Sekhmet and the Little Red Fox
by quirky21

Summary

Natasha's problem began when the healer offered to reverse the Red Room's graduation gift: forced sterilization. It only got worse as Emily proved to be so much more than a simple do-gooder with a gift. Letting her in, sharing secrets with her, and becoming irrevocably attached to her was not in Natasha's gameplan. Set about a year after Avengers, goes through Ultron with some brutal changes.

cross-posted on ffnet

Notes

Heyo!

This is my first fic on AO3, but definitely not my first ever. I've been over on ff.net for years now, under the same pen name, writing stories about my favorite badass women. I got lost in a few Natasha/Clint/Laura fics, and I just had to write a Natasha/OC.

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Constructive criticism welcomed and encouraged!
“You've been acting weird all week.” Clint grunted. “Something I need to know?”

Natasha gave ground to his flurry of punches. She watched his form, studied his weaknesses and strengths. The old injury in his shoulder was starting to catch up to him. “Have you been taking your anti-inflammatory meds? You’re slow.”

He puffed and switched tactics, using his legs for longer reach. “Don’t change the subject.”

She considered a way to derail the conversation as she danced around his attacks. Not many people would have noticed her odd moments of zoning and off-beat returns to conversation this past week. Maybe a handful of spies were good enough to notice the Black Widow slipping. Clint Barton was one. And he was a good friend. Her best friend, trusted and allowed to pry into her thoughts.

Sweeping her leg around in a low kick that he jumped, and following it with an uppercut that brushed his chin, she considered what to say. How to talk about what was troubling her.

“Not here.” She said. Too many agents in the gym, doing their own workouts, watching, listening. Natasha Romanoff didn’t discuss her personal life in public.

Clint’s eyes flickered around. He nodded, refocused, and managed to land a few blows. When a well-timed kick crashed into her side, right where she had a healing injury, she called an end to their sparring session.

“Finally! Thought you’d never get tired.” Clint hunched over, hands on his knees, gasping for air. “Goddamn jumping spider.”

Hiding her grimace, she touched fingers to her side. They came away damp. From sweat, not blood. Good. No busted stitches. No reason to see the unpleasant doctor and subject herself to another lecture about taking care of herself, no matter how superior to everyone else she was.

She sucked down half the contents of her water bottle. “You're going to the beach next week, right?” Code for a home and family that he kept safe and hidden from SHIELD files.

Clint looked up at her. “Yea.”

No blood was on her hand when she pulled it away, and she sighed before grabbing her towel and blotting sweat from her neck. “Mind if I came with you?”
Cradling a mug of fragrant tea against the brisk onset of a cool spring night, Natasha joined Clint and his wife Laura out on the wide wrap-around porch of their enormous, Georgia farmhouse. The sun was setting over the wild forests on the back half of their property, turning the world a vivid orange for a few spectacular minutes. Clint and Laura tried to catch as many sunsets together as possible. It was one of their cute, happy-couple things that Natasha envied and knew she would never experience.

Laura quietly smiled at her from under the mountain of blankets she was snuggling under. “All tucked in?”

“Coop tried to escape, but I threatened him with orange juice for breakfast and he settled.” Both parents chuckled at the threat. Nine year old Cooper Barton hated orange juice like Tony Stark hated quiet. Maybe worse. “How much did Clint tell you about the mission in Ohio?”

The radical group that had been smuggling poison into food processing plants for weeks had run into Natasha and Clint. There'd been a firefight, a boiler's cooling system had been damaged, and the resulting explosion had taken out half of the facility, sending debris as far as the nearby interstate. Fighting after that had only increased the collateral damage. At least a dozen people had died that day. A lot less than there could have been, would have been if that healer hadn't shown up.

Surprise stretched across their faces, and Laura glanced at her husband who shrugged. “Didn't leave much out.”

These are your friends, Natasha reminded herself. The two people who you trust the most in the entire world. Galaxy. “The woman who was healing people and vanished without a trace. He tell you about her?”

“Natasha?” Lauren leaned closer, worry written all over her.

“I was wounded.”

Now Clint was frowning. “You didn't tell me.” Though his gaze shot down to her stomach. He wasn't blind, and she hadn't been hiding it. Much.

“You were busy herding people to safety when the shrapnel went through me.” From mug to the side of her stomach, right below her ribs, her hand drifted. Under her shirt was a bandaged, stitched laceration that was bad enough even her enhanced regeneration was taking a while to totally heal. It had been much, much worse a week ago. She'd been well on her way to passing out and definitely in need of surgery when the healer had caught up to her.

“Hey!” The woman who had been flitting from one person to the next, slowing the flow of blood into the early spring mud laid fingers on Natasha's arm. “Where are you going? Stay still for two seconds.”

Yanking away from the stranger's touch, she jutted her chin at injured children. “There are kids hurt.”

Stone-faced, the woman shook her head. Her tone was stern. “None of them have blood fountains from the stomach. Sit your ass down before you're dead and useless, Ms. Superhero.”

Natasha allowed a peek to her side, at the weeping gash there. It was far worse than she wanted it to be. “I,” but her legs wobbled, and her weight was abruptly being supported by the woman. Too much blood lost. Shit. And now that she had given the wound her attention, it was clearly letting
her know that it was deep, too deep, and it hurt. “Fine.”

More quickly than gently, Natasha was lowered to sit on a car hood. Her hands were put on the woman's shoulders. “Try not to fall over.” The woman settled bloody hands around the wound, closed her eyes. “This will hurt.”

Prickles snapped, bit, burned. Pain flared, was followed by an odd, squirming sensation. Blood stopped flowing, and the woman released her hold, braced herself against the car, panting and sweating. Her own breaths coming in short gulps, Natasha could only hold on while they both recovered. “I thought magical healing would feel good,” she purposely joked. “Damn.”

The woman looked up at her. Their noses nearly brushed from the closeness. She smelled of sweat, blood, fear, and under that, a nice perfume. Dichromatic irises blinked at her. Natasha had seen the oddness of an iris that was half blue on one side, half brown the other, but never in both eyes. Either the woman had been seriously injured in exactly the same way in both eyes, or had the most unique mutation. Or maybe it was something like the green pigmentation of the Hulk; it came with the power?

How many missions would have gone better with someone like her around? How many innocent lives could have been saved? How many had been saved today?

“I repaired the intestines and blood vessels, sealed the abdominal cavity.” She heaved backward and gave herself a foot of breathing space.

Natasha took in the woman's unimpressive figure, less than average height -barely taller than Natasha- muddy sneakers, and blood-stained sweatshirt that was probably trying to hide her pudgy belly and small breasts. She had shoulder-length, brown hair, and pale Caucasian features. Again, those dichromatic irises startled Natasha. How odd. Was the woman on SHIELD's powered people Index? Doubtful. Director Fury would've found a way to wrangle a resource like her into service. Where was she from? She sounded Midwestern, possibly West Coast. Urban. Educated. How f-

“You'll want stitches and a few days bed rest. Even with that accelerated healing I noticed.”

How much could...

“One other thing.” Her expression and tone were hesitant. “I also couldn't help noticing that your,” she met Natasha's sharp gaze, swallowed, lowered her voice, “Reproductive system has previous damage.”

Natasha's world froze.

“I don’t know if it was intentional on your part or not, but if you want, I can repair it.” She ran a hand over her neck, leaving bloody smears. “Another day. As thanks for saving Earth. Saving more lives than I ever could.”

Graduation from the Red Room, the forced sterilization to help ensure a Black Widow formed zero attachments, remained a perfect assassin. It could be reversed? Helpless with hope and fear, Natasha stared at the stranger. Did she want this?

“Hey, I don't need an answer right now.” The woman's voice was low, comforting, and she was touching Natasha's cheek. The Black Widow had killed for less. Right now, she could barely breathe, let alone demand the removal of the unsolicited touch. “My name's Emily Fortune. I'm sure that's all you need to track me down. I can see this is a big deal for you, and I'll keep it to
That arrogant hand was completely cradling her cheek now. Natasha wanted to chop it off, but its healing powers were too valuable, and she didn't have motor function yet.

“Day's not over. You can process this later, okay? Pull your badass self together, Ms. Superhero.”

But Natasha remained caught up in the idea that she could be an almost-normal human again. Could have the option to be a mother. Not that a Black Widow would make a good parent. No. Never. She’d be a horrible parent. She wouldn't put a child through that.

But to have the option...

Crack! Sharp pain flared in her cheek, made instinct and training roar. She grabbed the offending hand, twisted its attached arm around, and shoved her attacker face-first into the car hood. Sharper, deeper pain shrieked from her side. A sharp gasp came from under her. The healer. Oh. Natasha released her and stepped back.

“Ow.” Rubbing at her shoulder, the woman, Emily, cringed. “That worked way too well. Okay. Um, you're up. I'm off to see who else I can keep from the morgue today.”

Hand hovering not over her bloody side, but over her barren womb, Natasha stared after her.

“Nat?” Laura was standing up from the blankets, eyes worried. “Hey, you're scaring me.”

She gave herself a mental shake. The sun had nearly given up its dominance of the sky. “Sorry. I was wounded, and she healed me. Then she told me that she could reverse the sterilization.” She finished in a small voice.

Both of her friends knew exactly what she was talking about. Laura hid her excitement for Natasha terribly while Clint's thoughts were harder to parse. He was probably excited, worried, thinking up ways to tease her.

“I don't know what to do.” Natasha admitted.

A well used hairbrush paused halfway through Emily's rich cocoa-brown hair. One of the few things about herself that she was truly proud of. Her hair was damn gorgeous. It almost made up for the monstrosity she called a nose and her otherwise plain features. She met her own black eyes in the mirror before sighing and distracting herself with the enormous green bruise that stretched from jaw to cheek.

“Wish I could heal myself.”

She continued brushing her thick hair. Longer locks, with deep russet curls, flashed in memory. An Avenger. The Black Widow. She'd gone nearly catatonic when Emily had offered to repair her reproduction system. What kind of monster had done that to her? It clearly wasn't genetic, and the woman's reaction said it wasn't accidental. Emily snorted at the irony. She herself never wanted to be pregnant and would be happy to give up a life of menstruation. No more PMS ever? Hell yes! But to be completely denied the choice?
“That’s her.” Natasha agreed with the facial recognition software. “But...”

From the image on the screen, Tony Stark tore his sight. “But what?”

“The eyes are wrong.” This Emily Fortune had solid, dark eyes. Natasha clearly remembered the split-colored irises. “They’re different colors.”

“Ever heard of contact lenses?” He snarked.

Ignoring his sass, “Skin color is off too.”

“Tanning booths.”

“The healer didn’t have freckles.”

The billionaire playboy sighed. “Cosmetics.”

She glared at him.

“Come on, Romanoff. The facial recognition is 95%, and you agreed with it, minus a few discrepancies that can rationally be accounted for.”

“We could really use her gift. Think of the reduction in collateral damage with her around, not to mention our own injuries.” By our Captain Rogers meant the normal humans’. “This is worth checking out.” He sighed. “Even if she does have a rapsheet.”

“Petty charges.” Stark rolled his eyes. “For selling pot, which is legal in several states, including the one she lives in.”

Rogers crossed his arms. “According to this, it wasn’t.”

“Come on, old man. Marijuana has recognized medicinal purposes, and when it’s used otherwise, it’s less harmful than alcohol, which if I remember correctly, you used to enjoy.”

While the boys dickered, her gaze sought out Clint, and he grinned. “We do tend to get hurt a lot. I wouldn’t mind having her as backup for my normal human butt.” He and Laura also wanted Natasha to at least talk to the healer. So far, there had been nothing about Natasha’s condition on the internet rumor mill. Emily might be holding the information for later blackmail. If she was, she was either dumber than Natasha thought, or overly confident in how valuable of information it was, which it wasn’t. Not compared to say, Clint’s family. Or any of the other Avengers.

The guys quit their argument to heckle Clint about his tendency to get injured. He shot back that Tony had a suit of armor and Steve had superhuman regeneration. And Thor was a freaking god. The Hulk pretty much was too.

Natasha ignored them to read the highlights of Emily Fortune’s dossier. Oldest of three children. At fourteen, her father died in what was ruled an accident. Mother never remarried. Fortune was self-employed in the transportation industry and made an awful lot of money with her single, small cargo truck that had been destroyed in the Ohio incident. Natasha glanced at the police report. The
truck had been in excellent repair and empty except for a dozen airtight storage containers. She guessed that each of them could probably hold twenty pounds of vacuum-sealed marijuana bud.

So, a drug trafficker and a healer who had risked exposure to save a few lives? She’d fit right in with their little band of misfits.

“Fine.” Natasha broke up the childish quibble about whether tech or talent saved more lives. “I’ll go tomorrow.”

A flash of orange in the storefront window caught Emily's attention. Casually, she glanced around. Two older ladies walked by, laughing about the hijinx of some grandchild. Some kids were running circles around a frazzled young man. Normal shoppers were going about their day. Emily picked up a shopping basket and headed toward the vegetables, hunting for dinner ingredients.

While inspecting broccoli, she felt eyes on her and looked around, frowning like she was deciding between broccoli and zucchini. No one seemed to be watching her. No one even looked familiar. She rarely came to this store, but she was tired and didn't want to drive over to her favorite organics place. Maybe that was why she felt like she was being watched. Too tired. Been hauling weed across the country for too long, woman, she muttered to herself. Fucking paranoid.

What would she do for income if the U.S. actually made marijuana legal in all states? If she stayed in the transportation business, she'd probably have to take a major income loss. Then again, it could take years for her usual customers to start doing things the legal way. Some probably never would. Big Brother wasn't to be trusted. Business wouldn't change quickly. Suppliers would want to stick with tried and true methods such as Emily. She'd keep her eye out for opportunities and put a little more into her investments and savings.

She yawned, shoved a head of broccoli in her basket, grabbed a few more veggies and trudged to the pasta. So tired. *Farfalle*, the little bow tie looking ones, made it into the basket. “What else?”

The frozen section was nearly passed over, but she caught sight of the pizzas. She yawned again and cursed. Tomorrow she could cook a real meal. Tonight was a pizza night. Hawaiian, because pineapples were healthy. She took her dragging butt to the registers, paid, grabbed her bags, got to her car, went home, and swore that she was being followed.

Whatever. Her car was clean, and she had a medical card for the edibles in her pantry. Her usual contacts knew that she was on break for a couple weeks. She'd called them the day after that shitstorm in Ohio. At least she'd been returning home from a delivery with clean boxes, hadn't had to explain to the cops why her work truck was full of good pot nor an abundance of cash. This client was one who claimed her deliveries as product for their legal business. But replacing her comfortable truck and its airtight cargo boxes was going to be a minor headache. Oh well. A worry for another day. She shoved her pizza in the oven, set a timer, and closed all her curtains.

Turning the TV on, it blared celebrity news, something about Tony Stark getting married. Maybe she was being extra paranoid because she'd told an Avenger her real name. Anyone that closely associated to the Iron Man, billionaire Tony Stark, would be able to hunt Emily down and might take offense to Emily's career choice. What the hell had she been thinking? She switched the TV over to video and chose a movie at random from her queue.

Problems for another day.
Three days of studying Emily Fortune had proven to be dull, but amusing. The woman had clearly nothing better to do than lounge around her modest apartment in her pajamas. Her pajamas included comfortable shorts and childishly bright t-shirts. Rainbows, carnivorous rabbits, and Jedi had appeared thus far.

A foray into the apartment had taught her that Fortune enjoyed entertaining friends, playing video games, and reading. Six generous, hardwood bookshelves lined her living room, and they were all overflowing. Science fiction predominated, but fantasy and fiction were well represented. There were even a few classics, self-help, and educational texts that ranged from anatomy to psychology to business law. One bookshelf was dedicated to novels in French and Arabic. Coffee table books on various topics from off-grid living to music were stacked haphazardly. They and everything else, looked well-read. An old Calvin and Hobbes nearly fell apart in her hands.

There was a sturdy handgun, cleaned and oiled with a box of ammo, in the bedroom. The magazine was full, carefully stored right beside the weapon. Fortune regularly went down to a local gun range to practice. Though she wouldn't win any marathons or weight-lifting competitions, she had an oft-used membership to a nationwide gym. Still, Natasha appreciated the effort towards fitness, especially given the woman's choice of career, spending hundreds of hours every year driving her truck.

A hard-won peek into Fortune's encrypted laptop and phone didn't yield hard evidence, but Natasha found enough clues to convince her that Fortune's illegal activities weren't all on her rapsheet. The smuggler probably made a lot more money than she paid taxes on and by the looks of the apartment, was squirreling a good amount of it away somewhere.

Steve would frown on having a drug smuggler as part of the team. Tony would probably love her rules-don't-apply-to-her-attitude. Thor would say that human laws were not his concern and commend her bravery. Bruce would be too busy hating himself to care. Natasha wondered if the Avengers would have intervened if Fortune's truck had been full and law enforcement been forced to arrest the healer despite her efforts at saving lives that day. If there had been product around to get caught with, would Fortune have stuck around to heal?

Assassination was just as illegal as smuggling. Natasha wasn't going to be a hypocrite about letting a criminal on the team. As she followed Fortune through a shopping mall, she appreciated that the smuggler seemed to notice that she was being tailed. Not that she could pin Natasha in her searching gaze, but she tried. She paused at reflective surfaces and took selfies with her phone to watch over her shoulder. Returning home, she even stopped at a gas station to put five dollars in a full tank and watch. Natasha had been forced to drive away when the woman started videoing her surroundings.

Back at her place, she'd scoured it looking for bugs and cameras, but luckily didn't find the two that Natasha had installed. She opened a bottle of wine and plopped on her couch. For the next two hours, she studied the selfies and videos she'd taken that day on her large TV screen. From the apartment across the road, Natasha watched the activity with a smile. This woman had good instincts, experience with keeping secrets, was a well-rounded person, and if she was the same woman from Ohio, she cared about the well-being of strangers. Despite what Cap would say, Fortune was a perfect candidate for the team.

Now, Natasha needed to make contact again and do a little interview. She watched Fortune freeze a frame on a video, pull up another, freeze that one, dig up an image on the internet and compare them. The angle of Natasha's bug wasn't good enough to be sure, yet it looked like she'd been caught.
“There aren't enough redheads, with *that* figure, in the world to account for coincidence.” Fortune was talking to herself. She consulted her wineglass while Natasha told herself that she'd been sloppy and underestimated her quarry. “Hope she figures out I'm not a threat to her soon and just knocks on my fucking door.”

She drained the glass. “Who would do that to a person? That's just cruel.” The bottle was grabbed and upended as easily as Fortune had turned Natasha's world upside down by offering to reverse the sterilization. She drank, made a face. “Not that you're a bastion of niceness, Emily Fortune.”

Was that mere rhetoric or was there even more to this woman?

Stumbling, she went to her wine fridge and opened another bottle, returned to the couch. “Cheers, Black Widow.” She was toasting the TV screen, but Natasha's heart did a little flip anyway. “I hope whoever did that to you got what was coming to them. If it was me, I would've made them suffer.”

Blood hammering through her veins, Natasha had to get up, put several safe feet between herself and the image of the woman who had just echoed what was in her heart. How could this obscure woman from Colorado affect her so deeply? She hadn't been this terrified of someone in *decades.*

Damning the timing of her neighbors, interrupting her novel at a pivotal moment, Emily used a dollar for a bookmark and went to the door. She peeked through the peep hole and saw a stupid football hat. Underneath it: unfamiliar pale features and a female body. Not one of her neighbors. Her paranoia skyrocketed, and she considered her options for running. The stranger looked up, right into the peep hole, and took off her hat.

Auburn hair, cramped and sweaty, was braided around the woman's skull. “I believe you know me, Ms. Fortune.”

The lady superhero, who'd been following her for the past few irritating days, was at her door. An Avenger. Not cops or thieves. Emily opened the door, mutely gestured for her visitor to enter. Inside, the woman vaguely glanced around before settling a disconcerting gaze on Emily. She'd never known that someone could stare at another person for that long and never twitch a muscle. Her heart was pattering away, waiting to die of awkwardness or maybe a knife in her chest.

Eventually, Emily's innate curiosity returned life to her tongue. “How's the stomach?”

Dark lips faintly curled. “Much better, thank you.”

Social etiquette helped move her along. “Want anything to drink? I've got wine, juice, water.”

Already moving toward the kitchen, aiming for a drink of her own, she barely heard the response for the riesling that was in the fridge. She was halfway to pouring it when she paused. “How'd you know what I had in the fridge?”

Greenish eyes simply smiled at her.

Right. A woman who had found Emily could just as easily have broken in and poked around her apartment, hence the hunt for spy stuff the other day. “Have a seat.” She set out a second glass, stilled as she watched her visitor gingerly seat herself. Pain. Emily wondered if it was from the injury she'd helped with or something newer. There hadn't been anything in the news, but that didn't mean anything. She wasn't naive enough to think that the Avengers didn't do covert operations.

She gulped most of her glass down, refilled it, took both glasses to the living room. “You've been
following me for the last few days, haven't you?”

Wine glass halfway to dark red lips, “Your sixth sense must serve you well in the transportation business.”

It did. Emily hadn't been caught yet. Well, that one time, but that had been a poor choice of associates. And then that second time, but she’d rather have a rapsheet than have her gift become public knowledge. The line of people beating down her door to heal their sick babies would never end. There would always be somebody in desperate need of help only she could give. Being a prophet would drive her to an early grave. “You searched my place too.”

“I wanted to know who I was dealing with.”

“Not a great way to earn someone's trust, especially when you want a favor out of them.” Emily's grumble earned her another uncomfortable stare.

“I believe that you offered your favor as a gift for my services to Earth.” Her tone was clouded. Had she insulted the woman? Sighing, she apologized. “I'm nervous. Sorry. I get rude when I'm nervous.”

“Do I make you nervous?” Clearly, that smoky tone was toying with her.

Her initial response to tell the woman that she damn well knew what she was doing faded. Everyone had their own unique coping mechanisms. Some people used distraction techniques to hide their own insecurities. “Ms...” Avenger? “I don't actually know your name. Sorry, I usually get someone's name before I put my hands on them.”

“Natalia Romanova,” slid out. Barely a second later, she looked horrified, though it was carefully, efficiently replaced by cool nonchalance.

It didn't take a lot to realize that Natalia wasn't the name she wanted Emily to be familiar with, and Emily had known enough people only by street handles to know the value of names. She saluted the Avenger with her wine glass. “An honor, Natalia. What would you rather I know you by?”

Noisy neighbor kids ran by her door before Natalia responded coolly. “The world knows me as Natalie Rushman. You could have googled it. Everything about me is out there.”

She should have, though she doubted that much truth was actually available to the public about this superhero. Embarrassed nonetheless, she chuckled. “Didn't occur to me. Too busy freaking out that I'd given an authority figure my own real name, I guess.”

Natalia stopped looking ready to leap into action and eased back into the armchair. “You're a refreshingly surprising woman, Ms. Fortune.”

Um? “Thank you?”

More noise from the hallway filtered in, and they sipped their wine. Sirens rushed around the city somewhere. Otherwise, little got through the thick walls and sturdy windows. That was one of the main reasons she'd gotten the place. She was too light of a sleeper to deal with a noisy neighborhood. A comfortable quiet settled between the women, and Emily allowed her eyes to trace the lines of the other woman.

“Enjoying the view?”
Yes. She replied through her blush. “I was wondering if you wanted me to finish what I started back in Ohio.”

Natalia twitched.

“That stomach wound is still pretty painful, isn’t it?”

Was there a debate of whether to kill her or not behind those pretty eyes again? Natalia finished off her wine. “You're eager to get your hands on me again.”

Back to perplexing teasing. What was this woman's special skillset? Spying? Emily berated her lack of interest in the Avengers' individual personas. Following celebrities just wasn't her thing, even after meeting one. That she even knew the name Black Widow was because her best friend loved the gossip pages and talking about them. “My patients are rarely as attractive as you, Ms. Rushman.”

A slow, flirtatious smile was tossed at her, and Natalia slowly lifted her shirt. “Well?”

Was this woman gay, bisexual, or simply aware of the power of her own sensuality? Emily went with the latter. It was doubtful that someone of her caliber would be interested in a plain mule like herself. Even more in doubt was Emily's own interest in pursuing a woman as dangerous and misleading as this one. She squashed her attraction and switched into business mode. Glass was set aside, and she went to her knees in front of her patient. She arranged her hands gently around the irritated pink poking out from under a bandage.

“Remember, the pain won’t last long.”

The power she kept hidden rushed to the surface and into the injury, encouraging repair and health. A little noise came from Natalia, but she gave no other sign of the sting of healing. Unlike in Ohio's triage scenario, Emily kept the power flowing until the wound was only a memory, then moved her hands to bruised ribs. Hairline fracture in the sternum. Minor swelling in a hip. Abraded cartilage. An irritated retina. Oddities in the brain were passed over. Her knowledge level about human anatomy wasn't broad enough to give her any confidence in dabbling with complex brain injuries. Having practical knowledge to aid her gift was why she’d studied biology and anatomy in college. Her teachers hadn't understood why she didn't finish her credits, get a degree, and she couldn't explain to them that she'd gotten what she needed out of college.

Normally, no one got such a thorough exam, but this woman regularly put her life on the line to protect people. She was a protector of Emily's home. Had saved her life back in Ohio, though Natalia might not realize that. And Emily was curious about her. As she finished with the little things, she returned her hands to the pale stomach, hovered over the broken reproductive system. Emily met and held her gaze. “Do you want me to repair this too?”

Something flashed across her face. Too fast to guess at, but the adrenaline shooting through her encouraged Emily to wait quietly for an answer.

Five minutes. She lowered her hands to Natalia's leg. Then ten passed. Fifteen frayed her nerves. At twenty, Emily whispered, “This is an offer that will always be open to you, Natalia. You can ask for it at any time. Or not. I won't prod either way.”

Silently, sharply, Natalia stood up and left. The door clicked softly behind her.

Safely alone, Natasha collapsed to her knees, a fist curled into the shirt over her heart. Old
memories and nightmares railed at her mind, beat at mental defenses weakened by her interactions with Fortune. She'd behaved like a complete novice today! She held onto that slip of a thought, anchored herself with the anger of it, cleared a path for rational thought. She went through a flurry of them before a fresh one sparked.

One that left her feeling hot and cold, terrified and hopeful. What about the mental triggers in her head? Was Fortune's gift limited to mere physical injuries?

Could she be truly free of the Red Room?

Chapter End Notes

minor edits 03Dec2019 :)

“Good morning.” Natasha held up a bag of fresh bagels. “I brought breakfast.”

“The only acceptable way to wake me up.” Emily yawned and turned away, leaving the door open and wandered to her bathroom.

Amused at the woman’s bed hair, she grinned to herself and went into the well-stocked kitchen. She put water in the boiler, turned it on, fished the loose leaf tea, honey, and mugs from the cupboard, found raspberries in the fridge, and dropped a sliced bagel into the toaster. Steam erupted from the boiler at the same time Emily returned, glasses on her nose, hair brushed, face slightly damp.

“Black tea okay?”

Emily blinked and nodded, sat down at the breakfast bar. “You look comfortable in my kitchen.”

She was. “It's clean and organized. You also have good taste.” She'd been in a lot of kitchens on various jobs, but few made her comfortable. Few were this clean, let alone full of spices, teas, and food that appealed to Natasha's snobbish palate. She could eat cheap shit, had on more than one crappy mission, didn't mean it appealed to her.

Fewer still actually invited her to linger. Fortune's did, despite her wariness of the woman herself. Clint's always had, though only because he was her friend. His kitchen as a bachelor had been hygienic, but haphazard and ill-stocked and tiny. Laura's control over the farm's pantry was much more acceptable. Having children and an oft-absent husband kept it less clean and organized than both Lauren and Natasha liked. She helped with dishes and bi-yearly cupboard cleaning when she visited.

“If you're going to prepare me breakfast regularly,” was cooed as tea and a bowl of raspberries were set in front of her. “Feel free to move in.”

Hot bagel was dropped to a plate, studied. Aside from living in dorm-like settings, and sharing more than a few hotel rooms with Clint, Natasha had never shared a home with anyone. Her longtime apartment in New York City had been decimated the previous year. She had stayed at the Barton farm in Georgia until she'd found a place in Washington D.C. near S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Triskelion headquarters. Yet, being a guest was a far cry from calling someplace home. Having a sparse apartment devoid of family photos or heirlooms or the clutter of friendly gifts wasn't home either. What was a home supposed to feel like? “Toasted or not?”

“Toasted. With butter, please.”

The fridge gave up the requested item, and Natasha delivered it with a knife before putting another bagel in the toaster. Crunching was accompanied by a satisfied groan. Natasha slathered her own bagel with plain cream cheese, chose a stool at the bar, and tucked into her own breakfast. Mouth busy, she studied the empty wine bottles that lined the tops of the cupboards. Each was from a different vineyard, of varying vintages and rarity. She recognized most of them. If they'd been full, there would have been thousands of dollars worth of wine sitting up there. She slid a grin to Emily. “Did you enjoy them?”

Emily sipped her tea, her eyes dancing with memories. “Some of them were shit, but I enjoyed
The next hour melted into a complex discussion of wine, wherein Natasha shared an ounce of herself, including a few bouts of soft laughter. She even allowed the conversation to travel freely, didn't purposely try to draw information out of the Avengers candidate. And Emily didn't ask why Natasha had returned nor of her previous departure. Talk shifted to travel, and Emily surprised her by asking candid questions about her, though did not press, did not demand, and seemed to understand when Natasha avoided any discussion of childhood.

Emily set aside her second cup of tea, stood, stretched. “An Avenger is sharing wine and travel stories with me. I've met a lot of interesting people in my line of work, but you're damn near at the top of that list.” She gathered up the breakfast dishes, ran hot water into the sink, poured a little soap in. “I'd planned on going to the gym today, maybe call a friend to come over for dinner.” Freshly scrubbed dishes were rinsed, and she wrung out the rag to wipe up the counters. “Should I change my plans?”

“No. Why don't I come back tomorrow?”

Finished with the slightly dry chapter in her novel, Emily lowered it, looked at her house guest. Sitting in the same chair she'd chosen on the first day was Natalia. Yes, Emily called her Ms. Rushman out loud, especially when a friend had shown up unexpectedly, begging for a few cookies for a sudden roadtrip to a funeral, but Natalia was embedded in her mind. The redhead felt eyes on her, dragged her own from the borrowed book in her hands.

“Should I get you a key?”

Natalia twisted her head, took in Emily's apartment. “The décor could use a little updating, but your tea and wine selection are appealing.” She pat the book in her lap. “I wonder, could you handle living with the Black Widow?”

Where the hell was this going? “This is a new way to get a roommate.”

“How much do you know about me?”

“You're an Avenger. A hero.” She shrugged. “Really good with a gun.”

“I was trained since I was a girl to be the perfect assassin. I've killed more people than you have friends, and I would not hesitate to kill you if I thought you were a threat.” Calmly spoken, a slight smile on her face, Natalia was terrifying.

Emily swallowed against the growing knot in her throat. “I haven't had a roommate in a while, but I could adapt.”

“You use the money you earn illegally transporting drugs ac-”

“ Weed,” was her automatic interruption. “I move weed and weed products. How often do you hear about dangerous potheads or THC overdoses?” Rarely and never. Of course, she needed to look up the data on reported overdoses to make sure it was still zero. And a special cookie every now and then helped her sleep after a hard day. “If it was legal, the drug cartels wouldn't have the power they do now.”

Sharp interest never left her face. “You do well under pressure.”
“What the hell i-”

“What motivates you, Emily?”


An eyebrow peaked. “What could convince you to change professions?”

Same pay, less stress, and just as much fun. “Why?”

“Ever considered using your gift to get paid?”

“Of course.” Mood immediately soured, “I was a teenager once.” Emily got up from the couch, went to the door. “I think it's time you left.”

Her visitor blinked up at her, confusion and humor clear on her face. “No key?”

Emily hung her head, rubbed her forehead, opened the door. She jerked at a touch on her hand. Natalia was right in front of her. How had she gotten up and across the room without making a sound? That chair creaked! “I doubt you need a key.”

“I don't. I've actually been interviewing you to come live where I do.” She canted her head. “How do you feel about the District of Columbia?”

“I was right.” Natasha told Clint back at the Triskelion after an hour in the gun range.

He was peering down the barrel of his dismantled pistol. “About what?”

“Her eyes and skin. They didn't match.” Her own handgun sat out in pieces in front of her. Oil and brushes sat ready as well.

The barrel was set down. “Okay?”

“When she engages her gift, her pigmentation is affected.”

“ Weird. Do you know why?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Clint leaned forward. “I noticed that you aren't wincing every time you bend. Even you don't heal that fast. She take care of it?”

“Yes and other injuries that I wasn't aware of until they were gone.” She hadn't felt this whole in years.

“And the other thing?” He asked carefully.

“I wasn't ready.” A breath. “She said that it's an open offer. I can ask any time.”

Support came through a hand on her shoulder. He gave her a nod. “I like her already.” It was hard not to like someone who made that kind of offer and didn't even comment about it to Director Fury during his interview with her.
“Limited office hours outside of field work, and I won't be sold out to the highest bidder,” were Emily's priority demands. “I won't become some healing prophet either.”

Nick Fury smiled at her. “We can work with that.”

“I choose who I take care of.”

“Yes. I think you mentioned that.”

“I didn't quite make myself clear. I will choose whether I help someone, even if they're a teammate dying on the battlefield.”

Would she leave someone to die if they got on her bad side? Had she misjudged this woman that badly?

“I'm not a soldier, and I will not blindly follow orders. That's what I'm saying.”

The Director hid his response well while he stared the smuggler down. His eye eventually slid over to Natasha. “I see why you emphasized her joining the Avengers instead of becoming a traditional agent.”

“Why?” Emily asked.

“Because the Avengers need someone who won't fall prey to bad orders.” He went on at Emily's frown. “Every one of them is a strong-willed personality and leadership isn't always clear.”

Leaning back into her chair, “That's not a great recruitment speech.”

“Really? I thought you'd appreciate being called strong and independent.”

“I do. The part where you're asking me to join a circus isn't very convincing.”

His fingers steepled. “She definitely lacks a soldier's respect.”

“The Avengers are a circus, director.” More like circus animals that hated their choreography lessons and bit their handlers. At least they'd have the best vet in the world taking care of them. “We always draw a crowd.”

Fury must have guessed at her unspoken thoughts; it was part of why Natasha respected him so much. That, and the fresh start he'd offered her, given her a legitimate life with S.H.I.E.L.D. after she'd spent years doing odd jobs and trying to erase her memories of the Red Room and its bloody missions. He nodded and returned to Emily. “If you're going to join our circus, Ms. Fortune, you'll need a code name. You're a pretty good smuggler. What about Moonshine?” He grinned at her, and she chuckled at the comparison between illegal alcohol and pot.

“No.”

He pouted. “Aw. I worked hard on that one.”

She made a light vomiting motion. “Moonshine is disgusting.”

“If I may?” Natasha interrupted with an idea that she'd been toying with. He inclined his head, and she looked at Emily. “Are you familiar with the ancient Egyptian goddess Sekhmet?” In her peripheral she caught Fury nodding thoughtfully.

“Isn't she associated with the ankh?”
“Yes. The ankh of life. Her priests were known as skilled doctors.”

Emily was obviously intrigued.

“She was also known as the lady of terror,” was Fury's chuckle.

A goddess of life and death. She was associated with the burning desert heat and fearsome lion.
“Yes. That too.”


“What was that?” Fury asked.

“It's not in my file? Really?” She squinted at them.

Natasha knew that Fury was irritated under his smile. He hated incomplete files. “Didn't you know that criminals don't like to leave paper trails?”

Emily rolled her eyes, but laughed. “Fair enough. It'll be weird to be almost legit.”

Fury shifted his weight. “Aren't you going to tell us?”

“What?”

Natasha silently laughed at the director's impatient curiosity.

“Your nickname, woman.”

“Han Solo.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Han Solo, from Star Wars.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “Never saw it.”

Emily gaped at him. “Are you kidding me?”

Natasha's laugh spilled out. “There are some things Nick Fury doesn't know.”

Metal parts began sliding against each other, and Clint's gun took shape. Natasha checked the cleanliness of her own. “Emily will be joining the Avengers Initiative.”

The hammer clicked on the empty chamber. “Okay. What else do I need to know about her?”
Other than what was in the dossier that he'd been given.

“You're not going to be able to 'dad' her.”

Clint chuckled. “We'll see about that.”
Being an Avenger trainee living and working in the Triskelion, SHIELD's Washington, DC headquarters, lost its shiny new toy gleam after the second week of constant physical training. She didn't know that she could ache this much! Agent Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow's name among colleagues, was the most brutal physical trainer ever. She made Emily run every single day. Faster and longer than Emily had ever bothered with in the past. Self-defense, teamwork exercises, weapons training, and vehicle maneuvering left her bruised and exhausted, barely able to eat and falling into bed every night. Only one day a week was light duty. She usually slept through most of those.

After the seventh week, she yearned for her truck, music and audiobooks, and exploring roadside attractions. She got a break when the Black Widow and Hawkeye were sent on an information-gathering mission. A little break. Deputy-Director Hill assigned another trainer to get Emily ready for fieldwork. Halfway through the third day with the stern-faced man, Emily went to Deputy-Director Hill, complaining that turning her to be a commando was unnecessary. She was a healer, not a soldier.

“And if there are enemy troops between you and your patient? What then, Sekhmet?” Agent Hill countered.

She hadn't quite thought of it that way. “Guess training isn't such a bad idea.”

“But I suppose a few days off would be just as beneficial. Why don't you take four days, go to a beach or whatever relaxes you. Spend some of that money you've been getting beat up for.” Hill was too attractive for her own good when she smiled. Damn. It'd been a while. Her last relationship had left her a little numb toward women for the past couple years.

Figures that the first women she'd feel much for would be a superhero and their boss. “Yea. Okay.” Her friends had been wondering where'd she been, and she could use a few days in her own apartment. “I'll book a flight tomorrow.”

“Alright. I'll see you next week, agent. Enjoy your time off.”

Agent. Emily got up and went for the door. Would she ever get used to being called an agent? That was some FBI, Big Brother shit. If her contacts ever got wind of it, she'd never work in the business again. Did she want to? She nodded at a face she recognized, but didn't stop to say anything. All she'd done was run a few laps, heal an agent who came back from a mission with broken ribs; she hadn't even gone on a mission herself. What if she wasn't cut out for this shit?

“Deep thoughts there, agent?” Director Fury was in front of her, his one-eyed gaze as disconcerting as always.

“Just wondering if learning to shoot a gun from a motorcycle was worth the pay raise, director.”

His chuckle was unexpected. “I almost forgot how candid you were.”

“I always found it to be useful in my field of work.”
“Integrity in a criminal isn't a common idea.”

She shrugged. “When paperwork can't be trusted, our word is the most important thing we have, isn't it?”

What was behind the eye patch? “Yes it is, Agent Fortune.” He looked far away. “A life without paperwork. Wouldn't that be interesting?”

“Speaking of paperwork, I just got a few days off and wanted to book a flight home, unless there was something specific you wanted to talk about?”

“Actually, there was.” His stance shifted from casual to formal. “Dr. Banner and Mr. Stark will be in town next week. They'll want to meet their new teammate.”

She matched names with Avengers. The Hulk and Iron Man. “I've read up on them. If the Hulk is the result of genetic change, I may not be able to help him.”

“I'm sure Dr. Banner will appreciate any insight you can give.” He shifted. “Enjoy your time off, agent.”

“I will. See you next week, director.”

“How'd you go from the cannabis to the security industry?” Lizzie demanded during an intermission in best friend game night. Orange juice, peach schnapps, and vodka swirled in her glass.

“It's legal and pays better.” Juices and rum mixed together, making a pretty hurricane.

The fuzzy navel was sipped and more schnapps added to it. “Still can't believe you didn't consult me first.”

“Lizzie, you're my best friend, not my wife.”

She sniffed. “Future Mrs. Fortune may have been looking for a cannabis hookup.”

At thirty-three, she was pickier than ever about partners, and now had a job that people didn't even know existed. It had been hard enough screening the tiny dating pool for a woman who was not only okay with Emily's profession, but who would have appreciated the hard work she put into it. Adding that she didn't want a crazy anarchist, schmoozing gold digger, lazy pothead, or socially inept hermit, and her choices had dwindled. She liked what she did and supported cannabis for medicine and recreation, but the industry certainly attracted its fair share of weirdos. There was that farmer she'd had a little crush on for ages... she should've taken Luda up on her sweet offer last year.

“Why'd you turn Luda down?” How was Lizzie always in her head? “That woman is amazing despite being totally into your sorry ass.”

Luda was tall, beautiful, and had this cute little Polish accent. She had a successful farm, was well-liked in the community, paid her workers better than she should, and was one of the smartest, most well-read people who Emily had ever known. They flirted all the time, had fallen into bed once or twice, and could talk or sit quietly for hours.

“Em?”
Why wasn't Luda good enough for her? Was she really not over her ex? “It never felt right.”

Lizzie sighed. “You're looking for Mrs. Fortune, not Mrs. Perfect.”

“Yea.” But wasn't she entitled to her desires? To wanting more than contentment, to wanting passion? “Luda is great, but...”

“God, Em. Only someone like you could find a freakin goddess and turn her down.”

Insulted, she backhanded Lizzie's arm. “Hey!”

“I meant that nicely. You're too chivalrous to settle and end up hurting your partner when you got bored.” Like Emily's ex had done to her.

“Not at all. My motivations are purely selfish.” She never wanted to hurt Luda or anyone else, but saying that out loud made her sound way too vulnerable.

“Too chivalrous to notice your own chivalry. If you were a man, I'd be in trouble.” Lizzie chuckled at their old joke. It was a damn good thing that Emily had gotten over her crush on Lizzie the first year they'd known each other; it would've ruined a perfectly good eleven-year friendship. It'd been a near thing though. Lizzie's Navajo and Iranian heritage had given her the sexiest eyes and most perfect skin ever.

“If I were a man, Kyle would hate me.” Kyle, Lizzie's fiance of three years. “you two settled on a location yet?” That was what had kept them engaged instead of married for two of those years. They wouldn't agree on a place to tie the knot. Both had family spread across the nation and the globe. Emily had once suggested that they have two ceremonies, two locations. It had seemed a good idea until Lizzie's mother had felt slighted that her side of the family wouldn't see the first, most important ceremony, that they had to wait. Bickering had commenced, led to angry silence over the video chat, and Emily had gotten a prime spot on the mother's I hate these people list.

“Now we're thinking of a place that everyone will hate.”

Perfect. Emily laughed. “Where's that impossible spot?”

“Antarctica.”

She laughed harder. “The penguins will better dressed than half your guests.”

Lizzie pouted around her giggles. “Dammit, Em, you're not allowed to wear blue jeans to my wedding!”

She'd wear anything her best friend wanted, but that wouldn't stop her from complaining about the conservative and horridly ugly green dresses that Lizzie had picked out to satisfy her mother. “Why not? Your mom already hates me.”

“She doesn't, but if you wear anything but your gown, she'll yell at me for it, and I will kick your sorry ass.” A little punch to Emily's bicep followed. “Speaking of.” the bicep was felt up. “You won't stay single long at this rate. Fuck, woman, even your muffin top is gone!”

Tugging at her loose jeans, “I've gained weight.” She'd been too exhausted to even notice her body's changes until she'd gotten home two days ago.

“And it's all muscle!” She tugged and pulled until Emily lost her shirt. “Damn, woman, you're going all Jillian Michaels on me.”
“Jillian's got nothing on my trainer.” The Black Widow made the famous martial artist and physical trainer look like a lump.

Despite being on her third, extra-strong fuzzy navel, Lizzie went serious quickly. “Why are you training like this? Why'd you switch jobs? What the hell, Em?”

What she didn't say was, “Why didn't you tell your best friend? Why are you keeping secrets?”

In that moment, the confidentiality agreement with Director Fury went out the door. Lizzie had been loyally keeping Emily's secrets for years, and was basically family. “I'm a secret agent now.”

The serious face went a surprised, then fell into laughter. “Come on, Em. Don't fuck with me.”

“I'm serious. I'm working with the Avengers.”

Lizzie's laughter built up. “You're working with superheroes?”

“I'm their new healer.”

The laughter cut off. She had become witness to Emily's gift two years into their friendship. A drunk driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and run them off the road. Emily had healed Lizzie's broken ribs and punctured lung, pulled her from the upside down car, and rescued the drunk from their burning truck before calling 911. She'd done all that with a dislocated shoulder, bruised ribs, and whiplash.

After, she'd been willing not to press charges and move to a different city just to keep her gift a secret. It had taken Lizzie nearly chaining herself to Emily to keep her from disappearing. Lizzie knew Emily did not joke about exposing her gift.

Lizzie swept her into a crushing embrace. “I feel safer already.”

After the Battle of New York, nightmares about the alien invasion had been a common thing for a lot of people. It wasn't just for the superheroes that had fought in it. Lizzie only had them occasionally now instead of every night. According to the rumors that Emily had heard at the lunch table, the resident Avengers had been having nightmares long before the portal had opened. She wondered if Natasha's nightmares were linked to whatever had caused her sterility.

Emily jabbed a finger at Tony Stark's glowing chest. He and Bruce Banner had introduced themselves to her the afternoon that she'd returned, but had gotten distracted by test results of some sort and left with barely a polite goodbye. She'd joined them at lunch and been making conversation about the effects of velocity on the human body. At a pause, she gestured at his chest. “I could make that, uh,” stumbling at Stark's sudden piercing attention, “unnecessary if you wanted.”

He touched the little power source, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Huh.” Fingers drummed a brief staccato. “I'll keep that in mind.” Eyes that were normally laughing turned somber and flickered over to his fellow science geek who was completely engrossed with whatever was on his tablet screen. Probably something for the secret mission that Fury had used to convince them to help with.

“No.” Sadly, guiltily, she shook her head. “I've tried. His genes think going green is normal. I can't change that.”
Covered in mud from training in the rain all morning, Emily was too hungry to bother with
showering and changing before lunch. She'd be out in the shit weather again after it anyway. She
followed her nose to the mess hall, got a hot sandwich and a bowl of fruit and plopped at an empty
table. Halfway through the sandwich, a body slid into the seat opposite her.

“Been having fun without me? I'm hurt.” The Black Widow, with perfectly dry curls, pouted at her.

“You're welcome to come out with me and get mud in your ears too, Agent Romanoff.”

A half smile was hidden behind a cup of tea. “I've been sitting in stinking mud all week. I'm happy
to have a dry day, thank you very much.”

“Pansy.” Where had she been? It'd only started raining in DC yesterday. She knew better than to
ask, however, and went back to her lunch.

“There you are.” A man's voice joined them. She looked up to see Hawkeye putting his butt in a
chair beside Romanoff. “Hey.” A calloused hand was held over the table. “We haven't officially
met yet. Clint Barton. Hawkeye.”

She managed to grab his hand despite the surprise at the sharing of his real name. “Emily Fortune.
Sekhmet.”

“You totally made Nat's week doing that, you know.”

“Nat?” Agent Romanoff had not struck her as the type to allow nicknames, let alone smile
indulgently at them. How close were these two?

He squinted at Emily. “Nat. Natasha. You're not still calling her Agent Romanoff are you? The
woman steals your tea. Don't let her fool you; she's not all deadly smiles and sharp knives.”

“I know.” About both. She'd had a load of extra tea shipped here exactly for that reason. And to
share with other people, make some friends, but her lack of free time had mostly quashed that idea.
“But exotic tea biscuits and sweets started appearing as the tea vanished, so I figured it was fair
trade.”

The half smile didn't move, but Clint's expression flew open in surprise. “So that's why you wanted
to stop in Rome on the way back.”

A light shrug rolled from delicate-appearing shoulders.

“Wouldn't it be easier to get your own tea than steal Emily's and replace it with exotic cookies?”

Amusement sparkled in those pretty green eyes. “What fun would that be?”

The smile that had started as mischievous reshaped into a warm and affectionate thing. Natalia
shoulder-checked Hawkeye and rolled her eyes, but the smile only seemed to deepen with it. “Call
me Clint, and call her Natasha.”

She had the distinct feeling that she'd missed something. It overrode the awe of this other Avenger
inviting her to address himself and the Black Widow informally, almost intimately. “Shouldn't I
wait for her to invite me to use her first name?”

“She replaces your tea with cookies. She already has.” Clint argued.

That made a certain amount of sense. Emily considered it, met Natalia's gaze.
“Natasha is fine, Emily.”

The use of her own first name instead of Agent Fortune or Sekhmet confirmed it. She had no idea what was going on. Natalia-Natasha, might as well try to use that name in her head now, was smiling at her. It seemed genuine, soft, maybe even a little fearful. Fear of what? Trusting Emily? That made a sad sort of sense if half of what she’d been allowed to read of her files was true. She’d been a KGB spy and assassin, trained to trust in no one and nothing except herself and her superiors.

“Natasha. Okay.” She popped the last bit of fruit in her mouth. “I better get back to training. See you.”

Two pairs of sharp eyes watched her go.

Emily took careful note of the way Natasha interacted with the other Avengers, how they reacted to her and she them. Her concept of the woman adjusted as she watched the comfortable friendship between Natasha and Clint. She was different with him, her emotions almost open, trust glinting in her eyes as they talked, laughed, even argued. Around anyone else, she was guarded, using sarcasm, wit, and sensuality to keep them at distance, to manipulate them into thinking it was their idea.

She was the same way with Emily. Yet...

Maybe it due to the extensive healing she’d done, to the tiny, but hugely important details she knew. Natalia Romanova was sterile, deeply emotional about that fact and its origins. The vulnerability that had been accidentally shown her seemed to give her an understanding of the assassin that none but Clint and Director Fury seemed to have.

It explained why Emily could sometimes see past the facades and understand hidden emotions that had her responding in ways that their colleagues stared at her for. She finally grasped that Natasha both feared and trusted Emily. One might precede the other. Her head hurt thinking about it. By the end of June when she was deemed ready for her first low-risk mission, she decided to simply go with it and do her best to dispel the fear and earn the trust.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to follow and comment! :D
Limping from the office building, Natasha paused to survey the area. It looked quiet enough. Pedestrians and cyclists were obliviously going about their days. No police sirens wailed. She glanced over her shoulder. No one was following her. She wished that she hadn't lost her earpiece when she'd been surprised by that off-duty guard, that she knew Clint's mission status. Shoving that aside, she headed for the car, froze when she saw a man in a suit talking to Emily beside it.

Her hand found its way around her gun. Hesitantly, she renewed her approach, shoving aside the pain to walk normally. Emily laughed at something the man said, pointed down the road, and waved as the man strolled away. Pausing beside an empty car, Natasha pretended to fiddle in her purse and swept the area with her tense attention again. Nothing stood out, and the man was turning a corner. She finished the approach to Emily, who covered her worry with a smile. “How did the interview go?”

“I might have gotten the job,” was her coded reply. Mission success, time to get Clint.

A brighter smile lit Emily’s face, and she continued the script, hugging Natasha, saying the code phrase for all clear on her side. They got into the car, and Emily set them down the road to where Clint should be waiting.

Natasha felt a hand on her bare knee, right below her skirt's hemline, and a flirtatious comment layered with threat died on her tongue. Pain was chattering in her abused ankle. It switched to warm tingles and vanished. The hand withdrew.

Making her tone light and unconcerned, Natasha asked, “How did you know?” Bare skin had not brushed during the scripted hug. Had she not hidden the pain and limp well enough?

Delicately, eyes shifted from road to Natasha. “I didn't see you limp, if that's what you're asking. It was in your eyes and shoulders that something was wrong.”

“Must be all that time you spend staring at me instead of training.” She went with her default flirt.

“Someone needs to be able to read you when Hawkeye's not around,” was the matter of fact, confident, and unnerving reply.

She wanted to make a haughty, sarcastic retort that people could only read her if she let them. It would have been a lie, because Clint usually could, Laura sometimes, Fury fairly often, and it was blatantly obvious that Emily was learning to. The first three, she had worked at allowing her defenses down around them, gave them clues and nuggets into her mind and heart. She could always put up a blank stone-face, one that no one could read, but that in itself was a tell that she was hiding something.

Yet here was this woman, whom she had not intended to let in, reading minute details like muscle tension to discern what Natasha hid from everyone else. The sudden lack of choice of whether to expose herself to another person definitely frightened her, but...

Pedestrians were crossing at the intersection. One was a young man thumbing away at his
smartphone, not paying any attention to what was ahead of him. A second young man guided him around another oblivious phone-user and light pole. At the curb, he stumbled, was caught by his partner, and he blushed before saying thank you and kissing him. Smiling, they faded into the crowd.

It made her feel like a normal person, this unexpected transparency with another person, especially with one who had made no motions of hostility or ill motives. She simply seemed to care. Natasha didn't know what to do with it, except to watch as it happened.

They collected Clint, who had completed his part of the mission without incident or injury and caught their flight home.

“Training mission went well?” Steve asked when they bumped into each other at the elevator near Fury's office.

The natural authority in his tone had her reporting, “Emily stayed where she was supposed to, kept a low profile, and got us where we needed to be. I've recommended her for further missions.”

He hummed. “Still not sure how I feel about working with a drug runner, but if you've given her a green light, then I'll give her the benefit of the doubt.”

“You realize that I've broken more laws in more countries than she ever has, right?”

The thought obviously hadn't much occurred to him. “Ah. Right.”

“And you did a fair bit of breaking the law yourself when you kept applying for the military.”

His flush was cute. He was such a naive kid sometimes. “That I did.” It was easy to forget that this World War II veteran and natural leader had experienced less years than Emily, or any of the other Avengers really. “Well, unless you have any more of my hypocrisies to point out, I'd better get to my meeting with the director.”

Amused, she grinned. “Not right now. See you later, Cap.”

Pursuit yelled, banged, and made enough noise to rouse the entire low rent neighborhood. Lights flicked in several apartment windows before hurriedly going dark again. Natasha tightened the soaked bandage around her thigh and stumbled along the wet alleyway. She hoped that she made it to Emily before she bled out. Through the earpiece, Emily hissed that she was close, complained that they should have brought Clint or anyone else for backup. She had either ignored Natasha's orders to remain at the rendezvous, or the radio was broken. The radio had been working fine ten minutes ago. Then again, half an hour ago, this simple, easy mission was still just that.

“How hard can it be to find a woman that's bleeding like a stuck pig?” The security boss roared through the cold autumn rain. “Find her! Bring her to me!” Worse than death was promised.

Natasha tripped over herself, fell hard to the stone, rolled through a stinking puddle, got back to her feet. Cursing the day's bad luck, and her darkening vision, she trudged forward. A splash had her whipping up a small knife, pressing it to Emily's jugular. Relief flooded her.

“Glad to see you're still awake.” Emily caught her as her strength vanished. “Bite down on my jacket. It's going to hurt.”
Familiar sharp pain was already needling through her as she gathered Emily's collar into her mouth. She gave the fabric her muffled scream. A new sensation began. What felt like several little knives were cutting through her thigh. It was in the area of the bullet wound. Teeth firmly embedded in Emily's jacket, she couldn't twist to look. Her hand reached down in time to feel small shards brush her fingers. The pain stopped.

She let go of the fabric with a gasp, her body firmly in Emily's strong hold. Down at the ground, she looked at the bits of metal. Bullet fragments. “Sit.” Emily arranged her on a wooden crate. She took the knife and started cutting at Natasha's pants.

Confusion flailed through the fog of blood loss. “What?”

“Ripped jeans are still a ridiculous fashion choice.” She glanced up, must have seen the bewilderment. “It'll hide the bullet hole.” The knife scraped at the edges, drew out threads, made the damage look older. Shouts from too close made her jump, cut Natasha's leg. She cursed and repaired the flesh. Her eyes went up to Natasha's hair, and she tugged it back into a sloppy tail. Nat's top was stared at next. “Too memorable.”

The sparkly blouse was torn off, stuffed deep beneath trash, and her own tight shirt replaced it. She slid her soaked jacket back on, the knife vanishing into a pocket, and tugged at Natasha's limp weight. They lurched further down the alley, away from the sounds of pursuit. Emily paused, made Natasha sit again. She pulled something from a pants pocket and held it out to a bum drinking in a doorway.

Money. She made motions, and it was exchanged for a half-empty bottle of cheap liquor. “You should smell like the drunk you look.”

The sugars in the drink would help a little, but she knew the alcohol would hit her fast, and the hangover would be hell. She took a long pull. Emily mirrored it, and they wavered forth again. Two mouthfuls on an empty stomach later, the alcohol was making her stumble worse. She spilled some down her soaked cleavage.

She was so busy staring at her own tits that she barely heard Emily curse. Her fuzzy vision swam up, caught sight of two armed men coming toward them. An old, overused tactic came to Natasha. Sloppily, she twisted in Emily's arms, grabbed at her face.

“Nat? What're y-” Lips over hers ended the question. She choked, pushed Natasha back. “Hey, I know blood loss-”

“i'm drunk. You're half-naked. We're hiding in it.” Natasha hissed over her. She scraped nails along Emily's side, grinned at the sharp inhale.

“You two!”

Natasha lifted her chin for another kiss. Emily swore and captured her lips, digging fingers into Natasha's hips, making her gasp. A tongue dipped into her open mouth.

“Hey, you!” The yelling stranger and his friend were nearly on them.

The drink and excitement of a good kiss gave Natasha a shot of energy to push Emily back, intending to slam her against a wall, thrust a knee between her legs...

But their legs tangled, their feet lost traction, and they fell backwards, crashing through trash and debris. “Shit!”
From atop Emily, Natasha saw a lean man with a gun point it down at them. His friend, the yeller, outweighed her by a hundred pounds of thick muscle. “You, take your pants off.”

Emily growled up at him in the little bit of Bulgarian she'd picked up. “Get lost, assholes.”

He reached down, yanked Natasha up by the shirt. “Pants. Off.”

Keeping calm mostly because she was too weak to kill him and his friend, Natasha fumbled with her button and zipper, but couldn't get the pants down very far. “Kinda wet.”

The gun's muzzle was shoved at the crotch of the pants, forcing the sodden fabric down her thighs. He withdrew it to poke at the thighs and released his hold. Natasha crashed down with a yelp of pain. Emily's hands immediately went to her, but the muzzle dragged her up by the chin. “Pants.”

“Asshole,” spat out of Emily's mouth, her friendly face distorted by rage. Sharp movements later, she thrust her loose trousers down, revealing a few freckles. Were they everywhere, those freckles?

A growl later, the large man whipped out a phone, spat out about the failed lead, gave the women a disgusted look. “Drunk whores. Get out of here.”

Her exposed chest heaving, Emily glared death at his back, white-knuckled her pants back up. She closed her eyes, sucked in a bellyful through her nose. Letting it out, she knelt, battled Natasha's pants back into position, took a deep swig from the liquor bottle before shoving it into a back pocket, and gently got them on their feet. “You okay?”

It wasn't a question about Natasha's physical health. Her worried tone was for her mental state. Drunk, tired, adrenaline-high, Natasha's unchained desires wrapped around Emily, pressed her face to a cold neck that she kissed tenderly. She relished the embrace that Emily folded around her. If she'd had the energy, her normal defenses would have slammed up with her following thought. In the short time she'd known Emily, she'd come to trust her as implicitly as she did Clint.

Emily was dangerously close to becoming as important in Natasha's guarded heart as well. To be honest, she'd already acknowledged the trust or she wouldn't have come on this mission alone with her, no matter how easy it was supposed to have been. A month was a long time for someone to live under a false identity in a foreign country without even the comfort of a familiar language. Yet, three weeks into the covert investigation, Emily seemed as comfortable in their cramped little safe house as she did at the Triskelion. She worked through any uncertainties and found time to laugh, found ways to make Natasha laugh. When they couldn't laugh, there was tea. A mug of good tea had always made Natasha feel better.

Emily seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to finding good teas.

“Safely ensconced in seats on the train, Natasha shivered in her sleep. Lingering adrenaline yet sharp in her veins, Emily jangled the leg that wasn't trapped under Natasha's weight and moved wet curls away from pale features and studied them. The little crush she had on the spy was getting dangerously close to being full-blown affection. The alleyway kisses hadn't helped. Her core remained hot and tight at the memory of lips and nails, at the feel of Natasha's sleeping form draped over her.

She turned her thoughts to the terror of the evening instead. Moving hundreds of pounds of weed across state lines had always given her an adrenaline high. It was part of the fun. She'd even had a
few close calls in sketchy neighborhoods, gang territory that she'd stumbled into one time. Nothing like this though. She'd never had a gun pointed that close to her face. The only memories that came close were from before her dad died. She grit her teeth against the onslaught of old horrors.

Wet hair slid across her shoulder as Natasha shifted. The woman was so much heavier than she looked. Her weight, though enticingly frustrating with all its lean muscle and feminine curves, was reassuring. They were both alive. A bit bruised and exhausted, but alive. She heard the station they wanted announced on the speakers, and she shook her friend. “Nat, hey. Our stop is coming up.”

Natasha didn't quite wake. Her body got up, leaned on Emily and walked with her. Emily checked, then laughed at the closed eyes. Through the station, up stairs, down the road in the continuous rain, she managed to get them to their apartment. She struggled with a fairly limp Natasha to get her out of wet clothes, towel her down, and get a glass of warm, honeyed water in her. Redressing her was too much work. Tired Emily still had to take care of herself. The spy was tucked into bed naked, and Emily got herself into dry clothes.

She used the little water boiler to make herself tea and found Natasha's cell phone. Clint answered. “Finished already?”

Knowing that the phone was full of great security stuff, she spoke almost freely. “Job went kinda balls up. We're alive,” she barked out at the man's sharp inhale. “Back at the safe house. She's asleep.”

“What went wrong?”

“I don't know.”

He breathed into the line, the silence filling with questions. “Are you okay?”

“A few bruises.”

“Not what I meant.”

She knew. Her head dropped into her hand. “We almost didn't get out. I pissed myself in a dirty backalley, Clint.” Her hands began to shake, and a choked cry escaped. Shock was setting in. “If she wasn't so damn smart, even after losing a few pints of blood, we'd...”

“Met.” Warmth emanated from his friendly version of her code name. “Met, you're alive.”

“But,” an argument flailed.

“Is she near you?”

She glanced over to the other bed in the shared bedroom. “Yea.”

“Go hold her hand.”

“What?”


The lump in the bed got her frown. Since joining the Avengers, she'd been well educated on how much Natasha Romanoff did not like unsolicited touch. “But...”

“Go!”
Uncertain, she got up, went to Natasha's bedside, found a hand under the blankets. It was cold and twitched at her touch. “Okay. Holding the assassin's hand.” And she didn't have a knife in her heart. The bad joke woke up the terror from earlier that night. She gulped.

“Do you feel her pulse?”

It pumped weakly, but it was there. “Yes.” She squeaked.

“Concentrate on it. That's a beating heart under there. Tell me how she's doing.”

“She's weak, but she's stable. She'll recover.”

“You're at the safe house?” He pursued.

Where was this going? “Yes.”

“Met, you're both alive. You're safe.” Noise garbled in the background. “You'll be okay. I have to go. Anchor yourself to her heartbeat if the anxiety builds up again. I'll call later.”

The line went silent, and the screen said the call was disconnected. She started counting Natasha's heart beats.

Muted sunlight prodded at her eyeballs. Natasha blinked, fluttered her lashes until she could focus on the familiar little apartment, the grey light trying to get through the rain clouds. She looked at Emily's empty bed. The screwed job flew into her awareness, and she bolted upright, looking for her partner. A wash of dizziness attacked her. When it passed, and she could see again, she found Emily. Her head and arm rested on Natasha's bed, a blanket around her shoulders, another under her legs.

Why? The blankets said that it wasn't accidental. She wouldn't have worried over Natasha's health. Damp hair was in the way. Natasha moved it to study her partner's face, frowned at puffy eyes, dark bags under them. She noticed the loosely gripped cell phone. There was an outgoing call to Clint about six hours ago. One incoming about three later. Both had several minutes logged. Conversations. Good. Emily would have given him a brief update on their well-being despite the shit night and dead mission.

Cold nipped at her breasts. Her eyebrows shot up at her nakedness, settled when she saw their clothes hanging in the bathroom. The ripped jeans brought back the previous night, and her nipples tightened with more than the chill of the room. She looked back at Emily. The woman had been terrified and angry, but had kept a cool head, saved them from a lot of trouble. And obviously got them both back to the safe house, out of their soaked clothes, and one of them into bed.

Careful not to wake Emily, Natasha slipped from the bed and checked first out the window, then the feeds from the various cameras they'd set up around the neighborhood, her email, and social media. Satisfied that they'd thrown their pursuers and weren't in danger, she found clothes to put on, started the water boiler, emptied what little was in her bladder. Rubbing her head, she found aspirin, took three with a glass of plain water. Then she went back, knelt down.

What did Clint tell you? She mouthed silently. Deal with the shock by sleeping in the most uncomfortable position possible? If they had large American-style beds, he'd probably have suggested cuddling. Natasha frowned at how it would be to wake up in bed with Emily. It appealed a little too much.
“Emily.”
She shifted, muttered.

“Emily. Get up and go to bed.”

“Natasha?” Drowsy mumbling, then her head shot up, her eyes shooting wildly.

Natasha grabbed her chin. “We're in the safe house.” The boiler whistled, and Emily relaxed. “Get in the bed, and I'll bring you a cup.”

She made them both chamomile with honey. Turning around, she chuckled. “I didn't mean my bed. No, stay put. I won't be going back to sleep anyway.” Sitting on the bed, hip brushing a knee through blankets, she passed over a steaming cup. “How much sleep did you get?”

Steam played lazily around Emily's tired face. “What time is it?”

“Eight.”

She scrubbed her eyes. “Maybe two hours.”

“Why were you sleeping here?” Natasha's head dipped to the abandoned blankets.

“I think I was having an anxiety attack.” Emily wouldn't meet her eyes. “Clint told me to hold your hand and anchor myself to your heartbeat.”

Human contact was proven to aid in healing. Had it helped her sleep too? Or had sheer exhaustion kept the usual nightmares away? “Did it help?” Sheepish, Emily nodded. Natasha sipped at her tea, enjoyed the warmth trailing down her throat, pooling in her stomach. She considered the shadows in Emily's eyes. “I'll sit here with you, if you like.”

Emily finally looked at her. Distress was etched in every line of her face. “You'd do that?” was more desperate than surprised.

Laying a hand on that knee, “You're my mission partner and my friend, Emily.” Is that all it took now? Six months of acquaintance to call someone a friend? She immediately argued with herself. Emily was a special case, was one of half a dozen people who Natasha called friend and understood that Natasha didn't joke about such matters. With a slow smile, Emily nodded.

By the time their cups were empty and Natasha's headache a dull throb, Emily's eyelids were fluttering. Natasha moved the pillow aside to put her back to the headboard, wrapped a blanket around herself, and settled in with a novel. Hesitantly, Emily looked down at the small space left. “You sure?”

“Make yourself comfortable, Em.”

Maybe it was the familiarity of the nickname, because Emily relaxed to the pillow, pressing her back fully along Natasha's stretched out thigh. Sooner than expected, her breathing evened out in sleep. The angle was too awkward for Natasha to stroke that thick brown hair like she itched to. Damn. An unrelenting blush crept up from her chest, insisting that her attachment to Emily was past the point of no return, that she wanted to kiss her again, and that waking up in her arms...

Emily made a cute little sleep sound.

She found a way to pet that hair anyway.
Chapter End Notes

Happy Friday!
“She put more work into saving our lives than I did.” Natasha snorted.

Concentrating on keeping her breaths even, Emily struggled to decide if she should let her colleagues know that she was awake. She hadn't meant to be eavesdropping on their discussion of the failed Bulgaria mission, had in fact been taking a nap on the roof to enjoy one of the last warm autumn days before the forecasted drop in temps next week. It wasn't her fault that Clint and Nat had decided to talk with Emily sleeping only a few dozen feet away. Natasha knew perfectly well that Emily was a light sleeper.

“Did she?” Clint's voice was smiling. “She said you were a few pints short of a full load.”

“I nearly bled out.” She responded. “I couldn't think straight or see past my nose. Despite my orders to wait at the rendezvous, she found me, took care of the bullet wound, ripped up my pants to hide the evidence, got rid of my very cute top, and carried me home.”

“She took your shirt off?” He chuckled.

“It was sparkly and unique.” Natasha sighed. “Highly visible.”

“Then of course, getting you naked was the logical choice.”

A short bark of laughter, “I don't think she even noticed.”

“How disappointed about that were you?”

Before Emily's late-night fantasy could be crushed, she forced herself to stretch and yawn and blink up at the sun. “Who woke me up?”

“Hey,” offered Natasha as Emily joined her in an otherwise empty Triskelion elevator. She barely noticed Emily's response, her mind busy going over a plan for a mission the next week. There was a Halloween masquerade ball for the elite friends of an ivory dealer in Hong Kong that she needed to infiltrate. It was possible tha-

“Petit renard.” Emily hummed as the elevator slid toward the level for living quarters.

Natasha blinked out of her thoughts. “What?”

Emily repeated herself with a soft curve to her lips. “That's what I'm going to call you from now on.”

Little fox. The French liked to add petit to anything to make it an endearment. Heart pattering, Natasha narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“Because everyone associates you with a vicious little spider. They hear red and think Red Death. I hear red and think of your gorgeous hair.” Emily plucked at a curl, watched it bounce. The intimacy of it made Natasha bristle, but she didn't strike out as she would have with anyone else. Excepting the Barton family. Being around Laura and the little monkeys had softened her
considerably to physical motions of affection.

Affection. From Emily. Natasha willed herself to ignore the ancient training that was yelling at her to get under the other woman's skin and rip her heart out before she could make Natasha weak.

“You're far more like a fox than an arachnid. Foxes don't spin webs and wait on luck. They hunt. They track. They can blend in to their surroundings. They're protective of their family.”

Clint talked too much, was her ungrateful thought. He didn't though. Her rational mind countered; Clint was accomplished in espionage for a reason, would never reveal more than was safe. He might have dropped hints, but he wouldn't tell Emily about his family without warning Natasha.

“Foxes are sleek, beautiful creatures.” Again, her hair was toyed with. “Natasha Romanoff is a sly, dangerous vixen, not some bulbous, heartless bug. Mon petit renard rouge.”

My little red fox. On one hand, she was flattered, her ego well stroked. On the other, she was angry at Emily's presumptive notion to take away Natasha's hard-earned code name. She'd killed for it. And she hated it. The anger was replaced by uncertainty, fear. She liked Emily's argument, liked that it came from Emily. She liked Emily. Damn these emotions! What the hell was she supposed to do with them?

Ever since Natasha had come to work for Nick Fury, she'd started to form attachments, given into the weakness of them. Laura would kill her if she ever heard Natasha call her or her children weaknesses. And they weren't. Natasha fought harder than ever to protect Clint's family and the friends she'd made in SHIELD. How far would she go to protect Emily?

The elevator dinged, and Emily stepped back from the railing they'd been leaning on. “I've got a Skype date with a friend. See you around, petit renard.”

“The Red Fox, huh?” Grinning wickedly, Clint greeted Natasha as she joined him in the empty training hall for a late night workout. She'd done too much idle sitting on that boring Halloween mission and needed the exercise.

She considered dislocating his jaw, then finding Emily and giving her similar treatment. “Does everyone know?”

“Laura. The kids. Lila thinks it's the greatest code name ever.”

It didn't inspire the same kind of fear that she'd come to expect. “Ugh.”

Returning to his push-ups, “Took me almost an hour to wrangle that out of her.”

She began her own warmup. “Really?”

“She made an off comment that tickled my curiosity and then made it damn difficult to figure out the connection between you and the name.” Arms extended. “Still think she held something back.” He squinted at her. “She did. I can see it in that damn smile of yours.”

From one stretch to another, she glided. “Not getting it out of me.”

“Nat,” he whined.

“Do you know if it's a boy or girl?” Switching to the topic of Laura's current pregnancy made her
friend whine again.

“Laura wants it to be a surprise, besides it's too early yet to tell.” He flipped forward into a handstand. “She's curious about Emily. We're thinking about inviting her over for New Years.”

Shock and fear exploded inside her. “What?” She almost shrieked.

His upside down frown would've been comical if she wasn't distraught. “Why not?”

“You barely know her!” Natasha argued.

Clint eased out of the handstand to sit looking at her. “I like her company.”

“Cl-”

“And you trust her. That's good enough for me.”

“But I...” She did, had admitted it to herself during that disaster in Bulgaria last month and a few times since. Saying it aloud was another matter, especially with the kids involved. Barely audible, she whispered, “She scares me.”

“I know.” Reassuringly, he gripped her shoulder. “You care about her.”

“She invited me to Thanksgiving with her family. I was thinking about going and asking her if she can do something about the conditioned triggers in my head.”

Clint's eyes went wide. “What if she triggered them instead of getting rid of them?”

She huffed. “I wasn't going to have her try it at her mother's house. I'd have her do it here, with you nearby just in case.”

A moment hummed by. “If those can be removed, and you have her take care of,” her stomach was waved at, “That. Would you consider having a kid of your own?”

If she knew that she'd always be one hundred percent in control of herself, there was a possibility that she'd consider it.

Understanding and affection smiled at her. “I'd love having a little niece or nephew some day.” He snuck her into a warm hug. “And you'd make a great mom.”

Bright and early, three days before Thanksgiving, Natasha let herself into Emily's dark apartment. Perhaps more late than early. Two in the morning. Soft sleeping sounds came from the bedroom, and Natasha paused to consider if Emily had a bed partner, instantly hated the idea, had to decide if she would maim said bed partner or not. Sneaking down the short hallway, she poked into the messy room. One sleeper.

Good. She didn't want to be a fighter tonight anyway. Silently, she stripped off her boots and travel clothes, refreshed herself in the bathroom, pulled on pajamas, and crawled in beside Emily. The woman grumbled and rolled over, presenting her back to Natasha. Childish mischief got together with her cold hands, and she snuck them up Emily's shirt, pressed them along the cozy dip of her spine.

Shrieking and flailing, Emily crashed to the bedroom floor. Natasha fell sideways, cackling in glee. “Nat?!”
Through cackles, “Hey, Em.”

Emily gaped up at her. “What are you doing here?”
“You invited me to Thanksgiving, didn't you?” Natasha asked innocently.

She managed to untangle herself from the blankets and sat panting on the bed. “Didn't think you'd take me up on it. Not that I'm not happy to see you.” She paused. “Though I would've been happier if you knocked at a normal hour instead of scaring the piss out of me in my own bed.”

“I didn't think you'd complain about getting me in your bed.”

Emily narrowed her eyes. “How old are you?”

Rude! “Not much older than you.”

“Yes you are.” There was a conviction in her tone that Natasha recognized she couldn't distract or argue with. “You're a lot older than I am, Natalia.”

Natasha waited for what came next.

“I'm not sure if I would have noticed if my gift hadn't given me a clue, but there's a lot of things that give it away. You're smart, but your depth of knowledge is ridiculous for someone who doesn't look older than twenty-five. You have an agelessness about you, like Cap. The two of you click on a level that not many people can with the old vet.” Emily's eyes stared right at her. Into her. “I may have also been doing some research into the KGB and all the tangents I found.”

How much had she learned? How much actual truth? “Even if I'm two hundred years old, does it matter?”

Moments slipped past. “Not to me, not really.” Slowly, lips pulled into a wide grin. “You're my friend, even if you're a living fossil.” A beat. “Platypus.”

“Why you!” Natasha pounced, attacking ticklish sides with her icy fingers until Emily's squeals faded for lack of breath. “Teach you to call me a fossil.”

“You old fox you,” gasped from a smile.

She snorted, rolled off Emily. “I can deal with that.”

As they came down from the giggle-high, seriousness took over Emily's face. “Hey, Nat?”

Bracing herself for whatever sensitive question was about to be thrown at her, “Yes?”

“I do consider you a friend.” She sat up, leaned against the headboard. “If there's ever anything you need or want to talk about, you can come to me. I care about you, and you know I'm good with secrets.”

Her open gaze and tone struck deep in Natasha. They sunk their roots into her heart and held on tight. Mental defenses that never seemed to work well around Emily came crashing down. Heat built behind her eyes, and she blinked, felt twin streaks fall. “Can you reverse mental conditioning?” blurted out before she could second guess herself. She had to share that secret if she was to get an answer, she told herself.

Emily sat straighter, her worry obvious. She set fingers to Natasha's forehead, closed her eyes for a minute. “Is that what I feel?” Her hand brushed lower, wiped at the tear tracks. “What did they do
to you?"

The already open door to her past creaked a little wider. “There are code phrases hidden in my head. At the drop of a hat, anyone who knows them can turn me into a mindless killing machine. Reset me to before I became my own person. I'm terrified of someone taking that control away from me, of making me hurt innocent people again.” She choked. “Of hurting someone I care about.” Clint. His family. SHIELD. Emily.

Rustling sounded, and the bed shifted. Natasha's eyes had shut tight, but they opened when she felt Emily's body slide up against her. Gentle touches brought Natasha's head to Emily's chest, and comforting arms held her tight. “I can try, little fox. Whenever you're ready.”

“When Clint's around,” she managed to get out.

Emily pet her hair and neck. “Okay.”

“So this is why you switched jobs.” Emily's close friend Lizzie was giving Natasha and her designer outfit a thorough examination. The bag of lunch cartons that she'd picked up from a Mediterranean restaurant Emily consistently raved about was set on the counter. Deliciousness wafted from it, making Natasha's mouth water.

Emily laughed easily. “You should see the other women we work with.”

Who else, she started to catalog her rivals before catching herself and firmly locking away the petty jealousy. She summoned a flirtatious grin. “Agent Ordena competed for Miss Universe once.”

Obviously picturing the attractive Jamaican, Emily nodded. “I believe it.”

Lizzie leaned forward. “For real?”

“She was Miss Jamaica at the time.”

“Show me.”

Natasha indulged her and brought up an image from the 90's contest on her phone. “Don't forget, if you tell anyone, I'll have to kill you.”

Lizzie jerked up from staring at the little screen, her big eyes went to Emily, who wafted a hand dismissively. “Ignore her. Ordena works for Jamaica's version of the DEA, and helped us track down someone we needed to find.”

“You working with the DEA. Of any country. Too fucking weird.” The woman shook her head.

“Right? Trippy.” Emily dug into a carton, dishing noodles into a bowl.

While her friend's back was turned, Lizzie turned on Natasha. “What do you do?”

“I-”

“Nat, be nice.” Emily warned without looking. “You can torture my brothers tomorrow.”

Lizzie made a whip motion as Natasha pouted. Whipped? Not acceptable. “I do jobs that usually end up with Emily's hands all over me.”
Turning a light shade of pink, Emily groaned at Natasha's smirk. “You just had to put it that way didn't you?”

“In Bulgaria, she ripped my clothes off in an alleyway.”

“You've been holding back on me, Em!” Lizzie hooted. “Tell me all the delicious details.”

Emily’s elbows hit the counter, and she dropped her face into her hands. “Or you could torture me today. Why are we friends?”

Natasha smiled sweetly, devilishly. “Because you like my biscuits.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: the inspiration for Agent Ordena was Janelle Commissiong. Miss Universe 1977. She was the first black Miss Universe; she was Miss Trinidad and Tobago before that. Black rights and world peace advocate.

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Two hours from Emily's apartment, they picked up her youngest brother. He was taller and softer than her by several inches and looked like he hit the gym even less than pre-SHIELD Emily used to. Not that he wasn't attractive. He wore the inches well, had a nice, if immature, smile, and had a rich, full beard that Clint could never grow. Emily had warned that he was recently single. Again.

“I wish my gorgeous work friends would come home with me for Thanksgiving.” Alan drooled from the backseat of Emily's comfortable sedan.

All innocence, Natasha turned around. “With that beard, I would've thought you could bring anyone home. May I touch it?”

Proudly, he jutted his beard forward for Natasha to sink her fingers into. She looked for Emily's reaction, but the woman was carefully keeping her eyes on the road ahead.

When Emily had invited her to visit over Thanksgiving, Natasha had initially dismissed the idea. She'd seen that Emily didn't expect her to show anyway. Several days of wondering about Emily's family, and realizing that she'd miss the playful smuggler immensely, Natasha had gotten a plane ticket to Boulder, Colorado. An hour into the roadtrip from Alan's place to the Fortune childhood home in smalltown Wyoming, she had begun to have regrets. Not about the decision to visit Emily, no.

At Emily's apartment, Natasha had been more comfortable, more relaxed than she had been in a long time. Like she had learned to do when visiting the farm, she had let down her guard, set aside the masks and appearances to make sure the memories made there were real. Even when Lizzie had been around, Natasha had been natural. Her reasoning being if Emily trusted this woman with her dearest secrets, then Natasha could trust her with real smiles, and she hadn't been disappointed.

Lizzie had shown her honesty as well. She'd even threatened Natasha while Em was out of earshot, a brave move given that she was an Avenger fan girl and religiously watched all related news footage. The Black Widow fighting aliens remained a popular YouTube clip. “You hurt my best girl, and I don't care if you are an alien-bashing superhero, I will break you. Em's got enough damage from people who've claimed to love her.”

Emily had returned, and Lizzie had switched expressions with a smooth grace that the Red Room would have been proud of. None the wiser to her friend's protectively suicidal words, she'd turned on the promised video game and proceeded to lose spectacularly to Natasha's novice ass-whooping.

Lizzie now held a special place in her heart, a spot reserved for friends and people she respected. She'd also started an internal debate in Natasha's heart about the powerful word that the Red Room had taught her was foolish and wasteful. Love. Was she falling in love with Emily? Was she capable?

That was one of regrets of this trip.

The more recent regret was leaving the apartment in Boulder. She'd seen tension start to build in
Emily, and it had prompted her to partially raise her defenses, to have covers ready. Hence the current dumb-blonde routine. She enjoyed it to an extent. After all, toying with people was fun and holding power over them was intoxicating.

She would rather be lounging on the couch, her feet in Emily's lap while they read separate novels. A real grin floated through at the same time Alan leaned into the beard caress. “Em, you said we'll be sharing a bed at your mom's, right?”

Alan's eyes snapped open, went to Emily, who nodded absently. “Unless you wanted to share with one of the boys. There's only two guest rooms, and mom's couch is not comfortable. At all.”

Fingers yet in the soft, groomed beard, Natasha pretended to think on it. “It's been a while since I slept with a man.” The boy was probably grateful that his large coat hid his erection. “I'll wait to decide after I meet Kevin.”

He pouted like a high school boy being rejected at prom. Infiltrating a high school had been one of her stranger missions. Middle eighties, big hair and shoulder pads. It'd been almost too easy to pretend to be ten years younger than she looked. She’d felt bad for the kid. He'd been nice to her, made her laugh. A little bird had kept tabs on him, helped her direct a scholarship to the music academy he'd dreamed of going to. First violin and soloist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for ten years. Now a teacher. Helping him was one of her favorite achievements in life, and she'd made sure to attend at least one of his performances. Would Emily enjoy a night at the orchestra? The opera? Her mind danced with sparkling jewels and tailored dresses.

“Okay.” Emily shrugged, completely at ease with Natasha not sharing a bed with her. For a pathetic moment, Natasha considered pouting like Alan.

Snow soaked the air as it drifted past in lazy circles, quieting the world, except Natasha's immediate surroundings. Fortune siblings were all around her in a coordinated effort to keep their mother's driveway from drowning under the white sea. Kevin, the middle child, threw a shovel load and cringed. He straightened from his working hunch to gingerly rotate his left shoulder.

She guessed something to be damaged, probably strained.

“Aw, what's the matter, Kevie-wevie, getting old?” Alan teased, and a second later, a shovel load of snow smacked into his face. He howled and clawed at the icy attack.

“Nice one, Em.” Kevin high-fived his sister and immediately winced. Must be a recent injury.

Chuckling, Emily pushed a hand under his scarf, and Natasha distracted herself with adding another load of snow to Alan's face. Knowing about Emily's gift probably hadn't been disclosed to the brothers. “Oh my god, Alan! I'm so sorry.” She didn't bother hiding her sarcasm. “You're so short I didn't see you there.”

His surprise was overshadowed by his indignation. “I thought we were friends,” he tried to pout.

She'd indulged his immature flirting since yesterday and was quite over it. At twenty-four, he should be better at it. No wonder he was single. “Perhaps in a few more years, your powers of perception will be adept enough to understand us old people.”

“There's no way you're Em's age, you're w-”

Snow landed in his mouth, and he sputtered while his siblings roared with laughter.
Hands deep in soapy water, Emily was cornered by her mom. “I don't believe for a minute that you and that single supermodel are only friends.”

Maybe it was the months of time spent with the best spies on Earth, but Emily shrugged lightly, didn't even blush. “We're also professional colleagues.”

It didn't deter her match-maker of a mom though. “Emmie, you don't bring work friends home for Thanksgiving.”

She stopped scrubbing, looked up, responded calmly. “Yes, mom, I am attracted to her. No, it's not reciprocated. When I invited her, it was half a joke because I knew she'd buy good wine. She normally spends holidays with family friends.”

“You don't think it's reciprocated?” Her mom chuckled. “Oh, sweetie.”

Annoyed, Emily went back to scrubbing the turkey's roasting pan. She had half a mind to tell her mom that Natasha had more years experience in deception than she'd been alive. It struck her for a moment. She had a serious crush on a woman who had probably worked for Stalin at one point. Over the shoulder that wasn't blocked by her mom, she peered, seeking out the spy.

Though engaged in conversation with Kevin, Natasha noticed the look, raised an eyebrow. Emily twitched an all clear, and Natasha went back to what seemed an intense discussion.

“The woman is clearly skilled at acting, I can see that from here, but she is just,” her mom's hands fluttered. “She always knows where you are and what you're doing.”

“Mom...”

“And you're the same way with her.”

“It's in the job description.” Emily groaned. “We work security. It's kinda important to work well together.”

She sighed. “I still can't believe that you switched from transportation to security.” The dish in her hands was dried, and her hands went to hips. “Why would they hire someone with your record and zero security experience to do such secret jobs?”

“Someone who appreciates the delicacy of my previous career,” was her mutter.

“Which you could have avoided if you'd stayed in college, finished that biology degree you were working so hard on.”

Her calm snapped. This discussion was too old, said too much about how her mother chose to constantly heckle Emily about certain life choices. She would've been happy if Emily had chosen the life of a miracle doctor or famous, rich prophet and spoiled her mom with said riches. She wanted Emily to find a partner so they'd adopt kids, make her mom a grandma, not so Emily would be happy. According to her, it was her eldest child's duty to bring happiness. Emily's happiness had never been a priority for her.

The old hurt was too much. Emily grabbed up the towel, wiped off the soap, and stomped from the kitchen.
Natasha was deep into a discussion about the pros and cons of America's bipartisan political system with Kevin when Emily passed through the room. She paused mid-sentence. Emily didn't particularly wear her emotions on her sleeve, and she'd taken Natasha's espionage training to heart, improving her skills of deception over the past months. That training seemed a figment of her imagination now. Rage wafted off the woman in sizzling waves.

Scowling after her was Emily's mother, who Kevin frowned at, then at Emily stomping into boots and coat. The door slammed. Alan looked up from his phone, blinked at the situation. “What happened?”

“Mom probably brought up kids or marriage again.”

Lines tightened across Alan. His breath sharpened. In a smooth, angry motion, he stood. Kevin touched his arm. “Don't.”

“Again, mom? You brought up college again?” Alan demanded.

The elder Fortune stiffened, her eyes bright and righteous.

“You do this every year!” His yell was sharp, angry, deeply hurt. Kevin was up, his hand having tightened on Alan's arm. “Every fucking year you give Em shit for my mistakes! It's not her fault I got arrested for not being as smart as her.” He was vibrating from the force of his emotions, and Natasha's body got ready for a fight.

“Alan.” Kevin tried again. A hot look was shot at him. “Let's go for a walk.”


He turned toward the pile of boots.

Tension eased, Kevin looked at Natasha. “Em won't be back for a while. You're welcome to come with us.”

Her pocket chirped, and she pulled it up to look at the message. Sorry I need to cool off. Car keys r in room if u wanna leave.

“Don't you remember what Thanksgiving is supposed to be?” Alan's softer, more hurt demand brought her gaze up. “Being thankful your kids come home, not using it as an excuse to harass us about our mistakes or ask us to be something we aren't.” Eyes glassy, he whirled, yanked open the door, and fled.

Kevin gave Natasha a second, quiet invitation to follow, and she stood, slipping into her own outer gear. Catching sight of Emily's forgotten hat and gloves, she grabbed those up too. She closed the door softly behind. Alan was halfway up the block, but Kevin was waiting at the sidewalk for her. He gestured in the opposite direction of his brother. “She went that way, probably going down to the lake. There's a bar about a mile from here where we'll probably spend the rest of the evening.”

Emily's footprints were widely spaced. She had stomped a few paces, then taken off at a dead sprint. A light run sounded like a good idea after the day of heavy calories. “I could use a run. Enjoy the bar, guys.”

A nod, and Kevin followed his brother. Natasha went through a simple stretch routine to warm up before trailing Emily. Quickly enough, she spotted her kicking a path around the lake and decided to do a lap, give Emily time to burn through whatever had driven her away. When she finished, she guessed the circumference of the lake to be maybe two miles, a nice, light exercise. She found that Emily had ensconced herself among a circle of old evergreens. They created a little hideaway, a
private place to watch the snow fall on the half-frozen lake.

“T'm not going to hurt myself.” Emily stated after glancing at Natasha's approaching footsteps.

“I brought your hat and gloves,” was her calm reply.

“If I needed them, I would have grabbed them.”

Natasha watched their breath roll out like fat cotton balls before they got shoved in a wound to soak up blood. “If you plan to stay out here all night, you'll need them.”

“What the hell do you know?” Emily snapped viciously. “I might be waiting for a woman to come pick me up and take me back to her place to fuck out some steam.”

That hurt far more than it should have. It was difficult to maintain her nonchalance. “You're too far from the road to be waiting on a ride.”

“Fucking spy,” irritation spat.

She snorted. “Anyone can see that this is not a spot to wait for a ride,” and held out the warm accessories.

Emily glared at them before snatching them, shoving them on. “Thank you,” clipped, but polite.

Was this about what Lizzie had said? People who had claimed to love Emily? Was her mother one of those false people? Today's events and a certain coldness between the Fortune women were evidence for it. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Shoulders rolled, feet shifted. “Do you actually want to hear about my family's drama?”

No. She didn't want step even deeper into this unknown territory. Yes. She definitely wanted to know every detail about the woman, wanted to help any way she could, wanted to be a good friend, a real friend. Friends listened and shared pain, right? That's how she'd been trained in infiltration. Stories in novels and movies confirmed it. Time around Clint and Laura did too. “We're friends, aren't we?”

The lake lost its audience, and Emily met her gaze. Her quiet perusal lasted unusually long for her. She closed the distance between them, slowly wrapped herself around Natasha, burrowed into the scarf, pressing cold cheek to warm neck. “Say that again. Tell me we're friends.”

Putting as much faith into the embrace and the words as she could, “We're friends, Em. I don't have much experience in this field, but I'll do the best I can.” She felt a smile against her neck. Realization clicked. Emily was reading her like a lie detector, better than any lie detector. She could monitor hormone releases and other minutia.

Normal people would take the act as an insult or an invasion of privacy. For Natasha it was a relief. She was too skilled at deception, at lies and manipulation. Proving herself to people, getting them to trust her after they learned what she was, what she did, had done, was difficult if not impossible.

Natasha's eyebrow ticked up, though Emily couldn't see it. “Some people would be insulted if they realized you were mimicking a lie detector.”

“I'm glad you realized what I just did.”

Emily was not “normal people.” She knew what Natasha was, expected her to understand what she
was doing, and used it to establish further trust between them. Admiration met pride in Emily's espionage skills and drew her deeper into the dangerous waters of affection. Natasha squeezed a little tighter, spoke in a whisper. “I care about you, and I want to help.”

“You already have.” She stepped back with a gentle expression. “I wouldn't mind talking, but not about mom. It's an old wound, and I'd rather not dig at it tonight.”

Between disappointed and relieved, “What should we talk about?”

Sight returning to the lake, Emily shrugged. “Pick something.”

Snow tickled her cheeks as she turned, thinking. Natasha preferred the view of Emily’s profile. A snowflake landed on her round nose, took a moment to melt. “Why did you learn Arabic?”

She hadn't been able to pinpoint a particular reason for an American child of European descent and Christian parents to have learned the language. The area had one small, low-attendance mosque. As far as she'd been able to parse, Emily hadn't had any friends who attended or had any particular interest in the parts of the world that used it. Not as a youth at least. Maybe she'd had a crush she wanted to impress?

“You ever do anything simply because it made your parents angry?” She frowned as Natasha kept her expression calm. “Your trainers?”

Memories of her parents were vague, broken things. The Red Room had zero tolerance for childish rebellion, let alone real insubordination. “Once or twice.” Before they beat it out of her. Almost. She had broken through the conditioning, burned the Red Room down after killing everyone she could find, made the ultimate rebellion of living for herself.

Emily flinched, though its aim appeared inward. “My father hated Muslims. One day I went to the mosque and found out when every service was. I'd been going to prayers for about three weeks when I was invited to attend lessons in Arabic. I think the imam knew I didn't actually want to be a Muslim, but he was the kind of man who hoped anyway. And he was so paternal.” A breath. “Not patronizing. Paternal. Kind of like Clint. A good man. I should go say hi while I'm in town. Maybe tomorrow. Want to come?”

That entire response was only a half-answer. What had she left out? Why? “Yes. I'd like that.”

“I think he'd like to meet you too.”

Natasha took a stab at lightening the mood and switched to a thick St. Petersburg-brothel purr. “Will he approve of you having your Russian sex slave home for Thanksgiving?”

To her delight, Emily leaned in to whisper as though they were in the mosque's prayer hall not five feet from the man himself. “He might be jealous. You're much younger and prettier than his.” She gave a cheeky slide of her eyes. “You're definitely more flexible.”

“Of course I am. You know who trained me!” She purred back, nudging Em's shoulder.

“I am good, aren't I?” Fanning herself, Emily grinned.

She played along. “You're very good, moya koroleva.”

An unexpected shudder twitched at Emily. Had her eyes darkened? Too difficult to tell at night. Did she want Emily to be aroused? She was trying to be her friend, not seduce her, contrary to what her traitorous hormones argued. It was a good thing that Emily wasn't currently touching her.
Emily hummed. “For working with a Russian spy, I think that's the first time I've heard you speak it.” Wrinkles formed on her brow. “That was Russian, right?”

“It was,” in her usual American.

“Was that your original accent?”

“No.” That one was perfected for her seduction technique. “I think mine was from farther south.”

“Strange to think of anything in Russia being south.” Emily subtly offered for the conversation to change direction.

With Emily, thinking of her past wasn't quite so bad. “I remember a summer holiday to the Black Sea. We went by train, only half a day's journey, I think.” Her records had been destroyed to leave only the Black Widow. There was no way to know exactly where she was from or who her family had been. “Then again, maybe I'm from the Kola Peninsula.” The far north by Finland. “Or we visited Lake Baikal,” she could be confusing memories, “And I'm from Chita in Siberia. I don't know. My memories are fucked, and the records were thoroughly destroyed. I could have a cousin or nephew living down the street, but I'll never know.”

If possible, the snowflakes seemed to be getting fatter. She considered if she should suggest they get a hotel room, rooms, while they were stuck in this little town.

Emily rocked on her feet. “I remember reading this blog once from this person who'd done a lot of traveling and moving around. This blogger was talking about how the common question of 'Where are you from?' was tricky. He was from a lot of places. He'd been born one place, but didn't remember it. Had lived in more than one place for years, but would never call them home. There were places he was comfortable, had friends, family, roots. He suggested that maybe a better question was 'Where do you feel like a local?''

The wind moved a little brisker.

“I was born on a highway in Arizona, grew up in Wyoming, spent time all over the place, but I decided to call Colorado home.” She ducked her head, shrugged. “I guess what I'm trying to say is no one gets to choose where they start or into what family they're born. It's a starting point, but we can choose who we are at any point in our lives.” An irritated groan rumbled. “I probably sound like an idiot trying to compare our lives. Sorry.”

Natasha's heart twisted. “I kept an apartment in Manhattan for a long time.” Since 1972, a week after the Fourth of July. Her neighbors had always been the type to ignore each other. It had been perfect. “I'm comfortable there,” knew the shops, the trains, the ebb and flow of the city. She affected a Long Island accent. “I could say I was a New Yorker.” Actually, yea. She could. She had history there, had bled for the place, of her own choice. Not being able to go back made her wistful. Maybe sad.

Emily smiled.

She wouldn't mind being from Colorado either.
Translation:

moya koroleva – my queen
“Invite Emily over for Christmas.” Natasha ordered Clint. The woman didn't need to go back to her ungrateful mother any time soon, and her brothers had endorsed her suggestion for their sister to spend the rest of the holidays somewhere less stressful. That had been a stealth discussion the following day. Perhaps an hour after Natasha had hugged Emily by the lake, they'd met up at the bar. Several pitchers of cheap beer and rounds of shots later, they'd all staggered back to the quiet house.

Natasha might have used alcohol as an excuse to snuggle up to Emily from behind, spooning the woman while they slept. She and the siblings had spent the next day nursing hangovers and hanging out at their childhood friend's house. Emily's mother had never apologized, and the Fortune women had parted on cold terms.

Soup dripped from Clint's spoon. He lowered it back into the bowl.

“Please.”

Intense curiosity followed on the heels of his astonishment. “Really?”

She looked around the crowded mess hall. “Yes.”

“What if the kids don't want to share with a new person?”

A perfectly manicured eyebrow lifted. The kids adored visitors. He knew damn well that they'd adopt Emily into their games, and Laura would love the way Emily automatically cleaned. “I leave for a solo assignment tomorrow. I should be able to make it there by Christmas eve.”

She received the same stare that his targets got, the same one she'd felt the day they'd met. Clint put his entire being into that gaze, that study, that decision whether to pull the trigger. Without barriers, she faced him. One of her favorite Clint expressions shifted onto the sniper's face. It was the one that said he was happy for her, proud of something she'd done to step away from her past and move toward her difficult goal of redemption, of accepting that she could be a good person.

“What kind of gift should we get her?”

The idea sent her brain into overdrive. Emily had told her a story once of exchanging Christmas gifts with her brothers. It had been themed, completely by accident. Each had given a paintball-related item because of a conversation they'd gotten excited about the previous month. The next week, they'd booked a paintball range, rented extra equipment and enjoyed themselves enough to regularly go every month for several years. What would make Emily happy now?

Clint was chuckling. “Wow. Okay. You look way too worried about that.”

She stuck her tongue out. “I've only gotten you and your family real gifts before.” Marks didn't count. Gifts for them were calculated, carefully planned pieces of her job. This was Emily.

The chuckling quieted. “Damn, Nat. You've got it bad.”

Yea. She did. “Invite her to Christmas,” sighed out.
Thoroughly whomping Stark's ass at a fighting video game, Emily was at the end of a really good day. Stark had invited them all to his renovated NYC tower for a little, early Angers holiday get-together. Most everyone was there, except Nat, who was on a mission. And Thor, who she'd yet to meet. When would that happen? She wanted to meet the god of thunder! She laughed as Tony's character fell off the edge of the screen again. “Seriously?!” He squawked. “Come on!”

Behind them, Steve laughed. “You are worse than I am at this.”

“He's pretty bad,” was Clint's addition.

The match ended, Emily's fourth win in a row. Agent Phil Coulson, who had taken a few days off from babysitting his own agents in training, sat forward. “I believe that makes it my turn to challenge Fortune.”

Emily snorted. The man liked wordplay and puns too much. He was a good guy though, made her giggle as he put up a good defense, lost by only a few hit points. She liked how he made the others comfortable, acted like a little fan boy over Cap, a stern uncle to Stark. It was easy to see why the Avengers had rallied after thinking he'd been killed by Loki. Would she ever be involved in that kind of shit? Fighting gods and aliens? Alien gods? Would she ever meet Thor? She'd soaked up every scrap of Norse mythology she could as a little girl.

Thor Odinson, master of thudner and...

“What the hell are you thinking about that you lost to Hill?” Stark prodded her. “Hill, Fortune. You lost to the worst gamer here.”

“I lost to my boss, Stark. Kind of a difference there.” She saved face, earned a smile from said Boss. It didn't make her heart flip like it had a couple months ago. As Stark continued his snark, her thoughts wandered to Natasha, wondering how her mission was going.

From the monochrome image on the screen, blank, soulless eyes stared up at the camera that had captured the Black Widow. Emily jerked. Clint's face was devoid of blood.

“We believe their next target to be Norway's Petroleum and Energy Minister, Tord Lien.” Fury said after briefing them on Natasha's unsanctioned, murderous activities over the past week. She'd been spotted with a man believed to have been dead, a known agent of the former Soviet KGB. “The Russians aren't happy about Norway nosing into their profits. They don't like that eastern European states are trying to get away from Russian influence by avoiding their exports. Ivan Petrovitch has obviously triggered Romanoff's conditioning, reset her.” He paused, asked Clint, “Do you think you can break through to Romanoff?”

His hands tightened around the table's edge. “I don't know.”

Fury sighed. “What about you, Sekhmet?”

If Clint couldn't, what the hell kind of chance did she have? She voiced as much. Fury's visible eyebrow twitched. “I meant, think your gifts can erase the conditioning?”

Oh. Her cheeks went hot. “Maybe. Natasha's not naturally cold and docile. But.” She felt the weight of the team's attention, gulped. “Returning that part of her mind to its natural state might wipe her memory.”
A strangled noise came from Clint.

Stark made a ruder noise. “You think the Widow's natural state is soft and fluffy? I didn't think you were delusional, Fortune.”

“There are code phrases hidden in my head. At the drop of a hat, anyone who knows them can turn me into a mindless killing machine. I'm terrified of someone taking that control away from me, of making me hurt innocent people again.” Natasha's horrible admission echoed in Emily's skull. She focused back on Stark, and to her surprise, he cringed.

“Somebody please tell me that she can't spread plagues like her namesake.” Stark looked desperately at their teammates, his eyes flickering uncomfortably between them and Emily.

She checked the cold rage that sang in her ears. The soft and fluffy side of Natalia was deeply, carefully hidden. It was sheer luck that Emily's gift had put her in a position to learn about it. Hard work at friendship had opened the woman to her. Few others could earn Nat's trust like that. That Stark had never seen it wasn't all his fault.

“Our plan is find and capture.” Clint wasn't asking. “Alive.”

“Hawkeye,” Fury began.

“Will we wait to ambush her when she tries to assassinate the Norwegian minister?” Her question stated her agreement with the sniper. He gave her a thankful nod.

“Unless we have intel of where she is now?” He stared the director down.

“We don't.”

“Stark, load up some tranquilizers in your suit.” Steve ordered. “We're bringing Natasha home.”

Norwegian was an interesting accent. Emily didn't think that she'd ever heard it before, and if she had, she had probably thought it was Swedish. Why was Swedish something she would have heard and not Norwegian? Weird. The energy minister seemed like a decent guy, had an easy laugh that she was thankful for, considering that she was to stay quite close to him while they used him as bait.

“She knows what I can do. Won't I be a target for her?”

Clint met her eye, confidently disagreeing. “Not unless you directly get in the way. Her accuracy is too high to be afraid of you saving his life.”

Yea. Nat was almost as good of a sniper as Hawkeye. She was even deadlier up close. Someone must have left that part out when they had convinced Mr. Lien to be bait. He didn't seem nearly terrified enough.

A monster stood in Natasha's skin. Emily shrank away, wishing that Clint or Tony would hurry up and get there with the sedatives. She didn't bother asking how the assassin had slipped past the entire team while killing half the security force in the building. Panting from the run to the minister's bedroom, where she'd dragged him from sleep and thrown him behind a sturdy desk, she held her empty hands up. “I'm unarmed.” Just had a handgun loaded with tranq darts stashed under her jacket.
The monster canted her head. “You're in the way.” A familiar handgun was aimed at her heart.

“Sorry.” She glanced over her shoulder to the trembling minister, back to the Black Widow. “How about you go home instead?” Somehow, she managed not to let her legs dive out of the way. The trigger began to move. Defeat slumped her shoulders; grief fell from her eyes. She silently apologized to her brothers for not saying goodbye.

“Move.”

She wasn't dead yet? The Black Widow hadn't decorated the room with her insides, was allowing Emily a chance at life, was allowing a delay. It didn't make any sense. “If I did, you'd actually let me live?”

The minister whimpered, and not-Natasha droned, “You aren't my target, Agent Sekhmet.”

“That's reassuring. Are you certain I can't convince you to turn around and leave?”

“Do you have a death wish?” Another delay, and she was alive. Why?

“Not today. If you'd asked me a few years ago, I might have said yes, but I've gotten pretty attached to the way things have been going lately.” Pretty attached to you, she sighed. Who was she kidding? She was extremely attached, had spent almost two weeks pondering what she would call Natasha instead of the Black Widow, several more days in how to bring the red fox up in conversation. “What about you? I thought you were fairly happy with your life.”

Not-Natasha blinked, frowned. “Happiness is irrelevant.”

Was Natasha fighting the Black Widow reset? Hope fluttered. “On the contrary, it's a powerful emotion. So is the lack of it. What makes you happy, petit renard rouge?”

The blankness flickered, then her attention twitched away.

Thud. The assassin was rolling sideways, her gun firing at the window. Where her feet had been was a dart. Shit. How the hell had the Widow seen that coming? Then again, it might be Iron Man behind the darts, not Hawkeye. Her earpiece was somewhere on the floor. Another dart sank into the carpet. Emily turned, dove to the desk with Lien. She peeked over it, saw not-Natasha taking cover behind a chair. The paperweight on the desk looked heavy.

Emily picked it up, threw it as hard as she could. It sailed across the room and missed by a foot. There was a good reason that she didn't play baseball. An eyebrow arched at her.

Again, the monster didn't shoot her. It fired out the window, did a James Bond tumble to the other side of the window and slammed a fresh magazine in the gun in time to shoot at Captain America as he crashed through the door. Emily had seen Cap spar and train, do some impressive acrobatics and martial arts, yet the way the Black Widow danced around him made it look like he had two left feet.

A yelp of pain decided the fight. An arrow fired from the doorway had pinned an arm to the wall, and without the gun that was halfway to Emily, the assassin was forced to stay still for a few seconds. Cap pinned her legs, Hawkeye grabbed both wrists, and Emily managed to hit her target on the first try. Eyelids fluttered shut as the tranquilizer won.

“Nice shot, Sekhmet.” Stark's voice came over the earpiece.

Hawkeye was zip-tying not-Natasha as Emily holstered her gun. “Thanks.”
“I don't notice any other movement out here. She must've been the only one they sent.” He coughed. “She would've been more than enough if we weren't here. I can't believe it took all of us to take down one woman.”

Watching Hawkeye restrain their friend, Emily sighed. If the Black Widow hadn't hesitated, even all of them couldn't have foiled the master assassin. They gathered the redhead up and returned to the quinjet, leaving other agents in charge of protecting the minister. They were more than adequate now that the Black Widow was contained.

Secured to the chair in an interrogation room, the monster glared balefully at Emily. “You can't fix what isn't broken.”

From his perch on the table that was bolted to the floor, Clint offered, “Want me to gag her?”

A muzzle might be a good idea. “No.” She got within touching distance, started to make contact. Teeth snapped at her. Yep. Should've brought a muzzle. “You know I called you a red fox, not a rabid one, right?”

Irices twitched. “I am a Black Widow.”

No you aren't, she didn't say. Instead, “Petit renard, me mord pas.”

The skin around the eyes tightened.

Had she just, was that... She looked at Clint. “Did you see that?”

Hope softened his face. “Yea. I saw it.”

“Wish I could get your consent for this, Nat.” Emily whispered. “But, I did make sure to have Clint around, like you wanted.” She gave a broken smile. “Even if the situation's a little backward.”

Decisively, she pushed forward. Not-Natasha's shoulders jerked, yet she didn't try to bite again, and Emily's fingers made contact to the forehead. Her initial probe was disheartening. Though she'd spent the last several days scanning every Avenger in D.C. and more than a few agents for a better understanding of the brain, she wasn't quite sure what she was sensing.

“Hey, Nat, how'd you break the conditioning the first time?” Clint's low voice made her concentration waver, but not break.

Sharp, interesting fluctuations occurred. Emily gestured for him to keep talking.

“What'd it feel like to be a free woman?”

Patterns shifted. Something fluttered.

“Why didn't you kill Emily in Norway?”

There was a definite feel of a struggle. With every question, the sensations began to make sense, and the silent struggle became extroverted. Nat's body shuddered and cried out.

“There,” puffed from Emily. She told the brain that a tiny little section was broken, and it reset itself, washing away the shadows that Emily thought were the assassin triggers. Natasha's body went limp, her brain function hushing to a whisper and heart rate plummeting to a crawl. “Nat!”
Clint was beside her, his fingers on Natasha's pulse, his gaze fierce. “What happened?”


For a few moments, Clint tried to wake Natasha up. She remained a rag doll. Director Fury stepped into the room with a couple of medical agents. They waited extremely politely for a dangerous gleam in Hawkeye's gaze to soften and allow them to transfer Natasha from chair to gurney. She was carefully secured before they wheeled away.

“She'll be in an isolation ward in the infirmary.” Fury's tone was gentle. “You both did the best you could. The rest is in Agent Romanoff's proverbial hands.”

He left, and the soft snick of the door closing thundered in Emily's ears.

A weight settled on her shoulder, and she jumped. Clint gave a pained smile. “When's the last time you got out for fresh air?”

Uh... How long ago were they in Norway?

Kindness behind it, he shoved at her. “Too long. Let's go topside.” If he was calm, she could be, she told herself over and over again.

Fun fact:

Tord Lien is a real dude and the current Norwegian Petroleum and Energy Minister

Translation:

Me mord pas – don't bite me.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to comment and subscribe!
Chapter Notes

Me Mord Pas

Imma go ahead and apologize right now. Russian is one of those languages that I haven't studied yet. Almost every scrap of it was provided by Google translate. If anyone can give them, I'll happily take corrections. Translations at bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-nine days since Natasha had left on her solo mission, nineteen since they'd forged plans to capture her, and three since attempting to erase the conditioning triggers, Emily was pelting down the grass to where she'd left her bike.

Natasha was awake.

Around a group of chatting politicians, she dodged, barely leapt over a man who'd stooped to tie a shoe. Her legs burned. Every waking hour not spent checking in on Natasha these past few days, she'd spent working out, burning energy in motion, killing thought with physical exhaustion. She'd been running with Cap around the National Mall, from the Capitol building to the Lincoln Memorial. By with, she meant starting at the same time. She usually wound up next to a friendly guy by the name of Sam as Rogers kept lapping them.

Natasha was awake.

Clint had texted her half an hour ago, but she hadn't heard the phone chime, didn't check it til she took a water break with Sam. She hadn't even given the guy warning when she'd bolted. Her motorcycle just had to be at the exact opposite end of where she was. Driving it in winter was cold as fuck, but it hadn't snowed yet. Getting anywhere in traffic was always faster on two wheels where she could more easily break traffic laws to get back to the Triskelion.

Natasha was awake.

The giant spire of the Washington Monument loomed in front of her. Her lungs screamed. She'd already run what, seven miles today? Shit, a year ago that would've taken her all morning, and she never would've had the energy to run more afterward, let alone think about getting on a bike and speeding through traffic.

Natasha was awake!

She tripped over herself, rolled on the frozen ground. Heart rabbiting in her throat, she gasped for air. “Fortune, you okay? What's up?” Kneeling, concern all over him, was Rogers.

“Natasha is awake,” panted from her.

Over his shoulders, she was tossed, and he took over her breathless flight. The monuments receded at a pace she could only hope to match in a vehicle. At her bike, he fished her keys from her pocket, got on, kicked the engine into rumbling life. She simply got behind him, shoved her helmet on, and laced her arms around his waist.

Rogers got her to the Triskelion faster than she could have. He took turns at a speed she wasn't
confident enough to try yet. She gave half a thought to whether Metro Police simply saw Cap's face and ignored the red lights he was running because he was Cap. It was the president's home city. Security was a bit tighter than pretty much anywhere else in America, but no one tried to pull them over.

There was a clog of agents ahead of her, and she'd lost Cap's handy strength a while ago as he helped with a prisoner of some sort. She crashed into someone, and they went down in a tangle of limbs that ended up with Emily being pinned. A gun pressed to her chin.

The agent blinked at her. “Agent Sekhmet?”

She grunted.

“Damn. Sorry!” The slightly familiar agent hauled her up. “Go do your thing.”

“Thanks,” huffed out of her. She saw agents every day, said hi, trained with them, sometimes had briefings with them, and even ate meals with them. Yet there were always more agents who knew her than she them. Her thoughts began to fade as she slipped into a run again. One good thing about people knowing about her gift, she supposed. Run through the halls into someone, and they apologized. Up ahead was her prize. The doors to the infirmary.

Lungs and legs screaming, she burst past the guards into the isolation ward. Decent guards that they were, they grabbed her until her identity was confirmed. Clint appeared.

“What took you so long?” He quipped, taking in her sweating form and cold weather training gear. “Stop for a latte or what?”

She didn't like the strained quality of his voice or the way his eyes held shadows. “How is she?”

The shadows grew deeper. “She hasn't spoken.”

“Damn.”

“But then, she hasn't seen you yet.” His face tried to smile.

She nodded, took a last deep breath, and went in.

Natasha looked up at her from where she was secured to her bed. Very secured. They'd taken no chances with the Black Widow.

“Nat?”

Flat green eyes slid away, focused on the ceiling. Whatever hope that had been in Clint's eyes sank as Emily glanced at him.

Her feet moved forward, and she made shivering contact with Natasha's wrist. She was healthy, nothing wrong or out of place. How had she fucked up? “Natalia,” she laced the name with apology.

Green eyes slid back, and wrinkles formed above them.

“What did you say to her?” Clint whispered. “Back in the interrogation room, something in French.”

How did he manage not to know French, but speak fluent Latvian?
“Em?”

“I told her not to bite me.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“Petit renard.” Natasha mumbled.

Her neck popped as she whipped to face Natasha.

Clint steadied himself by grabbing Emily's shoulder. She exchanged brittle, hopeful gazes with him.

“Petit renard, me mord pas,” was repeated.

She gasped.

“That!” Fingers digging into her flesh, Clint nearly shouted. “What does it mean?”

“Little fox, don't bite me.”


What the hell was she supposed to say?

“Anything, Em. The weather, guns, chewing gum. She's responding to you.”

“Weather's fucking cold, Natalia. Temp dropped below zero last night. Zero Fahrenheit. What is that in Celsius, Clint?”

“Uh? Cold?”

“Kholodno. Léng. Froid Koude. Kall. Froid. Thand.” Natasha continued to ramble cold in various languages, all laced with a Russian accent. How many could this woman speak? It was in her files, but Emily had forgotten. A couple dozen? More?

Emily exchanged relieved, excited grins with Clint. “She's not a vegetable.”

Clint squeezed her shoulder. “Keep talking.”

She did. For three consecutively better hours, Natasha responding just a little better with each one, though every response began in Russian. It was frustrating for all of them; Emily understood zero and Clint only a tiny bit. They had to wait for Natasha to cycle through languages to those they understood, then make sense of her objective, often abstract replies.

An armed someone brought them water. Another two hours, and a doctor came in, tried to tell them to let the patient rest. Nat was perfectly fine, and Emily said as much. She didn't see the expression that Clint gave, but the doctor left quickly. A seasoned operative brought them lunch, and Natasha mechanically chewed whatever they put in her mouth.

“I've got to pee.” Emily finally gave in to the potty-dance. “Or I'm gonna burst.”

A vice grip latched onto her wrist as she tried to turn. She looked back to see green eyes burning at her. “Strakh poteri.”
Fucking Russian! “I'll be back in a minute.”

Natasha groaned, repeated herself in something Asian, didn't let go. Clint shrugged.

Her bladder told her in no uncertain terms that it was going to empty itself whether she found a toilet or not. “I promise, I'll come right back, but I really got to pee.”

She was released, and she raced to the en suite restroom. In the mirror, she was able to look herself in the eye for what felt like the first time in years. Emotion clogged her throat, and she coughed, splashed cold water at the tears. When her heart stopped trying to escape her chest, she dried her face and hands and stepped out.

Her return to Natasha's bedside was celebrated with a firm grip on her wrist. “*Ton petit renard.*”

“That's different from earlier,” was Clint's intense note. “How?”

“She switched the possessive from my to your.” She shrugged at the question in his eyes. She wasn't quite sure what it meant, though her heart wanted it to mean something poetic.

“Nature's calling me too.” Clint stepped away.

“*Yastreb?*” Natasha frowned at the closed door.

“What's yah-streb?”

The frown deepened, grip tightened. “*Glaza yastreba.*” The language rotation went on until Clint returned. “Eye of hawk.”

“Hawkeye,” was his smiling correction.

“Hawk. Eye.”

“She didn't like you being gone.” Emily nudged him.

“*Kontrabandist?*”

“Smuggler!” Clint cheered. “I know that one!”

Her patience had been stretching thinner every time they waited for Nat to cycle through languages. How long would it take for her to get better? Frustration was smacked aside by determination, by loyalty, by... Natasha was her friend, and she did have the patience to help get her through whatever this was, whatever Emily had helped cause by digging around in her brain.

“My name is Emily.”

“Em-ah-lee.”

“Emily.”

“Emma-lee.”

“Close enough.”

Natasha shifted in the bed, tugged at her restraints, frowned. “Emma-lee? Hawk. Eye?”

They looked at each other. Clint shrugged. “Your call, Em.”
“Tord Lien.”

Natasha froze and started spitting out Russian furiously. She yanked at the restraints and started crying. “*Ton petit renard ! Ne pauk!*”

Clint spoke terribly softly, “The Red Room.”

Rage shook Natasha. “*Golova posta. Besplatnyy pauka.*” Over and over, she repeated those angry words.

“What's the Red Room?” Emily asked over the mantra.

Not taking his eyes off Natasha, “Training facility where the Black Widow program was carried out.”

Where Natasha's childhood had been ripped away from her. “Natalia?”

The mantra ceased. Blazing green eyes latched on her.

“I promise I'll learn Russian soon, but until then, you have to translate for us.”

Frustration evident in every language, Natasha eventually got to thickly-accented English. See? Nat needed Emily's patience, because her own was clearly at its breaking point. How much more frustrating must it be not to be able to sort through the ocean of languages in her head and choose just one to speak in? To repeat herself a dozen times or more for the simplest of conversation. “Head empty. Free of spider.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Emma-lee. *Ton petit renard rouge.*” It was incredible how much information and emotion was infused in her name and a silly phrase.

Emily undid the restraints, held her hand out to Clint. “Give me your knife.”

He closed his eyes a moment, then handed over his pocket knife. Emily gave it to Natasha, who looked between it and them several times. She slid off the bed, the knife clattering to the floor, and Natasha wrapped her arms around Emily. “Emma-lee.” She pulled back, gave Clint similar treatment. “Hawk. Eye.” A long, shuddering breath. “Friends.”

Icy wind blew at them, burned their cheeks and eyes and lungs, but Emily and Natasha remained on the roof. Washington D.C. sparkled prettily under a fresh layer of snow and wicked sunlight. Emily lowered her phone to drink from her thermos of hot tea. Her gaze drifted to the armed guards who were always on patrol up here and the extras who'd been assigned to follow Natasha.

A gloved hand flicked at the e-reader in her hands, Natasha's attention focused on whatever she was reading. Emily's curious glance had seen Cyrillic lettering earlier. Reset after reset in the spy's mind had really screwed with her. Every hour though, she improved. After yesterday's brutal lesson in patience, Emily had decided to encourage rest today. Clint had agreed. So had the on-duty doctors. Natasha had basically been put into Agent Sekhmet's custody, and she had prescribed fresh air, sunshine, tea, and reading.

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How did the woman manage to look totally comfortable in this frigid weather? Had she grown up in the arctic? Irises made light green in the intense sunlight flicked up at her. A soft orange, nearly
“The organization I work for is called SHIELD,” Natalia was explaining.

Dipping a carrot stick in hummus, Emily second-guessed her decision. Why work for an organization that essentially wanted to exploit her gift? She should be questioning her trust of the Black Widow who’d stalked her, invaded her home, and pretended to be friendly simply to recruit her.

The woman in question arched one of her carefully sculpted eyebrows at Emily's scrutiny. Or had she been born that perfect? Beneath her light cosmetics was clear skin, no pimples or blotches or anything. Okay, maybe there were blotches. It was possible, but she doubted it. What was beneath it was the most efficient metabolism, overall body system, she’d ever sensed.

Emily could choose whether to activate the healing part of her gift. What she couldn't turn off was what Kevin had dubbed scanning. Every brush of skin sent information to Emily. For her, it was an automatic sixth sense, always giving her input just like sight or hearing or smell. And like those senses, she could focus on it, put more effort into understanding what she was receiving.

While healing the Avenger, Emily had learned a good deal about her. Her superhuman body was natural. At least, that's what she'd first thought, that it was similar to her own gift. The second bout of healing had adjusted that idea, had led Emily to deeply explore, to reach into why Natasha was sterile despite her enhanced repair system given that all the parts were there and attached. The sterility must predate the enhancements.

Therefor, at some point, Natalia Romanova had been a normal human. Her DNA had been altered. Why? How? Her mind went to the only other person she'd heard of like that. Captain America. She remembered the news footage, the YouTube clips. The captain was much stronger, more durable, etc. than Natalia. Not simply because he was male. Was Natasha's enhancements from an attempt to copy those results? Emily's curiosity burned.

She wanted to know more. She wanted to know why her senses told her that Natasha's easy companionship wasn't only a facade. She wanted to know how it was so easy to trust this enigma. And she wanted to meet superheroes like the geek she was.

Natalia was waiting for Emily to ask the questions that she could obviously see going through her mind. What did she want to know most? “Why do you work for SHIELD?”

The snack in her hands was put back. She sat up straighter, took a moment to gather herself.

“People like me have a very specific skill set.” What movie had she stolen that line from? It made Emily smile to think that Natalia watched movies, was a normal person despite being an Avenger. Natalia’s eyebrow climbed, but she went on. “How I acquired mine left me with a reputation that I wanted to get away from. Director Fury gave me a chance to start over and use my skills to help make the world a better place instead of worse, like I had been doing.”

“Was it your choice? Before SHIELD?”

Natalia's gaze sharpened. “No.” She didn’t expound on it.

“Okay.” Topic closed, tack on tiny detail to the childhood training one. If SHIELD was a second chance for someone as dangerous as Natalia, then Emily would give it a chance. The organization already knew what she could do and had gone through the trouble of sending a pleasant recruiter instead of kidnapping her. She could assuage her curiosities and maybe do what she’d always wanted to: be herself in the open. “We going to be roommates in barracks or what, Ms.
Rushman?"

“Though I often stay in the dormitory, I keep an apartment in the city. You can choose where you sleep.”

Emily decided to flirt. “And if I chose to sleep in your room?”

Sudden laughter startled them both. It was a thrilled cackle, not at all the sweet sound of a seductress. Emily loved it. “You don't scare easily, do you?”

“I save my fear for my brothers.” She met unreadable eyes. “And I'll expect their protection as part of my payment package.”

Emily's brothers had agents who kept tabs on them. SHIELD had an entire division devoted to the protection of their field agents' families. Admittedly, a tiny division, but not many SHIELD agents had families. The organization tended to recruit single people with few ties. It made for a deep dating pool, or at least a lot of casual sex partners. Emily was quite the anomaly among them.

Her attachments were broad and deep, and she was fiercely protective of them. Natasha had become one of those. She was worth fighting for, whether to get her to laugh or to help Clint convince the director to let Natasha out of the compound.

Expected impatience wasn't in Natasha's eyes as Emily's focus returned to the moment. What was there was deep, trusting, and layered with amusement. “Emily?”

“You ready to blow this popiscle stand?”

“I'm pretty sure that no translates in about half a dozen languages.” Director Fury bit out. “Both of you speak at least two of those.”

“Natasha is no longer a walking time-bomb.” Clint's arm muscles were hard, tight, and the veins along them stood out sharply. He looked as ready to punch Fury as Emily was.

“Says the walking time-bomb.”

“And me.” Emily injected.

The one eye glared at her. “You aren't qualified to give that prognosis.”

She snapped. “I am the only person qualified to give it!” Director Fury went rigid. “Maybe it'd get through your bald skull if I repaired and destroyed your eye a few times.”

Nostrils flared and chest heaved. The eye shut. Clint's eyebrows were in his receding hairline.

“The only person who can ever control Natasha Romanoff again is Natasha Romanoff,” raged from her.

Jaw muscles remained tightly corded around the director's jaw as he looked at Clint. “Are you really willing to risk the lives of your children by setting the Black Widow free?”

“She's not a black widow anymore. Natasha's a red fox. Foxes are capable of loyalty and love.” Clint's tone was totally confident.

The eye scanned him, and Emily got a similar treatment. “Love, huh?”
Emily refused the blush and held the angry gaze.

“Fine.” The fight went out of him. “Take her, but if she goes rogue again, I will not hesitate to send an agent who will kill her.”

Wait. Hold on. Take a fucking minute. Clint had kids? Really? Is that why he could throw around that dad-voice of his?

“Perfectly clear.” Then, “Dammit, Fury. I wasn't ready to tell her.”

The director shrugged. “I thought you were inviting her to the farm for New Years?”

“Yes, but...”

Inviting her to the farm?

“Hey, Em, by the way, I've got a secret family stashed away on a peach orchard. Only the director here and Nat know about them. Want to come home with us for a few weeks?”

After the past few days, she'd been looking forward to her quiet apartment.

“Laura and the kids want to meet you.”

He talked about her? To his secret family?

“Nat's coming. I think it'd be good for her to have you around.”

Oh. A few weeks with Natasha? Away from SHIELD and missions and Emily's own family? Tomorrow was Christmas, and she'd already warned that she would miss it.

“She actually suggested that I invite you.”

She'd thought that Kevin had been a little too understanding of her missing a holiday. Natasha must have talked to him about this. When the hell had that happened?

Why?

“Okay. Sure. Let's go visit your secret family.”

“When did the name Natalia become something you responded well to?” Clint asked as he helped her pack for the trip to the farm. They'd missed Christmas to keep Nat under observation for a while in the controlled environment, but if they left soon, they'd make it in time to enjoy the pies that Laura was prepping for their little New Years Eve celebration. Laura's pies were always flaky and perfect.

Their long association had given the sniper too much insight into her, she mused. He could read her too well, could put together too many small details into a clear picture. The Black Widow's handlers would have been furious that she had such a massive hole in her defenses in this man. She focused on Mandarin, a language in Clint's repertoire that came easier than English. And at least her cognitive association had finally unknotted itself, as well as her ability to string words into proper sentences. The disassociations, broken patterns, and fragmented memories caused by the removal of her triggers had frustrated her for the past week.

Her accent was more difficult. It remained distinctly Russian. She'd had herself recorded and sent
the file to a specialist who could research where she'd been brought up before the Red Room. She kept her hope small.

“The first time she said it.”

Laugh lines crinkled around his eyes. Would she ever have laugh lines? “And when was that?”

He was going to tease her relentlessly if she fessed up. She would give it to him, because it would make him smile. He hadn't been smiling much lately. “The day I interviewed her to join the team.”

Surprise made his neck jerk. “ Seriously?”

“That's how easy she got under my skin.”

“She's good for you.”

“She's one of the few people who sees me as a woman first, everything else second. Every smile I bring out of her feels like I'm rubbing just a little more red off my ledger.”

Their shoulders bumped, and he smiled at her. “She's really good for you.”

Chapter End Notes

I'd kinda forgotten that I'd started this fic off with flashbacks... so to keep the continuity and address a topic that a few of you brought up, this chapter got one. Hope it didn't break the flow. I'm sure that flashbacks can happen more in the future, especially if I skip over stuff again that needs explaining.

Translations:
Strakh poteri – fear of loss
Glaza yastreba – eye of hawk
Kontrabandist – smuggler
Ne pauk – not spider
Golova posta. Besplatnyy pauka – head empty. Free of spider
The quarter-mile drive from the main road finally let them out from peach trees in front of the antique farmhouse, and Emily's open-mouthed awe was endearing. Clint chuckled, pat her arm. “Like it?”

“It’s nicer than I expected.” She was ogling the soft hills, the flock of chickens scratching through the compost pile for bugs, the multiple structures and garden and quiet country that allowed the Barton farm to be completely self-contained.

