in English edging into Czech.

Natasha catches a glance, her mind processing the image even after the figure disappears around the corner of the warehouse. Tall and skinny, but bent, putting some actual weight on the long fancy cane in his hand to push himself out of sight.

Clint is shaking Giselle a little, asking her who the fuck that was, and she just keeps shaking her head, fear slackening her features. “The Craftsman. I called him… but I didn’t think he got the message.”

“Great. Clint, hold down the fort—” Natasha starts to turn, ready to follow, figure out where the fuck an ancient German could have disappeared to, when the ground shakes with a loud bang and the Hulk steps in her way.

He’s shoved over the produce truck and now he’s giving her the look that Bruce does when she says something he hates, but not enough to fight it, just enough to tamp it down with everything else he holds fast.

Turns out, she hates that look just as much writ in IMAX scale, and it hardens her resolve. “You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

Hulk flicks a finger at one of the truck’s wheels, sending it spinning. “Veto.”
Clint, who doesn’t seem to find any of this particularly dire, starts to howl in laughter, earning an arched brow and a glare from both of them. “You just got the like fuck you will look from a giant green rage monster.”

“Do you want to see the range and depth of my fuck you looks?” she asks, teeth gritted.

“We need a plan. We’ll probably need back up. You know how these things go. Pop Goes the Weasel over there probably turns into one of those people who zip off their skin. Don’t give me that look, you know it’s been that kind of year.”

“And you missed the Krampi.”

“Saw ‘em on YouTube though,” Clint says, “which is why I think it’s a lure to get us on his territory, probably drones up the ying-yang.”

“I hate when you’re right.”

Hulk stamps again. Turns his glare on Giselle.

“I know he lives nearby. I don’t know where. But yeah, he...makes things.”

“What kinds of things?” Natasha steps closer.

“Biomechanoid. He’s a genius. Came here in the seventies. He...there’s a rumor that he made…” She looks around, eyes wild, knowing she’s going to have to tip her hand. “Dave has a mechanical arm. He...I know who he is. I mean, I know his name isn’t Dave. The arm. The Craftsman made the arm. Or that’s the rumor.”

“Fuck.”

“Stark,” she presses her comm. “I think we found you a present. Start scanning for anything with similar signatures to the squid and the Krampi.”

She waits, hears a triumphant noise in her ear. “Got it. About half a mile south, away from the harbor. We’ll meet you there.”

“So what do we do with her?”

“Take me with you. I’ve got training - tactics, weapons…”

“Nope, not putting a weapon in your hand, but…”

“Just bring her,” Natasha says, weary. “We’ll stick her in a corner.”

Hulk has gone back to dismantling the produce truck while they debate, but when Clint whistles, he turns, bares his teeth while offering a middle finger the length of a canoe paddle, and they start to jog.

**Welcome to the Concrete Jungle**

They don’t get far before they encounter the first animal - a mechanical wolf, no fur, less lovely than the squid, but beautifully dangerous nonetheless.

Natasha comes around a corner following Tony’s directions, taking point, and the wolf lunges for her throat out of nowhere. It’s teeth graze her arm, sharp enough to tear open her uniform before she can fire. Then it’s silvery body is shattering into pieces, a pure demonstration of force and
momentum as Hulk punches it away from her.

He catches her eye, smirking.

"Let me guess: Bad Wolf?" That earns her a chuckle. There's an almost conjoined twin logic to how the two minds relate to the one brain that she's starting to grasp.

"Guys, you really might want to hurry," Tony says, and she hears the sound of his repulsors. "This is a zoo. Literally."

There's a bright light, and a popping sizzle they can hear even over the distance. And then green eyes light up the dark around them, blinking open like cartoon bats in a cave.

"There are civilians in these buildings," Thor reports, sending Mjolnir on a circuit through three and a half wolves, then bringing it down on the last half with a sound like a struck anvil. "I've been down here before, for wine and cheese and performance art."

Two more wolves leap, and Hulk grabs them by their throats, but another gets around him and nearly makes it to Clint. The two thrown wolves sail through the wall of the nearby warehouse and there's an unsettling crash as something structural crumbles inside. An arrow pins the third wolf to the ground, uncomfortably close to Barton. It's still whining silently and writhing.

"I'm uncuffing her," Clint says. "I can't shoot and wrangle."

Natasha responds to Thor, "We've gotta evacuate the civilians."

"Agreed."

"How do we get these people out? There's a lot of animals. We're gonna need help. Haul Cap back from his popsicle, call in the Coast Guard, something." Tony shoots again. She can hear JARVIS in the background, guiding his aim.

Natasha taps into her comm. "Nick, we need back up. We need civilian evacuation in this area. Is Hill's team anywhere close?"

"Negative, they're on the way to the Tower. I can send them your way, but it'll take a while. There's a snarl of traffic in midtown, and the chopper's still en route from dropping off the kids. I'll reach out to SWAT."

"No way, I'm not punching a giraffe." Tony sounds legitimately offended in the background. "That's just fucked up."

Clint has the droll calm he gets when he's in the zone, "He can only reach the giraffe because the suit can fly."

"Stark," Natasha barks like jerking on a choke chain, as she slides underneath a mechanical cheetah and jabs into it with her lightstick, hoping that the fact she can see through it means it's not full of exploding goo. "Just punch the fucking giraffe before it eats you."

She looks over at Giselle, and unholsters one of her guns, tosses it to the woman. "Think twice about betraying us," she says, kicking the cheetah free from her stick. "You might hit me, you might hit Clint. We're human. You could probably kill us."

Giselle tests the weight of the weapon, holds it with authority.
“But he,” Natasha gestures at the Hulk, who is gleeful in his savagery as he rips the rack of brass antlers off a metal moose, snaps them in two, and proceeds to use them like a pair of knuckledusters. “He’d be peeved.”

Giselle nods once, sharply, and aims at the next wolf.

Once they get past the initial menagerie the attacks thin, and they’re able to get close enough to the workshop to help Thor contain the other animals. Tony broadcasts an evacuation message, aided soon after by a few squad cars full of officers who do the yeoman’s work of evacuation and holding cleared ground while dodging mechanical beasts, the Hulk, the god, and the three other Avengers working the front line of sharp metal teeth and claws.

“We saw Scranton on the news, so we did a refresher training last weekend,” the ranking Lieutenant on the scene reports to Natasha. “We got this.”

Natasha and Giselle help with the evacuation until Clint runs out of arrows and he swaps with Natasha, leading citizens while she rushes in to electrocute mechanical wildlife. Her bullets don’t do much but slow the drones down unless they hit the pulsing hearts. She’s an excellent shot, but it takes too much ammunition to be an effective strategy.

It’s truly a fight, more vicious than the Krampi, and Natasha feels Steve’s absence acutely; not just his tactical strategy, but his ability to focus the Hulk.

He listens to her with selective hearing, following her orders until he sees an opportunity he prefers, and she gets some of Steve’s frustration when she hares off on her own. Sure, he’s breaking the right things, but he also knocked Tony into a building with a second giraffe, and nearly stepped on Giselle twice.

She’s suspects the latter was deliberate.

Steve is unreachable, but she finally gets a message from Nick through Pepper: Barnes is under observation, Steve doesn’t have his shield with him, but he’s leaving now, because Pepper promised she’d stay and then kicked him out.

Then finally, nearing serious dusk, they get the bulk of the beasts surrounded in a circle, close enough to employ Thor’s electrical trick from Scranton. He channels the lightening, directing it down, striking an elephant, whose trunk is close enough to connect with a straggling wolf, and the spark forks outwards, collapsing half the creatures to the ground.

Stark ascends to skyscraper height to scan for any outliers while Thor harnesses a second round of lightning, but when he channels it down a stray tendril zigs up into the dark sky and unerringly zags toward the lump of metal.

Lightning is faster. It’s just a zap, but the suit is still vulnerable thanks to the new modifications he’s been workshopping, and it lights him up like a whistling spark from a firework.

He’s got a long drop, but terminal velocity for him in the suit is terrifyingly fast, his path toward the ground lit like tracer fire.

Hulk lunges on a curve to intercept, but even with preternatural outfieldsing skills there’s no great options for cancelling out that much momentum. Stark barrels into him at full force, sending the two of them knocking and tumbling, crashing at an angle through one of the multi-level warehouses, which collapses on top of them.

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There’s a weight on his chest, and his head aches. Bruce coughs up what feels like a pound of dust, but he can’t be sure. It’s pitch black. Everything hurts.

JARVIS’ voice is ringing in his ears, magnified and way too close to his face. “Dr. Banner? Perhaps you could assist, initial scans indicate deployment of Reset would result in a 72% chance of immediate evacuation from the building rubble--”

“JARVIS--.” He can’t see anything, can’t get his bearings, doesn’t know if he’s standing or lying down, where he is, or what’s happening.

“--level requires an override, but Sir is unresponsive--”

“--do NOT deploy.”

It’s so black his visual center is making random sparks to keep itself occupied; he’s pinned by hot metal and rubble, and Tony’s suit wants to spray pixie dust without regard to whatever structural integrity they may have in their favor. He pictures the nanopowder dissolving the broken pieces pushing against his back, only to send them plunging down onto a spike of rebar, or cause a shift that crushes someone else. Blood and concrete, and he doesn’t have enough space to move his belly to breathe, and there’s a sharp edge against the back of his neck and he starts to panic, can’t breathe, can’t move, and then the blackness swallows the sparks.

Some time later Bruce opens his eyes because he’s coughing, lungs spasming from frigid air and a cloud of particles. It’s still dark, but he can see, and he’s sitting upright.

Tony’s next to him, helmet off, pale and bruised. Natasha crouches in front of him, gloved hands on his thighs. She’s filthy, covered in grey powder, but so is everyone - Tony’s suit, and Thor, even Giselle, sitting slumped over her knees on a piece of concrete.

Clint stands point, a little cleaner than the rest. He gives Bruce a jaunty wave. “Hey, doc.”

Bruce looks down at Natasha, throat feeling sandblasted. A sting radiates along his cheekbone, sharp when all the other pain has turned sore. “Did you slap me? Are we playing interrogation?”

She starts to laugh, shoulders slumping, and he sees how brittle she is, the laughter on the edge of manic. He tilts her toward him and buries his face in her hair, not caring about the concrete dust. She’s real, and whole, and here, and so is he.

Tony puts a heavy, solid hand on his shoulder, and Bruce covers it with the hand not holding onto Natasha.

“Looks like we broke some shit,” he says, coughing a little more.

“Yeah,” Tony says. “But we didn’t break any people, so halle-fucking-lujah, right?”

Bruce chokes out another laugh.

~*~

After Fiona clears him she hands over a set of scrubs and points him to the corner lavatory, “Just keep the mud clear from the drain, the low-flow shower’s tetchy.”

The TacWear pants are a loss, though a small one, since they didn’t really succeed at the business casual look they were aiming for, and this pair is half shredded anyway from having a warehouse fall on them. He empties the pockets and slips everything into the inner pocket of the scrub pants.
Natasha is cloistered with Hill and his understudy kidnapper, while Clint handles the check-ins from the Avenger’s common area instead of Tactical HQ, his hair damp and sticking in all directions as he explains, “There’s more chairs, and it’s closer to the booze.”

Tony sits at the table, slack-jawed with awe as Nick Fury jiggles and pats an infant against his shoulder. It’s a testament to his shock that he’s not saying a peep about the Avengers’ logoed dish towel on Fury’s shoulder that’s just been defaced with a wet belch.

“Good job, Nate.” Bruce says, tweaking the small sock covered toes. Nate coos at him happily.

Fury wipes him off and hands him over. “Little guy’s a trooper, but I’m getting a backache.”

“No worries, sir,” Barton salutes sloppily with his phone. “I’ve got the evidence.”

Bruce grabs another dish towel and manhandles Nate so he’s facing outward. He’s solid and warm, smells good, and is pretty happy for a kid who should have been in bed hours ago. Nate settles into the crook of his arm and stares at Tony, who stares at Bruce, eyes wide.

“Traitor,” Tony breathes out, voice filled with utter betrayal.

“He likes me.” Bruce adds, “which is more than I can say for the other Barton offspring.”

Tony gasps and clutches at imaginary pearls, or perhaps his actual sternal scar. “There’s more of them?”

“Yes, Stark. I have a wife and three kids.” Clint pauses in his typing, which he’s somehow doing while still wearing his fingerstall glove on his drawing hand. “We own a bit of acreage in the country, I can my own salsa, I know five ways to fold a cloth diaper, and my wife makes more money than I do even with you paying my salary these days...though my death benefits are better.”

“Admit it, Tony,” Natasha strolls in, “he’s your worst nightmare.”

Nate coos again and kicks his feet, but he’s getting slacker, Bruce can feel sleepiness pulling at the kid. It echoes his own exhaustion, which is apparently evident since Natasha shifts Nate back to his dad and takes Bruce toward the elevators.

“We should get the debrief out of the way before you pass out.”

He nods, lets her take him to the Tactical HQ floor, but when the doors open he stills her with a hand on her shoulder before stepping out alone. “I’ll meet you in the suite?”

She follows him out, puzzled and wary, “I’m going with you.”

“Please.” Should have known it wouldn’t be that easy, but he had to try. “Let me take care of this alone.”

Bruce pinches the bridge of his nose to avoid seeing Natasha shaking her head. He’s too tired to have this discussion, he really just wants to drag her off to bed and fall asleep with his face buried in her neck, overwhelmed and grateful.

He wants some room to fall apart a little, but he’s only going to get that piecemeal, and only if he gets his way on this.

“I will break down everything for you, in the same way I’ll break it down for Cap and for Hill. But I don’t want you in there when I do it.” It’s going to be bad enough rehashing it for the paramilitary
dynamic duo, but he thinks it might be good practice for trying to say it to Natasha, give him a modicum of objectivity.