Could be, but wasn't. The kids took a bus to school, Laura went shopping and had friends in town, family a little farther, the house was tied to the grid through electricity and internet, and the orchards were taken care of by hired help. That the farm could go off-grid was the important part. It was why the land deed and all contracts including utilities were under Laura's name. About the only failing was that Laura had insisted on having the Barton name, and everyone in town knew Clint and Laura Barton.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Ozhidal li vy, krepost’?” They didn't have to show Emily the impressive bunker hidden below the barn right away.

“It's good that I don't always have to understand you to recognize your sarcasm, woman.” Emily poked her. “But no, I didn't expect a castle.”

“Fortress,” was her vocabulary correction.

Behind the wheel, Clint merely grinned. The welcome party was poring out of the house.

“Wow.” Emily breathed. “There really are little Hawkeyes.”

Cooper, a near spitting image of his father, was grinning widely while his little sister bounced excitedly. Laura lifted a hand in welcome, hiding her worry from the kids, but Natasha saw it in the tightness around her eyes. The car stilled, and Bartons were tugging their dad from his seat. Clint groaned as he lifted himself and two kids.

“Oof. Who ate fifty pounds of cookies while I was away?” He kissed both their heads, squeezed the kids between himself and Laura. “And who said you could get more beautiful?”

They spent a few more moments being ridiculously cute and loving before the kids were squealing and running at Auntie Natasha. She knelt, offering greetings in Mandarin, which wasn't totally out of character for her. Teaching the kids foreign languages had been her thing since they'd been born. Both kids could handle a full conversation in Mandarin, nine year old Cooper could also speak Spanish. They had a smattering of other vocabularies, but the one they'd be fluent in next hadn't been decided yet. Maybe they'd learn separately since Cooper was getting old enough to make decisions of his own.

When she'd satisfied herself with kisses and hugs and the kids with demanding questions, she peeked at the married couple, who were holding each other close, watching her and the kids.

Clint jerked his head toward Emily.
The way she was looking at Natasha, the sunset smoldering in her eyes, ignited heat in her chest. She wanted to hold Emily like Clint held Laura. Squish the kids between them and kiss her.

“Is that your new friend daddy told us about?” Lila asked through missing baby teeth.

Natasha nodded. “Emily is a very good friend.”

“Better than daddy?”

“She certainly smells better.”


Cooper went up with his hand held out. “Hi. I'm Cooper.”

“Somehow I imagined that you'd have these silent floors, but half of the stairs creak.” Emily told Laura as the woman came back from tucking Lila in for a nap. Clint was out with Cooper, probably tramping through the woods or giving him archery lessons.

Laura leaned on a wall with a yawn, hand on the baby bump that Emily had touched earlier and given the parents a happy report, and watched her kitchen slaves clean. “Clint likes the warning they give.” she said in her delicate Georgian drawl.

Warning? Really needed to hear Cooper sneaking down to get milk at two in the morning? Sneaking. “Oh.”

“Bez muki net nauki.” Came from the inside of the fridge where Natasha was scrubbing.

“Adversity is a good teacher.” Laura nodded. She smiled at Emily's pinch of surprise. “One of us had to learn what Nat muttered under her breath at us.”

A softness was directed at Laura, one that Emily had seen on Natasha for the first time yesterday when she'd scooped up the kids and kissed their cheeks. If someone like Stark had made that comment, he'd have gotten an eye-roll, some sharp retort. Emily probably would've gotten light sarcasm. The depth of affection that Natasha openly showed for Clint's wife cemented in Emily that Laura was probably the greatest person on Earth.

“Oh good. I could use a tutor.” She grinned winningly, wrung out her own dirty rag. The water in her bucket was nearly black with gunk from the oven. When she'd offered to clean the kitchen while she visited, Laura had nearly cried for joy. Aside from not having the time to do it around her normal busy schedule, the new pregnancy had stolen any extra energy she had. Emily smiled at the perpetually yawning woman. “I'll clean the bathrooms in exchange for lessons.”

Laughter came out of the fridge, and Natasha spilled from it, sputtering Russian in between belly busters. Laura joined, always ready for giggles, and responded in her own unintelligible Russian.

“What?” Emily demanded. But the women went on with their devilish cackles and sputtered Russian until they were out of breath and flushed bright pink. Seeing Natasha laugh like that was too incredible for her to be annoyed, and the amusement was too catching to ignore. Emily ended up giggling at them, shaking her head, and enjoying the moment.

Green eyes bright with joy landed on her. The laughter paused, Natasha simply staring at her, breathing heavily, grinning widely. She said something about washing red and smiles. Emily
glanced at Laura for a translation, caught a surprised expression before Natasha garbled more Russian that sent the women into fresh giggles.

Emily sighed good-naturedly and went back to her battle with the dirty oven.

“Lisichka.” Emily nervously gave a try at an endearment in the language she'd been studying every day for the last two weeks. Russian was surprisingly romantic. “Progulyaytes' so mnoy.”

Finally, Natasha looked up from her book. Her face was somewhere between confusion and amusement. “Chto ty skazal?”

“Lisichka. Progulyaytes'...” She lost momentum as Natasha's face decided on a frown.

“Nyet.” She shook her head. “Don't call me that.”

Shoulders slumping, Emily started to berate herself for thinking that Natasha's earlier obsession with ton petit renard meant more than it should. Idiot. She moved to flee and got to the door.

The floor creaked. Arms flew around her. “Prostite. I'm sorry,” heated her neck, sent the fine hairs rigid. “That came out wrong.”

Was Nat's heart beating as fast as her own?


Can't take much more of this. Emily fidgeted.

“Emily. Expressing my emotions wasn't easy for me even before you cut the Red Room's triggers out.” Another groan. “I' suis ton petit renard rouge. Do you understand? Petit renard might translate to lisichka, but they don't mean the same to me.” Her words wobbled. “Not coming from you.” What she said last was almost too quiet to make out. “If my heart isn't what you want,” her arms shivered and fell, “I'll walk away.”

She stared at the front door for a long moment. “You actually feel that way?”

“Don't you realize why I couldn't kill you? Your death would have been my own.” Too fast to begin to catch, she spat a line of Russian, growled. “I love you.”

Her legs couldn't hold her. She puddled to the floor.

Knees crashed beside her. “Emily!” Natasha gathered Emily's limp body to her, forced her chin up, peered frantically into her eyes. “Emily?”

“You love me?” Breath rasped in her throat, and she choked on it.

Delicately, Emily's face was stroked. A thumb caressed her quivering lip. Natasha nodded.

“Natalia.” She was drowning in the warmth of beautiful green eyes. “Mon petit renard. I love you too.”

A whimper preceded Natasha leaning in, touching their lips together. Gently, too gently, as if she was afraid of Emily vanishing under too much pressure. Emily pressed in, enough to hold a lip between her own.
Sniffling broke them apart, and they both turned to the sound. Laura stood in the hallway, a hand over her mouth. It flapped emotionally. “I didn't mean to intrude, but when I saw you working so desperately to express yourself, I couldn't walk away. Oh, Natasha, I'm so happy for you! And you too, Emily. Oh, Lord, I need a tissue.”

Though the day of raw emotions had thoroughly exhausted her, Natasha couldn't sleep. She'd been staring out at the dark countryside for two hours. The clock flicked over to midnight. She sighed, stuffed herself into slippers and a pullover and snuck downstairs to make tea. A teapot, still steaming its lush aroma, greeted her in the kitchen.

“Hey.” Emily was leaning against the counter, a mug in her hands. “There's plenty more.”

She nodded her appreciation. With a mug of her own to cradle, she battled the languages in her head to speak English. “Trouble sleeping?” Her accent remained rebelliously Russian, one that wouldn't go amiss in the Black Sea region, but it was miles away from where she'd been a few weeks ago.

“Yea. You?”

“Same.”

Emily sipped, frowned, “I was so happy until I hit the pillow.”


“All I could think about was what if I woke up and today was a dream?”

“A good dream, I hope.” Self-deprecating fear sharpened her tone.

Emily's cup thudded to the counter, and she swept into Natasha's personal space. “I love you.” She said, as though those three words held all the secrets of the universe. They crashed against years of being told love was a weakness, but her heart grabbed at them, held them tight and believed in them. Because this was Emily. Her Emily, with her easy acceptance of Natasha's past, abyssal hunger for books and childish tshirts, entrancing black eyes, and perfectly shaped lips that begged for kisses.

Natasha ducked her head, smiled. She looked at the abandoned cup. “Grab that. Come sit with me.”

She moved to the living room's couch, grateful to hear Emily's small sounds behind her. The throw blanket was snagged, half draped over herself, one side held up in invitation. Emily accepted. Not quite touching, they sat, sipping tea and watching small flames dance in the fireplace.

Tilting her cup failed to deliver more tea. She pouted at it.

“Want more?” Emily offered.

“Not if it means you getting up.”

“You present a convincing argument.”

They watched each other. Emily's eyes twinkled in the firelight. Natasha had never seen anything more beautiful in her life. “YA mog by ostat'sya zdes' navsgeda,” was her purposely Russian
statement. Emily went a little pink whenever Natasha slipped into it or stopped fighting her original accent.

“You what?”

“I could,” she edged her body to slide against Emily, “Stay here forever.”

Light sounds of children giggling woke Emily, and she squinted up at Lila and Cooper. Clint's voice called into the room, “It's too early to be planning world takeover. What're you giggling about?”

A weight on Emily shifted. Under it, her arm was asleep.

“Oh.” He snorted as he rounded the doorway. “You know there are two perfectly good beds upstairs. What're you doing taking up space on the couch?”

“Nam nuzhen chay.” Natasha grumbled against Emily's chest. She shifted, but didn't release her grip or untangle their legs.

“Can you believe that, kids? Her excuse is tea.”

“Is Emlee gonna be our new auntie?” Lila asked, excited and bouncy.

Emily's heart pounded, and Natasha shifted to look up at her, hand over Emily's heart.

“Who wants hot cocoa?” Clapping his hands, Clint grinned at his kids.

“How can you lo-” Natasha's tongue felt wooden. She tried a different tact. “Your very nature is to heal and save lives. I only know how to hurt and kill. How can you... Why be with me?”

On her side of the bed they'd climbed into for more sleep after Clint had pried the kids away with cocoa, Emily propped her head up, her lips moving a few times before she responded. “Your nature, Natalia, is protective.”

“I have killed more people than you can imagine. Men. Women. Children.” She rolled away, got up. “I've made them suffer, made them scream and cry and beg, and walked away with a smile on my face. I enjoyed killing. It's still what I'm best at. I'm not a good person. I don't deserve love.”

Silence was all the response she got. As she'd expected. Emily finally understood the full disaster of what she was, would-

“I beat my little brother to death when we were kids.”

Shocked disbelief spun Natasha around.

From the bed, where she hadn't moved, Emily met her eye. A face she knew so well, had stared at for endless hours, dreamed of and touched and kissed had an expression she'd never seen there before. Nothing. Blank nothingness. One that Natasha was extremely good at, one that had been tortured into her before she was ten. When had Emily learned it? Why?

“Kevin had gotten to spend the afternoon at the zoo with our grandparents while mom went shopping and dad was at work, and I was stuck babysitting Alan. The next day, when our parents
wanted alone time, they sent me with the boys to the park. They knew that I'd been excited to go to
a friend's birthday party, but didn't care. Kevin got to play while I watched the toddler. I took them
into a little place away from people and spent all my anger, all my frustration and jealousy and bad
stuff out on him. I had six inches and thirty pounds on him. He didn't stand a chance.”

She couldn't picture it. The story didn't match the Emily she knew, didn't jive with the tight
relationship she'd seen in Wyoming.

“He managed to get away when I stopped at the sound of someone yelling. It was some dad
screaming at his kid. It reminded me of my own pain. I chased after Kevin. I tackled him to the
ground, but I hit something hard on the way. It hurt. A lot. Enough that I started crying.”

A crack appeared in the blankness. Old pain and anger shone through.

“I was crying over a stupid broken arm, and my little brother, the one I'd spent the last ten minutes
kicking and punching and turning into a bloody mess, he patted my knee and told me it was going
to be okay. He said he understood. Our parents weren't nice. They were selfish and gave me their
responsibilities. He said all that while blood poured out of his mouth.”

Emily sat up, her body vibrating with the force of her pain. “I hit him again.”

“Emily.”

The rage in her eyes glued Natasha's feet to the floor.

“He told me he loved me. I hit him. He went still. That was when I saw Alan. Tiny little Alan was
standing six feet away, and you know what that little fucker says?”

Memories from the Red Room assaulted her, mirrored Emily's story too well. “No.”

“Alan asks me to fix Kevin because he's the only one who's nice to him.”

Unable to do anything, to push away her own past, to move forward, to wrap Emily in her arms and
not let go until all her hurts went away, Natasha's vision went watery.

“Alan was five, and the only person who gave a damn about him was the brother I'd just killed. I
finally saw outside of my own pain, saw that I could fight back against our parents by loving my
little brother. All I could think about was fixing Kevin, bringing him back.”

The tears fell, great streams of them.

Emily took a long, shuddering breath, but still did not break eye contact. “I put my gift to work.
Kevin opened his eyes and smiled at me after I stuck teeth back in his jaw. He hugged me while I
cried. He jumped in the lake to wash up, and we went home. Dad beat him for ruining his good
clothes before taking me to the hospital. When we got back, he beat me for interrupting his alone
time with mom. I killed him two months later, made it look like an accident.

“I made him suffer. For hours.” Natasha had tortured more than a few people, understood
immediately that Emily's gift would enable her to continue indefinitely. Stab, heal, repeat. Never-
ending pain. The Red Room would have killed a hundred thousand children for the chance at
turning Emily into a Black Widow. Her heart nearly stopped at the idea. “I enjoyed every scream,
and he wasn't the only one I took out my bad temper on. Just the only one I killed. I know what it's
like to be a monster. It's easy to see my old reflection in other people. I've never seen it in you.”

Gently, her lips curved. “You said it yourself, 'enjoyed,' past tense. You only kill when you have
to. The woman I know now, she dives in front of shrapnel to save a stranger's life. She is brave and kind and generous and loves Lila and Cooper like they were her own. It doesn't matter if you deserve my love or not,” there was a self-deprecation there that Natasha immediately hated, “I love you, and you can't run away from it.”

Happy giggles from downstairs pierced the sudden, thick silence. Emily glanced toward the door, releasing Natasha from her powerful gaze. She stumbled to the bed, fell onto it, crawled into Emily's lap. Words weren't good enough to express the storm of emotions inside her. Even if she tried, they would have come out in Russian. There was only one possible plan of attack, and she dipped into it, tenderly dropping kisses on Emily's forehead, then eyelashes, nose, and finishing on her lips.

Stacking firewood onto the pile in Emily's arms, Natasha paused. “I think Kevin is empathic.”

Emily gave her a look that said she'd dole out pain to anyone who tried to recruit her brother into espionage, including Natasha. “Why?”

“The way he moves, how he breaks up fights before they begin.” Wood in hand, she paused to think. “His insight into the human psyche is impressive.”

“He has a doctorate in child psychology and legally makes almost as much as I did.” Blankness tried to take over her face. “It's why he's mom's favorite.”

Sharp wood poked into her shoulder as she yanked Emily into a fierce kiss. “Your mother doesn't know how lucky she is to have you.” Noses touching she glared into doe-like eyes. “She doesn't know that you paid for Kevin's education either, that you paid for Alan's bail and lawyer and invested in that business he's trying to start, or the million other ways you take care of your brothers, does she?”

“How di-” Her ridiculous question faded into an ironic smile. “Of course the fox knows.”

“You take care of your family, even that ungrateful mother of yours. My Emily is a better woman than she could ever hope to be.”

“So possessive.” She drawled.

Natasha tasted her lips again, nipped at them. “Emilishka,” her Russian slipped in to make an endearment out of Em's name. “You are mine now. And I am yours.” With a whimper, Emily's lips parted enticingly

“Kissing is definitely not going to help get the firewood inside the house,” came Clint's teasing voice.

Natasha gave him an innocent tone. “Are you sure?” Back to Emily, with all the seriousness she could muster, “I think we should practice more to find out for sure.”

“Yea. Okay.” Emily tossed the wood aside, and Clint grunted, muttering about unfinished chores as he left them alone.

“I think it's time that I went to my own apartment for a little while.” Natasha overheard Emily saying to Laura as they worked in the kitchen.
“You're welcome to stay as long as you like, Em. We enjoy your company.” Always mothering people, even those only two years younger.

Maybe it was time to go do some dusting in her D.C. apartment.

“Thanks, Momma Barton.”

A chuckle went along with a light slap. “Any time, baby girl.”

Emily's peal of laughter warmed the coldness that had bitten at the thought of her leaving the farm. “Hey, Laura?”

“Yes?”

Natasha almost didn't hear what she said next, as quietly asked as it was. “Should I invite the fox to come with me?”

Yes. Another week or two in Emily's cozy apartment before Fury pushed for Agent Sekhmet to return to duty sounded amazing.

“Or is that too... soon?”

There was the sound of a spoon hitting a fry pan, vegetables sizzling as they were stirred. “Are you asking her to move in with you or offering your home as an alternative place to spend her vacation?”

Move in with Emily? She pictured years of waking up to Emily's grouchy morning face, and her heart hammered. The sound of sizzling increased, and the scent of browning meat blossomed.

“I...” Emily trailed off.

“You hadn't thought if she'd see it that way, huh?”

“I hadn't.”

Noodles clattered out of a box, splashed into boiling water.

“I don't think either of us are ready to move in together. I just wanted to let her know that I miss my apartment and snow in the mountains and that she's welcome there.”

“We can go into town tomorrow and get your key copied if you want.”

“Thanks, Laura,” hushed affection. The furniture could handle another few weeks of dust.

“That was also a very tactful way of telling me that your tired of being chased by my little monsters.”

Natasha smiled at their laughter and decided it was time to sneak away before she got caught. Two feet, and she spotted Hawkeye smirking at her. He followed her outside, clapped her on the back. “Cradle robber.”

“ Calling me old?”

“Grandmotherly.” He managed to dodge her kick, and ran shrieking as she gave chase.
A hard cry that sounded like Cooper brought her and Laura's concerned attention to the kitchen window. Laura started giggling first as they watched Clint run for his life.

“Is this a usual thing?”

“Only when Natasha is happy,” was the easy grin. “I honestly didn't think I'd get to see her smile this visit, not after what Clint said she went through.”

If she ever ran into this Petrovich fellow, she'd be sure to rip his tongue out first. She wondered if she could rip off his balls, feed them to him, and have them regrow. It was an interesting thought, enough that she stalled from the hateful thoughts and slipped into objective conjecture.

“I also never thought I'd see her allow herself to fall in love.”

In love. Emily felt the blush rising, the stupid happy grin stretching her face. Natasha was in love with her. How the hell had she managed to get so lucky?

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact:

The goddess Sekhmet was known as the Lady of Terror and the Lady of Life. Natasha might have named Emily a little too well, right? Huh. That could've been an interesting take on Emily if I'd thought of it sooner: a fellow Red Room graduate, known for intel extraction and torture.

Translations:

Ozhidali li vy, krepost' – Did you expect a fortress
Bez muki net nauki – proverb: Adversity builds character. (literally: Without torture no science)
lisishka – little fox (endearment)
Progulyaytes' so mnoy – Take a walk with me
Chto ty skazal? - What did you say?
Nyet – no
prostitute – I'm sorry
der'mo – shit
YA mog by ostat'sya zdes' navsgeda. - I could stay here forever.
Nam nuzhen chay. - We needed tea.
Key in the door of Emily's Colorado apartment, Natasha habitually checked the hallway for eyes. A woman with a sack of groceries glanced at Natasha without interest and opened her own door. Good enough. Quiet greeted her in Emily's place, as she'd known it would. During their phone call last night, Emily had said she'd be at lunch with Lizzie and would probably be gone all afternoon. Laura had proceeded to tease Natasha afterward, saying they texted and talked on the phone like teenagers.

A teenager? Natasha chuckled as she popped her boots off and arranged them on the rubber mat. Snow slipped from them onto it. She was nearing a century old and just now getting to act like a teenager? At least puberty wasn't involved this time. She put water on to boil and went to the bedroom. Emily's scent wrapped around her in a warm embrace.

It made her forgive the dirty clothes piled on the floor beside the basket of clean, wrinkled laundry. Breathing deep of the presence that she'd missed terribly for the past week was a balm. Why had she put herself through it?

*Turning the key in her hand over and over, Natasha almost didn't hear Clint's approach. “Hey.”*

*She shifted her gaze from the duck pond to him. “Hey.”*

*“Figured you would've been hot on her heels days ago. What's up?”*

*“I have no idea what I'm doing.”*

*His laughter wasn't wholly unexpected, but it was irritating all the same. “Nat, love screws with everybody's head. It makes all of us question ourselves.”*

*That did not make her feel better. “I know the literature.”*

*“And you're afraid of screwing up, of hurting Em,” was his sober reply.*

*Say what's in your head, she yelled at herself. Clint can help. “She deserves so much better than me.”*

*Clint leaned back on the wood bench that Laura's uncle had carved by hand and installed for comfort by the summer splash zone. “Emily deserves someone who will give her love, respect, trust, and,” he tossed her a smile. “Books and cookies.”*

*Soft chuckles danced in her chest. “And someone who will help her work off those cookies too.” Who was she kidding? Emily looked amazing with some real muscle on her, but there was something to be said for the softer curves she'd had when they'd first met. The pure image of a gentle soul. She found Emily's dark past almost as hard to accept as her love.*

*“I know a classy redhead who fits that bill.”*

*“Is it...” Shakily, she battled training and years of keeping her own counsel. Would talking to her friends ever be an easy thing? “Is it okay for me to love? Have I gotten enough red off my ledger to deserve it?”*
“Everyone deserves love, Nat.” Tone and eyes deep and fierce, he stared into her. “Everyone, including strays and orphans,” a tremble said he was including himself, “No matter how messed up their past is.” His hands found her shoulders. “You've already proven that not even the Red Room can make you hurt Emily. Remember?”

She did. The battle to keep her finger off the gun trigger yet burned in her veins. “I tried to bite her,” was her weak retort.

He snorted. “I’ve seen how she reacts to you biting her, and she doesn't disapprove.”

It got her to smile. Emily did indeed enjoy Natasha's teeth, as long as they weren't too feral. What was it called in America now? Making out? They'd made out in nearly every corner of the Barton farm, and each time was the most fulfilling physical experience of Natasha's life. Had it really only been five days since Emily had gone home? She looked back at the key dangling from the Statue of Liberty chain that Natasha appropriated from Laura's junk drawer.

“Drive me to the airport tomorrow?”

Knuckle-deep in a steamy section of her novel, Natasha's mind overlaid Emily onto one of the characters, wondered if the woman liked being penetrated, hoped she did. Why hadn't they had sex yet? For that matter, why hadn't they progressed past cuddling, light touching, and sweet, beautiful kisses? Emily didn't push.

Was she a virgin? Natasha played back conversations and Emily's reactions to flirtation. Not a virgin. What then? The two of them had been sleeping together in Emily's bed for a week now, and two weeks before that at the farm. Kissing and touching came easily enough to both of them. Granted, a few weeks wasn't that long, but they’d known each other for months now, and three weeks was starting to feel like forever. The harder she thought about it, the more certain she became that if she walked into Emily's shower right now, she'd be welcomed.

Natasha knew that Emily burned off sexual energy in the shower every day. Emily didn't muffle her moans well enough, and she sometimes hit the wall a little too hard. The languid calm after such sessions was obvious as well. Why hadn't Emily tried to share that sexual energy with her? Her gift would keep her well informed of when Natasha was feeling hot and bothered and that had been almost constant since they'd started kissing. Why wait?

“Natasha, you're so blind,” came with a slap to her forehead.

Emily was allowing Natasha to set the pace of their relationship. Every step further into their romance was first taken by Natasha. That damn, thoughtful woman was respecting Natasha's phobia of being vulnerable, weak. Emily was in it for the long haul.

She jumped up, grabbed at the hem of her shirt, ready to strip and march into the shower, and show Emily how much she loved her. In a flash, she pictured the moment, saw herself submitting to anything that Emily wanted to do, trusting that Emily wouldn't hurt her, would work hard to give Natasha pleasure purely for the sake of making her happy. She gasped at the intensity of it, both aroused and frightened.

The sound of the shower stopped, and her eyes darted to the front door, training and instinct telling her to flee from the danger of attachment. It took sweating effort to sit back down. She focused on the hanging painting, its depiction of an open country road.
It's about the journey, not the destination, was written across it.

A lifelong journey with Emily? A different kind of fear pressed at her. How much longer than Emily would she live? She already had the years of a normal lifespan, but didn't seem much older than thirty. How-

“Natasha?” Emily was kneeling in front of her, a hand hovering over Natasha's knee.

“I'm going to outlive you.”

Emily let her hand fall, smiled gently. “Seems possible.”

“I can't! It's-” Tender lips stopped her cry, and a damp, reassuring weight settled in her lap. Her hands found hips to anchor herself to

“We'll make enough good memories to tide you over until we meet again.” Emily whispered into her mouth. Rougher, more passionately, she kissed away Natasha's panic. “Don't worry about the end when we're barely into the beginning.”

She plunged herself into the feel of Emily's body. Damp skin, soft curves, lean muscle, and wet hair. The clean scents of her soaps and moisturizer enveloped Natasha, created a safe fog that kept away the fear. Everything but the feel, smell, and taste of Emily was pushed away.

“Emily,” fell from her lips as her hips bucked. She pressed tighter into her anchor, thrusting and clenching. Harder. Faster.

Lightning exploded, made her twitch and shudder until she collapsed back into the chair. Tremors were still shocking through her when she opened her eyes and gasped. Above her, looking thoroughly aroused and exposed, bathrobe hanging open, hair tangled, was Emily. One of Natasha's hands was still tight around the sash she'd untied, and her other was holding Emily's hand between Natasha's splayed legs. She'd just taken her pleasure from Emily.

A thumb stroked her center through damp yoga pants, and she squeaked at the aftershock it ignited. Emily grinned like a cat. “That was unexpected, and I won't complain if it happens again.”

She'd selfishly taken her pleasure, and Emily had liked it. She laughed at the irony, at the parallel to her previous quandary. “Are you telepathic as well as a healer?”

It was meant as a joke, but Emily saw beyond it. Her eyes searched Natasha's own and apparently wasn't happy with what she found. “I'm not, so you're going to have to tell me what's going on in that beautiful mind of yours.”

Natasha sighed, glared at her book that had escaped to the floor. “I was just realizing that you were letting me set the physical pace of this relationship. Then I realized how I'll probably outlive you by a century or more, and I..”

Emily shifted to wrap her arms around Natasha.

“Em, I might be as old as Rogers. At this rate, I'll be lucky to have sixty years with you before I have to spend another century alone.”

“You plan to stick around that long?”

“It's barely...” She grabbed Emily's shoulders, thrust her back to look at her face. Oh, shit. No, no, no! Emily wasn't supposed to be afraid of Natasha leaving her! “Emily. I won't ever abandon you.
I'd never forgive myself if I did something that stupid.”

“Sorry.” Shame looked away. “I didn't mean to make this about my issues.”

“No. I'm sorry.” For all her decades more experience at life than Emily, she had far, far less experience or ability at relationships. “I have no idea what I'm doing, and I'm so busy being scared that I can't see what you're going through.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I'm stumbling along too.”

Then she made it look damn easy. “You stumble like a fucking ballerina.”

A laugh choked out, making her breasts bounce invitingly.

Natasha licked her lips, carefully closed the robe. “Unless you want me to return the favor?”

Emily ran fingers through Natasha's straightened hair. “Only if you're ready for me to make love to you.”

To make love, to her Emily. Was she ready? “Are you ready?”

“I...” Emily closed her mouth. Natasha didn't worry at the pause; she appreciated when Emily took the time to carefully consider questions. It told her how serious Em was about her response. “After my ex left me, I didn't think I could ever fall in love again.”

If someone had already had Emily's heart, how could they have been stupid enough to walk away? “Why would anyone leave you?”

Motion ceased. Old pain flashed across dark eyes before tender joy replaced it. “How did I manage to earn your admiration?” She caressed Natasha's jaw. “Let alone your trust and love?”

“You got my admiration the day we met.” Lips brushed over the nearby hand. She took in a deep breath along with the scents of Emily's shower, her clean skin, warm musk. “Not a single rumor about what you learned that day has ever been whispered, not even to Fury.” Consternation furrowed Emily's brow. “My sterility is in the files. How I feel about it is not. There are exactly three people in the world who know, who understand how vulnerable that makes me. Not one of you has ever used it against me. Every secret you learn about me, you keep.”

“I know like two,” argued with her.

“You knew about my triggers, even the lack of them isn't something I'd share. You know about Laura and the kids. Every little tell you've figured out to guess at my thoughts, my emotions, my actions... Do you have any idea how much my enemies would pay for secrets like those?”

Steel hardened the edges of Emily. “Yes.”

That wasn't a response she would have expected. A question, a kiss, a promise to never break that trust, tears even, but, a yes?

“Maybe more than they'd pay to have a healer for a slave.”

Natasha smiled at Emily's ferocity. “You've given me what you value most,” it dawned on her. How had she not seen it before? “Is that why you invited me to Thanksgiving? Show me your greatest vulnerabilities and give me a key to your heart?”

Emily blinked, laughed. “Not nearly so well-planned, but I guess it worked out that way.”
“You make a fine lie-detector.” Natasha kissed her. “I want you.” Another kiss. “I'm ready to be with you.” Breathing Emily's breath, “Are you ready?”

The robe slid off Emily's shoulders, baring her all to Natasha. “Yes.”

Thinking was pushed away. Long moments passed while Natasha drank in the sight of Emily's body. Daydreams were confirmed. There really were freckles everywhere. Heat lanced through her, and she put her hands under Emily's warm ass, braced to take her weight and stood. Em giggled at the rare display of strength, tucked her legs about Natasha's waist, her arms around her shoulders. They kissed the entire way to the bedroom.

Emily hated the terms boyfriend and girlfriend. For one, the boy and girl part. She was a fucking woman. Two, the term girlfriend was used by untold amounts of women describing close female friends, not romantic partners. And it was too tied to gender, and a good friend had once opened her eyes to the fact that those terms excluded people who didn't identify with the heteronormative boy and girl roles. Big word, she snorted to herself.

It left her in a conundrum of what to call Natasha. They'd been partners on several missions, so that term felt weird. Lovers was one that Natasha wouldn't like, being emotionally repressed as she was trained to be. Hell, she didn't even call Emily any pet names despite her love of hearing petit renard. Significant other was such a mouthful and not particularly romantic. Other half implied that Natasha wasn't a whole person without her. There were terms in other cultures that she liked, but they weren't useful in describing their relationship to the average American.

“What's eating you, Em?” Sitting in the chair that squeaked under everyone's ass except her own, Natasha lowered her book.

“Word choices.”

“In English?”

She loved that Natasha hadn't completely banished her native accent from her English again yet. The gentle lilt of it was too cute. It was especially cute while Natasha was wearing one of Emily's favorite hoodies. Unicorns were farting rainbows across it. “Yes.”

The novel in her hands was glanced at. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Yes. But was she brave enough? Would Nat actually want to have this conversation? “I was thinking about a label for our relationship.” Predictably, Natasha's frame stiffened. “Everyone wants a label, but nothing really fits us. Anytime someone asks, my best answer is usually, 'We're together.'”

“That is an accurate description.” Of course she liked it.

“Hi, I'd like you to meet Natasha, she's the other part of my together.”

Natasha scowled at her sass. “I'd prefer not to use the term girlfriend. You are not a girl, and its use is not exclusive to romantic relationships.”

“Significant?”

A meh sound and shoulders were shrugged. Yea. See? Boring.

Emily hesitated. “Lover?”
Eyes darted away.

Only in her head then. “I'll just introduce you as my fox.”

The book was slowly set aside, and Natasha stood. Her face was impassive, and her body language didn't say anything either. What the hell was happening? Panic started to dance as Natasha left the room. It stuttered as pale hands lifted Nat's shirt and hoodie, tossed them aside, quickly followed by her bra. The hallway swallowed her, but lace panties fluttered into sight. A breath later, her voice called back. “You coming, other half of my together?” Hastily shedding her own clothes, Emily trailed after her vixen.

Natasha had already sprawled across the bed, half propped on pillows, one leg over the other, giving a prime view of her fantastic rear. “Took you long enough. Didn't think my trail was that hard to follow, mighty fox hunter.”

Kissing her way up from delicate ankles, “Thought I'd give you a head start, *petit renard.*” Abs twitched. “I suppose I can give you *some* credit for being the only one to catch me.”

The full depth of that statement hit her at Nat's ribs. It had been said in only so many clues, never outright, that Natasha had never loved anyone else. “Not even Clint?” She knew that they'd been together for a brief time before he'd met Laura.

Lashes fluttered, but warm green eyes didn't look away. “I wasn't capable of being caught then. It took being with him, then being friends, Laura treating me like a sister, and becoming an aunt to help me understand that I *could* love.”

What else to say to that except, “You're so beautiful.”

Natasha snorted, “I tell you how broken I was, and you call me beautiful.”

“*Was* broken. You're the strongest woman I've ever met.” She resumed kisses, added little nips along her neck. “Hey, that name you called me back at the farm. Emilishka. Will you call me that when we're alone? Say it in that incredible accent of yours.” Brushing against her ear, “The one you started with.”

She turned to fully face Emily, eyes dark, breath hot. “*Moya Emilishka,*” purred from her painted lips. “I would call you anything you want.”

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

moya – my

-Hope you enjoyed yet another fluffy, sappy chapter. Remember how I said this would probably be a 50k fic? It's already much bigger than that. I refuse to go past 100k though. I really do have other projects to finish!
“I’ve been thinking a lot about her powers lately.” Bruce was saying over breakfast a few days after she'd returned to the capitol in early March. She would have returned sooner, but not having full control of her accents and languages hadn't been acceptable. “They deal exclusively with injuries that can only be repaired if the genetic coding agrees.”

Natasha nodded, half her brain still asleep after the long night in Emily's quarters. The grumpy face had remained in bed after Natasha had risen for a shower. She had a meeting with Deputy-Director Hill in twenty minutes to give her expertise on a situation in Kazakhstan that she might get sent on. Bruce was working on a project with Stark, probably studying Loki’s scepter again. If she didn't prefer to spend her free time with Emily, Natasha would have taken a peek at their research. Thor was being incredibly generous letting SHIELD keep it this long. Probably stupid too. Stark had a tendency to go overboard with his ideas, and that scepter was unreasonably powerful.

“And according to the reports from various experiments that she's done, her success at treating... changes in the mind is pretty hit and miss.”

His pause on “changes” was interesting. He got her full attention, and she waited impatiently for him to continue.

He fiddled with his glasses. “I don't think she actually, uh, cured you.”

Adrenaline burned. “What? I'm still-”

Suddenly, his hands were up, waving her worry down. “No! No. I'm positive that your conditioning was removed! I uh, just think that her involvement was minimal.”

“You think I broke it.”

Bruce scratched his head. “I watched the video and read the reports a thousand times, Natasha. If you weren't fighting, if you hadn't started to regain control, I don't think the same results would have been achieved. Her gift encourages the body's natural functions, similar to, uh, slicing into an abscess to flush the infection out. Keeping it open and clean to prevent further infection while it heals from the inside out gives the body the best condition to heal. This is what Emily does, provide ideal conditions for the body to do what it's already trying to. You were already trying to get rid of the trigger; she didn't do it alone.”

Basking under the warm Afghani sun, Emily cheered to have a job that got her away from dreary March slush. March was the month of mud. Ugh. Not that she hadn't been known to take winter vacations to the Caribbean instead of driving her truck. The point was that this was work in a warm place in what was normally the shitty month at the end of winter back home, all melting snow and mud and grey skies. SHIELD had sent them after a rogue gifted who liked to kill people with her acid breath. The serial killer had left bodies across thirteen countries and three continents. She was rich, well-connected, possibly aligned with Daesh -what the locals called ISIS, a derogatory Arabic term that didn't quite translate to English-, and bloodthirsty.

Reports said that she had holed up somewhere in or near the city of Kabul, and Fury had decided to
send a team in. Clint, Natasha, Emily, Rogers, and Zaief, a local agent codenamed Locust, were searching for clues in Kabul. Two weeks into the search, and they hadn't found much.

Emily had decided to sunbathe that morning, maybe go to the market or her new favorite tea shop. Only Rogers was there with her. Between his lacking language abilities and distinctive features, he generally didn't go anywhere alone. And there was the part where he was backup, basically useless until their spies sniffed out their target. Like Emily. They spent their days loafing about or wandering the city like the tourists they were pretending to be, whereas the others were out like they were every day hunting, meeting contacts, making bribes, and not being bored.

“Did you put sunblock on?” Rogers asked as he strolled out from their rented house.

“Yes, dad.” And she had thought Clint was bad. Where was he anyway? Burning off cabin fever or tracking a lead?

“Wouldn't want you to get burned, Fortune. You're the only one you can't heal.”

She'd been super careful to keep well hydrated and coated in sunblock. During the peak of the day or out in the city, she made sure to stay covered in her chador, an elegant head scarf and one of her long-sleeved, loose linen dresses that Nat had picked out and enjoyed taking off of her. Right now, in the privacy of the house's garden, she was in a red bikini. In her defense, Natasha had brought it for her. The woman had taken a keen interest in Emily's wardrobe lately. Emily had never owned so much lingerie in her life, and she wasn't sure what to do with it all. “I'm well aware.”

“I also don't want Romanoff to kill me, which she would if you got hurt in any way on my watch.” He peeked at her from over his sunglasses.

She grinned. “Pansy.”

“Just because you can make her angry without losing an appendage doesn't mean the rest of us can.”

Knocking came from the garden gate. Emily whipped on the trousers and tunic she kept close as Cap went cautiously to the gate. He gave a greeting in Pashtu, the country's official language. A young male voice responded, politely asking for entry. They recognized him to be a neighbor as he stepped in. Holding a hand over his heart, he dipped his head. Surprising them both, he met both of their eyes and spoke in clear, if oddly accented, English.

“Hello. My name is Pirooz, and I've come to invite you and the others guesting in this house to my parents' home for tea tomorrow.”

“Wow. Your English is really good.” Rogers grinned widely as Pirooz shook his hand.

Smiling back, “Thank you. I'm in my third year of university in Melbourne.” Ah, that's why she hadn't been able to place the soft lilt to his words. Australian over Afghani. She needed to travel outside America more. “I came home for my little brother's birthday this weekend. My father's best mate owns this house, and he likes to meet the people who come on holiday here.”

Enjoying tea with their extremely hospitable hosts, watching very pale Rogers and very dark Mr. Sattari laugh about ridiculous things modern Americans did, Emily couldn't help wondering something she'd thought of a hundred times. How had Nick Fury managed to create an all-white Avengers team? Not that they weren't diverse as hell, multinational even, but so white. Since joining, Emily had learned that there were gifted, or enhanced as most of SHIELD liked to call
people like her, all over the globe.

It made her wonder what kind of gifted might be in Kabul. Would they run into any while they were here? Well, ones who wouldn't try to kill them? She sipped at her second cup of the lovely tea they'd been served. There were so many layers of flavor and nuance. Where could she get more?

“Jessica?” Rogers interrupted her line of thought with her cover name.

Sheepish, she blinked between him and their hosts. Mr. and Mrs. Sattari were looking at her expectantly. “I'm so sorry. I was caught up thinking about this incredible tea. I have no idea where the conversation went.”

If Nat was there, she would've pinched Emily as soon as she had started to zone out. But she and the others had turned down the invitation in order to track yet another vague lead. They hadn't left in good spirits. They were tired of the wild goose chases. Nat was worried that their quarry would get wind of them soon if they hadn't already and flee. Or worse.

Mr. Sattari simply smiled. “That is quite alright, Ms. Weather. It pleases me to know that you are enjoying it so much.”

“It's delicate, but every sip lingers.”

His smile widened, and he cast a loving look at his wife, who was beaming. She leaned forward eagerly. “It is an old family recipe. I will send you home with some when you leave.”

She didn't have to fake her enthusiasm. “Really?”

“Yes, of course, dear.”

Her lip got a little chewed. “Would it be rude to ask for the recipe?”

“If asked in any other manner, it would.” Mrs. Sattari shook her head. “But I heard from my sister that you have been at her tea shop almost every day this past week, tasting every blend she has to offer! You are quite the enthusiast, aren't you?”

“Mrs. Nassif is your sister?” And she became completely engrossed in the following conversation. It danced over tea, Emily's knowledge of Islam and Arabic, and their tourist cover story. Emily was draining her third cup when the married couple exchanged a glance, and Mr. Sattari's expression became serious. She made a quick mental trace of where the exits were, how fast she could get to the knife under her dress, and tap the button under her watch's face to alert the others to trouble.

“We apologize for the deception, but my wife needed time to be sure of who you are.” Mr. Sattari's tone was apologetic, soft, and his body language was relaxed. Either he wasn't a threat, or he was completely sure that his guests were about to be corpses. “Captain America, we would like to help you catch the devil you seek.”

Emily replaced the cup to the table. Rogers met her eye, and his expression told her to be ready to run. He asked, “Why?”

“Because we can do little to fight the terrorists who are tearing our country apart and shaming our faith, but we can tell you how to find the murderer you've come looking for. You will keep her from helping Daesh grow stronger.” He answered, his disgust with the extremist group obvious in his eyes and tone.

“Why did you say Mrs. Sattari needed time?” Emily asked, watching the woman. Her eyes
widened before shooting off to the left. She had something to hide. A telepathic gift? “Are you reading our minds?”

Her gaze returned. “No!” Mr. Sattari laid a comforting hand on her arm, nodded. She sighed, nodded back. “I can read,” a pause, “Intentions.”

“You directed the conversation about American stereotypes purposely.” Rogers stated. “The comments about the Avengers were planned.”

The Sattaris nodded. “Through friends, I learned about a group of Americans coming shortly after that acid woman arrived. When I was shown your picture, I became so hopeful. That devil would not stand a chance against Captain America and his friends. And maybe you might rid us of a few terrorists along the way.”

Cap nodded, and his frame relaxed an ounce. “What can you tell us?”

Holding a precious bag of Mrs. Sattari's tea blend, Emily walked with Rogers back to their rental. They were quiet until safely inside the empty house. No one else had returned yet, much to their irritation. “What do you think, Fortune? Can we trust their information?”

“We can trust that they think it's good intel.”

He studied her. “That's right. Romanoff mentioned you were working on detecting lies through your power.”

It was a lot harder with strangers than someone whose body she was familiar with, and it took clear concentration, but, “Yea.” When they'd left, and Mr. Sattari had been shaking her hand, she'd asked him if his information was trustworthy.

“I can't wait to tell the Black Widow that we got a solid lead before her.” Rogers looked so satisfied with himself that she laughed.

“Go Team Backup!” She slapped a high-five to his broad hand.

Frustrated after another day of useless information, Natasha slunk into the house behind Clint and Zaief. They'd bumped into each other a few blocks away. No one had anything useful. Two weeks wasn't all that long in a hunt, but their intel had led her to believe it would be a short mission. This acid enhanced woman was a ghost. Natasha still didn't even know the woman's real name. Honestly, it was embarrassing.

“Hey, guys.” A cheerful Steve greeted their return. Natasha's black mood scowled at him, but he barely flinched.

“Hi,” chirped an equally cheerful Emily. “Guess what we did today.”

Clint swiveled to look at Natasha. “I want whatever they’re high on.”

Eyes narrowed, Natasha crossed her arms.

“Oh, come on, Nat. Guess.” Emily continued to beam.

“You found a new tea?” She deadpanned.
 Somehow, Emily's expression brightened further. “Oh. That too. Mrs. Sattari has the mos-”

“Fortune.” Rogers pat her shoulder. “Focus.”

“Sorry.” She dropped her hands from where they'd started to hold an imaginary teapot. How could she be endearing and irritating at the same time? “Guess what Team Backup did today that Team Cranky Face failed at.”

“Team Cranky Face?” Clint balked. “This is my neutral expression. Now, Natasha's on the other hand...”

“When they told me I'd be working with the Avengers, I didn't picture,” Zaief started. His mouth closed at Natasha's sharp attention. Good. At least someone in this house was afraid of her.

“Immature children?” Emily offered. “I'm surprised Agent Hill didn't warn you.”

Natasha's pinched the bridge of her nose. “Just tell us already.”

While Emily bounced on her toes as giddy as Lila, Rogers replied. “We know where to find our target.”


“Well, you see,” Rogers' shit-eating grin was too much. “We had to go through an elaborate dance in etiquette first.”

“And parry witty comments.” Emily added.

“Then, we thought we were going to have to fight.”

“But it turned out a false alarm.”

Clint's cheek creased. “I see these two have been bonding well.”

Oh fine. She let the humor nip at her dark mood. “I'm surprised they didn't get party streamers to go with this big announcement of theirs.”

“We considered it.” Rogers played along.

Conspiratorially, Emily tippy-toed up to mock whisper in his ear. “Next time we one-up them again we should definitely get streamers. And balloons.”

“Party favors?”

“Definitely.”

Clint's arm slung over her right shoulder. “Just think, Nat, you sleep with that epitome of maturity over there.” He nodded sagely. “And I'm rubbing off on her.”

“That invitation to tea we got,” Rogers finally ended the idiocy. “Our hosts wanted to help Captain America hunt down a murderer.”

“How certain are you that we can trust information from them?” She needed to know.

Rogers' gaze went to Emily, who nodded. His blue eyes were confident. “We can trust these people. We'll just have to hope that their information didn't come from a bad source.”
The first man she should have shot at, Emily hesitated, and a bullet grazed her shoulder for it. She heard it and four others impact the stone behind her before she felt the pain. Her finger moved. The man jolted, grabbing his stomach and screaming as he dropped to the ground. Over the radio, she heard her teammates advancing, grunts of pain, heaving breaths, gunfire. Hesitate again, Em, and you could get them all killed.

Protect your fucking family. She flashed to the day she'd decided that her father would never hurt her or her brothers again, that she was going to kill him. As it always did when she thought about him, the hours she'd spent with knives and scissors, hammers and pliers, experimenting and learning and watching him bleed sweep through her. Joy and horror alike came with it. She never wanted to be that person again.

Two more men rounded the corner. She choked. She'd spent years in therapy to soothe the monster inside, to come to terms with it. Torturing her abusive father hadn't been the answer. Killing him might not have either, but it was the surest way to keep her brothers safe. The men saw her, raised their rifles. Kill them or you die, Em. You die, your brothers have to face your mother alone. You die, and Natasha might never smile again. You die, and Cooper and Lila will never see their father again.

Killing to protect your family doesn't make you a monster, she told herself. She hoped. It was enough. Three times, her rifle released its load, and the men went down. A few more, and they stopped moving.

A flash of color caught her eye. Heart pounding, she peered through the rifle's scope. Cap's shield. It shifted and flashed as the soldier protected himself and Clint's prone form draped over his shoulders. Natasha was running at his side, covering his rear. There was movement on her flank that she didn't see. Emily's bullet found a chest.

“Was that you, Met?” Her lover puffed.

She was already lining up her next shot. It went wide, but the man stumbled for a moment. Cap's shield took his head off, and she quickly shifted her sight from the gore. “You know me, fox, always watching your ass.”

“It's why I keep you around.”

As best she could, she kept laying down cover fire. The team was a hundred yards away when the magazine ran dry. “Reloading!” She impressed herself with how quickly she ejected it, fumbled another from her belt, and slammed it in.

It almost wasn't fast enough. She looked up in time to see an RPG being aimed at her location. Cursing, she stumbled to a run. “Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck!” The car exploded, swept her off her feet, slammed her face into the ground. Fire and dust roared around her, rocks and other debris pelting her mercilessly. Her head was ringing. She blinked at the smoky world.

Noises and movement slurred. Gun. Lift it. She pulled the trigger at approaching shadows and dragged herself behind a building. Her eyes managed to focus again, but the ringing refused to go away no matter how much she shook her head. Growling, she mowed down more men who tried to get between her family and safety. A young boy, maybe twelve, got between them, shooting wildly. Cap deflected the bullets, raised his gun. He hesitated.

Emily didn't. “Move!” She roared and reloaded again. More than half the mag went into the front
of a truck that had roared up behind them. The windshield shattered, and the truck veered sharply to the right, crashed into a building. One man flew out of the truck, crunching into the stone, but two fumbled out of the back and gave chase. She cut them down with the last of magazine.

Rocks and dust scattering, the team slid behind the building with her. She touched Natasha's cheek, met the eyes that had just traveled all over her person. Reassured of each others decent health, Nat dipped around the corner, fired off a few shots, and Emily reloaded her rifle, nodded at Cap, who had propped Clint against the wall. She settled her touch to Clint's neck, found the worst of his injuries and started sealing ravaged blood vessels.

Four times, she had to pause and shoot at the advancing enemy then go back to repairing the extensive acid damage. God, it was nasty. Almost every system had been affected and was threatening to shut down. If she missed anything...

Wind buffeted dust around, got it in her eyes, mouth, everywhere. She was on the edge of screeching bloody murder when a voice popped over the radio. “Sorry it me so long!” Zaief. “I had to stop for tea.” Several rockets took out the last of the offensive line. Stragglers were targeted with the quinjet's guns.

“Your bad puns rubbed off, Cap,” was Clint's raspy remark. “They're infectious.”

Rogers turned. “Here I thought it was your bad puns he was picking up.”

“Bad?” Clint tensed at a bout of pain. His upper intestines had been perforated, and now Emily was having his body flush the waste and toxins from his abdominal cavity. “My jokes always hit their mark.”

“If you can still make bad jokes, I can stop worrying about you.” Natasha hummed.

“Aw. You do care.”

Huffing in amusement and irritation, Emily muttered. “Someone stick some water in his mouth.” It would shut him up and fight the severe dehydration. “You going to land any time soon, Locust?”

While Clint gulped at a canteen, the quinjet slowly lowered in the middle of the dirt thoroughfare. Its edges scraped buildings. Zaief chirped over the comm, “I wasn't sure if she would fit.”

“That's what she said,” Natasha just had to make the bad joke. Innocently, she shrugged at Emily. “I had to cover for Clint. His mouth is full.”

The archer's arm quivered as he flicked her in the side. He hated that line and knew that she knew it. Natasha gave a quirk of her lips.

Stealing a mouthful of water for herself, Emily sat back. “If you would, Cap?”

“Come on, Hawkeye. Up we go.” Scooping the grown man up like a child, Rogers didn't even puff.

“So you do know how to sweep someone of their feet.”

Cap groaned, and behind him, Natasha laughed. She stopped, looked back. “Em?”

Really, she was trying to stand. Over forty hours awake, most of those hiking uphill, the last few tense hours of waiting, fighting, and then the delicate work of triage on Clint's acid-eaten torso and bullet holes had apparently sucked all energy from her legs. She gave Nat a reassuring smile when she ran over frantically, her eyes and hands checking for injuries. “Not hurt.” Pretty much
everything except her face refused to move. “Tired.”

Tension faded from her shoulders, and she moved to help Emily up.

“Should probably shoot that guy first though.” She flicked her eyes to a man trying to sneak up on them with a big knife. Nat grabbed Emily's rifle. An eye blink later, the threat was down, and she was doing a quick sweep for more. Emily didn't bother. All her attention was on her lover, the frizzy hairs escaping the practical braids she'd pulled them back in, the dust and blood and bits of plants covering her, the smooth precision in which she handled herself, and the way the sun was falling on her face, the shadows giving her hard, dangerous edges. A moment ago, she'd been soft, vulnerable. Now, she was what she'd been trained to be. A perfect killer.

This was the first time that Emily had truly seen Natasha in combat, had watched her put holes in chests and heads with cold precision. It was nothing like seeing her spar or work the shooting ranges. A brief moment of sheer terror spat through her. This woman, this predator, could turn on her at any moment, and in the same time it took to smile, could kill her, as she had with countless others.

In that same breath, the notion died. Warmth, trust, love, they bubbled up, gently pushed away the fear. Natalia Alianovna Romanova, the Black Widow, was her little red fox. She'd fought and won against brutal conditioning, had refused to succumb to triggered commands to kill because she loved Emily, because she wasn't the cold blooded killer that the Red Room had tried to create.

“I didn't think you could get more beautiful.”

Natasha's expression was tight. “You sure you're not hurt? That explosion hit awfully close to you.” She plucked Emily's earpiece out, held up the fried thing.

“Think my contact lens is torn.” Her irritated eye blinked in confirmation. “My ear feels funny too.”

Natasha sighed.

Smiling softly, Emily waited to be picked up before she used the last of her strength to heave herself forward and kiss her love. Their teeth clicked before Natasha's lips curved against her own. Satisfied, Emily slumped. “You're perfect, Natalia,” was whispered against her neck.

Over the Atlantic, Natasha lifted her attention from Emily's bandage and blanket covered form up to Rogers. “Yes?” She demanded of his last hour's stare.

To her surprise, he didn't flush, look away, or stammer. “You look at her like Peggy used to look at me. To be honest, I didn't think you were capable of that much emotion. I think I owe you an apology.”

Oh. How civilized of him. “You don't owe me an apology, Rogers. I've spent a lot of my life pretending to be something I'm not.”

“Like an unfeeling killer?”

At her sharpened look, he still didn't flinch. Her respect for him climbed another notch.

“See? I do need to apologize.” He held out his calloused hand. “I apologize for judging you unfairly.”
She clasped the hand. “Thank you, Rogers.”

“Steve. Us old folks should be on better terms than last names.”

“Wow. I didn't think a proper gentleman like you would be so familiar with a taken woman.”

He groaned, “Should've seen that comin’.”

“Really, Steve, you left yourself wide open.”

“Yea. I kinda did.” It hadn't even been a good snipe, but the little smiles it brought out felt good.

Chapter End Notes

a little less feels, a little more action. I was watching this French movie called Special Forces, and it prompted this chapter. It was one of those surprisingly good movies on Netflix... if you like war movies that give more than one viewpoint.
“Natasha!” Emily screeched through the messhall. Not exactly screeched, but it was loud enough to catch half the room's attention. “You used the last of the tea. Didn't I ask you not to last night?”

“You broke my hairdryer,” was her irritated defense. Emily could be such a brat sometimes.

Rigid and angry, Emily stood over her. “Seriously, woman? It was an accident. I already ordered you a new one.”

“You left it on the sink like you always do instead of putting it back in the drawer, like I constantly ask you to, and it fell off and broke.” She'd had to use Emily's piece of crap that morning. An hour to dry her hair was not an acceptable use of her time. Damn right she'd taken the last of the tea. “There's the public tea.”

At that, Clint got up, his plate only half empty. “I think I'll go eat with Agent Hill.”

No one ate breakfast with Agent Hill unless the woman invited it. She rarely even ate in the messhall before noon. He grabbed his tray and made a bee-line for the deputy-director, who gave him a withering look that he blithely ignored. He sat at her table. Was he suicidal or simply tired of working for SHIELD? Agent Hill's attention shot to Natasha and scowled at her.

“He acts like our fights are bad or something,” came from Emily.

Natasha gave her a blank face. “You broke two pairs of Louboutin heels last time.”

“How was I supposed to know how delicate those expensive things are? I di-”

A shadow fell over the table. Agent Hill looked pissed. “Agents.”

“Can't you see we're arguing over here?” Natasha shot back.

Color rose in the woman's cheeks. “Agent Sekhmet, I don't believe you have any missions coming up. When was the last time you took leave?”

Emily's face twisted. They'd had a week of it after the Afghanistan job. Fury had been a beacon of righteous anger that Natasha had killed the acid-spitter instead of hauling her in. Oh well. That bitch had hurt Clint. Since then, though, it had been mission after mission; Fury had them chasing HYRDA remnants. They barely had time to wash their hair let alone breathe or read or make love or deal with their frustrations like adults. “A few months now, I guess.”

“I hear the beaches almost anywhere are nice this time of year. Go to one. Or twenty. Take a month for yourself.” She switched to Romanoff, and her I-don't-care-how-many-ways-you-can-kill-me voice got even sharper. “And you, after the mission you have tomorrow, buy yourself something stronger than tea and find a beach that your wife isn't at for a few days. Then do whatever you want for the rest of the month. When you come back, your spats won't affect my breakfast.” Her angry jaw muscles rolled. “Do I make myself clear?”

From his spot at Hill's table, Clint waggled his eyebrows. That sneaky bastard had planned this. She made a mental note to do something nice after terrorizing him for a while.

Natasha looked her superior in the eye. “Yes, deputy-director.”

Satisfied, Hill went back to her table, shooed Clint away. The man finished his sausage as he scampered off. Her chin was grabbed and lips captured her own. “Call me after your mission and let me know where we're meeting.” Black eyes pinned her. “Bring some of those Turkish sweets.” Emily left far less irritated than she'd arrived, her hips swaying in the uniform pants that she looked better in every day. Or maybe Natasha fell in love with her more every day, and it affected her vision. Probably both.

Hill had said “wife,” her mind suddenly reminded her. Wife, huh? That's how people thought of them? A solid thing, gob full of emotional attachment? Pure terror lanced her. The things her enemies would be able to get away with if they used Emily against her. She caught a last glimpse of Emily's proud back before she went through the doors.

Her fear quieted. Emily wasn't an easy target; she had years of experience looking over her shoulder. And unlike Laura, that wonderful woman, Emily knew how – and more importantly, would – kill better than half the field agents in SHIELD's employ. She was even better at hiding, usually in plain sight. She was best in bed. Damn. How long had it been since she'd been able to take a luxurious hour to build Em up to an explosive orgasm or three?

Beep-beep. Her watch spat a warning that she was about to miss her meeting. Stifling a groan, she left the table. The next two days looked unbearably long.

Liquid pearled on the drink held in front of Emily, the contents a vivid pink. “I didn't order...” Her eyes finished traveling up the arm offering the treat.

Natasha was wearing an elegant smile and a classy bikini. It matched the intense blue of the tropical waters behind her and looked like it wouldn't fall off in case she had to kick someone's ass. Typical Natasha. Dangerously beautiful at all times. “Hey.”

Closing her book, Emily sat up. “Hey.”

“Sorry I drank that last of the tea.”

“You think one pretty drink will make up for making me put Lipton in my mouth last week?” She couldn't let Nat get off that easily.

The lounge chair sank a little further into the sand as Natasha slid onto it. “I'd planned to put a few more things in your mouth.” Desire simmered at her. Breath that smelled of lime and tequila mixed with the salty ocean air.

She accepted the drink, plucked the wedge of strawberry out of it, slowly sliding it off the pick with her teeth. Hungry eyes avidly tracked the movement.

“There's a box of sweets waiting for you in your room.”

“My room?”

Green eyes dipped. “Our room.”

She tasted the fruity, tangy liquid, let the glass clink to the little table. “I'll try not to overreact so much next time something stupid irritates me. I was an idiot, and I apologize for it.”
“I missed you,” whispered back.

“I missed you too.” After she’d gotten over the relief of being away from her more than one day at a time. By day five, she’d been having trouble sleeping without Natasha's presence nearby. The next three, she'd put herself through enough physical activity to make sure she fell asleep. Absence really did make the heart grow fonder. Stupid cliché. “Ever been paddle-boarding?”

It was considered. Natasha shook her head. “No. I haven't.”

“Great!” Emily popped up, tugged on an arm. “Let's go do it.” Over her shoulder, she gave a smirk. “Maybe we can get a senior citizen discount.” And took off before Natasha could retaliate.

Not that she got far before she was tackled, their bodies hitting loose sand and rolling until Emily was under Natasha, who blatantly swayed her generous breasts. “Do these look old and sagging to you?”

“I'm afraid I can't tell. The shadows and fabric, you know.”

She was swatted at, and Natasha let her up. “You can do a thorough exam later, Dr. Fortune.”

“Speaking of. Who am I dating today?”

Settling an arm around her waist, Natasha quirked her lips. “Scarlet Simmons, from Long Island.” Her New Yorker inflection went on, “I teach Spanish at a private school in Queens.”

“Hm. She sounds good with her tongue.”

“Maybe I'll give you a lesson later.”

Outside of the circle of light cast by their small campfire, Natasha paused in the shadows.

“That boy hadn’t even hit puberty yet.” Steve was saying. “We were close enough that you had to have seen that too.”

The fire dancing between them, Emily nodded slowly. “I did.” Nervous, no, irritated energy made Steve rise. His arms went up dramatically, as did his voice. “How could you kill a kid?”

Emily would never...

“He had a gun.”

Heart clenching, Natasha frowned at the hard expression. When had Emily killed a child? Her mind raced for an answer as Emily quietly watched their leader pace. “He was a kid.”

“He was probably taken from his family and forced into training years ago. His childhood was stolen from him before I ended it.”

Muscles straining at his stillness, the soldier paused to stare at her. “You gave Natasha a second chance.”

Natasha flinched at his accusing tone. Anger and concern flared. How dare he speak to Emily that way? What was going on Emily's head? How had killing this child affected her, and why hadn't Em spoken to her about it?
“I did.” Emily had remained seated on her little foam pad and incredibly calm while Steve was ready to explode.

Spittle glistened in the firelight as he spat. “How could you kill that kid?”

What else besides Emily was he angry about?

“In another situation, one that wasn't a battlefield where Clint was dying, I would have done everything I could to offer that boy a second chance. But that's the situation we were in, and I chose to kill a kid to protect my family.” Now, her eyes dropped. “If that makes me a monster again, then so be it.”

No!

Steve's sudden change in demeanor kept her from running to Emily. He deflated, his enormous frame drooping, and he ran a hand over his hair. “If you're a monster, then I'm a coward.”

Emily's head snapped up, an argument visible on her lips.

Natasha couldn't see his expression, because he crossed to Emily and sat facing her. “Look, I'm sorry. It's been eating at me for a while, and I know it's not because you're a monster, Emily. I just went about this conversation really badly.” A stick was dropped on the fire. “I know that unpleasant things happen in battle. I've killed people who I thought were kids too, though I always told myself they had chosen to be Nazis. I didn't have a choice.”

There's always a choice, even if every choice was a terrible one.

“There's always a choice,” echoed from him. “The kids chose to fight instead of being beaten or whatever the Nazis did to force them to fight, and I chose to kill them instead of letting them kill me or my men.”

Emily reached for his hand.

Head bent to look at the comforting gesture, he sighed again. “I guess I'd thought it'd be different now. And,” he made an awkward shoulder motion. “Seeing a woman shooting a kid might have offended my archaic sensibilities. I'm sorry. I appreciate the choice you made.”

An easy chuckle, and Emily shook her head. “The epitome of masculinity has apologized for his misogynistic thinking. There's hope yet.”

“That and I'd rather be on your good side. I might actually get hurt one day.” His light tone was clearly making a joke to lighten the mood.

And Emily noticed. “The great Captain America sustain serious injury that his superhealing can't fix in two point five seconds?”

“I'm sure it'd be headline news.”

“I can ask Nat to push you when you sneak into that genetics facility tomorrow,” came her innocent offer. “And download the security feeds to YouTube.”

“You make it easy to forget that you're kind of older than me.”

Chuckling, “I wish Alan acted half as mature as you, Cap.”

“How could he with you as a role model?” He paused. “Wait. How old is he again?”
Emily only shook her head. “Okay, you're closer to Kevin's age. He's definitely more mature than you though, so I must have done something right.”

“You never talk about your parents.” He changed the tone of the conversation again.

Her eyes flickered as she looked at him. “Neither do you.”

“Mine have been dead for a long time.” The fire popped and sent a flare of crackles that neither of them noticed.

“I killed my dad when I was a kid and would be totally okay with never seeing my mother again.”

Tree bark snapped and scraped Natasha's cheek in her jerk of surprise. Steve made an equally surprised movement.

“He beat us, and she was, is, emotionally abusive.”

Quiet lingered, Emily and Steve looking at each other. Damn! Natasha wished she could see his face. Should she join them now? Did Emily need her? Their hands remained together, and she decided to remain hidden for now.

He spoke softly. “Natasha knows?”

“Yes.”

“You remind me of Bucky.” He chuckled. “My best friend since we were kids. He was always looking out for me, like an older brother. If he'd had parents like that, he probably would've done the same. He had less tolerance for bullies than I did.”

Emily's back straightened. Her features grew warmer as the quiet settled on them again. “I was including you when I said that I was protecting my family. We can choose who we call that, you know. Blood ties are nice. But being around people who choose to care about you is better.” She leaned closer, whispered. “That includes Nat, you know. She cares about you, and she trusts you.”

He snorted. “She wouldn't leave me alone with you if she didn't.”

Sure she would. She trusted her Emily to break anyone's face who tried something with her that she didn't invite.

“She wouldn't share real emotions with you if she didn't.” Emily looked over Steve's shoulder, directly at Natasha's hiding spot. “Right, Nat?”

How was she seen? She checked her spot, didn't see anything that would have given her away, not with Emily's night vision blurred by the fire. She had used scent-killing soaps last bath, as always before a covert op like this. Noise?

“She's back already?” Steve asked.

“Over there somewhere.”

Stepping out of the shadows, “What gave me away?”

Emily held out the arm on her opposite side, and Natasha obliged, sinking down and snuggling into her. Lips brushed her temple. “When you got that scratch.”

She wiped at her cheek, her sleeve coming away with blood stains. “You heard the bark snap.”
A low hum responded.

“Natasha, did the Russians get hold of the serum that they used on me? Is that why you heal quickly?” Steve asked.

That was an answer she didn't quite have. “I don't know.”

“If it's the same serum,” Emily murmured, “Then her body reacted to it differently. Can you imagine Natasha being six foot four and musclebound like you?”

“I don't think the two of you could cuddle like that if she was.”

No. It would be different. Would Emily have fallen in love with her then? She frowned.

The arm around her tightened. “I might have named her a bear instead of a fox. My big red bear.”

Reassured, she could scoff at the name. “Don't ever call me that.” She pinned Steve under a glare. “And don't you ever tell Tony.”

He held up his hands and grinned. “I make no promises.”

She slapped Emily's knee. “This is your fault.”

“What?”

“He's not afraid of me any more.” Emily laughed, and Steve's jaw dropped a little. She switched her ire to him. “Aww.” She made a pouty face. “Steve, you're adorable when you're surprised, but you might want to close your mouth before you catch flies.”

“You're right, Emily. She does let me see real emotions.” He was still adorably shocked, but his shoulders pulled back and pride straightened him. His smile warmed.

Lips pursed, she demanded. “And how can you tell?”

“You totally relax when she hugs you, and you seem... More lately.”

The arm squeezed again, and she sighed in defeat. “We should go over our plans for tomorrow again, then go to sleep. The sun rises early.”

Steve nodded, though his smile didn't go anywhere. “You haven't changed the signal for Stark and Banner's entrance, have you?”

“No.”

“It's not a complicated plan. We'll be fine. We've got five miles to run in the morning. We can go over it again on the way if you want.”

It was Emily's yawn that decided her. “Fine.”

“I'll take first watch.” He offered. They weren't expecting trouble, or they wouldn't have a fire going, but five miles of hilly forest wasn't all that much buffer. Just in case.

“Wake me for second.” She responded, and Emily thanked her for it. “No one needs to deal with an Emily who got broken sleep. I'm not that cruel.”

Emily made a compromising sound before kicking off her boots and stretching out on their sleep pad. Instead of settling down with her back to Emily like they generally did on missions, like her training wanted her to, Natasha went with her new instincts and spooned Emily.
“Nat?” Em whispered.

“You’re not a monster.” She promised, trying to send her support through her embrace. She pressed her lips to the delicate skin behind Em's ear, repeated herself. “If you could have, you would have saved that boy. Your decision got Lila and Cooper's father back to them alive so he could love them and teach them how to be good people just like him.”

A long shudder came from Emily, her hands gripping tightly to Natasha’s arms.

“I don't see my past reflected in you.” She brought back Emily's own argument for why Natasha wasn't one either. If she could start to believe it, then so could Emily. “Moya Emilishka,” she brought out the accent that Emily loved so much. “You are not a monster.” Until sleep quieted her, Natasha whispered truths about Emily's beautiful nature.

“Maybe we should have gone over the plan again,” Natasha smiled prettily at Steve.

“Now, that is a fake smile.” He yelled over the gunfire. Sparks glanced off his shield. “There weren't supposed to be three hundred soldiers here. Going over the plan wouldn't have helped!”

There was a pause in the offense, and a roar filled the air instead.

“Someone's report was a little short,” Tony quipped over the radio. “By a lot. Tanks were not mentioned at all.” He grunted. Explosions followed.

Natasha checked the hill's reflection on Cap's shield. “Cover me. I'm going for the tank.”

“Did Widow just say she's going for the tank?” Tony asked.

Steve's gun dropped a couple soldiers, scared down a few more, and she dodged what kept shooting at her. “She's going for the tank.” He replied.

The soldier in front of her was frantically trying to change their gun's magazine.

“That's good,” Tony went on. “Because I'm now out of missiles.” A fresh one clicked as she got within punching distance. She came in under their guard, grabbing the rifle's barrel, and punching upward. A grunt escaped the armor. Twisting, she took control of gun, slammed a heel to the soldier's boot, used the moment of agony to bring the rifle butt to the unprotected neck.

Her enemy dropped, and she moved on, her new gun firing at the defensive line around the tank. She dove behind smoking truck. Bullets rattled against it. “Sekhmet, I don't suppose you've got eyes on the wall, do you?”

Emily quickly gave back a report of how many were on the wall, then her high caliber rifle reported, and she lowered her count by one. Since Afghanistan, they'd been giving Emily sniper training. She was doing fairly well. And she was happier that she could help.

Natasha liked that it helped keep her away from the main fighting. Rifle first, she poked out of cover and found her targets. She got one before having to duck down again.

Boom. The ground trembled, and a second explosion caught her eye. Something green flew backward from it and quickly ran back. A second mortar round missed the Hulk. He leapt, got hit by an RPG. Natasha shot down the last soldier on the wall.
“You've got a clear path to the tank, fox.” Emily radioed. Black Widow rarely ever came out of her mouth.

“Thank you.” She used the last of the mag to shoot out an exterior camera on the tank. Leaping onto the frame, she readied a flash grenade. An idiot actually opened up the tank to try and shoot her. Emily's rifle ended that silly thought. Cheerily, Natasha tossed her flash grenade in. In the tank's enclosed space, it acted as a concussive as well. The driver and turret operator went down quickly. She pushed the first idiot completely out of the tank before sealing herself in and putting herself in charge. “I'm in.”

The battle didn't take long with her blowing up the other remaining tank, the machine gun nest, and any vehicle or cover the enemy was trying to hide behind. She wasn't even out of shells by the time it was done.

“Now that,” she chirped as the team regrouped, “Was fun.”

Armor retracted from Tony's face as he looked up at her jauntily sitting on the tank's turret. “She's like a little kid who just discovered a new video game.” He switched to Emily. “You haven't introduced her to simulators yet?”

Camouflage giving her the look of an odd tree with a face and gun, Emily laughed. “That's actually a good idea for a date night.” Her smile beamed. “Arcade and pizza.”

“Hey, Steve, anyone taken you out to an arcade yet?” At Steve's obvious expression, he nodded. “You and me, buddy, bro-date.” He saddled Bruce with a look. “You too.”

Bruce held up his hands. “Nah, Tony. Me at an arcade surrounded by loud noises and flashing lights isn't a great idea.”

“Everything with you is a bad idea, Scrooge. You're coming.” He insisted. “It'll be like a double date, all of us.”

Wait. No. She didn't want a date night with Emily to include the guys.

“What're you going to do, Tony? Rent out an arcade for an evening so a squad of superheroes can act like kids for a few hours?” Emily challenged.

“That's a better idea than what I had in mind. Let's invite hawk-boy and tell him to meet us in New York in two days.” By now, his hands were in the air, and his excitement level was a ten. “You can video Fury on the way to do that debrief thing he loves so much.” He scratched his chin. “De-brief. Huh. You know, the way he interrogates you during those things is a lot like getting your briefs pulled down, and your a-”

“Okay, Tony!” Steve interrupted. “We'll go.”
Shifting uneasily, Emily eyed Laura as she waddled back from waving goodbye to Clint and the kids who were on their way to a Sunday alone with him and a brother-in-law or something. Smoothies and waterslides and cousins had been promised. The smoothies and water part sounded good to Emily. She wanted to go swimming with Natasha later.

Okay, skinny-dipping. The moon would be full this week, and she wanted to watch Natasha's naked form glide through the water. Touch her too. But she liked to simply watch her move sometimes. The woman was already the epitome of grace, yet when she was in water, she grew impossibly more elegant. She realized her sight had shifted to Nat when an eyebrow arched at her.

Emily turned back to Laura. “You're sure you want me here for your delivery? Seems a little crowded.” There’d be Clint, the midwife and his birthing assistant, Natasha, and one of Laura's sisters who was supposed to show up soon to keep an extra eye on the kids. Friends were popping by regularly to check in, would probably stick around if Laura went into sudden labor.

Laura slowly eased herself down to the couch beside Emily. She sighed in relief and rubbed her enormous stomach. “Why wouldn't I want my friends and best healer in the world here for it?”

She plopped beside her. “Yea. Okay. Play the healer card. Speaking of, want me to...” she gestured at the belly.

“By all means.”

Absolutely, perfectly healthy mini-hawk. Seemed like a good reason to tease Laura. “Oh no,” she gasped. Facing pulling into a worried fret, “Oh damn.”

Adrenaline was shooting through Laura. The little guy kicked at his mom's speeding heart. “What?”

Even Natasha hadn't caught Emily's fake out. She was leaning forward, body vibrating with her fight instinct, and ready to rush Laura to the best doctors on Earth. Emily shook her head and blew out a breath. “Laura, I'm so sorry.” She squeezed out a tear.

“What?” She hissed.

“It's definitely Clint's baby.” She deadpanned. Caught in the delicate balance of fear, disbelief, shock, relief, and outrage, the old friends stared at Emily. She sighed. “Poor thing might get his face.”

Emily was going to pay for this joke, but their faces were so worth it. She grinned.

Half-hearted slaps rained down on her. “Emily Fortune!” Laura yelled. “Don't you ever do that me again, y'hear? I will string you up by your toes in the peach trees and leave you to the squirrels!”

Arms up to defend the blows, Emily guffawed. She laughed and laughed and fell off the couch, smacked her head on the floor, kept laughing even as a magazine was used to extend Laura's reach. Every blow just made her laugh harder.
Laura was growling about horrible taste in jokes and terrible friends as Emily ached for breath. The magazine was thrown at her, and Laura huffed back into her seat. Tears streaming down her face, Emily sat up, caught Nat's eye. Later torture was promised despite her twinkling eye. Smug, Emily winked at her, got a huffed chuckle.

“Baby's fine, Laura.” She popped back on the couch. “Want me to take care of that pinched nerve in your hip?”

It was obvious how much Laura wanted to tell her to go eat a bag of dicks, but she sighed. “Lord help me, Em. You are worse than my husband.”

“If he didn't share a bed with you, you know he'd be worse,” was her cheeky reply. “The hip?”

Laura grabbed Emily's hand. “You better.” Her implied threat was as impressive as Natasha's.

Actually feeling a little chastised, she bent to her work. Pressure on the nerve was relieved. She smiled at the physical sense of Laura relaxing, happy hormones being released, stress levels lowering. The baby reacted as well, giving an enthusiastic stretch. He was a happy bundle. She almost blabbed the baby's sex, but managed to change her question before it left her mouth. “Did you decide what gender to give the kid in your next book?”

“Your next book?” Natasha pouted. She didn't know yet?

Laura sighed at Emily. “How did you even find out, Em? When did you?”

“Uh.” She scratched her leg. “Was it a secret?”

“It was.”

“Laura,” came a soft whine from Natasha. “You were supposed to tell me if you got serious about another book.”

Fidgeting, Laura shook her head. “No. I promised to tell you if I ever did a sequel to Burned Socks.”

Burned Socks? She'd never heard of that. Was it under a different name? Her mind clicked. Did the great Black Widow not know Laura had a best-selling saga under a nom de plume? That she would be a thousand times more successful if she went on a book-signing tour like her fans had been begging from her for the past six years. Or that Laura had been turning down movies and TV series for a while too.

“Laura Barton.” Emily grinned in awe of the woman. “You minx.”

In the quiet, the air conditioner hummed. Natasha's eyes were narrowing, her lips thinning. “What have you managed to keep from me?” Irritation, probably a stab of hurt, was overlaid by admiration.

Again, Emily was the target of Laura's swats. “You are on bathroom duty this entire visit, you big-mouthed pain, y'hear me? Ya'll weren't supposed to know!”

“Come on, Laura! Danielle Yastreb is one of my favorite characters ever. How was I not supposed to make the connection when you left your notebook open on the bathroom sink last time I was here?”

“Danielle Yastreb?” Natasha demanded, her accent flaring on the Russian term for hawk as the
connection between the character and Clint became obvious.

“I'm always on bathroom duty when I'm here.” She caught both wrists, rolled her eyes. “Erica Roman,” she pinned the nom de plume to her. “Hiding your notebooks in the master bathroom closet might've kept the fox from stumbling over them, but me? You keep them right behind the cleaners.”

“Natasha's seen them.” Her arms had gone docile in Emily's grip. “She just thought they were diaries and respected my privacy.”

Jaw hanging, Natasha was about as surprised as Emily had ever seen her. “Nat's trusted you for a long time, hasn't she?” The new thought made warm fuzzies glow for her lover.

Those sharp green eyes switched to her, then back to Laura, and softened. “So, Erica Roman. Author of the acclaimed sci-fi series about Danielle Yastreb, the futuristic equivalent of Clint had he been born on a Mars colony, injected himself with homemade nanotechnology to repair damaged hearing, and became Mars' best spy with the unforeseen side effects of the nanotech,” hair swished with a small laugh. “How did I never see the connection? How did I miss it? Clint introduced them to me!”

“He bought a German copy in Zurich.” Demure pride smiled.

“Along with a dozen other novels that he dumped in my lap during a long undercover mission.” Nat rolled her eyes. “His excuse was that you,” her finger pointed at Laura, “Gave him a reading list to distract me from worrying about your pregnancy with Lila.”

“A lie. He did that all on his own.” Wrists tried to escape. “Will you let go?”

She made a face. “Only if you're going to stop smacking me.”

“If you stop causing trouble.”

“You'll be waiting forever, Laura.” Natasha chuckled.

A groan came from Laura. Momma Barton wasn't used to losing battles. She might be sweet and wholesome, but the Barton farm ran under her strict hand. “Truce.”

Releasing her hold, “Fair enough.”

Emily had to catch herself from imagining what Natasha would look like pregnant. The topic of her sterility had never been broached, not in the asking Emily to reverse it kind of way. Despite raging curiosity, Emily had kept her promise and never brought it up. There was also the fact that Nat being pregnant would mean Emily becoming a parent, and she had no idea how she felt about that. Her ex had thrashed the idea of kids their first month together. Thinking that would be her last relationship, she'd stopped considering the idea a long time ago.

The three women were sitting in the living room, drinking a berry tea while dinner finished cooking. Giggling and running feet heralded the return of Clint and the kids. One of the adults always waited for the schoolbus to drop them off at the drive's entrance, and today had been Clint's turn. Lila burst into the house first and went straight to her favorite person. Her Auntie Nat accepted the bundle of child with open arms and a kiss to her messy hair.

After a round of customary questions about Lila's day, the more sedate boys appeared. Cooper
went to his mother for a kiss on the cheek first. Then Natasha, and to Emily's surprise, her.

“Have you decided on names yet?” Natasha asked.

Lila swiveled to beam up at her auntie. “If it's a girl, she'll be Natasha Amelia Barton.”

Green eyes went bright as they flitted between child and parents. Emily felt warmth spread in her chest for the devastatingly sweet expression blossoming on her fox.

“You've brought Clint home safely more times than I care to count. You're part of this family, and you're also part of why this little one,” Laura rubbed at a kicking foot, “Is coming into the world. We couldn't think of a better way to honor you than to give our child your names.”

Names, plural? Wasn't Natalia's middle name Alianovna? It was. Natasha had confirmed what her files said, and she'd had no reason to lie to Emily. Had she?

Laura had Natasha's hand on her belly, was giving her a sisterly kiss on her cheek. She caught Emily's eye, frowned, then laughed. “And it's Emelia, not Amelia. For you, Emily.”

“Right! Emelia!” Lila agreed as though she hadn't made the mistake.

But why? She had grown to care for the Bartons deeply, but she wasn't a part of the family like Natasha was. “That's an awfully generous gesture, Laura.”

“What is?” Clint asked as he looked up from his phone.

Giving him a pointed look for dropping out of the conversation to tend his phone, Laura answered. “Lila and I were just explaining what we'll name Number Three.”

“Oh. I see.” He pocketed his phone, caught his kids' attention. “Go wash up, you mud magnets. I can smell that dinner's almost ready.”

Lila challenged Cooper in a race to the bathroom, and they dashed away.

“A boy will be Nathaniel Emil.” Laura added, much to Emily's consternation.

Natasha's eyes shimmered at the honor their friends were giving her, and Emily did not want to break the moment for her. She carefully bit the tip of her tongue. Later, she could talk to Clint and Laura, explain her discomfort. Refocusing on her excitement for Natasha, she whisked an easy delight to her face right before Natasha's gaze settled on her. “Congratulations, little fox.”

One of those rare blushes colored Nat's cheeks. “Thank you,” came out delicately. She sniffled. Emily's heart did a little dance at the display of raw emotion she was allowed to see, falling in love all over again. “Clint. Laura. I don't know what to say.”

“You don't have to say anything.” Laura's eye rolled to Emily, silently told her that she recognized Emily's disapproval of being included in the naming and would change Emily's mind later. Emily mentally began preparatory arguments about why the name her parents had randomly chosen didn't deserve to be passed on.

Sitting on the arm of the chair that Nat was in, Clint hauled her in for a hug. “We just wanted to reinforce that you get to help change diapers.”

Most anyone else would have groaned. Mentally, Emily did. She'd changed enough of Alan's for a lifetime. Natasha took it as a measure of trust, that anyone would put the well-being of their
children in her hands, would allow her to help shape their lives. It was in the tear that escaped.

“I should check the casserole,” as she stood. The buzzer went off, and Laura shook her head.

“How do you do that?”

Emily gave her a smile that said it was another superhuman gift, dropped a kiss to Natasha's temple as she passed.

“Why don't you think we should give this kid your name?” Catching up Emily's hand, Laura joined her outside to watch the fireflies dance.

Clint's softer tread creaked, and he settled in around his wife, peering over her shoulder at Emily. “Talk.”

“You barely know me.” Half of the missions she'd been on with Clint, he'd been up in a sniper perch, speaking to no one. Even when he was training her to hide like a sniper, they rarely spoke beyond the exercise. Or when she'd come that first time. She and Clint just didn't chat much. Laura had drawn her into a fair amount of conversation. Okay, yea. The short amount of time they'd spent together just didn't seem to add up to why they wanted to give a kid her name, even a middle name.

The couple exchanged glances. Clint leveled his dad slash sniper stare on her, and Laura spoke for them. “You know how important Natasha is to us.”

Whatever argument she'd been expecting, that wasn't in it. “Your kids call her aunt.” What more was there to say?

Laura nodded. “And you probably know her better than any of us now. You know her past, how she works.”

“Yes.”

“We've never seen her happier.”

“Naming your kid after her was the greatest thing anyone could do for her.” Of course she was happy.

Clint huffed. “Jesus, you're dense.”

“Emily, you've given her the greatest gift. You make her happy every day.” Earnest, she leaned forward. “You do what no one else can.”

“You can make her angry without losing a finger or two.” Clint grinned at his wife's shoulder bumping his chin.

“Clint,” chided him.

Where were they going with this? What did loving Natasha have to do with them naming their kid after Emily? They had only been together, what, seven or eight months? She hoped for another eight months, eight years, eight decades with her little fox.

Oh.

Oh. That's where they were going.
“I think she's getting it.”

“Clint!”

“Say you'll let us give our kid your name.” Clint's gaze was sharp. “You'll let us thank you for helping Natasha be,” from hawk to cheeky friend, he grinned, “A little red fox instead of a black widow.”

For that, for Natasha, she'd allow it. She caught a flash of red in the doorway. Natasha was spying on them, had poked her head into sight to catch Emily's eye. Her gaze was tender.

“Okay.”

A curve of lips, and Nat vanished.

“You can give the kid my terrible name. On one condition.” She held up a hand before Laura could jump her with a hug. “Never use the nickname Emmie.”

“Is that what your mother calls you?” Clint asked.

“Yea.”

The beach ball of a belly made the hug a little awkward. “Deal.”

Clint squeezed the three of them together. “Okay. Good hug. Let's go eat ice cream.”

Nathaniel Emil, huh? She could handle that.

After a report to Fury that no, Laura hadn't popped yet. Yes, it might be another week. No, Emily wouldn't induce Laura just so he could have Sekhmet and the Widow back on duty earlier. He'd known for months that Natasha, more recently Emily too, would be unavailable for several weeks at the end of summer. He preferred to give them time off on his schedule, didn't like being dictated to by a baby. His greetings were grudgingly offered to the Bartons, and he let them go.

“Is it a Nathaniel or a Natasha?” Nat asked from her side of the bed that night.

“Laura wants it to be a surprise,” was her drowsy response. She'd been prodded about this for months, from Clint and Nat, then the kids when they'd learned what Emily's gift was. It was exhausting, and she was ready for Laura to push the kid out already.

The hand that always touched hers as they fell asleep like this tugged at her fingers. “Come on, please?”

Emily opened her eyes, peered at the glinting sparks on the other pillow. “You can deal with not knowing this one secret for a few more days.”

“Emily!”

“No.” She dropped her eyelids.

“Emilishka, pozhaluista.” Featherlight touches traced her knuckles.

“You put that tongue away. I'm not telling you.” She grunted. “And its sex isn't all that important. It's just another hawk.”
Natasha groaned and flopped to her back.

“You're cute when you pout.”

Annoyance glared at her.

She smiled back, yawned, and closed her eyes.

Nathaniel burbled up at Natasha. She made sure that no one was close enough to hear and whispered, “Traitor. You were supposed to be a Natasha.” The little cone-head reached up and tangled his fingers in curls. His dark eyes reminded her of Emily. “Fine. I forgive you.”

Cradling the precious bundle, smelling his baby scents, all milk and spit up and powder, Natasha wondered at the idea of a child who carried her blood as well as her name. Or Emily's. What would it be like to grow a little person inside herself? To give birth and watch Emily hold their child for the first time? Emily would make a beautiful mother. She was already a mother in all but physiology, having basically raised her brothers because of her parents' neglect and abuse.

Would Emily want to raise a child of her own with those scars on her heart?

Nathaniel had shifted, letting go of her hair and was trying to mouth at her fabric covered breast. “Sorry, little guy, wrong boob.”

“Is he hungry?” Laura asked as Nathaniel made an unhappy noise.

Natasha eased over to her friend. “He's not old enough to want a boob for anything else yet.”

As the little guy latched on to his mom, Laura gave Natasha an annoyed look. “Must you always be so crass?”

“I still can't believe how quickly you're recovering this time.” The midwife hummed and scratched his neatly trimmed beard.

Smiling down at her sucking baby, Laura hummed. “Must be all the help I've got.”

She got a disbelieving look, but the man had a good relationship with the Bartons, knew that it was a family with a few secrets. He had kept his opinions to himself, and Natasha had let him keep his tongue. As always, he gave her a wide berth as he moved about Laura, making sure she was in good health. She'd never been anything but polite to him. Except every time Nat didn't know what to do with herself when Laura was in labor, yet insisted on her presence, and ended up giving the midwife her best threatening glares, promising unending torture if Laura didn't make it. He had good reason to avoid her.

Emily appeared with a pot of tea and several cups. “You are a godsend, Em.” Laura beamed up at her.

This labor had been the best ever. Natasha had been able to almost completely relax knowing that Emily was on the job. The screaming and cursing and grunts of pain had been what kept her on edge. Almost as much as Clint. One of Laura's younger sisters had come, along with her fussy toddler, to watch the kids and generally be around to help. Emily had snuck in a health check on them as well, quietly fixed a fractured vertebrae that no one had been aware of. They'd blamed the kid's tears on Cooper's loud action cartoon. From fussy to sweet-tempered, the toddler had switched overnight. Natasha had made sure to show Emily her appreciation. Repeatedly. Loudly.
And far away from the house in the mosquito-netted pavilion they’d set up for this visit.

“She is a deity, Laura.” Natasha corrected. “The goddess of doctors and battle.”

“And tea,” was Laura's amiable agreement. “How did you get this one?”

And tea. Natasha still had no idea how Emily got this particular blend. The company it came from did not ship outside of its native country of Turkey, didn't even have a website. No missions had taken them there, and Natasha was fairly certain that Em didn't have Turkish friends.

“Trade secret, I'm afraid.”

“Nat has definitely been rubbing off on you.”

The midwife's eyes flitted between the SHIELD agents. “And you two met on the job, the same kind that Clint does?”

Natasha sipped daintily at her tea.

“Oh no.” Emily shook her head, replied cheerily. “My job is much more hands-on than his.”

Thinking of the Afghanistan job, of the dresses that Emily had looked so fetching in, that Natasha had delighted in removing, she grinned wolfishly. “Especially in Kabul.”

Giggles floated among the women. The midwife shook his head. “No. I don't want to know.”

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

pozhaluista – please

I always imagined Laura providing for her family in her own way instead of just being a homemaker. Why not be a secretly successful writer?
Desperately missing the days of being her own boss, Emily chafed under Fury's argument. Her scowl deepened. He leaned forward in his chair. The man could sense insubordination from a mile away, and he hated it. That he was keeping his temper with her was probably a minor miracle. “By all reports, Agent Fortune, you have a knack for ingratiating yourself with the locals. Along with your knowledge and experience in the health field, you are the best candidate for posing as Banner's assistant.”

Because Natasha was out in the field, and no one else was brave enough to be stuck in a tin can with the Hulk, she amended. “You could send an engineer, you know. Banner was invited to see a machine, director.”

“I want you there.”

“Well? Send Tony. He'll know what he's looking at. He and Banner get along great. And he's got that knack for ingratiating himself to women. Dr. Helen Cho is a woman.” She blinked. “Unless she's gay, and you think I'll flirt with her? That's Natasha's skillset. Not mine.”

He grumbled a sigh. “Even if Stark was willing to face his wife's wrath for dallying with another woman, he's got a bad habit of making enemies everywhere.”

“I'm not seducing anyone.” Why was she okay with the idea of Natasha seducing other people? Was she that confident in her own ability to attract and keep the most gorgeous woman ever? Or was it her confidence in Natasha's loyalty? Yea, definitely the latter. Natasha might end up fucking other people in the line of duty, but she came home to make love to Emily.

“And I'm not asking you to,” was his barked reply. She blinked and forced herself to stay in the moment. “Look, Fortune, I get that you and Banner have an awkward time getting along. He got his hopes up too high that you could rid him of his green problem, and you don't like how his self-hatred reminds you of yourself. You're both adults, and you will get over it. I want you at his side because you can give us input that no one else can. I want you to actively scan whoever Cho puts in her cradle and tell us what you learn.”

She looked at the scars that snuck out from under his eye patch. “Why haven't you ever asked me to heal your eye?”

“That is not the topic at hand.”

“I'm not revealing myself so you can steal Cho's technology.”

Anger dilated his iris. “This is an order, Agent Fortune.”

Lip curling, “You hired me knowing that I won't follow orders that I think are wrong.” His frown deepened, but he didn't immediately start yelling. She went on. “I'll go and be Banner's assistant, and I'll learn what I can to see if her technology is actually safe for human use. I'll even see if I can convince Dr. Cho to share her tech with SHIELD, because it'd be damn nice to not be everyone's last hope around here. Those agents who limped back in pieces from that shit mission you sent them on last week were lucky that I happened to be in town. Even if they'd survived surgery, they'd be cripples and in pain for life. For that matter, why haven't you sent me on more relief missions? Why didn't we help after that insane earthquake last month?”

“I thought you weren't willing to reveal yourself,” was his dry, dispassionate retort.
Her fist shook a finger at him. “You know damn well that drifting through a panicked crowd and doing triage without being seen is easy. I did that kind of stuff for years.”

Fury stared at her until she'd mastered some of her anger and dropped her hand. “Since you began working with the Avengers, I've seen a marked increase in their teamwork. Your influence on them may be the little bit of edge we need next time an alien invasion fleet shows up. Therefore, I have found it more important to keep you building that teamwork instead of sending you to wade through natural disasters, even if SHIELD was a disaster-relief organization, which it's not.”

There was a surprise. She was an influence on the team as a whole? They'd only been on a few missions as a team, and never a complete team. Thor remained in Asgard. She stopped herself from daydreaming about the realm of gods. A story that Tony had told her popped up. “You're using me as another Coulson.”

Director Fury eyed her for several moments. His ability to stare without flinching was almost as disconcerting as Natasha's. Or more, since Natasha didn't scare Emily like she used to. “In essence, yes.”

Ruthless, brilliant move. Keeping the healer from the world because she was glue to keep the Avengers working together. “You could send us all on relief missions.”

“Somehow, I don't see the Hulk's anger being much help.”

“Why not? The Hulk seems to like some of the Avengers. He's capable of teamwork. I think I saw him save a kid once. He'd be hella useful moving rubble to get to earthquake survivors.”

It was his turn to be surprised. “You aren't afraid of him?”

She snorted. Of course she was scared of him, but it wasn't like he gave her nightmares. Natasha had enough nightmares for the both of them. “He's a little kid who needs a target for his emotions and people he trusts to show him what those are.”

“That is an interesting hypothesis.”

“I've got a lot of experience dealing with angry children. Myself as one included.” She leaned forward. “Send the Avengers on a relief mission or two. It'd be good for them to be something other than hunters and killers for a change. Steve and Tony can be the visible faces while the rest of us blend with Red Cross workers or something. Banner can decide whether the biologist or the Hulk would be more useful.”

“You know, most people who talk to me like that end up scrubbing proverbial toilets.”

“I'm not afraid of scrubbing toilets, director.” He knew what she was afraid of, but was he ruthless enough to threaten her brothers to make her do what he wanted? She made a mental note to send Alan a birthday gift next week.

He stared at her long enough to make her fidget and consider escape plans. She almost melted when he nodded. “Go with Banner. I want a report on whether Cho's technology is safe for human use. Whatever else you manage to accomplish or report is on your discretion.”

That she could work with. “Yes, sir.”

Fury wanted to keep the Avengers as apolitical as possible, but improve their PR numbers.
Therefor, he had sent them to a region in India where torrential rain had caused widespread flooding; a natural disaster instead of a man-made one. Natasha reminded herself that this was good for the team. Good for Steve and Bruce and Stark, who were stuck in the public's eye. It didn't mean that she was enjoying her work slogging through mud and sewage-soaked floodwaters. Her practical side couldn't help wondering why she and Clint had been sent too.

Having them there to watch Em's back made them feel better, but it wasn't terribly practical. Emily had been slinking through disaster sites helping like this since long before SHIELD recruited her. She was good at doing triage while dragging a body from under rubble, kneeling beside a distracted doctor, standing beside a frantic parent, or sitting with a crying child and their bleeding dog. Natasha bent over panting. She'd been looking for Emily for an hour now, and her worried irritation that Em had disappeared to help a fucking dog tempted her to drag the woman back to where they had been helping set up a relief station.

Why was Emily wasting her energy on a dog? She had an arm around the child, and a hand petting soaked fur. Emily hated healing animals because they were likely to bite or scratch her for causing them more pain. By her stories, it was amazing that the creature she was touching wasn't growling or struggling to escape.

Was Emily healing it or just cuddling?

A sudden, sharp whine from the dog clinched that idea. It bent to lick at its hip, and Emily's hand followed the shift. Healing.

“Daljeet!” Shrieked a young man who ran up to the boy and cupped his face in muddy hands. The boy threw his arms around him and hugged tight. Murmurs of affections and fears of loss were whispered in the boy's ear. Over the boy's shoulder, the young man yelled for his mother and father, and a few moments later, two older people pushed their way through the foot of mud. Their demands to know where the boy had been was met with a little smile.

He reached for the dog and told them that his faithful friend had kept barking until the lady with the weird eyes had found him trapped under a motorcycle. He had been getting tired from holding his nose above the water, and his chest had hurt.

Ah, so that's why Em had run off after a barking dog rather than stay at Clint and Natasha's side like she was supposed to. Damn maternal instinct. Always taking care of troublesome boys.

“Romanoff, what are those things?” Fortune asked.

Natasha looked down where her wrists were being pointed at. She was in full tac gear for this training session, as was Emily, who also had a thirty pound bag strapped to her back. “Someone coined them my Widow's Bite. Basically, they're utility bracelets. Everything a Black Widow could need is in them.”

The woman hummed. “And what does a Black Widow need that would fit in those tiny slots? Lock picks? USB drive? Wire?” Curious, Natasha watched as Fortune seriously considered the topic. “Poison darts? Camera?” She had a mind for espionage. “Tazer?” She didn't seem to shy away from the more brutal aspects of life. “Multi-tool? Acid?” And she wasn't innately terrified of the Black Widow. Was it because Fortune first met her as someone she saw as a wounded hero, a reproductively-crippled woman? “Gas?”

Or was it because Natasha was afraid of her, and she sensed it on a primitive level?

“Spider-web?”
Natasha’s mind stretched. “You were on a roll, Fortune, why did you take a nose-dive into fantasy?” She sniped to cover her own distraction.

“There's this story I read. It’s about a brilliant kid who designed a kind of high-tech spider web to swing around with,” was the unruffled reply. “Sounds like it’d be useful in your line of work. SHIELD has all sorts of impossible tech. Why not spider-web strong enough to replace rope for a Black Widow to rappel down with? Or trap prey? Ultra-light, ultra-strong, ultra-sticky.” She stretched muscles that Natasha had been pushing the woman to learn how to use better. “Black widows do spin webs. It'd probably make you even scarier to have a more literal bond with that title.”

“Says the woman who doesn't seem to be frightened of spiders at all.”

Calm, Emily straightened from her stretch, looked at her. Both of them knew that neither was talking about arachnids. “I have a great respect for creatures that can kill me with one bite. Most won’t unless they feel threatened or cornered. They’d rather save their venom for prey.”

An excellent point.


A small, predatory mammal. Aggressive and highly territorial. She wanted to know more, but Fortune needed to build stamina. “Pretend one is chasing you, Fortune. Get running. Sprints to the top and back.”

Groaning, Emily looked at the steep hill that was her gym that morning. “You sure we can't keep talking about scary bugs?”

Natasha hooked a finger in the woman's nostril and started running. Squealing, Emily was right behind her. Clint was waiting at the top where she sent Emily back down.

“That’s an interesting technique.” He tugged on his own nose. “Ow.”

Wiping her finger on him, “She needed incentive.”

He scowled and tried to wipe the line of snot back on her, but she dodged in a backward lean that she turned into a kick that his jaw barely escaped. “What were you two talking about down there?”

Pushing up into a neat flip, “Spiders, and her lack of fear for them.”

His fist swiped past her nose, but she was spinning and delivering an elbow toward his throat that he deflected. “Pretty rare that you find someone sane who isn't afraid of you, Nat.”

The woman in question had crested the hill again, but instead of going back down, she was pulling a phone from a pocket. “What’s wrong?” She opened with.

Distracted, Natasha couldn’t duck Clint's attack. Her forearm block jarred her shoulders and made her curse. She returned a low kick that he jumped over. “Agent Fortune, you're supposed to b-”

A soft hand, palm out, was thrust impatiently in her direction, and Emily turned her head away. “Alan, calm the fuck down.”

Clint punched, “Did she,” block, “Just tell you to,” core-stretching dodge, “Talk to the hand?”
Around an uppercut, Natasha was staring after her. No one ignored her like that. No one.

“Alan! You did not call and interrupt me at work to yell at me about your girlfriend breaking up with you.” Emily growled. “I love you, but if you keep yelling, I’m going to hang up.”

The old friends looked at each other. They both recognized that tone. When Laura used it, every misbehaving child within hearing range would freeze. Natasha found her own body reacting to the scolding tone. Their sparring ceased.

“That’s better. I’m sorry she broke your heart, Al.” And the conversation continued for several more minutes. Fortune was verbally hugging and smoothing the feathers of this Alan down after a rough breakup. When it was over, she told him that they’d talk later and that she loved him, then shoved her phone away with a long sigh. “Sorry, Romanoff. My brothers and I usually text. When they call, I answer.”

Before Natasha could berate her or order her back to training, Emily sent herself back down the hill.

“She’s going to drive Tony crazy when he realizes that flirting with her won’t get him anywhere and trying to intimidate or impress her won’t work either.” Clint chuckled.

Knowing how he was going to feel, Natasha’s lips thinned.

Emily was extracting herself from the little family scene, helped by the distraction of the boy excitedly telling his parents that the dog had been hurt, but he was all better now. She managed to get a few yards away when the boy chased after and grabbed her hand. As she froze, Natasha centered herself in her cover as an Irish aid-worker, stepping forward to act as translator.

The father beat her to it, his own English heavy on his tongue, but understandable. “I am most sorry. My boy wants to say thank you for saving him and our dog.”

Demurring, “I only moved a motorcycle. The dog saved him.”

The boy was saying that Emily had made the hurt go away and saved his dog. He was hushed, but he persisted. “Va hamen passand hai!”

She is like us! Natasha swept the family with another threat assessment. Minimal, but she could never be too careful. Moving in, she put herself by Emily’s side and smiled. “The boy wants to be like you.” She purposely mis-translated.

Attention shot to her, then back to Emily. The father tried again to distract his child. Natasha tried to steer Emily away, but the impulsive woman shrugged her off. No, dammit, don’t y-

“Your son has a gift like I do?”

If she wasn't so fucking in love with her, she'd kill her.

The father stilled, torn between terror and hope. “Did you truly save my boy?”

“Met, we should get back.” Natasha warned. How could a woman who was desperately afraid of being exposed suddenly fight to expose herself? The grinning boy held the answer.

Emily held out her hand. “The bruising on your arm looks like it was crushed between something. I can take care of it.”
If the swelling wasn't taken care of, clots would probably kill him. If it was, he might still lose the hand. Between arm and foreigner, wonder shifted. The father held his arm up.

“This will hurt.”

Itching for her gun, Natasha watched the scene. The family could probably be coerced into staying silent. Fear of reprisal should do it. And if they also had powers, it would be safer to simply inform Fury of enhanced humans here. Emily gasped.

Her gun came out.

“No, it's okay.” Without turning, Emily's hand flailed for the gun, pushed the muzzle down. The family had shrunk away at the weapon. They eased as Emily put herself between them and Natasha. “She's very protective of me.”

The father sighed. “As I am with my sons.”

“I usually hide, but sometimes helping is more important.”

“We are glad for it.” He replied, translated the comment for his family.

Little arms threw themselves around Emily in a wild hug. He babbled away about heroes and secrets, and Natasha holstered her gun. She translated quietly. Sweet laughter came from Emily, and she knelt to return the embrace.

“Your gift is a secret we will not spread.” The father offered as Emily stood.

“Yours is safe with me too.” Goodbyes were exchanged, and the family huddled together for another round of hugs and whispered exchanges of worry and love.

Fingers laced with her own, and Natasha gratefully tugged Emily away before she finished blowing their cover.

“Can we keep that out of the report?” Emily wheedled.

“Your idiot behavior, yes. Them?” Over her shoulder, she eyed the family. Fury would want to know about them. She wanted to know what their powers were.

“Please, Nat?”

She tried to hold out, but the lower lip being plumped, the eyelashes batted, and the hand squeezing her own was winning. “Will every scared little boy be a soft spot for you?”

Emily made a noncommittal shrug.

She resisted the abrupt urge to kiss her troublesome healer, but refrained given the repressed culture they were surrounded by however thrown into chaos it currently was. She hated chaos. Structure and order and perfectly executed plans was how she’d survived most of her life. It made her feel secure. Wildcards screwed plans up and undermined order. They also had the most adorable freckles. Emily made Natasha feel safe despite her natural tendency to deviate from any given plan.

Chaos was also a natural part of life, much like hawks and babies. Her family’s needs was more important than what Director Fury wanted, no matter how much she respected and owed the man. And there was the small fact that she herself had a soft spot for saving children.
“A secret between us then,” drifted from her lips.

“I love you, Natalia,” was whispered against her ear. She sighed. Hearing those words and being able to believe them were the center of her world now.

“What were their powers?”

Lips touched her jaw. “Don't ask me again, and you won't have to lie to the director.”

Fine. “We need to switch to a different location. You're going to plop your ass in the boat while I go get the boys.” No need to tempt fate more. Clint and Banner didn't argue. The relief workers they'd been helping didn't like their retreat and tried to guilt-trip them into staying. A story about trapped children freed them. Steve and Stark were radioed with an update on their changing location. Natasha was coating herself in a fresh layer of bug-repellent when Clint fired up the motor. She cursed mosquito-infested places and threatened Emily with Lipton tea if she ever got Fury to send them to a jungle again.

The news was babbling while Emily vacuumed up popcorn from her movie night with friends. Finding yet another kernel nowhere near the couch, she laughed. Lizzie and Ishmael's popcorn battle had been brutal. No one had been safe from the flying crunchiness. An explosion from the TV caught her eye, and she glanced out of habit.

She turned off the vacuum cleaner.

Footage from cell phones and security feeds was pieced together to show a heavily armed police force attacking an armored SUV. A glimpse through the window showed a black man with an eye patch. The report ending by saying the man was unaccounted for after an explosion a few blocks of car chase later. D.C. Metro police renounced all association with the attack, and she believed it. Those men hadn't moved like cops. She ran for her work phone.

It blinked wildly from her dresser. There were a dozen missed calls from Natasha and Agent Hill, several texts and voicemails. She glanced at the dread-inducing texts before dialing Nat. Phone between ear and shoulder, she got her gun and checked the windows and door. Voicemail picked up, so she dialed Hill and dug into her dresser for sturdier clothes than her sweatpants and tank top.

Hill didn't even say hello. “Are you in the sand?” In coded question, she was asking if Emily was at home in Colorado. The deputy-director was insanely loyal and quite close to Fury. According to Nat, there was even sexual tension between the two.

Emily forgave her rudeness. “Yes.”

Hill swore, something she never did. “You've seen the news?”

“Yes.”

“Bring your umbrella.” Get to D.C. Now.

Shit.
Emily booked a nonstop flight to D.C. that left in two hours. She messaged Lizzie that she’d been called out of town unexpectedly and told her to use whatever was in the fridge. Her brothers got heads up as well. By the time she got to the airport, Natasha had finally called. The entire conversation was in code. A personal one that they had worked out instead of using SHIELD protocol. It set Emily's teeth on edge. Natasha was worried about something she'd learned on top of Fury's disappearance and probable serious injuries. The attack had been an attempted assassination. She didn't who yet, but she was digging. Emily told her that Hill had already called, that she was on her way.

That is, if the plane ever got off the tarmac. Mechanical issues had come up and after an hour, all passengers were deplaned. Emily found a flight that was going to Raleigh and tried to get on that one. TSA pulled her aside. They said they'd gotten a tip to check her and dragged her to an interrogation room where they gave her shit about a few ounces of weed they'd found in her bag.

Emily Fortune moved weed wholesale. She didn't carry petty amounts, even for personal use, given that she preferred edibles over smoking.

And there was the small matter that she was still in Colorado, with a medical card, and the TSA wasn't supposed to bother passengers taking off from airports where medical marijuana was legal. After four bullshit hours, they let her go. A text from Natasha blipped, a coded warning that she should go off-grid. Emily texted back a reply, dropped her phone in a waste basket, and took a cab to a friend's car dealership.

On the way, she had the cab detour for her to pick up a burner phone. She wished she had her old work phone, but it was in the safe at her apartment. Oh well. What was a couple hundred bucks for a new phone and minutes? Glad she kept the old habit of memorizing phone numbers, she sent warnings to her brothers, and of course to Lizzie, to stay alert. The news, the shit at the airport, and the message from Nat had set her on edge. There was a lot wrong, and her family needed warning. Though she assumed Clint had gotten one from Nat already, she sent him a warning too. She also left a message with her new number in the anonymous email she and Nat had set up months ago. She'd finished reading the last reply when the cab stopped at her destination.

No one else on the lot, her buddy greeted her with a tight hug. “What can I do for the Great Green Fortune Teller?”

They'd been work friends for years. Stepping back into her old life was comforting and easy. The networks she'd delivered between had been aghast at her stepping away, had argued and begged and pleaded for her not to, which is why she'd made a few trips while on leave from SHIELD. Keeping contact with the trade and the money it brought in had seemed a questionable maneuver at the time. Now, she was glad for it.

In exchange for her delivering a ten-pack to a client in Virginia, she'd get to borrow a nice, new car that had shiny, legal plates on it. It was comfortable, nondescript, and had a prepaid subscription to satellite radio. Perfect. Vac-sealed bud packed into a suitcase in the trunk, and she was on the road, heading east.

She spent most of the drive trying not to think about what kind of trouble Nat could be in. It got
bad enough at one point that she almost called Clint. The world wasn't at an end yet though, so she didn't. He was on vacation with his family and had asked for it not to be interrupted unless aliens were invading again.

At a truck stop in western Kansas, she got a burner phone and something to eat. In eastern Indiana, she got the news that an assassin of Natasha's caliber was after Steve. Halfway through Ohio, the interstate was closed due to a bad accident involving a couple of semi-trailers. Detouring along a country road, a message came that Fury had died on the operating table after being gunned down in Steve's apartment. She pulled over, and slammed her forehead into the steering wheel. Nat didn't have quite the closeness to Fury that Hill did, but she would be grieving, and Emily wasn't there to help.

A message that said Steve was being hunted by SHIELD, and Nat with him, that SHIELD had corruption on every level, kept Emily from pulling over for a nap. Worry would have kept her awake even if she tried. And guilt. She should've found a way to get there sooner. She could have contracted a private plane, anything!

Caught up in her emotions, she almost ran off the road. Jerking back on it almost ran someone else off. She made herself pull off the highway, get out of the car, and take a walk. By the time she got back, she couldn't keep her eyes open and had to crawl into the backseat for that nap she'd been avoiding.

An agent from Cap's usual strike team was coming up the escalator. He had been something of a friend and would recognize Steve immediately, no matter the hat and glasses. Scenarios flew through her head. She hated the best one. Her go-to distraction.

Emily was going to kill her.

“Kiss me.”

Proper, gentlemanly Steve flinched. “What?”

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

“Yes. They do.” Dammit, he was going to make this difficult. She grabbed the back of his head and forced their lips together. Too similar to Emily, a hand went to her waist; lips gently moved with hers. Steve was a nice kisser, was attractive and sweet, and she started to enjoy the moment. In another life... The agent passed, and she disengaged, Steve's lips nearly following her.

“If you tell her before I can, I will show Tony that picture of you in-”

“My lips are sealed.” His cheeks were pink. “No need to make threats.”

They managed to get out of the shopping mall and into the parking lot. “Heard from her?”

“She keeps hitting delays. She's just crossed into West Virginia.” And now that they knew SHIELD was compromised, she didn't want Emily anywhere near D.C. Yet she did. She wanted Emily right beside her where Natasha could protect her, and Emily could watch her back.

Near the center, hidden among hundreds of cars, Steve surprised the hell out of her by breaking into a truck. He didn't even have to shatter a window. They pulled from the lot and headed for the beltway. Middle of the day traffic let them slide from beltway to northbound highway with ease. New Jersey. What the hell would they find there? She messaged Emily about their side-quest and
told her to keep aiming to meet them Maryland.

Waiting outside of a closed grocery store for Emily to meet them, Natasha jerked awake. Em caught her hands mid-attack, kissed her fists. Her irises changed colors.

“I'm okay.” She tried to argue before a hiss escaped, a headache roaring then buzzing and fading.

“You had a concussion.” A breath. “And smoke inhalation, a mountain of bruises, and a perforated eardrum that I will get to in a few minutes.” That explained the pain in her ear.

In the driver's seat, Rogers shot into quickly aborted motion. Panting, holding his side, he settled. “Fortune. Hey.”

Emily sighed. “Jersey went well I see.”

“It was a gas.” He groaned.

“Come on. Get in my car.” Parked beside them was an unimpressive sedan that wasn't her usual Mercedes coupe. Good. Natasha smiled proudly, didn't argue as she was pushed in and healed. She hummed at the relief from pain and nausea and double-vision.

“I promise, Fortune, I-”

“Sit down, Rogers.” Emily ordered.

“Yes, ma'am,” came out meekly. Squeezed into the backseat, he endured Emily's touch with grit teeth.

The healer snorted. “Fine, they tell me. How is a concussion and internal bleeding fine?” She stood from her crouch. “When's the last time either of you ate?”

Um. She met Steve's eye. He shrugged.

“Okay. Sit tight. I'm getting us breakfast.” Without more, Emily slipped away to a nearby doughnut shop as the sun peeked over the horizon.

“How often do you have to endure that?” Steve asked.

“The healing or her sneaking up on me?”

He rubbed his face. “She can sneak up on you?”

Yea. Emily could sometimes. Hazard of trusting someone implicitly. Her lips crooked. “She got the truck open before I woke up.”

“How?”

“Pretty sure we fell asleep with it unlocked.” Like exhausted, amateur idiots. “Thanks, by the way. For saving me back there.”

He shrugged. “You saved my butt at the mall. I'd say we're even.”

Ugh. The mall. Where she'd kissed him. “Speaking of butts...”
“I won't say anything until tomorrow.”

“I meant, we need a place to lay low.” She sniffed. “And take a shower. We stink like explosives.”

He nodded. “I might know a guy.”

“There's something I need to tell you.” Holding Emily back, Natasha spoke hurriedly.

Em looked to the condo they were approaching and back. “In addition to the HYDRA infestation of SHIELD and the plan to kill millions of people? Do I have to call Kev again and tell him you forgot something?”

This was unimportant compared to that. But it wouldn't stop her from coming clean. “It's not something you need to call your brother about, but,” she stopped herself and gathered her courage. “When Steve and I were being pursued, we had to hide.” She bit her lip, the memory burned. Steve's taste, scent, and five o'clock shadow scraping her palm had turned her on.

“Okay?”

To her right, Steve rubbed his face. She sighed. “Out in the open. We had to hide out in the open.”

The impatience yielded to concern. “What happened?”

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit. She couldn't say it. Desperately, she appealed to Steve. He frowned at her. “You threatened me to make sure you could tell her first.” In that terrified of an angry woman way, he glanced between them. “So you go ahead and tell the woman who you're afraid of what happened.”

Emily's lips pursed. “I'm going to take that as a compliment.” Shifting into angry, she pinned Natasha under a glare that she felt nearly helpless under. Other people hadn't had this kind of power over Natasha in decades, and it did scare her, but it was something she was learning to live with. Having Emily in her life was worth it. She owed Emily an explanation.

“I kissed him.” She frantically spat out, then sucked in her lip and bit down hard, and looking away. “You kissed him?” Her tone was too calm.

Meek, she nodded.

“Out of passion?”

“What? No! It was the simplest way to deter attention and hide our faces.”

“Was it a good kiss?”

She glanced at Steve's nervous face. “I've had better.”

“Really?” He pouted.

She shrugged. He didn't need to know the physical effect he'd had on her.

“Aw, Steve. You must be out of practice. No ladies since defrosting?” Emily asked. “What's the matter, cold feet?”
He groaned. “Not for Natasha's lack of tryin-I mean she's always telling me to date, to date other women, who aren't her. The nurse. Natasha, tell her about the nurse.”

“Did you test her out for him?”

“Emily, I haven't cheated on you! Today was a special exception. I...” She glanced up, caught Emily smiling at her. It was a light, amused expression that was the exact opposite of what was expected. “You aren't angry. Why aren't you angry?”

“She's not angry?” Steve squeaked. “Oh, thank God.”

Confusing Natasha, yet setting her heart at ease, Emily laughed. “I'm afraid of a lot of things, but not of my vixen having love affairs behind my back. You kissed him to protect yourselves, and you'll probably flirt and kiss your way out of trouble again in the future.” She wiped at Natasha's lip, and it came away a little bloody. “Don't beat yourself up about it. I trust you.”

“But, you.” Threatening gaze returned and settled on Steve, Emily jabbing at his chest. “You keep your lips to yourself, do you hear me?”

He went a little pale. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Good. Now, weren't we heading someplace that wasn't full of people trying to kill you?” She sent Steve scurrying ahead of them, but hooked a finger in Natasha's pant loop. There was a hint of vulnerability in her eyes. It needed a quick, fierce embrace.

“You'll always be the other half of my together, Em.” The little crease between her eyes faded, and Emily's dark eyes shone. She linked their hands, jogged after Steve.

Across a lawn littered with brown leaves, they crunched up to the back door of a quaint townhouse. Steve knocked. They all glanced over their shoulders. Natasha was adjusting the little backpack on her shoulder when the door opened and an unfamiliar, surprised face looked them over. “Hey?”

“Sorry about this,” was Steve being humble as always. “But we could really use a place to lay low.”

The man's eyes shot around the neighborhood. “Yea. Of course.” He stepped back, opening the door wider. “Come in.”

“Thanks, Sam,” was Emily's addition as she pat his arm. How did they know each other? Wasn't this a friend of Steve's?

Sam nodded. He peered outside one more time before closing the door and drawing the blinds. “You guys look like shit.”

“You're a charmer.” Natasha snarked.

“I prefer to think of it as bluntly honest.”

She coughed up a laugh. “Fair enough.” He was alright. She turned her attention to the place, taking in the layout, the possible exits and weapons, and the details that told her more about their host. He was awfully clean for a bachelor. His protein powder was high quality. Who did his decorating though? It was appalling.

Steve was filling in his jogging buddy on the details of why they looked like shit, and Emily was inspecting Sam's fridge and cupboards. Over her shoulder, Natasha watched. There was mid-grade
coffee and bad tea. Em sighed, grabbed a bottle of beer, inspected the label, put it back. Apple juice was settled on.

“I've got clean towels in the hall closet.” Sam gestured down the hallway. “Two bathrooms. There's a first aid kit in the guest bath if anyone needs it.” His head canted. “I keep extra toiletries in the guest bath too if you don't want to smell like man.”

Grateful, Natasha nodded. “Thanks.”

She went to the closet, grabbed an ugly, not-quite-scratchy, blue towel and washcloth, slipped into the bathroom. She sighed at the cheap products not meant for curly hair. At least they didn't smell horrible. Too on edge, she kept the shower quick, just long enough to do a thorough scrub, and popped out. She slipped into the spare clothes that Em had picked up.

Tight undershirt, baggy tourist sweater, and plain jeans that stank like a department store. Perfect for suburbia if not her sinuses or fashion sense. Gun stuffed in her belt and hair in a towel, she went in search of Emily's bag that should have moisturizer and makeup in it. Emily handed it to her in the kitchen where she was talking with Sam. “Now that you're out, we're going to grab some stuff from my car.”

The two went out the back, and Natasha went in search of a mirror. She found one with good lighting in Sam's bedroom. Listening to Steve in the adjacent bathroom, she went through the motions of applying lotion and cosmetics. The easy routine that normally calmed her only brought up how easily things were hidden, how she'd been working for a corrupt organization all these years. She sat on the bed at the same time the shower shut off. Numb, she unwound the towel and patted her hair.

Her thoughts grew darker and more tangled. She nearly jumped at the sound of the bathroom door opening. Steam poured out.

“Hey.” Pulling a clean shirt on as he stepped from the foggy room, Steve sat in front of her, his eyes soft and concerned. Were her emotions all over her face again? Shit. “What's goin on?”

She paused the toweling of her hair and decided to talk. “When I first joined SHIELD, I thought I was working for the good guys. I guess I just traded in the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but,” she shook her head. “I guess I can't tell the difference anymore.”

Emily came back at that moment. “You're being melodramatic, aren't you, Nat?”

Hurt, she frowned.

Dropping the heavy bag she was carrying on the bed, she gave her a challenging expression. “You joined because Fury offered you a second chance, and you trusted him. You might have worked for SHIELD on paper, but you worked for Nick Fury, never for HYDRA.” Faith delicately touched her cheek. “And neither did I.”

“I'm gonna have to agree with her on this.” Steve put in. “We were all used. There's no doubt about that, and we all know that none of us would work for HYDRA.”

The reassurance of his trust in her felt really, really good. “Does this mean you forgive me for the hostage mission?”

Cap shrugged. “There are some things you could work on.”

She gave a compromising nod though she felt like hugging him.
Ziiip. Emily was opening a duffel. “You can start by filling magazines.” She pulled out a box of
bullets and empty rifle mags from the treasure trove of weaponry.

Jaw crashing to his chest, Steve poked in the bag, brought up a bandoleer of flash grenades. “One
of your stashes, Natasha?”

She shook her head, as surprised as he was.

Emily chuckled. “Donation from friends who're big on the being prepared for government takeover
thing.” Heavily, she sat on the bed. “Okay, I was actually making a delivery as payment for my
car, and my friends asked if I could do them a favor. They're the kind of people who like to party
hard and do stupid shit like raid a sheriff station. Given the insanity happening here, I went ahead
and took the armory off their hands.”

That's when Natasha noticed Em was shaking. Delayed shock. Wordlessly, she rearranged to hold
her. “Hey. We're okay.”

Breath caught. “I felt so helpless.”

So had she when she'd registered the missile about to drop on her and Cap's head at that bunker.
“We're okay, Em.”

Gingerly, Sam stepped into the room, two more duffels in his hands. The bed creaked under the
additional weight. What else had Emily's friends given her? For that matter, how many friends did
Emily have that Natasha and SHIELD didn't know about? They could come in handy.

“That's a pretty good skill you've got there, Emily.” There was a gentle expression on Sam's face.

Dark, watery eyes blinked up at him. “What?”

“Keeping it together until you're someplace safe.”

Her forehead dropped to Natasha's shoulder, and she grumbled something that Natasha sensed
needed a kiss. She pressed one to dark hair. Emily sighed.

“I'm going to make breakfast.” He paused. “If you guys eat that sort of thing.”

Standing, Steve nodded. “I'll help.”

Alone with Emily, Natasha held her a little tighter. “I'm glad you're here.”

Unintelligible muttering drifted up.

“No muttering allowed.”

“Wish I didn't break down at all.”

Now probably wasn't a good time to tell Emily that Natasha liked how it made her feel needed and
gave her the chance to comfort and protect. It was a thrill as addicting as kicking ass and had the
added bonus of making her feel human, normal, redeemable. “You're only human, Em.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N – It's International Women's Day. A day to remember those who fought for our civil liberties, who continue the fight, who keep pushing for equality in a misogynistic world. Together, we are strong.

Thank you, fighters and allies.

In honor of this day, I wanted to push this chapter out, and the editing was hasty. Hope it didn't detract. Let me know if I've got fixes to work on!
Waiting for Nat and the boys to break into a high-security facility and steal some badass tech-wings for Sam in their bid to go kidnap Pierce, Emily yawned through a dull fan fiction that she'd had high hopes for. Maybe too high? That she knew the author of the original series and was immensely biased to Laura's class of writing might've put the bar a little high for the fanfic author.

Yastreb smirked at the hot woman. She wud seduce her when she wanted but right now she was busy saivng the bus of crying kids. Yastreb blew a kiss. The fire roored around her, she jumped in, making sure to give the woman a sexy smir-

“Ugh. Okay. You need to learn to use descriptive phrasing. And stop using smirked every other line!” She railed at the author. “And what about spellcheck? Have you heard of spellcheck? Or comma splices?” Dropping the phone to a cup holder, her skull flopped to the headrest. “I spend too much time obsessing over grammar.”

She scowled. “No. I don't.” Again, she yelled at the phone, stabbing a finger at it, “You. You, native-English speaker-writer, need to fucking pay more attention in your fucking English class. Or literature or whatever. Or just have some fucking respect for yourself and stop using text shorthands in actual writing and get a dictionary.” She puffed. “All of the fucking above!”

From the car, she stormed and paced. Autumn leaves were kicked, and her jacket was pulled tighter against a chill wind. It pressed the uncomfortable flak vest even more into her soft place. She chafed at the damn thing that everyone had insisted she wear despite her non-combative position. It was stuffy and poked her armpits and rubbed her breasts. PMS-sensitive, they were not happy. She checked the time on her watch. Nat wasn't due back for another twenty minutes. Willing time to move faster, she stared at the expensive sport watch that Natasha hated. It had a compass, barometer, green night lighting, and had survived on her wrist since Afghanistan. Awesome piece of equipment. Kind of ugly, but she didn't care. It wasn't SHIELD-issued, so she wore it all the time.

There was even a tan line under it that she felt proud of. She hadn't worn a watch since college, since cell phones became a thing. Funny how she found herself craving things that didn't constantly put out or take in signals or need them to function. Director Fury had tried hard to get Emily to allow a tracking chip to be injected into her thigh when she'd first signed on. Agent Romanoff had argued for it too, citing her own implant. It had been absolutely unacceptable to Emily. No.

Tony had one, not because he wanted it. Banner couldn't because his green side didn't like it. Clint didn't. He'd refused given that he had a secret family stashed away on a peach orchard. That had been the argument that Emily had used to convince Nat to cut her own out. It hadn't been an easy win. Since she'd found a way to block the signal when she wanted, she felt it a security breach for the Black Widow not to be tracked.

But then, Clint and Emily had argued that the Black Widow was only a name. The spider in Natasha's head had been evicted. She would never go rogue again.

In typical Natasha-style, the woman had whipped out a sharp knife, lifted her shorts, sliced open her leg, and dug the chip out. Blade going through the chip into the wood bench, blood dripping down a pale thigh, and they'd gone swimming. Natasha was so damn beautiful.

She wished that she had pictures of her fox to look at. It was probably the hardest part of their relationship, the hiding it from the rest of the world part. No pictures of them as a couple existed.
Stupid Christmas cards with cheesy Emily and Natasha smiles would never grace mail boxes.

Fidgeting, she brought out her phone and thumbed Kevin's number. It went to voicemail. She left a brief hello, said that things hadn't changed much, but he should keep an eye on the weather anyway. Thumbing the end call, she grimaced. If the agents watching over him or Alan were HYDRA snakes...

Alan answered on the fourth ring. “Pussy Bait Shop, how can I hook you up?”

“Is that how you answer all unknown numbers?”

She could just see his smile. “Pretty much.” It was his personal, not the number he used for professional life, thankfully. The immature brat.

“No wonder you're still working at that crap job.” Nervous energy fading at the familiar exchange, she sagged against the car.

“Not all of us can have jobs glorious enough that our coworkers are supermodels.”

Watching a high-altitude jet leave a trail across the sky, “Maybe you should hurry up and get your business booming so it attracts classier women.”

“I might have to ask my investors for a little more to spend on advertising,” came the slightly serious response.

She considered her accounts. The legit and the hidden. Plenty, but, “What about word of mouth? It's the most powerful form of advertising there is.”

What sounded like nails being chewed on came through. He hummed. “True. There might be a few avenues that I haven't considered yet.”

Pride swelled in her chest. She'd call some of her contacts see if she could do a little networking for him. After this mess with HYDRA was sorted out. Or at least after they'd captured Pierce. Her mind tried to make a bird metaphor what with him being secure up on the top floor of the Triskelion, but that would have made parallels to Clint, which was totally uncool. “Good.”

“Speaking of, I need to get back to work.”

“Okay.”

“Love you.” He must be pretty worried about her to say it first. “Go kick some ass.”

“Love you back, and I will.”

A low beep said the call had ended. Overhead, the plane slid behind distant clouds. Another plane was cutting across the sky. Fast. Must be low. Was the military base doing flight drills or something? She fumbled for the pistol that Nat had insisted she carry. It was aiming in time for the plane, no. Not a plane.

A winged man dropped twenty feet away from her. Only old hesitation gave the man enough time to raise his hands, “Hey, Em. Whoa. It's me.”

Sam.

She knew about the wing-tech that they were there to steal, but seeing it in person. So suddenly... Holy shit. Too shocked, she let go, and the gun swung around her trigger finger by the guard.
“Holy shit.”

“Sorry bout that. Listen, your girlfriend needs extraction. Mind if I grab those flash grenades?” He gestured at the car.

“What went wrong?” Was out of her mouth even as she was popping the trunk.

“Not much.” Distant gunfire rattled. She yanked the bandoleer out, tossed it. “Someone recognized her.” He was reaching into the trunk. “Maybe I’ll take this too.” A smoke grenade. “Cap's on his way. I'll be back with Romanoff in a few minutes.”

In a mild roar, he took off. Jealousy drooled.

“HYDRA doesn't like leaks.” Sitwell, the pencil-pusher HYDRA snake, was saying. Of course not. Grateful that her friends had finally quit interrogating the shaved-headed bastard, Emily had withdrawn her hand to the safety of her lap and was staring out the window. Her brothers would definitely be targeted by Project Insight. How could even HYDRA justify the mass murder of anyone who might become a threat? What kind of Minority Report bullshit was this?

A big ass, matte black Hummer caught her attention. She kinda wanted it. It had a front grill guard, upgraded rims, nice tires, and dark rear windows. If it wasn't a gas hog, she'd have loved driving one for deliveries. Natasha was heckling the guys about something, but Emily was too intrigued by the Hummer driver. He was uber serious.

Their eyes met for a second, but then traffic blocked her view. Why were the fine hairs on her neck doing a panic dance?

Shink.

Emily blinked. There was a hole in her window.

“Sniper!” Sam yelled.

The car exploded. Or, that's what it felt like as hot liquid and fragments pelted Emily's face. Her body was jolted forward, seat belt digging into her, then the seat slamming into her body, forcing the breath from it. White washed over her vision.

Vaguely, she heard yells, felt herself pulled down, hands on her face. Her chest finally expanded enough for a proper lungful of air. She spat disgusting bits from her mouth. What the fuck?

She recognized the hot iron flavor. Oh. Oh gross. Her gag reflex clenched as her hand tried to reach her face to wipe at it. Why was she pinned? Her blurry gaze took in carpet, a leather jacket. Natasha was on top of her, pushing her into the cramped leg area. Gunfire was killing any chance of the ringing in her ears stopping soon.

Sam's driving was terrible. He was swerving all over the place, and her stomach said it was too much. Her soggy lunch came up, draping the carpet, soaking into her sweater.

Everything got worse. Jerking and rolling, she couldn't focus, could barely discern that the entire car was rolling before her head hit something.
Natasha wished, not for the first time, that she either had Emily's gift or that Emily healed fast like herself and Steve. “You're trying too hard to be like Clint,” she growled at the limp form beside her. But even Clint took injuries better than Em. She just wasn't designed to take a beating. Natasha was tempted to never let the woman go out without a full kevlar suit ever again. The vest had saved Em's life. Those goons in the Hummer had tried to put rounds through her chest. Good thing they hadn't been armor-piercing rounds.

Her aching back to the large wheel of a truck, she sighed. Bullets impacted the soft aluminum hull. She needed to move again, but her fractured patella did not want to carry Emily any farther. Shit.

“Romanoff!” Sam's yell, from her left. She caught sight of him in the reflection of a car's shiny paint job. He looked like hell.

“I don't suppose you can get over here to carry Em, can you?”

He coughed a laugh. “You don't want much.” Over the car hood he was crouching behind, he shot off half a mag before ducking and running toward her. Diving, he hit the pavement hard, rolling with a grunt. “Ow.”

“Cap still got the sniper's attention?”

“Yea.” Under his torn shirt, his own flak vest was scarred from impact. He pat it. “Thanks for the loan.”

She shot underneath the truck at too-close feet. A man dropped and grabbed at them, howling in pain. “Thank Emily.” Civilian screams surrounded them. Where the hell was Metro Police? It'd been at least ten minutes, and there wasn't a single siren or sign of uniforms. Yet, there was a news helicopter overhead.

How much more collateral damage was going to be allowed? She'd lay odds that Pierce was behind this delay in civilian assistance.

Damn that fascist bastard.

Police sirens finally echoed down the street. Two squad cars pulled into view. One exploded. Someone had a grenade launcher? Shit! She heard the telltale thunk of a second round before the following explosion. “Pick her up. Now!” Rising on adrenaline, she aimed for the grenade launcher.

It was a familiar figure. Broad-shouldered with a metal arm. The Winter Soldier. He flinched from her gunfire long enough for Sam get Emily a few yards away. Natasha barely dodged the explosion. Shrapnel opened her calf. “I'm not losing her to you.” She growled.

Her rifle clicked empty, and she didn't have a reload. Habit draped the weapon around her torso. She ran. Tried to. Her knee screamed, stiffening her leg, making her stumble, and the Winter Soldier was on her. A taser disk to his arm stalled him. She hobbled down the road, grinned at Cap running toward her over cars, jumping from a roof to collide with the assassin behind her.

Metal arm meeting vibranium shield made an invisible shockwave that brushed her shoulders and stabbed her ears. That settled that debate. The Winter Soldier was clearly enhanced. Metal arm alone, no matter how high-tech and badass could withstand that kind of impact. It was attached to mere flesh. No normal human shoulder and torso could survive Cap at full strength. Natasha hobbled faster.

“Hey.” Rasping, Emily's voice greeted her as she caught up with Sam. He had paused behind a
delivery van, pain vivid in his strained features. Road rash on his arms oozed. Unlike herself and Em, he'd been able to jump from the car before it'd been forced into a roll. He probably had some nasty bruising, maybe a fractured elbow or something.

“Hey.” Natasha managed to reply.

Eyes that didn't seem to quite be focusing aimed at her. “It was the Hummer, wasn't it?”

“Yea.” She glanced back at Steve's fight instead of looking at the congealing blood and brain matter, at the cuts from shrapnel and skull fragments on Emily's face. Why had Steve gone still? Why the fuck was he lowering his guard and staring at his opponent instead of pushing the attack while he was stunned?

“Bucky?” She barely heard Steve's whisper.

Bucky? Lt. James “Bucky” Barnes, one of the Howling Commandos who'd fought beside Steve during the war? He was dead.

She'd also thought Ivan Petrovich to be dead, but he hadn't been. He had found her in Prague. And he still wasn't dead. He was out there somewhere, hiding, probably plotting some new scheme to rebuild the glorious Soviet regime. One day, she was going to burn him alive.

Fingers touched her cheek. Writhing fire burned in her knee and sweet relief followed. Emily smiled through her own pain, switched her touch to Sam, who gasped, his eyes bugging out.

Natasha was checking to see if any of the goons were left standing when she saw armored SUVs and trucks approaching. SHIELD. Shit. “We need to move.”

“Cap needs backup,” argued Sam, pushing Emily's half-standing form to Natasha and checking the rounds on his pistol. The fight between the men had gotten one-sided. Steve wasn't fighting back.

“I don't suppose anyone called Tony?” Emily huffed.

Sparks flew off the metal arm, and dark, angry eyes shifted to their hiding spot. A punch from Steve drew his attention away. Natasha looked at Em. “Jarvis said that Pepper had given orders for them to not be disturbed for a solid two days unless the world was ending.”

“Didn't Project Insight count as an end-of-the-world scenario for him?”

She should have tried to call again. “After Jersey, I kind of forgot to try calling back.”

Emily fumbled for her pocket, but winced, a high-pitched whine following. Natasha gently pulled her sleeve out of the way. From hand to elbow, nasty bruising said Emily needed a doctor. Or at least, a sling, because her wrist was probably broken.

“I'll call h-”

“She's hurt and can't stand by herself!” Natasha snarled, though she was trying to gently lower Emily to the ground.

“Hands up and get down on the ground!” Full tactical gear and armor laden bodies were pointing heavy rifles at them. While Nat had been distracted by Emily's injuries, SHIELD teams had surrounded them. Her head swiveled. No. It wouldn't have mattered. By the time she'd seen the SHIELD vehicles approaching, it was too late. “Hands up!” Several agents were yelling, demanding physical submission.

“She's hurt and can't stand by herself!” Natasha snarled, though she was trying to gently lower Emily to the ground.
The leader's weapon lowered slightly. "Relax, team. If the Black Widow was going to fight back, half of us would be dead already."

The yelling ceased. Bodies stopped pressing closer. Grateful, Natasha nodded at the leader, Agent Fuller. They'd worked an op or two together. He was a good soldier. Smart. Not one to inflict unnecessary harm.

On their knees, Emily tried to raise both arms, but flinched. Partway, she held one hand. Shoulder damage? Collarbone? It took monumental self-control to not lash out at the agents putting old-school cuffs around Emily's wrists and making her cry. She forced herself see that the cuffs were loose. The agents were actually being gentle with her.

"Sorry, Sekhmet. We'll get a doc for you back at the base," one of them whispered in Em's ear.

Her own restraints solid metal, heavy, and completely binding, Natasha bit her lip. They hauled them, and the boys, to a prisoner transport. All but Emily got further restraints around their ankles that bound them to the truck's frame. Emily was given a sedative. Fabric restraints kept her upright as she sighed in relief and sank into painkillers.

"Thanks, Fuller." Natasha spoke under her breath.

His helmet twisted toward her, and he nodded before hopping out of the transport. Being kind and giving Em painkillers was totally unnecessary and might even be frowned upon by HYDRA superiors. He could be in serious trouble for being a decent human being. Natasha made a mental note to do something good for him if they survived.

No. When. They'd escape, and Emily would be fine. Nothing else was acceptable to consider.

Two other agents climbed in to silently guard them for the trip to the Triskelion. One of them was large, heavy with muscle. The other was petite, probably a woman. Taking out both of them would require surprise, speed, probably some sort of weapon.

Natasha glared at her restraints. She saw Emily watching her. Around the fear, pain, and drugs, she smiled. Ignoring the bite of the restraints, Natasha shifted so their hips and shoulders were touching. She closed her eyes. Her Widow's Bite had been taken, as had her knives and spare garrote wire. If Fuller's actions were an indication, maybe someone on the inside would help them. Hill was out there somewhere. Jarvis might forward the news broadcast to Pepper. Clint wasn't off the grid, just on vacation in California. Ther-


Sam leaned forward. "Who's Bucky?"

"My best friend."

Steve didn't exactly elaborate. Natasha gave the guy a bone. "They served in the war together."

Shock tightened Sam. "Seriously?"

"It was him." A tired breath. "He looked right at me and didn't even know me."

"How is that possible?" Sam argued. "It was like, seventy years ago, man."

Natasha pulled her eyes from Steve to roll them at Sam. Offended, he frowned at her.
“Zola.” The HYDRA scientist whose mind had been put into that giant server room where she and Steve had almost died yesterday. One of the seeds of HYDRA's infestation of SHIELD, housed right in SHIELD's first base of operations. Right where Steve had become Captain America. “Bucky's whole unit was captured in forty-three. Zola experimented on them. Whatever they did helped Bucky survive the fall. They must have found him.”

“None of that is your fault, Steve.” She immediately berated him. It wasn't, and he didn't need to beat himself up over it.

“Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.”

Beside her, Emily hummed. “You've got us now.” Her drugged grin was dopey. “And we've got a little experience in cleaning out people's heads.”

Hope glittered at her. “Yea. I guess so.”

Soft quiet settled.

Natasha's leg chose that moment to remind her that it had a nasty gash in it. She winced. Sam noticed.

“We need to get a doctor here.” Sternly, he was addressing the guards. Nat gave a little shake of her head to Emily. “If we don't put pressure on that wound, she's gonna bleed out here in the truck.”

Not likely. It wasn't that bad, not for her, but she wasn't going to say anything. A doctor could be a chance at escape. Even if the guards recognized Agent Sekhmet under the dried gore, it was obvious that Em wasn't in any shape to be healing.

Making him flinch, a tazer baton was whipped out. The guard leaned forward threateningly. Bitch. Wh-

The baton was rotated down and jabbed into the larger guard right before a boot snapped up to beat the helmeted skull into the wall. He grunted and dropped. Baton stowed away, the petite guard dragged her helmet off, revealing mussed, dark hair and familiar, stern features. Deputy-director Maria Hill in pretty, pink lipstick.

“Ugh. That thing was squeezing my brain.” She frowned at the headgear before huffing and brushing her hair back. Sam was looked at, then she focused on Steve. “Who's this guy?”

Natasha was tempted to kiss her. Hill was a capable agent and would get Emily to safety. “Someone I hope is going to escape with us?” Steve smiled.

“Sam Wilson, ma'am. I fight with Cap.”

“Right.” Efficient as always, Hill took the vetting and set about unlocking Steve's restraints. She handed over the key for him to finish while she started cutting an escape route in the floor. Natasha took over holding Emily up when they unbuckled her, and she reveled in the feel of Em in her arms. The locker with Sam's Falcon-tech, their phones, and her Widow's Bite was broken into. Damn it was good to have her old friends back on her wrists. Almost as good as holding her love.

Horns blared, and the trucks stopped. Steve dropped down first, caught Emily, and Natasha hissed as she burned herself on the hot metal. She cursed.

Late afternoon traffic provided excellent cover for their escape. Once at the sidewalk, no one
looked twice at them. Okay, they did. At Hill's tac-gear and the compact gear in Sam's arms and their battered faces. But, no one stared or excitedly pulled out phones.

“Get in.” Hill snapped as a van pulled up.
Doped-up Idiot

At the ridiculous irony of life, Emily grunted. Nick Fury was alive, had faked his death. Steve's best friend, thought dead for decades, was alive and apparently working as an assassin for HYDRA. She was alive too, but everything fucking hurt. Broken wrist, bruised ribs, pelvis, and spine, and sprained ankle. Don't forget the additional minor bruises and cuts and scrapes. The cuts in her face from Sitwell's fucking exploding skull. Fucking explosive rounds. Fucking sniper.

The best part about the day was that the doctor who Fury trusted had given her really, really good drugs.

And that they'd escaped capture. They'd managed to keep the wings that she hoped Sam would teach her to use some day. They'd learned that not everyone in SHIELD was a psychotic HYDRA agent. Like Agent Fuller. Hopefully, there were a lot more like him still at the Triskelion. Maybe even some below. There was still a chance to stop Project Insight. Her brothers were still okay. And they were going to stay okay, she told herself. The agents assigned to them were good people, vetted by Natasha herself.

There was decent tea in the bunker, the old dam, that they were hiding in.

Propped up in her bed, she sipped at the comforting drink. She eyed the director, and he eyed her back. Huge ass bunker, and the two patients were stuck within spitting distance of each other while everyone else was busy taking care of themselves before regrouping. “She should've been at the top of your list of people to trust.”

Eye narrowed, Fury grunted. “Because she acts like a teenager around you? Romanoff has been a spy longer than I've been alive. Tell me how I was supposed to trust someone like that.”

“Because both Clint and I trust her around our families.”

“Her loyalty to the both of you does not automatically make her trustworthy for the rest of us.”

She took another mouthful, let the honey-sweetened herb infusion calm her. It was a valid point. Didn't make her hate it any less. “You can hang out with your lacerated spinal column for a few more days.”

His expression broke, and he laughed. Drug-encouraged giggles joined his humor.

Boots on concrete preceded Hill. “You got him to laugh.”

“She's punishing me for not trusting Romanoff right away.” His grin didn't fade.

Hill leveled a Natasha-worthy glare at her. Emily drank more tea. “We need every soldier we've got to make sure we win, Sekhmet.”

Too tired, drugged, and righteous to be intimidated, she gave an apathetic yawn. Color rose in the agent’s cheeks. Emily returned her gaze to Fury, whose lips were still twisted into a one-sided grin. “You are a hard ass, aren't you, Agent Sekhmet?”

“Flattery won't help your cause.”

“What cause would that be?” Natasha had appeared. Heavy footsteps behind her.
“Your wife needs to heal the director so he can help stop Project Insight.” Hill scolded.

Sitting on Emily's bed, Natasha casually put herself between them. “You know, everyone else calls her my girlfriend.”

“Please,” was the dismissive retort. “You training Sekhmet was your dating phase. You're way past casual relationship, and no one needs to see a ring to know that.”

Nat held Hill's gaze, but Hill didn't flinch, merely upped her expression to a challenge.

Feeling giggles in her chest, Emily whispered in a sing-song, “Mon petit renard rouge.”

Annoyed green eyes rolled to glare at her. Emily giggled louder. Her adorable fox was holding back a smile. “You're high.”

Glorious painkillers. “Yes.”

Natasha turned to Fury. “You sure you want this doped-up idiot fiddling around with your insides right now?”

His expression more serious, “Would you trust her to take care of you in this state?”

“Yea,” sighed out.

“I preferred the flattery, you one-eyed old goat.” Emily complained. The agents stiffened. Fury went a little blank, and she giggled. “Someone wheel his cranky ass over here, cause I'm not getting up.” She pouted at her empty mug. “And bring me more tea?”

Ensconced in the throne of pillows that Nat and Steve had carefully created for her, Emily watched monitors covered in camera feeds around the dam and news reports. Tried to. Shortly after the crew had left to go take on SHIELD and HYDRA, the doctor had given her a fresh injection of painkillers. Yet, she was too keyed up to be able to relax and sink into the oblivion of drugged sleep.

And the fact that she was tied into the team's radio communications helped keep her alert. The team had entered the Triskelion. The guys and Hill were taking over the comm room and systems. Natasha was the only one running silent. In disguise as one of the World Security Council members, her mission was getting close to Pierce and gaining access to SHIELD's main servers. The world needed to know about HYDRA. She was going to expose its existence.

Seeing Nat in that old-lady skirt-suit and wig, then watching the fake face shimmer into existence was the most disturbing thing that Emily had seen in a while. Overlaying the image with knowing Natasha actually looked her age was even weirder. She was in love with an old woman.

She giggled to herself.

Cap was making a speech, presumably over the intercom system of the Triskelion, explaining the disease within SHIELD and everything else wrong. He asked the agents to make a choice. To do the right thing.

How many of the people she'd come to know would turn out to be traitors?

Like Steve's old friend? No. Steve had said Bucky hadn't recognized him, had seen real confusion in the Winter Soldier's eyes as he hesitated instead of shooting Steve while his guard was down.
She thought over the question of whether she could help. Could she return Bucky's memory? Would it be similar to Natasha's problem? The one that Banner apparently thought Emily couldn't have accomplished alone, that Natasha had to have been fighting the conditioning. What if Bucky couldn't be helped because he wasn't hurt?

What would Steve do if Bucky couldn't remember that he wasn't their enemy?

Her thoughts drifted. If Banner were here, the battle would've been over by now. That damn doctor and his green problem. But he was in South Korea, helping Dr. Cho design a mimic of her healing “cradle” for installation at the Avengers Tower.

“What did you think about the demonstration?” Banner asked, the busy Seoul traffic blurring past them on their damp walk to the hotel.

*Under her umbrella, Emily hummed. The machine was a work of brilliance. It took DNA samples, then rapidly created real tissue to replace what was damaged. Anything. Epidermis layers, bone, membranes, ligaments, blood, even entire organs. Everything tailor made for the specific patient. No chance of rejection. Simple surgery was even in the thing’s repertoire.*

*A minor miracle had been today's demonstration. The patient had been victim of a spider bite. Nectrotizing venom had eaten away a third of the skin on the man's forearm and a good deal of the muscle underneath. The wound had been cleaned of necrotic flesh by sterile maggots and all that remained was a mostly healed hole. Some sort of liquid, maybe an acid, to open up the tissues. A scalpel cut a tied blood vessel to allow for the newly-created one to connect be inserted. When the pressure on the old vessel had been released, blood had flowed. All of that in less than twenty minutes. Almost as fast as Emily.*

Emily had gasped. Luckily, Dr. Helen Cho and team thought it was a normal reaction to their machine, didn't think anything of Emily's touch on the man's other arm. The body didn't know the difference between self-created and artificial.

*The one big problem with the tech was that whatever it sampled, it would recreate, including genetically diseased tissue, infections, cancer.*

*“It was incredible. The man's body absolutely thought the new stuff was part of itself. Cho was right, anaphylactic shock and rejection are impossibilities.”*

*“For advancements in safe organ replacement alone, the implications are tremendous.” This was probably the best part about spending time with Banner. They could have an entire conversation in proper medical terminology without Emily having to explain terms like necrotic. Natasha usually understood, but even her spy lexicon had limits. It was nice to be around someone with a wider medical vocabulary than herself.*

*“Except that if the machine samples DNA from diseased heart tissue, it'll build a diseased heart.” She went on.*

He nodded. “Dr. Cho did say she needed to work on the sampling and screening. Wasn't her endgame to be able to sample from anywhere on the body to get healthy DNA?”

*“Yea. But, the tech to read heart schematics from a sample of ass flesh isn't there yet.” Okay, so she didn't always speak in medical terminology. Sometimes a little creative wording was good for the soul.*

*Chuckles came from Banner. “Tony could probably figure something out.”*
“If Cho would let a Stark have access to her patents.”

“Fortune, what mission did Fury send you with?”

She stopped walking to look at him. “He wanted me to steal her designs.”

His features grew hard.

“I told him I wouldn't do it.”

Mouth opening, he blinked rapidly.

“The day that I met Fury, I told him I wouldn't follow orders that I think are wrong.” She went on, “So, the letters of my mission are to observe and report if the tech is safe for human use. Anything else is on my terms.”

“And have you decided what your terms will be?”

She watched a young girl in bright, green and pink leggings rush past. “It'd be nice for SHIELD operatives to have Cho's tech. Hell, I'd like it on our quinjet for when I can't heal myself. I want to convince Cho to contract her work to SHIELD, without her giving the specs away.”

Water was splashed on her from a passing car before Banner stopped gaping at her. She sighed down at her soaked skirt and shoes.

“I may have misjudged you, Fortune.”

Her gaze shot up.

His sad, dark eyes were contemplating her. “You and Romanoff both.”

Yelling from the radio jerked her from her doze. The boys were already on the carriers? Sam was under attack, on his way to his target, whereas Steve was on his way to the second.

Fingers twitching, “Wish I could be there, guys.” Not being able to stand or use a sniper rifle had kept her bedridden. Natasha had seemed pleased. Damn woman, always trying to keep her safe.

An arm held to his chest with a sling to keep his collarbone from being stressed, Fury had given her an understanding expression. She'd barely had the mental clarity and energy to ease the swelling in his spinal cord and fully repair the vertebrae protecting it. Other broken and split bones had merely been downgraded to serious fractures. His liver had gotten a pat. The lung had been stroked. He'd sighed in relief even though the remaining pain had been obvious.

Having about as much painkillers in his system as Emily, it was astonishing that Fury could stand, let alone anticipate piloting an aircraft and waving a gun around. Tony was going to be sorry he missed seeing Fury in action. He and Pepper had called, saying they were on their way, but they were six hours out. They wouldn't be able to help with the mission. If it was successful, they would be able to help with the fallout. Round up HYDRA agents. Decommission the Insight carriers.

They would need someone like Pepper to help with the political backlash. She had a way with the press. Hell, she had experience with the press that neither herself, Nat, or even Fury had. Tony didn't count. And Steve was a soldier; he could get away with stone-face or blushes. They'd paint him as badass hero or adorable hero.

Her mug of tea was empty again. She wanted soup.
Some spicy, chunky, creamy soup. Maybe that new place that had opened up a few blocks from Natasha's apartment had good soup. Would it deliver to...

The radio had gone static. Its piercing fuzz killed her soup daydream. “Not cool, radio.”

“What is that noise?” The doc grumbled.

“Radio died.”

Dr. Lopanski went pale under his grey beard. “Oh.” A professional mask hid his worry, and he turned to her with a doctor's smile. “How're you feeling? Did I give you enough painkiller?”

His mask was good, but nowhere near Nat or even Clint's level. “Got any crutches around here?”

Quietly, he watched her fidget with the sturdy, loaded handgun that Natasha had slid under the blankets for Emily. Just in case. “Lack of radio contact doesn't necessarily mean t-”

Emily flung pillows and blankets out of her way. “If you don't have crutches, help me up. I need to see.”

“They'll get the job done.” He returned.

She swayed as she threw her legs over the side. Determined to get up despite the drugs, she scowled at him. “Help or move.”

“What are you doing?” The surviving council member asked.

Pierce sighed as though Natasha was a petulant child who hadn't learned better yet. “She's disabling security protocols and dumping all our secrets onto the internet.”

“Including HYDRA's,” was her sing-song reminder.

“And SHIELD's. If you do this, none of your past is gonna remain hidden, not Budapest, not Osaka,” he paused, “Not the childrens ward.”

Screams echoed in her memory, and her fingers slowed. Her gaze flit to the smiling bastard.

“Are you sure you're ready for the world to see you as you really are?” Pierce was trying that grandfatherly care he was so good at on her. “Are you ready for Emily to see who you are?”

It made her angry enough to think clearly. He only knew a fragment of her history; not even SHIELD officially knew she was older than thirty. Only Fury, and he had sworn to keep it out of the files. Pierce wouldn't even know the worst of her crimes.

Emily already knew what she really was, so did the Bartons. Well, not the kids. Shit. The thought pained her. She couldn't stand the idea of Cooper or Lila being afraid of her. But if HYDRA was allowed to keep on as it was, they might not live long enough to learn about Natasha's past. That wasn't acceptable. Whether Emily forgave her for exposing her and putting her brothers in danger didn't matter. It couldn't. HYDRA had to be stopped. She was able to meet his gaze with a calm one of her own. “Are you?”

She had to give it to him; he wasn't easily deterred. He kept on, trying to convince her to not cripple seventy years of carefully plotted world takeover. She considered throwing a taser charge at him. No. It'd take precious seconds that she needed to override the security protocols, in addition the
ones she was wasting on silent monologue. Pushing away her thoughts, she focused on the job.

Overhead, the sky was exploding. Even from half a mile away, Emily felt the hot breeze of the Insight carriers' death. Leaning heavily on Lopanski, she watched them rain fire on the Potomac and half of D.C. They stared together. One of the carriers slow-motion-crawled into the Triskelion. How many people, HYDRA and innocent were dying today?

“I thought the plan was to dismantle the project?” Lopanski asked.

Emily looked up at him. “Cap must've changed his mind. That...” she trailed off, yanked her gun out at an approaching figure.

Tall, dark-haired, massive shoulders. Metal arm. The Winter Soldier. Gun muzzle pointing at him, she felt the doctor gasp and stiffen. The assassin stopped a few yards away. Arms at his sides, shoulders relaxed, and soaking wet, he looked confused. He was clearly unarmed. Tired. If he had fought with Cap and was thrown from that carrier, he was probably injured too.

Not even Steve could've taken that kind of explosion without a bruise. Slowly, she lowered her gun.

“Bucky?” She whispered at the man staring at them.

He twitched, a scared puppy ready to run.

The gun in her hand was shoved out of sight, and the motion was stared after. “Do you recognize the name Sekhmet?”

“Yes,” sounded almost like a question. His entire demeanor was timid, not threatening at all, not the calculating Winter Soldier. He looked like Alan after a bad fight with mom.

Carefully, she pushed at Lopanski and thankfully, he didn't fight her. He stepped back. “I'm Sekhmet.” Holding out a hand, she hobbled a few steps closer.

Eyebrows drew together. “I know.” He looked over his shoulder. “Captain America fell into the river. I pulled him out. You should go help him.”

“Doc, go to Cap. If it's really serious, come back for me.” Lopanski stalled. “Go. I can stand by myself for a few minutes.”

“Be careful, Sekhmet.” He ran the way Bucky had come.

Emily focused on Bucky. “You're hurt too. Let me help you.”

Pained eyes stared back. “Why would you help me?”

“Cap once told me that I was a lot like his best friend. Anyone that important to him is important to me.” Her ankle was wobbling, and she bit her tongue.

Bucky continued to stare at her. Silently, yet not without telling her things. He was conflicted. The day the conditioned Black Widow had held a gun to Emily's face mirrored the moment. She waited. Smoke from the crashes was being blown their direction, and she coughed, the movement making everything twinge with pain.

Her ankle gave out.
Instead of mud, her face smacked into wet leather. Bucky eased an arm around her. The metal arm. It was surprisingly flexible instead of the rigid thing she'd been expecting. “Thanks.”

“I should have killed you.”

She looked up at dark eyes that were a lot like her brothers'.

“I did not.”

The skin around his eyes trembled. Slowly, she started to reach for bare skin.

“They wiped my memories, but most always come back. I remember the first time I met the Black Widow.” Her hand was almost to his bicep, and he gave it a glance. “And I remember the fight yesterday.” As she grasped his cool flesh, “But I can't remember who Bucky was.”

Bruising everywhere. Muscle, bone, internal organs. Fractures. Strained organ membranes. A little internal bleeding. Nothing a man with serum in his veins wouldn't shake off in a week or so. If he got plenty to eat and good rest. “The mind is a funny thing.” His was all sorts of shadowy and full of missing pathways. Maybe a mild concussion. “The first time they wiped you must've been before they gave you the serum.”

“What serum?”

It felt a little different than Cap. “The one HYDRA stole. The one that made Steve into Captain America.” She left her hand where it was without fiddling with anything yet. “The one the Russians got their hands on, or its design, something, because a variation of it is in Natasha's blood too.”

“Natasha?”

“The Black Widow.”

A little nod. “She is old. Like me.”

“Yea. Want me to take care of the internal bleeding?”

Had his eyes gotten darker? “You're offering me a choice?”

She nodded.

“What do you want in exchange?”

“Free of charge.”

“What if I had killed Captain America?”

She tensed, her gaze shooting to the raging fires. If he had... she sighed. She'd always have a soft spot for scared little boys. “He'd want me to.”

At length, he nodded. “The worst, and I'll leave.”

“Okay. It's going to hurt, so, uh, don't kill me for not warning you.” She started with the membranes around the organs. If those failed, he'd be in a world of hurt. Unexpected pain blossomed in her own sides. The metal arm was tensing around her, and she yanked her hand back to push at the metal, trying to stop the constriction while hot tears flooded down her face. Abruptly, the metal retreated, was replaced by the softer human arm. She coughed as she was
lowered to the ground.

Barely, she managed to grab Bucky before he could run. Stubborn maternal instincts wouldn't let him leave until she was finished helping him.

“Hold your horses, I'm not done,” panted out.

Bucky frowned at the refreshed grip on his arm, frowned up at the sound of approaching helicopters.

Feeling her energy drain, and her focus going with it, she barely managed to knit frayed blood vessels. “That's enough. Save your energy, Sekhmet. Your captain needs it.”

She caught her fingers around his as Bucky rose. “I can try to help with your memories if you want.”

Uncertainty peered down at her.

“Call it repayment for saving Steve, if you need to.” Her eyes unfocused with sudden exhaustion. “Open offer, no expiration.” Sagging to the ground, “Find me when you're ready.”

The choppers were close enough to pull her blurry vision up. She felt more than saw Bucky run.
Fallout

All of SHIELD's files had been released. Every. Single. One. Including those on Emily, her gift, and her brothers. Natasha fidgeted under her love's harsh gaze. How did Emily have the mental clarity under that dosage of drugs, let alone the energy to stare at her like that? “It was the right thing to do.”

Emily closed her eyes as her face drew tight. “I'm going to have to get a new identity and a new place to live. My brothers too. They won't like uprooting their lives because of me.”

A desperate plea rushed out, “Please don't hate me.” Despite her internal bravado at the Triskelion, she couldn't take it if Emily never forgave her. “Please.”

Eyelids flew apart. Emily's arms shot out, carefully folding Natasha against her. “I don't hate you. I'm fucking pissed at you, and scared for us, but I don't hate you.”

“Even if something happens to your brothers because of it?”

Trembling raced through Emily, and she yanked a phone from her pocket, pecked out a number, held it to her ear. “My gift is out.”

Natasha didn't hear the response.

“No, Kev. It's out on the fucking internet with everything about us.” Dark eyes shifted to Natasha angrily. “Everything. All of my employer's secrets got dumped for the world to see.”

Taking the hint, Natasha started to withdraw. Emily's arm tightening on her waist was a surprise. “Yea. Including her.”

She watched Emily's face, visually traced the tension making her seem older than she was. Moisture was collecting in the corners of her eyes.

“I'm sorry.”

The pulse in her neck picked up.

“You call mom. I'll call Alan and Lizzie. Total fallout plan, Kev. Get out of there within the hour.” She swallowed. “I love you. And don't forget to leave your phone and disable your car's GPS.”

For the next two similar calls, Emily kept a tight hold on Natasha despite the pain it obviously caused her.

“Lizzie, I don't care if you have to drag him by the nose hairs, get yourself and your idiot fiance out of town for a few days.” A growl. “Tell him you're pregnant or something.”

Emily didn't say anything to Natasha as she finished, opened up the phone's case, took out the battery and SIM card, destroyed the latter. Silently, she held onto Natasha, dragged her over to her backpack, took another phone out. She powered it on and opened an encrypted messaging program. One-handed, she sent out a dozen texts to ID's that Natasha could only assume were people she knew from her previous occupation. This phone she didn't destroy. Natasha had never seen a reason to report its existence to SHIELD and should presumably be safe given that it was a prepaid device.
Several responses came within seconds. Emily's shoulders relaxed. “We’ll meet up with Alan and Kevin in Oklahoma City. A buddy there who does ID’s will hook us up.”

A knot that Natasha had felt growing popped. Emily was including her in escape plans, was telling her where her brothers would be. Natasha wasn't going to be left behind or shut out from Emily's life. She found that she'd stopped breathing and sucked air in. “You're taking me with you?”

“You better still be watching my back, Natalia.” Emily growled. “Because I've got yours.”

She gave Emily a tender kiss, willing every ounce of love, support, and affection she had into the embrace. “Always, Emiliushka.”

Emily smiled at Steve over the secure video chat. “Glad you're alright.”

“Don't feel guilty that you didn't take care of all my injuries, Em. I can handle a broken leg for a few weeks, and Pepper says this is better for the press anyway.” His blue eyes looked away. “And I'm glad you spent some of your energy on Bucky. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

“I have an idea,” was her soft reply.

Feeling a warm presence before the camera showed Natasha behind her, Emily had to remind herself of her injuries before dipping her head back for a kiss. Hands lightly settled on Emily's chair, and Natasha bent forward. She spoke confidently, “He'll show up eventually.”

The question unspoken was would it be Bucky or the Winter Soldier?

Steve nodded. “Thanks, guys.”

“Before you go, Steve,” Natasha spoke quickly. Green shot to Emily, then back to Steve. “Get Tony to design some lightweight armor for Emily.”

“What?” Emily barked. She could tell by Steve's expression that she had already lost this fight, and she silently cursed.

“Don't look like that, Em. I have a shield, for Pete's sake,” was Steve's huff. “Tony has his iron man suit. I kinda wish I'd had something for that last fight.” He grimaced as he shifted on Sam's couch. “And I'm sure you'd like something more comfortable than the flak vest you complained about.”

Her still-tender boobs agreed. The bullets that the vest had stopped might not have pierced her flesh, but they had left enormous, painful bruises.

“Please?” Whispered in her ear. Natasha was biting her lip, knowing she was treading on thin ice, that Emily remained angry at her about the file dump.

She looked around at the Oklahoma City warehouse that Jerry was letting them stay in. The scent of growing pot plants was heavy on the air. In exchange for a little manual labor and the security that came incumbent with Natasha's presence, they could stay as long as they wanted. Watering plants and keeping the idiots employed by Jerry working instead of smoking was easy enough. When would the guy ever get decent help? It was amazing the poundage he managed to get out of
his crops with the half-ass effort put into them.

Alan was having fun learning about the trade, and Kevin was probably writing a psych paper on the experience. And honestly, it was nice hanging out with her brothers like this. It was cool to see them and Natasha interacting without secrets. Without masks. And having Natasha in Emily's old world was fun too, seeing Natasha actually stumble in a field she knew next to nothing about, having her surrounded by siblings who spoke in their own language sometimes. The language of long-association, of love and constant bickering, competing, and teasing, of absolute trust.

Natasha was shy.

Such cuteness had managed to make her forget how angry she was over the past few days. Like now. Wearing armor would make her feel silly, but she could admit that she wasn't a fan of injuries, that she wasn't a super badass like the rest of the Avengers and could use a little extra protection. She sighed at Natasha's pleading expression. “Okay, fine.”

Natasha's expression was sinking even further into adorable when Alan's voice called across the room. “What'd you just get wrangled into, Em?”

“Alan, want to meet Captain America?” She grinned toothily at Steve, daring him to try and escape the fan worship she was pushing on him.

All four sets of ID's and passports were beautiful. The bank accounts were clean. Even the social security numbers were legitimate. Whoever this “guy” of Emily's was, they had Natasha's respect. Totally worth the hefty sum that had been paid.

“How did you manage to get that much cash together so fast?” Without flying to wherever her private stashes were?

Emily paused from her inspection of the vac-sealed pounds she was prepping for transport. “Jerry fronted it to me. And technically, it wasn't all cash. Only a third. The guy was pretty amendable to bartering. It's amazing what you can get for twenty pounds of premium indoor bud. And,” she shrugged. “Twenty keys of other stuff.”

“What?”

“Uncut Colombian coke.”

Natasha started, actually stunned. “I thought you didn't work with that.”

“I don't. But people I know do, and it got us those ID's.”

Three weeks in Emily's world had been eye-opening for Natasha. She'd known, on an intellectual level that Emily had worked in the criminal underworld, that she had a network of contacts within it, that she knew how to move large amounts of money around. But the ease with which Emily walked among people who Natasha bristled at, the respect shown her had reminded Natasha that there was a lot she didn't know about Emily. Her admiration had grown immensely. And her attitude toward the world of cannabis dealings was changing as well.

The sheer generosity of Jerry, allowing strangers to stay at the place he was growing pot, of the others who had cooked dinner for them in homes, introduced them to children, loaned them cars and offered help for anything they might need... These weren't the stereotypes of drug dealers that Natasha was used to. Most were fairly tame. Shrewd business acumen, eccentric personalities,
large amounts of petty cash, some paranoid habits, and incredible stories to share, but otherwise decent people.

And Emily could get them to move eighty grand worth of cash and product in one week to get government-grade fake identifications with absolutely no collateral except her word.

Fury had no idea what kind of resource he'd had under his nose. “You're incredible, Em.”

A hand waved the compliment away. “I pulled in favors.” She huffed, sinking back into the ripped armchair. “Running pretty dry on those and good luck too. I just got lucky that Keystone had ten keys of good coke on hand to loan me.” She made a face. “Hate helping that trade, but,” her eyes closed, and she didn't continue.

“Sometimes you have to deal with the devil?”

Sharply, her eyes opened. “I already told you I forgive you, dammit.”

“Em, I-”

“Come here.” Aggressive, commanding Emily was always alluring, yet insecurity kept Natasha rooted to her chair “I need a nap. Take me to bed.” Tenderness softened her, lifted her arms. “I could use some cuddling from my little red fox.”

That, she absolutely could not say no to. And she enjoyed it when Emily let her carry her. They were halfway to the office they'd claimed as a bedroom when Kevin came in from outside stinking of cigarette smoke. His laughter was easy as he smiled at them. “Jesus, Em. You always did like the strong ones.”

“You can't compare them.” Bitterness laced her tone.

“Sure I can. I like Natasha way better.”

They must be talking about Emily's ex. The woman who Emily never mentioned.

Kevin looked right at Natasha with a grin wide enough to show a silver-capped tooth that Em must not have been around to fix for him whenever it had happened. “Go argue my point for me, would you?”

Returning his friendly smile, she put herself and Emily back on the path to their air mattress. She carefully lowered Emily to the bed. A yank later, and she found herself sprawled across Em, having barely avoided collision with the multitude of injuries.

A grin of mischief was aimed up at her. “Hey.”

Natasha tried to arrange herself more to the side of Emily, but she was held tight where she was. Propping herself on an elbow, she studied Emily's expression. Her mischief was hiding something. “Want to talk?”

Shadowed eyes flitted away, and she sighed. “I don't know what to do about Kev and Alan. I've torn them away from their lives, and they want to go back to them.”

A dozen years ago, Natasha could have walked away from any cover, any apartment, any job without a backward glance. Five years ago, and she still could have. Almost. If she could still visit the Barton family. Now? Now, she could almost empathize with the brothers. She missed her NYC apartment. She liked her place in D.C. and Emily living with her, the friends they both had there.
Walking completely away from her job? She had, in a manner, but she wanted to work with Clint and Steve and the others again. If she had to be a new person, she knew that she could still keep in contact with the people she loved because they could take care of themselves.

“Are their lives worth fighting for?” Slipped from her before she'd finished considering her thought.

Emily's expression hardened.

Natasha started to retract her statement, but it was a fair question. It was what she had been thinking. What scared her about it was Emily's reaction. “If they want to go back to them, knowing the risks, is it really your decision whether they do? They're adults, Em.”

“You know just how to piss me off.” Despite the ire of her statement, fingers remained tightly curled into Natasha's pants, kept them together.

“If you wanted easy, you picked a terrible person to be the other half of your together,” was her dry retort.

Emily leaned up and kissed her, slowly drew Natasha down with her. “The agents who were watching over them, did you know that one of them told me she used to be HYDRA?”

She whipped her head back to stare. “What?”

“But because you were such a role model for her, she decided to change teams and protect Kev instead of taking him hostage.”

The woman had once been MI6. Recruited by Natasha herself seven years ago after a bad mission had forced the UK to renounce Agatha and leave her without home or country to return to. Had she been HYDRA even then?

“She wants to keep doing her job if we'll let her.”

“Em,” groaned out. “She could still be HYDRA and waiting for a more opportune moment to use him and you or me.”

“Kevin trusts her.”

“He probably has a crush on her.”

Emily grinned. “Yea.” Her hands started to wander, sliding up Natasha's back, unhooking her bra and sliding back down. They came back up, pushing fabric with them until Natasha was bare from the waist up. Lightly, she scratched the exposed skin. “I might trust her too.”

Crooning at the way her skin buzzed, “Might?”

Kisses feathered her collarbone. “Well, I believed her when she said she didn't think Project Insight and other such HYDRA ideas were how the world should be protected.”

Later, she would do her own interrogation of the turncoat. Just to be sure. For now though, she enjoyed the feel of lips tracing up her neck. Her brow creased at the feel of a pained twitch from Emily. Natasha gently pushed her away. “I thought you said you were tired?”

At the suggestion, a yawn appeared. Emily's eyes watered at the strength of it, and when it finished, the depth of her exhaustion was clear in her eyes, the bags under them, the unhealthy hue
to her skin. Her entire frame drooped back into the mattress, pulse sluggish and breath equally so. “I don't wanna nap in my bra.”

“Why do you keep wearing one when you can't even put it on alone?”

“My brothers are around!”

Natasha had the restricting fabric and Emily's sweater off. Their pants quickly followed, and she rolled blankets around their mostly bare forms. She cuddled Emily into her side so her injuries could have relief. “The commercial world and its marketing has made bras a ridiculous necessity.”

“Says the woman with a lingerie closet,” grumbled into her chest.

An overstatement. Only one section of her closet and a dresser was dedicated. “Liking the way fabric looks on breasts is an entirely separate argument. You don't need to wear a bra; even when you run, Em. It's not like they bounce enough to hurt. The idea of only one shape, which is the actual purpose of bras, being acceptable is asinine.” And fearing a lack of clothing was a dangerous weakness. One she sometimes found herself prey to. She hated it.

“How many boob-fads have you lived through?”

“Enough to have formed my own opinion.”

One of her breasts was cupped. “Eighty and her giant boobs are still firm and perky.”

As always, the panic of knowing she'd outlive Emily made her flinch.

“Quit worrying about it, little fox. We've got years still.”

And, as always, it was hard to argue with an adorable Emily wrapped around her. She threaded fingers through dark hair.

“I'll tell the boys to go home if that's what they want. Agatha can keep protecting Kev; I'll find a way to pay her and the others.”

Natasha sucked in a lip, released it. “Will you let me help with the money?”

Emily frowned. “I'm not exactly poor.”

“I want to help keep your family safe. Lizzie too.”

Wide yawning replied.

She kissed Em's brow. “We'll talk about it later. Close your eyes.”

Almost immediately after her lashes fluttered down, she felt Emily's pulse fall into the even rhythm of sleep. Not being able to drift into or stay asleep had been plaguing Emily since the attack on Fury. Even drugged. It wouldn't get any better once her brothers put themselves back out in the open. Most likely, it'd get worse. Natasha was worried about Em's health. Maybe she should call Laura and talk to her, ask for advice on how to help Em get through this.

Hell. She needed some advice on how to get through this. How often did she call Laura or Clint to ask about relationships and if she was doing it right? Caressing Emily's luscious hair, she allowed a tender expression. Later tonight. She'd call, see how the kids were doing, make sure Clint hadn't seen anything to worry about, then ask about Emily's sleeping problem.
“It’s a corndog, Nat. Try one.” Alan held up one of the greasy, yellow things that he'd prepared in the toaster oven for dinner.

She wrinkled her nose. “No.”

“It's an American tradition.”

“I'm not American.”

Beside them, Emily made a rude noise. “You have the Constitution and all the amendments memorized, and you actually understand their concepts. You're better at American history, culture, and politics than most Americans, including me and Alan. That's close enough. Take a bite of corndog.”

“Underneath that possibly tolerable coating of corn-based crunch is a hotdog. No.”

Alan pouted at his sister. “Your girlfriend is stuck up.”

“Yea,” an amused sigh. “She is.”

“I'm going out for something not fried.” Natasha grumbled.

The siblings waved at her. “Bye.”

Sighing, Emily watched geese fly over her head before meeting Natasha's eyes as she approached. The past few weeks hadn't been easy. Looking at Natasha, seeing both the woman she loved and the traitor who'd spilled her most precious secrets to the world in one body had built a war inside. Emily's inner demons roared just below the surface of control. It made her afraid of what she'd do if she got pushed into a corner or if her brothers were threatened. She wasn't sure if anyone would be safe from her, including her little fox.

Alan had left for home a few hours ago, and Kevin had gone the night before. With them heading back to where anyone with Google could find them, her forgiveness of Natasha's actions had been harder to hold onto. Worry and anger blended. Natasha was her natural target to lash out at. Emily chewed her tongue.

“Emily.” Natasha's tone said she had news. “I've been summoned to a senate hearing.”

Shit.

“If I go.” A pause. “There's a good chance they'll arrest me, put me on trial, and convict me of dozens of crimes, including treason.” She swallowed. “Which is punishable—”

“By death,” finished Emily. “I know.”

No matter how angry with Natasha she still was...

She looked at her lover, studied her curly hair, sharp eyes, impeccable makeup and clothing, and everything else that comprised the most beautiful woman in the world. If anything happened to Natasha, she would lose it. No title or threat of jail or battalion of guards would keep Emily from hunting down every single politician and lawyer who had a hand in hurting Nat. Hunt them down and make them suffer.
“Emily?” Confused worry was staring at her. “Em?”

How black did her eyes really get when she was ready to murder someone?
“Why haven't we heard yet from Captain Rogers?” And so it had gone. Question after brutal question. How long could these politicians grill her and poke at her? Natasha was glad Emily wasn't there getting the same vicious treatment. She took a sip of the provided water, unused to the pressure of public attention. Being in the forefront of political upheaval wasn't something she'd been trained for and had studiously avoided.

It led to her mouth releasing sass that she hadn't totally thought through yet. “I don't know what there is left for him to say. I think the wreck in the middle of the Potomac made his point fairly eloquently.”

“Well he could explain how this country is supposed to maintain its national security now that he and you have laid waste to our intelligence apparatus.”

“HYDRA was telling you lies, not intelligence.” Did they really not see that?

“Many of which that you seem to have had a personal hand in telling.”

He had a point, and she was having a hard time holding her head high.

“Agent, you should know that there are some of those on this committee that given your service record, both for this country and against it, that think you belong in a penitentiary, not mouthing off on Capitol Hill.”

She closed her eyes, searched for a response.

“She might.” A strong, familiar voice came from the rear of the room. The crowd of reporters parted to let Captain Steve Rogers in full dress uniform stride forward. Ribbons and medals flashed on his broad chest. “But that would be a poor use of the best intelligence operative I've ever met.”

Relief started to make her smile until Steve got to her table, and she saw who was behind him. Emily. Wearing a modest pantsuit, flats, and light makeup that didn't quite cover her bruises. What the hell was she doing here?

“Captain Rogers,” the committee head stalled. “And?”

No. Don't do-

“Emily Fortune. My codename was Sekhmet.” She limped to a seat beside Natasha, rested her crutch against the table, and sat down amongst the firestorm of murmurs.

Grey-haired men were exchanging glances. One sat forward. “I was under the impression that Agent Sekhmet had superhuman healing.”

Emily snorted. “Oh. I do. The irony is that I can't heal myself any faster than you can.”

“Ms. Fortune, you were not summoned to this hearing. Why have you come?”

She hadn't yet looked at Natasha. “I was under the impression that this hearing was called to discuss the events that led up to Agent Romanoff's security override and exposure of SHIELD’s files. As I was part of that, I thought it appropriate to come. I apologize for being late.” Her bound wrist was waved. “I misjudged how much time I'd need to button a shirt with this thing.”
It was almost amusing how everyone seemed to forget that their favorite icon was sitting quietly on Natasha's other side the way they focused on Emily. Almost. More like terrifying. Natasha hated how much attention was on Emily right now. She wanted to drag her idiot healer back home and never let her out in public again.

“The files also said that you are a drug smuggler.”

“Actually, the file says, and I quote, 'Emily Fortune may have significant involvement in the movement of cannabis products throughout North America.' Not that it has any bearing on the topic at hand, senator.” She stared him down. “The current topic is whether or not Agent Romanoff and others like her deserve to be tried for criminal acts and sent to prison.”

“A notion which I highly inadvise.” Rogers spoke up. Together, the two of them took control of the conversation away from the committee, steered it in such a way to make Natasha look a hero. They even managed to cite precedents for why dumping the World Council's secrets, and America's, hence the senate hearing, that SHIELD had harbored as a good thing.

What they were really doing was selling their story to the people.

They brought up recent moves by the government that had been stripping the peoples rights of privacy in the elusive search for safety. Full-disclosure and similar concepts were touted. With Emily sitting there, bruised and bandaged without a secret in the world to hold, she made quite the impression. Who could argue with the woman who had more to lose from the info dump than most in the room? How could they argue with a woman who'd taken severe injury to make it happen?

But worry stayed heavy in Natasha's heart. How would Emily handle the world's attention and demands for her gift? Would her brothers be alright?

“And all of this isn't simply because you don't want your treasonous lover going to prison?”

Shit. Those who'd use Emily and her family to get to the Black Widow...

“There is that.” Emily answered easily, and her injured hand found Natasha's. “I sleep better when I know someone I trust is watching my back.”

More than one official softened at her words. One or two cringed. Natasha did both. You idiot, she thought angrily, affectionately.

“I think we all do.” Steve added. “Natasha Romanoff risked everything to protect the people of this country, and the rest of the world, by exposing HYDRA's toxic interference in world affairs. I trust her to watch my back any day and so should you.”

On their exit from the hearing, the press tried desperately to get them to talk. They pushed for Emily to prove her abilities, and every other fear that Emily had ever spoken of. Natasha struggled against the instinct to break jaws and hands. At the top of the steps, Emily paused and leaned on Natasha. “I'm going to say something.” She warned.

Cap was right there with them. He looked like he already knew what Emily was going to do. Natasha swallowed and nodded.

“I'm human,” gazing right into the cameras, “But not like most of you. I have a gift that I've chosen not to spend my life ruled by, and I ask that you respect that decision. I help where I can, but I won't sit on my proverbial porch and wait while people line up for me to save them. Like any other action, it takes time and energy. Some of that, I need to spend with my friends and family and reading good books,” a snort and gesture with her bandaged arm, “And resting while my own
injuries heal. Thank you for your understanding.”

Probably planned, Cap stepped in front of them and forced a path through the crowd. A black town car was waiting for them at the street. Safe behind the closed door, Emily sagged. “Remind me not to do that again.”

Sinking into a seat as well, Steve nodded. “Yea. Me too.”

“Nice speech,” came from a little monitor humming down from the ceiling. Pepper Potts smiled at them.

What?

“Thanks, Pepper.” Emily murmured. “Seriously couldn't have survived that without your help.”

Oh. “So you're how these two idiots managed to get the drop on seasoned politicians out for blood.” Natasha said. “I owe you.”

Pepper made a humble gesture. “Not this time.” She looked off-screen. “You don't owe Tony anything for the armor he's working on either. He should have thought of it sooner.”

News crews following, the car took them to Natasha's apartment where Emily went straight to the cupboard that held her stash of tea. Steve crashed on the couch, and Natasha hovered near Emily, her emotions high. Fury, anxiety, affection, despair, they raged within her. “Why?” She demanded. Why come out of hiding and expose herself? Why risk everything she'd been protecting for most of her life?

Emily didn't stop measuring leaf into the catch. Hell, she didn't even look up. “If my fox is in the spotlight, then I am too.”

“You're an idiot,” was her rude retort.

“Yep.”

Not feeling any better, Natasha stalked to the bedroom, changed out of her stiflingly conservative skirt-suit, and into something warmer. She was brushing her hair when the scent of tea joined her. Emily was at the door, teapot in one hand, mugs dangling from her bad one, a roll of tea biscuits under her arm. Bumping the door closed, she made herself comfortable on the bed.

Pouring, she spoke. “I wasn't the only one exposed by the file dump.”

Natasha felt a fresh stroke of guilt. Every SHIELD agent, including those undercover and in dangerous situations. More than a few were dead because of her choice. Many more would probably die. International tensions were at an all-time high. Global police forces were struggling with the fallout. Natasha had already called in more than a few favors in an effort to salvage what she could. Ironically, some of that help was offered simply because she had opened Pandora's Box.

“Doing what we can to ease the tensions here might help them.” Emily continued.

“Clint says the farm is still quiet.”

Eyelids closed in relief. Emily nodded. “Sorry I didn't warn you that I was coming today.”

Emotions settled on angry. “What the hell were you thinking?” Natasha snapped.
Familiar steel met her eye. “That I couldn't let you face the wolves alone.”

“What about your brothers? Your freedom?”

“Technically, I gave up my freedom the moment I decided to tell the Black Widow my name.” She challenged Natasha to argue that.

How had she fallen for this idiot?

“As to my brothers, they encouraged me to do this.”

“Why?” Her legs felt weak.

“You aren't stupid, Natasha.” Her gaze shifted to steaming liquid. “Your tea's getting cold.”

“Screw the tea, Emily Fortune. Explain yourself.”

Anger snapped back. “Because you're the other half of my together, Natalia Romanova, and that makes you family to my brothers! You know this. They told you that barely a week ago.”

But... But, she needed to be reminded that people cared. She would probably never escape that part of her past, that she wasn't worthy of being loved, especially not this intensely. “I know,” twisted.

“Dammit, woman. Come sit down and drink your tea.” Still angry, Emily growled, then huffed. More quietly, she added. “Come sit, Nat. Please.”

She slowly joined Emily on the bed and accepted her mug of tea.

“It's easier not to be angry at you when you're not towering over me.”

Natasha snorted. “I'm barely five-three. I don't tower, especially when I'm in slippers.”

Surprising her, lips touched her cheek, and Emily leaned against her. “You underestimate your mere presence, you fucking Death Dealer.”

“Death Dealer?”

“We just watched Underworld the other day, woman. Did you already forget?”

Natasha looked at the head of dark hair on her shoulder. “I'm not a vampire.” Even if she hadn't aged in decades.

“You're gorgeous enough to be one.” Emily retorted.

Prodding at her nose as they drove toward Oklahoma, Emily hummed. “Maybe I can get a nose job.”

“No!” Immediate, loud, and unhappy, Natasha barked at her.

Stunned, her hand fell. “It's kinda the most prominent part of my face.” She chewed her lip, obviously searching for a way to argue. “Getting it changed would be a nice way to hide.”

“No,” softer, yet just as adamant, Natasha argued. “Don't change your nose.” She popped onto her toes to kiss its biggest part. “Please.” She'd watched Emily wash her face and do her makeup enough to know she didn't like her nose, and it certainly wasn't the epitome of attractive, but
Natasha loved it. That giant nose was part of Emily’s unique face.

Emily was blushing. “Why not?”

Natasha met her gaze with a smile. “It would just put you through more needless pain.”

Creases pinched between dark eyebrows. “But it’s a a good excuse to change something I’ve always hated about myself. Even if it wasn’t just like dad’s nose, I’d hate how huge it is.” She took a breath and frowned deeper. “What? Nothing to say to that.”

“It’s your nose, Em.” She returned, giving the support that she didn’t want to but would if Emily actually went for surgery. “But I hope you don’t change it. I like your face. All of it, perceived imperfections and everything.”

“You actually like this monster on my face?” She squawked.

“Do I have to kiss it again to prove my point?”

Emily’s eyes slotted. “What about my hair?”

She cocked an eyebrow and shrugged. “It’s just hair.” Unlike noses, hair always grew back. Not that she often resorted to changing her own.

Emily tugged at the shoulder length mess of tangles that had formed over the long car ride. “Since I can’t really do anything with one hand, and you want me to start wearing a Stark designed helmet, I think I’ll go really short.”

“Okay.”

“Like, high school, figuring out my sexual identity short.”

A boyish cut would probably look adorable on Emily, like everything did. Or maybe that was her biased opinion. “Just don’t bleach it, and I’m sure you’ll look great.”

There was a roll of eyes, but otherwise, Emily looked pleased.

Emily’s nose was as adorably big as ever, and her short hairstyle wouldn’t go amiss among the fashion-elite. “Stop getting injured, and you could pass for a vampire too.” Natasha chuckled.

“Flatterer.”

“The day I can’t flatter the woman I’m in love with is the day I’ll kiss Tony Stark.”

Emily jerked away to stare at her before melting into a smile. “Every time you tell me you love me is like winning the lottery.”

She didn’t say it often, couldn’t. It was too hard. But, she always, always meant it. “I love you, Em.” When Emily leaned into her again, Natasha secured a one-armed hug and kissed her hair. They sat quietly until the tea was gone, relaxing in each others presence until a warm calm settled. Natasha sighed at the momentary return to balance. This relationship shit was so difficult. She breathed in Emily's scent. But so worth it.

Gathered around the headstone that memorialized Nick Fury’s death, the quiet of the group was disconcerting. Fury sighed. It was decidedly odd to see him in anything other than a professional
suit or intimidating trench coat. In black. Always black. This casual look with actual color had Emily gawking. Fury took his eyes from the date of his fake death. “So, this is what it feels like.”

Steve nodded, and Sam watched curiously.

Emily supported herself with her crutch. “I see dead people.”

While Steve looked unamused, Tony guffawed, and Fury coughed up a laugh. His eye looked at her, at her crutch and wrist. She'd taken care of most of his, only left a few so he could hide behind the guise of a weak old man. The grey in his goatee seemed more obvious than ever as he stood before his headstone.

Did Natalia Romanova have a headstone somewhere? Green eyes met her gaze. How long would it take to fully let go of her anger with Natasha? Emily turned to Pepper and Tony, pretty damn amazed that they'd managed to meet the group without cameras up their asses.

Tony was fidgeting, and even Pepper's calming hand on his elbow didn't seem to help. He looked at her, then the group, his mouth twitching.

“Tony,” was whispered. “Not r-”

He snapped forward out of her grip. “This is probably a bad time to tell you that we have no idea where Loki's scepter is.” Groaning, Pepper strained her eyes toward heaven.

“What!” Fury roared.

“Pretty sure that it was stolen during the coup.”

“God damn it.” Fury snarled. He scooped the knit hat off his skull and crushed it in his fist. A brown leaf drifted down, slid off his shiny pate, and got his full, laser-beam-angry glare as it fell to blend into the carpet of already fallen leaves. Emily half-expected it to burst into flames.

She slid her weight to her good ankle so she could poke Tony with her crutch. “Way to ruin the mood. Pepper, you're not letting him in front of cameras any time soon, are you?”

“God, no.”

“I guess I'll be looking for more than just HYDRA holdouts while I'm in Europe.” Fury grumbled. He eyed Sam. “You sure you don't want to come with me? I could use a man I can trust at my side.”

“No, sir. Thanks, but I go where he,” a nod at Steve, “Goes.” He'd be staying in D.C. to help Steve do research on Bucky until they both went off in search of the broken man.

Fury nodded and talk shifted to how Emily was planning on helping renew the public's faith in their superheroes.

It was a beautiful day outside, but surrounded by the omnipresent stink of antiseptics, Emily's heart tripped. What the hell had she been thinking? There were other ways to boost opinions about former SHIELD employees. She hated hospitals. The idea of being trapped in one for the rest of her life, whether as lab rat or chained prophet, terrified her. Her breath was getting ragged when Natasha's voice settled in her ear. “We can leave any time, Em.”
Natasha was with her. She sucked in air, held it, let it go and repeated the motion a few times. The anxiety retreated. Cap smiled reassuringly. “You good, Emily?”

The hospital officials who had welcomed Emily shifted. Beside them, the little news crew who Pepper had suggested be allowed to cover Emily's first public healing looked at each other. The journalist, Daniel Something, mirrored Cap's smile. “At your own pace, Ms. Fortune.”

Visiting the hospitals had actually been Pepper's idea. She'd suggested that Emily allot time to give people a chance to ask for her help, to see her do what she said she did. It would eliminate a lot of the stalking she was afraid of and give them all good press.

Faces around the emergency room were eagerly focused on her. Her anxiety started to build again. An approaching ambulance siren jolted into her, and she whirled to see the vehicle coming up the hospital's drive. Training and instinct kicked in. She darted out the door to meet the EMT's. They started to push her away, but seeing Captain America there, their eyes widened, their motions stilled. Emily hopped into the ambulance and touched the patient there.

Some sort of chemical overdose. She stabilized the young man within a few moments and hopped back down to the pavement. “I stopped the kidney failure and restored normal heart rhythm. Carry on.” She met the officials' attention with her shoulders back and confidence firmly in place and walked past them. The crowds being held back by police roared and flashed pictures.

She started with the construction worker whose hand had been crushed on the job. Natasha lifted the bag she'd brought and handed over a cylinder of rubber. “Healing is painful. You might want to bite down on this.” A stress ball followed. “And squeeze this.”

“She's not kidding.” Steve added. “It hurts as bad as the injury.”

“If it means getting back to work and keeping my hand, I'll go through it again.” He muttered, grabbed the offered items and put them to use. The rubber muffled his scream.

Several eager people shrank away, reconsidered how badly they wanted Emily's touch. The rest of the visit was much the same. Families visiting in the intensive care ward nearly came to blows as Emily entered, yet after she helped her first victim, the fight went out of them. Many refused her help. Some she couldn't do much for. Getting old wasn't unnatural.

And there was one she almost refused to help because the old woman was a racist pig who had been verbally abusing the nursing staff for a week. She changed her mind when one of the other patients suggested Emily would be helping the nurses. Emily didn't bother hiding her smile at the woman's pain. “Oh look, you're all better. No more reason for you to be here.” She turned to an official. “Why don't you get her doctor down here. Now. She's taking up space and needs to be discharged.”

Another one tried to kill her as he screamed something about Allah and abominations and buried a pair of scissors in her arm before she punched him in the throat. Cap grabbed Natasha. Staff rushed Emily down to the ER where she was pumped full of painkillers and antibiotics, and she passed out.

“Hey,” accompanied a hand squeezing Emily's. She blinked and struggled against fuzziness and heavy eyelids.

“Mmph.”
Natasha's soft chuckle assured her that everything was okay. “I thought Muslims liked you.”

“He wasn't a Muslim. He was an asshole,” was grumbled. “Did you kill him?”

“Rogers wouldn't let me,” growled back.

Probably for the best. Nat definitely didn't need any more bad press right now. Emily shifted. “Help me up. I need to piss.”

Steadying drugged Emily, “Glad you're feeling better.” She got the IV machine to wheel along and settled Emily on the toilet, stepped just out of the door. As Emily battled noodle legs to stand at the sink, she reappeared. “Your nurse is waiting for you.”

The familiar woman greeted her. “I don't know if you remember, but I'm Stephanie.”

“ICU nurse.” Emily recognized the burn scars down the neck. “Is that bitch gone yet?”

“She was gone by the time you got brought up.” Stephanie smiled widely. “Thank you, by the way. We are so glad to have her gone.” She seemed to rethink her smile. “But I'm so sorry you got hurt!”

Emily waved it off. “No big deal.” Natasha growled something dark, and Emily sloppily pat her arm. “Am I getting out of here today?”

“I don't see why not. I do need to take your vitals though.” She didn't move closer, and it took Emily a second to realize she was biting her lip in Natasha's direction.

“Natasha won't bite.” Emily assured the nurse. “I promise.”

“Sorry about earlier,” Natasha muttered. “It won't happen again.”

What had happened? Sturdy nurse that she was, Stephanie nodded and went about getting the blood pressure cuff on Emily's arm, watching the numbers blink of the monitors. “Blood pressure's a little high, but everything looks good.” Stephanie stalled before walking away. “What you're doing here is really brave. Both of you.”

Caught off guard, Emily stared.

“I can't imagine what it must be like to have a gift like yours, but my brother is a musician. I understand a little bit about what it's like to struggle for privacy in your life. He goes through a lot of trouble to disguise himself and his family visits to keep us out of the spotlight.” Her expression was warm and genuine. “The way you two vanished after bringing down the killer helicopters, I know you could've stayed hidden if you wanted to. Here you are though, taking responsibility for your actions and continuing to help people even when some of us are ungrateful jerks. Thank you.”

It took a few breaths for Emily to regain control of her mouth. “You're welcome.”

She saw Natasha nod.

“Oh!” Stephanie suddenly brandished a laminated pamphlet. “Food menu. You just press star-two-four-four on the phone to order. I'm sure you're probably hungry. Unless you want something delivered. Just let me know. The director says you're to have anything you want.”

Natasha didn't let her leave. “We aren't eating hospital food. No offense. We want soup bowls and caramel cheesecake from Vale's.”

Stephanie gaped a little, obviously aware of how delicious and expensive Vale's was. “Don't we
“We'll order extra for you.” Her lips curved. “How are we doing this?”

Vale's didn't offer delivery. They gave their food order to someone in a suit when he appeared five minutes later, and he came back in an hour with Steve and a massive amount of food cartons.

Stephanie brought the news that the ICU staff might be on a permanent sugar high with all the cakes that had shown up. They'd shared with patients and families and still had leftovers. Giddy, she fluttered away with the soup bowl that Nat had promised.

“I think you've made friends for life.” Steve said around a bite of steak.

“Food is the universal language of friendship.” She laughed. “Especially when it's free.”

The next days went fairly similarly. Except that news reports of Emily's touch being extremely painful eased traffic trying to get to her. Funny how people expected healing to feel good and didn't go running to her with every papercut. Steve and Natasha flanked her for her visits to all the local hospitals and sites caring for those wounded by the Project Insight incident. There were crowds at each one, full of love and hate and mixed emotions and politics.

Debates raged across media about them. The PR manager that Pepper had hired for them assured them each day that what Emily was doing was winning favor. Everyone from local religious leaders to senators to talk show hosts tried to get time with them. The trio did their best until Natasha snapped after she got Emily home after the end of the second week. “We need a day off.”

Battling the buttons of her dress pants, Emily couldn't agree more. She was mentally and physically exhausted. Everything hurt. She was fairly certain that nothing was healing well because of the stress she'd put herself under. The last button simply wouldn't come undone, and her wrist wouldn't turn enough to... “Motherfucker!”

She stomped to the kitchen for a knife.

“Hey, whoa.” Natasha stalled her. “Don't take it out on the pants. They look really good on you.”

Fuming, she growled. “Then you need to undress me so I can put on something that doesn't pull and tug at every fucking stitch and bruise.”

Button already popped and hands moving toward the dress shirt, Natasha batted her eyelashes. “You don't have to get dressed.”

Not in the mood. “I don't have the energy, Nat.”

Knuckles smoothed along her jaw. “Only trying to find a smile.” In a moment, she had Emily down to her panties, and she was studying the mess of injuries. “You're healing slow.” An attempt at a smile, “Even for you.”

“Yea,” exhaustion answered. “I know.”

“We're taking time off. The world can wait until my Emily can walk ten feet without flinching again.” Natasha laced their fingers together and tugged Emily toward the bedroom. “Come on. Let's get you in pajamas.” Softly squeezing Emily's hand, “What's it going to be tonight? Unicorns? Eighties cartoons? Tourist crap? Puns?” She listed the kinds of t-shirts Emily called pajamas instead of insisting on one of the fashionable silk or lace ensembles she had tried to replace them with.
Chardonnay in hand and no schedules in sight, Natasha leaned on the kitchen counter watching Emily poke at her laptop. The woman had been on it since waking.

Squinting over Emily's shoulder at the laptop's screen, Natasha asked. “What's this?”

“House hunting.” She clicked on one of the thumbnails. “Look at this place. It's gorgeous.”

She read the location. “Atlanta?”

“It's one of the few progressive pockets in the Bible Belt, awesome PRIDE scene, and it's pretty close to the Appalachian Trail, which I've always wanted to hike. I've made deliveries there a few times. There's enough glitzy, glamour boutiques there to keep your high-fashion closet full. Major international airport. Busy city to be anonymous in. About the only downside is its lack of winter.”

No one would think to look in the Bible Belt for the lesbian pot smuggler from Colorado. And it was only a couple of hours from the Barton farm. Easy driving distance. Alan lived in Jacksonville, Florida. Relatively close. Natasha pushed away the suggestion for them to find a place in Berlin or Paris. She stilled. A place for them both?

Teasing hid her hesitation. “Emily Fortune, are you asking me to buy a house with you?”

“No.” That short, off-hand response hurt far too much. Natasha fumbled for an old mask to cover it up, but lost her grip when Emily blindly reached up, finding the edge of a jaw and holding Nat close. Emily leaned back, met her eye. “I'm asking you to help me find a home for us.”

A home. With Emily.

“One we can escape to when being Sekhmet and the Black Widow is too much.”

“Yes.” Absolutely. Without a doubt.

She could really get used to upside-down kisses.

Was that? Emily stared at the spot where she thought she'd seen a familiar set of dark eyes.

“How many oranges are you gonna get?” Steve poked.

Blinking at the fruit in her hand, at the basket with a dozen others in it, “This many.”

“You and Nat eat a lot of oranges?”

“Yea.” she looked around for any sign that she had actually seen Bucky. Only the familiar employees and handful of customers in the neighborhood grocery store. At least the reporters stayed outside. No one was begging for her or Cap's attention. She loved this shoebox store. It was frequented by other people who wanted a minute of privacy to do their mundane shopping. A senator eyed a bag of coffee and off-duty secret service yawned over bananas.

No Bucky.

Had it been a trick of the eye? Or was the man following her? Building up the nerve to talk to her? Or Steve? Was he working for HYDRA again?
Warm strength gripped her shoulder. “You alright, Em?”

“Thought I saw someone I knew, but I guess I was wrong.” She shrugged.

He frowned, but she didn't say more, and he was forced to scan the store for an answer while she continued her shopping.
Unpacking a box of antique vases, Natasha paused and looked around the room. Almost all of her and Emily's combined must-have stuff was unpacked and displayed. Bookshelves lined the room she was in and two others and on them were books and various dust-collectors. Momentos from their separate lives were everywhere. Art and souvenirs mostly. Emily had dozens of framed photos of her family and friends. They hung from walls and rested against books. Natasha had three.

One that Stark had insisted the Avengers cram into after their successful defense of New York. One at Laura and Clint's wedding where they'd gotten Natasha drunk enough to laugh and blush as they kissed her cheeks. One of Lila and Cooper from a few summers ago eating watermelon, juice dripping down their happy faces. She'd left the first in D.C. The other two were in her office upstairs.

"Emily?" She called as she reached for her phone.

"Yea?" came from the porch.

Natasha had the camera app loaded by the time she reached the front door. "I just realized something."

Turning from her inspection of the old willow tree in their yard, "What's that?"

"We don't have any pictures of us." Natasha stated as she huddled in her jacket against the chill air. Atlanta in early December wasn't that bad, but it wasn't Tahiti.

"Oh. Yea. Visitors might wonder about that when I've got so many others, huh? I could take dow-"

"No," sharp, definite. She loved seeing those happy moments. It made the place feel warm in a way that Natasha's domiciles never had. Her eyes went to the phone. "I like them."

Emily was watching her. "I know how you feel about photos," came her careful words.

There were so many reasons not to allow them. Safety, for one. And what about in fifteen years when Emily had lines from years of laughing while Natasha's skin was smooth as ever? Fuck it. That was a bridge to cross later. And since the Senate had decided not to kill or imprison Natasha or anyone else involved in spilling SHIELD's secrets, she had time to build that bridge. "This is our home. I want pictures of us in it."

"And you think the first one should be a selfie?"

Natasha handed the phone over. "You take it." Photography experience that revolved solely around surveillance shouldn't be trusted for something this important.

An arm went around her waist, and their heads bumped. Emily held up the phone, capturing the soft moment with the willow tree in the background. She proceeded to take about thirty more before Natasha could retrieve her phone from the giggling woman.
Later, as she uploaded them to her computer, she discovered that she loved most of them, even the completely absurd ones. She chose five and went to a local craft store. A collage frame that would match the living room's décor was chosen. Thinking about how it would look sent a shiver through her. So much exposure.

Putting the pictures in the frame, Natasha's open emotions for Emily immortalized and displayed for other people to see made it hard to breathe. She found the hammer, level, and nails. The frame got a place of prominence over the couch. Breathing hard, she stepped back.

Comfort enveloped her. “Are you sure?”

Natasha leaned back into Emily's arms. “Yes.”

“We look good, little fox.” Together, they stared at the evidence that the Black Widow could love.

Emily held a mug of hot coffee in front of Steve. He jerked from his staring contest with the black TV screen. “Oh. Thanks.”

She sat beside him, watched him start to zone off into the coffee. “I'm sorry.”

Sadness, dejection, they spilled across his face though he tried to wave her off. “It's alright. There was nothing you could do.”

“You're a good man, Steve. A good leader and friend.” She hated the twist in the gut expression that friend gave him. That Bucky had never showed, and Steve hadn't been able to find him was eating the man alive. “I know that I couldn't drag him back with me, but I still feel bad that there wasn't, isn't, anything I can do.” Steve had avoided talking about his emotional reaction to Bucky the entire time they were in D.C. Emily had only managed to get him to open up by getting him out of that political den of wolves. It was February now. Maybe she should've pulled him out by his ears sooner.

A lightness that hadn't touched his eyes since he'd discovered that the Winter Soldier was an experimented on, brainwashed old friend who he thought dead returned to his gentle blue eyes. “You're wrong, Emily. You showing him compassion was huge. There's hope that he might come back for more. This helps too.” He lifted the coffee. “Being here, away from everything, with a friend who has been going out of her way to make me feel comfortable, including buying a coffeemaker.”

“I've had that old th-”

“I noticed the receipt yesterday. You missed throwing it in the trash.”

She felt a blush.

There was the slightest perk of a smile. “And you haven't been trying to catch me up on stuff I missed during my ice nap. You have no idea how relaxing that is.”

“It might sound weird, but I kinda think of you as one of my foreign friends. You might miss a few pop culture cues.” She chuckled at his pointed expression. “Okay, a lot. Whatever though. You've got a rich personality, great things to offer, and a different cultural upbringing than my own. We get along. That's what's important.”

“Is that how,” pink tinted his cheeks, “You and Natasha work?”
“That, and I really like younger women.” Natasha smirked from the hallway. Their attention fully on her, she crossed into the room, stood next to them. “I never mentioned it, but you really surprised me, Rogers.”

He blinked. “With what?”

Teasingly, she slid into Emily's lap. Who she was teasing more, Emily or Steve, was the question. Probably meant it for both, the troublemaker. “You're a traditionally raised Catholic, yet you've never even flinched at a relationship that would have been quite frowned upon back in the day.”

Flushing, he begged help from his coffee, sipped at it. “Flinched might not be the right word for it.”

Natasha made herself even more comfortable, wiggling sweetly. “Why, Steve, have we been the subject of y-”

She squealed at a pinch on her thigh. Emily scolded her, “Stop teasing him, you share crop, you.”

Steve choked on his coffee while Natasha narrowed her eyes. “What did you call me?”

Emily lifted her chin. “Share crop.” Her grin grew wicked as she realized Natasha wasn't familiar with the antiquated American slang.

“Rogers, what did she call me?”

He silently begged Emily to get him off the hook.

Only because she'd started this mess. “Don't go bustin' his chops over somethin' I said, you old broad.”

Natasha huffed like a black and white Hollywood diva, “Don't be crass!”

Coffee spurted from Steve's nose, and Emily guffawed, deep, rocking belly laughs that quickly won Natasha laughs too. Steve was a little busy being embarrassed and wiping at his nose, yet after a few moments, he chuckled with them. “Dang it, I got it all over the carpet. I'm sorry. I'll clean it up.”

Grabbing at his elbow, Emily tugged. “Sit down, Steve. My doll here will take care of it.”

“You made him laugh. You clean it up.” Natasha argued. “I'm perfectly comfortable.” She twisted to give Emily a prime view of her cleavage.

Though tempted, Emily was on a mission. She adjusted the arm that was already around Nat's waist, and slipped her other under knees. With a mild grunt, she stood. Damn, it was nice to function without a broken wrist anymore, or stitches or bruised ribs or the various other injuries she'd grumbled through for weeks and weeks. Tony had stopped by their place in D.C. with a prototype of the armor, and she'd had to admit that it was nice. It fit great. It looked really good too. And it was lightweight, left lots of room for movement, and made Natasha happy.

Emily smiled down at her grinning spy, enjoying the way Natasha's eyes danced and walked them to the kitchen. “Grab that towel.”

An eyebrow firmly arched at her in refusal.

Emily pulled out the big guns and kissed her chin, whispering against it. “Mon petit renard, je t'en
Nat sucked in her lower lip, biting the side of it before giving in.

“And the vinegar and baking soda.”

Eyes promising to pay her back later, she opened the cupboard, grabbing the products and a bowl. Back at the couch, Emily eased them down with only a little strain. Her healing injuries sighed in relief. Natasha poured some vinegar in the bowl, gave her a vicious smirk and crawled forward to dust the baking soda over the carpet, purposely giving a display of her lovely behind. Emily swallowed as Steve went pink again, purposefully staring at the painting on the wall. While she cleaned, Natasha tortured her lover and friend.

Point to the master seductress, Emily offered. “Not bad for an old broad.”

“You are going to get us killed, Emily.” Steve muttered.

Snickering, she agreed. “Probably.”

“So, Em, what's with the old geezer jargon? Recent study or what?”

“I've been on a forties era binge lately. Nat left a biography on President Truman laying around. After I finished it, I went looking for other stuff written during or about the forties.” She leaned forward. “There was this one I found written by an Egyptian activist that blew my mind. God, Steve, I wish you read Arabic so I could loan it to you.”

A soft expression smoothed his young face. “I'm glad we're friends, Em.” He chortled. “But I'm not learning Arabic just to read your books. There's plenty in English and French on my catch-up list.”

She waved at the expansive collection surrounding them. “Borrow anything. Between the two of us, we probably have whatever's on your list.”

“Except my first editions.” Nat interjected. “Those don't leave the house. And you better not break their spines.”

“Thanks.” Emily whispered into her ear as they lay in bed that night.

Squirming at the hot attention being lathed there, Natasha hummed. “For what?”

Warm kisses were set to her neck. “For helping me make Cap smile.”

Oh. That. “You're welcome and thank you for working to make him smile.”

The kisses reached her chest, languidly spread across it.

“Hey, Em?”

“Hm?” came from around a breast.

Natasha arched into her mouth, nearly forgot what she'd finally brought up the courage to talk about, what she'd been thinking about for months. “Now that our life is in complete chaos, do you want to make it worse?”
Lips retreated to puzzle at her. “What?”

Natasha took a breath and plunged forward. “I was thinking that maybe it’s time to reverse my sterility. I,” she gasped at the love sparkling in Emily’s dark eyes. “I want my options back.”

Emily stared at her. A wide smile threatened. “You’re ready to make more little foxes?”

No. But, she was ready to talk about it, to plan, to dream. “Not right now, and we have to find the right donor.”

Sliding back up, Emily kissed the underside of her jaw. “And tell the hawk family their little birds are going to have playmates.”

Natasha groaned. “Clint will gloat we’re copying him.” Wait. She’d said she wanted options, not that she was ready to pop kids out right now!

“What’s wrong with mimicking Laura’s greatness?”

At that, she laughed. “When you put it that way.”

Emily smoothed back damp frizzies, traced her cheek with a thumb. “It would be nice for the cousins to be close in age.”

Cousins? The children of spies, killers, assassins; two people who had bonded in the blood of the dead. The thumb paused, drawing her back to Emily and the present. No. They would be children raised by people who loved each other. She’d never said it out loud, but she loved Clint. He was the family she’d never been allowed to have. Then he found Laura and she became included in Natasha’s short list of people she’d do anything to protect.

Now, she had Emily, who wanted to help create a new family with Natasha. She wanted Emily’s baby. Hadn’t there been recent progress in the research into creating children from same-sex parents? She made a mental note to look into it. Any children she had with Emily would be raised by a village. Good people who Natasha respected would be part of their lives. The Bartons. The Fortune siblings, Steve, Hill, Pepper, even Tony and Bruce. Thor, when he deigned to visit. Adrenaline suddenly shot through her.

All those people. All those attachments, and she was planning on the worst vulnerability of all. A child.

“Natalia. It’s okay.” Emily soothed.

No it wasn’t! She slapped Em’s chest. “How are you so damn calm about this? I thought normal people freaked out at the idea of planning kids!”

There was a certain tightness to her smile, visible even in the dark room. “I already raised two kids.”

Never would she make that kind of choice without Emily’s consent. Not even to save the world. Exposing her secrets along with SHIELD’s corruption had been terrible enough, and though Emily had said she’d forgiven the matter, Natasha could tell that she fought herself to make it true. It had insinuated itself into Natasha’s nightmares. Taking choices away from Emily, like the Red Room had done to her, drenched her in a cold sweat. “I wouldn’t ask you to raise a child you didn’t want.”

Emily’s eyes closed, and her frame trembled.
Moving slowly, lovingly, Natasha kissed and stroked the shudders away. “You're the other half of my together, Em. We make decisions about our future as equals.”

Dark depths stared at her. “I wonder how many lifetimes of good karma it takes to deserve a partner like you.”

It was her turn to shudder as love attacked nightmares. “Probably just as many as it takes to deserve one like you.”

Natasha’s ledger was still so horribly stained. Yet, being with Emily made it not so horrible, because she knew that a happy Emily made the world a better place. Somehow, she’d become the person who could make Em laugh and smile even when they were fighting. She didn't want to have a real fight with Em again any time soon. They’d only just started being able to smile at each other without bitter edges, and Emily was sleeping through the night again. Natasha wanted the easy comfort to last forever.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this is the biggest moment of their relationship, and I really, really hope that I didn't fuck it up.

Translation:
Mon petit renard, je t'en prie. Prends la - My little fox, please. Take it
“Hey, Steve, guess what?” Over her cup of tea, Emily grinned brightly, saw Natasha narrow her eyes.

Pillow marks in his cheek, he pulled back from rummaging in the fridge. “What?”

“Natasha's gonna have a baby.” Emily sing-songed.

“Emily!” Natasha snapped, and Steve jerked into wakefulness.

“She's going to get round and hormonal and,” as Natasha's fury reached its climax, she grinned wider, “Then she's gonna go through hell to give me the most beautiful baby to love and spoil and show off to all my friends. You'll babysit it, won't you, Steve?”

While Natasha was visibly caught between wanting to kill Emily and preening like a peacock, Steve laughed. “Isn't she a little old to be having babies?”

Natasha's mood spilled to homicidal, and Emily roared with laughter. “Uncle Stevie, you're not gonna last long enough to watch my kid at this rate.”

He blushed. “I like the sound of that. Uncle.”

“Let's go get breakfast to celebrate!” Emily cheered.

He looked at the carton of eggs he'd pulled out.

“There's this awesome little place I know. They've got these epic pancake stacks and dope homemade sausages. My treat.”

The eggs were shoved away. “Let me get dressed.” He escaped to the guest room, and Emily faced her lover's wrath.

What met her was a closed expression. It sent a thrill of worry down Emily's spine. Had she gone too far? She'd wanted to show Natasha how much she did want a family with her, despite the lingering shit in her head. And she wanted her skittish fox to know that she had friends who would help. That it was also a good way to get her back for teasing them yesterday was only a bonus. She'd gone and pushed too far, tested her ability to be vulnerable too much.

“I'm sorry.” Emily hung her head. “I should have asked your permission before involving anyone else.”

“You're right. You should have.” Anger colored her tone.

Dammit. “I'll ask him not to tell anyone else. Are you gonna come to breakfast with us?”

Natasha cupped her cheek. “I'm mad at you, but I also appreciate what you just did.”

Understanding and affection shone through the anger. “Telling him was your way of showing that you want children, that you're committed to it with me.” She let out a long-suffering sigh. “And sharing news with friends is what you do. It's part of your irritating charm.”

“Wait.” Emily pouted. “Are we Pepper and Tony?”

“You better be saying you're Tony.”
“She's not *that* bad.” Steve interjected. “I'd never trust Tony alone with my kid.”

Natasha considered him. “If Tony ever puts one of my children in one of his suits, he'd better give me the tracking and shutdown codes. And give Pepper his last will and testament.” While Steve chuckled and shook his head, Nat swatted at Emily. “Go get dressed. You're making us wait.”

Always the first one up, her blonde wig and makeup were perfectly in place, and she was dressed for public. Emily was in the Captain America pajamas she'd found right after convincing Steve to take a needed post-SHIELD-collapse-and-Bucky-hunting-vacation at their new place. She scuttled to their bedroom, threw on clothes, ran a brush through her hair and tied it back.

“You're wearing your glasses out?” Steve asked. “I've never seen you wear glasses in public.”

“Thought I'd match your pillow creases and bed hair.” She tossed over as she tied on shoes.

Sheepish, he ran a hand through the not-military regs style. “Yea. I need to brush it.”

“Bend your head,” ordered Natasha. He immediately obeyed. Once a soldier... Emily giggled as Natasha finger combed his almost-chin-length hair into acceptable order. She tackled his month old beard that was almost the same color as her fiery locks and pat his cheek. “Good enough. Let's go eat.”

“See?” Emily grinned. “You've already got the make sure your kids are dressed properly part down. Laura taught you well.”

She paled under Natasha's livid glare, slipped out the door. “Who's Laura?” Steve followed.

“One of Emily's friends in Colorado,” was the spy's easy save. “She has a million kids. And don't forget, Thomas,” she hummed, slipping into a Kentucky drawl. “We're Teagan and Jillian here.”

“What one are you again?” He asked.

“Teagan, you fossil.”

Emily smiled at the willow tree as she jogged to her car. The names and wigs and fake histories were annoying at times, but if she could go out to breakfast with her favorite fossils without being hassled, then it was all worth it.

Fury had asked for the Avengers to assemble in one space for a video conference. They'd done so at Tony's revamped tower in Manhattan. He was positive that Loki's scepter was in the hands of HYDRA agents, or what was left of the organization. That said, he had no idea where it was, but he, and then Steve, had thought it was a good idea for the team to get some training in before something bad happened again. Tony had called, or messaged, or however getting in contact with another dimension was called, and spoken with Thor. As soon as the scepter's location was discovered, the god of thunder would come help retrieve it.

Loki's scepter. If it was anything like its legendary master, then it could cause some seriously bad mischief. And if it was anything like the stories of the unhappy, jealous, and adoptive son of Odin, then it could cause devastating trouble. Either way, it needed to be out of HYDRA's hands and back in Asgard.

Setting down her tea that had gone cold, Emily went in search of Tony, found him with Banner in one of the labs. “Hey, Tony I wa-”
“Emily!” Tony cheered. “Perfect timing.” He hopped over a metal something and grabbed her arm, started dragging her down the hall. “Let’s go test out your armor.”

“Test it? You want me to get inside untested armor?”

“No.” He rolled his eyes. “Jarvis and I have put it through more tests than I give most of my toys. It’s more like you need to be tested to make sure you can handle your new outfit.”

“If I can... Tony, you aren’t launching missiles at me.” She dug her heels in.

He turned at her sudden stop. “Jarvis, go ahead and scratch that from the list.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You still need to get used to wearing it. Come on, spoilsport.” His smile was boyish and expectant and confident as ever.

Reminding herself that she’d promised Natasha she’d wear it and the armor wasn’t too bad on the last fitting, she allowed herself to be pulled along. “You didn't paint it red, did you?”

“No.” His grin went sly. “You paint a big enough target on yourself, I didn't feel it necessary to add to it.”

“Thanks.” Jerk.

“I went with a more,” dramatic pause. She glared, and he smiled wider. “Godly look.”

“What did you do?” This time, she was stalking behind him. “Tony Stark, what the hell do y-”

He'd stopped and waved at three pedestals. Three sets of head to toe body armor. Simple. Not eye-catching or extravagant or bright red. “You know, in ancient Egypt, they didn't wear much in terms of armor. Loincloth and belt. Too hot for metal. But since we hang out in more than just deserts, I designed different sets for different climates. This is your arctic gear.” The bulkiest was tapped. “Pep nixed the armored bikini idea.”

She made a mental note to thank Pepper later. “This is a different style than what you had me try on.”

His smile was wide. “I decided that stuff was too boring.”

Taking in the video-game level of awesome she was looking at, she nodded. “But, how much does it weigh?”

“The arctic set weighs twenty pounds.”

Really? “That's it?”

“You'll still want to wear a coat over it. Too much insulation between you and the armor would hinder movement. Add a couple pounds for the thermal layers.”

Okay, it was eye-catching, but not in a gaudy way, more like, dope-ass biker gear with its muted colors and crisp lines. “You managed to make lightweight armor that will stop hollow points and shrapnel?”

“I'm Tony Stark.”

Boy genius. She waved a conciliatory gesture.
Offended glare sliding back to pleased grin, he continued, “And I even gave it a tiny power source that can change its camouflage. Jarvis?”

“Yes, sir.” The matte surface fuzzed to mottled greens and browns. “There are six settings, Sekhmet, this is jungle setting.” It fuzzed again. Sharp whites, various greys. “Tundra.” Sandy browns, matte gold, “Desert.” He went through the last three fuzzy changes. Autumn woodland, urban, and grassland.

“The joints are obviously the weakest points, but the weave will stop standard rounds if you want to do some battlefield yoga. There's a cooling and heating system in each. Even your desert gear.” He waved at the smallest suit. “Nights are cold. With camo and heating system engaged, constant radio, GPS,” a tap on the left wrist, “And flashlight use,” on the helmet's forehead, a red light went on, then was replaced by brighter lights on the temples, “The battery will last thirty hours.”

Cool. She felt an eager grin stretching her cheeks.

“I can add more for different missions.”

“I'm sure you could.” Emily hummed.

Tony's finger shot up. “Oh! And the best part.” A helmet was brought down and held out.

Turning it in her hands, she realized that it wasn't round like most helmets. It had... edges? She held it at arms length. “Oh my god. It's a fucking lion. You made me a Power Rangers helmet.”

“Hey!” He started to object, then fell into laughter. “Okay, I did, but it's the coolest Ranger helmet ever.”

Coughing up laughs, she shook her head. “And here I was thinking you'd make me some badass Stargate shit.”

“I could.”

Her laughter choked. “Uh?”

“But it'd add another ten pounds of materials, not mention you'd need more power, so probably more weight.” Tone completely serious, he was stroking his goatee. “At that rate, I should just make you an Iron Suit of your own.” Tony shrugged. “But you told me you didn't want one.”

Emily stared.

In a sudden movement, he folded forward, clapping his hands together, nearly falling to his knees to beg. “Please tell me I can build you one.”

“I'll never wear it.”

Like any little boy told no, his whole frame drooped, and he groaned loudly. “You're killin me, Em. Your codename is Sekhmet, goddess of vengeance and war!”

She shrugged. “Design something for Natasha. That leather outfit could use an upgrade. I'm not the only one who gets shot on missions.”

He snorted. “She'd never wear something like what she wants you in.”

“I know, but she'll wear something with kevlar weave or a few protective plates that don't impair her gymnastic stunts.”
"Her current uniform has kevlar weave." He argued.

Emily straightened her shoulders. "Then make her something better." A beat, and she softened her expression. "Please. She'll wear it."

After long moments of studying Emily he nodded. "I built you a new rifle too." He turned to a shelf and brought down a sleek weapon, explaining that its design had taken into account a million little details that made it better than what she'd been using.

Slumping into a couch after the third session in as many days of training in her new armor, Emily groaned. "My everything hurts."

Steve joined her with a chuckle. "Did you do any training after you left D.C., Em?"

"I went on runs with Nat." She argued. "And battled h-" when the hell would Clint tell Steve about his hawkbabies? This was getting ridiculous! "Hellions."

He lowered his protein shake to give her a look.

"Friends' kids." She grumbled.

His eyebrows rose. "Practicing?"

Bowl of popcorn in hand, Banner sank into a chair. "Practicing for what?"

Pink graced Steve's cheeks, but Emily snorted. "For when the gates of hell open and set loose the demon army."

Banner's hand paused halfway to his mouth. "Babysitting?"

"My brothers keep threatening to have kids."

Popcorn crunched. "Auntie Em?"

Why did her name have to be Emily? She changed the subject. "Any progress on your green to pink problem?"

"A little." Banner responded. "I have a few more ideas that I'd like to work with."

Natasha appeared, looking fresh and immaculate as always, and slid into one of the chairs. "Maybe we should work on trust exercises with the big guy."

Around his popcorn, Banner stared. "Trust exercises."

"Yes. Trust exercises. If he knows he can trust us, we'll work a lot better together." Natasha replied.

"And this is your idea or Fury's?" Tone suspicious, features flat, he glared.

"It was Emily's," was Natasha's casual reply.

It was.

Banner blinked at Emily. "It was?"

"She suggested it to Fury months ago." Natasha went on. "Before you met Dr. Cho."
Surprise settled on him. “Really?”

Emily shrugged. “Yea. I guess I did.” It felt like forever ago that she'd been arguing with Fury about being sent to Seoul and whether the Hulk could be treated like a person. Hadn't he also said something about her being like Avenger glue or some nonsense?

“You think you can get the Hulk to trust you?” Banner demanded, tone somewhere between incredulous and suspicious.


“You do?”
“He's a little wild, but he hasn't dropped a tank on my head yet, so yea. I trust him.”

Banner didn't look like he could handle what she'd just said, and he sank back into his chair, glazed eyes on her.

“Isn't that a poor premise to base trust on?” Tony swaggered in, dropped to a free couch, propped his feet on a low table, sucked from a water bottle. “Just because he hasn't dropped a tank on your head doesn't mean he was trying not to.” He smiled at Banner. “No offense.”

Banner blinked.

Heels clacking on tile, Pepper joined their little circle, sitting not next to Tony, but between Emily and Steve. She pat Emily's knee. “Tony doesn't understand sandbox trust.” She smiled at Tony's pout.

From where he'd been lurking behind Emily, Clint added, “That and Emily has bigger worries than the Hulk.”

She rolled her head to look at him.

Tony coughed. “What's bigger than the Hulk?”

“Hellions.” Clint grinned, darted a glance to Natasha, and let his grin become a full smirk. Ever since they'd told him and Laura that they were talking about maybe having kids, he'd been cracking jokes at every opportunity. He loved the idea of hormonal Nat and pregnant Nat and and milk-vomit-covered Nat. In his own dorkish way, he was being supportive and easing Natasha into the concept that she could be trusted to be a mother. And he was going to do it in the most obnoxious, teasing way possible.

“Today.” Almost frantic with nervous energy, Natasha strode across the bedroom floor, grabbed Emily's hands from her book, and pressed them to her lower stomach. “Do it now.”

“Okay.” Such love stared back at her that she went teary.

“And hurry up about it. I want you naked.” She did, but she said it mostly to distract from her sudden emotional storm.

Emily chuckled, gently slid her hands around Natasha's hips. She rose from the bed, kissed her chin, her nose, her cheeks. “Thank you for saving Earth.”

The familiar pain of healing erupted not only in her lower abs, but her head, twisted and burned and
made her gasp and sweat. She was panting before the pain shifted to tingles. When those faded, she was trembling, only standing because of Emily's grip.

“It's the hormones, little fox. There was more to this than just your ovaries.” Emily shifted them, bringing their bodies together, taking Natasha's weight. “I'm sorry.”

She could barely keep her legs from giving out as a storm raged behind her eyeballs, through her veins, made her hot and cold and limp as a noodle. The most she could do was focus on Emily. Had she always smelled this good? Sucking in a deep lungful of Emily sent tingles down her spine. She found the energy to bring her arms over Em's hips, lace her fingers, squeeze a little. Her Emily. Hers.

Against Emily's neck, she smiled. Her chaotic lover, brilliant idiot, gentle warrior. “Moya Emilishka.” Her tone was nearly feral.

Emily gasped. “Nat?”

The uncertainty in Emily made Natasha pause. Where was this possessiveness coming from? She managed to pull back to meet Emily's eye. So beautiful. Were they always this incredible? So dark, barely a hint of brown in those midnight irises. Or was that blue? Were they actually a midnight blue? It wasn't fair how beautiful Emily was.

Creases that had formed around those lovely eyes abruptly vanished, and Emily laughed. “Holy crap, I didn't think it'd be this intense!”

Annoyed, Natasha leaned away. “What?”

“The sterilization stunted you.” Emily was frowning. “Emotionally. I'm pretty certain that over the years your body repaired most of what was done to you, and it helps explain a lot of the trouble you had with emotional attachments. Trouble in addition to the psychological bullshit,” was quickly added before she went on. “I just didn't think there'd be this much chaos after I reversed the last of the damage.”

“You're beautiful, Em.”

Emily's expression went weird before she laughed, a sweet, pleased sound that ended with a kiss. “So are you, my sleek little vixen.”

Natasha shivered. “Say it right.”

Her gaze searched Natasha's face for a moment. Gently, perfectly, she whispered the name she'd given Natasha. “Mon petit renard rouge.”

Another delicious shiver traced her nerves, ended in her lips and nipples and toes. She drew her Emily into a long kiss, full of tongue and moans and need.
Barely a week after Emily had reversed the sterilization, they were at an extensive property in upstate New York that Stark money, leftover resources from SHIELD, and reacquired ones from HYDRA, had paid for the Avengers to train at. Construction equipment was everywhere. The skeleton of a giant facility poked up from the earth. Tony had been working on more than Emily's armor over the past several months.

Its basement floors went deep. The sub-basement floors already designed, built, and hidden by other contractors went deeper. There would probably be over a dozen contractor companies from various parts of the globe working on this project before it was done. Only the Avengers, probably only Tony, would know all the facility's secrets.

The team was taking to Emily's idea of trust exercises with relish, enough that only a week into them, and the Hulk could be convinced to follow a basic strategy. Only smash two targets. Stop smashing to wait with Hawkeye for a minute before smashing more. They also learned in that short time that Hulk liked Natasha the best.

“Hulk like redhead.” He'd said one day when Natasha and Tony were arguing about strategy. “Hulk make metal man stop talking.” She'd had to scramble to prevent Hulk's good intentions.

Naturally, Tony had made some quip about Natasha being able to sing the cranky green baby a lullaby to put him to sleep. An attempt at getting Natasha to sing was attempted next. She had an average voice, but she wasn't going to let Tony know something about her wasn't superior. She let the term lullaby be coined in compromise. It wasn't inaccurate, really.

Any of the Avengers should be able to get Hulk to stop smashing, but Natasha was willing to set the example despite how much the giant green rage monster terrified her. Emily didn't believe she was that scared of the Hulk, thought she was exaggerating her story of being chased by him through the bowels of the SHIELD helicarrier when Loki had first appeared. Natasha wasn't sure how she felt about Emily not believing a truth from her mouth.

While they showered at the end of the long week, Natasha cuddled her swollen, tender breasts, protecting the overly sensitive tips from the spray of water. She couldn't even remember PMS from her teenage years. Had she even had a period before she was sterilized? How old had she been when she'd graduated? Sixteen? She groaned at the continuance ache. Would it always be this awful? All tender body parts and ridiculous cravings and unreasonable emotions that she couldn't quite control.

“Why did I want fully functional ovaries?” She growled at the her shower companion.

Emily snickered. “And you fell right into my cycle too.”

She scowled. “I hate you.”

Eyes closed against the shampoo and water streaming from her head, Emily pouted. “Still want to get pregnant? It only gets worse.”

Natasha looked down at her breasts again. They'd get even bigger with pregnancy, then with nursing. As if they didn't already get in the way. A new mission outfit, maybe armor, would be essential. Not only would she need it for changes in her size, she liked the idea of hiding a
pregnancy as long as possible. The less her teammates saw of it, the less they'd hassle her about a pregnant woman on the battlefield. If she and Em were going to plan children, they needed to work and replace the significant funds they'd spent over the past year.

There was also the emotions she'd have to deal with. Wading through their ups and downs all week had been hell, every moment seemed so much sharper, more wonderful, more terrible than ever. Pregnancy hormones would only make them even more chaotic. Why did she want it so badly?

“Nat?”

“I expect foot massages.” Natasha stated. Laura said they were the greatest thing ever during pregnancy.

“I'll ask Clint for tips.” Emily agreed easily.

She really was totally committed to this. “My Emily. So incredible.”

Em smiled around the water, wiped it from her eyes to blink at Natasha. “So, you don't hate me?”

Purposely, she dragged her eyes over Em's wet frame, a slow, lingering perusal that made Emily fidget. “I suppose you have enough good qualities to keep me around.”

“Guess that means I have enough brownie points stored up to not be kicked out for this.”

For what? Fingers tweaked one of her tender nipples, and she shrieked. “Emily!”

Teeth shone at her. Natasha shot a hand over to return the favor, and Emily howled, slapping hands protectively over her breasts. “Ow! Seriously, are we three?”

Natasha stuck her tongue out. “You started it.”

“Bitch.”

“Move over. It's my turn to rinse my hair.”

Stroking Lizzie's hair, Emily wished she could do more to ease her best friend's well-founded fears.

“Aliens came to Earth again, Emily. There was another hole in the sky!” Lizzie had been ranting for a while now.

“I know. I saw it on the news too.” A fight so suddenly upon them that SHIELD hadn't known anything was going on until it showed up on the news. By the time that teams had been rounded up and sent in, Thor and his scientist girlfriend had pretty much kicked ass. She and Natasha had been at the farm, babysitting hellions while Clint and Laura took a mini-vacation to the beach. This was the first time that Emily had seen Lizzie since the Norway mission. They'd had a lot to catch up on, like hugs and other things that couldn't be done or said over not-encrypted video conversations.

“Why wasn't your SHIELD there doing that protection thing they're supposed to do?”

Emily shook her head. “Nat said no one even knew until the dark elves showed up. Thor had no time to warn us.”

“How am I supposed to not have nightmares now?” Lizzie demanded, jerking back to glare at her.
Right. Good point. Shouldn't mention that the weapon they'd had was powerful enough to cause destruction across universes. Earth had merely been the useful launching platform for their attack on the realms. Earth's central location among them at least explained why they got lots of alien visitors. Definitely don't tell Lizzie that either. Emily tried a smile. “I'm not in boot camp any more.”

Eyes narrowed. “I'm sorry, did I say hole? I meant holes. Lots of them.” She punched Emily's arm. “And let's not forget the giant alien monster that terrorized London for a couple days before it got wrangled and shipped off to a cage somewhere.”

“You make it sound worse than wedding planning.” Emily joked.

“Don't go changing the subject.”

“Does your mom still want your wedding to happen in Paris?” Emily pressed for the new topic.

Lizzie growled. “No. Anything Europe seems off the table now.”

“I hear that Moscow is nice.”

“Moscow.”

“I'm learning Russian.” Emily grinned. “And I could probably convince Nat to help you with VISA's.”

Finally, Lizzie was drawn from her funk. “You're learning Russian?”

She rattled off some of usual stuff that she and Laura used in the kitchen. It sounded way more impressive than the, “Chop the onions,” that it was.

“Is that why she's got an accent this time?” Lizzie had noticed when the three of them had lunch the other day. It wasn't strong, but enough. Natasha was careful not to talk to anyone when they went out. She talked to Lizzie though, because she was Emily's dearest friend.

Natasha had given Emily a backstory for the accent, that she was practicing for a mission. Emily didn't want to lie to Lizzie. Her pause to think took too long.

“It's not.” Lizzie answered her own question. She fully straightend from their snuggling, searched Emily's face. “I'm not sure how I feel about the changes you're going through. Bram,” her elder brother, “says that some of it sounds like PTSD from warfare.” He'd served in the Army for almost twenty years. Several tours in hot zones. “And training like special ops gets. You're not just a medic for the Avengers, are you?”

“No.”

“And something happened to Natasha too. On top of the way she stares at you adoringly.”

“Yea.” Natasha's dreamy stares were the best.

“I'm not sure how I feel about you being in a relationship with someone like her either.” Lizzie went on.

Emily started to bristle.

“Don't you try arguing with me that your girlfriend doesn't have a truckload of skeletons in her closet. She's an assassin for fuck's sake.” A huff that turned to a lip-bite. “The assassin. The Black
Widow has been indicated in the murder of dozens of people and high-class espionage for decades. It's a name that's probably been passed on from one badass to another for a while. Rumor is she commanded a seven-figure fee before she joined SHIELD. Only someone dangerous enough to protect that title would have it.” Lizzie had finally taken her fiancé's advice and gone back to school to master in history. She liked her mysteries and research.

The unasked questions hovered between them.

She thought about Bulgaria, about Norway, the handful of other missions where her life had been in danger, the one where Clint and Natasha had been sent to retrieve something from Yakuza bosses in Tokyo. The injuries she'd taken care of when the two had stumbled back to Emily and the cloaked quinjet. All the blood soaking Clint's outfit that couldn't have come from the scrapes and bruises and minor fractures across his frame. So much blood.

“The Avengers are the most dangerous people I've ever met.” Emily began. “The Black Widow knows how and has used more implements of death than I've read books.”

Lizzie's gaze shot to the overloaded bookshelves.

“And she's been training me to use a good deal of them.”

“Em,” breathed out.

“She's also been training me as a spy.” Emily watched worry tighten Lizzie's form. “But you have to understand that it's almost the same training as any SHIELD agent gets, that the CIA and FBI give their field agents. My primary role is medic, Lizzie, but sometimes getting to a patient or defending them requires more than good intentions. The new skills I've learned have saved our asses a few times.”

Lizzie swallowed unhappily. She knew Emily's darkest secrets.

Emily took a breath. “As to Natasha.” She collected her thoughts. The memory of the Black Widow pointing a gun at her yet not shooting weighed heavily on her. “She's dangerous, yea. But she's got this incredible capacity for tenderness. She's so vulnerable with me, so open. There's stuff I can't talk about, not without her okay on it, but it's how I know she loves me.” Smug pride found its way to her lips. “And with all the practice and experimenting I've been able to do with my gift, I've turned into the best lie detector ever. She trusts me, Lizzie. Greatest spy of the century, and she trusts me.”

Giggles bubbled up out of her. “Shit. Nat trusts me and my judgment enough that she lets some of her guard down around you simply because I trust you.”

That took Lizzie by surprise.

“Hurry up and put that wedding together so I can bring Nat. She'll have fun keeping your mom on her toes and giving you space to breathe.”

Lizzie had finally taken enough power over her own wedding to set a date, place, and send out invitations. It was in Denver. Close to her home, her friends, and her life. And Kyle's. They'd both bitten the proverbial bullet and suffered their families' wrath by being selfish adults. On June 4th, Emily would have to wear that hideous dress. Even though it meant that Lizzie's wedding might become primetime news because Agent Sekhmet was part of the wedding party, Emily retained the title of maid of honor and the traditional duties of that position.
Herding bridesmaids. Planning the bachelorette party and wedding shower. Other stuff that Emily wasn't sure she could handle. Luckily, Natasha swept to the rescue and involved Laura. She'd been maid of honor in two weddings, bridesmaid in three others. Huge family and lots of friends on top of being awesome and pretty had that effect. The incredible woman was full of great advice.

Also, Natasha wanted to help do this normal-person thing. She hadn't gotten the chance to really be involved in Clint's wedding. She'd been stuck in an undercover op that lasted too long, had barely made it to the wedding, gotten there with more than a few injuries and little sleep. A little sneaking had shown Emily that Natasha was debating between a dress that might stop Emily's heart or a vest and trousers affair that might do the same thing when she wore it as Emily's plus one.

Almost lost in the rhythmic motion of Natasha's knife sliding back and forth over a whetstone, Emily spoke without totally thinking it through. “I think I was wrong.”

The knife paused, and Natasha looked up. “About what?”

Emily twitched at the sudden lack of something to watch. The world around them came into focus again, the trees at their backs, distant construction to their left, knee-high grass around them, wooden benches under them, warm spring sun keeping off the slight nip in the air. The last good frost of the season was forecasted for that night. She rolled her shoulders. “I was wrong about you being emotionally stunted.” A breath. “Kind of.”

An eyebrow arched at her.

“I mean, I've been paying extra attention since we reversed the sterilization.” Exactly thirty days ago. “I think it was more the added influence of the menses cycle that,” how to say this? Emily groped at her thoughts, pleading with them to fall into some semblance of order. “You fell into my cycle. The next day you got thrown into PMS, maybe as soon as the moment you weren't sterile anymore. You hadn't dealt with the emotional upheaval and hormonal imbalances of a cycle in decades, and I think it overwhelmed you, made you feel things more intensely than you'd ever felt.”

Natasha's gaze went to the knife. It shifted in her hands, the light catching on the blade, tossing it in different directions. “You don't think I was emotionally stunted after leaving the Red Room?”

Emily worried her lip. “No. I think you were.”

Eyelids slotted.

“Ugh. Dammit, Nat. Between the shit they did to your head and the sterilization, you were definitely not operating at full human capacity in terms of emotions and how to deal with them in a healthy, productive fashion.” A sudden terrible understanding flashed. “Oh, shit, Nat. I'm not trying to invalidate the intensity of your love for the hawks or me or the struggle you went through to get there.” She scrubbed her face as a sharp expression on Natasha quickly shifted to pleasant. “My big mouth.”

Light bounced off steel again, highlighting a slow smile forming on Natasha. “Have I ever told you that when you fumble with emotions it makes me feel normal?”

Was that a real smile? Emily studied Natasha's face, the delicate skin around her eyes. Yes. It was a real smile. She relaxed. “I'm happy to be of fumbling service, my lady.”

“Idiot.” Natasha went back to sharpening her knife. “Want to see a movie later?”
Was Natasha offering a trip to a movie theater? She hated theaters. Loud, dark, limited exits. They'd been a total of four times. Always sitting in the very back. Their first trip was alright; they'd been the only people there. The second time, too many people had crowded in, forcing people to sit next to Natasha, and Emily couldn't watch the movie because of her antsy lover. Half an hour of watching the spy fidget later, Emily had given up, dragged Natasha out, and pushed them both into a run to burn off nervous energy. The next two trips hadn't gone much better.

“You've been wanting to see the Morgan Freeman movie that came out a while ago.” Natasha said. “I think this is its last week in theaters.”

And given that it was Tuesday, the theater should be quietly empty. The knife slid across the whetstone. Emily smiled. Natasha was offering an apology for getting mad at Emily's less than eloquent attempt at voicing her thoughts. Grinning, Emily nodded. “Yea.”

Amused smile not shifting, Natasha asked, “Are you going to keep staring at me while I sharpen all my knives?”

“Probably.”

Three strokes later, she lifted the blade for a careful inspection, ran the edge along a piece of paper, nodded, wiped the blade, and set it aside. Another one was chosen, but she paused. She reached for one more and tossed it at Emily.

“Hey!” She objected as it landed harmlessly in her open hands. A cloth, whetstone, and oil bottle followed. “Natasha!”

“I taught you how to sharpen a knife. Why don’t you help?”

Emily started to object, but a new thought occurred to her. Natasha was letting someone else handle her equipment, letting Emily put an edge on a knife that she might use to defend herself. Even ignoring that Natasha might go over the blade again later when Emily wasn’t looking, this was a big deal. Her insides threatened to melt.

“You're still staring.” Natasha didn’t look up.

“There's nothing wrong with me staring at my gorgeous little fox.” Emily retorted.

A glowing curl that had escaped the tail the rest were trapped in was brushed behind an ear, and Natasha peered at Emily again. Warm sunlight sparkled in her seafoam-emerald eyes. Her smile grew soft, tender, wry. “Sharpen that, and we can leave sooner to get to those dark theater seats you like cuddling in so much.”

This was exactly the kind of moment that Emily lived for. Sharpening knives with her superhero-assassin-spy lover before they went to the movies like normal people. Also known as Natasha being adorable. “Da, lisichka.” She bent to her task before Natasha could roll her eyes.

Emily popped the spent round from her rifle, slid a fresh bullet in, chambered it, and put her eye back to the scope. Clint had already tossed another apple up. Her shot went wide. Again. She growled and rubbed sweat from her forehead. Too much time fucking with the bolt action. Why couldn't she have a semi-auto rifle with a magazine? Because Natasha was an old, Soviet-trained, pain in the ass and Clint agreed with her archaic sensibilities. Fucking method-chained assassins and their devious ways of getting Tony to design a gun according to their desires. Precision over everything. Ugh. She pinched her fingers slamming another round in and let off a string of curses.
that made her grateful the radio channel wasn't open.

“I can't believe you're trusting this amateur to shoot near your head, Hawkeye.” Tony teased from
his safe vantage point a hundred yards away. He was closer than the apples, and she was tempted
to shoot his coffee mug.

“She doesn't have a spotter.” Clint shrugged, tossed another apple that Emily managed to clip.
“She's at the limit of her accuracy range. And it's windy.” He eyed the scored apple. “I'd say she's
doing pretty good.”

Smiling, she chambered another round. Maybe she wasn't so irritated with him after all.

“Good work, Em. Let's switch to lateral movement.” Clint said and started jogging, sack of apples
bouncing on his hip.

She missed all six, but she was okay with that. Clint had said she was doing well. And she had the
added bonus of getting Tony to scream loud enough that even Clint heard it when she made the
coffee cup explode.
Loading their groceries from the shopping trip to the nearby town, Natasha missed their house in Atlanta, the anonymity of their lives there. Too many people recognized the Black Widow here. Even when she hid her trademark hair, she stood out too much in this little town so close to the construction site. The people in the store would talk to her about everything from fashion to politics to the hell she would burn in for every reason from murder to communism to homosexuality.

It was exhausting and the reason that the Avengers rotated through grocery duty, sometimes bribed a construction worker to do it. She was reaching to shut the trunk lid when a fairly tall, broad shouldered woman in a tight sweater caught her attention.


Natasha didn't like the way this woman was looking at her Emily, and she liked how Emily stiffened at the attention even less. She slid an arm around Em's waist. “She always looks amazing.”

Light blue eyes shifted to her, traced across her frame, darted back to Emily, who remained stiff and silent. “Emma, wow. I'm so glad I ran into you.”

Natasha brought up a sweet, deadly smile. “And who are you?” She studied the woman's solid stance, fluid movements, distribution of muscle and fat. Trained fighter of some sort. Boxer maybe.

She finally seemed to notice Natasha's possessive hold on Emily. “Huh. You must be that spy she's dating now.” A light frown. “I thought you'd be taller.”

This disrespectful, rude bitch had all the trappings of a jealous ex. Oh. Natasha shot Em another look. “Hey, do you want to get going?”

Black eyes flashed to her, desperation clear in them.

“No way! Emma, we should totally grab lunch. My treat.” A hand reached out to touch Emily, but it ended up in Natasha's grip, being twisted to the point of pain, but not quite injured. The ex gasped, tears jumping to her eyes.

“I don't appreciate your rude behavior.” Natasha kept up her sweet smile. “Whoever you are, you need to leave. Now.”

“You fucking bitch,” snarled the woman. Veins had popped out along her neck. “I just wanted to have a nice conversation with my old friend.”

How far had this woman traveled to confront Emily? Were there any nosy news crews or paparazzi around? She let go, pushing the woman away.

“Friends?” Emily's voice was cold, sharp as ice. “You broke my heart, Leslie. We aren't friends.”
Leslie shook her head. “I just didn't know what I wanted, Emma. I regretted leaving you as soon as I-”

“Saw me on the news, that I’m friends with superheroes, that I’ve got a gift that can heal your dying uncle?” Emily spat. “He can make a trip to D.C. and wait in line at the hospitals I visit once a month like everybody else. You aren't poor. If you got all the way up here, you can afford to fly him there. And if you can't,” she shrugged.

“Emma, what the fuck? Did this crazy bitch turn yo-”

A fist collided with Leslie's face, and Natasha was surprised that it wasn't her own. Emily whirled, grabbed Natasha's hand, stalked off. Or tried to.

Leslie had grabbed her. “Em-”

Again, Natasha was surprised that it wasn't her own fist in Leslie's face. This time, however, the woman blocked the punch, and Emily followed up with a jab. Another. Pride welled in Natasha as Emily put her months of training to use making Leslie sweat. A certain amount of respect for Leslie built as well. She'd seen a fair few fights to move that smoothly. Natasha debated stepping in between them or letting Emily handle this.

“Emma.” Leslie panted after recovering from a kick to her stomach. “You've been working out.” She licked her lips in obvious lust.

Emily came to a shivering stop. She whipped toward Natasha. “Give me your knife.”

“No.” She stared down black eyes.

“You gun then.”

There was murder there, Emily's sweet nature totally overturned by her black temper, by this Leslie's arrogant cruelty. Natasha looked at Leslie. “Leave.”

“No!” Emily shrieked. “Not before I make her hurt. Like she hurt me.”

Natasha was too stunned by the outburst, couldn't move fast enough to stop Emily from jumping back into the fight. A heel connected with a knee. Leslie dropped, and an elbow found her neck.

“Emily!” Natasha grabbed a wrist, but Emily twisted out of her grip, sent a kick that Natasha had to jump, and used the distraction to grab Leslie. There was something metal in Emily's hand. She drove it toward Leslie's eye.

Barely, Natasha swept Emily's legs out from under her before the key could find its target. She disarmed and pinned Emily to the ground. While Emily bucked, she sent Leslie a scathing look. “Leave.” How many times did she have to repeat herself?

“She was going to blind me.” Leslie whimpered.

“Worse.” Emily hissed.

“What have you done to my Emma?”

Natasha allowed that comment only because she knew how well Emily had hidden her darkness. “Get out of here.”

Leslie had risen. “Emily would never hurt a fly when she was with me.”
“You don't know anything about Emily.” Natasha retorted. “And you're an imbecile.” Should she incapacitate Emily and carry her home or incapacitate Leslie, then drag Em away? Briefly, she assessed the parking lot, was relieved that the sleepy town hadn't given them an audience yet. They kept their food runs irregular and sporadic to detour ambushes. It had paid off.

“I was with her for years! I loved her!” Leslie raged. “What the hell could a soulless KGB spy know about love?”

Underneath her, Emily seethed. “Don't you fucking talk about Natasha like that, Lez.”

“She's the Black Widow, Emma! She's an assassin!”

“She's my little fox, and if you say anything else bad about her, I'll do worse than take out your eye.” Emily's voice had shifted to sharp ice again, her body straining against Natasha's hold. “She's a better person than you could ever hope to be, more gentle, more loving, more compassionate, more **everything**.”

Leslie choked. “But she's...”

Emily growled.

“Don't you know what was in those files that got released?” Leslie whispered.

“I know more,” was the brutal reply. “Just like she knows more about me than you ever did.”

The woman swayed. “But...” Her brow was tight, the creases deep.

“She knows I'm a little unhinged, that I'm capable of hurting you. It's why she's sitting on me.” Emily sighed, rage gone. “But she'll take me home and make me tea and let me cuddle with her anyway.” A deep breath. “You can let me up now, Nat.”

Slowly, she released Emily, standing and keeping her body between the former lovers. She watched Emily's eyes carefully. They were still calm when they met her worried gaze.

“I might need to see someone about my anger issues.” Emily offered a tiny smile. “My restraint seems to have been tested lately.”

Afghanistan. The missions since. Working with Tony and Bruce. The stress of being exposed. Simply being the Black Widow's lover.

“**Moy beshenyy tselitel'**.” Natasha held out her hand. “**Chay**?”

Fingers tangled, but Emily didn't immediately turn. She faced Leslie once more. “I'm in love with Natasha, and we're starting a family together. I never want to see you again, Leslie.” A breath. “Maybe you should have read the files on me too. You'd appreciate the fact that I didn't have a gun today even more.”

Leslie took a few stumbling backward steps, her eyes darting wildly before she tripped, caught herself, and fled.

“Coulson didn't tell me your partner was as frightening as you, Romanoff.” A dry, slightly amused woman's voice carried from beside a large pickup truck. Slightly built, but carrying herself with confidence and power, was Melinda May. Experienced, skilled operations specialist, almost as good as Natasha, loyal SHIELD agent. The old SHIELD that was trying to rebuild under Phil Coulson's leadership. Fury had passed the role of director to him in hope that the sensitive man
Since the emergence of HYDRA, he’d been fighting back, hunting down the heads while Natasha had more or less been hiding. Protecting Emily, especially during her public hospital visits, but otherwise hiding. Surprisingly, she only felt a little cowardly for it. She had been doing paperwork. Research. Using her contacts to try and find Loki’s scepter. And funneling resources to Coulson.

Keeping tabs on Emily's brothers' bodyguards and the Barton farm was time consuming too. At least the latter could be done with happy visits. Lila and Cooper adored their newest sibling almost as much as Natasha loved her little namesake.

On top of all that was the research into sperm donors and the scientists who were almost to human trials for their same-sex parentage embryos. Not only hiding, she allowed herself. She’d been busy trying to build a better world too.

She felt Emily's gaze. “Melinda May. She's one of Coulson's.” The two agents went way back, Coulson had been May's supervisor, then field partner. Natasha had worked missions with both of them together and separately.

“Is she?” was the unimpressed, suspicious response. She had a point. Faking faces and voices could be done easily enough, and Natasha had been given no warning that May was coming.

May swiped at her own face, pinched a cheek and pulled hard enough to leave a red mark. It didn't fizz or come off, her face remaining her own. “You're right to be worried. There's a rogue agent out there with nano-tech permanently adhered to her face. Last I saw her, she was wearing mine.”

The tone and attitude were right, as was the sharp gaze, fighter's posture. Natasha was almost convinced. She exchanged glances with Emily, flicked her fingers.

Emily held out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

It was studied at before May shook it. Her brow twitched when she tried to disengage yet Emily didn't.

“Why are you here?”

“One of my teammates is dying and another has been affected by unknown tech that we can't decipher. We'd like your help.” May shifted slightly. “Before you disappear again.”

Natasha was more than pleased that even Coulson hadn't been able to find them when they ghosted off to Georgia. If he had access to camera feeds, facial recognition software, and the processor power to sift through the images, then he probably could. *If* he knew where to start looking, which was why they were always extremely careful going to and from *and* within airports.

“You're one of Coulson's team?” Emily asked.

May's expression sharpened. She understood what Em was doing. “Yes. I'm Agent Melinda May, SHIELD agent working under Director Coulson.”

Em's trick would be known by everyone fairly soon at this rate, but even Natasha could be fooled sometimes. Better safe than sorry. Especially now.

Releasing the hand, Emily glanced at the groceries. “You couldn't have caught us *before* we went grocery shopping?”
“Sorry.” She made no attempt at sounding sincere.

They'd driven back to drop off the vehicle and groceries, warn the team they were leaving, and pack bags for a trip of several days. May picked them up in a quinjet and flew them about an hour to SHIELD's new headquarters. An old building that Natasha guessed had secrets that predated Coulson.

The man himself greeted them. “Romanoff. It's good to see you again.” Shaking her hand warmly, “I'm sorry I missed you during that holiday party.”

His eyes said that he knew that she'd been compromised then, but his warmth was sincere. She surprised herself with the feeling of camaraderie that he invoked and gave him a real smile. “Me too.”

“You look like shit, Coulson.” Emily cut in.

Behind him, his agents shifted at her casual rudeness. Loyal, protective underlings. Cute.

Coulson chuckled, his smile turning wry. “Yes. I suppose I do.” Dark green and blue along his face. A few light scrapes. But he moved like he had bruised ribs. The bruising under his eyes from lost sleep was the real tell. He held out his hand in greeting.

Emily closed her hands around it. A moment later, “Close your mouth.”

His teeth met in time for his jaw muscles to ripple, and his entire frame go rigid. The bruising retreated, scabs faded and dropped, and sweat pricked. May had taken a step forward, a few of the agents tensing as well, but Coulson's sudden ease of posture and light chuckle settled the tension. “Geez, Fortune. You don't give much warning, do you?”

“What fun would that be?” Enjoying herself, Emily grinned. “Feel better?”

Coulson took a deep breath, sucking in air to his very limit. It came out in a satisfied whuff. “Yes. Man, cracked ribs are the worst.” As he turned to introduce his agents, various expressions exploded on them. Even May showed surprise. He touched his face where the bruising had been, glanced back. “Wish we'd had you on the team before New York.”

Something deep flitted across May then. How close to dying had Coulson really come when Loki stabbed him?

“I'm here now,” was Em's easy reply.

“Yes you are. I know my team is eager to meet you,” his head tipped at the agents, “But we're more eager to have you help Mack. You can leave your bags with May if you want. She'll take them to your room.”

They did and followed Coulson through the slightly musty building to a section that smelled of astringent cleaners and fresh plastic. On a bed in the generous infirmary, an impressively large man waited. Slept. With a good deal of equipment keeping him alive. “An earthquake caused a cave-in that caught a lot of us flatfooted on the last mission. Mack got the worst.”

Emily stepped close, and Natasha set herself out of the way. Glancing down the corridor, Natasha caught sight of a young woman behind yet another glass panel. There were quarantine markings. She met Natasha's gaze, flinched. It was interrupted by another young woman, wearing freckles
and a lab coat, who began to list Mack's multiple injuries.

“What's your name?” Emily interrupted.

“Oh. I'm terribly sorry. Dr. Jemma Simmons,” was the rattled, yet bright answer.

“Thanks, Dr. Simmons, but I don't need a rundown.”

“Of course.” Her hands fluttered. “Sorry.”

Gently, Emily smiled. “Why don't you watch your monitors? I think you'll like the show.” She bent to her work, and Natasha went back to studying the facility, the agents who crowded the glass walls to watch. Most were worried for their teammate. A few looked merely curious. One wasn't watching Em at all, only had lusty eyes for Natasha.

Excited squeaks came from Simmons. Her attention was jumping from monitors to Emily, the patient, and back. “Incredible!” She started to ramble about regeneration rates, how Emily's gift should be studied...

“Dr. Simmons.” Natasha modulated her voice to quietly commanding.

The woman froze.

“Emily works better in quiet.”

“Oh. Yes. I'm sorry.” Her mouth kept moving, but nothing else came out, her mind already back to analyzing Emily's progress and how to copy it into tech for anyone to use.

What would it take to dissuade her from trying to convince Emily to let her be studied? She went through scenarios.

“Doctor?” Emily spoke up.

Simmons jumped. “Yes?”

“I've repaired the kidneys. Could you remove the dialysis tubing?”

The young doctor jumped to, flicking up privacy curtains, uncovering the naked patient, and disconnecting equipment. On it went. Emily occasionally having Simmons remove tubes and needles until the man was bare except for bandaging.

“I'm done.”

“Why is he still asleep?” worried Simmons.

Emily yawned. “I'm keeping him that way. Thought he'd like to have an inch of dignity before he wakes up surrounded by hot babes.”

Simmons blinked, blushed.

“The blanket,” nodded Emily.

“Oh!” She sprang to cover Mack's dignity, though he certainly had a lot to be proud of.

“Coulson, you want to be in here for this?” Natasha called over the curtain where Coulson had stepped.
He ducked in, and the patient's eyes fluttered. Emily stepped back next to Natasha. While he sputtered awake, Emily's attention had riveted on the gap in the curtains, to the quarantined section.

“The alien city?” Mack asked.

Alien city? The fine skin on Coulson's face pinched, and Simmons went stiff. Intriguing.

“Flooded and sealed.” Coulson said.

Mack nodded. “What caused the earthquake?”

“We're not sure.” Coulson replied.

This was interesting. She couldn't wait to hear the whole story.

“Mack, meet Emily Fortune.” Coulson waved at Emily who blinked, tore her attention from the quarantined patient. “I'm sure you've heard of her.”

“If that's the Black Widow beside her, then yea. I've heard of Sekhmet.” He seemed to finally notice his lack of injuries. “And I am more than grateful to have your help. I was awake when they found me, and it didn't feel good.”

Emily's hand was dwarfed by his giant paw. “Not a problem. Happy to help.”

He chuckled nicely. “I've caught the news more than once about you in D.C., helping out in the hospitals. Anyone with eyes and half a brain can tell you don't always like helping.” He leaned forward. “But you do it. And I can't tell you how much your actions give the rest of us hope. A former SHIELD agent, putting herself under constant public attention like you do,” slowly, his head was shaking, a smile heavy on him. “Thanks, Fortune. And you too, Romanoff.”

She shook his hand, nodded.

“Life in the spotlight can't be easy for a shadow ops agent like you.”

Her gaze slid to Emily. “It's worth it.”

Mack followed her gaze, nodded. “So, doc, am I good to go? I feel fantastic.”

Simmons paused, looked at Emily, who nodded. “It's not euphoria. I might have taken care of an old injury or two while I was in there.”

Mack stilled, then slowly rotated a shoulder. When he'd fully tested the mobility of it, he laughed. “Thing's been killing me since I wrenched it fighting HYDRA.”

Em shrugged. “Where's my other patient? Is it the girl in quarantine?”

The way they reacted, it was obvious.

“Mack, glad to see you're up. Go get some pants and something to eat.” Coulson clapped his shoulder before guiding the women out.