“Then why say it all twice?”

He forces his hands away from his eyes, his brow, meets her implacable stare. He made the best judgments he could, and while subsequent events and a pushy pre-teen proved him woefully wrong, he can’t let himself go down the rabbit hole of what if. “I don’t want to hash that out in front of you as a teammate. I want…I want the luxury of having you listen personally, not professionally.”

Her eyes are wide, and he can’t tell if she’s angry, or hurt, or just fucking copacetic. “I’d be fine,” she says, deliberately obtuse. “I want to be there--”

“Natasha, I cannot look at you in a briefing and talk about what happened in that warehouse, okay?” He realizes from the tension in his hands that he’s gripped her arms hard, but she keeps that neutral face like it’s taking all her bandwidth. It washes over him that she’s just as fried, hanging off the same frayed rope. He loosens his fists and smooths his hands upward. “I can talk to you after, just us. As my partner, as the person I love, that I’m in love with.”

She twitches as if physically jolted by the words. She says, “I see,” but it sounds like filler, she still doesn’t move even as he slides fingers into her hair, curls soft around his knuckles.

Of all the ways he’d envisioned forcing this issue and laying it bare between them, telling her no and kicking her out of a debriefing was none of them.

“I’m being selfish, but--I can’t do it.” He cups her face and brushes his mouth against hers, and feels her trembling, exhaustion and soured adrenaline probably. “I’ve had a hell of a day. I don’t particularly want to break down in front of Captain America, but that might be good for him even if Hill will never let me live it down.”

~*~

Maria is waiting for him outside the conference room off of Tactical HQ, but instead of walking in with him she gestures Bruce back toward the elevator and takes him down to Steve’s suite. The door opens on a wave of glorious food smell.

She shoves him toward the couch, which is Prussian blue velvet and big enough for Captain America to sprawl like Manifest Destiny.

Steve calls from the kitchen, “Dinner’ll be ready in forty.”

“Forty? What?”

Maria saunters back with a glass of red wine that she hands to Bruce. “Forty minutes, forty winks. It’s leftover Bolognese, it can just keep simmering.”

Steve comes out with a stained kitchen towel over his shoulder and sits on the matching loveseat. It’s late, and there’s almost a firehouse feel to the night, domesticity picked right back up after an emergency. Five alarm is over, put the chili back on.

Bruce sips at the wine, knowing he’s dissociative and sketchy. “This is not a debriefing.”

“Well, I say it is.” Maria pulls up an ottoman and plucks down in front of him. “So let’s get it out of the way before dinner.”
Bruce slumps back into the couch, which feels as good as it looks, and perches the glass on his thigh. His stomach is growling, his eyes are burning, and Maria sits leaning forward with elbows on her knees.

He tells them about Barnes, about discussing the Red Room and his suspicions, about the maker of the arm. He tells them about Giselle’s hostile takeover of the kidnapping, about seizing what he thought was an opportunity for escape. He tells them about going to the warehouse, Giselle’s desperation at the mess her sister had made of things, fearing for her life, unable to see a way through or trust that anyone could help.

Bruce tells them about the long strange trip, the positive ease and friendliness melting into what he describes tersely as, “the opposite.” He tells them how it came down to his own last ditch plan to save the city by convincing Giselle to blow his brains out.

He tries to diffuse the tension by making a Get Smart joke, holding his finger and thumb a centimeter apart, “Missed it by that much.”

Dead silence as Maria gently takes his glass and sets it on the coffee table.

“Do me a favor.” Steve says, arms crossed and jaw muscle pulsing, “Don’t try that joke with Romanoff.”

Bruce lays out the whole day of best intentions and best laid plans of mice and men. He tells them about Marisol dropping down from the ceiling like divine intervention.

Words spent, he reaches out, grabs the glass and downs the wine. Steve stalks into the kitchen, taciturn.

“No bleed through from the Hulk this time?” Maria meets his eyes, shrewd.

He shakes his head. There was plenty of overlap beforehand, but once he let go it didn’t even feel like lost time.

Maria rubs her palms and stands, “So we know that even when you’re totally shut out, he’s still a halfway decent team player.”

She takes the glass from his nerveless fingers and goes into the kitchen long enough that he dozes in spite of himself. He wakes up under an afghan, weirdly hot and still bleary.

They eat around the coffee table because that’s apparently the deal when it’s Maria’s turn to cook. Bruce wants to apologize, for the trouble, for the awkwardness, for giving James Barnes an epidural hematoma, no matter how small. Steve looks at him with his Power Frown, but surprises him with an earnest, “I’m so relieved you’re okay.”
Cocoa Spiked with Dread

Peyton enters the elevator at the Trust floor, and rides up with Natasha to the Avengers common area. “I want you to understand, when I told you about Marisol, it wasn’t to get her in trouble.”

“JARVIS, hold at the destination.”

“Yes, Ms. Romanoff.” The elevator pauses at the floor, doors closed.

Natasha faces Peyton. Marisol has been with Fiona since she got back to the tower, being checked out and fed, and this is to be the debrief. But it’s not going to work if Peyton gets cold feet about the truths shared so far. She reassures, “Strictly off the record.”

Peyton acknowledges this, “We don’t like people to know about her. She’s scary, but she’s ours.”

Natasha feels a smile pull at the side of her mouth, “I get that. You’re protective of her.”

“She’s protective of us.” Peyton sighs, and the words flow out like she’s opened a sluice gate. “She follows us out at night, watches over us. She took out Gerrish because of what that woman put Aisha through, and that sociopath was starting on Mellie. Marisol takes care of things that need doing. Before she went into the system, when her auntie was working she’d cook for her cousins, standing on a chair making mac and cheese when she was four. Four. Marisol went into the basement last year, and when she came out she didn’t fear anything anymore. Whatever needs doing, she’ll just do it.”

“Protective like you would be of someone who can’t feel pain.”

“Yeah.” Peyton relaxes a bit, and Natasha pushes the door open button. “Fiona thinks it’s in there, the fear, just disconnected or misinterpreted.”

Fiona and Marisol sit at the kitchen table in the Avenger’s common area. Fiona is ostensibly taking Marisol’s pulse, touch lingering as she soothes, “Deep breath...now slowly out. How about now?”

“Softer, I guess.” The girl shrugs, eyes closed, “Things aren’t as sharp. I can’t feel my heartbeat in my chest anymore...”

Marisol still wears her broken glasses, though Devon in the Upper Floor Concierge office keeps sending Natasha text updates on the replacement pair he’s been sent to obtain.

She thinks the whole department is on the verge of committing seppuku over being infiltrated by Giselle, but at least they have the excuse of not having seen and dispatched her twin sister and still not recognizing her, differences of coloring and weight aside. Draga and Libuse Kadlecova were listed as identical twins in the files, but after two tracks of experimentation they looked more like cousins, and Libuse had been hiding in America for years, with the flawless accent to show for it.

Peyton has not sat down, and Natasha sees that she’s pulled a saucepan out and is rummaging in the pantry.

Debriefs have taken on an odd tone under Maria’s direction, more like aftercare. Natasha wonders if that’s just for the St. Potts School or across the board, if Not-SHIELD’s agents also get homemade hot cocoa around the kitchen table, rubbed down like thoroughbreds.
Fiona gets her started, asking her what happened from the time she decided to leave the tower. The kid’s voice has a clarity and focus that rivals half the junior mints Natasha’s been working with the past few months.

When Marisol describes inching across the gantry up near the ceiling of the warehouse, Natasha is grateful to have something warm and grounding in her hands.

“It took her a while to be convinced,” Marisol says, “It gave me time to get into position, get a good angle. She was looking for a better option.”

There’s no comfort to be found in that, in any of it really, aside from everyone walking away with minimal physical injuries, and roughly average psychological wounds. She allows herself a frisson of sympathy for Bruce, forbidding her from his own debriefing, and thinks maybe she was wrong about that one. It’s bad enough hearing second hand in a kid’s pragmatic voice.

She doesn’t want to contemplate how close she was to losing him, but her tactical mind spins out all the scenarios where Marisol’s timing is off, where she’s too late, or gets herself killed in front of Bruce, or by Bruce in the confusion. Anger burns so clear and bright it nearly burns out the choking grieving fear that’s clawing at her.

She is so far past compromised, there may not be another word for it besides love.

“He listened to me, when he changed, just like Dr. Banner does when you tell him something he doesn’t like that much. When he helped us last summer, and afterwards at the hotel,” Marisol considers, “it was like that. Only bigger. And much louder.”

“You could have been seriously harmed,” Natasha says, not as chastisement but simply to state the obvious. “It was a large risk to take. Did you have an alternate strategy if you hadn’t been able to disarm and secure the woman?”

“No.” Marisol tilts her head in consideration, “Well, I thought probably the Other Guy would help.” Bruce’s phrasing, sounding very precise in her mouth. “If he could. Hopefully. It’s not good to rely on something untested, I know, but he’d helped us before.”

The girls don’t tend to seek out physical comfort from the other adults in the tower, and in turn the adults are all very careful to adhere to the set boundaries, but when Peyton goes to escort Marisol back to their floor, Natasha puts her hand on Marisol’s shoulder. She doesn’t twitch or stiffen, just looks up at Natasha like she’s meeting the eyes of a peer. Perhaps she is. “Your work today was excellent. We have a much larger discussion in front of us about the surveillance of Barnes, but that’s a Trust-wide conversation. For now, thank you Marisol.”

Marisol nods, and digs under her sleeve for something up on her forearm. She hands Natasha Bruce’s wristwatch.

Natasha whispers again, “Thank you,” but can’t say anything more and retain her composure. She stands in the kitchen staring at nothing, trying to wind it all back in as she methodically polishes the bezel and fastens the watch on her wrist.

“Go the hell to bed, Romanoff.” Fiona calls from the bar where she’s doctoring a thermal cup of the last of the cocoa with some Maker’s Mark, “I’ll lock up.”

“Okay.” Natasha says, instead dropping onto the couch with a lukewarm cup nestled in her lap.

When Pepper comes later Natasha is only then realizing that she should have eaten something hours before, instead of sitting there cradling a cup of cold chocolate dregs. She could go back to the suite,
find something to stick between some bread. Moving requires a decision though, and she just can’t. She feels like she’s passing through fog, drained and vague, shrouded. She’s exhausted but she can’t picture sleeping. She’s desperate to see Bruce, and is equally desperate to avoid him. She can’t imagine what she’ll say, feels ill at the thought.

Pepper’s shoulders are slumped unevenly, her writing arm hitched higher, and her hair is messy. A wash of compassion takes Natasha as Pepper sits down beside her.

She gives in to instinct, touches the other woman’s arm gently. “You look beat,” she says, “you should go to bed.”

Pepper gives her a funny half smile. Under her eyes there are dark circles, and the dense field of freckles she usually conceals. “It’s actually closer to the time I get up than the time I go to sleep.”

Natasha swirls the dregs in her cup. “I figured someone should get some rest.”

“Too keyed up even if it were a decent hour. I just got back from the hospital. With Barnes.” Pepper says, and tilts her head toward upstairs. “He was a wreck when they brought him here, the gunshot looked like a scratch compared to his head, there was so much blood, even in the backseat—but after the CT they sent him home with instructions for mild concussion, gave him Tylenol and shooed us out of the ER. He just kinda followed me like a duckling, so I didn’t wait around for back-up, I drove him here myself and handed him off to Hill. She’s got a team with her, guarding Rogers’ suite.”

Pepper rubs circles over her brow, light fingertips working back into her hair.

“In a few hours he’d healed a cracked skull and a bruise on his brain they’d normally do surgery for, but it was indistinguishable from a bunch of old injuries, they kept asking him if he used to do mixed martial arts, but they didn’t even want to observe him. And he...I know that he shot you. He’s killed people, and he tried to kill Steve. I’ve read those files, Natasha. But he just looks like this stocky confused guy, like a less house-trained Steve Rogers, but that’s just not true, is it?”

Natasha shakes her head, abandoning thoughts of eating. “No. He’s not like Steve. Well, he was treated with a version of the serum, I think, but he’s not like Steve.”

Pepper gives up on the massage and just holds her head in her hands. “Tony’s in his workshop because he nearly got electrocuted again, and instead of going to bed, instead of resting, he’s figuring out how to prevent it. You look terrible, and you never look terrible. Clint has children - which I know because Tony is so outraged he can’t talk about anything else - and we’ve upped the number of assassins in this tower by two. That’s not even mentioning the fact that the children we’re housing were part of an unauthorized surveillance operation on an internationally sought after criminal, and that two of them, one still a minor child, participated in tactical operations tonight.”

She’s starting to sound hysterical, but Natasha is frankly impressed by the intel she’s gathered. Pepper shakes herself, and as if in answer to the unspoken question says, “JARVIS gave me a summary. He doesn’t like it when I feel left out. I think he considers my sanity important to keeping Tony alive.”

“I’m sorry?” Natasha isn’t sure what else to say.

“I’ll be fine.” Pepper’s laugh is ragged. “Are you okay? Has anyone even asked?”

She gives Natasha a look like she’s waiting for something, reciprocity or confession. She kind of hugs her arms around herself, like she’s not sure how to address this, but presses forward with the
courage and persistence that Natasha has always admired in her. “I know what it’s like,” she says. “To wait. To be left behind. To not know.”

Natasha tries to dismiss the concern, both to herself and to the other woman. “Pepper, this is the job-”

“No,” she says. “That part is not the job. I know the difference, because I don’t do the job, but I live the other part. When you have to wait for news, when you don’t know what’s happening, and it’s agony. And they get back, and it’s almost worse because you think how am I ever going to let him out of my sight again? But you know you have to, and how much worse must it be, for you? Because I imagine everything that can go wrong but I can sometimes convince myself it’s just my nightmares, that it’s fine. But you? You know exactly how wrong things can go.”