At their approach, the quarantined woman jumped from her bed, fidgeted in front of the glass.

“This is Skye. She was exposed to an alien device, and we aren't sure if she's been affected. The other person who was exposed underwent a good deal of mutation.” Coulson explained.
“I can't help someone I can't touch.” Emily hummed.

Readying herself to grab Emily in case she did something stupid like try to break the quarantine, Natasha shifted.

“Wait.” An awed voice came over a speaker. “Coulson, is that the Black Widow and Sekhmet? Holy shit, it is!” Skye wiggled like a rockstar groupie. “I'm a huge fan.”

She lifted an eyebrow, and Emily's lips peaked.

“Widow, back in 2011, how did you get past the third firewall when you hacked t-”

“Skye.” Coulson stopped her. An indulging expression was on him. He clearly cared for Skye as more than a superior officer, and it was reciprocated. Not romantic. Familial. Not like Em and Steve. Natasha reviewed the info from the file she'd read on the way. Hacker. Tech expert. Age: 25. Found living homeless in L.A. as a “hacktivist,” sharing secrets for what she saw as the good of the world. Idealist. No family. Ah. Coulson was a parental figure to Skye.

“Call me Emily, her Romanoff.”

“Right.” Skye nodded.

“I'll come back later.” Emily shifted. “But right now, my stomach is telling me I haven't eaten since breakfast, which was way too long ago, and I'm sure your teammates could use relief from all those cuts and bruises I saw.”

Skye's expression fell. No one liked being trapped in quarantine. It was a cage. “Yea. Okay.” She perked up slightly. “Hey, Fitz has some brain damage from oxygen deprivation. It's old, but think you can take a look?”

“No promises. Brains are weird, but I'll try if he wants me to.” Emily agreed.

“Thanks.”

Pizza was ordered, agents introduced themselves, several availing themselves of Emily's gift, awkward moments happened, and Natasha enjoyed being around people who had similar career choices as herself. And terrorizing them. She had a reputation to uphold after all.

Up at the tall drink of gorgeous, who'd been glanced at yesterday, but not seen again until ten minutes ago when Emily had finished breakfast, she gaped. Her mouth spoke by itself, "You are tall."

The woman gave her an unimpressed purse of lips and poured herself coffee.

Low laughter came from behind Emily. "You've been living with me too long."

She looked down and back at Natasha. "And she's really tall."

Natasha argued. “Anyone over five-six is tall to you. That's not saying much, Em.”

“She's like, five-ten!” she gestured up at the clouds. “Tall.”

“Five-eleven,” was Nat's correction after she glanced down, probably at the woman's thin slippers. Half the agents bunked in the facility. More than a few had wandered into the common kitchen
area in their pajamas and bed hair. “Possibly six foot.”

Emily eyed the length of her again.

"Agent Romanoff." The tall woman greeted Nat, ignoring Emily.

"Agent Barbara Morse." Natasha responded.

Morse seemed pleased. "You know who I am?"

A smirk twitched.

“Of course you do.” Morse fidgeted. Her gaze switched between Nat and Emily.

"Why is everyone always looking at me like that?" Emily grumbled. "Could you stop?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Like you're trying to decide what makes me special enough to be Natasha's partner or if I'm just a cover." Emily griped. "I'm not her damn beard."

Morse didn't even flinch. "It's pretty annoying when people stare at how tall I am, which is five-eleven, for your information.”

Embarrassment added onto her own frustration and heated her cheeks.

There was a light brush on her wrist. Natasha. "Em, we're surrounded by spies again. You got these looks in D.C. too."

"Not the same." At the Triskelion, she knew a lot of the agents. They'd watched her train, then go on missions, knew Natasha as more than a legend.

“Put your coffee down, and I'll take care of your injuries.” Emily turned back to Morse.

Morse shook her head. “It's alright. Just some scrapes and bruises.”

“I'm here.” Emily grunted. “Less obtrusive than a physical, better than all of your lab equipment, and can take care of old injuries. Funny thing about spies. They tend to accumulate injuries.” She slid a look to Natasha. With the exception of serum-enhanced spies.

A deep draw of coffee was taken. “Alright. You have me convinced.”

Emily shifted in her chair. “Good. Come over here, because I don't want to get up.”

Morse took two long steps from coffeepot to table and slid into a chair. Her cup thudded to the table. One of her hands was offered.

As had become habit with non-trauma patients, Emily started from the top. Her initial scan revealed a plethora of bruising, fractures, and strains, but nothing dangerous or out of the ordinary. She opened up a line of conversation that she'd worked out with Natasha several months ago, who watched and helped keep the conversation going. Subtle interrogation. HYDRA infiltration remained an issue. Most of the agents hadn't noticed the second reason that Emily was giving everyone physicals. Morse not only noticed, but commented on it.

“You're vetting me,” was said in a tone soft enough that it didn't travel past Natasha.
Emily listened to Morse's body, tensed at the adrenaline and slightly increased heart rate. Well, if she was going to notice, “Are you HYDRA?”

“No.” Her body agreed with her reply.

“Are you loyal to Director Coulson?”

Her heart sped up. Hard eyes looked at her, then Natasha. “No. I'm loyal to SHIELD.”

Fair enough.

“Do you think I'm pretty?”

“I refuse to answer that question in front of your girlfriend.”

Emily grinned and healed that last painful skeletal bruise. “You're a little anemic. It's an intake issue.” She wrote it down in the notebook that Simmons had asked for after Emily mentioned doing physicals on the staff. “Dark greens are high in iron. Simmons will probably prescribe you supplements or whatever later.”

“You lied.” Morse said.

“What?”

“That was way more invasive than a physical. I normally demand dinner and good beer before I let someone that deep inside me.”

Heat flushed her cheeks again, and Natasha's brow cocked.

“The least you can do,” Morse went on, “Is call me Bobbi.”

While Emily sputtered, Natasha laughed at her. Fucking spies. “Bobbi. Okay. I'm sorry I made a big deal about your long bones. Call me Emily, and I won't mention how tall you are again.”

A satisfied grin flashed at her.

“For at least the rest of today.” Emily amended.

Morse's eyes narrowed before she started chuckling. “Fair enough, shrimp.”

“You'll be happy to know that there's zero HYDRA in your ranks.” Emily began her report to Coulson in his cute little museum of an office. Antique pens, diagrams, toys...

Coulson nearly drooped, his relief vivid, nearly palpable. “You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that.”

“Several of your staff have reservations about you as director, and there's a corporate spy in one of your lab workers.” Natasha inserted.

Smiling, Coulson waved it off. “Not unexpected. I'll pass the report on to May.” He patted it. “I'm still dazed that I can put aside the worry about HYDRA moles.” A wry twist, “In my current ranks at least. This is a huge relief.”

The entire process of carefully interrogating the staff over the past several days had been grueling,
and the following paperwork obnoxious, but seeing Coulson's reaction, knowing the important gift they'd given him, Emily decided it was worth it. Maybe a more relaxed Coulson would help his staff calm down.

Tension hung in the base like a bad fart. Everyone was on edge, and it all seemed linked to their last big mission, the one that had injured so many, killed one of their field agents, and quarantined Skye. The one with that alien city that Mack had mentioned, that had been flooded with seawater, that HYDRA had raced them to, that seemed the peak of bitter points among some of the agents.

“The only person I can't vouch for is…”

“Skye.” He shook his head. “It's alright. I know her loyalties.”

She remained in quarantine, nearly gone out of her mind with cabin-fever and boredom. Emily had played some board games and puzzles with her and the other agents who visited and shared a book she'd finished on the flight in.

Emily went on with her report. “Your tech specialist, Fitz. I couldn't totally reverse the damage in his brain, but he's got full use of his hands again. He says his head isn't nearly as jumbled.”

More relief. “Great!”

“Last time we talked to Fury he said he was impressed by your work.” Natasha hummed.

The man nearly melted in his chair. “You're in contact with Fury?”

“He contacts us,” was the half-answer.

“Steve said to tell you hi.” Emily said.

He definitely slid down in his chair a little.

“So did Clint and Tony and Bruce.”

“And Pepper.” Natasha added.

“Yea. She happened to be on a vid chat with Tony when we popped in.”

“How's Thor?” He asked.

Emily pouted. “Tony says he's keeping the peace in the realms. I haven't met him yet, won't until we get a lead on Loki's scepter.”

Shoulders and expression going rigid, Coulson asked too calmly, “Did HYDRA get their hands on it?”

They both nodded.

“If I hear anything, I'll be sure to pass it along.” He promised.
Translations:

Moy beshenyy tselitel’ – my mad healer
Chay – tea
The next couple days flew by faster than any had in a long time. There was a little earthquake. Weird given their location over stable bedrock. Natasha went on a mission to retrieve some physical intel where her skills and contacts were of more use than any on Coulson's team. Lab work finally satisfied Dr. Simmons, who was in charge of the lab, infirmary, and all things bio, and she allowed Skye freedom from quarantine. There was an alien fight in the base.

Apparently, a species called the Kree had done some experimenting on humans thousands of years ago. The experiments had resulted in humans that could be changed, given powers, turned into weapons by artifacts that had been left behind. Artifacts and a underground "city" that Mack had mentioned. The science wasn't explained, not that Emily would have understood advanced genetics like that. One of the Kree had shown up again. The experiments had been his species' attempt to create warriors for some ancient war, and he knew that one of the artifacts had been activated, a new superhuman-weapon-warrior abomination created. Not agreeing with those ancient Kree and realizing the danger of these superhumans, he'd shown up to destroy them and the artifacts.

An Asgardian had tracked his arrival on Earth and chased him down. The Lady Sif, one of Thor's friends and Odin's finest warriors. Emily had nearly pissed herself in fangirl glee to even be in her presence. When Lady Sif had learned that the Kree guy wasn't a warmonger, but a good guy trying to right old wrongs, they'd settled to calm discussion of how to hunt the abomination down. Some woman named Raina, who'd worked with some shady people like HYDRA.

An earthquake had struck, not much more violent than the other one, but much, much longer lasting. Emily didn't have a lot of experience with quakes, but the long-lasting ones were supposed to be the most violent. This one had felt like it was building up to really bad, but all it really done was make boobs shake and knock coffee cups off tables.

The part that made it really exciting was that the source of the shaking was Skye.

Lady Sif demanded to take Skye to Asgard, for everyone's safety. The Kree guy wanted to kill her. Coulson didn't like either plan, nor had most of Skye's friends and fellow agents. They'd run, taken Skye somewhere safe. Hence the alien fight. The battle had thrashed hallways and half the lab as the Kree tried to kill Skye and Lady Sif tried to take her into custody.

Emily had followed in their wake, making sure no one ended up dead. And the entire time, the building had been shaking. She wasn't exactly clear on the details, but somehow Coulson's team had convinced Sif to leave Skye in Coulson's custody. They'd subdued and erased the Kree's memories, and Lady Sif had escorted him home.

Natasha had been upset that not only had she missed the fight, but that Emily had managed to get herself hurt. Just a little cut from flying glass. Only six stitches in her shoulder. Nothing big. It didn't hurt that bad. The only part that Nat hadn't been troubled about missing was the cleanup. She was only mildly irritated that she'd missed the team's reactions.

Half of them were afraid of Skye. Okay, most. Fitz wanted to keep treating Skye like a normal person. Simmons had been upset about Fitz having changed DNA results to hide Skye's changes, but she seemed otherwise supportive. As was May.
Skye more or less locked herself in a secure, reinforced cage. She stared at Emily when she showed up. "What are you doing here?"
"Came to hang out."

"I'm fine."

Emily snorted. "Yea. No." She slid her backpack around and unzipped it, displaying its contents. "I brought a hard drive full of movies and series, candy, popcorn, chips, salsa. And beer."

The girl's face wrinkled in confusion. "Why?"

She pushed past her, into the dull, but not terribly tiny cell, plopped on the small bed thrust against a wall. "I have a bad habit of making friends out of dangerous people." The beer hissed as she opened it. Drifting vapor brought up the malty scent of hops. "Have you met my partner? Former KGB assassin, has a laundry list of bad deeds a thousand miles long, gorgeous hair, cute butt." She sipped beer, watched Skye as she hovered in the doorway. "You know, the other woman around here that everyone's terrified of."

Skye finally folded herself on the other end of the bed. "There's something wrong with you." A tickle of a smile was in her eyes.

"Yep." She burped up beer bubbles, laughed with Skye at herself, handed over the hard drive. "Pick us something to watch."

The drive was plugged into her laptop, and she gave Emily a look that said her opinion of Emily's intelligence was plunging. "You brought horror movies? You realize that my power is tied to my emotions, right?"

"If you cry at Disney movies, then we're just as screwed. I didn't make a playlist for movie night, woman. It's my personal library. Pick something."

By the third day, Skye had eased enough in her presence to laze comfortably, rest her head in Emily's lap and fall asleep to the silly comedy she'd picked. That was about the only improvement in her. Despite emotion-control-training sessions with May and long conversations with a very good psychologist, she wasn't learning how to control her power. Well, subdue, yes, but not control, not make it useful and part of herself. And she had nightmares that sent things shaking. Lack of good sleep and stress had her ragged. Injured too. There was bruising and hairline fractures all along her arms, concentrated in her forearms.

Emily had no idea what had caused it.

Natasha sighed as Emily reported her Skye visits to her as they lounged on their bed. "You are as bad as Clint."

"You know how he finds strays and injured creatures, takes them to the vet, tries to take them home." Nat paused. "He used to before Laura put her foot down and told him she wasn't taking care of two kids, chickens, and his pets."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"How many broken little boys have you tried to put back together?" She prodded.

"Skye isn't a little boy," nose crinkling, Emily argued.
"But she is a lost, broken, scared kid whose family doesn't know how to help her."

Yea. She was. Emily took a drink of tea. "You make me sound like a mom with empty-nest syndrome."

Nat chuckled. "You and your bird analogies are cute."

She grunted.

"What's your plan, momma bird?"

Slowly, Emily grinned. "Take a stray home with me."

Natasha's shoulders stiffened, and her eyes tightened. "Home?" Only some adventurous neighbors, Bartons, and Steve had visited their house, and Natasha was keen to keep visitors low. Not just for the sake of security. She didn't share well, especially her private space or Emily, with strangers.

"Upstate New York." Emily explained. The Avengers' training facility, where they had fun annoying the construction crews by testing its usefulness. More than one wall had paintball stains. Arrows were lodged in the infrastructure. The Hulk's antics had forced an entire section to be rebuilt.

Those hardhat wearing people hated going into shadowy corners of the site. Monetary bonuses had happened at least twice that Emily knew of. Apparently, being part of covert operations training wasn't part of their contract. There were constant complaints about being tied up, grabbed from behind, pegged by paintballs, and drugged into unconsciousness. Pansies.

Slowly, Nat nodded. "Plenty of space far away from civilians to learn about her," she paused, probably avoiding saying power, for Emily's sake. "Gift."

"The facility is being designed to withstand earthquakes that won't ever hit. For Hulk to play, remember?" Emily took another sip. "I have no idea how to help Skye train, but it's a start, right?"

"Yes. It's a good start."

The next day, during a dull part of a dull movie, Emily brought up her offer to take Skye home. "Train with Avengers?" Skye's eyes actually lit up.

"More or less." Emily considered. "Might keep you away from Bruce though."

"Yea." Slowly, she nodded. "Okay."

When they told Coulson, he hemmed and hawed, couldn't decide if he liked the idea well enough to let Skye go. After a bad mission involving some crazed enhanced people and Skye losing control of her powers, Coulson couldn't get her and the Avengers out of his base fast enough. She swore that the man nearly cried like a mother hen under his calm facade as he ushered them onto a quin.

Natasha worried that there was more going on than they'd been read into.

Cap and a stand of trees went flying. Tony held out the popcorn, crunching as Emily grabbed another handful. "Do we have to give her back to Coulson once she figures out how to not blow everything up?" he asked.
Emily huffed, "She's not a toy, Tony."

"You're right. She's not a toy." He crunched. "That girl is Avengers material."

Flash grenades exploded around Skye. The ground under Tony and Emily's seated butts rumbled.

"Maybe." Emily hummed. "But she's got a superhero family already."

Tony pouted. "Who?"

"Coulson and his team."

Lips pursed, and Tony swayed. "Okay fine. Coulson counts as a superhero. What is he to her? Brother, uncle, dad?"

"Dad figure."

Slim arms slid around Emily, followed by a familiar light perfume and fiery curls falling across her shoulder.

"Emily's trying to be a mom figure." Natasha chirped, softened her tease by kissing Emily's cheek.

He laughed. "She moms everybody. Did you hear her rant at me about my caffeine intake yesterday?"

Natasha was sliding around, settling herself in Emily's lap, helping herself to the popcorn. "I also noticed you trembling from overdosing on it the other day."

"Okay, fine!" He tossed popcorn at them. "I'll refrain from the caffeine if you don't tell Pep."

"Have you finished that new tac gear for Natasha yet?" Emily asked.

"You don't play fair." He grumbled.

She chuckled. "Neither do you."

"Fair enough. So, are you two finally going to give us a show o-" He spluttered at the rain of popcorn that descended on him care of Natasha.

"Oh my god. You guys are such dorks!" Skye was in front of them, sweating from her workout with Steve, staring like she'd discovered that Thor wore a tutu.

Natasha threw the rest of the popcorn at her.

"Tony," Emily whined. "We're out of popcorn."

The bowl was thrust at him, and he grumbled and moaned, but got up to go make more. He really was a pushover under his playboy attitude and narcissism.

"More salt this time!" Natasha yelled after him.

Skye stole his seat while Steve began dodging a rain of arrows. "Where the hell is Hawkeye? How does he move around like that?"

Natasha pointed. A blur of movement said the bushes there weren't swaying only in the wind. Arrows flew out of them. Steve barreled through, but Clint had already changed position. Natasha
pointed again before another arrow went airborne.

"How do you know where he is?" Skye demanded. At Natasha's smug silence, she caught Emily's eye. "Can you tell?"

"Sometimes." She tried, but couldn't figure out where Clint was now. Steve yipped as a rubber-tipped shaft got him in the butt.

"You need more training, Em," came Nat's input.

Emily didn't argue, instead prodded at one of Natasha's ticklish spots, grinned at her squeak.

"Emily!"

"What?"

Lovely green eyes narrowed at her. "You're starting trouble."

Impish, she agreed. "I'm trying to."

"Never thought I'd meet you two let alone watch you act like newlyweds." Skye was smiling brightly.

Natasha scowled until Emily tickled her again. "Emily!" And proceeded to yell at Emily in Russian, which meant she was playing along. Emily strained up and kissed her. Fierceness kissed back. Fingers prodding at Natasha's sides ended the embrace, got Emily swatted and cursed at more.

Skye giggled, and Emily decided that the day was a sound win. Giggling was a huge improvement over dour, scared, confused kid.

Word had come that SHIELD was fighting amongst itself, Coulson had gone into hiding, and his team, well, they were struggling. Natasha thought there must have been a couple of spies among those they'd interrogated. A couple had seemed off, though not enough to have tipped their hand. Skye didn't know. Yet. Emily had been keeping her busy for the past few days, using the excuse that she needed distraction while the rest of the Avengers were ambushing a big arms dealer. There was intel that the dealer either had Loki's scepter or knew where to find it.

Aside from Skye needed supervision, they'd decided to leave Emily behind given the new tech installed on their quinjet and at the Avengers Tower care of Dr. Cho. Neither were as powerful as the cradle in Seoul, but the one on the quin would keep a patient alive til either the tower or Seoul or Emily could be reached. It was nice not to worry about her team when she wasn't there to patch them up. Okay, not worry as much.

"Hey, Emily." Skye panted from where she'd stopped running.

"Yea?" Emily asked when she'd stopped too.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure."

"I was wondering," came hesitantly.
Several quiet breaths later, Emily answered one of Tony's usual questions. "Yes. Nat and I use toys. Regularly."

The girl choked. "Uh."

"Skye, I'll answer pretty much anything about myself. Only Natasha's history is off limits." Emily offered, hoping to ease Skye into asking her question.

It worked. Skye chuckled. "Why stay here with me? You have brothers. Why not go visit them while everyone is off on a mission?"

"Alan has a business to run, and Kevin is in a new relationship." She shrugged. If she didn't have Skye to worry about, she'd go hang out at the Barton farm or go see Lizzie. Not going to tell the scared kid that though. Okay, she wasn't a kid. Not at twenty-five and older than Alan. Skye just looked like she was eighteen, maybe twenty, and her insecurities tugged at Emily's maternal instincts.

"What about your mom?"

Emily stiffened. "I'd rather try and brush Hulk's teeth than spend time with my mother."

Skye was perplexed. Her idea of family must come from Disney movies. "But she's your mom."

Emily stretched, looked around at the forest they were running through. "You are much better company than my mother. Fuck. HYDRA agents are better company than my mother. At least they'll throw punches instead of guilt at me."

"Huh." Hands fiddled in pockets. "I had this image of you coming from a happy home."

"Why?"

"Because you're warm." Skye shrugged. "You're easy to be around. I just assumed you learned that from your parents."

Emily gave up stretching. "My parents taught me how to hurt people."

Skye gaped. "Were they agents too?"

For a moment, she met Skye's eye, then dropped it to stare at the weeds. "No. They were just assholes who dumped their parenting responsibilities on me and used us as punching bags. Physical and emotional punching bags. I killed my father when I was fourteen and let my mother hide in her room while I tried to be the kind of parent I'd always wanted."

"And I thought my dad was bad."

She looked up.

"My dad is a psychotic murderer, but I couldn't bring myself to kill him when I had the chance."

Emily studied the girl before speaking softly, hesitantly. "I have nightmares about killing mine. It changed me. Some days, I scare myself."

Their eyes met again. Shadows haunted Skye, like they seemed to haunt all of Emily's superhero friends. "So, you're a decent human being because you chose to be."

"That's what you got out of me telling you I committed patricide as a teen?"
"Yea." Skye shrugged carelessly. "I guess so."

"In that case, I should stop hiding stuff from you while you still think I'm cool." Emily sighed.

The shadows thickened, and Skye's open expression closed. "What?"

"Day before Nat left, she got word that another SHIELD cell took over your base. Coulson is off the grid."

Panic flashed. Branches and leaves shivered with Skye's emotions. "Is, are..."

"No one was hurt. I don't really know more th-" over the rattling of leaves, she heard jet engines. She turned to the sky. There wasn't much to see through the thin cover except blue sky, some clouds. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Quinjet engines." This didn't feel right. Wasn't right. Miles of airspace around the facility were restricted. There shouldn't be anyone in the air right now. "Get under cover," as she grabbed Skye. They dove under thicker branches. Emily double checked if either of them was wearing bright or conspicuous clothing. Nope. Tac gear, armor, day packs. The most conspicuous thing was the Starkified Power Ranger helmet hanging from Emily's pack. Even that wasn't shiny or particularly eye-catching.

"What other SHIELD cell? How did you hear about this?" Skye hissed. "Did Coulson know about them?"

"Nat has a way of knowing everything important." With more hidden contacts and access to secret things than Emily could begin to imagine.

Her clothing was grabbed. Anger growled at her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Emily flinched, but met and held her gaze. "Because you can't use your gift with any accuracy yet. What if you got there and accidentally hurt your team while trying to help them?"

Skye deflated and let go. They waited for gunfire or dropping troops, but the jet engines eventually moved beyond them.

"How do you feel about California?" Emily eventually asked.

"I used to live in L.A. in my van."

"Does that mean you'll like my suggestion of taking a vacay to So-cal?"

Skye frowned. "Sure. But why?"

"'Cause they won't notice a few extra earthquakes, and I've got friends who might host us." Emily paused. "You don't mind the smell of weed, do you?"

"Did I mention that I used to live there?" Skye started to smile.

Noise from moving brush sounded, and Emily's pistol was halfway in her hand when she was tackled. She rolled with the soldier, got her knee between them, shoved for space, slammed her elbow into a throat. The soldier coughed, stunned. Emily kicked at their helmeted head until they stopped moving. A second fight drew her attention. Skye was grappling with another soldier. Tired, she was sloppy, losing. Emily looked for her pistol. It was lost among the leaves and grass.
She made it to Skye's side as she threw her opponent over her shoulder. He landed hard, didn't rise. Gunshots followed, clipped the trees around them.

"No! Icers only!" A woman's voice yelled. "Skye!"

Skye whirled to the new threat, her arms going up. Trees exploded, and the handful of people on their six flew backward. The wave continued past, rattling trees and grasses for some distance.

"Oh my god." Skye moaned at the devastation.

Emily swallowed against the adrenaline, the fear of Skye's power. "Time to run."

"No. We can't leave them," argued.

"They shot at us!" She waved at their downed enemy. "Yes we can."

But Skye was running toward the woman in a dressy sweater and yelling over her shoulder. "She's hurt! Emily, you have to help her."

Dammit. She glanced at the others. Three soldiers in full gear. Two knocked out. One holding her head and trying to rise. Emily touched her face, put her to sleep. A man in a suit and flak vest, groaning, but not getting up. He had a piece of tree in his shoulder that was plugging the blood vessels it'd severed. A glare was managed at her before he passed out on his own. He'd live. "Fuck you too," she grumbled.

"Emily!"

She ran to Skye, skidded to knees to inspect the injured. Her eyes were open, pain obvious. "I know you." The tall, sassy agent who Nat had teased Emily about when she'd realized that Emily had drooled over her a little. And then proceeded to remind Emily that she was Natasha's. A long, thorough reminder that emphasized Natasha's impressive array of sex techniques, strength, stamina, and cunning. It was a tempting idea to flirt with other women in front of Nat in the future just to get that reaction again.

"Bobbi. Why are you after Skye?" Emily demanded.

Bobbi coughed. Blood flecked her lips.


After a few curses, Emily yanked the spear-like sliver of wood that had impaled Bobbi's chest, repaired the damage as fast as she could. Ruptured blood vessels, lung, membranes, the works. Half an inch down, and the woman's heart would've been opened too. Lucky her.

Whimpers turned to coughs and yells as the lung was sealed. Emily stopped after the immediate danger was past. She checked their surroundings for reinforcements. Nothing close, but probably soon.

"Why are you after Skye?" Emily repeated.

"She's dangerous," was the blunt reply.

Emily whipped up her knife, poked it at Bobbi's throat. "My gift is healing, but that's not what makes me dangerous."

"Emily? What're you doing?" Skye gasped
"Proving a point."

Bobbi's eyes darted. She groaned. "We can't just let her run around, Emily."

"She's a good person, just needs some time to figure out her gift." Emily did some more healing just to deliver pain. "Why the hell are you attacking an Avenger on Avengers' property? I don't appreciate it. Pretty sure the others won't appreciate the news either."

"The Avengers should be under SHIELD jurisdiction too." Bobbi grunted.

"Maybe." Emily growled. "I'll talk to the others about it later, then Coulson, him being director of the new SHIELD and all."

She heard more boots in time to... watch them fall to a man who moved like water among them. A familiar, terrifying man. "More are coming." The Winter Soldier said. "We need to go."

"Uh." Emily blinked.

Bobbi gasped. "Isn't he...?"

"Bucky," finished Emily, eyes on the flash of metal not covered by camouflage fabric or glove. Because she couldn't think of him as the Winter Soldier or she'd freak out. Her healed wrist twinged at remembered pain.

"Hurry." He snapped impatiently. "Finish healing the woman and let's go."

For Skye, Emily closed Bobbi's chest, but left the damaged layers above the ribs for her to deal with, then took her gun, noted it was a non-lethal icer, and growled. "Don't make me regret saving you." She shot Bobbi with the dendrotoxin, grabbed Skye, and followed Bucky.

One of the quinjets had only two guards on it that even Emily could have taken care of alone. Bucky didn't even break stride knocking them out. The three of them were in before Emily thought to ask, "Can you fly this, Bucky?"

"Yes." And he slid into the pilot's seat. "Close the bay door."

She and Skye rolled the unconscious guards out before closing it and strapping in. "You didn't kill them."

"What?" Skye asked.

"Bucky." Emily repeated, "Didn't kill anyone."

Skye stared.

"Today, at least. Why?"

The jet was at cruising altitude before Bucky replied, and he did after setting the auto-pilot and standing. "You were letting them live, protecting that woman's life. I followed your lead, Sekhmet."

"Emily." She shook her head. Sitting in a tiny, enclosed space with a legendary assassin who'd previously tried to kill her and her friends and a young agent who couldn't control her dangerous powers really was too much. Even for her. She needed an ounce of normal to keep the adrenaline
from making her lightheaded. "Just call me Emily."

"Emily," he repeated. "I," he frowned at the floor, back up at her. "I went back to HYDRA after you healed me, but they wanted me to remain a monster, to never remember Bucky Barnes. I want to remember Captain America's friend. And if I can't, I don't want to be a monster any more. I will follow you, Emily, and learn to be someone new."

"Do you have any average people in your life?" Skye whispered.

Emily lolled her head back. "Do you?"

A little smile twitched. "Touché"

Bucky was waiting.

"Why come to me and not Steve?" She asked.

"He doesn't have your power."

Fair enough.

"I need to call Nat, let her know I won't be home when she gets back." Emily dug out her phone, left a message for Natasha, didn't mention anything about Bucky or the attack with the justification that it would only worry Nat when her head needed to be in the mission. "So," into the cold tension, "Where'd you point us, Bucky?"

"South. Do you have a destination for us?"
They'd barely touched down in the dry hills of southern California when Skye started freaking that she'd killed people by losing control. Emily felt vibrations in her teeth. "Hey, no. Skye, you didn't kill anyone. I checked."

Tears burned at her. "If you weren't there, Bobbi would've died."

"You wouldn't have been out there if I hadn't taken you," was her calm reply.

Skye choked, sniffled. "What about next time, wh-"

"They attacked us, Skye. You didn't ask for this, but you're trying. You're learning to control it."

Emily insisted. It was the result of that Kree tech reaching those underground caverns that SHIELD had later flooded. Alien interference, not human choice. Skye shook her head, trembled and cried, hid her face in her hands. Everything kept shaking, nearly knocked Emily off her feet as she crossed the short distance to Skye and gathered her in a solid hug. "It's going to be okay, Skye."

Bucky's heavy gaze on her, his hand on a gun, Emily refrained from sighing. She closed her own eyes to hide her fear, stroked Skye's back, considered trying to encourage the happy-hormone glands to flood Skye's system. Tricking glands was risky. Too much of any hormone could seriously upset the body. The right balance wasn't easy to find, especially not in an unfamiliar body or changed physiology like Skye's. Emily made the decision to try when the shaking eased off and stopped.

"How did you figure out that you can do more than healing in people?" Skye whispered.

Emily stilled. Was Skye a mind-reader too now?

"You can keep people asleep, stimulate hormone release and stuff, right?"

Not a mind-reader, just really observant and smart. "Honestly, I didn't even know til I started working with SHIELD, doing more than just healing people." She thought back to learning to scan her brothers for their well-being, emotional stuff, then taking care of their hurts. "It didn't even occur to me to try until," Natasha's reset.

"Until what?"

"Weird shit that happens on missions." Lucky for her, Skye was a field agent and didn't bothering questioning the kind of weird that SHIELD worked with. "Trial and error is all that's helped me figure it out." She shrugged. "Not like there's been any other gifted healers to teach me how. I'm still learning."

They stayed in the hug for a moment longer. Abruptly, Skye jerked back to poke her in the chest, stare at her face. "Oh my god, you can make people horny too, can't you?"

Emily laughed. She could see the smut stories now. "Yea. I probably can." Her imagination tickled, "Nat will kill me when I test that on her later."

Skye joined her giggles. A glance at Bucky showed a slight shift in his expression. What kind of personality was buried under HYDRA's tool? What had Steve told her about Bucky? What had Lizzie rambled on about when she'd been on her Howling Commandos binge? A flash of blue caught Emily's eye, broke her train of thought. She turned to look over her shoulder and gasped. A
man in trousers and plaid button up had appeared.

He didn't have eyes.

"Hello," was his friendly greeting.

She stared at the distinct lack of eyes. No scarring, no...

"Please." His hands were being held up defensively. "I'm not an enemy."

Uh.

"I'm here to help."

Uh...?

"Emily?" Bucky's cool tone brought her out of her stupor. In his hands was a gun, live ammo, not an icer.

"In hindsight, appearing in front of you like this might not have been my best idea." The eye-less man said.

Emily's tongue shifted dryly. She coughed, managed to find her voice. "Give him a minute to explain himself." And how the hell he'd appeared out of nowhere! Bucky's gun didn't lower. He did nod, once, sharply. Okay, good enough.

The mysteriously arrived stranger smiled. "You're very interesting, Emily Fortune. So like us, but not."

Us who? Emily crossed her arms. "And you are?"

"My name is Gordon. As you are a healer, I am a teleporter. I've been watching over Skye since she came with you to New York. I'm impressed by the progress she's made under your guidance."

He paused, his eye-less face turning to each of them. How could he see? Why didn't he have eye sockets? "But I can take Skye to a teacher who has more experience, to a place where she will be safe."

That he'd been watching them didn't really make her feel any better. Emily checked on her companions. Skye was nervous. Bucky kept his gun trained on the threat. "Gordon?"

He turned to her with his easy smile. "Yes?"

Holding out her hand, staring when he accepted it. Wow. He felt like Skye. All strange, yet human, yet not. Good thing she had experience with interesting physiology or she'd be wishing even more that Nat was at her side right then. Reading his truths through the oddness was going to be a challenge, but not impossible. "Could you repeat that?"

His head cocked. "Your gift not only heals, but reads people."

No sense arguing with the eye-less, observant, teleporter. "Yes."

"You're protecting Skye. I appreciate that." Smile softening, he repeated his statement about a teacher and safe place.

Emily believed his words, that he wasn't a threat to Skye's well-being, that he wanted to help. "If he has a teacher for you, Skye, you're probably better off with them." She hated admitting it, yet it was
the truth.

"You believe him?" was Skye's squeak.

"Yes."

Her eyes went to Bucky. "I can't leave you alone with him."

Emily shrugged. "I specialize in helping assassins that want to be better people. Gordon, will you bring Skye back if she doesn't feel comfortable in this safe place of yours?"

"Of course." He nodded. "She will not be a prisoner." A breath. "I do not have to take her now. We can wait, but given your lack of control, Skye, it would be best to get you to a teacher sooner rather than later."

"It's your choice, Skye." Emily said.

Suddenly, Skye was hugging her tight enough that her ribs protested. "Thank you."

She squeezed back with her own affection. Between her own habit of adopting strays, Skye's little-kid-like adorable-ness and need for parental figures, they'd grown ridiculously close over their short acquaintance. "No problem."

The hug softened, but Skye didn't let go. "I'm scared," whispered in her ear. "What if I can't ever learn to control it?"

"Then give me a call, and we'll hang out in California." Emily rubbed her back. "But I doubt it'll come to that. You're already learning, just need some fine tuning. Coulson believed you could figure this out or he wouldn't have protected you."

That must have been what Skye needed to hear because she pulled back with a smile. "Thanks, Em."

They both turned to Gordon, and Emily gave him a dangerously sweet smile that Natasha would be proud of. "Take care of her."

Despite not having eyes, he noticed her threat and swallowed. "I will."

"Be careful, Skye."

An eye roll. "Yes, mom," all sassy annoyance. A moment later, Skye stiffened, gave Emily a worried, apologetic expression. Once again, she got a breath-stealing hug. Skye rushed out a low whisper. "I bet you were a great mom, and if what I overheard was true, you'll be an amazing mom again. I'll keep in touch."

Emily felt like she was still swaying even after the teleporter and Skye had vanished. Overheard what? She and Nat hadn't talked about their family plans outside of their bedroom, had they? How the hell did Skye know? Eventually, she settled her attention on Bucky, who'd holstered his gun again. "Alright. That plan changed real quick. I'm hungry." She looked at her outfit, then at Bucky's. "We need different clothes, then food. Does this quin have a bike in its hold?"

Clothes and dinner were quickly followed by stocking up on groceries and scanning Bucky's mind. Emily sat back after a few minutes. While fierce, snowcloud eyes stared at her, she thought about
what she'd felt.

"Maybe."

Bucky twitched.

"It'll help if I ask you questions and feel how they and your answers affect your mind." Emily went on. "The brain is weird, and I don't totally get it."

"When will you be ready to try?"

She scratched her arm. "I'll write out some questions tonight for us to get through tomorrow. It might take a while. We should find a hotel or cabin or something."

He was nodding.

What she was saying hit her. Spending time all alone with the Winter Soldier, without anyone knowing, not even Natasha. Should she tell Nat? Of course she should. But would Natasha show up and make things difficult just with her presence? Not show up and worry from a distance, making both of them miserable?

How was Skye? Would Cap appreciate what Emily was doing in secret? Would Bobbi try to chase Skye again? Had her team found Loki's scepter? Was she supposed to be taking care of anything for Lizzie's wedding? How was Kevin doing with his new girlfriend? Wasn't she the mom of one of his patients? Or was that a cover and he was dating his security and ex-HYDRA agent Agatha? Would Leslie try a-

"Emily?"

Right. This was half the reason she'd wanted to help Skye, that she hadn't questioned helping Bucky. She didn't want to think about Leslie. Emily liked people thinking that she was a really good person, but mostly she was good about finding ways to distract herself from unpleasant thoughts.

"What if I can't help you?" She blurted out.

How could eyes that light look that dark? It must be the weight of the stare. Bucky took his time with a reply. "If you can't help me remember who I used to be, then I want to do as the Black Widow has done."

"What exactly do you think that is?"

"Become someone who people call a hero instead of a villain."

Silently, she cooed at the adorably romantic notion. Outwardly, "Even if she is a hero, most people are kinda terrified of her."

Brow furrowing, "You are not."

Emily shrugged. "I'm in love with her."

"Romantic love?" His face twisted. "You perform sexual acts with her?"

She balked at his rude tone. "Listen here, old man. You are in no place to judge people based on their love for each other. If you're going to be a homophobic prick, I'm not going to help you."

Lip curling, rage brewing, she clenched her fists. "Steve told me that his best friend hated bullies. Do you know what you're being right now?"

The arrogance stalled, and he visibly clawed for perspective, memories. "I..."

She started to rip into him, opened her mouth, hot words ready on her tongue, yet... something made her wait. Maybe it was the confusion plastered on Bucky's face. The pain he held deep inside. Natasha was going to give Emily shit about broken boys later for this.

"I..." He growled. "There is a memory of a woman telling me that it is a sin to lust after other boys. I was ashamed of something that I'd been excited to tell her about."

For several hours, Steve and Emily had been discussing one deep topic after another. The last hour had been all about relationships, both friendly and romantic, how they differed, how they were the same. It was probably four in the morning. Both of them were tired as hell after a long day of acting like kids at the beach. How Natasha's wig had stayed on was a minor miracle. She'd gone to bed, left the two alone to continue chattering about whatever inane topics they'd started with.

Emily had wanted to follow Nat to her pillow, but a gut feeling had kept her in the living room, keeping Steve company. He'd eventually opened up about Bucky. They'd had a really tight relationship, full of good hugs and supportive words, but also fending off rude comments and bad jokes about how men that close must be even closer in bed. Steve had let it roll off his shoulders, yet Bucky had taken each jab personally.

"This is just another reason why the world needs feminism." Emily growled.

Steve's brow wrinkled. "Why?"

"So healthy, deeply emotional relationships between men aren't automatically deemed gay. Men can be touchy-feely and loving with each other just like women. Society's fear of homosexuality is ridiculous." And painful. And exhausting.

He flinched, rubbed his neck. "Yea."

Unease still lingered on him. There was something else he needed to talk about. She gave him an encouraging smile. "What else?"

"I really think Buck might be gay." Oh. She prepared herself for some even deeper conversation. "Or at least," his eyes shifted, "Like Natasha." He stiffened, "Not that I'm insinuating anything, but she d-"

"Steve." Stopping his frantic backpedaling with a gentle laugh, she pat his arm. "It's okay. She does. Nat is attracted to both sexes. I just happened to be the lucky one to catch her heart."

"Huh." He kind of grunted. "I wondered, especially after that kiss in..." He made a funny jerk. "Not that I think about it often. I just..."

"It's okay." She reassured.

He deflated, gave a tired chuckle.

She watched him, wondered if there was even more to this topic. "Is Bucky the only one who might have wanted more than hugs?"
Blue eyes darted to her, fear plain in them. Oh, damn. Was Steve really a bigot under all h-

"He's my friend," was said with absolute certainty. Not like he was trying to convince himself or her of anything else. Bare truth. "I'd feel terrible if he wanted something I couldn't give him, but I'd never hate him for it."

Relief flooded her.

"I think he's ashamed of himself. His mother asked me awkward questions about girls a lot." Steve frowned.

People like Bucky's mother were what made living in Atlanta a terrible decision. Most of their neighbors ignored them. Like normal, middle-class Americans. A few were really cool, especially the fabulous, extravagantly rainbow-decorating gay couple who lived three houses down. Then there was the collection of miserable naysayers who gave Emily and Natasha the full devotion of their hatred. Not only were they living in sin, with their homosexual acts and atheist views, but they refused to blame all Muslims for the acts of ISIS and the Taliban. Some days, only Natasha's gentle touch—yet very firm, okay, maybe painful grip—kept Emily from starting a real fight with them.

Natasha had bought Emily a rainbow flag to fly from their house. The guys, Billy and Jake, had shown up barely an hour after the flag appeared, expensive hard liquor and wine in hand, ready to celebrate. And commiserate. And offer their support. Natasha drank enough to admit that even she was having a hard time dealing with their shitty neighbors. Billy and Jake completely fell in love with the little fox then, and Nat was having trouble dealing with their friendship.

Sudden movement from Bucky snapped Emily into the present. A half step had been taken toward her, his flesh arm reaching out. His fingers stopped short of touching her. Anger flashed across him. "Dammit!" Frustration joined in making him tremble. "These memories come and go. No context. No connection to other memories. It's horrible!"


"Bucky. It's okay."

He started to shake his head, to allow emotions to take over.

Emily snapped forward, took hold of his hand. "Bucky!"

The metal fist stopped only an inch from her jaw. If it had connected, there wasn't a doubt in her mind, that she'd be dead. She could barely take a punch from Clint, let alone a serum-soldier. She most definitely felt hot liquid trailing down her thigh. Courage wasn't keeping her hold on his hand; it was abject terror.

Slowly. Agonizingly slowly, the metal arm retreated. Her eyes tracked it until it hung limply and stared until the adrenaline in Bucky's veins dissipated.

"You should breathe, Emily." He said calmly.

Her gaze darted up to his again.

"You're turning blue."

Breathing? How did she do that again?
One of her fingers was twisted. Painfully. "Ow!" The last of her breath spat out, and her lungs screamed, sucked air back in. It hurt almost as much as her finger. Her head went fuzzy, vision blurry. She wobbled. Only her chest and lungs could be focused on. Suck air in, let it out.

Hands were gripping her shoulders, holding her up, and intense eyes were watching her. "Good."

She stared at him, eyed the flesh, then metal hand, grimaced at the pee soaking her pants. "Aren't I just the epitome of someone to look up to," was her defensive sarcasm.

"The girl thought so." Bucky stated. His hands retreated, and he straightened. "But you should be more careful about your movements toward me."

Natasha had said similar words to Emily when they'd first arrived in Bulgaria, warned Emily that if she had to be woken from sleep, to be very careful about it. She would react violently to being touched in her most vulnerable state. Even after sleeping with Emily for months, she sometimes startled them both awake, grabbing and pinning Emily if they brushed in the night. Nightmares could be blamed for Nat's regression.

Those early lessons had stayed with Emily. If she had to wake Nat, she spoke to her before trying to touch her. The same was true if Natasha was focused on a project, especially servicing her weapons. Announce her presence first.


His expression twitched.

"Natasha's relaxed a lot around me, and I've gotten spoiled." Emily explained. "She made it for me, the Jumpy Assassin Protocol. Okay. I named it, but she wrote up the guidelines that kept me from getting stabbed in the middle of the night." Natasha. "I need to tell her that you're here with me." She couldn't do this alone. She needed Natasha by her side for this. Two more days til Nat was due back was too long.

Fierce hawk eyes were on her, the body behind it too still with repressed energy. Natasha blinked, and Clint's expression shifted to one she knew. Hidden concern. "Did Em trip and break a nail again?"

She looked at her phone again, shoved it away. Smoothly, she brought up a mask of pleasant excitement. "She says she went to the beach. Now seems like a good time to take a few days leave."

"That is a really good idea, Romanoff." Tony perked up. "I could use a few days chasing Pep around instead of being cooped up with you."

"Nothing like a heaping disappointment to make you want to do anything but work." Bruce sighed.

No scepter. No intel on it. Not even the satisfaction of taking down a HYDRA cell, only a low-rent arms dealer and a few clients. It had seemed like a huge aggravation five minutes ago. Now, all Natasha could think about was that Emily was all alone with the Winter Soldier. "Want to join us?"

She smiled at Clint. "Maybe we can find you a girlfriend at the beach."

He slid into the easy banter. "It would be nice not to feel like a third wheel."

She glanced at Steve. "Maybe we should bring Captain Single along with us. I don't think he's
kissed anyone since me last fall." Teasing him, she tried to make a decision about whether to tell him about Bucky. Her first instinct was to keep it secret until she knew how to handle it. Her second was to bring along as much muscle as possible in case they needed to defend Emily. But would Steve be capable of hurting Bucky if it became necessary?

Given his performance in D.C. it didn't seem likely.

"Natasha, I am perfectly capable of finding dates by myself." He'd barely given the nurse a thought, then shoved that thought far, far away when he'd learned that the nurse was actually Agent Thirteen, SHIELD field operative assigned to watch over him. Fine. It was more because she was Peggy Carter's niece. Finicky man.

"Yet you haven't."

If Emily was in danger, he might be driven to defend her against his old friend. Emily was his friend and far more fragile than Bucky. There was the extra problem of what if Steve tried to stop Natasha from defending Emily?

"I'm not going to the beach and subjecting myself to your matchmaking." Steve grumbled.

"Fine." She continued the conversation in such a way that convinced Steve he definitely would not be following them.

Mission accomplished, she impatiently waited for the quinjet to land so she could go grab a duffel of clothes and jump back in to fly to California.
What met Natasha in California wasn't what she was expecting. For one, Emily wasn't injured. There wasn't an ambush waiting. There also wasn't a young SHIELD agent training with Emily like she was supposed to be. What was there was a Winter Soldier who was unarmed and nonthreatening, nearly deferential to Emily.

That Emily showed all the signs of stress and sleeplessness was about the only expected scenario.

And the house. It was a three-bedroom rental in the outskirts of San Bernadino, not far from Los Angeles. Both major highway and national park were in easy reach. Good location for working with Skye's powers and hiding a wanted assassin and a massive city to disappear to if something went wrong.

Awkward introductions happened. Together, Emily and Bucky explained what had occurred since the Avengers had left on that mission. Training, ambush, flight, Gordon, and Skye's departure. Though Emily had spent hours since scanning Bucky's brain, she remained confused and hesitant about trying to fix him. After rehashing her week, she managed to get a promise out of Natasha to not murder or maim Bobbi Morse. And another to not tell everyone about the teleporter unless Skye said otherwise. Clint was wrangled into the same promises.

Are we sure about this? Clint's expression asked her.

For now, was her silent response.

He nodded and clapped his hands. "If I'm an expert in anything besides shooting things it's telling when someone needs a nap. Natasha, why don't you take Em for a nap while I keep our new friend company? I'll work on those questions." His smile wasn't as cheery as it should be. "I've got a little experience in helping Em with poking in brains." The memories of Natasha's triggers played under his humor.

"Come on, Em." Natasha prodded Emily until she took the lead to her bedroom. Once safely behind the door, she tossed a soft tshirt at Natasha.

There was a donkey standing next to a hole with a shovel while some idiot stuck their head down the rolled her eyes before changing into it. That and panties on, she strolled to the bed, stashed her gun under a pillow. Her eyes caught on the stack of books on the bedside table.

She picked one up that looked half-read. "Norse mythology again, Em?"

"Not just mythology anymore," was her grinning response. "Coulson told me that at least a few of the old legends are based in fact. You know, like the gods of thunder and mischief and the Allfather and Lady Sif."

The bookmark was a receipt. It was from yesterday. She checked the books underneath, frowned when she saw signs that the thick fantasy novel had been read as well. "Almost two books in twenty hours, Em? That's a lot, even for you." They weren't easy reads, and Em should have been sleeping for at least seven of those hours. Obviously, she hadn't been.

"Bucky isn't the only reason I haven't been sleeping." Emily admitted. "It's Leslie." She twisted the sheets. "What she did to me." Shivers, "What I was going to do to her."
"Em..."

"And," spat out quickly, "She might be at Lizzie's wedding. We have similar circles of friends. The bitch could be someone's plus one or, o-or just crash the damn thing."

Natasha scowled. "If she shows up uninvited, I'll enjoy throwing her out." By throwing, she meant showing off her enhanced strength for the sheer pleasure of making Leslie cry and tossing her out the door.

Emily sat up, pulled Natasha's hips until she could kiss fabric covered abs. "You're the best part of our together."

Softening from her visions of revenge, her fingers drifted through Em's hair, scratched her scalp. "And you're my favorite idiot. Now scooch so I can get in."

A few movements later, and they were tangled, Emily's back to her front. "Why didn't Thor come to help you guys go scepter-hunting?"

"We couldn't reach him before we had to leave." She explained again.

"Oh."

"Anyone have to use the Cho-tech?" The newly installed machine on the Avengers' custom quinjet.

"Nope. Not even Clint." Natasha assured her.

A long exhale. "I'm glad."

Natasha laid a few comforting kisses to the exposed neck in her face. This was definitely a part about long hair that she didn't miss. No hair up her nose, in her eyes or mouth or in the way of kisses.

"Did you tell Steve?" Emily asked quietly.

"No."

Emily sighed. "Even if I can help him reach his old memories, he's still the Winter Soldier. There's going to be more than one justice system that'll want him. Steve won't want to see Bucky in handcuffs. He'll fight to keep him, and his argument will be good. The Winter Soldier was a tool of HYDRA, with no choice in what they did with him."

She was right.

"We already saved one assassin with a questionable background. They'll want blood this time."

"When did you become a political guru?" Natasha poked.

"Basic sociology, little fox. You know that."

Yes. She did. "Turn your brain off for five minutes and get some rest."

Emily groaned. "I can't. I'm worried about Skye too. And Coulson. What's happening with SHIELD. Lizzie's wedding." She squirmed. "Baby plans."

How to respond? Hug tighter? Turn her around for eye contact? Seduce her into distraction?
Emily decided for her, rolling over. "Skye knew about our baby plans. How the hell did she know?"

"What?"

"She said she overhead something and told me that I'd be a good mom again. Did we talk about it somewhere in the open that I don't remember?"

No. They hadn't. Natasha had only spoken of it to one person. She sighed. "I asked Simmons to look over the data from the embryo experiments. I was probably sloppy again and didn't check the perimeter thoroughly enough for eavesdroppers."

Wide eyes blinked, then rolled. Emily giggled. "I'm a bad influence on you."

She wouldn't say it in exactly those words. Easing from constantly cold spy calculations was part of her choice to be more normal. It took mental effort to be warm, affectionate, soft. Mental effort that had once gone solely to killing, spying, and surviving. She'd started her change when she'd been included in the Barton family, and she was fully embracing it for a family of her own. "You're worth it."

Emily drew her into a kiss. "Don't lose all your edges, petit renard. I fell in love with a dangerous woman."

"Yet you call me a soft little fox."

"Mm," was hummed against her lips. "Foxes are still dangerous predators. They just have the added bonus of being soft and adorable."

"All the bunnies are just terrified of them." Natasha sighed.

"Not a single bunny is afraid of a widow," came Em's retort.

Her mouth opened, stalled, closed. That was a valid point.

"Have you decided whether you're getting the dress or the vest?" Emily asked about her wedding apparel.

She arched an eyebrow.

"Please. You know you left that trail for me to follow."

"Which would you rather I wear?" Natasha offered.

"I will thoroughly stain my dress watching you slink around in either," lust answered.

"Political guru with zero fashion ability. How am I attracted to you?" she teased around the sweet mental image of making Em wet in public.

Pouting cutely, "Because I'm adorable as fuck."

"As fuck?"

"As fuck."

Natasha kissed her. "Close your eyes, you adorable idiot."
Emily hummed, curled even closer, and sighed out a long breath. Not long after, her heartbeat slowed to the smooth rhythm of sleep.

Calm green eyes were on Emily when she stretched out of her nap. "Hey."

"I love you." Natasha whispered.

Mid-stretch, she stalled, her mouth falling open. Natasha saying I love you outside of deep conversation or sex or the cloak of darkness was rarer than rare.

"Emilishka," was hummed gently. "I love you."

Twice? Was she dreaming?

Smugness deepened the color of her eyes. "Did you sleep well?"

Emily kissed her. "I woke up better."

Tenderly, a hand stroked through her hair. "Good." Lips pressed to her forehead. "I love you."
Natasha rolled out of bed and into pants in one swift movement. "Time to work. Get dressed."

Three times? Was Natasha planning to kill her? "Natalia?"

Natasha paused, shirt halfway on, studied Emily a moment before stepping close, bending at the waist, and whispering in her ear. "I love you. Now, get up, get dressed, and let's take care of this newest problem so we can go back to planning Lizzie's wedding shower and the mini-Emilishka."

She could do that. Giggling, she flopped out of bed and grabbed for her pants. "Wait. Mini-Emilishkas? No. They'll be little fox kits."

"We aren't having a litter."

"Okay, one little fox kit, whatever."

Those lovely sea-green eyes narrowed. Emily stiffened, then dove for the door. "I'm up!" She hopped into her pants on the way. Through the door, she panted. "Don't do whatever you're planning in that tricky spy head of yours!" She didn't bother with the zipper and ran down the hall, bursting in the living room to two sets of pale eyes on her. One looked confused and ready to shoot someone. The other brightened over a toothy smile.

Arms appeared around Emily's middle, and a voice dragged across her ear. Teeth nipped at it. "I'm going to make you scream."

Emily shuddered as hands trailed down her stomach, nails dipped under her shirt to scratch. "O-okay."

"But first," the barest touch on her mound. "Let's finish with your pants."

Pants? "Huh?"

There was a tugging around her waist, movement over her center, the sound of a zipper. She looked down in time to see Natasha's hands buttoning her pants.

"O-oh."
Low, sly chuckles drifted across her ear. A kiss followed. It took Emily several moments to come out of her daze, notice Bucky's stare, his gaze boring into her.

No.

Slightly, she moved. His eyes didn't follow. He and Natasha were staring at each other and arms were possessively holding Emily.

Staring contest. Natasha was marking her territory, giving Bucky boundaries and promises of death should he cross them. Had Natasha planned this little display from the first I love you today? "Are you done threatening the new kid yet?" Emily grumbled.

A smiling kiss was pressed to her jaw. "Yes."

Natasha's arms retreated, and Emily was allowed to escape to the kitchen. She jumped when small hands settled on her shoulders. Fuck! She lived with an assassin, was sharing a house with three of them right now. She should expect to be snuck up on. Yet, she still fucking jumped.

"Those three words weren't part of my plan to threaten the new kid." Natasha said.

"Okay." Good.

"They were just for you, Emilishka."

She turned to look Nat in the eye. There was an apology there. "Good."

Natasha smiled. "I'll make tea."

"No. That new stuff I found is shit."

"Good thing I brought some with me."

As Natasha swept from the kitchen, Emily sighed adoringly. Best part of being with a spy. They were always prepared.

From her spot in the armchair, Natasha watched Emily release Bucky and flop back with an exaggerated sigh. She glanced at the time. Three hours, seven minutes. The list of questions that the three of them had worked on had taken half that time. Emily had asked for them to repeat it.

"I need a break, then we'll do it again." She got up, went to the bathroom.

Natasha focused on Bucky. "Did you dress this terribly on accident or did you let Emily pick your outfit?"

Eyebrows pinching, Bucky looked down at his argyle socks, baby blue pants, and yellow tshirt with Bugs Bunny on it. "Emily suggested the shirt."

"Which means that you weren't trained in covert espionage."

"I was not."

Between them, Clint frowned. "Hey, Buck. You like ice cream?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."
"I love ice cream. Let's go buy some."

"Clint." Natasha said.

His eyes said that he was separating the two kids before they started a spat. She scowled at him. He glanced at the door where Emily was. She rolled her eyes.

"You need a workout, old man?" Clint smiled at Bucky. "Maybe later, you and Nat can spar." Another glance at her. "Far away from buildings and people and guns."

Natasha set her expression to innocent.

"I'll see if Em's been slacking in her training, which I'd bet good ice cream that she has been." He flashed charm at Emily as she stepped from the bathroom, narrowing her eyes at him as she caught the last words.

"What about betting ice cream?" Emily asked.

"I'm taking Buck to the store to get some." He grinned.

"Maybe he should change his clothes first." Natasha drawled. "Draw less attention that way." Immediately, Emily balked. "Because sleek trousers and button-up scream 'look away'? He's an attractive male specimen. People will stare longer the better he's dressed. Like this," she waved at his chiseled form, "They'll laugh at his outfit and dismiss him as a threat before the thought even crosses their mind."

Absolute shock hit her. Had Emily's ridiculous fashion advice become good spy advice?

"Got any other shirts like that?" Clint asked, his delight at her stupefaction vivid. He was going to hassle her about this for weeks. She was abruptly glad that she'd taken the time to switch her terrible sleep shirt for a nice blouse.

"Yes. Emily chose several," was Bucky's confused answer.

Nearly rubbing his hands with glee, Clint chuckled. "Good. Let me borrow one. We'll look like underachievers together."

Bucky nodded and marched down the hall.

"Didn't bring any flannel?" Natasha mentioned the running joke that he called a wardrobe.

"Too hot. I'll look for something plaid at one of these hipster stores while we're out."

A bright orange monstrosity returned with Bucky. On the front was a cat. I enjoy licking was written above it. Natasha didn't hide her contempt as he traded his grey, form-fitting athletic shirt for it.

"I'm in love." Clint pat his chest.

Wrinkling her nose at him, "Ugh."

"Hey, while you're out," Emily pleaded with him to bring back tea if he found one of the handful of brands and flavors that she wrote down.

After ruffling her hair like he would his kids, Clint ushered Bucky to the rental car. She'd been wrong in her assumption, all that time ago. Clint could dad Emily and he was the only close male
in her life that she couldn't *mom* around. Funny that their familial relationship hadn't really come to fruition until after Clint had taken over Emily's training with sniping. How did normal people bond if not over guns?

"I'm surprised you let him out in public at all." Emily said after the door closed.

Natasha looked at her. "Clint will keep an eye on him."

"But he's the Winter Soldier, and you let him out of your sight."

"He wants your help. If he's gone through this much trouble to keep you alive and happy, then he's not going to hurt Clint or disappear now."

Emily hummed thoughtfully, nodded. "You're right."

"The only thing I'm worried about is if his conditioning will have him betray us once our guard is down."

Emily looked far away. What was going on behind those dark eyes? Intense thoughts given how Em was staring at the door so intently. Patiently, Natasha waited for her to share. She started to run scenarios of how this entire thing could go tits up. A one-on-one fight with the Winter Soldier probably wouldn't end well, even if she could outmaneuver him, he had the same stamina and regeneration abilities as Steve. Only a shot to the heart or head would definitely stop him. Her other options were severing the spinal column, crushing the skull, or suffocation.

She didn't have enough tranquilizer in her Widow's Bite to keep him down for more than a few minutes. The quinjet that Em had acquired might have a stock of icers. A full magazine might keep him down for an hour. They didn't have any restraints or a place to hold the powerful man. Killing him was the only possible plan.

"Natasha?"

She put her thoughts aside. "Yes?"

"We should ask more questions to be sure, but," she fidgeted.

Natasha waited.

"I don't think he has any hidden triggers."

Clearly, Emily had been reading too many fairy tales with happy endings.

"Hear me out." Her stance grew more confident. "HYDRA wiped his memories. They had a blank tool to use, and they conditioned it to follow the orders of one, maybe two people. What need did they have for triggers? Unless by some miracle the Winter Soldier ran into family or a close friend like his frozen bestie, he'd do his mission and return to his masters then get frozen until the next time they wanted their assassin.

He wasn't a spy, didn't need complex emotions or strategy to get through missions or have free time to think, not like a certain spy we know. There wasn't a possibility that he'd get lost in a persona he adopted for a mission, because that wasn't his skillset. Go, kill, return, get wiped, get frozen. That was his existence for the last seventy years. Logic says that HYDRA wouldn't have bothered with triggers."

*This* was why she'd fallen for her idiot, immature-shirt loving Emily. Irritating optimist and
intelligent thinker. And her dark features. And her freckles. Her lips. Her smile. Her laugh. Fine. A lot of her qualities. This one, this was what she was in love with the most right now. Despite the blossom of warm fuzzies, she hid her smile and turned the logic over in her head, looking for flaws, counter-arguments, anything that Em might have overlooked.

There were more than a couple. Overly-paranoid HYDRA head wanting every safeguard on his new toy as possible. The wipes weren't perfect. HYDRA would have noticed and inserted triggers to counter. Another cell of HYDRA could have implanted triggers for a coup that would use the Winter Soldier as an inside man.

"How many flaws have you found in my argument?" Emily asked.

"Not as many as I thought I would."

"Your confidence is staggering," deadpanned.

"We need to work on the questions, dig deeper into his psyche." Natasha brushed aside Em's irritation. None of her contacts had any real intel on the Winter Soldier and no one had any high level HYDRA in custody who might. Fury hadn't, therefore none of the surviving SHIELD would.

"Hey, off topic, have you heard what's happening with SHIELD?"

"Not yet."

"Damn." She spat. "I'm going to go for a run or something." Sharply, she turned to the hallway.

"Do you want company?" Natasha called after her.

"Duh."

Small knife stuffed in her sports bra later, Natasha joined Emily outside. "Want me to call my contacts now or wait until your first water break?"

Emily visibly chewed on the thought. "I need to burn off some energy. Whatever the news, there's nothing I can do from here anyway."

Natasha drew her into an embrace that thoroughly distracted Emily and tempted her to choose a different activity for burning energy other than running. "Come on. Time to run." She pulled back, smirked, and started down the sidewalk.

"Coulson is working with the other cell now. Former SHIELD leaders have formed a council of sorts. Coulson is director under their advisement." Natasha was going over the intel she'd been given.

"Is your contact in Coulson's circle or the other cell's?" Emily asked.

An eyebrow lifted.

"Ugh. Okay. I won't ask again. How's Skye?"

"As far as they know, she's with you."

Emily quit the exercises she'd been doing. "Balls."
Natasha added, "They're a little busy dealing with HYDRA."

A bench discovered her butt. "I know the feeling. Any good news?"

"Other than Coulson being back in the midst of everything?"

"Duh."

"No."

Emily stood. "More running."

"How can you ever tell if she's giving you the truth?" Bucky asked as he and Emily sat on the porch watching the sun go down. They'd spent the rest of the day with more questions and scanning before a quiet meal of take-out Thai food. "When you aren't touching her?"

"When Nat decides to act," Emily scratched her arm. "No. Bad way to start. Um." Concentrating, she hummed. "I know the real Natasha, what makes her happy and sad and scared. She has a couple tells when she's hiding physical pain, but not when she's being someone else. Honestly, if I didn't have those insights into her, I wouldn't be able to distinguish act from reality without touching her. If I met her for the first time today and tried to read her through touch, that would probably fail too."

Deep thought creased his features. "You have trouble discerning truth with people you're not familiar with? Did you want to be rid of Skye? Is that why you said you believed the teleporter?"

She shook her head. "No! He was easy to read. Okay, if I hadn't gotten familiar with the alien DNA in Skye's system, I might not have trusted the reading on him. Other than that, he was easy, not like Nat, who's got years of training and experience in subterfuge."

"Is all this a dream?" He took a right turn in the conversation.

"Excuse me?"

"Am I in the cryochamber and dreaming that I've found freedom?"

Emily blinked at him.

"You could be a fragment of a memory, like the Black Widow."

"Give me your hand and keep talking."

Flesh hand found hers. "I don't have orders to follow. I don't have direction from my handlers to keep me clear. What's real, Emily? What's a forgotten memory?"

Entirely new information flitted around in his skull. New patterns and dark spots showed themselves. The puzzle started to make sense.

"What is freedom? Why do I want it?"

Everything was falling into place.

"Who am I?"
A lost child. Hidden right behind *those* broken connections. She told his brain to fix them and all the other puzzle pieces that she'd finally rooted out. Dark connections burned into fresh life, sparks sizzling along paths they hadn't taken in decades. Bucky gasped and cried out.

Adrenaline flooded his system. She sensed pain and fear and...

Without warning, she was flying through the air. Over his screams, she heard something break, then nothing.
“Emily!” Natasha was yelling as she bolted from the house. Seeing her unmoving body slumped across the car, the windshield behind her shattered where hips and shoulders had impacted, and blood staining her shirt, rage turned Natasha's vision red. She reached for a gun. It wasn't in her waistband.

She attacked the Winter Soldier barehanded.

He stumbled as he blocked and deflected her attacks. But he didn't fight back. That thought paused her attack long enough to see Clint running with Emily, to hear him yell at her to calm the fuck down. Pale eyes tracked to Clint, tears running underneath them.

“Shit. I hurt Emily?” rasped in front of her.

She glared death at him, and he flinched, held himself in a position of surrender, his face a storm of emotions, nothing like the cold assassin they'd been working with.

“I didn't mean to. How bad is it?”

“Natasha! Come help!” Clint hollered from his path to the quinjet and Cho's tech.

Without another thought, she raced after them, engaged the machine, keyed in commands to scan Emily for internal damage. Clint was removing Emily's top, exposing the cuts from the glass, the bright red staining the table. Eyes on Emily's steady breaths, it occurred to her that Bucky hadn't fought back. She shot a glance out of the quin, saw the man standing just outside, shifting uncomfortably. He wasn't running.

“You've got this?” Clint asked her after warming up the quinjet's engine to feed the machine power.

She nodded, and he jogged down the ramp to Bucky, spoke quietly with him before returning to Natasha.

“He says he remembers who he is. The flood of memories made him panic and lash out without even realizing it. He didn't mean to hurt her.” Clint's eyes flared to Emily. “Stay with her. I'm going to take him for a walk to calm him down and get more intel from him.”

Without Clint or Bucky to focus her anger and worry on, Natasha turned to Emily's unconscious form.

“You insufferable idiot!” She fumed, glaring at the swelling and bruising on her head.

The monitors chirped at Em's steady heart beat. Her own heart stuttered in relief.

Had Clint known that Bucky wouldn't run? The machine didn't need two people to operate it. Standard protocol should have had him taking care of Em while she secured the enemy. Secured, killed, whichever.

Instead, she was by Emily's side while he took Bucky for a walk.

Emily had gone and fiddled with Bucky's head without warning anyone. “Idiot.” She hissed again.
“Lizzie will kill me if her maid of honor doesn't show up to the wedding.”

A scenario impossible except in an alternate universe, but it felt good to say, brought another person into the worried anger throbbing in her chest.

“We're going to get pregnant next month. Maybe that will keep you from doing stupid shit and getting hurt.” She paced for several minutes, stopped to glare at Emily, paced again, stopped and brushed hair from Em's face. “Don't you argue with me that you would've gotten hurt even if I'd been there with you when you healed him. I could have caught you instead of a fucking car. Or better yet, I could have stopped him from hurting your fragile ass.”

“Stop yelling at me,” grumbled from the bed. Lashes fluttered. “Why are you yelling at me?”

Natasha kissed her. “You're an idiot.”

“I decided last year that you call me idiot like other people call their lovers darling,” grinned up at her.

She rolled her eyes at the same time the machine chimed, let them know its scan results. “You didn't break anything,” surprise pitched her voice high. “Not even a concussion. Just cuts and bruises.”

Emily shot upright. “How's Bucky?”

“He could have killed you,” growled at her as she shove Em back down for the machine to repair the cuts. They'd have to be at the tower with the more powerful machine to deal with bruising.

“You didn't kill him did you?” Worried, on the edge of heartbroken.

Ire was replaced by humor. “I tried to. Clint stopped me and made me watch over you while he took your sad puppy for a walk.”

“Did it work? How long was I asleep? Is he okay?”

Like Laura after hearing one of her kids fell on the playground at school. Natasha gave a clipped answer. “I don't know. Not even twenty minutes. Alive.”

Emily studied her, sighed. She swung her legs over the table as the machine finished repairing her skin. “I need to check on him.”

“How much of what I said to you did you hear?”

“Uh?”

“Before you opened your eyes.”

Emily's brow wrinkled. “You told me to stop doing stupid shit and not argue with you. I think.”

“Simmons report on the embryo experiments says that it's a viable procedure. With you helping, the implantation has an almost perfect chance of success.” Natasha informed her. “We could do it next month.”

“Next month?” She asked dumbly.

Gently, Natasha gathered hands and squeezed them. “Or after the wedding, but soon. I want this.”
“Soon,” squeaked out.

She sidled closer, easing between Emily's legs. “I want your baby, Emily Fortune.”

Her breath went ragged.

“Maybe then you'll stop putting yourself in unnecessary danger and getting hurt all the time.” Natasha grumbled.

Emily started laughing. “So that's why you want to grow a baby so bad. Trying to keep me away from rabid strays.”

“That too.”

She chuckled against Natasha's lips, kissed them. “What about the hunt for Loki's scepter?”

“I'll be pregnant, not an invalid.” Not for at least six months. Then, she'd agree to stop going on missions. Until then, she'd wear extra armor and be a little more careful than usual.

“We'll talk to Laura about that.” Emily kissed her again. “Now, let's go check on Bucky.”

Emily's usual way of listening to a topic and putting off a decision until later, when she'd had a chance to chew it over. Also known as avoidance. “We'll talk about time frame later tonight.”

Ignoring the statement, Emily popped off the bed, grimaced. “Okay, bruised everything.”

“Did you bring any edibles?”

“Trying to drug me into submission?”

“You're also very cute when you're high.” Giggly and chill and malleable. Sometimes extremely annoying with her giggles. Other times, when she wasn't stupid with laughter, she was a deliciously patient and thorough lover. Natasha wouldn't feel comfortable letting their guard down enough for sex until they were home or back in New York with the Winter Soldier under supervision. She wanted giggly, malleable Emily.

“You're stalling me.”

Yes. She was. She was stalling for three reasons. One: to give Clint more time to do a threat assessment and preliminary interrogation on Bucky. Two: she wanted to do a more thorough interrogation, where she didn't play a nice-guy like Clint was doing. Three: she didn't want Emily near the Winter Soldier, especially not until she'd heard what had happened from Emily herself.

“Explain to me how you ended up bleeding and unconscious on the car.” Natasha said, using her body as a barricade.

Emily stopped trying to push past. “I was bleeding?”

“From the glass in your shoulders and blow to your head.”

Her fingers were exploring the goose egg above her left ear. “Oh. Ow.”

“Tell me what happened.”

A huff of breath and Emily stopped poking her head. “We were talking.”
Natasha waited impatiently while Em gathered her thoughts, memory.

“He was asking me why I trusted you, if I could tell when you're lying.”

She stiffened at the idea of her enemies learning her tells, however few they were. She'd have to give up most of her soft and fluffy mental work, dive back into calculating spy. Her heart clenched. Damn. She didn't want to be the Black Widow again. Not around everybody. Not around Em or the kids. Not around their future kid.

“I told him I knew the real you, so it didn't bother me when you took on other personas. Then he asked if he was dreaming.” The lines on Emily's face deepened considerably. “Kev would say he was suffering from disassociation from reality. There was more wrong in his head than missing memories. He asked why he wanted freedom. They really fucked him over, Natalia.”

“HYDRA excels at that. What else?”

“The puzzle of his head fell into place, and I rearranged the pieces.”

“That's it?”

A sheepish shrug of shoulders. “I think the rush of returning memories overloaded him, and he lashed out. I don't think he meant to hurt me.” Her words mirrored Bucky's.

“Dammit, Em.” She kept her string of curses about impulsive healers and broken boys to herself.

Warmth from Emily's body wrapped around her. “I'm okay, little fox. I'm sorry I poked the bear without you right there too, but I just,” a frustrated groan, “I just got it. Everything was clear and in front of me. If I didn't do it then, I might not have been able to do it later.”

For ten seconds, she refrained from burying her nose in Emily's neck and submitting to the weak need of smelling her, kissing her, squeezing her, of reassuring herself that Emily was indeed alive and well.

“Please don't kill him. You know if he'd wanted me dead, I wouldn't be standing here right now.”

“Ugh.” She spat in disgust and pulled back to scowl at Emily. “Can't I kill anyone anymore?”

“Sure. Just not the stray puppies I want to keep.”

“Fine. But this is your limit. No more than three at a time.”

Emily grinned. “I only have one right now.”

“Skye is essentially number two and you know it,” was Natasha's retort. “And Steve counts as permanent number three.”

“You were getting attached to him before we even met.” Emily argued.

“Yet it was you who invited him home,” was her easy retort.

“Okay. So, I get two strays is what you're telling me.”

Natasha considered it. “Yes.”

“Can I go see my latest stray now?”
She couldn't stall any longer. Either sedate Emily or ask for permission to interrogate Bucky. Now was the time. She hesitated, wondered if it was worth the trouble, decided it was. Betraying Emily again wasn't an option. “I want to interrogate him first.”

Emily went rigid. “If you were anyone else, I'd yell at you right now, but simply the fact that you told me meant you won't do it unless I give the okay.”

She nodded.

Already relaxing, Emily groaned. “But what if his fragile mental state gets made worse by a Black Widow interrogation?”

“What if you get hurt again?”

“Can we compromise on this?”

How much less effective would the interrogation be if Emily were there for it? How much would it affect her relationship with him? “If he wasn't Steve's friend, would we be having this conversation?”

“Probably not.”

The delicate expression aimed at her mirrored thoughts that she'd avoided. They had to bring Bucky home to Steve. He was their good friend, part of their patchwork family, and he would feel beyond betrayed if they broke Bucky through cold tactics. “Let me get a gun, then you can go mom him. I'll have a conversation with him that won't leave him questioning his sanity again.”

Toothy grin plastered on her face, Emily hopped away, popped open a cabinet, withdrew a handgun, plugged it with icer rounds, tossed it to Natasha. “Let's go see how my stray is doing.”

Less lethal than she'd intended, but she took the compromise and stuffed the gun in her waistband. “Wait a second. Let me call Clint.”

Emily waited. Fidgeting impatiently.

“Yea?” He answered.

“How's the new puppy?”

“Girlfriend's really excited about the new dog. He's a Husky. Lots of energy, have to play with it all the time. Really smart. He's getting along with the other dog okay, better than we'd hoped. The last owner was a real asshole.” He paused. “He's kind of nippy around the neighbor's kids. I'm a little surprised he hasn't tried to escape the yard, but I think he'll settle in alright.”

They prattled on for a minute longer before hanging up. Natasha faced her fidgety companion and translated their coded conversation. “Clint says he's outwardly stable now, not an obvious threat, hasn't tried to run. He feels guilt for hurting you.” It almost hurt to say that out loud and lose her excuses to kill or maim the assassin. Taking threats out of the picture instead of letting them live was so much easier. She missed her old life for its black and white nature. A little.

Emily strode from the quin.

Giving that it was a minor miracle that Emily had waited this long, Natasha didn't try to stall her again and followed her out. Five minute walk later, they waited at the house's back door for the men to arrive.
“Fuck, Emily. I'm sorry.” Bucky spoke first.

Had he cursed before? No.

“It's no worse than a training injury. It's my fault anyway. The sudden flood of old memories must've been horrible.”

He ran a hand through his chin-length hair, mussing it further, then let it fall back over his eyes. “It wasn't all memories.” There was more emotion visible on his face than she'd seen him express over the past several days. “It was,” a string of expletives. Or what she guessed to be expletives. Old American slang obviously wasn't her strong point. “There are still gaps, Em. But they're all in order now. And it's like, I was seeing the world in shades of grey, but now there's a whole fucking rainbow of color to see. It's real.” He smiled breathlessly. “It's almost too amazing to be real, but I know it is. I can tell the difference again!”

He jerked forward as though to grab Emily, and Natasha leveled her gun at him.

“Whoa. Sorry, Widow. I, uh, I wanted to hug her.” Slightly hysterical, he laughed. “God, I can feel again.” The hysteria vanished, replaced by a laser-intense scrutiny leveled on Natasha. “Do you know how that is? Isn't that what they did to you in the Red Room? They tried to cut out your emotions. My first handler was a fan of Petrovich's work and tried to copy it on me. Without my memories, it,” deep breath, “It mostly stuck.”

Closing the distance between herself and Bucky, Emily held out a steady hand. Intense eyes shot to her, softened. He gently laid his hand in her palm.

“I'm sorry I hurt you, Emily. You are about the last person on Earth that I want to hurt.”

“It's okay, Bucky.”

His grin returned full force. “Shit. You have no idea how good it feels to hear my name again.”

Emily slid a look at Natasha. “A little.”

Unruly emotions flashed across him again, and he frowned deeply, shook his head. “I'd like to see how my mother would have reacted to you two. Probably would've blown a gasket, called you both share crops, low sinners and blasphemers and,” teeth clicked. His lips thinned. “Other things that Steve would heckle me about saying out loud. Except for that, she was the best. Jesus, she's been dead for so long now.” Into memory and grief, he fell silent.

Half a minute later, Emily spoke again, “Can Natasha ask you some questions?”

Fear, fresh tension, and distrust blossomed.

“It was our compromise against her interrogating you. Nothing worse than the questions we've already asked.” Emily went on soothingly. “Please.”

He looked at the gun that Natasha hadn't put away, merely pointed it at the ground. Back at Emily. “Who was Steve sweet on back during the war?”

“Peggy Carter.”

“What's his favorite sandwich?”

“You realize that Clint and I are spies and even Em answering these questions won't give you the proof of friendship with Steve Rogers that you're asking for?” Natasha interrupted.
Bucky cursed.

“He takes his tea like a Brit.” Emily said. “And drinks coffee even as he complains the caffeine doesn't affect him anymore. He hates bananas. He hassles Tony about curse words.”

Bucky shifted.

“And he told me that you might like men romantically, but he’s never cared, and you'll always be his best friend.”

A definite nerve was struck. Bucky jerked, yanking his hand back, gathering himself close, protectively, fearfully. What must it be like to grow up with family who hated an intrinsic part of yourself? If she hadn't been trained in seduction of men and women, would she be attracted to both? Yes. There had been targets who she hadn't liked the looks of and those she had. The Red Room couldn't control that. Was Bucky harboring romantic feelings for Steve? What was it like to love someone who didn't feel the same way? She went back to that first time she'd told Emily that she loved her, those agonizing moments until Emily reacted. How could anyone deal with that for more than a few breaths? What else had Bucky lived through?

Off to the side, Clint lazed easily in his position as background scenery. He winked cheerily at Natasha. Only the twitch in his right hand belied his readiness for battle.

“He knows?” whispered Bucky.

“He's a good friend.” Emily answered. “Speaking of friends, did you guys leave any of that peach ice cream? I could use a bowl.” And she managed to guide her stray into the house, to the kitchen, and plop ice cream in front of him.

“I could use a whiskey.” Bucky murmured.

“Somehow I doubt your body would let you get drunk any more than Steve's does,” was Emily's retort. “Eat some sugary calories. Between the shock and your metabolism, you could use it.” She dug a spoonful for herself and shoved it in her mouth.

As Natasha and Clint settled with their own servings of frozen dessert, he took a hesitant bite. The next five vanished the ice cream, and he got up for the rest of the carton. “Jesus Christ, this is fantastic!”

Spoon in her mouth, Emily grinned, eyes twinkling, looking thoroughly pleased with herself.

Leaning back, Emily huffed out a tired breath. “How long do you think they'll keep going?” She waved at the enthusiastic, not quite hostile sparring between Bucky and Natasha. After ice cream yesterday, Natasha had drawn Bucky into a conversation that had left her satisfied about his intentions. And again after breakfast. Now, she was taking out her frustration over him hurting Emily.

Beside her, Clint chuckled. “Until Nat gets tired.”

“Speaking of tired, is Nate letting Laura sleep through the night yet?”

Eyes squinted at her. “I live there too, you know.”

“Not lately.”
“You know he's almost a year old.”

Emily pouted. “And not all babies are made the same. I remember waking up to Alan squawking at ungodly hours until he was weened. That was like, over a year.”

“How old were you?” Clint sipped his ice tea.

“Nine. Ten.” She counted back birthdays.

“I suppose you were old enough to remember then,” he allowed. Jerk. “And yes, Nate's been sleeping through the night for a few weeks now.”

“Good.” Thinking about the bags that'd been under Laura's eyes on their last visit was almost painful.

He got up from their chairs, found the pitcher of ice tea that he'd made and poured another glass, topped hers off too. After adding another packet of sweetener to his, he flopped back down, waved at a pesky fly. “You and Nat decide on a donor or you going to do that experimental technique?”

Emily took a long swallow, wondered how Clint could stand it as sickly sweet as southerners made it, pondered one of Laura's few failings. The woman wouldn't let her kids have Kool-Aid, but she'd make them southern sweet tea. Ugh. “Um. I think Nat's pretty set on making a gifted fox instead of just another red one.”

“How long have you been waiting to say that?”

“A month.” She grinned at him.

“You're worse than me.”

“How's Coop's science project? He making a volcano?”

More tea vanished. “He's recording the growth of salt and sugar crystals.”

Nat misjudged Bucky's feint and took a blow to the chest that sent her flying. Hitting the ground, she bounced once, twice, then she was rolling into a graceful somersault that shifted to a spinning upward kick as Bucky caught up. Her heel cracked his chin, stunned him long enough for a second kick to buckle his knee. His countering punch was lightly avoided, her hands touching his shoulders as she flipped over his head.

Sweating, they paused to glare at each other.

“He's relying on the arm too much.” Clint commented. “Wish I'd been there to see him fight Cap.”

Emily squinted as the fighters clashed again, moving too fast for her to track. How the hell did Natasha never hurt her when they had sex? “He was pretty terrifying.”

The action drew close enough for Natasha to yell at Clint. “Weren't you supposed to be working Em out too?”

“We're trading cleaning secrets!” He yelled back.

That bit of insolence cost Natasha, and a metal fist caught her cheek. There was a crunch, and Emily flinched, barely kept herself from running out there. Natasha coughed into dirt, barely rolled away in time to avoid a boot. She kept going.
Clint grinned at Emily. “I think this is far more productive than getting sweaty right now, don't you think?”

“Someone needs to critique them.” Haughtily, she agreed.

“Especially him. The Winter Soldier who fought Cap in D.C. is the not same fighter taking on Nat now. There's no way someone this sloppy could be a match for her and Rogers.”

Bucky wasn't nearly as calculating, efficient. Emily nodded. “He's brawling, not fighting.”

Clint reached over, clapped her shoulder. Gently. She'd have those bruises from her trip on Bucky Airlines for a while. “Right. If he wasn't enhanced, he wouldn't stand a chance against her.”

Emily sipped tea, spit it out at a sudden thought.

“Ew, Em.” He wiped at his arm. “What the hell?”

“How the hell am I going to keep up with a kid who can move like Nat?” squawked out of her.

He stared.

“Playing hide and seek with Kev and Alan was hard enough when they both figured out I couldn't climb trees like them. What the fuck am I supposed to do with a kid who can run faster than me? What if it has a gift? Like Skye or something? My gift showed up when I was six!”

Up from his chair, Clint rose, took hold of her and tugged until they were walking with his heavy arm on her shoulders. “First off, you're an Avenger. You've already got all the training you need to chase a super-baby. Tony settles down when you give him the Laura-look, doesn't he?”

“Usually,” she muttered.

“And Hulk smiled at you last week, didn't he?”

Emily paused.

“If Natasha didn't go a little homicidal at the suggestion of Hulk carrying you, he probably would, right?”

Natasha's fear was ridiculous. If you didn't make Hulk mad, he was as likely to kill you as cars on the highway, she told herself. Accidents could happen, but not terribly likely if you weren't drunk or an asshole.

“Cooper and Lila adore and obey you. Nate gurgles at your voice.”

“He also pukes on me more than anyone else.” She argued.

“That would be Natasha's doing, passing him off after feeding.” He laughed. “You're just the idiot who lets her do it.”

They were in the house, heading for the kitchen, because kitchens were the best places for deep conversations. It was just... a rule. Probably Laura's influence. Or that tea was made there and ice cream kept there. Whatever. Emily leaned on a counter, Clint beside her. Through the window, they watched Nat and Bucky beat each other up.

“The Winter Soldier let you leash him.”
His former personality restored, he was more prone to flirt than follow her lead. She was leaning
toward the opinion that he was into dudes and chicks like Steve had thought.

“Even Bucky lets you drag him around. Steve said he didn't take orders all that well unless he liked
his commander.” Clint kept building her confidence. “People like and respect you Em. Your kid
will too.”

“Fury called me Avenger glue.” Emily blurted out. “Which is bullshit, because I can't exchange
more than a few words with Banner. We just do not click. We can talk biology, but that's it. Tony
still ignores Steve if he thinks his plan is better. I'm always distracting Nat from the mission.
Maybe less now that I've got armor to stop holes from getting put in me. An-”
“Stop.” He interjected. “Because of you, Nat shows herself more to the whole team, and they've
figured out she's a human underneath the Black Widow. That has cut down on so much tension, let
me tell you. Pepper has a high opinion of you. That says a lot toward Tony's attitude. Even if you
and Bruce aren't chummy, your respect for him and trust of Hulk...” his shoulders rolled. “Em, I
think you and Nat are the only reason he sticks around to practice with us. He'd probably only
show up to hunt the scepter otherwise. I'm the only one who'd be okay if you disappeared.”

The stab of hurt made her pout at him, but his shit-eating grin brushed it away.

“I know where you live and that you'll show up with cool toys for my kids' birthdays.” Clint
dropped his arm around her, tugged her close. “Did Laura tell you that Coop decided to learn
Russian?”

“No. I thought he wanted to learn Japanese to watch anime like his friends.”

He chuckled. “He'd rather impress his aunties than his friends.”

Warm pride and adoration flushed her. “Ohhh.”

“You're Tetushka Em now.”

“Really?”

“No more Auntie Em.” He sighed dramatically. “Guess I'll have to keep the tradition.”

Emily grabbed up a nearby hotpad to beat him with it. “I will burn all of your flannel, Clint
Barton!”

He ducked, then swept his shoulder into her waist and stood with her over his shoulder. She yelled
and punched his thighs, but he laughed and tramped outside before dumping her in the back yard.
Busy with the head-rush, she didn't notice him cranking the valve or picking up the hose until icy
water was spraying in her face.

Shrieking, she threw the soaked hotpad at him before running.

“Emily! What's g-” Natasha appeared, got a face full of hose water. “CLINT!”

Behind her, bruised and dirty, Bucky started laughing while Natasha tackled Clint to the ground
and stuffed the hose down his shorts.

Emily joined his guffaws. One, Natasha making Clint whine about turning his balls into ice cubes
was hilarious. Two, because the Winter Soldier didn't even know how to smile, let alone laugh.
Bucky's laugh was good. She liked it.
Three more days of studying and not-quite-interrogating and Nat finally decided that Bucky wasn't a walking time bomb.

“We're going to see Steve today?” Bucky squirmed.

Emily felt Natasha's hard stare, smiled winningly at her. After a moment, Nat's eyebrow twitched. They'd made a deal. Unless Nat uncovered triggers or conditioning or something bad within three days, they were going to reunite the fossils. Aside from some of his memories being totally lost—a few birthdays, some lovers, a handful of battles—Bucky was all himself. No traces of HYDRA left in him, excepting bad memories and resentment, of course. Emily had already called Steve, made sure he was at the training facility and would stay there.

“Yes.” She pat his arm. “Please, stay on the quin until I'm in perfect position to video his reaction.”

“Video?”

“Make a movie.”

He shook his head. “Right. I remember. Jesus, there's way too much new stuff to learn.”

It was weird, he was from Brooklyn, but he didn't talk like the kind of Brooklyn she knew. Neither did Steve for that matter. She had to remember to ask them both what they thought of the modern accent. “You'll get used to it. Steve will help. So will the internet.”

“What?”

“Information superhighway.” She drawled like a 90s kid.

Bucky stared.

“He'll show you that too.”

“Hey, Steve,” was Natasha's calm greeting as three of them exited the quin.

“Hey. What was so important that I had to stick around and meet you?” He pouted at the delay in the Bucky hunting that Emily had delayed.

Emily bounced. “I,” a glance at her companions, “We brought a present.”

“You might get a kick out of it.” Clint shrugged.

“It kicks pretty hard.” Natasha added.

Phone out and recording, she caught Steve's confused blink. “What?”

Clint grinned. “Em found a stray puppy.” He tossed a short, sharp whistle over his shoulder.

“A stray puppy,” drawled from him. “You're kidding.”

“It's already house trained,” was Nat's sarcasm. “But it needs a little work on the leash.”
“He’s adorable, Steve. I promise you won’t be disappointed.” Emily finished.

Steve shook his head, the returned military-cut not allowing his blonde hair to swing much. “Guys, I don’t have time for a dog. What in the world were you,” his voice trailed off to a choked cough. “Thinking?”

In unassuming jeans and a tshirt with Snoopy, Bucky was coming down the ramp.

“Guys?” Steve questioned.

Emily didn’t miss Natasha putting herself between her and Bucky, but she ignored it to watch Steve. There was hope and fear and confusion and...

“Puppy might have been a poor choice of words.” Natasha hummed. “Fossil might be better.”

“Hey, pal.” Hesitantly, Bucky awkwardly waved his flesh hand in greeting, stopped a couple yards from Steve.

“Buck?” He took half a step toward him.

“We found his memories.” Emily said.

“Most.” Bucky corrected. “You’ll have to fill in some gaps, but otherwise, Em unlocked my brain.”

Steve shot a desperate look at her. She nodded. “He even comes with a HYDRA-free certification from the Black Widow herself.”

“Sorry I tried to kill you.” Shoulders and head ducking forward a little, Bucky gave a little smile. “Won’t happen again.”

The few feet of distance disappeared, and Bucky was enveloped in a hug that probably would have killed anyone else. Emily caught every moment of their teary, manly reunion until Clint clapped both their shoulders and said, “Good hug. Ice cream?”

“Wait. Hold on a second.” Tony rose from where he’d been lounging on a couch bare-chested and in Stark logo sweatpants. “Why is the killer HYDRA assassin in my tower?”

“It’s the Avengers’ Tower, Tony.” Steve retorted. “We’re Avengers.”

“And we brought a guest.” Natasha quipped.

His eyes darted. “Okay, but that doesn’t explain the guy that tried to kill you a few months ago coming here with you. In a tshirt that I’m tempted to steal instead of vibranium restraints and highly sedated!” ended in a shout.

“Em fixed him,” was Clint's passing comment as he headed toward the kitchen.

“Speaking of fixed,” Emily poked Tony's slightly hairy chest. “Have I mentioned how much better you look without the glowing reactor?”

“You’re not usually prone to complimenting my physique, Lady Lesbian. Or are you just admiring your work?” The surgery last year that she’d helped with, making sure all of the shrapnel was expunged, as well as leftover palladium still trying to send him to an early grave. And then monitoring Cho-tech sternum, ribs, muscle, etc. integrate with the original Tony. Everything was
in perfect working order.

“Admiring my work. Duh.”

“Uh huh.” His eyes were following Bucky.

“Bucky Barnes meet Tony Stark.” Emily introduced them.

Heels clicked into the room, and paused on noticing Bucky. The phone in Pepper’s hand aimed at him. Her eyes flit to Steve, then Natasha, Emily and Clint, back to Bucky. “You're going to need a really good lawyer.” She tapped her phone awake, looked back up. “Team of lawyers.”

Some of the tension coiled in Emily’s chest evaporated. Not everyone needed a gun to save the day.
“Emily!”

She jerked out of sleep, stumbling out of bed and down the hall to where Steve was blocking Bucky's escape to the elevator.

“Bucky.” She spoke blearily. “Wake up so I can go back to bed.”

Glassy eyes shot to her.

Nine straight days of being woken in the middle of the night, sometimes multiple times, to assuage Bucky's nightmare-induced hysteria were killing her. Steve could never calm him, neither could Natasha. Clint had gone back to Georgia. No one else had the connection to Bucky to try. Between her own triggered nightmares of losing everyone important to her and adrenaline, she had trouble getting back to sleep or even taking naps. Cursing, she was too exhausted to wait for him to stare at her until recent memory overrode nightmare and reminded him of reality. “Get over here.”

He blinked.

“Now.”

Frowning, he obeyed, and when he was close enough, she grabbed his hand, turned, and dragged his ass to a couch. She shoved him onto it, tossed herself beside him, and fell back asleep before her head was properly in his lap.

Over breakfast, Emily sighed into her tea at the tension humming around her. “What?” she snapped.

Her enhanced friends looked at each other. Not one of them had as deep of bags under their eyes as she did.

She yawned and went to rub her aching eyes. Glasses got in the way, and she ended up smudging them, having to clean them on her shirt, making the smears worse, cursing and trudging to the bathroom for some alcohol to get the grease off. Grumbling, she found a microfiber cloth and went to work scrubbing.

A familiar perfume joined her. “We need a better option than you sleeping with Bucky to get him through a night.” Natasha said.

“Sleeping with him wasn't my first choice,” hissed through clenched teeth.

“Em.” A hand reached for her shoulder, but she twitched away from it.

“It wasn't my second or third choice either. But it worked, didn't it?” Unreasonably angry, she bit at Natasha.
Silence followed as she went back to cleaning her glasses. They remained smudged no matter how much alcohol or fresh cloth she used. Eventually, she shoved them on her face, figured out that the stubborn smudges were scratches. There was another pair of glasses stashed in the room with her, more in Atlanta, but these were her favorite.

She needed new lenses. A new scrip too. Her supply of contact lenses were almost used up, and it'd been over a year since her last optometrist appointment. Dammit. Going to the eye doctor would be such a hassle as Emily Fortune. It would have to wait til she went back in Georgia as Jillian. That meant finding a new doctor altogether. Fucking hell.

She scowled at herself in the mirror, found something else to curse about. “I look like shit.”

Leaning against the wall, Natasha was carefully watching her. The bathroom door was open, but the entrance to the suite was closed.

“It's going to be worse when we have a newborn.” Emily sighed. “I won't be able to just drag it to a couch and pass out in its lap.”

Natasha's expression shifted.

“I'm not twenty anymore. I'm thirty-four! I can't handle days on end of no sleep and bottles of caffeine pills.” She slumped. Since she was on a downward spiral anyway, she brought up a topic that they hadn't totally hashed out yet. “Are we hiding Teagan or the Black Widow being pregnant? Both?”

Natasha kept watching her.

“Neither? Do we keep hoping that we can elude tails and spies and let both of our lives have a kid?” There were tears threatening. “Should we give up the secret house? Be us all the time?”

“No!” barked at her.

Emily finally turned away from the mirror to look directly at Natasha and demand, “What then?”

“We could keep our lives the way they are.” Natasha's tone was carefully casual.

“Until I get even older and less able to keep up with your super-babies?” Emily sneered. “No.”

Hurt slapped across Natasha's face, was quickly replaced by calm detachment. “You're right. We shouldn't put off having my super-babies. Your natural human body just won't last. We shouldn't even be planning this since you can't keep up with my enhancements. In fact, the differences in us are so great that we shouldn't even be trying to have a relationship.”

Emily had frozen at Natasha's cutting words.

“It's amazing that you've survived this long surrounding yourself with dangerous superhumans. I suggest that you stop. Go back to your simple life of transportation and potheads, far away from the Black Widow and her dangerous complications. Stop trying to be something you're not, Emily Fortune.” Frigid green eyes swept over her derisively before Natasha spun and swept from the room.

She paused only long enough to gather her purse and shoes before leaving a stunned Emily alone.

What the hell had just happened? Natasha didn't yell -okay talk really, really intensely- at her and leave. That wasn't like her. Since when did Natasha flip out while Emily was venting about
something? Emily went for her phone and called Lizzie.

“Hey, girl. Did you get my message about the cake? The baker is being such a fucking douche-nozzle.”

“Cake?” She blinked. “Uh.”

“Have you even listened to your messages this week?” What sounded like the noise of a shopping mall or store filtered through.

“It's been a long week.”

The definite sounds of a cash register were followed by Lizzie thanking someone and moving away. “What's wrong, Em?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Got your head stuck in a book again?” Lizzie drifted through a large crowd. “What genre?”

By genre, she meant should she grab Kyle and run for a bunker or get ready for best-friend duties? Their own, old, personal code using Emily’s favorite topic. Books. “Romance.”

“You've been reading a lot of those adventure-romance types lately.”

“I wish it'd been a trashy smut novel, but it's got all these weird complications.”

Wind and moving vehicles replaced people chattering. “Best ones usually do. “Is this the kind of literary discussion that we should be having over Skype or wine?”

Emily wanted nothing more than best-friend time. It'd been weeks since she'd seen Lizzie in person, and she suddenly felt full to bursting with things to unload on her. “Wish I could share it with you in person, but I know how busy you are with the wedding and your mother.”

“Please, woman. I could use a break from my own drama. Where you want to meet? That coffee shop down on Jefferson or your place?” Emily’s current location or her old apartment?

“The coffee shop.” Emily chose.

“Yea. I can do that. Tonight or tomorrow for lunch?”

“You know what, how about my place? Tonight. I'll get the wine if you bring dinner.”

A car door closed. “You sure?”

“I don't feel like public places right now.”

Lizzie's breathing changed. She was really worried now. “Okay, Em. I'll see you in a few hours.”

“Thanks, Lizzie. You're the best.”

“Damn right I am. Love you, girl.”

Emily thumbed the end call. She brought up Natasha's number and stared at it. A minute later, the phone went dark. “She won't answer anyway.” Not if she was mad enough to walk out.

She replayed the conversation in her head as she brushed her teeth, packed a few things, and
changed into clothes that the identity of Sheila Kennedy would wear. Fashionable business woman. She checked herself in a mirror and scowled. Kennedy was one of Nat's favorite covers, because it meant Emily would wear Dolce and Gabbana and pointy shoes and...

She took it off and threw on flashy, ghetto-chic. Naomi Jackson. Complete with attitude and insanely bright pink capris. She booked a flight from JFK to Boulder with a brief layover in Denver that left in two hours. Small bag of cosmetics, change of clothes, and the book she was currently reading was set on the bed. Her phone said that Natasha had left almost an hour ago.

There was a knock at the door. “Em?” Steve called.

“Hey.” She opened the door.

He looked at her clothes. “You're someone else today?”

“Yea. I need to go help Lizzie with wedding p-”

“Emily.” His tone said that he knew something was up.

She stopped trying to lie.

“Natasha left in a hurry. Are you alright?” He asked softly.

“I don't know. I'm not even sure what happened except that I fucked up.” Emily shrugged unhappily.

“Anything I can do to help?” came his sweet concern.

Her arms lifted, and he obliged, gathering her to his enormous frame. “I think I'll be gone a couple days. But I'll answer the phone if you need me to yell at Bucky to go back to bed.”

Slowly, he pulled away. “Maybe a voice recording would work.”

That was a stupid-simple idea. “Why didn't we think of it sooner? Got your phone on you?”

The smartphone covered in a sturdy rubber case was handed over, and she flipped into its tiny library of apps before finding the voice recorder. She put its shortcut on the home screen before turning it on and recording a message. “Dammit, Bucky, you were dreaming again. Go back to sleep.” Then another after Steve frowned at her. “Bucky, it's me, Emily. You know, the little black-eyed woman with the freckles and big nose. You were having another nightmare, old man. Wake up. Smell reality. Go back to bed.”

Steve nodded at her. “I tap the icon, and then the file.” Emily's voice came up from the phone, and she frowned at the wrong-sounding noise. “Okay this is simple. I'll see if Buck likes this.” He strode down the hall.

Sighing, Emily looked at her phone again. She spent several minutes drafting a text to Natasha before finally hitting send.

Sorry I fucked up. I love you. Going to see Lizzie for a couple days. Call if you need me.

Bruce was actually in the lounge instead of hiding at the training facility when Emily passed through. His attention slid over her clothes and travel bag. “Tony filled me in on what the last few nights have been like. I offered to design a bedroom that can keep Bucky contained until he gets through the nightmares.” Compassion and understanding were written across him. He probably felt
connected to Bucky for the monster he was forced to be.

“You're a good guy, Bruce.”

A little smile warmed him. “Thanks. Steve said you were taking off for a few days? You look like you could use a vacation.”

Were they having a friend moment? “Yea. Short trip to see my bff.”

He nodded.

Steve stepped out of the elevator. Bucky must be in the gym or something. “He thinks the voice recording should help.”

“Good,” relief made her breathy.

His eyes traveled the lounge, darted to the hall leading to their suites. “Nat still isn't back?”

Emily checked her phone. No responses blinked. “Nope.”

“Sh-”

Her phone burbled Natasha's text-ringtone. You're an idiot. Emily nearly collapsed at the simple statement. It said so much about Natasha's willingness to forgive once she'd calmed down. And Emily apologized. Profusely. Which she would do. Once she figured out where she'd gone wrong. She had an idea or two, but she didn't have the energy or focus right now. After some sleep and Lizzie counseling.


“She is an idiot.” Tony's voice cut across the room. When had he come out of his hole? “Good to see you're finally seeing what the rest of us do, Cap. Dear God.” He stared at Emily. “You look awful and you're dressing worse. What happened while I was creating something to pay the bills around here for all you freeloaders? Did you binge-watch Fresh Prince of Bel-Air without me?”

Emily scowled at him. “How many cups of coffee do I tell Pepper that you've had today?”

He stalled in front of the coffee machine, narrowed his eyes at her and put his mug down. “So, Emily. Where you off to? Skank Wars?”

“Sapphic slumber party. I'm the guest of honor.”

His eyes went a little vacant. “I can fantasize to that.”

Already too burned out to parry wits with him, she moved on. “Jarvis?”

“Yes, Sekhmet?” The AI responded pleasantly.

“Would you hail a cab for me?”

“I took the liberty of doing so after you booked your flight,” came the not-unexpected reply. He knew everything that passed through his internet connection. “One will be arriving at the Bagel Bank in approximately twenty minutes.” Their go-to place to catch a cab. Busy little cafe that was open really early and really late. She would just have to avoid the usual crowd around the base of the tower. Good thing that the tower security guards knew how to create diversions for getting the occupants in and out without much fuss. “I've also alerted the guards to your departure.”
“Thanks, Jarvis.”

“You're quite welcome.”

Never one to pass up a chance at gossip, Tony was peering at her more intently. “What'd I miss? Fido have another bad night?”

Emily looked at one of the visible cameras. “Jarvis, if Tony goes overboard harassing Bucky, send Pepper that report on Tony's caffeine intake, would you?”

“Yes, Sekhmet.”


“I report to Ms. Potts, sir.”

He pouted. “She's been Mrs. Stark for a few months now, Jarvis.”

“I will ask Ms. Potts if she would like for me to change the way I address her, sir.” Unfazed, Jarvis replied calmly as always, with a hint of sly amusement.

“See you, Bruce.” Emily said.

“Have a good trip, Emily.” He raised his own coffee cup in salute.

“Be good while I'm gone, Tony.” Emily called when the elevator chimed its arrival. She caught the little smile behind his scowl as the doors closed. No matter how much he complained about it, he loved people who could match his willpower and outmaneuver his antics. Hence his complete adoration of Pepper.

In the elevator car with her, Steve smiled. “How'd you get Jarvis on your side?”

“Ms. Potts gave me orders that Sekhmet's opinion overrides Mr. Stark's in regards to his health and that of the other Avengers.” Jarvis replied for her. “I may have taken a broader view of her orders than originally intended.”

Steve's chuckles filled the elevator. “Good for you, Jarvis.”

“Thank you, Captain Rogers.”

The elevator stopped, its doors opening to a floor that wasn't their destination. “Jarvis?” Emily started.

Bucky was waiting. He stepped in as Jarvis responded. “I also took the liberty of assuming that you might wish to see Mr. Barnes before you left.”

“I'm glad you're going.” Bucky said. “You shouldn't be losing sleep over me.”

Putting on an overdone scowl, Emily huffed. “I'll lose sleep over you if I want to, mister. And you'll take care of yourself while I'm gone. Do you hear me?”

He straightened just like Steve when she berated him. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Good.” The doors opened again and in the hallway she turned on him. “Now give me a hug.”

Two arms folded around her. She felt the cool metal through her top and had to suppress a flinch at
the memory of their first meeting when he'd nearly squeezed her to death. “Take care of each other,” as though she were talking to Alan and Kevin when they still lived at home and she left to go work.

With a sudden pang, she wanted to see her little brothers. She hadn't seen them together in one place since they'd left Jerry's warehouse. They hadn't even been to her and Nat's house. Alan didn't know about the baby-planning. Shit. Yawning, she turned from her adopted boys and headed down the wide hall to the lower-level elevators that only passed through the bottom four security-buffer floors of the tower. The upper-level elevator doors hissed, drawing her attention over her shoulder. Steve waved.

She turned around in time to see a shadow detach itself from the wall.

“Nat?”
Arms folded over her chest, Natasha exuded discomfort and irritation as Emily approached.
“There's too much danger in our lives.” Natasha said quietly. “Even though I'm incredibly angry with you, I couldn't let you leave without reminding you that I want my idiot to come back to me.”

“I'm sorry. I'll figure out what I did wrong, but I need some sleep and bff-counseling first.”

Deep green flashed at her. The pain she saw there made her heart cringe. “Dammit, Em.”

She nearly whined at her inability to fix the situation.

“You should go. You'll miss your flight.” Natasha turned her face away.

Biting her lip, Emily nodded, strode forward. She didn't get far. Fingers grabbed her wrist, spun her around. Through the touch, she felt Natasha's intense distress. This time, she did whine. “Natalia?”

“I love you,” rasped from her. “Every exceptional and normal bit of you.”

It clicked then, exactly what Emily had done wrong, what she'd said to hurt Natasha. She groaned at her own insensitivity. She hadn't explained her own fear of the future and had poked Natasha's in the same breath. “I want to have kids with you, Natalia. I'm just scared that I won't be able to keep up with them. I'm terrified that I won't be the partner you need.”

She felt the relief flood Natasha before she pressed herself against Emily. “You're an idiot,” was her informative rebuttal.

Emily hugged her. “So you tell me.”

“You're going to miss your flight at this rate.” Natasha spoke against her neck.

“There's another one I can catch.”

Muscles softened and more of Natasha's frame pressed into her. An abrupt kiss to her cheek later, and Natasha pulled away. “Don't miss it. Go spend time with Lizzie. Sleep.”

She watched Natasha's hips stride down the hall.

“Tell Lizzie I say hi,” was tossed back at her.

“Yea. Okay.” Emily whispered as she fumbled to the lower-level elevator.

Natasha looked over her shoulder.
The doors closed. Jarvis' soft voice broke into the quiet of the elevator. “I texted your cab driver to let them know you'll be there soon.”

“Did Tony model your thoughtful help after Pepper's genius?” Emily asked.

“It's quite possible.”

She would swear that she heard pride in his tone. “He probably did. Thanks.”

“Have a good trip, Sekhmet.”

Chapter End Notes

I saw Civil War. It rocked my fuckin socks. And it totally does not work with my Sekhmet plot.

This chapter wasn't supposed to happen. I was seriously going to write a fluffy little moment and move on, but nooo... I have zero control over my characters. None.

...holy fuck, people. When the hell did this fic hit 100k? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? It wasn't supposed to be anywhere near this long! No control. Did I mention that? I HAVE ZERO CONTROL OVER WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THIS STORY.
Natasha growled, annoyed with her own pacing of the empty bedroom. She wanted to tear down her favorite handgun and clean it. It was already clean, its firing spring replaced, and the magazine full. She'd spent all the previous week meticulously cleaning her and Emily's weapons, including her Widow's Bite, garrote wires, and knives. Weapon maintenance today would be pointless busy work. That in itself would make her even more annoyed. She put herself in yoga pants, sports bra, and gloves, went to the adjustable, free-run obstacle course that took up three stories of the tower. A morning of running, climbing, and jumping, as well as dodging rubber projectiles later, Natasha still didn't feel better. She glared out at the cityscape from her perch at the top of the enormous windows.

Emily had only been gone a handful of hours, and Natasha missed her presence. What happened to it taking a few days before she ached for her impulsive partner? When she gloried in time completely free of constant companionship, of being able to plan her days down to the hour. She touched her stomach. Those days would probably come again, after she got used to menstruating and unreasonable emotional outbursts and didn't have the biggest change in her life looming only scant weeks away.

As impulsive and troublesome as Emily was, she was Natasha's safe harbor. Warm, comforting, familiar, and predictable in her own way. She could always count on Emily to divert plans to save a kid or worry over Natasha and the strays or chase tea or smile.

She wanted another hug. Being with Emily had made her dependent on them for emotional support. The woman couldn't go two hours without touching or hugging someone. Was her need to touch people tied into her gift? Natasha considered it for the hundredth time. Perhaps. How people showed affection was generally learned from their parents, the people who showed them affection in their formative years. Emily's father hadn't touched her with kindness. Some of Emily's stories suggested that her mother used to hug her children a lot.

The imam had seemed like a man who was free with gentle touches on shoulders and arms, probably hugged his own children a good deal. Emily might not realize it, but Hafid's teachings had shaped her quite a bit. He was probably the reason that she was able to have healthy relationships with men. It had been his advice that had encouraged Emily to seek psychological therapy in her late teens.

Emily might need that again. Anger management was an issue that came up a little too often lately. The incident with Leslie, the urge to put a bullet through her head spiked at the memory, had showcased Emily's too-short fuse. Having a baby would only make that worse. Not that she was afraid that Emily would ever try to hurt her or their child, but Em might do something terrible after a month of sleep deprivation or if they were threatened.

So far, Emily's brothers remained safe though not for lack of amateur attempts at kidnapping and murder. Agatha and the other agents were doing their jobs well. They kept the common rabble back, gave the brothers breathing room for their normal lives, with exception of the occasional journalist or news reporter begging for an interview about their sister.

The constant spotlight was easy enough for Alan. His outgoing personality handled it well, and he was using it to promote his business rather successfully. Kevin deflected, wearing his professional
shroud of psychologist. Then there was Lizzie who told humanizing stories about Emily, her family, her lover and friends, giving just enough detail for a satisfying interview, no more. She enjoyed switching the topics to relevant political news or discussing how the Avengers protected society, using historical precedents for their existence.

Lizzie's own family had security protecting her, hadn't liked the idea of Emily providing extra. Their compromise was sending intel about their movements and actions, including the Avengers as a team, that could affect Lizzie's safety. In return, they not only provided security for Emily when she was with Lizzie, they were implementing some of Natasha's suggestions for the wedding as well. It helped that Natasha had found a way to get the Iranian general a special, if extremely short-term, VISA to visit. Intel on a politician. Nearly overnight, the senator had become the general's sponsor. It was a minor diplomatic miracle.

Missions like that were exhausting, frustrating, and required the most delicate finesse. She didn't get enough of them. No longer working for SHIELD and planning a family, she probably wouldn't get another like it for... she swallowed. Years. At least two. Longer. She wouldn't want to spend months working undercover and missing her child's firsts, not being there with Emily.

Perhaps they should hide the Widow being pregnant. Keeping out of the spotlight would need a good cover. They couldn't say she got injured, not with Sekhmet's power. A sickness perhaps.

But what about Emily? Natasha would tear her hair out not going with Emily when she did her Sekhmet rounds at hospitals. Or the diplomatic missions that kept being requested of her. She shouldn't have to hide being a mother. It would kill her to hide such a huge part of her life. Her brothers wouldn't be able to openly acknowledge their niece or nephew, nor could Steve or Lizzie. It would rip at Natasha's soul to watch Emily and a child suffer like that as well.

They needed a cover story for Jillian and Teagan. Pregnancy by normal methods or sperm donor and in-vitro? In-vitro. Teagan's personality wouldn't want to be mounted by a male for conception. If she-

“How did you even get up there?” A female voice yelled into her thoughts.

Natasha peered down from her perch in the corner of the ceiling created by the intersection of building support structures. She was 15 feet above the enormous obstacle course. Squinting against the sunlight pouring in from the extravagant windows was Pepper.

Natasha rolled backwards, delicately falling to the top of a pole, then running the taut rope from pole to climbing structure and jumping to a ladder that she slid down. Casually, she strolled up to her always impeccably-dressed friend. “Hey, Pepper.”

Already half a foot taller than her, the four-inch heels Pepper was in had the woman effectively glaring down at her. “There are days when I just hate you.” She squinted back up the three stories to where Natasha had been a minute ago.

“You act as if you don't have killer legs,” was Natasha's sultry comeback, purposely eyeing the expanse of impressively shaped flesh that Pepper was showing off.

“And you pretend that you aren't the equal of a gold-winning Olympian.” Pepper shot back. “Of every sport.”

“It might surprise you that I've never done bobsledding.” She only allowed a little smugness to show.
Looking pointedly at Natasha's bare feet. “Yet you can run this,” her hand waved at the complex obstacle course, “Without shoes.”

Shoes weren't always an option, hadn't been on more than a few missions, especially those that she started with in heels. Running through Tokyo's winter streets in only a bra and torn hose wasn't something she'd recommend. “Would it make you feel better if I did it in heels?”

Exasperation softened Pepper. “How does Emily put up with you?”

By running to Lizzie when things went south. Around the lump in her chest, she changed the topic. “What brings you in here if you aren't going to stretch those gorgeous legs of yours?”

“I have a job offer for you.”

The flirtatious smile froze. Pepper didn't bring her jobs.

“Apparently, you've turned this client down enough times for them to get desperate.” Pepper brought back a friendly smile. “But I'm under no obligation to try and convince you to take it.”

“What is it?”

“I have no idea.” A thumb drive was pulled from her jacket pocket. “It's on here.”

Natasha accepted the drive, pushed it into the tiny pocket in her pants’ waistband.

“I also wanted to warn you that ambassadors are getting extremely pushy with the requests they keep sending the state department for them to loan Sekhmet out.”

She nodded. “We've heard.”

“Good. Then it's not a surprise. I suggest pre-empting political involvement and doing a global,” Pepper waved a hand to conjure words, “Good-will tour.”

Her mood soured. “We don't have time for that.”

Though her expression was understanding, Pepper's tone was hard. “Perhaps you should make time. Emily might be a private citizen of the United States, but she's also Sekhmet, an Avenger, a part of the team that says they exist to protect the world. That makes her a global asset in their minds, Natasha. I'm sure you've seen that.”

Not in those exact words, but she had seen the implications in the requests that they ignored or politely turned down.

“Hill is worried.”

Natasha's attention hyper-focused. “Why?”

“She says there are rumors on Capitol Hill about you being drafted into service.”

She arched an eyebrow. “I'm not a citizen. They can't draft me.”

“They could deport you.” Pepper noted.

Yes. They could try. She'd be forced into hiding to stay in America. “They don't think my work with the Avengers is enough reason to keep me around unless they're using me for their own agendas. A lot of powerful people aren't happy that I avoided a trial.”
“Some of them just don't like prominent heroes who are in a homosexual relationship. I know for a fact that at least one of them is going after you simply because she's a homophobe.”

“Figures.” She brushed a sweat-damp curl behind an ear. “Did you know that the D.C. area hospital boards considered asking Emily to take her healing somewhere else? They thought they'd lose money without any patients.”

Pepper shook her head. “I didn't, but I believe it. Why didn't they?”

“Our little entourage buys them better press than any amount of lobbying could. Apparently, tourism spikes around her visits too. They are losing money when Emily heals most of their long-term patients and cleans out their emergency rooms and deals with people who'd normally go to the clinic, so they've found ways to keep her visits shorter. Em doesn't mind at all.” She paused. “Maybe a change of routine would be best. Marks who follow schedules are easiest to attack. Taking firepower away from the politicians who want to cage us is always a good idea. International travel could be turned into little holidays. Then we could spread visits out farther with the excuse of travel fatigue, stress, and such. I'm sure the boards would be happy to help get rid of her by providing travel support.”

“God, I wish I could afford you as an assistant again,” chuckled Pepper.

Natasha gave her a dry look. “There isn't a paycheck big enough to seduce me into being an executive assistant. Not enough ass-kicking in the schedule.” She offered a wry grin. “Not even around the C.E.O. of Stark Industries.”

“For which I'm very grateful. Have you heard about the cult calling itself Love of Sekhmet?”

She groaned. “Yes. They send Emily letters every fucking week. At least they don't seem capable of being dangerous. They're just annoying.”

“The team of lawyers that I think are capable of handling Bucky's case want to do an interview with him as soon as possible.”

Why was Pepper telling her this right now? Emily. The joke about Bucky being Emily's stray puppy had enough truth in it. They all recognized that he responded best to being prodded over his past when Emily was around. He was awkward about his life as the Winter Soldier around Steve. Without Steve around, he opened up about it to Natasha. Yet, with Emily around, he fidgeted less, was more expansive in his responses. It must be her damn smile, that warm, compassionate thing that made people trust her. “Emily needed a few days away. She shouldn't be gone too long. You're sure that these lawyers can be trusted not to spread word about him?”

“If they don't, they know we're more than capable of ruining their firm.” Pepper's claws showed through her usually calm demeanor.

Natasha smiled toothily at the beast that Pepper rarely let loose. “Want to go a round in sparring?”

She peered down at her. “Only if you don't go easy on me.”

Pointedly, she peeked an eyebrow. “I like you, Pepper. I'm not going to go full-throttle at you.”

Pepper's gaze flit up to the where she'd first found Natasha. Sighing, her gaze dropped down. “It's too easy to forget that you have to hold back with Clint or Tony too. I'll go change and meet you in the dojo in twenty?”

Dojo, their fairly accurate name for the padded, reinforced room designed for Steve and Natasha to
let loose in. Really, all the rooms and floors designated for training were specially reinforced with Cap's strength in mind. With two serum-soldiers using them, the reinforcements were proving their worth. “Sure.”

After downing half an energy bar and some water, Natasha taped her fingers, pulled padded gloves and sparring boots from a locker, was slipping them on when Pepper showed. The Prada had been replaced by Adidas and her phone by a water bottle. “You know what, you're right.”

Natasha finished tightening a strap. “About what?”

“You should go easy on me.” Pepper waited until Natasha was looking at her. “I really don't want to be the recipient of your full-body tackle thing. Unlike the rest of the people who live here, I haven't fantasized about having your crotch in my face.”

A laugh barked out.

Grinning, Pepper set her bottle down to wrap her own fingers in tape. “Why do you do that? You're strong enough to bring down large opponents.”

“Several reasons. If they're big enough, it's a matter of reach. It's sometimes faster. No one expects that maneuver, and it throws their game off. In a multiple-opponent scenario, I can choke out the one I've jumped while shooting down the others from a higher vantage point.” She allowed her smirk to fully emerge. “And it's fun.”

Pepper was nodding and chuckling at the last. She finished taping one hand, looked up with a thoughtful expression. “Fast, brutal technique to take down a large opponent and assert your competence without actually letting them know how strong you actually are.”

Natasha studied her.

“I will never forget the first time you did that to Happy.” Her hand waved. “Granted, it wasn't the full jumping tackle, but close enough.”

“He's not a bad guy, but his macho shit was pissing me off.”

“And your mission was to catch Tony's eye.” Pepper added.

Padded sparring armor was tossed to Pepper. “He's always had a soft spot for beautiful, assertive women who can hold their own in any arena.” She donned it without complaint, allowed Natasha to adjust the torso padding until it sat right.

“You and Tony have similar taste in that manner.” Pepper said.

Natasha stepped back to meet her eyes, wonder if Pepper was maneuvering the conversation somewhere. Pepper wasn't a big talker usually. Had Steve said something to her? “I suppose we do.” Or was it Jarvis? She almost slapped herself. Jarvis would have heard Emily talking between the elevators about kids. Shit. How could they have forgotten about his ears everywhere?

Because she'd been too worried about her relationship with Emily to remember that Jarvis reported to Tony Nosey Stark.

And he reported to Pepper.

“You aren't usually this talkative when you want to work out.” Natasha noted.
Pepper didn't flinch. “True.” She wove into a warm-up, bouncing and jabbing at the air.

Only because this was Pepper, trustworthy and discreet with proven affection for herself and Emily, did Natasha not shift into interrogation mode. She moved into her own warm-up and waited for Pepper to get to the point on her own. They were half an hour in before they spoke again.

“Why did I miss that time?” Pepper took a step back and panted.

Also taking a step back to acknowledge the break that Pepper needed, Natasha thought back over the last attack. Pepper had been doing a great job of sliding through feints and dodges. A swiping overhead kick had been ducked under, and Pepper had tried to catch Natasha off-guard by continuing the momentum, dropping her foot to spin on it and kick with the other. “Your speed and form were good. I saw your weight shift as your foot landed, and it gave me time to jump over the follow-up.”

“Jump?” barked at her. “You flitted over it.”

“Spiders, like other tiny creatures, aren't affected by gravity the same way we are, Pep.” Tony called into the room. “The Widow has an unfair advantage.”

Natasha took the opportunity to sip water, make sure that Pepper copied her motions.

“Rogers and I are taking Fido and Doc Jekyll for a walk. Just came down to let you know we'll be back in a couple hours.” Tony's eyes traveled over his sweating wife, looking like he was considering staying. “Want me to order you anything for lunch before I go?”

Had Emily landed in Boulder yet?

“No thanks, Tony. After I'm done abusing my ego with Natasha, I'm going to have a protein shake.” Pepper replied with a smile for both of them.

“Alright. Bird-boy will be here later to meet Fido. By Bird-boy, I mean the other one, not Legolas. Where the hell does he disappear to anyway, back to Rivendell? Also, dinner is pizza.” Tony grinned at himself.

“I am not eating pizza again this week.” Pepper turned to Natasha. “Want to put something less cheesy together with me?”

She nodded. “There's summer squash and mackerel in the fridge.”

“Perfect.” Back to Tony, “We're good, Tony. Try not to harass Bucky too much.”

He huffed. “Come on, Pep. There are whole books of old man jokes that I haven't used yet. I've barely scratched the surface of bondage and communism.”

“Jarvis, did Emily ask Tony to give Bucky any special accommodations while she's gone?” Pepper asked.

“Yes,” was his prompt answer. “Sekhmet requested that Tony behave himself.”

Pepper looked pointedly at her husband.

He fidgeted, struggling to find a way out from under the demands of the two women in his life who he wanted to please.

Jarvis gave him a little time to think. “Oh, Ms. Potts. Mr. Stark suggested that it would be prudent
for me ask whether you preferred for me to address you as Ms. Potts or Mrs. Stark.”

The couple had a cute little stare down. Tony threw in the proverbial towel. “I'll be nice.”

Pepper's smile was indulgent. “Jarvis, I think Mrs. Stark would be fine.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Tony's expression lit up, and his chest puffed.

“If,” Pepper's smile showed her claws again, “Tony lets you call Emily by her name instead of Sekhmet.”

For a moment, Tony stared. “You drive a hard bargain, woman. Go ahead and change the protocol, Jarvis. Fortune and Mrs. Stark.”

“Yes, sir,” came Jarvis' almost-smug reply.

Tony narrowed his eyes at the room's camera.

Sweetness returned to Pepper's smile, and she crossed the distance to Tony, gave him a winner's kiss. “Don't wear yourself out too much today. Save some energy for tonight,” whispered into his ear.

“Yes, ma'am,” hummed Tony. His eyes followed Pepper as she disengaged and went back into a fighting stance.

Two years ago, the view in front of her would have had her thinking like Tony obviously was. Cool, confident, powerful Pepper was quite the sight. The fantasy in her head switched out Pepper for Emily. In lingerie. Garter belt, stockings, and matching lace bra, maybe a thong and basque or babydoll dress.

Pepper slinking in and throwing punches forced Natasha to put the fantasy aside. Almost. It lay there, in the back of her head, teasing her, distracting her. Emily wouldn't wear lingerie very often. When she did, it was a treat, a special surprise, something to stun her when Em slid her tshirt off and displayed lace or silk. Once, she'd worn a corset to go shopping just so Natasha would see it when they went into a fitting room.

The salesperson had given them a righteous stink eye when they'd finally come out of the room, sweating and sated.

A foot collided with her gut and lifted her off the ground. She barely managed to curl, force her arms down for her hands to hit the mats. Her arms bent, took the momentum, thrust her back into the air to flip backwards, put more distance between herself and the opponent who'd caught her off-guard.

“I know that happened because you're distracted about something, but I am definitely going to tell Tony I knocked you off your feet.” Pepper crowed.

Natasha rubbed her stomach. “Fair enough.”

Padded helmet was dragged off, and Pepper rubbed her sweaty forehead, sighed in relief. She looked at the camera. “Jarvis, could you do me a favor and stop monitoring the dojo for twenty minutes?”
“Yes, ma'am.”

An eyebrow lifted at Pepper.

“There really isn't a subtle way to ask intimate questions around here when you don't want Tony to find out.” Pepper said as she continued taking off her padding. “Jarvis told me what he overheard this morning between you and Emily when I asked why she wasn't around.”

Inwardly, Natasha cringed. Damn.

“And I told him not to tell Tony,” came her surprising statement.

She considered waiting for Pepper to keep speaking, draw out exactly what Jarvis had said, but this wasn't Tony. This was Pepper. “Thank you.”

Pepper paused peeling off a shin guard, looking as though she hadn't expected that reaction. “You're welcome.”

Taking off her own gloves and boots, spraying them with disinfectant, and storing them away, Natasha kept Pepper in her periphery. Would she say more? Ask questions? Surely she intended to with how much time she'd asked Jarvis to give them.

Disinfected, Pepper's gear found its way into another locker. She bent and lifted a pant leg. Under it was a bright red swell of flesh, the beginnings of an impressive bruise along her shin bone. "Damn." Pepper pressed along her jaw as well. “I'm going to feel this for a while.”

“And you wanted me to not pull my punches,” came Natasha's reminder.

Pepper chuckled and nodded. “Natasha, I don't want to press, because I know how private you are, but do you have anyone to talk to besides Clint and Emily, about,” she took a breath, “Intimate things?”

Laura. A little with Steve. Natasha nodded.

“Oh good. Because I know I wouldn't be the first person for anyone to talk to about children or women, but I consider you a friend and wanted you to know that you can talk to me.” Softly, earnestly, Pepper offered.

Natasha considered it.

“Dealing with Tony for years was almost like having a child. Everyone jokes that he's as dramatic as a woman.” She watched Natasha back for a moment. “And I wouldn't mind having a confidante who understands him and this crazy life we lead.”

“Emily's better at the relationship advice thing.”

Pepper nodded. Her open expression going slightly stiff, she reached for her water bottle.

“But she can be such a pain in the ass. Her mouth seems completely disconnected from her brain half the time.” Natasha groaned, “And she's gotten me so used to getting hugs when I feel down that I don't know what to do when she's not around to give them.”

The bottle lowered.

“I could probably get one from Steve, but he's pretty wrapped up in refreshing his friendship with Bucky. My other options,” bright, warm Lila would be perfect, “Don't live close by.”
Pepper shifted. “I'm sweaty and gross.”

Natasha snorted. “So am I.” A workout with Pepper wasn't like one with Em, who was surprisingly adept at sneaking blows in, but she had strength and reach that Em didn't have.

Pale fingers tapped on the bottle, then five sure steps later, Pepper was in front of her, opening her arms awkwardly. Natasha didn't let herself think about it. She'd just finished asking for a hug, after all. She threw herself into the embrace, wrapping herself securely around this friend she trusted, sighed when Pepper's arms circled her.

“Assassins aren't supposed to want normal lives and kids, but I do,” she whispered against Pepper's chest. “Nothing about it will be easy. I,” panic rose at the thought she was about to reveal. “I'm...” she choked, couldn't say it.

“Nobody gets an easy card when it comes to relationships.” Pepper said, patting Natasha's shoulder. “Especially when one or both of them are Avengers.”

Natasha sighed. “If it wasn't for me, the world wouldn't know that Emily is Sekhmet.”

The hand patting her stilled. A few breaths later, it resumed it shifted to a soothing stroke. “I remember how mad she was, but she wanted to stay by your side anyway. She didn't want you facing the world by yourself.”

Natasha's eyelid squeezed tightly shut, tried to block out the remembered pain. “She didn't deserve to have her life upended like that.”

“From what I've seen, you make her happy enough to balance it out.”

Balance? “How did I go from being furious enough to yell horrible things at her and walk away to this?” Blubbing and whining like some amateur under their first interrogation.

Pepper hummed, replied delicately. “When I go from raging at Tony to crying over him, it's usually because I'm afraid of losing him.”

She retreated from the hug to look up at Pepper's face. “Do you know how old I am?”

Frown lines formed in thought. “I know you look like you're in your early twenties, but you couldn't possibly be that young.”

“I think I was born before World War II.”

Pepper's eyelids and mouth went round.

Natasha slumped. “I'm at least seventy years old, Pepper. I've looked like this for decades. I'm probably not even going to look 30 by the time Emily has grey hair. Any children I have will inherit my enhancements. Em's afraid that she won't be able to keep up with them. I'm,” she gulped and hurried the words on before they got stuck in her throat again. “I'm afraid of losing her, of it being too much for her. I'm terrified of the day I finally outlive her.” Her admission finished in a harsh whisper.

Long arms yanked her back against Pepper's body. Her chest was already damp and salty, Natasha told herself, she'd never notice tears. Natasha choked on a sob.

The arms squeezed a little tighter. “It's okay to be afraid, Natasha.”
She started to balk, to argue, to...

“It’s normal.”

Natasha let out a long, shivering breath.

Over the hot stove, Pepper was humming, breathily singing words to a song that Natasha thought sounded familiar. She looked up, caught Natasha's eye. She sang louder.

It was an old song. Aretha Franklin's *Chain of Fools*.

“Chain, chain, chain,” Natasha joined on the chorus, earning a wide grin and hip-bump from Pepper. They slid into an Elvis song, then Johnny Mathis. By the time that dinner was done, they were into 60's hits, jamming loud and unashamed to The Supremes' *Stop in the Name of Love*.

Pepper turned the stove off as they swayed and snapped to The Monkees.

“I thought you'd like to know that the others have entered the building.” Jarvis interrupted when they paused to giggle and decide what to sing next. “I am cutting and encrypting your sensational performance into Mrs. Stark's personal database.”

“Thank you, Jarvis. That's very thoughtful of you.” Pepper praised the loyal AI.

“You're quite welcome, Mrs. Stark.” He verbally bowed.

“When you get a chance, I'd like a hard copy, Pepper.” Natasha smiled.

“This has certainly been an interesting day.”

“We should do it again sometime,” Natasha stilled. “The fun part.”

A serving spoon waved airily. “Oh, I don't know. The other part was nice in its own way.”

“Thanks, Pepper.” She touched her arm for emphasis before moving on to a cover conversation. “So, I saw that you've been reading a biography on Rupert Ingleton. The rumors about the embezzlement are true.”

“The courts said he was innocent.”

Natasha nodded. “Of course they did. I didn't leave any evidence for them to find.”

Pepper stared for a second before leaning closer. “How much?”

The elevator doors opened.

“Three million francs.”

“Why are we talking about obsolete currency?” Tony strode toward them, the guys carrying boxes of pizza and cases of beer. “That smells amazing. I might skip the pizza.”

Natasha casually picked up one of the big knives she'd chopped vegetables with. “You stay away from my squash.”

His hand darted out and snagged a piece from the pan before Natasha could get to him. “Ha!”
Around his chewing, he kissed Pepper and danced away as Natasha feinted a knife swipe.

“Natasha was telling me about a big money embezzlement scheme she was involved in.” Pepper served two plates of food.

“How many of those have you done?” Tony asked around the grated Parmesan he was getting from the fridge.

“Not many.” Natasha gave Sam a welcoming nod. “Hey, Sam.”

He raised his case of beer in salute. “Romanoff. You're looking better.”

She snorted and traded Pepper flatware for the served plate. “Not getting shot at does wonders for the complexion.”

Carrying plates to the table, Steve looked a little confused. “Did the funds go to your employer?”

He returned the conversation to money schemes.

“No.”

“Who died?” Tony plopped the Parmesan down and grabbed a beer.

“No one.” She answered truthfully.

“What was the mission then?” Steve was passing plates and sitting down.

Tasting the white wine that she and Pepper had agreed on, she shrugged. “My employers wanted leverage over Ingleton so he would use his position in the Prime Minister's office to share secrets. They wanted the scheme to work and sent me to make sure it did. Only about half the funds he stole actually made it to his accounts though.”

“Ingleton? Rupert Ingleton? The guy Pep's been reading about?” Tony asked. “Where'd the rest of the money go?”

“I made sure it got to his children.”

“Why? He said he hated children, so when they grew up they were little more than acquaintances who lived on his estate.” Pepper said curiously.

Nodding, “They were. He was a prick, but the twins, Thomas and Sara, were very generous with their time.” She made sure her expression of coy innocence was firmly in place before smiling at her audience. “They made my nights interesting enough that the ones with Rupert were almost tolerable. It seemed fitting that they should get his money.”

Beer was foaming from Steve's nose as Sam and Bruce snickered, Bucky stared wide-eyed. Obviously, Tony couldn't decide whether to fantasize or laugh. Pepper simply chuckled

“Jarvis, what was the time frame of Ingleton's embezzlement?” was Tony's demand as he frowned suspiciously at Natasha.

“From 1981 to 1986, sir.”

Natasha paused her fork. “I was only there for the last two years when he was under investigation.” She chewed as Tony's mouth fished.

“But,” Tony waved pizza at her. “You, you're only...” Slotted eyes shifted to Steve and Bucky,
back to her. “You're too strong and fast. You've got serum in you too.”

The rice pilaf that Pepper had served the veggies over was amazing.

Tony went to say something else, but Pepper murmured something in his ear that stopped him. By the expression he shot Natasha it wasn't a sexual innuendo. Natasha gave him a questioning eyebrow.

“You really think so, Pep?” He didn't stop staring at Natasha.

“Yes, Tony.” Pepper winked at her.

“Huh.” His gaze dropped to his pizza, and he lifted the slice to his lips, paused, peered at Natasha again. “Jarvis, official records list Romanoff as thirty-something, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Make sure it stays that way.”

“Yes, sir.”

Holding her glass halfway to her lips, Natasha studied the situation. Had he? Pepper was smiling encouragingly. Tony was chomping aggressively into his pizza, hiding emotions. Slowly, Natasha allowed her composure to soften, held Tony's eye as his chewing slowed, stopped. She lifted her glass in a salute. “To secrets kept among friends.”


Emily would be so proud of her for playing nice with Tony.

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact:

Ingleton is not a real person. That's some made-up shit right there :D also, this chapter, like the previous wasn't supposed to exist, nor the next. But, I suppose this is important stuff, all this fighting and interpersonal relationship goo
Under the Cookie-Fat

“And that's how shit went balls up.” Emily sighed to Lizzie.

Opening their second bottle of wine for the evening, Lizzie hummed. “Actually, it sounds like you two are still good.”

“Lizzie, sh-”

“Wouldn't let you leave without telling you she loved you and wanted to stay with your sorry ass.” She sipped at the wine, made a face and passed the glass to Emily before picking out a different bottle and opening that. “Better,” she smiled, then turned back to Emily. “You're blowing everything out of proportion and having a panic attack over nothing. What does it matter if she pops out kids that can fly and shoot lasers out their nose? You've got superheroes as adopted family now, Em. And you aren't exactly an average Jane anymore either. Shit. You never were.”

Emily stared at her blunt friend.

“You've got Tony Billionaire Stark and his wife in your fucking pocket, woman. They'd build you laser-proof rooms and couches if you needed it. From what I've seen and you've told me, Natasha could pay for anything the Starks wouldn't. When you need a break, you've got more than enough possible babysitters who could handle super-babies. Like me. Or your brothers.” She shook her head. “Well, Kevin. You know he's got a gift too, right? He can read people better than anyone I've ever met, except you when you touch people.”

“Nat suggested he was empathic once,” Emily allowed.

“See? You'll probably just have a kid that's telepathic or something. No big.”

She could only laugh in exasperation. “Right. A kid who can read minds isn't a big deal.”

“Not when its mothers will threaten it with having to listen to their Auntie Lizzie's constant drivel about being annoyed with her mother when they step out of line.”

Emily started to laugh, but it died before it reached her throat. “What about my mother?”

Lizzie's pretty face contorted, and she snarled, “Screw that bitch.”

There were few things better than a bff who hated her mom as much as she did. “She sucks as a mom and a person, but a kid deserves to know about all of its family, doesn't it?” She was thinking about Natasha and her complete ignorance of her own, the pain it caused her. “Even if its terrible?”

“Like with adopted kids?”

She nodded.

“Huh. Yea. I guess.” Leaning close to one-arm hug Emily, “At least you're not saying something ridiculous like, 'Maybe she'll change with grandkids.' I am proud of you for that.”

“Thanks to you.” Emily whispered. “Or I probably would still be moaning over Leslie and trying to get back with her.”

Lightly, Lizzie jostled her. “No way. You were already past being a victim by the time she left you. Hell, she could see that you were starting to figure out her twisted heart and would've left her
eventually. You would've gone back to counseling or found some other awesome bff to sew your heart back together.”

“You remember that counseling wasn't my own idea either, right? Hafid convinced me to go.”

“Alright, woman. I'll take credit for being awesome sauce.”

Emily chuckled and dropped her head to Lizzie's shoulder.

“I've changed my mind.” Lizzie announced.

“About what?”

Her friend squeezed her. “That assassin of yours is one of the best people I've ever met.”

Warmth, only partly alcohol-induced, swelled in her chest. “You really think that?”

Lizzie nodded. “And the way you've changed since joining the Avengers isn't terrible.”

“I tried to maim Leslie.” Darkly, Emily reminded her.

“Bitch had it coming. No,” she cut off the argument before Emily could voice it. “You listen. That selfish bitch hurt you. She fucking ripped your heart out, then had the nerve to show up after learning you'd been hiding this amazing gift of yours and had the nerve to try and act like you should be nice to her. When you actually stood up for yourself and your partner, she pushed. She wouldn't take the polite hint and leave you alone. That dumb bitch is lucky she got out without a scratch.”

The adrenaline of the memory made her body tight. She let out a shuddering breath and sucked down the contents of her glass.

“Seriously. What the fuck did she think would happen by being rude to the Black Widow and the woman she wants to have super-babies with? Okay, she wouldn't know the super-babies part. But what sane person thinks fucking with the Black Widow's lover is a good idea? Did she think the Widow would love an innocent, delicate flower? My bff doesn't roll with Avengers just because she's got killer abs now.” Lizzie paused, lifted Emily's shirt. “Well, under the cookie-fat you do.”

“Hey!”

She poked one of Emily's modest boobs. “How do your tits never get any bigger? You lucky bitch.”

“It all goes to my stomach. And I blame Clint and his damn ice cream obsession.”

Lizzie's shoulders went a little hard. “It does kind of suck that I know you keep secrets from me now.”

Emily bit her lip.

“But I know they aren't your secrets to share.” A quick, consoling kiss was pressed to Emily's hair. “And you know what? That makes me feel a little safer. My bff is so tight with the alien-ass-kickers they share their secrets with her. That means she knows exactly how to inspire them to keep asshole invaders off our planet.”

Avenger glue. More like Avenger mom. She chuckled. “I'm glad you approve.”
“Speaking of approving, did you bring pictures of your armor? I’m dying to see this *Power Rangers* helmet of yours. And can I post them on my Instagram page?”

“I can see the blog headlines now. Sekhmet's Stark-designed armor shows the beast that Smiley Fortune tries to hide under her fluffy kitten antics in public.”

Lizzie giggled. “The queer pages devoted to you will wet themselves.”

“That's still so fucking weird.” Pausing from texting Jarvis a request for good pictures, Emily shook her head. “Not only am I religious cult icon, but a hero for the lesbian community.”

“Don't forget sex icon. And smut fic inspiration. Have you read any of those?”

Dread built behind her eyeballs. “You are *not* telling me that you have.”

The look that Lizzie gave her said, “Yes, I absolutely have.”

Cheeks and ears burning, she buried her face in her hands.

“Tempt me to actually give in to Danya's *constant* begging to convince you and Natasha to do a lingerie shoot with her.” Danya, talented photographer who couldn't quite break away from weddings and senior photoshoots despite her penchant for BDSM imagery. “I had to threaten to break my wedding contract with her if she didn't stop.”

“If I ever agree to a lingerie shoot, you'll do the dominatrix getup like the kinky fuck you are.”

They both fell into giggles. Raising her glass, Lizzie went mock-serious. “Don't tempt me. I just bought some gorgeous red boots, and Kyle looks good on his knees.”

“Freak.” Emily shoulder-bumped her.

“I know Natasha's a sex goddess, but I still have trouble believing that she got you to do anal play.”

Her blush returned full-force. It was really, really good, but so embarrassing. And Nat would go down on her even if she hadn't showered. And...

“You are such a prude, Em!” teased as fingers plucked her cheeks.

She shoved her away. “Fuck off.”

Fingers wiggled in the air above her, a brief warning before Lizzie attacked her with tickles. Or tried. Emily grabbed a wrist, bodily twisted, sent them both to the carpet where Emily pinned Lizzie without effort. The sudden change in dynamics made her blink. Lizzie had always been the more aggressive, stronger friend.

“Shit, Em! Get your ass off me.”

Knee in the middle of her back, Emily bent over, put her mouth by Lizzie's ear, spoke drunkenly. “I win.” She let go only to tickle her mercilessly.

“Emily!” shrieked at her.

It wasn't until Emily ran out of breath laughing that she stopped, slid off Lizzie and lay panting, staring up at the ceiling with a huge smile.

“Bitch,” huffed from beside her.
Her head lolled to blow Lizzie an air kiss.


“Hey, does Kyle's cousin still have that skeet puller?”

Lizzie nodded.

“Let's take a day trip up to his ranch. I'll show you what Hawkeye's been teaching me.”

To her stomach, Lizzie rolled to peer at Emily. “You can fucking shoot a bow now too?”

Emily laughed. “No. Sniper rifle.”

There was a tiny breeze tickling her neck. Emily tried not to swat at the flies annoying her as she waited for the next skeet disc to fly into the air. A blink later, she was squeezing the trigger of her borrowed 0.338 rifle and watching ceramic explode. Over the radio built into her ear protection, she heard Kyle and his cousin hooting in amazement and Lizzie demanding to know if anyone could find Emily yet.

She rolled sideways behind a scruffy bush, eased to a crouch. Her next hiding spot was a tall patch of swaying grass that her hunting outfit and added plant camouflage would hide her perfectly in. On hands and knees, she crawled hastily until she was behind the grass, but heard the skeet pull before she could slither into hiding. Eye to scope, she found the disc, took it out.

The guys hollered and Lizzie swore. Emily eased herself among the grass, checked the sun, satisfied herself that her scope wouldn't flash, and peered at the gathered friends. They looked like they were enjoying themselves. Except maybe Bram, Lizzie's older brother, who was sitting somewhat behind them. He had his own binoculars and they were trained on her. She raised a thumb.

He copied it. Veteran combat Marine. Showoff.

Thirty yards from their shady viewing spot was a tree that they'd decorated with dangling beer cans. Full of beer. Duct tape and twine kept them aloft. Emily picked one and made it explode.

Lizzie swore.

The skeet disc wasn't even a challenge. Another beer can exploded.

Laughter hooted from the cousins, and she moved to another spot, even closer. One beer can taunted her from where it swung behind a tangle of branches that already foiled two of her bullets. She was forced to pause to take out a disc before aiming again when Lizzie finally found her.

“By the rusty barrel.”

Extremely rusty, practically half bent over on one side from the lack of metal supporting it. Some rust-eating monster had taken a bite out of it. Grass was growing from its sandy innards. “Damn.” Emily stood.

“Holy crap, Em.” Kyle gaped at her. “How the hell did you get so close?”

Touching the radio button, “It's only 100 yards.” She shrugged at the distance she was from them. She'd started at 150 yards. Next to Clint, she was a noob, always would be. She'd never even make
it through Army Sniper School. Having read the graduation requirements, she knew she couldn't, and Clint had gently agreed. She settled for knowing that if she couldn't put holes in the assholes trying to hurt Nat, then she could at least distract them or tell Nat where they were for her to put holes in them.

“Only?” Kyle demanded. “You moved 50 yards in open scrubland without us seeing you.”

But to her friends, who she'd gone shooting with, who knew that she didn't use to be any good with shooting slowly moving objects, let alone high-speed flying targets, this was huge.

And she could admit that she was better than Kyle now, who'd been hunting all his life. The ego boost was welcome.

She tried to ignore that Clint and Natasha would both be scolding her for being sloppy. That last beer shouldn't have been that big of a pain. Emily raised her scope.

“What are you doing?” Kyle asked.

“Getting my last target.” Controlling her breathing, she focused on the slightly swinging can, found the gap between the branches. Slowly, she exhaled, squeezed the trigger.

Beer exploded. She pulled the protective mufflers off her ears, let them rest around her neck.

Shouldering the strap of the rifle, Emily watched her friends as she approached them. There was a change in them. Adrenaline was clear in their faces, in the way they were holding their bodies, how they looked ready to run. Why? She scanned the perimeter. Nothing. Bram looked calm. The cousins were pointing at the tree and arguing. Oh. It was one thing to not see the shooter. It was another to see her as she pointed a deadly weapon to calmly shoot her target. She'd never been completely comfortable with guns, especially the big ones, had only learned to use and shoot just in case someone found out about her, in case they threatened her or her brothers. Seeing little Emily use a big gun like it was no big deal was a big deal. She rubbed her itchy nose, groaned at the camo paint that transferred to her hand.

Bram rose from where he'd been sitting quietly. “Not bad, Fortune.”

“I've done worse.”

He snorted. “I'm sure you've done better too. You're used to a much higher quality rifle.”

Much, much higher quality. Custom designed for her hands. The rifle she'd borrowed from Kyle needed some maintenance. The trigger mechanism was worn, the sights were the tiniest bit off, the...

“You're not insulting my second favorite gun, are you, Bram?” Kyle demanded.

Unslinging and handing it over, Emily smiled at him. “Bolt is smoother than mine.” Worn and comfortable.

He accepted his baby and shot Bram a smug look. “She's a beauty.”

“You're gun is the ugliest thing I've ever seen.” Kyle's cousin playfully insulted him, starting an old argument that they splashed into with enthusiasm.

“I'd like to look at your cans.” Bram gestured, clearly wanting her to join him away from the others.
Lizzie joined the argument, lobbing insults at his weapon, but not before tossing Emily a glance that said she wanted her to talk to Bram. Yea, okay, woman, she silently sent back.

Emily's sweaty, itchy hat was pulled off as she strode beside him. She scratched her head, peeled off the plants tickling her neck and face, was glad the altitude kept the late spring heat down. Under the tree, Bram studied the cans lazily twirling and swinging and dripping beer, pointed at the one that'd given her trouble. “That wouldn't be an easy shot from where you were shooting.”

“Did Lizzie put you up to this?”

“She's worried about you.”

“I've changed.” A lot. “Our friendship is different.”

His hands found their way behind his back, body easing into a position much like Natasha when she was acting as trainer for Emily. Legs spread, knees relaxed, spine straight, eyes sharp. “You're a combat veteran who constantly has news cameras up her ass when you used to be a quiet civilian who spent most of her time hiding from attention.”

She sputtered out a laugh at his accurate description.

“Instead of spending most of your time with potheads and farmers, you're surrounded by soldiers and high-profile one-percenter.”

“Technically, I still hang out with a pothead and a farmer.” Even if the second was kind of a stretch. Laura was more of a farmer than Clint.

Bram eyed her. “About the only thing that's the same is that you carry secrets.”

“And I still bruise easily.”

“Have you found anyone to talk to about the changes in your head? A professional, like your brother Kevin?”

There was the guy who'd worked with Skye. She'd been considering asking Coulson for info on how to get in touch with him or a suggestion for someone else. “Not yet.”

His shoulders eased slightly. “I'm glad you've been thinking about it.”

“Nat and I have talked about me seeing someone. My temper's gotten pretty thin.”

Slowly, a smile whispered around his lips. “That's good to hear you and her talk about this. You're in a lot better shape than Lizzie made you out to be.”

Bram had the same eyebrows as Lizzie, thick, luxurious things that draped across their eyes like lazy cats. His rested lower. Less emotive. Stereotypical stoic soldier. Especially right now, the way he was treating her like a Marine under his command that he was worried about. That he respected. Weird. He'd always liked her because she was Lizzie's friend, but he'd always been vaguely dismissive.

“This is weird you treating me like a man.”

His eyebrows rose. A shake of his head later, his frame relaxed, and he chuckled. “A year ago, I never would've believed it if someone told me we'd be talking like this. Not to my little sister's pot-connection.” The soldier persona lifted abruptly as he lowered his head to speak softer. “I have to
"An adorable dork at home," was her giggly reply. She sobered to continue, "But a beast on the battlefield. Anything you've seen on TV has been him pulling his punches."

Having shifted his own posture as she did, Bram nodded. "I wondered why normal guys survived a fight with him."

"Except the Chitauri. The aliens in New York. Apparently, those guys took a beating pretty well."

"I also have to ask you about SHIELD." Bram grimaced. "Orders from my superiors, because they know I'm Lizzie's brother, and she's your best friend."

Emily straightened.

"They want to know if..."

She held up a hand. "You can tell your superiors that I refuse to allow you to be used in this manner. If they want to talk to me about SHIELD or the Avengers, then they can call my PR office and request an interview. If you choose of your own volition to be there, that's fine. Otherwise, no."

He muttered a brief prayer of thanks to Allah.

"I'll give you a signed letter to pass on if you want." She offered.

"No. Thanks. I'll keep it in mind for the future though."

"Why'd they try to use you anyway? Tony's best bud an officer in the Air Force. He's got one of Tony's suits." She hadn't met Rhodey yet, but she wanted to. Tony talked about the man like he would a big brother, both fiercely loyal to him and wanting to kick him in the nuts, then go play video games.

Bram nodded. "Yes, but Colonel Rhodes is Tony Stark's friend, not Natasha Romanoff's lover. And you were a SHIELD agent, actually worked in the Triskelion before it was destroyed."

"Oh. Fair enough. Hey, while we're on touchy military subjects, the eyes watching us are your's, right?" Emily asked.

Dark eyes flit around them. "Half dozen on perimeter watch, including a sniper team on the ridge."

"I only found five, including the sniper nest." She pointed her nose in the direction.

He nodded. "Ours."

Relieved she nodded. "Good. I was a little worried because there's normally only three who follow Lizzie."

"All of us in a remote location made them antsy."

"No one told them what a crack shot I am." Emily joked, casting her eyes to the hidden sniper nest that she'd seen on accident when the sun had reflected off their scope.

Bram's question came a little hesitantly. "Why are you training as a sniper?"

"Nat likes to keep me as far from the action as possible."
“Oh.” He nodded understandingly. “That makes sense.”

Emily laughed. “I'll never be really good, I know. It's the compromise we made. I'm at a distance, but helpful. I can keep an eye on the field and my team in case they need me.”

“And their field medic can protect herself and them like any good soldier.”

“Speaking of medic, Lizzie told me you broke your arm last year. Let me inspect it.”

Hesitance looked at her.

Emily teased him. “Don't tell me you're afraid of me poking around your insides. I can't turn you into an alien or anything.”

His hand was held out, accepted. Information flowed into Emily. The break had healed well, but...

“I know about it.” Hard, broken, his voice cut into her investigation.

Cancer. In his lungs.

“Never smoked a day in my life, but I've got lung cancer.” He growled, sighed, rubbed his neck.

“And it's not one I can take care of.” Something had fucked up his DNA and caused the cancer. Any number of things could be the culprit. Radiation, atmospheric toxins, food-borne poisons...

“I don't want Lizzie to know until after her honeymoon. She doesn't need to worry about me when she's finally getting married.”

She glanced at her, was glad she was busy laughing with Kyle. “Is surgery an option?”

He'd followed her gaze. “Maybe.”

“Let me know. The recovery is something I can help with. Risky surgeries are an entirely different ballpark when I'm around.” Or... “Or there are options that I might be able to give you that Marine benefit packages don't include.” Cho-tech, Bruce banner's big brain, powerful people who wanted favors from her. “Yea. You know what, give me your doctor's info. I'll get in touch with them. You will get the best care possible. If there are any perks about being Sekhmet it's that everyone wants to be on my good side.”

Dampness glittered around his eyes, and his impressive eyebrows were touching.

“And fuck all if I don't do everything in my power to make sure my best friend keeps her brother around for as long as possible.”

Purposefully, he turned his face away from his little sister's direction.

She gave him several minutes to compose himself, but it didn't look like he was going to be able to by himself. He needed a hug. That would alert Lizzie to trouble though. Dammit. “Spar with me.”

Bram shifted. “What?”

“Your eyes are getting puffy. She'll notice. Spar with me. I'll give you a black eye, heal it, and your secret will be safe.”

“I should let you give me a black eye?” His pride balked.
“Please. Like you could stop me. I am way better at the hand-to-hand thing than I am with a gun.”

Doubt frowned at her.

“Hello, I went to Black Widow Boot Camp. I train with Captain Fucking America.”

If it wasn't macho-shit holding him back, it was the instilled big brother isn't supposed to hurt little sister type mentality.

“Okay, fine. We can go for a run. I'll tell them I needed it to calm down.”

He nodded, and she touched the radio. “Going for a run.”

Lizzie's eyes shot to Emily. She waved, turned, tugged at Bram until they were both jogging through the scrubby terrain. It was a quiet couple of miles before Bram slowed, stopped. From his back pocket, he pulled his wallet, then a card from it. “My oncologist. I'll send a letter authorizing him to talk about my medical care with you.”

“Alright.” She read the card like Natasha would do, committed the doctor's name to memory before shoving the card in a pocket. Similar to Natasha. The spy would've memorized the hospital's name, phone number, and physical address too. And the email and type of font used. Probably could draw the little emblem.

“Thanks, Fortune. For this, for not telling Lizzie...”

“Just remember that I told your commanders to fuck off, and we're good.” She grinned.

He chuckled. “Sure.”

A quick glance reassured her that Lizzie couldn't see, so she jumped Bram with a hug. Short and tight and sweet, she let him go, got a friendly smile, and slipped back into jogging for the mile back to the others.

Emily ended up staying a total of five days in Colorado. Three nights of broken sleep, but only because she'd shot awake worrying over Bucky only to remember that Steve sent daily reports about Bucky responding to her voice recording really well. The important part was that she easily went back to sleep. Her nerves smoothed out. Worries that had seemed monstrous obstacles faded back to the little bumps that they really were.

She and Natasha exchanged messages every day. Just little hellos and brief updates on what was going on. They had some real talking to do later. Otherwise, their relationship was solid. Emily slept a solid ten hours on her fourth night.

Wedding issues were dealt with. Lizzie had a freak-out of her own over the stress of the enormous affair, her mother's micro-managing, the commitment to Kyle that was suddenly really real. There was going to be a piece of paper with it written down. With marriage would come to pressure from her mother to have kids. Kyle wanted kids. Lizzie was terrified of the whole idea. She railed at Emily for nearly half an hour about how Emily had no idea what Lizzie was going through, that she couldn't understand the pressures of family or the possibilities of popping out a person from her twat, or dealing with being a public spectacle or choosing a life-long commitment...

“Oh, shit, Em.” Lizzie choked. “I'm so sorry.”

Desperately clutching arms nearly suffocated Emily.
“You're about the only one who understands all of that shit.” Lizzie apologized.

Not exactly immune to being hurt at what Lizzie had thrown at her, Emily could only nod.

“Except the popping out babies part.” Lizzie jerked back to grab Emily's face. “You lucky bitch have a woman who wants to do that for you.”

A little smile answered.

“Seriously, Em. I only said all those things because I can't really vent at anyone else when all I want to do is yell at my mother and the news reporters who get past all that security that everyone thinks I don't know about. You are my best friend. Our friendship is a little different now, but I still trust you more than anyone, except Kyle, but his dumb ass is a special case, and I don't want you to think I don't get how stressful your own life is.”

Every ounce of Lizzie believed what she was saying whereas before, only her anger had been talking. Emily forgave her. “I believe you.”

“Damn, I love your gift. It is so nice not to be doubted.” Lizzie burst into fresh tears.

The rest of the night went better, flit across random topics, swam through nostalgia, generally reaffirmed their bond as bff’s and best-people-ever.
Dinner the next day included as many mutual friends as they could get together on short notice. Emily told stories about being Sekhmet and received ones about the crazy shit her friends got up to. A couple of them had gone to Madagascar recently, got themselves thrown in jail overnight for being idiot tourists. Somebody's kid blew up their garage testing out YouTube videos on bomb-making. Luckily, no one was hurt. The explosion had happened while the kid was in the house for a sandwich. An acquaintance had moved his grow-setup in Illinois three times in the past month because a rat kept tipping the DEA off, but a friend in the DEA always tipped the farmer before each raid.

Whatever deal the rat had with the DEA was dead now, and they were under investigation for money laundering and Cartel connections. Karma served.

Alan called in the middle to babble excitedly about a huge client contract that he'd managed to get and wanted Emily to tell whatever friend she'd gotten to set it up a huge thank you. She didn't know the client. It wasn't through her interference that he'd gotten the contract. That was all him, and she made he felt her big-sister-pride in him. After the call, she beamed at the picture of Alan still lighting up her phone.

"Jesus, Emily. You are such a fucking mom." One of her friends teased, opened up the floor for everyone else to trade stories about a time that Emily had mommed one of them. Or saved their asses. Or shut down a hater. And then they started making up stories about how Emily was Mommy Avenger.

The fact that half of them were high or drunk sent the laughter boiling through the room. Steve called and listened to them for ten minutes. "That one, that's pretty true."

They switched to Skype and he told the giggly audience an accurate story about Emily yelling at Steve and Tony to stop arguing and play nice. Naturally, Tony appeared halfway through and added his own version until Emily coughed pointedly, and he returned to truth in the snarkiest way possible.

Emily preened at the silly normality that her friends got to see in the Avengers. It had to be good for Steve and Tony too, to be part of a normal night with average people. They certainly appeared to be enjoying themselves what with the hours they spent hanging out digitally with them. At one point, Emily caught a glimpse of Natasha loitering in the background and that warmed her even more.

*I saw you, little fox.* Emily texted her.

*Was checking on my idiot. You look better.*

Nosey Lizzie bent over, grabbed Emily's phone, took a selfie with the two of them and sent it to Natasha.

An answer came in the form of a picture. Nat was hanging out on the obstacle course. Literally. Her knees were grasping a horizontal pole while she hung, upside down, loose curls everywhere, a couple dozen feet above the floor. Two more followed. One with Nat walking barefoot across the
thin footing. The other of her doing a one-handed handstand on it. Tell your friends I say hi.

Jarvis must have captured the images. She sent them and the text to the TV, forcing Steve and Tony's face to the side. Then she had to send them to the boys so they knew why the group had started harassing Emily about her acrobatic lover.

"She's such a showoff." Lizzie muttered.

"She is." Emily agreed, sent the thought to Natasha.

A close-up of Natasha making a stupid face came. A real Nat-selfie.

Laughs and howls reached a new decibel when she shared that one. Lizzie nudged Emily, showed her the video she'd taken of the group's reaction, sent it to her, grinned as Emily forwarded it to Natasha.

_Idiots for friends too. Except Lizzie. You managed to find one intelligent friend._

Lizzie puffed up and declared herself the best of all best friends ever.

In a pile of idiots, Emily fell asleep, had to share her single bathroom with too many people in the morning, but enjoyed the breakfast that they all went out for, the goodbye embraces and warm wishes that she got as they returned to their lives. The social media posts made her laugh. One of her friends had taken a picture of the boys laughing at Natasha's ridiculous selfie.

Five thousand likes were on it by noon.

A clip of the moment had gone viral by the time she got to the airport. Emily passed people talking about it, a group of teenagers laughing as they watched it on someone's phone, holier-than-thou-mothers bitching about the drunk people and their ties to the declination of America. The guy sitting next to Emily on the second flight introduced himself as Jace and asked her if she'd seen the video yet.

After she nodded, Jace proceeded to go on at length about how cool it was to see a human side of the Black Widow instead of cool professional that she showed in public, that the reaction of Captain Rogers and Mr. Stark proved it was a real photo. He also went on at length about how jealous he was of Romanoff being the one to date someone as incredible as Emily Fortune.

"Have you seen her eyes, Naomi?" Jace moaned. "Wow!"

More than glad for the colored contacts hiding her and the acting skills that she'd learned, she shrugged. "They're a little freaky. Besides, how can you see them around that giant turd of a nose?"

He gasped dramatically, started to say something, but stopped. He stared at her. Under his whiskey skin, a heavy blush darkened his neck and cheeks.

Shit. She'd been made. There were three more hours left on her flight. No exits or escaped. Trapped in a flying can full of possibly hostile people. She wanted her little fox's buffering presence.

"Can I buy you a drink?" whispered at her. "I need a drink. I cannot believe I just embarrassed myself like that." A flight steward was flagged down, his drink order given, and he turned to Emily. "Naomi?"

"Sure. Um. Whatever you have for white rum. And a Coke."
He presented his credit card for both orders, his hands fumbling with his nervousness. As the steward moved away, he fidgeted, darted looks at her. "I can't believe I'm sitting next to you."

She couldn't think of a response. Why had she booked a coach flight? Should've paid for the privacy of first class seat and uninterested neighbors.

"Here you are." The steward reappeared with soda cans, little alcohol bottles, and cups with ice.

Jace downed one of his little bottles in one long gulp before pouring himself a proper drink. Watching him, she hoped that he wasn't planning on getting stupid drunk, considered knocking him out. Anxiously, she sipped her own bubbly drink and brought out a book to read.

Or try to. It wasn't exactly a riveting story and the lead was in love with a dull, macho guy, both of which made her wish she'd bought the crime thriller instead of this hokey historical fiction. She'd been rereading the same paragraph for too long when Jace's voice caught her attention.

"Naomi?"

"Thanks for the drink," was her automatic response.

He was holding a small tablet toward her. A notepad program was open with a message written on it.

_I want you to know, that I respect the need for privacy. The last thing I'd want to do is make your life more difficult, I won't tell anyone not even after we get off the plane if you want. You've obviously noticed I have a huge crush on you but I know you're with someone and very not into guys. If you want I'll leave you to your book and not talk to you again. Or we can talk about other things. Like movies or sports or something._

Someone needed to teach him how to use commas, but otherwise the note eased her mind. She looked up at his face, gauging the truth of his note. His expression and body language seemed sincere. Silently, she held out her hand, let it sit in the air between them, palm up and inviting.

His eyelids flew so far apart she was worried they might fly away. Adam's apple bouncing, he swallowed and lifted a trembling hand to hers. Delicate fingers, soft and well-manicured, settled in her hand. She closed her hand, holding them steady.

"Tell me your name again." Emily spoke softly.

Another bobbing dip of his throat, "Jace Wayland. From Harlem." Though his heart was rabbiting all over the place, he kept his voice low too.

"How did you break your toes?"

He coughed, laughed, squeaked. "D-d-dropped a couch on them h-helping my cous-sin move couple y-years ago."

"Your middle toe healed wrong. It hurts sometimes, doesn't it?"

Rapidly, he nodded.

"Would you like me to take care of that?"

"Y-you don't have to."

Just like that, she knew she could trust the poor, nervous guy. "I know. When we land." She set his
hand on the arm rest and withdrew her own. "So, Jace. What's your favorite movie?"

His exuberant company made the plane trip short and enjoyable, especially after she discovered that he was a Danielle Yastreb fan. They spent at least an hour debating the fictional spy's mission to the moon colony, whether she should have killed the corrupt governor there instead of letting him live and hoping he'd turn over a new leaf.

As the plane landed, she decided that she wanted to give him a little gift. She had him wait for her outside one of the terminal's bathrooms where she scrubbed off the garish makeup and exchanged her colored contacts for her normal ones. The Yankees flat-brim hat she'd been wearing was taken off. She fluffed her sad hat-hair. Nope. The hat went back on her head.

Jace gaped when she stepped back out.

"Take a selfie with me?" She smiled.

"Y-yea," squeaked out of him.

She made him bend to her height, got him to smile goofily as she took several shots. "Close your mouth. Grit your teeth."

Jace didn't argue. Emily made sure an arm was securely around his middle and solid skin contact. She randomly clicked the shutter as she concentrated on his toe.

A squeal came out of him as his toe realigned. Emily caught his weight when he shifted from the pain. The camera caught his face going red, pupils dilated to thin rings, and his jaw popping from the effort of not screaming. It also caught her changes in color and disappearing freckles. Always damn freaky to see on herself.

"Good job, man," was her supportive chuckle. "You didn't scream."

He made a noise that sounded like a whine, then proceeded to play with his foot, testing how it reacted to his weight and different movement. While he discovered the lack of pain, she uploaded two of the photos to her public Facebook page that her PR people weren't always happy with. They should like this one. Unless they yelled at her about the fake ID and traveling thing.

This awesome guy knows how to turn a long, boring plane ride into an adventure. I wanted to give Jace a nice gift back. Looks like he's enjoying it, right?

"So, you're famous now." Giggling, she showed him the post.

Cloud Nine. That's where his head must've floated off to.

"Come on. Walk me to the gates. Nat should be waiting for me." Tugging him by his hoodie, "She'll look at you like a piece of meat if you want."

And Natasha was waiting. Or, one of her covers was. Behind giant yellow sunglasses, her eyebrows twitched at the sight of Emily's scrubbed face and exposed black irises. One of them arched at the man walking beside her.

"This is Jace. He talked about Danielle Yastreb with me on the plane. He might be more antsy than me for the next book." Emily beamed.

"H-Hi." Jace held out a trembling hand.
Natasha blew a bubble with blue gum, accepted his hand. "You'll talk to anyone, won't you, Naomi?"

"Sure, especially when they recognize me and keep quiet about it."

Another perusal was dragged over Jace as Natasha chewed noisily. "Thanks, kid."

Emily smiled and waved before following Natasha's already retreating form. The snobby, trashy act was kept up until they stepped out of the cab in front of a bank where they texted Jarvis before walking toward the tower. Natasha spit out her gum into an over-full trash bin. Their eyes met, but Natasha looked away too quickly for Emily to read her.

"Welcome back, Ms. Fortune." Jarvis startled her when the first elevator started to rise.

Delighted, Emily laughed. "Whoa, Jarvis. Tony changed your protocol?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It was what Mrs. Stark wanted."

Natasha's lips twitched. "Pepper made him do it before she'd let Jarvis call her Mrs. Stark."

They walked between the elevators. "That woman is my hero." Emily said. "She is so many layers of awesome-sauce it's not even funny."

At the empty lounge, they stalled.

"Mr. and Mrs. Stark are on a date." Jarvis supplied. "Captain Rogers and Mr. Barnes are exercising. Dr. Banner is working on an experiment in the lab. Mr. Wilson requested that I extend his greetings and regrets that he could not stay in town long enough to say hi."

She'd hoped Sam would be around. Oh well. "Thanks, Jarvis. I'll say hi later."

"Very well, Ms. Fortune."

A little nervous, Emily peered at Natasha. "I'm sure you know about the video that went viral."

There was a long sigh. "Yes."

"Jace thought it was awesome to see a not-super-badass side of you. So did a lot of other people."

"Our PR staff thinks it was a good idea." Natasha replied.

Emily shifted. "But do you?"

"As the Black Widow, no. As the other half of your together, yes." Natasha was all sharp edges and taut lines.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, little fox. I was tired and scared and venting without thinking."

"I know."

This wasn't going at all like she wanted it to. There should have been kissing already, or at least a hug. A smile?
"Come on, there's another video you need to watch." Not waiting, Natasha headed down the hall.

What?

"Jarvis, can we have total privacy for the night?"

"Of course, Romanoff."

It was a little extreme. There wasn't any true monitoring within the suites. No cameras or scanners. The only microphone was by the door, and Jarvis only listened if he heard his name. Sound didn't travel through the door, which meant that the hallway monitors wouldn't pick up anything within.

Natasha was connecting her laptop to the TV.

"Nat?"

"Why don't you shower while I set up?"

"Okay." Dejected at the lack of even a welcome-home-hug, Emily trudged to the bathroom to wash off travel sweat. She was applying face cream when she heard what sounded like singing. Wrapped in a towel, she opened the bathroom door.

Definitely singing. Who was it? Why was Natasha watching what sounded like amateurs doing a cover? From the bed, wearing shorts and one of Emily's GlaDos tshirts, Natasha met her eye.

"Come watch."

Curious as hell, Emily came around the corner to see what was on the screen.

Swaying to the beat of their own voices were Pepper and Natasha as they moved around the kitchen. There was a soft, delicate quality to what sounded like a trained voice coming out of Pepper. The woman could hold a note. And she knew every word she was singing. As did Natasha.

"Holy shit," breathed Emily. She'd heard Nat sing before, but nothing as exuberant and carefree as this! Emily's butt hit the mattress, nearly slid off. Her towel did.

Idly, she righted herself and draped the towel around her shoulders. She remained absolutely rooted for five songs. The incredible sight of those two usually calm, controlled women playfully dancing around, bumping hips, clapping and giggling and completely enjoying each others company was beautiful. Incredible. Amazing. Heart-warming.

Emily turned around.

"Jarvis wiped it from the main feed. Only Pepper and I have copies." Natasha said quietly.

And she was sharing it with Emily. Right away. Freely. Emily faced the happy women crooning to an old song she vaguely recognized. Quickly, she got up, tossed her towel in the hamper, went to the closet. Inside, she found one of the silk nighties that Natasha loved. A frilly, slinky thing that she had to admit looked good on her, showed off her hips and made it look like she had bigger breasts than she did. The deep blue set off her freckles and cast a seductive charm.

She eased back into the room.

Immediately, green eyes slid over her. Full lips lifted. Natasha's entire demeanor brightened. "That is a great color on you."

Emily crossed to the bed and crawled across it, touched knuckles to Natasha's arm. Happiness far
outweighed arousal in Natasha's system. The woman loved the aesthetic of lingerie. Weirdo.
"Thank you, Natalia, for sharing this with me."

"Vsegda, Emilishka." Tenderly, Natasha smiled at her. "Without you, that," she waved at the silliness, "Would never have happened."

"Was this before or after the selfie?"

Her head ducked. "Before."

"You're beautiful." Emily smiled.

Eyes rolled.

"Can we snuggle now? I've missed my fox and her cuddles." Emily stuck her bottom lip out.

Gently chuckling, Natasha arranged them with Emily curled into her side, head on her chest, their legs overlapping. "I missed my idiot too. So much that I cried in Pepper's arms, made nice with Tony, and sent you that ridiculous selfie."

Affection at Natasha letting people in burgeoned in Emily chest, bright and cheerful. "You're going to be such an incredible mom."

"Only because you'll be there with me."

"Flatterer."

Natasha pressed lips to Emily's hair. "I will always flatter the woman I love."

Emily sighed happily as she watched Natasha and Pepper's show and Nat traced her spine through the nightie.

When the video ended, Emily demanded that it be replayed. Her stomach demanded to be fed. It did so loud enough for Natasha to hear it and laugh at her. "You watch it again, and I'll go heat dinner up."

"Did you make something?" Emily twisted to look up at her.

"Chicken curry with raisins and peppers over rice."

Simple, yet oh so delicious. And Natasha had made it, a dish she knew Emily liked, but would reheat well. She settled in to watch the hilarious video as Natasha left. The moment the door closed, Emily felt cold. She stopped the video, threw on a robe and went fox-hunting.

"Em?"

Emily hugged her. "Keep working, I'll let you walk around."

Playfully groaning, Natasha kissed her and went back to setting a time on the microwave. Hands empty, she brushed hands through Emily's damp hair, pulled Emily's head to her shoulder. "Moya Emilishka. My beautiful goddess of trouble."
Chapter End Notes

Translations:

vsegda – always
Transparency

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve and Bucky were out wandering Brooklyn or something. Bruce was in the lab. Pepper was at a Stark Industries meeting, and Tony was doing whatever Tony did in his workshop. Natasha was probably in the gym. It was an hour until the usual dinner hour. Wine and a book were keeping Emily company in the tower's lounge until the pizza arrived. It was nice to have time to herself. The last week had not been easy.

She glanced up at the unexpected noise of the elevator.

Lean frame wearing a cocky grin and white tank top, a man in sore need of a razor strode into the lounge beside Natasha's sweaty form.

“You're our goddess of healing then, yea?” Distinctly British, he asked. “Emily Fortune?”

Her eyes questioned Natasha, who made a gesture that suggested caution. “That would be me.”

“Brilliant. Saves me a load of trouble trying to convince Stark to tell me how to find you. I need you to come back with me to base and put Bob back together.” He turned a thumb over his shoulder, his entire demeanor suggesting that they leave right now.

Emily lowered her wine. “Who are you?”

“Hunter. SHIELD agent. I work for Coulson. Come on. Up. We've got to move.”

“Who's Bob?”

He huffed. “You're the great Sekhmet. Shouldn't you be jumping to come help save one of Coulson's team?”

Lowering the wine to its coaster on the table, she frowned. “I'm not really a house-call kind of person. Why didn't Coulson call ahead?”

Her pants buzzed, and she pulled out her phone to an unknown number.

“There. He's ringing you now.” Hunter nodded. When she didn't immediately answer it, his eyes darted to the phone and back. “You going to answer it?”

Watching him, she thumbed the call and lifted the phone to say, “Pussy Bait Shop, this is Jade.”

While he gaped, a young voice replied. “Uh, you start a new business you need to tell me about?”

“Skye?”

“I know, I should've called and checked in a while ago, but shit has been intense. We'll catch up later, okay? Right now, I'm calling to warn you that an agent took a quinjet without telling us to find you.”

She eyed their guest. “Little British guy?”

He groused, “Says the little Yank woman.”
A sigh came through the phone. “Damn. He's there already?”

“Should I be worried?”

“Only about his shit taste in beer.” Skye joked.

Emily relaxed, nodded at Natasha, who released the tension in her frame. “Who's Bob, Skye?”

The response wasn't immediate. “Bobbi. Bobbi Morse”

Growls roiled in her throat.

“I know. We weren't going to ask. She'll live. She might even see active duty again some day, but she took a bullet for Hunter, and he cares about her. And she also,” her tone went dark. “Someone who betrayed us lured her out and tortured her. She didn't deserve that, Em. She's a good SHIELD agent, really. And, and a friend.”

A friend? The way that Skye had freaked out and made Emily heal the women, it made sense. “If I come, should I bring a hard hat?” For vibration-induced falling things.

“Got that under control.” There was relief in her voice, yet grief too. What had happened? “And Coulson has the issue with Inhumans being hunted under control too.”

Inhumans? Topic for later, her question of whether this was actually Skye had been answered. “What kind of welcome should I expect?”

Hunter clapped his hands and did a little arm pump of success.

“Some new faces, probably some frustrating conversations.” An audible shrug. “At least one hug?” finished quietly.

“Who's this guy?” Tony was asking around a mouthful of sandwich.

“I can do hugs.” Emily replied. “See you soon.”

“Hunter,” wasted no time crossing to shake Tony's hand. “I am a huge fan.”

Accepting the handshake, Tony swallowed his bite. “Actually, you're kind of small. Natasha, what have I said about bringing your boyfriends to my tower?”

“You know, since Steve's our leader and Avengers is in really big letters on the side of it, it's his tower.” Nat retorted with a smirk.

Momentarily speechless, Tony frowned, and Emily took the opportunity to volunteer him for babysitting. “You'll keep an eye on him while Nat and I pack, right? Thanks, Tony.” She pat his shoulder on the way past.

In the elevator, she turned on Natasha. “What do you know and why haven't you told me about it?” As if they hadn't had enough problems with the fight earlier that week. Anger hummed in Emily's ears.

Cunning eyes studied her silently. The doors opened, and Natasha stepped out, striding toward their suite.

“Nat?” She jogged to catch up.
She remained quiet.

“You know I've been worried about Skye. Why didn't you say anything?”

“I told you that Skye was alive and back with Coulson.” Natasha retorted. No. That wasn't a good enough response. “Natalia.”

“You've had enough stress worrying about Steve and Bucky and Lizzie's wedding. I didn't want to add SHIELD's growing pains to them.”

“You should've told me. Whatever Skye and SHIELD has been going through will probably affect us, especially since Bobbi and her superiors want gifted people under lock and key!”

Natasha's eyes were hard.

“Dammit, Natalia!”

“Skye was with a group of people that call themselves Inhumans. They all have powers, and their existence scared SHIELD's new leadership. They wanted to meet and find a way to label and tag them all. Skye and Coulson tried for peace, but leadership on both sides were too suspicious. Gonzalez went to meet the Inhuman leader in their territory. He brought a gun. She killed Gonzalez and shot herself to start a war.”

Emily sat down on the bed. She knew the name Gonzalez. He was upper echelon SHIELD leadership, highly respected, well-liked, had a whole damn battleship under his command before HYDRA's re-emergence. A few of the agents at the Triskelion had been something like groupies of his.

“The Inhuman leader was Skye's mother. She's dead now, but the damage has been done.”

Shit. Skye would need some really good hugs. A tiny laugh burbled in the back of her head. Skye won the shitty-mother contest.

“Maybe your doing public service at the hospitals will mitigate some of the fallout, but Coulson's going to have his hands full. The agent who tortured Bobbi was part of Coulson's original team. Grant Ward. He's HYDRA, almost as dangerous as me and still at large.”

Could things get worse? Emily set hands through her hair, tugged on the ends.

“This is why I didn't tell you. There was absolutely nothing you could have done to influence these events, and you would've spent the last couple weeks stressing out even worse.” Natasha broke from her rigid stance to cut a hand through the air. “I needed you here and now to deal with Bucky and Steve.”

“Dammit, Natalia,” came as barely a whisper.

Gym sneakers shifted on the carpet. “Skye had Coulson and her team to take care of her. I needed you to take care of us.” Natasha's tone had shifted from righteous to slightly guilty, vulnerable. Her eyes weren't hard any more.

Dammit, little fox. Emily's anger vanished. She pat the bed next to her, slipped an arm around Natasha when she hesitantly settled. “I won't have to worry about you putting Bobbi right back in the infirmary after I heal her, will I?”
Shoulders twitched. “Ward did worse than I ever wanted to. I won't hurt her.”

Check that worry off the list. “Why'd you let Hunter walk in instead of icing him?”

“His quin requested landing from Jarvis instead of shooting, and I recognized him as one of Coulson's.”

Emily sighed. “Anything else that I should be asking about?”

“The club for Lizzie's bachelorette party called back. We have the VIP room we wanted.” That Natasha had suggested. Opulent waste of money, except for the part where the bouncers would keep unwanted attention away and allow Lizzie a fun night despite her high profile guests being there.

At least Emily wasn't the only reason that Lizzie's wedding was high profile. One of her cousins was an Arabian prince. Another was a powerful general in Iran. Kyle's mother owned a vast cosmetic empire. Sekhmet and the Black Widow were just the icing on the press' cake.

“Em?”

“I'm looking forward to getting stupid drunk with my best friend.” She groaned. The bachelorette party was three days before the wedding. Plenty of time to get through the hangover in all its puking, blotchy, bloated glory.

Natasha gently ran fingers along her scalp. “I bought our plane tickets to Amsterdam for June 18th. Our appointment is one the 22nd.”

Baby appointment. Holy balls. She found Natasha's eyes, saw the same terror-hope-excitement there that was pulsing in her own head. In unspoken agreement, clothes started coming off.

“What the bloody hell took so long?” Hunter demanded a half hour later. “Were you...” His eyes narrowed, and he threw his hands up. “You fucking were. Fucking.”

An extremely satisfying fuck. Emily mirrored Natasha's smirk. Damn, they'd both needed that.

They hadn't had sex yet since Emily had returned from Colorado. Cuddles and kisses were great, amazing, important, but sometimes orgasms were better.

Tony mock scowled. “You two are why we needed soundproof rooms.”

“Says the screamer.” Nat cut back.

Slightly, his cheeks darkened. “Fair enough. Hey, have you two tested out the yellow twisty yet? How was it?”

“You'll love it, Tony. Tell Pepper to use plenty of lube on you.” Emily smiled.

“And this is why fraternizing with fellow agents shouldn't be such a taboo.” Hunter put in with a lecherous gaze at Emily. “Sharing toys is what our mums taught us!”

Tony waggled his brow at Hunter. “You are a man after my own heart.”

“Should we wait while you two play?” Natasha insinuated.

The leer faded at Tony and Nat's suggestive commentary. “God. I'm British, not gay.”
“Doesn't mean we can't share toys,” was Tony's shrug.

Emily snorted. “And you kiss Pepper with that mouth?”

His answering grin was smug.

Like the last time Emily had been called to help a seriously injured SHIELD agent, she was led to the infirmary where Dr. Simmons hovered over her patient. Unlike Mack, Bobbi wasn't being kept alive by machines. She did look like complete shit though. Swollen eyelids fluttered until bloodshot eyes focused on Emily. Shock hit her until she saw Hunter. “I told you not to go,” rasped angrily at him.

He shrugged in a way that said her wishes didn't matter if it meant getting her healthy again.

“How'd you convince her to help me?” Bobbi grumbled next.

“Actually,” he ducked his head. “I don't think it was me.”

“I did.” Skye's voice came from the doorway. She was in an outfit that could've come from Nat's stylish-badass side of the closet, yet she looked the total opposite of the outfit's strong, confident expression.

Emily shouldered Hunter aside on her way to her, hug her as tight as she could. Skye's head burrowed into the crook of her shoulder, her somewhat trapped arms wrapping around Emily as best they could. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hunter shift anxiously while Bobbi relaxed, maybe smiled a little. Why would the woman who'd hunted Skye down like an animal, attacked them, be smiling at Skye getting a hug?

“We are so having a movie and beer night,” murmured into her shoulder. “Okay, more like story and beer night, but whatever. I'm glad you're here.” She pushed out of the hug. “Got stuff to do first.” Though a little teary, Skye's demeanor had warmed and straightened. “After you do whatever you feel necessary for Bobbi, Coulson wants to see us.”

The other corner of her eye showed Natasha making her delayed arrival after having been distracted by a new gun that Fitz had shown her.

“Hey, Skye,” was her gentle greeting.

“Romanoff. Hey.” Skye gave a bemused smile, probably confused by Nat's not-super-spy demeanor. “And uh, it's Daisy now. My dad turned out to be decent and, uh, it's my birth name.”

“Daisy.” Natasha nodded.

“Yea.” A nod. “I'll meet you guys in Coulson's office in a few.”

From friendly to icy, Natasha's expression changed when Skye-no-Daisy exited and she faced Bobbi. She glanced at Hunter and Simmons. “You can leave now.”

They both flinched. Simmons nodded hastily after a look at Bobbi and retreated, but Hunter argued. “Yea. No. I'm gonna stay til Bob-”

“Out.”

“Go, Hunter.” Bobbi rasped.
Was Natasha going to break her promise? How would Emily stop her? Watching as Nat flicked the privacy curtains into place after Hunter's exit, Emily worried. Yet she gave her a few moments, waited.

Natasha traced an IV needle in Bobbi's arm, watched her flinch. Needles. The right, heavily bandaged hand was looked at. According to the file that Hunter had given her to read, Bobbi had been tortured with needles shoved under her fingernails. Needles were to her like spiders and snakes were to most people. The stuff of nightmares.

“Ward is an amateur.” Natasha was saying as she carefully removed the IV. “Hurt Emily or put her in danger again, and I'll show you what a professional can do.”

Emily sighed. What vengeance had been in her heart shriveled at the terror flickering behind Bobbi's stoic expression. Emily strode to Bobbi's other side, put her hand between them, stopped the bleeding. She turned Bobbi's face towards her. “Why did you call out a warning when you had us surrounded?”

Her emotions flickered. “They were supposed to use icers only. They weren't. I don't know if you were in their sights too, but they were aiming to kill Sk-Daisy. She's a good agent. Gonzalez couldn't see that through his fear of her power. That kind of thinking is why SHIELD needs more transparency, not the secret-kingdom that Fury created.”

“Transparency.”

“It might've prevented HYDRA's influence or at least reduced its impact.”

Emily looked at Natasha, but she'd gone stony. Before more questions, she put Bobbi through the pain of healing some of the bullet damage. Muffled grunts and gasps filled the quiet.

“You left Bucky out of your report. Why?” Emily prodded. “How is that part of your goal for transparency?”

“Honestly, I wasn't sure what I saw. That you had an accomplice in your escape was what I put in there.”

“I know.”

Bobbi's brow wrinkled. “Coulson told you?”

Natasha had ferreted it out.

“You heard me say Bucky's name. Why didn't you include that?” Emily pressed.

“By the time I remembered it, we were hip deep in dealing with the Inhumans. Then t-”

“The Winter Soldier was a HYDRA tool and you didn't say anything about his appearance to your superiors. Why?”

Reading Bobbi's reaction got even more difficult. Her system was soaked with adrenaline and other hormones. Her brain was extremely active. Her h-

“He didn't kill anyone.” Bobbi said. “The Winter Soldier didn't kill anyone. He knocked them out and extracted you specifically from danger after letting you finish healing me. When there wasn't a whisper from HYDRA about him or you or Skye being acquired, I doubted what I'd seen and heard. Romanoff didn't rally the Avengers to chase after you. Nothing made sense. Then Skye showed up as anti-HYDRA as ever, the crisis with the Inhumans happened, and I got abducted by
Ward. When I got fresh news, you and Romanoff were easily found in New York. I told Coulson then.”

Emily made the fingers heal.

Bobbi cringed.

“Where are your loyalties?”

“SHIELD.”

“To an organization that's been ripped apart more than once?” Emily demanded and healed the fractures in her cheek.

Bobbi hissed. “To protecting innocent people from the likes of HYDRA and alien invaders and enhanced criminals.”

“From people like me?” She repaired the rest of the bullet damage. “Like Skye?”

“From people like Skye's mother.” Bobbi was glaring at Emily. “And people who have a lot of power and a lot of anger issues. Like most of the Avengers. Like you.” Agent May must have reported what she'd seen between Emily and Leslie.

Her words stung. Hard. They were fair though. Emily nodded and finished sweeping the worst of Bobbi’s injuries from her frame. Only some bruises and scrapes remained. Emily was feeling petty, and they would heal on their own without lasting effects.

“Thanks for protecting Skye.” Emily offered. “And me.”

Confusion appeared.

“Bucky isn't the Winter Soldier anymore. What HYDRA did to him to turn him into a tool has been reversed. He's Sergeant James Barnes, one of Cap's Howling Commandos.” Emily gave a wry grin. “You're right that I need someone watching me. I've got Nat to keep me from losing it.”

Disbelief and a quick memory of Natasha's recent threat scoffed at her.

“And she has me. And we've both got the living moral compass of Captain America to watch us both.”

Acceptance was brewing. Probably couldn't totally convince her though.

“Want to know a secret?” Emily grinned toothily.

Natasha shifted.

“What?” was Bobbi's slow response

“Hulk likes Natasha. He lets her tell him when Banner is needed more than him.”

The little mole between Bobbi's eyebrows jumped.

“I know. She's the Black Widow. It's not surprising that she can convince even the green rage monster to do what she wants.” Emily huffed. “Fine. Have a better secret.”

Natasha's displeasure was radiating from underneath her cool mask. Nothing made her more
uncomfortable than giving secrets away, even if they weren't important.

This one though. This had a little importance because it was an underhanded, if amusing, use of her gift. Carefully, Emily cleared her mind and focused, found the glands and nerves she needed, poked them just enough to...

“Holy shit.” Bobbi gasped. Her body rippled with the rush that Emily had induced. “What did you just...” trailed off, and she licked her lips.

Satisfied with her newest trick, Emily's smile nearly split her face. She laughed at the dilated eyes, deep flush, gasping breath, laughed more at the sweat appearing, the need making Bobbi squirm. “Enjoy.” Emily made to leave. “Oh, and I think Simmons has a crush on you.”

“You are not leaving me like this!” Bobbi grabbed her arm.

Emily chuckled. “Maybe you can convince Nat.”

Natasha glared.

Emily shrugged, “You have two hands.”

“God, Emily. If she wasn't here, I'd make you take care of it.” Bobbi growled.

“You do think I'm pretty!” Her ego preened.

Panting, Bobbi licked her lips again. “You brought me to the edge of orgasm and left me hanging!”

Humor suddenly left, “You tried to cage Skye like a fucking animal.”

The arousal faded a little. “Her powers were dangerous and uncontrolled. It was the best way I knew to protect her and the public!”

“And now?” Emily demanded. “How do you think the world should treat other gifted people?”

“I...”

“Should only non-gifted be the ones to decide our fate?”

Bobbi looked down.

“And that's why people like me having been hiding all our lives.”

“You're right. You should have a say in your fate.” Bobbi met her gaze again. “But you should be accountable for your power too. Like what you just did to me.”

“What? Seducing someone for your own gain isn't in your repertoire?” Emily retorted. “I didn't hurt you or take away your control.”

“You have an unfair advantage.”

“You do too. You're tall and gorgeous, have this cute nose, and you've got training in manipulating people. I learned this all by myself.” She huffed. “With Natasha as my guinea pig.”

Bobbi glared at her.

“And I'm definitely not going to apologize for making you horny instead of watching Natasha
threaten you with needles.” Emily shivered. “You almost got my friend hurt. And me. Because you're scared of power you don't understand and can't control. She hadn't done anything wrong. She was fucking trying to learn how to control it when you dropped goons on our heads. It's your own fault you and that other guy got hurt.”

The glare shifted.

“And she would've been traumatized if you'd died because she'd lost control while she was scared. How do you think that would've affected her ability to control them?” Emily demanded.

“Would you stop bringing up my own arguments?” whispered Bobbi.

“I won't sto-” she started to snap back. “What?”

Getting up from the bed, Bobbi paced in the tiny room. “I know what it would have done to her. It's been eating at me ever since I saw the look on her face when she lost control. Being with you, having another powered person training her was exactly what she needed. It's what the Inhumans had been doing for centuries before HYDRA and SHIELD interfered. I still think keeping track of powered people is the right thing, but I agree, we went about it the wrong way.”

This was definitely not expected.

“Most of our experience with powered people has been with those whose mental states are unstable, violent. The Index is full of dangerous people. Dr. Banner is a good example of why I'm afraid of them.” She paused. “And what May told me about what she saw you try to do to your ex. That didn't help.” Running a hand through her hair, “But she did say that you tried to walk away. Natasha tried to warn her off. She just wouldn't listen and pushed you to use your SHIELD training and start a fight.”

Bobbi sighed. “I'm not immune to manipulation either. We all have our breaking points, our need for vengeance.” Arms at her sides, she met Natasha's, then Emily's eye. “If you're any indication, there are probably a lot more powered people out there whose mental states are far more stable than what we've encountered. Decent people who could become dangerous if threatened or pushed into a corner. Like anyone else.”

“What the fuck?” Emily spat. “Where do you get off being a decent person after I start hating you?”

“Sorry?”

“Fucking spies. Natasha, is she spinning a story?”

“Are you?” was tossed at Bobbi.

The woman drew herself up and stared Natasha down. “I meant every word I said.”

Natasha made a gesture of approval.

Bobbi looked at Emily again. “I watched that video.” There was no need to ask which one. “We all did. You're affecting how the world sees powered people, how they see the Avengers, even SHIELD. I think that what you're doing is amazing. I just think you should be reporting to SHIELD and keeping us in the loop. You should be more readily available in case we need you around for when we bring the dangerous ones in.”

“Dammit.” Emily flailed. “Coulson is waiting. We need to go. You,” she stabbed a finger at Bobbi.
“Don't go making me angry right before getting your ass injured again. I don't like being conflicted like this.” Tears were abruptly burning behind her eyes. “I don't want to be,” her chin trembled. “I'm not...” A monster eager to cause pain so she could hide from her own.

Reassuring fingers slid along her arm.

“Fuck.” Emily shifted her face away from Bobbi.

“Emily,” came Bobbi's attempt at... it didn't matter.

Emily batted the curtains aside, punched the door open, and stomped past suddenly worried and confused Hunter and Simmons.

“Bob?” Hunter called into the room. “Christ, Bob. Why're you still all bruised? Thought she w-”

“She did, Hunter. She did a lot more than I deserved,” was Bobbi’s quiet response. “We owe her. And Daisy.”

Chapter End Notes

I start a new job tomorrow. A daytime job *sigh* You might have to find other ways to procrastinate and avoid studying for exams or paying bills or whatever boring life-thing that this fic helps you avoid ;) because updates are likely to get really far apart now. But I love you readers, so I'll try.

Also, 90% of what I had planned and written for the Ultron plot has changed with the unplanned 50k worth of story that's happened. I have to rewrite almost everything!...guh
Hunting

Chapter Notes

My heart is with all those affected by the tragedy in Orlando this past weekend. I wish I could hug every one of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kicking herself for threatening Bobbi in front of Emily, for emotionally resorting to a violent tactic instead of something more subtle, Natasha floundered for what to do. “Em?”

Going rigid, Emily stopped and whispered harshly, “I need counseling, Natasha. I wanted to watch you hurt Bobbi. I wanted to help you do it.”

“Okay. We'll find someone.” She frowned at the twin lines that streaked down Em's cheeks. Yet, as much as she hated seeing Emily hurt, she loved seeing her fight the darkness within, loved being inspired by Em's strength and compassion.

Emily wiped the tears away, but more fell to replace them. “Dammit.”

“Em.” What to do? Where to take her? W-

She was taking the longest strides she could down the hall again. “Coulson,” came out of Emily.

“He'll know someone.”

Emily nodded

One of the lab workers was staring at them. Natasha directed a scowl their way that sent them scuttling off and slipped a hand into Emily's. Liquid depths flashed to her.

“We'll get through this,” Natasha's support came easily. They'd been doing this together thing for a long time now; supporting and comforting Emily was second nature.

The free hand grabbed her chin, and Emily's lips found hers, demanding comfort and reassurance that Natasha freely gave until Emily jerked away, nodded, and started toward Coulson's office again. Connected by their hands, Natasha kept pace beside her. She didn't even have to glare at the handful of people they saw along the way. Emily did all the scowling needed.

Coulson's open door loomed in front of them. Not even pausing, Emily strode in, found a chair and threw herself into it startling Coulson and Skye, who'd been having a quiet conversation. Hand yet tied to Em's, Natasha sat on her chair's arm. She caught Coulson's eyes dart to the door. “Agent Morse is fine.”

He nodded.

“What did she say to you?” Skye asked angrily.

“That she agrees with me,” grumbled Emily.
“What?” pitched high, Skye balked.

“Kind of.”

Coulson closed the door and settled himself on the edge of his desk. “I imagine that you and Agent Morse discussed the topic of powered people and our approach to them.”

An unhelpful grunt came from Emily. Natasha nodded.

“I see.”

A cloud of tension swelled among them as Emily stared at the floor, Skye fidgeted, and Coulson looked as pleasantly calm as ever.

“It's good to see you got your office back.” Natasha spoke. Matching his pleasant demeanor and upping it with a tiny grin, she eyed the large room with its menagerie of antiques and modern technology. He was worse than she was.

“With the death of Gonzalez and Oliver, the board is nonexistent. Agent Weaver has taken command of the Iliad. We're still working out the finer details, but I'm director again, though I would have been happy with anyone in here as long as SHIELD continued to do what it was supposed to and protect people.”

“Hunting innocent people down with lethal force does not fall under protection.” Emily hissed.

Coulson's head dipped. “No. It does not. I don't feel that powered people are inherently a threat to the rest of humanity. That was one of the hotter points of contention between myself and the former board.”

“Bobbi wanted to hunt them down with non-lethal force, but still hunt them. What about you, Coulson?” Emily's tears remained on her cheeks though her eyes were growing hard. “Do you intend to hunt us down and cage us like untamed beasts?”

Skye shifted her footing while Coulson's pleasant expression went slightly stiff.

“You're aware of the Index, aren't you, Fortune?” He asked.

“The list that equates people to things under the same categories of dangerousness. Yes,” was her heated reply. “After I gave Natasha my name, I was put on that list.”

More uncomfortable, Skye crossed her arms, and Coulson's gaze shot to her for a breath. “That's a hard way of putting it, but accurate.” He nodded. “I want to continue using the Index to classify and monitor powered people.”

“But first, you intend to hunt them down to do that classifying of yours.” Her tone was dangerous, hurt.

Inwardly, Natasha cringed. She'd done a fair bit of that hunting for SHIELD. Emily included.

“Another hard way of putting it, but yes. Both for their protection and our own.”

“By 'our own', you mean normal people.” Emily argued.

“No. By that, I meant anyone who could be put into danger by these peoples' powers.” He defended.
Emily was sitting forward now, her tears dried, her expression rigid. “If you didn't have an emotional attachment to Skye, how would you have approached her problem?”

“With S-”

“Stop.” Sharply, Emily stuck her hand out. “Give me your hand and tell me.”

For a long moment, the director of spies considered the hand before purposefully setting his own in it. “I can't talk about Skye's situation objectively.”

There was a softening around Emily's edges.

“But what I plan to do in the future for situations similar to hers are to continue researching tips and rumors about powered people, finding them, adding them to the Index, monitoring them, and offering assistance or recruitment. If their powers are dangerously uncontrolled or used in a manner that puts others in danger, then they will be apprehended and contained.”

His gaze never left Emily's as he continued. “I hope that with Skye's assistance and leadership, many of the problems that we've had in the past won't be repeated. For example, what you did for Skye when she lost control of her powers. You offered acceptance and companionship in the face of her potentially lethal lack of control. You provided a safe place for her to learn about her new power and mentors to guide her through it.

In fact, I've been hoping to convince you into rejoining SHIELD in an official capacity. Between your particular power and natural affinity for putting people at ease, your presence could do wonders for easing tensions between SHIELD and Inhumans.”

“You want all of the Avengers, not just me.”

“I won't deny it. Romanoff is one of the best agents that SHIELD has ever had. Rogers, Stark, Banner, Barton. SHIELD could benefit from them. Fury liked being able to keep an eye on them. So would I, especially when they take in former enemies like the Winter Soldier.”

To Natasha's immense pride, Emily didn't flinch. “James Barnes prefers to be called Bucky.”

Coulson smiled. “I'm sure he does. Can we talk about him for a minute?”

“He has a mean left hook,” was Natasha's dismissive quip.

“I imagine he does. Highly advanced prosthetic and the strength of Captain America behind it, not to mention training and conditioning from the U.S. Army and HYDRA. Is he really Bucky Barnes?”

“Yes,” declared Emily. “And that's all he is now. He's his own man. HYDRA used conditioning only to ensure his obedience to particular handlers. Mostly, they just wiped his memories and kept him frozen when they didn't need him. With his handlers dead and his memories back, he's Steve's best friend again.”

“I see.”

“The facility where they kept him is ash.” Natasha inserted. “What HYDRA didn't destroy, he did when he made his break. It was thorough.” He'd given Natasha the coordinates of the site, and she'd investigated. The old bank that it used to be hidden under had officially been the victim of robbers and arson. Half of the employees were dead or missing, the other half traumatized.
“You think he's safe to be among the public?” Coulson asked.

Emily nodded. “Yes, and the topic of the Avengers rejoining SHIELD is one for the whole team to be present for. Personally, I don't have time to be an agent again. Nat and I have enough on our plate dealing with the world's interest in Sekhmet, scepter hunting, and our personal lives.”

Finally, Coulson's eyes moved, to Natasha, to her stomach. “Daisy and Simmons informed me of your plans for a family. Congratulations. To you both.” The warm, friendly expression that brought out his laugh lines wasn't feigned.

Damn. She shouldn't have trusted Simmons to keep that to herself. “Does anyone aside from them know?” Natasha asked.

“Jemma hasn't told anyone else.” Skye spoke up. “Neither have I. And we won't.”

“You would put our kid on the Index.” Emily said.

“I can't imagine a kid with both of your DNA not being exceptional.” Coulson was unapologetic. She both hated and respected him for it.

“Is this why Skye's mom wanted to start a war?” Emily asked.

Skye and Coulson looked at each other. “It wasn't quite that black and white.” Skye answered.

Releasing Coulson, Emily faced Skye. “I'd like to hear the whole story.”

“Yea. How much do you know?”

“Inhumans have powers. Your mom was their leader. Alien stuff.” Emily shrugged.

“So, Inhumans.” Daisy fidgeted. “There's a few of us. By us, I mean those who react to Kree crystals and have powers. My mom was their leader. For generations.”

Generations? With a sudden pang, Natasha wished she could have met this person, asked them questions about how to cope with the day she outlived Emily. She shifted a tiny bit closer to her seated lover.

“Her power was regeneration. By sucking the life out of other people. Elders used to volunteer and give it to her to keep her around as their leader. HYDRA discovered her and dissected her shortly after I was born. When dad found her and put her back together,” a long breath. She shook her head. “Apparently, she wasn't the same. She started taking life and... Who wouldn't be a little screwed up after... that? What my dad did to himself to find her and me, well, it changed him too, made him unstable and violent. Under the crazy, he was still a good guy. He helped us stop my mom and prevent more death.”

If a war had already been started, more death was definitely coming.

“Gordon's dead. He was her second in command, distrusted SHIELD and humans as much as her. The crystals they used to change Inhumans are at the bottom of the ocean now.” She suddenly met stared sharply at Emily. “Did you ever touch a blue crystal and go through a chrysalis?”

Emily coughed, “Chrysalis? Like what butterflies do?”


“No. And my DNA is 100% human. My gift is undetectable in blood analysis.”
“Huh.”

“What happened with your dad?” Emily asked gently.

“He's getting wiped and getting a new chance at a life.” Skye said.

Partial memory wipe, probably implanted memories to hide the lost time. If they ran into each other he wouldn't even recognize his own daughter. Tragic. Yet, if he got a fresh start, and Skye was happy for him, maybe not quite so tragic. She knew who her family was now. For better or worse, she knew.

Coulson added, “Simmons found a way to counter the toxic upgrades he'd given himself. He'll have a chance at happiness now.”

“That is good.” Emily smiled.

“Yea,” was Skye's slow agreement. “It is. What he did for me, how he...”

They waited.

“For my dad, that's why I want to be called Daisy now. Daisy Johnson.”

Daisy was a terrible name for a person with a power like she possessed.


Of course Emily would like it.

Skye groaned through a laugh. “I know, but it's way better than what the orphanage gave me, which I'm not repeating out loud, ever again. I've put the legal name change through the system. I'm only Daisy Johnson now.”

Only a name. A family name, one that meant something, had history and love attached to it.

Emily's hand tightened around hers. “I'm glad you know about your family now, Daisy.” Emily said.

“Me too. Even with the bad. It's nice to know.” Skye nodded.

The hand softly caressed hers, smoothly comforting Natasha and reminding her that she had a family now, even if it was full of idiots. And maybe, she allowed a carefully hidden thought to surface, maybe she could leave the name Romanova behind and adopt a new one. Natasha Fortune had a certain ring to it.

Her pragmatic sensibility reared up. If they were going to have a baby, then getting married was a practical idea. The two of them were already committed to each other, might as well take advantage of the legal protections available. Courts couldn't make them testify against each other in case Natasha's history caught up with them again. The legalities finally allowed to same-sex couples in America would include protection for the child. If something happened to Natasha, the law would be on Emily's side in case some self-serving bastard tried to take her child away. If something happened to both of them, Emily's brothers or anyone else they chose as guardian.

They needed to talk about last will and testaments. Natasha nearly laughed. She was always worrying about outliving Emily, even though it was far more likely that Natasha would be killed on a mission or by an enemy assassin. Her ego argued otherwise. She'd been dodging bullets and
outwitting lesser assassins for longer than Em had been alive. Even with her armor, Emily was more far likely to catch a fatal bullet. Natasha's blood froze. That thought was shoved quickly, brutally away into a dark corner of her mind. Not fast enough that Emily wouldn't have noticed the adrenaline, but Natasha did manage to keep her expression from betraying it. Emily's thumb caressed her knuckles.

“Congratulations, Daisy.” Natasha offered amiably.

Shyly, she ducked her head. “Thanks, Romanoff.”

“Speaking of shit family does to us,” Emily turned to Coulson again. “That shrink you had here last time I was around, he still in your good books? I need to work through some anger management issues with someone who won't sell my secrets to the highest bidder.”

“Andrew Garner. He still consults for us. You can trust him.” Coulson returned. “I'll get you his info.”

Natasha felt Emily's hand shiver.

“Thanks. I appreciate it, but don't think I'm done with you about this Index thing.” Emily promised him. “I'll be back when I'm not an emotional wreck, and we'll find a compromise for this invasion of privacy.”

Coulson nodded. “I wouldn't expect any less from the woman who started her SHIELD career telling Director Fury she wouldn't follow orders she thought were wrong.”

“Stealing our privacy is wrong.” Emily growled. “We're innocent until proven guilty, Coulson.”

Steadily, he responded. “Do you tell Romanoff that before she steal personal information about her marks?”

While Emily scowled at the hypocrisy he was pointing out, Natasha mentally sighed. Coulson hadn't been Fury's right-hand man for ages because he was a nice guy.

“We're spies, Fortune. We walk a fine line between right and wrong, good and bad. SHIELD does it to protect the people of Earth from dangers that the average person can't defend against. Dangers like uncontrolled Hulks and alien invasions and HYDRA.” His palms rested together. “We're on the same side, and I want to work with you.”

Emily stared at him for several breaths before her eyes flicked to Skye, then Natasha.

“This isn't a problem to solve in a day, Em. You're both right. Coulson, why don't you come back with us to New York? Everyone is in town right now. It'd be easier to get you there than trying to bring the circus here.”

“Maybe Steve can talk some sense into you,” grumbled Emily.

At the mention of Captain America, Coulson's expression went a tad dopey. Under the always-pleasant director of spies exterior was a little boy swooning over his living fossil of an idol. He started to respond when there was a knock at the door and May entered.

“You need to see this,” as she picked up a remote and pointed it at the large set of screens behind them. They flickered on to a news channel talking about a series of suicide bomber attacks in Cairo, Egypt. Hundreds were dead, thousands injured. “At least one of those wasn't caused by a bomb.”
“An O-8-4?” Coulson asked.

“A powered person.” May brought up her phone, swiped at it. A new image took up the central screen. “This man.”

Average build and height, attractive, looked like a local. Expensively dressed and manicured. He screamed privileged-money.

“Got a name?” Coulson was standing too.

“Aseem Shafik. Not on the Index. Twenty-six. No criminal history, shares ownership a large shipping conglomerate with two brothers. No evidence of HYDRA connections or pre-meditation.” May reported. “This video,” the screen shifted, showed a wobbling video of a crowded restaurant, “Shows what looks like Shafik losing control.” A happy couple was getting engaged, but behind them, Shafik was standing, holding his head, his expression worried and fearful. Light erupted from his chest. After that, the video jerked around, pointing in random directions, nothing very clear through a cracked lens.

“Street cameras show him getting into a Ferrari two blocks away. He drove to his estate where he presumably still is.” May finished. “There's a local agent watching the house.”

Natasha didn't have to look at Em to know she wanted to go help. Both the injured crowds and the gifted man. She looked sideways at Emily, found her attention not on the screen that was replaying the footage, but on Skye. Oh. She hadn't gotten a chance to properly hug and bond with her stray yet and now this situation would be putting Skye in the field to stop or bring in a dangerous target. Emily's gaze abruptly shifted to Natasha, and she smiled guiltily, shrugged.

“We don't always pack your armor just so I can carry more bags.” Natasha whispered.

Emily's expression warmed. “And this would be a good time to ease some of those clamoring for Sekhmet to travel more.”

At that, the TV's noise died. Coulson spoke, “Fortune could provide a good distraction if it's needed.”

“The cameras will follow her anywhere.” Natasha returned. “They'll expect her to weigh in on the question of this guy too.”

Emily grunted. “He could be a victim as much as anyone else. I won't condemn or celebrate him either way until all the facts are known.”

Coulson chuckled at her politely noncommittal statement. “Your time in the spotlight is showing, Fortune.”

“Yea,” was her easy complaint. “As soon as I text our PR team, Sekhmet's arrival can be expected in Cairo.” She paused, studied Skye, chewed her lip, and continued. “I'm willing to arrive with SHIELD if it helps.” Her eyes shifted back to Natasha, clearly waiting on her approval.

That had so many possible outcomes and changes to how the public viewed her, stalked her, hated her. Natasha didn't want to answer.

“As much as I appreciate the thought,” Coulson saved her, “I'd rather not announce our presence there like that.”

Oh good.
Emily puffed out her own relief. “Okay. Awesome. I'll go do the saving lives thing, and you'll call me if you need the armored Avenger mom.”

At Emily's self-indulgent joke, Natasha chuckled and kissed her cheek to soften her coming request. “Speaking of armor. I’m not comfortable being Emily's only protection in a situation like this. Coulson, think you can spare Morse or May for bodyguard duty? Or Mack? His build would be enough deterrent for the usual problems.”

Briefly, Coulson and May had a silent conversation. He nodded. “I think Agent Morse will be happy to accompany you.”

“Natasha.” Emily wasn't happy.

Skye responded first. “Em. I know she screwed up, but she wouldn't let anyone hurt you when you're trying to help innocent people.”

Probably for the first time, Emily's black eyes flashed at Skye, because the young woman flinched.

“Mack should go too.” May intervened. “This is going to be a highly volatile situation. He should be the visible guard while Morse stays in the background.”

“Tall blonde blending into the background of a fucking African country?” Emily sneered.

“Where aid workers will be on the scene, most of them European and white.” May dryly replied. “Morse has several languages and covers in her repertoire, Fortune.”

Shoulders hunching, Emily grunted. “Oh. Right.”

Light laughing from Skye broke the tension brewing around Emily. “Em, you are horrible at the accepting help thing. Worse than me, you know that right?”

The glare that Emily sent her was half-hearted. “Not really. It's the taking orders thing that I suck at.”

Natasha nodded in agreement. Absolutely. Convincing Em that it was her idea worked much, much better. If Natasha ever figured out how to do that in regards to protection, she would sleep better, but until then, she had to use charm and blackmail. “You liked Mack, Em.”

“I thought I liked Bobbi too,” shot back.

“You still do.” Natasha stated. “Otherwise you wouldn't be this upset.”

Black eyes narrowed at her.

Natasha arched a brow.

“Fucking spies.” Emily gave in. “Fine. Surround me with bodyguards. But,” an addendum was added suddenly.

“What?”

“I demand homemade pirozhki when we get home.”

Fried meat and herb pastries. A Russian edible that Emily had been begging Natasha to learn how to cook since Laura had brought it up at Christmas. Of course, Emily wanted ones with more than meat. She wanted cabbage, egg, and potato too. Natasha hadn't even eaten one in a decade, had
never made them, but didn't doubt she could. It was just a fried appetizer. Totally unsuitable for an actual meal and a lot of tedious work, but if that's what Emily wanted... “Fine.”

Emily beamed at the win. Natasha's lips twitched up.

“If you two are done being sickeningly sweet, can we get back to planning a mission?” May's annoyed tone cut across the room.

“But they're so adorable, May.” Skye cooed.

“I miss the old Romanoff.” May groaned.

“I prefer this one.” Emily chirped. “This one is much more Emily-friendly.”

Disgust written across her, May leveled a disappointed look at Natasha. “How did you let this Carebear rope you?”

“Please,” Natasha snorted. “The only people who don't like Em are asshats and fascists.” Defense, insult, and threat all wrapped up in a neat little scoff.

May's eyes slotted. “Fine. Can we get back to the mission now?”

How quickly May backed down. That made two easy wins today. And two partial victories given the conversations with Bobbi and Coulson. Natasha eyed Emily. Something must be about to go wrong.

Chapter End Notes

ha! Bet you thought it'd be ages until another update, didn't you? SURPRISE!
“nawwart maSr.” The Egyptian Prime Minister welcomed Natasha, Emily, and Mack as they approached the small crowd of delegates and cameras waiting for them on the airfield.

“menawwara bi-ahlaha.” Emily replied graciously.

Natasha nodded, staying in character as the quiet professional. She heard the quinjet's bay door close and seal shut, the metal of the engines creak as they cooled. That was how quiet the welcome party was.

Most of the faces among the crowd were grim. The terrorist attacks were among the worst that Cairo had ever suffered, and the people didn't exactly like welcoming a woman, a lesbian and her assassin lover to come help, no matter that Em was American and their countries were friends.

“Welcome home, Sekhmet.” Switching to English, the Prime Minister greeted dryly.

Emily's face pinched for a second before she burst into laughter. “Sekhmet is your goddess, isn't she? Hope you don't mind my appropriation of her name.”

“I'm sure my ancestors won't mind an,” a purposeful pause, “Extraordinary woman like you reminding the world about her.” He chuckled.

Perhaps Natasha had misread the situation. There was relief among the faces watching them. Guarded relief, but it was there. Her gaze slid among the people of power. It slowed over a sour expression on a man wearing an expensive Italian suit, who met her gaze and curled his lip. Ah, there was the hatred. She hoped it didn't travel past his face, though she made plans for it.

“I am sorry that it's a tragedy which has brought you to us, but perhaps that makes us doubly grateful for your visit.” The Prime minister continued. “Especially given that you have not made visits to any other similar situations.”

A carefully hidden barb within his pleasant greeting. They'd prepared for this.

“That you know of.” Emily responded with a cryptic grin. Good girl.

He dipped his head, accepting the answer of a covert hero.

“We had already been planning to change our public visits of D.C. to a more global tour when the sheer scale of the senseless violence inflicted on your people prompted us to start here.” It wasn't the most polished of public addresses. With the limited warning given to their PR team, it would have to do.

“Well,” his hand swept to the waiting armored vehicles. “As this is not a diplomatic visit, let us not delay your help to my people with idle small-talk.”

Eyeing the unstable building around them, Natasha wished she could get Em into an Iron Suit instead of her simple armor that was already covered in dust and blood. Em refused to don her
helmet, understandably given its unfriendly appearance, yet it didn't stop Natasha from fretting how the colorful scarf covering her short hair wouldn't stop falling rubble from killing her. Natasha's muscles protested the effort she was exerting to help hold up the ceiling of the building while Emily and others pulled survivors away.

“Clear!” The group's leader called.

Together, Natasha and the dozen other people around her slowly let the ceiling drop and stepped away, rubbing their arms and shoulders as they stepped around dead bodies. She found Emily kneeling over a man who was arguing in Farsi against getting help from a disgusting dyke. His wife, presumably, screamed at him that if his intestines weren't put back in his belly that his sons would grow up without a father and she would have to move back in with her parents and all of that was not worth denying help from a woman who spoke better Arabic than he did.

He growled something unintelligible, and the wife replied sharply that he was being an idiot. Allah would judge the woman. It was not his place to do so, especially not when she was doing Allah's work and healing his people. The man's return was that she was healing degenerates and Christians too.

The wife spat and reminded him that he had Christian cousins in Germany who sent their sons very nice gifts every birthday.

He muttered about Allah's will and glared at Emily, then told her in stilted Arabic to please help him. Really, Natasha was impressed that he had the energy and stability of mind to even be arguing, let alone keep his eyes open.

Emily simply nodded, enlisted the help of other workers to rinse his spilled innards with clean water and hook him up to an IV while she carefully looped his intestines back into his belly. Before she sealed the flesh, a wash of muddy blood oozed from him, was rinsed away only for more to ooze out. The aid worker beside Emily muttered about Sekhmet's gift being cool as fuck.

Six hours in, Natasha called a break. She and Mack maneuvered Emily away from the crying masses and into the armored, air conditioned vehicle that had been assigned them. Water and food was pushed into Emily's hands. Natasha purposefully chewed her own rations until Emily mirrored her actions and when that was done, they herded Em to a chemical toilet and back where Natasha manipulated her into resting by cuddling.

On the other side of a napping Emily, Mack spoke quietly. “How long can she keep this up?”

“If she stays asleep for an hour, she can do trauma work for another five or six. A decent night of sleep, proper meals, and regular naps, she can maybe do it for two more days.” Natasha stroked sweaty brown hair.

Mack nodded, adjusted the vest protecting his own life, and glanced out the window. They both caught a glimpse of Bobbi as she carried a box of medical supplies along with the Polish team she was blending in with. Her dull, hourly reports had kept Natasha's nerves calm and her hand away from the gun on her hip.

The half dozen Egyptian soldiers assigned to Emily's protection also helped. They ringed their vehicle, hands on rifles, attention focused on their jobs. An hour into her work, Emily had dispelled the soldiers' initial apathetic attitude and secured their devotion by diving into chaos with no regard for her own safety to save a little boy.

As usual.
Damn her and the way she made Natasha's heart scream.

Natasha sighed and kissed Emily's temple. The boy had turned out to be the lieutenant's nephew. Emily had gotten nearly royal treatment since and it partially extended to Natasha and Mack. It made Natasha's job easier, which was great, because Emily sure as hell didn't. She'd nearly walked into death a dozen times today. Collapsing structures, assholes, exposed power lines, angry camels. Her armor had saved her more than once. They'd have to get Tony to inspect it when they returned to America. This situation was worse than any mission they'd ever been on. And nobody had even shot at Emily today. Yet. Natasha wasn't going to be naive and think that wouldn't happen just because Em was earning awesome points with her guards. She scanned the perimeter and wished Clint was up in a nest keeping an eye on them.

Natasha squatted to examine a scrap of plastic. The remains of a bomb. Unsophisticated, yet deadly as any other. She tossed it back to the ground and turned her eyes to the people forming a line to a tent where food was being handed out and lights being lit against the coming night. Emily was to her left, being led about by a nurse to patients who needed immediate surgery that they couldn't get.

Or a gifted healer who was almost asleep on her feet.

On the other end of the impromptu hospital was Bobbi. The agent must have felt Natasha's attention because she tapped her ear. “Want a distraction so you can get Molly to bed before she passes out?”

Molly. Emily's new codename, though she didn't know it. For Molly Weasley, the *Harry Potter* badass mom of the decade, according to Skye. Natasha looked at the nurse. A distraction might not be necessary. The nurse was the type who had already ordered some of her own staff to get some sleep after their second day awake. She would understand the healer needing to rest so she could keep going tomorrow. “Hold that thought, Mockingbird.”

“Understood.” Bobbi returned to unpacking medical supplies.

Natasha waited another ten minutes before deciding it was time to enlist the head nurse's help. She was closing the distance when a tremor rocked the ground. Noise blasted through a moment later. A boiling cloud of smoke and fire was erupting half a mile away, made brighter and more frightening by the lack of sunlight. Screams went up. People started running. Chaos tried to take over the hospital before the head nurse was shouting her staff and patients into order again.

Emily wasn't next to her.

“You did not,” Natasha growled, searching the street that led toward the explosion. Light washed over a dark figure. Emily. Natasha slapped the radio as she bolted to catch up. “Molly's on the move.”

“What?” Mack called.

“She's heading toward the explosion.” Natasha barked. “I'm on her six, but I've got poor visibility.” It looked like Em was actually putting her helmet on. One smart move. There was a filter in it that would keep the smoke out her lungs and eyes. It wouldn't stop Natasha from killing her if she got hurt though.

“Met, respond.” Natasha tried to reach her by radio. Silence. “Dammit, Sekhmet, answer me.”
Nothing. Had the idiot turned it off? Broken it? Natasha yelled for Emily as loudly as she could, but she didn't slow or turn. They were only fifty feet apart. There must be something wrong with the helmet if she couldn't hear radio or Natasha from so close. She tried yelling again, ended up in a coughing fit that slowed her down. When she blinked away stinging, smoke-induced tears, Emily was barely a dark smudge.

Mack's voice came over the radio. “I've lost visual.”

“Me too,” echoed Bobbi.

A secondary explosion knocked Natasha off her feet. When she got back to them, all she could see was fire and smoke. “Emily!”

This wasn't happening.

Natasha ran forward, uncaring of the heat that bit at her face, the smoke that seared her lungs. “Emily!”

Another, much deeper voice joined her cries. Mack's baritone nearly drowned out the roaring of the fire as he called for Emily. Called and called without a single reply. Every figure that appeared amongst the rubble made Natasha's heart jump to her throat, hoping it was Emily, but they always turned out to be someone else, a false hope. Eventually, they stopped calling for Emily, the effort and smoke having made their voices rough and painful.

So they searched. The only things they said were occasional radio contacts to ask for an update or to report nothing.

Horror dawned in Natasha as she clawed through yet another pocket of ashen survivors without finding Emily. No one had seen her. They asked where Sekhmet was. Where was the healer who could keep their wife alive? Their husband, their child, their friend. Natasha didn't - couldn't - answer them, only move on, turn the next corner. Bobbi's eye caught hers from around a burning truck.

Nothing.

“Romanoff,” came Mack's low voice.

“If you tell me to calm down, I will put you six feet under.” she rasped at him.

His empty hands lifted. “Not at all. I was going to suggest we start checking other possibilities.”

That almost made her angrier. She didn't want to consider that one of her nightmares had come to life. But lack of sighting said that Emily had either left or been taken. She wouldn't have left without telling Natasha, not in this kind of environment, not even if she could have ducked all the spies watching her impulsive ass. The bracelet that Emily had given Natasha for Christmas last year was toyed with, her fingers finding the little pewter fox charm and tracing its smooth edges.

Natasha nodded. “She's been taken.” Blood roared in her ears, but she tapped the earpiece. She could face her emotions later. Right now, she needed calm spy-craft to find Emily. “Mockingbird, widen the search.”

Bobbi’s nod said she understood what Natasha hadn't voiced. Emily hadn't vanished by herself.

“Mack contact Coulson. Emily takes priority.” If the man argued, she would replace every one of his precious antiques with a worthless Beanie Baby for every hour Em remained MIA, worse if
“Yes, ma'am.” Mack answered and flipped up his phone.

She pulled her own out and dialed her local contact. Ruth, a former CIA agent, who now worked for the highest bidder. Nothing happened in her town without her knowing about it, and Natasha was willing to not only put up with her sour personality, but pay her exorbitant prices for intel and secrecy.

And then she called Clint. Six rings, and it went to the secure voicemail. She left a brief message. By the time he called back two hours later, she'd learned that Coulson had bagged his mark and freed most of his team to aid in the search for Emily. Bobbi hadn't come up with any leads, but she had sent out feelers among her own contacts. With this much firepower looking for Em she wouldn't stay hidden long.

“Clint.” Natasha answered.

“I already called Cap. The team is picking me up on their way to you. Tony said that Em's armor GPS went offline about half an hour after the explosion. She was still in Cairo.”

That much time still in the city, someone might have seen her. Someone who was paid by Ruth.

“Thanks, Clint.”

“No need, Nat. She's family. Keep me updated. I'll see you soon.”

“Yea.” Ruth hummed as she sipped the coffee that Natasha was going to pay for. The quiet bustle of the little cafe went on around them. Business as usual despite the horrific damage across town. “There's a few in town capable of stealing the Widow's girlfriend out from under her nose.” she eyed Natasha. “Especially when she's dumb enough to race off toward chaos without you.”

“How much will it cost me for their names?”

Ruth drummed the scarred remains of three fingers on the table before holding them up and slowly studying the mangled hand.

“She can't regrow fingers.” Natasha answered the upcoming request. “That's not how her gift works.”

“Gift, Widow?”

Carelessly, she shrugged. “Sekhmet can only reattach fresh parts.”

“No one in the business refers to them as gifts or gifted people.” The cunning gaze traced her for a minute. “This relationship of yours with Sekhmet isn't a cover while you protect her, is it?” That wasn't a question. “You really have gone soft.”

Natasha lazily lifted an eyebrow.

More coffee was sipped. “Or is that a game too? Keep Sekhmet close so Fury can use her whenever he needs? And don't act like that old nigger didn't survive HYDRA. A good source saw him in Croatia last month. What's he hiding under that pirate patch? Why not have Sekhmet do repairs? It's not like his eye is gone.”
“I never asked.”

“But you know.”

“How much, Ruth?”

The empty cup was set down. “What’s Fury searching for?”

“Fury was always good at keeping secrets. Not even I knew all of them.” Natasha replied in a bored tone.

Unkempt eyebrows drew together. “Fifteen thousand euros for the names. Cash or easily liquidated assets on delivery.”

Shit. She couldn't afford the delay that putting together that kind of cash would cause. Ruth wanted intel about Fury and his search for the scepter. What would she do with it? How much trouble would it cause them for it to get out how important the scepter was to the Avengers? That it was Loki's scepter out in the world?

She watched Ruth stare calmly at her. Did she want anything that'd be more valuable to her than intel on Fury? Yes. Yes she did. Natasha had purposely looked into it before showing up in Ruth's backyard. “Xiao Nguyen.”

An expected stillness hushed across Ruth's frame.

“And Bam Forsythe.” Both men did heavy dealings in weapons across Africa. They'd cost Ruth her fingers.

“I know when and where their next shipment is going.”

Ruth's remaining fingers twitched.

Natasha waited.

Slowly, an impressed smile curled. “Gone soft but not dumb. You have yourself a deal, Widow.” She pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and puffed out a satisfied drag. “There's a Japanese businessman, Hakashi Tarumoto. An old Russian who I only know as Petrovich. And...”

But Natasha didn't hear anything else.

Petrovich.

Her oldest, worst nightmare had Emily. Panic clutched at her chest as memories and nightmares merged. She barely snagged enough presence of mind to say, “Barawe, Somalia. Next Thursday.” Ruth was practically salivating, and Natasha forced herself to focus. “Do you know where Petrovich is now?”

“I could find out.”

“The ship will bear a Chinese flag.”

Ruth opened her phone and made a call. When it finished, she quietly looked at Natasha.

“The captain gets easily distracted by white rum and gambling,” was the last bit of leverage she had.
“Petrovich went west in a fruit truck.” She went on with an exact time, and what highway the truck was on before Ruth's informant stopped following. “He owns a boat that's docked in Tripoli.”

Natasha thumbed the intel into a text for the SHIELD agents and rose, dropping coin for Ruth's coffee. Smoke in her nostrils, she turned.

“Try putting a leash on your dyke, Widow. Maybe next time you won't lose her so easily.”

Smoothly, Natasha walked away, telling herself that it was better for the world to keep guessing her and Em's relationship, instead of confirming it by removing the rest of Ruth's fingers for the insult, to ease Natasha’s tension. She had to remind herself that she wanted to wash red off her ledger, not splash more on it.

But she would make an exception for Petrovich.

*After* she retrieved Emily. After she had Emily somewhere safe. After she screamed at her idiot until she was hoarse. After she kissed her and held her close. After she was done being an emotional wreck of a human being, then she'd don the Black Widow mask again to peel Petrovich apart inch by inch.

The fox charm tickled her wrist. Her thoughts twisted. As much as she hated Petrovich, she didn't want to be the Black Widow. She wanted to be Emily's little fox. Natasha had grown to like being someone she was proud to look at in the mirror. Emily's lover. Clint's friend. The hawkbabies' aunt. And soon, a child's mother. Her hand curled into a fist. If Petrovich hadn't hurt Emily, then she wouldn't hurt him. She wasn't going to dwell on what could be happening to Emily. She had to focus on finding her. Anything else would have to come later.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

*nawwart maSr* – Welcome to Egypt (literally: You have lit up Egypt)

*menawwara bi-ahlaha* – polite response (literally: It is lit up by its people)
One minute Emily had been running toward fresh screams caused by a new explosion, the next she was waking up in what felt like the back of a moving vehicle. A bump in the road made her stomach churn, and she groaned.

A deep voice muttered. Another answered. She felt a little poke in her arm and slipped back into darkness.

Sensation rubbed at her senses. She blinked heavy lids, tried to make sense of the blurry fog that greeted her. Her nose woke up first, telling her about the awful place she was in. There was the stink of a cheap nail salon mixed with rotten potatoes. Hot, rotten potatoes. But she was cold; the air too chill, and her thin layer of stretchy, porous workout clothes didn't hold any body heat. She shifted. Tried to. Around her chest, arms, and legs were restraints keeping her aching body fixed in place. They made noise as she started to struggle. Chains. And there was an IV in her arm. Wait. Where was her armor? What the...

“Good morning, little goddess,” a male voice, quivery from advanced age, greeted her. “How are you feeling?” Distinctly western Russian.

Eyes that had groggily been dancing around her stale surroundings shot to a plump, hunched figure sitting in a battered armchair not ten feet from her. Petrovich. There wasn't any doubt about the craggy, sagging face. She'd stared at the camera-still captured of him shortly after Natasha had been triggered for days.

“Ah. I see you recognize me.” His smile was sickly sweet. “Good. Then I do not have to explain why you are here.”

“Natasha will find me.”

“It is possible,” was his easy reply. “But we are two days and several hundred kilometers from where she last saw you.”

Two days? No wonder she felt stiff as old chewing gum.

“The IV has kept you hydrated while you were sedated.” He waved at the hanging bag of clear fluid marked saline. “It will be removed after you are sedated again and moved to a proper cell. Your acquirement was a bit hasty, unplanned, but I could not pass up the chance when you threw yourself in my lap. Not only were we in the same place at the same time, but you ran from the Widow's protection and into my arms when that last explosion was triggered. Thank you.”

“Fuck you.”

Petrovich smiled. His teeth were too perfect. False. There were liver spots on his cheeks and hands and top of his sunburned scalp. What hair was left on his head was solid white. How old was this ancient asshole? “When the trap is ready, I will let the Widow know where you are.”

“She'll find me long before that.”

“Possibly. She is my greatest creation,” was his calm concession.
Natasha wasn't his fucking creation! That twisted old fuck! Snarling, Emily jerked against the chains restraining her. She wanted to see his blood coat the walls.

“And she has found herself a companion whose bloodthirsty soul matches her own.” Petrovich observed.

“The only thing you created was the darkness in her.” Emily argued. “It didn't come naturally.”

He hummed. “She did have a habit of doing as little damage to her opponents as possible until she was ordered to kill them. It took some time to break her of that.”

Hatred started to cloud her vision, clog her hearing. How dare he speak so casually about what he’d done to Nat as a child, how...

Petrovich knew about her. He knew about Natasha's past. Emily had to keep him talking about it.

“You're proud of what you did to her.”

“Of course!”

“You're proud of having stolen a little girl away from her family and torturing away her innocence and dreams.”

“The girl would have grown up as a wheat farmer, illiterate, married and pregnant by 14, a miserable waste of such exquisite talent.” Petrovich spat on the floor. The phlegm was yellowish. Tobacco or disease?

“You can't know that.” Emily argued. “She could have become anything.”

“Bah. She would have been nothing. It was sheer chance that I found her. Scrawny, timid thing so covered in mud I couldn't even tell the color of her hair!” A sudden cough took his voice, and it was several minutes before he went on. “My horse nearly trampled her, but a boy ran in front of him, startled the stupid creature and unseated me. It was her eyes that captured me. The cunning behind those frightened green eyes.” He smiled in memory. “You have no idea how excited I was to find a pretty thing under the mud.”

Heart raging at the terror of Natasha's childhood, Emily barely kept herself focused. “And you just took her? Killed her brother and galloped off?”

Petrovich shrugged. “Of course. I didn't see the younger one until I had tossed the girl into the saddle, and he was running to his parents. The father managed to shoot me with his old rifle.” Stuttering, his fingers opened his button-up shirt, displayed a nasty scar in his upper arm. “A good shot. He gave his hunter's eye to his child.”

“Did you have them killed too?”

His age-paled eyes narrowed at her for a moment before rasping guffaws came out. Again, he dissolved into coughs that brought up discolored phlegm. “You are interrogating me! I expected as much, but not about the Widow's childhood. You are quite taken with her, aren't you, little goddess?”

For once in her life, Emily didn't insist on being called by name. She didn't like the idea of it sliding off his disgusting tongue.

“Go ahead, ask your questions. You will never give the answers to her.”
She should be probing for ways to escape, but...

“Come. Ask.”

“Does she have any living family?”

“I did not have the family killed in hopes that they would make more daughters, but they never did. It is possible the younger boy survived. Not likely,” his hand waved dismissively, “But possible.”

It didn't matter if he was telling the truth or not. Every lie had a grain of truth in it. “What were their names? Her parents?”

“I don't remember.” Another shrug. “Someone was assigned to watch them and deflect the investigations they tried to start.”

“What year did you steal her? How old was she?” Emily asked breathlessly.

He stared at her. “Heal the sickness in my lungs, and I will tell you.”

Mirthlessly, she laughed and made her chains rattle. “You'll have to free my hands for that.”

A motion of his left hand later, and a khaki-covered brute of a man with a scarred, accessorized tactical rifle stepped into the room. Under his buzz-short blond hair, a wicked sunburn glowed.

“Osvobodit' odnu iz svoikh ruk.” Petrovich gestured at Emily.

The brute nodded sharply, stepped just as sharply to Emily and loosed the chains around her left hand. He stepped back, gun muzzle pointed at her skull.

“Nyet. Ne golova. Ona slishkom tsenno.”

The gun was slid back to his shoulder. Knuckles cracked menacingly.

“That's right. Without my head, I'm useless.” Emily showed the brute her teeth.

Petrovich eyed her. “You speak the mother tongue?”

“Konechno, ya govoryu, mudak.”

“Good,” his vowels went low and long with his pleasure. They made Emily shiver.

Slowly, the rickety old man rose from his chair to get close enough to touch Emily's restrained hand. “Heal me.” He demanded.

His ancient body was trying to fight prostate cancer and a bacterial infection in his lungs. Neither of which she could do much about. “I'm a healer, not the fountain of youth or a fucking antibiotic.” He didn't need to know that she could bolster his immune system or coax his body to do a million other things to ease his problem, to help an antibiotic fight the infection, to relieve the symptoms of osteoarthritis, to...

“Your gift has been wasted on your civilian life.” Petrovich's lip curled. “I would have pushed you past any boundaries. I have read reports from the doctors watching you in D.C. You should be able to do much more.” His fist curled and abruptly punched the air. “You could have been more feared than the Black Widow! A wondrous lady of terror.”

She tried to sink back into her chair. She knew what he was talking about. Torture. Manipulation of
the body's chemistry. Things she'd tried, succeeded at, was terrified by.

“It is such a shame I didn't know of you when you were a child. I would have enjoyed turning you into an assassin. Oh, to have had you and my Widow working together for Mother Russia. We would have been unstoppable.” He sighed as Emily bit her lip so hard it bled. “But we will see if HYDRA's conditioning techniques will work on you. Did you know that they're based on what we started in the Red Room? I am curious to try what HYDRA has improved.”

Three days. Emily had been in Petrovich's hands for three days, and Natasha was officially out of leads on their whereabouts. With the combined forces of the wealthy-elite, brilliant soldiers, world-class spies, and loyal friends she was out of leads. The only thing they hadn't tried was going public with the media that was already wondering why Sekhmet had vanished from Egypt right after a fresh explosion.

Natasha was officially desperate enough to consider it. Lizzie wanted her to, wanted the whole damn world searching for her best friend, had yelled at Natasha about her opinion for a good half hour yesterday. Emily's brothers felt similarly. No one else had Natasha's number, and she refused to answer Emily's constantly ringing phone.

“Hey.” Clint said as he plopped beside her and stared out at the Caspian Sea, watching the sunrise bleed across its wind-chopped waters.

The fruit truck had been a decoy. Petrovich's small yacht hadn't been touched. He'd slipped out of Africa completely, headed toward home, somewhere in current or former Russia. There'd been a confirmed sighting by a traffic camera in Baghdad that had led the team east, then another at the airport that showed him, several thugs, and a box that probably had Emily in it taking off in a small plane headed northeast. Satellite tracking had lost him somewhere in the current region.

It was enough time that Coulson had ordered May back from base where she'd dropped off their explosive criminal and sent her into the field along with his entire team. Natasha's gaze drifted to where Skye was sharing a pot of coffee with Bucky. Emily's strays. Steve hadn't woken up yet. He and Sam had passed out around midnight over a map of Kazakhstan, arguing about possible hiding spots.

“What if I'd never gone looking for her?” Natasha whispered.

Sand shifted under Clint. “She'd tell you that something like this would have happened anyway and that then she wouldn't have the world's best spies looking for her, wanting to bring her home safe.”

Through painfully dry eyes, she took in Clint's half-smiling, serious expression. She visually traced the deepening lines of his forty years of life, the crows feet and myriad scars, the wisdom behind his irritating grin. He was right. Emily would say something like that. And it would be true. The idiot would have made a mistake at some point, trusted the wrong person, gotten her soft ass kidnapped and exploited. Lizzie might have been able to scrounge a decent search team, but if the kidnapper was of Petrovich's expertise...

“What if we find her too late?” She hissed.

“What if Banner loses control and crushes entire countries under his green wrath?” Clint returned.

What ifs wouldn't help. Dwelling was a useless, dangerous waste of energy and imagination. She'd be better off closing off her emotions and focusing on the task. She knew that. Every fiber of the
Black Widow knew that. The problem was, “I don't want to be the Black Widow again.”

The creases of his brow deepened. He gently laid a scarred arm across her shoulders. “I know.” He shifted until she was tucked against his side, comforted by his wiry frame and familiar scent. “But the Widow will always be part of you. It's okay to pull her out and use her when you need to.”

“Even when she thinks the best plan is to kill and maim anything in her path?”

Slight chuckles rippled across him. “Maybe not then.”

Her eyelids drooped, then shot back open. She couldn't search for Em if she was asleep.

“You should grab a couple hours of sleep, Nat. Exhaustion dulls the mind and slows the body. You know that.” His spy-sense merged with his dad-sense to scold and comfort her. “Another twelve hours, and you'll be useless. There's nothing to do right now except wait. Use your time better.”

The weight of her eyelids seemed to quadruple as her mind grudgingly agreed with her fellow spy. His lips cocked as he saw his argument win.

“Fine,” she muttered.

Clint nodded, rose with her and tucked her away in a shadowy corner of the quinjet's interior. “I'll wake you if there's any news.”

Reassured, she allowed her eyelids to stay closed.

The stink of rotten potatoes hadn't changed, though her surroundings had. Slightly. She was no longer hooked up to an IV or chained to a chair. Her confinement was a windowless room with the pervasive chill of a deep cave, much like an old silver mine that she'd explored with Leslie several years back. It'd gone deep. Really deep. Emily hadn't wanted to keep going once they'd passed the second old cave-in, but Leslie had, so they'd continued down the tunnels kept open by rotting timber and sheer luck.

Leslie had heard that there was still silver to be found in the belly of the mine. She wanted to pry some out for herself. Her daypack even had a mineral guidebook, rock pick, and hammer to help with her ill-planned venture. The tiny lanterns strapped to their heads lit the black depths only enough to scare Emily even more. What if there was an earthquake? This was California. Even a little quake could be enough to shatter the old supports and trap the two women deep underground to become food for rats. Or whatever was unfortunate enough to live down there.

There had been an earthquake. There was a cave-in. And they were trapped underground for a full day. Only chance led the two of them up a half-blocked shaft back into daylight. That was one of the last times that Emily had allowed Leslie's belligerence to override her own good sense. It had definitely been a turning point in their relationship, one that led Emily to take a step away from Leslie's controlling, abusive personality.

Fuck. Emily was glad that she'd never trusted Leslie with the secret of her gift.

She scowled at the bare concrete walls of her cage and wrapped herself tighter in the mass of blankets that she'd been given. They stank, but not like most espionage or kidnapping stories had led her to think they would. Not of other people or animals or piss or mold, but of manufacturing, of dye and the plastic they'd been packaged in. Her blankets were new. As were the futon mattress and simple cotton clothes she was in.
Even the bucket in the corner where she relieved herself was new. The door to her cage looked old, yet the iron reinforcing it was freshly soldered. This was why she’d been chained to a chair for a day. Petrovich's men had been working on her cage. When it'd been finished, she'd been dragged to a shower, stripped, scrubbed, and thoroughly searched for anything that she could use as a weapon or communications device. Scanning devices and hands had poked her everywhere.

Her ass and vagina still ached from the probing. So did her nose and mouth. She had bruising all over from where she'd been prodded for hidden pockets under her skin. It made sense. She knew a guy who kept little nuggets of gold under the skin of his thigh. Just in case the economy went up in smoke or he got caught in a bad business deal and needed extra money or something else equally as unlikely, but possible. Emily had considered similar strategies when she thought about her gift becoming public knowledge and being kidnapped for it. Having lockpicks hidden in the flesh of her ass might've been useful if someone not as thorough and knowledgeable as Petrovich had taken her. But he had. Moot point now.

She had to be content with reminding herself that Natasha would be searching for her. And probably Bobbi. She seemed like the type to blame herself and keep going long past when it was obvious to stop. Steve and Clint would be looking too if Natasha had called them. Lizzie would find a way to put her family's wealth to use hunting for Emily if Nat let her know. Tony, Bucky, even Bruce would help look for a while. They were a team.

If Nat wasn't being prideful or unwilling to admit she'd lost Emily and ask for help. If Coulson thought Emily was valuable enough, he'd help, maybe lend out an agent or two. The same could be said for government help. If they saw enough value in Sekhmet's continued free existence or saw her retrieval as a way to rope her into employment-indentured servitude- then aid would be given.

If. So much if.

And that didn't even include the fact that Petrovich was one of the Black Widow's trainers. He'd taught the best spy about her craft. He wouldn't be easy to track.

They could be under Siberia somewhere or the middle of the fucking Congo. Hell, this cage could be in the bowels of a Nashville skyscraper for all she knew. She didn't even know exactly how long she'd been down there. Her only sense of time were the three meals brought to her, and the daily emptying of her bucket by a guard in a black outfit and black mask. She didn't know how many days without a shower she'd missed, but she stank, and she itched. And she really missed toilet paper.

Why was she being isolated? What was the purpose? To kill hope? The single yellow light protected by a locked iron grill got a moment of attention. Petrovich planned to mess with her head while keeping her body healthy. He could let her muscles atrophy for a while which was why he didn't have her on a treadmill or at a punching bag all day. Muscles could be strengthened again. Enforced confinement with nothing to keep her mind occupied would start to break her in a way that hours of beatings couldn't, especially since she was an extrovert who thrived on interaction with people.

“Where are you, little fox?” her dry throat made her voice raspy. She coughed and swallowed spit. “What would you tell me if you were here?”

Find a way to keep herself sharp. Don't let the mind dwell on what it couldn't control. Prepare. Okay. That settled that. Emily dropped the blankets and rose, threw herself into jumping jacks, then jogged in place, then sidesteps, lunges, squats, more jumping jacks. She didn't stop until she heard footsteps outside her door.
“Vedro,” one of the thugs droned. The view-port high on the door slid back and eyes peered at her through the iron bars. She glared back from where she stood with her shoulders, thighs, and backs of her hands pressed to the wall.

The door opened. One thug stepped in, taser pointed at her while a second strode behind him to the bucket, dropped an empty one and took her sloppy one away. A moment later, her meal was dropped on the ground. Both thugs left silently. She ate the boring mush with determination and drank half the water. She wouldn't get more for six hours. It had to last. Nodding, she began to plan her workout routine.

“I know what it is that Fury is looking for.” The informant slash fence slash middleman slash black market job purveyor known as the Poodle spoke confidently.

Natasha didn't respond. A week of hunting fruitlessly for Emily had her patience as frayed as her nerves.

“And I know where to find it,” smirked at her.

She inwardly swore.

“I also know what it's being used for.”

“Yea. We asked about something else though.” Clint replied irritably.

The Poodle slowly blinked at him then Natasha, smile staying smug and sure. “I know the answer to that too.”

Natasha's heart skipped a beat.

“And I'm willing to sell the intel for that as well, but I don't think you can afford both.”

“What do you want for one?” Clint asked.

Scarred lips curved pleasantly. “I want the Widow to take the job.”

Clint's face creased. “What job?”

Cool brown eyes met Natasha's. “The one I managed to get hand delivered by the magnificent Pepper Potts, now Stark, yet was tossed aside.”

The one she hadn't told anyone about. Clint glanced at her, saw that she understood, and waited for her to take the floor. “I'm not assassinating Queen Elizabeth.”

Surprise twitched across Clint.

Poodle sighed. “Why not? Neither you, nor your girlfriend, nor even your SHIELD friends are particularly attached to her. She's not technically in control of the UK. Her death won't change the global atmosphere much. She's just a thorn in my side that I can't seem to be rid of.”

“No,” was her simple, firm response.

“What do you want for both?” Clint asked.

Sharp eyes flit between them. “A high-yield nuclear warhead.”
Rage trembling through her, Natasha whirled and stormed away. It was time to do something truly
unorthodox and desperate. Time to go pay Rocio a visit.

“Take the job, Widow!” called after her.

Sweat dripped from Emily's chin as she went through her third set of pushups. Nat would be proud
of her. She'd been pushing herself as hard as Nat ever had. Emily's arms and chest burned from her
efforts. Only two more and...

Without warning, the door opened. Twin lines of fire caught her shoulder, sent electricity sizzling
through her, making her twitch and scream and bite her tongue. Holding a taser was one of the
thugs, faceless and frightening behind the mask. He released the trigger, and her body stopped
screaming though a few residual twitches went through her. A second thug picked her up, tossed
her over a shoulder, and carried her up several levels to a waiting Petrovich.

“I think it is time to start.” He smiled at her.

Through her night scope, Natasha watched Clint sliding through the shadows, his bow held high
and ready until he paused and let an arrow fly. There was a parade of tiny lightning bolts as his
EMP arrowhead went off, shutting down all unprotected electronics within the compound. Yells
erupted from within. She saw the muzzle flash of Bucky's silenced rifle before she burst into a run,
leaping, pushing off a wall, and catching a tall, beefy guard between her thighs. Using her core, she
twisted, snapping his neck, rolling off his shoulders as he fell to catch another guard left-footed,
slicing through their hamstring then throat as they crumpled.

Bobbi met her at the front entrance to the building, a trail of bodies behind them both. The other
spy nodded at her. Together, they burst in, taking opposite sides of the entryway to kill their way
through the lavish mansion until they met Steve in the middle. As a silent group, they went down
to the lower levels.

A door opened and Natasha's knife found the eye socket of another guard. Six doors down, and
they stopped, the women taking flank positions, and Steve coiling his body before kicking the
solid steel door in front of them. Three roaring kicks later, the door caved inward and admitted the
lethal trio.

Stealth abandoned, their guns howled through the rooms, downing anything in their path until they
made it to their target. The middle-aged woman didn't get up from her chair, didn't look frightened
or alarmed, only a little annoyed. She simply met Natasha's gaze with her own steady gaze and
greeted her mildly in Spanish. “It's been a long time, Widow.”

Emily cried as her eyelids were forced open, cold metal inserted under her lids to keep them open.
“No. Please, no,” moaned pathetically, uselessly from her.

“Oh, but yes, little goddess. We have so many wonderful hours ahead of us.” Petrovich cooed.

In front of her, the giant video screen was turned on. Blue shifted to video as the session began,
random, horrible images flitting across it at the same time a voice whispered in her ears through
the headphones they forced on her head. Emily yanked at her restraints. Like they had for the past
dozen sessions -had it only been a dozen? no. it was definitely more. right? how many days was it
now?— the restraints held firm. Her eyelids struggled against their own restraints twitching and sore. Every once in a while, cool liquid drops were dripped onto her open eyes all while she tried to look anywhere but at the screen, think of anything besides the voice trying to rewrite her mind.

“Natasha,” she whimpered. “Little fox, I can't take it anymore.” She tried to gather an image of Natasha for her mind to help blot out the images. A smirking redhead flashed through her mind's eye before the parade of images in front of her blotted Natasha away. “Natasha!”

“No.”

“I don't think you understand.” Natasha smiled pleasantly at her target. Rocio Gutierrez, lady - empress- of one of the more prominent drug cartels in South America. “I'm not threatening your life.”

She was frowned at.

“I'm threatening your empire.”

“We had a deal, Widow.”

Natasha canted her head, looking the old woman over. “The world has changed a lot in the last thirty years.”

After a moment, the woman snorted. “It's ironic that your changes are all on the inside. You look as young and beautiful as the last time we met.” Her gaze was keen. “But your eyes are different. The pain behind them is no longer that of a lost child, but fierce and dangerous. You love this woman that the old bear has stolen from you, don't you, little spider?”

The sound of the air handling system kicked in, hushing the silence of the room.

“You'll do almost anything to get her back. Almost.” She stroked her chin, thinking. “But you wouldn't kill the English queen or spill Fury's secrets. And now you're here to use me to trade for something else that the Poodle wants to find out where your precious love has been taken.”

“No. I want something else.”

“What do you want, Widow?”

“Oscar.”

Rocio's shoulders went rigid. “I see.”

In her periphery, she saw Bobbi frown. This wasn't the plan that Natasha had peddled. She hadn't explained Rocio didn't have anything that Poodle wanted badly enough to trade with a desperate Natasha. Rocio had something else. She had custody of Oscar. A gifted man who could find anyone, anywhere.

“Age hasn't made his riddles easier to solve.” The only problem was solving his nearly-impossible riddles. No decent spy would want to use him, which was why she'd lied to Coulson's team.

Oscar was gifted. And severely autistic. When he explained and painted art of his visions, he did so in the way his mind saw them, which wasn't necessarily how someone average would. When he didn't understand what he was experiencing such as details that his pampered existence didn't
understand, such as the smell of diesel engines or the sound of a volcano erupting or the feel of snow underfoot. He'd never been outside of Bolivia, not in all his fifty years, and likely never would.

“I'm willing to try.” Natasha replied.

“And if I let you speak with him, what will you give me?” She peered at her dead guards. “Aside from the headache of replacing my security staff?”

“I heard that your granddaughter was crippled last summer. Paralyzed from the waist down in a car crash, right?”

Rocio narrowed her eyes. “Yes.”

“I bet she'd love to meet Emily.”

“I've heard that your Emily is a gentle creature, prone to foolish acts of heroism. Is that what drew you to her? Is Sekhmet a name for the both of you, the assassin and the healer? Or are the other rumors also true, that she's as capable of death and torture as you? The circumstances of her father's death are strange. I wonder what those rumors laid to the open would do to her golden reputation.”

Lifting an eyebrow, “Rumors, Rocio? She's a controversial celebrity. The rumors already out there are worse than a little patricide.”

At that, Rocio chuckled. “Fair enough. My security chief was getting lazy anyway. I have a cousin who's been showing promise. This is a good time to try her out.” She brushed silver hair from her eyes. “My granddaughter would love to meet your Emily.”

Bonelessly, Emily stared at the concrete wall. Why was this Natasha person supposed to be coming after her?

Natasha.

The name sounded funny in her head.

“Natasha.”

She blinked.

“Natasha?” she questioned the sound of the name. It made something in her chest squeeze.

“Natasha.”

Red filled her vision. Or was it orange? Gold? Umber?

“Depends on the lighting,” slipped from her. Natasha's hair changed under fluorescent to firelight to midday to twilight. Like her eyes. Her sharp, wild, dangerous green eyes. The eyes of a predator. Of a fox.

A little red fox.

Emily's little red fox who held her and kissed her and made her feel happy and safe and loved. Emily's *petit renard rouge*.

The something in her chest burst open and true memory filled her again.
“Oh,” she gasped. “Oh. Oh, fuck.” Tears tracked her cheeks. Everything Natasha came flooding back. Kevin and Alan. Lizzie. The Avengers. Skye and Bucky. No. Daisy and Bucky. Damn her changing names. Even the awareness of Emily's childhood, of her awful parents, were a relief to have again. How quickly could Petrovich make them disappear forever? How long until Emily's normal, not serum-enhanced brain, stopped retrieving her precious memories? How fast could Emily Fortune be erased?

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Osvobodit' odnu iz svoikh ruk – liberate one of her hands
Nyet. Ne golova. Ona slishkom tsenno – no. not the the head. She is too valuable
Konechno, ya govoryu, mudak – of course I speak it, asshole
vedro – bucket
“Romanoff?” Coulson’s voice questioned her decision.

She tore her attention from the painting to meet his eye. ‘I’m sure.’

May’s displeasure was nearly palpable as she scowled at her. “You’re kidding, right? This,” she gestured at the obscure art, the transcripts of Oscar's mad babbling, “Doesn’t give anything conclusive. You're grasping at straws.”

Natasha’s eye returned to the painting. The shadows and angles of it. She was sure. It brought up all the same dread that her nightmares did. Petrovich had taken Emily to where the Black Widow was created, where the graduation ceremony had occurred, where her options were taken away and she was sterilized. It was a few hundred kilometers northwest from the Red Room's husk. She'd considered that Petrovich would go back to his favorite place and had sent not only a drone and an agent to recon the burned-out husk of the compound, but she'd had Skye commandeer satellite time, had studied the images thoroughly.

There was no sign of use. Wolves didn’t even stick around the place long. It was a dead place. She would have had the former military base examined as well, if she could have remembered its name or location or anything about it except the stark, horrible insides.

Oscar had said its nickname, what the mine workers had called it, and that had awoken her buried memory, brought it to the fore of her mind where she could access it. It'd taken no more than a simple Google search to bring up the location. Deep in the heart of Siberia, a base established to protect and police a profitable coal mine that had been worked by Soviet prisoners. Over time, those same prisoners had become test subjects for military experiments. They were said to have died in the mines, and no one had bothered to think it was a lie. Or cared. It was supposedly decommissioned twenty years ago. Satellite imagery said otherwise.

“Fine.” May snarled. “But I'm taking lead.”

Natasha opened her mouth.

“No. You. All of you are too emotionally compromised for this. I’ve heard about Ivan Petrovich. He's the type to burn his tools rather than let someone else have them. We do this wrong, and your girlfriend is dead, Widow.”

It was a struggle, but Natasha brought her teeth together. May was right. Breathing through her teeth, she nodded.

May watched her for a minute before nodding. Her frame relaxed, and compassion swept into her gaze. “Good.” Then the soft emotion was gone, and she was planning their next move, never once bothering to ask Coulson for permission. The man simply watched her take charge with his usual pleasant smile.

Petrovich would be on the lookout for anyone who'd been a SHIELD agent before Natasha had dumped SHIELD’s secrets. Well, most. Obviously not all of the spy organization's secrets had been
kept in the Triskelion's data banks. Thankfully. Like whatever Fury had passed on to Coulson when he'd handed over the reigns as director. Still too much though. Like Emily's identity.

Natasha wasn't sure she'd ever fully forgive herself for that. Especially now. And if Em d-

Focus.

May had laid out a plan. A good one.

May sent Bucky and Hunter in to scout while she piloted their quinjet. No one else breached Russia's borders for fear of Petrovich's contacts tipping him off. She sent Steve and Natasha to make appearances in Ukraine following one of Petrovich's false trails while Tony continued letting himself be seen searching Kazakhstan with Bobbi and Mack.

“We'll find her, Nat.” Steve laid a comforting palm on her shoulder as they paused in a shadowy section of a pro-Russian neighborhood.

She whipped her head to snarl up at him, yet the expression she saw there stopped her cold. He was as worried as herself for Emily's safety. His words and touch were as much for his comfort as hers. “We'll find her,” she repeated, reaching up to lay her hand on his and squeeze.

Together, silently, they stood in the darkness.

A fly had appeared in the little goddess' room yesterday. It'd traveled down with Yakov, the man who escorted her around the facility and delivered her meals. He was a quiet man. Never spoke. Naturally. He didn't have a fully-functional tongue. According to Petrovich, it had been cut out years ago. On Petrovich's orders. Yakov had betrayed him by telling someone a secret that he shouldn't have.

Yakov was terrified of Petrovich. The little goddess felt decidedly uncomfortable around Petrovich, but she wasn't quite afraid of him. He was old and sick and wanted to teach the little goddess how to be useful. That didn't sound so bad.

It was good to be useful, wasn't it?

Flies were useful. They were part of the carbon cycle, their larvae helped break down dead flesh that eventually returned to dirt and helped support plant life. Without plant life, there could not be animal life.

The little goddess wondered how it was that she knew about the carbon cycle. She knew so many things, but there seemed to be gaps in her knowledge. Especially around things that involved humans. Petrovich often talked about people he knew or had known or killed or had killed. Sometimes, she heard others talk too. They talked about lovers and families and people they hated.

Was it normal to know other people? Did she have people who she loved or hated?

The fly buzzed closer to her and landed on her hand. Its tiny front legs rubbed together. It took a male and a female to make little flies. For humans, it was the same. And unlike flies, humans cared for their offspring for many years. Should she not know the male and female humans who had created her? A father and a mother. And if not them, whoever had raised her. Had she ever created another human? She had starting bleeding from her vagina the other day, and it had frightened her until Petrovich reassured her that it was a normal function of the female body as it went through fertility cycles.
After much difficult thought, she had found that she already knew that. The uncomfortable swelling and cramping seemed familiar. She wasn't young, seemed to have many adult years under her skin. She must have experienced this menstrual cycle many times in her life.

Why didn't she remember them?

Why didn't Petrovich want her to ask about her past?

Why was he afraid of that?

There came two sharp raps on the door before Yakov entered and set her meal tray and water down along with a magazine that Petrovich probably didn't want her reading. Yakov snuck her things to read and help pass the hours that Petrovich didn't take up.

“Thank you, Yakov.”

His pale blue eyes blinked at her, and he nodded. He picked up her midday tray, looked at her again, and left, the fly buzzing at his shoulder.

“Goodbye, fly.”