There is something in the quiet compassion of Pepper’s voice, the way that it seems to hurt her to say this, the way all of their pain seems to hurt her because she’s so human, so kind and bright and normal, full of empathy. Because she has opened a home to all of them. Pepper squeezes her upper arm, pulling the cup from her grip.

That kindness erodes what little composure Natasha has maintained and the dam starts to crack--and she doesn’t want to show that here, she has no idea what to do with Pepper’s empathy.

Pepper had been worried for all of them. Pepper had taken Steve and Barnes to the hospital, kicked Steve out to be Captain America, and brought the Winter Soldier and his discharge paperwork home on her own, knowing how dangerous he was, just...getting it done.

Pepper has been triaging damage all evening, and now she’s here, while her own partner is avoiding reality in his workshop, after her tower has been compromised, the children in it at risk, the adults struggling for solutions, but now she’s here asking after Natasha’s state of mind. Getting it done. The icy control, the inhabiting of mission identity, those strategies that Natasha’s relied on are melting, all of those banked emotions coalescing and slamming into her at once. She’s burning up, cheeks flushed, hands shaking.

“I need,” Natasha tries to breathe around the sting in her throat, standing up suddenly, heading to the elevator. “I think I need to get out of here. Go outside.” She doesn’t want to cry in the street. She doesn’t want to cry at all.

“I know.” Pepper ghosts her, soft hand on her shoulder blade, “It’s all good.”

“It’s so hot in here...” She just needs something to push against. She needs to be alone somewhere, let that ice fill her back up.

“JARVIS, express to the penthouse. Override access to the balcony.” Pepper pushes her into the elevator, and Natasha looks at the mug still in her hand to avoid the look in her eyes. “It’s gonna be okay.”

~*~

Natasha’s mind keeps racing a circuit.

Finding Bruce’s location, too late to find Bruce, thinking maybe Ross had learned subtlety.

Making the call on Ameena, leaning hard to see if she’d snap or bear up.

Seeing Marisol safe, perched on the Hulk’s shoulder.
That last choking half hour as they’d all dug through rubble, even Giselle, with the NYPD and NYFD, shifting half a warehouse of brick and concrete to find Tony and Bruce.

Stark limp and unnervingly still, Bruce’s face bruised and slack, skin blanched from the cold, grey with dust.

Marisol’s quiet voice describing getting into position, listening from above as Bruce talked Giselle into killing him so he wouldn’t hurt anyone.

She does not know if he closed his eyes when the barrel settled against his head, but she sees it. She can’t stop seeing it.

His grip on her arms, fierce and hot, words of love so sweet in his mouth, stinging like a slap as he banished her. Her own throat choked silent with anger and fear.

The bracing winter wind is helping, but only barely, numbing her skin and bleeding off her heat. JARVIS has kept the lights low so she can pace in the dark. Her teeth are chattering, and she doesn’t care. She can pretend she’s shivering from the cold and no other reason. She wraps her arms around herself. Her relief, and her rage, and her fear are so searing that only the bitterness of the elements can balance it out.

She doesn’t want to break things, she wants to crack herself open, feel this fevered brittleness shatter, and try to rebuild from there. She just don’t know how. She’s no longer shivering, numb and inert, the heat a fading memory.

The elevator opens, a glimpse of light in her peripheral vision, Bruce heading toward her with a sweater on but no coat, and it infuriates her, the lack of care he takes with himself. That halts her for a moment, as she lets it ricochet, and realizes they’ve always been fighting about the same thing.

Stop taking yourself for granted, stop walking in front of every bus, stop making me worry you won’t come home. I have a stake in you, your life is tied in with mine. Come home. Please, promise you’ll come home.

She understands now that it’s the promise.

Now he’s in front of her, bruised and worse for wear, the tail end of Hulk come down still tattering him at the edges. She can’t do anything more than fist her hands in his sweater and haul him tight against her. His arms wrap around her solid and strong, and she doesn’t cry, it has to be from the sere cold wind, because she’s not a woman who cries in relief.

Natasha pulls his mouth to hers, and he burrows his hands into her hair, and it’s a new kind of desperation from the ones they’ve thrown back and forth in the past. Those had been merely teasing taunts. She wants to claw open her skin, dig into his. Sharp salted tears slide between their lips to mingle with wine, the taste of exhaustion, the slick heat of need. He bites her lip, and she fists his hair, gripping so hard it has to hurt.

Bruce pulls back just enough to whisper her name, endearments, saying I love you, and please, and come inside, and he’s tugging her back through the doors, and she comes stumbling after.

The heat of the room is a shock, the cold packed hard within her skin, and she's light-headed from the contrast. She starts shivering again, the cold leeching out of her against the hot skin under his sweater, his insistent mouth, swollen lips and tongues tangling, knees buckling, and it doesn’t matter that she’s riding him down onto one of those ridiculous fluffy rugs, a soft snowy cousin of their own.
She strips his sweater off him and he darts his arms back down to pop open the fly on her jeans.

This isn’t arousal, this isn’t spent adrenaline or comedown. She wants to wound him as much as she wants to wrap around him, keep the world from touching him, take his blood heat into her, wrap her hands around his throat and her thighs around his hips.

His hands are inside her jeans with a death grip on her ass, and she shoves his chest down, rearing up on her knees to see him, really look at him, bruises and high color, her own damage reflected in his gaze, and then the lights go on.

JARVIS sounds embarrassed, announcing simply, “Mr. Stark,” as the elevator opens.

Bruce reacts first but is unhurried, sitting up and shifting her a little forward. She’s still straddling him but it looks less obscene, and she reaches over to snag his sweater off the ground.

Tony just walks by them and flaps a hand, “Carry on,” as he sails over to the bar.

She rolls off of Bruce, shimmying her jeans back in place, and slumps beside him against the white couch.

Tony comes back into the living room with three glasses and the good bourbon that she’d tasted earlier in the day, a thousand years ago.

Bruce pulls his sweater back over his head, trying to put his hair in some sort of order, but that’s a lost cause. She reaches up, but he intercepts her hand and threads his fingers with hers, pulling sleeve cuffs out of the way so her bare wrist curls over his.

Tony pauses in his pouring, “I probably shouldn’t offer you a depressant.”

“I can’t believe I have to say this to you,” Bruce shakes his head, “but alcohol is more complicated than that.”

“We could probably confiscate a blunt from downstairs—”

“I’m not stealing Ameena’s shit, and I don’t need a hit of paranoid.” Bruce takes the glass that’s already poured. “But thank you.”

“I’m at a loss here Bruce,” Tony continues pouring. “You look like ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag.”

Natasha takes the fuller glass and reassures him with a murmur and a hand squeeze, “Seven pounds at most.”

“I’d like to tell you about the plans we’ve made to just implant that goddamned phone in you,” Tony says to Bruce, “Or chide you for making us worry. Or talk about the fact that Barton has spawned and no one told me. Maybe even address the one armed elephant in the room downstairs.”

Natasha puts her head on Bruce’s shoulder, and just keeps watching Tony, feeling the echo of earlier in the weight of the rocks glass in her hand, the heady scent of that bourbon now spiked with the scent of Bruce next to her.

“But the truth is, I’m really glad you’re not dead and that the worst thing that happened was we killed some metal zoo animals and broke some buildings. Dammit, Bruce, don’t get kidnapped again. Our luck is terrible. I don’t know that we can eke out another happy ending.” Tony’s face goes white in horror. “Oh god, I think I made Romanoff cry.”
There are tears on her face, but they don’t actually mean anything. Bruce pulls his sleeve onto the heel of his hand and wipes at her cheeks.

“Oh, now stop it, you’re both leaking. That can’t be healthy.”

“Thank you Tony,” Bruce adds his own tears to the patch of sleeve, then drinks the bourbon in a long swallow. “I’m glad you’re okay. And I love you too.”

“Well, you know, as they say,” he gestures with his own glass, downing half of it, “ride the lightning.”

She pulls Bruce to his feet, and Stark kisses them both on the cheek before gruffly shooing them out. They press against each other in the elevator, and she holds on to it until they’re in front of the suite, catching Bruce before he can swipe the palm lock. She turns him to her, hand against his cheek.

“I want to hear whatever you want to tell me,” she says. “In whatever capacity you need me to be. I know…it’s not going to be easy, but I’ll listen. As the person you come home to, have come home to. As someone who loves you.”

**Veto Power**

The suite smells like spaghetti sauce, and Barnes and Hill sit at a clean dining room table set with two woven placemats but there’s not a trace of food.

Barnes hasn’t eaten since before he went to the Natural History Museum. It’s not the length of time, he’s gone days without food when on a mission where things had gone badly and he didn’t have the opportunity to grab any nutrition, but never after healing an injury as extensive as what Banner gave him. It’s left him feeling hollow, light, crystal sharp. He wonders if the arm is damaged, and if they will ever give it back to him.

He’s been living on borrowed time with it anyway. He’d been looking at prosthetics knowing that once it failed he didn’t have any chance of repair, he just didn’t expect to have it broken against his own skull. It’s the quiet ones you’ve gotta watch.

Hill is quiet. Barnes’ stomach rumbles, and she looks up from the tablet in her hand. “Do you even know how to delete your search history? Clear your cache?”

He licks his lips.

“You’re a rumor of a ghost in meatspace, but God, Barnes, your IP is a neon sign. I’m an intelligence operative and I feel like I’m taking unfair advantage of you knowing all this.”

He finds he doesn’t mind that much. Sure, he’d rather she didn’t know his taste in porn, or some of the more horrible mission details he’s researched, trying to make pieces of memory fit with actual history, but even that...he thinks it’s probably good to be an open book with the spymaster who might be able to give him a kind of sanctuary.

“Strangely,” Hill scrolls her tablet, “It is a compellingly effective defense, with regard to your intentions.”

The cat jumps onto the table as if sensing a situation that wasn’t quite awkward enough without a cat butt. Hill scratches behind the ears, eliciting a deep purr and a hunkering down, then works up a handful of scruff and lowers the dazed cat to the floor, “Step off, Ragamuffin. That’s a good kitty.”

“You named my cat?”
“Steve did.” Hill slides the tablet away. “And why not? You didn’t. Well, ‘cat’ is not a name.”

Barnes shifts in the chair, looking at her more sharply. He hadn’t referred to the cat at all when Banner was in the apartment, much less when Steve brought his squad. “You can’t know that from my laptop.”

“Nope.” She threads her fingers together and finally hits the tender spot. “Thing is, the nebulous and undefined legal situation you were in is now further complicated by your recent actions, which have blown your ability to fly completely under the radar. Currently, no charges have been pressed, and I get your motivations, but it shows an extreme lack of judgement. It also pissed off a lot of the people who’d otherwise be on your side. I mean, what do you want Barnes? I could hook you up with three squares in a federal pen before lunch, Howling Commando or no. Beats the night shift.”

“Says you.” Her look is as bland as if making small talk, slow blink of her dark blue eyes. He lets himself smile. “I just want to to have a life. Maybe a sandwich.”

“That it?”

“I don’t ever want to kill anyone again.”

She leans back in the chair and considers him for a long moment. “I’m your best bet at getting through this with some measure of freedom, but I have to know that you’re going to be worth sticking my neck out.”

Barnes thinks she’s not wrong. He also thinks she’s sleeping with Steve, who’d never turned his head for any woman less than extraordinary. She’d be the second one he’s aware of, in fact. All of the fears he’d had about Steve, compromised and kept in the dark and used...had been more about what had happened to him. “Potts mentioned reality testing techniques on the car ride over...”

Hill quirks her head. “You’d be okay with a total stranger pointing out possible delusions?”

A total stranger sharing Steve’s bed, his mission, comfortable in his kitchen. Barnes had been so wrong, but now he’s here, and whether he can stay or not, he can’t bear to leave. His charm is a rusty straight razor, but he tries it anyway. “Someone’s gotta keep Steve and I out of dutch.”

Hill brings him up short. “That’s not me, Barnes.”

He plants his elbow on the table, hand spread, forgetting for a moment to be deliberate and easy, dropping all of the Dave out of his manner and simply willing her to listen. “I need someone to trust. Someone who doesn’t care about me. Steve trusts you.”

She has normal human speed, so he has plenty of time between when she snags the fork and when she slams it into the table. One tine nearly touches the thin web of skin between his fingers. Her sly smile tells him she knows he could have stopped her, and that she’s pleased he didn’t.

“So you do have some impulse control. Maybe we can work together.” She rocks the fork back and forth to pull it free from the wood. He keeps his hand still and spread, and she offers him the fork, handle first. “If you actually talk to me, I can tell you when you’re fucking up.”

~*~

Natasha curls up on her side, arm around Bruce’s leg and head on his knee, her own feet tucked up under the pillow by his head so she can look at him and have her hands on him. The room is lit only by the bedside lamp at the lowest setting, over his shoulder so he can see her expression but it’s dark
enough for him to hide in. It’s the concession she’s offering.

“Serotonin stimulation has a trajectory,” he says, hands idly stroking her ankle. “It’s a pendulum, and I think, it’s like mixing your poisons, right? You take a mood altering substance that fires that many neurons, mix it with a type of dissociative issue…”

“I know how the chemical works,” she says. “And more or less, I know how you work. Stop waffling.”

He taps her foot a little to chastise.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Honestly. Keep going.”

“I’m not waffling, I guess I’m trying to talk out the chemistry. The biology. I don’t know. The science. I did a run of experiments with some of the mood stabilizers not that long after the accident, then a few years after as they developed better ones.”

Like the conversations they had at the beginning about triggers and things that help, none of what he tells her is in any record or dossier. It makes perfect sense that he would do this--self-medication is a classic strategy and he has the expertise and curiosity to make it an art--and also that he’d keep his results secret. He’s extending more trust, here in this bed, running through his findings like sketching out an abstract and doubling the number of people who know.

“Alcohol can ameliorate the anger, the antsiness, sometimes. If I push hard and fast past my tolerance and only do it rarely. At social levels, no effect. Weed increased paranoia, yet anxiolytics put him on a hair trigger. SSRIs, which give a more gentle dialing up of serotonin, just messed up sleep and sex.”

“Wasn’t this during your dry spell?”

“Yes, exactly. Try masturbating for two hours on the edge of orgasm and not being able to get there, see how that affects your issues with anger.” He sighs, “Silver lining, I made a small breakthrough in meditative breathing. Still not worth it, and that’s before the withdrawal, which was a few weeks of REM rebound, vomit and vertigo.”

“You think you’re in for that now?”

He shakes his head, “Maybe a week of the doldrums. Thor promised cookies.”

“Did anything help at all? Chemically?”

“Lithium helped a little, maybe, but any missed dosage or change in timing and the swing was so immediate that it ended up not being worth the risk. Especially since you need to check blood levels, and that’s a whole separate set of risks. Antihypertensives made me spacey, I couldn’t think, I couldn’t process. I couldn’t keep myself safe on the run, not even sure they did anything. Atypical antipsychotics helped, gave me an idea of what control felt like, but when they gave out it was...dark. He’d be...worse, less calculating, anguished somehow. I’d feel wrecked when I came back.”

“So what Barnes gave you felt like that, and you anticipated the swing back.”

“Yeah, but I expected the...aching rage I used to get before I...came to terms with it, I guess. That loathing, impotent kind of anger that makes you want to drive into a bridge abutment. The kind of thing that can't be fixed by sacrificing a few cups. I’d forgotten,” he fills his lungs slow, considering, "maybe couldn't really see to begin with, when I was in it...that there’s a place between rage and desperation. That quiet can be just as terrible."
She has seen him like that – when the sleep deficit is high, when missions have gone badly, when he’s been working too much, drowning in analysis and theory and neglecting human contact. But it’s been a long time since it’s been that bad - before the stand down protocol, really - when he was still largely isolating himself in the tower instead of using it as a base. When curiosity was his sole outlet for human contact, and he kept the rest of them aside from Tony at a respectful distance.

You didn’t work in the field and not recognize the aftereffects of trauma, but that didn’t mean she’d had any idea what to offer, or that she had anything to offer him in the first place, until she lit on the idea of the protocol, willing to try anything.

Even now she feels like her contributions when he’s struggling are often largely physical – touch, presence, checking in. Love, for what it’s worth, and she knows from the accounts of other agents that sometimes it’s not worth much, but it usually doesn’t make it worse. She is very, very determined to not make it worse.

Natasha eases further up his body, her head on his diaphragm, arm draped over his hip. He puts one hand on her waist underneath the shirt, stroking her hair back from her forehead with the other. The tightness in her chest, the hollow, stretched feeling still lingers, and she wants to burrow inside him, wrap him up so that she can physically press her need, and her love, her fear into him. Let the heat and texture of his skin ground her, proof of the life thrumming through him. The earlier hyperventilating desperation has worn off, but the need for tangible evidence of his presence still itches in her palms.

“It felt like clarity,” Bruce says, tilting his head up to the ceiling, “in the way that it sometimes does when your brain and body are lying to you. It felt like the only option I had left. Even then...all I could think of was how angry you’d be. How much I had to lose. I should have known I was wrong, when even that didn’t help.”

“You didn’t trust him to save you?” she asks, pressing her mouth to his ribs, rubbing her cheek against the taut stretched skin of his side.

“It seemed like it was up to me, to save everyone else,” he said. “It was a lie, but for a moment, as awful as it was, it felt good. It was a relief to have the choice.”

Her nails dig into his back at that and he reaches down, tugging her up so that she’s sprawled on top of him and he can put his arms around her.

She presses her thigh between his, cradles his neck in her hand. This is not about comfort, at least not on her part, but reassurance. She knows now that they’re different things.

“Besides,” he says softly, “it felt like I owed her something, a chance, maybe? An equal shot at not destroying more than she had to.”

She feels him breath in the circle of her arms, stroking down his back with one slow hand, and lets that be her acknowledgement that she understands. Her words are just as soft and paced when she finally speaks. “He knew, somehow. That it was a different situation, like with the gamma burn. He knew to hold fast, keep you safe. Keep the rest of us safe. Marisol, me, Tony. He took into account all that stuff, the way those things pass back and forth between you.”

“Trust,” he says. “I guess it comes down to trust.”

She presses her teeth against the muscle of his shoulder, biting down until he flinches, but he only holds her tighter.
“I promise,” he says, “to work on that.”

She closes her eyes, lets herself go heavy and lax across his body, and he lets her pin him down until she wakes close to dawn. She slides off of him to fit against his back, wrapping her arm around ribs that stretch with a sigh, hooking her fingers into the thatch over his heart.

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The dozen of them are flanked by Agent Yoshida and her second in command, as they file out of the elevator into SubSeven. Aisha has been mumbling into her earpiece all the way down, and finally addresses the group, “The Trust has override access now.”

A small panel next to the massive ARC doors opens, and one by one they lay their hands on the scanner plate, registering their intent: Mellie, Georgia, Catherine, Aisha, Sumi, Dom, Khadijah, Luz, Marisol, Ameena, Trinh, and finally Peyton. A larger panel in one of the doors slides open, revealing a pane of layered sapphire glass thick enough to make the inside of the ARC look like an aquarium.

The woman inside is nondescript, round face framed by honey brown hair in untidy waves. She’s in a thermal shirt and jeans, a uniform work shirt over top with a name patch that says Gigi. A padded jacket lays on the futon hastily pulled into the ARC when all their instruments were removed. She stands slowly, as if she aches, and the contusions and swelling peeking from under her bandages show the uneven accelerated healing that’s an unfaakeable badge of kinship.

Gigi looks at them, nodding to herself. Her voice is thick and nasal from Marisol breaking her nose. “I see now why Madame fell.”

Khadijah crosses her arms, unimpressed. Mellie’s eyes are keen, possibly already working on her impression or trying to discern any trace of Czech accent.

“When I heard about Texas, it seemed like a lucky break, like when Draga and I were disposed of. Romanoff had come like a vengeful angel and you’d made the most of it. But seeing all of you shoulder to shoulder…it was one of you who took her down, wasn’t it?”

“Short answer, yes,” Georgia waves her hand, interrupting Gigi’s study of them all. “We’re all fucking Spartacus.”

“Sorry about your sister,” Catherine prefaces. “But we’re not discussing Denton.”

Trinh says, “Maybe later we’ll discuss Prague.”

“Or the Craftsman.” Luz adds.

“First, we need information.” Khadijah takes a step closer to the window. Sumi and Dom stand silent at the edges, watching the woman from each side. They are the most sensitive, the best able to read people, even people trained by Kudrin to be smooth and cold as marble. From the beginning they had vouched for who could be trusted and who couldn’t. Dom had been the one who caught that Trinh had gone from suicidal thoughts to making a plan and sent Ameena to talk her back from the edge, and those talks are when their focus shifted from survival to coup. Sumi was their peacemaker, emotional translator, mediator. “A lot rides on you being truthful with us.”

Gigi studies the lot of them again, raising her chin to bare her throat and opening her arms, showing her palms and the bright edges of bluebirds. “What else can I lose?”

Peyton asks about her infiltration of the tower. “I placed myself here right after the SHIELD datadump went live. I suspected what Romanoff started out as, but I’d been in the city for the Battle
of New York. I wanted to know if I was right, and how someone like that had come out from under Kudrin’s thumb.”

Ameena asks about her surveillance of Barnes. “Barnes was a lucky break, I saw him watching Captain Rogers. I got him a job farther from the tower, to see if he’d take it or if his goals were more short-term. Then I just wanted to figure what the hell his deal was, this strange civilian life he was putting together. Then, when Draga started shooting at hornets’ nests, it was good to have another potential asset at hand if it splashed back to me.”

Gigi runs her fingers through her hair. “All of my assets exploded in my face, and I am here until I am disposed of once more.” She laughs, “Draga would tell me, a gun in the face is easier to handle than a knife in the back. I thought, what does she know? She’s the one who got the strength, I got the strategy. I think we both just got screwed.”

She paces away from the window, then comes back. Khadijah asks about Draga.

Gigi repeats what she’s already told Hill and Romanoff, what she knows about the Investors who’d financed Kudrin’s work, how she’d fled Europe the moment she was discarded while Draga stayed in their shadow, stashed like a seldom-used tool. “They gave her a sop, a clerical job she barely bothered to show up for until they hired Radek.”

Romantic Radek, the reason Draga took that last job in the first place, for the money to walk away and start a normal life with Radek.

“But to do it, they had to open up the books for her. She did not take it well. Draga, she was the kind of person where if a little is good, more is always better. She wanted to burn everything down. I couldn’t keep her sane when we shared a bedroom and a nightmare; I knew all I could do from across an ocean was...keep her from coming here.”

Later that night Aisha is able to hack into the analysis file that Hill and the Avengers are putting together on Libuse Kadlecova, though JARVIS regretfully shuts her down before she can crack into the one on Barnes.

They sprawl out in the common area of the Trust floor, pouring over and analyzing SMS logs, financial records, internet activity, interviews with co-workers both in the tower and at the produce distributor, a thorough search and inventory of her flat—it all painted a picture of a someone slowly fraying even before Draga had started imploding. Gigi and Giselle each worked full time, which allowed Libuse to afford to live alone in a small efficiency less than an hour away, but also left her precious little time for sleep after two cover changes and commutes.

She’d done her damnedest to reassure Draga that the Trust girls were a failed experiment, damaged instead of enhanced, and that Romanova was in it for the charity and self-flagellation.

*Fine, come take out a bunch of disabled children if you think that’s wise, one translated email chided, give your real targets more time to hide and regroup.*

Peyton opens the email attachment, a highly altered version of her neurological report. She stands and strides over to where Trinh is sitting on the kitchen counter. She shoves the tablet at her and quietly demands, “Explain what it says.”

Trinh swallows her guilt and reads out a listing of injuries and loss of function, that clear voice marred at the end with checked tears.

“Frame it, Trinh. Put it on your wall.” Peyton says, “That’s what you kept from happening to me in
Denton.”
When Your Past and Future Come Knocking

Bruce would have sworn they’d just gone to sleep, even though light is coming in the window, and the clock confirms that it’s nearly 7 a.m.; but Natasha isn’t in bed and low voices murmur on the other side of the bedroom door.

If it had been something secretive, she would have left the suite. He pulls on the discarded pyjama pants and t-shirt from what feels like days ago, and blearily makes his way out to the sitting room. His muscles creak, a buildup of lactic acid and a deficit of rest, but he knows he can’t go back to sleep yet.

Natasha sits at the bar with Nate on her lap, offering him a green plastic spoon of something from a small bowl while Clint drinks coffee, leaning on the other side of the counter.

He’s still raw with emotion and fatigue, and he has to dig the heels of his hands into his eyes at the sight of her, sleep mussed and worn with dark circles under her eyes and still so lovely, arm around Nate; the gift of waking up in their bed, of loving her, of loving everyone in this room.

Clint lifts his coffee cup at Bruce, and reaches over to snag the Chemex and another cup while Bruce moves to stand behind Natasha. He rubs his thumb over the taut tendons of her neck, presses his mouth against her bare shoulder, gentle fingers over Nate’s soft, downy head. She brushes her palm against his cheek.

He takes the coffee Clint hands him and goes to the end of the counter, asking, “There a reason why we’re not still in bed?”

“Kid gets up, everyone gets up,” Clint says.

“I was awake,” Natasha adds, “and everyone else got their baby fix last night. I figured it was my turn.”

“Laura’s in Arizona supervising a project. Her partner was supposed to go, but her boy’s got mono. So my kids are in Long Island, and Nate and I are here. We’ll head back tonight after we get her at the airport.”

“So basically my abduction coincided perfectly with your availability?”

“Happy to help, doc.”

“Thanks Barton.”

Nate is now covered in malty-smelling cereal which he’s ceased eating in favor of gleefully gumming it out of his mouth. Natasha pushes away the bowl, and cleans his face gently while Barton finishes off the cereal to a raised eyebrow. “Kids teach you to eat what’s in front of you whenever you get the chance.”

“I thought the army taught you that,” Natasha says, wiping her fingers off.

“Not that different,” Clint says with a shrug, “at least in the early years. Less shooting with kids, but you run the risk of shitsocks.”
Natasha just nods gravely, leaving Bruce to say, “Dare I ask?”

“Sometimes it comes out with such force it shoots down the pant legs and right into the socks.” Clint grins at Nate, who gives him a full gummy grin back. “Baby’s a whole tear-down at that point, right son?”

“I shouldn’t have asked.” Bruce has a scrape along the back of his neck from the rubble extraction. Their fumbling desperation the night before had opened it up again and it itches. He tries not to scratch. “So about the house guests.”

“Barnes is gonna be a long exercise in therapy and legal red tape, and Giselle...Gigi, Libby? I don’t even know what to call her, but she’s her own bag of crazy and damaged. So where does that leave us?” Clint asks.

Natasha stands up, Nate on her hip, to pace a little. “Steve owes me a conversation. I called Barnes being in the city, but he didn’t cop to it. Clearly, he knew more than he wanted to share.”

Bruce gives in, fingers rubbing against the scratch. “So, yeah. About that.”