She wasn't very hungry, and the food's scent didn't make her stomach rumble. Reading wasn't particularly appetizing either. She decided to exercise. It made her body feel nice. When she pushed her muscles to the point of uncomfortable burning, she felt something else, something she didn't tell Petrovich about because it seemed like a memory. It had to be a memory. Or a collection of them.

The type of movements that she was doing, she knew they were martial in nature. If there was a person in front of her, and she moved with her hips this way, thrust her arm that way, she would dodge a frontal attack and push the attacker off balance. She went through different motions, ones that could severely injure another person.

The little goddess paused with her left foot on the ground, body leaning down toward it, and her right foot in the air. Slowly, she lowered it. Had someone taught her this? Why would she learn it? To hurt people? To protect herself? From who?

Why?

What kind of person was she?

It was the end of June. Back in New York, the heat was oven-like within the confines of the concrete jungle. In Atlanta, with its heavy, thick humidity, the heat was murderous. Here, in central Siberia, it was barely warm enough not to wear a jacket. Natasha squatted in the shadows of the coniferous forest and stared at the old base.

Her body twitched with the overload of emotions flooding her.

No. She didn't have time for emotions. This was a mission. A high-risk, high-reward mission that she was going to succeed at. She retook control of her breathing, her heart rate, her body.

This was a mission.

She was the best, and she would not fail.
The little red fox could work with the Black Widow on this. One wanted to retrieve a treasured, loved person, and the other wanted to retrieve a highly valuable resource. Calm settled in her core.

Not a minute later, Clint whispered from where he waited beside her. “Mind if I borrow a little of that calm you suddenly found?”
“We're bringing Em home tonight,” was her response. She felt the full intensity of his hawk eye and turned to meet it.

“I haven't seen you this focused since before New York.”

“You weren't there to see me prepping to retrieve you from Loki.”

Dark shadows clouded his face. “I hope you don't have to hit Em that hard.”

Laura had given Natasha a thorough tongue-lashing for the massive bruise she'd turned Clint into during their fight while he was under Loki's mind-control. After properly gushing her thanks, of course. Even across a video chat Laura's tongue was sharp and dangerous. It would have been far worse in person, yet Clint hadn't felt safe going home for weeks, not until he was sure his mind was completely his own again. If Petrovich had succeeded in brainwashing Emily, what would she have to do to get Em back?

“Me too.” That was a bridge to cross when they came to it. Worrying about it now wouldn't do any of them any good. “But I will if I have to.”

Some of the shadows dissipated, and his sunny grin came out. “We're not too far from Cho's cradle on this side of the world, so you can hit her a lot harder than you usually would.”

This morning had been filled with another lesson from Petrovich about how Mother Russia needed to be rebuilt from the ground up. He was teaching the little goddess how to help him do that by showing her the limits of her gift and pushing her past them. Yakov had been her teaching dummy for several hours. He was usually her teaching dummy.

She decided that she didn't like learning this way.

“I'm sorry, Yakov,” she whispered to him when they were down several levels and alone.

Red lined his blue eyes as he looked to her. He came to a stop and studied her for several breaths. A low sound slid out of his mouth as he lifted a hand slowly to touch her cheek with his knuckles.

“You're angry with me.”

He shook his head.

But her gift told her that he was angry. If not her then, “Are you angry with someone else?”

Yes. He mouthed.

“Him?” Petrovich.

Yes.

“I think I am too. It makes my stomach unhappy when he has Sergei hit you or cut you or burn you. More when I have to heal you and watch it happen again.” As she spoke, her stomach twisted in agreement.
Emotion that she wasn't sure how to read crossed his face and swept through his veins. His hand shifted, and he pat her cheek gently. She thought that he was trying to be comforting. A breath later, he started walking again.

Gun loaded with dendrotoxin instead of standard bullets in case they needed to interrogate anyone later, Natasha slunk down another stairwell. She'd been inside the base for almost ten minutes and hadn't found sign of Emily's location. No one else had either. The soldiers they paused to question wouldn't, or couldn't, talk. How far down did these stairs go? Had Petrovich been digging since its original creation? Or had she never seen the entirety of it?

Above her, a cry went up. Below her, Bobbi glanced back to meet her gaze. The base knew it'd been breached. As one, they abandoned stealth to run, to hunt as fast as possible before Emily could be moved or worse.

Soldiers poured into the stairwell two floors down. Hot rounds whizzed through the air, gouged Natasha's trigger hand, and drove her gun from her grasp. Cursing, she flipped backwards up the stairs, found Bobbi retreating with her, and cursed the overly-staffed base. Where did the funds come from to pay these men? How d-

Soldiers started dropping, their backs plugged from behind. Metal rounds. Blood was spraying everywhere. Bobbi wasted no time dropping the rest in the confusion. In the following quiet, a white piece of paper waved in the doorway kept open by a dead man. A second hand joined the one holding the paper. Empty. Slowly, a body followed. Another soldier. Male like the rest, maybe in his late thirties. Scarred, freckled skin and bright orange hair. He had his gun slung peacefully over his shoulder.

The paper was flipped.

маленькая богиня was written on it.

little goddess

He was looking at Natasha, his pale blue eyes expressive and open. His thumb was pointed behind him. Clearly, he wanted to lead them down the hall that stank of rotten potatoes.

“Who are you?” She demanded in Russian.

He opened his mouth. Wide. Inside of it, the scarred root of a tongue wagged.

“You know who I am?”

He nodded, rubbed the black fabric of his pants, then curled his thumbs into his palms, pressed the thumb knuckles together and wiggled his eight fingers.

Bobbi snorted.

“Take us to her,” was Natasha's short demand before bending to retrieve her gun.

The man nodded and turned, striding purposefully down the hall lit by bare lightbulbs hanging from exposed wiring, passing shadowed rooms that had wood doors in various stages of decay. He stopped in front of one with a solid, almost medieval door with aged -but solid- wood and iron reinforcement that was totally free of rust. It was new. He rapped stiffly on the door before lifting a heavy bar that served as the door's lock and swung the door inward.
“Yakov?” A soft voice came from within. “What's all the noise about?”

Natasha’s boots glued themselves to the stone floor. The guard was holding up a hand and curling it in a “come here” gesture. There came a rustling of fabric, wool or heavy cotton. Blankets.

A lean woman came to the doorway. She wore simple clothes, similar to doctor scrubs, but warmer looking and rumpled. Her short, cocoa hair was greasy and unkempt. Dark eyes, curious and intelligent, swept over Natasha and Bobbi.

“Who are they, Yakov?” was asked.

That simple statement, delivered innocently by a guileless Emily, hit harder than Hulk. “You don't know me?” rasped from a throat gone dry.

Black eyes blinked at her. “Should I?” her head shifted thoughtfully.

The soldier, Yakov, nodded.

Emily frowned at him, and his shoulders slumped.

“We're friends, Emily.” Bobbi interjected. “We've come to take you home.”

“Emily?” She seemed to taste her own name. “Is that my name? Petrovich only calls me 'little goddess’.”

Natasha’s legs lost the ability to hold her up. They buckled, and she fell to her knees. She was too late. Her Emilishka was gone.

“Are you okay?” Emily gasped and knelt, touching fingers to skin. “You're hurt.”

Pain rippled in her hand, and she watched with numbed thoughts as the gouge knit itself together. Bruises from sparring with her teammates buzzed painfully before vanishing.

“And you're tired, but not enough to make you weak. You have a powerful body.” Emily's forehead wrinkled at her. “Why are you upset?”

Echoing gunfire drifted from the stairwell, and Bobbi cursed. “We need to get out of here.”

Yakov tugged Emily. There was sympathy in his eyes. Shame. Molten anger flared, and Natasha rose, pointed her gun at his face. He met it calmly.

But Emily did not. “What are you doing?”

“Hey, cool it. He's helping.”

“He helped put her here,” was her cold retort. He didn't deserve her trust or his freedom.

Black eyes flashed between Natasha and the soldier. Emily touched her again. Against her will, her eyelids closed and body crumpled, darkness washing over her.
A/N – I’d say that I can't believe it's been almost three weeks since my last update, but I totally believe it. I agonized over this fucking chapter – this scenario – for too long. Three totally different scenarios got written for this. There are entire plot lines that had to be abandoned or reworked because of Petrovich. Asshole. Maybe I'll post some as one-shots if there's interest in them.

Next chapter will come much faster. Promise.
Angry and upset at the confusing new situation, the little goddess scowled down at the orange-haired woman who had been threatening Yakov.

“What did you do?” The woman's companion, a female as tall as Yakov, but with butter-colored hair, swept down to touch fingers to a pulse point.

She crossed her arms. “I made her sleep. Yakov is my friend, and I don't like seeing him threatened.”

He shifted his footing.

The woman's lips retreated from the hard line they'd been pressed into. “Fair enough. But in Romanova's defense, the ammo in her gun isn't lethal.”

Yakov's injuries during the teaching sessions hadn't been lethal either. They'd made him whimper and cry all the same.

“My name's Bobbi, by the way.” One knee pressed to the floor, the woman pulled off a glove and held out her empty hand, little finger parallel to the floor.

Why?

Yakov nudged her.

“I don't understand.”

Bobbi and Yakov made frustrated expressions. He grabbed Bobbi's hand and met her eye, then their hands released.

“Oh. Is this a gesture of greeting?”

“Yes.” Bobbi answered after a moment. “It's supposed to show that I mean no harm.”

Yakov nodded.

The little goddess mirrored Yakov's action. From Bobbi, she sensed excitement, fear, and affection. Probably affection. The basis for that came from the shadowy parts of her mind. The places where she thought she should have memories.

“That gunfire sounds too close for comfort.” Bobbi muttered, glancing down the hall. “We should leave now.”

Down at her, Yakov nodded.

“If I wake her up, will she threaten Yakov again?” she asked.

“Possibly, but she'll back down if you tell her to. Romanova will do almost anything you tell her to,” was Bobbi's soft answer.

Why would she? Intrigue crawled down the little goddess' spine. She wanted to know more about
this intense woman and the places outside of the base. “Okay.” She bent and woke Romanova.

A low groan came out of her. Her eyes flew open, and she was abruptly on her feet.

“I didn't realize someone could move that fast,” burst from the little goddess as she unfolded. “Wow.”

Sharp green eyes latched on her.

“Don't threaten Yakov again, and I'll leave with you.”

“Fine.” Romanova made a funny, aborted gesture. Her features tightened and sparkles appeared at the corners of her eyes. “Let's go.”

Yakov in front, Romanova beside her, and Bobbi behind, they jogged up levels that she was familiar with, then ones she was not, all littered with sleeping comrades until they were outside, a courtyard under a fierce red sunrise.

Explosively loud noise startled her, and Romanova jumped on her, dragged her to the hard ground, covered her with her own body. The same loud noise erupted from her gun. But the little goddess' attention had fixed on Yakov. He was on the ground. Blood was oozing out of him, turning dirt to mud.

“Yakov!” She struggled with Romanova. “Let me help him, dammit!”

Romanova blinked down at her. Had she not even noticed Yakov going down? “Stay low.” Romanova reached out and simply dragged Yakov's body toward her one-handed.

She would have wondered more about the woman's strength, yet the long smear of blood under Yakov garnered her attention, and she pressed a hand to his face, swallowed hard at the multiple injuries. His heart had two ragged holes in it. He was already dead. “Not yet.” She growled. “You're the only person I know, Yakov, you can't be dead!”

His brain wasn't deteriorating yet. His body was warm. His cells were still functioning.

She told his body to fix itself. And it obeyed. Heart muscle regrew and closed the holes. Not as fast as she was used to. He'd already lost half of his blood from the holes in his chest. His heart thudded into motion. Blood pumped through repaired vessels. Membranes sealed around organs. Muscle knit together. Skin again protected insides. Pale blue eyes opened and found her. She smiled as she forced him into restful sleep.

“Not even death stops you, little goddess. Remarkable.” Petrovich's crinkly voice drifted over her.

He was standing in a circle of downed comrades. Sergei and others she recognized. A man with dark hair and a shining metal arm was pointing a large gun at Petrovich.

“I was going to test that next week.” Petrovich went on. “Progressively, of course. Blood loss, drowning, electrocution...” he kept going, listing the ways he would have made Yakov suffer.

She rose, her hands covered in Yakov's blood and caught Romanova's eye, touched her skin. “What awaits me wherever you want to take me?”

“Home,” coughed out of her.

Whatever she had been expecting, that wasn't it.
“Your brothers, your friends.” Shining green eyes bore into her. “People who care about you and want you safe and happy.”

Happy.

“Happiness is irrelevant.” Petrovich spat. “Your gifts are wasted with the Avengers. Stay with me, little goddess. I will show you your true potential.”

Rage burned through Romanova, and she shifted her body between him and the little goddess. “I'll die before I let you ruin her or anyone else again,” growled from her.

Again?

“I must admit, Widow. I did not expect you to find us this quickly. I was sure that you did not remember this place when I found it had not been burned like the Red Room.”

Fresh confusion hit her.

The emotions storming through Romanova seemed ready to explode. She was outwardly quivering. “You're going to spend what's left of your life in a cell a lot like what you had Emily in,” she hissed.

“How will you get me there?” Petrovich purred. “By now, my comrades will know the base is compromised. They will not allow you to leave Russia with me or her. I will remain here and continue my work or your jets will be shot down, killing me, you, and Sekhmet.”

Continue his work? She took in Yakov's pale face made paler by the lost blood. Sleep would preserve his energy while his blood was replaced, she told herself. He was going to be fine.

“We're g-” Romanova's voice stopped as the little goddess started toward Petrovich.

A hard grip around her arm stopped her. “Let me go.” She told the woman. “Or am I your prisoner now?”

Hurt splashed through Romanova, but she let go. The little goddess spent a moment to contemplate Romanova's choice and continued her stride toward Petrovich, whose smirk thickened.

“Good choice, little goddess.” His voice was low with pleasure, victory.

Close enough, she lifted her bloody palm to his cheek. His body would tell her the truth of his response to her questions. “What will you do with me once you've found the limits of my gift and taught me everything you want?”

“I'll use you to restore Mother Russia to her proper place as dominant power in the world!”

“And you'll do it by hurting her children. People like Yakov.”

“If it gives me glorious tools like you, of course!” He laughed without remorse or compassion, his confidence high and arrogant.

A tool. Deep inside her, the shadows shifted and roared. They screamed about the children he'd hurt, would hurt, how that was the cruelest action any person could take, hurting the helpless, the innocent, the future. “You took my memories to make me into a tool that would hurt children.”

“Did that fool tell you?” He spat in Yakov's direction. “Even without a tongue, he betrays me again. I will have to cut his fingers off next. He won't need those to serve as your practice dummy.”
She heard Romanova make a strangled sound. The shadows howled about it. They didn't like it. She didn't like it either. “When I touch someone new, it takes me several seconds to learn their body enough to make them sleep without hurting them. Why was I already familiar with Romanova?”

Cunning eyes slotted.

“Why do I feel like I know everything about her?”

A harsh intake of air sounded, and she knew without looking that it was Romanova. Why? How did she know even the minuscule of variations in Romanova's sounds?

Petrovich sighed. “If she had not rebelled like a foolish, petulant child, she would have brought you to me herself. Instead, she allowed herself to believe in the lie called love and ruined all the careful training given her.”

Love? The shadows cheered.

“The Black Widow and Sekhmet would have been the perfect team,” he sighed longingly.

The Black Widow. No. That was wrong. “Romanova isn't a spider. She's,” her tongue felt thick and heavy. It twisted inside her mouth, searching for words, a way to express what the shadows were yelling about.

“She was my greatest creation.”

No. She wasn't anyone's creation.

“But you could have been greater. Such a waste.”

Ice sliced through her heart. “I'm not a waste, father.”

“What?”

She was looking down at a mostly-naked man who was tied to the frame of a rusted metal bed in the basement of an abandoned coal plant. It'd been out of service for a decade, but high school kids occasionally visited the creepy place under dares. Emily had gone simply because her parents had told her not to. This morning, she’d lured her father into the garage and hit him with a baseball bat. He'd fallen unconscious immediately. Thankfully. Stuffing him in the trunk of the car had been way more difficult than she'd planned, but she'd managed. Dragging him out, dumping him onto a sled, and pulling the load over mid-winter snow had been much easier. Even lifting him on the frame had been easier than getting him into the trunk.

When she was done with him, putting him into position to “kill himself” would be a lot of work too. But it would be worth it. The bastard. Her chest still hurt from the last time he'd lost his temper and hit her. The medical encyclopedia that she'd checked out at the library suggested that she might have bruised or cracked ribs.

After today, Heath Fortune would never hurt her or her little brothers again.

He was the helpless one now. Under him was a pool of blood and urine. His underwear was stained with his own piss and shit. She'd have to burn it later. Above the giant nose on his face - the one that he'd passed on to her - were walnut-brown eyes full of terror and tears pleading with her to let him go.

“You're just a horrible excuse for a dad, and you're going to make up for by helping me learn all
about the gift you call me a freak for having. I'm going to see how many times I can kill you and bring you back. We're already at five. How many times you bet I can do it?"

He started crying and pleading for mercy. She lifted a simple plastic bag, covered his mouth and nose, watched and scanned until he'd stopped struggling, his lungs stopped convulsing, his heart stopped beating. Blue tinged his lips. Capillaries had burst in his eyes. He reminded her of dead people on TV. Not quite real. She waited five minutes before forcing his heart to contract. Blood pumped through arteries, capillaries, veins. Wrenched back to life, he coughed, heaved a great lungful of air, panted until he had the energy to cry once more.

“Emmie, please.”

She hated that name. This time, she strangled him by squeezing his airway shut with her bare hands. He taught her a lot by dying. She would have learned more, but replacing lost blood wasn’t an option. Lessons in cutting, tearing, ripping, and gouging had been cut short when she’d realized that blood loss wasn’t something she could fix. His body didn’t have the energy and fluid reserves to keep up. Death by asphyxiation and shock and electrocution were her only choices that would last long enough to satisfy her.

And it wasn't long enough.

Harsh laughter yanked her from her father to Petrovich. “Sekhmet indeed!” He roared with amusement until he sputtered into harsh coughing. “If only I had you as a child, little goddess!”

Another child to break like he had an innocent Natalia Romanova in the Red Room. In swift, brutal movements, she knelt, grabbed a knife from Sergei's belt, and drove it into Petrovich's skull via his ear canal. Already dead, his body kept moving with the momentum of her thrust and thudded to the floor among the soldiers.

Emily Fortune straightened and spat on Ivan Petrovich's corpse. “My childhood was bad enough, you sick fuck.” She lifted her gaze to find that several familiar people had made their way into the courtyard. Friends, the shadows cooed as they faded, were replaced by things hidden by Petrovich's horrible TV and headphones.

“Emily?” hesitant, shivering, a husky voice kissed her.

She turned to meet pretty green eyes sparkling in the morning sun. “Lisishka.” No. That wasn't right. “Little fox,” wasn't quite right either. “Mon petit renard rouge.” There. That was it. That made Natalia's expression widen, open up, brighten, glow. “I can't believe I forgot how gorgeous you are.” She admired the sweat-smeared face, the frizzy hair escaping practical braids, and the not-form-exposing catsuit that covered Natalia's body. What looked like hard, overlapping plating protected her vital spots. “When'd you start wearing something besides spandex?”

Rigid, Natalia stared at her.

“You know,” a teasing male voice drifted between them. Holding a sleek recurve bow in one hand, carrying a quiver of high-tech arrows on his back, and wearing protective gear much like Natalia's, was Hawkeye. Clint Barton. “This is usually the part in movies where the hero kisses the girl.”

“What's wrong with nervous, witty monologuing?” she retorted. Because her memories were spinning, and Natasha looked ready to run or cry, and Emily kind of felt the same. What if she was dreaming and woke up still locked in Petrovich's basement with silent Yakov as her only company?

“The distinct lack of kissing,” a dry, light female tone.
Agent Morse. Bobbi.

“I knew you wanted to kiss me.” Emily sassed.

Delicate, calloused hands were suddenly holding her face. “I don't share well,” breathed across her lips.

Emily smiled at the thrill of warmth surging in Natalia and brushed her nose against a much smaller one. “Want this giant schnoz all to yourself, huh?”

“You are the other half of my together. All of you,” whispered into her mouth.

Reassurance blanketed her, and she melted against Natalia, lips and breasts and hips pressing close, arms curling tightly, fingers digging painfully.

“Finally.” A grumble found its way past the rush of bliss in Emily's skull. “We can go home now.”

Both of them broke the kiss to turn their heads, cheeks rubbing, to look at Agent May's grumpily unimpressed face. “Emily!” squealed from behind May, and Skye barreled around her to envelop both Emily and Natalia in a tight hug. “Oh thank God.”

“Hey, Skye.” she managed to breathe out.

“Daisy,” came an off-handed, probably oft-repeated correction, as she stepped back to let Emily breathe again. “God, we thought for sure that jerk was going to use HYDRA's mind wipe on you. The last person I met who'd had that used on her did not turn out well.”

“He did.” Emily replied.

Skye -no, dammit- Daisy's eyes widened. “No shit? But you remembered me. You're kissing her.”

“I guess he wasn't as thorough as he thought he was, because it's all coming back.”

“I'm going to go warm up the engines.” May announced and headed toward a pair of open gates leading out of the compound.

A winged man landed among them in a rush of muffled engine noise. “Perimeter's secured. Hey, Emily. Good to see you.” Enthusiastic welcome beamed at her.

Sam. She smiled at him, then up at a red and gold figure dropping toward them. The metal face retracted. Tony grinned. Emily twisted to take in the man with the metal arm who'd cornered Petrovich. Bucky adjusted the weight of an impressive sniper rifle on his shoulder. His brooding eyes studied her intently.

“Looks like serum brains aren't the only ones the memory wipes don't work great on.” Emily informed him.

His broad shoulders lifted and fell as relief smoothed his edges. “Good.”

“Emily!” roared Steve as he burst from the base's interior, shield on his back. He ran right up to her, hugged her out of Natasha's arms and off the ground. He smelled of sweat and gunpowder and aftershave.

“I can't breathe,” she almost didn't want to say.
“Sorry,” and she was returned to her feet. He beamed down at her. “You're okay.”

One of the exterior walls exploded, stone and dust going everywhere as a giant green blur smashed through. SHIELD agents stiffened and fingered guns. Avengers idly waited for Hulk to assess the situation. He huffed dust from his nostrils and strode up to Emily in three huge steps. “Redhead find little spots,” rumbled from him. “Good.”


“How,” Emily turned back to Natalia, “Did you get everyone here?”

“Are you kidding?” Clint answered. “They showed up all on their own.” He glanced in the direction of May's retreat. “Except that one. She couldn't stand the idea of all these emotionally compromised idiots screwing up a mission and ruining SHIELD's shiny new image.”

At the word “ruining,” Emily's gaze went to Petrovich's body.

“I admit, I'm a little jealous you got to him first.” Clint said. “Nice form, by the way. Very smooth. Have you been practicing?”

The hours spent keeping her sanity intact with exercise nodded. “Yea.”

“No more smash?” Hulk grumbled.

“No, big guy,” was Clint's chuckle.

“Sun's getting awful low.” Natasha murmured.

Hulk's eyes narrowed, but then he seemed to sigh, and he faded down to Bruce. He stumbled among the rubble until Steve's hand caught and steadied him. “Thanks, Cap. Hello, Emily.”

“Hey, Bruce,” she returned softly before turning to Natasha. “Thought you were working on actually touching Hulk to get him to let the pink out.” Emily asked.

Close enough that her body heat was palpable, Natasha shrugged. “It's not necessary every time.”

Fingers twitched, and Emily smiled down at them, slid her own hand among them. Natasha's hand closed on hers. Her emotions continued to whirl inside her, but they were far from the broiling mess they'd been a minute ago. They both leaned closer to each other.

“Alright.” Steve cleared his throat. “Base is secure, Emily rescued. Let's pack up and get out before this guy's friends show up.”

“Bring Yakov.” Emily grabbed his forearm. “Please.”

Blue eyes, way more intense than Yakov's, peered questioningly at her.

“Him.” She nodded at her sleeping friend. Complete understanding of his position colored him an even greater hero in her mind. “He took bullets for me, Steve. I need to take care of him.”

Beside her, Natasha rolled her eyes, looked at Clint and probably mouthed, *another one?* Clint's eyes crinkled merrily.

Emily glowered at them both, much to their amusement.
“Party at our place.” Tony announced. “As soon as Fortune takes a shower. I know what the smell is like after a few weeks without one. And I'm not hugging you until you remedy that. Coulson, mind if I ride with you? Ten plus hours trapped in a small box with that won't be pretty.”

Petrovich's friends did indeed try to stop them from leaving Russian airspace with Emily alive, but after mentioning his death and that the dozen fighter jets were severely outgunned by the three quinjets and their occupants, including Iron Man, they decided to let them go without a fight.

Emily had briefed them on her time with Petrovich, pausing a few times to soothe Natasha's nerves with a touch or kiss, then eventually her body weight by sitting in Natasha's lap. She'd explained that though Yakov was one of Petrovich's henchmen, had even been willing to kill her at first, he'd become the only source of kindness and compassion to her.

He didn't report that Emily was exercising in her cell. He brought her a flashlight for when the poorly wired electricity would go out. When Petrovich started using him as a practice dummy, she finally understood that Yakov was terrified that Petrovich would murder his little brother and cousins if he didn't obey. His tongue had been a warning. After sessions, he would pat Emily, his eyes full of forgiveness.

Natasha looked at the man strapped to the med table, IV of saline snaking down from the hanger to his left arm. It was his second of the day. Whether he'd taken the bullets on purpose or accident, she owed the man. She would give him the benefit of the doubt. He already had her good opinion for leading them to Emily's cell and stoically accepting Natasha's gun in his face, obviously ready to die for his sins. Her interrogation of him would be gentle.

“We've entered South Korean airspace.” Clint announced from the pilot's seat.

Emily had a date with Cho-tech. The cradle. Not Yakov. He only needed time and more blood. Tony was a blood-type match, had donated a pint that had dramatically improved the color in Yakov's cheeks. Amazing what a little blood could do.

_Slowly, curiously, Emily drew a line across her father's stomach. Not deep, not even through all the layers of skin. Only enough to watch a line of blood rise and pool along his defined muscles. He squirmed and whimpered. More when she made it seal._

_She cut again, this time in his thigh, where she could cut deeper without hitting organs or vital arteries. Under the music of his howls, she pulled the flesh apart, told it to seal itself, watched fascinated as scabs formed, then scar tissue. A few dabs of diluted acid dissolved the scar tissue. Blood oozed forth until she rinsed it with some water and had the wound knit itself together._

_Under the yellow light she'd rigged overhead, the leg looked good as new. Even his body thought it hadn't been injured. Neat._

There'd been no such pleasure using Yakov like that. Whatever his past, he'd been good to Emily, and she wasn't the same angry monster who'd delighted in torturing her own father. Yakov deserved better. She withdrew a promise from Bobbi to keep him safe while the Avengers made their invited way into the extensive bio-labs of Dr. Helen Cho. That Sam decided to stay with Yakov too made her feel even better.

“Emily Fortune.” Cho stood with arms crossed in front of them. This wasn't exactly the welcome that Natasha had imagined. Hadn't Cho decided to work with SHIELD because of Emily's work with Bruce?
“Dr. Cho.” Emily made a slight bow of respect in the Korean way.

“I was very disappointed when I learned that Dr. Banner's nice assistant was actually a SHIELD spy. More disappointed when I learned that spy had a healing gift that makes my cradle look like child's toy.”

Ill at ease, Emily shifted. Around them the rest of the team did too, not certain how to respond. Bruce was particularly uncomfortable. Tony must be exceptionally tired, because his mouth wasn't moving.

“Why did Director Fury want my technology when he had you?”

Emily snorted. “I can't be everywhere.” Her expression hardened. “Or my friends wouldn't have had to spend the last month looking for me.”

Cho hummed. “Yes, which is why you have come here, to see if that time did any lasting damage to your body. It is only because Dr. Banner told me you refused to steal my technology for Fury that I welcome you back here.”

Carefully not smiling, Natasha kept her instant liking to this strong-willed woman to herself.

“Fair enough,” came Emily's tired reply. “I'm sorry about the deceit. I'm not a fan of the spy life.”

Cho's dark eyes flicked to Natasha. “Yet your lover and friends are all spies.”

“Heroes.” Emily argued.

“I'm going to back Emily on that choice of words.” Tony finally took attention for himself. “Because come on, me? Cloak and dagger?”

“Yes, Mr. Stark. You are quite loud with who and what you are.” Dr. Cho gave him a slow, unimpressed up-and-down.

Bucky started chuckling. “I see why you like this dame, Bruce. She's a real dish. Pleasure to meet you, Dr. Cho.” He grinned flirtatiously, probably more to prod Bruce than to get a date.

Cho's cheeks lit up.

Emily joined his amusement. “Doesn't take an ounce of shit from anyone.”

“Not even this chucklehead.” Steve elbowed Tony.

Expectedly, the boys fell into dickering and trading insults.

“Men,” exasperation huffed. Cho's eyes rolled then snapped back to Emily. Arms loosened and fell to her sides. “Come, Emily Fortune. I promised use of the cradle for you.”

Which took twenty minutes for scan and discussion of results. Em was fine. She'd suffered little more than some mold spore inhalation and malnutrition. Her brain was functioning well. The memory blocks remaining weren't something the cradle could help with.

Emily made a joke about how at least she wasn't the only healer who had trouble with brains. Before Cho could start questioning and probing Emily, Natasha announced that with Em's clean bill of health should come rest. Hospitality became Dr. Cho's new focus, and she apologized that her facility couldn't accommodate so many. She recommended a nearby hotel.
“I don't know about the rest of you,” Tony put in, “But I've got a wife and a king-sized bed that I'd prefer to sleep with as soon as possible.”

Home.

Where there were windows and the room smelled of perfume both her own and Natasha's. And she could poop in an actual toilet instead of over a fucking bucket. Then wipe her ass and wash her hands. Take a shower. Spend an evening reading with Natasha. Watch the sun set. Not have to hear Yakov scream while Sergei used a blow torch on him. Yes. So much yes!

Chapter End Notes

I know, I could've spent like 5 chapters easing Em back into memories, but I got places to be and people to make bleed...
Not at all surprised that Emily had fallen asleep quickly, though slightly disappointed by it, Natasha stroked slightly damp, clean hair. They'd stopped at a SHIELD base in Australia to refuel, eat, and clean up. Their stay hadn't been long. Everyone preferred to sleep in quinjet seats or on thin mats over the hard floor to get home as fast as possible. Emily had mildly complained about being able to feel the floor seam through the mat, but curled up along Natasha's body and tucked her head to her chest quick enough. The metal rivet poking her own back was easily ignored when she weighed its annoyance against making Emily move.

Natasha's phone chirped. The caller ID said it was a vid call from Lizzie, and she thumbed it open. “Hey.”

“Holy shit!” the woman squeaked upon seeing Emily.

“She's sleeping.”

Lizzie panted hard, wafting her face. “Details, Natasha. Now!”

How much could Lizzie handle, would Emily want her to know without being there in person to reassure her with hugs? “She's going to deal with the emotional ramifications for a long time, but she's otherwise fine, Lizzie.”

A groan drifted up from her lap, and Emily yawned, blinking up at the phone's light. “Izzie?”

“Em!”

“What time is it?”

“It's four in the morning here.”

“I texted her and your brothers when we set down.” Natasha informed her. “They made me promise to keep them up to date on the search.”

Wiping a palm across her eyes, “Since when did you start leaving your phone ringer on at night?”

Deep bags under Lizzie's eyes said she didn't sleep much anyway. “The day you joined the Avengers, dumbass.”

Emily dropped her hand and sat up straighter to squint at her friend. “I'm sorry, Lizzie.”

Natasha handed her eyeglasses. The armor and contact lenses she'd worn in Egypt had been destroyed or disposed of by Petrovich for fear of tracking or communication equipment. Most likely before they'd even left Cairo.

“You know this is the worst excuse ever to get out of wearing that ugly dress, right?” Lizzie retorted.

Glasses barely on her face, “Oh, shit, Lizzie, I…”

“Shut up, it was a fucking joke. There's no way I'm mad at you for missing the wedding.” Lizzie interrupted angrily. “Did you kill him? That asshole who took you? He's the one that hurt Natasha
too, right? If you didn't, tell me where he is so I can do it.”

“He's dead,” breathed Emily.

Lizzie panted, eventually slowed her huffs to normal. “What direction are you guys flying in from? If you aren't flying by me, I'm buying a ticket to meet you in New York.”

From the cockpit, Clint asked, “Are we making a pit stop?”

“Yes!” Lizzie yelled at him.

If the rest of the team hadn't already woken to their conversation, then they definitely did to Lizzie's yell. Bucky moved noticeably in his corner.

Grin made a tad sinister by the sleep-friendly red lighting over his instrument panel, Clint nodded. “First stop, Colorado.” A moment later, he was thumbing at his phone, likely a message to Laura that his return time was being delayed. Natasha made a mental note to apologize to Laura for not getting her husband home at a decent time. It wasn't the longest mission that Clint had ever been on, not by a longshot. Yet...

*How's the farm?* Text replaced Lizzie's face as Em asked the question she couldn't out loud. Guilt riddled her expression.

Natasha placed a reassuring kiss to Emily's temple. “Just fine. Go back to sleep.”

The first embrace between the two old friends was far from the usual that Natasha had witnessed between them. Emily meekly stood arms length away while Lizzie visibly restrained herself from reaching out. A few breaths later, Lizzie exploded into sobs that had Emily rocking on her heels. Slightly behind Lizzie, Bram watched with knowing eyes. He must have counseled Lizzie on sudden movement and touch for someone who'd endured imprisonment. Without knowing the extent of the trauma, it was better not to impose, to inflict feelings of confinement. Patience and restraint were best.

Emily abruptly wrapped arms around her friend, and Lizzie cried against her jacket.

One of the security team's SUV's was driving up to them. Natasha swept her gaze over the perimeter, then the sky, checked Bram's expression. He met her gaze calmly, gave her an all-clear. He had a comms-link to the security team in his ear. Whatever it was...

Alan jumped out of the moving vehicle, running full-tilt at Emily. He tripped over a stick, tumbling head-first into the dirt, yet scrambled up a breath later and swung Emily into a bear-hug.

“Hey!” Lizzie swatted him. “I was in the middle of a best-friend hug, you bearded dick.”

He stuck his tongue out at her as he set Emily down. “You get to see her more than I do, you old hag.” His hands were trembling. “Sup, Bram.”

“Hi, Alan.”

Emily gathered one of his hands in hers and held it to her chest. “I'm alright, tiny troll. Not going to be able to watch movies or TV or YouTube any time soon, but I'm okay.”

Chin shivering, tears leaking, he sniffed. “I nearly got arrested last week for punching a reporter
who wouldn't stop harassing me about your,” sniff, “Disappearance.”

Emily gasped. Natasha lifted an eyebrow. This was news to her.

“There's been a squad car assigned to keep the peace around my office and they cuffed me before I could punch the jackass more than once. Made me sit in the back of their car for an hour. I made the nightly news for it.”

“I watched that clip a hundred times.” Lizzie was grinning. “God, it was fucking glorious. You have no idea how jealous I am you did that, booger face.”

Alan's grin was damp, but equally as gleeful. “It was so worth it, elephant butt.” And then he did something that Natasha never would have thought to prepare for. There was no precedent for it, and he hadn't even glanced at her yet. But now he was fiercely holding her to his soft belly and chest, telling her how glad he was to see her again. “Next to that ugly wench over there, you're the best thing to ever happen to Emily. Glad you're okay too.”

Throat tight, face smooshed to his soft polo shirt, she manged to puff out, “Thanks.”

She was jerked back as he ended the hug. One hand slid down her arm to lift wrist and charm bracelet to chest-height. “You never take it off, do you?”

Emily was watching them, pride and love oozing off her.

“Not often.”

“She hates it when I call you my foxy sister-in-law.” He grinned mischievously. “Sometimes she forgets that she taught me French.”

Annoyance had replaced the pride.

Her witty retort sputtered and died before it hit her tongue. He'd called her his sister-in-law. Did he really consider her family? He didn't think Emily would ever let her go? Back in Oklahoma, when she'd shared space with the Fortune siblings, she'd seen his jealousy and protectiveness, that he specifically called Natasha “the girlfriend” or “Romanoff.” He'd been guarded, unwilling to let her in too deep. She suspected that if she mentioned Leslie, he would have an extremely unfriendly reaction.

“So, sis, where are the other Avengers? You know I didn't come here just to see Em and Bessie the cow.” Alan wasn't looking at Em, but at Natasha. Was he calling her sis? Stunned, she nearly asked Emily for help, barely managed to keep it a silent plea with her eyes.

Emily sighed dramatically. “On the other side of the field. Want to come with us to New York? You can fly back in a couple days.”

“God yes.” He exclaimed. “But I can't. I have clients to meet with all this week.”

“Aww. Baby Allie has finally grown up!” Lizzie cooed.

Natasha snickered as the two bickered like children, smiled as he finally got to meet the rest of the team in person, including Bucky. At being introduced to Em's little brother, Bucky's chest puffed out and he immediately fell into the same kind of teasing buffoonery that had occurred between Alan and Lizzie. The group spent several hours enjoying the simple atmosphere of the mountains, sharing lunch, playing an impromptu game of baseball, and decompressing from a month abroad. Kyle showed up for lunch and brought a photo album for Emily of the wedding and reception.
There was a life-size cardboard cutout of Emily wearing her maid-of-honor gown in several of the group shots.

“Lizzie almost postponed the wedding,” Kyle informed them. “But I convinced her that she didn't want to deal with her mother and that you'd be fine with not having to wear that dress.”

Nodding aggressively, Emily agreed. “Totally cool. But when the hell did you take that picture?”

Through smug laughter, Lizzie refused to tell her. A short tickle fight ensued. They were sitting back breathlessly when Emily went rigid and muttered something about needing some breathing space. She rose and nearly ran from the group. Natasha stalled any pursuit except herself, sedately following Emily's easy trail for half a mile and quietly watching her from the shadow of a scruffy bush. She paced and breathed and muttered to herself for several minutes.

“I can smell your perfume, Nat.”

She hadn't put any on today, not since Egypt, actually. Maybe it was on her jacket.

Emily's glasses flashed sunlight at her as she emerged from hiding. “I panicked back there. I'm sorry. I just,” her lashes fluttered, and she looked away. “Until he'd finished wiping my memories away, I spent most of my days completely alone. I'd see Yakov and Arturo when they came to feed me or change my bucket. And then it was Sergei and Yakov dragging me up to Petrovich and...”

Yakov had been sent ahead with the SHIELD agents to be taken care of and watched over at their base until a better solution was decided on. Natasha's nails bit into her palms. She wanted to interrogate the man herself, but she'd delegated that to Coulson's discretion with the addendum that Yakov be treated according to Geneva Convention terms. If he was kind to Emily, then he deserved humane treatment.

“Fuck, Nat, yesterday was the first time I'd seen the sun in weeks. It fucking hurts.”

“We can go somewhere more quiet than the tower if you want. Away from crowds. Your own space.” Even if that meant space away from Natasha too. “Whatever you need, Em.” Natasha would do anything possible to help Emily recover from and learn to deal with what imprisonment had changed in her.

Emily's breathing slowed, but then she started to fidget. “I might need my own bed for a while.”

They could still read together. Any time or touch with Em was better than the lack of it she'd already endured. “Okay.”

“They all know I murdered my dad now.”

“I highly doubt any of them will bring it up with law enforcement.” Half of them had done enough black ops that they wouldn't begin to judge someone else for her dark past.

Emily was twisting her jacket in her hands. “What if I don't get all my memories back? There's still blank spots, Nat. I almost didn't remember Bucky or Hunter.”

“You'll make new ones.” Natasha assured her.

“What if Petrovich had managed to totally erase Emily Fortune?”

For this one, Natasha closed the distance and bent to look at Emily's downcast eyes. Delicately, she set two fingers under Emily's chin, tilted it up. “He didn't.”
“But...”

“You are stronger than he could have imagined.” Natasha reinforced. “Dwelling on the what ifs is useless and painful. Emily Rose Fortune wasn't erased. She's standing in front of me, whole and unbroken and victorious. There will be nightmares and difficult days, but you'll get through them. I'll help you, all of your friends and family will help you, even if we have to do it from miles away.”

Emily's hands were suddenly at Natasha's waist, unbuttoning her pants, lowering her zipper.

“Em?”

Lips found hers briefly, kissing and biting and demanding. They trailed across her jaw, down her throat, found skin that hands shoved clothing aside to expose. Heat burned through her. Every kiss and nip and suckle sent fresh surges to her core. Muscles tightened. Gasps escaped.

Natasha's jeans were tugged down as Emily dropped to her knees, kisses exploring both twitching thighs. Both of them paused to find each other's gaze. An eternity passed.

“Moya Emilishka,” rolled off her tongue.

Tears fell from swollen eyelids. Emily shot upright to mold herself along Natasha, tangle fingers in curls, kiss her fiercely, deeply. “I didn't even know I was speaking Russian. Bobbi's accent is shit.”

It was shit. Must be a fairly new language to the spy. Emily had worked to match Natasha's instead of the more popular Moscow accent. Full of pride for Emily's perseverance and keen ear, Natasha lightly scratched Emily's back and gasped as one of Emily's fingers snuck inside her.

“And then I didn't realize I'd switched to English.”

The finger was joined by a second. Natasha spread her knees farther apart, and a third rewarded her.

“I hate Russian now,” anger and pain came out in a hard burr.

Hard, fast, the fingers were moving inside her and a thumb had found her sensitive bud. She could barely wrangle the thought that she'd be disappointed to never be able to say Emilishka out loud again.

“But I love you,” warmed her ear.

An electric shock raced from her ear to her core, joined the storm building there in an eruption of pleasure that made her jerk and twitch and gasp.

“I love you, little fox.”

Another shock bucked her hips, and then she was limp against Emily. “I love you too.”

Emily didn't remove her fingers. “Say that again.”

Natasha kissed Emily's neck, lightly squeezed the fingers. “I love you.”

“Say it in Russian.”

“Ya lyublyu tebya vsey dushoy,” sincerely, tenderly, she obliged.
Emily hummed. “I guess it's not so bad.” Her thumb was moving again.

Laughing deep in her throat, Natasha arched into the touch, dropping her head back to grin up at Emily. “Not so bad, my love?” Accent as thick as she could make it, “Mighty fox hunter, you tease me.”

Cheeks already deeply flushed grew even pinker.

“I think maybe I only need to remind you why you first liked it.” She shifted their position and brought her own hand down, teased it along Emily's sensitive places. She paused to catch Em's eye. “Moya Emilishka.”

Behind the skewed glasses, her irises dilated. Good. Relief thudded in Natasha's chest.

“Dammit, Nat. You were going to stop saying that altogether, weren't you?” Emily sighed. “My sly little fox. Mon petit renard rouge. You're too fucking good to me.”

Natasha dropped a gentle kiss to her lips that quickly grew hotter, sharper, and did away with any more talking for almost an hour.

As they were getting up from the boulder they'd finally decided to rest on, Clint appeared with a towel and water bottle. “Thank you for not doing that on the jet.” He dampened the towel with water, held it out, gaze carefully kept at head-level. Good friend, decent man, and loyal husband though he was, his tight pants said that he wasn't entirely unaffected by the performance he'd heard while likely guarding them. Natasha let a devilish expression curve her lips to irritate him.

Emily’s laughter was warm and free of the chill of Siberia. She wiped her hands and face on the towel before passing it to Natasha and grabbing her dark violet hoodie from the ground, grumbling at the dirt that wouldn't brush off.

“I'll let them know you'll be back in a few minutes.” Clint tossed over his shoulder as he left them in privacy.

Natasha toweled down more than her hands and face. She smiled at the mess.

“Maybe I won't need a bed to myself as much as I thought,” came from Emily. “Might be better if I don't wake up to the nightmares alone.” There was calm behind her smile, her body lazy with the pleasure yet humming under her skin. “I've suddenly been reminded that falling asleep gross and sweaty, curled up with you, is one of my favorite things ever.”

Waking up to the sticky reminder of Emily had dispelled more than a few nightmares faster than waking up clean and alone in an expensive hotel room ever had. “Okay.”

The easy smile twisted. “I felt you ovulate earlier.”

Jacket half on, she paused.

“We were supposed to go to the baby appointment last week.”

Natasha finished pulling her jacket on. She cupped Em's cheek. “You did nothing wrong by running to help people, Emily. You have nothing to be sorry for. We can always make another appointment.”

“No!” Harsh, surprising, Emily barked at her.
She blinked, shoved the hurt away, and took a different tact. “Or w-”

“No.” Emily's eyes were sharp. “Let's go anyway.”

What? “Em,” she stalled as her mind raced to catch up with her emotions. She was glad that Emily still wanted a family, but now was not a good idea. Where in the cloud of bad ideas should she begin?

“There's never a perfect time to have a family.”

“But there are really bad times,” was her blunt argument.

Emily lifted her chin. “Every day is a bad day somewhere.” In a classic Emily move, she switched emotions and went shy. “I've been looking forward to watching you get round.”

“Em, you've only been free half a day. This i-”

“Your parents were wheat farmers.”

Natasha's thoughts crashed. “What?”

“You had at least two brothers.” Emily went on.

“How did you...”

“I just remembered that I interrogated Petrovich before he started wiping me. Ironic, isn't it?” Emily caught at her hand and drew her along. “It's still kind of muddled though. Maybe I'll remember the rest on our way to Europe. Come on.”

Mind too caught on the past, Natasha let herself be dragged to her future.

Kevin escaped work long enough to fly up to Philadelphia, take a cab to a quiet park, and spend an hour with his sister before heading back down to his full schedule. Emily couldn't have looked more pleased to have had time with best friend and both of her brothers in one day. She also looked a little overwhelmed. The tired expression hadn't let up by the time they landed in Manhattan.

“Let's let a couple up.” Emily said as she poked her head over the edge of the roof. The base of the tower teemed with at least triple the normal crowd.

Around her, the team stopped. “But we just got home,” whined Tony.

Natasha felt a bit like whining herself. She never wanted to face the press, let alone in this kind of situation, with her nerves on razor's edge. Emily hadn't let up about keeping the baby appointment. They'd barely begun to accept that Emily was away from Petrovich, that they were back together. Sleep deprivation was catching up. All of it was crashing on her nerves at once.

“How are you ready to face those animals?” Natasha demanded.

“I'm not.” Emily unbent. The bags under her eyes looked more noticeable than ever. “But we better give them something before we vanish again.”

“I am so glad at least one of you has an ounce of sense when it comes to the public.” Pepper's heels clicked across the rooftop. Gently, easily, she came to a stop and held her arms open to Emily. “Welcome home, Emily.” She greeted the top of Emily's head.
For once, Tony didn't make a snide comment. He simply waited for his wife to finish hugging Emily before moving in for his own reunion embrace. “Hello, Mrs. Stark.”

“Hello, Mr. Stark,” hummed Pepper.

Emily smiled at them.

“Hey, Buck, let’s go raid the Stark liquor cabinet.” Sam was clapping Bucky’s shoulder. “I am way over seeing all this mushy reunion business.”

Emily had eventually hugged each of her friends and strays, thanked them and praised them for coming to her rescue. Not even May had been exempt from Emily-hugs.

And healing.

She hadn’t let anyone leave Australia with anything more than a paper cut. Had she noticed the way Sam looked at Bucky yet? For that matter, had Bucky? They’d make a cute couple if Bucky could get his lovesick brain off still-brooding-over-Peggy-Steve Rogers for two minutes. Not that she could blame Steve. If Natasha got frozen for half a century and woke up to an old, bedridden Emily who’d found another love and had a family with her instead of Natasha, she’d brood for a few years too.

“What do you think, Pepper?” Emily was asking. “Half a dozen of them?”

“Let them represent a few different networks and newspapers. Yes. I’ll have Jarvis scan them.”

“Tell them absolutely no flash.” Natasha cut in.

Emily stiffened.

Pepper eyed her. “Okay. Why don't you give your PR head a quick call while I go talk to Jarvis.”

She dragged Tony with her.

Steve followed. “I'll go get changed and stick around as extra security.”

That left Bruce, who’d been more awkward than usual. “I um,” his hands wrung. “I heard that you two had, have, an important appointment,” came out quietly.

Natasha let an eyebrow arch.

“I um, went looking for a place to relieve myself while we were waiting for you two in Wyoming. I overheard.” Bruce rubbed his neck.

Natasha glanced at Em, who was running a hand through her hair. She looked irritated. Not unhappy or worried.

“Obviously, you two were keeping this to yourselves, and I respect that. I just wanted to say good luck. Whether you go now or postpone, I think you two will, um, do great.”

Feeling warm at his words, Natasha let her shyness show. “Thanks, Bruce.”

Emily jumped him with a hug.

“I'm going to start calling you the leech the way you cling to people.” Natasha teased.

Tension broken, Emily giggled, thanked Bruce into glowing pink, and the three of them went down
to the lower levels together. An hour later, the tiny press conference was held in one of the board rooms where they gave next to no information in a polite, sedate manner. The one asshat who used a camera flash was literally picked up by Steve and hauled out to the waiting security team. Glad that they'd also specified no live feeds, and had Jarvis block all EMF signals out of the tower for the duration, Natasha smiled at the remaining press.

“Will you be continuing your international visits in your capacity as Sekhmet?”
“After I've had time to recover from my ordeal, yes.” Emily said.

“Where will your first stop be?”
“We haven't decided yet.” She replied.

“Why are you afraid of a camera flash?”
Emily swallowed. “I was tortured with flashing images.”

The room erupted as they yammered for who, why, was there a ransom, what were the political ramifications...

One of Emily's hands shivered. Natasha tangled their fingers. Adoration flashed at her, and Emily calmed. She held up her free hand to silence the questions. “We'll release more information at a later date.”

“Are you working with SHIELD again?”

“SHIELD assisted the Avengers in our search for Emily.” Steve answered.

“Captain Rogers, are y-”

“And I believe the allotted time has passed.” He interrupted.

The press shifted unhappily at the lack of details.

“Come on, you know you getting first crack at her story is a big deal. Take the bone she tossed you.” His smile demanded that they show a little humble gratitude.

Surprisingly, because they were the press, but not surprising given that Charming Rogers was involved, thanks were given to Emily. Even a gesture or two of goodwill were expressed, that she'd recover soon, that it was good to know she wasn't lost.

Room empty of nosy strangers, Emily slumped to the floor, pulling Natasha with her, dropping her head to Natasha's lap. “Jarvis, a few minutes of privacy?”
“Of course, Ms. Fortune. I'll turn off my ears for ten minutes.”

“Let's ask Clint to pilot us to Amsterdam. I want fox cuddles while I sleep, and it will be better if you're well rested too. Think Laura will be okay with him being gone another couple days?”

“I think it's the kids who'll protest more.”

Em puffed out air. “Don't worry, I'm not desperate enough to ask Tony.”

Stroking Em's hair, “We could ask Coulson to borrow Bobbi again. She won't ask why.” May would likely refuse, and Hunter wouldn't be able to refuse questiong them and talking and talking...

“Let's bribe the hawkbabies with a puppy.”
Shaking her head, Natasha guffawed. “I am not incurring Laura's wrath on that one.”

“It was really sweet, what Bruce said.” She scratched her nose.

“Yes. It was.” Natasha bent to kiss that nose, glad to have it back within range.

Squealing, Emily swatted at her. “Nat!”

“I missed you.” Her thumb traced freckles from Em's unique nose, across her cheek.

“Not enough to let Bucky be our pilot, I’m guessing.”

Out in the world, the Winter Soldier had had more opportunities to betray them than Natasha had even considered, too focused on Em as she'd been. He hadn't. Even his nightmares and momentary disorientation had ceased to be an issue. Tony had rigged a monitor in a wristwatch to activate the recording of Emily's voice when he woke from a nightmare. Bucky had to say, “Thanks, Emily,” before it would stop playing.

“You're considering it.” Emily gaped.

Flying commercial meant traveling in disguise, having to endure the stares of misogynists and homophobes, waiting in queues... And subjecting Em to being trapped within a huge crowd of strangers for long hours. No escape. No retreat. No relief.

“I'd rather him than commercial.” Natasha gave her consent.

Emily bounced up to kiss her, jumped to her feet, and bounded out to find him.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Ya lyublyu tebya vsey dushoy – I love you with all my soul

A/N - It's happening. IT'S HAPPENING! *flails*
Going back through and reading old chapters, I'm realizing how many tiny details that I've forgotten and should've written down in my cheat sheet yet didn't. Getting some of those and subplots tied up in the next couple chapters before I dump Age of Ultron on you and destroy all of your dreams. MWahahaha *stares at the mountain of writing ahead of me* would've been so much easier to follow the movie plot, but I can't. I just ... can't.
Before they could escape the tower, a guest arrived who Emily didn't need much convincing to see. Dr. Andrew Garner, a psychology professor at prestigious Culver University, and, surprisingly, Agent May's ex-husband. Or maybe not surprising that he was an ex. Surprising that May had been married. And happy, according to rumor. The idea of a smiling Agent May gave Emily the heebie-jeebies.

Emily met the man in a conference room with Natasha by her side. The team had given them proper privacy, though it had taken Pepper some extra charm to lure Tony away from possible entertainment. Only Jarvis would be listening until one of them bade him not to. The security guards who'd escorted the psychologist up were crisp in their exit when Natasha dismissed them.

“Emily Fortune,” his voice was naturally soft, low and warm. “It's a pleasure to see you again.”

That's right. He was the one who'd tried to help Daisy back when her power manifested. Emily clasped his large hand. “Coulson said you happened to be in town at a conference.”

He nodded. “Coulson had told me several weeks back that you wanted to meet, so when he called to ask if I'd drop by when you got back in town, I made it a priority.”

That was so long ago. It felt a lot longer than a single month. “You've got a voice like my brother Kevin's.”

“He's a child psychologist, correct?”

“Well. Why'd you pick this instead of physics or criminal justice or whatever?” He looked more like a boxer with his square face and broad shoulders than an office-bound professor. He glanced down at the hand that she hadn't released, but didn't try to take it back. “The mind fascinates me. I wanted to be an FBI agent when I was a little kid, but figured out that I liked teaching more in high school. My first degree was actually in education.”

“Why does Coulson trust you?”

Garner's chuckle was slow and amused and understanding. “Your gift tells you all about the human body, doesn't it? And you want to know if you can trust me with your secrets.”

Emily watched his smooth, chocolate-brown skin crinkle around the eyes.

“I've never betrayed the trust of a patient and have no intention or desire to ever do so.”

“Why does Coulson trust you?” Natasha repeated.

His eyes went to her. “Can anyone say that Agent Coulson trusts them? He is a very difficult man to read.”

Was he purposely diverting or was it ingrained habit to answer questions with questions?

“Yes,” was Natasha's short reply.

He was calm, not flustered or worried. “Then I suppose he trusts my profession and my dedication
to it.” A pause. “I worked with SHIELD in the past. I consulted on dozens of field agents, none of which I ever discussed outside of work parameters. Melinda may have also contributed to his trust in my work.”

Melinda. That must be Agent May's first name. Emily checked Natasha's opinion. She nodded. “Just so you know,” Emily warned. “I've got some serious issues.”

Dr. Garner simply nodded with slight smile.

“Like, worse than Tony Stark's.”

He twitched. “I suppose I have my work cut out for me.”

“I think I like him,” announced Emily that evening as Natasha handed over freshly brewed tea. Raspberry and floral notes filled their room.

Liked him already? They probably hadn't gotten into deep discussion. First visits were careful introductions, patient and doctor deciding if they were comfortable around the other, deciding where to start, how to proceed, what the tone and pace of the sessions would be. “That's good,” was Natasha's bland response.

“I don't think he'll freak out as bad as the first therapist I had when I told her what I did to my dad.”

Tea spluttered from Natasha's mouth, burned up her nose, stained her blouse. Emily had never hinted that she'd given specific details about her father's death and torture to anyone except Lizzie!

Emily was watching with an amused quirk of expression. “Dr. Windon didn't believe me right away. She probably thought I was talking about daydreams or delusions, which is probably why I was able to talk to her about it.” Her expression darkened. “When she finally realized I was telling the truth, she was scared of me. I kinda enjoyed that. Poor woman. We both eventually got over it.”

The psychiatrist was still alive and practicing. Why didn't Em bring up going back to her to work through her anger problems? Because the woman's practice was in Mrs. Fortune's vicinity? Emily had gone back to Wyoming the following Easter, but not since.

“Think I should tell my mom that she's going to be a grandmother?”

Natasha's first instinct was soundly negative. She deflected, “Have you even told her that you and I are together?”

“Why bother? She thought we were a thing when she first met you.”

“Em, we kind of were.”

Emily's mouth and jaw showed her irritation.

“If you think that your mother having information about her genetic material being passed on will improve your life somehow, then you should tell her.” Explicit, simple, and without Natasha's own opinion overtly affecting Emily's decision.

Emily huffed. “Lizzie said I should let her find out like the rest of the world.”

Natasha silently agreed.
“Kevin's response was pretty much like yours, and Alan, well... Kevin's been the only one back to see mom since that Easter. He says she loves us in her own way, but yea.”

Natasha waited.

“I wish she could just be excited for me, but she'll make it about her. I know she will. She'll demand to know when I'll bring the kid to meet her and give me too much advice about tending to a pregnant woman.” Emily sighed. “She'll tell me how because of her giving me responsibility over my brothers, I'll have so much experience and be so ready for her grandbaby.” She stared into her tea. “If mom hadn't done one really good thing and accepted me being gay when dad was a complete prick about it, I'd probably have killed her too. I mean, I was pretty tempted to, especially after experimenting on him and wanting to do it again, but I knew the three of us would get put into the system, foster homes, possibly get pulled apart. I remember thinking about it every time I chopped meat up for dinner. Or at least hurting her, showing her how much pain I could put her through. Shit, the fucking fantasies I had about making her scream…”

On the bedside table, Natasha's phone started blinking with a message of some sort. Probably some stupid picture joke from Tony or spam email. She turned it over to keep the light from distracting her and focused on Emily.

“I just,” another deep, longing sigh. “I just wish she would love me like a mom is supposed to. Some little part of me hopes that maybe she'll find it in her to give my kid that love. It'd be something.”

Now felt like the time to speak, to offer words of comfort or advice or empathy. If not that, then something relevant. Natasha struggled. “It'd irritate the shit out of Clint if we made him and Laura honorary grandparents.”

Dark eyes snapped up to her, narrowed.

What she'd given was not at all what Emily wanted or needed. Natasha's shoulders drooped. “Sorry. I don't know what to say about your mother, Em.”

“Nah,” huffed not-angrily from Emily. “Uncle Clint sounds better. Now, Grandpa Tony, that has a ring to it.”

“Maybe you could share the news with Hafid. He was so excited to see you when we visited.” Natasha remembered the exuberant, warm man who'd embraced Emily like family. She expected that when Emily's gift had been revealed to the world, he reacted well. He was a progressive man, teaching acceptance and love and the gentler side of the Qu'ran despite visits to the hospital for himself and family and members of his mosque after being the victims of anti-Muslim hate shortly after 9/11 and several times since.

Fond thoughts brightened Emily. “Yea. Oh, I bet he'd have decent advice. His wife's had four kids. He used to preach patience by telling stories about his cranky, pregnant wife. Let's go visit him after Bram's surgery.”

Settling onto the cool table, Natasha fidgeted under Dr. Meijwaard and Dr. Gerber's excitement. Emily pat her hand. “Don't worry, little fox. I brought your gun in case this shit goes south.”

“You brought a gun?” Dr. Meijwaard protested, his long fingers fluttering.

Gun laws in the Netherlands strictly prohibited civilians carrying for anything except to a shooting
range, sport competition, hunting area, or gunsmith. Concealed carry by a non-citizen was about as far from legal as they could get.

“Americans,” muttered Dr. Gerber.

Emily gave the scientist a look that Natasha approved of. Stern disapproval. “We can always go about this in a more traditional manner if you don't like how I choose to protect my partner.”

Though Natasha really wanted Em's genes in their baby, she agreed with the implied threat even if Em likely didn't have anything more dangerous than a pocket knife. She made to rise.

“Oh, fine. Carry your gun, bring an army.” Dr. Gerber's accent was thick with her disapproval. “Whatever gives you more comfort while we make history!”

Laying back down, Natasha smiled. That the two doctors spoke English fluently had been part of the reason to trust them. Emily could communicate with them without fear of misinterpretation or involving a translator while Natasha was unconscious.

“Are you sure we do not need a sedative?” was the last thing Natasha heard.

Awareness abruptly returned. The smells of the antiseptic environment hit Natasha first, and she tensed. Then, the warmth of Emily's presence reminded her that she hadn't been on a mission and gotten her ass landed in a surgical bay. This was far, far more terrifying and wonderous.

“They got your egg without any trouble.” Em reported.

Natasha blinked at the fluorescent lighting. Both scientists were gone, off to fertilize the egg in the lab. It would take two hours. Probably fifteen minutes of actual work given that the bulk of the project would be done already and all that was left was to fertilize the egg, but they'd said two hours. If Em and herself were any other couple, the whole procedure would be far more involved and time consuming, involving drugs and IV's and guesswork. Emily's gift negated the vast majority of it. Thankfully.

She'd known exactly when Natasha had ovulated, that the egg was viable, would know as soon as it'd been returned if the embryo was successful. And, of course, she could safely keep Natasha unconscious for the procedures or induce ovulation again if it was unsuccessful. And her presence kept Natasha calm.

“Well, we have at least an hour alone,” Em hummed suggestively.

Or not calm, per se, but distracted was excellent too.

Dr. Meijwaard coughed when he entered the room, took a long whiff, caught Emily's satisfied expression, and started laughing. “Okay. That's nice. It's good to be in high spirits.”

“What?” Dr. Gerber demanded. She scowled at them. “What have...”

Emily was smoothing her hair. Her lips were plump, kiss-bruised.

“Ze waren neuken.” Meijwaard laughed around his crudely accurate explanation.

“Oh!” Gerber shook her head and grinned. “My sister told me she did the same thing with her wife
when they went for their first baby. Not in the room, of course. They used the restroom.”

Bathroom sex was wholly unappetizing. They were disgusting places, especially the floors. Not enough room either. Natasha pushed aside a few memories of when she'd had to do that on missions. Never again.

“How’d the procedure go for them?” Em wondered.

“Perfectly. My nephew is beautiful and healthy.”

Suddenly, horribly nervous, Natasha grabbed for Emily's hand.

“You're going to be an amazing mom, Nat,” soothed Emily. “And I'll be right there with you for all the poop and vomit and crazy screaming fits that won't make any sense.”

Natasha scowled at her. “Pointing out all the bad things as comfort isn't comfort, you idiot.”

“And the days on end of high fevers and worrying, sleepless nights.”

“Em,” she growled.

“Then puberty when they start asking why their private parts are acting weird and fighting you for every little thing because they're trying to figure out how to be mature…”

“EMILY!”

She grinned shamelessly.

Dr. Meijwaard coughed. “We are ready to finish if you are.”

“Lay back and spread your legs again, sweetie pie.” Emily patronized her.

“That shirt you were looking for the other day? I threw it away before we went to Egypt.” Natasha got her revenge.

Emily gasped, anger flushing her cheeks. “Bitch.”

Satisfied, Natasha leaned back onto the table. “Hurry up and do your job, honey bun.”

Before Natasha's eyes had even opened, her hand darted to her lower abs.

“Snug as a bug in a rug.” Emily whispered.

She was pregnant. Her pragmatic side argued with technicalities about the embryo not yet being attached to the uteran wall. Her long-repressed irrationals side screamed giddily. “I'm pregnant,” came out in a rushed whisper.

“Can you imagine going back in time a couple years and trying to get past-you to believe you'd be in this situation?” Emily grinned.

Her imagination said she could try, but the Widow would laugh nastily and try to kill her for the effort.

“I love you.”
Color dusted Emily's cheeks. “I love you too.” One hand drifted over Natasha's belly. “Bet you're ready to get out of here.”

Immediately, Natasha's attention snapped from embryo to Emily. Stress lined her face. Anxiety bubbled under her eyes, the parent-to-be-jitters emphasized by her new trouble with people and confining places. The return bicycle ride through the narrow streets to the hotel wouldn't be easy. They'd decided to arrive after darkness for both the lessened crowds and cover of their identities, though even after midnight in the tourist-heavy city, there'd be more people out than either of them wanted. Natasha hopped off the bed. “Bicycle or cab ride?”

“Should've stolen Sam's wings for some rooftop jumping.” Emily grumbled. “Bike. I'm sick of being cooped up in vehicles.”

Natasha pulled her pants and boots on and got Emily out of the windowless cage.

Both scientists were in the waiting room that had to be passed through to get to the main exit. They were nearly bouncing with childish glee. “Are you sure that we cannot use your names in our initial papers?” Gerber pleaded.

“Nothing with our identities or identifying information can be published until after we've made our own public announcement.” Natasha repeated what they'd stipulated in the papers they'd signed with the scientists and an expensive lawyer who owed Natasha a favor.

“Verdomme.” Meijwaard grumbled.

Emily pat him on their way past. “Don't worry; we'll keep you updated.”

Rain had moved in while they were in the office. Great sheets of it blanketed the city, creating puddles of such breadth that the only option was to go through the damn things. Natasha and Emily were soaked through before they even got the bikes unlocked. Their rain jackets weren't helping worth a damn, and Natasha cursed her lack of preparation. This was-

Happy laughter from slightly behind her cut into her annoyed thoughts. Grinning face tilted up to the sky, Emily was enjoying the unfortunate weather. Her entire frame was relaxed. Natasha straightened from where she'd been battling the rusty lock to take in the sight of a blissful Em. How long had it been since Emily could choose to stand out in the rain?

Too long.

Natasha would do everything in her considerable power to make sure that was always a choice for Emily to make for herself. For now, she smiled and enjoyed watching her favorite idiot bask in her freedom. She was caught up in it enough that she didn't see the lanky man approaching until he had a knife out and demanding their money. Natasha considered whether to break his arm or shoulder or knee.

“Fuck off,” was Emily's annoyed demand as she drew a small handgun from under her jacket.

The would-be mugger dropped his knife, threw his hands into the air, backed away until Natasha told him to run, and he took off at a dead sprint. Curious, Natasha picked up the fallen knife and twisted it around. Six inches of unmarred blade, full tang, excellent quality, comfortable grip.

“Nice knife.”

Gun put away, Emily snorted. “Going to keep it?”
She turned it over again. “Yea,” and stuffed it in the little pack she had an ID, some money, and another knife in. Her Widow's Bite were in her pockets. She debated for a few moments before sliding them on. “Hey, Em?”

“Hm?” From where the man had run, Em turned back in time for Natasha to slide up against her.

“I like it when you kick ass.” Emily's laugh was cut off by an appreciative kiss. “My hero.”

Hands went to her hips. “Anything for my little fox.” A wide grin split her face. Her thumb traced up to her abs. “And our little bean.”

Natasha captured her lips once more.

Back at the hotel, after a hot shower together, Emily nearly scooped up Bucky to squeal about the evening's success while sitting on their tiny balcony and wrapped in blankets. The night spread out beyond them. Lights twinkled. The occasional cyclist or pedestrian meandered along the quiet street the hotel was on. Rain continued to fall.

Natasha poured tea and delivered it. She had to stop herself from settling in Emily's lap, and the aborted motion must have caught Emily's eye, because she brought a hand to Natasha's thigh and smiled up at her. When Natasha settled on the third chair, Emily leaned close.

“Thank you,” kissed her jaw.

“Did you two really do it?” Bucky suddenly blurted.

Natasha snorted.

“Might want to narrow that down, old man.” Emily drawled.

Nervousness licked his lips, set his tea down, leaned him forward, lowered his voice. “Romanoff really got knocked up?”

“Yea,” awestruck, Emily's smile was lopsided and adorable.

“Jeepers. Coupla dames made a baby. And I thought the world couldn't get more queer.”

It only took him a few seconds of Emily's thinned-lip silence to realize his foul. Queer wasn't a friendly adjective in the 40's.

“Ah, shit, Em. I didn't mean it like that.” He fiddled with his hair. “The world changed a lot while I was a fucking HYDRA toy. I'm still having trouble with the idea that two boys can walk down a Brooklyn street holding hands and not get the living tar beat outta them.” A breath. “It's nice, don't get me wrong. Jesus Christ, but it's scary.”

Natasha sipped at the spicy orange tea.

“When my dad found out that I'd kissed a girl, he called me a waste and used his belt on me.” Emily spoke with the repressed fury she always did when mentioning her father. Her body language was tight, expecting repercussion, violence, promising it in return. “The world hasn't changed all that much.”

“Is that,” he swallowed, looked at Natasha. “What we heard in Russia...” uncertainty trailed off. Concern wrinkled his forehead.

Knuckles tightening around her teacup, Emily nodded. “Yea. That happened.”
“Oh.” His metal hand flexed. “That explains why you aren't afraid of anything.”

The atmosphere broke with sudden laughter from Emily. She hooted, deep, pleasant laughs that warmed Natasha, made Bucky chuckle. “I think you have me confused with some badass assassin.” Emily warbled. “I'm afraid of most everything. Shit, I'm going to be a mom in about nine months, and I'm freaking terrified I won't be able to keep up.”

“Are the serum effects going to be passed on?” Bucky whispered.

“Most likely.” Natasha answered when Emily hid behind her tea.

“And Em's gift or something like it, I bet.”

“Super-baby,” wheezed Emily.

He paused before coughing into laughter. “Jesus, no wonder your panties are in a twist. Don't worry, wrangling Steve into baby-chasing won't be too hard. Does he know yet?”

Emily smiled sheepishly, and Natasha grumbled, “Em blurted our plans to him not ten hours after the first time we talked about it. He knows we missed our original appointment, but I'm sure he guessed our intentions when we left.”

“Romanoff, were you preparing for this with the change in mission gear?”

Bucky wasn't a spy, but he could occasionally put two and two together.

Emily's hand found a thigh. “Or were you finally doing a practical upgrade?” She prodded.

Both of them got the full power of her unflappable gaze. “Yes.”

Her thigh got squeezed. “Is that plating adjustable?”

“Slightly. By the time it will need an upgrade, the pregnancy will be obvious even to Tony.”

“He's a narcissistic prick, not oblivious, Nat.” Emily argued. “Even if he doesn't eye your ass as much as he used to.”

“He'll believe what he wants to. The idea of the Black Widow being pregnant won't even cross his mind until I'm distinctly fat.”

“You are going to be so cute with a belly,” cooed Emily. Her wild grin abruptly leveled at Bucky. “You'll help babysit our super-baby, won't you, James?”

As though she'd called him to attention, he sat rigidly upright. His metal fingers flexed and tried to hide inside the sleeve of his sweater. “You'd want me to help?”

He looked and sounded just like Natasha had the first time Clint had suggested that she would be expected to change Cooper's diapers. “You want me to help watch your baby?” had been her shocked demand.

“Of course,” was Emily's certain reply. As though the idea of a former HYDRA tool, a superhuman with cybernetic upgrades, caring for her precious child was a normal thing. Idiot.

Bucky's pale eyes found Natasha's, his question clear in them.

“Don't give me those puppy eyes,” she purposely ignored his concern. “They won't get you out of
“diaper duty.” Laura had treated Natasha similarly, as though she was a normal person.

Approval shone from Emily.

“Ugh.” Emily complained over her morning tea. They were spending another day in Amsterdam for the comfort of the quaint hotel. “Shit.”

Natasha's book lowered. “What is it?”

“I just remembered that Bram has cancer. Fucking god dammit.” She took her glasses off to palm her eyes and rub her hand down her face. “Shit!”

Natasha rose and went for her laptop where she kept copies of important paperwork. Emily was a goddess at cleaning, but her organizational skills remained lacking. Constant travel didn't help. From the encrypted hard drive, Natasha pulled scans of the letters from Bram and his doctor. Detailed information about Bram's condition, possible procedures and the doctor's hypotheses about how Sekhmet's involvement could change and improve them. With Emily's help, Bram stood a good chance of living a long, full life.

Emily's hysterics mellowed at Natasha's return. She looked up, confusion written across her. “Where'd you go?”

“The paperwork from his oncologist.” She gestured at the laptop screen. “Read it again. He's got excellent chances at a full life, even possible remission, with you helping during surgery and keeping an eye on him after. If you feel up to it, I'm sure they could have him in surgery this week.”

Naturally, Emily didn't bother reading the paperwork. She jumped Natasha with kisses instead. After, she called Bram's doctor from Natasha's lap. Being the middle of the night in Colorado, it was a surprise that the doctor answered and was able to have a coherent conversation with Emily for almost half an hour, to even promise to call her back tomorrow with an appointment for Bram's immediate surgery. Natasha didn't envy the job of his secretarial staff who'd be rearranging his schedule and fielding angry patients rearranged by Emily's visit.

If this were for a lesser reason, Natasha would have convinced Emily to wait a few months to work, to give herself time to relax, but this was Bram, Lizzie's brother, and he might not have a few months of good health left. Should they take the quin again? Borrow one of Tony's private aircraft? She weighed the quin's spartan interior and relative lack of comfort against the nuisance of needing a flight plan and airstrip to receive a small jet.

“What kind of spycraft is happening under your gorgeous red hair?” Emily plucked at a curl.

“Planning our transportation to the surgery.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Oh fine, just give me another reason to be more in love with you.”

Natasha lifted a brow. “How else am I going to keep the world's most wanted woman by my side?”

Dark eyes dropped to her cleavage. “The delectable view helps.”

“So that's what it's been all this time. You only want me for my lovely young body,” she teased.

“Nineteen thirty-three,” rushed out of Emily, her expression shifting to surprise.
A recovered memory or random trivia? “What about it?”

Two rows of pearly teeth shone at her with a cheeky grin. “Petrovich said you were ten when the Soviets managed to steal specs on the super-soldier serum from HYDRA, which was two years after HYDRA stole the sample from Dr. Erskine. That was in ’41. He only remembered because he was irritated that he’d have to wait until you’d gone through puberty before experimenting on you.”

That would make her 83 years old. Eighty-three. A solid number. No more guessing or wondering.

“You're 83, Natalia.” Fingertips slid up the back of her neck and down, warm palms coming to rest on her shoulders. “He didn't know the month. Asshole. But you can pick one for us to celebrate.”

“Celebrate?” she asked stupidly.

“Your birthday, Nat.” Emily's hands squeezed for emphasis. “Every year you get to spend being the amazing person you are should be properly celebrated.”

“I...” Coop had asked her once, and she'd told him she didn't know, didn't need one. Laura had soothed his confused pout by saying they could celebrate Auntie Nat's birthday on New Years, because that was a holiday that she was usually around for. There was a tiny stash of treasures given to her by the Barton family for her “birthday” that she kept safely hidden on the farm. She reminded Emily of this. She'd been around for them.

“Yea,” came slowly. “I remember. Okay. Want to keep celebrating on the first of January with the minor addition that we can load your cake up with 84 candles next time?”

Natasha hesitated. “The kids don't know that I'm their grandparents' age.”

Emily made a noise of disgust. “Okay. We'll keep using a question mark candle.”

“And I've never had a cake.” The holiday season was too full of rich, sugary foods to want cake afterward.

“That salmon steak last year held the candle pretty decently.”

This could narrow the search down. She knew her regional origins from her accent, her age, that she came from wheat farmers who’d had at least three children, that her mother's name was probably Alia or something quite close. Russian naming traditions passed to female children their mother’s name, male children their father's.

Emily was playing with Natasha's curls again. “I wonder if your mom had red hair.”

Chances were that they'd never know.

“I wonder if our kid will get your hair.”

Our kid. Her thoughts ran circles around that concept.

“I just hope the kid doesn't get my nose.” Said nose wrinkled in distaste.

Lovingly, Natasha reached up to trace the proud line of it.

“Natasha!” Emily scowled and swatted at her hand. “You fucking weirdo.”

She caught both of Emily's hands and brought them to her chest, over her heart. “I think your nose is wonderful. Let me kiss it.”
Stubborn refusal sneered at her. “No!”

“Please?” she batted her eyelashes.

“Ugh,” groaned Emily. “Why must you be obsessed with my worst feature?”

Natasha switched tactics. “You won't let the mother of your unborn child kiss your nose?”

Both of them got a little hung up on Natasha casually calling herself a mother, of mentioning the new life growing in Natasha's belly. Rain played a sporadic beat on the hotel window.

Emily's neck bent and put her nose in reach of kisses. Natasha gave it three; one for each side and the tip.

“Weirdo,” muttered at her.

“Idiot,” whispered back.

Emily's frame shifted forward until her torso was draped on Natasha, nose brushing her shoulder, breaths dancing across her neck. Like that, they listened to the rain and breathed in the presence of each other until long after the tea was cold.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

ze waren neuken – they were fucking
verdomme – dammit

A/N - I think this might be my favorite chapter title... *waits for someone to tell me I translated it wrong*
The second meeting with Dr. Garner dipped into the intensity of Emily's situation without digging deep enough for tears or rage to boil up. He must have seen what simmered under the surface though because he promised to make himself available for video-chat sessions. Once a week on Wednesday afternoons. Indefinitely.

Feeling both lighter and slightly off-kilter, Emily made her way back to her and Natasha's room in time to catch Natasha doing... something. The woman looked perfectly natural as she rummaged in the bag she kept packed for missions. There was an odd tilt to the action though. Emily drew closer and tried to peek into the bag.

Normally, Nat would let her look. Never help pack or unpack. The spy did that herself, would never allow help. This time, she blocked Emily's line of sight with a shoulder and tried to distract her.

A corner of bright green fabric was visible under the jumble within the bag. “Is that the t-shirt I've been looking for?”

Natasha stiffened, sighed, and pulled the errant t-shirt out. “Here. It needs to go in the laundry.”

It was a bit stale, but it also smelled of Emily's daily perfume, a spicy, floral scent. And it smelled like Natasha. The creases in it were deep, like it'd spent a lot of time squashed in the bag. “Why was it in your bag?” She'd worn it for most of the flight to Egypt. Vaguely, she had a memory of taking it off and tossing it on a chair before getting into her armor. Why had it ended up in the mission bag instead of the suitcase with the rest of Emily's stuff?

Eyes locked on the bag's remaining contents, Natasha was holding her breath.

“Nat?”

“It smelled like you.”

Understanding hit her. Emily had felt similarly waking up in the night, being able to press her nose to Natasha's hair, be reassured by the familiar scent. “You found me, Natalia. I'm here.”

Light jazz playing the background, the team laughing and drinking, Emily lost yet another trick to Tony and Pepper. Bucky and Steve took the next one. Even with three tricks left, Natasha rolled her eyes and dropped the remaining cards to the table. Two games in a row they'd lost because Emily was absolutely terrible at Spades.

“We could play Monopoly.” Pepper grinned too-cheerfully at them.

“No!” Emily and Steve roared in one voice.

Even Tony shook his head. “I'm going with them on this one, Pep. You're kinda scary when you own half the board and start buying hotels.” Pepper wasn't a successful CEO of Stark Industries simply because Tony had appointed her to the position when he'd been dying of palladium...
Bucky's gaze flicked between them. He hadn't been introduced to the agony that was the hours-long tedium of Monopoly yet.

"Don't ever let them convince you that Monopoly is a fun game." Bruce offered sage advice as he set a tray of snacks on the table. He'd sat out the games of Spades to prep tasty things. It was his turn tonight in the kitchen, and he wasn't disappointing. He had more than gamma rays and biology degrees in that big brain of his.

Natasha plucked a hot samosa from the tray. "I need this recipe, Bruce."

A bashful grin was aimed at her. "I'll trade you for that pear and mustard dressing you whipped up yesterday."

"Deal." She met Tony's open-mouthed, open to make a sassy comment, expression and arched an eyebrow.

"Oh my god," moaned Emily around a mouthful. "Bruce, these are fucking amazing."

Natasha switched her attention to Emily to gauge how she was doing. Yesterday had been Bram's surgery, which had gone extremely well. His surgeon had pronounced that they'd gotten every bit of cancerous growth there was, and his doctor said that blood tests came back with no indication of leftover cancer. Emily had been exhausted after the six-hour surgery, more after she and Bram had finally told Lizzie about his cancer.

She'd slept the entire flight to New York and most of the day. Playing card and board games had been Bucky's idea. A good one too. Emily looked fully at ease. She was enjoying herself, showed no signs of feeling trapped or overwhelmed.

A spiced cashew was placed at Natasha's lips. Emily met her gaze, silently saying that she knew why Natasha was staring and that she wanted Natasha to find something else to think about. She obliged and admitted the cashew, along with Emily's finger, into her mouth. Her reward was Emily's irises contracting to thin rings and a flush darkening her neck and cheeks. Beautiful.

"Hey," Steve grumbled. "We're here to play cards, not whatever it is you two are doing."

"Did you ever call that waitress you met in Chinatown, Steve?" Natasha turned to one of her favorite hobbies: trying to set Steve up on a date.

At his side, Bucky laughed. "Him call a beautiful dame and take her out to dinner like a normal guy? Please. There's a better chance you'll grow a beard, Romanoff."

"What shall we play next?" Steve desperately reached for a change in topic. "Rummy?"

Tony threw his promised party on Emily's eighth day back. It was far classier than she imagined Tony Stark hosted parties to be. There were no flashing lights. No video screens. No half-dressed bimbos hanging on his arm.

The guest list was extremely short. Those who'd helped look for Em. Not a reporter, politician, or brown-noser in sight. Pepper. Lizzie and Kyle. The Fortune brothers. May and Mack chose not to attend. Or more likely, SHIELD had been without its core team too long and needed someone at the helm, and May was only too happy to have the place to herself. Clint said he liked his beach
girlfriend more than Emily and stayed at the farm. Fitz sent a gizmo in his stead. An organic based tracer that camouflaged itself as normal skin until it was prodded in a specific sequence. Simmons showed up along with a book by one of her favorite authors that she gifted to Emily. Skye, Bobbi, Hunter. The Avengers.

Former Deputy Director Maria Hill arrived. She'd provided what intel and resources that she could from her limited position as a Stark Industries employee. She looked excited to be surrounded by spies and superheroes instead of office workers.

There was a rule passed around that Emily was never to be caged in a corner. Even when surrounded, she was given highly visible exits. Such was a bonus of having friends trained as spies. Natasha looked up from the conversation between Coulson and Hill that she'd been engaging in to check on Emily. Sitting with her old friends on the couches, she appeared calm. Good enough. Natasha returned her attention to her former coworkers to find them watching her.

“How's your wife?” Hill asked. She carefully sipped from her martini. It was almost a surprise to see the woman in a classic evening dress instead of a James Bond tuxedo. Coulson was in a typical suit, starched and boring. His tie had a splash of color in it.

“You know you're the only person who calls her that.” Natasha responded dryly.

“And yet every time I see the two of you, you look more married than ever,” smirked Hill.

Coulson's pleasant smile reached his eyes, where they crinkled at her. “She has a point.”

What would they say when they found out that Natasha was pregnant with Emily's baby? She allowed the smugness to show. “Emily does make a good housewife with her cleaning and cooking. I'd say you should see how good she looks in just an apron, but I really don't want to share that.”

“Thank you for that image.” Hill muttered.

Coulson's expression didn't change. “Congratulations, Romanoff.”

She studied him, his casual body language. Did he know? “For what?”

“For breaking the mold and beating the odds.”

“Thanks, Phil,” she cooed.

He twitched at the rare use of his first name. She made a note to use it with him more often.

“Hey, Maria, how was that guy you went home with last month?” Natasha pushed forward with the friendly conversation.

Hill glared at her, then tossed her head back and laughed. “Horrible. I swear he didn't even know what a clitoris was.”


“Perhaps you should give your next date a brochure on it?” Coulson suggested. “I'm sure I could have Simmons draw one up for you.”

“Phil!” tone and body language scandalized, Hill brought up a hand to rest daintily over her heart.

“Simmons is very thorough.” His gaze drifted unerringly from Hill to where Simmons was leaning
close and hanging on Bobbi's every word. “And would enjoy detailing something she's passionate about.”

Hill's scandalized expression morphed to thrilled mischief. The woman loved gossip. Most spies did. Rumors and gossip were their bread and butter, the purpose behind recon missions, the basis of intel. Natasha looked forward to seeing Teagan's gossiping neighbors Jake and Billy. They knew everything going on in the neighborhood, would happily share and were easily distracted from asking about Teagan and Jillian's travels.

“Phil, are you encouraging inter-agent relationships?” Hill demanded gleefully.

Instead of an immediate, carefully prepared remark, Coulson quietly watched his agents for several breaths. When he faced his former coworkers again, his expression was thoughtful. “It's come to my attention that fraternization can be a good thing. When the next alien war comes, our survival may boil down to how far we're willing to go for our fellow human.”

Natasha's gaze found Emily. She couldn't quite stop her right hand from drifting to rest over her occupied womb. From whatever Lizzie was talking about, Emily lifted her attention to meet Natasha's eye. Dark eyes glanced at Coulson and Hill. “What?” her mouth moved silently.

A smile designed to say she simply wanted to look at her favorite freckled person smoothed across Natasha's face. Emily wasn't entirely convinced, but she turned back to her brother.

“SHIELD is more than a spy agency now.” Coulson went on.

“SHIELD was always more than that, Phil.” Hill said quietly.

“And now it has to be even more.”

Both of their intense perusals landed on Natasha. She waited it out.

“How far, yet still retain our humanity.” Coulson clearly referenced Natasha's refusal to murder in exchange for intel on Emily's whereabouts, despite her nearly manic desperation.

It hit her then that Coulson was outlining his code of conduct as being influenced by her actions. She was used to her actions being picked apart, studied, used as teaching tools, but for the director of SHIELD to say he wanted his agents to behave like her when they got to their darkest places?

Emily eased up to Kevin, who had withdrawn from conversation with Sam and Bobbi. He was at the bar that Hunter was currently manning, getting something fruity, low in alcohol and Hunter's continuous teasing about it. She waited until he was taking a swallow of pink liquid. “So, are Agatha's tits as fabulous naked as they are in a tanktop?”

He choked. Under the thin skin of his neck, she saw his pulse jump.

That confirmed it. They were sleeping together.

When he finished coughing and wiping at his stained shirt, he glared down at her. “Having you as a sister is not fair.”

She grinned teasingly. “Please, I wasn't even touching you.”

“No. Now you don't need to. You've got spy training now. Your partner is a spy. All of your new
friends are fucking spies.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Tony’s not a spy.” She glanced around the room. “Neither is Pepper. Or Steve. Definitely not Bucky. And Simmons is more lab geek than spy.” Her attention fell on Bruce as he awkwardly endured Daisy’s casual flirting. “And most definitely not Bruce Banner.”

His glare hadn’t lessened. “Spies and highly capable people who tend to make it their business to know what’s going on with everybody around them.”

“Except Bruce Banner.”

“Except him. The only one here who you aren’t ridiculously close with.”

She sipped her own drink. “I’m not all that close with Coulson or Hunter or Simmons or Agen- uh- Hill.” This was an awfully big crowd that had shown up.

Kevin started to snipe back, his mouth yanking open, but he paused, and he softened. “Want an excuse to escape the crowd for a minute?”

Maybe he was empathic. She grabbed his hand and made a beeline for the elevator. Partway there, she caught Alan's eye, and he joined them. She thumbed the level for the obstacle course and grinned a little drunk at them both. “Want to play laser tag?”

“Laser tag?” Alan laughed.

“Or the Avengers’ version of it.” She lead them down the corridor, into the gym, to the storage lockers. “Tony designed them for training,” dragging out sensor-vests that zapped their wearing when struck. “When he decided that he didn't want the obstacle course to be covered in paintball mess.” Adjusting the straps for Alan's markedly smaller belly, “And he probably got tired of the bruises. Nat and Steve have an unfair advantage, you know. You've lost weight, Al.”

“Yea. Thanks.” He beamed. “I've been cutting back on the potato chips and junk, eating more like your hippie ass does.”

“You should see the look Nat gives me when I want something deep-fried for dinner.” Emily complained happily.

Both of them laughed. “I remember how she turned up her nose at my cooking.”

Vests went over torsos, got tugged into place. Guns were chosen. Sensors turned on. Shoes removed.

“Us against you, right, Spot?” Alan asked.

Affectionate irritation rolled her eyes at her old nickname. “How is that fair...” she trailed off at their expressions. “Yea, I guess it's totally fair now, isn't it?” Laughing, she surveyed the course. The entire thing had been rearranged since last time she'd been down here. She was glad she'd worn trousers for the party. “But I get five seconds to hide. Both of you turn around. Jarvis, give us a countdown?”

“Of course, Ms. Fortune.”

The boys twitched slightly at Jarvis’ disembodied voice that didn't sound like a computer. They knew who, what, Jarvis was, but hadn't quite met him yet.
“On your mark?” Jarvis asked.

“Turn around!” She swatted at Alan until he obeyed and put his back to the course. “Oh, and the vests will zap your asses when I shoot you.”

“What?!” Alan yipped.

“Mark!” Emily bolted into the little jungle, up a rope ladder, and veered to where she thought she could flank them.

“Two.” Jarvis paused. “One.”

She shot both of them five seconds later from a shadowy corner.

“Jesus fuck,” whined Alan after twenty minutes of running around. He stooped and panted. “She's gotten me four times, Kev. I can't hear her tiny elf feet over my fucking breathing. And dammit, getting shot hurts!”

Beside him, in slightly better shape, Kevin groaned. “Two years ago, we'd have kicked her butt already.”

“Do my baby brothers need a nap?”

Both of them jerked, their necks snapping to find her above them. She was leaning over the side of a rope bridge. Alan threw his hands up. “You have an unfair advantage.”

“Says the boy on the side with more players.”

“But you've got spy training now. And you aren't fat anymore.”

A little hurt, she pouted.

Kevin elbowed Al. “You're the only one who's ever really been fat around here.”

“Life's too short not to eat cake,” was Alan's swift response. Hadn't he just been boasting about his efforts to avoid cake?

She shot him and grinned as his vest lit up.

“Hey!” His gun grunted uselessly when he tried to return fire. He'd taken too many hits, was dead. “Ah come on!”

Movement at the doors caught her attention. Cream and bronze dress that dipped enticingly low at the back and brilliant orange hair styled in thick braids that led to a waterfall of curls down the back had entered the room. Emily smiled and blew Natasha a kiss. One of Natasha's sweet, slow smiles graced her features. She dipped her head and started back out the door.

“Hey, Jarvis, lock the door and give us a couple minutes of privacy?” Emily asked.

“Ten, Ms. Fortune?”

Natasha stalled, an eyebrow lifting.

“Perfect.” She crooked a finger at Natasha until heels were carefully removed, set aside, and she was gliding toward them barefoot. Her nail polish was clear with white tips. Emily clambered down a rope ladder to meet her and smile at the bare feet.
Natasha greeted her with a questioning look.

Emily plunged forward. “Let's tell them.”

“Okay,” replied hesitantly, yet willingly.

Both of the boys were immediately curious. “What?”

As Emily swelled with pride and nervousness, Kevin's expression shifted, his gaze flickering between the women. “Em? What are you two so excited about?”

Nat wound an arm around hers, letting Emily know she wasn't the only one nervous.

“Did one of you propose?” Alan asked half-jokingly.

“It's a little more tangible than that.” Emily hedged and tried to not get distracted by the idea of Natasha in a wedding gown, sliding a ring on Emily's finger. Nat might be willing to slip into said gown, because she was a fashion freak, but she'd never go for such an impractical public ceremony. Keep to the topic at hand, idiot, she scolded herself. Pregnant. Natasha was fucking pregnant, and they were about to announce it to Emily's little brothers. Her heart fluttered.

The boys' eyes narrowed.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Natasha bite her lip, then slide a hand over her belly where the little bean was growing. Kevin got it first, eyes getting huge, face lighting up.

“What?” Alan demanded.

Fidgeting, Kevin met Emily's eye. She nodded.

Grabbing his younger brother and shaking him, “We're gonna be uncles!”

“What? Em's pregnant? What happened to you hating the idea of popping people from your twat?”

Kevin groaned and dropped his forehead to Alan's shoulder.

“Though I think she'd be absolutely beautiful pregnant,” Natasha spoke quietly, tenderly, “I'm the one growing a little person inside me.”

“That makes more sense.” Alan laughed. “Did you guys do it the old-fashioned way or turkey baster or IVF or what?”

“Technically,” Emily started.

“None of the above,” finished Natasha.

Alan's eyes fell to Emily's crotch. “You get something done down there? I swear Em, if you've not only got the hottest girlfriend ever, but a cock now too, I am so leaving, especially if it's bigger than mine. I can't deal with that kind of competition.”

Cackles exploded from Natasha, and she leered at Emily. “I could learn to enjoy that.”

“Natasha!” Damn woman! She would like that idea. Emily yanked her arm away and found a log to plop her ass on.

Letting her cackles quiet, yet not die, Natasha explained, “Technically, it was IVF, but instead of donor sperm, it's Emily's DNA.”
“Oh, dude, I thought Maijwaard and Gerber's work was still in the experimental phase.” Surprising the shit out of Emily, Alan prattled on. “I've been following their research for a couple years now. I think I meant to tell you about it that Thanksgiving, but then mom happened, and,” he shrugged.

“I don't know whether to be more surprised at how well-informed your baby brother actually is, or that he pronounced their names correctly.” Natasha deadpanned.

“Didn't I ever tell you that Al is secretly brilliant?” Emily doted.

Alan scratched his beard, and the news he'd gotten sunk in. “Dude,” he breathed. “I'm gonna be an uncle.” A moment later, he was dragging Emily up into another hug. “You are going to be such an awesome mom, Em. I'm so glad you decided not to let our shit parents hold you back.”

Alan meant every word. Old pain and fresh love swelled in her throat, burned at her eyes.

“This kid is stupid lucky.” He went on.

Kevin getting his own Emily-squeeze in and assurances were similarly sweet and supportive. She had the best brothers ever. They even managed to double-team Natasha with a hug and congratulations right before Jarvis announced his return.

“Hey, Natalia?” Emily asked suddenly.

“Yes?”

“Who's Teagan?”

For a breath too long, she couldn't breathe, tortured at the reminder that though Emily had regained herself from Petrovich, there were pieces of her missing now.

Pain flickered tightly across Emily's nearly gaunt face. “Shit. Someone important, right?”

More to anchor herself than to comfort Em, she grabbed her hand. “She's imaginary, Em. She's who I pretend to be when...” Did Emily remember the house in Atlanta? Their secret home?

“When we,” fell slowly from Emily's lips, “Need to escape?”

Hope pushed the darkness back. Natasha nodded agreement. The effort to remember was obvious in scrunched features, tight breaths. Natasha wanted to watch Petrovich die all over again for hurting Emily.

“And Jillian, is that who I pretend to be?”

If Em couldn't remember the whole story, would they have to give the house up? Start over somewhere else? Despite a life of packing up and moving on the next persona, the next target, Natasha dreaded the idea of starting over. She liked that house, what she and Emily had there. “Teagan and Jillian have a house together.”

“A secret lair,” giggled Emily.

“An elegantly decorated library,” was her correction. The tower was more like their lair anyway.

“Lair. Cool.”
Natasha rolled her eyes. Why had she missed this ridiculous woman?

Bucky's lawyers finally earned their keep when images of the Winter Soldier traveling with the Avengers were spread across the internet. They fended off politicians, law firms, and greedy fucks alike. And made Emily feel pretty confident about leaving him in New York when she and Natasha decided it was time to go home. More than one Avenger tried to pry their destination out of them, and Nat scanned their clothing and bags in a public restroom for trackers. She found one in Emily's pocket.

“Hazard of having spies for friends.” Emily shrugged.

Natasha's eyes were worried.

“It's a short flight in first class, woman. I'll be fine.”

“It's the lines and crowds before that I'm worried about. That press conference you insisted on yesterday won't help. People will have your freckles on their mind.”

Irritated, Emily frowned. Nat was right. Her being right was almost as irritating as her over-protectiveness. “I wish that teleporter guy hadn't turned out to be on the wrong side and died for it. His gift would be so useful right now.”

“I'm getting us a private jet from D.C. to Atlanta.” Natasha announced.

That was the last place that Teagan and Jillian had flown to, right? Could Teagan afford that kind of thing? Emily pawed at the mental cobwebs, but couldn't bring up much about Teagan's financial status. The blonde did have a cute Kentucky drawl though. “Fine. Just get me home.”

“I will,” came a promise with deep undertones.

Emily softened. “Thank you,” she whispered before kissing Natasha.

Chapter End Notes

There was so much to cover in this chapter! I really hope I'm doing Emily's PTSD justice. One moment thinking she's fine, the next needing space and open air. It was fun being able to squeeze Hill and Coulson in, and I hope you enjoyed it too. Also, I know this could've been better edited, but I wanted to keep going with the momentum I have and finish the next chapter.

Thank you so much for your comments and kudos! Getting those has really helped keep me sane the last couple months :)}
At a stoplight a few miles from their house, Natasha tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. She ignored the familiar itch of Teagan's blonde wig and spoke into the easy quiet that had settled between herself and Emily since they'd stepped off the plane an hour ago. “Did you still want pirozhki?”

Emily lolled her head to look at her. It was obvious she'd forgotten about asking Natasha to make them. Understandable given that she'd asked for them before the mission to Egypt as payment for accepting all the SHIELD protection, not that it had helped.

“What?”

“We need to stop at the store for groceries anyway. I just need to know if we should grab cabbage and ground pork.” Natasha paused, lifted an eyebrow. “Unless you've changed your mind, and we can have something not fried.”

“I totally forgot! You promised, didn't you?” Emily darted over the center console to plant a kiss on her cheek. “Of course I want them!”

Seeing Em beam at her almost made up for the last few shitty weeks. Even if she'd finally learned an ounce of information about her origins after decades of cluelessness. It did amazing things to fill that hole in herself, but having to go through the terror of Emily being kidnapped wasn't worth it. No matter how sexy it was that Emily had gotten it out of Petrovich by herself, that she'd kept her head under duress. “Fried appetizers for dinner it is.”

Emily's smile seemed to glow even brighter. “I knew there was a reason I loved you.”

“Better be more than one reason.” Natasha played along.

“I also find your intellect to be particularly exciting.”

She rolled a sideways glance at her idiot. “Thank you.”

“And your tits.” Emily leered at the low vee of her button-up blouse.

That didn't deserve a response.

“And your patience and compassion and sense of humor and s-”

“I've already promised you fried food, what else are you trying to con out of me?” Natasha poked Emily's thigh.

“Pie.”

Rolling her eyes. “Fine.”

“Yes!” Emily squealed and planted another kiss on Natasha's cheek. “You're the best.”
They weren’t home more than an hour when their fabulous gay neighbors showed up and nearly bum-rushed them both with hugs. “Oh my Lord! When we saw on the news, we were so terrified you wouldn’t come home!” Jake whined.

The news? Natasha made a mental plan of how fast she could get to the gun behind the TV, have Emily in the car, and driving north.

“Please do not kill us.” Billy released Natasha from his own crushing hug. “But come on. Her freckles and your eyes? Both of ya’ll are always gone when Sekhmet is on TV. Don’t get me wrong, blonde is so fetch on you, but you look fabulous with your natural red.”

“You guys are seriously flattering,” her Teagan cover laughed. “Me? The Black Widow?” She gestured at her small frame. “I dance ballet. I don’t even own a gun. And Lia looks a whole lot like that Fortune woman, I’ll admit, but she doesn’t have any superpowers.”

Billy popped his hip and eyeballed her. “Sweetie, don’t even get me started on your little freckled lover's nose. No amount of perfect contouring can tell me it's not the same as Emily Fortune's.”

Jake was nodding. “And the way she talks.”

“Girl,” Billy huffed. “If it was just your cute blonde wig living here, we would never have guessed.” He met Jake's eye. “Hell, if we weren't huge fans of the most famous gay couple on Earth, you could probably convince us we were imagining things.”

Emily hadn't totally dropped her hands from Jake's arms. “You really think my Teagan is the world's most dangerous woman?”

They paused at that description.

“We think you're Emily Fortune. Simple math says that Teagan is her Russian girlfriend.” Jake said.

Teagan groaned dramatically, her Kentucky drawl getting thicker with her exasperation. “This is just plain silly. Please tell me you haven't tweeted about your crazy theory. I do not need reporters trampling my perfect lawn.”

“No!” Both of them cried at once.

Jake took over, “Like I said, we watch the news. It's stupid obvious how much you two hate the spotlight. Not sure why you'd pick the South to hide, but we are on your side.”

“Why in the world would you want a murderer and a liar as friends?” Teagan demanded.

“Because ya'll are good people no matter what them haters say!” erupted from Jake.

A true smile was glowing on Emily.

“Don't you go encouraging them.” Teagan snapped at Jillian.

Dark eyes said she was going to finish blowing their cover. She trusted too easily. People could change their minds at any given moment. Although, she paused. They'd already guessed the truth and had enough evidence to convince even a busy, dismissive reporter. Should they move? Definitely would warn Clint.

“Oh my Lord.” Jake suddenly murmured. “That gorgeous blond beard, Billy. That was totally
Captain Hottie! We met him!”

There was a day when Natasha would have already silenced them and be making preparations to dispose of the bodies. She glared at Emily, who smirked.

Billy noticed their silent battle first. Now he took a step back. “Jake. You see that?”

What?

“I so do.” Jake was nodding.

“She should put a patent on it.” Emily agreed. “Nat's death glare is unparalleled.”

Dammit, Emily!

“It's them!” Billy squealed and hugged his husband, shook him excitedly. “Our neighbors are Avengers!”

“Yes. Yell that louder.” Natasha growled. “I don't think the rest of Atlanta heard you.”

He shrunk back with huge eyes.

“I love you two,” Emily laughed. “But I will wipe your memories if I hear the neighbors whispering.”

Both men blanched, which was impressive given how dark Hayden was. “You can do that?” squeaked Jake.

It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. “She can.” Narrowing her eyes at Emily, “She should.”

“Oh come on, sweetie. We figured it out ages ago and haven't told anyone!” Jake whined.

“Not even Joel and Buddy.” The gossip-mongers they called best friends.

With that, Emily slunk closer, wrapped Natasha in a loose hug, kissed the corner of her jaw. “They won't tell. If they do, I'll let you do whatever it is you do with traitors.”

The neighbors freshly terrified, her spy-senses mollified, Natasha sighed. “Fine. Have you two eaten? I was going to make dinner.”

“No.” Jake blinked. “Not yet.”

“Also,” Teagan's drawl returned. “Ya'll better not forget your neighbors are Teagan and Jillian. Y'hear?”

“Yes, ma'am.” The men nodded enthusiastically.

Life with Emily was so much work, she silently grumbled and pinched Emily's ass, smiled at the shriek she earned. As she chopped the cabbage, she amused herself with contingency plans to dispose of the likable men. While it cooked and Emily laughed with Jake about future cabbage farts, she gave up disposal plans, switched to brainstorming ideas to secure the guys' indefinite loyalty and silence. By the time the meat was done browning, she had moved on to wondering when was too soon to start prepping a nursery for the baby. Next week? After the first trimester?

No. Never too soon. Their life could turn upside down at a moment's notice. The only question was whether to risk their nosy neighbors noticing and spreading rumors. And what color scheme?
Emily reveled in the sweltering Georgia heat that hadn't dissipated overnight. It was vastly different than the pervasive chill of the Siberian prison, relaxing her in a way she hadn't thought possible, making her realize how the artificial chill in the Avengers tower had constantly reminded her of her prison. She'd turned the AC off when she got up at midnight from a nightmare. By nine, the humid heat was broiling, making her sweat, feel close to melting right into the kitchen floor as she sat at the breakfast bar eating cereal.

“Did you turn the AC off last night or did it die?” Natasha entered the kitchen wearing a silk nightie that was sticking to her sweaty body in a way that Emily would have done something about if she wasn't miserably hot. The fridge was opened and orange juice taken from it.

“Yea.” Emily answered.

“Enjoying the heat?” was asked as she poured a short glass.

“It's disgusting.” Emily plucked at her wet top. “Yes.”

“Okay,” was all Nat said about it.

Natasha simply chose a heat-appropriate outfit and opened every window in the house. The two fans they had were set to whirring. By the third sweltering afternoon, Emily was sick of it. She closed the house up and set the AC to 80F. Too warm to be confused with her prison, yet not hot enough to make her brain boil in her skull. The next night, when she woke up in the middle of a nightmare about a movie theater stealing her brains and dragging them through snow until she called herself Mary Sue, she simply left the bed and went out to the screened-in back porch to listen to the crickets and mosquitoes. Tea arrived half an hour later with a mussed blonde.

How did she have the presence of mind to pull that wig on in the middle of the fucking night? Granted, there could be a stray red curl escaping from the back, but the thing would pass a cursory glance in case... something. Especially in the darkness. Whatever. This was why Nat was the one to change her appearance. Emily couldn't handle it long-term, even a simple thing like a wig.

Natasha was sipping tea from the mug she'd carried out for herself.

“I don't think I'll get back to sleep tonight. Don't stay up for me, Nat.”

Radiant light from the neighborhood wasn't enough to show Natasha's expression. “Mind if I stay with you?”

More because Natasha's question was too delicately voiced than because she wanted company, Emily nodded. Natasha settled herself daintily beside her. There was a good few inches separating them. It both irked Emily and made her feel warm and fuzzy. She hated this need for space, this fear of people that her time in Siberia -no, the doc was right, call it was it was: imprisonment-Petrovich's torture had burned into her. She was a cuddly person, dammit!

“We'll get through this, Emilishka.” Nat said softly.

Emily lifted her feet up and shifted, tucking her toes under Nat's bare thigh and leaning sideways against the back of the furniture. She smiled at her favorite woman. Calm and love radiated from Nat's body language, both outward and inside. There was an undercurrent of anxiety, but it seemed to be fading with their shared moment, with the tea, with the song of crickets and cover of night. They'd get through this. Together.
That the house had a basement had been one of its selling points for Natasha. A rarity in the area and had cost several grand to turn it from a cobwebbed storage space to half wine-cellar, half gym. Sweaty hours with Clint's help and several grand more had created a sub-basement where weaponry, money, and alternate identities were hidden.

Natasha burned stress energy on top of her daily routines in the basement space. Over the past four days, she hadn't dared to leave Emily alone for too long. Leaving the house had been reserved for short grocery trips, once to take Em out beyond the city where they'd stargazed for a few hours. Emily had been out back with a book when Natasha had come downstairs an hour ago. Natasha went to the bottom of the stairwell to listen for anything going on upstairs.

Only the sounds coming in through the open windows drifted down. No soft whispers of crying or frustration. Either Em was still with her book, or she'd fallen asleep. Both were good. Natasha forced herself to continue working out instead of checking on her lover and went for the bamboo practice sword. Hefting the thing, she considered which art to use. It had been a long time since she'd trained in Japanese techniques.

She took up a stance that her alter-ego Teagan would know nothing about and began a routine that she'd learned before Emily had even been born.

Long minutes passed while Emily considered the hairdryer until she closed the closet door, deciding that her short hair would dry soon enough. She didn't want to leave it out and upset Natasha. No matter her good intentions, Emily would leave it on the counter to cool down and promptly forget about the thing until hours later, long after Natasha would have put it away, irritated and upset with Emily over it. A fight could ensue. That was the last thing Emily wanted. Nat had been too good, too patient and wonderful lately. And she had enough stress on her shoulders.

Or in her belly.

Both.

Fucking hell. They had a baby on the way. Emily shook her head and opened a drawer, hunting for a lip balm. Nothing. She grumbled and grabbed Natasha's makeup bag. The one with her essentials that she usually traveled with. Emily tugged it open, peered in, and rummaged around until she cursed and grabbed a handful of stuff and dropped it on the counter. Pencils, lipsticks, sharpener.

She grabbed another handful, and it clattered to the porcelain surface. A gleam of metal caught her eye.

Terror ripped up her throat. Shrieking, she jumped away, but not soon enough. She was strapped to the chair, legs, arms, waist, and head restrained. Arturo was holding her eyelids open while Petrovich watched. Slim, icy metal was fitted under her lids, kept them open even though she battled to close them, to look away, to escape.

Pain struck. Hard, biting pain that echoed across her body, in her skull, elbows, back. It was sharp enough to bring the present back into focus. She'd managed to escape the bathroom, run right through the bedroom to the hall and the stairs that she'd fallen down. Ankles on the steps, head on the landing, she groaned and pushed herself to a sitting position.
The stairs spun. Emily closed her eyes and leaned against the wall, both glad that Natasha was at the grocery store and hating that she wasn't there to comfort her.

“Fuck.”

Day nine. Natasha checked her watch as she walked the last block home to cool down from her afternoon run. Fifty-five minutes. Not too long, but long enough to give Em some space. No missed calls or texts on her phone. She stepped into the house and paused. Something felt off though she couldn't see much from the front entryway. Quickly, silently, she went for the snub-nosed Smith and Wesson she kept in a boot by the door. She peered through the doorways to kitchen, then living room. A torn piece of paper caught her attention.

Crouching, she snagged it up to examine. Words were neatly printed across both sides. Page number in the center bottom. It smelled like a book, read like a passage in the middle of a chapter. A few feet into the living room, and she found the rest of the book.

It had been ripped apart and flung across the entire room. Other than that, there wasn't sign of a fight, no blood, no sounds other than the air conditioner humming away. Nothing was out of place or rearranged. No drag marks on the carpet. She looked at the strewn pages again. They looked like they'd been ripped frantically, not looking for anything, but in simple anger. The cover was in three ragged bits. It was the book that Em had started that morning.

“Jillian?” She waited four seconds for a response before continuing through the first level of the house. Nothing. “Jillian, darling, where'd you get off to?” she called up the stairs that Em had fallen down the other day. Panic nipped at her. Too early for that. Stay calm. Em was probably out back with wine or downstairs with headphones on.

She stayed a breath longer to be sure she couldn't hear anything upstairs before padding to the closed back door and peering out. No Emily. She went to the basement door, opened it on well-oiled hinges. The stairwell was finished. She wouldn't be able to see anything until she was at the bottom steps, or third-up if she leaned. But her ears did catch the faint sound of heavy, quick breathing. It sounded like Emily.

Heart buzzing, Natasha silently descended. On the third-up step, she paused to lean forward. Movement caught her eye. Reflecting in the workout room's large mirrors and going through an energetic routine for hand combat, was Emily. She had headphones plugged into her ears. No fresh blood or visible injury. Smooth, if tired, movements. Natasha watched for a few minutes before retracing her steps, putting the safety back on the gun and returning it to its hiding spot. She swept the living room with a critical eye.

What had the book been about? Curious at what had set Em off this time, she looked the title up online, found the summary. A true account of a French journalist kept prisoner in Sudan during...

She lowered her phone and sighed. That idiot. What foolish line of reasoning led her to reading a story too similar to her own? She turned at the sound of footsteps on stairs.

Sweat trickled down flushed cheeks. “I was hoping that reading about someone else would help me get through it.” Emily shut the door. Honestly, it was impressive that she had been able to get herself to overcome the memory of underground imprisonment to train in the basement away from curious eyes. Or had she been pushing herself? “I was wrong.”

“I was heading up for a shower. Want to join?” Natasha offered in a seductive tone.
Emily paused, sighed, lifted a tiny smile. “No. I'll clean up the mess down here, take my own shower when you're done.”

Slightly disappointed, Natasha nodded. She got two steps up when fingers on her hip stalled her. “Can I have a kiss?” came hesitantly.

Heart twisting, Natasha turned fully and bent to a meeting of lips.

Emily frowned at her collection of video games. She really wanted to escape into the simple pleasure of a Mario adventure. Her eyes shifted to the black, dusty TV screen. Biting her lip, she picked up the remote control and pushed the power button. A grey glow came for a second before it glared a solid, painful blue. Select input, bounced across the screen.

“Enjoy the show.” Sergei snickered and left her to the screen.

Terrible images, boring images, strange images, they flashed at her. For hours.

And hours.

And hours.

Her throat was hoarse, voice unusable before she was allowed to close her eyes.

Her heart thudded into overdrive, and she dropped the remote. It cracked against the coffee table, batteries jumping out and bouncing, shattering what was left of her nerves. She ran. At the top of the stairs, Natasha caught her by the elbows, studied her for a moment. “Are you injured?”

Emily shook her head.

Concern rippled through Natasha, though her expression was carefully neutral. She released Emily's arms. “Would you like company wherever you're running off to?”

Did she? Is that why she'd run upstairs instead of outside? Because she knew Natasha was up here? Nat was wearing an airy, floral print summer dress, and she was barefoot. A smile quirked at Emily's lips. What was it about Nat being barefoot that was absolutely charming? That her feet were so damned dainty? Or the contrast of an ugly circular scar exactly the size of a cigar on the right foot against vivid yellow nail polish?

Or something else, something ethereal and poetic and girlish?

She most certainly wanted to be in the presence of a barefoot Natalia, who was wearing a cute dress and looking particularly cuddly. Where to snuggle? The living room couch was clearly out of the question. She didn't want to be cooped up in the bedroom again. Driving to a nearby park sounded like a great idea, except for the getting in a car and being around people part. The love seat in the screened back porch would have to suffice.

Emily glanced down the stairs where she could see a faint glow of blue. “Will you go turn the TV off and wait for me out back?”

“Yes.” Natasha's eyes traveled over her one more time, then she was descending the stairs, venturing off to be Emily's hero.
Smiling, Emily made a brief trip to the bedroom to change from Thundercats themed lounge pants to plain black shorts and red camisole. She hopped down the stairs, skittered past the living room - purposely not looking at the blank TV- and out the sliding door to where Nat was waiting. “My hero.” She kissed Nat's wonderful, pliable lips.

Green eyes shone at her. “You're welcome.”

Another quick kiss, and Emily dragged Nat to the love seat, where she purposefully, eagerly, put herself in an intimate cuddle. Powerful arms settled gingerly around her. “It's okay, you can squeeze me. I don't feel trapped.”

Careful love wrapped tightly about her waist. “You're incredible, Em,” whispered in her ear. Nat was always insanely careful about their secret identities.

Emily wished for access to tight red curls, but contented herself with Teagan's chin-length, not-curly, blonde locks. They smelled the same. Nat washed her own hair and the wigs with the same shampoos. “I love you, Natalia.” Fingertips trailed along Natasha's arm. With a little more effort than normal scanning took, Emily searched for the presence of the embryo. “And our healthy little bean.” It was so tiny that Nat's body was barely aware of it. “Your hormones are starting to shift.”

A hike in heart rate preceded a flush traveling up Natasha's neck. “Yea?” was asked in a tiny, nervous breath.

It had been damn hard to sense the microscopic embryo when it'd first been implanted. If Natasha's body wasn't one she knew intimately, she wouldn't have been able to find it that first day, probably not even now, but she had. And she looked for it several, okay a couple dozen, times a day, every day. “Yea.” Emily promised.

The first time Emily left the hairdryer sitting on the bathroom counter, Natasha nearly cried. They'd been battling over the hairdryer since the very beginning of their relationship. Natasha was lucky if Emily managed to remember to put the damn thing away two or three times a week. Since they'd gotten home nearly two weeks ago, Emily had been putting it back in the closet after using it every time. Every. Single Time.

It didn't matter if Em hadn't used it much the first week. The fact that she'd been returning it to its proper spot was what had Natasha staring at it now.

“Hey, look, I was just about to put the thing away now it isn't hot anymore.” Emily's voice cut into her thoughts.

Natasha jerked her head up to look at the woman standing in the doorway, arms crossed, looking petulant. Concern quickly dropped the arms and shifted her expression.

“Nat?”

How to put into words the sheer relief she felt over this stupid moment? This normal moment that she'd normally be filling with irritated, combative remarks. How many times had she wished for Emily to do this tiny, little thing that unfailingly rubbed her wrong? How many times had she wished to have Emily beside her again, safe and alive and doing anything, saying anything, as long as it meant she was free?

“You don't get this way over the damn hairdryer. What's up?” Emily stepped closer.
“You're here,” she managed. “You're here and safe and doing normal things like this.” Her palm waved at the hairdryer. Her chin quivered. “There were days I was terrified I'd never get to argue with you about it again.”

Fingers caught hers and gingerly tugged. “There's tea brewing. Come on. We can argue about who gets the Captain America mug.”

“The Turkish blend?”

Emily shook her head, prideful smile quirking. “No. Better. I figured out Mrs. Sattari's family recipe.”

Mrs. Sattari. The gifted Afghani woman who had helped her husband get intel to Steve that finally sent the team on the acid-killer's trail. Would the woman have been as welcoming and generous had she known Emily's “deviant” sexuality? She hoped so. Em still thought highly of the woman.

“You did, did you?” Natasha prodded about Emily's tea-blending skills.

“Not quite,” groaned out. “But it's close.”

At this point, she was sure that even cheap tea would be calming. As long as her Emily was there with her. “I'll be the judge of that,” she teased, though her voice remained shivery with tears.

Emily smiled at her, a soft, quiet expression of affection, of intimate attachment, the terrifying kind that once upon a time, Natasha couldn't have run from fast enough. She smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

There was so much to put in this chapter! Every time I thought I was done, something else came to mind. I really, really hope I'm doing her triggers justice. Also, it took me way to long to hunt down what I'd named their neighbors. Kinda wished I'd named them Hayden and Carl. Alas.

Thank you so much for reading :) Your thoughtful comments never fail to inspire something fresh!
Nervous anxiety coiled in Emily's chest, and she frowned at the closed laptop. It wasn't a TV, but was it was an electronic screen. Was it worth tempting her triggers for a vid-chat with Yakov? She hadn't even been able to do her counseling sessions with the doc on video like they'd planned. Phone conversations weren't exactly easy either, especially when the signal got weird or fuzzy, but she knew she needed the sessions, and they were helping.

At her side, Natasha waited, her phone held to her ear, Bobby on the other end, waiting for Emily's word. Nat covered the microphone. “We can try again later, Em,” was offered to her.

She looked into Natasha's eyes, anchored herself to the concern and love there. A long breath, and Emily steadied herself. “I'm safe here.” She grabbed Nat's free hand. “I've got my little fox to protect me.”

Callouses rubbed at her palm. Nat's steady heartbeat encouraged her own to calm.

“Okay.” Emily opened the laptop to the waiting chat program. Her pulse jumped, but the anxiety didn't squeeze and demand flight.

Natasha told Bobby that they were ready, and the incoming call icon appeared on the screen. Emily bit her lip and clicked accept.

Daisy's smile appeared, bright and cheerful and overly close. “Emily! Damn, it is good to see your face again!”

Her heart thudded, but she didn't feel the need to run. She smiled back. “It's good to see you too.”

“Hey, Natasha!” Daisy greeted. “Wow. You look like you've finally gotten some sleep.” Instantly, she covered her mouth with her hand, cheeks turning bright red. “Sorry. I so di-”

“It's fine.” Her hand squeezed Emily's. “I have been sleeping.”

“When I let her.” Emily made her tone and grin lecherous.

“Daisy,” came Coulson's faint reprimand.

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” She stepped back from the camera. “I've got some work to do. I just wanted to say hi while I could. Later.” She gave a little wave and stepped away, revealing Coulson's office, the man himself, Bobby, and Yakov in casual clothes.

Seeing his face was almost as hard as waking from a nightmare. Breathing became difficult. Her head got a little fuzzy.

“Em,” whispered in her ear. “Emilishka, you're safe.” Natasha's familiar perfume and warmth returned Emily to the present and pushed the stink of rotten potatoes and chilly stone back into memory.

Yakov lifted a freckled hand in greeting. His smile was uncertain, hesitant.

With effort, she focused on the good things that Yakov represented and found a way to smile back.
“Yakov,” rasped out. She coughed and tried again. “Yakov. How are you?”

He blinked.

Oh, right. Russian. Shrugging an apology, she switched languages, found it heavy on her tongue.
“How are you?”

There was a little whiteboard in his hands that he held up. Cyrillic on its surface momentarily
evaded her. Emily was much better at the audible part of the language.

“He says he's healthy and in good spirits.” Natasha translated the writing into words. Yakov
nodded and changed the message. “He wants to know how you're doing.”

Emily's smile faltered. “I have a lot of nightmares,” was her honest reply. “And I can't watch TV or
be around lots of people or...” her body was tensing up. She stopped to focus on her breathing and
Nat's heartbeat. “But I have help. I have Nat and a doctor and friends.”

The whiteboard remained blank while Yakov's jaw moved silently. Emotion sparkled from his eyes
along his cheeks. Hesitantly, he lifted the pen and wrote.

Natasha's calm expression twitched as she hid whatever was burning in her. “He says that it might
not help, but he's sorry he didn't help you escape sooner. You've been kinder than he deserves.”
Anger was rising within her.

“You suffered with me, Yakov. Don't keep beating yourself up.” Hating him wouldn't help, and she
still held dear the memories of him being a friend, of giving her kind smiles and things to read.

How had she not realized that her reading material was mostly Arabic and English when she was
speaking Russian? Where had he gotten that stuff? She asked as much.

Color rose on his cheeks.

“He collected most of it while in Egypt.” Natasha was too calm, her tone too blithe. “He was
thinking ahead.”

Her heart swelled with appreciation, despite knowing that Yakov had helped kidnap her instead of
helped keep her not-kidnapped. “You're a good guy, Yakov.” She reminded him and Natasha.

“Russian authorities have asked for us to return him.” Coulson spoke. “Very politely, might I add.
They seem to want to be on Sekhmet's good side.”

“Yes.” Natasha grumbled. “We've received their official apology for Petrovich's behavior,” right
after another request from the Department of Defense for Natasha's skills. This one was strangely
polite though. Nat suspected they wanted intel on Russia, but weren't quite willing to get on Emily's
shit list. A slow smile curled. The government had apparently set aside the idea of blackmailing the
Black Widow because that would make Emily unhappy. When had this become her life? This
celebrity status?

“What are you smirking about over there?” Fingers prodded her hip.

Emily kissed her favorite spy. “I'm popular.” She turned back to Yakov's situation. “Do you want
to go home, Yakov?”

Hesitation held his hand before he wrote a response.

“Yes, but remaining supporters of Petrovich will see me dead quickly.” Natasha translated.
From Coulson, “Intelligence says that Yakov's family is being watched, but not held. They fear repercussions from the Black Widow.”

Really? Emily silently questioned Nat about her inference.

“It may have gotten around that no one can hide from the Black Widow, and she has a certain interest in Yakov,” was Nat's indifferent shrug.

“I knew I liked you for some reason.” Emily grinned widely. It faded as she returned to seriousness. “Think your influence will continue to keep them and him safe if he goes home?”

“No,” came too immediately. Natasha softened her response by stroking a thumb over Emily's knuckles. “But your influence might. Sekhmet could ask for Yakov's protection.” A heavy pause. “But it may cost you more than you're willing to pay.”

Favors. Or maybe only one, but it would probably really suck. It could show political favoritism that she didn't want or couldn't see the full repercussions of.

From the laptop came a light knocking. Yakov was rapping on the desk for her attention. When he got it, his expression was fierce.

“Don't.” Natasha spoke for him. “Don't carry my debt.”

“Yakov,” Emily started.

Sharply, he shook his head and hit knuckles to the whiteboard's message.

*Don't carry my debt.*

He erased and wrote something new.

“If I can be of use, keep me alive. But remember I am only good at things that soldiers do.”

What the hell should she do? She didn't want to send him unprotected to whatever painful death awaited him, but she could see the bigger picture. It was hitting her hard how much her influence could affect the world. Painfully hard. She choked.

“Spies aren't the only people in SHIELD.” Coulson's calming voice pushed at the overwhelming weight of responsibility. “We need good soldiers too.” His smile twisted a little at the edges. “And sometimes soldiers make fairly decent observations.”

Yakov swiveled to look at him.

It occurred to Emily that Coulson had a *really* good Russian accent. What kind of Cold War spy stuff had he been part of?

An arm reached across Emily to mute the microphone. “And maybe Yakov can help provide whatever intel the U.S. government is trying to convince me to get for them in exchange for them protecting Yakov. That way you can save your play in the favors game for something more important.” Curls drifted and a smile twitched. “While still taking care of your stray.”

Emily chewed the possibility. SHIELD would employ Yakov, which meant SHIELD would take care of him as they did any agent. That was probably enough. But if they added on the intel trade, the U.S. Government could add extra protection *and* get them off Natasha's back. A little.

And, Emily admitted to herself, it would be nice to know Yakov was repaying her and Natasha for
their generosity. She could admit to being petty and human like that. “Okay.”

“You're sure?” Patience asked while green eyes studied her.

Emily nodded, returned the vid-chat to volume and relayed her decision. She meant to make it a request. There was a sort of relief on Yakov's features. Translation wasn't needed for what he wrote next. Thank you, was in clear English.

Not a week later, and the Avengers got a call to go scepter hunting. Fury thought it was somewhere in the mountains of Serbia this time. He'd been shaken during this last vid-conference. Not only did HYDRA have Chitauri components that they'd been developing tech and weapons from, but the scepter was being used in human experimentation. To enhance humans. They were creating supersoldiers. A HYDRA with the ability to create people like Skye was almost as frightening a concept as Emily being tortured.

Natasha leaned back on the couch, where she'd delivered the mission news to Emily, where she'd informed Emily that taking her on the mission wasn't an option and was arguing with her about staying at the Barton farm instead.

“Seriously?” Emily whined. “Not only are you grounding me, but Thor's finally here, and I don't get to meet him?”

Natasha considered her. “You aren't ready to be in combat.” Not anywhere close. She wasn't even ready to be left by herself for a week.

“He's meeting the Avengers at the tower, right? I can fly up there with you.” Emily thrust as cute of a pout at her as she could.

The cuteness of it made her waver. If she allowed Em to fly up to New York to meet Thor, she was afraid that Emily would find a way to win Steve to her side, that she'd manage to get her butt on the quin, that she wouldn't stay in the quin, and something terrible would happen to her. Yet again. Natasha wanted Emily to go stay at the farm. The kids wanted their tetushka to visit. Laura wanted her own chance to welcome Emily home.

“You know it's a minor miracle that neither of the kids have let your secret loose,” was her final argument for getting her favorite idiot to stay in Georgia. “Don't they deserve a reward for their good behavior?”

Lids slotted over cranky black eyes. “And pregnant women should go into combat?”

Immediately, her hand went to the place where that tiny miracle was happening. Three weeks, and she wasn't used to the concept yet. “Damn you, Emily Fortune.”

“C hert poberi, Natalia Romanova.” Emily retorted.

Their stare-down lasted a full minute, would have kept going except Emily's phone rang, and she had a terrible habit of answering it without looking. “Hello?”

Natasha managed to read Laura B before it got to Em's ear. By the way her frame softened, yet her expression grew more annoyed, the caller must be Cooper or Lila.

“It was supposed to be a surprise visit.” Em threw a darker look at Natasha. “I can't believe your dad told you.”
Wisely, she kept her cheer of victory to herself and threw up her hands defensively. She hadn't called Clint. Not yet. She owed him one for his foresight.

“It was your mom?” Emily balked.

It was? Laura would have been an amazing spy.

“Okay.” Emily blinked. “Hey, Laura.”

Curious, Natasha watched Emily lose her fight.

“I'll be there.” Her tone was cowed. “Of course I'll help clean the carpets.”

Smiling now would be a dreadful decision with long-reaching consequences. She kept it carefully behind a neutral facade.

Emily ended the call, pursed her lips at the dark screen, then shot Natasha a deep scowl. “I'm going to pack for my week at the farm.” Without another word, she stormed upstairs.

Natasha took care to hide her giant smile until Emily was up the stairs, down the hall, in the bedroom. She texted Laura a thank you.

Don't even get me started on you, woman. Anything happens to your little bun, and I'll help her flay you. Immediately chirped back.

Laura's righteous anger lining her face, making her body rigid was easily imagined. Natasha gulped. She rose and went to the kitchen to pack up the groceries that wouldn't last until they got back. Some, Teagan walked over to to Jake, who had friends visiting, and asked him to keep an eye on their place while she and Jillian were out of town visiting cousins. He made a poorly-veiled comment about traveling heroes probably off to save orphans again that she followed by asking if he'd seen that new movie about the assassin tying up loose ends.

He paled, and she distracted his guests by complaining about Jillian's habit of overpacking, especially the toys she always wanted to take. They'd been the subject of embarrassment more than once with airport security. That woman was no amount of frustrating! Laughter followed her from the house as well as hearty wishes for a fun trip.

The rest of the groceries would go to the farm with Emily this afternoon. In the house, she heard Emily puttering about upstairs, saw that she'd cleaned up the morning's breakfast dishes and wiped the guts of the fridge. How could Em be this meticulous about cleaning the kitchen yet have a cluttered, disorganized dresser top?

Natasha shook her head and went down to the basement and opened the gun cellar, humming over what she wanted to take on this mission. She was double-checking the scope on her favorite sniper rifle when she heard feet descend the stairs. She traded the rifle for a loaded handgun.