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Bucky recuperates in the guest room, a patchwork cat curled up and lodged in his flesh armpit. Maria is asleep in his bedroom, her team in shifts on stand-by. Steve takes watch on the blue couch, not quite sure what to do, the apex of a triangle stretching between two points--his past and his present, with no sense of his future.

The hospital had sent Bucky home with post-concussion instructions that boiled down to watchful waiting with some periodic checks. Steve gets that any other interaction would be hovering, and he’s unsure of his welcome. He’d been so certain the previous night, but that was before sitting through Maria’s debrief with Bruce, before seeing the man passed out on his couch, banged up and so damned weary and yet uninterested in pressing any charges. Before spending a night checking on Bucky every two hours, and having the long (short) night to think.

The knock on the door of the suite is expected. Steve opens the door on a reckoning of sorts.

“Allright, Rogers,” Natasha has her arms crossed, Clint is next to her with a dozing infant strapped to his chest like armor, although based on the look Natasha is sporting, Steve is the one who might need the protection. “You want to talk this out, or do want to fight about it?”

“Nat,” Clint says in a tone that Steve only hears between the two of them, coded, and he lays a hand on Natasha’s shoulder. It’s very clear to Steve that he is there as an intermediary.

He gestures them in, and looks down at Clint’s kid. “I think maybe we should talk this out as a team.” Natasha is bristling, and Steve does understand. This isn’t professional outrage or anger. It’s personal, not just the position his silence put them in, but his decision to keep this secret from her after what she’d risked to help him in the first place.

She’d handed him a file a year ago as a peace offering, as a gesture of friendship. She’d handed him a life, Bucky’s life, or this version of it, and gone on to make her own.

“I didn’t know how to tell you,” he begins. “Because I didn’t know what to do.”

“I understand secrets, Steve,” she says quietly, “I even knew, on some level, that you were keeping him a secret until you were ready. But you let it get in the way of your judgement. You knew Barnes was aware of you, watching you, and you sent him a goddamned signal that you knew, a fucking
sign of approval.”

Her words hit like punches, the ragged edge to her voice more punishing than anger, a view of the violence she keeps contained, cold enough to crack metal. Clint keeps his hand on her shoulder, knuckles white. He doesn’t usually touch her in public, no one does. Nate twitches in his carrier, little burbling whimpers, spinning off from the tension.

“So, what portion of culpability do you assume? He was out there, unstable, and you knew, and you didn’t say a thing.”

Steve doesn’t lie except to himself, and he cannot lie to her now. “It...he was mine. It was my choice, and he wasn’t hurting anyone…”

Natasha shrugs out of Clint’s grip to pace in a tight circle. He cradles the baby’s rump instead, strolling into the living room like he’s come to have tea. There’s a soft snick of the bedroom door opening and he hears Maria murmuring to Clint.

“I didn’t know what to do that wouldn’t make it far worse.” Steve presses, needing Natasha to understand. “Or take the decision out of my hands.”

“I should have. I should have pushed you on this.” She turns back to him, flushed in a way that even battle doesn’t always do. “He’s been in this tower, Steve. Doing recon. He’s been on the Trust floor. More than once. Did you know that?”

Steve didn’t.

He drops back down onto the couch, chilled. Bruce had talked about Bucky’s obsession with the girls, with saving them from a new version of the Red Room.

“He drew those conclusions from bad data, Steve. Intelligence is complicated if you don’t have all the context, and he’s barely working within the context of this century. What if, instead of trying to keep the girls from being victimized, he’d defaulted to other orders?”

Steve is quiet. “He didn’t.”

She explodes, “You couldn’t know that!”

“Nat--”

“--and you didn’t give anyone the option of questioning your judgement or your choices, or even being another voice. You didn’t tell us because you didn’t want that counterpoint. You kept us in the dark because you thought you were getting what you wanted.”

“And you don’t?” Steve stands up at that, getting in her face. The hypocrisy is astonishing and he’s sick of holding back. “You don’t do the same goddamned thing?”

She is so small, her arms bare, and while he still riles at looming over a woman, even Natasha, the unfairness stings. He’s pushed her, confronted her, but he’s never yelled at her like this, called her on the bullshit she asks him to swallow.

“You follow your own agenda, your own orders, your own missions. Even working together, you listen to your judgement before you trust mine. You do whatever the fuck you want and expect the rest of us to just deal with it, accept it.”

She reels back from that. “That’s not the same.”
“It is the same. When you put yourself in danger, that puts the rest of us in danger. You listen to your instincts, and sure most of the time they’re right, but sometimes you’re wrong. One of these days you’re going to be wrong and someone’s going to fucking get hurt, get killed.”

She raises up on her toes, elbow pulled back like she’s itching to throw a punch.

Steve would almost welcome it. From the time he was small he’d preferred a fist in the face to the anger and fear and shame, the unfairness, coming up short when people were counting on him. He pushes harder, “So don’t lecture me about doing what I want, when you do the same damned thing and I’m just supposed to accept it, we’re all just supposed to fucking accept it! Do you know how that feels?”

He watches, hurt and aching, with a dawning awe as she just snaps it off, takes all of the anger, the outrage and fear, and pulls it back in until she’s simply still, perfect marble, absolutely unreadable.

“Nat, don’t,” Clint says from the couch, leaning forward, ready to get up, “don’t do that.”

The anger drains out of Steve in a rush, and he wants to scrub at his face like a kid. She’s his friend. He loves her. He doesn’t want her to shut him out like this. He’d rather be yelled at, a thousand times over. He knows what to do with anger, but this is just ice. “Natasha,” he says, “c’mon. Please…”

“No, you’re right,” she says, voice completely even and it cuts at him. “You’re right, and sometimes, I am wrong. But I’m not wrong about this. I have been chasing the fallout of trauma all over Eastern Europe and I know what it looks like--assets abandoned, left without direction. It’s dangerous. Barnes is dangerous.”

She’s unflinching, unforgiving, like shards of broken porcelain. Steve slumps into himself, walks away from her to sit next to Clint on the couch. Nate is snugged on Clint’s lap, examining footie-covered toes like they are the greatest thing in the world. Maria hangs back in the doorway in her running clothes.

Steve tuns his focus on the baby so he doesn’t have to look at the absence of Natasha even as she stands before him.

“I was wrong about keeping Bucky a secret,” he says finally. “But I’m not wrong about who he is. And I’m not going to continue to fight with you about this. I’m sorry about what happened. And if things had gone the other way, I would never have forgiven myself.”

Natasha sucks in a breath at that. “And that would have meant less than nothing--”

“Romanoff,” Maria’s voice is brisk, interrupting before Natasha can say anything more and Steve is suddenly so grateful for her, not for stepping in but for being his friend, for her steadiness, her command of a situation. “Let’s go.”

She tosses a set of hand wraps to Natasha, who catches them without looking.

“Come on. We can beat something into submission and I’ll tell you about your protege.”

Natasha exchanges a glance with Clint, and for a second, Steve thinks she’s going to refuse. But she nods at Maria and strides out of the suite. Steve sinks back into the couch. He keeps looking at the baby, and finally Barton says, “Go ahead, pick him up. He’s been remarkably chill about having his entire routine upended. I think he likes hanging in the lap of luxury and staring at weirdos.”

He’s very tiny in Steve’s big hands, and kicks out, eyes wide and dubious. “I know how you feel kid.”

“You gotta remember,” Barton’s voice is as nonchalant as ever, and at first Steve thinks he’s still
talking about the baby, “she’s still figuring out what it means to have something to lose.”

Steve keeps gently bouncing Nate. “Then she should understand where I’m coming from.”

Barton hums a little. “Maybe that’s the issue. You two are going to have to work that out. But Steve, I feel like I can say this with some authority: don’t underestimate the trauma that Barnes has gone through. Even if he’s still in there, and I trust you that you think he is. Even if he’s still there, it’s not all he is anymore. His judgement is always going to be influenced by what happened.”

Steve makes a noise of protest, “I know what I’m doing…” he starts, but Clint waves him off.

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m just saying, be careful. Extend trust if you need to, but don’t…be blinded into seeing what you want to see. He had options -- he clearly knew where you were, he could have reached out to you, could have asked about the Trust. Instead, he planned and implemented a dangerous op based on interrogation and an attempt to turn an asset. When pushed he fell back on his training, and put a whole bunch of innocent people at great risk.”

Steve nods, but he also bristles against the assumption. “You’re the one who brought Natasha in. How can you honestly lecture me about this?”

“When I recruited Nat, I had a whole organization dedicated to intelligence and security behind me. I was stupid enough to think I was doing something humane, giving her a chance at another life.”

“You were.”

Barton laughs, and it’s harsh and self-directed. “Natasha is my family. I don’t have any regrets. But the risk I took on behalf of others? Makes my skin crawl now.”

He watches Barton’s fingers skim along the little limbs, soothing.

“I thought I was being noble. But that was it, I wanted to think of myself as noble. I’d just had a kid. I wanted to be the kind of father who was a good man, believed people were redeemable, someone who lived it. I wanted my legacy to be bigger than my ability to kill people from a distance. I’m glad I did it because it worked out, and if I’d been wrong, I would have been too dead for regrets anyway. But it’s moments like this where I can savor the breathtaking ignorance of my youth.”

**Snatching the Pebble from the Master**

Trinh is in the lab, sitting at Bruce’s station while Tony and Luz work companionably on the other side. It’s technically a school day, the girls should be in class, but Bruce isn’t going to make an issue out of it.

Luz gives him a nod. She’s got one of Johannes’ arms on a workbench and is creating a circuit chart from it. Tony glances up at him from his own arm, a piece of his suit that he’s carefully disassembling.

“I’m good with electricity,” he says as a greeting, “but I have a feeling that wearing a metal suit powered by a nuclear fusion reactor is probably always going to be a war between me and the lightning, no matter the number of modifications.”

He grins at Tony. “You always reach for the stars, though.”

“Ad astra,” he grins back, "ad nauseum.”

Trinh is ostensibly there for mouse care, and some analysis runs. He lets her work as he idly checks
his own samples. Giselle had agreed to provide a blood sample and Fiona had surreptitiously slipped him a spectrum analysis she’d pulled from Bucky the night before.

There’s a lot of data and Bruce is too tired to interpret any of it, but he catalogues and charts, and runs Giselle’s sample to compare to Dragana’s. Mostly, he doesn’t want to get caught up in whatever Natasha and Steve are hashing out. He feels like he might have thrown Steve under a bus, but then he’d ended his day under a building in part because of Steve’s secrets, so he feels just a tiny bit vindicated. Or maybe that’s the exhaustion and pissiness talking.

After about half an hour, Trinh clears her throat. He looks up, notices that Luz has put down her tools and pushed the goggles onto her forehead to look at him as well.

“We, uh,” she glances at Luz, who looks grim, but nods in encouragement. “We made a bad call,” she says. “To keep Creepo...”


Trinh continues, “To keep our surveillance of Sergeant Barnes a secret. You’ve trusted us here, given us opportunities...”

“We made a decision,” Luz tags in, “and we made it for good reasons, but we didn’t take into consideration that there were other ramifications. We should have. But we protect our own first. We thought that was what we were doing.”

Trinh finishes, so serious that Bruce has to grip the table to withstand the look on her face, the weight of responsibility, of all she has weathered, of all they’ve done. “We neglected to consider that you,” she gestures to Bruce and to Tony. “Are also ours to protect.”

“You’re children.” Tony’s voice sounds rough, harsher than Bruce has ever heard it, “Your job is to be protected, not the other way around.”

“Then we protect each other,” Luz says, like that settles it.

Tony’s jaw muscle looks like it’s about to pop free, but he finally just nods once, sharply.

Bruce has to look down, scrub at his face, disturbed and so touched by these girls. Shaken. Moved.

His own voice sounds very distant when he says, “Thank you.”

~*~

Maria has gone ahead and wrapped her knuckles. Natasha had been silent on the elevator ride down, body as loose and relaxed as ever. Maria has over a decade of training as a handler, as a spy, as a cypher herself, but Romanoff has always been something else entirely, no matter how much they wanted to act like she was within the scope of their understanding.

Maria loves her job, but ultimately it’s still a job - vocation, yes, and even avocation, but she could step away from it.

She wonders if Natasha has ever understood that option, the job woven into her literal DNA. A year ago, she might have said no, but lately...there are traces of human in the curve of her smile, in the way her eyes track those around her with something like fondness. Not every look freezes the blood. Maria considers the mouth guard in her hand.

“I’m not going to hit you in the face.” Romanoff has secured her own wraps, and her feet are bare. She gives Maria this warm rich smile that belies everything that she’d just been contemplating; it’s a
smile that’s asking for blood.

“You say that now…” Maria takes an account of the bruises peeking out of the black tank top Natasha is wearing, how she stretches slower and longer than usual. Last night’s efforts had been particularly grueling, and Maria doesn’t want to push her operative. But she’s not sure what else to offer. Debriefing isn’t just information retrieval, it’s also asset management. No one has ever been able to do the latter with Natasha aside from Fury. He’d always treated her like the crown jewel in his arsenal, allowing her free reign in certain realms and setting hard boundaries in others, seemingly by whim but one couldn’t argue with his results.

Maria gives her tight hamstrings another stretch while Natasha contorts her body effortlessly, then stands up, rolling on her toes. They slip through the ropes into the ring. “Can we just go through some blocks and feints, first?”

“I thought you wanted to fight.”

“I wanted to keep you and Steve from going at it in his living room. Thought you might need another outlet, but I’ve lost my hubris. I don’t want my ass handed to me, particularly. I’m out of practice, and it has been one motherfucker of a week.”

“Don’t lie to me Maria.” Natasha snorts. “You still do katas every morning, and even the juniors in Prague get all dreamy at your marksmanship ratings.”

“Okay sure,” she shrugs, “but Steve won’t spar with me anymore since we started fucking--he’s such a baby sometimes, it’s not like he didn’t hold back before. And honestly, SI security takes up more time than I could have imagined, coupled with the rest. I still run and lift, but I’d fail any SHIELD upper level hand to hand.” She grins then, “I’d still wale on a CIA flunkee though.”

It’s a lot of talk. Of course she still trains, and she has some of her own frustrations to work out, but she’s settled on conciliation as a tactic, which feels both like condescension and kindness.

“You ever want someone willing to beat the shit out of you, let me know.” They start slow, uppercuts and jabs and elbows. Natasha doesn’t flinch when their ulnas connect, she doesn’t register anything.

“So,” Romanoff breathes like this is cocktail conversation, “how come Bruce gets wine and Bolognese, and I get Krav Maga?”

“Well, aside from it being leftovers,” Maria is working harder to match the conversational tone, “I’m not actually debriefing you, just trying not to get punched. Plus he’s a delicate flower and you’re a professional.”

That actually makes Romanoff snort with laughter, and aim an elbow at Maria’s side that she’s not quite quick enough to block completely.

“This is stupid.” Maria says, moves to pull a kick shield from the wall and shoves it at Natasha. “Are you punishing me or yourself?”

Natasha rolls her eyes and holds the padding up without answering, and it’s a relief to slam a kick into it, an equal relief when the smaller woman holds true and steady.

“Ameena,” Maria starts, sees just a hint of tension in Natasha’s stance. “Flying colors. Yoshida reported that she followed orders, acted responsibly, was respectful and engaged.”

Natasha pulls back her mouth, contained pleasure.
“All that effort to pull her out of a life of violence, and the best we can do is offer it to her in a
structured environment.”

“Story of my life, Hill,” Romanoff says, but Maria thinks she means it, and something loosens in her
a little.

They continue in silence, punctuated by the thunk of limbs against padding, switching so Natasha
can kick. She’s more limber than Maria, so much controlled power. Maria is skilled, talented even,
and she’s worked hard to stay agile, but Romanoff’s movements are art. Even through the padding
the blows are searing. Maria finally calls time when her arms start to shake, sweat pouring off them
both.

Maria lays back on the mat, belly exposed like a dog because she’s perfecting her management
techniques.

Natasha stretches her hip flexors in a complicated bend that makes Maria wince.

“I’m mad at Steve, too,” she admits, both to the air and to Natasha. It’s become so complicated for
something that had been, initially, so easy. It’s the kind of conversation she’d have with a friend,
with her middle brother if the topic hadn’t been her sex life, or Steve himself if it had been a normal
relationship, casual and satisfying. But everything about these people made things complicated. Even
friendship. So she’s hashing out her mixed feelings with a woman who doesn’t actually talk about
her feelings. Ever.

Still, Maria presses forward, less concerned with talking emotions than treating Romanoff like a
person who has them too. It’s a new idea. She’s full of them this week.

“It doesn’t do any good though, being mad. He’s torn up about how he handled this, and it’s just
frankly too much to ask him to look at this logically, or to stay angry at him for wanting something so
badly. I’m not sure anyone realizes how few things Steve allows himself to want.”

Natasha raises a shoulder like she’s familiar with the concept.

“I’m not saying get over it, or forgive him, or even that I think Barnes shouldn’t be arrested.
That’s...going to be a long row to hoe to even figure out. I’m just saying it takes a lot of energy to
stay angry at Steven Rogers. You have to decide if it’s worth it.”

Natasha sighs, knees improbably apart, bending forward to press her forehead to the soles of her feet.

“I haven’t decided yet for myself, although I’m leaning towards getting the hell over it.” Maria grabs
two towels and tosses one over, using her own as leverage to stretch her hinky calf.

Natasha rolls up one vertebra at a time, but when she finally speaks, it’s not at all what Maria
expected. “When Clint first brought me in, I had to figure out what he wanted. What SHIELD
wanted, what Nick did. I’ve always been good at that, and the work was easy. Figuring out how to
do it as a life, that was harder. So I watched you, to see out how it all worked.”

Maria is very careful to not drop her gaze as Natasha continues, softly.

“I watched what you did to see what was important to someone who chose this life, who came up
within it, who didn’t start out damaged. I determined what was important in this world,
professionally, from you: camaraderie, and duty, comportment while still retaining self and
personhood, how to be a person in the midst of all of the intrigue and damage and missions. The
inevitable types of compromise and loss. You’re a good leader, Maria. You were a good example.”
Maria is a little stunned, suddenly aware of how hot her hands are inside the wraps.

“So I wanted to say thank you. For being that. For showing me that.”

She doesn’t like being caught out, but saying, “You’re welcome” feels inadequate and awkward.

Natasha holds the towel tight in her fists and keeps talking. “When I dumped the SHIELD data, I knew I was exposing myself, and others. But I couldn’t allow myself to think beyond the immediate need, and I don’t think there was another choice. But for the complications, the harm it’s caused you and other people, I want to say I’m sorry.”

Maria very carefully starts unwinding her wraps. “Okay,” she says. “For what it’s worth, I don’t blame you for that. I don’t think anyone does. Not anymore. But seriously, what’s driving this?”

Natasha stretches over her thighs, folding in half, gripping the soles of her feet.

“Mentorship,” she says finally, like it’s been working its way through her brain and finally teased itself out into the light. “It’s complicated, waking up out of a life you only half remember, stepping back into the world with normal rules. Calculating how to use skills gained in violence to be a force of good in the world. As much as I want to, I can’t dismiss the idea that Barnes has the capacity to be a force of good any more than I can look at Ameena, or Trinh, or Aisha or Mellie and say that they are only the sum of their damage, that they’re not capable of taking that damage and making it beautiful.”

“You know it’s possible.” Maria looks at her shrewdly. “You did it yourself.”

Natasha nods. “But I had help.”

Maria rises to her feet, steps close to Natasha and offers her hand, “Now we get to see if that can scale. More damage, but also more help.”

Natasha pauses, and Maria lets her hand drift back to her side. “I’m not angry with Steve for withholding information, but for letting his fears get in the way of his judgement. He knows better. But it’s just... we’re all so fucking fallible. Love can be so brutally dangerous to those around us, and I used to think the answer was just not giving in to it, or needing it. That it was weakness.”

Maria throws her towel at Natasha’s head, not surprised when she catches it out of the air like an afterthought as she rolls easily to her feet. “And now?”

“Now I think, what’s the fucking point without it? And who the hell am I to say or feel that, but there you go.”
Close to Home

The group assembled at the dining table of the common area are an illustration of disheveled fatigue. Pepper is the sole one who looks remotely professional, but even if they were all in uniforms instead of a collection of pajamas and workout clothes, their body language alone exudes the weariness of a shot waistband.

Even Thor looks discombobulated. There’s one plateful of cookies in the middle of the table, but no one reaches for them.

“Look,” Tony shuffles the ice cubes in his glass, “maybe we don’t make a decision today, but it needs to be sooner rather than later. You’ve all had a chance to review what Hill's team and JARVIS have been able to recover of our two special guests’s activities and whereabouts for the last year or so, right on up to the grand finale the other day. So let’s put the metaphorical cards on the table, pros and cons, pluses and minuses. Thinking outside the box, or in the box, or keeping them in a box.”

He looks at Pepper, “And you say I never pay attention in board meetings.”

She doesn’t even roll her eyes, but she does nod at Tony’s words.

“We need to make a decision about Sergeant Barnes, and about,” she pauses, “Giselle Urbanek--Libuse Kadlecova. Whatever her name is. I think that we need to vote. I will vote as the public face of Stark Industries and Tony will vote as the owner, technically, of this property. We talked about that, and it seems fair since he lives here more often than I do. Bruce gets a separate vote since he was the one kidnapped. The Trust will get a vote as well.” She nods to Khadijah. “Maria will vote representing...whatever it is that you’ve all decided to call notSHIELD. That leaves Natasha, Steve, Clint and Thor to vote as a collective for the team.”

Bruce looks across the table at Natasha. Her cheeks are flushed, and she has this blank seriousness to her that he kind of hates, but also recognizes as what she needs right now.

He takes a cookie, as a gesture more than anything else. “I think we need a bigger conversation about this, time to at least speak with Libuse, and Barnes.”

“Not at gunpoint.” Tony crunches a piece of ice.

“Regardless, I don’t like the idea of turning them over to the government. This tower is already housing potential killers who are trying to reform, to do better, be better. If it’s possible to extend that further, if they want the opportunity, than I have to vote yes. We are the embodiment of reaching beyond what was done to us. I think we can extend that to these people.”

He doesn’t look at Steve or Tony or Clint, just Natasha. She’s lost the blankness, at least enough to give him a small version of that hot smile that lights him up. Nothing else matters right now. Later, it will. But not right now. There’s forgiveness in that smile, for the new killers in the fold.

“Yes,” she says. “That’s my vote as well, or my quarter of a vote.”

“Forgiveness, and reformation,” Thor says, voice low and deep and rich, “If it’s possible, I can’t see how we could offer anything else.”
Khadijah looks at all of them, an equal at the table. “We talked about it already, and I know that legally we don’t have any options if you decide to turn her over to any of the relevant authorities, but we are willing to offer Libuse sanctuary with the Trust. She’s one of us, technically.”

Pepper scrubs at her eyes a little, looking down at her phone like there’s an answer there, and Natasha nods at Khadijah. “I’m willing to support that,” she says. “Depending on what she has to say. I won’t allow you to put yourselves in danger, but I won’t override a joint decision in any other circumstance.”

“Thank you,” Khadijah says, folding her hands as if resting her case. “The Trust abstains from the vote on Sergeant Barnes. We don’t feel like we have an objective position there.”

Tony’s laughter is just this side of hysterical, but the young woman keeps a completely straight face, until he wipes his eyes and says, “Fair enough.”

~*~

There’s spit-up in a plume down Natasha’s back when she comes back up to the suite after seeing Clint and Nate off, and she heads straight for the bathroom. While she’d scrubbed off the dust and blood the night before, she worked up a sweat sparring with Maria, and she just wants a soak.

She strips as the tub fills, adding her clothes to the pile near the vanity. There are no bubbles, no accoutrements, just sinking into a big puddle of hot water and flipping through last month’s battered SciAm. When she tosses the magazine in favor of simply staring at the tile, there’s a brassy jingle when it hits the pile of clothes.

Natasha runs the wrinkled pad of her thumb across the names, one on each side: ROMANO, FLAGSTAFF.

~*~

The tub is occupied when Bruce gets back to the suite, which is fine, he’s clean enough to just fall face first in bed, and probably it wouldn’t be safe to bathe alone this tired anyway. He half knocks, half pushes the door open slowly, just looking to connect, take a piss, brush his teeth.

“You’re really killing it with dirty talk.” Even the pleasant echo of the warm humid bathroom doesn’t smooth her voice out, dark commas tilting down from the corners of her eyes. She sits up and pauses, and he can see the hot water line where her pale skin turns bright pink. Natasha does not take a soakyp spa-like bath, she parboils herself in epsom salted water like a crab.

She looks like she’s mustering resolve, so he gives her until he’s done, then flicks the tub drain and pulls a towel from the bar. She hauls herself out, and by the hesitant way she moves he’s already snagging the jar of arnica balm.

That she lets him see her ache is a weird privilege.
She towels her hair, then walks naked toward the bed, steaming dry by the time she’s hit the sheets. Her fist is clenched against her belly as she sprawls out on her back.

Bruce dims the lights down low and fits himself on his side against her, ear nestled between her breasts, her neck cradled in one hand and her legs draped over his. She strokes her hand down his back and he hears her heart slow, her breathing even out as she plunges fingers into his hair and presses him against her chest.

He cups her fist, still against her belly, but she doesn’t interlace their fingers, doesn’t slide his hand lower. Instead she nudges his hand over, and opens her fingers so they press palm to palm.

In her hand, in his hand now too, is the keychain.

Natasha’s ribs are still, held breath. He strokes his fingers behind her ear to soothe, and her lungs hitch started again as he curls closer around her.

Bruce had banged it out on a whim with some of the crafting supplies left in the Barton’s guest room, to test the idea out, feel the weight. Ever since it’s ridden in his pockets, or tucked under his wallet when he empties them at night, close to his skin, a talisman always within reach. A promise he made to himself, but hasn’t been able to share.

The metal is hot from her skin, a throughline to all those times he’s pulled it out to rub between his fingers, the name swap she chose for them only half in jest, the letters blood warm.

It’s Tony’s voice in his ear asking, what do you want? like that’s a question he needs to answer, like the answer could have any bearing on reality. It’s Natasha telling him that she wants to be part of his decisions. It’s hope, and veto, and wrapping his hands around her thigh as she comes shuddering against him because she’s given him that power. It’s giggling in a frigid bed in Eastern Europe, and found families, and murderous wards; the casual abnormality that is their normal, and trusting in each other’s judgement even when it feels like biting down on tin.

She’s gone still again, waiting for him to respond.

You leap, he thinks, but not every leap is swapping a void for the embodiment of monstrous rage. Sometimes it’s a freefall into a firefight, and sometimes it’s ceding control to someone who will accept it as precious and vulnerable. Sometimes a leap is feting accomplishment, and the warmth of the best person you know, safe in your arms. So stop waiting, and fucking jump.

He takes the keychain from her hand, sliding it over his index finger and rubbing his thumb against the stamped names in habitual motion.

Bruce shifts up on his elbow to face her, sliding skin against skin. She combs her fingers into his hair, nails on his scalp, and he leans in to kiss the hollow of her throat. Her arm strokes around his ribs. She is so damnably, astonishingly beautiful, even with circles under her eyes, weariness etched into the lines around her mouth.