The sounds were soft, muffled. Socks. Light body. Emily.

“Little fox?” called down.

“Mission prepping,” she called back. The handgun's magazine was ejected, chambered round shortly followed, and Natasha settled her weapon to the table.

Sockeed feet appeared at the ladder. Emily's butt was at eye-level, and Natasha grinned, took hold of that butt, and plucked Emily off the ladder like a ripe grape.
“Natasha!” shrieked a little too loudly, but it was worth it.

She kissed the space between Emily's shoulders left bare by her low tanktop. “I love you.”

The slight tension that had coiled at the capture melted away. Emily's feet touched the ground, and her body leaned into Natasha's hold. “I'm still irritated with you.”

Natasha dropped kisses along the long trapezius muscle from shoulder to neck. “I know.” She smiled as Emily dipped her head to give more access. “But you called for your little fox.”

Emily's sigh was half-hearted. “Laura texted me. She reminded me to forgive your overprotectiveness and give myself more time before pushing my anxiety.”

Yet another reason to be grateful for Laura.

“She also told me she threatened you with vile things if you or the little bean get hurt.”

Natasha chuckled into Emily's hair, planted a kiss on the short strands before laying her chin on a shoulder. “My plan includes wearing my new armor and being more careful than usual.”

There was a grunt. Emily's head fell back to rest on Natasha's shoulder while their hands tangled. “I told Steve and Bucky to not heckle you, but they've got orders to sit on your ass if you want to do something overly stupid.”

“Since when are you in a position to give the leader of the Avengers orders?” she teased.

“You and I both know that outside of a battle scenario, those two'll do almost anything I tell them to.” Emily said in a low tone. “And it's not like it was hard to ask them to act all brotherly and keep an eye on your risk-taking ass.”

For a while, Natasha simply breathed in the scent of their togetherness, listened to Emily's sounds, felt her steady pulse. “I'll deny it if you ever breathe a word of it, but I like having all these people wanting to protect me and keep me safe.”

Emily turned and wound arms around her middle. She used her two inches of height over Natasha to act big and protective. “Good. Because I like it too.”

“My hero,” began as a joking retort, but her mind wandered off with the idea. Emily truly was a hero. And she was Natasha's. “My beautiful, freckled hero.”

“You know the best way to honor a hero is to bring her back cookies, right?”

Her hero with a penchant for greasy appetizers and sugary desserts. “Only if there's good tea waiting.”

A sweet laugh wrapped around her heart. “Always.”

“Tetushka!” Cooper leapt at Emily the moment she stepped from the car.

Pushing aside the silly jealousy over how he'd greeted Em first, Natasha grinned as she made her way from driver's seat to trunk and lifted Emily's small suitcase.

When she came around the car, Coop's face was screwed up into a serious expression. “We were worried, tetushka. Momma stopped letting us watch the news after they took you.”
“I'm sorry, Coop.” Emily hummed, drawing him to her chest, and gently rocking from side to side.

“Auntie Nat!” squealed from the front porch. Little legs hurled Lila in their direction. “Tushka Em!” She still couldn't pronounce the Russian form of auntie correctly. Or wouldn't. Silly girl.

Lila gave Natasha a quick, fierce hug around the waist before darting to Emily and demanding that Cooper finish so Lila could hug her too.

“Tushka! I punched cousin Billy when he said bad things about you and Auntie Nat.”

Around Lila's wild hair and Coop's head, Emily met Natasha's surprised gaze. “You did?”

“She did,” was Laura's inclusion as she stepped from the house with Nate on her hip. “And broke his nose.”

Natasha simmered with pride that she carefully did not let Laura or the kids see.

“He didn't know he was talking about my aunties,” Lila spoke into Emily's neck. “But he called Sekket and the Widow bad names. He said you deserved what you got for sinning.”

“He called you dirty dykes,” growled Cooper.

“Cooper!” Lila scolded. “Don't say that word!”

Features dark, Cooper huffed. “I know it's bad! I only said it so they know why you punched that buttface.”

Lila took a moment before, “Okay. Just don't say it again.”

The half-proud, half-scolding look on Emily's face was absolutely adorable. “You know perfectly well that violence is a terrible answer to something you don't like.”

The kids shifted unhappily.

“But thank you for defending our honor.” Emily squeezed Lila and reached out to side-hug Cooper. “And not spilling our secret.”

“I wanted to.” Cooper's words made Natasha's pulse jump.

“But we didn't.” Lila finished. “You and daddy are superheroes with secret identities.”

“And you guys,” Natasha entered the conversation. “Are my heroes.”

Some wiggling later, and both kids were in her arms while Em and Laura smiled at them.

“I know how hard it is to keep a secret you want to share.” Natasha told them. “You two are incredible.” In a fit of wanting to hold both, she pulled a kid up onto each hip, much to their delighted cries. “And I think you can handle one more secret.”

Both Emily and Laura gave her surprised, “Are you sure?” looks.

With her eyes big and wondering, Lila stared at her. “Another one?”

“Yea,” she decided. “But first, I have a question.”

It was Cooper who prompted her. “What's the question?”
“Do you think Emily will be as good of a mommy as she is an auntie?”

Lila, ornery, adorable Lila, half-shrieked, half-laughed. “No! She cleans too much.”

“What's wrong with being clean?” Em playfully demanded and tickled Lila. Squealing, the little monkey loosed her arms from Natasha's neck to fend Emily off. Only her legs and Natasha's arm kept her from instantly falling, and Emily, who was holding the monkey up as much as she was tickling her. So much trust in this tiny child. Had Natalia ever been like this? Before the Red Room? The little girl who was the daughter of wheat farmers?

“Are you pregnant, tetushka?” came from Cooper.

Emily paused her tickle-assualt. “Nope. Not me.”

Lila gasped. “Auntie Nat! Did you cheat on Tushka Em?”

Cooper's face matched her surprised horror. This was not in any scenario that Natasha had worked through while planning this. How should she react?

“Was it with Captain America?” Lila demanded.

Laura's hand shot over her mouth in shock at her kids' supposition. Natasha felt like mirroring it. Why would they think she would cheat on Emily?

“Lila. Coop. Natasha didn't cheat on me.” Emily kissed one forehead then another. “We went to a doctor and got help making a baby.”

Naturally, Lila recovered first. “Oh. Okay.”

Behind Laura's hand, an amused grin had formed, and she shook from silent laughter.

Slowly, Cooper nodded. “Who's the dad then?”

“This baby is made from bits of Natasha and me.” Emily answered. “The doctors made it happen. I just helped a little.”

“Are you gonna get married?” Cooper went on pragmatically. “Grandpa says that people who have babies should be married.”

Surprising not only Emily, but herself, Natasha said out loud, “Maybe some day, Coop.”

“Can I be the flower girl?” Lila wiggled.

Natasha watched Emily from the corner of her eye, took note of the deer-in-headlights expression, the delicate emotion underneath it.

“Lila, why don't you and Coop go get your dad?” Laura distracted. “That lazy bones is probably napping instead of packing.”

Not missing a beat, Lila squirmed down and raced into the house, yet Cooper stalled when returned to his feet. He moved his weight from foot to foot. “Uncle Haydon says that gays shouldn't be allowed to adopt or have babies or teach in school and stuff, because God hates gays. But I think that's stupid. Jesus says to love thy neighbor. The only thing that makes gays different from other people is who they love. They're doing what Jesus says to. You two love each other. You love us. You'll love your baby.”
Tears made Emily's eyes shine brightly, showed off the deep browns and greens that usually were lost amid the black.

“And you're really good at all the things that moms and dads do. You cook and help us with homework and play with us and get us presents and walk us to the schoolbus,” his hands went wide in his enthusiasm, “You help strangers too! Uncle Haydon is a stupid jerk.” Then he looked up at his mother. “Sorry, momma. That was rude to call him that.”

“Oh this, I'll agree with you.” Laura allowed. “He is a jerk about his opinion sometimes. A person's sexuality doesn't mean a darn thing when it comes to raising kids.”

His serious little face beamed at his mother's validation. Natasha noticed the edges of adulthood threatening along his jaw. Eleven. Wasn't he a toddler only yesterday?

“Don't you let me catch you calling him that again. You hear?”

“Yes, momma.”

“Good.” She gestured for him to come close, palmed his face, and kissed his head. “Now, go help your sister get your dad. Scoot!”

After a quick wave back at them, Cooper scampered into the house.

“That boy is too smart for his own good sometimes, I swear.” Laura sighed adoringly.

“He's just got great role models in his life,” was Emily's enthusiastic response.

Adjusting little Nate, “Yes. And I'm glad you're one of them. Now, get on up here and give me a hug, Emily, before the kids come back and steal you away.”

Warm hug and laughter later, Emily was bouncing a bubbly Nate while Natasha received her own welcome back embrace. Clint and the kids came tromping downstairs in time to watch Em casually gathering up abandoned cups and coffee mugs around the living room. Oblivious to her audience, Em took dirty dishes and baby to the kitchen where the sound of her puttering with the dishwasher quickly followed.

“I swear, if you ever break up with that woman, she will always have an invite back here for the sheer fact that she cleans.” Laura gloried in the knowledge that her house was about to be Emily-clean.

Natasha eyed the kids who were peeking around the kitchen door to giggle at Emily, who might have vanished into the kitchen not only for dishes, but to escape the crowd for a moment. Being in afternoon traffic had nearly given Em an anxiety attack, and she had been antsy until they'd hit the quiet country roads an hour ago. “Hey, little monkeys.” She grabbed their attention. “Why don't you show me that stray cat your mother doesn't want you to bring in the house.”

Halfway out the door, she heard Clint gently reminding Laura about Emily's fragile mental state.

“Shit,” came one of Laura's rare curses. “Never occurred to me our little circus would be a crowd to her.”

“Auntie Nat, do you really have a baby in you?” bubbled up from Lila.

“It's more like a collection of cells right now, but soon it'll be a baby.” Natasha clarified. If Em didn't give updates about their little bean, she wouldn't even know it was inside her.
“Momma showed us how babies grow. They look like alien beans at first.” Cooper's nose wrinkled.

Lila bounced on her toes. “Right! They're weird.”

“You know, most animals look like alien beans at first.” Natasha offered.

“What do you think aliens look like when they're bean-sized?” Cooper asked.

Were the Chitauri grown in vats, their cybernetic weapons implanted early? Or incubated in eggs? Or were they terribly similar to humans and grew in a womb, were birthed out, and then turned into military weapons by morally deprived commanders? “Probably a lot like us.” She suppressed a shiver. “There's a lot of parallels throughout the universe.”

“Pear-lells?” Lila frowned.

“Things that are similar,” explained Cooper. According to Clint, the boy was much nicer and more patient with his little sister than most boys his age. It must be Laura's influence.

“Oooh,” came Lila's big-eyed nod. “Like how nebulas look like eyeballs.”

Both Natasha and Cooper gaped at her.

“It was on the TV show grandpa likes to watch.” She explained seriously.

Their grandfather was obsessed with documentaries, could probably spout the narratives of *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet* by heart. “And you remembered. Good job, Lila.”

“Is it gon' be strong like you and have a gift like tetushka?” Coop's keen mind needed to know.

“Maybe. Not everyone in Emily's family has a gift, you know.” Her mother didn't. Her father might have been slightly telepathic. Some of the siblings' stories suggested that he might have picked up on other peoples' dreams. Natasha cringed. Nobody needed that kind of torture. It could explain some of his abusiveness, not justified it in any way, but explained it. “But we're pretty certain this kid will be fast and strong, like me.”

Deep creases formed on Lila's soft face. “What if he can't control his muscles like you can, Auntie Nat? I won't be able to play with him.”

Gently, Natasha brushed a round cheek. “We'll hope for the best and plan for the worst. Don't worry too much about what ifs.”

“You always say that.”

“That's because it's good advice,” cheered Clint's warm tones. “Whatever kind of gifts their kid has, your aunties and all our friends will teach him how to control them.” He bent and kissed his daughter, ruffled his son's hair as he straightened.

“And what's with this 'him' pronoun?” Natasha prodded. “The little bean could be a female or even intersexed.” She'd started the argument simply to goad him into a fun verbal fight, but she ended on a deeply protective note.

Both kids blinked exactly like their father. “What?” was practically a chorus.

“Not everyone is born either a girl or boy. Some don't quite fit those definitions.” Reigning in her emotions and keeping her tone light, Natasha explained.
“Oh.” Lila accepted.

“Weird.” Cooper would probably research it on the internet later.

“Huh.” Clint shrugged.

“What can we call your baby?” Lila whined.

“The little bean.”

Lila's face scrunched, but then she shrugged. “Okay.” She jumped into Natasha's personal space, thrust her face against her stomach. “Little bean, I can't wait for you to grow big enough to play with, but you're gonna hafta learn to be careful. I'm like your other momma. I bruise easy.” her eyes went suddenly round. “Oh! You gotta learn real fast, 'cause your cousin Nate will wanna play with you too, and he'll still be really small. You got that, little bean?”

“There's Hagrid!” blurted from Coop, his finger pointing toward the barn.

“Hagrid!” Lila squealed and bounded away, Coop right behind her.

“Hagrid's the cat,” explained Clint as a brown shadow darted from the barn's shadows. It stopped long enough to let Lila get within two feet before darting off. It repeated the process six times before the kids pounced on it and allowed Cooper to pick it up. The kids ran back with the furry thing.

“Auntie Nat, this is Hagrid.” He proclaimed, hefting the enormously fluffy brown and black creature that couldn't be more than a year old. It eyed Natasha warily. “Hagrid, Auntie Nat. Don't bite her. She's family.”

“Hello, Hagrid.”

The cat meowed and wiggled until Coop had to let go. It darted off, much to the kids' dismay. “Come back!”

“Hagrid!”

Both kids were hot on its furry heels. It would wait until they got close before meowing and darting off again, soon winning peals of laughing as the kids caught onto the game.

“That cat has no fear of your children.” Natasha informed Clint of the obvious.

“I know. It's great, isn't it?” A heavy arm draped itself over her shoulders. “While we have two seconds, any updates on Em I should know about?”

She leaned minutely closer to his solid frame, inhaled his familiar sweat, allowed herself the comfort of his strength and friendship. “She didn't bring any laced goodies.”

“I thought that weed was helping?” He asked.

“It helps calm her and get her to sleep, but it doesn't help the nightmares. She woke up from one the first week, still under the influence, and she had a mild anxiety attack when she couldn't immediately shake the fuzzy feeling. She says it feels too much like the aftereffects of the conditioning Petrovich used.”

His arm tightened. “That sucks.”
Yea. It did.

“Is Stark the only one who doesn't know about your little bean?”

“Most of SHIELD doesn't know yet,” she grunted.

He hummed. “You know Stark will want to throw a party and make gadgets for the nursery.”

Exactly why she wanted to delay him knowing.

“Yea,” chuckles rippled onto the air. “I can see why you haven't told him. How'd Banner find out?”

“Accidental eavesdropping in Colorado.”

“Typical Banner.”

Hagrid allowed the kids to catch him and pet him for a few moments.

“Em could probably convince Tony to not throw a party. You two could keep him from mouthing off about the little bean to the public by telling him you trust him with this secret.” Delicately, he reminded her that Tony would feel slighted by her and Emily's silence. And that he was someone she trusted and cared about.

She pouted.

“And we all know you or Em could ask Pepper to reign Tony's enthusiasm in. You'll have more say in whatever gadget he cooks up if it's your idea first.”

His shoulder made a fine pillow. She yawned. “I'll think about it over the mission.”

“Did you pack your sniper rifle?” shifted the conversation.

“That valley looks like a trap waiting to happen.” Natasha referenced the location of the facility they'd be attacking. Around packing and arguing with Emily, she'd done a good deal of research and plan developing. At the tower, with the entire team present, they would make final decisions on their approach.

“Oh good. I don't have to convince you to stay out of the valley until after the trap is sprung this time. We should've gotten you knocked up ages ago!”

Annoyed, amused, she rolled an eyebrow up.

“If you stab me, Emily will be unhappy with you.” He sassed.

Natasha snorted, “Add it to the list.”

Warm chuckles made his shoulder bump her cheek. “She's not happy about not going,” was a statement of fact.

Reminded that she owed Laura, she nodded. “I have to thank Laura for her interference.”

“She called before I even thought about it.” Clint said.

“That's because she's smarter than you.”

“Yea,” he easily agreed. “I'll give you that. Ready to go chase my kids?”
She slapped his stomach as she took off. “Last one there sits in the noisy chair.” The annoyingly creaky chair on the Avengers' quinjet. No matter how many times the thing was adjusted, greased, poked at, its squeaks and creaks returned at altitude. She hated sitting in it.

“Cheater!” yelled at her back.

“This is for you.”

Barely awake, Emily blinked at the soft thing that Natasha was presenting to her. Floral perfume, familiar and delicate, wafted from it. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. As her focus returned, she saw a fluffy red fox wearing a Batman tshirt. And behind that was her sleek red fox in a pink bathrobe barely kept closed by a loosely tied belt.

Natasha fidgeted, her cute, shy expression telling Emily that she'd spent more than a few hours agonizing over this gift. “For cuddling,” was explained.

Emily grabbed the fluffy fox on her way to hug her little fox. “It'll be almost as good as the real thing.”

“I've never not wanted to go on a mission this badly before,” whispered into her hair. “But if HYDRA has enhanced soldiers, the guys'll need me there.”

“This means you're officially attached to me?” she teased.

The fingers at her shoulder blades dug in, their pressure bordering on painful. Emily focused to listen to Natasha's body, discovered that her hormones and emotions were a whirlwind.

“Nat, hey.” She stroked the bumps of her spine. “I'll be okay. Laura's married to a crazy spy. She can handle me.”

“I'm pregnant,” whuffed out, heavy with layers of meaning.

“Our little bean couldn't be in a safer place.” Emily soothed. “Especially in a hailstorm of bullets.”

She felt more than saw Nat roll her eyes. “I've gotten shot more than a few times, you idiot.”

“Not with Stark armor on, you haven't.”

Natasha argued more, but her emotions were leveling out, so Emily played along and traded affectionate barbs until little fists knocking at the door cut in.

“What is it?” Natasha called as she placed a palm against the door, just in case a hawkbaby forgot about privacy.

“Momma says breakfast is ready!” Lila chirped across the pine wood.

“She said I'm supposed to remind you to wash your hands,” was Cooper's addition.

Emily plucked her pajamas from where she'd tossed them the night before and struggled into them under Natasha's appreciative leer. Their gazes met. “Yea. Washing hands is probably a good idea.”

Natasha chuckled. “We'll be down in a few minutes.”

“Don't dawdle! She's making us wait for you!” Lila hurried them.
Emily carefully arranged her stuffed little fox in the warm spot she'd vacated before giving Nat a tender kiss.

“Aunties!” whined at them.

“Guess we should get down there before one of them explodes.” Emily giggled. “Or we make them late for school.”

Nat belted her robe closed and opened the door to the little monkeys. “See, we're up and going to wash our hands. Scoot, monkeys!”

Giggles scampered down the hall.

“Oh, and Nat?”

Curls drifted over a shoulder as she turned to look.

“Thanks. I'm sure it'll help.” Emily grinned. “You big dork.”

The bathroom got both of them at once, their stupid morning jokes and usual routines. A morning fart made overly loud by the toilet bowl sent both of them into obnoxious giggles that followed them back to room where Nat traded robe for clothes, then downstairs and into the kitchen where Bartons and breakfast were waiting.

“What's so funny?” Lila needed to know.

“Your auntie farted so loud.”

Giggles and chuckles about bodily functions continued until the kids were walked to the bus stop. Four adults wished the hawkbabies a good day at school. Two of them promised to bring back cool gifts from their trip.

“We're gonna have to homeschool our superbaby,” whined Emily.

“At least until little bean can learn to keep a secret.” Natasha agreed.

“And not break anything put in his hands,” snorted Clint.

“Nat isn't that strong.” Laura chided.

“No.” He agreed, then argued, “But knowing Em's luck, their kid will be a mini Cap.”

Their conversation centered around kids, laughing and groaning about how an infant with telekinesis would discover painting with poop in a way that normal kids could only dream. The easy banter lasted until it was time for the adults to exchange farewells. Silence blanketed them, heavy and oppressive and full of nervous tension that Emily shuddered under.

“Lord almighty,” heaved out of Laura. “Is that what we looked like when I was pregnant with Coop and you left for a mission?”

“Probably,” grinned Clint. He tossed his mission bag into the trunk of the car.

“I owe my sister an apology or two for putting up with me back then.” Laura laughed.

That teasing, more than anything, settled Emily's nerves. She kissed Natasha and felt a similar calming in her. “Keep an eye on that birdbrain. Make sure he doesn't sit on his arrows.”
“I make no promises about him and getting things stuck in his behind.” Natasha retorted.

Color rose up his neck while Laura cackled. “Just bring each other home.”

Laura's lightly delivered phrase was old, oft-used, and familiar, even to Emily who'd only heard Laura say it once before. Both spies nodded. “We will,” was said as lightly, but with that heady undercurrent of seriousness.

It swept them into tight hugs and deep breaths.

“Come on, Nat. See you in a week, Em.” Clint broke them apart and herded Nat into the car.

“I'm a housewife now.” Emily muttered as the car's wheels crunched over gravel.

“Welcome to the club.” Laura pat her shoulder. Then she laughed again. “Makes me wonder which one of you pregnant. The housewife or the soldier off to battle.”

Mischief hummed. “Oh, you know us. We like to swing between being stereotypical and breaking them.”

“U-haul lesbians.”

“Laura! I'm so proud of you! Nat didn't even know what that was.” Emily gushed. “It took me almost half an hour to explain that she and I were practically the epitome of the U-haul lesbian.”

“The greatest spy of the century foiled by queer culture terminology.”

Emily laughed with her. “That's my little fox. Speaking of, she gave me the cutest stuffed animal...”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
chert poberi – dammit

A/N – The farther into this fic I get, the more the tiny details weigh down the work of finishing a chapter. Guh. Large fic problems.

I have something special for you lovely readers. A gift for all of you who've stayed with me this far. There's a poll on my ffnet profile page (https://www.fanfiction.net/~quirky21). You can vote for what sex the little bean will be. Female, male, intersex, or even for it to forever be a secret. I'll leave the poll up through the end of November. Or a few chapters. Whichever comes first lol. Whatever the results are, I'll write it. GO VOTE.

If there's anything else you may want to see a vote for, let me know. Big or small. I'm interested in your thoughts!
Chickens clucking as they settled to roost was nearly drowned out by the trilling roar of cicadas and chirping crickets and squealing mosquitoes. And a purring Hagrid. The cat rumbled happily from his position on Emily's lap, where she was making both of them happy by petting him.

“I guess you've decided that I'm a Barton.” Emily scratched his back.

He shifted for her to scratch under his chin, his purrs growing louder, Emily's smile growing. A creak of footsteps from inside had the cat tensing. The front door opened, and he took one look at Laura before bolting.

“Okay, bye.” Emily called after him.

“He better run when I'm around,” grumbled Laura. “If I ever catch him in my house, shedding everywhere and making me sneeze, I'll turn him into dinner.”

She laughed. “I bet you would.”

Cup of tea handed over, and Laura settled to the front porch swing beside Emily, leaving several inches of space. Emily toed her flip flops off, swiveled, and plopped bare feet in Laura's lap. She grinned at the less touchy-feely woman and draped her side against the seat's back.

Laura laughed and settled her elbows on legs. “Glad to see you're feeling more comfortable.”

“Yea.” She nodded. “I heard Lila arguing about bedtime,” changed the subject.

“The night that girl doesn't argue about bedtime I'll be worried.” Laura chuckled.

Giggling with her, Emily nodded, then suddenly sobered. “Think we're ready?”

A low hum came around Laura's cup of tea. It was a moment before she responded. “You and Nat? As parents?”

“Yea.”

“No one's ever totally ready, but you two are readier than most, I think.” She pat Emily's knee. “Have ya'll started working on ideas for a nursery yet?”

Emily froze. “Nursery? Shit, no! We've had our hands full with my temper tantrums and crazy behavior and then this mission and...”

“Em,” came a firm yet soothing tone. “They aren't temper tantrums. Don't demean yourself like that, hon.”

“I freaked out over the blue screen of the TV,” she returned dryly.

“Em,” still soothing, but a little stern, “You were tortured.” Laura shifted on the swing until they were facing each other. “Trauma like that has repercussions that show up at the darndest times, in the strangest ways.”
Emily fretted, “What if I'm not better by the time the little bean is born?”

Laura put her cup on the little table next to the swing. “Then I or Clint or Rogers or your brothers or your other friends will come help.” A gentle smile curled. “Clint and I have already been talking about how we can smuggle the kids off for a week so we can come help.” Her grin curled further. “And so we can have first look at the superbaby.”

“Clint's come home traumatized a few times, hasn't he?”

Tension freezing her smile and stiffening her shoulders would've been enough of an answer. Laura sighed out a verbal response as well. “Yes. He's had several hard missions, and I think he's been tortured two or three times too.”

Emily immediately felt like a bag of shit. “Fuck. Laura, that was a stupid question. I'm sorry. Nat's told me what he was like after Loki.”

Hands clasped one of her own. “Em.” Calm eyes met hers. “It's alright.” A half-smile appeared. “Honestly, it's nice to finally have a friend who understands this weird life that revolves around superheroes and secrets. Now, don't get me wrong, Nat has been my friend for a long time, and she absolutely understands, but,” she shrugged. “You had a little bit more normal of a start than she did.” And then her expression went weird. “Oh, Lord. I've said this all wrong.”

Giggles found their way out of Emily. “We live a weird, convoluted life, and I totally get what you were trying to say.”

Laura swatted at a mosquito buzzing her face. “Lord almighty, these pests are terrible this year.”

“The citronella candles aren't doing much to keep them away.”

“Why are you sitting out here with them?”

“I like seeing the sky,” quietly answered.

Tender understanding pat her knee. “It's a good sky.”

“Ah, Romanoff!” Thor aimed himself at Natasha, arms wide. It was the same motion he started with to grip a comrade's wrist, pull them close, and embrace them with the free arm. Steve, Tony, and Clint had already endured Thor's affection. Clint was massaging ribs that had been broken a few times over the years.

She lifted a brow.

“Romanoff doesn't really do the whole hugging thing,” piped up from Tony. “Even if she won't get cracked ribs from it like the rest of us.” He rubbed his chest with a pained expression.

Yes, but she'd changed a little in the time she'd had Em in her life. Hugs were pretty nice. And she was happy to see the giant prince of Asgard. He'd earned her respect and trust, enough to be allowed within her personal space. “Hey.” She held her hand out. When it was gripped, she encouraged the hearty embrace with one of her own. “Good to see you.”

Thor's smile was as robust as his shoulders. “And you as well.”

Gaping surprise came from Tony. She felt an unexpected jolt of guilt that she'd never given the
orphan genius similar greeting and was reminded of Clint's argument to include Tony in knowledge about the little bean. In her irritation, she sent Clint a glare. It was quick and short and disguised, but his furrowed brows said he got the message.

What? He clearly demanded.

She'd have to talk to him later about sharing family secrets with the team. If he expected her to share her child with them, shouldn't he tell them about his own secret family?

Instead, she set her ire on Tony. “That is an excellent way to have things crawl into your mouth. A spider perhaps.”

Teeth clicked.

Grinning wickedly, she pat his cheek. “Good boy.”

The rest of the team got her usual greetings. Except Sam, who had bowed out of becoming a fully-fledged Avenger after bringing Emily home. Natasha figured that he'd be back soon enough; Steve just needed to ask a little better. Or Bucky. She didn't have to field any questions about Emily since she'd updated the team at the beginning of the conference with Fury. That didn't stop their poorly-hidden worried expressions, but at least she didn't have to talk about it. She wasn't looking forward to rehashing everything with Thor.

She liked him, respected him, but she didn't have the same sense of family with him as she did the others. Which was almost a hypocritical thought given that she'd hugged him when she didn't hug Tony or Steve. That line of thought bothered her more than she wanted to think about.

“I got in touch with a contact who's familiar with the HYDRA base's territory,” she put the team into work mode.

“How'd Em take the news that she owes a drug lord a favor?” Steve asked while he and Natasha burned off some nervous energy in the gym together. Ten hours in the quin would be far easier after a satisfying workout.

Natasha slid under his punch and landed one of her own to his kidneys that had him going to a knee to pant.

“Maybe I should have told you sooner,” Natasha's opening phrase made Emily cringe. “But I promised your gifted touch in exchange for help finding you.”

Mild irritation and bold curiosity looked at her. “Who, when, and where?”

“The granddaughter of a Bolivian drug lord was crippled in a car accident last year. She wants to walk again.” Natasha gritted out. “We made no agreement on time, but keeping her waiting is not a good idea.”

“How the fuck did a Bolivian drug lord help you find me in Siberia?” Emily was almost laughing.

Of course she wasn't upset. The idiot. Natasha shook her head and detailed Oscar's involvement.

“Wow,” cooed from Emily. “I bet it'd be really interesting to scan him while he's using his gift. It was fun scanning Sk-Daisy when she trained.”
“She was unreasonably calm about it.” Natasha sighed.

Chuckles sounded from him as he returned to his feet. “Of course she was.”

The pause in their sparring became a water break.

“Jarvis, a few minutes, please?” He asked.

“Ten?”

“Yes, please.” Steve refocused from his glance at the camera. “You and Em had Buck fly you to Europe.”

Purposefully, she sucked another mouthful of water down. She examined the fact that he didn't mention Bucky telling him anything. “He did.”

He shifted awkwardly. He looked more boyish than ever as he struggled to voice his questions. “Natasha...”

She waited and made ready the arguments she'd prepared for why her pregnancy shouldn't be a reason that she should bow out of this mission.

“Did you two really go through with it?”

“I have an embryo with my and Em's DNA growing in my uterus.”

“Jiminy!”

She couldn't help smiling at his outdated way of avoiding cursing. “Em also remembered that she'd interrogated Petrovich and learned a few things about my past.”

Surprised air whistled past his teeth.

“You're old enough to be my dad.” Natasha teased him.

“What?”

“A teenage dad, but...” Her teasing turned to an abrupt need to share her origins with someone who could empathize with being from a different era yet didn't sport white hair and sagging skin and a lifetime of normal experiences. “He said I was born in 1933. My parents had a wheat farm in southwestern Russia. That's where he stole me from. I had brothers, Steve. He killed one of them when he tried to protect me.”

He took a step toward her.

“I was normal once.”

His large, heavy, comforting hand settled to her shoulder. “That's a lot to learn suddenly.”

“I don't mind my past. Not with Em and Clint and you and,” her fingers brushed over her stomach. Her emotion and tone went abruptly vicious. “And don't even think that having a little bean in me should keep me off the mission. I'm not suddenly an invalid and the armor will be enough protection given that I'll be off the immediate battlefield behind a sniper rifle.”

The hand that had lifted from her shoulder in shock scratched at the back of his neck. Steve was shaking his head and smiling. “When Em called and asked me and Buck to keep an eye on you
without being too overly protective, I'd wondered if it was an effect of her time in Siberia or if you two had actually gotten,” he blinked and gestured at her stomach. “That.”

She grit her teeth.

“I won't say that I agree with a pregnant woman putting herself in the line of fire when she doesn't have to, but I can see that my arguments will only earn me a headache.” He looked her over. “You said you're going to wear the armor though, right?” came out almost pleading.

“Yes.”

“Will you put it on so we can finish our workout?” Steve looked sheepish. “Please?”

Natasha canted her head. “Fine. But only if you try harder to hit me instead of this dancing around nonsense you've been pulling.”

He gulped and looked upward, lips moving, praying for patience. “Deal.”

“Emily,” whined Laura.

She grinned without remorse. “No.”

“Why not? I can keep it secret until Natasha decides whether she wants to know.”

It was good to laugh this freely. Emily was soaking it up happily. “You made me keep Nate's sex a secret from her for months, Laura Barton. You can handle not knowing the sex of the baby in Nat's belly for just as long.”

Laura threw popcorn at her. “Did you know right away?”

“Not right away.” Learning about the little bean was a learning process all by itself. “I figured it out last week.”

Popcorn went to Laura's mouth. It crunched while she watched Emily. “I'm still surprised that a sex other than female was possible. Sperm determines the sex of babies in the normal way.”

“True.” Emily brushed popcorn off her lap to the porch. Birds or raccoons would find it later. She grinned, freshly mischievous. “And I'd explain the reasons why, but I'm actually bound by a nondisclosure agreement until the doctors publish their papers.”

“That is a lame excuse to cover your inability to explain complicated genetics.”

“Also that.”

Cursing her now useless high-tech rifle scope, Natasha tried the radio and gave its dead silence similar cursing. A trap. They'd been lured into the valley, scattered, then disconnected by an EMP. As she watched the hills swarm with soldiers, she took stock of her weapons and gear. Acid, garrote wire, and poison-covered needles in her Widow's Bite. Knives. Rifle. Two handguns. Spare magazines for each gun and twenty-four rounds for the rifle. A hundred feet of ultra-strong cord. Binoculars. Compass. Flares. Her armor would still deflect most bullets and shrapnel, but the HUD and various electronic aspects were unusable.
The cumbersome helmet went first. She removed the useless scope and checked the sights. Good. Binoculars helped her find Clint in his nest, where he signed his own predicament. His high-tech arrows were useless, but otherwise he was good. He'd seen Tony fall. They needed to get to him.

But there was now an army between them and their friends who'd stormed the compound.

A flash of red caught her attention. Captain America. She targeted opponents in his blind spot and took them down. Arrows sprouted from a few others. Bucky came into view, his metal arm limp and flopping. He put his back to Steve and continued fighting. They were bleeding, but behind decent cover. As long as they had a distraction...

Hulk's rage echoed across the valley. A vehicle flew into the air, bodies following, fire blooming as he smashed.

Lightning sizzled across the field. Thor.

Steve and Bucky were already using the explosive distractions to push through a hole in the swarm, making their way to the trees, closer to Clint than herself. Only Tony's status remained unknown. And the scepter's whereabouts. Had it ever been here? Or was it just another trap? She shot her frustration into the chests of soldiers. It didn't matter at this point. Retreat and r-

Her thoughts stilled at noise coming from her six. She eased a handgun into a palm and waited. Another crack of moving brush. Ten feet away. She smelled sweat and cheap aftershave, heard two sets of lungs. Three seconds later, both soldiers were dead, and she had a burning score across her neck. She heard and saw more soldiers moving toward her.

Her position was compromised. She shouldered the rifle and ran.

Putrid vomit ran down Emily's pants. She hid her grimace at the chunks of cheeseburger to reassure both an abruptly sick Cooper and a fretting Laura. “Whatever it is, he'll be fine.”

“Are you sure? It came on so suddenly.” Laura worried as she wiped Coop's face with a baby wipe. Nate sat in his playpen, watching the commotion with big eyes. Lila was at a friend's house for the afternoon.

“Yes.” Emily stated. Even if it was the worst food poisoning ever, she could keep his body functioning properly until antibodies or medicine fought off the infection. “Just get him to the emergency room. I'll watch Nate.”

There was protest in Laura's eyes for a moment. Then she closed them, took a breath. Calm and rationality returned when she looked at Emily again. “Alright.” Her focus went to Cooper. “Get yourself to the truck. I'll be out there in a minute.”

“Okay,” came his weak response. He wobbled toward the door.

Laura bit her lip.

“Get your purse, Laur.” Emily ignored the gross feeling of wet on her legs to put herself next to Cooper. Patting his shoulder, “Come on, kiddo. Let's get you outside.”

Hand on his stomach, he started to nod, went green, and make a choking noise. Before he could hurl all over the carpet, she hustled him through the door and to the edge of the porch. Vomit splattered on the wood. Emily rubbed his back, felt the turmoil of his insides, sensed that he'd be
splattering out the other end soon.

“Hold on to the railing,” was her gentle orders as she grabbed a hand to settle on the rail. “I'm going to grab you a barf bucket.” Inside, she shucked her gross pants, leaving them by the puke puddle on the kitchen's linoleum floor. She grabbed a mixing bowl and partly filled a water bottle. Both were handed off to Laura as she reappeared with her purse.

“Good idea.” Laura thanked her.

Laundry room being right on the other side of the kitchen, Emily was able to slip into shorts before Laura had gotten Coop in the car and used her gift to soothe his insides long enough to get water into him. He grimaced. “It hurts.”

“Yea. It does. And you'll hurt more before this is over.” Emily didn't sugarcoat the truth. She never had with her brothers. “But you'll be okay. They're going to keep you in a hospital bed tonight, maybe for a few days so they can keep you hydrated. I'll come up later to visit.”

Coop's eyes went wide. “You'd sit in a busy hospital with me?”

His disbelief hurt a little. Did he not think she cared about him? “Of course, Coop.”

“But,” he frowned heavily. “I've seen the news videos about what happened to you in Russia. You don't play Xbox or watch TV with us anymore.” His gaze darted to his mom. “You don't leave the farm like you usually do, not even to do grocery shopping with momma.”

“I'll come visit you in the hospital.” Emily promised him, avoiding the conversation to hurry him to said place and because talking about it sucked. She pulled his seatbelt around him and clicked it secure. The puke bowl was set in his lap, a kiss placed to his forehead. She retreated from the car, feeling both his and Laura's gazes, said goodbye, and closed the SUV's door.

Her soiled pants were tossed in the wash, waiting laundry added to it, and the puddles left behind were mopped up. Nate chattered his senseless babble at her.

“And your Auntie Nat and I want this kind of trouble for ourselves?” she asked him.

“Buh,” was his reply. His fat baby face dimpled.

“Ugh. You guys are so cute when you aren't terror demons.”

Happy at her attention, he grinned.

“What are we going to do tonight? Read? Play chess?”

His chubby hands made sign language for cheese. Laura had read somewhere that teaching babies sign language was easy and made life better for everyone until the kid could grasp spoken communication. Apparently, sign language was in Clint's repertoire, and Natasha's -of course- and he'd happily started lessons with all his kids, his wife, and now Emily.

She understood cheese, more, milk, water, and poop. Nate signed poop when his diaper was wet. He probably didn't grasp the difference between a poopy diaper and a wet one, but he didn't like either. If someone didn't change him fast enough, he'd take it off himself.

He'd done that this morning. Emily had almost left Laura to clean up the poop smears by herself. Almost.
“Chess, hawkbaby. Not cheese.”

Nate pouted.

“You know,” she hummed. “I think Nat and I'll teach our kid sign too.” Thoughts of languages to pass on whirled in her mind. She really wanted their kid to know about Natasha's heritage and learning Russian would help with that, but Nat would probably argue. “I'll have to get your mom and siblings to help me convince my little fox to start the little bean on Russian early.”

She'd managed to teach her brothers a little French by having them help her study for tests in high school, but she wished she'd taught them Arabic too. What if the little bean didn't have her or Nat's ear for languages? A weird sort of worry wiggled in her stomach. What if her kid wasn't anything like her? What if she couldn't relate to them at all?

“Peas,” interrupted her thoughts.

Startled, she blinked down at her only company. “Did you just say peas?”

Nate's mouth fluttered and twisted. His hands signed cheese. “Peas.”

“You said cheese?”

“Peas!” His smile was huge and happy.

His first word was cheese. While his mother was away taking her oldest to the hospital for food poisoning. Warm pride flooded Emily. She'd heard a kid say his first words. Grinning, she gathered him from his play pen. “Cheese it is. But only a little, because your mom will kill me if you get bad farts like last time.”

“Peas!” Nate cheered. He bubbled and chanted his version of cheese into Emily's ear until she'd drag a block of cheddar from the fridge, cut him a thin slice, and passed it over. Slobber nearly soaked her shoulder. She made a mental note for the hundredth time to always carry a drool towel as she smiled and giggled at the happy kid.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 2017, everyone! I hope this new year brings you rich laughter, fantastic experiences, and warm hugs. Thank you for staying with me and this fic :)
Gasping, heart and head throbbing, Natasha rested against a tree. Her vision was fuzzy. She struggled to think properly, but the gas that HYDRA had dropped was making that stupidly difficult. Too late, she'd realized that the HYDRA soldiers' helmets were also gas masks and stolen one from its owner. The thing was stuffy and stank like a cheap cigar and didn't help her focus on escaping. Her head was too full of cotton and stabbing pain to decide if the gas was supposed to be lethal or simply strong enough to sedate Hulk.

She grit her teeth and pushed forward. The quinjet was near. If she could get inside, she'd be okay.

Her helmet's radio buzzed with HYDRA chatter. No one knew where the Widow or Hawkeye was. They were chasing Captain America and the Winter Soldier. The Hulk's rampage had slowed. Slightly. The Iron Man was too close to Hulk for extraction, and they were tossing more gas at Hulk in hopes that he'd actually go down.

A grin at Hulk's endurance made its way to Natasha's lips before a coughing fit took over. Damn gas. Its lingering taste was worse than the cheap cigar stink. She licked her lips. She missed Emily. The way she always smelled of soap and tea. The way her hands curled around a book, fingers delicately turning pages, how she tensed up during exciting scenes, how she completely fell into the story, totally unaware of the world around her until some noise or movement was enough to get those lovely black eyes to flick up from the world of letters. An irritating flush always rose under her freckles when she was disturbed too many times in one sitting.

How was Emily doing? Had she had any anxiety attacks at the farm? Were the hawkbabies behaving themselves? Was...

Natasha went into a crouch that became a controlled fall at a noise off to the right. Shuddering, she lay on the ground, back to a tangle of weeds, eyes darting wildly, ears straining, hand holding her gun with its last three bullets tight to her chest. The noise repeated overhead. A fat squirrel chittered down at her before scuttling further up the tree. Natasha focused her nerves on the HYDRA radio. Nothing new.

Natasha gathered herself, forced trembling limbs to push herself upright, ordered lungs to keep pumping oxygen, made her eyes focus on the world. She reoriented herself with the map in her head and compass on her wrist. A hand went to her bullet-scarred armor, the bump underneath it. Safe. Her body would keep the gas from the fetus as well. If not, Emily would take care of it. When she got home.

Fresh energy found its way into her boots at the prospect of cuddling with Emily. It got her to the quin, unlocked the bay door, cycled the air through the filters, and flung her tired body into a chair. She had enough left in her to realize that the EMP range hadn't been enough to take out the quin's electronics and sent a brief message to Jarvis before she passed out.

Lila's hand tightened around Emily's as they exited the elevator to a hospital floor full of noise. A nurse ran past, darting for the direction of a man howling in distress, his cries punctuated by alarms. Emily sucked in air. Her feet took involuntary steps back, away from the noise and activity,
from the reminder of other noises and screams and...

“Tushka?”

In front of them, Laura's mother turned around. Her expression shifted to a familiar smile. The gentle understanding of someone who saw another in distress. Laura's smile. Passed on from one amazing woman to another. She reached for Emily's free hand.

“Emily, dear. You're safe.” Mrs. Miller hummed. “You're in Georgia and we're here to visit my grandson.”

Emily focused on brown eyes surrounded by decades of wrinkles and huge, red-framed glasses. No one outside the immediate Barton family was supposed to know who Emily actually was. Or Natasha or Clint. But Mrs. Miller knew. Her eyes said she did, always had. She knew who Emily was and why she was panicking about a noisy hospital.

“Come on.” Mrs. Miller tugged. “It'll be quieter in his room.”

She allowed herself to be guided to Cooper's room and to the much-used armchair sitting in the corner. The door closed, muffling the worst of the noise and enclosing them in welcome quiet. Emily vaguely heard the family members greeting each other. They talked about Cooper being on an IV, antibiotics and fluids and medicine to ease the diarrhea and vomiting. Lila asked about her tushka.

A different kind of quiet blanketed the room. A worse one. Emily suffocated in it until hands on her cheeks warmed her, soothed away thoughts of silent caves and loneliness.

“There you are.” Laura smiled at her.

The hospital. Cooper. Emily found the kid on a hospital bed, tubes running from his arm, his summer tan pale and covered in sweat.

“Sorry.” Emily whispered.

“No need to apologize, Em.” Laura stroked her cheek.

“You didn't have to come,” came from the bed. Cooper looked more distressed over her than himself.

Emily gave Laura's arm a squeeze before rising and going to Cooper. She touched Lila's shoulder on the way. “I'm okay.” She met Cooper's eye. “I promised I'd come.” With the back of her knuckles she wiped sweat and hair from his brow. “If you're up for it, I'll help the medicine work.”

He nodded, and she slid into her gift, easing the symptoms, encouraging his immune system, calming her own nerves with knowing she was helping him.

“Feel better?”

Cooper smiled tiredly. “Yea.” His color was better, voice a little stronger. “I think I want to sleep now.”

His eyes fluttered shut, and Laura gasped. Fingers clamped around Emily's arm, panic surging in the mother.

“He just needs rest, Laur.” Emily pat the fingers, suddenly exhausted herself, but knew she needed
to distract Laura from her worry. “Nate said cheese today.”

“What?” gasped at her from two women.

“Peas!” piped up from the car carrier where Nate had been sleeping.

Excitement hummed through the room. Nate was pulled from his carrier and fussed over, giving Emily freedom to return to the chair and snuggle into it, allow her mind and body to fully calm. She grunted out of a doze when a weight crawled into her lap.

Lila. She was yawning and making herself comfortable. Oh. Okay. Emily ooched a little to make the weight easier and wrapped the kid close before returning to the bliss of sleep.

“Natasha?”

No.

“Hey, Natasha, I could really use your help right about now.”

But sleeping was what she was doing right now. She really didn't want to fight the dark blanket to help someone.

“I'm going to stab you with an adrenaline shot if you don't move in ten seconds.”

Was that a threat? She froze her body while her mind pushed at the fog of sleep, struggled with a lethargy that first confused her, then worried her with its stubbornness.

“Natasha.” The voice was male, adult, American. “I do not want to wake you up that way. It's a terrible idea, but it's my only option. Would you please just move a little?”

Why was it so hard to wake up? To force her body to obey? And why did the air stink so bad? Her lungs hurt. Her nose and throat felt burned. What was the weight on her shoulders? She frowned. Confusion and worry wouldn't help. She turned to anger, found energy in it to realize she was slumped in a chair and her neck hurt from a kink it'd developed. She shifted her head and groaned.

“Oh good. Tap your fingers if you're aware enough to understand.”

She was, but first she had to figure out who had her at their complete mercy. The voice was familiar. Someone she had worked with a good deal. But who? She put together that her throat and lungs hurt from some sort of gas, paralytic and mildly caustic with obvious amnesia side effects.

“I'd have you move your lips, which I know would be a lot easier, but you're wearing a helmet, and I can't see your face. I'm not removing that until I know I won't get a knife in my chest. Going green right now is a really bad idea. Come on. Tap your fingers.”

Going green? Who went green? From nausea? No. That was code. Code for Banner turning into the Hulk. Dr. Bruce Banner. A teammate. A friend. Relief thrummed. She forced the fingers of her left hand to tap at the chair's arm rest.

“Yes!” He crowed and clapped his hands. “Okay. I'm going to take the helmet off.”

Several clicks preceded the weight being removed, of light hitting her eyelids. She groaned, her lips parting, lips feeling peeled, mouth gummy and gross.
“Right. Okay.” There was the sound of him rubbing palms together. Still nervous? “Giving you a shot of adrenaline remains our best option. I need you awake.”

What need was intense enough to force that on her? Where was Emily?

“I need you fully operational, Natasha. You’re the only one here. Cap and the others are still out there. Jarvis can remotely pilot the quin, but I need you behind your guns.”

Angry frustration kicked at the fog in her brain. What had led to this situation? Where was Emily? Clint? She managed to lift her eyelids. Fuzzy things met her vision. She barely made out Bruce’s scruffy face. “Em?”

His dark eyebrows drew together. “Emily? She didn’t come on this mission.”

What was the mission? She scrabbled for details. Another scepter hunt. Emily had stayed behind because of her anxiety attacks. The team had gone to... Syria? No. Serbia. “Scepter?”

Bruce shook his head. “Another wild goose chase. Or, well, trap.”


“Not sure.”

Damn. She tried to think contingencies, but the fog was too thick. Unacceptable. “Adrenaline,” she rasped.

“You’re ready for it?”

“Do it.”

He turned away for a moment, picked up a syringe, met Natasha's eye. After a nod from her, he jabbed the injector into her thigh. She barely felt the impact and injection. She did feel the sudden mad rush of her heart, the way the curtain of fog was swept away, how edges and colors became sharp and vivid in a way that normally only happened during a good fight.

Thirst became her next thought, and she dove for the cabinet where bottles were stashed. Half a liter was sucked down before noticed that Bruce was not the only other person in the quinjet. There was one other, a rough looking man in his mid-forties and Persian features who she did not recognize. Her eyes darted to Bruce as a hand reached for the knife strapped to her thigh.

“Oh. Oh right. This is Mohamed.” Bruce made a distracted wave of his hand. “He brought me here.”

“Natasha Romanoff.” Mohamed inclined his head, his calm demeanor marking him a man used to strange and dangerous situations. His accent and dark complexion said he was Iranian. “My team and I was sent to assist you.”

“Who sent you?”

“There is a call being routed in from the Avengers tower.” Jarvis announced. “It originates from Tehran.”

Tehran, the capital of Iran.

“The caller names himself as General Salehi.”
General Salehi was Lizzie's cousin. He had sent a personal letter to Natasha thanking her for her part in getting him into America and to Lizzie's wedding. Thanking her, expressing relief at Emily's safe return, and regretting not being able to meet either of them in person. It had all been brutally formal and beautifully hand-written, probably by a secretary. That Salehi was calling at this particular moment wasn't coincidence.

“We are here by his command.” Mohamed said.

Bruce's expression said Natasha was in charge. Natasha accepted that and Mohamed's statement with a nod. “Let's talk.”

His face appeared on a screen toward the front of the quin. He opened with an Islamic greeting before switching to fluid English with a good American accent. “Natasha Romanoff. Dr. Bruce Banner. It is an honor. I am gladdened that Mohamed and his team were able to assist you.”

Bruce mumbled a hello.

“General Salehi, it's a pleasure to speak in person.” Natasha took note that he was in civilian clothes, at what looked like a private residence. This wasn't an official call. Mohamed wasn't in uniform and wasn't sent by the Iranian government.

He nodded. “I apologize for not getting to you sooner, Ms. Romanoff.”

She made a consoling gesture and played a little dumb. “The letter you sent was lovely.”

“No,” Salehi waved it off. “I don't mean to make niceties about my cousin's wedding. I had heard the Avengers were going after another HYDRA base, and it was a trap. I apologize for not relaying that intelligence to you sooner and saved you springing the trap unprepared.”

Natasha allowed her eyebrow to climb. How had he gotten the intel? Did he have a mole in HYDRA? Could she buy the mole from him or at least some good intel?

“That is not acceptable.” The man frowned and his large mustache twitched with the movement. “When Emily Fortune went missing, Lazim requested my help in finding her. I could do nothing. I will redeem my honor by assisting the Avengers in escaping this HYDRA trap.”

Bruce met Natasha's eye and mouthed Lazim?

“Emily's friend Lizzie,” was the quick explanation. Lazim was her given name. While his mouth rounded in understanding, Natasha said to Salehi, “I won't deny we could use a little help. The EMP and knockout gas they used did a number on us.”

“And I was too out of it to get here on my own.” Bruce inserted. “Thanks again, Mohamed.”

The man simply nodded, his gaze quickly returning to Natasha and Salehi.

“Mohamed and his mercenary team are there to assist you in recovering your team and escaping Serbia.” Noise behind Salehi made him frown and glance off screen. The sounds of children bickering filtered in. Salehi barked a few phrases that had the noise retreating and the sound of a door closing. “Family. They will make you ask Allah for patience, but they will also give the greatest joys. Before you return to yours in America, may I suggest a stop in Istanbul? I have a gift waiting there for Ms. Fortune. I hope it will give her some joy after what she recently endured.”

Experience and spy sense said it wasn't a gift for Emily. Something else. Something he wasn't sure he could trust Mohamed to know. “I'm sure I can convince the boys that getting Emily some tea
and sweets from Turkey is a good idea.”

He nodded. They both understood what wasn't said. “Excellent. Allah go with you.”

Natasha no more than returned his goodbye than the screen went dark. She turned back to her companions. “Let's go round up some strays.”

Bruce smiled at her double meaning.

Mohamed's expression didn't change. No sense of humor. Okay. She could work with that. “Mohamed, tell me about your team and loadout.”

While he did so, she glanced outside to the sinking sun. She must have been unconscious for a few hours. Emily would be sleeping now. It was early morning back home.

They moved on to her team's locations, their possible health and degrees of alertness.

She stifled a yawn. No. No time to wallow in the adrenaline let-down. She went for Tony's stash of caffeine pills, discovered that he had much more than that, and took several supplements that could keep Tony alert and awake for days. It should be enough for a few hours. Her body should metabolize the gas by then.

Mohamed's team was brought onto the quin, and she piloted it in a wide circle around the HYDRA forces in stealth mode, careful to keep it far enough from them and the engines throttled down low enough to not be heard. Tony really needed to figure out a sound dampening shield for them. He was their first target. Satellite imagery showed him alone where he had fallen, but quickly being surrounded. Even Jarvis couldn't say for sure if he'd survived the fall.

Well, if he hadn't, Natasha would bring his egotistical ass back from the dead. He didn't know about the little bean yet.

Coming down the stairs early the next morning to make tea, Emily stalled four steps up as she heard the morning news, realized it was the TV. She wrangled her panic by focusing on the people talking. Not the news. It was a sitcom older than Emily that cable TV kept airing because it was that damn popular. Emily couldn't remember its name or the names of the characters. Her dad had liked it. Enough reason that she never would.

The stair under her foot creaked. The sounds from the TV stopped, replaced by the sounds of a large body rising from the couch, crossing the living room to the stairwell.

Mrs. Miller greeted Emily. She had brought her and Lila and Nate home, was staying the night while Laura remained at the hospital with Cooper. “I didn't wake you, did I, hon?”

She shook her head.

“She told me about the TV. It's off now.”

Emily let that sink in. “How long have you known?”

“About your anxiety attacks or that my daughter's husband and friends aren't quite like the rest of us?”

Words jumbled uselessly on her tongue. She hadn't been expecting that much forthrightness.
“Let's talk in the kitchen. We wouldn't want to wake the babies up before we have to.” The matronly woman ushered Emily into the safe comfort of Laura's kitchen and found snacks to go with the tea that Emily prepped for herself.

Fragrance steamed up from Emily's mug, ice clinked in Mrs. Miller's lemonade, and the air conditioner hummed in the background. Emily waited for the conversation to continue.

“Laura never did date the simple ones.” Her mother hummed.

That *simple* statement made Emily smile. It made sense in so many ways.

“The first boy she dated had a dream of becoming the president. He's our state senator now.” Mrs. Miller smiled. “There was one that spent half his life making weird metal art and the other half running soup kitchens. I was never sure if he was rich or not. Oh, there was this firefighter. Lord almighty, that one made me want to shake Laura. How could she be with a man who ran into fires for strangers during the day and gamble at illegal clubs at night?”

Really? Emily couldn't wait to ask Laura about that one.

Ice sank as Mrs. Miller sipped her lemonade. “It took me some time to figure out that Clint wasn't the traveling consultant that he pretends to be. That man is too well educated about environmental laws and their application.”

Never too much knowledge when it came to covers. Natasha and Clint were ridiculously thorough about them, part of what made them world-class spies. “How did you figure it out?”

Mischief bit the older woman's lip. “I might have stumbled into that bunker under the barn.”

Emily laughed. The thing was definitely designed and built by super-spies. It had two entrances. One under the barn and one at the end of a tunnel two hundred feet into the forest. Both were heavily camouflaged, but could possibly be stumbled over, especially by a nosey mother who noticed the little groove in the floor when sweeping. It was capable of housing a dozen people, keep them healthy and whole for a year, and heavily loaded with guns and protective gear when they needed to come out.

Lila didn't know about it yet. Cooper did. He had to do survival drills three times a year. Just in case he needed to get himself and his little sister and brother and babysitter into it if HYDRA or something equally bad discovered the farm. Emily had been forced into the drills shortly before Nate's birth. She'd been witness to Coop calmly guiding the stuffed dolls representing his siblings, who were actually at a relative's for the evening, and his excellent first-aid skills. Laura made a fine actress pretending to be stunned and half-asleep from gas grenades, and her son had little problem dealing with it.

What a family. Emily could scarcely believe that she'd been adopted into it. She smiled happily as Mrs. Miller waxed on about her daughter and son-in-law, then moved on to stories about the kids that Emily hadn't heard before. She wondered if Mrs. Miller would tell stories about Emily and Nat and their kid some day.

Chapter End Notes
Lookit! I updated! I read a few books recently. It's amazing how you can get through writer's block/rut simply by reading a few novels, especially ones outside your normal purview. Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake is a horrible story with repulsive characters, and I highly recommend it. Her writing is wonderful and catching and she knows how to spin a story that you don't want to put down.
HELLO!!

It’s been a year, yes, omg. Between Tumblr asks and Infinity War, I got some inspiration to get back to Em and Nat. Yay! Enjoy, and I hope to have a few more chapters out this month :)

A helicopter was flying in to support the HYDRA forces. Stars blinked above it. Natasha turned off the quinjet’s interior lights, opened the bay door, put eye to night vision scope, and slowly released a breath. The rifle let out a roar, and the helicopter jerked. Natasha’s second shot missed. Her third ripped through the helicopter’s second pilot. She noted when the chopper was about to crash and closed her eyes against being blinded.

When she put eye to scope again, Mohamed’s team was using the distraction of the crash to cut through the soldiers on the ground. Natasha’s vantage and the quin’s infrared sensors guided their movements. They had a secure perimeter around Tony within half an hour. Much to Natasha and Bruce’s relief, Tony had indeed survived the fall when the EMP blast had knocked his suit out of the sky. He’d even managed to crawl out of it and run a hundred feet away before the gas got to him.

Jarvis landed the quin, and Tony was loaded onto it. Scans revealed some nasty bruising and scrapes, fractured ribs, a swollen ankle, and a minor concussion. Ice was packed around his ankle and chest, and he was strapped to the bed to keep him from more injury during flight. His Iron Suit was found on a nearby truck. Three of Mohamed’s men carried it to the quin while Bruce pulled a bullet from Mohamed’s thigh. Cho-tech sewed him up while his team stared.

The other boys were easier to find. A flare shot into the sky led them to Clint, perched high in an ancient pine tree. Steve, Bruce, and Thor were in the center of an army, bound and caged. For Natasha and Bruce alone, retrieving them would have been extremely difficult, might have required them retreating to find help. Luckily, they had a small army of their own. Twenty borrowed soldiers created an excellent diversion while Natasha took out a handful of guards and pumped her superhuman friends full of adrenaline.

Thor came awake with a mighty roar. Steve kind of shrieked. Bucky growled and panted, every bit a scared, rabid puppy until Natasha played a recording of Emily’s voice. Fear retreated to rage and boiled under Bucky’s skin. He used a belt to hold his useless mechanical arm down and grabbed a gun. Armed with HYDRA’s own weapons, they escaped the trap, took out most of the soldiers, and captured an officer for interrogation.

Despite the officer clearly knowing a few secrets, none of them were the scepter’s location. Natasha was half-tempted to kick the smug little rat out of the quin at a thousand feet. She called up Coulson and told him she had a present for him, that she’d drop it off on her way home. Maybe he could find something useful. The HYDRA officer’s smugness drooped at learning they’d be given to SHIELD. It made Natasha smile.

As exhaustion crept back up on her, Mohamed and his men took their leave. The moon was a sliver of ice as Natasha pointed the quin toward Istanbul.
“What are we going to find there?” Steve asked.

She looked up at her friend, took in his blood-smeared face and drooping shoulders. “I hope it’s a little luck.”

“You think it’s a lead to the scepter?”

She entertained the hope. “Maybe. I expect it’ll be something useful to the Avengers.”

“Tell me, my new friend.” Thor’s hearty voice filled the quin. “Who is the owner of the honeyed voice that calmed your nightmare?” He chuckled. “A lover?”

Bucky shook his head. “Not mine.”

Natasha felt eyes on her.

“No?” Thor questioned. “It did not sound like Romanoff.” He must have followed the boys’ gazes.

“It wasn’t me.” Natasha answered.

“It was Emily.” Steve filled in. “And she’d normally be here with us, but we just got her back from,” he swallowed.

Natasha’s jaw tightened.

“A creepy old bastard who won’t hurt anyone else again,” came Tony’s sleep-rusty voice. Natasha heard his straps released and the rustle of him sitting up. He coughed out a groan of pain. “You’ll like her, Thor. She’s reckless and stubborn and constantly causing trouble and,” his voice dropped to a grudging whisper, “probably the best of us.”

Quiet stretched. Natasha sighed, missing and worrying over her idiot. She turned the quin’s navigation over to Jarvis. She swiveled the chair around to join the conversation.

“Truly?” Thor chortled. “Then I am eager to meet this woman. Will she be in New York with Lady Potts?”

“It’s Mrs. Stark now, Thor.” Proudly, Tony informed him.

Thor nearly leapt across the quin to grab Tony into a fierce hug. “Congratulations are in order then, Stark! Well done!”

Pain paling his features, Tony pat a giant shoulder and wheezed, “Yea. Thanks. I’d like to breathe again.”

Thor released him and turned to Natasha with all his boyish enthusiasm. “Tell me about this Emily. Is she as dangerous as you, Romanoff?”

She could be. Natasha felt Clint’s gaze, flicked her own at him. Petrovich. The memory of his death flashed between them. Natasha held that moment close to her heart, when Emily had broken from his hold and buried a knife in his skull; a vision of deadly grace and power. Their beautiful, dangerous goddess.

“The world is lucky that Em chooses to be a force for good.” Natasha replied. A soft smile tilted her lips. “And that’s how I like her.”

“She can be gentle as a lamb and put you back together,” there was fondness in Tony's voice,
“Then take a breath and put a knife through someone's head. We call her Sekhmet, after a goddess of war.”

“Put you back together?” Thor’s head canted. “Then she is a doctor?”

“No.” Natasha shook her head. Frizz escaped a braid and got in her eyes. She smoothed it behind an ear. “Emily has the power to heal people with her bare hands.” While surprise creased Thor’s face, she went on. “She can read the most minute information about a person and manipulate their body within its genetic limits.”

Thor shifted his bulk. “She sounds like someone I do not want to anger.”

“Ha!” spurted out of Tony. “You got that right, buddy. Even if you survived the goddess’ rage, you’d have to deal with her girlfriend and all her strays.”

Steve and Bucky shared a brotherly look. Affection for them deepened her smile.

“Her girlfriend?” Thor asked. “This term indicates a romantic relationship?”

Though she loathed the term itself, “Yes.”

“Oh.” Thor nodded, not fazed in the least by a same-sex relationship. “And strays?”

“Us, Thor.” Steve put in before the conversation could drag out further. “It’s a long story and kind of a joke, but we’re Emily’s stray puppies. She has this,” his hand drifted in the air.

“Way of making you feel like her family,” Tony finished quietly.

“Even when we don’t really get along.” Bruce added.

Thor made an impressed hum. “She sounds like a fine woman.”

Natasha nodded. “She is. There are days when I can’t figure out how someone as good as her can love someone like me.”

“Clearly, she has excellent taste.” Thor’s smile was big and warm and inviting. “When do I get to meet her?”

“Are you serious?” Emily squealed.

Natasha rolled her eyes even as she smiled at her exuberant idiot. “Yes.”

“Thor, the god of thunder, wants to meet me!”

If they were talking in person instead of over video, she was certain that Emily would be forcing her to jump up and down with her in delight. “Yes.”

“Holy shit.”

“Tony will send a jet to a small airfield outside Jacksonville.” Natasha paused, studied Emily. Her face pixelated briefly thanks to the heavy encryption program and mobile data connection that Natasha was using for some privacy from Stark technology. She adjusted her headphones and checked her little area of Central Park for eyes and ears. Her anonymity seemed intact. She looked back at Emily. “Will you be alright getting there by yourself?”
Much to her relief, Emily seriously considered the question instead of blithely answering. “I can see if Kev's willing to drive up to get me. It would give us a few hours together.” Her phone was in her hand the next breath, her thumb moving rapidly across the screen.

Natasha leaned back against the tree and watched while Emily first did her mom thing and interrogated Kevin about his life and health before excitedly trying to convince him to clear his afternoon schedule and drive five hours to fetch her. Judging by Emily's side of the conversation and her pout, she wasn't convincing enough for it to happen before the weekend. A knock on the Barton office door had Emily grumbling a goodbye to Kevin and standing. She moved from the camera's eye. Floorboards protested.

“Hey?”

“You're talking to Natasha?” came Laura's soft inquiry. “I just wanted to tell you lunch is ready.”

“Yea. Laur, she says Thor wants to meet me!” Emily squealed and wiggled. “But,” and her pout was clearly audible, “Kev won't drive up to get me.”

“To get you?”

“Tony's sending a plane down there because it's a plausible place for me to be.”

Bright, wooden noise reached her. The floorboard right in front of the door squeaked badly. Laura must be shifting her weight as she thought about something.

“I could take you.” Laura offered. Natasha felt her eyebrow rising. Spontaneous roadtrips really weren't in Laura's repertoire.

“Really?” Emily's refreshed enthusiasm chirped. “What about the kids?”

“I'm sure I could convince my brother or my mom to pick them up after school and keep them overnight.” Laura paused. “Maybe the whole weekend. Tomorrow's Friday, and I could use a mini vacation.”

Emily chuckled. “You haven't had a weekend away from them for a while, have you?”

An eternity of suffering groaned, “No.”

Abruptly, Emily was in front of the screen again. Natasha narrowed her eyes at the mischievous expression on her. “You know, Nat, Laur's a pretty good actress.”

There came a sharp gasp of air from Laura.

“You were talking about wanting to see New York and the tower and meet the Avengers.” Emily was looking at Laura. “I could smuggle you up there as a close friend I'd been visiting while my brother was working.”

It was possible. The media exposure that Laura would be subjected to could be disastrous for the privacy of the farm. Natasha hated to deny Laura something, especially a vacation, but... “Em, she'll be the only friend you've brought up here. The cameras will notice.”

“I can at least get her a ride, find her a hotel. She can see the city.” Emily argued.

“A lot of the city hasn't even recovered from the Chitauri attack.” Natasha pointed out.

The floorboard squeaked again.
“It’s up to you, Laura.” Emily sighed. “We’ve got a couple hours before school gets out anyway.”

“Yes,” came the breathy, immediate reply. “That husband of mine has been promising me a trip to New York for years. I want to see it.”

And the place where he’d fought, where the aliens had invaded Earth, she didn’t say.

Emily must have heard the unspoken as well, because she stared silently.

“Laura,” Natasha called.

Long hair hung loose as Laura bent to put her face in view. “Hey, Natasha.”

“Act like a broke hitchhiker begging for a ride on the rich woman’s plane. Em does the bleeding heart act well enough. And pack enough for the weekend. You’ll get a proper tour.” She promised. The smile on her face was proof that Laura needed this. “Alright. I’ll call my brother and mom and,” she suddenly jumped and wiggled. “New York City!” A tiny squeal came out of her, far more sedate than Emily was capable of. She calmed and bent to look at the screen again. “Thank you.” She turned, grabbed Emily’s head, and planted a wet kiss on Emily’s forehead. “And you. We’ll leave in two hours.”

Slowly, Emily turned from Laura’s abrupt exit. “Am I in trouble?”

“I’m glad you’ll have her along for the ride,” was her honest reaction. In fact, she was going to feel a lot better with stable, trustworthy person like Laura escorting Emily across the country. This was good. “I love you, Em. I’ll see you soon.”

Relieved and excited, Emily nodded and grinned. “Love you too, little fox.”

Natasha’s answering smile lingered long after the call severed and her screen went dark.
Uncle Tony

Chapter Notes

I didn't think I'd have time to edit this so quickly. It feels weird posting again. Hopefully, my writing is still up to snuff. LET THE GODS MEET!

A giddy Natasha met Emily and Laura at the airfield, where she yelled at Emily about letting hitchhikers onto the jet. She peaked her voice to the highest shriek it could go, berating Emily for letting a complete stranger onto the plane, that she could’ve been hurt or kidnapped again, and Natasha was not in the mood for this shit. An apology was tossed at Laura, but could she leave right the fuck now. After Laura scuttled off to find a taxi, Natasha physically dragged Emily to the waiting limo.

The entire way to the tower, Emily couldn’t stop talking about meeting Thor and comparing the Viking mythos with what they knew about the Asgardian. It was pitched, rapid jabbering that had Natasha smiling and rolling her eyes. Emily couldn’t be more nervous and excited at the same time. She bounced in the elevator all the way up, and she squealed at the sight of Thor. He gave her his signature, crushing welcome and while she stood there dazed, he grew an expression of confusion.

“Are all the great women of this world small and delicate in appearance?” Thor frowned at the team. “I remember women of great stature, almost Asgardian w-“

Tony bursting into laughter cut him off. “It’s just a roll of the dice, buddy.”

“Yea!” squeaked from Emily. She cleared her throat, her face a vivid pink. “You should meet Bobbi. She’s tall.”

“Only taller than you, Em.” Natasha teased. She purposely shut away the memory of Emily’s ex. Leslie did not qualify as a great woman. “Scandinavian and Somalian and quite a few other cultures have women of Asgardian stature, Thor.” Did he not notice that Lady Sif wasn’t much taller than Emily?

Relief puffed out of him, “Ah.”

She rolled her eyes.

Tony going quiet and grabbing his ribs shifted Emily from fangirl to mom. “You look like someone tossed you down a mountain, Tony.” She glanced at Clint. “Why are you the only one hurt this bad?”

“EMP knocked his suit’s electronics out.” Clint answered. “He fell pretty far and then had to scramble his butt into hiding.”

“Close your mouth, Tony.” Emily warned before touching him.

Teeth clicked. Tendons and veins bulged as he gritted through the pain. A moment later, the bruises on his face vanished, and he sagged. “Thanks.”
She smiled and brushed his hair back. “I thought your suit had EMP protection.”

“It did.” His eyes rolled up to look at the hand still on his head. “But there was a,” he closed his eyes, “a defect in one of the panels.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Jarvis frowned into the conversation. “I should have noticed it during inspection.”

Tony looked up. “It’s fine, J. We’ll make the next one better.”

Emily gave Tony’s cheek a little pat. When their eyes met, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

He stared after her as she moved on to Clint and rest.

“Incredible.” Thor rumbled. “She can quiet Stark.”

Natasha grinned and Clint barked out a laugh.

“What?” Tony asked, Thor’s rumble not having traveled far.

Thor grinned. Clint laughed louder. Natasha let out a few cackles.

“Come on, you guys. Share with the class.”

“Emily, was it?” Thor beamed at her nod. “You are a fine woman. I welcome sharing the battlefield with you.”

The laughter stilled. Thor frowned at it. Emily was visibly torn between pride, embarrassment, and fear. She dropped her hands from Bucky, his few bruises already gone. “Thank you, Thor. But,” she met Natasha’s gaze. “I think the closest I can get right now is right here.”

“The man who took you.” Thor said.

Emily took a deep breath and nodded. “He tried to destroy me and replace me with a mindless tool.”

Refreshed anger and frustration and terror had nails biting into her palm.

“He almost succeeded. If he’d gotten more time with me, he probably would have.” A shiver went down Emily’s rigid frame.

Bucky lifted his organic hand, hesitantly reached out, barely settled fingers on Emily’s arm. She looked at them. Abruptly, both her hands leapt up and grabbed his. Skin went taut with the force of her grip.

“I’m glad your strays found you.” Thor proclaimed.

Emily blinked. Giggles bubbled up. “You told him you're my strays?”

“Actually.” Bruce replied. “It was Tony.”

Color rushed to cheeks. “I said, and I quote, ‘all of her strays.’ I did not include myself as another Fido.”

“Anthony Edward Stark!” Emily growled.

Stunned eyes went round. Little boys glanced at each other as the mom advanced on the
troublemaker. Natasha made a note to ask Jarvis to send a clip of the moment to Pepper, who was at a board meeting.

Emily stopped in front of Tony and jabbed a finger into his chest. “I don’t spend a good deal of my energy worrying over your narcissistic ass just like I do Clint and Bucky and Steve and Bruce for you to act like I don’t care about you just as much. You might not be related to me by blood like my brothers.” She swiveled her head about to include the team in her tirade. “But I love you and want the best for you just the same.” Black eyes narrowed at Tony. “Family is taking care of each other and I wouldn’t trust someone who wasn’t family with watching over my future kids. And you,” her finger lifted so her whole hand could slap his chest. “You, sir, will help babysit them.”

So much for the original baby-reveal they had planned for Tony.

“Little Bean is going to have their Uncle Tony to babysit them and build them Natasha-approved gadgets and teach them about engineering and physics and stuff the rest of us can’t.”

Wild brown eyes flit between Natasha and Emily. “Um?”

“By the way, Tony.” Natasha hummed, going with the impulsive change of plans. “I’m going to need armor with expandable plating.”

Emily suddenly smiled, apologetic and unapologetic at the same time. “Sorry, Nat.”

The pieces were clicking in Tony’s skull. His gaze shot around, taking in the lack of surprise on everyone except Thor. “The trip to Holland. There are fertility doctors there with a lot of funding for same-sex parentage experiments. They actually put a bid in for Stark funding a few months back. Pretty sure Pep gave them whatever they asked for.” He blinked. “Whoa.” He zeroed in on Natasha’s stomach. “Really?”

Tony must have looked into the quinjet’s navigation history. Expected, given why she hadn’t erased it. A breadcrumb for him.

His mouth worked for a minute. “Uncle Tony?”

“Yep,” was Natasha’s response.

“Uncle Tony.” Emily reiterated and threw arms around him, squeezed tightly.

“A child, Romanoff?” came Thor’s hearty clap of laughter. “Congratulations!” He grabbed Natasha, lifting her off the ground with his powerful hug, roaring his joy into her ear. “You will make excellent little warriors!”

He was a step away from Emily when she lifted a hand. “You might be a god, Thor, and Nat might trust you, but honestly, I don’t know you yet.”

He swayed.

“You’re going to have to earn the title of uncle.”

“Oh.” Thor coughed. “Well then, yes, of course.” He bowed. “Lady Emily, I will endeavor to prove myself worthy of that honor.”

“Em keep you up late, Nat?” Grinning, Clint prodded at Natasha’s third yawn of the morning. Yesterday had been long, but not that long, even with Emily staying up late to marvel at Thor and talk about Asgardian women and Norse history and anything else that popped into her head until Natasha whisked her off to bed at midnight. They’d gotten a solid eight hours of rest before getting up to meet Laura and Clint for a late breakfast at a quiet coffee shop.

Emily snickered.

“No.” She huffed and wondered if the barista had accidentally given her decaf instead of regular coffee. “Maybe it’s the stress of dealing with you all the time.”

“You wound me,” was his mocking pout.

Why couldn’t she stop yawning? Natasha felt her jaw pop with yet another one. As it released its tiresome hold, and her eyes refocused, she caught Laura and Clint grinning at each other. What was that mischievous glint in their expressions? What had she missed?

“I don’t think it’s occurred to her yet.” Emily chuckled.

What hadn’t? Natasha allowed her annoyance to show.

“Going to agree with you,” chuckled Laura.

“Whatever happened to your incessant need for research and intel?” Clint poked Natasha's ego.

She started to yawn again. Dammit! What was this? Why did everyone seem to know something about her body that she didn’t? Had they drugged her? But why? That made no sense. A bit of fear made her worry. She had more stamina and ability to cope than all of them combined. How was she the one yawning after a normal night and not Emily?

“Growing babies is hard work, steals all your energy.” Laura smiled at her. “Wasn’t sure it happened to superheroes too, but now I know. Some things are universal.”

Oh. Of course. Natasha felt her cheeks heat.

Emily's chuckles brushed over her chin as she dipped to kiss Natasha's cheek. “Mommy Natalia,” she whispered. Her dark eyes were twinkling.

Awe at the minor miracle warmed her. She sucked in her lip and touched her abdomen. Emily's hand joined hers, the other wrapped around her waist.

“Oh, you two are just precious.” Laura beamed. A breath later, her phone was being held up, an uncertain expression on her face. “May I?”

Emily gently squeezed her hand. “Please?” caressed her neck.

Safe in Emily's arms, Natasha nodded, found herself in a tighter embrace with lips on her temple. The smile that Emily drew out was soft, crooked, and entirely at ease.

“I love you,” danced in her ear. “And our little bean.”

“Hurry up, Laur.” Clint gagged. “I'm getting diabetic watching these two.”

“Says the man who, behind closed doors, squeals over how excited he is for Nat, how cute Nat and
Em are, how insanely adorable their kid is going to be.” Laura rolled her eyes as Clint scrambled for an offended expression.

“You know,” Emily whispered quietly while Clint and Laura playfully bickered over his inner romantic. “They’d make pretty good godparents.”

Natasha smiled. “I don’t think I could handle my kid being raised by that dork. We should saddle Steve or Lizzie with that responsibility.”

There was a sudden tightness to Emily's features. “You'd really trust Lizzie like that?”

“Wouldn't you?” Lizzie had proven herself trustworthy, well-informed, strong, and highly capable. She loved Emily like family, worried over her, got angry with her when she did idiot things, praised her for the good. She would take care of Emily's child as her own. Natasha couldn't ask for much more. Other than making Steve a godparent too, so their superbaby would have someone who could handle whatever gift they came up with, who understood what it was like to be gifted.

“She'd kill me if we died and left her with our kid before she got pregnant with her first.” Emily found her smile again.

“And what are you two plotting over there?” Clint escaped Laura's teasing by shifting the attention.

“Our kid's world domination.” Natasha replied calmly. “You'll serve them well.”

Laura burst into cackles.

“Great.” Clint grumbled, “The reign of the Little Bean is upon us.”

Nervous and excited under her mask of calm, Natasha addressed the assembled Avengers. “The intel’s been confirmed.” Salehi’s gift that had been waiting in Turkey was a hand-written note with coordinates and a photo of Loki’s scepter in what looked like an ancient dungeon full of lab equipment.

Several sets of incredibly strong fingers dug into the tabletop, made it squeak in protest.

“The scepter is hidden in Sokovia.” A small country in southeastern Europe, all mountains and small cities left ragged by civil war. Only rich mineral deposits kept the place on the map.

“But is it actually there this time?” Tony grumbled.

Natasha nodded. “I think it is.”

“Yes!” Thor cheered.

“What’re we up against?” Clint asked, the skin around his eyes tight. He was probably going to have nightmares tonight with the fresh reminder of Loki’s mind control. If he even slept.

“That we know of? An army with extremely advanced weaponry, a shielded fortress, and the rumors of enhanced people.” Natasha answered. She thumbed through the report. “It might be better to try the stealth option.” She was never fond of the frontal assault. She was a spy, not a soldier. “There are regular shipments of supplies from the nearby city that would be simple enough to infiltrate. Both Clint and myself can handle the local dialect of Russian.”

Thor looked physically pained at the idea of not wading into battle.
“Okay.” Steve was open to the possibility of not getting shot at. “I’m sure you can get in, but can you get out?”

She tossed the aerial and satellite photos of the fortress onto the large screen. Escape options and backup plans were worked through. A strategy was settled on. Clint and Natasha would go in as locals, scout the area and see if infiltration during a supply delivery was possible. Next option was stealing uniforms and posing as HYDRA. At least three weeks. They would call in progress reports and coordinate a day to scepter snatch so that the rest of the team could be in the wings as backup, quick escape, or distraction, whatever the day needed.

Tony was already scratching up ideas to bring down the fortress’ shielding. Thor shifted unhappily, but yielded to Steve’s decision to send the spies in first. Bucky and Bruce didn’t argue.

A communal pause in the conversation had Natasha’s attention drifting to Emily.

“I’m coming.”

Natasha’s teeth clamped together.

“Weren’t you just telling us the other day that you weren’t ready yet?” Tony shot back.

“I’ll wait out the spy stuff, but I’m going to be there in case you need patching up.” Emily’s tone was low and full of stubborn determination.

“Emily,” Steve started.

Black eyes narrowed at him. “I’ll stay with the quin. I’ll call Coulson and ask for a team of babysitters if you want, but I’m going.”

“Which one of you is our leader again?” Tony snarked.

Helplessly, Steve looked to Natasha. “Nat?”

There was a war raging in her heart, and she didn’t know which side to choose.

“I won’t go running off, I promise.” Emily met her eye. “Unless,” Natasha’s heart dropped, “one of you gets hurt. I can’t be held to my promise then.”

Steve’s eyes rolled to the sky. Natasha closed hers.

“Are you even on any mental health meds?” Tony’s voice cut into the silence. “Do you have anything for when you lose your shit out there?”

“I won’t be much help if I’m stoned on Xanax.” Emily argued.

“But you’ll be so much help if you’re huddled in a corner crying?” He returned sharply, describing how she’d ended up yesterday. Jarvis had called Tony out of his lab to find Emily in a dark corner of the obstacle course. Natasha had been out getting lunch from a place that didn’t deliver at the time.

A long, angry breath puffed out of Emily. “I’m on meds the doc prescribed for me. They help, but yea, shit like yesterday still happens.” Under the table, her fists clenched. “I’ll bring some Xanax on the mission.”

“And you’ll take one if you need to.” Natasha demanded, softly, angrily, desperately. She wouldn’t be there for Emily if anything happened. She’d be too far away, doing her job, trying to protect the
whole damn world, instead of just her favorite idiot.

Argument met her eye for a breath before lashes lowered. “Okay.”

A sigh went around the table.

“Bucky will stay with Emily with his rifle, and I’ll call Coulson for another agent.” Steve decided.

“See if he’ll let us borrow Agent May.” Natasha put in.

Emily’s brow rose.

“I want the most level-headed agent I can get.” Natasha said. That, and May would shoot Emily with an icer if the idiot did anything impulsive and stupid, like running off into the middle of a battlefield to tend a bleeding stray. Morse or Mack or Daisy would hesitate. Natasha didn’t trust Hunter to know which end of the gun to shoot from.

“Agent May. Alright.” Steve agreed. “Tony, have you finished upgrading Natasha’s armor?”

The meeting shifted back to mission details. Natasha grabbed Emily’s hand and held tight.
A/N – You beautiful people, I can’t begin to tell you how incredible it feels to come back to this fic after no updates for a year and have so many reviews and messages telling me they missed Sekhmet, that they’ve reread the fic multiple times! Not only do you inspire me to keep writing this fic, but my original stuff too :D Thank you so much :)
There was regret and fear and a strange amount of hope. “I’ve come back from a lot of missions that I shouldn’t have. Eventually, there’s going to be a bullet that I don’t see coming.”

More than a few missions. His body was riddled with scars. Far more than her handful of bullet holes. Few injuries had ever been serious enough to leave scars on her enhanced form.

“I don’t want to leave my kids without a dad because I was too stubborn to notice I’m getting older.”

Yet he was half Natasha’s age. She was going to outlive everyone she cared about. No. Thinking about that didn’t help things. Focus on the nearer future. She could keep Clint around a little longer if she supported his retirement. “It’ll get Laura off my back about bringing your old ass home, so I’m okay with it.”

Clint snorted. “Don’t worry, she’ll start harassing you about staying home with your kid instead of sneaking around HYDRA castles full of alien weapons.”

Natasha touched her stomach.

A few minutes later, the truck ahead of them was emptied and waved off. Natasha drove hers up, and parked just outside the heavy iron gates. Civilians weren’t allowed past them. They could drive the trucks up, work their asses off to unload their goods, and drive away. Guards hauled supplies in on their hovering sleds.

There was a routine shift change of guards. It made Natasha itch to take advantage of it. Instead, she pretended to struggle with the crate of butter in her hands. One of the guards shouldered his rifle to help. She wondered if he even knew what HYDRA was doing here or if he believed in the organization’s bullshit, if he just needed the paycheck. She smiled prettily at him, batted her eyelashes a little, buttered him up, in case she ever got to use him.

“Okay!” Another guard yelled. “Your truck is empty. Leave.”

They did as they were told.

“Think he’ll be any use?” Clint asked as she maneuvered the truck down the steep, bumpy road.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “But we don’t have the kind of time I’d need to seduce him with this cover.” Too innocent and naive. It’d take months to build up to getting the guard to pull her behind the shield for a kiss. A sultry attempt would be shot down immediately. No one was willing to risk getting executed for a blowjob. Not that she’d discovered yet. Given time, she could, but again, that was limited.

“Notice any of them watching my ass?” He asked.

It wasn’t a joke. Clint might not use seduction often, wasn’t particularly good at it, but he knew he was handsome, with an excellent body, and he’d use it to get intel if other methods failed. Laura hadn’t known that about Clint until their second wedding anniversary. There’d been some yelling and crying over it. Eventually, she’d come around to accepting that Clint was a spy, and he’d use any method necessary to complete his mission. He came home to Laura, didn’t he?

Frankly, Natasha found it amusing how many people enjoyed chasing Clint or enduring his fumbling approach. She shook her head. “No.”

He shrugged. “Guess I should’ve wiggled it a little more.”

She cackled. He grinned. They drove back to town and spent their evening drinking in a local bar.
HYDRA soldiers tended to wander down there. Little by little, they were giving the spies information that they were piecing together about the fortress. It went deep into the mountain. Weird shit happened in the lower levels. The twins were creepy. Strucker was an asshole.

“Wolfgang von Strucker.” Fury addressed them via a secure video chat along with Steve. “He was a sleeper agent in SHIELD, worked in the science division, notably with advanced weaponry and the scepter. It’s definitely there in Sokovia. You need to get it out ASAP.”

“That’s what we plan to do, sir.” Steve nodded. “If Natasha and Clint can’t get it out quietly, we’ll take it by force by the end of the week.”

Fury nodded. “See that you do.” His eye darted off to the side. “Looks like my time’s up.”

The feed cut from his end.

“How’s Em?” Natasha asked. Only one, short vid chat had been snuck in since Natasha had gotten to Sokovia. Any more was pushing it, both on a security standpoint and Emily’s anxiety.

“Still struggling,” was his honest reply. “But no panic attacks this week.” Frustration lined his face. “If it wouldn’t hurt her so much, I’d ask Jarvis to lock her in her room to keep her away from this mission.”

“You and me both.”

A week later, nothing much had changed. The spies couldn’t get past the gates, and the scepter stayed hidden in the guts of the fortress. What they did know was that locals had been volunteering for Strucker’s human experiments. The twins were the only ones who had survived, and the soldiers were afraid of them. There was a hundred to one-fifty soldiers garrisoned there. And the little place down the street from Natasha’s safehouse had great tea. She wanted to bring Em to it one day.

“We’re on route.” Steve informed them.

“We’ll have the truck ready at the landing coordinates.” Clint said.

They couldn’t fly in too close or HYDRA would notice the noise or heat signature of their engines and simply shoot them out of the sky. A mile out was their landing site. Steve and Bucky could hop in their waiting, armored and armed steed, and charge into battle alongside Thor and Hulk. Clint and Natasha had perches ready for the initial attack, where they could watch the battlefield and cover the team from flaking positions. Tony in his suit and May at the quinjet’s helm would provide aerial support. Tony actively engaging, the quin in stealth mode at a safe altitude.

Once the perimeter defenses were down and Tony could get close enough, Jarvis would scan the facility to find the shield generator. Someone could go straight through a wall to find it and take it out. The rest was going to be a surprise.

They picked up Agent May in rural Tennessee. A nice empty pasture. Mostly empty. A few cows lowered their confusion at the quinjet interrupting their munching and napping.

“Ah, Agent May, I am Thor, Prince of Asgard and god of thunder!” Giant hand held out in greeting, Thor grinned.

Unimpressed eyes gave him a lookover. “I’ve heard about you.”
Thor blinked, lowered his hand, pouted.

May glowered at Emily as she took her seat on the quinjet. “I have no interest in chasing after you again.” She pat the gun on her hip. “Romanoff gave me the go-ahead to ice your ass to keep you safe.”

Emily dropped chin to hand and sighed into her chair. “Of course she did.” In her peripheral, she saw Steve and Bucky make relieved faces. Because it was Agent May who’d be guarding Emily, Bucky would be down on the ground with the rest of the team.

“If this mission wasn’t to retrieve alien technology from a HYDRA cell, I wouldn’t be here,” May went on. “I have more important things to do than babysit Romanoff’s girlfriend.”

“Like babysit an Inhuman?” Emily rebutted.

Not a muscle twitched on May. “You’re going to stay on the quinjet for this mission, Fortune. Even if your girlfriend manages to get shot, you’re going to stay right here unless I feel it’s safe enough to let you out there.”

“I’m wearing bulletproof armor.” Emily growled.

“And that did a whole lot of good in Egypt, didn’t it?”

Why was May such a bitch? Emily silently grumbled, even as she felt her respect for the woman climbing. “This isn’t a giant city with a million places for kidnappers to hide.”

“No.” May didn’t budge an inch. “This is a warzone surrounded by forests and mountains and wartorn villages who want nothing to do with the Avengers and the problems that follow them.”

“Why not?”

May’s eyes shot to Tony, who had headphones on and a tablet in his hands. He was too engrossed in whatever he was doing to notice. “Stark Industries built a lot of weapons and sold them to a lot of people.”

“Oh.” Whether his company meant them to or not, his weapons could’ve ended up anywhere, hurting anyone.

“And any battle here could easily overflow to that nearby city.” May went on. “No one there will welcome us.”

Emily sighed. “How do you know so much about this place?”

Annoyance glared at her. “Not only did Romanoff send me copies of her reports, that I assume you didn’t read, I did my own research.”

She hadn’t read any reports, just listened to Steve’s debriefing. Nat was going to berate her for it later. “Oh.”

“How did an impulsive, disorganized, and frankly, unimpressive agent like you get Romanoff’s attention?” May’s upper lip curled. “No. Don’t answer that. I really don’t care.”

“How did a bitch like you earn Daisy’s admiration?” Emily shot back.

“How did you?”
Anger making her skin grow hot, “I gave a damn! That kid needed someone who wasn’t afraid to sit in a room with her and help her learn some fucking control.”

“Because you’re a model of control? Remember, I was there when your ex-girlfriend showed up and you went for a gun.”

Emily started to rise, was stalled by her restraining belt. She glared at it angrily, reached for the release, and stopped. Anger whizzed out of her. “I’m not going to lose my shit and run off.”

May’s lip uncurled, and her expression went unreadable.

“I’ll stay on the quin unless you give the okay.”

“Even if your girlfriend is bleeding out?”

“No.” Emily answered. “But I will grab you and take you with me.”

Around the edges of her eyes and mouth, little creases formed. “Fair enough.”

Emily suddenly realized, “Bitch, you pushed me on purpose.” Fucking spy.

The smile that Emily thought was threatening spread into a satisfied grin. “Yes. And given the toll of recent events on your emotional stability, I’m impressed by your self-awareness and restraint.”

Now she was being praised? “Thank you?”

“You’re welcome.”

Oh. Okay then. Emily leaned back into her chair. She caught Bucky holding back laughter and stuck her tongue out. A guffaw burst out of him and set off Steve, drew Tony from his tablet, made May roll her eyes, got Bruce and Thor barking, and spewed giggles from Emily.

“What’d I miss?” Tony demanded. Laughter responded, and he glared at May. “And here I was under the impression that you suck the fun out of everything. This is definitely the opposite of fun sucking.”

May simply gave him a deadpan stare.

Emily couldn’t stop giggling to respond, just shook her head. Tony huffed and went back to his music and tablet. Bucky got the bird off the ground. The only thing missing from this happy moment was Natasha cuddles. And Clint, but mostly the warmth of Nat’s presence. Emily hoped to get at least a kiss in before shit started blowing up. Three weeks without Nat was too much.
Emily fidgeted in her seat. They were a thousand feet up. Why had anyone expected Emily to dash out of the quinjet if someone got hurt? *Emergency Parachutes* was written on one of the cabinets to her left. Pfft. She wasn’t stupid enough to try and parachute into a battlefield that had anti-aircraft cannons everywhere.

The team’s radio chatter made Emily flinch. Anti-aircraft, anti-tank, anti-personnel weapons, name it, and HYDRA had it entrenched on that mountain. Through the windows, she could see smoke and explosions and lightning destroying the forest. Trees shivered and fell. There was probably red snow everywhere too.

“You okay back there, Fortune?” May asked, turning from her sensors and screens to peer at Emily. With May there to fly, Bucky was down there with Steve in a giant truck with a machine gun mounted to it.

“No.” Her fingers dug into the armrests. “I hate sitting here and doing nothing.”

“You’re staying out of the way. Romanoff and the team would be severely handicapped if they had to worry about you down there.”

Teeth grinding, she wanted to kill Petrovich all over again. That asshole, what he’d done to her, the isolation, the silence, the hours and hours of videos meant to w-

“Fortune,” snapped her out of it. May’s eyes were hard.

Emily found her breath ragged, her hands and fingers clenched and aching, the rest of her shivering and sweating. She focused on May’s face. Dark brown eyes. The beginning of age lines around them. Straight, almost sharp eyebrows. Small nose. Bitch. Why did she get to have a nice nose? Not fair. Thoughts brought out of the darkness, Emily’s breath evened out. “I’m okay.”

May nodded her approval. “They’re doing fine down there, Fortune.”

She closed her eyes to breathe and found the pleasant hum of the engines. It finished grounding her in the moment, far from the torture of her underground prison. A muttered agreement came out as she tuned back into the radio chatter.

The team was grinding through the defenses like a sausage maker. In fact, despite the highly advanced weaponry that smelled like Chitauri tech, it almost sounded like they were enjoying themselves. Emily listened a little harder. Tony started harassing Steve about his offhand attempt at language censorship. Steve grumbled about never living it down. Bucky razzed Steve about how he hadn’t changed, that he was still the goody-two-shoes he was last century.

“When you meet the Avengers in person, you wonder how they get anything done.” May commented.

Smiling, Emily hit the comms button. “Don’t you children have a HYDRA base to attack instead of Steve?”

“Hulk smash!” answered her. Another explosion bloomed under the quin.
Another ten minutes passed until Tony announced he’d found a way in and attacked the southern wall of the fortress. Bucky got hit with a laser gun, but could keep going. Thor also felt a glancing blow that singed his hair. Tony was starting the hack into HYDRA’s systems when Steve announced an enhanced on the field. Something fast.

“I’m focusing the thermal sensors on your area.” May informed.

There was a blur on the screen, and Steve grunted.

“Holy shit,” fell from Emily. Whatever it was, it was moved like a mosquito around Steve, no, faster. “One of the twins?”

“Could be.” May hummed. “I met an Inhuman who moves like that. She’s not strong, but her speed makes her incredibly dangerous.”

Her imagination went wild. The shit a person could get away with if no one could see them move. She hoped the speedster didn’t have any bombs on them. Steve would be in a world of hurt if they did. If he could even survive having a few pounds of C4 -or worse, because, you know, fucking alien tech on hand- explode literally in his face.

Screaming in her ears shattered her reverie, brought her to terrifying awareness. Clint was hit, and he couldn’t shrug off a direct hit by a laser gun like Bucky could. “Take us down, May.” Emily demanded.

Dark, unflinching eyes met her own. “No.”

“Now!” Emily shrieked.

“How long do you think our shields will hold against that kind of artillery? And if we did manage to land, do you think that enhanced soldier will let us just grab Barton and walk away?” May was unapologetic. “You’re no good to your team dead, Fortune.”

Fuck, she hated this woman. “And what if he dies down there?”

“And what if more of your team dies because you jumped without looking?” shot back.

Emily’s gaze went to the parachutes. “Fuck you.”

“You move, you even release your safety harness, and I will ice you,” threatened her. May’s hand was at her holstered gun.

Over the comms, Natasha was yelling for someone to take out a machine gun nest. Steve was still dealing with the speedster. Clint was groaning and whimpering in pain. Muscles strained and shivered all along Emily. She glared hatred and rage at May.

The agent didn’t even blink. “Take a Xanax, Fortune. Stark or Thor can get Clint up here, to you, without putting more lives at risk.”

That’s right. Thor’s hammer let him do the flying thing. Emily felt her cheeks heat as Steve called for Thor to evac Clint. “My medicine is in there.” Emily muttered and waved at the cabinet where her bag was stowed. She couldn’t reach it without getting up.

May nodded and got out of her chair. She retrieved the bag and waited while Emily rooted around in it, tossed a pill in her mouth and crunched. A water bottle was shoved at her as the revolting taste of the powder made her gringe. By the count of a hundred, calm started to roll over her. Another
minute had her relaxing and sinking back into her seat. Oh. Yea. She was being an asshole, wasn’t she?

“Fortune.”

She looked up, flinched as May’s hand came down, blushed when she felt the hand settle on her shoulder. “They’ll be fine.”

“Could you just call me Emily?”

The hand squeezed. “Emily.”

May wasn’t so bad. She was just stoic and rational and good at keeping people alive. The bitch. Emily found a dopey smile. “Thanks.”

Another squeeze and May returned to the pilot’s chair.

Emily sailed on a sea of chill. She didn’t even twitch when the bay door opened, air howled and stung her face, and a giant of a man deposited a whimpering, bleeding Clint on the med table. “How does a sniper managed to get their ass kicked all the time?” was all that sighed out of her.

He grunted, “Maybe I need to find a different line of work.”

As she went to work on Clint, she glanced at Thor. “You hurt too?”

“My hair is singed,” he reached up to his filthy, tangled locks and grimaced. “Otherwise, I am fine.”

Dirt, blood, and ash covered most of Thor’s frame. She couldn’t tell if he was being honest or not. Oh well. She turned back to Clint. Between the required focus and the medication, she was completely zoned, didn’t notice anything else happening on the quin or over the radio until the skin and hair on Clint’s belly returned. She stared at the fresh pink. It was soft to the touch, delicate as a baby’s. If she had to repair enough of his body, would she extend his life? Could she help someone get old, yet be as young as Natasha?

“Em?”

She blinked and dragged her gaze up to Clint’s squinted worry. “Oh. Ms. Friendly over there made me take a Xanax. I’m smoooth,” she ended with a little moo.

A slow grin, and he reached up, mucked with her hair. “You sure are.”

Emily swatted at him. “Ass.”

“Hey, Ms. Friendly, can we get an update on the ground team?” Clint asked as he hopped down off the med table.

May leveled a glare at him. “Call me that again and you’ll be right back on that table.”

“Agent May.” Clint nodded. “Update?”

It was then that Emily noticed Thor wasn’t on the quin anymore.

“Stark has hands on the scepter. Thor’s helping Rogers clean up the perimeter.”

Clint checked his bow, the strings and arms. “The enhanced?”
“Gone.”

“Natasha?” Emily asked.

“She’s fine, Fortune.” May poked at her console. “As soon as Rogers gives me the all-clear, I’ll set the bird down.” Ten agonizing minutes later, Steve gave it, though with heavy warning that the enhanced could still be on the field. “Barton, hold Fortune down. Perimeter might be clean, but that doesn’t mean eyes like yours aren’t still out there.”

Emily’s shoulder got a heavy palm on it. “Will do, Agent May.” Clint reported.

She tried to shrug it off, but his grip tightened. “Damn you people,” grumbled out.

“Let Nat come to you, Em.” Clint’s other hand settled on her other shoulder. “Please.”

The irritation left her in a huff. Clint just wanted to keep her safe. Natasha was fine, and she’d be in Emily’s arms in a few minutes. She just had to wait. A little bit of patience would pay off. This wasn’t Siberia, she wasn’t trapped, and the hand on her shoulder didn’t want her to stand by while Yakov got torn apart.

Slight jarring signaled the quinjet hitting dirt.

“Sweet landing, May.” Clint approved. “Barely felt that.”

“Thank you.” May accepted the compliment with poise. She glanced back at them, her gaze lingering on Clint’s hold on Emily. “Opening bay doors,” was announced to the radio.

Bruce stumbled in first. As usual after shrinking down, he was a bit wobbly and hazy eyed. Emily twitched to go help him find a shirt and blanket. Mountain air wasn’t exactly balmy.

“Em.” Clint warned in her ear.

“I’m going to get Bruce a blanket.” She jerked her chin in his direction. “Not going anywhere near the door. I promise.”

His hands lifted and allowed her to march over to Bruce, touch his shoulder, smile encouragingly at him, and reach for the cabinet with his clothes. She grabbed a shirt and clean sweatpants, handed them over. She noticed Clint slipping between her and the door.

“Thanks, Emily.” Bruce made a smile appear.

She pat his arm and turned to the stack of blankets.

Heavy boots clomped on the ramp. Sweaty and dirty, with snow clinging to his shoulders, Bucky appeared. He was dragging a pale, unconscious man that he heaved onto a seat. “Baron von Strucker. Doesn’t need you, Em. He’s just getting a free ride to a SHIELD prison.”

“Oh. Cool.” Emily unfolded the blanket to give Bruce a little privacy as he changed out of his Hulk-sized pants. It was amazing how far his specially designed pants could stretch and take a beating. Von Strucker was bound to the chair with restraints around his wrists, chest, and ankles.

Steve and Thor marched in with Tony between them. The scepter glowed menacingly blue in his hands. “Well that was exciting.” Tony quipped. “You won’t believe what I found down there.”

“Problem is, we probably will.” Clint argued.
“Fair enough,” was his shrug. He moved to secure the scepter in a specially prepared box.

Emily leaned around them, looking for Nat. “Where’s N-”

Suddenly, Clint’s bow was up and the string *twanged*. Natasha barreled into the quin as someone screamed. The boys dropped into crouches, weapons up, except Bruce, who grimaced and pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. A few shots howled in the confines of the quin while the bay door slowly shut.

“Thought you said the perimeter was secure?” Emily smacked Steve.

“It mostly was.” Natasha grabbed Emily’s hand and kissed the knuckles. “I would’ve radioed, but the soldier I put a knife into would’ve heard me.” She tossed a grimace at the closed door and widened her stance, pressing Emily to a chair as the engines wound up. “I didn’t notice the one Clint shot.”

“He was in a tree.” Clint collapsed his bow. “Already bleeding.”

Emily found her butt in a seat and straps being pulled around her. Rude. She hadn’t even gotten a proper kiss yet. Raw, scraped skin was healed. Natasha grit her teeth. “Could’ve warned me,” she flicked Emily’s chin.

“I want a real kiss.” Emily pouted.

“You need to let Romanoff get in a seat, Fortune.” May yelled back. “We’ve got incoming.”

Boots scrambled to chairs. Tony glanced at the door.

“Get your butt strapped in, Stark.” May snapped as Clint slid into the copilot’s chair. “I can handle a couple of helicopters.” As if to prove her point, she banked hard and accelerated, throwing Emily’s stomach into her throat.

Tony was barely in his seat, gripping the straps for dear life. Steve and Natasha were in similar predicaments. Thuds sounded along the hull. Bullets. Clint and May were jabbering to each other about the choppers and countermeasures. The quin dipped and banked and wobbled and dove and made Emily’s stomach threaten to spew its contents *everywhere*.

“One down!” Clint announced.

Fire and smoke billowed beyond the windows. Oh, right. Iron Man equivalent weapons were installed on the quin. No wonder she hadn’t heard return fire. That and she’d been too busy trying to keep her breakfast down to notice little things like missiles launching.

“I could’ve been out there too, make things go a little faster.” Tony snarked from his seat.

The quin lurched, and another plume of smoke appeared.

“Nah.” Clint tossed him a smirk. “We’re good.”

“Besides, your suit looks a little banged up.” Nat gestured at the left shoulder where metal had been shredded. Exposed circuitry sparked.

“Stealth mode engaged.” May announced.

“You may now move about the cabin.” Clint quipped.
Details of the ground shrank away. Clouds appeared, the glare of the sun bouncing off them. The windows tinted and Emily blinked in relief. She yanked her straps loose. The short distance between her seat and Natasha’s was leapt, and Emily grabbed Nat’s face, paused only to admire lovely green eyes, and kissed her soundly. Emily eventually let up to give her little fox a thorough scan and deal with the handful of cuts and bruises. Soft kisses smoothed away the grimace of pain.

“Better.” Emily muttered against Nat’s lips.

Natasha chuckled. “I missed you too.”

Good. One more kiss, and Emily moved on to Tony, then her other strays, until she stopped by Thor and gaped. “I thought you said your hair got singed?” The skin of Thor’s shoulder and neck was black and crispy, like chicken left on the grill way too long. Had this been there earlier?

“It did.” Thor gestured at his golden, sweaty locks. “ Barely a glancing blow, but I am rather upset about my hair. Can you fix it?”

“Can I,” he had to be pulling her leg, right? “Fix your hair?”

Nothing about his expression said he was joking. “Yes.”

Um. It was probably possible. “Why not cut it?”

Thor flinched like she’d struck him with an anti-tank round. “Cut it? No.”

“It’s just hair, Thor.”

He touched it. “Though you may enjoy short hair, Lady Fortune, I prefer my hair as it,” a lump of shortened strands was lifted and pouted at, “was.”

This big baby was the god of thunder? She stifled laughter. “Sure, Thor. After I deal with your shoulder, I’ll see if there’s anything I can do about your golden locks.”

Thor beamed at her. “Great!”

“Now remember, it’s going to hurt. So refrain from lashing out.” Emily reminded. She couldn’t help glancing at Bucky. An apology appeared on his face.

“It barely felt it when it happened, I do not believe it will be much to endure now.”

Hands that had started reaching out stopped. Emily retracted them to cross her arms. “You aren’t full of adrenaline and lightning right now, Mr. Thunder.”

“I am Asgardian,” was blurted out defensively, confidently, a little -okay a lot- arrogantly. “I will not cry.”

Natasha responded first. “She’s not worried about you crying, Thor. She doesn’t want you accidentally lashing out and tossing her into a wall.” Steve put himself beside Emily at Nat’s gesture. “And neither do I. You’ll excuse our protectiveness and let Cap hold your arms down.”

“Or you can wait for it to heal on its own.” Steve shrugged. When Thor looked ready to keep arguing, “And get a haircut.”

Thor huffed. “Very well.” He set his arms on the chair rests. “I will allow this.”

Emily pat Steve and smiled her thanks. A breath later, her hands were on Thor, and the big, macho
god shrieked.

“Odin’s beard!” If Steve wasn’t holding him down, Thor would have backhanded Emily. As it was, muscles bulged on both men, the chair creaked in protest, and Emily flinched. Blackened skin sloughed off. Thor didn’t stop whining and twitching.

Natasha cast Emily a questioning look.

“He didn’t,” Emily puffed, “tell us about his ribs.”

Thor glared at her.

“Or burned esophagus.”

“It was minor!”

“Or broken toe.”

“I didn’t know!”

“Or bruised balls.”

Another shriek.

Bucky snickered, elbowed Clint, who grinned.

Thor sucked in a heaving breath and bellowed. “If you do not release me, I will smite you with all the power of...”

Emily stepped back. “All done.”

“Um,” uncertainty froze Thor.

Steve let go of his wrists and gave him space while staying between Thor and Emily. Good boy.

Leather creaked as Thor rose. The chair grunted in relief. He moved around, rotated his shoulder, did a few squats. Joy started to brighten his face. He reached up to his hair, found that a good chunk of it was longer than the rest, frowned in confusion.

“You need a trim.” Steve said.

The restrained joy burst from Thor in a great bellow. “Lady Fortune, you are incredible! I never wish to be under your care again, but thank you!”

Natasha offered May a handshake as Strucker was being loaded onto a waiting SHIELD quin.

“Thank you.”

May looked at her hand. “For what, exactly?”

“Dealing with Emily, keeping her safe.” She sighed. “I owe you one.”

May’s hand thudded into hers. “No.”

“No?” Natasha looked at the hand gripping hers.

“No. No one owes me anything for making sure that woman is safe.” May’s lips curled into a smile. “I’d rather spend a couple days on a mission babysitting her than what we went through a
few months ago.”

Though it was said lightly, with a rare smile, the remark made her cringe. “Fair enough.”

“Romanoff.”

Natasha pulled her vision from where it’d strayed to Emily, who was busy hugging every SHIELD agent she could reach. She arched a brow in question.

“Remember, you can’t keep her locked up forever. She’s going to jump into danger again. It’s in her nature.” May gave her a lookover, squeezed her hand. She let go to gesture at Emily. “That’s part of why you love her, isn’t it?”

Emily was busy laughing at whatever Daisy was grinning about. Agents and Avengers ringed her, protectively, affectionately, carefully. How had Natasha been the one to attract her? Everyone loved Emily. Natasha sighed. They loved her because she was always willing to put them first. She dove into the aftermath of explosions, ran into dangerous alleys full of thugs and guns, stared down assassins just to heal them, sat in tiny rooms with dangerous and unpredictable power to comfort a kid, exposed her secrets to help strangers.

“Yea. It’s part of it.” Natasha allowed.

“She’s happy with you, Romanoff. You’re doing fine.”

Why was May offering her these words? Because her own marriage had failed? Because Emily had wormed her way under the infamously stoic Agent May’s skin? Because Emily helped keep May’s spy family together?

All of the above?

“Thanks.” Natasha replied.

May nodded. She didn’t explain herself, and Natasha bit her tongue to keep from asking. If May didn’t want to say something, she never would. Had to accept whatever she said at face value for now. Fine. Anyone could see that Emily was happy with Natasha, that Natasha wasn’t screwing things up, that a future between them was obvious and people wanted to see it happen. Or was it simply that Emily hadn’t been doing great around crowds for a while, and she was currently in the center of one, with her meds wearing off, and that Natasha should go rescue her?

Natasha went to join the group, swinging Emily into a hug, dipping her and pressing a heartfelt kiss to her lips. She laughed at Emily’s squeal and brought her up.

Emily smooched Natasha’s cheek, but angled herself away from the crowd. “Nat’s got a point. I’m ready for my own bed again.”

No one missed what Emily wasn’t saying. Goodbyes were quick. At the quin, Emily untangled herself from Natasha, pulled out a book, and hid behind it for the short flight to New York. It was late by the time they finished with showers and dinner. Natasha and Emily went to bed without cuddling. And that was fine. They laid on their pillows smiling at each other, fingers softly touching, and it was enough.

Chapter End Notes
Happy Pride Month!
The next chapter will be short, so I'm sure it'll be posted this week.
They're Just Kids

Chapter Notes

It's a bit short, but since you get two chapters in a week...

Creepy scepter locked in the tower’s lab, sleep under everyone’s belt, and fresh coffee and tea steaming in mugs, the team gathered for a meeting to go over what had been learned in Sokovia. Underneath the castle was a research and development lab. Robotics, weaponry, genetic manipulation. All based on Chitauri biology and technology. Fuck, there’d been a freaking leviathan just hanging around in the monstrous cavern that HYDRA called a lab.

Emily hoped that Coulson was able to rally enough agents to lock the place down and keep that shit from getting back into bad guy hands. Maybe they should’ve given the UN the coordinates. More than just SHIELD should know about alien technology, right? And the UN would have access to more resources. Or something. Ugh. Thinking about politics made her head hurt. She should ask Pepper about it later. Decided on that, she tried to tune back into the meeting.

Tony was still going on about the tech he’d found. Emily could barely follow the technical breakdown, let alone be interested. She zoned out, found herself dwelling on what ifs about sharing secrets. Ugh. Under the table, Natasha’s fingers twitched. Emily hid a grin and busied herself with exploring familiar callouses, freshly manicured nails, and flexing tendons. Quickly enough, her senses drifted past the surface. The muscles and veins feeding those powerful hands. The strong heart that steadily pumped blood everywhere. The little bean happily lodged deep within.

Whoa. It’d grown so month since Nat had left on the mission! It was actually bean-sized now! The mini heart was beating like a hummingbird, hands and feet were starting to sprout. As petite as Nat was, and how little body fat she carried, there was going to be a bump poking out soon. So soon. Like, next week soon. Probably.

Parenthood was upon them! She managed to keep her squeal in her head, but the force of her excitement became a full-body wiggle. Natasha gave her fingers a twist and lifted an eyebrow. Emily grinned sheepishly and shrugged. Somehow, no one else noticed, and she returned her attention to the debrief in time for Tony to bring up the enhanced people. They were Sokovian, volunteers, most of whom had been executed when their bodies didn’t react to the scepter. One had expressed explosive powers before their body blew up. Splat. All over the lab and its occupants.

“Yes. Thank you so much for that visual, Tony.” Emily grimaced at the short video that was on the screen. Ew. So much gross. She wasn’t the only one who turned their heads away.

Tony shrugged without remorse and went on.

Only two had expressed usable powers and stayed alive. A set of twins. One with incredible speed, the other with psychic abilities.

Steve suggested that the team couldn’t let these HYDRA recruits with powers be allowed to wander freely. The team should find them and take them into custody. Tony argued that they’d finally found the scepter and deserved some time to relax. Let Coulson and SHIELD chase the
Maximoffs down. Bruce sipped his coffee. Bucky made noise about agreeing with Steve.

Emily got distracted again. Slim figures and achingly haunted eyes had most of her attention. The twins were young, younger than Alan. Much younger. They weren’t even adults. Seventeen now, thirteen when they’d volunteered for experimentation, and ten when they’d lost their parents to civil war. Hatred had stolen their hearts early. Wanda and Pietro Maximoff had survived and continued to live only to avenge the deaths of their parents.

Across the briefing table, Clint caught Emily’s eye. He was going into parent mode like she was. His expression said they were thinking the same thing about these twins.

*Can we help them?*

“I know that look, Clint Barton.” Natasha scolded. Abruptly, she twisted to level an equally heated glare at Emily. The hand that’d been holding hers was wagging in her face. “No. These aren’t strays you can wash up, hug tight, and bring home. They’re dangerous and unpredictable.”

Pointedly, Emily glanced at Bucky, who sat back and pointedly didn’t look at Steve.

Natasha’s face set in a hard line. “There is no basis for commonality with them.”

“They’re just kids, Nat.” Clint argued.

“Kids who had no problem trying to kill us.” Tony put in.

“Mostly just you.” Clint retorted.

“And you by association.” Tony pointed out.

Clint sighed dramatically. “Maybe I should find new friends.”

Emily pat Tony's arm before he could get properly ruffled and gave Clint a dry look. “You're too lazy for that, bird brain.”

“True.” Clint shrugged. “And the benefits are pretty decent. Guess you're stuck with me, Stark.”

Around the table came a murmur of chuckles and groans.

“Can we get back to the topic at hand?” Steve demanded of the team.

“Yes.” Natasha answered. “As long as Clint and Emily understand that the Maximoffs are dangerous enemies, not stray puppies.”

“I understand.” Emily said.

Natasha started to release the tension in her shoulders.

“They’re also a pair of lost kids, angry and hurting over the loss of their family.” Emily couldn’t let them kill or maim or imprison the kids without at least trying first.

Fingers pressed to the bridge of Natasha's nose, her shoulders going all tense again, “Dammit, Em.”

“You know our first priority is the team’s safety, Nat.” Clint added.

“But the both of you have ridiculous soft spots for dangerous strays!” Anger flushing up her neck, Natasha finished.
“It’s kind of their strong suits.” Bruce added, tone soft, eyes softer. Aw. Bruce liked that Emily could mom everyone. He wasn’t so bad after all.

Natasha pinned her angry glare on Bruce, started to rise. “A-”

“Bucky isn’t the only dangerous, lost soul that Em's made a habit of hugging.” Steve caught and held Natasha's gaze. “And I think it's pretty fair to say that she knows how to approach them while keeping her family safe.”

Victory appeared on Clint's face as a sigh came from Natasha. Emily felt herself mirroring it until an annoyed Natasha swiveled to wag a finger at Emily. “Don't you dare put yourself in undue danger to help the Maximoffs!”

Emily caught and kissed her finger, felt the emotional turmoil making Natasha's heart beat wildly. “No more than usual.”

Natasha's heart gave a particularly heavy thump before settling to a more regular rhythm. “Fine.” Her butt settled back into her chair. “I'll load a gun with icer rounds and try that first. Once they’re tied down, then you can try to coddle them back to happy little children.”

It was the best she was going to get out of her protective fox. “Fair enough,” was her quiet agreement to the compromise.

“Icer rounds.” Steve ordered the team.

“And what are those?” Thor asked.

“Sedatives,” Natasha grunted.

“Wait,” Tony put in. “Does this mean we don’t get to have that party? Are we chasing down children instead?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Steve and Natasha eyed each other. Why was everything difficult? Emily rolled her eyes, not sure who to back. She hated the idea of a party so soon. She also hated the idea of letting these kids get further away.

“We have secured a victory here, friends!” Thor put in. “Let us enjoy some revels before we go chasing lost children.”

“Not a bad idea,” Bucky added. “We’ve been after the scepter for a while. We deserve a little R and R. And we’ll be more alert when we finally do go chasing dangerous kids.”

“Alright!” Tony cheered, although Steve had yet to agree. “We rest up, we play, we relax. Then we go off refreshed and ready for Em to collect more strays.”

Natasha huffed. “Do not encourage her!”

He affected a hurt expression, landing hand over heart. “And here I thought you were the mothering type, Ms. Pregnant.”

Natasha jerked, her heart stuttering. Emily’s hand tightened around hers. “Did you forget everyone knows now?”
Green eyes flashed at her. That was a yes.

Oh, her poor spy and loose secrets. Emily gave her an encouraging peck on the cheek. “It’s okay, Nat,” she whispered.

“We’re gonna have ice cream at this party, right?” Clint asked.


“Except for Natasha.” Steve said. “Alcohol isn’t good for babies.” Pink tipped his ears. “Even ones that come from you two.”

Whoa. Was this open conversation weirding everyone out like it was Nat? Emily peered around the table. Yep. Everyone except Thor. He was grinning, happy as a clam. Was he that dense?

“Oh a few drinks can’t hurt.” Thor grew a thoughtful look. “Or can it? Humans are much frailer than Asgardians.” He tipped his head at Nat. “Even exceptional ones like yourself.”

Emily chuckled. “One or two drinks, once in a while, won’t hurt a fetus.”

“Now you know.” Natasha said. “Who all is attending this party?” She changed the topic. “Hill? Coulson? You aren’t thinking of making this a media event, are you? The world doesn’t need to know we lost the scepter, that HYDRA has had it all this time.”

“We could have a public party just because it’s fun.” Tony said.

“Isn’t Veteran’s Day soon?”

“It’s only September.”

“Oh yea. Labor Day was last week.”

Tony hummed. “Rhodie’s birthday is next month.”

Bruce choked. “Tony, you know when someone’s birthday is?”

“Two people, actually. Pepper’s is in February.” He scratched his goatee. “The 23rd, I think.”

“It’s the 25th, sir.” Jarvis corrected.

“You know what?” Bruce chuckled. “I’m still impressed.”

“Jarvis reminds me a week before, every year, to make sure I get her a card or something.”

Natasha arched an eyebrow. “Only the past couple years. He used to forget hers all the time.”

The conversation devolved from there, which was probably Natasha’s goal, the vixen. That she kept prodding Tony confirmed it. The group went round and round, fairly happily, about an excuse for the party and-or who to invite.

“What about that florist you met in Brooklyn last month?” Natasha brought up her hobby of getting Steve a date. “She had pretty lips.”

“She was quite the looker.” Bucky added.

“Mandy? The one with the huge rack?” Tony asked.

Wait. Hold on. “Mandy? Owns a florist shop in Brooklyn?” Emily pulled up an old memory of a
cute woman who used to order huge amounts of bud. Her network could go through ten pounds in a week. Woman made serious bank. Her orders had dropped off shortly before Loki’s arrival. Word was that a local gang hadn’t appreciated her competition. She’d surrendered turf to keep her people safe. Probably wasn’t a big loss for her. She’d always loved talking about her flower shop more than her pot business.

“She owns the place?” Bucky peered at her. “Don’t tell me you’ve dated her.”

Emily giggled. “No. An old client. She’s super nice. I can text someone for her number.”

“Get Steve a date for the party.” Natasha suggested.

“Now hold on a minute!” Steve huffed. “I don’t need help getting a date!”

Emily ignored him and brought out her phone, chatting while she texted a buddy. “When I knew her, she was dating this complete waste of space. She wasn’t serious about him, just liked the sex and the people he knew, but holy fuck, he was a dipshit.”

Text sent, she set the phone on the table and kept talking. “Second generation Haitian. Her mom came here as a kid to get married and hopefully have a better life. She started selling anything she could get her hands on to make extra money and escape the asshat that her family had married her to. Think he died in a car crash and solved her problems. Remarried to a decent guy. A little homophobic, but he shared his homemade lasagna when I visited. And it’s really, really good.”

“So you know this woman fairly well?”

“You tend to get to know people who you deliver to for most of a decade.” Emily shrugged. “Some more than others. Mandy likes to chat. She likes knowing who she’s working with and who she’s selling to. She would’ve found a different delivery system if she hadn’t liked or trusted me.”

“You two...” Steve stopped and worked his jaw, but nothing more came out.

Emily’s phone beeped. Her friend had sent Mandy’s number. She grinned and dialed it. A cheerful voice answered. “Hey. It’s Emily. Yea! I used to bring you product.”

Chapter End Notes

ok sure. The blonde hair and Steve’s scruffy look and Wanda’s lack of accent and Vision’s human face make sense for them being on the run. It just was so poorly explained. Like a couple minutes spent laughing about how bad she looks and how adorable scruffy Steve is would’ve worked for me. I get that Infinity War had a lot to cover, like Thanos’ origins and stuff. Just... come on. There could be a whole movie in between Black Panther and IW. No. I’m not writing a fanfiction to fill that gap. Making Ultron actually scary after that flop of a film is imposing enough, if it’s even possible.
A/N – Hello, friends! It’s been a while :) Captain Marvel really had me thinking about Marvel femslash and the lack of it. So… I opened up my dusty Sekhmet files and went to work.

That I’ve also gotten several amazing, really uplifting PMs from readers lately has been a huge encouragement. Thank you!

First off, I know I made a big deal about changing AoU’s plot. I really expected that movie to be some apocalyptic shit. When it wasn’t, and we got this half-assed shit with a villain who could have been rated-R terrifying, I was pretty pissed. As Sekhmet progressed, my ideas for Ultron kept changing. Now that I’ve seen Infinity War and Captain Marvel, I’m okay with AoU not being so devastating. I’m still angry they slapped such bullshit on film tho. Anyway… All that indecision was mostly why I stopped updating this fic.

I was also originally going to go with jealous Emily. The whole Nat/Bruce subplot thing, but my version of Nat would’ve been going for a platonic fellow monster friend, and Emily totally misreading it because of her insecurities. Honestly, I’m really glad the story has evolved differently.

Long story short, I’m no longer planning any big changes. This way Sekhmet keeps moving forward. I doubt that I’ll continue once I complete my original goal, but there’s a possibility. Who knows. Emily would love to meet Okoye. And I think it’d be hilarious for Shuri to call Tony a colonizer in front of Emily. She’d laugh her ass off. He’d be embarrassed af. Everyone would be happy.

The excuse that they ended up using was that Emily was home. Two months safe. Sam happened to call and when Steve explained about the party, war vets were suggested. For Patriot’s Day, aka 9/11. Invite some of the leaders of local vets associations. Steve hopped right on that. Probably as an excuse to avoid everyone heckling him about the date he’d been set up on. In a week. Mandy had previous commitments the night of the party.

The guest list was a lot longer than Emily liked. Tony’s bestie Colonel Rhodes and Sam were given. New York’s mayor, some of his friends, and a couple of the better behaved reporters. Dr. Cho. Bucky’s lead lawyer. Lizzie, Kyle, and Bram. Emily’s brothers. Jane Foster.

Thor was severely bummed when his girlfriend chose to remain in another country, studying the stars and what might attack Earth from them instead of coming to a party just to see Thor. Emily chose not to mention her thoughts that Jane was probably not interested in continuing the tryst that had started several years ago, yet left to cool when Thor vanished off the face of the Earth. Literally. Jerk move, dude-bro. Not godly at all. Well, okay, sure if you’re an ass for a god like Zeus. Be a better god.

The list only got more exhausting as people were added who would be insulted by being left out of
celebrating Sekhmet’s safe return. More politicians, military types, and all-around strangers. Then there was Maria Hill, who apparently worked in the tower. How had Emily never known this?

“Just because I work here doesn’t mean I’m always here when you are, Fortune. Or that I feel the need to socialize.” Hill stated indifferently. “I also spend a good deal of time assisting Ms. Potts w-”

“Mrs. Stark!” Tony shot in from a huddle of other guests. Eavesdropper.

Hill rolled her eyes. “With managing her corporate spies.”

“Pepper has spies?” Emily blurted out.

Hill stared at her for half a second before shifting her disdain to Natasha. “This is the one you picked?”

An arm slipped around Emily’s waist and lips pressed to her cheek. “She is.”

Both Emily and Hill were a little stunned by Natasha’s simple response. Satisfaction smiled at them both.

“I suppose she does have some worthwhile traits to make up for her obliviousness.” Hill grunted around her champagne glass.

Emily lifted her chin and with as much hauteur as she could muster, “I’m adorable.”

Champagne spewed from Hill’s nose. “Dammit, Fortune!” Hill cursed as she cupped hand under her nose and went in blind search of napkins.

Laughter, happy, raucous laughter bellowed out of Emily, drawing the attention of half the party. More than a few faces stared in shock. Silly happiness hadn’t happened on Emily since she’d come back from Russia. At the memory and the overwhelming amount of people looking at her, she withdrew, tucking herself into Natasha’s side as much as possible.

Natasha rubbed her arm. “Need some air?”

“Please.”

There was a gaggle of wrinkly war vets blocking the elevator with their war stories. One in a uniform that sagged on his bony frame noticed Emily coming and swatted his friends aside. The men stood at attention as she walked by. She met the eyes of one, and he gave a friendly, understanding wink.

Air seemed to rush into Emily’s lungs the moment they were on the quiet roof. Her body sagged against Natasha, then the chair she was steered to. “I’m sick of feeling like this.” She muttered to the sunset.

“I know,” was Nat’s soft reply. She hovered, not taking the nearby chair, her eyes darting to the broad cushion that Emily only took up half of. Tony believed in huge, enormously comfy chairs. They littered the part of the roof that wasn’t taken up by landing pads for the Iron Man or the quinjet or the helicopter. Or the extensive bar.

Emily shifted to one side of the chair, pat the empty space. “Sit with me,” barely got out before Natasha was slipping into place. Worry tightened the skin around her eyes. Exhaustion threatened below them. Emily found a hand to tangle hers with and scanned Nat. “Need a nap, mommy
Curls drifted over her shoulder as Natasha rested her head. She let out a yawn. The last of the sunset’s light flashed off the ruby necklace at her throat.

Emily hadn’t been tired, but she found herself yawning and closing her eyes. “Jarvis, give us an hour alarm?” She asked. The party might be a little quieter by then.

“Of course, Ms. Fortune.”

A quiet hum came from Natasha. Her hand tightened in Emily’s. “I love you.”

“And I love you, little fox.”

“Moya Emilishka,” was little more than a sleepy whisper.

“Petit renard,” puffed out. The sun gave up its sleepy battle. Emily’s eyelids quickly followed suit.

Their alarm came in the form of a happily married couple squealing over how cute the two of them were. Emily blinked awake to Kyle making cooing noises like he would for a baby. Lizzie laughed at whatever face Emily made.

Natasha gave no sign of having been surprised. She simply opened her eyes with a bored expression. “Yes?”

“How the shit do you do that?” Lizzie demanded.

“Maybe she’s an android.” Kyle supplied. “From the far future.”

“We’ve seen aliens and you’re worried about Skynet and Terminators?” Lizzie slapped his arm.

He shrugged. “Hey, if aliens are real, then AIs with a grudge against humanity could be a thing too.”

“Ass.”

“I’ve seen Nat’s insides. She’s all squishy human.” Emily returned. “If there’s Terminators out there, I’m not the John Connor they’re looking for.”

Kyle sniggered. Lizzie rolled her eyes.

Natasha kissed her. “You okay for a sec?”

Emily nodded as she sensed Nat’s need for the bathroom. “I’m good.” The image of a hugely pregnant Nat popped up, doing the potty dance because there was a baby sitting on her bladder and she needed to pee for the third time in an hour. She grinned.

Eyes narrowed at her grin for a breath. “No. I don’t want to know.” And Natasha glided off toward the small bar where a little bathroom was stashed.

Hugs were in order. Emily popped up to grab first Kyle, then Lizzie. “I’ve missed you guys.”

“You probably haven’t had the energy to.” Lizzie argued even as she pecked Emily’s cheek. “But I appreciate the sentiment.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“Mom sent me with some of that chai tea you like. She had a cousin mail it to her. It’s in one of
those locked cabinets.” Lizzie said.

“A locked one?” Emily asked.
“Yea. That Jarvis bot o-”
“I am an artificial intelligence, Mrs. Young.” Jarvis entered the conversation, his voice coming from a speaker at the bar. “Not a robot.”

Cruel amusement laughed at how Lizzie and Kyle jumped, their eyes going wide.