“I love you,” he says, “you know that.”

Natasha nods, teeth hard against her bottom lip, like she’s nervous and trying to bite it away.

“I didn’t think I’d ever love anybody again. Not just for lack of opportunity, but I didn’t think,” he considers how to say this. “The first time I let myself love someone, I couldn’t help it. Like a war I was fighting with myself. I couldn’t ever really look beyond my research...or my past...all of the things I was scared of becoming. Then the accident happened, and I was truly alone. Now...I see how much I’d isolated myself, even before. When I didn’t have to. How I’d made even loving
someone else a lonely thing.”

She watches him with that infinite reserve of patience she can tap into, that look that can feel like a wall or like an embrace, depending which side you’re on. He’s been on the inside for a while now, and he doesn’t ever want to leave.

“Love doesn’t save you, in my experience. I didn’t see how loving you could bring you anything but destruction—that it’s all I’d ever brought to the people I cared about. But that was a lie. That was fear, and pain, and bad calls made in terrible circumstances. Loving you makes me better... as a scientist, as a friend, as a force for good when I can be.”

She’s got a look on her face now that he doesn’t quite know what to do with, so he buries his face in her neck, gaining a measure of calm. She gives him some respite before tugging at him until he rears up to face her again, prodding, “And?”

Bruce grins down at her, and it doesn’t matter suddenly; he doesn’t have to make a case. He doesn’t have anything to prove. “Tell me you love me.”

Natasha swallows hard, and her eyes are wide, pupils blown even more than the low light accounts for. “Yes,” she says, “You know I do.”

“No,” he rubs his cheek against hers, with the grain and then against, “Tell me.”

It takes her a minute, and then she wraps her arm around his neck and rolls him, pressing her mouth just before his ear. He feels pinned, and soothes his hand along her ribs and side, lets her lock him tight.

“I love you,” she whispers, and the words make Bruce shudder beneath her. “So much I...don’t know what to do...with myself, this feeling.”

He can’t see her, but every hesitation of breath, each small twitch of effort is writ against his skin.

“Everything I do, it...wraps around that now. Like you’re entwined in my nerve fibers, part of my cells, my thoughts, my needs.”

She grinds her cheek against his as she lets her hold loosen, and now she’s looking down at him with an expression of puzzled, almost angry awe. “I can’t escape you,” her eyes soften and that wicked half smile flickers, and she presses her forehead to his and breathes against his mouth, “I don’t want to.”

Natasha kisses him, and he’s lost in the taste of her, in the taste of the words, in the headiness of mutual admission like throwing himself off a plane and punching through wet misty cloud only to land rolling in a field of grass. Coming out whole on the other side of potential loss and disaster. She pulls his hips tighter, her thigh wrapping around his and he wants to get lost in her body, her taste and scent and feel...but if he doesn’t ask her now, he knows he won’t, and this is important.

He gets his hand in between them, the keychain is still banding his finger.

Maybe he’s spent too much time with Tony, but he’s developing his own flare for the dramatic, so he takes her hand so that they’re both holding onto the metal again. “You told me the other day that I had to learn that asking for what I want isn’t going to raze the world.”

“That was actually yesterday.”

He snorts with laughter, only vaguely unhinged, and says, “Yeah, okay. So here’s the thing. I know
what I want, and I’m asking. I want you. I want a home that we build together. I want to take this thing between us out into the world. I want to shop for a couch with you, for a bed, and good sheets, and fuck in our kitchen to bless the house, and then probably in all of the other rooms as well for good measure. I want to buy dishes, and a vacuum, and...more than anything, I want you to buy into this idea with me of building our life. Together.”

The tag is digging in his palm hard, her knuckles white. Her cheek is wet and stubble-burned, and she lays it hot against his anyway. Her voice is thick in his ear. “Yeah, okay. Yes. Yes, I want that too.”

Bruce lays a kiss against her cheek, his words soft in her ear the way she’d spoken to him, “This is my promise: that I won’t leave.”

Her arm wraps around his neck again, but not as hard, the desperation eased into tenderness.

“I want to be worth the risks you take to love me, to be with me. I’ll keep working to be worth it. Loving you is the best thing I’ve done, and I will only get better at it.” He finds his own hesitation, swallows and works through it, “I promise...I will work on compromise with the Other Guy, because you believe in what he can be as well. So that’s what I want, what I’m asking. And I am asking, not just talking vaguely. Do this with me. Be with me. As my lover and my partner, and the person I can’t imagine living without.”

Natasha’s answer is so quiet and pained it takes him a second to parse the words, “I don’t know if I can.”

“Oh, sweetheart…” He gets it, he does. It was one thing to know where she came from, quite another to live with a dozen iterations of that same abuse and see the raw ugliness she was subjected to, that she carried inside. She bends her skills toward protection, riding out chaos and bad calls, plugging on and steering herself ever more true. It gave him hope he hadn’t thought existed, challenged him to move in a direction he’d thought impassable. Sometimes this still pissed him off.

“You ask the impossible of me all the time.”

Bruce can feel her start to curl away, but he follows her, turns it into a shift of limbs and now he’s locked around her. She lets him pin her, eyes shut tight even as her fingertips dig into his back, her foot locks behind his knee.

“But just you asking, makes me want to do it.” She understood the futility of atonement, the inability to see oneself as good, but she boxed that away and got on with the work--and when she looked at him she saw potential he was simply unable to see. She’d been right about the stand down protocol, right about extending the Other Guy some trust. He wants to keep doing the same for her, keep seeing and reflecting back her best self. “So now I’m asking, as the monster you created: do you want to do this with me?”

Her laugh breaks through, almost a gasp, and she throws all her tension into rolling him beneath her again. “You are impossible. Yes, I want to do this with you.”

“That’s good enough for me.”

Natasha threads her fingers through his, holding tight, pressing his hands up by his head to keep him still, and he looks up at her, gives himself up to her, happy to be in her hold. He’s enthralled, enamored, rich with the feeling of finally asking for what he’s been longing for, of her admission of matched desire, a life started together. This set of promises.

She bites her lip, looking down at him, and he could drown in that look, deep and open and
thoughtful, like just seeing him opens something up in her, pushes her past her fear.

Bruce wants to touch her, cup her face, her shoulders, sweep down her back in comfort, but he just stays in her grip and watches her as she descends, slowly...so slowly, like the control itself is important, like she needs it, her own form of reassurance.

She leans down until her hair falls around them both, and then her mouth is on his, perfect in the slide of her lips, the stroke of her tongue, the roll of her hips, the soft press of her breasts against his chest, the strength of her body wrapping around him. She fills him with this delirious, deliberate joy, this utter sense of belonging to something, to someone, finally liberating, all the terror lost. Lust and home, hope and longing. Love.

**Pushing your Potluck**

To: trustassembly@msf.org; dave@spsfrk.msf.org; libby@spsfrk.msf.org
From: root@si.org
Subject: Potluck

The wheel of fortune ever turns, and to everything there is a season. I have long awaited this day, and nigh it approaches. POTLUCK WILL BE MINE. This Friday, Avengers’ common area. Fake it til you make it, shake and bake it, cake it, chafe it, fuck it--I don’t care, just bring enough to pass.

Before you ask:

- yes, Pepper, I know how a potluck works. JARVIS told me.
- no, Thor, cookies will not be accepted. See if Eric’s willing to share his Swedish Meatball recipe.
- yes, CuntraPuntal can play a set. Two, if you can work in some un-ironic slow jams. It’s almost Valentine’s--perhaps Motorhead’s *Love Me Forever*.

Be there or be square.

Tony

Natasha eases the plunger on the syringe slowly, measured drips, as if titrating a drug into a mark, nuanced and delicate.

They land in the bowl of sodium alginate laced water, which reacts with the calcium lactate she’d added to the liquor, forming a skin around a perfect sphere of liquid Cointreau. She does a silent count, and lifts them out with a slotted spoon once they’ve set, laying them into a bowl of pure liquor to wait for the evening. Bruce enters their suite, trailed by Trinh, Marisol and Mellie like ducklings, grocery bags in hand.

“The lab smells like Kahlua.” He says by way of greeting. “I’m assuming it’s for the same reason your dehydrator was stuck under the fume hood.”

Trinh starts rooting through the kitchen drawers, pulling out the peeler and paring knives while Mellie works on the mise en place of a large sack of potatoes and several cheeses.

“Doesn’t that worry you? If the hood’s working properly, should you be able to smell anything at all?” This was the infused rice krispies, as the third application of Kahlua took a final eight hours to dehydrate. The vodka milk and cream was already chilling in little glass pint milk bottles in the Avengers common area bar fridge. She’d show Lewis a White Russian all right.
“Pretty sure Tony left the door open when he peeked earlier. I think he only took a handful.” Bruce reassures her, “I plan on telling Lewis once she’s soused with cereal, so she can riff on Tony the Tiger all night.”

Natasha gives him a full-on grin, just so damned pleased to have someone like him to play with.

Marisol switches out Mellie’s paring knife for a peeler, and then half a potato later makes the girl put on a kevlar glove. Trinh double checks everyone else’s potatoes and methodically removes all of the eyes and stray roots and blemishes, before turning them into precise cubes and dumping them into the stockpot to boil.

Natasha pulls out the mismatched array of Tupperware popsicle molds Steve has been giving her, whenever he finds them on his journey to find the ugliest resale housewares to leave around the tower to annoy Tony. She adds the last layer to her frozen shots, and slips them back in the freezer.

Mellie is doggedly grating her assigned cheese, now wearing both kevlar gloves. Marisol whisks with the expression of a trauma surgeon, with Trinh assisting, splashing milk bit by bit as she builds a white sauce.

Bruce turns from draining the potatoes, glasses completely fogged but looking at Natasha as if he sees her anyway. His mouth makes a wry moue.

She remembers cooking with him and Steve, the night she decided to try developing the stand down protocol. She’d talked about how it made tactical sense, how it was the humane thing to do for such a complicated and high-value, high-risk asset...but she can face now that a part of her was curious and enthralled and challenged even then. A part of her had just wanted him to stick around long enough for her to come to terms with, figure out, see how he ticked and why he seemed to resonate with something inside her. What the hell was that? She’d had no idea. Probably for the best. She’d’ve run like hell if she’d known it was something that could turn into love.

“Bruce,” She hands him the tool and dons the Captain’s resolute voice of command, “Mash.”

He says tonelessly, “Ha.”

She smirks.

The steam dissipates from his lenses to reveal warm amusement. He gently takes the masher from her hand and proceeds to beat the hell out of the potatoes.

Mellie sneezes on her pile of grated cheese.

Natasha handles quarantine and clean-up while Marisol cools the cheese sauce and Bruce and Trinh start building the base of a mountain of stiff mashed potatoes. Trinh shapes a well in the middle, lined with rice paper, to hold the cheese sauce. The top goes on with much discussion of temperature, viscosity, and the inherent drawbacks of edible building materials, a discussion which began last week when the latest semester of Film Appreciation featured Bruce’s choice of Close Encounters, and will probably flare up chronically all through the Potluck.

Marisol is standing on the counter making lines in one side of the potatoes. Bruce is supervising, having been told by Trinh that his hands are too big for this phase of the project. Natasha suspects it’s probably more a sense of ownership.

“I have to hand it to you all.” She says, surprised the cheese sauce hasn’t yet leaked all over like a baking soda volcano experiment. “That is undoubtedly the nerdiest thing I have ever seen.”
“I’ve always wanted to make one of those.” Bruce sighs and sounds weirdly accomplished. “Never thought it would be cheesy inside though.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Natasha tilts her head to rest it down on Bruce’s shoulder. “Warm and cheesy.”

Bruce slides his arm around her waist. “So will you be stuck behind the bar all night?”

“I’m prepared to dazzle them with the soy lecithin and the infused campari,” she says. “Alternately, to make a bucket of martinis, dole them out like William Powell, and then make out with you on the couch the rest of the night while the non-enhanced dance sloppy and get all sappy.”

He grins, “No wonder I love you.”

~*~

The bombpop starts with a layer of chambord vodka with blue food coloring, then lime infused silver tequila, then a syrup of kirschwasser and cherry concentrate, each one doctored with enough sugar and gelatin to make them freeze after a fashion.

They only have to stay together long enough to be slurped and sucked, delivering a cold hit of sweet and boozy. It’s a trick of chemistry and sheer will, like all of the molecular mixology - fooling liquids into stasis, infusing hidden flavors, creating art from chemistry, creating smoke from mirrors.

Natasha loves how you can look at these disparate elements, watch them come together in unexpected forms, and then dissolve them again on the tongue, unmade.

~*~

It smells like the 1950s in the common area, casseroles and bundt cake and an honest to god jello salad made with green jello, cream cheese, pineapple and 7-Up, courtesy of a stained recipe card Maria’s father had read to her over skype.

Vats of meatballs and little smokies rest in their respective gravies. Jane dishes a bunch of them up and spears them with toothpicks, demonstrating for Thor who gamely attempts to stab the sausages, the tool laughably small in his meaty grip.

“Finger foods,” Jane says, and Thor, who has attended a party or two, raises an eyebrow and says, “Then why can’t I eat them with my fingers?”

Jane shrugs. “They taste better on toothpicks.”

Thor had supplied a glazed ham, and he looks longingly at the slices spiraling off the bone.

From the corner of his eye, Bruce watches the girls deliver the platter with the mashed potato Devil’s Tower from a catering cart, taking a deep breath once it settles onto the table. Darcy is already a little glassy-eyed, and cheers outright. The Kahlua crispies had been confiscated early and sequestered behind the bar.

She holds up the little cup that contains layers of spiked cream and boozy cereal. “These things pack a wallop,” she says, “a delicious, delicious wallop. And seriously, she looks all prim and innocent over there, but I think she’s trying to compromise me.”

Natasha behind the bar is distracting in one of his favorite ways, assembling all of these perfect, complicated concoctions with effortless efficiency and a devious grin.
The shift over the last few days, as they make their way towards this promised, delicate future, has been one of held breathless moments, an awed sharing of space, counterpointed with aggressive affection, a precious sense of possession. He’s as likely to find her fingers entwined with his as they sit quietly, as to be attacked in the hallway, hot mouth and sharp teeth and the wind knocked out of him.

He’d sprawled on the bed earlier in all but his shoes, watching her dress. She’d sat next to him to slip on her heels, then just smiled, leaning over to sweep her thumb across his cheekbone so tenderly. He’d slipped his hand under her knee and it took everything he had not to sweep that leg over his shoulder and bury his face under that prim skirt.

“Well?” Darcy prods.

Bruce turns his attention back to her, shelving those thoughts for later. He’s nice to Darcy so he can get her intern to write his abstracts, it’s the deal they explicitly forged at Thanksgiving. “I can almost promise you that she is,” he reports solemnly, “compromising you.”

She squints at him. “You are a bad influence.”

He laughs, “On who, exactly?”

“Romanoff. Before, she was just kind of terrifying and polite. Now she’s enjoying it.”

“Don’t be fooled,” he says. “She always enjoyed it.”

Darcy taps the rest of the deconstructed White Russian into her mouth, and asks about the house hunting as she crunches.

“We’re negotiating,” he says, “there’s a list. We took one of the whiteboards from the lab.”

“Compromise is key,” Darcy agrees. “That’s why I live alone.”

~*~

Steve takes a seat in a big square armchair, while Fury shares a long couch with Maria in the middle. Bucky stoically joins them, taking the opposite end near Steve, handing her one of Natasha’s boozy popsicles.

No, Dave...but it’s impossible for Steve to call him that even though the Trust girls have taken it up, as has most of the Tower except for Natasha and himself. Even Maria calls him Dave, reporting that he talks to her like a regular human being when it’s just the two of them, though with Steve he almost sounds redacted. There’s no longer a SHIELD watch on Steve’s suite, but she’s been staying in his guest room across the hall from his bedroom where Bucky sleeps, as he camps out on the couch he’d been bragging about not too long ago. He thinks they should probably talk about what this is, and what they should do about it. Preferably not with Fury around.

They face off with Steve like the three monkeys; see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil.

Fury has a new eye patch, this time bedazzled with a heart outlined in gold. It looks like something that would pop out of a saint’s chest on a holy card.

“Sir,” Maria says, saluting with the bombpop, “nice nod to the coming holiday.”

“I’m the very embodiment of love, Hill,” he says. “Storge, agape, eros, philia--pick your poison.”
Maria bites off the blue warhead part, where the tritium trigger would be. Steve remembers listing blue raspberry as one of the things he liked about the future, and she had mentioned bombpops, and he gone off on how could this be an appropriate name for a pretentious Italian ice aimed at children, which caused her to detour into the Cold War...and she’d made the excellent point that eventually you learn to live with a risk, maybe learn to laugh at it, and maybe turn it into something sweet.

*Of course,* she’d added after she’d let the poetry of that reverberate, *once we relax, we get to rail against our complacency and scare each other shitless once more, with terrifying miniseries about nuclear winter.*

"Sgt. Barnes," Fury leans over to acknowledge him, and Bucky looks so deeply uncomfortable that Steve almost wants to save him.

Bucky dips his popsicle into the small glass of Asgardian hooch he’s nursing and gathers himself like he’s working up to actual speech, licking his lips. He and Maria both have blue tongues now.

Steve thinks that if he kissed either one of them, he’d taste haunting cold and raspberries from the future. He thinks they could paint his body blue with their tongues. He thinks about kneeling down and burying his head in the space between them, pressing a leg against each ear, two different hands snaking down the back of his collar, raking through the hair at his nape. He thinks he’s going to have to choose, and he thinks he’s losing his mind.

These intrusive fantasies make Steve feel ashamed, less because of the sex than because of the distance. He can barely get Bucky to talk to him, an awkward chasm of shame at what had gone down, how their tenuous hidden connection had escalated and blown up in their faces.

“I think,” Bucky says, and rubs his head in a deliberate play for time to arrange his words, “I think that I should apologize. For mostly killing you. I’m glad that I didn’t.” He cocks his head like he’s not sure that’s what he meant, but seems to decide it’s close enough.

Maria chokes a little, but doesn’t comment, just nibbles at the white part of her popsicle.

“I didn’t know at the time that you hadn’t died, sir. Which….it’s hard to know what’s appropriate to say, except that I regret--Jesus, Steve, I don’t think your face should be that color.”

Steve feels like he’s having a heart attack, the way his chest is squeezing at the incongruity, at the frustrating experience of looking at those blue tongues, and two sets of eyes that don’t cut him any slack. “I think I need a drink,” he says.

“Thought the serum made you a teetotaler,” Fury says, with a bit of *and fuck all of you for good measure* in his voice.

“No, sir. Well, yes,” he says, “but often you can make something happen just by wanting it badly enough.”

“Lucky for me that was true in DC.” Fury waves him off toward the bar as Maria stifles a snort.

Steve slows as he approaches, steeling himself for the likely chill of his evening getting worse. Instead, Natasha pushes a tiny glass towards him, and it’s the least aggressive gesture he’s gotten from her in a week. He knocks it back and appreciates the effect of vodka tweaked somehow to evaporate into his head before can even swallow.

She follows his glance behind and then, in a gesture of unexpected kindness, rests her fingers on the back of his hand.
“It takes time, Steve,” she says. “For everyone to regroup, figure out who they are and what they want. Barnes is trying to figure out what’s left of the man you knew, how it fits with the man he is. He’s coming to terms with a lifetime and more of being someone’s tool, passed around like a war prize. It doesn’t...that doesn’t get fixed in a few days, or even a few months. You don’t...it takes time.”

A tiny bit of the ache in his chest eases. “Does this mean you’re not mad at me any more?”

She raises an eyebrow and reaches under the bar, sets a rocks glass and pours him his own finger of Asgard’s finest paint thinner, hedging, “Maybe.”

He unleashes the full power of his grin at her, but she’s immune. Her weaknesses are more sly.

She leans down on her elbows on the bar, and meets his eyes. “I think I’m a sucker for the underdog.”

“Join me?” he says, gesturing at the liquor.

She waits a few beats, and then pours for herself. They clink glasses and drink.

~*~

“Libuse stopped eating meat when she came here, as part of the cover identity, which is why she made salads.” Luz points the salads out to Tony, knowing he won’t eat anything Libuse touched, but still trying to be diplomatic about it with the woman standing awkwardly right there. “Kale and cranberry, spinach, orange and almond, and real Caesar with anchovies.”

“I’ll stick with the fattoush I brought, thanks.” Tony adds, “Also anchovies are not vegetables.”

“I’m branching out.” Libuse says.

Luz has talked about her, briefly and sporadically, as she and Tony have been doing another pass on the bus, exploring the best way to wire it for remote start, new mods to lock it down, protect it, make it a safe space if the girls need a quick escape for any reason.

“She’s one of us,” Luz had said, checking the electrical on the newest alarm. “Any of us could have been that, been her. Either of them. She’s made some bad choices, but she’s ours.”

Tony wants to say, constantly, that Giselle is a worst case scenario, but it’s not like he can really hold Romanoff up as the best either. There’s so much fucked up going on, that he just tries to ride it out, to ignore the fact that being in the room with her makes him feel queasy and nervous in a way that Barnes’ dead-eyed stare doesn’t even begin to elicit. Even though it should, it really should...his parents alone...and yet he can turn his back on Barnes, but not yet on Giselle. Libuse. Whatever.

Happy’d had kittens. Tony had finally gotten sick of the justified ranting and sent him a full Hello Kitty desk set for his new office in the tower.

Luz breaks the tension by shoving a plate into Libuse’s hand. She pauses, and then dishes herself some fattoush.

“I was thinking,” Tony says to Luz, “that maybe you and Catherine could do a more formal internship this summer. In robotics and engineering. Give you some hands-on stuff, help you develop some new projects, maybe even some stuff for us.” He gestures around. Luz doesn’t give much away, but her eyes widen a little. She gives a small nod.
Tony meets Giselle’s eyes, and there’s something dark there, and a little lost. “No projects for you,” he says. “But you know, I’m still thinking.”

~*~

Pepper is a little tipsy, feet curled up on the couch as the band plays. Clint sits at the other end, Bruce leaning against the arm of the couch. They converse in absent unhurried bursts of shouting.

“I’m not that attached to a yard,” he says. “But I like the idea of something stand alone. That limits our choices, but we’ll figure it out. I’m trying to not get in the middle of the security requirements.”

Clint nods. “No one wants to mow the lawn.”

“Magda will take care of you,” Pepper assures. “Just be clear about what you want.”

Clint drums on his thighs. “Stark still mad?”

Bruce shrugs, “Not mad, just baffled. I don’t even think that’s true, actually, I think he just can’t reconcile the idea of wanting separate space.”

Pepper hums a little. “No, he does. He’s just not prepared to admit that he’s going to miss you.”

“I’ll still be here most days, and it’s not like we’re leaving anytime soon.”

“Tony likes to start early so he can milk his displeasure for all its worth.”

What Tony had said in fact was, “Mazel Tov,” and squeezed Bruce’s arm, shaking his head, but looking at him shrewdly. “It’s a big step, a big choice, nowhere to retreat, you know.”

Bruce had nodded. “It’s time, though. We...we’re ready for that.”

“Yeah,” Tony had said, like he can see something Bruce isn’t saying. “Yeah, I think you are. I don’t know why you have to take it off campus, but we’ll figure the logistics out.”

“Tony…”

“Trust me, Bruce. Trust me.”

~*~

CuntraPuntal had agreed to learn one sappy song, and they chose a speedy thrash guitar version of Can’t Help Falling in Love, because Sumi has a love/hate thing for Elvis and they agreed that a cover of a cover was an acceptable level of detachment from this crazy little thing called love.

They finish to shouts and hollers, and then the tutors haul the karaoke machine back out from the Trust floor where it’s been since New Year’s eve.

Darcy has been working on a duet with Thor, and he gamely grabs the other microphone. Clint leans against Natasha. “So which one is Pancho and which one’s Lefty?”

Thor, unsurprisingly, is Lefty.

Jane chimes in on the other side of Clint. “There are at least ten versions of this song, and I can tell you that I’ve heard all of them. When he studies something, he really studies it.”

Mellie is showing Barnes the book of songs, but he mostly looks lost. “I don’t know any of those,”
“These,” she taps on the set of standards. “You probably know these.”

Steve comes up, looking over her shoulder. “He should,” he says. “Irving Berlin, Blue Skies, remember that?”

There’s a pause, and then Barnes gives a nod. Just a short one and a curt, “Tin Pan Alley.”

“My mom,” Ameena says, and swallows hard. “My mom listened to those when I was little. I’ll stand up there with you. If you want to try it.”

Later, given just enough Cointreau beads in the good bourbon, Clint borrows the guitar from the band and lets fly.

Bruce squints at him, asking Natasha baffled, “He can sing now?”

“When he’s drunk he forgets to try to be a tenor.” Natasha rolls her eyes, but decides to take advantage. She’s just on the edge of loose and languid, and she wants to put her hands on Bruce in public. “C’mon doc, wanna stand in the corner and pretend to dance while Clint relives his courting days?”

“I’m a terrible dancer. Also, I feel like this is not an improvement over the prog rock.”

“You waltzed with Captain America. And do you really want to wait until Clint moves on to Yes?”

“I thought we promised never to speak of that again.”

"The waltzing or the prog rock?"

She grins.

But he gets up, and puts his arms around her waist, and sways along with pretty decent rhythm as she lets him take her weight, hands clasped around his neck. She fits against him, they fit together, here in this place, full of the broken and damaged who have knit themselves back together, and created odd and fractured and true kinds of family.

“This is a pretty romantic gesture from you,” he says.

"I'm working on blatant displays of sentimentality in public,” she says.

He puts his hand on her cheek, fingers brushing against her curls, and leans in, kissing her, tasting kahlua and alien liquor and the rich, cool taste that’s purely her. She hums a little against him and he withdraws, brushing his mouth against her temple, and puts his hand back on her waist.

“Just testing the waters,” he says.

“Inappropriate,” Clint bellows from the couch.

“Says the guy who conceived his first child in a club bathroom.” Natasha says.

“Are you accusing Barton of grade inflation?” Bruce asks, all innocuous inquiry belied by the way his hand slips down her ass, “Or suggesting we should give him something to yell about?”

Fuck...that smirk.
She stops swaying and presses down on his shoulders until he sinks on one knee.

The room noise peters out as he looks up at her, that smile blooming full on her face and then his. He pulls her closer, seeing her light up when someone gasps and another person swears a long streak in a whisper. She savors it, everyone else balanced on the edge of anticipation for something the two of them know they aren’t going to get.

She grabs his tie and pulls, bending as he rises, tipping over his shoulder in a graceful swoop.

He catches her around the knees and pushes up with determination because she’s heavier than she looks, dense bone and muscle even though she’s balancing her own weight across his shoulders, one arm snaked around the front of his chest and the other palming his ass.

Natasha’s laughing, upside down behind Bruce as he knuckles his glasses up with his free hand and, with a casual nod to the assembled, walks out with her.

~*~ ~*~ ~*~

End Notes

Thassalia and feldman are also on Tumblr.

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