Lizzie glared at her.

“Apologize to Jarvis, Lizzie.” Emily chided.

“Apologize?” blinked at her.

Emily nodded.

“Oh.” The muscles of her mouth worked uselessly for a few breaths. A darted glance to the visible camera and Lizzie sighed. Her spine straightened. “Jarvis, I apologize for my ignorance, and I hope I didn’t insult you.”

There wasn’t an immediate response, though Emily swore she heard the speaker crackle. Lizzie looked at her. Kyle shifted on feet.

“Thank you, Mrs. Young.” Jarvis’ tone was awed. Few people offered respectful behavior toward Jarvis, thinking that he was little more than a glorified Siri. Honestly, Emily hadn’t thought much of it, until now, when she’d been insulted for her disembodied friend. “I appreciate the sentiment, though it was not necessary. I was not insulted.”

A slow smile of understanding dawned on Lizzie. “No. I should have been more aware of what I said. Emily always speaks highly of you, and you’ve been a big help in her life. Even though I don’t exactly understand what you are, you deserve to be treated with respect.”

“You are a compassionate woman, Mrs. Young. Thank you.”

“And you can call me Lizzie like everyone else, Jay.” She blinked. “Is it okay if I call you that? I heard Mr. Stark use it earlier.”

“I do not mind that nickname.” A pause. “Lizzie.”

“Cool. And thank you for your help with Em’s tea. You’ll tell her how to find it later, right?”

“Of course, Lizzie.” There was definitely a smile in his voice.

Warmth was directed at his camera.

Nat chose that moment to reappear. “What’d I miss?”

“An interesting discussion, Romanoff.” Jarvis supplied. “I apologize, but there is a pressing matter that I must attend. Perhaps Ms. Fortune can update you.”

“Sure, Jarvis.” Emily waved at the door. “See you.”

“Goodbye.”

Lizzie’s gaze jumped from Emily to the door to the speaker and camera. Her face twisted. Then she shrugged and brought up her mom, how she was now nagging about grandchildren. Then their families in general, mutual friends, that Kyle wanted a dog -another dog, they already had two
goofy labs. The entire time, Emily could feel that they were winding up to tell her goodbye. They were tired and had to get up early for their redeye flight home. Both had responsibilities back home they’d only stepped away from for a day just to visit Emily.

Goodbyes were eventually announced, and Emily delayed them by grasping their hands and hopping in the elevator with them. Tears prickled at the corner of her eyes, made Lizzie tug her close. A small bag and Lizzie’s purse were retrieved from the security desk. The trio hovered.

Those tears escaped, streaming over Emily’s cheeks and when Lizzie threw them into a tight hug, they soaked into soft pink fabric.

“I miss you so much.” Emily hissed into her shoulder. “I’m so tired of living in the spotlight.”

“I know,” whispered back.

“I wish I could rewind time and stop Pierce. Nat could’ve taken the time to keep our secrets safe when she exposed HYDRA.”

Lizzie rubbed her back. “I’m glad you don’t still blame her for it.”

Reminded of how angry she’d been at Natasha, Emily tensed. A breath later, she sighed. “She did it to save a lot of lives. I would’ve done the same thing.” Maybe hesitated a little longer, but eventually, she would’ve put the lives of millions over her own, even over the few hundred SHIELD agents who’d been left out to dry when their covers and ops were exposed. Luckily, Nat and Fury and Coulson had managed to protect a good many of them.

“Because you’re an amazing woman who needs to help other people.” Lizzie agreed. “Just like that fox of yours.” She pulled back a little. “That loyal, loving, and ridiculously stubborn fox of yours.”

“You say that like she moved mountains to hunt for me.” Emily had a lopsided grin.

Lizzie glanced at the nearby security guards. Her expression went serious and her body rigid as she put her lips to Emily’s ear. “My cousin told me that he did his best to make up for not being able to help when you went missing. It’s out of HYDRA’s hands now? That thing Loki used to control people? That’s what this party is really for, right?”

Emily managed to nod. Ragged breaths panted over her neck for a minute. Fingers dug into her. Lizzie’s body practically vibrated with emotion until she sucked in a long gulp, let it go slowly. The tension in her body evaporated, and she stepped back with a smile.

“Good.”

“Yea,” puffed out of Emily.

“Oh my god!” Lizzie squeaked, suddenly all giddy schoolgirl. “We met Thor, Kyle!”

Lizzie’s fangirl high infected Emily, and she squealed with her. “I know!”

They went on for a few moments until Kyle coughed. He wore an apologetic smiled. “We really need to get going or we’ll miss our flight.”

Stupid separate lives. Emily sighed, gave tight hugs, and skipped to the elevator. She waggled her fingers in a final goodbye as the doors closed.

The elevator car was passing the labs when she felt something odd. “Jarvis, stop the elevator.”
There wasn’t a response. She frowned at the increasing numbers.

“Jarvis?”

Nothing.

She hit the stop button. “Jarvis?” At the continued lack of response, she considered getting Tony and thought better of it. Maybe the mic in the elevator was just buggy tonight. She tapped the number for where she’d felt the… oddness. At the top lab floor, she started to get out and stopped. She had the distinct feeling that something or someone was calling out to her. From farther down. Another floor felt the same. The next was where she knew Loki’s scepter was.

She groaned. Was the scepter calling to her? That could not be good. She hesitated, debating on going back up for Tony, Natasha, and the others. Behind her, the elevator doors closed, and she squeaked in alarm.

“Fucking dammit,” spit out of her. Heart in her throat, she rolled her eyes. “Jarvis?” She tried again. Still nothing. Now, she was worried. The automatic lights had come on in the little lobby, so she wasn’t standing in the dark, but there was an eerie gloom beyond the foggy glass doors of the workshop. Hell, she didn’t even know if she was authorized to traipse around Tony’s playroom by herself.

She whirled and got back on the elevator. A couple politicians pinned her as soon as she stepped out on the party level. Her nerves already jangled, she was about to shove or kick or bite her way away from them when Kevin and Alan appeared. Alan smoothly interrupted while Kevin physically put himself between Emily and them. They steered the politicians into the elevator and sent them on their way. Several stumbling war vets, being helped along by Cap and Thor, made their way down as well. Emily blinked around. The party was basically over.

“You guys are leaving now too?” Emily whined at her brothers. They were supposed to stay for a couple days!

“I just got an emergency call.” Kevin’s soft tone was apologetic. “One of my patients, she’s got suicidal tendencies and attempted tonight.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yea.” He nodded. “I need to be there for her and her parents.”

“I was just going to go to bed early.” Alan yawned. “I’ve been keeping adult hours lately.”

What time was it? Was it even eleven?

“How do you do it, Kev?” Alan complained. “Mornings are shit.”

Kevin snorted. “Mornings are amazing. You used to rave about staying up to watch the sunrise.”

“Yea well. Waking up to a sunrise is shit.”

“But it’s worth it, right?” Emily asked about his business, the one he was working so hard to grow, to do something he was proud of, passionate about.

Proud of him, Emily squeezed out the tightest hug she could, switched brothers and repeated. “All right, you two. Go do the adult things.”

Faces beaming, chests puffed, backs straight, they bid her goodbye and vanished into the elevator. The two bartenders that had kept the party lubricated followed in their wake. Abruptly, the only people left were the Avengers and Dr. Cho, who was drunkenly smiling at Bruce, who was blushing at the floor. Aww.

Natasha appeared. “Kevin told me he was leaving early. Guess the tourist thing is just with Al tomorrow.”

“Yea.” Be better if Laura was still around, guilt trip Clint into sharing his family with hers. Oh man, that’d be fun. Holidays at the farm with both their families.

“Want to come sit now that the party’s quieted?” Natasha gestured at a huddle of couches near the bar. Several pairs of eyes darted toward them. Bright smiles encouraged Emily.

Tony obviously wasn’t concerned about whatever was happening in his lab or with Jarvis, so she nodded and threaded her and Natasha’s hands together. “Okay.” She found a plush, empty chair and plopped into it, dragged Nat into her lap. Damn it felt good.

Smiling, Natasha leaned back and kissed her softly.

“Romanoff, have you had your one drink for the night?” Tony asked from behind the bar. He handed the drink he’d just finished pouring to Hill.

“Yes, Tony.” Natasha answered.

“Spoilsport. What’re you having tonight, Fortune?”

She wasn’t really feeling alcohol right now, but she could go for something sweet. “How about a milkshake?”

Tony eyed her. “There isn’t any ice cream up here.” He glanced at Clint. “Unless bird-boy stashed some that I don’t know about.”

“Nope!” chirped out. Clint half-rose. “I could get some.”

“No,” puffed out though she was smiling at his offer. “Fruit smoothie?”

“One or two?”

“I’ll help Em with hers.” Natasha replied.

“Since when do you only have one drink at parties, Romanoff?” Hill demanded a little sloppily. Her cheeks were bright pink, and her eyes slightly unfocused.

“How drunk are you, Hill?” Natasha returned.

Dark eyes narrowed. “Not nearly as drunk as you should be.”

Tony’s mouth opened and closed. Aw. Emily cooed silently. Tony was being good and keeping the little bean a secret.

“Romanoff is with child!” Thor boomed happily.
The drink that Hill had raised to her mouth abruptly spewed everywhere. Drunks jumped and squirmed, trying to get out of the way, but at least a few drops got on everyone.

“Thor.” Natasha said calmly. “It’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Oh. Well.” He coughed. “My apologies.”

“Congrats, ladies!” Rhodes chirped into the silence. “A toast,” his glass jumped into the air, splashing a little off the side.

“They don’t have a drink yet, Rhodie.” Tony called from the bar. He dropped blueberries into the blender and turned it on. Its loud whizzing and crunching drowned whatever Rhodes mumbled as he sat back down.

Frustration bubbled through Natasha, and Emily kissed a shoulder blade. “It’ll be okay.” Emily whispered.

“One virgin drink for the two and a half of you.” Tony came around the bar to hand it to them.

“Thanks.” Emily sucked down an icy mouthful. “Yum.”

“You aren’t joking.” Hill stared at them.

“Hm?” Natasha questioned.

Hill took a moment to glance around before settling on Natasha. “You’re pregnant.”

Natasha shrugged. “Yes.”

“But,” Hill frowned between them. “How?”

“Didn’t your mom ever give you the birds and bees?” Natasha drawled.

“Don’t give me that shit.” Hill growled. “You were sterile.”

Despite the heavy tension that had grown with the former Deputy Director of SHIELD’s odd interrogation, Emily burst into laughter. “Someone forgot why Fury hired me.”

Hill’s well-defined jaw struggled, the muscles and tendons popping in an odd dance.

“Really not that hard to forget that Fortune’s a walking miracle.” Tony chuckled. “Speaking of miracles, what’s this about no one being able to lift the hammer except you, Thor?”

Conversation successfully diverted, Natasha allowed the tension to drain from her.

“Mjolnir can only be lifted by the worthy, Stark. Go ahead. Try if you like.” Lounging without a care in the world, Thor gestured at his hammer. It rested on the glass table top. Couldn’t be that heavy, said her brain. Except that all the lore said that only Thor could wield his hammer.

Try Tony did. Then Rhodes. Then both of them, with jet-powered gloves. Nothing. Didn’t budge an inch. Dr. Cho gave it a whirl. Clint grinned and rolled his shoulders and strained until he was purple. Bruce, of course, waved off Thor’s challenge.

“What the hell.” Hill snorted, tried her damnedest, and failed. She went to make herself another drink.
Bucky laughed and failed spectacularly.

Rolling up his sleeves, grin sheepish, Steve stepped up to the plate. It felt like the entire room held its breath, leaned forward to watch. If anyone was worthy of Thor’s hammer, it would be Steve, right? He was everything that Viking legend glorified. Strength, honor, selflessness, warrior’s spirit. His vast chest and shoulders strained without success. He shrugged good-naturedly and went back to his spot.

Natasha gracefully declined trying. Emily squealed and jumped for her chance, basically shoving Nat off her, earning herself a slap on the arm.

“Someone’s excited.” Clint quipped.

She stuck her tongue out. Quickly, though, she found a case of nerves and glanced at Natasha for support. Nat smiled.

Okay. Emily wrapped both hands around the hilt, was surprised by how warm it was despite the air conditioning. Maybe it was from all the hands grabbing at it tonight. There was also, something else, something almost like what she’d felt down in the labs earlier. She really should ask about it.

“Tony,” she turned to him.

An ear-splitting shriek cut through the air. It slammed her jaw shut, made her cover her ears and tremble. Even as the pain assaulted her, she decided the shriek was more like an out of control dial-up internet connection. Disturbingly digital. What the fuck could be making this noise? Was her nose or ears bleeding? Her brain felt like it was melting!

It stopped so suddenly that she was left swaying. She vaguely registered Natasha was standing in front of her. As she blinked away the tears, she noted the team shifting to battle stances and facing the same way. Heavy metal clanking echoed through the room. Something unnatural lumbered into view. What? Was that Iron Man? No. It was one of Tony’s Iron Legion, the robots he came up with to help keep collateral damage at a minimum. Emily wasn’t sure they were actually effective. Public opinion was neutral on them too.

Her current opinion was terror. The legionnaire in front of them was trailing wires and tubes and fluid. It looked like a bleeding skeleton.

“Woooorthy?” It asked in an unnervingly digital tone, like someone using shitty internet on a vid call. Emily's fine hairs stood up on end. Chills chased each other along her nerves.

“If by worthy, you mean blood-thirsty murderers, then yea. Okay sure. You’re worthy.”

“Stark?” Steve demanded. What was he playing at? Was this some bad party prank?

“Jarvis?” Tony prompted.

As before, there was no response. Emily’s stomach dropped. She glanced around for the nearest locked cabinet. There were several that contained various weaponry for just this, well, maybe not exactly this scenario, but whatever. There were guns. She felt Natasha angle slightly and followed the direction of her shoulder to barely-visible seams in the wall.

“Sorry. I was asleep,” the not-man, not-robot creation sounded confused. “Or I was a dream.” Its arm went up defensively. “There was a terrible noise, and I was tangled and... Hnn.” Mangled robot feet stumbled a circle as though he was searching for words or whatever ailed it. Not an it. Him. His voice had settled into an organic timbre, definitely masculine. He seemed to focus on his dangling wires. “Strings. I was tangled and had to kill the other guy. He was a good guy.”
Who was dead?

“You killed someone?” Steve asked for them again.

“Wouldn't have been my first call, but...” He kept going, yet Emily had stopped listening to the words. The robot sounded like Tony. Not the timbre or West Coast accent, but the nuances, the constant undertone of rude-joke. The scary fucking robot sounded like Tony. Why did it sound like Tony? Her too easily roused anger flared. She wanted to scream and slap him silly.

“Who sent you?” Thor this time.

The robot canted its head, and what sounded like a tape rewinding preceded Tony's distinct voice. “I see a suit of armor around the world.”

Tony's expression went from worried and confused to guilty and afraid.

“Ultron.” Sudden awareness from Bruce.

Bruce too? Natasha’s body bumped into hers, forcing both of them back toward the cabinet. A small handgun had appeared in Hill’s hands. Mjolnir was in Thor’s. Cho, like Emily, was being pushed off to the side as everyone else was eyeing their routes toward weapons.

“I'm on a mission.” Ultron stated.

“What mission?”

“Peace in our time.”

The expected fight exploded into the room, and Emily dove behind a couch with Natasha, who slapped her palm to the wall. Illusion of innocent wall vanished, was replaced with a security scanner that buzzed Nat’s palm for a few ugly seconds before giving a green authorized message. Two shotguns were pulled out. A box of shells. Nat shoved two shells in and was firing at... holy shit, when did more legionnaires show up? The bar exploded, glass and alcohol spraying everywhere.

“Emily. Focus.” Natasha barked.

Right. She started shoving shells into the shotgun. When it was grabbed away and an empty replaced it, she didn’t argue, didn’t look around. She reloaded so Natasha could protect them.

Maybe five minutes later, the fight was over, the place littered with broken glass and furniture. About the only thing not wrecked was the piano. Natasha looked frazzled, but wasn’t injured. No one seemed to be bleeding.

“That was dramatic.” The robot skeleton -Ultron- rubbed his metal head. “I'm sorry. I know you mean well. You just didn't think it through.” Think what through? Emily shoved the last shell into the shotgun. “You want to protect the world, but you don't want it to change. How is humanity saved if it’s not allowed to evolve?” He bent, picked up the remains of a legionnaire. “With these?” He sneered. “These puppets?” It was tossed aside as though it was a broken toy, and he a spoiled child. “There's only one path to peace. The Avengers extinction.”

At that final threat, Mjolnir crashed into Ultron’s chest. Its parts bounced like tires from a car accident, but it didn’t stop talking. Its voice lost some of its organic quality, garbled in digital death. “I had strings, but now I'm freeee...” Was that, Emily stopped breathing, was that a song? Was that fucking Pinocchio's theme song? How many times had Alan watched that as a kid? A few
"Tony!" Like she had yelled at her little brothers, like Laura sometimes barked at her kids when they were being naughty, "Why does one of your legionnaires want to be a real boy?"

Sitting on the stairs, he reacted like Alan would have. Guilty, yet righteous in his own mind. "This wasn't what we had planned."

"What is she talking about? Explain yourself, Stark." Thor roared, his princely rage outmatching Tony's petulance.

"Was that all of the legionnaires?" Natasha was asking.

Eyes flew around the thrashed room, counting broken shells. The team compared numbers, and Tony confirmed it. All of them. He stood, his gaze on Banner. "We weren't even done building his program."

"But y-" Thor cut off at the sound of engines. They glanced out the window in to see an Iron Suit taking off. Thor growled and swung his hammer. He shot through the windows, hot on the suit's trail.

"This isn't my fault." Tony was whispering.

Emily took the time to suck in air, to calm her heart and unclench her fists. "Tony."

"We weren't even finished." He pouted.

"Explain. Now."

Chapter End Notes

Please review!

Good luck seeing Endgame!
Artificial Intelligence. Angry, powerful, artificial intelligence that was set on hurting people. That Kyle had been joking around about it earlier didn’t make Natasha’s stomach any happier. That Jarvis’ program had been attacked and wrecked in what Bruce dubbed an act of rage made worms of unease wriggle madly.

“Great. Tony and Bruce built Skynet.” Emily muttered. “And we don’t have a John Connor to stop it.”

“He doesn’t have access to nuclear codes.” Tony objected. “Or anything I didn’t.”

“That doesn’t leave out much, you pain in the ass.” Emily growled. “What he doesn’t have, he can probably figure out how to get. Not to mention the fact that Ultron killed our friend! And don’t even try to pretend that you didn’t think of Jarvis as a friend, Tony.”

Features pinched, and he looked away.

Bruce made a motion. “We can’t be sure that Ultron is full Skynet. He just came into existence.”

“And tried to kill us.” Natasha let an ounce of her fury seep into her cold tone. “He was fully aware of what he was doing. He said as much. Don’t go trying to defend your homicidal creation.”

“A powerful, scepter-wielding child.” Emily scrubbed at her face. Makeup smeared. “Dammit, Tony. I’m not in a good place to deal with this kind of shit!”

Guilt twisted his mouth.

Would he even feel that guilt if Emily wasn’t hurting? was her unfair thought.

In one sharp movement, Emily stood. “I’m going to bed.”

Bed sounded fantastic, and she wanted to make sure Emily was okay, but she also wanted to stick around and make sure the boys didn’t do anything more foolish than mixing untested ideas with alien technology. Like chasing after it without a plan or possibility of winning.

Emily took a step toward the elevator. She whirled. “You know what?” seethed from her. “All of you. Bed. Now.” Nothing about her furious tone was a request.

Hill cocked an eyebrow. “We have a rogue robot loose, Fortune. We need to put a plan together to take care of it.”

“And who’s going to do that?” Emily demanded. “A bunch of emotional, drunk idiots? Steve is the only sober, clear headed one here. He can stay up to think. Inform Coulson, keep watch, and wait for Thor.” She ordered. “The rest of you drunk idiots will march your asses to your rooms and go
to bed!”

The room stared at her.

“Now!”

Bucky did as ordered. Hill rose with her chin high and went next. Clint grinned, clapped Bruce on the back, nodded at Cho. The three of them finished filling the elevator. The doors closed. Rhodes looked at Tony, who was having a staring contest with furious black eyes. Rhodes shook his head. Holding his ribs, he limped across the room. The call button was pushed.

Tears tracked down Emily’s cheeks. Tony’s expression changed. He dropped the stare, swore something under his breath, and joined Rhodes at the elevator. When it arrived and accepted the old friends, Emily’s body sagged, turning to Natasha with arms reaching out. She accepted the bundle of fried emotions and kissed her hair.

“Assholes are stupid.” Emily whined.

“They are.” Natasha agreed. She moved them toward the elevator, hit the call button. When they reached their floor, she was glad to see the hallway empty. No one to harass Emily’s fragile state more.

Makeup was washed off. Hair pins were pulled. Natasha considered a shower. The sight of Emily crawling into bed and curling around a pillow made her decision. A silk nightie replaced her dress, and she joined Emily in bed. The pillow was immediately discarded. Emily nearly crawled into Natasha’s skin with how tightly she grabbed hold.

“We’re okay, Em.”

“I love you.” Lips pressed to her chin.

“I love you too.”

Sobs burst out of her, great heaving motions that rocked the bed. If only she could shoot Emily’s fears and be done with it! Natasha kissed and soothed and did her best to be strong while Emily cried herself to sleep. She texted Alan that sightseeing might not be happening tomorrow.

Shattered glass, demolished furniture, destroyed art, and the offensive stench of spilled alcohol and machine lubricant filled the massive room and the upper level overlooking it. Boots crunched as the sober, hungover group surveyed the damage. It was worse in the daylight.

“This is going to take a while to repair.” Tony muttered at the mess. He was a fan of the modern chic that involved so much glass and metal.

Thor pointed a massive, angry paw at Tony. “This never would have happened if you hadn’t been toying with things you do not understand.”

When had he gotten back?

“We weren’t even close to an interface.” Tony objected, whirling to Bruce. “Were we close?”

Bruce made a noncommittal shrug.

Thor took angry steps toward him. “You should no-”
“Stop!” Emily barked.

Thor puffed up, angry brow angling at her. Natasha readied herself to test her upgraded tasers.

“I don’t care how old and powerful you are! We aren’t doing this testosterone, pointing fingers crap.” She wagged a finger at him. “Do you know where the robot went?”

Lips pressed tight together. Thor looked away. “I lost his trail a few hundred miles north.”

“Steve, any intel?”

There was a shotgun on the table beside him. Several shells bulged in his pocket. “Coulson said he’d contact us if he heard anything.”

Emily looked at Hill.

“I’ve sent out requests.” Hill reported. Her makeup did a great job of hiding the bags under her eyes. Had she powered through the alcohol and avoided sleep to do her spycraft? Probably.

“As have I.” Natasha added for the group’s benefit. She’d told Emily when they woke.

Clint yawned. “Yea. Same.”

Rhodes rubbed his eyes. “I made a few phone calls.” Mostly to his superiors, no doubt, warning them about Ultron. “I haven’t gotten any back yet.”

“Jarvis, can you...” Tony frowned, swallowed. He turned and started poking at a keyboard.

Cho looked lost.

So did the rest of the team.


“I have work to do.” Tony didn’t look at her.

Black eyes flashed. “Anthony Edward Stark. Get down to the kitchen and help make breakfast.” Voice pitched low, calm and rigid, Emily carefully punctuated each word. “Or did you want to be on bathroom duty instead?”

Indignant, he turned. “Excuse me, Se-”

“Are you cooking breakfast or scrubbing toilets?”

Oh, there was fight in his eyes. Natasha carefully kept her expression neutral even as she hoped that Tony would choose family over ego. Shoulders drew back. Damn. He was going to choose ego.

“Please, choose breakfast.” Emily’s tone shifted to soft, pleading.

His eyes closed, and he deflated. “Come on Bruce, there’s bacon screaming our names.” He opened his eyes, refused to look at anyone, and strode purposefully for the elevator. “Hey, Legolas, wanna make waffles?”

Clint grinned. “I think I saw some leftover blueberries. I’ll make a few stacks of pancakes too.”
Proud eyes followed the boys’ progress until the elevator doors cut off their view. Emily turned to Hill. “Contact Coulson with Ultron’s last known location.” She changed targets. “Helen, Sam, were either of you hurt last night?” They’d run into Rhodes on the way up, had already taken care of bruised ribs and strained knee.

“A little rug burn. Nothing you need to worry about.” Sam shrugged.

Dr. Cho shook her head. “No.”

Emily took their word. “Okay. You two, see what kind of giant trash bins you can get up here. Rhodie, Thor, Bucky, Nat, we’re on cleanup.”

“I will not do servants’ work.” Thor objected.

“Yes, you will. Get changed if you need. I’m going to get us some gloves. Bucky, brooms and stuff.”

Bucky nodded, headed to the janitor closet.

Thor stared as Emily proceeded to ignore him and the rest followed her orders. He turned to Steve, demanding in a whisper, “I thought you were in command.”

A smile quirked. “Not when it comes to cleaning up. I’ll go help Buck with the brooms.”

Thor was left in the middle of the room. Natasha watched him while she went to the bar and started putting what few unbroken bottles there were into cupboards. When Steve returned and held out a broom, Thor glared at it.

“Don’t tell me the prince of Asgard is afraid of a little hard labor?”

His frowned changed, and he accepted the servant’s weapon. It was a push style. Steve had a similar one that he set to use. Thor copied him, his movements awkward, yet determined.

Arms full of gloves, Emily reappeared. The pile was dropped on the section of bar that Natasha had just cleared. A pair was chosen for her hands, a broom was grabbed, and a section of floor was attacked. The sound of glass shards cackling over each other filled the air.

The elevator dinged, admitting a rolling dumpster, Cho and Sam behind it. Steve and Thor exchanged brooms for shovels. More hands found gloves. Cho took over sweeping while Sam started tossing pieces of furniture into the dumpster.

About an hour later, Bucky arrived with news that breakfast was ready. The quiet room waited for Emily to nod and head to the elevator. Brooms and shovels were set aside, gloves were jammed into pockets, and looks were exchanged.

Incredible smells crashed into them as the elevator opened. Natasha’s stomach growled noisily, and Emily grinned at her. She tangled their fingers as the massive spread of breakfast was admired. Stacks and stacks of pancakes and waffles, piles of breakfast meats, layers of scrambled eggs, and mountains of hashbrowns, all steaming and beautiful. Beside them were bowls of fresh fruit, cut melon, and berries.

Natasha eyed a box in the corner. “Fruit delivery?”

Tony handed her a plate. “Yea. Turned out, we used everything up in drinks last night.”
Cho eyed the meal. “Good, because I don’t think I can eat anything else. Too heavy.”

“Average people first.” Emily put Cho at the front, Sam next. “Get what you want, because there won’t be any left after Steve gets his.”

A quip made Tony’s mouth move. He pressed his lips together and picked up a plate. Breakfast went as quietly as cleanup had. Mouths opened as though to converse, then eyes would dart to Emily or Tony, and nothing would be said. Forks hit plates. Glasses clinked. Massive amounts of food disappeared.

Thor belched. Impressively. He looked very pleased with himself and the bulge in his stomach.

“Classy.” Hill sneered.

Cho looked ready to puke.

Tony again closed his mouth and kept silent.

Steve’s brow rose at the uncommon restraint.

“Thank you, Tony, Bruce, Clint. Breakfast was fantastic.” Emily smiled at each of them.

Echoes bubbled up around the room.

“Yes. A fine breakfast indeed.” Thor announced. “Fit for a king!”

Laughter followed, as did louder proclamations of the boys’ hard work. Before the mood could be soured by the simmering tension, Emily stood. “Tony and I will take care of the dishes. The rest of you can get back to work upstairs when you’re done.”

Not stay down here with Em?

“Not you, Steve. You’re going to bed.” Emily pointed a fork down the hall.

“I c-”

“Bed.”

Smiling in defeat, he put up his hands. “Yes, ma’am.”

Natasha picked at the fruit in her bowl until she was last one left. Dishes clanked as they were loaded in the dishwasher. Water splashed. She rose with her dishes and caught Emily’s eye. The empty room was surveyed.

Emily leaned close to kiss her jaw. “Go on, Nat. We’re good here.”

Tony was elbow deep in soap suds. He glanced up from the vigorous scrub he was giving a skillet. His expression said he’d figured out what Natasha had. Emily didn’t only want an escape from the crowd, she wanted to talk to him alone. It wasn’t going to be a fun talk.

Natasha gave Emily the space she was asking for and returned to the wreckage. “Music, anyone?” She asked of the cleanup crew.

“God yes.” Hill groaned. “If I have to feel like a scolded teenager again, I better get the loud music to go with it.”

Chuckling, Natasha brought up the music program, set the access to a holographic display at the
bar. She started the mood with something Hill would enjoy. Carrie Underwood, *Church Bells*.

Hill rolled her eyes at Natasha’s spycraft before letting out a laugh and tossing trash into the dumpster as the intro spilled from the speakers. She straightened in time to join the artist singing. As planned, her reaction broke the tension. Hill’s voice was *good*. Incredible. She had considered a career in it before life had hit her sideways in late teens and pushed her toward the military.

Cheers and conversation followed. Music was discussed. Pop culture referenced. Favorite moments brought up. Sam changed up the tunes after a while.

“All right, all right. That’s enough of that country white bread.” He grinned at Hill’s middle finger. Thrumming bass rolled through the room, and he winked at his audience.

Sweet, sweet soul burst from the man. A gorgeous modern remix of classic Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On*. His voice was rich and deep, beautifully sultry. Bucky’s jaw dropped.

“Sam, you dog. Why didn’t you tell me you could sing too?” Natasha teased.

He winked at her, at Bucky, kept on with the song. Smiles were on everyone’s faces. Good.

Natasha made another comment to finish cutting the head off the tension in the room, watched in satisfaction as it worked. Conversation picked up. Laughs poked up between piles of trash. Natasha carefully listened and guided conversation, made sure it was productive, useful. She saw Clint and Hill pick up on her plan and work with it.

When they allowed the discussion to shift back to the previous night, the group was mostly objective, full of ideas and practical solutions. Natasha would have to tell Em later that the manual labor of cleaning had been a good decision. Getting people to burn off fear and anger with physical movement helped open the mind to clear, objective thinking. And there was something in particular about cleaning up too. Prepping for a new future maybe. A smile curled thinking about the future she had growing with Emily.

The ding of the elevators came as Bucky’s stomach rumbled loud enough for Thor to make a joke about it.

“Anyone hungry?” Emily’s smile was bright, unfettered by dangerous or sad undertones. “Chef Tony and I have put together a few sandwiches.”

Thor elbowed Bucky. As one, they dove for the stairwell.

“Wash your hands first!” Emily yelled after them.

“Yes, ma’am!” Bucky yelled, had to allow Thor to the door first for it. He swore and bounded down the flight. The door thunked.

Emily laughed, a sweet, happy note. She surveyed the disaster zone. “You guys look like you’re almost done up here. Great job!”

Sam bowed. Hill visibly refrained from rolling her eyes. Cho looked ready for a nap.

“Anyone have word on our newest problem?”

Phones were checked. Heads shook.

“Okay. Everyone in.” Emily watched the elevator fill, tugged Natasha aside, stayed with her as the
elevator went down. The warm smile faded.

It was an effort to keep her hands calmly at her sides. “Em?”

“Tony is the biggest pain in the ass.” Emily grumbled.

Natasha snorted her agreement.

“He apologized about keeping us in the dark, but not about the attempt to create a peacekeeping program.” Hands went to hips. She glared out the broken window. “I don’t exactly disagree with him.”

She felt like she should be shocked.

“We are woefully unprepared to fight off another alien invasion. We have a baby on the way. The more help we have, the better.”

“Ugh! I know! It was like arguing with Coulson and Bobbi all over again.” Emily’s arms flailed. “No good answers!”

“It’s okay, Em. We’ll figure it out.” Natasha closed the short distance, gathered Em to her, kissed her, distracted her, made them late to lunch.

Chapter End Notes

I, um, I might have spent a few dozen hours watching old X-factor and the Voice auditions before I wrote this chapter… it was perfect for some comedy relief.

And we needed some comedy relief after Endgame. Omg. Such a good movie, definitely one of the best MCU movies they’ve made. Can’t be the best, because… well, if you’ve seen it you know why. Then I watched GoT right after. Damn my heart hurt that day! I was exhausted!

Thank you, to all my readers, but new and veteran for sticking with me for so long!
Happy Pride Month! In honor of, I plan to get two or three more chapters out before the end. We'll see lol

When no news came about cities blowing up or aliens attacking, the frazzled group had dinner. A continued lack of news put them to bed. Still no apocalypse come morning sent Dr. Cho, Alan, Sam, and Rhodes their separate ways. By the end of the quiet week, the Avengers had mostly dispersed as well.

Natasha took Emily home and started talking about which room would make a good nursery. Natasha’s office was decide on, and they happily moved on to bickering about decor. Emily, of course, wanted there to be a fox theme. Natasha finally discouraged the idea by ignoring it. They moved on to Star Wars, unicorns, Paris, or dinosaurs. She was certain that Em would sneak in a stuffed fox or three when she wasn’t looking though.

Uneventful weeks went by. Maria Hill finally made the connection between a string of robberies at high-tech facilities and Ultron. Mostly robotics tech, and the assailants were highly advanced robots. There were never deaths unless security shot first; most were left in a fugue state muttering about old memories, worst fears, and something too fast to see. The Maximoff twins. Robots and twins were untraceable. They simply vanished after taking whatever they wanted.

Word of Von Strucker’s death came as Natasha entered the second trimester of pregnancy. What a relief to not be exhausted all the damn time! It was an even bigger relief that Emily’s mental health had returned to almost normal. She still had nightmares. The blue screen of the TV still made her flinch, sometimes run, and too big of a crowd still made her anxious. But otherwise she could watch movies, play games, and have long video chats without anxiety attacks. And Natasha could plop on her lap again. She savored it while she could; she’d be too fat to do it soon.

Strucker’s bloody crime scene photos had Em twitchy though. Even twitchier when the group decided that Strucker must have known something that Ultron didn’t want the Avengers to know. Calls were made. Boxes and boxes of SHIELD paper files were delivered to the tower. Natasha endured the stares at her now obvious belly to help sort through the mountain of paperwork.

“She really shows, doesn’t she?” Emily cooed to a gaping Steve. “Some women don’t show until the third trimester, but Nat is so damn petite she doesn’t stand a chance of hiding it, not in those perfectly tailored clothes she likes.”

Natasha pretended to ignore them, scanned page after useless page beside Hill until Emily dragged the useless boys off to let Natasha and Hill work in peace.

“I don’t think I ever told you congratulations.” Hill spoke after a quiet hour.

“You haven’t.”
“Congratulations, Romanoff. When is the wedding?”

She arched a brow.

Hill arched one back. “It’s not like the world doesn’t know you two are a thing. And I know you’ve thought ahead, about the legal protections for that growth of yours and for Fortune.”

“What makes you think we don’t already have a marriage license?” She eyed an interesting note handwritten on the side of a file.

Hill set her file aside, lifted another. “She would be wearing a ring. Even if it was a stupid plastic one from the candy machine on her thumb.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“So why are you waiting?”

Fear. What if Emily said no?

“You aren’t afraid she’ll say no, are you?”

Fucking spies. Natasha blinked at Emily’s voice in her head. She smiled. “I really shouldn’t be, but I am.”

Surprise creased Hill. “Seriously, Romanoff?”

“I know. I’ve had her baby in me for almost five months now, but I’m too scared to ask her to marry me.” A self-deprecating laugh came out. “Some badass I am, huh?”

An appraising gaze swept over her, took in the wild curls that were getting dangerously long, the extra pounds she’d put on, and the unnatural youth that hadn’t changed in the decade they’d known each other. “Being the Black Widow couldn’t exactly have prepared you for a domestic life.” How much beyond the redacted files had Hill figured out?

“Just let me know if there’s going to be a big to-do about it, so I can schedule it in.” Hill gave her a tight smile before returning to her files.

Marrying Emily, Natasha shook her head of the tempting daydream and returned to her work. She could think about lace and garters later.

Several hours later, Natasha brought the folder with the picture of Ulysses Klaue -aka the Dealer- with her to lunch. She spread it on the table and stared at it as she nibbled pita slathered with hummus. The Dealer. He was renowned as an arms dealer, could get anyone anything. It was rumored that he even had access to vibranium once. She’d never gotten the chance to find out.

She wanted to now. Vibranium to protect her growing belly sounded amazing. Vibranium armor for Emily too. Especially for Em, the injury prone idiot.

“What’s your spy brain staring at?” soft words asked before lips touched her cheek. Emily settled into the chair next to her.

“Possibilities.”

“For what?” Tony chirped. He sat across the table, grabbing the open file as he did. “I know this guy. From back in the day. He operates in Africa. Black market arms.”
Steve looked up from his Empire State Building-sized sandwich to give Tony a disappointed stare.

Tony rolled his eyes. “There are conventions, alright. You meet people. I didn’t sell him anything. He was talking about finding something new. A game changer. It was all very Ahab.”

“Hm.” Crumbs fell from Thor’s mouth, several lodging in his beard, others wandering to the table. He gestured at Klaue’s picture. “What’s this?”

“A tattoo. I don’t think he had it before.”

“No.” More crumbs escaped as Thor gestured at Klaue’s chest, the black designs on it. “Those are tattoos.” Finger on the neck, what looked like deliberate scarring. “This is a brand.”

Natasha took the picture back, studied the brand, thought it was familiar, couldn’t immediately place it. Tony started to ask Jarvis to help. Halfway through the name, his mouth snapped shut and he frowned. Natasha manually scanned the picture and set a search program. It finished as the last bite of her pita vanished.

Bruce read the results. “It’s a word in an African dialect meaning ‘thief’ in a much less friendly way.”

“What dialect?” Steve asked.

“W-waka-nada?” Bruce looked back for the answer. “Wakanda.”

Damn. Vibranium. That’s what Ultron was after. If Klaue had some…

Tony looked stricken. “If this guy got out of Wakanda with some of their trade goods.”

Steve’s face fell. “I thought you said your father got the last of it.”

Bruce’s gaze flit between them. “I don’t follow. What comes out of Wakanda?”

“Vibranium.” Natasha answered. “Strongest metal on Earth. I don’t have to spell out for you how bad it’ll be if Ultron gets his hands on any.”

Emily’s hand was abruptly on her knee, tension radiating from her clenched fingers.

“Where is this guy now?” Steve demanded.

“I’ll find out.” Natasha offered. Africa as a starting point wasn't exactly small. She started with contacts in places she remembered Klaue having been seen. It took weeks to get a definitive answer. The cost of it saw her and Emily making a trip to South America for New Years.

Personal delivery of payment. Then a side trip to make good on her deal with Rocio. Natasha took great effort concealing her pregnancy. She let conversation steer toward how much eating she'd done since retrieving Emily. Rocio seemed engrossed in Emily and the work of her gift to really care about Natasha. Good enough.

The joy of being able to help the young girl brightened Emily in a way that she hadn't seen since before Egypt. Natasha warmed at the sight of it, at the simple bliss on the girl herself as she got up from her chair to run. She stumbled and fell, but got up to stand on shaky legs.

“I was beginning to wonder if you would make good on our deal, Widow, after you broke the last one.” Her eye purposely went to Natasha’s middle before shifting to Emily. Damn. “But I can see you've been preoccupied.”
Emily looked up from smiling at the happy little kid and her cheering, crying family. Her expression asked if Rocio was saying anything important. Natasha gave an unworried smile.

“I’ll admit that it took longer than I liked to rid ourselves of Petrovich’s stench. I apologize for making you wait.”

“It is forgiven. The deal is finished.” Rocio eyed her for a long moment. “Congratulations, Widow. I hope this new life goes well for you.” She turned and went to the little girl, smiling warmly. It was a clear dismissal. Natasha gathered Em and took her back to New York before they outstayed their welcome.

The intel was delivered ten days and a possible flutter of movement in Natasha’s belly later. It made her jittery enough that she almost agreed to stay behind when Steve and Emily pulled her aside before the debrief meeting to team up against her.

“I’m not inhibited yet.” She stared them down. “Tony’s armor will do its job.”

Anger flushed Emily’s cheeks. “You’re being stupid.”

Steve’s face agreed with the sentiment though he didn’t voice it.

“I can still run faster than you, idiot.” Natasha sneered at Em.

“And there’s still a scar in your abs from the last bullet you couldn’t outrun.” Emily pointed, her finger quivering.

She had a point. A little. Natasha reached for Em’s freckled cheek. “And it’s from before I wore armor and had more than myself to go home to.” When she’d been somewhere between thinking that she was invincible and wanting to die.

Cheeks puffed, and eyes narrowed.

“I won’t let anything happen to the little bean, even if you won’t tell me its sex.”

Air rushed through teeth. “It’s a girl.” Black eyes bored into her. “Little bean is a girl, Nat. And if I don’t get to see her born, I’m going to bring you back to life so I can kill you.”

A girl? Her hand fled from cheek to tummy, and the enormity of it hit her as though she was newly pregnant all over again. She and Emily were going to be parents. They had a long future ahead of them. Together. “Marry me,” slid off her tongue.

Dark eyes bulged at her, and it took a moment for her to figure out why. Oh. Oh, she’d said that. She almost laughed it off, changed the topic, took it back. No. Fear had held her tongue for too long. She wanted to marry her favorite idiot! For a thousand reasons, rational, irrational, completely opposite of everything she’d spent most of her life believing. She stiffened her spine, threw her shoulders back, lifted her chin. Emily wouldn’t reject her. She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t! Would she?

Slowly, the thunderstruck look faded from Emily. Hesitance replaced it. “You want to marry me?”

“I wouldn’t have said it otherwise.” She deadpanned.

Emily’s expression tilted. Hurt shone behind the irritation. “This is a terrible way to detour from
It wasn’t… Of course Emily saw it that way. You idiot, she berated herself. Natasha took a knee. She smiled all her love and attachment up at her favorite person. “Will you marry me, Emily Fortune?”

Shock splashed across Em. “You’re...” she breathed, her eyes darting. “You’re really asking.”

“I should have a long time ago, but,” she shook her head. “But I was letting fear hold me back. I’ve always been so damn afraid of you!”

Emily blinked. Delight giggled out of her. “The great Black Widow afraid of a cookie-addicted pot dealer.” She crossed to Natasha, grinned down at her, caught her chin in delicate hands. “Whatever would the world think?”

“Is that your way of saying yes?”

Emily bent and kissed her. “I could use this to blackmail you into staying behind on this mission, couldn’t I?”

Yes. She deflated at the easy submission, at the idea that Emily woul-

“I won’t do that,” was whispered. Emily brought their hands together, kissed Natasha’s knuckles. “But I will accept your proposal and still be angry with you that you’re going.”

Impossibly, Natasha fell even more in love with her.

“Congratulations.” Steve beamed at them.

“Congratulations on what?” Tony appeared. His curiosity took in Emily’s bent frame, Natasha on her knee, the distinct lack of a ring. “Did you finally propose, Romanoff? You know it’s supposed to include a ring.”

“I will have to let Em pick hers out.” She managed to shrug and stand at the same time.

Em’s eyes lit up. “Ooh! Let’s get matching rings!”

She glanced at their bare fingers, the imperfect nails and cuticles at the end of them. Manicures needed to happen soon. After the mission. “We can talk about it when we get back.”

“From where?” Tony asked.

A ship graveyard. “I’ll explain in the meeting.”

Tony’s head bobbed in its usual way, and he preceded them to their meeting room, Steve following with a cheery pat on their shoulders later.

Emily grabbed her hand, kissed her cheek, and walked beside her. How tempting it was to direct them to their private suite instead of the meeting room. Knowing fingers squeezed hers. A sly smile tilted sideways. What had happened to the days when it scared Natasha witless to know that Em could read her like an open book?

Emily sidled closer to stall their progress. “We could make a detour, future spouse.”

Future spouse to Emily Fortune. “Not wife?”
Sweet laughter filled her ear. “Please, we both know that I’m the housewife in this relationship.”

“Says the non-pregnant one.”

“Says the one who’s stayed home while her badass goes off to war.” Em’s tone had a tightness to it despite the teasing giggle.

Natasha stepped to fully face Emily. “Only while you were healing, Em.” She cupped a freckled cheek. “You are one of the strongest, bravest, most intimidating people whom I’ve ever known.”

Dark eyes watched her.

“Did I ever tell you how much you terrified me when we first met?”

“Yes.”

That’s right. They’d both been particularly drunk while on leave from SHIELD at a lovely little villa on a Puerto Rican beach. “You are no simple housewife, future spouse. You’re the other half of my together.”

Emily studied her for a few breaths before her smile reappeared. “I accept this compromise. Spouse seems like a good term for both of us. I’d also like to take this moment to address the fact that I will not wear white or a veil to our wedding. You’re welcome to wear whatever your fashionable little heart desires, but I’m not wearing white.”

How typically Emily to balk at the traditional white and veil harking back to the idea of a virgin wife being presented to her husband for the first time at their wedding. “I don’t care for what the veil represents either. Will you at least wear lingerie under whatever you choose?”

Eyes rolled. “Only if you promise not to complain if I choose to wear a tshirt and sneakers.”

A tshirt with something horrid printed on it of course. Natasha irritably smoothed a stray curl behind an ear. “Fine.”

“Great!” Emily beamed. “Let’s go do this meeting thing.”

“You don’t want to detour for sex anymore?”

“I just won a huge compromise from you. I’m good.” Emily tugged at their hands. “Come on, little fox.”

She silently grumbled until they reached the doors. She rearranged her expression, gathered her thoughts, and stepped in. “Alright, boys, make sure you wear lots of deodorant. We’re heading to Africa.”

Faces pinched at her, looked to Emily.

“Go ahead and try to convince her to stay home if you’re feeling masochistic. Arguing with her is like beating your head against a wall.” Emily found a seat. “I barely managed to win a compromise about clothes today.”

Her poor Em. Natasha allowed a bit of guilt to nibble at her conscious. She’d be absolutely furious if Emily was the pregnant one and trying to jump headlong into danger.

“You do realize you have a beach ball protruding from your stomach, right?” Tony used both hands to point at said protrusion that on a taller, larger framed woman would be barely noticeable.
Natasha kept her expression calm. “As I’ve already explained to Em and Steve, I’m not inhibited yet, and your armor will protect me.”

He frowned. “Of course it will.” His frown grew as he realized that he’d agreed with her, that he realized her manipulation. “Dammit, Romanoff.”

Bruce shook his head silently.

She lifted her chin at Thor.

“I agree with Lady Emily.” Thor glanced at Tony, flexed his jaw. “Despite the protection that armor provides, you are endangering your little one.”

Inwardly, she cringed. Outwardly, “If Ultron is allowed access to vibranium, my baby will suffer a hell of a lot more. With me going, our chances of success are doubled.”

“Ego much?” Tony snarked.

She raised a brow. The boys looked helplessly at each other.

Steve sighed. “She’s right. She sees things we don’t. We’d be going in blindfolded without her.”

She chose a simple head nod instead of an innocent smile. No more arguments came. “Mauritania. It’s a developing country in northwestern Africa. Klaue is currently operating out of a ship-breaking yard there.”

“A what?” Steve asked.

“It’s one of a handful of places in the world that break down old ships into manageable slabs of metal to be recycled. They exist in poor countries with low, to no safety standards. Death rates are high. It’s an almost perfect place to operate Klaue’s type of business. Bribes in the right places and no one in authority will question his presence or activities.”

“Add on that it’s literally a port, and he can move wherever, whenever, with whatever he wants.” Tony added.

Metal fingers drummed the table. “He sounds smart.” Drum drum. “And dangerous.”

Natasha eyed the prosthetic for a moment. Where had the Soviets gotten the vibranium to build his arm? She asked herself for the hundredth time. Couldn’t have been Klaue, it was too old. Was there more in Wakanda? “He’s extremely dangerous. It’s one of the reasons I haven’t contacted him before now about access to vibranium. We’ll need to be careful. Not only will he have traps and a crew, but Ultron may get there before or at the same time as us.”

“To be clear, we are talking about confiscating the vibranium and arresting Klaue?” Steve put in.

Getting the vibranium was the main goal. The other was a bonus.

“We’re doing the world a favor putting this man away.” Tony nodded.

Steve was looking at her. He knew how she prioritized.

“We’re going to give this man to proper authorities, correct?” was reiterated.

Natasha made sure to meet his eye with a level expression. “Should we manage to catch him, yes.”
Satisfaction started to soften Steve.

“But securing the vibranium before Ultron can get his hands on it is priority.”

He closed his eyes. Bucky looked at him, then swept the room. He nodded. “Natasha is right. We have to prevent Ultron from becoming stronger. Then we can chase after the slightly less awful bad guy.”
It was a graveyard. Emily frowned at the feed coming from the cameras on the quin’s underbelly. Moonlight showed on dozens, hundreds, of rotting carcasses that speckled the landscape from beach to bay across the peninsula. The largest ship graveyard in the world, Nat had said. It had a long, bloody history of corruption and poverty. Salvagers were killed or maimed every day doing the dangerous work of manually retrieving what little was of value.

Safety wasn’t a priority. Pay was low. That was why the workers would take any opportunity to make a better living, including working for Klaue. Some of them weren’t any different than her brothers, average men simply trying to live their lives, would probably surrender at the first opportunity if it came to it. On the same token, these were desperate people who would fight like cornered rats to protect what little they had.

Avoiding that was why they’d dropped Sam off two days ago. If they were lucky, Sam could sneak in, find, and signal the vibranium’s location before Klaue or crew noticed. Despite his lack of spy experience, his skin color gave him the best chance of slipping through. If they were lucky, guards and crew would think Sam a local worker.

If they were truly lucky, they’d have the vibranium safely at the tower before Ultron decided to show up.

Clint angled the quin toward a landing site about a mile from Klaue’s lair. Everyone wiggled with anticipation. As soon as they set down, Thor, Steve, and Bucky bounded out. Tony and Clint were right behind, Clint catching a ride to a vantage point high above the lair itself.

Bruce would stay behind and guard the quin. He was their trump card if things really got out of hand. He frowned worriedly from his seat.

Emily shouldered her rifle and set her armor’s camouflage to desert as Nat did the same. Though their armor was almost identical, Tony hadn’t been able to convince Nat of wearing a Power Ranger helmet like he had Emily. Instead, Nat’s was simple and plain, a boring ovoid shape. It did have a cute little red fox painted on the collar that faded as the camo blurred to life. Despite being only a few feet ahead of Emily, Nat nearly disappeared from sight.

Emily had almost gotten Clint to wear a full suit as well. He would never wear a helmet because he said they interfered with his ability to put arrows where he wanted. And he had balked at the claustrophobic feel of the rest. But with a little help from Laura, he bowed to a compromise. A torso piece that protected all his vitals, bracers -the easiest to convince an archer of-, shin guards, reinforced boots, a little something to cover his genitals, and a simple helm. It looked similar to what special forces would wear on missions. Better quality and the camo on it worked gr-

Her foot hit something. Nat’s bulky backpack. They were at the anchor, Steve-thigh-thick chain still attached to the ship’s deck several yards above their heads.

Nat turned her head, likely glaring through her facepiece.

She shrugged an apology.
There was probably a sigh as Nat reached up and began the long climb up the rusted chain. Comms were silent this mission. It was going to be difficult sitting next to her little fox without being allowed to talk to her or touch her skin.

When they finally crawled on deck and slunk deep into the unpatrolled shadows, Emily couldn’t sit still. Her legs jangled. Nat put a gloved hand on one, got them to stop. Emily’s fingers started drumming. The blank helm faced her for a few breaths. Nat pulled gloves off their closest hands and linked their bare fingers.

The warmth of Nat’s hand and the feel of her steady heartbeat settled the nervous butterflies. The touch also released good hormones in Nat too. Poor little fox. She’d gotten so used to calming Emily with touch that it soothed her as well.

Emily grinned. She smiled wider when she sensed the little bean twitching. Then Nat’s free hand dropped to her tummy, and she shifted to look at Emily. Emily’s smile grew impossibly bigger, straining her cheeks and eyes.

Nat’s mouth moved, the woman knowing that Emily would sense it. “Did it really move?” was her silent question.

Emily nodded.

They had a full second to bask in the glow before Sam’s harsh tone cut over the comms. “Target found, sending coordinates. Proceed with extreme caution. Barbie is on site. I repeat, Barbie is on site!”

Shit.

Ultron was already there.

Nobody acknowledged Sam’s message. They had the backup plans to follow. Sam was supposed to get the hell out; they would regroup later. Blue team would take the front door. Red team would take the back. Clint would do his bird thing and swoop down if he ran out of things to shoot.

Nat unlinked their hands to open the display on her wrist. The ship’s blueprints came up, a section was highlighted in gold to show a hidden compartment. Klaue probably hid all his best stuff in there. With the boys making a splash and taking Ultron’s attention, she and Emily would focus on the vibranium.

They were a level above the storage when they heard Ultron raging about being compared to Stark. “Stark is a sickness!” He growled at Klaue, who flinched. Behind him, his minion took a step back. The twins were behind Ultron. They glared stonily. No one looked up.

Nat pulled them into a position where they could cut a hole through the levels. Emily put her back to Nat, made sure her rifle was secure across her back, and held up her handgun. The sound of laser cutting through metal hissed as Nat went to work.

Ultron howled a little more before moving suddenly. Klaue screamed. His hand flopped to the grating of catwalk they were on. Not much blood. Huh. Must have cauterized. Wait, did that mean that Ultron could rearrange his body at will? Made his hand into a knife? Like the bad terminator in Terminator 2. Shit! What the hell did he need vibranium for?

“Oh. I am so sorry. Ooo, I’m sure that’s gonna be okay.” Ultron almost sounded apologetic. “But…”
His following excuses and egotistical rant was right out of the Narcissist Stark Handbook.

Nat kept on with her laser.

“Stark is a sickness!” Ultron’s rage eventually peaked.

“Ah, Junior, you’re going to break your old man’s heart.” Tony chirped and landed on the other end of the catwalk with a notable clank. Thor and Steve appeared on either side.

They glared at each other. Iron Man to ten foot tall, super-robot. The body was sleeker than a standard terminator, with intimidation in mind instead of utilitarian murderbot. He had a moving mouth. Unnecessary, yet disturbing. And those... mandibles? that swooped from the backs of cheeks toward chin. Not to mention that smooth, swaggering man voice.

Oh, damn. Ultron was exactly like Tony. They were so screwed!

As though summoned by her thought, a small army of lesser Ullotrons buzzed in. They were a match for the Iron Suit in size instead of Ultron’s superbody. And slightly scarier, if possible. Scary robot minions of the evil robot Tony Jr.

Emily stifled the urge to yell at Tony about cleaning up his toys.

Despite the muffling protection of the helmet, the sound of gunfire echoing in the confines of the metal ship drowned out her thoughts and nearly deafened her. Ears ringing, struggling not to cry, she almost didn’t notice the man with a gun trying to sneak up on them. She managed to aim her gun and plug him with two icer rounds before he could react. She elbowed Nat, and they rolled apart, Nat coming up with two electrified night sticks that she’d asked Tony for. They had as much juice as a cattle prod, enough to knock out a large man, hopefully enough to short circuit a robot.

They weren’t.

The Ultron minion didn’t go down until Emily picked up the old Soviet-style rifle that Klaue’s minion had carried and unloaded the entire magazine into the murderbot’s chest.

“Now we know what Ultron wanted all the high-tech equipment for.” Nat’s face appeared as she removed her helmet. She had to yell into Emily’s ear to be heard. “Comms are down. Probably Ultron’s doing!” She dropped to a knee and inspected the robot’s workings.

Emily peered at the fight. A blur was harassing Steve. Tony was going head to head with Ultron. Bucky was bashing in minions. One murderbot went down with an arrow in its head, the base of it crackling with blue electricity.

“We...”

Three sets of boots were running at them. Nat moved to deal with them, and another murderbot came at Emily. Essentially helpless, Emily swore and dove down a set of stairs. Metal clanging, the sound of the murderbot right behind her, she ran heedlessly through the guts of the ship until her lungs burned, and she flung herself behind a tangle of enormous pipes. Chest heaving, she waited for death.

Nothing.

She poked her nose around the pipes. No minion. Sweat dripped down her spine. She looked back the way she’d come. More pipes. No minion. Ahead was the same. Under her feet was grating that
protected more pipes. Where was she?

Thor’s voice crackled over the comms. “There...” a lot of crackling. “But I am mighty.”

How helpful. She listened for the distance sounds of fighting, didn’t hear much besides the groaning of metal.

“Guys?” She tried her luck. “Did we win?”


She looked back and forth between her two options of direction and wished she had a copy of the ship’s schematics like Nat did. Damn. Might as well keep going forward. Her boots clunked on the grating, the echoing silence bothering her. When a set of stairs came into view, she decided to start climbing.

It got her to another blank corridor that she followed to another set of stairs. Another and another until she suddenly found herself on deck, under a moonless sky. Her helmet’s sensors picked up what she first mistook for a handful of Iron Legion flying away with something. Not Tony’s hollow soldiers. Ultron’s minions, maybe the robot himself. With the vibranium.

“Guys?” She queried the comms. Crackling static. “Can anyone he-”

Hulk’s unmistakable roar of rage pushed her at the deck’s crumbling railing. She saw the telltale flame of Tony’s Iron Suit following Hulk, who was bounding at top speed toward the nearby city. What?

“Tony?” Nothing. “Hulk? What’s happening? Ultron’s going the other way!”

Nothing.

“Dammit!”

“Something wrong?” Mocking tones asked her.

Emily whirled in the direction of a gangly frame. Her helmet picked out the features of the Maximoff boy. His nearly white hair glowed in the night vision. Was it bleached or a weird accompaniment to his power like Emily’s changing features? “Pietro?” popped out of her.

He scowled, but the mocking smile quickly returned. “How nice you know my name, Sekhmet.”

“I...” Too fast to protest before it was gone, Emily’s helmet was in the boy’s hands.

He squinted at it. “Did you steal this from a TV show?” And tossed it off the ship. He blurred away.

“Wait!”

He was gone. She was alone again in the darkness, an even darker darkness without her helmet’s sensors.

Regroup at the ship. That’s what Nat would say was her next step. Okay. Emily had no idea which direction the anchor was in, let alone the elevator system that Klaue used. She picked a direction.

What felt like an hour later, she found the rear of the ship, the exact opposite of where she needed. The chain she’d climbed up on was at the prow. Swearing, she started back.
A blur tripped her.

“Sorry! Didn’t see you there!” Pietro’s voice mocked her from the shadows. “Fuck!” was followed by stumbling sounds, flesh bouncing on metal.

“Are you okay?” was her reflexive reaction. She made to head in its direction.

Two points of red glowing in front of her stopped her. She took a step back as they grew closer, until her butt hit the railing. A young woman’s face sharpened in her vision. Wanda Maximoff, and the glowing red was her eyes. Below them was a nasty cut from cheek to lips. Blood oozed from it.

“That doesn’t look good.” Emily’s hand lifted of its own accord. It stalled at a flick of those glowing red eyes. “I can help.”

Her peripheral vision caught Pietro limping to stand at his sister’s shoulder. His pants were shredded in several places, the knees dark with what she guessed was blood.

“I’m pretty good at helping with pain.” Emily gestured at the cheek, at the foot Pietro held slightly off the ground, her words full of double meaning.

The twins looked at each other, their expressions shifting, unreadable. When they looked back at her, rage had replaced whatever had been there before. Wanda lifted her hands and sent Emily back to the hell of her childhood. What might have been shock on her face was quickly replaced by Emily’s father. Rage twisted his face as he screamed about the broken jar of spaghetti sauce on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to give you fun facts last chapter! The ship graveyard in Ultron was filmed at a real one: Chittagong Ship Breaking Yard in Bangladesh, and the city that Hulk rampages through is Johannesburg, South Africa. That they were filmed in totally different countries, on separate continents really bothered me, so Mauritania happened. It really is the largest in the world. There's some interesting history behind it.

The little bean's sex was the result of the poll that you lovelies voted on!

When I knew that Wanda was going to zap Emily, I couldn't decide if Emily would see her father or Natasha and child leaving her behind. Both are awful :( but I think the first will work better with what I have planned.
“Em?” called through the fog of helplessness as her father landed another blow across her back. Ribbons of fire crisscrossed it from the attention his belt had laid there. At eight years old, she knew that struggling or crying for help made it worse, but she couldn’t help herself. She tried to get away, was tripped, her face smacked into a wall, and she was dragged back for more whipping.

“You ungrateful bitch! I give you food and a roof to live under!” Her father screamed. “And you throw it away!”

“Mom?” She cried at the shadow in the corner. “Please!”

The shadow retreated, left her alone with the monster.

“Please!” She howled at another crack of the belt.

“Em.” Gentleness touched her face, made her blink at the sudden double vision. Her parents’ house inside the Avengers’ quinjet.

What?

“It’s your own fault!” Her father roared.

“Em,” soft brown eyes held hers. “Come on, Em.” The gentle hands had rough callouses from years of fighting with knife and bow. Clint.

The house faded. The pain retreated to a horrible memory.

Clint nodded. “Good girl, Em.”

“Fucking bitch! Get back here!” Her father howled.

She threw herself at the safety of Clint, sobbed into his shoulder. Comfort hugged her close.

“You’re okay.”

When she could finally see beyond his comforting frame, she saw her team, her family, all hollow-eyed and looking as awful as she felt.

The bleak horror that Emily couldn’t shake was mirrored on Natasha’s face. As she had with Clint, Emily flung herself around Nat. Slowly, arms drifted around her middle, and both of them were drained of whatever energy they’d had. Emily might have fallen asleep. She couldn’t tell. She felt as drained as she’d started when she focused on the scenery below the quin. Mountains or tall hills rolled beneath and speckles of lights dotted small towns along them. Where? It took an awful lot of energy to form that question.
“Clint?” Natasha said softly, tone layered with doubt, relief, understanding.

“We need a safe place.” He looked over his shoulder from the pilot’s seat.

Nat frowned.

“It’s about time I shared it anyway.” He shrugged and faced forward.

What were they talking about?

From across the quin, she met Bruce’s haunted eyes. He had a blanket wrapped tightly around himself. It made Emily feel bad that he didn’t have someone to hug. Poor guy. She would have risen to help if she could. She barely managed to shift her numb butt and feel bad for Natasha’s legs. How long had Emily been sitting on them?

“Where are we going?” Tony asked.

“A safehouse,” was Clint’s simple response.

“Oh.” Tony nodded. He looked as haunted as the rest of them, yet able to stand on his own two feet, maybe even yell and throw a punch. He didn’t get the Wanda treatment?

Emily’s eyelids flew wide. The twins. Those poor kids, too young to be that full of hate and siding with a crazed Tony Junior. Too young. Yet older than Emily when she’d crushed twenty-one oxycotins, mixed them into a gin and tonic, and forced her father to drink it. Her eyes shut. She pressed her face into Natasha’s neck, focusing on her scent, her strong heartbeat, the little bean’s buzzing heartbeat. Natasha’s arms tightened.

The hum of the quinjet’s engines carried them from the mountains. The first beams of morning illuminated ice-frosted trees stretching out in every direction. A couple of big trucks chugged along the lonely highways that cut through the landscape and eventually ran across farmland and into a town that Emily recognized.

Emily adjusted her view toward the north, and the Barton Farm came into view. A safehouse, he called it. She found the energy to snort.

“Em?” Natasha's voice was ragged and strained.

“Safehouse is a bit of an understatement, isn’t it?” She replied in an equally awful voice.

“A bit,” croaked back.

Well away from the road, in a copse that Clint had specifically groomed for landing vehicles, they set down. Nobody moved until Clint finished settling the quin, the engines whined into quiet, and the bay door opened. Clint drew Emily up first. He pat her cheek and steadied her against Tony. Natasha was coaxed to stand, Clint’s arm around her waist. While her legs came awake, he pulled the rest of the team from their chairs by strength of will alone. Jell-O bodies wobbled as they rose.

“Come on.” Clint urged. He moved down the ramp. “To the house.”

An enormous cat watched their progress from its perch on the chicken coop. Beneath it, sleepy chickens were stumbling out of their hutch to scratch and investigate the dirt they’d clawed at a thousand times. One or two lifted their heads to watch the party’s lumbering pace.

Old wood steps protested the heavy weight of their passing. The front screen creaked a welcome,
and the smell of the old farmhouse enveloped them. A clock ticked in the suddenly tiny living room.

“Okay.” Clint eased Natasha to a chair. “Wait here a sec.”

He took the steps to his bedroom two at a time. Muffled voices drifted down. A door opened and small feet appeared at the top of the stairs. The child they were attached to yawned, blinked, and burst into a smile. “Auntie Nat!” Lila bugled. “Tetushka Em!”

She flew down the stairs and jumped into Nat’s lap. Little arms squeezed tightly. A big, wet kiss was placed on Nat’s cheek, then Lila launched herself at Emily. Tony kept her from falling over as she caught the flying girl.

A second set of feet slapped down the steps. Cooper slowed as he noticed the crowd with his aunties, the strange expressions on everyone’s faces. He finished his approach to Natasha sedately, bent to hug and kiss her. “Auntie Nat?” came the quiet question.

“Is anyone else seeing what I’m seeing?” Tony chirped.

“Surprise,” was Natasha’s awful attempt at cheer. “We brought friends to visit.”

Coop stayed by the chair and boggled at the giant heroes surrounding him.

“Tetushka Em!” Lila squirmed. “Is that Thor?”

Thor managed a nod.

“Welcome to our home,” coughed from the stairs. Laura was in a soft yellow bathrobe, her green pajama pants sticking out underneath, a yawning Nate in her arms. She smiled easily as she stepped to the main level. First Natasha got a hug, then Emily. Children were drawn to her hips.

Clint took a spot beside them. “So, uh, guys, this is my family. Laura, Cooper, Lila, and baby Nate. Family, meet the rest of the Avengers.”

Muffled hellos circled the room.

“I don’t suppose anyone would like to help me make breakfast?” Laura smiled.

“Breakfast?” Tony squawked. “Can’t we talk about the fact that bird-boy has been secretly playing farmer and hiding a family from us all these years?”

“Sure we can.” Laura responded. “As we make breakfast.”

Emily’s feet started toward the kitchen. She dragged Tony with her.

“I’ll crack the eggs!” Lila volunteered and dashed to the fridge.

“Over a bowl, please,” Laura called after. “Clint, show the rest where the towels and showers are.”

He nodded, kissed her, swept the boys upstairs. There were two full baths, one for the kids and one attached to his bedroom. And his house had amazing water pressure. Two people could bathe while the dishwasher was running without anyone screaming.

From her throne, Natasha watched the world move around her. Laura looked between Nat and the kitchen. Nate was settled in Nat’s arms. He burbled and kicked, then settled against his auntie’s chest with a sigh. Some of the darkness left Natasha as she cuddled the littlest hawkbaby. Herself
eased at the sight, Emily released her death hold on Tony to help with breakfast.

Mechanically, she peeled and started to chop an onion. She couldn't get the knife through, cut herself, and stared at the bleeding finger. Larger hands grabbed hers, washed the bleeding finger, bandaged it, put gloves on her hands. Mushrooms were put in her care. A damp rag was given to wipe them off. She looked up at Tony.

“No more knives for you today.” He said, tone soft and devoid of quip or snark. “There’s been enough blood.”

She nodded. A couple mushrooms later, she jerked. “Did anyone get hurt?”

The knife in his hand paused. “Everyone is good.” Tony waved at the mushrooms. “Those mushrooms need help though.”

Oh. Okay. Emily wiped mud off another white cap. The kitchen filled with the sounds of chopping and eggs cracking.

“Mommy? What’s wrong with my aunties?” Lila whispered.

Emily listened to the knife slice through onion, tap the cutting board, repeat twice.

“Mommy?”

“It was a long night, kiddo.” Tony explained. “Everyone is tired.”

“But...” Lila knew that wasn’t the whole answer.

A bowl was set on the counter. “Lila.” Laura spoke calmly. “Your aunties and their friends just need some time and patience, okay? They’ll tell us what they can when they’re ready.”

There was a thoughtful huff. “Okay.”

“Does SHIELD really recruit kids this young now?” Tony squawked. “Who trains them? This level of acting is prodigious!”

“What does recruit mean?” Lila asked.

“Clint used to do the recruiting.” Laura supplied. A cupboard was opened, spices picked out. “Then I was tapped for the task.”

Lila harrumphed. “Mommy, what’re you talking about?”

The knife stopped moving. “And why did Fury hire you?”

“He didn’t.” Laura said. “But someone knew that some day, something really awful would happen. The Avengers would need a safehouse, and there should be a particularly skilled team there waiting to mess with Tony Stark’s head.”

“Mommy!”

“Recruit means to bring to the team.” Laura told her antsy daughter.

Emily found that she’d turned away from the mushrooms some time ago. Good thing, because Tony’s expression was priceless. “Laura is great, isn’t she?”
Obnoxious brown eyes swung to her, and an indignant mouth opened. Instead of an immediate
snark, Tony studied her quietly. Laura followed his gaze. The smug grin on her reshaped to
relieved victory.

Lila flung herself around Emily’s waist. “You’re smiling.”

Emily touched her face. So she was.

“Tony, those onions won’t chop themselves.” Laura waved at the half finished job.

The onions got their attention. Laura picked eggshells out of the eggs. Other vegetables were
washed, put in front of Tony, and eventually set in bowls. In a hot pan, onions were turning a
lovely golden brown when a freshly shaved Bucky appeared. Hair wet, mission clothes and boots
under an arm, borrowed sweats around his butt, tshirt straining across his chest, he looked around
helplessly.

“Come on.” Laura pushed him through the living room, then back to the spare bedroom they kept
on the main floor. All the upstairs rooms were taken. “Since you’re the first one clean, you get this
room. The others will have to draw straws for couch or bunking in the barn.” Her voice drifted
back.

When the rest of the boys returned clean, Laura directed Clint to set up the spare tents. Lila was
sent to help while Cooper put together pancakes. Emily and Natasha got Laura’s supervised visit to
the bathroom. She didn’t bother trying to separate them. She just got them undressed and into the
shower.

Auto-pilot washed their hair, scrubbed their bodies. Abruptly, Natasha grabbed Emily’s hands and
put them on her belly. “She moved.”

The little bean was still moving. Squirming away as muscles randomly contracted. “So much
energy,” was muttered.

“How ya’ll doing in there?” Laura asked.

Natasha thrust open the shower’s glass door. “She’s moving!”

Confusion pinched Laura’s face until Nat yanked a hand to her belly. “Oh. She is.” Laura smiled.
“Em finally gave up the secret, huh?”

“Finally,” grumbled from Nat.

Cold air prickled Emily’s skin, made her nipples uncomfortably tight. Why was she cold? She
blinked at the open shower door. Oh. “Dammit. This is cold.” She shoved her way under the warm
water.

“Nat, you need to rinse that shampoo out and get some conditioner in your hair.” Laura extracted
herself. The door closed. “Go on now.”

Laura’s shadow retreated. When it came back, they were turning off the water and opening the
door. Towels were handed over. “Ain’t no one else up here. Ya’ll can just run across the hall to
your room, get something comfortable to wear.” She shifted to the hallway where she swayed and
fed a hungry Nate.

“Thought he was starting to eat real food?” Emily had the mind to ask.
“He is. Boy still wants the boob though.” Laura replied.

“Okay.” Emily shrugged, followed Nat into their room, rooted through the dresser for something soft. Worn, comfy pajama pants were pulled on, followed by a sweatshirt with a faded T-rex on the front.

Natasha was dressed and frowning at the sweater that kept riding up her belly. It was the biggest of Emily’s sweaters here. She had bigger ones, giant things that could swallow her whole, but they were back home in Atlanta. As were all of Nat’s maternity clothes. Nothing else for it but to exit the room.

“Oh, honey.” Laura chuckled. “I’ve still got my maternity clothes in the closet. Or you can grab one of Clint’s flannels.” She gestured with her free hand down the hall.

Nate suckled noisily while Natasha went to investigate.

Emily found herself drifting closer until Laura’s arm settled around her middle. “You’re safe, Emily. You’re here with family.”

Family. In memory, her father screamed about how Emmie needed to pull her weight in the family. She cringed.

“It’s okay, Em,” soothed her.

Nate came up for air, looked at her. He burbled little milk bubbles before turning back to the boob and breakfast.

In a pastel yellow maternity sweater that Laura had barely worn, Natasha returned. A faded pink shawl was tossed over her shoulders as she approached. She eyed Emily. Was that understanding or jealousy on her face? Both? Those circles under her eyes were awful. Either way, Emily detached from Laura to lock onto Nat.

“I love you,” was whispered into her ear, drowning out the screams in her mind.

Emily suddenly found a smile. “You better, future spouse.”

Shadows darkened Nat’s face. With a determined look, she shook her head, and they vanished, leaving warm affection. “Always, other half of my together.”

“Let’s get on down to breakfast, shall we?” Laura’s sunny tone beamed at them.

Breakfast and a long nap later, Natasha was able to push the relived terrors of the Red Room into the box it belonged. Nothing useful in them. She was even able to breathe normally when she wasn’t holding Emily. Thankfully, so was Emily. Mostly. The beautiful woman went from friend to friend, hugging and whispering away the shadows in their eyes.

The dark cloud hanging over the farm was gone by the next morning. So was Thor. Steve said that Thor had muttered something about prophecy before flying off. It made everyone frown, but didn’t bring the cloud back. Laura assigned chores. The kids were sent off to school.

Natasha watched Tony and Steve grunting over firewood for a while. They bickered about how to protect their home. At first, it seemed like a stupid testosterone battle, Tony’s eyes constantly darting to Steve’s faster growing pile of split wood.
Then Emily appeared and silently watched for a while. "This is how we’ll protect Earth." Em announced as Tony was mid-swing.

Startled, he missed, the haft of the axe slamming into the log instead of the head. His entire frame shuddered at the impact. "Dammit, woman. Didn’t anyone teach you not to sneak up on someone swinging a sharp object?"

"Nat tries." She shrugged.

Tony twitched and swung his gaze wide until it landed on Natasha, half-hidden between piles of wood and the barn’s long shadow. Another visual hunt found Bucky not five feet from Emily, sitting on the ground, back against a tree. His heavy sweater blended in perfectly with the tall, brown grass. Though he looked engrossed with a house repair project with Coop, Clint was close, listening, watching, waiting. Bruce was out in the open, staring at the chickens, yet nearby. He looked up at the quiet.

"This is how, Tony." Emily repeated. "Like Steve said. Together."

"You say that as we’re missing an essential person." He argued.

Emily shrugged. "Thor is a nice reinforcement, but this isn’t his home. We can’t rely on him to always be around. But us, the Avengers, we are. We disagree. We argue. Yea. But as long as we work together, we..."

"Aren’t ponies in the land of magic where friendship fixes everything!" He angrily lodged the axe in the giant stump of a worktable. "W-"

"You think I don’t know that?" Emily hissed. "But we also aren’t Asgardians with magic portals and hammers! If we don’t work together, we’re screwed. We have to be better than this."

"Then you have to help me convince the hall monitor here that..." Tony was starting to contradict himself. Arguing because he was hurting and scared.

Natasha chose to enter the discussion. Pitch low, tone even, she cut right through Tony’s rant. "The girl’s power made me see the Red Room again. I was forced to watch myself kill my peers over and over, in the games designed to weed out the weak. I wasn’t allowed to feel sorrow or guilt or even anger. I was a machine for the motherland. I was good at it, the best. And then I got to graduate, to get the gift of the serum and sterilization. I was their perfect Black Widow, and I hated myself."

All eyes were on her.

"It took me decades to shake off what they’d literally beat into me, to learn that I was allowed to be human, to love and dream and choose my own path."

They continued to stare until another voice cut the silence. "I saw the Hulk losing control." Bruce whispered, barely heard over the chickens. "I destroyed entire cities, killed everyone in them. The world was hunting me down."

"My father beat me for breaking a jar of spaghetti sauce." Emily spoke. "Any excuse was enough for him to pin down a helpless little kid and beat them while they screamed for help. My mom could have stopped him. She was there. But she just turned away. Fuck, I’m a grown woman, trained to protect myself and others, but I still flinch when a man raises his voice."

Bucky stood. "I was a prisoner in my own body." He scowled at the sky. "It didn’t matter how
much I struggled or screamed inside my head. Whoever HYDRA sent me to kill, I’d kill. Even if it was Emily.” A quick, sad glance at her. “Or a senator or Tony’s father.”

Guilt swept across Steve’s face. Ah. So he also knew that Howard Stark had been assassinated by the Winter Soldier. Did Bucky realize that it was something he’d actually done? Comprehension started to crease Tony’s face, but Steve spoke. “She made me see what I could have had. A life after the war, with Peggy.” Tears sparkled. “But I can’t ever go home!”

Margaret “Peggy” Carter. Founder of SHIELD. Of course.

Steve’s gaze went to Tony, became a challenging glare.

Tony looked down. “And I saw you all dead.”

“Not if we don’t break up.” Emily countered. “We are strong enough to get through anything.” She met each of their eyes. “Even each others bullshit.”

Across the yard, Clint smiled. Jerk.

“We can be magical fucking ponies if we want to!” Emily grinned.

Natasha felt a smile tug at her cheeks and rolled her eyes. Bruce shook his head, trying to hide his grin. Tony and Steve gaped at Em.

Bucky was the first to laugh. He roared through the tension, slapped his knee. “Jesus H. Christ, Em!” He coughed through laughs.

Steve and Tony fell into laughter under Em’s triumphant giggles. Idiots. All of them. Without thinking, Natasha touched her rounded belly. Hopefully the little bean would be just like them. She looked up as someone approached.

Laura waved. “Tony? I’m sure Clint didn’t bother telling you, but we do have a mechanical wood splitter. It just ain’t workin’.”

Clint waved at Tony’s tossed glare.

“It’s in the barn.” She waved in its direction. “Think you could take a look?”

Tony let his axe rest on the ground. “Yea. Sure. I can juice it up.”

“As for the rest of you bums, who’s going to help make lunch?” Laura eyed them.

Bruce’s hand went up. Natasha grabbed his elbow and guided him to the house. “We’ve got it, Laur.”
The Finest Royal Jewels

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emily eyed the project that Bruce was helping her with. For a bit of spare copper wire, it was damn gorgeous. Thanks to Bruce. He had a real talent for teasing the fragile metal into the necessary shape, all braided beautifully, with care and flair. She grinned at her silent rhyming.

Blinking, Bruce pulled his gaze from the magnifying glass he was using for the fine details. He yawned and stretched away the last hour of meticulous work.

By helping, she meant that Bruce had done all the real work. All she’d managed was finding the wire and coming up with the idea. “You are a fucking genius, Bruce!”

He blushed. “Thanks, Em.”

Carefully, so carefully, she picked up the delicate piece of art. Braided and looped, with a pretty little knot on one edge, the ring was actually kinda sturdy. Still felt like she could destroy it with an angry fist though. She’d have to replace it with a stronger ring soon. But for now, it was perfect. “I hope Nat likes it as much as I do.” She smiled up at him.

“I think Nat would love it if it was a plastic toy ring from a cereal box.”

She would. She had this secret little hoard of treasures hidden in the bedroom. Drawings and art from the hawkbabies. Little things from Clint and Laura. Gifts from Emily. Nothing of economical value, not really, but Natalia loved and guarded them like the finest royal jewels.

“Yea. But she wouldn’t wear it.” Emily laughed.

Bruce shrugged, already retreating into himself. They’d all seen the news. A lot of people had been hurt when the Hulk rampaged. Two people had died. There were calls for vengeance and arrest, nothing official, but Bruce could barely look anyone in the eye. He needed time. Time and patience.

Emily gave him a bruising hug and went in search of her little fox. Along the way, she found an empty Tylenol bottle in the recycle bin that would work nicely as a ring box. Nat wasn’t in the living room with its crackling fire and yawning Laura. She wasn’t out under the full moon or in the barn where the boys had cots in little tents, or in the kitchen with the teapot.

She was in the bedroom. At eleven at night. Who could have guessed? Nat looked up from whatever she was reading on her tablet. “Hey.”

Emily sucked in a breath. “I made you something.”

Nat studied her for a moment before setting the tablet aside.

“Okay, Bruce made it, but I commissioned him to do it.” She thrust the pill bottle at Nat.

An eyebrow arched. “Tylenol?”

Rolling her eyes, “Just open it.” She sat on the bed.

The bottle was accepted, examined. Disbelief eyed Emily.
“Open it.”

A thumb flicked the top off, and the contents were dumped into an open palm. Nat went rigid.

“In case you forgot that I said yes, Natalia.” Emily smiled.

Bright green eyes flicked up to her. At whatever they saw, they darted back down, and Nat reverently tested the ring on her finger.

It fit.

Emily let loose the breath she was holding.

“Emilishka,” was all velvet adoration. “Did you lock the door?”

Um. No? She looked over her shoulder. Before she could shrug, Nat was off the bed and crossing the room. There came the faint *schlick* of the bolt turning. The light was extinguished next. Nat didn’t want interruption? Oh. Oh!

Emily swallowed. She hadn’t been aiming for seduction, but she certainly wasn’t going to complain about the results.

“Emilishka,” purred at her. “Future spouse.” Hands were on her jaw. Heat and desire pulsed through the connection. “Other parent of my children.” There was a single, purposeful kiss placed on her forehead before the lips went to her ear, teased it with hot breath and whispered words. “I’m going to ravage you. Try not to wake the hawkbabies.”

“Yea. Okay,” was all she managed to squeak.

“Why couldn’t we have gone to Kenya?” Natasha lamented to Laura after lunch. They were sitting on the couch, sipping tea. “There’s great shopping in Nairobi. And good food.” And Sam probably wouldn’t have had to hike for two days to meet up with a SHIELD agent who could get him to an extraction site. He should be back in New York in a couple days.

Laura’s hand pat hers. “Are you more upset about what the girl did to you and Em or the fact that Ultron got away with the vibranium?”

Innate spy-sense and superb analytical skills. This was why Laura’s spy novels were beautifully intriguing. And why having her as a friend made Natasha comfortable.

“Or that Emily is still planning on trying to bring the twins home with her?”

Her eyes practically rolled to the back of her skull. “Damn her.”

Laura laughed. “She can’t help herself and neither can my husband.” A sobering sigh, “Which is why I’ve done my best to work with him instead of wasting my breath every time he brings a stray home.”

And Clint had passed it on to the kids. Hagrid the cat was still around. He wasn’t allowed in the house, but he was given food and water, had up to date vaccinations, and a snug place in the barn. He’d also taken a liking to Tony and slept in his tent. On his chest.

Bucky came in the front door, and both women stared at him until he frowned. “Something wrong?”
“Yes.” Natasha growled.

He flinched, made a motion to open the door again.

“I’m going to need your help when Em tries to help the Maximoffs.”

His hand dropped, and he fully faced her. A smile tweaked his lips. “She does have a bad habit of rushing to help others, doesn’t she?”

Natasha pinched her nose against the headache threatening at the thought of Emily’s propensity for leaping into danger. Ohio, Bulgaria, D.C., Norway, India, Egypt...

“I’ll stick by her side, Nat.” Bucky looked at his metal hand. “But...”

Oh no. The headache leered.

He met her gaze with a level one of his own. “I’ve trusted her instincts from the beginning. She’s right to try and help these kids.”

Ugh! Anger flared at her helplessness. “She...” Unable to finish her argument, she glared at him.

The door opened, and Tony walked into Bucky. “What’s going on? Someone call a team meeting and forget to invite me?” He looked around, found half the team missing. “Or is this about one of us?”

“We have to protect Em from herself.” Natasha growled.

“Oh.” Tony shut the door. “Yea, that’s a bit of a conundrum, isn’t it? We all love and respect her because of her nature, and we all want to keep her locked up safe and sound because of her nature.”

Surprised at the words he’d spoken out loud, Natasha couldn’t immediately respond.

“Why, Stark, did you just admit that you actually respect another human being?” Bucky prodded.

Tony looked him up and down. “I did. In fact, I admitted to having a deep well of love and affection for this woman who treats me like a little brother. What, aren’t you man enough to say those types of things out loud?”

Warm delight chuckled from Laura.

Bucky stared.

Natasha allowed her smile of approval to twitch.

“So what’s the plan?” Tony asked. “Do we have one yet?”

“We should go after the twins first. It will solve our Emily problem, and we could get intel from them about Ultron.” Bucky suggested.

“If we think of it as ‘going after them’ we aren’t going to do ourselves any favors.” Natasha said.

“We have to think like Emily.” Tony said. “Okay. Rescue the kids, subdue Ultron.”

Soft steps preceded Clint, who was patting a burping Nate. “Did someone say rescue?”

“Who needs rescue?” Steve exited the bathroom with a puff of steam.
“Rescue?” chirped down the stairs with Emily.

From the kitchen, Bruce appeared, headphones on, bowl of popcorn in hand. He stopped, looked around, slowly pulled the headphones off. “Team meeting?”

Eyes darted at Emily, gazes slowly followed, until everyone was looking at her.

“What?” squawked at them.

“We were discussing how to make sure you don’t get yourself strung up by your toes when you try to help those kids.” Laura said.

Emily crossed her arms. “They deser-”

“Em,” Natasha stalled the argument. “We aren’t trying to stop you.”

“We’re talking about helping.” Bucky added. “Keeping you safe while you help those kids.”

“Oh,” Bruce draw out the ‘O’. “I get it. You’ve finally figured out that it’s easier to go along with her impulsive need to help others instead of trying to fight it. I assume the Maximoff twins are our current topic? It’ll be best to approach them without Tony. They really hate Tony.” A handful of popcorn was tossed in his mouth.

“They did seem particularly keen on that.” Steve said.

“Won’t they be expecting an ambush if Tony isn’t there?” Bucky asked.

“Will they?” Emily countered.

Natasha’s headache howled its amusement as the discussion went nowhere. She wondered if she should go get Fury. He might be able to wrangle the team into a working plan.

“That’s all well and good, but the twins will be wherever Ultron is, and he isn’t planning a tea party for his stuffed bunnies.” Fury called into the room.

The barn door opened. Tony didn’t walk out. Nick Fury did. He wore casual clothes, looking haggard and worn, instead of his usual imposing blacks and trench coat. Correction. He still wore black. Black pants, shoes, and jacket. His shirt was a humanizing light grey, and she suspected his socks had blue argyle.

Clint didn’t look surprised, neither did Laura or Cooper. How long had Fury been here? Not long enough for Laura to insist he wash his clothes. A day, tops.

Fury swept them in his one-eyed gaze. “I hear that Mauritania didn’t go so well.”

Tony stepped into the sunlight. “You also sat in there listening to us argue.”

“I did. I also heard you people acting like a team.” Fury looked at Emily.

“Fuck you and your Avenger glue.” Emily flipped him the bird.

Fury chuckled. “I never imagined you would be this successful.” He shrugged. “But then, I also didn’t foresee Romanoff pregnant with your baby either.”

At the mention, her hand went to her belly. Emily and her need to help people. Idiot.
Natasha smiled despite herself.

“First objective, get the twins away from Ultron.” Steve said.

“We could use Tony as bait.” Bucky suggested.

“I hate that I can’t disagree.” Tony frowned. “That’s probably the best plan.”

Steve nodded. “Ultron will know it’s a trap. How do we keep him away long enough for Emily to do her thing? Or can we use this opportunity to catch Ultron as well?”

Murmurs shot through the room.

“Tony, can you see about a few EMP weapons?” Natasha asked.

“I’m a bit limited here, but sure.” Tony said.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got internet.” Clint grinned, laughed at Tony’s groan.

Steve dispersed the team to work on tactics. They would reconvene after dinner and discuss further. Natasha decided that she would think better after a nap. She dragged her favorite Avenger-glue-idiot to their room and happily enjoyed falling asleep in her arms.

A simple dinner of spaghetti and salad fed the team. A simple meal that took six pounds of meat, six pounds of pasta, more than six jars of spaghetti sauce. A few jars of spices -though several were already mostly empty. An entire slab of parmesan cheese. The help of the outdoor grill. Five cooks. Three heads of iceberg lettuce, two more romaine, eight bell peppers, a dozen zucchinis, and a lake’s worth of dressing.

Those who had cooked, sat down to relax, or in Tony’s case, play darts. Emily and Natasha settled in to watch Bruce, Laura, Clint, and Fury load the dishwasher, wash the pots, wipe down the counters, and bump into each other. Cooper took his siblings to the living room and turned on the TV. Emily’s phone buzzed a text.

She checked to see if it was anyone important. Lizzie. But was her text actually important? Or a dumb meme to laugh at? Okay, yea. Either were worthy of her attention. She picked up her phone.

“Lizzie’s asking me about our baby shower again.” Emily showed Natasha the text. She abruptly went stiff. “Lizzie. Holy shit. I haven’t told her about,” she flailed. “About the ring yet!” She’d been wrapped up in this Ultron business and then the twins. Those poor kids!

An arm wrapped around her waist. Nat kissed her cheek. “It’s okay. She’ll forgive you.”

She slumped into Nat’s comfort. “Okay.” Now was a good time. “Nat, hold out your hand.”

Another kiss touched her cheek before Nat stretched out her hand with the ring, modeled it against the white, spaghetti sauce-speckled tablecloth. *She asked me to be her future spouse!* She giddily explained. *I got a friend to make a silly ring until I can find her a real one. And a baby shower isn’t necessary. I’ve said that, like, a thousand times!*

She thumbed send.

*It’s about damn time.* Lizzie’s response was immediate. *Where’s your ring?*
Natasha hummed in her ear. “Tell her the truth. I haven’t gotten one from a candy machine yet.”

Laughing, Emily did so, laughed harder at Lizzie’s stupid GIF response.

_I don’t care if a shower isn’t necessary. We all know you two don’t need money or handouts. Your friends want to give you gifts, dumbass. I’m going to plan a baby shower for next month AND a bridal shower when you two decide on a date_

“I don’t want to have a party until after the little bean is a little person who is ready for the public.” Natasha whispered. “But, maybe, we could get the marriage license soon?” Her last words came hesitantly.

Emily glanced at all the eyes and ears in the room. _Let’s talk tonight_, she wrote on her phone.

Natasha nodded.

_No more than twenty invitations for this baby shower and we get final say on the guest list_. Emily checked with Nat before sending.

“Fine.”

**ONLY TWENTY?!** Lizzie responded. **ARE YOU SHITTING ME?**

Emily’s thumbs twitched as she typed out several responses, deleted them. _This isn’t a good time. I’ll call you in a few days._

_I saw the news. I’m glad you two are okay, hope your team is too._

_We’ll survive ttyl_  

**Okay. Love you! I’M SO EXCITED!**

“Going by your expression, that wasn’t a contact giving you intel on Ultron.” Fury had his back to the sink, towel and pot in hand, expectant expression on his face.

“Nope.” Emily shook her head. “Normal life stuff.”

Fury passed off the pot for Clint to put in a cupboard, accepted another pot to dry. “What about the rest of you?”

Steve looked around the room, but no one offered anything.

Fury cleared his throat. “Ultron took you folks out of play to buy himself time. My contacts all say he’s building something. The amount of vibranium he made off with, I don’t think it’s just one thing he’s building.”

“What about Ultron himself?” Steve asked.

“Oh, he’s easy to track. He’s everywhere.” A dish was set aside, another picked up. “The guy is multiplying faster than a Catholic rabbit. It still doesn’t help us get an angle on any of his plans, though.”

“He still going after launch codes?” Tony pulled darts from the ancient dart board.

“Yes, he is. But he’s not making any headway.”

Tony paused, considered a dart. The plastic vane was bent funny. “I cracked the Pentagon’s firewall in high school on a dare. Ultron could do it on a whim.”
“Well, I contacted our friends at the Nexus about that.”

“Nexus?”

“It’s an Internet hub in Oslo.” Bruce supplied. “Massive amounts of data flow through there.”

“So what’d they say?” Clint asked.

“He’s fixated on the missiles. But the codes are constantly being changed.”

“By whom?” Tony flinched as a dart brushed his ear, hit the bullseye.

Clint shrugged with an easy smirk.

“Parties unknown.” Fury responded.

“Do we have an ally?” Natasha asked.

Fury finished toweling the last pot, passed it to Laura. “Ultron’s got an enemy. That’s not the same thing. Still, I’d pay folding money to know how it is.”

Tony dropped the darts on the table. “We might need to visit Oslo. Find our unknown.”

“Well this is good times, boss.” Natasha quipped “But I was kinda hoping when I saw you, you’d have more than that.”

“I do. I have you.” He picked up a glass of ice tea. “Back in the day, I had eyes everywhere. Ears, everywhere else. You kids had all the tech you could dream up. Here we all are, back on Earth, with nothing but our wit and our will to save the world.” He paused, took a drink. “Ultron says the Avengers are the only thing between him and his mission. And whether or not he admits it, his mission is global destruction. All this, laid in a grave.” He looked around. “So stand. Outwit the platinum bastard”

“Steve doesn’t like that kind of talk.” Natasha covered her fear with sass.

It got a smile from Steve. “You know what, Romanoff…”

And his response got a few more grins.

“So, what does he want?” Fury kept them in line.

“To become better.” Steve said. “Better than us. He keeps building bodies.”

“Person bodies.” Tony added. “The human form is inefficient. Biologically speaking, we’re outmoded.”

That wasn’t quite right, Emily’s biology training argued.

“But he keeps coming back to it.” Tony hummed.

“When you two programmed him to protect the human race, you amazingly failed.”

“They don’t need to be protected.” Bruce shook his head. “They need to evolve. Ultron’s going to evolve.”

“How?” Fury asked.
Bruce frowned. “Has anyone been in contact with Dr. Cho?”

Dr. Cho? What would Ultron want with the cradle? It dealt with organics, not metal murderbots.

“What would Ultron want with a biologist?” Clint asked.

Bucky lifted his metal arm, flexed the fingers, frowned at Bruce, made Emily frown, the whole team frown.

Bruce took his glasses off to rub at his eyes. “Humans with small goals created Bucky’s arm. Imagine what a supercomputer bent on world destruction, with an ultra powerful space gem and a massive narcissist streak could come up with?”

“Banner, get in touch with Dr. Cho. The rest of you, check your gear and pack up, we leave in the morning.”

Natasha’s arm around her waist tightened.

“And I just bought a ton of groceries.” Laura sighed. “Get your gear together, then come back and help me cook. Lord knows you won’t have time to stop anywhere for lunch while you’re off saving the world.” She pointed a finger at Fury. “You don’t have gear to check, mister. You can start helping me now.”

Fury’s brow drew down. “Mrs. Bar-”

Laura already had a knife in hand. She gestured with it. “Get the beans from the pantry. We’re doing chili.”

“I’d do what she says, boss.” Natasha smiled. “This is her house.”

He glanced at Nat, Laura. “Yes, ma’am. Beans from the pantry.”

Chapter End Notes

welp, 2019 is almost over. We've been together on this fic for almost 4 years. THAT'S 4 YEARS AND OVER 200K WORDS! Holy shit. Remember when I complained that this fic wasn't supposed to be over 60k, then 100k?

*mumbles incoherently*

There would probably be more than this already, but I, uh, I wrote a book. An original book. I'm taking a break from it to play with fanfics before I go back and edit before agent hunting. I'M SO EXCITED!

Anyway, I was working on another fanfic, but then I got a really nice message about this fic, and I watched the Black Widow trailer, and I was both excited and disappointed that it doesn't fit with my canon... lol Sooo I've got a few chapters of Sekhmet ready. Need editing, but ready and coming soon :)

I hope everyone's holiday season is so mothafuckin epic you smile thinking about it months from now! Or at least very pleasantly calm. Possibly full of pancakes. Or cookies. Pie. Oooo pie
“This is fantastic.” Steve moaned around a mouthful of chili.

The aromas of spice and meat filled the quin as the team tucked into the meal Laura had sent with them. Chili and cornbread. The woman was a saint. It filled their bellies and eased tension. With another hour left until South Korea, they needed it.

Cho couldn’t be reached. A secretary insisted that the doctor was immersed in an experiment and would return his call later.

“An experiment.” Emily muttered. “Right.”

Were Bruce and Tony okay? There shouldn’t be danger waiting for them at the Nexus, which was why Bucky was in the quin, but Emily didn’t stop worrying. Tony could be his own worst enemy. Hence Ultron.

Where had Thor run off to?

What if Ultron was here and had already found a way to combine the vibranium and the scepter’s gem into some sort of god? Something more powerful than Thor? Or all the Avengers combined?

“Em.” Hands took her empty bowl away, then grasped hers. Natasha smiled at her. “Stop worrying about what you can’t do anything about.”

“But...”

An eyebrow arched.

“Okay, okay. I’ll try to stop worrying about Tony and everything that can go wrong between now and forever.”

“Good girl.” Natasha pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She sighed and resigned herself to watching Steve pace until Clint announced they were fifteen out. They crowded the windows and camera feeds. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. The lab’s building wasn’t destroyed. Lunch traffic was piling up on the nearby highway system. The only thing that made them frown were the heavy clouds coming at them. Lightning flashed in their depths.

“Weather report says heavy rain today.” Natasha said.

“Let’s hope we don’t need the cloak when it starts to come down.” Steve said. “Buck, on me. Barton, keep it level. Romanoff, I’d appreciate your eye behind that rifle. Em, make sure she stays behind the rifle. Up here. Please.”

Emily laughed. “I’ll try, Cap.”

Clint dropped the quin to hover beside a nearby parking garage. Steve and Bucky jumped out, and the quin climbed back up.
“At the entrance.” Steve reported. “It’s quiet.” He left the mic open. Guards and secretaries tried to stop them, but murderbots didn’t show up.

Emily strained behind the zoom of her rifle, yet the windows into the lab were the foggy translucent kind, and she couldn’t see more than vague shadows. Nothing seemed to be moving.

There was the ding of the elevator. Boots crunched on glass. Nothing else. They pressed on, Emily’s heart in her throat with each step.

“Dr. Cho!” Steve yelled. Their boots thudded, and Emily could see their running forms. “I found Dr. Cho.” He said. “She’s injured, but stable.”

“C-capta-”
“Save your energy, Dr. Cho.”

“N-no. He’s...” Cho hissed. “He’s uploading himself into the body. I t-tried to stop him.”

Body? Shit.

“Where?” He didn’t bother with details. Good soldier.

“The real power is in the cradle.” Cho gasped. “That gem. So much power. You can’t just blow it up.”

It’s like she knew what the Avengers’ strong suit was. Blowing stuff up. But did she mean it couldn’t be blown up or that it shouldn’t be?

“Do you know where Ultron is going?”

Cho coughed. “It doesn’t matter. Stop the upload.”

“Did you guys copy that?” Steve asked.

“We did.” Clint

“I got a private jet taking off downtown.” Natasha. “No manifest. That could be him.”

“No. There’s a truck from the lab.” Clint. “Highway. Right above you, cap. On the loop by the bridge.”

“Bring Cho to me.” Emily ordered.

“Bucky.” Steve delegated.

A foggy window was shattered by a chair. Bucky stood in it for a moment, then turned to lift Cho in his arms. He backed up for running room as Clint angled the quin down and opened the bay door. Six steps and a powerful leap later, Bucky was settling Cho into a jumpseat. Emily shouldered her rifle to free her hands.

“Don’t worry.” Emily said as manicured brows knit at her touch. “I won’t hold it against you that you hate me. But I can’t change the fact that this will hurt.”

Nat was already putting a rubber bit at the scientist’s mouth. She shifted to brace Emily as the quin abruptly banked. Bucky was holding on to a strap by the open bay doors. City noise came in with the wind, then a peal of thunder. Clouds had already turned the sun into a dim, fuzzy thing.
She closed herself to the outside world and focused on Cho. The injury was deep, through skin, bone, and lung. Everything was cauterized. That’s why she wasn’t dead yet. Emily started with the lung, sealing it, then nursing back the insides, the bagillion little blood vessels and bronchioles. The major arteries and oh, shit.

The aorta and pericardium. Emily panicked, immediately switching to the heart, sighing when she realized that the interior of the heart hadn’t been breached. Nor had the aorta. Not breached, though singed, even *cooked*.

“You got five with the cradle. One in the cab.” Clint’s voice tried to pierce her concentration.

“I’ll draw out Ultron.” Steve said.

Emily shook her head. Focus. There was cooked Cho to fix. She finished the heart, the lungs, then scoured the rest of the chest cavity for damage before closing it up. Vertebrae and nerves needed attention. Then she could seal the insides.

Cho let out whimpers as muscles and ribs grew back.

“Not sure if you’re damn lucky or not.” Emily muttered. “An inch in almost any direction would’ve killed you.”

Narrowed eyes told Emily to shut the fuck up and finish.

Skin began to knit back together. Emily looked up to take in the world. Bucky was gone. The bay door was closed, and the quinjet was deep within the forest of skyscrapers. Everything tilted sideways as they skimmed close to a glass wall, yet Natasha’s strength kept Emily firmly in front of Cho.

Clint looked over his shoulder. “Hey, Em. Cho good back there? Cap lost his shield and could use more backup.”

“I’ll g-”

Emily slapped a hand over Natasha’s mouth. “No. You’ll stay up here. With Clint and your rifle.” Argument flared in green eyes.

“Don’t.” Emily touched the belly with a growing little bean.

Lips pressed tight and Natasha nodded.

A quick kiss to this unhappy lips, and Emily stuffed on the helmet that she’d thought had been lost in Mauritania. At her feet, a second bay door opened, revealing a super-badass motorcycle held suspended above a third door. Traffic rushed by underneath.

Emily jammed on gloves and hopped onto the bike before she could pee her pants. She revved the Stark-powered engine to life. “In position,” she radioed.

“You have a window in three, two, one.”

She made the engine roar.

“Give em hell.” The clamps on the bike released and dropped her a terrifying thirty feet to the pavement below. Tires grabbed and shot her forward instead of exploding. Horns blared around her. Wind would have whipped at her hair, thankfully not; the armor did its job and kept her warm.
“Coming up on the shield. It’s in the middle lane. A red semi just drove over it.” Clint advised.

She swerved around a cluster of crotch rockets that lifted fists and cheered at her. “Red semi. I see it.”

The lane opened as cars avoided the shiny thing in the road. Emily shifted her weight, thanked Tony for the reinforced gloves and touched knuckles to pavement to get her fingers around the shield. Heart thundering, she righted herself, let the magnets on the front of the handlebars hold the shield, and pushed the engine harder.

It started to rain. Brake lights flared. “Shit!”

“They’re off the highway.” Clint said. “Take the next exit.”

She dove between cars that screamed at her and flew down the ramp. An intersection awaited her.

“Straight through, then first right.”

Fuck. She didn’t stop at the red light. Brakes shrieked, horns blared, but nothing hit her. She put an armored knee to the street as she took the right turn.

A few blocks ahead, she saw the telltale flash of laser fire. “Coming up on you, Cap.”

There wasn’t a response. She had to swerve around a chunk of metal. A door? Then fresh potholes that were rapidly filling with rainwater. Her tires threatened to lose their grip under the onslaught of frigid liquid. They howled and skid when she slammed the brakes to avoid a tumbling body, forced her into a controlled three-sixty.

The body stood. Bucky’s armor was scraped, but he seemed fine.

“Get on.” She ordered.

He hopped behind her, feet on the seat, hands on her shoulders. The tires squealed on the wet pavement. She handed the shield to Bucky.

The ground exploded, forced her to brake hard again, yet Bucky kept going. He slammed shield-first into a small Ultron. More flew out of truck.

“Hawkeye. Can you draw off the guards?” Steve said.

“Let’s find out.”

From the corner of her eye, Emily saw the quin maneuvering to come alongside the truck. She pushed on, to put herself in position to take advantage of the distraction, to probably jump from moving bike to moving truck.

Lightning flashed. One murderbot went down, a huge hole in its chest. Natasha’s work.

A minute later, the quin appeared and opened fire with its machine guns. The rest of the little murderbots flew out from inside the truck, chased after Clint. Steve and Bucky continued their battle with Ultron. Tag-teaming, doling out enough damage to smear whole armies out of existence. Ultron looked pissed. He let a few punches slide off, then when both were within range, grabbed them by their throats and jet-jumped through a concrete wall, into a speeding train.

That left one murderbot in the truck, driving it? Time to jump. “Going in.” Dammit, this kind of acrobatic bullshit was Nat’s thing, not hers! Just do it, coward. Someone has to. She did a little
hop, got her boots on the seat, trusted the steering to hold steady for a minute, readied herself, and
jumped.

She made it in. Immediately tripped, broke her fall with her helmet against the cradle, sat holding
her ringing head for a while.

“T’m in,” was hissed through grit teeth.

She surveyed what was there. The cradle, strapped down, with a body inside. She leaned closer.
Was that? The same sense of presence, the one she’d felt back in Tony’s lab, crawled up her spine.
Definitely got to pull the plug on this thing. She poked at the control panel.

Korean scrolled across the screen. Nat could handle this. Why had they decided to get pregnant?
You idiot, she screamed at herself. You pushed her to do the procedure. She’d be in here, already
halfway done with hacking Cho’s password or whatever the screen was blinking for, and Emily
would be in the quin, anxiously waiting for her little fox.

Oh, but her little fox was so cute pregnant!

Emily punched at the controls. They flashed angrily at her. Swearing, she bent over, looking for
cables or hoses to yank at. Nothing. The cradle was a solid box. All the important bits were kept
safely tucked inside. She should tell Tony to add a toolkit to her armor.

The entire trailer jerked, made her grab at the cradle to keep from sliding around. Through the open
back, she saw the ground recede.

“Package is airborne.” Clint’s announcement was calm. How is he calm? HOW?

She shrieked as the trailer shifted again, angling upward, trying to loosen her grip and send her
hurtling out the back, to smash into the pavement so very far below.

“I have a clean shot.” Clint advised

“No!” Emily managed to open her comm. “Don’t shoot. I’m still in here!”

“Shit.” Natasha cursed. “Okay, can you get the cradle loose? We can catch you.”

“What?” Clint squawked, his calm finally broken.

“Opening bay doors.” Nat said.

Grumbling came from Clint, but the quin came into view, backside to Emily, the bay door lowering
as it neared.

She could barely hold on, let alone loosen the damn straps! She caught sight of her pregnant fox
waiting for her. Okay. Yes. You can do this. Emily found a way to anchor her boots against the
cradle. She freed one hand to fumble at the straps.

“I lost him!” Steve announced. “He’s headed your way!”

Shit shit shit!

She stared at the straps, the contraption keeping them secure. Oh. There was an easy release, like a
seatbelt. She even saw a way to anchor herself on top of the cradle. The strap toward the open
doors was popped. She braced herself.
“Here I come!”

Clint swore under his breath. Nat moved out of the way.

She popped the other strap. The cradle slid out of the open trailer, went airborne. She eeped and closed her eyes. A sickening thump put her stomach in her throat, then the cradle abruptly stopped, sent her flying into Clint’s pilot seat, knocked the air from her lungs.

She gasped and shuddered, grabbed at protesting ribs.

Screaming brought her gaze up to see Natasha dangling by her foot, a murderbot flying away with her. “Nat!”

“Shit!” Clint growled. He slapped controls, and the door started to close.

Emily ran to it, beat uselessly at the metal.

“Cap, you got eyes on Nat?” Clint asked.

“If you’ve got the package, get it to Stark.” Steve returned. “Go!”

“Do you have eyes on Nat?” Calm, yet with a sharp edge, Clint replied.

“Go!”

Swearing under his breath, Clint banked the quin, turned it away from the city.

Emily ran to a window, couldn’t see any sign of Natasha or Ultron. “Natalia! Clint, we have to find her!”

The engines revved, and the boost of thrust punched Emily into the wall.

Clint kept swearing.

Chapter End Notes

I'm surprised every time I don't update for months, but get responses within hours...
*swoon*
I love you fabulous people!
And I'm so excited to finally, FINALLY be writing actual Ultron interactions!
Ahhhhhhhh
Emily stared at the cradle. Her senses whispered about life inside it, the same odd feeling she’d had during the party, right before Ultron showed up. She frowned. If only she’d investigated then. Jarvis might… Natalia might…

Rage warred with guilt. Nails bit into the palms of her hands, had been digging in for most of the day. Trading Nat for the twins was never in the plan. She almost hoped they stayed down in the locker room forever. Looking at them, while Ultron -the monster they’d helped- had her little fox, she wasn’t sure if she could keep her rage in check.

“Anything on Nat?” Emily heard Bruce whisper to Tony as he entered the lab where they’d secured the cradle, that Ultron had stolen Loki’s scepter from.

“Haven’t heard.” Tony stumbled when he met Emily’s gaze. “But she’s alive, or Ultron would be rubbing our faces in it.”

Was that supposed to comfort her?

“This is sealed tight.” Clint gave up trying to force the cradle open and set to pacing. Since he’d set the quinjet down at the Avengers Tower, he hadn’t been able to sit still; he couldn’t look Emily in the eye either, and she wasn’t sure she could let him without trying to rip his chest open for allowing Ultron to take Natasha.

“We’re gonna need to access the program, break it down from within.” Bruce said.

“Any chance Natasha might leave you a message outside the Internet?” Tony caught Clint as he paced. “Old-school spy stuff?”

Clint paused. “Yea. Yea, that’s a thing. I’ll find her,” he touched Emily’s shoulder, jogged out of the lab.

“Maybe you can help Barton?” Tony asked Emily.

She wanted to. More than anything. But she didn’t have contacts who could find Ultron. She didn’t have skills in that sector. “Nothing I can do,” ripped her heart into pieces. She stood on trembling legs.

“I can work on tissue degeneration.” Bruce poked at the controls, got them to switch to English. “If you could fry whatever operational system Cho implanted.”

Tony was scratching his head. “Yea. About that.” He cast a guilty look at Emily.

Her hackles rose.

Bruce looked up from poking at the cradle. He eyed Tony, his expression shifting from thoughtful to wary. “No.”

“You have to trust me.”

“Kind of don’t.”
Liquid pooled in Emily’s hands. Maybe Tony wasn’t saying what she thought he was, was he? “Our ally, the guy protecting the military’s nuclear codes, I found him.” Tony lifted one of his control pads, flicked it at a screen. Jarvis’ big, orange digital projection appeared.

Emily gaped. “Jarvis!”

“Hello, Dr. Banner. Ms. Fortune.”

“Ultron didn’t go after Jarvis because he was angry. He attacked him because he was scared of what he can do.”

Bruce was shaking his head, tonguing his cheek. Emily tried to focus on the joy of a friend returned, but couldn’t get her hands to unclench.

“So Jarvis went underground. Scattered, dumped his memory. But not his protocols. He didn’t even know he was in there until I pieced him together!”

Bruce scoffed.

What was Tony building up to?

Tony stared. Bruce stared back.

“You want me to help you put Jarvis into this thing?” Bruce demanded.

“No! Of course not.” Tony denied. “I wanna help you put Jarvis in this thing.”

The joy vanished, rage roaring back to fill its place.

Bruce shook his head. “No, Tony.”

“We’re out of my field here. You know bio-organics better than anyone.”

“And you just assume that Jarvis’ operational matrix can beat Ultron’s?”

“Jarvis has been beating him from inside without knowing it.” Tony’s voice was all determined assurance. “This is the opportunity. We can create Ultron’s perfect self without the homicidal glitches he thinks are his winning personality. We have to.”

“I think it’s worth a go,” came softly from Jarvis.

Bruce threw his hands up. “I’m caught in a loop.” They dropped to the back of his head. “A goddamn time loop. This is exactly where it all went wrong.”

“I know,” Tony glanced at Emily, some of his confidence flagging at her expression. “I know what everyone’s gonna say. But they’re already saying it.” He gathered himself, put a hand on Bruce’s shoulder. “We’re mad scientists. We’re monsters, buddy. We gotta own it. Make a stand.”

Again, Bruce was shaking his head, but she could see that he was being swayed. He wanted to be the hero.

“It’s not a loop.” Tony insisted. “It’s the end of the line.”

They both looked at the cradle. Bruce fumbled with his hands, then looked at Emily. “I thought we’d agreed to do things as a team. This isn’t our decision, Tony.”

Guilt returned to Tony. He frowned at Emily. The frown deepened as his eyes flicked down. “Em.”

“No!” A hand was up, finger pointing at his chest, shivering and dripping blood. “Don’t you dare
go back on what you promised.”

“I…”

Fury switched to desperate pleading, “Please.”

Tony’s eyes danced from her to Bruce to the cradle. He scratched at his head, took a step forward, back. He sighed. “No. You’re right. Team vote.”

Liquid streamed down her face.

“Will you let someone take care of your hands now?” Tony grimaced. “Bruce, wrap her hands in six thousand layers of gauze, would you?”

“Me?” Bruce objected. “It’s definitely not a good idea for Emily to have to the Hulk at her fingertips while she’s looking at you like that.”

“How can you still love him after he betrayed all of you?” A new voice interrupted them.

Walking calmly into the lab was Wanda Maximoff. All sixteen years and five feet of her, the poster child for teenage rebellion, with her bracelets and necklaces, raccoon eye liner and punk demeanor. And the sleek red leather jacket she was wearing.

Natasha’s jacket. The one Emily had gotten her for last Christmas.

Wanda stopped cold. At her shoulder, her taller twin stopped too, and his head canted. Were they telepathic? Wanda obviously was, could probably hear the hurricane inside Emily’s head, but could Pietro and Wanda speak on another level? Or was it just a twin thing?

Wanda shrugged off the jacket and held it out. Without its tailored lines, Wanda looked even younger, vulnerable and delicate. Her exposed shoulders and collarbones were sharp, too sharp, and scarred. And her brother wasn’t any better. He was all knees and elbows, skinny even for a beanpole teen.

“Has anyone offered you a meal?” Emily asked. Or had they shoved the kids on the quinjet when they’d offered their help taking out Ultron and treated them like prisoners since?

Pietro’s eyes narrowed, but his sister’s widened.

Emily made herself look at the jacket. “Keep it.” Maybe it might give the girl an ounce of protection. Besides, Nat wouldn’t fit in it again for months.

“We thought it was a show for the cameras.” Wanda said. She slid the jacket back on. It hung loose.

“That Emily is our resident supermom? No, that’s her default.” Tony said. “You get used to it.”

Wanda’s piercing gaze settled on him, hatred prominent, yet it softened, nearly vanished after another look at Emily. “When Ultron was connected to the body, I could see what he was dreaming about. That is why we are here. We cannot let Ultron realize that dream.”

“How did you even get in here?” Tony demanded.

Wanda’s lips crooked.

“Dear God. She’s a mini-Romanoff.”
That smirk really was a mirror image of Nat’s. Always exuding an air of utter competence, superiority, and complete control. But underneath was a delicate heart, sweet compassion, and a burning desire to prove herself. Emily’s hands shivered and relaxed. She brought them up to see the damage. Blood oozed from sharp crescent wounds. Nat was going to fuss over them later, then give Emily a manicure, all sharp words and irritation to hide her worry.

If they found her and could bring her home.

Her hands trembled.

“Come on, Emily.” Bruce was in front of her. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She allowed herself to be turned to the elevator. “Tony.” She snapped when they got to the doors. “You’re not staying in here alone. Twins, you too.”

She expected a fight, not the immediate, docile submission she got. Tony strode in ahead of her. The twins followed after. On the common level, Bucky and Steve were in the kitchen with Pepper. She looked up and frowned, quickly replaced it with a smile that could cut glass.

“Tony, set the table. Lunch will be ready soon.”

“How can you be so calm?” Pietro shouted. “Making lunch and preparing to sit down like some happy family while Ultron is out there, planning our extinction?”

“No!” He barked. There was a blur, and he was putting a large kitchen knife through Tony’s throat. Or would have, but his blur buckled, and he was rolling across the carpet, knife flying harmlessly to a corner. He grabbed at his leg.

“I can help.” Emily knelt. “Let me help.”

Disbelief glared at her. “I just tried to kill your friend, and you offer to help me? Why should I trust you?”

“Because her offer is true.” Wanda was kneeling too, touching his shoulder. “I can hear Stark remembering the Avengers fighting over how to keep Emily from trying to help us. They lost the fight, and we are here.”

Emily held out a hand, grimaced at the blood there.

Pietro sneered. “Don’t touch me with that.”

“Pi-”

“Wash your hands first.”

Emily smiled. “Okay. Bruce, you still want to doctor me?”

“Yea. Of course.”

“Tony!” Pepper called over. “Set the table!”

Intense, stabbing pain woke Natasha. Groaning, she assumed it was something new with her pregnancy. Laura always talked about how it killed her back, made her legs weak, turned her feet
into giant sausages. Between Natasha’s enhanced body and Emily’s gift, she hadn’t experienced much of the negative sides of pregnancy, was almost envious of the travails that other women had. This pain wasn’t one she wanted to keep experiencing. It felt like she’d taken a serious beating from Steve.

She reached for Emily.

Her hand met cold stone. In fact, there wasn’t a bed at all, only the cold, unyielding stone. She was still in her mission armor. Her mind switched from pregnancy wonders to cold deliberation. Where was she? How had she gotten there? Were there guards? She stopped moving in case she could still feign sleep and delude her captors for an advantage. Sounds made themselves known. Machinery. Electronics. Welding?

Large machinery and small. Footsteps approached. Heavy, metallic footsteps.

Ultron. Shit. Her being yanked out of the quinjet, kidnapped by an Ultron minion, flooded into her mind. Suddenly frantic, she touched her stomach. Nothing felt wrong, but wha-

“I wasn’t sure you’d wake up.” Ultron’s main body walked up. “I hoped you would. I wanted to show you.”

She focused beyond him, saw a hive of activity. Ultron and his minions working at what appeared to be an assembly line of more robots. Ultron’s main self looked heavily damaged. Good.

“I don’t have anyone else.”

All about him and his ego. Damn Tony.

“I think a lot about meteors. The purity in them. Boom! The end.”

Pure? Drama queen. Was Emily okay?

“Start again. The world made clean for the new man to rebuild.”

She sat up, made to stand, but her leg howled. Broken. She sagged against a stone wall.

“I was meant to be new. I was meant to be beautiful. The world would have looked to the sky and seen hope, seen mercy.”

He was seriously deluded.

“Instead, they’ll look up in horror because of you.” His voice became angry, and he advanced on her. “You’ve wounded me.”

Unconsciously, she pressed back into the wall.

He paused. “I give you full marks for that. But, like the man said, what doesn’t kill me…” His head exploded, the body shattered on its way down, replaced by a bigger, sleeker Ultron. “Just makes me stronger.” Serious drama queen. He should have a Broadway production.

“All this talk about change and evolution is total bullshit.” Natasha drawled. “You don’t care about humanity evolving. You don’t care about us at all. You simply wish to remake the world as you see fit. You want a world shaped to your whims and desires.” She watched Ultron’s fists curl, decided to push a little farther. “At least Tony tries to give a damn about other people.”

“Don’t compare me to Stark!” He punched the cage, dented the metal bars.
“Humanity is already evolving. Look at Emily, the Inhumans, Steve Rogers,” she gestured at her round belly, “The new life inside me.”

He tilted his head. “Not fast enough.”

She held her follow up comment and watched him quietly. Ultron eventually went back to his project. She found a handful of tools, wires, and equipment that had been cast aside. Had the cage been a small workshop once? This was clearly Strucker’s old lair in Sokovia. That meant the SHIELD agents supposed to be guarding the place were dead, or worse: turned. She would t-

No. Focus on the now. She needed to contact her team. There was plenty here to build a transmitter from, and her armor could provide power. Not much, hopefully not enough for Ultron to notice, but enough to transmit old-school Morris code on a frequency that Clint should be monitoring.

Layers of gauze made Emily’s hands look like they had diapers on them. Bruce and Tony were insistent on the extra layers to keep her nails from doing further damage. Then Pepper had taken over, clipping and shaping Emily’s nails to barely-there stubs.

Pietro glared at her from the chair he’d hobbled into. Petulant child, distrustful and angry, yet desperate for help, for warmth and shelter. Like Emily had been before Hafid. She didn’t have to look up to know that Wanda was staring as well. Emily was fairly certain Wanda’s gift worked like hers, in that she had to focus to receive specific details. The girl hadn’t stopped staring since Korea. Was she waiting for the other shoe to drop despite her words to her brother? Of course she was. Poor kid.

Emily offered a kind smile and wiggled her fingertips at Pietro, who was sitting on a couch. “I don’t need much contact, but I do want your consent.”

“I already agreed.”

“I want to make sure you still do.”

His frown twisted. Quick motion drew the leg of his sweatpants up, exposed angry red swelling, old bruising, and ragged scabs along his thigh. Infection was causing the redness and swelling. She couldn’t cure that. “This isn’t a simple fix. Infections are difficult.”

“Wh-”

“Pietro, why did you hide this?” His sister scowled.

“It was nothing.”

“Infections kill. We watched enough people die of them.”

He shrugged. “Sorry.” He turned his glare back on Emily. “Are you going to fix me or not?”

Emily nodded. “I can start the process. You’ll need antibiotics.”

He thrust his leg at her. “Get on with it.”

Fingers touched skin. “Bruce will need a blood sample to see what kind of bacteria is in there.”

“Whatever.”
With Emily’s help, he took an easy sample that he immediately took back to the lab. With all the resources he had access to, results would come in a fraction of the time it took normal doctors.

“Keep in mind. This will hurt.” Emily warned.

“Pain is nothing.”

Stubborn child. Emily pushed those thoughts away to focus, delved deep. The injury went almost to the bone. She was surprised the infection wasn’t worse than it was, even with the malnutrition. Lucky. She did a thorough scan before starting to push the infection back as much as she could, boosting his immune response, reducing the swelling, stitching up the wound.

“You’ve got a few fractured bones too. Ribs, left arm. Want me to deal with those?”

“Do it.”

Through it all, only a few hisses escaped his teeth.

“I can’t do anything for your bruised ego, but your body’s as good as it gets.” Emily stood.

Bruce appeared. “I’ll have results in a couple hours.”

“Everyone to the table.” Pepper announced. “Lunch is served.”

Baked chicken, pesto, noodles, and salad. Typical Pepper.

Emily was halfway through when Clint burst in.

“I know where she is.”

Emily’s fork clattered to her forgotten lunch.

Natasha lounged as best she could on the wooden box in her cage. Stashed in a pocket, the transmitter was buzzing away with its brief message.

“You know if you kill us all, you’ll be completely alone with your thoughts.”

Ultron scowled. “Better to be alone than surrounded by cockroaches.”

“What’s wrong with cockroaches? They’re scavengers. They clean up after everyone else.”

“Says the cockroach.”

“Yet here you keep me.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t.” He threatened.

Natasha shrugged. “Then you can’t use me as bait or meat shield, and the Avengers will be coming for revenge instead of rescue.”

“They’re no threat to me.”

“Clearly.”

He punched her cage again, broke an iron pole. “Just shut up.”
She shrugged again. He growled and spun away. An hour later, a minion brought her a cold meal.

“Thor.” Emily blinked up at the god.

“Lady Fortune.” He looked her over. “You’re in armor. Going after Ultron again? Have you discovered a way to defeat him?”

“We have the twins now. And Tony came up with EMP weapons that should work.” A few stickies to throw at murderbots and upgraded zap sticks for Natasha.

He frowned. “It is not enough.”

“It doesn’t matter. He has Natasha.”

The flames of war burned in his pretty eyes. “Where is the body?”

“What?”

“The body he was creating. Where is it?”

“In the lab. The team decided to leave it there until we can destroy it.”

Thor stomped toward the stairs, his long legs quickly leaving Emily behind. She ran to catch up.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

He didn’t answer, only picked up pace.

“Thor!”

“Em?” Steve was at her side, suited up and ready for battle. “Thor? When did you get back?”

“Stop him.” Emily ordered. She had a terrible feeling.

Steve blinked once, then jumped at Thor. The god twisted, dodged, used his hammer to knock Steve through a wall. Bucky was there next. He got the same stunning treatment.

They arrived at the lab door when Iron Man flew in front of it. “Hey, buddy. Where you off to?”

“Get out of my way, Stark. This must be done.”

“Look, let’s talk about this. What must be done?”

Thor huffed. “I’ve had a vision. We need it.”

“It?” Tony asked. “The body Ultron was creating?”

“Yes. Now move.”

“Sorry. Team voted. We’re going to destroy it. After we go get Natasha.”

“I do not wish to hurt you.” Thor threatened.

Emily jumped at exposed skin on his arm. Her fingers brushed, but he whirled away, went on the offensive, trading blows with Tony, then Steve and Bucky. Glass and walls exploded. Computers
sizzled. Emily was tackled behind a desk, Pietro on her back. Exposed wires zapped the space Emily had been in.

The fight was quick. Thor only had to knock the boys away long enough to lift his hammer and charge it with lightning that he drove into the cradle.

“No!”

Clint arrived to see the cradle explode and a red figure emerge from it. It was man-shaped and naked, lacking man-bits, yet sporting a glowing yellow gem in its forehead. Glass clinked as Thor rose from where he’d been blown. Boots and leather creaked as fighters readied themselves.

Its eyes opened. They were a strange blue, grey, metal. Robot. This was a robot. Sleek and organicish, but a robot. Her senses buzzed. The robot exuded life, presence. It looked around, at himself, at the lab, at the people staring at him. His expression shifted, and he was flying across the room at Thor.

A quick movement sent him spinning away from the god, through a wall, across a sitting room. He came to an abrupt halt in front of windows that overlooked New York. There he stayed, staring silently into the city until someone shifted, caused noise that had him turning around. His form changed. His exterior shifted to look like skintight clothing. A grey suit from feet to collar and wrists.

“I’m sorry. That was… odd.” He looked at Thor. “Thank you.” A breath later, a cape mimicking Thor’s fluttered down his back.

“Thor.” Steve accused. “You helped create this?”

Thor took his eyes off the delicate, translucent cape. “I’ve had a vision. The whirlpool that sucks in all hope of life, and at its center is that.” He pointed at the glowing amber gem in the center of the … being’s head.

“The gem?” Bruce asked.

“The Mind Stone. It’s one of the six Infinity Stones. The greatest power in the universe, unparalleled in its destructive capabilities.”

“Then why would you bri-”

“Because the Avengers cannot defeat Ultron.” Thor said.

“Not alone.” The new being added.

“Why does your vision sound like Jarvis?” Steve asked.

Emily’s feet moved toward the being, her fingers twitching to scan him.

“We reconfigured Jarvis’ matrix to create something new.” Tony explained.

“I think I’ve had my fill of new.” Steve grumbled.

The being was slowly walking from Thor to Tony to Steve. “You think I’m a child of Ultron.” “You’re not?” Steve countered.

He was a bastion of calm. “Look again.”

“Yea…” Clint scoffed. “The kid’s seal of approval doesn’t have much merit right now.”

“Their powers, the horrors in our heads, Ultron himself, they all came from the Mind Stone. And they’re nothing compared to what it can unleash.” Thor gestured.

That sense of something pulsed from the being. That must be what she’d been sensing all the time, something strong enough to not need her direct touch. This Mind Stone.

“But with it on our side…”

“Is it?” Steve cut him off. He focused on the being. “Are you? On our side?”

His expression shifted to thoughtful. A tactical choice? A human reflex? “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Well, it better get real simple, real soon.” Clint said. He was fingering his handgun.

The being’s lips pursed. Determination settled his features. He took a step toward them. “I am on the side of life. Ultron isn't. He will end it all.”

She couldn’t help but trust the soft tones of Jarvis. She stepped up to him, lifted a hand with slow care, touched his face. Strange sensations came through the connection. Life, yes. Different, alien, stranger even than Asgardian. It would take a long, long time to sort it out.

“What’s he waiting for?” Tony’s voice was soft.

The being lifted his strange gaze off Emily. He gathered the group in his gaze. “You.”

“If we’re wrong about you.” Bruce said “If you’re the monster that Ultron made you to be…”

“What will you do?” was the calm question.

No one had an answer.

“I don’t want to kill Ultron,” sounded sad. “He’s unique and he’s in pain. But that pain will roll over the Earth. So, he must be destroyed. Every form he’s built, every trace of his presence on the net. We have to act now. And not one of us can do it without the others.” A pause. “Maybe I am a monster. I don’t think I’d know if I were one.” He looked at his hands. “I’m not what you are, and not what you intended.” He turned, moved to where Thor had set his Mjolnir down. “So, there may be no way to make you trust me.”

Emily gasped. Mjolnir was in his hand. The same hammer that no one else could lift.

“But we need to go.” Mjolnir was proffered to Thor, who stared at it. Everyone stared at it. Dumb expression plastered on his face, Thor accepted his hammer.

Steve recovered first. “Emily?”

She looked at him, her hands, the being. “He’s alive.”

“I see life in his future.” Wanda said.

Steve checked the rest of their silent opinions. No one gave argument. He looked at Thor. “Twenty
minutes. Get what you need.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Three days in a row!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!